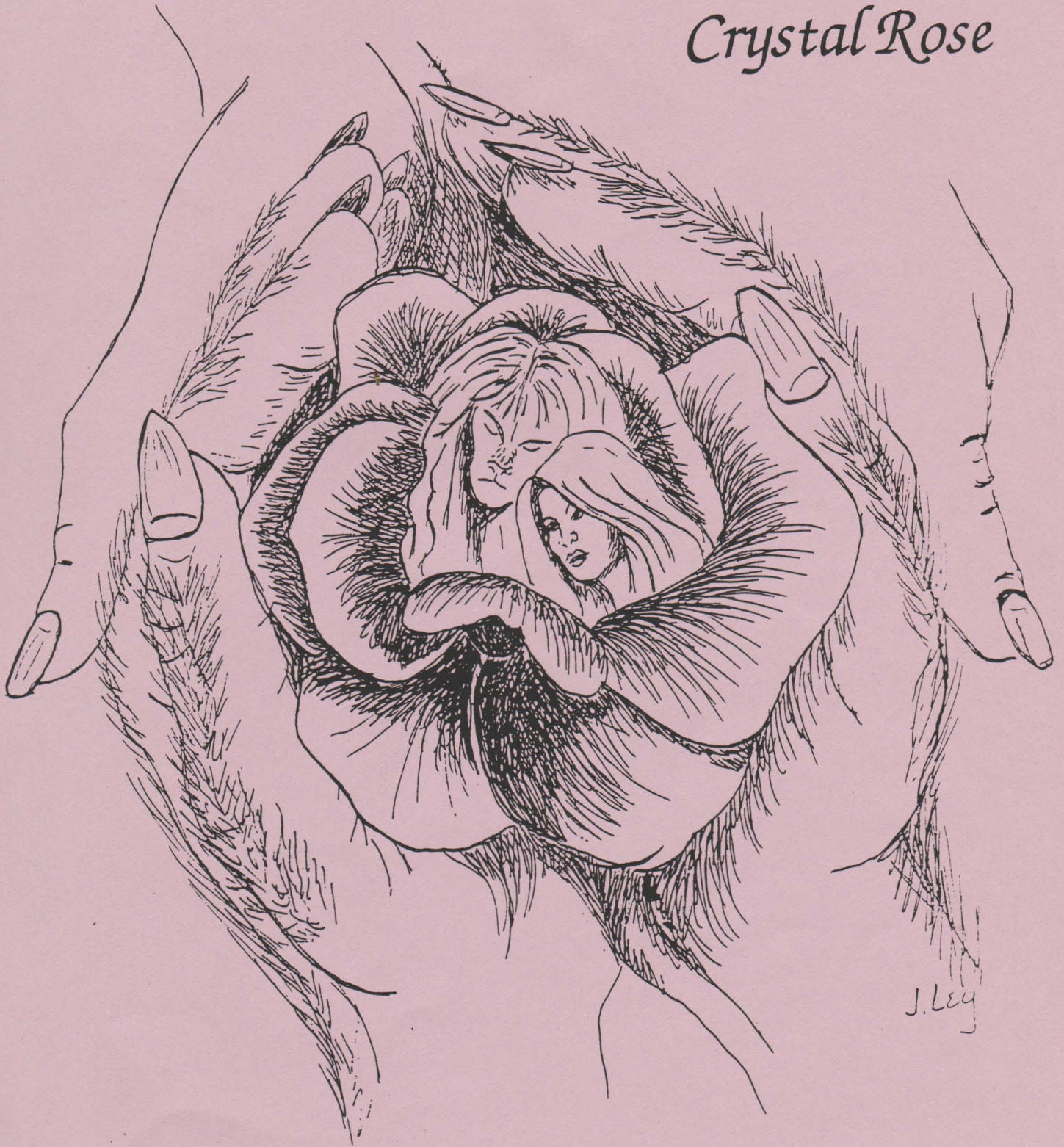


*Within the
Crystal Rose*



Edited by Margaret Davis

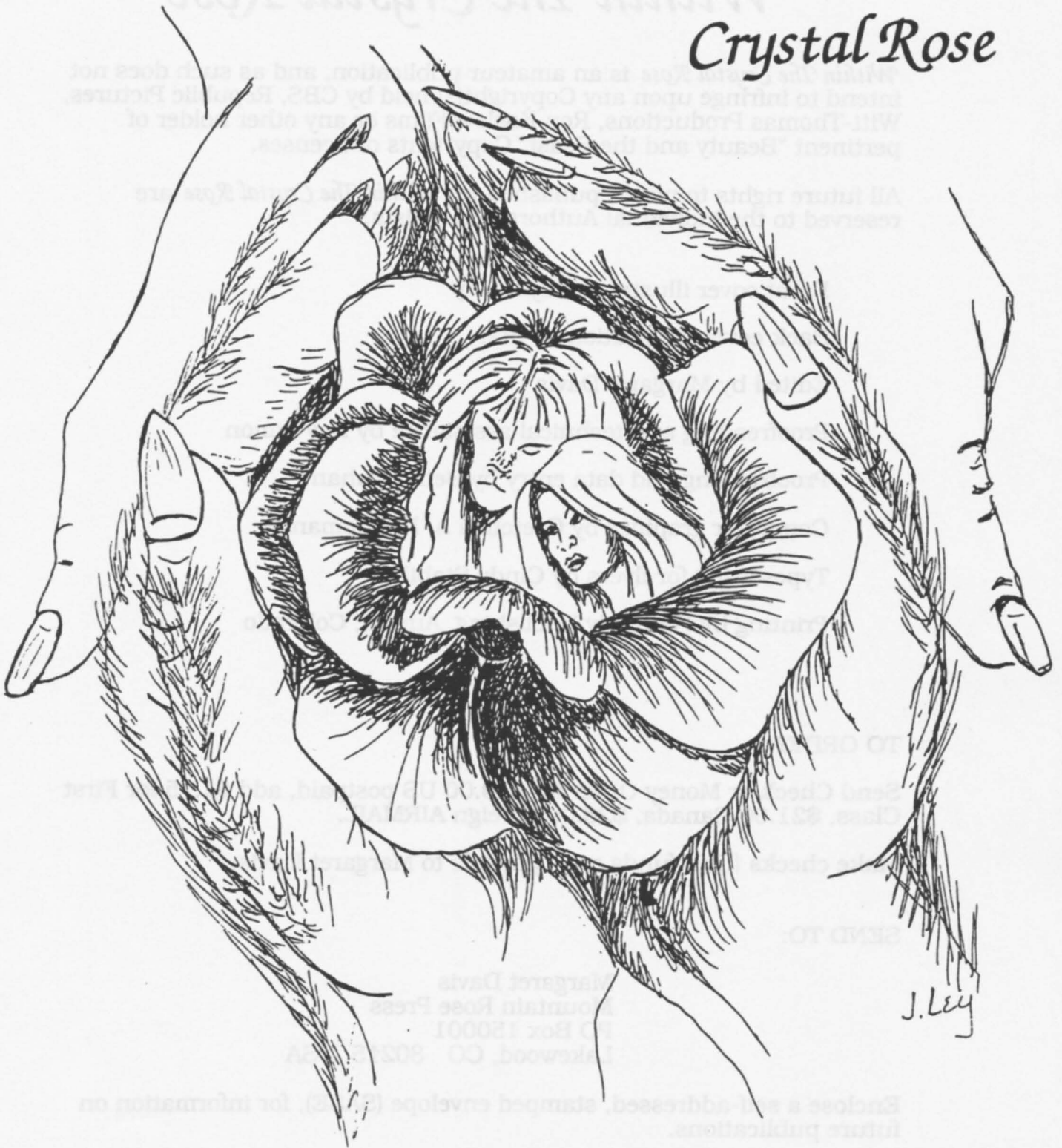
Dedicated to:

Ron Koslow, who had the vision

George R. R. Martin and company who gave
the vision a voice

Ron Perlman, Linda Hamilton, Roy Dotrice and
Jay Acovone, who brought the vision to life
and to Janet, who set my feet upon the path.

Within the Crystal Rose



Edited by Margaret Davis

Within The Crystal Rose

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Letter from the Editor

April 2, 1990

Dear Friends,

Eight months ago I asked an experienced 'zine editor, "Do you think I could do a 'zine?" She assured me I could if I was willing to work. From that inauspicious beginning, came the book you hold in your hand.

Along the road I've met the most wonderful people, the fans and Helpers of *Beauty and the Beast*. They are a generous, giving bunch, ready to lend support and encouragement at the drop of a long-distance call. *BATB* touched our hearts in new ways. It said different was okay. We were inspired by the principles of truth, genuine caring and acceptance. Regardless of the future of *Beauty and the Beast*, the world has become a better place since we first heard, "Her name is Catherine..."

You will notice that "Baby Sister" is missing from the Table of Contents. The author is expecting a baby and found morning sickness took all her attention before deadline time. The story will be seen in *Within the Crystal Rose II*.

There are a number of people who were instrumental in the creative process of this 'zine. Without their love and support, I'd still be in the idea stage. Thank you and hugs go to:

- Janet, who listened, advised, proofread and kept saying "You can do it";
- Mother, whose generosity provided the tools;
- Doris, who listened to every word (sometimes three and four times) even on vacation;
- Beth, who typed, proofread and found time to write a story while doing her 'zine;
- Star, who found Cindy to typeset the flyers and was our go-between, and who gave so much support and encouragement;
- Gretchen, whose typesetting skills were instrumental;
- Gina, Beth, Janet, Bobbi, Erica, Roxanne, Linda, Kerin, Kathy, Lisa, Kathie, Eleanor, and Anita who wrote wonderful poetry and stories;
- Star, Barbara, Judy, Phyllis B, Kathy, Phyllis A, Holly, Jerry, Kerin, Chris, and Maggie who sent such lovely artwork;
- Gina and Roxanne who gave long-distance support, read their stories to me and listened to mine;
- Cece, Caren, Sharyn, and, my sister, Jo who proofread and gave encouragement;
- and lastly, to the CNB lunch bunch who saw the first rough drafts and listened patiently to new story ideas, when I was caught up in 'tunnel vision'.

Letters of comment are welcome. I would enjoy hearing from you, as would the contributors listed on the following page. I look forward to meeting many of you at TunnelCon. Until then I will continue

Keeping the dream alive,

Margaret

Meet the Contributors

Authors

Erica Aguilar
Gina Alkazian
Bobbi
Eleanor Clark
Beth Druhan
Anita Hooson
Kerin Rose Houseburg
Kathy Jacobson
Roxanne Shearer Koogler
Linda Mooney
Kathie Ono
Kay Simon
Lisa K. Wildman

Artists

Phyllis Berwick
Dragon
Barbara Gipson
Kerin
K. Jacobson
J. Ley
Pilgrim
Holly Reidel
Chris Schacter
Star
Maggie Wade

Several authors and artists are published for the first time in this fanzine. It is another example of the inspiration and influence of *Beauty and the Beast*.

Letters of comment welcome and will be shared with the contributors. Most contributor's addresses available upon request, send SASE to:

Mountain Rose Press
PO Box 150001
Lakewood, CO 80215



Longings of my Heart

A wall built to keep the hurt at bay

*To protect my heart from the pain of Aloneness
To shield my mind from the agony of possibilities without hope
To find pleasure in the pages of prose and verse
To care for the safe ones, a brother, a friend, a child, a father
To deeply bury the desire and want, the guilt and shame
To write of the longings of my heart in the wakeful hours of night
To run in serpentine tunnels of stone, fleeing myself
To endure for the sake of others, to protect and defend
To be drawn Above, to walk under the stars
To smell growing things and the rain
To watch the twinkling city from high above
To live with the familiar sting of emptiness.*

A wall broken down and breached by another, unexpected yet longed for

*To share sonnets, symphonies and rain
To embrace me in my Aloneness
To trust, to love, to dare to dream
To bare my soul, my deepest thoughts
To receive the gift of total acceptance
To speak of the hopes and hurts of a lifetime
To find the other half of myself.*

Margaret Davis

Catherine's Egg

by Linda Mooney

She groaned when the doorbell rang and opened her mouth to yell at whoever was there to come on in. Then she remembered that although the door was unlocked, the safety chain was still latched. She grabbed the crutches by the couch and maneuvered her way around the furniture. Balancing herself carefully, she got the chain undone and turned the doorknob. Joe peeked at her through the narrow crack.

"It's me, Cath. I brought those briefs you wanted."

"Just a sec," she said as she moved out of the way so Joe could enter.

"Radcliffe, I thought you said it was just a bad sprain," he commented, eyeing the thickly bandaged ankle.

Catherine laughed half-heartedly. "So did I, but the doctor said I pulled some tendons. I'm supposed to use these things until my next appointment in two weeks." She plopped back down on the couch and laid the crutches against the end table. Joe made himself comfortable on the twin couch across from her.

"Having a tough time getting around?" he teased.

She grinned, "I decided if I couldn't get myself down to the office, then..."

"Then the mountain could come to Mohammed, is that it?" Joe finished.

"Something like that." She began to leaf through the stack of files as Joe glanced around. "If you'd like, there's some soda in the fridge. Help yourself," she offered.

Joe excused himself to disappear into the kitchen and returned a moment later with two soft drinks. He popped the top of one can and handed it to her before opening his own and settling back on the couch.

"So... tell me, what'd you do? Finally fall off a pair of those seventy-dollar high heels?" he asked between swallows.

Catherine hesitated. "No... I tripped over some wood."

"You tripped? Where were you, in the park?"

She smiled in reflection. "Sort of. I was running and just didn't see it." The memory tinted her cheeks.

In the following moments of silence while Catherine went back to perusing the files, Joe entertained himself by looking around the room.

"Mind if I ask you a personal question, Cathy?"

She glanced up. "What?"

"You got gremlins?"

"Excuse me?"

He waved his arm to include the entire apartment. "Seems like every time I come over, which isn't often I might add, your furniture has shifted. I distinctly remember the last time I was here, there was a dried flower arrangement by the front door, and before that some carved African antelope head. Now there's that lamp-looking thing. And didn't you use to have a cabinet..."

"All right, already!" Catherine held up her hands in surrender. "It's not me. The blame is entirely Mary Anne's."

"Who?"

"My housekeeper," she explained. "Well, actually, she's the building's housekeeper and is available to the tenants. She comes in once a week, while I'm at work to vacuum, dust and whatever."

"She says she rearranges things to keep the brain cells from going stale. I fought it when I first moved in, but it was definitely a losing battle, and after a while I just gave up. I only hope I never have to come home after she's been here and find the electricity is off. I'd be in real trouble."

Joe chuckled and glanced at his watch. "Rats. Gotta go. I'm supposed to meet Burgamy at the courthouse in twenty minutes."

"This late at night?"

Joe shrugged. "No rest for the weary. Anyway, *somebody* has to do all the extra work that's piling up on your desk." He stood up and carried his empty soda can to the kitchen.

"Well, thanks for bringing these by," Catherine said as he pulled on his coat. "I'll call Rita to come pick them up when I'm finished. Please excuse me if I don't show you to the door," she added dryly.

"No sweat." He waved to her before closing the front door behind him.

Scant seconds later a pattern of taps sounded at the French doors behind her. Half-turning, she called out, "They're open!"

A well-loved figure slipped into the room and strode over to her, lowering the hood that hid his face.

"Catherine, how is your ankle?" Vincent asked, concern for her welfare clearly evident in his voice.

"Much better," she assured him. "I'm on some light pain killers, so I don't feel any discomfort."

Vincent sighed and knelt beside the couch. "I knew you were on some medication. I still feel your pain, but it's fuzzy and disjointed. I needed to come and see how you were doing, if there was anything you needed me to do for you, or get for you."

"I would love your company for an hour or two. I ordered a collection of poems by Ben Johnson through the book club and it came today. Would you read to me?" Catherine asked.

"Gladly, but first..." Vincent reached inside his cloak to a hidden pocket and withdrew a small object. He took her hand and laid it in her palm. "I've brought you a gift... from Cullen."

"From Cullen?" Catherine looked down as Vincent pulled back his hand and gasped when she saw she was holding an egg, beautifully shaped from a single piece of wood. On one side was carved the image of Vincent and on the other, a picture of herself. The grain was delicate, the finish a chocolate-colored satin; the whole of it in her hand was warm and comforting.

"Vincent, it's lovely," she breathed, "but why the gift?"

Vincent lowered his head, a smile playing lightly about his lips, before replying. "A Helper from the coast sent some driftwood as a present to Cullen and in his haste to get it back to his chamber, he dropped a piece of it. That's the piece you tripped over in the tunnels. As an apology, he carved you this, since he heard you collected decorative eggs."

Catherine reached out to tilt his chin up so that he was looking directly at her. "And how did he find out about my collection, Vincent?"

He shrugged his shoulders, but there was a twinkle in the pacific blue eyes. "I, too, felt responsible for your accident. After all, if we hadn't been playing tag with the children..."

"Then I would never have received such a wonderful present," she finished for him. "Would you give me your arm and help me over to the display case so I can add it to my collection?"

"With pleasure." He held her arms, pulling her up from the couch, and braced her around the waist as she hopped to the glass etagere. She carefully placed Cullen's egg on the top shelf, next to the pearl-encrusted Fabrege egg her Father had given her mother years before, after a trip to Europe. He had been fortunate enough attend the Sotheby sale and outbid those present for the treasure. It had always been in a place of honor in his home after her Mother died, and now it was hers.

And there, side by side, the two completely different eggs remained, parallels of two worlds and symbols of two hearts, to be viewed and treasured now and forever.



I Know Your Soul

*Of all the guys I've met
You're the one I can't forget.
Your heart is like a lump of gold
Hard to get and hard to hold*

*If I died and went to heaven
and you weren't there,
I'd carve your name upon a star.
If you still weren't there by judgement day
I'd give the angels back their wings
And just to prove what love could do
I'd go to Hell to be with you.*

*Although we're only strangers now
I feel I know your soul somehow
To prove my feelings are true and right,
I'd like to know you more some night.*

Erica Aguilar

** Excerpt from 'My Guy' by Erica Aguilar, age 12*



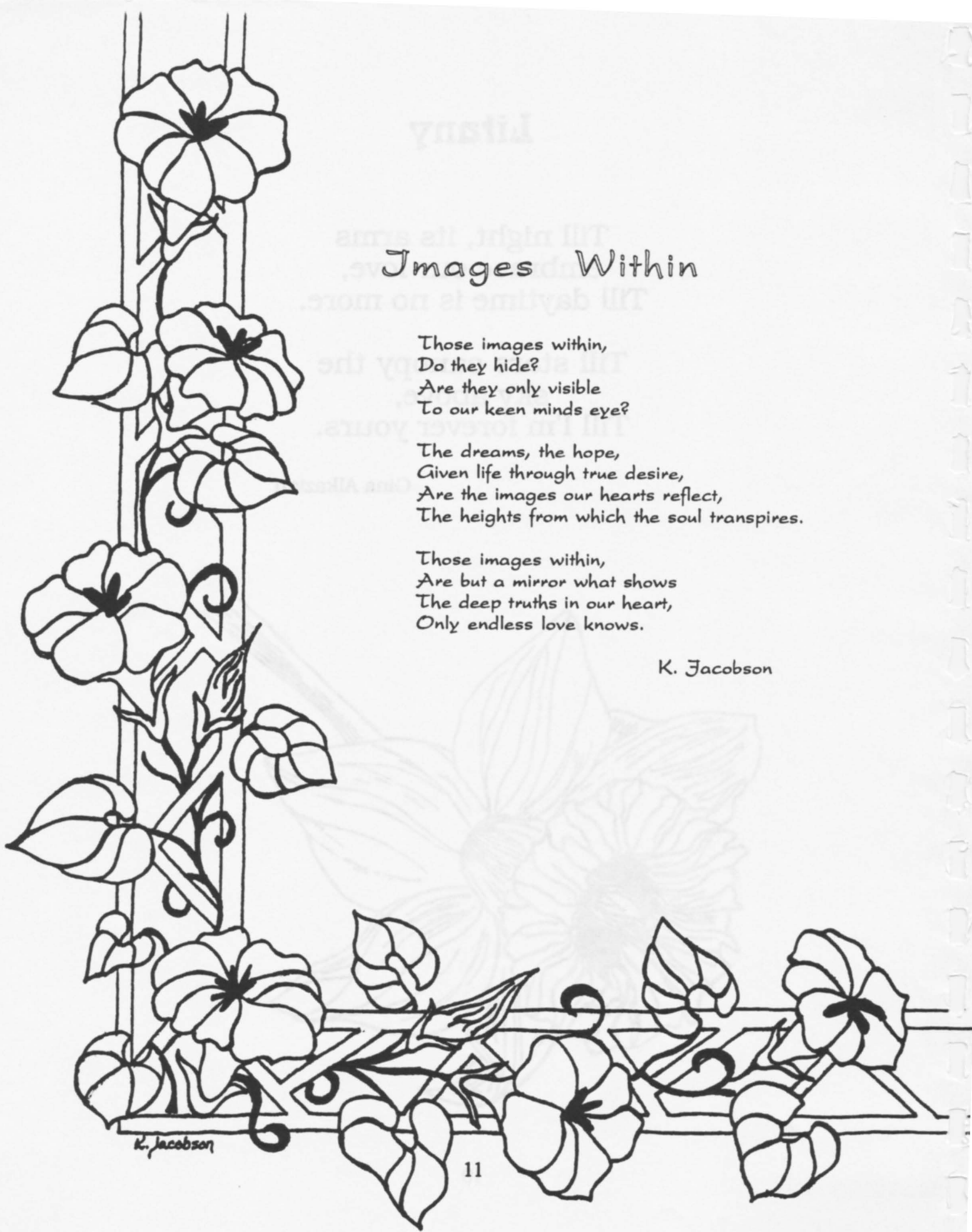
Litany

Till night, its arms
embrace our love,
Till daytime is no more.

Till stars canopy the
sky above,
Till I'm forever yours.

Gina Alkazian





Images Within

Those images within,
Do they hide?
Are they only visible
To our keen minds eye?

The dreams, the hope,
Given life through true desire,
Are the images our hearts reflect,
The heights from which the soul transpires.

Those images within,
Are but a mirror what shows
The deep truths in our heart,
Only endless love knows.

K. Jacobson

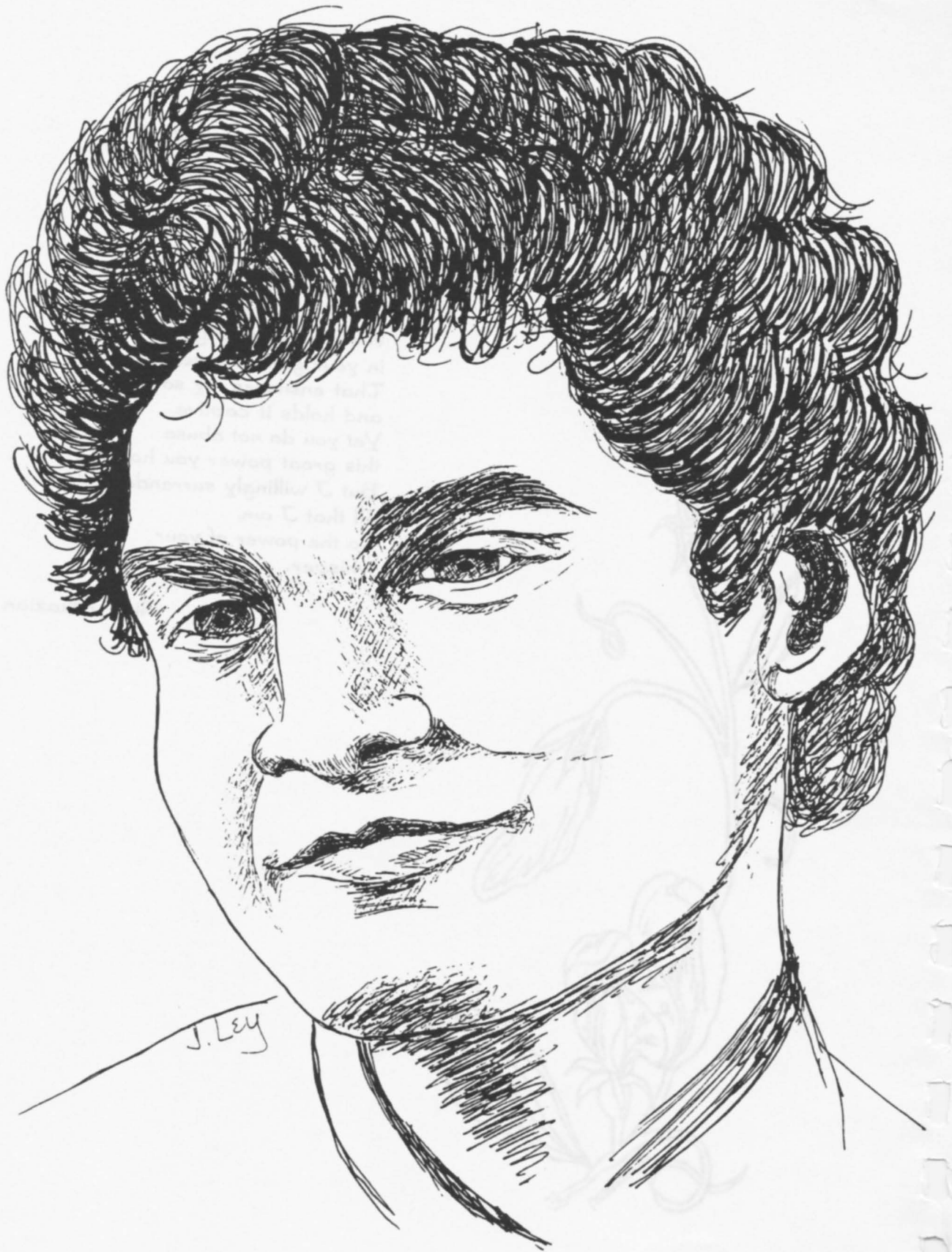
K. Jacobson

Whispers

As loud as a whisper
you call my heart to love.
And it answers in the
fullness of my being.
What great strength you hold
in your gentlest speech,
That ensnares my soul
and holds it captive.
Yet you do not abuse
this great power you have.
But I willingly surrender
all that I am,
To the power of your
whisper.

Gina Alkazian





Blackout

by Beth Druhan

Joe Maxwell groaned, rubbed the back of his neck, and tossed the file he had been reading into his over-burdened "In" basket. Leaning back, he propped his feet on the desk and called it a day. Not that he'd been very productive. Maybe he'd feel better if he could manage to relax this weekend.

He let his eyes close, faintly aware of the tired whirl of the fan in the corner and traffic noise from far below. Thoughts drifted across his mind's eye, unpleasant thoughts that he tried to shove away. But they would not be banished. They had plagued him all week, nipping at his concentration and filling him with vague sadness. Next Tuesday marked the twentieth anniversary of his father's death. His father's murder.

Joe took a dart from the pencil holder and threw it, hard. He watched with satisfaction as it struck deep into the dart board and trembled there. *You'd think I'd be over this by now.*

He hoped the evening ahead with Cathy Chandler would help. She had recently lost her father, and he knew her mother had died when Cathy was a child. Shea Stadium was hardly the perfect setting for a heart-to-heart chat. Maybe they could go somewhere after the game and talk.

He was still mildly amazed that she had accepted his offer of a spare Mets ticket. He'd caught her on her way to an appointment.

"This Friday? Sure, Joe. Sounds great." Cathy had smiled at him and whisked out, leaving him staring after her, mouth ajar.

He winced as he remembered Escobar's smirk. "Spare Mets ticket? Pretty lame, Joe. And close your mouth. You look silly."

He had asked Cathy out many times before and almost always received a gentle refusal. But it seemed she had finally grown weary of Mozart and white wine, and decided to sample life's simpler pleasures - baseball and beer. The idea made him grin.

Today they had both worked late, trying to wrap up the slippery details on an extortion case. He glanced up at the sound of her footsteps, hushed but audible in the silent office, coming closer. A sudden mischievous impulse made him snatch up a stout rubber band.

As her slim, green-clad form appeared, he fired. The rubber band flew across his office and just missed the swirl of dark, honey-blond hair as she crossed the doorway.

"Missed!"

"No cigar, Joe!" Cathy lunged around the door frame and aimed a pink water pistol. Before he could duck, a thin stream of water spurted against his chest. "Gotcha!"

"Hey, what the... Radcliffe," Joe sputtered, leaping out of his chair. But he laughed as he crossed the office. The cool wetness felt good next to his skin, since the upstairs air conditioner had gone on vacation with everyone else at the beginning of August.

Lounging against the door frame, he surveyed her smug grin. "This insubordination has got to stop, Chandler."

His growl didn't intimidate Cathy. It never did. She smiled up at him, eyes dancing. "Yes, Oh-Lord-and-Master."

"That's better. Ready for the Mets tonight?" He mimed a fast-ball pitch.

She glanced at her watch. "I can taste the peanuts now. I'm going home to change. Is seven o'clock in front of the ticket counter okay?"

"You bet. I'll buy the first round."

She smiled over her shoulder as she walked toward her desk. "I'll hold you to that, Joe. See you later."

"Hey, Radcliffe!" he yelled after her. "How about giving me the Mets? Friendly ten-dollar bet?"

"Seven o'clock, Joe!"

Chuckling, Joe went back to his office for his suit jacket and briefcase. To soothe his conscience he gathered up a few files to take home and retrieved his tie, draped as usual over his desk lamp. Monday would come soon enough.

He tucked his gear under one arm and began his usual circuit of the bullpen, turning off forgotten desk lights. The office, so frenetically busy during the workday, now looked forlorn and dingy in the amber sunlight. Lazy swirls of cigarette smoke still floated in the air to mingle with the bitter scent of overdone coffee.

He was usually the last to leave, in charge by default of shutting off lights, copiers, the coffee machine. Even though he knew the cleaning people would be in later, he couldn't resist the impulse. He felt as if he had his mother at his elbow. *Don't waste electricity, Joe. It's not free.*

As he shut the office door behind him, he spied Franklin, the janitor, unloading his vacuum cleaner from the elevator. He headed down the hall at a half-trot. "Hey, Frank. Hold that."

Franklin gave him a wide grin. "You, leaving early, Maxwell? I can't believe it. Usually I have to sweep around your big feet."

Joe smiled as the elevator doors began to close. "Don't work too hard, Frank."

He thumbed the Lobby button, leaned his tall frame against the back of the elevator, and wished vaguely for a beer. He knew he didn't have any in his refrigerator; he couldn't even remember the last time he'd opened it. He grinned crookedly, as he thought of his tiny, nondescript corner of the Village. It was a far cry from Radcliffe's uptown digs.

He waved at the night guard and took a deep breath of the air-conditioned cool in the lobby, like a swimmer going underwater. As he emerged onto the street, the dog-day humidity wrapped itself around him, an unwelcome second skin. Not a breath of breeze stirred the city's carefully placed trees. He slung his jacket over one shoulder and headed for the subway station a few blocks down.

Friday's mass exodus from the business district was nearly over. Only a few obsessive-compulsives like himself were left, vying gamely for taxis or hoofing it toward public transportation. Joe bought some cheese curls from a street vendor and grinned at a redhead who gave him the eye as she passed. With his dark eyes and easy, sensuous smile, he didn't often have to ask twice for dates. Except, that is, when he asked out a certain diminutive lady lawyer. Joe continued on toward the subway entrance, thinking idly about Cathy Chandler.

She had worked with him almost two years now, and she was by far his best investigator. She had an uncanny knack for getting into and out of dangerous situations in a way that shed glory on the department and made her the apple of Moreno's eye. Joe wasn't jealous, but he *was* curious. Sometimes she was downright mysterious about the exact way things had happened, and every once in a while she would vanish to who-knew-where. If she weren't so good at her job, he wouldn't put up with it. But she was, and he did.

He was embarrassed to remember that at first he'd thought her a bored Park Avenue princess looking for thrills, and expected that her major distinction around the office would be her vast collection of earrings. Cathy had proved him wrong and become a good friend.

Joe scowled to himself as he began to descend into the subway, trying to ignore the sour smell of hot, tightly packed humanity. *More than a friend, buddy, he told himself. Or at least, you'd like her to be....*

Still scowling, he groped in his pocket for a token and pushed through the turnstile. He joined the crowd waiting on the platform to take the subway to the Village. Lately, he wasn't entirely sure what he felt about Cathy. He knew he was instantly aware of her when she walked into a room. He noticed what she was wearing, he listened for her laugh... And then, a few weeks ago, that head-case had nearly killed her. He'd been scared down to his bones, scared and protective and angry. And he thought maybe he'd cared a bit too much for mere friendship.

You wouldn't call it a date, he thought, watching the train approach. With an ear-splitting roar, it barreled into the station and slowed to a halt at the curb. An old woman carrying several bulky packages trod heavily on his foot, as she shoved past him into the car. No, you wouldn't call it a date. Just friends, taking in a ball game.

Joe boarded the car and automatically reached for an overhead strap, before he realized there were plenty of seats in this particular compartment. Besides himself and the old woman, there were two business suits, one pregnant woman who looked miserable in the heat, one presumed student in an NYU T-shirt, and a blonde-haired man asleep in a corner. Joe took a seat and dug into his briefcase for a file. He didn't really want to read, but staring on the subway was asking for trouble. He ought to be home in no time.

* * * * *

Vincent's eyes were blue, a blazing, electric blue; but their beauty was hidden in the tunnel's darkness. Cloaked in flowing black, he was a shadow among shadows, as silent and potentially lethal as they--and as soft and protective. His booted feet made scarcely a sound on the gritty floor as he moved unerringly toward his destination.

Ahead the shadows faded and fled as they met illumination from above. Vincent walked until he stood at the base of a rusted metal ladder that reached away into the light. It was time to go up.

