

'IN SEARCH OF ANGELS'

(Seven Days)

A BEAUTY & THE BEAST Novella written by:

by Trisha Kehoe

*As a preface to this Novella, I can only
Remind you that I am a Classical Beauty
& the Beast fan, and ask that you trust me.*

NO MATTER WHAT HAPPENS

*I've wanted the shadows, I don't anymore.
No matter what happens, I won't anymore.
I've run from the sunlight, afraid it saw too much.
The moon had the one Light I bathed in -
I walked in.
I held in my feelings and closed every door.
No matter what happens, I can't anymore.*

*There's someone who must hear
The words I've never spoken.
Tonight if she were here,
My silence would be broken,
I need her to touch me -
To know the love that's in my heart -
The same heart that tells me
To see myself
To face myself
To be myself at last!*

*For too many mornings, the curtains were drawn,
It's time they were opened, to welcome the dawn.
A voice inside me is getting stronger.
I can't keep quiet any longer.*

*No matter what happens,
It can't be the same anymore.
I promise it won't be the same
Anymore*

'No Matter What Happens' from the movie
'Yentle'. Words: by Barbra Streisand
Lyrics by: A. & M. Bergmann

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GUARDIAN ANGELS

"...for all their activities in heaven and as regulators of natural law in the physical universe, what most endears the angels to humanity is their special involvement in each human life. From conception and birth, until death and beyond, angels are said to attend and fortify each moment of human life as personal guardians, guides, comforters, strength-givers, and more.

For thousands of years, angels have been a persistent idea and image - an archetype and icon - in human awareness. They've figured prominently in centuries of secular folktales and scriptural stories. Prophets dreamed of angels, mystics saw them, saints spoke to them, and the suffering prayed to them.

In literature and painting, music and architecture, as well as scripture and philosophy, the universal appeal of angels has richly and deeply woven in bright threads into the tapestry of popular symbols of beauty, grace, wisdom, mercy, strength, peace, innocence, truth, hope, and guardianship.

The word 'angel' comes from the Greek 'angelos', meaning messenger. Angels are heaven's messengers of light, and some of the greatest world legends come from accounts of angels appearing to humans as divine emissaries.

Early Christian writers placed angels over the elements of earth, water, fire, air, and over all plants and animals. Jewish scripture gives angels dominion over the wind, storm, lightening, thunder, rain, snow, and heavenly bodies. And the Islamic prophet Mohammed proclaimed that 'every raindrop is accompanied by an angel.'

"So in a voice, so in a shapeless form, Angels affect us oft, and worshipped be."

- John Donne

Everywhere in the city of Manhattan, lives were coming full circle; anniversaries and epitaphs to lost loved ones were being observed in words, by candlelight, in prayers, and lastly, in the recesses of the mind and soul of a broken-hearted, solitary, and unusual man.

Huddling down into the warmth of his cloak, a solitary figure veiled in shadows peered up at the myriad points of flickering light just beyond the confines of Central Park. Out there, in one of those dwellings encompassed by shards of brilliance, another family occupied... her... apartment now.

His eyes and tone of voice giving new interpretation to the word anguish, Vincent selected one glimmer of light from all of those before him. Staring up at it intently, as if that one bit of radiance was the only truth left in a vengeful, hostile world, he whispered hoarsely, "Four years ago tonight, I lost... you, Catherine."

Taking no notice of the tears burning a path down his stubbled cheeks, he studied the illumination of the world Above through somber, red-rimmed eyes, knowing that for whatever time was left to him, for all the days of his life, he would think of this city as the world that had been Catherine's home. Her home, yet his too, in a way, when he had walked its streets with her at his side.

Swallowing his grief and closing his eyes, Vincent allowed his thoughts to drift back to happier times, wondrous times, remembering how beautiful Catherine had looked in the silvered moonlight, clinging to his arm as they strolled through the park together on a night much like this one, her eyes filled with incredulous delight as he recounted his initial, childhood perceptions of the moon to her.

Staring up at it tonight, this devastated, lonely being didn't greet the moon as had been his custom for well over thirty years. For now, this night of all nights; it brought him nothing by way of consolation. If anything, to see that glimmering sphere suspended there in the sky, its incandescence seemingly eternal and unswerving, seemed only to mock his isolation.

The moon didn't feel his pain - couldn't feel it, nor understand it. No one had been able to do that, except for Catherine, and she was...

'No.' Curling his nails into the palms of his hands, Vincent turned away the thought. '*Do not think about it, you must not think about it.*'

Yet, unable to confine them, he lost himself in the bittersweet warmth of his memories. The image of her face, the sound of Catherine's voice, was a part of him, now and forever.

"For... always." Shuddering as choking sobs burst from his throat, he moaned, "Oh God, I cannot help but think of her. What else is left to me but my memories? As painful as they are, they are all I have now, except for Jacob. Catherine was my heart, my very soul, the best and dearest part of my existence, and now I have lost her forever. Forever."

As a numbing cold seemed to spill through every part of him, tremors journeyed the length of Vincent's body. "Oh please, if You are truly there, and can hear me, release me from the torment, the agony, of that single word?"

Putting one hand to his wildly racing heart, he stared into the sky, knowing that if such a thing could be done, he would have stormed Heaven's very gates to bring Catherine back. Or, if need be, he would have descended into the depths of Hell itself, willingly, gladly, to free her from that demonic place.

Mulling that over, Vincent exhaled roughly. No, Hades wasn't the place to look for Catherine - never there. Never there. For hadn't it been written long ago that '*Hell hath no place for angels*'? Ah, but there was always room in that fiery chasm for 'beasts', wasn't there? This was a place he had come to have an intimate knowledge of. Hadn't he been abiding in a Hell, of sorts, for the last four years? Four years ago tonight.

Trying to see beyond earthly limits, he selected one glittering star from all of those overhead. Focusing piercing blue eyes on it, he proclaimed, "If I were given a second chance to be a part of Catherine's life, I would find the strength to be... more... to her this time. I would."

Like a ritual over which he had no control, every year on this night since the one on which Catherine had drawn her last breath in his arms, he had offered up this same pledge, praying that somewhere, somehow, *someone* would hear it, have pity on him, and believe the words to be true.

But this time, Vincent didn't merely think the vow, he declared it aloud, and as he did, the words came from his heart, not his head - which seemed to make all of the difference.

Realizing somewhere deeply within him that the vow was one of hopeless desperation, he gave it anyway, to whatever God or Gods might be listening, murmuring hoarsely, "If You can truly hear me, help me now? Please? I would give anything - anything, merely to hear Catherine speak my name once more; to touch her again, hold her again, just... one more time."

In a tremulous whisper, he continued, "On my solemn oath, if You were to grant me a second chance, my life would be very different this time, truly it would, for I have learned from my... mistakes. But, it's too late, isn't it?"

A strangled sob burst from his throat. "Years... too late."

Putting one hand to his chest, Vincent fought to steady his voice. "Living as I have been for these past four years, if You would call *this* being alive, I have come to terms with many of my differences, for the most part, as well as my fears. Some lessons have come at a very high price, but I *have* learned - I have grown both spiritually and emotionally. This time, I would give Catherine all of the words I didn't have the courage to share with her before."

Tilting his head back, he stared Heavenward, his eyes glistening with unshed tears. "Now, I could give her the only thing she ever truly wanted: all of my love. All of... me."

And somewhere, in a joyous, shining place beyond, death's dominion, Vincent's anguished plea was duly noted and understood.

In that region of time and space where all souls are eventually reunited again, compassionate eyes peered down at him, considered his entreaty very carefully for a moment, a heartbeat - and then agreed to it.

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As his very spirit was buffeted by the singular emotion all mortals experience at some time in their lives, whether they be man or beast - that of self-pity, Vincent tried to stand. Momentarily overcome by memories, scents and sensations that reminded him of Catherine, he lost his footing. Staggering back against the stone wall of the culvert, he slammed up against it full force. Uh...!"

With his legs trembling so badly they wouldn't support his weight, he slid heavily back to the ground. Bringing his knees up to his chest, he buried his face against them as his racking sobs intensified. He felt as though he were drowning; being drawn ever downward into a barren, desolate place devoid of all other emotion but that of inconsolable grief.

Flinging back his head, Vincent cracked it up against the stone wall once, then again, then a third time, crying aloud into the mantle of stars above him, "Oh my Love, my sweet Love, how I miss you! Do not leave me here to endure this life without you any longer? Take any form, haunt me, curse me for time eternal, but do not leave me alone here in this... wretched place? But, if you cannot come to me, Catherine, I beg of you, let me come to you? I tried - I tried, but I cannot continue like... this... much longer."

Sitting there, shivering in the cold, Vincent didn't seem to notice the strange flashes of lightening that breached the Heavens as he spoke, nor did he heed the wind and rain that pursued it savagely across the sky. Pelting him incessantly in a sudden, fierce downpour, raindrops began to mingle with the tracks of his tears, the feel of them like gentle, compassionate fingers brushing against his furred, tawny skin.

Beginning an act of fealty to the only woman he would ever love, Vincent reached up and removed a much-cherished, small suede pouch from around his neck. Then, as he had done for the past four years on the anniversary of Catherine's death, he opened the pouch and carefully retrieved an ivory rose and a brightly polished crystal from their loving confinement.

Drawing them close to his body to shield them from the rain, he smiled sadly to find the crystal's chain once again clinging to the rose. Staring down at them through his tears, he found it curious, and wonderful, that no matter how many times he untangled them, whenever he undid the pouch he knew somehow that he would always find the chain of the crystal tightly embracing the rose; joined together as his life had been joined to Catherine's.

Inspecting the objects through eyes that ached from crying and were bleak with pain, he whispered, "I shall remember every moment, every touch, every word, always. Always. This, I promise you, my... Love, my torment. My blessed, blessed torment."

Cupping the rose and the crystal in the palm of his trembling left hand, he kissed each item tenderly, then brought them up to rest against his heart. "Oh Catherine, forgive me? Forgive me for failing you?"

Burying his face into the curve of his arm, Vincent let the tears flow freely now. Mourning the loss of his soul-mate, he wept bitterly, knowing that her belief in him, her trust, her devotion, and her love, had been the only truths worth having; ones that had made him feel not only accepted, but human.

Pausing at the nearest pipe to the entrance of the tunnel-world just after dawn, Vincent tapped out a brief message to Father. */// V to F. Home. ///*

The acknowledgement came back almost immediately. */// F to V. Jacob asleep. No emergencies. ///*

Drawing a thankful breath to know that his presence wasn't needed anywhere for the moment, Vincent proceeded wearily down the corridor. Stopping at the children's dormitory to check on his son, as he always did after one of his increasingly rare excursions Above, he tiptoed past Jamie's bed and over to Jacob's. Standing over him, he smiled at finding the boy in his usual sleeping position: knees bent under him, hind-end in the air, and clinging tightly to one of his most beloved toys - a faded-pink, lop-eared, love-squashed, stuffed rabbit.

Hearing the slight wheezing sound in Jacob's breathing pattern, Vincent tilted his head to one side, listening intently for a few moments, and then frowned. Surely the boy didn't have another cold so soon? Dear God, was the fever back as well? Touching the child lightly on the brow with the palm of his left hand, he shook his head back and forth, the expression on his face one of obvious parental concern at finding him exceedingly warm.

Jacob's bouts of illness seemed to hang on beyond what would be considered usual for a child his age, and now he seemed to have another cold, his fifth in as many months. His eyes darkened. In truth, there was no way of knowing what was normal for this child - his child. There never would be. Heartsick with guilt, he thought, *'What sort of a legacy was this to give to one's own son?'*

Knowing that he must speak with Father about revising the boy's medication again, Vincent gazed down at him worriedly. When Jacob had been barely a month old, Peter Alcott, a friend who was also a trusted Helper and a highly-skilled physician, had examined him at great length, then sadly concurred with Father's diagnosis that the child was suffering from a condition known in medical circles as 'failure to thrive'. Oh God, what a wretched phrase.

Allowing his palm to rest a moment longer on Jacob's forehead, Vincent frowned. Surely there was something more that could be done to help him? With all of the ever-new medical technology available in the world Above, through Peter, there had to be something on the market that would bring an end to the child's anguish once and for all? There must be *something*.

Trying to feel hopeful, he gazed down at the small form curled up in the bed and smiled sadly. Jacob. His son. The miracle of actually being a parent still bewildered him at times, as well as utterly unnerved him.

Recalling bouts of teething, disconcerting struggles with a seemingly endless assortment of unidentified fevers that beset Jacob without warning, then ebbed away almost as quickly, as well as the childhood scrapes and nosebleeds the boy endured without too much complaint, Vincent sighed, wondering how Olivia, Lena, and the women and men of both worlds who had children, handled parenting with such aplomb?

How did they make everything look so easy, so effortless, in tending to their offspring? How did they deal with the seemingly endless teething; the incessant questions; with the toys strewn everywhere; with the plates of food that ended up on walls, on floors, but not in mouths?

He would never fathom how in God's name those dauntless parents coped so well, with so much, without losing both their patience and their collective minds. Yet, even as he posed the question to himself, he knew in his heart-of-hearts that there was only one answer to it: love. When you love someone, you could endure anything, *do* anything required of you, to insure their well-being.

Reaching down to tuck Jacob's quilts more firmly around his slender frame, Vincent exhaled softly, wondering if Catherine would have considered him to be a worthy parent? He did the best he could, but a boy needed his mother. Especially this boy.

Swallowing the rekindled onslaught of grief that perception brought, he knelt down beside the bed and solemnly studied his sleeping child. *'Sleep well, my beloved son. May you dream only happy dreams, for both of us.'*

Contemplating Jacob's tousled, honey-blond curls, firm jaw line, and small button of a turned-up nose, Vincent blinked away tears. Bending his head, he gently brushed his lips over the child's sweet-smelling, powder-scented cheek, his heart shattering anew at the boy's resemblance to his mother.

After speaking with Father at some length, Vincent took the final bend in the corridor leading to his own chamber. Hovering just inside the entrance, he stared into the shadowed, empty room, then sank back against the stone wall as a variety of emotions ripped through him, including a bleak sense of aloneness. Taking a labored breath, and then another, he pushed away from the wall, trying to force himself upright again, but it was no use, he simply didn't have the strength left to do even that much. Oh God, he was tired - so very tired.

Fighting to summon up enough energy to go to the warm pools at the far end of the Triple Falls long enough to wash his hair and ease his aching muscles, he groaned as an uncompromising lethargy sank into every part of his being. He should bathe and at least make an effort to cleanse his hair, this he knew, but right now even personal hygiene seemed beyond him.

Releasing a strangled gasp as another bout of total exhaustion washed over him, claiming what little remained of his inner strength; Vincent made one last mighty effort and managed to struggle out of his drenched cloak and mud-spattered boots. Then, ignoring icy chamber air and the goose-flesh prickling his skin, he hastily slipped out of his soaked vest and shirt, stripped out of his pants and thermals, and eased out of his damp socks.

Shivering with cold, and allowing the discarded apparel to puddle at his feet, he stepped over them and walked toward a large wardrobe at the far side of the room. Using stiff, uncooperative fingers to tug open one of the cumbersome oak drawers, he reached inside and pulled out a thick cotton nightshirt and a pair of warm, loose-fitting flannel pants.

As Vincent lifted the sleep-wear into his hand, two delicate-looking pieces of material, which had been tucked underneath his garments, fell to the floor. Peering down at the items and recognizing them instantly, he stiffened, then released a despairing whimper from deep in his throat.

Clutching at the center of his chest with his left hand, he reached out slowly with his right and picked up the small bundle of woven fabric; an ivory-tone, beribboned mohair shawl, and a folded nightgown. The outfit had belonged - still belonged, to Catherine. She had worn the nightwear here, in his world, the time she came Below to heal when her father passed away.

Sinking to his knees, Vincent brought the dearly-treasured garments to his mouth, brushed his lips over them lovingly for a moment, then lifted them to his nostrils. Greedily breathing in the slight trace of Catherine's scent that still clung to the shawl, his face seemed to crumble.

"Oh my Dear," he moaned softly, stroking the soft fabric with the pad of his thumb, "I would give any-thing within my power to have you beside me at the Falls wearing this... once again."

Trembling so badly he truly thought he might shatter to pieces at any moment, he brought the bundle of material to rest up against his aching, hungry heart. Cradling Catherine's attire as one would a frightened child, he began to rock back and forth, thinking that perhaps what was claimed in books was true; it was possible to feel one's own heart break - and it was possible to feel it happen... more than once.

Thinking back on those few precious hours he and his Beloved had shared at the Falls, Vincent closed his eyes and waited, half expecting to die on the spot, for the regret the memories brought forth shamed him to the soul. As they sat together that day, sharing their thoughts, Catherine had asked him if they 'would ever be together - truly together'.

Terrified of hoping for too much, and of wanting her so much, he had given her an answer, of sorts, but it wasn't the one he had wanted to give her. Because of his fears for her safety, and his own lack of knowledge regarding physical intimacy, there had been so much time wasted, so many opportunities missed for both he and the woman he loved. Time and opportunities that would never come again.

There were so many truths he had kept locked away in his heart; so many words he had never been able to give to Catherine, to share with her. Only once, at the time of his greatest inner struggle, had he told her aloud that he loved her, but he had said nothing more than that. He simply didn't have the words to express his deeper feelings, at least not then. And now, when he had found the courage to tell her how much he loved her, she lay in a grave; a cold, desolate place that no words could penetrate.

Contemplating those words that now burned in his soul, Vincent studied the thick tufts of fur on the backs of the hands that Catherine had loved so much. Yes, he thought, gulping back tears, these were her hands; they truly belonged to her, as he did - forever.

Burying his face in the shawl and nightgown he was clutching to his chest, he whispered, "I love you, Catherine. I shall always love you, and want you as a... man... wants a woman. Yet, I think you always knew that, didn't you? You knew me so well; at times much better than I knew myself. You were the air that I breathed, the touchstone that centered my life. Your devotion honored me, strengthened me, and God... oh God... how I *loved* you."

With tears streaming down his face, he peered up at the chamber ceiling. "If you can hear me now, from where you are, give me a sign? Please? Give me... that much... to cling to, if you can?"

With a yearning born of aloneness, Vincent listened carefully for a moment, praying as hard as he had ever prayed before in his life, but all he could hear was the tapping of the pipes outside of his chamber, the distant rush of a subway car overhead, and the swift thudding of his own heart.

Taking a deep, cleansing breath, he slowly rose to his feet, painstakingly refolded the shawl and nightgown he was holding, and tucked them away in the wardrobe. Closing the drawer, he sank down to the edge of the bed and bowed his head, trying to draw on an inner strength to sustain him now, when there was nothing else, and no one else, to do it - not anymore.

After several moments of bitter introspection, he regained a semblance of emotional calm and threw on his nightwear, thinking, '*Jacob may awaken soon and want me close. I must try to get some rest.*'

Flinging himself down on the bed, Vincent yanked the quilts up to his chin and sighed, hoping to find some respite in tranquil dreams for the next few hours, yet knew in his heart that no such boon would be granted him. After tossing restlessly back and forth on the bed for some time, he finally rolled over onto his left hip and folded his arms across his chest. Silently entreating the hideous nightmares he'd been having almost continually for the last four years to forego plaguing him this one night, he settled down and closed his eyes.

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Ah, but the dreams came as they always did, and tonight those visions took a fateful turn for the worse.

In his minds-eye, Vincent could hear Catherine calling out to him; he could see the anguish in her eyes, and abject relief as he caught her up in his arms. She was so pale, so very pale. He shuddered as the smell of sweat and blood assailed his nostrils. Oh God, the stench of death was all around him, smothering him: And in that wretched moment, the truth of what was happening lanced through him, the cadence of his heart like chimes tolling a bitter end to all of his dreams – and hers.

He could see his own face, and his tears mirrored in her eyes as the woman he treasured above anything else in the world smiled up at him and reached out to gently stroke the left side of his cheek. Then after whispering a litany that tore him apart, she gasped softly, closed her eyes, and left him – forever.

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"Catherine, no. Please... no? Stay with me? Stay... stay? Oh God! CATHERINE!"

Jerked awake by the sound of his own screams, Vincent bolted upright in the bed, swung his long legs over the side of it, and stumbled to his feet. With his heart seeming to pound in his ears and his breaths coming in strangled gasps, he located his still-damp boots in the shadowed room. Tugging them on, he flung his cloak over his shoulders and bolted out of the chamber.

He had to get away from the dreams, the memories; from the pain. He had to run - to hide! Yet, was there anywhere he could go that would allow him to escape his feelings of guilt and despair over the loss of half of his very soul? In truth, where could he retreat from himself?

".....and death shall have no dominion. Death shall have no dominion..."

Sobbing the words and running at great speed, with no thought to a final destination, Vincent eventually skidded to a halt in the middle of the Whispering Gallery bridge. Putting one hand to the center of his chest, he tried to catch his breath, but it hurt to breathe. Oh, how it hurt.

'*So having another bad night, are we?*' silently growled a voice he knew well, for it was a part of him. It would always be a part of him. '*Now, isn't that a shame?*'

Stiffening defensively, Vincent swept his eyes over the cavern. Well aware that this fragment of his psyche could wound in deep places, leaving only madness and destruction in his wake, he feared his dominance nearly as much as the poisonous thoughts the darkling himself evoked.

Fighting to confine his anger – and his fear, he curled his large hands into fists, demanding, "Leave me."

"Leave you? Never."

Growling low in his throat and narrowing his eyes, Vincent coiled his body into a defensive posture as a face dark with rage came into view at the far end of the bridge.

"Thinking about the woman, are we?" the voice sneered. Then, a cloaked figure emerged into the open, folded his arms across his chest, and leaned back against the rocks, somber, taunting eyes blazing into his. "She's dead. Now, there's only you..." A cruel smile edged into the corners of the apparition's mouth. "... and me. Catherine has gone to a place where even I cannot reach her."

In a voice awash with malice, he continued his merciless jibes. "Nevermore will you hear her soft voice calling to you, or stroke her hair; nevermore will you take pleasure in the sound of her laughter washing over you, smell her perfume, or hold her in your arms."

Moaning, "Do you think I would need you to remind me of those times," Vincent tried to inhibit the malevolent words of the primal 'thing' who dwelt within him, snarling, "Get out of my mind, and my soul. Leave me alone with my memories, my grief, and my dreams."

"Dreams!" the apparition spat. "Haven't you learned yet that dreams are only for fools?" Then, sharing Vincent's loss as only he could, the voice of his own special demon seemed to grow hoarsely dispirited. "Face it; deal with it, as I have had to deal with it - the dream you shared with the woman... our woman, is over. Now, awake or asleep, for every moment of the rest of your life, try to warm your soul in nightmares, as I must; as I always have! Find what solace you can there, for that is all that's left now, for either of us. It's over."

Even knowing that there wasn't really anyone there, Vincent still took an involuntary step backward when the caped figure leaned toward him, pointing accusingly. "It took me years to get even for the suffering I was forced to endure at your hands, but I finally had my revenge. You shut me out once too often, so I took the bond away from you and gave it to our son."

"A reckless act which cost Catherine her **life**," Vincent charged, his tone ominous - menacing.

"I..." Hesitating, the effigy hunched broad shoulders. "Yes, perhaps that was an irrational move on my part, but it's done now, and I can't undo it." Challenging eyes met his. "But, it wasn't my fault Catherine died. How could I help her when you wouldn't let me?! Damn you... damn you, your pride, your arrogance, your selfishness where she was concerned, cost us everything!"

Having no words to refute the denunciation, Vincent bowed his head and kept his own counsel.

As it retreated back into the recesses of his subconscious, the beast made one final, damning denunciation. "Catherine died because of you. You wouldn't let me in, and without me, you couldn't find her in time to save her!"

"I don't need you to remind me of that!" came a cry of utter despair. "In God's name, cease tormenting me!"

"As you command," he sneered, adding coldly, "But, I'll never be very far away. You're all I have left - now. And one day, you won't be able to get rid of me quite so easily, that I promise you..."

And as quickly as it had come, the shadow drifted back into nothingness.

For some time, Vincent continued prowling back and forth across the narrow walkway spanning the bridge. Clenching and unclenching his hands, he fought to contain an urge to scream aloud as he had the night Catherine had been taken from him, knowing full well that the remembrance of how she died, and the way she died, was slowly and methodically eating him up inside, like an insidiously spreading form of cancer.

Swiping at the scalding tears coursing down his face, he struggled to regain his sight, as well as his sense of inner control, but it was a gesture in futility. He couldn't focus his thoughts, nor could he see. With his vision completely obscured, he stumbled over the rough-hewn planks of the bridge and suddenly lurched sideways, towards the edge.

Reaching out blindly with his left hand, Vincent felt for the coarse length of rope enclosing the walkway. Gaining a tenuous hold, he grasped the twists of rough hemp in trembling fingers and put his free hand over his heart, trying to take slow, even breaths, then winced. The stabbing pain in his chest was worse tonight than it had been in weeks. Rubbing the area tentatively, he growled, wondering if the ache would never cease plaguing him?

'Catherine could have eased your suffering, but she's...'

"Please, no more..." Sinking to his knees, Vincent pressed his hands to the sides of his head in a vain attempt to shut out the voice taunting him, but it didn't help. Nothing helped.

'Then her father lay dying, you made a vow to him, pledging to 'protect Catherine, watch over her, and love her till your last breath', didn't you? Didn't you?!'

Unable to contradict that truth, Vincent shuddered mightily and buried his face in the palms of his hands. "Stop..."

As the voice rose to a grating timbre, the words impacted on his mind cruelly, like merciless, incessant blows. *'Your vow meant nothing - nothing! You failed Catherine - failed her when she most needed you!'*

"Damn you to the flames of perdition, that is ENOUGH!" The word echoed through the Gallery like a crackle of gunfire. Still on his knees, Vincent slammed his clenched fists down to the bridge once, then again, and a third time, until the wood began to split, groaning, "...enough. I cannot endure any more, especially... right now."

Staring up at the vaulted ceiling above him through tortured eyes, he begged, "Help me to disregard these malignant images in my heart, and the voice within my mind, for they are plundering my very soul?"

Wrapping both arms across his stomach, he began swaying back and forth, struggling desperately to reject the voice and its denouncements, certain he would go quite mad if he couldn't vanquish it - and soon.

Time passed, seconds into minutes, minutes to hours, before Vincent managed to struggle to his feet again. Moving to peer over the edge of the bridge, he stared down into the Abyss, watching the coils of steam rising from there with bleak, dispassionate eyes. Strangely enough, tonight that cheerless place seemed to be calling to him in some way, inviting him to... do what?

Eyeing the shadows, he noted that the bridge and surrounding area seemed far less threatening now, than they had when he was a boy doing hand-stands down here with his brother, Devin. Tonight, even the whispers from the world Above were more muffled than was usual, almost imperceptible; as though they too, felt his anguish, and were stilled in deference to it.

Unbeknownst to him, at that moment, Vincent stood at a crossroads, and there were things there, on that shadowed path, that no one wanted to meet in the dark. A part of himself he had always feared dwelt there, at that crossroads, in those shadows, and once that threshold had been crossed, you never knew whether you'd come out on the other side hating everything and everyone, including yourself. Or perhaps, if you came out at all, you came out touched by a special kind of madness.

Leaning slightly forward, Vincent stared down into the chasm before him, his unusual mouth curved into a grimace of a smile. 'Yes,' he thought, *'perhaps to go mad was the answer. Conceivably, in going insane, I will at last find a peace, of sorts'*. Then, suddenly reminded of the less-than-gentle side of himself he had always feared, he grunted scornfully. *'Or, will 'his' pitiless taunts follow me even into lunacy?'*

Envisioning Catherine, lost in the misery of these endless, hollow years without her, he decided it was past time to find out if there was indeed a way to finally be at peace, and away from his demons. Vincent's eyes scanned the swirling mist below him. Yes, there was another way besides madness to end this anguish; a quicker way... a surer way. Focusing all of his energies on the exact center of the void, he slowly let go of the rope and swayed forward...

Suddenly, from within his thoughts, a voice entreated, *'No, my Love, you mustn't...'*

As Vincent's head jerked up, startled, somber blue eyes swept over the Gallery expectantly. "C... Catherine?"

'I'm here - always.'

Hearing her voice so clearly he gasped and nearly choked on the breath, Vincent yanked back away from the edge of the Abyss. Riveting his eyes to the far end of the bridge, he offered up a silent, frantic prayer, hoping against hope to see her standing there. But, he was alone. It was only the voices within his own mind once again, taunting him. Mocking him.

Yet, perhaps wherever Catherine was, she would still sense his agony, hear him, and understand what he was about to do?

"Oh Beloved," he whispered, tears making his tone husky and thick, "this life is so barren without you here to share it with."

