

The Moon Child

by B. Jaye

(from CRYSTAL CAVERN TWELVE)

He looked around the hall, at the rows of people who occupied the practical tables and rigid plastic chairs that scraped the bare floorboards when they were moved.

It was almost five years since he had first arrived in the parish, young and eager, full of ideas and confidence. Now, the plain discoloured walls needed more than just a good coat of paint. The window frames had deteriorated still further, though the glass panels sparkled as always from their regular weekly wash. The roof, this had a tendency to leak in several places, as if it had endured a thunderstorm for too long, or if the snowfall had been particularly heavy.

But for all its faults, it was a place that offered a temporary shelter from a world that seemed cold and harsh towards those who had faltered, many through no fault of their own, in the struggle to belong.

It felt good, as always, to hear the hum of conversation, sometimes with raised voices. The clatter of plates and cutlery, the slurping sounds. In an ideal world, no human being would live as they did. However, as long as there are people like himself to make their life seem a little less severe for a few hours, to show that there were still people who cared, who had not forgotten them, then there was a kind of hope.

For that was the killer and the thing which cut the deepest. The look in their eyes, that lifeless, despairing look. And yet, there had been one who had taken him completely by surprise. One who had boosted his faith.

The very thought of her made him smile and he immediately scanned the hall again. He found her despite the throng, sitting as usual at the corner of a table - alert. As though at the first hint of danger she would be ready to react.

When the Duchess had first brought her to him, he had thought that she was just like the others, though more fortunate because the street wise woman had found her. A young woman whose hair was beginning to mat, the long weather-worn coat that had seen better days but which, no doubt, still provided ample warmth, gave no hint that she was different. But when she lifted her head and had looked at him for the first time, he had seen her eyes. Those beautiful grey/green eyes that shone with life, with hope. With an intelligence and a certainty that she was not one of them. Not an air of superiority or conceit, just the knowledge that she did not belong with them.

More and more of late he had found himself thinking of her, had begun to entertain the idea of trying to find her family, her friends. He could not, would not believe, that she was alone in the world, that no one was worried or concerned about her. The god in whom he believed often appeared to allow things that seemed beyond understanding, but he was not a cruel god, of that he was certain.

Only later, much later, would he come to realize just how much he cared about her. That in his own way, he had come to love her, unaware that he was just like some others from her past whose lives she had touched.

Automatically, he nodded and smiled; though with genuine concern, as the last of the regulars who shuffled their way along the counter with the trays that bore their meagre but hot, and surprisingly filling meal. Having seen her, he found that he could no longer resist the urge to go to her. Not that he

tried.

He attempted to be nonchalant, stopping to talk briefly with those he knew well or with those that he had not seen before. But all the while advancing towards her, glancing across in her direction to make sure that she was still there.

She had sensed him searching for her earlier, finding her. Even though she was in the wrong position, she had seen him approaching. She liked him, but wondered sometimes at the way in which he looked at her. But some of the men who smiled and gave her money when she had accompanied the woman known as the *Duchess* onto the streets, to beg a few dollars for some coffee, fruit or doughnuts. Perhaps it was because she was younger and did not look so world-weary or dirty, especially after she had managed to wash.

She thought then of the one she called the *Duchess*. The woman who had found her that night and had taken her to shelter; had named her *Moon-Child*, when those who inhabited the space around the box she called *home* had inquired about the stranger brought into their territory. It was then that the old woman had rifled through her belongings, and found the weather-worn coat that had surprised her with its warmth. It hid the clothes that she wore and made her look like one of them. She had not realized just how hungry she must have been, until she had devoured the apple the old woman had given to her, leaving nothing but the stalk.

In the time that followed, the Duchess had taught her how to survive by showing her where to find good food. The hall that offered a hot meal that was filling and could stay hunger for days, if necessary. A safe place to rest, except that she had found her own. A place where she could rest when it was daylight, as thousands of people went about their daily business. During the hours of light, there was too much noise, too many people, no time to enjoy, everything was too rushed.

But the night, the night was different. The sights and sounds, the lights, the very smell and feel of it; safe, magical. She loved the night and especially the park and the place where she could listen to the music. She remembered the night that it had rained. People ran, but she had remained and the orchestra had played on. How she had laughed, remembered suddenly that other time with him. She did not recall how she had come to stand in the shadows near the drainage tunnel, but she knew that somehow it was because she had thought again of *him*. That feeling deep within her that stirred whenever she brought him to mind. Saw that strange, magnificent face, those deep-set eyes smiling at her. She had wanted to enter the tunnel but did not dare. There was a danger, not to herself or from what she might find inside, but a danger nevertheless. And so, whenever she found herself in that place, she would simply smile and give an imperceptible nod of acknowledgement.

