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SHADOW DANCERS

*a Beauty and the Beast fanzine
by Rhonda Collins*

SHADOW DANCERS

A Beauty and the Beast novel

Story by Rhonda Collins

Based on the series created by

Ron Koslow

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Thanks to everyone once again: Ron Koslow, the writers, actors, cast, crew and production. The magicians who gave us the magic.

This story is dedicated to all of us.

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Poetry by Rhonda Collins and Nan Dibble

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AUTHOR'S PREFACE

When I began writing *Beauty and the Beast* fanzines over two years ago, I never dreamed I would write as many as I have. Each time, as I struggle through the last chapter and the minor annoyances of production I tell myself it's the last one. You can see how far *that* gets me. So after I finished *The Mirror of Our Dreams*, more reasonably (I thought), I decided simply to take a break. But almost immediately my family became involved in a move back to our home town when my husband changed jobs...and I always seem to write better when I'm under stress. So this story began telling itself and wouldn't leave me alone.

First, a recap of *Legacy of Love* and *The Mirror of Our Dreams* seems to be in order for those who have not read them.

In *Legacy of Love*, Diana helped Vincent to remember what had transpired between himself and Catherine in the Trilogy cave, thus allowing him to eventually move past his grief and learn that life still offered hope and new promises. In that volume, Diana--who is also an empath--realized that a bond was forming between them. Because she knew Vincent wasn't ready for anything like that, she used her own techniques of blocking to keep him from finding out about this still tenuous connection.

In *The Mirror of Our Dreams*, Vincent finally realizes just how important Diana has become to him and also learns of the newly forming bond...which in their case is two-way and far stronger in some ways than what he'd experienced with Catherine. Wonderful? Not exactly. Although Vincent is now ready for another relationship (having realized how ephemeral life is...and that *Someday* doesn't always come), Diana is terrified. She's never been this close to anyone before--never allowed it. Shared dreams interfere with privacy and life becomes intolerable for her. She begins having trouble functioning in her daily life without relying on prescription sleeping pills at night. At Devin's prodding, Vincent and Diana eventually retreat to the depths of the tunnel system to face *themselves* and each other.

So now we come to the present. Having faced the bond and their many fears and finding many of them to be shadows without substance, Vincent and Diana must now return to their own separate lives and try to find a balance.

I hope you enjoy *Shadow Dancers*. This is for all of us...and for *them*.

Be well,



Rhonda



SHADOW DANCERS

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

IMPACT

poem by Nan Dibble

Sometimes I want to love you right through the middle
and out the other side. But I never can get quite through.
It's not the impact that hurts--it's the bouncing back.

CHAPTER ONE: IMPACT

Diana's steps slowed as she and Vincent reached the end of their trip: the manhole where she would leave his world and emerge into her own was directly above her. There was a sense of unreality about the moment--as though the fabric of the two worlds was somehow torn, and she was about to step through. She turned to him and stated flatly in the first words either of them had spoken for hours: "I don't want to go back."

The gentle voice that answered her held a touch of sorrow. "I know. But you must."

A glance upward into the darkness showed her very little--a darker shadow among other shadows. Vincent stood there, head bowed--discernible to Diana more through the oddity of the new inner sense she'd found in the bond than through any sight of the eyes.

They'd been traveling in darkness or near darkness for the last full day, even avoiding the inhabited tunnels in their trip to the surface: both of them unwilling to distract themselves from their discoveries. The bond sang between them, soft and sweet. A dark melody that knew few boundaries...indeed, *allowed* few.

"I don't know if I can do it, Vincent." She took a deep breath, held it, then let it out slowly. "It's like asking me to cut off my arm."

Diana felt Vincent's hand on her face, tracing along her jawline...then his thumb gliding over her lips. The touch was gentle, but through it she could feel the strength flowing into her: the bond was intensified by touch. She knew then that she could do it. He believed she could, therefore she could. *I think, therefore I am. Believe in courage and it exists.*

Moving into his arms, she lay against his chest listening to the strong, steady beat of his heart while she tried to calm herself.

"It's dark Above, Diana." he said softly. "Do you wish for me to accompany you?"

She moved her head slightly against the leather of his vest. "No. Then it'll just be harder for *you*, leaving *me*. It's *my* world up there. My place. Vacation's over and I've gotta get back to work."

"I will still be with you. It is only your choice that keeps us separate. Whenever you look for me, I will be with you."

"You make it sound as though I don't want this," she commented a little resentfully.

Vincent chuckled then. "You *don't*...not always." He was quiet for a long moment before continuing. "It will be difficult, Diana. For both of us. Living our separate lives--in our own worlds--will be far different now that we have both experienced what we have in the closeness of the bond."

She moved from his embrace and stood a little apart. "Guess in the end we really *don't* have much choice, huh?"

"In this, no. I think not."

• • • • •

Vincent watched as Diana ascended into her world and sighed deeply as he pulled the manhole cover closed afterward. He tried to pull himself out of their connection enough to turn away toward home. *She must do this and I cannot stand in her way. She has only now learned to allow our connection to exist. Now we must both learn to exist apart from one another.*

Vincent traveled slowly back toward the Hub. Toward his home in the tunnels below the city. He'd been gone for the last several days and knew that he, too, must return to his responsibilities. He and Diana, forced by their increasing awareness of one another--both physically and empathically--had retreated far below the inhabited areas of his world to a place of quiet darkness to learn if they could accept the bond between them.

For Vincent, the main difficulty had been in risking another bond at all. When his bond with Catherine had been broken, the consequences had been disastrous. Diana's concerns had been far different. She'd had to learn to give up the total control she kept of her life and voluntarily release it--not to another, but to the bond itself. Both had feared their own inner darknesses: parts of themselves they'd kept hidden for so long. The issues that had forced their hand may have been originally about choices and

control, but it was love and trust that brought them through the darkness to the light.

In the end, the trip raised more questions than it answered, and Vincent wondered if their problems had only begun.

He'd traveled but a short distance when he stopped, closed his eyes and drew a deep cleansing breath. *Warmth. Comfort. The sensation of warm water on bare skin.* Diana was showering. Vincent let himself be drawn into the sensation, enjoying the freedom to do so without fighting the desire it evoked. This desire was not the spiraling vortex they'd experienced before, but was quieter, more manageable. He found himself wishing he hadn't left her alone...and was astonished at his own acceptance of his feelings.

As Diana finished her shower, Vincent was reminded of his own need to be clean. Their trip together had been made with few amenities and little time for bathing in the icy river below them.

Rather than brave a cold shower after such a pleasant interlude, Vincent stopped by the bathing pool to bathe quickly before picking up Jacob and seeing Father.

When he felt clean again he headed for the nursery, where he was greeted joyously by his son. "Up! Up, up up!" Jacob danced in the crib, his small arms held high as he waited for his father.

Mary beamed as Vincent shifted his pack to the other shoulder and lifted the child. "He's missed you dreadfully, Vincent. He was asleep earlier, but he must have known you were coming. He woke a short time ago calling for you."

"I know. Thank you for keeping him, Mary. I will keep him with me, tonight."

Jacob's strangle hold around Vincent's neck was almost painful, but the love radiating from the child more than made up for any discomfort. Jacob settled quickly once he knew his father was not leaving him again. His hold relaxed and the small head rested quietly on Vincent's broad shoulder. Even before Vincent reached Father's study, the child was asleep again.

Standing at the top of the iron staircase with his son asleep on his shoulder, Vincent watched his foster-father as the older man studied plans laid out on the cluttered desk before him. Vincent slowly descended the stairs and called softly to him.

Father glanced with surprise up over the rim of his glasses, then set them aside as he pushed back from the desk. "Vincent! You're back! Where's Diana?"

Vincent spoke very quietly to avoid waking Jacob. "Diana is home. And well."

Taking his cue from his son, Father too, lowered his voice to a near whisper. "The trip...did it go well?"

"Well enough." At Father's curious expression, Vincent shrugged. The trip had been an intensely personal experience, yet he wished to ease Father's mind. Father cared for Diana, and Vincent knew he'd been concerned

about both of them and about their decision to confront themselves within the bond. To face their fears of exposure and loss of self...their fears of harming one another. "It went well, Father, but there's still much for us to learn. Adjust to."

Father smiled and pointed to Jacob. "That young man has missed his father." Father glanced up at Vincent, meeting his eyes. "We've all missed you. And I, in particular, am glad the trip went well. No more dreams?"

Vincent smiled a little, feeling a sudden rush of warmth. A mixture of love from Father blended with his lingering sense of Diana...and perhaps a little embarrassment as well. "Many dreams, Father. But now perhaps we will face them with more understanding." He looked down at his son. "I think perhaps I need to put Jacob to bed. Goodnight, Father."

"Goodnight, Vincent. Sleep well."

It was only a short distance from Father's study to his own chamber, and a few minutes later Vincent was laying Jacob in his crib. He stroked his son's soft, amber curls very gently and covered him against the chill.

Once Jacob was settled, Vincent stood a moment in the middle of his chamber, weaving a little, not quite certain what to do. He was very weary...almost totally exhausted, in fact. The long trip and the emotional load were wearing on him. He sat on the edge of his bed and rummaged in his pack. Finding his journal, he walked to his desk, lit the stub of candle and seated himself to write.

It was difficult leaving Diana tonight. She phrased it well when she said it was like cutting off her arm to leave. It was the same for me. What we did was needful. We had to place ourselves totally within the bond to see if we could tolerate the closeness. But now.... Now there are other questions. Other problems. Diana cannot live here, Below. Her life is Above. Nor can I live Above. And we cannot allow the bond to rule us. To take away our choices. We must remain separate...individual...in our daily lives or we will be unable to function.

Vincent sighed heavily and rubbed his eyes. "Catherine. Is there no end?" He smiled, then, as he thought of what Catherine would most likely have told him. He could almost hear her lilting voice as she teased: *Love has no ending.* "No. No ending, Catherine. But no end to the problems, either." Closing the journal, Vincent blew out the candle and stripped for bed.

Sliding between the cool, well-worn sheets Vincent heaved a grateful sigh and closed his eyes. He dreamed of a slow-moving dark river and Diana's presence around him, gentle and giving. Their desire wove them together in a slow dance of love that brought with it a strong sense of belonging.

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When Diana entered her loft after leaving Vincent, the first thing she saw was the light on her answering machine blinking, but she wasn't ready to face the reality of her world yet. *Whatever is on there can just wait until morning.*

Stripping off her soiled jeans and sweatshirt, she took a long, hot shower, letting the sensations flow through her and into Vincent--just as the hot water streamed through her long, red hair--and felt his reciprocal appreciation. The simple, sensual delight of sharing the shower with him was unspoiled by any hesitation from either side. There was desire in the sharing, but it was muted after the intensity of their prior sharing, Below--a gentle and sensual blending--as though for the moment all the tension was burned away. The shower and the continued connection with Vincent calmed Diana considerably and gave her strength to face the next day. And reality.

After her shower Diana pulled on a clean pair of sweats then brushed her hair dry, using the hairdryer intermittently. All the while she thought about the last few days she'd spent with Vincent. *It's so strange. I feel as though I've grown another arm, or maybe another head. An extension of some sort.* She sighed, wishing they were back Below. *Somehow, everything up here seems unreal...not quite as "there."* Underneath all of her perceptions was the steady beat of Vincent's heart and the gentle peace they'd established between themselves. She tried focusing on that and found it settled her a little, though she was still too restless to sleep.

Wandering her loft, she finally pulled up her computer and sat to record her thoughts in her journal.

The trip was a success, I guess. I feel much less apprehensive about the bond and he seems to feel less worried about harming me. So I suppose we accomplished a lot. Strangest thing is, though, that neither of us is really sure if we actually made love or not. Some of our "dreams" became so intense that later neither of us knew what we'd done. We had a rather weird discussion about that on the way back. He says it hardly matters. Now me, if I make love to somebody, I damn well want to know it! He just finds it amusing. Even with the bond, sometimes I wonder if I'll ever completely understand him. I know some of it was real...but how much was real and how much was imagination?

Once we started back, we realized that the hardest part is yet to come. We still don't really have that much control over the bond...especially not at night. And I don't care how accepting we both are, it's going to cause problems. We can't just be dumping on each other every night all our hopes and dreams, our fears and our deepest, innermost private feelings. I don't know about him, but there's still a lot about me that I don't feel comfortable sharing.

Diana sighed and saved the file then exited. Flipping of

the power switch, she headed for bed. *We'll work it out. There's too much good in this relationship to let a few snags ruin it.* She smiled as she thought of the dreams of the last few days...and nights. *Yeah. There's a whole lot of good.*

Slowly braiding her hair into a loose braid, she wandered toward the bedroom and bed. The mattress seemed sinfully luxurious after sleeping in the sleeping bag on rocks for several days.

Diana dreamed she was back below the Catacombs in the vast caverns of darkness that were neither Vincent's world, nor her own, but entirely theirs, together. And Vincent was with her in the dream. They were floating down the dark river on a raft of swirling color and sensation, the darkness around them somehow enhanced by the vividness of themselves. There were no true images, but merely a profound sense of watchfulness--of waiting for a fulfillment yet to come...something yearned for, yet purposely kept separate from. There was no haste now...no desperate need urging them on. They were merely waiting to be filled with themselves. They were content.

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Vincent spent most of the following morning trying to separate himself from Diana's emotions. It was difficult to bring himself back to reality and the tasks at hand. The dream he'd shared with Diana the night before was still pleasantly on his mind, as well.

After breakfast, Vincent stood patiently trying to pay attention to Father's explanation of Mouse's plans, which were unrolled on the desk before them. Father leaned heavily on his cane as he traced the route of the new tunnel which would be opened. Vincent, Cullen, Marcus and Mouse were scheduled to spend the next few weeks on an ambitious excavation project which they hoped would prevent future flooding from Above. The last time the city Above had flooded, it had been a disaster Below.

"...and the runoff should be set at least thirty degrees... Vincent?" Father's voice held an edge of annoyance.

"I'm sorry, Father. Please, continue."

"You haven't heard a word I've said in the last ten minutes, Vincent. This drainage project *must* be completed before we get any further flooding. Understanding these plans is vital if you intend on accomplishing anything and finishing in time."

Vincent forced himself to attend. "I know." Bending over the plans that Mouse had sketched out, Vincent traced the line of the tunnel which was yet to be carved...which would connect the old drainage system to the underground river. "Here..." he said, "...then again, here, the excavation will be hazardous. To manage the thirty degrees necessary for the runoff we will have to brace these sections...."

Vincent lost the thread of Diana's consciousness as he

purposefully devoted all his attention to the plans. He was only vaguely aware that Diana was well and eventually was able to put aside his immediate sense of her as he and the others started their work.

It was not until much later in the afternoon that he began sensing her stress and unease and knew she'd been assigned another case.

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Vincent was right, Diana thought miserably. It is harder, now.

She sat at her desk staring at the computer. She'd been transferring files from the police network for the last hour. Greg Hughes and Joe Maxwell had been delighted when she'd returned from her trip Below with Vincent. They'd been looking for her for days, wanting her to take on a multiple rape/murder case. There'd been five messages from Greg and four from Joe on her machine when she'd finally listened to it. There probably would've been more, but between their calls and the calls from Susan, the machine ran out of tape.

Without ever going into the station, Diana started the case, transferring files via modem from the network. Greg had thoughtfully dropped off the two boxes of material that now sat on her kitchen table.

Apparently cases of rape and murder had been turning up in New York and the surrounding areas. Only now were law enforcement officials realizing that the M.O. was similar to other unsolved cases in the past. This whole thing really bothered Diana and made her nervous in some manner that she didn't understand. *It's just another case, Bennett*, she told herself sternly as she tried to chase the "willies."

She sighed as she glanced up at the clerestory windows. *My concentration's shot.* Vincent was as tense as she was. She knew it--could feel it--and it bothered her. Everything she was feeling about this case was transmitting down through the bond to him. Not the details, but just the *feeling*. She knew he'd be here as soon as it got dark, and she wasn't sure what to do about it. *I can't keep feeding this garbage to him. He's not going to be able to function, and neither am I.*

Vincent had told her that he would be working on an excavation in a hazardous area of the tunnels, trying to rework a drainage system. It was necessary work that had been postponed too many times. She knew he didn't need to be distracted by worry over her, but she wasn't sure what to do about it. She was still sitting, chewing her thumbnail and staring at a digitized picture of the last victim when she heard the soft tap on her window and felt the nearness of his presence. With a huge sigh, she cleared the screen and started up the stairs to meet him.

When she opened the roof door and saw him, she knew she was going to have a rough night. From this distance, the sympathy and concern emanating from him were almost

overpowering. "Hi," she said gently, smiling and trying to calm herself.

"What is it, Diana, that has you so upset?"

No preamble. Nope. Right for the throat. There are disadvantages to this "honesty" business. She shrugged. "Just a case. Y'know how it is. Real sticky one, this time, though."

Vincent didn't answer, nor did he move toward her. He just stared out over the city and settled his broad shoulders solidly against the brick wall. The faint light from the open door picked up glinting highlights in his hair.

"So. How's Jacob?"

Gleaming eyes turned to her and she could feel his indignation at her obvious attempt to change the subject. "Jacob is well," he answered. "He misses you."

"Yeah. Well, I miss him too." She moved over to the parapet and sat facing him. "How's the work going?"

"It's progressing slowly. The rock has been there since the beginning of time; one cannot expect it to yield overnight. Why are you doing this, Diana?"

"Doing what? Asking about your son? Your work?"

"Avoiding the issue."

"There is no issue, Vincent," Diana said with frustration. "Just a case. Like any other case. And the fact that we're too close, now, for our own good." She shook her head when he started to respond. "Look. Seriously. This case is gonna be a monster. You *know* what that does to me. But it's the way I work. It's the way I've *always* worked. The only way I *can* work." She stared hard into his eyes and let him feel her concern for him. "I'm used to it, Vincent. But you're not. I deal with it in my own way. I can't keep it all away from you, but I can't let it all come through, either, or you're not going to be able to do your own work, keep up with all your responsibilities."

"You're planning on blocking again."

"You knew I'd have to some of the time, anyway."

He sighed and looked away.

"You *knew* it, Vincent," she insisted. "So did I. I can't live up here and not block. I can't work and let it *all* in." Frustrated, she indicated the vast city below them with a sweep of her arm. "I can't even go *out* into the city without blocking. At least not for long." She jerked her thumb back toward her loft, through the open door. "That's the only place I can stay completely open. There, and Below, with you. That's just the way it is."

"I know. But this time, you're blocking to protect me."

"It's not like it's the first time," she shot back, thinking of the months she'd hidden behind her barriers to keep him from suspecting that she, too, was an empath...to give him time to deal with his grief over Catherine's death. To avoid adding to his problems.

"No." His tone was a little bitter.

"We can't distract each other right now, Vincent. People are depending on us. Both of us."

Vincent opened his arms for her, but Diana hesitated, wrapping her arms tightly around herself. She shook her

head firmly. "Can't." At his hurt expression--the pain he felt--she continued swiftly: "I'm sorry. But I just *can't*. We're too close, now. If I touch you it'll be worse. I *don't* want you involved in this one. At least not right now. You can't help, and we can only hurt each other. In fact, I think it'd be best if you stay Below for now."

For the first time in many days there was a wall between them. One built of barriers of restraint. Diana hadn't blocked yet, but still the barrier was there. An emotional barrier of their pain and concern. Each for the other.

Finally Vincent looked away and sighed. "Perhaps you're right, Diana. But if you need me...?"

"I won't," she stated firmly as his head swung heavily toward her...before he could come up with another argument. "I'm not in danger, Vincent. It's just...complicated. It's the hardest case to deal with that I've had since...."

"Catherine," Vincent said softly. Diana's life had turned upside down when she began searching for Catherine's killer...and for the mysterious man she'd loved. Before that time, Diana had been content with her life and totally in control of it. Since then--since she'd learned of Vincent's existence--she'd lived on the ragged edge of sanity at times. She'd broken off her relationship with her lover, risked her career, compromised her beliefs...and committed murder. Most of it directly for him. Saying her life had been complicated by his presence was hardly a strong enough statement.

"Yeah," she agreed quietly.

"Very well," he said, giving in reluctantly. "I will stay away. For a time. Diana...."

Vincent's eyes...his expression...told her as much as the rush of love that came across the bond to her. It took all her control to keep from throwing herself at him and burying her face in that fall of golden mane. "I know," she said softly. "Me, too."

In moments Vincent was gone--over the edge of the building--and Diana was left alone staring out into the darkness. Carefully shielding herself, she turned resolutely toward the open door of the loft and the madness that lay inside.

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The two men laughed as they walked away from their victim, leaving her tied and gagged. Naked and vulnerable to the elements.

"I'll bet they don't find her. Fifty bucks says they don't find her in time."

"You're on." The thin man laughed raucously. "Damn. It gets better and better, Bull."

"Ah. Yes. You're learning, my friend." The cold mist swirled around them as they walked the deserted alleyways. A stray cat dodged out of the way as the big man--called Bull by his companion--aimed a kick. "Now we watch...and wait. That's part of it, too, you know."

Seeing who'll live and who'll die. Knowing that even if they live, they've learned not to talk."

The thin man shivered. "Shit, man. It's gettin' cold. Maybe I ought to double the bet. A hundred bucks says they don't find her in time."

Bull laughed and slapped his companion on the back. "What the hell. The bet's part of the game. You're on."

The conversation continued as they walked easily, unhurried, through the cold mist and fog toward the subways.

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There'd only been one victim in the city itself at the time Diana took the case. A week later there was another, and the woman lived. Diana spent a week of sleepless nights trying to make things fit. There seemed to be no connection between victim and rapist, and the girl wouldn't talk. She was utterly terrified. She was in therapy and Diana hoped it would help her regain some of her self-esteem and ease some of the fear. Diana spent hours trying to understand what it was the men were trying to gain from their systematic destruction of other human beings.

One morning at 3:00 am after a long bout of trying to psych herself into the rapists' mindset, she found herself on her rooftop watching over the city that never slept. She watched the slow crawl of the traffic beneath the lights and felt the pulse of the city. *It never rests. Never stops*, she thought. She brushed her heavy hair back out of her face and wrapped her coat tighter as she looked out at the mad twinkle of lights. And felt the current of life and death that flowed beneath them. *I try to understand, but nothing makes sense anymore*. Despair swept over her momentarily, but she clamped down on it ruthlessly. Despair wouldn't help her find the men doing this and it wouldn't help Vincent sleep, either.

With a sigh, Diana left her roof and trudged downstairs. For the first time in ten days she looked around her loft and it became real to her. Psych books and papers were everywhere, littering the floor, the table, the couch. There were dirty coffee cups everywhere as well. The rumpled pile of afghans and pillow on her battered couch gave evidence to the fact that too many times she'd fallen asleep there. *It's just another case*, Diana muttered rebelliously. *Looks normal to me*.

She made a half-hearted try at picking up coffee cups, dumping them in the sink and running some soapy dishwasher. While the sink was filling, she leaned on the drainboard and her mind drifted back to the case. The hot, soapy water overflowing the sink onto her hands and feet snapped her back to reality. "Oh, dammit!" She slammed the water off, then surveyed the floor. She wriggled her toes in her soaked socks and sighed with exhaustion. She didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

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Vincent threw himself into his work with a will that bordered on desperation as he tried to ignore Diana's continued stress and confusion. As in the past, he found that the heavy, physical labor distracted his mind and kept him too exhausted to think about much else. Even so, it didn't block all of Diana's anxiety and stress from her case. Cullen, Marcus and Mouse struggled to keep pace with him as they worked long hours day after day chipping away at the stone.

Angling his chisel and hammer just so, Vincent struck a single blow that splintered and split the rockface. Years of working with rock had taught him how to find the weaknesses in the stone. Still, he wished for Old Sam or Kanin, who knew far more about this kind of work than he did. Old Sam, who was dead now, and Kanin, who was still in prison. Cullen knew wood--the grain, the resiliency--not stone, which was unforgiving of mistakes. Marcus, who had taken over the forge after Winslow's death, knew metals and steel--how to temper it, mold it--not stone, from which one could only subtract from the whole to leave the shape one wished. As in the case of this project, Mouse knew best how to get from point A to point B and knew instinctively how to plan such things, but the actual mechanics of it were sometimes lost to him...unless it involved machinery. So Vincent carried the load. Telling each person where to work and how. He knew he wasn't the best person for the job. But he also knew he was the *only* person available. His companions were eager learners, though unskilled. Fortunately each was able to apply what they *did* know and take directions on what they didn't.

Sweat trickled uncomfortably down Vincent's neck into his shirt and down his forehead into his eyes. He wiped at it automatically with his forearm. The other men were stripped to the waist, but Vincent refused to expose his differences any more than he had to. Even in his home, with his friends.

A lantern appeared in the darkness, casting dancing shadows on the walls. Vincent paused as Rebecca and Brooke brought their lunch. Jamie accompanied them, also bringing along with her some of the older children to help with hauling off debris to help clear the slowly enlarging passageway.

Jamie ordered the children like a general organizing a small army. With her improvised miner's helmet and old, battered leather jacket, she appeared very determined. The children were efficient. It amused Vincent momentarily. Jamie appeared more like a mother hen than a general, although he knew it would distress her to know it.

Thanking the women for bringing their lunch, Vincent gratefully called a halt to the work and the men discussed their progress as they watched the children clear the area. Jamie worked with them, hauling the rock away. The loose rock would be used as fill for low areas and as material in conjunction with mortar to form dams and walls. Nothing would be wasted.

As the others talked, Vincent stared off into the dark-

ness beyond the torches and lamps. Thinking of Diana. Sensing her anger and frustration with her case; an almost feral *seeking* that brooked no opposition. A shadow separated itself from the outer darkness. The Other gestured to Vincent.

She's hunting. Without you. She doesn't want you. She needs me!

Vincent looked down and closed his eyes wearily, then looked back. *Go away*, he thought furiously. *Leave it be. She does not need either of us.*

The Other paced the border of light restlessly for a few more moments, then disappeared. Vincent rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand. It was becoming more and more difficult to keep his mind off Diana's misery. She alternated between empathizing with the victims and trying to put herself into the mindset of the rapists. She shut herself off from him most of the time during the day--and at night when she was working--but the brief times when she slept her dreams were chaotic. A cacophony of clashing emotions and violent images that only served to stir the Other to life.

"Vincent?"

Vincent startled and glanced up into Mouse's questioning gaze. Pulling himself away from his thoughts with difficulty, he rose.

Mouse inquired anxiously, "Not going to eat?"

Vincent glanced down at his half-eaten sandwich. "No. It's all right, Mouse. I'm just not very hungry."

The area was clear of debris and it was time to get back to work. The men settled without discussion back into their respective work areas. They'd only been back at their tasks for a short time when Mouse's chisel slipped and gouged his palm. Crying out in pain, the young man dropped his chisel and hammer.

Vincent rushed immediately to his aid. Cullen hurriedly tore a piece of cloth from his shirt for Vincent to wrap the hand with. It was bleeding profusely.

"Damn, Mouse!" Cullen said with a low whistle. "You really did it this time." He patted Mouse's shoulder reassuringly and sympathized. "I did the same thing last year, remember? When I was carving that rocking horse for the kids?"

Mouse nodded, his face slick with sweat, his eyes wide as saucers. He kept staring at the spreading blood.

"Mouse. I need to get you to Father," Vincent stated flatly as he tried to ignore the acrid scent of Mouse's blood. "This is going to need stitches."

Mouse's wide eyes showed his terror. "Not needle, Vincent."

"It's all right. I'll be there. It needs to be done, Mouse."

Placing one hand firmly on Mouse's back, Vincent guided his young friend through the long corridors, steadying him as they went. Behind him, Marcus and Cullen picked up their tools and continued working.





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It took Vincent longer than he'd anticipated to accompany Mouse to the hospital chamber and stay with him while Father treated his wound. Mouse was terrified, and Vincent couldn't leave him.

Mouse sat stiffly on the cot in the hospital chamber while Father prepared to suture the gash. His innocent blue eyes grew wider by the moment as he watched, and Vincent tried to reassure him. "It will be all right, Mouse. Father has done this a few times before, you know."

Mouse's eyes rolled wildly up toward Vincent as Father prepared the syringe of Lidocaine for anesthetizing the site. The young man tried to jump off the table, but Vincent anticipated the move and caught him, holding him firmly.

"It will hurt a little, Mouse," Father said gently, patting the young man on the arm. "It won't hurt but for a few moments, then the medicine will make the hand numb. You will barely feel it when I stitch it, I promise."

Mouse tried to be brave, but at the first stitch, he passed out and Vincent stood by, holding his other hand and watching as Father stitched the gash closed. By the time Mouse came around, the gash was neatly sutured and Father bandaged it for him. "Now. No more rock-cutting until this is well-healed."

Mouse complained, "Have to help, Father. No one else."

"We'll manage, Mouse," Vincent offered. "It will just take longer, is all. Far better that your hand should heal." Vincent smiled down at his friend. "You can be working on new projects while we finish this one."

That thought seemed to cheer Mouse considerably. "Did have idea...." Mouse hopped down off the cot and wandered off, his mind already on whatever obscure path it had taken.

Father just smiled and shook his head. "It doesn't take much to distract him."

"No. But he is correct. The project will take much longer without him. He wasn't merely another hand for the cutting, Father. We consulted with him constantly on angle and stress levels. Perhaps we could allow him to assist in that fashion...?"

"Absolutely not!" Father was adamant. "He'll try to do too much. You know it. As it is, it's a good thing the boy's right-handed, because you know he's already tinkering."

Vincent sighed. Father was right. He knew it. But he hated to have this project drag on. In another couple of months the spring rains would start. If they weren't finished with the drainage tunnel they would have to evacuate the five families located on those lower levels near the project to higher ground.

"It will be all right, Vincent," Father commented. "We've endured floods and evacuations before. If the project isn't finished, it's just not. The important thing is

that no one else be injured."

Vincent nodded silently, then turned toward the chamber door. "I must get back. Cullen and Marcus will need further supervision."

Returning to the work site, Vincent worked several more hours. Much later, weary after his long day, Vincent settled his son for the night and finally tried to sleep himself. Overtired from the long day and still intermittently sensing Diana's uneasiness, he slept restlessly.

Images flashed of men with no faces--large, heavy hands. Intense feelings of pain, more emotional than physical. Rage, overwhelming shame. A sense of loss and helplessness.

Vincent jolted awake, shuddering--the contact broken as Diana woke. He rolled over, then lay staring into the darkness. The sick feeling of the dream slowly dissipated. He raked his fingers through his mane, pulling the long hair back out of his eyes. He wished desperately that there was some way he could help Diana cope with this case. But there was nothing he could do as long as she so adamantly shut him out.

After Vincent's stomach settled and he no longer felt that any sudden movement would cause him to retch, he tossed the covers back and moved to his desk. Lighting one small candle, he opened his journal.

I thought when we returned from our trip below the Catacombs that our relationship would improve: that Diana had accepted our bond and the needs we both have of that intimacy. In that much, perhaps I was correct. Diana does seem to accept the bond more freely now. But I find that other problems engendered by the bond are just as severe. She insists upon protecting me from the negative emotions--the evil--that she deals with in her cases. She will not share her struggle with me, nor allow me to help. And she buries herself deeper every day in a morass of the pain of the victims and the evil of the ones she hunts. I fear for her sanity. But the dreams she cannot control, and I hesitate to let her know how much is coming through to me for fear she will once more resort to drugs to mask them, as she has in the past.

Vincent rubbed at his tired eyes. *Tomorrow I will see her and will not allow her to send me away. There must be something I can do to ease this for her.* He sighed and returned to his journal.

Despite our need for "separateness," I find it difficult to remain separate from her emotionally. In any relationship there must be an ability to remain separate and individual. There must be privacy. That has come to be almost impossible for us. I find it interesting, though--the differences in our perceptions of both the bond and the possibilities of a sexual relationship between us. To Diana, a

physical relationship is the easy part. She is afraid of the more intimate giving that the bond allows. For myself, it is still the act of physical love that disturbs me. I still do not trust the Other, though Diana does. For I know all that he is capable of. Diana does not, for all she believes she does. For now, since Diana is no longer denying me the intimacy of the bond, my desire is controlled. Yet I feel it is only a matter of time. Both of us have been alone for far too long. We must both struggle to find a balance.

Vincent closed his journal, blew out the candle and undressed for bed. He hoped Diana would sleep more restfully until morning. He wished there was some way he could assure that she *would*.

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Greg called Diana early the following afternoon. There had been another victim.

An hour later, Diana stalked a damp, stinking alley, digging through the refuse, hoping to find something--anything--that could provide a clue. She looked up as the forensics team moved past her on their way back to their car. The stretcher with the body bag on it followed after. Diana didn't look at it. She'd already examined the woman. Dead of exposure after being left tied in the old building. The temperature had dropped to eighteen degrees for two days. She hadn't had a chance.

Only with a few of the victims had the men Diana hunted gone so far that the woman had died before help reached her. The men usually left the victims in abandoned buildings where almost inevitably one of the homeless would find them in their own search for shelter. The men always left them tied, naked and helpless against whatever would come. For this one, help came too late. *The only cases have been in the winter...never in summer weather. Almost as though that's part of the "game."*

Returning her attention to the trash-littered room, Diana waited until everyone left, then removed her gloves so her sense of touch could open her up better for impressions. What she got when she touched the bed forced her to shut down almost immediately. She gagged from the sheer pain and sense of helplessness she picked up. Literally sick with her own anger and disgust as well as the lingering impressions of pain, Diana was too hesitant to even try again.

Wearily shoving a strand of loose hair back, she knelt and began making notes. Her fingers were freezing and she angrily stuck them back into the gloves, then found she couldn't write.

"Damn." She swayed as she stood, a second wave of nausea almost overcoming her. She leaned against the peeling plaster of the wall and stared around the room. "Who are you? Who the hell are you? Why can't I figure you out?"

Whenever she'd picked up impressions from the men it had been of a sick hunger...a need to give pain and a desire

to simply own someone else. Another form of power-hunger: she sensed that often in her cases. But this was different. Usually Diana could tack together the shattered pieces of mismatched information and her impressions and come up with *something* that could help find her prey--but this time she kept hitting a blank wall. The rest of the detectives on the team weren't doing any better: they kept looking to her for miracles.

Diana was the only woman on the task force, and this time, because of her prior record, she was heading it. In rape cases it was always helpful to have a woman on the case.

At the last late-night session Grady Wilkes had talked about using a woman for a decoy, but Diana vetoed it. "It won't work," she'd answered. "We don't even know enough about them to know what they're looking for."

Abandoning her efforts to pick up impressions, Diana wandered through the room, digging listlessly with the toe of her boot at the debris on floor. As she pushed at a pile of papers something caught her eye. She stooped and picked up a Polaroid picture. It was dirty and a little wet. It might have been there for a long while, but as soon as Diana picked it up--delicately handling only the edges--she felt it was important. The picture was upside down, and she turned it over, drawing in a sharp breath as she saw the image. There was a man in the photo--turned away with only part of his back showing. He was wearing a Tee-shirt that said BULL in big red letters across the back. There was a woman in the background tied to a bed. Diana didn't recognize her as one of the known victims, but she recognized the fear in the girl's eyes.

"Bingo," she whispered.

Diana opened her carryall and pulled out a plastic bag zip-lock bag, then carefully placed the photo inside. *Maybe forensics can find prints.*

After a little more digging, Diana decided there wasn't much else of use, and she returned to the precinct...but on the way she stopped at the house of the one victim who was still alive and at all functional. The girl refused to say anything when Diana showed her the photo, but Diana could see the fear in her eyes.

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Once Diana made it back to the lab, she had forensics check the photo for prints: there weren't any. She had them shoot a negative of it so they could distribute copies to the rest of the team. She was certain the man in the photo was one of the men they were hunting.

"Bull, huh?" Diana slung her heavy carryall over her shoulder and started out the door. "I'll find you. And when I do, there'll be a few *alterations* made. We'll see how you like being a steer."

That night, Diana again dug through her abnormal psych books--still trying to find answers as to what drove men to seek power over others...especially women--it didn't

help much. Didn't tell her anything she didn't already know. She sighed and rubbed eyes that were grainy from lack of sleep. *Power is a drug for some men. So's pain...as long as that pain is somebody else's. Maybe the were abused as children and are perpetuating the pain...it happens all the time. Maybe they've just learned to like the taste of someone else's fear.* She sighed and put her head back on the couch pillow: she didn't care anymore *how* they got that way. She just wanted it to stop.

Earlier, Diana had ordered up a pizza and the box still sat unopened on the table. Her appetite had diminished to almost nothing, and forcing herself to eat was difficult, but she knew she had to. Reluctantly, she stuck a piece in the microwave and warmed it, then carried it with her to the computer. She was still there when she heard Vincent's tap on the window. She glanced down at her plate: the pizza was cold and untouched. She groaned. *Vincent's gonna be furious with me.*

Yanking the rubber band off her ponytail, Diana grabbed her brush off the counter and made a few swipes at her hair on the way to the stairs, then chucked the brush across the room onto the couch. *It's useless, anyway.*

When Diana opened the door to the roof, Vincent was waiting. He took one look at her and turned her back toward the loft, pushing gently. "Go back inside, Diana. Out of the cold." He followed her down the steps, then pointed to the couch. "Sit."

As she sat watching him, Vincent went to the kitchen and warmed a piece of pizza, poured her a glass of milk and brought them to her. "Now. Eat."

"I'm not hungry, really," she protested.

"You will eat or I will take you Below."

Anger flared between them. "You don't tell me what to do. Not *ever*. Understood?"

He nodded mildly. "Yes. Now eat."

Their eyes met in challenge for a moment, then Diana laughed shakily. "Okay. You win."

Once she began eating, Diana found she was ravenous. Vincent warmed three more pieces of pizza for her before she was finished. As she drained a second glass of milk, she noticed that Vincent's eyes had shadowed to the deeper gray-blue of worry.

"Must I stay here to make sure you eat?"

She shook her head and raised her fingers in the girl-scout salute. "No. I promise. I'll do better. I just get so...."

"Involved," he stated flatly.

"Yeah." She gestured toward the computer and stood...hoping he'd take the hint and leave. "I've got a lot to do."

Instead of leaving, Vincent settled back into the couch cushions and picked up one of her psych books. "Very well."

Diana stared down at him as he oh-so-innocently flipped pages and ignored her. He was here to babysit and it infuriated her. "Gee," she snarled sarcastically. "I don't

know how I ever managed from day to day without you to hold my hand."

Without looking up, Vincent simply said, "Neither do I."

When he glanced up and met her eyes, they both laughed. Diana laughed until her eyes teared, then sat on the couch beside him, curling against him. "God, you're good for me."

"Then I may stay?"

She shook her head. "Only for a while. I really *do* have to get back to work. We found their latest victim today. Dead. She wasn't found in time and the weather...."

Vincent put the book aside and brushed at Diana's loose wisps of hair. "You need to rest, Diana. You cannot continue like this. You're burning yourself up from inside--with anger and determination--and it cannot last."

"I have to last long enough to get these animals, Vincent. They've gotta be taken down. And I can't expend energy on anything else right now."

"If you keep this up, you won't have any energy left."

"Don't do this, okay?" Diana simply didn't feel capable of dealing with Vincent's *protect* mode. "If you really want to help, tell me about what's goin' on Below--where it's sane. How's Jacob...and Father...and Mouse and Jamie." At his look, Diana shrugged apologetically. "I know. But I'm not avoiding the issue, just side-stepping a little. I really want to know. It helps to know that there's someplace that makes sense."

"Very well." Vincent sighed and drew her back down to rest against him. She settled her head on his shoulder as he talked. "Jacob is fine. He's not only walking, but running, now. Mary has had her hands full, with me working on the excavation project. Jamie has threatened to put him on a leash."

Diana laughed. "I hear they have those for kids now. Not a bad idea, really."

"Mary would most likely agree." Vincent shifted and his thigh brushed against hers. For a moment, both of them were silent as all else slid to the background except the current that hummed between them.

Diana placed her palm on the smooth, broad surface of Vincent's thigh and brushed the corduroy softly, and with a catch of breath, he placed his own hand over hers, stilling it. Vincent continued with his narrative, his voice betraying his state of mind. "Father...Father is well. Peter was down last week and saw to Father's hip, which was troubling him. He...is improved." Shifting once more, to sit a little more distant from her, Vincent brushed her cheek with the fur on the back of his hand...an apology of sorts. "The excavation is progressing, but slowly. Mouse slipped and injured his hand today...."

"Is he okay?" Diana questioned anxiously.

"The gash required stitches, but he'll be fine, Diana. Do not be concerned for him. Father has banned him from the work site for fear he would forget and reopen the



wound." Vincent sighed. "I fear his absence will slow the work. We are unable to consult him about the plans...and the spring rains will begin soon."

Vincent's voice faltered a moment as Diana reached under his mane to rub the back of his neck, scratching the ridge of stiffer mane underneath. He closed his eyes and leaned back into the massage. Diana loved watching his face...watching the emotions move across the leonine features. The peace lasted a few moments, then he sat up abruptly. "Diana. I cannot...."

Diana smiled and snuggled in closer, looking up at him innocently. "You can't what?" Diana had closed down on their connection a little, to make things more tolerable for Vincent, but she couldn't help teasing him. They'd realized that the only way to learn to control their desire instead of letting it control them was to work by stages. *Desensitization*, Devin called it. It seemed to be working: they played their games with one another, trying each time to become a little more in control. At least now they could tolerate some sexual byplay without a total emotional overload. "Are you ready for a baby step?"

Diana could see both frustration and anticipation reflected on Vincent's face. It was almost funny. He was saved from having to make a decision when the phone rang stridently.

"Damn!" Diana rolled away and picked up the phone. "Bennett here."

She closed her eyes and groaned as she heard Greg Hughes' voice: all the pleasure of the evening drained away. "Greg. Not another one already."

Diana could feel Vincent's eyes on her, sense his frustration blending with her own dissatisfaction, but she forced herself to think about the case and pay attention to Greg. She shook her head, though she knew Greg couldn't see. "Too bad we couldn't keep it under wraps a little longer, but I understand why you had to make the announcement. Now every woman in the area will know to be careful. As for having anything, no. Just the photo, Greg." The anger was back. "Damn. If we could just get a witness."

There was another long pause as Diana listened to Greg. "I'm sorry, Greg. It's just not comin' this time. The pieces aren't there. There's nuthin' to shuffle...no edges to fit together. These guys are control freaks and sadists. They really enjoy what they're doin' and they're careful. The guy in the photo matches the name on the shirt. He's built like a bull...at least from behind. Massive shoulders and well-muscled back...longish hair, brown. But it doesn't show his face and no distinguishing marks." She got up, dragging the phone with her over to the cardboard box near the computer. She talked as she dug through the photos for the photo. "Forensics dusted the picture for prints and didn't find anything usable. Tell the boys to watch for the Tee-shirt and someone with that build and long hair. I had the lab make copies to pass out. Now me, I figure someone with that build, maybe he's a weight

lifter or wrestler. I can check around some of the gyms, show the picture. But that's all we've got, Greg. Until we get somebody who'll talk."

When Diana hung up the phone a few minutes later, Vincent crossed the room and came to her, then stood beside her as she stared down at the battered Polaroid photo. "Is this one of the men?"

She nodded numbly, then looked up as the wave of anger from Vincent rocked her. She closed down on their connection immediately--reflexively--as she felt her own anger spiral. The intensity frightened her. He held out his hand, and she gave him the photo. Her hands shook a little as she handed it over. "I found it today at the scene."

Diana paced around the counter to the kitchen and began making coffee. It was going to be a long night. "I've gotta get back to work. No time for playing around, enjoyable as it would be."

Vincent leaned a shoulder against the wall and eyed her silently. With the bond still closed down, Diana could feel nothing from him. The light next to the couch cast deep shadows over his face and eyes, making it even harder to read his expression. She tilted her head and asked, curiously: "You okay?"

He nodded. "Are you?"

Confused and with her mind still mostly on the case, she nodded abstractedly and muttered: "Sure."

"Before we were interrupted we were...." Vincent's voice trailed off and he looked away. His expression was hidden by a fall of honey-colored hair.

Diana put the coffee on and went to him, touching his shoulder lightly. "Sorry. Oh damn. I'm sorry. You can't just turn it off.... I *can*...sometimes. It's just this case, Vincent." As he glanced up, his expression dubious, she shrugged. "No. That's not true. It's *any* case. When I'm working I can't think about anything else. This one's just worse than most."

He shook his head. "It's not what you think, Diana. When you became distracted from the bond, my desire, my need diminished. It was your *anger* reflecting my own rage that concerned me. You shut down...."

"Reflex." She shrugged again, dismissing his concern for her. "I'm okay. I guess I couldn't handle all your anger and mine, too."

Vincent watched her for a moment, a strange look on his face. "I suppose so." He gestured toward the workspace. "Can I help in any way?"

Diana shook her head. "No. 'Fraid not. Besides, it's gonna be another all-nighter and you need to get some rest." She went to him and hugged him, wrapping her arms tightly around his waist. "At least with me awake you should be able to rest."