'I miss you too, my Love,' replied the one voice that could always make his heart-rate escalate until it seemed to pound in his ears. *'My Love,'* she murmured again. *'I can call you that now, can't I?'*

"Oh... yes," he managed in a strangled whisper.

Thinking that the sound of Catherine's voice was merely additional proof of ensuing madness, still a part of Vincent's consciousness reached out for her, clinging to the illusion with a sense of desperate finality. Momentarily losing himself in a vision of her as only he could, he began sobbing quietly, his thoughts on her and the son she would never hold in her arms.

Closing his eyes, he confessed, "I... I no longer have the strength to endure without you, Catherine."

'Vincent,' she insisted quietly, *'holding life as sacred as you do, as you always have, how can you contemplate ending yours like... this?'*

Disputing with the woman he loved, he entreated, "Please, my Dearest Heart, let me come to you now? Jacob has Father to care for him, as well as the rest of the community. Surely, you of all people understand that I **have** to be with you, and if death is the only way to accomplish that end, then that is what I choose."

'A life must be lived, not wasted.'

"A life without you..." Staring into the past, he gulped hard, forcing the words past the dryness in his throat. "...is no life at all."

'There is another way.'

"No," he sobbed, clutching at his chest, "...not for me! I love our son with every fiber of my being, but God forgive me, it's not the same as having you here with me. Jacob is a part of you, but he isn't **you**, Catherine. I can no longer abide this aloneness, the emptiness, nor the memories which are crushing me - destroying me, moment to moment."

'I know you hold yourself accountable for my death, but you were not to blame. You must believe that,' the illusion offered by way of consolation. *'Dearest, what happened to me wasn't your fault.'*

"Wasn't it?" As the image of a building, and then a roof blanketed by a cold, starless night swept into his thoughts, Vincent's eyes jerked open, his body stiffening as though it had just been dealt a swift and fatal blow. "I loved you, and that loving begat a child - a wondrous, beautiful child. Yet, the reality of him, took you away from me."

'No,' the voice gently contradicted. *'It was my own lack of caution that ended my life.'*

Unable to fault her aloud, even now, Vincent shook his head adamantly back and forth, but said nothing. Thinking back on a time of overpowering madness and the bleak cave which he had retreated to five years earlier, expecting to end his own existence, eyes brimming with unshed tears slowly closed again.

"I should have never asked Father to bring you Below that night - yet I needed you with me so much, I... I wasn't thinking clearly."

'But, I would have gone anywhere, and done whatever I could, to save you.'

Eyes shaded with grief opened to stare into the shadows. "Am I worth so much then? Was saving me, worth your life?"

'Would you have done less, for me?' When he made no reply, she went on, *'When you chose to isolate yourself from those who love you, thinking to shield us, did you imagine that I would let you endure... that... alone?'*

"Yet, I knew it was dangerous to have you so close to me that night, and still I allowed it to happen!" he cried, self-reproach causing his voice to turn grating - abrasive. "When you came into that... terrible place, some part of me knew you, Catherine, recognized you."

Dishonored at admitting that aloud, Vincent bowed his head. "I should have found the courage within me to send you away then, at that moment, and in that way, keep you safe..." He released a shivering breath. "...from my demons."

'There are no demons within you,' she disputed lovingly.

"That's not true!" he exclaimed, momentarily losing his composure. "We both know full well that for me, that can never be true! If I hadn't loved you..." Hesitating, he passed one hand over his eyes. "...you would still be alive. Alive. The blame is mine, Catherine, and I can no longer bear to live with the burden of... that truth."

Taking a deep breath, Vincent turned and moved to the right side of the bridge. Holding his hands out in front of him, imploring her to understand, and to forgive him his cowardice, he promised, "No one shall ever know that 'this' wasn't merely an unfortunate accident." With that, he took a step forward, then another, and finally a third.

Lifting his booted foot for the final desertion of self from self, he flung his arms wide. "Wait for me, my Angel? Soon, soon now, shall I hold you close again..."

"No Vincent," came a feminine voice from directly behind him, "Not like this." Then, a slender, delicately-formed hand came to rest on the curve of his left shoulder. He gasped as fingers with a vise-like grip clamped down almost painfully on the muscles there, and the voice, kind, yet gently chastising, intoned, "Do you think to discover the remedy for suffering in death? You didn't before. Remember?"

Yanking free of the hand restraining him, Vincent whirled around, then blinked several times, staring at the woman standing in front of him. Where had she come from, and how had she managed to get so close to him without him sensing her presence in any way? Challenging her very existence, he shook his head adamantly from side to side.

"No. This cannot be! This time, I am not dreaming, I'm certain of it, so how can you be here?!"

"Yet, I am here," the woman replied. "I'll always be here - for you." Clad in a shimmering gown of purest white, a woman who was the mirror image of how he had always envisioned Catherine in his secret, innermost soul, lifted sad, smoky-green eyes to his. "I have come because it is Catherine's dearest wish that I be here for her now, when you are despairing of all hope."

"Hope," Vincent spat disdainfully. "That is merely a word."

Knowing that the reminder of his troubled childhood would sear him to the soul, the Spirit eyed him compassionately. "Until the night you found Catherine, in truth you lived your life by that single word."

When his only response was a disdainful snarl, she motioned to the limitless void directly behind him and shook her head from side to side. "In choosing death over life, you have brought the woman you love great affliction. Is this what you would have her endure unto the end of all things - the knowledge that you destroyed yourself and brought pain to those she cherished, so that you could be with her?"

His senses reeling, Vincent stared at the woman, unable to speak. This was a dream. It had to be a dream! Once before, in a vision, he had met this same woman; on the night he had disappointed Catherine by not having the courage to accompany her on a trip to a place from her childhood - the house in Connecticut.

Scrutinizing her, he thought, *'This particular nightmare will come to an end here and now. Although this Angel or Devil, as the case may be, might occupy space, surely there can be no substance to her...'* Reaching out tentatively, he traced one shaking finger along the left sleeve of her gown, then jerked his hand back as if he'd been burned by an unseen flame. Oh dear God, he wasn't dreaming. She was real. This time, he had actually touched her!

Grunting to himself as his sense of reality came into play, Vincent eyed her suspiciously. She was a witch. Yes, that was it. She had to be. A good witch perhaps, but a witch nonetheless; a Spirit not of this, or any other world. Standing so close to the woman he could feel her breath warming his face, he continued eyeing her intently.

This... whatever she was... was very beautiful, but she wasn't his Beloved, merely an illusion of her, and she would not deter him from his objective. After inhaling deeply of her scent - one that reminded him very much of Catherine's, he took a step back, and then another.

Gathering his determination around him as though it were his heaviest woolen cloak, Vincent insisted gruffly, "Your words have no power over me - not this time."

Seeing his resolve in the darkening blue of his eyes, the woman offered, "Even if I tell you that I have the power to alter the past..." She hesitated. "...temporarily?"

"Alter it?" A faint glimmer of hope Vincent didn't dare to acknowledge sparked to life from within. "How? In what way? And to what end?"

Certain that her explanation would astound him, the Spirit of Light and Hope reached out and caught the edge of Vincent's cloak in her fingers - just in case. "I know your heart as Catherine did - and does, and all of its deepest, most private longings. You are a kind man, a just one, and deserve a better life; a far better one than you... received."

"You say much, but your words do not answer my questions," he accused impatiently.

"Very well then, I shall speak more plainly." Studying him, she murmured, "Some years ago, I asked you to 'remember love'. Can you, even now?"

"Remember it?" Hurt beyond a way he thought he still could be, tears welled up in Vincent's eyes. "If, as you say, you know my heart, how can you ask?"

Seeking to cleanse his soul of the pain, the Spirit implored, "Tell me of the night Catherine died? What happened then, after that?"

"After that?" As the agony of that moment swept through his soul anew, Vincent began to weep, his sobs echoing through the chamber. "There is no then, there is no... after."

"There can be. With love, all things are possible." Taking a deep breath, the Spirit, Angel, or witch - call her what you will, vowed, "I have been granted the power to bestow the dearest wish of your heart. If you will agree to certain 'conditions', you have the opportunity here and now, to alter the course of your life - and Catherine's, by revising for a time, the evil that was done to both of you."

"You are saying that you...!" As she had surmised, Vincent lurched backward, staring at her, and would have surely plunged over the side of the bridge to his death if she hadn't been holding him fast. "...you can bring Catherine back?"

"Yes," the Angel stated quietly, knowing that he really didn't believe her. "But, as I've said, there are..."

"Liar! Vile tormentor of my soul!" Not allowing her to finish, Vincent thundered, "Stop now, and say no more to me on this matter! **Dare** you trifle with my feelings in such a contemptible way?!"

Reaching out and quickly taking hold of the Angel's arms, he shook her quite roughly, almost violently, the glint of fury in his eyes warning enough in itself. "On this issue, do not test my patience, nor provoke me any further, especially this, of all nights!"

Slowly reaching up to stroke the left side of his tense jaw, she met his eyes calmly, her expression holding absolutely no trace of fear. "What I have promised can be done."

When Vincent slowly loosened his hold on her arms, the woman moved slightly away from him. Examining the sleeves of her gown at some length, she waited, knowing that he would need a few moments to come to terms with her words, accept them, and learn to believe them.

'To have Catherine back!'

Turning away from the apparition who had surely been sent here to mock his aloneness, Vincent stared out over the span of the great void. With his heart pounding much too fast, his thoughts scattered wildly - rage warring with hope, fear clashing with excitement. What if it were possible? What if, in some way he could not fathom, such a thing could actually be done? He had to find out.

Not daring to turn around and find himself alone in this shadowed place, for that would only serve to confirm his suspicions of utter madness, he finally got the words around the lump in his throat, asking, "Done how, and at what cost?"

Knowing that he finally understood, the Angel whispered, "The cost is... exceedingly dear, I'm afraid."

Half turning, Vincent stared at her through eyes that had narrowed to slits, his mistrust quite evident. "Tell me?" When she hesitated, he glared at her, snarling, "I shall not ask a second time."

Fighting to keep her voice steady, she replied, "In this choice, your son's life hangs in the balance."

The words echoed through the chamber, hovering between them for many moments before Vincent trusted himself to acknowledge her in any way, or to speak again. Eyes ablaze with barely contained fury, he snarled low in his throat, the sound ominous. When he finally managed to unclench his teeth, his voice was hushed, quiet. Deadly quiet.

"Are you mad to think that I would barter Catherine's child away for any inducement you could possibly offer me?" When she made no reply, he moved to tower over her, the gesture telling the woman that her very life, if indeed she had one, was in ultimate peril of being lost. "No one shall take the boy away from me again so easily, that I promise you."

Putting one hand to his breast, the Angel entreated, "Please? If you will allow me to explain, you will come to understand that this parting has been preordained by your own words."

As his lips curled into a feral snarl, Vincent cautioned in a hissing tone, "Then explain quickly, lest I send you back to where you came from, to dwell forever with the rest of the demons in this wretched place." His voice turned guttural; dangerous. "For if such as you can be destroyed, oh, you shall be."

Speaking in a soft, clear voice, she began, "Do you accept that the birth of your son, and Catherine's death, were brought about by your illness, and her attempts to save your life?" When he made no response, the woman took him back further in time, observing, "When the man you call Father, lost Margaret, Catherine declared that it was 'sad to have a beginning and an end, but nothing in between.' To that, you replied that they had shared seven days."

Nodding his head, Vincent murmured, "I... remember."

Gazing up at him, she smiled gently, hoping to ease the sting of her words. "In your thoughts, and in your heart, you envied Margaret and Father those days together, wishing you could have had them for yourself and for Catherine."

"How do you know...?" Trying to hide his disgrace, he looked away. "Yes, in truth I envied them that time together."

"If you still wish it, I can give you those seven days with the woman you love by your side, but in doing so, the past must be altered."

Challenging eyes met hers. "Why?"

"Earlier tonight, in the park, you vowed that you would '*do anything, live up anything, to hear Catherine speak your name again*'. Is that true; would you give up anything - and everything?"

When Vincent made no response, she continued, "Your words moved... someone... deeply, and I have been sent to learn if they were *merely* words." When he turned away to gaze out over the chasm, the Angel patiently gave him a few moments, then asked, "Do you comprehend the meaning of what I have just said?"

Not trusting his voice, Vincent nodded his head slowly up and down.

"Good." Taking a deep breath, she prepared herself for what must be said next, and it was the hardest part of all. "And, if you choose to be at Catherine's side, you must also choose at what moment in time you would begin that cycle of your lives over again. But, that time must be an interval that originates before Jacob's conception." Needing to make certain he understood, she continued, "You may have Catherine back for seven days, or you may leave circumstances as they are now, and only you can make that decision."

"I cannot make such a choice!" Turning around so quickly his long, amber hair whipped him across the face, eyes dark with anger locked to hers. "The price you ask of me is far too high."

"It is not I who asks this of you, but it is part of the covenant." Touching her heart to his, the woman continued, "'Tis said 'be careful what you wish for in this life, for it may be granted you.'"

"Yes, I know the expression well," Vincent growled. "You would have me believe that one dream would be fulfilled at the cost of every other one, by taking the only part of Catherine left in this world away from me. What sort of spiteful God is this, who would approve of such... despicable terms?"

Realizing it was his pain making such a denouncement, not his heart, the Angel overlooked the reproach, announcing solemnly, "Yet, even as we speak, the child's strength wanes."

"Jacob merely has a cold," he retorted sharply. "All children become ill at times."

Holding Vincent's focus, she searched his eyes. "It is time for you to face the truth, and come to terms with it..."

"No!" he roared, taking a step toward her. "Do not even let the words pass your lips!"

"I'm sorry, but this must be said." Tears of compassion spilled down the woman's face. "Jacob is a lovely child, a truly extraordinary one; yet because of his uniqueness both parents must be there as he matures, or all is lost."

"Lost," Vincent echoed, stricken to the heart. "No. Oh please... no?" Then, recalling how ill the baby had been when he found him and finally brought him home, he curled his nails into the palms of his hands.

Taking a deep breath, he searched his heart carefully, then at last allowed himself to hear the truth of her words. For, it was true Jacob had never been as strong as he should have been, and seemed much more susceptible to ailments than other children his age. Nothing he, Father, or Peter did, nothing they tried by way of treatment, seemed to make even the slightest difference.

Barely managing to express the thought aloud, he put one hand over his eyes, groaning. "Oh God, what you have told me is the truth. My son..." Choking on the words, he forced them from his throat. Catherine's son, is... dying."

"Please know that it grieves me deeply that such a thing will happen, and soon." Her tone anguished, the woman entreated, "One day, perhaps you will be able to find the compassion within yourself to forgive me for forcing you to face such a difficult truth?"

"Forgive you?" Eyes glistening with tears met hers. "No, I don't think so."

"I understand." Suddenly, the Angel frowned and tilted her head to one side, as though listening to a voice only she could hear, then she smiled, her eyes aglow with new and wondrous 'possibilities' she wasn't at liberty to speak of, at least not now. Blushing furiously, she eyed him from beneath her lashes. "But, the concept, the idea of that miraculous child, will never die. Jacob shall be with you always, even unto the end of all things. He is a part of your very soul."

"Yes, he... is." With his heart being torn asunder as he came to terms with the choices she was offering him, Vincent swallowed the pain.

That his son was going to die was a certainty, in his heart-of-hearts, he had known that for some time. So he could stand by helplessly and watch it happen, or agree to her terms, and allow the boy's frail, ailing body to find peace now. Barely confining his sobs, he stammered, "If – *if* I agree to these conditions you speak of, will Jacob... suffer?"

"No, that I promise you." Glancing up at the high ceiling, the woman smiled. "Where I come from, children do not suffer, they play happily in the sunshine."

"In the sunshine," he whispered. With tears clinging to his lashes, Vincent glanced up, his eyes following the path hers had taken. "I'm glad." Then gazing down at her, his expression was resolved, unfaltering. "And you say I can choose the exact moment of Catherine's return?"

"You have but to envision the time, and it is done."

"Will I remember any of this past," he questioned. "The pain of it? The grief? The... child?"

"If you allow it, I would spare you as much of the grief as is possible," the Spirit offered.

Nodding in agreement to that, Vincent stared at her, his eyes determined - uncompromising. "And after the seven days, what then?"

"Would you have me tell you the future?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry, but I cannot do that." Troubled green eyes peered heavenward. "Only a very few are so privileged, but alas, I'm not one of them."

"And what of these last four years; will they alter for everyone, or only for Catherine and I?"

"That has been taken into consideration," she replied enigmatically.

Suddenly envisioning a bed, with the image of a body drawn in chalk outlined on it, a shudder seemed to run the width and length of Vincent's body. "And the cruelty of that past - the carnage of it; can that be changed?"

"I... I'm not at liberty... "

Not giving her the opportunity of completing the thought, he stared into her eyes, her very soul, insisting, "*That must* be changed, or I will speak no more of this, **ever**."

"You would have guarantees where they are none. I can only give you seven days, and each of them is a gift."

"Such 'gifts' are cruelly earned," Vincent retorted glacially.

Realizing his patience with her was wearing thin, the Angel reminded him, "The first time we met, I told you that 'life is a journey; that we create that journey for each other'. This is what you must do, but it will take all of your courage."

Bowing his head, he whispered, "The only true 'courage' I ever had, now lies in a grave behind Saint Cleo's church."

"No." Placing one hand to the side of his face, she smiled. "You have merely lost your way temporarily, that's all. You have a brave heart, Vincent - a truly courageous one, but you have never learned to trust fully in what it expresses. My dear friend, in the time given you, you must use that courage to create a new journey for yourself and for Catherine; a safer, more loving one. One that you can honor and remember with joy, instead of despair and regret."

Still half-believing that this wasn't some sort of a self-mocking, twisted dream, Vincent breathed, "Oh, I shall, believe me. No matter what it takes, no matter what sacrifices must be made, if given the chance I will change that path, for Catherine's sake."

"And for your own as well?"

He hunched his shoulders. "What happens to me is of little consequence."

"Little consequence!" Casting him a look of utter incredulity, the Angel gasped, "Surely, you don't believe that to be true even now?!" Pointing one finger at him accusingly, she exclaimed, "Oh,

foolish creature that thou art, if you truly believe that, then these years of anguish and pain have taught you nothing!"

Taken aback by her sudden burst of anger, Vincent frowned. "I don't understand?"

Losing all patience, she glared at him, lashing out verbally. "Was all that Catherine endured, for you, so insignificant? Was her fear for your survival when you were lost to yourself in the cave, of such 'little consequence'? You were, and are, her life! She would have willingly given up everything...everything... for you, to safeguard **you** - and did in the end." As she moved to stand toe-to-toe with him, the Angel's eyes flashed emerald in the flickering torchlight of the cavern. "Never, ever, forget that again."

"I did not mean to provoke you." Taking a step backward, Vincent held his hands out palms up in a gesture of reconciliation. "It's just that I'm not accustomed to thinking of myself in... that way."

Regaining her composure, the woman in white sighed ruefully. "Yes, I know." Suddenly feeling an invisible but adamant nudge to her ribs, she realized her span of moments here was nearly at an end. Wishing that she didn't have to leave just yet, she observed sadly, "Even for such as I, time is an inconstant, capricious thing, and quite elusive. Soon, I **must** go. Before I do, is there anything more you would ask of me?"

Almost certain he knew the answer to his next question, Vincent asked it anyway. "How much of this conversation will I be allowed to share with Catherine?"

Affording him an unyielding look, she replied, "Would you tell the woman you cherish that she will cease to exist in just seven days? Could you tell her you and she had loved, and that the loving produced a child who was taken away from her by that... that... **demon's spawn**? In all honesty, could you say *such words* to your Catherine, knowing they would only serve to frighten her?"

"No." Thinking of that time, he shuddered. "As much as I would wish to discuss all that you have told me with her, I don't have... that kind... of courage."

"Then you must tell her nothing, for half-truths will not suffice here. She would only suffer needlessly."

"Yes, she would," Vincent concurred, adding softly, "And Catherine has endured more than enough already." Looking to the left, he eyed the abyss. "When the seven days are at an end, will I be allowed to do as I wish?"

Knowing, of course, the question behind the question, the Angel nodded. "As much as 'someone' disagrees with what you would do, from the moment of Catherine's demise, the choices you make are inviolate."

"And if I choose death?"

"Then you shall die."

Sensing that she was being entirely truthful with him, Vincent seemed satisfied with her answer. Taking a deep breath and struggling to set aside a lifelong reticence to speak of things of a personal nature, he forced himself to ask the one question he had thought never to express aloud to anyone. "In this... new life, will the memory of loving Catherine remain a part of my consciousness?"

"No, I'm sorry, but that cannot be allowed." Closing the distance separating them, the Angel touched him lightly on the area of his chest encompassing his heart. "But, the memory of loving her shall be in here, as it has always been."

Frowning, he considered that very carefully. "How can this be? I have searched for years, yet could find no awareness of it - none."

Musing on the ineptness of mortals, she arched an eyebrow at him and sighed. "That is because you have been searching for answers with your power to reason, not with your capacity to love. You've always had the force of will to remember that time, but not the faith - not really. And if you have lost that faith, then you have truly lost... everything."

Placing one forefinger under his chin, the Angel tipped Vincent's head back and smiled at him. "I realize that it is small consolation, if any, but you have been granted the boon of being able to recall certain portions of this discourse 'twixt me and thee. I cannot do more, but hopefully what you remember will be enough to ease your way in the struggle ahead of you. But, heed my warning; this time, you must trust in your heart, Vincent, and **only** in your heart, for that is where your courage lives."

With a strength born of renewed hope, he whispered fiercely, "On my life, I promise to try."

"Then, so be it." As her outline shimmered for a moment and then began to fade, its shadowed edges turning formless, the beautiful apparition searched his eyes. "From the moment Catherine first speaks your name, you are granted seven days. Use them well. Until we meet again, go with courage, and go with care, my beloved friend."

Uncertain of what to expect next, what to trust, or what to believe, Vincent's breath caught in his throat as the woman continued to fade from view. Swallowing hard, he found himself wondering if she was going back to the place that also sustained Catherine's essence as well?

Murmuring, "Farewell," he stared at her as the Angel withdrew, his eyes widening as her silhouette seemed to be borne aloft - perhaps by an unseen hand, or on unseen wings?

Oh God, please, please, let it be true? Suddenly feeling strangely light-headed and fatigued beyond anything he had ever felt before in his life, Vincent prayed silently, frantically, for what had been promised to begin. Closing his eyes, he tried to remain calm, hoping that the covenant they had made was real; that what she had vowed was *truly possible*. Then, remembering something crucial, he lurched forward. "Wait!"

Tightening his grip on the ropes encompassing the bridge, Vincent searched the cavern ceiling through determined, intensely penetrating eyes. When the vague outline of the woman came into view far above him, he flung one hand out toward her, his voice rising in alarm.

"Come back? Please come back! I... I have not yet chosen the precise moment of Catherine's return!"

From above the shadows of silver, purple, and lucent pink that had begun to elongate over his face and form, encasing him in an undulating sphere of color, a gentle voice drifted down. "Oh yes, you have. Your heart chose the moment, for you, some time ago..."

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"Though they sink through the sea, they shall rise again. Though lovers be lost, love shall not, and death shall have no dominion..."

As Catherine's voice seemed to pull him back from a faraway place, Vincent echoed hoarsely, "And death shall have no dominion." Tired beyond a way of defining it, he battled his way through the fatigue long enough to ask, "You knew those words?"

Touching him lightly on the upper arm, Catherine peered over the edge of his left shoulder, trying to get a better look at him in the shadowed half-light of the room. "You've been repeating them for three days." From behind Vincent, her eyes mirrored her obvious concern for his well-being. Yes, he did seem calmer now; more lucid; more in control. Thank God. Hoping to keep him talking, she asked softly, "Who wrote them; was it Dylan Thomas?"

Vincent tried to respond, but weariness claimed him again, imprisoning the words. Trembling mightily as wave after wave of total exhaustion swept through every part of his body, he had no choice but to surrender to it.

Realizing that he had gone back to sleep, Catherine settled herself closer along the length of Vincent's broad, muscled back, kissed the edge of his upper arm, and sighed. Trying to feel hopeful, she prayed silently, *'Oh God, I love him so much. Please make him well again, and give him back to me? Without him, there's nothing - nothing.'*

Hours later, coming fully awake in the shadowed room, Vincent slowly eased up on one elbow and tried to get his bearings. This wasn't his chamber, yet he knew this place, and instinct dictated that he didn't belong here. Furrowing his brow, he studied the objects within his range of vision: a small, delicate-looking crystal lamp, a bureau of some sort, strewn with what appeared to be various size bottles of perfume, a silver brush and comb, and a vast assortment of unfamiliar feminine toiletry items.

Then, remembering what had come to pass three days earlier and exactly where he was, he bowed his head, deeply ashamed. With his thoughts under the control of an aberration he loathed, he had burst into Catherine's apartment, her **home**, wreaking havoc upon her most cherished possessions. How could he have done such a thing; how could he have defaced her belongings in such a despicable way?!

Stiffening as profound humiliation seemed to burn through every fiber of his being, Vincent slowly eased out from under a heavy satin coverlet. Turning to face the bed, he stared down at the small figure laying curled up on her right hip and managed a wan smile. Catherine would forgive him, of course, and understand that at the moment of the act he had been truly out of control; lost to himself. She always understood.

With his heart pounding much too fast, he studied her through eyes aglow with adoration. Catherine. His Angel, his beautiful...

Angel?!

Suddenly, from behind him, a small hand came to rest gently upon his left shoulder, and a feminine voice murmured in his ear, '*You have been given seven days. Remember love, and trust in your heart...*'

Seeing the vague image of a woman's form reflected in the mirror off to his left, Vincent whirled around to confront her, then blinked, surprised to find himself alone. Carefully scrutinizing the shadowed room, he frowned, then, as the actual meaning of the words he had heard impacted on his consciousness, his eyes went widely startled. Oh dear God, he was hearing voices now. He had well and truly lost his mind - or had he?

Reeling back a step, and then another, as thoughts and imagery from what he had imagined to be a dream brought about by illness overloaded his senses, he put one hand to the middle of his chest and struggled to contain the urge to cry out Catherine's name.

Had the wretched vision of losing her, and the agony of the years afterward, been only that - some sort of a hellish nightmare? With images of faces he didn't recognize, names, and a grave strewn with white roses battling for mastery over his powers of reason, Vincent shook his head adamantly back and forth, struggling to focus, to bring continuity and lucidity to his thoughts.

Catherine couldn't be here, she couldn't be! Yet, she was here. She was asleep in the bed directly behind him. But if that were true, what of the last four years? Was that a dream, or was this a dream?

'*Think... try to think!*' Closing his eyes, Vincent took a deep, slow breath and exhaled it a little at a time in an effort to remain calm. Before he did anything else, he had to weigh what he knew as fact and the certainties of life, and isolate those images from others assaulting not only his senses, but his very soul. One of these truths was plainly a phantom of his mind, a vision, but which was which?

He seemed to remember standing on the Whispering Galley bridge. Had he actually been there? 'Go back,' he urged his consciousness, '*Take me back to that time and place...*'

Yes, he could see the Bridge now; he could feel it beneath his feet. With his eyes still closed, he listened intently, trying to isolate each sound in turn. Voices? Ah yes, now he heard them clearly. Two voices, his own and a feminine one. There was a woman smiling at him, a woman who

looked like Catherine, was Catherine, yet... wasn't her. She was speaking to him of such strange things, unbelievable things; some of her words were terrifying, some of them brought feelings of profound consolation.

Opening his eyes, Vincent stared into the depths of his waking dream. Dear God, he could actually smell the scent of the woman's hair in his nostrils; he could see what she was wearing - a shimmering dress of white... no, not a dress, a gown. Was this utter madness or had he actually met this woman, and had her words been truth; wondrous, glorious truth?!

Fighting to remain in control of his emotions, he turned to stare down at Catherine. She was clad in a blue, striped cotton shirt, not a soiled hospital gown; her face seemed relaxed, not glistening with perspiration; her breathing was even and steady, not erratic.

Walking over to the bed and kneeling carefully on the edge of it, he rested his ear at Catherine's breast, listening intently. Yes, her heart was beating. Unable to trust even their Bond to guide him at this moment, Vincent reached out a trembling finger and stroked it gently against the curve of her mouth. Her lips were soft and warm, not cold and stiff. Hardly daring to breathe, he touched her forehead gently with shaking fingers. Her flesh was glowing, warm to the touch, not pale, not... lifeless. She was alive.

Alive.

Gasping softly as the truth of that seemed to burst upon his soul, Vincent opened his mind to Catherine's until he felt the constancy of their empathic link singing in his blood, his veins, surging through every part of him, nearly making him cry out with the miracle of it. Oh, how he had missed feeling her there, in that special place that was only hers - ever hers.

Thanks be to God, his Best Beloved wasn't laying in a wretched graveyard behind Saint Cleo's Church. She was safe, and she was here with him!

