

# *THE MIRROR OF OUR DREAMS*



*a Beauty and the Beast fanzine  
by Rhonda Collins*



# *THE MIRROR OF OUR DREAMS*

*A Beauty and the Beast novel*

*Story by Rhonda Collins*

*Based on the series created by*

*Ron Koslow*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Once again, my sincere thanks to Ron Koslow, all the writers, actors, cast, crew, and production--the magicians who gave us the magic.

It's been a long time between zines, but I'm finally finished. I want to thank all of you who have waited so patiently (and impatiently!) for this story to "become."

This story is dedicated with greatest appreciation to:

Ron Perlman and Jo Anderson



There is no one who is like another.  
We are all individual--unique.  
There is no love like unto another,  
Yet love, unlike individuals, survives.

If you wish to contact the artists in reference to their wonderful artwork:

Jan Durr  
54 1st Avenue, East Orange, N.J. 07017

Rosemarie Hauer  
Muhlgasse 20  
A-2560 Berndorf, Austria

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

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## AUTHOR'S PREFACE

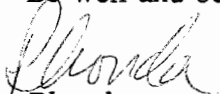
*Legacy of Love* was my sixth fanzine. It, like all my stories, was a labor of love...just as everyone's fanzines are. When I wrote my other five fanzines I told one story. One possibility. When I wrote *Legacy of Love*, it was intended as a prequel to that series. It still is. But because these are *our* stories, and because there are so many possibilities, I decided to branch off and continue along a different storyline.

Variety is the spice of life...and that is especially true in fanzines. After all, where would fandom be without all of our myriad ideas and visions of the story--Classic, third or "fourth season?" The fans keep *Beauty and the Beast* alive in all its permutations. Not all of us see the series in the same way, nor do we all agree on what "should have happened." That doesn't matter. What *does* matter is the love and understanding that brought us all together in our love for a television show...and keeps us going with a new love of life and each other. And a new belief in dreams.

Storytellers and poets walk a tightrope between insanity and brilliance...between fantasy and reality. We continue to tell our stories and empty our souls with the hope that what we share touches someone somewhere. Otherwise, we cannot justify our faith in ourselves, or in others. We, the fanzine writers, tell stories that might have been. Ron, Linda, Jo and all the rest of the talented actors on the show breathed life into the characters Koslow and the writers created. With their hearts and their gifts they helped the stories come alive for us all.

So I present to you another "might have been." Visit the tunnels and our friends and think of dreams that never truly die.

Be well and be happy.



Rhonda



## SOLACE

For so long I walked the darkest nights,  
The moon lying hidden by stormy clouds.  
I searched the empty streets for what?  
For a dream that I knew I would never find?  
And the city lights that once I loved  
Offered little solace in their glow.  
All hope had long since fled my life  
When suddenly you came to me.  
You gave me comfort when there was none,  
Brought light to the misty corners of my world.  
You showed me kindness where there was hate,  
And helped me open up my heart.  
Your fingers touched my tormented soul,  
And slowly I began to heal.  
The sun may never shine on me,  
But the moon has a beauty of its own.  
It softens even the darkest night,  
And comforts those who walk alone.<sup>1</sup>





## ANOTHER DREAM

These feelings I have are unlike any I have known.  
They sweep me along in their path,  
and I am lost in their depth--  
as a leaf is lost to the wind,  
and a star is lost in the night.  
You have given so much of yourself--  
You saved my life with your care when I was but a stranger;  
you gave me time to heal when I was broken;  
and when there was nothing, you gave me hope.  
For so long, I was afraid to share my heart,  
unable to believe that, by loving you,  
I was not losing Catherine.  
And now--only now--I know  
that I must give of myself again.  
But still my feelings trouble me.  
They rage within me like a turbulent sea,  
and sometimes I fear we may drown in the storm.  
Yet there is a strange peace I find with you.  
For you have given me the strength to dream another dream,  
and the knowledge that, although so many dreams have died,  
and so much has been lost forever,  
with you, there is the chance to hope again--  
and the possibility that this time, the dream will come true.<sup>2</sup>

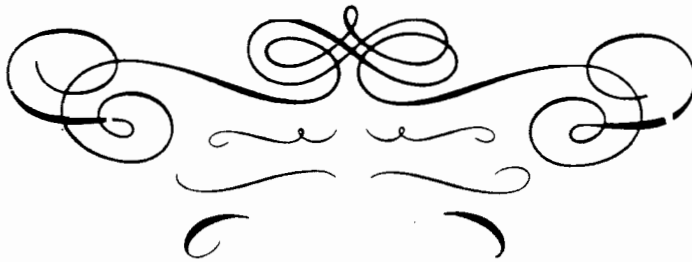


## *LOOKING GLASS DREAMS*


*Looking Glass Dreams have set us free--  
Too long alone to guard against the long,  
unhurried awakening of desire.*

*We are as two vines curved 'round one tree--  
too alike and near to glimpse our own becoming  
both offering and sacrifice...*

*Each to the other in a silent plea--  
too frightened to reach beyond...  
the silver mirror of ourselves.<sup>3</sup>*





incent prepared for bed after walking Diana home to her loft. For the first time in weeks they'd remained Below all afternoon, and he was amazed at how much he'd enjoyed it. Escaping--to her loft, or away, below the Home Tunnels--had been a way of life for so long, that for him not to feel the *need* to escape seemed very odd, indeed.

He felt a sense of peace, tonight.

Hanging his cloak, then pulling his vest off, Vincent sat on the edge of his bed and began unlacing his boots. He'd enjoyed himself tremendously today--watching Jacob as his son played in the shallows of the Mirror Pool--and watching Diana as she saw parts of his world she'd missed seeing for so long. He smiled a little as he remembered her delight in something as simple as the bathing pool. A routine part of his life became magical when he thought about how it must appear to her...though it would have been even nicer if he'd been able to sense her feelings. That was the only thing that bothered him about the day...about Diana. Things he didn't understand disturbed him.

Standing, he pulled his long-sleeved cotton shirt off and hung it carefully, then taking the pitcher standing next to the bed, he poured a basin of water and washed his face and hands and brushed his teeth. The entire time he performed his nightly routine, he thought of Diana...and wondered, conversely, what she really thought about him. There was no way he could know. He sighed as he was drying his hands. *It was so easy, with Catherine. Diana is such an enigma.*

He drew his nightshirt over his head, then unbuckled, unsnapped, and removed his jeans...folding them and placing them within reach for in the morning. He laid out his robe as well. Since becoming a father, Vincent had found that preparedness generally served him well. He never knew when Jacob might need him. He stood watching his sleeping son for a long moment. He and Diana had kept Jacob so busy all day that the toddler was exhausted. *He should sleep well, tonight.*

Blowing out the one remaining candle, he slipped between the sheets and tried to relax. More and more often, both day and night, he found his thoughts returning again and again to the enigmatic red-haired detective. He knew that tonight would be no different.



Diana had enjoyed spending the entire afternoon and evening with Vincent and Jacob. He'd taken time off from his schedule to spend Below with her, rather than coming Above to her loft. She so seldom had time to explore his world, and she treasured times like today.

Diana knew Vincent was improving daily now that he'd remembered making love to Catherine--as though a weight of guilt had been somehow removed--and the improvement was obvious to everyone, not only her. Father had commented on it as well. But there were times when Diana also sensed a disturbance seething below the surface, and she wondered if it had to do with the dreams.

For months Diana's bond with Vincent had been growing steadily stronger,

although he was still unaware of the connection. Diana purposely blocked him except for brief times when she experienced an overwhelming need to know how he felt. And when they both slept, the dreams would come--unavoidable and intense--and Diana knew that eventually Vincent would figure out that there was a connection. She couldn't hide it forever.

For all the long months of his grieving for Catherine, Diana had been terrified that if he knew another bond was forming that he'd run like a scared rabbit. But now she wasn't so sure. Now, she didn't know what to expect, and it was making her nervous. *To expect nothing and get nothing is easy, but to expect something and be disappointed can be devastating.* She didn't dare hope too hard. And even if she did allow herself to hope and wasn't disappointed, she didn't have any earthly idea what to do next. Now that he was less self-involved, she worried how he was going to see her.

Walking to the bathroom, Diana unbraided and brushed her hair and stared for a long while at her reflection--really looking at herself for the first time in a very long while, trying to see what Vincent saw when he looked at her. She thought her eyes too large, and her nose a little Roman, and she absolutely hated her hair. But her smile was okay. *Should be. Dad's life insurance paid for those stupid braces...and he wasn't even around to see the results.*

As she brushed her teeth, Diana continued her critical evaluation. Usually, Diana avoided mirrors. For a lot of reasons...none of which would ever make any sense to anyone except maybe Vincent...and herself.

Diana felt that she had to begin examining a few things about herself. The recent shift in Vincent's focus from self-absorption and grief to interest in life in general...and in her--was both exciting and a little unnerving. She hadn't had to think about it before. All she'd been able to concentrate on was keeping him going and helping him remember what happened with him and Catherine in that dark cave when Jacob was conceived. Just trying to make it through day to day had been a priority. Now she had to worry about *her* relationship with *him*, and that was a different kettle of fish entirely.

Before going to bed, she wandered back into the living room and booted up the computer and brought up her journal. She sat hesitantly with her fingers poised for several long moments before beginning to type.

*It's beginning. He's coming out of it. So now, where do we go from here? Where do we want to go? Where can we go? It's really strange to be thinking in terms of possibilities. For so long, my only hope was to survive each night and make it through his dreams...and to help him remember what happened that night with Catherine. I couldn't worry about myself, then; it was too important simply to help him. At one time, I thought that once he'd remembered, the dreams would cease, and he'd stop reaching out to me. I thought I'd have to forget about him, and that my life would eventually get back to the way it was. I was wrong. Instead of going away, the dreams are only changing...metamorphosing into something new...and thoughts of him have taken over my life. I'm glad he's more content, and that his dreams reflect his memories instead of his nightmares. Or maybe they aren't his dreams at all, anymore. Maybe they're mine...or mine and his combined.*



Diana paused, and brought a hand up to chew on a thumbnail. She almost hated to put into words what she was feeling, as though to write down what she was wishing for would somehow jinx it.

*Occasionally, when our dreams become mixed, I feel it's me he's seeing, not Catherine--but I'm not sure. Maybe it's just what I want to see...nothing more. Does he ever realize what's happening? No. I don't think so. Not yet. But he will. When he does, how will it affect our relationship? What if, when he knows that I'm empathic too--that I can sense him--he won't see me any more? He's still so fragile. I think he's still afraid of another bond. All those scars are still so tender. And me...God, I'm worse than he is. Look at my track record. I don't know much about how to keep a relationship going. I've never had any luck with men...or even with people in general.*

Diana got up and paced a few minutes, thinking hard. Then she sat back down and typed furiously.

*The way he talks about Catherine--about their bond--scares me. It seems he knew her soul, and loved her from the first. I don't know if he could ever love me--or anybody--that way again. Especially me. I'm tougher--and touchier--than Catherine. Than most people, in fact. And besides, I don't care how perfect Vincent is, Catherine is always going to be his model of what love should be like. I don't know if I can measure up to the pedestal he has her on. And the rarified atmosphere would make me dizzy, anyway.*

She stopped typing a moment and took a deep breath. This was worse than going to therapy and trying to tell someone about yourself. Her Mom made her do that when she was a kid. Everyone thought she was so withdrawn, and they'd wanted to "bring her out." *Obviously it hadn't worked.*

*I'm different, and I've never had anyone who could love me for those differences. From what I know of Catherine Chandler, and what I've felt of her from her things, she was basically an innocent. She had to work at being tough. But I've had to fight all my life just to remain me, and not get lost in everyone else. I've had to learn to block all the emotions out. With Vincent, I'd have to learn to open up, and I don't know if I can...and that could be disastrous for both of us. And there's another thing: with the people I hunt, I feel as though I crawl through garbage every day. Sometimes I worry that it has made me a part of it. Will that make a difference to him?*

She sighed, watching the cursor blink at her, then began again, her fingers shaking.

*Vincent and I are both hunters. And he hates and fears that part of himself. If he really knows me--as the bond will allow--will it be too much like looking in one of the mirrors that he avoids? Mirrors aren't windows: they would block the light. They reflect who we are. They're private. And neither of us are used to anyone seeing and knowing that*



*part of us--as much as we want it and need it--we fear it. But the mirror of the soul, reflecting love's light, is the truest mirror of all. We both need to have someone love us for ourselves.*

Diana stared at the screen, trying to digest the words she'd just typed. It was hard to put her hopes and fears into words. The trouble was, she was beginning to get lonely. She may never have had a relationship that really *worked*, but she'd had relationships. And now, with Vincent so near...in ways she'd never had before, she longed for more... even though she *was* afraid. And the intense sexual quality of some of the dreams they'd shared certainly didn't help the situation. It had been a long time.

Sighing heavily, Diana saved the file and exited. Wearily, she turned off the computer and headed to bed. She wished she hadn't started thinking about all the things that *could* happen. It depressed the hell out of her. *Oh, well. Tomorrow is another day. Assuming I can get through the night.*

*As Diana slept, she shared a jumble of dreams with Vincent. At one point they were wandering in a mirror maze, like the ones in a carnival. At first it was fun, but then Diana noticed that as they looked in the mirrors, the reflections were reversed: Diana's mirror reflected Vincent, and Vincent's reflected Diana. It became confusing--disorienting--even frightening because of the compelling quality of the dream.*



Diana woke early to finish the report for her last case. It was finally over and she could hand Greg Hughes and Joe Maxwell each their copies of the report and have a few days to herself before disaster struck once more. She took time to write a message to Vincent and seal it in an envelope.

She thought of the way her life was going, and she was frustrated. Before she'd met Vincent, her world had been her loft and her cases. It had been, if not a varied world, at least a relatively safe and controlled one. Now, she felt her world had tilted, somehow. It was as if she was trying to reach something in a corner, and her arm wasn't quite long enough...and just when she felt like she was about to *reach it*, whatever *it* was would slide away from her. Even her dreams were no longer her own, and she was powerless to stop it.

And *about* the dreams. The dream last night had been a strange one...disturbing, but not truly frightening. Still, it made her uneasy. It nagged at her in some deep way, and worried her. She never even knew for sure if it was her dream, Vincent's...or if they'd shared it. She felt as though she hadn't slept at all.

She sighed tiredly as she finished braiding her long red hair. The green eyes that stared back at her seemed haunted, even to her, and the porcelain-fair complexion seemed too pale, with delicate blue circles under the eyes. She shook herself and snapped at her reflection, "You worry too much, Bennett!"

Spinning around and stalking to the other room, Diana grabbed her carryall and the printed reports and slapped the down button on the elevator. On her way out, she

dropped a message into the grate over the sentry point near her apartment, knowing whoever had duty would relay it.



Vincent woke and lay quietly with his eyes still closed. Catherine's rose felt cool and smooth under his fingertips as he touched each porcelain petal, seeing it in his mind's eye. He didn't carry the rose with him any longer, but instead kept it next to his bed, where he could reach out and touch it like this at night. He remembered what Catherine had told him of how it had comforted her in the dark, and now he, too, allowed it to comfort him after his dreams. It was, in truth, a piece of her to hold close. His eyes opened to the darkness of his chamber.

His dreams had been odd, as they often were, lately. At least the ones involving Diana. He was accustomed to his waking dreams--the prophetic visions. And he had shared dreams with Catherine, quite often. Those dreams had been disturbing at times, but for very normal reasons. These dreams, however, he couldn't quite understand. Sometimes it seemed they were only fantasies, and he would try to stop them--turn the woman into Catherine. Sometimes it even worked. But much of the time the dreams were simply very odd. The nightmares were gone, but his life was still uneasy.

Levering himself up in bed, he ran his fingers through his tousled mane and reluctantly put the rose aside.

He felt better now, it was true. But sometimes, as he went through his days, he felt as though he were delicately balanced in the middle of some strange scale of life with grief on one side and joy on the other. He was almost afraid to move--lest he topple into the abyss--yet he felt he *must* move. He was tired of living in limbo. He'd been more settled the last week or so. Remembering had helped tremendously. But still, occasionally something would remind him of Catherine with such force that the emotion--joy or grief--would break over him in a flood. But now, even the grief was different: it cleansed him, somehow, allowing him to go on.

Sighing, Vincent swung out of bed and reached for his robe. Feeling under the bed, he slipped on his sandals and stood silently in the darkness, watching Jacob as he tied the belt. His son was still deeply asleep and should continue sleeping for awhile. *I have time for a quick shower before breakfast.*

Hurrying down the quiet tunnels toward the showers, Vincent found himself actually looking forward to the day. He anticipated hearing from Diana at some point today. Last night during supper she'd told him that her case was over, and all she needed to do was file her report. The visit had been pleasant, although not as long as he would have liked, nor as private. Mouse and Jamie--and Jacob--had been with them most of the day. Vincent hoped they'd have some time to visit now, just the two of them.

Reaching the showers, Vincent shivered slightly as he stripped off his robe. There was no one about at this hour, and usually there was a little warm water since it'd had the night to sit over the steam pipes. The warmth wouldn't last long, but while it did, he would savor it.

As he stepped into the stream of water, he let it run through his thick mane and wash over his face. He lathered quickly and rinsed before the water turned cold, then stepped out and shook--tiny droplets flying from the soft down that covered his body. He dried the rest of the way with the heavy towel, then began pulling on his jeans.

Vincent's mind noted almost subconsciously that his world was beginning to wake. He could sense the buzz of awakening minds around him and heard the increase in the tapping on the pipes as messages began to flow in their customary rhythm. He reflected silently on how much easier it was getting to handle all the emotions around him. He was beginning to relearn the art of fine-tuning them, and they were becoming merely a part of the tapestry of love that his world wove around him. The process had been so gradual that he'd barely taken note of it in his struggle to remember loving Catherine.

Pulling on his shirt and vest, then thick socks, he slid his feet into knee-high fur boots. Once dressed, he started back to his chamber to get Jacob ready for breakfast and himself prepared for his classes. He could sense that the child was waking, so he hurried.



The daily struggle to get Jacob dressed for his time in the nursery with the rest of the children always had Vincent's nerves frayed almost to the breaking point. He never could understand how, after all his experience with children and his innate love for them, his patience level with his own son could get so low.

Jacob, however, seemed to delight in tormenting his father. Since learning to crawl he had become an absolute terror, and his climbing ability, while scarcely matching his father's at the same age, was still far above that of most other children. While Vincent had been showering, Jacob woke and climbed out of the crib. By the time Vincent made it back to the chamber--a matter of minutes--the child had already torn pages out of three books.

After rescuing the books and admonishing the totally unrepentant child, Vincent spent another half-hour trying to dress the kicking, wriggling toddler. He was so relieved when Mary came by that he felt almost guilty watching his son wave bye-bye over the good woman's shoulder on the way out. He was equally relieved that Mary had offered to feed Jacob breakfast; that meant that for once he could join Father for breakfast and eat in peace.



Vincent joined Father in his study. They routinely used this time to go over plans for the day and discuss problems. Today, Father was immersed in reading a report from Robert, who had just finished an inspection of the tunnels on the lower east side below the Serpentine and just above the Catacombs. Apparently there was a leak that had been undiscovered on the previous maintenance rounds of that area...possibly even before that. Which meant it had been going on for almost a year. The rock was chalky and soft there, and the leak had made the area even more unstable than usual.





Vincent stood behind Father, looking at the maps over Father's shoulder and pointing out the problems inherent in fixing the leak. After discussing the problem, Vincent sat and poured another cup of tea. "Mouse and I will repair the leak ourselves. We've had more experience with working in those unstable sections."

Father seemed pleased that the problem would be taken care of. "Sometimes it seems that all we do is fix leaks, Vincent. I wonder that the city doesn't become suspicious that they have so little maintenance to do, but perhaps they are merely grateful."

Vincent smiled at that. "Let us hope they continue being both grateful and a little obtuse."

Father re-rolled the map. Then, leaning back, he removed his glasses and looked down. When he'd moved the map, it exposed an envelope with Vincent's name on it. "Oh! I forgot, Vincent. Alain delivered this earlier from Diana. He knew you'd be coming here for breakfast, so he simply left it with me. I'm sorry, but I was so involved in what we were doing I forgot to give it to you."

Taking the envelope with a smile, Vincent rose. "Don't worry, Father. I know what it is about. She was to let me know if she'd be finished filing her report today so we could visit."

Father seemed amused. "I thought that was what you were doing most of yesterday and last night. If you weren't visiting, what *were* you doing?"

Vincent answered a little wryly. He found Father's attitude amusing, but also a little puzzling. Father's complete acceptance of Diana still confused him. "Not exactly *visiting*.... We haven't had much time to visit Above, lately, as she's been working on her case. Yesterday Mouse and Jamie were with us during our tour, and last night the entire meal was spent listening to Mouse explain his latest invention." He chuckled. "An interesting enough pastime, but not quite the same as truly visiting with Diana." Vincent sighed as he rose to leave. "For now, I must face the students for history class. Once I am through with that, the rest of the day should go fairly well."



On the way to the classroom Vincent opened the envelope and read Diana's brief message:

*Vincent,*

*Tonight, after dark.*

*Diana.*

Smiling gently, Vincent tucked the message into the pocket of his jeans and continued on to his class. He was looking forward to a quiet evening with Diana. This last case had been extremely complex, and watching her work had been fascinating, when he'd been able to be there. She hadn't even been home much the last few nights

she'd been working on it. The intensity she put into her work still amazed him. She always seemed so "focused" on whatever she was doing. *She is very dedicated.*

As Vincent entered the common room he was using as a classroom, he overheard Kipper explaining in great detail to the younger children about how the Indians had scalped everyone and carried the scalps as trophies. His enthusiasm for his subject had the youngsters gaping in horror, and Vincent reminded himself to remedy Kipper's incorrect information at the first opportunity. Vincent cleared his throat. "Kipper. Perhaps we should go on to other facets of the Amerindian culture. I think you have covered that particular subject in great enough detail for the time. Thank you."

Beaming, Kipper replied, "Glad to help, Vincent."



Diana met Greg Hughes in the lobby of the Criminal Courts Building, and they rode the elevator up together to the D.A.'s office. Greg leaned back against the elevator wall and stared at Diana, and she shifted uneasily under his gaze. "What is it, Greg?"

"You just look worse and worse, Di. There's something bugging you, and has been for months. You're losing weight--and you can't afford to lose an ounce--and you're even more pale than usual."

Diana crossed her arms defensively. "I'm fine, Greg. Maybe I just need some down time."

The elevator opened, and Greg pushed off, taking Diana's elbow to guide her peremptorily out the door. "Down time doesn't solve everything, girl."

No more was said as they wove their way through the noisy outer office and knocked on Maxwell's door.

"Come!" Joe's voice called from inside.

Greg and Diana peered through the door, and Diana watched warily for thrown darts, but today Joe seemed in a fairly good mood: he didn't seem to have a need for relieving frustration by throwing darts at pictures of current antagonists. Greg asked quickly, "Is it safe?"

Joe grinned as Diana peered around Greg. "Sure. C'mon in."

Diana advanced to the desk and tossed the envelope with the report down in front of Joe. "It's all there."

Greg patted her on the back proprietorially. "I didn't think she'd make it through *this* one."

Diana tried to appear angry, but she was too fond of Greg to really be angry with him. He treated her more like a daughter than a subordinate. As her father's junior partner, he'd gotten very protective of her, though their ages weren't that far apart. "Sez you. The day I can't handle a little murder and mayhem is the day I retire."

Greg smiled gently. "Well, how 'bout retiring for a few days at least? Down time may not solve everything, but it's all I can offer you. Make use of it or I'll suspend you and *make* you take a vacation."

Diana noted Joe's questioning glance, and frowned at Greg. Anybody being "nice" to her always made her feel a little funny. "Yeah, well, I hear Florida's nice this

time of year, but I think I'd miss you guys too much. Somebody's gotta keep this city in line. Might as well be me. But I'd appreciate a few days off. Thanks."



Evening came, and Vincent prepared to go Above to visit Diana. He had decided to spend a good deal of the evening trying to pierce that shell she kept around herself. She knew so much about him, but there was still so little he really knew about her. It was his own fault, he knew. He'd been turned inward in his grief for far too long.

Vincent was a little worried about Diana. She wasn't looking well, lately. He knew she didn't get enough rest and almost never ate. If he didn't remind her to take a break, she'd often go on working for hours at a stretch and miss meals. Often, when visiting, he found himself fixing her supper and all but forcing her to stop and eat it.

Vincent bathed Jacob and dressed him for bed, then left the child with Mary. Afterwards Vincent dressed more carefully than usual, then swept up his cloak and left. On his way out, he passed Father's chamber, and Father called him inside.

"Yes, Father?"

"Are you on your way to see Diana?"

"You know that I am." Vincent waited for Father's usual remonstrances.

"Good." Jacob Wells dropped his eyes to his book.

Vincent simply stared. He started to speak, but closed his mouth tightly. Father simply reeked of satisfaction. It was puzzling. When he could get past the feeling that Father was making fun of him, he asked quietly, "Is there anything you wish me to tell her?"

Father smiled gently and shook his head, but as Vincent turned to leave, Father added a comment: "Yes. Tell her...happy hunting."

Father's eyes seemed to positively twinkle as he replaced his glasses and turned to his book. He waved Vincent out.

Vincent was becoming more and more puzzled by Father's behavior, but he really didn't wish to take time to worry about it. He hurried through the tunnels toward Diana's loft, anticipating a pleasant evening. *She might explain to me just how she managed to make everything fit in that last case.*

Vincent always enjoyed these discussions after her cases--enjoyed trying to follow her thought patterns--to see if he would have come to the same conclusions. So far, there were *still* times when he couldn't see just where and how she got the information for the giant leaps she took to reach the conclusion.



Diana had just gotten home and was listening to her messages when she heard Vincent's tap on the skylight. She'd spent the entire day wandering. She'd been to the museum, book stores, even gone to a movie.

As she headed for the roof, she was busy thinking about the time she was supposed to be relaxing. She didn't like having a lot of time off. It gave her too much

time to think about her solitary existence.

Diana opened the door to the roof and saw Vincent leaning against the wall. It always took her a moment to adjust to his presence. No matter how often she saw him, there was always a sense of stunned surprise mixed with grateful awe.

Once her mind began working again, she noticed he'd dressed for her tonight--she could tell. Gone were the tattered skin-tight corduroy jeans, and in their place were dark leather pants and knee-high boots topped by a shirt in what appeared to be pieced fawn-colored leather with fringes. She felt encouraged. *God. I want to get him in the light so I can see him properly. He's gorgeous.* "Hi. I just got home. You feel like pizza?"

Moving gracefully away from the wall toward her, Vincent smiled, and Diana caught a quick glimpse of white canines flashing. That sexy voice and rumbling chuckle coming to her out of the dark asked the most innocuous question. "What kind?"

Grinning, Diana felt a familiar heat building inside her. "Whatever you want."



Vincent followed Diana down the stairs into the loft. He realized there was something unusual about her tonight, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it. She moved differently. Her voice was a little softer. It made him uneasy. Not being able to sense her always made him feel off balance, but normally it was vaguely exciting and intriguing as well. Tonight it disturbed him.

As Diana hunted the number to call for the pizza, Vincent watched her...and noticed her watching him. That made him even more uneasy. Diana had been known to surprise him, and the surprises were not always pleasant; in fact, he couldn't *remember* a time when the surprise was less than catastrophic--at least from *his* point of view.

"Well, what did you want?" Covering the mouthpiece, Diana cocked her head and gazed at him quizzically.

"Mushroom?"

She grinned. "With onion?"

"If you wish," he answered, with a shrug.

"Naw. Cut the onion." She spoke quickly, giving the address, then moved past him to the refrigerator. "Tea, Pepsi, or beer?"

The tone of her voice was so strange; Vincent turned and observed her through strands of blond mane. She leaned against the refrigerator looking back at him, but her eyes gave up none of her secrets. She was still wearing her green silk blouse from work; the blaze of her red hair falling across it took his breath away momentarily. *When did she take her hair down?* He hadn't noticed her taking her braid down, but she'd obviously done so. It was strange, too, for her to offer him beer. He *knew* he'd mentioned to her that he didn't drink. "Tea, please."

Diana set a glass of iced tea down in front of him, then walked into the living room and put on some music. *Brahms? With pizza?* Vincent found himself watching her more closely as she walked toward him. His eyes followed her movement, which was more graceful than usual...full of promise. *Promise of what?* His throat was



suddenly very dry, and he reached for his tea. At that moment the buzzer interrupted his thoughts, and Diana went to answer. She turned to him. "It's the delivery boy. I'll go down and get the pizza."



Diana chuckled as she rode the lift down. She felt reckless. And Vincent had looked positively weak-kneed himself. *Definitely off balance. But I was right. He is absolutely fabulous in those clothes. And he did dress just for me. I'd better back off though, or he'll leave for sure.* She paid the delivery boy and hurried back to the loft with the pizza.



Vincent paced while he waited for Diana to return. The tension he was feeling made him very uneasy. He didn't like this. His desire for Diana disturbed him immensely. It was different, now, when he dreamed of Catherine. That desire was acceptable. This was not. And he was certain Diana was aware of what she was doing to him. The thought made him angry. And the anger itself worried him. He knew how tentative his control still was, and felt Diana did, as well. It had been desire and rage that had driven him to madness before, and he still didn't trust his control.

He leaned with his back against the counter, head hanging, and listened to the squeal of the ancient lift as it climbed its slow way up. He breathed deeply, flexing his hands, which had been clenched; forced himself to relax. Hearing the accordion door to the lift open, he turned to Diana. He could tell by her expression that she was well aware of his mood swing.

"I think perhaps I should not stay, Diana."

Diana tossed the pizza box on the table and it skidded across the surface, barely stopping before crashing to the floor. The pepper shaker, however, wasn't as lucky and hit the floor with a sharp thud. "Suit yourself."

She brushed past him to open the refrigerator and pull out a beer. She leaned her head back against the refrigerator door, a gesture combining defiance and defeat...but her voice held only a touch of sorrow. "You can't walk a tightrope forever without falling off, Vincent. That goes for me as well as for you."

Vincent saw a tear glisten at the corner of her eye, and his anger vanished as though it had never been. This was Diana. His friend. Surely something was disturbing her. How could he be angry...stay angry? Moving to her, he reached out to stroke her face with the back of his hand. "I will stay if you wish."

She leaned into him for a moment only, then sighed raggedly and pulled away, wiping her eye with the back of one hand. "No need for you to stay. I'll probably be lousy company."

Now that his anger and desire had returned to more manageable levels, Vincent felt foolish. He really *did* want to stay; he'd missed Diana a great deal--missed her wit and conversation...and truthfully, just simply missed *her*. He could see she was still

upset with him, so he tried to put things right. "Diana, I'm sorry. You seem...disappointed, but I don't understand. What is it that you wish of me?"

Diana put the beer on the counter and stood, hands on hips, gazing up at him. Her emerald eyes blazed with fury. "What do I want? I want you to see *me*, Vincent. Just me. For once. Is that so very much?"

The sudden mercurial changes in Diana's outward mood from distress to momentary peace, to rage confused Vincent even further. The evening was not turning out at *all* as he'd planned, and Diana was more of a puzzle than ever. He wished desperately that he could sense her. *Surely she knows how I feel by now--how I cherish our relationship.* "But Diana...I *do* see you." He was confused, but determined to make things clear between them and find out what it was that was disturbing her. He took her face in his hands, though she tried to shrug him off. "You have not been well of late, Diana, and I fear our relationship has placed a strain on you...the secrecy, the lies...and...Gabriel." It was the first time since it happened that Vincent had ever dared mention Diana's role in Gabriel's death. They'd both avoided it after skirting the issue once.

Diana's rage seemed to evaporate once more, and she sighed. "I'm fine about all that. Doesn't bother me." Diana closed her hand around Vincent's and rubbed the soft fur across her face a moment, the tender gesture making Vincent's chest constrict, and once more causing that red tide to rise, the haze of desire obscuring his mind...straining his control.

He forced the words through clenched teeth. "Diana. Please. You *are* important to me."

Diana glanced up, seeming puzzled...and very childlike. "Am I?"

Vincent was relieved as the red tide faded, moving into the background of his consciousness. Taking a deep breath, he put his arms around her and drew her to him, meaning only to comfort her...to assure her that she was, truly, very dear to him. But as she moved fluidly into his embrace he felt the desire rise again, pendulum-like--sending him sliding out of control. His hands grasped Diana's forearms, and his body shook with his effort to get a grip on the desire and the accompanying anger. It angered him that Diana was so aware of his reaction. He wasn't sure if he was angry with her, or with himself. It didn't matter. It was taking all his control to put her from him now. "No!"

He spun away from her, lunging back up the stairs, and she scrambled after him, pausing only to snatch his cloak from the back of the chair, where he'd tossed it. He caught the heavy cloak as she threw it at him. "Don't forget this. Damn you, Vincent. If you leave now...."

The pain he felt at leaving her was searing. Vincent looked back over his shoulder as he swung one leg over the parapet and told her softly, his rough voice carrying across the roof, "I *must* leave, Diana. Please forgive me."





Diana turned, kicked the wall viciously, then hobbled down the stairs nursing her sore toes. "Damned if I *will* forgive you, Vincent. I've *had* it." She threw herself onto the couch and sat staring miserably at the wall. She knew she'd misjudged and pushed him further than she should have, but her own strength was giving out. Greg and Joe were right...she looked awful and felt worse. She couldn't keep on like this. Something had to give.

*And it's damn well gonna be him. It's time, damn it. He can't live the rest of his life on memories. It isn't healthy for him or for Jacob either...and it's hell on me!*

At the same time, she couldn't help berating herself for pushing him. He was right. His tightrope was higher than hers...more dangerous to fall from. More dangerous for both of them.

Lying back on the throw pillows on the couch, Diana gave herself over to her thoughts of him. She pictured him as he'd looked tonight: the cascade of his thick blond mane flowing over that wonderful shirt--which had felt as soft as butter against her cheek. Those azure eyes alive with desire...even if it had been only for a few moments. The mingling of scents he always carried--candlewax, smoke, leather...and him. Definitely, him. But right now, if she opened up, all she could sense from him was that black anger and his usual suppressed desire. She sighed. *It was a mistake. A stupid mistake. What the hell did you think you were doing, anyway? All you succeeded in doing is making both of you miserable. You told Father he wasn't ready...yet here you are, pushing him. Back off, Bennett. You don't even know what you want, so why rock the boat?*

She rolled over and buried her face in the throw pillow and pulled the tattered afghan over her shoulders. *Maybe this is all a big mistake. This can't be good for him. Maybe you're not good for him.*



Vincent stalked like an angry tiger through the tunnels toward home. *How could Diana do that to me? She is ruining everything.*

His anger simmered, boiled over, then simmered again. Rational thought was far behind him. Reaching the Chamber of the Falls, Vincent sat on one of the boulders and brooded. He heard a familiar voice next to him...one he'd hoped never to hear again.

*You're a fool.* The Other sat perched on a nearby boulder, elbows on knees, chin in hand, his expression almost ingenuous beneath the tangled mane. Vincent didn't find it amusing at all.

"Go away."

The Other sighed and stretched his legs out, crossing his arms. *Why do you think she bothered with you all this time...just because she's altruistic?*

"She's a good person, and a friend."

*Hmpf. Never said she wasn't. But what you don't seem to realize is that she's also a woman...maybe that's what makes her so angry.* The image disappeared, then suddenly reappeared inches before Vincent's face, startling him into a snarl. The Other smiled with a savage satisfaction evident on his dark features. *Guess if you can't stand*



*the heat, you get out of the kitchen, huh?*

Vincent roared and reached for his antagonist's throat, but of course there was nothing there.

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Father found Vincent at the falls a short time later. His roar had been heard and the message passed on to Father. Father lingered in the entrance watching his son. He had hoped the evening with Diana would go better than it obviously had.

Father had watched the distance slowly close between his son and Diana, and determined to support Diana in this as much as possible. He'd impeded the relationship between Vincent and Catherine, and regretted that, realizing too late what harm his intervention had done. He'd watched Diana bring his son out of the darkness and back into the light, but he'd feared that eventually she would encounter opposition from the roadblocks Vincent had placed in her path.

It appeared that she'd just run headlong into one of them.

"Vincent?"

Vincent's voice carried back to him, firm and clear. "I'm fine, Father. Can I never have any privacy? With Pascal's constant vigilance on the pipes I cannot even sneeze in peace."

Father sat next to Vincent and positioned his cane within easy reach. "I believe it was a roar that got their attention this time...not a sneeze. Everyone loves you, Vincent, and we tend to be a bit over-protective. Is there anything I can help with?"

"No."

Father turned his eyes out across the pool and listened to the roar of the falls. "I know you come here to relax...as do I."

"Yes."

"Things did not go well with Diana tonight?"

Vincent shifted uneasily. "Please. Don't start. I appreciate your concern for me, but there is nothing you can do. It is something I need to work through on my own." Vincent looked across the water to the falls and Father noted he blinked back tears. When he spoke, his words were measured and deliberate. "Has it never occurred to you, Father, that I have no private personal life? I allow everyone else their privacy...difficult as it is, for me...yet I have none of my own. Even with Catherine, I could scarcely breathe without everyone knowing...." He sighed, then answered Father's question without allowing Father to answer his own. "No. Things did not go well. Goodnight, Father."

As Vincent rose to head back to his chamber, Father spoke softly to him, hoping his son would not only hear, but *listen*. "We all love you, Vincent."

• • • • •

Vincent retrieved Jacob and carried the youngster back to their chamber. After waking briefly, Jacob snuggled down in Vincent's arms with his face buried in his father's neck. As was often true, Vincent found comfort in the child's peace, and it

helped him to put other thoughts into perspective. He forced himself to calm his emotions so he wouldn't disturb the child, then tucked Jacob into the crib. He moved to his desk and tried to record his thoughts in his journal.

*My evening with Diana did not turn out as planned. Once more she surprised me by turning my thoughts in directions I wish to avoid. She has been my rock, an island of peace. And now I discover that she, too, wishes something from me that I cannot give. Will there never be anyone other than my son who has no expectations I cannot fulfill? Obviously Diana wishes for our relationship to be more than friendship, and I cannot give her what she wants. I can only hurt her. I cannot let go of Catherine. In addition, the desire she stirs in me is so powerful that I fear losing control. The sheer need I feel around her is frightening. The hunger. How blurred the images are when I try looking inside myself...the image of the man and the image of the beast. I still try to see myself as others see me, but Diana would tell me to see myself as I am. I want to see myself as she sees me...to know what I am to her. I need to understand, and there is no understanding for me. Love is a burden if you cannot give it.*

Vincent re-read the words he'd written and put away his pen. In truth, there were no words for what he needed to say. Undressing for bed, he thought wistfully of the park Above and how he would have loved to take a walk to clear his head, but it was late, and Jacob could not be left alone. *Perhaps I should have left him with Mary a little longer.* Gone were the days when he could disappear for days at a time, or even simply for a few hours...at least not without preparation. It seemed it had been a long while since he'd even taken a walk in the park.

It occurred to Vincent that he and Catherine had favored her balcony, the park, and his chamber for their trysts, but only the balcony had been truly *theirs*--neither his world nor hers--and in that one space they had created a world of their own.

Most of the time when he saw Diana it was in her loft, and when she came Below there was no distinction between his chamber, Father's, or anywhere else in his world. She tended to pop up just about anywhere. He'd never crossed that imaginary line into Catherine's world...almost never set foot in her apartment at all. But with Diana that self-imposed prohibition had never existed. In one very real sense, her world was his world, just as his was hers. Each was comfortable in the other's space and there was no strangeness in that. That, too, had often puzzled him, though it pleased him as well. Their friendship was one of the most important things in his life, now. He couldn't imagine being without her.

Vincent went to bed and slept restlessly. Once more his dreams were disturbed.

