

Beauty and the Beast Trilogy

by Rhonda Collins

*A NEW BEGINNING
THE TRIALS OF LIFE
THE TRUTH OF LOVE*



Beauty and the Beast

Fourth Season Trilogy

A NEW BEGINNING
THE TRIALS OF LIFE
THE TRUTH OF LOVE

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

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This republished set is dedicated to the readers, old and new, with gratitude.
and of course
to Ron Perlman, Linda Hamilton and Jo Anderson
and
to Jan, who's been a great partner

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

This trilogy set came to be for two reasons. One reason was that, after publishing seven fanzines one learns *how to do it better*...or at least more efficiently! Another was, that I wanted the first three zines to be available at a more reasonable rate for you--the readers. These stories were originally about 270 pages with very few (and fairly bad) pictures. After two years of *constant* writing and zine publishing, my art has improved and so has my knowledge of how to produce a zine less expensively.

The stories are basically the same. Outside of fixing a few "trouble spots" all that has changed is the format and the art. And the price.

One thing: I know there are still typos "hidden away" in here that I've missed. If you find any that you think should be corrected in future volumes, please let me know. If you see any you can't live with, **definitely** let me know and I'll fix it and send you a new page to have inserted. Thanks.

I would like to add here a note about "my" Diana. When I watched the episodes of third season I was convinced that Diana was psychic. I had read the book *Red Dragon* and seen the movie *Manhunter*--and Diana's character was so like the detective in that story (and I was convinced that Graham was psychic) that I *knew* this must be the case. And it fit. I thought it was a marvelous touch. After all, if the writers were forced to remove Catherine then it seemed logical and appropriate to have Diana be very different. Besides...it sets up so many fascinating ramifications. I wanted in my stories to show how two very similar characters (Vincent and Diana) would relate in a situation like this. It was fun.

Since I wrote these three books before ever even being aware of fandom's existence (and indeed, never thinking anyone else would ever read them), I felt a freedom in writing them that I think makes them just a little unique. In my second series I made Diana only empathic, not psychic--but I still firmly see and *believe* her to be at least empathic. But it's fun to have written two very different series about the same characters.

So. I hope you, the reader, enjoy the stories as much as I enjoyed writing them. Those of us who love the tunnels and the people who live there know that there is still magic in the world today, and we will keep the dream alive for ourselves and as many others who will listen and learn. The dream is still in the dreaming, and the promise in every day.

Keep thou thy dreams--the tissue of all wings
is woven first from them; from dreams are made
The precious imperishable things
Whose loveliness lives on, and does not fade.*





BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

BOOK ONE

A NEW BEGINNING

Based on the series created by Ron Koslow

Story by Rhonda Collins

WHEN THE NIGHTTIME COMES¹

Diana woke to the early morning darkness. The tangled sheets hindered her as she climbed out of bed. Her head hurt terribly and her eyes were sore from crying. As she looked at her disheveled image in the mirror, behind her she thought she could see Vincent with his long, tousled chestnut mane and gentle eyes, but when she turned, he wasn't there. She turned back and leaning on the counter, cried again. "Damn it! I wish I could stop this. I wish *he* could stop this. He doesn't realize what he is doing to me." Diana had always used her psychic ability in her cases. That's why she insisted on working alone and on only one case at a time. But now, she felt Vincent's grief and love for Catherine like a knife in her heart...and she grieved with him, even though she had never truly known Catherine in life. The trouble was, she couldn't control her abilities with Vincent, as she could with her cases...she couldn't turn it on and off. The pain Vincent felt was always present, the feeling to Diana being somewhat analogous to a sore tooth, but in the past two days it seemed more like an abscess. Vincent put a good face on it most of the time and went about his life fairly normally, but the pain remained, deep inside...hidden from the world, but not from her.

She washed her face and with a little makeup tried to repair the damage the night had done. As she brushed her long red hair, the pain washed over her again. It was truly absurd, and irony of fate. She thought back to when she had found Vincent on Catherine Chandler's grave and brought him home to nurse him back to health...but it hadn't really started then.

It had begun when she had taken on Catherine's case and had slowly, through bits and pieces begun finding out about the unusual man whom Catherine had loved, and who had loved her. As she read inscriptions in books, read poems that were marked, found all the hints of this love in the bits and pieces of Catherine's life, she began to feel she knew this strange man just a little. She picked up feelings from Catherine's things, fuzzy images which tantalized her and drew her closer and closer to Vincent. Then as she began to connect him to

the many savage killings that had happened around Catherine, she didn't know what to think. But she realized that somehow Vincent knew when Catherine was in danger, and he was her protector.

It was difficult to reconcile the gentle man of the inscriptions and poetry to the savage murders, but she had known instinctively that they were connected... that they were the same man. When she found him, and saw this visage that would have frightened anyone else, somehow she had not even been surprised. She *knew* this was Vincent--the killer--but also Vincent the lover. As he raged in his fever and deliriums and almost destroyed her apartment, she feared for her safety, but she always waited for the man she knew to be there to come out. She felt his rage and his own terror caused by his fever and hid behind her gun, and when he did come to himself...something began happening to her. She felt a pull from him she could never explain to anyone. She could not get him out of her dreams, her thoughts.

Vincent had had a psychic bond with Catherine and had been able to "feel" her emotions, and this bond had helped to create a greater love than Diana could ever have imagined. All her psychic ability had ever brought her was the ugliness in people's souls. But in helping Vincent to heal, to find and rescue his son, and in the months since then of just knowing him--now she was beginning to feel Vincent's moods more and more often, and it had not been fun. Last night had been especially bad. It was Jacob's birthday today--the child Catherine had borne for Vincent, and the anniversary of Catherine's death, and Vincent had been up mourning all night, and would continue, she knew, for God knew how long.

Diana had come to love Vincent...and because she now had this bond, she knew it was hopeless. Although his and Catherine's son, Jacob, had given him something to live for, Vincent clung to Catherine's memory desperately...afraid to lose a single moment of their lives together. *How do you fight a memory? How can you even want to fight a woman like Catherine?* Diana would not want

Vincent to forget Catherine. If he *could* forget a love like that, he would indeed be a monster. But how could she convince him that you can love again?

Diana had not dared to say anything to Vincent about how she felt--for fear he would bolt like a rabbit for fear of hurting her...and himself...and then she would not be able to be near him at all or be able to help him through this. But this had to stop, one way or another. She had printed out her journal from her computer--all the entries from the last year that pertained to Vincent and Catherine and bound them. She planned to present them to Vincent today to make his own decision. Perhaps if he truly knew he was not alone, it would help...or perhaps he would never see her again. It was frightening to her, though, even the thought of letting him see even a glimpse inside her soul. She had never let anyone else in.

Diana pulled the curtain over the clippings, photos, and all the other information on the current case she was working on; a particularly horrible multiple rape and murder case. Today, she was forgetting it. She dressed in her sweats and Reeboks and rode the elevator down. She wished she had an entrance to the tunnels in her building as Catherine had, but she had to settle for going to one of the other myriad of openings in the city. She had learned of many of them and never used the same one twice in a row for secrecy's sake.

Once down in the tunnels, Diana pulled the flashlight out of her shoulder bag--she hated to carry a purse, but down here she needed things. She knew her way fairly well, but marked her way with the blue chalk just in case. She moved quickly through the tunnels: her bond with Vincent gave her an advantage in finding her way through them. She could hear the incessant tapping on the pipes as people relayed messages. She saw few people about when she got to the living areas, but it was early yet. She went first to Father's chambers.

Diana and Father had become fast friends once he was convinced she was no threat to the tunnels or to Vincent. Father had always been opposed to Catherine's tie with Vincent, but had finally accepted it, but now, he felt that Vincent needed Diana. He knew his foster son was inwardly dying a little every day with his grief over Catherine. Outwardly, Vincent was going on with his life, and having Jacob helped, but he was still grieving. Father had tried to help him let go of the

grief, but had been unsuccessful. Father hoped that someday Vincent's friendship with Diana would blossom into something more, and bring him out of his despair. He knew also that Diana loved Vincent, though she had never spoken to him of it. He could see it in her face when she looked at him.

As Diana came to the door of his chamber, he looked up over the rims of his glasses. "Diana, dear, please come in. Is everything all right?" Looking at her more closely, he murmured..."No, I suppose not. Is there anything I can do?"

Diana looked down, unsure of what to say. "No, Father. I came to see Vincent, but I'm not sure I should."

"He may send you away, Diana. He has everyone else. He even has Mary taking care of Jacob, which is just as well...the poor child has cried all night, sensing his father's distress. He is finally asleep."

Diana brushed her hair out of her face and straightened up. "If there is ever going to be anything for me here,... with him, I have to tell him how I feel."

Father looked alarmed. "Now is perhaps not the best time, child."

"No, Father, now *is* the time. He is doing himself harm, and if this goes on, he will harm Jacob as well. It has to stop." She turned and left Father's chamber, and Father sat heavily into his chair.

Vincent's chamber was lit only by one candle and the light from his stained glass window. He sat alone, quietly staring into space--into his memories. The tears ran slowly down his face. Diana entered from behind him, quietly, but he heard her anyway. "Diana, please...leave me. This is not a good time."

Diana moved around in front of him and kneeled in front of him. "Vincent, Catherine is dead..."

He rose, enraged, and threw the chair across the chamber. "Don't you know that is all I think about!"

"Yes," she said harshly... "That *is* all you think about. Catherine would *never* have wanted you to bottle your love and hide it so deep within you that you smother life. You can't tell me you don't remember....Though lovers be lost, love is not...and death shall have no dominion....Death Shall Have NO Dominion Vincent. But that doesn't mean you should not live ... or love again."

Vincent stared at her as though he wanted to rend her limb from limb. He stood with his fists clenched so tightly his claws were drawing blood. She flinched, because she didn't just see his anger at her, she felt it. In a minute she would lose him completely. "Vincent... Love is like a river. It begins with a small spring...runs into a stream, changes to a river. The river has eddies and currents... and eventually it runs into the sea...to join a great body of water. Love is like that too. Catherine's love is with us still. I never met her, but I knew her...I learned to know her and love her, just as I....learned to love you...before I ever set eyes upon you. I learned to love you *through* Catherine." She got up to leave, and she placed her journal in his hands. "Read this. And remember, even if I never see you again, I'll always be with you, just as you were with Catherine. Remember too, that Catherine still lives in Jacob...and someday he will want this day to be remembered with the joy of his birth...not the horror and despair of his mother's death."

Vincent was standing, head bowed, looking at the papers in his hand as she left the chamber.

Diana told Father as she almost ran into him, blind as she was with tears, "I'll be down at the Mirror Pool if Vincent decides to see me. If not..." She stumbled through the tunnels down to the Mirror Pool and sat crying softly, for by now, Vincent was reading her story

As Vincent read Diana's journal his anger changed, quieted. He was puzzled and concerned. *How could I have been so blind as to not see what Diana was going through?* She had been a more than a friend to him...had helped him find his son, rescue him. The strangest thing was that he had no feeling of bond with her, as he had with Catherine, but amazingly, she had this bond with him! His thoughts were turned completely upside down. Suddenly he saw his relationship with Catherine in a different light as well. He perhaps had not fully realized why it had taken Catherine so much longer to fall in love with him ... when he had loved her from the start. It had been impossible for him not to love Catherine: with his bond, he had felt all the good, the innocence, inside her...he could feel how she felt about him. Diana too was gentle, kind, intelligent. She had the same dedication to helping people that Catherine had...he knew he loved her...he had great respect for her. *But am I in love with her?* He had never even allowed himself the

possibility. To him the only love he could imagine was Catherine, and even the thought was an affront. *But what would it be to be without her, as I am without Catherine?* That thought was unbearable as well. But he had so little of himself left to give to anyone ... he was afraid to hurt her, and himself.

Meanwhile, Jamie had brought Jacob to Diana at the Mirror Pool. They had become fast friends since Diana had been introduced to them. "He is a beautiful child, Jamie. I wish he were mine."

Jamie didn't know what to say. She, too, knew how Diana felt about Vincent. Most of the tunnel dwellers were able to see what Vincent had been blind to for so long. "Mouse and I wanted Vincent to be the first to know, but we haven't been able to bring ourselves to talk to him lately ... Mouse and I are in love, Diana."

Diana hugged her friend around the squirming Jacob. "Perhaps soon he will be able to be happy for you without feeling so much pain. But after what I did today, I may not be back for awhile, Jamie, so give Mouse my congratulations... for me. Thank you for bringing Jacob to me. Perhaps you should take him back to Mary for me now, though."

As Jamie turned, she saw Vincent in the doorway. He held out his arms for Jacob, held him close to his breast for a moment, then gave him back to Jamie with a nod. Jamie glanced quickly at Diana, then left. Vincent turned then to an extremely pale Diana. He reached out and brushed her hair back from her face. "How could I not know, Diana? I'm so sorry."

Diana reached up and stroked his face. "How could you know? Every love is different, that is why it is so wonderful."

Vincent looked troubled, and said quietly, "I can never forget Catherine, Diana. It would not be fair to you."

Diana just smiled, and said, "Vincent, I would never want you to. Don't forget her. Cherish those memories. Just don't forget that I'm here for you, in whatever capacity you want or need...friend ...or lover. I'm with you wherever you are and whatever you do,... and your grief is what is killing me. I want to help you let go of the grief, not of Catherine. Just...don't send me away. Let me be a friend, at least."

Vincent held her for a moment, and tears glistened in his eyes. "I would never send you away."

They talked for a long while, and Vincent felt more at peace than he had in months. The constant ache of Catherine's loss was still present, but it was somehow eased. They walked hand in hand back to Father's chambers.

Father looked up, instantly taking in the change in Vincent. He was relieved to see that Diana was smiling as well. "Well, I see you are feeling better, Vincent. Changing the subject, Father put his book away and cleared his throat, "Ahem...Also, Diana, Mouse tells me he has an idea for a tunnel extension to the basement of your building, with a secret door. Would that be of benefit to you?"

Diana looked as though someone had given her the world. "Oh, yes! Father, that would be wonderful! The only other tenant left in the building is an artist who uses the bottom half of the building mostly for storage, so it would work out wonderfully! Can it really be managed?"

Vincent just looked from one to another of them, more than a little puzzled. *Was I really been so far sunk in my grief that I had not realized how close Father and Diana had become, and what a good rapport they have?* He shook his head, a little ashamed of himself.

Vincent walked Diana back to the tunnel exit she was planning to use this time, and they walked in a companionable silence, glancing at each other quietly from time to time.

"You're feeling better, I see," Diana said.

"And *feel*, from what I hear," Vincent chuckled, looking at her with his head cocked. "I must admit, I never realized quite how that must have made Catherine feel at times...it is a little...odd. Especially since I have been on the receiving end before.

It is going to take a little getting used to." Diana took his hand and stroked it. It feels good to me just to know you will try to accept my love ... even if it will never be more than friendship."

"Diana..." Vincent began..."I think you know it is already more than just friendship, but where it will lead, ... how deep it will grow, we will simply have to wait to find that out. I only fear to disappoint you."

Diana looked up at Vincent and placed her hand on his chest. "Life is full of disappointments, but love is all that matters, and you cannot find that without risks. You knew that with Catherine. Remember it with me." She pulled his head down and kissed him gently, hiding herself in the curtain of his hair.

Diana left the tunnels, and after reaching the street, hailed a cab to go home. As she was getting out of the elevator she heard the telephone.

"Damn!" Rushing to get it, she hit her knee and was hobbling around when she answered the phone. "Diana here,"

"Well, it's about time," Joe said, his usually cheerful voice sounding angry, "Where have you been? ...Never mind. We have another one. I need you down here now."

Rushing to get cleaned up a little and change, she then hailed another taxi and headed to the morgue. Joe met her and they went to examine the body of a 26-year-old, red haired girl who had once been beautiful. Now, her raped and mutilated body was the only testimony she would ever be able to make as to what had happened.

Diana turned away. After today, she simply couldn't tolerate the sickness of the outside world. She had to get this animal.

"There's been another turn, too, Bennett. This was pinned to the body." It was a note for her. Whoever this man was, he knew she was getting close, knew who she was. "Be careful, Diana. We put a patrol outside your apartment, but we never know where you are to protect you."

Diana shrugged, dismissing Joe's suggestion. "I can't work that way anyway, Joe, you know that. I can take care of myself. I always have."

Diana left the morgue and headed home. She knew she was being followed, but she was not sure if it was police or the killer...though she suspected the latter: she could feel a submerged hatred. She still had her bag with her gun in it, and opened it. Just as she reached the apartment, she was grabbed from behind and dragged into a car. Her assailant was big, and as he tied and gagged her, all her plans and struggling went out the window along with her bag. She lay in the back seat as he drove away, wishing that Vincent *did* have the bond with her he'd had with Catherine. Unless she was very, very lucky, or very, very good ... she was done for. The car stopped. She heard the driver's side door open and footsteps coming around to get her. When he opened the door, she kicked him in the face, but he grabbed her feet first and pulled her out onto the pavement, hitting her head on the concrete. Diana passed out, and when she came to, with her hands and feet still tied, he had her inside an apartment, his presumably, and locked in a filthy bathroom. She looked around, dug under

the sink, shoving her head up underneath and feeling behind her, and found a wrench. She began tapping the code for Vincent's name and an S.O.S. on the pipes. The killer didn't come and stop her, so she kept it up, over and over...hoping someone would hear.

Night wore on, and Diana could see little out of the tiny window. She continued her tapping off and on, knowing Pascal would eventually hear it, but she had to keep it up so they could locate her. She wondered where the man had gone, and how long she had before he came back. She stopped tapping periodically to rest, exhausted, against the tub, or to work at her bonds, trying to get loose. Her hands were tied too tightly, but by wiggling and hooking the rope on the handle in back of the toilet, she was able to finally get the rope off her legs. She began tapping again doggedly. They just *had* to hear her. "C'mon, Pascal...find me."

Pascal listened to the pipes carefully. That S.O.S. and Vincent's name had been going on for a while now. He had been able with the childrens' help, to trace it to an outskirts of the city, and pinpoint it to a specific building. He had sent for Vincent when he knew where it was coming from.

Vincent appeared in the doorway. "Pascal, what is it?"

"Listen,..." Pascal whispered.

Alarmed, Vincent listened to it twice..."Everyone is accounted for?"

"Yes."

"Then it must be Diana...where?"

Pascal went with Vincent to Father's chambers and pointed out on the maps where the building was.

As soon as Vincent had memorized the location, he took off in his ground-eating stride toward the subways. He waited and leaped onto the first train going the right direction. He rode the roof of the train, clutching the grooves in the top with his claws, his mane flying behind him, He became more and more worried...and enraged. He couldn't lose her too. When he had lost the bond with Catherine, she had died...because he couldn't find her to save her. If the same thing happened with Diana, he couldn't bear it. He leaped off the train when it stopped near the intersection he needed. He heard the tapping

again, felt the pipe, and redirected himself. Soon he found himself underneath the building, but could find no entrance...and the tapping had stopped. He must go Above.

Inside the building the door to the bathroom opened and Diana saw a big, ugly, vicious-looking man dressed incongruously in an expensive suit...carrying a surgical scalpel. *My*, she thought, *He is ready to do business*. She backed against the wall, getting as far away as possible, but he knocked the wrench out of her hands and forced her into the other room. There were pictures of his other victims on the walls. "Now, my dear, you will have to join my other friends." Diana was fighting her bonds. She knew Vincent was just outside, but she was losing her own reasoning power,... she was beginning to feel his rage. As the man was closing on her, suddenly she broke the bonds on her own wrists and grabbed the hand that held the scalpel. She knocked him off balance, pulled him down, kneeling him in the groin, then growling like an animal herself, she tore the scalpel from his hand and used it to slash his throat.

As Vincent roared and broke the door down, he saw to his astonishment and horror the man lying over Diana. Both of them were covered in blood. At first he thought both of them were dead, but then Diana moved, trying to pull herself from under the man's dead weight. Vincent rushed to her side, dragging her from under the would-be killer, and lifted her carefully to the bed. She seemed dazed, stunned. He murmured to her, stroking her hair, and pried the scalpel from her hand. He could see what had happened, but could not understand how. He removed his cloak and wrapped her in it, then lifted and carried her gently back to the tunnels, to Father.

As Father examined Diana, Mary went to get clean clothes and water to wash the blood off of her. As Father finished examining her, he turned to Vincent, "She is in shock, Vincent, but I think she is coming around. She seems to be doing better. Whatever happened?" Vincent told father all he knew,... and surmised, but neither of them could explain Diana's torn wrists.

There was a small moan from Diana, then she said in a barely audible voice ... "Vincent...you're here."

Vincent smiled at her and held her hand, "Yes. You are in my chamber. You are safe." Diana slept then, and Father left Vincent to watch over her.

Vincent sat watching Diana sleeping in his bed, and thought how lovely she was, with her long red hair fanned out around her. How had he never seen it before? How had he never realized how much he had come to love her? He thought of Catherine, and how he had sat next to her exactly like this when he had found her in the park that night, dying, and how his bond had formed with her during that time of healing. Suddenly he realized that it did not matter to him if the bond never formed for him with Diana ... the bond had been a gift, as Catherine had said...formed in a time of deep need for him. She had told him that there were so many gifts waiting for him in life and that all he had to do was open his arms for them. He was amazed at how alike Catherine and Diana were, and how wise...and yet...how different.

Diana woke, and saw Vincent looking gently down at her...and turned away. She remembered the rage and the blood, and what she had done. Vincent didn't know the ugliness inside her. It wasn't that she fed on his rage, it was that she didn't *need* to have that rage ...to be able to kill. She had killed Gabriel in cold blood, and she was glad. And she was not sorry she had killed the man last night. But Vincent could never understand that, and if he ever *really* knew her, as he had Catherine...how could he love her? Right now all she felt was his love and concern reaching out to her, blanketing her in comfort, and all she wanted to do was to escape into his arms from all the ugliness in the world ... all the ugliness that had found its way inside of her.

"Diana," Vincent said quietly, "you are safe now. Don't be afraid."

"I'm not afraid, Vincent, I'm ashamed." Diana whispered.

Vincent turned her and cradled her against him, tears in his eyes, "I know that shame, Diana."

Diana pulled away, forcing Vincent to look at her. "No,... your shame is not the same as mine, Vincent. You believe it is, but it is not. I know that Catherine told you many times that all people

have a dark side...you told me that...but you cannot understand my dark side. If you did, you could never care for me."

Vincent touched Diana's face gently. "I may not have the same bond with you that I had with Catherine...or that you have with me...but I know you Diana, and there is no evil in you."

Diana flung herself from Vincent's bed, standing before him in the patched flannel gown Mary had put her in, her red hair flowing over her shoulders, and her face twisted in pain. "Vincent, you don't understand the extent of my psychic ability. With Catherine, you bonded with her alone... In my work, I get into the minds of murderers, devils. Their thoughts become my thoughts. That is what I *do*. The evil *is* inside me. I can't get it out. I don't think I can ever get it out. I feel as though I've absorbed it. I never could love anyone ... never let them in ... because I always saw everything, and what I saw deep inside them inevitably disgusted me. Until I met you. Even your rages are clean in comparison to the filth I experience up there every day. Your soul is a refuge for mine, and I feel as though I soil you by touching you!" Tears streamed down her face, and she shook with her need to be held by him.

Vincent looked thunderstruck. He had never considered how extensive her abilities were. He knew she was intelligent and intuitive and he knew she had the bond with him--but what she was telling him must be so incredibly difficult for her. He was speechless for a moment, and in that moment, Diana whirled, grabbed her clothes from the chair and ran from the chamber.

Diana fled past Father straight to Jamie's chamber, where she tore off the nightgown and dressed quickly. She had to leave here now before she did any damage to Vincent. If he ever learned of how she had fed on his own rage in order to gain the strength to break her bonds...and kill that man, what would it do to him...or to any chance of his ever loving her?

As Vincent started after Diana, Father met him at the door and caught his arm..."No Vincent, let her go for now. Go to her in awhile."

"Father, I have to help her. If what she tells me is true, I must go to her and be there for her."

Father was confused, "What did she tell you that has upset you both so?"

Vincent just looked at Father, torn with a

desire to tell him and ask his counsel, and yet feeling this was not something Diana would wish him to share. "I cannot say for now, Father...but I have to go to her."

As Father watched Vincent rush down the tunnel looking for Diana, he held onto the hope that good might still come of this woman for Vincent.

Looking for Diana, Vincent saw Jamie... "Where is she Jamie? I must find her." "She's not above, Vincent." Jamie took Vincent's hand, concerned for both of her friends." Please. Let her calm down. She says she has to go to Joe Maxwell and tell him what happened."

Vincent hung his head as he leaned against the wall. He shook his head when Jamie asked if she could help. Slowly he made his way back to his chamber, and sat restlessly...after a long while, he lay down, exhausted by his emotions and fell asleep. He dreamed he was following Catherine's voice through the mist, but he could not find her. Catherine's voice told him, "We loved, Vincent. Remember love, but remember too that Though Lover's be lost, Love is not. Then he saw himself and Catherine as they had been when Catherine told him "Life has so many gifts waiting for you. All you have to do is open your arms for them. Open your arms, Vincent." He did, and Catherine moved into them, butwhen he looked down at her face, it was Diana!" Vincent awoke, drenched in sweat.

Going to Mary, Vincent asked if she would continue caring for Jacob until he returned. "Tell Father not to worry, but I will be away for a while. I will be back soon." He kissed Jacob, marveling again at the child's beauty, and took his leave of Mary.

Vincent had decided to go to Diana's loft and wait for her there. By the time he reached the apartment, it was dark and he was able to go to the roof. This time, instead of simply waiting for her on the roof, he forced his way inside. He stood upstairs, looking down at Diana's cluttered apartment. Slowly, he walked downstairs, feeling an intruder. Suddenly, he stopped dead in his tracks...Catherine's rose bush! It was here...and alive! He knelt next to it, touching the petals softly, and the tears began to fall again. Diana had saved it and cherished it. Rising, he went to her wall and pulled the curtain away, revealing the mass of clippings, police photos, ...all the sordid details of the last case Diana had been working on

... the one that had almost killed her. He saw what this man had been doing, and a growl rumbled, starting deep in his throat. This is what he had intended for Diana! If she had seen into his mind...no wonder she felt soiled. Carefully, he closed the curtain and went to the bedroom. Diana's furnishings and appointments were so different from Catherine's... more ...functional, somehow. He looked around. Everywhere saw practicality and function...very few frills. He sat in the overstuffed chair next to the bed to wait.

A little later, Vincent heard the elevator and closed the door to the bedroom, just in case Diana was not alone. When Diana came out of the elevator, she knew Vincent was here, patiently waiting. Her stomach was churning with the grueling interview she had just had with Joe and the coroner. There would be a hearing later, but Joe said there would be no problem for her as far as her killing the man. It had been self-defense. She wished he were right,... but the problems were problems only she knew about. She went to the kitchen and washed her face, preparing to talk to Vincent...she was afraid that would be almost as difficult as her meeting with Joe.

When Diana turned, she saw that Vincent had come out of the bedroom and was standing there with his arms outstretched for her, and she ran to him, but stopped just short. Vincent dropped his arms, but said softly, "I needed to know you were well...so I came to you."

Diana's need to be in his arms was almost overwhelming, but she remained where she was. "I'm well enough. Thank you, Vincent ... for coming. There were ... unpleasant things I had to take care of, but Joe says everything will be fine."

Vincent moved over to the window and stood looking out at the city. The lights were like jewels in the darkness, but he couldn't see anything, his heart was too sore thinking of Diana's pain.

"Diana, why will you not let me comfort you? I know there is something disturbing you ... something deeply wrong. Please let me help."

"No one can help me with what is wrong, Vincent ... it is something only I can deal with," Diana said bitterly.

Vincent turned to face her again, a little angered, but puzzled as well. "Diana, friends help one another, and we ... are more than friends. Where I would be without you, I cannot bear to think about. The darkness can be deadly, especially when the darkness is inside you." Changing the subject, seeing he was making her uncomfortable, he moved softly past her to

Catherine's rose bush. "It's like suddenly coming upon a living part of Catherine unexpectedly. For you to have done this, ... was wonderful."

"I didn't do it for you, Vincent, although I'm glad it pleases you. I don't like to see people die, and when I become involved in their lives through my cases, it's like a small part of them comes alive to me. When I saw Catherine's roses were almost dead, it became important to me somehow to save them. It was before I met you. Catherine's mind and heart were clean and innocent. When I touch her things I feel that innocence, that goodness." She paused, considering how much to say, then continued, blushing... "You know, Vincent, I even talk to her sometimes...about you, and Jacob. I sit talking to that stupid rose bush as if she were here."

Touched, Vincent didn't know what to say at first. Then, he just smiled and said, "I talk to her

too. But I talk to her about Jacob...and you." Vincent took Diana's hand and led her to the roof, think of. But you are not alone. If you need me,... ever..., you know where I am. When you become tired, and afraid of the darkness...let me be your safe harbor, your quiet place.

Diana watched Vincent leave then went inside. She picked up a volume of Rod McKuen's poetry, turned to a page she had marked, and read,

*From your arms I'll make a wall
then I'll never be alone
I'll let your arms encircle me
When the nighttime comes.*

*From your smile I'll build a wall
the tallest wall that man has known
Then I'll hide behind your smile
and I'll never be alone.²*

She closed the book thoughtfully, then went to bed. She could still feel Vincent's peace and innocence. How a man could be as wise as he and still have that ...essence... of innocence despite all that had happened to him, she didn't know, but however he came to be what he was, he was unique...in every way.



OF SELF AND SOUL³

Vincent returned to the tunnels, weary, but at peace. It had been a very long time since he had rested peacefully. He checked on Jacob, who was already sleeping peacefully, his small hands curled up over his head. Vincent smiled and touched his sleeping son's mind briefly, then left him sleeping. He would pick him up when he woke. Entering his chamber, he sat at his desk and opened his journal. Picking up his pen, he thought a long moment, then began writing...

Love is all there is in this world that matters...love between a man and a woman, the love between parent and child, between friends. All love is the same, from the same source at birth, and entering the same realm at death. It is all an unending circle, and nothing is ever lost.

He paused, looking up, again with tears in his eyes, then began writing again...

Catherine is lost to me in body, but not in spirit. Her love is with me always, and if I ever need to hold her, I have only to hold Jacob, look into the wonder of his eyes, or touch his soul with the bond we share...the same bond I had with his mother. I will always feel the sorrow of losing her, of never being able to look into her dear face again, but I will also feel the joy of the love we shared. This last year has been harder than I had thought life could ever be, but Diana has helped to remind me of the truths that Catherine and I discovered together. Between my son and Diana, I am beginning to feel alive again.

Slowly closing the journal that Catherine had given him, he caressed the leather binding with his huge, long-taloned hand, then put it away. Raising his head, he felt a pull to Jacob as the child woke, looking for him, and he got up and went to the children's chamber, where Mary had been tending him.

Jacob had not even cried as he woke...he could feel his father coming for him, and when Vincent stood over his bed, he reached up, smiled, and said "F'ar!" He clambered to his feet, his tousled chestnut hair bobbing, and grabbed his father around the neck, hugging him, then his serious blue eyes looked into his father's.

"You are such a blessing, Jacob. I love you." Vincent hugged his son fiercely. Snuggling against

his father, Vincent's hair forming a veil over him, the child fell back to sleep as Vincent carried him back to his own chamber and put him in his own bed, covering him tenderly with the quilt Mary had made for him. *A year old already*, Vincent thought. *Soon he will be skipping stones on the Mirror Pool and exploring the maze.* Vincent shuddered thinking of the dangers a child experiences just growing up, and thought...*As with Catherine, I will have to learn to love enough to let go with him as well...to let him grow up without holding too closely. I wish Catherine could be here to see him grow up...and I hope I am equal to the challenge of rearing him without her.* He thought of Diana with warm pleasure. He really wasn't alone, not anymore. She had helped him to see that he could love someone else without betraying the love he would always have for Catherine.

Weary, but at peace, Vincent turned back the covers on his own bed and undressed. He climbed into bed, covered up, and turning over said a silent prayer of thanks for all his blessings.

As the sun rose,... much too early for Diana after her long night, she turned over and covered her head with the blanket. *Maybe I can squeeze in a few more minutes of dreams*, she thought drowsily. Then the telephone rang. "Damn!" She scrambled up, the blanket wrapped around her, and answered the phone, "Hello," she croaked.

Joe sounded cheery for so early. "Hi, Bennett. Sleeping late?"

Diana rubbed her eyes, but grinned at his jaunty tone, "Yeah, stayed up late. What's up, Joe? You sound happy."

"I am. Just like I said, everything is A-OK. You're off the hook, Bennett. Self defense, just like I figured." On a more somber note, he added, "I know it was rough, and there's a lot you're not telling me. If you need anything, let me know, okay?"

Warmed by his concern, Diana said, "Thanks Joe. You're a good friend."

Joe paused, then said, "Well, one good friend to another, how would you like to go out to dinner tonight...no strings...just friends? I kinda like you, Bennett, and I don't know about you, but I need all the friends I can get."

Diana felt herself closing up again, not

wanting to get too close to anyone...and remembering Vincent...but he said no strings..."Okay Joe. I think I'd like that. What time?"

Joe whistled as he started his day. Yeah, he really had gotten to where he liked Diana. She was unusual, and really pretty when you got used to the fact that she didn't go to any real effort to get that way. He chuckled to himself. She reminded him of some of the tomboy sisters of his friends as he grew up. But there was just something about her...something really deep that made him want to know her better. He went through the day looking forward to the coming evening.

Vincent went through his day, taking care of his usual activities and chores. With Jacob in tow, he taught the younger children in their literature class, then left him with Mary while he went to help Mouse and Alain, who were working on Diana's tunnel. Surveying the area, Vincent commented, "It seems to be going well, Mouse." Then he asked, "Alain, how much longer will it take, do you think?"

Wiping sweat from his brow and putting down his tools, Alain considered, "Possibly another two to three days for the tunnel itself, then another few days for us to finish the entrance. We want to make sure it will be stable and safe for anyone using it."

Vincent clapped his friend on the back and smiled, "I am sure Diana will appreciate your work. I know I do. Now, give me some of those tools, and I will give you a hand."

They worked the rest of the day, shoring up the tunnel and they reached the basement to Diana's apartment building sooner than Alain had anticipated. Tired, but elated, the three friends headed back to the living areas for some rest and some dinner.

"I don't know about you two, but I'm famished." Vincent said, pulling his grimy hair back out of his face..."and I need a bath."

Mouse teased him, saying "Never get dirty if you don't work, and besides, Mouse is always hungry."

"How about a swim before dinner? We haven't done that in awhile," Vincent asked. "Not me," Alain said, "water's too cold, and I'm too tired. You two go on."

Vincent and Mouse headed for the Mirror Pool, joking along the way. Mouse said finally, "Good to see you happy, Vincent....Mouse is happy too."

Vincent looked at Mouse quizzically, then said, "Is there something you're not telling me?"

Mouse blushed and stammered and clasped his hands in front of him, "Jamie and Mouse."

Vincent looked astonished, "You and Jamie? You mean...you are in love?"

Mouse nodded, his tousled blond hair bobbing. "It's good Vincent. To have a Love. Now Mouse knows too." He looked at Vincent worriedly, "Doesn't make you upset? ... Been waiting to tell you until you felt better."

Vincent hugged Mouse, "No, of course I'm not upset...except at myself. I'm glad you told me. Does Father know?"

Mouse wrinkled his nose, "Yes. Doesn't approve. Says we're too young. Mouse thinks he's too old...just forgets."

Vincent stared ahead silently, then said, "No, Mouse, he remembers, believe me. I'll talk to him. I think it's wonderful." They went on for their swim, then headed back for dinner.

As Diana got ready for her dinner with Joe, she looked at herself in the mirror ruefully. "I don't go out often enough I guess. I hardly recognize myself in a dress. I wish he had chosen someplace less fancy...burgers and fries maybe." She heard the buzzer, and told Joe to come up. When the lift stopped and Joe got off, he stood a moment with his mouth open. "Catching flies, Joe? C'mon, I don't look that different, do I?"

"Bennett, you amaze me. I should've done this a long time ago." Joe exclaimed. Diana began getting a little uneasy. Joe had said "no strings," and she really liked him. She would like to have him for a friend, but she didn't want to encourage him if he expected more from her than that. "Joe, this is, just a friendly dinner, right?"

"Sure, Bennett, no strings...but hey, I can still look, can't I?"

Diana laughed, "Yeah, I guess. Last I checked there were no laws against that." They left for dinner, chatting amiably, and Diana relaxed and enjoyed herself a great deal.

After eating and seeing to Jacob's dinner,

Vincent was playing with his son in his chamber when Father came to see him. "May I come in Vincent?"

"Certainly, Father. Is there something wrong?"

"Not wrong exactly," Father said, "I suppose you have heard about Mouse and Jamie."

Vincent looked up and smiled, knowing what to expect. "Yes, Mouse told me today. I think it is wonderful."

Father looked exasperated. "Vincent, don't you think they are a little too young and inexperienced?"

It was Vincent's turn to look exasperated. "And how are they to become experienced? Jamie and Mouse are meant for each other, Father. I have always thought so. Let them have each other. They will never do anything to hurt each other. Just talk to them and guide them. Don't be critical." Vincent looked away momentarily and his blue eyes filled with tears. "Look at our own lives, Father. You had so little time with Margaret, and I so little time with Catherine. I for one will never begrudge another any time they have for love." Then, his eyes clearing and smile lines crinkling in the corners, he said, "Would Jacob's grandfather like to keep him for awhile tonight?"

Father picked Jacob up and agreed readily. "Are you going Above tonight?"

"I thought I might go tell Diana how we were progressing on her tunnel...and perhaps invite her Below for awhile."

Father just smiled inwardly a little. "Well, young man. Suppose we go visit Grandpa's chambers. Oh my. Vincent, that does make me feel old. Have a good visit."

Vincent dressed and threw his cloak over his shoulders. Putting out the candles he left for Diana's apartment, thinking how pleased she would be at the progress being made on her tunnel.

After dinner, Joe and Diana decided to walk back to the apartment. They had both had a wonderful time, but Diana was becoming more and more uneasy. Joe really liked her, and she didn't want to hurt him. She had touched his hand briefly earlier and gotten impressions from him that certainly did not seem to go with his statement of "no strings." She knew Joe. He was one of the good guys...one of the few people she could really stand to be around. She didn't want to lose his friendship.

"Joe..." Diana began, a little apologetically, "I have to tell you, I had a very nice time tonight, but I want it to stay just friends. It has to be that way...there is someone else." Joe looked a little downcast, but said cheerfully, "Oh, ... well. That's okay. But Bennett, I know you're not seeing anyone, and you're not living with anyone.....You know. You've been acting funny ever since the Chandler case."

Diana started to tense up and pull away.

"C'mon, Bennett...I have had a feeling for a long time that you found that Vincent character of Cathy's...and you have been protecting him, just like Cathy did. You haven't fallen for him too, have you?"

Diana sighed. "We've been over this before, Joe, and I've said all I'm going to on the subject."

Joe just looked at her, defeated. He really liked Diana, but sometimes he felt like women were more than the opposite sex, he felt as though they were aliens...he would never understand them. "All right. Have it your own way. But we're still friends, right?"

Diana smiled..."Right."

As they rode the lift up to the apartment, Diana began getting nervous again...Vincent was coming...she could feel it. Now she had to get rid of Joe. As they got off the lift, she said, "Thank's Joe. I really enjoyed it."

Joe hedged and grinned... "Hey, is this the Bum's Rush or what? I know you don't have a case yet, so can't I come in for awhile, just to visit?" Joe was really a little hurt. She was obviously trying to get rid of him. Just then there was a knocking at the window above. "What's that?" Joe said, quickly reaching for his gun.

"What's what?" Diana asked innocently.

"Listen, I've really got to go. I've got things to do."

"Not until I check this out, Bennett."

Exasperated, Diana pushed Joe onto the couch. "Damn it Joe, stay here and sit down. It's nothing, okay?"

Joe settled back on the couch reluctantly looking worried.

Diana rushed upstairs. "Vincent," she whispered, "Where are you?"

Coming around the edge of the building, Vincent dropped to the roof, "Here, Diana. I'm sorry. I did not mean to interrupt. Is he gone?"

Diana looked anxiously back towards the

door, "No, he's sitting on my couch. Vincent, have you ever considered meeting Joe? He knows so much about you already, he could find you if he really wanted to. Catherine trusted him, and so do I. He could be a very valuable Helper for your world, you know."

Vincent looked at her with his clear blue eyes. He had thought the same thing many times, and he was very tempted. "Do you feel he can be trusted, Diana? How would he handle meeting me?"

Diana smiled, "With the wonder of a child, Vincent. Please let me introduce you." Making a sudden decision...one of the few of this magnitude in relation to the tunnels that he ever made without Father's counsel, Vincent said, "All right. I trusted Elliott, and he didn't fail me."

Leaving Vincent on the roof, listening, Diana went back downstairs to a very nervous Joe. "Are you all right, Bennett? I was just going to go looking for you."

"I'm fine, Joe. Sit back down. How good are you at keeping a secret? If I tell you a story, will you swear on Catherine's grave...on the trust she had in you, that you will not reveal what I tell you?"

Joe looked at her as though she were mad. "Does this have to do with Vincent?...If it does, and you can promise me he didn't kill Cathy,...yeah, I swear."

Diana began... "Do you remember everything we learned about Vincent?..."

As Diana told Joe the true story of what happened to Catherine, and to Vincent, Joe grew more and more astounded. "You mean you knew all this and you withheld it? Why?"

Diana sighed. "Because, Joe. Vincent is very unusual. He lives apart from the rest of the world for reasons which will soon become very apparent to you. He is an astounding man. And, more than that, the lives of many people depend on the secrecy that you have just sworn to...you must remember that. Now. Give me your gun, just temporarily. I don't want you doing something out of reflex."

"What do you mean?" Joe asked, confused.

"Just do it. You'll see."

Joe gave her his gun, and at a noise from the roof, he looked up as Vincent came through the door above him. He could not see Vincent's face, as it was hidden in the shadows of his hood.

A quiet voice said, "Joe. It is good to meet

you at last. Catherine told me a great deal about you."

Eyeing Vincent's unusual clothing, Joe thought, *What is this? A costume party?* But Vincent's voice, grating, rough...gentle and honest, convinced him that this was indeed the man that Catherine had loved. "Vincent," Joe said, and started forward.

Diana caught his arm, "No, Joe. Wait until he comes here."

Vincent came slowly down the stairs, his fur boots making no sound at all, and the cape a soft, swishing against the rails. He stood in front of Joe and threw back his hood. Joe jumped almost out of his skin, and gasped, taking in the leonine face, long, coarse chestnut hair,... and the hands! *God! His hands have claws! No wonder those men had been torn apart!* Joe backed up a foot or two.

"Joe," Vincent said softly, his voice like velvet..."Don't be afraid."

Looking into Vincent's gentle blue eyes, Joe regained his composure and said shakily, "I'm sorry, Vincent. You startled me. I'm not exactly afraid. I'm more...awed. I understand things a lot better now. I understand why Cathy was so secretive...and why she felt she had to protect you."

Vincent's voice carried almost more sadness than Joe could bear when he spoke, "Catherine protected many people with her bravery Joe...a lot more than you know." He went on to explain to Joe about the tunnels; how they came to be used as they were, and how Father had struggled all these years to keep it safe from discovery. "You have met my father, Joe. His name is Jacob Welles."

Joe nodded, remembering. "Scared me half to death first time I met him. Thought I was being kidnapped, but he,...all of you...were instrumental in finding Gabriel. Everything is so much clearer now. Thank you,...both of you. I was beginning to think I was going nuts."

Vincent reached out his clawed hand and put it on Joe's shoulder. "Catherine thought a lot of you, Joe Maxwell. She trusted you, and Diana trusts you. Now, I must trust you not to reveal what you now know. We in the tunnels have many Helpers here above, and Diana and I hope you will consent to be one of them. In return, if there is ever anything we can do to help you, we will, and the tunnels will always be a safe place for you. You will always find friends there."

Joe thought a long moment, then spoke, "I promise to keep your secret safe, Vincent. You must realize though, that I have taken an oath as

District Attorney, and there are times when there may be a conflict of interests. In those cases it is always going to be a judgement call, but I will always keep the tunnels' secret and the secret of your existence safe."

Vincent smiled and replied, "That is all we can ask."

The three of them sat and talked for several hours, then Joe got up to leave. "Vincent, one thing...I know Catherine had your child. Will I ever be able to see him?...Does he..."

Vincent's blue eyes sparkled as he thought of Jacob, "Does he look like me? No. He looks like Catherine...though I'm told he has my eyes. Yes, you will see him, and see Father again. He is going to be extremely upset with me that I confided in you without his consent, but he will understand."

Vincent held out his hand, and Joe clasped it firmly. "Goodbye, Vincent. Get in touch soon."

After Joe left, Vincent and Diana went to the roof. Vincent was humming Catherine's lullaby while he held Diana. "It's late, Vincent. I know you are anxious to get back to Jacob. I'm glad you came, and that you met Joe tonight. He's a good man."

Vincent considered his words before speaking, "He *is* a good man...and he cares for you, Diana. I can see that."

Diana pushed back the veil of Vincent's hair and stroked his face. "He knows we can only be friends, Vincent. I think he understands how I feel about you. Don't worry."

Vincent looked down, ashamed. He had felt a little jealous. He understood now how jealousy could come from uncertainty. With Catherine, he always *knew* how she felt, but with Diana, he must feel his way, and their relationship was still very new. Looking down into her face, he spoke softly, and changed the subject, "Mouse and Jamie are in love, Diana, did you know?"

She smiled. "Yes. They were waiting to tell you. I'm happy for them." Remembering then what he had originally come for, Vincent told her, "Mouse and Alain are almost finished extending the tunnel. I helped some today, and we reached your apartment. Soon, you will have your own secret entrance to the tunnels."

Diana was so excited she could barely speak. "Vincent! Then I can come and go as I please. I can't wait!"

Caressing her hand, Vincent murmured, "I am

glad you are pleased. It should make things safer for both of us."

Later, at home, Joe sat on his battered couch in something of a daze. He felt as though he had been put through a meat grinder. All these months of searching for Cathy while she was pregnant and alone...he, Elliot, and Vincent. So much misery for everyone...especially Cathy. How she must have suffered going through all of that alone. He could only imagine how she and Vincent both had suffered. He shook his head in wonder just at the thought of Vincent, the tunnels...the whole story. He liked Vincent. The man inspired confidence and trust, despite his strange appearance, but damn it...he had never had a chance with Cathy, and now he could tell that Diana was falling for him too. He mumbled to himself..."Too bad we have the same taste in women...and me always a day late and a dollar short." He wondered if and when he would hear from him again.

"Vincent, honestly you exasperate me!" Father exclaimed, pacing the floor in his cluttered chamber. "Since Catherine's death, I swear you have become careless. First Diana, then Elliott Burch, and now Joe Maxwell. Why don't you just take out a full page ad telling everyone where we are?!"

Father was livid. Vincent rarely saw him so angry, but he patiently placated him. "I have not been careless, Father. You know that. Joe already knew too much to be left in the dark. He was more of a danger that way than having him know the truth. Besides, Catherine and Diana trust him...and so do I. He could prove to be very valuable to us. He is a good man." Vincent sat idly playing with Father's chess set, moving the white queen to stand by the black king.

Father leaned on his stick, looking at Vincent and considering...he sighed, "I suppose you are right, as usual." Vincent didn't answer and just continued staring at the chess set. "I don't suppose the reason you are so interested in my chess set has anything to do with wanting a game...certainly not at this hour."

Vincent startled..."What? Oh. No, Father." He stood and stretched. "It *is* late. Was Jacob any bother?"

Father's face softened, thinking of his

grandson..."Of course not. He likes the chess men as well. They kept him busy almost until bedtime. He is already asleep in his own bed to save you the trouble of moving him."

Vincent hugged Father and thanked him, then left for his own chamber.

Entering his chamber, Vincent checked on the sleeping child, who smiled in his sleep, sensing his Father's presence. Vincent sat at his desk and opened his journal...

The night above is quiet now when I visit... I can see the beauty Above again as well as the ugliness. I can see the lights and remember the love that lives behind many of them...and as Catherine said, ... each possibility. I no longer feel the darkness pressing so heavily upon my soul. The turmoil I have felt for so long is stilled. Perhaps the grief will return, but for now I can count my blessings. I tend to worry though, how good this relationship will be for Diana. Joe Maxwell is a good man...

Confused, Vincent closed the journal and went to bed. Why was it that he couldn't just enjoy his happiness and contentment without worrying about the future?

The next morning after rising, Diana received a call from Joe asking her to come in for a new case. She almost dreaded starting another one. It meant getting so involved again in some monster's mind...but that was the only way she could work...it was what she had chosen to do. She grabbed a taxi and headed to Joe's office.

As he waited for Diana, Joe looked at what they had on the case. Not much. A lost child, mother hysterical, father obnoxious. The girl had disappeared after school four days ago, and foul play was suspected. One shoe was found, and her books...one of the books had blood on it...same type as the girl's.

Diana came in and smiled at him. "Hi Joe."
"Hi Bennett."

They smiled at each other, each remembering their shared secret.

Joe handed her the file and Diana began to read. After awhile she looked up. "Can I see the shoe and the books, Joe? I need to hold them."

Joe handed her a box. He had anticipated her request.

Diana picked up the shoe and looked at it. It was an expensive loafer for a little girl, about ten years old. She closed her eyes and held it tightly. "She was angry Joe, but scared too. The danger wasn't immediate. But she was running when she lost it." She picked up the book with the blood. "She cut her hand on something...that's where the blood is from. At least we know someone didn't kill her. That's all I can get from this. Sorry, Joe."

"That's okay, Bennett. It's more than we had." Joe sighed. "I wouldn't have called you in on this, except that this is a very prominent family, and they are making noise. The girl has been gone for just a few days. To tell the truth, if I had her father, I think I would have run too."

Diana looked at Joe oddly. "She was running from someone Joe. Maybe I should meet the parents. Do you have men out looking for her on the streets?"

"Yeah, and there's no sign. All the friends have been checked out...nothing. I'll arrange a meeting with the kid's parents."

Diana got up to leave, then turned to look at Joe..."I had a good time last night, Joe."
Joe grinned crookedly, "Before or after I took you home?"

Diana blushed. "Both. I'm glad you two met. It certainly makes it easier on me. I don't know how Catherine stood it."

Sitting on his desk, Joe folded his arms and asked point blank, "You've got it bad, don't you?"

Diana just stared at him, then shrugged. "See you later, Boss."

Vincent, Mouse, and Alain were working steadily on the opening to Diana's basement. This part of the job needed to be done swiftly before it was discovered. The tunnel opening had been made and Alain had built a sliding door that was to be concealed behind a cabinet which Mouse had rigged to move aside with another lever.

"Really good plan, Vincent. No one will ever find," Mouse said excitedly.

They were about finished and were testing the sliding door when Kipper came sliding to a stop, gasping for breath.

"Vincent....Father....wants you....Says its important."

Vincent supported the boy while he caught his

breath. "Father didn't say what it was about?"

"No...just that he needs you. I think they found somebody in the tunnels."

Vincent glanced questioningly at Mouse and Alain, and Alain nodded..."Go ahead. We're almost through here. You'd best see what the trouble is."

Vincent took off at a trot toward Father's chamber. When he reached his destination, he saw Father with his medical kit bending over a little girl, who was crying. He ducked out of sight so as not to frighten her, and waited until Father turned around.

"Wait here Jeanie. I'll be right back." Father hurried over to Vincent and spoke with him, "Eric found her wandering in the upper tunnels, Vincent. Her hand was cut badly and is infected. She won't say where she is from, but says she won't go back. She just says 'he' hurt her and she won't ever go back."

"What do you want me to do, Father?," Vincent asked.

"I need you to go meet Peter and get some antibiotics for her hand, for one thing. You can travel fastest and safest. You know where to go. He'll be at the regular meeting place in about half an hour, and he's expecting you. Also, next time you see Diana, see if there are any reports of missing children meeting her description."

Diana waited nervously in Joe's office. Joe had gone to get Mr. and Mrs. Price so she could meet them. The door opened, and she turned, smiling.

Joe introduced them, "Mr. and Mrs. Price, this is Diana Bennett. She works with us on some of our more difficult cases, and she has agreed to help find your daughter."

Mr. Price came forward with a smile to shake her hand. As Diana gripped his hand, she suddenly felt revulsion. Images flooded her mind, and suddenly she knew why his daughter had left. This man was a child molester! It took everything she could do to remain civil and calm. Mrs. Price was crying and thanking Diana for helping, but Diana was having trouble concentrating on the whole scene. The few minutes they were there were an ordeal.

After they left, Joe came back in, disturbed, "What the hell's the matter, Bennett? You acted like a zombie with those people."

Diana slammed her fist down on Joe's desk,

then looked at Joe..."He molested her Joe. That's why she ran. And her mother knows it....Damn it, I hate this job sometimes! So what do we do if we find her? Give her back? Or do we send her to Social Services?"

Joe looked shocked, his brown eyes wide. "You're sure,...absolutely?"

"Absolutely. I just can't prove it...and that's what counts, isn't it?" Diana said, and slammed the door on her way out.

Diana went back to her apartment, so angry and upset she was in tears. Even if she found this child, what would she be going back to? And if the child wouldn't accuse her father, they could do nothing...but perhaps she would stand up for herself...she ran away. Angrily, she buzzed around her apartment, cleaning up her usual mess. There was little she could do without more to go on. It was getting dark soon..."Perhaps a visit to see Vincent will cheer me up." She began getting things together for a very special get-together she had planned.

Vincent took Jacob with him when he met Peter and picked up the antibiotics for Jeanie. It was the first time Peter had seen the child in months.

Peter was delighted. "He looks so much like Catherine, Vincent. He is about due for some immunizations...I think I can manage them for you."

They talked awhile of the usual comings and goings in the tunnels, ...Vincent tried to catch Peter up on everyone. Peter was pleased to see Vincent seeming so cheerful. Since Catherine's death, though he had not been outwardly grieving, he had not been happy either, and he cared a great deal for this unusual man, and he wished him happiness.

The telephone rang in Diana's apartment, but when the answering machine picked up, Joe hung up the phone. He really didn't have much to report to her anyway. He wished he didn't believe what she had said about Mr. Price, but he had a gut feeling she was right.

When Vincent left Peter, he hurried back to Father with the antibiotics for Jeanie. While he was in Father's chambers discussing the child, Jeanie came into the chamber and stopped suddenly when she saw Vincent.

"Jeanie," Father said, "Come here and meet my son and my grandson."

Jeanie came forward, her eyes wide, but when Vincent kneeled on the floor, holding Jacob and smiled at her, she suddenly smiled back, and everything was fine. "Why doesn't your son look like you, Father?" Jeanie said.

Father smiled and told her how they had found Vincent and he had adopted him. "Then why doesn't your son look like you, Vincent?"

Vincent almost laughed. "He looks like his mother, Catherine."

Jeanie started to ask the next most logical question about Catherine, but Jamie hurried in with a message that Diana was on her way to see Vincent...she had been seen by one of the sentries.

Vincent looked at Father, saying, "I'm glad she's coming, Father...I have not had a chance to ask her for her help." He commented to Jamie, "I'll go meet Diana if you can tell me which way she is coming."

"Do you mind if I go along?" Jamie asked.

Vincent and Jamie walked along leisurely toward Diana, discussing Mouse and Jamie's plans.

"We're going to move into my chambers, Vincent, and leave Mouse's as they are. That way, he still has his junk and I don't have to put up with it!"

Vincent chuckled, agreeing that it seemed a logical plan. They saw Diana coming down the tunnel towards them, and Vincent pointed to her for Jacob, and Jacob waved his fat fists towards her and bobbed up and down in Vincent's arms. Vincent noticed that Diana was carrying quite a bit...a large ice chest and a heavy bag slung over her shoulder, so he hurried to her. "Here, Diana, you take Jacob and let me take that...what on earth is all of this?"

Diana grinned at him. "It's a surprise for Jacob...and the children. It occurred to me that we never had a first birthday party for Jacob, so I brought ice cream."

Vincent lowered his head, remembering what Diana had told him about Jacob needing to remember that day as a happy one. Then he looked at Diana, who had Jacob hanging from her

neck like a baby monkey, and put one arm around both of them. "You are so thoughtful, Diana. Thank you."

Jamie didn't need an invitation to leave...they barely knew she was there anyway. She slowly dropped back and ducked into a side tunnel to go find Mouse for the party. He loved ice cream.

Reaching Father's chamber, Vincent explained about the party and they all went to the dining room. As they left, Father sent one of the smaller children with a message for Mary to get the children together.

As Diana and Mary set up the bowls for the ice cream, Father and Vincent played with Jacob. Diana watched Vincent out of the corner of her eye, marveling at how wonderful he was with his son. Suddenly, behind him, a girl came through the entrance with Kipper...Jeanie Price...she had seen her too many times in photographs to mistake her. She had to talk to Vincent and Father, but it could wait until after the party.

They dished out the ice cream and sang "Happy Birthday" to Jacob, who thought the whole thing was an absolute lark...he crowed right along with them.

Vincent laughed... "We'll start him on singing lessons in the morning!"

The children played and ate their ice cream...making the usual mess, but Diana could only watch Vincent as he fed Jacob his ice cream and let him play in it. Before he was done, Vincent was wearing more ice cream than Jacob was, and looked just as pleased. Diana took a camera out of her bag and snapped a picture of them, the flash startling in the chamber. Everyone looked up. She blushed and said, "We've got to have birthday pictures."

She handed the Polaroid to Vincent as it finished developing. He sat there amazed. She snapped another one of him looking at the first one. When she had finished taking pictures of all the children, Mary, and Father, Mouse and Jamie, Father took the camera from her and motioned for her to join Vincent. She stood behind him and Jacob with her hands on his shoulders. Vincent looked up at her and Father snapped the picture.

When they put away the camera, Father came up to her, and putting his arm around her, whispered ... "You are good for him. Thank you."

Mary and Diana cleaned up and Diana took a wet wash cloth to Vincent to try to repair some of

the damage. "I really think both of you need a bath, Vincent. He even has ice cream all in your hair."

"I'll go for a shower later," Vincent said, "but if you will help me with Jacob, we can go bathe him now." He put some water on to heat, and Father took Mary's hand and they left.

As Vincent bathed Jacob, Diana took another wash cloth and cleaned some of the ice cream from Vincent's face and hair. "You are wonderful with him Vincent. Catherine would be proud of you, and so pleased."

Vincent was quiet a moment, then his blue eyes looked into her green ones. "I think she would have approved of you, as well."

Jacob then splashed water all over both of them, suddenly making things a little less serious. Drying and dressing Jacob, they went to Father's chamber together.

When they reached Father's chamber, Diana decided she had best mention Jeanie. She hated to bring up such an unpleasant subject after such a wonderful evening, but it was necessary. "Father, I know who the new little girl is. Has she told you anything about herself?"

Father looked at Diana seriously, "No, she has not...except for saying that she absolutely will not go back to wherever she came from...that "he" would hurt her again. Do you know who she is, and who "he" is?"

Diana sighed..."Yes, I do. I was assigned a missing child case...hers...with her loving parents seeming so distraught. But when I met them, and shook the father's hand....Father, her father molested her. That's why she ran away."

Father looked dumbstruck. Vincent, who had been sitting quietly with Jacob on his lap, asleep, shook his head...ruefully, "To harm your own child...or any child that way...I cannot imagine....Diana...she must not go back."

Diana sat in the chair, frustrated. She looked at Vincent and Father...hoping for some help. "I don't know what to do. If I take her back, at the best...if she accuses him and will testify, they will take her away and put her in foster care. But if she doesn't go back...he gets away with it. And I have to tell Joe something. What can I do?"

Vincent looked at her with understanding..."And how does her mother feel? Does she know?"

Diana looked away. "Yes, she knows. I

imagine it is the usual case of her not feeling able to do anything, but she knows."

Father had been quiet all this time, and he said finally..."Perhaps now is a good time to introduce Joe Maxwell to our world. It is time to see how far his promise to us will take him. Between all of us, surely we can come up with an answer. Make the arrangements, Vincent. Put Jacob to bed, and I will watch him until you return."

Vincent and Diana took Jacob and laid him in bed, Vincent covering him tenderly. He blew out all the candles and left one oil lamp burning, and they left. "I will take you to Joe's apartment building, and you can bring him Below, if he is there. I will wait for you at the entrance to the tunnel."

When Joe heard the knock on his door, he turned off the TV and asked, "Who is it?." "It's me, Joe, Diana."

When Joe opened the door, Diana without preamble said, "Joe, can you come with me...now...it's about Jeanie Price."

Joe grabbed a jacket and locked the door. They went out of the building and around the corner. When Diana started to pull up the grating on the sewer, Joe said, "Hey, wait a minute..." Then he saw Vincent raise the grate and extend a hand to Diana. "Oh, well...hey...I should have known. Evening, Vincent."

Joe looked around the tunnels as they traveled, listening to the soft music of the tapping on the pipes, and Diana explained what had happened. "So now, we are in a strange position, Joe. We need your help and advice. We need to keep the tunnels and Jeanie safe, ... but there are other considerations as well. The "right thing" here is hard to determine. Joe just shook his head.

"Man. When I promised to keep the tunnels safe, I knew times like this might come, but this is hard, Bennett."

Reaching Vincent's chambers, Vincent led Joe to Jacob's bed and said, "Catherine's child, Joe...my son."

Joe gazed down at the beautiful sleeping boy and felt peace at last for Cathy. He hadn't realized how much he had cared for her until she was gone. At least Vincent had his son. Catherine could be happy about that. He marveled at the child. He looked like Cathy...but he could see Vincent too, in the shape of the skull under the baby fat, and in the

hair color and texture. He thought as the child grew, he would look more and more like his father...just not quite as ...unusual.

They moved to Father's chambers. "Will Jacob be all right by himself Vincent? What if he wakes?" Joe asked.

Vincent smiled gently, "He will be fine, Joe. I'll know if he starts to wake."

Joe didn't understand, but everyone else seemed quite sure the child would be fine alone. *Must be handy to be so sure of your parenting*, he thought...

They sat for a long while discussing Jeanie's problem. Finally, Joe said, "Well, we can't really make any decision until we can talk to Jeanie. I think we should let her make the decision...it's her life, after all."

Diana yawned. "Well, it's too late tonight. Perhaps Vincent and I can talk to her tomorrow." Vincent took Diana and Joe back to the exit near his apartment, and thanked him. Diana said she would take a cab from Joe's apartment and go home. Vincent handed her the empty ice chest and her camera, smiling. "I will see you tomorrow then. I will meet you ..."

He touched her cheek briefly and turned to go. Joe was almost embarrassed by the tenderness in that touch. *I was right. I never had a chance...* he thought.

Entering his chamber, Vincent sat at his desk and opened his journal. He reached for the photos Diana had taken of him and Jacob, and the one of the three of them. It amazed him how thoughtful she was. He didn't even have any photos of Catherine, ...but then, he had all his memories, and they were as clear as the day they happened. He did have the painting of him and Catherine that had been done by Kristopher Gentian. He got up and went to the painting and uncovered it. He kept it covered against the dust and damp of the tunnels. It was truly magical... and it would belong to Jacob one day. Recovering the painting, he went back and closed his journal with the photos inside. Tonight, he felt like dreaming instead.

Joe was doing some dreaming as well...his covers were tangled as he tossed and turned. He kept seeing Vincent and Diana together...kept seeing Cathy and Vincent. Cathy was dead, but

Diana was alive...could Vincent ever make her happy? Then, his dreams ran to the little girl, Jeanie...and her father....Legally, he should make sure she came in...tried to prosecute her father...and didn't her mother at least deserve to know she was all right? He kept seeing different scenarios of what could happen, whichever way he decided. Over it all, and wound into each scene somehow was Vincent....if anything ever revealed the secret of the tunnels, Vincent and the entire tunnel world would be destroyed. Finally, sweating and exhausted, Joe got up and fixed himself some coffee. He stared out the window, watching the sun come up. The lights in the city gradually dimmed, then went out. His phone jangled in the background, and he picked it up. "Hello."

Diana listened to Joe's tired voice and felt sympathetic. She too, had slept badly. "Hi Joe. How would you like some breakfast? I know it's early, but I thought maybe you'd like to talk before I go meet Vincent."

Gratefully, Joe accepted. He had to go in to the office, but he'd like to keep in touch on this as closely as possible. Taking a cab to Diana's apartment, Joe tried to get his mind ordered for the day ahead. He knew the Prices would be in to see him at some point today, and he just wasn't sure how he could keep from decking the man, and he just couldn't do that. The man hadn't even been accused of anything at this point. He sighed, paid the cabbie and buzzed himself up.

Sitting on Diana's couch, drinking his coffee after breakfast, Joe looked at Diana from his bloodshot eyes and asked, "I know it's not any of my business, Diana, but ... you know I care. Do you really think it's a good idea for you to get...well...romantically involved with this guy? I mean, look what happened to Cathy."

Diana fiddled with her spoon, then walked over to Catherine's rose bush, knelt, and touched a rose softly. "Joe, nothing bad happened to Catherine that Vincent caused."

"The hell you say! If it hadn't been for Vincent, Chandler would have lived out her days doing corporate law, and never gotten involved in the seamy side of life." Diana looked at Joe speculatively.

Quietly Diana reminded him, "If it hadn't been for Vincent, Catherine would have died in the park two years before Gabriel killed her. If she

hadn't gotten a job with the D.A.'s office....she never would have been the kind of woman she wanted to be. She changed after her attack Joe. It wasn't just Vincent...she was a good woman. But Vincent gave her the strength she needed when it mattered....and he saved her life many times over as well....Why are you suddenly so upset about Vincent? Don't evade me, Joe...you know I can tell."

Joe got up and paced the room. He turned to look at Diana. "Don't mind me, Bennett. Just the old green-eyed monster, I guess. You're right. I'm not thinking straight. I like Vincent...hell, who wouldn't? I guess I just don't like the idea of *you* with Vincent. But that's my problem...not yours...not his. And don't worry,...I wouldn't let it influence any decisions I make...okay?"

Diana got up and took Joe's hand. "I'm really sorry, Joe. You know how it is...a person just doesn't really choose these things...they just happen." She sighed. "I'll let you know what we find out as soon as I can."

Joe got his coat and kissed Diana on the cheek. "Thanks, Diana. See you later."

Vincent had gotten moving early...taken care of Jacob and left him with Jamie and Mouse. Mouse was delighted, but Vincent cautioned him to please not take Jacob to his "Mousehole"...as there were too many things for him to get into and get hurt on. Mouse looked a little offended...

"Mouse knows that, Vincent! Not stupid you know! Besides, Jamie is great with kids." He beamed at Jamie lovingly.

Vincent just cuffed Mouse on the shoulder and apologized..."Sorry Mouse...I have to worry...it's my job."

As Vincent walked off down the tunnel, Mouse looked at Jamie and sighed. "Getting as bad as Father...." Jamie just smiled and bounced Jacob on her hip.

Diana could sense Vincent heading towards her, so she got ready to go meet him. She took the lift down to her new tunnel entrance and moved the cabinet, marveling at Mouse's ingenuity. She pulled the concealed lever and the door slid open, creaking. The only problem was what to do about the cabinet once she was on the other side. She would have to ask Mouse if there was a way to

move the cabinet back from inside the tunnel. Fortunately, it really wasn't a problem, but it would be safer if it could be arranged. She headed down the tunnel toward Vincent...thinking about the things Joe had said. She wondered if Vincent was aware of what Joe was feeling towards her... she thought he was, as she had felt some disquiet from him a time or two...but nothing serious. When she rounded the corner she saw him moving towards her and her heart leaped, pounding in her chest. The very sight of him still took her breath away.

The pipes beat their staccato rhythm, the constant heartbeat of the underground world, as Diana and Vincent made their easy way back to Father's chambers. Vincent held Diana's hand gently and led her over steps and was especially careful of her in the Whispering Gallery on the bridge. Diana was sure-footed as a cat and really didn't need his solicitude, but always enjoyed it just the same. Since she rarely wore high heels, like Catherine had, she and her Reeboks got along just fine in the tunnels, but Vincent was innately a gentleman, and she wouldn't change him for the world. There was a message repeating on the pipes, and Vincent stopped a moment to listen. He picked up a rock and tapped a reply, then listened for a response. It came in a moment. He looked at Diana..."Father has Jeanie in his chamber and is ready for us. She knows who you are now, and she is fairly upset."

"We had best hurry then, Vincent."

Reaching Father's chambers, Vincent went in first and Jeanie ran to him and hugged him fiercely around his waist. "Don't let them send me away! I don't want to go!"

It tore at Vincent's heart to see her so upset, this pretty child with her blue eyes, blond hair, and freckles. He kneeled down in front of her and explained that Diana was here to find out what had happened and that it was up to Jeanie to decide what she wanted to do, but that there were a lot of things to consider. "Diana will understand, Jeanie. She wants to help you to do what is right for *you*. But your parents are looking for you, and your mother, at least, we know is missing you badly. Talk to Diana. I will wait with Father." Diana came in the door and kneeled down next to Vincent. "I want to help, Jeanie. Go on, Vincent. We will come to you when we are finished."

Vincent left, looking back to see Jeanie sitting in front of Diana and nodding to her as Diana spoke quietly. He left and went to his chamber, where Father was waiting for him. "What will Joe Maxwell do, Vincent?"

"Hopefully, the right thing, Father...whatever that may be. Whatever it will be, he will try to do it in a way that will not jeopardize our secret."

When Diana and Jeanie came to Vincent's chambers, the little girl seemed subdued, but not unhappy. Diana looked at Father and Vincent, both of whom seemed so worried, and smiled. "Jeanie has decided to write a letter to her mother telling her what her father did and that she is staying with friends, and is safe. For now, she does not want to go home, but says she may someday. Now we have to see what Joe has to say about this....this is going to be a hard one for him, you know."

Vincent took Diana to the exit of the tunnels closest to the District Attorney's offices, and said goodbye. It seemed to Vincent as though goodbye got harder to say every time. "I am going for a walk in the park tonight...would you meet me after dark at the Central Park West tunnel entrance?"

Diana put her arms around him and looked up into his beautiful, unhuman face..."You know I will...Perhaps I'll have good news from Joe by then."

As Diana climbed the ladder to go out, Vincent murmured, "Parting is such sweet sorrow..."

Hailing a cab, Diana thought of Vincent's parting words and the feeling behind them. It was getting harder daily for both of them just to be apart. *It's harder for him than for me, because it is I, this time, who have the bond. To touch him, I need only reach out...wherever I am, and he is there. But for him,... as it had been for Catherine...he feels the pain of being alone*, she thought.

Joe was waiting impatiently to hear from Diana. When she walked through the door, he

stood up so suddenly he knocked a stack of books and files off his desk. "Damn! This has not been my best morning, Bennett." As he was picking the mess up, he glanced up to see Diana chewing on a nail. "Okay...give it to me. What's the verdict?"

"She doesn't want to come back, Joe...not right now. She wants to write her mother a letter telling her what happened and explaining she is with friends and safe,...but she won't come home right now. She won't testify because it will hurt her Mom....Joe...she's safe where she is. Don't you think that justice would best be served to leave her there for now? When she's older and stronger, perhaps she can come back and testify against him then if she wants. I don't think she can do it now."

Joe thought, and said, "We can't force her to testify...and if she won't, then she's better off where she is, I guess...but this one makes me feel like I lost. I'd like to get that guy....but not at her expense, I guess. I'll act surprised when they get the letter."

Diana stood up and looked gravely at Joe, "Thanks Joe. Sometimes there is no clear-cut answer. Maybe when she's stronger she will want to do something, but not right now. For what it's worth, I think you made the right call."

As Diana walked down the hall, through the bustle of secretaries, the noise of clattering machines and conversations, she was happy that she knew such men as Vincent, Joe, and Father. They restored her faith in humanity, and she smiled as she pressed the elevator button and waited in the crowded hallway for the elevator.

Vincent leaned in the doorway in the pipe chamber, holding Jacob. Jacob was excited by the tapping of the pipes and the activity; he clung with one chubby hand to his father's mane and with the other he waved and pointed, making cheerful half-words and noises.

Pascal, busy as always, listened to a pipe with his stethoscope, then gestured for his son, Zack to come and listen as well. "Where does that come from, where does it go, who is it to, and what does it say?"

Zack, already accustomed to his father's impromptu tests of his knowledge listened and grinned widely..."Comes from the Broadway tunnel, from Lucas..comes to you to relay to Father the message to send someone for a food pickup at the same tunnel at 3:00 P.M." Pascal

tousled his hair and sent him off to skateboard with Kipper at the Reach. "Be careful! No broken heads!"

He and Vincent glanced at each other and smiled. "Your time is coming, my friend. Father just took him out of his cast from breaking his arm...but you and I...we got into some scrapes in our day as well..."

Vincent shifted Jacob and disengaged his hand from his hair. "Pascal...I'm going Above to meet Diana after I put Jacob down for the night. Don't you ever feel like going Above...getting some fresh air?"

"Not me...this is too important to me. It's like music is to a musician, or art to an artist. You go on, and have fun. Tell Diana hello from me."

Vincent left his friend listening to his beloved pipes and went to feed Jacob his dinner, bathe him, and put him down.

Later, in his chamber, Vincent was reading "How the Leopard Got His Spots" to Jacob, who was very close to falling asleep, when Father came in to get his grandson...

"But they will never do it again, Best Beloved. They are quite contented as they are." Vincent closed the book quietly and getting up, lay Jacob in his bed.

Father came up and put his hand on Vincent's shoulder. "You go on and I'll keep an eye on him. But please be careful up there."

Vincent barely heard the warning...Father had said it so many times it was a part of him. "I won't be late." Vincent picked up his wool and leather cloak, and throwing it over his broad shoulders, strode out of the room.

As Diana crossed the park, detouring to avoid people, she saw the opening ahead. A quick look around showed that all was clear, so she ducked into the tunnel to wait for Vincent. He was near, she knew. Every time she came to this tunnel entrance, she thought of when the assassin sent by Gabriel had blown it apart to gain entrance to the tunnels. The tunnel dwellers had repaired the damage, and it was good as new, as far as anyone could tell, but she...even if Vincent never spoke of it...could feel Vincent's sadness once in awhile when he ran his hand over smooth tunnel wall where his and Devin's names had been carved.

She had never met Devin, but she had heard Vincent speak of him. That piece of concrete with his name on it that still sat in her cabinet held a piece of his past. It was funny sometimes ... the small things that make up memories.

She stopped her ruminating when she heard the door slide open and saw Vincent standing on the other side of the bars. "Vincent..."

Vincent ducked through the opening, and reached for her hand. "I have been looking forward to tonight. It has been too long since I have been outside."

They walked hand in hand past the old carousel...Vincent savoring the sight and scents of the park and the city beyond. It was all so alive. Vincent pointed to the moon, "I keep wondering when I will be brave enough to bring Jacob out to see the moon. It is bad enough worrying about myself being caught Above without worrying about what would happen to him if I were and he was with me."

Diana squeezed his hand sympathetically...not sure what to say. There were so many things he would be unable to do with Jacob. "We'll manage somehow to show it to him." Vincent glanced up...noting the "We" and smiled.

They wandered under a bridge and Vincent leaned on the brick wall facing Diana and crossed his arms. "Tell me what Joe decided."

Sighing, Diana told Vincent that Joe would go along with what Jeanie decided, although he didn't feel right about it...he didn't like her father getting away with what he had done.

Vincent looked out at the park, his night vision showing him a world without color...all tones of grays..."I used to think everything was black and white...good or evil...but contact with your world has shown me that at times there *are* shades of gray. Elliot once told Catherine that too...that his choices were not always black and white...I didn't understand then, but I do now. Life is simpler in the tunnels, but we are not exempt from the complications of life...and sometimes, as now...your world reaches out and draws us into their...shades of gray. It makes me uneasy at times; I feel as though I am compromising my principles."

Diana reached out and put an arm around his waist. "You must remember, Vincent, that Jeanie is the one who made the decision. It was hers to make. Not yours, not Fathers...not mine or Joe's. If she chooses differently later...that too, will be her decision. For her, it is the right one, I think. She needs your world's security and strength right

now to build her own strength...and you and Father have given her that."

Vincent walked Diana through the park as closely as he could get to her apartment, bade her goodbye, and watched as she disappeared around a corner. Sighing, he tasted the breeze and listened for anyone nearby. He heard lovers walking far off to the West and a car traveling slowly off to the East. He realized it was later than he had thought, and headed back to the tunnels.

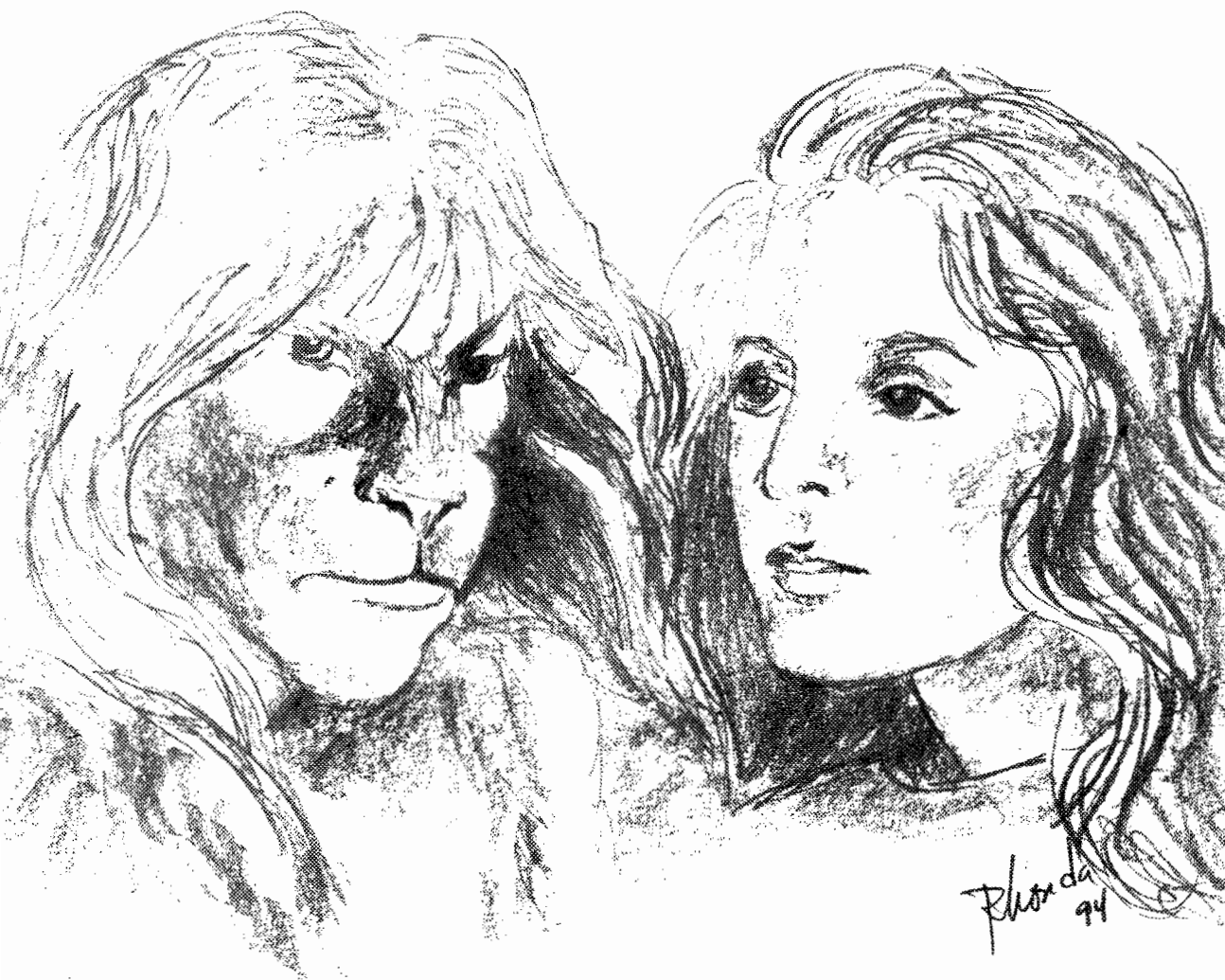
The tunnels were all but deserted except for the sentries who greeted Vincent as he went past them; even the pipes were quiet except for a rare short burst from a sentry checking in. Reaching his chamber, Vincent smiled to see Father asleep

on his bed. Leaning over him, Vincent spoke quietly to wake him, then spoke with him about Jeanie as he walked with him to his own chambers. He relayed Diana's information about Joe's decision to let Jeanie stay with them.