"You need rest, Diana. You cannot continue like this."

Releasing him suddenly and backing off, Diana glared. "Dammit! I know what I can do and can't do. You don't. When I reach my limit I'll collapse, then you can tend me all you like. You can even take me home and let Father

fuss. But for now, just go home and let me do my thing. When I catch these bastards *then* I'll rest. You go cut rock and I'll do my own kind of excavating."

"Diana...." Vincent began.

Diana stopped him with a look. "It's my work, Vincent. It's who I am. Take it or leave it."

They were silent a long moment, then Vincent nodded. "Walk with me to the roof?"

"Sure." Slipping her arm around him under his cloak, Diana tried joking a little. "The N.Y.P.D. motto, 'To protect and to serve' might as well be tattooed across *both* of our foreheads."

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After leaving Diana, Vincent took to the streets. The dark alleyways and deserted back streets were a second home for him. It had been far too long since he'd spent time simply watching the city. Avoiding areas he knew to be trouble spots, Vincent found one of the tall, older buildings and began climbing. The more ornate architecture allowed better handholds for climbing and he soon found himself a perch far enough above the city to watch the lights and the traffic.

Sitting with his fur-booted legs dangling over the edge and the wind teasing his hair, Vincent tasted the wind. Here, above the traffic, the air was sharper and cleaner. And the city lights *were* beautiful. He thought about Diana's parting comment. *To protect and to serve. She is so right. That is what we do, both of us. Who we are. If that were taken from us....*

Vincent stared out over the jeweled city lights and watched the traffic moving far beneath him. This...this bright city was more Catherine's than Diana's. The dark alleyways and tenements were Diana's. And the darkness behind the lights. Yet, because of Catherine, the lights of the city belonged to Vincent, too. Diana had reminded him of that. *Perhaps someday I'll be able to help her find the brightness of the city again.* He worried briefly about the sudden flare of rage that sparked between them tonight. Diana had closed down, instinctively. *I wonder if that instinctive blocking is to be welcomed or feared?* On one hand, if Diana blocked when the Other flared to the surface, it could help in controlling the one thing Vincent feared the most: losing control of the Other. On the other hand, if Diana were to block an overload instinctively, could it once more cause the backlash that had taken Vincent's empathic sense once before, when he'd made love to Catherine? Diana claimed the Other was not empathic. Vincent had his doubts about that. When the Other had killed for Catherine, Vincent knew that the bond had been present then. Vincent sighed, but looked back out over the brightness of the city and refused—at least for tonight—to believe in the darkness.

Vincent sat with his cape billowing from the wind and his hair straying across his face from time to time. The few pigeons he'd disturbed strutted about for a time, then found other resting places as he kept his silent vigil over the busy city. Wishing he could keep such a vigil over Diana ...and knowing he could not.



A LOVER'S FACE

poem by Nan Dibble

I hope you like this face I wear for you.
I ironed it specially, used the whitest starch
and fastened it with safety pins to show
only a lover's cheek, a lover's brow,
a lover's lips. (You must excuse the eyes.
I'm sure I'll learn to mask them, too, with time.)

CHAPTER TWO: A LOVER'S FACE

While Vincent sat at ease overlooking the city, a tall, heavily-muscled man stood staring down at his prize: a naked, dark haired-girl with large, frightened eyes. "She's lovely, Adrian." Bull jerked his thumb at the door. "Check the alley. Make sure it's still safe."

The thin man, who hovered at the edge of the room, grinned and slipped outside. While he was gone, Bull knelt and patted the girl's face. "Adrian doesn't like women who insult him."

Bull started undressing, and as the cold air hit his skin, he shivered--more from the anticipation than from the cold. *It's not that cold, yet. But it will be, in a day or so.* Bull was anxious to begin, and the sight of the girl, lying tied to the bed--gagged and completely helpless--excited him tremendously. Her dark hair spilled over the white skin. And she was trembling too: from fear.

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Vincent was hard at work at the excavation site when the pipes summoned him to Father's study. Hot, tired, sweaty, covered with rock dust and bits of debris, Vincent presented himself at the top of the iron stairway. "Father? What is it? Is there an emergency?"

Father motioned for Vincent to come inside and sit. Vincent could sense Father's agitation and concern. Sitting tentatively across from the older man, Vincent asked gently: "What is it?"

"Eli's granddaughter, Miriam, is missing, Vincent. She's been gone for two days."

Vincent felt an immediate stab of alarm. He'd known Miriam since they were children. Although she didn't live Below and was now very little concerned with their world--busy with her own life and studies Above--he knew that Miriam was not the kind of girl to worry her grandfather needlessly. Something was very wrong. "What can I do, Father?"

Father removed his glasses and ran shaking fingers through his graying hair. "Eli fears...that she...oh dear. That she might be a victim of these madmen who are attacking women. If so...."

Vincent's despair and anger were growing by the moment. "Where was she seen last?"

"Eli had not heard from her for several days. The young woman she lives with called him the moment she suspected something was amiss...when she heard on the news about the men loose in this city. She says Miriam was on her way to class the last time she saw her. That was two days ago."

Vincent groaned and threw his head back. "It will be dark soon. While I shower, find on the map the nearest tunnel exit to the place she was last seen. I'll see what I can do. I know from Diana the types of places to look, and I can search faster than the police."

Father nodded silently and began pulling maps from his shelves--maps that had been painstakingly hand-drawn to correlate the tunnels Below and the myriad gateways to the city.

Vincent hurried to the showers and rushed to get clean. Dressing in fresh clothes and taking his cloak from the peg in his chamber, he returned to Father's study. As Father pointed out the various thresholds in the part of the city surrounding where Miriam was last seen, Vincent despaired. *So many places.* He knew he needed help to find Miriam, if indeed, she had become another victim of these men.

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A half-hour later found Vincent on Diana's roof. When the door opened to the loft and Diana stepped through, he said quietly: "I need your help."

Immediately Diana came to him. "What is it, Vincent?"

Though he tried to appear calm, Vincent knew Diana was sensing his distress. Hers was coming back to him in waves. She had no idea what was wrong, but she knew it was serious. "The granddaughter of a Helper. An old friend. Miriam. She's missing, Diana. Eli...her grandfather...fears...."

Her face set as granite, Diana murmured: "How long?"

"Almost two days. The young woman she lives with wasn't too concerned at first. Then she heard the announcement on the news and called Eli. We know where she was seen last...."

"Damn!" Diana spun and headed for the door. She

called back over her shoulder, "Meet you in the alley. I'll help you look."

By the time Vincent reached the alley back of Diana's building, she was there, waiting for him. Her coat was wrapped tightly around her and her hands stuffed deep into pockets. "We'd better find her," Diana said quietly. "It's supposed to drop twenty degrees before tomorrow. It's already getting cold."

"I know."

Together, they moved off toward the subway station as Vincent explained where they were going. Once at the station, Vincent waited impatiently in the shadows until Diana was inside the car and the car had begun moving before making his leap to the top. As the train gained momentum, Vincent had a jolt of uneasy realization. He could almost hear the Other gleefully commenting: *We hunt together, now. As we should.*

Vincent's hair whipped back and the stink of the oil and ozone was heavy in the wind that hit his face. Electricity crackled around him--like the feeling that was moving through him--wild and uncontrolled.

Shifting with the car and leaning into the curves--digging his claws into the grooves in the top of the car--Vincent had little time to worry about just what his darker half meant. But when the car slowed and stopped and he leapt into the shadows to await his partner in this hunt, he realized his heart was pounding. With anticipation. *To hunt with Diana....* Then he shook his head. He must keep his wits about him. Stay alert and under control.

He glanced aside as he saw a movement in the shadows. The Other separated from those shadows and showed himself--shaggy mane and ragged clothes--a feral viciousness apparent in his attitude. *And if we find them? What then? What of Miriam? Will you leave the justice to Diana?*

He saw Diana coming toward him and pushed off from the wall. *Leave it. Let us find Miriam. She is who we are hunting tonight. Not prey.*

Without a word Diana joined Vincent and the two of them disappeared into the darkness, searching for the nearest threshold to Above that didn't take them through the crowds.

Once they reached the streets, they split up and started scouring likely-looking buildings. Both of them knew there was little hope of actually finding the girl, but they had to try.

Vincent knew from Diana that all the women were found on the first floors of the buildings...generally run-down, deserted buildings--often scheduled for demolition--or unoccupied apartment buildings. They were left exposed to the elements and the cold. Almost as though the men intended for them to die from exposure...wanted their suffering far more than the deaths themselves. It was as though they taunted the police, because the women weren't hidden. No great pains were made to assure they weren't found. As though the men delighted in the game of

allowing Fate to control their deaths. Because a few of the women *had* lived...although none were brave enough to testify or even give any information against their attackers.

At least knowing the area to look narrows the search, Vincent thought, as he moved quickly from building to building, window to window, slipping to the shadows whenever he sighted or sensed anyone. He could sense Diana--a seeking, hunting presence--as alert and sharp-edged as he, himself was. He knew he would sense it if she found Miriam.

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Diana trotted through the garbage-littered alleys and dark streets, sometimes stopping to dart inside one of the tumble-down rooms. The smell of wet garbage and decay was all around her. She found winos, druggies, a few homeless families sheltering in the buildings, but not the girl she sought. As she rounded a corner, she almost ran into a trio of young toughs as they shuffled the opposite direction. She tried to go around, but they moved to block her. "Hey, Baby...lookin' for us?" The scraggly-bearded young man reached for her and Diana backed off just enough the pull her gun.

"Not on a bet. Get lost, punk."

The three boys backed off and wandered away, muttering angrily.

Diana just shook her head as she put away her gun and continued her search. Punk kids with inflated egos were no threat.

The alleys got darker and quieter. Almost peaceful. Diana pulled her coat a little tighter around her as she kept walking. She could sense Vincent as he searched, but his anxiety and concern for Miriam blurred her sense of her surroundings. With an effort, she tried concentrating on the area around her. Fuzzy sensations reached her from people in the area, but nothing firm or definite. Then...*There! Something different. Weak, but there. Desperation. Fear. A hunger....* Diana stopped dead in her tracks and cast around to try to locate the presence she felt, but it was too weak. *Whoever it is can't be far.* She dashed from window to door to window. There was no guarantee...not even any real *reason* to believe it was Miriam. It could be some wino or druggie in trouble. It didn't matter. Whoever it was needed help.

When Diana burst through the door into the garbage-littered room and saw the woman tied to the old cast-iron bed, she almost cried with relief. It *was* her. And she was alive. Diana rushed to her, addressing her gently, though she knew the girl was not completely conscious. Her eyes scanned the bed, the girl's body, as she dug in her carryall for a knife to cut the ropes that tied the victim to the bed. Once she found the old pocketknife she carried, she removed the gag. "S'okay Miriam. It'll be over soon. Hang in there."

Diana almost choked as she worked. The girl had been

laying in her own waste. She was battered and bruised. Furious, she sawed harder at the bonds, then when the last one was loose, she pulled off her coat and covered the girl. *She's cold. So cold.* Diana sat on the edge of the filthy mattress and pulled off her boots and socks, then put her socks on Miriam. She pulled the boots back on over bare feet.

Miriam's eyes fluttered open briefly and she murmured: "Who...?"

"Police. Diana Bennett. Vincent's coming, Miriam." There was a beginning of a smile. "Vince...Where?" "Here." Vincent crossed the room quickly, removing his own cloak and placing it over Diana's coat. He knelt in the filth beside the bed and took Miriam's hand. "I'm here, Miriam. It will be over soon."

Diana watched as tears welled in the dark eyes. "They...." Miriam released a ragged breath and a sob.

Diana touched Vincent on the shoulder, but he didn't look up. She could sense a black anger that matched her own as the golden head bent over his friend. "Stay with her. Gotta go call for an ambulance and the cops. I'll be back before they get here, then you've gotta go."

Leaving Vincent with Miriam, Diana dashed for the nearest phone booth. She'd seen one at the last intersection just before the boys had passed her. When she got there, the booth was occupied by a tall black kid. She skidded up and banged on the door.

"Hey, bitch," the kid yelled. "Who you think y'are?" "Police."

"Yeah, sure." The kid turned away and closed the door. He added a few profanities and Diana fumed.

Digging angrily in her carryall for her gun and badge, Diana then banged on the door with the butt of her gun. "Police, asshole! I need that phone. Now! Move it!"

With an angry scowl, the kid hung up and opened the door. "Awright cop lady. I'm outta here."

Glowering after the kid's retreating back, Diana slipped inside and closed the door. She shoved her badge and gun back in her carryall and dug for change. Once the ambulance had been called and was on the way, Diana called Greg to tell him to send the team to investigate and to supervise.

"How'd you find her, Diana?" Greg's voice was fuzzy from lack of sleep. The call had wakened him.

"Tip from an informer. Doesn't matter. We need to get her out of here, Greg. See you in a bit."

Hanging up the phone, Diana darted back up the alley toward Vincent. To take his place with Miriam.

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When Diana returned, Vincent glanced up to see her staring at Miriam. He could hear sirens in the distance, coming closer. "She is asleep, I think, Diana. She rests easier, now."

Without looking at him, Diana said gently, "You gotta

go. They'll be here in minutes." Her eyes finally met his. Her rage had cooled some and he could sense a deeper concentration as she continued: "She'll be okay, now. But you've gotta go."

Vincent's rage had also faded, replaced by sorrow. "How can men do these things, Diana? Why?" He thought of Miriam, who had always been so kind and carefree. So easy with him, even as a child. So accepting of others and so giving. Momentarily his memories of finding Catherine resurfaced and doubled his misery.

Diana pulled at him, breaking into his thoughts. She lifted his cloak from the still form and handed it to him. "Dunno. Still tryin' to figure it myself. Go on. Go tell Eli. And Father. I'll take it from here. Won't let 'em hurt her again."

Vincent drew a deep, shuddering breath, grateful for Diana's steady presence. "Thank you, Diana."

She shoved at him again, pushing him toward the door. "Nuthin' to thank me for. You'd have found her. *You* told me where to look. Now go, for pity sake! Unless you want to play footsie with the cops. I hear Joe's comin'...I can make introductions...."

Vincent allowed himself to be pushed. "You *will* keep me informed?"

"Hey. If you don't get out of here...of *course* I'll keep you informed. But send Eli to City General."

The ambulance turned the corner and Vincent dashed down the alley, pausing in the shadows to watch as the EMTs efficiently began unloading the stretcher. Two squad cars pulled in behind the ambulance. Lights and sirens filled the night air. Vincent knew he had to leave. It was becoming too dangerous to stay. People were coming to investigate the confusion: three people passed him without glancing his way.

Turning away, Vincent headed off at a trot for the subway, and an hour later he was letting Eli know his granddaughter was alive and giving him Diana's message. Eli's relief warred with his anger. His despair. And Vincent could feel the old man's emotions wash over him as Eli asked: "Why, Vincent?"

"I don't know, Eli. I don't know." It was terrible to have no answers.

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Diana sat across the room from Miriam Davidson. Elbows resting on her knees, she sat chin in hand staring at the still figure in the hospital bed. Miriam was one of the lucky ones. She'd survived. Because of Vincent, she'd been found before she died of exposure or from her injuries. *If this is lucky...* Diana thought angrily. Miriam's pale face and long dark lashes were accented by the black and blue bruises that marked her face, neck and shoulders. The rest of her body bore similar bruising and her wrists and ankles had raw, open wounds where she'd struggled against the ropes that had tied her to the bed where the men

had raped her, then left her with no thought of returning. Now she lay in a hospital bed, recovering. And angry.

Good, Diana thought. *Stay mad. Raging mad.* Diana was equally furious. And she fed on Miriam's anger to keep herself going. As the victim slept, Diana rose and paced the room, quiet as a cat. Arms hugged tightly against herself, she watched over the young woman. Thirty-two years old, dark and pretty, Miriam was even pretty with the swollen jaw and black eye from the beating the men had given her. Diana cringed as she thought of how she'd found the girl. *How brave she is to have agreed to stand up to them in court after that.* Diana couldn't imagine enduring such total loss of control. Diana threw her head back and gritted her teeth. *Anger.* A blinding emotion she couldn't afford. She threw another glance at the woman as her boss, Greg Hughes, opened the door and looked in.

"Diana," Greg whispered. "How's she doin'?"

Diana moved to the door and stepped outside into the hallway. The guards outside the room were reminders that Miriam wasn't safe yet. She was a witness and one that would talk. "She's okay. Weak. But she's going to make it, Greg. And she says she can identify them."

"Were you able to get anything else out of her before she went out on you?"

Diana suppressed her irritation. She knew Greg wasn't purposely being insensitive: he was just doing his job. He wanted to nail these animals as much as she did. "Not much. We'll have to give her a little while, Greg. Maybe in the morning she'll be strong enough. All I do know is that she's mad and she says she can identify 'em."

"We need to move on this, Di," Greg pushed. "If we wait too long, they'll get another one. We already lost the one last week. Maybe I should talk to her."

Diana spun angrily to face Greg. "Don't you think I know that? I don't like losin' 'em either. But with Miriam we've got something *solid* for a change. Not just a bunch of hunches and impressions: ideas with nowhere to go and no proof even if we're right. We've got a *live* witness, ready to testify. Let me handle it, okay? You get some ham-handed man in there with her and she'll back off. I know it."

Greg glared, offended. "I'm *not* ham-handed. I'm really very sensitive."

Diana finally smiled a little and patted his arm distractedly. "Yeah. But you're also impatient. So'm I. Besides...right now she doesn't need a man around her at all. Your just being male could scare her off."

A few minutes after Greg left, Eli came back. He'd finally been persuaded to go get himself some coffee. He'd brought some back for Diana.

"Thanks, Eli," Diana murmured as she wrapped still-cold hands around the steaming styrofoam cup. She just couldn't get the chill to leave her.

"Any change?" Eli looked exhausted. He was, after all, some seventy-odd years old. He'd raised Miriam after

her parents had been killed in a car wreck. She was all he had left in the world.

"She's breathing easier. She's resting quieter." Diana turned to Eli. "You really should go home, Eli. Try to get some sleep. She'll be fine, now. I promise. She's gaining strength by the minute and she's got two guards on her door. And me."

The old man's gaze wavered her way and his voice was hesitant. "Ms. Bennett..."

"Diana."

"Diana, then. Thank you. I don't know what I would have done if you and Vincent had not found her."

Diana brushed at a loose strand of hair and glanced back at the bed. "Like I told Vincent, it wasn't me. He'd have found her. I just can't believe our luck. If she'd been anybody else--someone Vincent hadn't known--no one would've thought to look in time."

When Eli finally agreed to leave, Diana asked him to please get a message to Vincent about Miriam's condition. Then she settled down in a hospital chair with a blanket over her and tried to rest. She watched over Miriam until finally, her own exhaustion began overtaking her and she slept.

Diana couldn't move and the bonds at her hands and feet felt like brands of fire as they cut into her skin. She could sense the presence of the men around her even when their jeering voices were silent. She was afraid and desperate as she'd never been before in her life. When the blows came, the pain, and the final indignity, Diana screamed her fear and anger.

And woke, shaking, to find that what she'd dreamt must have been produced from what she was picking up from Miriam. For Miriam, too, was screaming. The door to the room burst open as both armed guards rushed in, ready to protect their charge. A heavy, white-gowned nurse shoved past the two men and went to Miriam, injected her with a sedative and tried to comfort her.

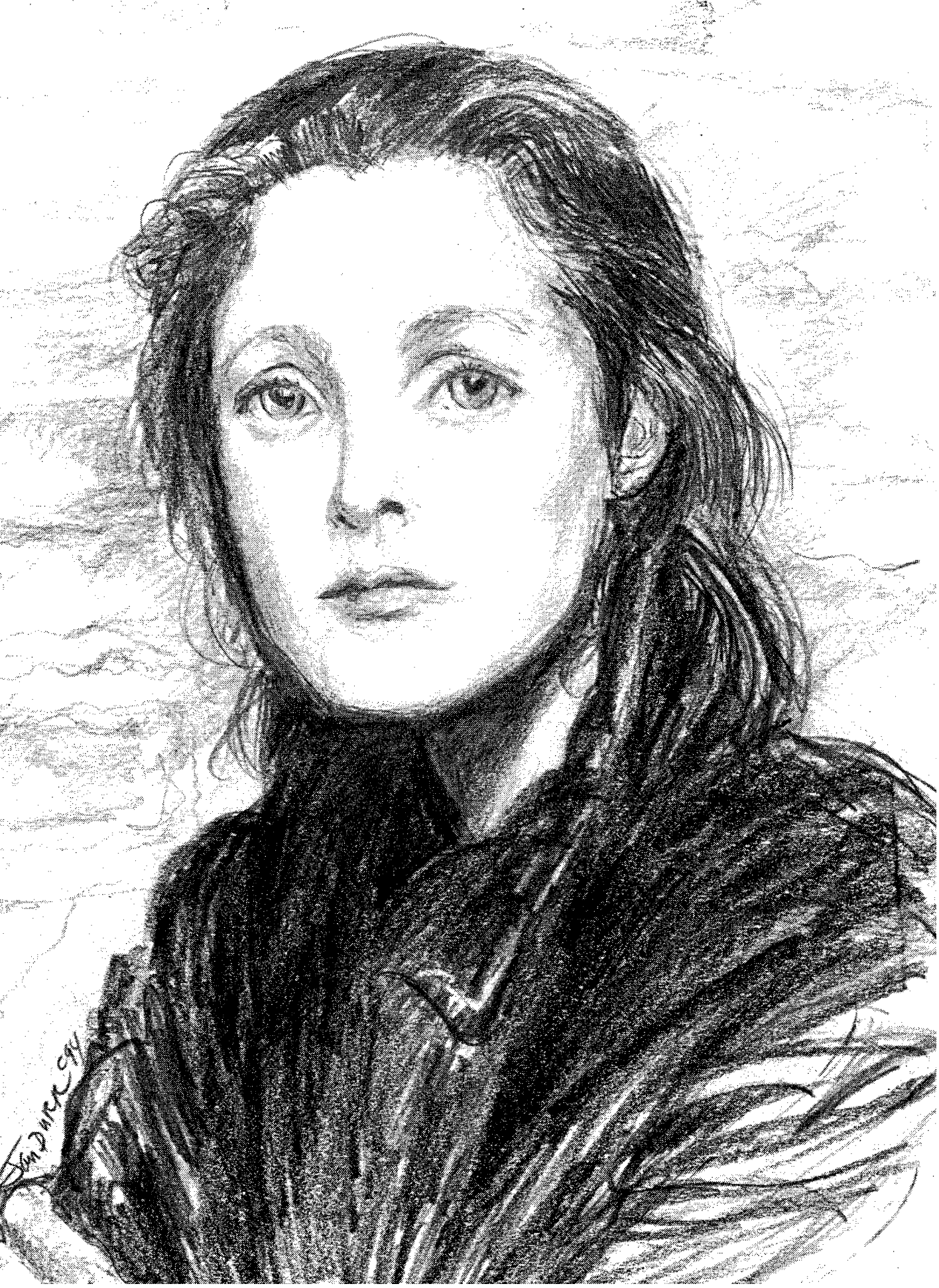
Lacking the ability to do more than stare, Diana barely heard the voices of the cops asking her what the *hell* had happened. Then a voice from the door drew her attention.

"Bennett?"

It was Joe Maxwell. Standing there framed in the glaring white light from the hallway, the D.A. was only a silhouette until her vision cleared and took in his disheveled appearance. His tie was at half-mast, his shirt looked like it had been slept in. His curly dark hair spilled over his forehead, making his frightened eyes look even wider.

"Bennett. What the *hell*.... Are you okay?"

Diana uncurling from the chair and pushed the tags of loose hair back from her face. The pain and fear--the anger--from Miriam were gone--masked by the drugs. Diana told herself sternly that she was letting herself become too close. Too involved. Clearing her throat she said evenly: "Yeah. I'm fine. Sorry. Didn't mean to



scare everybody. Just a nightmare."

Joe held out a hand and took hers. "Must'a been a lulu. C'mon."

With a backward glance to assure herself that Miriam was completely out and the cops were back at their posts, Diana allowed herself to be led out by Joe, scrubbing at her eyes with the heel of her other hand.

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Sitting at the table in the hospital lounge, Joe watched Diana Bennett. The redheaded detective had intrigued him from the moment she'd accepted the Chandler case. Mostly then, she'd made him angry--she was so completely unbending--but he couldn't help admiring her as well. *Her determined brand of ethics and courage can grow on you.* He sipped his lukewarm coffee and grimaced. Bennett had gulped hers while it was still scalding, then settled into an uncomfortable silence as she stared at her coffee cup. Finally she spoke, her voice tired beyond mere weariness. "Where's Greg? He finally go home for some sleep?"

Joe nodded. "Yeah. I told him I'd stay on for a while, just to make sure the girl would be okay."

Diana nodded. She seemed distracted.

"You okay, Bennett? That was a God-awful scream you let out."

She crumpled her cup in one reflexive motion then picked at the remnants on the table. "Yeah. It just...gets to me sometimes." She lifted her eyes to Joe's...eyes that were so changeable...sometimes green, sometimes blue...sometimes that odd shade of smokey green-gray. Right now they were so dark he wasn't sure *what* color they were. She asked quietly: "Why, Joe? Why do they do it?" She swung out of the chair and started pacing the deserted lounge, gesturing angrily and staring down at her feet. "I watch and I study...I hunt the bastards. Each time I think I've learned something...gotten closer to understanding. To stopping it. But there's always a new way...a new hatred...another killer and another kill. Sometimes I want to...."

Joe could see the anger, the suppressed frustration, the fear in every movement. She stopped, then, and stood stock-still, her head thrown back and the long red ponytail streaming down her back. Joe felt like if he touched her she'd break, she seemed so fragile. *I need to talk to Greg. There's something really off-kilter here.* Joe had watched Bennett's career carefully since the Chandler case, and she was brilliant. But she burned like a torch. And she was burning herself out. *I wonder if it all started then--with Cathy and that madman Gabriel--or if it started before that.* He shook his head sadly. He hated to see good cops lose it. And this one was on the ragged edge.

"Go home, Bennett. Get some rest."

She shook her head without bothering to look at him. "Can't sleep lately. S'easier to keep goin'."

Joe stood, feeling infinitely tired himself. "It's not a

suggestion, Bennett. It's an order. Go home. If you can't sleep, then get drunk. Or get laid. Get away from this."

Diana barked a laugh then brushed at her eye. *Was that a stray tear?*

"So who's gonna stay here and protect our prime witness?"

Joe jerked his thumb toward the room. "Two cops and a worn out D.A. Nuthin' better waitin' for me at home. Now get outta here."

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Vincent couldn't sleep, either. After leaving Eli, he'd visited with Father, then sat for a long while with Jacob--although the boy was asleep, Vincent cherished whatever time he could spare to be with him, lately--then he tried reading for a time. Nothing truly eased him. His own rage and unhappiness over Miriam kept him restless enough: Diana's state of mind only added to his unsettled state. With a sigh, he put his book aside. He startled as he saw the shadowy shape of the Other perched in the leather chair across the chamber.

We should have stayed and hunted. Perhaps they were still there, watching.

Vincent could hardly ignore himself. *It is difficult to hunt when you don't even know the prey.*

I would have known them.

Vincent stared at the apparition. At his own frustration staring back at him. *Perhaps. But leave it. After all, you are no better than they.*

The dark shadow faded, leaving Vincent alone, lying on his bed and staring into the silently flickering flame of the single candle burning by his bedside. His eyes drifted closed as he watched the flame and finally, he slept.

Vincent found himself walking in a dark place that was not any place he knew. It had no depth. No substance. It was only emptiness and a growing hunger. He longed to be free of it...of this feeling of...nothingness. He wanted filled...and to be rid of the gnawing ache. Like a child, he only knew he hungered, and for what, he didn't know. Gradually there grew in him...around him...the sense of her. Of Diana. And of a growing wariness as the dream became even darker in a way that had nothing to do with absence of light. Diana was afraid... desperate. She needed him, but he couldn't see her. Couldn't find her. The emptiness became filled with her pain, her desire to be free...and whole. Shame at her helplessness. But Vincent couldn't see, couldn't find her. Couldn't help her. The Other paced beside him, restless and angry. As Diana screamed her anguish, the Other roared his own and attacked.

Vincent woke with a start, not knowing if the Other had attacked himself or Diana. He forced himself out of bed to try to record his feelings in his journal.

He is becoming more restless daily. If it isn't Diana's

nightmares disturbing my rest, then it is him. It's this case that provokes him. And provokes fear in Diana. It is Diana's rage and fear that pull him. But for what reason? Is it lust or the desire to protect? He does not taunt me with visions of loving her...or even of the kill. But his frustration.... I do not understand. And Diana...I feel I am losing her to some great darkness that I cannot even guess at and can certainly not protect her from.

As he finished his entry and closed his journal, Vincent began to feel a growing need to go Above, to Diana's loft. Eli had told him that she was staying at the hospital with Miriam, but somehow, Vincent knew she was going home...and that she needed him.

It was very late, but heedless of the hour, Vincent drew on his cloak and headed Above. All thought of the excavation project and his need to be alert and available for that was banished from his mind. Nothing mattered but seeing her and doing whatever he could to ease her pain.

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When Vincent reached Diana's loft he found it still dark. Empty of her presence. Yet he knew she was coming. Trying the loft door, he found it open, so rather than waiting in the cold, he went inside.

As he wandered the dark rooms, Vincent thought of how strange it seemed to be here without her. The rooms were cold. Lifeless.

It is colder out. We found Miriam just in time.

In the thin, cold light that came through the window, Vincent stood in front of Diana's evidence board and examined the pictures there. The faces and bodies of women who'd been abused and left to die. He stopped abruptly as he saw Miriam's picture. Diana must have been back here before returning to the hospital.

The embers of his rage flared once more and Vincent clamped down on the feeling, fearing that it would grow beyond his control. *This...this is what she lives with.* Vincent's mind whirled. Sometimes it seemed to him that the world had gone mad and that the only sane place was the world Below. His home. Once more, he wondered bleakly how Diana, an empath like himself, could survive this without going mad. His world was a cocoon of safety and love, yet even then the press of others' emotions took their toll on him. How could Diana, who allowed herself almost to *become* both victim and criminal even survive? Even with her ability to block it out at times.

Vincent shook his head in amazement. He glanced up at the window and saw his reflection against the black glass...with the lights of the city beyond. It reminded him of the Other. And of how there were no mirrors in his chamber. *Or in Diana's home. We do not like to be reminded of what we are. What we can become.*

There was a small sound and Vincent snapped to alert attention as the freight elevator started up. He could sense

Diana's presence and rejoiced, even through the pain and exhaustion feeding through the bond, which had just opened as she dropped her block.

When the door opened, he waited patiently as she stepped off and into his arms, burying her face in the curve of his shoulder.

"Oh God. Vincent. I'm so glad you're here."

As her fear and pain subsided and exhaustion and relief took their places, Vincent felt a kind of contentment spreading through him. She was here. And safe. They'd hunted together--after a fashion--and that hunt had saved Miriam. There had been no blood spilled and even the Other was quiescent. For now, the warmth of her body and of her presence was enough. It was his world. He released a long-held breath into her hair. "And where else should I be?"

Diana pulled him to the couch and they sat in the darkness with her curled next to him, his arms around her safely shutting out the madness for a time. Finally, Diana chuckled a little. "Maxwell sent me home."

"A wise man, Mr. Maxwell."

"Since I told him I couldn't sleep, he said to get drunk. Or get laid." She watched him, seeming to judge his reaction.

"I see," he said quietly, trying to keep a straight face. "Have you any preference?"

Solemn now, she smiled gently. "Yeah. But I think I'm too tired to do justice even to the thought."

"It's likely just as well."

Diana moved to the rug in front of the couch and stretched out, motioning Vincent to join her down there. He watched for a moment, then thankfully realized she only wanted to stretch out. He took the afghan from the back of the couch and covered her with it, then lay across from her, lying on his side and leaning on one elbow. His long hair touched the floor as he reached across with one hand to brush a strand of softly curling hair out of her face.

She'd raised her barrier against the bond again. Her eyes closed and her voice was gentle. Wondering. "I never meant to love you, Vincent. You know?" Her eyes opened briefly as she glanced up to see that he was listening.

Vincent nodded his understanding. Wanting her to continue.

Her eyes drifted closed again. "Never meant it. Never wanted it. You were an enigma. A myth. A missing piece in a jigsaw puzzle of a weird case."

She fell silent and her eyes remained closed...as tightly closed as the bond. Vincent waited patiently for her to continue, all the while thinking how lovely she was--even through the aching weariness--and how precious to him.

Her eyelids fluttered a moment, the long lashes lifting a tiny bit. She sighed. "I hunted you like I would hunt any other prey. Wondered *why* someone like Cathy Chandler would love someone she never spoke of...never acknowledged. Not even a picture to prove you existed. It didn't

figure."

Silence again. Once more Vincent waited. He'd always wondered what Diana had been thinking while she sought Catherine's killer...and her lover.

Finally, Diana rolled over onto her side, opened her eyes and blinked a time or two. "Then I discovered the tunnels. I read the books you'd given her, the inscriptions." Her face was so serious. So intent. "You existed. I *knew* you did. I could almost *see* you, but the image was elusive...nothing I could grab onto. I began to realize that Cathy Chandler had something I never would find: someone who loved her. Loved *her*. No matter how foolish she might be, no matter what mistakes she made. Someone who knew her. I knew I had to find you. Maybe just to prove to myself that such a person existed--such a *relationship* existed--that all my hunches, my intuition...weren't wrong after all."

Diana sat up and wrapped her arms around her knees. The afghan fell away. She looked away from Vincent's gaze. He found himself staring at her back.

"Just like with all the rapists and murderers...the embezzlers and pimps...I asked myself questions: 'Why'd you always show up when Cathy was in trouble? How did you *know*? Why did you kill the way you did? What made you kill...to protect her...or something else?' She turned her head toward him, laid it sideways to see his reaction since she couldn't sense it with her barrier up. He hoped there was no visible reaction to betray the turmoil he was feeling. The love, the pain. For her. For Catherine.

She looked away again. "All the answers--the impressions I sensed--were contradictory: Intense love, rage, jealousy, honor. Warrior, poet, scholar, gentleman...and lover. I had to find you. *You* became my obsession. Not Cathy. Not the case. Not justice."

She sighed. "Then, the night I found you I was reading one of Cathy's books. I don't even remember the name, and certainly not the quote. 'The paths of glory lead but to the grave...' or some such. Then it occurred to me. Where I'd find you. At her grave. Eventually that's where you'd come. Because you had to. Because that's where *she* was."

Vincent glimpsed a tear at the corner of Diana's eye and restrained himself from reaching up to brush it away. He didn't dare to interrupt her.

"So I went to the grave and waited. Really felt stupid, sitting there in the dark." She laughed a little. A self-deprecating laugh. "Don't know why I felt stupid. Most of the people I know best are dead. The victims I become. The men I end up killing. Don't know why it surprised me...to be keeping company with ghosts."

"Diana..." Vincent began, then stopped, realizing what he was doing. He clamped his mouth shut.

Diana shook her head and brushed angrily at her tears. She picked at the loose braid on the carpet. "No. S'alright. It's true, you know? I always *have* gotten along better with the dead. It's real-life relationships that throw

me." She paused. "When you stumbled onto her grave it was as though I'd called you up. Conjured you out of nothing...or maybe out of my dreams. And when I turned you over and saw your face for the first time..."

A look of awe transfigured Diana's face as she remembered that moment. And Vincent's heart constricted. He knew, then, that Diana had known him even before she'd seen him. There'd been no fear...no surprise. And she confirmed this in her next breath.

"...it was like I knew you. Like I'd known you forever. A sense of *recognition* like I'd never known before. And there you were, trying to die on me."

"But I did not die. You would not allow it."

That drew a small smile from her and a chuckle. "Hell, no. I'd worked too hard to find you. Besides. You had all the answers."

Diana stood suddenly, the afghan sliding off her shoulder and onto the floor. She walked off toward the window. Vincent hesitated a moment, then rose and followed her. When he stood beside her, she glanced over at him almost angrily, then stared out the window again. "I never asked for love, Vincent. Never thought I wanted it. Not anymore. I knew it would be an inconvenience. Something I'd have to work around. Figured it wasn't for me...no matter how much a part of me wanted it, I knew it wouldn't work. Cops shouldn't fall in love. Or have families. It makes 'em vulnerable."

Vincent reached over and touched her shoulder. When she didn't move away, he began massaging her tight neck muscles. "But you did. And, so did I. Though neither of us wished it...or sought it."

Diana leaned back into the massage and closed her eyes. "*Fought* it, is more like it."

"Come back to the couch, Diana. Or the rug. Try to relax." Vincent led Diana to the couch and settled her in front of him. He worked at the knots in her neck and took her ponytail down, allowing the thick red hair to fall loose down her back. It spilled over his hands and he lifted its weight, savoring the silken feel of it. He found Diana's ever-present hairbrush on the floor beside the couch and began brushing the thick mass, carefully working away at the knots with his long nails. Very gradually, almost imperceptibly her block began dissolving as she relaxed.

Putting the brush aside, Vincent eased his length further down the couch and pulled Diana into his lap. There was no desire in the motion, no hunger for anything except the contact and her contentment. Diana leaned her weight back into him and closed her eyes as his arms wrapped around her. They remained that way for some time, until Vincent realized Diana had, indeed, fallen asleep. Reaching carefully for the afghan, he pulled it up and over her, not wanting to disturb her. He found that if he laid his head back on the arm of the couch, he was quite comfortable. The scent of her hair and of her filled him as he slept.

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Across the city, another man stared out a window at the city below him. He was alone, and feeling very lonely. Pictures flickered in his mind, like an old movie. A woman. A baby, growing into a child...a boy. *Barbara... Danny*, he thought sorrowfully as he sipped his drink and pulled his heavy robe tighter around him. *I tried, Barb. I really did. Never meant to hurt you. There're just things that...happen.* The man thought of his son, whom he hadn't seen in months--except for brief glimpses as the child played on the daycare playground, or when his mother took him out to the park--and who he might never see again. *I won't fight you, Barb. I'm not good for Danny.*

I know that I'm not really good for anyone. He wiped at tears and sighed, thinking that Barbara was right and she didn't even know why. *And with luck, she never will....*

Mark Bullock finished off his drink and removed his robe to get back into bed. The pale shimmer of winter moonlight highlighted the bunched muscles of his back as he pulled the covers back. When he glanced up, he could see his reflection in the mirror, and it looked grotesque to him. *I never let you see my other face. Only a lover's face.*

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BLIND PASSION

poem by Nan Dibble

The dark of passion is a blind pool
Where none can be certain if I love
Or kill. Beneath the surface, forces move
Faceless in the dances of mortality, the tidal pull
Of longings never named. Were we to meet
In the sweet surge and settle, float suspended
and naked in the dire truth of dreams,
Would we love there or would it be ended
By the quick flash of fangs, bubbles that are screams
And the slow falling away forever?
The deeps dissolve all our disguises
And love and loathing are but a breath apart.
Would you dare embrace what rises
From the black abyss of the heart?

CHAPTER THREE: BLIND PASSION

Diana woke with the sun streaming through the clerestory windows above her, more relaxed than she remembered being in a long time. It took her a moment or two to realize that she was sleeping in Vincent's arms...that the gentle breath in her ear was his. She glanced again, startled, up to the sunlight. *Jesus, Mary and Joseph! It's full daylight out! Father will be fit to be tied!* As she shifted suddenly, she felt Vincent wake.

"Diana?" His voice sounded sleepy and contented. And the warm contact of the bond reinforced the feeling.

She struggled to get up--to turn over and face him--without making him uncomfortable, and finally succeeded.

"G'Mornin'" she said gently. "Thanks for stayin'."

Vincent reached up with one hand to stroke her face...her hair. With the motion, the sunlight on the red-gold hair on his hand caught her eye, and her glance moved to his hair, gleaming golden in the light. "Oh!" Her exclamation of delight made his eyes crinkle around the edges as he smiled. Actually *smiled* at her.

He glanced up to the light and commented: "I believe I've overstayed."

"Definitely. Means you're stuck, too. Father'll be furious. And the project...."

Vincent made a feeble motion toward sitting up, then grimaced. Diana laughed and moved off of him then as he sat, massaging his arm to allow the blood flow to return.

"Pins and needles?"

He flexed his hand, but his eyes still smiled. Then he sighed. "Father will not be so much *furious* as concerned. Diana...could you perhaps...."

She was up and pulling on her coat and boots before he finished. "I'll get a message to him." She stopped at the door and looked back, a small grin on her face. "Guess I

don't have to tell you not to answer the phone."

Diana went as far as the first sentry, not trusting to merely dropping the message through the grate. The sentry was Alexander, a young man Diana didn't know very well. When he shifted the loose brick from its hole to look out, she said cheerfully: "Hi. It's me, Diana. Need to get a message to Father. About Vincent."

The muffled voice behind the bricks asked: "What about him?"

"Tell him that Vincent's with me, in my loft. That there's nothing wrong. And I'm sorry about keeping him from the project...." Diana's voice trailed away as Alexander didn't answer. "You there?"

"Yeah," the boy answered. "You sure he's okay?"

Relieved, Diana nodded...then figuring maybe the boy wouldn't have seen, added: "Yeah. He's fine. Really. I was the one who was a mess. But it's okay now. Tell Father everything is fine. Can you pass it along through the pipes or something? Can I wait to see what he says?"

"Sure. Just a minute." The boy's face disappeared from the view-hole and from somewhere behind the wall there began a staccato burst of intricate taps. The tapping went on for several long seconds, then everything was quiet, almost as though Pascal had called an all-quiet. Diana grinned. Everyone was going to know Vincent had stayed the night with her. *I'll bet the rumors abound today!*

When the answer came, Diana strained to see if she could recognize any of it. She could, a little. Vincent's name. Hers. Not much else. When Alexander's face appeared in the view-hole again, he grinned, as though he, too, was aware that Vincent was going to be a topic of conversation today. "Father says okay. And thanks for letting him know."

Diana stuffed her cold hands into her pockets, once more stifling a grin as she thought of what Father's reaction must've been. And of his rather bland response over the pipes. She grinned a little to herself as she started back home.

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Vincent heard and felt the freight elevator as it whined its way up. He smiled a little, wondering what Father thought about his overstaying. *It does not matter. It is done now, and I can hardly regret it. It was the only peaceful rest either of us has had in weeks.* He finished scrambling the eggs he'd started as soon as Diana left, determined that she would, for once, have a decent breakfast before beginning her day. The fact that he was to be a part of that day pleased him...though he knew Diana would need to be gone at least some of the time. He regretted the loss of time to the excavation project, and knew there was no way they would finish before the spring rains.

"Vincent?" Diana pulled the wire screen back and stepped into the loft. "Vincent?"

"Here," he said softly, almost laughing as she leaned sideways looking around the corner with a surprised look on her face. "Where did you think I would be?"

She stood with her hands poked deep in her pockets and her long hair hanging loose over her shoulders. "Dunno. I can hardly believe you're here. Now. In the daylight. Could'a been a dream. First nice one I've had in weeks."

Vincent handed Diana a plate of scrambled eggs and motioned for her to sit. They shared a quiet, companionable meal before the telephone rang.

Diana sighed. "Reality calls. Must be Greg, or Joe." Reluctantly, Diana picked up the phone. "Bennett here."

As Diana spoke, Vincent was able to tell from the conversation that Miriam was awake and doing well. And asking for Diana.

A vast relief settled over him. Miriam had looked so terrible when they'd found her that, although Diana assured him she would heal, Vincent had feared for her. He knew the inner healing--the healing her spirit needed--would take far longer, but he felt Miriam had the strength to survive this and become stronger because of it. She would have Eli and himself and all the rest of her friends, Above and Below.

Vincent watched Diana--animated now, no longer as wan and exhausted as she'd been--her bright hair touched by a shaft of sunlight, her slim form straight and tall. He watched and imagined the silken slide of her body against his...and he felt a stirring within him of the powerful, thundering desire they'd shared before in their dreams.

Sensing his sudden change in mood, Diana turned toward him, her eyes wide. Her conversation faltered, and she ended it abruptly. She stood still, watching him as she placed the receiver in the cradle. Her lips parted as her tongue moistened them. "Vincent...."

Vincent felt as though the entire world had suddenly become unreal...except for himself and her and the powerful pull of the current between them. There was a roaring in his ears, in his mind. He swayed as a wave of desire from Diana hit him...staggered him. He saw--felt--the presence of the Other. Heard his whispers of encouragement. *Touch her, Vincent. Take her. Can't you feel what she wants?* Vincent shook his head, trying to clear it. It didn't help. Diana still had not moved, but behind her stood the Other. *Look at her!* The Other reached out his hands--tipped with deadly claws--as though to touch Diana. *All you need to do is reach out and take what she offers. If you won't, then I will. I'll touch that silken skin. Taste her. I'll put myself where you've only dreamed of being. How would it feel, Vincent...to have her in your hands, under your body, your teeth at her throat as you ram yourself...*

With a roar and a sudden lunge, Vincent leaped toward his enemy--only to have him disappear--and found himself hurtling towards Diana in a headlong rush he couldn't check.