Struggling against a sudden urge to wake Catherine by gathering her into a fierce embrace, Vincent eased off of the bed again. Half fearing she would vanish if he looked away, he continued to stare at her for several minutes, watching joyfully as her breasts rose and fell with each sweet breath she took and expelled.

Blinking away tears, he urged silently, *'Yes, my Love, my precious Love, breathe... breathe.'*

As the face of an Angel clad in a diaphanous gown glided through his mind, Vincent tilted back his head to stare at the ceiling and brushed at the wetness coursing down his cheeks. *'Whoever brought this about, You have my eternal gratitude. If the conversation I remember actually took place, and somehow, I know in my heart that it did, the pledge I made will be kept.'*

As suffering yielded to renewed hope, and rapture eclipsed despair, somber turquoise eyes seemed to explode to life again, as though rekindled by a faith which had been set aside for an eternity of four unendurable years. *'Oh, my covenant with thee shall be kept, this I promise you.'*

Needing a moment to regain control of his emotions and come to terms with all that had happened in these last few moments, Vincent forced himself to step away from the bed. Glancing over at the window, he noted the melded sprinkling of blue, amber, and grey elongating over the sash, spilling light onto the carpeted bedroom floor.

Feeling a sudden need to inspect the city by twilight, he moved to stand before the window, eased aside the sheer curtains, and gazed out over a world for which he had always felt immense affection - until four years ago. Especially now, at this particular hour, he used to regard this bustling metropolis as truly a part of him. The brightly polished lights shining in the streets below had been his sun - the only one he'd ever had, or in truth, would ever have. The grimy city streets had been his school, his teacher, and a very hard taskmaster indeed, the lessons taught there harshly learned, and equally hard won.

Peering down, he watched as a score of taxicabs rushing north came up against hordes of late-night pedestrians moving in the opposite direction, smiling as a nearly deafening blare of horns sent the walkers scattering hither and yon, a few of the people throwing the cabbies some highly descriptive hand gestures as they leapt out of the way.

Knowing, of course, what the gestures meant from his life on the streets and back-alleys of this world, he arched an eyebrow ruefully, thinking, '*Welcome to New York*'.

Taking in sights and sounds he had been doing his best to ignore for what seemed like a lifetime, an eternity of four long, bitter years, Vincent sighed happily. How glowing the city looked now, how much more at peace than it had the last time he had studied it. Or perhaps it was he who had found a peace of sorts - however temporary?

Moving over to the bedroom door which led out onto the terrace, he opened it a crack and inhaled deeply of the crisp, evening air. Greedily taking another breath, and then another, he closed his eyes, savoring life as he hadn't for - had it truly been four years?

Suddenly, his highly-sensitive ears detected sounds coming from the apartment adjoining Catherine's. Tilting his head toward it, he listened for a moment, then closed his eyes, trembling as the soft-pitched wail of a baby's cries rekindled the unbearable remembrance of another child crying - his child.

Putting one hand over his eyes, Vincent swallowed hard, trying to contain the sobs burning in his throat.

"Jacob," he whispered, sick-at-heart. "Oh, my fearless little boy..." Trying to see beyond earthly boundaries, he stared into the Heavens. "I pray that you are well and strong now, and released from your suffering." Sending all of his love flowing aloft, he continued, "Where you are now, have you met a beautiful young girl by the name of Ellie? Oh, I hope so."

Smiling sadly, he implored, "Trust her, Jacob; she's one of us, truly she is, and she will take good care you - there." Swiping at his tears, he thought, 'Are you playing happily in the sunshine, now, my... son?'

With the salt of his tears stinging his eyes and trickling into his mouth, Vincent released a shuddering breath. '*We shall meet again, Jacob; I believe that with my whole heart and soul. The Angel promised me that you would always be a part of me - and you will be. Always. Until I can hold you in my arms again and read to you from the books you loved so much, know that I love you, and shall... miss you.*'

"Vincent?"

Gasping softly and opening his soul to her as Catherine spoke his name, Vincent fought to keep his heart from bursting in utter joy. Keeping his eyes riveted on the window, he tried to stay calm, knowing that if he turned around right now and came face to face with her, he would crush her to him, and truly frighten her with the intensity of his emotions. Wetting his lips with the tip of his tongue, he tried to speak, but no words would come. His Beloved had been returned to him. From this moment, this single shining moment, a new journey was beginning, for both of them.

Stepping up beside him, Catherine observed softly, "You're feeling better."

"Y...yes," he managed. Glancing sideways as she peered up at him, Vincent took a deep breath and met her eyes, his heart pounding against his rib-cage like a captive bird. Catherine. Catherine! For a time, for a few precious moments, the center of his universe had been restored to him. He could breathe again, **feel** again. He was alive again - if only for seven days. Then, thinking of what she had been forced to endure these last days, because of him, he bowed his head. "I'm... sorry."

Rubbing his back gently, she murmured, "Oh Vincent, there's no reason to be sorry."

Unable to trust his voice further at that moment, he forced himself to tear his eyes away from her and turned to stare out of the window. Focusing on the brightly lit towers directly ahead of him, Vincent studied them intently, fighting to calm his rapidly pounding heart and still the trembling in his hands. He wanted so desperately to hold her, to do so much more than hold her, but not yet. Not yet.

Eyeing the approach of night and supposing that Vincent had made up his mind to leave soon, Catherine furrowed her brow apprehensively. Thinking that to go Below right now, especially alone, was the one thing he mustn't do, she still couldn't bring herself to ask him to remain here, with her.

After what he had endured these last three days, how could she ask him to remain Above, in a world he didn't trust; a world that had only brought him heartache and despair - especially in these last weeks? His instincts were the ones that must guide him at this moment, this she knew, and however reluctantly, she would have to abide by his decision. Yet...

Glancing at Vincent and quickly away again, Catherine tried to hone in on his emotional state, then frowned. Why did he look so sad, and why couldn't she reach him? It felt as if he had intentionally closed a part of himself off, away from her. Unable to fathom his reasons for doing such a thing, she decided not to ask, knowing he would share what he was feeling if - or when, he chose to, and not before.

Emulating him, she turned and stared out of the window. Claspings her hands behind her, she scanned the reddish-gold tinge of approaching dusk that had begun to stretch out like diaphanous, searching fingers over the buildings and streets of her world.

Sighing, she observed quietly, "It will be dark soon."

"Yes. I had thought to..."

When his voice trailed off to silence, Catherine turned toward Vincent and put one hand to the side of his face. Tilting his head down until their eyes met and held fast, she studied him worriedly.

"Tell me?"

"I wish..." Capturing her hands gently into his, he hesitated, brought to the verge of tears by the pleasure of merely looking at her. Summoning all of his courage, Vincent cleared his throat. These words must be said. He only had seven days to fulfill his vow and this must be said.

Taking a deep breath, he released it slowly, giving Catherine all she had ever dreamt of with the words, "I thought it would be better if I went Below, but that may not be the wisest thing to do right now. I... I really don't want to leave you."

Waiting for him to continue, she prayed silently, 'Say it. I've waited so long. Oh please, my Love, say it now?'

"I realize it's an intrusion, and that you must be very tired from... all that has happened these last three days, but if you would permit it, would it be all right if I remain here with you, at least for a little while?" Before she could make any sort of response, Vincent swallowed hard and peered shyly down at her from beneath his bangs, adding softly, "Please?"

And with that entreaty, a wondrous dream that had been constrained by four years of despair began renewing itself. Unfurling slowly, like wisps of smoke from a freshly kindled flame, it seemed to encompass the lovers in delicate, imperceptible sparkles of light. A light born of love and hope; a light born of two hearts yearning to be one.

Hardly daring to believe she had heard him correctly, Catherine made no effort to conceal her happiness. "You can stay here with me for as long as you want to."

Breathing a sigh of relief, Vincent squeezed her hands gently for a moment before releasing them. Straightening to his full height, he looked deeply into her eyes. "I don't know what will happen now, but if I stay here with you, please be assured that I would never... harm you... in any way, Catherine. I truly believe that - at last."

"And I have always believed it." Smiling through her tears, she reached up to brush long tendrils of hair away from his slightly quivering, full lower lip. "You must promise me one thing. Whatever happens, whatever comes, you will share it with me."

Trembling all over as the memory of those words burst upon his mind, Vincent cupped her face in the palms of his hands. "There are so many things I wish to share with you. Oh my precious Rose, so many things..."

As glittering eyes seemed to stare into her very soul, he bent his head and kissed her very gently on the forehead, the sensation like a shower of rose petals dancing over her skin. After brushing his mouth lightly over her eyes, the tip of her nose, and her chin, he slowly tasted his way over to the curve of her right ear. Groaning hungrily, he touched the tip of his tongue to her skin and

lapped delicately, the taste and scent of her flesh intoxicating, drawing him; calling to him as nothing else in his life ever could - or would.

"Oh Catherine, I love you so..."

Murmuring her name breathlessly again and again, Vincent eased her cotton shirt to one side and nuzzled his mouth against the nape of her neck. Licking at the softness there, he inhaled the scent of her deeply into his nostrils, cherishing the moment unconditionally - absolutely. This was the woman he loved. This was his woman; only his... rightfully his.

At the same moment Catherine whimpered deep in her throat and reached up to encircle his neck with trembling arms, Vincent rested his lips on hers, whispering into her mouth, "Whatever happens, whatever comes, know that I love you. I shall always love you. Only you, Beloved..."

As a suddenly rising passion caught them both unaware, he tilted his head back and moaned deep in his throat. Wrapping one long arm completely around her waist, he moved the other to the back of Catherine's head. Weaving his fingers through her hair, he drew her forward into his arms with a gentle pressure of his fingers to the center of her spine, yet still kept the embrace relaxed enough for her to back away if she choose to. And if she did, he would surely die.

Going willingly into his arms, Catherine hardly dared to breathe as Vincent slowly bent his head to take her mouth in a gently probing kiss. The first thing she was aware of was his taste - like fire and honey on her tongue. Then, there was the reality of his lips on hers, the feel of them strangely wonderful, warm and soft; oh, so very soft. Convinced that he had always been innately sensual, to have that perception realized at last shook her to the depths of her innermost being.

Then, there was the wondrous reality of his teeth gliding along her skin, the feel of them hard and sharp against her mouth. 'Yes,' her heart cried out, *'Kiss me, Love, keep kissing me. Oh, you taste absolutely wonderful, just as I'd always dreamt you would!'*

Surrendering herself totally to his kiss, Catherine let the sensation of it fill her mind until there was nothing else but him and this moment. Vincent was everything that was important in her life; the only thing that mattered; the only one who meant anything.

Melting into his embrace, she knew that she'd never be able to get enough of him; never get close enough to the solid strength of him. This oh, so special man was a banquet only for her, one she would willingly, gladly, take her fill of for the rest of her days.

With a shudder that seemed to travel the length of his body, Vincent began to ease her out of the kiss with a loosening of his hands in her hair, soft murmurs of love, and the touch of his fingers to the side of her face. Towering over her, lips parted, still moist from her taste, he took a deep breath and exhaled it as slowly as he could. Enough... enough - for now. As desperately as he wanted her, he refused to rush this moment.

Taking a single step backward and tilting his head to the left, he smiled at the woman he loved, the look in his eyes endearingly shy even now. Capturing her hands gently into his, he kissed each finger softly, then put one arm around her shoulders.

"I... should get word to Father." Drawing her close, he sighed. "By now, he must be quite concerned."

"Yes." Snuggling into the warmth of his embrace, Catherine closed her eyes. Oh, to feel his arms around her like this, holding her close with no signs of hesitation, was all that she had ever hoped for. Loath to be parted from him, even for a few moments, she offered somewhat reluctantly, "I could go Below and tell Father... whatever you want me to tell him. Or, you could write him a note and I'll deliver it."

"I believe a note will suffice, at least for the time being." Nuzzling the crown of her head, Vincent smiled to himself, suggesting quietly, "But there is no need for you to deliver the message directly to Father, my Love. One of the sentries will be more than willing to present it to him, for you."

"All right." Understanding that he didn't want her to be forced into what could very well be a complicated and disquieting series of questions right now, or perhaps even a verbal confrontation with his rather 'tenacious' parent, Catherine breathed a sigh of relief, grateful that Vincent realized that facing him wasn't something she had been looking forward to. Taking him by the hand, she

led him into the dining room, suggesting, "Why don't you sit down and make yourself comfortable, and I'll get you some writing materials..."

"Thank you." Watching avidly as Catherine turned and started for the desk a few steps away, Vincent allowed his eyes to wander over her diminutive form, gazing longingly at the slender column of her neck, then lowered his focus to the small of her back, and lastly to observe the gently swaying motion of her hips moving from left to right as she walked.

Eyeing the loose cotton pants she was wearing, and envisioning what lay beneath them, he licked his lips as though already tasting the softness of her in his mouth and on his tongue. Clamping down hard on the inside of his jaw, he forced himself to look away. *'Stop now, before these... carnal images... drive you entirely beyond the limits of propriety.'* Then, unable to forbid himself, he glanced at Catherine once more through desperate, yearning eyes. *'God, oh God, how I need her.'*

Barely managing to contain his hunger, Vincent folded his hands tightly together and settled his buttocks firmly into the chair, knowing if he didn't, he would have been out of the seat and across the room in an instant, to reclaim her. Staring down at his nails, he tried to control the shudders sweeping through every part of his body, but they seemed to have a life of their own.

Pressing his knees together as a sudden, fierce erection battered at the confines of his jeans, he clamped down hard on his emotions, fighting to contain the hunger raging throughout every part of him, but this went beyond anything he had ever experienced before. Closing his eyes and breathing open-mouthed, he tried to regain his inner calm, knowing, as he had always known, that nothing would help him now until he was lost within Catherine - and found in that same moment.

Taking the folded piece of paper Vincent handed her, Catherine slipped it into the pocket of her jacket. Smiling at him, she promised, "I'll be back as soon as I can." After making sure she had her keys, she started for the door.

"Catherine."

"Yes?" Peering back at him, she waited.

"Perhaps it would be better to put the note into an envelope."

She frowned. "But, nobody in the Tunnels would ever read a note that wasn't addressed to them."

"One person... might," Vincent observed dryly.

Suddenly remembering Mouse's penchant for improving his reading abilities with whatever came his way, including things of a highly personal nature, she arched an eyebrow. "Oh dear, I forgot that Mouse might be on duty tonight."

Chuckling softly, the one she loved nodded in agreement.

Walking over to the desk, she began rifling through the top drawer. Taking out a small envelope, she placed the note inside, licked the flap, and then patted it for good measure. "There, now it's secure."

"Thank you." Getting to his feet, Vincent walked over to stand beside her. Gesturing to his rather rumpled clothing, he observed, "In my note, I asked Father if he would please have someone bring me a change of clothing as soon as it was feasible."

"If you like, I could bring them back myself?"

Putting one hand to the back of her head, he stared at her, the heat of his eyes seeming to penetrate through her jacket right to her bones. "That would cause us to be apart for... longer than I could bear." Then, motioning to his tangled hair, he asked, "Later on, may I use your shower?"

"Of course. There are plenty of towels in the linen closet on the left wall, as well as shampoo and conditioner."

Looking puzzled, Vincent echoed, "Conditioner?"

Momentarily forgetting that Vincent wasn't accustomed to many of the 'niceties' her world oftentimes took for granted, Catherine silently cursed her lack of tact, then explained, "It's a lotion used after shampooing; one that makes it easier to comb out tangles."

"Oh, I see. Thank..." Pausing for a moment, he gazed at her thoughtfully, then cupped her chin in a slightly trembling hand, observing, "It seems that I have been thanking you for so many things these last hours, my Catherine."

Making no reply for the moment, she beamed up at him, thinking, '*His Catherine? Oh, I like that. I like it very much indeed.*' Watching his reactions closely, she leaned slightly forward and began to stroke one finger down the center of Vincent's bristled nose. When he tensed, but gave no indication of pulling away, she moved her finger to his cleft upper lip and scratched gently, lovingly, along the thin line of cartilage at its center.

Lurching toward her, Vincent groaned, his eyes startled, rolling wildly out of control as he collided emotionally with a sexuality he hadn't known he possessed until this very moment; one that truly made him who and what he was. Tossing his hair back, away from his eyes, he shook his head fiercely from side to side. Dear God, what had Catherine just... done... to him?! Clenching his teeth and curling his nails inward to keep from grabbing her, he bent his head and pressed his mouth into her hand, wanting more of the touch - needing it with an urgency his innocence could not yet define.

As his breathing pattern seemed to accelerate, then turn ragged and throaty, Catherine slowly drew her finger away. Knowing that she had a very important errand to run, she took a deep breath and tried to calm her pounding heart, but when she returned, she would definitely remember where they had left off.

Resting her forehead against his, she murmured, "As for thanking me, there's really no need to, although I appreciate it." Holding him close, she went on, "You are the gentlest, most genuinely kind person, I have ever known in my life."

"Am I, my Catherine?"

"Oh yes. And the dearest."

Immensely pleased by the compliment, Vincent smiled, his lips curving upward until the tips of his gleaming fangs peeked out. Angling his head to the left in the endearingly shy manner she loved, he straightened proudly, the look on his face nearly stopping her heart.

"Truly?"

"Truly." Resting her hands on his shoulders, she stood on tip-toe and softly nibbled at one corner of his mouth. "I absolutely adore you, you know."

His expressive eyes disclosing everything Catherine yearned to know, Vincent's pupils grew large, then larger still, as he stared at her, intensifying to a smoky ebony that almost completely masked the radiant turquoise coronas.

"Oh, I love you, and how I need you..." Bending his head and imprisoning her around the waist in the same swift motion, he captured her mouth in a tender, yet soul-searing kiss, then, with a deep shudder, broke it so suddenly she fell forward against his chest.

"Forgive me? I..." Fastening his hands around Catherine's upper arms, Vincent tilted his head back. Panting, he struggled to contain the fever of excitement racing through his blood, his groin, through every part of his body. At last managing to regain a semblance of control, he moved to stand slightly away from her, stammering, "When you are this close, my... my thoughts overwhelm me, until I cannot breathe nor think of anything else, but.."

Reeling back a step and then another, putting more distance between them, he prayed silently for the strength to remain exactly where he was, for if he moved so much as an inch, he would lower her to the carpet and make love to her right here, and right now. When he managed to speak again, his voice was roughly impassioned.

"You must go now, Catherine." Exhaling fiercely, his eyes aglow with intent, Vincent curled his hands into tight fists, vowing hoarsely, "If you don't, the message in your pocket may not get Below at all... this night."

Muttering to himself and pacing nervously back and forth in the bedroom, Vincent ran one hand through his tangled hair and tried to contain his impatience.

"Why has she been gone so long? I should have delivered the note myself, instead of asking Catherine to do such a thing for me."

Then, as a sudden warmth filtered through the Bond, announcing her imminent return, he put one hand to his breast. At last. Taking his first unobstructed breath in nearly an hour, and instantly reminded of his rather odiferous scent, Vincent strode purposefully into the bathroom.

Locating the light-switch, he flicked it to the 'on' position, blinking when the unaccustomed glare of the overhead light assailed his highly-sensitive eyes, then, carefully ignoring a large, polished mirror hanging over the sink, he walked over to the small linen closet. He knew what he looked like, and needed no such reminders - especially right now.

Removing three towels from the stack of thick, pale yellow ones in the closet, along with a blue plastic bottle of shampoo labeled 'Pantene' (tm), and a second one that Catherine had defined as 'conditioner', he set them down on the rim of the tub. Eyeing the shower and noticing there wasn't anything in there to scrub with, he turned back to the closet a second time to retrieve what he hoped was a washcloth, and an oval, pink-wrapped bar of what appeared to be some kind of soap. Bringing the wrapper to his nostrils, he inhaled deeply. Hmm, this exquisite scent reminded him very much of Catherine.

Finding it intensely intimate to be sharing something of hers in this way, Vincent felt a rather curious sensation catch at the center of his groin and knew it instantly for what it was. It wasn't the first time such a feeling had rushed through him when he thought of Catherine, yet this was the first time he found the courage to acknowledge it, even to himself. It was true, unadorned passion.

Laying the bar of soap on the edge of the tub next to the shampoo, he peeled out of his grimy, perspiration-stained shirt, then his dungarees, and lastly his socks. Stretching widely and shaking his head from side to side, he breathed a sigh of consummate relief to be free of the soiled apparel. To him, feeling unclean was an affront to an instinctive sense of fastidiousness. Even as a child it had always been thus.

While his friends always seemed to enjoy splashing and cavorting in the piles of dank mud left after a heavy rain, he had always gone along with them, not wanting to be called different, or any of the wide variety of other childhood taunts that could really wound. Yet, secretly he had cringed in disgust at the feel of ooze and grime under his nails and in his hair.

Even now, after driving his body to the limit of endurance for as long as thirty or more hours on a needed repair with other members of a work crew, when they had helped each other stay on their collective feet and stumbled off to bed, he went to the Falls to wash. The need to feel clean was a nuisance at times, but he had discovered when still very young that he simply couldn't rest until he had scrubbed properly.

Looking down at the discarded pile of clothing at his feet, Vincent scowled, displeased that Catherine had actually seen him in such a state. Then, he flushed, his skin turning exceedingly warm at the memory of what had transpired between them. She truly hadn't seemed to mind his disheveled appearance. Why, she had even kissed him. Hugging the precious moment to his heart, he smiled and turned to pick up his shower things. And, he had certainly kissed her.

His mind caught up in thoughts of her and that oh, so special memory, he began to unwrap the soap, glanced up - and then jerked back with one hand to his chest, gasping, "Blessed Saints...!"

Not having noticed the full-length mirror hanging on the back of the bathroom door until this very moment, Vincent fought to stop trembling on discovering himself face-to-face with it. That... thing... had scared the very bejesus out of him:

Automatically turning away from the image of himself, he faltered, then, sighing roughly and straightening his shoulders, turned back to face the mirror, silently admonishing himself, *'Face this now and be done with it once and for all. This is what you are - what you have always **been**. This is what Catherine will see, what she will be... loving, and holding in her arms.'*

Considering what was reflected there, his eyes traveled the length of his face and body from the prominent curve of his cheekbones, to his rather flat, bristled nose, the stark-white, elongated fangs, the profusion of wild, auburn mane that fanned out over broad shoulders, his furred chest, and then lower to the powerfully built columns of his thighs.

Moving his gaze to his elongated, semi-erect phallus, and finally to the ample sac beneath which encompassed the essence of his masculinity, Vincent tensed his stomach, took a deep breath, and waited, preparing himself both mentally and emotionally for the familiar onslaught of anguish looking at himself always evoked. But this time, instead of the pain, he felt only a curious sense of acquiescence.

Taking a few steps backwards and resting his hands at his hips, he turned slowly and stared at his reflection from back to front. Coming full turn, he faced the mirror again and shook his head from side to side. **This** was what Catherine deemed 'beautiful'; this was what she... cherished? Unable to comprehend the miracle of why she loved him, some time ago he had come to terms with the fact that she did, and wanted him as he was. Some years earlier, she had indicated lovingly that his hands belonged to her. She also seemed to accept his teeth, his massive, furred body, and his moodiness, as easily as another person might accept that the sky was blue, or that a rose smelled sweet.

Grunting, "A rose by any other name..." Vincent contemplated his reflection a moment longer, then sighed and hunched his shoulders. Even though he couldn't fathom Catherine's total acceptance of him, he had no choice but to concede that she **did** love all of him. For the next six days, he would concentrate on that, and only on that. The joy of his existence was that such a beautiful and fragile creature could see him as he was, and all that he was - and wasn't, and actually want him in a physical way.

Taking immense comfort in that thought, he let the matter rest for the time-being. Staring down at the bar of soap he was still holding and reading the brand-name imprinted on it, he smiled. 'Caress'. (tm) Suddenly, a throaty chuckle he simply couldn't contain burst from his throat. It would seem that even the ordinary things of Catherine's world bore rather... suggestive titles.

Forcing himself to concentrate on the task at hand, Vincent began twisting the tub faucets this way and that until he was satisfied with the temperature of the water, then, gingerly stepping into the small shower stall, he pulled the door shut behind him. Sliding under the pulsing spray, he picked up the bar of soap and began lathering it into a pink-tinged froth. Starting at his face, he scrubbed hard, then slowly and methodically progressed to his arms, underneath to his armpits, his chest, down along his belly, his groin and thighs, and lastly to his back and buttocks.

Humming an unnamed concerto under his breath, Vincent flicked the bottle of shampoo open with one long fingernail and then thrust his head under the almost scalding water. Once his hair was thoroughly clean, and conditioned, and with his flesh tingling from an over-exuberant scrubbing, he allowed the steaming drops of water to spray down over his stiff shoulder muscles and aching limbs. Closing his eyes, he leaned forward on the shower wall, rested his forehead against the tiles and grunted softly. Ah yes, this felt extraordinary.

Although there was plenty of water at the springs below the Triple Falls, it smelled of sulfur, and its temperature was never quite hot enough to suit his needs. Ah, but Catherine's shower pleased him; it pleased him very much indeed. Slowly turning around, he let the spray pound at his lower back, thinking that to revel in such an extended, rejuvenating shower felt almost... decadent. The Falls were deeper than this, of course, but it didn't have the wonderful sensation of a spray-arm permeating ones skin.

Angling his head back, Vincent groaned in contentment as the water splashed over his face and chest. It felt so good, almost too good. Tilting his head down, he surrendered completely to the sensation of the spray hammering against his neck and exposed scalp. Wasn't it marvelous what hot water, soap, and a change of clothing...

Clothing? Clothing!

Utterly panicked, Vincent's eyes flew open. Oh dear Lord, what had he been thinking of, or indeed, had he been thinking at all? He had nothing clean to put on as yet, and it could be hours until suitable attire was brought up from Below! Growling contemptuously at both himself and this sorry state of affairs, he shook his head from side to side. Well, he would simply have to don the soiled things again, that was all.

Or he could try to swallow his embarrassment and explain this abysmal situation to Catherine as best he could, and pray she had something in her closet to fit him - perhaps one of her quilts? Other than remaining in this rather cramped bathroom for what might possibly be a very, very long time, those were his only choices.

"Oh, how vexing!" Displaying an unfamiliar, but totally human, loss of temper, Vincent smacked one hand up against the shower wall, snarling, "Blast!" Turning off the faucets, he settled back against the tiles and allowed gravity to bring him to rest on the wet floor. Muttering some rather unique epitaphs under his breath, he brought his knees up to his chest, folded his arms, and buried his face into them.

* * * * *

"Vincent?"

After making certain that the front door was locked securely, Catherine hastily stripped out of her jacket, her eyes scanning the living room, and then the dining area. Frowning, she walked over to the terrace door and peeked outside. Where was he? Praying he hadn't decided to leave, she looked for a note, feeling a surge of disappointment, then smiled as her eyes focused on the bedroom, and the light streaming out from under the bathroom door. Oh, there he was...

Walking over to the door, she knocked gently. When a sensation of extreme irritation mingled with distress glided through the Bond, she knocked again, harder than before, calling out, "Vincent, are you all right?"

"Yes, Catherine," came that rumbling voice, "I'm... fine."

Not honing in on the trace of frustration in his voice, she announced, "I met Mary Below, so I gave her the note. Is that okay?"

"Yes." That was followed by the sound of the linen closet door opening. "Thank you."

"You're more than welcome. Are you getting ready to take your shower?" When the only response she received was a muffled sigh, Catherine eyed the door. Something was wrong, but what?

Shifting the bundle she was holding onto her left hip, she went on, "I stopped at the laundry so that I could bring you something clean to wear, instead of you having to wait. This way, I've saved someone else a trip. I could only find one outfit, though."

When there was still no response, she frowned, wondering if he was upset with her about something? "The laundry was closer than your chamber, so it only took a few extra minutes. If you'd like to take a shower now, you know where the shampoo and other things are. There's a hairbrush in the cabinet, and I think there's a spare toothbrush in there..."

Before she could finish, the door opened a crack and one brilliant blue eye peered out at her. "I... have already taken a shower."

"You have? Oh." Fighting desperately to keep her eyes from wandering, she cast him a puzzled look. "But, what were you going to wear until your clean things arrived?"

"I was just asking myself that... same question," Vincent admitted, his tone utterly chagrined.

Unable to contain it, Catherine giggled. "Then it's just as well that I decided to pay a visit to the laundry-room, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is."

Leaning on the door-jamb, she folded her arms across her chest and cleared her throat, unable to resist asking, "Um... Vincent, how many towels are you wearing right now?"

"Five." With that, a long, muscled arm reached around the edge of the bath-room door.

Taking his hand, she brought it to her lips, kissed it, and then tumbled the bundle into it. "Here you go..." As the door closed again, she explained, "Neither Mary nor I could find your boots anyplace, so I guess you're stuck with the ones you wore up here three days ago."