"I must say I am relieved, Vincent. Had she gone back at this time, questions would be raised about where she had been. I feel, too, that she is better off here than with her family or in foster care." He paused, then asked Vincent..."How was your walk?"

"It was pleasant, ...thank you, Father, for watching Jacob."

Father saw he would get no more from Vincent tonight, and went to bed, and Vincent, going back to his own chamber, finally did the same.



FAIRY SONG⁴

A week or so passed quietly. Joe called Diana to let her know that the Prices had received their letter from Jeanie...mailed from outside the city...and the Prices were anxious just to let the matter drop. "No wonder he's so anxious...I'm sure once he got the letter saying that if she came back she would testify against him, his paternal concern simply withered away. She seemed not to be overly worried as well...just relieved that the girl said she was all right and with friends."

Diana sighed..."I'll tell Father and Vincent. Thank you, Joe."

"By the way, Bennett, there's a new case for you; several joggers in the park have been strangled...same M.O....no real clues, as usual. Nothing to really tie the victims...not even robbery as a motive. Can you come down to the morgue to see the last body...and to my office?"

Steeling herself for another case, Diana said, "Sure Joe. I'll head right over."

Later the same day, Vincent was running his routine sweep of the tunnels...checking for anything amiss, broken, or needing care of any kind. The pipes tapped their usual unending messages, a soothing music...almost unheard except in his subconscious until his name was tapped. He stopped to listen. "Vincent...letter received from above...unknown sender ...go to Father." Vincent tapped a quick reply, then headed home. Who, he wondered, could be sending him a letter if not Diana or Joe?

When Vincent reached Father, he could tell the older man was concerned. He handed him the small envelope with the unfamiliar writing, and Vincent stared at it a moment before opening it.

"Vincent,

Catherine gave me your messages and told me that if I ever needed a safe place...away from the death and dying...to come to you. She told me who to contact and where to meet you. I need that safe place, Vincent. Please meet me at the Central Park West Tunnel at midnight tonight."

Love, Brigit

Vincent looked up into Father's worried brown eyes. The candlelight flickered over both of them, causing shadows to dance in the chamber.

"Brigit."

Father was lost a moment, then looked at Vincent in dismay..."Brigit O'Donnell?!"

"Yes. I told her to contact me if she ever needed me...needed a safe place...and she has....don't worry so, Father. Brigit ... if *anyone* would keep our secret safe, Brigit would...but I wonder what horror has driven her to seek out my help."

Vincent thought back to that magical Halloween night when he had met Brigit and had spent all night seeing the city with Catherine later. Saowain...the night when the wall between the worlds grows thin, and the spirits of the underworld walk the earth. He smiled, thinking of the wonders of that night and all that he had shared with Brigit...and Catherine. Brigit had seen him as he truly was and not been afraid, and she, with her lost Ian, and he...having lost Catherine...now shared still another bond. If anyone truly understood him and how he felt about Catherine, it was Brigit. Reassuring Father, Vincent left to finish his work and check on Jacob.

Diana stood outside the morgue, hesitating. She always hated this, but it was needful. Pushing the doors aside, she went in and an orderly pulled out the body she had requested. She looked down at the sheeted figure, then pulled back the sheet. A young man, 20 perhaps (opening the file it showed: *Age 21...Robert Gainer...death by strangulation... signs of a struggle. Bruises on the shoulders, arms...one on the head from a blow.*) She put the file down and wiped perspiring hands on her slacks. Placing her hand on his head, she closed her eyes. "You were running...enjoying the night air. Surprise. Pain. A stranger. No air...can't breathe! Terror and dark!" She broke off, sweating. This hadn't helped her much. Just that he hadn't known his killer. Shaking, she covered the body and pushed it back into its slot. The other two bodies...an older man and a young woman, she received much the same impressions. Going later to Joe's office, she was unable to help him with anything new.

Joe gave her the remainder of the information he had. "The victims all died between 11:00 P.M. and 1:00 A.M. No sign of robbery...no sexual assault...nothing. They were all killed in the park in different areas, but within a one mile radius.

We have undercover police watching the area."

Diana sat heavily into a leather chair. "This one isn't going to be easy, Joe. Have you had police out dressed as joggers during that time?"

"Not yet, but that's a good idea, Bennett. If you think of anything else...let me know."

Midnight, and Brigit waited just inside the pipe where Catherine had told her to wait. The man, John...the helper...had been kind in giving her directions and she had been careful not to let anyone follow her. She heard a grating as the tunnel door opened, then Vincent stepped out, pushing open the bars. He was not dressed as handsomely as he had been on Halloween, the time they met, but Dear God! He was as magnificent as she remembered, with his glorious chestnut mane and strangely handsome face. He reached out one hand, and she did not hesitate to take it...though she had only seen that hand once before...when it grabbed Jamie Harland through the window in her father's hotel room and pulled him outside.

"Come," he said, "It is not safe to stay here." He drew her inside the tunnel and closed the entrance. They stood staring at one another for a long minute...then Vincent spoke, "Brigit...it is good to see you, but why have you come?"

Brigit squeezed his hand, then dropped it. "I have angered both sides now, Vincent. Someone tried to kill me two nights ago. The hate and killing are taking their toll on me. I needed somewhere to go where no one could find me...just for awhile, to let me rest, and to let things quiet down a bit. I hope it is all right."

Vincent looked at this delicate woman who had so much strength and marveled. "Of course you are welcome for as long as you wish. Please come and see my world. Are you very tired?"

She smiled radiantly at him..."Tired? When one is come into the faerie realm? I feel as though I have passed over into a magical land, Vincent. Please show me."

Vincent led her through the tunnels, down the spiral staircase, their feet ringing on the metal stairs. He led her through the Chamber of the Winds to the Mirror Pool and the falls. She was enchanted. "Oh Vincent! It's wonderful! How Catherine must love it! How is she?"

Vincent turned to her, his grief unexpectedly ravaging his face...thought he had been prepared for the question. He knew Brigit had not stayed in touch with Catherine. "Shedied...about a year

ago."

Brigit was aghast. She put her arms around him, and he laid his head on hers and cried. He told her the long story of Gabriel and how he had kept Catherine for all those long, dark months, and then killed her...right after her son had been born. Brigit looked up at him, tears in her eyes..."But she left you a son, Vincent. How wonderful for you. I would that Ian had left me a part of himself."

They walked on, past the Abyss, turning corner after corner, going down still more levels, until they reached Vincent's chamber. Father was there with Jacob, and Vincent introduced Brigit. "Father, Brigit O'Donnel...Brigit...this is my father, Jacob Welles....and my son, Jacob."

Brigit reached a small hand out to Father, and he smiled, captivated by her. "Please, everyone calls me Father..."

Brigit smiled and took his hand. "Father then, it is. You must be a remarkable man, to have done all this," she made a gesture indicating the entire tunnel world, "and to have reared such a remarkable son." She then looked at Vincent for permission, then took Jacob from Father. "Oh my, Vincent. He is wonderful. How I envy you."

Vincent, Father, and Brigit talked far into the early morning before Vincent took pity on her exhaustion and insisted he show her to the guest chamber. "You are welcome for as long as you wish, Brigit."

Sleeping in the next morning, Vincent was awakened by Jacob, who was climbing out of his bed. He picked the child up and convinced him to snuggle in next to him for a bit longer. He slept again, and dreamed. He was in the park, looking for Diana, and couldn't find her. He was frustrated and anxious...there was something wrong...not immediately...but a dull, worrying sensation kept nagging at him. When he woke again, he felt more tired than before, so he got up, dressed himself and Jacob, and took Jacob to see if Brigit was ready for breakfast.

Brigit was waiting for him when he got there. She had been visiting with Jamie, who had made her acquaintance just that morning. "Ah, and here is himself."

Vincent inclined his head in acknowledgement, and replied, "Should my ears be burning?"

Jamie and Brigit just laughed, and Jamie left

to meet Mouse. "Ah, I suppose your ears might be burning. Jamie was telling me you have been busy lately."

Vincent looked puzzled. "I am usually busy, why does that seem strange to Jamie?"

"She tells me there is a woman in your life again, Vincent...I'm happy for you."

Embarrassed, Vincent looked sidelong at Brigit, "Diana has been a good friend."

Flirtingly, teasingly, Brigit looked up at him, "So just a friend she is, now...that's good...perhaps I have a chance with you."

Vincent's head whipped up, tossing his mane...he looked at Brigit in astonishment, not knowing whether she was serious or not, and couldn't tell from her look, even then.

"Ah, don't be running away, now. I'm just teasin' you...though there might be a scrap of honesty in there as well. We have much in common, you and I...and I do find youvery attractive." She slid her small hand into the crook of his arm and walked with him toward the kitchen. Vincent could absolutely not think of another thing to say, and they walked in total silence.

Breakfast was interesting, to say the least. One person after another had to be introduced, and Brigit graciously spoke with all of them. Vincent was inordinately quiet while he fed Jacob and ate his own breakfast. Brigit was beginning to realize that her flirting had truly bothered him, and was sorry, butshe could not truly say that what she had told him was untrue. She was drawn to him more and more, and she was strangely jealous of this unknown woman who had found her way into his life.

Brigit went with Vincent when he went to teach the children in their literature class. She listened to him read from Hamlet...

..."I stand in pause where I shall first begin, And both neglect. What if this cursed hand were thicker than itself with brother's blood, is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens to wash it white as snow? Whereto serves mercy But to confront the visage of offence?" ⁵

His voice went through her like a knife...she had never known anyone whose very voice could affect her like that. She listened as the others took their turn at reading as well, but afterwards, all she could remember was watching him as he read, and listening to his voice. After class, he continued her tour of his world. He even took her to the Reach, where the children played on skateboards on the

only unbroken area of concrete available to them.

When they were alone again, she tried to apologize to him for upsetting him. "Truly, Vincent, I didn't mean to upset you. I was only playing a bit." She put her hand on his chest, and his breath caught...and she continued speaking, "I was only playing...then...but I'm not playing now. Truly, you and I are much alike, and there is no reason we should not comfort one another."

She slid her arms around his neck, and Vincent caught her hands, meaning to pull them away, but instead found her lips upon his in a searching kiss. Confused and ashamed, Vincent did pull away, but his senses were reeling. *Diana*,... he thought...*Diana will know what I am feeling*. He pulled away from Brigit and said, "I'm sorry...I must go."

He left her standing by the Mirror Pool, a little ashamed of herself. She must apologize properly next time, and forget this nonsense. Deep down, she knew there could be nothing between them...their worlds were even more disparate than hers and Ian's had been...or his and Catherine's. She had been being selfish...but for that time she had needed him so...it had been so long since she'd had anyone she cared that much for...or wanted so badly. *It was a mistake to come here*, she thought sadly.

Diana did feel what Vincent had felt with Brigit. She was as confused and upset as he was...and was feeling extremely jealous. Who was this woman? How had she even gotten close enough to him to get him to allow her to kiss him? Perhaps it was time for a visit to the tunnels!

Diana headed through the tunnel from her apartment... determinedly heading for Vincent, though what she would do or say when she saw him, she didn't know...certainly not accuse him of anything...what happened was not his fault, she knew that. But she had to meet this unknown woman.

Vincent, seeing her suddenly appear ahead of him, though he had expected her, stopped him in his tracks. He held out his arms for her, and she ran to him. He groaned as he held her...almost too tightly.

"It's all right, Vincent, I'm here." Diana said finally, "It's all right."

Vincent remembered how he had felt when he felt Catherine falling in love with Elliott, and when Michael had kissed her...and he knew how Diana felt...but he was so relieved to see her. He stroked her hair, her back, as they clung to one another desperately...not wanting to let each other go.

"Who is she, Vincent? What does she mean to you?"

Vincent considered his words carefully. "She is a friend...someone I met awhile back. She and I are much alike...we have both lost people we loved...I care for her. She is a gentle and brave woman. I do not love her, Diana... but..."

She looked up at him sadly..."But you found yourself desiring her, and you don't know why."

He sighed and looked away..."Yes." Diana took his hand, stroking the long, reddish hair.

"It's all right, Vincent. I understand. It happens. I would like to meet her, though."

As they reached the guest chamber, Vincent saw that Brigit was ready to leave. Distressed, he said, "You do not have to go. You came here for safety...that has not changed. You are still welcome, Brigit. We are still friends."

Brigit started to reach out for him, then changed her mind...it might not be wise..."I know, Vincent. But I would not cause you pain. Besides...it is time to leave my safe place..."

"...and walk empty handed among your enemies?" Vincent finished for her...making it a question.

"I have friends there as well...." she said, then changing the subject, "So this is Diana?"

Diana stepped forward, liking this woman immediately, despite what had happened. "Hello Brigit. Vincent told me how he met you, who you are. Truly, if you need to stay, it is all right..."

A look of understanding passed between the women that Vincent surely did *not* understand. "Perhaps I will be back again." She smiled at Vincent, then back at Diana.

Diana felt the other woman's loneliness and understood why she felt as she did about Vincent...but deep down, she was glad she was going...Brigit was entirely too loveable for Diana's peace of mind. But she could tell Vincent was not happy with the arrangement...he was concerned for Brigit's safety. Diana looked at Brigit again and decided suddenly..."Brigit...would you perhaps consider staying with me a few days? You would never have to leave the tunnels to reach my

apartment...you could still be safe for awhile, and you could have access to the telephone to see what the status is before you go back. I would enjoy getting to know you better."

Brigit smiled mischievously at Diana, her eyes twinkling..."Sure, and I would enjoy that too, Diana. If you are sure, I will take you up on the offer."

Vincent let his breath out. He had not realized he had been holding it. He was relieved that Brigit would be safe, now ... and grateful to Diana for her generosity.

"Come," Diana said, taking Vincent by the arm, and Brigit reached up and took his other. Somewhat bemused, Vincent led the two women down the tunnels with them both chatting around him. He was a little amused, but felt superfluous somehow.

As they reached Diana's apartment, Diana hugged him again, looking up into his azure eyes to reassure him that all was well, then stepped back to allow Brigit to say goodbye. Brigit took Vincent's hand and thanked him for his friendship. "We are birds of a feather, ye and I, Vincent. I do care for you, you know."

Vincent's head bowed and he spoke quietly..."...and I you, Brigit...but..."

She waved away his protest..."Nay...don't say it. It does'na matter. I'm only sorry I caused you distress. I was being selfish...and I think Diana understands. She has the Gift, you know."

Amazed, Vincent looked at Brigit. How could she know of Diana's gift...unless she had some of her own?

Cocking her head and smiling up at him, Brigit said enigmatically, "I come from the old country, you know. Perhaps we are all faerie-touched."

As the two women disappeared inside the bowels of Diana's basement, Vincent leaned with one broad shoulder on the wall of the tunnel. The smile he smiled was somewhat enigmatic as well, before he shrugged and headed back to Jacob.

Diana and Brigit got along famously and talked for several hours. Brigit told Diana about her work...the ugliness and the beauty of her country...told her about Ian and their love, and how sympathetic she felt to Vincent and Catherine...and to Vincent and Diana. "It is so difficult to love someone who cannot even live in the same *world* with you. No one else can ever

understand. But it creates it's own kind of beauty as well...the struggle. It is a kind of triumph of the spirit. Vincent has a soul like Ian's...I'm sorry I intruded, Diana."

Diana thought awhile, then confided to Brigit... "Vincent's and my love is so new...to him at any rate...it seems I have loved him forever...it is too easy to feel uncertain. Vincent is still so vulnerable after losing Catherine. When I felt his passion aroused...and then he came to me...I was

tempted...." her voice broke, "to take advantage." She stood, and looked out the window, unwilling to look at Brigit. "But when he does come to me...I want him to want me for myself...not because he is aching for Catherine...or for any other reason."

Brigit came and put an arm around the taller woman, and they stood, looking out over the city. "Come, it is time for bed...we have both been up too long."



THE LAND OF LOST CONTENT⁶

Vincent slept restlessly, then lay awake, his hands locked behind his head, staring at the ceiling. His dreams ... He got up and stood over Jacob, thanking God and Catherine anew that he had been blessed with his son. He sat down and lit a candle, opening his journal. Perhaps if he put some of what he was feeling on paper his mind would allow him to sleep.

Is it wrong to want what other men have as a matter of course? To live with the one I love, and to love her day to day? Catherine..." He paused, a tear slipping down beside his nose.. "is lost to me...at least in that way. I will always have my memories, but I can never hold her in my arms again. I am puzzled by my behavior with Brigit. All I know is that it was wrong...for me...I do not love her. Perhaps someday I will again feel that perfect union of body and mind that I felt with Catherine...one perfect, shining moment that will last forever. Perhaps with Diana our love will grow to the point where the time will come...but will it ever be the same without my bond? Do I dare to hope?

Sighing, he closed the journal, caressing the leather of the cover, then blew out the candle. When he slept this time, his dreams were quiet.

Meanwhile, Diana could not sleep either. Vincent's earlier dreams had kept her awake, formless as they had been, and now he slept quietly...but she was too restless. Getting up, she decided that now would be a good time to tempt their killer. It was foolish, but she knew there were undercover cops out there right now. She dressed in her jogging clothes, shoes, and tucked her gun into her pants and slipped out, thinking she had not woken Brigit. Brigit sat up and thought for awhile. Diana had told her about the case she was working on, and she had seen the gun. Suspecting what Diana was up to, she made a sudden decision. She went down to the basement and entered the tunnels, hoping she could find her way to Vincent.

Diana jogged easily, enjoying the night air despite her purpose in coming. She was nearing the area of the killings. There was no moon, so her night sight was limited. Suddenly, she sensed

she was being followed.

The tunnels all looked the same. Brigit knew she had taken a wrong turn, and she was panicking. Suddenly, an arm reached out and grabbed her shoulder, and she screamed, whirling...to see a young man...one of the sentries, she supposed. She had met him briefly at dinner last night. "Thank God. I need to find Vincent. It's an emergency."

The boy turned and tapped a series of short, coded messages on the pipes, then turned to Brigit. "Pascal will send someone for him, and I'm sure he will be here soon, Ms. O'Donnell."

Relieved, Brigit slumped against the tunnel wall. "Thank you, Alain...that is your name, isn't it?" The man nodded, pleased that she had remembered.

Vincent was shaken awake quietly by Father. "Brigit is in the tunnels near Diana's apartment. She got lost trying to find you, and says it is an emergency...Alain sent the message to Pascal. I'll stay with Jacob."

Vincent dressed quickly and ran to find Brigit to see what the problem was. When he reached her, she told him of her concerns for Diana.

"I had dreams the other night of Diana being in trouble in the park, and not being able to find her ... do you know the area she would be in?"

Brigit had brought a map from Diana's wall that showed the area of the killings. Vincent looked quickly at it and decided which tunnel exit would be quickest, and left immediately, asking Alain to see Brigit safely back to Diana's apartment.

Reaching the subways, Vincent caught the first northbound train and rode the top as far as he was able, then leaped off when it slowed to stop. A few steps took him around the corner where he could follow another tunnel upwards to the exit to the park. It was an easy route...and quick. Once in the park, he tested the air and listened for any movement, and found nothing amiss. It was a

short jog to the perimeter of the area indicated on Diana's map--but then he had the entire area to cover. He ran...for Diana's life could depend upon his speed in finding her tonight.

Diana could feel the man getting closer and closer to her and could hear the slap, slapping of his feet. She could feel the anger in his mind...anger at what or who, she couldn't tell...but for now it was directed at her. She could also feel Vincent coming, and he was fairly close...so she should be safe. If she called out, he would probably hear her...but she hoped it would not be necessary. There were plainclothesmen in the park as well, and that would be a danger for Vincent. Suddenly, the man was very close...before she could turn, he had grabbed her around the neck, and there was a wire at her throat! Equally suddenly a long, hairy arm grabbed him and slammed him against a tree, knocking him out.

Vincent stood over her breathless, then he whirled on her, both angry and relieved..."How could you put yourself in this kind of danger, Diana!"...Desperately he tried to make her understand how upset he was with her..."You are *not* Catherine...I cannot tell when you are in danger...you were almost killed!"

Equally angry at him, Diana glared at him..."No, I am not Catherine! But I am not helpless either. I could have handled him, thank you very much! Besides, there are plainclothesmen all around here...get out of here before you are seen, Vincent." Her voice softened and she kissed him quickly. "Please. Thank you for your help. But I would die if you were caught because of me. Go!"

Vincent left as soon as he made sure she was securing the man with the wire. Shaking his head ruefully, he ducked around some bushes and climbed a tree so he could watch the proceedings.

After tying the man, Diana blew her police whistle, which brought plainclothesmen from all over. Joe was called, and when he got to the scene, Vincent almost started chuckling. Joe was as angry with Diana as he had been and was reading her the riot act. "Damn it, Bennett, this was the stupidest, most irresponsible act of idiocy I have ever seen. Do you *want* to get yourself killed?"

Diana was trying to keep a straight face, but she could feel Vincent's amusement at the situation. She was embarrassed. It had been stupid, and unprofessional. "I'm sorry Joe..." she looked up, and looking at Joe she said, "and Vincent."

Joe glanced up quickly, but could see nothing...especially with no moon to aid him, but suddenly he was sure Vincent was there watching. "Well, don't do it again, Bennett! Now go on, get out of here. You can file your report...such as it is...in the morning." He left with the others, putting the prisoner into a patrol car.

Diana leaned against the tree and waited for Vincent to come down. He sat there, arms folded, his grin so wide that even his teeth showed...something he never allowed himself to do...at least when anyone could see him. Perhaps he should just sit here and let her stew! Finally, she turned and looked up..."Damn it Vincent. Come down and quit playing games."

Vincent slowly came down from his perch, his eyes laughing at her. "Come, let me take you home. Brigit is waiting for you...she was concerned...it was she who sent me for you."

Exasperated, Diana groaned..."Mother hens, the lot of you...but thank you anyway. If you will walk me to the edge of the park, I'll go reassure her." By the time Vincent bid Diana goodbye at the edge of the park, she was less angry and hugged him gently. "I'm sorry Vincent. You and Joe were perfectly right...I should not have done this on my own. I was angry with myself as well...not just you and Joe. I'm glad you were there for me."

She kissed him quickly and would have withdrawn, but he held her gently and kissed her again, a little more passionately than she had expected. Breathless, she looked at him questioningly, but he just smiled and walked away, feeling quite pleased with himself.

Brigit left to go home a few days later, and Diana missed her. They had become good friends in the few days they had known one another. Diana had not seen Vincent since he had left her in the park, and she was feeling unsure of what to think of him. All she could feel of what he was feeling was a certain contentment...the dratted man was entirely too sure of himself! Diana had promised to deliver Brigit's goodbye to Vincent, so she planned a visit to the tunnels as soon as she got off work. Joe had her checking on some things for him...not her usual cup of tea, but she always got bored between cases anyway. She delivered her results to Joe, wending her way through the usual

chaos of the D.A.'s office.

Joe looked up, smiling. "Already, Bennett? Thanks. Say, I meant to ask you the other night...was Vincent up that tree?"

Grinning, Diana shrugged..."You and Vincent...my resident Mother Hens. Don't know what I'd do without you, though. I'm going to see him tonight...any messages?"

"No, that's okay. Just tell him Hi for me...and thank's for protecting our village idiot." Shaking her head, Diana left. "Men!"

Down in the tunnels Diana traveled quickly, knowing exactly where she was, and feeling at home. It had taken her awhile, but sometimes she felt she belonged here far more than Above. Hopping over from one drainage pipe to another, she listened to the tapping on the pipes. She kept trying to learn the codes, but there were too many she was unfamiliar with. She thought she heard her name being tapped, so she supposed a hidden sentry was sending word ahead to Vincent. They were more efficient down here than the telephone system, thanks to Pascal.

Up ahead Diana saw a shadow moving, and around the corner came Vincent, Jacob riding astride his shoulders and holding tightly to his father's hair.

"Jacob! Come here!" Diana held up her arms, and Jacob all but fell from atop Vincent's shoulders into her arms, so hard did he throw himself at her. "Ah, Vincent...it seems I see too little of him. He grows between one time and the next. I miss him."

Smiling at both of them, Vincent commented on Diana's absence of the past few days..."We have both missed *you*....How is Brigit?"

Shifting Jacob to her hip, and starting down the tunnel, leaving Vincent to follow, Diana glanced back flirtatiously and said, "Brigit sends her love, of course...and she has headed back to Ulster. Things have apparently settled down, so she was able to return safely." Catching up with her, Vincent caught her hand, and when she smiled up at him, he knew things were all right between them. "Joe also sent you a message, you tree-ape, you. He said to thank you for saving his village idiot."

Chuckling, Vincent commented, "I knew I liked Joe." Diana punched his arm..."Jacob, did you hear what he said? I don't think I'll bring *him* any more ice cream!"

They were still bantering with each other as they went down the steps to the Chamber of the Winds. The wind tore at Diana's hair and blew Vincent's mane around his face like a chestnut halo. Jacob hid his face in Diana's neck. "Where are we headed, Vincent?" Diana asked.

He just smiled enigmatically. "Come....you'll see."

Entering the Great Hall, Vincent closed the huge doors and closed off the wind. He lit a lantern, and that pushed back the darkness somewhat. Diana looked around..."I don't see anyone, Vincent...what..." Just then lanterns flared as they were lit, and Mouse and Jamie came forward from the darkness.

"Surprise!" Jamie smiled. "Mouse and I wanted to meet you here...to announce we've decided to get married, Diana. We wanted you and Vincent to help us plan the wedding."

Diana rushed forward and hugged her friend. "When is this to happen? What can we do? Who would perform the wedding?"

Vincent came forward and explained. "Diana, here in the tunnels there have been few weddings...none for years, in fact...and never have we had two of our own tunnel children marry." He smiled. "Part of what we need to do is to convince Father to do the ceremony for Jamie and Mouse. You know he is being stubborn about this. You are to stand up for Jamie, and I for Mouse." He looked at his friends indulgently.

"Is *that* why all the secrecy?" Diana asked. "Surely Father cannot be *that* stubborn. I will ask for you, Vincent if you think he will listen to me any better than you...but perhaps if we ganged up on him..."

Vincent responded, "My thoughts exactly."

After talking for awhile about how they wanted to do the ceremony, Vincent and Diana left Mouse and Jamie and went to see Father.

Father sat reading, his chamber as cluttered as usual. He looked up when they entered, pleased to see Diana. "My dear...how good to see you." He rose and limped across the room to greet her, then stopped as he saw the look that passed between her and Vincent. "What now?...When you two look like that, I know something is about to happen that I am not going to like."

Vincent cleared his throat and began..."We came on behalf of Jamie and Mouse, Father. They wish for you to perform their marriage..."

Father sat heavily into a leather chair behind him. "Impossible. They are simply not ready, Vincent."

Diana kneeled in front of Father and looked at him sweetly. "Father, who are we to say they are too young? They are more mature than many others who have been married younger and had successful marriages." She stood and looked down on him. "I think they are perfect for each other."

Vincent looked at Father impatiently... "Father, you know they will just move in together anyway, why not humor them...it is important to them."

Knowing he was defeated, Father gave in reluctantly. "Oh, very well. I know when I am outvoted."

Vincent hugged Father... "I knew you would see reason."

After finding Mouse and Jamie in the "Mousehole," Vincent and Diana told them the good news. "Okay good...Okay fine. Glad Father agreed...want to do this right."

Diana drew Jamie aside and began discussing wedding plans. "I will help you find a dress Above, and I want it to be my wedding present to you...it will be such fun!"

Jamie, who had rarely worn anything but the patchwork clothes sewn there in the tunnels or cast offs, beamed at Diana. She could barely imagine seeing herself in a white wedding dress. "Won't that be awfully expensive, Diana?...Maybe we could just get ideas and Mary could sew me a dress. I'm sure she wouldn't mind."

"We'll see...but you must go with me and try some on, at least...to give you an idea of what you want....and we'll rent Mouse a tux...won't he look wonderful!"

Vincent and Mouse were looking at each other in dismay. *What were they getting into?*

Walking Diana home, Vincent was very quiet, and Diana could almost feel his mind churning. Something was bothering him...she sighed. Sometimes she felt like a brain surgeon...it almost took one to get a straight answer from Vincent when he was like this...or to get him to talk at all. "Are you all right, Vincent?"

Vincent turned his head a fraction and looked sidelong at her...thinking again how lovely she

was, and how good for him. He smiled, but his eyes were shadowed. "I'm fine, Diana...just thinking about the wedding. It will be the first real wedding here in the tunnels in many years...especially between children raised here."

"You're not worried about Mouse and Jamie are you?"

Vincent shook his head. "No. Never about that. I have always thought they belonged together...that it was just a matter of time."

Diana stopped and pulled him to face her. "Then what is it, Vincent?"

Looking away, Vincent collected his thoughts, then smiled at her. "Truly Diana, it is nothing important." He kissed her goodbye and sent her on her way home.

Back in his chamber after collecting Jacob from Mary, who had him all ready for bed, Vincent put the child down for the night and opened his journal.

Mouse and Jamie's marriage should make me happy. Instead I must be ashamed for the envy that I feel for their happiness. I cannot help thinking about all Catherine and I missed...all the things I will never know of living with the woman I love. Such a normal thing. I must be content with the life I have and with the blessings I have been given, but I cannot help wondering about what might have been.

He sighed. Diana had asked him what was wrong, and somehow he just couldn't bring up Catherine yet again with her. It just didn't seem right. He closed the journal and went to bed...hoping he would sleep quietly.

Diana knew something was bothering Vincent...something to do with Catherine...and with her, but his emotions had been too formless for her to tell for sure. Besides, she did not like to pry, so she rarely made a distinct effort to touch his thoughts directly and just picked up on what came naturally. She couldn't help that, so could hardly be accused of prying. Showering and dressing for bed, she thought about Jamie and Mouse. Jamie would look lovely in a white wedding dress. She tried to picture Vincent in a tux, but shook her head...*No...that would never look right.* Still thinking about variations of dress for the wedding, she went to bed.

TRUTH AND INNOCENCE

The next morning the phone woke her even before her alarm did. Groping for the receiver, she knocked the phone off the table and she could hear Joe calling... "Hello...Diana? You okay? Hello?!"

Hanging half off the bed, she picked up the receiver... "Um. Hi Joe. Are you in the wake up call business now?"

Sheepishly, Joe apologized... "Sorry Diana. Did I wake you?"

Diana thought... *Um...it's Diana...not Bennett...it must be personal.* Then smiling to herself she answered, "Yeah, you woke me, but it's okay. What's up?"

After a short pause, Joe said, "Well, I kind of hate to ask you this, but I have a special case for you...it's kind of personal. Could you come down to my office this morning so I can fill you in?"

Awake by now, Diana was intrigued. "Sure. Let me grab a bite and a shower and I'll be right there."

Getting up and about, while she was fixing breakfast, Diana reached out tentatively to Vincent...just to be sure he was all right. He was still sleeping, lucky man...no telephones where he was. Sleeping, and no real dreams. She ate and hurried to meet Joe; he had sounded worried.

When Diana opened the door to Joe's office, she could tell he hadn't had much sleep. She ought to be glad he had waited until he had to call her...he had probably wanted to call much earlier. She plunked down on the chair in front of his desk. "Okay, Joe. Let's have it."

Joe wandered around the office, his hands in his pockets...apparently not sure where to begin. Finally he did. "Awhile before Cathy got murdered I was working on an important case, and while working on it I became involved with one of the female attorneys working for Proctor and Brannigan...the firm who was defending the man we were trying to prosecute....To make a long story short, she was setting me up to discredit me, and Cathy pulled me out of a tough spot. The woman was Erica Salvin. Cathy also saved Erica's life. At any rate, by the time it was over, Erica testified against her boss, who had engineered the whole thing against me. After *that* was over, she left corporate law and New York...and me...and moved to Chicago to join the D.A.s office there. I

think Cathy may have been an influence there, but I was never sure." Joe saw Diana watching him carefully... she obviously had no idea what he was leading up to. "I got a call from Erica last night, and she told me a very strange story. She had been working on a murder case...big time drug dealer killed...when he died he had on a strange ring...gold, very old, with a Latin inscription." Diana sat up straighter, a shock running through her.

Joe continued, ... "She removed the ring and has tried to trace it with no luck. But at the funeral she noted at least three other men wearing identical rings. As if that isn't weird enough, since the funeral there have been three other murders. Each man has a tattoo of a ring ... with one word tattooed inside the ring...each word different. The first word was "The" the next was "Truth," and the third was "shall." She wanted to know if I could check on Diamond and Jewelry Way to see if I could find out anything...but I remembered that you had said something about a ring connected with Gabriel, but by that time it was unimportant. Can you help?"

Now it was Diana's turn to pace. Finally she turned to face Joe. "I know what the inscription is...Veritas de Liberabat." Father translated it for me when I couldn't find out anything...*The Truth Will Set You Free.* Whatever this is, Joe...it is connected to Gabriel somehow...or to the organization he belonged to. That is all I know...all I can tell you. Vincent still has the ring somewhere, I'm sure...and somewhere I'm sure the police have Gabriel's ring. Perhaps a comparison would help. Can Erica come here?"

Joe looked relieved. "So you'll help? I can't think of anyone else who could do as well with a case like this. Erica said she will come if we feel we can help."

Diana stood up and put her hand on Joe's shoulder. "You know I will, Joe. It's about time I had a case with some meat to it...you've been coddling me. Besides...that organization of Gabriel's intrigues me."

After Diana left Joe, she went to the police department and checked to see if Gabriel's ring was still available to her...but when the box with Gabriel's possessions were brought to her...the ring was missing. *Interesting,* Diana thought... Obviously someone with connections had managed to retrieve the ring. Somehow those rings were

very important to these people. Just how many there were was an interesting question. Equally interesting was the fact of the tattoos on the victims. *What is the significance? Obviously the English translation of the inscription is being spelled out in the victims...so three more victims...but why?*

Erica came in at Kennedy at 6:00 P.M. the next day. Joe and Diana were at the airport to meet her. "Joe," Erica began..."Thank you so much. I don't know how to thank you for your help...I know I certainly don't deserve it."

Erica looked more than harried...she looked frightened. Diana could tell when she shook her hand that Erica was hiding something important. "Erica, if Joe and I are to help you, you are going to have to be honest with us. You're scared stiff...what is it."

Erica looked around, "Not here. Wait until we're alone and I'll tell you more. I could have been followed."

Joe hurried the women into a cab, and when they got to Diana's apartment he turned to Erica, "All right...we're alone. Now give, Erica."

Sinking into Diana's couch, Erica began, "After the funeral I began getting uneasy. Someone has been following me. Twice my apartment has been broken into...I assume they are searching for this..." She handed Joe the ring.

Nodding, Joe glanced at Diana and gave it to her. "It looks the same, Joe." Looking at Erica, she asked, "May I keep this?"

Relieved, Erica said, "By all means. I'd just as soon never see it again."

Joe, taking Diana aside, asked if Erica could stay with her. Diana hated to let her stay because then she would be unable to use her tunnel entrance, but she agreed that it would be easier and safer for Erica. "Remember Joe...no matter how you feel about Erica...no matter what...you can't let slip about the tunnels or Vincent."

Glaring at her, Joe said, "What do you think I am, Diana...an idiot? You know better than that...but get that other ring from Vincent...and try to keep him out of it. I *know* he will want to get involved just because of Gabriel's possible involvement...but try to keep him out of it."

After getting Erica settled and Joe left, Diana excused herself, saying she needed to go out for a

while. Since she couldn't use her basement entrance, she walked across the park to use the Central Park West tunnel. That was the only other entrance from which she knew the way faithfully...she really didn't have time or energy for getting lost tonight, and even following her direction sense, sensing Vincent, she still sometimes got lost. As she walked, she tried projecting her thoughts to Vincent. She had found that if she worked very hard, sometimes she could "show" him where she was. It was ineffective and clumsy at best, but when it did work, it helped a lot...but it took a lot of effort.

Vincent was reading Hamlet, and had been arguing a point with Father, one that had been brought up by one of his students...when suddenly he snapped the book closed. Father looked up, startled. Even Jacob, who was playing with Father's chess men, looked up at his father, surprised. "I have to go, Father. I need a walk. Keep Jacob for me?"

Father was perplexed, but he answered, "Of course, Vincent. Are you all right?" Puzzled, Vincent answered: "Yes, fine. Sometimes Diana *calls* me...and I *hear* her. I *think* she is in the park...I need to go check." Kneeling, he kissed Jacob, who waved "bye-bye," and went back to his chessmen.

Vincent picked up his cloak and trotted off down the tunnel. He wondered why Diana would be coming via the park rather than her own tunnel, but he was suddenly sure she was, indeed, at the park entrance. Reaching the doorway, he saw her just closing the door. "Are you all right, Diana?"

She turned and reached to hold him. "I'm fine, Vincent. But I have some information for you on a case I'm working on now...besides, I needed to make arrangements to take Jamie to look at wedding dresses tomorrow." She proceeded to tell Vincent about Erica and the case. "So, Joe and I thought if we had the assassin's ring perhaps a comparison would help...but I believe they are identical."

Vincent responded immediately, "Of course you can have the ring. As for Jamie, why don't I have her meet you somewhere Above tomorrow? It will make things easier for you."

Diana was relieved, and asked Vincent to tell Jamie to meet her at the Park Avenue entrance...actually at a coffee shop Above...at noon tomorrow. "Tell her to wear some of her best

'Topsider' clothes...'cause we're going shopping."

She and Vincent talked for awhile as she leaned against him. He idly stroked her hair, bringing it tumbling down around her shoulders in a russet stream. She basked in his quiet pleasure, and regretted it when the time came to leave. "I think I am going to ask Joe for a few days off soon, despite this case...I need to help Mary with Jamie's dress. Going shopping is fine, but I know that after trying on some of these dresses what she is really going to want is for Mary to make it for her. I just want her to have the experience of seeing herself in these dresses to give her an idea of what she wants....Besides...it would be wonderful just to spend some time down here...with you."

Vincent nodded wordlessly and kissed her goodbye.

As Diana entered her apartment, Erica was looking out the window. "I had forgotten how lovely this city is at night."

Diana went and stood beside her. "I know...Erica...tomorrow I am helping a friend find a wedding dress, and soon I am going to take a few days off and go stay with her...Joe will know how to find me if you need me. You and he can pursue information about the ring and the murders until then. At this point, I have told you all I know anyway."

Erica looked very tired, suddenly. "I suppose I should go to bed. It has been a long, stressful day."

After Erica went to bed, Diana stayed up and took all the information about Vincent off her computer and went around her apartment removing anything that could possibly point to him or the tunnels and placed it all in her safe. She didn't think Erica would snoop, but it was best to be careful. Joe already had standing instructions if anything ever happened to her to give it to Vincent. Then, since she had given Erica her room, Diana made up the couch for herself and fell asleep.

In bed himself by this time, Vincent lay under his patchwork quilt...feeling very lonely. To have Diana here...for days at a time...would be wonderful. Perhaps he could dream just a little...and hope...that someday she could be here permanently. He was not sure, but he felt, somewhere deep inside himself, that Diana could be happy here. He was almost afraid to allow himself to dream like this...he had learned long ago that

impossible dreams can be so hurtful as to almost destroy a part of him. He put aside his thoughts as well as he could, and tried to sleep.

Joe was wakeful himself. Seeing Erica again had stirred his memories. He had never felt for anyone as he had for her...until she betrayed him. Understanding why she had done it didn't excuse what she had done...but her contrition made it easier to forgive. He, too, was thinking in terms of possibilities.

Diana called Joe early the next morning and explained her desire to take a few days off to help with Jamie's wedding. "But Diana! You've only just started on this case...we need you."

Diana continued doggedly, "You don't really need me, Joe. I've already told you what I know...I got the assassin's ring from Vincent and determined that Gabriel's is no longer in the lockbox at headquarters. If anything does come up, you know how to contact me...it's not like I'm going to the moon."

Joe mumbled, "Might as well be, down there...no phone."

Diana laughed. "No, but use a messenger. You know who to use. They are very efficient."

Joe asked Diana about Erica..."Is she doing okay? I mean, she's been under a lot of stress. Maybe she ought to take a few days off, too."

Diana could hear a world of caring under Joe's gruff tones. "Why don't you suggest it, Joe. Maybe you and she can...renew your acquaintance. She seems like a really nice person....Listen...I've got to hurry. Jamie will be waiting for me, and I'm running late. Catch you later." Leaving a note for Erica to call Joe, Diana left to meet Jamie at the coffee shop.

Jamie watched for Diana, wondering just what she was really doing here. She felt out of place in her jeans and T-shirt. Going shopping on Park Avenue--in jeans and a T-shirt? Even she knew that was going to look bizarre. Looking up, she saw Diana come breezing in--dressed in sweats, of all things, and she suddenly felt better. Buying coffee and sweet rolls, Diana discussed with Jamie just what she had in mind in terms of dresses, and

of whether or not Jamie wanted to buy a dress or have it made.

Jamie looked at Diana shyly, "I think it would be neater to have Mary make it...and I think she would like that...but getting ideas of what looks good on me would be nice too. I've never been much for dresses, you know."

Diana grinned..."Me neither, kiddo."

They wandered through a few bridal shops until Jamie found a dress she really wanted to try on. When she came out of the dressing room, Diana held her breath....Mouse would absolutely die.

When Jamie faced the mirror, she was speechless. "Is that really me, Diana?" The long lace sleeves and bodice and high lace neck set off Jamie's trim figure to perfection. The frothy veil made her face look like an angel's.

Diana smiled at her, "I don't know if Mary could make one like this exactly...but at least we have ideas. This is perfect...now, let's go for patterns and material."

They spent the rest of the day picking up material and they found a pattern that looked remarkably like the dress she had tried on. Chattering like magpies, they headed back to Diana's apartment, where Diana packed a few things and left another note for Erica. Heavy laden, they used Diana's tunnel entrance and went Below.

Joe and Erica spent the day on a picnic, renewing old acquaintance...and rekindling some old fires. They went to the zoo, and then had a picnic in the park. Erica had been sure they were followed, and had thought she had seen a man wearing a ring like the ones that they had, but Joe told her she was over-reacting. By the time they got to the park, Erica was more relaxed than she had been in some time.

"Joe, how would you feel if I moved back to New York...and came to work for you?"

Joe leaned back, chewing a piece of grass. He looked up at the clouds. "Are you sure that's what you want? We'd be lucky to have you in the office...and I'd be delighted...you know that."

In their contentment, they never noticed the man who had been following all day. The man stood in the shadows of the bushes 100 yards away, twisting a gold ring and following every move they made with his ice-blue eyes.

Back in the tunnels, Jamie and Diana found Vincent and Mouse swimming in the Mirror Pool with Jacob. Diana was a little flustered, seeing Vincent there in the water. She had never seen him without his numerous layers of clothing...and he was truly magnificent. Even without a psychic bond, Vincent could read Diana's embarrassment.

He handed Jacob to Mouse and leaned on the edge of the pool. "Diana...If you will throw me my cloak and the towel, I'll get out. Why don't you and Jamie wait for us in my chamber?"

Mouse watched his friend, puzzled, as Vincent stared after Diana. He started to say something, then thought better of it. It was, after all, not his business. Finally, he did say, "Is Diana all right, Vincent? Seemed upset. They could have come swimming too."

Vincent just climbed out, with the water streaming from his pelt and mane. He dressed, then caught up Jacob and dried and dressed him while Mouse dressed. Looking at Mouse, he finally said, "No, Mouse. Nothing is wrong with Diana...nothing at all."

As Vincent strode ahead of him in the tunnel, Mouse thought hard about Vincent and Diana. Seemed to him they were neither one acting like themselves. *Talk to Jamie.*, Mouse thought. *She can explain to me...* He just wished Vincent didn't always keep everything inside himself...sometimes it helped to talk.

Diana had practically run to Vincent's chamber, and Jamie followed after her, a little amused...but feeling sorry for her friend as well. Back in Vincent's chamber, they spread out the material and the pattern and waited for Mouse and Vincent. Diana paced the room, quietly. She looked at Jamie and said, finally..."Perhaps I shouldn't stay down here after all."

Jamie just patted her arm, hugged her, and said, "You love him. I think he loves you. Just give him time, Diana."

Tears started in Diana's eyes. "Will there ever be enough time...for him to leave Catherine behind?"

Just then, she felt Vincent nearing them, and brushed away the tears. This is Jamie and Mouse's time...it must be happy.

When they saw all the purchases, Mouse was amazed. "All this...only one dress, Jamie!" But

he fingered the lovely material and lace wonderingly.

Vincent played with Jacob and watched quietly. He looked at the pattern and material, imagining how Jamie would look dressed in it. "It will be truly wonderful, Jamie."

Diana and Jamie took the material and pattern to Mary to discuss making the dress, and to measure Jamie. When Mary saw the material, she became very excited. "Heavens,...it's been years since I've had anything like this to work with." The room buzzed with plans. Mary was also making Mouse's clothes for the wedding, and she consulted Jamie on materials.

Vincent let Mouse return to his Mousehole, and he and Jacob went to visit Father. Father was irritated by all the confusion. He had been to see Mary and could barely get her attention at all. "How long is this going to go on, Vincent? I'm an old man...I like my quiet."

Vincent hugged Father. "Not so very old you cannot remember the joy they are feeling. The tunnels can use some excitement once in awhile." Father looked at Vincent with concern.

"I hear Diana will be staying for a few days. That alone will bring more excitement than I feel like dealing with."

Irritated, Vincent stared at Father. "You will not need to deal with it."

"I remember when Catherine stayed here...what it did to you. But what you seem to be overlooking, Vincent, is that the tables have turned, somewhat. It is not *you* I am concerned about here."

For a long moment, Vincent looked at Father. He was unsure how to respond...he knew what Father said was true...that the proximity would be far harder on Diana than on him.

"She will be occupied with the wedding preparations, Father. Perhaps it will be no problem."

After he left Father, however, Vincent thought a great deal about what his parent had said. He thought back over the last week or so...he thought again about the kiss he had given Diana in the park that night. Suddenly, he felt a little ashamed of himself. He had been indulging himself in a little flirtatiousness...something he had never really

dared with Catherine...He had almost felt like any normal man pursuing someone he cared for...forgetting that Diana was more vulnerable than he. She was dealing with what she felt as well as his own tumultuous feelings. He had been there...he knew. However, he did absolve himself of any blame for this morning. After all, he had not known she was coming...he had not expected her until much later. He would simply have to be more careful while she was here.

Diana was looking for Vincent that evening. He had been conspicuous by his absence all day, though she supposed he would have had better things to do than help with Jamie's wedding dress. In fact, he and Mouse had been speaking with helpers about arranging flowers for the ceremony and supplies for special candles to make Jamie's and Mouse's chamber beautiful as a surprise for her on their wedding night. He had spoken to Rolly about music, and the children were practicing the song they were to sing. Diana found him lying propped up on his bed reading, with Jacob sleeping next to him on the bed. He looked up when she called softly from the doorway. "Come in, Diana." He quietly lifted the sleeping child and placed him in his own bed. He settled back down and indicated for Diana to sit.

Diana picked up the book he had been reading..."Shakespeare's sonnets..." She turned to the marked page and read...

*When to the sessions of sweet silent thought
I summon up remembrance of things past,
I sigh the lack of many a thing I sought,
And with old woes new wall my dear time's
waste..... 7*

Vincent watched her, knees drawn up, arms crossed. Resting his head on his arms, he listened..."Please...continue. Find something you like." The candlelight in the room gave her face an angel's glow and the red of her hair was like a sunset. Vincent could not have looked away to save his soul.

Looking back down and scanning pages, she smiled, then began...

*Let me confess that we two must be twain,
Although our undivided loves are one;
So shall those blots that do with me remain*

*Without thy help by me be borne alone.
In our two loves there is but one respect,
Though in our lives a separate spite,
Which though it alter not love's sole effect,
Yet doth it steal sweet hours from love's
delight...⁸*

Sighing, Vincent took the book from her and shook his head. "I am sorry for this morning, Diana...and for the park the other night. You know, surely, that I would never cause you pain or distress purposefully."

Diana carefully moved over next to him and took his hand. "I know that, Vincent...and I hope you know that I would never do anything to hurt you...or to pressure you. I am content to be near you, and to receive your love in any way you feel free to give it....Besides...don't feel too guilty...I thoroughly enjoyed the kiss...and the view this morning."

Vincent swung his legs over the side of the bed and stood...reaching out a hand to help her up. "Come. I'll walk you back to the guest chamber."

Diana put an arm around Vincent's waist, and his arm encircled her as he walked her to her room. Reaching the chamber, Vincent bent and kissed her gently, then sighing, rested his great head atop hers for a moment, his mane all about her shoulders. "Goodnight, Diana. Sleep well."

Diana watched as Vincent turned and walked slowly back to his chamber, then, instead of going to bed, Diana lit a lantern and walked to the falls. For a long time she sat by herself, watching the falls...listening to the water and the quiet. The tapping of the pipes had quieted...it was late. She was so immersed in her thoughts that she did not hear or sense Father come up behind her, and she startled when he placed his hand on her shoulder.

"I'm sorry, my dear. I didn't mean to frighten you."

Diana moved over so Father could sit next to her. "It is so lovely here...so peaceful." She looked over to Father..."It makes me wish I could stay forever."

Father looked down and fiddled with his gloves. He cleared his throat, then said quietly..."Is there any reason why you could not?"

Diana stood, then turned to Father. "No...not for myself. But he isn't ready, Father. When he can bring himself to ask me to stay, then I would forfeit the world...until then...I will simply wait."

She leaned over and kissed Father on the cheek, surprising him. "Goodnight, Father...Thank you...for caring...and for asking."

Back in the guest chamber, Diana lay in bed...unable to resist touching Vincent's mind with hers. He was asleep and she envied him the luxury, for it had been a long day for everyone. Jamie's dress was almost finished, and it was going to be lovely. The ceremony was to be in two days. She hadn't heard from Joe, so either he hadn't found out anything new, or he was taking her advice and he and Erica were renewing their acquaintance. She hoped it was the latter. *Someone* ought to be able to have a good time.

Joe and Erica had enjoyed their day tremendously. They spoke little of the case, though they did again try a few jewelers to see if they could find out anything about the rings. They were followed all day by the silent watcher with the cold blue eyes. When Joe left Erica at Diana's apartment, he felt as though his life had taken a new turn. Erica settled down for bed to sleep thinking that perhaps her life, too, was beginning to look up.

The man followed Erica and Joe to the apartment, and watched the elevator to see what floor they went to, then made a call. Watching Joe leave, he rode the lift up to Diana's rooftop apartment. He climbed out the service door on the elevator and went around the ledge to the rooftop...it was easier to break in. Gaining access to the apartment was simple, and a little chloroform made sure Erica did not wake to disturb him. He tore the apartment apart, but didn't find the rings.

The next morning when Erica woke, she felt as though someone had hit her with a hammer. She couldn't remember anything after laying down...surely she hadn't been as tired as all that. When she got up, she gasped. The room was torn apart...Diana's things were everywhere. She ran to the phone and called Joe.

Joe grabbed the phone, wishing people would leave him alone on his day off. "Joe here. What now!"

"Joe, it's Erica. Someone was here last night...they must have ...I don't know...drugged me or something...the whole apartment has been ransacked. I'm sure whoever it was wanted the

ring...or rings."

Joe pulled the drawer to his dresser out, just to reassure himself that the rings were still there. "You're okay?...That's all that's important. I'll be right over."

Foregoing even a shower, Joe dressed, put the rings in his pocket, and headed over to Diana's loft. On the way, he put the rings into an envelope and scribbled a note to Diana and Vincent about what had happened. As he passed the barber shop where he usually got his hair cut, he went inside and gave the envelope to the owner, who was a Helper. "Get it to Vincent right away, okay Charlie?"

Joe never quite made it to the loft. A cab pulled up just before he got to Diana's building; the door opened and he was dragged into the car and knocked unconscious. When he woke, he was tied in a basement somewhere. He could hear machinery going above...probably a pump of some kind. He wasn't gagged, but he doubted anyone could hear him in any case...if his captors had thought so, he was sure he would have been gagged.

Erica paced the apartment. Joe never had gotten to the apartment. He wasn't home and he wasn't at the office. "They've got him...I know it...Damn it. I don't even know how to reach Diana." She called the police and explained the situation, but there was little they could do, since they had no more information than she had. She cleaned up the apartment as well as she could, then took a taxi to Joe's office to see what she could do.

Kipper brought Vincent the letter about noon. After reading it, he hurried to Diana. "You must go Above, Diana and see what you can do to help. We can manage here until you return."

The dress was about finished, so Diana agreed she should go see what the damage to her apartment was and see what she could do to help. Vincent took her as far as the nearest subway access and watched as she got on the subway. It pained him to watch her go away from him...and possibly into danger once more. But, others needed her as well...he had to accept that.

Reaching her apartment, Diana was appalled at the damage. Even sofa cushions were ripped, but obviously Erica had tried to straighten the mess as much as she could. The safe was intact, so that was no problem, at least. But she wondered where Erica was. Perhaps she and Joe had gone in to the office to do some research. She called Joe's office, and Erica answered. "Erica, it's Diana..."

"Diana! Thank God! They've got Joe...and maybe the rings. I didn't know how to find you!"

Diana's mind raced, "Calm down, Erica...think...where were you and Joe yesterday? Did you notice anything unusual?"

Erica took a deep breath. "We went to the zoo first...I was paranoid...kept thinking we were being followed, but Joe convinced me it was my imagination...now, I'm not so sure. I thought I saw the guy talking to another man at a oh, I don't know...it looked like a storage building near the seals...I think it may have been a pump house...anyway...the man seemed to be discussing us, and he was twisting the ring on his finger. He seemed angry and pointed at us...or in our direction, anyway..."

Diana looked around the apartment and sighed. "I'll be there in awhile, Erica...I have to do something first." Hanging up the phone, Diana picked up a couch cushion and closed her eyes...she saw a hand with a knife, slashing the pillow...nothing more...she walked around, picking up odds and ends, and picked up various impressions ...anger ...desperation...the rings... "You need those rings, don't you? Your life probably depends on your getting them back...but what do the tattoos mean? 'The truth will...the truth will set you free. Six people. Three dead...three more to go. But why?' Frustrated, she left and grabbed a taxi downtown to see Erica.

"Where are the rings, Mr. Maxwell?" The man with the ice blue eyes stood over Joe with the hose.

Joe's face was swollen where he had been beaten, but he just mumbled, "Don't know..."

"Perhaps if we talk to your lady friend we can impress upon both of you the need to give us the information."

Joe looked up, his mind going round in circles..."Leave her alone. She doesn't know."

"But you do, don't you Mr. Maxwell?...and I would bet you will tell me to save the pretty lady a lot of pain." Nodding to a stocky, mean-looking

character, he said, "Get her. Bring her to me. And if you can find the redhead...so much the better. Two are even better than one." He pulled on his gloves and got back to work on Joe...aiming a couple of well-placed kicks prior to beginning.

Diana and Erica discussed what they knew about the case. Erica told Diana, "I suspect the men with the tattoos all belong to one part of this organization...that they are not part of the hierarchy...but part of some specific part...I don't know, though. It's a drug smuggling operation, I know that much, but I don't know how they get it in or where it goes. I don't even know if it is based in Chicago or elsewhere. The men who died were not from Chicago. One was from Detroit, one from L.A....and one from here. It makes sense though, I guess, what you say about the rings...if they are as old as you say, and if there are only so many of them for the leaders of the organization...they must be very valuable to them."

Diana left Erica to send a message to Vincent about what they knew...and about the zoo and the pump house. She suspected they might be keeping Joe there, but without anything to go on, they couldn't get a search warrant. Perhaps Vincent could ... take a look. She gave the message to Clarence, then headed back to the office. When she got to Joe's office, she stopped...something felt wrong...suddenly she whirled to run, but it was too late...steel hard arms grabbed her and held her. Another man pulled Erica out of the office. She felt a gun in her back and she and Erica were walked sedately to a waiting car. They were driven to the zoo, and were let in through the back by a distinguished man in a gray business suit. Diana recognized him as the zoo director...she had met him awhile back at some public function...she couldn't remember where...but she hadn't noticed then the ring that he wore on his left hand. They were taken into the shed that Erica had described...it was, indeed, some type of building housing the pump for the seals enclosure.

"Joe!" Erica pulled loose and rushed to Joe, who was huddled on the floor, bleeding and moaning. Cradling his head in her lap, she swore at the man standing over them. "Damn you! What have you done to him?"

Another man lifted Joe and held him upright while the first spoke to him. "Now, Mr. Maxwell. You will tell me where the rings are. You will also tell me what you know of the tattooed

men...or you will watch while we do the same thing to your pretty friends as we have done to you."

Diana struggled to get loose..."Joe...don't do it. It will be all right, Joe...do you understand me? Don't tell them anything."

Joe shook his head, and the man started for Erica. Suddenly the door of the building was ripped from it's hinges and Vincent's roar shook the room. In moments it seemed, the three men were dead, and Vincent had Diana in his arms. Erica huddled by Joe...terrified, but slowly coming to the realization that she was not about to be killed.

Diana spoke urgently to Vincent..."We need to get out of here...there may be more of them."

Vincent went to Joe and Erica moved to put herself between them. Vincent stopped and said quietly, "I will not harm him. He is a friend...Come. Let me help him." Diana drew Erica aside and Vincent lifted Joe like a baby and carried him outside. He indicated the gate and the car next to it. "Diana...see if one of the men inside has keys to that car and take Joe to the hospital. I want to look around before I leave."

Diana ran back inside and found the keys in time to see Vincent putting Joe into the car. She looked anxiously at him, "Be careful, Vincent."

Rushing Joe to the hospital, Diana then spoke to the police chief and told them what had happened...more or less...mostly less. She hoped Vincent would be gone by the time the police got there. They took Joe to surgery for a ruptured spleen, and she and Erica waited for him to come out.

Vincent found papers in a file cabinet indicating drug deliveries routed through the zoo via animal and bird deliveries. He heard the police sirens and decided to leave the evidence in the files for them to find, and was safely gone before they arrived.

When Diana arrived down in the tunnels, she found Vincent pacing his chamber...wondering where she was and if she was well. He immediately clasped her to him and released a ragged breath. "I've been so worried. Thank God you are safe....How is Joe?"

Her face buried in his homespun shirt, Diana answered, "He will be all right. They had to

remove his spleen. Erica is with him...and grateful to you. She will say nothing."

"Did the police find the papers about the drug deliveries being routed through the zoo?"

Exhausted, Diana sat down in Vincent's chair.

"Yes. Another small part of Gabriel's organization is destroyed." She held up a ring. "Now we have three..."

Vincent's rueful smile told volumes about how he was feeling, but when he spoke, he sounded worried. "I fear we will hear more from this organization before this is ended." Standing

and taking Vincent's hand, Diana spoke firmly..."But for now...we have a wedding to finish planning."

Diana and Vincent both sat then, leaning back on pillows on Vincent's bed, talking about the wedding...then finally just sitting quietly. Vincent looked down and realized that Diana had fallen asleep in his arms. Gently, he moved her down and lay with his arms around her, looking into her sleeping face. How sweet this was to have her here with him, like this. He closed his eyes and slept...holding her until morning.



A TIME FOR US

Jacob woke first, calling for Vincent. As Vincent woke, he gently disengaged his arm from under Diana and went to pick up his son. Vincent hated to leave Diana, but...Jacob had to go to the bathroom, and since they were potty-training...he didn't have much choice, so he took Jacob to the wash room nearby. When he returned, Diana was just waking.

"Vincent, she said sleepily, "was I here all night?"

Vincent reached down for her hand, and holding it, smiled, "Yes. You were exhausted....It was wonderful having you with me...so I didn't wake you." Vincent put Jacob on the bed and he threw himself into Diana's arms, hugging her tightly...

"Di'na...luv you."

Jacob gave her a baby's kiss, and Diana looked past him at Vincent, who was standing there with a very strange look on his face. He cleared his throat, then said, "I need to find Mouse to finish getting our details squared away for the wedding tomorrow."

Jacob waved to Vincent, then pointed to him for Diana..."Fa'r go bye."

Diana played with him awhile, tickling him and playing peek-a-boo. "Come on, tiger...let's go eat."

Vincent found Mouse...and Jamie down near the Mirror Pool...one of their favorite places, but when he rounded the corner, he stopped in his tracks...they were locked in a lover's embrace, kissing passionately...they didn't notice him. Vincent, his heart pounding and ears burning, retreated back into the shadows and leaned against the wall. Closing his eyes, he tried to gain some composure...and was not having much luck. *Whatever is the matter with me?* he thought. He felt the inexorable crumbling of walls he had been building all his life. *I have no control anymore...* He threw himself down the tunnel and toward the maze. He had to be by himself for awhile.

Jamie pulled away from Mouse with his protests. "C'mon Mouse," she teased. "tomorrow is around the corner...We could go swimming...that should cool you off."

Mouse grinned mischievously, his blond hair hanging in his eyes. "Not with you there..." Then, the thought of swimming made him remember

Vincent the other day. "Jamie...Vincent and Diana...sure are acting funny."

Jamie hugged Mouse. "I know. Both of them are being very stubborn...but they'll be okay...they'll figure it out eventually."

Vincent sat by himself in the dark. It didn't help. His stomach was churning, and his peace from last night was totally shattered. He was totally disgusted with himself that he had lost control yet again. Taking a deep breath, he started back toward the kitchen...if nothing else, he could quiet one ache...he was suddenly starving. He ran into Mouse and Jamie in the tunnel and was suddenly glad that no one could see him blush.

"Mouse!...I was looking for you. After breakfast, we have some things to finish up...good morning Jamie."

Jamie looked at Vincent and smiled. "I hear you and Mouse have big things afoot."

Entering the kitchen, they waved to William, then joined Diana and Jacob.

Diana pulled Vincent down beside her and kissed his cheek..."I see you found them." To Jamie, she added..."Final fitting on the dress after breakfast...and we need to talk to William and make sure we are going to have enough food ... if not...I'm going to go buy out a grocery."

Mouse took Jacob from Diana and looked at her with his usual guileless innocence..."You are good Diana. Good friend. Wish you could stay here always."

Vincent's stomach gave a thump, and he stopped midbite to look at his friend, but Mouse was just chattering on. Diana could feel Vincent's disquiet acutely, and wondered what had happened. He had seemed sosettled and content...when he had left her. When they finished, Mouse and Vincent took off on their own errands and Jamie and Diana took Jacob to Father.

Taking his grandson from Diana, Father inquired about the preparations. "I have been working on the ceremony...I hope everything will be perfect for you, Jamie." Jamie stood on tiptoe and kissed him. "Thank you, Father."

As they left, Diana giggled to Jamie..."I knew he'd come around eventually. He just has to put up a front...like someone else I know. You know, Jamie...sometimes I wonder if dynamite would

help."

Jamie shook her head. "Nope...but we get to them eventually...if it makes you feel any better, I think he's weakening," she laughed.

Mouse and Vincent spent their day getting the candles together and making sure the flowers would be delivered. Mouse showed Vincent a delicate gold bracelet he had made for Jamie as a wedding present. Vincent held it in the palm of his hand ... wondering how Mouse ever had the patience to do such delicate work. "It's wonderful, Mouse. I'm sure she will love it."

Mouse was uncharacteristically quiet when he asked Vincent, "Vincent...am I good enough for her? Want her to be happy."

Vincent stared into Mouse's innocent blue eyes for a long moment..."I don't think it matters if we are good enough for them or not, Mouse...they seem to love us for what we are. I think that is the wonder of love...and maybe we are harder on ourselves than we need to be."

Vincent stared off into space, and Mouse tried to get up courage for his next question, "Why don't you ask her, Vincent?"

Turning to Mouse, Vincent wondered briefly if he had read his mind..."I don't know, Mouse...I just cannot...not yet." Shaking off the mood, Vincent clapped Mouse on the back..."Come on. You still need to be fitted for the clothes Mary is making for you, then I need to help you with that setting for the ring." Mouse had somehow kept one sapphire from the treasure chest they had found ...it was perfect for the ring Mouse had made, but he needed help to finish the setting.

Diana had sent off the the messengers to find out how Joe was doing and to get a message to him, if possible, that she and Vincent hoped he was doing all right. When the messenger returned, she found that Joe was doing fine and wished Jamie and Mouse well. Erica was apparently still with him at the hospital. She felt as though a weight had lifted...she hadn't realized she was still so worried about him. She needed to go back to her apartment and get her own clothes together for the wedding, and now that she knew Erica was not at the apartment, this was a good time. She headed back to her loft, feeling as though she were leaving home...not going to it. Back in the apartment she picked through her wardrobe until she found a simple light beige, floor length dress. The long, full sleeves would keep her from getting cold in the

damp of the tunnels...besides...she always did like the way she looked in it. She showered and washed her hair, even setting it for a change. It wouldn't look this way tomorrow, but perhaps it would still have some of the fullness. She called Joe at the hospital, and he seemed to be doing well. It was evening by the time she headed back to the tunnels.

Reaching the guest chamber, she laid her dress on the bed and put the shoes with it. She looked around the simple, old-fashioned chamber with its worn furnishings and candlelight, comparing it with the chaos of her apartment. She really didn't want to go home.

Vincent had been looking for Diana and had only just found out from Jamie that she had gone home to get her clothes a long while back. He went to her chamber to see if she had come back yet. Calling softly from the doorway, he let her know he was there.

"Come in, Vincent. I'm all ready for tomorrow."

Vincent stood in the doorway watching her. "How would you feel about a walk before dinner?"

Diana felt as though she had been walking all day, but a walk with Vincent was not something she intended to miss. "I would love it."

Hand in hand, they strolled through the connecting tunnels. He took her to the Whispering Gallery, and they stood, listening to a concert somewhere above for a time. The voices were drowned by the music temporarily. Diana sighed. "Your world is so perfect, Vincent...so quiet and true. Mine is filled with anger. I feel so at peace here."

Vincent hesitated, then asked, "Do you think you could be happy...living here?" Diana's hands tightened on the rope of the bridge, then she looked up at him with so much love, his heart melted. "I could be happy anywhere if you were with me."

Putting his arms around her, he murmured into her hair..."Would you stay, Diana? I need you...I love you."

Diana turned to him..."You must be sure, Vincent. If you are sure...yes, I will stay."

As the music soared, Vincent leaned down to kiss her, and for once, he allowed himself to forget his ever-present control, and his passion surprised both of them.

As they walked back to go to dinner, she leaning against him, Vincent had never felt such contentment.

They met Father and Jacob, and the talk at the table was all concerning the wedding. It was a pleasant confusion. Things were coming together nicely. Peter had been contacted and was going to give Jamie away...and Michael was coming. As his wedding gift, he was going to take pictures of the wedding for his friends. The children had already placed fresh candles in the huge chandeliers in the Great Hall and placed fresh torches and candles all around. It should be dancing with light tomorrow. Rolly was taking the children for one last rehearsal of the song from the movie Romeo and Juliet, "A Time for Us", and Jamie looked radiant. Vincent and Mouse had finished the ring for Jamie, and now they were talking about "something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue." Mary said she could take care of the something old and something borrowed at the same time, and said she would give it to Jamie tomorrow, and Diana smiled secretively and said she already had the something new...and it was also blue. Vincent told Mouse and Father to come by his chamber later, that he had something he wanted Father to use during the ceremony that he thought Mouse would like.

The entire evening was festive and cheerful, and when Father and Mouse followed Vincent to his chamber, they were surprised when Vincent pulled out an old trunk and carefully opened it. "This trunk contains most of Catherine's possessions...the ones that carried meaning for me...and for her. Diana was able to get most of them back for me." He pulled out an old, delicately engraved Bible and handed it to Mouse. "This was Catherine's mother's Bible, Mouse. I am sure she would be pleased if Father carried it during the ceremony. She would have loved to see this day."

Mouse wiped away a tear, then hugged Vincent. "Wish she could be here Vincent. This makes it like she is. Thank you."

Mouse left to find Jamie, leaving Father and Vincent alone together. "That was a kind thought, Vincent. Mouse and Jamie loved Catherine too...we all did."

Vincent closed the trunk and covered it. He looked up at Father and put his arm around him. "I have something to tell you, Father. I think you will be pleased."

Father looked expectantly at Vincent...never sure what to expect from him.

Vincent continued, "I asked Diana if she could move to the tunnels...if she thought she could be happy here,...and she agreed."

Father threw his arms around Vincent and hugged him. "I am so glad...for both of you. It's about time, I think....Well. I am going to retrieve my grandson from Diana so everyone can get things done." Pointing at Vincent with his cane, he said jokingly..."You always surprise me, Vincent..."

Pascal suddenly came to the door of Vincent's chamber. "Vincent. Glad I caught you. Sentries say there is an intruder in the upper tunnels, near the Central Park West tunnel...but Kipper said he looked familiar. Maybe you better check it out."

Glancing at Father and grabbing his cloak, he said, "Tell Diana to wait up for me...I'll be back as soon as I can."

Rushing out, Vincent ran for the park tunnel. As he neared the tunnel, he heard whistling, and he recognized the tune. "Devin!" he called, and Devin almost ran into him as he rounded the corner. They embraced, cuffing each other gleefully. "I was beginning to think I wouldn't see you again," Vincent cried...then looked around, "Where is Charles?" Charles was a carnival freak, his deformities overwhelming, whom Devin had rescued, and taken with him to live somewhere where he could live with dignity.

Devin sobered immediately. "Charles is dead, Vincent...died a few months ago. We were living in a cabin in the Rockies, and he was fascinated by the mountains. I came back late one night from getting supplies, and he had gone looking for me. He fell. I buried him on the mountainside."

Vincent thought about Charles sadly. He had been so deformed by his disease...and his soul so injured by people's fear and hatred. "Was his time with you good, Devin?"

Devin thought back, and said, "I think so. He finally began to think of himself as a man and not something merely to be shunned. It was privileged to have known him."

They were walking slowly back to the living areas, when Devin asked, "So how is Catherine?"

Vincent stopped dead in his tracks. He hated to have to go into Catherine's story tonight, after all the joy...but Devin had to know. "Catherine is dead, Devin." At Devin's shocked look and the pity on his face, Vincent turned away. He began the long, horrible story. "She died in my arms, Devin...and told me before

she died that she had borne me a son. They had taken him."

Devin leaned against the wall and looked at Vincent with pity. "You've had a miserable time, my friend...I hope that's not the end of the story. Did you find the baby?"

Vincent reached out and put an arm around Devin's shoulders. "Yes. And that, ...as Kipling said...is another story." He quickly gave Devin a synopsis of meeting Diana, who was investigating Catherine's death, and her part in helping him find and rescue Jacob. "In the end, it was she who killed Gabriel...she is truly remarkable, Devin."

Devin just shook his head. "Every time I go away the place falls apart. Maybe I should stay awhile!"

"Well," Vincent smiled, "At least if you came home, you came at a wonderful time. Jamie and Mouse are to be married tomorrow."

Devin gave Vincent a strange look, "Those two? They were just kids it seems last time I saw them...'course I didn't really see them when I was here last. Guess it's been a couple of years."

They were nearing Vincent's chamber by this time. "We're running out of guest chambers...I suppose you could always sleep with me."

"Not me, brother. You take up too much room...if you can find a bed in the dorm, that will be fine...I'm not particular."

When they walked into the chamber, Father laughed..."Devin! Leave it to you to surprise us...and this is a wonderful surprise!" He hugged his son exuberantly.

Devin was bemused, "I think that's the happiest you've ever been to see me, Father...could it be you're mellowing in your old age?" Looking down, Devin saw Jacob standing there, holding onto Vincent's leg.

Vincent picked Jacob up and proudly introduced him. "My son, Devin."

Devin put out his arms for the child, but Jacob grabbed Vincent around the neck and shook his head shyly. "Well, Vincent...I don't know what to say. He is ... beautiful. Guess this makes me an uncle, Huh?...Funny, Vincent, he's a lot shyer than *you* ever were...'course my ugly mug would scare anyone."

Vincent was thoroughly enjoying himself...and then things got even better...Diana came in. "Devin...let me introduce you to Diana....Diana...my brother, Devin."

Diana had heard about Vincent's brother Devin... who was Father's natural son. Vincent had told her stories about things they had done...it

had been his name with Vincent's in the tunnel the assassin had destroyed. She put her arm through Vincent's and held out her other to shake hands with Devin. "I'm glad to meet you Devin."

Devin smiled at the two of them together. It was obvious there was more to this relationship than Vincent was telling him...and to think he always worried about Vincent being trapped in the tunnels. He shouldn't have worried...beautiful women seemed to be finding him with regularity. Devin excused himself and went with Father to get cleaned up and settled in the dorm for the night. He would have liked to visit, but with the wedding tomorrow, everyone would need to get a good night's sleep. There was always tomorrow.

Diana and Vincent went to bathe Jacob and get him ready for bed. They fed him and dressed him for bed, then Diana sang to him until he fell asleep. As Vincent was walking Diana to the guest chamber, Diana said quietly. "You know, Vincent. Before long, Jacob will be old enough to move to the childrens' dorm. You cannot keep him in there with you forever...there's barely room now."

Vincent sighed. "I know. It is hard to let him out of my sight. But you are right, as usual." He pulled her close to him and looked down, smiling at her upturned face. "Could it be that you have an ulterior motive?"

Blushing, Diana pulled away. "You know better than that, Vincent..." but smiling back at him, she retorted, "however, privacy can be an advantage at times." Diana yawned behind her hand. "It's been a long...wonderful...day. I really am tired, Vincent."

Vincent traced the curve of her cheek gently with his long-taloned hand, then kissed her goodnight. He headed slowly back to his chamber and sat at his journal.

I think I realize now why my emotions have been in such turmoil--why my control has slipped so. With Catherine, I was always close. I could touch her with my bond whenever I wished, so any other expression of love could be held more aloof if necessary. With Diana, I lack the bond, therefore my desire for her becomes almost unbearable.

Understanding helps, but does not solve the problem.

Sighing, Vincent closed the journal and went to bed...to his dreams.

LOVE'S PRESENCE HAS NO END⁹

The next morning everyone was bustling about early, grabbing quick breakfasts then running to finish their chores before the wedding. Devin borrowed some of Alain's clothes for the wedding...his scuffed jeans and T-shirts were not at all appropriate. It seemed strange to him to be back in tunnel garb, but the leather pants and vest were attractive on him. Vincent dressed Jacob in his best, then dressed himself. He wore his tight, black leather pants, high boots and white shirt with full sleeves. He pulled his black vest over the shirt, adjusting his wide belt. He checked to make sure he had the ring and put it into a pocket, picked up Jacob, then left to help Mouse wait. When he got to the Mousehole, Mouse was dressed in similar leather pants, white shirt and black leather vest...but he had refused to put on the bowtie that Jamie had gotten for him. Instead he had put it on Arthur. The raccoon sat on the table, washing his paws.

"Mouse...surely you aren't planning on having Arthur at the wedding."

"Aw, Vincent. You really think Jamie would be mad?"

Trying to keep a straight face, Vincent replied..."I think if you really want to be married today, Arthur had best stay home."

"Okay good...Okay fine....But he keeps the tie!"

Diana had done what she could to set her hair last night after Vincent left, and it flowed over her shoulders in a red torrent. The beige dress with lace bodice and sleeves flattered her. She had a lovely figure...it was just usually hidden in sweats...her favorite clothes. She looked in the mirror and was satisfied. She hurried to help Jamie finish dressing.

When she got to Mary's chamber, Diana gave Jamie the gift she had been saving, and Jamie opened it..."Oh Diana! It's lovely." She held up a delicate blue camisole for her to wear under her dress.

"That can be the something new and something blue," Diana explained.

Helping Jamie into her dress and veil and fixing her hair, Diana could feel the happiness in the air around her everywhere.

Looking in the mirror, Jamie gasped. "It's

perfect." She turned around, radiant. "Do you think Mouse will be pleased, Diana?"

"He'd have to be dead not to be."

Mary held out a lovely gold filigreed necklace to Jamie and told her to put it on. "This was my mother's. She wore it on her wedding day, and I wore it on mine....in another life. This can be your something old, and something borrowed."

Jamie flung her arms around Mary, who had been the only mother she had ever known. "I love you so, Mary. Thank you....I think I'm going to cry."

"Don't you dare!" Diana said. "It took too long to do your makeup...and we don't have time."

They could hear the strains of music coming from the Great Hall...everyone was waiting for them. The only problem was coming through the Chamber of the Winds without completely ruining their hair, but they managed as Alain opened the doors enough for them to enter. Mouse and Vincent were standing in front of Father, and Mouse just stared as they came down the center of the room through the people standing in silence. Rolley's music played softly in the background and the children were singing. Flowers were everywhere. Vincent and Mouse had brought them and put them in vases early that morning. Peter took Jamie's hand and led her proudly to Mouse. Father cleared his throat and began, holding Catherine's Bible in front of him.

"Who gives this woman to be married to this man?"

"I do," said Peter.

Father continued, "These two young people have chosen to spend their lives together, and wish to celebrate this in the presence of God and the ones they love. Our world has had other weddings, but this one is the first wedding of two children who have grown up together here. This is a special day of joy and celebration for all of us...but most especially for Mouse and Jamie." Looking down at Mouse and Jamie, Father continued..."This is a solemn day, for in addition to the joys you will share in the years to come, you must also share the sorrows and trials of life. ... Mouse, will you take this woman to be your wife...to love and to cherish in sickness and in health, in happiness and sorrow, until death you do part?"

Mouse held Jamie's hand and looked into her eyes..."I do, Father."

"Jamie, will you take this man to be your husband...to love and to cherish in sickness and in health, in happiness and sorrow, until death you do part?"

Radiantly, Jamie looked at Mouse and replied..."I do, Father."

"Vincent, the ring, please."

Father nodded to Vincent, and he stepped forward and gave Mouse the ring. Jamie looked at Mouse in astonished wonder as he prepared to put it on her finger.

Father continued. "This ring signifies their love...unending and eternal."

Mouse slipped the ring on Jamie's finger.

"Having consented before God and man, Jamie and Mouse are now bound as Man and Wife. May their life and love bring them happiness."

Mouse kissed Jamie and Vincent and Diana looked at each other across the room, smiling.

Everyone came to congratulate the couple, and Diana and Vincent stood off to the side, arms around one another watching. Vincent nodded in Father and Mary's direction, indicating that they, too, were embracing. Diana smiled up at him. "Perhaps it is contagious." Everyone moved back and Vincent and the other men moved to help set up the tables for the wedding feast. William had outdone himself, as usual, and the cake was a marvel. After cutting the cake, the feast was spread out on the tables, everyone sat and the celebration continued.

Michael had been taking pictures for the couple throughout the feast, but had only taken one at the end of the ceremony. Father came up to Jamie and Mouse and presented them with a wrapped gift. "This is to go with Michael's present." They unwrapped the gift to find a blue satin photo album.

Vincent and Diana left Jacob with some of the older children and slipped away to Jamie's chamber, where they lit the many candles they had set up there earlier. Then, Vincent scattered hundreds of rose petals the children had garnered from dozens of old roses ... spreading them over the bed and floor. Satisfied as they looked at their handiwork, they disappeared into the tunnels as Jamie and Mouse came running down the tunnel laughing with the crowd chasing them. As they disappeared into their chamber, Diana and Vincent joined the others and they returned to the Great Hall to continue the celebration.

"Quite a party," Devin commented, as Vincent and Diana joined him.

"It is a celebration even more wonderful than Winterfest...I don't remember any other quite like it," Vincent replied.

Vincent left momentarily to get Jacob, and Devin looked at Diana and grinned..."Well,...don't keep me in suspense...when is the next wedding?"

Diana blushed, a little irritated..."I don't know what you mean, Devin."

"Oh, c'mon Diana," wheedled Devin in his most charming voice. "You know I can't ask Vincent...it would be like pulling teeth...and his would be a problem anyway. I'm not blind...I can see how the wind blows, and I think it's great."

Vincent came back, wending his way between the people. "Diana, I need to take Jacob and put him to bed. Would you like to come, or stay?"

"Come, of course." She glanced at Devin, "Have fun, Devin."

Sitting down in a chair and leaning back with his elbow on the table, Devin watched them leave, somewhat enviously. "Lucky guy, my brother."

"It's good to get away from the crowd," Diana said to Vincent.

Vincent looked puzzled, "Are you tired? We don't have to go back if you don't care to."

Brushing back her hair, Diana looked at Vincent quizzically. "We can if you want, Vincent. It's just that I get so little time alone with you...and I have to go back Above tomorrow."

Jacob was sleeping soundly, exhausted by all the excitement. Diana sat down on Vincent's bed and smoothed the patchwork quilt reflectively.

Looking down into her candle-lit face, Vincent said, "I know you have to see about Joe," He paused, not quite sure how to bring up her coming back down to the tunnels permanently. "Diana, have you changed your mind?...about us?"

Diana looked up quickly..."No! Vincent...don't even *think* that...it's just that there are a lot of things to take into consideration. I have to tell Joe...give him notice that I'm leaving..."