Startled more than frightened, Diana dodged instinctively and stood, shaking, as he hit the wall behind her. Vincent huddled against the solidity of the wall, tucking his hands in his armpits. Trying desperately to contain what so adamantly refused to be contained.

Diana came to him quietly, gently, and touched his shoulder in entreaty. "Vincent...it's okay."

He felt himself quieting--the rage, the desire ebbing as sand trickles through an hourglass--to leave him empty and aching. Ashamed, he turned from her. "I'm sorry, Diana."

"For what? You startled me a little. That's all."

He lifted his eyes to meet her puzzled expression. *Hadn't she felt it?* What he'd felt was an overwhelming desire to simply possess her...regardless of anything else. He'd been completely heedless of any thought of her feelings in the matter--and also heedless of the other, darker desires that lurked too close to the surface. *Obviously not.* Avoiding her touch, her look, Vincent struggled to his feet. "You felt nothing, just then?"

Her look of frustration said a great deal. "Idiot! Of course I felt it! Why do you think...." She stared a moment. "It was a feedback loop, Vincent. Again. I felt your desire...it sparked my own, which in turn fed yours. The only thing that broke the chain was when you...jumped at me like that! It startled me so that I was pulled out and I blocked. Why the hell did you do that, anyway? If you hadn't, we wouldn't be standing here discussing something so ridiculous, and I'd at least have something worthwhile making me late to the hospital."

More puzzled than before, Vincent asked: "You felt nothing but..."

She shook her head. "I felt nothing but your desire to make mad, desperate love to me. Sounded perfectly reasonable to me. I was feelin' pretty desperate there,

myself, for a few moments."

They stood facing one another for a moment, he puzzled and she seeming to him to be more amused than anything else. "I don't understand."

Diana shrugged and picked up her carryall. "I'd stay and *make* you understand, but unfortunately, you pick the most God-awful times to get this way." She eyed him speculatively. "Are you *okay*? I mean, I'm not gonna come home and find you've run off into the daylight or some such? You'll wait for me?"

He nodded hesitantly and tried to smile.

She hesitated, unsure. "You're really okay?"

Vincent thought a moment, then nodded. "Yes. Go on, Diana. I will wait."

Diana came to him and hesitantly patted his arm, then backed off. "I've gotta go. Miriam's waiting to talk to me. Taking her statement's important...."

He nodded again. "I know. Go on."

She stopped at the elevator door and looked back. "We'll talk about this later."

As Diana's head finally disappeared down the elevator shaft, Vincent thought despairingly: *How do I talk about this with her? What could I say that would not make her think me either insane or as warped as the men she now hunts?*

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It was raining as Diana drove out of the garage in her battered sedan. The sky was leaden. At the first stop light she peered out at the lowering sky and shook her head. *Looks nasty.* She thought of the delayed excavation project and felt a twinge of guilt. She hated to interfere in Vincent's life. Yet, their lives seemed inextricably entwined. If her cases didn't somehow take her Below, then increasingly they drew him Above. The similarity to Catherine's dilemma disturbed her. The one time Vincent had killed for Diana, their connection had still been so tenuous it hadn't been a problem...but what might happen if they got caught in a feedback loop now was unthinkable. The thing that bothered her the worst though, was the way she'd automatically shut down on the bond when she'd felt the loop begin: *What if we finally get around to making love and I do that...shut down on him? He can't take it again...that sudden loss of connection at the time when he should be most connected.*

Diana gripped the steering wheel tighter, then forced herself to relax as she realized she was shaking.

Pulling into the hospital parking lot, Diana slammed the door and pulled her coat tighter as a gust of wind blew heavy raindrops into her face. *Wet and cold.* She thought of how bright the morning had been and how quickly the weather had changed. *Kind of like life, Bennett. You've gotta take what you can get when you can get it because it never stays the same for long.*

Walking through the bright-walled halls with the busy

bustle of white-coated physicians and nurses, Diana longed for the warmth and security of her own cluttered, comfortable loft--with Vincent's presence, both bright and dark enhancing it. Here, there was a sense of helplessness. The patients in their beds. Totally at the mercy of the doctors' abilities. She shuddered delicately. *Why should I think something like that? This is ridiculous! Doctors help people.* But she couldn't help it. The image remained.

Although the two young cops at Miriam's door recognized her, Diana flashed her badge anyway before entering. Protocol had to be observed. She paused just inside the door. Miriam was sitting up, watching the rain.

"Miriam?"

The girl turned. Her face was more vividly black and blue than the day before, but her eyes were clear. Her long, dark hair had been neatly brushed and she wore a fluffy, dark blue fleece robe. Clearly Eli had been here. "Hi. Diana, isn't it?"

"Yeah. You remember me?"

Miriam shook her head and tried to smile. "No. Grandfather told me it was you who found me." She glanced past Diana to assure herself that no one else was in the room, then back to Diana. "He said you're the Diana Vincent has spoken of."

Diana felt herself flushing, thinking irrelevantly of this morning. "Yeah."

Miriam nodded and looked away. "I'm glad it was you that found me. Like I was, I mean. It would've been awful...."

"If it had been Vincent...?" Diana probed gently.

"Yeah. Or worse, if it'd been some stranger."

"Or nobody."

Bleakly, Miriam nodded. "Yeah."

Diana sat across from Miriam. "Do you think you can talk about it? Tell me what happened...what you know about them? You said you can identify them."

Miriam crossed her arms tightly across her chest and stared out the window. "The skinny one. Adrian Slade. He's an accountant, of all things. He does the books for the company I work for."

Diana pulled out a pad and pen to take notes and switched on her tape recorder. She was excited by the information. *An accountant. He deals with black and white facts and figures. Numbers are fixed things. Powerful things to someone who knows how to handle them. Intimidating to someone who doesn't.* "You know how we can reach him?"

Miriam's eyes snapped in fury. "Oh yeah. I know."

She gave Diana an address and phone number.

"Did Slade ever give you any reason to think he was twisted like this?"

Miriam shrugged. "I never liked him. He always somehow made me feel like...like I was beneath him. That he was better than everyone else. It used to make me mad, that he made me feel that way, so I guess I was always kind of standoffish to him. Let him know that his opinion of me

was unimportant."

Diana asked quietly: "How'd that make him feel, d'you think?"

"He didn't like it much. I saw him once outside the office and heard him talking to someone. Called me a smart-assed bitch."

Diana nodded. The comment fit. She'd resisted Slade's attempts to degrade her and had made herself a target. "You have any idea who the other man is?"

Miriam hesitated, then shook her head. "I'm not sure about him. But I know Slade called him 'Bull.' He's the worst. Slade...mostly watches."

Diana could tell Miriam was fading. The strain--either physical or emotional--was getting to her. "And you *will* testify?"

Dark eyes flashed again. "Yes!"

"You know it'll be rough? They'll ask you everything. The defense will try their damndest to discredit you. Everything you've ever done. Everything you've even *thought* of doing. I want you to be prepared."

"I know."

Diana nodded and met her eyes. "Just so you know." She bent her head to avoid those trusting, dark eyes and asked the next question.

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Diana paced Maxwell's office and argued with Joe and Greg. They wanted to go ahead with the arrest warrant. Diana resisted and they couldn't understand why.

"We've got everything we need to nail the bastard, Di. Why don't you want to go for him? We can get the information on the other guy out of him."

Diana shook her head. Something felt wrong. "I can't explain it, Greg. It's a hunch. If we go after Slade first and try to get the goods on Bull, we'll lose him."

Joe was leaning back in his chair, playing with a cat's cradle and listening to the argument, only injecting something now and again. Diana didn't like the way he kept looking at her, like she was a picture window and he was looking through. Finally Joe thumped the chair down and planted his feet. "We need a better reason than that, Bennett. If we have to, we could offer this guy a lighter sentence to get info on the other one."

Spinning to face Joe, Diana planted her palms on the desk and glared at him. "No! I don't want that and neither do you. Besides, my hunch says that Slade's not the mover here. It's Bull."

Greg tried to settle her down. "Di, c'mon. They're a team. But neither one is stupid. They couldn't be and have left as few leads as they have."

"I don't care. They *did* get sloppy with Miriam. Slade screwed up. He picked a woman who knew him. They've never done that before. Why?" She was pacing again, trying to piece things together in her head. "Why? Because usually Bull picks 'em. Miriam says Slade

watches. Now, ordinarily maybe I'd figure that Slade might just be a voyeur and he uses Bull. Miriam says he participates...but only after Bull's finished." Diana pulled at her braid, which was bothering her--restraining her--and continued her pacing. She was only vaguely aware of the two men watching her. "Bull...now Bull's on a power trip. Both with the women and with Slade. Slade gets the leavings...he watches Bulls' performance and cheers him on, then gets rewarded."

Joe finally got her attention by slamming a heavy brass paperweight down on the desk. "Alright, Bennett. Enough. You might be right, or we might. We can do one of two things: We can put him under surveillance and hope he'll lead us to Bull, or we can take what we've got with the witness. We can do DNA testing on the semen samples and get a composite done of Bull. Either way we go, it's a risk. Now me, I'm the cautious sort. I say we take what we've got and run with it, and since I'm the D.A., that's the way we go. End of story."

Diana turned to Greg for support and Greg shook his head. "I think Joe's right. Not only that, Di...I think we've got a problem." He paused a moment and the two men exchanged telling glances. Greg sighed and looked back. "Di. We're takin' you off the case. Now that we've got one of the men, we can take it from here."

A shock went through her. She'd never expected *that*. "No! Greg..."

"No buts, Di. You found the girl. You were great, as usual. But the stress is getting to you, and you're too valuable to us to lose. We want you off on psych leave: you've gotta get a rest. Get away from this one. As of now, you're on paid leave. I don't want you to have any further contact with the case. Period."

Diana could feel herself slump, like a sandbag losing sand. "What about Miriam? She trusts me."

"We've got other good female officers. It's not up for discussion." Greg shifted uneasily. He obviously didn't like doing this. Didn't like *having* to do it.

Taking a deep breath and recognizing defeat, Diana regained her dignity. Unconsciously echoing another misunderstood genius, she said glumly: "Okay good. Okay fine. You know where to find me."

Without another word, she turned and left the office.

As she stormed through the aisles of desks, people warily scurried out of her way. No one attempted to talk to her. They knew better. Striding angrily out into the hallway, Diana hit the down button on the elevator. She paced restlessly back and forth in front of the door, then leaned against the wall, her head thrown back and eyes closed. She muttered to herself in a low growl. "...Can't believe it. Damn it!" The door to the elevator opened. "Well, hell."

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While Diana was busy arguing with her superiors,

Vincent paced her loft. He'd stood at her window in the sunlight until the clouds blew in and the rain began. Afterwards he leafed through her psychology books, reading passages which drew his attention. What he read depressed him. Too many things seemed to point accusing fingers straight to him, and he dreaded speaking to Diana about such things.

There is no way I can possibly approach this with her. Especially now. In the midst of this case.

The sarcastic voice in his mind whispered: *Do you honestly think I'll go away if you simply wait? What's more, how do you know she wants me to leave?*

Vincent groaned. It was hopeless. He loved Diana--knew she loved him. But despite having made love to Catherine, despite all Diana's reassurances, Vincent still didn't trust himself in a physical relationship. He *knew* what he was capable of when the beast within was aroused. He knew that no part of himself--even the Other, strange as that entity might be--*wanted* to harm Diana. *But once the beast is called, and he comes...will he distinguish between love and the kill?* And even so...even if the Other loved her...Vincent knew what Diana feared. More than anything else she feared loss of control. Loss of self. The Other would not consider Diana's fears--instead he would feed on them, as he did on the fears of his prey. When driven by his desires, the Other could think of little else but the satisfaction of those desires. And even if the Other remained under *his* control, Vincent wondered if Diana could tolerate the total loss of self in the bond during the closeness of sex. *And if either of us breaks the connection...pulls out forcibly...what might it do to the other?*

As Vincent paced, the small apartment seemed to shrink as his strides grew longer and the shadows of the city lengthened. *Where is she? It's getting dark.*

The telephone rang, and Vincent startled. It rang again, and the answering machine picked up. *Bennett here. Or not here, whichever. Leave a message after the beep and either way, I'll get back with you. <Beep> The voice on the other end of the line was Diana's, and he reached to pick it up. "Vincent. Don't pick up. Just wanted to let you know I'd be late. If you have to leave, I understand. Miriam's okay." <Click>*

Vincent stared at the machine. It was strange to hear Diana's voice disconnected from her. He glanced out at the city, where the lights were blinking on. Soon, it would be dark enough to leave, and he supposed he must. He still needed to work on the drainage project tomorrow.

A little later when full dark had settled over the city and just as Vincent was about to leave, the telephone rang again and the machine picked up. This time, the message was from Greg Hughes, Diana's boss. *"Di. Sorry about today. I know you're pissed as hell, and rightfully so, but Joe and I really think it's for the best. I'll keep you informed on the progress of the case, though that's not really kosher. Try and get some rest."* There was a pause. *"Your Dad would be behind me, Di. You know it."* He hung up without

saying another word, and the machine clicked off.

Vincent hesitated a long moment, then removed his cloak. *There is something wrong. Where is she?*

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It was dark when Diana finally made it home to her loft. A quick glance out the window showed the lights of the city shining brightly even through the rain. She stepped out of the old freight elevator and tossed her bag onto the couch. Walking wearily to the refrigerator she leaned over to dig out some leftover pasta for supper.

"Diana..." A gentle, grating voice came from the other side of the living room, and when she glanced up she saw a dark form standing in the shadows.

Diana blinked back tears of frustration. She didn't know if she could manage enough control to keep herself from flying into his arms and simply dumping it all on him. She held her empathic barrier against him, though she longed to discard it as a burden that had grown almost too heavy to carry. She joked feebly: "Seems like I'd learn to go to the store." She plopped the container onto the table. "I'm not really hungry anyway."

The dark figure separated from the shadows and Vincent stepped into the light coming from the kitchen. His mane was a sunburst of gold against the darkness. A long-taloned hand backed with reddish fur and tipped with long claws reached out and gently took Diana's hand and led her to the couch, where he sat and waited for her to join him.

Diana hesitated a moment, shook her head, then pulled away. She walked resignedly to her evidence board and began removing photos, clippings and reports to return them to Greg. The rest of the team would need them. She could feel Vincent's eyes on her as she worked--as she angrily tossed the weeks of hard work and the evidence of ruined, shattered lives into a packing box.

Diana paused as she pulled down the last photo: a black and white glossy of Miriam Davidson that was taken as she was carried from the tenement on a stretcher. Diana put a hand to her face and rubbed at tired eyes, starting violently when Vincent touched her shoulder.

"Diana," Vincent whispered gently. "Please. Come sit with me for a time. We needn't talk about it if you do not wish it."

Vincent guided Diana to the couch and settled her against him. Eased by his presence, Diana closed her eyes and lay her head on his shoulder. She gave up the battle to shield herself from him and slowly released her barriers. As Vincent's peace settled around her and she wondered why she'd ever fought so hard against "losing herself" into him. He was the only person in the world who truly understood her--who could accept her as she was--dark and light, strong and weak. For him, she didn't need to be perfect, or strong--at least not all the time. She was only now beginning to accept that and learning to let go of some of her hard-won controls.

She suddenly jerked to attention as Vincent tried to remove the photograph from her hand. Her grip tightened so reflexively that the picture bent and tore. "No!"

"Diana!" Vincent was puzzled by her behavior--she could feel his confusion--and she tried to explain.

"It's just...don't...look...she wouldn't...wouldn't want anyone who knows her to see. Especially not you."

As though reassuring a child, Vincent patted her hand and carefully removed the photo. It didn't matter that he'd *already* seen Miriam when they'd found her. He knew that Diana was right. "I won't look, Diana. I promise." He laid the picture aside and gathered her into his arms.

She sighed and sat up, gathering her pride around her. "Sorry. I know you weren't prying. Go ahead and look at it if you want. Might as well. Everybody else in the precinct has," she added bitterly. She stood and raked her hair back out of her eyes. Glancing back at the massive figure on her couch, she smiled a little despite her mood. Vincent's expression was a mixture of concern and curiosity.

"No," Vincent said quietly. Without glancing at the photo, he took it and laid it in the box with the others and put the lid on it. "Now," he said, turning back to her. "Something has happened."

She nodded solemnly.

"Is Miriam worse?"

Diana glanced up. His concern, both for her and for his friend was etched across his face. "No. No. She's okay. As okay as she *can* be anyway." She sighed. "They took me off the case, Vincent. Said I'm getting too close...too involved." She rubbed at her face again. "Hell. Maybe they're even right. But they wouldn't listen to me, and I'm afraid they're gonna blow it...lose the second man."

Pragmatic as always, Vincent asked quietly, "Is there anything you can do about it?"

She shook her head. "Not a damn thing."

"Then this case is over, at least for you. You've done what you can for Miriam...for now. She's safe. And perhaps you will allow me the pleasure of your company. For I have missed you sorely, Diana."

Diana's short laugh was more of a bark. "Don't see how you can possibly take pleasure in my company when I'm in this kind of a mood."

Vincent didn't answer. He merely took her hand and led her to bed, where he tucked her in and stretched out beside her. "You will sleep, tonight. It's over, Diana. Rest, now."

"You'll stay?"

"Yes."

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As he lay awake beside her, Vincent only wished he understood why this case held such horror for Diana. Why it struck such deep resonances within her. She'd dealt with

rape cases and rape victims before. It wasn't only that. *She's exhausted emotionally. Once Miriam is out of the hospital, Diana and I can help her with her healing. It would be good for Diana to help heal someone rather than simply seek justice for them. Perhaps they will heal one another.*

Vincent shifted carefully, making himself more comfortable. He'd promised he would stay the night with Diana and he would, although what Father would think about him staying yet *another* night didn't bear thinking. And the drainage project was hopelessly compromised in any case. They would have to evacuate the living chambers beneath the serpentine when the rains started. He moved Diana's head onto the pillow and off of his shoulder, then lay with one arm around her while she snuggled like a child into the circle of his warmth and safety. With her settled, Vincent closed his eyes and slowly drifted into a contented sleep.

It was a white room. So totally devoid of feature that even the joining of the walls and ceiling were not noticeable. There was no door, no windows...no way out. The bright light, coming from everywhere was inescapable. Vincent tried to move, and couldn't. Tied in some way and forced to endure the light, he knew that every flaw in him was clearly visible, both inside and out. A hole opened in the wall exposing the comforting darkness outside the room, but there was no way to reach its safety. "You belong to me, now. Nothing you do can take you away from me. I am in control, now." Vincent turned his head to see...himself...or rather, the Other, dark part of himself.

Vincent woke sweating to find Diana sobbing in the corner. Quickly untangling his legs from the sheets, he ran to her, scooping her up and holding her to him. Her fear was a tangible thing, curling around her. "Diana...Diana. Shh."

"No," she gasped, clutching his shirt so hard he felt the seams give. "Don't."

Thinking that Diana had seen the Other in his dream and that he'd frightened her somehow, Vincent reassured her: "It was a dream, Diana."

She threw her arms around his neck and buried her face in his shoulder. "Hold me, Vincent. Tight."

So, he held her tightly until her shaking subsided and the tendrils of fear dissipated. Once she was calmer, Vincent tried to make sense of what had happened. "Your dream...was I in it? Did I frighten you?"

Diana's head snapped up and she stared at him with a puzzled expression. "You? No. Of course not. I don't remember you there at all."

Vincent hadn't seen Diana in *his* dream either, but he'd just assumed somehow that the dream had been shared, as so many of their dreams were, now. "Is it anything you can tell me?"

Diana's distress radiated across to him very clearly. Fear and embarrassment. She shook her head. His sense

of her faded as she blocked. "No. The images are vague. I just...felt...I don't know. Can't even grasp the words. It was a place...like a room...but it was a prison." She frowned and stared into space. "There was someone else there...telling me I had no choice."

"But it wasn't me?" Vincent was still confused. The dreams were too similar not to have had shared elements.

She shook her head again. "No." Sliding away from him, Diana began pacing. Her hair was coming out of her braid in big, floppy chunks. She pushed the arms of her sweats up as she walked. After a minute or two she stopped and stared at him. "Maybe I *am* getting too close to this one. Maybe Greg and Joe were right. Psyching myself into those guys has been driving me up the wall--figuring out how they thought and hunching what they'd do next; asking myself what *they* were dreaming about, what they wanted--it was all I thought about. I was dreaming about them, about *how* they'd do something, *where* they'd take someone, *who* it might be. Turning it all over and over again in my head. Talking to myself...to them...all the time. I know you felt a lot of it. I've been living with that mentality for weeks. Don't worry about it. It was just another nightmare about the case, is all. It'll be better in a day or so. I just have to let it go now."

"Perhaps," Vincent said gently. Not entirely convinced. "This is different, though, is it not? You still haven't told me why you're so angry."

She sighed. "I'm mad at a lot of things, but mostly at myself. I never let my obsession with my work show to my superiors, Vincent. I always try to stay in control, collected. Because I know what happens to those of us who can't handle the stress. But this time I've blown it. Greg has me on psych leave...and Joe I think, is considering a psych discharge...if I don't straighten out."

"That's their job, Diana. They wish you well," Vincent countered in what he hoped was a reasonable tone.

Diana shoved her hair back and glared at him. "But Vincent, they're *wrong* about the case...about these men! I know it. Feel it." She told him what she thought about the two men. "If they push Slade, he'll go to prison and take the fall, leaving Bull free. Because Bull *owns* him. They'll take down the patsy and leave the real monster out there."

The failure of the judicial system Above hardly surprised Vincent. He'd seen the same thing time and time again during his two years with Catherine--and even more so since he'd been involved in Diana's life. But Diana took every failure personally. "Sometimes, Diana, we must accept that we cannot control *everything*. The dreams...."

Vincent reached for her and she waved him off brusquely. "Vincent...if it's gonna work between us at all, we've gotta give each other space. We can't stay out of each other's dreams, but that just means we've gotta *force* ourselves to quit analyzing 'em. I can't handle it if I feel like you're always trying to 'fix' me. Besides, my frustration has nothing to do with the dreams. The dreams just

echo the way I feel about the case."

Vincent joined her at the window and stared past her into the night. He leaned a shoulder against the wall and sighed. "You're right, of course...but it's difficult, Diana. I feel your pain and want to help."

"Sometimes you can help best by leaving me alone." Seeing the hurt on his face, she took his hand and patted it reassuringly. "Not *alone*, really...just.... Damn," she swore softly. "That's not what I meant. It's just...like I said...we've gotta learn a balance. Learn the difference between yours, mine and *ours*. All relationships are like that, I think. Ours is just more complicated because it's harder to tell the difference. Y'know what I mean?"

"Yes."

A deep silence fell as they both watched the rain. Vincent watched the small rivers running toward the culverts and sighed.

Seeming almost to read his mind, Diana finally came to him and put her arm around him. "I'm sorry. Two nights, now, I've kept you. You've missed one full day of work already. You've got to get back."

Vincent rested his cheek against her hair. "Diana. Come Below for a few days. You're no longer needed here. We will both rest better, there."

Sliding away, Diana walked over to her desk--rested her hands on the box of evidence--and stood silently, head bowed. After a few moments, she seemed to make a decision. Picking up the telephone, Diana dialed and waited, turning to Vincent. Her expression was deadly serious. "Greg. Diana here." She paused, listening. "I'm okay. Yeah. I understand. I have all the evidence together and I'm planning on going away for a day or so. Could you...." She paused again, obviously having been interrupted. She seemed frustrated. "...Greg. If you want the evidence, somebody's gotta come get it tonight. Or I'll drop it off. Whichever you prefer." There was another long pause, and Vincent watched Diana's expression. It seemed pained. "Yeah. I know it's almost morning, Greg. Sorry." Finally, she said quietly, "Okay. I'll wait."

Diana carefully replaced the receiver in the cradle, then turned to Vincent and smiled. The smile seemed just a little forced. "There. It's done. Greg's coming by in a few minutes to pick up the evidence." She walked past Vincent into the bedroom. He followed silently, watching as she pulled an old, ragged suitcase down from the shelf in the closet and threw it onto the bed. Without looking up, she began tossing a few changes of clothes into it. "You can wait here, in the bedroom, while Greg's here. Then we can go."

Diana heaved the suitcase off the bed and started into the living room.

Vincent stopped her, taking the suitcase from her. He placed it on the floor, then softly caressing her face, he turned her toward him. "Diana. You don't *have* to go with me. I would not have you there unless you wish it. It's not necessary." Vincent couldn't understand Diana's



withdrawal. He wished desperately that she would come out of the shell she'd so carefully erected around herself. At one time, Vincent might have considered such withdrawal to be simply because of *him*--the way he was, or something he had done--but he knew Diana well enough to know that the only time she *truly* withdrew was when it was something she, herself, did not wish to face...or share.

Diana shrugged, but her shell seemed to crack a little. "No. It's a good idea, Vincent. Really." She gestured to the quiet apartment. "Can you imagine me sitting here brooding for the entire time I'm off? Watching the rain? Wanting to be on the case or with you?" She smiled then. A smile that touched her eyes. "Maybe I can do security for you while you make up for lost time on the project."

Before Vincent could answer, the intercom buzzed and Diana stalked across the room to it. "Yeah?"

"Diana? It's me." Greg's voice sounded hesitant.

"Okay. I'll send the elevator down." Diana nodded to Vincent and he withdrew into her bedroom, closing the door firmly.

Ingrained habits of politeness forced Vincent to try not to listen to Diana's conversation with her boss. The two voices in the other room were first very soft, then raised as they argued. Vincent stared out the small window in Diana's bedroom, wishing there was something he could do to help Diana through this.

"...so *damned* stubborn, Diana! Just like Patrick!"

"Can't think of anybody else I'd rather be like. Thanks for the compliment."

"Yeah. Well Patrick got himself killed because *he* wouldn't listen to reason, either!"

Dead silence.

Vincent half-turned, hesitant and anxious. He knew Greg Hughes was treading thin ice about now. Any derogatory mention of Patrick Bennett--Diana's father, whom she'd adored--always sparked her anger. Even if it was coming from her father's friend and ex-partner.

There was more discussion, but quieter now. As though Diana were trying desperately to maintain what little

remained of her dignity and self control. Vincent turned back to watch the rain and tried to distract himself. *It is wetter than usual for this time of year. I wonder if that is good or bad? If it rains now, will it be drier later?* he thought inanely. He tried to focus his mind on his problems Below, with his own world and let Diana deal with hers. *Before long we will have to move the Andersons. And Mouse, he thought ruefully. The Mousehole will have to be evacuated. Mouse will be most upset.* Vincent wondered if Mouse's original reason for drawing up plans for the project to begin with was because he absolutely hated having to move his things. Vincent sighed and wished that Greg would leave.

Almost as though his wish had been magically granted, Vincent heard the whine of the elevator. Before the sound had died away, the bedroom door opened and Diana stood framed there. She looked as brittle as glass: sharp edged and pale. But her voice when she spoke was even and calm. "Greg's gone." Arms wrapped around herself defensively, Diana waited for Vincent to make some comment.

He didn't. He simply nodded and walked past her into the living room, leaving her to follow. Vincent struggled to be patient, to allow Diana to make the decision to go or stay. To follow or lead. It pained him to watch her indecisiveness...Diana, who had always been so sure and confident. Diana, who after Catherine's death had led him through the darkness of grief and self-hatred to the light of acceptance and love. He ached to hold out his hand and lead her out of this dark river she floundered in--that threatened to swallow her--but he knew that like Father, who could only wait and watch him and Catherine as they fought the currents of the river, so could he only wait and silently encourage her. Pray for her.

"You heard?"

Vincent looked away. "A little."

Diana took a deep, shuddering breath, then picked up her suitcase. "Good. Then I don't have to go over it all again. Let's go. Meet you in the alley."



MIDNIGHT PASSIONS

by Rhonda Collins

Softly silent, gently burnished memories
slide easily into mind.
Calling to us both
waves of longing shining as the seas.

Midnight passions, noonday sins
artless and engaging.
Shadow fears, invisible tears
evaporate upon the winds.

Bright imaginings, dark desires
weave gently through us
Real enough to touch
the heavy heartbeat of love's fires.

CHAPTER FOUR: MIDNIGHT PASSIONS

Vincent traveled quietly with Diana through the tunnels and the silence between them was not the companionable silence of friends or lovers. It was not at all like it had been when they'd traveled this way last: when they'd returned from their trip Below. Then, the bond had closely linked them, making words unnecessary. There had been darkness between them, but there had also been light. Now, it was as though he walked with a stranger who was neither angry nor pleased, but merely *here*. Vincent had offered to carry Diana's suitcase, but she'd shrugged off his efforts. Frustrated and helpless, Vincent could only continue on their journey toward his home.

As the torches became more frequent, the niches with cheerfully-burning candles lined the tunnels walls, and the rhythm of the pipes was around them, Vincent felt eased. For once, Diana's company was becoming oppressive. He needed the warmth and love that his home provided. *Perhaps that love will also help Diana to find herself once more.*

Vincent finally broke the long silence. "I must stop by to see Father."

Diana nodded absently. "I can find my way to the guest chambers by myself."

"I'm certain Father would like to see you, as well, Diana."

"Not now." She glanced up into his eyes and tried a smile. "Give me a little while, okay? Time for a bath in that great bathing pool. Tonight?"

"No," Vincent said decisively. "First, you will come with me to breakfast. Neither of us has eaten, and William will be pleased to see you."

Vincent knew Diana had no appetite, but she had to eat to regain her strength. This case had drained her as no other since her hunt for Gabriel.

Diana hesitated, then quietly agreed. "Yeah. Okay. I suppose you're right."

Relieved, Vincent added: "And perhaps afterwards you might like to visit with Jacob. He has missed you, Diana."

The thought of Vincent's son obviously brought some light to Diana's dark mood. The smile she gave him was genuine and easy. "I'd like that." She reached up and stroked Vincent's cheek, lingering briefly. "I'm sorry, Vincent. I don't mean to...well...you know."

"I know. Go now, and bathe. Try to relax. But don't take too long, or William will be finished serving."

When Diana left to do as he asked, Vincent watched her for a moment, then turned toward Father's study. He paused as he approached the entrance, a little reluctant to face Father's lecture on caution--about his remaining Above with Diana--and about neglecting his responsibilities.

When he entered the study, however, Father merely glanced up and waved to him, indicating he should come in. "I heard on the pipes that you'd returned." Father gave him an odd look that Vincent couldn't quite place. "Of course, everyone knows where you were last night. We were all concerned. Is the problem resolved?"

Vincent was unsure just what problem Father was referring to. There were so many. He stepped hesitantly down the stairs, deciding to comment upon the problem that seemed most generic. "I don't believe that anything has been resolved, Father. Miriam is still in the hospital. The men who attacked her are still free."

Father tapped his fingers restlessly on his desk. "Poor Miriam. Eli has been beside himself." A moment later, Father glanced up from the plans in front of him, his expression curious. He rolled the drawings, tied them with a string, then inquired gently: "And Diana? Yourself?"

Father was persistent, and with a touch of embarrass-

ment, Vincent belatedly realized that everyone who'd heard Diana's message about where he'd spent the night probably thought he and Diana had done a great deal more than simply spend the night together. Vincent shrugged helplessly and tried to explain. "Diana is very...fragile...right now, Father. This case has consumed her. Occupied her every moment. I've never seen her quite this obsessed. And now her superiors--Greg Hughes and Joe Maxwell--have removed her from the case. They will not take her advice, fearing she has become too close to react reasonably. I've brought her Below to rest. To heal."

Father rose and reached for his cane. Vincent could sense his concern. "She hasn't been eating again? Not sleeping? The dreams...?"

Placing one restraining hand on his father's shoulder, Vincent commented gently: "All of those, Father. But we must allow her time." After Father was once more seated, Vincent sat facing him and attempted to change the subject. What was between himself and Diana was not something he wished to discuss with anyone. Not even Father. "Tell me. Has there been any progress at all on the project? Have plans been made for the evacuation? If we begin early enough...."

Father waved aside Vincent's questions. "The project hardly matters at this point, Vincent. You know it's too late to finish in time. And yes, we've already made plans for the evacuation and temporary re-settlement of the few families in the area. And Mouse." Father fell silent for several long moments.

Vincent considered apologizing for the delay. However, it *had* been only one day, after all, and it couldn't be helped. But they'd already been cutting things so fine as it was.

Father confirmed this with a sigh. "We should never have started that excavation project so late. I know Mouse meant well, and all of you worked very hard, Vincent...but the weather is simply not going to cooperate. It's not even spring yet and already heavy rains are causing minor flooding in the area. Working down there now would be hazardous in the extreme."

Vincent agreed with Father's conclusions, then looked over the plans for the orderly evacuation. At least they still had plenty of time for that. This year there would be no injuries or lost possessions.

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Diana luxuriated in the bathing pool with the steam heavy in the air, grateful that no one else seemed intent on bathing at the same time. Not that she was a prude, but right now she just wanted a little privacy. She was still tightly blocked although she knew that if she were to let down her barriers she'd probably feel much better. The atmosphere here, Below, always seemed to relax her. But she didn't want to disturb Vincent. Her thoughts and feelings were in such turmoil right now, and she knew he

had enough problems without her adding to them. She remembered what had happened the previous morning. They hadn't even had time to talk about *that* yet, and Diana knew it was important. To both of them. *As hard as I try not to, I still cause him problems. My emotions upset him. Even the love and desire I feel for him upset his balance. And when I can't keep myself level and centered....*

Diana could hear more activity in the corridor outside, so she knew her time was about up. Regretfully pulling herself out of the steaming pool and drying off, she dressed in her sweats and combed her hair, leaving it loose to dry faster. *Guess I'd better try to act normal--or whatever I can fake--and go face Vincent and Father. I guess breakfast with the whole community is better at this point than tea for two.*

Taking her towel and hanging it in her chamber to dry, Diana then turned toward Father's chamber, where she knew she'd find Vincent waiting for her. She took a few deep breaths to settle herself. Sometimes, despite his British accent and quaint ideas of propriety, Father reminded her forcefully of her own father, and at this moment Diana wasn't sure she could handle the comparison. She missed her father acutely. *Oh, Dad. Am I really as strong as you always said I was? Right now I don't feel strong enough to put one foot in front of the other. How'd I lose my objectivity? You always told me justice was everything. I don't want justice. I just want....*

Diana stopped. She could hear the clipped tones of Father's voice admonishing his son.

"I know you love her, Vincent. And I know she needs you. Needs all of us. But you *must* be more responsible about making it home before daylight. Or getting a message here, at least, if you will be safely in her loft. We were all concerned for you."

Vincent's voice was low, soft and calm. He didn't seem at all concerned that Father was upset with him. Somehow, that relieved Diana immensely. But she still felt guilty. "Sometimes, Father, one cannot predict such things. I *am* sorry that I worried you, but we *did* get word to you as soon as possible."

"Whenever you're Above, I worry. When you're not home before daybreak, I become frantic."

There was a long silence and Diana sighed and steeled herself before moving into sight in the doorway. She forced a smile and hoped it was genuine-looking enough to pass Father's scrutiny. She knew it wouldn't fool Vincent.

"Hi," she said cheerfully. "Wish I could take that pool Above with me. It does great things for a person's attitude." She came quickly down the stairs, noticing as she came that Vincent was already on his feet and moving toward her.

"Diana. You look better." Vincent turned to Father. "Will you join us for breakfast, Father? Everyone has been missing Diana. Especially Jacob."

Diana felt a little unreal. It was as though all this around her was a soft, bright dream. From Vincent with

his gently grating, sexy voice, virile and strong in his cloth and leather--the golden glow of the candlelight making his hair the burnished gold that she loved so much--to the kind, graying English gentleman in the ragtag layers of mismatched clothes, it all seemed unlikely and strange that she should be allowed here at all. She found herself looking around the study as though she'd never seen it before. Piles of books, from first editions to torn paperbacks, candles in sconces and candelabra, the old ship's wheel, even the sound of the pipes...it all seemed alien. But so...*damned*...desirable. *I wish I fit in with all this...peace.*

"Diana?"

Vincent's voice called her back. She realized she'd been daydreaming. "Yeah. Sorry. You ready to go eat?"

Vincent nodded and Diana steeled herself to keep from crying as Father leaned over to hug her. "It's good to see you, my dear. Please stay as long as you can, this time."

Vincent's hand closed over Diana's and her world narrowed down to that small focus as he drew her out of Father's study and into the corridor. *Tunnelvision*, she thought irrelevantly--feeling hysteria nearing--and followed Vincent obediently. By the time they reached the nursery, Diana was able to manage a little coherent speech. "Father looks like he's doing better. His hip, I mean."

Vincent's response seemed a little curt. "He is."

When they entered the nursery, it seemed to Diana that there were children everywhere. *Rugrats*. *Little ankle-biters*. Mary was letting the children play on the floor on the piled carpets, and they really were everywhere. Diana smiled. Couldn't help it. There was Jacob, toddling over to Vincent. *He's actually walking, for Chrissakes!* It was the first time she'd seen Vincent's son since he'd begun walking.

Jacob toddled in a reasonably steady motion toward his father, his chubby legs encased in his heavy tunnel togs and tiny feet in small fur boots. Then, noticing Diana, his head swiveled to peer up her. The motion upset the baby's balance and he fell backwards onto his backside, howling at the indignity. Both Diana and Vincent rushed forward, but Diana reached the baby first, picking him up and soothing him.

"Hey. S'okay tiger. Really."

Big, wet blue eyes regarded her solemnly as Jacob chewed on his fist, sniffing unhappily. A moment later the baby pulled his fist out of his mouth, pointed to her and burbled: "Danana."

Diana turned to Vincent, her own eyes suddenly threatening rain. He only smiled as he knelt beside her. "He has missed you, these past weeks."

Her voice caught. "Who...did you teach him my name?"

The baby was reaching for his father now, and Vincent took him gently. He held out his hand for Diana as he rose. "It seemed appropriate. Often, he had a...a *wanting*. He seemed to be looking for someone. I finally realized he was looking for *you*, so I gave him a name so he could ask

for you. It seemed to satisfy him."

As they walked, Diana lifted Vincent's mane to see Jacob, hidden underneath. The baby smiled and hid his face. She smiled back. "He really missed me?"

"Since he has learned your name, he asks for you constantly. He loves you, Diana."

A feeling of peace settled over Diana. Vincent's hand enclosed hers as surely as the peace and love of this world--and *his* love--enclosed her. She felt some of the pain and anger from the previous weeks drain away. She glanced up to see Vincent gazing at her with eyes that were calm and serene. "Thanks."

Hiking his son a little higher, Vincent put his other arm around Diana. "For what?"

She shrugged and leaned into him. "Oh. Nuthin'. Everything."

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They barely made it to breakfast. Only a few people remained: Mouse, whose hand slowed him and Jamie, who was obviously staying to keep him company. The two were leaving just as they came in. The older children who had cleanup duty waved gaily, but William seemed disgruntled.

"You know the rules, Vincent. Seems like by now you'd know to be here on time..." William threw Vincent a look that would've made him blush if he could have. "...no matter *what* you were up to the night before."

Vincent *did* know the rules and normally he wouldn't even *try* to cadge William out of breakfast, but it was necessary that Diana rest and eat. A little angry at his own discomfiture, he swallowed the anger to allow William the upper hand. He knew that William had a soft spot for the redheaded detective, whose temperament and argumentativeness could match his own any day. And he knew that the best way to win this particular battle was to lose it. "I'm sorry, William. Diana has been working a difficult case and has been neglecting herself. I've brought her home to coddle her."

Naturally, Diana bristled and rounded on Vincent. "I don't need *coddling*! And if William can't be bothered to feed me, I can just do without!" She spun and started to walk away, but William caught her arm.

"Hey there. No arguments? You're just gonna let me win, just like that?"

Diana shrugged and looked away. "No skin off my nose. I don't eat half the time anyway. Won't miss it."

Crossing his arms over the wide expanse of apron, William regarded Diana thoughtfully, then in an aside to Vincent, commented: "She *does* look a mite peaked. More than a little on the skinny side, too, if you ask me."

"Nobody asked!" Diana snapped furiously at the cook.

"Well," William considered thoughtfully. "I suppose I can make an exception. After all, we've got the evacuation to think about, and I'd hate to have Vincent going weak in the knees on us. Now you...you'd be useless anyway. Too

skinny to do much, even if you weren't half-dead on your feet." He turned to the kitchen and returned with two plates heaped with pancakes and blueberry syrup.

Vincent sat at the long trestle table and settled Jacob beside him, handing the child a pancake to chew on. "Thank you, William," Vincent said rather meekly. He carefully kept from smiling at William's satisfied look.

Diana stood with her arms crossed and glared at William's back as he left. Finally, she slung a leg over the bench and sat, elbows on the table and positively glowered at Vincent. "You're hopeless. Frustrating. Absolutely insufferable."

Vincent was tempted to answer, but when he glanced up, Diana was already helping herself to the pancakes. *Best to quit when one is ahead*, he thought with satisfaction.

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The rest of the day was taken up with evacuating the families below the serpentine--and with convincing Mouse to allow his treasures to be moved. The water had already reached the Andersons' chambers, so their goods were the first to be shifted. Vincent watched Diana as she struggled with Maize Anderson to move the mattress from their bed. Slogging through a foot of water, they carried the mattress barely an inch above the waterline. Normally, he would have offered his help, but Diana seemed so determined...and the mattress was almost clear. He shook his head and turned to help Cullen with a heavy dresser. When they'd cleared even the pictures on the walls and the books, Cullen insisted on removing the shelves that were attached to the walls.

"If the water *should* get this high--granted it probably won't--it would warp the wood. No sense in wasting it."

So Vincent helped Cullen with the shelves, and while he did, he could hear Diana arguing with Mouse about the necessity of moving the young man's belongings. Mouse had dug in his heels and simply refused to cooperate. "You've gotta move 'em, Mouse. Just think of the damage all that water would do to all the electronic gadgets."

"Mouse'll build dam. Make water go around." The blond-haired young man glared stubbornly through long bangs as he gestured to indicate the water going around his dam.

"Well. Guess we could leave it," Diana shrugged. "I know Father'll be glad to get rid of all that junk."

"Not junk! My stuff! My things!" Mouse was becoming agitated. Furious with Diana.

"Yeah," Diana drawled. "Once all that stuff gets ruined by the water, why I'm sure you'll have lots of room."

Mouse was almost beside himself with fury. Vincent could sense the boy's feelings of betrayal: Mouse liked Diana very much and felt she was against him...trying to take his things away. He was more angry over the assumed betrayal than he was over moving his treasures. Vincent sighed. He could see what Diana was trying to do, but she

simply didn't understand Mouse (few people did), and he'd found that with her block up Diana tended to be a little obtuse when it came to dealing with people. It was when she was blocked that she made the most mistakes...both professionally and personally.

Slogging through the water to the pair, Vincent placed a restraining hand on Mouse's shoulder. "Mouse. Diana is teasing you. Not to hurt you, but to make you understand how foolish it is to leave your things in the Mouse-hole--in danger."

Not quite appeased, Mouse glared at Diana. "True?"

Diana shrugged, spread her hands helplessly and cocked her head. "True. I'm sorry, Mouse. But you were being so stubborn. Guess I thought if I got you mad enough... either at me, or at Father, that you'd move the stuff. We'll be real careful with it. I promise."

Mouse's face lost its truculent look and his eyes gradually regained their interest. "Don't think dam would work, Diana?"

She shook her head. "No, Mouse. I really don't. It would be really risky anyway. The water could short out all your electronic stuff. And what about Arthur? You wouldn't want anything to happen to him."

Once Mouse was assured for the fifteenth time that they'd take extra care with his things (since his hand was still not completely healed and Father wouldn't allow him to help with the move), he became engrossed in a conversation with Diana about how they would make Arthur comfortable in the guest room where Diana was currently sleeping, until such time as Diana went back Above and Mouse could take it over.

Vincent watched the exchange with interest and relief. Although still blocked, Diana seemed easier and less stressed than she'd been in weeks. *Perhaps it is all she needs: to be assured she is still needed. Still loved.* That was not the problem Diana was fighting, Vincent knew, but still, knowing that one is loved and accepted often provided a buffer for deeper problems.

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It was a very long day, but eventually it came to an end. After a hurried meal from baskets brought by William and his helpers, the tired and dirty movers trudged with clean clothes and towels toward the showers. Diana carried hers in a denim bag.

Vincent whispered to Diana: "There *is* another heated pool that the others do not use. Would you care to try it?"

Startled by Vincent's intimate tone and obvious implication, Diana could only stop and stare for a moment. He seemed hesitant and unsure, now that he'd made the suggestion: his eyes reflected concern, but Diana couldn't tell if he were concerned about her, or about himself. *Maybe both*, she reflected. "A baby step?"

Seeming shy, now, Vincent turned away. Hiding in his hair as he always did. "Perhaps. But...only if you wish, Diana."

Diana took his arm and snuggled close. "I think it's a great idea."