Suddenly remembering something, she winced, then eyed the closet, whispering half aloud, "And then again, maybe not..."

The bathroom door opened again, but no wider than before. "Pardon?"

"Never mind. You finish up in there, and I'll get us something to eat, okay?"

"That would be very nice, but please don't go to any trouble on my account, Catherine."

"It's no trouble. Besides, I'm absolutely starving!"

Although she couldn't see his smile, she seemed to feel it right down to the soles of her feet. "So am I." With that, the door softly creaked shut again.

Grinning to herself and wondering if they were talking about the same type of 'starvation', Catherine walked over to the closet and threw open the doors. Stepping inside, she stretched up on tip-toe to reach the top shelf and began shuffling things back and forth, muttering to herself, "Oh, where on earth did I put them?! I know they're in here someplace..."

In the bathroom, Vincent had unwrapped the bundle and was staring down at the tan nightshirt and beige flannel pants in his left hand. Catherine hadn't brought one of his customary daytime outfits from Below as he had first assumed; this was nightwear. Considering that, his mouth crinkled up at the corners and an openly sensual look came into his eyes. *'Ah Beloved, I understand precisely what this outfit is supposed to convey to me, as you knew I would, and I wholeheartedly agree.'*

Running one hand through his damp hair, Vincent stepped into the living-room to find a fire crackling away in the fireplace, and a dozen or so couch pillows piled on the floor a safe distance from its heat. Noting that Catherine had switched off most of the lights and lit many various-sized candles, he smiled gratefully and padded into the small kitchenette.

"My... Dear, is there anything that I can do to help?"

"No thanks, everything's all set." Focusing on what she was doing, Catherine tried not to grin. *'My Dear. Now, didn't that sound splendid? Didn't it sound absolutely perfect?'* Turning around, she smiled and motioned to a tiny, oak kitchen table and chairs.

"Please sit down? I haven't done any shopping for a while, so I hope canned vegetable soup, and grilled cheese and tomato sandwiches will do?"

"Yes, that's fine, thank you."

Pulling Catherine's chair out for her as a gentleman would, and waiting until she settled into it, Vincent reached for the one opposite her. After eyeing the fragile-looking cane seat uncertainly, he sat down, praying that his size wouldn't split the thin slats. When the chair emitted a few high-pitched squeaks of protest, he stiffened and held his breath, ready to leap to his feet, but 'everything' seemed to be holding together satisfactorily, at least for the moment.

Eyeing Vincent from beneath her bangs, Catherine picked up a large spoon and began to eat her soup, cursing inwardly as some of it dribbled onto her chin. *'Oh sure,'* she silently admonished herself, *'now's a great time to let your nerves get the best of you.'*

Suddenly, she wanted to pinch herself to make certain that all this wasn't just a dream. Vincent was actually in her home; he was really and truly sitting in her kitchen just like it was an ordinary, everyday occurrence! A few more drops of soup dribbled from her spoon. Furtively swiping at her chin, she thought, *'Why don't you just pick the bowl up and drink it that way, Miss Sloppy Britches?'*

Picking up his napkin, Vincent seemed to take no notice of her rather appalling table manners.

Unable to keep her eyes off of him, and taking note of the fact that he hadn't bothered to tuck in his shirt, Catherine glanced at the taut movements of his upper arm and shoulder muscles beneath the thin material, as well as the mass of auburn chest hair peeking out at her from over the top of the hastily tied shirt-laces.

As Vincent got to his feet and walked over to the counter to retrieve the bread she had forgotten to bring to the table, her eyes drifted down over the plump bulge starting inches below his navel that seemed to end just at the curve of his left thigh. *Oh... God.*

When her eyes would focus again, she scanned the tumble of damp ringlets clinging to the sides of his head, with more of them cascading over wide shoulders halfway down his back, wondering how he managed to look so innocent, yet so utterly sexy, all at the same time? As far as she was concerned, everything about Vincent was sensual; from the way he walked and talked, to the movements of his hands, to the way his brow furrowed when he was pondering a serious issue. There was such an attitude of dignity and maturity about him, yet right now he looked as young and innocent as a freshly-scrubbed little boy. Oh, she wanted to just eat him up. Focusing on his body, Catherine flushed to the roots of her hair. Now there was a thought.

Forcing herself to look away and settling back in her chair, she shivered as a sudden onslaught of goose-flesh peppered her skin. Why wouldn't this dear soul believe that he was incredibly beautiful? Someday he'd believe that. If it took her the rest of her life to prove it to him, he would believe it.

Trying to catch her breath and not sound like a blithering idiot, she gestured to the chair as Vincent eased down into it. "T... those are stronger than they look, so please don't worry about damaging them."

Nodding uncertainly, Vincent wriggled this way and that for a moment. Deciding that she wasn't trying to spare his feelings, he relaxed - a little. In the past three days, he had defaced too many of Catherine's possessions as it was. He was not about to damage **one more thing**. Tucking a linen napkin under his chin, he took a piece of bread from the basket and automatically started breaking the crusts off and plopping them into his soup. Picking up his spoon, he started to bend forward, then, feeling Catherine's eyes on him, he glanced up.

"Is anything wrong?"

"No... nothing." Picking up her napkin, she tucked it into the front of her shirt, then took a piece of bread and began to crumble it into her soup.

Realizing that he had just committed a rather disgraceful social faux pas, Vincent stared down at the table.

"Forgive me." His fingers played with the napkin at his neck. "For some reason, my hands are not as steady as they should be right now, and I don't have another clean outfit."

"You don't have to explain..."

"Yes, I do," he insisted, motioning to the remnants of his piece of bread. "Even as a child, I always enjoyed bread in my soup instead of with it, as is proper. I simply forgot... where I am."

Feeling his embarrassment wash over her, Catherine's heart went out to him. Hoping to make him feel more at ease, she shrugged. "Well, proper or not, I always do the same thing, at least when

I'm in my own home. Soup can be awfully messy, and it's just not the same without bread in it, is it?"

"No, it isn't," he agreed, giving her a look so filled with grateful adoration, she blushed furiously.

Staring down at the bowl in front of her, Catherine stammered, "V... Vincent, this is your home too, for as long as you want it to be, and you can do whatever you like here." Looking up, she met his eyes resolutely. "The only thing I've ever wanted, is for you be completely at ease with me."

Reaching across the table, he squeezed her hand gently. "Catherine Chandler, you are a quite extraordinary woman."

Knowing that he would be able to feel the joy curling through her heart, she grinned at him. "Of course I am. After all, an extraordinary man loves me."

When he glanced away, Catherine knew that she had unintentionally made him ill-at-ease. Oh...damn. Sighing, she reached for her sandwich, hesitated, then leapt to her feet and headed toward the refrigerator, exclaiming, "I nearly forgot the pickles!"

Pickles? Vincent eyed her dubiously. With cheese sandwiches and soup? That sounded like a rather bizarre combination. He jerked back as a large, dripping, item in question, was suddenly waved under his nose.

"Here, try it, it's good."

Not wanting to appear rude, he bit down tentatively. Immediately, his eyes began to water, his nose began to twitch, and then his jaws seemed to cave in as he gasped, "I wasn't expecting it to be quite so sour, and so... garlicky!"

"'Clausen's Garlic Dill' (tm) are the best kind." Crunching on the rest of the huge pickle, Catherine plunked back into her chair, then noticed the look on his face. "Don't you like garlic pickles?"

Blinking rapidly and trying to swallow, he replied hoarsely, "No, I don't think so."

"Have you ever had one before?"

"No, never."

"Oh." She grimaced. "Sorry. Would you like a glass of milk?"

"No, thank you, but I would like a glass of cold water. A very large one?"

"Certainly."

"Catherine, would it be all right if I use some of the mouthwash I saw in the bathroom earlier?"

"Help yourself."

"Excuse me for a moment?"

"Uh huh." Absolutely mortified, she eyed Vincent as he left the room.

Getting to her feet and walking over to the refrigerator, Catherine yanked open the freezer door, took out a tray of ice and smacked it down to the edge of the sink, growling under her breath, "Brilliant move, lady. Don't bother **asking** the poor man if he likes something, just shove it down his throat."

Sitting across from Vincent twenty minutes later, Catherine looked up to find him rolling and unrolling the edge of his dinner napkin. Feeling a distinct awkwardness settling between them, and recognizing it for what it was, she tried to think of what to do. Before initial physical intimacy she knew that moments of tension were quite common, but this was driving her absolutely crazy.

Hoping to ease the situation by giving Vincent a few moments to himself, she got to her feet and reached for the soup bowls and silverware, asking, "Are you satisfied?" Wincing to herself at the unintentional double entendre, she made it even worse by adding, "Or are you still hungry?"

Rolling her eyes toward the ceiling, Catherine clamped down on her bottom lip, thinking, '*Dammit, is your foot going to be a permanent part of your mouth?!*'

"No, I'm not... hungry." Feeling her chagrin roil through their connection, Vincent kept his eyes focused on the napkin, barely managing to check a throaty laugh. It would appear that at the moment his Beloved was every bit as nervous as he was - if not more so.

"Well, I think I'll do the dishes then, and take a quick shower."

Getting to his feet and coming around the end of the table, he rested one hand on her shoulder.

"As you prepared our meal, Catherine, it seems only fair that I do the dishes."

"But..."

Determined blue eyes locked to hers. "That way, the time we are separated will be reduced by half."

How could she find fault with that?

Dropping a fleeting kiss to the side of his face, she handed him the bowls and silverware. "Deal." Not wanting to take the time to explain the intricacies of her dishwasher right now, Catherine gestured to the cabinet under the sink.

"The soap and things are in there. I won't be long..."

When the bathroom door finally opened, Vincent stopped tapping his fingers impatiently on the living room carpet. Sinking back among the pile of cushions in front of the fire, he folded his hands over his stomach and sighed, trying to relax, just as Catherine called out,

"When I'm done in here, would you like some cookies and a mug of hot chocolate?"

Putting aside, for the moment, other hungers that were tormenting him to the brink of lunacy, he replied, "That would be very nice."

"What do you like in it?" Clad in pale apricot, silk pajamas and shaking her hair dry with the tips of her fingers, Catherine padded out of the bedroom on bare feet. "Would you like marshmallow, cream, or do you prefer it plain?" When he didn't answer, she cast him a puzzled look. "Are you all right?"

His tone of voice was even huskier than usual, and slightly self-mocking. "No, not...really."

Walking over to stand in front of him, Catherine lifted long pieces of his hair into her fingers and allowed them to glide slowly through her hand back to his shoulders. "Can you tell me?"

Ravenous eyes inspected her from the top of her head right down to the delicate shade of her polished toenails. Having no words for the feelings coursing through him, Vincent shook his head and glanced down at his hands, taking a deep breath as a kiss of womanly understanding descended to the top of his head.

"Your silence is the finest compliment a man can pay a woman, my Love."

Ten minutes later, Vincent reached up to take the tray Catherine had just carried into the living room. "This looks delicious," he observed, eyeing the hot chocolate heaped with swirls of marshmallow.

"I was going to stick pickles in the hot chocolate for flavor, but there wasn't enough room in the mugs," she retorted, offering him a plate of cookies.

"Excuse me?"

Settling back on the pillows, she eyed him. "That was a joke, Vincent."

"Oh." He rolled his eyes toward the ceiling. "Thank Heaven."

"Did the mouthwash help?"

"Immensely," he lisped, running his tongue over his teeth.

"I'm glad." Curling into the warmth of his body, Catherine sighed. "It's nice being here like this."

"It's much more than nice." Easing one arm around her shoulders, Vincent pulled her even closer. "It's a miracle." Kissing the top of her head, he thought, '*More of a miracle than you shall ever know.*'

"Are you warm enough?"

"Hm." Glancing down at the thick, brown and grey knitted slippers on his feet, he wriggled his toes back and forth. "I appreciate the early birthday gift. My new slippers fit well, and they are exceedingly comfortable."

Catherine beamed at him.

"And you made these yourself?"

"Uh huh."

"You have a keen eye for measurements. My feet are rather long, as well as extremely wide. How did you manage to get the size of the slippers exactly right?" When she didn't answer, he bent forward to peek up under her bangs. "Catherine?"

Chewing at her lower lip, she examined the buttons on the front of her silk pajamas at great length.

"My Dear, what's wrong?"

"The... um... reason Mary and I couldn't find your other pair of boots is because I borrowed them to get the measurements for your slippers, and decided to have them resoled for you as a surprise." Burying her face into the curve of his arm, she groaned, "They're still at the cobblers!"

"Oh, I see. I wondered where they were."

"I'm sorry."

The gentle squeeze he gave her proclaimed that all was forgiven.

Moments later, Vincent looked up just as Catherine tilted her head back to catch the last drips of hot chocolate on the back of her tongue. Eyeing her, he smiled, but said nothing.

"What?" Taking note of the upward curve of his lips and the amused twinkle in his eyes, Catherine made a face. "I have a marshmallow mustache, don't I?"

Unable to tear his eyes away from her mouth, he merely nodded.

"That usually happens when I have hot chocolate and marshmallow. Honestly, sometimes that stuff is like glue." She searched for the elusive, sticky mess with the tip of her tongue. "Where is it?"

One claw-tipped nail reached out to lightly touch the edge of her top lip. "Here," came a voice thick with emotion. Then, the finger moved gently along her lower one. "...and here."

Looking up at him, she whispered, "I forgot the napkins." Picking up the tray, he started to rise. "I'll get them."

"Vincent..." Catching him by the hand and urging him back to the cushions, Catherine knelt in front of him. Tilting her chin up, she tried to keep her voice steady. "There's more than one way to remove stickiness; a much more enjoyable way."

The tray Vincent was holding went clattering down to the carpet. "Oh, forgive me for being so... inept... in such matters. I promise you, Catherine, you shall never have to ask again." Cupping her face gently in the palms of his hands, he leaned forward and began nibbling at her lips, lightly at first, and then more and more demandingly.

Moaning softly and pulling her firmly onto his lap, straddling him, he put one hand to the nape of Catherine's neck, holding her tightly as the barely-contained depth of his passion erupted full force. This time, he knew neither of them would be satisfied with kisses, or with whispers of endearment. They needed more, they deserved **more**.

Fueling his hunger, desire seemed to explode in all directions at once. Pounding through his veins, his groin, through every fiber and bone in his body, his blood seemed to be pulling at him in a probing, single-minded quest. Emotions he had done battle with for most of his adult life, especially since the night he had found this woman, tore at him relentlessly, and now, here with her, he couldn't struggle against those feelings anymore - and didn't want to.

When Catherine encircled his neck and wove her fingers tightly into his hair, Vincent moaned. Pulling back, he angled his mouth over hers, then bent forward again, trying desperately to go deeper, wanting more of her taste - wanting more of her. When she explored the contours of his mouth with the tip of her tongue, then edged his lips slightly apart, his tongue was there to meet hers and claim it almost greedily, beginning a dance as old as time itself.

Swiftly moving his left hand downward to cup her buttocks, Vincent crushed the woman he hungered for to his breast. Succumbing to a need that went beyond conscious thought, and gentility, he urgently sucked her sweet-tasting flesh into his mouth, yet even this didn't satisfy the appetites roiling through him like flames ravaging his will. Gladly, joyously lost in the sensation of Catherine's body pressed to his, the taste of her on his tongue, and the scent of her in his nostrils, his mind screamed, *'Go deeper. Absorb her until you are one body, one soul... one hunger.'*

Locked in Vincent's tight embrace, Catherine's body seemed to answer the call of his. The reality of at last being united to him in this way glided through her senses, becoming a truth that once experienced, kept unfurling and growing, her force of will like a moth spiraling ever upward until it was finally consumed by the sheer masculinity of him.

'Yes,' her heart sang, *'this sumptuous being was made to give love - and to have it returned to him full measure.'*

Trying not to go too fast and quite possibly unnerve him, Catherine fought to restrict the scope of emotions flooding through her and found that it was impossible. Vincent's mouth, the taste of him, the wondrous scent of his utter masculinity, and the feel of his body, was a craving she knew would never be fully satiated. Although the fingers clasping her were trembling, the strength there, in those clawed, beautiful hands, called to an unknown wildness in her. Plundering her mastery over her own body, the sensation left her silently screaming for more.

And Vincent answered that call with every fiber of his being, with every part of himself so long withheld from her. Opening his soul to Catherine's, he took her into its secret, innermost depths, allowing her to know him as no other woman ever would - or could. With a faith and trust that responded only to hers, was warmed by the radiance of hers, he flung himself heart, body, and soul into the refuge of Catherine's love, knowing that she would never pull from him, be frightened of him, or deny him a physical completeness he had been denying himself for so very long. Too long.

Desperately needing to take a breath, the lovers parted long enough to stare into each other's eyes. Smiling as one heart, one soul, soft hands reached out to gently stroke furred skin, and calloused fingers reached out to touch lightly at the delicate warm flesh of a trembling, full lower lip.

Bringing her hand to his mouth, Vincent kissed the palm and then slowly moved it to rest against his left breast. Unable to find the words to convey his need, he pressed her hand down gently against his shirt, allowing the gesture to say all of the things he had no way of expressing aloud right now.

Cupping his fingers gently around her thigh and battling to subdue his harsh breathing, Vincent instinctively jerked back as her fingers went to the front of his shirt. When she began to undo the first lacing, he placed a trembling hand over hers.

"I never want to disappoint you, nor cause you to regret..." Exhaling sharply, he continued, "...the threshold we are about to cross."

Sitting back on her heels, Catherine tilted her head to one side and studied him. "Are we truly part of each other, forever?"

The look there, in those glittering, impassioned eyes, was the only answer she needed.

"Then, how could I ever regret loving you?" Cupping his face in her hands, she murmured, "Long ago, you told me to follow my heart."

"Yes," he managed, his eyes darkening as her emotions, her need of him, glided through their connection, "I remember."

"That's what I'm doing, Love, and my heart will always lead me to you. Always." Placing her hand to his chest, she pressed in lightly. "The question now is, have you learned to follow yours?"

'Follow your heart, Vincent, for that is where your courage lives...'

Thinking of the Whispering Gallery, and those words being said to him by what he had come to believe was truly one of Heaven's messengers, two clawed, trembling hands tightened around Catherine's slender waist.

"I... must."

Leaning forward on his chest, Catherine dipped her tongue into the pulsing division of Vincent's notched upper lip. Having learned that the touch aroused him as no other, she nibbled gently on the sensitive pads, then continued to stir his senses by slowly making the journey from there to his left ear.

After blowing her breath on the reddened lobe, she brushed her mouth over it, pleading, "Search your heart? Can't you feel it? You and I belong together; we belong to each other. When two people pledge themselves in such a way, then they make love. And with love, there is no regret - there is only love."

Putting one hand to the nape of her neck, Vincent pulled back to watch her through hungry eyes, the look there passionate, yet still so heart-wrenchingly vulnerable.

"Help me? Although I have read a great many books on the subject of... physical union, they weren't very enlightening."

Placing large, calloused hands on Catherine's upper arms, he urged her to lay back among the pillows. Bringing one long leg up over her body, pinning her beneath a shaking, heavily muscled thigh, the gesture trusting, yet so utterly sensuous, he rested his mouth at the curve of her ear, imploring huskily, "Please, guide me onto this path lovers trod? Show me what must be learned...now?"

"Yes, Love." Weaving her fingers into Vincent's tangled mane, Catherine drew him closer. "My shy, sweet Love..."

For many moments, few words were spoken, for none were needed, or necessary.

Trusting her to accept what God had wrought in creating him, for the first time in his life Vincent felt the delicate strokes of a woman's fingers lovingly caressing his body. Reveling in a touch he had long hungered for, as a starving man would crave sustenance, he allowed the Bond he and Catherine shared to fully govern his responses. As her fingers moved over him, bringing an end to the anguished years he had thought of himself as too 'different', too unsightly, to be loved by a woman, he sighed and closed his eyes, yielding to the sensation of pure touch.

Returning her caresses hesitantly at first, and then with more and more boldness, he whimpered deep in the back of his throat, his hips arching wildly as Catherine's hand trailed down between his thighs. Passing over the taut muscles there, she lovingly explored each long-concealed, empty part of him, imprisoning his body - and freeing his soul forever.

"Ah yes," he groaned urgently, "Keep touching me."

Wanting Vincent to voice all of his needs aloud, and to hear himself saying the words, Catherine stayed her hand just above the area she knew he most wanted her to touch, crooning, "Where, Love? Where do you want me to touch you?"

Reaching out, Vincent tried to show her by taking her hand and positioning it where he would have it, but she curled her fingers into the firm muscles of his belly and clung fast. Meeting his eyes, she smiled encouragingly.

"Say the words?"

Struggling not to look away, he gulped, "I need your hand... lower."

For what seemed like an eternity, Catherine kept her hand where it was, then agonizingly slowly stroked it along his length, murmuring, "Here?"

Crying her name aloud as he surrendered to pleasure, to Vincent's mind each caress, each press of her hand to his aching, ravenous flesh; each soft kiss she bestowed to his face, his eyes, his mouth, and then lower to his chest, mirrored the ebb and swell of a storm-tossed sea, the currents between them evolving into a turbulence of uncontrollable passion he had never thought attainable - not for him.

When Catherine's searching fingers went to the waist-band of his pants and slipped under it to move down his belly and scratch gently along the pulsing vein at the underside of his penis, he moaned with pleasure and eagerly lifted his hips.

"Yes..."

Kicking free of the tangled pants, Vincent settled back on the carpet and curved his left arm over his eyes, hardly daring to breathe as he awaited what would come next. Desperate to feel her hands and mouth on him everywhere, an unknown part of him wanted to be absorbed by her, to become a part of Catherine in ways he couldn't comprehend; to be held safe and at peace in the warmth of her arms, and to lose himself completely in the enticing fragrance of her body.

Holding Vincent and Catherine in a protective embrace, the Bond intensified even more. As a fire consuming everything and anything that would keep it from its natural progression, emotions long withheld and long denied between the lovers blazed forth. Enticing them onward, beyond all inhibitions in a limitless rush of physical arousal, their bodies prepared them for an exquisite journey only they would - or could, ever make.

Once again, Catherine tried to steady her emotions and found it impossible. Indeed, was there a woman on earth who could have looked into those eyes, into that face, and not want to touch him - and do so much more than merely touch him?

Leaning back against his thighs, she finished undoing the lacings of his shirt, then lifted it over his head and let it drift down to the carpet. Moving closer, she licked daintily at the warm flesh of first one quivering pectoral muscle and then the other. Nuzzling into the musky sweetness of his skin, her mouth found the puckered button of one, tiny bronzed pap. Running her tongue along the edge of it, she peeked up just as Vincent arched upward and unleashed a rumbling whimper.

Curling his nails into the carpet beneath him, he moaned, "Oh Catherine... Catherine, I have yearned for the touch of your hands and mouth on my body for so many endless, empty years."

Meeting her eyes with a look of clearly defined eagerness, Vincent brought his left hand forward and rested it on the top button of her shirt, the motion one of gentle entreaty. When she rolled her shoulders forward in invitation, he swallowed hard and fought to steady his hand, silently admonishing himself, *'Be careful. Don't mar her flesh with your nails.'*

Then another voice, one he had been halfway expecting - and dreading, echoed silently, *'Yes, please be careful? We mustn't ever hurt this woman. We must be gentle with her, and loving, always, as she has always been with us.'* Vincent blinked, startled by a rumbling chuckle. *'Didn't you believe me when I told you that I love her, too, and cherish her every bit as much as you do? Well, perhaps you believe me now.'*

'Perhaps,' he concurred. With that reluctant acknowledgment, Vincent continued his loving chore. Once the tiny pearl buttons of Catherine's shirt were undone, he gently eased the material aside and lowered his gaze to inspect the gifts being offered to him, and only to him. Marveling at her cream-colored flesh and the softly rounded curves of her breasts, he shuddered expectantly. Yes, now he believed. At this moment, he could believe - just about anything. Slowly lifting his head, he observed her thoughtfully and pursed his lips, allowing her emotions to direct the movements of his hand.

When his thumb swept against the firm span of a swollen nipple, Catherine arched her back and murmured his name, the word a gentle caress to his ravenous, wildly pounding heart. Placing one hand to the back of his head, she drew him down, needing his mouth there. After reaching out to

stroke him, from the taut skin of his belly, upward to the furred expanse of his straining chest, she cupped her left breast in the palm of her hand, encircled the aching nipple with the tip of her finger, and lifted it to his mouth.

"Please..."

Making a great effort not to lurch forward by stiffening the muscles of his upper body, Vincent forced himself to lap delicately at the warm flesh, the taste of her scattering his senses, the skin beneath his tongue softer than the newest and most delicate of spring roses. Nuzzling first one nipple, and then tasting and licking his way across the delicate span in-between to the other, he yielded to a need primal in nature, yet totally human, and completely male. For a moment, a heartbeat, something called to him from the past, yet not his past; an urge that was wildly erotic, sexual, and known, yet never experienced - never known.

Lapping more and more forcefully, he delighted in the taste of Catherine in his mouth, and the feel of her soft flesh cupped in the palm of his hand. And when his own flesh hardened in response to the gentle probing of her knee at the center of his groin, Vincent awarded her an enraptured, full-throated growl.

With a last, covetous stroke of his tongue to the tips of her breasts, he sat back on his heels to study what he had accomplished. Gazing at the taut peaks which seemed to be pleading silently for further attention, a rumble of pure joy erupted from Vincent's chest. Inhaling and leaning toward Catherine, he agonizingly slowly blew the breath out across her heated flesh, his masculinity gloriously reaffirmed by her startled gasp of pleasure.

When she gasped a second time, Vincent quickly bent his head and captured the released breath in his mouth, kissing her fast, hard, and deep until they were both left trembling. Rejoicing in her response to him, his very soul encompassed by a deep sense of pride, he thought, *'Catherine's heart has been telling me the truth, and for so many years, I refused to listen. She exults in my touch as much as I do in hers. Well, I'm listening now, and what I hear truly bedazzles me. Oh, how I love her! This woman was meant only for me...created only for me, and I for her.'*

Seeking to alleviate the discomfort in his groin area, one brought about by the rigidity of his male organ pressing into the softness of Catherine's thigh, he shuddered and reluctantly broke the kiss. Sitting up and bringing her to rest in the crook of his arm, Vincent lay his right cheek against the top of her head. Listening to her reactions through their connection, he carefully stroked the tip of his nail along the curve of her left ear, the gesture reminiscent of one he remembered doing before under the bandstand in Central Park - or had that time been only a dream?

He seemed to remember Catherine smiling that night and closing her eyes. This time, she smiled and moved closer, murmuring, "There are no words to tell you how much your touch pleases me, and arouses me."

"Feeling what we do for each other, words aren't necessary; they never have been." Rising to his knees and moving to kneel in front of her, the expression in Vincent's eyes seemed to claim her very soul as a part of his - as belonging only to him; with him. "Yet, there are things that must be said now, if only because you deserve to hear them spoken aloud."

Tracing her bottom lip with the pad of his thumb, and with his heart thudding in cadence with hers, he curved his fingers to the center of Catherine's spine and gently drew her forward in his embrace.

"I love you, and..." As his courage deserted him, he buried his face into the nape of her neck, his lips moist and hot, his voice a whisper of velvet on her skin. "...want you so desperately, I think to truly perish of the need."

"Oh, I know that feeling, believe me..." After kissing the side of his face, Catherine emulated him by rising to her knees. "Vincent, look at me?" As his head came up and yearning eyes met hers, she smiled and took him by the hand. Encouraging him by a gentle squeeze to his fingers, she helped him slide the bottoms of her pajamas down her legs and eased out of them.

Moving her fingers slowly along the heavy sac of Vincent's scrotum and then into the wealth of springy curls embracing his lengthening penis, Catherine smiled as the flesh there hardened, the pulsing head darkening with blood as he pushed into her hand.

"Don't stop," he beseeched breathlessly. Digging his heels into the living room carpet, he arched upward and threaded his fingers into her hair. "Please, not... yet?"

Bending her head, Catherine licked and tasted her way from the warm curve of Vincent's neck, down over his straining chest, lower to his stomach, and then dipped her tongue into the furred jewel of his belly button. Fondling and stroking the curved stalk of his erection, she cherished the lustful grunts of uninhibited pleasure that seemed to explode from his throat, aware that he was making no real effort to contain them. Watching her own hands move over him, she eyed the sexual tightness of his posture as every muscle and corded sinew of his body, from his shoulders to the middle of his thighs, seemed to contort with a steel-like rigidity.

Glancing up and noting his tightly closed eyes, and the tense line of his jaw muscles, she realized that Vincent was making a great effort to keep as still as he possibly could. Sadly, she wondered if his innocence led him to think that this was expected of him? Showing him that it was all right to move by taking his hand and clasping it to her right hip, she leaned into him, inviting his touch, and quickly discovered that he was intent on doing much more than merely caressing her.