*Diana moved towards him, her sensual smile lighting her face. Moving into his arms, her body molded against his, the soft curves against his solidity frighteningly exciting. Struggling to stop his treacherous thoughts, Vincent re-played visions of Catherine and the love they'd shared. He tried desperately, even in his dream, to hold to his memories. As always, when the dreams turned to Diana, he would try to pull away, but the siren song that was pulling him was becoming too strong for him to resist. And the*

guilt he felt was overpowering.



Diana nibbled her way through a slice of pizza and put the rest in the refrigerator. She turned on the computer and was preparing to bring up her journal when the telephone rang. She answered rather dispiritedly. She'd finally blocked Vincent because his mixed feelings of anger and frustrated desire were further depressing her.

"Hello."

It was Joe. Checking up on her. Ever since the Ashman case, he'd been easier to be around. He didn't push, and hadn't mentioned the Chandler case, though she knew he still wondered. They'd settled into a kind of uneasy truce that couldn't truly be called "friendship" quite yet.

"Hiya, Bennett. You doin' okay?"

She had to grin a little. "Yeah. I'm okay. You and Greg can quit being mother hens. So I'll take a few days, but don't hesitate to call if you need me."

There was a hesitation on the other end, then Joe said quietly, "You've had a rough year. Some of the cases you've handled have been real killers. Things like that can get to anybody, Bennett."

"I'm okay, really. I thrive on that stuff. You should know that by now...and Greg *does* know. Damn. He's known me since I was a kid. I need the action."

"Right now, you need the rest. So rest. That's an order...passed on from Greg through me."

"I'll try."

"Good. G'night, Bennett."

"G'night, Maxwell."

Diana hung the phone up and shook her head a little wonderingly. *Maxwell checking up. Will wonders never cease?* "I really *must* look bad."

She went back to the computer and pulled up her journal.

*Blew it tonight. He gives me mixed signals, even when I "read" him. Sometimes I think he's ready to move on, but later I realize it's just wishful thinking on my part. He was dressed fit to kill tonight...excuse the pun. Bad choice of words. I know he did it for me, and a man just doesn't do that unless he's interested. I know he's attracted to me--I haven't been celibate so long that I can't tell when a man wants me! Hell. I don't know if I'm ready, but I think it's time to find out if there can ever be anything for either of us in this relationship besides friendship. I can't walk that tightrope forever. Neither can he. Time to either climb up to a higher level, come down...or fall off.*

Diana saved the file, exited the program and shut down the hard drive. Walking into the bedroom, she dug through her drawer and pulled out her sleep shirt. Shedding her work clothes and making a half-hearted toss at the laundry hamper, she pulled the old shirt on, savoring the comfort of the familiar softness against her skin. Then she

pulled on a pair of heavy socks and slid into bed. There were times she really missed Mark. She *had* loved him as much as she'd been able to. He'd been easy to be around, a lot of fun, uncomplicated...and *very* sexy. *So help me Vincent, if you invade my dreams tonight, I'll show you no mercy!*

Fortunately for Vincent, he'd already done most of his dreaming before Diana fell asleep, and the remainder of his dreams were too formless for her to pick up more than bits and pieces, so for one night, at least, they both had a little peace.



Vincent woke with Jacob throwing his toys at him. The child stood in his crib and carefully tossed one toy after another with unerring aim directly at Vincent's head. This was his current favorite game, and it was most definitely *not* Vincent's. A sharp-edged block hit Vincent on the nose and he sat up with a muffled roar. Jacob bounced with glee, knowing that his antics had been the cause of the wonderful sound his father had made. It was dark in the chamber, but Jacob had his father's unusual night vision and the darkness didn't bother him...nor did it hinder his aim.

Vincent rubbed his sore nose, then lit a candle. He spoke softly to Jacob, then removed him from the crib to change him. By the time the child was dry and in clean clothes for the morning, Vincent was in a slightly better humor. Jacob was such a joy to him that any minor inconveniences were easily ignored.

Today Vincent and Mouse were scheduled to fix the leak under the east Serpentine. Vincent carried Jacob to the nursery to leave him for Mary to tend. He spent some time playing with the child to settle him with the other toddlers, then left when Jacob was well-occupied--though he always felt a little guilty sneaking off. He stopped in for a quick breakfast in the common dining hall and waited for Mouse, who wandered in as he was finishing. He visited with the younger man while Mouse ate. Their plans for the day were gone over and supplies discussed. When they were ready to leave, they disposed of their dishes and went their separate ways to collect the tools they needed.



After gathering their tools, Vincent met Mouse at the "Mousehole," and they continued down toward the east Serpentine. Mouse chattered cheerfully about one of his newest inventions, but Vincent listened with only partial attention. His mind refused to settle into its accustomed pattern of duty and work. His dreams last night had further confused him, and his thoughts were whirling. Suddenly, his solid base of peace and solidarity with Diana seemed shattered, leaving a void. He missed her tremendously, but refused to think of the ramifications of the desire he felt around her. *No.*

"Vincent!"

Vincent startled. Mouse was looking at him with innocent blue eyes, obviously hurt that he'd not been paying attention. "I'm sorry, Mouse. What were you saying?"

Mouse shrugged. "Doesn't matter. Won't work anyway."

"What won't work, Mouse? You were just telling me about your plans for re-designing the old washing machines that Evan sent us...."

Mouse was miffed. "That was before. No problems there. Need help on Jamie's phonograph. Weren't listening."

"Sorry, Mouse. I was thinking."

Mouse scratched his head, then pointed ahead. "There's leak. Doesn't matter, Vincent. Won't work anyway. Can't find stuff to fix. Jamie'll be disappointed."

Vincent raised the lamp to survey the damage. It was obvious the water had been leaking for some time, and this chalky rock was unstable at the best of times. Vincent hoped they could manage to fix the leak without the tunnel floor collapsing; all the rock strata in this area were brittle. Fortunately, the leak was slow enough that at least there wasn't a river to work in. It also appeared the ceiling was intact, which meant that the living quarters in the level above would be secure. They had already turned the water off at the cutoff, so it was time to go to work. "Come, Mouse. Let's get this fixed, and you can tell me what parts you need. Perhaps I can help."

As they worked, Mouse continued to talk about the old phonograph he was trying to fix for Jamie, and the parts he'd still been unable to find or make. Vincent tried valiantly to pay attention, but his mind kept wandering back to Diana. Mouse held the tools while Vincent attempted to wrench the rusted pipe apart. The pipe was stubborn, and Vincent braced himself and tried again. A soft rumbling began and Vincent yelled, "**Move!**" and shoved Mouse hard just as the floor gave way beneath them. He felt himself falling and grasped futilely at outcroppings of rock which broke off in his hands.



As soon as the dust settled, Mouse threw himself on his stomach and inched toward the hole. Directing the flashlights from his improvised miner's helmet downward, he scanned the area and located Vincent. "Vincent!" When his friend didn't answer immediately, Mouse panicked. "Vincent! Wake up!"

A groan answered him from below, then Vincent's voice drifted up to him. Vincent was obviously in pain, but his voice was calm. "Mouse. I suppose you had best get help. I appear to have...damaged myself."

Mouse started to go, then came back. "Tell Father what, Vincent? How hurt?"

"If I am correct, I may have broken my leg, so have them bring a stretcher. They'll have to carry me up the Serpentine, I fear, unless Father says it's safe for me to hobble. Go on...and Mouse...tell him not to worry. I'll live."

Mouse's teeth flashed in a wide smile. "Okay good. Okay fine. Back quick."

Mouse's footsteps receded in a flurry and Vincent leaned back against the rock. He tried to shift his leg, but decided against it. He could stand the pain, but if it *was* broken, it would be best not to move it prior to splinting. Gritting his teeth, he reached under his posterior and removed a sharp rock which was causing him additional discomfort. He noticed that every time he moved, rock dust drifted down into his eyes, and it occurred to him that his mane was full of it. He tried to shake some out, but the

resulting stab of pain that action sent down his leg stopped him. "I think I'll just close my eyes and wait."



Diana didn't know what to do with herself. Normally, with time on her hands, she'd go Below and visit. After last night, she figured that might not be a good idea. Whenever she dropped her block, she could feel Vincent's frustration and unrest, so rather than make herself miserable, she kept her block up.

She wandered restlessly. She'd already done everything she needed to in the city yesterday, and she wasn't very keen on going out into that barrage of emotions today. She tried calling her sister, but there was no answer. *This is ridiculous. There must be something I want to do. I remember that at one time I did have a life...when there were other things I was interested in other than Vincent. There were things I did when I was off.* Then she remembered how seldom she was really off. And when she *had* been off, at least for the eighteen months or so before she'd met Vincent, there had been Mark, and they would've gone out and done something. Together.

Diana sighed heavily. Looking around the loft, she realized she'd really let things go during that last case. That wasn't unusual. While working she didn't notice how filthy the loft got until she either ran out of clean clothes or food, or just couldn't find anything anymore.

Reluctantly heaving herself into action, she dug under furniture for dirty clothes, stuffing them into Mark's old duffel bag as she went. When she thought she had everything, she pulled the duffel bag into the elevator and took everything down to the laundromat next door. Leaving everything going in the washers, she took off back upstairs to finish cleaning. *Hope nobody steals my clothes. Then I'd have to join a goddamned nudist colony. Oh well. Good excuse to move to Florida. Too cold in New York. Wouldn't that freak Greg? Might even get me away from the dreams.*

After another hour and another trip downstairs to switch clothes to the dryer (so far the nudist colony was still an empty threat), the loft looked passable. Barely. She hurried downstairs and shoved the clothes into the duffel bag and dragged them back upstairs, dumping everything on the bed. She sorted through the mass and found what she wanted to wear, and headed for the bathroom for a shower. *Great. I can have a wonderfully entertaining time sorting and folding clothes.*



The stretcher-bearers left after Vincent was safely in the hospital chamber, then Father had Mouse rig the emergency electricity so he could make use of the X-ray unit Peter had sent down. Fortunately, the technician that serviced Peter's unit was also a helper, so he kept theirs in good repair. Vincent had been correct in his diagnosis: the tibia was fractured, but it was only hairline.

Father casted the leg and cautioned Vincent against trying to do any of his work other than the teaching, at least for a week or so, then obviously reconsidered. "I don't



even want you doing that. You never *do* take it easy. If I give you an inch, you take a mile. In a week or possibly less, at the rate you heal, the cast can come off."

Vincent was concerned that the leak had still to be repaired, but Father said that for once someone else could handle the emergency. "Mouse is already taking Marcus and Cullen with him to shore up the area and lay planking. They'll get it fixed, and they'll be careful, so don't worry about it."

Once the cast had set, Vincent hobbled back to his chamber and changed clothes. Father didn't even want him walking on the cast much, or he might crack it. He stared ruefully at his jeans. Father had cut the pant leg to the knee to allow for the cast. It appeared he was going to have to live in the same jeans for several days at least. He needed a bath, and every time he moved his head, dust drifted out. His hair needed washing. *How am I going to manage this?* Feeling silly, he leaned forward and shook his mane until he had most of the loose dirt out. Then he finished changing his shirt and vest. He raked his mane back with his hands, getting it tamed a little, then sat going through his class notes.

He hated being chamber-bound. Being restricted always made Vincent restless. He leafed through books, jotting down information for Father to use while continuing the classes. *I don't know why he can't have the children come here. We've done it before.* Actually, he *did* know why. Father was right. There was no practical way to keep him still. Once he got started on something there was no stopping him. He even paced at times while he was teaching. He looked around the room dismally. *A week? I cannot do it. I will simply have to heal faster.*

There was a slight sound at the door, and Vincent looked up, grateful for the company. "Jamie."

Jamie came in and stood hesitantly next to him. Her wide blue eyes were troubled, and he could sense her concern. "I'm fine, Jamie, just irritated with myself. I should have known to lay planking for a floor. It was carelessness."

She leaned forward and rapped on the cast with her knuckles. She grinned. "Seems funny, seeing you like this." She thought a minute. "Hey. Didn't Father have any crutches?"

Vincent shook his head miserably. "They were all too short. I think if he'd had any, he'd have hidden them, just to keep me prisoner." He knew he sounded petulant, but he couldn't help it. The thought of the next week or so was discouraging.

"Aw, that's not true." She brightened. "I know. We'll get Cullen to make you some. He could do it with no problem. Then at least you could move around."

Vincent cheered a little immediately. "That would be wonderful. And Jamie...could you do me a favor?"

"Sure."

"Bring Jacob to me? I know it is not going to be practical for me to keep him right now, and I know Mary will relish taking care of him...but I need to see him, too."

"I'll get him for you now, Vincent."

"Thank you, Jamie."

It seemed forever until Jamie appeared at his chamber door with Jacob. His son flung himself into Vincent's arms with his usual cheerful violence. "F'ar!" Murmuring

endearments, Vincent clung to the child. Their reunions, even after a brief time, were always intense. Jacob quickly discovered the cast and sat between Vincent's legs patting it. Mary and Samantha had come with Jamie and brought their evening meal.

Vincent watched Jacob. *He looks less like Catherine every day, and more like me...and like himself.* He felt regret in that. He had hoped the boy would resemble his mother more and more, but he supposed that was selfishness of a sort. Jacob would look truly like himself. Vincent fingered the fine red-blond hair that was so like his own, and gazed into eyes that were also his. The child still carried much of his baby fat, but as he grew, Vincent could tell Jacob would have the same high cheekbones he himself had. *Perhaps in Jacob it will be distinctive.* His inspection of his son was disturbed by Mary's announcement that supper was served. He glanced up.

"Thank you, Mary." He nodded to Samantha. "And you, too, Samantha. You are all very kind."

Mary blushed and bustled around the chamber, lighting more candles. Vincent had been sitting almost in the dark when they'd come in. After everyone had left, Vincent found that feeding Jacob and himself was more than he'd bargained for. The child was far too active and Vincent was unable to keep him in one place. Before he knew it, he was sitting with a very filthy child and his cast had been decorated with the remnants of their supper. When Jamie stopped back by, he was embarrassed by her gentle laughter.

"Oh, Vincent, I think you're going to have to give up this *pleasure* until you're out of that cast. This room just isn't set up for feeding anybody as active as Jacob."

Jamie took Jacob from Vincent and wiped some of the food off the baby with a wash cloth and scrubbed delicately at the cast. She hung Jacob upside down under her arm with the child screaming delightedly. "I'll take him back to Mary for you, if you want, and I'll come back and get the dishes."

Vincent reached for Jacob and kissed him, then handed him back. "Thank you, Jamie. I'm sorry for the inconvenience." He sighed. "I suppose I will have to leave him with Mary for meals as well...but we *must* manage visits."

Jamie patted his arm. "Sure. We'll get him to you until you get the crutches. Don't worry."

Vincent thought a moment. "Did Mouse get the leak fixed?"

"Yeah. It was really a nasty one. They had to build a floor over the hole before even being able to reach the place, but it's done. At least your efforts loosened the joint. Don't worry about it." Jamie laughed softly at Vincent's sigh. "Cullen said that later, after he cleans up, he'll come by to measure you for crutches."

"Thank you." Vincent was relieved. If he could just be a little more...mobile...perhaps things would not appear quite so dismal.

"Does Diana know?"

Vincent startled. "Know?"

"Yeah. About your leg."

He shook his head. "No."

"I'll go tell her, if you want," Jamie offered eagerly.

Vincent smiled gently. He knew Jamie idolized Diana. Any excuse was good

for a visit. Diana had become almost like an older sister to the younger girl. He started to tell Jamie not to bother, but he couldn't quite get the words out. On one hand, he was angry with Diana, but he still felt this pull towards her. He wanted to see her, and there was no way he could go to her.

"If you wish." He glanced up to see Jacob hanging off Jamie's hip, reaching for him for a hug, and he took the child for a few moments and held him close. He murmured quietly to his son, reassuring both the child and himself that it would not be too long before he could care for him again. Jacob fussed a little when Jamie took him back, but settled quickly.

Vincent felt twice as lonely once Jacob was gone. He wished he could sense Diana as he had Catherine, and know her presence. Reaching over to the small table next to the bed, he took his rose and cradled it carefully, and losing himself in his memories, he felt a little less alone.



The hot water felt wonderful after her hours of housework. It even relaxed some of the muscles in her neck and shoulders. She hadn't realized how tense she'd been. The afternoon of cleaning had also helped a little to ease some of that tension.

She squeezed the excess water out of her long hair and dried off. While she dressed in her sweats, she thought of Vincent, and hesitantly opened herself up a little--trying to sense him. She was never sure when it was safe to try and touch. When his thoughts and emotions were on something other than her, it was usually safe to assume he wouldn't notice her. When she reached out and sensed him, the emotions she received were puzzling: a little anxiety and stress...the ever-present frustration...and something else she couldn't quite place. When she felt a sense of puzzlement growing, she knew he must be beginning to feel her intrusion, so she blocked again. She began drying her hair, and was just finishing braiding it when the intercom buzzed. She fastened the rubber band on the end of the braid, then hastened to the living area to answer.

"Yeah?"

A small, hesitant feminine voice answered, made a little tinny by the old intercom. "Diana? It's Jamie. May I come up?"

"Jamie? Sure. I'll send the elevator down."

While Diana waited for the ancient lift to groan its way up, she wondered what Jamie was doing here. This wasn't the girl's first visit to Diana's loft, but they *were* infrequent enough to make Diana curious. When the lift stopped moving, Diana pulled the accordion door back and motioned Jamie in.

"C'mon in. Did Vincent send a message? Is he coming up tonight?"

Jamie grinned. "Well, that'd be a little difficult. You see, he broke his leg."

"WHAT?" Diana knew she must've reacted just about how Jamie expected, because the girl laughed.

"Yeah. He and Mouse were fixing a pipe down near the Catacombs. It's been leaking for a long time and the chalky rock underneath gave way and spilled him down

to the next level. He must've landed just right...or just wrong. Anyway, he's going to be pretty immobile for awhile, and he's not happy about it."

"I guess *not*." Diana plopped down on the couch and shook her head, feeling a little bemused. She knew this man had been shot, knifed...God alone knew how many times, according to accounts she'd heard...survived an explosion...the results of which she'd seen personally. Now he had something as mundane as a broken leg keeping him chamberbound--simply because a lot of the terrain in the tunnels was impossible to maneuver for someone wearing a cast. It was kind of funny. At least she *assumed* Father had put him in a cast. She asked Jamie, "Is he in a cast?"

Jamie grinned. "Yeah. No crutches yet, either, so that makes it worse. Cullen's making him some."

"Good. He's gonna be grumpy enough as it is." She smiled a little, thinking of the odd impressions she'd received earlier, and the added frustration. *Oh well. At least I know what he's frustrated with currently, and for a change it's not me.*

Diana glanced at her watch. "Hey, Jamie. It's about suppertime. Want to stay for spaghetti?"

The girl's face lit up. "Sure."

They chattered cheerfully as they made supper, and Diana relaxed further. Jamie was good company...uncomplicated and undemanding. As they ate, Jamie spoke at length about Mouse, telling Diana stories about their growing up that delighted her. Diana watched the younger girl as she talked about Mouse...noticing how she blushed and her voice grew softer the longer she spoke. *Young love. At least she and Mouse seem to understand each other pretty well.*

Jamie began asking Diana more serious questions about men in general, and Diana began to realize how Susan must feel. Although Susan was slightly younger than Diana, it had always been Susan who took care of her. Diana's life had always been too complex and demanding for her to look after Susan. Fortunately, Susan was solid and very *normal*. She had provided the stability Diana had needed while growing up. Diana's empathic gift and her mother's lack of understanding of both it and her had been almost more than the teenage girl could handle. It was kind of nice to be able to be someone else's "big sister," though she felt a little inadequate to be advising Jamie on men. *I can't even get my own love life in order.*

Jamie stayed until well after dark, and Diana hated to see her go. Jamie offered to take a message to Vincent, but Diana shook her head. "No. You can tell him I miss him, if you want...but other than that, I think I'll just wait until tomorrow and go see him."

Diana sent Jamie down in the elevator, then walked to the window and dimmed the lights. She stood staring for a long while, watching the traffic.

*Okay, Greg. I'm rested enough. I can't take too much quiet.* She knew though, looking out at that beautiful city, that behind all those pretty lights were some very ugly happenings. It wouldn't be long before she was called back in. She'd helped Vincent begin to see the possibilities behind the lights again...as he had before Catherine was taken from him, but for herself...she still had problems seeing past the stark realities.

She really wanted to go Below and visit, and see how Vincent was doing. She

needed him desperately, but it was getting too late for an impromptu visit, and she still felt that putting a little time between their last meeting and the next was a good idea.

She became more and more restless and began to pace nervously. She had to have something to occupy her mind, so she sat down at the computer and pulled up her games directory. This was her way of completely retreating from reality.

Studying the menu she'd set up, she selected Zork II. If she recalled correctly, she had been busy trying to capture a unicorn with a gold key around its neck. Restoring her saved game and dragging out her painstakingly drawn map, she thought for probably the hundredth time: *Let's see. How do you catch a unicorn?* "Okay. Virgins catch unicorns. That leaves *me* out." She became wrapped up in the game for an hour or so, and while trying to kill the dragon without being killed, it occurred to her that dragons often guarded things.... *Like maybe princesses?* And of course, a princess is going to be a virgin.... *At least in Never-Never Land, anyway.*

After another futile hour of trying to kill the dragon without getting burnt to a crisp, she wished again that Vincent were with her. *I gotta teach him to play Zork. I wonder if he'd appreciate it. There is, of course, some irony about it being located in The Great Underground Empire.*<sup>4</sup> She sighed and saved the game, exited and switched off the hard drive. She played her games so seldom that it was hard to remember where she left off last, at times, and what she'd tried and hadn't tried. She chuckled a little to herself and muttered, "It's gotten that way about sex. I've forgotten how *that* works, too. I wonder how long it takes to revert back to virgin status?"

Diana unbraided her hair and undressed for bed. The thought of night and sleep disturbed her and drew her at the same time. She didn't even know for sure if Vincent *could* feel her, other than brief flashes. She was still unsure if the dreams she'd shared with him had gone the other way as well. On one hand, she wanted desperately for it to work both ways...on the other, she wasn't so sure.

That had always been Diana's major hangup with sex, and relationships in general. There had never ever been anyone on the other side who could feel what she felt...what she needed to *give*. She knew that she and Vincent could share all that they were through the bond...but only if they both let their guards down, and she didn't know if either of them could do that. She wanted that bond--needed it more than breath. And she felt the calling from him--a pull, that *surely* he must be feeling from her as well. But they were both scared. They'd both spent their entire lives pulled inside themselves...hiding, in one way or another: both were very private individuals. He hid from others because of his exterior...and because of the inner part of him that he considered a beast. She hid because of differences no one could see...but those differences set her apart just as much from the people in her world as his differences did him. They were both used to giving of themselves...but still they kept themselves separate and alone...with a tight inner core that was unknown to anyone.

She slid into bed and pulled the covers up over her shoulders, but it was a long time before she slept.

*The dream began much as all dreams do, formless; sensation more than sight, then firming slowly into images. In the dark before the images came, Diana felt the warmth*

of his body next to hers, the massive strength of his thighs as they lay against her. His arms encircled her, a gentle prison. His lips trailed down her neck, the upper lip with the firm cleft in sharp contrast to the silken softness of his full lower lip; the short fur on his muzzle tickled deliciously. She felt the soft sliding of his tongue as it dipped to the hollow at the base of her throat, tasting delicately. Everything was so real. His clothes smelled of candlewax, leather, and damp wool. His hair smelled the way it did when he'd just come in from the rain. And underneath it all, the musky scent that was him. So real. The images firmed along with the sensations, and she realized that Vincent's eyes were closed. She traced his face with her fingertips, and brushed his eyelids with a light kiss. Almost reflexively, he tightened his embrace. "Look at me, Vincent. Please. See me...see me."





## ALL OF THESE ARE DREAMS

**T**he telephone rang, and brought Diana up with a start. She knocked the phone off the nightstand in her efforts to grab it, then had to hunt for it. Her voice sounded unused, like a rusty door. "H'low."

It was Maxwell. "Diana. Sorry, but playtime's over. We have a real nasty one for you." He gave her the address in the Bronx, and she dug for a pen to write it down. She was afraid she wasn't awake enough to remember.

"I'll be there as soon as I can."

Diana stared at the clock. 1:00 A.M. "It figures." She had gotten about two hours of disturbed sleep. After a quick shower, she dressed and left.

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Diana's old blue Chevy shook and shimmied its way to the address Joe had given her. She parked and made her way through the crowd standing outside, elbowing her way to the door. Flashing her badge at the suit at the door, Diana walked into a bloodbath. Joe was busy talking to Greg Hughes over in the corner, and Diana avoided catching his eye as she took in the scene. On the couch were the remains of what had once been a family; that much was clear. The scene swam for a moment before she settled, then she studied the scene clinically. Joe and Greg noticed she had arrived and joined her.

Diana's dispassionate voice began noting and commenting on the scene. "Severed the limbs where they lay. He put them all together on the couch. All the pieces. Like he wanted them all together. When did it happen?"

Greg motioned for the cameraman to take some photos from a different angle, then commented: "About two hours ago, apparently."

Diana excused herself and went to stand next to the couch. She stood quietly, watching as the pieces of bodies were bagged and tagged. She spoke to the other officers on the case, made notes, and gave some instructions to the forensics team. When everyone else was ready to go, she spoke with Greg and Joe, and made plans for tomorrow. After everyone was gone, she went back to the couch and stood staring. She knelt, and reached out with one hand to tentatively touch the bloodstained fabric...and opened up for the impressions.

She shuddered a little as a wave of acute sorrow swept over her...and fear. Desperation. She was having trouble separating the emotions of the victim and the murderer. There was no hatred here. Only fear, sorrow, and strangely...love. There was a scent. Elusive. Familiar. She filed it away in her mind for future reference.

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Vincent was becoming more and more restless. Cullen hadn't finished his crutches yet. Mary brought Jacob to visit right after breakfast and left him for awhile.

That helped some, but Vincent felt he was losing hold. As soon as Mary came to get the child, Vincent's thoughts ranged back to last night. His dreams had been vivid and disturbing. Frightening because of the seductive quality of them. He never saw the woman in his dream, but the remembered sensations alone were enough to cause him distress even now. Without seeing her, he knew the dream was about Diana...no. More to the point, Diana had *been* there, and he *knew* that on some deep level. He put his hands to his head and swung his legs off the bed. He moved to his desk and tried to record his feelings in his journal.

*These dreams are strange. As vivid as any I have ever had, and very like those I thought were past. I know Diana was with me...or I with her. I was afraid to let her go. Afraid to look at her, for fear she would leave. If I couldn't see her, it was all right. Couldn't see her. But I was not afraid to touch her. Touch, but not sight. Was I afraid that if I saw her as Diana she would disappear? Or is the sight I fear a different type of sight? This is hopelessly tangled.*

As Vincent was sitting, staring at his journal, Cullen appeared at the doorway, holding up the crutches. "Rush job. They won't win any beauty prizes, but they'll do."

Gratefully, Vincent closed the journal and rose. Cullen passed him the crutches and checked them for proper size as Vincent tried them out. "They feel good, Cullen. I cannot tell you how glad I will be to get out of here." Vincent looked up to see Father standing in the doorway, arms crossed. "Father."

"Cullen told me he'd have them ready this morning." Father came over and checked the height, and cautioned Vincent about not over-doing. "It will be good for you to get out and about, but just remember that you will set back your healing if you re-injure that leg."

"I will be careful, Father. Be assured. The last thing I want is to delay getting out of this." He tapped the cast.

Father started for the door, commenting that he needed to get to the class he'd taken over since Vincent's injury.

Vincent couldn't resist asking, "Father, tell me...how far has Kipper gotten in the history class?"

Father's scowl was an answer in itself. "You mean the class he teaches prior to the normal class? His class on the more gruesome aspects of whatever period we happen to be studying? *That* class?"

Cullen guffawed and Vincent tried very hard not to smile. "Yes. *That* class."

"I don't even want to talk about it. The boy is going to age me ten years before you get back to teaching."

Vincent was smug. "I would be more than happy to take over."

"In a week or so. I can survive that long. I hope."

Cullen grinned. As Father left, Vincent commented quietly, "If you think he's bad now, you should have been there when we were studying the Aztecs."



After Cullen departed, Vincent restrained himself from immediately trying out the crutches. He went back to his journal, trying to recapture his thoughts. He replayed dreams he'd had lately; soft, gentle dreams of Catherine, and vivid dreams of Diana that ranged from gentle waves of comfort to explosive visions of desire. He tried to clarify to himself how he was feeling.

*Something calls me in the night. I feel it, and I try to answer. I still walk the tightrope she spoke of. She knows me so well. Yet knowing me as she does, still she does not fully understand the dangers. I feel poised at the edge of an abyss. She weaves for me my heart's desire--a web so delicate it shatters at a touch. I cannot believe in dreams again...cannot let myself try. I feel guilty even thinking of it. I must think of Diana's welfare. Besides, all of these are dreams...with no reality. Catherine and I believed in dreams, and we made our dream a reality. I thought our dream had ended...yet I realize now that it is still alive. Jacob is a constant reminder that our love continues to exist.*

Red-gold mane bent over the journal, Vincent stared at the words he'd written, letting their import settle into him.

A battered tennis shoe flew through the air and landed next to him. Bending to retrieve it, he glanced toward the doorway and smiled with unexpected joy. "Diana."

"Just checkin' to see if it was safe. You know...spring any traps and such. Are the waters safe?"

"Just barely. Come in, if you can stand my mood."

Diana stood framed in the chamber entrance. The candlelight flickered over her fiery hair, which she'd left loose. *She's doing that more often lately.* She was in her usual attire of slacks and sweater...but this time with one shoe on and one shoe off. He held the other shoe out to her. "Perhaps you might want this."

Advancing with a grin, she wrapped her hand around the sneaker. Their fingers touched and lingered. He raised his eyes and met hers. She pulled at the shoe. "You have to let it go...unless you want to play Prince Charming and put it on for me." He released the shoe immediately.

Diana seemed perfectly at ease as she sat on his bed and slipped her shoe on, re-tying it. Afterwards, she nodded toward his cast. "I see you zigged when you should'a zagged. Hurt bad?"

He hadn't realized just how badly he'd missed her. The sudden joy he felt upon seeing her was almost painful. "No. Father says a week, or perhaps less, in the cast. I heal quickly."

"I know."

Her tone forced him to look directly at her once more. *Yes. She would know.* He changed the subject. "How is your work going? Have you begun a new case?"

"Yeah. A real nasty one. Somebody chopped up a family. Husband, wife, two kids. Piled 'em all up on the couch."

Vincent tried very hard to read Diana's emotional state through her gestures and body language. He was learning, but it was difficult. It was like suddenly being thrust

into another country and having to re-learn how to communicate. Even when he'd lost his empathic powers before, it had been no great problem understanding the people he lived with because he'd known them for so long. It was very different with Diana.

Vincent used to wish he could sense Diana, but now he wondered if he wasn't fortunate he couldn't--if his dreams were any indication of how he felt. His meager store of understanding of her body language and expressions told him one thing: Diana was disturbed. Worried. But why? Was it the case, or was she, too, embarrassed by what had occurred between them the other night?

Vincent mulled over all this information so long, trying to decide how to best pursue this, that apparently Diana became restless, and he had no time to pursue his proposed line of questioning.

"Are you still angry with me?" she asked quietly.

It took him a moment to answer, since he'd been thinking of something else entirely. "Not so much angry as disappointed."

"Disappointed? Why?" She seemed very calm.

Vincent could feel his anger rising once more at her purposeful obtuseness. He forced it down. "Because you *know* the balance I must keep, and you deliberately upset it."

They were glaring at one another now, the gentle humor of before gone as if it had never been. *Why is it always like this? Our emotions swing like a pendulum from one extreme to the other.*

Diana rose and paced. When she turned back to him she stated flatly, "You needed to be unbalanced."

He tried to rise and tripped on the cast, shaming himself by appearing clumsy instead of righteously angry. So he remained seated, his hands clenched into fists. But at least his voice conveyed his feelings to her. "I *needed* to be unbalanced? I thought you understood. *You* at least. Of everyone. *How* can you say that, Diana....*How?*"

Vincent couldn't sense her emotions, but the pain in her eyes spoke to him almost as loudly as any bond ever could. "Because. Because you needed to fall off the tightrope. And so did I. And...." She looked away and hugged herself in that defensive posture Vincent had become so familiar with, and though his anger still flared, he felt a sudden urge to take her in his arms and hold her. To reassure her that nothing had changed--though it had--in some radical way. Their eyes met momentarily and he felt his heart spiraling out of control. Plummeting.

It was very strange and confusing to him--this feeling that rose within him with such force. He wasn't sure what, exactly, to call it, or how to arrange it within his mind. It was unlike what he had with Catherine...yet elements were the same. He wanted to deny the existence of it altogether--thus avoiding the complications it created--the conflicts. Yet, he could not. The feeling was there. Unavoidable. Undeniable.

Vincent looked away, but he couldn't avoid the issue. He was acutely aware of Diana standing here, next to him--waiting for his answer. He knew exactly how she would feel under his hands. Closing his eyes, he knew her walk, the sound of her voice...the very motion of her breathing...the scent of her hair. He was *aware* of her, physically, as he'd never been aware of anyone. Not even Catherine. He'd never had

any sense of her *except* what his physical senses could bring to him, and he realized that because of that, their relationship--along with their mutual respect and trust--had grown in a different direction. But these feelings frightened him. This was very dangerous....

As though she'd seen--or felt--what he was thinking, Diana answered, and the pain in her eyes changed again--slid suddenly into a rage that matched his own in direct counterpoint. "Let me guess. The reason you can't face this is because of Catherine."

It took Vincent a moment to speak. To form his mouth and tongue around the words required to answer that question without growling at her...and to force himself to speak the real truth. "Not entirely, but yes...some of it is that."

Arms crossed, feet planted resolutely, Diana asked with a voice like cut crystal, "All right then, give me one reason *besides* Catherine."

"Myself."

"Terrific. That tells me a lot. Could you get a little more specific?"

Vincent turned away, wishing he were not hampered so by his injury...the cast. He was trapped. With Diana's questions. With her. When he spoke, he knew his voice echoed the overwhelming weariness he felt. "You know what I am, Diana. Probably you know me better than anyone ever has. Catherine never truly understood...until...she brought me back. Then, perhaps she was beginning to understand. You do, though, I think. I *cannot* be what you need for me to be."

Diana leaned her forehead against the cold rock wall and closed her eyes. She appeared as frustrated as he felt. Without moving, she commented, "That's only an *excuse*, and you know it. After all, you loved Catherine. You have Jacob to prove it. You even remember it now."

"Diana..."

She turned angrily toward him. "It's an *excuse*, Vincent. Just another way to hide. Whether you're hiding from yourself or from life, it makes little difference...it's still hiding. I've thought of you as many things, but never as a coward."

Diana went to him and knelt between his legs. She lifted a hand to his face, softly tracing his high cheekbones, her thumb gliding delicately over his full lower lip. She placed one hand on his chest. His eyes closed and he shuddered slightly. He couldn't move away...didn't want to. "Yes. Feel that, Vincent. That's the promise of life yet to be lived...if you...if *we* aren't afraid to reach out and take it. Take something *you* want, for a change."

"Don't, Diana. Please." His body was rigid, arms stiff at his sides with his hands clenched. He felt that impossible pull again, inexorably drawing him to her. He could sense his tenuous control sliding with deadly swiftness toward the brink of that dark chasm he considered *loss of self*--he sensed the Other close to the surface. Then the connection was broken. By him...or her. He didn't know which. They were both shaking.

Vincent closed his eyes and placed his hands over his face. "I cannot." He forced himself to look at her. *What was that*. His sense of her was gone again...as though it had never been. He was still shaking. He had never felt anything quite like that, except in his dreams. His connection with Catherine had been different: softer, gentler overall--except when he'd killed for her. Even when making love to Catherine





after his loss of self, the bond had calmed him, brought him to himself. This was like falling into a maelstrom. It absolutely terrified him.

Diana's voice was very small. Very quiet...but it pulled him back. "You can't reach out and accept it if you don't let yourself. I'm not sure I can, either. All this...is...beyond anything I've ever experienced." Placing a hand on each of his knees, she raised a tear-stained face to his. "I don't understand it either, Vincent. I'm frightened, too. But not of you. Never of you. Of myself, maybe. I have dark, secret places within myself that I don't want you to see. It scares me."

"*I could kill you.*" That admission, wrenched out of him, hung in the air between them for a moment. *That* was true. He had no need to dissemble, or hide behind other excuses. That one fact alone was enough. No matter how dark Diana felt her inner secrets to be...she could not kill him merely by daring to love him. *This* was not negotiable. Vincent did not treat with the Dark One. He contained him. Caged him. To release him was to release death.

Diana shrugged, but her eyes never left his. Her voice was very soft. "Yeah. You could. But you won't." Before he could say another word, Diana reached over and picked up the crutches, handing them to him. "C'mon. Let's go for a walk. I didn't come to argue. I came to see you and visit with Jacob for a little while. This new case is gonna be bad, and I don't know how long it'll be before I can be with you again. Shouldn't be here now, but...I missed you."

They walked quietly, Diana matching her stride to his, and Vincent was relieved that, for now, at least, neither of them had to face the questions they'd posed one another.

When they reached the nursery, Vincent watched with pleasure while Diana played on the floor with his son, scooting a model train around in a circle while Jacob chased it. The child crowed with delight, throwing himself into Diana's lap after chasing the train until he was dizzy. "Di'nah! More...more!" She lifted him and threw him onto the large bed that Mary used for nap time for some of the older toddlers, then tickled him as he squealed. When the tickling became too much for him, she stopped and let the baby tickle her. Vincent found himself wishing he could just let go of his fears and enjoy being with her, as his son so obviously did. When the child tired, Vincent rocked him as Diana watched, and together they put him down with the other toddlers. It was hard for Vincent to leave.

"I cannot care for him now, Diana. He is too active. But I miss him."

Diana patted his arm a little awkwardly, almost seeming afraid to touch him, afraid to spark that connection they'd felt, and start something else they'd only argue about, or hurt one another with. "I know. But it won't be long. And by the time you're out of the cast, my case may be over, and we can actually spend some time together, too."

As they passed Vincent's chamber, Diana stopped, then seemed to gather courage. Leaning forward, she placed a soft kiss on his lips before he could move away. The touch was very gentle, her lips soft and moist against his. The moment passed so swiftly that Vincent had no time to react, and she turned, hurrying off away from him, leaving him staring wistfully down the empty tunnel.



Diana worked for several hours after leaving Vincent. She went over evidence, forensics reports, and looked over lists of possible contacts. She entered it all on her data base, then made her notes.

*Impressions: I don't get the impression he's a serial. One-timer, though the style is serial. I hope I'm not wrong. Had a real strong sense that he knew them and felt he had done something to help them. He loved them. Something else: a smell. Chemical. Like a darkroom. I recognize the scent from the photo lab. Need to see if any of the evidence squad picked up any photographs that the family had done recently.*

Exhausted, she finally saved the file, exited and went to bed. Her last thought before falling asleep was of that family--in pieces--all piled together on the blood-soaked couch.

*Diana knelt in the blood and it covered her hands as she tried desperately to put the pieces back together, but they wouldn't stay. A disembodied voice kept saying, "I tried to put them together, too, but it didn't work. This was the only way." Her mind kept sliding in and out of the killer's mindset, and before long, she couldn't tell if she had been the one to cut them up, or if she was the one trying to put them together...or if the two were actually one. She felt strong, gentle hands on her shoulders and turned to look through tear-misted eyes at Vincent, who held out his arms to her. She threw herself into his embrace, wanting to hide in the circle of his arms...draw on his strength...but when she looked into his face, she saw in his eyes a mirror of herself and pulled away. Blood stained his white shirt...the blood from her hands. No, she thought, I can't let him see me like this. If he sees inside me, I'll disgust him; frighten him. She pulled away and ran. The faster she ran, the slower she seemed to go, and the harder it became. He was still behind her, hunting her; she knew he would catch her. There was a river, and she stopped to wash the blood away. If I clean myself, maybe he won't see me. But the more she washed, the more blood there was, until the river ran red with it. Looking up, she saw the vultures circling. I'm dying. This is killing me. I can't get clean.*

She woke sobbing, the tears soaking the pillowcase. She headed for the bathroom and yanked the cabinet open, frantically digging for the sleeping pills. When she'd found them, she took two, then stumbled back to bed. Pulling the covers over her shoulders, she curled into a fetal position and tried to sleep. Eventually, the pills worked their magic.