Still not looking at her, Vincent said quietly: "We're both very tired, Diana. After last night--and today--I thought perhaps...perhaps the *beast* would be still...if we were very quiet and...and...."

She couldn't help chuckling. "And if we tiptoed around the issue?" He glanced up at her so endearingly through his bangs that she smiled back. "Where is this place?"

Thirty minutes later they were still climbing over rocks. Diana's patience and endurance was about exhausted. Vincent apologized quietly. "I *told* you the others didn't come here."

"I can see *why*," she puffed. Using Vincent's arm as a lever and struggling not to drop her bag, Diana pulled herself over another boulder. There were no more candles set in niches, and the last torch was far around the bend. She could barely see. But she could hear water running. Feel the increased dampness and a warmth that hadn't been there before. She took a deep breath. "We're here?"

Vincent's soft rumble of acknowledgement was encouraging. He took her bag from her and bundled it with his own clothes and towel. "Come. Take care, though. It is downhill from here."

"Thank God for small favors." Diana was so exhausted she didn't know if she could make it *down* the hill, much less a trek back *up*. Vincent released her hand and went ahead, and before she reached the bottom of the hill, he'd already lit several candles which were set in niches around the wall. Tearing her eyes away from Vincent's expectant look, Diana examined their hideaway. It was small and close. The pool, too, was small. About the size of a jacuzzi. Glints of mica flickered in the candle flames, and reflections danced on the still surface of the water. When she looked back at Vincent, she was startled to see him unrolling a thick roll of blankets and quilts. "You come prepared, or what?"

His expression was a delightful mix of embarrassment and what Diana could only construe as expectation. "I...these...are left here. It is true that the others don't come here, as a rule. Not to bathe. But occasionally the young people...when they wish to be alone...."

Diana laughed as comprehension dawned and Vincent laughed with her. *A goddamned lovers' lane...here Below.* It was just *too* funny.

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The wholehearted laughter broke down many remaining barriers between them. Diana's block was not quite so solid, and Vincent could once more sense her...some, at least. Quite unselfconsciously, Diana began removing her clothing--then stopped when she realized that he hadn't moved. "We *did* come down here to bathe, didn't we?"

Vincent stared. Diana had already removed her shoes and jeans. Her long legs were pale, well-shaped and

lovely. He felt a tightness in his chest. And other places. He looked away, and down. Then sat on a boulder to begin removing his boots. The leather laces were wet and knotted. Diana laughed again and knelt to help him. They fumbled at the knots together until she said dryly: "These things got an owner's manual?"

The knots in the laces may not have come loose, but the knot in his chest *did*. The butterflies in his stomach settled. He leaned over and kissed her softly, then rested his forehead on hers and sighed. "Diana..."

She kissed him back, lightly, playfully...then returned to the boots. The laces came free first on one, then the other. She pulled the first boot off. "Got it."

Vincent bent and removed the other. Diana peeled off his wet socks and delicately traced his toes with her fingers, lingering on the nails, which were tough as the ones that tipped his fingers, but were blunt. Sensing her question, Vincent answered gently: "I trim them with heavy clippers and file them with a metal file."

"I'd wondered about that. Figured you must, or you'd have no socks." She stood and held out her hand. "C'mon. Let's get the rest of those wet clothes off."

As always, Vincent wondered at Diana's easy acceptance of him. Of his differences. To her the question of how he kept from putting holes in his socks was infinitely more interesting to her than the fact that he had claws at all. But he still had not quite thought of having to strip before her. "Diana..."

Vincent shrugged out of his vest and began loosening his belt...wishing Diana would look somewhere else. She smiled gently, turned, and pulled her sweatshirt over her head. Vincent paused with his jeans halfway over his hips and watched Diana as she slowly stripped her cotton panties down and stepped out of them. His breath caught and held. In the candle glow, Diana was a vision. A dream come to life.

He turned away, then, taking a deep, ragged breath. *I must do this. I must.* Shaking a little with his absolute terror...at the moment he was filled with an abject fear of...of...*What?* A disgusted inner voice asked. *What is there to fear? This was your choice. You planned this. You can hardly back out now.*

"Vincent?"

"Yes. A moment. Please." Vincent tried, then, to remove his jeans quickly, but wet jeans are not the easiest thing in the world to remove. Still facing the wall, he *did* finally manage to get them off. And felt a delicious stab of delight from Diana. He turned, still mostly covered by his long shirt, to see her sitting on a rock next to the pool, her chin in her hand.

"You got great legs."

"Diana..." It was a plea...but a plea with laughter behind it. "Please."

Diana rose and came to him, then. Her small breasts swayed gently as she moved. She stopped inches from him and reached up to help him draw his shirt over his head.

When that was done, she settled against him as his arms drew her in. For the first time, truly, with nothing between them. Unless of course, you counted her block, which was firmly back in place. She asked softly: "That wasn't so bad, now, was it?"

He laid his head on hers and murmured shakily: "Terrible. But it was worth it."

Diana ran her hands down Vincent's back, then around to his chest. Vincent closed his eyes and groaned as she ran her fingers through the soft curls she found there. Even without the touch of the bond, this was quickly becoming more than he could tolerate. Diana backed off, still holding his hand. "Come on, then. Let's get our bath."

Vincent watched as Diana slipped into the pool. It wasn't deep, and she could stand. Knowing his discomfort, she turned away to allow him to join her. As he slid into the warm water, Vincent listened closely for the sound of the Other's mocking voice. Tried sensing him. He could feel a tense darkness in the background of his mind. Waiting. But for now, it was distant. *Distant thunder*, he told himself.

Wisely, Diana had moved away from him and was washing her hair. Vincent tried desperately to ignore the distant thunder and the tense arousal beginning. He scrubbed at his hair, rinsed it. Bathed himself... washing *there* quickly, sketchily. Not wanting to linger ...or even *think* about being where he was...with Diana. *Sometimes I think we both must be mad. We play with this feeling as though it is something we have a hope of controlling.* Despair washed over him. He knew he needed to get out of here, and quickly. He could sense the Other, now...close and intimidating. Whispering to him. *She is here, Vincent. Take her.*

Splashing from the pool, Vincent shook the excess water from himself then began frantically pulling on his dry clothes.

"Vincent?" Diana's surprised voice called him from the pool. "Vincent!" Then she was out of the pool, dripping everywhere. Pulling at his arm as he finished dragging on his clean jeans.

Spinning toward her, he threw off her hand. "Diana! This was a mistake. I must go!"

Relentless, Diana shook her head. She dropped her block and her love for him, her concern, spilled over him like warm water over ice...melting his resolve. He tried to take a deep breath. Couldn't. Tried to leave. Couldn't quite manage that, either. Diana's need was still drawing him. This time the game they played had gone too far. He knew it and so did she.

Vincent reached for her and drew her to him. There was no resistance. His hands closed on Diana's shoulders and he opened his eyes to see her staring at him, her eyes wide, not quite focused. Her tongue darted out to wet her lips, then she bit her lip softly, her eyes closing. Vincent watched every motion, fascinated: the small, even teeth

sliding over her wet lip, the curve of cheek and jaw, the pulse beating wildly in her neck.... "Diana," he whispered hoarsely. The line of her neck flowed smoothly into the soft swell of her breasts. The water glistened and he found himself staring for what seemed an eternity at a bead of moisture that trailed its way down over that swell. He tore his eyes away and threw his head back, mouth open, his breath harsh and ragged.

It was like dreaming--like the dreams--yet unlike. Her mouth was warm and inviting...inviting him to come in and stay. Her skin was like silk. He was aware of her hands moving across his chest--her mouth, her tongue on his throat--all touching. Touching him. Caressing him. *Not frightened. Never frightened*, he thought, amazed. Vincent lost all sense of time, of place...of who and what he was. There was a roaring in his ears, like the rush of blood. A pounding rhythm of need urging him on.

His own fears were growing as he felt himself losing control. The Other was so close...so strong. But the touch of her skin on his, her scent: she was everywhere. The desire roiling around them both was eclipsing thought. Then, eclipsing even fear itself.

With no clear thought, Vincent lifted her and took her to the pad of blankets. There was only sensation and the bond, though even that curled and sideslipped. The sensations were all one: they were all Diana. For a long moment he looked into her eyes, allowing himself to be drawn deeper into the spell. There was a momentary wavering of purpose as desire warred with reason. He sensed Diana trying to pull out--to moderate the urgency--and his fears surged. But then, all fear was gone...and all reason. Diana needed him and he must give her what she needed. There was no other choice for him.

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When Vincent leaped from the pool, Diana spun around to see him pulling on his jeans like a fireman headed to a fire. Only Diana knew the fire was within him and he wasn't running *to* it, he was running *away* from it. Immediately, Diana remembered the day before when he'd leapt at her so strangely, and knew she had to stop him from leaving. They had to face this, together. With the water streaming from her, she clambered from the pool and grabbed at his arm, trying to stop him...get his attention. When he insisted he had to *go*, Diana knew that the only way to stop him from leaving was to hold him with the bond and she dropped her block immediately. She felt the storm, then. It pulled her in like a whirlpool sucks in a leaf. She felt as though she were standing in a wind tunnel. *No way out...only deeper and farther.*

Vincent's hands tightened on her shoulders, drawing her to him. She felt herself swaying as she looked into his eyes. They were dark and wild and her own vision swam a little. She tasted him as he threw his head back, groaning as if in pain. She kissed and licked the hollow of his

unroar, his lips. Curled her fingers in the fur on his chest. All she could think of was the silken feel of the fur on his face and the delicious taste of him as he kissed her--the slight, raspy feel of his tongue as, daringly, he tasted her more deeply. Moaning softly, she tangled her hands in his mane. As in their dreams, the bond wove them together more tightly than their bodies ever could, but the urgent desire that had left them in the dreams was returning full-force now, with them awake.

Vincent pulled back and looked down at her. His wet mane was wildly tangled by her hands, his eyes were unfocused. Or perhaps focused on something beyond sight. Diana couldn't tell if the rapid thudding she heard was his heart or hers. They seemed to beat in sync.

When he picked her up and took her to the rough bed he'd made, Diana was lost in a vortex of need. Both his and hers.

For a moment, Diana tried to pull out...to allow themselves to step back and think. Vincent knelt over her and they stared at one another for a long moment--not quite sure what to do next--both realizing that this, finally, was no dream. They'd faced their desires in their dreams, but controlling the storm while awake was another thing.

Diana could sense Vincent's indecision. His fear of the Other; his fear of harming her. She could see the Other in his eyes, sense him in the aggressiveness of Vincent's posture, but she had no fear of anything about Vincent. It was only herself that she feared--the darkness that she dealt with daily--which could feed into him through the bond. Between the physical sensations and the emotional charge, Diana was very close to overload, and she knew he was, as well.

As they stared at one another, drifting closer every moment, Diana could remember telling Vincent: "Sex is easy. It's love that's hard." They balanced precariously, unable to stop themselves...unable to go back. Both of them knew that this bond, once completed--fused with the intensity of sex--would only become stronger. There would be no going back.

Diana trembled as she saw the change in Vincent. Saw him lose himself completely. And suddenly she was afraid. The bond snapped closed and Diana realized in panic that neither of them had any control of the situation. Impatiently reaching out, the Other yanked Diana to him, crushing her against him. Diana strained to pull Vincent back--to touch him with the bond--even as she responded to the Other's kiss. Tumbling sideways, Vincent's body now pinned her down. Then as the Other bore her down, growling "Mine"...fastening his teeth in her shoulder and taking her roughly, Diana felt all the rage she'd been swallowing for weeks come to the surface. She fought, wishing for nails...teeth like his to leave her own mark upon him. She bit his lip as he kissed her, and he laughed at the taste of blood. His laughter flooded her with anger, tingeing everything red. But then, as he continued thrusting into her, at first savagely, then more gently, he whispered

to her. "Yes, Diana. Take me. Make me yours as well." And she did. And the rage faded, to be replaced by an exultation so great she almost couldn't bear it.

The bond returned, and Vincent was there once more, caressing her. Loving her with as much ardor as the Other. The bond whispered and roared around them--within them--and they were caught in the storm. They rode the thunder until it became impossible to remain separate. Or alone.

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Diana slept beside him. The guttering candles provided little light, but Vincent needed none. *My Diana*, he thought with amazement. Truly his. For now, she belonged to all of him. All of what he was. And remarkably, she had accepted all of him within her. *Or perhaps it is only that I am hers.*

Vincent had been so frightened and appalled when the Other had wrenched control from him and taken Diana so roughly. His worst fears had come to life and he'd been helpless. But somehow, it had been right--what she'd needed to realize that she could never lose herself as long as he was alive. His Huntress remained within him. He touched his shoulder--it was sore, the marks of her teeth still visible--and smiled, favoring his lip, which she'd so savagely bitten. He longed to kiss her neck, her shoulder, where his own marks were visible.

A shadow separated itself from the dark wall and squatted on the other side of the sleeping woman. The Other smiled, his teeth flashing. *I told you I'd do what you would not. Ah, the shadow breathed, we truly hunted together that time!*

Vincent said nothing for a long moment, then reached out to stroke Diana's hair. He told the Other: *Yes. But your time is done, for now. Go.*

Almost amicably, the Other nodded, then disappeared. Vincent felt a freedom he'd not known since he was a child. *He will never willingly harm that which is his.* Vincent knew Diana was safer now, from the Other, than she'd ever been before. But still, Vincent would never fully trust him. For Vincent had learned the hard way that under the right circumstances his darker side was capable of anything. It was a lesson he had no intention of forgetting.

As he watched, Diana stirred. By now, the candles were almost completely out, and he knew Diana would be blind in this light if not for the bond. "Vincent?" Diana's voice was lazy. Unconcerned. She moved closer to him, to rest within his warmth. "We sleepin' here?"

"Diana..." Vincent wanted to talk with her. To discuss what had happened within themselves.

"Um...?" Diana was already asleep once more, drifting in that dreamstate where he must sleep to follow. Covering them carefully with a loose blanket, Vincent rested his head on his forearm and curled his other arm around her and slept.

Vague images of light and dark. Indistinct shapes that held no fear. Soft whispers of thought and sound...sensation. "Softly now," a voice whispered. Gentle touches on satin-soft, yielding skin. The scent of desire. The shape of a woman. Diana. Black and white...colorless in moonlight as she ran. Fled? No. Hunted...through the white

iridescent light. Vincent knew himself to be willing prey as he withdrew to the shadows so she could playfully hunt him. Even as he fled, Vincent could feel her hands on his skin, soft on him. Feel her lips. Her tongue. The sharp edge of small teeth. He allowed himself to be caught, and color came into the world. And a gentleness shaped from love's violence.



LOVING STRANGERS

by Rhonda Collins

Watch how carefully the dancers move
Deeply--
Touching one another
Blindly--
For they cannot see
the hidden faces of their love.

Lovers dance politely in the dark
Quietly--
Believing as they go
Desperately--
Because they must
Learn the fevered ballet of the heart.

CHAPTER FIVE: LOVING STRANGERS

Meanwhile, far Above in the city, Mark Bullock sat next to a telephone waiting for the call that would assure him he was once more safe. Mark sat with his feet on his desk, impatiently loosening the tie that had restrained him all day. Adrian Slade had called him to act as his attorney.

Me! I knew the man was stupid, but that's too much.

Mark had assured Slade that he'd send an associate, reminding Slade that they could have no further contact--and reminding him that he'd better not talk.

I can't believe I took Adrian's suggestion on the last girl. I should've known he was too careless to be allowed to pick the victim, but I figured I'd toss him a bone. Big mistake.

Upon hanging up the phone after Slade's call, Mark immediately set in motion a search to find all the material evidence the police had on this case. His contacts were very efficient. When the call came, Mark smiled. *It was easier than I thought it'd be. Greg Hughes was a fool to leave the evidence on his desk.*

Naturally, none of Mark's snoops ever knew who he was or even saw his face. He was cautious. *Now for the girl. Without the evidence or the witness, Slade would go free.*

A little regretfully, Mark realized that he'd have to dispose of Slade now, as well, because he certainly couldn't have any contact with him after this. *And I know Adrian would try. Mark was genuinely fond of Adrian Slade. Adrian was always so eager to please...so admiring.*

It had been remarkably easy for Mark to have the new janitor at the precinct bribed to get the evidence from the case. The hard part had been in finding out where it'd be. But Mark had snitches everywhere. Being a criminal defense attorney had made him a lot of very grateful clients in years past. Men who were grateful enough to help him

out when he needed it...and smart enough not to talk. Having all his father's money gave him an edge as well. Outside of nice clothes, fast cars and subservient women, Mark had little reason to spend that money.

Interestingly enough, whereas the gossip around the city told Mark zilch, the grapevine in the police departments was hot. There was a lot of controversy over this case--including discussion over the hot-shot woman detective from the 210 squad who'd been heading it--and that interested him as much as the evidence.

Spinning in his plush office chair, Mark finally decided to call it a night and head for the meeting with the janitor. *I'll have to kill him, of course, once he's seen me. But men are easy to kill. Women are harder. It's too much fun to keep them alive...just a little longer.*

The pictures on Mark Bullock's walls were of him in college, on the football field. Star of the team. His talent at the game had kept Bull in college without his devoting much effort to his studies. He'd been headed for pro status very quickly. Then his hopes had gone down the drain when a woman he'd gotten rough with had cried rape. In those days, date rape had been harder to prove and he'd gotten off...but pro scouts tend to be leery of anyone with even a whiff of sex scandal in their history. After that, he'd had to buckle down to make it through school. He'd had the ability...he'd just never had to use it.

Mark stared at the pictures and frowned. *If it hadn't been for that bitch, I'd be playin' ball right now.*

Mark shifted uneasily in his chair. He enjoyed the games he played with the women as Bull, but he was smart enough to understand where the rage came from. With practiced ease, his mind switched gears and he began thinking of how he'd handle the janitor. *I'll enjoy seeing the police perspective on this for a change.*

On impulse, Mark unlocked a drawer, opened it and slipped out a framed photo of Barbara and Danny. For several long moments he sat, gently caressing the frame and running his fingertips over the faces. Eventually, though--reluctantly--he put the photo away and locked the drawer. With it, he temporarily put away Mark Bullock and turned again to Bull.

Standing and stretching, Bull put his mind on things he could control. He headed down to the docks for his meeting, anticipating a pleasant evening going over some old memories and making some new plans. Having to dispose of the janitor was merely an incidental. He closed and locked the door, on which the brass plaque read:

Mark Bullock
Attorney at Law

Whistling a cheerful tune, he strode off toward the parking lot and his black Jag.

Thirty minutes later found him equally cheerfully dumping the body of the janitor in the Hudson River after strangling him.

As he drove home, Bull glanced through the box, smiling a little at the photos of the victims. He knew that none of the ones left alive would testify. They were all too terrified of him coming after them. All except that last one. Pretty, dark-eyed Miriam. He swung past the hospital, though he didn't dare go inside. *She'll be released soon. They won't keep her forever. I know where she lives. I know where her grandfather lives.* Slade had shared a great deal of information about the girl, and although it had been merely incidental at the time, it would come in handy now. *What information I don't have, I'm sure is in this box.*

Bull flexed his gloved fingers nervously on the wheel. *Adrian knows too much. And I should've known better.*

Pulling into the garage of his condo, Bull left the Jag to be parked and carried the box of evidence upstairs.

"Good evening, Mr. Bullock." The doorman was friendly. He knew Mark Bullock well. Or thought he did.

"Good evening, Randolph." It pleased Bull to know that no one *really* knew him.

Once inside his home--his own space--Bull put the box on the glass table in the kitchen and put away his coat and gloves. With a pleased smile, he poured himself a glass of champagne and sipped it while he spread the police photos out on the table.

"Very nice, but it's not what I need."

He dug deeper and found a hand-held cassette recorder. "Aha!" He pressed the "play" button and got the hiss of empty tape. He rewound and tried again.

The voice on the tape was female. *Very nice*, Bull thought. *This must be Diana Bennett. Super cop.* It was a tape of Diana questioning Miriam and Miriam's answers...taken to be transcribed.

Bull listened to the tape twice. It wasn't as much fun

to listen to as it had been to *do*, but listening to Miriam's anguish on the tape gave him a different type of satisfaction. And Diana's voice fascinated him. Rumor had it that Ms. Bennett was cold. Very cool and collected. Very much in control. Rumor also had it that she was beautiful. The combination was one that had always fascinated him. But thus far he'd never quite had the nerve to try working that combination. If Ms. Bennett was everything she was cracked up to be, he'd have no choice. He'd have to take her down.

Bull poured himself more champagne and toasted the ladies. "Two for the price of one."

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The following morning Vincent woke first. He never overslept when he was Below. He had an instinctive rhythm to his life there. The changes in the sound of the pipes and the long-memorized subway schedules were ingrained. And even here Vincent could hear the slight increase in the tapping of the pipes.

Carefully slipping from Diana's arms, he found spare candles set in the niches. *Other lovers have been thoughtful.* He glanced back at Diana as he lit the first candle. It was strange to think of them as lovers, yet that was what they had become.

Diana looked so peaceful as she slept. Vincent had no desire to disturb the wondrous sense of peace. *Perhaps there is no need to speak of my concerns. Diana would tell me that I place too much value on words.* He pulled on his jeans and belted them.

Although Vincent had moved soundlessly, Diana stirred: the change in their connection had disturbed her. She sat up, automatically pulling the blanket up to cover herself. She seemed shy, reticent. To Vincent, she was lovely enough to take his breath away, and he, too, felt shy. He gestured to the candle he'd lit, which cast a soft radiance over her. "Someone left replacements. I must remember to return with more."

Diana's gaze drifted around the small chamber. He could sense her retreating within herself as the bond closed down. She wouldn't meet his eyes. "Diana?"

Hugging the patchwork blanket closer, Diana slowly raised her head, though she still wouldn't look at him. "Guess it's time to go."

Vincent was confused by Diana's attitude. Her reluctance to stay open with him said one thing. Her comment said another...both so different from her actions last night. Frustrated, Vincent turned away and pulled his shirt on. He stooped and picked up Diana's clothes and took them to her. He was confused and upset by the way things were going. Opening his hand, he let the clothes fall in front of her. "I will leave to allow you to dress." He turned and stalked toward the exit, only to be stopped by Diana's shaking voice.

"Vincent...."

He stopped dead in his tracks, his head hanging. Waiting for whatever she might have to say, knowing it couldn't possibly be anything he wanted to hear. Surely, somehow he'd misinterpreted what he'd felt through the bond last night, and Diana wanted nothing more to do with him. "Yes?"

Diana's voice was low and sweet as she asked gently: "Do we have time for another bath?"

Still unsure, Vincent darted a look back over his shoulder at her. She stood next to the pool holding out her hands for him. "If we hurry we'll have time."

Hopeful, but still unsure, Vincent started back. "Diana..."

She shook her head and her long, heavy hair slid over her shoulders like dark red silk. Her body was white marble in the faint, shimmering light. The shadows chased one another into obscure corners and disappeared from his view. "No," she said gently. "Don't talk. Don't ask questions. Not yet. There'll be time enough for questions later."

Vincent pulled his shirt and jeans off and tossed them aside, joining her at the edge of the pool. His fingers played over her alabaster shoulders, the fingertips trailing with cobweb touches down her back until his hands rested on the swell of her hips. All the while he watched her reaction to his touch...waited for her barriers to come down.

Diana sighed deeply and closed her eyes as she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him softly. Her voice was thick with emotion. "Vincent. Oh, Vincent. Wait for me. Be patient." She drew back then, and smiled, though her eyes were still shadowed by more than the darkness in the small cavern. "C'mon. This'll have to be quick, or Father'll be looking for us. And probably everyone else as well."

Confused, but drawn and reassured by Diana's light, bantering tone, Vincent followed her into the pool. *I don't understand, my Diana*, he thought. *Where have you gone?* She was hiding again and he ached to feel that more-than-physical touch that the bond gave him. Yet her tone and actions told him that she wasn't unhappy with him or frightened. Therefore, it could only be her *own* fears she was hiding from. Her own darknesses. *Wait for me*, she'd asked him. So he would wait. And ask no questions.

In any case, Vincent soon forgot his questions as they bathed one another. Without the bond to spiral their desire out of control, it was a gentle, comforting time. It allowed them both time to draw back and rediscover themselves, even while touching one another.

After their bath, Diana quickly brushed her hair while Vincent was lacing his boots. As he hurried to finish dressing, Vincent felt Diana's hands in his hair and glanced up to see her, hairbrush in hand. She grinned at him cheerfully. "I'd better untangle some of these knots, or people *will* be talking."

The thought of what people no doubt were *already*

saying was a little daunting. As Diana brushed his hair, Vincent sat stiffly...so deep in thought he was unable to enjoy the sensation of her hands working the hairbrush through his thick mane. It disturbed him badly enough that everyone knew he'd spent two nights in Diana's loft. *Then I bring her Below and we promptly disappear*. He hadn't thought. Hadn't considered what this would look like.

Diana was humming softly as she worked at his hair. Vincent heard the Other laughing in the background and glanced up to see his dark twin lounging against the cavern wall. The Other flashed him a grin. *Who cares what they think? Especially Father. Old "Don't do this, and don't do that." I'm sure there are quite a few who envy us.*

It wasn't what Vincent wanted to hear. He'd had little enough privacy in his relationship with Catherine. This would become intolerable very quickly. "Diana," Vincent began hesitantly.

"Yeah?"

"Do you suppose...everyone...knows?"

Diana's hand paused in its downward sweep and she knelt beside him. Planting a kiss on his cheek, she chuckled. "I think it's a safe bet that they *think* they know a lot more than they do."

When Vincent didn't look up, didn't answer, Diana turned and walked away. He looked up to see her stuffing her dirty clothes and the brush into her bag. She looked furious. "Diana. What's wrong?"

She rounded on him with her eyes flashing. "You! You're ashamed of me. Ashamed of *us*. Guess I don't fit everybody's image of..." She clamped her mouth closed, spun around again, grabbed up the bag and headed for the door. "Never mind."

With three long strides he caught her by the wrist and spun her around. "What are you *talking* about? Me? Ashamed of you? Of us? Diana...that's...ridiculous!"

"So now I'm ridiculous? Would you have been so concerned about what anyone thought if I were Catherine?"

"Yes!" Vincent was furious. Diana was driving him crazy with her unreadable and changeable emotions. And here she was, picking a fight over *Catherine*, which at this point in time was patently ridiculous.

"Yeah, sure. I'll bet." She was staring daggers at him. Daring him to argue with her.

He resisted the urge to swat her, as he knew this reaction must stem from whatever it was that was still disturbing her. But she was deliberately provoking him! He drew two deep breaths before answering...knowing that what he said now would be critical. "Of course it disturbs me when...everyone...knows my private affairs, Diana. Don't you know it upset me that I couldn't so much as go Above to *see* Catherine without everyone knowing? Do you honestly think there wasn't speculation then? Do you believe I didn't *know* that? Don't you think it upset me that they probably thought we were...closer...than we were? Especially under the circumstances? Even Father...hinted...asked questions."

The fire in Diana's eyes had died, replaced by a look of contrition. "I'm sorry." She moved into his arms and hugged him. "Oh, I'm so sorry, Vincent. You're right. I know it must've been awful. This is such a close society. And now...."

"They will know. They will talk. And speculate. And I will *know*. I will feel the questions."

Diana pulled back and brushed a kiss over his lips. "Then let 'em talk. We'll be a three-day-wonder. Then, when they realize that you can be as normal as they are, they'll get used to the idea. They'll be happy for you. For us. They love you."

Vincent raised his head, listening to the faint tapping of the pipes. "William is ringing for breakfast. If we don't leave now, you'll have to fight him for breakfast again."

Diana slung her bag over her shoulder, and Vincent gathered his clothes. "Then let's go. I've gotta go Above and check my messages, anyway." She tucked her arm in his and smiled up at him. "It'll be okay. You and me...we're tough. We've still got some ragged edges, and we'll be in a fishbowl while we smooth 'em out. But we'll make it."

As Vincent looked into Diana's intense eyes and saw the love reflected there, he felt a surge of relief. No matter what, it *would* be all right. Because they wouldn't let this relationship slip away. They would fight...and hurt one another. He and Catherine had both been so tentative...too concerned about hurting one another to even *try* to reach for their dream. *But Diana and I will reach out...we won't stop trying.*

Vincent saw a slight movement in the shadows and knew the Other to be just out of sight...near enough to feel, but far enough not to be a threat. A sense of frustration haunted him. *Both of us have kept our anger inside us for too long. Perhaps it is inevitable that it will come out where we both feel safe.* Vincent considered that thought, not sure whether he felt encouraged or frightened by the truth of it. For now, the look in Diana's eyes was enough to reassure him.

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Greg Hughes was furious. Furious with himself, with Joe Maxwell. And furious with Diana for being right. They'd arrested Slade and done the DNA testing. Unfortunately, Slade's DNA and the DNA from the sperm sample didn't match. Slade wouldn't talk. *Someone* managed to spirit away the evidence and the witness' testimony. And now Miriam Davidson had clammed up and wouldn't talk. Without the evidence or the witness, they had to let Slade walk.

"Damnation! I should've listened to her. Should've made *Joe* listen to her."

Greg had left a message on Diana's machine about what had happened, apologizing profusely for his own stupidity. Unfortunately, he *still* couldn't force himself to put her

back on the case. Despite everything, he knew she was at the breaking point, and he'd never forgive himself if Patrick's daughter ended up burned out, crazy, or dead because he hadn't done what he *knew* he had to do. Diana should remain off this case, no matter what.

The intercom buzzed and he answered it.

"D.A.'s office, boss."

"Thanks, Janine." Greg stared at the blinking light on his phone. "Shit. Now I've gotta explain to the D.A. how I lost the evidence. Can my day *possibly* get worse?" Parking himself in his chair, Greg picked up the phone. "Greg Hughes, here."

"I *know* who you are, Hughes. I called *you*, remember? Cut the bullshit." Joe's anger crackled, even over the phone lines. "What on earth happened?"

Greg lit up and took a drag. "I don't know. I went at 4:00 am to pick up the evidence from Diana. I left it on my desk with the door to the office locked. Joe, it was late. It'd been a helluva long day, if you recall."

"Then how in hell did somebody get it? How would they have even known where it *was*?"

Flinching from the venom in Joe's tone, Greg apologized. "I don't *know*. I really don't. The only thing we can figure is the new janitor, and he's missing...along with all the keys. Needless to say, all the locks are being changed today."

"Kind of like closing the barn door after the horse gets out, isn't it?"

The cigarette tasted foul. Greg crushed it out. "Yeah, it is, but it's the best we can do. We should've listened to Diana, Joe."

"Maybe. But it's done now. All we can do is go back to square one. The Davidson girl's being released today, I hear."

Even over the phone, Greg could hear the thud of Joe's darts hitting the wall. He just hoped it wasn't *his* picture acting as bulls-eye today. "Yeah. There's no point in keeping her. The doctor says she's okay. I was kind of worried about letting her out, but really, if she won't talk there's not any real reason for them to consider her a threat."

There was a long silence punctuated by thuds as darts hit the board. "But just in case..." Joe said tersely, "...keep a tail on Slade. A quiet one. And keep one on the girl. I'm not convinced that she's safe. If Bennett was right and Bull's the planner--the mover--in this, maybe, just maybe Bull will try to get the girl or Slade. Or maybe Slade will contact Bull. It's all we've got, now."

"Will do. I take it you still agree that we keep Diana off the case?"

Joe's voice evidenced his reluctance. "We have to. She's on the ragged edge, and if she snaps God knows what could happen. We can't afford to lose her *or* screw up this case any worse."

After hanging up the phone, Greg stood, shoved his hands deep in his pockets and surveyed the city through his

dirty office window. *Where are you, Di? You're not at your sister's, you're not at home. Where the hell did you go?*

He buzzed his secretary and had her call in two of the undercover cops so he could arrange the surveillance that Joe had ordered.

• • • • •

After breakfast, Diana gathered a few things to head back Above. Vincent had already left to begin his normal routine of teaching and chores. Even though the evacuation was safely accomplished, he couldn't continue his work on the project until the water receded. As she tossed a few things into her denim tote bag...dirty clothes to wash and odds and ends, Arthur, Mouse's racoon, sat on the bed pawing through things. "Scat!" Diana swatted Arthur's backside playfully and the fat raccoon waddled off to sit a few feet away, obviously nursing bruised feelings. Diana laughed at his look of wounded dignity. At the sound of her laughter, Arthur turned and continued his careful journey over to the old nicked and peeling endtable, where his water bowl was sitting.

As Diana finished zipping her bag, Mouse poked his head around the corner of the door. "Diana?"

"Yeah. What's up, Mouse?"

"Arthur okay?"

Diana glanced back at the disgruntled raccoon and grinned. "Yeah. He's okay." She glanced down at the half-door assembly Mouse had rigged to keep the raccoon contained: Arthur was too heavy to climb the slick partition. "You think this'll keep him outta trouble?"

Blond bangs bobbed up and down as Mouse nodded. "Just don't want him to get lonesome." The boy stared at Diana with accusing eyes. "Diana not here last night. Mouse not here. Arthur got lonesome."

Diana pulled the locking mechanism open and slid the door back, closing it behind her. "Sorry, Mouse. You can stay with him tonight."

"Diana going to see Miriam?" Mouse's concerned blue eyes were wide. "Miriam okay?"

"No. I probably won't see Miriam, Mouse. Sorry." Mouse's question reminded Diana that she was no longer involved with Miriam's case. She'd tried desperately to put the thought out of her mind and she'd succeeded fairly well. She glanced at Mouse's worried face and tried to smile. "I know, Mouse. I'm worried about her, too. Tell you what: I'll try to check on her. See if I can talk to her. They might not let me."

Diana hiked her bag up on her shoulder and started toward Father's chamber to leave a message with him for Vincent.

Mouse tagged along. "Who not let you see Miriam? Why?"

Mouse's determination was becoming irritating. Diana didn't want to talk about this. Didn't even want to think

about it. It made her mad all over again. But glancing over at Mouse, with his engaging, boyish expression and honest concern, Diana sighed. "My bosses, Mouse. They took me off the case, so I can't really have anything to do with the case anymore. They *might* let me talk to Miriam, but they wouldn't be happy about it." She watched Mouse to see if he understood. He still seemed puzzled. She sighed. "Mouse. It's my job to do what my bosses tell me to do. I don't always have to like it."

Mouse nodded then, and smiled wryly. "Rules. Yeah. Have bosses here, too. Gotta follow rules."

Relieved that *maybe* this discussion could end now, Diana agreed. "Sure thing."

Mouse smiled then, a wicked little smile--engaging and mischievous at the same time. "Tell Miriam Mouse says 'Hi.'" He turned to leave, then grinned back at her. "Rules made to be broken, Diana. Just don't get caught!"

As Mouse disappeared around the next bend, Diana found herself smiling after him. Vincent always said Mouse was ingenious. Diana knew he was brilliant. Somehow, she'd never realized he was also devious as hell. *I should've known, listening to Jamie's accounts of their exploits when they were younger.* With a lighter heart, Diana walked the remaining distance to Father's study. *I will somehow get to talk to Miriam. Maybe I can at least help her deal with this. I may not be able to work the case, but at least I can do something.*

A little hesitantly, Diana poked her head around the corner and announced her presence. "Father?"

Father was standing next to a tall bookshelf, poking at a book with his cane. The book was about to tumble down when Diana called. Father turned, smiled, then ducked as the book fell. He caught it on its way down without even ruffling a page. Diana was impressed. "Great trick." She peered upwards into the cobwebby shadows. "I imagine you get enough practice."

"It's easy enough getting them down. It's getting them back up there that presents the problem." He switched the book to the other hand, tucked it under his arm, then held out a hand for Diana. "My dear, please. Won't you have tea with me? I believe William has included some of his biscuits and honey..."

Diana shook her head. "No. Thanks, Father." She jerked her chin up in a pointing gesture. "I've gotta go up and check my messages. Thought I'd try to see Miriam, even though they took me off the case."

"Hadn't you heard? Oh. No. Of course not. You still don't know much pipe code." He glanced back and laughed at her perplexed expression. "Well. The message just came over the pipes. Apparently they are releasing Miriam today to go home. Eli is delighted."

"Oh. Well, good. That must mean she's doin' okay." Diana was confused. She'd kind of thought they'd have kept Miriam in protective custody until Bull was caught. She *had* seen him and could identify him. *Maybe that means they've caught him.* But somewhere, deep down,

Diana had a gut feeling that something was wrong. This didn't feel right and she had a sudden, desperate need to get Above and see what the status was. If they'd even let her.

After a few more minutes of small talk, with Father fishing unashamedly as to her relationship with his son, Diana headed out through the tunnels toward home, thinking that maybe Vincent wasn't quite as paranoid as she'd thought. She wasn't sure *she* could live in that kind of a fishbowl.

Diana knew her way well, and within a half-hour she was riding the elevator up to her loft.

Throwing the wire screen back on the elevator Diana hurried to the answering machine, which was blinking furiously. Several messages. She dumped her bag, grabbed a pencil and pad off her desk just in case she'd need it, then hit the play button.

<Beep> Diana. *It's Suz. Where the hell have you been? Greg Hughes has called here twice. What's up? Give me a call and let me know you're okay.* <Beep>

<Beep> Diana. *Greg here. You were right. Okay, don't say it. I don't want to hear it. I know this'll make you nuts, so call me and I'll fill you in.* <Beep>

<Beep> Greg again. *You still haven't called, so I thought I'd let you know the evidence is gone. Stolen right out from under my damn nose. Then Miriam clammed up, so we had to let Slade walk. Di...you're still off the case. No contact. Remember that.* <Beep>

<Beep>..... <Beep>

<Beep>..... <Beep>

<Beep> Diana, *it's Miriam. I'm scared. I got a call from Bull. He said if I talked, I was dead. Diana...he knows where Granddad lives. I don't know what to do. They're releasing me tomorrow. Oh. Damn these machines!* <Beep>

Tuesday, 7:10 pm. End of final message.

Diana stood like a stone staring at the machine. "Damn." She swatted the pillow off the couch. "Double damn!" She started peeling off her sweats and heading for the bedroom. *First dress to kill, then go kill Greg.*

It wasn't until she was in the in the bedroom digging through her closet that Diana thought of the two calls with no message. *It isn't like Greg to not leave a message...at least his name. Maxwell either. Susan knows better. Miriam, maybe? Scared at first to leave a message? Maybe.* Still, those two calls bothered her. She seldom had anyone call and not leave a message, and no one knew her number but people who *would* leave messages. Finally, she shrugged it off as a wrong number. She pushed aside the everyday clothes she usually wore and pulled out some of her nicer slacks. and a new blue silk blouse. It couldn't hurt to look nice. She smiled wryly. *Okay, so I'll try to look professional and in control.*

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Vincent climbed the serpentine toward the Hub: the

timeless dark on his left hand and the ageless stone on his right. Only occasionally did a torch light his way. As he turned into the pathway leading to the Chamber of the Winds, Jamie's voice caught him off-guard. "Hi, Vincent."

Jamie was obviously returning from Rat Patrol duty, though she no longer served on the Patrol. As she passed him, she tossed two large sewer rats past him and into the Abyss. "Good evening, Jamie. Where did you get those?"

"Up near low Ripley. Father almost had a fit when he heard on the pipes they had a rat problem down there. The kids haven't been keeping after 'em, I guess."

Jamie's disgust at the Patrol's inefficiency amused him, but she was right. When she and Mouse had been leading the Patrol they'd never have allowed rats that size to infiltrate the living areas. "I'll have to talk to Kipper. Thank you for taking care of the problem. Have you seen Diana?"

Jamie wiped her hands on her pants and shouldered her bow. "Sure. She went Above. Said she needed to check messages or something. Hey! Did you hear? Miriam's going home from the hospital today. Eli's excited."

Vincent hadn't heard: he'd been below the pipes. His joy at Miriam's homecoming almost eclipsed his disappointment over Diana's absence. He'd known Diana was going back Above, he'd just hoped he'd see her before she left. But perhaps he could visit Miriam. "That's good to hear. Do you know if she'll be going home or staying with Eli for a time? I don't care for the idea of her being alone so soon."

Jamie fell in with him, keeping pace with two steps to his one. Vincent reminded himself not to slow his steps or shorten his stride to match hers: she would be most upset with him for making concessions. Jamie's breathing was a little faster than usual as she tried to keep up. "I think she's staying with Eli." She fell silent for a few steps then changed the subject. "Mouse said Diana left Arthur alone in the guest room last night." She paused and glanced up expectantly, and Vincent could almost *feel* the question that Jamie was too polite to ask. "He sure was upset," Jamie continued. "Says Diana told him to stay in the guest room with Arthur tonight. Guess she's not planning on coming back down."

The passages were less dark now, with frequent candles and torches. Two of the children ran past them, laughing as the youngest, Timmy, darted around Vincent to dodge the tag.

"Hey!" Jamie cried, indignant at the interruption.

Vincent just chuckled and turned in circles as Rosemarie tried to reach Timmy around him, then the children both took off back the way they'd come. Vincent smiled down at Jamie. "I seem to remember you and Mouse at that age...."

Jamie sniffed. "We were *never* that rude."

"Of course not," Vincent said quietly.

Jamie laughed and blushed. "Yeah. Well, maybe sometimes."

They both fell silent for several yards, then Jamie ventured a question. "Vincent...Diana's okay, isn't she? I mean, you stayed Uptop with her, and you never do that. I mean..." Jamie blushed. "I mean. It's not my business. But she seemed kind of sad when she first came down. But she was better this morning."

Vincent sighed. Perhaps this was an opportunity to defuse the gossip a little. "I'm glad she seemed better. Her case..."

"With Miriam?"

"Yes. Her case has been difficult. And she becomes very involved in her work. Her superiors felt she needed a rest and removed her from the case. It upset her."

"Oh." Jamie seemed a little disappointed. "Too bad."

Vincent couldn't tell if Jamie was disappointed that Diana had been taken off the case or because there wasn't a more personal reason for Diana's presence in the tunnels.

Jamie was quiet a few more moments, then added hesitantly: "Mouse says that Cullen told him that Diana's acting like a woman in love. Is it true, Vincent?" She looked away then. "I'm sorry. It's not my business. Forget I asked."

Dismayed that obviously rumor was, indeed, running rampant, Vincent cringed. But Jamie's honesty and earnest friendship--her admiration for Diana and her love for him--all came through to him. He couldn't *not* answer her truthfully. "Does it matter if it is true?"

Jamie's face was radiant as her head snapped up to look at him. "Really? Truly?"

Jamie's joy radiating at him helped to dispel some of Vincent's fears--and raised others. "Truly, Jamie. But please. Diana and I...everything is so new. I would rather hold this...newness...to myself. For a time." He could see that Jamie was disappointed not be able to rush to the nearest pipe with the news. But Jamie was also his friend.

"Sure. I understand."

Vincent could almost feel the other questions chasing around in Jamie's head. But he couldn't help asking a question of his own: "What else does Cullen have to say?"

The sidelong look of mischief that Jamie gave him made him uneasy. "Oh. Not much. Just that you seem a little edgy and so does she. You know Cullen. He kind of likes to be one-up on everybody. He'd rather just hint. But I think he's a little jealous."

Vincent grunted. He wasn't sure if he was amused or annoyed. As he'd suspected, his private life was once more a subject of intense curiosity. But as Diana said, there was probably little to be done about it.

A few passages up, Jamie left Vincent to meet Mouse and Vincent continued on to Father's study to make his report. As he walked, he tried to cheer himself. He muttered a little to himself as he thought of Diana's comment about living in a fishbowl. A few turns from Father's study Vincent stopped suddenly, as though struck by a blow. The world around him spun and receded.

It was the white room, again. Seamless as the inside of an egg. Pristine and pure. Diana was within the room, tied immovably. A darkness moved toward her, sliding stealthily, like mist along the ground. But Diana was looking at him when she screamed. And the white turned red.

Vincent jerked so hard he struck his head against the stone of the tunnel wall. The pain brought him back to reality. He was badly shaken by the realization that this had not been a dream--his *or* Diana's--but a vision such as he'd not had in a long while...not since his hunt for his son. But what the vision could possibly foretell, he had no idea. He heard voices coming his way and forced himself upright. He straightened his clothes, tugging on his vest and patting carefully to make sure everything was in place. Taking a few deep breaths, he nodded to William as the cook came toward him. "Good evening, William."

"Evenin', Vincent."

After William passed by, Vincent continued toward Father's study, where he hesitated a moment at the top of the stairs. "Father."

Father was having his evening tea and reading a paper one of the helpers had brought down. He seemed disturbed as he waved to his son to join him. "Vincent. Look at this."

Father spread the paper across the desk and Vincent leaned across to get a better look. In a small, second page blurb, the police admitted that they'd had to release Adrian Slade for lack of evidence. Anger washed across Vincent's mind again, raw and new at the thought of Miriam in that filthy bed--treated as she'd been--and left to die. And now this man--and the other--would be free, just as Diana had feared. Straightening up, he carefully refolded the paper and handed it back to Father. "Has Miriam returned home yet?"

