

HANDS

A.N.D

Tears gathered in Catherine's eyes as she listened to Vincent make his tragic confession of his attraction to Lisa, the night she rejected him, the guilt of his injuring her.

"I hurt her," he repeated brokenly. "That's when I knew that these hands were not made to give love."

He held them before her eyes, tears streaming down his face, and Catherine's heart broke. To see him in such agony, to know that he hated himself for what he was, was more than she could bear, and she knew that she could not let Vincent leave her this night before she had purged this ancient guilt from him.

Accordingly, she reached up and took the hands he claimed to hate. He let her, watching with sorrow as she wrapped her smaller fingers around his own. She lifted them to her face, rubbing the soft fur backing his fingers across her cheeks.

"Vincent," she told him firmly, "these hands are beautiful." She shook them before his face for emphasis. "These are my hands."

Gently, she kissed the fingers she held, then pressed them to her eyes as she broke down under the pain of his sorrow. Vincent bent his head to rest against hers, and they sobbed together for a while, finding what comfort they could.

And there was comfort to be had, simply in being together again after Vincent's withdrawal into himself at Lisa's return. After a time, the tears slowed, and Vincent raised his head.

Catherine clung tighter, whispering, "Please don't go. Not yet."

Vincent looked into her eyes and nodded. Catherine dared release his hands then and wrapped her arms around him instead. After a startled moment, Vincent returned her hug.

"You're not afraid," he marvelled

"How could I be afraid of you?" Catherine asked him. "You're the one who taught me how to face my fears, to live with courage instead of fright. I've never been afraid of you, not even at the beginning."

"You threw a bowl at me." Vincent reminded her sorrowfully. "And once you stepped back from my embrace."

Catherine remembered and regretted the bowl, but she had to search her memory for the time when she'd shied from his touch. How could that be? She hadn't even been afraid of him when he had been drugged. When had she ever -- ?

Oh. Back in the very beginning. Jason, and her terrible anxiety that Vincent was the subway slasher. She had gone to confront him, and he'd told her "We both know what these hands can do--have done! But I am not the one you seek." And, when he'd

reached for her, she had gasped and jumped back, only to be instantly overwhelmed by the pain in his eyes.

Catherine put the memory away as she looked at Vincent in confusion. "You didn't doubt yourself then. Why do you now?"

Vincent dropped his head and looked away, as if in shame "Then, I had only done what I must to protect you. Now... Lisa has reminded me of what I am, and how hopeless it is to believe that I could ever have a life with you."

"NO!"

"Yes! It cannot be, Catherine! Our love, what we share, is the most important thing in my life. You must believe that. But our dream must remain a dream."

"Vincent, we will find a way!"

"Look at me! My hands, my face... These hands," and he released her to shake them before her, "have murdered, Catherine. And not even as a man takes life, but as an animal! Tearing, clawing..."

He plunged from her arms and turned away. "I am not... a man."

"Vincent, you are a man!" Catherine cried in anguish.

"Am I? When the Tong came, when the Outsiders came, everyone looked to me to defend the Tunnels. Not those wiser, stronger, more experienced. Me! Because that is what I am made to be -- the Defender -- protecting my World with my claws and teeth!"

He stalked angrily to the other side of the balcony, eluding Catherine's attempt to catch him. When he reached the railing, he whirled, teeth bared, extending his hands to display their sharp nails.

"Not even those I love are safe from these hands. Devin, Lisa... even Father! If Winslow hadn't driven me away when I was drugged by Paracelsus, I would have killed my own father with these hands!"

"But never me," Catherine suddenly felt very calm and sure, unaffected by Vincent's agony. "Not even then would you hurt me."

She stepped forward and grasped an outstretched hand, bringing it once again to her face. This time, she didn't curl his nails away but tenderly trailed his fingertips across her cheek.

Vincent flinched and tried to pull away, but Catherine wrapped her other hand around his wrist to hold him.

"Never me," she repeated serenely. "You will never hurt me."

Vincent's left hand was gently sandwiched between Catherine's cheek and hand, and she moved her face caressingly along his palm. She led his fingers along her cheekbone, across her lips, up to trace her eyebrows.

Vincent was very aware of the smooth, soft skin beneath his fingertips, and horribly afraid that he would scratch her.

"Catherine, be careful!" he gasped as she closed her eyes and swept his fingers lightly across her eyelids.

"I'm safe with you. Isn't that the first thing you ever told me -- 'Don't be afraid. You're safe.?'"

She opened her eyes again and smiled into the troubled blue ones above her. There was fear in them, and pain from his memories, but beneath it all, she thought she saw the first stirrings of acceptance, excitement.

She kissed his palm in encouragement, and he threw his head back from the temptation.

"Catherine," he moaned, "please! I can't..."

"You already are," she whispered, kissing each fingertip as punctuation. "And I love it, and I love you... You are the man that I love and no other... and you can never hurt me. You said so yourself on this very balcony," she continued playfully, smiling.

"Remember?"

Catherine's face grew serious once more "Even when I tried to drive you away, accused you of the most terrible things because of the voodoo drug, all you said was 'I could never hurt you. Even in this terrible darkness, I am with you.'"

"I remember," Vincent said quietly.

"Then how could you think I'd let you face your darkness alone? There is nothing you could do to change my love for you.

Finally, she was rewarded with the smallest trace of a smile. "You are remarkable," Vincent told her lovingly.

Catherine smiled broadly back. "No, I'm in love."

She let go of Vincent's hand and stepped back. "You know, you did make one mistake all those years ago with Lisa. Just not the one you thought."

Vincent tensed "What?"

Catherine spread her arms to him. "You picked the wrong woman. Reach for me, Vincent. Hold me as long as you want, because I don't ever want you to let me go."

After a startled pause, he did just that, sweeping her into a warm embrace and feeling her arms twine about him to hold him close with all her strength. And this time, the tears they shed were for joy.

END