"Oh yes, let me... please let me..." Curling one hand over her hip and clasping her around the bottom with the other one, Vincent brought her down to the heat of his mouth. Beginning to suckle at her breast with snuffling, thirsty murmurs of pleasure, he closed his eyes, forcing himself to rely on instinct alone, then, releasing her buttocks with a loving squeeze, he let his fingers stray slowly down between her legs.

Sliding one finger barely into the moist cleft there, Vincent deepened the touch and swallowed a growl, loving this beyond conscious thought... absolutely... utterly. With the essence of her femininity bombarding his senses, his phallus filled with surging blood. Distending and hardening to the verge of pain, it begged for release. Every nerve, every part of his skin on fire for her, his mind screamed, *'Oh God, could such softness, such gifts, be real, and were they truly being offered to him?'*

Then, another voice from within cried out, *'Yes, this woman is a gift to you; to us. Don't stop. Caress her as you've always dreamt of caressing her. Make her yours completely. Make her ours.'*

'No,' Vincent argued silently, *'I will not surrender to your lust.'*

'My lust? What's pulsing between your legs isn't only mine, it's a part of both of us,' the voice insisted. *'In denying what I want... what you want, you deny Catherine's needs as well. If you refuse to accept what her body is telling you, then listen to her emotions - listen to her heart. She wants your hands all over her. Don't you understand? She needs to be touched as much as you do!'*

Utterly engulfed by the limitless scope of his desire, and by the rigidity of the hot flesh pounding between his thighs, Vincent curled his nails into the palms of his hands and eased away from Catherine. Unsure of how to proceed - or exactly how to ask what he would have of her, he focused wild, hungered eyes to the curve of her thighs, his intent explicit.

"Before... this... goes any further, I must know what the limits are, regarding... touch."

"Only those you place on yourself," Catherine answered quietly. "Where do you want to touch me?" When he didn't respond, she took his left hand and pressed it to the honey-gold curls just below her belly. "Here?" Gently prying his clenched fist open, she eased his trembling forefinger barely inside of her, moaning, "And here?"

"Yes... there. Oh Catherine, I need this so much. So much...."

Unleashing a moan that was as filled with rapture as expectation, Vincent parted the core of her womanliness with the pads of his fingers. Turning his nails to the underside to keep them from raking her delicate skin, he crossed his middle and left fore-finger over each other and slid them carefully... easily... inside of her.

Made dizzy by his touch, and with her womb clutching and releasing in spasms around the stout length of his questing finger, Catherine brought her legs up and then bent them to the sides, wanting more. God, oh God, how much rapture could one person take!

"Ah, the feel of you robs me of all patience!"

Curling his finger more and more confidently into her heat, tears came into Vincent's eyes at the sense of privilege this afforded him. Nuzzling his way up her body, he edged forward to draw her breast into his mouth. Suckling deeply, each pull of his lips in tune with the pressure of his fingers between her legs, he groaned and traced the tip of his raspy tongue around the puckered nipple.

Arching her back as Vincent began tugging more and more lustily on her breast, Catherine tried to get even closer to the heat of his mouth, groaning, "Yes, like that... like that. Don't be afraid to touch me as much as you want, and where you want."

Surprised by joy as a flow of wetness seeped down over the finger embedded within her, Vincent tensed, then he went totally limp, caught off guard as a rush of pure carnality pounded through him. Ah, to be able to touch her in this way; to have her in this way. And, when Catherine's searching fingers gently closed around his aching flesh to stroke up and down, suddenly the touch wasn't enough - not nearly enough.

Her caress seemed to turn his blood to liquid flame, and at the same moment caused it to surge outward, nourishing his penis with a pulsating heat. Sliding his body up along hers, Vincent exalted in the reality of his tensed, fur-covered belly rubbing against the softness of Catherine's, the feel one of velvet on silk. And still, it wasn't enough.

Continuing the tender stroking, she put her mouth to the curve of his ear, breathing, "Does my touch give you pleasure?"

"So much, that I am starved for more," Vincent moaned. Barely in control, he rubbed his lower body against hers, urging, "Don't stop?"

Knowing that he must learn to voice his passion, she increased the urgency of her fingers. "And this - does it excite you?"

When her thumb dipped into the highly sensitive slit at the crown of his penis, Vincent arched his back, gasping, "It possesses me!"

"That's what it's supposed to do, Love. Try to relax and enjoy it."

Relax? Dear God, she was driving him wild! When her finger teased the distended vein running along the underside of his penis, Vincent nearly lost what was left of his mind. Pumping his hips rapidly up and down, he held his breath and waited, knowing that he was on the edge of a desperately needed release. Ah, it felt so good. Yes - oh yes, any moment now... any...

Suddenly, Catherine ceased her stimulating motions, and his mind screamed in protest. No... no... she couldn't stop now, not when he was this close! Announcing his frustration in a full-throated growl, Vincent's first impulse was a compelling need to seize her hand, cover it with his, and stroke their joined fingers roughly up and down his rigid flesh; to watch his semen erupt, forced to completion by the drive of their greedy fingers clutching at its length.

Managing to gather his wits about him, he shuddered and tried to catch his breath. Realizing, of course, that Catherine wanted the first expulsion of his seed to be within her, as was fitting, Vincent conceded that she had been right to stop precisely when she did. If she had continued a moment longer, he might have humiliated himself by refusing to let her stop at all, and would have surely reached the peak of ejaculation.

Moving to lay across his damp chest, Catherine twisted the silken curls there around the tip of her finger. "Forgive me?" Hesitating, she blushed. "I need your first time to..."

"Yes," he managed hoarsely, struggling to form words, "I know. It's all right. Just... give me a moment?" Trembling all over and fighting to keep his own hand from seeking out the heat raging between his thighs, Vincent looked up to find Catherine watching him, all of her love and trust fully evident in her half-closed, grey-green eyes.

Letting her hand drift through his hair, she shivered. "You are truly stunning, you know."

"Catherine, please..." he whispered, turning his head to stare at the fireplace.

Putting one finger to his chin, she urged him to look at her, insisting, "You are. I wish that you could see yourself as I do, and learn to believe that."

Vincent started to respond, then pulled back slightly. Astounded by the image of himself there, in her eyes, a part of his consciousness noted that there was a high sheen to his skin. Mirrored by the embers of the dying fire, his face seemed to glisten with varied tints of bronze and gold; his eyes, wide and slightly startled, were shining as brilliantly as the bluest of gemstones. Yet, there was nothing terrible there, in that image; no predatory demons, no shadowed specters.

And in that single, wondrous moment, bathed in the warmth of her love and mirrored in her eyes, Vincent finally saw what Catherine had always wanted him to see: Himself. Male, completely naked, beautiful, and utterly aroused.

Yet, as much as he wanted her, he simply refused to be enslaved by the needs his own body. Gathering Catherine into his arms, he sank back among the pillows and released a sigh of impatience. His intellect might be telling him to savor the moment, but his groin area was adamantly refusing to cooperate.

Seeming to know that Vincent needed some time to come to terms with the newness of... all this, Catherine glanced over at him. Studying his face and form, she contemplated him from a woman's viewpoint, and found that to her eyes, he truly defined the word sexuality. Lost in him, she surveyed the span of his shoulders, the muscled length of his legs, and hungrily took the scent of him into her nostrils. Unable to resist the urge to touch him, she slid one hand down over the body she cherished above all other things in the world.

Slipping one hand under Vincent, she curled her fingers into the quivering muscles of his firm bottom, smiling to herself as he instinctively tensed. Then, leaning forward on his chest, she began to nibble on the tip of his nose.

Startled as he unleashed a snuffling grunt, Catherine eased up on one elbow and smiled. "Did that tickle?"

When he merely pursed his lips and arched an eyebrow in her direction, she trailed one fingernail along the middle of his forehead, into the solemn grooves there, and then further down, into the deep furrows at the sides of his mouth.

"I bet that did."

As Vincent proceeded to blink rapidly, caught off guard by the actions of her industrious little finger, Catherine giggled, the sound of her laughter a balm to his spirit; a sonata drifting into his aching, hungry heart.

"Oh, I've wanted to do that to you for such a very long time."

Focusing glinting blue eyes on her, Vincent's left eyebrow arched just a bit higher. "And now, you can cross it off of your... list, can't you?"

"Sorry."

The furrowing of his brow held the question.

Tilting her chin defiantly, his lady announced, "I intend to do it again as often as I like."

"Oh you will, will you?"

"Uh huh."

Fighting to keep his face utterly composed, Vincent tensed his stomach against the mirth threatening to explode outward. Narrowing his eyes, he stared at Catherine as only he could stare. He was new to this 'game', but it did seem to come naturally to him.

"And if I decide not to allow such liberties, what then?"

Edging her tongue into the exact center of his upper lip, she smiled to herself as his nose twitched, then eased away, asking, "Could you honestly refuse me anything I really wanted?"

"No." Lacing his fingers together across his stomach, Vincent sighed, admitting, "You know perfectly well that there is nothing I have, that I would not willingly share with you."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing," he vowed adamantly, gazing up at her.

For a moment the only sounds in the room were the crackling of the fire and ticking of the clock.

"Then why are you lying there, when you know that I want you to make love to me?"

With that, Vincent's eyes alone seemed to possess her. Glowing as though they were truly lit from within, the tumult of emotions mirrored in those astounding eyes was explicit. "Catherine," came that rumbling voice, "in my own way, I have been making love to you from the moment you first spoke my name, and I shall continue to until my dying breath is stolen by the Chamber of the Wind."

Urging her closer, he continued staring at her. "When I depart this life, the image of you, laying here like this, shall still be reflected in my eyes. I love you that much, that deeply..." His voice changed to a hoarse whisper. "...that eternally." Placing one finger under the bright tears suspended from her lower lashes, Vincent brought the droplets to his mouth. "And if there truly is an afterlife, my love of you shall endure... even there."

Held a willing prisoner beneath his fiery gaze, Catherine felt an incandescent heat rush through every part of her body, and knew in an instant that although Vincent was sweetly innocent to love-making, as a man he knew what he wanted; he knew what he would have. Trying to imagine what he would do or say next, she shivered. She had waited a very long time for him to give voice to his innermost feelings, and knew now why he had been unwilling to do that, until now, for his words were truly a form of making love; a love sweeter and purer than she could ever have conceived possible.

Shaking his tangled hair out of his eyes, Vincent sat up and rested most of his weight on his right elbow. Taking Catherine's hand and kissing the tip of each finger, he drew it down along the inner edge of his thigh to the cuff of his aching hardness, seeking her touch and her tenderness; needing her to center him now, as passion ravaged his emotions, leaving him uncertain - and utterly vulnerable.

Thinking that soon he could very well be beyond any sort of verbal expression, he focused his thoughts by taking a deep breath, releasing it with the words, "I want your touch, and I need to touch you, but your skin is so delicate, and my hands are..." Left speechless as one long, unbroken shudder seemed to run the length and width of his body, he shook his head from side to side.

Ever attuned to Vincent's emotions, and his deep-seated apprehensions, Catherine ran the pad of her thumb along the crown of his penis. Spreading the warm fluid there back into the puckered slit at the top, she smiled a knowing, woman's smile as he groaned and pushed upward into her palm. "Yes," she whispered, urging him on, "...like that. It's all right. Don't be afraid."

When her devouring fingers moved again, stroking even more firmly, Vincent gasped as a riot of color seemed to explode behind his eyes. '*Oh God,*' he begged silently, '*Don't stop this time! It feels so good. Catherine... please... please!*'

Suddenly another voice, a rougher, more earthy one, silently echoed the petition. "No, don't stop! As her hand moved again, the words were followed by a growl of pure lust.

'Ah, that feels wonderful! We need this. I need this. Allow yourself to rejoice in the feeling, as I do. Submit to it, learn to trust it - and me.'

Seized to the soul by a rush of pure passion, Vincent began to pant harshly as the sensation fused into a cataclysm of blue, purple, red, and gold behind his tightly closed eyes. Feeling a frenzied, unknown, and uncontrollable carnal desire rising from his innermost being, he feared it, yet still welcomed it as a part of who and what he was. His breath coming in gasps, his pelvis rising and dipping in tune with the movements of Catherine's hand, he instinctively bent his knees, parted his legs, and let them drift down to the carpet, his very posture revealing his complete surrender to her loving command. Unnerved by the hunger roiling through him, he growled, then bit down hard on his lower lip in a vain attempt to contain the sound.

"Yes Vincent, it's this good." Moving her hand downward, to the base of his curling erection, Catherine sighed longingly on discovering that her fingers didn't quite meet around its width. Stroking her hand along his sleek span all the way up to the swollen, moist tip, a shiver of sexual anticipation shot through her. Oh yes, his body was truly magnificent.

Bringing him to full arousal by clasping him tightly and sliding her hand back down over his penis again, all the way to the base, then to the warm, velvety sac beneath, conveying through touch alone how much she cherished him, Catherine was suddenly reminded of something she had told Vincent once, years before.

Using every means at her disposal to entice him onward, she fastened her hand more firmly around him. Then, bending forward, she began nipping at the curve of his left shoulder, murmuring, "Don't be afraid to want it, to deserve it - if only for yourself. You deserve everything." With her other hand, she reached up to brush his bangs back from his eyes. "Don't you know how much I want you?"

Struggling to find his voice, Vincent moaned, "Every bit as much as I want you." Nuzzling into her hand, he nipped the palm delicately with the tips of his gleaming incisors. "Beloved, know this: you and only you control all that I am, all that I could ever become. Whoever... whatever, dwells within this body, be it dark spirit or bright, man or... other than man, every part of me loves you, Catherine, and trusts you."

Tears of joy welled up in her eyes as he continued, "Fully believing that now, I also know that no part of me would ever hurt you."

Smiling through her tears, she whispered, "Our Bond will always safeguard me, my Love."

"No," Vincent argued gently, "it's not that which protects you, Catherine. The blending of our souls is merely a part of... this miracle. It is you who keep us safe - both of us. It's you." Then, having no remembrance of exactly what had happened between them in the cave, he bowed his head. "I need you more than I had ever thought to need anything or anyone in my life. In that wanting, lies a path that... I have never walked." Eyes the color of twilight sought hers. "Please? Help me to walk it now?"

Settling back on the cushions, the woman he loved opened her arms. "With courage and with care, it's time to walk that path together."

Curling his body, Vincent rose gracefully to his knees and slid forward until he rested at the juncture of her thighs. His eyes locked to hers, he attempted to press even closer. "Your power over me, over him, is our protection. I sense this is true with every part of my being. I shall be grateful to you for that, always. Always..."

When the tip of his penis brushed against her slick channel, Vincent's breath left him in a shuddering gasp. Enjoying the sensation of moist warmth closing around him, sheltering him, and inducing him to get closer, he cradled her hips in his free hand. Bringing Catherine up into an urgent embrace, the words, when he found them, were hoarsely impassioned. "Knowing that you would have all of my love, and his, please focus your thoughts now, as I gather the courage to... bring our journey full circle?"

Doing as he asked, Catherine tried to breathe slowly and evenly. Relaxing her body, she turned her mind inward, to a tranquil place composed entirely of hope, trust, and love.

Rolling onto his left hip, Vincent met her eyes, smiled shyly, then reached down between their bodies. When his fingers closed over hers, he squeezed them gently, then wrapped them in a vise-like grip. Holding her hand there, trapped beneath the trembling strength of his, he curled back onto his stomach and pressed forward, groaning, "Hold back nothing of yourself, I beg of you?"

Distributing his weight to his knees, barely inhibiting an urge to seize her by the hips and drive forward full force to possess her, he growled, "Wanting you as desperately as I do at this moment, your acceptance, and your love, are the only truths keeping you safe... now."

Bringing her feet up to encircle his quivering buttocks, Catherine lunged strongly against him, crying out, "Vincent, please!" Writhing from side to side, and then bucking wildly, she brought her hips up and crossed her ankles tightly over his broad back, imploring, "Don't make me wait any longer. I need you!"

"No, Beloved," he sobbed, "No more waiting..." Cupping her buttocks in an unyielding palm, as though a small part of him still feared rejection, even now, Vincent pulled Catherine up into the

muscled division of his thighs, whimpering at the feel of her delicate body pressed up against the rough strength of his.

Building the tension shimmering between them for a moment longer, he swept the extremely sensitive head of his phallus against her humid cleft. Straining to hold back, he struggled to cherish this moment for as long as he possibly could - even if the time allowed him proved to be a single beat of his thundering, wild heart. But as the scent of her musky heat filled his nostrils, he discovered that in the end, even for him, there were limits to patience.

Moving inward and duplicating the motions of Catherine's body, Vincent twisted his pelvis from side to side. Trembling as her silken wetness pulsed around him, the velvet-soft knob of his maleness slid inside of her, lodging firmly. A groaning snarl seemed torn from his belly as her inner muscles clutched around him, holding him fast. Having no choice but to surrender to the sensation, his thoughts scattered wantonly, love fusing with lust, need eclipsing fear.

'So', his heart cried as he locked his forearms, *'this is what was known as passion! More... I want more. I will have more...'*

Feeling a deep, aching pressure emanating from Catherine, Vincent set his teeth on edge and tried to still the movements of his body. Then, as the discomfort where they were joined seemed to taper off to a pulsing softness, he angled his pelvis up and thrust again.

Crying out as an unknown ecstasy seized at her womb, taking her higher and higher on the wings of his passions, joy forged into a moment of pure lust within Catherine as Vincent withdrew almost completely, hesitated, then plunged again. Sobbing her name, he began jerking his pelvis from side to side, then thrust hard, burying himself within her to the base of his shaft.

"Oh yes, Love!" Clutching him to her with every part of herself, she pressed her body upward to meet his unyielding thrusts, knowing that he would never leave her lonely and unfulfilled again. Rolling her hips under Vincent's in eager, uncontrollable bursts, Catherine raked her nails hard down the exact center of his spine, making no effort to hide the whimpering cries that escaped her throat. "Harder. Again... oh please, again!"

Lowering his full weight onto her and capturing both of her hands into his left one, Vincent curled the other one around her taut bottom. Sobbing, "Be still now, just for a... moment," he placed his mouth to the pulsing vein at the curve of her throat and bit down lightly, the gesture loving, yet one of unconditional possession.

Clasping her tightly in his arms, he withdrew until only the swollen, overfull tip of his erection was still embedded within her. Tensing his buttocks and teasing them both with short, utterly demanding strokes, he waited impatiently for her body to call to him, enticing him to return full measure. And it did. Oh, it did.

"Love, move with me..." Unable to repress his hunger for even a breath longer, Vincent buried himself within Catherine until the soft flesh of his scrotum cleaved to the warm division of her backside. Curling his toes into the carpet, he gripped her around the bottom and began pumping furiously. Taken by undulating waves of rapture, he pierced her sleek threshold again and again, his pelvis grinding savagely against hers, the force of his need at last spinning him beyond coherent thought into an unknown realm - one consisting of utter carnality.

His head drifting back, Vincent's mouth opened to gulp air into tortured lungs. When Catherine screamed his name and the moist richness of her climax seemed to devour him, his erection distended even further. Hovering on the verge of a frenzied release, from behind his eyes a mist the color of flame seemed to reach out to consume him. Wild-eyed, desperate to ejaculate, he cried aloud with the need as her inner muscles spasmed and released around him in a succession of unyielding contractions.

"Catherine, take my hand!" Reaching out blindly to weave his fingers through hers, Vincent gripped them almost too tightly. Aroused to the edge of madness, he curled his pelvis down and in for one last, mind-ravaging lunge.

Fully embedded within her, the shaft of his sex began to throb and convulse as he rocked his hips, the hunger he felt evolving to a sexual urgency that moved as he moved, matching him stroke for

stroke, and thrust for thrust. Through the Bond, his body sang to hers, *'Never enough... can't... won't stop now. Catherine, accept me!'*

Seeming to hear his silent cry, she moaned, "Always..." Managing to ease one hand in-between their tightly joined bodies, she caressed the base of his full scrotum, urging, "Give me all of you..."

"Oh God, when you touch me like that, I... cannot hold!" Claspng her tightly, forcing her to be still beneath him, Vincent stiffened for a moment and tried to focus. With his eyes radiating a blend of surprise mingled with excitement, he looked down at her, groaning, "It's beginning..." Jerking straight up to the palms of his hands and spreading his legs as far apart as he could, his body shuddered uncontrollably as he prepared for his own release, sobbing joyfully "...now."

Reaching ejaculation, Vincent didn't roar, nor did he snarl, nor make any sound that was in any way animalistic. With his head thrown back, his jaw clenched, and his lips curled into a sensual pout, Catherine's lover simply unleashed a slow, vibrating hiss of satisfaction as the hot jettison of his completion spilled into her womb.

As his orgasm seemed to go on and on, identical tremors ripped through Vincent and Catherine's bodies, then, returning them to a relaxed state with a steady, thrumming rhythm, the Bond seemed to unfurl until each could hear the other's thoughts.

'Beloved?' he questioned silently. Trying to keep his full weight off of her, he tightened his arms at her waist and rolled over onto his back.

Knowing what he was asking her, she smiled and moved with him, coming to rest face down on his chest. *'I'm fine.'* Licking at the saltiness of Vincent's damp skin, she sighed, thinking, *'In fact, I'm just splendid; almost as splendid as the feel of you under me - and inside of me.'*

Feeling the hot confirmation of his passion seeping down between her legs, Catherine held Vincent in a fiercely protective embrace and closed her eyes, loving him so much it hurt - it was a physical ache. Ah, but what a joyous ache was this. At last, the dream they shared had come full circle. Now, there would be no more pain for either of them; no more endless, empty hours; no more nights with him Below overwhelmed by his fears, and her Above, crying out her frustration into a pillow.

Deliciously exhausted, Vincent snuggled into a spot that seemed to have been created only for him - the curve of Catherine's left shoulder, and tried to disregard the weakness in his limbs by curling one long leg possessively around hers and weaving his fingers through her tousled, sweet-smelling hair. Dear God, he wondered, how was it possible for a single span of love-making to debilitate ones strength to such an extent?

When her contentment seemed to reach out and embrace him, he closed his eyes and drifted with her. Half asleep, floating in that wondrous place somewhere between reality and imagination, Vincent allowed his consciousness to explore the miracle of what had just happened, then, mocking his own misgivings, he grunted softly, wondering why on earth he had ever feared such an exquisite, natural expression of physical union?

Thinking back to a time when he had thought Catherine was truly lost to himself forever, he was reminded of something Father had said. Trying to ease the pain he knew was overwhelming him, the man who had raised him had sought to comfort him by vowing that *'Catherine's love was a gift, one that was to be cherished and honored, always.'*

At that time, unable to believe that pledge of faith, he had turned away from those words, not wanting to accept such a 'gift', for it brought little by way of consolation. Now, he knew that Father's words had validity. It was true, Catherine's love was a gift, as this time together was a gift - an offering made of love, and brought about only through faith. To be able to touch her with a lover's caress, to know that the hands he had always thought of only as abhorrent, killing machines, were not merely welcomed but truly loved, meant everything to him - everything.

With tears spilling down his face, Vincent drew her closer, as though seeking to ward off what was to come by the simple force of his own will. If he was only allowed to have such gifts as his own for seven brief days, he would learn to be grateful for that, and content with it. In truth, it was more than he had ever thought to have.

Deeply shamed by the thoughts searing his brain, he admitted to himself that although he had given his word, a part of him still wanted desperately to break that pledge - to smash it. Oh God, he needed to discuss what had happened in the Whispering Gallery with Catherine, and he never would. Never.

When drops of moisture spilled down onto her skin, Catherine blinked and came fully awake. Leaning up on Vincent's chest, she put one hand to the side of his damp face, wondering why he looked so unhappy, especially now? Brushing her lips over his eyes, she asked quietly, "Tell me?"

Smiling at her through his tears, he shook his head back and forth, having no words to explain what was going through his mind. What could he say to her? What words could he give Catherine now, that wouldn't break not only his vow, but his heart as well?

Thinking of the few hours they would have together, Vincent forced his mind away from the pain. Six days from now, there would be time enough for tears. Burying his grief in a secret part of his soul that even 'beasts' had the right to hold unto themselves, he kissed Catherine with utter tenderness, murmuring, "I mourn for all of the time that I've wasted. Simply that, no... more."

Then, a hesitant smile curved his mouth upward as one long leg curled around hers, his eyes agleam with all sorts of wondrous 'possibilities'. "Hopefully, some of those precious moments can be recaptured... forthwith?"

With that shy petition, one she knew he had barely summoned up courage enough to voice aloud, Catherine just couldn't help it. Flinging her arms around Vincent's neck, she exclaimed, "Oh, you're so adorable, I could just eat you up like candy!" Hugging him for all he was worth, she began dropping moist, lusty kisses to each and every part of his face and body that she could reach. "I love you so much!"

"Yes, I know." Blinking away his tears, Vincent smiled again, wider than before, as her happiness temporarily dissolved the hard core of anguish clamped around his heart. Then, as a wealth of kisses was rained down upon his chest, all the way to his belly, he tensed his stomach and laughed aloud, the sheer joy radiating from his eyes seeming to light the room far brighter than any candle ever could. "My Dear, I've been aware of that for... a very long time."

Rolling Catherine over onto her tummy and starting from back to front, he began to mirror her affectionate caresses by nibbling lovingly on the nape of her neck, down her lower back, and then on her firm, rounded bottom.

And to his utter amazement, Vincent quickly discovered that he wasn't as tired as he thought he was. Not by half.

Some time later, seated together out on the balcony, Vincent held Catherine in his lap, facing him, and stared up at the multitude of stars shimmering overhead. Following the path his eyes had taken, she smiled Heavenward, asking, "Have you made a wish yet?"

"Hmm?"

She pointed aloft. "There, that bright one in the center. It's traditional to make wishes on those, you know. They're supposed to be the eyes of Guardian Angels watching over us; at least according to some of the stories I've read."

Leaning back to cup her face in the palms of his hands, Vincent tilted her head up and searched her eyes, his expression unreadable. "Do you truly believe that there are Angels who grant wishes, my Catherine?"

Nodding her head up and down, she studied him, loving how the starlight danced over his features and mingled with his long, saffron hair. "I believe in them every time I look into your eyes, Vincent." Smiling, she lay her head to the center of his chest, tightened her arms around him, and sighed happily. "I have to admit that it took her, or him, a few years, but one of those Angels up there finally answered my dearest wish."

Resting his chin on the top of her head, Vincent glanced up, his eyes glistening with unshed tears. "And mine, Catherine. And... mine."

* * * * *

More asleep than awake, Catherine reached out to pat Vincent, but discovered that she was alone in the bed. Cracking one eye open and glancing at the bedside clock, she groaned, "Five a.m.?!"

Muttering under her breath, she curled up into a tight little ball and thumped her pillow soundly. Thanks to Kipper, the dear little 'early bird', she was already grumpy. What on earth had possessed him to deliver a bundle of clean clothes to Vincent at four in the bleeping morning?! And, speaking of Vincent, where was he?

She glanced at the bathroom door. Unless he was taking a shower in the dark, he wasn't in there. Sitting up and stretching for the ceiling, Catherine tilted her head to one side and listened for a moment, but all she could hear was the ticking of the clock in the living room. Frowning, she threw off the bed-covers and reached for her robe. Okay, let's just find out where that man has gotten himself to this time...

Stumbling sleepily into the dark living room, and stubbing the big toe of her left foot on the end of the rotten couch in the process, she yelped, "Ouch! Son-of-a-...!" Muttering a vast array of curse words under her breath, Catherine plunked her fanny down on the carpet and bent forward to examine her throbbing digit. That had hurt, dammit!

Having felt the pain, Vincent immediately stopped what he was doing and rushed to Catherine's side. Padding into the living room on large, but cat-quiet feet, he reached down... then jumped back, startled as she hollered.

"Gahhh!" Nearly leaping out of her skin as a large hand reached for her foot, the woman he loved proceeded to back-pedal furiously on her behind, then looked up and put one hand to her chest, exclaiming, "Oh, you startled the blessed hell out of me!"

"Forgive me, my Dear, it wasn't intentional." Kneeling in front of her, he rested Catherine's foot on the middle of his thigh and examined it closely for a moment. Then, trying desperately to keep his voice from betraying him, Vincent met her eyes, observing quietly, "Your toe is very red."

Glaring daggers at the object in question, she wriggled it back and forth, sneering, "That's because it's very banged." Not in the best of moods this early in the morning, especially before she'd had at least one cup of coffee, Catherine afforded Vincent a look of ill-concealed exasperation, thinking that her foot wouldn't have been attacked in the first place if she hadn't been looking for him - again. "Where were you?"

"In the kitchen."

"Oh. Doing what exactly?"

"Attempting to make coffee."

Arching an eyebrow, she repeated, "Attempting?"