Vincent was sitting by the Mirror Pool as dawn broke. He'd been there most of the night. Last night's dream had confused him more than any of the others. He was



beginning to realize that in some way, somehow, he and Diana had formed a definite empathic connection, though he felt it very seldom. He assumed that because at night their minds were open, the bond had more freedom. *I was with her last night. I know it. But the dream was appalling. And she ran from me and wouldn't let me comfort her. She was afraid...but not of me. Of herself. Of letting me see her.*

He was frustrated. He wanted to protect Diana, but he didn't even know who or what she needed protection from. Besides, he knew instinctively that Diana would refuse his protection, even if he could offer it--at least the type of protection he'd offered Catherine.

Once, long ago, he'd killed for Diana--before they'd found Jacob. Since then, he'd realized that, as a rule, Diana didn't need his protection. She was careful. Very cautious. She protected herself. That had relieved him when he'd realized it--even as it also frustrated him now.

He thought back to the dreams he'd had since meeting her and wondered how long he'd been fighting this connection, unknowing.

Vincent sighed as he watched the stars disappear in the pool as the sun rose. *Catherine, what am I to do? This feeling I have.... I neither understand it, nor wish it. When I am with Diana it is like fighting hurricane winds. We battle half the time and the other half, anchor one another to reality. And when she touches me, Catherine...I fear myself. If I should ever harm her....*

There were other considerations as well, that Vincent's mind shied away from even thinking of. Diana was right, accusing him of making excuses. Knowing that he'd loved Catherine and not harmed her had eased--though not erased--his fear of harming Diana. What disturbed him as much or perhaps even more than that was the bond itself. It frightened him and drew him at the same time. This fear was strictly personal. He simply couldn't handle forming a bond again and then having it broken as it had been with Catherine. He wasn't sure he could survive it a second time. He wasn't sure he wanted to try.

He was very tired, and equally discouraged. He missed Catherine dreadfully. She'd always managed to say the right thing...and he'd been able to feel the intent behind her words. He missed knowing the right thing to do. And he missed Diana. Unlike with Catherine, when Diana was not with him he was truly alone, for he had no sense of her. *Except in our dreams.* He stared out over the water until his weary eyes closed. Before long, he slept, and he dreamed of Catherine. Only of Catherine. There was no sense of Diana.

*He and Catherine sat quietly near the falls, Catherine's head resting on his broad chest. Vincent sensed a great darkness around them, and he feared it, but when Catherine smiled up at him, his heart eased. "It's not the end, you know," Catherine told him. She placed her hand upon his heart. "I'll always be here for you, if you need me." Tears sprang to Vincent's eyes. "I've missed you so, Catherine. I've felt you near so many times--yet when I would reach out for you, there was nothing. It would only be a dream. Are you real, even now?" Her laugh rang out merrily in the cavern. "Of course I'm Real. Anyone loved by you can't help but be Real. And once you're Real,*

you can never be Unreal again. Becoming Real is painful, though. More than sometimes. I don't care what the Skin Horse says.<sup>5</sup>" She sobered a little and stroked his cheek. "I never had time to finish the job, with you. You still don't really believe that you deserve love." He looked down, and Catherine shook him gently to get his attention, then continued. "Believe in love, Vincent. Don't be afraid to accept the gifts life offers." She grinned mischievously and played with his hair. Taking his hand, she brushed at the fur on it. "You still have a lot of hair that hasn't been loved off, you know." Vincent laughed a little through his tears. "Does that mean I have to get loose in the joints and shabby, as well? And I hope my eyes don't drop out." Catherine was fading now, and Vincent panicked, but Catherine lifted her face to his and kissed him softly...the sensation like mist. "If you start falling apart, I'm sure Diana will put you back together. That's what love is about, after all." Vincent reached to hold her close, but there was nothing. She was gone, and he wept, brokenhearted.

"I can't, Catherine. Please. Please don't go. I need you."



Diana woke feeling disoriented, the effects of the sleeping pills making her sluggish, her mouth cottony. She remembered last night's dream and was truly frightened. What was Vincent going to see when he really saw her--the *inside* her? She thought of an old nursery rhyme: *My inside self and outside self are different as can be....* She knew that Vincent had still not accepted *his* inside self. How could he accept hers? Or would that make it easier for him: seeing the darkness in her? *Be careful what you wish for...it might just come true.*

Diana dressed and had a little toast with two cups of coffee. She promised her stomach a decent lunch, at least.

By the time she reached the station, she was beginning to feel almost human. She visited the evidence room and told Barney what she was looking for. They looked through photos which had been found in envelopes with the negatives. The photos hadn't come from a commercial photo lab. Someone had done them for the family. Diana could smell the developer...the same scent she'd smelled at the site. Her eyes met Barney's as she commented, "I think we've got something."

"Possibly." Barney grinned. "I know you, Bennett. If you say these are important, then they are." He stuffed the photos back in the envelopes and handed them to her.

Diana drove to the home of the wife's sister...the first on her list to talk to. She met with Mrs. Larkin, a pleasant, very normal housewife with 2.5 kids. The woman was still obviously struggling with her grief over her sister's violent death. Through careful questioning, and "listening" to the feelings behind the words, Diana found that their brother, Eric Reeder, had been institutionalized before the murders. He'd had a complete breakdown. He'd been released just days prior to the killings...and he was a photographer. Diana asked if he'd been upset by something within the family, but Mrs. Larkin stopped talking immediately and shook her head. "I don't think I'd better say

any more. I don't like this."

Diana understood, and thanked her. There was no point in distressing the woman any further. She had a pretty good idea of where she was headed, now.



Vincent was playing with Jacob. He had the child sitting on his lap while he repeatedly wound the old carousel for the baby to watch. Jacob was entranced by the movement and would reach out occasionally to touch the horses on the carousel gently as they circled past him.

Vincent was miserable. The dream of Catherine and loss of sleep had left him drained. He felt as though he'd lost her all over again. And yet, suddenly, his grief had a different texture, as he turned over and over in his mind the things Catherine had told him. But the "real" feeling of the dream reminded him all over again of how much he'd lost. Once more he was feeling guilty over not having been able to protect her. His mind and heart were also rebelling at the conflicting emotions he was experiencing concerning Diana. He tried very hard to keep his emotional state as level as possible so that he didn't disturb Jacob, but still, every once in awhile the child would glance up at him with serious blue eyes before going back to the carousel.

There was a soft call at the door, and Vincent looked up to see Eric standing there. He called the boy inside, glad for the company.

Eric sat quietly, watching Jacob, his myopic eyes large behind the thick lenses. Then, seemingly out of nowhere, he asked Vincent, "Do you still miss Catherine as much as you did, Vincent?"

Startled that the boy would even ask such a thing, Vincent was speechless a moment. Then suddenly he remembered the date. It was the anniversary of Ellie's death. Eric was remembering his sister. When Vincent answered, his voice shook just a little. "Of course I do, Eric. Just as I know you're missing Ellie."

Eric removed his thick glasses to wipe his eyes. "I wish so much I could go back and tell her I loved her. Even though I know she knew. I still feel guilty about telling her I hated her, Vincent. But I was just a little kid, y'know? And she'd promised me she'd never leave me."

Vincent sighed heavily and wiped at his own eyes. Jacob began crying a little as he picked up his father's sorrow, and Vincent settled him with difficulty. "I feel guilty too, Eric. I promised Catherine I'd always protect her. And in the end, I couldn't."

A silence settled, then Eric spoke softly--with the wisdom of a child just learning adult truths. "Remember, Vincent? You told me that sometimes a person can't always keep their promises. No matter how much they love someone."

Vincent stared into Eric's wide eyes...so defenseless without their shield of thick glass. He smiled and reached out to tousle the boy's hair gently. "Yes, Eric. I *do* remember. And maybe it's time for both of us to let go of the guilt. I think Ellie and Catherine would want that."

Eric replaced his glasses and they smiled at one another. Then Vincent felt Eric's surge of relief as the boy flung himself over Jacob to wrap his arms around his



friend's neck. "Thanks, Vincent."

The boy was gone, suddenly, in a rush of adolescent energy--leaving Vincent feeling a little bemused. "No," he said quietly, to himself. "Thank *you*, Eric...for reminding me. It helps."

A little later, Brooke, Mouse, and Jamie came to pick up Jacob, and Mouse and Jamie stayed to visit while Brooke took Jacob to Mary. As they were about to leave, Vincent asked Jamie: "Could you come back later, Jamie...after evening meal? I'd like to give you a message to take to Diana."

Jamie flushed a little, clearly delighted with the excuse to go see Diana. "Sure, Vincent. No problem."

When Jamie and Mouse left, Vincent went to his desk to compose a message for Diana.

When Jamie returned, Vincent gave her the missive and watched anxiously as she left. He restlessly counted the days until he'd be free to go Above, and despaired. He glared at his cast. *Four more days*. However, with her involved in a case again, she wouldn't have much time for him anyway. Somehow, that thought didn't make him feel a great deal better. If he could just get Above, he could at least watch her, be with her...be there for her if she needed him.

He sat, silently staring at the wall for an indeterminate period of time...not really thinking about anything. He was unutterably bored as well as anxious about Diana. He missed the children's chatter and their games, and decided to try to make it down to the Mirror Pool. He could at least watch the children while they swam.



As Vincent neared the pool, he could hear the shouts of the children echoing off the rock walls. He had been correct in his estimation of the time. Swimming class was in progress and if he was also correct in remembering who had swimming class this week, it would be Marcus trying to keep tabs on them. He heard a gruff voice sound in a yell ahead of him.

"Dean! Quit dunking Eva! She's squalling like you're killing her. Marjorie, go get Timmy before he goes any deeper."

Vincent came up behind Marcus, a heavy-set black man who reminded Vincent of Winslow, and the older man turned to grin at him. "Vincent! Good to see you. How's the leg?"

"Bothersome."

The two men watched the children playing for a short time, and Vincent remarked, "They are doing well. I see Timmy is becoming more adventurous." He nodded toward the six-year-old, who was swimming in an awkward dog-paddle toward the deeper part of the pool, with Marjorie right behind him. As older sister, Marjorie sometimes resented having to keep tabs on her brother, but overall, she did well.

Marcus chuckled a little, watching Timmy as he resisted Marjorie's efforts to make him come to the shallow side of the pool, then called out, "Timmy! Mind Marjorie." Both children headed back.

Overall, discipline was seldom a problem in the tunnels. No one wanted to be called before everyone else in common meeting to have punishment decided. It was far too embarrassing, so overt disobedience was rare.

While they had been watching Timmy, another of the children had moved into deeper water and began floundering. At the first call and feeling of distress, Vincent was already heading for the water, but Marcus grabbed him and pushed past--diving after the child, and all Vincent could do was stand there and watch. Marcus was perfectly capable, but his own inability to help merely brought to the surface more of Vincent's frustration. Once he was certain the child was safe, he left the pool and headed for Father's chamber. *Perhaps a game of chess....*



Diana spent the entire day chasing leads and never really pinned anything down. She thought that the wife's brother had killed them--and felt his actions had been prompted by a misguided sense of trying to "put the family back together." Apparently there had been a divorce in the works.

The day wore on and Diana was becoming more and more frustrated. She met with a couple of the victims' neighbors, then wearily headed home with what information she had. On the way home in her rattletrap of a car, she tried opening up to sense Vincent, but the nearness of the other drivers, with their emotions overlaying everything, her sense of him was merely another layer. She tried to sort it out, but his frustration and the similarity of the emotions of the drivers only added to her own misery. She built her block again. There was no point in making herself more miserable. *I'll try again later when I'm not so tired myself...and when I'm alone.*



Vincent and Father had been playing chess for several hours. Vincent had won one game fairly quickly, but the second was dragging on. His attention was wandering, and Father was winning. Shifting restlessly, Vincent eased to a more comfortable position, and tried to scratch under the cast with one long nail. It wasn't long enough. He reached out and sought the bond with Jacob and lost himself in that for a few minutes, comforting himself with the fact that the child was happy.

Father's voice cut into his thoughts. "You seem distracted, Vincent. Is there something wrong?"

Pulling himself back with a little difficulty, Vincent shook his head. "No, Father. I'm fine. Just tired of being unable to *do* anything."

"I suppose playing chess with an old man is not much to keep you occupied."

Vincent cocked his head and peered at Father, who was being blatantly ridiculous. "I enjoy playing chess with you, Father. You know that. But you know how difficult it is for me to be inactive. I cannot even care for my own son properly and have had to leave that to Mary. I cannot do my rounds or teach. I cannot even go see Diana...."

"Ah. And *there* is the root of the problem. How long has it been since you've seen her?"

Vincent fidgeted, a little unnerved by Father's gleeful tone. "I *saw* her briefly yesterday. It is not the same thing, and you know it. I need to get *out* of here...the park, her loft...anything. I feel caged. And I feel useless. If there were a security breach, I'd be of no use at all. I cannot believe I was so careless."

Father removed his glasses and stared at his son. Vincent could almost feel the gaze penetrating. "It's been three days since I placed that cast. When you broke your wrist, it took...oh...four to five days for the bone to set, and it was a comminuted fracture. I had figured a week for the leg because of the weight. You *know* how fast you heal. But the fracture *was* only hairline. I will remove the cast tomorrow and re-x-ray it...." He held up a hand at Vincent's look of hope. "But...if I deem it necessary, another cast will be placed. I won't have any arguments. And even if I remove it, you are going to have to watch yourself for a few more days at least. But it will give you more mobility." Father replaced his glasses. "By the way--checkmate."



Wearily, Diana dumped her carryall on the couch and checked her messages. There was one from Maxwell asking for a quick progress report, and one from Greg for the same. She called them both and told them what the status was, then made herself a sandwich. As she sat at the table eating rather listlessly, she glanced at the clock. *It's early yet. Could go see him.*

Even as she was thinking of the possibility, the buzzer sounded from downstairs. It was Jamie, with a message from him. She sent the elevator down, then waited impatiently for it to come up. When she pulled the accordion door back, Jamie's radiant smile greeted her.

"Hi, Diana." Jamie dug the note out of her pocket and held it out to her. When Diana almost grabbed it, Jamie laughed, causing Diana to blush.

*I guess I am kind of transparent.* "Thanks, Jamie. I was just thinking about maybe going Below to see him." Trying to look unconcerned, Diana wandered over to the window and opened the note.

*Dear Diana,*

*There is a song between us in the night, Diana, calling me...a pull I try to answer. Who is it that keeps nightwatch on my soul, reminding me that dark eventually gives way to light?*

*Is it you?*

*I miss you.*

*Vincent.*

Diana's knees turned to rubber. Gripping the windowsill, she stared down at the city below, watching the cars and pedestrians fighting over their usual piece of sidewalk or street, and blinked. *I should go to him. I should. I want to.*

She couldn't believe what she'd just read. *Nightwatch. He is aware. He knows about the connection. Oh, Vincent. Are you ready for this? Am I? Can't work tonight. Case is a bust anyway. I know who did it...just can't prove anything yet. Gotta see him.*

Suddenly making up her mind, she nodded to herself and told Jamie: "Thanks, Jamie. I'm going down."

After hustling Jamie out, with the girl teasing her about how it wasn't cool to let a guy know she was so interested, Diana went to take a shower. Thirty minutes later, she found herself in the alley checking to see if there was anyone around before ducking down a manhole. *Y'know, a year ago if anyone had told me I'd know the sewers better than any sewer rat, I'd have called them a liar.*

As she walked through the dark tunnel, she reached out to see if she could sense Vincent, and the touch when she felt it was like sunlight and shadows across her soul. There was a lot of pent-up frustration--there always was, with Vincent--but otherwise, he seemed quiet. If not contented, at least not unhappy. The touch felt good...comforting, and solid.

Diana passed a sentry point and stopped long enough to greet Brooke, then headed downwards toward the Hub. When she reached the entrance to Father's chamber, she peered in. She was about to announce herself, but Vincent had already heard her and turned.

"Diana," he breathed, and started to rise, but before he could, she was down the stairs and standing next to him. She barely noticed when Father left the chamber.

She stood there for just a moment, then sank to the hassock next to him. Looking up into the azure depths of his eyes, she found herself floundering, words awkward. "I missed you."

Vincent twirled the black king idly between thumb and forefinger and smiled enigmatically. "I'm glad. I've missed you as well."

She swallowed the lump that formed suddenly in her throat, and tried to speak. "I got your note."

Vincent placed both hands around her face, cradling it and tilting it up. His eyes were shadowed a little with concern. "I would not have sent it if I'd known it would upset you."

Diana stared a moment. Her own eyes filled with tears. "I'm not upset. I'm *not*, Vincent."

Putting the chess piece down, he reached out and drew her up and onto his lap, holding her gently. Child-like, she rested her head on his shoulder and closed her eyes as he stroked her back softly. He took one of her hands and cradled it in his, and at the edge of her consciousness she could sense the wonder in his mind at the difference in their hands. He ran the tip of one forefinger over her short-clipped, unpolished nails, and she was vividly reminded of her own inspection of *his* hands and nails the first time she'd seen him. She was so engrossed in watching him that she was startled when he

spoke. His words rumbled softly against her ear.

"You have been a gift to me, Diana. I have only recently realized how great a gift." They were still not looking at one another, and Diana had blocked herself. This was becoming too intense, and she was frightened once more to let him sense her feelings, so powerful were they. She was still too afraid to let him in...but so terrified of losing him. She trembled a little. He continued speaking, asking her gently:

"You're frightened?"

She nodded, scarcely moving her head, but she knew he understood. "Yes."

Vincent sighed heavily and one hand came up to stroke her hair. He rested his cheek against that silken flame. "I, too, am frightened. Just because I did not harm Catherine does not mean that I would never harm *you*. I have done things, Diana, that are unconscionable."

Diana felt the pain spreading and tears start. *What is wrong with me lately? All I can do is cry.* "I don't believe you are capable of harming me."

"And I cannot afford to believe you safe from me...not yet."

They were both quiet again, then Diana leaned down and kissed the tip of his nose. She was trying desperately to force her own fears aside to deal with his. Those were the most immediate. *One problem at a time.* "I'll find some way to convince you." She slid off his lap and held out a hand. "I can't stay long. Need to get back, but I'd like to peek in on Jacob before I go. Do you mind?"

Vincent rose, picking up his crutches, and shook his head. "No. I think it would be a good idea. He has missed you, and I need to go put him down anyway."

They walked slowly to the nursery to visit with Jacob, and Diana sat next to them on the nursery bed that Mary kept for her use, and for changing the babies. Vincent read Jacob a story that Diana knew he was far too young to understand at all, but the child listened intently to the rhythm of the sounds, and perhaps the emotion behind the words. As Vincent read, Jacob's eyes became heavier and he finally slept, but Vincent continued to the end of the story. Diana knew he was enjoying the reading just for its own sake...and because he knew she was enjoying the sound of his voice. He shut the book and put it aside.

"Diana. Would you take him and lay him down? It is difficult for me to rise with the cast, and I am afraid he would wake."

Diana took the child gently and held him for a few moments and brushed her fingertips delicately over the soft red-blond curls. She was only marginally aware of Vincent's eyes on her. *Sometimes I wonder who I love more intensely--Vincent--or his son.* She placed Jacob softly into the crib and covered him with the quilt against the chill of the tunnels. When she turned, she flushed a little, realizing Vincent was watching her intently. His gaze caught and held her.

"He loves you," Vincent said quietly. "He asks for you all the time. He does not understand yet that you do not live among us."

Diana's eyes trailed over Vincent as he reclined almost lazily across the bed, the only disruption of symmetry being the casted leg. He shifted a little and seemed uneasy under her scrutiny. Then she noticed something she hadn't noticed before. *His hair is so dusty! Usually it gleams like burnished gold in this light.* She wandered over to him

and sat on the bed, within the circle of his arm, and almost automatically that arm came up around her waist, holding her gently. She reached out and tousled his hair, and he closed his eyes as rock dust sifted down.

Vincent bowed his head in obvious embarrassment. "I know. I feel filthy. But there is no practical way for me to wash it until the cast is off and I can bathe or shower."

Diana considered carefully. An idea was taking shape in her mind. She really didn't have time for this, but if he would agree.... "Would you let me wash it for you?"

He looked up, startled expression completely endearing. "How?"

"Follow me."

Vincent followed Diana back to his chamber where she asked him to gather his shampoo and a towel, which he did. "Diana. You *said* you needed to get back. Perhaps...."

Diana shook her head. She wasn't letting him off that easily. "This sounds like a mercy mission to me. C'mon. To the bathing pool."

He followed slowly, and Diana opened herself briefly to his impressions--almost chuckling at the consternation. He didn't dare refuse, but he was embarrassed as hell...and fortunately, too flustered to sense *her*.

Diana made one side trip to a storage chamber to pick up a bucket and told him to go ahead.



Vincent entered the chamber with the bathing pool. Since it was late no one was there: he was relieved. He hadn't considered having someone else wash his hair. The thought was entirely alien to him. He wondered idly if Diana even remembered the way here. As he started to go look for her, she pushed aside the hanging leather sheet that served as a door.

Diana cocked her head, and the corners of her mouth lifted in a small smile. "You planning on leaving your shirt and vest on? They'll get wet."

He hesitated, then began fumbling with laces, too embarrassed to think for a moment. He realized what he was about to do, and stopped. "Diana. I...."

There was a tiny metallic sound as the bucket touched the stone floor, and Diana reached up to help him. "It's okay."

He stood stiffly while she unlaced his shirt and vest. His body was still, but his mind was whirling frantically. *I'm not ready for this.* He knew Diana was not completely ignorant of the appearance of his body. She had cared for him for three days while he was unconscious, after all. But it was very different being *awake* and having her see him. His hand came up and closed gently around hers. "Perhaps I can do this myself."

The laces on his shirt were open, and Diana worked her hand under the material and stroked the long, curling hair of his upper chest. Sea-green eyes lifted to his. "Maybe. But I would like to do it." She glanced back at the pool and pointed with her chin. "Besides, the water level is too low for you to reach without getting in. Let me



do this for you."

Vincent knew she was right. That was why he hadn't done it himself before now. He'd only hoped perhaps to dissuade her. Taking her hand back in his own, reluctantly removing it from its nest of golden fur, he backed off a pace or two, then released her. The vest slid off easily. He folded it carefully and put it aside. He turned back to her briefly, took a deep breath, and in one fluid motion removed his shirt. He avoided looking at her as he folded that as well, placing it atop the vest. When he did finally turn to gauge her reaction, she was standing with her arms crossed, hugging herself in the same gesture of defense she used so often. There was not a great deal of light in the chamber--only what was shed by the few candles that had been lit when they'd arrived, but he knew there was enough for her to see him clearly--and her expression puzzled him. He couldn't read her expression, and all he could sense of her was the usual fuzzy blankness. Her eyes were shadowed. Her voice came to him gently. "You're so beautiful, Vincent."

His heart was thudding in his chest so hard he felt surely she must hear it. He tried to distance himself to keep his actions appropriate. "How...how do you wish to do this, Diana?"

Seeming to wake from a trance, Diana shook her head a little. She surveyed the surroundings, then motioned for him to come over. "Lie on your back--here--with your head over the water. Then I can pull water with the bucket to pour over your hair."

Carefully, Vincent did as she requested, and watched her as she knelt next to him, leaning down to pull the water up. She pulled off her sweatshirt, revealing a soft white T-shirt underneath. He closed his eyes as she bent low across him to pour the water through his hair and lift the heavy mass to wet parts she couldn't reach. Twice, she did this to wet all of the hair, and twice her presence coming so close was almost too sweet for him to bear. He locked his fingers together across his stomach, tightly lacing them to keep his hands still. He heard a sound, and listened carefully. She was humming softly to herself, a gentle, calming tune.

Closing his eyes, Vincent listened, and found himself relaxing. She moved away momentarily--to retrieve the shampoo, he assumed--then was back. He felt her begin to work the shampoo into his hair, her fingers gently massaging his scalp and the back of his neck where the mane grew in a ridge down his upper back. He'd never imagined how relaxing it could be to have someone wash his hair. Vaguely, deep within himself, he could feel a sense of wonder that he was here, half naked, with Diana calmly washing his hair--and he felt none of the overwhelming desire for her he'd had at other times. *Perhaps there is hope for us after all.* He became so relaxed under her deft hands that he almost dozed off. He could hear an occasional tapped message on the pipes, but it was quiet except for Diana's soft humming and the sound of the water. He was a little startled when she caught his mane up to squeeze the water out, and he started to get up, rising to one elbow.

"Careful. You'll soak yourself." He stayed where he was, resting on his arm as she knelt behind him and dried his hair. He felt a surge of indescribable tenderness. She asked softly, "Feel better?"

Vincent turned, struggling to his feet, forgetful of the cast for a moment. "Yes.

Thank you."

Diana came close, reaching out tentatively to lay her hand on his chest. Her fingers traced the whorls and patterns of the fur that grew there. As suddenly as though someone had shattered a mirror, so was Vincent's peace shattered with a touch. A tide of desire and need rose so suddenly it frightened him, and he turned away from her. *Why? Why some times and not others?* But Diana wouldn't let him go. She caught his arm and came around to face him once more. "Diana...please. My control...."

"Is intact. Don't worry so." Her tone was a little bitter, and Vincent realized she was right. Although he still desired her, that need was now much more manageable. Sighing heavily, he said, "I felt as though someone had snatched me up and dropped me into the Abyss...then pulled me out again."

She chuckled and slid soft, warm arms around his bare waist, and laid her head on his chest. "That good, or bad?"

A little wonderingly, he replied, "Truly, I do not know." His breathing was still a little uneven, and he wondered about the sudden changes in emotions he'd been experiencing. Everything was so abrupt...as though a door would open, then slam closed. At times the desire would build slowly, but lately, most times it burst upon him as though through a broken dam. It was difficult to maintain any equilibrium.

Moving his cheek softly against her hair, he relished the feel of her soft breasts pressed against him. There was very little between them, just now. He murmured quietly, "It is late, Diana. You said earlier you could not stay late, and now you have. I have kept you far too long." Even as he spoke, his fingers traced the sweet curve of her back and he was reluctant to release her. But release her he did, forcing himself to comply with the necessity of her leaving. Bending to retrieve his shirt, he pulled it over his head. "I will accompany you a short way, at least."

Diana pulled her sweatshirt back on, and they walked slowly toward the nearest tunnel exit, making idle conversation. Vincent asked Diana about her case. He could tell she was uneasy and wished he understood the reason. "Why does the case disturb you, Diana?"

She shrugged. "I don't know, exactly. I just feel a sense of impending danger...a darkness. It's probably just my imagination. Don't worry. I'll figure it out."

They had come to an upward climb, and it was easier for Diana to go on alone. Before she continued on, she came to him and brushed his mouth with a warm, moist kiss, lips softly clinging. "Soon." She turned and strode quickly off around a corner and was lost to his sight. For the first time Vincent reached out and actively *tried* to sense her when she was not in his presence, but found nothing but blankness. Disappointed, he turned and made his way back to his chamber.



Diana's energy level dropped abruptly as soon as she stepped out of the elevator. It was very late, and she had to get up in a few hours. She was too restless to sleep, so she switched the computer on and pulled up her journal.



*Tonight I saw Vincent for awhile. Didn't really have time to go Below, but couldn't resist. Actually got him to take his shirt off so I could wash his hair for him. He's more beautiful than I remembered. What little I saw of him while I cared for him after the explosion on the Compass Rose, was hurried. I'd had too many other things on my mind to really appreciate him. At least we took a few baby steps. He knows there is a connection...I can tell from his note. I stayed blocked anyway. It was hard, but I had to. I know he felt my desire tonight when I dropped my barriers. He almost couldn't handle it, and I couldn't stop feeding my emotions to him. He knows now that he can be half-naked in my company and can have me touching him as I did tonight without arousing "the beast." At least as long as I block he has no problems with control. Moments of contact he can handle, but nothing extended. Damn. He's finally almost ready to try to stretch our relationship...leave the tightrope, and if he does, and if I try to share myself with him, he's going to lose that tight control..."lose himself." Total overload. I guess it's one step at a time. All I seem to be able to do right now is project my feelings onto him or block him completely. That's great. Now I have someone who can feel what I feel and number one, I'm afraid of letting him see too deeply inside of me, and number two, if I do let him sense me it drives him crazy.*

Chin in hand, Diana stared at the screen. *Damned if I do, damned if I don't. Now ain't that the damndest thing?* She sighed and saved the file, exited, and cut off the computer. It was too late to work and she was beat anyway. She fell into bed without undressing and was asleep in moments.



It took Vincent longer to get to sleep. He lay in bed, cast outstretched, the other leg bent at the knee. In his hand rested Catherine's rose, his thumb tracing the hard porcelain petals, absently noting every whorl and even the small chip on the bottom petal. He opened his mind wide to feel everyone around him, and the faint hum of all the sleeping minds reassured him. *Everyone. I can feel them. Not intensely, but they are there. A presence. Why do I not sense her? I know there is a connection.* He tried once more to touch the living essence of the woman who was becoming more than a friend...and found a presence! *There!* He closed his eyes and let the feeling wash over him. *Asleep. She sleeps. And she is quiet, for now. At peace.* He was enthralled.

Never before except with Catherine had he been able to touch and hold a presence from a distance, except with Jacob, and Jacob's bond was still tenuous and childlike. It had been so long since he'd felt anything like this. Tears stood in his eyes. His hand closed tightly over the rose. This feeling reminded him forcefully of Catherine...but it was different somehow. Catherine's moods had colored his every moment, waking and sleeping, but softer, gentler. Different. Just as Catherine was different from Diana. This feeling was powerful. Compelling. But it was intermittent and extremely rare. *That explains the pendulum of my emotions lately, and enforces my belief that during our dreams the limits I have placed upon myself are gone, and the bond is facilitated. When I feel her desire, it joins with mine...but why so intermittently?*

*And why, when I actively try, can I still not sense her most of the time?* Frustrated at his inability to solve the puzzle, Vincent settled back into the pillows and tried to sleep. The rose was still tightly clutched in his hand.

*Diana came toward him through the park, the sunshine glinting in her hair. She was riding a glistening white unicorn with a gold key suspended around its neck on a scarlet ribbon. He sensed her amusement, though he wasn't sure why she was so amused. Vincent already felt a sense of wonder at the sunshine, the unicorn, and Diana, so he was not surprised when the unicorn came to him fearlessly and rested its head on his shoulder. He reached up and absently scratched the animal's neck under the long silken mane. Vincent glanced down at his other hand and noted he was holding a long-stemmed red rose...a bud...still tightly closed. After a moment, he lifted his eyes to Diana's, and his hand raised to give her the rose. Their fingers met and the rose unfurled before their eyes.*



Music was playing somewhere, and Diana wished fervently that it would stop. When she woke completely, she realized that music was from her alarm. She stumbled out of bed and headed for the shower, hoping it would revive her.

As she showered, she closed her eyes and let the warm water wash over her--and thought of the dream last night. She smiled a little. Some of the things that popped into their dreams were strange, even disturbing...but last night had been fun. She didn't know what Vincent had contributed, but she knew where the darned unicorn had come from. She chuckled a little and felt almost as though she'd been transported *into* her game.

She'd think of the dream again later and try to understand what it meant. Right now, she had to get her mindset onto the hunt for the killer. Today, she was questioning John Lawler--the husband's brother.

She finished dressing and raided the refrigerator. There wasn't much, as usual, so she decided to pick up something at a fast food place on the way. She thought wistfully of William's blueberry pancakes.

Shrugging her carryall over her shoulder, she entered the elevator and slapped the down button.



Vincent sat a little tensely on the cot in the hospital chamber while Father used the small saw to remove the cast. Vincent grimaced. The sound of the sawteeth cutting through the plaster set his teeth on edge.

"Only a minute or so more, Vincent. I'm assuming you can wait that long, at least."

Vincent tried to relax. He forced himself to unclench hands that had wrapped themselves around the edge of the cot, and he watched as the sawblade bit its way through the last quarter-inch of the cast. Before Father could even turn off the saw,







Vincent had pulled the cast apart and tossed it aside. He began a thorough job of scratching his leg.

"Itches a little, does it?" Father grinned as he watched his son repeatedly rake his nails through the long hair on his leg.

"Um. I thought it would drive me insane. I even tried chopsticks to scratch the itch, but they never reached."

Father X-rayed the leg and found it to be healed, which didn't surprise either of them.

"I still want you to be careful," Father cautioned. "According to the films, the bone has knit, but the muscles will be a little stiff, even after just a few days of disuse...although after only four days, it amazes me that it could be healed at all. Even just a hairline fracture should take a great deal longer than that to heal. Your recuperative powers never cease to amaze me."

Sliding off the cot, Vincent tested the leg and found it sound. "May I have my duties back now, Father?"

"Only the teaching and duty roster. Sentry and maintenance rounds you will still leave to Cullen and Mouse for a few days yet, at least."

Vincent nodded agreeably. *Anything. Just get me out of here!* He wasn't about to mention to Father that he fully intended to go Above for a walk and to see Diana. He was quite sure that climbing buildings would definitely be listed on the "too strenuous" list. "Very well. May I go?"

"I suppose. Just please try not to fall into any more holes for awhile."



All during the interview with John Lawler, Diana was distracted by the man's dislike of his brother-in-law. She did, however, get the information they needed. Eric Reeder was definitely their man, and Lawler was more than happy to give them whatever assistance they needed to get the search and arrest warrants. After several hours down at the station and a still longer wait on the judge, Diana found herself across the street from Reeder's apartment building. Procedure had dictated backup, and that was fine with Diana. She had a very uneasy feeling about this one. The officer accompanying her was Charles Hansen, a young man she knew to be reliable.

"Reeder is just out of the institution," she told Hansen. "They released him reluctantly because he was still so depressed. I just don't feel good about this, for some reason."

"From what you've told me, the guy's a time bomb waiting to go off again. You sure you want to do this?"

Diana nodded. She was very uneasy. "Yeah. Let's go in, Charlie."

Reeder was ready for them, and when they forced their way inside, they found Reeder standing on a stool with a noose around his neck--holding a loaded .38. He made it apparent that he had every intention of committing suicide--and taking them down with him.

Diana felt Reeder's confusion and despair, and she couldn't help feeling sorry for

the man. She wanted to try to talk him down. She nodded to Charlie, then laid her gun down. Raising her hands, she started toward Reeder slowly. "Eric, c'mon. There's no sense in this. We can help you." She was unprepared when he raised the gun to fire.

As Reeder raised the gun, Charlie saw and shot immediately, and Reeder's bullet lodged in the wall instead of striking Diana. As Reeder fell, the noose broke his neck. The backup squad had moved in at the shot, but everything was over before they got there.

Diana was shaky...not from fear, or reaction...but from anger with herself. The moment she'd realized that Reeder was about to shoot, and she had no gun to defend herself, she'd found herself dropping her block and *projecting* everything she'd felt just then to Vincent. Not because she'd wanted to call him, but because in that moment, fearing it to be her last, she'd wanted to be with him. The bond reached out, almost a tangible presence, touching him, wrapping around him, and she cast all her fears and hopes into him. She could feel his response...and immediately, she realized what she was doing and withdrew, throwing up her barrier up once more. Whatever the reasons for her "calling" him...he would've come, otherwise...cast or no cast. And she couldn't let that happen.

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Vincent was on his way to his chamber when he felt a wave of shock, fear, and confusion from Diana...mixed with anger and sorrow. Her presence was so real to him he almost felt he could reach out and touch her physically. The emotions were crushing. Though the intense barrage lasted only a second, it shook him. *Something has happened. Something terrible.* He knew from the contact that Diana was not at home, and that the danger was over, so there was very little he could do at the moment. That thought distressed him terribly, but he knew he had no choice but to wait until later and go to her once she was home.

He leaned against the rock wall, letting it support him until he recovered. *What was that? Why does she persist in blocking me out...pushing me away? I have no power to protect her from anything...least of all from herself.*

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Charlie called for the meat wagon to pick up Reeder, then he and Diana examined the apartment for evidence. They found a darkroom setup in one bedroom, and pictures of the slain family all over the walls. All the pictures were family pictures of togetherness. They gathered the evidence and called for the meat wagon to come pick up Reeder. After the body was bagged and tagged, Charlie drove Diana back to the station, where they met briefly with Greg Hughes.

Greg took one look at Diana and grabbed his coat. "C'mon, Di. I'm takin' you home. Let Charlie take care of the paperwork."

For once, Diana didn't argue. On the trip to her apartment she huddled against the car door, barely aware of Greg at all. *I'm tough, she thought. Real tough. First*

*time in ages that I've come close to biting it and I yell for rescue...makes no difference that I yell silently...it's yelling just the same. I never would've done that before. Before I met him, that is. I can't be dependent on anyone least of all him. I'll get myself dead that way. Like Dad. Either that, or I'll drag him into trouble every time somebody wants me dead or out of the way.*

They pulled up to her apartment.

Greg came with her up to the loft and made some coffee. Diana just stood by the window, looking out. When he brought her a cup of coffee, she took it without looking up. "Thanks, Greg."

"What is it, Diana? What's bothering you?"

She shrugged. "Misjudged him. Wasn't careful enough."

"You can't always be right."

That made her furious. "I *have* to be right! I have to protect myself. "Me."

He lifted his hands in surrender. "Hey. Truce. That's what partners are *for*. You've just been workin' alone too long. It's okay, kid."

She got up, moved over to the window and stood hugging herself. She felt completely defenseless. Greg reached out to embrace her. Hesitantly, she leaned into his shoulder, shuddering a little. Her block was holding, otherwise she couldn't have tolerated the contact at all. But she desperately needed *some* kind of contact. If it had been anyone else other than Greg, she would never have allowed the hug. But Greg had known her for too long. At work it was strictly professional, but whenever he could, he was still "Uncle Greg," her old friend, who had helped teach her most of what she knew about police work.

Even then, Diana couldn't tolerate the contact for long. "Uncle Greg" or not, Greg Hughes was still her boss, and Diana was ashamed of herself of showing her weakness. After a moment, she pulled away. "Thanks, Greg. Guess I just needed a hug." She tried to smile. Felt it fall flat. "I'm okay. Really."

Greg looked unsure. "I guess." He picked up his hat off the couch where he'd tossed it and walked to the elevator. After he'd hit the button, he looked back. "Diana. Remember. You're not your Dad. But you *are* fallible. I still wish you'd consider working with a partner."

*That* made Diana smile. It put her back on familiar ground. Old arguments. "No way. One slip, Greg. That's all it was. It'll just make me more cautious."

Greg just shook his head and got in the elevator. "Okay. Take care, kid."

"Bye, Greg."

Diana watched as Greg disappeared down the elevator shaft. Tears blurred her eyes as she turned toward the stairs, knowing Vincent would be there. *He's probably been waiting since dark.*

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Vincent arrived while Greg was there, comforting Diana. He was a little surprised at himself for the strange sensation he felt, watching the man hold her...the way she settled so comfortably against him. Something twisted inside him.

After the man left, Diana turned, and he saw she was crying. He didn't know what to do...what to think. He tried to sense her, and felt nothing. Just a blank fuzziness with no life beyond it. He felt like roaring his frustration. Anger and jealousy warred with his desire to comfort her. And his inability to sense her only consolidated these emotions into a tight knot of pain. Summoning all his control, he tapped gently on the window and was rewarded by Diana's tear-streaked gaze. He watched as she hastily wiped her eyes and headed for the stairs, and he turned to the door to meet her.