Vincent sat up suddenly..."Diana...will it bother you, not working?"

"Not really. I would like to be able to help them out once in awhile, though. Joe may be able to arrange something...we'll see...Trouble is, I can't keep my loft if I'm not working, and usually the department needs address and phone on file...but like I said...maybe Joe can work something out." She looked over at Jacob tenderly..."Besides, Vincent...there's no hurry...I

can't very well move in *here* right now, and the guest chamber is not that much improvement over my loft...not for us."

Vincent sighed. Nothing was ever simple.

Diana could read how he was feeling. "I know," she said sympathetically. "A friend once told me that life is like a string of problems strung together by hope. Sometimes it seems that way. But don't worry so. We'll work things out." She pulled him down next to her and put her hand on his chest. "You...are driving me crazy, Vincent. You look fantastic tonight."

Vincent's eyes raked her from head to toe. He didn't have to tell her what he thought of her tonight. "I think we had best either go back to the party or go for a walk." She chuckled.

"Spoilsport...I guess we had best go back to the party. I need to tell Father and Mary goodbye."

After staying at the party long enough to thank everyone for their help and allow Diana her goodbyes, Vincent walked her to her chamber. As Vincent stroked her shoulder, he quoted,

*Here, where I trace your body with my hand,
Love's presence has no end;
For these, your arms that hold me, are the
world's.*¹⁰

"Goodnight, Diana. Sleep well." Diana watched him leave, thinking ruefully to herself...*You don't make it easy.*

Vincent undressed for bed, his thoughts in turmoil. He had purposefully made it hard on Diana tonight. Was he afraid of what would happen once she was back in her own world?

Moving to his desk, he opened his journal and began to write,

Duty, honor, honesty...all the things I have always believed in...held dear, I feel slipping away, replaced by my own selfishness and desire. I cannot force a decision on Diana...it is one she must make of her own choosing. She has responsibilities in her world, and a chance to help...as Catherine did. If she gives all that up to come here...can she be happy?

Sighing, he closed the journal. He stood, and uncovering Kristopher's painting of himself and Catherine, he stood silently, then cried quietly, "Catherine, what am I to do? You once told me that it was not wrong to want something...even if it was only for myself. I cannot allow myself to force Diana...or coerce her...but Catherine, Catherine...I cannot lose her as well."

Vincent covered the painting and tried to sleep, but his dreams were disturbing. He followed Diana into the city, down dark alleyways...the mist shrouding both the ugliness and the beauty he knew to be there. He called out to her and she turned, but did not answer. Her figure moved farther and farther from him and he grew more and more desperate to reach her. Suddenly, he looked down and she was lying in a pool of blood. As he cried out in despair, she spoke to him...but he could not understand what she was saying. Vincent woke to Jacob's distress, and shaking, he picked his son up and tried to comfort him...to still his own fear.

There was a small sound at his doorway, and he looked up to see Diana in the much mended cotton nightgown she had borrowed from Mary standing there...her green eyes wide and her long red hair in disarray. In a moment she was at his side. "Vincent...what is it? I felt your fear...your distress. Are you all right?"

Shaking, Vincent put an arm around her and laid his head upon hers. Closing his eyes, he forced down the fear and tried to summon strength from her touch. "It is nothing...only a dream. I am sorry I disturbed you." Releasing a great, shuddering sigh, he told her, "You must try to sleep. You have a long day tomorrow."

"I can't leave you like this, Vincent...please...let me stay."

Vincent tried to put Jacob in his own bed, but the child refused to let go of him, so without words, Vincent drew Diana to the bed and they lay together quietly, with Jacob resting between them. Brushing back Diana's hair and kissing her forehead he said goodnight, and hoped that at least now all three of them could rest.

When Diana woke the next morning, Vincent was already up. "Good morning," he called as he pulled back the curtain and entered the chamber.

Rubbing her eyes, Diana smiled, "Good morning. How late is it? I need to be getting moving."

A shadow passed over Vincent's face, but he

immediately smiled and handed her a bundle of clothes. "I brought your clothes from your room, and William has some breakfast being kept warm for you."

After Vincent left so she could dress, she thought about the vague impressions of fear and

distress she'd had from him last night...and the uncertainty she felt from him this morning. *He is afraid if I leave, I won't come back...* she thought, distressed.



RETURN FROM OZ

Joe was eating his lunch about the time Diana knocked on the door of his hospital room. "Hi. Can I come in?"

Joe grimaced at his food, and pushing it away, said, "Please...especially if you have a burger and fries on you...you don't by any chance?"

Laughing, Diana said, "No...but I hear you're getting sprung soon."

Joe indicated for her to sit, "Well, how was the wedding?"

Diana proceeded to tell Joe all about the wedding and how wonderful it all had been, then she became more serious. "Joe. I need to give you notice...after I finish helping Erica with this case,...I'm out. I'm moving to the tunnels."

Joe painfully pulled himself upright on his pillows. "C'mon Bennett...not really? You can't do this to me. I just got used to you....are you sure all this with the wedding...with all the romantic slop hasn't just influenced you? You're a damn fine investigator...besides being the only psychic I know...you sure?"

Looking down, fiddling with Joe's discarded napkin, Diana blushed. "Yes, Joe. I'm sure...but I'd like to still help out if you need me sometimes, if we can work it out so the department doesn't need my address and phone. You know how to contact me. Could we do that, do you think?"

Joe put his index finger under Diana's chin and brought her face up so he could look into her eyes. "So when's the wedding?"

Diana stood and looked out the window. "We haven't gotten that far yet...will you help?"

"Yeah. I'll do what I can, Diana...I sure hope Vincent appreciates you."

When Erica came back, they began going over what had happened on the case since the other night. "Well," Erica began, "the bodies are in the morgue...unexplained deaths. The police are none too happy with us as eyewitnesses, you know...but that's tough. I got a call from the D.A. in Chicago. There has been another murder...another tattoo...this time with the word "Set."

Diana mused. "The truth shall set... That means there are still two more people left to be killed. I know as well as I know my own name that after those two are killed, there will be no more...I don't know why, or who they are, but I know that."

Erica continued, "Before the last man died, he wrote a name, apparently...John Benjamin... and

the letters N.Y."

Joe looked up, excited...I know a John Benjamin...he is a church leader here in New York...could that be the NY?"

"Maybe," Erica said. "All these men have been clean...no records...squeaky clean, in fact. It's worth a try."

Diana and Erica inquired around to find out where to contact this John Benjamin, then went to see him. Entering the church where Benjamin had his offices, Diana inquired if he was in.

"Do you have an appointment?"

Diana showed her badge and said, "We just want to talk to him for a few minutes." The secretary disappeared into the other room. Erica commented to Diana that the tattoos on the other men had been on the back of the left hand, so it should be easy to tell if he was on the list.

When John Benjamin walked into the room, he held out his hand to shake Diana's. "Good afternoon, ladies...or should I say officers?"

"Actually, we're from the District Attorney's office, Mr. Benjamin. We're here in relation to some murders, and we were hoping you could help us," Diana said politely. "Of course...anything I can do to help..."

Erica produced photographs of the four victims. "Do you know these men?" John Benjamin looked at the photos, then handed them back to Erica. "No, I have never seen them before...should I know them?"

As he held the photos, both women noted the tattoo on the back of his left hand. Diana showed him close ups of the victims hands...showing the tattoos. "Are you sure you never saw them before, Mr. Benjamin?"

Benjamin paled. "It has finally happened." He took his handkerchief out of his pocket and mopped at his suddenly sweating forehead. "Please, come into my office and I'll explain."

Once inside his plush office, John Benjamin asked the women to be seated, and he leaned shakily against his desk and began..."Many years ago my son was killed. He had become involved with drugs...and the police couldn't seem to find his killers. I raised a stink that caused a lot of trouble for the police department...a lot of bad press, and I was "warned off." He went to his bar

and poured himself a drink...nodding to the women, who refused. Gulping his scotch, he continued. "A few days later I was contacted by a man who told me there was a way to work against the organization who both smuggled and dealt in this death. By this time, I was angry enough and desperate enough to do anything. This man said they had several groups of six men all over the country who they asked periodically to do them favors...to help work against these people. We were contacted periodically...we did our jobs...and that was that. I felt as though I was doing something to help. We were warned that at some point we may be found out by this criminal organization...that it was very old and very powerful, and that if we were ever contacted by another man with a tattoo, we could be sure he was involved with us. If four men have been killed...I am next on the list for our group." He held out his hand, and the word inside the ring was "you." "You have to help me...you see, we have been slowly ridding the world of the top people in this organization...they all wear rings that are very important to the organization...we have been killing them and stealing the rings. Loss of those rings is a demoralizing tactic...the organization has an extremely mystic side to it, and those rings are considered rings of power...and there are only fifteen of them. We have eight. They are beginning to get desperate."

Diana threw a significant look to Erica. With those eight rings and the three they had, that only left four. *They must, indeed be getting desperate*, thought Diana with satisfaction. *Vincent must know this!* "Mr. Benjamin, we would like to take you into protective custody...if you can help us find out more about this organization. We have had dealings with it ourselves and we also have three rings in our possession."

Benjamin looked astonished..."That only leaves four rings! God...no wonder they have started hunting us. I knew it was coming though."

Diana immediately called Joe and had him arrange for a safe house for Mr. Benjamin. He called his wife and had her pack for both of them. When the officers arrived to collect him, Diana and Erica left. Diana told Erica to fill Joe in and left her to head back to the tunnels.

Amazingly, when Diana told Vincent about the developments in the case, instead of being pleased, he seemed angry...though he said nothing.

"Vincent...would you please talk to me! I may be psychic and snoop for a living, but I don't like to pick *your* brain...that violates your privacy. All I know is you are angry...why?" Moving around the room, Vincent reminded her more than ever of a great cat...his restlessness and suppressed anger worried her. "Gabriel took Catherine from me...why shouldn't I be angry?! Now, this organization threatens you...No!...I will *not* allow it to happen again! Diana...I cannot tell you what to do...I cannot allow myself to do that. But I have to say that I do *not* want you involved in this any further."

Diana looked at him with a mixture of love and annoyance. "Vincent," she said quietly, "I began this case and I have to finish it...unless Joe takes me off of it...it would be wrong for me to just quit...Besides...I need to do this partially *because* of Catherine...and *for* Catherine. Surely you understand that."

Defeated, Vincent sat heavily in the chair, clenching his hands so hard his inch-long nails drew blood. When he looked up, there was such pain in his face that Diana couldn't bear it. She went to him and pressed his great, shaggy head against her breast. "I'm so sorry, Vincent...but I must do this. I will be careful...I promise."

Vincent reached into his desk and drew out the rings and held them up. "When this is over, these must be destroyed...all of them. If you must do this...tell Joe if he needs me for anything to contact me." He held up his bleeding hands. "These are all I have to help with...but if they are needed...use them, Diana." Knowing what that cost Vincent, and *would* cost him if indeed, the need became great enough to call on him, Diana swore to herself that somehow she would get through this without involving him further.

When she left, Vincent begged her to be careful. "The dream I had last night showed me your death, Diana...and I dream true. I do not know if it was the future as it is or merely as it could be..." As they embraced, Vincent held her fiercely...not wanting to let her go...knowing he must.

"I will be careful...I *will* come back to you, Vincent...one way or another."

In his hospital bed, Joe was chaffing at the inactivity and his inability to be involved in Erica's case. He was totally dependent on Diana, and now she was threatening to run off and live in the

tunnels...granted, she was planning to continuing the case, but if *he* were Vincent, he'd put his foot down and make her quit. Joe grinned lopsidedly... Fortunately for this case, he wasn't Vincent. The nurse brought his medication and he settled down to sleep after trying Diana's loft several times. He left messages on the machine to the effect of "Call me and let me know what's going on!"

Diana met Erica at the loft and picked up Joe's numerous messages. "Antsy isn't he? Joe just cannot stand to be left out." Diana asked Erica what else she had found out from Benjamin.

"Not much. All he knows about the final tattooed man is that he also lives in New York and he is an art dealer. I guess we hit galleries and art dealers tomorrow, right?"

"Yeah, and there must be a thousand of them...did you ask him what he did with the other eight rings?"

Erica smiled and handed Diana a carved wood box. "Here they are. It makes *me* antsy having them here."

"No kidding," Diana frowned. She needed to get these to Vincent for safekeeping. She called Clarence, the black saxophone player who often delivered messages below...he was the only one whose telephone number she knew.

"Clarence...Diana. Will you be at your regular corner tonight?...Good. I have something I want you to deliver to Vincent...it is urgent that he get it."

When she got off the phone, Erica couldn't stand it any longer. "Diana...who *is* Vincent? He is incredible!"

Diana shook her head..."I can't tell you, Erica. His very existence depends on his staying hidden. The fewer people who know about him the better...I have to go out and deliver these rings to someone who will get them to him...and a place where no one will ever find them."

Diana called a cab, then after drinking a quick cup of coffee, pulled on her coat, as it was beginning to get colder out. She put her gun in the coat pocket and put an envelope with the rings in her jeans. "I'll be back soon."

The cab was waiting when she left the building, and she went straight to Clarence's corner. He was just setting up, and she stood and

watched him, then listened to him play for awhile. "Wonderful, Clarence. Thanks..." She leaned over and handed him the envelope and a couple of dollars...it was all she had on her. Clarence pocketed the envelope and dropped the money into a jar, then continued playing.

Diana walked for awhile, then decided to stop by the hospital to see Joe. Visiting hours were almost over, but she could just make it. She thought about Vincent as she hurried to the hospital. She hated that Vincent had become involved in the case. She had promised herself she wouldn't involve him, and then he had ended up having to rescue them anyway. At least the rings would be safe in the tunnels... but she hoped this was almost over. Reaching the hospital, Diana stopped at a pay phone to call Erica, and when she answered, Diana explained she wanted to talk to Joe a little more about the case. When she got to Joe's room, he was sleeping, and she hated to wake him...but it was important.

"Joe," Diana whispered, "it's me...Diana."

Just as Joe woke, his eyes widened and looked behind Diana, "Diana! Watch out!"

Hands grabbed her from behind and one of them hit Joe, knocking him unconscious to silence him. Chloroform took care of Diana, and as they laid her on a hospital gurney and draped her to make it look like she was going to surgery, they talked quietly.

Joe came to while they were talking, and listened...his head throbbing..."take her to Gabriel's old house, the old man said. Figured they wouldn't think to look there...it's been unused since they got him." As they wheeled her out, dressed in their masks and gowns, as soon as they were out of sight, Joe struggled up and staggered to the nurse's station to alert them to get hospital security. Then he called the police to get them over to the house in case security missed them. His stitches hurt, but he wasn't doing too badly, he thought. As soon as he realized security had missed the men, he slipped out of the hospital and headed for the tunnels...Vincent had to know. He knew where to go...he could probably help Diana far more than the police.

Reaching the nearest tunnel entrance he knew about, Joe realized he was not going to be able to find his way. He began beating on the pipes a he went, hoping someone...one of the sentries perhaps...would find him. Eventually a skinny,

curly-headed boy peered out through a peephole and saw him. He was a stranger, so he ran for Father.

"Father..." Jeremy puffed as he skidded to a halt in Father's doorway. "There's an intruder in the tunnels...he looks hurt...and he's banging on the pipes, making a terrible racket." About that time, Pascal came in with the news that he couldn't hear any messages properly because someone was beating on the pipes.

"Send Vincent to see who this is...hurry." Father ordered.

Jeremy showed Vincent where the intruder was, and recognizing him, Vincent called to him..."Joe! What's wrong?"

Joe grabbed Vincent by the vest..."Gabriel's house...They have Diana!" Vincent started to leave immediately and Joe stopped him..."Careful Vincent...I've called the police and they'll be arriving there also."

Vincent nodded and told Jeremy to help Joe and he took off. He remembered all too well where Gabriels house was.

Jeremy helped Joe back Above, and Joe hailed a cab and headed for Gabriels. He looked strange in his suit pants with the hospital gown tucked in...his shoes with no socks, and the cabbie wondered what kind of a weirdo he had picked up.

Grabbing the first train going the right direction, Vincent clung to the top of the car as it sped into the darkness, his cloak and hair streaming behind him.

Regaining consciousness as she was being pulled from the car, Diana recognized the house. The two men half carried, half dragged her through the long hallway into a stately and ornate living area. The man who rose from the couch to greet her was old...probably one of the oldest men Diana had ever seen, but his gray eyes glinted with life and hatred.

"You and your friends have caused us a great deal of trouble, Ms. Bennett. But that is about to come to an end. What began here will end here, and you will tell us where to find the rings."

The man set about preparing an injection of sodium pentathol and Diana watched in horror. If they found out about the tunnels...! Suddenly, her head came up...she could feel Vincent coming closer...then suddenly there was a crash as a door was forced from its hinges. She could hear his roar of rage...and as the old man turned, dropping

the syringe and aiming his gun at the doorway, Diana broke from the grip of her captor and flung herself at the gun. Vincent burst through the door in time to hear the shot and see Diana fall...one blow broke the old man's neck...the man who had been holding Diana raised his gun, but Vincent threw him against the wall, breaking his back. The other man ran. Vincent stooped to lift Diana, but knew it was too late for him to help her...he held her to him calling to her..."No, Diana...don't leave...don't go." His hair and clothes were covered with her blood as he cradled her to him.

Things were so dark...Diana could hear Vincent calling, but she was so tired...so very tired. She turned, and the light was so bright...so beautiful...she could see figures reaching out to her, and she drifted that way... it was so much easier...as she started towards them another voice ... another figure stopped her... A gentle voice said, "You must go back, Diana...go back to him...he needs you to stay." Diana turned, and feeling Vincent's anguish, she found strength in this new presence and started back.

"Vincent..." she breathed...her voice so small, so quiet, he could barely hear it. "Stay, Diana...be strong. Help is coming." Vincent could hear the police sirens and ambulance sirens coming closer, but he couldn't force himself to leave.

Suddenly Joe skidded into the room, then turned yelling to everyone to go get the Med Techs and get that ambulance up here...and search outside. When everyone was gone, Joe pulled at Vincent..."Go, Vincent...you can't help her...get out of here now so someone else can...you can't help her if they catch you!"

Vincent kissed her, then with an anguished look at Joe, ran out the door and disappeared into the depths of the house. He was almost seen by one police officer before he found the tunnel exit in the basement.

The ambulance technicians got Diana into the ambulance, Joe with her, and headed for the hospital, leaving the police to gather the bodies and evidence. As they rushed Diana to surgery, Joe collapsed in the SICU waiting room to wait for news.

Reaching home as soon as the trains and his own exhausted body would carry him, Vincent burst into Father's chamber, bloody and disheveled...wild eyed with grief and despair.

Listening to his story, Father changed clothes quickly into his old suit while Mary brought Vincent a basin to wash the blood from his hair and hands. Devin quickly brought him clean clothes, and he too changed. Vincent and Devin traveled with Father and waited under the hospital in the tunnels while Father tried to find out how Diana was, and Devin waited with his friend...and tried to lend him strength.

Father quickly found Joe, huddled painfully in a waiting room chair, his face white with his own pain. "Is there any news?"

Joe shook his head. "All I know is she is still in surgery...but she was alive, Jacob...she was alive."

"Thank God! I'd feared..."

Just then a surgeon rounded the corner, his gown bloody..."Joe Maxwell?..."

"Here!" Joe leaped to his feet, and would have fallen had Father not caught him. "She'll be fine, Mr. Maxwell. The bullet passed on through, but it caused considerable damage...she came very close to bleeding to death...she's in recovery."

Father spoke to the surgeon about Joe's condition as well, and before long they had him back in a hospital room to finish his recovery. Father saw him settled, then went immediately to Vincent to reassure him.

"Father!" Vincent cried as he saw the older man coming towards him.

"She is in recovery, Vincent. She lost a lot of blood, but they repaired the damage and say she will be fine."

Vincent slumped against the wall of the tunnel and cried in relief. He embraced Father and Devin gratefully. "Father...is there no way I can see her?"

Father shook his head..."The risk is too great, Vincent...but I will stay and bring you word."

"Next time you come, bring me paper and pen so I may write a message, then....and....thank you, Father."

When Diana finally woke completely, she was in a room in SICU. Father sat beside her and smiled when she opened her eyes. "Father..." she said weakly. "Vincent...?"

Father took her hand. "I have a message here from him. Do you want me to read it to you?"

"Please." Father opened the folded sheet of paper, and penned in Vincent's careful script was a short message... "Come home, Diana...I love you."

Smiling, Diana closed her eyes and sighed. "I will. Tell him...there's no place like home...need my ruby slippers." She slipped off to sleep again, and Father left to deliver her message.



Vincent," Father pleaded..."You must go home and get some rest. You haven't eaten or slept...Let me take you home, and Devin can remain here for news."

Vincent shook his head mutely, but Father was insistent, and finally won.

Devin found Diana's room and settled down in the chair next to her bed. Joe snuck a trip in to see her and discovered Devin. He recognized him as Jeff Radler, the attorney who had worked in the D.A.'s office briefly. "Jeff! What in hell!" Joe whispered angrily.

"Devin, actually. I'm Jacob Welles' son...Vincent's brother...kind of." Joe's eyes immediately went to the three scars on Devin's cheek, the connection to Vincent suddenly clicking. Devin followed the glance...used to it. He touched the scars. "Yeah. We fought. He won. It was a long time ago."

Joe nodded to Diana. "How is she?" Devin shrugged.

"I'm no doctor, but she's sleeping peacefully. The doctor came by and said she was doing okay. Father made Vincent go home finally." Devin and Joe talked awhile, and Devin told him stories about the tunnels and when he and Vincent were children. "Vincent and I learned everything together...how to swim...how to outwit Father." Devin chuckled. "I think the only times Vincent ever went against Father's wishes were the times I led him astray...but he had his own wiles to get around the old man."

After visiting for a while, Joe left to go back to his own room.

When Joe got back to his room, Erica was waiting for him. She had spent all day straightening out details at his office and the police station. She handed him the ring the officers had retrieved from the body of the elderly man Vincent had killed.

"That makes ten, Joe. My case is pretty well closed. Benjamin helped us find the 6th man, and they have been put in the Witness Protection Program. So they may be safe. And at least we know where to find them if we need them later."

Joe was surprised Erica had no questions about how the men had died...he supposed she had a pretty good idea. "I imagine eventually we will

hear from the final three, but for now, perhaps we can rest awhile."

A few weeks later, Diana was packing her things to move to the tunnels; everything was about ready to go, and Devin and Vincent moved things little by little to the tunnels through her private entrance. The children shuffled things from inside the entrance on to the guest chamber.

Finally the apartment was empty except for Catherine's rose bush. Vincent knelt beside it, "And what do we do with these, Diana? They will not grow in the tunnels." They looked at each other and smiled.

That night, Vincent and Diana took the rose bush to Catherine's grave and planted it there. "You know, Vincent...it was Catherine as much as anything or anyone who saved me...it was her voice I heard as I was dying...sending me back to you. I was so tired, I couldn't find the strength to come back by myself... and she lent me hers."

Looking down at Catherine's grave, Vincent put his arm around Diana and said quietly: "This is the first time I have been here that I have felt at peace. I feel that finally both of us can be at peace."

Their arms around one another, Diana smiled up into his beautiful, unhuman face, and said, "Come...let's go home, Vincent...we have plans to make."

As Vincent and Diana reached Vincent's chambers, Devin met them there...he seemed packed to leave. "Devin...you can't leave yet!" Vincent said, astonished..."You have to stay to see Diana and I married."

"Oho!" Devin grinned...setting his things down. "Well,...I have to admit that would be worth staying for...if you two aren't planning to wait too long....I wondered why we were lugging all that stuff into the guest chamber instead of yours....Please don't tell me we're going to have to move it!"...he groaned comically.

Diana laughed in delight at his discomfort...feigned or not. "It will be a little while..." she looked at Vincent and pretended annoyance, grinning wickedly at him..."we have a

small problem. Jacob is not taking well to being moved to the children's dorm, and his father isn't much better...we may have to carve a room for him next to ours...want to help?"

Vincent just laced his hands behind his back and looked innocent, raising his eyes to the ceiling.

"Now Vincent,..." Devin began, "you and I shared the dorms from the time we were about Jacob's age...and we had a ball. Mary was great then...and she has mellowed with age...from the wild child that kid has, who do you think is going to be running the place in a week?"

At that, Vincent let out one of his rare laughs. "I know...but it's a weaning process for both of us. Our bond makes it more difficult at first, but hopefully soon we will both have adjusted."

"Well," Devin said pointedly, "I, on the other hand am a little old for the comfort of the dorms, and I would love to be able to use the guest chamber...but it seems to be occupied...if you want me to stay, you'd best get adjusted, my friend!"

Diana laughed and told them she was going to see Jamie and pick up Jacob...if *someone* would just make up their mind where he was to sleep.

Vincent and Devin settled down to a game of chess, and Devin had to admit he was glad to be home. "It's strange to think of you living here in this chamber with Diana....but pillow fights with her will be a lot more fun for you than they ever were with me, I imagine."

Vincent had been engrossed in thinking out a move, and the comment caught him off guard. He looked up to see Devin holding a pillow over his head, and ducked just in time.

When Father wandered in, there were feathers all over the room, some of them stuck in Vincent's hair. "My God! I think we've gone back in time at least 20 years!" He looked at the two men, but his eyes somehow slipped back in time and saw two skinny teenagers. He shook his head and smiled. He found it very difficult to be surprised at anything Devin did...or talked Vincent into doing...even now. Besides...it had been far too long since he had seen that look of mirth on Vincent's face. He did manage to look solemn and remind them that pillows were not that easy to come by in the tunnels, and that Vincent would have to sleep without.

Devin grinned, "I'll buy him some for a wedding present..." , and as Father left, Devin looked wickedly over his shoulder and in an aside to Vincent whispered, "and two extra for the honeymoon!" Vincent picked up a handful of feathers and dumped them on Devin's head,

chuckling.

As they were picking up the feathers, Diana and Jacob came in. Diana had felt Vincent's joy...glee?, and had wanted to see what was going on...she had never felt quite that emotion from him before. As they came in, Jacob squirmed from her arms and ran around picking up feathers, taking them to his father.

"Heavens...what happened? It looks like a flock of geese decided to go skinny dipping and left all their feathers here!"

Vincent had the guilty look of a 10-year-old, and Diana was enjoying his pleasure. "Devin has been reminding me of the pillow fights we had as children...we got carried away."

Jacob brought Vincent a load of feathers and said carefully, "Here, Fa-ther."

Vincent looked at Diana, tickled that Jacob had been able to pronounce father, and she blushed..."We've been working on it." Diana picked up Jacob again, "Vincent, while you finish cleaning up, I'll go put Jacob to bed in the dorm...if it is all right."

Vincent agreed, somewhat reluctantly, but when he was kissing Jacob goodnight, the child clung to him and he almost relented.

Once Diana and Jacob had left, Devin consoled Vincent...and teased him a little as well. "You know, Vincent...separation anxiety is supposed to be something HE experiences...not you...and with your bond, I'm surprised it is a problem. Quite frankly, you and he are going to have to learn a great deal of control as he gets older....Just think how *we* would have felt if Father had known everything we were up to! Besides...he needs a mother...we had Mary, but it's not the same."

Vincent sighed, "I know...besides, he needs to become more accustomed to Diana doing things for him anyway."

When Diana returned, happily singing to herself, Devin excused himself, saying that "Uncle Devin" needed to join the rest of the kiddies...it was past his bedtime. Diana pulled up a straight-backed chair and sat backwards on it, resting her arms across the back. "Jacob is so wonderful, Vincent. I read to him from Winnie the Pooh, and we had four or five other children listening in with him. He went right to sleep, although he insisted I hold his hand until he did."

Watching her as she spoke, so animated and

loving, Vincent realized that Devin was right...Jacob did need Diana...and he, especially, needed to learn to control the bond between them. When his own emotions ran high, he tended to disturb Jacob...and that could become rather...inconvenient."

When Diana noticed Vincent's enigmatic smile, she asked, "Whatever are you thinking?" Walking around to rub her shoulders, Vincent replied, "Now we need to plan another wedding...our own."

They talked and planned for a time, then Vincent picked up a book of poetry and read to her a while.

*I must not think of thee, and tired yet strong,
I shun the thought that lurks in all delight --
The thought of thee -- and in the blue
Heaven's height,
And in the sweetest passage of a song.*

*O just beyond the fairest thoughts that throng
This breast, the thought of thee waits hidden,
yet bright;
But it must never, never come in sight;
I must stop short of thee the whole day long.*

*But when sleep comes to close each difficult day,
When night gives pause to the long watch I
keep,
And all my bonds I needs must loose apart,*

*Must doff my will as raiment laid away,
With the first dream that comes with the first
sleep
I run, I run, I am gathered to thy heart.¹¹*

"Time for dreams, Diana." He led her back to her chamber, and went alone to his.



Everyone wanted to help with the wedding, and since everyone had been organized for Jamie and Mouse's, many of them agreed to take care of the chores they had before. Rolley and the children would take care of the music and the candles in the Great Hall, and Michael again wanted to take pictures. Vincent and Mouse again arranged the flowers. Vincent was going to wear what he had worn at Mouse's wedding, as Diana claimed he couldn't possibly look any better, but Diana wanted to wear her mother's wedding gown. Vincent had ideas about some special arrangements of his own. He borrowed a ring from Diana's jewelry box for the size, and had Mouse make a gold ring of delicately twisted and carefully crafted gold wire.

As Mouse worked on Diana's ring, Vincent watched, amazed at Mouse's craftsmanship. He was so patient as he worked...one would never expect that kind of patience from Mouse. "Okay good, okay fine, Vincent. Almost finished..."

Vincent examined the ring closely, "It's wonderful, Mouse. Diana will love it." Mouse was concerned because there was no stone, and he wished he had kept a few more from the treasure chest, but Vincent preferred the simplicity.

Diana paced Vincent's chamber. She needed to go Above on an errand that Vincent and Father were probably not going to approve of...but this was another problem that needed to be resolved before she could stay here.

As Vincent came into the chamber he could tell that something was disturbing her. "What is it?...What is wrong?"

"Sit down, Vincent. I need to talk to you about something important." Uneasy, afraid something was seriously wrong, Vincent sat and waited, opening his hands, palms up to indicate for her to begin. "There are people Above who are important to me, who need to know where I am, Vincent. My sister, Susan, and her daughter, Alex. I cannot simply leave and not let them know where I am...we are very close."

Vincent said simply, "She is your sister. She can surely be trusted with your happiness...can she not?"

"I believe so, Vincent. I would also like for her to be in the wedding. Do you think Father will agree?"

Standing, Vincent embraced her..."He loves you, too. He trusts in your ability to judge people...probably more than he trusts mine...he has often accused me of leading with my heart instead of my reason."

Speaking to Father went about as Diana had suspected it would. He was not happy...but, as Vincent had predicted, he eventually capitulated, stating that Diana should know her own sister and her reliability. So, after obtaining Father's blessing, Diana left to talk with Susan.

When Susan opened her door, she threw her arms around Diana. "God! I have been scared to death! Where have you been? I have tried reaching you for days, and when I went to the loft, I found no one there. I talked to the landlord and he said you had left."

"I'm sorry Susan. I should have talked to you before I left, but I had other things on my mind," Diana apologized.

Susan was really angry..."First you get yourself shot, then first thing out of the hospital...you're gone! The least you could do is let me know. Even Joe wouldn't tell me anything, though I could tell he knew where you were."

"Sit down, Susan, and let me explain."

Susan sat and folded her arms. "This had better be good."

Smiling, Diana began her story. "It is good...the best."

Bemused and more than a little confused, Susan looked at Diana oddly, "So you are going to live down in these tunnels with this man you have fallen in love with?" Diana nodded. "It sounds like a fairy tale..."

"More like a wonderful dream, Susan. Vincent, the tunnels...everything is like nothing that has ever been...nothing I could have ever imagined. I will be happy there...and I want you to be there when we get married...I want you to be my Matron of Honor."

"If that's what you want, of course I will," Susan replied.

Diana explained to Susan that most important of all, she must never, ever reveal anything about the tunnels or Vincent to anyone...his very life and he lives of those who lived in the tunnels relied upon secrecy. She explained about Vincent's

appearance and tried to prepare Susan.

"You always were unusual, Diana...and this whole thing is about as unusual as things get."

Diana helped her pick out a dress to wear for the wedding. "I would like for Alex to be flower girl, but I think she is too young to be trusted with a secret like this. The wedding is day after tomorrow. I will send someone to bring you to the tunnels...his name is Devin. You'll know him by the three deep scars on his left cheek."

After leaving Susan, Diana went to the D.A.'s office to see Joe. When she walked into his office, Joe almost fell over his own feet trying to get up. "Diana! It's great to see you...seems like it's been forever and it's only been a few days. Is everything okay?"

Diana smiled. "Things are great, Joe. I came to invite you to the wedding."

Joe grinned his lopsided grin, "So, things are moving right along, are they? When is the great event?"

"Day after tomorrow, in the afternoon, about 2:00 P.M....but you have to remember, Joe, we don't run by the clock down there,...so come early...we'll put you to work."

Diana left to pick up her wedding dress from the cleaners, where she had left it before moving down to the tunnels. It wasn't heavy, but it was awkward. Once she got off the Lexington Express and was able to find her way back to the tunnel entrance near there, she was able to send a message on the pipes for Vincent to come help her. As she struggled along, when she looked up, help was coming, but it was Devin, not Vincent. She thanked him for coming, but inquired as to where Vincent was.

Grinning mischievously, Devin answered, "Oh, Vincent had some errands to run...he's going to be gone probably until late this evening...said to tell you not to worry and to please get Jacob ready for bed."

Devin irritated Diana sometimes, but she had to admit, he was good for Vincent. As they walked, Devin talked to her about Vincent. "Somehow I never really imagined Vincent getting married. Last time I was home, he was with Catherine, and that surprised me more than I would ever admit to him."

Diana looked offended. "Why did it surprise you...don't you think Vincent is worthy of being loved...just because of the way he is?"

Devin looked shocked..."That's not it at all! Everyone loves Vincent...It's just that you have to admit, most women wouldn't look beyond the exterior...and here he has found two beautiful women to love him. I'm delighted for him...even a little jealous, if truth be told...Vincent has always been a romantic...I guess we both were, but Vincent especially. But I guess you know that."

Changing the subject, Diana asked about them growing up together, and Devin set off on stories. "...I always led him into sin, so to speak. Vincent was always the good one...I was the terror, and Father lived in terror of my dragging Vincent into some problem Above where he would be caught...But what dreams we dreamed. We had a great childhood." Diana found herself liking Devin more and resenting him less...it's just that he was so...impulsive...and Vincent so serious, she could hardly imagine them being as close as they were.

She asked, "Was Vincent always so serious?"

Devin laughed outright. "Getting a laugh out of Vincent is almost impossible...but I never quit trying."

"Like the pillow fight last night?" Diana asked archly.

"That was great! Of course, now I have to go get him some new pillows, but it was worth it....Seriously, though, Father says Vincent was in a bad way after Catherine's death. I wish I'd been here. Maybe I could have helped."

Diana shook her head. "I don't think anything but time could help him...and his own strength of character. He loves Catherine more than life."

"You speak as though she were still alive...and that he is not over her. You're not jealous?"

Diana looked at Devin carefully...as if judging his worth..."If Vincent were to forget Catherine, I could never love him. You don't ever forget a love like that. The important thing is that he loves me as well...and that I am here for him, and she cannot be. Love is not something to be measured out in parcels like that. I will gladly always share him with Catherine's memory."

Devin just looked at her and shook his head. "You are amazing."

Diana picked up Jacob from Mary after they dropped her dress off in the guest chamber. The

tunnels seemed extra dusty this time of year, so she left the dress in the plastic, hanging it up to get the wrinkles out.

"Let's go see Jamie and Mouse, Jacob." Jacob was walking fairly well by this time and insisted on walking, but he was kicking up more dust than was necessary...his tiny legs were coated with it. But he seemed so cheerful as he kicked trails in the dust, Diana didn't have the heart to stop him. They found the couple in the Mousehole discussing Arthur.

"Mouse, I love Arthur, but I will *not* have him sleeping with us! If you want him in the room, it's fine, but if you can't train him to stay in his own bed, then out he goes." "Always slept with me, Jamie. Doesn't understand."

Jamie looked to Diana for help as she came in... "Oh No! Don't ask me....Vincent and I have enough things to work out on our own...We're having enough trouble relocating Jacob."

The discussion continued as Diana decided that discretion was the better part of valor and slipped out, dragging Jacob away from the said raccoon. Arthur waddled after them for a few feet and sat down. She could hear Jamie taking up the battle cry... "I will *not* sleep with a raccoon!"

"Well, Jacob...it's just you and me. Let's go swimming. Diana picked up towels and clean clothes for Jacob, and once at the Mirror Pool she undressed Jacob, sitting him on the towel while she undressed to get in.

While she was pulling her sweater over her head, Jacob decided to take a plunge. Horrified, she jumped in after him and grabbed him. Vincent had been teaching him to swim, but he was still a baby...and the Mirror Pool was deep in places. Once in the water, Diana found a shallow spot and played with Jacob, trying to get him to swim to her. Unafraid, he bobbed up and down, sank like a stone, then kicked and came up. He swallowed some water and cried, but grabbing Diana's hair, used it to pull himself to her and wrap his arms around her neck...where he clung like a leech. She washed all the dirt off him and played until the cold water became too cold.

Climbing out, she quickly dried them both and dressed Jacob after wrapping the towel around herself. She heard a voice behind her, even before she sensed him there, and spun around...to see Devin leaning in the doorway.

"How long have you been there!" Diana exclaimed indignantly.

"Just got here, unfortunately. Tell you what, give me Jacob and I'll be a good boy and turn

around while you dress...Vincent will shoot me if you catch cold just before your wedding!"

Handing Jacob to Devin and turning him around, she started pulling on her jeans and sweater. "You are impossible, Devin!"

"I know." Devin said smugly. "But I have redeeming qualities."

Diana couldn't help it...she burst out laughing. "I have to admit...you are a breath of fresh air here in the tunnels...I'll bet you *did* stir up some dust around here."

They continued talking as they headed for the kitchen...William would be serving dinner about now. "I need you to do me a favor, if you don't mind, Devin. I need you to pick up my sister for me on the day of the wedding. She has never been here, or met Vincent, and I won't have time to go get her."

Devin made a sweeping bow, managing to look comical... "If your sister is half as beautiful as you, I would be honored."

Grinning, Diana handed Jacob to him, "Good! Now, please take your nephew...I need to talk to Jamie." Jamie and Mouse were sitting with Alain and Nancy...there had appeared to be no bloodshed...unless Arthur is the worse for wear.

Diana leaned over and whispered in Jamie's ear, "Who won?"

Jamie excused herself a moment and drew Diana off to the side. "I won. I told Mouse that he could either sleep with me in our chamber or with Arthur in the Mousehole."

When Diana joined Devin and Jacob over by Father, she decided it had been a pretty productive day...and she was certainly in a good mood. She reached out to touch Vincent, curious where he was...and all she could tell was that he was pleased with something...he felt ... accomplishment? *Whatever is he up to?* Dinner was pleasant with small talk and joking about the wedding.

After dinner, Jacob began rubbing his eyes and calling for his father. Devin played horsie with him and quieted him for awhile, but the closer to bedtime, the more restless he became. Handing him to Diana, he said quietly, "Well mommie...guess it's story time." Diana picked Jacob up and he squirmed to get down. "Fa-ther!"

"Come on Jacob...I'll read you some more

Pooh."

Rubbing teary eyes, Jacob looked at Diana suspiciously..."Pooh? O-kay."

Taking him to the dorm, Diana settled down to read, again flanked by several other children...the ring was larger tonight than the previous night. Again holding Jacob's hand until he went to sleep, Diana looked lovingly down at him.

Mary came up behind her and put her arm around her. "The children all love you, Diana. Jacob does too. It's an adjustment for him, that's all."

"I know, Mary. It's an adjustment for Vincent as well. For so long after Catherine died, he clung to Jacob like a lifeline...and they both became dependent...their bond only encouraged that...now they have to separate some. It's for the best, but it is hard."

"Have you ever thought of what you will do with yourself once you are down here permanently?" Mary asked quietly.

Startled, Diana looked up, "No,...not really, why?"

"Well," Mary said..."I'm not getting any younger, and the children do run me ragged at times. None of the young women seem to really be interested in really working with the children. I won't be around forever, and I thought perhaps you would like to work with me with them."

Surprised, Diana thought about it. "Perhaps I would like that...let me think on it some more, Mary. I may still be working with Joe and the D.A.'s office on occasion, though."

Diana went back to Vincent's chamber and lay on his bed reading. He had books everywhere...under the bed, in bookcases, in drawers...a tidy mess, but she loved this room, with the delicate stained glass window lighted from the other side with the kerosine lanterns in the adjoining hall. The candles threw their amber light over her and over the patchwork quilt. She had intended to wait up for Vincent, but the candles burned low and she fell asleep. The next thing she knew, Vincent was bending over her in the dark, his long mane tickling her face.

She murmured sleepily, "Um,...Vincent...what?..."

Vincent picked her up, cradling her head on his shoulder and carried her to her chamber. As he tucked her in, she opened her eyes and

smiled..."Goodnight Diana. See you in the morning."

Vincent wanted to sleep, but could not, so he picked up a book of the meditations of Kahil Gibran, and leafing through it, found selections on marriage. He read several of the paragraphs, then saw one that seemed most appropriate to how he was feeling.

It is the dividing line between Doubt that beguiles the spirit and saddens the heart,

And Certitude that floods the inner self with joy. It is the beginning of the song of Life and the first act in the drama of the Ideal Man.

*It is the bond that unites the strangeness of the past with the brightness of the future; the link between the silence of the feelings and their song.*¹³

Vincent closed the book and put it under the bed, along with a score of others that lay there. He lay back, nervous and excited. He thought of tomorrow...and of Diana...and Catherine. *So many blessings...so much joy, so much pain.* The last few years had indeed, been tumultuous. Their wedding was the beginning of a new life... a new beginning for both himself and Diana. Perhaps together they could both conquer the darkness within themselves. Together they were stronger, and better, than each was alone. He ached to discuss this with her, but knew she slept. He closed his eyes, and joined her in that quiet realm.



EPILOGUE¹⁴

The next day was a bustle of activity all day long. William was desperately trying to finish the cake and make sure food pickups were made. The helpers had been hard-pressed to deal with two weddings in such a short amount of time, but they came through, as always. Almost everyone...even all the helpers...were going to be here. Everyone wanted to see Vincent married. The children swept the Great Hall of all the dust...they hoped the wind from the Chamber of the Winds wouldn't blow it all back in again. Fresh candles were placed in the chandeliers and along the walls, and the tables were polished. Vincent and Diana spent the day thinking of the vows they were going to speak, as they wanted to personalize the ceremony.

By evening, everyone was tired, but Diana and Vincent wanted to take a walk, so leaving Jacob sleeping in the dorm with Mary, they headed for the park. As they walked beneath the moon, wandering under bridges, Vincent again reflected back on the last few years of his life. So much had happened. So much wonder and love...so much terror and sorrow. He discussed his feelings last night with Diana.

"But we have the rest of our lives ahead of us, Vincent," Diana reminded him. "We have Jacob, and we have our friends. Perhaps we will have bad times in the future...but we have to make the most of the present...and savor all the wonder of ourselves." Continuing, Diana spoke seriously, "I hope you will be happy with me, Vincent. I am not like Catherine. Catherine had an innocence that I simply do not have...I have seen so much evil from the inside out in people, I have had to develop such a tough skin...and you yourself are so good...I hope I do not disappoint you."

"I love you for yourself, Diana. You have had to endure much, and it has made you stronger and better. You need to value yourself more."

Parting at Diana's chamber door, Vincent reminded Diana gently, "There will be no more partings."

Diana stroked his face gently, "You have been dealing with things far better lately...You have been sleeping well."

"I have been content to have you near, knowing that you were staying. Good night, my love."

The morning dawned bright and clear on the city Above, but Below the eternal dusk was lighted by thousands of candles and oil lamps. People

bustled about preparing for the celebration to come.

The pipes kept up a constant, staccato rhythm as messages were relayed, keeping Pascal hopping from one side of the pipe chamber to the other. Devin headed for Susan's apartment to pick her up, Diana having given him the address the evening before. The sentries were watching for Joe, to lead him to the living area once he was spotted. Jamie and Mouse helped Diana and Vincent get ready. Diana was fairly calm, and looked lovely in the old, beige lace of her mother's gown. Mary again loaned her mother's necklace for the something borrowed, something blue. Diana felt that her dress took care of the something old. For the something new, Jamie brought her a veil that she picked out to go with the dress. She was absolutely radiant.

Vincent, on the other hand was all thumbs. He simply couldn't make his fingers work correctly, and Mouse had to help him into just about everything. "Patience, Vincent, won't be long now."

Devin finally found Susan's apartment, and when she opened the door, he gaped...she was beautiful...the same red hair as Diana.... "You must be Devin," Susan said, noting the scars. She thought he was rakishly attractive, and the scars only added to his mystery. Susan had a box with her dress and shoes in it, and Devin carried it for her, offering her his arm. They didn't have far to go to reach the nearest tunnel entrance, but when they reached there, Susan was a little reluctant to descend into the darkness with a total stranger.

"It's all right, Susan. I know it seems strange, but Diana is on the other side, believe me."

Susan let Devin help her down into the tunnels and followed him cautiously...looking around at this strange, entirely new world she had been brought into. As they entered the living areas and began seeing people, Susan noted their patchwork clothing, she noted the candles and oil lamps everywhere...all indications everywhere of a society that was independent of the world above...separate and complete. The children laughed and ran, playing everywhere. People waved to Devin as they passed. Everyone appeared busy and productive, and there was a festive air to the entire place. Susan had questions brimming to

the top, but she had so many, she was unsure what to ask first. Devin could almost read her thoughts...

"I know. It's hard to believe, isn't it? I grew up here, and it is still a culture shock every time I come home....Come...let me introduce you to Father...he is my real father, but he is called Father by everyone here. He is the patriarch of the tunnels...he organized the place...created this world."

Leading Susan down spiral stairs and past the Mirror Pool, through the Chamber of the Winds, he opened the doors to the Great Hall where Father and Mary were supervising the placement of the flowers that Vincent and Mouse had brought down in cart-loads full early that morning.

"Father," Devin called, as he forced the doors closed. "I brought Diana's sister, Susan, to meet you and Mary. Susan, my father and Mary...who is the closest thing to a mother Vincent and I ever had." He kissed Mary and hugged her, causing her to blush.

Putting an arm around Mary, Father smiled at Susan. "Welcome to our home, Susan. We are pleased you could join us today...we love Diana as much as if she had been born here. We all hope she and Vincent will be very happy.

Devin looked around, "The place looks great. These two weddings are going to outdo Winterfest! These tunnels haven't had this much excitement since Vincent and I were kids."

"Thank God!" Father replied earnestly. "I deserve some peace, at least, Devin." Devin grinned. "Well, I had best take Susan to Diana and go get dressed myself. If I'm not there to stand up for Vincent, I'll have scars on my other cheek!"

As they walked through the Chamber of the Winds, Susan held her hair back and asked Devin, "What did you mean by you would have scars on your other cheek?" Stopping, Devin said, "Well, Vincent and I had a fight one day...standing just about where you and I are standing now. I punched him in the nose and he sliced my cheek with his claws...surely Diana explained about Vincent's... differences."

"Yes, but ...I've never met him. Claws?" she said quietly, wondering what Diana was getting into.

"Inch-long. Vincent could eviscerate someone if he chose to...but you will never meet a more gentle man. Even provoked, it takes a lot to cause him to lash out...and he will almost never defend himself unless he has to...but don't *ever* let anyone threaten anyone he loves. Diana is in good hands,

believe me...." Reaching the guest chamber, Devin called through the curtain..."Diana...are you dressed? Susan is here."

Jamie pulled the curtain back and told them to come in. When Devin and Susan saw Diana, they both stared. Devin just leaned against the wall and nodded, but Susan almost cried. "Oh, Diana. Mamma would have loved to see you in her dress! You are beautiful."

"Gotta go," Devin said, and took off.

Devin walked into Vincent's chamber just as Vincent was finishing dressing.

"You're late, Devin...did you get Susan to Diana?"

With his usual bantering, Devin started dressing, "Brought her and left her with Diana. She's as gorgeous as Diana. Maybe I'll stay around awhile after all. Settle down, brother...everything is under control...except for you. You'd best sit down or I'll be picking you up off the floor."

Instead of sitting, Vincent paced. "Have you seen Jacob...where is he?"

"He's with Father and Mary in the Great Hall....quit worrying...he's fine, Diana's gorgeous,..."

His azure eyes gleaming, Vincent sat on the bed in front of Devin..."I want to see her so badly...I haven't seen her all day. Is she all right?"

Looking unconcerned, Devin pulled on his vest, "Better than you...cool as a cucumber....Did you finish up your secret mission yesterday?"

"Yes. Everything is ready. Narcissa will send someone to light the candles when she senses we are near...she would rather wait to meet her than come all the way up here....Devin...I just want everything to be perfect."

Turning and embracing his foster-brother, Devin's usual mocking tone faded away. "It will be, Vincent...how could it be anything else? I've never felt as much love in these tunnels as I have in the last few weeks...."

Mouse nodded silently, and Devin continued, "Now,...We need to get to the Great Hall, or you will be late for your own wedding."

As Vincent, Devin, and Mouse entered the Great Hall, Vincent calmed some...it really was

happening. The walls were covered with flowers...garlands hung from the chandeliers. Hundreds of candles burned, throwing dancing light over everything. Oil lamps burned on shelves...and all his friends...the tunnel dwellers, the helpers...everyone he knew was here to celebrate with them. Mouse sat with Jamie, whispering into her ear something that made her giggle, and Vincent and Devin moved to stand near Father.

Rolley began the first strains of music, clear and beautiful...Vincent was so nervous, he didn't recognize the piece. The doors to the Hall were opened and Diana, Susan, and Joe came in...there was a flurry of activity as people stood to hide the activity from Vincent as the women repaired the damage the winds had done, then Susan walked slowly up to join Vincent, Devin, and Father. The music changed and the children began singing...but Vincent saw Diana for the first time, and suddenly there was nothing here but her...she was radiant. He had never seen her looking so lovely. Joe took her arm and walked her slowly towards him, then suddenly they stood beside him. He couldn't take his eyes off of her.

Diana saw Vincent standing in his black leather pants, white shirt and vest, and thought again how absolutely magnificent he was. There had never been anyone like him before, and there never would be again...she touched his soul and felt it's wonder...he was the one perfect thing in her world.

Father began the ceremony.

"Again, within such a short amount of time our world has been blessed with love. Vincent and Diana, who are dear to all of us, have decided to join their hearts and their lives ... and they wish to share their joy with us. We have in the past few years watched Vincent endure much pain and sorrow...and it gladdens our hearts to have him blessed once again with the happiness he deserves. These two people do not need to be told that life has thorns of pain and despair, and I know that they will greet any problems of life with the same love with which they will greet the joy. Diana and Vincent have written their own vows, but first, who gives Diana to Vincent to be married?"

Joe stepped forward and placed Diana's hand in Vincent's. Their eyes met briefly, and Vincent's seemed to promise him he would take care of her. Smiling, Joe kissed her and stepped back.

Diana began: "Vincent, I was alone in my world. Because of my gift, I saw more of the evil

and horror that was in my world than I could bear. I was losing hope and felt I would never find anyone I could bear to love. I came to love you before I ever met you...as I searched for Catherine's lover. When I found you, your gentleness healed me and gave me faith in the world again. You taught me that anything is possible, and that there are endless possibilities...that even love was possible. You made me believe in Forever. Vincent, will you share my life and love...all that I am or ever will be...Forever?"

Vincent's long-taloned hand held hers and he bent to kiss it. Looking up, answered, "I will."

Father indicated to Vincent to begin...

"These tunnels have been my world all my life, and these people, my friends. I was blessed with these--yet I was alone. I met Catherine, and she showed me the world. She taught me what love truly was...what endless promises life had to offer. When she was taken from me, I could see only the darkness of an eternity of aloneness stretching ahead of me...then Diana came into my life and reminded me that love is truly eternal. She taught me again to believe in Forever. Diana, will you share my life and love...all that I am, or ever will be...Forever?"

Moving closer to Vincent and reaching up to kiss him gently, she answered, "I will."

Devin gave Vincent the ring, and Vincent placed it lovingly on Diana's finger.

Everyone crowded around to congratulate them, but Diana eventually drew Vincent and Susan off to the side so her sister could properly meet him. At Susan's first glimpse of Vincent, she had been enthralled...no description could have done him justice, and hearing his voice, the strength, gentleness, and love...no wonder Diana loved this amazing man.

The couple opened some of the gifts they were given...there were so many that Diana wondered where on earth they would put everything. Father gave them a leather bound book of love poems for Vincent to read to Diana. Mary gave them a quilt she had made for them...and Devin of course gave them new pillows...one set for everyday and one set...just for fun. Diana kept her gift for Vincent until later when they would be alone...she had gotten him a new journal, leather bound and gold engraved...to begin their new life together.

William had outdone himself again on the feast. The cake was brought out and Diana and Vincent cut it. Jacob ran and clung to Vincent's leg, so he picked his son up and he and Diana fed him some cake. Michael had been snapping pictures, and managed to get a picture of Jacob smearing cake in Vincent's hair and Diana laughingly smearing it worse with a napkin. All during the feast, Jacob sat in either Vincent's lap or Diana's, and when it was time to leave, it was hard for Vincent to hand him back to Father.

"Don't worry so Vincent...he is, after all, not the first child I have kept!"

Diana ran with Susan to change clothes...apparently Vincent had somewhere they were supposed to go, so he wanted her to dress in jeans and sneakers...*Not the usual going away attire, she thought.*

Vincent changed into his traveling clothes while Devin teased him about the pillows..."You mean you're not taking the fun set!"

Smiling, Vincent only commented, "Where we are going, feathers would not be appropriate, Devin...another time." As he started to leave the chamber, Mary came in just in time to bring him a huge basket of food she had packed for them. He kissed her and thanked her, then went to collect his bride.

As they started down the stairs past the Chamber of the Winds, down into the maze, Diana asked curiously, "Where is it we are going?"

Putting an arm around her he kissed her ear and whispered..."A very special place...a most appropriate place."

Tickled by both his joy and his romance, Diana was silent and followed through the darkness. The maze was not kept lighted, except in a few places where oil lamps or torches burned. Diana carried a lantern, but it barely made a dent in the darkness...she blessed Vincent's night sight. Suddenly they were out of the maze and entered a cathedral-like room with great pillars and stairways...carved Heaven knows when or by whom. She was awestruck by it's grandeur.

"Is this where you were taking me?"

"Not yet...but almost." Several more rooms of granite-like rock...rooms where Vincent had to bend over to avoid the ceiling, then they came to an opening to another cavern. Taking her lamp, Vincent told her to wait a moment, and he went inside, setting down the basket and lamp. When he came out, he swept her up in his arms, her giggling

like a schoolgirl, and took her inside. When he set her down, at first the light was blinding to her. But as her eyes adjusted, she saw the most incredible and wonderful sight...A cavern of crystal of every variety lit by scores of huge candles...and Vincent and laid them a bed in this cavern to celebrate their love.

Diana turned to look at him and said almost soundlessly, "Oh, Vincent...It's wonderful...You're wonderful."

His blue eyes glowing with love, Vincent said, "I wanted to give you a gift, Diana--to make this night as unique and special as I could."

Gently, taking their time, they explored their love for one another. As Vincent's passion rose, Diana's mind felt overloaded...she projected her love for him...her infinite joy...and to his amazement, Vincent was at last able to truly be a part of her. When as their passion quieted and they lay swathed in the quilts Vincent had laid for their bed, Diana reached for his thoughts, and Vincent seemed sad. When she turned to him, there were tears in his eyes. "Vincent..." she whispered, "what is it?"

"I thought...there for a moment that the bond would stay...but it's gone."

Pulling him close, Diana reassured him..."It will come again, Vincent...and again. Perhaps you will only be able to reach me at these times...but isn't that enough?"

Sighing with pleasure, Vincent answered "More than enough. It's just that when it suddenly is gone...over...the pain of loving you is almost more than I can bear...of loving you and then losing that wonderful bonding...think, Diana, what it would be like for you to suddenly not be able to reach me ...right now."

She held him closer...understanding. Lying there, they slept for a long while, then Vincent pulled her up, and wrapping themselves in blankets against the chill, he led her to a lake where steam rose from the surface like a cloud.

"The lake is heated from volcanic activity far below...there are others, but this is one of the few that does not smell of sulphur."

Leaving their blankets behind, they swam in the warm water, rejoicing in each other's happiness. Diana lay back, floating as Vincent caressed her. She laughed, watching as his long reddish pelt on his shoulders and arms floated in the water, making him look fuzzy in the amber glow of the lantern. Playing in the water, they moved closer to one another. This time, their lovemaking was quieter, gentler, and the bond for

Vincent was not as intense, but he was still able to bond with Diana. He had feared, unreasonably he supposed, that Diana was wrong, and it would never happen again. He was relieved, and as he embraced her, Diana stroked his hair, "There may be times when the bond does not occur Vincent...but see, they will come again."

They both hated the idea of leaving the warm water and stepping into the chill air, but eventually they had to wrap themselves in the blankets once more and return to the Crystal Cavern.

Dressing against the chill, Diana combed her hair, spreading it out to dry and as Vincent sat looking at the book Father had given them, she combed his. "No one has combed my hair since I was a small child...it seems strange."

Diana lifted his mane and kissed the back of his neck, "I gives me an excuse to touch you."

Vincent smiled..."You need no excuse." He began reading to her a passage from the book...

*A loftier palace, fairer far,
Is ours, and one that fears no war.
Safe in marvelous walls we are;
Wandering sense like builded fires,
High amazement of desires,
Delight and certainty of love,*

*Closing around, roofing above
Our unapproacht and perfect hour
Within the splendors of love's power.¹⁵*

"Ah, Vincent. I never want to leave here. This is our own world...the pool, the cavern. Does anyone else come here?"

"Only Narcissa..."

As if on cue, a figure appeared, coming slowly out of the darkness into doorway, lit by the circle of the light from the lamp. Diana startled, clinging to Vincent...the woman had startled even her. She should have been able to sense her there...and she looked so strange. Cataracts coated her blind eyes, but she knew they were there. Her colorful clothing and turbaned head seemed so out of place here in the tunnels.

"Hello Vin-cent. I came to be introduced to your bride...the one I feel who has such power."

Vincent introduced Diana to Narcissa.

"Narcissa has great power, Diana..."

A harsh laugh followed Vincent's statement, "...nonsense, Vin-cent...Father has told you many times that I am only a foolish old woman."

Vincent and Diana looked at each other knowingly...they both knew that such powers were far from foolish. They invited Narcissa to join them as they opened Mary's basket, which she declined graciously.

"I came to meet your bride, Vin-cent...and I find this woman of power. You did not tell me she had the power." Narcissa reached out and took Diana's hand, and the two women sat kneeling, looking at one another for what seemed an eternity, though Vincent knew that neither of them was seeing the other. What they were seeing had nothing to do with the here and now. When Narcissa finally dropped Diana's hand, she looked at Vincent and smiled. "It is good, Vin-cent."

Diana looked perplexedly at Vincent, who shook his head. They talked with Narcissa about people she knew, catching her up on the tunnel gossip, and Vincent told her about Jacob and how much he had grown.

"Children are a blessing from the gods, Vincent...I have seen, so I must leave now." She again took Diana's hand and patted it. "Take care. Life has many things to offer you both, but all the joy will not be without it's accompanying debts."

As they watched Narcissa hobbling off into the darkness, Diana looked at Vincent and shivered. "Spooky."

Quietly Vincent asked, "What did you see...when you and Narcissa held hands, Diana?"

Bemused, Diana shook her head. "I'm really not sure. Flashes...odd visions. Perhaps she saw more than I did, but if so, she was not very explicit about it, was she?"

With an odd smile, Vincent stared into the darkness. "Narcissa never is explicit. But she said it was good..."

They finished their meal, discussing plans for the future...for the endless possibilities that life now had for them. They looked around the cavern, noticing that even the largest candles that Vincent had placed were burning down somewhat. If they let them burn continually, they would be in darkness other than the oil lamps. Vincent opened the book again and read her one more poem:

*Nothing is enough!
No, though our all be spent-
Heart's extremest love,
Spirit's whole intent,
All that nerve can feel,
All that brain invent,-
Still beyond appeal
Will Divine Desire
Yet more excellent
Precious cost require
Of this mortal stuff,-
Never be content
Til ourselves be fire.
Nothing is enough!¹⁶*

Diana embraced him as he sighed. "I, too, hate to leave this place, but we still have tonight."

He opened his pack and put the book away, then leading Diana to their bed, they took advantage of the remainder of the dancing light from the candles, which still sent shimmers of rainbow through the chamber as it touched the crystals, to celebrate their love once more before they returned home.

Vincent got up to blow out the candles so they could sleep, and Diana watched and almost laughed as he walked carefully over the crystal-littered floor in his bare feet. As he dove back under the covers away from the chill of the chamber, he embraced her in the dark, snuggling down, spoonlike, to sleep. He whispered in her ear, "Next time, you blow out the candles." Diana giggled again.

When they woke, Vincent re-lit a few of the candles, then collected the rest to carry back to the candle-makers. They dressed and Diana collected a large piece of amethyst quartz to place by their bed at home. As Vincent rolled up the quilts and blankets that had made their marriage bed, they were both a little saddened.

Vincent kissed Diana gently, "We can always return."

Smiling, Diana looked up into his azure eyes and said, "Every anniversary Vincent, until we are very old."

Contented, Vincent picked up his shoulder bag and the quilts, Diana carried the basket and the lamp, and they headed home...to a new life.

The darkness in men's souls is but a test of their virtue
As always, love is both the question and the answer.



Playing in the water, they moved closer to one another.



2/20/91

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BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

BOOK TWO

THE TRIALS OF LIFE

Based on the series created by Ron Koslow

Story by Rhonda Collins

Vincent and Diana reluctantly left the Crystal Cavern. Their honeymoon had ended. Vincent gathered all their things, and Diana stared back over her shoulder as they started out. As they traveled back through the tunnels to go home, they lingered in the huge cathedral-like room they had passed through on the way down. Diana was still completely astounded. "It's incredible! No one would ever think that all this...an entire world...lies beneath the city, Vincent. But this is stranger still. Whoever could have built this place, and for what purpose?"

Vincent leaned against one of the pillars and his eyes roamed over the vaulted ceiling. "Perhaps we all need to have places that are unexplained and wonderful, Diana. Some people can only imagine them...we have them to visit." His thick mane gleamed golden in the lamplight and his eyes sparkled. "Come...let's go home."

It seemed to Diana that the trip home took twice as long as the trip down to the Crystal Cavern. As much as she loved Vincent's home...her home now...the Cavern was their special place, where no one else went...except perhaps Narcissa. Leaving there after their honeymoon was hard.

She was quiet for so long, Vincent became concerned. "Are you all right, Diana? If you are tired, we can rest."

Putting down the lamp and the basket she was carrying, Diana stretched, re-tying her long red hair back out of her face. "No, I'm fine. I want to get home. I miss Jacob...and I know you do."

Vincent looked at her, smiling. "I do miss him. This is the longest I've been away from him since we rescued him from Gabriel. He has been unhappy...I can feel him missing me." He had a faraway look in his eyes. "Our happiness overshadowed the distress Jacob was projecting, but the nearer we get, the more I feel it..."

"We'd better get back then." Diana lifted the basket and lamp, and smiled at Vincent. She was a little concerned about how Jacob...and Vincent...were going to handle the marriage. It had been hard enough to get Jacob to where he would sleep in the children's dorm. After this separation...brief as it had been...would there be a setback? Vincent and Jacob had to begin separating their bond a little, and Vincent in particular had to begin

developing control. She would have to help him.

Diana had had enough practice herself in blocking other people's emotions and erratic images she received. She had to be able to pick and choose what she received....even with Vincent. Actually, *especially* with Vincent, because her bond with him was so overwhelming.

Vincent, too, was worried about how things were going to go with Jacob, and for many of the same reasons Diana was. He glanced at Diana and smiled. *She is so determined as she climbs with her burdens...determined and adorable. Everything will be all right. We have each other.*

In the children's dorm, Mary was caring for Jacob. Her gentle face displayed her concern. The child had been fussy and miserable most of the time Vincent and Diana had been gone on their honeymoon. There had been a few times the child had seemed happy, and slept, but otherwise he cried and called for Vincent.

Suddenly, the child began pulling at Mary and saying, "Fa-ther..coming! Go see!" Mary picked him up and headed for Father's chamber, but Jacob kept pointing toward the maze. Mary knew Jacob could feel his father returning, so she began walking toward the maze entrance.

When Vincent and Diana appeared in the tunnel entrance, she put Jacob down, letting him run to Vincent.

Dropping his burden of quilts and backpack, Vincent kneeled and scooped Jacob up joyfully. The child grabbed him around the neck and clung there like a monkey, hiding his face in his father's hair.

Diana smiled as she watched Vincent and his son. Their reunion was so beautiful...*You would think they'd been apart for months...not one night.* Putting down basket and lamp and kneeling beside them, she leaned down to hug Jacob, but the child knocked her arms aside angrily and pushed her away from Vincent.

"No! Go 'way!"

Vincent saw Diana, saw her stricken look. He could feel his son's jealousy. Jacob had always loved Diana, but he knew that something was different, and he didn't want to share his father with her...especially now. Vincent felt so divided...he didn't know who to feel

sorriest for...or who to help. "Diana..."

"It's all right, Vincent. Go with him, spend some time...comfort him. I'll take care of the quilts and the backpack...just take care of Jacob."

Gratefully, Vincent picked up his son and took him down to the Mirror Pool to visit.

As Diana and Mary watched them walk away, Mary put her arm around Diana and shook her head. "It's going to be hard for all of you for awhile, but he will adjust, and so will you."

As Diana "tuned in" to Vincent's emotions, she wasn't sure what to think. "I hope so, Mary." She and Mary picked up the quilts, backpack, basket, and lamp, and took everything to Vincent's chamber...their chamber now. Diana looked around in dismay.

"While you were gone, Devin moved most of your things in here, but organization is going to take a while," Mary said.

"That's an understatement, Mary. What are we going to do with all this? Vincent is going to just die." The chamber was piled with the boxes they had brought from her loft--all her clothes and belongings. Fortunately she had given her computer to Joe...and given away a lot of her other things rather than bring them down here...especially since many of them required electricity. But there was still a lot to make room for. In addition, throwing away anything was simply not a concept that Vincent could deal with...in his world, they lived on other people's cast off's...he probably had everything he had ever owned in this one small room.

Suddenly, Diana was very tired, thinking of all the problems they had yet to deal with. "Oh, why couldn't we have just stayed in the Crystal Cavern?" She sighed and began moving boxes to the side to at least make a pathway.

Diana spent at least an hour sorting boxes and trying to get an idea of how they could make room for some of their things. She was getting a headache. For once, the tapping of the pipes, instead of soothing her, made her head pound. Perhaps if Vincent and Mouse made shelves it would help...and she had to get some kind of closet built to put their clothes in. Shelves would help for the books as well, and if she dug all the junk out from under the bed, they could store some things under there....

She was dusty, dirty, hot, and tired when Jamie came in to rescue her and take her to shower and go

eat. "It's going to take more than one day to do all of this...don't kill yourself."

Diana was relieved to see Jamie...it was nice just to have her cheerful, common sense attitude around her. "Actually, Jamie, trying to tackle this keeps my mind off of how Vincent and I are going to handle Jacob...I'm afraid we're in for a rough time. He really seems to hate me now. He can sense the difference in our relationship, and he feels threatened."

Jamie just shook her head. "Give him time, and don't push."

They went down to the bathing area to shower and wash Diana's filthy hair...she had been crawling under the bed and digging out Vincent's stash of books, trunks, and boxes. Jamie hugged Diana and grinned, "Besides, you just got back from your honeymoon...Was it wonderful?"

Blushing, Diana smiled and said, "Yes, it was wonderful. He is wonderful."

While Diana was working in their chamber, Vincent was busy playing with Jacob...trying to reassure him that everything was fine. They swam in the Mirror Pool, then went to visit Mouse in the Mousehole so that Jacob could play with Arthur. As long as they were together, Jacob was fine, but Vincent was more than a little anxious about what was going to happen come bedtime.

Mouse chattered on about how glad he was that Vincent and Diana were together now, like him and Jamie..."It's good Vincent. Happy."

As Mouse rattled on, telling Vincent about his plans for some new projects, Vincent watched Jacob playing with Arthur and smiled, thinking how patient the pudgy raccoon was with the playful child. Jacob kept catching Arthur's tail and pulling him backwards. Vincent was surprised the raccoon didn't bite him, but Arthur would just grab the first piece of passing furniture and hang on, while Jacob laughed. Vincent decided it was time to take pity on Arthur, and picked Jacob up.

Turning to Mouse, Vincent said, "I think it's about time I find Diana and get Jacob cleaned up for supper."

"No!" Jacob cried. "Di-nah go 'way!"

Vincent sat Jacob down and stared at the child in frustration.

Mouse looked confused. "Mouse thought Jacob liked Diana."

Vincent sighed, "He does. He's jealous, Mouse." Vincent smiled ruefully at his friend, "I have a feeling Diana and I are in for some sleepless nights." Speaking to Jacob, Vincent said, "Jacob, we are going to go see Diana now, and give you a bath. I want you to behave yourself...be nice to Diana. She loves you...just as I

do."

Jacob just set his jaw and looked stubborn, and when Vincent picked him up, he clung to him tightly.

When Vincent walked into his chamber, he stopped dead in his tracks. He had never seen such a mess! *How are we ever going to get this straight?*

Diana came up behind him and put her arm around him. He looked down at her, loving her...it would be all right...one way or another.

Suddenly Jacob pushed Diana away again. "Go 'way!"

Looking at Vincent, Diana put out her arms for Jacob. Vincent handed him over to her, kicking and protesting. Diana took him over to the bed and sat down, holding him forcibly on her lap. "What's wrong, Jacob? I know you don't like me right now, but I love you. Maybe you won't be so mad at me in awhile."

Jacob shook his head, and the set, stubborn look of his jaw discouraged Diana. She gave him back to his father, and they took him to supper. He sat on Vincent's lap at supper, making it difficult for Vincent to even eat in peace, but Vincent was patient with him, glancing at Diana periodically...just for strength. They took him after supper to give him his bath. Diana let Vincent bathe him by himself, not intruding, but when they took him to the children's dorm, Jacob grabbed Vincent and wouldn't let him go.

"Vincent..." Diana looked at him pityingly, "I know it's hard, but you have to be firm...or we're in trouble. Do you want me to put him down, or do you want to do it?"

Troubled by either choice, Vincent pried Jacob loose and kissed him, telling him, "Jacob. It's bedtime. Diana wants to read you a story and put you to sleep like she has been doing. I'm going to visit grandfather. Go to sleep now like a good boy. I love you." He forced Jacob into Diana's arms, then fled desperately from the room.

While Diana fought with Jacob, trying to get him to settle and listen to the rest of Pooh's story, Vincent sat huddled in Father's chamber, his head lying on his arms on Father's table. Devin was there with Father. They had been playing chess when Vincent came in.

"Remind me not to get married, Father...the kids are sure to take after me, and I'm not sure I would have Vincent's patience...or yours."

Father comforted Vincent as best he

could... "Diana loves Jacob, and he knows that, Vincent...it will just take time."

Vincent could feel Jacob's feeling of abandonment...his anger at Diana, and his feelings of helplessness at the whole situation. Somehow, knowing that it would pass, just didn't help Vincent's own feelings of helplessness right now. Eventually, Jacob cried himself to sleep, finally allowing Diana to finish the story. But he wouldn't allow her to hold his hand until he fell asleep, as he usually insisted on. Exhausted, Diana walked to Father's chamber to get Vincent. When she came in, Vincent went to her and his arms closed about her.

Vincent commented, "He's sleeping...but not quietly. His thoughts are very restless. We had best try and get some sleep while we can."

They said goodnight to Father and Devin and made their way back to their chamber. Turning down the bed, they climbed in...not even bothering to undress, because they knew it would be useless anyway.

Diana rested her head on Vincent's chest, calming herself by listening to his heartbeat. He stroked her hair and back. She cried quietly, trying not to let Vincent know she was crying, which was of course, impossible. It had almost broken her heart for Jacob to reject her as he had: she loved the child so, and she knew what this was doing to Vincent. She hated to have him feeling so torn between her and his child, knowing there was nothing he could really do to help either of them... except to love them both. She cried herself to sleep, lying there on his chest, and Vincent lay awake...his mind an open channel for Jacob...and his heart aching for all three of them.

Jacob woke four times that night, and each time Vincent woke Diana, and she was the one who went to him to comfort him. Each time the child fought her, screaming for Vincent...waking other children in the dorm, and generally causing chaos. Diana would finally get him back to sleep, and then wearily return to Vincent and cry a little more.

This same pattern repeated for days...at times Vincent would go to him at night, just to make sure he knew that Vincent was still there for him as well. Each day became a little easier for them all, but Diana and Vincent were both so exhausted they could barely function.

Finally, after a week and a half, the night came when after going to sleep Jacob slept the entire night, and Vincent and Diana were able to sleep. They began to think that perhaps there was hope after all.

Diana slept, and in her dream Jacob was hugging her and saying he loved her, and Vincent was kissing her. She woke to Vincent nuzzling her neck and whispering to her, "Diana, I hate to wake you...but it's morning...and there's a message from Joe for you."

Groaning, Diana sat up. "I was having a wonderful dream, Vincent. Come here and hug me, please, before I have to face the day."

Vincent gathered her into his arms and held her tenderly. "We haven't had any time for ourselves...or strength to do anything about it if we'd had...but I love you...it will get better, Diana...I promise."

Lying there enclosed in his arms, Diana drifted off to sleep briefly...then woke with a start. "Oh...the message from Joe. I guess I had better see what he wants." Opening the message, Diana read:

Diana,

Just wanted to let you know Erica is pursuing information on the remaining three rings in the organization. David Benjamin and Walter Ansley are helping supply information in the hopes we can track them down. If we hear anything, we will let you and Vincent know. Hope the honeymoon was great and you and Vincent are enjoying your wedded bliss.

Love, Joe.

"Diana handed the message to Vincent, who frowned at the first part. "I hate to think of you continuing with that case, Diana. I almost lost you last time."

Diana got up and dug around in a box for some clothes...they still hadn't gotten a thing done in the room. "I know, Vincent, but it needs to be resolved. Won't you feel better knowing that Gabriel's organization is finished...and we can destroy the rings for good?"

Sighing, Vincent agreed.

"Damn!" Diana swore...looking up apologetically. "I can't find any socks. I think I'm out."

"Haven't you been washing?" Vincent asked.

"No." Diana looked at Vincent helplessly. "I'm just not used to having to do things as they are done down here...I'm used to laundromats, I'm afraid...and I've been so tired, I haven't even thought about it..."

Vincent chuckled, "Don't worry about it. I'll go borrow a pair from Jamie for you, and I'll do some

of your clothes today."

Taking Vincent's hand, Diana pulled him down beside her. "Vincent, I love you. You've been so patient...I have an idea. Suppose I go Above today and visit Joe...and take Jacob with me. Perhaps if I take him to do something he would enjoy, he would stop being so angry with me."

Uneasy, Vincent asked, "What would you do?"

Diana thought...she knew Vincent would be a little jealous of what she was about to suggest, but she still thought it would be a good idea..."I thought maybe I could take him to the zoo."

Vincent got up and paced the room. He knew he couldn't hide his feelings from Diana...and he hated even having this feeling...but he knew she understood..."I'm sorry, Diana...I cannot help it. I hate feeling this way, but I wish...I wish I could go with you. I'm envious. There are so many things...I can never show him...or do with him. I feel so inadequate and helpless."

Diana caught his hand..."I know. I won't take him if you would rather I did not. But think, Vincent. Perhaps when we come back, he will have had a wonderful time, and won't feel so resentful of me...and you can spend some special time with him and talk to him about the animals when you put him down to sleep."

Sitting beside her and holding her, Vincent rested his head on hers. "Jacob and I are both blessed to have you. Someday he will realize that...someday soon, I hope. Yes...take him...it's a good idea. I'll go get some socks from Jamie."

Vincent borrowed the socks and suggested to Jamie that perhaps she would like to go with Diana.

"I don't have any money, Vincent."

"I'm sure Diana will be able to take care of it. She needs to check her post office box and go by the bank anyway, she said. By the way, tell Mouse we need to check that main pump today. I have to make my sweep of the tunnels today to check for problems, and when I get back we can check it. We may need to start looking for parts again...and...thank you for the socks, Jamie."

Jamie grinned, her blue eyes sparkling, and waved at Vincent as he headed back down the tunnel. She figured she'd better hurry...Diana usually wasted little time in getting going once she set her mind on a plan of action.

Later, after bidding Vincent goodbye, Diana, Jacob, and Jamie headed off to go Above...leaving Vincent to

try and get his chores done. He had fallen behind in the past couple of weeks. He needed to re-start his literature class as well...the children were complaining that they had never finished Hamlet. He also wanted to surprise Diana when she returned. He asked Mouse if he and Jamie would keep Jacob all night. There was to be a concert tonight--Vivaldi--and he set up a bower in the tunnel underneath with candles all around He had Mary pack a light supper in a basket for them. *It is time we have some time to ourselves, now that we're not too exhausted to do anything but sleep.* He did manage to wash a few of Diana's clothes for her and hang them to dry. She was going to have to get used to doing them without the help of the laundromat.

As they came Above through the tunnel exit, Jamie carefully checked to make sure there was no one around. Jacob looked around, excited...he had never seen any of this.

As they moved out into the city, moving along the sidewalks, the cars, the people,... Jacob kept pointing at things...Diana would tell him what it was, and he would try to repeat it. "Those are cars, Jacob...cars."

"Cars..." Jacob said carefully.

Diana hailed a taxi, and Jacob almost jumped out of her arms when they got inside. "We're going for a ride, Jacob. A ride in the car." He jumped up and down, and looked out the window as they drove.

Diana and Jamie were tickled watching him. When the taxi stopped, Jacob didn't want to get out, but Diana told him they were going to see more things, so he finally got out. They went into the building and let Jacob push the buttons for the elevator so they could go up and see Joe.

"He's having so much fun...at least Vincent can feel that...even if he can't be here." Diana said.

Going to Joe's office, Diana knocked and peeked inside. "Are you busy?"

Looking up and grinning, Joe couldn't believe his eyes..."Never! Never too busy for you Diana....and Jacob! You must be Jamie...I know I've met you, but it's hard to remember everyone..." He shook Jamie's hand and tried unsuccessfully to get Jacob to come to him. "How's Vincent?"

Smiling, Diana said, "Wonderful. We just wanted to drop by to make sure you hadn't found out anything else about the two remaining rings...or

ringleaders...and to pick up my last check. Then we're taking Jacob to the zoo."

"The zoo sounds like fun. But no, we haven't found out anything concrete about the rings. I'll send you word." Joe rummaged in his desk and pulled out Diana's check. "Been keeping it for you, since I knew you'd be back in eventually."

Diana and Jamie took Jacob and left Joe's office, but they were stopped numerous times on the way out with people wanting to admire Jacob, and asking whose child he was.

After finally escaping after making up a suitable story, the women walked to the post office and to the nearby bank to deposit Diana's check and withdraw some money.

Jamie was fascinated watching Diana. She had had few dealings with banks, since the tunnel dwellers used very little money--most of their exchanges took place with helpers on a barter system.

Diana looked at her balance with dismay. "I know I don't really need money as much as before, but it still makes me uneasy seeing that balance going down so. With me not working much, it will go down even more, I expect."

They stopped by a frame shop and Diana gave the clerk some measurements on a polyglass cover she wanted to have made for Vincent for Kristopher Gentian's painting of him and Catherine. The clerk said they could have it finished by late afternoon. As they left, she explained to Jamie..."Vincent always has to keep it covered against the damp and dust - this way he will be able to enjoy it and the painting will be safe...Do you think he will be pleased?"

Jamie just laughed and nodded. "Of course he will. I'm glad you feel so secure with him that you don't mind having the painting there. Everyone loved Catherine. I wish you had known her."

Diana was quiet for a time, then confided to Jamie: "It's not that I feel so secure, Jamie...sometimes I feel pretty inadequate next to Catherine...I worry that if Vincent knew me as well as he had Catherine, he wouldn't love me. Maybe this is just one way of trying to prove to him that I don't resent her...because I don't. But that doesn't keep me from worrying about comparisons...comparisons that he is bound to make at times. I'm glad you think he'll like it."