Brandishing his right thumb, the one she loved eyed the blister there, growling, "Your overly complicated coffee-maker and I had a... major difference of opinion. I lost."

Swallowing her laughter and nearly choking on it as she tried to picture that scene, Catherine managed, "What... what did you do to it?"

"Have no fear, that nefarious thing is still in one piece." His tone of voice descended to a hissing whisper. "But only... just."

Getting to her feet and ducking her head to hide a wide grin, she made a big production out of straightening her bathrobe, remarking, "Well, I guess the theory I read about in Woman's Quarterly has basis in fact after all." That said, Catherine started for the kitchen.

Following her, Vincent asked, "What theory is that?"

Glancing back over her shoulder and affording him a wry grin, she gestured to her foot and then to his thumb. "The one about making love destroying brain-cells."

As he stopped dead in his tracks, a roaring laugh burst from Vincent's throat. "What?!"

Grumbling, "How can you be so cheerful this early in the morning," Catherine stepped behind him and forcibly guided him toward the kitchen. "Come on. If I'm going to be up before the pigeons, I want a lot of coffee!"

"As you are still half-asleep, would you like me to prepare it?" he offered obligingly.

"No thanks. With you snarling at it, the pot will probably explode."

Peeking around the curve of Vincent's left elbow and catching the highly insulted expression on his face, Catherine collapsed against his back and laughed until she began hiccupping. "You... know I'm only... teasing you."

"Hm." Seeming to forget how sound carried in confined spaces, he muttered, "A pox on that infernal coffee-maker."

Her eyes going quite round, Catherine exclaimed, "Why Vincent, that was almost an out-and-out swear!"

"Perhaps expletives are catching..." As he turned around, taunting eyes met hers. "...Miss Blessed Hell."

Laying on the bed with one arm folded behind his head, Vincent listened to the slightly off-key singing emanating from the bathroom. Resting the book he was reading face down on his stomach, he chuckled, then clamped down on the inside of his jaw as Catherine stepped out of the bathroom, followed by a cloud of steam.

"What's so funny?"

Picking up his book, he studied it intently. "Nothing."

"You were laughing."

Oh oh. "Was I?"

With a large, yellow towel wrapped around her hair giving her the look of a diminutive snake-charmer, Catherine plunked down beside him. "I felt it." Before he could deny it - and lie outright for the first time in his life, she touched the area just over her heart. "Don't you understand? I felt your laughter here."

As the book dropped from his fingers, Vincent sat up, the look in his eyes one of surprise mingled with indefinable joy. "You actually... felt it?"

Beaming at him, Catherine nodded.

"But, how can that be?" Shaking his head back and forth, he tried to come to terms with this unexpected revelation. "This Bond that we share has deepened beyond what I believed was truly possible."

Suddenly, from within came a deep, slightly taunting chuckle. *'See what can be accomplished when you learn to finally trust in your heart, and in me? When you made love to Catherine, you didn't shut me out, so I figured I owed you at least... that much.'*

Furrowing her brow and getting to her knees, Catherine reached out and rubbed the middle of Vincent's back. "What's wrong?" Suddenly feeling chilled, she shivered and started to pull away. "Are you... displeased... about what's happening to our connection?"

"Displeased?!" Reaching out with astounding swiftness, Vincent yanked her into his arms. "My Love, you misunderstand. Such a gift makes me want to shout my joy aloud." Holding her almost too tightly, he bent forward and brushed his mouth over hers. "At this moment, what is the Bond telling you?"

"That you love me."

"What else?"

Closing her eyes as his tongue moved over her lips, she stammered, "I... that you want me."

"Catherine, look at me." When her eyes fluttered open, Vincent cupped her chin in his hand and stared at her, demanding, "What else?"

"That you'll take me."

Crushing her mouth beneath his as the words were spoken, he proceeded to do exactly that.

And so, the hours of the next days blended one into another as Catherine and Vincent learned each other's hearts, bodies, and special, sweet secrets that only lovers are at liberty to share completely. With faith and mutual respect guiding them, two special people united their hands and hearts and became one soul - one spirit.

Sheltered within the gentle circle of a dream that could overcome any obstacle life cast its way, stone by stone, word by word, and touch by touch, all of the apprehensions, the fears and the barriers, that had kept Vincent and Catherine isolated from each other physically for so many years, were brought forth, examined, discussed, wept over, and at last, evaporated, the edges of the pain softening and blurring until it disappeared forever - with no one to mourn its passing.

To her delight, Catherine learned that the man she loved had a dry, subtle wit, and to Vincent's chagrin, he discovered that when he chose to direct that sense of humor at her, his gentle, usually refined lady, could give quite as good as she got - and then some.

Magically, wonderfully, living the dream they had sought for so many years, Catherine and Vincent learned to be completely at ease in each other's company, and in each other's arms.

* * * *

Bent forward over the bathroom sink, splashing cold water on his face in an attempt to force himself awake, Vincent shivered at the icy water made contact with his overheated flesh. Straightening up and reaching for a towel, he winced, trying to ignore the aching muscles in his legs and lower back.

Coming face to face with his reflection in the mirror, he eyed it calmly for a moment, then arched an eyebrow at the drowsy likeness staring back at him and grunted to himself, thinking, '*See what being overly enthusiastic has done to you, you insatiable...*' Unable to find a suitable word, he continued the self-rebuke. '*Did you think it was truly possible to make love as many times as you have these last five days and not suffer the consequences of your actions?*'

Leaning toward the mirror, Vincent's eyes wandered over the imperceptible scratches on his upper arms and chest, the purplish welt on the curve of his left shoulder, then he turned to examine his back. Oh dear. He would certainly not be going shirtless Below in front of anyone for quite some time, especially Father.

Probing at his mouth, he ran the tip of his tongue over his unusually swollen lower lip and chuckled, his eyes sparkling happily on discovering that Catherine's small, uncompromising teeth had quite definitely claimed another part of his anatomy as belonging to her. Ah well, as Father would say, '*If one chose to dance the tune, then one must summarily pay the piper.*'

Facing the mirror again, he stuck out his tongue and proceeded to scrutinize the appendage at great length by curling it up and down, and then back and forth. Good Lord, it had the appearance of an overripe tomato.

"Vincent," came a voice from directly behind him, "what on earth are you... doing?"

Jerking his tongue back to where it belonged, and nearly biting it in the process, Vincent whirled around to come face-to-face with a smiling Catherine. Locking startled eyes to hers, he asked, "How long have you been... standing there?"

One perfectly tweezed eyebrow arched just a tad higher. "Long enough."

"I was merely..." Turning around and opening the door to the linen-closet, he dove into it headfirst for a hairbrush, cutting off not only his words, but nicely concealing his reddening face.

Sensing that she had just witnessed a rather unexpected, and uncommon - for him, display of pure male vanity, Catherine didn't have the heart to tease him about it. Besides, she had been doing the exact same thing in the bedroom only moments earlier; along with a bit of feminine gloating to boot.

Walking up behind him, she hugged Vincent around the middle, rested her chin on the center of his back, and sighed. "Are you as wonderfully exhausted as I am?"

"Hm." With that non-committal response, he bent forward at the waist and started brushing his hair with long, almost fierce strokes, sending a stream of freshly washed, liquid gold curls cascading to his knees.

Content to be part of such an intimate moment, Catherine trailed her right palm over Vincent's shoulders and bare back, then looked down and gasped. *Oh God*. Yanking her hand away, she eyed the series of scratches criss-crossing his upper torso, then bent over to brush her lips tenderly over the injuries.

"Forgive me?"

Still brushing his hair, Vincent asked, "For what?"

"For what!" Looking horrified, she touched the bruise on his left shoulder. "I've... I've left marks all over you!"

"Rites of passage," he mumbled half-aloud.

"I don't understand?"

Straightening to his full height, he observed quietly, "It's written that expanding one's 'horizons' can sometimes be a trifle... demanding."

"But to hurt you, of all people..." Turning away, she swiped at her tears.

Putting one hand to her waist, Vincent turned Catherine around to face him. When she buried her face into his shoulder, he placed his forefinger under her chin and tilted her head up.

"Please don't cry? I'm fine, truly I am." Making no effort to conceal gleaming, white teeth, he smiled almost lasciviously. "In fact, if the truth be told, I consider every scratch, every bite, every single, blessed bruise, well worth it."

Easing his hair back over one shoulder, Catherine peered up solemnly at him. "I did that, too, didn't I?" she murmured, sniffing forlornly. "I took your innocence."

"If that's what you would call my... naiveté, it wasn't 'taken'," he insisted, "but given willingly, gladly, with the greatest of joy, and deepest of pleasure..." Hungrily scooping her up into his arms, Vincent flicked off the bathroom light with the edge of his right hand, and strode purposefully into the bedroom. "...for the giving has truly ended my aloneness."

"The rainbow comes and goes, and lovely is the rose. The moon doth delight, look round her when the heavens are bare; waters on a starry night are beautiful and fair. The sunshine is a glorious birth..." Unable to express the conclusion of the poem aloud, Vincent ran the lines in his mind: *'But yet I know, where'er I go, that there hath past away a glory from the earth.'*

"I've always loved Wordsworth." Leaning up on one elbow to study his face, Catherine smiled. "You recite so beautifully. Why did you stop?"

Although Vincent was well versed in some arts, subterfuge wasn't one of them. Sighing, he observed, "I suddenly remembered the conclusion of that particular ode is... extremely sad." Placing one arm around her waist, he drew Catherine down in the bed and held her tightly to his

heart, whispering huskily, "Wouldn't you agree that there have been more than enough such words spoken between us as it is?"

Nodding her agreement, she snuggled against him and said no more for several moments.

Sensing wisps of sorrow drifting through the Bond before she could contain them, Vincent tightened his arms around her.

"What is causing you to be so dispirited?"

Unable to mask her disappointment, Catherine burrowed down into the velvet warmth of his chest.

"Because, somehow, a part of me knows that you'll be returning Below today."

When there was no response, she peered up to search his eyes. "When?"

"Before six," Vincent murmured softly.

After touching her hand to the lilac and amber haze trailing glimmers of light over the bedcover, she moved closer to him, whispering, "So... soon?"

"Yes." Sliding one hand down her hip, Vincent captured her hand into his. "These days here with you, Beloved, have been... a miracle, yet to remain Above..." Not finishing the thought, he gave her hand a loving caress with the pad of his thumb.

"I know." Catherine's lower lip trembled as she looked at their entwined fingers. "I'll... miss you very much."

Feeling her turbulent emotions curl around his heart, Vincent put one hand to the side of her face. As wistful, smoky green eyes met his, he tilted his head to one side and smiled. "But, you're coming with me... aren't you?"

When her eyes went very round and tears came into them, he let his soul speak to hers, allowing her to feel the truth of his words as well as hear them.

"My precious Love, did you truly imagine that I could leave you here, unhappy and alone, ever again?"

For a moment, a radiant look came into Catherine's eyes, then she sighed. Winding a few strands of Vincent's curly chest hair around the tip of her finger, she looked away, stating quietly, "Father won't approve of... this."

"Perhaps not; that remains to be seen," he replied calmly. "Even if he doesn't agree with our choices, it was our decision to make, Catherine, not his." After kissing her tears away, Vincent rested his mouth on hers, reaffirming, "You are the woman that I love, the center of my world, and the most meaningful part of my life. Father has known the certainty of this for... some time."

At that, she smiled, but her tone remained glum. "Oh, he's going to be absolutely furious."

Easing back to look at her, Vincent smiled, mocking gently, "No, not 'absolutely furious'. Father will be a bit sad perhaps, as all parents are at times like this, but when he sees you and I together, truly sees us, I'm certain he'll realize that our desire to be one, physically as well as spiritually, is a... *'fait d'accompli'*. Once he yields to that truth, he will come to terms with the situation as best he can."

"And if he can't?"

"He shall have to."

"I hope so," she breathed.

"As much as I love him, and respect his wishes in most things, even Father doesn't have absolute authority over my personal life; that is a privilege I reserve unto myself."

When she still seemed uneasy, his tone grew huskily determined. "Catherine..." Cupping her face in his left hand, Vincent asked, "Would you have me state the obvious?"

Nodding her head, she managed a shaky smile.

"Very well. I am not a child, and this I will have. Your place is with me; it has always been with me."

Brightening visibly and managing to swallow the lump in her throat, she stammered, "Y... you're certain?"

"Yes." Brushing her tangle of hair back from her face, Vincent afforded her one of the most sensual looks he had ever given her, his eyes prisms of blue flame in the shadowed room. "Will you stay with me?"

Not answering the question, Catherine announced, "You might get tired of having me underfoot all of the time."

"You are well aware that such a thing will never happen," Vincent insisted. Then, sensing that she was enjoying his obvious frustration, he cast her a knowing look. Fair was fair. After all, he had kept her at a distance for a very long time, leaving her unsure of herself, as well as in turmoil emotionally - and this moment seemed to be his comeuppance for that.

"Will you stay?" he asked again, barely keeping his voice even.

Before she could finish the thought, Vincent clasped her tightly at the hips and lowered his mouth to hers, growling the words this time. "Will... you... stay?"

"Yes," Catherine sobbed, flinging her arms around his neck, "Until the end of forever!"

Crushing her mouth beneath his as she said the words, Vincent embraced her almost too tightly and tried to turn aside the ache pulsing around his heart, thinking, '*The 'end of forever' shall come all too soon, my Love. All too soon.*'

Yanking on his boots, Vincent stomped one foot and then the other down hard on carpeted living room floor until he was satisfied with the fit. After five days of disuse, the boots were overly tight. After settling his cloak over his shoulders and carefully placing his slippers into the bundle of clothing on the couch to await transit home, he started for the kitchen, calling out, "Are you certain you don't need my assistance?"

"No thanks, at least not right now." Accompanied by the sounds of cabinet doors being opened and shut again, Catherine announced happily, "I'm almost ready. I just want to pack up a few more canned goods and other things to bring Below with us. William has enough people to worry about feeding without my appetite adding to his burden."

"You could never be a burden to anyone." Leaning on the door-jamb, Vincent watched the bustling activity in the kitchen for a moment and smiled. "Besides, you have the appetite of a bird."

"Yeah," his lady retorted, plunking some cans into a large cardboard carton, "... a giant Condor."

"As they are said to be not only highly-intelligent, but also extremely rare, I shall accept the comparison."

Smiling as a large hand came to rest on her shoulder, the can of soup Catherine was holding went clanking down to the counter. Turning around, she flung herself into Vincent's waiting arms.

"When you asked me to come Below and stay with you, I couldn't believe it. Oh, just imagine the times we'll have!"

Feeling her joy wrap around his soul, he held her close but said nothing.

Burying her face into the front of his vest, Catherine shivered, her voice filled with regret. "When I left you after my father died, even though you denied it, I knew how disappointed you were." Before he could reply, she went on, "When I kissed you good-bye that day, I remember thinking that I'd never get another chance to be with you - truly with you." Touching the side of his face, she vowed, "This time, I promise..."

"No." Putting one finger to her lips, Vincent shook his head back and forth. "You don't have to make this pledge." Joyful eyes searched hers. "Even without our Bond, I would know at this moment how much you love me, and want to be with me, for it's reflected in your eyes."

"I'm glad you're finally able to accept what you see there, and to believe it." Holding her best treasure in a fierce embrace, Catherine rested her cheek against his vest and closed her eyes. "Do you remember when your friend Lin was married Below?"

"Yes, of course. The ceremony performed by Master Po was beautiful." Nuzzling the tip of his nose into her hair, he murmured, "As were you; so beautiful that I..." Taking a deep breath, Vincent declared hoarsely, "Oh, I wanted you so much that night, Catherine, I thought to truly die of the ache."

"Yes, I felt it."

"You knew?" Leaning back, Vincent peered down at her, his surprise evident. "But, I tried very hard to conceal my feelings that night, as I always tried to shield them from you."

"You never could, Vincent - not really." Smiling up at him, Catherine expanded his limited perceptions of the opposite sex by admitting, "A woman knows when she's truly loved." Gripping him by the shoulders, she repeated, "She **knows**. Later that night, when you came to me, your eyes gave you away; so did your voice. From the way you looked at me, I knew you envied all that Lin and her husband would share as newlyweds, just as much as I did."

Tightening his hold on her, Vincent nodded his head.

"We vowed then to measure the moments of our lives in a different way." Reaching up, Catherine tightened her arms about his neck. "And now, we can."

"Yes..." Yanking her to his chest so she wouldn't see the tears streaking his face, Vincent struggled to keep his voice from betraying him. "We shall live day to day, moment to moment, heartbeat to heartbeat. I could hope for no more than that, and rejoice in it. And, should the time come when you... have to... leave me, each moment we've shared will remain a gift I shall treasure always, until my last earthly breath."

"Thank you, Vincent." Feeling his tears on her forehead, and assuming they were happy ones, as hers were, Catherine eased slowly out of his arms. Gesturing to the cartons on the kitchen counter, she blew her hair out of her eyes. "I should finish up in here so that we can start Below. And, I have a few calls to make. I'll see Joe later in the week, but if I call him now, he won't leave so many messages on my answering machine." Hesitating, she looked thoughtful. "I should call Jenny, too. She worries when she can't reach me."

Scanning the counter, he offered, "Why don't I pack the rest of this, while you make your telephone calls?"

"Thanks, I appreciate that."

Not reflecting on the bleak truth of his words, Vincent added graciously, "We have plenty of time, so make your farewells to whomever you wish."

With a loving pat to the front of his vest, Catherine beamed at him. "Yes, we have all of the time in the world, now, don't we?" With that, she turned and started for the living room phone.

'All of the time in the world.'

As the truth of those words impacted on his mind, Vincent leaned forward on the edge of the sink and bowed his head. Thinking that his heart would shatter at any moment, he put one hand over his eyes, pleading silently, *'Oh God, help me to conceal my despair from Catherine for these next two days, I beg of you?'* Suddenly thinking of the Whispering Gallery, tremors shot through his frame. *'And when her time with me... closes... remember that I kept to my part of the covenant. Hopefully, at that moment, You will also keep Yours?'*

* * * * *

Ensnared behind his desk like a somber potentate, Jacob Wells listened carefully, his eyes narrowing as Vincent came to the end of his narrative.

"...and, due to Catherine's generosity and loving care these last five days, I seem to have recovered completely."

"Yet, whatever caused your inner struggle hasn't been resolved," the older man insisted. "The... problem... could return again at any time."

Smiling at Catherine, Vincent whispered, "Oh, I think the 'problem', as you call it, has been well resolved; well resolved indeed."

Admitting, "Well, you do seem... calmer, at least right now," Father sat across from Vincent and Catherine, his eyes flickering from one to the other. Leaning forward on the desk, he studied his hands glumly. From the moment they had come down the chamber steps hand-in-hand, he had sensed immediately that his worst fears had been realized.

Despite all of his warnings, and all of his advice on this matter, his son had chosen to overlook the risks involved and had taken this woman into his bed. The tunnel elder's jaw tightened angrily. No - she had taken him into hers. Now what was he to do? Dear God, didn't they realize what could have happened?

Frowning at his son from over the tops of his spectacles, Father tried to keep his tone of voice from betraying his innermost feelings, commenting rather sharply, "If Catherine has chosen to stay here, then so be it. Will this be a brief visit, or is it to be... an extended one?"

Curling his nails into the arms of the chair, and making a supreme effort to keep his anger under control, Vincent met his parent's piercing grey eyes as calmly as he could, asking quietly, "Is there to be a limit on the period of time allowed?"

"No, of course not. I merely wanted to know if I should ask someone to prepare a Chamber or..." Gnawing at his lower lip, Father sank back into his chair and fell silent.

"Thank you, no. The arrangements have already been discussed and attended to." Managing to loosen his grip on the chair, Vincent laced his fingers through Catherine's and glanced shyly at her.

When the woman he loved told him that she found this entire situation amusing by having the audacity to throw him a furtive wink, he narrowed his eyes in mock reproach, then bowed his head to hide a wide grin as her love and trust glided through their connection. Dear God, this woman was truly invincible. Nothing fazed her; not Father's scowls; not even his obvious displeasure.

As the hard core of his anger subsided, then ebbed away like waves on a tranquil shore, Vincent's head came up. Focusing on Catherine, he finished what he had to say. "Another chamber shall not be required... this time."

"Oh, I see." Thinking that he and his son would most certainly discuss this at great length when they were alone, the elderly man nodded curtly, observing, "Well, as the 'arrangements' have already been discussed amongst yourselves, if not with me, there's nothing more to be said then, is there?"

"Yes, there most certainly is."

Taking note of the genuine anger in Vincent's tone of voice, Father grudgingly remembered his manners. "I pray that your stay here will be a peaceful one, Catherine, and... welcome."

"Do you mean that, Father?" As he looked up, the man found himself being scrutinized by unswerving, determined green eyes. "Am I truly welcome here?"

Noticing the possessive way Vincent was clasping her by the hand, and their shining, hopeful faces, a part of the man they all looked to for guidance couldn't help but acknowledge that something new and wondrous had truly blessed this world. His choices now seemed to be one of two: he could try to be gracious about this, and admit that Catherine had won the day, and his son, or he could ask her to return to her own world, and quite possibly alienate Vincent forever. Those were his choices, and he abhorred both of them.

Managing a wan smile, he cleared his throat and answered her question. "Yes, Cathy, you're welcome here. Many of us have been considering you to be a part of this world for some time now." Fighting to contain a sudden rush of aloneness, he went on, "Even I don't have to be hit

over the head with... certain facts... more than once. You and Vincent aren't children. You have the right to make your own decisions, and your own choices - whatever the consequences of your choices may prove to be."

Giving him a searching look, Vincent straightened in the chair, asking softly, "And can you come to terms with those facts, and learn to trust in our decisions, and in our judgment?"

"I'll have to, won't I? To be honest, Vincent, when I received your note five days ago, I half expected this... affair... had taken a decisive turn in a new direction."

Winching inwardly at his own choice of words, Father pursed his lips and got to his feet. Coming around the edge of the desk, he rested one hand on Catherine's shoulder and the other one on his son's. "I remember what it is to love someone so much, so deeply, that nothing else matters - not even a parent's fears and disapproval. All I can do is promise to try very hard to concentrate on the joy of those memories, and disregard the anguish they bring."

"That is all that anyone could ask of you, Father." Getting to his feet and bringing Catherine up with him, Vincent enveloped the man in a hug that would have done a bear justice.

Uncertain of what to do, Catherine stood to one side until Father opened his arms and drew her into them. Hugging both her and his son very hard, he sighed. "I do worry about the both of you, you realize? What am I to do when faced with such courageous, yet utterly incautious people?"

Hugging him back, Catherine smiled. "Just love us."

"That is all you can do, Father," Vincent murmured, holding the two people he loved most in a fierce embrace. "Simply love us - as much as we love you."

As his son turned away to swipe at his tears, the tunnel patriarch bent closer to the woman in his embrace, whispering, "Please, try very hard not to cause him pain?"

"I won't," Catherine whispered back. "For his pain is also mine. Oh, Father, I love him so much, and I'll do everything I can to give him a happy life - I promise."

Snuggling down into Vincent's bed, Catherine tugged one of his giant pillows to her breast and sighed happily. Was she dreaming, or was she really here, in this chamber, nude and so relaxed she felt entirely boneless? Peeking over the top of the huge pillow, she eyed the man padding around the chamber slapping out candles with the palm of his left hand.

Examining Vincent from beneath her lashes, all the way from his bare feet to the rounded curves of his equally bare bottom, she shivered. *Oh my goodness, what a magnificent sight to create happy dreams on. Just look at that rump, those legs, and oh, the width of those shoulders!* Grinning, she thought, *'Come on, turn around. There's a few more parts of you I find my eyes greedy to inspect; almost as greedy as my hands are to touch you; as my mouth is to taste you; as my tongue is to...'*

As Catherine's highly erotic images whirled through their connection, Vincent arched an eyebrow, thinking, *'So, we begin again, do we?'* Continuing his task, he tried to ignore the surge of heat tingling along every inch of his frame, then grunted softly as the sensation spiraled downward to the center of his groin. Oh yes, most certainly... again. And again, and again...

After pinching out all but one of the candles on his desk, he quickly slid under the bed-covers and rolled over onto his left hip, facing Catherine. "Well?"

Her eyes utterly innocent, she smiled at him. "Well what?"

Trailing the pad of his thumb along her rib-cage, the flat plane of her stomach, then lower to the curve of her thigh, he pressed his body forward into hers, whispering, "...this. See what all of your staring and sensuous imaginings has accomplished?"

Giggling, Catherine bent her knee up and nudged at him, retorting, "It's too dark in here for me to 'see' much of anything." One hand stole down to caress him. "But I can certainly feel something rather impressive coming between us."

Sliding to his knees and cradling Catherine's hips in his hands, Vincent's gaze drifted down over her body to the division of her thighs, then across his own body until he focused on the erection pulsing between his legs. Scrutinizing himself rather circumspectly, he moaned, then shivered as the cool chamber air swept over his aroused flesh. Oh God, it felt so good... so good.

The part of him that was most male controlled his reactions now, and he tensed expectantly as a familiar hunger roiled through him, priming him, readying him. His phallus ached to be sheathed within Catherine's warmth, to be joined to her; as his arms ached to hold her; his mouth and tongue ached to taste her. Every part of his body was on fire for her, and now those flames could be fed, then banked again, until the next time.

His eyes glittering like blue crystals in the shadowed room, Vincent curled his hands around Catherine's buttocks and lifted her completely off of the bed, murmuring urgently, "Nothing is 'coming between us', especially tonight. That part of me which is achingly aroused, and utterly male, is merely building a bridge, Love." Taking a deep breath and releasing it as he rolled his pelvis down and in, he groaned, "...merely building ...a ... bridge..."

* * * * *

Taking extreme care not to wake Catherine, toward dawn Vincent eased out of bed. Locating his night-clothes in the shadowed room, he slipped into them, then shifted the chair behind his desk to face the bed and settled into it. Resting his elbows on the curved oak arms and steeping his fingers, he sank back and studied the woman peacefully asleep across from him. Laying there curled over on her right hip, Catherine breathed quietly and steadily, her hair falling about her face and shoulders in a delicate tangle of honey-brown.

She was the woman he loved, the only person in this world who truly knew him and understood him, and tonight all of this - the sharing, the laughter, the passion, and the joy - would be merely a memory.

'*Oh God,*' he thought, powerless to inhibit the agony coursing through him, '*Help me to bear this? Help me to endure losing her... a second time?*' Resting his head against the back of the chair, Vincent stared at the chamber ceiling through tear-filled eyes. At five minutes past seven this evening, his scant measure of time with Catherine, in this life at least, would be at an end.

'*Focus on something else*', his soul cried out, '*Anything else but that!*'

With his mind searching frantically for somewhere it could retreat to, at least for a few moments, Vincent scanned the room. When his eyes came to rest on the bed and the half-crescent glass over it trailing an amber haze over Catherine's face and form, he forced himself to shift his range of vision elsewhere.

Leaning forward in the chair, he studied the cluttered mantel which contained a vast array of discarded treasures from the world Above, eyeing the assortment of books, chess-pieces, and various-sized carvings of animals and figurines with scant interest. Then, his eyes went to his desk, and the bronzed leather journal in the center of it. As he focused on the slim volume that had been a Christmas present from Catherine, the tears that had been threatening to overflow spilled down his face. No, he couldn't write these thoughts down - not these. Some anguish went far too deep to express in mere words. Yet, there were some things that must be written, and quickly, for the hours were pressing close.

Carefully easing the desk drawer open, Vincent retrieved an envelope and four pieces of crisp vellum stationery. Settling back in the chair and uncapping his pen, he stared down at the pieces of paper, trying to find the words he needed. How did one bid farewell to people who had sheltered him and cared for him since he was three days old? What mere words could express the extent of his gratitude or the depth of his love to this giving, generous community?

Moving his chair nearer to the desk, he positioned the stationery at the correct angle for his left-handed script, released a shaky breath, and began to write:

Dear Father, Mary, Pascal, Jamie, Mouse, William, and all of you who have been my cherished companions:

I pray that in time, each of you will one day come to understand what I have done – and why, and find it in your hearts to forgive me? Know now, that I am at peace at last, for I am with Catherine. I had to be with her, and this was the only way to accomplish that end.

For the last years, although my physical presence was here with you, in our world, my heart, thoughts, and soul already dwelt elsewhere, with the only woman I shall ever love.

Why and how this moment came to be will be very difficult for many of you to accept, or to believe, but it did happen. In truth, the journey, I begin now commenced on the Whispering Gallery bridge seven days ago, and later today it shall conclude there. Or if you believe in an after-life, my pilgrimage begins there, for it leads me to the missing half of my soul.