Tiny hairs on the backs of his hands lifted as a shiver of automatic apprehension, bred into him by a protective parent, ran beneath his skin. He reminded himself for the hundredth time that he was perfectly safe, that the basement of Zeke's delicatessen was Helper territory. It was just that he felt so horribly exposed when he climbed blindly into the light.

Vincent grasped the ladder in large, furred hands and began to ascend. He swung himself up using only his hands and arms, letting his feet dangle. A guilty pleasure, this display of his strength, but one he did not deny himself when he was alone.

He slowed near the top and rested his feet on the rungs as he peered over the edge of the manhole-sized opening. He held his breath and listened. No one was near.

Cautiously, he climbed the last few feet, emerging behind a stack of fat, dusty flour sacks. He had been here many times before. The kindly shopkeeper had long made a gift to the tunnel dwellers, of whatever food he could not sell the day he prepared it.

Zeke had known someone would come and had moved the flour sacks from their customary place over the opening. Vincent could certainly have shoved them over himself, but Zeke hadn't known it would be Vincent who picked up the food today. Perhaps if he had, thought Vincent, squinting, he might have dimmed the lights a little. But it was bright in the small basement, for things had happened to Zeke that made him abhor darkness.

A long, phosphorescent tube blazed white along the length of the rectangular ceiling, and all the surfaces were spotless, though crowded with foodstuffs. At one end of the room was the massive metal door of the walk-in refrigerator. Closer to Vincent, a narrow stairway led up to the shop above.

"Who's that?" came Zeke's hoarse-voiced challenge. Vincent saw the old man's shadow move on the stairs, but knew he would not descend until he heard the identity of his guest.

"It's Vincent, Zeke," he called softly. "I've come for the food."

"Ah, Vincent!" Zeke hurried down the stairs, as though to compensate for his earlier reluctance. He was a stringy scrap of a man in his seventies, with a salt-and-pepper beard and a gruff kindness about him. An immaculate, white apron covered his old-fashioned trousers and shirt, and his shoes were buffed to a reflective shine. His black eyes crinkled at the corners as he welcomed his visitor.

"Didn't know it would be you today, Vincent. Usually they send the young ones." Zeke hastened forward to shake Vincent's hand.

"Michael and Lena have taken most of the children on a... field trip," Vincent explained, groping for Lena's term. "They've gone to the Metropolitan Museum of Art." Even to him, his voice sounded wistful. Zeke seemed to understand, laying a warm hand on his arm.

"Never you mind, Vincent. Everyone knows you could lead tours in that place."

Vincent smiled at Zeke's effort to comfort him. He had long ago ceased to be bitter about his world's limitations, but that didn't mean he didn't chafe against them now and again.

"Have you been well, Zeke?" he asked as the small shopkeeper led him toward the refrigerator.

"Not bad, not bad. Business is picking up. Lots of folks are coming over on their lunch hours. Can't resist everything fresh, every day," Zeke chuckled. He grunted as he unlatched and pulled open the heavy door. Cold air rushed outward, driving back the sticky summer heat.

"Prop that open, would you Vincent? Darn thing's not hung just right, and we're liable to get shut in here." Zeke tugged on a string that dangled overhead, and dim yellow light flooded the room.

Vincent dragged a crate in front of the door and made sure it was heavy enough to keep the door open. "Cullen could probably fix this for you, Zeke," he offered.

The old man piled sandwiches and Styrofoam containers of potato salad and coleslaw in a large box. He shook his head emphatically. "Nah, I'm used to it. Same as you get used to freckles on a wife, you get used to the little things around here. Wouldn't change it for love nor money."

Vincent smiled at that. Just as he reached to help Zeke lift the box from the floor, the lights went out, plunging them into darkness. Zeke sucked in his breath and voiced a ripe Yiddish curse that Vincent politely pretended not to understand.

"Power's out," Zeke said shakily. "Got a flashlight around here somewhere."

Vincent didn't answer at once, absorbed by the sudden swoop of fear within himself that radiated from his bond with Catherine. The

tension eased as he felt her emotion, which had been mostly surprise, level off and fade. He heard Zeke take a few hesitant steps, as if he forced frozen muscles to work. Vincent knew how Zeke hated darkness, had hated it since a nightmare boxcar ride toward Auschwitz. Vincent strove to soothe the man with his voice.

"Stay still, Zeke, and tell me where to look for the light. I can still see a bit."

That voice, deep and whisper-soft, was one of the few Zeke trusted, coming at him out of the dark. He cleared his throat and wet lips gone dry with remembered terror.

"I think it's on the second shelf to the right of the door."

Vincent found the flashlight and thumbed it on. The cone of light seemed of immeasurable comfort to Zeke, who took it from him and sighed heavily, expelling his fear.

"Ain't this just grand. If the electric is out for long, I'll have a lot more for you to carry Below, Vincent." He gestured around him at the shelves packed with produce, meats, and cheeses of all kinds. "All this will go bad within a couple of days."

"Surely they'll fix it before long," said Vincent. Disquieting thoughts of Catherine, alone in a darkened city, troubled him.

"Maybe, maybe not. Depends how widespread it is and what caused the blackout. Could be hours, or days." Zeke shuffled glumly out of the refrigerator, followed by Vincent with the box of food. "There was looting during the big one in '65. Better find my shotgun."

"You must come Below, where it's safe, if that happens," said Vincent quickly.

Zeke shook his head, and a little steel came into his voice as he replied. "What, and let those hooligans steal everything I have? I lost it all once, in Germany. Never again!"

Vincent let that pass, but made a mental note to have some of the people Below help him watch over Zeke. He would not see the old man hurt or robbed.

"The ones I feel sorry for are the poor folks stuck in the subway tunnels," said Zeke. Memories of the boxcar were in his shudder. "Sitting ducks for the muggers."

"You're right," Vincent said slowly. For a split second, he felt a repulsive flash of what Catherine called "city-think". *There are miles of subway tunnels; what good can one man do...* instantly he was ashamed of the thought, and decided he must see if he could help.

"I must go Below, Zeke, and see if I'm needed," he said. "Will you be all right?"

The old man waved him away. "Sure, sure. No need to worry. You go on." Zeke waited, lighting Vincent's way as the leonine man made his careful descent, the box of food balanced on one shoulder.

Vincent called out his thanks and then began to retrace his path, his movements graceful and sure. In the tunnel world, darkness was the norm; the city's lack of light mattered not a whit.

He moved swiftly, and once he reached an intersection that contained one of the main pipes, he tapped out a message for someone to come and pick up the food. As soon as he received a reply, he was off in the opposite direction. He wanted to check on Catherine, but he would go to her home via one of the subway lines. If he came across any trouble, he would deal with it.

* * * * *

Joe froze as the lights cut out and the subway car began to slow. Like a dying animal, it groaned to a halt.

"Oh, fine... blackout," someone said in a sarcastic tone. Joe thought it was the student. Reflexively, he closed his eyes to think, even though the inside of his eyelids was no darker than the subway car. He mentally pictured the car and tallied its occupants. He thought only himself, the student, the slumbering man, and the pregnant woman were left, plus one teenage girl who had boarded after them. He had a vague memory of the business suits and the old woman leaving the car.

After a few moments of utter blackness, weak emergency lighting flickered on, dim and intermittent. Joe was able to see that his head count was correct. He saw the passengers staring nervously around at each other, judging possible friends and foes. Joe saw the pregnant woman draw her purse in closer and curve one arm protectively over her belly. She was pretty, with dark hair and eyes and olive skin. She looked like pictures he'd seen of his own mother when she was young.

The student stood up and moved toward the door. "Always wondered what you'd do if you got stuck in one of these," he said to no

one in particular. He wedged the fingers of both hands into the crack that halved the door, braced his long legs, and pulled. With a grunt, he managed to separate the doors a couple of inches.

Joe got up to help. Pulling opposite one another, they forced a three-foot exit into the pitch-black tunnel. Joe looked askance at it and wondered just who--or what--he might encounter stumbling around out there. He almost wished he hadn't quit smoking, after the interminable nights of studying torts and precedents were over. If he hadn't quit, he would have had a lighter in his pocket.

The student seemed to feel no misgivings. "Hey thanks, dude. I'm outta here. No telling how long this will last."

"Mind if I go with you?" The teenager, a skinny girl with lots of jangling bracelets and impossibly tortured hair, stood up. "I got somewhere to be."

"Sure, babe. Let's go." He helped her climb onto the narrow strip of concrete that ran along the underground tunnel at about waist-level. He looked back at Joe. "You coming, man?"

He wanted to go. Hours sitting in a dim, sweltering subway car held no appeal, and Cathy would be worried about him. But when he glanced behind him, he saw panic forming on the pregnant woman's face. If Joe left, it would be only her and the man slouched in a corner, who hadn't moved or spoken, though he now seemed to be awake. The woman was in no shape to climb around in the dark.

"Nope," he answered. "I think I'll hang on awhile. I'm a long way from home, and the electricity might come back in a few minutes."

"Suit yourself," the student said. He climbed out of the car, and his footsteps receded as he introduced himself to the girl. "The name's Van. You know, like Van Halen."

"Maya. Like nothing you ever heard of... "

They were gone, swallowed by the dark tunnel. Joe thought about closing the door. He felt vulnerable with this black hole at his back. But they might need the ventilation. As he returned to his seat, he caught a grateful look from the woman. He smiled at her and sat down again, his eyes fixed on the only other passenger. Street rules told him to give the guy a hard stare, let him know he was being watched. But the man, cap pulled down low, wasn't looking his way.

Joe leaned back with a sigh, stretched out his legs, and unfastened his second shirt button. Could be a long wait, and not enough light to read by. He decided to try conversation.

"Guess we're instant friends," he said, smiling across the aisle at the woman. "I'm Joe Maxwell."

She smiled tentatively in return and gave him a damp hand to shake. "Connie Reichert. Think this will last long?"

Joe shrugged. "Depends what went wrong. Cops'll be along presently with flashlights. They won't leave us in here forever." A thought occurred to him, and he grinned at her, well aware of the charm in the expression. "You weren't trying to get anywhere important, were you? Like the hospital?"

Connie gave a nervous giggle. "No. Another month to go, and I won't take the subway, you can bet on that. Where were you going?"

"Home, to the Village. Then to a ball game." Joe heaved a gloomy sigh. "Guess the Mets will have to win without me tonight."

They said little more as they settled down to the business of waiting. Joe kept setting ten-minute deadlines. In another ten minutes, he promised himself, he'd try to talk Connie into chancing the tunnel. Heat and darkness, darkness and heat, pressed on them almost palpably, like a smothering blanket. Despite his intention to remain watchful, Joe felt himself grow drowsy. It seemed to him there was not quite enough air to go around.

It happened before he could even register that the man had moved. Steel-wire fingers grabbed his shirt and hauled him halfway to his feet, before a haymaker punch slammed against his head. Joe found himself on hands and knees, spitting blood.

Connie screamed. "No! No, get away... " she shrieked.

"Gimme the purse, lady," growled the punk. He shook her with one hand, and tried to wrestle the purse away with the other.

Panicked, Connie continued to scream and claw, holding on to the purse, with the same ferocity she'd have shown if he'd threatened her baby. The punk slapped her once before Joe jumped him from behind.

Joe dragged the punk away from Connie, who pressed herself into a corner, sobbing. He jabbed a solid body punch at the would-be mugger, and grabbed him by the arms to wrestle him to the floor.

Neither could get swinging room, but Joe knew he had a weight advantage and capitalized on it. As he rolled on top of his opponent, who was struggling and cursing wildly, Joe clutched a handful of dirty, white-blond hair, and began to slam the punk's head viciously against the floor, ignoring the fists pounding his back and arms.

The smaller man gave up trying to punch and, with a manic burst of strength, shoved Joe over and wrenched free. Drugs, Joe realized as he stared at the bloody mass of hair in his hand. *He didn't even feel that.*

The punk backpedaled, his glittering eyes fixed on Joe. Like a magician's trick, there was suddenly a six-inch switchblade in his fist.

"You are dead meat now, pretty boy," he whispered. "Gonna carve you up."

Connie yelped at the sight of the knife and tried to press herself further into the wall.

Joe sucked in a ragged breath as he got to his feet. He knew that giving up his wallet and Connie's purse now, wouldn't stop the fight. He'd pushed this guy to far, and was probably going to pay for it. His mind, which should have been fixed on survival, was shrieking *Dad, Dad... DAD!!!* All he could think of was his father's murder. He'd been knifed in an alley, and bled his life away on a cold morning, twenty years ago.

Warily, the combatants tested each other with feints, each waiting for the other's move. Joe knew not to watch the evilly glinting blade, but the man's eyes, equally evil. When they flickered, he sprang.

Closing one hand around the man's wrist, Joe tried to drive the knife upward. But his fear made him slow and his skin was slick with sweat. He saw the punk twist the wrist out of his grip, and slash at him crosswise, grabbing him by the arm. For an instant, Joe thought he hadn't been touched; then he felt a shriek of pain and a spurt of warmth from his abdomen. Numbly, he watched the knife rise and hang poised to deliver the killing blow.

This is totally impossible. It's like a bad TV show: son knifed just like his dad. This is why I'm not a cop. Oh god, my poor mother...

Something happened. Even afterward, Joe couldn't clearly recall what. There was someone else in the car, a huge, black-and-gold someone else, and was this guy really roaring or was that the blood in his ears and the song of pain in his mind? His knees banged painfully on the floor as he was dropped, and his head nearly followed.

heard a sickening *thunk*, as the newcomer swung the screaming mugger against the wall of the subway car. The limp body crashed to the floor a few feet from him.

Joe glanced over and saw that the man still breathed. Then his eyes travelled upward. The black outlines of his rescuer loomed above him. Clothed in black, flowing cloak, the huge figure seemed a part of the darkness, even his face was shadowed.

"You're bleeding."

The voice was strong and gentle, like the hands that lifted Joe, as though he were no heavier than a child, and laid him across a row of seats. Joe squeezed his eyes shut and clamped his teeth together to hold in a cry of pain; the reaction was fortunate, for the sight of the furry, claw-tipped hands attending him would have compounded the day's shocks.

He felt most of his shirt being torn off. His hands, held flat against his belly in an instinctive effort to stem the blood loss, were nudged away. With seemingly trained smoothness, the stranger pressed a wad of cloth against the long wound and wrapped the sleeves of the shirt around Joe's torso to hold the bandage in place. Only when the hands left him did Joe experimentally open his eyes. He couldn't see very well; his ears seemed more reliable. He could hear quiet breathing close by, and Connie's hushed sobs, farther away.

"Are you all right?" he heard the man ask. It sounded like Connie was nearly hysterical.

Both hands pressed against her eyes to shut out the nightmare, she moaned. "Stay away... stay away from me."

The stranger sighed deeply, and did not try to approach her.

"Who are you?" Joe asked, his voice humiliatingly weak. "Where did you come from?"

"I am a friend," came the soft reply. The voice, soothing and deep, floated to his ears as though disembodied. The massive figure was hooded, and even his hands were hidden.

Joe reached up without thought to push the hood away, the movement causing a jolt of pain in his gut. His rescuer reared back out of reach, and Joe's hand fell.

"Please don't," said that distinctive voice.



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Joe peered at him, still trying to see. Succor without a face was not entirely to be trusted. His thoughts seemed to bleed away, just like his wound.

Suddenly, a solid wedge of light parted the dimness and a gruff voice came through the gaping door. "Police. You folks okay in there?"

Vincent froze as the policeman barked his demand. He had been so distracted that he hadn't even heard the approaching footsteps. He saw the injured man draw breath to reply, and then wince in pain. The woman was weeping quietly. Vincent would have to answer.

"There's someone hurt in here, officer. He's bleeding. We'll need a stretcher to move him." Vincent's muscles trembled as he resisted the urge to flee. Discovery seemed imminent.

The chagrin in the officer's voice was plain. "Gonna be a problem, friend. Been lots of injuries with the blackout, and they'll have to come down on foot from street level. Can you hang on?"

The woman, hearing a sane, sensible voice from the world she knew, heaved herself to her feet. "Get me out of here!" she whimpered. "Don't leave... get me out!" She stumbled toward the door, arms outstretched.

"Easy, lady. I'll get you out," came the long-suffering voice. The officer grunted as he bore most of her weight, hoisting her up to the narrow cement walkway of the tunnel. He shone the beam of his light inside again.

"How many more of you in there?"

"Three," Vincent replied. "Myself, the injured man, and the one who attacked him. He's no longer a threat. We'll be all right until your return." He sweated, willing the officer to go for help, without coming inside the car. There was nowhere to hide.

The cop, thus reassured and with an hysterical pregnant woman hanging on his arm, made the wise man's choice. "I'll get up top and call the squad, then. Sit tight." The light vanished as he led his charge away, droning encouragement to the tearful woman. Their voices faded gradually.

Vincent sighed silently with relief, and looked over at his patient. The man hadn't spoken or moved since he had reached for

Vincent's hood, and looked to be unconscious. His eyes drooped nearly closed and his skin was a pasty white. He was probably in shock.

Vincent glanced around for something he could use to cover the man. He couldn't part with his cloak lest his features be revealed. Spotting a coat on the floor, he scooped it up and draped it over the still form. Surprisingly, the man's eyes opened and he peered again at Vincent; he was not unconscious after all.

"Hey," the man murmured weakly. "Got a name?"

Vincent hesitated, then shrugged, in for a penny, in for a pound. "Vincent. My name is Vincent."

Joe tried to smile; maybe he'd succeeded, maybe not. Blood loss, he thought, was almost as good a buzz as three beers and football on Sunday. Almost. He wished he could turn and make sure the punk was still face-down and unmoving; he wished he could see this Vincent's face. Still, shouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth... or a gift Ninja in the face...

He lifted his head, trying to clear it, and found that to be a great mistake. The movement made his stomach muscles go taut, and the already white-hot pain intensified. A groan escaped between his clenched teeth.

The hooded figure shifted fractionally closer. "You must stay still," warned the soft, gravelly voice. "Help will be here soon."

"Hey, Vincent, I haven't thanked you," Joe managed. Had to talk; had to think; anything but feel the amazing pain of his rent skin, the same pain his father must have felt when he died. "You came out of nowhere." He heard rather than saw the smile.

"I came out of the tunnel when I heard the woman cry out."

"Not many men would've helped," said Joe. "This is New York, after all."

"You helped," said Vincent. "You fought that man to protect the woman, despite the fact that this is New York."

The mockery was gentle, and Joe shrugged. "Well, you know. Couldn't just sit there. My father was a cop... he would have done something." *But he didn't*, hissed a tiny voice in his mind. *He didn't do a thing, except let himself bleed to death. Let himself be taken from us....*

Vincent stirred. He sensed more pain in this man than that of the wound. It was rare for his empathy to touch those to whom he was not close. Perhaps the sharpening of all his senses in the absence of light, had enabled him to feel this man's pain. It was fresh pain, laced with old grief.

"You know my name," he said. "What is yours?"

"It's Joe," came the answer. "Joe Maxwell."

Vincent froze, eyes widening in shock. This was Catherine's Joe, the friend from work she liked so much. She had told him she would not see him tonight until late, because she and Joe were going to a baseball game. He was doubly glad he'd been here, able to help Catherine's friend. He would go to her later, let her know the man was safe.

"Nice fix, huh?" Joe murmured. "They say if you live in New York long enough, statistics are going to get you." His words had begun to slur.

Vincent made no reply, glancing anxiously at his patient. Before he'd covered Joe with the coat, he'd seen the spreading stain on the makeshift bandage. If help did not come soon, he would have to take this man to Father. He winced at the thought, it was easy to envision his parent's displeasure. Vincent prayed for the sound of help approaching. As soon as he heard it, he would melt back into the shadows, into his own world.

Suddenly, he wondered what he would do if the power were restored before he could escape. He would be caught in full light, which was something he feared almost as much as Zeke feared darkness. But he could not leave Joe, injured and helpless, alone in the car with the one who had attacked him. Vincent sighed silently. He was trapped.

Joe fought off the dizzy nausea that assailed him. He had to keep talking so he could ignore the panic he felt, at the slow, warm seepage of blood from his stomach. He cleared his throat.

"I was going to a baseball game with a friend of mine. Hope Cathy doesn't think I stood her up. It took me months to get her to go out with me." He knew he was babbling, but he didn't care.

"She works with me in the D.A.'s office. In fact, if I live through this, I think I'll put her on the prosecution for that scum-of-the-

Earth." He jerked his head toward the still figure on the floor. "She's some lady."

Vincent smiled to himself. *Indeed.*

"And," continued Joe thoughtfully, "she's got great legs."

Vincent raised his eyebrows at that. Something, some feeling, stirred in him that he didn't name and quickly repressed. It left a nasty aftertaste.

Joe continued blithely on, unaware of his effect on his listener. "I always wondered why she never hooked up with anyone else after she gave Burch the heave-ho. Once in a while she mentions a date with someone, but no one from the office has ever met him. She never even says his name. She's going to just lose it when she hears about this." Joe paused, leaving Vincent to wonder what Catherine was going to lose.

"Awhile back, Cathy was mugged herself. Missing ten days, and hurt pretty bad."

Vincent closed his eyes as memories, some harsh and some wonderful, cascaded through his mind. He said nothing as Joe went on.

"That was before I knew her; but I always felt it had something to do with why she gave up corporate law and came to work for us. She has a way of looking at things dead on, you know? She's not afraid to say what needs to be said, to decide what's right and refuse to compromise." Joe groped for words, trying to explain why he'd wanted to spend tonight with Cathy.

"It's like that knife attack cut away all the shadowy grey areas for her. What happened to her made her stronger." He sighed. "Me, I sometimes feel like I'm going to unravel."

Vincent waited, sensing there was more. His generous heart wanted to help this man, Catherine's friend.

"My father died like this, Vincent," Joe said presently. His mind had wandered away from Cathy and settled on the tragedy, which had become raw and fresh in his thoughts since he'd first seen the knife. "He bled to death. I always wondered what he felt, those last moments, and now I know. Weird."

Vincent knew this was the source of that other pain he had sensed before, the pain that was not the wound.

"You said your father was a police officer. He was murdered?" he asked hesitantly, fearing to press.

Joe nodded slightly. Pain spiked through his stomach. "Got knifed by a couple of kids when he was on his way home. Just about killed my mother, losing him. If you hadn't come along today, I hate to think... " *Why was he raking over this ancient history, especially to a stranger?* Somehow, though, he felt that Vincent didn't mind.

"It must not have been easy for you, either, to lose your father. You were young?"

"Fourteen. And I was so mad at him," Joe murmured. "Like it was his fault he got cut up and died, you know? I mean... he was a cop, he had a gun, he was my *father*, he should have been able to do *something*..." Joe cut himself off, smothering the flood of grief and rage and vulnerability. He had sworn never to feel like that again. Never.

He thought Vincent wasn't going to answer. Then that unique voice, quiet and strong, reached him. He found himself thinking irrelevantly what an asset that voice would be in the courtroom, even as he listened.

"I, too, have a father who has disappointed me on occasion, either in deed or in understanding. I have been angry, and resentful. But I know that he always does his best. And I love him."

The words were piercing and clear in Joe's head, even though almost everything else was rapidly going grey and hazy. Suddenly, new pain slashed at him, pain in his eyes, as light blazed in the compartment. He blinked, caught a glimpse of a swirling black mantle, tawny hair, and a face... a face that was... Gone.

Vincent hid himself in shadow after bolting from the car. He didn't know whether Joe had gotten more than a glimpse of him. Chances were, despite the man's undoubted intelligence and tenacity when presented with a puzzle, he would think he'd imagined whatever he'd seen. The cars jerked as power returned, but did not move. Peering down the tunnel, Vincent spotted paramedics approaching with a stretcher, led by a beefy police officer. Joe was safe.

Lest he be discovered, Vincent faded noiselessly back into his world, where darkness was not an emergency, but a blessing.

* * * * *

Joe counted the water spots on the ceiling of his hospital room. There were eighteen, and he'd counted them three times already. He was bored, bored, bored. And there weren't even any pretty nurses. It was with a welcome sense of *deja vu* that he spied a slender form in his doorway.

Cathy saw that he was not asleep and came all the way in, smiling at him. "Maxwell, I have never been so insulted. Stood up on a first date."

She carried neither a potted plant, which he would have killed with kindness, nor a box of candy he wasn't allowed to eat. Instead, she'd brought him three newspapers, separated into sections to spare him lifting the heavy sheaf of paper. She knew him pretty well.

"Sorry, Radcliffe. In the mood for excuses? I've got a whopper of a story." He gave her a sheepish smile. "Thirty-nine stitches, Exhibit A."

Cathy settled into the chair beside his bed and took his hand, giving it a squeeze. "I'm glad you're all right, Joe," she said. She didn't try to hide the concern in her eyes, and Joe gently brushed a finger along her cheek.

"Thanks, Cathy. So am I."

She smiled shakily. "Spill it already. You're a hero, they tell me."

Joe recounted his adventure from start to finish, and found her suitably amazed by his mysterious rescuer. As he spoke, he tried to convey Vincent's odd synthesis of gentleness and strength, his quaint way of speaking, and his almost medieval appearance, in the glimpse he had gotten. He shook his head, stymied.

"He was big, and really strong," he said at length. "He threw that creep against the wall like an old shirt, and picked me up like I was a six-year-old. But he said he was a friend, and he stayed almost until the paramedics got there. I never got a good look at him. His face...."

Joe's voice trailed off, and he shrugged as he met her expectant eyes. What he wanted to say was, *he looked like a lion*. Cathy would scoff at that, and tell him he'd dreamed it. Perhaps he had. But he doubted his own ability to dream up someone like Vincent.

"We talked about my dad," he admitted, a little shamefaced. "It's been twenty years, since..." He saw by the change in her eyes that she knew what he was feeling.

"They say when you get in situations like this, strangers become your best friends. It was true for Vincent and me. He... well, he helped me. Let me talk about it." Joe felt like a fool. She hadn't been there, couldn't understand.

But it seemed she did. Her voice was compassionate, as she again took his hand in a warm grip. "I'm glad you had someone there for you, Joe. Thank goodness for Vincent."

"Yeah," said Joe quietly.

They talked a few more minutes before Cathy left. She promised to keep him posted on the goings-on at the office. Joe was sleepy, the painkillers and his own exhaustion drawing him to the brink of slumber. Just as he slipped over the edge, Vincent's words echoed again in his mind, and they became Joe's own as he spoke to his father.

I know you did your best, Dad. And I love you.

Catherine sighed as she settled against the hard vinyl of the taxi seat and gave the driver her address. Joe had given her quite a scare. She laughed as she mentally patted herself on the back for her acting skills. Joe hadn't a clue that she had known the whole story, before he began to speak. She wondered if he would ever ask her how she knew he was in the hospital.

The streets were only marginally crowded this late on Saturday night, and Catherine soon alighted in front of her building. She hurried knowing who was waiting for her above. As the elevator whisked her upward, she got out her keys, and was barely through the door to the balcony, before Vincent was there, drawing her into his arms.

She pressed herself closer to the beloved figure and nestled her cheek just where she could hear his heart beating. No matter that she'd just seen him an hour ago; blissfully, she lost herself in the feel and scent of him.

"Joe is well?" Vincent questioned, his hands lightly rubbing her shoulders.

Catherine nodded and leaned back in his arms. "He lost a lot of blood. They'll keep him in the hospital at least until Wednesday." Her lips curved in an impish smile. "Were your ears burning about twenty minutes ago? He was singing your praises."

"Does he remember much about me?" Vincent asked.

Catherine shook her head. "He remembers a large, strong, gentle man named Vincent who saved him, but didn't want to be seen. I think the secret is safe."

Vincent sighed with relief. "Joe is a good man. I trust him. But when I think what Father would say, if I told him I'd been seen, again..."

Catherine laughed. She drew him to the balcony rail and they gazed out over the sparkling city. Light and power, its lifeblood, had been restored, and all was as it should be. Catherine took Vincent's hands in hers, she was learning to lead him into the closeness they both wanted, and enjoyed the feel of the slight breeze ruffling her hair.

"They said on the news that the blackout was caused by a car that smashed into a transformer. It took out whole blocks of the city, but they got it fixed quickly."

Catherine paused, puzzled by Vincent's expression. He was not looking directly into her eyes as he usually did, reading the play of emotions there. He was looking at... her legs? She had put on a knee-skimming silk dress before going to see Joe, and wore low heels. She looked down and saw nothing amiss.

"Vincent?"

"Yes, Catherine?" He met her eyes, his a guileless, innocent blue.

She shrugged, and wrote it off to momentary inattention. "Anyway, Joe's going to be fine in a week or two, except that he'll have a nasty scar. He says it doesn't upset him, since he knows a girl named Lilah who thinks scars are sexy."

Vincent chuckled at that, and slipped an arm around her shoulders as he turned to lay his cheek against her hair.

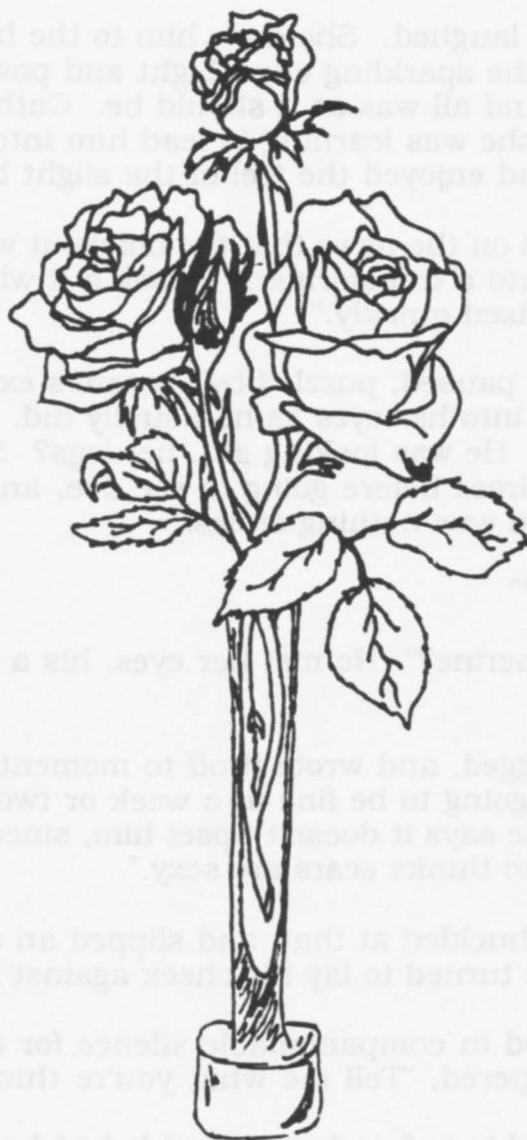
They stood in companionable silence for a while before Catherine whispered, "Tell me what you're thinking?"

"I am thinking of darkness, and light," he answered at once. "Some of us so at home in the former, some needing the latter to survive."

"Sometimes," said Catherine, circling her arms around his waist, "the brightest of lights grows out of darkness. It was out of the

darkest time in my life that you came to me. And I have never feared darkness since."

Vincent hugged her hard, wordlessly, letting the radiance of their bond speak for him.



Lionheart

You love me. This I know.
You need not say the words;
Your smile, that sings,
Your eyes, that dance on seeing me
Speak more than any, "I love you."
Will you continue yet
To love me when (as certainly I must)
I wound you? When I crush your hope
Of any happy life with me?
Will you consider that the friendship
Which you have, though not the passion that you sought
Is still of value in itself?

I rather hope you will. He would.
And you, dear friend, possess a heart like his.

Roxanne Shearer Koogler



W

Vincent

Swirling cloak,
Golden hair,
Leonine features,
Vincent is there.

Azure eyes,
Longing sighs,
Flashing teeth,
Vincent is there.

Poetry reading,
Children leading,
Catherine's love,
Vincent is there.

Kerin Rose Houseburg



Soulmate

*He touches my soul
and lifts me up from my lonely state.
His generous heart gives comfort and love
to my troubled and dangerous life.
Yet he asks for nothing in return,
for these gentle services rendered.
But I would gladly give all of myself to him,
this mate of my soul.*

Gina Alkazian



Nonie

by Linda Mooney

She didn't know how long she'd been having those dreams. They'd been a part of her nights for as long as she could remember, a sweet and perfect escape for her from the horrors of her real-time life in the daylight. In them there was Him, a large figure of black and gold who never frightened her, but offered such warmth and security that when sleepiness began to overtake her, she eagerly anticipated her first glimpse of Him. Standing just beyond the opening mists of her dreams, He waited to guide her into his netherworld of gentle, healing darkness.

In those dreams she could like a life like other six-year-old girls, without pain or cold or hunger, for the dreams gave her a family who loved her, cared for her, fed her, and kept her warm in clothes that resembled Grandmum's patchwork blanket. But then morning would come and she would have another day of unknown terrors to live through.

She lived with Grandmum in a part of the city where the worst aspects of mankind thrived. Slipping through the streets on her way to the corner market, she could watch a drug transaction, a stabbing or a pimp beat up on his girls. And if she was lucky, she could make it safely home before one of the dregs who lived in the alleys tried to stop her for the little money or food she carried or worse.

Grandmum only got a single check in the mail once a month--that is, if the gang of young men in the neighborhood didn't pry open the mailboxes with a tire iron and take it. But the money was never enough; most of the time it ran out before the last week of the month. Then she and Grandmum had to survive on the handouts she got from the back doors of the nearby restaurants or the pieces of fruit she stole from Mr. Wallace's corner market.

Now, with snow beginning to cover the trash in the streets, she was going to have to find a way to keep herself warm, a somewhat impossible task. Her fingers and toes always seemed to be red and stiff from the cold and blowing winds.

Even Grandmum was feeling the bitterness of the winter. She rarely got out of her bed now, relying on her granddaughter to fend for herself and feed them both.