Diana and Jamie took the subway to the zoo, and Jacob was all eyes everywhere they went. Jamie was almost as enthralled. It had been years since she and some of the other tunnel kids had scraped enough money together to come to the zoo, and Diana was a fountain of

information about a lot of the animals. Jacob learned a lot of new words to try out on Vincent. They had lunch and ice cream, and Diana was pleased to see that Jacob seemed to be back to his old self around her, and was as loving as he had been prior to the wedding. After they left the zoo, they took the subway back to the art shop, where the cover was ready. It was wrapped, but so bulky that Diana gave Jacob to Jamie and carried it.

After finding a tunnel entrance in a deserted alley, Jamie went down first, then helped Diana come down with the cover.

"Where are we, Jamie? I don't recognize this part of the tunnels."

Jamie thought and re-oriented herself. "We have to go down and West from here. It's a little way. We probably should have taken the subway back again and entered closer to home, but we're here now, so let's go."

It seemed they walked forever, and Diana's arms were about to fall off, tired as she was from carrying her awkward package.

Jamie was able to let Jacob walk some, and help her, so that helped. Eventually they were nearing home and suddenly around the corner came Devin. "Well, well...what have we here?"

Gratefully Diana gave him the package. "I'm really glad to see you, Devin. How did you know where we were?"

"Sentry saw you and Jamie struggling along, so he sent a message to Pascal to send help. I just happened to be talking to Pascal when it came in....whatever is this thing?"

Diana grinned. "A surprise for Vincent."

Devin laughed. "I think he has a surprise or two for you as well."

They chattered as they walked, and Devin asked Jacob about the zoo. When they finally got to Vincent and Diana's chamber, Jamie said she would take Jacob and wash off some of the dirt and grime he'd picked up on their trip, and Diana hugged her gratefully. Diana asked Devin to help her, and they took the painting down, put it into the cover, and hung it to surprise Vincent.

"If we ever get the chamber cleaned up, it will look wonderful." Devin looked around and shook his head.

"I'll have to help Vincent make some shelves for you. This is pretty impossible otherwise. Vincent's a pack rat almost as bad as Mouse--just different stuff."

Devin hugged Diana, surprising her with a brotherly kiss. About that time, Vincent walked in, and for a moment, Diana caught a hint of jealousy from him...then he smiled.

Diana motioned to him, "Come here, Vincent. I have a surprise for you." Devin slipped out the other exit as Vincent came to Diana and turned around.

Delighted, Vincent reached out and touched the cover on the painting. "It's wonderful, Diana...now everyone can see it."

Quietly, Diana added..."..and you can see it whenever you please, and not just in snatches."

Vincent gazed at Diana lovingly and pulled her close. "You amaze me daily with your compassion and consideration...thank you. Now. I have a surprise for you as well. Where's Jacob?"

Slipping an arm around Vincent, Diana replied, "He's with Jamie at the Mirror Pool...come...he has to tell you about the zoo...he's been waiting all day."

As they walked hand in hand down to the Mirror Pool, Diana told Vincent about the day and how excited Jacob had been.

Vincent squeezed her hand. "I know. I could feel his excitement and joy all day."

Diana's face was hopeful as she told him, "I think it helped, Vincent...he doesn't seem as angry with me."

Smiling gently, Vincent looked ahead. He hoped Diana was right. When Jacob saw his father, he ran on his pudgy legs over to him and Vincent scooped him up. Vincent sat on a boulder next to the pool while Jacob babbled to him.

"Fa-ther! Saw an-mils. Saw..." he stopped and looked at Diana for reassurance...then tried the new words slowly..."saw mon-keys an'...tiger...an'.....Fa-ther...saw big"again he looked at Diana and she prompted him..."big jer-aff!"

Vincent looked at Jacob and tried hard to keep his face serious. He lifted him as high as he could in the air and gazed up..."Was he that big Jacob?"

Squealing with joy, Jacob waved his arms. "No...bigger!"

"How wonderful! Did you have fun?"

Jacob hugged Vincent hard..."Yes!"

"Did you thank Diana for taking you?"

Jacob wiggled off of his father's lap and ran to Diana, hugging her..."Tank you, Di- nah. Love you." Diana's eyes glistened as she gazed at Vincent. Things were going to be all right.

Vincent called Jacob to him again and asked him, "Jacob, how would you like to spend the night with Jamie and Mouse...and you can sleep with Arthur?"

Jacob was ecstatic..."Oh! Yes!"

Diana and Vincent left Jacob with Jamie and Diana went to collect her clothes and take a shower...she wanted Vincent to shower with her, but he declined, saying he would "rather watch." He collected her clothes for her while she showered quickly...the water from the shower never was heated as well as she would have liked, and it was chilly. Vincent just enjoyed the view and handed her a towel as she got out.

Shivering, she commented, "I wish the water could be warmed more...I do miss hot showers."

Vincent remembered the first shower he was able to take after Mouse had invented their showering system...it hadn't been heated at all then...the cold water had almost frozen him. "It's still an improvement over carrying water. Come...I've collected your clothes. I have a surprise for you."

After they returned to their chamber, Vincent pulled out one of Diana's dresses and asked her to wear it.

As she dressed, she looked at him curiously. "What are you up to?" Vincent didn't answer...he just continued changing clothes himself, wearing a secret smile.

When they were through changing, Diana laughed and said, "Here we are, all dressed up and no place to go!"

Vincent put out his arm for her to take and said, "Nonsense. There's always someplace to go, if you use your imagination."

They wandered through the tunnels, listening to the music of the pipes as the messages were tap-tapped continuously. Diana felt Vincent's contentment, and a barely discernable amusement. She wondered briefly what he had in mind...not that she cared...whatever it was, she knew it would be special, coming from him. She began hearing music--wonderful music--Vivaldi she thought, and as they turned the corner there was a suffused glow from dozens of candles, a picnic basket, and a bed made from quilts...like their marriage bed in the caverns.

Wordlessly, Vincent pulled her to him and kissed her.

Diana trembled...it seemed as though it had been forever since they had been together this way...all these weeks with Jacob taking up all of their time and energy...then...everything was forgotten except Vincent.

As the music soared overhead, their hearts and minds blended as they loved one another.

They lay under the quilts, quietly listening to the music, Vincent caressing her, and she listening to his heartbeat. Finally, Vincent asked,

"Are you hungry? Mary fixed us supper."

"In a minute, Vincent. Right now I'm only hungry for you...to have you here like this. I've missed this."

Vincent kissed her neck and looked at her gently..."I too, have missed us being together. Remember Diana...your bond keeps you touching me...I have felt so distant at times it almost seemed we were again in separate worlds...but...Diana...the bond for me seemed to last longer this time. Perhaps in time it will stay permanently."

As she sat up, Diana shivered. "It's cooler up here than down in the living areas." She leaned over to kiss Vincent. "I love you, Vincent...come...let's dress and eat...I think I *am* getting hungry."

After dressing, Vincent wrapped his cloak around Diana, who was still cold. The concert was nearing its end by the time they finished their supper.

As they headed home, Diana looked up at Vincent..."Perhaps you're right and your bond with me will become stronger each time...but Vincent, will you be very disappointed if it doesn't?"

Shaking his head and putting his arm around her, Vincent reassured her. "No. I didn't expect for it to come at all...it was a wonderful surprise...just as every day with you is new and different. Nothing matters but that we are together...Forever."



WIND OF EVIL

At the same time Vincent and Diana were heading home from the concert, far across the city in a luxurious home, a beautiful woman sat staring at a television screen...watching the tapes Gabriel had made of Vincent, the one of when he attempted to rescue Catherine and the ones made during his captivity when he came to save Jacob. A man came up and her.

"Mariah...excuse me..."

"What do you want?" The woman's voice, like the rest of her was exquisite.

The man continued, "We saw the woman today and followed her. She had the child with her, but we lost her."

The woman turned, and her eyes, so brown as to appear black, snapped at him...her face was beautiful, but as cold as marble. "You will find them again. And when you do, I want them... especially the child. The woman is a bonus. If I have either of them...he will come...but this bond he has with the child will bring him to me more surely." She stared coldly at the man. "If you fail, you know what will happen." She twisted at the ring on her finger as she spoke.

"Yes, Mariah. We won't fail you."

She turned again to the screen. "He and I could rule the world. There are two rings left. Mine and Ezekiel's. And *he* is expendable. The other rings don't matter...if Vincent can be....*convinced*... to stay with me."

The man cleared his throat. "Mariah...suppose he doesn't agree?"

She didn't bother to turn around. "He's a man, is he not? There's not a man alive who can deny me what I wish."

The man backed out slowly...he supposed it didn't matter...it was true, there was no man *alive* who could deny Mariah, and if the beast-man didn't cooperate, he wouldn't remain that way long either.

Devin came into the room while Diana and Vincent were cleaning, moving, and organizing their things.

Diana was stretched out over the bed, digging underneath. "Vincent, some of this just has to go! I'm sure you haven't looked at some of this stuff since...since you and Devin were *boys*."

Devin jumped onto the bed. "Hey, let me see that! Vincent! Do you remember where we got this?" He held up an old battered model airplane with one broken wing.

Vincent leaned against the wall and chuckled.

"Of course. You dragged me Above one night to see some model airplanes in a model store, and when we almost got caught by a passerby you pulled me into the alley. We found it in the garbage. You were so sure you could fix it and we could fly it. But we never could find parts for the engine, even if we could have fixed the wing. You were sorely disappointed, as I recall."

Devin lay on his back on the bed, pretending to fly the crippled plane. "No more so than you, brother...but we had fun trying." He looked at Diana. "You *can't* throw this away."

Diana sighed. She just knew this was how every item was going to go...or rather *stay*. The tunnel dwellers were all inveterate packrats...they had to be to survive...but something had to be done.

"Vincent ...Devin...I love you both, but some things are going to have to either be thrown away, given away, or stored elsewhere. We have to be able to walk in here. Isn't there a...a storage chamber or something around here?"

Vincent thought and finally said, "Yes, we do have a place where we can store things for use later, but I don't know how much room it has for extras." Motioning to Devin, he said, "Come, we can go check."

After they left, Diana hopefully began putting some of the things she knew Vincent would never use into a box, knowing that most of it would come right back out. She felt a bump under the bed and looked over the side to play peek-a-boo with Jacob.

Father came in to see how things were progressing, and laughed at Diana's frustration. He leaned on his stick, his eyes expressing his enjoyment of the situation. "I'm afraid he is merely a product of his environment, my dear. Look at my chamber...I don't know half of what is there, but if anyone tried to take any of it away, I would certainly put up a fight."

Jacob ran to Father and pulled on his pants leg..."Gran'Fa-ther....look...I have a house."

"Yes, Jacob, I see. It's a rather dusty one, don't you agree?"

Jacob was coated in dirt from crawling on the dirt floor under the bed...and in the years of dust accumulation.

Diana lay with her chin in her hands looking at them. She loved it here...she loved *everyone* here...and as frustrated as she was at the mess, there was nowhere else she would rather be. She lay back looking at the amber stained glass window with a tired pleasure, as Father said, "I believe Mouse is coming up in a while with the shelves. Perhaps you will be able to make some headway then, Diana."

"I hope so, Father. I just want to be able to find

things again. And I have to put up a mirror. I can't stand not being able to see myself when I'm getting ready in the morning...even if Vincent doesn't want one in here."

Vincent and Devin came back, and Vincent told Diana there was plenty of room...now all they had to do was figure out what could be stored. They spent the next hour or so dickering over what could go and what absolutely had to stay, and finally they had several large boxes that Devin and Vincent took to storage.

"Well..." thought Diana. "That's a start. Now for the shelves and some organization."

When the men got back, Mouse and Jamie came in with some of the shelves, and sent Vincent and Devin for the rest.

Mouse began carving out holes in the walls for the supports to hold the shelves, and by late afternoon they had shelves on almost every wall...enough to hold almost everything they needed.

Hugging Jamie and Mouse in turn, Diana thanked them. "I don't know what we would do without you two."

Devin looked around. "The place is certainly going to look different, Vincent." He laughed. "Maybe I need someone to organize me as well. Diana, by the way, would you put in a good word to your sister for me? I have been wanting to go see her again, but somehow, I felt as though I should talk to you first and see how you felt about it. I *am* a rather rakish cad, you know. You may not want me around her."

Diana *did* have some misgivings about Devin and Susan. Susan was a very settled, very vulnerable sort. She'd already lost one husband...she didn't need any more heartache. Besides, no one ever knew where Devin would be tomorrow. "Devin, I don't know. Vincent and I know how difficult it is to live in two different worlds...and at least we are much alike, he and I. You and Susan are so different. Besides...we don't even know how long you'll be around before your feet get itchy again."

Devin had no answer for that, but he came and put his arms around Diana and said, "I know. But for a woman as sensitive and lovely as yourself...or Susan...I might be tempted to stay."

Diana felt again that flash of jealousy from Vincent and wondered a little at it. He dashed it down as fast as he could, so she never felt more than a flash, but it was there. *Sibling rivalry, perhaps? Or is it something more?* "I'll think about it, Devin." She laughed at Devin's

woebegone look. "I'll be watching to see if you intend to mend your wandering ways."

After Devin left, Vincent and Diana were putting books on the shelves and organizing things, and Diana finally decided to confront Vincent about the vague feelings of jealousy she had sensed several times when he had seen her with Devin. "Vincent, how do you feel when you see Devin hugging me?"

Startled, Vincent turned quickly to look at her. "Feel? I...I'm pleased that you like one another. Devin *is*, after all, my brother. There is no one else besides yourself to whom I feel so close."

"Then why do I keep feeling jealousy from you? You're not unsure about me are you?"

Stopping his work and embracing her, Vincent kissed her. "Never. I guess...I *do* feel just a little jealous. He is attracted to you, you know...and he *is* loveable, and charming. In his own way."

Diana laughed, looking Vincent in the face. He was struggling, trying to push the unwanted emotion away...to pretend it didn't exist. "A loveable clown. He *is* wonderful...he's good for you...and me. We both tend to be too serious, and Devin adds mischief. But I love *you*. I don't know. If I knew he would be staying, maybe I would feel better about him and Susan...but I don't want her hurt. And I don't know if Susan could ever live down here...or Alex. How would you feel about Devin living Above?"

Picking Diana up and depositing her on their bed, Vincent peered underneath first to check on Jacob, then lay next to her. His jealousy was gone as though it had never been. He laughed. "Not a bad idea...keeps his mind off of you."

Then, laughing back at him, she tickled him until Jacob protested that his head was being bumped.

Much later, the chamber was organized, the books neatly lining the shelves, and all of their separate treasures were carefully placed. Vincent and Mouse had made a wardrobe and their clothes were hung on hangers Diana had gone Above to get.

As Vincent sat at his desk, writing in his new journal, Diana lay on the bed reading to Jacob from Kipling's Just So Stories about The Elephant's Child. Jacob had been obsessed with animals since his zoo visit, and he loved the Just So Stories... "and ever since that day, O Best Beloved, all the elephants you will ever see, besides all those you won't, have trunks precisely like the trunk of the 'satable Elephant's child."

Jacob rolled over and squealed..."More Di-nah!"

Vincent closed his journal and went over to pick up Jacob. "No more now, monkey. It's time for bed."

Kiss Diana goodnight and I'll tuck you in."

Jacob obediently hugged Diana and kissed her. "Read more tomorrow?"

Diana kissed him, tousling his hair, and promised she would.

Vincent took Jacob to put him to bed, and while the child slept Vincent could feel the soft touch of the bond with his son. *He is so precious to me.*

Diana came up behind him and put her arms around him, and they walked back to their chamber. However, their peace was short lived. As Diana and Vincent came together, loving one another, Jacob woke...his distress and his bond intruding upon them.

Vincent sighed. "I thought perhaps he was past this.

Diana got up to go to him, wrapping her fleecy robe around her. She suspected strongly that it was her and Vincent's renewal of lovemaking that was distressing Jacob: the bond between father and son was too uncontrolled. Something would have to be done.

As she went in to Jacob, she knew how he would greet her.

When Jacob saw her he screamed, "No! Want Fa-ther. Go 'way Di-nah."

Diana persisted. She sang to him and talked to him about the zoo, and eventually he settled down and slept again.

When she returned to Vincent, she found him awake, his arms clasped behind his head. He raised up on one elbow as she got into bed. "It wasn't as bad this time, was it?"

"No, but Vincent...you're going to have to train yourself to block. Perhaps I can help...or we're going to have to take a honeymoon every week, just to love one another. It will still disturb Jacob though, even then. We'll begin working on it."

They snuggled in and Diana slept. Vincent remained awake for a time, concerned about just how he was supposed to block Jacob and make love to Diana at the same time...he supposed it was possible. Diana should know. She'd had more experience with having to block unwanted impressions. But could she teach him how not to send his impressions to Jacob. Vincent sighed again. Maybe he should consult Narcissa. She was more skilled than either of them in these things. Eventually he slept.

The following morning as Vincent was preparing to teach his literature class, he heard a message on the pipes indicating a letter had come for Diana. Since Diana still didn't know all the codes, he went to alert her. The letter had to be from Joe. When he found her, she was dressing Jacob. "Diana, a message came in that a letter had come for you. I'm assuming it's from Joe. You had best go see Father. I'll be teaching my class if you need me."

Kissing Vincent, Diana took Jacob to Father's chamber. As Diana read the letter, she sighed. "Father, I have to go Above to talk with Joe and Erica. They have a little more information on Gabriel's organization."

Jacob chimed in, "Go Di-nah!"

Thinking about it, Diana said, "Why not? Tell Vincent I took Jacob with me. I shouldn't be too long, anyway."

Vincent was teaching his class--they had switched to Romeo and Juliet--when he felt Jacob's excitement. He wondered what was going on, but he assumed Diana would let him know after class.

Jacob loved riding in the cab. He babbled and pointed, asking questions about everything. When they got out and went in the building, he got to push the elevator buttons again. Diana made her trek through the busy office with its noise and confusion, and the obligatory stops to show off Jacob, finally making it to Joe's office. When she poked her head in, Joe shoed everyone out.

Grinning, Joe pointed to Jacob, "Got your sidekick again today, huh? How was the zoo?"

"Wonderful. I'm enjoying being domestic. Where's Erica?"

"Let me buzz her and she'll be here in a minute. I don't think she has ever met Jacob...she'll be tickled." He spoke to Erica on the intercom briefly, then came around and sat on his desk, arms folded. "You look great, Bennett. Guess chasing bad guys isn't as much fun as playing house with Vincent."

Diana blushed furiously. Joe could always manage to do that to her, but Erica came in and rescued her. She cooed and played with Jacob. As they sat and talked, Joe filled her in on what little they had learned. "The last two rings belong to a Mariah and Ezekiel. We can't find out last names: the organization isn't big on letting out that information. Their usual nesting grounds are overseas, but with all the others being wiped out, they've moved over here to investigate. We still don't

know their whereabouts. But they're definitely out there somewhere, Diana, so be careful. They know about you...and Vincent. The police fortunately never recovered Gabriel's tapes on Vincent: the ones he told you Gabriel had made. So that just means that they have them. I really shouldn't even have called you here...but you needed the information." Joe glanced at Erica a moment before going on. "I probably should've come to you."

Diana was suddenly uneasy. She hoped she could get back to the tunnels all right. "Joe...do you have a gun I could borrow? I left mine...at home...I would feel safer."

Joe opened his desk drawer and pulled out his .38. Diana put it into her carryall. "Thanks. I'd better get Jacob back to Vincent."

When Diana left Joe's office she hurried with Jacob to the nearest tunnel entrance, hoping to get out of sight as soon as possible. She didn't want to risk being seen and trailed.

Once she was down in the tunnels, she felt better for a time, but then she began to get uneasy. *Something isn't right.* She felt as though she were being followed. She tried to pick up any sense of someone and then she caught it--there--the man's mind was so dispassionate she almost missed it! She became desperate to get away--to lose him--but he already knew too much...he knew she had headed into the tunnels, and that alone was too dangerous. She pulled out her gun, but then put it away. She couldn't very well start a gunfight with Jacob with her. Messages were being sent on the pipes. Perhaps someone had alerted Vincent of an intruder. The best she could do was to lead the man away from the inhabited areas...but she was so concerned about Jacob! Jacob in turn was beginning to pick up on her distress, and he didn't like being jostled about with her running. He was crying and afraid. Diana hoped Vincent would feel his fear and be able to find them.

Vincent was helping Mouse with what minor repairs to the main pump that could be done when he heard the message about an intruder. He dropped what he was doing and headed toward the area...then he sensed Jacob's fear and sensed that Jacob was in the same direction he was headed... and he redoubled his speed. When he found Diana and Jacob, the man had them cornered and had his gun out, threatening them. He roared a challenge, and the man turned to shoot, but Vincent, far faster than the man had imagined, knocked the gun aside

and flung him against the wall...then, about to finish him, Diana pulled him aside. "No, Vincent..." she screamed...her voice cutting through his rage. "No. Not in front of Jacob!"

Jacob was hysterical already, sensing his father's rage in addition to his own fear. Vincent removed the leather belt he had on and bound the man securely. His rage quieted, and he calmed Jacob as Diana explained what had happened, and what Joe had told her. Vincent asked, "What do we do with him now? Take him to Joe?"

Diana looked at Vincent, and at the still crying Jacob. "You do nothing but take care of Jacob. Get him home. I can handle this." The man was awake by now and on his feet. "Go, Vincent. Take care of your son. I'll return later."

Hating to leave her alone to take care of this, but knowing she was right, Vincent carried Jacob down the tunnel. Diana looked at the man coldly. "Get up and come with me."

The man grinned. "Sure darlin'. Take me on in. Don't matter none anyway." He was quiet as they walked a ways, then he began being belligerent. "C'mon sweetheart...let me go. You know it don't matter anyway...I'll be out by nightfall." When she kept walking, he continued..."When I do get out, I'll come back. If I don't someone else will. Then I'll have some fun. Why don't you stop and let me go. I'll show you what a real man is like...not that...that thing back there. When they get him, he'll be a goner anyway...the kid too."

Diana stopped, hesitating, unsure. *What am I doing? I can't take him back...he knows about the tunnels. If I let him go, they'd have an army down here.* When the assassin had found the tunnels two people had died...and more than that would die if they came again...first among them Vincent and Jacob. She set her back, and her face became hard...and cold as ice. "Turn to the left and go down the steps. The man turned and looked down a seemingly endless row of spiral metal steps. "Hey...we didn't come this way...why are we going down?"

"Just do it...move." They walked down a long way...then a shot rang out. And Diana was alone on the steps...and the man was falling into the Abyss. Diana put the gun into her carryall and sat down--dispassionately staring into space. She knew Vincent would have heard the shot...or the sentries would have. She knew he would find her. And when he saw what she had done...she didn't want to think about what he would think. Tears slid down her cheeks, but she dashed them away. She wasn't crying for the man she had killed, or for remorse, and she didn't want to give Vincent the wrong idea. It was time she faced him and

he knew what she was capable of. She had to know if he could still love her...once he really knew her. She sat a long time in the darkness, listening to the pipes, waiting for Vincent. Eventually she heard his soft step behind her and felt his presence.

"Diana...are you all right?" he asked, concerned. "Where is the man?"

She turned to face him. "He's dead, Vincent. There..." she pointed to the Abyss..."He's no longer a threat. It was the only way."

Vincent looked at her hard, marble-like face and saw a stranger...and stepped back momentarily... He stammered, "He was bound, Diana...he couldn't have hurt you...you had the gun...how..."

Diana had opened her mind to Vincent, and felt his confusion...his disgust at the image of her killing a bound man...even one like this one had been. Then, a brief flash as he thought...*Catherine could never have done this!* She also felt his love for her. But right now she couldn't handle this. She didn't mind his love for Catherine, but she couldn't bear always being compared to her...and coming out on the bottom. She had enough disgust at herself...at her own hardness. She wished she could be different, but she couldn't: she would do what needed to be done to protect the ones she loved. And if that meant killing that man like he had been a rat in a trap...so be it. It was just one more blot on her soul... something else she had to face every time she looked in a mirror.

Looking up at Vincent, her face still hard, but tears streaming from her eyes, she said: "I told you...warned you...I'm not Catherine. There's a darkness inside me that she never knew...I couldn't let him come back...the only thing I'm sorry for is for how you see me now."

She left him standing there and went to their chamber. She grabbed some clothes and left. Passing Jamie, who tried to stop her, she said, "I'm going Above for awhile. I have to be by myself...tell Vincent...I love him."

Vincent stood beside the Abyss, his hands clenched. He leaned back against the wall, visions of Diana's hard face...and of her shooting an unarmed, bound man, and throwing him into the Abyss. He could have killed him...would have, if she hadn't stopped him...but Diana had done what she had known had to be done...and that although he had thought of the problems the man would bring... what he would have been unwilling to do once his rage had subsided.

He held out his hands and looked at them. He had killed many men...all of them had deserved death...but he mourned each and every one as a passing life. He knew now that Diana was far harder than he had imagined when she had warned him. *But how can I judge her? She's lived among murderers for so long...having to reach into their minds as she tracks them for the police. She's told me that the darkness had penetrated her soul.* He understood, now, what she had meant. But she had been protecting him...protecting Jacob...and their world. *Is she wise...or ruthless? Can I even say she was heartless?*

He shook his head. His convictions had been beaten and battered in the past two years, and now he felt them to be torn asunder. *I have to go to her. Try to help her. Try to make her understand that I still love her.*

When Vincent returned, he met Jamie with Jacob in his and Diana's chamber. "Where is Diana?"

Jamie was confused and upset. "She's gone, Vincent. What happened? She looked like a stranger...and she'd been crying."

Vincent threw back his head and roared...a roar of despair and pain that echoed through the tunnels, sending Jamie scurrying from the room, Jacob crying in her arms.

Above, her carryall heavy on her shoulder, Diana didn't know where to go. Her loft was gone. She couldn't see Susan right now. She had no one to go to but Joe. She walked to his apartment, unwilling to take a cab, as her funds were so low. When she knocked on his door, she prayed he would be there.

Joe turned off the TV and looked through the peephole. When he saw Diana, he yanked the door open. "Diana...what...?"

Diana looked up at him with her face ravaged by pain and hopelessness. "Can I come in, Joe?"

He put his arm around her and led her to the sofa. "What happened, Diana?...Answer me!"

In a soft voice, broken with grief, Diana just said, "Can I stay here awhile, Joe. I have no place else to go."

Joe just hugged her and let her cry against him. "Baby, you can stay here as long as you want, you know that." Joe's thoughts were racing...what on earth had happened? If he found out Vincent had done something to her...he'd kill the guy...but he couldn't imagine Vincent doing anything that would get Diana to this state. Joe made up the couch for himself and insisted Diana take his bed. He made her take a sleeping pill and put her to bed, then he sat up for a long while, thinking about what he was going to do to Vincent if he had caused Diana this pain.

Vincent lay awake, staring at the ceiling. Father had come and gone, Devin was still here...sitting across from him. Vincent couldn't seem to force him out of the chamber, so he gave up.

Devin sat in Vincent's chair, his feet propped on the bed. "I wish you would talk to me, brother. You used to. I don't know what happened, but it must have been something major, or Diana wouldn't have left. I can't imagine what you could possibly have done."

Vincent growled...more at himself than at Devin, and swung his legs over the side of the bed and sat up. He leaned over, his head in his hands. "No, you can't imagine what I did...no one could." He explained to Devin what had happened, as well as he could. It was like explaining sight to a blind man...but he tried to explain how Diana had seen into his deepest soul how he had felt about her at that one moment--about how she had known he had compared her to Catherine--how it had hurt her. "How can I fix a thing like that, Devin? And what's more, now she is Above and in danger--because of me, and I cannot even go to her. I don't even know where she is!"

Devin couldn't think of what to say. Finally, he said, "I'll go look for her, Vincent. Tell me who she knows and where they live...I'll look...and I'll find her for you. I may not be able to bring her back, but maybe I can find her."

Vincent looked up hopefully, then went over and hugged Devin. He told him about Joe and Erica--the only two people he could think of other than Susan. He didn't know where Erica lived, but he could give Devin Joe's address...and he had Susan's. "Go to Joe first, Devin. I don't think she would go to her sister with this...with Gabriel's organization looking for her, I don't think she would endanger Susan."

Joe was still up, drinking his fourth cup of coffee, when Devin knocked at the door. When Joe opened the door for him, Devin looked up at Joe, and knew Diana was here: there was so much anger in his face. "Can I see her?"

Joe's face was hard, and he said, "She's sleeping. I gave her a sleeping pill. What in the hell did he do to her?"

Devin shook his head. "It's not like you think, Joe. I don't even know what to think...but I don't feel like I should say anything about it if she hasn't told you...it's too personal. Just know that Vincent would never hurt her...not purposely anyway."

Joe sat down heavily on the sofa. "You didn't see her when she came here, Devin. I've never seen such pain on anyone's face...except maybe Vincent's when he told me Cathy's story." He ran his hand through his disheveled hair and rubbed his eyes. He looked up at Devin. "I loved Cathy...never knew it until she was gone. I care a lot for Diana. I don't want to see her hurt. I thought Vincent was the best thing for her...now I'm not so sure."

Devin sat next to him. "They'll work it out, Joe. But what Vincent is most concerned about now is that Diana is in danger up here and he can't protect her." He told Joe about the man who had followed Diana to the tunnels, and that Diana had killed him.

Joe nodded. "I'll do what I can to protect her, but this organization is wide-ranging and powerful. I wish she would go back...they sure as hell can't work things out long-distance."

After Devin left, Joe finally went to bed, and his dreams weren't pleasant.

Vincent lay in their bed, looking at the painting of himself and Catherine. It had been so generous of Diana to get the cover for it so he could see it whenever he wanted. "Oh, Catherine. What have I done? Will she ever come back to me?" He could almost imagine what Catherine would say to him. But she had always been so optimistic...even in the direst circumstances. "Diana, please forgive me...come home." He projected his thoughts, his love as hard and he knew how...outwards...to her, hoping she could feel his love. He finally slept restlessly, and dreamed.

In his dream, Diana was alone in darkness...she was crying, trying to push the darkness away, but it became heavier and heavier until it smothered her.

He woke, feeling his own distress compounded by Jacob's as he cried in the dorm. Vincent went to his son and tried to comfort him...wondering who was comforting whom.

Jacob cried, "Where Di-nah, fa-ther? Want Di-nah..." Vincent, knowing he was only causing problems for later, took Jacob to bed with him, and together, they tried to rest, and Jacob cried for both of them.

When Diana woke, groggy from the sleeping pill, she felt a little better, but there was a nagging ache and an emptiness inside her that would not go away. She

built her block between her and Vincent a little higher--like a brick wall--and pointedly kept herself from reaching out to him. She went into the kitchen, where Joe was making breakfast.

"Hi sleepyhead. Ready for some breakfast?"

Diana stretched, and tried to smile..."Smells good, Joe. Aren't you supposed to be at the office?"

Joe shrugged. "Yeah, but I called in. They can get along without me for an hour or so. Erica is going to take care of a few of my problems for me." As they ate, Joe tried hard not to push, but finally he told her..."Devin was here last night, checking on you for Vincent."

The bite of food Diana had just swallowed caught in her throat. "Oh?...and what did he have to say?" Frustrated, Joe said, "Not very damn much, Diana. Look, I don't want to pry, but if he hurt you...did anything..."

Diana laughed bitterly, "No, Joe. Vincent would never do anything to hurt me...not purposely...it was my fault...I thought...well...never mind."

Joe pushed this time... "No...not never mind, Bennett!...Come on. This is something you need to talk about...what happened down there?"

Diana sighed. Maybe Joe was right. She told him what had happened as well as she could, and tried to explain how she felt about herself...always had...and how she had tried to warn Vincent before they were married that she just wasn't as good or innocent as Catherine had been....and now he knew that.

Joe sat quietly through her long explanation, watching her changing face. "So, when he realized what you had done...and your lack of remorse...for an instant, you say he compared you to Cathy...and you fell short?" Tears filled Diana's eyes. Joe felt sorry for her, but he continued. "So what? Do you think that he is never going to compare you to her? You have to remember Diana...He and Catherine were never married...never had to deal with day-to-day problems. Marriage is hard work..." He held up a hand for her to let him finish..."I know...this is different."

But Diana...it was only a moment. Didn't you also feel his love and concern for you behind that flash?"

Diana stared at him..."Yes."

"If he could still love you and be concerned about you behind and around what he was feeling at that moment, then his love for you must be very strong. You think about that. Remember also...I seem to recall in your vows you said...Forever.

Are you going to run away the first time you two disagree over beliefs or opinions? You have to talk it out with him...give him a chance, Diana."

Diana stood up and went to Joe, and hugged him. "Thank you. I was just so hurt, and so disgusted with myself that I wasn't thinking straight. I needed to get away, but now...I need to go back."

As Diana left, Joe was feeling pretty proud of himself. Once those two got together, everything would be fine again. He groaned. Now he had to get to the office.

As Diana left Joe's apartment, she was followed once again, but this time she knew it immediately. As she ran around a corner, she ran right into another man, who grabbed her. "Not so fast, miss." He put his hand over her mouth, and pulled her back into the alley as the man who had been following her rounded the corner.

Later, Diana found herself once again a captive of Gabriel's organization. She was placed in a small cell...more a cage...with a bench-like bunk. She paced the cell when they threw her in. Her blue sweats were a little warm, so she pushed up the sleeves. When no one came, she sat on the bunk and chewed a nail, thinking frantically.

Mariah sat watching Diana on the monitor. When Diana's captor came in, she swiveled her chair around. "You were fools. I told you to wait until you could catch her with the child. It will take longer now. Place the ad in the paper. Perhaps he will see it." The man left quickly. Mariah turned back to the monitor. "You're not much, Ms. Bennett, but you're all I have...and it will have to be enough...though I can't imagine what he sees in you."

Sleek and sexy, Mariah got up and straightened her expensive silk suit, and shook out her long, wavy black hair. "I can't imagine any man choosing you over me...he'll be no different...in the end."

Going down to Diana's cell, Mariah smiled when Diana turned. "Hello, Ms. Bennett. So, we finally meet. You've managed to cause our organization a lot of trouble."

Diana stood. "Mariah."

Mariah inclined her head, "So, you know my name...I'm flattered. Tell me, where is he?"

Diana felt a chill...whether it came from inside or simply emanated from the other woman, she couldn't be sure, but suddenly she felt even more uneasy. "He who?"

"There's no sense in evading me. You know very well whom I mean...Vincent. You know where he is...Gabriel knew. He knew how great Vincent could be...he wanted to...convince him to join him...but in some ways Gabriel was a fool. He was quite mad, you know. I climbed the ladder of the hierarchy with Gabriel. He loved me...in his own way. He told me about Vincent. When I came here, I found the tapes he had made, safely hidden. He was quite correct...the man is magnificent." She glanced archly at Diana... "Far too magnificent for the likes of you. The man has potential that I can use."

Diana watched as Mariah glided around her "cage." The woman was beautiful...probably one of the most beautiful women she had ever seen...but Diana could sense the rot beneath the surface, almost as you would smell the stench from a garbage dump. The evil was almost palpable. She shuddered. *And I thought Gabriel was bad.*

Mariah continued: "Vincent will come for you...we will make sure he knows where you are. Then I can begin to convince him he needs to stay with me. Together, he and I will be unconquerable."

Diana just stared...she didn't know whether to laugh or cry. This woman actually believed she could get Vincent to care for her...or perhaps she didn't care if he loved her...just so he obeyed her...that was equally ludicrous. "Forget it, Mariah...Gabriel couldn't succeed in changing Vincent, and neither will you. You simply don't have what it takes to interest him."

Mariah spun on her six-inch heels... "Nonsense. I always get what I want." She stalked out of the room.

Nightfall came, and Vincent paced the chamber. He had put Jacob down for bed, and he was missing Diana acutely. *Perhaps if I go to her now that I know where she is.* Snatching up his cloak, he went by the dorm and asked Mary to please keep an eye on Jacob, and left for Joe's apartment.

Joe was making himself a sandwich when he heard a tap on the window, and saw Vincent clinging to the side of the building. Rushing over, he opened the window and moved back to let him in. "Man you're nuts! How on earth did you get all the way up here? Never mind. I don't see how you do half the things you do. Well, are things any better?"

Perplexed, Vincent looked around... "What do

you mean, Joe?...and where is Diana?"

Suddenly worried, Joe asked, "She never came back down? She left here early this morning, Vincent going to see you."

A sudden fear came to both men as they stared at each other helplessly. Vincent paced around the sofa and back again. "They must have her, Joe. What can we do?"

Joe was already on the telephone, calling the police to have them put out an APB. "I'll do what I can, Vincent, but unless they contact us...I don't know if we'll have much luck. I'll keep you informed."

Days passed...agonizing days for Vincent. Helpers had been alerted to keep a lookout for any signs of Diana or anything that could lead to her. Devin had gone to see Susan...seemingly just to visit, which he wanted to do anyway, but also to see if Diana was there, without upsetting Susan. He enjoyed himself, despite his worry over Diana. Of course Susan had not seen her, and wanted to know how she was doing. Devin could only lie and tell her everything was going well...and he felt like a heel.

Diana's absence was affecting Jacob as well. In contrast to the way he had been acting towards her, the child loved Diana and missed her sorely. In addition, he kept telling Vincent, "Di-nah go. Jacob bad."

Feeling Jacob's emotions, Vincent didn't know what to do. He tried to reassure him, but he knew it didn't help. Jacob was sure Diana had left because he had told her to go.

As Vincent sat, trying to calm his son, Kipper came running in with a message from a helper. When Vincent opened it, he found a clipping from a personals ad...

Looking for Vincent...who must be looking for Diana. Meet at The Grave on Tuesday night at midnight. Be alone.

"Tonight." Vincent knew, if he went, he would be captured again, and that wouldn't help Diana, but he had to go...but maybe if he could arrange something with Joe...they could somehow keep track. He went to Devin. "Devin. Go to Joe, and tell him about this. Tell him that you need to be able to trace me. They will find the trace, I'm sure, but perhaps it will enable him to find us."

Devin went to Joe, and they discussed the possibilities. "Vincent's clothing provides good cover for a tracking device, but it would have to be small, or it would be discovered too soon." Joe got some equipment together, and he and Devin went Below.

They spent much of the evening planting a small bug

on Vincent on the inside of his shirt. Joe explained to Vincent that he and Devin would remain in the van about a block away...and hoped they could follow.

As the evening wore on, Vincent became a little more hopeful. He was, more than ever, glad that Diana had talked him into confiding in Joe. Without a bond with Diana, there was no other way to find her.

When midnight neared, Joe and Devin went above to the van, and Vincent headed for Catherine's grave. That had to be the meeting place.

Once Devin and Joe were in the van, Joe handed him a .38, looking at him curiously. "Do you know how to handle this?"

Grim faced, Devin nodded, slipping it into his belt. "I've killed men before, Joe. Don't worry. I can do what has to be done." Looking up at Joe, he said, "He's my brother...and we're all he has."

They settled down to wait.

Vincent arrived early at Catherine's grave, and he kneeled, bowing his head. "Catherine. I love you. Be with me in this."

He heard a helicopter and turned. He knew what to expect. He knew they would not get close to him without knocking him out first. He barely flinched when the darts hit him. He struggled instinctively to stay awake, but sank, unconscious to the ground.

Joe and Devin also saw the helicopter. They had Vincent on their monitors, but it was going to be difficult to follow if they went too far on the helicopter. They began moving, and Joe followed. They kept up well for awhile, but then Vincent's captors found the bug and got rid of it. Joe realized they would lose the copter when they took off over the water, headed for Statten Island. "Damn! Joe exclaimed." They watched as the helicopter disappeared into the distance. Joe watched with binoculars and at least got an idea of where it came down.

When Vincent woke, he was in a lavishly appointed room. *Hardly a prison cell.* There were bars on the windows - electrified of course. He smiled. It could hardly hold him. *I will just go through the wall, if need be.* The trouble was, he didn't know where Diana was. He realized he

would just have to wait and see what happened. He moved gracefully around the room, examining the appointments. There was a bookshelf with various classics, and he leafed through a few of them. He closed the book he was looking at when he heard a key in the door.

A woman came into the room...the most beautiful creature he had ever seen...her delicacy and beauty almost took his breath away...momentarily...until he saw the hardness of her eyes. He knew then that this was Mariah, and he noted briefly the ring on her left hand...almost like a wedding band.

"Vincent," she breathed. "I have long awaited this meeting." She moved gracefully towards him, hands outstretched, and Vincent clenched his hands. He could kill her in a heartbeat...surely she knew that...but she also knew he wouldn't.

"Where is Diana?"

Mariah smiled. "She's safe. And she'll remain that way, as long as I do...and as long as you do what I wish. Her safety depends on you."

Vincent's voice was like a thundercloud--full of threat--"What is it that you...wish...Mariah?"

Mariah moved closer and closer, then put her tiny hand on Vincent's chest. She looked up at him. "I think you know what I want, Vincent...I want you..." Vincent retreated a step or two...looking at her in astonishment...and disgust. "I could never love you...I don't think I could even stand to touch you!"

Mariah moved away, gliding around the room. "I didn't ask you to *love* me Vincent. But eventually, you will do as I wish. If you harm me...Diana dies. If you don't do as I wish, Diana suffers. You could get out of this room, but if you do...Diana dies...immediately. Think about your options. I'll get back to you."

Mariah swept out of the room, and the door locked behind her. Vincent leaned against the wall, crossed his arms across his chest and groaned. Looking up at the ceiling, he said a silent prayer for rescue...this was worse than he'd thought it would be. He hoped Joe and Devin hadn't lost him. He felt his shirt, but as he suspected, the bug was gone.

Diana paced her cell, rattling the bars. Vincent was here...she could feel him. She knew he had seen Mariah...she felt his disgust. She smiled, thinking of Mariah's frustration. She knew that Vincent would rather bed a rattlesnake that go to bed with her. If nothing else, at least she could be amused at how this would affect Mariah's self-esteem!

Going back to the tunnels Joe, Devin, and Father had a discussion that lasted far into the early morning hours. Devin had come up with an idea, but were not sure it would work.

"No! I will not allow it!" Father was adamant. "You cannot use Jacob that way. You will be putting him in danger."

Devin sat on the edge of his father's desk, and tried to reason with him. "Not at all, father. You and Jacob would remain behind. All we need is to get the direction. Let us at least try it...it's our only chance."

Finally, Father agreed to try. "But you don't even know if he can point the direction, Devin."

Mary brought Jacob to them, and Devin kneeled down in front of him. "Jacob, can you feel where your Father is?"

Jacob stood, chewing on his thumb...Vincent had finally gotten him to stop sucking it, but he still chewed it when he was nervous. "Yes."

Devin prompted, "Can you tell me which way he is?"

Jacob thought, and pointed.

"Good! Jacob, we are going to play a game. It's kind of like hide-and-seek. We're looking for your father, and we don't know where to look, so we're going to go for a ride in a car, and you need to tell us which way to go. Will that be fun?"

Jacob was excited by the idea of a ride in a car. "Yes!" The three men took Jacob Above, and left in the van for Statten Island, hoping to use Jacob to find them. Joe hoped they weren't too late.

When Mariah came back into Vincent's room, she had their dinner brought in on a cart.

Vincent was sitting in the chair next to the bed, reading Shakespeare. He put the book down and stood.

"I see you are comfortable," Mariah told him. "I've decided to eat with you tonight. Do you like lobster?"

Vincent thought, and decided it was useless to antagonize her at this point, so he shrugged, and said, "I have never eaten it."

Mariah waved the servant out and uncovered the tray. "Wonderful. Then I can introduce you to another pleasure tonight."

Vincent smiled, but inwardly he cringed... "Please hurry, Joe," he thought.

As they ate, Vincent barely tasted the lobster...something he had always wanted to try.

Mariah hardly ate either. She had her mind on

other things: how to properly seduce Vincent, for one thing...how to dispose of Diana after he had come around, for another. "You and I could do great things together, Vincent. Gabriel tried to convince you to join him, and I'd like that as well. But with me, you would be an equal partner. The rest of the organization is done, thanks to you and your friends. There is only one other ring, and I can dispose of the wearer easily. Then..." "The Truth Will Set You Free." She glanced at his huge hands and reached to touch one. He pulled it back out of reach. "I'm not sure his ring will fit you...but we can manage something. I can give you many things...your freedom for one.."

Vincent couldn't tolerate sitting across from her any longer. He shoved the chair back and got up, moving across to the window to stare across at the world--a world bathed in sunlight--something he was never able to see. He couldn't even enjoy the view. "Truth is like the stars; it does not appear except from behind the obscurity of the night...and freedom is something you cannot give me, Mariah." He turned, and looked at her, almost sadly, it seemed. "Love is the only freedom in the world. I cannot think of a thing that you could give me... I do not want you, Mariah."

Mariah struggled with the fact that any man could *possibly* not want her, and she moved over to embrace him. When she felt his shudder of disgust, she turned and went to the door. "Diana will suffer for your...disobedience. I will make sure you see the results of your stubbornness."

Vincent launched himself at Mariah with a roar, but she was too close to the steel door, and was outside before he hit it. He slid down the door and sat...feeling unbelievably tired...and frightened for Diana. He felt responsible for anything that would happen to her, yet he felt powerless to stop it. If he broke out, they would probably kill her. If he stayed in...who knew what Mariah would have done to her. "Diana...what would you have me do?" He tried desperately to reach her--to establish their bond--but it was hopeless. He could feel nothing except his own despair.

Jacob was restless and unhappy, despite the game. Every time Devin asked him where his father was he pointed, but he could feel Vincent's mood, and began crying. "Want fa-ther."

Devin comforted him and said, "I know, Jacob, but we have to find him first. Which way again? Are we closer?"

Jacob sniffed. "Yes. Very close. Over there." Joe was driving past a large estate, and he stopped before he got to the gate, where a guard was standing. Devin

questioned Jacob again. "Tell me how close, Jacob. Is he in a house near here, can you tell?" Jacob just shook his head and pointed in the direction of the estate. Devin commented, "That's got to be it, Joe."

They took the van back the way they had come and parked it, leaving Father and Jacob in a safe place. They left to find a way in and to wait until nightfall.

Diana saw Mariah enter with her two bodyguards.

Mariah indicated for one man to begin filming. "Vincent is being most uncooperative, Diana. He needs a little convincing that I am serious in my intentions towards him." She nodded at the second man, who unlocked Diana's cell and went inside.

Diana backed up against the bars as the man advanced on her. Diana used every dirty trick she knew to fight him, but eventually she lost. "Enough." Mariah's voice cut through the man's intent, and he released Diana...reluctantly.

Clothes torn and face and neck bleeding, Diana spat at him. She turned to the camera and said to Vincent: "Whatever they do, Vincent...it doesn't matter...I love you and I'm with you...don't..."

Mariah motioned to the man to stop filming. "Very touching...I wonder how Vincent will handle this...I didn't let your friend continue this time. Next time, I'll let him have his fun."

Diana turned her back on Mariah, hugging herself tightly. She reached out for Vincent...needing his strength...but she felt only his desperation and worry for her. She hated having him subjected to Mariah's sick malevolence. She would rather face anything than have him in Mariah's power. Diana considered herself to be already tainted with the world's evil...Vincent wasn't...she wanted to keep him that way.

When the key turned in the lock, Vincent turned, almost afraid to find out what Mariah had done. She had a television moved into the room and slipped a tape into the tape player. Turning it on, she left the room, looking back over her shoulder to add..."Enjoy yourself. I thought you might like a little entertainment. Perhaps it will help you think of your options."

As the tape began to run, Vincent tried to look away, but he couldn't. Tears ran down his face and an anguished moan escaped. The tape was

mercifully fairly short. Vincent kicked the television over, then picked it up--and with his roar echoing in the room--he threw it at the door. He paced the room, becoming more and more enraged. Diana was so brave...and so helpless. *I must control myself. Must help her. I can't let this continue.* He thought things through. *Obviously help isn't coming. They found the bug...Devin and Joe have no way to trace me.*

When Mariah came back into the room, Vincent stood looking out the window at the gathering dark. "I will...do...what I must to keep Diana safe." He turned to look at her, and the look he gave her made her step back. "But if any further harm comes to her...woman or not, I will kill you, Mariah...understand that."

Mariah, heartened by her victory--his agreement... however reluctant--moved toward him and reached up, caressing his face.

It took everything Vincent could do not to flinch.

Mariah began slipping his vest and shirt off...with very little assistance on his part.

Vincent felt as though he were moving through a glacier as she led him to the bed. He felt absolutely nothing. *How am I supposed to get through this?*

Suddenly there was gunfire downstairs. Vincent came to life suddenly and grabbed Mariah, holding her so tightly she could barely breathe, much less call out for help. He snarled down at her not to say a word, and proceeded to throw himself at the wall, attempting to break through. The wall was beginning to give, when the door burst open, and Devin came through.

"Come on Vincent," Devin yelled. "Joe is downstairs getting Diana. The police are on their way to clean this up...leave her."

Vincent released Mariah, saying, "Gladly." But before he left, he pulled off her ring. As he and Devin were moving off down the hall, Mariah grabbed a gun from one of the dead guards and shot...wounding Vincent...and Devin spun and fired...killing her.

Vincent just stared at her body dispassionately. It was the first time he'd ever seen death when he felt absolutely nothing.

They ran downstairs to meet Joe and Diana. Vincent's shoulder was bleeding profusely. When he saw Diana, he could have cried with relief. She ran to him, and ignoring his pain, he grabbed her and swung her around.

Joe cried, "Come on you two! The police are almost here, we've got to get out of here."

They managed to get out of the house and down the street to the van before the police came.

As Vincent ran, he felt very exposed without even

his shirt to cover him. He missed the feeling of his cloak about him. He ran, hand in hand with Diana right behind Joe and Devin, trying to ignore the sirens behind them.

Once inside the van, Vincent, Diana and Jacob sat in the back, hugging each other while Father checked Vincent's shoulder. Joe drove slowly through the city to the park to drop them off at the Central Park West tunnel.

They made their way through the tunnels, Vincent was silent. He just held onto Jacob and Diana as though his life depended on never letting them go. He listened to Devin's tale of how Jacob had led them to him when they found the bug.

Vincent hugged Jacob tighter, and the boy said, "We found you, fa-ther. But game not fun... not hide again, okay?"

"I won't Jacob. Thank you for finding me."

Back in their chamber, both Diana and Vincent agreed that, just for tonight, Jacob could sleep with them, and they all curled up in bed under the quilts, Jacob sound asleep between them.

Diana and Vincent sat, propped up by pillows, arms around one another. *I'm sorry* had been said, over and over again...I'm sorry for running away, I'm sorry for comparing you to Catherine...I love you.

"Nothing matters except that it is over and we're together." Diana said.

Vincent disagreed. "Everything matters, Diana. I didn't mean to compare you to Catherine. I shouldn't have. You are you...and I love you for yourself. I can understand why you had to get away to think...I react the same way at times."

He became very quiet, and Diana could feel his unrest...his distress. "What is it?"

His voice was choked with emotion as he said, "I'm sorry I couldn't stop them from hurting you, Diana. I was afraid to leave the room for fear they would kill you...and I was more afraid to stay. I...tried to do what Mariah wanted...was actually going to try! It was fortunate that Joe and Devin came, because I don't think I could have done it...and then..."

Diana put her hand over his lips, quieting him. She rested her head on his chest and said fiercely, "Never mind. I know. I'm glad you couldn't Vincent. I would have rather had myself drawn and quartered than have had you go through with it." She continued, more quietly, "I could have escaped...gone away with my mind to where you

were, and they couldn't have really touched me. But you had only yourself."

Vincent shuddered. "I still feel tainted by Mariah's touch. When Devin killed her, I felt ...nothing...I should have felt *something*, Diana...even rage or hatred would have been preferable."

Sadly, Diana sighed, hugging him. "I know. Now, I think you understand how I felt when I killed that man, Vincent. I felt...nothing. He was a human being...but there was nothing human left in him...he was a threat to everything I held dear. I swatted him like a roach. I didn't feel good about it...but worse, I felt nothing. I didn't want you to ever feel that way."

Vincent's heart felt as though it were slowly thawing...and the vise that was around his chest was being slowly released. "She was so *evil*, Diana. I could feel it emanating from her. How could anyone so lovely be so evil? You're right...I don't think there was much humanity left in her."

Vincent carefully slid out of bed, trying not to disturb Jacob. He opened the drawer on his desk and brought out the wooden box with the other thirteen rings, and added Mariah's to it. Then, turning to Diana, he said...only one more. Ezekiel's. I wonder when we will run him to ground? Let's hope that when we do, we fare better than the last two times."

Picking up Jacob, he moved him to the children's dorm and came back to Diana...who was waiting for him with open arms. He entered there for the healing that they both needed.



Vincent's shoulder healed quickly, as his wounds always did, and their lives settled down. Jacob seemed to have accepted Diana again, although whenever they tried to make love, they always woke him. Diana had begun teaching Vincent blocking techniques, and he was slowly getting better with this.

"Now, Vincent...reach out. Can you feel Jacob? Good. Make the bond as tight as you can, then begin building blocks...like a brick wall, between you and him."

Each time, Vincent's barrier became stronger, until finally the time came when they felt safe going to bed at night and loving one another, though Vincent still had to make a conscious effort to build his barrier.

"It will become unconscious after awhile, Vincent, and it will become easier," Diana explained.

"I hope so," Vincent said, "It certainly distracts me from the task at hand..."

Diana laughed and slipped out of his embrace. "Not now...you know we are supposed to meet Devin."

Vincent sighed. "I know. He's really looking forward to your going and getting Susan for our picnic, but I wish I could delay...just a little while."

She teased him, "Don't you know that anticipation is half the fun?"

Vincent grimaced, pretending dismay. "I think I've had all the anticipation I need to last a lifetime...can't I just have the other half?"

Laughing, Diana teased him out of the chamber, making him chase her down to Devin's room, where out of breath, she called out to Devin to come on.

When Devin came out, he was dressed in jeans and T-shirt instead of tunnel garb, and he looked almost embarrassed when Diana teased him. "Well, are you ready for your date? You'd better be on your best behavior...I'll be watching!"

Vincent just leaned on the tunnel wall and watched their banter. He was glad Devin had decided to stay on. Diana was right...he was good for both of them. He pushed off from the wall and said, "Well, you had better go, or Susan will be waiting all day. I have chores to do while you two are off gallivanting. He kissed Diana and sent them off to get Diana's sister.

Vincent quickly made his sweep, looking for broken pipes, loose tunnel shoring, anything that needed repair, and made note of the areas and the materials needed so helpers could be spoken to

about parts. He and Mouse had already put the word out for the parts they needed for that main pump, and it was worrying Vincent. He hoped parts would be found in time. Devin had been to junkyards and found some of them, but Mouse was still rebuilding those.

When Vincent got back to the living area he found Father and gave him the information. Vincent was concerned about some of his findings, "I don't want anyone to go down that south tunnel area until we fix the shoring. They can use the alternate route. I'll have Pascal relay the message on the pipes. We don't need anyone trapped."

Father considered, "Good idea, I'll let him know. I'm on my way there anyway. By the way, Vincent, William says that he has your picnic basket ready for you to pick up, but he said you have to pay the price: He has a food pickup for you to make near Lexington. You can just make it if you hurry...take Kipper and Sandra. With the cart, you'll make good time."

Vincent hurried off to round up Kipper and Sandra and pick up the cart...a quick message on the pipes told them where to meet him.

They trotted along at a good pace for a while until Sandra fell and sprained her ankle, but Vincent just put her into the cart and pulled it.

"A lot of help you're going to be," Vincent teased.

Kipper just grinned...if he knew Sandra, she probably arranged it just so she could get a ride.

When they got to the pickup point, Vincent and Kipper loaded the food, and as Kipper had suspected, Sandra said her foot felt a lot better, and got out and helped.

Vincent didn't say anything, but the laugh lines around his eyes just crinkled as he glanced over at Kipper. He hadn't been fooled either.

Devin and Diana picked up Susan and her daughter, Alexandra, and headed back to the tunnels. They had talked seriously to Alex, who was only about seven about the seriousness of keeping the tunnels secret. Alex said she understood, and she was usually very good about keeping her word.

Devin reassured Diana, who was worried, "Even if she told anyone, Diana...who do you think would believe her...or be able to find their way if they did? She'll be so lost once we're down there, she'll think she's in another world."

Susan commented dryly: "It is another world, Devin. I'm anxious to go visit again...my visit during the wedding was much too brief."

They rode the subway for a way, then got off, ducking into a side passage, then down to a tunnel entrance.

Once down in the tunnels, Alex looked around suspiciously ... "What's that noise?" Up here you could only hear a faint tapping on the pipes...it would get louder as they descended.

"That is people talking to each other, Alex. Listen closely as we go on, and you'll hear more of it. That is how we communicate down here instead of by telephone," Diana explained to her niece.

"Do you know what they are saying?" Alex asked.

"Not everything...I'm still learning too...it takes a long time." Diana looked at Devin. "Vincent and Devin know all the codes. They grew up here, and they used the codes all the time." A staccato tapping...then an almost musical reply was heard.

"What did they say, Devin?" Alex asked.

"One of the sentries has seen us and is alerting Vincent that we are on our way, and he answered. He will probably meet us...here..." Devin picked up a rock and tapped a message..."I just let him know where to meet us, so he won't have to search."

Alex was fascinated. "Neat! That looks like fun! Can I learn?"

"Sure, if you have time enough and patience enough. Maybe on your vacation you can come visit your aunt, and you can go see Pascal...the man who takes care of the pipes...he loves to teach the kids about the codes."

Susan and Diana smiled at each other. Summer was coming up...maybe they could come to visit, though where they would stay, Diana didn't know. They had to get Devin settled into a permanent chamber soon. Their amount of guest chambers was woefully lacking. Diana asked, "When are you and Vincent going to find or carve you a chamber, Devin?"

Groaning, Devin replied, "Soon, I guess. I hate to carve rock, but there is no other way, unless I want to go live down in the maze or the catacombs...and I'm not as reclusive as Narcissa."

At the mention of Narcissa, Diana began thinking. She would like to see her again. Their brief meeting on her and Vincent's honeymoon had whetted her curiosity about the woman. "Who is Narcissa, Devin? I have met her once, but she is so mysterious."

"Don't know, Diana. It seems she has always been there. Vincent and I used to visit her as kids. Vincent with his dreaming true and his hyper-intuition had always been interested in psychic things, so he learned a lot from her. Father always

says that half she talks about is nonsense, but I don't think Vincent believes that."

"Nor do I," Diana replied.

Susan just listened to their discussion. Growing up with Diana, she too, knew that being psychic was not nonsense. When Diana told her something, she listened. Up around the corner a shadow moved, and lantern light danced.

Diana ran ahead and hugged Vincent. They came back to the others, arm in arm.

"Susan," Vincent said with his soft, almost furry, gentle voice, "It is good to see you again." He kneeled in front of Alex, who was spellbound. She had been told about Vincent,...but seeing him was something else again. "Hello, Alex. Welcome to my world."

Alex came forward and felt Vincent's hair and touched his face. "You're beautiful, Vincent."

Smiling, Vincent picked her up and hugged her. "What a compliment coming from such a lovely young lady!"

Alex blushed, pleased.

"Where is Jacob?" Diana asked. "Down at the Mirror Pool with Mouse, Jamie, and Arthur...I guess we are going to have to look for a pet for him. He would just as soon go live with Arthur as stay with us."

As they traveled, Devin moved over next to Susan and began pointing out areas of interest and telling her about his world. Diana and Vincent dropped back and let Devin have his fun. Susan was listening to him avidly, and was obviously enjoying his company. Vincent leaned over and whispered to Diana..."I think my brother will be staying around for a long, long while, Diana."

Diana hoped so, because Susan really seemed enchanted with him.

As their feet rang on the spiral staircase going down, Devin kept himself between Susan and the Abyss. She was delighted with the Voices in the Whispering Gallery, and charmed by Devin's attention as he carefully guided her over the bridge. They passed the waterfalls, and Devin explained how he and Vincent as children had come here to skinny-dip and test their skill at holding their breath under the falls. "We'd be blue before we'd come out...or at least I would...it's hard to tell *what* color Vincent was..." Devin broke off, laughing, as Vincent cuffed his head.

As they got to the Mirror Pool, they saw Jamie and Mouse waving.

Jacob ran to his father and looked up at Alex. He was a little shy around strangers usually, but he was also a little jealous of this little girl, since his father was holding her.

Vincent put Alex down and introduced them. "Why don't you go introduce Alex to Arthur, Jacob?"

Jacob held out his hand, and took Alex to see Arthur.

The chubby raccoon waddled over to Jacob and sat down, and Alex clapped her hands. "He's so cute!"

The picnic was spread and the adults talked while Alex and Jacob fed pieces of food to Arthur.

Diana commented to Mouse, "Mouse, you're going to have to put Arthur on a diet if this keeps up. Soon, he won't even be able to walk."

Mouse shook his head, sending his blond hair flying. "Hard, Diana. Everyone feeds him. Such a beggar."

The children were chasing Arthur down the tunnel, and Vincent called to Jacob... "Don't go far, Jacob."

Susan asked Vincent... "Don't you worry about him down here...so many places to get hurt?"

"Not so much now," Vincent replied. "But later, when he becomes more adventurous...I imagine I will." He glanced after the children. "I know Father worried about all of us...and he worries about the children now. When I think of the things Devin and I got into, it even curls *my* hair."

Devin grinned. "But we survived...barely." Suddenly Vincent rose and dashed into the tunnels after the children. By the time the others got up to start after him, he was back with Jacob under one arm, Arthur on his shoulder, and Alex trailing behind.

"What happened, Vincent?" Diana asked.

"They were getting ready to go into the maze, and there are too many hazards there."

Susan laughed. "With your bond, at least you can keep up with him...and try to keep him out of trouble."

Devin commented that when Jacob got older, he wasn't going to appreciate all this *closeness*.

"Diana has been teaching me to block, Devin," Vincent replied. "And we can teach Jacob...but for now, it will help keep him safe."

They cleaned up after the picnic and Devin said he would take Susan and Alex home. After they left, Mouse and Jamie decided to go swimming and Diana and Vincent sat by the falls and talked. Jacob wanted to swim, so they let him go in with Mouse.

"Vincent, let's take Jacob outside tonight. We have still never taken him out at night...You've never been outside with him. There's a full moon tonight."

Vincent was unsure. He feared getting caught Above himself...to be caught Above and have Jacob with him...he shuddered at the thought.

"You can't live in fear, Vincent...he'll miss too much of life."

Eventually, Vincent gave in. He knew Diana was right. He leaned his head over on Diana's, watching Jacob. "I hope he sleeps well tonight."

Diana poked him in the ribs. "Still anticipating?"

Vincent picked her up and walked to the edge of the pool, threatening to throw her in....

"No! Vincent! Don't you dare!"

So, Vincent let her down and hugged her.

Mouse and Jamie just watched from the water. It was wonderful to see Vincent so carefree.

Vincent and Diana took Jacob from Mouse and dried him and re-dressed him, then told Mouse and Jamie goodbye.

Once back in their chamber, Vincent sat rubbing his shoulder.

"I'll rub that for you if you want..." Diana offered.

Vincent shook his head. When Mariah shot him, the bullet nicked the bone, and occasionally it still bothered him...a reminder of past unpleasantness. He still had dreams of being trapped with Mariah...and no way out...being unable to help Diana; when he did, Diana would wake him before it got too bad... and remind him that she was safe and there was no need to worry.

Diana watched him, a little worried. He may have healed physically after his encounter with Mariah, but he still had those dreams...and that was unlike him--to continue to worry after the fact. But his convictions--the very way he looked at himself and the world around him--had been shaken by her, more even than by Gabriel. Her evil had touched him and tainted him, and that, more than anything Mariah could have done to her, angered Diana. Vincent was strong, but he had been through so very much. The very fact that he shook off her desire to make his shoulder feel better disturbed her. Since their wedding, he had always welcomed any contact with her...needing the closeness between them. For him to retreat was not at all like him.

Sighing, Diana called: "Come on, Jacob. Let's go see if Mary needs help."

Diana gave Vincent a quick kiss, noting that he didn't even look up, and left the chamber.

After Diana left, Vincent sat down at his desk and opened his journal. His hand shaking, he began to write.

The dreams still haunt me. The emptiness that I felt at Mariah's death haunts me more than anything. I wake calling for Diana, and she is always there, but even her presence...even when we bond...nothing drives it away

permanently. The woman's evil haunts me more now that she is dead than when she was alive. I am unsure what bothers me the most...my inability to help Diana in the dream, or the dead feeling inside of me as I see Mariah die. How can I wish for someone so completely evil to live again? I feel some need to atone...but for what crime...for wishing her dead, or for not caring that she died? I should talk to Diana...she could help me, I know, but I cannot.

Vincent closed the journal, then sat staring at his painting. Catherine's beauty shone, and he remembered her goodness and innocence. He was once like that. Their love had been like that. But he thought of Diana and her strength. She dealt with this same feeling...had dealt with it before she ever met him...and she, too was good, and gentle, and kind. She was able to rise above it, and she gave him hope that he, too would learn to fight against the emptiness...filling the empty space with love.

He sighed, stretched, and rubbed his shoulder. The ache was almost gone. He went to find Diana and Jacob.

Diana helped Mary change the sheets in the children's dorm, and watched Jacob play with some of the other children. He had formed fast friendships with one or two of the boys a little older than he. He was so precocious that he was far ahead of the children his own age. He was only a little over a year and a half, but seemed much older. He had been talking well for months, and some of the things he figured out for himself amazed her. She wondered if Vincent had been that intelligent. She knew *she* certainly had not been...*Maybe he got it from Catherine. Of course,* she thought, *neither Catherine or Vincent had had Vincent for a father, either.* She was sure the bond between father and son made learning easier for Jacob. She had a feeling life would continue to be interesting as far as Jacob was concerned.

Mary came over and whispered to Diana, "He's going to take over around here, if we're not careful!"

The women gathered the sheets and asked the older children to take care of the younger ones, and left to wash. Diana remained so quiet that Mary was concerned about her. "Are you all right, dear?"

Diana smiled, trying to reassure Mary. "I'm

fine, just tired, I suppose. We've been busy this week, and Jacob is just now beginning to sleep well."

Mary said no more, but decided she needed to talk to Father. Diana didn't look well. She was very pale.

While they were washing clothes, Vincent came and helped for awhile, and before long they had the sheets all hanging out to dry. Diana looked so tired, Vincent convinced her to go lie down, and took her back to their chamber. Mary watched them leave, then went to talk to Father. "Father, I'm really concerned. I think you should check her. Diana isn't one to complain, and I know she's been through a lot lately, but I know it's more than that. I suspect she may be pregnant." Mary was the midwife in the tunnels, and she had delivered many a child, and taken care of many of the mothers before they gave birth.

Father sat with his fingers laced in front of him, worn fingerless gloves frayed and patched by Mary's careful knitting. He finally looked up at Mary and said quietly, "Mary, I'm sure Diana is well aware of her condition. When she is ready, she will either consult me, or see someone else, I am sure. I think right now she is concerned about something else. Let's wait a while. If she does not come to me...or tell Vincent, then I promise I will talk to her."

Vincent had gone with Mouse to finish shoring up the tunnels. Their progress was slow, but steady. He had left Diana lying down and had checked on Jacob.

Kipper and Sandra were playing with the younger children, so Jacob was fine for a while without Vincent having to bother Diana.

But Diana wasn't sleeping. She was thinking and "listening" to her own body. She knew she was pregnant...she had known for some time. She was delighted, but she worried about telling Vincent. He'd felt very fortunate when Jacob had been born so "normal" and looking like his mother...she knew he would worry about this child, and he was already so disturbed right now, she didn't want to give him anything else to worry about. She knew, also that Mary suspected.

Sighing, Diana sat up. She might as well go see Father...he would know by now anyway, and she needed care for the child's sake.

When Diana appeared at his doorway, Father was both concerned and relieved. She looked so pale,...but at least she was here. "Father...could you please examine me?" She looked down, embarrassed. "I'm

pregnant, Father....if you would rather, I could go see Peter."

Father hugged her, and brought her over to his chair. "Nonsense. If you want me to care for you, that's fine. But if you prefer Peter..."

She looked up into the gentle brown eyes of Vincent's father..."No. I want you. I like Peter... but I love you."

Touched, Father sat beside her and held her hand. "Does Vincent know?"

"No. And I don't want him to...not just yet. He's still having trouble getting over what happened with Mariah. He has dreams, Father. I'm worried about him. I don't want him to have something else to worry about."

At first, Father didn't understand, then he realized what Diana was talking about. "I see...yes...I suppose he will be concerned. Are you not?"

Diana looked up at Father..."I love this child. We already have a bond...tenuous as it is. It doesn't matter...if it looks like Vincent, I will only love it more."

After examining Diana, Father reassured her that everything was fine, but that she needed to rest.

"I'll talk to Peter about getting you some Prenatal vitamins. Have you had any morning sickness?"

"No, thank goodness...I couldn't hide that from Vincent."

Father sat Diana down and looked at her. "It is your decision, of course, but I really think you should tell him, Diana. He deserves to know."

"I'll tell him, Father...just...not yet. I have to find some way to help him with his nightmares first."

Father was stern with her. "Vincent has been fighting his own nightmares for his entire life, Diana...don't baby him. You'll see. He will be fine...just be there for him."

Diana hugged Father. She'd lost her own father years ago, and he had become very dear to her. She valued his advice, and he had known Vincent far longer than she. *Perhaps he's right. I do try to protect Vincent...even from himself, and I suppose I shouldn't.*

When she returned to the chamber, it was getting late, and Vincent was nowhere to be found. She reached out with her hand, searching for him, and sensed him, still working, so she went to collect Jacob and have supper.

Jacob was endearing at supper, and Diana looked forward to the time when she would have another child of Vincent's to love. She asked William if he could put back a dinner for Vincent and one for

Mouse, as they hadn't returned from working on the tunnels, then she left to put Jacob to bed.

Jacob played and fussed, but he settled easily as Diana sang to him. She had asked Vincent to teach her Catherine's lullaby so she could sing it to him...she felt Catherine would have liked that.

Once he was asleep, she sat watching him for awhile. Strangely, he looked more like Vincent to her every day. She fingered his wavy chestnut hair ...which was getting rather long. She hesitated to cut it... long as it was, he looked more like his father.

She rubbed her eyes and went to their chamber, wishing Vincent were back...it seemed awfully late to still be working on the tunnels. Reaching out once again, she sensed him coming back, and she lay back on the bed reading, to wait for him, thinking that they had never taken Jacob outside, as they had planned earlier...too many things to do.

Before she knew it, she had fallen asleep.

Vincent stopped by the showers to clean up, then went to the kitchen. He knew Diana would have had William put his supper back for him, and he was starved. The tunnels were finally safe again, and the work had done him good. Emotionally, he felt better than he had since... well, since Mariah. His mind shied away from thinking of then. He didn't need to depress himself again. He could sense Jacob peacefully asleep, and looked forward to being with Diana.

When Vincent entered the chamber, he saw Diana curled up under the covers, sound asleep, her lovely red hair spread out like a fan around her head. He quietly pulled up a hard-backed chair and sat backwards on it, his arms across the back, and laid his chin on his arm, watching her sleep. She was so pale and lovely lying there, the patchwork quilt covering her and the candlelight making dancing shadows across her face. Vincent sighed. *It's very late. Even the pipes are quiet.*

He undressed and slipped in beside her quietly, trying not to wake her, and as he did, she automatically adjusted her body to fit his and murmured his name. He curled his arm around her, snuggling in, and fell asleep.

The dreams began before long, but this time they were different, somehow... Vincent felt the same disgust at Mariah's advances as before...he still felt the same...inadequacy at his ability to protect Diana...but this time, when Mariah died, he rushed to her side, and as she died, he wished that somehow, he could have loved her just a little. In his dream, he remembered a long-forgotten line from a poem:

*"Alone...the word is life endured and known.
It is the stillness where our spirits walk
And all but inmost faith is overthrown."*

Diana woke, feeling his disquiet, but she found him awake, his azure eyes gleaming in the dark.

"I'm sorry I disturbed you...I'm fine, Diana, truly. Tomorrow, I'm going to see Narcissa. I may be gone a day or so...I need to be alone to think."

Diana stroked his chest, and reached up and kissed his neck. He rolled over towards her and began caressing her. Their bond, which had been steadily growing stronger, caught, and as they loved one another, Vincent sensed something different... something hidden that had not been there before.

Afterwards, as the bond slowly faded--it was lasting longer each time--Vincent watched Diana.

Suddenly, remembering Diana's tiredness, her pallor, something seemed to fall into place, and Vincent turned Diana's face to his. "Diana...Why didn't you tell me?"

Looking up into Vincent's gentle eyes, she said, "I was going to...but you've been so distressed lately." As she watched his face for any signs of anxiety, she was surprised to see only love...and reaching for his emotions, she found only a gentle, quiet happiness. She reached around his neck and hugged him. "You're feeling better. I was worried about telling you, afraid you'd worry."

Vincent caressed her back and laid his face against hers. "It was bound to happen eventually. We will face what comes. I will love a child of yours. Never withhold something like that from me...especially not to protect me."

Diana told him what Father had said--that he had been fighting his nightmares all his life, and that she shouldn't try to protect him.

"He was right, Diana. Now, just as you had to go off on your own to think, I have to...but not about the child. Try not to worry. Just rest and take care of yourself. It's my job to worry about *you*."



After Vincent left the following morning, Diana went through her day leisurely. Mary wouldn't let her help her with any of the children... she said she needed to rest. She even took Jacob off her hands.

Diana wasn't used to so much leisure, but she was very tired. She decided she would just read, and she lay across the bed reading...a mystery this time. She felt like something light.

Periodically she would touch Vincent's mind to reassure herself he was all right. He seemed fine...just very determined...then she seemed to be drawn into his mind, and she saw visions as she lay awake, staring at the wall.

Narcissa was waiting for Vincent when he came to her chamber. She'd sensed him for a long time. "Enter, Vin-cent...why do you come so far to see old Narcissa?. You should be home wit' your bride."

Vincent told Narcissa of Mariah and the dreams. "I cannot fill the emptiness, Narcissa. I need to know her...why she was what she was. I need to be able to mourn for her, evil as she was."

Narcissa shook her head, "To bring the dead to life is nought, Vin-cent...for none are wholly dead...but you need to search wit'in yourself...to walk wit' your spirit in the darkness of your own heart. Remember, even evil has its place there, for wit'out it, your spirit would be weak, wit' not'ing to triumph over.

She held his hands and told him to concentrate. "Look you at de point ahead...that encompasses all being. All time is now. Then take your Spirit Walk and find what you seek wit'in yourself."

*"All thought becomes an image and the soul
Becomes a body; that body and that soul
Too perfect at the full to lie in a cradle,
Too lonely for the traffic of the world:
Body and soul cast out and cast away
Beyond the visible world."*²

Vincent concentrated, and Narcissa chanted some song, meaningless to Vincent...but as the chanting wore on, he concentrated on the point ahead and the darkness closed around him...he felt himself falling.

*Vincent saw the "Other"...the beast inside
himself...taunting him. and thought of lines from
Yeats...*

*"By the help of an image
I call to my own opposite, summon all
That I have handled least, least looked upon."*³

Time seemed skewed somehow... he saw Catherine and himself in their innocence and love... saw her taken from him by Gabriel. But their love lived on. He saw Jacob...saw him growing to manhood. He saw Diana as she reached out to him...somehow she was here with him. Diana reached out to him and took his hand. He saw her growing large with the child she carried. He saw Mariah coming toward them, her smile lovely, her eyes cold... he saw his "Other self" smile at him and reach out for Mariah..to kill...but when Mariah saw Vincent and Diana together, tears started in her eyes and he heard a voice...that was not a voice...telling him, "Love unknown cannot be given. False dreams, all false." The "Other" retreated... Vincent saw her dying still reaching for him...and releasing Diana, went to her side. He looked up at Diana, tears falling. Diana took his hand, smiling, and released him from his dream.

Vincent woke suddenly from his vision and saw Narcissa still staring at him with her blind eyes...seeing beyond him. Narcissa spoke quietly to him. "You have seen what you needed, Vin-cent?"

Vincent shook himself, "I think so, Narcissa. Thank you." He reached up and felt the tears on his face and brushed them away. The emptiness seemed to be filled, somehow, and his spirit was quiet. He was able to mourn Mariah now.

As Vincent left Narcissa to go back home, the old woman sat back, musing, her blind eyes seeing more than the world around her. "More trials await you Vin-cent...and Diana as well."

Diana woke...she looked around the chamber, feeling a sense of loss. Her connection with Vincent while he took his Spirit Walk was broken... but she sensed he had found what he sought.

The days passed quietly, running one into the other as days do, and Vincent and Diana's contentment grew. It was a quiet time for them, with Diana's pregnancy advancing rapidly...even as Catherine's had. Vincent was enjoying being able to share it with her...as he had not been able to share Catherine's, and they both enjoyed a growing anticipation. Their bond was growing easier to establish daily.

Father was the only one concerned about the speed of the gestation. He consulted with Peter, but without doing extensive testing, which they had no way to do, all they could do was trust to nature and Diana's own body.

Jacob was growing like a weed and learning more every day. Diana sat Jacob on a chair in the dining area for his first haircut. She and Vincent had put it off long enough, and Jacob's hair was hanging down his back...and looked exactly like Vincent's. Diana hated to cut it, but she'd decided on only cutting it to just short of shoulder length. When she was finished, she decided it was a good length on him. The boy was going to be very striking, with Vincent's clear blue eyes and the same bone structure in the face. He would perhaps never be conventionally handsome...but no one would ever ignore him, either.

The boy was almost two, and they had still never taken him Above with Vincent... Vincent always temporized somehow. But Diana was determined they would take him Above soon. He was old enough to really enjoy himself. He had Vincent's night sight, and his acute senses...all the advantages and none of the disadvantages his father had.

When Diana told Jacob she was finished, he hopped down and streaked around the corner to find his friend Toby...one of the cast-offs from the world Above whom they had rescued. Jacob already ran the tunnels, and they already managed to get into a lot of mischief. They had lured Arthur away from Mouse, and the raccoon seemed to enjoy following the children around the tunnels...he was even losing weight with all the walking. Mouse seemed to accept the loss with equanimity.

Diana put her hands over her stomach and felt the comfortable bulge of the child, and felt it move. Reaching with her thoughts to touch the child, she could *hear* the heartbeat. She, more than anyone knew there was nothing wrong with this pregnancy.

When she entered their chamber, she saw Vincent at his journal, and lifting his mane, kissed

the back of his neck and went to lie down.

Vincent smiled at her, and went back to his writing.

...Diana is lovely, and so pleased with her pregnancy...about the child. I too, am pleased, but I have my concerns. Jacob was fortunate...he inherited only qualities from me that cannot set him obviously apart from the world Above. If this child should be born with my differences...the differences which do set me apart, I worry about the child's future.... Our home down here is an ephemeral sort of world, existing day by day on the trust and honor of everyone who knows about it. What will become of the child if our world should ever cease to exist? I can only hope that, as with Jacob, the problem will not exist.

Vincent closed the journal and went to lie beside Diana. He placed his huge, long-taloned hand gently over her abdomen and felt the child move. "It's so wonderful, Diana. The child is well?"

Diana smiled. Only Vincent seemed to trust in her that the child was well... Father and Peter were constantly worried.

"She's fine, Vincent."

Startled, Vincent looked up..."She? When did you learn this?"

"Today...I don't know how I know, but I do."

Vincent turned suddenly, and asked, "Where is Jacob, Diana?"

Puzzled, she said, "Don't you know?" Vincent reached out for Jacob and encountered a fuzzy blankness...he was there, but blocked. "No....I can't reach him."

Suddenly concerned, Vincent started out to look, with Diana behind him. They finally found him at the Mirror Pool...where he knew he was not supposed to go without them.

The child looked up guiltily. "Father!I ...I followed Arthur...see?" Vincent reached out to see if he could touch him, and the bond was there ...Jacob was fibbing, of course...he had discovered how to block...by himself! After being appropriately chastised and sent to the dorm, Vincent turned to Diana, who was leaning against the wall, grinning at him.

"I told you it would happen eventually," she said gleefully. "He's too smart for his own good, Vincent."

Vincent shook his head ruefully. "It took me weeks to learn to block with you teaching me, Diana...he is amazing." He thought for awhile, then said, "Is our daughter going to have your psychic ability, Diana, or do you know yet?"

Diana shook her head. "It's too early yet to know

for sure, but I suspect she will...I have no problem picking her up."

After they returned to their chamber, they lay in bed reading and discussing the upcoming Winterfest. It was Diana's first since she'd moved below.

"This past year has been wonderful, Vincent. We have had so much to be thankful for. Despite the troubles with Mariah, and our problems before we were married, it has been wonderful."