And, if there is indeed a life after this one, or beyond it, then we shall meet again. I trust in that, and believe in it with every part of my being. My dear friends, we shall meet again. Until that sweet hour, love each other as I have loved you, care for each other, and have faith. Although it took me a lifetime, I have finally learned that faith is truly the greatest gift we can give to each other.

Perhaps, if you listen carefully, you shall hear my voice and Catherine's in the happy sounds of the Tunnel children's laughter, or see us reflected in their eyes, and through their memories of us.

I have come to the conclusion that what happened to me on the Whispering Gallery bridge was a moment of pure enchantment. As I try to explain what occurred there, in this letter, please, for my sake, open your hearts and minds to the possibility of such a wondrous thing as a true miracle?

A week ago, despairing of all hope, and lost to myself in ways you could never fully understand, no matter how hard you would try, I had gone to the bridge prepared to end my life, but something altered that path, at least temporarily; or more precisely, some one altered it...

* * * * *

Sometime later, having finished his letter, Vincent folded it and placed it inside of the envelope. After writing 'Father' on the front, he sealed the flap, slipped the words of fond farewell into his journal, and got to his feet.

Taking the few steps to the wardrobe at the other end of the room, he opened the heavy doors and placed the journal in the folds of his gleaming-white, heavy silk dress shirt, then, straightening his shoulders, he quietly shut the door and turned away, thinking, 'Yes, *that was a suitable place for such a letter*'.

Having made the shirt for him some years past, for a very special Saowen, dear Mary knew how much he cherished it. If, or when, his body was recovered, the letter would be discovered among his possessions when his burial outfit was laid out. Or, if his remains were never found, then whomever used the wardrobe after him would surely discover it, and see that it got into the proper hands.

Half-sick of shadows and such desolate thoughts, Vincent moved over to the bed. Easing his body over the gentle rise of Catherine's hip, he curled his frame along the length of hers. Snuggling up behind her as closely as he could and weaving the fingers of his left hand gently into her tousled hair, he closed his eyes and sighed, waiting for her to wake up and kiss him good morning - one last time.

Opening her eyes to find herself enveloped by a veil of silky gold threads, Catherine blinked, momentarily disoriented, then came fully awake. No, it wasn't thread, it was hair - beautiful, long hair. Smiling, she peered up to find herself drowning in eyes the color of a tranquil blue ocean. When Vincent lowered his head toward her expectantly, she brushed her mouth over his, piping drowsily, " 'Morning, Love."

Smiling, he savored the taste of her for a moment before replying, "Good morning, my Dear."

"What time is it, please?"

"Pascal just tapped out the hour a few moments ago as being ten a.m."

"Ten!" Catherine exclaimed, sitting up. "Good Lord, I've been asleep for nearly eleven hours. I never do that." Glancing at him, she observed, "I can't imagine what made me so tired."

"Can't you?" Eyeing her candidly, Vincent chuckled. "I can."

Noting the rather satisfied expression on his face, Catherine arched an eyebrow at her noticeably contented-looking companion. Well, well, proud of himself, was he? If so, he had every right to be. Recalling the previous evening, she eyed him from beneath her lashes, wanting to bend down, kiss him to within an inch of his life, and start all over again.

When Vincent clenched his jaw in a vain effort to stifle a yawn, she sighed and willed herself to shift her focus to other things. But some thoughts just wouldn't shift gears quite that easily - especially when they were about him.

Although Vincent was fairly new to the art of love-making, he certainly had some very interesting moves. Reliving some of them, she flushed hotly, savoring each little tingle inching along her body. Oh God, he was absolutely glorious in bed - or as Mouse would express it, he was 'gooder than good.' He seemed to know instinctively what touch pleased a woman the most, and where, and used every means at his disposal to intensify that pleasure until her body and mind were left screaming for more. And more... and more...

Waiting patiently for Catherine's emotions to become less... volatile, Vincent smiled to himself and studied his hands at great length, knowing of course, that she was thinking about him. As both her deep contentment and utter exhilaration fairly skipped through their connection, he closed his eyes and nodded his head slowly up and down, murmuring, "Hm... yes."

Leaning forward on his chest, Catherine cupped her face in the palm of her left hand, asking, "Yes, what?"

Opening his eyes, he placed one hand to the left side of his chest. "I can feel your contentment."

Studying him as one would examine something very, very precious, she smiled. "Yes, I know. Now that you've finally allowed yourself to sense all of my emotions, how do they affect you?"

"The sensation is... quite extraordinary." Flushing under her rather intense scrutiny, Vincent continued, whispering haltingly, "T... to realize I am the cause of such intimate emotions brings me a sense of inner tranquility I had thought never to know." Reaching out a trembling finger to gently stroke the side of her face, he smiled shyly. "Thank you for bringing such a precious gift into my life."

Smiling through her tears, she leaned forward and brushed her lips over his, murmuring, "...empty plates."

Looking extremely puzzled, Vincent echoed, "Empty...plates?"

"When I was a little girl, I remember sitting in the kitchen watching my Mom baking cookies. When she piled them on a plate to give to one of our neighbors, my initial, rather selfish reaction, was to ask why she was giving **my** cookies away."

"You could never be selfish," Vincent gently contradicted. "You were simply a child who didn't want to give up something she liked; that's perfectly normal."

Thinking that over, Catherine made a face. "Maybe. Were you ever stingy when you were young," she asked, half-anticipating his answer - which surprised her.

"Oh yes. I remember being especially... parsimonious... about sharing my crayons with anyone. I enjoyed coloring." Thinking back on a particular day, he chuckled. "And so did my brother."

Grinning, she arched an eyebrow at him. "What colors did Devin end up with?"

"The grays, tans, dark greens, and, as I remember, a rather repulsive shade of lime."

"Oh, how dreadful of you." she accused, laughing. "Poor Devin."

Narrowing his eyes, Vincent growled, "Poor Devin, indeed. He more than got his revenge, I assure you."

"How?"

"My brother hid the crayons until I agreed to share all of the colors with him." Grunting indignantly, Vincent folded his arms across his chest. "I never saw any of the purple ones again, nor the blue ones, for once Devin got his hands on them, he turned the tables, so to speak, by refusing to share them with me."

"Quick thinker," Catherine noted, making no effort to conceal her amusement.

"Hm." Deciding not to pursue this subject any further, and eager to share more of Catherine's childhood remembrances, Vincent deftly shifted the topic back to the original one. "And when you asked your mother why she was giving away 'your' cookies, what was her reply?"

Letting her hand glide through his hair, she cuddled under the curve of his left arm. "Mom said that when someone gives of themselves, no matter what it is, if it's on a plate, it's only good manners never to send the plate back empty. Having you in my life, and knowing that you love me, has more than filled my plate." Hugging him around the neck, she kissed the vein pulsing at the edge of his throat. "I'm only giving back some of those gifts where and when I can."

"And the plate you have given me, Beloved, contains the rarest of all gifts one of limitless courage." Sliding Catherine up the length of his body, Vincent bestowed a gentle kiss to the middle of her forehead and inhaled deeply of her scent, observing, "You seem very well-rested. Am I correct in assuming that you slept peacefully?"

"Never better." Nestling closer, she sighed happily. "It must have been the company."

Tilting her head back, Vincent afforded her a bedazzling smile. "Oh, I hope so."

Before she could say anything more, a sudden draught of cool air wafted across Catherine's bare backside. Burrowing against him like a child would, she shivered and tucked her nose under the curve of Vincent's arm.

Pulling the quilt up over her shoulders and settling it firmly around her, he urged her closer to the warmth of his body. "Are you cold?"

"No, not really." She shivered again. "It was more like somebody walked on my grave."

The expression was one used quite a bit in her world. Catherine had no way of knowing how it would affect the man she loved - or precisely why.

When Vincent's body stiffened and he put one hand over his heart, she looked up, catching the shadow of pain in his eyes before he could conceal it.

"What?"

Seeming to choke, he shook his head and stared at the ceiling for a moment, then jerked upright very suddenly and clamped his other hand over his eyes.

Bringing the quilt up with her and wrapping it around his trembling frame, Catherine placed her hand on the side of his face and tried to get him to look at her.

"Please tell me what's wrong?"

"I..." Taking a deep breath and trying again, he forced the lie from his lips, whispering hoarsely, "I don't know exactly."

For a moment, I merely felt sad." Not quite meeting her eyes, he managed a shaky smile. "The feeling is subsiding now."

"I'm glad of that," she replied. Sensing that he wasn't being totally honest with her, which was not only surprising but more than a little alarming, Catherine said no more. When he was ready to discuss what was bothering him, he would.

Hoping to ease whatever was causing the disruption in the Bond, as well as weighing so heavily on Vincent's peace-of-mind, she got to her knees, shifted behind him, and stroked his tousled hair until his body lost some of its rigidity, then let her hand drift over his back. Digging her fingers gently into the knotted sinew between his shoulder-blades and then lower to the center of his spine, she smiled as he leaned back into the touch, closed his eyes, and sighed.

"Thank you. That feels marvelous."

"You're welcome." Wrapping her arms around his neck, Catherine kissed the side of his face. "Are you feeling better?"

Certain that his voice would betray him, Vincent merely nodded.

"That's good." Not pressing him any further for the moment, and thinking to turn his thoughts toward other things, she bent forward to whisper in his ear, "Have you given any thought to what we're going to do today?"

Straightening his shoulders and turning to face her, Vincent forced himself to concentrate only on her, and not on the few remaining hours. "What would you like to do?"

"Well, if you don't have anything else planned, I'd like to spend some time in my second favorite place down here, in your world - the Triple Falls."

His brow furrowed. "But, why don't we go to your favorite place?" Patting the bed, Catherine smiled. "Because we're already there."

"Oh, I see."

Before Vincent could say anything more, a loud gurgling sound emanated from Catherine's tummy. Somewhat embarrassed, she laughed and folded her arms over her stomach, exclaiming, "Oh dear, I don't have to go to the Triple Falls; it sounds like it's come to visit me!"

Suddenly conscious of the time, Vincent eyed her apologetically. "You must be absolutely famished."

"Yes, I am a bit hungry," she acknowledged quietly.

That admission caused him to move to the side of the bed, reach down, and retrieve his jeans and shirt. "Please forgive my lack of courtesy in not offering you something to eat before this? I'll go straightaway and see what's available in the kitchen."

"Would you like me to go with you?"

Glancing down and taking note of how relaxed and contented she looked nestled in his bed, Vincent shook his head. "No, thank you. You're comfortable where you are. I won't be long."

Tapping her fingers on the quilt, Catherine realized Vincent simply wasn't getting the hint. "Well," she sighed, "you don't have to go right now..."

"Yes, I do," he insisted. "What kind of a man allows the woman he loves to suffer needlessly from the pangs of hunger?"

Chewing on the inside of her jaw, Catherine eyed him. Surely, he wasn't being this obtuse on purpose?

Sliding the jeans over his hips, Vincent got to his feet and slipped into his shirt. As he started to fasten the buttons, a small hand held out a double-wide, tanned leather belt, but before he could take it, Catherine reached for the single metal fastening at the top of his pants.

"Allow me?"

Being very careful not to catch his skin in the teeth of the zipper, she agonizingly slowly eased it up, then snapped shut the closure just below his navel. Knowing exactly what she was doing, with a loving caress to the plump bulge at the jeans' center-seam, she announced, "There, all set."

"Th... thank you." Struggling to steady his nerves, and to turn aside a sudden, intense hunger that went far beyond mere food, Vincent turned around, bent forward, and reached for his boots.

"Vincent..."

Stiffening as a fingernail edged along his posterior and probed lightly at the division of his buttocks, he was left trembling by the explicit sensuality of Catherine's gesture, as well as the emotional pull inundating their connection.

"Yes, my Love?" Swallowing hard and slowly straightening up, he turned around.

Eyeing the desk and the small bowl of fruit resting there, Catherine gestured to it. "I'll settle for an apple for now." Sooty green eyes locked to his. "If you will."

Making no effort to conceal the eagerness in his tone, Vincent declared, "That's precisely what Eve is presumed to have said to Adam, and you know what happened to them, at least according to the Bible."

"Uh huh. They suddenly realized that they were naked, and God cast them out of Paradise." Opening her arms, Catherine sank back to the bed. "But, I already know I'm naked, so I'm willing to take the chance... if you are?"

When he tried to unbutton his shirt and his fingers refused to cooperate, Vincent yanked it off over his head. Curling his hands around the waist of his jeans, he slid them down his legs, stepped out of them, and took the single pace necessary to bring him to the bed. Kneeling on the edge of the mattress, he reached out for the woman he cherished, murmuring throatily, "As long as you love me, I could never lose Paradise, Catherine, for that wondrous place surely lies within your embrace, and the sweet refuge of your body..."

Much later, as the lovers struggled to catch their breath, teasing eyes the color of spring grass locked to half-closed, satiated turquoise ones. Patting Vincent's perspiring face, Catherine smiled and went completely limp on top of him.

"Now then, wasn't that more satisfying than a cup of herbal tea and a muffin?"

Still fighting for breath, he groaned, "It was more satisfying than a full, six course meal."

"Only six, huh? I must be losing my touch." As one golden eyebrow arched, Catherine giggled and sat up. "Well, come on lazybones, if we're going to the Falls, we should start getting dressed..." Challenging eyes met his. "Unless of course, you'd rather walk through the tunnels just as we are?"

Certain that she was merely teasing him, Vincent was still more than a little startled by the audacity of her suggestion. "You wouldn't do something so... so utterly wanton," he proclaimed, affording her a guarded look.

Letting one hand trail down over his masculinity, Catherine retorted, "Surely after all that we've done these past days, you know that I would do anything with you - and for you?"

Trying to envision Father's face if two nude people simply strolled into the library to visit him, Vincent chuckled softly. "Dear Lord in Heaven, Father would have an apoplectic seizure."

"No, he wouldn't; he'd be too busy trying to cover up the entire tunnel community's eyes with only two hands." That said, Catherine slid to her feet and reached for his cloak. "I'm going to take a quick shower, and then we'll go, okay?"

Eyeing her and then the cloak, Vincent implored, "Surely you're going to wear more than... that?"

"Why?" Struggling to don the cloak as he did by swinging it up and back over her shoulders, Catherine was nearly yanked off of her feet by the sheer weight of the garment. Well, hadn't that been graceful? Finally draping it properly around her body, she pulled it tightly closed and walked

over to the wardrobe. Opening it, she took out two towels and a bar of herbal-scented soap. "Don't worry, no one will know."

Sitting up, Vincent sighed. "Except for me - hopefully." Taking in the scene before him, he wondered if Catherine realized how very petite she looked standing there wrapped in his voluminous cloak - and how utterly appealing?

Reaching the entry-way, she peered back at him and smiled. "I won't be long. Now, don't you go anywhere - not without me!" With that, she turned and quickly left the chamber.

'Not without me.'

Vincent stared at the deserted entry-way for what seemed to be a very long time, then a look of confusion came into his eyes.

'Not without me.' The phrase echoed through his mind, and seemed to punch a hole in his heart as more words merged with them. *'Vincent, you can't! I won't let you... I won't let you!'*

Swinging his legs over the edge of the mattress, he sat up and stared into the shadows. What was it about those words that tore at him? Catherine had said them to him before, this he knew, but... where... when? Why couldn't he remember? Frowning, he tried to think, but there was no memory of the exact time and place.

Suddenly, from within his consciousness, a gentle voice implored, *'Trust in your heart, and only in your heart. You've always had the power to remember, but not the courage - not really.'*

With that, images and sounds from the past began racing through his mind: The Whispering Gallery Bridge. A pledge; a pledge that took away so much, so much, yet gave back... everything. The grief. The promise - and the pain. Words. Words that decimated him - words that brought renewed hope.

'Not without me!'

Gasping as his heart began to hammer against his rib-cage, Vincent clamped his fingers around his left breast, trying to contain the ache there, and to catch his breath. Dear God, what was happening?! In truth, was there something about those words he didn't want to remember? Did they recall a span of time his mind rejected; an interval his heart simply refused to come to terms with?

Setting logic aside for the moment, he exhaled a lingering breath, then, closing his eyes, he did what the voice encouraged him to do and opened his heart to the past. Putting one hand to his chest as a cave shrouded in a bluish haze came into his minds-eye, he tensed warily. Yes, he knew this place... quite well. Too well. From what Father had told him of that night, this was where a dauntless Catherine had insisted on coming, all alone, to protect him from himself, and try to bring him back to her by... loving... him.

Nearly crying out as the mental image of two people swept through his mind, Vincent gripped the sides of the bed in trembling fingers. He couldn't make out their faces, but they were touching quite intimately, caressing each other, and kissing. Oh, such kisses; such love; such passion.

The image intensified. Softly feminine hands reaching out... coaxing... imploring. Other hands reaching up to entwine with them. Clawed hands. His hands - on Catherine, touching her delicate flesh, rolling her swiftly beneath him... urging her legs apart... guiding himself desperately... urgently, inside of her...

"No!" Half expecting to be caught up in a moment part of him still believed to be a time of madness and savagery, Vincent jerked to his feet. Putting one hand out in front of him and stumbling blindly across the room, he came up hard against the stone wall at the left side of his chamber. Burying his face against the stones, he curled his nails into them, moaning, "Oh God, please... no? I don't want to see this. Why am I being forced to bear witness to this?!"

'Trust in your heart,' the voice urged again, *'And remember love.'*

Wanting to run from the malevolent pictures his mind was calling forth, and from the voice piercing his brain, he turned around, bent forward, and curled his nails into the side of his desk.

Summoning all of his courage and all of his inner strength, he forced himself to allow the scene to evolve.

Trembling mightily as a rush of pure passion knifed through his body, Vincent gasped as the image of Catherine's face came into view. Her expression was loving, not apprehensive; her skin was flushed, not bruised - not torn by rough, calloused hands; her mouth looked soft and delicately swollen from his kisses. And her eyes, oh, her eyes - they were ablaze with love - for him. For him.

As all of the memories came flooding back, Vincent sank down to the edge of the bed and buried his face in his hands, remembering everything - all of it. And with the remembrance came a new inner peace. Even though he truly believed he hadn't hurt her that night, still a part of him had always refused to accept that truth. He accepted it now.

"Oh, thank God... thank God... I didn't hurt her. No part of me hurt her!" Sobbing in relief as the hard core of pain dissolved from around his soul, Vincent crossed his arms over his stomach and rocked back and forth on the bed, allowing himself to accept what had happened, and to trust in it. And in that acceptance, his tortured soul finally began to heal.

* * * * *

Late that afternoon, the lovers walked along hand-in-hand toward the cavern of the Triple Falls. greeting other members of the community they met on the winding paths of his world, Vincent paid scant attention to the sly looks thrown his way by a few of the older men and boys, nor did Catherine seem to notice the envious whispers of some of the teenage girls and unmarried women.

Strolling along beside his lady, Vincent kept his more solemn thoughts to himself. In just under four hours, all of... this... would come to an end. Turning his head slightly to the left, he blinked away tears and straightened his shoulders. No more such thoughts - not now. Glancing down at the fingers of his left hand that were laced through Catherine's, he curled the other hand into a tight fist. Not now.

Focusing his full attention on her as Catherine stopped short in the corridor, Vincent cast her a look of chagrin, thinking perhaps he had been walking too fast again.

But before he could offer an apology, she peered up and down the shadowed passageway, then looked up at him, observing, "We're finally alone."

Catching the impish look in her eyes, Vincent's mouth curved upward in a faint smile. "So it would appear."

"Can you hear anyone close-by?"

Tilting his head to one side, he listened for a moment. Although there were voices in the distance, they seemed to be moving in the opposite direction. "No."

"Good." Tugging him eagerly toward a darkened outcropping of rocks, she ducked behind one of them, exclaiming softly, "I've waited a very long time to do this."

Putting her hands to the front of his shirt, Catherine managed to catch Vincent off balance just enough to back him up against the stone wall. When he barely managed to secure his footing, she nearly knocked them both to the dirt floor by flinging herself up against him and throwing her arms around his neck.

Surprised by both her tenacity and her strength, Vincent wrapped his arms around her and laughed heartily. "Catherine, what are you doing?!"

Tilting her head back, she smiled at him, but instead of answering his question, asked one of her own - one she already knew the answer to. "Do you love me?"

"Since the night I found you, and every moment since."

"Will you do something for me?"

"Of course. What is it?"

"Pick me up?"

"Pick...? Do your feet hurt?"

"No."

Bending forward, he frowned and inspected her small feet. "Have you turned your ankle?"

Oh, honestly! "No." Yanking him upright by the front of his vest, Catherine held on to it tightly, her eyes flashing emerald in the half-light of the passageway. "I just want you to hold me."

"Oh." Lifting her easily into a loose embrace, he arched an eyebrow at her, waiting for what would happen next.

When his Beloved leaned forward and slowly edged her tongue along the curve of his mouth, Vincent finally grasped her intent - and knew in an instant exactly what was going to happen next.

Eyeing Vincent as he tucked in his shirt, Catherine smiled. "Have you gathered your wits about you yet?"

Returning her teasing look with an immensely sated one, he grunted, "Only just barely." Then, as though only now remembering exactly where they were, Vincent shook his head slowly back and forth. "Dear Lord in heaven, what were we thinking of? Anyone could have come along and... discovered us."

Catherine shrugged. "I don't think so; we were well hidden."

"Even so, they certainly would have... heard us," he accused, the love in his voice overriding the censure of the tone.

"They would have definitely heard you," she countered.

"Yes, they would have, wouldn't they?" Ducking his head, Vincent had the good grace to blush.

"But nobody did."

"Yet, someone could have," came an embarrassed whisper.

Taking him by the hand, Catherine locked adoring eyes to his. "But nobody did."

Before any more words could be exchanged, a rush of voices could be heard far down the passageway: "Mouse, slow down," a boy's voice called out, followed by a second one, "Yeah, we've got all afternoon!" Then, a feminine voice exclaimed, "Hey, wait a minute, will you, I got a damn rock in my sneaker!"

As Catherine and Vincent came to a bend in the corridor that diverged into two separate tunnels, they were nearly bowled over as Mouse came charging out of the one to the left, followed closely by Eric, Geoffrey, and Jamie. Quickly positioning himself between Catherine and the rush of exuberant young adults, he barely kept her from being hit full force.

"Hi, Vincent, hi, Catherine," Mouse gasped, hurrying past them. "Bye, Vincent, bye, Catherine..."

Reaching out a clawed hand to momentarily check his friend's feverish pace, Vincent clung tightly to the back of his shirt, asking, "Where are you going in such haste?"

Shifting the backpack he was wearing into a more comfortable position, Mouse smiled at his two favorite people in the world. "Big project." Eyeing them thoughtfully, he questioned, "Wanna help?"

After exchanging glances with Catherine, Vincent shook his head. "No, thank you. Maybe another time." Then, a look of apprehension came into his eyes. "A big project, you say?"

Before Mouse could elaborate, Jamie piped up reassuringly, "Don't worry, it's okay. We're just going to help Elizabeth sand down some walls for her paintings."

"I see." Still uncertain, he eyed Mouse, thinking, 'But that wasn't a 'big project'. What mischief was he up to now?'

Impatient to be on his way, the young inventor added hopefully, "Father said we could go."

When Catherine put one hand on his arm, Vincent sighed. "Very well then, but please be careful?"

"We will. Promise." Gathering up his friends, Mouse waved them off ahead of him and turned to smile shyly at Catherine. "See ya later."

"Uh huh. Say hello to Elizabeth for me, won't you, and tell her I'll be down to see her very soon - maybe tomorrow."

At that statement, Vincent clenched his jaw and reclaimed her hand, asking hoarsely, "Shall we go?"

Assuming that the frown creasing his brow was concern for their friends, Catherine smiled up at him and squeezed his fingers gently. "They'll be okay."

Glancing back over his left shoulder, he eyed them doubtfully. "I certainly hope so."

"Mouse, you pain," Jamie's voice echoed far down the corridor, "If you don't slow down, and right now, I swear I'm going to kick you in the butt!"

Laughing at the threatened mayhem, Catherine remarked, "They're such fine young people, aren't they?"

"Yes, they are."

Without reflecting on her choice of words, she announced wistfully, "If we were ever blessed with a child, I'd want him, or her, to be exactly like them, wouldn't you?"

Keeping his eyes focused on the corridor directly ahead of them, Vincent murmured, "Knowing full well that any child of mine could quite possibly have my... physical attributes, you would still... want this baby?"

Surprised that he would even discuss this, Catherine hugged him as hard as she could, replying, "With all of my heart, with every part of myself, for it would not only be my child, it would be yours - a very special child."

"And if this... special child... were to be a son," Vincent breathed, barely managing to get the words past the rawness in his throat, "what name would you chose for him?"

"Well, my first choice would be to name him after you." Hesitating, she eyed him. "But, if you didn't agree to that, then I'd like to call our son Jacob, after your father, and Charles, after mine."

"Yes." Glancing up at the tunnel ceiling, Vincent's aching heart soared far beyond its limits. "...Jacob Charles would be a fine and fitting name for... our son."

Settling back in Vincent's lap at the Triple Falls, Catherine closed her eyes and smiled as he wrapped his arms across her shoulders. Placing her hands over his, she bent forward slightly and brushed her lips over the tips of his fingers. Scanning the cavern and noting varied tints of blue, pink, and lilac shifting and wavering into a rainbow arc far above them, she sat forward in his embrace and pointed to it, exclaiming, "Oh, isn't that lovely!"

"Yes, it is." Saying nothing more for several moments, he tightened his embrace and tried to summon the courage to share his private thoughts with her; words he had never given her before, knowing that they must be said now, for he would never have another chance to speak them aloud - at least not in this life.

"When you left me, that first time, and went back to your own world to begin your life anew, I came to this place. Sitting in this exact same spot, I remember feeling... rather sorry for myself."

"Because I left," Catherine stated softly.

"Because I had to let you leave." After touching his lips to the crown of her head, Vincent rested his left cheek against it. "As I sat here, new thoughts and emotions lanced, through me - among them was a vast sense of aloneness I had never experienced before, not that deeply. I knew then that somehow, I was... connected to you, forever, almost as if we had become one heart... one soul. Even though I thought never to see you again, I was joined to you for the remainder of my life, Catherine."

"Our Bond had already begun?"

"Oh... yes." Blinking away tears, he went on, "In my wildest imaginings, I had never dreamt to feel such an emotional pull toward another living soul. To feel it happening, growing inside of my mind, my heart, and my... body, terrified me."

"Because of what happened with Lisa," Catherine whispered. Turning in his embrace, she lay her cheek to Vincent's breast and listened to the cadence of his wildly pounding heart. "You know that I would never pull away from you, or hurt you, my Love; never."

"I know it now, but I didn't know it then, nor could I trust what I felt emanating from you. Oh, how I longed to trust those feelings," he exclaimed fervently. "I wanted to go to you, to run to you, to talk about them, but I didn't have that kind of courage - not then. You came from a world that had no place for me in it. What could I offer you? What could I hope for that wouldn't bring me pain - one I would never have survived a second time?"

"You tried to close yourself off from me, then, didn't you?"

"Yes, I tried... very hard."

"But, you couldn't do it?"

"Oh, I learned to control my need of you moment to moment, Beloved, but no more than that." Letting his fingers drift through her hair, Vincent brought the silken tresses to his lips. "Fearing that if I didn't learn to contain these new and extraordinary emotions roiling through me, consuming me, they would surely destroy me, I tried to bury them deeply; to confine them to a part of myself no one knew... would ever know - or so I thought then."

Sighing, he stared out over the cavern. "And so, over those eight wretched months, we both tried to pick up the threads of our lives again."

Nodding her head, Catherine admitted, "It was very hard to do that, without you. I was as confused as you were. Part of me wanted to go to you and never leave you again; another part of me was bound to my father, and to things that really had no importance, when I think about them now."

"Only God knows how hard I fought to stay away from you. Oh, how I fought that need - that hunger."

Touching the edge of his jaw, Catherine buried her face into the front of his vest, murmuring thankfully, "I'm very glad you didn't win that particular battle, Vincent."

"So am I. Oh, so am I."

With every beat of his heart stealing away more and more of their precious moments, Vincent brought Catherine's chin up with the pad of a trembling finger and stared deeply into her eyes. Renouncing the pain these words would bring, for they were part of a time in his life that held only grief and regret, he uttered them solemnly, lovingly - for they would be said to her directly this time, and not whispered to himself, alone in his chamber.

Knowing that she would assume he was speaking of another time in their lives, he began, "There was a moment, when the way was still new, and I was afraid to hope, you put your hand on mine. Nothing had ever felt like that to me - like your touch. I wanted to weep. You turned and looked at me; your eyes were filled with dancing light, and I was bathed in your warmth. And I believed in that moment, that even for me, all things were possible. In that moment, in your light, I felt what it is to be... beautiful.