As Diana stepped through the door to the roof, Vincent forced himself to move quietly and normally, not to rush to her and simply remove her from this place...to take her away with him to where he knew she would be safe, and secure. He swallowed convulsively and found his voice. "Diana."

She stood near the door, arms tightly wrapped around herself. "Your cast is off." Her voice was flat and sounded cool.

"Yes."

She fidgeted. "How long have you been here?"

"Long enough." He wasn't about to ask her any questions or give away any information, though he ached to know. *Trust. There has always been trust between us. I must trust her now. But will she trust me enough to give me the truth? To tell me what is wrong?*

He couldn't believe that this feeling that was washing over him was simply because she'd allowed someone else to comfort her. He blinked and shook his head, a little ashamed with the realization that he was actually jealous.

Diana moved past him to the parapet and stared out across the city. "That was Greg Hughes. My boss. He knew my father, and has known me a long time."

Vincent moved to stand beside her and watched as the breeze lifted the strands of her hair and blew them across her face. He tried, with difficulty, not to let his jealousy show. He was still a little amazed at feeling that way at all. "I see." He felt a small shaft of amusement...and momentarily was unsure if the feeling was his own or Diana's, but when he actively tried to sense her, he felt nothing. But she did *look* amused...and embarrassed.

"I think you *did* see...and that's the problem. Isn't it?" she asked quietly.

Vincent turned away and his hands curled tightly into fists, claws turned inward.

"What was it exactly that I saw, Diana?"

A heavy sigh preceded her answer. "He was comforting me. I had a hard day."

Turning to her, Vincent stared, and she looked away. He said gently, "Tell me."

She shook her head, looking unbelievably miserable. "It's nothing, Vincent."

Really. It just got kind of rough today. That's all."

Vincent put his hand on her shoulder. "Today I felt you. Something terrible happened. But I couldn't come to you. The feeling was gone almost immediately."

Diana nodded, staring into his eyes, her look almost challenging. "I know. I'm an empath, too, Vincent. I didn't want you to come. I don't want that for us...ever.... I defend myself."

He startled just a little. *Of course.* More pieces of the puzzle fell into place. The amazing leaps of knowledge in her cases...things he couldn't figure out just from

the evidence at hand. *No wonder she is so solitary.* And he also knew now beyond a shadow of a doubt that the bond worked both ways...and why. He felt relief, and a certain exultation that he didn't quite understand. But he *was* beginning to understand Diana's desperation this evening. *She is an empath...and I never knew.* She'd shut herself off from him. He wondered briefly how long she'd known of the bond, and why she'd hidden it. Why...and even *how.* He forced his mind back to the original problem. "You needed me, Diana. It is not wrong for you to need me."

Her tone became hard, and she pulled away. "Not *that* way. Never again. You killed for me once. It won't happen again--not if I can help it. I refuse to use you as a guard dog. I don't need one."

Vincent drew her, resisting, into his embrace. Nuzzling her hair, he whispered into the long tresses, "Why have you hidden yourself from me for so long? Is the thought of a bond with me so very terrible?"

She shook her head slightly, then looked up into his face. "No. Not terrible. But a little frightening...and confusing. For months now, I've felt as though we are two moths beating ourselves to death against a pane of glass that separates us from the flame. If the glass were suddenly to disappear, we would simply rush into the flame and be consumed, but if it remains, we'll continue beating ourselves against it. That pane of glass is my block...my barriers...and all the years of denial and pain that both of us have behind us. The bond is the fire. I don't know if there is an answer." She raised a tear-streaked face to his. "I won't have you killing for me...as you did for Catherine. Not after all you've told me. It scared me when I automatically called to you today."

Vincent's thumb traced the track of her tears. "You didn't need me, then. Not really."

She glanced up, looking startled.

"When I sensed you, I felt more startlement and shock than true fear...though there *was* fear in that first moment. You were in danger, but the situation was under control, was it not?"

She nodded, and watched him speculatively. "Yes. I had backup."

He shrugged and wrapped her tightly in his embrace. "You are careful. But if you ever *do* truly need me, Diana, I would be very upset with you if you allowed yourself to be killed simply because you wished to spare me." He bent slightly and laid his face against the silk of her hair. The fingers of one hand traced the line of her shoulder while his other arm drew her closer.

To Vincent's astonishment and dismay, Diana pulled away. "There's more, you know, about the connection we share, Vincent, that worries me. The way we both would react to it when you kill...how our emotions could get caught in a feedback loop...an emotional echo. And what that could do to you." Tears glistened on her cheeks and she blinked to clear her eyes. "That feedback loop also works the same way with our desire...my desire. You know that..you've felt it. And...there are so many other things. Personal things that I don't know if either of us can deal with."

Vincent dropped his arms to his sides, feeling a little defeated. She was right. *So many problems.* "I know. But perhaps...together...we can deal with the problems. Apart, we can do nothing but remain miserable."

Desperation in her eyes, Diana's gaze met his. "But what if all I bring you is unhappiness, Vincent? I've tried so hard not to be intrusive...to let you heal after losing Catherine. And now that *you* seem more settled and are actually *looking* at me...noticing *me*...I'm scared to death."

"I am frightened as well, Diana." He stared out over the city for a few moments, then changed the subject. If they continued to dwell on their fears, nothing would ever be accomplished. Facing one's fear was a fine thing, but letting it rule you was another. He'd learned that much at least. "Winterfest is in two days. I would be honored if you would accompany me this year."

"Winterfest?" Diana's voice was very small in the darkness. She was still very unsure of herself, he knew.

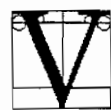
Vincent was not only unsure of himself, he was embarrassed as well. He realized Diana had known of last Winterfest. She'd been Below enough by then to know everything that was going on. Father had wanted her to join them, but Vincent had steadfastly refused to invite her. "I'm afraid Winterfest was a very muted affair for everyone last year because of me. I could not bear to attend. I tried, but was only able to remain a few minutes. I thought to invite you then, but feared that if you came, I would be trapped there...out of politeness. That would hardly have been fair to you. Father was angry with me. He felt you had earned your place with us." He bent his head, hiding behind the golden fall of mane. When she didn't respond, he glanced up in time to see her smile. Encouraged, he asked again. "Would you honor me by attending Winterfest with me, Diana? You are welcome of course, to come alone. You belong with us. But it would please me to have you there...beside me."

Without reservation, now, Diana moved into the circle of his arms, and he closed them around her. When he felt the small affirmative movement of her head against his chest, he was elated. Though he could still sense nothing from her, now he was less puzzled about the intermittent nature of this new bond. And for now, even without the bond, he could tell she was exhausted, both emotionally and physically. On impulse, he swept her up in his arms and carried her down the stairs. He was rewarded by a series of small giggles as he deposited her on her bed and covered her gently with the comforter, tucking it in around the edges. "Sleep well. And if you dream, know I will be with you, for better or worse. I will see you tomorrow evening for Winterfest."





## REFLECTIONS OF INNOCENCE



incent knelt beside Diana's bedside, holding her hand until she fell asleep.

Once she was deeply asleep, he ventured tentatively to try and touch her sleeping mind. He smiled softly as he felt her presence curled quietly and peacefully within. He knew that as she slept that presence would slowly uncurl and reach out to him. The thought stirred him deeply. Withdrawing, so as not to intrude, he held her hand a few moments longer, then rose to leave.

After leaving Diana's loft, Vincent rambled through the park, and took his time going home, but once there he retrieved Jacob from the nursery and settled to write in his journal.

*So. Diana is an empath. I should have known. The signs were all there, had I not been so long steeped in my own grief that I never looked past the end of my nose. She is so solitary. She works alone, always. She has no social life. How has she managed, Above? She says she blocks me...she must block everyone else, as well. How sad for her. I know from experience how difficult it is, living "on the surface of things," when the touch of the life around you is as necessary as breath. It is a blessing, however, that she is able to place barriers between us; if not for that buffer, there would be no control, or peace, for either of us, I am certain.*

Pausing, Vincent reflected on the last year, and squirmed a little, thinking of how open he had been to her. *No wonder she knows me so well. Knowing how to block could be useful at times.* He went back to his writing, trying to finish capturing his thoughts.

*It is interesting...the differences in my relationships with Catherine and Diana. With Catherine, the bond formed first, before I ever even allowed myself to dream of touching her physically at all. And for so long...even to the end, I feared that. With Diana, for so long I have had nothing but the physical touch of her. All I knew of her was the physical Diana, and so our relationship has evolved differently. I suppose that is why I am so aware of her. And now there is the bond as well...and that is now what frightens both of us more than anything else. Life is very strange.*

He closed his journal with a thump. *To bed...to our dreams. For now, I know that they are truly ours, and not mine alone.*

Vincent undressed, blew out the candles and slid into bed under the quilts. He lay in the dark, his eyes open, surveying his surroundings. His night sight showed him a world without color...of grey tones. He found himself missing the brightness of Diana's hair. He closed his eyes and tried to relax. He allowed himself the luxury of "listening in" on his son's peace, and let it lull him to sleep.

*Again, Vincent dreamed of the unicorn. It stood on a hill in the sunshine, and Diana sat next to it. As he approached, the unicorn slowly lowered itself, to lay its head in her lap. Diana reached out and took Vincent's hand, and as he knelt beside her, the unicorn slowly disappeared.*

Vincent woke after the dream...startled by its clarity. He lay in the dark, listening to Jacob's quiet breathing and the rumble of a subway train passing far overhead. He opened his mind, searching softly for any sense of Diana, and felt her peacefully sleeping. He rose and padded to his desk and opened his journal to make an addition.

*We dream of unicorns and sunshine. Improbable things for me to associate with. I must try to remember to ask Diana about her dreams.*

He closed the journal and went back to bed, satisfied that he'd put into words what was bothering him, so he would remember later. He slept peacefully the rest of the night.



When Diana woke the following morning, she called Greg Hughes to make sure he didn't have anything for her. Finding herself free, she then took a quick shower and washed her hair. Gathering the clothes she meant to wear for Winterfest, she headed Below. She couldn't bear the thought of waiting until evening. Perhaps she could be of some assistance.

The deeper she went, the more tapping she could hear. The messages were really flying today. Everyone was busy.

Whenever she came to a sentry point, she would stop and check with the sentry on duty to say hello. When she finally reached the Hub, she asked Jamie if there was still a free guest chamber, and dropped her things off in the one the girl indicated.

"Who needs help?"

Jamie laughed and pushed her untidy blond hair back out of her eyes.

"Everybody. Anybody. Take your pick."

"Vincent?"

"He's working in the Great Hall. He and Mouse are helping Cullen repair one of the tables. I'm helping William in the kitchen...he always needs help. And Mary and Brooke have the babies."

Diana considered the ups and downs of peeling potatoes over changing diapers on crying babies, and decided that peeling potatoes would be easier on the nerves. She threw an arm around Jamie's shoulders. "C'mon. Let's go see what else William needs."



By the time Vincent finished with the table and the chandeliers in the Great Hall and had his shower, he was ready for William's evening meal--hasty though he knew it would be tonight. He was anxious to see Diana.

He stopped by for a brief visit with Jacob. He knew Mary and Brooke would have already seen to the children's baths and dinners, but he wanted to see his son before bed. He was delighted when he heard Diana's voice reading to the children. He hadn't expected for her to be here. He leaned in the doorway and watched, knowing she was aware of his presence.

Jacob sat in her lap, clinging to a loose strand of red hair, and a circle of other children sat at her feet. When the story was over, Diana shooed them off to bed and stood, shifting Jacob to her hip. The boy turned and waved cheerfully to his father, who came over to take him from Diana.

"The children enjoyed the story. You read well."

She blushed. "I like kids."

Vincent turned his attention to his son, giving him a hug and listening to the boy's excited, but unintelligible description of the story Diana had read. The child's delight and contentment wove its way through the bond, and Vincent absorbed it gratefully. When Jacob yawned and rubbed his eyes, Vincent said quietly, "It is time for bed, son." Vincent placed Jacob in his crib in the nursery and kissed him goodnight. The child settled immediately as his father tucked him in. Vincent knew Mary would care for the child in the morning during the last-minute preparations for the celebration.

He stood, staring down at Jacob as the child curled under the small quilt. He felt Diana's arm slide around him, and his arm moved automatically to encircle her. He glanced down to find her smiling up at him.

"I suppose we should go eat, or William will put it all away," she said gently.

"Yes. He's not overly patient with laggards when he's busy."

They walked slowly, hand in hand, to the kitchen, where they managed to talk William out of a couple more servings. Taking the sandwiches and a thermos with them, they walked down to the falls.

They ate in companionable silence, relaxing from their hectic day. When they were finished, Diana leaned against him and they watched the falls.

"I love this place, Vincent," Diana murmured. "It's the first place you showed me when you brought me down here for the Naming Ceremony. I remember how your emotions changed as you told me of growing up here, and swimming there, under the falls."

Vincent didn't answer at first, and when he did, he drew her in closer. "You sensed me even then, and I knew nothing of it. I do not understand, Diana, how it is that I never knew. How have you kept me from knowing?" He couldn't help feeling a little upset with her, that she'd known of the bond for so long and managed to keep it from him.

Diana took his hand, curling her fingers around his. "It wasn't hard, at first. Between your grief and your problems relearning to control your empathy, you were very self-absorbed. Then, too, I think you feared another bond: you feared being hurt that way again--to become so close, and to lose it. You were going through a lot, and I

didn't want to add to your pain. You needed time to heal." She gripped his hand a little harder, squeezing gently, and hid her face in his layered clothing. "And I learned to block long ago."

"I see. I understand now, why the connection is so intermittent. It has puzzled me from the first that I couldn't sense you. And you were correct. It *was* a blessing for me at first. Having a place of peace. But why do you continue blocking me now? I am no longer grieving as I was, and I know of the bond."

She pulled away and shrugged. "It's part of who I am. *What* I am, Vincent. It's protection, and I can't give it up, just like that." She moved her hands in a waving gesture, indicating the entire tunnel system. "This is your world. You grew up sensing everyone, and everyone loves you...yet although you don't block, you hide in other ways. You leave, you escape at times." She looked up and sighed. "Up there...in my world...there are so many people, Vincent. So many emotions crashing in, and most of them are not benign...and there's nowhere to escape to. I had to learn to block to stay sane. It's automatic. Defensive. That's part of it. It's the 'letting people in' that's hard for me, now."

He took that in. Digested the information. Yes, he could understand what she was saying. But that wasn't all of it, and he knew it. "I understand. But you say, *part of it*. What is the rest?"

She hugged herself, once more going to defensive mode. "Things will never be the same for us as it was with you and Catherine. I'll always block you sometimes. I won't be able to just *let you in*. And even if I could, I'm not sure I'd want to. I'd be scared to."

He turned her toward him and took her face in his hands. "Why, Diana?" She tried to pull away, but he wouldn't allow it. "Why?"

"Because, dammit! When I work my cases, I get inside the minds of monsters...and they come to live inside me. When it's over, they may be gone, but the emotions aren't. I hunt them...and I'm good at it. But I lose myself...more every day." She was crying now, and he pulled her close, cradling her head on his shoulder.

He held her tightly, feeling her shudder. He knew how it felt to have a monster living inside you. To lose yourself to that monster. He understood Diana's fear: it was his own...but he still wouldn't let it go. "Do you not wish the bond, Diana? Do you wish we had no connection?" He needed to know. He thought that perhaps she was as unsure as he was.

When she answered, she sounded puzzled. "I really don't know how to answer that. I want the bond. Need it. I can't imagine being without it, now...or without you. But it *scares* me," she finished plaintively. "No. It *terrifies* me because we have no choice, and I'm used to having choices."

He sighed wearily. "And it frightens you because you fear my leaving. Diana, believe me. I will not leave. As you say, *we have no choice*. The bond exists, and the pull is too great to ignore." He tried to make her laugh then, to lighten the situation. "Besides. You would only find me again. After all--I have no place to go." He nudged her, and she did finally chuckle.

"Guess you're right." She turned and placed her palm against his cheek and

kissed him quickly. "I suppose we're stuck with one another, huh?"

He smiled sympathetically. "Yes. It appears so. Does that thought distress you?" She shook her head, and he reached out, tracing the long line of her neck. "Diana, know this. The bond is...important...needful, I think...for both of us. Yet, even without it, still I think we would be right where we are, now." Her gaze met his as she raised her eyes. "There is much between us, Diana, and we are still *becoming*--still growing. We grew together first from my need and your desire to help me--then with friendship and respect...and not simply because of the bond. Whatever it is that we are *becoming* is a living, growing entity in itself, and the bond is merely one evolution of it." She shivered, and he said quietly, "We have time to learn where the wonder will lead us. But for now, we should retire for the night. We are both tired and tomorrow is Winterfest." Vincent rose, holding a hand out to Diana, and they walked slowly to her guest chamber. On the way, Vincent asked her gently: "Do you dream of unicorns?"

She glanced up at him and blushed. "Yes. Unicorns and sunshine, roses...and you."

He smiled mysteriously. "There are many myths and beliefs about unicorns, Diana."

They stopped outside her chamber. "I know. They symbolize innocence. That's why I was so delighted in the dream. Supposedly only virgins can catch unicorns, yet I was riding one."

He chuckled. "I do not believe that even *I* qualify at this point."

She traced his lower lip with her fingertip, then smiled. "Perhaps it simply signified innocence. Despite everything, you are the most innocent man I know."

"Then what would the rose signify?" Vincent asked, in his most innocent voice.

Diana blushed and looked away. "Red roses signify love...and passion."

He cleared his throat and looked down. "Actually, although unicorns signify innocence, there is also a sexuality inherent in the association between the unicorn and the virgin." He reached up with one long-taloned hand and brushed the strands of red hair away from her face. "The unicorn symbolizes many things, and the connotations have become confused through the passage of time. Mostly, the unicorn is magical, and makes us believe in magic. Innocence earned does not die, Diana."

Diana stood quietly, lost in Vincent's gaze. There was an aura of quiet and peace around him at this moment...a sense of innocence that had, indeed, been earned. Finally, she nodded almost imperceptibly and whispered. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Diana." He smiled gently as she turned to enter the chamber, then walked slowly to his own.



Diana changed into another of her old sweatshirts. She curled up under the quilts and blew out the candles. She lay in the dark chamber, feeling a little odd. She'd never stayed Below before. It was disquieting, listening to the rumble of the subway and the musical tapping of the pipes...quieter now, with everyone settling for bed. Stranger



still, to her, was knowing that Vincent was just down the passage from her...so near, and yet so far. She knew that as she slept, the sense of him would fill her, and his dreams and hers would become one. Rather than disturbing her, the thought was comforting, and she closed her eyes and slept.



Vincent, too, was thinking of how near Diana was, and yet how far. He tried to read for awhile, but the poetry only reminded him of the newness and the uniqueness of their relationship: so different from what he'd had with Catherine--yet so powerful and magical in and of itself. He wondered if they were both being foolish, believing in dreams...when in reality both of them were so unsure of this relationship. Dreams were safe. There, one could believe in magic. In their shared dreams, he and Diana were revealing themselves to one another--yet in reality, they were still hiding behind their customary shields.

Vincent put aside the book with a sigh, and blew out the candles. He reached out to try to touch Diana, and found her sleeping...though her emotions were turbulent. He closed his eyes and tried to sleep, and though he tossed and turned for awhile, eventually sleep did overtake him.

*He hunted, panting heavily in the darkness. The shadowy forest drew him, and all his senses were alert. There was an elusive presence ahead, and though he knew not what it was he sought, he knew it was there...ahead. The scent of the prey stirred his aching body into even more feverish effort. He ran, dodging the branches, pulling them loose as they caught at his cloak. There was a shaft of sunlight striking the clearing ahead, and they stood there--the woman and the unicorn. Diana's hair shone against her own pale skin and contrasted with the glistening white of the unicorn. Breathless, heart pounding, Vincent advanced, and they awaited his coming. Vincent could feel the Other. The Beast within him. Aroused from the hunt and desirous of his prey. His nostrils flared, taking in the subtle musk of the woman, like fresh-turned earth, and the sun-drenched light of the unicorn. Suddenly Vincent could see the Other--separate from himself--pacing beside him. The beast advanced, not upon the woman, but upon the unicorn. In frozen terror, Vincent watched--knowing what the outcome must be...and fearing it. But to his astonishment, the Other merely knelt at the feet of the unicorn. Vincent found himself weeping, as he slowly, almost reverently, entered the clearing. When he reached his dark half, he put a hand out and touched him on the shoulder. The mane of tangled hair turned, and the Other faced him with wide-eyed innocence, then slowly faded from sight. Vincent turned, to find that the unicorn, too, was gone, and only he and Diana remained...within a mirror-like enclosure. The park was gone, the sunshine...everything was gone except themselves and the reflective mirrors. Taking Diana in his arms, Vincent lowered his mouth to hers in a searching kiss, and the mirrors shattered, scattering rainbows.*





Don't  
Cry

The following morning everyone was up early working. The pipes were singing their messages, and footsteps sounded up and down tunnels and stairwells. Diana had never seen such a flurry of activity--not even at the family gatherings she'd attended when she was younger, large though they had been. She hadn't realized that she actually missed those times. She rarely attended anymore, now that both her parents were both gone.

Today, Diana found herself helping Rebecca finish parceling out the last candle deliveries.

"Samantha and Kipper are to take these candles to Evan and his family." Rebecca looked harassed, and frowned as Zach and Carmella skidded back into the chamber. "What is it now?"

Zach grinned. "Nuthin'. We finished the deliveries. Anything else?"

Rebecca took Zach by the arm, detouring him to the corner, and began asking questions, obviously concerned that they'd finished so quickly.

Diana listened with only half of her attention. Everything was so *alive*, and so happy. She hadn't even had to block yet, despite the barrage of emotions, but it was beginning to make her a little giddy. She could sense Vincent down in the Great Hall, finishing up the heavy work of moving tables. Even *his* frustration level was low today.

Before Diana knew it, the day had gotten away from her, and it was time to dress for the festivities. Brooke had finished with routing her deliveries, and she and Diana headed for the bathing pool to clean up. As they stood in the tunnel outside, waiting for it to clear out, they visited.

"Mary left you something in your chamber, Diana. She put it into the old chest. Don't forget to look for it when you get back."

Diana could sense Brooke's underlying amusement, and wondered what she could be thinking. "Why would Mary have left me something? C'mon, Brooke...give."

The younger woman shook her head. "It's her surprise. She wanted to give you something special, just for Winterfest. You'll love it."

The leather door to the bathing chamber opened, and Livvy and two other women Diana didn't know came out, so she and Brooke went in to bathe. When they'd finished, Diana rushed back to her chamber to see what Mary's gift was.

She knelt in front of the old chest and opened it to find a bundle, carefully wrapped in soft cloth. When she unfolded the cloth, she gasped in astonished pleasure. It was an exquisite velvet gown, forest green, with a low-cut bodice and long, tapered sleeves. It was obvious that the dress was made for her. Quite literally. Mary had asked her weeks ago to act as a stand-in for Jamie while the older woman was doing some sewing for the girl. The sweet woman must have taken measurements then.

Diana carried the lovely thing to the bed and placed it carefully on the quilt. The gown showed the love and care that had been put into it. She'd never worn anything so lovely. She raised fingers to trembling lips, then almost reverently stroked the soft, heavy, folds of the dress. She heard a sound at the door, and Mary stood there, smiling her gentle smile.

Diana stood shifted a little uneasily. "Mary. It's lovely...but I can't wear that...it's...too beautiful. You put so much work into it."

"Nonsense," Mary admonished. "Beautiful things are made to be enjoyed, and besides...I made it for you to wear, not to look at." Her look became almost coquettish. "For *you* to wear. For *Vincent* to look at...and touch."

Diana flushed. She was too embarrassed to speak. Mary came to her and placed her arm around the younger woman. "Diana, I've watched you since you came into Vincent's life...watched you, and watched him. I know how much you love him, and how hard you've tried not to let him know. He suffered so when Catherine died. To tell the truth, I was afraid he simply wouldn't be able to face life without her. I didn't think even Jacob would be enough to keep him with us. But gradually, I saw life and interest come back into his eyes, and I know who put that interest there."

Diana listened to Mary's soothing voice, all the while watching her own fingers as they traced a design on the bed next to the gown. Still, she didn't say anything. She couldn't. She knew that her love for Vincent was obvious to these people, but it was embarrassing for her to have to face it so openly. She was too used to hiding her emotions from others. She wasn't good at this. But it was easy to talk to Mary, and even easier to listen. Mary's emotions were honest and gentle, and Diana felt herself opening up to them. "He knows how I feel, now, Mary. He is accepting it better than I thought he would--better than *I* am, actually."

Diana felt satisfaction from Mary. "Well. It's about time." She patted Diana's shoulder. "Don't be afraid of love, child. Especially not of Vincent's love. He won't ever hurt you."

"I'm not afraid of him hurting me, Mary. I'm afraid of hurting him. After all, I'm not Catherine."

Mary hugged her. "Of course you're not. He knows that." She patted Diana's cheek. "Wear the gown. Enjoy it. Enjoy Winterfest." Her eyes twinkled, and Diana wondered at the burst of delight from the woman. "Let Vincent enjoy the gown, and you *in* it."

Mary left to ready herself for the festivities, and left Diana feeling confused and anxious. She glanced at her watch. "Oh, damn. Well, Bennett--if you don't wear the gown, you'll hurt Mary's feelings." So, with her decision out of the way, Diana dressed, carefully avoiding looking in the mirror as she dressed.

When she'd finished, she brushed out her long red hair and dug in her bag for her suede slippers. Taking a deep breath, she turned to face the mirror and stood riveted. *It can't possibly be me.* The woman in the mirror looked like a princess in a fairy tale... though a little pale. Shaking herself into movement, she grabbed her bag and dug out her makeup. Just a touch of blush and lipstick, a little eyeshadow and the picture was complete. She lifted her chin and studied herself critically. She hoped Vincent would be pleased with the results...he certainly wouldn't have the pleasure of seeing her this way again for a long while. She still wasn't quite sure it was even *her*. Grinning, she went to the mirror and knocked on it, almost expecting her hand to pass through and meet the flesh of some other person lurking there. Even as she was thinking this, she heard a sound in the doorway, and turned.

She walked slowly to the doorway and saw Vincent standing hesitantly in the corridor outside. She enjoyed the startled look of delight in his eyes, and allowed her



barrier to slip just enough to feel his joy, and let him feel hers. He looked marvelous himself. He wore black leather pants and hip-high boots topped by a ruffled white shirt...and no cloak. His blond mane had been brushed to a high sheen and was more tamed than she'd ever seen it. She could tell it wouldn't stay that way long, though. Already stray strands were settling back into familiar waves.

"Hi," Diana said, suddenly shy.

His smile--almost not there--until you looked into his eyes, twitched at the corners of his mouth, and his voice rumbled a soft, "Hello." He swallowed nervously, and shifted a little.

Diana, too, was becoming even more nervous. For some reason, she felt like a teenager on a first date. Where was their camaraderie--their easy friendship? There was too much between them now, for that easiness. They were both too aware of what was under the surface. "Guess it's time, huh?" She clutched her Winterfest candle tightly in one hand.

"Yes. I thought...I thought you might come with me to pick up Jacob...that you might like that," he stammered.

"Yeah. I would." Diana was disappointed. He hadn't said anything about the dress, or how she looked. Then again, she hadn't said anything about *his* appearance either. Perhaps he was just as disappointed. She started to say something, then stopped. It didn't feel right--the time had passed--so she left it.

They walked side by side, Vincent barely touching her, though occasionally his hand would settle on the small of her back as he guided her automatically. She ached for each touch of his hand and wanted to reach out and sense him...but her barriers were tighter than ever, and she simply couldn't force herself to lower them.

Once they reached the nursery and had Jacob with them, Diana felt easier. The child was exuberant and gleeful, and Vincent's anxiety seemed to ease as he obviously began picking up on his son's mood. With the little boy holding their hands, picking up his feet occasionally to let them swing him, they made their way toward the Great Hall.



Vincent cast a sidelong look at Diana as she played with his son. She was breathtaking tonight. *Titania, queen of the fairies*. She did, indeed, look ethereal, although he knew she was very real and mortal--his hands and heart burned from the feel of her under his hands. He was glad, for the moment, to have Jacob as a buffer, with the child's innocent delight in the evening muting the awakening awareness between the two of them.

When they reached the Chamber of the Winds, Diana struggled to keep her hair from becoming tangled, holding it behind her, as Vincent took Jacob. Vincent's mane was once again wild by the time he opened the doors and let them inside, but the look in Diana's eyes told him that she wasn't displeased.

Vincent guided Diana through the darkness to the table where the others were waiting, and they found their seats. Once everyone was settled, Father began the traditional Winterfest speech, with Vincent, Mary, and Peter joining in. Diana had

never experienced the beauty of the ceremony before, and Vincent watched her tenderly. She had begun crying softly by the time he leaned across and lit her Winterfest candle for her. His hand closed over hers, and he murmured to her that he understood how she felt.

William's feast was wonderful, and Vincent enjoyed the looks on everyone's faces--enjoyed sensing their joy for him--as they saw him with Diana. Although many of them knew her only slightly, or not at all, most had known her from the beginning. All were delighted to see them together. It disturbed him that Diana was so tightly closed to everyone around her. He couldn't understand how she could possibly live that way.

Kipper and Samantha dashed up and begged to take Jacob to play, and Vincent hesitated. He had wanted to play with Jacob, himself...but the child wanted to go, so Vincent released him, reluctantly. Diana slipped her hand under his arm and glanced up at him quizzically. "It's nothing," he replied to the unspoken sense of question.

Vincent's arm slipped around her waist in an unusual public show of affection. Diana startled, asking quietly...obviously trying to joke with him: "You been trying out William's brew?"

Their eyes met. "No. I need no additional intoxication, with you here." Diana's look indicated to him that he'd said the right thing, and he smiled gently. "Would you care to dance?"

Her delight was almost palpable. "Only if you lead."

They danced one dance after another, stopping only to visit a few times and to sample some of William's more benign offerings.

Vincent was enjoying the dancing, but he was having a difficult time keeping his mind off the soft curves that moved against him. He held her just a little more tightly...a little more closely than was strictly necessary. Her warm breath against his neck and the sensuous feel of the velvet under his palm...with her back under that...were, as he'd told her, all he could bear just now. It was taking all his control to continue dancing politely, instead of simply burying his face in the fall of her hair and crushing her to him. After most of the evening, the acute pleasure of her nearness was almost becoming pain. At one point, his breath came in a shuddering gasp, and Diana murmured quietly into his ear, "If you need to leave, it's okay."

He nodded, relieved that she'd understood. Diana slipped her arm around him, and they left the dance floor. She called to Brooke, who currently had Jacob. "Brooke. I think it's about time to put the crown prince down for bed. Thanks for keeping him."

"No problem." Brooke handed the child over and left to find a dance partner. Jacob passed from Diana's arms into his father's and settled his head on Vincent's shoulder, his thumb in his mouth. His eyes closed sleepily. Diana kissed the baby, and told Vincent, "I'll go say our goodbyes, if that's okay...."

Vincent nodded wordlessly. He was unable to face anyone at the moment. He stood in the corner near the door, holding Jacob, and watched Diana as she went from person to person, telling them goodnight. He thought of how gracious she was, how gentle, and kind...so giving, without appearing overtly to be that way, at all. She was a joy to him, and a great tenderness swept over him.



The walk between the Great Hall and the nursery gave Vincent time to settle himself. The walk was companionable and pleasant, with Diana discussing the people she'd met, and how much she'd enjoyed herself. The even, soft, patter of their conversation smoothed out the uneven edges of the tie between them. Just now she was companion and friend...and Vincent was grateful.

They settled Jacob in the nursery with Livvy, and walked back toward the falls. The awareness that had grown between them tonight was far from gone...only muted. There was an echoing resonance of emotion despite Diana's barriers, and an electric charge that was both exhilarating and frightening. Vincent found himself perspiring, despite the chill of the tunnels and his lighter than normal attire. Diana, on the other hand, seemed cold, and he lacked his cloak to offer her, so he was left with no option but to offer her his embrace.

When they reached the falls, Diana settled onto a boulder with Vincent standing behind her, arms wrapped around her for warmth. She leaned back into him and sighed.

Vincent had always savored every scent, texture, and color--perhaps merely because of who he was--or perhaps because it helped make up for the monotony of life Below. But now, suddenly, his senses seemed more alive than they'd ever been. In the candlelight, Diana's hair shone like fire itself against the pale skin of her neck and throat, and the rich, deep, green of the velvet was equally brilliant in contrast. He relished the softness of the velvet against his palms, and the firm suppleness of the body beneath it. The scent of her skin and hair set his pulses racing.

Finally, he could bear it no longer. He had to tell her how he felt, how wonderful she looked...show her. He nuzzled her shoulder, and her shiver at his touch thrilled him. "You are lovely tonight, Diana."

Turning her head so she could see him, she smiled mischievously. "Didn't think you'd noticed."

Her barriers lowered a little, and he could sense her delight in the evening--and their companionship. Their eyes met a moment, and he smiled, settling her against him again, and tightening his embrace. His mind whirled with a strange sensation of delight and wonder. He bent his head to whisper to her, and the bright gold of his hair blended with the fire of hers. "Oh...I noticed."

## ROUGH EDGES

*You and I are all rough edges  
wearing away at one another,  
trying to make each other fit--  
planes and angles into curves.*

*Will we ever wear each other down  
as eventually even water wears down rock--  
with all the rough edges stripped away  
to make the singing one smooth melody?<sup>6</sup>*





little later, after delivering Diana to her guest chamber, Vincent sat at his desk staring at his journal. His pen was poised to write, but the words.... *There are no words. No appropriate ones, at any rate.* Nevertheless, he applied himself to the task. He had taken Diana back to her chamber when it had grown too late to avoid the inevitable.

Now that they were apart, Vincent felt odd. He'd tried to sense her after leaving the guest chamber, but there was nothing except her barrier. He tried once again to put into words how he was feeling.

*The last few days have been enlightening and frightening. While Diana builds her barriers higher, I find mine crumbling at an alarming rate. Tonight was wonderful. Magical. I felt things I never thought I would feel again. But sitting here, afterwards, I wonder at my own complacency. I am vaguely shocked at myself. Not because I am considering possibilities. Catherine would approve of that. Not because I think I would harm Diana. I believe there is evidence enough to support the possibility of safety. I am shocked at myself because suddenly I understand many things that I was blind to before. Diana is correct. Where is our choice in this? Diana fears so many things about this bond between us. Issues I was never forced to face with Catherine. I never realized how forbearing Catherine was, nor how intrusive the bond could be. We must proceed with care, in this. Indeed, where is the choice? Is what we stand to gain worth what we might lose--our friendship, our trust in one another? I cannot bear any more losses.*

Confused by the conflicting emotions threading through him, Vincent raked his fingers through his mane and closed his journal. He could hear and sense others passing his chamber--stragglers from the celebration. He sighed, wishing he could recapture the carefree, magical feeling he and Diana had shared such a short time before.

He put away his journal and blew out the candles, but instead of going to bed, he reached for his cloak. *Perhaps a walk....*



Diana was edgy as well. Why, she couldn't quite understand. Everything had gone well, tonight. Too well, perhaps. *It's as though he and I were walking through fairyland--blind to everything except the pleasure we felt in one another's company.* She pursed her lips and stared into the cracked mirror as she brushed her hair.

She tried to figure out what it was that was bothering her, and then the answer struck her. *Of course! Most of the night I was shielded...from him...from everyone.* She flung the brush into her carryall, angry with herself for not realizing what should've been obvious to her from the start. *Of course everything went fine! We couldn't sense each other ninety percent of the time. Without that damned bond getting in the way, we're fine, but add that to the mixture and we get fireworks...and not necessarily the good kind. When we can react like two normal human beings, we get along fine.*

*But try to relate as two empaths and all hell breaks loose.*

Diana realized she was *still* blocked. She turned and stared at the bed, where her green gown had been laid carefully out, ready to put away. The covers were already turned back. *Yeah, she thought bitterly. I'm blocked now...but when I go to sleep, the block goes away, and there's nothing between us but the dreams.*

Not that *all* the dreams were horrible, or even confusing. Some were great. But the problem was, one never knew what it was going to be. And now that Vincent knew they weren't his imagination, he'd start realizing a lot more about her than she was ready for him to know. *Hell. He's used to picking apart dreams. Finding out what they mean. He's told me about those "waking dreams" of his--the visions. Well, dammit, I don't need anyone picking apart my psyche, thank you very much--especially not him! Whatever happened to privacy, for heaven's sake?*

Hurriedly, she dug in her carryall for her sweats and pulled them on. She stuffed all the rest of her belongings back inside and glanced longingly at the gown. She absolutely refused to wad it up and shove it in the bag with the rest of her stuff. She sighed, brushed her hand across the velvet, and closed her eyes. The image of how Vincent had looked when he first saw her in the dress--and the sensations of joy and desire she'd felt from him then, so briefly, before she'd raised her barriers--came back to her and brought tears to her eyes. "Oh, Vincent. Whatever are we gonna do? Where are we headed, with this, and who's gonna hurt who before this is all over?"

Dragging the heavy carryall up and over her shoulder, Diana left the chamber without a backward glance. All she could think of was putting some distance between them...though rationally, she knew that even distance wouldn't help.



Vincent traveled the snow-covered park quickly. He was cold. He used to love to walk the park in the spring and summer, but now that only reminded him of Catherine. Sometimes that was good--sometimes not. For now, winter was better, even if it *was* so cold it made his teeth ache. And it *was* beautiful, the moonlight on the snow, and sparkling off the icicles hanging in the trees. The Ramble and the Pond were especially pretty. He found himself wishing that Diana were here to share it with him.

Tentatively, he tried to sense her, thinking that by now she'd be asleep. All he found was the fuzziness of her barrier. He sighed and continued his walk. *Perhaps she, too, is having difficulty settling for bed after such a confusing night.*

The wind began picking up, and Vincent pulled his cloak a little tighter around himself. *Perhaps it is time to go back. I will stop by the guest chamber. If she is still awake, we can talk. That always seems to help.*

His mind made up, Vincent hurried through the frozen park back to the tunnels. He walked quickly through the dimly lit corridors toward the Hub, relaxing as he began to sense the presence of many sleeping minds around him. It was a quiet hum that spoke of peace and home, almost subliminal, but there nonetheless.

He slowed as he approached the guest chambers, then paused outside Diana's. He tried to sense her, but could sense only her block--and she seemed farther away.



"Diana...." he called softly. There was no answer. "Diana. May I come in?" He waited, but the sensation was growing within him that she was gone. Risking an unforgivable rudeness, he entered the chamber and stopped, staring in dismay. The chamber was empty. *Felt empty.* The magical green gown was lying across the bed and the quilts were turned back, but Diana was gone. And he had a sinking feeling she wasn't coming back.

Vincent searched the chamber for a note--some indication that she was coming back. But there was nothing. He was astounded. And angry. *She left without a word of explanation. Without saying goodbye. Nothing.* He couldn't believe it. *This is ridiculous. Why would she do that?* He knew Diana was uneasy--uncomfortable--with the bond. More so than he. He shook his head sadly, leaned back against the cold rock wall and stared at the emerald green dress. Groaning softly, he turned away and headed back toward his chamber.



Diana stepped out of the elevator into her loft, flipped on the light and swung her carryall onto the couch. It was very late and she was exhausted. All the exhilaration of the night was gone from her. Her head ached violently from blocking all night and just from general tension. She sighed tiredly.