Vincent gazed at Diana lovingly. "We have much to look forward to, as well. Winterfest will be especially festive this year. Today I visited the chandlers to see what supplies they needed yet to finish the Winterfest candles. Tomorrow we can all begin the deliveries to the helpers. William still needs some help organizing the feast...would you like to help with that? I know I can trust him not to overtire you."

Diana agreed eagerly. Everyone had been coddling her for so long, she felt she needed to do something. She hadn't even been Above to see Joe in the past few months since she'd started showing. He still didn't even know she was pregnant. Vincent didn't want to let her out of his sight. It was touching, but also a little suffocating for Diana, who had always been so independent.

Vincent left to go see if Jacob was properly chastised for disobeying, and to put him to bed. When he returned, Diana was reading...she was catching up on all the reading she'd never had time to do before. Vincent glanced over her shoulder at the book she was reading, one of Robert Browning's poetry. Diana rolled over, her belly beginning to bulge, as Vincent looked over her shoulder.

*Grow old along with me!
The best is yet to be,
The last of life, for which the first was made...⁴*

She pulled his hair gently..."Is that gray I see there?"

Holding her tightly, Vincent just whispered, "Never. You make me young."

Vincent blew out the candles and took the book from Diana, and they loved one another very gently, their bond echoing their joy.

The following morning everyone went about their tasks preparing for Winterfest. Vincent had canceled his classes until after the holiday, though the children all knew they had to finish reading their current poetry assignment, and analyze a poem to

discuss after they returned.

With Jacob in tow, Diana went to see William. Together, she and William made up the list of everything they still needed for the feast.

Almost everyone would be there, even Susan and Alex. Diana decided to ask Father if they should ask Joe...she thought he would be really pleased, and it would be a good time to tell him about the baby. When Father came in to check on the progress, she asked him, and he too, thought Joe should be included.

"I'll send Bennie to the office...he's in and out of there all the time...he should have no problem getting the message to him, and Vincent can go get him when Devin goes for Susan."

Father put his arm around Diana. "Please don't overdo, child. I need to watch you like a hawk. I know you feel well, but your pregnancy is so unusual,...well...I just want you to take extra care. Besides...that's my grandchild in there, you know." Diana kissed him. "I know. But don't worry, we're fine."

Diana finished helping William...they sent Jamie and Mouse out for the final food pickup, and she went with Jacob to see the fort that he and Toby had built out of boxes some of the older boys dragged below.

"That's wonderful, Jacob." She peeked inside and saw Toby hiding in the back with Arthur. The fort took up the area between Toby and Jacob's beds. "Perhaps you two can sleep in there tonight. Would you like that?" The boys agreed that would be fun. "Come on, now kids...it's time for supper. William is putting out a quick supper tonight...just sandwiches. Your father should be back soon, Jacob."

Joe received his message and his candle at lunch when Benny handed him his tongue sandwich. He was delighted. He hadn't seen Diana in ages...and he was touched to be included in their celebration. Vincent had told him about Winterfest, and how they celebrated with all the helpers and all the tunnel dwellers...it was a celebration of the creation of their world and of friendship. Joe couldn't wait. He wished he could take Erica, but she had not yet been introduced to the tunnels. *Tomorrow... it seems like a long time to wait.* He was to meet Vincent in the tunnel underneath the barber shop.

Vincent met Diana and Jacob in the dining room in time to grab a quick sandwich. As they headed back to their chamber, Jacob had to tell Vincent all about the

day, but then he began asking about going Above.

Vincent changed the subject over to Winterfest and got him interested, telling him stories about previous Winterfests, and how he used to make up stories about the tapestries, pretending he could go inside them and become part of them if he tried very hard.

Diana listened to the stories, but what she was really listening to was Vincent's feelings. He was still worried about taking Jacob Above, and always managed to change the subject. He couldn't continue forever. He was going to have to take the chance someday.

Vincent was listening to Jacob tell him about the fort and how Diana had said they could sleep in it with Arthur. "Can I come too?"

Jacob laughed. "No, Father. You're too big!" They were still playing with Jacob when Devin came to their door, peeking in around the corner..."Anybody home?"

Diana waved him inside, "Come on in, Devin. Are you ready to go get Susan and Alex tomorrow?"

Devin blushed. It was always funny to Diana to see him so discomfited...he was always so self-assured otherwise. "I'm looking forward to it. I've seen her quite a few times Above, delivering messages from you, and just going to see her, but she hasn't been here since we had the picnic. She's excited herself, thinking about seeing you."

Susan knew Diana was pregnant, but had not seen her since she first found out. Diana had gone to visit her shortly after their picnic and told her. She was going to be surprised to see how far along she was, though.

Vincent finally picked Jacob up, putting him on his shoulders for the ride to the dorm. "I'll go put this monkey to bed and let you two plan Devin's day tomorrow." The look he tossed to Devin made Devin blush again.

Jacob squealed as they trotted out the door and he was jostled up and down.

Devin just watched as they left, his face serious for once...and a bit wistful. "Vincent makes a great father, Diana. Of course he had the best one in the world to learn from. I wish Father and I had gotten along better when I was young. Too bad we got our wires crossed so early."

Diana hugged him. "Well, it's better late than never, for making up. You and Father appreciate each other more now. That's what counts, Dev." Devin got up from his perch on Vincent's desk. "Guess I'd best go, Diana and let you two have some peace...g'night."

Diana watched him go, then picked up her book and waited for Vincent to return.

When Vincent did return, he seemed restless, and touching his mind, she sensed he yearned for the open air Above. They had not taken many walks lately because of her condition.

"Vincent, why don't we go for a walk?"

Surprised, he looked at her, his pleasure showing. "Do you feel up to it? I would love to get out for a while, and it's clear tonight." She looked mischievous, "If I get too tired, I'll just make you carry me home."

Vincent reached out a hand for hers, and they wended their way through the tunnels to the Central Park West tunnel.

They wandered for a way through the park, arms around one another, like other lovers Vincent sensed in the park. The moon was full and lovely. Vincent quoted some lines he remembered:

*"This is the hour of magic, when the Moon
With her bright wand has charmed the tallest tree
To stand stone-still with all his million leaves!
I feel around me things I cannot see;
I hold my breath, as Nature holds her own."*⁵

Diana was always amazed at Vincent's memory of poetry. He usually didn't remember full poems, but he always remembered lines that held meaning for him. "I don't know how you do that, Vincent. You're like a magician pulling rabbits out of a hat...you always have something appropriate to say."

Vincent chuckled. "You must remember, Diana. In the tunnels, we read like people Above watch television. That is our entertainment. I have read many of my favorite poems so many times, that I cannot help but remember some of them."

Diana looked up at the moon. "It is lovely, isn't it?" "Yes. I remember the first time I saw the moon...Devin brought me outside at the full moon. I just never came Above until Devin began insisting."

Diana felt this was a good opening. "We need to bring Jacob Above, Vincent. He is asking again why he can't come Above." Diana could feel Vincent putting up his barriers..."Don't do that! I know you're worried about him, but I'll be with you. If anything happened, I could take him and you could leave...or Devin could come with us. Please think about it."

Vincent's by now automatic barrier dropped as he relaxed...the decision didn't have to be made now. "I'll think about it Diana." He continued,...apologizing for the barrier..."I'm sorry to have shut you out...it has become so automatic with Jacob that I find myself

barricading whenever I don't want to talk about something. I'll try to watch it."

Diana laughed. "I know. It's hard to be selective in these things. It has taken me my whole life to learn a lot of the things you've had to learn in a short while." When she reached out to touch his mind again, she found him open to her touch. She knew he wanted to touch her back, but that double bond was too distracting while they were Above...it would have to wait until later.

Vincent sensed people coming their way and he changed their course, heading back to the tunnels. Diana was tiring, anyway.

After they re-entered the tunnels, he *did* end up carrying her part way to let her rest. "You're getting heavy...I'm going to need a cart, next time."

She punched him, and he laughed, one of his rare laughs.

The next day Vincent and most of the men went to wrestle the huge tables into place in the Great Hall and to place the candles in the chandeliers.

Diana, Jamie, and many of the other women helped William in the kitchen while the older children watched the younger ones. When everything was about ready, Vincent went to meet Joe and Devin to pick up Susan. Diana wanted to go with Vincent, but he wouldn't let her. "If you do, you'll be too tired to enjoy the celebration. Go lie down a while."

Devin and Vincent walked together a while, then parted.

When Joe saw Vincent round the corner, he was pleased. He had been waiting for some time.

"Vincent! Thought I might be in the wrong place. Where's Diana?"

Vincent smiled. "She's home. You'll see her soon. We're glad you could come, Joe. I'm sorry we couldn't invite Erica...maybe another time."

As they neared the living areas, the tapping on the pipes became more active. Joe said, "I can't understand how you can stand the noise, Vincent." "It's not always this bad, Joe. Most of the time, you don't even notice it...it becomes such a part of you that you don't even notice unless the message is for you, or something that interests you...it becomes subliminal."

Vincent took Joe straight to their chamber, where Diana was lying down with Jacob as Vincent had asked her to.

When Joe saw her, he was astonished. "Diana!"

He spun to see Vincent's secret smile, "Why didn't you two tell me?"

Diana laughed at his surprise. "I don't know, Joe...time just gets away from you down here, I guess."

Joe wanted to know when the baby was due...which they really didn't know for sure, due to her strangely advanced gestation. Diana wasn't worried. "I'll know when the time comes, Joe."

About this time, Devin popped in with Susan, who hugged Diana and exclaimed over her pear-shape.

Alex immediately grabbed Jacob and ran off to play. Vincent reminded everyone that they needed to head over to the Great Hall for the celebration, so they started in that direction, gathering the children along the way.

Father began the celebration after everyone was there. Everyone lit their candles, one by one, and Father told the story of how the tunnels came to be. He added at the end their gratitude for the new friends and helpers they had acquired, indicating Joe and Susan, and reminded everyone that soon Diana and Vincent would be adding to their population.

The feast was wonderful, and everyone enjoyed the games and stories. The children put on a play that Vincent had helped them produce as a project for their literature class. Rolly played the piano and there was dancing. All in all, it was a wonderful day, and by the time evening drew near, everyone was ready to call it a night.

Devin had to leave early to escort Susan and Alex home, as he was still occupying the only remaining guest chamber, and Vincent left for a while to escort Joe home.

By the time Diana and Vincent headed to bed, Jacob was asleep already in Vincent's arms.

Diana looked at the child and smiled at Vincent. "Before long he will have his sister, Vincent."

They put Jacob down and went to bed.

Devin had taken Susan and Alex home, and stayed to visit with Susan after Alex went to bed. He sat on her couch and listened to Mozart as she fixed them some coffee. It seemed strange to Devin to be Above after spending so much time back home.

When Susan came back, they both sat a little stiffly, not quite sure what to say, or do. They'd been much more at ease down in the tunnels. Finally, Devin reached over, and brushing back her hair, kissed her. "I've been wanting to do that ever since I met you." Susan blushed furiously. "I've been wanting you to do

it."

So they tried it again.

When Devin finally left, he was whistling most

of the way home, despite the late hour. He had to remind himself to be quiet as he approached the living areas. He hadn't been this happy in a long time.



CHANGELING CHILD

The next few days passed uneventfully, with everyone going about their normal routines. One afternoon, toward evening, after chasing after Jacob and Arthur for a while, Diana lay down feeling uneasy. The child was quiet, and their bond was tenuous, but Father had told her that the child would be very quiet prior to birth. Diana assumed that would apply to their bond as well.

In bed that night, Diana woke with labor pains. Her water had broken. She woke Vincent, and he ran to get Father.

When Father and Mary got to Diana, she was not very calm. "There's something wrong, Father... I feel it...please... help."

When Father checked, he found that Diana was correct. The baby was in distress, but he wasn't sure why. He had sent for Peter already, who had more experience with problem births than he had.

Father determined quickly that the child was not turned correctly. It was lying sideways.

Vincent had never felt so helpless... he was able to bond with Diana in her distress. Their bonding had become easier and more frequent since her pregnancy, although he wasn't sure why. Through the bond he was feeling Diana's pain and that of the child.

Devin had come in and was trying to calm him. The chamber was full of people, but Father was too busy to care...besides...*someone* needed to keep Vincent under control and help him through this. It was going to be bad...no matter which way it went.

Father had Mary arrange for Mouse and Jamie to comfort Jacob, who was crying and screaming in the dorm. Vincent was too upset to build his block and *his* distress was upsetting the child.

When Peter got there and examined Diana, he tried to turn the baby, but was unsuccessful. He took Father out in the hall. "In addition, the cord is around the baby's neck. Peter looked desperately at Father..."Get the operating room ready, Jacob...we'll have to do a C-section, but it may already be too late."

Diana was past understanding anything that was going on. The baby was dying... she could feel it, and she was screaming for someone to do something. Vincent was desperately trying to keep control, and it was only Devin's presence and constant stream of talk that was keeping him going.

Finally, the jury-rigged operating room was ready and the emergency lights on. They wheeled Diana in and began the operation.

Vincent wouldn't leave... couldn't leave...and Devin was unable to leave Vincent, so Father and Peter had to work around everyone.

They screened off the operation as well as they could from Vincent, not wanting to upset him any more, and began.

Diana had been anesthetized, so Vincent was able to calm himself a little, but his anxiety--almost terror--for both the child and Diana was palpable in the room.

As Peter and Father feared, they had been too late, and the child was stillborn...and she had, indeed, looked exactly like Vincent...down to the claws on her tiny furred hands.

They wrapped her and handed her to Vincent to hold as they closed Diana's incision.

Vincent stood braced against the wall, holding his daughter. He took her tiny hand in his fingers, and touched her face. The tears that poured down his face were like a flood. He was all alone. Fortunately, Diana couldn't feel anything right now, but he feared for when she would wake and have to face this. They had both wanted this child so...and with the bond she and the child had shared...the loss was going to be even more tremendous than it would normally be.

Vincent covered his daughter with the blanket she was wrapped in and held her to his chest. He shrugged off Devin's hand on his shoulder, but gratefully accepted the chair Father placed next to Diana.

After checking Diana and making sure she was doing all right, everyone left so Vincent could be with them alone. He sat, cradling his child and watching Diana. "Catherine," he cried, "We will be sending our daughter for you to love...a part of us will be with you, now...even as a part of you is with us, in Jacob." He again uncovered his daughter's face and body. He memorized every inch, and stroked the silky fur. As was usual, he thought in terms of poetry in his grief.

*"Come away, O' human child!
To the waters and the wild
With a faery, hand and hand.
For the world's more full of weeping than you
can understand"*

"Death has stolen her away from us, this changeling child, and left us nothing in return but sorrow."

For hours he sat there as Father came and went checking on Diana. Her distress in the semi-conscious state was bad enough for Vincent.

Eventually she came out of the anesthetic fully, and turned her head to Vincent.

"Let me see her, Vincent."

Vincent tenderly placed the child in her mother's arms and helplessly watched as Diana went through the same ritual he had, of examining her inch by inch and cradling her to her breast. Diana's tears broke Vincent's heart...and there was nothing he could say, or do, to make it better for her. She covered the child again and gave her back to Vincent. "She's gone, Vincent. Have Father please help you make the arrangements for the funeral."

She dried her tears, and as Vincent reached out to her to try to continue with their bond... to try to comfort her, he could not re-establish it. Diana's block was up. "Diana..." He pleaded, "Let me in. Let me help."

Diana shook her head. "Not now, Vincent... perhaps later."

He nodded, and carried the child to Father and Peter.

Diana and Vincent did not want to cremate the child. They wanted her to lay with Catherine, so Peter made the arrangements with the cemetery, and they had a nighttime funeral... The tiny grave next to Catherine's had no name...they'd intended on naming the child after her, but now, the marker only said..."Our Changeling Child."

Everyone left, except for Diana and Vincent, who stood over the two graves, arms around one another. Diana could still barely move, and Vincent had carried her all the way, but she'd refused to stay home.

Diana was beyond tears...beyond grief, even. Vincent still could not reach her with their bond...it still required Diana's assistance...and desire for it, and he felt bereft. He needed her more now than he ever had before...and he knew she needed him. Finally, Diana spoke. "Take me home, Vincent, please. She's Catherine's child now."

Vincent carried her tenderly back to their chamber and put her in bed, then went to check on

Jacob.

Jacob had been subdued since the baby's death... he had sensed his father's sorrow and grief, and he had felt all the terror of the birth through Vincent. It was too much for a child his age to understand, and Vincent was concerned for him.

Jacob went to bed only after having Vincent hold him for a long time and sing to him. He sang Catherine's lullaby, which Jacob loved, and the child lay with his head on Vincent's shoulder, sleeping.

Vincent finally forced himself to lay him down, then stood over him, watching him for a long time.

Vincent went quietly back to Diana, who lay awake, curled with a pillow over her incision. Her face was cold as marble, and again, her block was up. Vincent kissed her and brushed the hair out of her face. He kneeled beside the bed. "Diana. Please let me in. Please share this with me."

"All right." Diana said coldly. "I'll share something with you. When I was coming out of the anesthetic and re-bonding with you, I felt your relief...that she was gone. You were glad she was gone. I'll never forgive you, Vincent."

Shocked, Vincent just looked at her. Surely she couldn't believe what she was saying! Vincent tried to speak, and couldn't. He tried to force the bond to show her what he was feeling... and was unsuccessful. He tried to put his arms around her, and she pushed him away. He stood... the emptiness filling him. He couldn't bear this, and he strode from the room, catching up his cloak on the way out.

Vincent walked the park for hours. He went back to the gravesite, and stood over the two graves. "I cannot bear this, Catherine. I feel I have lost her, too. Truly, I was never relieved the child was gone. I was, perhaps, relieved that she would never have to experience the pain that I have of her differences...but I loved her, Catherine. If you have any power over the living... help me to help her."

Vincent stayed at the grave until dawn began to break, then forced himself away. When he returned, he found Diana asleep, and slipped in beside her, careful not to wake her.

The next morning, Father came to their chamber, carefully waking Vincent, who woke sluggishly. "What is it, Father?"

Vincent followed Father out into the hallway. "Narcissa is here, Vincent. She says she came to see

Diana."

Vincent put his hand on Father's shoulder. He felt hope, suddenly. "If anyone can help Diana, Narcissa can. I'm certain she sensed Diana's need."

Vincent went to Father's chamber to see Narcissa.

"Vin-cent..." Narcissa called softly in her singsong voice. "Diana's trial has come, as yours did. If she can rise above her pain and reach out for your love, your bond will be stronger than ever. If she cannot, she will be lost to you. I foresaw this, but I could not warn you...or her...if I had, you would have lost so much more."

Vincent thought about what Narcissa had said, and knew she was right. He prayed Diana's love for him was strong enough to get her through this... and though at first he was angry that Narcissa had known about this and didn't warn them, he knew that they would have lost so much shared joy. Even the pain of losing the child did not erase the joy of their shared bond with her before her death. "Can you help her?"

Narcissa sighed. "I will try to help you bot', Vin-cent, for this is one trial you must share."

When they entered Vincent and Diana's chamber, Diana sat up painfully. "Narcissa. You came."

Narcissa put her arms around Diana. "We must take a journey, child, and Vin-cent must go with you. Of all t'ings known, knowing yourself is the most difficult of all, child, but only stillness can remain when you fill the emptiness with love. Use your Gift, and reach into yourself, as Vincent has learned how, and he will do the same...and use your bond wit' him, and I will take you for the journey." Narcissa took both their hands, and Diana and Vincent did as she asked.

Diana reluctantly allowed their bond to be re-established, and Vincent helped her to find the point she needed to focus on.

Suddenly, they found themselves hand in hand in the dark, and when Diana looked at Vincent, she saw the "Other"...the dark side he kept hidden from the world. The part of Vincent that he, himself, always saw and hated.

She recoiled, and tried to pull away.

The "Other" snarled, and said, "I was glad the child died...she looked like me and I hated her."

Diana saw the image of the "Other" shift into Vincent's familiar, gentle form. "He lies, Diana. I know he lies to me about everything...yet I still have to fight him daily. I hate myself at times...but never her. I was relieved, yes...but not at her

death...only at the peace I knew she would know, rather than the pain I have had to face. I had to have something to help me see that out of this fate we had to accept there was some good to be found. Can you still love me...having seen my other side?"

Diana felt as though she were falling into the Abyss. She wanted to believe him...to be held by him again...to be able to retreat into the quiet of his soul.

Things spun, then when she looked up, beyond them they both saw Catherine, holding their daughter...far beyond them. The light behind Catherine was blinding, but beautiful. They heard Catherine singing her mother's lullaby to the child--their changeling child--exchanged with Jacob.

As Narcissa had said, all things have their price, and the scales of life are balanced.

As Catherine and the child disappeared into the light, Diana reached up and touched Vincent's face. "I love you, Vincent. I should never have doubted you."

Their world spun again and they found themselves back in their chamber.

Narcissa patted Diana's hand. "T'ings are more clear to you now, child?"

Diana hugged Narcissa wordlessly, then watched as the old woman shuffled out of the chamber. Her work was done, and she was returning to her home.

Vincent reached out, and to his surprise, the bond was automatic...it was there, without Diana's effort, and she turned to him, tears in her eyes.

She reached out for him, and they needed no words to say, "I'm sorry, or I love you." They were finally able to share the grief of their loss, and the healing could begin.



RETURNING NOW TO PEACE AND QUIET

The anniversary of Catherine's death...and Jacob's birthday dawned, and Diana could sense Vincent's struggle to be happy for Jacob.

He had built a glider for Jacob, which he hoped would survive the day, and Devin and Diana had gone to get ice cream to go with the cake William had made.

The party was fun for the children, and Jacob loved the glider. He and the other children ran to try it out after Vincent showed them how to use it, cautioning them not to try it in the Chamber of the Winds.

This year, Vincent's grief over Catherine was muted...not so much grief as sorrow. Time had tempered the grief, and his love for Diana helped him a great deal. But when he told Diana he was going Above for a walk, and not to wait up for him, she knew he was going to her grave.

Diana was just as glad to let him grieve alone. She didn't care to see the baby's grave. The scars from her grief were still too new and tender, and she wished him well. She put up her barricades and hoped he'd built his own.

Vincent stood over Catherine's grave, remembering. He tried to remember every special moment they had shared. He shed a few tears, but many of them were merely tears of love.

*I shall remember you when winds
that blow across the sea
Have turned to melodies of space,
When waves come back to me
with memories I hold of earth
And stars dissolve like dew
Upon the wishful skies of night,
I shall remember you.⁷*

Throwing his head back and looking up at the stars, he cried to the heavens, "If thou wert with me, and the grave divide us not, be with me now..."⁸ He moved over and knelt at the side of his daughter's grave...the grief more fresh...more hurtful. "Catherine, she was so small, so innocent. Give me strength to help Diana through this... strength for myself."

He stayed for a while, lost in thought and remembrance, then his vigil over, returned home to Diana, who greeted him quietly, with open arms.

A few weeks later, Pascal and Vincent were

checking the pipes to the west of the living area for breaks. Vincent had finally convinced Pascal that he needed to get out of the pipe chamber for a while by playing on his sympathy. "I haven't visited with you for a long time, and I've missed you, Pascal."

Talking quietly about all that had occurred in the past year, Pascal reminded Vincent that he, too, had lost a child when his wife had delivered their son stillborn. "It takes a long time to get over the pain, but you and Diana are strong... you'll be fine... and having Jacob will help."

Vincent nodded. The healing had begun, and he was more accepting now of the pain that life brought. He had certainly had enough of it in recent years. But there had been so much joy, as well, and the pain had brought he and Diana even closer in their shared grief, than he could ever have believed possible.

Pascal looked at Vincent's drawn face. He'd been through so much. He decided to change the subject. "Is Devin still courting Diana's sister? Those two seem an unlikely pair."

Vincent smiled. "Yes. Devin is determined, but Susan remains aloof. I think she has more common sense than he...she knows he is liable to get itchy feet again someday."

Pascal reminded Vincent that the world was large, but there was nothing preventing Susan from going with Devin if he decided to leave for a while. And they could always come home.

While Vincent and Pascal were talking, Diana and Jamie were washing their clothes and visiting. Jamie had been concerned about Diana as well, but she seemed to be handling the baby's loss better now that she and Vincent were reconciled. She was quieter, but seemed contented.

Diana looked up for Jacob, who had come with them, dragging Arthur along.

"Jacob, please come here." Jacob obeyed, standing in front of Diana with his head cocked, his shock of chestnut mane down in his eyes.

She brushed the hair back and said, "Can I have a hug?"

Jacob just climbed up in her lap, and wordlessly hugged her tightly. Then he said, "Di-nah, want to go Above. Father said we could."

Diana kissed him. "I'll see what I can do, Jacob... You know that your father wants to take you... he just worries."

Jacob looked confused. "But why? Why does he

worry?"

Diana sighed. She knew Vincent had never really spoken to the child about his differences, but surely Jacob realized by now that his father was not as other men. "Jacob, you know your father isn't like other people, don't you?"

Jacob looked at her with his clear, serious blue eyes. "Yes...he looks different."

"Well, because he *is* different, people who don't know him might be afraid of him and hurt him. And he's afraid that if you're with him, you might get hurt as well...that's why he worries." Jacob thought a while, and said, "But why are they afraid? Father is nice."

Diana groaned inwardly...Jacob was at the "Why" stage...and the questions he asked were always so complicated. "Jacob, people are always afraid of what they don't understand. Do you remember when you used to be afraid there was a monster under the bed?"

Jacob nodded.

"That was because it was something unseen...that you couldn't understand because you were too young. Sometimes even grownups are too young to understand that just because someone looks different than they do, that they're just like them inside. And they could be afraid because your father can look fearsome to them."

Jacob smiled. "Like the lion at the zoo!"

"Exactly! Very good, Jacob! People would see that he looks like that lion, and would think that maybe he would act like that lion as well as look like him, and they would think how strange it was...and be afraid. Not everyone would be like that...but enough of them would so that it's dangerous."

Jacob seemed satisfied, as he didn't ask any more questions...not about that. But he sat chewing on his thumb...a sure sign of nervousness. "Di-nah, where's my sister?"

Diana's heart thumped, and she froze. Jacob had been looking forward to his sister being born, and after the birth, he'd never asked...and they'd been so grief-stricken, they'd taken advantage of his silence. "She had to go away, Jacob. She wasn't ready for this world yet, I guess."

"Did she go away because she looked like Father?" Now Diana was really confused. Jacob had never seen his sister, and no one had told him of her appearance.

"When did you see your sister, Jacob?"

"When Father did. He was very sad, Di-nah." Tears filled Diana's eyes. Then Jacob had shared Vincent's first sight of their child through their

bond. "No, Jacob. She didn't go because she looked like your father. Sometimes things just happen, and someone has to go back where their spirit came from. Your sister just went back right away, and wasn't able to stay with us. Maybe your mother was lonely, and she decided to keep her company."

Jacob hugged her hard. "Don't cry Di-nah. I will keep you comp'ny." He hopped down, and waved as he trotted down the tunnel toward their chamber.

Jamie had been listening to all of this in silence. She finally spoke, "That was beautiful, Diana. Jacob's very intelligent...he'll be fine. Are *you* okay?"

Diana hugged Jamie. "I'll be okay...eventually. As Vincent keeps reminding me, we have so many other blessings, we shouldn't dwell on our problems.... And speaking of which, how long do you think it's going to take Vincent and Mouse to fix that pump? Aren't they going to start on it soon?"

"Yes. Mouse has finally fixed all the parts that the helpers were able to get for us. The pump really needs repair badly, and they can't afford to wait any longer. Once they get started, it shouldn't take them but one day. If it's down any longer, someone from the city will send someone down to see what's wrong....too bad they don't bother to check it before it goes out. We can't afford to wait. Last time, it flooded some of the lower tunnels."

Diana, suddenly sensing company, looked around to see Devin and Mouse. She smiled. Devin had changed a lot in the last year...he had settled more. *Maybe he and Susan have a chance after all...if Susan could ever come live here. If Devin ever moves back above, I don't think he could stand to stay put.*

"Hi sis'. How are you?" Devin's expression showed he was concerned about her, still.

"I'm fine, Dev. When are you going to go see Susan again? I'd like to see her, but somehow, I just don't have the energy for a trip Above."

Devin grinned...this gave him a good excuse for a visit, and to invite Susan Below. Alex was probably anxious to come Below as well. She had been down for Winterfest, but she had never gotten to come down for vacation as they had planned. "I'll go see her tonight...and hope she's home." He kissed Diana's cheek and hugged her. "Maybe a visit from your sister would do you good."

Mouse and Jamie were visiting while he helped Jamie fold clothes. Devin began to help Diana get her things together, and they piled everything in baskets. "Good thing I came along. You couldn't carry all this." Diana laughed. Devin spoiled her as much as Vincent did. "You and Vincent both think I'm so helpless."

"Nope. We just like to think we're the big brave man-type." He flexed his muscles.

Laughing, they made their way back to the chamber. Devin was so funny, he could always make Diana laugh. He was the perfect foil for Vincent's seriousness. She didn't know what either one of them would have done without him... especially lately.

Devin helped Diana put away the clothes, watching her and noting the strain lines in her face. She was getting better, but slowly. Vincent had been more concerned about her than anything else...even his own grief. Besides, Vincent had his bond with Jacob. Devin knew must have been devastating for Diana when the bond with her child had been broken by death. Vincent knew what that was like from when Catherine died. He'd told Devin that a part of yourself dies with them, making it very difficult to go on.

Devin cleared his throat, "Um. Well, I notice that your and Vincent's anniversary is coming up before too long. Are you going away for a while?"

Diana stood, holding one of Vincent's shirts...staring at the amethyst crystal on the table by the bed. "Yes. We'll go away, Devin, for a day or so anyway... but we've got a little while yet before the day comes."

Vincent came into the chamber, tired from his sweep, and Devin put his hand on his shoulder. As their eyes met, Devin could see a question as to Diana's well being. Devin nodded and smiled, easing Vincent's strain a little.

Diana noted all this, and understood their concern. She reached out to Vincent and they embraced, their bonds touching effortlessly now. "You're tired..." she wrinkled her nose..."and sweaty... why don't we go for a swim before supper?"

Vincent caressed her hair and reached out to check on Jacob, finding him to be well, and well occupied, he answered, "I'd love to."

They headed down to the Mirror Pool, which was deserted, and slipped into the water. Diana washed the sweat off of Vincent...making a game of it ...a game that became more intense as they came together and loved one another. This was the first time they had made love since the child's death, and their need for one another was even more intense than on their honeymoon.

Diana cried, clinging to him desperately, and Vincent comforted her, crying himself. The

combined joy and sorrow they felt was overwhelming, and now, Vincent didn't have to lose their bond afterwards. The shared quietness of spirit was comforting to them both.

"We endure, Diana. Our love will carry us through."

They eventually made their way back to their chamber, and then to supper with Jacob.

At supper, Devin confided to Diana that he'd been seeing more of Susan. "I've been hoping things will keep going well, but Diana, she reminds me of a frightened fawn. Is she so afraid of being hurt?"

Diana was quiet for a long while. "Devin, when her husband was killed, it took her a long time to get over it. I suppose she doesn't want to risk the pain of losing someone she loves again."

Vincent nodded. He certainly understood. "Don't rush her Devin. Give her time to learn to love you...but only if you intend to be here for her when she does." Devin looked around the dining room at everyone companionably enjoying their meal... this was home. "I will be, Vincent. I've had enough of rootlessness. Once I came home the first time, this place, and these people began drawing me. When Charles died, I had no reason to stay away. I'm tired of being alone. I want to be with my family." Looking up and grinning... he couldn't stay serious for long..."When are you going to help me carve my chamber?"

Vincent groaned...carving solid rock into a room was *not* his idea of fun. "Anytime you're ready...see how much I love you Devin..." he held up his huge, clawed, hairy hands..."enough to put blisters on these delicate hands of mine."

Their eyes met, and Devin's twinkled with his usual mischief, but he said warmly, "I could never forget how much you love me, brother. That thought has warmed me during many a lonely time" then, jokingly again..."that's why I want to carve the chamber near to yours...so I can pester you easier."

They all laughed...even Vincent.

Several days later, Vincent, Devin, Mouse, and Alain were all carving rock for Devin's new chamber, and the halls rang with their work. Diana decided it was time for a visit Above to go see Joe.

Father had sent him a message about the child, so at least she wouldn't have to go into that with him, but she needed to get out. She was healed physically...and now she wanted to get back to work. Surely he had a case

she could help with. She knew Vincent wasn't going to approve, but she needed to feel she was doing something to help make things better Above. That was her world too, and the world that Jacob and whatever children she and Vincent might have would inherit.

She touched Vincent's mind briefly, and he touched back equally briefly...just enough for shared reassurance, then she left him a message, and went Above.

This time, she took her gun with her...life had taught her to be careful.

When she walked into Joe's office, he stood up hastily, scattering papers onto the floor. He put his arms around her in a wordless hug and kissed her forehead. "Hi Diana. Good to see you."

Diana felt his sorrow for the child, and for her and Vincent. "I'm okay, Joe. It's time to go back to work, if you have anything for me."

Joe sat down and motioned for her to sit. "Diana, I really feel it's too early. You need to recuperate yet."

Irritated, Diana replied, "Joe...I love Vincent, and you, and Father, and Devin...everyone...but I'm beginning to feel suffocated. You're all mother hens. I've got to get on with life...there are bad guys out there that need to be chased."

Joe stood and crossing his arms, stared out the window. "We've found Ezekiel, Diana."

Diana felt the adrenaline begin to pump. "Where?"

"He's here in New York, of course. He still wants you and Vincent...and the rings. The organization is falling apart. We haven't been able to touch him because just when we think we've found his den, he moves. We've gotten a few letters from him, taunting us to find him. We don't know what he looks like...but he knows us, Diana. I think he knows he can't rebuild the organization: he just wants revenge. There have been some pretty nasty sacrificial-type of killings, after which we received the notes. Like the rest of them, Ezekiel is as mad as a March Hare."

"Do you have the notes with you, Joe? If I see them, maybe I can tell you something."

Joe was reluctant. "Diana, do you really want to do this? How does Vincent feel about it?"

"Yes, I do, Joe. And it's not Vincent's decision. I won't be satisfied until this organization is dead and the rings are destroyed...every one of them. I'm doing it for Catherine and Vincent...and for myself."

Sighing, Joe pulled out four or five hieroglyphic-type letters and gave them to Diana.

"We're not completely through decoding, but we're almost there."

Diana didn't read the letters...she just held them. She got flashes of a young man...handsome, with gold blonde hair...long, narrow fingers...delicate hands...but the hatred was palpable. She asked for some paper and a pencil, and with one hand drew a sketch of what he looked like. His eyes reminded her of Mariah...and Gabriel. Diana shuddered. Then, suddenly, with a jolt, the eyes looked into hers:

It was like it had been when Vincent had taken his Spirit Walk...she was standing in the dark with this man...and he was coming toward her...

"Hello, Diana...I'm so glad you could join me...I've been working very hard to get your attention."

In this strange place, Diana had nowhere to go...she tried to leave, but Ezekiel's will held her there...this man was strong...and he had her Gift...but he was so twisted inside...

Ezekiel came near to her and traced her face with his delicate hands, sending a shiver down her spine... "Mariah was a fool to have wanted Vincent, when you are the one with the Gift...I'll be coming to get you soon..."

Diana woke, screaming, with Joe slapping her face. "Diana! Diana! Wake up!"

Vincent stopped working suddenly, feeling Diana's terror. He started to leave, but then stopped, confused...she was very frightened, but it was not a terror of death.... He touched her mind, and felt the sickness and terror...but also felt the danger was over for now...he knew she was with Joe. She had not made the bond two-way, so he backed out...just touching lightly to make sure she stayed safe.

He excused himself from his work for awhile so he could be by himself and keep touch with Diana.

Meanwhile, Diana paced Joe's office, hugging herself tightly to prevent the shakes. Ezekiel was playing games with the police...with her. But he was right: now that he'd found her, he would be able to find her anywhere. She couldn't go home until Ezekiel was dead. She felt Vincent, hovering just out of mind's reach, and she was afraid to touch him...afraid that somehow it would endanger him. "I have to send a message to Vincent, Joe."

Diana waited until Bennie came in selling his

sandwiches, and slipped him a message for Vincent.

Bennie just grinned and took off.

Diana didn't know what to do. Ezekiel could find her anytime, anyplace. She sensed that young as he was, he had been the mastermind behind the power of the organization. "Joe, you have to help me. We have to find Ezekiel and kill him...not just capture him. The man has my Gift...and he is more powerful than you can imagine. He has established a connection with me--found me--and now he can find me anywhere I go. I'm trapped as long as he's alive."

Joe looked confused..."A bond like the one you and Vincent share?"

"NO!," Diana was vehement. "Don't even compare the two. Ezekiel seeks to possess and coerce, and he's powerful enough to do it. Don't ask me how, Joe. You couldn't begin to understand."

Joe stared at Diana, not sure what to say. "Could you do something like that?"

Diana shook her head, "Not even if I tried...and I wouldn't try."

"I suppose Vincent knows this. Surely he felt what you were feeling," Joe asked.

"No, not all of it...I have him barricaded, but I can't hold it for long, and once it's down, I won't be able to keep him from coming for me...so it has to be now, Joe. I have to counter-trace Ezekiel after I let him in...you have to protect my body...and I have to guard my soul."

Joe took his .38 out of the drawer, checked it, and he and Diana moved to his car.

Diana began actively seeking Ezekiel. It didn't take long. Soon she found herself back in that darkness with Ezekiel.

"So, Diana...turnabout is fair play. I didn't expect you to come to combat so early...your eagerness to come to me is gratifying."

As they drove, Diana tried to draw a map pointing the way, but splitting her mind like that was exhausting...leaving openings for Ezekiel. Plus, she felt Vincent worrying at the edges of her barricade, anxious because of the terror he felt leaking around it. She couldn't let him in yet. Ezekiel would sense it. As they neared Ezekiel, he became stronger.

"We can own the world. We can build castles in the air, Diana..."

Diana steeled herself and replied..."over the bodies of the weak and helpless. Isn't that how you

work, Ezekiel?"

Joe had stopped the car...they were at their destination. He helped Diana from the car and they moved inside the building...rode the elevator up. He anticipated guards, but there were none...Ezekiel anticipated no resistance... and believed in his own power.

"You can't fight me forever, Diana...you can feel the pull on your mind getting stronger, and you can see the images of the empire we will create."

Diana's will was faltering, but it wasn't because of the images of dark glory that Ezekiel promised her...it was because Vincent was tearing down her barrier, brick by brick.

Suddenly, Vincent's image formed, and he was there with her. He saw Ezekiel and snarled.

Ezekiel had not anticipated Vincent's sudden arrival there in his netherworld... but he rallied, and Vincent and Diana faced each other. Ezekiel now saw Vincent as the tool he would use to obtain Diana. Vincent had not thought to build his barriers against an enemy like this, so his every thought and emotion was visible to Ezekiel... he knew all Vincent's secrets. He saw Vincent's greatest fears and flaws and decided to use them against him: Ezekiel began re-building Vincent's image into an even more vicious, depraved version of "The Other" that Vincent feared and hated. He showed Vincent scenes calculated to enrage him...he showed him Diana as his prisoner, tortured, but kept alive for the mere pleasure of causing her pain. He saw Ezekiel sending an army to the tunnels to kill and torture the ones he loved, and to destroy his world... he saw the death, the pain. He saw Father dead, Devin, Mouse, Jamie... one after the other of his friends died in agony.

As Vincent strove to reach Ezekiel, chains appeared, binding him securely. Then Vincent saw scenes of Ezekiel with Jacob, saw him twisting the child as he grew and turning him into a horror of a man. Then, as Vincent's rage reached a point where Ezekiel felt he could not further enrage him, he reinforced Vincent's image of "The Other," continuing to degrade him until he resembled nothing more than a rabid animal, even to the point of seeking to drop to all fours... to lose his humanity altogether.

Back in the tunnels, Vincent was raging in their chamber. Father, Devin, Mouse, Alain, and even Bennie, who had brought the message that Vincent never received... were all trying to hold him down while others bound him to the bed to restrain him.

Devin was white-faced and aghast. "I don't understand, Father. He was fine just minutes ago." Father just shook his head, as they watched in silence as Vincent's roars shook the chamber.

Jamie rushed Jacob from Vincent's presence, but even though the child was blocking, the rage filtered through, and Jacob was becoming hysterical.

Ezekiel spoke to Diana, "See your lover, Diana? This is his true identity, where his power truly lies. This is his inner soul that he keeps hidden even from you."

Diana was confused and terrified. She had no idea what to do. She knew what Ezekiel was doing, and she knew the grotesque horror that confronted her, slaving, growling, and screaming at her mindlessly was not Vincent. Not even at his worst. Even in his killing rages, which were brief, the rage was prompted by love--for his desire to protect those he loved. Her love for him and her desire to help him was overwhelming. She knew they were still bonded: she could see what Ezekiel was showing him, so she countered the images with her own. Slowly she fought Ezekiel to re-build Vincent's image into the image of the gentle man she loved. She thought of his soft, loving voice and projected scenes of his love for Jacob and his gentleness with him, of their love, their time in the Crystal Cavern...of their shared sorrow and loss of their child, and their love enduring even that. She made him remember Catherine and their gentle love. She showed him countless scenes of his gentleness with all the children in the tunnels who loved him. Gradually her image began winning...pushing back the corrupt image that Ezekiel projected. The roars began quieting somewhat, and she walked towards those elongated talons and slaving jaws with her arms outstretched in love and moved into them. She felt his arms close around her, not seeking to tear and kill, but with a fierce, protective love...and when she looked up, she saw his familiar, much loved face as he smiled down at her.

They joined hands and turned to Ezekiel who--knowing he had lost--tried to escape back to his body, but Diana and Vincent's combined wills were too strong even for him and they would not let him leave.

Back in the tunnels, Vincent's raging was over and he lay quietly, seemingly at peace. Father hastened to examine him, fearing he was having an

episode such as he'd had before when he had almost died, but found his heart beating strongly and regularly. He seemed only to be asleep.

Joe entered the room where Ezekiel lay on the couch, surrounded by two bodyguards. He had to release Diana to shoot, and she slipped to the floor. But as the gunshots rang out, they startled Diana, breaking her will for an instant...long enough for Ezekiel to escape them. The gunshots seemed to wake Ezekiel: grabbing his gun, he fired, but Joe was faster.

Vincent had stayed with Diana long enough to realize the battle was over, and she was safe, then withdrew. He opened his eyes in his chamber and asked Father to release him.

When Diana opened her eyes, she saw Joe standing over her anxiously.

"Ezekiel?"

"Dead...are you okay?"

Diana stood, swaying. "I'm fine. I just want to go home, to Vincent." She walked over to Ezekiel and pulled off his ring...the fifteenth and final one. Joe called the police, and after they arrived he gave them a brief synopsis and they cleaned up the mess.

"C'mon Diana. I'm taking you home."

Once Joe had Diana safe in the tunnels, and they were met by Vincent, he left.

Embracing one another, Vincent and Diana turned toward home. Diana held up Ezekiel's ring. "The last one. It's over, Vincent. We can rest."

Vincent mused silently on the way home. Finally he spoke, "Ezekiel was so powerful, Diana. The power of his mind was remarkable. He could have done so much good, but he chose to use his Gift for such dark purpose."

Sighing, Diana just said, "Power corrupts, Vincent. And absolute power corrupts absolutely."

Once they entered their chamber, Vincent pulled out the carved wooden box with the other fourteen rings, and dropped the fifteenth inside. They then walked to the Abyss and threw the box in, watching it as it spiraled out of sight.

Turning to embrace Diana, Vincent quoted,

"Returning now to peace and quiet,

And made more wise..."⁹

Diana looked up at him, troubled. "Ezekiel's visions...his version of you was so corrupt...that is NOT you, Vincent. I hope you realize that."

"That fight is a day-to-day battle, Diana. I simply have to look inside myself to see what's there to find, love or deceit."

HOME IS THE KINGDOM OF LOVE

Now is the time, Vincent. He's been waiting a long time, and you simply cannot keep putting it off." Diana stood, hands on hips, waiting for an answer.

Vincent looked at her determined face and knew his delaying tactics wouldn't work. "He's been Above with you."

"It's not the same, and you know it. Nighttime is your time Above...you know the park and the city at night better than anyone. He needs to learn how you see the world...be taught by you. You see so much beauty everywhere..."

"And so much pain..." Vincent interjected.

Exasperated, Diana would not give up. "We are going Vincent." She put her arms around his waist and looked up at his worried face. "You're retreating again. There are already too many things you cannot do with him...don't lose out on the things you can share with him because of fear of the possibilities."

Jacob came running in and jumped on the bed.

Vincent scooped him up, smiling. "Diana...and I... have decided it's time for me to go Above with you."

Jacob hugged Vincent and laughed. He was excited. He loved going Above with Diana, but he always wanted his Father to go with them. He hated to be separated from Vincent. He chattered all the way, and when they came out of the tunnels into the park, he was full of questions.

Vincent quieted him, "The first thing you have to learn is to listen. What do you hear?"

Jacob listened, and said he heard cars and a sound he didn't know.

Vincent listened then and explained that the sound was the gentle breeze in the bushes and trees. They rounded a corner and the moon seemed to sail above.

Jacob was beside himself.

Vincent smiled down at him, sensing his wonder. "The moon, Jacob. Isn't it wonderful?"

As they walked along, Diana listened as Vincent explained noises, smells, and sights to Jacob. They could both see so much more than she, and their senses were so heightened that she missed much of what they talked about.

Vincent sat Jacob up in a tree, letting him feel the bark and leaves, then with him under one arm, he carried him higher in the tree so he could be "closer to the moon."

Diana could sense Vincent's pleasure...and sense Jacob's through Vincent. It was wonderful. Diana

and Vincent skillfully avoided any potential problems of chances of discovery. With Diana's ability to sense a person's presence, and Vincent's night sight and heightened awareness, avoiding populated areas was no problem.

When they re-entered the tunnels, Diana glanced at Vincent as if to say, "I told you so."

Jacob fell asleep in Vincent's arms on the way home, and when they put him in bed, he never stirred.

Meeting Father on the way back to their chamber, he drew them into his own. "I don't suppose I could entice Vincent into a game of chess."

Diana squeezed Vincent's hand, and he smiled at Father. "Certainly, Father. We haven't played in a while."

Father laughed. "I know. Perhaps you've gotten rusty enough to where I can beat you again."

Diana kissed Vincent and told him she would go visit Devin or Jamie until he was through. Leaving Father and Vincent to set up their game, Diana walked quietly through the tunnels, listening to the pipes. She had learned most of the codes by now, and it was fun practicing by listening to the messages. When she rounded the corner, she almost ran into Devin.

"Whoa! Hi sis."

Diana laughed at Devin's startled look. "I was just coming to see you, Vincent and Father are playing chess."

Devin groaned..."Well, you've lost him for the night." He put out his arm for her. "Come with me, lovely lady, and we shall visit my kingdom."

They wandered to the Whispering Gallery and stood listening to the voices for awhile. Devin watched Diana as she closed her eyes and listened to snatches of music. When the music and the voices quieted, he commented, "I'm glad to see you're feeling better. The strain lines are gone and there's color back in your face...though you could do with some sun."

Smiling, Diana shook her head. "I only go Above when I need to nowadays...or when Joe needs me. There is nothing for me there, Devin. Everything I love...everything I need is here."

Devin was quiet a time, and Diana could sense he had something on his mind. She waited patiently for him to work up his courage to start speaking.

"Vincent and I are about finished carving my chamber." He looked at his roughened, calloused...and blistered, hands. "It's been a Herculean task...but it's almost finished."

Diana put her hand on his arm and looked up into his face. "And now?"

"Now...I don't know, Diana. I've been seeing Susan for a long while, but it seems I'm no closer to understanding her than I was before. Alex loves me, and I love both of them, but Susan...I think she loves me...but she never says so." He looked at Diana with anguish in his face. "How can I ask her to move down here, Diana? I have no reason to believe she would want to...Alex would be delighted...but Susan?" He shook his head.

Diana felt sorry for Devin... he had finally brought his heart home, and now, if the woman he loved didn't want to move here, how would he deal with that? "You could move Above, Dev. You're very talented...I'm sure there are many things you could do..."

Devin closed his eyes, listened to the pipes and the voices...carried to them from God knew where. Listened to the sounds of home. "Vincent and I used to love this place," he remembered. "We made up stories about the voices. We sat for hours here on this bridge." He turned to Diana and shook his head. "This is home. I've been away too long."

"Maybe once you move into your chamber and the guest chamber is vacant, you can invite her here for a stay...even just a weekend...begin getting her used to the place. I'll help all I can."

Devin looked hopeful. "I see what you and Vincent have, Diana...I want that...peace and sharing."

Diana looked up at Devin, then her expression changed a moment..."We need to get back, Vincent is looking for me."

Devin escorted Diana off the bridge and back toward Vincent.

Father and Vincent walked together, talking quietly. Vincent nodded a smiling agreement about something. When Vincent looked up and saw Diana, he felt the warmth of her love, he felt so blessed.

Father saw Devin and Diana at the same time, and he, too felt blessed...to have his son home after so many years. And to have Vincent and Diana here, together. Once again contented.

"Who won?" Diana asked, cheerfully.

"Father grimaced. "Vincent. He wasn't as rusty as I had hoped."

Diana kissed Father. "You could always play me...I'm hopeless at chess."

Patting her hand, Father just said, "I appreciate

the thought, my dear, but I do need *some* challenge at least."

After a little more bantering, teasing Father about his waning mental powers, they bid each other goodnight and went to their chambers.

Diana sat in front of her mirror brushing her hair. The mirror was a minor bone of contention between herself and Vincent. She kept it covered when she wasn't using it.

Vincent sat off to the side so he couldn't see his reflection and watched her.

She smiled at him as she brushed. "You see? You enjoyed it Above tonight. You can't deny it."

Chuckling, Vincent answered, "All right. I have to admit, it was delightful." He stood and looked at his painting...for the thousandth time. "He was so full of wonder, Diana...like Catherine. She always saw the wonder in the world...the new possibilities around every corner. I can see its wonder afresh through his eyes."

Diana came up behind him and put her arms around him, slipping under his arm and peering up at him. "Don't tell me you are so old and gray now that you can no longer see the world's beauty? Have we been through so much that the darkness covers the light? I know *that's* not true."

Putting his arms around her and lifting her, carrying her to the bed, he said, "No...I see more good than evil in the world, especially now. More light than darkness. He lay beside her stroking her face with his long-taloned hand, his gentle blue eyes meeting hers. "I see all of life and love in your eyes that I will ever need. My cup is full to the brim."

He blew out the remaining candle, and they went to bed, becoming lost in one another.

The days went by gently, and Vincent and Diana helped Devin move into his chamber. Mouse helped to build him a bed, and helpers found a mattress for him and a chest of drawers.

"I'll furnish it as I go, I suppose. I still miss the stained glass window you have in your chamber," Devin said wistfully.

"Oh, no Devin...don't get any ideas!..."Diana laughed.

Devin hung a picture he'd found of a seascape. "I always have loved the sea, Vincent. I still wish you and I could have sailed, like we had planned...far from everything."

Vincent put his hand on Devin's shoulder. "No one

can do everything he wants to do, Devin. We have to accept what life offers us, and be grateful."

Jacob came trotting in with Toby and Arthur.

"Here comes one of my blessings now," Vincent laughed. "What have you three been up to?"

Jacob climbed up on the bed and looked at the painting. "What's that, Devin?"

"That's the ocean, Jacob...a lot of water...it goes for as far as the eye can see, and even farther. Fish and whales and dolphins...all sorts of creatures live in its waters."

Vincent leaned against the rock wall and watched as Devin told Jacob about the ocean...about things he had seen, and Toby and Jacob listened wide-eyed. Devin was a good story-teller. "You bring it alive for all of us, Devin."

Blushing, Devin stopped, and shooed the boys out. "I'm supposed to go get Susan and Alex to spend the weekend...as Diana suggested. I hope she enjoys herself."

"She will, Devin," Diana assured him. "How could she help it, with such a charmer to keep her occupied?"

After Devin left, Diana and Vincent picked up Jacob and Toby and walked down to the Mirror Pool for a swim.

"It's been warm lately, and dusty," Diana said, pulling back her hair.

"All the more reason for a swim," Vincent said, smiling.

They watched the children run ahead and start pulling off their clothes and Diana laughed. "Not even two yet and he swims like a fish. He and Toby both...thanks to you."

"One less thing for me to worry about."

They pulled off their clothes and Vincent picked Diana up and threw her in. She came up sputtering. "You...You...hairy teddybear you..."

She splashed him and he dove in after her. When he came up, Toby and Jacob came over and hung on his back. "Take us for a ride!" So Vincent swam and played whale for a while as the children squealed and thumped his sides.

Finally he told them to play in the shallows and he and Diana swam together for awhile.

"Um. Can't come up with anything more imaginative than 'hairy teddybear'?"

Diana mused. "Maybe...let me think about it."

Vincent looked over at the boys, checking to see that they were safe. "You realize that soon we will need to plan our trip to the Crystal Cavern...it will be a year."

Diana said quietly, "It seems like a long time when you think of the pain...but it seems to have

gone so fast when I think of all the joy."

Vincent lay back in the water, floating. He closed his eyes... "All time is now...besides, for those who love, time is eternity."

Diana came up under him, tickling him and making him come up sputtering, "Well, time may be eternity for us, but Devin and Susan will be here soon, and we'd best get out and dressed."

They collected the boys and got everyone dressed. Diana enjoyed mothering Toby as well as Jacob, and she thought once again with a pang of sadness of her daughter.

Diana left Vincent with the boys and went to the guest chamber to get it ready for Susan and Alex.

While Diana cleaned and arranged the guest chamber, Jamie and Mouse came in with a bouquet of flowers Jamie had gotten from a helper Above. "We thought this might be a nice touch for the room, to help welcome them."

Diana hugged Jamie, "That's so thoughtful,...thank you! I'm sure Devin will appreciate anything we can do to make their stay enjoyable...and I'm hoping she will enjoy her visit too. Maybe she'll come visit more often."

They heard conversation and laughter farther up the tunnels, and Diana sensed Vincent coming.

When Vincent came in, he brought a trail of children behind him; it seemed as though half the tunnel children were on his heels.

"What on earth is going on, Vincent?"

Jacob was perched on his father's broad shoulders and he waved cheerfully. "We decided we're all going to go meet Devin and Susan. The children are anxious to play with Alex. Want to come?"

Laughing, Diana, Jamie, and Mouse fell in with the cavalcade as they headed out.

"Do we even know where we're going?" Diana asked.

Vincent shrugged..."More or less. I know the way Devin usually uses. It's fun anyway."

Diana looked at the motley...and noisy...crew. "If nothing else, they'll hear us coming a mile away."

Before long, they heard Devin's message on the pipes. He *had* heard them, and soon they saw the trio coming down the tunnel. Alex ran ahead to meet the children, then all the children, including Jacob, were off and running back toward the living area.

"What a mob!" Susan exclaimed.

"They were all anxious to have a new playmate for awhile." Vincent smiled. "It's good to see you Susan."

Susan hugged Diana, looking at her critically. "It's good to see all of you, too."

Diana saw her sister's worried look, and knew she was thinking about the baby. Putting her arm around Susan, she whispered, "I'm fine, really, Susan...just enjoy yourself."

While Vincent and Devin planned some entertainment for the evening Diana and Susan got their things settled in the guest chamber.

Mouse and Jamie had things to do, so took off on their own.

"Things certainly move at a more leisurely pace down here," Susan commented.

Diana sat on the bed, smoothing the patchwork quilt and watching the shadows on her sister's face cast by the candlelight. "Everyone has their jobs and they get them done... they just do them at their own speed. As long as they get done, no one complains." Diana sighed. "I'm the only one around here that hasn't been very useful. Everyone coddled me so much while I was pregnant, then after...I just wasn't up to much." She looked up, determined, "But that's going to change. Mary said she needs my help with the children, and I think that will be good for me."

Susan sat beside her and hugged her. "I'm sorry about the baby. Maybe working with the children will help. I know you certainly love Jacob."

Changing the subject, Diana got up and looked in the mirror, arranging her hair. "I wonder what they have planned for tonight? You can never tell around here."

Vincent and Devin tried to think of something different to do, but there were limited options.

Vincent thought for awhile, then said, "Rolly is rehearsing the children for a recital for tomorrow night, so that should be fun, but for tonight why don't you take her for a picnic. I'll show you a place where you can hear a concert...Catherine and I always listened to concerts, and Diana and I have had wonderful times there."

Devin agreed that would be a good idea, so Vincent helped him arrange it. *If he and Susan have half as wonderful a time as Diana and I have, Susan will never return Above.*

Later, Vincent joined Diana in their chamber after Devin and Susan had left. The children were all in bed.

Diana lay on the bed reading, and after kissing her, Vincent sat at his desk and opened his journal.

Soon Diana and I will celebrate our anniversary. We promised we would return to the Crystal Cavern every year, but this year our trip will be tinged with sadness over the death of our daughter. I still worry about Diana. She has a deep sadness that I cannot reach. I understand how she feels. I, too, still think of her often, but I still have my bond with Jacob to help comfort me. When her bond with our daughter was broken, I can imagine how she felt...and how she still feels the loss. Our bonding is wonderful, but it is of a different kind. I know she wants another child, but I'm not certain either one of us could go through that kind of loss again. Peter said another birth could be difficult, especially since the C-section: she would possibly have to have another, and here in the tunnels there is far more risk. She has agreed with Peter to avoid pregnancy, but I know she resents the restriction, and she hides her pain behind a barrier that exists even when we bond.

"Vincent," Diana's voice broke Vincent's concentration. He looked up to see Diana sitting up in bed, her hair down around her shoulders like a red tide. The stained glass window behind her cast an amber glow over her.

Turning, Vincent closed the journal. Dark thoughts and worries could wait.

The next morning, Diana asked Susan about her evening with Devin.

"It was wonderful. We listened to Mozart while we had our picnic, then went for a walk in the park. He's going to show me the Painted Tunnels today. He says your picture is there with Vincent and Jacob as well." Diana was pleased that Susan was so charmed. "How do you feel about Devin?"

Susan wandered alongside Diana, her hand trailing the pipes as they vibrated with the messages. "I don't know, Diana. He's handsome and charming...and I know he loves Alex and me. But everything is so strange. I don't know if I could live down here like you. I've just been holding myself aloof a little. I don't want to be hurt."

Diana understood, but she felt she had to be truthful. "Sometimes in love you have to make compromises. This world isn't perfect, any more than the one Above is, but down here we try harder to live in kindness and caring. Vincent once told me that all the world needed was to learn the art of being kind. But whatever you decide, make sure it is right for *you*, and Alex. I think Alex would be happy here."

Susan looked at Diana. "Are you happy? Since you

lost the baby, I've sensed a restlessness in you." Diana turned and began walking faster, forcing Susan to catch up. "I want another baby, and Peter says I shouldn't. Vincent agrees."

"And you're angry about it."

"Yes. I'm not angry at Vincent...he is just worried about me. But I'm angry at fate, I suppose. I'm not as accepting as Vincent is...and he has Jacob."

Susan looked concerned, "But you *love* Jacob."

Exasperated, wishing *someone* could understand, Diana said, "Of *course* I love Jacob. But it's not the same...not exactly. I'm sorry, Susan, but you can't understand what I mean. It's complicated."

Understanding more than Diana realized, Susan commented, "Devin tells me that you and Vincent are going away soon for your anniversary."

Diana smiled as she remembered their honeymoon. "Yes. I hope to convince Vincent to let me try again."

Susan put her hand on Diana's arm, and cautioned her, "Vincent doesn't want to lose you, Diana...and conditions down here are not the best for a medical emergency. Please think this through with your mind...not your heart."

Devin helped Vincent prepare for his trip to the Crystal Cavern. He was again going to prepare the cavern as he had for their honeymoon, and he wanted everything to be perfect.

"I wish I knew where this place was," Devin complained. "It sounds wonderful. You sure you don't want any help?"

Vincent just smiled. "No. This place is Diana's and my secret. No one else goes there but Narcissa."

Vincent opened the drawer on his desk and pulled out the leather pouch that Catherine had given him with his rose in it. It now contained Catherine's crystal as well. He showed the crystal to Devin. "I once got this for Catherine there, for the first anniversary of our meeting. The place holds many memories for me, Devin. It is not something I wish to share...at least not yet."

Devin nodded. "I understand."

At a noise from the doorway, they both looked up to see Father there with Mary and Jacob.

"We have a problem, Vincent..." Father began. Concerned at the serious look on Father's face, Vincent asked, "What is it, Father?"

"Your son tells me that he and Toby were playing in the maze...where they are not supposed

to go, and they were separated. Jacob found his way out, but he doesn't know where Toby is. Vincent...you need to be more strict! Jacob is far too young to wander so!"

Vincent and Devin were already half out the door. "You're right, as usual, Father, but for now, we need to find Toby. Bring Jacob so he can explain as well as he can where to begin looking."

By the time they had reached the maze, the message had been sent out on the pipes and several others were there to help. Mouse and Alain had lanterns and Mouse's improvised miner's hats to help with lighting. After talking with Jacob and getting his vague directions, Vincent directed Mouse and Alain to head one way while he and Devin headed another.

Diana and Susan came upon the scene immediately after the men had entered the maze, and Jacob ran to her sobbing. She snatched him up and tried to comfort him while

Father told them what was going on.

"Where is Alex?" Susan asked, worried.

Alex came out from behind Father and hugged her mother. "I'm sorry Mom. I was with them earlier, but I didn't know they weren't supposed to go in the maze. It looked dark and scary to me, so I didn't go in."

Diana talked quietly to Jacob and dried his tears. "I'm sure your Father will find Toby. Why didn't you 'call' to him as soon as you knew you were lost?"

Jacob sniffed. "...'cause we weren't 'sposed to be there, and he would be angry with me."

Diana said, "Yes, he would have been...and so am I. But whenever you're in trouble Jacob...let him know immediately from now on. Being punished is much better than being hurt, and you *know* your father would never hurt you. Promise you'll remember that?"

Jacob nodded.

Vincent and Devin called to Toby repeatedly and Vincent watched for signs of tracks, and as they traveled, they became more and more worried.

"I hope Mouse and Alain are having better luck than we are," Vincent commented to Devin. No one knew the maze better than Vincent and Devin. They, too, had played there as children...against Father's wishes...and they knew the dangers. There were holes to fall into, chasms, and always the danger of rockfalls.

Circling back and taking another route much traveled by the older children because of the many hiding places for hide-and-seek, they finally found traces of small footprints. They followed the prints until they separated and Vincent was able to tell which one's were Jacob's by the pattern on the sole. "He was heading into the

worst part of the maze, Devin. In that direction the rock is eroded by the water. The walls are soft and unstable. Go get Mouse and Alain, and have them bring ropes and digging equipment just in case...I'll go on ahead."

When Devin found Mouse and Alain, they all headed back and got the equipment Vincent had requested, and gave the news to the people waiting.

Jacob was crying, "Father's scared, Di-nah." Diana told Devin... "Hurry, Devin. Jacob says Vincent is scared...he must have found something, and it's not good."

When the other men found Vincent, he was digging frantically at a rockfall. He eagerly accepted a pick and the others joined in. "I only pray he is *behind* this and not *under* it."

After digging for what seemed to be hours--with the ceiling threatening every moment to come down on top of them--they finally broke through to find Toby unconscious on the other side.

The air was beginning to go bad in the small space he was in, but after examining him, Vincent decided he would probably be all right.

Vincent carried him out for Father to examine him further. By that time, the boy was awake and crying.

When they brought Toby out, Diana and Jacob rushed to Vincent's side, and Toby grabbed Diana around the neck, hugging her tightly. She comforted him as she had Jacob, then took him to Father.

Relieved that Toby was going to be fine, Father launched into his usual "Don't go into the maze" lecture and handed the children back over to Diana and Susan.

After they'd left, he turned to Vincent and began dressing him down. "I've *warned* you, Vincent. You depend far too heavily on your bond with Jacob to keep him out of trouble. Now that he's learned to block, you've got to become more strict with him."

Vincent knew Father was right, and thanked him for his advice. "I've hated to be strict with him, Father, but I think I'm going to have to be. Since he's learned to block me, he's become even more adventurous...and he's too young, and too smart for his age."

Vincent groaned. His back ached, and he still had his trip to the cavern to look forward to. The men went to clean up, then Vincent left to discipline Jacob and Toby.

The boys stood in front of Vincent, all but shaking in their fur boots. They'd never seen Vincent so angry. At least not at *them*.

"Jacob, you and Toby both know the rules, and you broke them...again. For your punishment, you will not be allowed to play together at all until after Diana and I get back...and if you do, we'll hear about it, and the restriction will be increased to a week. Do you both understand?"

The boys cried, but they knew better than to try and change Vincent's mind.

"Now, come on, and I'll put you to bed." He picked them up, one in each arm and carried them to their beds. He tucked them in and kissed them goodnight.

Jacob looked up at Vincent and said, "I love you." Vincent hugged him tightly, the band around his chest loosening, "I love you too, Jacob. Please don't scare me like this again."

When he kissed Toby, he hugged him tightly. "And *you*, monkey... you took at least ten years off my life. Don't do it again."



Vincent went back to his and Diana's chamber, and found Devin there with his traveling gear. He slipped into the shoulder pack and picked up the quilts, but Diana stopped him. "Vincent, please. You're exhausted. You don't have to do this. We can take things with us when we go. I'd rather have you here tonight."

Vincent gazed down at her, felt her bond reaching out for him, and he relented, dropping the shoulder bag.

Devin slipped out the door, and Diana led Vincent to the bed.

Undressing gratefully, and dropping into bed, he let Diana rub his shoulders for a while.

"I wanted everything to be as perfect again this time as it was the last."

Diana kissed his neck. "It will be. We'll be together. You couldn't very well surprise me, anyway. Come...and go to sleep. I'd much rather have you rested tomorrow."

Diana lay with her head on his chest, listening to his heartbeat as it slowed and he slept. She watched him as he slept, then snuggled down beside him to sleep.

The next morning, Diana said goodbye to Susan and Alex. Devin was taking them home. Vincent had said his goodbyes, and was busy getting their food basket ready to take on their journey.

Diana spoke quietly to Devin, "Devin, please keep watch on Jacob and Toby for us. I won't worry as much if I know you are watching them."

"I will, sis. Go and enjoy yourselves."

Susan hugged Diana and whispered, "Be careful what you wish for sister...you might get it...think of how Vincent would feel if anything happened to you...be wise in your decision."

When Diana rejoined Vincent, he was ready to go, and they left for the Crystal Caverns after she said goodbye to Jacob and Toby.

As they moved through the maze, Vincent avoided the dangerous areas and eventually they were out and headed down the long winding stairway carved into the rock that carried them deep within the earth...down to the interlocking caverns that led to the Crystal Cavern.

"Would you like to stop by and see Narcissa?" Vincent asked her.

"Not now," Diana said quickly. Perhaps later." As they went through the cathedral-like room they

had passed through before, Diana was again awed by the enormous amount of work that must have gone into building this room.

They finally worked their way through the many interlocking caves, and found the cavern, and Vincent insisted on going in ahead and setting up all the candles and laying out the quilts.

When he came back out, he said, "I think we ought to eat a little then do some exploring. There are some places down here I have never seen either."

So they laid out some of their food from the basket and had lunch, discussing where they were going to go.

When they set out, Vincent led the way. They traveled through a few corridors with low-hanging ceilings, then they came out in a huge cavern with stalactites and stalagmites and a lake in the middle.

Their voices echoed through the cavern, so they lowered them to whispers.

"It's lovely, Vincent...look!"

Vincent followed her around the small lake where she showed him what appeared to be cave paintings on the wall.

Vincent touched the edges of one painting reverently. "So incredibly old, Diana. It's amazing to think of the people who must have once lived here...done these paintings in the hope of good luck with their hunting. It is awe inspiring--the passage of the years--the endurance of man."

There were crystals in this cave as well, making the lamplight scintillate and the walls sparkle with a life of their own.

Diana shivered, moving closer to Vincent. "It's cold down here. Why don't we go back up?"

It didn't seem colder to Vincent, but he shrugged and they started back.

Diana didn't really know why it had seemed cold to her there... it was more a spiritual coldness than temperature. Perhaps it was Vincent's comment about the passage of so many years. It made her feel very small and unimportant, somehow.

"If you're cold, perhaps we should go for a swim in our lake."

Diana snuggled under his arm. "The lake sounds wonderful, but this time, let's take the towels I brought. I don't feel like freezing when I get out."

They picked up their towels and headed for the subterranean lake, heated by volcanic activity that they had discovered on their last visit here.

Reaching the lake, they began undressing one another, taking their time and enjoying the anticipation of the warm water and one another.

Slipping into the water, Vincent held Diana close,

caressing her back with his huge, clawed hands. He ran one talon down the small of her back very delicately, and she shivered with delight.

Looking down at her, he said quietly, his voice rough with emotion:

*"Fair is my Love
who shelters me,
Like the Night when
I walk Above.
More fair though, is she
than the night with its thousand eyes -
For when I look into her eyes,
Love looks back at me."¹⁰*

She put her arms around his neck and drew him down to her.

Their bond blended as they loved one another, and now Vincent did not have to be concerned about the bond never returning. They had grown so close in the last year, that they seldom had to look very far or try very hard for the bond, it just came naturally to both of them, and lasted as long as they wished.

Afterwards, as they floated gently in the warm water, their bond still touching, Diana said, "That poem was your own, wasn't it?"

Embarrassed, Vincent answered, "Yes, I wrote it for you, for tonight. Your love shelters me from the storms of life, and gives me hope and joy...an anticipation of life that I never dreamed possible--not since Catherine--perhaps even *more so* than with Catherine."

Diana clung to him and laid her head on his shoulder. "We've been through so much, Vincent. She looked up at him with tears in her eyes..." "I miss our child. I wanted her so badly, Vincent."

Holding her even tighter, Vincent replied, "I know, Diana. I miss her too...but I know it is especially hard for you. I still have the bond with Jacob, so I know what you are missing...but there is no guarantee that another child would give you that same bond...surely you must realize that."

Diana brushed her tears away and looked at him steadily, trying to keep her voice from breaking, "I know that. But it's not just the bond...that just makes it worse. I wanted your child. I wanted a part of us to live on, just as a part of you and Catherine will, in Jacob. I know it's selfish, and I fight against it every day, but I wanted your child, Vincent...and I still do...I always will. I want to

try again."

Looking into her face, pleading with her with his eyes...with their bond...to understand,... he said, "I cannot, Diana...please don't ask me to risk losing you...I have lost too many people I love, already."

Diana looked at him pleadingly,

*"I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams."¹¹*

Clinging to her desperately, burying his head in her hair, Vincent cried. He felt as though she were asking him to kill her himself. "Are you sure you truly want this, Diana? You would risk leaving me alone... again?"

Now, it was Diana's turn to feel as though she were killing him. *How can I ask him to do something that will put me at such risk?* Finally, feeling defeated, she said, "Please...at least let's think about it. We can talk to Peter more... he never said it was impossible. At least give me some hope. This is something that I don't just *want*...but *need*."

Vincent sighed.

*"Dreams are such flightless things
Without the wings of the soul.
And love would be a shallow thing
Without tears to make it whole."¹²*

They kissed, and left the pool. While they were dressing, Diana had an idea. "You mentioned seeing Narcissa earlier. Perhaps we should consult her...perhaps she could guide us."

Vincent regarded her a little sceptically, his head to one side. "Do you really think it would do any good, Diana? Her comments are so enigmatic at the best of times...she never makes it easy on one."

"I know. But we can try. We might learn something...she has helped us in the past."

They gathered their things together and walked the tunnels until they came to Narcissa's chamber. The old woman knew they were coming of course, before they even turned the corner. "Come in children, come in. Why you come to see old Narcissa? You came to celebrate, not to see me."

Diana spoke first. "You know I lost Vincent's child, Narcissa. I want to try again, and Vincent is worried about me...Peter says I risk another operation. Could you give us any idea of what would happen if we were to try?"

Vincent said nothing aloud, but his soul said

everything, and Narcissa knew his conflict. "To see the future is not always wise...I tol' you this before...if you wan' to see, Narcissa will help you look, but remember, what you see may not truly be... for the future is yet unmade, and we only see what may be...what your soul already knows. Vincent shuddered slightly, not sure he wanted to see *anything*, but Diana eagerly grasped Narcissa's wrinkled, bony hand when she held it out for her.

Vincent reluctantly took Narcissa's other hand, and closed his eyes, concentrating as she had taught him.

It was dark...so dark..., but then light began swirling and as their bond was formed, images began forming...again, Jacob as a young man, Diana large with child... then they both felt pain and fear...but they saw a child, Diana holding the child and Vincent there. The love they felt was overwhelming. The images were not clear...the child's appearance was not clear...so Vincent could not see if it looked like him...but the love that surrounded them was strong. The image faded, and again they saw Catherine with their daughter... whether she was truly there, or only in their shared memory and desire, they didn't know...Catherine's light voice said, "Remember love and be brave. Before you lies eternity."

They woke, a little disoriented. Diana and Vincent looked at one another, then Vincent reached out and held her. "Remember love." Narcissa gazed at them with her blind, cataract-coated eyes. She withdrew her hands and sat quietly a moment. "Perhaps you have seen only what you wanted...perhaps you have seen the trut'...fate has many twists and turns...but the scales of life always balance."

Vincent patted Narcissa's hand. "Thank you Narcissa. We still need to decide, but perhaps we can do it now without fear getting in the way."

They left Narcissa and went finally to the Crystal Cavern. Vincent went in ahead and lit all the candles and again carried Diana across into the cavern. The candles reflections danced across the multicolored crystals creating rainbows and a kaleidoscopic effect.

"It's as lovely as I remembered, Vincent." Diana walked around, touching crystals, though she knew she shouldn't...they were living crystals...still growing. She turned, to see Vincent already half undressed...turning down the quilts for their bed.

He held out a hand and drew her down with him. As they lay down, loving one another,

Vincent touched her delicately with his bond, and softly told her,

*"Life seems more dark with shadows
than with promise now and then
But we make light from darkness
As our souls meet and blend."¹³*

As they gently continued loving one another, they did, truly make light from darkness. Their worries and fears melted away, and only the love remained.

Later, they lay in one another's arms talking about their day, and about their visions with Narcissa.

Vincent reminded her, "Our visions do not mean that all will be well, Diana. A C-section here in the tunnels is not anything to take lightly...there could be any number of complications."

Diana sighed. "Vincent, Father and Peter are obviously capable...they got me through last time...and if we are forewarned, we can be careful and make preparations. If I'm not frightened, you shouldn't be....look at Devin... he performed a C-section when he was pretending to be a doctor, and he had never even done anything but read some books!"

Vincent groaned. "I hope we would never have to depend upon him at a time like that. *You* might make it through, but I know I wouldn't."

Diana got up on one elbow and looked down at him, sensing victory. "Does that mean we can try again, Vincent?"

Sighing, Vincent replied, "We'll see, Diana. Let me talk to Father and Peter, then we will decide. For now, it's your turn to blow out the candles."

Diana laughed. She remembered when they had come here before and she had laughed at Vincent tiptoeing around in his bare feet over the broken crystals on the floor. He'd told her that next time it was her turn.

"All right." She reached into her bag and pulled out her fur slippers.

Vincent snatched for the slippers, but missed. "Unfair!"

Diana stood out of reach, slipping on the slippers, and grinned. "But smart..."

Vincent watched her, chin resting on his hands. She was lovely in or *out* of candlelight. He rolled over as she slipped back under the quilts and pulled off her slippers. He would have loved to tickle her, as she always did him, but he was afraid of hurting her with his talons. Instead, he just lightly traced the lines of her body with the edge of his nail, saying, "That was

sneaky...I was rather looking forward to watching you dance."

Turning to him, Diana kissed him gently, "I'd

rather dance with you."

Things became very quiet. If they were dancing, it was to music only *they* could hear.



THESE THINGS ENDURE

Father and Peter sat seriously discussing Vincent and Diana's plans with them.

Peter was more encouraging than Father. "There's really no reason to expect for certain that you would need another C-section, Diana...it's just that the chances are greatly increased. There are exercises you can do to strengthen you. If you're in good shape, chances are things would go normally, and as you said, we could be forewarned."

Father was more concerned. "You were fortunate this last time, Diana. Under these conditions, infection could set in easily, and if complications arose which Peter and I could not handle, we could never get you to a hospital in time."

Diana looked to Vincent for aid, but he shook his head. "I know very little about this, Diana. I only know my love for you."

Diana looked crushed, but Vincent continued, "Peter says there is no reason to expect the worst. As badly as you want a child, if you want to try again...I will let you make the decision. We will leave it to God and Fate."

Diana ran to him and hugged him fiercely. "I'll take such good care of myself that nothing could possibly go wrong...you'll see..." She looked around at Father and Peter, "You'll *all* see."

Father's eyes met Vincent's over Diana's head, and he knew Vincent was not happy about this decision, but was going along with it only for Diana's happiness.

Diana sat and talked with Peter about what she should do to get herself in shape, and as they were talking, Father drew Vincent out into the corridor. "I know you're not happy about this, Vincent..."

Vincent shook his head. "I love her. If I should lose her too, I don't know how I would bear it...but if I love her, I have to allow her her dreams as well, even if those dreams could endanger her. If she feels it is worth risking her life for, how can I tell her no?"

Father just shook his head. "You're stronger than I am, Vincent. But you're right."

Diana was ecstatic. She began swimming laps in the Mirror Pool daily for general strengthening, and doing abdominal exercises. She felt better than she had in years.

Vincent just watched her and tried not to worry. One morning, a few weeks after their return

from the Crystal Cavern, a note from Joe came for Vincent and Diana.

To our friends,

Erica and I would like to invite you both to a very special reception at my apartment tonight. We were married a few days ago, and since we couldn't have Vincent at the wedding, we wanted to celebrate with both of you privately. Please come, we'll be home all night.

Love,

Joe and Erica.

Vincent read the note and actually laughed..."I'm beginning to think love is catching. I'm happy for Joe."

Diana was delighted with Vincent's pleasure. She knew he was still worried about her and that there was still a portion of him he kept blocked when they bonded...the part that was not happy with her decision...but she felt so good, she couldn't possibly believe that anything could go wrong this time if she became pregnant. Still, it was good to feel Vincent's unabashed pleasure for Joe.

"I'll be glad to see them both. Perhaps soon we can invite Erica Below."

That evening, after making sure Jacob and Toby were in bed and asleep, Diana and Vincent wandered the tunnels towards Joe's apartment.

Vincent commented..."It seems that we have two children already. I think we have adopted Toby... at least he has certainly adopted us...you in particular."

Diana's bond touched him lightly, caressingly, "I know. I don't mind if you don't. The more the merrier. He's such a loving child."

Vincent left Diana to find his way through the service door on the elevator so he could ride it to the roof, then climb down to Joe's apartment.

When Joe opened his door to Diana, she threw her arms around his neck and hugged him. "I'm so happy for you." She hugged Erica, "For you both."

When Vincent knocked at the window, Joe let him in. As he dropped quietly to the floor, his fur boots cushioning any sound, he pulled his cloak through and turned to Joe. "Diana and I are happy for you both,

Joe." He put his hand on Joe's shoulder, squeezing gently. He turned to Erica and lifted her hand, kissing it. "Take care of each other," he said, looking into her startled face.

Erica blushed. Vincent was always so courtly, his manners reminiscent of an earlier time...that she wasn't quite how to react.

They sat and visited for several hours, and Vincent invited Joe to bring Erica below sometime...he felt she could be trusted.

As they were walking back, the pipes were quiet. An occasional soft tapping from a sentry checking in was all they heard. "It's late," Diana commented, "We stayed longer than we'd intended."

Putting his arm around Diana, Vincent walked slowly, enjoying the quiet and her company. "It's rarely this quiet down here."

As they walked, they detoured over the bridge in the Whispering Gallery, listening for voices, but it was quiet there as well, with only an occasional sound from Above.

"The silence is always eerie to me when it is like this," Vincent commented.

He reached for their bond, and as they walked, arm in arm for their chamber, they could not have heard anything anyway, so completely were they concentrated upon themselves.

Several days later, Diana woke nauseated. After returning to bed from the washroom to Vincent's worried stare, she snuggled in next to him. She said nothing, but lay quiet, hoping. She opened her mind to her body, hoping for some clue, but if she were pregnant, it was too early to tell.

Vincent's anxiety followed him all day as he did his sweep, taught his class, played with Jacob. While he was washing clothes with Diana, his bond fluttered at the edge of hers softly, gently asking to be let in. They touched softly as they continued their work.

"It's too early to tell, Vincent."