Nodding and taking a sip of tea, Father said gently: "Yes. Eli reported in earlier. She's with him, staying in her old room."

Vincent could sense Father's outrage as well. "Vincent...how did this happen? There must have been evidence against the man or Diana couldn't have had him arrested."

Vincent was pacing restlessly, trying to think. Father's anger was increasing his own upset. "Diana did *not* arrest him, Father. In fact, she was against it. She'd wanted him watched so he could lead her to the other man, who she felt to be the leader of the two. Her superiors chose to take their own course and removed her from the case."

"I see. So what happens now?"

Vincent met his father's eye and shrugged. "I don't know. But I *am* going to see Miriam immediately after evening meal."

"Why not Diana?"

Vincent was already on his way out the door. "Because Diana will have her own problems right now, and will solve them better without me. Miriam needs me far more than

she does."

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Bull was delighted with the turn of events. Slade was free and presented an easy target, and now the girl was within his grasp. Naturally they would both have tails put on them, but those could be taken care of as well. *How many people have I killed? I've lost track.* The murders didn't disturb him. What disturbed him was the *necessity* of them. Bull didn't like to be pushed into things. Being pushed made him mad.

Picking up the phone, Bull made a few contacts and arranged a hit on Slade. *Better not to do that one myself.* Bull knew that because he cared for Slade, the emotion would make him careless. And besides, it was easier this way. The man he'd chosen was expendable, stupid and of course totally ignorant of who Bull was.

Other contacts had given him Diana Bennett's address and telephone number. On impulse, Bull rang her number and listened to her voice on the recording. He liked that voice. It turned him on just listening to it. After hanging up he sat a moment, then dialed again.

As he listened to Diana Bennett's throaty voice, he flipped through the pages of the paper and rubbed a hand across his smooth-shaven face. It felt strange, after wearing a beard for so long, but he'd felt it best to change his appearance. He'd also cut his moderately long hair to a shorter, trimmer style.

The paper was informative, but only to a point. There was a tiny piece on Slade's release and another on the same page about the body of the janitor being found. No connection was listed in the paper, but he knew the police would know better.

Bull placed the receiver back in the cradle and went to his window. The thin winter sunshine was quickly being obscured by clouds again. He glanced back at his desk and leaning over, picked up a legal document he'd received a few days back. A restraining order. Glancing over it again, he angrily tossed it back onto the pile of papers. *Damn it, Barbara, Mark thought, pushing Bull aside. Why'd you do it? I love you. You left me--took Danny. Now you won't even talk to me....*

Suddenly cold, he shivered a little. *Danny must've told her he saw me at the school. Or maybe not. I tried to stay out of sight.* He stood, head hanging, for several more minutes, then sighed. *I'd never hurt you, Barbara. Not you, or Danny. I didn't want to cause trouble.*

Raising his head, he straightened and adjusted his coat. The tears were gone. On impulse Bull decided to take his secretary to lunch. Keeping up his "nice guy" image was important. Besides...Evelyn was so meek and subservient that it always made him feel good.

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Diana had talked to herself all the way to the station.

Telling herself to stay calm, not to jump Greg the moment she hit the place. It didn't do a lot of good: she was still jittery and tense as she climbed the steps. Although she moved calmly enough through the outer offices, the jibes of a few of the officers got under her skin. Jimmy Faber was on his way out as she came in. "Well, well. Bennett rises from the dead. Where ya been? Long weekend with a hot date?"

She smiled sweetly (she hoped) and said, "I was dead. And now I'm not."

Another of the 210 across the room piped in: "She looks alive to me. I think she was just gettin' laid. She has the look."

How would you know, 'Tonio? Diana fumed silently.

"The Legend returns," muttered someone else she couldn't identify.

By the time she hit Greg's door, she was getting pissed all over again. She knocked on the door, then pushed it open. "Greg?"

The relief on Greg's boyish face almost took the edge off Diana's anger. Almost, but not quite. "Diana! Where in *hell* have you been? I've been looking for you all day."

Diana dumped her carryall on the chair and leaned against the door. "So why've you been lookin'?" Generally when you tell someone to 'get lost' you're happy when they do it."

"Sorry. You got my messages, I take it."

"I'd say 'I told you so,' but I'd rather not." Diana launched herself away from the door to stand shaking with fury in front of Greg's desk. "How on *earth* could you and Maxwell screw this up? Why didn't you *listen* to me?"

"I should have. But I didn't. So now we start over."

"Bull will kill both of them, you know."

Greg eyed her warily. "You're still off the case."

"Why? I was right, and you know it."

Greg came around the desk toward her. "That's not the point. You weren't taken off the case because you were wrong, Di. You were taken off for your own good. You were losin' it. Even if I wanted you back on, Maxwell would veto it."

The small core of anger Diana was nursing blossomed, but she forcibly kept her facade in place. "So what do I do now, just sit around and vegetate? Wait until you guys come up with a jaywalker for me to bust?"

"Now, you take a rest."

"For how long?"

"Until I say. C'mon, Di. You know you've always got time on the books. You work seven days a week, sometimes eighteen to twenty hours a day when you're on a case. So this is how we compensate. When you need the time, you've got it."

Diana had known Greg for too long to think she could get around him. She knew when she was beaten. In his own way, he was as stubborn as she was. And he knew *her* *entirely* too well. She grabbed her carryall and swung toward the door. "Alright. Guess you win. You'll keep

me informed?"

"I'll try."

Diana left Greg's office feeling totally defeated. She forced herself rigidly upright and outwardly cheerful. *I'll be damned if I let this bunch know how I feel.* The regular beat cops and the other detectives generally looked upon the 210 with skepticism and just a touch of awe. They were the lone wolves--misunderstood and envied--alone, even within their own unit...and some, like Diana, even more alone than others. She smiled as she left, hoping it looked genuine. She felt like she was running the gauntlet, and wondered how Vincent was handling things on *his* end...where the people he cared about *knew* something was going on.

Then she headed over to Eli's.

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Vincent hesitated before knocking on the panel which would announce his presence to Eli. He'd sent Kipper with a message earlier so that Eli and Miriam would be expecting him, but somehow he still felt as though he was being intrusive. Eventually, he knocked and Eli responded almost immediately. The panel opened, revealing the basement to Eli's shoe repair shop, which in turn attached to his home. The elderly man was thin and bent, but his spirit was not. To Vincent's empathic powers, Eli's courage shone from him, even in the darkness of the basement. Only Vincent and Father knew how much pain Eli lived with daily. He spared Miriam worry over something she could do nothing about. "Vincent. My old friend. Come. Miriam is waiting for you."

"How is she, Eli?"

"Ach. She is as well as can be expected after what those men did. But she is strong, like her mother. Like my Sarah, God rest her soul."

Vincent followed Eli as his friend limped up the steps to the darkened shop, then up another flight of stairs to the softly lit dining room. Miriam rose and walked quickly across the room to meet them. After only a moment of hesitation, she threw herself into Vincent's waiting arms. "Oh, Vincent. Thank you for saving me."

Vincent rested his head on Miriam's cloud of dark hair, and brief memories of happy childhood times passed quickly through his mind. "It wasn't me, Miriam. Diana found you."

"I know. But somehow I don't remember her there. All I remember is looking up and seeing this dear, dear face." She stroked Vincent's cheek. She trembled a little. "It was so *awful*. Worse than worse, as Mouse would say."

Vincent started to tell her how brave she was, but the bell at the front of the shop jangled harshly, interrupting him. Someone was here.

"Who on earth?" Miriam started down the stairs with Vincent close behind. She motioned for him to go back,

but he shook his head.

"This late--after hours--it is best to be cautious."

So Vincent stood in the shadows as Miriam checked the door--then opened it gladly. "Diana! What happened? They said you were off the case, and some other woman came to see me."

Vincent held his breath as Diana entered the darkened shop. He hadn't expected to see her here and he hadn't realized how much he'd missed her in the short time they'd been apart. But even this close, he still felt nothing from her. She was still firmly barricaded within herself. "Diana...."

Diana's head jerked toward him and he could see her eyes searching the darkness. "Vincent?"

When he came forward, she held out her hand, which he clasped, and the warmth of that touch spread through him. "I'm glad you're here," she said. "I wanted to discuss with Miriam the possibility of her, and maybe Eli, too, retreating to the tunnels for at least a few days."

Miriam's voice was hesitant. "Bull?"

"Yes. If he's threatened you already, you're definitely in danger. I know the police have you under surveillance, but it won't be enough."

"I can go, but Granddad will have to run the shop...and that scares me."

Diana thought a moment. "That may be all right. I don't think Bull will strike during the day...it's too open. And Eli can just disappear during the night. If he needs anything, we can get it for him through the tunnels."

Diana glanced up at Vincent for his opinion, and he nodded. "I, too, think it wise to take Miriam out of harm's way. And I think Diana is right that this man would seek the cover of darkness before attempting to harm Eli."

Together, they went back upstairs and told Eli their plan, and Miriam left to gather her things.

Vincent stood off to the side in the shadows and watched Diana as she spoke with Eli. The soft lighting in the small dining room made her hair shine with an almost radiant fire, and her skin was delicate ivory next to it. *She is so lovely*, he thought, with an ache of joy that was akin to pain. She glanced his way, and the deep blue of her blouse was reflected in her eyes...so that it was almost like gazing into his own. She smiled and returned to her conversation with Eli. *How gentle, how caring she is for all those who are in need of her. And how fierce in her protection.*

Miriam returned with a small valise and with a change of clothes for Eli. When they were ready to leave, Diana held back. Puzzled, Vincent went to her and asked gently: "Are you not coming with us?"

Diana shook her head. "Can't. I know I was watched as I came in here. If I don't come back out, it'll raise questions. Besides..." she grinned. "...I drove my car here. Can't just leave it. I'll head back to the loft."

"Will you come Below later?" Vincent had lowered his voice and he knew Diana could tell he wished this desper-

ately.

Placing a hand on his chest, rubbing gently, then patting, Diana looked over and smiled at Miriam, who was waiting patiently, then back to him. Her face was serious. "I don't know. Things are...unsettled...right now. The case...."

Frustrated, more than a little concerned, Vincent's voice had an edge he couldn't erase. "Have you been placed back on the case?"

"No."

"Then why, Diana? What is it that you think to do? Let Joe Maxwell and Greg Hughes handle this case. It is what they wish. They made a mistake, but they are *not* incompetent. Catherine had a great deal of respect for Joe."

There was a deep silence for a moment and Vincent realized his mistake in mentioning Catherine's respect for Joe's competency...since at the moment Joe was in doubt over Diana's. And perhaps speaking of Catherine right now was ill advised as well. Diana's complexion, already pale, seemed to lighten another shade. "Mistakes get people killed in this business, Vincent. Remember? Joe and Greg don't have a clue about Bull. Slade's probably just incidental...maybe not even the same partner he had in the last series of rapes." When she lifted her eyes to his, he saw there such pain and confusion that he ached to hold

her. When she spoke again, it seemed she was talking to herself more than him. "I can't let this one go. It's not over yet. It has to be over."

Vincent knew Diana was headed for danger in this, but there was no deterring her. Catherine had been stubborn in her own way, and she'd been oblivious to her steadily increasing dependence upon the bond--and him--to protect her. And because he'd loved her he'd been unable to speak to her of what had become evident to him: that their hunting together was becoming more and more dangerous for both of them. Diana was usually very careful about keeping their lives separate. Never--except when hunting Miriam--had they hunted together, and she was so competent a hunter herself that Vincent had managed not to worry excessively about her safety. Now, he felt uneasy. His vision had been disquieting. If she should need him, he knew she would block the bond. "Diana. Please come Below tonight."

Diana glanced over to Miriam and Eli, who were patiently waiting. "We'll see, but don't look for me. Go on. They're waiting." After a quick, reassuring squeeze to his hand, Diana turned and walked away toward the front of the shop.

Vincent took a deep breath and turned toward Miriam and Eli, and tried to get his mind off of Diana and their problems. "Come. Let us lock the shop after Diana, then get you settled for the night."



SHADOW DANCERS

by Rhonda Collins

Dancers in the shadows
Images in the night
Blend and weave together
The shadow and the light
Then one Shadow Dancer
Dances against the bright.

CHAPTER SIX: SHADOW DANCERS

Diana left the shop and went back to her car. There was a fine mist falling and it was cold, but nevertheless, she stood for several long moments next to the car, scanning the darkness around her. *They're out there, somewhere. Bull and Greg's tail.* Diana spotted the undercover officer fairly easily in his unmarked grey sedan parked a block down. Spotted him and dismissed him. But she wondered where Bull was, because she *knew* he was out there. Tentatively, she lowered her block. As always, Vincent was there and she felt his quick leap of joy as he sensed her, but she turned away from him, outwards to the darkness. She could feel Bull out there, waiting...sense his anger and frustration, but she wondered how much of that was also her own. And Vincent's.

Pulling back and wrapping her block carefully around herself again, Diana unlocked her car and slid in, relocking the doors afterwards. She checked her carryall for her gun, then started the car.

Driving through the misty city streets, Diana thought about Vincent. *He doesn't understand why I can't let this go. Hell. I'm not sure I understand. But I have the feeling that if I don't catch him, Bull will just disappear for a few years, then begin again.*

Diana reached her building, parked and started inside. Standing in the glow of the streetlamp, she felt exposed, but she glanced longingly at the alley behind the building. *I should go to him. I know Vincent's confused. God knows I am. Last night was...incredible. And scary as hell.*

A taxi went by, splashing water on Diana's pants and brought her to reality. She sighed and went inside, riding the elevator up to her loft.

Diana stared around the loft, which was still littered with debris from her case. *This place doesn't seem real, somehow. Like a hotel room I've only slept in and never lived in.* Even the mess didn't seem real. The evidence was gone, the evidence board clean, but the mussed couch with the pillow and afghans remained. An empty pizza box was on the table, and Diana smiled, thinking of Vincent force-feeding her. And things fell back into place.

Dumping her carryall on the table, she walked into the

kitchen. The water in the sink was cold and scummy, the cups still unwashed. The floor was even still wet. Hesitantly, she squeezed her eyes closed and opened the refrigerator...cracking one eye to peer inside. "Oh, yuck." Disgusted, she closed the refrigerator door and turned around. She leaned against the door and surveyed the apartment with distaste. "I think a bomb would definitely be the answer." *God, Bennett, how do you survive? Good thing you ate while you were out.*

Pulling off her silk blouse and muddy pants, Diana tossed them into the dirty wash on her way to the bedroom. She pulled on an old Tee-shirt and went back to the kitchen. Pulling the mop out of the broom closet, Diana mopped the floor. She put away the mop and picked up the litter in the loft...hesitating a moment before throwing away the empty pizza box. Last of all, she tackled the dishes. She let the cold water out and filled the sink, being careful this time not to let it overflow. She finished washing the coffee cups and few plates and as she was drying her hands, the telephone rang. On the second ring she picked it up. "Bennett here."

No answer. But there was someone there: a presence. She hung up and stood staring at the phone. *Everybody gets calls like that sometime. No big deal.* Nonetheless, it gave her an uneasy feeling. Of course her number was unlisted and not many people had it. But crank callers often just called randomly. *Put your mind elsewhere, Bennett. Do something constructive.*

The phone rang again, and Diana jumped. After hesitating, she picked it up. "Bennett here."

Greg Hughes' voice on the other end was irritated. "What the hell were you doing at the Davidson's?"

"Just checkin' up. I felt it was the least I could do."

"Diana..." Greg growled, "...I want you to stay out of this. Stay away from Miriam Davidson. I have a tail on her."

"I know. I spotted him. Figured he'd report in."

There was a moment's silence, then Greg said again: "Stay out of it. If you have anything else to do with this case...."

"Yeah?"

"I'll have to suspend you. You *could* lose your badge. Now do you understand me?"

Diana thought of Miriam and Eli, safe with Vincent. And of Bull, out there watching. *I'm not sure I have a choice anymore, Greg.* "Yeah. I understand. Call me when you want that jaywalker busted."

"You'd *better* understand, Diana. Because if you don't, jaywalkers may be all you *will* be busting." He hung up without saying goodbye.

Diana replaced the receiver softly, then wiped sweaty palms on her shirt. She knew Greg meant what he said and that she was pushing him...stepping over the line. She wandered into the bathroom, turned the water on in the shower to heat the water, then began peeling off her shirt. The water felt good when she stepped in. As she held her head under the streaming water to soak her hair, letting it run down her back, she tried to relax and let everything go. The steam filled the bathroom and the heat relaxed her.

In the other room, the phone rang several times, then was picked up by the answering machine.

Bennett here. Or not here, whichever. Leave a message after the beep and either way, I'll get back to you.
<Beep>

The tape hissed for several long seconds, then stopped. The machine rewound and reset.

By the time Diana got out of the shower, dressed again in a clean sleep shirt, and dried her hair, she felt almost human. She decided to update her journal.

As she passed the answering machine, she noticed the light blinking and punched the message button. All she got was a beep and the hiss of tape. She reset the machine and walked to the computer. After booting the computer and bringing up her word processor and journal, she sat down and started to type.

I'm not sure what I'm doing anymore, or why I'm doing it. I can't believe I let myself lose control like I did. No wonder Greg and Joe pulled me. But I can't just walk away from this one, and no one seems to understand. Not even Vincent. I think his losing Catherine has made him over-cautious. Must have, or he'd see what I see. He'd believe in me. Bull's out there...waiting. He needs to get to Miriam. And Slade. Personally, I don't give a damn about Slade. Bull will take care of him. But I will take Bull down, one way or another.

Diana jumped as the phone rang again. She just stared and waited for the answering machine to pick up. When it did, and it was another hang-up, she leaned her elbow on the desk and set her chin in her hand. *So. The hunt begins.* Diana didn't know what to do. *Should I try to handle it myself or tell Greg? Would he believe me or think I'm paranoid? I could sure use a trace on that phone.*

She glanced back at the monitor and re-read what she'd written.

So now I'm getting anonymous calls. Maybe it's nothing. Maybe it's Bull. If I had to give odds, I'd say it's 90-10 in favor of Bull. But if I tell Greg that, he'd really think I'm paranoid. No. I'll wait a bit. Play this by ear. And I'll have to keep it from Vincent. He'd freak completely. I won't do as Catherine did and use him as a weapon in this war. I'd rather die. And that brings up what I've been avoiding all day. Something that's been turning round and round in my head. I've looked at it from all the angles and I still don't understand. Why did I get so scared when the Other grabbed me last night? Vincent's warned me repeatedly. I've seen this guy in action. I knew the game could get rough. I should've expected it. I kept telling Vincent that I wasn't scared of any part of him. And I'm not. What happened? And my rage took me by surprise. It's a good thing there's no bond between the Other and me. Hell, he and I...we didn't make love, we made war. And Vincent...afterwards...was like nothing I'd ever thought possible. Even the dreams hadn't prepared me for that. I don't want to spoil that. Ever. And the other day...when I felt Vincent's rage...when it struck me...I blocked instinctively. What would happen if I should do something like that while making love?

Diana pushed away from the computer and went to the window. She stared at the black, mirror-like surface. With the loft lights on, all she could really see was her own reflection. *I wish Vincent was here. Right now, I could talk to him. I want to talk to him. I want to ask him what he felt when he killed for Catherine. He said that when he killed was the only time he and Catherine were close in the bond. But the Other isn't empathic. Or is he selectively empathic? He is Vincent's block...but...oh hell. I don't know. Don't understand.* The only thing Diana knew was that the thought of Vincent's killing for her while they were locked in the bond scared her to death. And the thought of her blocking him while they were making love scared her just as bad. She was suddenly very cold and very tired. She went back to the computer and saved her file, then cut off the power. With a huge sigh, she headed for bed.

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After settling Miriam and Eli for the night, Vincent stopped back by the nursery to spend a few minutes with his son. It seemed that lately he'd hardly had a chance to see Jacob at all. Moving soundlessly through the nursery, winding his way between small beds and cribs, Vincent took time to tuck in one child who had thrown his cover off, then found himself beside Jacob's crib. *He has grown so. If I blink my eyes, I've missed something.* Vincent's hand brushed over the baby's soft curls. His large hand, with the long reddish fur and hideous claws seemed grotesquely out of place...having no right to touch such beauty. But the feeling was only momentary. A remembered reflex from another time. *Oh, Catherine, Vincent*

thought gently: *Every time I see him I see your face. Your smile. When he laughs I remember the pleasure you took in life. When he listens with astonishment to music I remember your face at the concerts we shared. He is a living memory with a life of his own, and a treasure beyond anything except perhaps yourself. And Diana.*

Vincent's thoughts strayed and he found himself automatically trying to touch Diana...and feeling disappointed when he met the blank space that meant she was blocked. *I wonder how long it will be before she will either talk to me or let me through her block?* He missed her terribly and wished he understood this sudden withdrawal.

Jacob stirred under his father's gentle touch and reluctantly Vincent drew back, not wishing to wake him. He knew his own restlessness was transferring to the child.

With one last look, Vincent turned toward his own chamber, but once there he found himself pacing. Unable to settle. Seating himself at his desk, he opened his journal. *Perhaps if I write for a time...try to put into words what I am feeling.* Uncapping his pen, Vincent turned to his last entry, smoothed the blank facing sheet and began.

Today I brought Miriam Below for safety and to heal. Despite the trauma she has experienced, she seems strong. Almost defiant. Far more concerned for her grandfather than for herself. Perhaps that is her strength...that always she cares for others first. I sense beneath that stoicism hesitancy and fear, but that is normal. I believe that she will heal.

Vincent sat a moment staring off into space, thinking of Catherine after her attack and how long it had taken her to heal. *I'm not sure she ever did heal completely. Perhaps no one does after something like that. The scars always remain.* Turning his attention back to his journal, he continued.

At the moment, I am more concerned for Diana. She is avoiding me, both physically and emotionally. Yet when I see her, I can see no fear of me in her. I know she has not put away this case, though she has been ordered to. I can see the determination in every move she makes, though she is still blocked and still will not speak of what is disturbing her. She knows I disapprove, so perhaps that is the source of some of her reticence. I know she is also shielding me...though from what I am uncertain. I wish I could shield her from what I know will happen when her superiors find that she is insubordinate. I discover I miss her more and more with each passing minute, and I have had a vision of her--a waking vision, not a dream--in pain and fear. In great peril.

With a quiet moan, Vincent closed his eyes and raked his fingers through his mane. This wasn't settling him at all. It was only bringing his worries into sharper focus.

Suddenly Vincent felt an overpowering need for air.

The candlewax, smoke and dampness of the tunnels was stifling him unbearably. Shoving out of his chair and tossing the pen onto the desk, he grabbed his cloak and headed Above.

The trip through the tunnels to the park entrance seemed to take forever, but Vincent finally found himself operating the lever mechanism to open the sliding door. He pushed the gate away forcefully and it clanged against the stone with a horrifyingly solid noise that ricocheted all around him. Instinctively, Vincent retreated into the darkness to wait, in case anyone had heard. *I can't believe I did that. That was stupidity!* Years of ingrained caution--instinctive stealth--forgotten for one moment could mean disaster. Flattened against the wall, barely breathing, Vincent waited, casting outwards to try to sense any presence. There was nothing. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. The night air was crisp and cold and his breath hung before him. The cold air burning his throat felt marvelous. As soon as he was certain that no one had heard, Vincent closed the door and the gate, then ventured out into the park. It was still misting but it was not yet cold enough for that light rain to turn to sleet. It was actually miserable weather for anyone to be out...unless one is desperate to be in the open air.

Vincent traveled quickly through the park, unconsciously making his way toward Diana's loft. The entire way his mind kept forming images of her: Diana angry with him, her eyes flashing, Diana laughing as she played with Jacob, Diana intent and serious as she worked. And finally, Diana with him at the pool, long red hair loose and silken--then wet--her body alabaster and roses.

By the time Vincent reached the alley behind Diana's building, he was half-frozen. Thankful that it wasn't sleeting, he began his ascent. He pulled himself over the edge of the roof and was disappointed to see that the lights were off. Climbing to the window, he peered down into the living room. He rested his head against his knee and sighed. It had been a long, wet, cold trip for nothing. Then, softly, he felt the touch of her presence at the edge of his consciousness. *She sleeps.*

Vincent smiled and closed his eyes. Again, he pictured them together as they'd been in the pool. Warm, electrically tense, skin to skin. The remembered sensations pulsed through him, erasing all consciousness of the cold around him. He could feel Diana stirring in her sleep as she, too, became aroused. He felt her puzzlement upon waking to find herself in her own bed...then her gradual realization of where he was and what was happening. A few moments later, he opened his eyes to see Diana staring down at him, her long hair blowing free in the steadily increasing wind. Small droplets of mist gathered in the silken strands and glistened like diamonds in the light that was now being shed from the clerestory windows beneath him.

"Vincent...what on earth?" Diana's block was up again, wrapped around her like the thick white, terrycloth robe.



Embarrassed, Vincent rose, feeling awkward...the lingering arousal fading. "I...missed you."

She smiled and held out her hand for him to take. It made him feel better. "I missed you, too." She jerked her head in the direction of the door. "C'mon inside. It's cold out here and you're getting soaked."

Once they were downstairs, Diana pushed him toward the couch. "Let me put some water on for tea. I'll be there in a minute."

Vincent started to sit down, but hesitated. He *was* more than a little damp. He pulled his cloak off and hung it on the coat tree. The clothes underneath were much drier, so he settled onto the couch and waited for Diana. He watched her moving about the kitchen and was relieved when she joined him. "Diana. I'm sorry" he apologized. "I shouldn't have wakened you. I don't know what I was thinking."

Her gentle smile lit up the room. "Don't you? I think I have a pretty good idea."

Vincent looked away. "I *didn't* think." He looked back as he felt her warm arms steal around his neck. "I...should not have come."

Diana's face was serious, but her hands gently stroked the back of his neck and his face. "Maybe not. But I'm glad you did. I'm sorry if I've hurt you, Vincent. It's just...there's been a lot going on inside me that I wasn't ready to share."

"To share a pain lessens it, Diana...and if I've caused you any pain...."

She shook her head. "Not you. It's not you at all."

Diana snuggled against him and they sat quietly for a few moments, enjoying the closeness. Then the teapot began screaming, and Diana sighed. "Oh, damn. Be back in a few minutes."

Once more, Vincent watched Diana as she made the tea. Her actions were so normal that he relaxed. She was always so determined about everything. When she brought him his tea, already sweetened as he liked it, he took the cup from her, lingering a moment as their hands touched. "Thank you."

As they drank their tea, Diana began talking. "I don't know what it is, Vincent. Not exactly. My mind...my mind keeps going back to when we made love."

Their eyes met and he smiled. "As does mine. Obviously."

She chuckled then. "Yeah. I know." She sighed. "But I worry about what happened...at first. You know. With the Other."

"I'm sorry," Vincent murmured. "It was as I'd feared...but...we got past it...I thought." Vincent was confused, not sure what to say, or do.

Diana put her tea down and went to the window. Her reflection in the black glass was like a reverse photographic image. "I guess." She spun to face him and she seemed distressed. "It's not *us* that bothers me, not exactly. It's *me*." Walking quickly over to him, Diana sat beside him,

her face serious, but animated. "See, it scared me...the rage I felt then. Vincent, I was *furious* that you...the Other...*anybody* could get me in a position where I had no control. It wasn't that...oh, damn. I don't even know how to explain it. But my rage and the Other's determination to...claim me...scared me. Scared me. I shouldn't have been angry then. I wanted to claim you, too. It should've been...different."

Diana's eyes sought his with questions he didn't really understand. But he knew she needed his response. He reached for her hand and held it a moment, rubbing the palm with his thumb. She shivered delicately. He pulled her to him and settled her beside him once more. "We claimed each other, Diana. And now that the storm has passed, perhaps the Other will not be so insistent...." Diana trembled again, and he wished he knew what she was feeling, thinking. He held her a little tighter, and breathed in her scent. "Perhaps...perhaps there comes a time, Diana, when we must accept with gladness that which we cannot change within ourselves."

Diana's voice was so soft, he almost missed her question above the rapid hammering of his heart. "Have you?"

"I...don't know," he admitted. "Perhaps..." Vincent slipped his hand inside her robe to hold her closer. His hand found her breast under the soft cotton shirt. The words were hard to form, his throat was so tight. And until now he had not voiced them. Not to her. "I accept that I love you. That I want you."

She pulled away. "I can't...Vincent. The anger...I might...I might block and hurt you." She was shaking harder now, but Vincent took her face in his hands and drew her to him for a long kiss. Her mouth opened for him and he tasted the inside...the smooth warmth of her tongue...felt his canines click against her teeth. Diana clung to him, moaning softly. He shifted her toward him, opening her robe wider...sliding both hands under the cotton shift.

Vincent was himself so aroused by now that it was impossible to keep his hands from her body. He felt Diana pulling at his belt, opening his trousers, but he couldn't move to help her. "Diana," he gasped. "I can't...wait...."

He felt the touch of the bond--tentative at first--as she straddled him, then as he thrust upwards into her, the bond cascaded over him like water over a dam...surrounding him even as her body surrounded him. She moved gently over him, rocking slowly. He grasped her hips and moved with her as she flexed and bent, the smooth muscles fluid under his palms. He could feel the heels of her hands pressing through the layers of clothes on his chest as she leaned forward over him. Felt the gossamer touch of her hair on his face. His eyelids felt leaden. He wanted to watch her, but he couldn't force himself to open his eyes. She was all around him...her body, her hair, her scent...and the bond between them was alive. The soft sounds she was making grew louder, more insistent. The rhythm of their love

increased. Faster...faster. He couldn't breathe...his body was taut as a bowstring--he trembled beneath her--as she suddenly stopped and whispered in his ear: "I love you, Vincent." His world exploded outward...into her...and with her...into that place where separateness and aloneness had no meaning.

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Diana lay across Vincent, with her head on his chest. Listening to the steady beat of his heart. Somehow they'd found themselves on the floor. *I don't remember moving... or falling*, she thought, amused. Vincent's arms were around her--still underneath her robe and nightshirt, holding her close. Everything had happened so fast...yet despite the urgency they'd both felt, their lovemaking had been gentler, with none of the rage that Diana had so feared. And more than that, she hadn't blocked him. Hadn't hurt him by closing off the loop as she'd so feared she might.

Diana looked down into Vincent's face. His eyes were closed and the golden mane was spread over the floor. His long, pale lashes brushed his high cheekbones. The tips of his canines were visible through his slightly open mouth. "Vincent?" Diana whispered gently into the stillness.

"Um?" His voice was satisfied and sleepy. The sound of it made her smile.

"I...umm. I think it's started sleeting. Maybe...."

Vincent groaned and ran his hands up her back, then down...down to her thighs. And sighed regretfully. "I know. I have to go." His eyes opened, and blinked.

Diana kissed him, then reluctantly rolled away. Diana tied her robe as Vincent re-adjusted his trousers. When he glanced up at her through his strands of blond mane, Diana smiled a little behind her hand. She could sense his embarrassment as he said quietly, "I didn't mean...I meant...to take more care. To love you slowly. Gently."

She went to him and hugged him, leaning into his embrace. "S'alright," she whispered. "It was great." She nibbled the side of his neck playfully, stopping as she felt the reflexive tightening of his arms. *Best not get anything started again.* "Vincent. Really. You've got to go. Father'll have my head if you disappear again for a whole day. And it won't be safe climbing down if the ice gets much worse." Taking his hand, she led him to the coat tree, where his cloak hung. She pulled it off and handed it to him with a wry smile. "Go on, now. Before I keep you here again."

"Very well." Vincent grimaced a little as he shrugged into the wet cloak. He hesitated. "Diana...."

Diana patted his shoulder and pushed. "Go, for pity's sake!"

But Vincent wouldn't be pushed. Grasping her shoulders, he forced her to look at him. "Diana. Before I go. There is something I must tell you."

There was a sense of danger. Of Vincent's concern. Diana lifted her eyes to his. "What is it?"

Vincent released her and walked to the window, leaning one hand against the wall beside the glass. "I had...a vision."

A slight tremor ran through her. "A vision?"

"Yes. It was not a dream, Diana. It was...like others I have had. What I see...is true. Comes true. But I do not always know what the visions mean."

Diana's eyes ran over Vincent...over the broad shoulders and wild, tumbled mane, down his body to the fur-topped boots. Even the wet cloak couldn't spoil the symmetry. Or disguise the tension there. Diana crossed her arms tightly, shoving her hands up under her armpits to keep from shaking. "Like when we were searching for Jacob?"

Vincent turned to face her. "Yes. The images make no sense. They...tend to be...symbolic. But...there is danger, Diana. For you. You must stop this case. Leave it to Joe...to Greg."

The silence between them was almost palpable as he looked back over his shoulder at her. Then Diana shook her head. "I can't, Vincent." Before he could answer, she flipped off the light and joined him at the window. She stared out at the city and tried to explain. "Joe...and Greg--they're good desk jockeys, Vincent. Good politicians. Good men. They mean well. But they're not...predatory." She turned to Vincent then and stared hard into his eyes. "You know what I mean. As a hunter, you have to be able to see the pattern of the prey before you can break it. You have to know how they think. What they want."

Vincent looked away, unable to continue facing her under the truth of what she was saying. The bond was open between them and there could be no lies. "Yes."

"I *know* this guy, Vincent. I've become closer to him than anyone else...know him better than anyone else *could*. I can't just walk away and leave him out there." She looked down at the city, where the sleet was falling...the cars still speeding through the streets, regardless of the weather. "I've never understood how the other cops could put a case aside...go home, lay it down...eat supper, go to the movies. Just go...have a life. For me, until a case is over, it eats at me. Always has...always will. The case is alive until the hunt is over. One way or another."

The look in Vincent's eyes was painful to Diana. And the feeling coming through the bond hurt, too...because he understood. "So. Then that is as it must be. Is there anything I can do?"

She shook her head. "Just give me space to work. Understand." She tried a smile. "Keep Miriam safe. And Eli."

"And you?" His question was cautious.

"I take care of myself. Remember?" She nodded toward the window. "Look. You've gotta go. It gets any worse and you won't be able to."

Vincent took her hand and walked across the apartment, leading her up the stairs to the roof. Just before he opened the door, he turned to her, staring intently.

"Everyone fears something, Diana. Do you know what I fear?"

Puzzled, Diana started to say, *losing yourself*, but she realized suddenly that was no longer true. She shook her head tentatively.

"I'm afraid of not being there...again. Of being too

late." He caressed her face gently. "Take great care."

Before Diana could reply, Vincent was gone, melting through the now-open door into the darkness on the roof. She picked up a heavy afghan, wrapped it around herself and followed him. Standing alone on the deserted rooftop, her feet bare and cold, she murmured after him: "I'll *try* to take care."



JUNGLE LAW

This is the hour of pride and power
Talon, tush and claw
Oh hear the call!--Good hunting all
That keep the jungle law!
(from *Night-Song in the Jungle* by Kipling)

CHAPTER SEVEN: JUNGLE LAW

Mark Bullock hadn't needed to follow Diana back to her apartment. He'd learned the phone number and address from the same contacts that had helped him get the evidence. In addition, he had a more pleasant duty to attend to: he had to watch Slade's murder.

It was misting heavily and growing very cold as Bull waited across the street from where he'd told Slade to meet him. *The poor idiot can't seem to realize that we can't meet again.* Bull was well-hidden from prying eyes as he watched the street corner.

Taking out his binoculars, Bull surveyed the area, seeing if he could locate his man. He couldn't. *Good. That means the tail the police have on Slade will have trouble locating him, too.*

As Bull pulled his coat tighter around himself, he settled in to wait for the action. Images of the red-haired detective flitted through his mind. His hands itched to touch her... and to wipe that look of competence off her face. *She is beautiful.* Before coming here, Bull had stopped at a pay phone and called her number. She'd answered on the second ring. He liked her voice. Deep, sexy. No nonsense. He wondered what it would sound like begging. He'd made one more stop at another pay phone to try again. He didn't think she'd have a trace put on her line: she was officially off the case, but she'd still gone to see the girl. No. He didn't think she'd tell her superiors about the calls, but he couldn't be sure, so he only called from pay phones and moved on immediately. When he called the second time, he got the answering machine again. Disappointed, he hung up. He would've liked to try to get her talking. They had a lot to talk about. He thought Diana Bennett probably understood him better than anyone ever had. He'd seen her notes. He almost regretted that she had to die...but she couldn't be allowed to live, knowing him as she did. *When push comes to shove it's her or me, and I win hands down.*

As Bull was thinking about the calls, he noted movement out on the street. Slade was standing next to the phone booth, his hands shoved deep in his pockets. The thin man looked frightened and unsure. *And well you should be, Adrian. Well you should be.*

Slade peered around the phone booth a few times, then went inside and pulled the door closed. He dug in his pocket for change, then picked up the receiver. He was just starting to dial when a shot rang out and the entire side

of the phone booth was splattered with blood. Bull picked up his binoculars again to watch. He could see the exit hole the bullet had made in the glass. *Not bad. Head shot.* A minute or so later, a man--obviously the police tail--skidded up to the phone booth and yanked the door open. Slade's body fell through, practically onto his feet. The cop, dressed in sweats and a running jacket, pulled a gun and knelt beside the body--scanning the street and surrounding buildings cautiously. He pulled out a radio and spoke into it and within another minute a gray sedan pulled up beside the body, blocking Bull's view. Bull put away the binoculars and faded back into the room, heading for the rear of the building. He slipped out the back way. *Another problem solved.*

Walking casually down the street toward where he'd parked his car, Bull climbed in and drove away. He listened to the scream of sirens heading toward the scene of the killing and thought with satisfaction how much they sounded like a woman screaming.

Now all I need to do is prepare my hideaway for Ms. Bennett and Ms. Davidson. My special place. Bull had a boathouse at the docks that he'd fixed up as a playroom. He'd done all the work himself. It was soundproofed. And any messes he created there were easy to dispose of by taking them out on the boat and dumping them. But these special playtimes were few and far between. In the last eight years Bull had gone through periods where he needed these little "games." Some years he managed to get through football season without his own games to pacify him. And there had only been three or four victims in all that time that Bull had saved for his own "Super Bowl". And none of those had promised anything like Diana Bennett. He licked his lips in anticipation.

On impulse, inspired by the success with Slade's removal, Bull decided to pick up Miriam tonight as well. It would mean taking out the cop who was tailing her, but it was necessary. He swung back by the small shop and parked a few blocks away. He'd already pinpointed the undercover policeman earlier, and it was no problem finding him.

Walking up the street toward the battered dark blue sedan, Bull tried to appear no more than a casual walker. A little before reaching the car, he stopped at a pay phone and pretended to search for change in his pockets. After an obviously unsuccessful attempt to find change, he glanced

up the street to the car and walked to it. Leaning down to tap on the window, Bull smiled, knowing he looked perfectly respectable and innocent.

The young cop rolled the window down. "Yeah?"

"I'm sorry. I need to make a phone call and I don't appear to have any change. Could I trouble you?" Bull held out a dollar bill in his gloved hand.

"Sure. No problem." The young man turned away to dig in his pockets and Bull struck, winding a piano wire tightly around his neck. The young man struggled and Bull watched his face--taking pleasure in the fear in the boy's eyes--knowing that the weedy young cop was no match for his strength.

In his struggle, the cop knocked the car out of gear and it began moving. Bull swore, but moved along with it. Fortunately for Bull, the tires were turned to the curb and when the car stopped a few moments later, Bull was able to finish his job. The wire had cut deeply into the boy's neck and spattered blood all over Bull's five-hundred-dollar suit. He wiped in distaste at the mess. "Shit. I just got this cleaned."

Reaching for his handkerchief, Bull wiped gingerly at the stains and stared across at Miriam Davidson's apartment and the small shop on the east side. Folding the handkerchief, he stuffed it back into his pocket and walked slowly across the street and down the block-and-a-half to the entrance of the store. The street was dark and deserted. No cry had been raised during the murder and even the stray cats digging in the trash at the side of the store were quiet.

Bull had no problem forcing the door open. There wasn't even an alarm. Once inside, he stood in the silent dark, head cocked...listening for any sign of life. There was none. He moved through the store and up the stairs to the living area. It was deserted. Furious, Bull moved quickly and quietly down the stairs and out onto the street, knowing that somehow he'd been duped...he *and* the police. Disappearing into the shadows, he found his way back to his car and sped home.

Damn her! Damn the Bennett bitch! Bull didn't know if he was more furious having his prey taken from him or simply because he'd unnecessarily murdered the cop. Anything unnecessary was messy. Uncontrolled. *I'll have to do the red-haired bitch first, now...to find the other one.* *Damn!* He'd really counted on having the two of them together. One to do and one to have watch.

When Bull got back to his apartment, he sat staring at the telephone. He was frustrated, angry and very lonely. On impulse, he dialed Barbara's number. After the second ring, she answered. Hesitant, almost shy, Bull said gently: "Hi, Barb. It's me. Mark. Please don't hang up."

He sat, listening to Barbara quietly telling him that it was over. She didn't want anything more to do with him. When she stopped talking, Mark responded: "I know. I know it's over. And it's my fault. I just wanted...I wanted to let you know that I love you. And that whatever

happens, Danny will be taken care of. I know you don't want anything from me. But I want you to know that." Without waiting for an answer, Mark placed the receiver back in the cradle and stared at the wall.

It had been a long day.

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Once Vincent reached his chamber, he fell into bed and slept dreamlessly, in a pleasantly exhausted sleep that carried him through the few hours until morning. As the torches were lit in the corridor beyond the stained glass window, the amber light shining in his face caused Vincent to turn restlessly. He strained to regain the peaceful sleep he'd been enjoying, but now the pipes with their morning messages and the insistent tug of the bond between himself and Jacob pulled him awake. He indulged himself in a brief daydream involving Diana and himself, then reluctantly peeled the quilts back and readied himself for his morning shower.

After a quick shower and breakfast, Vincent hurried to escort Eli back to his shop.

Vincent walked slowly, matching his strides to Eli's. It was a long walk for the elderly man to have to make twice a day, and Vincent was concerned. "Eli...if this is too much for you, perhaps other arrangements could be made."

Eli shook his head. "It's nothing, Vincent. I take my walks in the neighborhood every day. Not so long, true." He glanced up and smiled. "Perhaps I will not bother with the neighborhood walks for a time, hmm?"

When they reached the secret wall to Eli's basement, Vincent cautioned Eli to wait. "Only while I check that it is safe."

Eli started to demur, but Vincent shook his head silently and disappeared into the basement, closing the door behind him.

Vincent stood still and listened...raised his head and sniffed the dead air. There was a lingering scent...very faint. *Blood.* He moved silently through the dark, noting nothing amiss until he reached the front door of the shop, which had been forced. He glanced through the window out to the street, and there was nothing. Vincent secured the door as well as possible and made sure the "Closed" sign was visible. Making one more circle of the entire shop and apartment, he returned to Eli, slipping out through the door and closing it. "The door to the shop has been forced. Nothing appears to have been disturbed."

Eli was shocked and upset. "Him! It was him... coming to get my Miriam!"

Vincent nodded. "I believe so, but he is gone, now. What would you do?"

"Is the door secure? Eli asked."

Vincent nodded. "For now. I think, perhaps, you should make a call to the police from another place...though I suspect they will already know. Diana said the police had

someone watching Miriam. Surely they know of this...or will soon." Vincent watched his elderly friend with concern. "Come, Eli. Let us go back. I will get a message to Diana."

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Diana woke with the phone ringing stridently in her ear. She'd put it close so she wouldn't have to get out of bed to answer, but when she reached for it, she knocked the receiver off, sending it clattering to the floor. "Oh, damn!" She leaned over and fished under the bed for the receiver and placed it to her ear. "Bennett here," she muttered.

It was Joe, his voice resigned and conciliatory. "Okay, Bennett. I apologize. Greg apologizes. We were wrong and you were right."

Diana sat and raked back her unruly hair. Satisfaction lanced through her. "Yeah? So what happened?"

"The bastard's got the Davidson girl. He killed the tail and broke into the shop."

"WHAT?" Diana reoriented herself just in time. She knew Bull *couldn't* possibly have Miriam. But then she thought of the cop. "Who was he? The tail, I mean."

"Saunders," Joe said quietly.

Diana bit her lip. Chuck Saunders. It had probably been his first undercover assignment. A nice kid. "Damn. How was it done? Strangulation again?"

"Yeah. A wire. Real messy. Listen, Bennett... Diana...I'm sorry, really, I am. But we need you. Miriam needs you. I think you're the only one who can catch this animal."

Diana bit back the nasty comments about desk jockeys and suits that were hot on her tongue. Joe couldn't help what he was...any more than she could help what *she* was. All either of them could do was be the best of what they were. "Okay. Then listen close. I think this guy's hunting me."

"WHAT?" Joe sounded shaken. "What makes you think that?"

She sighed, tired of never being able to be specific about how she knew something. "Just a feelin'. Some hang-up calls. Heavy breathing--that sort of thing. He's got my notes. All the evidence. Probably if he got that, he can get anything he wants."

Joe was silent a long moment. "Why you, Diana? Why would he come after you?"

"Because I know him...I understand him. And that threatens him. And intrigues him."