That night of the rain, she had almost raced back to wish the old woman goodnight, savouring the smell of the wet grass, laughing at the squelching sound of her feet, invigorated and although she was soaked through, she was happy. The Duchess, on the other hand, was not in such good spirits. In fact, she found that the old woman seemed cold to her touch.

"Child, what are you doing?" she inquired at the prying hands that roused her. "Yes, I got me a little wet, but I'm fine. Don't you fuss now. You look at you, soaked through!" she observed now wide-awake.

"Um," was the reply, as she pulled the old woman from the box with both her hands and tried to get the old woman to stand.

"Now, Moon-Child, you let me be!"

"Um!" she insisted.

A few bundles nearby stirred, mumbling and became still again. The old woman sighed, touched by the concern. Standing, she had to admit that she did feel quite weak, colder than she could remember ever feeling in all the years that she has spent out there. In a world most people pretended did not exist or tried to ignore. The young woman took her full weight against her and slowly the two figures

began their walk.

"Where we going child?" the old woman asked.

The young woman just looked up at her as the old woman smiled and brushed the hair from the side of the young woman's face. The old woman wondered again, as she looked at the scar at the front of her left ear and then found herself thinking of a little girl that had been taken away from her one tragic summer. A young girl barely ten years old who had loved to have her hair brushed until it shone. A young girl not unlike the Moon-Child when she smiled. Again, she wondered who this young woman might be. The one who had no name or speech. The one whom she would not have seen that night had it not been for the moon shining down on her like a street light. The young woman had not trusted her at first, but who after a few minutes had reached out for the hand she had offered to her. She had named her *Moon-Child*, without thought, as a way of explanation to Frankie and the others that had asked about her. Especiall as she was not one of them, clearly did not belong. But the long weather worn coat had soon found that.

"Where are we, child?" she asked looking up at the door they had reached.

The Moon-Child gave no answer except to bang loudly at the door, whilst still managing to support the old woman who now began to visibly shiver.

"There's no one home, child."

But the young woman persisted with her knocking and was soon rewarded with lights clearly being turned on inside.

"Who is it?" called the voice from inside.

"Oh, child, you shouldn't have," said the old lady, recognizing the voice.

They heard the various knobs and locks being released before the door swung open.

"Dear Lord! Come in, come in!" he ushered. "Marie, Marie!" he called as he helped to guide them through to his front room.

An elderly woman irately marched into the room, but immediately gave help acknowledging that a genuine emergency had roused her from a pleasant sleep and warm bed.

"What shall I do first, Father?" He smiled at the query.

"A hot bath I think and then see to the spare room and some extra blankets. Oh and some clothes too," he said at the housekeeper's look of disgust at the way in which the woman was dressed.

"That charity bag is still in the spare room, isn't it?"

"Yes, Father."

"Good, that will be fine, Marie. Thank you."

"Right then," she said, leaving the room to fulfill the tasks that she had been given.

"Moon-Child, will you help the Duchess to get out of those wet things? I'll get the fire started." She began the task without hesitation.

"Father, I really don't know why all the fuss," said the Duchess. "A little wet is all I am. So too is the child. If you have concern, it should be for her."

"We will see to her presently, but you first!" he replied turning to them as the fire roared into life.

The Moon-Child glanced into the firelight, the glow casting strange shadows across her features. She returned to the job at hand when she felt his eyes on her.

"Bath's ready!" called Marie standing in the doorway.

"Good. Help me to get her upstairs please Marie. I'll be back soon Moon-Child," he said over his

shoulder. "And try not to worry, we'll take good care of her."

The Moon-Child stood uncertain, then looked around and began to relax. Flashes of other such rooms went through her mind. A log cracked, startling her. Having realized that there was no danger, she once more became mesmerized by the flames, sat down on the floor and became lost.

He thought that she had left and felt a slight panic beginning to rise within him, but stepping back into the room he saw her. He thought to watch her, but those instincts that she possessed would not allow it. All in one graceful movement she was up, and ready to attack if necessary.

"I'm sorry Moon-Child, I didn't mean to frighten you," he apologized. "The Duchess is safely tucked up in bed. Maris is with her. I'll fix her something hot in a little while, but in the meantime, you have a hot bath waiting for you," he smiled. "Come on, we don't want you catching cold."