Vincent was unappeased. "I'm contacting Peter. He can test you and find out for sure."

After finishing up the wash and hanging it out, Vincent left to send a message to Peter, and later that evening there was a message from him to Diana for her to come to his office tomorrow, that the receptionist would be expecting her.

Diana sat fingering the note reflectively. She

listened to the music of the pipes, and heard the muted roar of the subway in the distance overhead. She sighed.

Every time she went back Above it seemed so strange to her, but she was sure Peter had his reasons for wanting her to come to the office.

That evening, while putting Jacob and Toby to bed, Diana read them a story from Pooh's adventures and sang Catherine's lullaby.

Toby clung to her for a bit of extra reassurance; Jacob was angry with him over some imagined slight and wasn't speaking to him.

Diana could feel his hurt, and soothed him as best she could. "I'll talk to Jacob in the morning if he isn't over his anger by then, Toby. It will be all right." She tousled his curly brown hair and kissed him. "I love you, sweetheart. Don't worry. Jacob loves you too."

She stopped by Father's chamber on her way back, as Vincent was playing chess with him. She watched their game for awhile, amazed at their concentration. They played chess like it was brain surgery.

Finally, Vincent said, "Checkmate." He smiled and looked up at Father.

Father groaned and ran his fingers through his hair. "You did it to me again. The student has so far outdistanced the teacher..."

Chuckling, Vincent hugged Father. "Only excellent teachers make excellent students. Besides, you wouldn't want me to *let* you win."

Looking up, as if he finally realized that Diana was there, Father said, "Hello, Diana. Are the boys asleep?"

Hopping off her perch on the desk, Diana commented ruefully, "I hope so. They had a fight today...Jacob's angry and Toby's hurt; but they'll be better tomorrow." She went on to ask Father about Peter's office and get the address. "It's going to feel strange being up there."

Vincent was pleased though, that Peter was doing this. "I imagine he wants to watch you closer this time, and up there he has better facilities to do so."

Diana dusted the seat of her pants off...Father's desk was dusty. "I need to come in here and clean for you, Father...it's getting unmanageable."

Father was alarmed. "Don't touch a thing! I know where everything is...more or less."

Vincent smiled, putting his arm around Diana, "I suspect less than more, but Diana will leave your nest alone...." He leaned down and whispered to her, smiling, and they bid Father goodnight.

The next morning Diana picked her way through the streets heading for Peter's office. She'd ridden the subway most of the way after Vincent left her at the tunnel exit.

Finding the address and going inside, she hesitantly spoke to the receptionist. "I'm Diana Bennett...I'm here to see the doctor..."

The receptionist smiled. "I'll tell him you're here, Mrs. Bennett. He's been expecting you. It will be a little while though, as he will have to fit you in."

Diana sat down, smiling at the "Mrs. Bennett." She supposed if Vincent had a last name, it would be Welles. But somehow, it didn't matter... not where they lived.

She sat reading baby magazines and books until she was called in.

She sat on the table in the small examining room, feeling distinctly uncomfortable, but when Peter came in, she felt much better.

"Diana...I'm so glad you came in." He hugged her. "The receptionist knows not to worry about the bill... I've told her anything we do is my responsibility." His expression became more serious. "Before the nurse comes in, I want to tell you, Diana, the reason I want to see you here is that I want to get periodic sonograms and keep close track of you. We'll draw blood to test positively for pregnancy, but I suspect you are already pretty sure..."

Diana nodded. The nurse came in, drew her blood and sent it off for the test, then Peter examined her. He nodded. "You were right...how does Vincent feel about it?"

The nurse left after Peter waved her on out. He's worried. I know he's not going to be happy until it's over."

Peter explained to her that the sonograms would help them trace the baby's development, its position, and any problems that might be developing. "There are other tests we could do as well, but I have the sonogram equipment here in the office, and I can do those myself. Anyone else tracking this pregnancy would become alerted with the speed of the gestation...at least if this one follows the same course as your last." He gave her strict instructions as to what exercises she could and could not do and gave her prenatal vitamins. "I'll send a messenger with the test results, but tell Vincent the news... I don't expect any surprises.

Vincent was waiting for her when she exited the subway. He had felt her coming and rushed back to

meet her. Her radiant face told him all he needed to know...and his worry and concern doubled.

"Worrywart," she teased. "Everything will be fine... you'll see." She hugged him and tried to cheer him up. She told him about the sonograms and how Peter was going to keep close track of her progress. They would be ready this time.

Vincent felt a little better, but as Diana had told Peter, he wasn't going to let go of his worry until she delivered safely.

Diana's sister was no happier than Vincent with her pregnancy. Everyone was worried. Even Jamie wasn't as enthusiastic as she could have been. Everyone tried, but Diana could feel the undercurrents.

Diana refused to let them dampen her enthusiasm. She exercised, and swam whenever the water wasn't too cold, and her pregnancy advanced as swiftly as it had before.

Susan spent more and more time in the tunnels in the guest chamber, spending weekends and days off with Devin... and keeping an eye on her sister.

Alex formed fast friendships in the tunnels and became belligerent each time they had to go back.

Devin grew more and more hopeful that eventually Susan would agree to move Below.

Whatever time Vincent had when he wasn't working or teaching, he spent with Diana.

Jacob and Toby were quite a handful, and they had both kept a much closer eye on them since the incident in the maze. They had been told about the baby, and Jacob watched her with almost as serious an attitude as his father, and Diana and Vincent were concerned about him.

Finally, one day, Diana's temper had frayed to the breaking point... the aura of worry and concern surrounding her was more than she could take.

One evening she was brushing her hair, feeling Vincent watching her with concern. She turned and faced him. "All right. I've had it." She slammed the brush down on the dresser and left.

Astonished, Vincent followed her to the falls.

Diana sat there on the rocks, awkwardly trying to put her elbows on her knees and rest her chin in her hands. Her stomach was in the way. "Damn." She leaned back instead. When Vincent rounded the corner, she said petulantly, "If you can't support me and be happy with me, then leave me alone."

Vincent sighed, coming softly up behind her. He rubbed her shoulders, which were tense as piano wires. "I'm sorry. I am happy about the baby...truly. It's just that my concern for you is my priority."

"Well if you're so *damned* concerned about me, try being concerned about my state of mind. All I can pick up is tension and worry. We were so happy last time... can't you find some of that happiness? Peter says everything is going fine."

Vincent came around and kneeled, laying his head on her stomach, his hands delicately feeling for movement. When the baby kicked, he smiled, rubbing his cheek against her abdomen. Every time he felt the baby, he lost his fear and only felt the wonder.

She felt his pleasure and relaxed some.

When he looked up, there were tears in his eyes. "I love you so much, Diana. I love this baby, too. My worry is for both of you, but I will try to have more positive thoughts. Do you know yet if it's a boy or a girl?"

Diana laughed. "Yes. Do you want to know?"

At Vincent's look of combined perplexity and joy, she answered softly, "It's a girl, Vincent."

They went back to their chamber, Vincent trying hard to block any negative thoughts about the pregnancy from his mind... concentrating on the miracle instead.

Once he had Diana tucked away in bed, he sat and read to her for awhile from "A Midsummer Night's Dream" then kissed her goodnight as she began to fall asleep. "I'm going to see Father for a while."

Vincent and Father discussed Diana's psychological state, and decided to pass the word to the others to try and think more positively.

"Has Peter said how soon it will be?" Father asked.

"Not long now. Peter said she could go into labor any time in the next week. She is to go for another sonogram tomorrow. I'm sending Devin with her. I don't want her alone at any time from here on out."

After leaving Father, Vincent went to check on Jacob and Toby.

Toby was asleep, but Jacob was sitting up in bed, looking at books. "I thought you were asleep."

"No." Jacob fidgeted, then looked at Vincent. The child's eyes seeming to bore into Vincent's soul. "Is my sister going to be all right this time, Father? Will she be able to stay?"

Vincent sat down next to his son, and Jacob crawled onto his lap, seeking reassurance. "I hope so, Jacob. We think so. Just think very good thoughts for her and wish her and Diana well,

okay?"

Only after he left did he wonder how Jacob had known the baby was a girl.

Finding Diana asleep, Vincent opened his journal and began to write.

Diana and Jacob both knew the baby is a girl...I wonder how Jacob knew. Sometimes the complexity of our various bondings is confusing, to say the least. If good wishes will get Diana and the baby through this safely, then surely they will be safe. I don't care if she looks like me, if she has a bond with anyone...I just want both of them to be well.

Looking up, Vincent noticed that Diana had not covered her mirror, and irritated he reached over to do it.

Suddenly, on impulse he turned the mirror toward him and looked at himself. The tousled chestnut mane framed a face that was unusual, but gentle and kind. His worried blue eyes looked back out at him. He saw a man... not a beast...just a very worried man.

Looking up at his painting, he thought to himself, *All that has passed, both joy and sorrow has at least given me this... I no longer see myself as strangers see me. Catherine and Diana have given me the gift of seeing myself only as a man.*

Shaking his head, as usual in awe of fate, he went to bed being careful not to disturb Diana.

After breakfast the following morning, Vincent sent Devin with Diana to Peter's office.

They caught the subway to ride it almost to the office. As they were sitting quietly, four toughs walked up and began harassing them. Devin clenched his teeth, not wanting to get into anything right now.

The boys continued, snatching at Diana's carryall..."Come on mama...give us your purse...what've you got inside, huh?"

Diana just smiled, unzipped the carryall and pulled out her .38. She looked the boy dead in the eye and said, "Nothing you really want, I'm sure. Why don't you get off at the next stop?"

Devin just watched in amazement as the four teenagers backpedaled to the door and swung out at the next stop.

Diana quietly put the pistol away--never looking at Devin.

When they got the train, they walked slowly the rest of the way to the office. Diana was too uncomfortable

to be walking very far, and Devin watched her anxiously.

"Will you stop it Devin! I'm fine. I feel like I'm under a microscope most of the time. I'm slow, awkward, and clumsy, but I feel fine otherwise."

Sheepishly, Devin looked away. "Sorry. It's just that if anything happened to you, Vincent would kill me... although from the scene on the subway, you seem pretty capable of taking care of yourself."

Diana could sense Devin's amazement and also his amusement. "Well, I'm glad I could entertain you. I'm just tired of trouble."

Reaching the office, Diana puffed up the steps and sat down gratefully in the waiting room as Devin told the receptionist they were there. Diana quietly asked Devin, "When I go in, I'd like you to come, Devin. Peter is going to do his last sonogram, and I think you will find it interesting."

Devin didn't know what to say. Finally, he looked at Diana and said softly, "I would love to see the baby, Diana."

When Peter called her in, he asked Devin to wait until he had finished examining Diana, then he would call him in for the sonogram, and Devin waited anxiously. After examining her, Peter stood looking at her smiling. "You're in great shape, Diana. The baby appears to be in position, the head engaged. I don't think you're going to have the same problems this time. Jacob already has the temporary O.R. set up just in case, and when you go into labor I want you in there, just to be safe. Have a messenger come up and call me...or leave a message with the service...I'll be there as soon as possible...and don't wait. I don't want to take any chances."

Relieved, Diana replied, "I want this baby so much, Peter...but I find myself getting scared."

Patting her shoulder reassuringly, he said, "That's understandable after last time, but there is no reason to expect problems....and if there are problems, at least we'll be ready for them. Now...I'll send the nurse for Devin...you want to see her again?"

Diana's smile made Peter's heart ache. "Oh yes. I wish Vincent could be here. He can receive my impressions, but it's not the same...he doesn't see her."

"I'll send him a picture...but he'll be seeing her before long, anyway." Peter whistled a tune cheerfully as he set Diana up for the sonogram.

When Devin came in, he smiled at her and reached for her hand.

Peter explained about the sonogram and told him

where to look, and began the test. They could see the baby, her heart beating, could see the image quite well. No obvious abnormalities were present, but some things are hard to see.

Devin squeezed Diana's hand. "It's wonderful Diana...and you can feel her as well as see her... and you have your bond with her. It's incredible." The wonder in his voice made him seem so childlike that Diana was touched.

They got a picture for Vincent, and Peter again told both Diana and Devin what to do at the first signs of labor.

As they headed home, Diana moving slower and slower, Devin became concerned. "Are you all right?" Diana stopped to rest. "Yes. I'm fine... just tired of being fat."

They rode the subway without incident and got off at the same place, and Vincent was waiting for them. He had felt Diana return and wanted to be there for her. As he helped her down the ladder, he asked, "Is everything all right?"

She smiled, and Devin answered, "Wonderful." He handed Vincent the picture, and Vincent stared.

Diana pointed out various things on the picture that were not too obvious. Vincent was pleased, but his bond with Diana kept worrying at her, needing to be reassured that everything was all right.

"Peter said there is absolutely no reason for worry, Vincent. We're all ready for this to be over...even her."

As they were walking slowly down the tunnel, chatting quietly and listening to the messages on the pipes, Diana suddenly stopped. She had a funny look on her face, and Devin and Vincent both asked at the same time, "What?"

She looked up at Vincent, then at Devin and said to Devin. With a smile, Diana said, "I think you had better go back and call Peter. *She* says its time."

Devin started sprinting up the tunnel, then came back. "I need some money for the phone..."

Diana laughed and dug in her carryall, giving him some change.

Vincent picked her up and began carrying her home. "I should have brought the cart...I should have known something like this would happen." On a more serious note, he added quietly, "You do not sense anything wrong do you... not like last time?"

Breathing deeply to help move through the pain, Diana said after the contraction ended, "No. Peter said I'd feel some distress from her simply because birth itself is traumatic, but I don't sense a struggle for

survival like last time....Oh!...." she breathed quietly for a minute. "That hurts."

As they neared the temporary O.R., Vincent saw Kipper and sent him for Father.

Putting Diana down on the table, he grabbed pillows to make her comfortable and waited for Father to arrive.

Diana opened her mind to the child and to her body, trying desperately to sense for any problems, but could find none. Another contraction hit her and she groped for Vincent's mind automatically and he flinched. "Sorry."

Vincent smiled, and opened his mind to share this with her. "Perhaps I can help you ease the pain some."

Father came in and quickly checked Diana. "You're doing fine. It's early yet. Vincent... whatever you do, do *not* let her push until I tell you to... she will want to, and that is where she could do the most damage to herself. She has to wait."

The evening wore on, and it seemed like an eternity. The labor was going slowly, but there appeared to be nothing out of the ordinary. Peter arrived and confirmed Father's opinion that everything was fine so far.

Vincent and Diana were only half in the here and now. In order to keep her out of pain, they had taken their minds off to that spot where Narcissa had taught them to find, but Vincent kept a part of himself in touch with what was going on. Dividing himself like that was a strain, but he needed to know when Diana needed to help rather than stay apart from what her body was doing.

Peter finally shook Vincent..."Vincent...she is trying to push... keep her from pushing just yet...tell her *soon*."

Vincent gave Diana strength and encouragement, and took her farther from her physical self for a few moments, then brought her back with Peter's encouragement of "Now, Vincent... on the next contraction, have her start working."

Vincent brought Diana completely back into her body, where she gasped at the exhaustion and pain.

Peter told her, "Now, Diana... push..."

And Diana pushed, feeling as though she was tearing in two. The pain eased off for about 30 seconds then began again.

Peter said, "Push harder... we've got the head, Diana."

She pushed and pushed...and pushed...finally she heard Peter say, "We've got her... good girl,

Diana."

Peter held the baby up as Father clamped the cord.

Father handed the shears to Vincent, saying, "Symbolically, Vincent, I think this should be your duty."

So Vincent cut the cord.

Peter gave the baby to Father to clean off and wrap while he finished attending Diana. He wanted to make sure there was no hemorrhaging from her previous incision.

When Father turned and laid the baby on Diana's breast, she sobbed gratefully and held her baby.

Vincent touched the downy red fuzz on her head softly in amazement. They both began their ritual of examining every inch of the baby. She, like Jacob, was very normal appearing--except when you looked very closely. Her eyebrows, soft red fuzz, were very slanted, very like Vincent's--giving her a fairy-like look--and the bone structure of her face with the high cheekbones and the pointed chin added to the impression. She also had a very fine down on her arms and legs and a delicate line of fuzz down her back.

Vincent touched her hands delicately and uncurled her fingers: they had very small nails...pointed, like his.

He kissed the baby then smiled at Diana. "She's beautiful, Diana."

As the child nursed, Diana looked down at her and smiled. She felt Vincent's pleasure and was relieved. *Yes, she is unusual... but she is going to be beautiful as well.*

When the baby opened her eyes, Diana gasped. They were such a clear blue...not the milky blue babies usually have, and she looked up at Vincent and blinked.

Her eyes were slanted under those slanted brows... and the bond that captured Vincent at that moment was not entirely due to any power of her mind. It was simply love.

Watching her husband, Diana thought happily: *God help anyone who comes knocking at our door for this young lady's heart...he'd better be worthy.*

They were interrupted suddenly by Devin at the door with Jacob.

Jacob ran over and climbed up on Vincent's lap. "Where's my sister?" They showed him the baby, and Jacob was very silent. He looked at Diana and smiled. "She's okay. I think she likes me."

Suddenly, Vincent couldn't stand it anymore. He hugged Jacob and rested his head on Diana's breast. Tears slipped down his cheeks. The months of pent up anxiety and worry...dread of this day...gave way to relief and an uncontrollable love.

Diana felt his relief and his love and joy and added her own to his, comforting him as best she could.

Finally, drawing a great, shuddering breath, he

looked at her and said, "Please don't do this to me again..." He touched the baby gently, and added, "Even for such a precious gift as this."

As soon as Diana felt strong enough, Vincent picked her up and moved her into their chamber.

He placed the baby next to her in the bed, then took Jacob to put him back to bed. Jacob was still very quiet, but it was a serene sort of quiet.

Finally when Vincent put him in bed, he said, "I'm glad my sister stayed here this time. She's neat."

Vincent hugged him and replied, "I'm glad too, Jacob. I love you."

Jacob nodded and said happily, "I know," and turned over and closed his eyes.

Diana held her daughter, exhausted, but so happy she couldn't sleep. She gently stroked her daughter's red fuzz and played with her fingers. The tiny fingers clasped her finger so tightly. The unbelievable wonder of new life...new hope.

She lay back and opened her mind. She felt Vincent coming towards her, tired but so much at peace. Through him, she felt Jacob, sleeping peacefully...and she felt the baby, her bond still tenuous, her thoughts and feelings so unformed.

She reached out and drew them all together, loving them.

Vincent came into the chamber and leaned against the edge of the door, looking at them. His mind brushed against hers like a caress.

He pushed Jacob's small cradle next to the bed so Diana could put the baby in it when she wished, then he undressed and slipped in beside her. He reached out and stroked the baby with one huge hand...almost covering her. "She is so small, Diana. I never saw Jacob when he was this tiny...if he ever was. She is so delicate...everything about her is delicate."

Diana picked her up and put her in Vincent's arms: he had still not held her for more than a moment or two. She lay in his huge arms, almost buried in the long reddish hair. He chuckled. "She looks like she's in a nest."

Laying her head on Vincent's other arm, Diana said, "She is... the safest nest she could ever hope for."

Nodding slowly, Diana fell asleep, and Vincent slowly eased her down to the pillow, then slipped out and lay his daughter in the cradle, covering her with the tiny comforter Mary had made for her. Then, after one last look he slipped exhausted into

bed, his last thoughts being: *And death shall have no dominion...*¹⁴ *We were right, Catherine...we were right.*

The following morning, Diana was feeling better, and it was a good thing, because everyone had to make a short stop in to see the new arrival.

Jamie stayed the longest, marveling over the baby. "Father and Vincent are already preparing for the naming ceremony. Do you know what you are going to name her?"

Diana just smiled. She and Vincent would name her at the ceremony and not before.

Jacob crawled out from under the bed to look at the baby.

Mouse stopped by to get Jamie and smiled down at the baby. "So small." He commented as he looked down at her in wonder.

When Vincent returned from making preparations with Father, Diana was asleep, so he went to visit with Devin.

Devin was on his way out to go get Susan and Alex for the naming ceremony, which would be tomorrow.

Vincent decided to walk with him. "I'm going to meet Joe and Erica in the morning to bring them for the ceremony. I'm glad you have stayed with us Devin. I don't think our happiness could be complete without you."

Embarrassed, Devin shrugged. "I love you too, little brother." Then, grinning at each other like teenagers, they just walked on.

William was in his element, making the feast for the naming ceremony. Everyone was attending who could get away.

By the time everyone was gathering, they had to have the ceremony in the Great Hall rather than Father's chamber...so many people wanted to see the baby and offer their congratulations.

Diana and Vincent stood before everyone with the baby in their arms and Jacob and Toby at their feet. Father looked up at everyone and began, "It has been said that the child is the meaning of life. The truth of that has never been more apparent to me than on this day, when we celebrate the child...this new life that has been brought into our world. We welcome the child with love, so that she may learn to love. We welcome the child with gifts so that she may learn generosity, and finally, we welcome the child with a name..."

Vincent was holding his daughter, with one arm

around Diana and he nodded to Diana, who spoke softly, but clearly, "We have named our daughter Catherine." A hushed, approving murmur went through the crowd, then people slowly began filing past, bringing small gifts for the baby and exclaiming over her.

When Joe and Erica came up, Erica hugged Diana. "I'm so happy for you both."

Joe just looked at Vincent...their eyes meeting for just a moment in understanding. "Catherine, huh? She looks more like a Cathy, don't you think?"

Vincent smiled. "I think perhaps she will need to grow into her name...so, yes, probably she will be Cathy for awhile."

They went then to the feast for the child... a celebration of new life, and a celebration of love.

Joe was amazed at the baby. He grinned his lopsided grin at Vincent...indicating he was getting ready to start teasing, "I don't understand how she can look so much like you, Vincent, and still be so beautiful and delicate."

Vincent's eyes crinkled at the edges as he smiled... finding he could enjoy Joe's jesting without discomfort. "She doesn't look like me... not really. She looks like herself. She has just enough of her mother and me in her to remind us that our love is forever... but the rest is pure...Catherine... just herself."

Diana gently took Cathy from Vincent and shook her head. "She's unique...just as every newborn child is unique. Her future is yet unwritten, and the possibilities endless."

Toby and Jacob ran up to see the baby, and Toby looked at Diana with his dark brown eyes, saying wistfully, "I wish I had a sister."

Vincent knelt down and took Toby on his knee. "You do. Jacob is your brother, just as Devin is mine. Father reared both of us, and loved us both... and it seems that Diana and I are rearing you as well as Jacob, and we love you, so why shouldn't Cathy be your sister, too?"

Toby threw his arms around Vincent and hugged him tightly, tears in his eyes. "I love you Vincent." Vincent gathered Jacob up in his other arm and stood next to Diana, smiling gently. "It seems our family is getting larger every day... do you think we can stop now?...I have too few arms to hold all of you as it is."

As their guests began to take their leave, and Devin left to escort Susan, Joe and Erica out,

Vincent and Diana took the boys to settle them for the night.

The boys picked on each other and teased each other all the way to the dorm, and once in bed, they begged Diana for a story.

Vincent took one look at Diana's pale, tired face, and told the boys that he would instead read to them, and what, pray tell, did they want him to read?

As they were discussing the pros and cons of different books and stories, Diana kissed Vincent and took Cathy to their chamber.

As Diana sat up in bed, nursing the baby, she looked across the chamber to their painting. *Catherine*, she thought, *Thank you for my life. I never would have found Vincent if not for you. Your strength brought me back when I was dying. We left our child in your care...and now this child carries your name. You will always be a part of us.*

When Vincent came in and saw Diana with Cathy, he felt a flush of pleasure. It seemed to him that all the pain and sorrow, all the suffering of the past few years were washed away and he stood on the threshold of Life. He drew a deep breath and slowly released it, closing his eyes he leaned against the wall, totally relaxed...for the first time in...it seemed like years, he had no fears, no anxiety.

Diana watched him wordlessly. She could feel his peace. She put the child in her cradle, covering her gently, then went to Vincent and put her arms around him, resting her head on his chest. One arm came up around her and gently held her to him. They bonded gently, quietly, their souls meshing without effort.

Gently, Vincent led Diana to the bed, and they turned the covers back.

As she got back in bed, he undressed and slipped in beside her. They lay together, still deep in their bond and as they quietly drifted towards sleep, the bond slowly released.

Weeks later, Diana, Vincent, and Devin left Cathy with Jamie and Mouse and took Jacob and Toby Above.

It was spring again, and Vincent breathed in the scent of new life gratefully. He had been Above much less often in recent months, and he missed it. It felt good to all of them to be outside.

Jacob and Toby ran and played ahead of them, Toby learning almost as much as Jacob. Without Vincent and Jacob's night sight, or their heightened senses, and without Diana's hypersensitivity, Toby was less aware of the world around him, but he enjoyed it just as much.

Vincent cautioned the boys to stay close...he still feared what would happen to Jacob if he were caught

Above with him, but less so now. It seemed to him that fear was much less a part of his life now. He knew that whatever happened, love remained, and as Narcissa would say, *The scales of life are balanced.*

Vincent nodded towards the boys, "They remind me of Devin and myself as boys...the same squabbling and disagreements, but their love for one another always brings them back."

Devin was trailing after the boys, trying to keep them out of trouble and give Diana and Vincent some time alone together. He came back trailing one boy on each hand. "I think I'm going to take these two back Below, if you don't mind." He grinned and added, pointing with his chin to the west, "I think I heard a concert going on over that way. You two might want to amble that way and listen for a while."

Smiling, Diana thanked Devin and waved as he moved off with the boys. She could feel Vincent's indecision...and tucked her hand in the crook of his arm. "Come, Vincent. We can stay far enough back to be unseen, but still hear the music."

His indecision resolved, Vincent moved slowly with her toward the music.

As they neared, Vincent listened, smiling. "They're playing a waltz." They moved together and slowly began to dance in the moonlight... with Vincent gracefully leading her into the magic of the music. He whispered to her...

*When yon full moon's with her white fleet of
stars,
And but one bird makes music in the grove;
When you and I are breathing side by side,
Where our two bodies make one shadow,
love...¹⁵*



They stood listening to the music for a while, then noticing people beginning to leave, Vincent drew Diana away. "It's time to go home, Diana."

They walked slowly toward the tunnel entrance, and Vincent was lost in thought.

Diana sensed the intensity of his emotion and rather than intrude with their bond, waited patiently for him to speak.

Finally, leaning against a tree, he stopped and touched her face gently. "Life has given us so much, Diana. I almost feel guilty in my happiness. I feel...as though I'm waiting...as though something will come along and snatch it all away." He looked at her, almost pleadingly...as though by her words she could ensure that things would always stay as they were.

Diana lay against him, her arms around him under his cloak. She felt the rough leather and homespun of his clothes, heard the beat of his heart. "All time is now, Vincent... all time is now, and love is eternal."

After they entered the tunnels where it was safe, they allowed themselves to bond, and as their souls joined, they thought they heard Catherine's voice telling them, *The time for mourning is at an end. Enjoy your peace, my Love. Love one another, and remember...Death shall have no dominion.*¹⁶

For what man has sought for is, indeed, neither pain nor pleasure, but simply Life.



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BEAUTY AND THE BEAST
BOOK THREE
THE TRUTH OF LOVE

Story by Rhonda Collins
Based on the series by Ron Koslow

THE WINTRY BLAST OF HONOR

Vincent paced restlessly in the chamber as Diana lay in bed watching him. He walked impatiently from bookshelf to bookshelf, fingering volumes, opening them and putting them back. The candlelight glinted on the metalwork of his belt and caught the highlights in his chestnut mane. Occasionally he would glance over at her.

Cathy, their daughter, nursed quietly, with an intensity that reminded Diana of her father. It made Diana uneasy to see Vincent so restless and so obviously distressed.

"What's wrong, Vincent? You've been nervous all day."

Shaking his head, his chestnut mane tumbling around his shoulders, Vincent only replied, "Nothing...." He stopped pacing and glanced back at Diana anxiously. He held out his hands despairingly, "I truly don't know, Diana. I just feel nervous. Perhaps if I went Above, took a walk."

Diana placed Cathy in her cradle next to the bed. "Devin just came back from Above, from his visit with Susan. He said there was a huge storm brewing."

Vincent rested his hands on the desk momentarily his head hanging. He sighed, then turned abruptly, snatching his cloak from the chair. "I cannot just continue like this all night...and I *will* if I stay here. Perhaps I simply need some fresh air. Try not to worry, and don't wait up."

Diana watched Vincent leave, feeling a little helpless. They'd been so happy since Cathy's birth, and Vincent so calm, but recently she'd sensed a growing restlessness. Perhaps it was only that he hadn't been going Above as much. Maybe he *did* only need the freedom that the city and park at night offered him. She hoped it wasn't anything more serious.

Watching Cathy sleep in her cradle, Diana smiled. The baby's soft chestnut hair was so similar to Vincent's, and so were the slanting brows. She had mittens on to keep her from scratching her face with her tiny talons of nails. Other than the nails, the brows, and a soft down on her arms, legs, and down her backbone, she was entirely human-appearing...and quite beautiful.

Diana stretched and decided to go check on Jacob and Toby to see that they got to bed. She'd promised them she would read to them again tonight and finish the story they had been reading.

As Vincent opened the door to the tunnel entrance, he could hear the wind in the trees out in the park. He smiled as he closed the door. *I love storms. Love the power of them and the freedom. Father never could understand why I love walking the park during a storm, and I know Diana doesn't either... not really.* In the park during a storm, Vincent knew there was little likelihood of encountering anyone else out in the weather and he could be much more free...and the storm spoke to him.

As the rain hit him in the face, he threw back his hood and raised his face to the heavens. The wind pulled at his cloak as he walked the paths. The lightning was crackling, the thunder rolling, and he could smell the ozone in the air. It was exhilarating! His clothing was soaked, and heavy, pulling at him as he moved. During one huge roll of thunder, he dared to throw back his head and release a roar of exultation. *Perhaps this was all I need. Perhaps I felt the storm coming, and the nerves were simply my anticipation.*

He walked the park for almost two hours, alone. No one else had any desire to get soaked. Once or twice he could sense Diana touching his mind briefly, worried, then withdrawing. He was sorry to worry her, but needed to be alone now. He needed the wildness of the storm to ease the restlessness in his soul.

When the storm began lessening, Vincent finally forced himself to re-enter the tunnels and head home.

When Vincent entered their chamber, most of the candles were out, but there were a few still lit next to the bed, where Diana was still up, reading. As he stood dripping in the doorway, Diana rose, putting on her terrycloth robe.

"Vincent, you're soaked...." She started to tell him to get out of his wet clothes before he got sick, but decided against it; she *was*, after all, not his mother.

Besides, Vincent never got sick. Instead, she said wryly, "You're going to make the floor muddy."

Vincent looked up to see her smiling at him, and smiled quietly back at her. "Sorry." He pulled off his wet clothes with difficulty, placing them in a pile next to the door. Shivering, he crawled under the covers.

Diana brought him a towel to dry his hair. "Did you have a good time?"

Thinking about it, Vincent's eyes sparkled. "Yes, I *did*. Diana, there's nothing like it! The power...the ferocity! It makes me feel...wonderful."

Diana snuggled down next to his now warm, though still slightly damp body. "Well, now that you're home, I'm going to sleep. Love you." Diana still felt some restlessness from Vincent, though he was much quieter. *Perhaps he still needs to be left alone.* She didn't press.

Vincent's soft voice drifted through the darkness to her. "You shouldn't wait up for me when I go Above. I lose myself in the freedom, and sometimes stay until dawn." He put his arm around her, and quickly went to sleep.

Diana lay awake awhile, wondering why suddenly Vincent was feeling the need to go Above again so often. This was not the first time in recent weeks he had gone Above on long jaunts by himself. Since their marriage he had gone Above less and less, and seemed contented. *Why suddenly now does he feel this pressing need?* She didn't really mind, since he enjoyed it so much. It was difficult for her to get away anyway now that she had Cathy, but it worried her a little since he had been so restless. Finally, she drifted off to sleep.

For several days after the storm Vincent was quieter, less restless, but though he appeared outwardly calm, he could feel the tension building as the time drew closer and closer to the anniversary of Catherine's death. Even when they were in bed making love, Diana could feel a tension that had not been present since their marriage, and it worried her.

But not as much as it worried him.

That evening Vincent wrote furiously in his journal.

Coming up behind him, Diana questioned him quietly, "Vincent, have you told Jacob and Toby goodnight? I'm going to put them to bed.

"Vincent glanced up from his journal momentarily. "I read to them a while earlier and

told them one of us would be in later. Could you tell them goodnight for me?"

Reaching up under his mane, Diana hugged him...and felt muscles like knots. Concerned, she patted him and backed off. "I will. I'll be back soon." Diana wasn't sure if he'd even heard her; he'd gone immediately back to his writing. As she left the room, she glanced back to see him staring up at Kristopher Gentian's painting of himself and Catherine. Sighing, she went to get the boys settled.

Vincent's mind was far away, both in time and space. He was remembering how he had promised himself after Catherine's death that he would continue to try and fight against some of the evil that men do to one another. As Catherine had. He and Diana had done that by completely tearing apart the remainder of Gabriel's organization, but since then, he had become passive...so content in his own life, and so happy with Diana and the children that he'd forgotten his promise to himself. Now, though, the anniversary of Catherine's death--and Jacob's birth--had reminded him of his obligations. Both to himself and to Catherine.

I rarely even go Above anymore, and almost never into the city itself. Other than the walks I have taken in the park and the freedom they provide me, everything I want, everything I need is here. But I am beginning to feel the guilt. If I break this vow to myself...to Catherine, I am breaking faith with us both...and I cannot allow that."

Vincent glanced across the desk at Diana's mirror and caught a glimpse of himself. But he saw "the Other"...his own impression of his other self whom he hated--who embodied all that was base in his soul--that he had fought so long and hard against.

The image snarled and grimaced at him, seeming to say, *I am your selfishness and fear of the evil--fear of getting caught-- of being seen for what you are. You are afraid of me. You always will be. I will always be a part of you, and you will never truly be free of me. I am what people see.*

Clenching his hands, Vincent turned away. For so long now, he had been at peace with himself; the victory had been hard-won with painful soul searching and with the strength given him by the love from both Catherine and Diana. For so long now, when he looked into a mirror, he could do it without flinching. And now, he could not.

He thought to himself,

*How in the name of Heaven can he escape
That defiling and disfigured shape
The mirror of malicious eyes
Casts upon his eyes, until at last
He thinks that shape must be his shape?
And what's the good of an escape
If honour find him in the wintry blast?'*

Vincent stood and stretched. He reached out and touched Diana with their bond caressingly for his own reassurance, then wrote her a note and left it on her pillow. He stood over Cathy's cradle for a moment, his eyes drinking in the sight of his tiny daughter. Then, throwing his heavy wool and leather cloak over his shoulders, he strode from the room, heading Above.

Diana was glad when she felt Vincent reach for their bond. Then she felt him leave. Sighing, she kissed the boys goodnight and sought out Father. She found him reading in his chamber.

When Father saw her come in, he leaned heavily on his cane and rose to greet her.

"Come in, Diana. Sorry, forgive me. My leg is bothering me tonight--the dampness recently, I suppose. I sent one of the children to the apothecary shop in Chinatown for something to ease the pain, but it doesn't seem to be helping."

Diana hugged him. "Please, sit down. You don't need to get up for me, Father."

She looked worried, and he asked, "Is everything all right? The children... No... Vincent?"

Diana nodded. "He's gone Above again, and I still sense so much restlessness. What is it Father? Do you have any idea?"

Father shook his head, lacing his fingers under his chin. "No, my dear, I do not. I imagine something is bothering him, and he will work it out himself. He always does, eventually. Perhaps it is only the time...his memories. I knew things were getting bad for him when he went Above in the storm last night. He never does that unless he feels like exorcising demons..." Father shook his head wonderingly, "...though what he *sees* in getting soaked, I've never understood."

Diana understood more than Vincent thought she did about why he liked the storm. "Exorcising demons. That's a good way of expressing it, Father. Thank you." She leaned over and kissed him gently. "Goodnight."

Vincent walked slowly tonight, thinking. There was no storm, but the park still smelled fresh from a hard rain earlier in the day. The air was cleaner than usual with much of the pollution having been washed out. He breathed deeply, savoring the myriad of scents. Before he knew where he was going, Vincent found himself at the graveyard. At Catherine's grave...and his first daughter's.

His voice was soft as the night. I still hear the music in the wind, Catherine...I hear it with Diana. I know what you would tell me--that it is not *wrong* for me to be happy--to accept the gifts that life has given me. Diana would tell me the same. Why are women so practical, and men so difficult?"

Suddenly, Vincent sensed a movement--a presence--behind him and turned, snarling.

A shadow figure began to retreat, then came forward slowly, hesitantly, arms outstretched. "Vincent?"

As the figure moved into the moonlight, Vincent gasped. "Elliot! Elliot Burch!"

The two men moved toward one another and grasped each other's shoulders, each amazed at finding the other solid and not an apparition.

Vincent began, "What?...How do you come to *be* here? I thought--*everyone* thought you'd died in the explosion on the Compass Rose."

Elliot just continued staring at Vincent...obviously still not quite believing he wasn't imagining him standing there. Then he said wonderingly, "I thought *you* died in the explosion. That my treachery had killed you despite everything."

They stood over Catherine's grave, and Elliot told his story. "I must've drifted out to sea. I don't know, Vincent. I found myself on board a fishing boat with a family who got me to a doctor. They took care of me. Afterwards, I just stayed on. I had nothing to come back to. My empire was gone, Cathy was dead; I thought I had killed you with my treachery. Then I heard of Gabriel's death. I didn't even have *revenge* for a reason. The family became the family I never had, Vincent. I've been contented. Only recently have I felt the pull to come back. To try again. I have some savings and if I build slowly, maybe I can build my empire again. Perhaps now with a little of Cathy's wisdom and compassion to guide me."

Vincent gazed at Elliot, wondering if he would seek the same type of power he'd had before.

*For wisdom is the property of the dead,
A something incompatible with life; and power
Like everything that has the stain of blood,
A property of the living.²*

Elliot shook his head. "I *hope* Cathy's wisdom didn't die with her, Vincent. I hope *both* of us learned from her...enough to temper power with compassion."

Vincent told him of Diana. "...She found me on Catherine's grave, badly injured from the explosion. She took me back to her apartment to heal. She was investigating Catherine's murder and already knew a great deal about me." Vincent shook his head almost wonderingly. "She helped me find Catherine's child, Elliot. My son. *She* is the one who killed Gabriel." He looked at Elliot for a long moment before adding, "A little over a year later, we were married."

Elliot's head jerked up, his eyes resentful. "Well. It certainly didn't take *you* long to forget Cathy."

Vincent shook his head again. "I will never forget Catherine. I will *always* love her. Diana knows that, and shares the love with me." He explained about Diana's gift and their bond, how it had grown.

Elliot knelt by the grave, touching the roses delicately. "Who planted the roses?" he asked.

"Diana and I did, just before she moved to...my home. The roses were Catherine's. They would have died where I live."

Elliot, seeing his opening, asked, "Where *do* you live, Vincent? I *know* you can't just stay in one room your entire life and walk the streets at night--so where do you live?"

Considering carefully, Vincent asked, "I think I can trust you, Elliot, but will you swear," Vincent pointed to Catherine's grave, "on her grave, that you will not betray me?"

Flushing, Elliot drew himself up and stared into Vincent's eyes. "I swear, Vincent."

He held out his hand, and Vincent took it, saying, "Come then. I will introduce you to my family."

Elliot and Vincent walked slowly across the park, talking of Elliot's plans and Vincent's restlessness, his feeling that he had somehow let Catherine down by allowing the evil to continue without doing something to stop it.

"You can't fix everything, Vincent, and you can't spend your life searching out injustice and pain without bringing a great deal of it back upon yourself. I plan to do things--build shelters for the homeless, try to do what I can to help--but you...you're killing yourself with an unjustified guilt."

Vincent didn't answer at first, but just looked despairingly at Elliot closely before adding:

*O' but we dreamed to mend
Whatever mischief seemed
To afflict mankind, but now
That winds of winter blow
Learn that we were crack-pated when we dreamed.*³

Elliot laughed, his smile gleaming in the moonlight, "I know that poem, and I can quote Yeats too, Vincent."

*A man in his own secret meditation
Is lost amid the labyrinth that he has made.*⁴

"You've been reading too much...and thinking too much. We're too much alike, Vincent. The main difference between us is that I always want more than I have, and I have the drive to go out for it...and I don't mind enjoying being happy. Your problem is that you feel guilty for feeling happy...and for not feeling content with your happiness. You feel you have to atone. I don't."

Vincent looked down, uneasy that Elliot had read him so well. "Catherine's first instincts about you were right, Elliot. You *are* a good man." Obviously pained at the admission, he continued, "She would have been better off if she had forgotten me and married you."

Elliot shook his head and walked on. "No. She loved *you*, Vincent. If you'd never come into her life, she could have loved me, but not once she met you. Besides, who she loved had no bearing on her death. Gabriel would have killed her irregardless."

By this time, they'd come to the entrance of the drainage tunnel in the west end of the park, and Vincent started into the pipe. Elliot halted.

"Where are you going?"

Vincent smiled over his shoulder, "Home, Elliot. Come."

They followed the tunnel a short way, then Vincent opened the gate and the steel door, indicating for Elliot to go on in. Once inside Vincent closed the door and faced his companion.

"Welcome to a new world, Elliot." As they traveled, Vincent explained how Jacob Wells had organized the homeless tunnel dwellers and made a separate, secret world beneath the city, safe from the evil that men do to one another... a world built on love and trust. "They found me, an abandoned infant, and reared me with love, with Father educating me. He has loved and taught more homeless children than I can count. Everyone calls him *Father* in our world."

As Elliot listened, he was astounded. He shuddered to think of what would have become of that abandoned infant had he been found by anyone else...and how very fortunate Vincent had been that this place existed.

Vincent was continuing, "...they come here, without

hope and learn love. So many people depend on this place for sanctuary." Vincent pointed out different chambers as they passed, and explained about the use of the pipes for communication.

Elliot was fascinated. "It was almost worth *dying* to have the privilege of learning about this place. I remember when Cathy and I were being chased the night my father was killed, and she brought me through the tunnels. You rescued us that night...I heard your roars above us. I should have made the connection...but then again, hindsight is easy."

As Vincent and Elliot drew closer to the living area, they saw a few people, who looked questioningly at Vincent, seeing him with a stranger. Vincent could sense Diana and touched their bond momentarily so she could sense he was not alone. By the time they reached the chamber, Diana was up in her robe waiting for them, but she was shocked when Elliot walked into the room.

"Elliot Burch! We thought you were dead!"

Quickly, Vincent explained what had happened.

Diana didn't know what to say, but finally she looked to Vincent. "Does Father know you've brought him Below?"

Shaking his head, Vincent admitted he had not consulted Father on his decision. "I imagine he will be angry, but Elliot saved my life, Diana. Catherine trusted him. He deserved to know the truth."

Diana looked caustically at Elliot. "He saved your life, Vincent, but only on impulse. He'd lured you there to die."

Elliot flushed. Vincent put his hand on Elliot's shoulder. "The important thing, Diana, is that in the end, he could not betray me."

Elliot shook his head. "No, Vincent. Diana's right. I don't know how I could've thought to do what I was planning. There's no excuse. Catherine was dead, and still, I was jealous of you. And Gabriel offered me my empire back. Jealousy and greed were all the emotions I was feeling. I've had a long time to think about it, and I still can't excuse it or forgive myself."

Vincent's hand tightened on Elliot's shoulder. "Sometimes self-forgiveness is the hardest to earn."

Cathy woke in her cradle making a soft cry, and Vincent went to her, picking her up gently and bringing her to Elliot. "This is our daughter Catherine, Elliot."

Bemused, Elliot took the child gently as Vincent held her out for him. He stared long into the oddly elf-like face with the unusually unchildlike eyes. "Catherine." He smiled gently and gave the baby to

Diana. "You truly haven't forgotten her, have you?"

Vincent shook his head, then glanced at Diana. Their bond touched a moment, then he led Elliot from the chamber. "Come and see Catherine's child. He has grown a great deal."

Vincent led Elliot through several hallways to the children's dorm where Jacob and Toby slept with many other children. As Elliot stood over Jacob's bed, looking at the little boy, tears slowly slid down his cheeks. He whispered to Vincent, "He's beautiful, Vincent." He touched the child's wavy chestnut hair that was so like Vincent's, and said quietly: "He doesn't really look like Cathy. His hair, bone structure, is yours, but I see her there as well."

Jacob smiled in his sleep, sensing Vincent near. He rolled over, murmuring "Father?" He sleepily opened his eyes a moment, but Vincent reassured him, and he fell back to sleep.

As Elliot and Vincent left the dorm, Elliot turned to him, "I won't ever betray your trust again, Vincent." He held out his hand, and Vincent grasped it.

"I know. Try to forgive yourself, Elliot, and think of the future."

Vincent took Elliot to Father's chamber, where Father was just preparing to go to bed. "Father. Forgive me. I know it's late, but I have a visitor to introduce to you."

Turning, Father exclaimed in a shocked voice: "Elliot Burch! Good Heavens, we all thought you were dead!" For once, Father did not admonish Vincent for bringing yet another stranger to their world. "Now, at least I have the opportunity to thank you for what you did for Vincent. And for Jacob."

Again embarrassed by his planned treachery, Elliot said he deserved no thanks, but only recrimination. "Nonsense," Father said. "We all have our weak moments. What counts is our actions. And in the end, your actions were the noblest possible."

Father, Elliot and Vincent talked for a while, then they asked if he needed a place to stay. "No, thank you. I have taken a small apartment. I'll give Vincent the address. If you ever need me for anything, please let me know. I haven't much influence now, and I'm still trying to get things straight legally, but if there's anything you ever need, let me know."

Stopping back by their chamber, Vincent told Diana he was going to take Elliot back Above, and she spoke with them a few moments. After her initial response,

Diana had opened her mind for impressions from Elliot, and she was now convinced he was no threat to them.

When they had entered the chamber, Elliot had noted the painting of Catherine and Vincent. Before leaving, he stood before it a few minutes. "It's lovely, Vincent."

Smiling, Vincent remembered when he had first seen the painting. "Yes. It is truly magical."

Kissing Diana and holding her a moment, Vincent left to return Elliot to his world, telling him about the painting and the story behind it.

As Vincent and Elliot left the tunnels to enter the park, it was very late. Vincent told him that Joe Maxwell, the District Attorney also knew about him and the tunnels. "You can always reach us through Joe if you need to."

As Vincent watched Elliot leave, and listened to the southing of the wind through the trees and bushes, another pang of guilt went through him, thinking of the corruption and evil that still existed in the city Elliot was entering. "If I could only enter the city openly, I could do so much." Sighing, he turned toward Diana and home.

Walking slowly, thoughtfully, through the tunnels, Vincent thought about all he and Elliot had discussed. Elliot had been very perceptive of Vincent's attitudes and feelings, but the fact remained that Vincent felt his promise to himself and Catherine to be unfulfilled, and the restlessness and guilt remained. *As I told Elliot, sometimes self-forgiveness is the hardest to earn.*



Several days after Vincent's meeting with Elliot, Mouse came to Vincent for help in repairing a water pipe in the water tunnels. The pipe had burst, and was flooding some of the lower chambers. People had to be moved and belongings salvaged as well as fixing the pipe. Mouse was trying to find a way to cut the water off, and when Vincent reached the site, he found most of the men there moving belongings or carrying children through the hip-deep water.

Surveying the situation, Vincent remained concerned. "What about the passages below here... are they clear?"

Jamie pointed west towards Samantha's chamber, which was one of the lower-lying ones in this area. "We can't find Samantha, Vincent, and the opening is blocked. I think everyone else is accounted for."

Looking around hastily, Vincent grabbed a rope, and tying it around his waist in a slip knot, he secured the other end to a pipe. Jamie watched, worriedly. When Vincent looked up he saw Devin and told him, "If I yank on the rope, begin pulling ...either Samantha or I may need help swimming back out. Where's Kipper?"

Kipper and Samantha had always been special friends, and Vincent didn't see Kipper either.

Jamie shook her head, frantic by now. "I don't know, Vincent. I thought everyone else was here."

Mouse came up, slogging through the water. He'd overheard. "Missing too, Vincent."

Taking deep breaths, trying to hyperventilate, Vincent finally took one deep breath and dove. He swam through the passage to Samantha's chamber, which was by now completely flooded. He had to go by feel, as it was totally black under water. When he broke the surface, there was only a foot of air space at the top, and Samantha and Kipper were nowhere to be found. Several more deep breaths, and he dove again, heading through the next passage. *They may have gone out the other way hoping to escape the rising water through the back well passage.* There was a ladder that led to a higher passage, but he knew the children had no way of knowing that even that passage had been blocked with the mud. *If they went that way, they may be afraid to come back with the water rising.* Vincent's lungs burned for lack of oxygen when he finally broke the surface.

"Vincent! Is that you? Over here!" Kipper yelled. Kipper reached down to help Vincent up the ladder. "Samantha twisted her ankle and can't swim. It hurts too bad."

Untying the rope from his waist, Vincent cut a 10-foot length from it and tied himself and Kipper together, then tied the end of the other rope around Samantha's waist. He looked critically at the water. He blessed his night vision, as it was almost black in here. *The level is still rising, so obviously Mouse hasn't been able to find the cut-off valve--or perhaps it's in a flooded area where he can't get to it.*

"Kipper, can you make it to the next chamber? I think there's still enough room to breathe."

"I think so, with you helping."

Vincent explained to Samantha that she was to help as much as possible, and he was going to have Devin pull her out. As they entered the water, Vincent jerked three times on the rope, and he told Samantha to take several deep breaths, then one as deep as she could. Devin began hauling on the rope, and Samantha went under. Vincent looked at Kipper and nodded, and they took several breaths, then dove. Vincent swam ahead of Kipper, and Kipper swam easily, so it was no problem. Eventually though, lungs straining and burning, Vincent felt Kipper begin to fail, and he pulled harder, not sure he was going to make it to the next chamber. As he broke the surface gasping, he pulled Kipper up after him. The young man sputtered and gasped, but nodded he was okay. Vincent hadn't seen Samantha, so he hoped she had made it through all right. They rested a moment, then took in more air and dove again. Pulling Kipper through the passages put an extra strain on Vincent, but he could see a glimmer of light ahead and swam for it desperately. As he broke the water, coughing, Alain and Devin grabbed him and pulled him out, with Kipper right behind him.

Kipper was a little the worse for wear, but after coughing up some water, he felt better.

"Samantha?" Vincent looked around and saw Father working over Samantha, giving her artificial respiration. Suddenly Samantha coughed and gagged, and a relieved sigh was heard around the chamber.

"Will she be all right?" Kipper asked, holding her hand. Father nodded tiredly.

Vincent looked around, and not seeing Mouse asked, "Did Mouse never get the water cut off?"

Devin shook his head. "He and Jamie went to the east tunnel--the one that was completely flooded--that's where the cutoff is. They couldn't reach it."

Groaning, Vincent forced himself up. He knew he was the only one in the group with the swimming power

to get there, and still have the strength to turn the cutoff--especially if it was one of the older ones and rusted.

"Take me there, Devin. I don't want Mouse trying anything foolish."

Devin assessed Vincent's condition, and said, "So you're going to try something foolish instead? Look at yourself..."

Vincent stared at Devin, then shrugged. "It can't be helped, Devin. Come on."

When they got to the tunnel, Jamie was hovering over Mouse, who was lying on a stone ledge above the three feet of water that covered the chamber. He was obviously exhausted from trying repeatedly to reach the cutoff.

Again, Vincent tied the rope around his waist. "This time, I'll be the one who will need help being pulled out. It's going to take all my air to reach the cutoff."

Making sure from directions from Mouse that he knew where he was going, Vincent prepared himself again, then dove. The cutoff was in a passage that angled down and the entire tunnel was flooded, with no air pockets. Exhausted, he pulled himself through the water by sheer determination. He finally reached the end and felt the cutoff, and bracing himself against the tunnel wall, he strained to turn it. The wheel finally gave, and Vincent closed it off. Then, air exhausted, he yanked on the rope, and felt himself beginning to lose consciousness.

Jamie watched the time, then ran to get Father. She knew that even Vincent couldn't hold his breath that long.

By this time, Diana was here, face drawn and anxious. She told Jamie to hurry. "I can't reach him Jamie! Hurry... please hurry. Pull Mouse!... Oh, hurry Devin!"

They hauled Vincent's limp body out of the water as Father rushed up. Father and Devin pulled him up onto the ledge and both worked over him, forcing air into his lungs and doing CPR. Diana kept trying to reach him with their bond, and finally *did* reach him, just barely. He wasn't gone yet, but was struggling. She projected her feelings to him, crying roughly: "Come on, Vincent... don't you *dare* die on me!"

Vincent gasped and vomited up half a lungful of water. He lay there looking like a drowned rat, and obviously not feeling a great deal better than one.

Diana put her arms around him and lay her head

on his shoulder. Her bond reached out for him, and felt his in response...weak, but there.

Diana cried. "I was afraid I was going to lose you."

Smiling slightly, Vincent reached up and touched her cheek with one long-taloned hand. "I didn't dare die ... you would have been too angry with me."

Devin helped him up, and he and Mouse helped him down the many tunnels to his chamber.

Diana forced Vincent to lie down, although he claimed he felt fine, just tired. "I'm more concerned about Samantha. Is she better?"

Father assured him Samantha was fine. "She didn't take in as much water as you did. The water is receding, and soon we can salvage everyone's belongings. We can fix the pipe as soon as the water level recedes far enough. Mouse has some pipe the same size stashed in the store room."

Nodding, Vincent finally relented and lay down to rest.

Jacob ran in with Toby, and climbed up next to him. "Father, are you okay? Mary wouldn't let me come to you."

Hugging both the boys, Vincent reassured them he was fine. The boys stayed for a while, playing with Cathy on the bed next to Vincent while he watched. When they tired of the baby, they ran off to play with Jacob's glider.

Diana picked up the baby and lay down next to Vincent, watching him anxiously. She hadn't withdrawn her bond completely, and she sensed that he was feeling anxious.

He lay back on the pillows, one arm across his eyes. Quietly, gently he reassured her, "I'm fine, Diana... please. Don't worry." His hand groped for hers and squeezed gently.

Diana knew that she would get no more from him, so she kissed him and left him to rest. However, once she was gone, Vincent swung his legs over the side of the bed and sat up. He went to his desk and opened his journal.

Our world is so tenuous. Every time there is a crisis, there is always the chance of discovery...or destruction. A pipe breaks, a flood occurs...the damage itself is bad enough, but if we do not repair the pipe soon enough, the city sends someone to investigate, which could lead to our discovery. Father is getting older. If anything happens to me, who will take over? Going Above risks my discovery...how am I to fulfill my promise to myself ...to Catherine? I must find a way.

He opened the book that lay at the side of the desk and opened it. He scanned the page and read:

*We are responsible for act and voice
To future generations yet unborn.
This is the opportunity--ours the choice
Of worlds we leave behind us when we go,
So that our children's children, unafraid,
May walk the paths of liberty and know
The beauty of a peace their fathers made.
God grant that now our action may be wise,
That time may witness peace within their eyes.⁶*

Vincent turned and caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror--seeing the dark, ugly visage of the Other. He stared as the image in the mirror postured and snarled at him. Clenching his fists, he said to himself, "As usual, I am my own worst enemy." Rising, trying to shake off his mood, Vincent went looking for Devin.

Devin was helping Mouse fix the broken pipe, and the job was almost completed. He and Mouse were covered in mud from head to toe, and were shivering, as the tunnels were cold.

When Vincent found them, Mouse was just tightening the joint, and Devin was caulking around seams.

Leaning against the tunnel wall, Vincent said quietly, "It looks as though you have set a record for fixing this pipe. We should have no problems after this, I hope."

Looking around, surprised, Devin stood up, groaning. "We should be able to turn the water on shortly. Vincent, why aren't you resting? You have no business down here after this morning."

Mouse just shook his head, his dirty blond hair hanging in his eyes. He obviously knew Vincent wouldn't listen, so why bother?

"I'm fine, Devin. I'm too restless to just lie there. I needed to make sure everything was taken care of. And I needed to talk with you."

Sensing that Vincent's unrest had nothing to do with the past disaster, Devin asked Mouse if he could take care of the rest, and preoccupied with his work, Mouse just nodded.

As Vincent walked with Devin through the tunnels, Devin waited for his brother to let him know what he wanted. He knew from long experience that Vincent never spoke unless he knew exactly what he wanted to say. Sighing, he examined his and Vincent's clothes.

"It's going to take ages to get the filth out of our clothes...and I'd give anything for a hot shower. We need to get Mouse to try and improve that shower system...it still freezes you half the time."

Finally, Vincent stopped and looked at Devin. "Devin, are you going to stay in the tunnels permanently?"

Surprised, Devin shrugged. "At the moment I have no plans for moving on. It depends on what happens with Susan, I suppose. Why?"

Vincent leaned against the tunnel wall, then looked into Devin's face. "Because if anything ever happens to me, someone must be here to take over for Father ... someone he trusts. And who the people trust. *Someone* needs to make sure our dream continues...and make sure there is a safe place for the children... for *my* children."

Not sure what to say, Devin just put his arm around Vincent's shoulder. "Nothing is going to happen to you Vincent. You're strong as an ox...and twice as stubborn. Besides..." His voice trailed off. He knew Vincent wasn't just concerned with what happened this morning. That was just a catalyst. "What are you getting at...what are you planning?"

Smiling thinly at Devin, Vincent just answered, "Nothing. I just wanted to know if I could count on you...if anything *did* happen."

No more was said, and the two weary men made their way to the showers after picking up some clean clothes in their chambers.

Diana was visiting with Father in his chamber. She knew Vincent had not rested and had restlessly left their chamber. "He's going to be all right, isn't he, Father?"

Father looked up from playing with Cathy. "Vincent? Of course. It takes a lot to put him down, Diana. I've taken bullets out of him and had him up in no time...the man is phenomenal. His recuperative powers are amazing. As long as he hasn't lost blood that needs to be replaced--which is impossible--not much keeps him off his feet. Is there something else worrying you?"

Sitting on an old tattered hassock, Diana crossed her arms on her knees and told Father, "He's still so restless and anxious--not exactly unhappy--but he feels as though there is something he needs to do. I don't know *what*, but it is disturbing him."

Sighing, Father took Diana's hand. "My dear, Vincent is a complex man. Even with your bond, I cannot imagine how you could ever understand everything about him...he doesn't even understand everything about *himself*, and that has always been of great importance to him. He keeps watch on his soul

every minute of every day. Sometimes he has to wrestle with his inner problems by himself--to exorcise those demons."

They smiled at one another, thinking of Vincent out in the storm the other night.

Cathy began to cry fitfully, rubbing her eyes with her mittened hands. She didn't like the restraint of the mittens, but they were necessary because of her tiny claws. Diana had tried to cut them, but like Vincent's they were very tough, and they grew quickly.

"I had best take her and feed her, Father. Thank you for listening."

As Diana walked to their chamber, she sensed Vincent coming back as well. Relieved, she sat on the bed, nursing the baby, and looked up when he came in.

Vincent seemed less strained, and much cleaner. He must have been to the showers. Sitting next to her on the bed, he kissed her neck and reached down to play with Cathy. He tickled her chin with the end of a nail delicately and she smiled up at him. He tentatively touched Diana's mind with his bond and she responded.

They both sat watching as Cathy fell asleep, her bond with her mother gently intertwining with theirs.

Finally, Diana laid the child in her cradle and went back to Vincent. She leaned against him, gratefully feeling his strong arms around her. "I was so afraid this morning--when I couldn't reach you with our bond--then when they pulled you out..."

Tears started down her cheeks, and Vincent brushed them away. "I was hardly near death, Diana, only unconscious from lack of oxygen. You woke me with your insistence.--your *outrage* that I could even *try* to leave you!" he chuckled, teasing her.

She pushed him down and sat on him. "You better *believe* it! I'm *never* letting you go!"

He rolled over, trapping her underneath him. Gently, he brushed her hair back and kissed her. "If anything ever happens to me, Diana, be strong. Remember Love. I will never leave you without a fight."

Diana clung to him, fighting back tears. Vincent could feel her anguish at the thought that she could have lost him--of the possibility of *ever* losing him. The band around his own chest tightened.

Cathy began fussing, sensing Diana's distress,

and she forced herself into a semblance of calm, then built her barricade as the child fell back to sleep.

Vincent sat up, trying to defuse the situation. "Come. William will have supper about ready. Let's go find Jacob and Toby and eat. I'm starved...I never got any lunch!"

Vincent and Diana tracked down the boys and got them cleaned up for supper. After reaching the dining chamber, they found that William had prepared a cake especially for Vincent for thanks in rescuing Samantha and Kipper, and for risking himself to cut off the water so they could fix the pipe.

Vincent was embarrassed. He hated anyone to fuss over him, especially when he was only doing what Devin or Mouse, or any of the others would have done if they'd been physically capable. "Thank you, William, but the cake should be for all of us. *We all* did what needed to be done, that is all. Thank Devin, Mouse, and Father for dragging me out and pumping the water out of me. *They're* the heroes."

Everyone laughed and clapped, but they knew Vincent was just covering his embarrassment.

Samantha and Kipper came up to them, and Samantha hugged Vincent, kissing his cheek. When Vincent looked at Samantha, it was hard for him to see the young woman she was becoming because he always remembered her as the dark haired, sweet voiced child who loved to read and act--and play jokes on him in class.

After supper, Vincent left to read the next chapter of *Treasure Island* to the boys before bedtime, and Diana went to ask Jamie if she would watch Cathy for awhile so she and Vincent could go *Above*. Once the boys were asleep, they were no problem, and Mary would be there. *Maybe a walk will help Vincent to relax*, Diana thought.

As Vincent read the next chapter of *Treasure Island*, there was the usual circle of children around him. Vincent lost himself in the story, and enjoyed it as much as the children. When he was finished with the chapter, the children clamored for more, and he allowed himself to be coaxed into one more, but after that he gently ruffled Toby's hair and put both him and Jacob to bed, shooing the older children off to their own. "No more tonight." He kissed them goodnight and

headed back to his chamber. As he slowly walked through the tunnel, his hand trailed the pipes, feeling the vibrations. His mind was Above. Tonight he was leaving the park and going into the city...alone. Where he was going he could not take Diana, and wouldn't even if he could.

When Vincent reached their chamber, he found Diana changing out of tunnel garb into her sweats and Reeboks.

She smiled up at him. "I left Cathy with Jamie so we could go for a walk Above."

Vincent just stared in dismay. He felt her reach for the bond, only to find him barricaded against her. Obviously concerned, she reached for him, but he caught her hands gently and finally looked into her face.

"Not tonight, Diana." He embraced her gently, stroking her hair, then dropped his block briefly...long enough to touch her gently with his mind, trying to reassure her of his love...but no more. "I'm sorry." Picking his cloak up from off the chair, he threw it over his shoulders. "Do not wait up for me tonight, please...I will be late."

Diana just watched, astounded, as Vincent turned and left her standing there. Irritated, she stormed through the tunnels to pick up Cathy from Jamie. By the time she got to Jamie and Mouse's chamber, she was downright angry.

Holding Cathy and pacing around the chamber, Diana confided in Jamie, "I don't understand him anymore, Jamie. I swear it was easier before we were married, before I taught him to block...at least *then* I got straight answers. He projected all his thoughts and feelings so that I couldn't help but pick up a lot...but now, he blocks so well that even when I break down and *try* to read him, I can't." Grinning at Jamie lopsidedly, she said ruefully, "He's getting as difficult as any other man!"

Jamie just laughed at Diana's discomfiture, and commented, "You'll get it straight, you always do. Vincent just needs a lot of thinking time...always has. I guess it's harder for him to get it done when he's so close to you."

Diana suddenly felt concerned. "Do you really think I'm the problem?" She worried: *Am I tying him down too much? Been too intrusive?*

Jamie just shook her head. "No, not you in particular...just everyone. I remember when I was a kid Vincent would disappear into the lower tunnels for days at a time when he got like this."

Diana hugged Jamie and thanked her, then left

quietly, heading back to try and pass some time.

Vincent hated to have left Diana the way he had, but he knew she would not approve of what he had in mind, and he had enough internal struggles going without adding a disagreement with her. Plus, he had no intention of being side-tracked.

By the time he finally left the tunnels, he was far into the lower East side of the city, and when he forced open the door, rusted from lack of use, he found himself inside the old Beaumont theater. The last time he'd been here, he had barely made it back alive. He'd been beaten within an inch of his life and hunted like an animal by a street gang. *If I'm going to look for people in trouble, this part of the city is definitely the place to start.* But it was dangerous for him here, and he knew it: there were only two exits to the tunnels. Vincent shuddered, thinking about the last time. If it hadn't been for Lucy, the prostitute who had helped him make it to the Beaumont, he would probably have died up here. Even though Catherine had been looking for him it was doubtful she would have found him in time.

As Vincent eased his way out into the dark alleyways of the city, his nose wrinkled with distaste at the smell of garbage in the alleys. *No clean air of the park tonight.* He walked slowly through the alleys, listening to the thousands of small sounds, his eyes darting to the shadows, watching for dangers. Cats squalled as he passed, but he ignored them.

Turning a corner, he noted a group of young men grouped around a fire escape and listened to their conversation as he melted back into the shadows.

"Tonio should go first, man... it was his idea anyway."

"He has to be taught a lesson, man...can't let him and his old lady get the idea they can say *No* when we say *Yes*, can we?"

The three other young men agreed, although they seemed anxious.

"Who's gonna do it?"

The young man named 'Tonio said, "I'll do it, man...if I go back to The Man and say we didn't waste him, I'll be next on his list."

Vincent watched as the young men slowly climbed the fire escape, opened the window, then followed behind them. He waited outside the window, feeling exposed, but listened to see what happened. He heard a woman begin to plead for them not to kill her son, and at that, he roared and burst through the window.

It was dark inside the apartment, and the boys he had followed could only see a black-cloaked form and hear his roars... that was enough for them, and they left, scrambling out much faster than they'd come in.

Vincent's night sight could see every detail of the apartment, and he could see the woman crying and hugging her son, a skinny kid, probably about fifteen years old. In his soft voice, Vincent said softly: "Don't be afraid. I came to help you, not to harm you."

"Gracias," the woman answered through her tears. "But who *are* you?"

Quietly, Vincent moved further into the shadows, and answered: "That does not matter. Just a friend. Who were those boys, and why were they trying to harm you and your son?"

Becoming angry and her voice rising uncontrollably, the woman hissed, "Vermin! They belong to a gang, and they try to force my Julio to join them, and he would not...so this is their answer!"

Vincent stood quietly, thinking. His own experiences with the gangs in this part of the city had come close to killing him, so he knew the danger. "Which gang is this, that threatens your son?"

The woman began speaking in Spanish, which Vincent understood, but she spoke so rapidly he was losing much of it.

The boy sensed Vincent's confusion and interrupted. "They call themselves the "Bombers." They wear old flight jackets they pick up at surplus stores. Their favorite method to terrorize someone is to use homemade bombs."

Shaking his head, Vincent remained quiet. He couldn't understand this madness. None of it ever made any sense to him, but the results of the madness--the pain it caused--was always real enough. "Will they be back?"

The boy grinned, his teeth flashing in the dark. "Maybe, but I doubt it. You scared them pretty bad...Thanks."

The boy's mother got up and righted a lamp and turned it on.

Vincent turned, but not quickly enough, and she gasped. "Madre mia!" She crossed herself. "What *are* you!" Then, seeing his stricken look she composed herself and, though still shaking, she went to him and put her hand on his arm. "It does not matter. Whoever you are...*whatever* you are...you are welcome here."

Her son sat quietly, taking in every detail of Vincent's appearance. To him, it was as though

God had sent this strange being just to save him...his guardian angel. He fingered the cross around his neck and smiled.

"I must go," Vincent said quietly. He knew the longer he stayed here the more dangerous it was for him. His best chance of making it home safely was to keep moving. "Please, do not tell anyone about me; it could endanger me...and others who care about me."

Both the boy and his mother shook their heads. "We will say nothing," the boy said, smiling.

Vincent bid his new acquaintances goodbye and stepped out the window onto the fire escape. He decided to climb to the roof and go from roof to roof for a while before going back to the streets. After moving along the roofs for a time, he dropped to another fire escape and made his way down. At this point he was very near the Beaumont, so he took to the alleys.

As he made his way silently through the littered alleys, between and around the garbage cans and debris, he thought again of the clean air of the park... and the love and comfort of his home. *I miss Diana...miss having my mind open to her.* He'd felt her several times in the past few hours trying to touch his mind, but his block was up. *I'm sorry to be causing her pain. I must let her know what I'm doing. But will she understand? How can she, when I don't even understand myself?*

Suddenly extremely weary, he found the entrance to the old theater, and entering the tunnels, he closed the door, securing it behind him. He sighed raggedly and leaned against the tunnel wall. It had been an extremely long day. *It was foolish to push myself this way tonight.*

Vincent was stumbling with exhaustion by the time he reached the living areas.

When he entered their chamber Diana leaped from under the quilts and ran to him. Putting her arms around him, she walked with him to the bed and slipped in beside him. She wanted so badly to bond with him, but the block was still there. She was so frustrated she felt like yelling at him, but she forced herself to remain quiet as she examined his drawn, tired face.

He lay there beside her, holding her hand, but she felt as though he were a million miles away.

"Vincent. *Please* talk to me. Have I done something...something to force you away from me like this?"

He moved his head slowly from side to side, almost too tired even for that. "Tomorrow...please."

Diana lay beside him, stroking the long, reddish hair on his shoulder, watching as he fell asleep. As she watched his chest rise and fall with his deep, slow breathing, and she knew he was asleep, she gently

touched his mind--not deeply or intrusively--just on the surface to reassure herself. Just to feel his presence again. "I miss you Vincent. Even when you're with me, we're apart." A tear slipped down her cheek, and she picked up the book she had been reading when he came in. Rod McKuen said it very well.

*Sometimes
the distance
that you keep
is as difficult
for me to bear
as proximity would be
to anyone I didn't care for.⁷*

Putting the book away and checking on Cathy, Diana blew out the remaining candle, sighed again and lay down next to Vincent to try to sleep...but sleep was long in coming to her.

Vincent dreamed he was walking the alleys again. He was searching for Julio...he knew the boy was in trouble...and that he was being followed. Evil behind and evil before...nowhere to go. He felt himself running...to something or from something, he didn't know. What was he searching for? He had forgotten. He stood and threw his head back and roared in frustration as the fog rolled around him... obscuring the answer and hiding him...from himself?

As Vincent tossed and turned in his dream, Diana was picking up the feelings he was projecting... the images. She saw him in his confusion and frustration and ached to help him.

She reached out...and walked through the fog to take his hand.

Vincent woke and looked down at Diana. She stirred, rubbing her eyes, and he brushed her hair back out of her face. She opened her eyes and smiled at him, and he felt as though a sunbeam had fallen on him. He was warmed by her love and caring. "I felt you there with me."

Diana's smile faded a little as she reached up and touched his face. "You are in so much distress...so confused. Can't I help you? Won't you let me in?"

Vincent put his arms around her and hugged her fiercely. "You help by just being here." Lying back down and pulling her to him, he told her,

"We'll talk about it later. Go back to sleep, Love."

When Diana woke the next day, it was late. She looked over at the cradle, and Cathy was gone, so Vincent had taken her to feed her, leaving her to sleep. Since she was nursing, he didn't do that often. She closed her eyes and reached out for him, and found him open to her touch. As she was getting up, he came in with Cathy.

Vincent smiled at her and put the baby in her arms, leaning over to kiss her good morning. "Cereal only holds her for so long."

As Diana nursed Cathy, she and Vincent discussed his morning thus far. "Jacob and Toby ate and ran off to play with the older children. They were excited about a project they were working on." He caressed Cathy with one huge wickedly taloned hand, and glanced at Diana. "William is keeping your breakfast for you. I have to help Mouse and Devin do some work down in the catacombs later after my class."

Diana touched his mind briefly and said, "We have things to talk about, you know."

Vincent looked down and sighed. "I know. But let it go for now." He looked back up at her through the chestnut veil of his mane and touched her face gently, "Later?"

There was a silence broken only by the tapping on the pipes, and Diana sighed, answering reluctantly... "I suppose so." She stared hard into his eyes and added, "But no more nonsense, Vincent. I want to know what's going on...we have to talk about this."

Vincent nodded silently, then left quickly, almost as though he were escaping pursuing demons.

Diana shook her head ruefully. She knew Vincent didn't want to talk about things that were bothering him until he had a chance to work them out himself, but sometimes that was simply not practical when his state of mind affected other people so acutely. *He has to understand that. His state of mind affects Jacob, and Cathy, and myself... and we can't all stay in a state of constant turmoil until he finishes working out his problems. Besides...I want to help.*

Getting up and finishing dressing, she took Cathy with her and had breakfast, then went to see if Mary needed help with the children.

Vincent was preoccupied during his literature class and the children knew it and took full advantage. Finally, after giving them a new assignment, he escaped--once again--and met Mouse and Devin down in the

catacombs where they were shoring up the few tunnels that were used at all regularly. The water tended to erode the rock down here and make things unstable, so this needed to be done periodically.

With Mouse and Devin, Vincent's silence didn't matter. They were used to it, and used to his moods.

Mouse chattered away, talking about new projects he had in mind and an idea he had to drain away some of the water eroding the maze and catacombs.

Devin listened to Mouse with half an ear and continued working, and watched Vincent. After having grown up with him, Devin knew when his foster brother was deeply disturbed by something, but he also knew better than to ask what it was.

Vincent was aware of Devin's concern, but he ignored it. He worked steadily, the work calming him, but in between he kept having brief, disturbing flashes of visions...disjointed things that seemed to have no meaning, but he knew from experience that his "waking dreams" *always* meant something. He kept seeing the city streets, Julio, the gang... bits and flashes... a knife... flashes of darkness and light.

Once, Vincent stopped and shook his head, trying to clear it, and Devin put his hand on his shoulder. "Vincent? Are you all right?"

Vincent shuddered. He looked at Devin and shook his head. He stared over at Mouse, who had stopped chattering and stared at Vincent with his worried, guileless blue eyes. He answered Devin slowly. "Perhaps not. I think I need to go speak with Diana. Can you continue here without me?"

Devin nodded. "Go on. We haven't that much left to do anyway."

When Vincent left Devin and Mouse, subconsciously he knew that he was not going to speak to Diana, but heading Above instead. He had to see if Julio was all right. *There is something wrong.*

When he got to their chamber, Diana was not there, and he gratefully grabbed his cloak and headed out. It was early yet, but if he left now, he would avoid having to explain to Diana. He didn't like the guilty feeling his relief at that thought gave him. *Whatever is wrong with me that I feel this need to avoid speaking with her about this?* That thought alone made him realize that he needed to re-evaluate what he was doing, but at this particular moment, the visions drew him on, and they had to come first.

Rationalization was fine for now, but understanding would have to come later.

He entered the old theater from the basement entrance and climbed the stairs. His fur boots made soft scuffling tracks in the dust and he could hear the rats scurrying out of his path. When he reached ground level, he could see the last rays of the sun making the dust motes sparkle, and he leaned against the wall watching as they danced in the golden light. He so seldom was able to see sunlight at all. He half closed his eyes and reached out a hand...almost as if to catch the light. *The fur on my hand even seems different in the sunlight*, he thought, *The color is almost beautiful, even to me.*

Vincent watched until the sunlight faded, then closed his eyes and waited until it was late enough for him to slip out. Tonight he would climb up and move along the rooftops to Julio's apartment. It would be safer that way. While he waited, he reached out to touch Diana's mind softly, unobtrusively, and sighed at the frustration and confusion he encountered...the pain that he was causing her.

Diana had finished helping Mary earlier in the day and tracked Jacob and Toby down. Some of the older children had taken them exploring the upper tunnels and they'd just come back covered in grime, but happy and tired. She took them to the bathing area and had them clean up and was waiting for them to finish when she felt Vincent's unrest and felt him coming back up from the catacombs.

She gathered the boys and was heading for their chamber, when she realized Vincent was heading Above. She didn't know whether to be hurt or angry. She thought, *He knew I wanted to talk with him, and he's avoiding me again.*

Trying to appear natural, she took the children to supper and visited with Jamie and Brooke. Brooke was excited, telling her that Michael had been down for a visit. He'd told Father he was to be graduating soon, and was returning to the tunnels to help teach the children. "He's going to make such a wonderful teacher. He always was so understanding with everyone when he taught before...think how much better he will be now!"

Jamie was almost as excited as Brooke. Michael had spent most of his adolescent years with them while he was growing up in the tunnels... they had a good friend returning to them.

Diana didn't know Michael that well, having only met him a few times. He'd been at their wedding and he seemed very nice, but she really didn't have much to offer the conversation. Besides, she had other things on her mind.

Cathy was fussy, picking up her mother's mood-and Diana's mood was very disturbed. She'd felt Vincent touching her briefly earlier and tried to reach him, but he barricaded immediately, of course. That was getting very old very fast. Diana didn't like being shut out, but mostly she was concerned about him.

When Vincent reached Julio's small apartment, he dropped down from the roof onto the fire escape and went to the window. He knocked on the window when he saw Julio's mother in the room, and she opened the window to him. She'd been crying.

"Come in! Thank the Lord you are here! They have taken him! I told the police, but they will do nothing. I told them places to go to look, but they will only hide if they hear the police."

Vincent asked her, "Do they use a warehouse as a hideout? One with a roof with glass?" He kept seeing a warehouse with glass that had glinted in the sun...sparkling like the motes of dust he'd watched in the theater.

She became excited. "Yes. I think so! Julio was telling me of some place like that!"

The woman gave him directions, and Vincent took off, again across the rooftops.

He had to descend to street level several times to get where he needed to go, but quickly climbed back to the roof as soon as he was able. He could travel faster and safer that way.

Then, he saw the warehouse...the lights from towers far in the distance did, indeed, sparkle on the glass, resembling the glints of the dust motes. He smiled briefly. As he swung over onto the glass roof of the warehouse, he looked down into the interior. There were people moving around inside, so he stayed back and looked through from the side of the building.

Julio was tied there, with the gang harassing him.

Vincent was just trying to decide what the best plan of action would be when one young man pulled a knife and threatened the boy. Vincent decided he could wait no longer and dropped through the glass like a fiend from Hell, roaring his challenge.

As the boys in the gang looked up and saw Vincent hurtling through the glass, his long mane flying, teeth flashing as he roared, and black cape around him like wings, they were convinced that

God's wrath was indeed falling from Heaven. All of them scattered and vanished except the leader with the knife and one boy with a gun, both of whom stood their ground.

As the boy raised the gun to fire, Vincent swung at him, his arms longer than the youth had anticipated, and his talons laid the boy's arm open when he grabbed the gun and threw it across the warehouse.

Screaming, the youth held his arm and fled.

While Vincent was occupied, the other youth dove for him with the knife. Though Julio screamed a warning, the boy managed to ram the knife into Vincent's side under the ribcage and ripped a long, jagged, deep cut.

Whirling, Vincent threw the boy against the wall, and enraged by the pain, he fought to control himself enough not to kill. He stood snarling over the boy, who managed to crawl away to safety.

Vincent pulled the knife free and used it to cut Julio's bonds.

Vincent slumped against the wall, holding his side as Julio ripped his own shirt off and tore it to bind Vincent's wound.

They heard sirens in the distance, and Julio hurriedly finished his rough binding job...the wound was awkward. Then, he and Vincent made their way down the alley--away from the warehouse--with Vincent directing him. Julio helped Vincent to the old Beaumont theater and watched to make sure they were not followed.

At the warehouse, the police found nothing except remains of Julio's shirt, the gun, the knife, and Vincent's blood everywhere.

Joe Maxwell was called, as this was a gang-related incident, and he'd been putting pressure on the police to crack down on the youth gangs.

As the police gathered their evidence and Joe watched and asked questions, the police brought in the youth who had stabbed Vincent.

The boy was babbling about a monster with a lion's face and body of a man.

The police just laughed and figured the boy was high, but Joe's face clouded over with anxiety. *What on earth had Vincent been doing here...and was he hurt?* Joe thanked the Powers that Be that Vincent hadn't killed anyone. *At least I don't have to cover up a killing.* Joe didn't like being put in this position. If that was Vincent's blood everywhere, he was going to have enough cover up to do as it was... and the first thing he needed to do was find out if Vincent made it home. *Nothing like having your friends make your job a little*

harder. Joe turned, and with a few words to the police, he got in his car and sped towards home, to head down into the tunnels.

Julio managed to get Vincent to the Beaumont, and was reluctant to leave him there, but Vincent insisted he get home and reassure his mother. "I will be fine. It looks worse than it is."