There was another long silence as Joe digested that. Then he dropped another bit of news. "Yeah. Okay. I can see that, I guess." He paused. "There's something else, Diana. Slade's dead. Our man watched him get his head blown off tonight while he was standing in a telephone booth. So far, we've done a pretty lousy job of protecting *anybody* from this guy. The Commissioner is about to... well...you know."

"Yeah." Diana sympathized. She absolutely hated it when the politicians started yelling about something they knew absolutely nothing about. "So anyway, Joe, maybe putting a tail on me isn't such a good idea. He's obviously aware of 'em. Best to keep him thinking that I'm off the case and not in good odor right now. Maybe a wire...but that'd be hell twenty-four hours a day. Any suggestions?"

"A small trace," Joe ventured. "Maybe in your clothes? That way, at least we could keep track of your whereabouts...and you could call in periodically. If we don't hear anything at the right time, we could follow the trace?"

Diana rubbed her forehead. She could see her brief times with Vincent flying out the window on little white wings. "Yeah. Okay. Send it to me through a messenger. Not a cop and somebody who wouldn't be obvious. I know how to put it on. He might be watching. If he sees me having contact with the cops, it might scare him off."

Joe sounded relieved. "Will do."

Diana hung up the phone and cursed quietly under her breath. She shrugged her way out from under the covers and headed for the shower. Her mind was working at top speed. *He's gotten rid of Slade...tried for Miriam. He must be really pissed that he killed a cop to get to her, then found her gone.* Diana showered quickly, avoiding getting her hair wet...she didn't feel like drying it. She needed to be available when the messenger came--able to hear the buzzer--and ready to move out. She had to make herself visible today...and available tonight. A wave of adrenaline surged through her...part fear...part anticipation. *Which one of us is truly the prey, here?*

Diana dressed, braiding her hair tightly. All the while, she tried to think of a game plan. Whatever she did would be dangerous--very dangerous--and that bothered her. Leaving her safety in someone else's hands--depending on a tiny piece of electronic hardware--bothered her more than she could say and didn't want to think about. Nor did she want to think about how angry Vincent would be with her if he found out what she was doing: offering herself as bait for Bull. *But there's really no choice,* Diana argued to herself. *What difference does it make if I act as bait voluntarily or I become prey unknowingly? If I lose, the result is the same in any case.*

Shoved sharply away with complete refusal to think about it was the one irrefutable fact: there was no way at all that she would come out of this unscathed.

Just as she finished braiding her hair, Diana heard the buzzer and hurried to answer. "Who is it?"

The intercom's static couldn't completely conceal Kipper's youthful voice. "Diana! Message from Vincent."

Diana groaned. She hoped Vincent didn't want to meet tonight. That could be a problem. Chewing her nail thoughtfully, Diana's mind looped in circles trying to figure out what to tell Vincent...how to keep him away.

When Kipper stepped off the elevator and handed her Vincent's note, she opened it with dread. When all it told

her was that Bull had broken into Eli's shop, she was relieved. "Tell him 'thanks,' Kipper, but I already knew. Joe called this morning. Tell Vincent they put me back on the case, so everything's kosher, now."

"Okay. Anything else?"

Diana thought a moment, then said quietly: "No. I guess not. Just tell him not to worry. Thanks, Kipper."

After Kipper left, Diana had a few horrible moments. Almost a panic attack. She had dozens of scenarios running through her mind of what could happen. She found herself thinking: *I might have just given up my last chance to remind Vincent how much I love him.* But she shook off the thought. *He knows. Whatever happens--he knows.*

The thing she feared the worst was not her own death, but the effect that might have on Vincent, after his already losing Catherine. Yet, almost as much, she feared having him come because of the bond and kill for her.

Just this once, she wished she could walk away.

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Greg was furious with Joe Maxwell as he faced him in Joe's office of the Criminal Courts Building. Although the D.A.'s office wasn't exactly plush, and the general disorder wasn't much different from Greg's own office, he noted subtle differences: leather chairs where he had wooden fold-outs for "guests" and a brass nameplate on the desk. Small things. The setting reminded Greg of who this was he was facing. If Joe hadn't been the D.A. they would have been in the middle of more than just a verbal debate over this. "I can't believe you *agreed* to this insanity! You put her back on the case without even consulting me...and now you tell me you're sending her out there with just a trace? No tail?" Greg had his thumbs hooked in his belt loops and his feet braced. It wouldn't have taken much to push him into punching the D.A. *Dear God. Patrick's ghost'll come back to haunt me if anything happens to his girl.*

Joe appeared calm, but concerned. "I agree that it's insanity. We both know that Bennett doesn't do things by the book. But I never said I wouldn't put a tail on her."

"But you told her...!"

"To hell with what I *told* her!" Joe said almost viciously, his calm facade cracking. "I don't send *anybody* out as bait without more precautions than just a trace!"

Greg felt relief wash over him, but then his mind started clicking. "She's right, though, Joe. The guy's obviously made two tails already. What makes you think you can get another one past him?"

"I don't know that I can. But it's just possible that he won't expect one on her. As far as he, or anyone else knows, Diana's off the case." Joe's anger seemed to fade to frustration. "Damn it! I can't just let her go out without *any* backup!"

"So who is it?" Greg almost hated to hear. In this case, the tail was in almost as much danger as Diana.

"We're doin' it a little different this time. Lew Dansen and Roger Martinez are monitoring the entrance to her building from a room in the building across the street. If they see her leave today, they'll alert Harve Wills as to if she's on foot or in the car, then he'll start down after her from a couple of blocks away. That way, maybe it'll be harder for Bull to spot the tail. Each shift we'll change the man and the vehicle." He shrugged. "That's the best we can do, Greg."

Greg nodded and looked away from Joe's too bright eyes. He was right. It was the best they could do. *If Diana doesn't know she's being tailed, she'll be more careful.* Then Greg smiled grimly. *Assuming the tail can get past her!*

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After Vincent sent his message to Diana, he checked on his son, then went back to his own duties. Despite whatever might be occurring Above, he still had his classes to attend to and the regular maintenance. He was anxious to get back to Mouse's excavation project. In the back of his mind he felt anxiety--worry for Diana--but there was little he could do, except perhaps get in the way.

During literature, which was his last class, they were reading Emerson's *Essays on Self-Reliance*. Vincent was trying to explain to Samantha what Emerson meant when he said that although one's actions may differ and seem to contradict one another, that if a man always acts according to his nature, whatever variety of actions will be in agreement. Vincent, who was of a dual nature himself, was only confusing himself. He began to think that perhaps he should have Father explain. He sighed. "All he means, Samantha, is that if you always act according to your conscience, that at the end of your life, the life itself will be symmetrical. Of a piece." He looked hopefully at the earnest young faces peering up at him and thought what a poor example of this he was.

Suddenly, as he surveyed the candlelit chamber, the murmur of the children's voices and the chamber itself faded--

To become again a white room...not this time egglike, but merely a room. Again, Diana was restrained there. Held against her will. Swift images-clashing lights and darks--a sense of water nearby. Then, like a wave, Diana's fear and the surge of the Other.

Vincent startled back to reality as Samantha tugged his sleeve. "Vincent? Are you okay? Is it time to go yet?"

Shaking, suddenly hot--sweating within the coolness of the chamber--Vincent focused on the girl. "Yes. Yes, Samantha. I'm fine. And yes, I believe it *is* time."

Vincent scarcely heard the children as they left. He tried to sense Diana, but he knew it would be useless. She was working, and she always shut him out then. Carefully

closing his book and making notes for the next class, Vincent cleared his desk and opened his journal. He sat staring at the blank page for several minutes before beginning to write.

I have twice had visions of Diana in peril. There is nothing I can do, no way I can protect her if this comes to pass. With Catherine, at least I knew I would feel her fear through the bond and be able to go to her. With Diana I doubt she would drop her block long enough to allow me to feel any fear she might have. I believe she would die before allowing me to protect her.

Vincent paused and stared into the candle flame. After a few moments, he sighed and continued.

I protected Catherine, yet at what cost to both of us? Diana believes the Other is a type of block--a buffer--that I use to protect myself from things I cannot face. Like the killing. And the desire I felt and had no outlet for. She feels that he is not empathic. Yet I can still remember the ecstasy of the kill--shared with Catherine.

Vincent's brow furrowed with his efforts to reconcile Diana's feelings with his own. What seemed true to her, he could not but doubt. Then, with a sudden sensation of being watched, Vincent glanced up to see the Other standing in the shadows. The glint of his eyes as he nodded in Vincent's direction was all that could be seen of his expression. It was enough to send a shiver through Vincent before the shadow melted back into the darkness.

On impulse, Vincent decided to consult someone with a deeper sight. He would see Narcissa.

Without taking time to tell Father where he was going, Vincent walked briskly through the corridors. He passed his friends with a brief smile and nod, unwilling to be detoured from his destination. Once he reached the old stairwell winding beside the Abyss deep into the bowels of the earth, Vincent moved more quickly. He traveled the steps lightly, quickly, traveling without need of a torch. Moving with an ease born of a lifetime of traveling these ways. He was impatient to reach the old black woman--the blind seeress who dwelt below the Catacombs. Father felt that Narcissa's wild talk was only that: ravings of a mad-woman. But Vincent knew better. Narcissa needed no light to see--beyond death, beyond the shell of the flesh to what lay beyond...or within. Narcissa had known Vincent from childhood. She would understand. *Yes. I will ask Narcissa.*

The steps were smooth and slick, worn smooth by the feet of men long dead and slick with dampness and patches of fungus. Vincent reached the bottom of the stairs and took the first turning of the way and followed the corridor until he reached Narcissa's chambers.

The chambers were not lighted, of course, since the old blind woman would need no light, but Vincent could hear

Narcissa humming tunelessly in the next chamber. The humming did not continue but a brief moment, as Narcissa stopped and called to him. "Vin-cent! Come, child. I have been waiting for you."

It used to startle and even frighten Vincent that Narcissa always knew when he was near. And often knew what was on his mind. Now, he merely accepted it as part of the old woman's charm. Part of what made her who and what she was. "Narcissa. I have come seeking your advice."

The old woman was merely a shadow among other shadows, the whites of her eyes like shining disks as she turned to him. She bent and lit one small candle on the table, though neither of them needed it. "About your friend. The fiery-haired huntress who lives Above?"

Vincent hesitated, then shook his head. "No. Not exactly. Narcissa...you know of the balance I keep... the...the part of myself that is not a man...not exactly...." Vincent really didn't know what to ask or how to ask it.

The old woman hadn't moved. Her unblinking gaze had not changed. Finally, she cocked her head and reached out to take one of Vincent's massive hands in her own frail ones, cradling the long, furred, fearsomely clawed fingers lovingly. "You speak of the warrior inside you. Of the protector." She nodded. "I know him. Since the beginning, I have known him. Why?"

Narcissa drew Vincent to a heavy, carved chair and motioned for him to sit. When he did, she sat facing him. She waited for him to speak, but it took several long moments for Vincent to formulate his thoughts. "When Catherine was alive...he protected her. Killed for her."

Narcissa nodded quietly.

"When...when he...I...killed..." Vincent looked away and drew his hands from Narcissa's. He held those hands out and stared at them. "With these hands, Narcissa...I killed. And because of my gift, there was a...fusion...a sharing of the death. Both my perception and the victim's." When Narcissa's expression didn't change, Vincent felt compelled to continue. "And those times...were almost the only times that Catherine could sense me through the bond."

Narcissa sighed and muttered: "A dangerous sharing."

"Yes." Vincent clenched his hands into fists and thrust them between his knees. He threw his head back and drew a deep breath. "And now...with Diana.... Diana, unlike Catherine, is an empath."

Vincent lowered his head to watch Narcissa. Her expression had changed from the blank-eyed stare...her eyelids had closed and she had a soft smile on her face. "Ah. I suspected so, child. I feel such joy in you. But there is dread as well. You have not killed for this woman?"

Vincent hesitated. "Yes. Once...but it was long before I knew of her gift. She...is able to block others' emotions from her...and hers from me. Narcissa...Diana claims that the...the Other...is not empathic. That she feels no bond with him. Yet I know this cannot be true, because of

Catherine." He paused, then continued. "Diana blocks me routinely when she works her cases...to protect me from what she does not wish for me to see."

Narcissa sat patiently, almost unmoving. "What is it that you fear, child?"

"I fear...that if Diana needs me she will block any fear she might feel from me...and I will be unable to go to her. I lost Catherine, Narcissa--because I'd lost the bond and could not sense her. I...fear not being able to protect Diana. I have had a vision of her...in peril."

The darkness around them was still and quiet. "And what does *Diana* fear, child?"

Vincent stared into the shadows. "I wish I knew. She says she does not fear the Other. I do. She fears harming me...." He stopped--embarrassed and unable to continue. There was no way he could explain to Narcissa about the feedback loop that so easily occurred between Diana and himself, or what happened when he'd made love to Catherine. When he'd lost his empathy. Narcissa would understand...too well. Taking a deep breath, Vincent decided he'd made a mistake. This was not something he could discuss. It had been difficult enough to discuss the bond with Catherine and the killing. He rose and apologized. "I am sorry, Narcissa. For disturbing you. I must go."

Narcissa's voice stopped him at the chamber door. "Vin-cent."

Vincent turned back to her.

"Remember that the blind may sometimes see what the sighted do not." Narcissa pinched out the candle flame, and by the time Vincent's eyes readjusted to the dark, the old woman was gone.

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After calling her sister, Susan, to apologize for not returning her call sooner, Diana spent most of the day doing routine errands: shopping for groceries and washing clothes. She went out and bought a new pair of tennis shoes. Occasionally, she would open up to try to sense any hint of the hunter she knew was seeking her: but there was nothing. *He probably has a nice day job. Can't let his fantasies interfere with his reality. Wish I could do the same.*

After spending hours out in the cold, Diana was glad to make it back home. She was chilled to the bone and wanted to take a nice hot bath to soak away the chill... knowing she had to go back out later. After starting the bath water running, Diana wearily stripped off the sweater and slacks she was wearing. Steam began filling the room, reminding Diana of the pool Below. Dipping one chilly toe into the hot water, she slowly immersed herself, turned off the water and lay back, luxuriating in the warmth. Diana settled her shoulders against the back of the tub and closed her eyes. The warmth felt *so* good.

On the other side of the door, the phone rang. Reflexively, Diana jerked up to a sitting position, then sat stock-

still. She knew she couldn't make it to the phone before the machine picked up. When it did and her message finished, Diana waited for the incoming message--but wasn't surprised when she heard nothing. *I wonder when he'll get the nerve to say something--or if he will?* Sighing regretfully, Diana finished her bath far more quickly than she'd intended and drained the water. Wrapping herself in her thick terrycloth robe, she walked into the bedroom and dug through drawers to find her warmest sweats and a thick pair of socks.

She was sitting on the edge of the bed, pulling on the socks when the phone rang again. She picked it up on the first ring. "Bennett here."

For a moment, Diana thought he wouldn't say anything. Then a husky, even, masculine voice said quietly: "Good evening, Diana. I thought it would be nice if we met."

Diana was silent a moment, considering options. There weren't a lot of choices. "What did you have in mind?"

He laughed and the sound was almost pleasant. Somehow, it sent shivers down her spine. "I suppose my *place at seven* might be a little forward."

"Yeah," she said evenly. "Just a little." *What the hell does this guy think I'm gonna do...go meet him for a goddamned date?*

"I want to meet. You pick the place. But you come alone."

Diana was both shocked and amused. This guy seemed to honestly think she'd just serve herself up on a platter. "Aren't you afraid this phone has a trace?"

"No."

Diana felt an undefinable chill. *Why is he so sure of himself? How does he know I'll meet him?* Because Diana knew she *would* meet him--at least she'd go to where the meeting place would be. But as a hunter. Not as prey. *But how does he know I'll come? Why isn't he worried about the trace?* He was too sure. Too confident. It threw her off balance. "I'll have to think about it." She hung up without a moment's thought. She knew he'd call back.

Diana paced the room, staring at the telephone as though it were a coiled rattlesnake. She wasn't sure what to do. And *that* shook her. *If I call and let Greg or Joe know what I plan on doing, what would they do?* She knew about the tail--she'd seen and recognized the car earlier in the day--and that already made her angry. Joe had said he wouldn't have a tail put on her. *I can't depend on them to do what they say they'll do.* On one hand, Diana was relieved about the tail. On the other, she was upset. If Bull made the tail.... *But if he doesn't, then I have backup. If I don't go, he'll keep stalking me...maybe hit me when I'm not ready. If I choose the place, the time...at least it's on my terms.*

Then, of course, there was Vincent. He was a problem. *If I open up to hunt Bull, I also let Vincent in. He'll feel the hunt. And he'll come. If I don't open up, I lose the advantage.*

Diana jumped a foot when the phone rang again. She took a deep breath and answered on the second ring. "Yeah?"

"You hung up on me. Don't do that again."

"I had to think about it."

Bull's voice was like cut crystal. Hard. "You don't get a third chance. Name the place, and if it's agreeable, I'll come. If you hang up again, it's my move."

Diana thought frantically. Trying to come up with someplace that would give her an advantage. "The park. The carousel." She glanced at her watch. "In two hours."

There was a long hesitation, as though Bull were considering. "I'll be there."

There was a click, then the dial tone. Diana was left standing there holding the receiver. Diana pulled her gun out and checked it. She dragged out her shoulder holster. She rarely used it, but figured now was a good time. She slid the gun in, settled the holster and buckled it. As she was tying her new running shoes she smiled grimly. *Did I buy these with this in mind?*

After Diana ran through her checklist to make sure she had everything, she walked to the bedroom and dug through the clothes to find her old, short, sheepskin jacket. It was warm, but wouldn't get in the way. She pulled it on and zipped it. Lastly, she took the trace off the blouse she'd worn during the day and attached it to the inside of the coat. She tapped it. *Hope this thing is working.*

Diana stared at the phone for a long moment before deciding to call Greg to let her know she was heading out.

It was a long walk to the park.

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Roger Martinez, a short, gray-haired, middle-aged cop sat smoking a cigarette in the dark...watching the reflection of the glowing end dance against the glass. It was bitter cold out and the glass kept fogging over, but he used a hairdryer periodically to dry the glass off. He had to be able to see the door to Bennett's apartment building. Dansen said she'd gone in about four and he hadn't seen her come back out. He'd come on watch at six and still hadn't seen her. Hughes called a few minutes ago to let him know that Bennett was going out--told him to make sure he didn't miss her. *Hope Harve hasn't gone to sleep out there...or run out of gas running the car heater. Damn, I hate stakeouts.* He was about to call Harve to make sure he was awake when the phone rang. Roger picked it up. "Martinez."

It was the D.A. It struck Roger as odd that the D.A. should have so much involvement in this thing. He'd checked in as often as Hughes had. Maxwell sounded stressed. "Anything yet?"

"Naw. She went in about four, and we ain't seen her again." Before Maxwell could say anything else, Martinez jerked to attention. There was movement down at the door. "Wait a minute." He dropped the phone and picked up the

binoculars. It was Bennett. She stopped a moment outside the door and looked both ways up and down the street. Martinez grabbed the phone. "Gotta go. She just stepped out." He pressed the button, effectively hanging up on the D.A., then called Harve Wills. "Yeah. Move out. She's headin' east on foot wearin' sweats and a light colored, short jacket."

When Roger saw the grey sedan go past the window, easing its way along, he called the D.A. back and told him that the tail was set. Wills said the trace was working. Roger eased back into the chair. His job was over for a while.

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Vincent sat across the chessboard from Father, waiting for the older man to make his move. Although Father was intent on the board, Vincent's mind was not on the game. His thoughts kept returning to what Narcissa had told him. *The blind may see what the sighted do not.* He couldn't understand what Narcissa could possibly have meant. That it *did* have meaning relative to his questions, he had no doubt. He sighed with anxiety. *Diana is still blocked. But she is hunting--I know it.* Several times during the day, Vincent had felt her drop the block, but she'd avoided his contact, sideslipping away to a separate focus. But through that, he'd felt the intentness of her attention.

Father startled him by finally moving. "Queen's Knight to Kings Bishop four." He smiled delightedly. "Check, I believe."

Forcing his attention back to the game, Vincent surveyed the board. Father did, indeed have him in an untenable position. But he saw a way out and moved, much to Father's dismay. Just then, he had a flash of feeling from Diana. Just a moment, then it was gone. It was...odd. Not quite fear...but.... He glanced up at Father. "Father. May we finish this game another time?"

Father's look was one of concern. "Is everything all right, Vincent? You seem distracted tonight."

"I am. A little. If you don't mind...?"

Vincent started to rise, and Father nodded. "Of course. I hope it's nothing serious. Diana?"

"Possibly. I'm not sure, myself. If you don't mind, I believe I will retire."

Father obviously would have liked to discuss this: to try to help. But he merely nodded. "Of course."

Vincent walked slowly back to his chamber. Jacob was asleep for the night--left with Mary, since Vincent had been unsure if he was going Above or not--and Vincent let himself concentrate upon Diana. He settled at his desk and opened his journal.

Narcissa reminds me that the blind may sometimes see what the sighted do not. Because with one sense removed, others become more acute. But I do not see how this applies to my question.



A dark shadow separated itself from the darkness in the corner and moved into the flickering light of the candle. The Other appeared anxious and determined. *Are you going to sit here all night? She's Above and she's hunting. Alone.*

Vincent considered his other half. If lacking empathy could be likened to blindness, then perhaps *he* was the answer. *How do you know she's hunting?*

Because you know.

Vincent silently capped his pen and carefully put it away, all the while considering what to say...what to ask. Looking up into that fearsome visage--to see it echoing his own concern--was disconcerting. *What does Diana fear, that she blocks me?*

The Other stalked past Vincent then turned back to face him. His fists were clenched tightly and he shook his head. *She fears...the kill. She fears me. Us.*

Vincent turned this over in his mind, then stared back at the Other. *You are empathic. I know it. Yet with Diana you've held back. Why?*

Because she is too sensitive to this. Not like Catherine. With Catherine such intense times were the only times I could touch her at all. With Diana, I do not dare. She fears the bond enough with you. I would not lose her. She brought me in with the bond once before...but that was her choice.

Vincent remembered the time below the Catacombs and how Diana had gone to the Other and brought him in with them in the sharing. She'd chosen love, then. Chosen them both. And then, when they'd made love the first time she'd fought him--the Other--and yet then there had been no bond. *Would it have been different if she'd have sensed you then?*

The Other seemed confused. Frustrated. *I don't know. I only know that she fears the bond with me. Because of the killing.*

Suddenly, Vincent understood. The Other had always protected him from the backlash of the kill--muted it--yet he'd never understood that until recently. And now the Other was protecting Diana from the feedback loop that occurred whenever she and Vincent were together and open to each other. Slowly, they'd begun to inch toward handling the desire...but she still feared what could happen if they fused in that loop when he killed. Therefore, she blocked. Not merely because she didn't wish to draw him into danger--as Catherine had--and not merely because she refused to allow their relationship to become drawn into the same loop of protection and killing that his and Catherine's had become. Though all of that was true. But it was also because she honestly *feared* for both of them what could happen if they were drawn into that loop during a kill. Because she was afraid she couldn't hold her block then and she *knew* instinctively that the Other was empathic...though she tried to deny it. Vincent groaned and faced himself fully. *So what do we do? Is there no answer?*

The Other drew himself upright from his crouched,

feral position. Even with his tangled mane, the tattered clothes and the vicious appearance that Vincent's subconscious gave him, he appeared proud. *We protect her. From what we can. As best we are able.*

As Vincent watched, the Other faded away. As he did, Vincent once more became aware of Diana. Briefly, he sensed her moving toward the park, intense and concerned. Then the connection was gone. Vincent knew that the only possible reasons Diana might have for heading to the park at this time of night and in the cold would be either to see him or in connection with this case. Either way, he wanted to be there. Whether she wanted him there or not.

Snatching up his cloak from the back of the chair, Vincent threw it over his shoulders and bolted out of the chamber. Once he'd started toward the park, however, he hesitated. *If I interfere with her in this case, she will be very angry.* Frustrated, he slowed and stopped. He tried again to sense her, searching desperately with the empathic connection to try to reach her. But there was only blankness there.

The Other whispered in his mind: *Of course if you don't--if you're not ready--she could be dead!*

With renewed determination, Vincent continued toward the park.

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Diana walked steadily toward Central Park, her footsteps barely discernable on the concrete. It was freezing cold, but at least it was relatively dry. She shoved her gloved hands deep into her pockets, knowing she'd have to take the gloves off when she reached the park or they'd make her clumsy with the gun.

When she turned off into the park, she became more alert, knowing Bull could be anywhere. Dropping her block, she cast ahead for a few moments, seeking any sense of him. *Nothing.* She glanced around. There was absolutely nobody within sight, though peripherally she was aware of the tail--lagging back several blocks--knowing they could keep touch with her without close contact. Greg knew she was out, and that was comforting, but any calls from outside the loft would look suspicious. Diana's breath formed clouds in front of her face and the leaves crackled underfoot--still frozen from the sleet the day before.

Moving uneasily through the darkness, Diana turned periodically, making sure she kept watch on all sides. She reluctantly closed the block to avoid alerting Vincent. Removing the glove on her right hand, she stuffed the glove in her pocket. She unzipped her jacket a little and her ungloved hand flipped the safety off her gun. *Pay attention, Bennett! Watch everything.*

Diana knew there was virtually no chance of capturing Bull. She'd have to kill him. Kill him or suffer the consequences, because in this hunt only one of them would survive. A little resentfully, she thought of Vincent. *If I didn't have to block him, I'd stand a far better chance of*

winning this. But she immediately put the thought aside. She couldn't afford indignation or resentment right now. *Besides, it's not his fault. He can't be anything but what he is.*

Nearing the carousel, Diana hesitated. *If I were Bull, where would I be?* She knew he was here, somewhere. Even though it was early. If she came early, then so would he. Diana scanned the trees around her, the bushes. She moved lightly, almost soundlessly, from the path to the cover of the bushes and watched again for any movement. She opened up again to try to sense him--and caught him--the sense of patient waiting and feral joy in the hunt. She tried pinpointing the location, but could only sense the direction. Then she sensed Vincent. Nearer and with his own sense of purpose. *Damn!* she thought angrily, slamming the connection closed. Diana was acutely aware of the cops--behind her by only a few blocks--and Bull ahead of her. *Why the hell can't Vincent stay out of it!* But she knew why. He'd told her. She could still hear his words ringing in her mind. *I'm afraid of not being there again. Of being too late.* Diana shook her head to clear it. Being angry with Vincent for simply being Vincent was ridiculous. And it wasn't helping her concentrate.

Diana reached the carousel and paused, balancing on the balls of her feet. *Is he outside or inside?* Pulling her gun, Diana sidled away from the carousel into the bushes around the perimeter. The well-tended lawn had been mowed before the nasty weather and although some leaves had fallen since, for the most part, the ground was clear: it was easy to stalk her prey silently, except for the occasional awkward crunch of frozen leaves. She glanced upwards. It was overcast with no moon, so it was very dark. *Wish I could see in the dark, like Vincent. It'd sure help.*

Carefully, with as much stealth as she could manage, Diana circled the entire carousel enclosure, watching for movement. *He must be inside. That's where I'd be.* Diana hated the idea of moving into the enclosed space and berated herself for picking this place--too close to the tunnels and with too-easy access for Vincent--but it was the first place she'd thought of. *Too late now.*

Putting all her muscle into it, Diana shoved the door back, knowing she was in the worst possible position--and wishing that *she'd* gotten there first rather than Bull. If Bull was inside, he now knew exactly where she was. Forced once more to use her empathy, Diana dropped her block and searched. She could feel Bull waiting just inside...but exactly where, she wasn't sure. She could also feel Vincent--closer than he'd been, and worried. And she couldn't close off the connection. Forcing herself into action, Diana dove headfirst through the door and rolled, coming up with a carousel horse behind her.

Almost before she'd landed, she sensed movement and whirled. Before she had a chance to get off a shot, Bull charged into her, shoving his shoulder into her chest like a football player moving through a field of opposition. The impact knocked the breath out of her and her finger

spasmed, sending a shot ricocheting through the darkness. Unfortunately, not into Bull. Diana knew the sound would have been muffled by the enclosure and that the tail, sitting in his car with the door closed and the heater running, wouldn't have heard. A massively strong hand encircled her wrist, turning the gun away and forcing her hand open. Diana tried kneeling him, but couldn't get positioned. She could feel his breath, hot against her face, and the angle put his neck just above her, so she opened her mouth wide and sank her teeth in his throat.

Bull yelled and released her hand. She scrambled for the gun, and failing to find it thrust her fingers at where she figured his face would be.

Other than Bull's one outburst and the crack of the shot, the entire fight was eerily silent, with grunts and heavy breathing the only accompaniment to their exertions. Diana felt Bull's rage when she bit him and his satisfaction when he finally had her pinned. And she could feel Vincent getting closer. She still couldn't see Bull other than as a darker shadow against the darkness of the enclosure. Diana waited silently, expectantly. Knowing he had to get up sometime. *Move, you bastard!* She ordered him silently.

Bull released Diana long enough to pull her upright--then made the mistake of releasing her right hand. In that moment, Diana thrust her hand, palm extended, at his face and connected with his nose. She could hear the crack. She didn't wait to find out the results as he released her and cursed.

"Damn bitch!" She was on her way out the door when he grabbed her around the neck and spun her around.

The last thing she knew was a flash of pain as his fist connected with her jaw.

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Vincent was still far from the park when he began receiving disquieting impressions from Diana. She was, indeed, hunting. And the hunt had become dangerous. He could sense it in her heightened awareness and the edge of euphoria. Still, he hesitated to interfere. He felt no fear from her, but only a savage anticipation. Because the connection sent his own senses whirling, he hung back. Afraid to come too close, because he knew that if he became involved in the hunt, the kill, the feedback loop would be more intense than anything they'd yet experienced. The metallic tang in his mouth told him how close he was to losing himself into the impatience of the Other. He managed to hold back until he felt Diana's pain lancing through him.

And still there was no fear.

Vincent pounded through the tunnel toward the park threshold, his anxiety turned to stark fear and a red rage. It took too long for the door to slide back...much too long to get the gate open. Only long-ingrained habit allowed him to take the necessary moment to yank the hidden lever to roll the door back. He was gone before it ever closed.



Diana knew she had only two choices: open the bond completely and let Vincent come to her--kill for her--or die and let him live with the feeling that once more he'd been too late.

Either way, they both lost.

Diana was still trying to decide what to do when the car stopped. She heard the car door slam, then the tap of footsteps on concrete. When the trunk opened, the light blinded her. Eyes watering from the bright light, Diana tried to turn away, but Bull yanked her out of the trunk in one savage jerk. Yanked her backwards, almost pulling her shoulders out of their sockets. Involuntarily she cried out and wished she could bite her tongue off rather than give him the pleasure. Her thigh hit the ground first and absorbed most of the impact.

Diana was still blinking, trying to adjust to the almost white-bright light, when Bull picked her up and carried her a short distance, dropping her on what felt like a mattress. As he fumbled with the handcuffs on her hands, Diana tried to gather her strength to fight, but found when the hands were free, they were too numb to move. Before she could do much of anything, he had reattached a cuff to one hand and attached the other cuff to a pipe over her. He did the same to her other hand. And repeated the process with her feet, attaching them to a pipe at the foot of the mattress.

By this time, Diana's eyes had adjusted to the light. The room, wherever they were, was painted a bright white and flooded with equally bright lights. She finally was able to focus on her enemy. The hunter who had turned her into prey. Licking dry lips, she croaked: "You don't *look* like a madman."

Bull laughed. His light eyes were steel gray. They were the only things in his face that revealed the cruelty of his makeup. The handsome face was framed by thick, curly black hair. Outside of his eyes and the recently broken nose, he was really very innocent-appearing. He pulled out a switchblade and began cutting off Diana's sweats, and she forced herself to think of something else. She opened up the bond and reached for Vincent. *Vincent. If you're coming...if it's gotta be that way...then you'd better hurry.* Still, Diana tried to concentrate on the bond to avoid feeling the fear and panic that threatened. Then, Bull's hands were on her, touching her with an intimacy she couldn't ignore.

"You want to tell me *now* where the Davidson girl is, or shall we play for a while?"

Diana closed her eyes. He slapped her hard on her already-bruised face.

"Open your eyes, bitch. Look at me. Or I'll tape 'em open."

Diana opened her eyes and glared at him.

Bull traced her swollen, bruised jaw with a gentle finger. "You're gonna spoil me for anyone else, you know," he whispered. "You're perfect." His palm cupped her breast then slid down her body possessively. "What games should we play, Diana? I could *make* you enjoy

this...even if you don't want to." He grinned down at her. "Wouldn't *that* be a kick? Talk about loss of control!"

Diana stared through him. She could feel Vincent very close, now, and his anger was beginning to rouse her from the lethargy produced by pain and cold. It was getting harder to ignore Bull's increasingly insistent advances.

When Diana wasn't reacting the way he wanted, Bull finally seemed to realize that all he could ever get out of her was pain...not enjoyment and not fear. He sank his teeth into her breast and Diana screamed...then spit in his face.

All she could think of was how much she wanted at this moment to kill him. She couldn't even see properly: her vision swam as the red haze closed in. She strained against the restraints, totally unaware of her skin splitting. The copper tang of her own blood was sharp.

By the time Vincent broke through the door, Diana was completely lost in the bond and in the rage.

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The night was quiet on the waterfront. Far in the distance, the Other could hear sirens, but they meant nothing to him.

As Vincent had grown more and more angry and frightened for Diana, the Other had taken control. The red rage was his: the killing belonged to him. But in order to find Diana, he had to open himself to the bond, which both of them feared so strongly. The Other shivered in the bitter cold and clutched Diana's jacket close. Her scent was strong in the jacket. He held it to his face and breathed her in...opening himself to new possibilities.

And the connection flared opened to its fullest.

Pain. And cold. Fear and shame. The Other knew those feelings well. The only way to combat them was to fight. To be angry. To let the rage heat your blood and crowd out the fear. Then, in the exultation of the kill even shame is buried. As he tried to locate Diana, the Other tried to encourage her and help her in the only way he knew: he fed her his rage to fight the cold and pain. To chase away the fear and cover the shame. The Other was furious at this man who used his strength to destroy those weaker than himself. Those that the Other would protect. He'd dared to touch Miriam. And now Diana. He made a sound low in his throat: a growl that grew to a wail as Diana's rage met his own and intensified it. He hurled himself through the night in the direction of the calling.

The Other paused very briefly outside the building considering the best way inside. But Diana's scream galvanized him into immediate action. Throwing his considerable bulk at the door, shoulder first, the Other crashed through into light so bright it momentarily blinded him.

It was the white room of Vincent's vision.

As the man turned--screaming in horror at the first sight of him--the Other advanced slowly. He savored the man's



fear. The sound that came from Diana's throat was more a growl than any cry a woman might make and the bond spiraled the Other's rage even higher--tighter. He was wound more tightly than he'd ever been. Ready to erupt into overt violence.

Rising awkwardly from atop Diana, the man back-pedaled away from the Other--and death was reflected in the shining mirrors of his eyes.

Turning away from the prey, the Other knelt beside Diana and gently caressed her bruised face. She turned to him and shook her head. Her voice was rough, strained, as she pleaded through her swollen lips. "Stop...this."

But when their eyes met, the Other backed away. The bond, like a thread of bright silver wound through them, around them, carrying a current that needed to be discharged. The Other shook his head, his heavy mane flying. There was no pulling out. He *tried* to stop. Tried to block Diana out...as he'd always done. To pull away from Vincent. Tried to quiet the rage.

The sirens were closer now. The Other raised his head and listened, momentarily distracted from his intentness of purpose. Then there was a sound behind him and he turned to see the man leveling a gun at him. Without thought--guided by the instinct of self-preservation and renewed rage--the Other sprang. His roar shook the building as the gun spoke--sending a bullet into his chest. Through his pain, the bond crackled, sizzled and popped with energy.

A swat of the Other's right hand sent the gun flying, then his left hand grabbed Bull by the throat, shaking him. Dropping him, the Other eviscerated the prey in one clean, killing stroke. The eyes of victim and killer met and the connection spiraled to include Bull as he met his death.

The Other howled as the backlash of Bull's death hit him. Hit Diana and Vincent and recoiled on him. The elation, ecstasy and orgasmic sensation of the kill turned to terror--horror--and pain. For once, the Other experienced the other side of the coin: Vincent's horror of the killing and Diana's fear and horror as she was pulled in. The sound of his anguish was drowned out by the ever-nearing sirens.

Then everything went black...for a moment...an hour. Time seemed suspended. When his vision cleared, the Other stumbled backwards and fell to his knees beside Diana. Uncomprehending. Everything was swimming. The sirens hurt his ears and the bright light hurt his eyes. The kill stank. To the Other, the entire room stank of blood, feces, urine and fear. He wrinkled his nose and snarled.

Finally, some realization of the danger he was in seemed to penetrate his fogged mind. Sirens meant police. Discovery. Panicked, the Other turned to the woman beside him. There was no way he could release her without hurting her worse. She was unconscious, but breathing. Gently, he touched her skin. *She is so cold*, he thought. Her lips had a bluish tinge. He ripped off his cloak and covered her. *She must not die*. All he knew at the moment

was that the woman *must* not die. And that he must leave.

The police will help her. He knew that much. Accepting that there was no more he could do, the Other staggered out into the night, leaving a pool of blood behind him.

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Joe Maxwell and Greg Hughes sat anxiously in a squad car waiting for the call from Harve Wills. There was another car waiting with them. Joe was determined they wouldn't lose Diana to this guy. The longer they waited, the more worried he got. "I should'a never let her do it. We should'a kept her off the case."

Greg's terse answer didn't help. "Harve won't lose her. Hasn't lost her yet."

"How the hell do we know that? The bastard could'a killed her already. Harve could be followin' a corpse."

"Shit. Don't even think it, Maxwell."

About that time, the radio crackled with the message to move out. The trace hadn't moved for ten minutes.

At first, they traveled without the sirens, but Harve called back, insisting that something heavy was going down. He heard screams and sounds he couldn't describe. Maxwell turned on the siren, and the noise split the cold air. He radioed for an ambulance to meet them at the scene.

As the sirens screamed, traffic got out of their way. The nearer they got, the more anxious Joe got. He could tell that Greg felt the same. Neither of them knew what they'd find.

Reaching the area, one squad car went through the alley to the back and Joe and Greg pulled in beside Wills, who was standing next to his car, hands shoved deep into his pockets. At Joe's questioning glance, Wills shook his head. "It's quiet, man. Too quiet. I pulled up here a few minutes ago. Look at the door."

Joe looked. The door had obviously been forced. The light coming from inside was blinding. There was no movement. No sound. "No one's come out?"

Harve shook his head. "Not that I've seen. Right after I got here I heard some screams. Some sounds like... growls. That's when I called you back." He shrugged. "I was parked down the way, there. A few moments later, when I didn't hear anymore, I eased on up here."

Joe, Greg and Harve moved in after alerting the backup in the alley. They entered the building with extreme caution, but when they saw Bull's body--or what was left of it--and Diana handcuffed to pipes welded to a bedframe, Greg and Joe both rushed to help her. Joe ordered Wills: "Check for keys to these damn cuffs. And be *careful!* I want forensics to go over this place with a fine-toothed comb."

Joe turned back to Diana. He'd immediately recognized the cloak covering her. He'd seen Cathy wearing it the night she was rescued from drowning. After *someone* (or some *thing*) ripped the trunk lid off the car she was trapped

in to pull her out. And another of the strange, mauled bodies was found nearby. *Vincent*, Joe thought tersely, *one of these days I'll find you.*

But for now, he had no time for conjecture. He glanced at Greg, who was stroking Diana's hair, speaking softly to her. "C'mon, Di. C'mon, baby. It's Uncle Greg. Hang in there, kid." Joe hadn't realized how close Greg Hughes and Diana Bennett were. Oddly, he felt a twinge of jealousy. Maybe just because this whole thing reminded him so forcefully of Cathy.

Joe swung around, barking at Wills: "Hurry up! Found anything yet?"

Wills was kneeling at the side of the eviscerated body, delicately fishing in a pants pocket. And trying not to gag. "Yeah," Wills choked. "Hold on. Got it."

Wills quickly brought a keyring to Joe, holding it gingerly with two fingers. It was bloody. "If they're not there, I don't know where they'd be." The man was pale and sweating. "I gotta get out of here a minute."

Joe ignored the sounds of Wills' vomiting and proceeded to try out keys. He finally found one that worked and began unlocking the handcuffs. The skin and muscle on Diana's hands were abraded and cut deeply. She was bleeding profusely.

Fortunately, the ambulance with the EMTs arrived immediately after the handcuffs came off. They burst through the door with a stretcher.

Diana started coming around as the EMTs began working on her. Her first action was to clutch the cloak so tightly that no one could get it away from her. So no one tried.

Placing a hand on Greg Hughes' shoulder, Joe told him: "She'll be okay, Greg. She's tough. You go on with her. Tell Wills to call for forensics. Immediately. Don't let anyone do anything with that cloak! If they get it away from her at the hospital, bag it and bring it to me."

Joe watched as Greg climbed onto the ambulance with Diana and the doors shut, then he turned back to the carnage and waited for forensics.

When they got there, he told them what to look for. "I want fingerprints taken...on everything. Look for hair samples. I want blood samples...especially on that pool of blood by Diana. That's not Bull's. Get plenty of pictures of the wounds on that guy. And look, too, to see if there's any identification on the victim."

Joe found Bull's gun and finding that made him think of Diana's. A search of the premises didn't turn it up. "Send someone to check the carousel. Can't leave a loaded gun somewhere."

On his way out, Joe noted the address of the boathouse to check for ownership. If there wasn't any ID on Bull, Joe figured it'd be easy to find out who he was that way. Because this place wasn't some tumble-down tenement. This was his playhouse.

Then, Joe let himself go to the hospital.

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Vincent struggled to get to safety. The Other had retreated, exhausted and confused as Vincent, himself was. Vincent's fogged mind could remember that there was a place that was safe, and dark. And warm. He needed warmth, needed rest. Needed someone to hold him and tell him he was safe. And he was thirsty. The blood he was losing disturbed him. He knew he needed to get to someone. A face formed in his mind and his lips formed the name. "Father. Need...Father." His mind was clearing slowly, but he still felt disoriented. He wanted desperately to see the woman--to know she was safe--but he knew he couldn't.

After what seemed like an eternity, Vincent managed--again more on instinct and ingrained habit than actual memory--to make his way to the perimeter of the tunnels and collapsed.

He woke to the sound of voices whispering softly and the sound of pipes. His mind was clearer and he knew he was home. He relaxed a little, relieved not to have to move. But he remembered that he still had something he needed to do. He tried to get up and fell back weakly, glancing at his arm in astonishment. There was a needle... and tubes. Uncomprehending, he tried to speak. "What..."

Immediately a face hovered over him. Gray and haggard. He recognized it. Knew the voice. "Vincent. Don't get up, for God's sake! Peter and I are giving you some plasma. Rest, now. You stumbled into the tunnel near Jamie's post and scared her half to death. You've taken a bullet near the heart and you've lost a tremendous amount of blood. We had no choice but to try the plasma. You don't seem to be rejecting it."

Vincent moved his head weakly, trying to remember the woman's name, then found it. "Diana...."

"Good God." Father raked his hand through his already disheveled hair. "What about Diana, Vincent? Where is she?"

Frustrated by his own weakness and inability to even think coherently, Vincent finally croaked: "Hurt. Hospital?"

The man beside Father--Peter, Vincent realized with his frustrating sense of half-recognition--spoke quietly. "I'll check the hospitals, Jacob." Then to Vincent: "I'll find out and get word to you." Peter grabbed up his coat and left immediately.

Still frustrated, but satisfied that he'd done all he could, Vincent closed his eyes and lapsed back into the welcoming darkness.

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When Joe reached the hospital he asked at the desk where they'd put Diana. Finding his way to her room, he went quietly inside. Greg Hughes sitting at the side of the

bed holding her hand. Her wrists were bandaged and she had IVs going. She was being given blood.

Greg looked up when he came in. Joe noted that the cloak was still, incongruously, folded and tucked under her other arm. She seemed asleep, her face deathly pale under the vibrant hair. "How is she?" He whispered quietly.

His voice tight, Greg answered: "She'll live. She would've bled to death if we hadn't gotten her in here when we did, Joe. She'd ripped the arteries in her wrists. Hell, *she* did more damage to *herself* with those damn handcuffs than Bull did. The bastard couldn't just use regular cuffs--he'd put in a sharp edge so the women wouldn't fight 'em. But you know Di...she'd fight no matter what. Otherwise, all she has is a cracked jaw, a few loose teeth, and a few other bad bruises. And the bite on her breast. Doctor says he hadn't raped her."

Joe was relieved, but puzzled. "So why is the cloak still here? I thought I told you to bag it."