Shoving her carryall aside, she dropped tiredly onto the couch. She leaned forward onto her knees, rubbing her temples with her thumbs. *This is so crazy, Bennett. You're crazy. For months you've wanted this man. Mooned over him. Now he's willing to look at you as something other than Mother Teresa and you run scared. Don't even give him a goddamned explanation. Just leave. What's he gonna think, huh?* She shook her head and groaned at the pain. She honestly thought her head was going to explode. *Can't think myself, who cares what he thinks.*

She staggered to her feet and headed for the bathroom. Staring into the tiny mirror over the sink, she laughed...with an edge of hysteria. *God, Bennett. Are you sure you didn't dream tonight, too? You sure don't look like that woman in the green dress.*

Twisting the handle, she splashed some cold water on her face, then opened the cabinet. She hesitated, her hand hovering over the pill bottle. It was such a temptation to take a couple of sleeping pills to keep the dreams away. *I've done it before. It won't hurt.*

She read the label before opening it. No more refills. She shook the bottle, opened it and looked in. Only a few more. She shrugged. Dr. Morrison would refill them. He knew she didn't abuse them. *Or anyway, I never used to.*

She dumped two out into her palm and stared at them. Closed her hand around them protectively. She tilted her head back and closed her eyes. Since she'd made detective and made it into the 210 she'd had a lot of times when the nightmares, or just the residual impressions from the cases would rob her of her rest--and her sanity. She'd relied on those pills to get her through a few rough times. But she'd always been able to say "No". It was getting harder to do daily.



Sighing with resignation, Diana opened her eyes and looked down as she slowly opened her hand. The pills were getting sticky. She scraped them off her palm and back into the bottle, closing it firmly and shoving it into her pocket.

Although she was exhausted, Diana walked back into the living room to her desk. She flipped the switch on her computer. When it finished booting she sat down in front of the monitor and began typing.

*Why am I fighting this so hard? The dreams aren't all bad. Some are great. And even though Vincent's scared, too, he's trying to adjust. Why can't I? It's got to be just as hard for him to let me in--to know I've been there all this time without his knowing. Why can't I just let down my guard and let him in?*

Diana sighed and glanced at the clock. *Three o'clock in the goddamned morning, and I'm sitting here doing self-analysis!* She rubbed at her tired eyes, then turned back to the monitor and continued her written monologue.

*Okay. Do you love the man or not? Yes. Don't be absurd. Do you enjoy it when the bond is open? Sometimes. Sometimes a lot. Sometimes not at all.*

Diana realized that if she were being honest with herself she'd have to admit that she wasn't avoiding the bond *nearly* as much to protect Vincent anymore as to protect herself. For awhile she'd been able to fool herself into believing she could open up to him--to *anyone*. It had been easy to fool herself when he had no sense of *her*. At least no conscious sense. But now that he *did* realize there was a connection, instead of making it easier on her, it was making it much worse. She was panicking, and she knew it.

Without even saving the file, Diana cursed then flipped the off switch. Then cursed again. "Damn. I'm too tired to even think, anymore. My head hurts, my eyes hurt. All I wanna do is drop this damn block and go to sleep." She walked over to the window and dimmed the lights. She knew Vincent was out there, somewhere. Wondering why she'd left. She slowly dropped her block and breathed a sigh of relief. For the moment she could sense nothing. But she knew that if she went to sleep she'd probably be pulled into the bond...into some kind of shared dream. "Well. Can't put it off forever. Gotta sleep."

Stumbling off toward the bedroom, Diana was so tired she hoped perhaps she'd just crash, and any dreams would be totally unremembered. She didn't bother to undress.



Vincent shrugged out of his cloak and draped it across his chair. In this early morning stillness, his chamber seemed very empty, with no light shining from the other side of the stained glass window. Without even Jacob in his crib, the room was, indeed, very unwelcoming. He could sense the child asleep in the nursery--and sense the

underlying buzz of everyone around him--but no Diana. He sighed. *Just as well, I suppose.*

The long day was finally beginning to take its toll on him, now that the exhilaration of earlier had deserted him. Even his late-evening restlessness had been worked out with his walk. As he undressed for bed, he thought ruefully of the empty chamber down the hall, and what it meant in terms of his relationship with Diana. *I suppose if she is truly upset, I'll learn of it in the dreams. What a bizarre way to have a disagreement...if that is, indeed, what we're doing.*

After donning his nightshirt, he slid gratefully between the sheets, hoping that perhaps he could get a few hours of sleep, since everyone would be sleeping late. As his eyes closed and he drifted into a deeper sleep, inevitably he began dreaming.

*He felt despair. Heavy and heartbreaking. He wanted only to run from it. He'd had enough of despair and heartache in the last two years. He shook his head and said, "No more. Please." Then he realized that the despair was not his own. It was Diana's--and he went in search of her. Eventually his surroundings became a little clearer and a figure formed. Diana. The slight form was walking away from him, and he hurried after her. She knew he was following--she even glanced back at him--but she hurried faster. Vincent slowed and let her disappear into the dark. She wasn't afraid of him, wasn't angry with him. But neither did she want to be with him. And the despair he felt now was his own as well as hers.*



Diana slept late, never waking throughout a string of odd dreams...some involving Vincent and some not. When she woke she was still exhausted. She showered and dressed, ate a light breakfast, then checked in with Greg. He had a couple of cases he wanted her opinion on, but nothing major, so she told him she'd check in later.

Wandering into her bedroom, she stared at Catherine's rosebush--just dry sticks this time of year--and kicked at the pot. "Damn it Cathy. How'd you handle it?" She really wondered about that. From what she'd gotten from Vincent--which wasn't much--he and Catherine had gotten along just great. But then they'd never made love, either, until after Vincent had lost his hold on himself. His darker half. *Okay. So she didn't handle things any better than I am. Maybe she didn't mind his knowing all her feelings. And she still drove him nuts...or he drove himself nuts.* Diana wasn't sure which.

Diana sat on the bed and considered their relationship--hers and Vincent's--in relation to that madness. Thus far, Vincent seemed to be handling the *intrusiveness* of the bond better than she was. *Seems to be, anyway.* At least he didn't seem to mind it as much as she did. But still, Diana knew that when or if they got caught in the feedback loop, especially in a sexual or killing-related situation, it could have disastrous results. Neither of them wanted to test it. Times like Winterfest were wonderful. They had no problems. As friends. Even sexually they could relate well for awhile. Until Diana dropped her block and started feeding her desire back to him. It just got too intense.

*Even if the feedback of all that desire to him wouldn't cause him to lose himself, what if I can't stand allowing him in and I shut down--block--like I always do, and cause the same backlash that he experienced with Catherine? I can't risk it. Catherine didn't know what would happen. I do. Without the bond acting for both of us, a sexual relationship is going to end disastrously.*

When Diana thought of the times before she'd met Vincent, she realized that any emotional/sexual relationship had only been a re-affirmation of her separateness. Her aloneness. Now, she wasn't alone. And neither was Vincent. Yet neither were they together. She felt a little like a cat chasing its own tail. *When you catch it, what do you do with it?*

Abruptly shoving all her worries aside, Diana quickly showered and dressed to go down to the station. *Maybe helping Greg out on these cases will at least distract me.*



Vincent spent his morning with his classes, then his afternoon on a shift of excavation duty. By late afternoon he was tired, dirty, and more than ready for a little peace and quiet. After a soak in the bathing pool and a quiet supper with Father and Jacob, he was once more at loose ends. His mind kept wandering toward Diana, wondering what she was doing and how she was. What was going on in *her* mind. Occasionally he would sense her for a short time, but then her block would go up again. It would slide between them and close her away from him. What little he *did* manage to sense was tired and unhappy.

Trying to fill his time and occupy himself, Vincent took a long time bathing Jacob, playing with him, reading to him. These things settled him. He loved being with his son. But still, in the background, was the nagging sense of something missing. He wanted to see Diana. Talk to her. Just be with her. He missed her quick wit and sense of humor already. It wasn't that she'd been gone so long--only since last night--but the sense of instability was bothering him. He realized that whenever he felt insecure in his relationship with Diana, it frightened him. She was always there for him. And the reality was that at any moment she could choose to leave and simply never see him again.

He'd been rocking Jacob while he'd gone over all this in his mind. Once the child was asleep, Vincent got up to put him into his crib, then stopped. He knew that as restless as he was, eventually he would break down and go see her tonight, or at least go out in the park. *I will leave him in the nursery.*

Vincent carried Jacob to the nursery and spoke with Mary about keeping him, then stopped by Father's chamber.

"Father."

The older man glanced up quickly and smiled. "Vincent!" Closing the book he was reading, Father waved Vincent inside. "Come in...come over here. Did you get the boy down for the evening?"

Vincent nodded and smiled. "Yes. He's sleeping quietly in the nursery with Mary."

"I see. I assume that means you're going Above."

Automatically bristling a little, Vincent prepared for the inevitable speech on being careful. But Father merely patted his arm and smiled. "Good. It will do you good to get out. Be sure and tell Diana hello for me--and tell her she looked lovely last night. It was wonderful to see her in something other than those baggy sweatsuits." He took his glasses off and waggled them at Vincent. "The change was quite remarkable."

Vincent couldn't bear it any longer. He had to ask, "Father...I don't understand. You never admonish me about going Above any more. You *encourage* my...friendship... with Diana. You never approved of Catherine. Why the change?"

Sighing heavily, Father said quietly, "Because even old men learn from their mistakes, Vincent. With all you've been through, I'd like to see you happy." He shifted a little, then met Vincent's eyes. "And Diana makes you happy."

Vincent looked down. Lacing his fingers together--he placed his hands between his knees and leaned forward. His hair fell across his face and hid Father from him. And him from Father. "I wish I could invent some means to make myself at all happy without her, Father. Every moment, it seems my happiness is more and more concentrated within her."

Father leaned forward and touched Vincent's hair gently, and Vincent turned to him...looking for answers. "You've fallen in love with her." It was a statement, not a question.

Vincent stood and clenched his fists. "I do not know, Father. I would never have thought it possible--after Catherine. Yet...what I feel for her is very different in many ways from what I feel for Catherine."

"Love is like that, Vincent. The love I feel for Margaret is very different from what I feel for Jessica. Yet it is love, nonetheless."

Very softly, Vincent said: "There is a bond, as well, Father."

Startled, Father spoke a little abruptly. "A *bond*? Like what you had with Catherine?"

Vincent began pacing. It was the only way he could arrange his thoughts. "Not...exactly. With Catherine, her emotions were with me every moment. Muted most of the time, yet coloring my life with the flow and the complexity of the changes. She was always with me. Yet...I was not with her. She could not sense *me*. Only occasionally and very indistinctly. But Diana is an empath, Father."

"An...empath? Good God, Vincent. Another empath? But I should think that would be marvelous!"

"Marvelous...and unsettling...and more than a little frightening." When Father gave him a curious expression--obviously not understanding--Vincent continued. "There is no *privacy*, Father. Even our dreams...."

Comprehension seemed to dawn in Father. "Oh my. Yes. I can see how that might be a problem. For both of you."

"She blocks," Vincent stated flatly.

"How?" Vincent could sense Father's curiosity.

"I am not really sure. It is a skill she has learned of necessity...to preserve her sanity, living Above as she does. But now it has become automatic with her; she says it



is *allowing people in* that is difficult for her. She is afraid to let me in, Father.

Father was watching him with an intentness that he found disconcerting. This conversation was becoming far more...detailed...than what he'd intended when he'd begun it. But he had no one else he could speak to about this, and unexpectedly finding a sympathetic ear in Father had lowered his usual resistance to this type of sharing.

"How does all this affect *you*, Vincent? How does it feel to *you*, knowing she knows *your* emotions?"

Vincent had to smile a little. He stopped his pacing and faced Father.

"Disconcerting. Embarrassing at times." He shrugged. "It gives me an even greater respect for Catherine's forbearance, Father. She never seemed to mind, and her love filled me...gave me so much."

"Diana has much to give you as well, Vincent."

"We both need to learn a great deal, Father. To give and to take. Neither of us knows how to be as open as we need to be for this to work, and without that... acceptance...all we will do is hurt one another."

Father sighed. "Pain is part of life...and love. I've learned the hard way that I can't shield you from being hurt. What is it that John Pomfret said? 'We live and learn, but not the wiser grow?'" That's just the way it is, Vincent. All we can do is try. Just do..."

"...be careful," Vincent finished for him, chuckling a little. Vincent came around the desk and hugged Father. "I will."

As he left to go by his chamber and pick up his cloak, Vincent thought to himself, *I can endure my own despair, but not another's hope*. He wondered which would kill him first.



Vincent crouched outside Diana's window, watching her work on her computer. She was still tightly blocked, so not only could he not sense her, he knew she couldn't sense him. Fidgeting restlessly, he watched for long minutes. Her fingers were flying over the keyboard. She stopped occasionally to reach for her coffee cup and take a sip, or to push straggling wisps of hair out of her face. He wanted to be inside, sitting on her couch. Comfortably welcome within *her* space. The bond didn't matter. Much. That was what he told himself. Repeatedly. What mattered was Diana herself. Their friendship. The trust they had in one another. That mattered most. Not the raging inferno of desire that flared between them at times, or the scattered, mismatched dreams. Those mattered too, he knew. *But not now. I must make her understand that.*

Gathering his courage, Vincent tapped lightly on the glass. She stiffened, then turned and slowly--seemingly reluctantly--pushed the chair back and rose. She climbed the steps to the roof, and he moved to meet her at the door.

When the door opened, he hesitated, seeing her standing silhouetted in the light. "Diana? Am I unwelcome?"

She seemed to slump a little, then held out a hand, which he took gratefully. So soft and warm within his. "No. Of course not. Come in."



Without releasing her hand, he placed his other arm around her shoulders and walked with her through the door into the light and warmth of her loft. She leaned into him comfortably and he led her to the couch, where they sat together, silently watching each other.

Vincent felt reluctant to begin the conversation, but finally he spoke gently, saying: "You left. I missed you."

She flushed, but pulled her hand from his and brushed futilely at stray wisps of hair. "I...panicked."

"Might I ask why? Perhaps I can help."

Taking a deep breath, she said, "I don't think so, Vincent. I don't think it's gonna work."

He felt a chill. "Everything was going very well, I thought. Why...."

She stood abruptly and wrapped her arms around herself. "Yeah. Things were goin' great. *Too* good--y'know?"

He shook his head, confused. "No. I don't...."

"Look. Think about it. Why were things going so well?"

She was obviously becoming very distressed, but he wasn't completely sure why. "Because...because we get along well. We like one another as well as.... Diana...there is too much between us for us to ignore this."

"Yeah." She sounded disgusted. "There's a lot between us, all right. Mostly my block. *That's* why everything went so great last night. Do you *realize* what would've happened if I'd left myself open last night...at Winterfest...during the dancing and afterwards? *Think* about it, Vincent! What do you think would've happened?"

Startled by her vehemence and the realization of what she was saying, Vincent could only murmur, "I...don't...know."

She shrugged. "Well, neither do I. But I get the feeling it wouldn't have been pretty."

Vincent turned away, old fears resurfacing without warning. "You mean I might have...harmed you."

To his astonishment she began laughing, and the laughter had a slightly hysterical edge to it. He watched, amazed, as she laughed until tears rolled down her cheeks. Eventually, she was sitting on the edge of the couch holding her sides. Her laughter confused him further and he was alarmed by the hysteria underneath. "Somehow I never thought that your death at my hands could possibly be amusing."

She began laughing again, waving at him hysterically. "Don't...don't *do* that!"

Obviously he was missing the point. He remained quiet until she could control her...amusement...and waited for clarification.

After several minutes, Diana finally drew a deep breath and wiped away the tears, though when she looked up into his face he could tell she was struggling to keep from laughing again. "I wasn't...concerned about your killing me. I...oh my." She giggled again, then drew a deep breath. "The picture I had was more of...us tearing one another's clothes off and *having our way* with each other...on the table in the midst of William's feast...and in front of everyone in the Great Hall." She took one look at his face and flopped backwards on the couch, knees bent to her chest, feet pinwheeling in

the air and whooping in loud screams of laughter.

Vincent couldn't remember a time when he'd been more...confused.

After what seemed an interminable amount of time, Diana quieted. Vincent stood still, quietly watching her--enjoying seeing a side of her he'd never seen before. When she'd finally settled, he said gently, "You are...very appealing. Are you aware of that?"

Drawing a deep, shuddering breath, she eyed him curiously. "Yeah. Me and Mouse. Both appealing...both nutty as fruitcakes." She cocked her head, flushed, and asked bluntly, "You *really* think I'm...appealing?"

Sinking down beside her on the couch, Vincent chuckled. "Unfortunately, yes. So I suppose that puts me in the same category as you and Mouse."

He pulled her to him and rocked her. Tears misted his eyes as he felt her slender body shake with laughter again briefly. She snuggled against him as he leaned back into the couch cushions, and they sat there silently for a very long time as he stroked her hair. *Perhaps all will be well. Or perhaps Diana is right. This is a very... strange...situation.*

They both dozed for awhile. Neither had gotten very much sleep the previous night, and this was the first time either of them were psychologically comfortable enough to fall asleep.

*They were dancing, and Vincent was enjoying himself more than he had in a very long time. Diana's body moved against him seductively--not, he knew, purposely--but merely because she was who she was. Her simply being there--herself--beneath his hands, against him, was enough to heighten his senses and expose desires he kept buried. For a long while the physical sensation alone was enough, but not too much. Then gradually he became aware of her more acutely. He became aware of her desire...a wanting that he became desperate to meet with his own. Hands sliding across smooth skin. The scent of her hair. Feather-light touches of her hands. Her breath in his ear. He was aware of himself pressing her down on a flat surface...then realization came. The table, the candles...faces around them. No!*

Vincent jerked awake, tumbling Diana off his lap. She rubbed her eyes and stared at him--eyes wide as saucers--then scrambled to her knees and away to the far end of the couch.

"I told you! *Told* you! Can't let down my guard for a minute."

Vincent reached for her to reassure her. "Diana...it was only a dream."

Diana was still backing away. "Yeah. But *whose*? Yours? Mine? Doesn't it *bother* you? My knowing what you're feeling? I know it bothers me, your knowing how *I'm* feeling."

Dropping his hand, Vincent shrugged a little. "I would be telling an untruth if I told you it did not bother me. Of course it does, Diana. But what is more important? Our privacy or *us*--our friendship--what we have between us?"

Her voice shook a little. "I don't know."

Vincent walked toward her and flinched as she drew back. Even though he knew that his appearance had nothing to do with her withdrawal.

He walked past her, turned, and leaned against the windowsill. "We need to find out."

She shook her head. "I can't. Can't risk it."

Vincent turned again and rested his shoulder against the join of wall and window and stared into the black pane of glass. He could barely see the lights outside for the glare of the loft lights. "Perhaps not now. But as you pointed out before, it appears we have no choice. We *must* learn to deal with it, Diana, since we cannot escape it." Diana was silent behind him, and Vincent went on speaking. He felt an infinite sadness wash over him. "Sometimes I think that all I ever had to share with Catherine was my differences. I was alone because of those differences, and by loving me, she too, was alone. I know rationally that this was untrue. Catherine and I shared much. Our love was a great gift. But still, my aloneness *was* forced upon her gradually."

Vincent felt Diana's warmth close behind him as her slim arms slipped around his waist. He closed his eyes and sighed, realizing that it had been his sorrow that had drawn her to him just now. When *he* was afraid, or unhappy, she put aside her own fears and sorrows. Just as Catherine had put aside so much for him, Diana did, as well. To her, as with him, the *giving*...the need to give...was enough to force her to put away her fears. He could feel her breath on the back of his neck as she spoke softly to him. "She chose, Vincent. She had a choice, and she chose you. When she was with you, the aloneness didn't exist."

"But she was alone when she was not with me. She could not sense me as you do. She was cut off from her friends, her family--by the secret that was us. It was painful to her. A large sorrow. I shared her aloneness, and it was a sorrow to me as well...to know that she was alone for my sake." He looked down. "I do not wish that for you."

Diana pressed against him as he turned to her, and allowed him to encircle her with his arm. "I've *always* been alone, Vincent. It's not the same for me as it was for Catherine. Knowing you has forced me to open up. She *had* a choice. She *chose* you. It's the lack of choices, the lack of privacy...and other things that scare me." She sighed, then turned to face him. "I think I just need some time to myself." She looked into his eyes. "Time to be *really* alone."

Vincent felt his heart constrict, and bowed his head. She was sending him away. He nodded reluctantly. "I understand. I will try, Diana."



Diana walked with Vincent to the roof and watched him leave. She knew he was upset with her decision and ached for him, but she simply *had* to work this out for herself. *I'm glad he seems to be taking things better than I am. I don't think I could stand it if he were to fall apart again.* She chuckled a little to herself and turned back to go inside. *At least we take turns having our nervous breakdowns.*

She pattered around the loft for a few minutes, then walked back to her computer. The screen saver had come on, saying repeatedly, *Go to bed, stupid!*

She sat at the keyboard and glanced at the file she'd been working on. Greg had

given her a case to play with today. It was a jewelry heist that had ended in murder. The entire Diamond Center was up in arms about it. There had been numerous thefts and sleight-of-hand type of robberies lately, and this just added insult to injury. Diana had considered carefully before taking it. She probably wouldn't even have been offered the case normally, but several of Greg's best detectives were on vacation. He thought she might enjoy a change from mass murderers and some of the really unsolvable stuff he threw her. *It might be kind of fun, at that.* She saved the file, exited the program and flipped the computer off.

Stretching as she rose, Diana set her coffee cup into the sink, then headed for the bathroom. She had no intention of dreaming tonight. Opening the medicine cabinet, she took out her sleeping pills. There were enough for tonight, then tomorrow she had an appointment with Dr. Morrison. Diana was sure she'd be able to convince him she needed another refill.

Diana stared at the pills. She knew she was using them as a crutch--and another barrier to hide behind--but she couldn't help it. She simply *had* to be able to sleep without projecting everything she felt to Vincent. Within her was a growing sense of anger at her helplessness in safeguarding her privacy. She knew she was being unreasonable: after all, for months she'd sensed *his* dreams. *Damn, Bennett! What're you so scared of? It's not like you're being tortured for information or some such. It's a sharing, for heaven's sake.* Shaking a little, she swallowed the pills. There were just so many things to worry about that she couldn't handle it right now. She felt as though she'd been fighting this forever. *Vincent worries about losing himself, and I do too. Losing myself and losing him. Driving him over the edge...or maybe leading him over it with me.*

She pulled off her sweats and dressed in a loose T-shirt. As she crawled into bed and curled up under the covers, she thought miserably, *I'm sorry, Vincent. I must be such a disappointment.*



Once more Vincent walked the park, trying to walk off his confusion and frustration. The air was cold, but there was no longer snow on the ground.

Vincent understood *why* Diana was so fearful of the bond. He simply wasn't sure what to do about it. Her reasoning was valid. Every time they allowed the bond complete freedom, even for a short time, it seemed he came close to losing control. And the dreams *were* disturbing in many ways. He wondered if the bond had bothered Catherine more than he'd realized. During the time he'd known her she seemed to have become adept in altering her emotions to avoid upsetting him. But he'd never thought to ask her if it disturbed her that he knew her so well. Perhaps he'd been afraid to get a truthful answer, since--as Diana complained--he'd had no choice. The bond existed. He couldn't *not* feel her, though he'd been able to mute his sense of her at times, with effort. With Diana, he'd hardly had the need to *try* to mute it: she blocked him so consistently that the bond was quite intermittent as it was. Except during the dreams. He wondered what it would be like to be able to block out other's feelings, as Diana

could...or even if he would want to be able to. On one hand, it would be convenient, but at the same time there was something a little abhorrent to Vincent about doing it. He'd had a taste of having to live without his empathy, and he hadn't cared for it. Neither had he cared for having to relearn his control. *We each cope in different ways.*

Vincent was very tired. Lack of sleep and emotional strain was beginning to take their toll on him, as well. But he was determined to give Diana the peace she needed. He knew she was usually awake during the day, so he decided to change his schedule. He would try to sleep during the day and early evening as much as possible. He steeled himself to stay awake. *I will do my security and maintenance rounds now, then teach class--then sleep.* He yawned. *It is going to be a long time until bedtime, I fear.*



Father was just waking as Vincent appeared at his bedside. "Father. I apologize. Did I wake you?"

Clearing his throat and reaching for his glasses, Father commented, "No. Not at all. I was just waking when I heard you below in the study." He surveyed his son with a critical eye. "You've been out all night, again."

"Yes." Vincent felt as though if he sat down he'd fall asleep immediately. He crossed his arms and leaned against the wall, letting the cold stone support him. "Father, I am going to change my schedule for awhile...or try to. I did my security and maintenance rounds last night, and after classes, I intend on sleeping."

Father just stared a moment. He was still obviously not quite as awake as he should be for a conversation like this. "I don't understand, Vincent. What's happened? Why this radical change?"

Vincent started to sit, then obviously thought better of it. He shook his head vaguely. "Diana. The dreams." Rubbing his eyes with the palm of his hand, he muttered, "I'm sorry, Father. I am very tired. Later?"

Shrugging into his robe, Father walked with Vincent down the stairs. "I think I have an idea of what you're trying to say. Go to bed, Vincent. I'll take the classes today and have Mary keep Jacob. Try to sleep."

"Thank you. I will."

Vincent wearily climbed the short stairway from the study and turned to go to his chamber.



Diana woke, still a little fuzzy from the sleeping pills. She hated that feeling, but knew it would wear off before long. At least if she'd dreamt the night before she didn't remember it. From what she could tell, the pills were still the only thing that helped her keep the connection from forming during sleep.

She felt better after her shower, and once she was dressed she ate a light breakfast of cereal, toast, and coffee. She almost felt human. There was a nagging sense of something missing. Like when a case had a piece she couldn't find, but she

knew what it was, this time. She missed Vincent.

Shoving the feeling aside, she picked up her carryall and stepped into the old freight elevator. A day on this jewelry heist case would make her feel better. It had elements that reminded her of something out of Sherlock Holmes. Lots of fun little pieces to pick up and puzzles to put together. Outside of the body, which was quite neatly strangled--no messy blood this time--there was nothing macabre or nightmarish about it. Just somebody trying to get rich quick, probably.

She was humming a little in time to the rattle of her car as she drove in to work.



Vincent tossed and turned. Exhausted as he was, he was having trouble settling. He'd fall asleep for a short time, then be awakened by people passing in the corridor outside, or by the pipes, or a subway passing. Jacob's waking thoughts and emotions also intruded. Vincent found that the child was very empathically *loud* during the day. He'd never really realized that before.

He could tell that Father had cautioned people to be quiet as they passed his chamber, but it really didn't help. In addition to the added buzz of many very *awake* minds, Vincent's hyperacute senses always knew when anyone was near.

Eventually, he rolled over and locked his hands behind his head, sighing in disgust. *This isn't going to work.*

He considered taking a few days and retreating below the Catacombs. It was the only place left for him to go, but he hated the idea of running from this, and felt resentment building toward Diana. Ever since he'd known her, Diana had chided him for refusing to face things--for running away. Now *she* was doing it. *This is ridiculous. I am losing sleep because she doesn't want to dream with me. Catherine and I lived on dreams for two years!*

Frustrated, he threw the quilted covers back and grabbed his robe. Lighting one candle, he sat at his desk and pulled out his journal.

*I need her. And she needs me. We are now each incomplete without the other. I, too, still fear what will happen if all the barriers are released and we are completely open to one another. The tie that binds us is very powerful, and it acts upon that part of myself I keep in chains. Yet in truth, the dreams are not so terrible. In the dreams I do not harm her, and I never harmed Catherine.*

*And all that faith creates or love desires,  
Terrible, strange, sublime and beauteous shapes.<sup>8</sup>*

*I can understand why she fears what our relationship is becoming. What we are becoming. I fear it too--this loss of control--loss of one self into the other. Yet, perhaps it is easier for me, since I know she has already known me so well...known my dreams, my fears...for so long, and without any awareness on my part. That bothers me even now, at times, but I suppose I am becoming accustomed to the idea. She says we have*



*no choice. I refuse to believe that. There are always choices. We simply have to find them. She has given me her hope and made me find mine. Now I must give her my strength and help her find hers. It is the only way.*

"But first I *have* to get some sleep."

Closing his journal, Vincent grabbed his pack and stopped by the kitchen for something to eat, then by the classroom to tell Father he was going far below for some peace and quiet.



Diana's day had been going fairly well. Dr. Morrison had prescribed her more pills with no problem, and she figured things would be fine. Then Greg informed her that she had to work with an insurance investigator on the case he'd given her.

"Damn it, Greg. I work alone. You know that."

Greg shrugged. "Can't be helped. The insurance company hired him, and you're stuck with him. All those diamonds were insured, and it's standard procedure. He seems like an okay guy, and they obviously think a lot of him." He grinned at her. "Live with it, Di. He ain't a bad sort, and who knows...he might help."

"Yeah, sure," she grumbled. "So what's this paragon's name, anyway?"

"Jake. Jake North." Greg grinned cheerfully and left, leaving Diana alone on the site, waiting for the insurance investigator. "Sure. Go ahead," she muttered glumly. "Pick up your marbles and go home. What'm I supposed to do?"

She wandered the store, watching the customers--feeling as misplaced as a hatrack in a shoe shop. All the elegantly dressed customers and ultra-polite sales *persons* kept staring at her. It was difficult to get her mind in gear. Eventually she was able to distance herself from her own discomfort and begin working.

Ignoring the disdainful looks, Diana peered into cabinets and showcases, asked questions about the security system, followed wires and examined personnel records. She was squatting on the floor in the vault scrutinizing the chalked silhouette of the murder victim when someone behind her cleared their throat. Startled, she glanced behind her to see a man leaning against the wall, his posture carelessly calm--obviously secure in his knowledge that he belonged just where he was--a charming smile on his face. She noted the scars on his left cheek almost absently...filing the fact away for future reference, as she did everything. "You must be Diana Bennett."

Flushing, feeling unaccountably uncomfortable under the man's confident gaze, Diana rose, brushing her hands on her slacks. She extended a hand politely. "Yeah. Sorry. You must be Jake North."

"Call me Jake." The man looked around the vault, his eyes scanning the outline on the floor. "Found anything interesting yet?"

She shrugged. "A little. It had to be an inside job. Just like the others reported recently. Same M.O....except for the body, of course. Probably the killer and victim knew one another. Forensics says there are no prints anywhere except those of employees."

"That doesn't necessarily mean anything."

"No. It doesn't. However...."

Diana spent the next hour going over evidence with the investigator and became impressed with his calm, cheerful attitude and no-nonsense methodology. She almost didn't mind that she wasn't working alone. She was trying not to rely too heavily on her empathy in this case, because she was reluctant to drop her block. It made her feel a little off-balance, somehow.



Vincent was finally getting some sleep...he'd been asleep for hours. Far past the catacombs, deep within the earth and beside his river, Vincent's mind was finally at rest. There were no emotions around him to interfere with his own dreams. Not Diana's or Jacob's because they were awake. There wasn't even a subliminal buzz of the others. It was quiet and he was alone in the quiet, enveloping darkness with only the sound of the river running over the rocks. He lay with his head resting on his pack and covered by a heavy blanket. He dreamt, and so did the Other.

*The Other was standing on Diana's roof. In the sunshine. He'd never done that before, though Diana had tried repeatedly to get Vincent to come up at night and stay during the day so he could enjoy the sunshine. Diana came out onto the roof with him and moved into his arms. So soft. So willing. He marveled at the sunlight in her hair...known it would look this way, like copper, fire...and blood. Marvelous. She drew him close and he could feel the supple, tensile strength of the body he was holding. She allowed...no...encouraged him to explore it. Her scent and the nearness of her was awakening his desire. She tilted her head back and exposed her throat and he could sense the pulse beneath the translucent skin...almost taste the blood. He shuddered and buried his face in the soft hollow between her breasts, resting a moment. When he raised his face to hers, his desire obscured all thought.*

Waking brought no relief to him. He knew Vincent would never allow him to see her. To have her. Diana was frightened of the bond. So be it. She wasn't frightened of *him*. He doesn't know how to block. I do. There was a nagging worry in the back of his mind, though. *Perhaps this, too, is wrong for her.*

The Other opened Vincent's pack and looked inside. The usual dried meat. *It will do.* The Other wasn't picky. Couldn't afford to be.

After eating enough to satisfy himself, he started back. Above. He would see her. Vincent couldn't solve her problem. He felt confident once more. They were both so afraid. It was not fitting for them to be afraid. Vincent merely needed to *show* her and not allow her to hide.

He began the journey home.



Mouse crept along behind him. He could tell by the way his stalker was moving who it was. There was no true guile, although the young man was one with his surroundings. Mouse seemed to gather courage. He straightened and called out: "Vincent!"

The Other turned and smiled a little. He didn't want to frighten the boy. Mouse was one who understood him, though he would never have been able to explain why. "You. What is it?"

Mouse walked closer. "Going Uptop? See Diana, maybe?"

The Other turned away. The thought of Diana drew him. "Yes."

Mouse reached up and caught Vincent's arm and the Other threw him off with a snarl. The boy persisted. "Can't go. Not Above. Not now."

Mouse was terrified and the Other knew it. He could smell it. Almost taste it. Ordinarily that fear would have urged him to the kill, but for now he had other things on his mind. But the words the boy was babbling began to penetrate to Vincent's other half. The Other stopped and seemed to consider. "Why not *now*?"

Mouse hesitated. "Not safe. Get caught. Put in cage."

The Other growled and spun away. He had no fear of anything. If anyone tried to stop him, he would simply eliminate them. Mouse followed, skipping sideways to avoid getting mashed against the sides of the tunnel.

They reached the tunnel threshold in the alleyway behind Diana's apartment building. The Other stopped and stared at Mouse. In his obsessive frame of mind, he wasn't quite sure why the boy was still here. He could tell Mouse was confused and frightened.

The Other spoke quietly, trying to make his voice reassuringly like Vincent's. "You should leave, now."

Mouse tried again to convince him he shouldn't go Above. "Not safe, here." He risked reaching out to take a cautious hold of his cloak. The Other stared down at the offending hand then back to the boy's face. Mouse dropped his hand, then peered up through the storm grate. He shook his tousled blond hair out of his eyes and stared up at the Other. "Won't hurt Diana?"

The Other leaned against the wall, then slid down, settling on his haunches, and Mouse followed suit. The Other was feeling confused and tired. "No. Not hurt." He placed a heavy hand on Mouse's shoulder. "Go home, now...Mouse."

Mouse hesitated, but rose slowly and began walking back the way they'd come, though he glanced back before passing out of sight. The Other had known that Mouse would obey him. He knew Mouse would always obey Vincent.



Diana had reluctantly allowed Jake North to come with her to her loft. The man was as hard to shake as chewing gum stuck to your shoe. She had to admit to herself, though, that she hadn't disliked working with him as much as she'd thought she would. He was bright and personable--even a little mysterious with his dark good looks. They'd made a lot of headway on the case, even determining that the clerk who'd been strangled

had been being blackmailed by someone else in the company. That had been North's contribution, which he'd ferreted out through ingenious questioning of some of the other employees.

Diana was impressed with his ability and was disgusted to find she simply wasn't as effective when she kept herself blocked. She supposed she'd become too dependent upon being able to pick up impressions. Simply trying to be brilliant in a "Sherlockian" sort of way was a lot more difficult than she'd thought it would be. She didn't really feel too sharp tonight, and her headache was getting worse.

Jake kept up a running stream of talk...obviously designed to keep her feeling comfortable. He paused in all the right places for her noncommittal grunts of reply and managed somehow to keep her interested. She studied him surreptitiously while she made coffee. There was *something* about him that nudged her memory...some indefinable thing she almost felt she *should* remember, but just couldn't. *Maybe it's the headache.*

While making the coffee she fumbled and dropped the filter assembly with a loud clang, startling Jake and sending a sharp blaze of pain through her. She saw spots dancing in front of her eyes and knew she was headed for a really major bout with migraine. Holding her block for so long was beginning to get to her badly.

When her vision cleared, Diana realized that Jake was standing next to her, solicitously offering her his help. "Here. Let me take that, and you go sit down." His voice was firm, but with just enough jest underneath to lighten it. "I *do* know how to make coffee, at least. Go." He pushed her toward the couch, and she figured it was too much trouble to argue.

Stumbling to the couch, Diana lay back gratefully and closed her eyes. A short time later she smelled coffee and sat up. Jake glanced over and grinned--a charming, irrepressibly childlike grin--and walked over to her, a coffee cup in one hand and a book of poems in the other. He handed her the coffee and sat next to her. "Feel better?"

Relieved, she smiled a little and brushed loose strands of hair back. "Yeah. I do. Thanks." She rubbed her eyes and asked, "Did I fall asleep?"

He shrugged. "I think so. For a bit." He glanced down at the book. "I was looking through your books. Hope you don't mind. You have an odd assortment."

Diana thought of the odds and ends of books she had--detective stories, college texts, psychology, and the damn poetry books she'd started buying since knowing Vincent--and grinned. "Yeah. Guess I do."

"How's your headache?"

She rubbed her temple. "Still hurts."

Jake grabbed her shoulders and spun her around before she could resist. "Relax. God. Your tendons feel like piano wires. Never saw anybody so tense." Diana leaned back into the massage and felt her muscles grudgingly relaxing. He worked his way up her neck and eventually rubbed her temples and the base of her spine. It felt so good, she began to relax in spite of herself. Then, without warning, there was a sound--a thud and a crack of splintering wood, and she automatically reached for her gun.





The Other perched on the roof watching Diana with the stranger. The wind whipped at his mane, repeatedly blowing it across his face, which irritated him. At first he was only annoyed at the delay, and determined to wait. But when the man actually began *touching* her in that familiar manner, he was more than annoyed, he was enraged. He couldn't see the man's face, nor Diana's...only their backs, but the Other could tell she was enjoying this entirely too much.

Lacking Vincent's empathic sense, the Other relied upon his other hyperacute senses for information, and at this point he wasn't getting much. Nor was he long on patience. He'd almost been submerged back into Vincent on the long trip up here. There had been little to keep him occupied. He was built on Vincent's deeper emotions, desire, rage, frustration, and keeping one idea in mind for long periods of time was difficult for him. But now, he had a focus: getting rid of this fool...dispatching him as quickly as possible.

Climbing around to the roof door, he tried it and found it to be locked...so he broke it. No problem.

After pushing the door aside, he barrelled down the stairs, roaring his challenge. Several things happened at once: Diana whirled, grabbing her gun and knelt next to the couch, and the man screamed at him--a name--"*Vincent!*?"

Astonishment overrode his rage--especially when Diana threw herself at him--causing him to hesitate in his headlong charge. He blinked at his "rival" in confusion. Catching Diana's hurtling body and holding her tightly, he instinctively thrust her behind him, then turned back to the man, whom he now recognized. He had to search his memory for the name, but the face and the memories and feelings it elicited from him were powerful. "Devin?"

Walking slowly forward, hands outstretched, was Vincent's brother. The Other shook his head a little and leaned forward to support himself on the back of the couch. He could feel Diana grasping his arm and guiding him--hear her murmuring quietly to him--though he couldn't understand what she was saying. There was a loud rushing sound in his head, and he was dizzy. He fought to keep control. He didn't want to go back yet. Devin was here. And Diana. His thoughts cleared. Devin had been *with* Diana. Touching her. A rival. A rumbling growl began and he turned toward Vincent's brother.



Devin hesitated, then continued toward Vincent. The growl became more menacing. Devin turned to Diana and asked quietly, "What's wrong with him? And how the *hell* is it that *you* know Vincent?"

Diana insinuated herself between Vincent and Jake...*Devin. God, this is confusing. Crazy.* She placed both hands solidly on Vincent's chest and pushed, which in turn caused him to growl at her. She didn't care. At least now he knew she was there, and his attention was pulled away from the kill. She answered Devin without looking back. "It's a long, long story. No time now. Go sit in the kitchen or something--but move slowly. Don't do anything he might consider threatening."





She could hear Devin complying, and watched Vincent's eyes as they followed every movement the man made. Taking his hand, Diana led Vincent to the other side of the couch and sat, pulling him with her. He came willingly, though he kept his eyes on Devin. Diana stroked his face and pushed the tangled mane back out of his eyes, keeping up a steady stream of nonsense patter until he would finally pay attention to her. She knew she was getting through when he pulled her closer to him and nuzzled her neck. "It's okay. He's over there and I'm here. Now tell me what's got you so upset...why are you here?"