Only last night she had said, "Nonie, I don't think I'll be around much longer and you'll be left alone. You'll just have to do the best you can, girl. I'm sorry. I took you in after your mother and father were

killed and raised you the best I could, but it's a cruel world out there. You know that. And I'm just letting you know that when I finally pass on, you'll have to find someplace else to live. I love you, Nonie, and I wish I could do more for you before I go."

Nonie had stood there with the wisdom of fifty years in her brown eyes and nodded. That night she crawled onto her small cot by Grandmum's bed and prayed she would have another one of *those dreams* where He would come and guide her into His world full of people who smiled or laughed and helped each other. Where she could go to school and learn to read the oceans of books she saw in the glowing mists.

It was with sadness she got out of her bed the next morning and went to the little kitchenette to fix herself a glass of powdered milk. When she realized Grandmum hadn't stirred yet, she went over to the old woman and gently shook her shoulder. At that moment the young girl realized her grandmother would never wake up again, and she cried the tears of one who had lost her only possession in life.

Nonie stayed by Grandmum's bed for most of the day and left her side only to nibble on anything edible she could find in the kitchen or to use the bathroom. The rest of the time she took short naps with her head lying against Grandmum's arm, hoping her dreams would help ease the pain and growing fear. But her dreams would not come and Nonie watched the sun go down over the backs of the tenement buildings beyond the single window in the room.

As darkness blanketed the sky, Nonie went to the stove and turned on the gas burners to warm herself over the small blue flames. It was in the pale light of the jets that she watched the black figure silently crawl in through the window and stand just beyond Grandmum's bed.

"It's you," she breathed softly.

The figure turned from its examination of the body on the bed and reached up with gloved hands to lower the dark hood that hid its face. Hair of wild gold framed a visage that the girl had seen countless times in her sleep.

"You're real," she stated.

"The figure tilted his head and smiled. "Yes, I am.

"But I see you in my dreams."

"They're not just dreams, Nonie."

The young child was mildly surprised that the dream man knew her name, but the feelings of comfort she received from him overshadowed her fear.

"My name is Vincent," he continued. "For the past few years you have been dreaming or *think* you've been dreaming of a place that really exists. It's my home, where I live." Vincent moved toward her and bend down on one knee to face her. "You see, you have a very special gift, a gift that enables you to see things and places that other people cannot. It's an esper quality, like ESP, but you're so young that your gift only works when you're asleep.

"So my gift works just when I dream?"

"Yes."

"And the dark place where you live is real, too?"

Vincent smiled again. "You see, Nonie, I have a special gift also. Whenever you dreamed, I felt it, and I was there to watch over you and guide you if you needed me." He nodded his head in the direction of her grandmother's bed.

"I wanted desperately to come and take you away from all this sooner, but your powers were too weak for me to locate you. Also, there was the fact that your grandmother still needed you. But now that she is dead, the strength of your unhappiness reached out and drew me to you. I know you have no one else, so I've come to offer you a home with people who will love you and want you to be part of our family."

"Is is just like in my dreams?"

"Only better," he promised.

Nonie wrapped her arms around his neck and buried her face in the soft amber hair, as Vincent lifted her in his strong arms and carried her to his world and a new life of happiness, warmth and security.



Kevin '90'

The Forbidden

I gaze upon your lovely face
The face I dare not touch

You are so close to me
The one I dare not hold

Your world is beyond me
The place I dare not go

When I'm with you, I sense
The thoughts I dare not think

I hide deep within my heart
The emotions I dare not feel

I am filled with
The love I dare not show

I burn for you
For the life I dare not have

We promised our love
For a dream we dare not live.

Kerin Rose Houseburg

The Mirror Pool

As I gaze into the water,
I see myself reflected there,
A strange face, framed
Among the limitless constellations.
I dreamed a dream,
Of your face beside mine,
Surrounded by stars,
In the circle of the Mirror Pool.
I reached out to touch the water,
And made the stars dance,
Are you there, watching,
From the reflections of a starry gate?

Kerin Rose Houseburg





Tunnel Children

Tap... Tap... Tap...
Rap-a-tap-tap, rap-a-tap-tap
They sing and rumble when they talk
Telling stories, singing songs
Rumbling and singing, tapping all night long.

Flickering and flaming
Shimmering and swaying
Glowing and flowing
Sweet light of our world

Hush-filled whispers
Story hours and teachers
Telling of beautiful things
Teaching about love
Waterfalls and crystals
Winds and whispers
Galleries and windows
Magic things of life

Tap... Tap... Tap... Tap...
Rap-a-tap-tap, rap-a-tap-tap
They sing and rumble when they talk
Telling stories, singing songs
Rumbling and singing, tapping all night long.

Lisa K. Wildman

Beyond Silence

by Eleanor Clark

Although following Vincent into the tunnel could be dangerous, Catherine knew she must not allow herself to convey any feelings of fear. Vincent was roaring now, unseen in the dark tunnel, snarling - the beast in control. *I must get his attention*, she thought and tried to project soothing thoughts through their bond, before she called to him.

"VINCENT!"

Silence! She stopped and allowed her eyes to grow accustomed to the dark. After a time, she could make out dim shapes and shadows. She moved on then, carefully, nervously, because she did not know what she would find.

There was sweat on his face. It was poured from him, his hair was soaked with it. He knelt on the floor on all fours. It brought tears to Catherine's eyes to see him so. There was a wild look about him, his hair snarled, tangled and dirty. She wept openly now, but silently. Still he made no sound as he looked at her. In the pitch blackness, she could barely see. He had discarded his clothing and was crawling naked in the dark. She stooped down cautiously and put her hand out to feel his brow, to see if he was feverish. He growled quietly, seeming to struggle for control. She pulled her hand back, and spoke softly.

"Vincent, it's me, it's Catherine. Vincent, we'll come through this... I love you."

As she watched he fell to the floor, drew his knees up, and wrapped his arms around them. He quietly tucked his head between his arms, and she could hear him weeping almost silently in great, wracking sobs.

"Catherine", he said finally, "you can't see me like this, you must never see me like this. The darkness protects me. You must leave. I cannot talk too long, I feel... something. I cannot control it. I cannot know what I will do. Catherine, if I hurt you... harm you... if you die, I cannot live. You are my lifeline, the anchor that holds me to shore. If I lose you, I'm lost forever. Go back... please!"

"Vincent", she said, "how could I leave you alone here like this. I cannot, without you, there is nothing for me. My destiny is to be with you. *I will be here. I will stay here with you always. Whatever happens we'll be together.* There can be no other way for us, for what we share together. There is nothing else.

"My love, our dream lives as long as there is breath in both of us. No matter what happens, no matter what you say, what you do, know that I love you until my dying breath and beyond. *Nothing* can part us or kill what I feel for you. I will share whatever must be, here, with you."

His head was still tucked between his arms, his voice so low and muffled she could hardly make out the words.

"Catherine, how can you see me like this and say those things?" He gave a long and deep sigh. Slowly he raised his head to look at her. So close in the dark and yet so far from his being, from what he was now. And once again, behind her, he could see the beast, snarling, reaching out - toward Catherine! He growled a warning and threw himself at the beast, wrestling and struggling.

Suddenly, he jumped up and ran, ran into the darkness, still silent. Catherine could hear his body as it bumped and scraped along the rough walls of the passageway and corridors that led even deeper into the earth. She sank to her knees, and finally to the floor where she lay for a long time, sobbing uncontrollably. Suddenly she rose, picked up his clothes and rolling them into a bundle, she followed Vincent into the darkness.

He was silent now, and she had no sense of where he had gone. The tunnel did not branch here, so he must have come this way. Eventually she came upon a fork. On the right, the tunnel led up again, toward the inhabited sections. The other headed downward. She knew he would not travel upwards right now, so she went to the left.

Pausing for a moment, she contemplated her plight. She was alone in the dark with no means of lighting her way, and with no food or drink. She felt certain that others would follow. She needed to mark her path, and leave a message for them to bring food and water. She searched the pockets of her coat and found a pen. She tore off a piece of Vincent's white undershirt, printed a brief message, and left it at the entrance to the left fork. She turned, and with a heart wrenching sigh, began her long descent.

She walked on for what seemed like hours, feeling her way along the corridor walls. There was a thin layer of dust on the floor. She could feel it and smell it when she kicked against a rock and caused a puff of dust to fly up .

If only I could see the tunnel floor, she thought, I would be able to see his footprints - to know if he came this way. Inching her way

through the darkness, she thought she saw a lightening of the darkness in the tunnel ahead. Rounding a corner, she quickened her pace as she realized the tunnel was getting brighter.

Suddenly the passageway opened out into a small grotto. From somewhere far above, a single ray of sunlight pierced the darkness to light a small, deep pool of crystal clear water. On the left, the dark wall rose, bending to form the ceiling in an almost perfect arch. To the right, a crescent of sandy beach stretched around the pool to a series of gradual rock steps on the far side where a passageway led out of the area.

At first she didn't see Vincent. Then, as his head snapped around upon hearing her enter and catch her breath, she saw that he was sitting on the steps, hidden from her except for the top of his head, which rose above the step. He looked startled at first, then such a look of love came into his eyes that she wanted to run into his arms.

He had bathed in the pool and had been shaking and hand drying his hair, which was almost dry and shone like burnished gold as the ray of sunlight caught it. Catherine stood, transfixed.

He started to rise to come to her, when suddenly he sat down again as he realized he was unclothed.

"Catherine," he murmured.

"I brought your clothes, Vincent", she said. "I'll lay them here on the beach beside the rocks. I'll wait in the tunnel while you dress."

Although she had never seen Vincent other than fully clothed, except in the shadows of almost total darkness, she felt a deep sense of his need to retain whatever small vestige he could of his great dignity.

While she waited in the darkness, Catherine recalled the events that had precipitated this situation. She thought that it really started with the many people Vincent had found it necessary to attack recently. It had been done mostly for her protection.

The strain had become evident when he had witnessed the two young men who had killed prostitutes for pleasure. Vincent had tried to stop them from killing; but had instead killed them, when she allowed herself to be lured into a deserted theater where they had captured and nearly killed her.

The strain had heightened when the reporter, Spirko, had succeeded in taking pictures of Vincent attacking two men who had

been hired, by one they thought at the time was Elliot Burch, to place Catherine in a situation that would summon Vincent. This seeming betrayal by Elliot, for whom they had recently regained a measure of respect and trust was another hard blow.

The discovery of Spirko's knifed body had identified Paracelsus as the informer and removed the fact of betrayal, but not its cumulative effects upon Vincent's already stressed body and mind. All this added to Vincent's naturally high level of stress, from having a mind that rode a delicate balance to maintain the conscious being she knew; put him at a level of extreme vulnerability, to the unbelievable events that followed.

Paracelsus' abduction and impersonation of Father had allowed him to influence all the tunnel dwellers, and to perpetuate his years old myth of Vincent as *his* son.

Believing himself to be born in violence and blood, and having killed his mother at birth, Vincent experienced what was probably a metabolic chemical reaction which drove him into madness.

Catherine's belief in him, and her faith in the impossibility of such things being true, led her to uncover Father's imprisonment and Paracelsus' deception. However, the damage had already been done. She and Jamie returned with Father to a Vincent who had been goaded into killing one whom he thought was his most beloved mentor and friend, Father, only to discover that his old nemesis had tricked him. The result of that deception was witnessed by Father and Catherine, the two people he loved most in the world, as well as by one of his most beloved children of the tunnel dwellers, Jamie.

The shock, disorientation, and confusion deepened the depression and heightened the chemical reaction in his body. It drove him even deeper into a state of madness. He was obsessed with the beast within. As the difference in his chemical makeup made it impossible to treat him in traditional ways, it was left to his own great heart, mind and soul to work his way through both the physical and emotional aspects of all this trauma.

It was evident to those who loved Vincent that his "beast" knew he had destroyed an evil, but the primary question that had to be answered in Vincent's tortured mind was this: Had he killed an innocent man, or had he known he was killing a guilty man? Did he really kill Father, as his conscious mind thought he did? Or did his unconscious mind *truly* perceive that this could not be Father, but was, indeed, the evil Paracelsus, who must be killed. Although the answer was evident to Catherine, this question had to be examined and

answered by Vincent to his own satisfaction before his madness could be healed.

How or where he would find his own answers, which he *must* do, Catherine could not imagine. She only knew that she would do whatever necessary to aid him in his search, to protect and care for him during the ordeal he must face, no matter the cost to herself. She knew that Vincent's family would be following would provide whatever support she needed to the best of their ability. She heard sounds at the tunnel entrance.

"Catherine," Vincent called quietly. "Please come out now."

She emerged from the tunnel to see him standing on the beach, his clean and almost dry hair rimmed his face in a halo of gold, as the sun's single ray touched it. She gave a gasp in awe of his great beauty and ran into his arms, murmuring words of love and reassurance.

"You shouldn't be here, Catherine, but I'm glad you are. I don't know when another attack will come upon me, and I *am* dangerous, even to you, at that time."

"Someone must be with you, Vincent, to provide food, gather your clothes, and just to know where you are, and what's happening. There is no life for me without you. Whatever happens, we will share."

"There is no sharing when this madness comes upon me, Catherine," he said, "only the madness, and endurance."

"Even the mad need love, Vincent, and others to be nearby. I have left a note for Mouse at the entrance to this tunnel, so they can bring food. Does he know of this place?"

"Yes, although we haven't come here for a long time. It is to this pool that our children come when they have completed their swimming lessons, for a final examination and initiation into the ranks of accomplished swimmers. The pool is very deep and cold, and is large enough to challenge a newly graduated swimmer.

"We usually come in a group and bring a picnic lunch. It makes a memorable day's outing for all of us, and especially for the new swimmers. My graduation day was especially memorable. It's a story I hope to be able to tell you sometime, when all this passes, if it is to pass.

"While the ray of sunlight is here, this is a warm, cheerful place, but it will soon be dark and cold. Perhaps we should sleep while the warmth is still in the air." He laid his cloak on the sand by the steps

and they sat, Vincent leaning against the wall, Catherine curled against him in the circle of his arm.

She turned her face to his chest and sighed, enjoying the closeness, the way he felt, the light, distinctive scent, so like... like Vincent. She slept.

He stayed awake for awhile savoring her closeness, her softness, her gentle breathing, the smell of her hair. Then he, too, fell into sleep.

Catherine awoke with a start. Jamie shook her by the shoulder and she saw Mouse standing just behind her.

"Catherine, Catherine, where's Vincent?"

She realized he was gone. "Oh, no", she said, "the madness must have come over him again, but I don't know if he went back or forward."

"We found your note at the fork and brought supplies for you. We saw no sign of Vincent".

"Then I think we must assume he went into the tunnel by the steps," Catherine said.

"Tunnel's O.K., but next two tunnels dangerous. Mouse knows. Almost fell in one on left."

Catherine was dismayed. "Tell me what you mean, Mouse?" she asked. "Could Vincent hurt himself?"

Mouse answered. "Tunnel's straight for about half a mile, then forks. Left fork OK. Right fork goes this way: bends right... down long stairs. Take no turns, don't know where they go. Straight... twisty... long, low, then high. More side passages... but straight may go to pit. Other branches? Don't know."

Jamie cut in. "We brought you this, Catherine." She held up a full knapsack. "Father has set up a relay system so that he can keep us supplied and we can keep him informed. He's very worried, we all are. We'll keep track of you as best we can. Leave notes for us when you turn. We're getting deep into unexplored territory now, so please, be careful."

Catherine left Mouse and Jamie in the grotto and entered the far passageway. She had a candle now, and she could see that Vincent's footsteps led this way. She came to a fork and noticed that the

footsteps led right. She left a note for Mouse and Jamie, and continued on. The stone staircase was there, just as Mouse had said, and although the passage beyond was narrow and low enough that she had to stoop, Catherine was able to negotiate it with little trouble.

A short way past the bottom of the staircase, she came upon the first turn that Mouse had mentioned. The footsteps led went straight, so she went on, following them into the passage to the left. This tunnel continued on straight for a long stretch, then began a series of twists and turns as it descended ever deeper into the granite depths below Manhattan.

Time passed slowly, and seemed interminable when she began to hear growling and snarling in the distance. She began to hurry, the candle flickering as she went. She could faintly make out a place ahead where the path widened. Beyond, now, she could hear Vincent plainly, roaring and raging in his struggle with the beast that obsessed him.

As Catherine began to run, cupping the flame of the candle to keep it lit, a puff of air wafted in from somewhere to her right, extinguishing the candle and causing her to gasp with fear. The Pit! She slowed quickly, but not quickly enough. With a cry of frustration and terror, Catherine stumbled and pitched off the edge of the pit into blackness.

Vincent, hearing her cry, stopped his own growling and turned in her direction. Coming instantly to himself, he ran back up the path and stopped at the edge of the pit. He leaned far over the edge, seeking to see to the bottom. There was nothing. He quieted himself, and tried to search for her through his inner being, through their bond. He found her then, a tiny spark at the bottom of the pit.

He reached out to her. "Live, Catherine! I'll find a way to you!" The spark flared. Then it was gone.

Vincent rocked back on his heels, stunned! He threw his head back. His cry of anguish rang against the stone walls. He stayed there for some minutes, sobbing his despair. Suddenly he leaped up and, turning from the edge of the pit where Catherine lay, he plunged at breakneck speed into the dark passage from which he had come.

Racing past the furthest point he had traveled, Vincent continued to run, tears streaming down his face, screaming in his rage and anguish, banging against walls and ceilings. He took turns as they came, mindless of his direction, trying only to outdistance the horrible pain of grief and loss that he felt. The last thing he knew was when his feet encountered empty space, and he fell into the blackness.

Mouse had gone back to report to Father, leaving Jamie to follow Catherine. Others had established a base camp where Catherine had started her trek. It was to this camp that Mouse had gone to send a message to Father, and to replenish supplies for both parties. He was resting and talking to the others when Jamie burst in.

"Mouse", she said, "We've got to do something! It's Catherine! She fell into the pit! I heard Vincent scream. He must have heard her fall. He's gone, Mouse, I don't know where, and Catherine might be dead! We've got to reach her, somehow. She might still be alive. Father might be able to help her.

"We need maps - are there NO maps of this area? Maybe there's a passage leading to the bottom of the pit. How about Paracelsus? He mapped many of the upper tunnels. When he kidnapped Catherine, the chamber he took her to was not very far from here. Are there any records of maps of the area? Has Paracelsus' chamber been searched since he died? We must get Father and we must reach Catherine - quickly!"

They took a few minutes to decide. Alexander would go to get Father; Luther and Roscoe would go to Paracelsus' cavern and search for any mapping records they could find. Mouse and Jamie would try to rest until Father came, so they would be fresh for the search.

Father was frantic. He had felt something - deep inside. He didn't know what. It had been a jarring, a pain, possibly a death, but not quite.

"Vincent!", he thought, *Something has happened to Vincent. And where is Catherine? Is she with him? Was she unable to protect him? Oh, my children, what terrible things are taking place down in that darkness?*

Alexander entered Father's chamber reluctantly, concerned about being the bearer of bad news.

"Father!" He hesitated, "Catherine has fallen into a pit. Jamie said she could make out her form, but she wasn't moving. Father, we fear she's dead, but she may not be. In any case, we need you there to examine or to treat her, if we can get to her. Roscoe and Luther have gone to search Paracelsus' cavern, which is fairly near the pit where

she fell. We hope to find maps of the area. Maybe there's a passage to the bottom of that pit."

Father said, "Something has happened to Vincent, too. I felt it, but I don't know what it was. We must try to find him. However, if Catherine has been located, we must get to her quickly." He gave brief instructions to Alex, then began his own hurried preparations.

Roscoe and Luther found what they were looking for in a cabinet under one of Paracelsus' large tables. They laid the maps out on the flat surface and began to examine them.

"Look, here they are!" They found that Paracelsus had, indeed, been mapping the whole area. A honeycomb of passages led to pits and blind ends, and they found one that led to the bottom of the pit where Catherine lay. They saw on the map, as well, a place where Vincent might have fallen. "Let's get these up to Father right away."

Roscoe and Luther rolled the maps they had examined, gathered all the remaining maps and headed back to meet the others. They arrived just as Alexander and Father entered.

"Peter is on his way. Pascal will bring him down as soon as he arrives. He'll tell him what's going on, and have him stay here, until we return with Catherine," Father said.

It was decided that Father would go to the upper edge of the pit with Mouse. Luther and Jamie would travel by through the lower passages to the base of the pit. They would find a way to bring Catherine back and meet Peter. Roscoe and Alex would gather more supplies and meet Father and Mouse at the upper edge.

They started on their way with Mouse carrying the rope ladder and supply pack, and Father, the lantern. Jamie and Luther soon out-distanced them, and they were left alone.

Father spoke quietly. "Mouse, I'm worried about Vincent. I fear that what I felt was his death. Even if we get to Catherine in time, if he's dead, she may choose not to live."

Mouse responded. "If Vincent's alive and Catherine dead, Vincent won't live. Must keep both... alive."

"Yes, Mouse, you're right, of course, but Heaven help us!"

They came to the staircase, and had to proceed single file with extreme caution. They got down the stairs safely, but the passage floor

became rough and Father was hard pressed to continue. They finally came to the place where the passage crossed over the pit into which Catherine had fallen. Father called her name with no response.

They had to wait until the others arrived to determine the feasibility of using the rope to bring Catherine up. Father suggested they rest and sat down with his back against the tunnel wall and soon fell asleep. Mouse stayed awake, both to keep an eye on Father, and to watch for signs of Luther and Jamie.

About an hour had passed when Mouse noticed a lightening on the floor of the pit. Soon Jamie appeared in the tunnel entrance to the pit followed by Luther. They could see Catherine clearly, now. She seemed to have landed on her back. Although there was blood under her head from a cut, it did not appear to be much, so she probably hadn't bled to death, although any internal injuries were unknown.

Most of the tunnel dwellers had at least a rudimentary knowledge of first aid, and Luther had more than most, having spent a year as an army medic. He checked Catherine's pulse and found it very fluttery and weak. Her breathing was shallow.

Possibly broken ribs, Luther thought, or pneumonia. Although her body felt cool, it was not stiff. Catherine was very definitely alive, although for how long, there was no way of knowing.

"Mouse?" Jamie called from below. "Is Father there?"

"Yes", he replied. "Sleeping... will wake. How's Catherine?"

"Alive... barely", Jamie voice was nearly a whisper, but the sound of their conversation woke Father.

"Luther", he said, "Can she be brought up here? Any breaks? How about her back? Her spine? Her neck?"

"Her spine and neck seem OK, miraculously", replied Luther, "but I think she has several broken ribs, definitely a broken collarbone, and her left ankle is at least dislocated. Her legs are badly bruised, but don't seem broken."

"I'm worried about her head. I'm sure she has a concussion, and we don't know how much internal bleeding there might be. And she's cold. It would take hours to carry her around. We could save time by pulling her up from here. What do you think, Father?"

Father spent a few moments in contemplation, then said. "I think we should bring her up if we can do so with relative safety. I'll

take a quick look at her when she comes up, and if it's feasible, we'll take her directly back to Peter. If she has a severe concussion, she should be in a hospital, Above.

"Come on, Mouse, lower that pack with the blankets on the rope ladder. Good! Careful now, Luther, move her as little as possible."

They used two rolled blankets as splints on either side of Catherine, and wrapped her tightly in the other two blankets.

Suddenly, Pascal appeared with Roscoe and Alexander close behind. Pascal spoke. "Peter is waiting in the grotto."

"Good", said Father, "then let's get Catherine up here. The four men worked on the robes at his direction and carefully drew her to the top of the pit. Father undid the blankets and did a cursory exam.

"I think it's safe to move her," he said. "Let's be on our way."

"Wait," Luther called. "There's one other thing. On our way down, where the passage turns sharply back to the pit, we found something interesting."

Jamie added, "The tunnel ends. There's an open wall into a large area. There seems to be a pool below. Before, when we heard Vincent roaring and running, he stopped suddenly. Perhaps he fell off that cliff."

Luther continued. "If Vincent did fall into the pool, it may have cushioned him. Perhaps he's injured. You have enough help with Catherine, now. I think we should go and explore."

"That seems a fine idea," Father said. "Mouse and Luther and Alexander should go with you two. Roscoe and Pascal should be able to manage Catherine from here to the grotto. We'll take her directly there. Take the rope ladder with you, and Godspeed!"

When they arrived at the grotto, Peter was waiting for them. He and Father examined Catherine thoroughly.

Peter looked up, "We won't know for certain until we get the x-rays, Jacob, but there don't seem to be many breaks. The unknowns are internal injuries and the concussion. We've got to get her to the hospital quickly. If we can work fast enough, I think she'll live. I'll go back and get an ambulance.

They all left the grotto. Kipper showed Peter the fastest way out, and the rest of the party headed for the rendezvous with the ambulance.

Mouse and Alexander climbed down to the others, then the little group followed the passageway. They dismantled the rope ladder and tied it into one long rope, which gave them just enough to get to the bottom. They landed in the pool which was, indeed, shallow, about 3 feet at the deepest.

The entire chamber was about forty feet in diameter, the pool, about twenty feet. They searched the entire area carefully, looking for nooks and crevices, into which Vincent could have pulled himself. They found no sign of him.

The pool seemed to be fed in two ways. First, an underground stream near where they climbed down, and a short waterfall to the left of a spring. Then Mouse made an interesting discovery of an exit from the pool into a very low tunnel.

"The current is very gentle. Perhaps Vincent left this way," Jamie remarked.

Luther asked, "Wading, Jamie... or floating?"

Mouse spoke up. "Don't know... no sign. Mouse will explore. Give end of thin rope from pack. Mouse pulls gentle, you come. Mouse pulls hard, you pull Mouse back."

Mouse entered the tunnel. He was chest deep in water, the gentle current helped him move along. He had to flex his knees a bit to keep from bumping his head on the ceiling.

They had brought 100 feet of the thin, strong nylon rope. He hoped it was enough to get them through the passage. Mouse waded along smoothly for what he guessed was about two thirds of the rope. The water began to get deeper and the ceiling lower. Soon he was neck deep in water, but could go no further in the tunnel. He tugged gently on the rope, and felt a returning tug. Mouse walked back upstream to meet them, where there was a little more head room. Soon he saw them approach.

"Tunnel ends here," he said. "Stream goes under. What now?"

Peter stood by Catherine's bed. Their examinations had proven accurate. Catherine's broken bones had been set. There had been some internal bleeding, but less than he had expected. The biggest problem seemed to be the concussion. She would have to remain motionless in her bed for some time to come. And, she had still not regained consciousness.

Suddenly Catherine's eyes opened wide. She looked straight at Peter. "Vincent," she said clearly. Then her eyes closed and she lapsed back into unconsciousness.

Vincent moaned and opened his eyes, he lay on a grassy verge beside the stream. He sat up and looked around. Across the stream was a wide grassy plain that seemed to stretch for miles.

Vincent blinked in the sunlight. At least he had assumed it was sunlight. He turned around then, searching for the source of the light, but could not find it. Perhaps it was behind the hill. The hill! He turned again, as if in a dream, and looked up. Before him lay a forested hill. Slightly to the right, there was a faint trail leading into the trees. Vincent took another quick look around to see if he had missed anything, then started up the trail.

As he walked, he noticed the light and the trees. There were trees of all kinds, bright with fall colors. The evergreens sparkled as though just washed by the rain. The light streamed through the trees, showing them in their greatest glory. Vincent noticed everything. The novelty of walking on a cushioned path through the sunlit forest was awe inspiring for him. He thought of the time when Catherine had wanted to take him to Connecticut. He even seemed to hear her call to him:

"Vincent!"

He stopped and thought, *Catherine! How did I get here? Where is here?* He knew of no place near New York that looked or felt like this. He examined his clothes, they were dry. He mentally checked over his body. He felt no injuries, and he was clean! The madness? He could find no trace of it.

Where am I? he wondered. *Where is Catherine?*

At the thought of Catherine, his hand automatically reached for the small leather bag that hung around his neck, the bag that contained the porcelain rose Catherine had given him on their first anniversary. It was gone! Where had he lost it? He sank to the

ground, deep in thought. He remembered being naked and in the throes of his madness. Perhaps he had lost it then. Perhaps Catherine had found it, and was keeping it for him.

NO! He remembered, Catherine was dead! He had felt her life flicker out. He began to sob, great wracking cries of pain and anguish. Catherine was gone. Even her rose, his remembrance of her, was gone. He was lost and alone, more alone than he had ever been before. Oh, to have found her, and now to have lost her was more than he could bear!

Where was he? For all he knew, he could be dead. But if this was death, where was Catherine? She should be here with him. He decided he must go on, to find somebody who might be able to give him some answers.

He hurried on, wanting to get through the forest. Maybe there would be some answers to his many questions. He could see the end of the forest now, and soon emerged from its canopy. The path led on to the top of the hill.

Vincent began to run and wondered as he went at his lack of stiffness, of injuries, at his strength and energy. He hadn't eaten for days. He had crawled through dusty tunnels, and finally fallen at least fifty feet into water. He should be wet and dirty and probably should have many broken bones. What was happening?

They stood looking at Mouse. The problem seemed unsolvable. "Well", said Luther, "What now?" Alexander suggested consulting the maps to see if they showed where the stream emerged. Luther suggested going back and getting some kind of diving helmets. Each of the group made some suggestion. Finally, they decided that Alexander, the strongest swimmer, would go forward; and they devised a system of tugs on the rope for communication.

Alexander tied on the rope, and spent about a minute hyperventilating, his lungs pumping like a bellows. He took one last deep breath and ducked beneath the surface. The rope began to disappear - 20 feet, 30, 50, 60. Suddenly the rope stopped. For a few moments, nothing, then three hard tugs. He was through!

They cheered and began to tie loops in the rope for handholds. Mouse, Luther and Jamie breathed deeply as Alexander had, nodded to each other, gave a tug on the rope to let Alexander know they were ready and ducked under the water. They stretched out and kicked to

streamline their bodies and help Alexander, who had to pull all three of them through fast.

They could feel the water rushing by them, and their clothing brushing against the rough sides of the tunnel. Mouse hit his head when the water pulled him too close to the ceiling of the tunnel. Suddenly their heads popped out of the water. It was pitch black, and the air smelled funny.

"This is a closed room," explained Alexander. "It's not large, so the air won't last too long. -I think something died in here, but it's something small. I've found another flooded tunnel. We must go on, there's no turning back. I'll do the same as before. I can swim fairly far myself, and it's certainly easier alone, and then I can pull you faster."

Alexander again hyperventilated, ducked down and began to swim. The tunnel was large enough, still with a gentle current, but the distance seemed interminable. He was very much afraid of running out of both breath and rope; but a few feet from the end of the rope, just when his lungs were bursting, he spewed forth from the underground stream. He found himself in the chamber of the three falls, behind the ledge where Vincent often sat.

He looked around, and spotted something or someone lying on the bank further along. They would investigate as soon as the others arrived.

He gave three good tugs on the rope, and felt the answering tug from the others. He waited until he felt their next tug, the signal that they were ready, then began to pull. He pulled as quickly as he could, he knew how long this passage was. Suddenly he felt a bump and the rope went slack. He was stunned. Would they all be lost?

Then there came one sharp tug, the emergency signal! He began to pull again, hard and fast, but didn't know if it would be quick enough. He had powerful lungs, and he had barely made it, but at last they emerged from the tunnel.

Jamie was first, and although breathless, she seemed none the worse for wear. Luther came next, sputtering and gasping, nearly unconscious, but he clutched Mouse tightly under one arm. Alexander dragged them all up on the bank.

Jamie went to Mouse immediately and checked for wounds and breathing. She began resuscitation and after a few breaths, Mouse began to gasp and cough. Jamie sat back on her heels and heaved a sigh of relief.

"We hit a snag", she began, "and Mouse's part of the rope broke. He tried to yell, and swallowed water. Then he drifted into a crevice, and we thought we'd lost him for sure. But Luther was able to grab him, and we gave the emergency pull.

"That was close. But... see where we are! And look there!" She was on her feet in an instant, running toward the prone figure downstream. It was Vincent. She examined him quickly, and called, "Luther!"

When Luther had finished his examination of Vincent, he sat back on his heels, puzzled. They could see that it was Vincent. At least it looked like Vincent, and he appeared to have been there for some time. But something was strange. He had been through so much, and although he was dirty, he didn't appear to be badly injured. His heart didn't appear to be beating, nor did he seem to be breathing, yet he wasn't dead. His body was limber, supple with no sign of rigor mortis or death.

"I think we should take him to Father, Luther said. "We know the way from here, and even carrying Vincent, we can make it by late tomorrow."

The rest agreed and used the rope and various articles of clothing and materials they could find to construct a sling-stretcher in which to carry Vincent, and started for home.

Catherine remained in a coma for two days. When she regained consciousness, she did so suddenly. She sat straight up in bed, her eyes wide open.

"Vincent", she cried, "come back". She sank back as pain overcame her, but she seemed to sense, more than hear, a faintly whispered reply.

"I'm coming, Catherine. I love you."

Was it his reply or only wishful thinking? She turned her head to the wall, closed her eyes and wept as she remembered their last moments together in the grotto. The sense of his absence was so painful. In fact, it was even more painful since she had never fully realized that she had a sense of his presence.

Where was he? What had happened? What was the extent of her injuries? What of Father and the others? Was there any word?

She remembered falling. What had happened since then? She rang for the nurse. In a few moments, a head peeked in the door, then disappeared. A minute later, a nurse came in followed by two orderlies, a strange doctor, and Peter.

"Well", said the nurse, "You're awake at last. How are you feeling?" She busied herself checking her patient.

Catherine looked at Peter. "My head feels clear, but I'm confused about what happened. I remember falling, but I'm worried about... my family. Peter?"

"We'll talk in a few minutes, Cathy." Peter turned toward the other doctor. "Perhaps, Dr. Bates, you could fill Miss Chandler in on her condition and prognosis, then she and I would like to talk privately."