Greg shook his head. "She came around as they were loading her onto the ambulance. The EMT tried to take the cloak and she started screaming. Got hysterical. So they just left it with her. It seems to comfort her, Joe. As long as it's there, she rests peacefully. They gave her a sedative, but still, if I try to take it, she wakes and starts fighting."

Joe wanted that cloak badly, but he wasn't going to put Diana into hysterics to get it. He picked up the phone and called the forensics department. "It's Maxwell. Yeah. When the team gets finished putting things away over there, send 'em over here to the hospital. Room 418. I want 'em to look at something." There was a long pause. "I know it's late. And no, I can't bring it to you. I want samples from this damn cloak and Bennett won't let go of it. Just do it."

Greg was quiet for a long while after Joe hung up. Finally he asked: "So what's the deal with the cloak, Joe?"

Joe considered. Greg had been there the night Cathy had been rescued wearing that cloak, but he guessed it hadn't struck Greg as odd as it had him. "Remember the night that Cathy Chandler got rescued at the lake--after someone else tore the locked trunk off the car? We found her wearing a heavy cloak-like thing?"

Recognition dawned on Greg's face. "Yeah. I do. Not only that, the guy who'd kidnapped her was dead when we got there. Mauled, just like this guy tonight." He glanced back at Diana. "I see what you're drivin' at."

Joe settled across the bed from Greg on another uncomfortable hospital chair, draping his coat across his knees. He changed the subject. "I never realized you were so close to Bennett."

Greg laughed a little uneasily. "Yeah. Well, you know how it is. Can't let things show when you're in a professional situation. But Diana and I go back a long way." He looked up and tried to smile. "Would you believe we used to play together when we were kids?"

"Naw. Really?"

Greg nodded. "I was a lot older, but it didn't matter. She was fun to play with, even at five. Di was never really young, y'know?"

Joe did, somehow. He couldn't picture Diana as a completely kid-like kid. She'd have been a little adult.

"We used to play cops and robbers."

Joe laughed, unexpectedly wiping tears. "Now why doesn't that surprise me?"

Greg shrugged. "Anyway, years later--a lot of water under the bridge--I ended up as her Dad's partner. Patrick took me under his wing. Taught me a lot. But any aspirations I might've had to Diana's affections kind of evaporated around that time. Patrick never would've stood for Di marryin' a cop."

Joe watched Greg quietly, sympathetically. "Then she became a cop."

"Yeah. It should've made it easier, but somehow it didn't. On top of that, I was his partner when he got killed."

"Did Diana blame you?"

Greg shook his head. "No. Or yeah, for a while, maybe. But hell, she blamed *everybody* for a while. But no. She didn't really blame me. But it did kind of distance us. Then, I got promoted and she got transferred to the 210. Now I'm her boss. Or I kind of pretend that I am. Nobody really bosses Diana."

"Must make it real hard."

"Yes and no. Usually, Diana doesn't *need* much supervision. It's just when she gets...obsessed...that it's hard to bring her down."

Now that Joe had Greg talking, he tried working into what he wanted to know. "She involved with anyone?"

Greg glanced up and met Joe's eyes. His sandy-blond hair and the expression in his blue eyes made him look younger than he was. "Not that I know of. Hasn't been for a long time. Not since she and Mark Scavone split. Diana's always been kind of a loner. Doesn't seem to like relationships. Hasn't had much luck with 'em."

"Maybe she needs somebody who understands her. Like you."

Shaking his head again and looking down at Diana's hand--still clasped in his own--Greg said quietly: "Wish I *did* understand her, Joe. All I know for sure is that she's special. Different. A little fey."

"Fey?"

Greg blushed. "You know. Faerie-touched. Patrick used to always say that Diana had the sight. I don't know if that's true or not. I only know that Diana *feels* things harder--stronger--than everybody else. That's why she's so good at what she does. But it's hard on her."

Getting back to Diana's relationships, or lack of same, Joe asked: "So she hasn't been seeing anybody since Mark. When did that end?"

Greg thought. "Back...I guess it was during the Chandler investigation, come to think of it."

Joe had known it. It had to be like that. Bennett had

always denied knowing anything about the elusive Vincent, but Joe had known, deep down, that she'd been lying.

About that time, the door opened and the forensics team stood hesitantly at the door.

Joe waved them in, whispering: "Come in. But be as quiet as you can. Try not to disturb her." He motioned to the cloak. "Take samples of the fibers with blood--to see if it matches the blood on the floor next to where she was--and look for hair samples. And anything else that seems significant."

Moving gently, the men were able to unroll part of the cloak without waking Diana. As long as her hold on it wasn't disturbed, she seemed fine.

One of the men told Joe: "Hand stitched. Fine work. The cloth appears to be from a blanket. Bits and pieces of leather. Leather rolls at the shoulder. Heavier leather on the arm." With difficulty, he managed to shift the cloak and get a look at the other shoulder. "No sleeve on the right. Interesting." He measured the length. "It would have to be worn by a tall man or it'd drag the ground. It'd be heavy to carry around, too--all that weight--the guy must be strong enough that it doesn't bother him."

In the meantime, another man was collecting samples of the fibers, stiff with blood, and putting them into a bag. He held up a long, blond hair for Joe's inspection. He added: "Might be light red. Could be Bennett's, but I don't think so. It's coarser, too." He bagged it. "Another thing," he added. "The material smells like smoke...and something else...maybe candlewax."

After the forensics team left, Greg carefully rolled the cloak back up, replacing it under Diana's arm. Joe just sat and stared at the wall. *So. If the hair is blond I know several things. Some of which I already knew. Cathy's Vincent is a tall, strongly built man (or something) with claws and hands capable of tearing men apart. He probably has long, blond hair. And he lives somewhere lit by candles. He glanced down at Bennett. And he protects people.*

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Diana was lost in the darkness. Strange images flitted through her mind--disconnected and bizarre. But nothing seemed to quite touch her, so it was all right. Even through the darkness she could feel the leather of his cloak. And a subliminal scent of smoke and candlewax. As long as he was there, nothing could touch her. Not even the darkness crowding from within or the red haze. Occasionally she woke enough to be aware of someone holding her hand, but the hand felt odd. Too smooth, too soft. There should have been fur and hard callus. But still, the hand was comforting.

Blinking against even the soft lights in the hospital room, eyes a little sticky and scratchy, Diana tried focusing on the figure at her side. The face blurred a little, then

cleared. It was comforting and familiar: she searched for a name. "Greg."

Greg smiled. "Hi, kid. How're you doin'?"

Diana considered. "Not bad, considering I must've been hit by a train."

Wiping away tears, Greg laughed shakily. "Now you sound like yourself."

Diana felt odd. Nothing felt quite real. She took inventory of herself silently. What she'd told Greg was true enough. She felt weak, her jaw hurt (in fact, her entire head hurt), her breast and wrists hurt. When she drew a deep breath, her chest hurt, as though a 50 pound weight was sitting on it. She was still confused. Unsure of how she'd gotten here. But she had an uneasy feeling that she was lucky to be alive at all.

But everything was hazy...like in a dream. In fact, in a moment of panic, she almost asked Greg what her name was. But she knew if she waited, someone would tell her, and she'd remember.

Diana's turned her head to look at the arm with the IV. And saw the bundle of cloth and leather under her arm. She smiled and dragged the heavy pile to her face and rubbed the butter-soft leather against her cheek. And let out a long sigh.

"Diana..." Greg began.

Diana. I'm Diana. Another piece clicked into place. Diana Bennett. Yes.

"Diana. Where did you get the cloak?"

Confusion again. She stared at Greg as he nodded toward the bundle in her hands. Panic. She stared at the pile of material with incomprehension. Vague images and sounds flitted through her mind. Things she didn't want to think about. She turned her mind away. "I don't know," she said, honestly.

Greg reached for it and she clutched it tighter. "No!"

Patting her hand, Greg sat back down. He looked confused, too. "S'okay. You can keep it. Do you remember who it belongs to?"

The scent of smoke and candlewax, leather...and him. An image of long, bronze-gold hair and eyes the color of a summer sky. The cat-like face was strange, yet oddly familiar at the same time. Beautiful. Diana remembered him as clearly as she now remembered her name. But she couldn't think of *his*. And some instinct told her that she had to keep his existence a secret...to protect him.

Regretfully, she turned to Greg and shook her head. "No."

"It's okay," Greg said. "It's not important."

But Diana knew it was. Terribly important. Just as the aching emptiness she felt was somehow important. And connected to him.

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Vincent spent several days in the infirmary, but soon became far too irritable to keep there. Half-remembered

events and people drifted through his mind and he struggled to firm them in his consciousness. His dreams were erratic and he often woke just on the edge of remembering something. The memories were returning, but his empathy was not.

Four days after being shot, he couldn't bear the frustration any longer and growled with irritation at Father while his bandages were being changed.

"Vincent! What on earth...?" Father glowered at his son.

Vincent turned away and shrugged. He apologized gently. "I'm sorry. The tape sticks to the fur--what there is of it. I'm tired and...I want to *remember*. I want...to...to know that Diana is well." He met Father's gaze. "I can't sense *anyone*, Father. Much less, Diana."

Father removed his glasses and made a show of wiping them, before replacing them. "I see. I thought perhaps there was *something*...."

"Perhaps Peter could go see her? Check on her for me?"

Pushing Vincent back down as he tried to rise, Father continued replacing the bandage, frowning over the damage. "I'm certain we can arrange something." Gingerly, Father pressed on the edge of the reddened skin around the edge of the fast-healing wound. "Does that hurt?"

Vincent shook his head. "Not really. It's sore, but it's healing."

The elderly physician shook his head in wonderment. "You constantly amaze me. This wound shouldn't be nearly this far along in healing." He smiled. "Naturally, I'm pleased. But no matter *how* fast it's healing, you still need to rest. Now. As for Peter--I will contact him after we finish here--and I'm certain he will do as you ask."

Vincent relaxed some. "I'm concerned, Father. If this affected her as it has me, she may not remember enough to function. I know she must be frightened, confused."

Father's look of contrition was acute. "I'm sorry. I hadn't thought. Of course you're right. I'll talk to Peter immediately."

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While Vincent struggled with his own lost memories and shadow dreams, Diana fought still harder. Worst of all was the vague, insistently nagging sense of having lost something of immense importance--with no idea at all of what that might be.

Unlike Vincent, whose injuries had involved deep healing of muscles and tissues as well as slow natural blood replacement, Diana gained strength quickly. Her irritation and frustration grew in direct proportion to her strength.

The dreary weather outside her window depressed her even further. She was watching the rain when there was a knock on her door. Suddenly alert, Diana swung her head back to the door just as a tall, thin, well-dressed man poked his head in. Again, there was that strange tug to her mind

that told her she should know this man. "Come in, please."

The man, smiling gently and moving quietly, walked to the foot of her bed. "Good morning, Diana."

"'Mornin'..." Diana was embarrassed by her inability to grasp the name, but it didn't seem to bother the man. "Are you a doctor?"

He laughed pleasantly as he pulled up a chair. "I am. Not one of yours, however. You don't remember me, do you?"

She shook her head. "No...I mean...not exactly."

"It's all right. My name is Peter Alcott. Does that help?"

It did. Like a ray of sunshine, the tiniest memory broke through. "You're a friend...of...of *his*. Oh...Dr. Alcott...."

"Peter."

Diana sat up straighter, feeling more excited than she had since she woke up. More hopeful. "Peter...tell me. About him. His name...."

Peter smiled. "His name is Vincent...."

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SILENT SHADOWS

by Rhonda Collins

Death's silent shadow
the unheard screams and sighs
Haunt the quiet darkness
and shine behind my eyes.

CHAPTER EIGHT: SILENT SHADOWS

A week later, Vincent was finally allowed to leave his chamber. He'd taken his son to the Mirror Pool and was watching him play in the shallows. He'd spent more time with Jacob in the past week than he had in the last two months. *At least something good has come of this*, he thought, as he watched Catherine's child. The red-blond curls were growing longer, and Vincent considered the fact that Jacob was in need of a haircut.

Idly, Vincent tried remembering the last few weeks. Even now there were gaps in his memory. Try as he might, he couldn't put it all together, though he was slowly remembering most of it. For days his dreams had been full of violent images and he'd wake trembling. Until he'd remembered the kill. He knew, of course, what had happened. Through great effort, Vincent continued forcing his memory--relearning objects, people--because he knew he'd been through it before. It was similar to when he'd made love to Catherine and the backlash of emotion had taken him unprepared and stolen his empathy. And the bond. He realized that he and Diana had become caught in a feedback loop stronger than they'd ever experienced, and they couldn't break out. He could remember the hunt. And finding Diana. And the kill. He vaguely remembered the police sirens and having to leave her.

Vincent knew, from Peter's reports, that Diana was healing. Peter said he would let them know when she was going home. Vincent also knew from Peter that Diana, too, was experiencing the same disorientation--the same relearning process--that he, himself, was. Peter had visited her and spoken with her. He'd told Vincent that Diana remembered him, but didn't remember everything. Peter said that she'd been desperate for information on him, but still she'd sent no message through Peter for him.

Jacob squealed and splashed his father and Vincent called him over to the edge. The boy's eyes and his smile showed his delight at the game. But Vincent could sense nothing of his son's emotions. Sighing, he helped the child out of the pool. "Come, Jacob. Let us go back."

After drying and dressing the squirming toddler, it took most of Vincent's reserve of energy to make it back to his chamber. He was relieved when he met Mary on the way and she took the active child. "Thank you, Mary."

"You look tired," Mary fussed. "You should be resting."

"It seems all I do lately, Mary. But thank you."

Returning to his chamber, Vincent sat at his desk and opened his journal. He'd tried to chronicle the effects of the feedback loop and his efforts to return to something resembling normal.

The days are dragging. Jacob is a joy to me, but I miss our connection. I think he, too, senses that something is not quite the same between us. It disturbs him at times. At others, he acts normally, seeming not to miss the connection. But perhaps it is because I have kept him close to me whenever I can. At night, he sleeps here, with me. I fear I will spoil him, but I seem to need him close.

The candle was guttering and Vincent lifted it, pouring out the excess wax. After it was once more burning cleanly, he continued.

Mary has been sewing another cloak for me. She started it two days after I returned. Peter tells me that Diana has my cloak with her in the hospital room. That she will not let it out of her sight, bloody though it is. I find that touching and endearing--that she should find comfort in it as she so obviously does--even through her confusion. I do wonder though, how the police reacted to it. And to the manner of Bull's death. Peter does not say.

Sighing deeply and feeling infinitely weary, Vincent continued.

I miss her very much. Not seeing her. Having no sense of her. With no sense of either Jacob or Diana...not even any feeling of those about me...I feel very isolated. It is not the same as when I was cut off from Catherine. For then, at first she was here--physically--fairly often. And when Gabriel took her I was too desperate to feel merely lonely. This is quite different. I know Jacob is well. Diana is...if not well...at least recovering. I am home. Even Miriam seems to be doing well, now that she knows Bull is gone and there is no threat. All is well. Except I am alone. And the world is different.

Vincent closed his eyes and listened to the soft tapping of the pipes. Constant messages which formed an unending song. It comforted him in an odd sort of way. It provided a connection of sorts. A bond to the rest of the

community.

On impulse, Vincent rose from his desk and walked to the pipe chamber. He was shaky and sweating when he got there, and sat upon an outcropping of rock which had been shaped into a bench. *Father will be angry with me if I overdo.*

He'd been sitting, resting, for some time before Pascal noticed him and descended from his perch on the pipes. Slight, prematurely balding Pascal lowered himself to the bench beside his friend. "Good to see you up and around," he said.

Vincent inclined his head in assent. Glancing sidewise through his mane, he met Pascal's eyes. Those eyes held concern and warmth. Pascal's gentle smile was the same as it had always been. But Vincent missed the constant bubble of Pascal's silent laughter. Pascal was so much in love with his world, his pipes and his friends. Pascal was the only one of Vincent's friends who would come close to understanding. "Pascal. I must ask you something."

Pascal nodded, obviously seriously considering Vincent's request. "All right. What is it?"

Looking away, Vincent gestured toward the pipes. "The pipes...connect you...to others. Constantly. Much like my empathy...connects...connected...me to others. Yes?" He glanced back to Pascal.

Pascal considered, then nodded slowly. "I suppose. I imagine there are similarities."

"How would you feel...cope...if the pipes were suddenly taken away, Pascal? If your...connection...were removed?"

Shifting uncomfortably, Pascal crossed his arms. He obviously didn't like even considering the idea. "It'd be awful. I hadn't thought." Pascal's glance grew more concerned. "I'm sorry, Vincent. I hadn't made the connection."

Vincent could almost *see* his friend's struggle. But Pascal smiled, his usual easy smile. And shrugged. "I guess I'd manage. And so will you. Y'know, Vincent, it's *people* who're important. The pipes, they're just a way to reach a little farther. They're a little more explicit than a smile or a frown." He settled his hand on Vincent's shoulder. A gesture of friendship he'd seldom indulged in, since he'd grown up aware of Vincent's sensitivity to emotion. "But *this* is a connection, too." Vincent's eyes met Pascal's again, and noted the smile lines at the corners as Pascal continued. "Touch, by itself, can be a very powerful thing. Enjoy it."

The pipes began calling again and Pascal rose. "Gotta go. Think about it."

Vincent watched Pascal as he sprinted over two low-lying pipes and up three levels to reach the proper pipe. He was once more lost in his own sort of bond. Vincent smiled and left the chamber.

Walking slowly back to his own chamber, Vincent thought about what Pascal had said. When he reached his chamber, he once more opened his journal.

I spoke with Pascal about the similarity of my empathy and his pipes. He reminded me of something I had lost sight of in the immensity of my loss and Diana's. He spoke to me of touch and what a powerful thing it is in conveying emotion. For me, touch has always been first and foremost a vehicle to carry my empathy. But what Pascal says is true. For Diana and myself a physical relationship has been immensely difficult. If we were open to one another, each touch carried us further into the vortex of the bond. Immensely exciting and completely satisfying...yet over all too soon. I wonder...when one sense is lost, another becomes heightened to take its place: what will our relationship be like, now? What will it be to touch one another in love without the bond--without that continual cry of longing and need pulling us toward completion?

Vincent closed his journal and listened to the rumble of a train moving above him and noted the quiet on the pipes. It was later than he'd thought, and his weariness told him he'd stayed up far too long.

Just as he was finishing dressing for bed, Vincent heard Father at the chamber door. "Vincent?"

"Yes. Father. Please come in."

As Father eyed him critically, Vincent smiled. "I know," he admitted. "I've overtired myself." He indicated the turned down quilts on his bed. "But as you can see, I intend on going to bed."

Father put aside his cane. "I'd like to take a look at the wound. To make certain you haven't reopened it."

Vincent sighed with resignation and pulled his nightshirt over his head, wincing as his arms moved upwards. He stood still as Father examined him, tsking over inflammation and slightly pulled stitches. "I was careful," he reassured Father. "Not lifting Jacob...except once."

"You shouldn't have been lifting him at all!" Father was indignant. "Vincent, I don't know how much abuse you think your body can take. Your recuperative powers are tremendous, but even at that, a body requires time and rest to heal properly." Father turned away and collected his cane. "I suppose I should be grateful you haven't been climbing Diana's apartment building." He helped his son pull his shirt on.

Vincent was silent for a long moment. "I would like to see her as soon as she returns from the hospital...."

"I'm certain you would! And arrangements can be made for her to come *here*! I simply will *not* have you gadding about after taking a bullet not more than two inches from your heart! You were incredibly lucky not to have had it puncture a lung in the process at the *very* least!"

Father was glowering. Vincent found himself wondering idly how it was that Father seemed to somehow grow at least six inches when he was angry. Vincent inclined his head in assent, but he was still uncertain. "Perhaps Peter could...."

"Perhaps. Or perhaps Jamie, or Mouse, or Cullen...."

"Not Cullen," Vincent said sullenly.

"Not Cullen? Very well. Then perhaps even I...can take a message to her and escort her down here. Just to make sure, since she, too, is recovering." Father paused, then asked curiously: "Why *not* Cullen?"

"No reason. Forgive me. Goodnight, Father."

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Diana stood staring out the window of the hospital. Susan, was busy picking up the room: making sure that they had everything. *It's funny*, Diana thought. *Susan's the only person I recognized immediately. Guess it's because we are sisters. Maybe we go back so far that those synapses didn't get fried.*

"I think I've got everything, Di. Are you ready?"

Susan sounded anxious, but she wasn't half as concerned as Diana. "No. I'm not sure of anything. But I guess there's not much choice." Diana worried about walking into her apartment--the place that was supposed to be home--and feeling a stranger there.

Diana sighed and turned, and at that moment the door opened and Greg walked in. "Hi, kiddo. Brought some stuff for you. Figured you might be ready to see it."

Susan's glance bounced from Greg to Diana and back again. Diana almost laughed: Susan reminded her of a dog sizing someone up silently before they bit them. "It's okay, Suz."

Greg glowered at Susan. "Jeez, Susan. You'd think that by now you'd know I'm harmless."

Tossing her armload of odds and ends onto the bed, Susan just muttered: "Guess I'll go get some coffee. Anybody else want any?"

"No thanks," both of them said in unison.

After Susan left, Diana perched on the side of the bed. "So what did you bring?"

Greg tossed some newspaper clippings and papers onto the bed. "Thought you might want these for your files. The clippings from the paper about the guy being brought down. How women were safe now, and all that. And some other stuff we found out about him."

Diana rose and went back to the window. "Thanks, Greg. But no. I'd just as soon forget the whole thing." She could hear Greg rustling the papers in the background.

"Sorry, Di. I should've thought...."

Diana turned to face him and leaned against the window frame. "It's okay. But since my memory is so full of holes anyway, that's one thing I think I'd rather just leave forgotten, okay? At least for now."

"Okay. I'll put 'em away for you, just in case you change your mind." Greg shoved the papers into a bag and put it aside. "Y'know, though...Maxwell's not going to let you off so easy."

Diana felt a tug of half-recognition at the name, but couldn't quite place it. A face came to mind, though: boyish, with a thatch of thick, curling black hair and a quirky grin. "The boy scout. Right?"

"Boy scout? Diana, Joe's the D.A. My boss...and yours...remember?"

"Oh. Yeah." The two facts clicked in her mind into a solid memory. She smiled at Greg. "He's still a boy scout. So, why won't he let me off so easily?"

Greg shifted uneasily, pointing to Vincent's cloak, which was folded on the bed. "He wants to know about the guy who wore that cloak."

Diana picked up the cloak and stroked the leather, suddenly feeling protective and very uneasy. "So what does he want to know?"

Shrugging elaborately, Greg pointed to the bloodstains. "What do you think he wants to know, Di?"

"Nothing that I can tell him." Diana turned away, still clutching the cloak. "I can't tell him what I don't know."

"Di. I don't know what's goin' on, but be careful. Joe Maxwell is straight as an arrow. Honest. He's a good man. But he's also tenacious as a bulldog, and he's never put away his obsession with Cathy Chandler's murder or her missing boyfriend and baby."

Diana spun, furious and frightened. "I told you, I don't know, Greg!"

Picking up his bag, Greg nodded to Diana. "Okay. I believe you, I guess. But whether you do or don't...don't say I didn't warn you." He paused a long moment, then pulled out a gun and put it on the bed. Lifting his eyes to hers, he said gently: "Your gun. Joe sent a man back to the carousel to look for it." He straightened and smiled a little. "'Bye kid."

As the door closed behind Greg, Diana smoothed the folds of Vincent's cloak, holding it against her cheek. *Vincent. His name is Vincent.* The image of his strange, leonine face floated before her, and she knew she'd protect him with her life...her job...even her sanity if she had to. But she still couldn't remember very much. The doctor, Peter Alcott, had told her that he would come see her after she was home, and would get her to Vincent.

Diana carefully placed the folded up bundle of cloth and leather into the small suitcase that Susan had packed. Then she picked up her gun, closing her hand around the grip for a moment--remembering the feel of it--and put it on top of the pile. *I'd wondered what'd happened to it.*

As Diana was zipping it closed, the door opened and Susan came back in. "You ready to go?"

Diana nodded. "I suppose."

The trip through the traffic seemed just slightly surrealistic to Diana. It seemed odd to be out here *in* it, rather than watching it from the hospital window. It was like watching a movie without sound. Diana knew that at one time she would have been able to sense Susan's emotions... at least a little, even without touching her...and a subliminal buzz of the rest of the emotions around her. That was what was missing, she realized, suddenly.

She sat up straighter and stared at Susan until at the first spotlight Susan turned to face her. "What is it?"

"I can't feel you. Anybody."

The light turned green and Susan turned back to the business of driving. "You mean, emotions?"

"Yes. Everything is...wrong...somehow. *That's* what's wrong with me. It's why I can't remember... because everything seems...different."

Susan didn't answer for several minutes as she continued to weave her way through the heavy New York traffic. As they pulled up finally in front of a red brick building, Susan stopped and parked. She turned, laying her arm across the back of the seat. "That makes a crazy kind of sense, I guess. I mean, you've been able to sense emotions since you were born. It'd become a part of everything you saw, touched, heard...everyone you knew. So of course everything is strange to you. But what I *don't* understand is what happened to make you *lose* that sense. And you don't remember, do you?"

Diana shook her head, puzzled. An uneasy feeling touched her momentarily and to chase it away, she craned her head to peer at the building. "Is this it? It looks kind of familiar."

"Yeah. C'mon."

Diana followed Susan inside. As they rode the old freight elevator up, Diana had an intense feeling of having done it a million times...an almost-memory. When Susan pushed back the accordion doors and led her into the loft apartment, Diana scanned the room--again with a sense of *deja-vu*.

Susan hung back as Diana walked slowly through the apartment, softly running her hands over books, furniture and photographs. Diana stopped at the computer desk and searched for the on/off switch. Finding it, she switched it on. She glanced up at Susan. "Go ahead and settle in. I want to poke around here and see what I find."

Diana immediately settled down onto the old office chair and began pulling up files...somehow easier with the computer than she was with other things. Especially people. She looked at files and familiarized herself with the setup.

It didn't take her long to find her journal. Diana's journal was divided into files and labeled by the year. There were several years' worth on disk. Diana began with the first one and began reading, becoming so completely absorbed in what she was doing that everything else faded to the background. She barely noticed when Susan brought her coffee and a sandwich, and she drank the coffee and ate the sandwich while she worked...also completely without noticing what she was doing.

As Diana read, memories began surfacing and pieces clicked into place. Several hours later she reached the personal files and notes she'd kept on the Chandler case. She drew a deep breath and exhaled slowly. Forced herself to step back.

She looked up for the first time, to note that it had grown dark outside. The lights of the loft were on and Susan was watching TV. Also for the first time, she noticed the sound of the television and the soft, background

noise of the traffic far below. It was as though, suddenly, she'd stepped back through a doorway into one reality from another.

Susan glanced up from the movie she was watching and smiled. "Hey. Finally come up for air?"

Standing and stretching, shoving her hands deep into her pockets, Diana walked over to the couch and sat on the arm. "It's coming back." She pulled her hands out of her pockets to gesture, expressively. "It's as though the words paint pictures for me, then the memory comes alive. I remember not only what's written, but whatever happened *around* that time."

"Good, I'm glad." Susan said quietly. "And the empathy?"

Diana shook her head. "No. Maybe...maybe that'll never come back. I may just have to get used to it."

"Perhaps. But it can't be all bad, Di. I've watched you all your life, struggling to be like everybody else. Trying to maintain your own identity while steadfastly keeping everyone else out. I've seen you draw back within yourself, away from relationships--even with those you loved most--even though you care so *much* for people. Maybe now you'll get a chance to learn what it's like to be *normal*."

"I'm not sure I know *how* to be normal," Diana said wistfully. "Whatever *normal* is...I think it's a long way from what I'm used to."

Susan shifted on the couch so she could rest her chin in her hand. "For one thing...just to be able to touch something or someone and simply enjoy the sensation. To learn what *touch* can be like without having to deal with all the other emotional baggage you've always had to deal with." She grinned wickedly. "You might even find a man you can put up with."

"I guess," Diana said, feeling skeptical. She couldn't remember if Susan knew about Vincent or not. Susan hadn't said and Diana hadn't asked. She noticed how tired Susan appeared. "Why don't you go on home, Susan? I'm sure Alex misses you."

"Are you sure? I can stay if you need me."

As much as she appreciated Susan's concern and care, Diana suddenly felt a great need just to be alone. To finish her journal and think about all she'd remembered. "I'm fine, really. I just need time."

Susan hid a yawn, then shrugged. "I really *am* tired. And you're right. I know Alex misses me. She likes staying at the sitter's, but even that novelty fades after a day or so. She'll be a lot happier if I don't stay the night."

Diana hugged her, realizing that Susan was right: the hug *did* feel good. She couldn't sense Susan's actual emotions, but the touch--just the closeness--felt great. "Go on, then. Get out of here. I'll let you know how I'm doing."

After Susan left, Diana climbed the stairs to the roof and stood looking out over the city. The bitter weather had warmed to merely slightly cold and dry, and the city lights

looked beautiful. *Before long, the weather will begin turning warmer. Spring will be here. It'll be a time for new beginnings.* She ran her hand over the rough texture of the brickwork, thinking for the first time in a long time about how it actually felt against her skin. How Susan's hug had felt. And what it would feel like to be held by Vincent. *I wonder how it will be between us now?* She remembered--with a distant ache--what it had been like when the bond had been open between them and she'd been in his arms. And turned back to the loft feeling very empty.

Detouring through the kitchen, Diana poured herself another cup of coffee and sat back down at the computer and began reading about the Chandler case.

October 10, 1989. 3:30 A.M.

Graveyard hunch paid off this morning, just after midnight. Hard to process the details--hard enough trying to explain to myself what has happened...what I've found. I found him at her grave half dead. Don't know if he's going to make it. Can't call the doctor. I'm scared. Disoriented. Even though he's in the next room it's impossible to believe he's really there. The thought of him is too great to hold in my head.

The night wore on, and Diana continued reading.

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Vincent hadn't meant to eavesdrop. He'd been on his way to Father's chamber to see if Father would like a game of chess. As he neared the chamber, he overheard Peter and Father in an exchange that sounded suspiciously like an argument.

"I would just as soon it ended, Peter."

Peter's voice was soft, yet had an edge to it. "I'm sure you would, Jacob. But it's not up to you--or me--to decide. It's up to them."

"But it's beginning again," Father rejoined. "I can't simply stand back and let it happen yet *again*! You know what he went through last time. The blood and the madness. It has to stop! He almost died this time."

Peter was beginning to let his anger show. His voice was rising. "He has a right to make his own decisions, Jacob. Even if they're the wrong ones. And I don't think Diana is a wrong choice, myself. As far as I can tell, she's been nothing but a steadying influence on him."

Vincent drew up, startled. They were arguing about *him* and his relationship with Diana! It was intolerable. Already everyone was talking, speculating. And now even Father and Peter were *arguing* over it. *Over whether or not I even have the right to such a relationship--or to make my own decisions!* He felt himself becoming angry. Without thinking, he stormed into the chamber and down the stairs, all thought of propriety and good manners set

aside by his righteous indignation.

"That's enough!" he bellowed. Then, seeing that his entrance had achieved the desired effect: total silence and undivided attention, Vincent straightened, jerked his vest down into place and took a deep breath before continuing. The two men stood rigid before him: one dressed in mismatched, castoff clothing, bearded and graying, the other sharp and professional in his natty tweed coat, expensive slacks and Italian leather shoes. Their expressions were exactly the same: openmouthed astonishment. It was enough to ease Vincent's anger and help him see the love behind the argument. "That's enough," he said in a quieter tone. He turned to Father. "Father, I know you're concerned for me. I appreciate that. I realize you've had more than enough reason in the past for concern. But I am well able to make my own decisions. And so is Diana." Vincent turned to Peter and asked calmly, "Has Diana returned home from the hospital?"

Peter glanced at Father, then back to Vincent. He nodded. "Yesterday. I thought I'd give her some time to settle in first. I plan on seeing her today to find out if she would like to come Below."

Vincent felt a rush of relief. "How is she, Peter? Do you know?"

"Physically she's well enough. From what I hear, she's still a little disoriented. I wish I understood better just what happened."

Vincent watched Father as the older man turned to settle himself into his chair. Vincent leaned against the desk and tried to explain. "Picture a circuit--say, an electrical circuit--that suddenly has too much load placed upon it. If there is a breaker to shut it down for safety, then it does so. If there is no breaker, it burns out. Not quite the same, but similar. Diana describes what we experienced fairly accurately as a feedback loop. I have experienced a very similar effect before."

Father's voice cut in from his chair behind Vincent. "With Catherine."

Vincent's head swung around so he could see Father and try to judge what he was thinking. Father sat with his fingers laced before his face, his expression hidden. "Yes," Vincent admitted. "But it was different. Not exactly of a kind with this. The last time it affected me, only. This time, it affected both of us."

Peter seemed acutely interested. "The last time, the effect was temporary. Eventually your empathy returned. Do you expect the same this time?"

Vincent pushed off from the desk and went around to place a hand on Father's shoulder. The older man covered it with his. "I don't know, Peter. Last time I still had a tentative bond with Jacob, which grew stronger and gradually aided in the awakening of the rest of my empathy. Now I seem to lack even that. I don't know *what* to expect this time. For either of us."

"I'm sorry," Peter said quietly.

Squeezing Father's shoulder gently, Vincent replied:

"Don't be, Peter. Diana and I...are strong. And we care very much for one another. Our... caring...did not grow from the bond, but from another kind of...connectedness. And I find in some ways a measure of peace in this. There is a freedom in the ability to be separate and alone this way. Diana and I have always known aloneness--separateness--despite our innate inability to keep everyone else out. But it was because of our differences and our self-imposed restraints. Pascal has only recently reminded me of the simple pleasure of touch." Vincent stepped around the desk and grasped Peter's hand in a handclasp. Something he'd rarely done before. "Bring her to me, Peter. And thank you."

Peter nodded to Vincent then looked down at Father. "Jacob?"

"Yes. Of course," Father muttered. "Go on."

Vincent smiled down at Father, whose expression was one of contrition. "It will be all right, Father. You'll see."

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Diana was asleep on her couch, head buried comfortably in a pillow as she avoided the sunlight. She'd stayed awake far into the night, rereading her journal and rediscovering her relationship with Vincent. The memories spun within her imagination, sometimes sliding neatly and easily into patterns and other times jarring and clashing with everything she thought of as possible and real.

In her dreams, Diana held Vincent and was held by him. Gently. In friendship and in love. In the world of her imagination, all things were possible and no problem too difficult to solve. That was one dream. But sometimes the dream slid into nightmare where dark imaginings banished all the possibilities. Sometimes, while half-awake, she tossed and turned, trying to shift the nightmare back to the pleasant dreams.

There was a buzzing interfering in Diana's dream and she resented it. She was dreaming she and Vincent were asleep together on the couch. She could almost feel his body next to hers. She wished the noise away. It didn't work. Slowly she began to have a nasty suspicion that the buzzing wasn't part of her dream at all. Carefully she peeled an eyelid open, her consciousness rising sullenly awake. "Okay. I'm comin'."

Moving on autopilot, Diana trudged over to the intercom and pressed the button. "Yeah?"

"Bennett? Maxwell here. Can I come up?"

Diana groaned and shoved her hands through her matted mane. *No, Maxwell. I wanna sleep. And dream. Not answer questions.* But what she said was: "Yeah. Can you wait a minute?"

"Sure."

Diana sighed and padded to the bathroom. She glared in the mirror and grimaced. The face that looked back

reflected just what she felt like: really tired and grouchy as hell. Digging through a drawer, she found a hairbrush and started yanking it through her hair, and a few minutes later the long, thick, red mass hung loosely down her back. She washed her face and changed to a fresh sweatshirt.

Feeling marginally more awake and able to at least be civil, Diana went back to the intercom and called Joe. "Maxwell. I'm sending the elevator down." She punched the button and released the freight elevator for him, then walked into the kitchen to make coffee.

When Joe pushed back the accordion door and stepped into the loft, Diana smiled at him around the corner... recognizing him immediately. *Definitely a boy scout.* "Go ahead and sit down. I'm gettin' a slow start today. Want some coffee?"

"Yeah, sure. Thanks," Joe answered as he perched on the couch like an overgrown canary.

Diana thought Joe seemed a little edgy. *Probably tryin' to figure out how to sneak up on me with the questions.*

The smell of fresh coffee filled the air and Diana started waking up decently. She glanced at the sunshine streaming through the window. *Looks like it's gonna be a nice day. Hope Joe doesn't spoil it.* She poured two cups. "How do you like it?"

"Black is fine," Joe called from the couch.

Diana took him his cup and sat next to him. "Okay. So why the wake-up call?"

"How're you feelin'?"

"Better. I'm beginning to feel like a woman with a past," she joked.

Joe didn't look up. Didn't seem to even recognize the joke, which Diana realized instinctively was unlike him. He fiddled with his coat, seeming intensely interested in a small stain on the sleeve. Finally, he cleared his throat and spoke hesitantly. "Diana. I need to know some things. Some of the things I kind of hate to have to ask, but I don't have a lot of choice. There's nobody else to ask."

Snakes slithered in Diana's stomach. To hell with butterflies...this was definitely snakes. Joe was so earnest. And so humble. *It's gonna be hell to lie to him.* She stared out the window at the deceitfully cheerful sunshine. "Okay. Go ahead and ask. Can't promise anything."

Joe finally looked up and she forced herself to face him. "I need to know...about the cloak. Where you got it."

"I don't know," she said, hedging a little. Stretching the truth.

"Look. I'm not dumb. That cloak is the same damn one that Cathy was wearing the night she almost died in the trunk of that car. There can't be two of the things around. There's not two people in New York that kill by mauling their victims, Diana. You can give me all the flack you want about people imitating the Subway Slasher. I don't care. I know what I know, so don't try handing me any of that."

Diana sighed regretfully. "Then what do you want me to do, Joe? Make something up?"

NO, mammit: I want the *truth* for a change."

"Joe, I'm sorry. This is useless." Diana got up and walked to the wall. She pushed the button for the elevator and stared back at Joe. "So long, Maxwell."

Joe finally got mad. "Bennett, you know I *could* get nasty over this. Your job is on the line, here. I could claim you're obstructing justice. Hiding a killer."

Diana wished desperately that she could read Joe's emotions. She studied him intently and made a decision based on Joe's character as she remembered it. "Yeah. You could. But you won't. Joe, we've been through this before--if I recall correctly--and we got nowhere. The problem is, that you don't want the guy who's been killing all these men. Now, you and I...we can't just ignore the fact that the men were guilty as hell. It's not supposed to matter. We're in law enforcement. They were supposed to be innocent until proven guilty. But even with the little fact of vigilante justice set aside, you and I both know that you don't want this guy for killing a bunch of animals that the city is better off without. You want him because you think he's the father of Catherine Chandler's baby."

Joe's face was deadly pale, but he didn't deny a word of what Diana had said. "It doesn't matter *why* I want him, Bennett. Just that I want him. And you're gonna help me find him."

"No. I'm not." Diana tried to keep her voice as level and gentle as she could. "I can't. Look, Joe. Cathy's gone. The baby's beyond your reach and so is Vincent. It doesn't matter whether I know anything or not--whether I ever did or if I just can't remember. Even if I knew, I wouldn't tell you." Diana walked over and picked up Vincent's cloak and held it up, displaying the bloodstains. "I don't remember a whole lot about that night, Joe. But just from the evidence, I know one thing: the man who wore this cloak saved my life. And I pay my debts. Sorry." She pointed to the open elevator.

Joe pulled on his coat, all the while watching Diana. He walked to the elevator, then stopped and eyed her. "This isn't over, Bennett. Not by a long shot."

Probably not, Diana thought as she watched Joe disappear down the elevator shaft. She collected the half-empty coffee cups and was washing them, thinking about breakfast, when the buzzer went off again. She stomped over to the wall and pressed the button. "Damn it, Maxwell, leave me *alone*!"

There was a moment of astonished silence, then a man's voice answered. "It's Peter Alcott, Diana. May I come up?"

Relieved and embarrassed, Diana apologized. "Oh. Sorry Peter. Sure. Come on up."

Peter stepped off the elevator, lean and immaculately dressed. Completely dignified. His smile was friendly, which was a welcome change after Joe Maxwell. "I'm really sorry I snapped, Peter. Maxwell just left, and he was becoming very insistent about Vincent...about my telling him what I know."

"Oh my. Is that going to become a problem?"

Diana shrugged as she started buttering some toast. "Probably. But I don't feel like worrying about it right now. Want some toast?" She motioned to Peter to sit, and he pulled out a kitchen chair.

Without removing his coat, Peter sat and stretched his long legs out, crossing them at the ankles, looking very much at ease. "No. Thank you. After you finish that would you care for an escort Below?"

Diana considered. Maxwell was in a snit, but she didn't think he was quite prepared to keep watch on her. Yet. She found herself smiling. "Yeah. I think I'd like that a lot. Thanks."

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Vincent found he was having tremendous difficulty concentrating on his lesson plans. Father had been teaching the classes for him, but Vincent was still preparing the lesson plans--at least since he'd recovered enough to do so. It had kept him occupied. But this morning he knew that Peter had gone Above to escort Diana to him. And that was all he could think about.

Finally finishing, Vincent closed the books and put them aside, but now, with nothing left to occupy his mind, he found he was more restless than before. He paced in long strides back and forth across his chamber. *This is doing no good. I must settle myself*, he thought. But he ached for the one truly important thing: to see Diana. To touch her and know her to be safe. And to see her eyes when she saw him again.

Vincent picked up his hairbrush and ran it through his mane a few times, more concerned for his appearance than usual. Then he resumed his agitated pacing. *How will she see me, think of me now? What does she remember? How much...how little?* Vincent feared that after the communion of the kill, Diana might be so frightened of him that she might want nothing more to do with him. Vincent had no idea where to go from here. And when he saw Diana, he knew he would have to go slowly, because neither of them had the benefit of knowing the other's emotions. It will, indeed, be like being blind. *No. Not blind*, he told himself firmly. *Like beginning again.*

Taking a few deep breaths, Vincent steadied himself. He remembered his gradual friendship with Diana. The tentative questions, the hesitant touches. The need to be near to her which had nothing whatsoever to do with the bond, which she'd so carefully blocked. But now, despite their empathic blindness, they knew one another. Perhaps this beginning was nothing to be frightened of at all.

Then he heard it: the message on the pipes. Diana and Peter were coming. Already they were leaving the upper levels beneath Diana's apartment. He started out the door, only to be confronted by Father. "And where do you think you're going?"

"To meet Diana."

Father shook his head. "There's no reason. Peter will bring her to your chamber." He patted Vincent's shoulder. "A few more days, Vincent. That's all I ask. This isn't an emergency, so sit down and wait." Father picked up the books and notes from Vincent's desk. "Thank you for the notes for class tomorrow."

Forcing resentment aside, Vincent nodded. Father was right, and he knew it. But after Father left, Vincent resumed his pacing. A part of him tried desperately--instinctively--to reach out for Diana. Tried to fill the empty places. The failure--the silence--was almost beyond bearing.

It seemed an eternity until he heard Diana's voice in the passage, and when he turned she stood there, framed in the doorway.

Neither of them moved. It was as though he was seeing her for the first time. Vincent knew it must be that way for her, as well. She'd left her hair down and it shimmered over slim shoulders encased in blue-green silk. Her eyes were the sea and sang a siren-song of longing. The candlelight cast a soft radiance over her. Slowly, he held out his hand, palm up, and she came to him, taking the hand in hers and examining it.

Vincent's heart ached as the soft fingers traced his palm, lingered over his nails. Then closed over his hand. She looked up into his face, her eyes meeting his. "Vincent," she murmured softly.

"Yes," he breathed. His heart was pounding. He brought her hand to his mouth and with infinite tenderness kissed her wrist, which was still bandaged.

With her other hand, she touched his mouth, tracing the odd, catlike, upper cleft with gentle fingertips. A tear slowly traced its way down her cheek. "Vincent. Oh, God. Vincent." Without warning she threw her arms around him, hiding her face in the many layers of cloth and leather.

Releasing a ragged breath, Vincent buried his nose in her hair, breathing in her scent.

It's going to be all right.

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Diana hadn't known what to expect. From herself or from Vincent. As she'd walked through the tunnels with Peter beside her she'd touched the rough, damp rock and listened to the pipes rattle and bang. After only a few minutes she'd remembered what the banging was: communication. *So much I've forgotten. Is it always going to be like this? Flashes of sounds, images turning into full-fledged memories--surprising me with the emotions behind them?* She didn't know how she was going to be able to stand it. She grew more and more anxious as they traveled, wondering how she and Vincent were going to react to one another. She remembered how she'd felt when she'd first seen him. There'd been a sense of recognition/connection. Like he'd been something that belonged to her--

--that *she* belonged to--that had somehow been lost and was suddenly found. She ached to touch him.

Peter said something to her and she had to force herself to attend. "His chamber is just ahead, to the right. I'm going to leave you now." He smiled gently and squeezed her hand. "I don't think you two need an old uncle like me around right now."

Diana looked away from him, toward the roughly-hewed stone archway that served as a door. "Thanks, Peter. For everything."