His voice was indistinct, nestled as he was. "Wanted to see you."

Diana chuckled, sliding in closer. "So you just...came."

He nodded, golden head moving minutely. "Yes."

He pulled back a little and gazed into her eyes. She found herself swimming in the depths of those eyes. *The windows of the soul. God. He's so innocent.* He said quietly, "I wanted to show you. Make you understand."

Reaching up with one hand, she stroked his face once more. The soft ginger-colored fur was soft and plush. *Like a carpet of moss*, she thought illogically. "Understand what?"

He blinked and shook his head a little. His eyes were pleading. "That I need you." His hand slid up her arm and settled on the back of her neck...his thumb resting along her jawline. "That I love you. And that you must not leave. Everyone leaves."

He leaned forward and kissed her--not at all gently--and when he drew back, the look Diana saw in his eyes made her shiver deliciously.

She put her hand over his, and he released her...rather reluctantly. Diana's mind was working like crazy trying to make sense of this. She knew this guy...had seen him in "their" dreams...but she hadn't understood just how separate he really was...or *could* be, from Vincent. She'd dropped her block to try to sense him and realized that she had no bond with him. It was confusing and a little unsettling...not to be *able* to touch him empathically. She couldn't even sense him as well as she could a stranger. *The dream made me think the separation was more symbolic. But he's really here...in the flesh, so to speak. That's really wild.* When she thought he was calm enough, she said gently: "I'm glad you came to see me. I know you need me." Tears misted her eyes. "I love you, too, but you need to go back for now. I don't think Devin will understand...."

His head came up and blue-granite eyes stared across the room at Devin, who hovered anxiously in the kitchen. "If I leave, he will still be here."

She dealt out more reassuring pats and hugs. "Yeah. But can you let Vincent come back? I think he can deal with Devin more effectively." He stared at her for a long moment and Diana's mind clicked to the scars on Devin's cheek. *Of course.* She'd heard stories about Devin, but never one that would tell her how he got those scars. "I mean...c'mon. You *know* what I mean."

He blinked rapidly a few times, then another low growl rumbled. "He was touching you."

Another piece moved into place in Diana's brain. She could kick herself. *Man, am I dense today. He's jealous, for God's sake.* She wasn't sure whether to be flattered

or pissed at the macho attitude. "Just friends. Okay? I was real tense and had a headache. That's all."

More blinking. Rapid. Disoriented. "Tired."

Relieved, Diana reached behind him and plumped the pillows. "Lie back. I'll stay here with you." She slid off the couch and knelt next to him, still holding his hand. "S'okay to rest now."

He closed his eyes and Diana found herself breathing in rhythm with him as she stroked the long hair on the back of his hand. His fingers were tightly laced in hers, but eventually the hold became less firm and his breathing slower and more regular. Still she didn't move from his side. She kept trying to sense Vincent and at last the connection formed. He was back. Sleeping peacefully. Carefully removing her hand from his, she then placed his hand on his chest and moved as quietly as possible into the kitchen, where Devin was waiting.

They stared at one another for a long moment, then Devin smiled charmingly. He whispered: "You did that very well...whatever the hell it was you did. Thanks."

Diana pushed him further into the kitchen and whispered back, "Yeah. Well, I didn't figure you needed any further decorations on your face...or elsewhere for that matter. Damn it, Devin. Vincent told me that you are a jack-of-all-trades and a master of none, and that you'd played a lot of parts in your life, but how in the *hell* did you manage to get to be a PI and get yourself put on my case?"

Devin peered past her at Vincent. "I'm a licensed PI. I just don't do it full-time." He shrugged. "As for *you*, I had no idea you even *knew* my brother."

"I do."

He grinned at her wickedly and she flushed. "I can see that."

Diana reached up and pulled at the band holding her braid and raked her fingers through her hair. Her head still hurt some, but the massage--and more importantly dropping her block--had helped a lot. She glanced back at Vincent, who was beginning to stir. "I think he'll be okay now, but he's gonna be confused as hell. Just let me handle this, okay?"

"You bet. I'll try to figure out what's goin' on as we go along. I've never *seen* him like that before. Father wrote and told me that Catherine died...does that have something to do with this?"

She shook her head. "Maybe a little. But just kind of indirectly, I think. Your brother's got some heavy things to work out, and he's doing okay."

"How do you fit into all this? How'd you meet him?"

Diana eyed him carefully. "Not now. You've gotta leave. He's gonna be embarrassed as hell when he wakes, and it'll be bad enough with just me here. I'll see you tomorrow. You can meet me at the station."

"What about him?" Devin pointed his chin at Vincent.

"I'll see what the situation is when he wakes and let you know."

Diana all but pushed Devin into the freight elevator and closed the gate as quietly as possible. She couldn't mute the sound of the elevator itself as it started up.

Hearing the whine of the elevator, Vincent woke--not slowly, but all at once--and came off the couch and to his feet in one fluid motion. He took in his surroundings--and

looked confused. "How..."

Fortunately, Devin was already out of sight. Diana turned and went to Vincent. She slipped an arm around his waist and tilted her head back to look at him. After testing with the bond to make sure he was okay, she blocked again. "It's okay, Vincent. Sit down and re-orient yourself and I'll get you some tea, okay?"

He took a deep breath and nodded hesitantly. Diana watched him closely as she prepared his tea. He sat hunched over, his fists thrust between his knees, not looking at her. When she brought the tea to him, he reached for it and took a deep breath. "Did I injure you? Or cause any damage?"

Smiling gently, she said, "Well, you didn't hurt me, but my door will need some attention."

He hung his head. "I'm sorry, Diana. I will see to it myself." He placed the teacup carefully on the coffee table and rubbed his palms on his knees. He was clearly embarrassed. "Diana...I truly do not know what to say. This...intrusion...is unforgivable. Especially after you asked for time to yourself...away from me...away from the bond." When his eyes met hers, they were full of pain. "I *tried*, Diana. I rearranged my schedule so I slept during the day. But I dreamed...and ended up here."

Diana leaned against the wall and stared at him. This was crazy. They were both turning their lives upside down, and it still didn't help. Their dreams *still* controlled them. She hesitated to mention to Vincent the fact that he hadn't exactly been *himself* when he'd come up--or that Devin had been here--and she wasn't sure if he'd remember it or not. She felt like she was lying to him. "It's really okay, Vincent. It's just a door. I'm more concerned about you."

Vincent rose and went to the window. "I...remember...bits and pieces. I remember Mouse. He was worried."

Wrapping her arms tightly around herself, Diana asked gently, "Do you remember anything else?"

He swung his head toward her, his gaze steady, but expressionless. "Yes."

Diana wasn't sure what to say, but she forged on. "What do you remember?"

A strange expression flitted across his face and Diana longed to drop her block--but was equally frightened to. Vincent came to her and placed his hand behind her head, thumb once more caressing her jawline. "I remember this."

Diana's heart was pounding. She waited.

His look was troubled. "I remember...there was someone here." She could almost see him remember. "Devin was here."

She reached up and took his hand--kissed the palm softly--and gave it a reassuring squeeze. "Yes."

He frowned. "Devin? Truly? It was not my imagination?"

"No. It wasn't your imagination. He was here."

Vincent turned away and was silent. Diana found herself shifting from one foot to the other restlessly. *Whatever is he thinking of?*

She watched as he clenched and unclenched his hands. *Damn. He really is upset. What is it between those two?* Fumbling for words, Diana said, "I imagine Devin will want to see you. He was worried."

"What was he doing here? How do you come to know him?" Vincent's voice was a little odd...kind of flat.

"I didn't know who he was. I'm working a case down in the Diamond Center--a jewelry heist turned murder. He's apparently playing Private Eye and was hired by the insurance company to investigate. He didn't know I knew you. Needless to say, we were both a little surprised."

He drew in a deep, ragged breath. "How odd. And how like Devin. I will enjoy seeing him again. I hope..." His head swung back to her and she smiled a little at him, encouraging him to continue. "I wish he had not seen me...as I was."

"I'm sure it'll be fine, Vincent. He *is* your brother, after all. And he's obviously seen you lose your temper before."

At his look, Diana felt like shrinking away. "Unfortunately, yes. We fought..."

"As brothers do."

He sighed. "Perhaps. Devin still bears the scars of that encounter, but that *was* the only time...."

"The only time you hurt him?"

Vincent nodded. "There were times, Diana...times when Devin would tease me...and it would hurt so. I *wanted* to hurt him. But I never did. And when we were older, there were other things he did that hurt. Yet he loved me. And I him."

"Loves, Vincent. Present tense."

"Yes. Thank you, Diana. Loves."

Diana felt a little more comfortable around Vincent now. They were talking again. Everything would be okay. She ventured to become a little more daring. "You weren't real pleased to see him when you first came in, though."

"No." He glanced at her with shadowed eyes. "It is of no consequence, Diana. I was...not myself...as you well know." He shoved away from the wall. "I must go. I am sorry to have intruded."

Diana followed him up the stairs to the broken door and brushed off his apologies again. She wanted to ask him to stay, but she knew that right now neither of them were in the best of shape, psychologically. She still resented their lack of choices, and he was obviously shaky from *losing himself* in front of both her and Devin.

Vincent startled her by reaching out one hand to brush at her tangled, uncombed hair. "You did not seem surprised at...the way I was, earlier."

Diana felt herself flush. She hadn't expected the question and wasn't sure how to answer. "I've...met...him before."

Vincent dropped his hand and raised his eyebrows questioningly. "When?"

"Kind of...in our dreams."

"I see." Diana's level gaze made him drop his eyes, but when he looked up again his small smile made her wonder what was going on in his mind. "Did he...or I, rather...tell you why I came?"

"Yes."

Diana couldn't tell for sure if he were pleased or not. He still seemed a little confused, but he also appeared pleased in an odd sort of way. And a little embarrassed. But she noticed he didn't ask what his alter-ego had told her. "At least it was not *all*




broken doors and anger."

He turned to leave, and at the last moment, Diana reached out--desperate to keep him here a moment longer--catching his cloak to get his attention. She asked him urgently: "Vincent. Do you sometimes feel...as though we are trying to fit square pegs into round holes?"

He chuckled then and covered her hand with his own, squeezing gently. "No. To me, it seems we are like two rocks in a river...the water wearing away the rough edges. Perhaps the bond is the river, Diana. Or, like the Skin Horse said, we are *becoming*, and the process will wear away the sharp edges. We do not break easily, you and I. You will see. I will be waiting for you, when you are ready to see me."





 Vincent left Diana standing on her rooftop. He could feel her eyes touching him as he left, but refused to look back. *It must be her decision to continue our relationship--whether it is merely friendship or something more. I will not push, but neither will I run from this. No more.*

He was angry with himself that somehow he'd allowed his own barriers to slip until the Other had taken control. Yet, at the same time it was encouraging--the very fact that the Other had chosen to go to Diana himself--and that he'd caused her no harm. It confirmed Vincent's growing belief that there was hope for a relationship between Diana and himself. What sort of relationship--what boundaries there might be--he had no idea.

He hadn't bothered to ask Diana what the Other had wanted. He knew. He knew the Other merely wanted what he, himself wanted. The fact that he did not *take* what he wanted was the most encouraging thing of all.

Vincent understood very little about his darker half. He'd read psychology books--read of suppressed memories and emotions causing many aberrations--but somehow his alter-ego didn't completely fit any given criteria. *Perhaps he, like myself, is unique...something that has never been.*

It disturbed him a little that Diana knew of this part of him. That she might even know more of this...entity...than he, himself did. She said she'd met that side of him before in their dreams. He remembered those dreams now. Before this he'd only remembered the unicorn, the sunshine, and Diana. He'd not thought of the others. But there were hazy memories of other dreams where the dark one walked as well...and had caused no harm.

But what disturbed Vincent most was loss of control. His inability to control that dark side of himself, the inability to choose even whether to dream or not. And his inability to simply *communicate* properly with Diana. *One would think that a bond such as we share would aid in communication, not confuse it!*

While he was heading back Below, it occurred to Vincent that he might as well return to the Home Tunnels. *Obviously being away, changing my schedule will not help.* It was with a sense of relief that he headed homeward.

He slowed as he neared Father's chamber. The candlelight was glowing softly through the open doorway. Obviously Father was still awake. *Waiting for me, I suppose. Mouse.* It occurred to him belatedly that of course Mouse had gone to Father after leaving him. Vincent sighed resignedly. He was getting very tired of feeling like an errant fourteen-year-old, and he truly was not up to a long father and son talk tonight. Unfortunately, however, the only way to avoid going by Father's chamber was to retrace his steps and re-enter the Hub from the eastern side. A long walk at the best of times.

Steeling himself, Vincent paused in the candlelight and placed his hands on the rails of the stairway. "Father?"

Father raised his eyes from the textbook he was consulting and started to rise. Vincent waved him back down and descended the stairs. "Please, Father. Don't trouble yourself." He could sense Father's concern and noted the searching expression. "I must

assume Mouse reported to you that I was Above and that I was...not myself."

Father nodded. "Yes. Vincent. This cannot continue."

Wearily, Vincent lowered himself into the chair opposite Father's desk. "Don't you think I know that, Father? We are trying."

Father rose, took his cane, and limped around his desk to face his son. "Vincent. You went *Above*. As you were. I shudder to think what could've happened."

At Father's tone, something in Vincent bristled. He stared into Father's anxious eyes. "But nothing did. Nothing horrible happened, Father." *Outside of a broken door, which is easily repaired, and a little damage to my ego, which is perhaps not so important after all*, Vincent thought to himself...not quite daring to voice *those* thoughts. "I was below the Catacombs, Father, and I dreamed. I felt such need and such desire for Diana that I couldn't bear it. Apparently some part of me decided I shouldn't have to."

"Dear God, Vincent. You could have..."

"But I didn't." Vincent stared hard at Father, but reached out and patted his shoulder reassuringly. "I didn't. I did nothing, in fact, except go see her. Talked to her. Don't you see, Father? Perhaps there is no reason for me to be so concerned about harming her. I never harmed Catherine, even in the extremity of my illness. Diana has almost convinced me that there is nothing to fear."

Father seemed to withdraw within himself a little. "I have tried, Vincent, to find something in all these books..." he gestured to the stacks of books in his library. "...to help you. But I've found nothing concrete. Peter tells me that I am intruding, and perhaps I am."

"Ah, Father. How can you not? But try not to worry. All will be well, in the end. It must be." Glancing over at Father's desk, Vincent saw a volume of Robert Bridges poetry. Picking it up, he leafed through until he found what he wanted.

"What is it, Vincent? What is it you are searching for?"

"*Our song is the voice of desire, that haunts our dreams. A throe of the heart.*"<sup>9</sup> What Diana and I share is not so different in many ways than what Catherine and I shared, Father. It is only different because she shares my emotions as well. What is causing the problem is not the bond itself, it is *us*...our learning to adapt to it. The problem is the many layers of protective insulation we have built around ourselves, the learned fears...all of which are understandable under the circumstances." Vincent stood and turned to leave. "What we can understand we can learn to deal with, Father. We *will* get past this."

"I truly hope so, Vincent. Are you going back to your regular schedule?"

Vincent nodded. "Yes. I will go by to check on Jacob, but I plan on leaving him with Mary in the nursery, for now. I will teach class tomorrow, Father. Thank you."

"Goodnight, son."

Vincent smiled at his father. "Thank you for your concern...and for your assistance." He trailed his long-taloned hand over the railing of the stairs, reluctant to leave, yet too tired to continue this discussion. "Goodnight, Father."

After checking briefly on his son, Vincent headed for his own chamber. He

slowed as he neared. *Something is not right. There is someone there.* That was unthinkable...that anyone would violate the privacy of another's chamber. Yet...he could sense a presence. He rounded the corner and stopped, startled. His brother lay on his bed, long legs stretched out, pillows piled behind his head, reading Kipling. Devin looked up when Vincent came through the open doorway and set the book aside. He had the grace, at least, to look embarrassed.

"Have you forgotten *all* courtesy, Devin?" Vincent removed his cloak and hung it, turning away from his brother to collect his thoughts, his emotions. *Whatever is wrong with me? I should be happy to see Devin. It has been almost two years.*

When he turned back to face his brother, Devin smiled...a touch uneasily. "No. I haven't forgotten. Since when do you and I stand on courtesy anyway?"

Vincent pulled his chair over and sat facing Devin. "Since you left. You no longer share this chamber with me, Devin. How did you get down here past the sentries?"

Devin gave an exaggerated shrug. "I avoided most of them. I'm sure you remember how we used to do that." He stared hard into Vincent's eyes until Vincent lowered his.

"Yes. I remember. What about the ones you didn't avoid? News of your arrival should have alerted Father...and me."

"Marcus knew me. I asked him not to say anything. Said I wanted to surprise you."

"It worked," Vincent commented dryly. He couldn't understand why he was feeling the way he was. Surely he wasn't still jealous. He'd heard Diana's explanation of how she and Devin met.

Devin swung his legs over the edge of the bed and walked over to Vincent. He placed his hand softly on Vincent's shoulder. "Want to tell me about it?"

"No."

Devin backed up and sat on the edge of the bed. "What's eating you, Vincent? You came charging into Diana's loft like a hound from hell. I've never seen you like that."

Images were sifting through Vincent's mind of Devin with his hands on Diana's shoulders, Diana leaning back into him; he saw Devin recoil in shock as he came through the door and advanced on him. A feeling coursed through Vincent that all but paralyzed him. He realized that in that moment he would have torn Devin's throat out...would cheerfully have eviscerated him. He couldn't speak for a moment and swallowed hard several times to clear his throat. When he could finally speak, he knew his voice was rough; he could hear the undertone of a growl. "Stay away from Diana, Devin."

Devin was up immediately, circling the room nervously. "Don't be ridiculous. I can't very well stay away from her, Vincent. We're working a case together. Jake North--that's me, by the way--is a private investigator." He bent and stared into Vincent's eyes. "A *licensed* PI, brother. He's one of my regular identities. I *like* being Jake. I'm *good* at being him. I was hired for this case and I intend to finish it. I can't help it if she happens to be the detective working it."

Through tightly clenched teeth, Vincent managed: "Does your PI license give you license to touch her as well?"

Devin grinned then, and Vincent felt an electric-like surge of long-buried resentment and anger. "Oho! Jealous are we? Just how well does our little red-haired firebrand *know* you, baby brother?"

With a strangled growl, Vincent was out of the chair. In one fluid motion Vincent had his claws at his brother's throat. Devin's face went white...so white that the scars on his cheek were barely noticeable. Vincent, however, knew they were there. He ran his thumb over the ridges as he stared into Devin's frightened eyes. And felt satisfied.

"Vincent...." Devin's hoarse voice was a plea.

Vincent released him and backed away, stumbling on the rug. He turned to the wall and laid his forehead against the cold stone. The shame washed over him...and the fear. "Forgive me, Devin."

He could hear anger--outrage--replacing the fear in Devin's voice. "What the *hell* is the matter with you, Vincent? I was *joking*, for God's sake!"

Vincent drew a ragged sigh and walked shakily to his chair. He slumped over, elbows on knees, and buried his face in his hands.

Devin was still angry. Vincent could feel the anger, but he tried to ignore it. He was still trying to put his own emotions into some semblance of order. Devin was ranting, and the words were beginning to make sense. "...always joked with you, teased you. I know you got pissed, but this is ridiculous. You didn't even get that mad when I tried to divert Lisa's attention from you."

Vincent raised his face from his hands. He could feel the anger building again, but he was determined to control it this time. "Yes. Why is it, Devin, that anytime a girl even *looked* at me, you tried to turn her away? Every time a girl was even my friend you discouraged her...tried to get her interested in you?"

Devin looked dismayed. "Hey. Vincent. Time out, here, okay? I'm sorry, really. I guess I did kind of do that." He knelt in front of Vincent and once more placed a hand on his shoulder. "We were kids, Vincent. Brothers. You know as much as I loved you, I was always jealous, too. Father always took your side, favored you. When we got older, that was one way I could get back at you, I guess. When I was doing it, I didn't really think about it, you know. I didn't reason it out. It just bothered me that girls seemed to like you better than me."

Vincent blinked and shook his head a little. Devin's emotions right now were very strong and easily read. Vincent could feel his brother's love...and Devin's regret for any pain he'd caused him. Vincent's own emotions were leveling out. He reached for Devin to embrace him, and Devin hugged him back.

Afterwards, they stared at one another a little awkwardly. Finally, Devin said quietly, "Really, Vincent. I didn't know you and Diana even knew each other. And it wasn't what you thought, anyway."

Vincent sighed and began removing his boots and clothes for bed. He was suddenly exhausted. "It does not matter, Devin. I understand. And even if it were what I'd thought...Diana is free to do what she wishes. She must be free to choose."

Devin took the vest that Vincent handed him and laid it aside. It was vaguely amusing to Vincent that, as he stripped for bed, his brother stood there like a valet, taking his clothes and putting them away for him. He didn't believe Devin was even aware of what he was doing. He remembered how, as children, Devin had always taken care of him. It seemed that he was automatically falling back into old habits. Vincent felt a rush of love for his brother, so powerful that it was almost painful. As Vincent slid between the cool sheets, he felt Devin's hand on his shoulder and heard his voice. "It's okay, Vincent. I've got a feeling she's already chosen you. I wouldn't worry about it. G'night little brother."

Devin picked up the book of stories he'd been reading when Vincent came in. The Jungle Book, by Kipling, of a human boy raised by wolves. He'd been remembering the stories and how he and Vincent had acted them out when they were younger. He glanced down at Vincent and sat next to him. Devin began to read quietly, his voice picking up the cadence as he read. It had been a long time since he'd read aloud.

*"...Then something began to hurt Mowgli inside him, as he had never been hurt in his life before, and he caught his breath and sobbed, and the tears ran down his face.*

*'What is it? What is it?' he said. 'I do not wish to leave the jungle, and I do not know what this is. Am I dying, Bagheera?'*

*'No, Little Brother. That is only tears such as men use,' said Bagheera. 'Now, I know thou art a man, and a man's cub no longer....'<sup>10</sup>*

Vincent was asleep, and Devin laid the book beside him. Tears in his eyes, he said very quietly, "I love you, Little Brother."



Diana tried to work after Vincent left, but found her mind to be too cluttered. Between trying to juggle the miscellany of the case, her own turbulent emotions, and her worry over Vincent, she found she simply couldn't concentrate. *Perhaps when I see Jake...Devin...tomorrow, we can sort through some of this craziness.*

After showering and dressing for bed, without hesitation Diana opened her bottle of sleeping pills and downed two of them. After tonight, she was sure that both she *and* Vincent could use a break.

Even with the help of the pills, it took her a very long time to calm herself enough to sleep. She was still thinking of Vincent--or more accurately of the Other--as she fell asleep.

*Diana dreamed she was with Vincent on the couch again, as they'd been earlier. His hand caressed the back of her neck and she could feel the touch of his nail along her jawline. When he kissed her, she tried to get into it, really enjoy it, but for some reason everything seemed flat. Like watching black and white TV after you're used to a big-screen color set. The dream changed repeatedly, as though her mind were switching*

*channels on the same black and white TV. As though she simply wasn't interested enough in any one thing to stay with it. Eventually the dream images faded entirely and she slept so deeply she was unaware of anything at all.*

The following morning, Diana was just finishing dressing when the buzzer sounded from downstairs. Lurching to her feet, still thinking a little slowly from the aftereffects of the pills, she went over and pushed the intercom button. "Yeah?"

The cheery feminine voice from downstairs was tinny, but recognizable as her sister, Susan. "Hi! Alex and I were over this way and thought we'd stop by for a visit. Got time?"

Diana felt an immense sense of relief. Maybe Susan's common sense could straighten her out. "Sure! I've got a few minutes. Wait a minute and I'll send the elevator down."

While she waited impatiently for the old elevator to wheeze its way up, Diana's mind was going over things she wanted to discuss with her sister.

When Susan stepped off the elevator, it was obvious she knew something was wrong. She herded Alexandra into the loft and after Diana hugged her niece, Susan sent the child over to the couch with some toys to play. Taking Diana by the arm, Susan pulled her into the kitchen. "Okay, spill it. What's wrong?"

"Jeez. You've been here...." Diana glanced at her watch. "...less than three minutes and already you're asking questions. Pushy broad, aren't you?" She grinned a little and shook her head.

Susan pulled out a kitchen chair and sat down. "C'mon. Make some coffee and let's talk."

Diana busied herself making the coffee, letting the routine settle her so she could think. She watched Alex quietly playing on the couch. The entire time, she could feel Susan's eyes boring holes in her back and could feel her determination. Susan never had been one to let things lie, though she also knew when to stop pressing. After she got the coffee started, Diana pulled up another chair and sat backwards on it, folding her arms across the back. Resting her chin there, she sighed and commented: "I don't even know where to begin."

"You *could* try the beginning, but I think we've been there already. It's *him*, isn't it?"

"Yeah."

The coffee was ready, and Susan got up to go pour two cups, then returned and handed one of them to Diana. "So has he run off--ditched you--or is he getting too close?"

Diana gave her sister a lopsided grin. Susan knew her too well. "He hasn't ditched me. Things've been goin' pretty good, actually. But yeah. He's gettin' too close." She looked away, then back...took a long sip of coffee. "He's empathic, too, Suz."

Susan stared back at Diana, astonished. *That* was obviously something she'd never considered. She stammered a little. "Bu...But maybe...wouldn't that be *good*?" She looked totally confused, but as she stared into Diana's eyes a moment, she



shrugged. "I guess not." Susan got up and paced a minute, then turned to look back at her sister. "Hell, Diana. What *is* it that you want, anyway? You've told me repeatedly that whenever you're in a relationship it's like they're deaf and blind--there's nothing on the other side...like you knock on the door and there's no one home. But at the same time, you've never let anyone get to know you. And *that's* what this is all about, isn't it? Now that there's somebody on the other side of that door, you're scared to open it."

Diana refused to meet Susan's eyes and stared at the pattern in the linoleum. Finally, she said quietly, "It's...intrusive."

Susan exploded. "**Intrusive?** *Intrusive*. Well, yeah. I guess it *would* be. But what the hell did you expect, anyway?" She glared as Diana opened her mouth and then shut it again...saying nothing. "Yeah. Well, *don't* answer that. You probably don't know the answer anyway. But tell me this. How does *he* feel about it? Does he know that you can sense him? Does *he* feel it's intrusive?"

Still examining the linoleum, Diana shook her head. "I dunno. I mean, yeah. He knows I can sense him. If he thinks it's intrusive, he hasn't said. I think he was a little mad...hurt...that I didn't tell him sooner...that I blocked him for so long."

Susan sat back down facing her sister. "So how'd he find out? Did you tell him?"

Diana shrugged. "Kind of. We've been...sharing dreams. He kinda caught on, and then I admitted it."

"Sharing dreams? Seriously? I mean...what *kind* of dreams?"

When Diana turned a bright shade of mottled pink, Susan burst out laughing.

"Oh, Wow. I mean...Di...have you two *done* it yet?"

Shaking her head miserably, Diana blushed even redder. "C'mon, Suz. *Those* dreams aren't so bad. It's the others...the nightmares...the dreams I have concerning my cases...dreams *he* has that are...well...odd. Those are dreams that neither of us particularly *want* to share, and we can't help it. It's like we haven't any privacy left. And this...this *bond*...between us doesn't seem to leave us any choice. I don't like that too much...not having control over my life."

Susan drank the last of her coffee and took the cup to the sink. She stood a minute as she rinsed the cup, then put it aside. When she turned, Diana could sense an overwhelming weariness and sadness. "Diana. I don't know what to say to you. You've always been real private. Closed, y'know? You don't even open up to me very often. I've watched you tuck yourself away in your own little world and shut everyone and everything else out. You put everything in its place and expect it to stay there. Control? Yeah. You've always had control. Whenever you've been in a relationship either you've ended it or pushed them away. You controlled it. And then you bitched about it. Maybe it's time you had a situation you *couldn't* control. You told me once that this guy you cared about had been hurt so badly that he was scared to love again...that he couldn't bear losing anyone again. Well, hell. You're too scared to even let anyone in--to let them love you to *begin* with--can't even imagine just letting go and letting anyone love you just for *you*."

Diana hurt. Now Susan was mad at her, too. She didn't understand. No one did. "I'm not very lovable."

Susan came over and brushed a strand of Diana's long red hair back out of her face. "Nonsense." She shrugged and called Alex. "C'mon, baby. Tell Aunt Di goodbye. We've gotta go."

After hugging Alex and promising to come see her soon, Diana hugged Susan. "You're mad at me."

Susan shook her head. "Nope. Just mildly annoyed. For somebody smart, you can sure be dumb, sis. If he loves you, he loves you. If he doesn't, no amount of hiding from him is going to *make* him. I've gotta go. Wish I could help."

Just before Susan and Alex disappeared down the elevator shaft, Diana smiled to Susan. "You've helped. You always do."

She stood a moment then looked at her watch. "Oh, damn! Devin's gonna be waiting for me. I gotta get movin'."



When Vincent woke, he lay with his eyes closed for a few minutes. The pipes were already singing messages for the morning--a message to Rebecca from Livvy, one from Mary to Brooke, a relay by Pascal from a helper in East Harlem to another on the West Side--and everyone was beginning their day. Jacob was waking as well. *I overslept*, he thought, mildly astonished. He remembered the night before and wondered briefly if his *discussion* with Devin had been a dream. But when he rolled over he saw the book, and remembered Devin reading to him. *Devin hasn't read to me in over twenty years.*

As Jacob's empathic call became louder, Vincent temporarily put aside his thoughts of the night before. His son had been missing him. He rose and dressed quickly, thinking of picking Jacob up for an early shower before breakfast; Jacob liked to shower with him and found the falling water both mysterious and delightful. After last night, Vincent felt he could use a little of Jacob's childlike wonder to chase away the darkness.

Before he could even finish lacing his boots, he heard Father's shuffling steps in the corridor outside. "Vincent...may I come in?"

"Certainly, Father. I'm getting ready to pick up Jacob for a shower and breakfast. Is there something wrong?"

Father shook his head. "Not exactly wrong. But I *am* a little confused. Marcus tells me that Devin was here last night, very late. Is that true?"

"Yes. Devin was here." Vincent sighed. He'd hoped he would have had a little time before Father learned of Devin's visit. For once he found himself wishing that one of his sentries had been a little less alert...or perhaps that his brother had been a little more stealthy. "It seems that he and Diana are working a case together." At Father's astonished look, Vincent laughed. "I know. You needn't say a word. Devin apparently has a private investigator's license under the name of Jake North. Diana is working a case involving diamond theft and murder. The diamonds were insured, and the company hired a private investigator--Jake North--to do the investigation. Since he and Diana were both assigned the case, they were working together last night when I went Above

to see Diana."

Vincent paused to allow what he'd just told Father to sink in, and steeled himself for Father's response. But Father merely looked at him a little strangely. "I see."

Vincent waited for further questions or comments, but none were forthcoming. Jacob was becoming more insistent, although Mary was surely attending him by now. "Father. I must go tend to Jacob. I feel certain that Devin will return at another time. It was far too late last night for a lengthy visit."

Father nodded. "I'm sure you're right. Go on, now. Take care of your son."

Vincent turned away to get Jacob. He was a little reluctant to leave Father with no explanation as to why his son had come like a thief in the night to speak only to his brother, but not to his father. He hesitated, but then continued on. He was certain Devin would return soon, and Father would be appeased. *Surely no further embarrassment is necessary.*

When Vincent claimed Jacob from Mary, the child's innocent joy in seeing him overshadowed any doubts or fears Vincent held from the previous night. For a time he was able to put those worries aside.

Reluctant to leave the child, Vincent took Jacob with him when he taught class, which he normally didn't do. The children were delighted and took turns holding him throughout the class. Reflecting back on the class later, Vincent decided that even if they had not accomplished as much as they normally would have, at least everyone enjoyed themselves.

He had to leave Jacob with Mary, however, when it was time to go work with the excavation crew. Before he left to go to the work site, he stopped for a discussion with Cullen over Diana's door. Cullen was free that day, so he said he would take care of it.



Diana met Devin at the station, and from there they left to interview employees at the last jewelry robbery. They'd already interviewed six of the employees and were headed back to Diana's loft to correlate the findings. As her car rattled its way through the traffic, Diana cast surreptitious glances at her companion.

Devin sat with the window rolled down and his elbow resting in the open window. The cold air was making her chilly. Devin stared blindly out the window. He'd hardly said a word since she'd picked him up at the station.

Finally deciding to try to get his attention, Diana commented: "Didn't your mother ever tell you not to hang your arm out the window?"

He swung his head back in her direction. "My mother died when I was born."

"Oh. Sorry." *Damn, Bennett. How do you do it? You always manage to put your foot in it.*

He shrugged and laid his head back on the headrest. "Doesn't matter. That's one thing Vincent and I had in common. Neither one of us knew our mothers. Except at least I knew mine hadn't abandoned me."

"Is that what you were thinking of just now?" Diana swung wide to avoid hitting

the taxi that had jolted to a stop in front of her, and narrowly avoided being rear-ended. She caught a glimpse of Devin's startled look before he relaxed and answered her question.

"Yes and no. Mostly I was just thinking about Vincent. Trying to understand what happened last night." He glanced at her hopefully. "I don't suppose you'd be willing to tell me what's goin' on...."

Diana didn't answer immediately. She wasn't sure how much Vincent would want her to say. She finally decided that he wouldn't appreciate her meddling. "No. I can't do that. It's for Vincent to tell you what he wants to. I will tell you that he's had a real rough time since even before Catherine died. I guess his sentence in hell has extended about two years or more. The things that have happened would've completely destroyed anyone else, Devin. It amazes me that he's done as well as he has."

"Father told me about Vincent's illness and Catherine's kidnapping. He told me she was murdered after she'd delivered Vincent's son." He paused for a long moment. "God, Diana. I can't imagine Vincent being a father...much less under these circumstances. I'm an uncle, for Chrissake and I haven't even seen the kid."

Diana gripped the steering wheel harder, her hands sweaty. "He's a great kid, Devin. And Vincent's a wonderful father."

Diana could feel Devin's eyes on her. "So. Now we're up to the present. Where do you fit in? That was quite a circus last night, but you handled it like you've done it before...."

She shook her head. "Nope. Just went on instinct." She carefully kept her eyes on the traffic.

"And you don't know what happened." Devin sounded disgusted.

"I never said *that*. I just said that what happened isn't for me to say. And I'm not sure Vincent *will*. Just leave it, Devin."

Devin sighed heavily. "Guess I don't have a choice. But tell me this: how'd you come to know my brother?"

"I was assigned the Chandler case after her murder. They'd run into a complete dead end, and that's when I get called. That's what I do, Devin. I work the unsolvable ones. The messy ones. The ones that don't *have* happy endings. This case...our case...was just for fun." She pulled over and turned into her parking lot. "C'mon. I'll fix us some hot dogs and tell you about how I met Vincent."

Later, they sat at Diana's kitchen table nursing a couple of beers. Devin had been silent all during Diana's terse recitation of the facts surrounding her finding Vincent at Catherine's grave, then the calm blow-by-blow of what followed...up to and including Gabriel's unorthodox execution. She asked no praise, placed no blame: merely laid the story out like cards on a table. He shook his head. "No wonder you two have gotten so close. He owes you a lot, Diana."

"He doesn't owe me anything. I think we're past owing each other anything at all--except maybe respect."

When Devin answered, it was obvious that he'd read between the lines in Diana's bare bones narrative. "There's definitely respect in what I saw last night. But there's a whole lot more there as well. I couldn't hear what you two were saying, but it's pretty

obvious that you care a lot for one another."

Diana rubbed the back of her neck and winced. Again, she'd been blocking all day. It seemed she'd been blocked forever. Devin asked quietly, "Head hurt again?"

"Yeah." The answer came out in a whisper.

"Do you get these often?"

Diana attempted a smile. "More often lately." Devin wore an acutely concerned expression, and Diana made a decision. "I'm an empath, Devin. Like Vincent."

Outside of the blink, Devin's expression didn't change, except perhaps there might have been a touch of confusion now evident in his eyes.

"That explains a lot. Between you and Vincent, I mean. But why the headaches?"

Diana leaned back in the chair and crumpled the napkin she held in her hand. She closed her eyes and tried to will the pain away. Eventually she gave up and met Devin's eyes. "Unlike your brother, I live and work in a fairly hostile environment, empathically. I learned to block a long time ago, though I usually only do it when I'm out, away from home and it really gets to bothering me. It's real hard to keep the block up for any length of time. That's what gives me headaches." She gestured to her isolated loft and her in-home office. "Basically, I live at home, work at home...even play at home. I stay pretty isolated." She grimaced a little at Devin's odd expression. She slid out of the chair and pushed her hands into her pockets. She turned away and faced the window. Talking was a lot easier if she wasn't looking at him. "Actually, I really kind of liked my life. It was quiet. Controlled. Private."

Devin's soft voice added: "Lonely?"

"A little," she admitted. "But then, I didn't know any different. I'd about given up on men completely."

"Until Vincent."

"Yeah," she breathed. "Until Vincent." She swung around and straddled the chair, crossing her arms across the back. She was finding Devin easier to talk to than she'd expected. Maybe it was because he knew Vincent too, and loved him. And he wasn't Father. Father was *too* close. And she really needed someone to talk to about this. Someone other than Vincent. Maybe even someone other than Susan, who knew her so well. A fresh perspective. "Y'know, it snuck up on me. He was having such a hard time, in his grief, that he hardly noticed me at all. I figured I'd just stick around and help him out. Kind of be a sounding board. I knew it'd hurt when he drifted off--when he didn't need me so much--y'know?"

Devin nodded silently, and she continued. "Well, it seems he was having a lot of trouble with relearning to handle his empathy. He'd lost it--well--awhile back. During his...illness." She didn't want to go into details on anything personal in Vincent's life. And his losing the bond was *definitely* personal. Especially the way he lost it. "Anyway, when he began sensing everyone around him it was hard for him to cope with that and his grief over Catherine, too. He needed a quiet place, and I could provide one."

At Devin's questioning look, Diana explained. "He couldn't sense me, Devin. I made sure of it. Actually, it was pretty doubtful that he would've even noticed me





anyway. He was pretty self-involved at the time, but by blocking him I was able to provide him a *quiet place*. Someplace he could get away from the constant intrusion of others' emotions--especially their sympathy and pity for him."

"I see. At least I think I'm beginning to. So how long has this gone on?"

"Until just before Winterfest. See, he'd started to realize that we'd begun forming a connection. We...." At this point, Diana faltered. *How can I explain this without getting too specific?* She gave up. There was no way. She blushed, but she forged ahead. "We'd been sharing dreams."

"Uh Oh." Comprehension seemed to dawn in Devin.

"Yeah. That's about the way I feel. To be truthful, it didn't bother me as much when he didn't really understand--just thought they were his dreams--but it bugs the heck out of me *now*."

"Does it bother him?"

Devin appeared only interested and concerned, and his attitude encouraged Diana to continue. "Yeah. But not as much as it bothers me." She stared hard into Devin's eyes, begging him to understand. "It's like...I don't know, Devin...it's like I'm losing myself into him. This damned *bond* that's formed between us is inescapable. It's almost like bit by bit I'm slowly *becoming* him...and maybe vice-versa. And it scares me silly."

"So you block all the time, and you get headaches."

"Yeah. Except I can't block at night." She looked away, hesitant to say more. It seemed as though all she did lately was bare her soul...to everybody but Vincent. *What the hell, Bennett. In for a penny, in for a pound. Maybe he can help.* "So I've been taking sleeping pills. They seem to block the dreams...at least they seem to keep the connection from forming."