"Miss Chandler," Dr. Bates began, "You've been in a coma for 5 days. We know you had a fall of some kind, but Peter has been a little mysterious about where and how." He explained her injuries, then continued. "Now that you are conscious, you should be able to leave soon. We'll keep you tonight and tomorrow for further observation, and if all goes well, you can go home the next day."

When she questioned him about working, he assured her that she should be able to go back to work in about three weeks, if she continued to heal as she had been.

Catherine smiled. Three weeks off! Her thoughts turned immediately to Vincent, and the trip they had wanted to take in the tunnels. She caught her breath again, and looked at Peter. Dr. Bates and the orderlies had left, and the nurse was busy rearranging her bed covers and pillows.

"Are you comfortable, dear? Would you like something to eat?"

Catherine realized she was very hungry. "Oh, yes," she replied, "I feel like I could eat a seven course meal!"

The nurse smiled and left. She returned almost immediately. "The Doctor has ordered your I.V. removed, put you on a soft diet today, and house diet tomorrow." She removed the I.V., and put a delicious looking glass of apple juice on Catherine's table.

"Now, you may have some privacy, young lady, and welcome back." With that, she left.

"Peter, tell me quickly, is he all right?"

Peter looked at her sadly. "We don't know, Cathy, he's gone."

She looked shocked. "What?"

"Mouse and Jamie heard a terrible roar. Vincent must have seen or felt you fall. He may have mistaken your unconsciousness for death. He ran, they could hear him crying out and bumping into walls. He must have been running blindly. When they were looking for the passage to the base of the pit, they found out what probably happened to him. We think he ran off a fifty foot cliff, Cathy. Several people went to search. They've been gone two days now."

"He's alive, Peter", she stated. "I know he is. I heard him. He told me he was coming. I know it was him. I do, Peter." She started to cry and Peter sat down on the bed and put his arms around her. He held her while she wept.

"Oh, Peter, what if it wasn't him, if it's just my imagination? What if he's dead, Peter? If he is, what will I do? There's nothing for me without him. No, I know it was him I heard. I must have faith. He needs me to have faith that he'll return, but, if he's gone!" She sobbed anew.

Peter held her and stroked her hair, as he had done when she was a little girl and her mother had died. *She needs him, Peter thought, just as he needs her. And they deserve each other, these two beautiful, different children. Please, God, let them find a balance, somewhere, where they can be together.*

Gradually Catherine quieted. With one final deep sigh, she looked up at him.

"Yes", Peter said to her unspoken question. "When you leave here, I'll take you Below. They can give you as good care as you'd get anywhere, and that way you'll be close if there's any word. I'm going to see Father, Cathy. Are you O.K.?"

"Yes, Peter, thank you." When he left, she sat quietly, pensively, looking out the window.

Vincent was walking now. He continued upward through the tall grass, enjoying the sights, sounds and smells of which he had heretofore only read and dreamed. Beautiful butterflies were everywhere, daintily tasting the flowers which grew in profusion in the

meadow. The flowers added their varied fragrances to the clean, clear odor of the meadow grasses, which he crushed with his passage.

The sounds of birds followed him, and he paused to look up and watch them winging to and fro across the meadow and back to the forest. He sighed, a deep sigh, full of questions and longing. He had reached the top of the hill. A gate lay open before him. As he passed through, he beheld a "being" of light and white, as he had imagined an angel to be.

As the being closed the gate, he spoke. "Welcome, Vincent, you have fared well on your journey so far. Those who have called you here are waiting." With a gesture of his hand, he indicated a path.

Vincent turned and started walking. As he continued across the field of waving grasses, he noticed that it was dotted with small clumps of trees and bushes. *How beautiful is Catherine's world*", he thought, *"if this indeed is Catherine's world*. If she were only here with me, to share this beauty." To his right, about a hundred yards away, he noticed a smaller set of gates and turned toward them.

As Vincent passed through the gates, he was met by three beings, all shining and shimmering. Behind them lay a small meadow which lay before what appeared to be the far side of the forest. One of the beings approached him. As she grew closer, Vincent could see that she resembled Catherine.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"I am Catherine's highest Self", she replied, "We have come to meet you, to help you in finding your way. You should not be here, your task is not yet complete. We are aware of what happened, and have come to offer assistance.

"Tell me", he said, "for I have surely lost my way, and do not know what place this is, or who you are, although you speak to me as if I should know."

The other two beings approached. Both were otherworldly in appearance. One of the strange beings spoke.

"Within each of us lies the power to know all that we can know, to be all that we can be. That knowing, that being, when fully manifested in the world as you know it, results in our "being" our highest selves.

"You have met Catherine's highest self. She is here because Catherine has not yet attained all that she can be. Beings who have

attained their highest level sometimes choose to act as guides for others. You are one of these, Vincent. We are such, as well, only we are guides on the spirit level, not the earthly level, as you have chosen in order to be close to your beloved Catherine.

"You choose to assist Catherine through her final steps. You have asked about your highest self, Vincent. Your highest self is not here, because you *are* your highest self, only you've forgotten. Look now within yourself, and regain the knowledge."

Vincent turned his thoughts inward. He stood for a moment with his eyes closed. He relaxed visibly, his respiration slowed. When he opened his eyes, he almost breathed excitement, yet there was an internal calm about him that had not been there before.

He looked at the three. "Yes", he said, "I see. And I see what must be done. But I've been mistaken. I've made a decision for Catherine that must be hers to make. And I do have one question that remains unanswered. One that I *must* have the answer for before I can continue with my earthly existence. When I killed Paracelsus, I thought it was Father that I had killed. Did I kill Father, or did that instinctive part of me know that it was Paracelsus?"

Vincent's guide spoke, his voice was soft and gentle, much as Father's had been when guiding Vincent as a child. "You know the answer to that, too, Vincent. Look within yourself, and see."

Vincent sank to the ground and gazed toward the forest, deep in contemplation. He remained for a long time lost in thought, and when he spoke, his voice held a new note of firmness, of confidence.

"A person may act or speak in many ways, but he will *always* act and speak within the realm of his nature, of 'who he is'. Father would never have done or said those things that Paracelsus wanted me to believe. I *did* know it was not Father. I knew it was evil. I may even have known it was Paracelsus."

His guide spoke again. "Answer the question, Vincent. Did you know?"

Vincent was again lost in thought. Then he replied quietly. "Yes, I knew. The part of me that is the beast knew. Paracelsus was evil. He could no longer be allowed to remain."

Again his guide questioned him. "And who is the beast?"

Once again Vincent looked within. "He is me. He is my dark side. He is the one who gives me strength and courage, who makes it

possible for me to protect those I love. Without him, my gentleness and uncertainties would prevail, and I and those I love would be easy prey for any attackers. Although he is more violent and kills without remorse, than an ordinary human's dark side, so is he more just. I must bear the remorse for him. For the human lives he takes, no matter how justly, are human lives which are sacred to me.

"So I will accept his judgement when necessary, but I will continue to mourn each lost life. I know now that I can trust him. He will never harm me, those I love, or any innocent. And I am able to accept and love him for his contribution to who I am. I will continue to strive for control of that dark side, so that one day, I will *choose* not to kill, but to find justice in another way."

His guide spoke once again. "Then it's time to go back, Vincent. Catherine's greatest steps, greatest obstacles are yet to come. You must be there to support her crossing. Only then can you truly be as one."

Catherine's guide spoke to Vincent next. "You will have one great obstacle to face here, before you cross back into the living world. When you cross, if you cross, you will forget this conversation, will forget us, and the fact of our existence. It will seem at first as a dream, and then will disappear."

The being in Catherine's image spoke. "You have lost something that is of great value to you."

Vincent's hand went to where he usually carried Catherine's rose. Again he felt the sorrow of its loss.

She continued. "Although we could not replace all of it, we have replaced the lost part with something that will remind you that there is mystery in life. And that the unknown can be loving and beneficent."

She held out her hands, in one was Catherine's porcelain rose, in the other, a small gray leather bag, embroidered with white and red intertwined roses. It was held by a cord of woven golden threads, signifying a precious treasure of love and purity. She put the rose into the bag, then hung the bag around Vincent's neck.

"Follow the path through the meadow and forest. Crossing the river will return you to your world. Farewell, Vincent. We are with you always."



When Alex and Luther carried Vincent's prostrate form into the hospital chamber, Father gasped, sat down heavily then instructed them in a brusque tone that masked his emotions.

"Put him on the examining table. Where are Jamie and Mouse?"

Luther replied. "They went to search for Vincent's rose. He must have dropped it somewhere, but we could find no sign of it. Also, his cloak is gone."

Father sent for Mary, then he and Luther began the task of undressing and bathing Vincent. When Mary arrived, they exchanged the information they had of his injuries. Miraculously, there were no broken bones, nor was there any sort of severe head injury.

Both Vincent and his clothes were very dirty, and still damp from the stream. His hair was matted and filthy, and he had chipped one of his fangs. When they removed his clothing, they found his body to be covered with minor cuts and bruises, some of which were beginning to fester. His vital signs remained negligible. Although he was clearly not dead, he was not clearly alive, either. It seemed more as though he was gone, and only his body remained.

"Perhaps he has an infection of some sort," remarked Father. "That could account for his unconsciousness. Perhaps we'll get Peter to look at him. And I think we should see if Catherine can come down here. Perhaps we could care for her here. Where's Kipper? Let's send a message for Peter now."

When Peter arrived a few hours later, he told Father about Catherine's condition and what she had said concerning Vincent. Peter also examined Vincent and said that his condition was like nothing he'd ever seen before, and that probably the best thing they could do was to keep a vigil. Make sure there was always someone with him so that if he woke, the event would not go unnoticed, and he would not be alone. When Peter repeated the discussion he had with Catherine about coming Below, Father was delighted.

"Tomorrow, you say, I wish she could come tonight!"

They bathed Vincent, washed his hair and brushed it until it gleamed. They dressed him then, in clean clothes for sleeping. They laid him in the bed in his chamber where someone would stay to keep watch. Even in this state, so like death, nobility lay like a soft cover upon his features.

Catherine's condition continued to improve. By the next day, she was eating ravenously and regularly and was discharged in the late afternoon. Peter came for her and together they went Below.

As they went, Peter filled Catherine in on what had happened. The rescue party's experience, Vincent's return, his condition, Father's wishes for keeping a vigil, and for her being there.

Although her broken ribs were still strapped, her arm in a sling because of the broken collarbone, and she limped badly on her sprained ankle, she seemed to have suffered no permanent impairment from her concussion. And being Below where Father could observe her and she could be close to Vincent, seemed perfect.

When Catherine and Peter arrived at the Central Park entrance portal, Pascal was there waiting. Peter handed Catherine over to his capable hands, and went to see Father.

"Take me to him, Pascal, please, quickly."

They suffer so for each other, Pascal thought. I wonder if they will ever find each other again.

Pascal led her to Vincent's chamber. She saw Mary seated near the bed and, as she moved further into the chamber, Vincent came into view. Even Pascal's warning had not prepared her for the sight of Vincent laid out as though for a wake. Ah, but his beauty... his beauty overwhelmed her! Catherine blanched and staggered, bracing herself against the wall.

Pascal took Catherine's arm to help steady her. Her face, pale and drawn, reminded Pascal of Vincent's.

"He's not dead, Catherine, but he's not alive, either. He seems to be some place in between. His body is cool, but not cold. He has scrapes and bruises, but no serious injuries. He doesn't seem to have a heartbeat, or to be breathing, but Peter did some tests. He says Vincent's vital signs are there, but very slow.

"Father says it's as if his body were keeping itself alive, but his spirit was gone. When they found him, he was clothed but very dirty. The little leather bag he carries around his neck was gone, too. Mouse and Jamie knew how much it meant to him, so they went back to search for it. They did a brief search when they found him, but needed to get Vincent back to Father as soon as possible. There was

no time to search extensively. I hope they find it, Catherine, I know it means a lot to both of you, but I don't expect them to meet with much success."

Catherine's hand reached automatically for the crystal that hung around her neck. Just holding it in her hand seemed to help calm her troubled spirit.

"Thank you, Pascal. I'll be all right now. Please leave us alone for a little while. Would you please let Father know I'll stay here?"

Pascal answered. "Peter went right to Father's chamber, so I imagine he knows. We'll leave you alone for a time. Catherine, but take care. You've been very ill, and are still weak. Someone will be nearby to assist you if you call."

"Thank you, Pascal," she replied. "I'll call when I'm ready to go to Father. Thank you, Mary, I'll watch over Vincent for now."

Pascal and Mary left quietly and Catherine was alone with Vincent. She sat down in a chair by the bed and looked at him. He looked so serene and beautiful lying there. Dressed in a soft ivory night shirt, his hair gleaming, he was, indeed, a figure of nobility.

Catherine thought of the many happy times they had spent here. It was in this very chamber, she had first heard his voice. Perhaps the familiar sounds, the tapping of the pipes and an occasional voice and her presence, would draw Vincent back from wherever he had gone.

At this last thought, she looked again at Vincent, took one of his hands in hers. She pressed it to her lips. Gently she lay his hand on the bed, and still holding it in her own, laid her cheek upon it and began to weep softly.

"Oh, Vincent", she whispered, "I don't know where you are, but I know you're alive. I do. Please come back to me. I love you so much. I need you so." Lying with her cheek on his hand, she slept.

She was walking down a broad meadow beside Vincent. She smiled up at him, and held out her hand. They walked for a while, then she turned toward him, stopping him for a moment. She slid her arms around his neck and whispered quietly in his ear.

"Soon?"

He put his arms around her, held her close for a moment, and replied quietly, "Soon".

She woke to Father's gentle touch on her shoulder. He sat down beside her and closed his hands over hers and Vincent's.

There were tears in his eyes as he spoke. "It's been five days, Catherine. It's as if he's away someplace, and I don't know where."

Catherine raised her head and laid her cheek on Father's shoulder. "He's coming, Father. I dreamed and he said, 'soon'."

Father looked at Catherine tenderly. He kissed her gently on the head then spoke. "Catherine, it's important for you to gain strength. You should go now, and get some food and rest."

Catherine sighed. "I suppose you're right, Father, but I hate to leave him."

He replied, "I do understand, Catherine, but you must rest. I'll wait here until you return in the morning."

Catherine rose and quietly left the chamber.

Vincent started across the meadow and soon entered the forest again. As he descended the hill, the forest became darker, thicker and more ominous. The path took many twists and turns. There were false branches that would lead him to endings that disappeared into the woods and were lost. Each time he came to these, he retreated within himself and searched for the path that would lead him home. He stopped for a moment, contemplating. As he thought of Catherine, he seemed to hear her call.

"Vincent! Come back!"

He closed his eyes, a tear rolling down his cheek. His gentle voice cracked as he whispered his reply. "I'm coming, Catherine."

Catherine! Had he really heard her? It *was* her. He was sure of it. She was alive! He called again, singing out. "I'm coming, Catherine! I love you."

He began to run, now, suddenly sure of each turning, sure of which path led him home, to Catherine.



The forest was thinning and he could see through the trees to a wide meadow ending at the river. He ran faster, anticipating his return. Just as he was about to leave the forest, a form seemed to materialize in front of him. It was Paracelsus!

"Where do you think you're going, Vincent? Home? Oh no. you're in my world, now, and I claim you for my own!" he said with a smile. "You will never see your *sweet* Catherine again." His voice dripped with scorn.

Vincent stopped mid-stride. "Hold, Paracelsus! You have no claim on me."

"You are mistaken, boy. You have proven yourself my son! You are mine, now, as you were never Jacob's," he said the last with a sneer, then continued. "When you *killed* Father, and you *did* kill Father, you killed an innocent man. Forget this facade of humanity, Vincent, it was never yours. It acts only to inhibit your power. I can still teach you how to use your power, to glory in being the warrior that you are..."

"Enough, Paracelsus! When I killed you, it was in response to your goading. My instinct sensed your evil, and ended it. I no longer fear the beast in me, for he is me, my ally. It is he who gives me strength. It is he who can sense the deep and hidden evil. Although the man may err, the beast never will. I do not welcome his killing, but I accept it for what it is. I welcome his honesty and virtue within me.

"It was he who knew you, although you cast your spell over the others and entangled me in confusion, creating great uncertainty in the man. You no longer have power over me in any world. I have only to raise my hand before me," he stretched out his left hand before him, palm toward Paracelsus, "and you are gone."

Paracelsus started to laugh then stopped. He gave a wild-eyed look, a howl of anguish, and slowly faded into nothing.

Vincent smiled and continued down the path and into the meadow. As he walked, Catherine seemed to be at his side. She smiled at him and held out her hand. He took it, and they walked on in silence.

Then she turned to him, stopped him, and slid her arms around his neck. Lightly, she kissed his cheek and he heard her murmur.

"Soon?"

He put his arms around her and held her tight for a moment. In her ear, he replied, "Soon" and she was gone. Vincent sighed and continued down the meadow to the grassy verge, and across the river.

When Catherine returned in the morning, Father had pulled a chair over, and was sitting close to Vincent's side. His head was against Vincent's abdomen. He held Vincent's hand in his own, and held it against his cheek. There were tears brimming in his eyes as he turned to her.

"It's been so long, Catherine, so long. Sometimes I despair that he will ever return to us."

"Father, we mustn't lose hope. It's all we have, that and love. And perhaps that's all he has, too. Our love, calling him back from whatever dark and dismal world he travels now. He looks so peaceful there, as if he were just sleeping, and will awake in a moment, and be our Vincent again. I can't help but wonder where he has been traveling these many days.

"You go now, Father. Get some food and rest."

Together they turned to look at their beloved Vincent one more time. Around his neck was a golden cord holding a small grey bag embroidered with entwined red and white roses. As they watched, his eyes fluttered, he inhaled deeply, began to breathe regularly, and opened his eyes.

"Catherine! Father! I've been looking for you. I could feel your love calling to me. At last I've found my way home." He put out his arms, and embraced them both lovingly. There were tears running down his cheeks to mingle with Catherine's and Father's on his face.

"Father, I must speak to Catherine alone. Perhaps while you tell the others..."

"Yes," said Father, "I'll go at once. Everyone must know. Are you strong enough, Vincent?"

"Yes."

"Good. I'll try to give you an hour alone."

"Catherine, I've had the strangest and most wonderful experience.... "

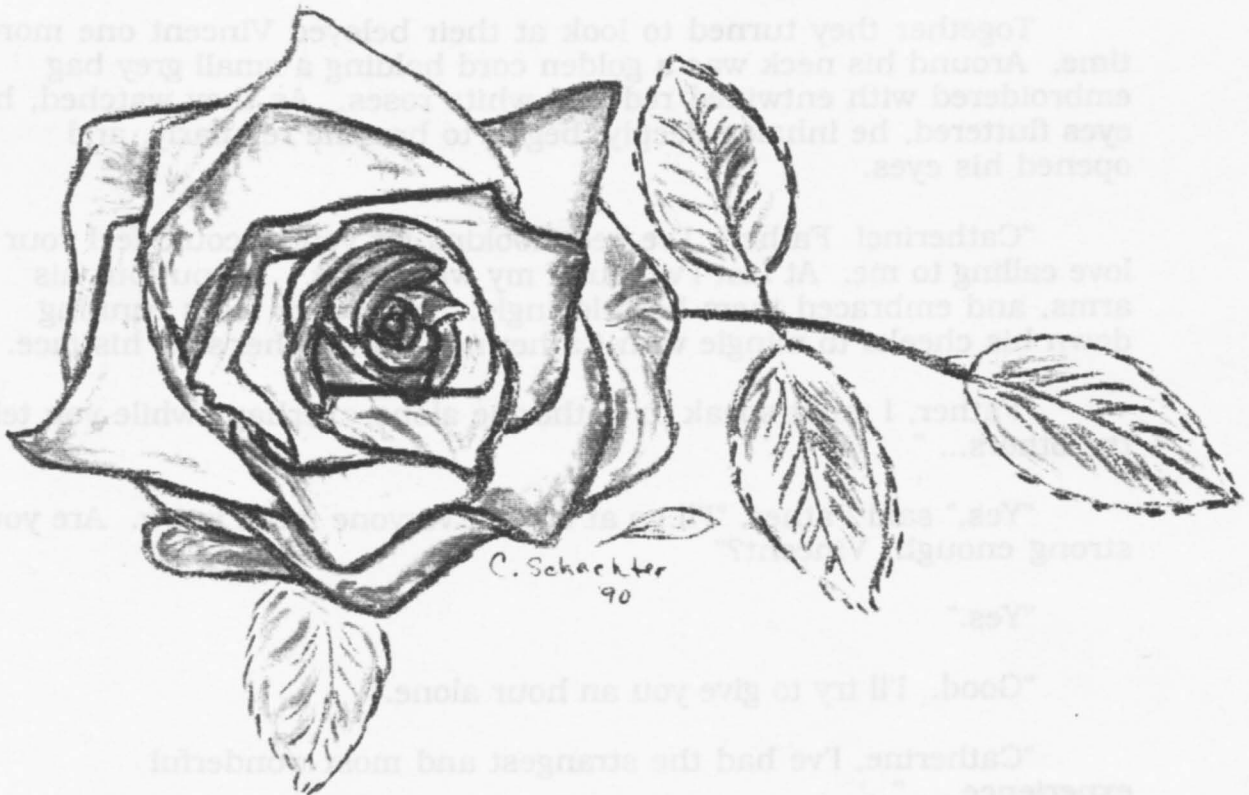
" ... so if you will still have me, Catherine, I'm yours."

Each sought the other's soul and found, in the depths, the flame of love burning strong and true.

Vincent lifted himself on one elbow and extended his other hand to Catherine. She grasped it and he pulled her close.

As they drew together, the question that lay uppermost in their minds was answered in the eyes of the other. As their souls opened fully, each experienced the emotions of the other. Peace and contentment flowed through them as their lips parted and met in their first true lover's kiss.

They sighed their contentment, and as they rose together into the light, it was with the knowledge that fear had been transcended. They were free at last, to be together in all ways, forever.



Wonderment

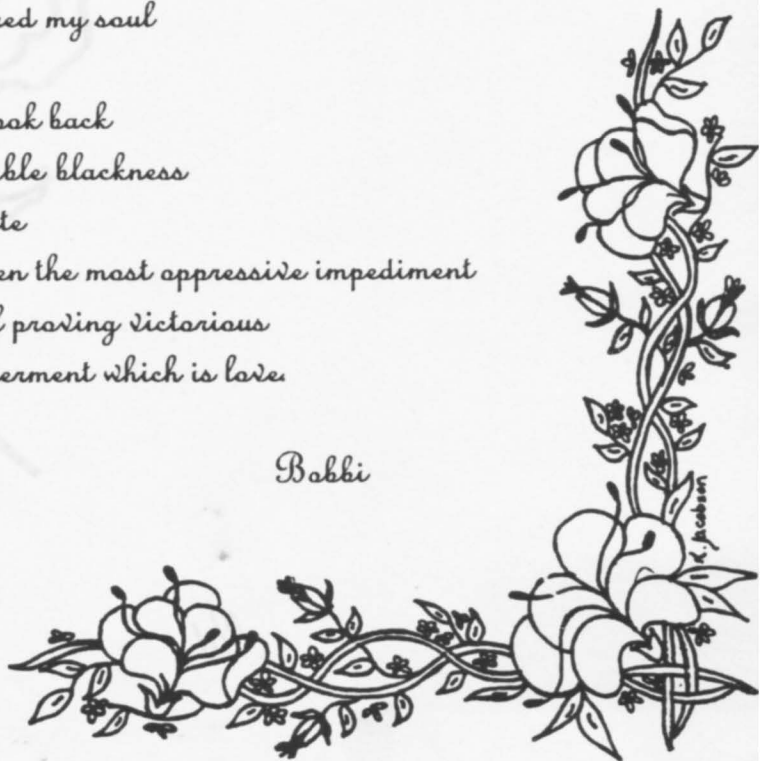
She comes to me in the darkness
Yet, she is enshrouded in luminescence
She touches me with infinite lightness
Yet, fire is sent coursing through my veins
Her beauty is limitless
Yet, she possesses no vanity

To embrace her enlightens all my senses
And compels my heart to take flight
Yet, she remains calm in the midst
Of my encompassing passion
Guiding me gently with her knowledge
Born of certainty

How long did I await
Such a love as this
Trapped in a lifetime of denial
Until she magically appeared
Enslaved in mere existence
Until she entered my soul

Now when I look back
On the lamentable blackness
That was my fate
I know that even the most oppressive impediment
Is incapable of proving victorious
Over that wonderment which is love

Babbi



This Secret Place

The tunnel world is a secret place
Of wondrous things and people.

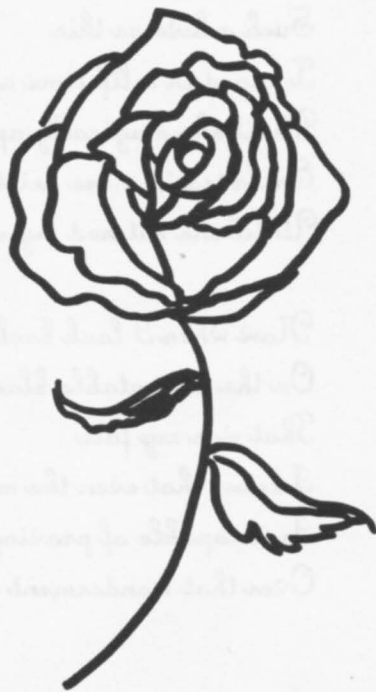
Vincent rescued me and by that act
Though forbidden, bound himself to me,
Forever.

My heart went out to that gentle face
The sweet longing of this place,
This secret place.

We are as one within our bond
Though we cannot be together

He's in my mind, I'm in his heart,
Because of this we'll never be apart.

Kerin Rose Houseburg



Revenge

by Margaret Davis

The television anchorman continued his synopsis of the days events in spite of the disinterested audience. Twenty men sat in front of the TV, some in bathrobes, others in casual clothes and one in a business suit. To the casual observer they were a group assembled to watch the news program. Under close observation, however, the blank stares, the ritual of repeated gestures and the hospital bracelets told another story, a story of mental illness. The barred windows, locked doors and restraints close at hand, warned of violence. These patients were a risk to themselves and others.

Ward 7 of the Mayfield Institute was reserved for patients whose mental illness made them non-functional. The severity of their symptoms was beyond the control of conventional dosages of drugs. The high doses they required caused some extreme side effects and sometimes produced a zombie-type behavior. The patient/staff ratio was three to one, an indication that the deceptively docile atmosphere of this evening was not the norm.

Steven Bass stared out the window wondering when they would come for him. Bernie had found him, had asked him questions about Cathy and that inhuman *thing* that put him in this wheelchair and in this place. Cathy had used all her legal skills to have him imprisoned here with all these loonies, she must have. Now that he had been able to talk with someone and tell the truth, it would only be a short time until he was released.

Suddenly Steven heard her voice. Was she here? Turning, he realized she was being interviewed on the news.

"Miss Chandler, is the District Attorney throwing the book at Andrew Warner because he used to work in your office?" The tone of the question indicated what the reporter believed.

"The District Attorney has found probable cause to charge Mr. Warner with murder. We are here to see that justice is served. That's all I can say at this time. Thank you."

"Miss Chandler, what about the violent manner in which the victim died?"

"There is seldom any justification for violence against helpless victims. The District Attorney is proceeding with the case in the standard manner."

"Liar, liar!" Steven's rage boiled over into action. Rolling himself forward, he pushed at the TV and knocked it over before the nurse could get to him.

It took three of them to wrestle him into restraints and get him into solitary confinement. Each wondered what they would have needed, if Steven Bass had use of his legs. It was not a pleasant thought.

* * * * *

Assistant District Attorney Joe Maxwell arrived in the office on this Friday morning in a state of sartorial elegance, that caused a number of whistles as he walked through the office.

"Hey, can't a guy get a new suit now and then?" Joe tried to keep a frown on his face, but a grin broke through as he opened his office door.

In his breast pocket were two tickets to "The Phantom of the Opera," a major investment. When your favorite lady doctor had a Friday night free and loved both music and Italian food, serious planning was in order. They would have dinner at his favorite restaurant in Astoria. Then to the theater, and afterwards... well, better not plan too far ahead. At least she had promised to leave her beeper at home.

* * * * *

The tall man was slightly breathless as he hurried through the door to the District Attorney's offices. A telephone call had assured him that Miss Chandler had not left the office. Now if he could just get the District Attorney to see him, maybe they could interrupt the chain of events that had unfolded over the last two days.

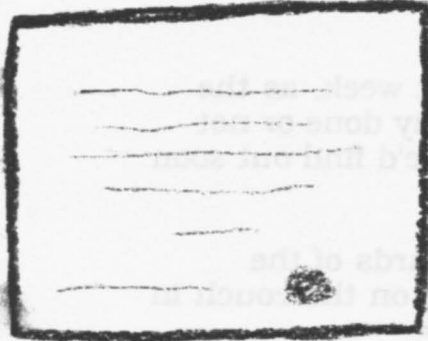
"Yes sir, may I help you?" the young receptionist queried.

"I need to see the District Attorney immediately. It is a matter of utmost urgency."

"He's out of the office until Monday. Could someone else help you?"

"Who is Miss Chandler's supervisor?"

Looks like Cathy is in big trouble, again, thought Marilou as she escorted the man to Joe Maxwell's office.



DEPUTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY

JOE MAXWELL

Holly Fiedel

"Mr. Maxwell, this gentleman asked to see District Attorney Moreno. Since he's gone, he wants to talk to Miss Chandler's supervisor," she announced.

Joe looked up from the deposition list for next week, as the lanky, blonde man entered his office. What had Cathy done or not done to cause such a anguished expression? Well, he'd find out soon enough.

The man introduced himself as Dr. Mark Richards of the Mayfield Institute. He closed the door before sitting on the couch in front of Joe's desk.

"Dr. Richards, how can I help you?"

"Is Miss Chandler still in the office?"

"Suppose you tell me what's the problem."

"Please, don't let her leave! It's vital for her safety!"

The doctor's concern for Cathy was contagious. Joe decided he should go check on her. He excused himself and closed the door before going around the corner to her office.

An elderly woman sat in a chair by Cathy's desk. Joe paused near them and waited until Cathy looked up.

"Excuse me, could I interrupt you for a minute, Cathy?"

"Mrs. Arnold, I'll be right back." As Catherine stepped away from the desk, she whispered, "What is it? She was just getting settled down enough to answer questions."

"Radcliffe, do you know a Dr. Mark Richards from the Mayfield Institute? He's in my office and says you're in some kind of danger."

A chill ran down Cathy's spine at the name. Steven Bass was at Mayfield. Bernie Spirko had questioned him there when he was after Vincent. Could Steven have convinced the doctor that Vincent was real and not his imaginary creation?

Joe watched the color drain out of Cathy's face, in a remarkable example of the descriptive term. He took her arm and steered her into the empty conference room next door. Her knees seemed to give way as he guided her to a chair.

"Stay right here, I'll be right back," he said.

Joe ushered the elderly woman out of the office. "Miss Chandler has been called away on an emergency. We'll be in touch next week."

Joe sat on the corner of the desk and looked at Cathy. She had composed herself somewhat, and now looked at him steadily. "You want to tell me what's going on, Radcliffe?"

"Joe, I... I don't know this doctor. What does he want with me?"

"I don't know. He asked to talk to me, but I think we should both hear what he has to say. Okay?"

Cathy nodded and they walked to Joe's office to hear the doctor's story.

* * * * *

Vincent firmly grasped his end of the bundle of two-by-fours. Cullen had the other end. Mouse waited for them to put the lumber on the tunnel floor. They were closing off a tunnel entrance. One of the lookouts had seen a man loitering in the vacant building that had a concealed entrance in the basement. They changed entrance/exits on a regular basis to avoid detection, but the sighting had made it imperative to change this entrance now.

As he stood resting for a minute, Vincent felt Catherine's uneasiness. He concentrated his thoughts on their bond, but she was still in the office. He would have to wait until she went home to find out what had distressed her.

* * * * *

Dr. Richards rose to his feet as Joe and Cathy entered the office. Joe introduced Cathy and pulled a chair close for her. Dr. Richards was clearly uncomfortable with Cathy present, he did not want to frighten her. Joe assured him that whatever he had to say, should be said to both of them.

When the doctor still hesitated, Cathy spoke up. "Dr. Richards, does this have anything to do with Steven Bass?"

By correctly guessing the reason for his visit, Cathy seemed to put the doctor at ease, and he began to tell them the story.

Stephen Bass had a history of violent behavior in the time he had been in Mayfield. He was confined to a wheelchair from the accident

that had preceded his commitment. The diagnosis was paranoid schizophrenia. He claimed to have been the victim of a huge, non-human creature. Evidence at the scene suggested he had run through a plate glass window.

The medical staff at Mayfield had tried a number of drugs and other therapy to alleviate his schizophrenic symptoms. The side effects had been so adverse, however, that after a time other less effective medications had been the only choice.

Steven continued to hear voices and to make accusations of being attacked by a creature. Much of his hostility was directed toward his former fiancée, Catherine Chandler. In his mind she was the cause of his paralysis, claiming it was she who caused the creature to attack him. He had even given the illusionary creature a name, Vincent. His delusion was so severe that he imagined a relationship between Miss Chandler and the creature. He had decided she was the one who had him committed to Mayfield, and no amount of explanation of the judge's order could convince him otherwise.

A few months ago, Steven had suffered a particularly violent episode after seeing Miss Chandler on the evening news. A new drug had been administered, and after a time, he seemed to improve. He began to participate in group as well as individual therapy, and seemed to be making progress.

After a number of weeks of improvement, he had asked for writing materials. He started a journal and expressed interest in learning to use the word processor. He told his therapist, Barbara William's, he might write a book.

"Barbara was my predecessor at Mayfield. I was hired after she died."

"Died?" Joe repeated. "What happened? Does this have anything to do with Cathy?"