In fact, the knife had penetrated deeply and he was losing a lot of blood, which he couldn't afford. Vincent stumbled down through the theater and just managed the door that led into the tunnels.

He reached out for Diana, calling for her help... though he knew she was already on her way. As he leaned against the tunnel wall, moving slowly, he fought to stay conscious so that Diana could find him. He just hoped she had thought to bring help.

His last thoughts before the darkness finally claimed him were of how foolish he had been. *Fools rush in where Angels fear to tread.*

Diana, Devin, and Mouse were hurrying to Vincent as fast as they could move. When Vincent finally passed out, Diana became frantic because she lost the bond.

But by this time, Mouse had a fair idea of where he was. "Only two tunnel entrances this way. Beaumont easiest, safest...that's where he'd go."

When they found him, Vincent was lying on his side, still bleeding. Devin felt his pulse and looked at Diana, clearly worried. "We've got to stop this bleeding."

Mouse relayed a message to Pascal to have Father set up the O.R. just in case it would be needed. They packed and bound the wound tighter, then Mouse and Devin managed with Devin at his head and Mouse at his feet, to carry Vincent home.

Father was appalled when he saw the huge gash in Vincent's side, and realized the amount of blood he had lost. Fortunately the knife had not punctured the lung, and there was no internal bleeding. Father managed to repair the damage and stitch the wound closed, but Vincent remained unconscious. Father sent for Peter to bring some antibiotics in case of infection.

Jamie and Mouse waited in the tunnel outside the O.R.; Jamie with Cathy on her hip and Mouse

sitting on the ground with Jacob and Toby.

Jamie caught a message on the pipes that Joe was coming. Brooke had been on sentry duty and had seen him. She'd relayed to Pascal to send someone for him, and he was being brought here. Cathy was restless, sensing Diana's distress, but Diana was still managing to block most of it.

Jamie told Mouse, "I'm goin' to meet Joe. I can't just stand here." She took off down the tunnel with Cathy.

Joe saw Jamie coming, and his guide waved and went back to his post. "Where is he? How bad is it?" Joe was angry with Vincent for putting himself...and *him* in such a bad position, but right now, he was more concerned about Vincent's condition.

Jamie shook her head. "It's bad, Joe. Father has him in O.R. We haven't heard anything." She began crying and Joe hugged her, and took Cathy from her. "He's strong as a bull, Jamie. I saw the knife...maybe it looked worse than it was," he said hopefully.

Jamie just shook her head. "I've seen him hurt a lot of times, Joe...it looked bad."

"By the time they got back to the O.R., Mouse had news for them. "Father stopped bleeding. Still not awake. Weak, Jamie."

Joe and Jamie sank down beside Mouse and the boys to wait, and Cathy fell asleep in Joe's arms. Joe consoled himself by watching the baby. She was getting prettier and prettier every day, but she still looked like a little elf with her slanted brows and eyes. He gently touched her tiny, pointed nails--so like Vincent's. Jacob was so quiet and intent it worried Joe. Mouse said he hadn't spoken a word since Vincent had been brought in. It was as though the child was, by sheer force of will, trying to keep his father alive.

Toby talked quietly with Mouse.

Diana kept stroking Vincent's hair and talking to him quietly. Her mind constantly tried to establish their bond...tried to lend him strength.

Devin just sat and watched and monitored Vincent's pulse and blood pressure for Father.

Eventually out of the darkness, Vincent began waking. He could feel Diana calling him and tried to bond with her, and finally touched her weakly.

Diana's elation came through to him, but her voice was quiet as she spoke. "He's back..."

Vincent opened his eyes and the world seemed to swim. Diana's face was not quite in focus somehow.

Vincent closed his eyes. He could "see" her better that way. He took a deep breath and his body screamed in pain...but he was used to pain. He could deal with *that*. He breathed softly, "Diana..."

Diana came around in front of him. "Yes?"

Vincent tried to shake his head..."I'm...sorry...to worry you."

Diana laughed weakly. "It doesn't matter...just rest."

Vincent slept. Diana could feel the difference between his natural sleep and his unconsciousness, and let out a deep breath.

She turned to Devin, shaking with relief. "He's asleep, Devin."

Devin put his arm around her and guided her to a chair. "You need to rest too, Diana...and the baby is going to need you soon."

Startled, Diana got up..."Cathy...I'll need to feed her. Devin...can you bring her to me?"

Devin nodded and left, coming back in a few moments with Joe and Cathy.

Joe looked at Vincent, lying so still, and came over and kneeled in front of Diana. "Is he all right?"

Diana took Cathy, who was still asleep, but stirring. "Not yet, but I think he will be. What happened, Joe?" She knew that if Joe was here, he must know what had happened far better than she did.

Joe just shook his head. "Don't know. Some kind of gang ruckus that somehow Vincent got involved in."

Diana's pale face became even whiter... "He didn't kill..."

Joe shook his head. "No. Tore one smart aleck's arm up some, and gave them a lifetime of nightmares...I hope. I can take care of it this time, I think."

Devin helped Joe send a message to Erica that he would be staying overnight in the tunnels. Then after taking Joe to the guest chamber, he and Father moved a cot in so Diana could stay near Vincent.

Jacob insisted on coming in to see his father, and stood over him with tears streaming down his cheeks. Toby stood next to him, holding his hand. At almost three, Jacob was more mature than most three year olds and he seldom cried, but this ordeal had been too much for him.

Diana came up and gently took his hand. "He'll be all right Jacob. We won't let him go."

Jacob shook his head fiercely. He'd felt his

sister die...he wasn't going to let his Father go, even for a minute, and stayed bonded with him.

Diana asked Devin to also bring Cathy's cradle in so she could lie her down. She hugged Jacob next to her on the cot. Diana tried to get Jacob to sleep, but he fought it...afraid to lose his bond with his father.

Peter and Father came in and Diana explained to Father about Jacob.

Father knelt next to Jacob and held out his arms. Jacob hugged his grandfather around the neck. "Jacob, you have to sleep. Let us watch out for him for a while. If we need you, we'll wake you, all right?"

Reluctantly, Jacob nodded, and lying down next to Diana, finally let his bond go and slept.

Devin took Toby to bed with him, explaining to him that Jacob needed to be next to Vincent because of their bond. He thought Toby understood. The boy didn't seem resentful, but he cried a little. He was worried about Vincent, too.

The next morning Vincent seemed better and a little stronger. He was already chaffing at having to lie in the O.R. "It's uncomfortable here... at least let me go to our chamber."

He tried to sit up, but Devin stopped him. "If you start the bleeding again..." Devin motioned to Mouse, who was hovering in the doorway, and quietly told the boy, "Go get Father and see if he thinks you and I can help Vincent to his chamber."

Diana and Jacob were still sleeping on the other side of the room, and Devin glared at Vincent, his scars standing out whitely on his cheek. "I don't know what you were up to last night, but you almost got yourself killed, brother. Remember how you felt when Catherine died? Well, you almost did that to Diana...and to Jacob, and Cathy. You want to talk about it?"

Vincent lay quietly looking at Devin, started to speak, then shook his head. He turned his head to look at Diana, lying with Jacob, and at Cathy, beyond her in her cradle. He closed his eyes and waited for Father and Mouse.

When Father and Mouse returned, Father examined Vincent's stitches and ascertained there was no fresh bleeding.

"If you're very careful, Vincent, Devin and Mouse can help you to your bed, but wait and let someone get the bed ready for you."

By this time, Diana was awake and at Vincent's side.

He reached up and took her hand. "I worried you."

His eyes were pained and tired, but Diana was just glad he was alive. "Yes, you did...and we *still* need to

have that talk. Almost getting yourself killed just delayed it."

With his bond touching hers, Vincent could feel the undercurrent of amusement and relief behind her statement and smiled. She was so tenacious. "Can we put it off at least until I am back in our own bed?"

Grinning, Diana kissed him and picked up Cathy, pulling her cradle after her toward their chamber. "I'll turn down the bed."

Jacob came over to Vincent and Vincent reached down with one hand to pat his cheek. "I worried you as well. I will be fine, Jacob."

Jacob's eyes met his, and the boy nodded. He knew his father would be all right now. He grinned and ran to find Toby.

Diana ran into Joe as she headed for their chamber and he relieved her of the burden of the cradle, carrying it for her. "How is he this morning?"

Diana smiled. "In pain, but I think he'll be all right."

They got to the chamber and as Joe set up the cradle for Cathy, Diana turned the quilts back and waited for Mouse and Devin to bring Vincent in.

When Vincent managed to finally make it to the bed, his face drawn in pain, Diana built up the pillows behind him and covered him. He seemed much more at ease once he was in his own bed.

Father came in and re-checked to make sure he hadn't opened his wound, and handed him his next dose of antibiotics, which he took without comment. At least Peter knew what few drugs he could take without reaction.

Everyone left except for Joe and Diana, and Joe asked Vincent, "I know you're tired Vincent, but if you could tell me what happened it would make my life a lot simpler. I'm going to have some covering to do as it is."

Sighing, Vincent briefly gave Joe a synopsis of his night's activities and how he had found himself in the position to begin with.

Sitting next to Vincent on the bed, Diana just listened, and touched Vincent's mind with their bond...finding out more between the sentences than in what was being said. He had purposely left his barrier down and invited the bond, so she knew this was easier for him than by directly talking with her about it.

After Vincent finished, Joe looked at him sternly. "I know you helped that kid, Vincent, but

in the future please keep in mind that whenever you involve yourself in something that ends up in spilt blood--yours or someone else's--it puts me in a touchy situation. There are going to be questions asked. You were seen. Blood samples were taken. How am I supposed to cover that up? How much worse would it have been if you'd killed someone...as has happened before? I can only cover for you so far and not compromise my own position and ethics. Remember that."

Vincent lay back on the pillows and nodded. That was something he hadn't thought of.

Diana also interjected a comment, very quietly... looking into his troubled blue eyes, "I don't think Catherine would have approved of your vigilante activities. Coming as a matter of course upon some wrong that you can right is one thing, but deliberately seeking out trouble like a caped crusader...is not something she would have approved of, I think.

"Vincent laughed at the "caped crusader" comment, then groaned as he held his side. He'd had this sudden picture of himself as Batman. He and Devin had dug comics out of garbage cans as children to read about super heroes. Diana had known just how to take the sting out of her remonstrance.

Diana leaned over and kissed him. "Sleep now." She and Joe left and she walked Joe down the tunnels towards home.



Vincent spent the next couple of weeks recuperating. He would have been ready to be up and around in a week, but Father and Diana absolutely refused to let him.

"You have entirely too high an opinion of yourself," Diana commented. "And if you won't use your common sense, we'll use ours."

Since he couldn't get out and about, Vincent spent the two weeks reading and writing in his journal. He re-read *The Divine Comedy*, thinking that Dante couldn't possibly have entertained much worse punishments than men inflict upon themselves. He sat at his desk writing in his journal.

I suppose Elliot was right. I do not know how to simply be happy. I felt as though I needed to do something to earn that happiness. I had to keep my vow. Somehow, destroying Gabriel's organization was not enough. Diana has convinced me, though, that just living day to day as best we can and helping people as we go is the best thing to do. I can potentially do more harm than good the way I was proceeding. Diana explained to me once how she felt that love was like a river. Life, like love is a swiftly moving river with its eddies, swirls, rocks, and rapids. Each morning is given us as a new day to fulfill dreams and grasp opportunities--a chance to meet our problems and deal with them in that swiftly moving flood. How we deal with them determines how our lives...and others' lives...will proceed. But each evening as the sun sets, we find time to dream. Each day is a little death, gone and never to return. The river cannot be halted or slowed, and time flows swiftly away. What will we have to offer when the last day comes and we close our eyes to no more dreams? Then our children must dream those dreams and follow the river in the new day that dawns...and our world must be made safe for those who dream. I can do far more good here than I can Above, by making a place where it is safe to dream."

Vincent closed his journal. He sighed deeply. He was restless again, but now it was simply because he was feeling chamber-bound. Father was coming a little later to examine him and let him know if he was well enough to trust to leave his chamber. Father knew once he released him, any chance of his taking it easy was forgotten.

Cathy fussed in her cradle and Vincent went to her, picking her up and humming to her. The baby

listened and watched her father intently. Sometimes Vincent wondered what she thought about him. Laying her on the bed, Vincent lay next to her and pulled off her mittens, letting her have at least a few minutes freedom. *She hates the mittens so.* He watched as she played with her own fingers and wished she didn't have to wear them. *Before long we won't be able to keep them on her anyway. She's always pulling at them, and only the leather ties keep them on.* She rolled over and got up on her knees and rocked. Vincent smiled. *Before long she'll be taking off.*

Jacob and Toby came in--ever inseparable, and they climbed up on the bed to play with Cathy. They begged for Vincent to read to them, and since he certainly didn't have anything more pressing, he lay across the bed with the boys on either side and Cathy sandwiched between, and finished *Treasure Island* for them. Cathy seemed to love listening to him as much as the boys, and eventually his voice lulled her to sleep.

By the time Diana returned from helping Mary with the children, Vincent had finished the story. Toby and Jacob had run off to play, and Vincent and Cathy were asleep on the bed. Diana sat at Vincent's desk and brushed her hair out, unbraiding the strands she had it tied back with.

When she was finished, she turned to see Vincent watching her. He said quietly, "You are so lovely sitting there in the candlelight."

Smiling gently, Diana sat next to him. She put her arms around his neck and rested her head against his. "You're restless again... but you're certainly healthy..." She looked into his eyes and smiled.

He pulled her closer, sliding his arms around her. "If I get any healthier you will not be leaving this room for a while."

Laughing, she wiggled loose. "Father's on his way to examine you... then we'll talk about it."

She picked up Cathy and put her in her cradle. "Soon she's going to need a bigger bed. Once she's weaned I suppose we should move her to the dorm. It's just down the hall."

Vincent told her about Cathy getting up on her knees and rocking. "Before long she'll be following Jacob everywhere. I wonder how he will care for that?"

Diana thought a long moment. "I don't think he's going to mind, Vincent. Haven't you noticed that he seems to know how Cathy feels almost before we do? I suspect they have a bond as well. Jacob is very protective of her, and Toby is almost as adoring."

Thinking back, Vincent remembered the first time he suspected a bond between the two...when Jacob had known that the baby Diana was carrying was a girl. He

chuckled a little to himself. Life was full of interesting complications... especially when you had a family like he had.

Before long Father came in to examine him and Diana took the boys to put them to bed.

After examining Vincent, Father pronounced him fit. "I would probably have let you go days ago if I'd felt I could trust you not to overdo. But by now, I don't think even *you* can harm yourself...unless of course you manage to get yourself stabbed, or shot, or drowned...again."

Vincent placed his hand on Father's shoulder. "I will try not to do any of those things, I promise."

Later, after Father left, Diana lay beside Vincent, twining her fingers in his mane. Finally she asked, "Have you decided to give up on searching out the evil in the world and correcting it all?"

Vincent rolled over, slipping his arm around her and quoted Thomas Gray, "Where ignorance is bliss, 'Tis folly to be wise." His eyes sparkled with mischief. "I cannot say I will never involve myself again, but rest assured I will not foolishly go searching for problems. I have enough of those just keeping up with you."

Diana reached under the bed and pulled out a pillow--one of their spares that Devin had given to them--and Vincent backed up, pretending fear and searched desperately under his side of the bed for the other. As the pillow hit him in the face he pulled the other pillow out and swatted Diana with it. By the time they were finished they were both laughing and feathers were beginning to leak from the seams, drifting in the air to fall like snow, landing in their hair and into the baby's cradle. Cathy slept through it all.

As Vincent began delicately picking feathers off of Diana, kissing her between each feather, he murmured in her ear ... "Now?.."

Diana grinned absolutely wickedly as she untied his vest and drew him to the bed. "Believe me... I'm all the problems you'll ever need, Vincent."

Later, as they lay quietly, deep in their bond, Vincent flicked a feather off the quilts and smiled. "Devin was right... pillow fights with you *are* much more fun than they *ever* were with *him*."

Gentle days passed into weeks, and Vincent was once more content. His restlessness was eased. He and Diana prepared for Jacob's birthday party, and this year Jacob insisted that Toby share his party since they didn't know when his birthday was.

Vincent, Devin, and Mouse had taken a party of the children exploring, then when they returned they had their cake and ice cream.

Diana and Jamie had made a special trip Above to get the ice cream and carry it down.

Vincent had given each of the boys some of the books he had enjoyed as a child and had kept put away. He promised them he would read the books to them one at a time, and began one of them immediately.

Vincent's trip to Catherine's grave that evening for his ritual of mourning her was brief. He stood over her grave remembering all the joy and talked to her for a while about Jacob. He told her about Cathy and how fast she was growing. His grief seemed far in the past, and his memories were joyful. He could almost feel Catherine's approval at his contentment. Before leaving, he stood briefly over his daughter's grave and silently remembered her, as well.

Sorrow touched him momentarily, thinking of how Diana would never come here. Thinking of their daughter only caused her pain, and she would only say that she was Catherine's child now. Bowing his head briefly, sorrowing more for Diana than for his own grief, he shed a few tears, then said goodbye.

A few days later, Michael came down preparatory to moving back to the tunnels, and Vincent spoke to him about a chamber that had become available.

"A few months ago, old Jared passed away, and no one has yet claimed his chamber. It is down toward the water tunnels, not so far as to be in danger of being flooded, but it can be damp."

Michael was simply glad he didn't have to contemplate carving rock. "Any place is fine with me, Vincent. It'll be good to be home."

Vincent took him down to the chamber and they discussed things that could be done to improve it. Old Jared had never wanted anything done to change it, though Mouse had ideas about how to ventilate the area better to help keep it dryer. They spent a productive day. Michael was pleased; it would be a while before he could tie up all the loose ends of his life Above, but before long, he would be home.

The following morning after Michael left, Vincent kissed Diana goodbye, telling her he was heading with Devin deep into the maze to put up some gates to keep the children out of some of the more dangerous areas; they would be gone all day.

A little later, Diana received a message from Joe that he needed her to come in for a department meeting

during which they would also be reviewing her status part time. Two of the department heads were supposed to be there. It wasn't critical, only routine, but Joe wanted her there.

After leaving Cathy with Mary and making sure Toby and Jacob were being watched by older children, Diana picked her way through the tunnels heading out for the meeting. She was dressed in a lovely white cotton dress and heels for a change, but she still skipped lightly from one steam pipe to another.

She was nearing the topmost level of tunnels when she began feeling uneasy and felt someone watching her. She opened her mind for impressions...and reached a roiling cesspool!

Glancing desperately around, she was unsure where to go...where the watcher was located. She reached out to Vincent and called him, and knew he would come, but she would rather evade them if she could.

She ran down one dark passageway and turned...right into a brawny, unkempt hulk whose arms closed around her like a steel trap. "Well, well, what have we here?"

A moment later another man rounded the corner behind her. "I see you caught her. Good thing; I wouldn't like to lose such a tasty tidbit."

Diana couldn't even move to try to get away... the large man's arms were like bands of steel, and when he began kissing her neck, his stubble felt like nails. She was terrified... she'd never been in quite this position before, and the man's emotions were frightening her even more.

The second man's hands roamed over her with a possessiveness that sickened her, and she wanted Vincent so badly she could taste it...she needed him now...needed his strength and power. He'd been far down in the tunnels when she called, and she hoped he could get here in time...

The men were tearing at her dress and she heard the material rip. She closed her eyes, shaking, and tried to draw on Vincent's rage to lend her strength, but the man was still too strong for her. Her adrenaline level was surging, her heart pumping wildly. She could feel Vincent approaching, and his rage growing by the instant.

A moment later a noise, almost a vibration was heard, distracting the men...it was a low, vicious, rumbling growl that reverberated in the tunnels.

Diana's captor continued holding her with one arm and picked up a steel bar to use as a weapon, and the other drew a gun.

Seeing the gun, Diana kicked out, tripping the man just as Vincent charged around the corner.

Vincent was past thought. He fought like an animal, with a cat's quick reflexes, and his timing was instinctive.

Diana hugged the tunnel wall watching the dance of death. There was a beautiful savagery in the way Vincent killed, and she shared his feelings of rage and felt his power as he whirled, his cape swirling around him.

It was over in moments, but it had seemed to Diana that those moments encompassed eternity. When Vincent turned to her, breath ragged from his long run through the tunnels and his exertions here, Diana felt his rage--which was just now changing to something else--and her heart quickened. They were bonded, and their emotions were turbulent and totally primitive. As she gazed at Vincent through half-closed eyes she could see the blood tipping his hair and hands--spattering his mantle and shirt--but none of that mattered. All that mattered to her was the primitive emotion that here was her mate, who had fought for her--protected her--won her, and she felt a desire for him that obscured all reason.

Vincent stood over Diana, his thoughts submerged almost completely in his instincts. The rage was still present--that anyone would dare to try and take her. His protectiveness was present, but masked in his instinctive jealousy. His desire for her became so overwhelming... the desire of re-affirming his possession of his mate... and Diana's own thoughts were doing nothing to help him clear his mind. He'd never in his life felt this way: he was totally incapable of thought right now. He shook his head, trying to clear it, but was unsuccessful. Between the passion that was rising in himself and the sheer desire he was feeling from Diana, he was fighting a losing battle. He pulled the back of his hand across his mouth, smearing blood...tasted its copper as his tongue touched his lips.

With an inarticulate moan, he managed enough restraint to pick her up and take her away from the carnage, but once in a connecting tunnel he put her down. He stood over her, trembling with his struggle to control himself, which was becoming more and more difficult.

Their emotions were caught in a loop, with nowhere to go except the obvious. When he once again had his arms around her, he was lost in their combined desire.

Diana pulled her torn dress around her as best she

could, and moved over to comfort Vincent. He stood, one arm braced against the tunnel wall, his head hanging in shame. "Vincent..." she began, and touched his shoulder.

He turned his head away, then suddenly turned to her and held her gently. He rested his great, shaggy, bloody head upon hers and the tears coursed down his cheeks. "I'm sorry, Diana... I..."

Diana touched him with her bond gently, and he responded equally gently. "There's nothing to be sorry for Vincent."

He shook his head mutely, then said in a voice so choked it hardly resembled him at all, "There was nothing of love in what we just did, Diana."

Diana held him closer, burying her face in his shoulder, his hair covering her. "Wasn't there?"

He put his hands on her arms and held her away from him, looking at her in astonishment. He choked, "I all but raped you, Diana... how can you ask that?"

Diana laughed shakily. "Rape implies lack of consent, Vincent. I don't think that applied just now, do you?" She shook him gently, making him look at her. "Vincent... it was *both* of us... not just you.

Trembling, Vincent stroked her back as he held her. He noted the bruises on her back and arms ... the scratches, and shuddered. He choked, "I...hurt you."

Diana turned him around and looked at his back and shoulders, which were scratched by her nails even through the thick fur. She had bitten his neck. "You didn't exactly come out of it unscathed yourself."

Vincent touched his neck with one bloody, taloned hand, and managed a weak smile.

"Take me home, Vincent."

Vincent swept her up, cradling her gently and carried her all the way home.

People stared as they passed them in the tunnels, but no one dared to ask what had happened.

Messages had alerted Father, and he met them at the entrance to their chamber.

Worriedly, he asked, "Vincent... is she all right?"

Acutely embarrassed, Vincent curtly told Father, "She is fine, Father... just leave us."

Lying Diana on the bed, Vincent gently pulled her dress down and examined her bruises, scrapes, and scratches, then went to get a basin of water. As he cleaned the wounds gently, he kissed every

bruise.

Their bond had not parted, and Diana turned to him gently and began removing his blood-stained clothing. She washed the blood from his hands, his hair and face. Diana led Vincent to the bed, and they loved one another gently, tentatively...so tenderly and softly that Vincent's soul began healing a little.

Much later that evening, after Diana sent an apology to Joe for missing her meeting, and Vincent had undertaken the distasteful duty of disposing of the men's bodies, they were in their chamber, trying to pretend it had been a normal day. Cathy was asleep in the cradle next to the bed, and Diana was reading from Shakespeare. Vincent was sitting quietly at his desk, looking at his painting and trying to get up the courage to open his journal and thinking that the journey from innocence to today had been a long trail. He reached out and felt Diana's love, like a blanket around him, and was comforted.

Diana spoke to him gently from across the room. "I love you, Vincent."

Vincent put his journal away. He was not sure he ever wanted to document the glaringly primitive feelings he had felt today...he hoped he never felt them again. He was so relieved that Diana was who she was and what she was. That she could understand and help him to deal with...himself.

He joined Diana on the bed and pulled out another book and read for awhile, the quiet companionship calming him. Suddenly he turned to her and read,

*I sent my Soul through the Invisible,
Some letter of that After-life to spell:
And by and by my Soul return'd to me,
And answered, "I myself am Heav'n and Hell":*

*Heav'n but the Vision of fulfill'd Desire,
And Hell the Shadow from a Soul on fire.*⁸

Their eyes met and they smiled, but Diana knew he was still uneasy about what had occurred. All day, they had stayed bonded, at least on some surface level, neither one feeling quite secure enough to release the bond completely. Diana had glibly tried to comfort Vincent with talk of instinct, but she, too, wondered how she could have so completely reverted to the primitive... even her absorbing Vincent's primitive feelings during his kill didn't explain her uncontrolled desire. God, no wonder Vincent had been unable to control himself, and no wonder he was confused. He couldn't possibly feel any more confused than she did. At least he wasn't retreating from her and was sharing

this with her. She would never be able to stand herself if this pushed him away, because she was at least half to blame...if indeed blame could even be considered.

Vincent appeared to be reading his book, but in fact he had been staring at the same sentence for the past ten minutes. He simply couldn't concentrate.

When he had gone back to the upper tunnels and removed the bodies to the Abyss, his disgust at himself had almost overwhelmed him. The killing had been bad enough--and he had been especially savage during this episode--but the aftermath had been worse. Vincent cringed inwardly as he mentally re-played over and over what had happened, trying to keep his thoughts from Diana... and trying desperately to understand.

Diana was still lightly bonded with him and she snuggled up under his arm. He tentatively hugged her, almost afraid to touch her.

Very quietly, almost inaudibly, she said, "It wasn't wrong, Vincent." Then, her voice a little stronger and steadier, "We have to keep telling ourselves that. We cannot let this undermine the pleasure we feel in one another. It was the circumstances...that's all."

Vincent pulled away and sat up. He laid his hands on the quilt and looked at them critically for a long moment, then said, "Another man, having just rescued the woman he loved from rape would not have reacted the way I did."

Diana pulled him around to face her. "I've taken a lot of psychology courses, Vincent, trying to understand the feelings I felt from everyone. What happened is *not* that unusual...especially considering our bond. Without our... connection, I think your rage would have faded, as it always does, and if you had felt desire for me, you would have controlled that until a more appropriate time. But we *were* bonded. You felt my desire for you...and the combination was too much for you. Each of us alone would never have felt the way we did, but together...I think it was inevitable."

Vincent just stared at her a moment, then he almost laughed. "You think it was *your* fault!"

Blushing, Diana nodded. "God, Vincent. I've never *felt* that way. When I saw you come around that corner to rescue me--my mate--I felt so much pride. And then...you standing there..." Diana looked up and saw Vincent watching her so intently, she blushed even deeper... "You were so magnificent. How could a woman *not* want the man

she loves when he'd just come and rescued her as you had me? Heaven help me...it makes me want you even now. You think *you're* horrible...well, I don't think very much of *myself*, either."

Vincent folded his arms around her, feeling her tremble. He was glad he wasn't the only one who felt this way. He held her gently and spoke softly,

*Touch me with your light
I see darkness without,
And the darkness within presses tight."*

They held one another, their bond entwined until they fell asleep.

Vincent dreamed he was sitting by the falls, reading. Suddenly he heard a coarse voice beside him, and looking up he saw the "Other"...his other self grinning at him. The apparition would not go away, though he tried to banish it by ignoring it. "You can't get rid of me, Vincent." The beast drew up one leg to rest on the rock and draped an arm across it. He shook his wild mane and grinned widely, showing his long canines. "I feel good Vincent. You should let me out more often." He leaped off the rock and squatted in front of Vincent, who turned and tried to leave. Leaping up, the beast grabbed his arm, pushing his foul face into Vincent's. "I enjoyed myself today...and Diana enjoyed herself as well." Vincent glared at the apparition, eyes blazing, his lip beginning to raise in a growl, then forced himself to turn and walk away. He would not fight this battle. He refused to allow himself to be taunted into being jealous of...himself. But his gorge rose once again as he bit back his self-hatred and tossed and turned in his sleep.

Diana was too busy with her own dreams to pick up Vincent's. She, too was dreaming of what had happened. She still saw Vincent as he had been, standing over her, his mane tipped with blood, eyes blazing...but now she was not picking up his emotions, and her feelings were different, somehow. She saw the savagery in the scene...and recognized it for what it was. She still loved him... still thought he was magnificent standing there, and felt the same pride. It didn't arouse in her the passion it had at that moment, but neither did it disgust her. She knew, though, that he must wonder how she could have responded so passionately to him when he was in a state that disgusted him. And she was ashamed, knowing it had been her own feelings that had goaded him into what had happened. In the dream she was able to calm him, and

he came to her gently and simply carried her home. She wished, for his sake especially, that had been the case.

Diana woke then, to find Vincent tossing and turning beside her. Gently, she shook him awake.

Vincent opened his eyes, instantly alert...

"Diana... what?"

Diana could see that his dream still lingered on the edges of his consciousness, and his eyes darted around the dark room.

"It's all right, Vincent. You were dreaming."

His arms closed around her, and she snuggled in, sighing.

Quietly, he asked her, "Did you dream as well... of today?"

Diana nodded. There was a deep silence, not even disturbed by the pipes or the roar of the subway. She'd never thought life could be so silent. As the moments ticked by, Diana felt his arms tighten just a little.

Neither of them sought their bond...they each had enough of their own thoughts to occupy them.

Finally, Diana said very quietly, "I love you, Vincent."

She felt his hot tears on her face as he answered, "I know."

The days following, Vincent and Diana felt curious eyes on them everywhere they went. No one had been given any explanation, nor was any forthcoming. And no one would dare to ask.

For Diana it was even worse than for Vincent, because she could pick up mental images from everyone she touched, and their curiosity distressed her. At least Vincent only had to deal with wondering what they were thinking. But, even with that, she was dealing with her feelings better than he was. She simply couldn't make him let go of the guilt. He was beginning to withdraw from her a little, and it worried her.

Weeks went by. It was coming close to time for their trip to the Crystal Cavern for their second anniversary, and she wondered if Vincent even remembered.

Late one afternoon Diana went to visit Father to talk to him about an excursion she was planning for some of the children. As they made plans, she could feel his concern and his questions...unspoken...but nonetheless present.

She looked up at him and took his hand. "I'm all right, Father. Two men...attacked me..." She looked down, then continued, "Vincent rescued

me. We were both very upset. It was a terrible experience for both of us, and we just don't want to talk about it."

Father had surmised that much on his own. "But you are all right? Was Vincent...in time?" Father looked away, embarrassed by his own question.

Diana smiled a little wryly. "I'm fine. Vincent was in time, Father. He will never let anything happen to me. Now please, drop it."

Devin was curious as well. He'd seen Diana and Vincent's condition when Vincent carried her home, and Vincent had looked as though he were in shock. It wasn't any of his business, but he hoped Vincent would talk to him if he needed to.

He and Vincent were down in the maze, finally installing the gates to keep the children out...as they had planned on doing when Vincent had taken off to rescue Diana.

Vincent was so silent and preoccupied that it was getting on Devin's nerves. "Nice day," Devin ventured. "The sun is shining and the birds are singing." He watched Vincent for a reaction and got none. Finally, he put his hand on Vincent's shoulder and said, "Brother... wake up."

Vincent looked up, startled. "I'm sorry, Devin. I was thinking of something else. What did you say?"

Devin said quietly, "I said you're a stubborn fool and it helps to talk. I'm a good listener."

Vincent turned and sat heavily on a boulder, running his fingers through his mane. Devin sat cross-legged in front of him. "Is Diana all right?"

Without looking up, Vincent nodded.

"Are you all right?"

Vincent shook his head.

Devin didn't know what to do. He'd done a stint as a counselor...untrained of course, and had helped in some rape counseling, but Diana seemed to be handling herself fairly well. Devin had also helped deal with the husbands of rape victims, and Vincent seemed to be reacting similarly. "Vincent, you need to talk about this. Are you angry?"

Vincent looked up at Devin, his eyes haunted. "Devin, you don't understand. You *think* you do, but you do *not*. Please leave it alone."

Devin shook his head. "No, I won't. You're stuck with me, I'm afraid."

Vincent got up to leave, heading down deeper into the maze. "No, I'm not."

Devin grabbed his arm, and Vincent snarled and rounded on him, hand upraised to strike. Quietly, Devin said, "Go ahead--I can turn the other cheek for you."

He turned his unscarred cheek to Vincent and stood quietly, and Vincent lowered his arm, his anger gone... drained away by shame.

Vincent trembled and turned away. "Please, Devin. I need to work this out on my own."

Devin shook his head. "No, Vincent. Some things even *you* need help with. Believe me, I've dealt with this before."

The harsh laugh Vincent let out sounded more like a bark. "Somehow I doubt that."

Devin grabbed Vincent's vest with both hands.

Vincent's head jerked up, eyes flashing momentarily.

Devin didn't back down. "A rape victim's husband needs as much help as she does, Vincent."

Vincent's body went rigid, his eyes dead as he said without inflection, "What if the husband is the rapist, Devin?"

Devin released Vincent's vest and stumbled backwards a foot or two. He remembered the look on Vincent's face as he carried Diana home, and momentarily he believed.... But then he also remembered how Diana had looked, and she hadn't looked like a woman afraid of her husband. He shook his head and said firmly. "I don't believe that, Vincent. Talk to me."

His voice halting, broken, Vincent slowly told Devin what had happened, and Devin nodded several times without interrupting. Vincent told Devin what Diana had told him, how she'd tried to make him feel better about what had happened. "But I should have been able to stop myself, Devin...No matter what...I should have been able to *stop*." The tears slid down his cheeks. "I could have hurt her...I *did* hurt her."

Devin leaned against the tunnel wall and watched his foster-brother in amazement. He tried desperately to think of how to approach this. Finally, he said quietly, deciding to go straight for the heart: "What are you, Vincent?"

Vincent raised his eyes questioningly to Devin. "What do you mean?"

Devin repeated himself. "What *are* you? All your life you've lived among men...you have the appearance of a beast, but I've known the man. What are you?"

Wretchedly, Vincent shook his head. "I don't *know*, Devin. I've *tried* to be a man...but sometimes the man is...submerged in the beast."

Devin asked Vincent, "What am I?"

Astonished, Vincent shook his head puzzled ... "Do not be ridiculous."

Devin shook his head. "What am I?"

Sighing, Vincent said, "A man, of course."

Devin stood before Vincent, looking him in the eyes. "I've never loved anyone the way you love Diana...but I can imagine what you must have felt. Hearing you talk about what happened...." He shook his head wonderingly, "I can understand how you felt. I can also understand how Diana felt. And Vincent...between the two of you, I don't see how anyone could have reacted differently in the same circumstances, assuming they were bonded as you two were. Quite frankly, I'm jealous. God...to love a woman that way and be loved in return...." He shook his head again, amazed that Vincent still thought it had been an act without love. "Vincent, to be human is to be fallible. If Diana doesn't blame you, how can you blame yourself? Why can't you just rejoice in the fact that you can feel that desire for one another, and be able to do something about it? Another couple in that position might feel that way, but be afraid to do anything about it, not knowing what the other felt, or the woman would have been so traumatized she wouldn't want to be touched. Instead, Diana felt your protectiveness, felt your desire for her...and met your desire with her own. That in itself is a gift...and it *was* love. You cared what Diana was feeling...had she felt other than she did, your desire would have evaporated completely. I *know* you, Vincent. Yes, it was savage...even bestial...but deep down every human being has a primitive instinct that is God-given, If we lose that, we lose a part of what it is to be human. You don't want to be human...you want to be Divine."

Vincent watched Devin as he was speaking--saw that he truly believed what he was saying--and that he wasn't just saying it to make him feel better.

Devin shrugged, grinning...wanting to stop while he was ahead. "Now that you've made me feel completely inadequate and foolish, can we finish the gates?"

Standing, Vincent put his arms around Devin in a bear hug. No more was said all afternoon, but when they were finished and were heading for the showers, Vincent quietly said, "Thank you, Devin."

Devin just nodded.

As Vincent headed back to their chamber, he realized he felt much better. It wasn't that Devin had said so much that was different from what Diana had told him, but it was interesting to Vincent that a man would see the situation the same way she did, and Devin had certainly put things in an interesting perspective. Diana always tried to protect him from himself, but Devin would always tell him if he were in the wrong. Vincent knew that from painful experience.

As he entered their chamber Diana turned to him, smiling. She seemed to feel his change in mood, and

had something new to add to it: she put Cathy on the floor and the baby crawled over to Vincent and began playing with his fur boots.

Stooping down, he scooped Cathy up, cradling her in one arm. She clung to his hair and smiled up at him.

Holding Diana with his other arm, Vincent looked down into her eyes. "Where are Jacob and Toby?"

Laughing, Diana told him that they were "helping" William in the kitchen.

Vincent just stared at her, amazed. "How did *that* come about?" He knew William hated having anyone in his kitchen...much less two monkeys like that.

"Well, they told him that they wanted to learn to cook, so he told them they needed to learn to wash dishes first." She shrugged. "Apparently they *really* want to learn, because they've been washing dishes for quite a while."

Vincent sat down on the bed and began laughing. For some reason that comment struck him as very funny...much funnier than it really was.

Diana just watched him as he laughed until tears were running down his face, then she started in laughing.

By the time they had more control, were both lying on the bed, with Cathy between them.

Finally catching his breath, Vincent said, "I cannot ever remember laughing that hard at anything. My ribs hurt."

Diana looked at him, grinning, and said, "I think we both needed to laugh...after all the stress."

They looked at each other and began again, helplessly laughing, as Cathy just looked on, perplexed at her parents' unusual behavior.

Diana and Vincent finally controlled their hysterics and composed themselves for supper. They went to see how William was faring with the boys, and by the time they arrived in the kitchen Jacob and Toby were soaking wet, but most of the dishes were washed.

Apparently their enthusiasm had not abated, and William was grinning ear to ear. "They may make cooks yet." William stood with his hands on his hips looking at the two wet boys. "Tomorrow if you want, I'll *maybe* let you make toast."

Vincent had to cover his mouth to keep from laughing...again...because as the boys hopped off their stools Jacob slipped in the water and fell on his backside. William handed them some towels to clean up the mess and instructed them to go change for supper.

By the time Diana and Vincent had started their

supper and fed Cathy, the boys were back to eat theirs, and they had to listen to their accounts of the hard work William had put them to all afternoon.

Since Jacob had turned three, he had become very independent. He and Toby both were extremely bright and captivating, and listening to their accounts was far more enjoyable that it might have been otherwise. It was *so* amusing listening to them argue as to who washed the most dishes that all the adults at the table had a hard time keeping a straight face...not just Diana and Vincent.

Mouse joked with the boys as much as anyone, "Hate dishes. Wet hands, like fish." He waggled his hands to simulate a fish swimming, then bit Jacob's nose, and the boys giggled.

Later, Vincent had the boys in the chamber with them, reading to them from *The Call of the Wild*.

Diana rocked Cathy in the old rocker Father had brought her. She hummed a lullaby while she listened to Vincent read and watched the candlelight flicker over his face. His feelings seemed much more settled, and she was relieved.

When Vincent finished reading several chapters, he put the book aside amidst protests from both boys, and looked up at Diana. "I think I'd best take these two down to the showers with me, then put them to bed."

The boys jumped down from the bed and stopped by the rocker to kiss Diana and Cathy goodnight, then followed Vincent down the tunnels to get cleaned up for bed.

Diana put Cathy into her crib, and making sure she was asleep, went to talk to Mary about keeping the baby tomorrow. She still needed to attend a belated meeting with Joe about what he could do for her to keep her status current...at least on a consultant basis. While she was UpTop, she also had an errand she wanted to run, if Joe and Erica would let her use their tape recorder to record some cassettes.

Vincent cleaned the boys up, then sent them to the dorm to change for bed, then he took his own shower. Getting his long mane clean after all the work down below took him a while, then afterwards, he wandered down to the falls and sat on a boulder listening to the water and the silence. One couldn't hear the pipes or the subways here because of the constant roar of the falls. It was very peaceful. Thinking about his dream the other night, he glanced around almost tentatively, but he was alone. He shook out his mane, combing it with

his fingers. *Maybe it will be almost dry before I get back.* He was so absorbed in his thoughts that he startled when a hand fell on his shoulder. He glanced up to see Mouse.

"Saw you here. Want company?"

Vincent knew Mouse understood his need to be alone sometimes and would never be offended if he refused, but tonight Vincent was only feeling quiet. A good friend would only add to his pleasure.

They sat together watching the falls, and Mouse finally asked, "Almost another year, Vincent. Jamie and I went UpTop for a while on our anniversary. Didn't like it much, but she did. You and Diana going away again soon?"

Vincent looked at Mouse in surprise, counting the days and months quickly in his head. "I'd forgotten! Mouse...thank you! How could I have forgotten?"

Mouse nodded. "Had other things to think about. Mouse would've forgotten, too, but Jamie reminded...."

Vincent was quiet for a long while, and Mouse tossed pebbles into the water while he waited for Vincent to say something.

Finally Vincent said, "I would like to do something for her this year, but I cannot think of what to do." Then he smiled and looked at Mouse. "I know, Mouse. Perhaps you can help me. Remember when we got the flowers for the weddings?"

They began making plans, and continued talking as they headed toward the dorms for Vincent to put the boys to bed.

By the time Vincent reached their chamber, his hair was dry, his plans with Mouse made, and Diana was already in bed asleep.

He stood watching her while he combed out his hair. He'd found from long experience it was easier to do once it was dry than when it was wet. *Two days*, he thought. *Not much time to make plans. Let her continue to think I've forgotten, then perhaps I can surprise her.*

It was dark in the chamber, with only a dim light from behind the stained glass window relieving the darkness, but with Vincent's curious night vision he could see almost as well as if it were well lit: only the colors were lacking.

He walked over and checked on Cathy, finding her awake, but quiet. She sat up and held out her arms for him, never making a sound but only smiling. Vincent picked her up and held her a

while.

The darkness never seemed to bother Cathy either. *I suppose she also has my night sight, just as Jacob does.*

Both of his children perplexed Vincent at times. They were both so serious, but they seemed happy and contented. Jacob began talking early, but Cathy seemed to make almost no sounds at all, except when she was becoming upset. He'd worried at first that she might be deaf, or mute, but Peter had assured them she was fine. Her bright, intelligent eyes always seemed to bore into you.

Cathy clung to Vincent's hair and snuggled her face down into his shoulder. His heart was so full of love for this tiny little girl. He whispered to her a little, then sat in the old rocker--which would barely accommodate him--and rocked her a while, humming Catherine's lullaby. When she fell asleep, he laid her back down, covered her, and went to bed himself.



The next day Diana informed Vincent she was going Above to see Joe, and Vincent stiffened automatically.

"I will go with you to the tunnel exit."

Knowing he was worried, she hugged him. She didn't want him to think he had to protect her every moment, nor did she want to begin depending on him that way. She'd always been too independent for that. "I'd love your company, but don't you have things to do?"

Reluctantly, Vincent agreed he did, but made her promise to take her gun this time.

"I'll be gone most of the day, Vincent, so don't worry, please. Just keep in touch."

Vincent nodded. *That* he would certainly do!

Diana checked on the boys, who were with William again and left Cathy with Mary.

When she got to Joe's office she knocked on the door and peeked inside. "Hi Boss. You *are* still my boss, aren't you?"

Trying to look stern and not succeeding, Joe stood up, hands on his hips. "When I tell you I need you here for a meeting I expect you here. Just because you live in another world shouldn't make a difference, Bennett."

Diana ducked her head, "Sorry, Joe. Something came up. Did the Commissioner agree to at least leave me on as a consultant?"

"Yeah, no thanks to you. But he knows how valuable you are on those cases when we have no leads...so you got lucky."

They visited a while, and Diana asked him for a favor. "You and Erica have a nice sound system and a good library of classical tapes.... I'd like to make a couple of cassette recordings of some of Vincent's favorites, and borrow your good tape player--the portable one that can run off batteries. Would you mind?"

Surprised, Joe just said, "Of course not. It sounds like a great idea." He dug in his drawer and gave her a spare set of keys. "Feel free. If you're still around this evening, send for Vincent and we can all have supper."

Diana shook her head. "Another time, maybe... this is supposed to be a surprise." She hugged Joe and took off for his apartment, then spent the rest of the day recording and editing the tapes she was making.

Vincent finished up all his usual chores, even fixing a leak in one pipe before Mouse returned with the cartful of flowers he had sent him for.

Puffing a little from the long trip with the cart, Mouse told Vincent, "Matthew sent message, Vincent... says you owe him one."

Vincent nodded. Their barter system generally worked fairly well. One night he would go up and help Matthew clean out the greenhouse: the helper had mentioned the need for that the last time Vincent spoke with him.

Mouse continued, "Sent vases too, Vincent. Think Diana will like them?"

Vincent looked at the riot of blooms of every sort and smiled. "Yes." He asked Mouse if he would like to visit the cavern with him so he could help carry some of the flowers, and Mouse agreed quickly.

"Always wanted to see it... won't tell!"

Vincent picked up his shoulder bag with all the candles in it and the rolled up quilts. He and Mouse equally distributed the flowers and vases, then headed for the maze. Anyone who saw them was cautioned not to mention any of this to Diana.

After the long trip to the Crystal Cavern, which took several hours, Vincent knew Mouse was tired... but when they stepped inside the cavern the young man's weariness evaporated. "Oh!...Vincent." Putting down his bundle he walked from one crystal formation to another. He turned to Vincent with his eyes gleaming in the lamplight. "Neat!"

They set up the candles and the vases of flowers. Vincent filled the vases with water, and hoped the flowers would still be fresh enough tomorrow night.

Making another stop at the pool, they headed back. Mouse's stomach rumbled. "Hope William kept some supper for us, Vincent. Starved!"

By the time the two men returned to the living areas, they were both very tired, and it was late. They ate what they could find in the kitchens and headed to their beds.

When Vincent entered their chamber, he found Diana asleep again, and even Cathy didn't stir as he re-covered her with the quilt. He lit one candle and opened his journal.

I cannot believe Diana and I have been married for two years. The time has sped by. I feel no older, and Diana certainly looks no older, but I can see it in the children. I hope tomorrow goes well. I still feel uneasy about loving her. I still do not trust myself completely.

Vincent stopped writing and put down the pen. He looked up at his painting. The faint candlelight barely illuminated it, but to him it shone like a beacon. He thought back to the innocence of that time of his and Catherine's love. After what had happened recently, that innocence seemed so long ago and so far away. *Would Catherine have reacted as Diana had? Would I have reacted that way to her?* He clamped down hard on that thought.... This was not a time for comparisons. *Besides, what is, is. There is no changing what is in the past. We must deal with the present and the future.*

He tried to concentrate...to seek that point far away to take him from his body to the spiritual plane...to try and contact Catherine and ask for her help. But try as he might he only met darkness.

He knew Catherine would not come back again. Her time in this world was spent, and she'd already stayed and helped him as much as she'd been able. Now he...and Diana...had to deal with their problems on their own. Together, and with love.

Sighing, he closed his journal and undressed for bed. He slipped in next to Diana and felt her move closer to him automatically. He hesitated briefly before putting his arm around her, sighing when her hand found his and closed around it. He closed his eyes and slept.

The next morning Vincent woke with Jacob and Toby jumping on the bed. "Father!, Father!" Jacob cried.

Instantly alert, Vincent replied, "What!" and grabbed them both, holding them tightly to keep them still.

Toby began telling Vincent about Arthur. "Arthur is sick, Vincent. Just lays down and won't play."

Jacob had tears in his eyes, and sat chewing on his thumb.

Vincent gently removed the digit from his mouth, and said, "I'm sorry Arthur is feeling unwell. Has Grandfather looked at him?"

Jacob nodded and Vincent sighed. He'd known this was coming...Arthur was getting old for a raccoon, plus being much too well fed. He looked

up as Diana and Father came in.

Father explained to the boys that Arthur was just getting old, and he wasn't ill, but that the boys were going to have to prepare themselves for the fact he wasn't going to be around much longer.

The boys decided that they would put Arthur in a basket in between their beds and take care of him. They trotted off to ask Mary for a basket and to move Arthur's bed from Jamie and Mouse's room to the dorm. Father and Vincent spoke for awhile about Arthur's condition, then Father left talk with Mary about the boys' plans.

Vincent raked his mane with his hand and looked over at Diana. "Too bad about Arthur. How is Mouse taking this news?"

Diana just shook her head. "He's fine. He's more concerned about how the boys are going to react when Arthur dies: they're so attached to him."

Vincent nodded. "It is always hard losing something or someone you love." Vincent's stomach growled. "I hope William hasn't put away breakfast. I'm starving." Vincent took Cathy from Diana, and they wandered arm and arm to the kitchen.

After breakfast, everyone went about their usual chores and Diana truly wondered if Vincent had forgotten what today was. When she reached for their bond to touch lightly, all she found was amusement (*with me?*) and concern for the boys.

She gathered their clothes that needed washing and Vincent helped her carry them down to the washing area. Mouse had rigged some old washing machines to help, but they worked only sporadically.

As they did the wash, with Cathy sleeping in one of the baskets, finally Diana asked Vincent, "Do you have any plans for tonight?"

Vincent had to turn away to avoid giving himself away. "I thought I might go for a walk tonight. I haven't been out in a while."

Discouraged, Diana muttered, "Oh."

Vincent looked at her innocently, as though the thought had just occurred to him, "Would you like to go? We could, perhaps leave Cathy with Mary or Jamie."

Sighing, Diana answered, "We'll see."

They finished their washing in silence, then Vincent left to teach his literature class.

Diana stormed off to go grouse to Jamie. She really couldn't believe he had forgotten.

Diana sat on Jamie's bed with Cathy, her legs crossed and chin in her hands. "I can't *believe* he forgot, Jamie! I know he's had a lot on his mind, but to

forget *completely*...that's not like him."

Jamie just cleaned the room while Diana talked. Mouse had told her about Vincent's surprise, but he and Vincent both would kill her if she spilled the beans. "Well...maybe he'll remember. Why don't *you* plan something?"

Diana uncurled and picked up Cathy. "I did. But I really wanted to give him the surprise in our special place." Sighing, she said goodbye and left Jamie to check their clothes to see if they were drying.

As Diana checked the clothes, she saw Devin bringing his clothes to wash, and she asked him how he and Susan were doing.

"All right, I guess. It's slow going though. I've been spending a lot of time Above."

Diana laughed, commenting that Father had been complaining that Devin wasn't pulling his weight.

Devin shrugged. He had an odd look on his face. "Father will always find something to complain about when it comes to me. Perhaps someday I'll surprise him."

Checking her wash, Diana found most of it to be dry already: the strong breeze that came through from the Chamber of the Winds tended to dry the clothes quickly. As she folded and piled it in the baskets, Cathy sat playing on a quilt, periodically crawling off so that she or Devin had to go get her.

Diana was deep in thought when suddenly Vincent came up behind her and startled her, putting an arm around her. "I came to help you take the clothes back. Then we need to get our things together for our trip."

Delighted, Diana threw her arms around his neck. "You *didn't* forget!"

Looking at Devin over her shoulder and through the veil of his mane, Vincent murmured. "No...but I *did* remember a little late. Forgive me?"

"Of course...but I have to make arrangements for Cathy, and Jacob and Toby...."

"Vincent shook his head. "All done. We need only to pick up the food basket from William and take Cathy to Mary. We can say goodbye to the boys there: they are babysitting Arthur."

Diana looked at Vincent quizzically. "What about quilts, candles...?"

Vincent smiled. "Oh, I have a roll of quilts to take along, but I think we can manage with just a couple of lanterns just this once. I'm sorry I forgot."

While they were talking, Devin picked up Cathy,

who was heading off again, and held her under one arm like a sack of potatoes. "Excuse me, but what do I do with this?"

Vincent smiled gently, taking his daughter from Devin. She clung to his hair and smiled at him. She was beginning to get some teeth and had been fussy, and in addition Diana was weaning her--partially *because* of said teeth. It was nice to see her smiling.

Devin helped them take their clothes baskets back to their chamber, where they collected their things.

As Diana gathered a large carryall from the corner, Vincent cocked an eyebrow at her, but said nothing. She was entitled to *her* surprises too.

They spoke to Father, asking him to keep a special watch on the boys--especially with Arthur ailing. Vincent was afraid the elderly raccoon could die at any time.

Then, they headed to the dorm to drop Cathy off with Mary and to say goodbye to the boys. Jamie was there as well and as Diana hugged her Jamie said quietly in her ear, "I knew he wouldn't forget."

As they began their long journey down to their cavern, through the maze and down the long, winding stone stairway, Vincent kept close watch on Diana: one step wrong and you could plunge into the abyss next to the stairs. But fortunately, Diana was almost as sure-footed as he was.

Finally after what seemed forever, they entered the cathedral-like room that preceded the passages to the cavern.

As always, Diana stood a moment in awe at the sheer accomplishment of this room and the mystery of its origin. Their eyes met and their bond touched briefly as they shared the wonder.

By the time they made it through the interlocking passages between the cathedral and the cavern, with Vincent having to duck through most of them, they were both tired. Vincent suggested that they go to their pool first to refresh themselves.

Diana gratefully agreed, thinking of the wonderful feeling of that water, warmed by volcanic activity below.

When they entered the area with the pool, Diana gasped: there were vases with flowers massed around the edges of the pool, and the scent from the many different blooms filled the air. The steam from the pool drifted above the pool, and the light from the lanterns suffused the area with a golden glow. "Oh Vincent! You are...."

"Yes?" he prompted teasingly.

She turned to him smiling... "Impossible... *wonderful*. I love you."

They got out their towels and Diana's robe, then removing their dusty travel clothes slipped into the water.

Diana clung to Vincent as they drifted in the warm water. "It's so good to be back here....Oh!" She released him and swam to the edge of the pool as he watched, puzzled. She opened her carryall and pulled out a large, expensive tape player and popped in a tape. Turning it on and adjusting the volume she smiled: the acoustics weren't too bad. The strains of Bolero filled the chamber, and Vincent swam over to her.

Taking her in his arms, he kissed her gently, but his eyes looked a little sad. "Music hath charms....?"

Diana put her arms around him, gently kissing his face. "To soothe you?.... No. That was not my intention. I only wanted to please you. You *are* pleased?" she asked anxiously.

As Vincent caressed her back, some of the tension drained away. He'd been worried that she'd been afraid of him. The music, the warm water, the scent of the flowers...Diana here, with him... like this.... "How could I not be pleased?"

Relieved, Diana drew him further out in the pool and put her arms around his neck, and wrapped her legs around his waist. She could feel him tense up again, but she continued, reaching under his arms, stroking his back. "Please, Vincent...relax...forget the worry. Only think of our love."

Gently, so gently, Vincent explored her body with his hands, kissing her softly. Her mind touched his, and with their bond complete, he finally loved her, knowing that the passion he felt was possible *only* because of their love: that he could never feel this way *without* love.

Later, they collected the lanterns and their clothing, and Diana shut off the tape. They decided to go back to the large cavern they had discovered on their last visit where they had found cave paintings.

As Vincent walked quietly beside the painted walls, he thought of the men and women who had lived here so long before.

Diana watched his face and felt his changing emotions.

Diana asked, "Beautiful, aren't they?"

His voice, quiet in the vastness of the cavern simply answered, "Yes." Afterwards they stood beside the lake watching the reflections of the lantern light on the water and the crystals in the

cave. Finally Vincent breathed, "So many years. Man has come so far...yet has so far to go. And then, there is me." He turned and looked at Diana, a deep pain etched into his face. "Diana, when I rescued you and when we...did what we did...I know you didn't feel the same disgust I felt afterwards. How?" He shuddered, thinking of his "conversation" with the "Other," and continued.... "Is *this* what you want from me?"

Shocked and a little hurt, Diana responded angrily, "Of course not! You know better than that! I can't deny the desire I felt then, any more than you can... but that doesn't mean that the love and desire I feel any other time is any less."

He'd turned away from her and was looking out across the lake again, but they were completely bonded...no lies could be told, no secrets hidden. They were both purposely completely open for this.

"Vincent," Diana said softly, "You've spent so much of your life fighting your dark side...but you've hidden from it as well...even now. Your method of coping has always been to take all that you hate about yourself and package it into this "Other" being, to the point that he has become very real to you. That's not healthy. Don't think I don't know how you see him everywhere."

Startled, Vincent swung around, facing her once more. He'd thought he'd managed to keep *that* much at least to himself. He started to speak, then his mouth closed to a tight line.

Diana continued, "The only way to rid yourself of him completely is to accept him as part of yourself... *truly* part, and realize that you don't have to accept his behavior. When you feel yourself experiencing those emotions...control them, and if you can't...then live with it...but *accept* that those feelings are a part of you, and that you're not the only one who experiences them. That feeling as you do is part of being human. I didn't marry a god...I married a man. I married *you*...all of you. I accept your dark side, and I love even that part of you. You're strong, and good, and gentle. Your dark side can never control you for long."

Vincent reached out and held her close, laying his head on hers. "The love I have for you cannot be measured, Diana. I never want to disappoint you."

Tangling her hands in his mane, she pulled his face down to hers and kissed him. "You never could...in any way."

Vincent wrapped one long arm around her, then they made their way to the Crystal Cavern. He went ahead and lit the candles, then carried her inside. There were flowers in here as well, though not as many; the crystals themselves would have overshadowed any further beauties Vincent could have created.

As Vincent rolled out the quilts and Diana set up the tape player again with another tape. Diana watched

Vincent for signs of distress...touched his mind with her bond, and found only peace.

As they ate some of the wonderful meal that William had prepared for them, Vincent pulled out his old battered volume of Shakespeare.

"There was something I wanted to read to you... it is, perhaps, not appropriate for this place, but I needed you to hear it..."

Diana nodded and listened.

*The expense of spirit in a waste of shame
Is lust in action; and till action, lust
Is perjured, murderous, bloody, full of blame,
Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust,
Enjoy'd no sooner but despised straight,
Past reason hunted, and no sooner had
Past reason hated, as a swallow'd bait
On purpose laid to make the taker mad;
Mad in pursuit and in possession so;
Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme;
A bliss in proof, and proved, a very woe;
Before, a joy proposed; behind, a dream.*

*All this the world well knows; yet none
knows well*

To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell.

Diana didn't know what to say, but Vincent smiled and took her hand. "I've said before, Shakespeare knew everything. I only saw myself as a beast...but Devin, and you...have helped to convince me that one fall from grace does not make me the monster that I appear, but only one fallible man: and I suppose not the only one to fall from grace."

Diana, her own control giving a little after their last confrontation, was almost in tears. She flung her arms around him, "Oh, Vincent, *please* stop tormenting yourself. Blame *me* if you have to blame someone, but stop blaming yourself. I'm as much to blame as you for any loss of control... probably more so."

Vincent drew her to him and shaking his head almost imperceptibly, told her softly: "There is no blame, because there is no fault. We both wanted one another...for whatever reasons. It's done..." He smiled gently and added, "...and it was done with love. We cannot go back and change it in any case, but only go forward."

They heard a slight sound at the cavern entrance and looked up to see old Narcissa standing in the lamplight.

Vincent rose to take her hand and bring her to Diana. He told the old woman, "I hope you did not

come to guide me in another Spirit Walk. I feel my strength would fail me tonight."

Narcissa cackled gleefully. "No, No, child. I came only for de company tonight. Your spirits are strong. You have bot' learned to deal wit' the darkness wit' love. You doan need ol' Narcissa to tell you not'in. She embraced Diana warmly. "How is de child? Tell me of her."

So Diana and Vincent told Narcissa tales of Cathy and a few of Jacob...and Toby, commenting on the bond they suspected Cathy and Jacob of having.

Narcissa nodded, her blind eyes unblinking in the lamplight. "Dose two, children of two mothers, but have one heart. Watch de young one. She is stronger den you know. Narcissa can feel her, even down here."

Narcissa asked how Father was doing, and was pleased to hear that Devin had stayed on in the tunnels. "De Father, he needs his son, like de son needs de father, and de Father, he needs love too." She smiled up at Vincent, "How is Mary?"

Diana and Vincent laughed at Narcissa's perceptiveness. Vincent admitted, "They are drawing closer. "They do not say much to anyone, but I think Mary's quiet love will win in the end."

Narcissa rose to leave, and as she made her way down the dark tunnel, Vincent just shook his head. "We can always count on Narcissa to make our anniversary even more interesting."

They put away the remainder of the food in the basket for tomorrow and turned down the quilts. Vincent went around and blew out most of the candles as Diana slipped into bed. When he joined her, removing his fur boots and breeches, she laughed.

He looked startled. "What?"

"I notice you blew out the candles first this time and took off your boots afterwards."

Diving under the quilt, covering her in the tent of his hair, he chuckled, "I learn by example. Do you have anything else to teach me?"

The batteries on the tape player had given out, so there was no music, but Diana's quiet murmurs of love were all the music Vincent needed to hear.

Vincent stirred restlessly in his sleep. His dreams were formless, but disturbing nonetheless. In his dream, Jacob was crying and he could feel his distress.

He woke suddenly with Diana's gentle shaking. "Vincent... I feel Cathy... she's very upset."

Pulling the quilt up around his shoulders against the chill of the cavern, Vincent shook his head, his mane down in his eyes. "I feel Jacob as well." The one lantern they had left burning sent dancing shadows throughout the cavern and caused his eyes to shine in the

dark, like moonlight on water. "I am not sure what it is, Diana, but something is wrong."

Without waiting to hear more, Diana rose and pulled on her sweats. She hunted around in the dark for her boots.

Vincent lit another lantern for her, then rose and dressed himself.

They gathered the quilts and the food basket and Diana packed up Joe's tape player, then picking up the lanterns they turned to leave for home.

Looking around, Vincent commented, "I will come back later and remove the flowers and collect the candles."

As they traveled back towards home, Vincent tried to pick up more definite impressions from Jacob, but the child's distress blanketed any more rational thought. It was grief he was feeling.

Vincent quietly told Diana, "I suspect Arthur has died, Diana, and Jacob is grieving."

Diana quickened her pace just a little. "If so, he needs you, Vincent...and more than likely Cathy is reacting to his grief." She glanced at him quickly. "We were right about their bond, but this is the first sure evidence."

Vincent put one arm around Diana, stopping her and taking a moment to hold her close. "I regret we had to cut our time together so short."

Diana brushed his tousled mane back out of his worried eyes and shook her head. "We had our time...our celebration. We needed to come here to renew your confidence in yourself and in our love. But now, Jacob needs your gentleness and understanding, and I need to go to Cathy."

Nodding, Vincent held her tightly a moment, then taking her hand, they continued toward home.



As they emerged from the maze they saw Jacob and Toby running toward them, both of them crying.

"Father! I knew you'd come. I called and called!"

Vincent dropped his loads and scooped both boys up and held them as they cried into his shoulders. "Arthur was very old, and he had a good life. He was tired and you must let him go rest now."

Toby sniffed, wiping tears away fiercely. "I don't want him to be dead, Vincent. Arthur was our friend."

Jacob just cried silently, glad his father was there.

Diana watched the scene feeling a little helpless. She looked down the tunnel and saw Mouse and Jamie approaching with Father, who was limping even worse on his cane than usual. Mary followed a little behind carrying a squalling Cathy.

Mouse looked unhappy, but seemed more concerned about the boys than his own distress. He looked helplessly at Vincent with his childlike blue eyes and held out his hands. "Nothing to do, Vincent. Went to sleep. Went then."

Diana hugged the boys and left them with Vincent and Mouse. She went to Mary and taking Cathy from her tried to comfort the child. The fact that Vincent was able to comfort Jacob helped Cathy more than anything her mother could do, and she had subsided to sniffles and gulps as she tried to recover from her long bout of screaming. "

I was about beside myself," Mary said. "I couldn't understand what was wrong with her."

Now that the children were quiet the everyday sound of the pipes could be heard, and the sound was soothing to Diana's jangled nerves.

Vincent looked relieved as well. He and Mouse were busy explaining to the boys that Mouse would make a casket for Arthur and they would go with them to bury him.

"Where was Arthur's favorite place?" Vincent asked.

Toby immediately answered, "The kitchen!"

Mouse laughed...he couldn't help himself. "Can't bury Arthur in the kitchen. William wouldn't like it."

Jacob finally spoke for the first time. "Arthur liked the Mirror Pool."

Vincent hugged Jacob and suggested they bury Arthur there. "That way you and Toby can visit him and think of him whenever you go to swim."

After kissing Diana and checking on Cathy, Vincent went with Mouse and the boys to start

working on the casket.

Jamie and Diana picked up her carryall and Jamie picked up the quilts and one of the lanterns and headed back to Diana's chamber. Father and Mary took the basket back to William.

Diana spoke softly to Cathy as they traveled down the tunnels. By this time Cathy had settled down and was completely quiet, as was normal for her. Diana was beginning to wonder if the child was ever going to learn to talk. She was five months old and rarely made any sound at all, other than laughing once in a while. She rarely cried...and never screamed--as she had been over Jacob's distress.

After arriving at their chamber, Diana changed out of her dusty traveling clothes and visited with Jamie. As they sat talking, Brooke came to the door looking for Vincent. "Hi Diana, I heard you and Vincent were back and I thought I would tell Vincent that Michael is moving home tomorrow. I thought that would cheer him up after dealing with Jacob."

Brightening perceptibly, Diana agreed. She leaned over the bed to grab Cathy, who had crawled to the edge and was about to topple off. "I know he'll be pleased, Brooke. They were talking about plans of how to split up the classes. This way they can rotate and take turns teaching the younger and older children. It will give everyone some variety, and it'll also give Vincent more time to take care of his sweeps and maintenance. Besides, I think he's missed Michael."

Jamie laughed and replied, "It will also give Father someone else to play chess with. He needs a little more frustration."

The women laughed, and Brooke added, "We have to find someone to play with him who can challenge him, but who he can beat once in a while."

A while later, Vincent returned with Jacob and Toby. The boys' eyes were red from crying, but they seemed more like themselves. Jacob crawled up on the bed and Cathy climbed into his lap.

After hugging his sister, Jacob looked up at Diana. "I didn't mean to make Cathy sad. She didn't even really know Arthur."

Diana just nodded. "It's all right Jacob. She's fine now. Are you okay?"

Jacob thought a minute, then said, "I miss Arthur."

Diana consoled the boys for awhile, telling them stories about pets she had lost when she was a child.

The boys left to get cleaned up for bed, and Diana asked about Arthur's funeral. Vincent told her about the funeral and that the boys sorrow had been very touching.

Diana suggested, "Perhaps we should see if we could get the boys another pet."

Vincent shook his head adamantly. "No. Not yet. I don't like the idea of so quickly replacing something they loved. They need to learn the process of grief. And realize you do not replace one person or thing you love with another: you love each for itself."

After supper, Vincent took the boys and read to them, beginning Tom Sawyer. He read longer than usual trying get them settled.

By the time Vincent returned to their chamber Diana was ready for bed and was brushing out her hair.

He leaned back on the bed, arm draped over his knee watching her.

Cathy crawled out of her crib and Vincent leaned over to pick her up. "Time this one moved to the dorm as well." He held her upside down for a moment--which would have brought peals of giggles from Jacob at that age--but she just regarded him solemnly. She *did* smile radiantly at him when he righted her and "flew" her up over his head. Sitting her on his lap, he looked over at Diana. "Why doesn't she speak, Diana...do you know?"

Diana reached out and touched Cathy's mind and found her contented and amused. She took her from Vincent and pointed to him. "Who is that Cathy?" Wide slanted blue eyes looked up into Diana's and images formed of Vincent, his loving her, playing with her. Diana shook her head and projected her displeasure. "Say it, Cathy." For the first time, Cathy made an attempt at communication. She shook her head with an emphatic "No." Diana asked again: "Well, who is *this*..." and pointed to herself. "Can you say "Mama?"

Cathy seemed to think about it, then smiled and said very clearly, "Ma-ma..." as if to say, "Now will you let me alone?"

Laughing, Diana hugged her and projected her happiness.

Vincent just watched, amused and puzzled. "What is it?"

Diana explained that she thought Cathy didn't feel the need to talk because she could read both of them, and could project her needs so well. "I've suspected it for a while. I guess we need to make more of an effort to show her that we're displeased when she doesn't verbalize, instead of just doing what she wants. You *know* that most of the time we

seem to know almost instinctively what she wants. How many times have you just suddenly known what she wanted and gotten it for her?"

Vincent thought and smiled, ruefully shaking his head. "You're right."

"I think she just projects so well and receives so well that verbalization has just been low priority. We're just going to have to make more of an effort to make her speak."

By this time, Cathy was getting sleepy and was rubbing her eyes. They'd removed the mittens a few days before hoping she was now old enough not to scratch herself, and thus far she hadn't. Vincent took her on his lap and read to her from the book of poetry he was reading,

*All that the sun will breathe today
The moon will lip and wear away*

*Tonight. And all will re-begin
Tomorrow as the dawn comes in.*

*Is no beginning, middle trend
Or argument to that or end.*

*No cause and no effect, and no
Reason why it should be so.*

*Or why it might be otherwise
To other minds or other eyes.*

He glanced down and Cathy was asleep, so he put his book aside and getting up, laid her gently in her bed and covered her.

Diana had slipped in bed and said quietly, "That was lovely. Read some to me, please."

So Vincent slipped in beside her and picked up where he had left off.

*The soul can dream itself to be
Adrift upon an endless sea.*

*Of day and night. The soul can seem
To be all things that it can dream!*

*Yet needs but look within to find
That which is steady in the wind,*

*That which the fire does not appal,
That which good and ill mourn not at all*

*Which does not seek, or lack, or try.
And was not born, and cannot die!*

*It has been writ in wisdom old -
This is the last word to be told:*

*-- There is no dissolution! No
Creation! There are none in woe!*

*There is no teacher, teaching, naught!
Are none who long for, lack for aught!*

*Are none who pine for freedom! None
Are liberated under sun!*

*--And this is absolutely true
In Him who dreams in me and you.¹⁰*

Diana listened with her eyes closed, letting Vincent's gentle voice wash over her and lull her almost to sleep. When he stopped, she glanced up to see him leaning over her. He had blown out the candles and put away his book.

Quietly, very softly he quoted in her ear,

*Belov'd and faithful, teach my soul to wake
In glades deep-ranked with flowers that gleam and
shake*

*And flock your paths with wonder. In your gaze
Show me the vanquished vigil of my days.*

*Mute in that golden silence hung with green,
Come down from heaven and bring me in your
eyes*

*Remembrance of all beauty that has been,
And stillness from the pools of Paradise.¹¹*

Diana reached for him, her bond touching his joyfully. She had been regretting having to leave the Crystal Cavern so soon, but anywhere Vincent was...was always beautiful.

The following morning when Diana woke she found Vincent already up and gone. He and Mouse had gathered all the older children and gone to shuffle the boxes that Michael and Alain were bringing down.

After traveling through the interconnecting tunnels and up two flights of stairs and a ladder Vincent, Mouse, and the troupe of helpers finally came to the point in the upper tunnels where Michael's things were being deposited. It seemed he had acquired far more than he had left the tunnels with. They loaded the cart, and Mouse and Vincent had left another cart at the bottom of each level to transfer the boxes to. They spent the next

several hours hauling the boxes and taking them down the ladder and steps to each level, re-loading carts and transferring them.

By the time they reached the lower level where Michael's new chamber was to be, all of them were exhausted and ready for lunch.

William had their meal ready for them when they arrived. The tired party wolfed it down, thanked him, and left again to get the final set of boxes that Alain and Michael had brought down while they were moving the first.

Father and Mary sat over in the corner watching the party leave, too engrossed in their own conversation to do more than smile at them as they left. Father *did* wave for Diana to join them and asked if she'd seen Devin since yesterday, and she said she hadn't.

"He went Above yesterday to visit Susan. He hasn't come back?" she asked worriedly.

Father shook his head. "Devin is still irresponsible, it seems. I thought he was going to help Michael move today."

Diana was a little concerned. Devin was irresponsible, true, but in the two years she had known him, he'd changed a lot. Also, he'd gone to see her sister. If he wasn't back yet, perhaps there was something wrong. "I need to go Above to see Joe anyway, Father. I'll check at Susan's to see if he's there."

Diana left the children with Jamie, since she wanted to be free to check a few places if she couldn't find her sister at home. Dressing in her street clothes rather than tunnel garb, she exited the tunnels near the Lexington subway and dug in her pocket for tokens. The roar of the subway was loud up here. As she made her way back to a seat and sat down, she watched out the window as the train flashed along. She felt a little strange whenever she left the tunnels now that she'd been living there for the last two years. She could feel the impressions of the people who brushed past her, jostled against her: irritation, anger--everyone was harassed and in a hurry. She heard snatches of conversations: people complaining about the crowds, the prices, the heat. It seemed to her as though no one had anything good to say or think.

It was a fresh reminder of why she loved the tunnels so much, and why her bond with Vincent was her refuge. Living up here had almost destroyed her. She could only manage it in bits and pieces anymore.

When Diana pushed her way off the subway and climbed the steps into the sunlight, she squinted against the brightness: her eyes were unused to the bright

sunlight after so long in the eternal dusk of the underground world. And people were right...the heat *was* still suffocating, although fall was near.

Diana was irritated when she realized she'd gotten off at the wrong stop. The thought of the subway again depressed her, so she hailed a cab, and had a woman push past her and take it before she could get in. She felt her own irritation building, but breathed deeply, forcing herself into a calmer state and hailed another...this time managing to get in before someone else stole it.

When she got to Susan's apartment she had the cab wait, which was just as well, since no one was home. She stood a minute thinking, then decided to go on to see Joe. She could make some calls from there.

The scene in the office was as hectic as outside. The clatter of machines and the clamor of voices almost unnerved her. *Have I been away from all this for that long?* She stopped and spoke to several people, waved at Edie, who was passing, heading back to the computer terminal, then knocked on Joe's door.

Joe's irritated voice answered the knock. "Come!"

When she poked her head in, Joe was sitting with his feet up on the desk reading a file, and he grinned ear to ear when he saw her...the frown disappearing. "Diana! A ray of sunshine at last!" He crumpled up an empty bag from his chocolate cheese puffs and threw it at the trash can, missed, shrugged, and gave her his lopsided grin. "I'd never make the NBA." He looked up at her, brown eyes twinkling, "What brings my favorite mole out into the sunshine? Ready to do some digging in *our* dirt for a change?"

Just seeing Joe and feeling his aura of inexhaustible good humor helped Diana's mood. "Maybe. Actually I came Above to see Susan... and to try and find Devin. But if you have something for me I'd be glad to help out."

Joe shook his head. "We might have something for you in a bit. Jimmy's been working on something and he's not getting far. There just aren't many leads, and those lead to dead ends." He watched Diana for her reaction, and wasn't disappointed.

"Not Jimmy Faber. *Please* Joe. You know we don't get along. He thinks I'm a charlatan... calls me a palm reader, mystic...anything else he can think of, and sneers it as he says it. If you *really*

need me, I'll be glad to help, but I wish it were anyone else."

Joe sat on the edge of his desk and crossed his arms. "Why does Jimmy dislike you so? I never have heard any reason for it."

Shaking her head, Diana said, "I was put on a case he was on several years ago. It was one he'd worked long and hard on...his baby...and I was fresh out of the academy. When I cracked it...well...he's never forgiven me." She held her hands out and shrugged. "I didn't even take credit for it, but he knew where the information came from, and just never forgot. I think he just doesn't trust anything he can't see, feel, taste, or smell. Some people are like that."

Joe got up and paced the room. "Well, he can certainly see, feel, and at least smell the corpses we've got."

"How many, Joe? Tell me about it."

Joe pulled out a folder with photos of bodies. All women, nude. "They're all prostitutes, all blond, not too young, 25 to 35. Suffocation in all the cases. We can't seem to find any ties, and nobody's talking. Two of them knew each other, but otherwise there's no connection...not even the same pimps or Johns...at least not that we know of."

Diana looked through the photos then closed the file. She leaned back and closed her eyes. She always felt as though she were on a teeter-totter emotionally whenever she thought about work. It felt good to be helping, but absorbing all the impressions from so many filthy, diseased minds and the pain and fear from the victims always tore at her soul. "Any recent bodies... any personal effects?"

Joe shook his head. "He takes all the clothes and belongings. And you know what's weird? He lays them out with arms crossed on their chests, and flowers in their hands...almost lovingly. The last one was last week. Is that too long ago? We still have the body in the morgue. We still have *all* the bodies on ice, but he's been doing about one every two weeks for the last two months."

Opening her eyes and stiffening her spine, Diana said, "Take me to the morgue, and I'll see if I can tell you anything."

As Diana and Joe stood outside the morgue, Diana took several deep breaths, then followed him inside.

When the attendant pulled out the drawer with the woman's body, Diana stood with her arms wrapped tightly around herself for a long moment, then told Joe, "I'd rather do this alone. Can you wait outside?"

Joe nodded and left. Diana pulled the sheet back and

examined the woman. She'd been pretty once, but had obviously had a hard life. She brushed the woman's hair back. "I'm sorry." She put her hands on either side of the head and emptied her mind. *The impressions were faint. She had quick impressions of a bright apartment, cheap but lovingly furnished. She saw the streets, but then only a quick glimpse of a tall man with no face visible...hair tied back in a ponytail. A trip up a stairway...then surprise and fear and the struggle to breathe.*

Diana covered the body tenderly, then went back out to Joe to report her few impressions.

Joe was pleased. "That's a lot more than we had. If we *do* get anything else that you could get impressions from, I'll contact you."

Diana stepped off the subway into the shadows and found the tunnel entrance. Once she reached the lower levels she could hear the singing of the pipes and the musical tapping lulling her senses into a sense of homecoming.

She reached out to touch Vincent and found him asleep, and she smiled. *He must have finished helping Michael and gone for a nap.*

Diana went by to see Mary in the nursery. The kind, gray-haired woman was smiling and singing a lullaby to a tiny motherless baby a helper had found in a garbage can a few days before. She seemed so contented and happy, and the peace of homecoming enveloped Diana like a warm blanket, dispelling all her weariness and irritation of the day. "How is he?"

Mary's gentle smile told Diana much. "He's doing well. I hate to give him up, but Martha wants to take him. Since she lost Bethany, she's been pining, and she can't have any more children."

Diana sympathized with Martha, and remembered their first daughter with a pang of loss. To change to a happier subject, she asked Mary, "How are you and Father doing?"

Mary just smiled quietly and said, "We are doing wonderfully. By the way, I think Devin is home. I heard a message on the pipes about him earlier."

Diana was elated. She almost ran to Devin's chamber, hoping to hear news of Susan, and extremely curious to find out just where he'd been the last couple of nights.

When she reached his chamber she was startled to find Susan and Alex there. Diana gleefully

hugged both her sister and niece. "I was Above looking for you today!" She put her arms on her hips and glared at Devin, "And what have you been up to?"

Devin tried to look innocent, but failed completely. Laughing, he took Susan's hand and told her, "Do you want to tell her, or should I?"

Diana looked from one to the other in sudden understanding. "You didn't!"

Susan nodded. "We were married yesterday. We've come Below for a short visit, but then Devin is moving Above."

That thought saddened Diana some, but she was happy for both her sister and Devin. She knew it had been a difficult decision for Devin.

Devin went on to explain to Diana that they'd decided he should go to medical school. "I've been studying regularly and with Susan's and Peter's help, I passed all the exams I needed to acquire all the college credits I need to go to pre-med. They weren't happy at my lack of records, but apparently my grades convinced them I could do it. It's going to be a long haul, and I'll be the oldest graduating doctor around, but then when Father is gone, our world will still have a doctor." He put his arm around his wife. "Susan has agreed to move down here when I finish, and she's putting me through school. You realize you have an angel for a sister?"

Diana embraced Devin warmly. "I already felt as though you were my brother: now you're my brother-in-law on both sides. Pretty strange, that. You realize Father is going to be beside himself with delight."

Diana picked up the children from Jamie, who had them down at the Mirror Pool. As she collected them, she commented she could use a swim herself.

Jamie sat next to the pool drying Cathy. "Why don't you and Vincent go swimming before supper? I'll keep the children a while longer. Mouse is puttering in the Mousehole anyway. He's trying to figure out a way to improve taking out the garbage, of all things! He's trying to build a trash-masher so the bundles we need to take Above to the dumpsters or to the Abyss will be smaller."