Devin was silent a moment, then added quietly: "It's your life, Diana, and I don't know you very well. I won't meddle, but it seems to me that you're about on the edge. You haven't seemed very sharp lately. I just thought you were tired. You can't keep up this way. You'll end up in the looney bin or some looney on the outside will kill you because you're not sharp enough or fast enough to do the right thing. In your line of work, you can't let yourself lose your edge."

"I know," Diana whispered. She stared at Vincent's brother and shrugged. "I know, Devin. I just don't know what to do about it."

Devin left a little later, and Diana worked for awhile on some reports. After finishing the last report on the last witness and the final paperwork that she had to turn in the following day, Diana settled down on the couch to watch the news. She'd just gotten comfortable when the intercom buzzed, and she groaned. Forcing herself over to the speaker, she pressed the button. "Yeah?"

Cullen's voice, a little indistinct through the old speaker, replied: "Cullen, Diana. Vincent asked me to fix your door. Something about a break-in?"

Diana fumed a little. Just like Vincent to give somebody the truth, but not enough to give anything away--leaving her with the explanation. She didn't know *why* that should irritate her, but for some obscure reason, it did. "You might say that. Sure. C'mon up, Cullen."

When Cullen saw the door, he raised his eyebrows and leaned against the wall. A low whistle was his only reply for a few moments.

Her annoyance with the entire situation was building by the minute, and Diana couldn't take it any longer. "Just fix the goddamned door, Cullen, or I'll call a carpenter myself."

Cullen grinned and spread his hands. "Okay. Don't get so testy." He put his toolbox down and began to dig.

Diana caught the sidelong glance he gave her and glared. The corner of his mouth twitched.

After rummaging in the box a few moments, Cullen found what he needed and began to work. He muttered something she missed.

"What was that, Cullen?"

"Oh, nuthin'. Just that the damned cat burglars get bigger every year up here."



After working on the excavation crew for hours, Vincent was tired enough to simply drop into bed. He put Jacob to bed, shared a quiet, late evening meal with Father, and now sat entering his thoughts in his journal. All day, despite the exacting--and exhausting--work, Vincent's thoughts continued returning to Diana. He longed to see her, but was determined to remain apart from her for as long as was necessary for her to come to terms with their increasing lack of *separateness*. For all its strangeness, the lack of privacy was more intriguing to Vincent than frightening; although it was more than a little disorienting and daunting having his inner self exposed to her in this manner.

*I miss her more than I can say, but strangely, what I miss is not the bond, but Diana herself. Her physical presence. The quiet solitude we both enjoyed in one another's company. I long for the camaraderie we shared in those long nights in her loft when I watched her work... times when so often she would forget my presence and be totally herself. I miss our friendship. I did not ask for this kind of love, nor do I wish it. Not if that love should mean loss of all else between us.*

Vincent's eyes misted over briefly and he wiped at them impatiently with the back of his hand. *Foolishness. I should be past this.* He reached over and flipped the cover off of the Kristopher Gentian painting of himself and Catherine and stared at the images on the canvas. His gaze touched Catherine's face lovingly. *Magic, moonbeams and rainbows. We chased them all, Catherine, you and I. We even caught a few.* The image of Diana in her rumpled sweats, hair pulled back into an untidy braid--cursing at her computer screen--brought a smile to his face, and he blinked away another tear. *I can no longer imagine life without her, Catherine...any more than I could have imagined it without you.* That thought sent a chill down his spine. His eyes dropped back to his journal.

*She entered the deep, unknown forest of my soul and stepped lightly through all the shadows there. Undaunted by the darkness and the pain, she brought me forth once more to light to make me whole. Yet now she fears my treading through the dark which lies inside of her. Through her pain. Does she not know that her journey through my heart has shown me all that need be known? It showed me love. There is nothing else that matters.*

Vincent capped his pen and closed his journal. After carefully covering the painting, he stood for a moment staring down at it, feeling such a sense of loss that it all but overwhelmed him. He turned regretfully toward bed, not knowing if he should dare hope to dream or not.



## TO MASTER YOUR DREAMS

If you can dream--and not make dreams your master;  
If you can think--and not make thoughts your aim;  
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster  
And treat those two imposters just the same....<sup>11</sup>

**T**he days turned into a week, and Diana was still taking the pills at night--every night--to stave off the dreams and enduring the headaches during the day. Vincent stayed away. And Devin worried about both of them.

Devin and Diana had finally managed to track down the evidence they needed to issue a warrant on the boyfriend of the murdered clerk. Careful questioning and various pieces of evidence had made it obvious to them that the man had been blackmailing her for inside information on diamond deliveries and security systems. When she'd threatened to back out and expose him, he'd killed her. Diana had insisted on picking the guy up herself, and Devin had gone along.

When they parked the car in front of the suspect's house, Diana cautioned Devin to stay in the car. "I don't need a civilian out there if there's trouble."

Diana's comment irritated Devin. "I'm not exactly a civilian, Diana. Besides, you don't look so hot." And she didn't look good at all. The dark circles under her eyes were getting more pronounced. In fact, Devin had noticed her becoming increasingly sluggish since the day he'd met her. Even her tongue wasn't as sharp as it had been earlier in the week.

Diana shrugged and looked away. "I don't have to look like a fashion plate to pick up garbage." She closed the car door and leaned down to peer into the car. "Don't get any macho ideas, okay? I've got backup, so stay out of the way." She pointed with her chin to the patrol car that had pulled up behind them. There was another in the alley behind the house.

Devin got out of the car and stood behind it. He watched Diana saunter up to the house and knock on the door. She stood to the side and called out, "Police. Open up."

There was no answer. Diana motioned to the other officer, who kicked the door in. Still nothing. They started in, and Diana tripped on the threshold, sprawling into the foyer of the house.

Devin's heart leaped to his throat, but before he could react, the male officer accompanying Diana had covered her. Shots rang out and there was a quick skirmish as the suspect tried to make his escape, but he was quickly handcuffed and brought to the car.

Diana was clearly furious with herself, and Devin knew better than to say anything. The fury in her eyes as they met his convinced him that his comments would be best left unsaid at this point, but he carefully stored the lecture away for another time.

Something had to be done, or she was going to get herself hurt, or killed. That stumble and fall was a symptom of a far deeper problem...one that was getting worse.

The ride back to the station was anything but pleasant, and Devin didn't stick

around while the paperwork was done. He called his client and updated them on the case and told Diana he'd see her later. After that, he went back to his hotel room--a place he was getting tired of very quickly--and called Charles to let him know he'd be home soon. He grinned at the enthusiasm in Charles' voice as his friend asked question after question about the case. Devin assured Charles that he'd give him a complete rundown when he saw him again.

After he hung up, Devin surveyed his room in distaste. The sterile atmosphere was wearing thin. He'd been ready for a little excitement when he'd dredged up his Jake North identity. He'd meant to spend more time at home, but things hadn't worked out that way. He hadn't been back down to the tunnels since he'd seen Vincent that first night. Now that the case was over, he intended to at least spend a day or so visiting with Father. *I think it's time Vincent knows what's going on with Diana. Maybe he can do something to straighten her out.* It was none of his business, he knew. Diana was an adult. So was Vincent. *But they're not being honest with themselves...either one of them.*

Devin pulled on his coat. There was a fine mist falling and it was getting colder. *Leave it to me to pick the lousiest night of the week to take a walk through Central Park.*

This time, Devin took the most direct route. It didn't matter to him if anyone knew he was coming, although he dreaded a confrontation with Father...and he'd still prefer surprising them. Somehow, Devin didn't think his father would forgive him for slipping in and out without visiting last time...to say nothing of wanting to know just how Devin had done it. He smiled to himself as he thought of the circuitous passages he'd had to take last time. When he and Vincent had been kids they'd often used that passage--one unknown to anyone else--to sneak past the sentries. But it was a tight squeeze for an adult. *I doubt if Vincent could even fit anymore.*

As Devin approached the first sentry point he heard the scrape of the brick being moved. It was a small sound, one which would not be noticeable unless one were listening for it. "It's all right. It's just me. Devin."

There followed a long moment of silence, then a girlish voice drifted to him out of the dark. "Devin?"

Devin was glad it was a girl. Women he could usually get around. Maybe he *did* still have a chance to surprise Father. Devin aimed the beam of his flashlight down, away from the peephole so the sentry could get a better look at him. "It's Devin. Who's there?"

"Brooke." The small voice continued, "You know your way?"

Devin remembered Brooke from the last time he'd been home. She was a cute kid. Devin moved closer, peering through the hole. There was the sound of a match striking, and he could see Brooke on the other side of the wall. "Yeah, I do. Let me go in quiet, okay?"

Brooke cocked her head to the side. In the lamplight, her curly hair framed her face in a soft halo. "I dunno know, Devin. Vincent doesn't like it if we bend the rules. He's pretty strict with security." She hesitated. "But Marcus didn't get in trouble when you came last week, and we've been kind of looking for you." She finally made up her mind. "Okay, go on."

Devin considered. "If I go east from here, then down the stairwell, are there any sentries?"

Brooke shook her head.

"Good. Then I can still surprise 'em."

Devin took the east branch of the tunnel and began the long trip down the metal staircase. When he got to the bottom, he looked back up. The stairs seemed to go on forever. He remembered walking those steps as a kid. Heaven alone knew how long they'd been there. It was a short walk, then, to the Hub. He couldn't avoid meeting a few people, but since they all knew him, it was no problem to talk them into letting him keep his arrival a surprise.

The hardest part of the trip was the last ten feet to his father's study. He could hear Vincent and Father inside, the cadence of their voices rising and falling in what sounded like a friendly discussion. The voices stopped as he stepped through the door, then Father was up, reaching for his cane.

"Devin! It's so good to see you!"

Vincent turned toward him, leaning his arm across the back of the chair. He didn't say a word, but merely nodded and smiled.

Allowing Father to gather him into an enthusiastic embrace, Devin found that his own eyes were moist as he blinked back tears. He returned the hug in kind. "Good to see you, too. Have you beaten Vincent at chess, yet?" For they had obviously been playing when he'd arrived.

"You must be joking, Devin. He was about to take my king yet again. You merely rescued me from an ignominious death."

Vincent chuckled, turned and began packing away the pieces. It seemed to Devin that his brother was reluctant to speak with him. *Maybe it's just my imagination.*

Father, however, seemed more than happy to carry the conversation. He seemed determined to avoid an argument, which suited Devin. He'd been afraid that Father would be angry with him for his sneaking in last time. "So, Devin. Vincent tells me that you have been working with Diana on a case. That must be interesting. How are you and she getting along?"

Devin could tell from the sudden rigidity of Vincent's back that he was listening attentively. He shifted his own attention back to Father. "Yeah. Kind of odd how things work out, sometimes. Diana is okay. We joke with each other that with this one we got to play Sherlock Holmes. Putting pieces of a puzzle together is a lot of fun."

Vincent carried the chess set over to Father's desk and put it away. He turned and leaned against the desk, crossing his arms. His expression was bland, controlled. "You always did enjoy Holmes. Strangely, he is also one of Diana's favorite characters."

"A little play-acting is fun, now and again." Devin wasn't sure just what was wrong. *Speaking of play-acting, I hope he doesn't do his Mr. Hyde imitation again tonight. I'm not sure I'm up to it, and I don't think Father could handle him as well as Diana did.*

"How is Diana, Devin?" Father seemed curious and completely open in his questioning. No subterfuge there. "We haven't seen her in awhile, and I miss her."



Devin wanted to blurt out what he knew, but if he did, Diana'd kill him--and he wasn't sure that was the right thing to do, anyway. *Something* had to be done about the dependency she was developing on the pills. He knew she hadn't yet been on them long enough to build up a true dependency, but she was headed that way. And the slow build up of the drug in her system was slowing her dangerously...as evidenced by today. "I guess she's okay." He glanced at Vincent, meeting his brother's eyes for the first time that night. "She misses you, Vincent."

Vincent shrugged. "She knows where I am."

The pain Devin saw in Vincent's eyes made him angry. Angry with Diana...and angry with Fate in general...and angry with his brother for not getting off his duff and doing something about the situation. Devin wasn't sure what was behind Vincent's cryptic comment, but he had a feeling that *he* wasn't the one to approach his brother about this. At least not without more information.

He changed the subject. "I talked to Charles tonight. He said to tell you 'Hello.'" The conversation then smoothed out as they discussed the young man with neurofibromatosis whom Devin had befriended and rescued from an abusive brother. Father wanted to know the details of Charles' current medical care and how the disease was progressing. Vincent was more concerned with Charles' psychological well-being.

Devin enjoyed the visit, but his nagging worry for Diana kept him off-balance. He knew Vincent sensed something as well, because his brother kept glancing at him oddly. Later, Vincent left to pick up his son from the nursery. He wanted to show him off to his uncle. Devin took the opportunity to discuss Diana's problem with Father, who would have a much more detailed knowledge of what to do.

Devin watched and made sure Vincent was out of earshot before turning to Father. "Now that we're alone, I wanted to talk to you."

Father settled back in his chair and laced his fingers. He looked worried. "I had a feeling you were concerned about something. What is it?"

"It's Diana. Has Vincent talked to you at all about what's going on with them? About the dreams?"

Father looked startled. "She's talked to you about that? That surprises...no, *astonishes* me!"

Devin was relieved. At least he didn't have to start from the beginning. He didn't have much time. "Yeah. Well, I have the feeling she's getting pretty desperate. She doesn't have too many people she can talk to about this, you know." Father nodded, and Devin continued. He glanced worriedly at the entrance to the chamber, then back to Father. "She's been taking prescription sleeping pills every night to avoid the dreams, and she's getting progressively less alert. She slipped today when she was trying to make an arrest and fell flat on her face. She could've been killed. I've taken those things myself before, and I know that the residual of the drug can build up and slow you pretty badly."

One glance at Father and Devin knew he'd dropped a bombshell. One thing Father never would tolerate was someone misusing drugs...prescription or otherwise. They'd helped too many people through dependency problems here in the tunnels. And seen too many die from various types of misuse. Father rose from his chair and slapped

his hand down on the desk. "Enough! This *has* to stop! I've had enough of this nonsense. Diana is too strong for this, and I simply will not allow her to harm herself--and my son--this way."

*Oops*, Devin thought anxiously as Father limped across the Study and up the stairs to his chamber. *I think I've stirred up a hornet's nest*. Devin followed hesitantly. "Where're you goin'?"

A muffled answer came from behind the closet door. "Topside."

"Whoa!" Devin launched himself upstairs. "Don't think that's a good idea. I think Vincent needs to handle this...not you or me. I think she'd take it better from him. I just kind of thought maybe you could help me talk to him."

"Talk to me about what?" Vincent was standing at the foot of the stairs holding his son. Devin barely had time to register the fact that his nephew was a perfectly normal little boy before the kid started yelling at the top of his lungs. Vincent glowered at them. "Settle down, please. Try to calm yourselves. Jacob is not capable of dealing with these feelings right now. In fact, I'm not sure I can myself. What is the problem. You two aren't fighting again, are you?"

Devin and Father glanced at each other and both drew deep breaths as they tried to follow Vincent's instructions. Vincent was trying to settle his son, but his curious glances towards them told Devin that his brother wasn't going to let them off without an explanation. Eventually the child's yells subsided to snuffling, and he clung to his father's neck for reassurance.

"Now," Vincent said quietly as he stroked his son's hair. "Would you please tell me what's going on? When I left you were having a quiet conversation." His gaze found Devin. "I sensed your worry even then. What is it?"

Father's voice pulled Vincent's attention away from Devin...much to Devin's relief. "Perhaps I'd better explain, Vincent." He motioned for them to return to the Study, and once there, each of them took a seat. Devin waited to see how Father was going to approach the problem. Father clenched his hands over the top of his cane and sighed. "I regret that our emotions upset Jacob. But what Devin told me disturbs me tremendously."

Vincent glanced back at Devin and frowned. "What is it, Father?"

"Devin tells me that Diana's emotional state is deteriorating. She has been unable to sleep, fearing the dreams...and she has begun taking prescription sleeping pills on a regular basis."

Vincent rested his head against his son's while he occupied the child with a toy. His voice was soft, very quiet as he answered: "I knew there was something.... My dreams have been only that, of late...*my* dreams. There has been no sense of her. I had no idea, though that she'd taken such a step."

"Yes. Well, Devin tells me that she is becoming progressively less alert, and suspects that the residual effect of the pills is slowing her dangerously. There was an incident...."

Vincent closed his eyes and sighed. "I don't want to even hear it. She wasn't injured?"

Devin had been listening attentively to the conversation and was relieved the

problem was out in the open. "No. She's okay. For now. 'Til next time. When she's not quick enough, or sharp enough."

"Something must be done, Vincent," Father admonished. "I know you've been trying to give her space and time. But this cannot continue. If you won't do anything, I will."

Devin watched as Vincent swung toward Father. He was obviously exasperated, but Devin couldn't tell if he was angry with Diana, himself, or Father. Perhaps all three. "Don't you think I *know* that, Father? What would you have me do? Charge up there and remove the pills forcibly and throw them down the drain? Force her to listen to me? I cannot even carry on an intelligent conversation with her, lately. I fear that I am probably the *last* person she would listen to."

Devin couldn't stand this anymore. He felt like the fifth wheel on a wagon. "Why, Vincent? She's not angry with you, and she misses you, too."

"What has she told you, Devin?" Vincent's voice was sharp--more than a little anxious--and Father placed a hand on Vincent's shoulder in an obvious attempt to calm him. The child started snuffling again. Vincent put him on the floor with his toy.

"She told me what happened when Catherine died and how she helped you find Jacob. About killing Gabriel. Said you two became close friends." Devin watched to see any sign of Vincent suddenly erupting into a rage. There was none. Only an acute interest. He relaxed a little. "She finally admitted to me that she's empathic, too...and that you two have been sharing dreams." When Vincent didn't react--except for a blink or two--Devin felt more comfortable continuing. "Vincent, she's scared to death of...of being *absorbed* by you, I guess. She says she feels as though she's losing herself bit by bit. I think she's always been so alone, so private, that the thought of *anyone* being that close to her terrifies her."

Once more, Vincent folded his arms, this time hugging himself tightly. Devin recognized the gesture--he'd seen Diana do it often lately. *Creepy*.

Vincent was very quiet for several long minutes. Finally when he spoke, he excused himself. "I am sorry. Please, Devin...stay and visit with Father. I have...matters to discuss with Diana." Vincent picked his son up and handed the boy to Father.

Devin watched as his brother turned the corner at the top of the stairs and disappeared. He startled as he felt his father's arm around his shoulder. "You did well, Devin, to tell me. I'm pleased that Diana had someone she felt she could confide in, recently. I'm sure you helped."

Devin wasn't convinced. He was afraid he'd only instigated an argument.



Vincent stood on Diana's rooftop trying to calm himself. Trying to put words and thoughts together. Nothing would be served by an argument. *A quiet, reasonable discussion. Between two intelligent people. Friends. It must be that and nothing more.*

Once he felt calm enough, he moved to the skylight and looked inside. He felt an incredible surge of tenderness, seeing her below him in her usual place--the computer desk--totally oblivious to her surroundings. He felt as though he'd been gone forever. It felt like forever, anyway. *Her hair is beautiful in the light. Even in the harsh fluorescents. It is more lovely still, in candlelight.* He hesitated, still reluctant to begin a discussion that might end in dissention. Steeling himself, he rapped on the pane.

Diana's head snapped up and around. She stared up at him for a moment, then headed for the stairs. Vincent could sense nothing from her. Her block was built solidly against him. He sighed and leaned against the parapet, waiting for her to come through the door.

When the door opened and Diana was silhouetted in the light, it was harder than Vincent had thought it would be just to remain where he was and allow her the choice to come to him or tell him to leave. He could see the indecision in her face, in the self-conscious hug she gave herself.

Vincent waited.

Slowly, Diana moved across the roof toward him, finally standing next to him. The scent of her hair and the delicate scent of the soap she'd used drifted to him and he closed his eyes and tightened his grip on the low stone wall he was leaning on.

"I'm glad you came," she said quietly.

Vincent's heart lurched. He'd been so afraid he would not be welcome. He raised his face to the night breeze and felt the sharp coolness of the air as it pulled at his long hair. He knew Diana would be cold, standing there as she was, without her coat. He extended his arm and offered his cloak, hoping she would accept this small gesture of his concern.

She hesitated only a moment, then moved within the circle of his arm. As he closed his arm around her, effectively wrapping her in his cloak--protection against the cold wind--he could feel her tremble. But if it was from cold or nervousness, he didn't know. "I've missed you," he murmured into her hair.

Vincent felt the warmth of her breath against his neck as she sighed and settled against him. It felt like coming home.

"I've missed you, too, Vincent. This last week's been hard."

"It doesn't have to be that way, you know."

He could feel the motion of her head against his neck. "I don't know anymore how it has to be. I used to *know*, Vincent...what I wanted...how to handle my life. Now, everything is muddled. And I'm scared."

Vincent sympathized. He tightened his embrace.

They stood, with Vincent braced against the steadily increasing wind, until with a small tug Diana indicated they should go inside. Without removing his arm from around her, he turned and walked with her into the loft.

As they walked through the door into the bright lights of the loft, Diana drew away a little. "Would you care for some tea?"

Vincent nodded and released her--a little saddened by the loss of the intimacy they'd just shared--and afraid it would not return. The harsh lights bothered him, and he took it upon himself to turn off the overhead florescent, leaving only the lamp by the

couch. He seated himself, partially turning and resting his arm across the back so he could watch Diana while she made the tea.

On her way back to Vincent with the tea, Diana stopped and flipped the power switch on her computer. She offered him his tea, and he took it. She'd already sweetened it. *She is trying so hard to act normally.* He watched as she curled up on the couch next to him. She kicked off her shoes and tucked her toes--covered by heavy socks--under his knee. Vincent ached with the sweetness of simply being with her, here...like this. It had been far too long since they'd been quiet like this with one another.

Vincent was almost afraid to delve below the surface, because the surface was so pleasant. But he knew he had to. Neither of them could ignore what was happening to them...to her. Diana could not be allowed to retreat from it, to mask it with drugs, or to hide. It would kill her--and him--in the end, if she couldn't face it.

"Diana," he began softly. "Devin spoke with Father tonight...."

"Damn it!" Diana exploded without warning. "I trusted him, and the first thing he does is run to you and tattle."

"Devin cares for you, Diana," he continued patiently. "He is concerned...as I am...as Father is. And he told Father, not me."

Diana had turned and sat rigidly facing away, but he could see the sparkle of a tear on her cheek. Her voice broke a little as she answered. "I didn't want...to worry you. I thought...maybe...just a little more time. But...it's not working."

She reached up and rubbed her temple; an unconscious action that told Vincent much. "Your head hurts. Come here." He turned her a little and began massaging her shoulders. The image of Devin doing the same swam before him momentarily, but he forced it away.

Diana's braid brushed the back of his hand, and on impulse Vincent removed the rubber band confining her hair and unbraided the length of it. His breath caught as he smoothed his hand over the waves. He leaned forward to rub her temples, being careful not to inadvertently scratch her with a nail.

Her voice caught him a little by surprise. "That feels so good." She moved back against him, to rest there.

"If it felt so good, why did you move?"

She murmured softly, "Because this feels better."

Knowing the time had come, Vincent said gently, "Diana. You must give up the pills. You cannot continue as you are."

"If I give up the pills, then we'll go back to the dreams, and I don't know if I'm up to that."

Vincent ran his hand down her arm to her hand, turning it. Holding it. The differences were glaringly obvious. He murmured. "I *miss* the dreams. Mine have seemed rather flat and colorless of late. I'd wondered why."

"It's less complicated this way."

"I do not understand you, Diana. You are better than this. Stronger." She tried to turn, to move away, but Vincent restrained her. He found it easier to talk with her in his arms. "For months you fought with me, forcing me to face my fears. I know now

that you were there with me when I remembered loving Catherine. *He* never would have allowed me to remember, Diana...without you to intervene." Vincent released her then, when she tried to face him.

Diana knelt on the couch in front of him and reached up to touch his face. Her hair hung past her shoulders in waves of vibrant silk. "You...remember me there?"

He shook his head. "No. But I know. It fits. 'Like a dog, he hunts in dreams,'<sup>12</sup> Diana, and I have my own fears of your knowing more of him."

Diana leaned forward and kissed him very softly, and Vincent thought his heart would burst with joy. The sweet *reality* of her--the sheer physical presence--almost overwhelmed him.

"He's really not so bad. He's part of you."

Vincent gathered her in once more, settling her on his lap. "We are so alike, Diana. You and I are both battling a lifetime of habitual and inborn traits that have assured us our privacy...and in some cases our sanity. We must go with care, but Diana--we *must* move. Our relationship cannot remain static and survive. And I am not sure that either of us can survive losing the other any longer...so please stop trying to kill yourself."

Indignant, she sat up, glaring at him. He knew his comment was striking far too close to home. "I'm not."

"Perhaps not. But the result could be the same if you do not stop the pills. The cumulative effect of the drugs slows you, Diana. And you become accustomed to taking them to sleep. Eventually you will be unable to sleep at all without them."

Diana struggled to her feet and walked to the window. Once more, she stood hugging herself in the defensive posture she so often assumed. Her hair, loose and wild, hung halfway to her waist. Vincent turned out the light and joined her at the window. Together they looked out over the city.

"Of all the people out in that city, Vincent...you and Catherine found one another. Then, of all the people Joe could've called, he called me."

Vincent's hand slipped under her hair and rubbed the tight muscles of her neck. "I know. Everything happens for a reason, Diana. I believe that, even now."

Diana was silent, then expelled a forced breath. "Well hell." She moved into the circle of his arms and buried her face in the curve of his neck. Vincent softly rested his cheek on her hair.

When she remained silent long after her outburst, Vincent chuckled and hugged her tighter. "You are such a gift to me, Diana. Just as Catherine was. Yet you are both such amazing individuals. I would have you no different than you are, and if some choices are taken from us, other gifts are given in return. I believe *that* as well." He paused, then commented: "The dreams are not all bad. Remember the unicorn and the sunshine? And I seem to recall a few others that were rather delightful."

She hid her face even more tightly against him. "I remember the river of blood, Vincent. And others like it."

Vincent was becoming a little frustrated. *She is so exasperating.* "Diana. What does it matter? You have seen *him*. The Other. I can no longer hide him from you. And I have accepted that. I do not like it, but I accept it. I have my fears and you have



yours. We still have a long journey to travel, exploring all that is happening to us. But all journeys begin with a single step."

She lifted her eyes to his. "And what is that first step?"

"Acceptance. Give me the pills, Diana."

She seemed to collapse a little as her bravado fled. With visible effort she gathered her inner spirit. Without a word, she walked to the bathroom and came back a few moments later with a bottle of pills. She placed the bottle carefully in the palm of his hand, and he closed his fingers over them. "You know, when you save someone's life, you become responsible for that person."

Her eyes were glinting with mischief, and Vincent chuckled. "Nothing quite so dramatic as all that. Besides, you have been responsible for me for a very long time, Diana. Let me be responsible for you for awhile."

They moved back over to the couch, and Vincent settled her against him. "Does your head still hurt?"

"Yes."

"Then let it go, Diana. Release the block. I will try not to intrude."

He began once more to massage her shoulders, kneading gently with his thumbs and the heels of his hands. He could feel the difference as her block slowly dissolved. His heart ached with the beauty of her presence, as bit by bit the layers fell away. He tried very hard to only allow himself the surface of her feelings: like touching the surface of a river and letting the water flow around his fingers. But even that was so much more of her than he'd had recently.

To distract himself he glanced aside...and noticed her hairbrush lying on the end table. Taking it, he began brushing her hair in long, even strokes, letting the rhythm soothe them both. He continued brushing until the hair fell in smooth, silken waves down her back.

When he stopped and leaned aside to put the brush back on the table, Diana shifted, turning to face him. He held his breath as she raised her fingers to his face, to trace the angle of cheekbone and run her thumb over his lower lip.

"Diana...I...don't...." His heart was pounding wildly. He'd tried so hard to keep his mind off anything that might spark his desire. They needed no complications right now, but at this moment the river of emotion he was sensing from Diana was beginning to drown him. He could feel himself becoming aroused and gently pushed her away from him.

Diana began pulling back, slowly building her block again...until they could control the flow of emotion and desire. But she left herself open just enough to let him sense the surface. He saw a touch of moisture in her eyes, but felt no sorrow in the soft caress of their connection. Her tremulous voice assured him that she, too, was aware of their need for time. "I guess we're not ready for this."

Vincent was still trying desperately to reach for control. He knew the Other waited just out of sight--out of reach--yet so close. And Diana might have no fear of him, but Vincent felt differently. His own voice sounded harsh as he answered. "No. Not yet." At her look of disappointment, he added, "Like children, we must learn to walk before we run. It will come." He rose, then--still holding her hand--and told her,

"I should go. Devin may still be Below. I would like to visit with him. And you need your rest."

Diana walked with Vincent to the roof. Before he left her, he touched her face--marveling at the silken texture--and said quietly, "Come to me in my dreams, Diana. You are always welcome there."



Devin lay on Vincent's bed reading some of the modern poetry Vincent had collected recently. *His tastes have become pretty eclectic*, Devin thought with a smile. *Must be Diana's influence*. He looked up to see his brother standing silently in the doorway. Vincent had thrown his hood back and leaned on one shoulder against the stone. His mane was a wild tumble of gold and bronze in the flickering candlelight, and Devin's breath caught in amazement as it did every time he saw his brother--grown into this incredible man--when he always expected to see the boy he'd left behind.

"Hello, Devin," Vincent said quietly. As though they'd not spoken together a few hours before.

Devin smiled. *So we begin again. A fresh start.* "Hello, baby brother."

"I see you have appropriated my bed again," Vincent smiled and began removing his cloak and hanging it.

"Only temporarily. So how is she?"

"Better, I think." Vincent sat heavily into the leather chair across from his brother. "Thank you, Devin. I knew there was something wrong, but I would never have guessed."

"You really think she'll be okay? She won't keep taking the pills?"

Vincent held out his hand and opened it, revealing the pill bottle. "I think not. But she will still have adjustments to make."

The brothers sat eyeing one another for a few moments, then almost simultaneously said, "I'm sorry...."

Vincent ducked his head and smiled as Devin grinned. "Hell, Vincent. I feel like a kid again, and keep looking up to see if Father's standing there over us to force us to say we're sorry."

"Except I believe that this time, we both truly are," Vincent replied soberly. He settled back into the chair and rested one foot on a low stool. He appeared entirely at ease.

Devin hoped Vincent was as relaxed as he looked. He leaned back on the pillows of Vincent's bed and leafed through the book he'd been reading when Vincent came in.

"Your tastes in poetry have certainly undergone some major changes since we were kids." He looked up to see Vincent sitting with his head resting on the back of the chair, his eyes closed. He thought for a moment his brother had gone to sleep, but then Vincent said--so quietly Devin could barely hear: "I was always jealous of *you*, Devin."

That wasn't what Devin had expected. Not at all. He cleared his throat. "I know that now," he admitted. "I never knew, Vincent. I was always jealous of you. But you knew that."

Vincent sat up suddenly, swinging his large frame forward and resting his forearms on his knees. The intensity of his gaze shook Devin. "It wasn't anything in particular. I loved you then, as I love you now. Wanted everything for you. Felt you deserved the best. But I was so...envious." He smiled a little. "So much, Devin. All our dreams. Deep down, I knew you would go, and I would stay. Even now I find myself wondering which of our adventures you are currently acting out."

Devin rolled over onto his stomach, facing Vincent. "You wouldn't be far wrong." He grinned a little wryly. "I think that's why I've never settled down, Vincent. Somewhere, deep down, I keep thinking about all the things you can't do."

Another silence. Devin thought he could hear the dust settle if he tried. When Vincent spoke again, it was obvious he'd been working toward something. "Diana has a sister, Devin. They are very close. She has told me how Susan has always been there for her...has always understood. But what amazes me is that she says they have never fought...never been jealous of one another. Sometimes I think Diana doesn't understand jealousy at all. She gives and never takes. She sacrifices herself constantly and only fears exposure of her own inadequacies...as though what she has to give is not worth enough for anyone to take."

Devin rested his chin on his hand and stared at his brother. Vincent was playing idly with the leather strips on his leggings, seemingly lost in thought. Devin smiled a little to himself, and told him: "She sounds more and more like you."

Vincent's eyes lifted and he shook his head. "No. I have so many desires...so many dreams, Devin, that I can scarcely keep track of them. Oh, I've tried for years to *have* no needs...because it was the only way I could survive. But then Catherine came into my life...and everything changed...."

"Once you learned to dream and had a few come true, you could no longer deny yourself. Oh...I understand, brother. I do."

The brothers talked until far into the night...about hopes and dreams. And fears. And by the time Devin left to take advantage of the guest chamber, they both felt better. Both had unburdened themselves of years of resentment and remembered that love was all that mattered. For Devin it was a true homecoming. For Vincent there was a sense of being set free. The sentry's "All's well," and the pipe chamber's musical reply drifted through the tunnels as they closed their eyes and slept.



After Vincent left, Diana stood on the roof awhile shivering in the wind. Too stubborn to go inside, she stood with teeth chattering--thinking how cold the city looked, and how bare--longing for the warmth of Vincent's arms around her. Long strands of hair whipped around her face, stinging as it slapped against her skin. Eventually the frigid air drove her inside to an apartment that seemed as cold in its own way as the wind outside.

She wandered from room to room, idly picking things up--putting some away, but mostly just shifting them from one place to another--until she found herself in the bathroom staring into the medicine cabinet. *They're gone. There'll be no more*

*crutches, kid. The rules have changed again.*

On about the fourth loop through the kitchen, Diana stopped and leaned against the sink. *Gotta stop this. If I were talking, I'd be babbling.* She glanced over at her computer. *Okay. So babble.*

She sat in the old office chair in front of the keyboard. After booting up and pulling up her word processor and her journal, she began typing:

*I'm exhausted. Need to sleep. Mind is running in circles. Trying to force myself to stay open. So hard. Gotten used to blocking. Headache gone though. So good to have him here tonight. When he was brushing my hair I could feel the tension flowing out of me...like it went up through my head and out into him--being absorbed--like I'm being absorbed. Assimilated. Don't want to be assimilated. Still fighting it. But it felt so right. So good. God I want him. Need him. Feel hungry...empty. What would it be like just to let it all go? Would I flow away...empty myself and be filled at the same time? What would there be left? He said we're becoming. Becoming what?*

She stared at the screen as the cursor blinked. Her eyelids became so heavy she couldn't keep them open any longer and she dozed--snapping awake suddenly a few minutes later--to see her screen-saver blinking its nasty message at her. She yawned, wondering what had ever possessed her to put such a pointed message on the thing. *Guess I can't put it off forever.* Diana hit the space bar and went back to her file. She re-read it, saved it, then exited. Standing wearily, she hit the off button on the computer and turned toward the bedroom. Too tired even to undress, Diana fell into bed and dragged the quilt over herself.

*She walked slowly through a large darkness. Instead of being afraid of the dark, Diana welcomed it. It was peace, and quiet. The dark was like velvet wrapping around her, enveloping her in warmth and comfort. She stretched out her arms to gather in the power of the night, and when she did, she found him there, waiting patiently. Gradually, his presence became more prominent, her sense of him larger than the dark. There was nothing to distract them from one another, and she moved towards him as though she were metal drawn to a magnet. There was no light, yet she could see him--or sense him so acutely that sight was unnecessary--standing before her. Moving towards him gladly, reaching for him, she moved into him and through him. She was lost to herself...there was only him.*

Diana woke with a start. The dream had been so real that she was still shaking with the intensity. She'd felt as though she were being swallowed--completely absorbed into him--and yet there had been a sense of freedom...of wonder...of gladness. A giving that had been a taking as well. *I don't understand, Vincent. I don't understand.* She wiped the tears away that were running freely down her face and drew a few deep breaths, trying to center herself.

She could still feel his presence, reassuring her that all was well. She closed her eyes and let the sensation wash over her until she was calm once more. Diana was

inordinately proud of herself that she hadn't blocked him. It was a start,



Diana woke with the sun in her eyes and with the intercom buzzer going off. It sounded like an angry bee. A very loud one. Swearing, she rolled out of bed and trotted across the living room to the intercom. She slapped her hand over the buzzer and barked: "Who is it?"

Devin's laugh answered her. "Wake up, sleepyhead."

"Aw, hell, Devin. I was actually sleeping, and you woke me up." She sent the freight elevator down. "C'mon up."

Diana rubbed her eyes and grabbed her brush off the couch. She was still trying to put her hair into some kind of order when the elevator stopped. When Devin pushed the screen back, she was busy wrapping a rubber band around it. "Helluva way to wake up on my day off. Thought you were visiting your brother."

Devin gave her a cocky grin and headed for the kitchen. Diana followed and pulled out a chair, straddling it backwards. She watched, amazed, as Devin made himself at home and started making coffee. "Don't you ever *ask*?"

He shook his head. "No point in it. Somebody might say no, then where'd I be?"

Diana rested her chin on her forearm and closed her eyes. Before long, the delicious smell of perking coffee filled the air. Devin poured them each a cup and brought hers to her...hot and black, like she liked it. After her first few sips, she asked again. "Like I said, I thought you were visiting Vincent."

"We visited. I talked to Father earlier in the evening, then when Vincent got back from up here, he and I had a long talk."

Diana glared. "About me, I suppose."

"What is it about women? Do they *always* think that they're the only things worth talking about?" He smiled to soften his comment. "Yeah, we talked about you a little. But mostly we talked about us, and old times."

Diana wasn't mollified by his easy manner. She was still angry that he would listen to her problems then run to Vincent with them. *I knew I shouldn't trust anybody--even Vincent's brother.* She replied a little bitterly: "Yeah? I'll bet you just couldn't wait to run tell him all about every weakness I had. I should'a known better than to give in and tell *anybody* how I felt. Never have before--why start now?" She sounded childish and petulant, even to herself.

Devin smiled, more gently this time. "Because you needed somebody to talk to about Vincent, and there was no one. For once, you couldn't even confide in your sister, not really. So you chose me." He leaned casually against the counter. "And maybe you really *wanted* me to say something--deep down--because you were scared, too, of what the pills were doing to you. Maybe you needed somebody to stop you."

Diana had no answer to that. *Maybe he's right. Susan was put out with me already. I knew better than to say anything to her about the pills. She really would've freaked at that. I would've gotten a two-day lecture.* She glanced up to meet Devin's

eyes and commented grudgingly: "Yeah, maybe."

"No maybe about it." Devin drew up another chair and straddled it facing her. "Diana, I like you. I'd like you even if you didn't love my brother. But because you do, that just makes you more special to me."

Diana was embarrassed. Talking about loving Vincent made her feel odd. It was a little like telling everybody you had a crush on the captain of the football team, and everyone knowing he loved someone else. Even though Vincent was getting past his grief over losing Catherine, he would always love her. *He loves me, too. I know it. He doesn't have to say it.* She took a deep breath and tried to concentrate on what Devin was saying.

"I know it's not my business, Diana. Not really. But I care. Vincent left you alone last night after taking your pills, and afterwards he thought better of it. He was a little worried that you'd have a hard time sleeping. But you seemed to be doing pretty well when I woke you. Were you okay?"

Diana nodded hesitantly. "Yeah, I was. At first it was hard settling down, but I was so tired that I fell asleep pretty easily."

"And?"

"And nothing! Damn it." Diana swung her leg off the chair and shoved the chair under the table. "My dreams are **mine**, Devin! Even my nightmares. Or they **should** be. I may have to share them with Vincent, but I'll be damned if I'll share 'em with you, too."

"I didn't ask you to. All I meant was that obviously you survived. Listen, Diana. Vincent says that you resent the fact that you and he seem to have no choice in this, that this bond is ruling your lives."

She nodded.

"Well, *do* something about it. Take charge. If you want my opinion..." He laughed as he saw her look. "...and I know you don't...I think you and he need to get away. Go somewhere where there's only the two of you, and work on it. By stages. Desensitize yourselves."