"How many lives were touched by you; how many lives were transformed by your courage to give - and to love? How many became beautiful in your light? We promised always to share the truth,

always, but, Catherine, there was a truth beyond anything... beyond everything... I had ever known, ever dreamed. It was the truth of all you gave, of all you sacrificed - for me. The truth of your love humbled me, silenced me, and the truth I could never share with you, was the truth of how deeply I loved you."

Moved to tears by such a tender, heartfelt pledge, and knowing how privileged she was to hear such words from this oh, so special man, Catherine stroked Vincent's bowed head and held him close.

Unable to confine the sobs rising in his throat, he enfolded the woman he cherished into a fierce embrace and kept the remainder of the words to himself - words that cracked his heart wide open all over again: *'I will remember. I will remember every moment; every word; every look; every touch. Our love lives, it will live forever. Nothing will destroy us. Love doesn't die. You're safe, you're safe, and now, sleep... my Love.'*

Weeping with him for all of the lost years, for all of the special moments they had missed that would never come again, she rocked him gently back and forth. Seeking to ease both his sorrow and her own, she crooned a lullaby from her childhood and held him safe and sheltered within the haven of her arms, thinking, *'Yes, Love, my Dearest Love, cry it out, let go of the pain. I promised Father that I would give you a happy life, and I will. I will. From this moment, the only tears you'll shed will be ones of joy.'*

* * * * *

Some hours later, after gazing at the lengthening shadows drifting over the walls of the cavern, Vincent closed his eyes and took a steadying breath. It was time to go. Using every bit of inner strength he possessed, he rose to his feet and brought Catherine up with him.

Clasping his hand, she admitted, "I was just about to suggest we start home."

"Oh?"

"Uh huh." She shrugged. "I don't know why, but suddenly I'm very tired."

Just as he was about to bend forward and gather her into his arms, Vincent straightened again at the sound of someone running towards them, then frowned as Jamie burst through the entry-way. Her hair was disheveled, her face smeared with blood and dirt, and her eyes were filled with obvious panic.

"Oh, I was hoping you'd be down here," she gasped. Fighting to get the words out, she stumbled forward. "Mouse... hurt. Tried to use a new 'gizmo'. The machine exploded and then a big chunk of the wall fell right on top of him!"

Catching Jamie in his arms as her legs seemed to give way, Vincent's eyes locked to Catherine's face. No. This couldn't be happening. Not now. Oh God, please, not now! His glance shifted frantically between the two women. What was he supposed to do, leave the woman he loved alone here, in this place, knowing full well he would never see her again?!

He had planned to guide Catherine to their chamber and hold her close until the very end, then follow her as quickly as he could. If he left her now, he would never get back in time. There simply wasn't enough time.

"Vincent, come on!" Jamie cried. "What are you waiting for? Mouse is hurt bad. Didn't you hear me - part of the wall fell on him! You gotta get him out!"

"Get Cullen to help you, or Kanin, or Pascal, or someone else; anyone else," he commanded hoarsely.

"They're all working in the lower tunnels." Her eyes lit on Catherine, pleading desperately for her support. "There's only William, Father, the kids, and some of the women left in the Hub. They're not strong enough to move the rock that's pinning Mouse."

As Catherine opened her mouth to speak, Jamie whirled around to confront Vincent.

"We need you!" Pinning him with an icy glare, she gripped the front of his shirt. Using all of her strength, she tried to shake him into action, yelling, "Are you going to help or not?!"

Yanking free of her and slowly backing away, Vincent tried to harden his heart against the frightened look in Jamie's eyes.

"No." As her expression altered to one of utter shock, he held his hands out in front of him in a gesture of apology. "I... can't... go with you right now. How can I make you understand that I cannot go?"

When Catherine gasped and put one hand to her mouth, he started toward her, then froze, knowing there was no way to explain this to her. Yet, if he didn't go with Jamie, what would happen to Mouse? What of his life? Where was the justice in this? God in Heaven, what was he supposed to do?

"Vincent..."

Knowing what Catherine was about to ask of him, he shook his head adamantly back and forth. "I won't leave you. Please, don't ask this of me?"

"Then, I'll come with you."

"No, absolutely not. You... cannot be there."

"But why?" Struggling to fathom his reasons for saying such a thing, her stomach tightened as she came up hard against an inner wall Vincent had suddenly thrown between them. When she reached out to him through their connection, there was... nothing.

Thinking to discuss this with him later, she put one hand over his heart, urging, "My Love, you must go - you must. Mouse needs you."

When Vincent started to look away, Catherine tightened her fingers around the tensed curve of his chin.

"Only you can help him now. I'll go to the hospital chamber and see if I can help Father and Mary set up - just in case. If they don't need me, then I'll meet you somewhere along the way home."

Straightening his shoulders, Vincent nodded in agreement. "If you... compel me to do this, then... so be it." Seized by a sense of hopelessness mingled with utter rage, he growled low in his throat, continuing, "I must always do what is **expected** of me, mustn't I?" Anguished eyes met hers.

Momentarily disregarding Jamie's presence, he bowed his head until only Catherine would be able to hear his words. "I love you. I shall always love only you. Will you... kiss me good-by?"

Knowing that even mere moments could prove crucial to Mouse's well-being, she pressed a hard, quick kiss to his mouth, then took him by the hand and led him in Jamie's direction. Watching anxiously as the younger woman dashed out of the cavern ahead of him, Catherine called out, "Good luck."

Just at the threshold, Vincent reeled backwards a step and flung one hand out to grasp at the stone wall. Freeing an agonized gasp as despair knifed through his body, he slowly turned his head to look back at Catherine one last time. Locking tortured eyes to hers and scrutinizing her lovely face for a single beat of his heart, he moaned softly, "Farewell, my Dearest Love. My... only Love." Blinded by tears, he loosened his grip on the wall, turned, and stumbled out of the cavern. "...farewell."

* * * * *

Eyeing Father from beneath his dirt-spattered bangs, Mouse waited for the yelling to begin. This time, he had really done a bad thing. Jamie told him that Vincent was 'really mad - madder than mad'. When this muddle, as Mary called it, was fixed, he'd go to Vincent and tell him 'sorry' - didn't mean to make him leave his Catherine at the Falls.

"All right now," Father advised, approaching the table, "this is going to sting quite a bit, but we must set your leg properly, and that requires sedation."

Mouse frowned. "Seda...?"

Using a term he could grasp, Father explained, "I have to knock you out."

"Already been knocked out once today," the younger man grumbled.

"Yes, I know," the tunnel elder growled back. Glaring at him over the rims of his spectacles, he added glumly, "We shall discuss that another time, when you are feeling better, and at great length, I assure you."

Eyeing the very large, nasty-looking needle in Father's hand, one that Mouse knew was for him, he squinched his eyes up real tight, thinking, '*Dumb machine was supposed to work - worked when he tried it out. Just wanted to help Elizabeth; wanted to surprise Jamie, too. Didn't know the stupid gizmo would go WHAM right in his face.*'

"Here we go," Father announced solemnly. "Now, take a deep breath and stay very still..."

"Yow-w-w!" Hollering as he was stabbed in the arm, Mouse opened his eyes and then blinked rapidly. Hey, how many candles were in here, anyway? Looked like about a jillion and they were all wiggly and wobbly. As his eyes fluttered closed again, he thought, '*Father didn't lie, that... needle... really...*'

* * * * *

With his heart pounding in his ears, and his legs pumping furiously, eating up ground at a speed that even he couldn't sustain for much longer, Vincent's boots kicked up swirls of thick, granular dust as he accelerated the pace.

Although Catherine had told him she would meet him at the hospital chamber, she hadn't been there. When he asked Mary if she had seen her, she said Catherine had been there very briefly, then she had seemed to... simply vanish.

'*No!*' his soul screamed, '*She was alive! She had to be... she had to be!*'

Careening off of an outcropping of stone, and then another one that tore through the sleeve of his shirt, leaving a jagged slash in his upper arm, Vincent dismissed the pain by snarling at it. The tear in his flesh was as nothing, the blaze of heat searing his oxygen-starved lungs was nothing, nor were the talons of pain squeezing at his chest. Nothing mattered but reaching his chamber. Catherine would be there - she must be there waiting for him to return to her - to come home. He could still feel her with him; still feel her heart beating alongside his.

Yet, even as he pounded through the corridors, struggling desperately to convince himself that she was alive, his more rational side was denying all possibility of such a miracle. One part of him was convinced that he had made an error regarding the time - and another side of him knew this to be untrue.

"Oh, my Love, please," he gasped, taking the final turn in the passageway, "Please be there?"

Skidding to a halt at the chamber entrance, Vincent put one hand to his heart, gulped air into his lungs, and stepped over the threshold. Staring at the shadowed, empty room, he sagged back against the wall as the overwhelming silence crushed the last of his hopes - and ended his dreams forever.

Sobbing, "No..." he turned and slammed his two fists down against the stones again and again. "No!" Even the Bond had betrayed him; even that wasn't to be trusted anymore. Closing it down completely, he narrowed his eyes and turned around.

Viewing the cheerless, cluttered room that had been his home... no... his prison, for so many years, suddenly he despised it, and absolutely refused to spend another second in this wretched, lonely place.

Instinctively reaching for his cloak, Vincent stared down at it for a single beat of his heart. Studying the cumbersome woolen garment through resentful eyes, he found that he hated it - he hated the purpose of it, the idea of it. Nearly engulfed by a frenzied rage, he curled his nails into the material, feeling a sudden urge to rip it to shreds. Perhaps he wouldn't be allowed to be with Catherine after all, and if he wasn't, then the alternative site would surely welcome him as he was, cloaked or not. Oh yes, beasts were most welcome... there.

Still, the behavioral patterns of a lifetime didn't alter as easily as one would wish them to.

Flinging the cloak about his shoulders and not even bothering to glance at the chamber one last time, Vincent turned on his heel and strode out. Seven days earlier, a covenant had been made. At no little cost, emotionally as well as mentally, he had kept to his part of the bargain, and now someone had damned well better keep to theirs...

* * * * *

Paying no attention to the muffled voices and swells of music echoing above him, Vincent strode directly to the center of the Whispering Gallery bridge. Not thinking about it twice, he took hold of the ropes and tensed his legs, preparing to catapult himself over the edge - only to find himself thrown backward very hard.

The growl that started in his belly rose to his chest, and then to his throat. Bringing his hands up, he held his clenched fists aloft, bellowing, "You would dare to interfere with me again?! It was agreed that I would not be denied this. Liar! Where are you?" When there was no response, he leapt to his feet and shifted his gaze to the left, and then to the right. "Curse you, take a physical form!"

"I'm here," came a voice from the shadows. As the gowned woman stepped out, abashed green eyes met his. "Forgive me if I hurt you, but I had to stop you, and... I... I simply couldn't think of another way - just then."

Barely managing to keep from lashing out at her, Vincent said nothing. Letting his shoulders sag, he stayed utterly still for a moment, then lunged sideways for the ropes - and once again found himself hauled back from the edge. Frustrated and angry beyond a way of defining it, he jerked upward into a menacing crouch, promising, "If you do that again, I shall strike you." Then, he grunted contemptuously. "As if that threat could make a difference to the likes of you."

Moving closer, the Angel placed one hand on his shoulder. "Please? You must listen to me."

"Silence!" he bellowed. "You lied to me once - you shan't do it twice." Yanking free of her hand, Vincent jerked backward, hissing, "Don't... touch... me."

Kneeling in front of him, the woman cast him a highly shamed look. Oh dear, how was she going to say this to him? Taking a deep breath, she exhaled it with the words, "An extremely serious error has been made." Her eyes locked to his. "And I made it." When Vincent made no response, the Angel fiddled nervously with the hem of her gown and bowed her head, continuing, "I was given permission to grant you seven days with your Catherine, but... I forgot something very important, and it's too late to revise the path I've set you on now."

Getting to his feet and gesturing to the crevasse at his left, Vincent glared at her. "The only 'path' I want, or need, is down there."

Rising gracefully, she kept her distance, not wanting to agitate him any more than she already had. Knowing, of course, that there would only three words that would get through to him at this moment, she uttered them slowly and clearly. "Catherine is alive."

The maned head jerked back as though she had slapped him. "What loathsome deceit would you have me believe now? Please, go... away?" A shudder swept through Vincent's body. Putting one hand over his eyes, he groaned, "The 'bargain' was for seven days. Seven. No more than that."

"Oh, I gave you so much more than you have yet to comprehend." Observing him guardedly, she edged closer and shook her head, muttering half aloud, "I truly can't fathom exactly how it happened. As a rule, I'm usually so thorough."

Glancing at the ceiling, she sighed wearily. "But, I wasn't very thorough this time. As a result, I've had to do an awful lot of explaining to my... superiors, and it wasn't an easy task, I assure you."

His eyes glacial, Vincent fairly spat the words. "Oh, am I to stay here then, and listen to your problems? Am I supposed to console you?"

"Don't you understand? My 'problem' is your salvation." She started to reach out to him, then hesitated and let her hand fall to her side. "Won't you trust me - one last time? Please?"

Vincent merely stared at her.

"You see, this sort of a pledge between my kind and... yours, isn't made very often, but when it is, it must be done precisely. The words exchanged must be explicit on all of the issues, as well as on the dictates of the vow itself." Frowning, she admitted, "And that is where I erred - I neglected to clarify one of the most important aspects of the covenant."

The command was abrupt and spoken in a flat, indifferent tone. "Explain it now."

Seeing that she had his attention, at least for the moment, the woman nodded. "Here, in this world, the concept of time is very different from..." She gestured upward.

The eyes focused on her narrowed impatiently. "Say it plainly, and say it quickly."

"Very well." Smiling faintly, the Angel gave Vincent back his dreams; all of them. "In not altering the span of time properly, or explaining it to you as I was supposed to, I granted you and Catherine seven of our days together, not seven of yours."

Vincent moved to stand toe-to-toe with her. "And precisely what is the span of one of your days?"

"Ten earthly years." At that, Vincent's eyes went widely startled, and his mouth opened, but he seemed to choke on whatever he was trying to give voice to. Taking him by both hands, the Spirit squeezed them gently. "It's true. It's true. I have given you ten of our years for each of your seven days, Vincent."

"S... Seventy... years?" In another life, the Angel's fingers would have been crushed from the strength of his grip. Barely managing to voice the words a second time, he gasped, "You gave me seventy **years** with Catherine?!"

"Yes, and I..."

"Oh God, I can't believe it! If this is true...!" Pulling the unsuspecting woman off of her feet, Vincent hugged her so hard she thought never to draw a proper breath again. "Thank you, my friend; my dear, dear friend." Beaming at her, he set her down to the bridge. "Thank you for being so 'forgetful'."

Taking a deep breath and relaxing his inner hold on the Bond, he cried out as a sensation of warmth spread throughout his body, then, flinging his head back, Vincent laughed joyously. "It wasn't misleading me, it was proclaiming that I hadn't lost her, and I refused to believe!" After hugging his diminutive companion one more time, he turned and sprinted out of the Gallery, crying out the one word, the one name, the one truth, that could bring such a look of sheer exaltation into his eyes.

* * * * *

Standing with her arms folded across her breasts, Catherine eyed the empty chamber and sighed. Well, Vincent seemed to have disappeared... again. He hadn't been in the hospital chamber, at least not when she had gone there, and he was still blocking their connection. Without it, she hadn't been able to find him anywhere, and he hadn't acknowledged her inquiry on the pipes, either. Where on earth was he?

'Catherine!

As the sound of her name exploded through their empathic union, followed by a sensation of overwhelming joy, she shivered, took a deep breath, and put one hand over her heart. Oh, that was better. Now, she could breathe again. She must remind Vincent that he had promised to share everything with her from now on, the good as well as the bad. Whatever reason, or reasons, he thought he had for keeping her at a distance these last hours, surely the problem could have been discussed, then overcome together? Besides, he knew that it frightened her when she could only feel a single heart beating in her breast.

"Oh, that man..." Swiping her hair out of her eyes, Catherine turned and started out of the chamber. When she got her hands on him, was he ever going to get a lecture on good manners. Honestly, closing off the Bond like that without even discussing it...

Just at that moment, the subject of her emotional turmoil filled the chamber archway. "Catherine... Catherine..." Hoarsely murmuring her name over and over again, Vincent reached out and yanked her up hard against his chest. "Thanks be to God..."

'Well,' she thought, burrowing happily into him, *'someone is certainly glad to see me.'*

"You're here waiting for me, as I prayed you would be." Sinking to his knees as these last seven days finally overwhelmed him, Vincent buried his face against her stomach. Trembling with relief, he began to weep, then he laughed, his words tumbling out a choked fusion of pain and joy. "You are... here."

As she bent forward to kiss the top of his head, Catherine's brow furrowed. Realizing that something, or someone, had upset him terribly, she murmured reassuringly, "Of course I'm here. Where else would I be?"

Clutching her fiercely and swallowing the lump in his throat, Vincent gulped, "Where else indeed?" Glancing up, he managed the barest of smiles. "There is so much I have to tell you, to explain to you and share with you, but the words... don't come easily."

As the shimmering candlelight washed over Vincent's face, the tears in his eyes, and the evidence of earlier ones on his dust-spattered cheeks, were brought sharply into focus. Seeing them, Catherine frowned and patted him gently on the left cheek. "What is it? What's happened?"

Putting one hand to his heart, he tried to find a way to begin, but right now nothing he could think of made the least bit of sense. For seven days he had wanted desperately to discuss all of these experiences with Catherine, and now that the opportunity had been afforded him, he simply couldn't speak of it.

Seeming to understand, Catherine stroked his face lightly with the tips of her fingers. "Something has brought you deep anguish, hasn't it?" When Vincent nodded his head and burrowed into her arms again, she knelt down and rested her mouth at the curve of his left ear, murmuring, "The words will come."

Clutching her as though she was the only thing left of sanity in a world gone mad, Vincent groaned, "And those words will surely break your heart, and mine. Oh, Catherine, I have been so frightened..." Seized by gulping sobs that left him shaken to the depths of his soul, he couldn't go on.

"Shh, it's all right." Hoping the memory would soothe his apprehensions, she rocked him gently back and forth, crooning, "You're safe. You're safe now."

"Yes, I'm safe... now." As a fierce shudder traveled the length of his body, Vincent met her eyes. "And so are you."

"I'll always be safe, as long as I'm..." Suddenly aware of a warm stickiness beneath her palm, Catherine glanced down at her hand, then at his torn shirt and the congealed blood on his arm. Tentatively reaching out, she eased the ripped material away from his skin to examine the wound more closely, gasping, "Who did this to you?!"

"What?" Glancing down at the injury, he furrowed his brow, trying to remember, then hunched his shoulders. "At the moment, I... I have no recollection of exactly how it happened. A bit of carelessness on my part, I would imagine."

"Uh huh." Shaking her head back and forth, Catherine eyed him glumly. "I thought I was bad. Honestly, in the space of an hour, you can get into more mischief."

When Vincent merely gazed at her, his expression that of an unruly but loving child accepting a scolding, she arched an eyebrow at him. Keeping him focused on her instead of on his emotional turmoil, at least temporarily, she observed dryly, "You've got so many holes in you already, I'm surprised your body doesn't make whistling sounds every time you move." That said, she started to get to her feet. "Come on. You know that Father will have..."

"Please, not yet?" Urging her back into his embrace, Vincent rested his forehead against her shoulder and made a great effort to stop trembling. "For now, I want to be alone here, with you."

"But your arm must hurt terribly."

"It does." Suddenly jerking to his feet and sweeping Catherine up into his arms, Vincent began whirling her around and around the chamber. "The ache is fierce, and I thank God that I am alive to feel it!" Continuing his frantic spinning until the desk was knocked sideways and the rug covering the chamber floor was a jumble at his feet, he finally collapsed to the bed, his words running together. "We are both alive, and I love you, and I shall never, ever let you go again."

Grunting as Vincent tightened his hold on her, Catherine blinked rapidly and shook her head from side-to-side, trying to regain her equilibrium. My goodness, what on earth had happened to cause that reaction?!

Before she could voice the question, Vincent buried one hand in her hair, imploring, "Never leave me, Catherine? Please, never... again." With that, he took her mouth with an unbridled passion that both surprised and delighted her.

When Vincent finally eased away long enough for both of them to catch their breath, Catherine sank back to the pillows, smiling as he eagerly followed her down. Sensing that his emotions were a little calmer now, she held him tightly, enjoying the feeling of his long, powerful body pressed against hers. As the deep shudders passing through him eased, then seemed to taper off to a more manageable level, she smoothed back the wild ruffle of hair from Vincent's face and searched his eyes.

"Are you all right?"

"No. But I shall be, given enough time."

"Do you want to talk about it yet?"

"I don't want to... but I have to."

"Why do I have the feeling that you're about to tell me something rather disturbing, and more than a little frightening?"

"Because it's... true." Sighing heavily and loosening his fingers from her waist, Vincent leaned slightly away from her. Loathe to be parted from her even that much, he afforded Catherine just enough room to breathe. Trying to focus his thoughts, he smiled hesitantly. "And when I share these events with you, my Love, you may conclude that I have lost my mind entirely."

"Oh, I suppose a little madness is okay." Acknowledging his smile with one that seemed to illuminate each and every shadowed niche of the chamber, Catherine laced the fingers of her left hand through his. "And if you are mad, it seems to be a very fine madness indeed."

Settling down in her embrace, he took a deep breath. "Do you remember what I told you of the events that occurred when I... couldn't... go with you to your special place from childhood - the house in Connecticut?"

"Of course. Even though I tried very hard to reassure you, you were so angry with yourself for disappointing me. You told me about a dream you had that night, and about a woman who looked very much like me."

"She didn't merely look like you, Beloved," he contradicted silently. "She was you, or at least the way I had always imagined you to be at that time in our lives."

Nodding her head, Catherine thought back. "You said that this... woman... revealed another life to you, one that..." A shiver went through her. "...didn't include me."

Blinking away tears, Vincent nodded his head. "And I have discovered what that sort of an existence was like, Catherine, believe me. I've seen that so-called 'life'; I lived it for four long, wretched years - if you would call it being alive."

Looking puzzled, she echoed, "You 'lived it'?"

"Perhaps a more fitting choice of words would be I survived it, for that span of years truly wasn't lived, it was... endured." Putting one hand to the side of her face, Vincent studied it lovingly for a moment before continuing. "Until the night came when I simply couldn't endure it for another moment..."

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Sometime later, as Vincent afforded her a few moments to grasp the full extent of his agonized narrative, Catherine reached out a trembling hand to take the linen handkerchief he held out to her. "Th... thank you." After swiping at her eyes, she blew her nose vigorously and tried very hard to stop crying.

She had died. In that other life, she had borne Vincent's son, and then died. And the baby had died, too. More tears welled up in her eyes. Jacob. Now, she understood why Vincent had asked her, earlier today, what she would have named their son, for he had known the boy, and raised him alone for four brief, anguished years.

"Jacob. Our son. Oh, Vincent..." Putting both hands over her face as he drew her into his arms, Catherine wept bitterly, sobbing, "I want him back. I want him back...!"

"So do I." Rocking her gently back and forth, he wept with her. "Oh, so do I."

Gasping as a searing pain squeezed at her chest, then seemed to continue in a downward direction to the center of her womb, Catherine buried her face into the front of his shirt. Trying to imagine all that this dear soul had been through, she clung to him, weeping for him, for their child, and lastly, for herself.

* * * * *

Rising slowly, not wanting to disturb the woman curled up next to him, Vincent lit the two candles on his desk, then started to ease back on the bed as quickly and quietly as he could.

"It's all right, Catherine murmured hoarsely. "I'm awake.

Going to his knees at the side of the bed, he lifted her hair away from her face and peered down at her, his eyes mirroring his concern. "Please tell me what you're thinking, and how you're feeling?"

Knowing, of course, that he would perceive the truth anyway, Catherine sighed, admitting, "I feel terrible... hopeful, loved and..." Sitting up and swinging her legs over the edge of the mattress, she hunched her slender shoulders dispiritedly. "There are so many conflicting emotions tearing through me right now, I... I can't sort them out."

"You will in time," Vincent murmured reassuringly. "We have seventy years to discuss what life, and the 'fell clutch of circumstance' has done to us, and to come to terms with it."

"Yes, we do, don't we?" Managing a shaky smile, Catherine stared at him for a moment, then took a deep breath and straightened her shoulders. For the past hours, she had been wallowing in her own pain. What about his pain, his grief? Focusing on Vincent, she eyed the dried blood on the middle of his arm. "You really should have Father take a look at that wound, you know."

Shaking his head to the contrary, he insisted, "There are other, far more important 'wounds' to attend to right now." Taking her hand in his, he brushed his mouth over the tips of her fingers. "At this moment, your grieving heart is foremost in my thoughts."

"As yours is, in mine." Then, forcing logic aside for the moment, Catherine frowned, asking, "Do you truly believe that the woman you met on the bridge was some sort of a... a... Heavenly Messenger?"

Well aware of what she was struggling to believe, and to accept, Vincent met her eyes and smiled. "You are here with me, Dearest. What other conclusion can there be?" Then, staring down at his hands, he shook his head back and forth, murmuring, "Yet, why she would deign to appear to the likes of... me, is something I cannot..."

Before he could say anything more, Catherine cupped his chin in the palm of her hand. Bringing his head up to stare into the face and eyes that forged her world into a steadfast, loving place, she examined Vincent with infinite tenderness and devotion. "I don't want you to think of yourself in that way ever again. To my eyes, you are..."

Knowing full well what she was about to say, Vincent rested one finger gently on the curve of her mouth and shook his head back and forth.

As that magnificent head bowed, she grasped Vincent firmly by the jaw and urged it back up again. When their eyes met, Catherine smiled and blinked away her tears. Yes, there was her destiny. In those radiant eyes was her future, and so many new and wondrous possibilities she had never dared to hope for - until now. In those shyly adoring eyes, she could see all of the children waiting to be born - and the first of them would be named Jacob.

Wanting him never to think of himself as ugly or unworthy of being loved again, she entreated, "Won't you believe me? Won't you at least try? If that woman, or Angel, is truly a part of me, then she **must** see you as I do; as I've always seen you. No matter what you would say to the contrary, my Love, or how adamantly you would deny the words to be true, to me, you are very beautiful."

When the look in Vincent's eyes announced that he was listening to her, and truly hearing her words, Catherine continued in a soft, but unfaltering voice. "My dearest Love, to an Angel we are all one perfect child - with many different faces."

And somewhere, beyond the confines of earthly trials and tribulations, in a place where dreams come true, a small boy with tousled, honey-brown curls tugged on the flowing gown of the pretty lady standing next to him, asking excitedly, "Is it time? Can I go yet?"

Smiling down at him, she replied, "No child, not yet, but soon."

"How soon?" Eyeing her knowingly, he gasped, "Do I have to wait a whole day?! That's an awful long time - 'specially up here."

"No, you don't have to wait a 'whole day," the woman replied, laughing softly to herself. "Would you agree to staying here, with me, for... oh... the length of one more story?"

"I guess so. You tell really good ones." Anxious to get himself 'borned', the child sighed impatiently and studied the people below him, observing, "You know what, my mommy looks just like you."

Peering down, the Angel eyed her mirror image. "Yes, she does, doesn't she?"

Thinking of all of the people he had met in this place, Jacob frowned. "But, my daddy sure don't look like anyone up here."

"No, he doesn't. There is no one else like him - anywhere. He's very, very special."

Being an inquisitive child, he piped up, "Even more special than Angels?"

Hunching her winged shoulders, which caused a single, lustrous white feather to spiral downward, she observed quietly, "That is something you shall have to decide for yourself."

Eyeing his father thoughtfully, Jacob examined him from every possible angle; from his long, amber hair, to his teeth and claws, right down to his big feet. Reaching a decision, he nodded his head and smiled. "I agree with mommy – **my** daddy is bootiful."

"I think so, too." Smiling and taking him by the hand, the Angel gestured to a gleaming, white marble bench just to their left. "Well now, what story would you like to hear?"

"You know the one." Swinging their joined hands between them, as most children would, Jacob skipped along next to his special friend. "It begins 'Once upon a time...'"

I see your face, and feel your heartache. I see the trace of the tears you have cried. The silent sound of the words left unspoken, you were strong enough to hide.

All of your life, no one's ever shown you, what it's really like to have someone to hold you.

In the arms of love, heaven's just a heartbeat away. I'll be your light in the dark, your shield from the storm, your shelter from the rain. And in the arms of love, I'll lift you above all the madness – all of the pain. And you'll be safe and warm here, in the arms of love.

We search this world for a little compassion, for just one look through the eyes of a child, for one more chance to be a believer, while there's still a chance in time.

*All our life with no one there beside you. Close your eyes and let the moment find you. High above the world, where dreams are sailing, far beyond the brightest, shining star – where everything you've waited for is waiting, I'll keep you far from harm, here in the arms of love. **

- Arms Of Love: Columbia Records / Michael Bolton

END