"She was found dead six weeks ago. She had been strangled in the parking lot beside her car. The police questioned all her patients, but didn't learn much. Steven Bass, was the most violent of her patients, but he was eliminated as a suspect because there had been no wheelchair tire marks at the crime scene."

Joe looked at Cathy as Dr. Richard paused. She sat rigidly still with her tightly clasped hands indicating the effect of the recitation on her nerves. He reached out and put his arm around her shoulders.

As the late afternoon shadows stretched across the floor of Joe's office, the doctor continued his narrative.

"They trained Steven on the PC and he spent hours working on his book. Barbara's notes say he was insistent that no one read it until he had refined his skill. She was so pleased with his progress, that she had acceded to this demand.

"As he improved, Steven moved to the medium security ward. He continued to show improvement, to work on his writing and had started making friends with other patients. Barbara's record showed her plan for his eventual move to minimum security ward. She thought with continued improvement there was even a possibility of allowing him a weekend pass.

Joe knew that all this background was probably necessary, but wished the good doctor would just get to the point.

"Mayfield computerized staff notations to patient files last year. Drug dosages, doctor's orders, therapist notes and treatment plans are all a part of the automated file. When you can call up a patient's record and have the latest information instantly, it streamlines the day-to-day operation.

"For some reason Barbara kept some of her notes on patients in longhand at home. They were discovered two days ago by her sister who was here to clean out her house. They gave them to me, but I hadn't read them until this morning.

"I read her notes on Steven Bass, *after* he disappeared early today"

"Disappeared?" Joe looked at Cathy with concern. "Do you think he'll try to get to Cathy?"

"Yes, I do. Let me tell you the rest."

"When I took over Barbara's case load, I read the printout of each patient's history. Steven Bass' record told about the severe delusions he had suffered, and detailed the progress over the last few months. I had some complaints from some of the patients who thought he monopolized the computer. I was so glad to see Steven's continued interest in something outside himself that I brushed off the complaints.

"When I read Barbara's notes on Steven I was dumbfounded. The notes didn't match the printout I read about Steven. The computer record indicated continued progress, the handwritten ones said the



initial progress had been promising but brief. His obsessive behavior regarding his writing was troubling to her.

"In her last notes she wrote of her suspicion that Steven had learned how to access his own file. When she tried to make a correction to a previous entry, she had found it different from her original. After careful research, she had found evidence of tampering with not only her notes, but those of other staff members who routinely entered their observations to patient files.

"He made subtle changes to his own file that made his behavior appear to be nearly normal. Her concerns that he was concocting some elaborate scheme to win his release, and the fear she felt when talking to him about his book had been deleted.

"She wrote that when she suggested he allow her to read his material, for a moment there was a look of incoherent rage in his eyes. The other thing missing was her theory that his injuries were not the cause of his paralysis."

Catherine's thoughts were carried back to that night of terror. Steven had been violently angry at her rejection of the home and furnishings he had purchased. He spent millions of dollars to replicate the dream house of her youth. Only Vincent's timely intervention had prevented her death, and she had stopped him before the final blow had been struck. *I wonder if I will regret that impulse*, she thought, then focused on Dr. Richards' next words.

"My treatment of Steven Bass was based on the altered record. I hadn't worked with him long enough to recognize his deviousness, his fury at being confined and his violent hatred of Miss Chandler and the creature.

"Steven Bass was moved to the open ward at Mayfield two days ago. We discovered he was missing around seven o'clock this morning. We feel his primary objective is to get to you, Miss Chandler. We are also concerned he will harm himself or others, in his search for this illusionary creature he calls Vincent."

Catherine felt a jolt of terror at the thought of Steven coming anywhere near her or Vincent. After she broke their engagement, Steven had disappeared from her life for five years, resurfacing eighteen months ago. He said he wanted to be near her after his diagnosis of a brain tumor. Since his parents had been killed, Catherine had been the only person he could turn to, for comfort in the short time he had left to live.

Catherine thought she would never have to worry about Steven again. He had been committed to Mayfield Institute on a permanent basis, and she had known he hadn't long to live.

"Dr. Richards, is this irrational behavior a result of Steven's brain tumor?" Catherine searched for a way to make some reasonable sense out of this problem.

"What brain tumor?"

"Steven told me he was diagnosed with a brain tumor and had six months to live. That was eighteen months ago."

"Miss Chandler, Steven never had a brain tumor. He must have been playing on your sympathy. As a paranoid schizophrenic, he sees you as the primary reason for his failures in life, his continued hospitalization and the cause of his supposed paralysis. That is, of course, not counting his invisible creature. And they can be so convincing because they believe what they tell you is the truth."

"Just what do you mean by *supposed paralysis*?" Joe's concern for Cathy gave his voice a sharp edge.

"Steven Bass *walked* away from Mayfield. We found his wheelchair hidden in some bushes."

"Couldn't there be some other explanation? Maybe someone picked him up and they left the chair on purpose?" Cathy asked.

"Miss Chandler, we now believe he is the one who strangled the therapist. Her last sentence in her handwritten notes indicated she saw him standing by his chair when he thought he was unobserved. We believe she confronted him and he killed her. We have talked with the Boston Police about the death of his parents. We have reason to believe he may have killed them deliberately and used his drinking to cover his true motive.

Catherine shuddered at the thought, she had always liked Steven's parents. *Surely even someone as sick as Steven would not deliberately kill his parents.* Even as she thought it, she remembered some of the cases she had seen in her time with the D.A.'s office. Some of the most hideous crimes had been committed by the victims' family members.

* * * * *

Vincent was uneasy. Since mid- afternoon he had felt Catherine's apprehension which had occasionally changed to fear. He

could not feel anything specific and suspected she was doing her best to mask her feelings. She had learned to conceal her feelings from him when Paracelsus kidnapped her. She had refused to let her terror draw him into danger. He paced the tunnels near her office, waiting to sense when she left the office and moved toward home or toward him.

* * * * *

While Cathy and Dr. Richards talked about Steven Bass, Joe went to an empty office to call his date. He told her he would send the tickets to her by messenger and she would have to take them and go with a friend.

"Marta, you know I wouldn't cancel unless it was an emergency," he said and counted it a blessing that she understood. "No, it looks like it could go a day or two. I'll call you when it's over." He listened a moment, then said, "I will. See you soon."

He had no intention of leaving Cathy alone until Steven Bass was locked up. She had talked him out of staying with her when that nut case was watching her, but not this time. Not even if he had to handcuff her to him. He smiled at the picture the thought brought to mind, *Chandler in chains? No I don't think so.*

Joe also called the thirty-third Precinct and asked for Greg Hughes.

"Greg, Joe Maxwell. Fine. Listen we've got a problem here... "

* * * * *

When Joe returned to his office, Dr. Richards stood to leave.

"Miss Chandler, Steven Bass was identified by an employee at his bank, according to the Police. She remembered him because of the large withdrawal he made, over twenty-five thousand in cash. We believe he is still in the city, you must be extremely careful."

"She won't be alone a minute," Joe stated emphatically.

Catherine felt a desperate need to get to Vincent, to warn him. Even though Steven Bass knew nothing of Below, he had seen Vincent. Could Bernie Spirko have said anything to Steven when he interviewed him that might have given Steven ideas? The risk was too great, she must warn Vincent!

After the doctor left, Joe told Cathy of his plan to take her to his apartment. She would be safe there, and he would be with her every step of the way. He refused to listen to her protests, and was glad when she finally gave in and agreed to go to his apartment for a while. He agreed to go with her while she picked up some clothes, after Greg had checked out her building..

Catherine excused herself to go to the ladies room. On the way she grabbed a pad and pencil and wrote two notes and labeled them. She sealed them in an envelope and gave it to one of the secretaries, who promised to deliver her *order* to the deli around the corner on her way home. One note Catherine sent asked the helper at the deli to deliver the second note to Vincent as quickly as possible.

* * * * *

Vincent continued to keep vigil close to Catherine's office. Suddenly he heard his name on the pipes and a message from Father to return at once. Torn between the two people he loved most, he hesitated. He sensed that Catherine was all right for the moment and hurried back to Father's chamber.

"What is it, Father?" Vincent moved quickly to stand beside the silver-haired man.

Catherine sent you a message marked 'Urgent'," Father said as he handed Vincent the note.

"Steven Bass has escaped. He is able to walk. The doctors think he will come after you and me. He is extremely dangerous and has vowed revenge on us. I will be with Joe until the police have checked my apartment. I will come to you as soon as I can. Do not come Above for any reason! Be safe, Catherine."

Vincent handed Father the note. As he read it, Vincent paced back and forth.

"Catherine must come Below. I can protect her here. She must not be where that... madman can get at her." Vincent's agitation was evident in the harsh tone of his voice, as well as the anguish on his face.

"Vincent, Catherine will be safe with Joe, he... "

"No! You don't understand. He nearly killed her, before. I was almost too late."

"Vincent, you cannot be with Catherine now. You would be in great danger. If they caught you Above..."

"Perhaps we can trust Joe with our secret. He is a good man. We can send a note with Kipper. They can both come Below." In his desperation, Vincent was willing to reveal himself to Catherine's boss in order to protect her.

"You cannot!" Father's voice rose above his customary tone, with this challenge to his authority.

"How can I leave her with only him to protect her? I know Steven's strength. Must I sit in safety and feel her taken from me?" The thought was such agony that Vincent snarled the last words and stalked from Father's chamber. Blindly he began to run, pursued by the possibilities.

* * * * *

Catherine sat in Joe's apartment and munched Chinese take-out. She wasn't hungry but ate to appease Joe. He insisted she would feel better if she ate. She knew she would only feel better when Steven Bass was behind bars and Vincent was beside her.

They both jumped when the phone began to ring. Each tried to look nonchalant as Joe picked up the receiver.

"Yeah? What? You sure the area's clear? Okay, we'll be there in half an hour."

"Greg Hughes is at your place. They checked the area and your building. No sign of Bass. They'll meet us there so you can get your stuff."

* * * * *

Vincent paced in the tunnel below Catherine's building, five strides forward then back. Catherine was moving toward her apartment and he wanted to be near. If necessary he could sacrifice himself to protect her. He knew he could not stay Below if she needed him.

* * * * *

Greg and his partner lead the way from the elevator with Catherine and Joe right behind them. Greg took her key and unlocked

the door then reached inside for the light switch. Suddenly he motioned them back and drew his gun.

Joe drew Cathy behind him and watched as Greg went through the door at a crouch, his partner on his heels. He could hear them moving, it sounded like there was water on the carpet.

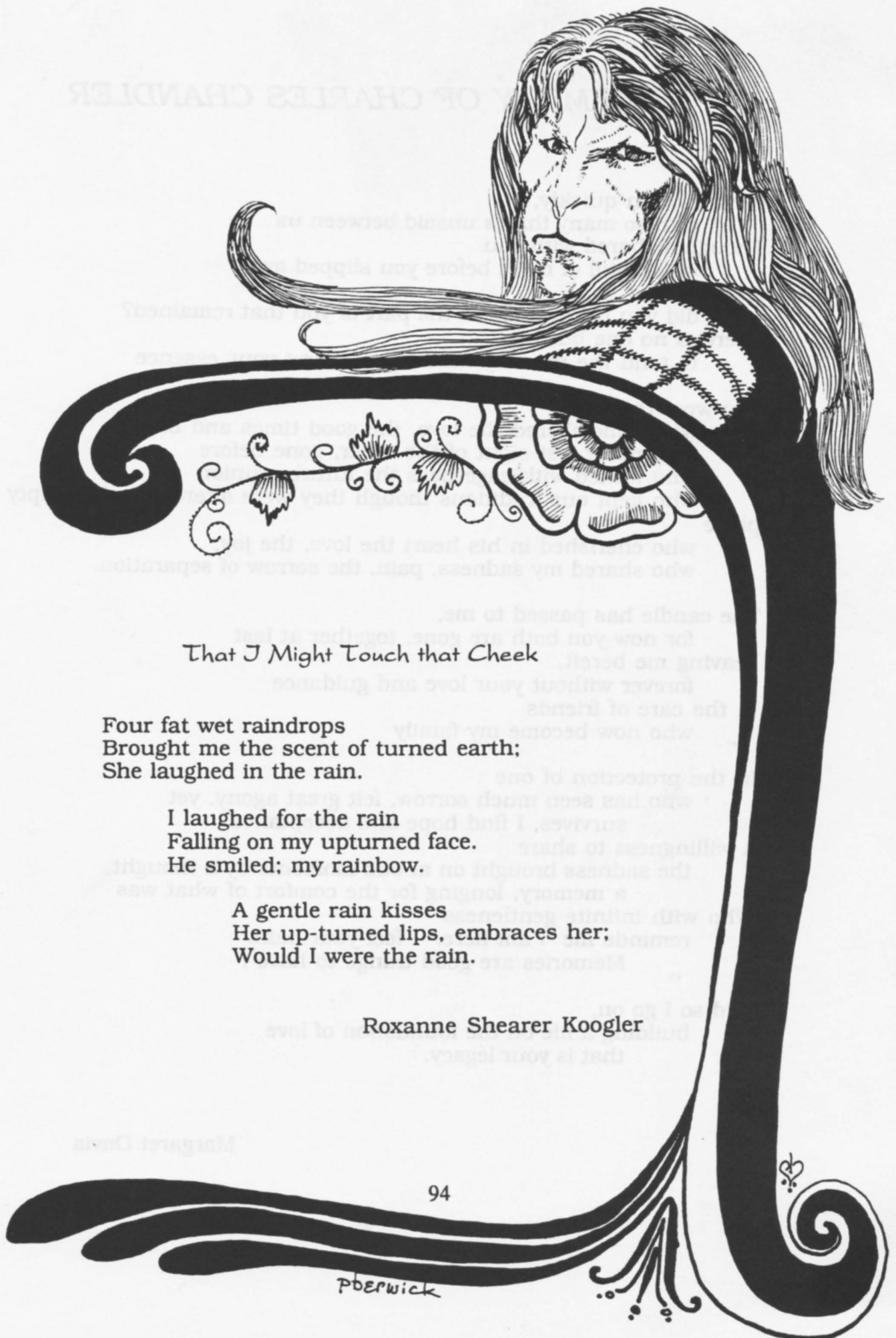
Catherine's nose twitched, something smelled foul and it was coming from the open door. Just when she thought she could not stand the suspense another moment, the lights blazed on in her apartment and she heard Greg say no one was inside.

As Catherine walked through the door, she came to an abrupt halt. Spray painted obscenities snaked across the walls. The fabric of her furniture hung in ribbons. Slowly she advanced into the room. Joe was behind her, cursing softly. The carpet underfoot was squishy, covered with an odoriferous soup of oil, syrup and other unidentifiable liquids.

The bedroom was an equally appalling disaster. All of her clothes hacked to pieces, the linens on her bed torn and covered with excrement. Across one wall was a chilling message:

No one will ever love you like I love you. I will be back for you Cathy.

To be continued in *Within the Crystal Rose II*.



That I Might Touch that Cheek

Four fat wet raindrops
Brought me the scent of turned earth;
She laughed in the rain.

I laughed for the rain
Falling on my upturned face.
He smiled; my rainbow.

A gentle rain kisses
Her up-turned lips, embraces her;
Would I were the rain.

Roxanne Shearer Koogler

IN MEMORY OF CHARLES CHANDLER

Struck down quickly,
 with so many things unsaid between us
Thoughts shared with you
 in the still of night before you slipped away
Did you hear,
 did you understand in the part of you that remained?
There is no one but me
 to tend the memory flame, preserving your essence

You were the one
 who remembered the love, the good times and bad
 who never lost sight of the other, gone before
 who waited with eagerness the future reunion
 who kept our traditions though they were altered by the empty
place
 who cherished in his heart the love, the joy,
 who shared my sadness, pain, the sorrow of separation.

The candle has passed to me,
 for now you both are gone, together at last
Leaving me bereft,
 forever without your love and guidance
In the care of friends
 who now become my family

In the protection of one
 who has seen much sorrow, felt great agony, yet
 survives, I find hope and acceptance
A willingness to share
 the sadness brought on at odd moments by a thought,
 a memory, longing for the comfort of what was
Who with infinite gentleness
 reminds me "I am here. I feel your pain.
 Memories are good things to have".

And so I go on,
 building a life on the foundation of love
 that is your legacy.

Margaret Davis

Reflections in the Crystal Rose

by Margaret Davis

Vincent lay in his bed, not sure what had awakened him. The pipes carried faint messages from the night-time sentries, tapped as they patrolled the perimeters. He listened for a minute, then turned on his side and pulled the quilt snugly up over his shoulder. He closed his eyes but before he slept, an overwhelming sadness swept over him. It was Catherine.

As he concentrated his thoughts on their bond, he sensed that far Above, Catherine was also awake. The sense of her was so bleak and sad, that Vincent rose from his bed and began to dress. She needed comfort and, if it came at the expense of interrupted sleep, it was a small price to pay. It was the dearest privilege to share *anything*, even sorrow or pain, with Catherine.

Vincent arrived on Catherine's balcony with the mere rustling of leaves to mark his presence. He had felt Catherine doze back to sleep while he was still in the tunnels, but it was a restless sleep, haunted by dark dreams.

Vincent tapped lightly on the bedroom doors. Inside he could hear Catherine's voice murmuring as she was driven by the goad of her dreams. He tapped on the door again and called her name, but there was still no response. He pondered on what could be troubling her. She had been unusually quiet the last few days, pleading overwork as the cause. Vincent had felt a sadness at odd moments from their bond, the bond which was now so different than it had been before the dark time last spring. The dark time when the beast within had nearly driven him into eternal madness.

Previously he had been able to feel Catherine's presence in his heart even when she was thousands of miles away. Now, it felt like there was a shield between them. Sometimes her feelings were clear, but at other times he had no sense of her and he was not always sure of her location.

They compensated for the lack by sending notes through the Helper network, and when they were together, by making an extra effort to articulate their feelings. They had spent much time together while he was recovering from his self-inflicted injuries last spring, and had become accustomed to sharing thoughts and feelings, more so than before. Catherine had understood when he was too exhausted by the pain of his wounds to even listen, and had sat for hours with only the rustle of turning pages to mark her presence. She seemed to

know that he needed the visual reassurance of her nearness because their bond did not always tell him she was there.

"Vincent, Vincent, no, no... don't leave... " Catherine's plaintive cry demanded immediate action.

When his third tap on the door went unanswered, Vincent reached into the pouch that held his memory rose, as well as a key to Catherine's balcony doors. Catherine had insisted he take the key. She knew the secrets of the tunnel entrances and wanted him to have equal access to her home.

Vincent unlocked the door, crossed to her bed and softly called her name to avoid frightening her. Still in the demonic grip of her nightmare, Catherine did not waken. Vincent knelt by the bed and spoke her name, as he lightly touched her arm.

Suddenly her eyes flew open. The sapphire eyes and beloved face drew her back from the clutches of her dream.

"Oh, Vincent!" she cried as she flung her arms around his neck and began to sob.

Vincent slid his arms around her, murmuring soothing words, and lifted her, covers and all, from the bed. In the living room, he sat on the sofa and cradled her in his lap, tucking the blanket around her for warmth.

When the storm of weeping began to subside, he took a corner of the blanket and dabbed at Catherine's face in an unsuccessful effort to wipe away the tears.

"I'm s-s-sorry, Vincent," the words came, as she hiccuped.

Vincent looked down at her tear-streaked face as she struggled to control the weeping. He gently stroked the side of her face with the soft hair on the back of his hand in an attempt to allay her fear and sadness.

"Catherine, you must not be sorry. Our bond allows me to share your feelings. Few others ever experience our closeness. We must accept it as a rare gift," Vincent said in his deep, soothing voice.

Catherine was unable to find the words to express the feeling of safety and peace that Vincent's embrace gave her. She snuggled close with a sigh and hoped he could feel her trust through their bond. She let his warmth and his arms surround her as the memories of her dream began to fade.

Catherine had been running, searching for someone, anyone, to know she was not alone. She was afraid, unprotected against the misty, formless shadows that seemed to close in when she stopped running. Her parents had appeared out of the fog and then turned away, heedless of her cries. She stumbled on in pursuit of another person. In the haze she saw a tall, cloaked figure striding purposefully forward. It was Vincent, he was trying to leave her again.

She called to him, pleaded with him, begged that he not abandon her in this scary place, to no avail. Her running feet seemed to pound out the words: alone, alone, alone. His gentle whispering of her name had pulled her back from the yawning chasm of loneliness and despair.

Catherine dozed in Vincent's arms feeling secure and protected. The slow beat of his heart in her ear was comforting, a continual reminder that she was *not* alone.

As the hours of night passed and Catherine slept peacefully, Vincent dared to dream of a time someday when they would be together *every* night. A time when the comfort and serenity of the other could be felt by extending an arm across the bed. Catherine had asked him nearly a year ago if he thought they would ever truly be together; and, although they had made tiny progressive steps forward, the reality seemed far away most of the time. The near fatal descent into the madness of his dark side had left deep scars in his heart. Tonight, however, the reality of their dream seemed close. As if she sensed his thoughts, Catherine stirred in his arms, murmuring softly.

Vincent gazed down at her face and felt the need to protect her not only from danger and himself, but from whatever was troubling her now. Should he ask Catherine to come Below? Perhaps her nightmares would be less intense there. Vincent felt a surge of desire at the thought of Catherine, Below and near in the night. *Must not, must not* chanted his inner self in an attempt to slam the door on the thought. He stood up with Catherine in his arms and returned her to her bed.

"Vincent, are you leaving?" Catherine's voice was low and husky with sleep.

"It is near dawn. I must go," he replied, as he tucked to covers around her. "Sleep well."

Vincent stepped out closed and locked the bedroom balcony doors, resisting the urge to fling them open again, take Catherine into his arms and stay.

* * * * *

Vincent sat in his customary chair by the chessboard. Catherine's note had said she was working late, so there was time for a game after dinner. Father sat opposite him, his forehead furrowed in concentration. Vincent's move had been designed to leave him with little choice but to sacrifice his queen.

Father glanced up as he considered his move, and caught a fleeting glimpse of worry on Vincent's face. Fully aware that his skills provided little challenge to the lightning swiftness of his son's mind, he wondered what was troubling him.

Vincent had always been such a sensitive, tender-hearted child; and now, grown to full adulthood, the sensitivity was tuned more toward the concerns of his tunnel family and Catherine, than toward himself.

Vincent always seemed to know when others were troubled. The child worried about a test in school, the teenager facing peer pressure, the lonely, the frightened, the unhappy, all received Vincent's special attention and encouragement. They found him to be the most patient listener, even when distress caused incoherent babbling and inarticulate explanations. Vincent's ability to totally focus on the person he was with, was exceptional. Nothing intruded on his concentration when he listened to someone who chose to confide in him.

And yet, Father thought, it is so typical of us all, now that he is well again, to sometimes forget that Vincent still has worries, needs and dreams of his own. Vincent's concern for his extended family had driven him from them last spring. He had fled lest he injure them when the darkness was overwhelming. Vincent had chosen to suffer the agony of Aloneness rather than place anyone at risk. And yet deep inside he must have known that Catherine represented his only hope. Vincent's last words to him had been "bring Catherine."

Dear Catherine, who had risked her life to bring Vincent back from certain death. She had never told him what she had seen in that dark place where Vincent had hidden himself. He had surmised much based on the extent of Vincent's injuries. Vincent looked as if he had battled with another of his same strength.

His skin was scored by deep claw marks in a lattice pattern, as if something had tried to rip his abdomen open with both hands. There were other marks as if he had been caught fleeing his pursuer, who hooked him in the flank and ripped the flesh as he struggled to get

away. He had lost a great deal of blood and his recovery had taken weeks. Someone of less strength would have died.

Catherine had been uninjured, although she had been so covered with blood that he was certain she had been clawed. She had spent two weeks at Vincent's side, after obtaining permission to take vacation time from her job. She had slept on a cot in Vincent's chamber and only left him briefly to stretch her legs and shower.

"Father, shall I come back next week and continue this game?" Vincent's voice intruded on Father's reflection and when he glanced up realized the memories had carried him away for several minutes.

"I seem to remember you need to meet Catherine in a little while. I'll let you off the hook this time," he said to Vincent in a serious tone that brought a derisive snort. "Give Catherine my love," he said with a dismissing wave of his hand.

As Vincent walked down the tunnel toward the park entrance, he thought back to his recovery, and how much he had missed Father's wry humor and peppery remarks designed to put one in one's place. For days Father had tiptoed around his feelings. Vincent knew he would recover the first time an acerbic barb slipped out.

* * * * *

Catherine found herself thinking of her father during the day, during the quiet moments between depositions, while waiting for a report or at the coffee machine. Just when she thought her emotions were under control, a memory would sneak in and give her a poke. As a result she had felt tears threatening all day, her throat felt sore from swallowing back the tears. She didn't have time to feel this way especially in the office. Nothing put a stigma on a woman any faster than crying at work. They might make an exception if your father had just died, but certainly not a year later.

She had not talked with Vincent about her sadness, although she knew he was aware something was bothering her. He had been such a comfort in the day's after the funeral, and she really wasn't sure why she felt a reluctance to share her feelings. Perhaps it was her need to know she could deal with this on her own, without an emotional crutch. Others had certainly been through similar experiences and survived. *I just need to keep moving forward and the pain will fade.*

It was just a year ago today that she had met her father for what turned out to be their last time together. A client had given him two tickets to a concert featuring Kiri Te Kanawa. His usual companion, Kay, was out of town, and Catherine had agreed to go. She

remembered how they had enjoyed the clear ringing voice and their laughter at her self-deprecating song, "I Want to be a Prima Donna."

Catherine had been dreading this anniversary, knowing she would relive every moment as if it were all happening again. She had managed to get through the holidays with minimal pain; she had felt surrounded by the love of her friends and tunnel family. Vincent had been solicitous of her needs during Christmas when it seemed that everyone in the whole world was going "home to be with my family."

The spring had brought the fear of discovery from Bernie Spirko, Paracelsus' mental torment of Vincent and the dark time that followed when he had nearly succeeded in leaving her.

Vincent was barely recovered and she back at work a few weeks when Steven had escaped. It had been peaceful since then. She and Vincent had spent much time together and their relationship had moved into a deeper level of understanding. She had learned not to depend on their bond to tell Vincent where she was and how she felt. Speaking about their feelings seemed to open new doors.

They had talked about her father often and she had not felt this overwhelming sense of loss and sadness. Why now? What made it so much worse? *Is it because we tend to think of things in time frames-- a week ago, a month ago, a year ago?* she wondered. She reached for the tissues again as her eyes filled with tears.

I should be able to at least work and keep my mind on the task at hand instead of being a soggy heap all the time, she told herself. No one seemed to remember that it had been a year, a year ago next Tuesday that she had arrived in the office to find that the hospital had called. A year since the agonizing waiting outside Intensive Care and the awful truth of her father blind, hooked to a wall full of machinery. And if anyone *had* mentioned it, she felt she would have run screaming from the office with the pain of her memories.

The rattle of the wheels on the custodian's cart reminded her she was not alone in the office, and Catherine began to gather the papers on her desk. She had said she would meet Vincent at the park entrance at eight-thirty and it would be a fast walk to be on time. Maybe a brisk walk was just what she needed to clear the cobwebs and regain control of her emotions.

* * * * *

When Vincent activated the door mechanism he found Catherine waiting for him, carrying a heavily loaded briefcase. He took the case and pulled her close with his other arm, glad for the chance to feel



Mary Fiedel 90

her warmth against him. She burrowed her head under his chin and he felt her need for his embrace as she pressed close to him. He pulled away enough to look at her face and saw the tears glistening in her eyes.

"Catherine... can you tell me what troubles you?"

"I just needed to be with you," she said in a forced, light tone. She knew one more sympathetic word was going to bring on *the weeps* and she did not want to spend what little time they had together, crying.

"What did you do today?" she asked deliberately changing the subject.

Vincent decided he would follow her conversational lead for now, since she seemed determined to keep her unhappiness to herself.

"Cullen and I have been working on a plan to expand Father's chamber before he is buried in books. There is some room on the upper level, but that means more trips up and down stairs."

* * * * *

They visited with Father and shared a cup tea and some of William's special dessert. A Helper had brought several bushels of apples and the fruit torte was one of the results. Father commented that Catherine looked tired.

Catherine told them about the heavy work schedule as they prepared for the trial that started in ten days on a drug dealer's case. The endless checking and rechecking to close off any legal loophole was exhausting. They all felt the pressure; there had been more than one incident of raised voices and sharp words in the office recently.

The mauve smudges under her eyes were mute testimony of sleepless nights. Vincent suspected the nightmare of the previous evening was not the first. Their diminished bond had kept him from being aware of them sooner. She was visibly drooping now, struggling to keep her eyes open.

"Are you ready to leave?" Vincent asked when the conversation lagged to a halt.

"I *am* tired," Catherine replied as she stood up. "Good night, Father." Each foot seemed to weigh fifty pounds as she walked toward the portal.

By the time they reached the entrance to her building, Vincent could feel Catherine trembling with fatigue. "I'll meet you Above in a few minutes," he told her, "and bring your briefcase."

Catherine gave him a hug and walked into the short passage to the hidden entrance in the basement. The closer she got to her front door, the more she dreaded being in her apartment. A number of her father's things were there to remind her of him, photographs, books and the string of worry beads she had brought him from Greece years ago. His possessions now caused sad memories instead of the happy ones of days past.

Inside her apartment Catherine dropped her coat on the back of the couch and opened the balcony doors. She filled the kettle and started heating the water for hot chocolate. She heard Vincent on the balcony as she poured the chocolate into mugs. He stood in the doorway silhouetted against the glowing night sky for a moment before stepping into the living room.

Vincent had become more comfortable in her apartment during his illness, and no longer had to be coaxed to come inside. The balcony doors were left open unless the weather was bitter cold, and that seemed to lessen the claustrophobic feel of Above. Catherine had had rheostats installed on all her lights so she could adjust the brightness. To Vincent's eyes, used to the dim tunnels, even the softest of artificial lights could be painful.

Catherine carried the mugs into the living room and curled up on the floor beside Vincent. He had lit the fire and they sat in companionable silence, shoulders touching as they gazed into the flames.

"It's so nice to have you here with me," Catherine said as she nestled closer to his side with a sigh. Before she could utter another word, she succumbed to weariness and dozed.

Vincent looked down at her face. Dark circles under her eyes and a new gaunt look about her cheekbones told him of the ravages of exhaustion. He wondered at the toll this trial seemed to take from her. She had been involved in other trials equally stressful and never looked this tired. And then there was the nightmare of last evening. All the evidence pointed to something other than overwork, something she would not share with him. Yet, his presence at least seemed to allow her to rest.

Catherine slept peacefully, but Vincent knew she needed to be in her bed to avoid aches and pains in the morning. He woke her and

gently guided her into the bedroom where she stood drooping, still in a fog from being aroused from a deep sleep.

"Where are your nightgowns?" he asked.

"Umm... third drawer," Catherine said after a moment.

Vincent pulled the drawer open and took a soft lavender gown from the pile. He knew she was too sleepy to undress herself; with fingers that trembled at the feel of her skin, he removed her shoes and then her dress and slip. Unwilling to tackle the pantihose or underwear, he pulled the gown over her head and carried her to her bed. As he tucked the covers around her shoulders, she murmured her thanks. He stood a moment longer tempted to let his fingers trail down through her hair before he turned away.

In the living room, he secured the glass doors on the fireplace and picked up the mugs to rinse them. Vincent walked out on the balcony and leaned against the rail. The night sky was full of clouds that reflected back the light the city offered up in greeting. He could smell the moisture in the air; rain or maybe snow before too long, he decided.

Since Catherine had come into his life this had become a familiar vantage point to watch the city. Here he felt safe, as safe as he ever felt away from the tunnels. It was comforting to have her close and he settled down to contemplate the glittering array before him. He wanted to be nearby if the nightmare returned.

* * * * *

The trees took on a frightening posture. Their bare limbs seemed to reach for her like some deciduous skeleton come to life. Mist swirled around her feet as she walked. Where was everyone? As she moved forward she saw the faint outline of someone walking ahead. She struggled to catch up but the figure seemed to move faster.

"Wait," she called, "wait for me." The figure turned and Vincent looked at her without recognition, shrugged his shoulders and turned away.

"Please, Vincent, wait... don't leave!"

The sound of Catherine's voice jerked Vincent from his reverie and he was at the bedside in a few quick strides. Her head twisted back and forth on the pillow and her forehead was wrinkled as she frowned, caught once more in the grip of her dreams.

"Shh, shh, I'm here, you're safe," Vincent crooned the comforting words as he stoked her arm. Through their bond he felt a stab of fear followed quickly by relief. Gradually she began to relax under his touch, the frown fading away. He was reminded of his troubled sleep in this same bed a few months before. Whenever the delirium lifted, he had been aware of Catherine's comforting warmth, her slender hands kneading his shoulders with a reassuring touch. And for a moment the threatening darkness would recede, only to return with vicious intensity and drag him away.

As he remembered her unselfish care of him, he realized the opportunity to comfort her was before him. He gave the warning shriek in his mind scant attention as he removed his cloak and settled onto the bed. With infinite tenderness he gathered Catherine close in his arms and felt rather than heard the sigh as she burrowed nearer to his reassuring warmth.

* * * * *

Catherine placed the last folder on the pile that was nearly a foot tall, finished at last. She looked out the window to see that the beautiful fall day was fading into the dusk of late afternoon. She resented the hours spent in the office on a day that invited a brisk walk in the park to scuff along in the leaves. Duty and responsibility gave no quarter, however, when an important trial started a week from Monday.

The media would be out in full force, hoping to tantalize viewers and readers with a scoop or juicy tidbit from the long-awaited trial. The outraged public was eager for punishment of the monster who peddled his wares to any who paid the price. He had lured seven and eight-year olds to work for him with the promise of money to spend on video games, movies and the sweets beloved by youngsters. The kids had been formed into a highly organized group of *go-fers*, who transported the crack and cocaine in backpacks next to their peanut butter sandwiches.