Diana's mind wasn't working. She felt like she had total brain-lock. *What in hell is he talking about? Desensitization?*

"I don't understand, Devin."

"Okay. Look. You say you feel like you have no control...like you're losing yourself into him. He tells me that it's gotten to where whenever you *touch* each other, or either of you feels the least bit passionate, it spirals out of control. Work on those things. A little at a time. Part of your problem is that both of you are so lonely, and to put it bluntly, neither of you has been laid in a *long* time."

The shark's grin he gave her *really* made her blush. All she could do was sputter. She was furious.

Devin took advantage of her temporary debilitation and continued. "I know, I know. But don't thank me yet. Just think about it. I'm right, and you know it. I've already put a bug in his ear, so you'll probably be hearing from him." He glanced at his watch. "Damn. I've gotta go, Diana. Gotta catch a plane. But I'll be back sometime soon, I hope, and I trust you and my brother will have gotten past this stalemate."



Before she could recover from her fury--and her current state of tongue-tied helplessness--Devin bussed her quickly on the cheek and took off for the elevator.

For once, the freight elevator was immediately available and he was on it and out before Diana made it over her shock and anger at his temerity. The red haze of embarrassment and anger slowly faded and she found herself laughing.

*He's probably right.*

Diana thought about what Devin had said, and the more she thought, the more she realized just *how* right he was. Something had to be done, and the only way to work on the problem was to face it head on.

Once she realized they had to face this, then she tried figuring *how* and *where*. Vincent couldn't go anyplace Above other than her loft, and her loft was too easy for either of them just to pick up and leave if they got upset. She had to think of someplace else. *Below. Below the Home Chambers. Down where he goes to get away. It's far enough that once we're down there, it's not so easy getting away. We'd have to face it. I couldn't leave by myself, and he wouldn't leave me in the dark.*

For some unknown reason, Diana was less afraid than she'd been for a long time. Just being able to make a move--take *some* action--made her less fearful. Made her feel more in control.

"It'll cure or kill."



## *RIDING THE THUNDER*

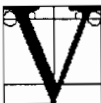
*Riding the thunder,  
that's what it's like.  
There are no other words to tell you  
how I feel when you touch me.*

*I ride the wave of thunder  
and wait frightened,  
for the storm to carry me along,  
helpless in its path.*

*I've felt love before, and desire.  
But never quite like this.  
I thought love should be gentle,  
not storm winds and hurricanes.*

*Should we let it carry us along;  
Safe within the thunder's song?  
Touch me and we'll try,  
to ride the thunder, you and I.<sup>13</sup>*

## RIDING THE THUNDER

incent had known she was coming. All morning he'd felt her presence. Felt her emotions rising and falling. When they'd flared into rage and embarrassment he'd known Devin was there, visiting. He'd felt her relief later, and assumed Devin was gone. Sensing her continually--as he had Catherine--was incredible to him. He didn't try to damp the feeling at all. It was too new for him. He tried to keep his own emotions low, though he knew she could sense him. Occasionally, though, he would allow a little of his own relief and love to wrap around her to encourage her.

He heard a soft sound at his doorway. "Vincent? May I come in?"

"Father. Yes, of course."

Father entered the chamber, then availed himself of Vincent's leather chair.

"I've arranged for your duties to be covered for the next few days, and Marcus is bringing you the bedrolls you requested. Mary has Jacob. Are you certain, Vincent, that this is wise?"

Vincent looked down and shook his head. "I am certain of very little, Father. All that I *am* certain of is that we must resolve this. If we do not, it will destroy us."

"Can you still sense her?"

"Yes." He glanced up at Father and reached for his hand. "Father...I have not felt this way for a very long time. Not since before Catherine died. Diana's presence is very beautiful...though still I sense only her surface emotions. I dare not allow myself to become too close."

Father looked frustrated. "I wish I understood more of how this connection worked, Vincent. She has learned to block, yet you have not. *Can* you learn?"

"I am positive I could, Father. Always in the past, when the pressures of others' emotions became too overwhelming, I simply went away. It didn't happen often. I use a different method--a kind of fine-tuning method--shifting them away from the core of my thoughts, my self. To me, the emotions of my friends and family are part of my life. I do not wish to block them. To me, that would be abhorrent, and it puzzles me how Diana has stayed sane, living as she does. Blocked away from others. Away from life."

Father nodded and looked up quickly as Marcus appeared in the doorway.

"Vincent. Here're the bedrolls you asked for. And William sent this." He set down a heavy knapsack of provisions.

Vincent rose and sighed. "Thank you. Both of you." He watched as his father and friend left quietly, then dug through his drawers to find a change of clothing for himself. It was strange to him to actually be packing for a trip away. When he went by himself, he took almost nothing. When he was finished, he sat at his desk to write in his journal while he waited for Diana.

*I can feel her determination to do this. Her fears lie coiled tightly--like a serpent waiting to strike--and my own are less than cooperative. My fears have a face. They*



taunt me with my cowardice...and my foolishness. She fears my seeing her dark side...but at least her dark side is not personified. What will happen when we are down in the dark, in his place? The last time I escaped to the darkness he went to her. I must not allow that. Not down there. There, he is too powerful.

Vincent glanced up and started as he saw the image of the Other standing in the doorway. The apparition said nothing, but faded away quickly, leaving Vincent shaken and uneasy. *He's waiting. Biding his time. Diana...I cannot...*

He was sitting with his face buried in his hands when Diana's voice caught him off guard. He'd lost the tenuous thread of connection while he'd been thinking about the Other. "Vincent? You okay?"

He glanced up, startled. She stood there, framed by the rock of the doorway, the candlelight flickering over her hair and face. Her porcelain-fair complexion and wide eyes made her appear ghostlike. Her hair was tightly braided. She carried a knapsack.

Shaking off his fears, he rose quickly and went to her. "I'm well." He hesitated to touch her, and turning, indicated the bedrolls and his pack. "I knew you were coming."

He sensed a sharp fear then and felt her closing up a little--like a flower closing at the end of day. "You knew."

Vincent backed away a little and shrugged. "Perhaps *knew* is not the correct word. I knew Devin was going to speak with you, and I suspected you would come. And you *have* been open to me today, though I've avoided becoming too close." He tried to project reassurance, and she seemed to relax a little.

"Sorry. It's just...this is hard."

"There is nothing to be sorry for, Diana. Both of us are fumbling for answers."

"How'd you know, though, that I'd choose to go down there with you?"

Vincent reached out to touch her face gently. "Because there is nowhere else. Because you must."

She stared at him, her eyes wide and a little afraid. But he could feel her determination in that little space she'd left him as she'd closed down and built her block. Her voice, when it came, was steady. "Well. I'm ready, I guess. Looks like you've got everything."

Vincent nodded and set about collecting their supplies. He handed Diana a lantern and picked up a bedroll and his pack. He started to pick up the other bedroll, but Diana lifted it. "I'll take it. Won't have you carryin' my stuff."

He smiled a little at that. The last thing he took was a coil of rope and hooked it at his side. "Come. If you are ready."



Diana followed Vincent silently. Today there was none of the easy friendship and camaraderie they'd shared in the past. Nor was there the raging desire. She had closed down again: built her block tightly against him. Earlier, she'd sensed him on and off as she'd made her plans to come Below, and it had been comforting. He'd not been

intrusive: he'd just been *there*. But now she was afraid. Afraid of what was to come. Of the unknown and the known. She glanced up at him, and he met her eyes. What she read there was determination. Resolution as strong as her own. To find a path through the fear and pain. She reached out and took his hand.

They walked for a long way like that, until the tunnel narrowed and forced them to travel single file. They passed the last torch set in the wall, and as the light grew dimmer, Vincent stopped and turned.

"There is something you should know, Diana."

She felt a chill, but tried to inject some levity. "Now you tell me."

His face didn't change. "We have only the one lamp. I brought the battery-powered one, but even that will not last with continual usage. There will be many times we will be in total darkness. I fear you will not be able to stand it. I can see, there--after a fashion--so it does not concern me. If it bothers you, we will not be able to stay."

Diana reached out and touched the cold stone wall. "We'll see. Darkness, as such, doesn't bother me. It's the darkness inside that scares me. Things that're solid and real don't scare me."

"Fears can be very real in themselves, Diana. And they can *become* very real when the dark surrounds you."

Diana hiked her bedroll and pack higher on her shoulder. "Well, I'm tired of being afraid. My Dad always said that facing your fear was the best way to get over it." Her tremulous smile shook him. "As you say at Winterfest... 'lead me through the darkness' and I'll try to follow."

Vincent brushed stray wisps of hair back from her face. "Your trust honors me, Diana."

Turning away to allow them both time to settle themselves, Vincent cut a piece of rope from the length he carried and tied it to his belt. "Hold this. That way it will be easier to keep track of me. It will let you know where you are in relation to me. The way is not difficult, and I will go slowly."

Diana nodded. The lump that was in her throat kept her from speaking. *Your trust honors me. How can he say that, when he knows how I feel? If I trusted him, we wouldn't be here now.* But as she followed him through the ever-increasing darkness, she realized that she *did* trust him. Implicitly. It was herself she didn't trust. It gave her food for thought.

Before long, her surroundings were so dark that the darkness itself was palpable. It lay like a thick blanket over her. The only reality was the sound of their movement. To make things a little less unreal, Diana began humming. The tune was cheerful and chased away the growing uneasiness she'd felt. After a short time, Vincent said quietly, "Would it help to talk, or does the humming help?"

She thought about it. "I think the humming is better. It's kind of mindless, if you know what I mean."

"Yes."

It was peaceful, following Vincent into the dark. Slowly, without even realizing it, Diana began dropping her block. She kept up her steady humming, though her throat



was getting a little dry. Before long, she noticed a difference in her surroundings. She still couldn't *see*, exactly. But she could sense the walls around her, could 'feel' Vincent ahead of her. It was a *sensation of sight*--impossible to put into words--that was delicate and magical. She began to sense Vincent's emotions, then, and realized what was happening: she was *seeing* as *he* saw. A shaft of wonder shot through her. She'd never imagined anything like this...this feeling of peace and completeness. And she knew Vincent understood. There was no need for words. He knew.



They were almost at the river, now. Vincent felt his excitement growing. To show this to Diana, to share the dark with her...it was more than he'd dreamed possible. He felt grateful. He'd never imagined there would be anyone he could share this with. The Other paced beside him--dark against dark. *You share it with me. Am I not enough?*

Vincent closed his eyes and banished his shadow. They came to the end of the maze, and Vincent brought Diana out into a huge cavern. He could sense her awe as she reached out and embraced the dark. "Oh. Vincent. It's wonderful."

He asked her quietly, "Can you hear the river?"

"Yes." She waved toward the sound. "It's there. Vincent. This is incredible. I don't understand it, but I love it."

Vincent took her hand and led her toward the river. "Sometimes understanding is not only not necessary, but is a deterrent to enjoyment. Just enjoy it, Diana. This is part of what I was trying to tell you. When you open yourself up to the bond, there can be much joy in it."

Diana was very quiet and Vincent could sense her confusion. "Is this what it was like, then...with Catherine?"

He shook his head, knowing she would sense the movement, even without sight. "No. Not the same. I do not believe that Catherine could ever have shared this with me, Diana. This sense that we are sharing now is unique to our relationship...to us. But some of it is the same. My sense of you is similar...except of course that you are *you* and not Catherine."

"Oh." She was silent until they reached the river. "Are we there yet? I mean...is this the end of the journey?"

Diana sounded so unsure of herself, that Vincent restrained himself from commenting that the progress of their journey could not be counted in footsteps, but only in how far they'd come in battling their fears...his *and* hers. "We can stop here. There is no point in going too deep. The purpose is served by simply being here."

Diana had retreated within herself. She seemed less open, more thoughtful. Vincent knew that it was time to back off a little. "Perhaps it is time for a fire and something to eat. Would you care for some tea?"

"I'd like that." Diana had now withdrawn from him completely. He could sense nothing of her. She stood silently, hugging herself as though by that hug she could contain herself within her skin.

"In order to make the fire, I will need to leave you alone for a short time to get wood. Do you want the lantern?"

Her answer was long in coming, as though she was considering all the alternatives. "No. I don't think so. I'll be okay."

She turned blind eyes to where she knew he stood, and smiled. His heart hurt with his desire to comfort her. He took her hand. It was cool and slender in his. He led her to a boulder and settled her against it. "Are you certain you would not wish the lantern?"

"No," she said softly. "Go on. Go get the wood, then you can explain to me just how there happens to be wood down here."

Vincent left her then, and went to collect wood for the fire from an ancient grove of trees that had somehow become trapped here long ago in some upheaval of nature. He tried to touch her, but she was still blocked. He was beginning to feel uncertain about the wisdom of coming down here. She'd looked so lost when he'd left her. And he worried about what would happen when they slept...and dreamt.

This was the Other's place. By mutual consent. It was here that the Other reigned supreme. Here, where there was no one to harm and only the darkness--both the outside dark and the inside dark. Diana might not fear the Other, but Vincent did. The Other would have no problem handling his desire. He *was* desire. Desire, rage, and fearsome need. He was everything that Vincent had shoved away, denied all his life. Vincent feared the Other would care little for Diana's uncertainties. And in the end, if the Other made love to Diana and did not kill her, he would still harm her--he would take her gift from her with his own empathic blindness. Perhaps he would not even mean to harm her...but he would.

He sighed tiredly. Fighting his own fears was debilitating enough. Trying to help Diana through hers was almost impossible. It *had* been wonderful today, though...while it lasted. For a time there had been no need for words, no room for dissention. There had only been the timeless dark and them. The *being* had been luminous.

*She began her retreat when she mentioned my bond with Catherine. She still feels threatened by that bond...by comparisons which do not matter. She is so insecure that she cannot believe herself to be worthwhile.*

Vincent slowly gathered the wood for the fire, purposely taking his time to give Diana the time she needed...hoping that the seclusion of the dark would open her up, as it did him. He heard a raspy chuckle behind him and spun with a snarl...knowing who he would see.

The Other lounged carelessly against a bent and broken tree trunk. *All the fires in the world will not keep back the dark forever, Vincent. For you or for her. When the fire dies, I will still be there...and so will her fears.*

Vincent turned away and tried to still the voice--banish the presence--of his alter-ego. But the voice followed him. *I'll take what you won't have. And when she needn't fear the bond all will be well.*

Vincent glared as the image of the Other merged with the surrounding darkness. His dark twin had voiced Vincent's deepest fears. Vincent thought of the months of



confusion and pain he'd suffered after losing his empathic powers...losing the bond with Catherine. But he realized that the loss of the bond and his empathy would not have been so terrible had it not been for the loss of Catherine herself so soon after...and his inability to find her. Perhaps for Diana the loss would be no loss at all...but a gift. He shuddered in revulsion. *No. I cannot believe that. Cannot let myself think that way. It will only give him more power.*

Bending to pick up one more branch, Vincent turned back toward Diana. *One problem at a time. We must go slowly and with care. But we will survive. We must.*



Diana sat against the cold rock and drew her knees up to her chest. There was no sound except that of the river flowing by...the sound of water wearing away rocks. *Like the bond is wearing away at us. Just like Vincent said.* The touch of his mind, his emotions, had been like dark velvet, sliding across hers. When she'd been in contact with him, the dark had seemed comforting and gentle. Now, it was cold and empty. Without their connection she was blind in this Stygian dark. And it was oppressive.

She heard him approach. She knew he was purposely making noise to allow her to realize he was nearing...he'd never made that much noise in his life, just walking. She smiled softly to herself. *He is such a dear man.*

"Diana." His voice was like caramel. So smooth and sweet. *You could get caught in it.*

"Haven't gone anywhere yet," she commented dryly...knowing he could see her perfectly well. "Did you find the wood?"

He chuckled. "It wasn't lost."

She found his chuckle irresistible. It was impossible to remain in the dark and closed to him. She lowered her barrier just a little...enough to sense his surface emotions. He was glad to be back with her...that they were here together. The soft click and tap of wood striking wood as he built the fire was comforting. She was strangely reluctant, though, to relinquish the peace of the darkness. When he didn't speak, she cleared her throat and began hesitantly: "I expected to eventually be able to see a little. You know...dark adaptation and all. But there really isn't any light to adapt to, is there?"

"No. Not here. Farther below us there are phosphorescent fungi that produce a little light. But here--no, there is no light."

The sounds of the firemaking continued. A match was struck, and Diana smelled the sulphur much more acutely than normal. The flare of light made her blink.

Before her, Vincent knelt before the small fire. In the firelight, the acute angles and planes of his face left secret shadows and hidden places; but the familiar grace of his movements, the golden fall of his hair were welcome and beautiful--as was his scent--which Diana realized she'd become more attuned to and aware of in the past hours. Though the darkness had been comforting in one way, the warmth and dancing light of the fire were welcoming in another. The circle of light pushed the darkness away until she and Vincent existed in a small world all their own...bounded by the dark.

Once the fire was going well, Vincent began heating water for tea. Diana reached over and opened his pack to find some of the sandwiches William had sent. She watched Vincent as he worked. She wondered at his silence. In the dark, the silence had seemed appropriate. Now, it disturbed her.

"You're awfully quiet," she said gently.

He didn't answer at first. He waited until the water was boiling and he could pour it into the cups she'd set out with teabags. As he handed her the cup, he said softly, "I do not know quite how to describe my feelings, Diana. We have talked the subject to death. Eventually communication breaks down in the face of emotion. Having you *with* me earlier--the way we were...was...." He looked away.

"Wonderful? Scary? What?"

"Immense. And delicate. Like something that would shatter with a touch. I do not know how to proceed, Diana."

Diana glanced at his closed expression and shadowed eyes and saw a mirror reflection of herself. He balanced lightly on the balls of his feet, the cup dangling precariously as his hands hung between his knees. He looked as though he were about to take flight any moment. *God. He's as scared as I am. He wants this so badly...yet he's so scared of losing himself, of hurting me.* She extended her hand and touched his.

The touch seemed to startle him to a sharper awareness. He drew away with obvious reluctance. "Perhaps...perhaps we should eat, Diana. Then rest. It has been a long day."

Diana twisted her braid, not knowing what to do. She could feel the turbulence disturbing the surface of Vincent's mind. She didn't dare open up more, yet she needed to understand. His emotions reminded her of the river beyond them: they ran with a deep, slow-moving darkness under turbulent rapids. Dreaming violence.

They ate in near silence and Diana's thoughts roamed ahead to when they had to sleep. *We must be crazy. To dare to dream together down here has got to be the most reckless thing we've ever done. What's more, even he knows it.* She shuddered a little. *He's scared of hurting me, I'm scared of hurting him...and we're both terrified of letting anybody walk through our hearts.*

Diana finished the last bite of her sandwich and got up to rinse her cup in the river. While she squatted next to the water, Vincent came and knelt next to her. Without looking at him, Diana commented: "Y'know, in my life there are few absolutes. I work on the edge of danger every day. Things change at a moment's notice. Most cops, myself included, have scenarios carefully tucked away in their heads for different situations to help safeguard them...to help them work automatically." She picked up a rock and tossed it into the dark river. She couldn't see where it went, but could hear the splash. "I never thought up a situation like this."

"No. I suppose not." He sighed. "Diana. If we left now, we could be back in a few hours. I know you are tired...."

He sounded so defeated. Diana couldn't bear it. She turned to him and brushed his heavy mane back away from his face and wrapped her fingers around the back of his neck. His mane bristled underneath the longer fall of hair. He was tense as a drawn bowstring. She shuffled closer so she could massage his neck and found herself pulled

tightly against him. She could feel his heart pounding. She realized that she'd lowered her block a little. She could sense his desire.

"Diana. I'm frightened. What is it like, to you--this feeling? To me, it is like being caught in a storm."

Diana trembled and pressed closer. *Desensitization. Go slow. But don't run away. Running makes even gentle dogs bite, remember? What would it do to the Other?* She buried her face in his neck, nuzzling against the edge of his shirt and the leather vest to allow the soft fur to tickle her nose. "Yeah. I know. But try to hold on. Try to control it." She moaned softly when she felt his breath in her ear and the rasp of his tongue. "Oh...God. Don't. Not yet. Not now. Just hold me."

Vincent settled back against a boulder and pulled her fully onto his lap. His arms tightened around her, and she felt the weight of his head as he rested it on hers. His fingers laced tightly through hers, trying--she knew--to keep his own from roaming. They lay that way for some time, with the bond neither fully open nor fully closed and the desire alive between them--singing like harnessed power through a wire--until eventually Diana could once more discern the sound of the water over Vincent's pounding heart. Her own pulse had steadied when she finally spoke. "We did it."

He nuzzled the top of her head and asked softly, "And what did we do?"

"Survived a baby step," she chuckled. "Damn Devin. I'd hate to have to tell him he was right about desensitizing. He's insufferable enough as it is."

"Why tell him anything? He does not expect a report."

She closed her eyes and sighed contentedly. "Won't get one, either."

Vincent was quiet for a long moment, then took a deep, slightly ragged breath. "It's like riding thunder, Diana."

"Yeah...I guess it is at that."

He shifted beneath her and Diana knew it was time to get up. No point in starting it all over again. They might not handle it this time. She rose a little awkwardly, still holding his hand. "I guess we'd better try to sleep."

He nodded. "Go on. I will stay here for a time."

Diana reluctantly released his hand and went to unroll her sleeping bag. She glanced back at Vincent. He was sitting with one leg curled under him, the other up and bent to form a resting place for his folded arms. His chin rested there as well, and the fall of his mane obscured his face. The fire was dying, but the few remaining flames cast a ruddy glow over him and threw a long shadow behind him. Diana half-remembered something from one of her psychology classes...something Jung had said about owning one's own shadow. *I guess that's what we both need to learn.*

Diana was too tired to even unbraid her hair. She unzipped the sleeping bag and crawled in. Once comfortably settled, she called softly, "G'night Vincent."

His gentle voice drifted to her through the growing dark. "Goodnight, Diana."



Vincent was acutely aware of Diana as she settled herself for sleep. She was still partially open to him, and he knew that as she slept she would gradually lose her



barriers completely. He was terrified. There was such a hunger in him for her touch, both physical and emotional, that he feared what might happen if...no... *when* they dreamed.

Once he knew Diana was asleep, he went to his own pack and removed his journal. The fire still cast a little light, and before it died completely he wanted to do some writing. He settled next to Diana's bedroll and reached over to brush a strand of hair away from her face. She smiled and his heart lurched. He looked away quickly, then bent to his writing.

*I do not know what the future will bring. As Diana said, it was a "baby step." As I was waiting for her to sleep, I tried to put my feelings into words. It is, indeed, like riding thunder. We both ride the wave of thunder and wait, frightened, for the storm to carry us along. But where will the storm carry us?*

The fire was dying and what little light there was along with it. Vincent needed no light to sense the world around him, but to read or write it was different. He closed his journal reluctantly. With the pad of his thumb, he traced the designs on the heavy leather binding.

He heard a rough chuckle and lifted his head to see--or rather sense--the Other squatting next to Diana. *She seems to be sleeping soundly enough.* The Other swung his heavy-maned head around to face Vincent. *Aren't you the least bit interested in what she's dreaming? Or are you being chivalrous and staying out?*

Vincent couldn't help sensing some of Diana's emotions as they moved through her sleeping subconscious. But he was trying to stay separate. *She dreams of the dark and of our fears.* He rose and turning his back on his dark double, stalked off into the darkness.

Unfortunately, leaving himself behind was impossible. The Other danced gleefully beside him. *So. She dreams of the darkness. How delightful. She could use a few comforting hugs...a little physical reassurance. Or does she dream of being prey?* When this comment did not elicit the desired result, the figure reappeared within inches of Vincent's face. With a growl, he continued: *I would love a good hunt. To kill can be joyous, like the release of passion long denied. Surely you remember...how it blocks the mind and eases the hunger.*

Vincent wasn't quite so easily shaken by his subconscious as he might have been a few months before. Diana's faith in him had given him strength. *You would not kill her...nor harm her purposely. I know that now. I know it.*

The figure of the Other dissolved and disappeared. *I know it....* Vincent repeated firmly to himself, as though repetition would somehow make it true.

His thoughts were interrupted by a desperate call from Diana. "Vincent!"

He spun and ran back to the campsite--to her side--and found her shaking. "Hold me. Please."

Vincent hesitated, but he could sense her need. Her barriers were gone, and she was terrified. Her terror fed itself into him, and he forced it down...tried feeding calmness back to her. Vincent was afraid of many things, but he was accustomed to

forcing those fears away. This part he could handle. He channeled thoughts of light and peace...and love, until her trembling ceased. When she'd settled a little, he unbraided her hair and ran his fingers through it, untangling the strands.

"Vincent...." she began hesitantly.

"Shh. There is nothing to fear." The scent of her hair was making him dizzy.

"I dreamed...of a long labyrinthine passageway. Like the maze. Totally dark. I mean...*really* dark. But you were there, and it was okay. There was...an *aspect* of sight...a brightness from within. A joy almost beyond bearing. I wanted to hold to that, but I couldn't. I couldn't, Vincent." She shuddered in his embrace. "Suddenly you were gone. And the dark silence closed in, burying me. And the dark turned red."

The tears slid down her face, wetting the fur on his hands as he brushed at them. "I will not go, Diana. Nor ever leave you in the dark. Feel it. Know it."

His fingers slipped beneath her sweatshirt and traced her spine. The touch of her skin was like heated silk, and the shared sensation ignited a fire in them both. He knew that for whatever he felt, she knew a sympathetic reaction. The sensation of her skin against his was hers to feel, just as the touch, now, of his lips, tongue, and teeth on her throat and neck were something he felt as acutely as she. Joy flared as brightly between them as the desire. And the dark was alive...pulsing with emotions long buried. The bond--the mirror-like merging of their connection--reflected each emotion, each touch, back to the other until there was no separateness.

A cry in the darkness drew Vincent enough out of the connection to realize *self*. A cry and a turbulence of spirit. The loss of self had been too frightening for Diana. With a groan, he released her, realizing that he had been close to *losing himself* into the Other.

Vincent felt the Other's impatience and anger lying just beneath the surface. He wrapped long arms around his knees and wept with frustration. His own denied desire was painful enough, without the greater pain of the loss of the bond. Together, they were almost unbearable. The only thing that held the anger of the Other at bay was the soft sound of Diana's weeping beside him. Her pain pulled him away from his own. "Diana...." he managed. His voice sounded harsh, even to himself. "Diana. I'm sorry. Truly. I didn't mean...."

Her sobs became quieter, smaller. They sat back-to-back in the darkness, the only contact between them the support that each provided the other.

Finally Diana said gently, her voice shaky: "It wasn't your fault, Vincent. It's just this damned bond. It's like being pulled into a whirlpool. I'm not sure I can handle that complete loss of who I am...*what* I am...into *anybody* else. Even you. And yet...I've never wanted anything so badly in my life."

Vincent sighed, feeling overwhelmed. "I know."

They fell silent, each enwrapped in their own thoughts. Separate. Lonely and incomplete.

Eventually Diana spoke softly. "Wanna tell me how there comes to be wood down here?" Her question hinted at her desire to bring things back to normal between them.

Relieved, Vincent began telling Diana his and Father's theories on how the grove of trees had come to be trapped below the earth. "There is evidence of some great cataclysm. An earthquake, perhaps, or volcanic activity. Even the rock strata in that area of the cavern differs, as though a piece of the surface simply fell Below and was trapped--enclosed--when the rock above closed together." He was silent for a time, then commented dryly: "It is useful, however it came to be here."

Diana said nothing, and Vincent wondered what she was thinking. Sometimes her thoughts bounced like rubber balls, with no connection that he could discern--yet always the connection was there in some way that led to a logical conclusion. He waited.

"It's odd down here. With you. As odd as that grove of trees. Yet, it's almost as though those trees have waited all these years just to have a purpose. Someone to need them. And though they seem out of place, by being needed, they belong."

He felt her shift against him. He knew she was staring out into that darkness with no awareness of her surroundings. Right now, her world was only herself and the touch of his back against hers. That was her reality. But he agreed, about the trees. More to help calm her than through any real understanding. "Yes."

"Would you sleep with me, Vincent?"

A shock ran through him. He knew what she meant. Not that they make love, but only sleep together. For the comfort that would bring. For the sense of being needed. That he'd not expected. Never. Certainly not after what had just happened. *She still trusts me!* He could sense the Other stirring with a desire that appalled him. "Diana. I will do whatever you wish. Whatever you think is wise. But I must warn you that I, too, am frightened. I think you know why. I think perhaps it would be safer for me to remain awake, then go back after you have rested."

Diana spoke softly, but her voice was like steel. "No. If we go back before we do what we came to do, then we're beaten."

Vincent shifted, felt Diana adjust to his movement. He wanted desperately to make her understand just how much she meant to him. Diana herself. He needed for her to understand how important their *relationship* itself had become to him. Important not just because of what that relationship could become, but because of what it presently *was*. Vincent rose and moved quietly over to the ashes of their fire and began building another. When the fire was burning cheerfully, he motioned for Diana to join him next to it. He settled himself against a boulder and she nestled within the circle of his arm. "Diana. To sleep next to you, with you in my arms, would give me the greatest joy. But when we dream...I do not know if *that* is what we came for. It could be very dangerous."

"It *isn't* what we came for. At least not entirely. But it's part of it. We came to make choices. To see if we still could. At least that's what *I* came for." She glanced up at him and smiled a little. "Besides. I'm not afraid of what could happen sexually. Not with you, *or your friend*. It's everything that goes along with it that scares me silly."

Vincent sighed and held her closer. "All I wish for you is your happiness. A quiet place within your heart." He paused, trying to put together words to make her



understand. There was so *much* she didn't realize about herself. "Diana. You have a nobility of soul that is rare."

She moved her head against him, denying his statement. "I'm full of doubts and fears. Burdened with the things I've done, and been. I'm not noble, Vincent. Only a common, Mick cop with a few screwy problems."

The firelight danced across them both, casting flickering shadows and golden highlights. Vincent brushed his hand across her hair, and thought, completely irrelevantly: *It is like burnished bronze in this light. Fitting for her.* "People are not born *noble*, Diana. Your life has been a struggle to be the best you can be. You give of yourself at great cost. Daily. You are not common. Your spirit is of fire-forged steel. Something precious and unusual."

Diana shifted uneasily. "Sounds like you're talking about yourself, Vincent."

"No. I know what I am, Diana. I strive daily just to remain on an equal footing with mankind."

"And leave them in the dust," she said dryly.

A little embarrassed by Diana's obvious--and to him--misguided admiration, Vincent once more turned the conversation away from himself...determined to make his point. "I remember," he said quietly, "a conversation we had once before. You were telling me about your father. How he'd always told you that each individual had a responsibility to make the world a better place. You said he taught you about Justice."

Diana nodded and glanced up at him, her eyes shiny with unshed tears.

"You never forgot what he told you. And you have dedicated your life to that cause...that search for justice...for what is *right*. Even to the extent of denying yourself. Denying your own hopes and dreams. You throw yourself into life, Diana. But you bury yourself in other people's lives. In *their* hopes and dreams."

Diana started to deny this, and Vincent shook his head, laying his fingers across her lips to quiet her. "For once, Diana, only listen. Let me tell you of yourself."

Her lip twitched a little at the corners, but her expression was puzzled.

"When I woke in your loft after the explosion and realized you had cared for me for three entire days, I was mortified. And astounded. Yet, you seemed to take it for granted. As though it were only natural to care for a stranger. Even such a stranger as I. From that point onward I watched you risk more and more of your life, your career and your privacy for me, for my son...for my world. But not only for me. I have watched you throw yourself into each case in the same manner, searching for that elusive quality of *justice* that your father spoke of so eloquently. I watched your disappointments, your disillusionment, and your joy when you triumphed. I watched all this from a distance and marveled. You ask for nothing for yourself. You take nothing. Yet, after Catherine died, all through my grieving you encouraged me to look at myself. Believe in myself. Ask myself what *I* wanted." Vincent paused to take a deep breath. The rest was more difficult to express. "As the weeks grew into months, I realized that there *were* things I wanted. Dreams I still held close. All my dreams hadn't died with Catherine."

"Vincent..." Diana began.

"Hush. It's my turn." He smiled and brushed her forehead with a kiss. She

was so *very* difficult to keep silent and still when she had something to say. "Eventually, I realized that you were finishing what Catherine began, in teaching me about love and life. All I had known of love before Catherine had been in books and what I could imagine. Then Catherine showed me possibilities of life I'd never dreamed possible for me." He held her a little closer, knowing that anytime he spoke of Catherine now, all she could think of were comparisons. He wished that were not true, but he knew it was, so he tried to make a positive comparison for her. "Catherine and I lived a dream, Diana. It was lovely. And magical. She brought me alive. And when I lost her, the dreams shattered my soul."

He felt the wetness of her tears on his hand and brushed them away with his thumb. "And then you came into my life. You refused to let me wallow in grief, and against my will you forced me to live. There were times when I almost hated you. Yet, I found I enjoyed the companionship we shared. Enjoyed it, then came to crave it. You came into my dreams, both waking and sleeping. With the bond or without. You gave me reality. We may have no control over our dreams, but somehow, I do not mind that. Because when we are awake, you are there...solid...real. You disagree with me--tell me unequivocally when I am wrong--and support me just as wholeheartedly when I am right. You are friend, companion, sister--even mother at times. If we never become lovers, we will still have the rest. And I do not wish to lose the friend in the attempt to find the lover. I have lived celibate for a very long time."

When he stopped speaking, he realized that Diana was trembling. He tightened his embrace and drew her in closer. "Now," he breathed into her hair, "if you still wish for me to sleep with you, I find I *am* very weary."

Without a word, Diana rose, still holding his hand. She drew him over to the sleeping bag. Vincent held out his other hand and Diana flattened her own palm against his. There was a warmth that spread from one to the other. A feeling that was not entirely physical. He smiled down at her bemused expression. "To face our dreams can be almost as frightening as facing our nightmares, Diana."

They turned, together, and without another word prepared for bed.



Diana lay awake. She was curled comfortably within the circle of Vincent's warmth, and marveled at how *right* it seemed to be there. All his talk of her nobility and strength confused her. She felt that nothing he'd said had anything to do with her, and *everything* to do with him. *He's the one who can't see his own greatness. Like I told him, I'm just a dumb Mick cop. Just because I plug along the best I can doesn't make me noble, for Heaven's sake.*

Still, though, Diana felt a nagging uncertainty as her mind ran repeatedly over what Vincent had told her. She really hated it when he did that: made her think about herself. She'd much rather work on *his* insecurities. *Introspection is too much like self-analysis.*

Vincent nuzzled her neck in his sleep and she shivered a little. He, too, had stayed awake for a time as their bodies adjusted to one another in the dark silence.



During that time, Diana's trembling ceased. She could feel Vincent's breath, warm and soft on her neck. His arm rested next to her stomach, his hand closed in a loose fist. She reached down, opened his hand and slid her fingers around it. Drawing his hand up to her face, she kissed it softly then nestled it next to her face. Her eyelids weighed a ton. Using Vincent's arm as a pillow, she closed her eyes and fell asleep almost immediately.

They both slept deeply, dreamlessly for a long while. A sleep borne of emotion exhaustion. But eventually--inevitably--the dreams began weaving through their minds and the web between them grew tighter.

*It was dark, but the darkness was warm and welcoming. The velvet cloak of night wrapped around her and kept her safe. There were no images, but only sensation as feather-light touches brought her alive. She could not identify or separate where the sensation began or ended--what part of her was being touched, or what she was touching. Mind slid across mind with a sense of belonging. There were no rough edges. Curves and angles met and melted together, becoming one. It was a kind of peace that was somehow also desire.*

*Diana sensed the dark core of rage and frustration deep within Vincent, all carefully cradled within scar tissue and covered over by the warmth of his love. The Other waited in the shadows, his strength tightly wound. He waited for the almost inevitable loss of control. Diana reached deeper, and Vincent allowed it. She saw the Other. He was standing, proud and defiant on a stark, windswept plain, alone and untouchable. Or almost. In one part of her expanded consciousness, Diana could feel the reality of Vincent's body--his hands and mouth on her, loving her--but in another, deeper reality, she could sense the Other standing and watching. Knowing rejection and abandonment once more...no different than what he'd known all his life. Without warning, Diana found herself beside the Other on that empty plain. A dream within a dream. Her hair whipped around her face as the icy wind tore past. She knew the time had come to make her choice: to open herself to love, or leave it behind her forever. She reached out to the Other and took his hand, then they turned together back to Vincent. Diana knew that the journey the Other made with her was one he'd never been allowed before. In the past he'd always been separate and apart when anything good happened in Vincent's life. Except his one time with Catherine. And even then, Vincent had not shared fully with his darker half. The only other sharing had been of pain...or the ecstasy of the kill. The Other hesitated, fearing the bond as much as she had, but Diana drew him on, encouraging him with a kiss.*

*The change from the Other's reality to Vincent's was abrupt, yet Diana knew that the Other was still there, with them both. Vincent's hand moved from the breast it was cradling to caress her face. His voice, when he spoke her name, was rough and ragged. Not at all normal. In the connection they shared, Diana was aware of a sharper edge to him, and an added depth of emotion. She was now aware of things about him she'd never known before. Deep insecurities and self-disgust that she'd suspected but never*

truly sensed...so deeply hidden had they been. And she loved him even more for his sharing of them. She knew the courage it had taken for him to share the Other with her...and to face that part of himself. The pads of his fingers trailed over her face, mapping it in his mind. She was that hand, and the sensation was hers as well as his. He buried his face in the hollow of her neck, his hair tumbling over her shoulders. The sensations assaulting her became more immediate, more focused. The sunflower scent of his hair, the musk of his body, the tang of leather and candle smoke. It made her giddy. Vincent's teeth and tongue were teasing the tender flesh of her neck and she felt the sweet weight of his body as he shifted over her, pressing her down. They became a world unto themselves: a world that consisted only of the sensation of soft fur against heated skin, rigid power losing itself in silken softness, and the ecstatic, elemental, abundant darkness. Like a key turning in a lock, doors opened. The spiraling emotions and sensations bore them through the darkness until the reflections they held of themselves shattered in the ultimate embrace of the bond. They died for a moment as individuals and were reborn each within the other. Promises took shape and became. For once in each of their very separate lives they were whole and undivided. The circle was complete.

The peace that followed was profound. Love was a palpable presence in the space they were in. Consciousness separated enough to realize Self...and became Diana. Yet, there was something indefinable...something of Vincent...that she'd brought back with her. Some small part of her that was changed...enriched...forever. And she knew it was the same for him. She blinked in the darkness and reached to feel, with a Braille-touch, the contours of Vincent's face. He, too, was awake, and she felt the feathery brush of his eyelashes against her fingers. Her mind was sluggish, drugged with pleasure and contentment. The lingering bond was muted. Sated. She found her voice: "Was *that* a dream, too?"

There was a long pause, then Vincent said gently, his voice resonating with contentment: "Does it matter?"

After considering, Diana shook her head and curled closer. "No."

As Vincent's bare arm drew her closer, Diana realized they had both at some point shed their clothes. *Perhaps it wasn't entirely a dream.* She felt an undercurrent of amusement as he murmured: "It was a little like riding thunder."

Thinking sleepily of the future, Diana thought: *No. More like the eye of the storm.*





## BEYOND THE MIRRORS

*Hunter and Huntress  
too alike to see  
behind the mirrors  
of yourselves  
a like reflection  
in another's eyes.*

*Man and Woman  
too long alone  
to understand  
the call of touch  
of breath and warmth  
in another's heart.*

*Touch the shifting surface  
Pass beyond and through  
Relearn the art of trust  
the give and take of self.  
And find that the reflection  
is you.<sup>14</sup>*





## REFERENCES

*My thanks to Katrina Relf for her lovely prose poetry and to the creators of another fantasy world (Infocom computer adventure games) for some of the symbolism I've used. B&B is not my first time to become "lost" in an alternate reality!*

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