Cautiously she followed him up the stairway, looking around her as they went. Assured that it was not a trap, she once again relaxed.

"Well, this is it, will you be all right, or shall I call for Marie? No? okay, well, er I'll leave you to it then. When you're done, come on back down to the front room okay? I'll have something hot for you. Well ... enjoy!" he said backing out of the warm room leaving the door ajar.

He stood outside listening, but heard nothing. He realized that the Moon-Child knew that he waited. He shook his head, smiled, and then made his way down the corridor to check on their other guest.

She looked at the steamed-up mirror and then slowly removed her gloves. She looked at her hands which, like the rest of her, had not really been made part of the street. She then set about undoing the buttons of the coat that had covered up the clothes that had set her apart from the others. She removed the leather jacket, sweater, jeans, boots and finally her socks and laid them on the long chair. She tested the water and removed her underwear. With a swift glance over her shoulder at the door she stepped into the steaming water, sliding down until the liquid lapped gently at her shoulders. The splashes were slight as she moved her legs and her hands through the water, savouring the feel, the soothing sensation. Without realizing it, she drifted further than she ever had whilst still awake. Lost in a world of images that mentally she did not recognize, but which emotionally made her smile. Despite her drowsy state, her instincts were still active and registered the approaching footsteps despite their silent tread. She waited for the figure to appear, gripping the sides of the bath ready to spring into action.

"Don't mind me. Just came to take care of ... your clothes," Marie stammered at the unexpected bundle on the chair. "These your clothes?" she queried in disbelief.

The Moon-Child shook her head. It made no difference to her.

"Always thought that I should have been a hairdresser," she smiled. "Now, you stay in there as long as you like. I'll be back soon."

She stopped at the door, adjusted the pile of clothing and turned back to the figure in the tub.

"Don't you worry about the Duchess child, she'll be fine," she assured and was gone.

This time the Moon-Child did not follow the sound of the footsteps, but simply closed her eyes and drifted once more.

It seemed ages before the old woman with the greying hair and heavy dressing gown returned to the bathroom. Marie watched the Moon-Child as she washed, helped her to wash her back, talking incessantly as she did so. It was obvious that Marie liked people. She held the gown as the young woman stepped reluctantly out of the tub, asked her to sit down and began to dry her hair.

The Moon-Child frowned as she made her way back down the stairs, wondering at the expression on the old woman's face as she sent her on her way. The room was empty but the fire was inviting, and she made her way over to it. More relaxed than she had ever felt, and making herself comfortable on

the floor, after a few minutes she looked around the room once more. To her right a cabinet filled with little ornaments and a step down to some folding doors. To her left under the window stood a table and four chairs. The mantelpiece held a clock and china animals stood either side of it. And just behind her within arms reach of the coffee table and precariously stacked were books! She smiled as she leaned forward to reach *Robert Ludlum, James Herbert, Barbara Hambly*. But the one that she reached for sent a wave of excitement coursing through her. Automatically she turned the pages until she found the bold title; *XXIX*. She held the book like a rediscovered treasure and made herself even more comfortable. The firelight danced in her eyes, the glow shone on her face as she heard his mellifluous voice whisper in her ear.

When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes

I all alone bewep my outcast state....

The sensation was sudden as she realized that she was no longer alone. She shut the book and put it swiftly to one side, as though to protect it, not daring to look up. As though she had been caught doing something that was forbidden. The tray was safely placed down on the coffee table.

"I'm sorry Moon-Child. I didn't mean to startle you," he apologized to her again, as he sat down on the sofa. "I thought that you might like some chicken and some freshly-ground coffee." The smile seemed to freeze on his lips, as she looked up at him for the first time. He could not help the look of amazement as he stared at her, wide-eyed, his lips slightly parted.

The Moon-Child frowned; her head tilted slightly allowing her hair cascade over her left eye. For him it simply completed the effect.

"I'm sorry Moon-Child," he stammered. "I....er...." He forced himself to look away to regain his composure.

When he looked up once more, nothing had changed. She still looked at him with a frown completely unaware of the reason why he stared at her. He smiled as she gazed down at her gown, as though she may have forgotten something or had not tied it correctly.

"Forgive me," he finally said, sensing that she was becoming uncomfortable. "It was very rude of me to stare at you, I know but.... you are just so beautiful," he stated with a shrug.