Diana looked across the pool at Jacob, who was sitting next to Arthur's grave. "Has he been sitting there long?"

Jamie shook her head. "No...Don't worry. He's okay. He'll get over it before too long."

Jamie called to the boys and said they would go visit Mouse for a bit, so they swam over and dried off.

Cathy caught hold of Jacob's hand, and he pulled her to her feet. As Diana and Jamie watched, she took a couple of steps, with Jacob holding her. "See that!"

Jacob crowed. Toby clapped for her and she sat down with a thud. Diana picked her up and praised her thoroughly, both verbally and mind-to-mind.

Cathy looked at Diana and hugged her, saying "Mama!"

As they followed the boys toward the Mousehole, watching them roust each other and run back and forth listening to the pipes and trying to decipher messages, Jamie quietly told Diana, "I think I'm pregnant."

Picking up on Jamie's emotions, Diana asked, "Is that good or bad?"

Jamie shuffled along, toes in the dust, looking down. "I don't know. I love children, but I don't know if I'm ready for my own. It's a big responsibility."

Diana walked along for a while without saying anything. "Does Mouse know?"

Shaking her head, Jamie looked at her with frightened doe's eyes. "Not yet. He'll be happy, I know, but Diana, he's like a kid himself. He still has problems with the concepts of "taking" and "stealing." What kind of a father will he be?"

Laughing, Diana about doubled over. "I'm sorry...it's not funny, I know. But truly, Jamie... you'll both be fine. And Mouse...well, he's Mouse. I think he'll make a great father. And you'll be a wonderful mother." She became more serious. "But you go see Father and Mary... take care of yourself."



SHE LIVED UNKNOWN

After leaving Jamie, Diana snuck into Vincent's and her chamber. There were only a few candles burning and it was fairly dark.

Vincent seemed to be sleeping so peacefully she hated to wake him, but it was almost supper time, and she *did* want a swim. She leaned down to brush his mane back out of his face, and one leather-clad arm came up to grab her and pull her down to him. She laughed and wiggled to get loose, but he just flipped her over and held her down.

Breathless, she said, "I should know better than to think I could sneak up on you." She wrinkled her nose. "You are sweaty, dirty, and you smell... let's go for a swim."

"All right." He lay back with his hands behind his head watching her get the towels. When she turned to him to see if he was ready, he had an odd look on his face.

"What is it?" Diana asked.

Vincent looked worried. "I'm not sure. I was dreaming before...about the city, and about you." He raised up on one elbow, his face still dim in the meager light of the few candles. "Did you go to see Joe today?"

Silently, she nodded. "He gave you a case. There have been murders."

Again she nodded.

Vincent seemed to shudder slightly, then sat up with a very strange look on his face. "He does it to make them innocent again."

Startled, Diana looked at him and said in a strangled voice, "What?"

Vincent's haunted eyes met hers, and he repeated, "He does it to make them innocent again."

Diana sat next to him, her arms around him. "How do you know that? What else do you know?"

He shook his head almost violently, mane flying. "I do *not* know, Diana. I know nothing about it. It's just...when I touched you, that thought came to me. My dream was formless...just with undercurrents of dread."

Vincent said no more, and as they walked toward the Mirror Pool he was extraordinarily quiet, even for him.

Finally, she told him about Devin and Susan, expecting the news to cheer him, and it did somewhat.

"It will be good for Devin to finally have a goal. And I think he truly loves Susan...and Alex." He glanced at Diana and smiled a little. "And you're right...Father *will* be delighted."

They reached the Mirror Pool, undressed, and swam for a while. Vincent rinsed his mane and washed away the sweat from the day's exertions.

Normally, they probably would have played and enjoyed themselves, but both of them were a little uneasy about what Vincent had felt in his dream, and what he'd said afterwards, so their swim was more subdued than Diana had planned.

At supper Vincent and Diana visited with Devin and Susan, Mouse and Jamie, and with Michael and Brooke. Michael was organizing his room with Brooke's help, and they were having a lively conversation when Father and Mary came up to the table.

When Devin stood and made his announcement, Vincent thought Father was going to fall over with shock. He embraced his son with tears in his eyes. "Congratulations, Devin...on both counts." He embraced his new daughter-in-law lovingly. "We will miss you down here, Devin, but I think you're doing the right thing. If there is anything I can do to help you... *anything*...please come to me."

That evening, Vincent finally asked Diana if she intended to continue on the case.

Mildly irritated, she answered, "Of course. I've started, and I don't quit once I start. We've been over this before." Concerned, she questioned him. "Are you worried about me...is that it?"

Strangely, Vincent shook his head. "No, at least not in the sense of you being in danger of death. I sense danger to someone else...probably someone I care for... but I don't know who."

Diana told him about the case, and he absorbed all she told him, but it seemed to give him no further revelations.

When it was time to put Cathy to bed, Diana decided it was time to move her to the dorm. "I talked with Mary the other day and we set up a bed for her with the toddlers. She's weaned. I think it's time."

Vincent groaned. "I hope Cathy's change to the dorm will be easier than Jacob's was."

Actually, he had no need to worry. Cathy fell asleep immediately and was perfectly happy. She could feel her parents wherever they were, and Jacob was near. She was content.

Almost two weeks passed with Diana going Above every day to check with Joe on the case. There'd been no further murders, but she found herself spending more and more time Above. She interviewed the families of the victims--the one's they could find. She visited their apartments.

Jimmy was about as happy to be working with Diana as she'd expected him to be, and treated her as though she wasn't there most of the time.

Diana passed on the information Vincent had given her, not telling Jimmy where she'd gotten it.

Of course, that just alienated him from her further. "Yeah, sure. Wha'd you do, read your Tarot cards? We need solid leads, not nonsense Bennett."

Joe just acted as referee and tried to keep things smooth. He knew where Diana got her information, and trusted Vincent's instincts...though how Vincent had come by that particular bit of knowledge puzzled him. He went over what they had come up with thus far. "Okay, so let's go on the assumption that yes...he kills them, takes all their clothes... leaves them naked...the same way they came into the world, then he lays them out lovingly with flowers in their hands. But why? Obviously Diana is right--to make them innocent again."

Diana sat and thought while Jimmy groused and Joe postulated. Finally she asked, "Could we put me out on the streets with a wire...see what I can find out?"

Joe just glared at her. If he let her do that, Vincent would kill him if anything happened to her...if he didn't kill himself. "No. I don't want you in the hospital...or worse."

Jimmy, however, was intrigued. "Not a bad idea, Bennett. First tangible help you've been. Besides...if you really *can* pick up these *impressions* from people you touch," He grinned maliciously, "maybe you can find him."

Joe interjected, "On the other hand, he's late... didn't kill anyone last week. Maybe there won't be any more."

Diana got up and moved over to the window and stood staring out at the city. "If there *are* any more, we'll need to go with my idea, Joe. I don't think there's any other way, unless he gets sloppy."

Vincent tried daily to go about his normal routine of sweeps, classes, and maintenance, but something kept nagging at the back of his mind. He didn't like Diana being Above so much, but at least he didn't feel she was in danger.

He was teaching poetry to his students, and they were to pick a poem to read in class for the class to analyze.

Jeanie had chosen a poem by Wordsworth and was reading it to the class when Vincent began to have flashes of memories and visions intermingled...

*She dwelt among the untrodden ways
Beside the springs of Dove,
A maid whom there were none to praise
And very few to love:*

Vincent shook his head as he had a flash of a blond woman, pony tail flashing as she turned in fear. Then it disappeared, and he tried to listen, smiling at Jeanie to encourage her.

*A violet by a mossy stone
Half hidden from the eye!
-- Fair as a star, when only one
Is shining in the sky.*

*She lived unknown, and few could know
When Lucy ceased to be;
But she is in her grave, and, oh,
The difference to me!¹²*

The vision returned, and suddenly Vincent recognized the woman. It was Lucy, the prostitute who had helped him when he'd been caught Above years ago. The name, and the poem had prompted the memory, but was this premonition or was it happening now?

"Vincent..." Jeanie asked concerned..."Did I read all right?"

"Yes...It was fine, Jeanie. I think you should all ... practice your poems, and think about Jeanie's. I think that's enough for today.

After waiting and pacing restlessly for hours, Vincent finally felt Diana heading back home, so he hurried to meet her. As he took off down the tunnels, he ran into Jamie with Cathy.

Jamie was caring for Cathy while Diana was working this case. It was working out well, as it was more of an incentive for Cathy to learn to speak, since Jamie couldn't "read" her like he and Diana could, and neither could Jamie pick up her impressions. It seemed the child was picking up more and more words every day. It was as if she already knew them and just needed to practice. Jamie just shook her head as Vincent passed them with barely a curt nod...it was so unlike him.

As Vincent turned the corner of the tunnel, Diana

saw him and ran to him, glad to see him after her day Above. She was ready for the aura of peace that always surrounded him, but when she reached out with her bond for him she found turmoil instead.

"Diana...has there been another murder?"

Puzzled, she shook her head. "Not that we know of." Seeing him like this, and feeling his distress, she knew he had seen something else. "What is it?"

Vincent paced back and forth in the small area in the tunnel, finally leaning with both hands against the wall, his head bowed. His mane fell forward over his face, obscuring all expression. The silence was only broken by the constant tapping of the pipes. "I have to go Above, Diana. I have to go back to the lower East side ... where I was hurt before."

He felt Diana's quick stab of fear for him and turned to her. "There is a woman there who helped me once, long ago before I met you. I'm afraid she might be this man's next victim."

Seeing Vincent's face drawn in pain, in his worry for this friend, she knew there was no way she could stop him. "Do you even know where she lives now?"

Obviously miserable, Vincent shook his head. "All I can do is look."

As he started to leave, Diana stopped him and told him about the meeting today. "I feel perhaps I should contact Joe and insist we try my idea. Perhaps I can find out something. And if you don't find this woman tonight, perhaps that information will help you find her."

The thought of Diana putting herself in such a dangerous position only caused Vincent more anguish, but he knew she was right. "If you do this, I want to stay near."

Vincent held her close for a time, neither of them feeling the need for words, but when he turned to leave Diana said quietly, "Be careful."

Vincent nodded to Diana and trotted off in the direction of the subway. Waiting in the shadows he watched until a train to the East side of the city slowed and he leaped for the roof. When it neared his destination and slowed, he leapt off, hurrying back into the shadows.

He made his way through the tunnels to the sub-basement of the old Beaumont theater and forced the steel door open on its ancient hinges. By this time, it was already dark, so he made his way across the rooftops to where he remembered Lucy's apartment being. He was undecided how to

proceed from here, but eventually he came down and hesitantly knocked on the door, then moved quickly into the shadows.

When the door opened just a touch with the chain still secured, he called softly, "Lucy?"

A woman's voice answered him, "No Lucy here, man. You got the wrong apartment."

Disappointed, Vincent left, wandering the alleyways and watching the streets. He saw many illicit dealings taking place, watched drug dealers, pimps, watched the prostitutes walking the streets, but he never saw Lucy. Frustrated, depressed and more worried than before, he finally took the long trip home a few hours before dawn.

When Diana woke the next morning, she woke Vincent and found out all she could about Lucy, then went Above to see Joe.

When she entered his office, Joe looked haggard. He hadn't been sleeping well since this case began. The police were baffled.

Jimmy was good at what he did, and he couldn't help it that he didn't like relying on psychics. He just hated a total lack of cold, hard facts. Diana considered it a lack of imagination, but shrugged it off. Since Joe was alone, she explained. "Vincent may know who the next victim is, or will be, Joe. He once knew a hooker named Lucy who fits the description of his other victims. He's been having flashes...visions."

Joe shook his head. "Are you sure it's not just imagination? Maybe he's just worried about her."

Diana shook her head emphatically. "When Vincent has a vision, if you're smart you listen. He looked for her last night, but never found her. I think I need to go out tonight, Joe. We may never find him any other way."

Joe stood looking out the window, hands in his pockets. "It's getting cooler out. Winter's finally getting here." He sighed and sat down next to Diana. Reluctantly, he agreed to her plan. "I hate to put you in that position, but maybe you can find out something. You get more with your impressions than the rest of us put together, despite what Jimmy says. We'll wire you just before dark."

They visited for awhile, with Joe asking about Jacob and Cathy. She could feel his concern for her all through the visit. She finally reached over and kissed his cheek. "I'll call Jimmy and we can go out for a burger before we hit the streets."

Diana hated to make the long trip home only to have to come back again later, so she stayed and went over the files they had on the case. She reached out for Vincent and they bonded. He knew then what they were planning and would feel it when she left for the streets.

Vincent took the children off Jamie's hands for the day after he'd finished his sweep of the tunnels. He was too restless to teach his class, so he had Michael take over for him.

He helped Jacob and Toby build a model airplane while Cathy napped.

After Cathy woke, the boys asked if they could go swim with Mouse, so Vincent sent them off and played with his daughter. "Father" was still too difficult for her to say, but she had a repertoire of other words that enchanted him. Like Jacob, she was extremely precocious...but of course, her favorite word was still "No."

Eventually Vincent wandered down to the pool and watched Mouse and the boys swim and decided to join them and give Cathy a swimming lesson.

Cathy was not overly impressed the first time her head went under water, and he could feel her anger at him and her fear of the water. After considerable mental soothing and physical coaching, she finally learned to hold her breath and swim a foot or two back to him.

Jacob watched the proceedings critically, as though anything that caused Cathy distress was extremely suspect to him.

While they were drying off, Mouse discussed his impending fatherhood with Vincent. "Scared, Vincent. Only Mouse...not like Father...not like you." He dried his blond hair vigorously. He stopped and walked over to arbitrate an argument between the boys and came back to Vincent.

Vincent just watched him with the boys and smiled. When Mouse came back, Vincent nodded toward the boys and commented, "You are good with all the children, Mouse. You'll be fine." Mouse looked relieved. He trusted Vincent's judgement.

After supper, and after reading to the children and putting them to bed, Vincent waited for Diana's signal and wrote in his journal.

Diana is Above, perhaps going into danger, yet I am more concerned for Lucy. Where is she? She was so kind to a stranger in need--to me--though she feared me at first. Without her, I would have died. Now she is in danger and all I can do to help her is send Diana and wait. This man who is killing these women has a sickness. I feel no sense of evil, but he must be stopped.

Vincent looked around their chamber, so peaceful with its amber light from both the stained glass window and the candles. It seemed a little empty without Cathy's crib, and more than a little empty without Diana. He could barely remember the time when he had been alone here: or more likely, he didn't want to remember. The many bookshelves that Devin and Mouse had helped him hang dominated the walls with volume after volume weighing them down.

Vincent walked over to the bed and picked up the amethyst crystal Diana had brought back from their honeymoon and twirled it in the light. He placed it back on the table, then putting away his journal, he blew out the candles and walked down to the falls. He sat and waited, his bond touching Diana's very lightly. When she headed for the East side, Vincent silently rose and followed.

When Joe and Jimmy let Diana out of the van they cautioned her to let them know immediately if she thought anything was amiss. She strode out over the cracked pavement in her high heels and short skirt, wearing six times the makeup she usually wore, and wearing a blond wig done up in a pony tail. She hugged the short fur jacket to her, wishing for her sweats... or her fur tunnel garb. *Damn, it's cold!* She had to smile though at what Vincent would think when he saw her...she certainly didn't look like herself.

She was approached several times by men seeking "company," but after touching them and receiving fairly innocent impressions she put them off as best she could.

One man became angry and tried to pull her along with him, but a quick stomp on his foot with her heel discouraged him quickly. She heard a soft inquiring voice behind her: "If you don't want to make any money, what're you out here for?"

Turning, she saw a woman...a hooker...with a kind, tired face, and blond hair. "Honey, you don't belong here, and you're new. Can I help?"

Diana recognized her as Lucy from the impressions she'd received from Vincent. "Lucy?"

The other woman gaped at her. "How'd you know me?"

Diana shook her head. "That doesn't matter now. You have to be careful...the man who's been killing women over here...I have reason to believe you may be next."

Lucy backed away. "Who are you?"

"Diana Bennett. I'm with the police." Lucy started backing away faster, but Diana stopped her. "Please. I'm here to help you."

They talked for awhile, Joe and Jimmy listening in,

Jimmy nodding to Joe with reluctant admiration as Diana got Lucy to stay. They'd follow if this man picked Diana or Lucy up.

Vincent watched all this from the shadows of the alley, amazed at Diana's transformation and relieved that Lucy had been found. *Surely this horror will end soon.*

A few more men came up and again were turned away by Diana, then a black van pulled up. As Diana and Lucy spoke to him, Diana nodded to Lucy. She tried to convince the man to take her but the man seemed intent upon Lucy, so as soon as the door closed on her, Joe and Jimmy headed up the street to pick up Diana and follow.

Joe followed the van slowly, trying not to alert the driver, and Vincent was easily able to follow across the roofs.

When the van finally stopped at a run-down apartment building and the man took Lucy inside, Diana began getting nervous. "We can't wait long, Joe." Diana could feel Vincent near. He was, in fact, already on the roof...and *he* had no intention of waiting too long.

After waiting a few minutes, Joe and Jimmy started inside and Diana followed despite their instructions otherwise. Diana was trying to sense where the man had gone with Lucy. She touched each door as they passed and finally touched one doorknob that brought her the impression of the man who'd picked Lucy up.

"She's in here Joe," she whispered.

Everything was quiet inside, then they heard a crash and a scuffle...a muffled scream.

Jimmy threw himself against the door and forced it open. "POLICE!" he yelled.

The man tried to escape through the window but once out on the fire escape found himself barred by a dark shape with flashing fangs. Vincent's low, vicious growl sent him scurrying back inside to the relative safety of the police.

Lucy was on the floor when Diana found her, a plastic bag on her head, but once Diana ripped the bag off and sat her up she gasped and began breathing.

As Jimmy cuffed the man and read him his rights, Diana said she would stay with Lucy and take her statement.

Joe and Jimmy loaded the man into the van and took him to the precinct to book him.

Lucy sat on the bed trying to calm herself, and Diana brought her a wet washcloth. They both looked up at a slight noise at the window, to see Vincent swing a leg over the window sill.

Lucy started up..."You!" She smiled and watched as Diana went to him and touched his arm lightly, then left the room.

Vincent went to Lucy and sat quietly next to her. "Are you all right?"

She nodded, transfixed by seeing him here. The last time she'd seen him he'd looked half dead. Now though--even here in the pallid light from the one low-watt bulb hanging overhead--he looked wonderful... like something out of a fairy tale. The pale light seemed to make a halo out of his wonderful chestnut and honey mane, and his gentle smile warmed her heart.

"I will let Diana take you home. I only wanted to know you were well."

As he started for the window, Lucy caught his arm. "Wait...please. Thank you."

Vincent shook his head, touching her face gently. "Thank Diana. Take care Lucy."

After he'd gone, Diana returned and silently guided Lucy outside. Finding out where she lived, Diana went home with her and took her statement. When she was about to leave, Lucy said quietly, "I'm glad he has you. Take care of him...he's very special."

Diana hugged Lucy. "Vincent thinks you are pretty special too. If you ever need him, contact the D.A., Joe Maxwell. He'll know how to reach us."

When Diana reached the station she watched Jimmy interrogate the prisoner. *We might have our differences, but Jimmy really is very good.* Jimmy was gentle when he needed to be gentle, and firm when he needed to be firm. He gently extracted the information from the prisoner. The man's lawyer was present, and was cooperating. The poor man was mad as the Mad Hatter. His sister had raised him, then when times got hard took up hooking. When the boy was fourteen she'd left him with Social Services for foster care, not wanting to expose him to the world she was living in. He figured if he "made them all innocent again" she would come back to him.

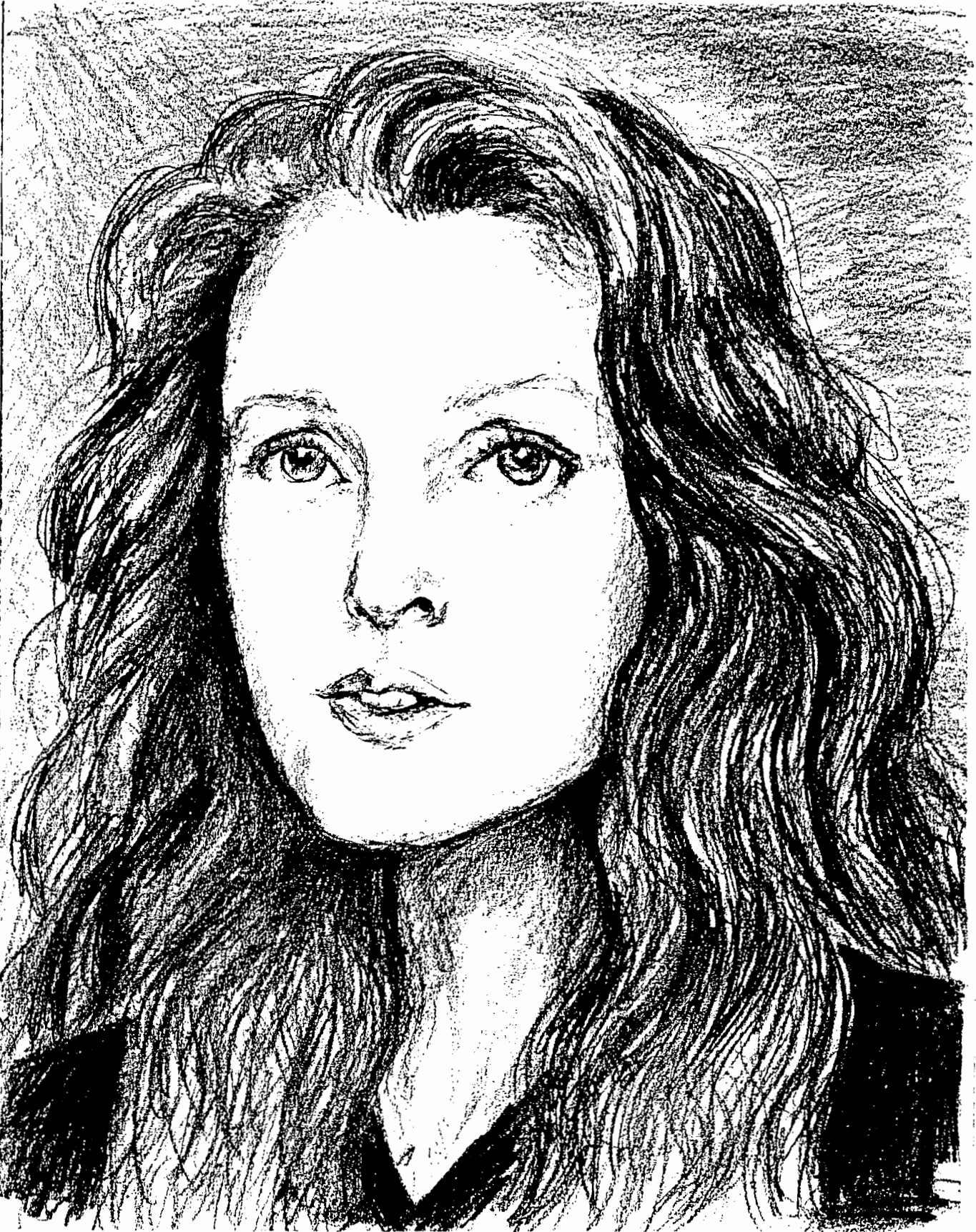
Shaking her head and hugging herself, Diana turned to see Joe watching her.

Joe asked her, "Did Vincent see Lucy?"

"Yes, briefly... just to reassure himself she was all right." She sighed. "I'm glad it's over." She nodded towards the man in the booth with Jimmy. "Perhaps now he can get the help he needs...and no one else needs to die."

Joe nodded. "Thanks Diana. We wouldn't have caught him without you...or Vincent. Even Jimmy knows that."

As they watched, Jimmy looked up at Diana, smiled, and winked.



It was getting colder Above. The heat had lasted far longer than usual, even after the leaves had begun to fall, but finally the cold began to set in.

Vincent loved the changing of the seasons. Their world Below was always the same, with not even the change from darkness to light, and he loved watching the world change. Unfortunately at night he couldn't see the riot of colors in the fall, but he often collected leaves and would take them down into the tunnels to look at by lamplight. He'd helped the boys start a leaf collection, and Diana watched with mingled amusement and sorrow as he helped them learn about them...as much for himself as for them.

Diana sighed. *I wish he could just take a walk in the daylight.* She watched as Vincent looked up the leaves in the encyclopedias and explained to the boys how and why the leaves changed colors. Not wanting to disturb them, she took Cathy to visit Father.

When she entered Father's chamber, she saw him sitting at his octagonal table playing chess with Mary. Actually, Mary was a fairly good player... far better than most, though she'd only learned to play recently...and Father beat her regularly enough to keep him satisfied.

As Diana came in, Father looked up and smiled. "Come in, my dear...bring my granddaughter to me."

Diana hesitated a moment, since she knew that chess was almost as engrossing to Father as surgery, but Father impatiently motioned her to come in.

"Checkmate," Mary said, and beamed.

Sighing, Father grumbled: "I'm going to stop playing this game. My heart can't stand the frustration." However, he said it with a gentle smile at Mary, who reached over the board and patted his hand. His smile broadening, he reached up for Cathy and put her on his lap.

The baby played with the chess pieces--each one a work of art. Cullen had carved them for him several years ago. Father was the white king, Mary the white queen. Vincent was a white knight, Winslow a black bishop, Pascal a white bishop, and Jamie and Mouse were pawns. Various other tunnel dwellers formed the rest of the set. Father treasured it, and the wood was polished to a gleam with constant use.

"Where's Vincent?" Father asked.

Sitting on the edge of Father's cluttered desk, Diana told them about the leaf collection.

All Mary could offer was understanding...a commodity she had a great deal of. "I understand how you feel. I used to watch him as he watched the other boys go Above during the day. The wistfulness on his face almost broke my heart. But Diana, he has adjusted, and he has a great deal to be thankful for as well."

Cathy held up the white knight for Diana and said, "Fa-ther."

Startled, Diana just stared at Cathy, then laughed. "Leave it to Cathy to wait until Vincent isn't around to say "Father" the first time. I think she can say everything else, but she's never said Father before."

Cathy just looked smug. The child could be absolutely impossible at times. She could talk like an encyclopedia when she wanted to: she knew words most three-year-olds didn't use. Like Mouse, though, she seldom made a complete sentence, only saying enough to get her by. Try as Diana might, she'd never gotten her to say "Father" for Vincent. It was almost as though she knew she were being called on to "perform" and simply refused, but it was obvious that her father was her favorite person in the world.

Father and Mary laughed along with Diana. They too, had experienced times when Cathy frustrated them terribly, but one could not help but love the little elf. She was simply beautiful with her softly waving honey blond hair, and her face with the high cheekbones, pointed chin: and serious blue eyes under her slanted brows truly made her look fairy-like. Her delicate hands with their sharp talons were strangely beautiful as well... they seemed to match the rest of her perfectly.

Mary began speaking with Father about the preparations for Winterfest, which was coming up soon. "William is getting in food from the helpers, and the chandlers are finished with the candles."

"I'm looking forward to Winterfest," Diana said. "Everyone will be here this year. Joe and Erica are both anxious to come down, and Devin's even taking a day off from school so he and Susan can attend. And Vincent wants to invite Elliot."

While they were discussing plans, obviously Cathy found it to be boring, because she fell asleep in Father's arms. Taking her from him, Diana took her to the dorm to put her down and found Vincent there just finishing reading the boys a story from *The Jungle Book*. She kissed the children goodnight, and she and Vincent wandered back to their chamber.

"Do you feel like a walk tonight?" Vincent asked.

"I'd love one. Let me get dressed a little warmer... it's getting cold."

After Diana was ready, Vincent threw his cloak over his shoulders, and putting his arm around her, they left. They walked in a companionable silence, listening to the music of the pipes. They stopped by the Whispering Gallery and listened to snatches of music and some children laughing somewhere in the city.

Once out in the park Vincent breathed in a deep sigh of relief. "I need to get outside more. I never realize how enclosed our world is until the moment I step out here." He gestured upwards to the towering buildings of the city. "I haven't gone into the city...gone to the roofs of any of the buildings to look at the lights in a long time."

He mused quietly as they walked, arms about one another, and finally Diana asked, "Am I keeping you from going?"

Startled, Vincent turned to look at her, his eyes liquid pools in the faint moonlight. "No, of course not. I suppose I simply haven't felt as pressing a need to be a part of a world I can never have. I have you now, and the children. My world is complete."

They continued their walk, with Diana telling him of her first trip to the top of the Empire State Building. "It seemed as though I couldn't get any higher. I felt I could touch the sky. It really *is* an amazing view."

Vincent told her of the many ventures he had made into buildings, riding the elevators unseen and unsuspected...the libraries he'd visited, and the one time he'd dared to enter the museum and was almost caught by the guard before he managed to slip away. "Sometimes I feel bad about that. I left the poor man feeling extremely confused." Vincent stopped momentarily, tasting the air and listening. He gestured for Diana to follow him, and they melted into the shadows as another couple came toward them around a corner, then passed out of sight. Sighing, Vincent led Diana back to the path. "I used to ride the elevators on some of the older buildings late at night as the watchmen made their rounds--clinging to the cables as they went up and exiting on the empty floors--going to the roof. I'd stand and look at the city spread out beneath me like jewels strewn on black velvet...and I would feel so alone." He looked down at the path as he walked and his face was hidden behind heavy veils of hair. "It was both better and worse when I met Catherine. Our love brought me such joy...yet at times the knowledge of the impossibility of it brought me such pain..." He shook his head in wonder. "Hope and despair warred within me during that time. Then, when Catherine was killed, I felt dead. Even with

Jacob with me, my life seemed so empty."

Diana had been silent, listening to Vincent's ruminating. His talk of Catherine didn't bother her. She knew he needed at times to talk about her.

He held her a little closer. "It still seems strange to me to think that Love was with me all along during that dark time, had I not been too self-involved to see it." He stopped, pulling her to him.

Diana smiled up at him, her face lovely in the scanty moonlight. "You needed your time to grieve and you would have resented me had I tried to intrude. You didn't need to replace Catherine, or have anyone even *try* to replace her... I wouldn't try to do that even now. You needed a friend, and I tried to be that as long as I could. Until I couldn't handle your grief any longer myself." Diana shivered. It was cold.

Vincent drew his mantle around her and they stopped under a bridge out of the wind. "Perhaps we should go back. It's getting colder and I sense snow."

As they headed back toward the tunnels Vincent seemed quiet, and when they reached the tunnel entrance, he opened the steel door and stood a moment. He reached out and traced her face with his hand.

"Do you mind if I walk for a time alone?" He touched their bond momentarily and found her curious, but not hurt or unhappy. Taking her face in his hands, he kissed her gently. "Do not wait up. I want to go see Elliot."

Vincent walked across the park and re-entered the tunnels on the other side. He caught a train--timing his leap perfectly just before the train accelerated--and clung to the top, his nails deep in the grooves. His mane and cloak streamed behind him and his teeth flashed as he smiled widely. He loved the speed and the rush of adrenaline as he rode the trains. Father hated it that he did this so often, but had given up years ago admonishing him. Most of the younger men--strong enough and lithe enough--tried it Vincent's way at one time or another, though he strongly discouraged it...for it was exceedingly dangerous, and people had died trying. It wasn't something that you could practice beforehand: either you could do it or you were dead. Subway tokens were not that hard for the others to get ...but it was impossible for Vincent to ride normally, so this was the only way he could utilize the subway system.

As the train slowed, Vincent leaped nimbly off and moved quickly to the shadows. He wasn't far from the address Elliot had given him. *I hope Elliot is home... and hope the apartment is accessible enough for me to get to it.*

Elliot Burch bent over plans and specs in his small apartment. He had empty Chinese takeout containers on the table next to him and a large mug of cocoa. He was making progress on getting his business going again, but his lawyers told him it might take several years to completely unravel the remnants that Gabriel had left him and have it accessible to him. In the meantime, he had only his small nestegg and his reputation to carry him through--that and his determination and drive.

He heard a sound at the window and moved over to glance through the curtains. When he saw Vincent on the ledge outside his second story window, he smiled widely. Opening the window, he gestured for him to come inside. They stood by the window, the curtains billowing for a couple of moments as they embraced one another awkwardly. Elliot turned to close the window, then offered Vincent some cocoa.

Nodding silently, Vincent paced the small apartment while Elliot got his mug of cocoa and brought it to him.

"It's good to see you, Vincent. Is Diana well? The children?"

Vincent nodded again briefly, the lines crinkling around his eyes as he smiled. "Jacob is three now--going on four, Cathy 10 months... and Diana is wonderful... are *you* well?"

Elliot exuberantly began telling Vincent of his accomplishments and plans, and Vincent listened, allowing himself be drawn into another world of business and finance--architecture--and Elliot's dreams.

They talked for several hours, then Vincent began telling Elliot about how he'd inadvertently endangered the tunnels when he'd been building the Burch Tower. "That was why Catherine had been forced to stop you."

Elliot remembered other things about that time--about how Catherine had offered to marry him only if he'd stop construction. Now he knew why. His bitterness showed in his face.

Vincent watched him carefully. "I'm sorry, Elliot. I just thought you should know."

Elliot nodded as he stared into his cup. "It's not so much Catherine as it is The Tower...." He grinned sheepishly at Vincent. "I've reconciled myself to the fact that Cathy could never really have loved me, thanks to you. But the Burch Tower... that was such a dream of mine. I felt so...bereft... when I couldn't finish it. I was very bitter about

that."

Vincent closed his eyes and thought a moment, then said quietly,

*One broken dream is not the end of dreaming,
One shattered hope is not the end of all;
Beyond the storm and tempest stars are gleaming,
Still build your castles, though your castles fall.*¹³

Laughing, Elliot tried to match Vincent's memory of poetry, but couldn't quite manage. He shook his head. "I know.... Didn't Thoreau say something about building castles in the air, but putting foundations under them? Well, I guess now I'm back to building the foundations."

Before Vincent left, he invited Elliot to Winterfest. "It is in two days. I will either send someone for you or come get you myself. I would like for you to be there this year. I'm sure you and Mouse will enjoy discussing projects." He explained to Elliot about Mouse. "He's quite amazing. No schooling other than what we were able to provide, or he could absorb himself, and *that* after being all but wild until he was eight. He could've been another Einstein. You'll like him." He smiled thinking of Mouse's many failed inventions. "Half of Mouse's inventions don't work, but the ones that do make our life below far easier and safer." He told Elliot about the shower system Mouse had devised. "The first time it was to be used, he asked me to try it out. I pulled the lever and nothing happened, so I stood there chuckling to myself: then suddenly this flood of icy water poured over me! I almost froze between the cold and shock."

Elliot laughed out loud at the vision of Vincent when that water hit him.

"Fortunately for the less hardy occupants of our world, he has managed to heat the water fairly well, though Diana says she still misses truly hot showers."

When Vincent left, Elliot had a hard time getting his concentration back, so he put his work away and went to bed. He was looking forward to their next visit; Vincent had been a stimulating companion.

Vincent went home by way of the park again. It would've been faster simply to ride the trains, but he never missed a chance to be in the park. He raised his head, testing the cold air. *Definitely snow.* By the time he was halfway across the park large flakes began to fall, and he stood, hands outstretched, face to the heavens, feeling the flakes hit him. He loved snow. *This year I'll bring Jacob and Toby out to play in the snow.* He turned several times as eddies of snow

swirled around him. *I wish Diana were with me to see this.* He watched as the snow fell harder and harder, beginning to stick to the ground. By the time he reached the tunnel opening there was almost a half-inch on the ground, and his tracks were being covered quickly. He leaned with one broad shoulder on the side of the tunnel and watched as the snow fell. It was so quiet. He murmured to himself,

*The City sleeps! And I alone keep watch.
So still and tranquil is the hour, I almost hear
The heart-throbs of the sleepers as they dream,
For lost in night's oblivion all seems
Enwrapped in its deep silences.*¹⁴

Pushing off from the tunnel wall, he went further inside and pulled the hidden lever, opening the steel door. He pulled open the gate, closed the door, and went home.

As Vincent came silently into the chamber, moving quietly as a cat in the darkness, his night sight showed him every detail of the room from the very faint light coming in from the stained glass

window. The scent of candle wax and smoke always seemed stronger to him after the air outside.

He watched Diana sleeping as he shed his boots, vest, and breeches and slipped in under the quilts. He lay with his hands behind his head thinking. *I enjoyed tonight...the walk with Diana earlier, and the visit with Elliot.* He glanced over at Diana sleeping beside him and wished fervently that she'd wake. He reached out and touched her sleeping mind softly, his bond not intrusive, but she stirred in her sleep and turned toward him... reaching for him. He gathered her into his arms, murmuring softly to her, kissing her face and throat, caressing her back. His hair cascaded over her like a tide.

Still most of the way asleep, Diana was still dreaming...but it was such a pleasant dream. Waking gently to Vincent's insistence, she responded joyfully, her bond seeking his even as their bodies sought one another.

In the world Above, the snow fell softly, blanketing a sleeping city, covering the buildings, trees and bridges, muffling the sounds to a delicate, glittering silence and creating an ethereal beauty.



Preparations for Winterfest proceeded. The load on the pipes for messages was enormous and Pascal was in seventh heaven. He and Zack hopped from one side of the pipe chamber to the other constantly. Messages were relayed almost without a hitch, but the tapping was becoming maddening to everyone else.

Vincent and Mouse were in charge of distributing candles by way of the children to all the helpers, and their many messengers came and went all day. Devin had even come down a day early so Father could help him with some studying the night before. He and Cullen were supervising getting the Great Hall in shape for the feast. All the women bustled around helping William with the food preparation and taking care of the children... keeping them out of the way and occupied. Diana and Jamie were decorating a cake for William and chatting.

Jamie was just beginning to show her pregnancy. "I'm glad my morning sickness is over. Maybe I can enjoy myself tomorrow. I think Mouse is about ready to move back to his Mousehole."

Diana sympathized. "You'll feel better from here on out, and Mouse will adjust." She laughed a little thinking of Mouse... "He *has* been a little out of sorts lately."

Putting the finishing touch on the cake, Jamie smiled and said, "I know... and it's not just me. His trash masher only managed to mash his hand and broke a finger. He has had to go around with it splinted, then when he was repairing the lift the cable broke and he sprained his ankle getting out of the way." Jamie shook her head. "I really feel sorry for him, but there's nothing I can do."

Vincent and Mouse were almost finished parceling out the candles. They still had the candles for Joe and Erica and for Elliot, and they sent Kipper up to find Bennie. He was to give a message to Elliot to meet Joe--then when and where Vincent would meet them both and bring them down.

Vincent watched Mouse as he limped around, noting that his usual spontaneous gaiety was lacking. "Are you feeling well, Mouse?"

Mouse looked up at Vincent through strands of blond hair. "Foot hurts. Finger hurts." He brightened a little and smiled. "Jamie feeling better, though."

Vincent leaned against the wall, arms crossed. "You and Jamie...are you both well?"

Mouse nodded hesitantly, then added, "Mouse worried...don't want Jamie to have same problem as Diana." His worried blue eyes met Vincent's.

A shadow passed over Vincent's face, but he smiled reassuringly. "Things go well more often than not, Mouse. I'm sure Jamie will do well."

Mouse nodded, seeming happier. He trusted Vincent implicitly.

Vincent gathered the remaining candles to take to Joe, Erica and Elliot. Since they were finished with their chores with the candles, they went on to help move tables and clean the Great Hall.

As the men were working in the Great Hall, Diana came in to speak with Vincent. He walked with her over to the alcove where they would be out of the way.

"Vincent was filthy with all the dust and dirt accumulation, and Diana smiled as she brushed his dirty hair out of his eyes. "Did you need me for anything?" Vincent asked, concerned.

"No. I wanted to let you know that I'm going down to try and talk Narcissa into coming to Winterfest this year. I left the children with Brooke."

Vincent put his arm around her and looked down at her. He was a little worried. "The trip down there is long, and you know how dangerous that stairway is. I would rather you didn't go alone."

"I know you'd rather go with me, but you can't..." she indicated all the work they were involved in. "Besides... you know how sure-footed I am. I'll be careful and I'll be fine. I need to go now, though, if I intend on getting back tonight. I'll be late as it is."

Vincent knew better than to try and change Diana's mind when she was set on something, so he cautioned her again and kissed her goodbye, but he intended to keep in touch with her with his bond all the way. *Not that it would be of any help if she fell.* He shuddered at the thought. He watched her as she went through the doors into the Chamber of the Winds, the wind blowing her hair around her, and sighing, went back to work. He knew he'd worry all day until she returned.

Diana took the path through the maze that she and Vincent always took to the Crystal Cavern. Narcissa's chamber was not so far, but it would still take a couple of hours to get there and a couple to get back.

Once out of the maze, she began down the seemingly endless stairway, keeping her right hand on the wall as she went and the lantern in the other. The lamplight

glistened off the quartz in the walls, making them seem almost luminous.

The quiet down here was almost unnerving after the racket above from the pipes. Occasionally as she made a turn she thought she could hear a distant tapping. There were pipes down here as well, and she could have sent Narcissa a message, but she was more likely to come if Diana made the effort to come invite her personally. Diana really wanted Narcissa to meet Cathy, and she thought the lure of the child might be enough to bring her. The old woman had expressed interest in the child's power before.

As Diana walked, she could feel the "nibbling" at the edges of her consciousness of Vincent's bond touching her. She wished she could touch back, but she needed her concentration on these stairs.

As she neared the last third of the stairs she noted there was a water leakage from somewhere seeping through a crack in the wall and reminded herself to tell Vincent about it so someone could check it out.

About that same time her foot slipped in the water.

Screaming her fright, Diana slid down eight or ten stairs, then caught herself barely in time before plunging over the edge into the Abyss.

Unfortunately, however, her lantern went over and she staggered to her feet in the pitch black dark. She stood there, hugging the wall, her immediate fright over, and determined to keep her wits about her. She felt the darkness pressing down on her, but she fought back her fear and forced herself to be calm. She knew Vincent felt her initial flash of instinctive fear, but she'd also felt him settle once her own fear had subsided.

Diana stood in the dark thinking. She felt the rough texture of the granite wall behind her, and under her Reeboks the stairs felt smooth and slick. She could hear the steady drip--drip of water. Mentally she recounted how far she had come and how far she had yet to go. *Should I "send" for Vincent or try to make it down the rest of the way? I'm almost at the bottom anyway.*

She sat down and scooted on her bottom for a few steps, keeping her right hand on the wall. *I can do it if I'm careful.*

Slowly and with infinite care Diana scooted down a few steps at a time. She felt her way carefully, counting steps. *I should be almost at the bottom*, she thought. Then it occurred to her that even if she made it to the bottom, she had no light to get her the rest of the way to Narcissa.

"Damn." She swore in the dark. She hated to

have to admit to Vincent that he had been right... she shouldn't have come alone. She heard a chuckle in the darkness.

"Now, child. How stubborn you be! Why you come here alone and in de dark?"

Relieved, Diana laughed shakily, recognizing Narcissa's voice. "How'd you know I was in the dark, Narcissa?" With Narcissa's blind, cataract-coated eyes, she was always in the dark.

Another chuckle answered her. "Why else you be scooting like dat? I hear de thump, thump. Besides, Narcissa could "hear" de distress when you lost de lamp."

"I wanted you to come to Winterfest." Diana said, "Now I suppose I would need you just to get back... unless you have a lamp I can borrow."

Diana felt a bony hand take hers. "Come child. You are on the last step. We go get another lamp, but since you come so far to get me, ol' Narcissa will come wit' you."

When the Great Hall was cleaned, the tables in place, and the candles and lanterns set for tomorrow, Vincent left to get cleaned up for supper. He'd been uneasy for a while after Diana's flash of fear, but she seemed fine now. All he'd felt for a time was her determination.

He fed the children and put them to bed, reading to the boys from *The Jungle Book*. He held Cathy while he read, and she fell asleep in his arms, her sharp-taloned fingers curled into small fists. Vincent kissed the boys goodnight and put Cathy in her bed in the wing for the toddlers, covering her with her quilt.

He could sense Diana coming back, but knew she would be back late, so he waited up for her. He visited with Devin and Father for a while, then talked with Susan and Mary while he watched Devin and Father play a game of chess.

For once, Father won and was jubilant. When Devin and Susan headed for Devin's old chamber, Vincent walked with them, then went alone to his own. He sat at his desk writing in his journal.

I wish at times Diana was not quite so determined and self-reliant. She worries me. However, part of what I love in her are those same traits, so I suppose I cannot have it both ways. When I felt her fear today, my heart was in my throat though I knew almost immediately that she was fine. The thought of losing her is almost more than I can bear.

He looked up at his painting of himself and

Catherine, remembering their love...and Catherine's stubbornness. *No. Independence*, he corrected himself. He looked down and continued writing.

Catherine was much like Diana in her independence. As much as I loved Catherine though, and as much as she loved me, I do not think she could have been happy forsaking her world to live here, as Diana has.

As he felt Diana coming closer and closer, he closed the journal and left to meet her. He could help her settle Narcissa in the guest chamber if she was with her. He walked slowly down the tunnel, noting that the pipes were at last quiet except for the sentries. He hadn't realized how loud it had become today until his head began aching.

Thinking of Narcissa sent his thoughts wandering toward his and Diana's pool near the Crystal Cavern. *The warm water would certainly have felt good after my exertions today.*

As he turned the corner he saw Diana and Narcissa come through the exit from the maze.

Going to her, he embraced her. "I was worried when I felt your fear. What happened?"

Diana thought fleetingly about fibbing, but Vincent's concern was always so real... he never said *I told you so*, ... and besides, he would know she was telling an untruth. So, looking up into his gentle eyes she admitted, "You were right. I shouldn't have gone alone. There was a water leak from somewhere and I slipped--lost my lantern. I scooted the rest of the way on my backside!"

Turning to hide his smile, Vincent greeted Narcissa, saying, "I am glad you came, Narcissa. I suppose after all Diana's efforts anyone would have felt obligated to accept her invitation."

Narcissa patted his face. "Nonsense. It is time I came for Winterfest. I have not yet met your children."

After settling Narcissa for the night, Vincent went with Diana to the showers so she could clean up for tomorrow. He sat on a boulder watching Diana hurry through her shower. Most of the warm water was gone after everyone else had cleaned up, and she hated cold showers.

When she came out, squeezing the water from her long red hair, he wrapped her in a towel and took another to dry her hair. As he worked to dry her hair with the other towel, she sat shivering: the tunnels were always a little cold and damp, though

the temperature stayed fairly constant.

Vincent playfully swept her up and carried her, with her giggling softly, through the tunnels to their chamber. Once there, he wrapped a quilt around her and gently worked the tangles out of her hair with the comb and his nails.

As Diana's chilly body warmed under the quilt, her eyes moved drowsily around their chamber, lovingly taking in all the books, the amber stained glass of the window, the comfortable lived in mess of all their belongings.

Vincent put the comb aside and put his arms around her from behind, burying his face in her hair. "Are you warmer now?"

Closing her eyes and leaning back into him, she murmured, "Um. I'm getting sleepy."

Vincent reached around and carefully unwound the quilt, then the towel. He picked her up and with one flip of his other hand tossed the covers back. He deposited her gently in bed and covered her with their patchwork quilt and two blankets. He walked around the chamber, blowing out the candles and removing his vest, boots, and breeches. His long homespun shirt made him seem like a ghost in the darkness. By the time he slipped in next to her, she was sound asleep with a sweet smile on her face. *Her dreams must be pleasing to her.* He leaned on one elbow, watching her sleep, and quoted quietly to himself,

*Out of the dreams that rose in happy throng,
Low to our hearts love sang an old sweet song,
And in the dusk where fell the fire-light gleam,
Softly it wove itself into our dream.¹⁵*

He put one arm around her, and drawing the covers up over his own shoulders fell asleep to dream his own dreams.

The morning was busy with everyone bustling about on last minute errands. Everyone grabbed a quick breakfast and then got out of William's way as the truculent cook bustled through his kitchen.

Vincent left to meet Joe, Erica, and Elliot while Diana went with Susan and Jamie to finish helping William. Brooke and Laura were caring for the younger children.

Walking with his easy, swinging stride, Vincent listened to the pipes as the messages pelted back and forth. He would be glad when they quieted to normal. *I'm certain even Pascal must have a headache by now.*

He finally reached the tunnel near Joe's apartment where he was to meet the others.

Elliot flash him a smile and leaned over to say something to Joe. Vincent smiled at Erica and took her hand, sketching a graceful bow. He loved to fluster her, and that always did. Eyes smiling, Vincent asked, "Are you ready for our celebration?"

They visited as they traveled, with Joe telling Elliot about last year's Winterfest. Elliot was obviously having a wonderful time already. He asked Vincent innumerable questions about the codes used on the pipes and on the practical aspects of life down in the tunnels.

Vincent laughed. "You're going to have to talk to Mouse and Pascal...you three will get along wonderfully. Maybe you can cheer Mouse up." He told them about Mouse's finger and foot and Jamie's morning sickness. "He hasn't been having a good time lately, and even his irrepressible good nature has suffered."

Erica commented on the noise of the pipes, "Isn't the noise worse than usual?"

Vincent nodded. "Things will quiet down soon, though. I just heard the last of the sentries checking in, and they'll be leaving their posts soon. We only leave sentries at critical spots during Winterfest, and people rotate so no one has to stay too long. Even Pascal leaves the pipe chamber for a while, though we can't keep him away for long."

Waving to some of the children, Vincent gestured for quiet as they screamed in a game of blind man's bluff. The children laughed and ran the other direction, waving back. Vincent shook his head, his mane down in his eyes. "Between the pipes and the chattering and screaming, it's a wonder we manage to make it to celebrate..." but as he spoke, his eyes gleamed. He loved hearing the children laugh, and the music of the pipes was part of his world.

Jacob and Toby ran up to them and Vincent scooped them up, tossing them both onto his shoulders. "Where are Diana and your sister?"

Jacob pointed down the tunnel. "They are with Narcissa."

After enduring a pummeling from their feet for a while, Vincent finally put them down and told them to go play.

Joe laughed as he watched them streak out of sight after the older children. "Those two amaze me. If I had half their energy, I'd be invincible."

Elliot was quiet, taking in all he could of the tunnel world. His visit before had been brief, and though Vincent had told him a great deal about his world, he was amazed at its complexity.

Joe and Erica, more aware of their surroundings, said they would go on to the Great Hall while Vincent showed Elliot around.

Vincent took Elliot through the Whispering Gallery and they stood for a short time on the bridge listening to the voices.

"Amazing." Elliot exclaimed. "I wonder where they all come from?"

Lifting his head to listen to some strains of music, Vincent closed his eyes a moment, then said, "No one knows. From all over the city, I suppose. This is a children's fairyland when it comes to imagination. You can pretend they come from anywhere when you're a child." As he ran his hand along the ropes on the handholds, he noted how frayed they were getting. "I need to come here and repair this tomorrow."

Leading Elliot back, he stopped by the guest chamber to pick up Diana and Narcissa. He found them in deep discussion, with Cathy sitting solemnly in Narcissa's lap. "Why so serious?" he inquired.

Glancing up, Diana smiled. "Nothing important. Narcissa has just been talking with Cathy."

Smile lines crinkling around his eyes, Vincent commented wryly, "If Cathy has been talking with *her* then that *would* be a milestone."

Vincent explained to Elliot Cathy's reluctance to grace the world with her speech.

Narcissa turned her blind eyes up to Vincent. "De little one, she will speak when she must, Vincent. She knows more dan you 'tink."

As Vincent watched in amazement, Cathy slid down off the bed, turned, and almost ran to him. The child hadn't even walked by herself yet, only walked holding onto things--at least as far as *he* knew. He looked at Diana questioningly as he swung Cathy up to his chest.

Diana shook her head, smiling. "Leave it to Cathy to pick a special day to walk to her father for the first

time."

Cathy just regarded her father with a small smile that became wider and wider as she sensed his pleasure in her feat. Her pixy-like face beamed. "Fa-ther." She threw her arms around him and hugged him, then pointed to Elliot and said, "El-yot."

Past being astonished by anything his daughter did, Vincent just handed her to Elliot. "She seems to know who you are, so I suppose introductions are not necessary."

As they walked toward the Great Hall quietly discussing the arrangements for the celebration, suddenly Cathy began crying and pointing back toward the Whispering Gallery. "Fa-ther...No. Ja-cob. No.No.No."

As Cathy pulled frantically on Vincent's tousled blond mane, he looked into her frightened eyes, then reached for his son's mind...and found him at the bridge. Wordlessly, he handed the baby to Diana and began running for the bridge, his mane whipping behind him as the wind from the Chamber of Winds tore through it. "Jaacob," he screamed, his voice torn by the wind.

When he came into sight of the bridge, his worst fears were realized as he felt his son's fear when the rope broke and he dangled over the Abyss.

Vincent threw himself flat on the bridge and reached down with one long arm to grab Jacob by the arm and pull him up. He sat shaking and hugging the child as he cried, and Toby stood next to him, too frightened to speak. Shakily, he got to his feet and taking Toby by the hand, carried Jacob off the bridge. By this time the others had reached the bridge, urged by Cathy's insistence.

Diana was furious. "They were *supposed* to be with the older children. How'd they get here alone?" She examined Jacob anxiously.

Vincent just shook his head, tears of relief standing in his eyes. He was still shaken. He sat on a boulder and called the boys. "You *know* not to come here alone." His voice broke with his emotion. "Where are the others?"

Toby shuffled his feet, and Jacob rubbed the tears from his eyes. He drew himself up and faced his father. "We left." He pointed towards the Great Hall. "They were busy."

Vincent hugged them fiercely. "Go with Diana."

As he started off, Diana asked anxiously, "Where are you going?" Calling back over his shoulder, he replied... "To fix the bridge, of course...go on. It won't take long."

As Vincent walked slowly through the tunnel, he noted that the pipes were finally silent. Suddenly he stopped and slumped against the wall, covering his face with his hands. He felt a hand on his shoulder, and looking up he saw Elliot watching him in sympathy. He shuddered. "I thought I'd lost him..."

"But you didn't. Come on. Let's go fix that bridge."

They went to the storeroom and got the tools and rope.

Vincent stated fiercely, "I am going to go back out there tomorrow and reinforce the webbing on that entire bridge...should've done it years ago."

After they returned to the bridge and fixed the broken rope, Vincent checked all the other ropes and found them intact. They returned the tools, then headed for the celebration.

Vincent felt emotionally drained, but as they pulled open the doors to the Great Hall, Jacob ran to him, and he held his son tightly. "Stay off of that bridge!"

Looking into his father's eyes, Jacob nodded solemnly.

"Now go play." He swatted Jacob's small bottom with one taloned hand, and watched him run off to join the other children. He looked up to see Diana gazing at him across the room. Their bonds touched, and the clamor and confusion faded away, and there was only peace.

Leaving Elliot behind, he strode quickly through the throng of people to stand before her.

Rolly began playing a waltz, and reaching out, he led her out to dance.

Narcissa stood in the background, holding Cathy. She felt the love Diana and Vincent had for one another, felt Cathy's satisfaction and Jacob's boyish happiness-already forgetting his close call. She leaned against the wall, her blind eyes seeing nothing, but her soul seeing everything. She was glad she'd come.

"Cissa" Cathy patted Narcissa's cheek with her tiny sharp-taloned hand.

"Yes, child." Narcissa said, "I know. I understand."

Elliot had been introduced to Mouse by Joe and they were deep in discussion about Mouse's plans for a new hydraulic pump and Elliot was promising to help him with parts. Mouse's eyes shone with the thought of brand new parts.

Joe and Erica were busy visiting with Father and Mary, and Father was trying to coax Joe into a game of chess.

Children darted everywhere between the adults, playing their games and generally causing confusion.

Sebastian was entertaining a large group of youngsters with his magic tricks.

Finally, Father ended his chess game by actually beating Joe, and called everyone to the feast: they'd waited until Vincent had returned and calmed down before beginning the feast and the ceremony.

As they lit their candles Father spoke of the light of their hearts and their love pushing back the darkness.

As Vincent listened to Father's solemn and moving speech, he thought as he did every year, of how fortunate he was to have such a place to live, away from the hatred and fear of the rest of the world. This celebration of the beginning of his world--their world, always moved him deeply. His heart constricted once again momentarily thinking of the close call Jacob had just had. He glanced across the table to where Jacob and Toby were sitting beside Father, then looked up at Diana. Their bond was intermingled with Cathy's...and Jacob's. The candlelight flickered in the huge hall, reflecting from Diana's eyes as she smiled at him. The bands across his chest loosened, and he breathed deeply. Father's voice seemed very far away as the peace of the moment overcame him.

Once the feast was over, the celebrations continued for several hours. Since Mouse and Elliot were so involved, Michael danced with Jamie and Brooke, and everyone had a wonderful time.

Vincent danced one dance with Jamie and commented on how wonderful she looked, which made her blush. Devin, of course, spread himself around liberally as Susan watched with amusement.

Eventually, after saying her goodbyes and thanking Diana for her efforts to get her there, Narcissa left to find her lonely way home to the catacombs. Then, when the hour became late, Devin and Susan came to tell Vincent that they would escort Joe and Erica home, as they had to be leaving as well.

Elliot came to stand beside them, and watched the others leave. "I'd like to stay the night. Perhaps I can help you with that bridge tomorrow."

Vincent nodded gratefully. Diana had gone to put the children to bed, and Vincent asked Elliot, "I'm going Above to visit Catherine's grave. Would you care to come?"

Nodding, Elliot walked with him as he headed towards the park. "Would Diana come with us?"

Vincent shook his head sadly. "No. Diana hasn't been there with me since our daughter was buried next to Catherine. That's the one thing she won't share with me."

They walked slowly through the park, their steps

crunching on the frozen grass and the remains of the last snowfall. They spoke of Vincent's first daughter, who had been the image of her father.

"Diana still feels the loss so acutely she simply will not speak of it. She blocks her pain away. When we had Cathy, it helped, but she still tries not to think about it. She grieved with me, but though I know she thinks of her still, she refuses to share her thoughts."

Reaching the graveside, Elliot noted the tiny grave next to Catherine's with the inscription: *Our Changeling Child*.

Vincent stood over Catherine's grave, thinking of how he had almost lost her son as well. Silently he told her, *I could never have borne losing both of you. He's all I have left of you besides my memories.*

Finally, Elliot cleared his throat, then asked, "I suppose Diana knows you are here tonight."

Vincent nodded. "She understands."

Elliot closed his eyes and thought of Catherine, of her laugh, her smiling eyes, her zest for life, and her courage. *I miss her*. But looking at Vincent he realized a depth of love he could never have given her. They both stood silently for a long while, then almost on cue, they turned together and headed back.

After showing Elliot to the guest chamber, Vincent went to his chamber. He found Diana sitting up in bed, her fiery hair gleaming in the candlelight as it streamed over her shoulders. He stood silently in the doorway a moment, just looking at her, appreciating her. She reached out a hand and he moved slowly towards her.

Diana watched him as he moved through the chamber, his huge frame moving with a dancer's grace, his tousled mane golden in the candlelight. His belt buckle picked up the candlelight and reflected it, but the love gleaming in his eyes was brighter. He slowly removed his vest and white shirt, then turned to blow out the candles. Finally, with only the glow from the stained glass window casting his form in silhouette, he finished undressing and came to bed.

"Diana..."

As they bonded, she could sense no thought of Catherine.

Later, with Diana asleep, Vincent lay for a long time, his arms behind his head. His bond sought his children and found them well, and Diana's sleep was peaceful. He carefully slid from beneath the quilts, and wrapping himself in his cloak for warmth, he sat at his desk. Lighting one candle, he pulled out his journal.

Jacob asked me the other night what the moon was. For a moment I had to stop and think before telling him the

truth. In my mind, the moon is my symbol for Diana. Catherine was my sun. Catherine brought me such joy and light--our love illuminated my dark days-- my entire world. But our love was as impossible for us, as it is impossible for me to ever live in the sunlight. The moon illuminates my nights and shines her light on me. Just as the moon's light is possible for me, Diana's constancy and love, even through the tides of life remain with me. Her love is quieter--the light less blinding, more illuminating. Comparison is impossible, useless, and hurtful. I love them both, my Sun and Moon. I feel sometimes as though I have lived three lives...one alone...one with Catherine...and one with Diana, and in each I have been a different man.

He closed the journal, blew out the candle, and went back to bed, satisfied that he had gotten his thoughts down properly.

The next day, Elliot and Vincent were reinforcing the bridge, criss-crossing ropes to make it less likely for anyone to slip and fall through into the Abyss...especially the little ones, who had no business there in any case.

Vincent's sigh expressed his frustration with himself. "I should have done this years ago. It was dangerous when I was a child. I can't believe I waited until there was almost a disaster before changing the design."

Elliot stood and stretched. He looked out over the chasm and shuddered, thinking of Jacob clinging to the rope over that endless abyss. "We all make mistakes, Vincent. I've told you that before. Besides, this place is no more dangerous than the city streets where other children Jacob's age play."

Snatches of conversation, music, radio drifted down to them from Above. Elliot listened, but continued looking out over the chasm. "This is a lonely place, here on the bridge."

Vincent looked up, mildly astonished. "Lonely? I've never thought so." He sat with one foot dangling over the edge of the bridge and smiled up at Elliot, peering through strands of blond mane. "I spent many an hour here as a child--not much older than Jacob--against Father's wishes of course. I used to sit and wonder where all the voices were coming from. Devin and I would make up stories." He looked around, remembering. "This place holds many fond memories for me." His face clouded a little. "It holds some painful memories as well... not just of Jacob. I would sit and listen to these voices and know I would never go Above."

Elliot just looked at Vincent sadly and quoted, *Who weeps now anywhere in the world, without cause weeps in the world, weeps over me.*

Who laughs now anywhere in the night, without cause laughs in the night, laughs at me.

*Who goes now anywhere in the world, without cause goes in the world, goes to me.*¹⁶

At a slight sound, they both looked up to see Toby, Jacob, and Cathy standing by the bridge.

Angry, Vincent bellowed, "What are you doing here!"

Toby flinched, Jacob stood impassive, and Cathy smiled.

Vincent strode off the bridge looking as though he were ready to do battle, "Where is Diana?"

Jacob said quietly, "She was talking with Jamie. We said we were taking Cathy to see William, but she wanted to come here."

Vincent glowered at Jacob. "After last night, I would think you would know better, Jacob. I don't care if Cathy wanted to come here or not. I don't want to see you here again, and if you ever bring Cathy here again with you, I'll" he thought furiously... he simply couldn't think of a punishment severe enough..."punish you severely. Do you understand?"

Jacob nodded, tears in his eyes.

Stooping, Vincent softened. "I don't want you hurt... any of you."

With that, all three of them threw themselves at him and clung to him, sobbing. After his mane was wet with tears, and Cathy hiccoughing, he consoled them, then told them, "Since you said you were going to William, why not do that now? Perhaps he will have something sweet for you."

They pelted off down the tunnel, Cathy running as fast behind them as she could manage on her tiny legs. It certainly had taken her no time at all to perfect her running.

Elliot came up behind Vincent. "That bridge should hold an elephant."

Quietly, Vincent replied, "It doesn't need to hold an elephant--only small children."

They looked at each other and burst out laughing.

A few weeks later, Vincent was playing chess with Father when Diana came into the chamber. She perched on Father's desk watching them play, not wanting to disturb them, but after waiting for quite a while with neither of them looking up, she cleared her throat and said, "Vincent."

Tearing his eyes from the chessboard, he reluctantly looked over at her. "Yes?" Though he was polite, Diana could feel his irritation at her interruption. He'd been concentrating extremely hard. Father was beating him for once, and it irked him.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, but you *promised* we would take the children Above to play in the snow tonight. They've been looking forward to it, and it's getting late." Diana could almost feel the war being fought in Vincent's mind... his desire to go Above with the children, and his equally intense desire to beat Father.

Finally, his desire to be with the children won. He held out his hands and looked ruefully at Father. "I concede. You probably would have won in any case."

Father grinned wolfishly. "I would have. There was no way out."

As Father put away the chess pieces, Vincent stretched. They'd been playing for a long while. "Are the children ready to go?"

Diana hopped off the desk. "Not quite. You have a few more minutes. I'll go get them ready."

As Diana was dressing Cathy, she could sense her excitement. The child knew she was going somewhere, but wasn't sure where. She'd never been Above in the park. Diana pulled her arms through the sleeves of the small parka she and Mary had made for her and put the tiny snowboots on her that she'd bought for her. She'd bought similar pairs for Jacob and Toby, and they were busy stomping around the chamber in them, anxious to leave.

When Vincent swung into the chamber with his long, easy stride, he was stopped at the door by two insistently clamoring youngsters. He swept them up, one under each arm and deposited them on the bed.

As they asked him a hundred questions, never giving him a moment to answer even one of them, he reached into their wardrobe and pulled out a heavier shirt and pulled it on, then picked up his

cloak and put it around his shoulders. He glanced at the boys, amused at their excitement, and noted briefly that they should be warm enough. When he looked at Cathy, he almost laughed. She looked like an Eskimo. Very quietly he smiled at Diana. He was trying not to laugh, but his eyes and his emotions betrayed him. He said softly, "Do you think she will be warm enough?"

Diana could sense his extreme amusement at her over-protectiveness, but she was completely undaunted. She smiled sweetly at him and commented wryly, "At least I'm taking her Above before she turns two." She kissed him on the cheek. "Allow me *my* over-protectiveness."

The children scrambled ahead of them as they headed for the park. Cathy tried to keep up with the boys, but the snowboots were awkward and she fell, so Vincent picked her up and she clung like a monkey to his neck and hair.

When they got to the steel door closing off the tunnels to the outside world, Vincent pushed the lever, and with a groan it rolled open. He reminded the children that though they could play, they still needed to play quietly if possible.

When they walked out into the park, it was like a fairyland. The snow covered everything and there were icicles on the trees.

Diana put the gloves on the children as Vincent watched: with his claws, he was a little concerned about trying to draw those gloves over so many tiny wiggling fingers.

When Cathy was ready, he took her over to a tree and showed her the icicles and snapped one off for her. She started to put it in her mouth, and he cautioned, "Dirty," and shook his head. She made a face at him.

"Father look!" Jacob cried, and when he turned, a snowball hit him in the face.

"Turning my children against me are you?" Vincent asked delightedly.

Diana was showing the boys how to make snowballs, and she grinned. He put Cathy down and began making snowballs and throwing them at the three of them, and Cathy ran between them laughing and stomping her feet, making tiny tracks in the snow. After the snowball fight, Diana showed them how to make snow angels.

As they watched the children run back and forth, the boys throwing snowballs...Cathy just running, they walked hand in hand behind them.

Vincent raised his head and breathed in the cold air. "It will snow again soon... that should cover the tracks."

Diana sensed his worry that someone would follow the tracks back to the tunnels. "It's getting late. Perhaps we should take them back...it's well past Cathy's bedtime."

They gathered the children together despite their protests, and took them back to the tunnels.

Vincent looked back over the tracked up snow and reached out with one fur-booted foot and smudged a footprint. "Perhaps I could erase some of the tracks just to be sure."

Diana watched as he took a branch and erased most of the tracks leading back to the tunnels... at least as well as he could manage. Tossing the branch aside, he sighed and looked up at the sky. "That is all I can do. The weather must do the rest."

They walked slowly back toward the living areas with the boys talking animatedly about the fun they'd had and jostling one another.

Cathy lay asleep with her head on Vincent's shoulder.

Diana took his hand, and they walked silently, listening to the boys' comments and smiling.

Once the children were put to bed in the dorm they went back to their chamber. Diana brushed her hair in front of the mirror while Vincent lay back in bed watching her. He loved the soft russet shimmer of her hair in the candlelight. She had it braided so much of the time to keep it out of the way, but he loved it loose. He touched her delicately with his bond and felt the tinge of sadness he had felt so often before...the sorrow of the loss of their first daughter. Watching her carefully, he said quietly, "I need to go to Catherine's grave tomorrow night--to check the rosebush. Would you come with me?"

Without turning around, Diana continued brushing her hair a few more strokes, then put the brush down and covered the mirror. She continued looking away as tears gathered in her eyes and she furiously blinked them away, obviously not wanting him to see. When she turned, she was composed, but he could feel her sorrow. "No."

Vincent turned the quilts back for her as she slid into bed. He sighed and reached for her, but she turned away. "Diana," he pleaded, "Please come with me. You still refuse to come to the baby's grave. You only say that she belongs with Catherine now...but I know you still carry her in your heart...and you grieve for her still."

Tears were sliding down Diana's face and soaking her pillow. Her block was up, but Vincent didn't need their bond to know how unhappy she

was.

"I can't Vincent. Don't ask this of me. We have Cathy now, and that should be enough."

Vincent ached to hold her, but just clenched his fists to keep from touching her, knowing she would only move away. Quietly, he said, "You must face this, Diana. She and Cathy were both our daughters. We lost her, but she was *ours*, not Catherine's." Vincent's vision was blurring a little as he stared across the room at his painting of himself and Catherine. "I thought for a time that you were healing...that having Cathy was all you needed, so I let it be. I was wrong. I had to release Catherine, release my grief, and you helped me to do that. Now you must release the child, and you cannot do that if you refuse to face the fact that she's gone." He gently put his arms around her, felt her sobbing, and held her closer. Eventually she turned to him, finally quiet.

They lay that way for a long while with the flickering candlelight casting shadows around the room. Gently Vincent asked, "Will you come with me?"

Diana buried her face in his shoulder and nodded almost imperceptibly, and dropping her barrier she reached for their bond.

Vincent soothed her as only he could. Not bothering to blow the candles out, they let them burn down, and fell asleep without moving, and their bond slowly released.

Deeply asleep, Diana dreamed... but it seemed so real. She was holding her child, and the soft, reddish fur of the baby's hands and arms was so soft. She looked just like Vincent. The child looked at her, her eyes totally unafraid. Diana glanced up and saw Cathy standing next to her. Looking into Diana's eyes with her serious blue ones, Cathy spoke--so clearly, Diana knew she couldn't truly be speaking: "She's not here, but she's not gone." The child faded as Diana tried desperately to hold onto her, but Cathy climbed into her lap. With tears in her eyes, Diana looked up to see Vincent watching her sorrowfully. "The river flows back to the sea, but she will still live in you and me. Vincent took her hand and Cathy's, and Diana woke.

When she opened her eyes in the guttering light of the candles, she saw Cathy standing next to the bed in her white nightgown. She was shivering in her bare feet and her blond mane was down in her eyes.

Vincent was awake as well, and called her gently, "Come here Cathy."

The tiny girl walked around the bed and Vincent lifted her up, putting her between them. Cathy climbed over him and hugged her mother tightly.

She stared into Diana's eyes and said, "Not sad,

Mama." Vincent asked Diana about her dream, and realized that once again, they'd shared their dreams. Or had they gone to that other more spiritual plane where they'd gone before? Had Cathy been there? The child?

He shrugged and quoted,

*I saw the mystic vision flow
And live in men and woods and streams,
Until I could no longer know
The dream of life from my own dreams.¹⁷*

Cathy snuggled down between them and went to sleep nestled against Diana. Vincent looked wonderingly at Diana. "I wonder..."

"What?" she replied.

"If Cathy was able to find her way into that other plane that Narcissa taught us to find...what else can she do? Sometimes I worry about her strength. Suppose, for instance, she found her way out of body, then was unable to return? She's too young to be doing things like this. I think sometime soon we need to consult Narcissa about her."

Diana reassured him, though he'd made her uneasy as well. "Perhaps it was only that we dreamed and shared the dream."

Vincent shook his head. "No. I believe that when we share dreams, we are on some level still in that other realm. Those dreams are too real. They remind me of my waking dreams--my visions." He looked fondly at his tiny daughter snuggled peacefully against her mother. "Sometimes I wonder what we have brought into the world, Diana. Jacob is already more intelligent and far more advanced than I was at his age...and his empathic power is greater than my own. I was concerned *enough* about him, but Cathy almost frightens me. What will she be like as she gets older?"

Diana just looked at him and had no answer. They both thought of Ezekiel. Power must be tempered with love and wisdom. Sleep was a long time in coming for either of them.

The following day passed uneventfully. Michael and Vincent made plans for their literature classes and for a play the older children wanted to perform.

Diana took some of the children for a trip to the Painted Tunnels to give Mary a break. When she returned from their expedition, Diana found a note from Joe. He had a new case for her and wanted

her to meet him in the morning. Diana laid the note carefully on the desk and wandered around the chamber. She was restless. She didn't want to go with Vincent tonight, but she'd promised she would.

"Diana? Are you back already?" Jamie came into the chamber, her cheerful smile fading a little as she saw Diana's face. "What's wrong?"

Diana walked over to the bed and picked up her large chunk of amethyst from the Crystal Cavern and sat on the bed looking at it. She looked up at Jamie. "Nothing really, I suppose...come...sit down."

Jamie sat, leaning back a little on her hands as her stomach was bulging just a little. Her sandy blond hair hung down over her eyes, reminding Diana of a cocker spaniel.

Diana laughed when she saw Jamie's stomach move as the baby kicked. She reached over and felt it. "What does Mouse think about this?"

Eyes twinkling, Jamie told Diana about Mouse's reaction when he first felt the baby. "He must have jumped a foot. I'm not sure what he expected.... Oh! By the way, did you know Elliot is here? He came down to help Mouse improve that old lift... the one that almost fell on his foot. They've been down there all day. I'm going down and I thought I'd come see if you'd like to come with me."

"Sure, just let me pull on a sweater, it's cold down there. Also, I need to pick up Cathy from Mary. The boys are with Vincent, but Mary certainly doesn't need another one to take care of."

They stopped by the dorm and got Cathy, dressed her a little warmer, then headed to the lower levels. As they walked, they talked about Jamie's pregnancy, Elliot's visit, everything except what was bothering Diana.

Jamie didn't push. During a long silent moment, the roar of the subway far above seemed gratingly loud.

Jamie finally commented, "Cathy's sure getting big. Her birthday is coming up soon." She fingered Cathy's blond mane, so like Vincent's. "It's kind of a shame... her hair was red when she was born, but it has changed. I would've liked to see her keep that red hair...like her Mom." She glanced at Diana to see what she thought.

Diana trailed her hand along the pipes, then smiled up at Jamie. "No. I'm glad her hair changed. She and Jacob both inherited Vincent's hair color...and a lot more." She was quiet a moment, then added, "Vincent was happy, I know, that she didn't look more like him, and I guess I am too." She took a deep breath and forced herself to continue. "Our other daughter would've had to deal with her differences in the same way Vincent has had to, and not everyone is strong enough for that."

Jamie put her arm around her friend. This was the first time since long before Cathy was born that Diana

had mentioned their baby. "I know."

Diana looked up with tears in her eyes, "I wonder what she would look like by now, had she lived."

Jamie brushed the tears from Diana's cheeks, and pointed to Cathy, who was standing watching them very solemnly. She smiled--just a little. "A lot like Cathy. And a lot like Vincent. If you think about it, you can see her."

Diana nodded just a little. Cathy, seeming to sense everything was all right, dashed ahead, her tiny legs kicking up dust clouds. Diana dashed after her, knowing that Mouse and Elliot were busy working with the lift and not wanting her to get hurt.

As she rounded the corner, she was just in time to see a greasy Elliot scoop Cathy up.

"Lose something?" He smiled.

Cathy patted Elliot with her tiny clawed hand. "El-yot."

Diana just shook her head and laughed. "She likes you Elliot."

Cathy pulled Elliot's beard and examined his moustache diligently, poking her fingers in his mouth. She was getting grease all over her, and Diana took her back with her kicking and protesting.

Jamie went and hugged Mouse. "All finished! Watch!" Mouse hurried to show Jamie how smoothly the lift ran now that Elliot had brought him the new parts he needed. "See? Now need something down here..." he motioned elaborately with his hands to indicate the lift going down, "Zip... down it comes. No problem. Need to move something back... Zip...up it goes."

If anything, Mouse was wearing more grease than Elliot."

Jamie looked down at the grease on her shirt. "You need to get cleaned up..."

Diana smiled at Elliot, "Now, do you think you can help him improve the showers?"

Laughing, Elliot held up his hands pleadingly... "Next on the agenda." He reached out and rubbed a smudge of grease off of Cathy's face and smiled at Diana. "Vincent told me you missed hot showers. Mouse and I have had our heads together, and I think we've figured out how to divert steam from the steam pipes Above to heat the water down in the showers. No extra effort and free heat."

"Sounds wonderful." Diana shuddered. "When it's cold, it takes everything I can do to force myself down there, but I hate hauling and heating water worse."

The two men walked along with them back to the living areas, then headed for the showers. Diana decided that tomorrow when she went to see

Joe she was going to see Susan and Devin...and was going to borrow their bathtub. A hot bath sounded wonderful. *Just think... a hot bath without hauling or heating water, then just open the drain and it goes away. Wonderful!* She felt absolutely guilty, thinking of the sensuous pleasure of that bath. She hiked Cathy higher on her hip. "Maybe I'll take you along and you can take one with me."

Cathy laughed and said, "Bath," and wiggled to get down.

After supper, Diana *did* heat some water for a bath for herself and Cathy. She washed her hair and luxuriated until the water started cooling. When she got out she dried them both and dressed Cathy quickly so she didn't get chilled.

As she was dressing, Vincent came into the bathing chamber. He helped her dump the water into the gutter that drained into the lowest of the sewers. After wrapping her hair in a towel, they went back to their chamber, where Vincent added some fuel to the stove to heat the chamber a little more so her hair could dry without her freezing.

"I'll take Cathy and put her down for bed. I need to read to the boys anyway, and she always listens until she falls asleep." He left her combing out her hair, and hoped she was ready to go Above... and had not changed her mind.

When Vincent finished with the children, he walked slowly back to their chamber. He reached to touch Diana with his bond to test her frame of mind. She seemed calm. As he turned the corner into the chamber he stopped.

Diana was dressed in her fleece lined sweats and was pulling on her snowboots. When she saw him standing there, she came to him and hugged him. "I'm ready."

He kissed her, then pulling out her jacket and scarf, said "Not quite yet. He wrapped the scarf around her neck and helped her with her jacket. "Now you're ready." Throwing his cloak over his broad shoulders, he wrapped an arm around her and they left for Above.

Vincent had brought some old rags and some plastic to wrap the rose bush, just in case the old wrappings had come loose.

As they entered the park, Diana hesitated...but only a moment. She looked around at the broad expanse of snow, and they picked the way they could leave the least noticeable footprints...at least for now. Further into the park footprints wouldn't matter. The snow was not as

pristine as it had been the previous night, but the moon glistening off the surface was still lovely.

The ice hanging from the trees glistened and shimmered, and the far-off traffic noises seemed muted. Their breath formed small clouds as they walked, arms around each other, toward the graveyard.

It was a long walk, and Diana was far from cold by the time they reached their destination, but she shuddered slightly as they approached the graves.

Vincent touched her mind lightly to lend her strength and reassurance and tightened his arms around her.

She shook her head, saying, "No. I need to face this alone."

Reluctantly, Vincent left her standing at the side of the child's grave and went to check on Catherine's rose bush. He carefully unwound the tattered rags protecting it and checked to make sure it was still alive, then re-wrapped it with the dry wrappings he had brought. Periodically he lifted his eyes to Diana. She was standing quietly, crying. The moonlight glistened on the tears streaking her face. When he'd finished, he went to her, and she embraced him.

"I know she's gone, Vincent, but I love her...I miss her."

Nodding, he said, "I too, miss her. But Diana, the river has gone back to the sea... there is no calling her home to us. She still exists... somewhere. We know that...just as Catherine is still somewhere...and they'll both be with us forever."

They stood, arms around one another for a long while, then Vincent took her hand and walked with her into the park.

Vincent was silent for a long time, walking with his head down, his mane obscuring his face.

Diana finally asked, "What is it? What are you thinking?"

Vincent spoke slowly, carefully...considering his words. "I was thinking about Gabriel...and Mariah. They kept telling me *The Truth Will Set You Free*. I still wonder at times what they meant by that... what it *could* have meant in terms of their organization, and their understanding."

Diana watched the moon slide back behind the clouds. "Their *Truth* would be as obscure to us as the moon is now, Vincent. We simply don't think the way they do."

Vincent sighed deeply. He turned to her as the moon came back out from behind the clouds, illuminating her face, and he gently took her face in his hands, his long-taloned fingers framing it. "I have learned many *Truths* in the last few years, and the only one that sets me free...is Love."

Diana slipped her arm around his waist, and leaning against him, they continued their walk, wending their way through the park... toward home.

*As rests the Sphinx amid Egyptian sands;
As looms on high the snowy peak and crest;
As firm and patient as Gibraltar stands
So truth, unwearied, waits the era blest
When men shall turn to it with great surprise.
Truth never dies.¹⁸*

*There is a truth beyond all knowledge --
That truth is Love.*



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