There was a soft touch as Peter leaned over and kissed her forehead.

Diana stood, shivering a moment. She'd given Peter her coat because she'd wanted Vincent to see *her*--not her baggy overcoat. Peter hadn't even asked her why. Maybe he understood. She walked quietly to the opening and stood staring.

He was there...waiting for her; golden in the candlelight. There was an amber and blue stained glass window behind him that also shed a soft light over the room. *Chamber*, she corrected herself. It was the same. The recognition. *I was lost, but now I'm found*, she thought joyously.

Vincent held out his hand and she took it. Remembered the first time she'd held it. She looked into his eyes and breathed his name like her first breath: "Vincent."

"Yes."

Diana's eyes were drawn to his mouth--the strange familiarity of it. The beauty of his voice. She touched the catlike upper cleft, feeling the firmness of the pads underneath and how they accommodated the fangs. Scalding tears threatened. "Vincent. Oh, God. Vincent." She threw herself at him, wanting to become so close that the aloneness didn't exist...remembering a time when it *hadn't* existed.

But she'd settle for this. His arms tightly around her and his strong heart beating against her ear.

When they could, either of them, allow themselves to loose their hold on the other, Vincent led her to the bed and settled her beside him. Touching. Always touching. She had so many questions, and didn't know where to begin.

Vincent helped her. "Are you well? Your wrists?"

She glanced down at the bandages, dismissing them immediately. "Better." Diana's fingers tightened over his. "Vincent. What happened?"

Vincent's soft voice washed over her, easing her fear. "It's all right, Diana. What do you remember?"

Images of hunting, and *being* hunted. The fight. The ride in the trunk. Feeling Vincent coming after her, and her sorrow that she'd led him to her: that she'd been unable to do anything else. "I called you. To the kill." Her voice was bitter.

"Yes," he admitted, but the hand clasping hers was warm. Gentle. Comforting. "What else."

Her throat grew tight. "I remember...Bull. I remember feeling more helpless than I ever have in my life. And

more angry. You coming through the door." She shook her head. "But after that, not much. The next thing I really *remember* is opening my eyes in the hospital room. And everything was...different."

Vincent drew her closer. "Do you understand what has happened?"

Diana considered. She'd read her journals--her accounts about Vincent and his struggle to relearn controlling his empathy after having lost it, and his story of *how* he'd lost it--and pieces clicked. More edges of the puzzle slid easily into place. And she remembered the first time she'd made love, how something similar had happened. But not as severe. And memories of her own fears concerning herself and Vincent surfaced. "I think so. The...emotions... during the kill. We got caught in it--in the feedback loop--and it burned us out." She stared at him. "I remember now--asking you to stop it--but you couldn't. Could you?"

He shook his head. "No. I tried. The Other and I both tried. But then Bull shot me...and we lost the battle."

Diana was rocked by a sudden sense of shock. *Shot! Vincent was shot--because of me!* No one had told her. She hadn't known. She began frantically patting, pulling at the multi-layered shirts and vests. "Shot? Where? Are you okay?"

Vincent laughed and pulled her to him, crushing her against his chest, and the sense of relief she felt was overwhelming. "I'm fine. Now. It doesn't matter. It's over, Diana."

Snuggling in under his arm, Diana sighed and relaxed as his arms enclosed her. "It feels good to be right here. I've missed you...even when I didn't remember who you *were*, I missed you."

Vincent settled more comfortably onto the bed and Diana moved with him. For long minutes they said nothing at all, merely content to lie there together, with Diana tucked as tightly close to him as they could manage. Occasionally one of them would make an idle comment, but mostly it was enough just to be where they were.

Diana had her fingers twined in Vincent's long mane and her head on his shoulder as she just listened--to his breathing, his heartbeat, the pipes as they tapped softly--and fell asleep.

She never noticed when Vincent drew the quilts over them both.

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Father and Peter had played two games of chess and William had already served lunch: neither Vincent nor Diana had put in an appearance anywhere. Father was becoming anxious and irritated.

Peter merely began putting the chess pieces away while Father limped to the bottom of the stairs and peered upwards. "Why don't you simply leave them alone, Jacob?"

"What on *earth* could they be doing...at this time of day...and for so long?"

Peter chuckled. "If you don't know that, my friend, you've gotten too old."

Casting an indignant look Peter's way, Father grunted. "Surely not. It's indecently early!"

Peter broke out in wholehearted laughter. "Oh, Jacob. Honestly. Sit down."

Father limped back to his chair and sat heavily. "I'm sorry. It just seems--indecent--somehow."

Peter picked up his coat. "Jacob, you have no idea what's going on in that chamber. Those two have a great deal to talk about. If you're so concerned, come with me. I really have to be getting back. It may be Saturday, but I *do* have to check my messages. I'm certain Diana will understand if I ask if she's ready to go back."

With a relieved smile, Father followed Peter to Vincent's chamber and stood a little back as Peter called softly: "Vincent? Diana?"

Vincent answered even more softly: "Peter. Come in."

When Peter and Father entered the chamber, the sight of Diana sleeping quietly in Vincent's arms melted Father's reservations. She resembled a war-weary child who had finally found a safe harbor.

"I wanted to see if Diana was ready to leave," Peter explained in a whisper, "but I think she's probably better off where she is."

Vincent nodded sleepily and whispered back, "I will see that someone escorts her home when she wishes to go. Thank you, Peter."

Father and Peter retreated back out into the corridor, leaving Diana's coat on the back of Vincent's chair. Father noted Peter's silence. "Very well. If you wish to tell me 'I told you so,' you're quite welcome. I worry too much."

Peter sighed heavily. "It's not the worry, Jacob. It's what you worry *about*. Vincent's a grown man. With a son of his own. He's entitled to a life of his own. And a woman to love him. Give him *some* credit for common sense."

"When he shows some, I might do that."

Peter rolled his eyes. "Honestly, Jacob...."

"There *are* some considerations," Father began.

"Which have already been proven to be less worthy of consideration than previously thought," Peter rejoined. "I know you care for Diana. You tried to help them when they had problems with the dream-empathy. Why not now?"

Father stopped at the entrance to the study. His hip would not allow him to accompany Peter farther. He wanted Peter to understand that he wasn't simply being an over-protective parent: that he had *cause* to be concerned. "Because of the killing. I never thought that after what happened with Catherine that Diana would allow the cycle to begin again. I...believed she had more sense. Perhaps I was wrong. Perhaps it's inevitable if he is involved with a woman who lives Above."

Peter leaned his lanky frame against the tunnel wall and stared. "Has it ever occurred to you, Jacob, that perhaps Vincent *chooses* women who..." Peter stopped and sighed, looking away. "I don't know. Catherine was an attorney. Most assistant D.A.s do *not* find themselves in life-threatening situations constantly, as Catherine did. Catherine sought out danger, Jacob. I only have the vaguest theories as to why. It doesn't matter. The fact remains that she did. Perhaps it stemmed from her attack. Perhaps it was something generated by the bond between Vincent and herself. Perhaps both. And Diana is a police detective who hunts the worst of society's dregs. So she, too, seeks out danger."

Father stared at his friend. "So what are you saying, Peter?"

"I'm not certain myself. But I know one thing, old friend. The day I first beheld that violently screaming, strange son of yours, I have known that his would never be the easy path. Despite whatever you--or he--may do, Vincent will always be *other* than human. There is a part of him that seeks the hunt...that needs the razor-edge of danger. And it can only be contained at the cost of something else."

Father studied his own fur-booted feet and poked with his cane at the sand of the tunnel floor. "Are you saying that Vincent seeks out women who need danger with some subliminal, instinctual desire to be drawn into that danger?"

"I don't know precisely *what* I'm saying, Jacob. Perhaps it's not that at all. After all, Catherine had always been protected and never shown any such adventure-hunting tendencies prior to her accident. So that could not have been the case with her."

Peter's comments had started Father thinking. "But it could have *become* the case...."

"Or," Peter continued, "it might have absolutely nothing to do with anything. But there is one thing I *do* know: Diana is right for him, Jacob. She's good for him. For once, give him credit for the good sense he has. But don't expect him to change what he is. He's a hunter at heart... and a protector by nature. You won't change that." Peter pulled his hat on. "Goodbye, Jacob. Tell Diana to contact me if she needs me."

"I will." Father watched Peter until he turned the corner, then returned to his study to consider Peter's remarks.

By the time William brought him his evening meal, Father had decided that Peter was right. *There is nothing I can do that won't drive him from me. It doesn't matter why he and Diana have been drawn together, but only that they have. And now, it's up to them.*

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Immediately after Father and Peter left, Vincent felt Diana stir. When he looked down, she was watching him. "Were you upset that Father found us like this?"

Vincent hadn't thought about it. So therefore, it must not have been important to him. "No. I believe I am becoming accustomed to the fact that everyone seems to have a different interpretation of our relationship."

She sat up. "Oh, really? And what's that supposed to mean?"

Vincent shoved himself upright. "Jamie. Mouse. Cullen...and others. There has been talk. Speculation."

"What kind of speculation?" She seemed curious more than upset.

"I cannot be certain," Vincent admitted. "I believe Jamie and Mouse are pleased."

"And Cullen?"

"Cullen seems to feel that you are acting like a woman in love," Vincent said a little tersely. "He's a little jealous. He likes you."

Diana chuckled and dug her knuckle into his arm. "I think maybe you are, too."

"Perhaps," he admitted reluctantly. "Diana...Peter has already left. Do you need an escort home?" The last thing Vincent wanted was for Diana to leave, but he knew that she had responsibilities and a life Above.

"Not yet." Diana shoved her hair back out of her face and looked around. "Hey. Isn't it lunchtime yet? I'm hungry."

Vincent listened to the pipes for a moment or two, and judged the time of day by what he heard and the amount of activity. "I fear we have missed lunch. Can you wait until later? We could pick Jacob up from the nursery."

Immediately, Diana's mind was diverted from food. "Jacob!" She slid off the bed and tried pulling Vincent to his feet. "C'mon. I want to see him."

Amused, Vincent allowed himself to be pulled. The nursery was not very far, but they met several people on the way. It was gratifying to Vincent that all his friends seemed delighted to see Diana. Until they met Cullen, who was on his way back to his workshop.

"Diana!" Cullen beamed. "Vincent, shame on you. Keeping her all to yourself. How *are* you, Diana? We've all been worried. We've missed you."

Vincent didn't answer. Cullen's eyes never left Diana. Vincent could certainly tell that Cullen, at least, had missed Diana. And Diana seemed to remember him.

Laughing easily, Diana shrugged. "I'm fine, Cullen. It's good to be back down here." Diana glanced back to Vincent and he found himself looking away. He told himself furiously, *I have no right...and no reason...for jealousy. Cullen likes her. I'm sure there are many, Above, who do as well. It's me...my insecurities, not Diana...not Cullen.*

"Gotta go," Cullen was saying. "I'm workin' on a dresser for Jamie. She found it Above--thrown away. And it's good, solid furniture. Just needed refinishing and a few joints tightened. Needed one new drawer. Good seein' you." He flashed an odd glance at Vincent. "See that you take care of this lady."

Once Cullen was safely gone and they were alone, Diana linked her arm with Vincent's. "He's a good friend. Easy to be with. I like Cullen a lot. Funny. I remembered him as soon as I saw him."

"Yes. He is...easy to be with. I like him, too. Cullen has not had an easy life. And he has been alone for a very long time, since his wife died." Vincent bowed his head thoughtfully. "I think...he is pleased for us. Though perhaps...a little envious. It is...difficult to tell...just what his feelings are. Now."

Diana smoothed the hair on the back of his hand as they walked. "Makes it interesting, doesn't it?"

He growled a little. "I'm not certain that *interesting* is the word I would use."

She laughed again, and Vincent laughed with her, realizing how ridiculous he sounded.

When they reached the nursery, Jacob looked up from the tower he was building with blocks. The child seemed astonished to see them. *It still puzzles him*, Vincent thought, *that he cannot sense me coming*.

Scrambling to his feet--not at all unsteady now--Jacob rushed to Vincent and threw small arms around his legs. He peered up at Diana shyly. "Danana come."

Diana knelt and held out her arms. The little boy moved into them and hugged her. Resting her cheek against the soft baby skin and feeling the springy curls against her face, Diana hugged him tightly until Jacob wriggled free.

After pulling away from Diana, Jacob cast a bewildered glance at his father. "Danana?" And Vincent knew from that puzzled voice and expression that once more Jacob, too, was having trouble coming to terms with not being able to feel more response from Diana. It made her seem different to him. The child's empathy was still operating, so he still had the one-sided ability to read emotion, but even so, with empath to empath there was something more. A reciprocal sharing. Even for a child.

Jacob clutched Vincent's neck as his father picked him up, then he stared back at Diana. "Danana stay? Stay now?"

Vincent was appalled. What was the child picking up from them? Vincent knew what *he* was feeling: and he didn't want Diana to go back. But he had no idea how Diana felt about it. He didn't want her to feel pressured either to go or to stay. "No, Jacob. Diana lives another place."

The child settled quietly against Vincent's chest, although he reached out to take hold of Diana's hair. Diana didn't say anything, but instead remained silent.

The awkward moment passed, and they played with Jacob the rest of the afternoon, reading him stories and helping him build with the blocks. As Vincent watched Diana playing with his son, he felt almost complete. He dreaded when she would leave, as he knew she must. Then, the ache would become intolerable again.

Their small corner of the nursery stayed strangely silent

in comparison to the play of other children around them.

When it was time to go to evening meal, Vincent was already wondering when Diana would say she needed to leave. *I must make arrangements for someone to escort her* Above, he thought sadly.

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When Jacob asked if Diana was going to stay, Diana's heart leapt to her throat. She hadn't thought about it either way. She hadn't thought about having a choice. Her life was Above. But now, suddenly, she felt a yearning to stay here with Vincent and his son. To make a life with him. For a moment it seemed possible.

She thought of her job, her sister, Joe, and Greg. She was on psych leave and would be until she was deemed fit to return to work, but she *was* remembering. *And no one knows about my empathy, so to them, that's not a consideration. But is it one to me?* Diana wondered if she would be as effective now, without her empathy.

And there was always Joe and his obsession over Vincent.

Diana just kept her thoughts to herself and played with Jacob. She listened to Vincent as he read from *The Wind in the Willows*, and settled Jacob against her on the thick rug on the floor. Behind them, a ring of children gathered to listen as well.

She watched Vincent. His wealth of golden mane hung over his shoulders. The light from the candles, which were set in niches high above the children's heads, created a soft radiance that touched the entire scene with warmth. She wished she could reach out and touch Vincent's hair, his face. Her entire body ached for him. *Before...when we were whole...he would have felt my desire, and through the bond could have touched me back. But now, he sits reading without any sense of what I feel.*

But just then, Vincent *did* look up. And smile. The smile that was not so much a movement of the lips as it was a change of his eyes. "William should be serving soon."

After dispersing the crowd of children, Vincent and Diana took Jacob with them to evening meal. Once more, they were the center of attention and obviously a topic of conversation. Diana was beginning to find it amusing and she was pleased to see that it no longer seemed to disturb Vincent as it had.

Cullen parked himself opposite them at the long communal table and was blatantly enjoying himself. "You see, Pascal," Cullen was cheerfully teasing as he waved a forkful of mashed potatoes, "Vincent has kept her to himself all day. Depriving the rest of us poor men of her lovely company."

Pascal's mild gaze swept back to Vincent. The pipe-master raised an eyebrow as Vincent's eyes met his, then he went back to eating. Pascal, being Vincent's contemporary, knew him better than most anyone--now that Winslow and Devin were gone--except perhaps Father: his mouth

Vincent didn't bat an eye as he shoveled a mouthful of food into his son. "Nonsense, Cullen. Diana is perfectly free to do as she chooses." Vincent smiled back at her and Diana felt a giggle rising. "If she chooses to spend her time with one whose face obviously lacks the charm of your own, there *must* be a reason."

Cullen clasped his hand to his chest dramatically and laughed. "Ouch! Got me with that one." He rose and winked at Diana. "Watch him. He's beginning to develop a sense of humor."

Diana laughed out loud and leaned across Jacob to wipe some peas off Vincent's vest. She might not be able to sense his emotions anymore, but she could tell from the look in his eyes that he was no longer bothered by Cullen's teasing. Or the fact that everyone seemed to accept them as a couple. Somehow, it felt comfortable.

Pascal rose and excused himself. "Gotta get back to the pipe chamber. Zach has a date later. Can you believe that, Vincent? Now I've got to work around my apprentice's dates?" Without waiting for an answer, Pascal returned his dishes to the kitchen and walked off through the exit of the communal hall.

Diana picked Jacob up as Vincent took their dishes to the children doing kitchen duty. While he was gone, Mary came by and offered to take Jacob with her to bathe with a few of the other children, and Diana reluctantly handed him over. She wasn't sure what Vincent wanted to do, but she had her own ideas in mind for the evening and was grateful for this unexpected help.

When Vincent returned to the table and asked about Jacob, Diana told him that Mary had taken him. "I'm sorry. I thought perhaps it would be all right. I'd wondered...." She looked away from his intense gaze, worried now that perhaps he would be upset that she'd decided arbitrarily to send his son with Mary.

"Yes?"

She felt herself flushing, and it upset her as well. Here they were, in public, with people seated around them, and she was about to ask him something personal. "Nothing. It can wait."

Vincent nodded toward the door. "Come. Tell me away from here."

Once they were out in the corridor, away from curious eyes, Vincent put his hand on Diana's back, guiding her gently--then slowly moving closer. "What is it, Diana?"

"I wondered...if we might go back to...the pool."

"The Mirror Pool?" Vincent asked softly. Her gaze darted up to meet his. Softly teasing, eyes crinkling at the corners, he touched her lower lip with one long-taloned finger. "The Mirror Pool is cool. Not warm, like another I remember."

She moved into his arms. "I think I'd prefer warm, if you don't mind. But won't people miss us?" she teased.

"More than likely." They neared Father's chamber and as they reached the door to the study, Vincent stopped at the entrance. Father was inside, his tray with his dishes set

aside as he examined some books the children had found Above in a dumpster. "Father," Vincent called politely.

"Vincent. Do come in. Is Diana with you?"

"Yes." Vincent turned and drew Diana to the entrance, to stand beside him. Without turning back to Father, he said softly, "We're going away for tonight. I wanted to let you know so you would not worry."

Father pushed back from his desk and rose. Reaching for his cane, he limped to the bottom of the stairs and stood looking up at them. "Not Above, surely. Please, Vincent. Your wound is barely healed."

"No. Not Above. Don't worry. Goodnight, Father."

As Vincent disappeared from his sight, Father whispered softly: "Goodnight, son. Be well."

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The trip to the pool was no shorter than it had been the first time, and Vincent paused halfway there, to rest. Although the wound itself was healed, he was still building his strength: he'd lost a great deal of blood and still tired easily. The steep slopes were unlike traveling the populated tunnels. As he rested against the wall, he noted Diana's concerned look, and he smiled. "You must not worry, Diana. It is only a little weariness. We are nearly there."

She shook her head. "I shouldn't have suggested this. You're not up to it yet." She hiked her carryall higher on her shoulder and put her other arm around him.

They moved on, and it wasn't long before they reached the last torch. From there, the walk was short, but both of them were out of breath by the time they slid down the last slope and entered the pool chamber. This time, it was Diana who unrolled the blankets and lit the candles as Vincent rested.

He settled himself upon the unrolled blankets--fresh and clean, that he'd brought to exchange for the others--and watched her appreciatively. "I'm glad you decided to stay tonight," he ventured hesitantly.

Diana finished lighting the last candle and shook the match out. She came and knelt next to him. As the tips of her fingers touched his face, Vincent closed his eyes and focused on the sensation: light, butterfly touches of trailing gossamer. Her voice was husky. "I'm glad I did, too. Somehow, I couldn't bear the thought of being alone up there...without you."

When he opened his eyes, her face was close. Her breath sweet and warm against his mouth. Their lips met and softly explored, and it was as though he could *feel* the shifting light and shadow of the chamber within himself. A part of him kept waiting for the bond to catch...to suddenly have her block evaporate and the connection erupt between them. But that couldn't happen, of course. Tongues, with moist touches delicately probed, licked.

Diana's hands slowly began untying and removing the layers of cloth and leather that separated her hand from his

flesh and between kisses he helped. Afterwards, removing her clothing took only a few moments.

They lay beside one another in the candlelight--his golden fur catching the light and contrasting with the soft whiteness of her skin. Her hair was a river of blood over the pale luminescence of her body. The image caused him to catch his breath. Running his fingers through the fiery flood, he brought the tresses to his face and breathed in the scent of it. *Not blood. Only silk. Pure silk.*

There was a shock of sensation as Diana's hand traced the muscles of his chest, softly trailing through the fur there. Her fingers found the fresh scar tissue and touched it gently. "Does it hurt?"

He closed his eyes and said quietly, "No. Except it burns...as the rest of my body burns when you touch it."

Tears filled her eyes. "I'm so sorry, Vincent. I was stupid. There should've been another way. I'm sure there was, but all I could think of was the hunt...and Bull...and myself. I should've..."

He stopped her litany of guilt with a kiss. "It's nothing. It's over, Diana. There is only now. He touched her breast--the bruise and scar from Bull's bite--then kissed her there. His hand brushed over her bruised hip. "You bear far more scars than I." He caught her hand and kissed her wrist--still wrapped in bandages--then met her eyes.

"It won't be the same, you know," she reminded him sadly. "The bond is gone."

Pulling her closer, settling her head on his shoulder, Vincent stroked her back--one long stroke from her neck to the curve of her hip, where his hand stopped, cupping her gently. "Is it? Is there no bond...no connection between us, Diana?"

Without answering, she arched toward him, wrapping her legs around one massive thigh, and Vincent nuzzled her neck. She threw her head back and arched against him again, rubbing herself against the soft fur on his thigh. The soft sounds she made aroused him further, and with his hands cupping her hips, he found himself pulling her harder into him. Still, she seemed reluctant to touch the hardness straining between them...a leftover, he knew, from when the bond had connected them. With the bond, once they'd begun feeding each other their desire, they were pulled to completion far too quickly.

Now, they had time for exploration.

Gently, Vincent took her hand and guided it, gasping sharply as it closed around him. Her hand moved slowly, stroking gently. Fatigue forgotten, Vincent began his own explorations. Curves and angles, textures, tastes and smells melted into one vast forest of sensation with no blurring of the bond. It was not *better* nor *worse*, but merely very different.

Moving Diana beneath him, Vincent lay between her thighs. He wanted to taste her. Feel her beneath his tongue. When the time came, he wanted to feel her, to know it as intensely as possible...since now, without the bond, it would, indeed be different. The scent of her filled

him, sent his senses reeling. He licked and sucked at the delicate tissues, his own excitement increasing as he could *feel* her arousal under his tongue. With one hand, he kneaded the firm muscles of her stomach, but as she reached her peak and arched against him, crying out as she never had before, Vincent could feel a savage anticipation surging within him.

Before the aftershocks of Diana's climax had ended, Vincent--urged by his own instincts and desires--entered her quickly, then thrust deeply, trembling violently as she wrapped her legs around him. With all the control he still possessed, Vincent forced himself to remain motionless, savoring every sensation. Then his control was shattered as Diana began moving rhythmically against him. With a roar that shook the chamber, he set his fangs in her shoulder--holding lightly--forcing her stillness. Still trembling, moving gently, Vincent continued with short, sliding thrusts until he, too, reached the point where he could no longer hold back...when the world shattered around him. He lost touch with reality and was aware of nothing else except his own exquisite physical release--a pleasure so intense it bordered on pain.

It was a long time before either of them moved. Vincent had collapsed beside Diana, drawing her into his arms. Finally, feeling Diana shivering as her body cooled, Vincent drew a quilt over them.

Exhausted, and although more satisfied physically than ever before, Vincent still felt a little sad. He understood now why there was so much emphasis on physical love in all the poetry and literature. With the bond, much of the purely *physical* pleasure was obscured. He'd read that often people were sad after sex. And now he understood that as well. Without the bond and after such a sharing, the aloneness became even more acute.

The candles still burned brightly, the candlelight catching the mist from the pool just right at times and sending sparkles of light dancing. It reminded Vincent of how he felt: intermittently dark and bright. Tenderly, Vincent stroked Diana's damp hair. But still neither of them spoke.

Eventually, Diana sighed deeply and murmured: "It was very different."

Vincent placed a kiss on her forehead. "Yes. Are you disappointed?"

"Yes. And no," she murmured softly.

She fell silent and in the waiting stillness Vincent wondered what she was feeling. Wished with a growing ache that he could *know*. When she finally spoke again, she sounded sad. "It was wonderful. *You* were wonderful," she added...as though knowing he needed to hear that he'd pleased her.

Vincent felt the sting of tears and blinked them back. It felt wrong, somehow, for either of them to have to *tell* the other what it had been like. But knowing how much he'd needed to hear Diana's words, he drew her face to his



and kissed her softly. "Thank you for loving me, Diana. For suggesting that we come here. I would not have asked, but I needed you so. You are everything I could have desired...and more."

"I don't want to go back, Vincent," Diana whispered. "I don't think I can stand being alone all the time."

Hope leaped for a brief moment, then died. Vincent knew that Diana was only reacting to the same instinctive sorrow that he was. "You must, Diana. There are still things you haven't remembered...haven't faced." He forced her to look at him. "You always told me that at the end of a case you made sure you learned all you could about both victim and killer. You haven't yet faced Bull or remembered the kill." Before she could reply, Vincent continued. "Remember when I told you about the white-haired assassin that Gabriel sent for me? How he told me he always learned the names? And I told him that I knew their faces?"

"Yes," Diana whispered.

"Still I can see the faces of those I've killed. I know Bull's face. I know how he felt when he died. How he accepted his death. It doesn't make it easier, but without being able to remember that...I could not go on, Diana. I *must* remember them. You, I believe, learn of their lives. You see them as human if at all possible and you keep that part of them alive within you. Without that, you are scarred."

Diana rolled away from him and stared into the darkness. But when he put his arms around her, once more fitting her close to him, she didn't move away. Instead, she murmured: "I know you're right, but...."

"I understand how you feel...about the aloneness. It will be very difficult now...apart. Even more difficult than before, I think. But both of us must learn how to function. We cannot know if our empathy will ever return."

"And if it doesn't?" She faced him more fully. "I don't want to be away from you. How can we live when all either of us wants is to...connect...somehow with the other? I worry, too...I don't know if I can even function in the capacity I have in the past. I built my reputation as a detective on my success rate...and my success rate was at least partially due to my empathy."

Vincent closed his eyes and sighed. "What is it you wish for me to say, Diana? I have no answers. Only more questions. But we must continue." He took her hand in his, lacing his fingers through hers. "What is it that you want?"

Diana shrugged helplessly. "I don't know what I want anymore, Vincent." The misery in her eyes pulled at him. "I don't *know*! I've hidden in my loft, inside myself and inside others for so long I don't know *who* I am...*what* I am...or...or anything anymore."

"I know one thing you are. You are the woman I love."

Diana kissed him gently. "I know *that*. It's about all I *do* know. But is it enough? What happens, Vincent...

when what you *do* becomes what you *are*...and then what you do is taken away?"

Considering carefully, Vincent answered gently, "I don't believe it really matters. We are what we are, Diana. I think that cannot be changed...or taken away. Not really. And it must also be accepted--by ourselves, even if not by those we love. Those we protect."

"To protect and to serve," Diana murmured against his chest.

"Yes," he agreed, remembering. "It is who we are. All we can do is the best we can. After a time it all becomes an unending circle--the life and death--all symmetrical. With no beginning and no end." He stroked Diana's hair, then trailed his hand from her hair to her breast. "There are many ways to protect, Diana. They cannot take that from you. As for our empathy: it may never return. But our bond has been forged in other ways." Diana glanced up at him and he smiled. "And there *are* compensations."

She snuggled in for another hug. "Yeah. There are *definitely* compensations."

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The following morning, after a leisurely bath and breakfast, Diana prepared to leave Vincent to go back Above. Jamie waited in the tunnel outside Vincent's chamber to escort Diana back to her loft as Vincent and Diana said goodbye. Vincent held Diana tightly, almost desperately. She could feel the tension running through him by the tightness of the muscles in his back. "I'll be all right," she said, knowing he was worried about her. "But I'll miss you. I'll be back as soon as I can."

He nodded and released her. "Be well, Diana."

It took all Diana's strength to follow Jamie down the tunnel away from him. She felt as though she walked in some dream where quicksand sucked at her feet. But eventually they reached the threshold and she thanked Jamie. "Thanks, Jamie. I think next time I'll remember how to come...just so long as you don't block anything off in routine changes. Be sure to let me know if you do."

Jamie's blond ponytail bobbed. "You're remembering most everything, now, aren't you?"

"Most," Diana agreed distantly.

Jamie seemed nervous when she asked gently: "You remember Vincent okay, though, right? I mean...you love him."

Diana smiled down at the girl, who was so eagerly embracing young womanhood, and she answered warmly. "Yes. I remember Vincent. He's pretty unforgettable." She stared up at the manhole. "Guess I'd better go."

As Diana emerged into the deserted alley, she considered going to her apartment, but decided instead to go straight to the precinct office to talk to Greg. Since she still didn't feel quite comfortable enough to drive or even take the subway, Diana hailed a cab and rode in silence all

the way to the station. The day was overcast and cold and made her feel even more depressed.

When the cab pulled up outside the police station, Diana paid the driver and slid out. She stood for a moment, shivering a little in the wind before steeling herself to go inside to the usual confusion of the office and the rude jibes of her peers. *I wonder what rumors have been flying since all this came down.* She took a deep breath and pulled the heavy door open.

The first officer she saw was Harve Wills. Harve muttered an almost incoherent "Hi, Bennett," and turned away, obviously a little embarrassed. Diana knew he'd been with Joe and Greg when she'd been found. It took almost more courage than she had, but she walked up to him and touched his arm, flinching at the look in his eyes. "Thanks, Harve." She stuck out her hand and Harve's big hand closed around it. "S'okay, kid. Just...take care of yourself. Okay?"

"I'll try."

Diana turned away with the feeling that she'd just climbed a mountain. The rest of the group of officers, detectives and office staff greeted her much too politely. Except for Roger Martinez, gray hair pushed back hastily and cigar smoke hanging around him like a cloud. "Get to work, Bennett. You been lazin' around too long, puttin' all the work on us."

Raising her eyes to Roger's, Diana smiled and winked. "You're just jealous, Martinez. Screw you."

"You wish!" Martinez barked and stuck his face back down in his paperwork.

Someone else barked a comment about Diana that she couldn't quite hear, though she knew it was suitably derogatory. She grinned. The place felt more natural, now.

She tapped on Greg's door and poked her head in. "Can I come in?"

"Diana!" Greg called happily. "You bet!" He came around the desk and started to hug her, then held out his hand instead. "Good to see you, kid. It's too early to come back, you know...did you need something?"

Diana shrugged. "I kind of thought I'd pick up the information you had on Bull. I think I'm ready now."

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Vincent faced Father over Father's desk. After morning classes, Father had brought up the issues he and Peter had discussed, and Vincent didn't quite know how to react. "Perhaps your concerns are valid, Father." Vincent studied his hands, spread flat upon the surface of the desk. He refused to look up. "There is...a fascination...with danger. I am not unaware of my own nature or propensities. I know what I am. But neither can I *change* what I am. But you and Peter both are wrong about my seeking out Diana *because* of these things."

Father touched his hand and Vincent pulled away. "I

believe the assumption is well-founded, Vincent."

Vincent finally raised his eyes and met Father's. "However well-founded you might *believe* you are, you are wrong. It is true that Diana and I are much alike. But I became friends with her long before that was obvious to me. Perhaps we *are* drawn to one another because of our similarities, but it was not a choice we made consciously, nor is it something that can be ignored or forgotten."

"I just worry about you, Vincent. Your relationship with Catherine drove you to madness. The constant killing...."

"Is over," Vincent responded in a deadly quiet voice. "At least any killing I might do because of being drawn through the bond. For that, you should be grateful."

Father raked a hand through his hair. "Grateful. I should be grateful that once more you wander through the tunnels as though half of you is missing?"

Vincent thought of Diana, walking Above. "Half of me *is* missing, Father. And until either the bond returns or Diana comes Below, it will remain that way. But I will do the best I can, and you must accept that there is nothing you can do except be here for me."

Regretting that Father would never--*could* never understand what he and Diana shared, Vincent left his parent and spent the afternoon helping Cullen finish some cabinets. It was fairly simple work, not requiring much physical effort, and Vincent enjoyed it. He enjoyed watching the natural brilliance of the wood come through after patient effort. He worked quietly, not paying much attention to Cullen and only fractional attention to the messages that passed on the pipes. He tried not to think very much of Diana.

Cullen left his own work to come by and check on Vincent's progress. "It's looking good." Cullen stood, wiping his hands on a rag with turpentine.

Vincent tried to ignore the admixture of scents of turpentine and finish. Mouse had designed for Cullen's workshop a chimney-like flue with an ingenious setup of battery-powered fans to provide ventilation, but still, to Vincent, the scent was heavy. "Thank you, Cullen." Vincent looked up and gazed at the lanky carpenter for a moment, then put his paintbrush down. "Cullen. I must ask you something."

"Sure," Cullen answered, staring at Vincent expectantly. "What's up?"

Vincent picked up his own rag and began wiping away stain from his palm, grimacing as he realized he had some in his fur. Still looking down, he said quietly, "You have lived Above...and you also know Diana. Care for her."

"Yes on both counts. What's that got to do with anything?"

"Nothing," Vincent replied. "And everything." He raised his eyes to Cullen's curious ones. "Do you believe that Diana could ever be happy here...Below?"

Cullen pulled up a chair and sat backwards on it, laying his crossed arms across the back. "Now friend, that's a

loaded question."

Vincent shook his head. "It's not meant to be, I assure you."

Cullen drew a deep breath and blew it out. He scratched his head thoughtfully. "Well, let's see. The *real* question here is, if I think Diana could ever be happy here--with you. Am I right?"

Nodding once, Vincent agreed. "Yes."

"Well then. The answer is...I don't know, Vincent. I think she'd be happy being *anywhere* as long as you were there. To a point. But to give up her work...I don't know."

"Suppose," Vincent began... "Suppose she felt her work had been taken from her by...circumstance. Do you believe that she could be truly happy here...or would she merely be settling for what was left?"

"Making do, you mean?" Cullen asked.

"Yes."

"Do you love her?" Cullen inquired gently.

"You know I do."

"And I know she loves you." Cullen hesitated a long moment. "No. I don't believe she'd think of it as 'making do,' Vincent. But it wouldn't be easy, either."

Vincent nodded and began putting away his tools and cleaning his brush. "Thank you, Cullen."

"No problem." Cullen was gone, then. Back to his own work, and Vincent left to see what else he could find to make himself useful.

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Diana hesitated before knocking on the door. The taxi was waiting for her, and the brick wall around her sheltered her from the cold and wind. She stood with her hands poked deep into the pockets of her coat. This was possibly one of the hardest things she'd ever had to do. For many reasons. She wished she'd never read the reports that Greg had given her. *But I did, and now I can't rest. I have to meet her. Meet the other side of Bull.*

Taking a deep breath and steeling herself for an ordeal, Diana straightened her shoulders and knocked. Thirty seconds or so passed, and she was about to leave--relieved that the woman hadn't been home--then the door opened to reveal a little boy, about five or six years old. Diana looked down into innocent blue eyes: eyes that Bull's would have been...at another time...in another life. Stammering a little, Diana asked: "Is...is your mother at home?"

The curly mop of black hair bobbed. "Just a minute."

A moment later a dark-haired woman stepped up behind the boy. "Yes? May I help you?"

Barbara Bullock was petite and pretty. When Diana didn't answer immediately, she looked puzzled. "I'm sorry, but can I help you?"

It had taken Diana a moment to collect herself. "Forgive me. Please." She started to turn and go. "I shouldn't have bothered you."

She'd taken two or three steps when a soft voice behind her pleaded: "No. Wait. Don't go. You're the woman the police told me about, aren't you? You're Diana Bennett."

Startled, not realizing the woman knew about her, Diana turned back. "Yes. I am. I'm sorry. I really shouldn't have come."

"No. I'm glad you did." Barbara looked down at her son. "Danny, why don't you go play in your room for a little while. I want to talk to Ms. Bennett for a few minutes."

After the child left, the two women stared at each other. Finally, Barbara spoke. "I'm the one who should be sorry. I was married to Mark for years. I should have known something was wrong. But he was always so gentle with me. I just never guessed."

Diana's throat was dry and her lips felt frozen, but she knew she had to say something. "This really isn't my business, but...."

"But why did I leave him? I left him because Mark has always kept someone on the side. I found out. I warned him and he said he'd stopped. Then I realized he still was seeing other women. That's why I left."

Diana looked away. "The man you married--Mark Bullock--was very different from Bull Bullock. Mark didn't want you to know that Bull existed. Maybe Bull didn't, either."

Barbara was quiet again a moment or two. "Mark called me...I guess the day before. Even though I had a restraining order on him. He wanted to let me know that Danny would be taken care of, no matter what. I didn't know what to think, then. I'm still confused."

Hugging her coat tighter around her, Diana shrugged. She remembered the hunt and shivered a little. "I think Bull knew there was a possibility that he was nearing the end of the line. That he'd finally met someone who was his match." *He was wrong, though. It wasn't me who was his match...it was Vincent.* She took one last look at Barbara Bullock. She found that tears blurred her eyes a little. "I think that Bull loved you, too. He obviously loved Danny."

Barbara nodded. "But I'm glad I got Danny away when I did. He hadn't seen his father for a year. So this has been much easier for him than it would have been otherwise."

Diana stuck out her hand and Barbara took it. "Thanks for talking to me. Good luck."

Diana left, the knot around her heart tightened. It hadn't helped to see Bull's wife. Mark's wife. It just made Mark more real to her than Bull. And she wasn't sure if that was an improvement or not. *You're gettin' soft, Bennett. Or maybe you're just gettin' too old. No, she amended. It's cowardice. Not age or anything else. Call it what it is.*

Diana pulled the cab door open and slid inside. "D.A.s office, please."

All the way to the Criminal Courts Building, Diana thought of the hunt, of Bull...and Vincent. They got stuck in traffic and Diana closed her eyes, trying to remember.

Bull's face looked down at her, taunting her with her helplessness. The spiraling rage, her own and Vincent's tore at her and she struggled to get at him, and couldn't. She could smell her own blood and the scent enraged her further. Then there was a huge crash as Vincent burst through the door. Diana felt as though something inside her was trying to tear its way through her. She could see, through Vincent's eyes, the prey backing away, and for a moment, when Vincent touched her, looked at her, she was rational. "Stop...this..." she remembered saying. But the bond wrapped tighter and Diana felt the Other: furious with a righteous anger and his own desire for the kill tearing at him. She sensed him try to comply with her wishes, but then felt his renewed rage as pain ripped through them. There was a soaring sense of power as they swatted Bull's gun away and grabbed him, shaking him like a cat shakes a mouse.

Diana jerked and held back a scream as the taxi swerved and the driver cursed fluently in Arabic. She had a sick feeling in her stomach, and she couldn't stop shaking.

Eyes--and a feeling of acceptance, almost joy--from Bull. And the rich sensation of the kill swept over her....

And left her drained. Weak and shuddering. She'd remembered. All of it. The taxi jerked to a stop and Diana ripped the door open and vomited out into the street.

"Hey! Lady, you okay?"
Diana wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and sat up, drawing deep, heaving breaths. "Yeah. We there?"
"Yeah. Ten bucks."

Forcing herself to focus on her actions, Diana pulled a ten-dollar bill from her purse, handed it to the cab driver and stumbled out onto the pavement. As he jerked away, sprinting into traffic, she stood weaving a moment then turned and with forced, unsteady paces climbed the steps into the building.

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Joe Maxwell was in the process of reading a deposition on an extortion case when there was a knock at the door. "Come."

The door opened and Diana Bennett stood framed there, looking very pale and just a little uneasy. "Joe? Got a minute?"

Sticking a folded piece of paper in the deposition, Joe waved her in. "Sure. How're you doin' Bennett?"

The tall redhead stood beside the desk, shifting uneasily and Joe wasn't sure what to think. Bennett was usually so

self-assured and hard-edged, but she'd changed in some subtle way since her run-in with Bull. Whereas her indecision should have elated Joe--giving him an advantage--instead, it depressed him. "Sit down and stay a while. You look like a bird on a perch--about to take off. Makes me nervous."

"Well, I'm not staying long," she answered. "Just wanted you to know I'm not ready to come back yet. There's still a lot I don't remember." Diana fiddled with her gloves, pulling them back on. "I already told Greg. I'm remembering more each day, but I just don't feel quite fit for duty yet."

"Y'know, Bennett, we've got some good shrinks working with the department. Maybe one of 'em could help."

She shook her head, and despite his annoyance at her stubbornness, Joe understood her answer. "I've gotta do this on my own. Besides, you already *had* a department shrink check me out. He just said to give myself some time."

"I have to tell you that, after a certain point, Bennett, the department can insist you get help. We can't keep payin' taxpayers' money to someone who's not workin'. At least not without good reason." Joe could see that barb got to her, so he continued. "Not only that, but I've got a personal stake in your memory. Remember that."

Diana nodded, her eyes boring into his. "I remember. But you remember what I said about motive, Maxwell. And think of what Cathy would've wanted." She turned to go. "I'll keep in touch."

Joe stood staring out the window after Bennett left. *Damned strange woman. I know she has the answers I need, and I've finally got her in a position she can't get out of. I hold the cards now.*

Joe sighed. He knew he could start an investigation on the odder aspects of Diana's last case...which would in turn lead to investigation of the Slasher killings on Cathy's cases. He could turn the screws and squeeze Diana pretty badly. She might even crack. He picked up the loop of string he kept wrapped around his pencil holder and started a cats-cradle. *But do I want to do that?*

After a long moment of consideration, Joe decided that, no, he didn't. Because Diana was right. This was personal. And unlike John Moreno, Joe refused to let the D.A.s office become tainted with either personal greed or personal vendetta.

But it didn't compromise anything to keep a *real* close eye on Diana Bennett.

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Vincent was busy writing in his journal when he heard the message on the pipes that Diana was on her way. His first impulse was to take to the tunnels to meet her, but he restrained himself. If Diana was coming down alone, it meant she felt confident enough to find her way. *Perhaps*

it would be best to allow her to remember the ways...so she may come and go again as she pleases.

But the wait made him anxious.

To ease the wait, Vincent re-read what he'd written. *I asked Cullen, whom I felt to be knowledgeable about the world Above--and who knows and cares for Diana--if he believed she could be happy here Below, with me. Cullen's answer was ambiguous. He intimated that for her to give up her work, her life Above, would cause conflict. Yet, he also said he believed she would be happy anywhere, Above or Below, as long as she was with me. I no longer know what to believe. When Catherine's father died she came Below to heal and she, too, wished to stay with me. But I sent her back, feeling that she was retreating here simply because she felt there was nothing left for her Above. I still feel I did the right thing. But had I let her remain, perhaps she would still be alive now. I encouraged Diana to go back Above to face her demons, but I believe I would have accepted her decision if she'd chosen to remain. I don't know....*

Vincent sighed. He had no idea if it would be wise to allow Diana to come Below to stay, but he knew he would no longer have the strength to send her away if she chose that path. He looked up when he heard a sound at the doorway--a soft scraping of leather on stone. He turned to see Diana with a small valise in hand.

"Do you think Father would object to a house guest?"

She put the valise down and clasped her hands before her, hesitancy showing in every line of her body.

Vincent tried to settle his thoughts. Chief of which was just what Father *would* think about this. After that, there was no thought. Only emotion. He cleared his throat. "I told you once that if you ever needed a home or a place to rest that these tunnels and chambers would be kept warm for you by friends. That has not changed, Diana. It has only become more true."

Diana stepped into his chamber and up to him. Her eyes held questions, and although her mouth smiled, even that smile hinted at concern. "And *this* chamber?"

Vincent enclosed her within the circle of his arms and rested his head on hers. Strange thoughts surged through him...and a fierce joy. "This chamber in particular, Diana."

They stood that way for several minutes, then Vincent found his tongue. "Diana...you know you are welcome here. But I need to know...is this for today only...or for our tomorrows?"

Diana drew back, her gaze unsure and troubled. "I can't promise you tomorrow, Vincent. All I know is now. I need to be with you now. If that's not okay, my loft is still there.... I don't want to hurt you."

A fist squeezed Vincent's heart, but he held out his hand for her to take. "Tomorrow will come, Diana. And we will face what it brings together...the joy and the pain."





TOMORROW ALWAYS COMES

poem by Rhonda Collins

New beginnings after endings
Birth follows death
Spring follows winter
Dark clouds with silver linings
All these things are true.

But still, endings bring pain
Death ends promises
Winter kills all hope
Dark clouds bring rain
I wouldn't lie to you.

The cycle of the seasons
Birth to life
Life to death
Everything has its reasons.
And tomorrow always comes.