It did not remove the frown from her face, but made her place her hand against herself in question.

"Yes, you are," he beamed. "Even Marie thinks so."

Now she understood the old woman's look when she had left the bathroom. She smiled in return, lowering her head and allowing her hair to fall forward as she reacted to the compliment. When she raised her eyes to him, he saw that she was blushing. He laughed, softly, warmly. She relaxed once more. He handed her a plate with a few pieces of chicken on it and she edged closer to the table. Having poured two cups of coffee, he eased back into the sofa taking a sip from his cup as he did so.

"So, do you enjoy reading?" he asked. "That's what books are for, Moon-Child. To be enjoyed, to discover new worlds, knowledge," he shrugged. "Do you have a favourite?" he asked, nodding at the book that she had taken.

The question immediately brought *him* to mind as she heard the hypnotic voice, the words that held meaning for the two of them.

"I suppose that if you asked me to name my favourite. I would have to say...." He faltered as she followed her gaze to the doorway.

"I'm sorry, Father, but would you please come with me?"

"What is it, Marie?" he asked, putting down his cup and going over to join the anxious woman who had appeared so suddenly in the doorway. "I won't been long, Moon-Child. No, you stay, finish off your chicken." He smiled and then left the room, following Marie.

He did not appear to be upstairs very long, as the Moon-Child soon heard him on the telephone and as soon as he had replaced the receiver, he joined her on the floor. He took her hands within his; not realizing that he gently ran his thumbs across the backs of her hands. Hands that had remained soft and smooth. There was no easy way to tell her.

"The Duchess is quite ill, Moon-Child. I've had to call for an ambulance. It should be here soon. We will have to go to the hospital with her, so I've asked Marie to look out some clothes for you now. Don't worry, the Duchess will be all right, I promise." He tried to encourage, at the same time feeling a strong desire to kiss her.

But her eyes had a power over him; it held him fast. Not wanting to break the warmth that briefly passed between them. However, it was her reaction to Marie's presence that broke the spell, and he found himself almost angry at the intrusion.

"These should fit you," said Marie without realizing her arrival had interrupted a special moment. "What you need is some fattening up, my girl. That's the trouble with all you youngsters, so skinny! Always on a diet," she continued, completely forgetting where the Moon-Child might exist.

Father Ryan shook his head, unable to remain angry, as his housekeeper treated the young woman as someone who had arrived for a fitting of new clothes. The Moon-Child smiled despite the situation.

"Well, I'll be upstairs," stated the priest, although he could not resist stopping in the doorway for one last look, but the woman took no visible notice of his presence, as they measured the simple attired against the young woman.

It did not take her long to don the new underwear, the brushed cotton blouse, plain denim skirt and an oversized cardigan. Marie had returned her boots but they did not suit her new clothes.

"If you're wondering about your own clothes," the old woman volunteered, "Your jacket and that ... that coat are in the hall closet. That other stuff's drying out ready for the wash tomorrow. Not bad," she commented. "Well, you just holler if you need anything, and try not to worry, child. Paramedics will be here in not time. Why don't you finish eating," she advised, patting the back of Moon-Child's hand and then left her alone in the room once more.

Moon-Child glanced at the chicken, but knew that she would not eat it until much later. Instead, she retrieved the book from underneath the table and curling up on the sofa, she began to flick through the pages, trying to decide which one might be the priest's favourite. As she raised the cup of coffee to her lips, she became aware of a distant sound that sent a shiver down her spine. She set the book and cup down on the table as she edged forward on the sofa, listening to the wailing siren that seemed to grow louder with each passing second. She jumped up looking around for another way of escape, apart from the open doorway, when she realized that the flashing lights had stopped right outside the window. A sound of fear escaped from her lips, her pulse was racing, as she became aware that someone was running down the stairs. Slowly, she backed away towards the wall, her vision focused on the open doorway.

He reached the front door just as the first few knocks had been made and automatically glanced over his shoulder. Failing to see her, his priorities divided. With some effort, he opened the door to the two people in uniform with their equipment and a stretcher.

"Father Ryan?" queried the woman.

He nodded, wanting to direct them so that he could make sure that Moon-Child was safe.

"You'll find her upstairs," he advised. "Marie!" he called. "I'll join you as soon as I can. There's something that I need to take care of first."

They followed his line of vision into the room to the wall, against which stood a very frightened looking young woman. The male paramedic was about to comment, when an elderly woman appeared at the top of the stairs and called for their attention.