It had been a tragedy just waiting for the right moment. The end result had been three children gunned down in a few bloody seconds by a spaced-out crazy who was after the contents of their backpacks. Several of the others in the network had confessed and identified the recruiter. Public sentiment had kept him in jail only two weeks. Then a slick, highly paid attorney, with no misgivings about the origin of his fee, had sprung him.

District Attorney Moreno was prosecuting this case himself. Everyone from the mayor and the governor on down wanted an example made of the scum, in hopes that others would be discouraged

from similar ideas. Catherine and Joe and others of the staff had spent the months before trial digging out the details of the true scope of the operation. Each new lead carried them deeper in the morass of filth, degradation and blatant disregard for human life.

Catherine was pulled from her contemplation of the events of the last weeks by the slam of an office door nearby. A curly head of black hair poked around the corner of her office and dark eyes took in the scene.

"Your Honor, we find the defendant to be tired and decidedly cranky. We recommend dinner with a friend to start the rehabilitation process." Joe Maxwell watched a smile light the face which was far too thin and pale, in his opinion.

"Thanks, Counselor, but the defendant has already been accepted into another program. Maybe another time?" Catherine grinned at him as she rose from the chair and scooped only two files into her briefcase before coming around the desk and linking arms with her boss.

They strolled arm-in-arm to the elevator and rode in silence down to the lobby. They parted with a squeeze of the hand, Catherine headed home to change and meet Vincent, Joe for an evening with a beer and a book.

* * * * *

Vincent and Catherine walked hand in hand down the tunnel toward the Falls. They had spent the evening hours with some of the children who needed to be rehearsed in their lines for the Christmas play. Vincent recounted for her his own struggle to learn his lines the year he played one of the Magi.

They settled down on the outcropping of rock overlooking the Falls, each content to sit quietly warmed by the touch of shoulders.

"I managed to hide these from the children," Vincent said with the tiniest trace of chagrin. From a deep pocket in his cloak he pulled a package with six chocolate chip cookies, Mary's specialty.

"Sweets for the sweet?" Catherine said with a flirtatious sideways glance and a flutter of eyelashes. "Or do you want some too?" The last was followed by a laugh.

Vincent realized it had been some time since she had been in a playful mood. Perhaps overwork was truly the cause of the changes in

her behavior. He chuckled as he opened the package and offered them to her.

"I bow to your judgment, Catherine."

Their laughter echoed off the walls as they reveled in a light-hearted moment of the kind sorely missed in recent months.

* * * * *

Catherine drove away from the little church with tears running down her face. She had come on a pilgrimage to the church of her childhood summers. The church was full of strangers and the overwhelming sense of loneliness had driven her out the door before she had time to sit down. The last time she had been here, the church had been full to overflowing with friends. The atmosphere had been one of sorrow for the loss of Charles Chandler and support and love for his only child.

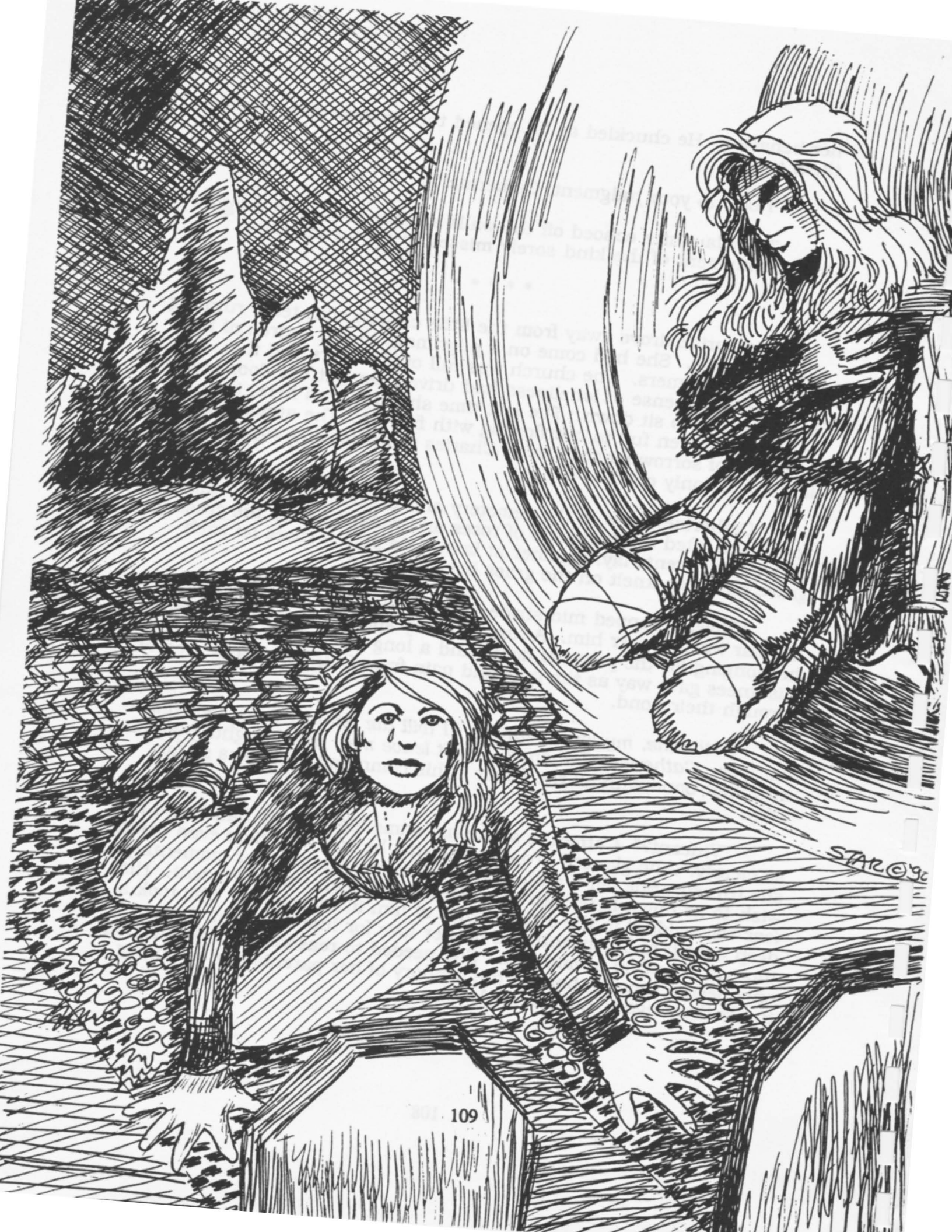
Catherine drove to the cemetery and parked the car. From the trunk she lifted two bouquets of roses and walked across the grass to where her parents lay, together at last. She placed roses on each grave and then knelt on the grass between them.

Vincent stopped mid-stride as his beloved's loneliness and despair washed over him. A roar of agony split the air when he felt her longing for the peace of death and a long sleep beneath the earth. His knees gave way as the grief and pain from Catherine came clearly through their bond.

Catherine, my love, hear me. I will die without you. Remember our love. Catherine, Catherine... don't leave me! His thoughts poured into their bond with all the fervor at his command. She was so far away.

"Vincent?" Catherine spoke his name aloud. She had heard him so clearly. She glanced around, knowing he was not there even before she turned. She felt a stab of guilt when she realized her momentary wish to lie down here with her parents had been felt by Vincent. His fear was evident in the strong sense of him in their bond. She took a deep breath and concentrated on her love for him and sent the thought arrowing toward him. She needed to reassure him that it had only been a thought born of the memory of her parents and a longing to see them again, not a true desire.

* * * * *



Catherine ran across the Park, driven by the urgent need to be with Vincent. As she came out of the trees and down the embankment a shadow detached from those near the tunnel opening. She threw herself into Vincent's outstretched arms.

"I'm sorry, forgive me. I didn't mean to scare you." She couldn't seem to get the words out fast enough. She felt the heaving of his shoulders and heard the tearing sound of his grief and fear for her. She reached up and smoothed back his mane to see his face. The vestiges of his anguish were evident as he struggled for control.

She was here, warm and alive. He had agonized over her safety when their bond had fallen silent after the brief flash of her thoughts of love. Only moments ago he had felt her presence coming close, and the torture of the past hours was relieved.

Catherine told him of her visit to the church and cemetery when they were safely ensconced in his chamber. She told of her increasing sense of grief as the anniversary neared. The telling seemed to lessen the pain of her memories.

"I keep remembering the conversation I had with Geoffrey when he said now I was an orphan, too," she explained. "And even though I have your love and an extended family Below, the loss of both parents is still so painful. I miss being able to reminisce about family things, memories from my childhood, with someone who was there. I think this has been building for a long time and I just didn't want to face it."

Vincent gazed at her thoughtfully and said nothing, just pulled her close and held her close to his heart.

* * * * *

Theodore thrust the glass rod into the blue flame that turned orange as he rotated it for even heating. He was glad Vincent had requested his help to create a special gift for Catherine. Vincent had been quite specific about his requirements for the object that was soon to be born from the flames.

Theodore remembered his first sight of Vincent eight years ago when he had come to live in the tunnel world. His friend had not changed much as the years passed, until the night over two years ago when Catherine had come into his life. With his observant artist's eye Theodore had been one of the first tunnel residents to perceive the change in Vincent. The air of distraction that was so out of character was one of the first clues.



They had all come to understand the depth of feeling between Catherine and Vincent. Even the most obtuse became aware of loving glances and a nearly visible spark that flew between them.

Theodore hoped Catherine would find that the peace and safety Below far outweighed the benefits of a life Above. He remembered with gratitude the Helper who had brought him to this haven. He had been in a witness-protection program after he testified against a co-worker in the engraving department of the Philadelphia Mint. He had been relocated to New York City and with the money provided had changed careers. He had done some glass blowing on an amateur scale and found he loved the creative process, bringing alive the flora and fauna from inanimate glass rods.

His creations sold on consignment in a gift shop in the Village and he was making a new life for himself when they had found him. He had arrived home unusually late to find his apartment building ablaze. He recognized one of the bystanders as a close friend of the Mint co-worker and it all fell into place.

He had slipped away and gone to the home of a doctor who had treated the wounds received in the beating he had suffered just before they got him out of Philly. Dr. Alcott had told him that if he was ever in trouble he could count on the doctor for help, and had brought him to Father after the fire. Theodore had lived Below ever since.

Theodore turned his attention back to his work and let the painful memories of long ago fade away.

* * * * *

Vincent tapped on the balcony doors and waited for Catherine. She had been enmeshed in the final preparations for the trial and he had only seen her briefly each night since their time together on Sunday after she had been to the cemetery. Today was the anniversary of Charles Chandler's death and he wanted to share her memories and comfort her.

Catherine stepped out the doors onto the balcony and into Vincent's embrace. No words were spoken as she nestled her head under his chin with the sound of his heart in her ear. It had been a difficult day with tears threatening, and she was weary from the struggle to maintain her composure.

Vincent drew away from her and looked into the hazel eyes swimming with tears. "I wish I had more memories of your father to share with you," he said.



Catherine sniffed and hugged him with all her strength, "Just being here with you is a comfort. Will you come inside? I'll make us some tea."

When Catherine carried the cups into the living room she found Vincent looking at the framed portrait of her father, taken just three months before he died. Her hands shook and the spoons rattled as she set the cups down on the table.

"He looked so distinguished in that photograph. I told him all he needed was a black robe to be a dignified Supreme Court Justice. He thought it made him look too old," she said with fondness at the memory.

Vincent sat next to her on the couch and sipped his tea. They talked of the coming trial and other inconsequential matters until Vincent set his cup down and turned to her and took both of her hands in his.

"I have a gift for you," he said and reached under his cloak where it lay on the back of the couch. He handed the oblong package to Catherine. She looked at him in surprise before bending over the package to open it carefully.

"Oh, Vincent, it's beautiful!" she exclaimed as she lifted the crystal rose free of the wrappings and held it up to the light. The rose fit in the palm of her hand. The petals were opening from the bud state and it had a long stem, three leaves and a single thorn. As she turned it, the rose sparkled and reflected the light of the candle flames into the room.

Vincent leaned forward to capture Catherine's gaze with his own. "Do you see how the light comes into the rose and reflects back at us in a blaze of color? If the light remained in the rose, we could not share the beauty of the reflection," Vincent began.

"Catherine, when sorrow, hope, sadness or joy come into our lives, we can keep them inside or share them. When feelings are shared, even sorrow can become a thing of beauty, like the light reflecting from the crystal rose.

"You trust me with your feelings because you do not mask them in our bond. I share your feelings, but you must give them voice, and trust that we will come through these difficult times. We will be stronger and our love more beautiful for the sharing."

As he spoke Catherine ran her fingers over the rose as if to record its shape indelibly in her mind. Her heart began to lighten as

she listened to his words and understood. Vincent offered her a great gift of significantly larger proportions than this lovely crystal rose. He reminded her that he wanted to share not only the happy times but the uncomfortable, the painful and the sorrowful. Her reluctance to speak of her grief had caused them both pain.

The crystal rose would serve as a constant symbol of the one who understood and loved her as no other. It would remind her of the deepening of their relationship and the drawing together of their lives.

"Thank you, Vincent, for both gifts."

Vincent rejoiced that she understood and held her close to his heart.



3

A Challenge to Love

Why do the voices
Incessantly fill my head

Who has the right
To pronounce upon our love
That which is sacred
And that which is not

Is my love for you
Any less pure
Because the world views me
As less than a man

Should my lips upon yours
Be forever denied
Because their shape
Displeases some unsolicited observer

My hands... these hands
That tremble with delight
At your tender touch
Should they, too, be banned

Throughout eternity
From caressing your dear face
Lest their unnatural appearance
Offend intrusive eyes

By whose laws must we seek
To define our love
O, let us be granted now the freedom
To rejoice as do others

For my pain-filled heart
Cannot beat without your devotion
My grieving soul cannot exist
If it be torn from yours

And my aching body shall not endure
Dare I lose your undaunted passion

Bobbi

The Joining

by Margaret Davis

Catherine, Joe and District Attorney Moreno emerged from the Justice Building into a sea of reporters. A forest of microphones were thrust in their direction as the person holding each one shouted questions, each trying to be heard above the others. Catherine and Joe stepped back a pace to let the District Attorney be the focus of the crowd and the mini-cams.

"Please, just let me make a statement," Moreno began and waited for comparative silence before he continued. "Today the people have given us a victory. But in the face of this victory, there is no rejoicing. Three children died because of crack. How many more of our children must die before this city, this nation goes to battle to save them from the scourge of drugs?

"It is not enough to destroy the factories in South America or to catch an occasional shipment. We must cut off the demand for the drugs! Only then will our children be safe. That's the message you need to convey. Thank you."

Catherine felt proud, proud to be a part of the team that brought a drug dealer to justice; proud to work for a man who ignored threats from the drug world to bring the recruiter of young children to deliver drugs to trial. And yet there was sadness for the families who had lost their children in violence.

This trial had been heart wrenching. Little children drawn into the sordid world of drugs, lured into the maze by the promise of money to spend at the arcade and the candy store. Seven and eight year olds who carried crack in their backpacks and who paid the ultimate price drugs extract from all they touch, death.

* * * * *

When she finally arrived back in the office, Catherine looked at the piles of folders and paperwork on her desk in dismay. *They must be hatching at night, the stack is twice the size it was yesterday.* Wearily she dropped her briefcase beside the desk and sat down.

"Radcliffe, I need to talk to you," Joe stood beside Cathy's desk with a ghost of a smile on his face. "I have your next assignment."

Catherine fumed as she followed him back to his office. *Not even time to take off my coat,* she grumbled to herself, Joe motioned to her to sit down and closed the door.



"Joe, my desk is covered. I'll need two weeks... "

"Hold it, Cathy, let me at least tell you what the assignment is," Joe said with a smile. "Moreno is so pleased with the verdict, he's given us some comp time for all the nights and weekends we worked." He watched her face and was rewarded with a grin.

"Really, Joe?"

"Yep, starting Monday. A week, Cathy, I may sleep the first three days."

Catherine was grateful for the time off, but wished it could start now. Time to sleep and time to be with Vincent, she'd had little enough of either lately.

"Go home, Radcliffe, we'll get everything sorted out tomorrow and then... veg out."

"Thanks, Joe." Catherine left his office, picked up her briefcase and headed for the door. She was tired and hungry and fortunately, late enough that flagging down a taxi was no problem.

When the elevator opened at her floor, she was not sure she had the strength to walk to her door. *Come on, just a few more feet, you can do it*, she coaxed her body. Just knowing the trial was over was such a relief, as the tension left her body it felt like the muscles turned to mush.

The door swung inward and she saw a dim light from the kitchen. There was a wonderful smell in the air. He was here! Hurriedly she closed the door and slipped on the chain.

"Vincent?"

"I'm here," came the answer in that soft, silk on steel voice. He came forward and took her in his arms, savoring the feel of her against him. He could feel her profound weariness mixed with her happiness.

"I've brought some soup for you, William made minestrone tonight."

"It smells delicious, I'll go wash my hands." Catherine thought back to the first time Vincent had brought supper just three weeks ago. It was the first day of the trial. She had worked in the law library for hours on a list of additional precedents Moreno had given her. She had left after she read the same page four times and it still didn't make sense.

When she arrived at home, she found a little lamp on in the living room and Vincent in the kitchen. She had not been frightened for she had instantly recognized his cloak draped over one end of the loveseat.

"Catherine, I felt your weariness and your hunger. I brought you some of the casserole from dinner." Vincent had explained his mission as he helped her remove her coat. He had made tea and sat with her while she ate.

In the three weeks of the trial, he had brought her supper on the days she worked very late, concerned that she would ignore her hunger in favor of collapsing into her bed straight away.

It was a routine that had a very comfortable feel. Several times after he left, Catherine could not help but long for a time when he would be there always. He had told her so long ago they would only be together if they could move through the fears. Surely the last six months met that requirement.

Returning to the present, Catherine moved to the table where he had set a place for her. When he placed the bowl of soup in front of her, she leaned forward and took a deep breath.

"It smells so good. There's something about soup that is so... well, soothing is the only word I can think of," she said and picked up her spoon.

"We won, Vincent. They gave us a guilty verdict early this evening. I know it's only one person, but it's a start."

"The most important fact is that you *are* doing something," Vincent replied. "So many are overwhelmed at the scope of the problem, that they are defeated without a battle."

"Yes. When I think of the pain of those three families. One of the mothers talked with me yesterday while we waited for the verdict. She asked me what she could have done differently to have avoided this. Billy was her only child. Vincent, I felt so helpless, I had no words to comfort her."

"There are no words to ease the loss of a child, especially a loss under violent circumstances, Catherine. But what you have done today will make the world Above a little safer for other children."

They rinsed the dishes in silence and then moved to the balcony for a few minutes before he left. There was a brisk breeze that rustled

the leaves on the plants and tugged at wisps of their hair. They stood shoulder to shoulder gazing down on the glittering array of lights. The sounds of the traffic that drifted up to them was not enough to disturb their contemplation.

"Eight more hours," Catherine said, finally.

"Until what, Catherine?"

"A whole week off! Moreno gave us a week to make up for some of the long nights and weekends. A return of probably one hour for every four we put in, but a nice gesture anyway."

Vincent murmured, "Well deserved. What are your plans?"

"I don't know, I want to sleep and catch up on the laundry, and I hope you and I can spend some time together. We've not had time to talk, lately."

"Perhaps you could come Below for a few days. The children and Father have been asking for you." *And I have been thinking about us and our future, we do need to talk,* he added silently.

"I've missed everyone, too. I could run all my errands on Saturday, meet Jenny for brunch on Sunday and then come Below Sunday evening."

"I'll see that your chamber is prepared." A shiver of anticipation drew an icy finger up his spine. Catherine, close by in the night, was not a thought to dwell upon, yet. He forced his attention back to her.

"... tomorrow night? I'll fix dinner this time."

"As soon as it's dark, I will come to you," he replied and was rewarded with a gentle smile and a hug.

* * * * *

After morning meal Vincent gathered up clean clothes, soap and towels for a bath. He had already checked Catherine's chamber. All was in order waiting for her arrival this evening.

High above him, Catherine slept peacefully. Over the months their bond had gradually returned to its former level, and once again he could feel her moods and emotions clearly. While Vincent was grateful for its return, in some ways he wished the connection could be muffled at will. Catherine's dreams drew him until sometimes it

was as if he saw through her eyes. She dreamed of loving him, dreams of sweetness and passion.

Vincent dropped his clothes at the side of the mineral pool and gingerly stepped into the water. It was hot but not unbearable. Gradually he immersed himself until he could recline on the underwater ledge with just his head above water resting on a towel at the edge of the pool.

The water moved against him gently, bubbling up from the natural spring. Slowly the tensions flowed from his body and his eyelids closed. He drifted in that place between sleep and awareness, lulled by the warmth of the water.

Catherine dreamt of a place, warm and misty and quiet. The water beckoned her. She dropped her clothes and entered the pool. There was room to lie down and enjoy the currents pushing over and around her. She opened her eyes and Vincent stood beside the pool. She extended her hand to him in invitation. He dropped his cloak and stood before her unashamed of his body. Taking her hand he moved into the water with her.

Vincent's eyes opened suddenly. He looked around for her and realized the sense of her presence had been only in his mind. He reached for her consciously through the bond and gently touched her. Her feelings of love and desire flowed through him along with her wish for a permanent relationship, a commitment.

Vincent wondered if their bond had carried to Catherine his thoughts of their future. For weeks he had thought of little else, going over and over in his mind the questions and doubts about a life together. Again and again he was reminded of Catherine's acceptance and love, her unshakable belief in the rightness of their love. She had demonstrated her faith in their bond and their love when she followed him where madness had driven him.

He had been determined to subdue the dark one, even if it meant his death. Her screaming of his name had pulled him back from the abyss of despair. Vincent worried at the problem long after his self-inflicted wounds had healed.

When stripped of the guilt, the doubts and the cocoon of limits he placed around it, their love for each other rose up a clear and shining thing. Pliant as a reed, strong as the finest steel, it was this love that carried them through all they had endured together. And finally, Vincent with rigorous honesty stripped the fears down to the very basics. *Would she find his body ugly? Was he capable of hurting that which he loved best?* The answer to both was, No.

Catherine had seen him as he was, naked and driven to the edge by the struggle. Howling his misery, roaring his agony, beyond the bounds of speech or thought, he came instantly to himself when she screamed his name and touched him. Even in that instant he knew not even the dark one would hurt her, he loved her as well.

Vincent had waited for the right time to share this with Catherine. The preparations for the trial and the mourning for her father had necessitated a delay. Now the time off and her imminent visit drew him near the time to tell her, to ask her.

He thought of the plain gold band hidden in his chamber. Made from the gold piece left on her balcony so long ago to draw him to her and into Paracelsus' lair. Now it was a thing of beauty with delicate engraving inside, *Forever and Always*. He hoped to see it on her finger as a symbol of their love.

* * * * *

"Jen, I haven't given Christmas a thought. Thanksgiving was just a blur. We spent so much time in the law library that I felt like it was my new home. All I needed was a bed and a closet."

"A *big* closet," Jenny added with a laugh. "Maybe two closets."

The two friends laughed together as only best friends can. Though it had been weeks since they had last seen each other, they had kept in contact with brief phone calls. Sometimes it was just a message on the answering machine to say, I'm thinking about you. They never seemed to run out of things to say, the conversation leapfrogged as a comment brought a idea to mind or the memory of something to share.

What a wonderful thing, friendship. Each knew she had only to pick up the phone and say, *I need you*, and the other would be there. And when one of them was angry or moody, the other forgave, casting aside the unpleasant and retaining the essence, the heart of their relationship.

"Well, let's go shopping then. Wear comfortable shoes and bring your plastic," Jenny invited. "How about Friday?"

"Okay. Meet you at Bloomies at five."

"Done."

They parted with a hug and a laugh, each thankful for the love and companionship and sense of family she received from the other.

* * * * *

Catherine strolled through the tunnels hand in hand with Vincent. The last two days had been spent catching up with the happenings in the tunnels, letting Father beat her at chess and sleeping, long restful hours. Now they were in search of a quiet place to be alone, sometimes a difficult feat in the underground community.

The Mirror Pool was far from the living quarters and provided an ideal spot for them. They watched the constellations reflected in the water for a time before moving to sit on Vincent's cloak with their backs against one of the walls. Alone took on a new meaning as they talked together and the hours of night slipped away.

"Catherine."

The sound of her name and the feelings behind it brought Catherine immediately to attention.

"Do you remember when you asked me if we would ever be truly together?" At her nod, he continued. "I told you we had to move through the fears. You said you were not afraid, but I was. The future is an uncertain thing, Catherine. There are no guarantees, thirty years, thirty days, who knows where the future lies?"

In Catherine's heart the bud of hope nurtured these many months, began to open. The Future! He had thought of the future, *their future?*

"My fear has always been that I might hurt you." At her first words of protest, he held up his hand and she fell silent. "When you came for me, followed me, touched me, you placed your life in my hands. I *did not* hurt you. Our bond, our connection remained, though I had cast off all vestiges of the man.

"It endured when all else was gone. You saw me as I am... *all* of me, which is my other fear. I *am* different, Catherine. I never thought to find someone who loved me in spite of my differences."

"Not in spite of, Vincent, *because* of your differences." Catherine's voice was soft with the emotions cascading through her heart.

"No one can say where our future will lead us, Catherine. If you will have me, I would be all to you that I can for such time as we have remaining."

The tears slid down Catherine's cheeks as she took her hands in his, "It will never be long enough. I love you."

"Catherine, my heart, I will love you until my last breath." He leaned down and took her mouth with his, sealing his promise.

After a time they pulled apart and gazed into each other's eyes. Reflected there, they saw peace and joy and a love that would never die.

"Catherine, there are many decisions to be made." He stopped as her fingers were placed gently over his lips.

"And we will make them Vincent, in time. The most important one has been made, we will have a future, together; and whatever its shape and form, it will be enough, Vincent."

"If we are to join, Catherine, I would speak vows with you. We need time to prepare. I will come to you Above, tomorrow."

"Will you walk back with me?" she asked. She wondered if they met anyone how she would keep from shouting her joy.

* * * * *

Catherine made one more walk through her apartment to see that all was in order. Candles covered the tables in all the rooms, fresh roses glowed like jewels in their vases, champagne cooled in the refrigerator. All was ready.

She showered then dried her hair and brushed it to a lustrous curve. Lotion was smoothed on her skin and the most delicate touches of makeup added to eyes and lips. She dressed in delicate undergarments, mere wisps of lace and fabric, and donned an apricot silk blouse under a creamy woolen jumper. As she added earrings, she heard the familiar tapping at the door.

Catherine drew in her breath as Vincent entered from the balcony. His hair was freshly washed and framed his face in a golden halo. A white, deeply ruffled shirt was tucked into dark green trousers that clung snugly to his thighs. Leather boots and a green brocade vest completed his outfit.



Vincent laid his cloak across the chair and stepped forward to take both Catherine's hands in his. "Are you ready?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Catherine, I love you. I will live with you, love you, protect you and be a husband to you for as long as we shall live." From his pocket he took a ring and slipped it on her finger. "I promise before God to share all with you: joy, sorrow, health, sickness until the end of time."

"Vincent, I love you. I will live with you, love you, accept your guidance, and be your wife for as long as I live. All that is mine is now ours. I promise before God to share all with you in plenty and in want, in sickness and in health, forsaking all others, until the end of time."

They remained clasping hands and gazing into one another's eyes for a moment.

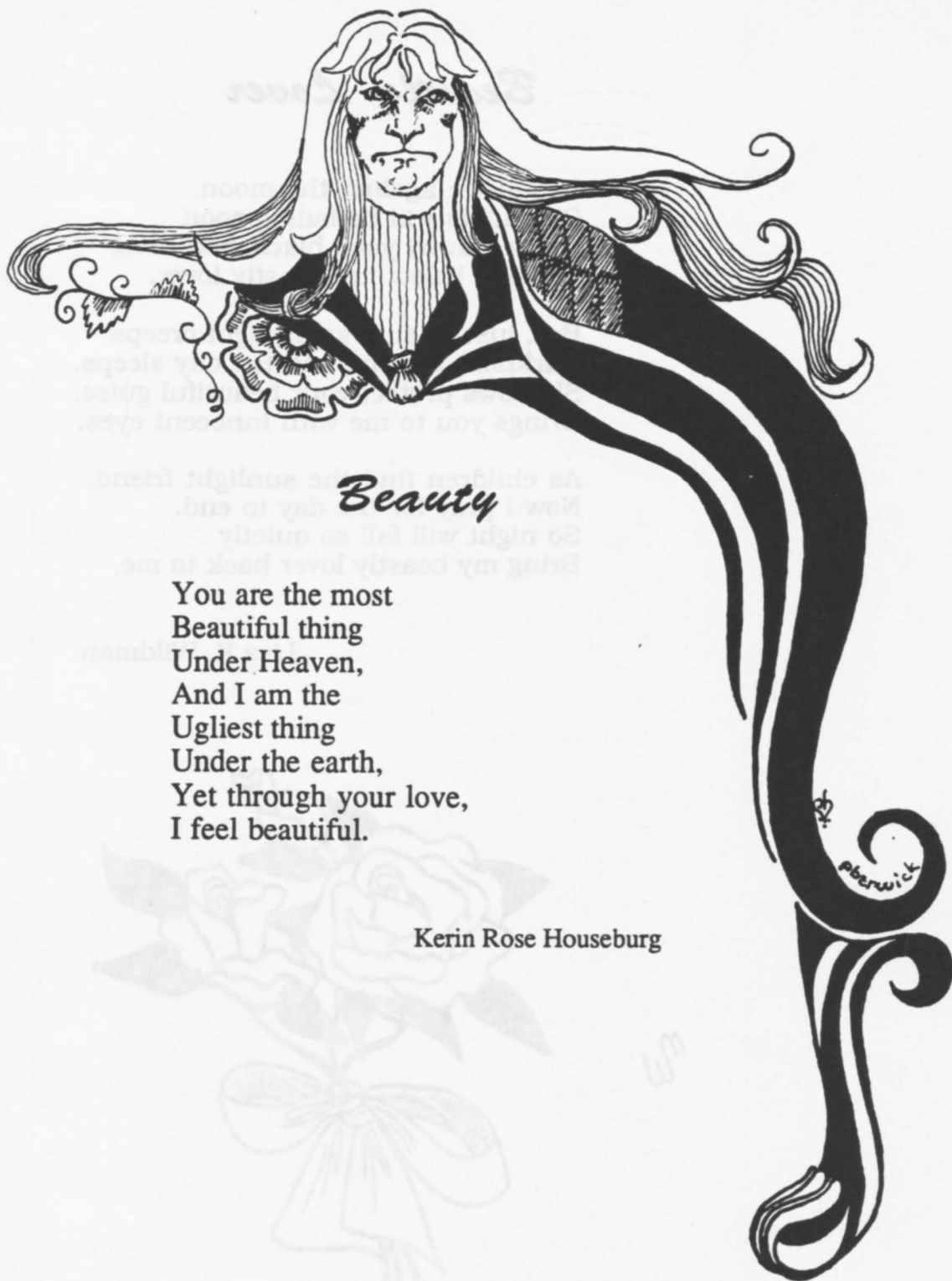
"My wife," Vincent said softly as he took her in his arms and kissed her.

Catherine nestled under his chin and murmured, "My beloved husband." She felt his happiness clearer than anything she had ever experienced in their bond and rejoiced that their dream was finally reality.

* * * * *

The moonlight streaming through the balcony doors, shown on the couple standing beside the bed. Clothing fell to the floor until nothing was between them but air. Vincent took Catherine in his arms and pulled her close. She fit against his body as if made to measure. Mouths whispered words of love.

She felt him lift her easily and carry her to the bed. Each touch of his hand fanned the flames of her love and the touch of his mind intensified the merging to one. Together they rose to mingle with the stars in the radiance of their love.



Beauty

You are the most
Beautiful thing
Under Heaven,
And I am the
Ugliest thing
Under the earth,
Yet through your love,
I feel beautiful.

Kerin Rose Houseburg

Beastly Lover

Silhouette against the moon
City lights will be fading soon
Talking away your blackened cover
Sending below my beastly lover.

But, just as sure as daylight creeps
Darkness returns and the city sleeps.
Shadows protect your beautiful guise,
Brings you to me with innocent eyes.

As children find the sunlight friend,
Now I pray for the day to end.
So night will fall so quietly
Bring my beastly lover back to me.

Lisa K. Wildman



The Facts of Love

by Kathie Ono

Three months. It had been three months since Catherine had come to live in the tunnels strictly on a trial basis. Those months were Father's request before any marriage took place. But the tunnel community hadn't waited for the trial period to end; the wedding plans were in the works almost from the beginning. Soon there would be festivities in the tunnels, a celebration of a miracle.

Catherine was amazed at how quickly the time had passed. She never once longed for her life Above. Much to Father's dismay, she had requested a leave of absence from her job, . He felt she should have worked during the trial period, if that was her future plans, but Catherine was adamant.

"If I did that, it would mean I doubted that I would ultimately move Below, as you do." Father looked away as Catherine tweaked his cheek. "Now I have to make it work, and I don't plan to work forever." With that she had hugged Father and tenderly kissed him just as she used to with her own father. The issue was closed.

Father had insisted on the trial period because he wasn't sure Catherine could adjust to such a different life style. Almost immediately, he knew he had been wrong, but he had been so insistent that it would have been too embarrassing to recant. The wedding preparations alone were taking that long; in addition, it was giving Catherine a chance to prepare for her new responsibilities, among them helping to teach classes.

She hesitated at first, but after Vincent's warm encouragement, she couldn't refuse. Of course, being with her beloved was a dream they both thought might never come to be, but here she was, living with and loving Vincent. Although these weeks were a waiting period before the marriage, a waiting period before making love it was not.

When they had made their decision to commit to a permanent relationship, they had spoken vows to each other before God. Regardless of what ceremonies later took place, in their minds and hearts they were married. And with marriage came the joys of physical love. Just before moving Below they had become lovers in every sense, fully giving to the other in every way.

One night after dinner, Vincent, Catherine and Father were sitting around Father's large table discussing the events of that day.

"Catherine, how did your first class go today?" Father asked.



Vincent quietly smiled as he gazed at Catherine for, unknown to her, he had listened outside the chamber as she taught her first class. He had been notably impressed.

But, Catherine hadn't been impressed. "I don't know Father," she winced. "I guess I was nervous; I don't think I did well at all."

"Why should you be nervous?" asked Vincent, not looking up from his book. "You've known most of those children for the past three years."

A not-too-confident smile crossed Catherine's face as she bit her lower lip. "I know, but, this was in a different situation. A teacher has to inspire, to wake up the imagination, to inspire their students, to do more on their own once they've left the classroom. I don't know if I did that."

Vincent's arm stretched across the table, his hand caressing hers.

"That will come. Father and I will help; in fact, we always have long talks about the classes... they really help. Just give it time."

Catherine smiled into his loving eyes and, for a moment, they forgot Father was there. They heard Father cough discreetly and verbalize his agreement with what Vincent had said. With that, the lovers were brought back to the moment. The conversation was on famous English novels, when Geoffrey came in to the chamber.

"Vincent, ah... can I talk to you?" he seemed deeply concerned about something.

"Of course, Geoffrey, come in".

Geoffrey proceeded shyly, not wishing to intrude on his elders. He was carrying a book with one of his fingers holding a place.

"Is it about something you're reading?" asked Vincent, his attention completely focused on Geoffrey.

"Yes, it's my biology homework. I have to read it and give an explanation in class tomorrow... but, I don't understand."

"I'm not an authority on Biology like Peter, but I might be able to answer an easy question. What's the problem?"

Father smiled at the mention of Peter. He recalled how many months he had talked to Peter about teaching biology to the children. Peter, at first, was adamantly against it, and said it had been years

since he had taught a class. But when Catherine mentioned that she would also be teaching a class, with absolutely no experience, his flimsy excuse evaporated; and, in his own words, he was "sucked in". The children enjoyed him and tried very hard to do well in his class.

Even though Father was the doctor, he understood why the children instinctively were drawn to Vincent. They felt his complete attention and knew he could answer any questions they brought before him.

Father's reverie was broken by a wide-eyed Catherine surreptitiously touching his arm, turned so that Vincent couldn't see her. Father frowned with curiosity as Catherine's eyes moved in the direction of the conversation. He began to concentrate on what was transpiring between Geoffrey and Vincent.

From what Father could hear, Geoffrey had questions regarding the reproductive patterns of certain plants and animals. Father listened for several minutes and realized the conversation had taken a turn and a tongue-tied Vincent was choosing his words very carefully to Geoffrey's pointed questions. He realized why Catherine had reacted as she did.

"But if plants and animals reproduce just to reproduce, what about humans? Is the act of reproducing in humans just to reproduce?" Geoffrey's question was quite sincere and innocent. But Vincent's words were too clipped to be of satisfaction to the young boy.

"Well, yes, otherwise, how would you have been born... right?" He looked over to Father and Catherine with an ever-so-slight look of panic crossing his countenance.

Catherine felt really naughty. With elbow on table, chin on clenched hand, she took on a wide-eyed, innocent look designed to bore straight into Vincent. Her look seemed to match Geoffrey's, but her intention was entirely playful. She saw a slight frown appear on Vincent's face.

Father looked down so he would not reveal the smile on his face, while Catherine, with great concentration, continued to maintain her wide-eyed, sober look at Vincent. Father marveled at her tenacity. The quiet was deafening. Father couldn't stand it.

"I th-think I'll leave," stammered Father, searching in his mind for a reason to depart. "Mary wanted to see me... about... taking the children on an excursion tomorrow. Yes, that's right, I was supposed to discuss it with her." He rose from his chair, gave Catherine a mischievous look and left.

While Vincent was still struggling to answer Geoffrey, Catherine's demeanor provided no help. But, her control was on the verge of breaking. She moved from her statue-like pose and looked around the table for her work.

"Well, there's something I have to do in our chamber, so..." With a gleam in her eye, she smiled at Vincent, whose frown deepened slightly.

"See you later. Bye, Geoffrey." She scooped up her books and started toward the portal. When she was behind Geoffrey, she turned to face Vincent, gave him a good-luck-you're-on-your-own smile, raised her hand and wiggled her fingers in a farewell then left.

Rounding the entrance into the walkway, Catherine stopped outside the chamber with her ear ever so close to the opening so she could hear the conversation. She realized Vincent would know she was there, but her curiosity was too strong. After she stopped giggling to herself, she managed to pick up their conversation.

"Geoffrey, " Vincent said in his deep, caring voice. "Humans are creatures of emotions - joy, sadness, love, hate, guilt, jealousy. Although you're very young, you've experienced them already." He saw Geoffrey nod in agreement.

"Plants and animals perform on instinct. The instinct to survive moves the plant to drink in the sun, the water and minerals from the earth to grow. Animals in the wild are constantly foraging for food, even killing other animals in order to survive.

"Plants and animals also act instinctively in reproducing, whether it's asexual or sexual reproduction, as you've been learning in class. They don't think about it... they just do it, an inner force drives them to procreate their species." Vincent paused, he hoped his words were the right ones. He felt this was going to be an important point in Geoffrey's development.

"But what about humans, Vincent?"

Catherine knew that Vincent's eyes would be firmly fixed on Geoffrey's as he spoke. In her mind's eye she could see the thoughtful blue orbs even now.

"As I said, humans are creatures of emotions. There are a vast majority of people who want to have children, to carry on their name. Sometimes, that thought will prompt them to want to perform the act of reproducing, but the act itself comes from love.

"Two people meet, talk, get to know each other and something develops between them... a connection, a pull that they get from no one else. Eventually, they realize they want to spend the rest of their lives together, help each other, nurture each other. Once they start building a life together, this pull becomes so great that they are joined, not only in soul and mind, but in body as well. They become one..." Vincent's voice started to trail off, thinking of Catherine whose smile he could feel in their bond, as her thoughts traveled on the same path.

"Like you and Catherine." Geoffrey said, completing Vincent's words.

Vincent smiled and softly whispered "Yes". He knew Geoffrey understood.

The velvet in Vincent's voice filled Catherine with thoughts of their love and her eyes were pools of happiness.

"Right now you've never experienced that and you shouldn't because now is not the time. One has to be mature and willing to accept the responsibilities of that kind of love. And, one of the responsibilities might be a child."

Catherine stopped listening at this point and closed her eyes. How lucky Geoffrey was, she thought, to have someone explain the facts of life in such a beautiful way. To explain the commitment and make act of love the beautiful experience that it was for her and Vincent. She stood there, lost in her thoughts for several minutes. When she opened her eyes, Vincent stood before her.

"Did I do well?" he asked, his head tilting ever so slightly.

Catherine looked deep into his eyes and thought that she had never seen anything as beautiful as Vincent. She sweetly smiled. He knew the answer.

Arm and arm they walked back to their chamber.





The Candlemaker

by Kay Simon

The room was steamy and fragrant with the combination of melting wax, perfumes and dyes. Rebecca absently pushed her humidity-dampened curls back from her face, oblivious to the wonderful picture she made above her veritable cauldron.

Large and high, this chamber was her very favorite place, her personal refuge. Here, her creative mind flew, and her solitude, and her desire for it had become well known, and she hoped, understood.

Of course, what she produced today was special. Today she slowly melted the wax for the most amazing event... Vincent and Catherine's wedding. Although there were the Winterfest candles she so lovingly made each year, and the more typical utility candles, each of which carried her loving touch, they were not as these. These were *more* than merely special. They would be unique.

These were the culmination of ten years of work, first of her apprenticeship and then of her success within the tunnel system. They reflected both her talent and what the others called her "artistic eye." When she thought how far she had come, from her childhood, when everything had seemed so easy, she realized just how far that was.

Now, it all came to fruition, as she expressed her personal happiness over the triumph of Vincent and Catherine's love in the truest way she knew how.

'Becca, 'Becca!' came a sweet voice, and little Ping floated into the room. Deceptively delicate, she was one of the toughest children rescued from Above. Her father had been a martial arts instructor until he had unaccountably disappeared, leaving her sister and herself to fend for themselves. Lin had found them cowering in an alley on one of her foraging missions Above, brought them Below and adopted them into her family immediately. Suli, originally Su Li, was still having trouble adjusting, but Ping had embraced the tunnel world with enthusiasm, and now her eyes were lit now by an impish joy.

"Father said I might help you!" she exclaimed, dancing around Rebecca's trough of hot wax.

"Careful, honey, or you'll hurt yourself," cautioned Rebecca, then dipped another row of wicks into the wax for a moment, then lifting them, sifted a varicolored glitter mixture over the still soft wax for a special effect. This glitter was special, for mixed in were tiny bits of her secret color additive. It actually was ground crayon which would

melt around the glitter and add to the uniqueness of the candles, but she told no one, for it was her own device and she was proud of it.

"Oh!" breathed Ping at the magic dust flung into the air over the waiting candles. "Like magic!"

"Yes," agreed Rebecca, with a genuine smile. Ping had lifted her from the doldrums. They only came once in a great while, when she missed her family, her life before, or what she might have had. Even after fifteen years she still missed them.

"Becky, last call. You'll miss the bus."

She felt a warm hand gently, then not so gently shaking her.

"All right, Mom," she mumbled, full of sleep. "I'm up." But her mother didn't leave, and she couldn't sink back once more into the pillows.

"Now, young lady," she heard, and finally opened her eyes. Her mother sat there, all beautiful and immaculately dressed. Her father must be at the office already. He was always at the office, making money off people who needed the expertise of well-dressed financial planners.

"Okay," she finally smiled, and gave her mother a hug. "I'll be down in a few minutes. She slid off the bed and stretched, yawning widely. It was too early. School was too early. 'Course, she had all afternoon and evening after school... Lots of freedom. Except for school.

School.

Something jogged at Rebecca's memory. "Ping! Aren't you in Vincent's beginning literature class this afternoon?"

Ping gave a pixie smile, and examined the candles hanging on their drying racks.

"Of course, but he had something to do. Something about clothes for the wedding, I think."

"Oh," said Rebecca, relieved. "Then you're not cutting class."

The irrepressible little mop of silken black hair shook vehemently at that unthinkable thought.

"Course not! Then I wouldn't be allowed at the wedding." Lately for the children, that threat was tantamount to the worst punishment possible.

Rebecca only wished there were other, equally effective deterrents when one or other of the tunnel children came up short. So far, she didn't know of any, and a couple were near to out-of-hand. She sighed. Good thing it wasn't up to her; she could never manage to punish any of them, and they had found out her soft heart.

"Your help would be most appreciated, then," she told Ping, and was rewarded by a huge smile.

"Marcus might come by, too," she remarked shyly, and Rebecca thought, 'Oh, ho, so this is how it is! But isn't she a wee bit young?' With that, she mentally chuckled.

Then again, she thought, perhaps Ping wasn't too young. It sure hadn't been that way for her...

"I'll call you," said Aaron. He was the nicest boy in class, and he had walked her home. And he wanted to call her!

How could life be more wonderful? Without trying she was pulling good marks, and her social life had blossomed. They lived in a huge house and lacked for nothing. Her oldest sister, Leah, was in college and Miriam was a junior in high school. They were paving their way for their baby sister to avoid the potholes and have a smooth social way through school. Life *couldn't* be better.

Then it had all changed.

She would never forget the day. The day when she had found out about Dad's activities. A couple of indiscreet things: a note of warning she had intercepted from one of his partners, a telephone call. She maybe was an innocent, but with those pieces, it didn't take anything to fit the puzzle together.

He had denied his involvement at first. Then he had made the mistake of trying to reason with her, as though she was still a child. And he showed no remorse, no guilt for bilking people out of hundreds of thousands of dollars, maybe *millions* over the years.

"Becky, you don't understand. Don't judge until you understand."

"I understand that under the disguise of financial planning, you have been acquiring your own nest egg," she said in a cold and even tone. She was still in shock.

"You don't know the half of it, and until you do, you can't be judge, jury and executioner. I won't let you," he vowed.

"Just watch me," the sassy, spoiled, shocked and worst of all, naive child she had been had dared to challenge.

But the stakes had been too high. He hadn't spoken of it again, and she was determined to expose him. But the challenge had been too much for a green girl. She hadn't moved quickly enough, and she had been expendable.

At first, she thought he had let her remark pass. Then her life fell apart, as he had her set up and arrested. Oh, on a comparatively minor charge of shoplifting, to be sure, but as they placed cuffs around her wrists, she thought she heard her father's voice,

You can't be judge, jury and executioner. I won't let you.

His greed, or his need to protect his partners, had gone beyond his love of family and of her.

The next time she saw him, it was with new eyes. Actually, she was a completely new Becky. He had finally posted bond, then tried to coerce her to come around to his way of thinking. She had resisted, hardened by the experience of what he could do. During the trial, which to her family's horror had actually occurred, he had been distant, but obviously uncomfortable. Her sisters and mother had been numb and shocked as their attorney floundered. She sat apparently calm, actually completely detached. This was not happening. It could not be happening. But it was.

Before the case went to final arguments, her father had drawn her aside.

"One word from me, and the charges will be dropped. But I must be sure of your loyalty before that happens."

She had merely stared at him in disbelief. He was rapidly becoming evil incarnate to her suddenly-aged eyes. How could he live with what he was doing?

Speechless, unable to defend herself, she had succumbed to the inevitable, and resigned herself to her fate.

"Guilty," rang out the verdict, and she suffered the next year in a girls' reformatory school. Nothing had mattered, not her youth, nor that it was her first offense. A diamond necklace still bearing its price-tag had been found in her purse, and she had been extravagantly punished for it.

So much for punishments.

Ping carefully helped her pour in the liquified color which gave the candles their delicate ivory tint.

"That was well done, Ping, and now I'll stir them," she praised. Praise and self-esteem were important to children. And security. How well she knew.

Newly released from the reformatory, she had fled to the anonymity of the big city. Oscar, a raffish but well-meaning character she had met while destitute, had suggested she use her body; it would be the most lucrative.

Some ingrained sense of pride had made her refrain, however. It wasn't part of the plan. Only those nights when she was hungry and exhausted and walking the endless city did she wonder if her pride had any bearing on this cruelty of life.

But Oscar had watched her hold off the desperateness. He had finally suggested friend he had, Eli, who might be able to help.

"Besides," he said gruffly, "I can't stand you looking so stick-thin. You need a place with regular meals."

She considered his offer warily. It sounded too much like a soup kitchen or one of the holy houses where they wanted your soul in exchange for a hot meal and a cot.

"C'mon," he urged one night when there had been nothing to eat all day, and she was weaving on her feet. "At least give my friends a chance. The worst you'll get is a lecture, the best, a new home."

Light-headed with hunger and exhaustion, she acceded, and her world changed forever. Eli welcomed her into his apartment, then introduced her to a world she could not have imagined, and which welcomed her even more.

It gave her a sense of belonging she had come to realize she had never truly possessed before, she only *thought* she had.

"When will you get married?" asked Ping as they whipped the wax to a froth to pour into molds for the larger table candles.

"Me?" she asked with surprise. She hadn't thought about it for years. She had been in the tunnels for years, but hadn't met anyone for her. Certainly not Vincent. He had been her friend, her staunchest supporter, after those first rocky moments...

"Meet whom?" she asked, overwhelmed with the people and the way of life. The difference of this world appealed to her, intrigued her, but also frightened her a little in its strangeness. It reminded her of her childhood, all light and fantasies.

"Vincent," repeated the man everyone called Father patiently. "He is... most unusual, and we prefer to have the new members of our community meet him only after they have settled in for a time."

"I'm settled," she claimed, intrigued about the mystery man.

Someone moved out of the shadows and into the golden light of many candles, several which were poorly made and guttering, slightly fouling the air.

Involuntarily, she drew in a breath. He amazed her. He completed her vision of the tunnels. Apparently only a few years older than herself, she sensed in him the feeling of displacement she felt. Of course, there would be no place for him Above, either. They were in that sense soul-mates.

"Rebecca," he had said gently, in a voice which healed even as he spoke.

She had become Rebecca from that moment on. She had been captivated, and had lived there since then. But not always happily ever after.

"And now for the piece de resistance!" Rebecca exclaimed. She tested the readiness of a poured mold. She had carved the master for it herself.

"What is it?" asked Ping, eyes round.

"A piece of my own sculpture," replied Rebecca with some pride. It had not always been that way.

"You have come before Council to apply for a position in our community?" asked Father gently.

"I would like to make the candles and other wax items," Rebecca said simply, thinking of the sealing waxes she could make, and the new stamps she had sketched only the night before.

Mary spoke up. Perhaps it didn't mean to be, but it came out as a protest. "But Athenie has been doing that, for goodness knows how long."

A chill went through Rebecca. She had at last found an interest, only to be denied?

Vincent, new to Council, ventured, "Athenie has spoken before of retiring to Florida with Tom. Could not Athenie use some help, perhaps an apprentice to learn her methods and take over when she leaves?"

Rebecca looked gratefully over at Vincent, her ally. No one said anything for a moment, and she felt as though she were holding her breath for the rest of her life.

Finally, Father said, "Well, we should vote on this matter," and it came out a chorus of ayes.

She would be a candlemaker. As the years went by, she became *The Candlemaker*, and some of the youngest children called her that. No matter. It made her proud.

Not so the headlines a few weeks later, where the man who had been her father had been arrested for fraud and theft of clients' profits.

He had been tried and sentenced a year later, and would remain in prison for the rest of his life.

She was sorry and she was not sorry, but she immersed herself in her work, and it became almost enough to forget it.

Almost.

With shaking hands, she finally peeled apart the mold, to reveal miniature sculptures of Vincent and Catherine facing one another, hands lovingly entwined.

"For what you have given me," she said gently under her breath, and heard Ping ask.

"What, 'Becca?"

Startled, she turned to the little girl with a laugh.

"My wedding present to them," she explained. It would sit on their cake and be a testimony of her affection for them both.

"It's beautiful!" exclaimed Ping, reaching out a tentative finger to trace the waving lines of Vincent's hair.

This was a culmination of her dream. With this, she knew it would be enough to hold her past at bay... at least for a while.



W

Wells Family Chronicles

by Margaret Davis

Vincent stoked the cover of the book in his hand, sensitive fingers tips following the grain. He brought it near his face and sniffed it, there was a faint hint of perfume that mingled with the aroma of the leather. His fingers fanned the many fine pages and the gold edges glittered in the light of the candle.

He carried the book to his table, drew his chair near and sat where the light would fall upon the page. Carefully he opened the book. On the first page words in a familiar hand flowed across the page, and brought her face clearly to mind.

December 14

Today my dream, my hope became reality. When I think it only a dream, I look down at my hand and see the ring, his ring, made for me. We are joined, he is my husband. The joy, the love I feel are beyond words and yet I try to find a way to express the depth of my emotion.

This new journal can be *ours* -- the Wells' Family Chronicles -- the record of our life, together. The joy of the word! I want to shout it from the balcony.

Catherine

Below her words he added his own.

Happiness fills me, Catherine's joy and love surround my heart. When a doubt rises in my mind, I have only to touch our bond to remind me of the rightness of our love.

I was with Father when Catherine's note and package arrived, with this journal inside. I wonder if my face shows my emotions as clearly as hers?

Vincent



December 21

Father will announce our engagement at Winterfest. He has asked that Catherine live Below for three months before our wedding. I spoke with Catherine and we have agreed, even though we are already joined. The vows we spoke to each other before God bind us together, and all that comes after can never take the place of those promises.

Vincent

December 27

I met Jenny for dinner tonight. I told her there was someone special in my life that I had not shared with her. She interrupted me to ask if this was the reason for the happiness she feels from me. She said she dreamed I married a prince and went to live in a castle with massive stone walls.

Over the course of the evening, I told her how my life has changed in the last three years. And how happy I am, how I feel that I've found a part of me that has been missing, how complete I feel when Vincent and I are together. As we left the restaurant, she hugged me and we both cried a little.

I told her of my request to Joe for a leave of absence and that I would be living with Vincent and his family until the wedding. She will come to my apartment tomorrow to meet Vincent, and I will ask her to be my maid of honor.

Catherine

December 28

Catherine brought Jenny to me on the balcony. I was surprised to feel the touch of her mind, and then remembered all the dreams of which Catherine spoke that indicate empathic power. When Catherine introduced us, she approached me with outstretched hands. I felt compelled to step back, but the calm in her eyes reassured me. I

took her hand in my leather-covered one and spoke to her.

We talked for some minutes and then she asked me to push back my hood. Catherine had told me of her loving heart and she was right. She has agreed to be in our wedding. Catherine will bring her Below for a visit soon.

Vincent

February 23

I spent some time with Rebecca today. She is making candles for everyday use. She tells me she will make special candles for our wedding. She taught me how to tie wicks and dip candles, and was too kind to say how crooked mine turned out.

She is just one of many who share their knowledge and skills with me. I feel so welcome here, the sense of family, and love is so strong. I wish everyone could know this feeling.

Catherine

March 4

The first fitting for my wedding dress was today. I brought my mother's dress to Constance two weeks ago. It is lovely and she had made it fit so well. She has Jenny's dress as well, it is the one she wore last year for the Covenant House benefit. It needed some repair at the hem where her heel caught it.

I'm saving the details about the dress for later, since my loving husband is not telling me of his wedding outfit.

Catherine



Doesn't it make the anticipation all the more sweet, my love?

Vincent

April 13

Catherine sleeps in our new chamber. I am often awake at this time in the night. I woke to the wonder of her in my arms. Our dream has become reality.

Peter escorted Catherine into the Great Hall, a good friend standing beside my bride. Her beauty took my breath away, as she stood at my side in her mother's gown with flowers on her brow.

We repeated our vows with our hands on the Bible that was her grandmother's. It was open to the story of Ruth that Father read.

To know she will be here forever, is the fulfillment of my most secret hope. It was the dream I never thought to see come true.

Vincent

It is afternoon and Vincent is with the children for afternoon lessons. I have no responsibilities calling me and have the luxury of an hour, to write notes for the gifts we received.

I am so happy, there are not enough words. I feel as though I have come to the end of a long journey, I'm home.

Vincent looked so noble, so regal yesterday. Without his cloak, his muscles seem to ripple beneath the fabric of his coat, and those shoulders... yum!



STAR 090



As long as I have known him, Vincent has hidden his emotions by allowing his hair to fall forward around his face, when he is deeply moved. Yesterday, he tied his hair back. On his face for all to see was his happiness and his love for me. Jenny says it's the same look she sees on my face. To me it was an outward sign of the changes our love has brought to him.

Jenny looked so lovely in her burgundy velvet. The deep richness of the color enhanced her eyes, and she had no lack of dancing partners. I think Lawrence, one of our Helpers, was positively smitten by her charms. It is so wonderful to share my joy with her.

Catherine Chandler Wells

April 19

Catherine and I took a picnic to the Falls, and then I showed her the mineral pools. We bathed there together. It is still new to me, this baring of the body, the loving. Sometimes I fear I will wake and find it all a dream.

Vincent

It is not a dream, my love, it's forever and beyond.

Catherine





GIPSON '90

A Silent Joining

*He walks toward me powerful and strong
His unique beauty flaming my desires.
I await... breathless with anticipation,
as he reaches out to gather me into his arms.*

*As I'm drawn into the circle of his embrace,
I feel my soul merging with his.
Where is the beginning of me,
the end of him?
I do not know...*

*All I know, is that I hunger
for this losing of myself.
This silent joining that pushes aside
And lets us truly become
one, in love.*

Gina Alkazian





A Life Together

by Anita Hooson

Catherine and Vincent walked hand in hand, as they had done so many times before down this particular tunnel passageway. Since their marriage and Catherine's subsequent move Below, they had settled into a comfortable routine. A safe egress point had been found for her daily commute Above, thanks to the propitious locale of a certain Helper's basement.

Life still wasn't simple, and probably never would be, but they had found a symmetry and were becoming quite adept at balancing Above with Below. Catherine still worked long hours and often brought book-work home; but at least now they were together, and their souls no longer cried out for the other in the darkness of night.

Nights belonged to she and he. Catherine found such incredible pleasure in his arms that she wondered how she had managed to survive for so long without it. He made her whole, his soul filling her as surely as his body did, in perfect union with one another. After their joining vows and only one night in his arms, she realized that she had never known love before, that every experience she had ever had paled in comparison to the ecstasy she found with Vincent.

He was strength and gentleness, light and darkness, innocence and knowledge, tender and hard. He was powerfully, masterfully male, yet sensitive to her every desire, wanting nothing but to fulfill those needs. He gave to her his soul, and she gave hers in return. They truly became as one.

For Vincent, those nights were indescribably exquisite. Catherine welcomed him into her arms so eagerly, yielding her body to his with such joy; he lost himself in her love. That passion such as this could exist, that he could be a part of such perfection never failed to amaze him.

In her arms, he was beautiful. He loved and was loved in return, and no man could ask more of life. For both, all the pressures and harassments of the day became no more than a single drop of rain to the vastness of the ocean when compared to the sweetness of those nights.

"Goodbye, love." Catherine took her briefcase from Vincent, and braced her hand on his chest as she reached up on tiptoe to kiss him.

"Take care, Catherine." One arm came around her, and pulled her against him for a brief moment before he released her.

"Remember, I might be late tonight since Joe goes to court tomorrow. I have two depositions to take."

"All right. I won't worry," he promised, even though both knew he would. It was perhaps the greatest test of his love, this letting go of her each day to venture into the hungry world Above, a world in which he was not welcome.

Catherine took a quick look at her watch. "Oops, I'm late again!" She squeezed his hand and slung her purse over one shoulder, throwing a last goodbye kiss at him before disappearing into the light from the stairway above. "I love you!" she called out.

"I love you, too."

* * * * *

It was late, but neither Vincent nor Catherine were ready to sleep yet. Their lovemaking earlier had so heated their blood that only now were they able to speak without effort. Catherine had lit the thick candle on the night stand a short while ago. She liked to be able to see his face, to see the love in his eyes.

They lay on their sides, facing each other now, only inches apart. Vincent had one elbow propped on a pillow, one furry fist under his chin. Catherine had gathered a fluffy down pillow under one cheek, she sighed deeply with contentment.

"When I was a little girl, I used to dream that one day a handsome prince would fall in love with me and take me away to his magical kingdom, where we would live happily ever after." Catherine watched as Vincent smiled at her, a lazy, sated smile. She noted with amusement the heavy-lidded look to his blue eyes and the way the pupils still dilated with pleasure. Taking a deep, yawning breath, she continued, her voice growing sleepy. "Then, I grew up as all children do, and I realized that there were no magical kingdoms, and I stopped believing in princes."

Catherine paused, and leaned forward slightly, touching her lips to his in a sweet, soft kiss. Drawing away, she whispered, "Until I met you, Vincent."

Shaking his tawny maned head slightly, he replied, "I am no prince, Catherine."

"Ah, but you are, Vincent. You are my every wish and every dream come true. You've given me *everything*." She made a small gesture, encompassing the world. "Everything."

Vincent reached out to brush back a silken strand of hair from her eyes. "My love," his voice was gentle, resonant. "It is *you* who have given me everything. Who would have thought that I could ever be so blessed?" This time it was he who leaned forward, not waiting for an answer. He took her lips in a tender kiss that slowly deepened as passion sparked between them again.

Murmuring soft words of love in her ear, he braced an arm on one side of her as he rose above her and reached across to snuff out the lone candle. Catherine's arms went around him, drawing him back to her, drawing him back down into the warm depths of her love.

* * * * *

"Catherine. Catherine, wake up."

In response to the soft but insistent voice above her head, Catherine pulled the covers over her face, and snuggling deeper still into her pillow, murmured something unintelligible.

"Catherine, you'll be late again if you don't get up." Vincent waited for an answer and not receiving one, added, "Now."

"Just five minutes more, Vincent," came the muffled voice.

"You said that five minutes ago. It's time now." Vincent shrugged his shoulders helplessly, hands on his hips. It was becoming harder and harder to rouse his wife from bed in the mornings. Not that he minded personally, but she had been late twice this week and had been quite put out that he had given in and let her sleep too late. Last night she had extracted a solemn vow from him that no matter how she clung to her pillow, he would not let her sleep late this morning. She had an important meeting at 8:00 a.m., and it was imperative that she not be so much as two minutes late.

Trying another tactic, Vincent turned to the small oaken table and poured a cup of freshly brewed, fragrant coffee from a chipped but lovely, old Wedgewood teapot. He had brought the pot of coffee from the kitchens ten minutes ago for just this purpose, along with one of William's freshly baked raspberry croissants.

"I've poured your coffee, Catherine. Get up now while it's still hot and you have time to drink it." He turned up the oil lamp as he spoke, flooding the chamber with brightness.

No response.

Sighing, Vincent crossed back to the bed and gently shook her shoulder. "Catherine!" That quiet, soothing voice was beginning to lose its patience.

"All right!" Catherine grumbled, thinking to herself that he was worse than an alarm clock. Sitting up, she shook the hair from her eyes and blinked balefully at her husband, who stood before her looking entirely too handsome and disgustingly wide-awake. He never had a problem getting up.

She yawned and stretched her arms above her head, before starting to sink back into the covers, her eyes beginning to droop again. Idly, she wondered why she was so tired all the time. She had been getting eight, even ten hours sleep a night all week, and yet, it seemed harder and harder to get up.

"It's time to rise, Sleeping Beauty," Vincent said, a smile coloring his voice, as he took the covers and threw them aside. She was so beautiful, all sleep-tousled like this. He had to stifle a sudden impulse to join her in bed and say the devil with work, hers or anyone else's.

"Okay, okay, I'm up." Catherine finally admitted defeat and swung her feet to the floor. Immediately, her stomach gave a most unpleasant lurch. She bent over, head in her hands.

"Catherine? What is it? Are you ill?" Vincent knelt before her, sensing her distress immediately.

"I don't know. I just... just feel like I'm going to be sick," she groaned, hands going to her stomach.

"Then you should stay home today. I can go to a Helper's and call in for you," he offered, frowning at her wan appearance. She hadn't been eating enough lately, and was sleeping entirely too much. "I think you should let Peter examine you, Catherine."

"No, I'm all right now." She waved him away and stood, groping for her robe. "I have to make that meeting." Shuffling out of the chamber, she bypassed the coffee and croissant disdainfully, headed for their bathroom and left Vincent to stare after her with concern in his blue eyes.

After brushing her teeth and taking an invigorating shower, Catherine felt much better, although still a trifle queasy. As she began

dressing, she winced while fastening her bra. With a dawning sense of wonder a thought settled on her mind, as gently as a snowflake drifting from the sky.

Could it be? Could it be possible?

* * * * *

Catherine sat at the conference table, hands folded demurely in front of her, giving the appearance of being at complete attention. Once her part in the meeting was finished, her mind at once returned to that little nest where cautious hope and soaring joy vied with one another for attention like baby birds.

The more she thought about it, the more certain she was that she had conceived Vincent's child. Vincent's child! A delicious shiver went down her spine, causing her to drop her hands to her lap and look surreptitiously about, to see if anyone had noticed. Of course, no one had. Just as soon as this meeting was over she intended to beg off the rest of the day and get to Peter's office as fast as possible. She wanted to be certain.

"Well, that about wraps it up for this morning. Back to work, people." Joe rose from the table, gathering the multitude of papers in front of him into one semi-neat stack. Glancing at Catherine, he nodded. "Good work, Radcliffe. With that affidavit from the eyewitness you dug up, we'll be able to put Tony Furtado away for a long time."

"Thanks, Joe," Catherine smiled. "Do you think it would be possible for me to take the rest of the day off? I put in a lot of hours on this case, and I've let some personal matters slide."

Joe glanced at his watch as he crossed the room to open the door. "Sure, Radcliffe, take off. You earned it." This case was going to be a feather in the D.A.'s cap, and he was feeling expansive.

"See you Monday, Joe." Catherine was already ahead of him and out the door.

"Yeah, 'bye." Joe smiled at her haste to leave. She deserved some time off, he thought, and she had been looking sort of tired lately. Well, no one could say the taxpayers weren't getting their money's worth out of Chandler.

Less than an hour later, Catherine sat in Peter's office, legs and fingers crossed. "Well?" she asked, eagerness edging her voice.

Closing her chart, Peter took off his reading glasses and smiled at her. "Of course, we can't be one hundred percent certain until the HCG test comes back tomorrow. But, these early pregnancy tests are actually very accurate now;, and combined with what you've told me and my physical exam, I think we can safely say that you are quite pregnant, Cathy."

"That's wonderful!" Catherine grinned at him, unable to contain her happiness. "I've been dragging around for a month now, wondering why I was so tired all the time, why I was queasy in the mornings, and I never once, until this morning anyway, thought about being pregnant," she said with wonder.

"Then you didn't plan this?"

"Well, we certainly didn't do anything to prevent it," she answered, a faint blush tingeing her cheeks. "But Peter, after you said Vincent's blood chemistries were unusual, I just thought... I think we both thought, that a child would not be possible for us."

"Well, Cathy, that wasn't a bad theory, but like most scientific theories, it obviously had holes in it."

"Yes, great big, lovely holes!" Catherine laughed out loud. "I've got to go. I have the rest of the day off, and I want to look at maternity clothes, and baby clothes, and some books on childbirth, and..." She laughed again, "You know, stuff like that."

Peter put an arm around her shoulders, walking her to the door. "It's nice to see you so happy, Cathy. Your love shines from your eyes, and it's a beautiful thing to behold."

Reaching up, Catherine planted a kiss on his cheek. "Thank you, Peter... for everything."

* * * * *

Meanwhile, Vincent was trying to sort out the feelings he was receiving through their bond. Catherine's tiredness was still there, but there was a ripple of joy present, a glimmer of... anticipation? He couldn't quite define it, but was relieved that she seemed better than this morning. Her meeting must have gone well--he could feel her happiness and satisfaction. Still, the tiredness worried him. Perhaps Father would have some suggestions.

Deciding to seek his counsel, Vincent extinguished the extraneous candles in his chamber, then strode to the study. A delivery of new medical journals had arrived just yesterday, so Vincent

was certain he would find Father ensconced behind his desk, devouring every word.

"Father? I hope I'm not disturbing you." Vincent stood before the massive oak desk, looking down through shaggy bangs at his father.

"Hmm?" Father looked up over his glasses. "Oh, no, Vincent, sit down." Marking his place in the thick magazine with an old envelope, Father closed the journal and gave Vincent his undivided attention. "What can I do for you?"

"It's Catherine, Father. Perhaps you've noticed how tired she has been lately. She goes to bed early, but it's almost impossible to get her up in the mornings." Vincent smiled gently as he said this last, his love for her evident. "I'm becoming concerned."

Father rested an elbow on the table, one hand covering his mouth, to hide a smile. *So, they hadn't figured it out yet*, he thought. Always perceptive, his sharp physician's eye had not missed the changes in Catherine this past month. The fatigue, the "green-about-the-gills" look she had most mornings, combined with her close, ah, proximity, to his son all added up to one thing in his mind. Before the year was out, he would be a grandfather, and before the month was out Vincent would get the surprise of his life.

"Well, Vincent, perhaps she's just working too hard." *Far be it from me*, he thought, *to ruin her fun in telling him. Besides, I can't be absolutely certain...*

"That thought has occurred to me as well, Father, but you know how devoted Catherine is to her work. I can't ask her to do less than she deems necessary."

"No, I understand that, Vincent, but perhaps you could suggest she take a short vacation, just a few days off, until she feels rested again." He didn't add that unless he missed his guess, Catherine would be taking a lot more than a *few* days off before too long.

"I'll do that, Father. Thank you." Somewhat reassured, Vincent rose from the chair. "I promised Mouse I would look in on his latest invention. I hope it's nothing dangerous."

Father and son smiled simultaneously with indulgent understanding.

"Indeed," Father paused as several possibilities occurred to him, then added, "You'd better go *now*, Vincent."

* * * * *

Catherine spent the rest of the afternoon as she had told Peter, looking at maternity clothes, baby things, and buying several books on pregnancy and childbirth. Although her first impulse had been to rush Below to tell Vincent, she had decided to savor the knowledge for a few hours first. She needed to give herself time to formulate just the right words, to inform him of the immense change coming to their lives.

What would he think? She was certain that he would already be feeling her excitement and joy, and would no doubt ask her about it as soon as she returned. Smiling to herself, she hugged her secret close to her heart and decided to wait until tonight, until they were alone together.

* * * * *

"When are you going to tell me?"

Catherine looked up from the mirror where she had been brushing her hair, pausing in mid-stroke. Had he guessed? "Tell you what?" she asked as innocently as possible.

"Catherine, you have been bursting with joy all day. I've felt it since this morning." Vincent stepped behind her, taking the brush from her hand as she rose from the chair and turned to face him.

"I knew you would. I've been thinking of the right words to tell you, and now, I can't think of any." She smiled up at him, the enormity of her news making her knees weak. A bite of sudden apprehension nipped at her as she looked up at him. Perhaps this news wouldn't make him happy. To be honest, she admitted to herself, this was the real reason she hadn't told him at once.

They had never discussed the possibility of children, since both believed and accepted the idea that offspring would not be a part of their lives. Catherine knew that Vincent would never consciously have chosen to place the burden he bore on another. There had been so much pain in his life...

"Catherine," he prompted, curiosity getting the better of him. "There are no *wrong* words. Tell me, please."

Raising her eyes to his, she took his hand, leading him to the bed. "I think you'd better sit down."

Obediently, Vincent sat on the edge of their bed, his hands folded together, as Catherine knelt before him. Placing a slightly trembling hand on top of his, she moistened her lips before speaking.

"I *am* happy, Vincent, and I hope... I hope you will be, too." Meeting his expectant blue eyes, she took a deep breath, and continued. "I saw Peter today, as you suggested, and he confirmed what I had begun to suspect." Catherine took one of his hands and brought it to rest against her flat belly. "I'm carrying your child," she said softly.

Vincent's eyes widened perceptibly. "A child?"

"Yes," she smiled, her own happiness vying against her concerns about his reaction. "As Peter put it, I'm quite pregnant."

"Catherine..." For a moment Vincent struggled for words. Then his mouth began to twitch in the beginnings of an unrestrainable smile. "But how can this be? I thought... I never thought... Catherine, a baby?"

Relief washed over her and she laughed out loud at his incredulous expression. It would be all right, he would be all right.

"A baby, Vincent, *our* baby."

"Surely, this is a miracle." Vincent gathered her into his arms, pulling her onto his lap, embracing her completely.

"Surely, Vincent, it is."

Much later, she lay in his arms, drowsy with pleasure, her head against his chest, listening as the pounding of his heart slowly returned to its normal steady rhythm. After she had assured and reassured him that intimacy would not harm either her or the child, he had made such slow and easy, exquisitely tender love to her that her body still hummed with pleasure. He slowly stroked her hair as her fingers made little whorls on his furred chest.

Sliding one large hand down to rest gently against her abdomen, he asked softly, "When?"

"Peter thinks I'm about six weeks along, so the baby should be due sometime in mid-November." She turned in his arms so that she lay full length against him, and laid a hand upon his face, her thumb lightly stroking one prominent cheekbone. "I love you, Vincent, and I'm so happy to be having your baby."

He was quiet a long time, and when he spoke his voice was low and velvety. "I love you. I hope... I hope the child will not be like me. I hope that... that I have given you a normal baby."

Catherine looked into those beloved blue eyes, eyes so full love and vulnerability, eyes that mirrored his great soul, so many times wounded.

"Oh, Vincent, don't you know that it doesn't matter to me what appearance the child might have? What child could be conceived in greater love than ours? And to me," she paused, her eyes caressing his face, "To me, you are beyond beautiful."

He only shook his head at her, marvelling as always at her acceptance of him, her love for him. Lying awake long after she was fast asleep, he did his best to lock away the dark fears and doubts that still, and always would, prey upon him. Perhaps he had no right to father children, and perhaps he would live to regret what they had done for love.

If there was one thing he had learned, it was that there were no certainties in life, that fate was a capricious thing. Loving Catherine was his destiny, however, just as loving him was hers. Life had never been sweeter since he had stopped struggling against that destiny. So now, he embraced his wife and with her, embraced his destiny, laying himself bare to whatever the fates had in mind for him.

* * * * *

Entering her fifth month, Catherine found that her waistline had succumbed all too easily to the growing life within her. So far, bulky, layered clothing had kept her secret, but soon she would have to tell Joe and make arrangements for a leave of absence.

Sometimes she toyed with the idea of resigning altogether. Although she no longer took any assignments that would pose a danger to her, and had not since that dark time of Vincent's illness, she found herself wanting to stay Below more and more. Perhaps she could take a position in a research capacity, thus limiting the time she would have to spend Above. She certainly had the makings of an excellent law library Below, since moving her father's entire book collection down over a year ago.

At least for today, though, Catherine put all thoughts that were work-related behind her. It was Saturday and she had a lunch date with Jenny, after which they planned to terrorize the maternity and baby clothes stores. Dear Jenny, Catherine thought fondly, it will be good to spend some time with her.

Jenny had taken the amazing events in Catherine's life in stride, never faltering in her friendship and support. It was nice to have a friend to share her most wondrous secrets with, especially the most wondrous one of all. Jenny had been so happy for her when Catherine told her she was expecting a baby. Catherine smiled, remembering.

* * * * *

"Cath, come in," Jenny said, opening the door wider. "Its great to see you again."

"Hi, Jen." The women embraced, laughing a little as they always did upon meeting. To be together somehow seemed to bring out the giggling girls they used to be.

"You look great," Jenny observed, noting the sparkle in Catherine's eyes. "Cathy, you're positively glowing! C'mon, tell me what it is."

"You're way too observant, Jen," Catherine remarked as she followed Jenny into the kitchen, where Jenny turned off the stove and removed the whistling tea kettle.

"Well? What gives?"

Catherine's face broke into a smile that illuminated the room. "I'm pregnant," she announced.

"Cathy! No kidding? That's wonderful!" Jenny gave her a quick hug. "But I thought... didn't you say once that you didn't think children would be a part of your life?"

"I guess I was wrong, huh?"

They both dissolved into giddiness again, laughing together, completely at ease with one another.

"What did Vincent say when you told him?" Jenny knew how much these special people loved each other, and she was perceptive enough to know that their path had not always been easy.

"He was amazed, and tender, and... happy, truly happy about it, Jen."

"Good." Jenny nodded her head emphatically. "You two will make wonderful parents."



* * * * *

Coming back to the present, Catherine took a final glance in the cheval mirror, grimacing at her rather plump form. Although she had not gained much weight, there was a definite bulge where her previously flat belly had been. *Oh well*, she thought, shrugging her shoulders, *a small price to pay for such joy.*

"Aren't you ready yet?" Vincent appeared in the doorway, a smile turning the up the corners of his uniquely beautiful mouth. He watched her place her hands on the small mound of belly.

"I'm ready. I was just thinking how fast this baby is growing." Turning to face him, Catherine continued, "I really need some expandable clothes." Pulling the material taut across her stomach she looked down and said, "See?"

Vincent crossed the room and took her in his arms, kissing her lightly on the forehead. "I see the most beautiful woman in the world, blooming with my child."

Her arms went around him, hugging him close. "Vincent," she sighed. "Have I ever thanked you for your patience with me when I went through that episode of being crabby and moody? Or for rubbing my aching feet after a long day? Or for helping me through that awful morning sickness?"

"There's no need, Catherine. Those things are gifts of love, freely given."

"Still, I thank you, Vincent." Reaching up on tip toe, she planted a crooked kiss on his mouth, thinking to herself she must have done something very good in a previous life to deserve such happiness in this one.

Vincent slid a hand between them to rest lightly on her abdomen, an action that was becoming a habit with him. He could feel the flicker of life beneath his fingers, something that never failed to awe and warm him.

Catherine noticed that more and more that he couldn't seem to keep his hands off her, and joked that if only she'd known, she would have contrived to get pregnant two years ago.

"I'd better go. Jenny isn't good at waiting." Catherine murmured against his chest, making no move to leave his embrace.

"All right. Take good care of our son." The silky voice was a bit deeper than usual.

"Son?" she questioned, looking up at him curiously. "Do you know something or is that just a figure of speech?" She had learned long ago to not distrust his *hunches*.

"Of course, I can't be certain." He smiled down at her, the tips of his canines glinting in the candlelight.

"Of course not. But?"

He meant not to tell her, to let it be a surprise, but he could not resist the eager look in her eyes. "A son. Yes, I think so."

"Vincent, that's wonderful! A son... like you?" She added that last a trifle hesitantly, knowing his fears, but hopefully as well, because secretly she longed for a son like him. Beautiful, strong, and gentle, like him.

"I can't tell, Catherine." Vincent shook his head a little, the golden-red tresses of his mane tickling her nose as she lifted her face closer to his.

"I can't help but hope so," she said softly. Catherine laid a gentle hand against his cheek and brushed his full lower lip with her thumb. "Vincent." Her voice was hushed, eyes misty with love and understanding. "I love you so much." She kissed him tenderly, their lips clinging together for a moment.

"My love, my life." Vincent whispered to her before finally breaking their embrace. He retrieved her coat, and held it out for her. "Come, you mustn't keep Jenny waiting. I'll walk with you to the entrance."

Shrugging into the coat, Catherine slung her purse over one shoulder, then linked her arm with his. A glint of amusement appeared in her green eyes as she casually offered, "Better meet me there at four o'clock, and bring Zach. Who knows how many shopping bags I'll have!"

* * * * *

Catherine shifted in bed, trying to get comfortable. It was no use. She was hungry and knew it would be useless to fight this craving. Picking up her wristwatch from the bedside table she squinted in the dimness. Two o'clock in the morning. For a moment she debated getting up and going to the kitchen herself, but she would

need to light a candle and he could see in the dark. She rationalized that he would wake up the moment she crawled out of bed, and insist on going anyway.

"Vincent. Tugging on a lock of tawny mane, she whispered his name again.

"Mmmmm?" Obviously, he had been sound asleep.

"Are you asleep?"

He rolled over onto his back, opening one sleepy blue eye.

"Not anymore."

"Good, because I'm hungry."

Dead silence.

"Vincent?"

"I heard you. I just hoped I was dreaming."

She reached over and took his rough chin in her hand. "I'm sorry, I can't help it."

The covers dropped to his waist as he sat up and stretched, revealing a broad expanse of heavily furred chest. He yawned, then rose from their bed, shrugging into his robe.

"What do you want?"

"Milk and a banana," she answered unhesitatingly.

"Milk and a banana," he repeated. "I'll be right back." He paused at the doorway and pinned her with a stern look. "You won't fall asleep, will you?"

"I promise I won't." Catherine sank back into the pillows, looking altogether too cozy.

Vincent shook his head and left for the kitchen. He fully expected her to be sound asleep by the time he returned, as she had been the last two times she had sent on him these nocturnal raids.

Sure enough, when he returned she was burrowed into the bed like some small animal in its nest, sleeping peacefully. Vincent paused

for a moment, then sighed and set the small tray on the nightstand. At least it would be there if she woke again.

He let the robe fall to the floor and crawled in beside her, gently easing one arm around her to rest a hand upon her belly. Every time he felt the baby move, he was seized with wonder at this miracle of love. Catherine smiled in her sleep and reached for his hand, her fingers curling possessively around it.

"Sleep well, my love," he murmured, drifting off to sleep with all his world cradled in his arms.

* * * * *

Entering her eighth month of pregnancy, Catherine fell prey to a moodiness she had not experienced since the first trimester. She was already uncomfortably large and despaired of ever being slim again. Vincent was unfailingly patient with her, more so, she admitted privately, than she probably deserved. She remembered with shame the incident last week, when she had insisted on accompanying Vincent to inspect a possible trouble spot in the tunnels near the Maze.

* * * * *

"I'm going with you."

Vincent's head came up from the detailed map laid out on Father's desk. He was visibly surprised that she would even suggest such a foolhardy thing. "No." His reply was immediate and firm.

Rising to the challenge she met his eyes. "No? I'm tired of sitting around getting fat."

"You are not fat, Catherine," he sighed, "You are pregnant. There is a difference."

"Not to me," she answered illogically.

He recognized that stubborn set to her chin and hardened his resolve. She was all too good at getting her way, using her lawyer's wiles with him until he would give in against his better judgement.

"Catherine," he began patiently, "the journey is too long for you in your present condition. You'll be ready to turn back before we're halfway there."

"I know how far the Maze is. Don't patronize me!" Her voice rose on the last note.

Vincent was saved from a reply by Father entering the chamber. He limped over to his desk, raising his brows at Vincent. "I thought you'd be gone by now. You will have to hurry or leave it until tomorrow."

Catherine rose laboriously to her feet and waddled over to the desk, one hand braced on her back. "We were just leaving now."

Father glanced at Vincent, who shook his head and raised his shoulders in a gesture of exasperation, before turning to Catherine, speaking slowly, as if to a child.

"We are not leaving. I am going alone. If you are so set on taking a walk, I'll walk with you to the Waterfall tomorrow."

Catherine went back to her chair and threw a shawl over her shoulders. "I don't want to go the Waterfall tomorrow. If you're afraid I'll slow you down, you just go on ahead, don't worry about me."

"That is not the issue, Catherine. I don't want you tiring yourself. The Maze is too far for you, and you know it." He looked down at her, starting to lose patience with her stubbornness. He was anxious to get there and assess the situation and still be able to return at a decent hour.

"I should know better than you what will tire me." She turned to where Father sat, judiciously keeping silent. "And walking is good for me. Isn't that right, Father?"

Father looked from Catherine to Vincent uncomfortably. "Oh no, you're not getting me involved in this." He waved his hands in dismissal. "I'm just an innocent bystander."

Vincent braced his hands on his hips, velvet voice edged with steel. "I cannot allow you to endanger yourself on such a foolish..."

"Foolish!" she interjected, "now not only am I fat, but foolish as well?"

"Catherine, be reasonable." Vincent glanced at Father for help, who only shook his head and mouthed the warning, "Quit."

Breaking into angry tears, Catherine stormed past Vincent's outstretched hand and out of the study.

"Father, what did I say to upset her so?" Sinking heavily into the chair next to the desk, he shook his head in bewilderment.

"First of all, Vincent, never use the word 'foolish' in an argument with a woman."

"I never meant to argue at all. This is ridiculous, she knows as well as I she cannot..."

Father interrupted, raising a hand, "I don't think she really wanted to go at all, Vincent."

"Oh no?"

"No, she's just feeling moody, not at all unexpected at this stage of pregnancy. She needed to vent some steam. Give her fifteen minutes to cry and settle down, then go to her."

* * * * *

Vincent paused at the doorway to their chamber, uncertain about his welcome. She was lying on the bed, a pillow clutched to her breast, her head buried in its downy softness.

"Catherine?" he ventured softly.

She looked up a little sheepishly, and sniffed. "You can come in."

Walking to the bed, he knelt beside her, looking up at her as she sat up and pushed the hair back from her face.

"Are you all right?"

She heard the love and concern in his voice, and was ashamed of her outburst earlier.

"Yes. Vincent," her hands twisted together in her lap, "I'm sorry for being such a witch. It's just... just that I feel like I've been pregnant for a hundred years, and I'll never be thin again..." She drew a shaky breath and plunged on, "I waddle like a duck when I walk, and my back aches, and I feel ugly..."

"Come here." Vincent rose and sat on the bed, pulled her into his lap where she cuddled against him like some absurdly plump kitten, rubbing her face against his chest.

His mouth in her hair, he murmured, "You've never been more beautiful to me, Catherine, than you are right now, full of the miracle

of life. You'll be slim again before long, and if you'll sit on the piano bench so I can get behind you, I'll rub your back right now."

"Thank you for understanding." He was so warm and comforting, so strong and safe. Lifting her face, Catherine kissed his neck. "What about your Maze project?"

"It can wait." Vincent lowered his head, enjoying the feel of her mouth on his skin.

She kissed his chin and nibbled that spot under his jaw where she knew he was most sensitive. "Are you sure?"

"Ah... yes..." He shifted a little, suddenly becoming warm.

She kissed the corner of his mouth, then took his full lower lip gently between her teeth.

Vincent's arms tightened around her as his mouth took hers, kissing her long and deep before reluctantly breaking contact.

Catherine sighed. Even now, hugely pregnant as she was, his kisses stirred her blood.

"I wish we could make love," she whispered wistfully.

"So do I." His voice was husky. Standing, he gently deposited her feet on the floor. "But since we can't, you had better leave off teasing me before I hurt myself." His blue eyes were sparkling like stars on water.

Catherine laughed, her black mood suddenly vanquished. "Well, I certainly wouldn't want that to happen." She took his hand and laid it on her swollen abdomen. "Before you get started on my back you can rub my belly first. Your son is kicking me again."

* * * * *

The pains began in that quiet, dark hour just before dawn. Catherine had lain in bed, semi-awake, since midnight. The heaviness in her abdomen had been increasing of late, and her back ached abominably, making decent sleep impossible. There seemed to be no position to shift into that was comfortable.

With a sigh, she threw off the blankets and swung her feet to the floor, thinking a short walk might alleviate the discomfort. A sharp pain knifed through her so suddenly she could not stifle the soft cry



that rose to her lips. Gasping, she braced her hands against the bed, letting the pain flow out of her.

Vincent came awake immediately at her cry of pain, sitting up in bed, shaking the mane out of his eyes. Unlike Catherine, he had been deep in sleep, and was disoriented for a moment.

"Catherine," he whispered urgently, reaching across the bed to touch her bent shoulder, "What is it?"

The pain subsiding, she half turned to look at him, her eyes still bearing a shadow of hurt. "I think it's time, Vincent."

He was up in a second, struggling into his pants. "I'll wake Father."

"No, it's still early, let him sleep a little longer." She smiled into his doubtful eyes as he came around to her side of the bed, still dressing. "He'll probably need all his strength later." Her feeble attempt at humor fell flat as a contraction surged through her again. "Ohh..." Catherine stood as if to escape the grip on her abdomen, and as she did so felt her water break, rushing down her legs and soaking her nightgown.

Vincent did his best to appear calm even though inside he was cringing at even these early pains. He helped her change into a fresh nightgown and for the next two hours alternately walked with her, rubbed her shoulders and sat with her when she would crumple with the pain.

He talked to her of anything that came into his head, trying to keep her mind occupied, knowing that she found comfort in the sound of his voice.

Just when he felt he could stand it no longer, she asked him to wake Father. They went together to the Hospital Chamber, Catherine leaning into the strong and comforting arm that encircled her. It had been decided earlier, due to the possible complications inherent in this pregnancy, to deliver the baby in the Hospital Chamber where everything would be close at hand should surgical intervention become necessary.

After settling Catherine in bed, Vincent kissed her lightly on the lips, holding her eyes with his for a second. "You'll be all right? I'll only be a moment." He was loathe to leave her for even a minute.

"Yes," Catherine smiled through her pain, reaching a hand out to touch his in reassurance. "Go get Father, we'll both feel better."

Vincent was grateful for her courage. He felt quite shaken by her pain, and prayed this would be a speedy birth. The thought of Father's presence brought a modicum of comfort, and he hastened to his chamber.

It seemed like hours to Catherine, but in reality only a few minutes passed before Vincent returned with a still-dressing Father in tow. They had stopped on the way and had awakened Mary, who had promised to be there shortly.

"Well, Catherine, it's finally time, is it?" Father's voice brought a measure of peace, reassuring in its professionalism.

The pains were steadily worsening, and in spite of herself, she was frightened by their intensity. She meant to answer him lightly, to not give credence to the pain, but instead spoke in a small voice.

"It hurts, Father."

"I know." He laid a gentle hand on her belly, expertly assessing the tautness he felt. "You've got a ways to go yet. You'll do just fine, though," he assured her.

Catherine's smile turned into a grimace as a contraction took hold of her, shaking her in its teeth like a terrier. Vincent knelt by her side, taking her hand to rub it.

"I'm sorry," was all he could say. Never had time passed so slowly.

* * * * *

"Read to me, Vincent."

"What would you like?"

"Anything." It was becoming difficult to speak without moaning, something she was trying very hard not to do. "No," she decided abruptly, "I want Lost Horizon."

"I'll have to find it." Vincent wished she had asked for something closer at hand.

"Okay, go find it." Catherine watched him leave reluctantly, then looked across the room for Mary, intending to take advantage of Vincent's absence. The pain began to wash over her in unrelenting waves of agony. She thrashed in the bed, throwing off the covers as

she raised her knees against Father's advice, her body acting of its own accord. Panting, during what she knew would be a brief respite, she turned wounded eyes to Mary, who had hurried to her side.

"Mary." Her voice was a whisper.

"Yes, dear?"

"I need something to bite down on, a rag, anything."

Mary patted her hand in sympathy. "I understand." Smoothing back the damp hair from Catherine's eyes, she spoke reassuringly. "You'll be fine. First babies are often the hardest. You are making progress, it's just a bit slow going now."

Mary crossed the chamber to where Father was readying an instrument tray, laying out his forceps. She opened a drawer and brought out a sturdy cloth bandage. She turned to Father and spoke quietly so Catherine would not hear.

"This is a hard labor, Father. I'm a little worried about her. She is very small, and the baby seems big."

"I know." Father's voice was grim. "I don't want to perform a Caesarean unless I absolutely have to, but we can't let it go on so long that she loses her strength."

Mary nodded in agreement and went back to Catherine, silently handing her the twisted cloth. She saw Vincent entered the chamber, the elusive book in hand, just as Catherine raised the cloth and sank her teeth into it, pushing her head back into the flat pillow as another pain seared her body. Only a muffled moan escaped through the cloth.

Vincent felt his body tremble at this mute evidence of what she was enduring to give life to his child.

"Catherine, oh Catherine." His voice betrayed the wrenching of his soul as he cursed himself for ever having touched her.

Somehow understanding, she reached a hand out and removed the rag from her mouth, licked her lips to speak. "It's not your fault, Vincent. If you don't stop feeling so guilty I'll send you away."

She smiled that gentle smile he so loved, turning his heart upside down. He tried to smile in return, and failed miserably, so he just sat in the straight-backed chair beside the bed and took her hand. The book fell unnoticed to the floor.

Hours passed as Father and Mary did their best to give instructions and encouragement to both Catherine and Vincent.

Oddly, from the depths of her pain, Catherine found almost as much comfort in Father's voice as she did in Vincent's.

* * * * *

She was lost, wandering in a frozen wasteland of agony, a place where nothing existed but blinding white pain, a place so far away not even Vincent could follow her there. She felt herself leave him behind, helpless to hold onto conscious thought. There was nothing but mountain after mountain of paralyzing pain to surmount, only to slip back down into another icy morass of suffering. Her body was being torn apart, shattered into a million razor-edged shards of anguish.

"Mary, prepare for Caesarean." Father's voice cut through the tension in the room, making his decision aloud. Fear rose in his throat like bile as he prayed he hadn't waited too long. He cursed silently his limitations here. Surgery was not something he liked to perform unless absolutely necessary.

Vincent paled noticeably, his eyes two burning sapphires of torment. A black void filled his soul as he felt her slipping from their bond, and knew he was powerless to help her.

Mary looked up from between Catherine's parted legs, which were shrouded in a surgical drape. "Just a moment, Father, I think she's going to make it on her own. She's very close now."

Father came around to the end of the bed and made a quick exam with one sterile gloved hand. "All right, but we can't wait much longer. She's getting weak."

Vincent stood and paced, unable to remain still any longer. He bludgeoned himself with his thoughts, *this is my fault, I'm responsible for this.... I should have known better...*

Catherine writhed in the bed, arching against the pain slicing through her. Suddenly, she went still. To the worried eyes watching her in the chamber, her stillness lasted only a second, but to her it was a moment frozen in eternity. Death was near; she could feel that her strength was almost gone, and He was hovering over her like a black shroud waiting to fall. It would be so easy, so very easy now, to just let Him settle around. So simple, just to stop fighting, oblivion would be welcome, no more pain, nothing to struggle against... For an instant, she faltered.

Then, two warm, strong hands closed around hers, sending a river of strength flowing from them into her. With the last of her life force she gathered her defenses and spat into Death's waiting face. *NO! her mind screamed silently, railing against the Fates. No, you won't cheat him of his son, you won't cheat him ever again, not while I've a breath left to fight with!*

Catherine pushed with all of her might, a scream coming unbidden from her parched lips as she gnashed her teeth against the pain, bloodying her lip.

"VINCENT!" His name escaped her in an inhuman scream mingling unbearable agony with unconquerable love.

Dropping her hand, Vincent fell heavily to his knees, crashing to the floor as would a mighty oak felled, while his name still reverberated in the chamber. He threw back his great, shaggy head and tossed his tawny mane from his face, his hands covering his ears. The muscles on his neck corded with tension as he roared her name into the void of his soul, his agony becoming one with hers.

Blindly, kneeling beside her, his hand groped for hers, prying the small fingers from their grip on the bed, encasing that pitifully clenched hand with his. He felt a spark of warmth once more within his frozen heart as her fingers weakly twined with his of their own accord. Slowly, he became aware of the sounds around him once more, but did not have the strength to move. He knelt there, head bowed till his forehead touched their clasped hands, feeling the flow of their bond between them. Each gave to and gathered strength from the other, sharing a strange, healing communion.

Meanwhile, Father was busy cleaning and suturing Catherine as Mary tended the newborn infant. After tying off the umbilical cord and washing him, she wrapped the softly crying babe in a warm white blanket, handling him with reverent care. This child had cost dear in pain, and was all the more precious for it.

Catherine wearily opened her eyes, drifting back into a conscious state, she turned her head to better see the kneeling man beside her. He looked up and their eyes merged, and nothing else in the world existed at that moment except their love. The bond they shared was even stronger than ever before. Their love somehow even deeper, as if having been tested in fire, it had been forged into something magical and so strong as to be unbreakable by mortal means.

"My love." Catherine spoke in a whisper, her voice raspy from the scream wrested from her in travail.

Vincent's azure eyes shone with the force of his love for her. "I love you." The words seemed inadequate to him, but she understood, as always. Then, a gentle hand upon Vincent's shoulder made him turn.

"You have a son, a fine, healthy boy." The relief in his voice was undisguised as Father held out a small, mewling bundle, tiny arms waving above the swaddling cloth. Vincent took the baby and with infinite gentleness laid him in Catherine's waiting arms.

"Oh, my baby," she breathed in wonder. Folding back the blanket to look at her newborn son, a tear ran unheeded down her pale cheek to fall amongst the snowy white linen. A rush of maternal love washed over her as she traced the tiny golden brow with one slim finger, her weariness fading in the face of such a miracle.

Catherine lifted her eyes to watch Vincent as he touched his son's cheek with awe. Sky-blue eyes met sky-blue eyes of the exact same shade. The baby grasped Vincent's finger possessively in his tiny fist.

"He is strong," Vincent said in wonder at the immediate bonding with this tiny being. His smiling eyes met Catherine's. "Thank you for our son." His deep voice was gentle.

Catherine touched her husband's cheek, answering softly, "Thank you for giving him to me."

As Catherine's eyes began to droop, Father came, took the baby from her and gave him back to Mary. Surrendering to an all pervading weariness, she slipped into a drowsy, semi-conscious state, only dimly aware of gentle hands and warm water cleansing her, changing her nightgown.

Her eyes did not open as Vincent carefully picked her up in strong arms and carried her into their chamber, settling her in the big bed. Snatches of conversation floated like butterflies above her head. "A hard labor... such a beautiful baby... she is exhausted... will need time to heal... the baby is hungry... no, don't wake her... get some formula into him...."

A loud wail punctuated the last thing Catherine heard, something about feeding the baby, and her eyes flew open. She struggled to raise herself, looking around the room for the source of the noise.



"No, don't take him away. I'll feed him."

Mary paused at the doorway, the baby crying in earnest now. She exchanged glances with Vincent, shaking her head. He hesitated, seeing the dark shadows beneath Catherine's eyes, the drawn and hollow cheekbones, the lingering pallor that suffering had left.

For a moment Catherine feared he would deny her, and her voice trembled as she pleaded, "Please Vincent, I want my baby."

Her overwhelming need cascaded through their bond, deluging him with the strength of her emotions. This flood of maternal love was as intense as anything he had ever felt from her, and he understood her need; the need to hold her baby to her breast.

Vincent took the wailing infant from Mary and walked over to his wife. With an unusual lack of modesty she hastily unbuttoned the front of her flannel nightgown, exposing the soft, creamy curve of her breast. With infinite gentleness Vincent handed her their son. Catherine winced as the little mouth closed around her, but made no move to interfere with her son's first meal.

Mary's eyes misted with tears at the sheer beauty of mother and child. She walked to Catherine's side and laid a gentle hand on the infant's head for moment.

"He's very beautiful," she whispered.

"He is, isn't he, Mary?" Catherine smiled.

"Yes," she nodded her head, meeting Cathy's eyes. "I'm sorry it had to be so difficult. It isn't always so hard."

"It doesn't matter," Catherine dismissed eighteen hours of suffering with a shrug. "He's worth it." She glanced down at the baby at her breast, then her eyes went to Vincent and held there. "He's worth everything."

Mary wasn't positive which *he* Catherine referred to, but nodded and turned to go.

"Thank you for everything, Mary."

"If you need me for anything, don't hesitate to call me."

Vincent walked with her to the outer passage, wanting to thank her privately himself.

Father limped wearily to the bedside. He sat heavily in the rocking chair that had been brought to the chamber only last week.

"I want to tell you, Catherine, how much I admire you."

Her brows went up in question.

"I've never known anyone, man or woman, with more courage and sheer determination than you possess."

Catherine blushed, and replied, "Why, thank you, Father. I can't tell you how much I appreciate that." She watched the baby for a moment before continuing, "Thank you for helping me. I couldn't have done this without you."

"My part in this was really very minor," Father said, obviously embarrassed. "You did all the hard work."

Returning, Vincent overheard their conversation, and smiled, his heart gladdened that the two people he loved most in the world had truly made peace.

Father got to his feet, stifling a yawn and patted Vincent on the shoulder as he exited the chamber, "Better get some sleep, my son. That youngster is going to keep you very busy from now on."

Vincent leaned close and said something to Father that Catherine couldn't catch, but she saw the older man's eyes go misty as Vincent kissed his cheek.

He turned back to Catherine, his usually graceful step slowed by encroaching fatigue. "Is he finished?"

"Yes. I think it's time for all of us to sleep." Catherine gave their sleepy son into his care, her fingers lingering for a moment on the precious new life.

"Did you tell Father his name?" she asked with a yawn.

"Yes. From his reaction I would say he thinks Jacob Charles Wells, is the perfect name."

Catherine smiled and sank back into the pillows, eyes immediately closing as she finally surrendered to the weariness of her aching body.

With great care, Vincent laid his son in the hand carved cradle next to the bed. He watched the little one in sleep for a long moment, his heart swelling with love. Sinking to his knees, Vincent folded his hands in an instinctive, age-old expression of humbleness. The tawny head bowed and he silently gave thanks to God, who in His wisdom and mercy, had truly blessed him.



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