"Up this way, hurry!" she beckoned.

"You got it?" asked the female paramedic, as she began to back up the stairs with the stretcher.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Father, you need a hand?"

It was no good. His attention was focused completely on the terrified figure standing rigidly against the wall by the fireplace.

"Moon-Child? Moon-Child, what is it? There's nothing to be afraid of," he stated quietly, slowly making his way towards her.

As he stood within hearing of anything that she might say without raising her voice, he thought that he heard a low guttural sound, something that could almost be said to resemble a *growl!*

The sound had grown louder and now there was no mistake. It was as if an animal had been cornered. Her lips were beginning to draw back, revealing her teeth. Her arms moved, her fingers curled to resemble the striking action of claws. But it was the expression in her eyes that sent a shiver coursing through him.

"It's all right, Moon-Child. I'm not going to hurt you," he tried to soothe, raising his hands very slowly to indicate calm. "No one's trying to hurt you. I wouldn't let them!" he stated, as he looked around the room trying to see what might have caused this change in her. There was nothing that he could see. The only thing that had happened since he had left her was...

"The paramedics?" he whispered to himself with a frown. "Moon-Child, you know that you can trust me. You know that, or you would not have brought the Duchess to me," he stated. "Come on, come and sit here," he quietly requested, indicating the sofa but not taking his eyes off her.

Slowly, she relaxed and accepted his outstretched hand. He smiled, relieved, as she closed her hand over his. For a moment, her beauty once again held him captive, the freshness and scent of her recent bath, the inner glow that seemed to permeate her being. He could not resist the urge to run his hand down the side of her hair, feel its silky strands flow through his fingers and finally to rest his hand lightly on her shoulder.

He was rewarded with a smile that warmed his heart. Suddenly, he felt her tense once again and followed her stare over his shoulder. He heard the voices guiding each other down the stairs and found his priorities divided yet again.

"Don't be afraid. Please don't be afraid," he begged and was puzzled by her enigmatic smile.

He could not know that she heard another voice trying to give her courage.

Father Ryan made his way to the doorway just as the paramedics began to make their way to the front door. In all the years that he had known her, the woman now strapped to the stretcher with a drip in her arm, a mask over her mouth that led to the small bottle of oxygen, had never looked so old or so frail.

"We'll radio ahead," the paramedic advised. "They would probably feel a whole lot better if you were there, Father. Red tape, you know how it is," she shrugged.

He nodded his understanding but stood uncertain, knowing his duty but still reluctant to leave her.

"Marie, would you stay with Moon-Child? Try not to leave her alone for too long. And make sure that you both get some rest. This looks as if it's gonna be a long night."

"Morning, don't you mean, Father?"

"Morning," he smiled, glancing at his watch dial that read 1:15am.

"Father!" the paramedic called from the inside of the ambulance.

"Just give me a second, will you!" he requested through the open front door, then returned to where

she stood waiting.

"I've got to go, but I'll be back as soon as I can. You have nothing to fear, Moon-Child. And when I get back, we'll talk, okay?"

She smiled almost sadly and without warning threw her arms around his neck and squeezed. It was a gesture that bothered him throughout the journey to the hospital.

As she heard the mantle clock chime 2:00 am, a feeling of sadness washed over her and she knew that there was no longer an reason for her to stay. The Duchess would no longer struggle to survive because she was free. Moon-Child glanced over at the sleeping figure of the housekeeper and tucked the blanket gently behind the old woman's back. She then made her way through to the kitchen and on into the small room to the far left that contained the washing machine. Her clothes were warm, but still damp in a few patches. She kept on the new underwear but changed back into the clothes in which she arrived. She found her leather jacket hanging neatly in the hall closet but the coat had been left in a bundle on the closet floor. Dressed once more for the streets, she checked on the elderly woman who had drifted into a peaceful sleep, soon after they had enjoyed a cup of freshly-brewed coffee. One final look around the hall, up the stairs, and she let herself out.

The brisk early morning air hit her immediately. She inhaled deeply, the fresh smell after the rain still apparent. She hugged herself and glanced skywards, knowing that there was only one place to be at such a time.

Overwhelmed by an excitement that she could not remember feeling before, her heart pounding, her pulses racing, she strode without hesitation to the drainage tunnel. She had just reached the solid concrete floor when several voices made her turn away from the dark entrance that beckoned. She raced back up the embankment and hid amongst the bushes. She watched unseen as a gang of six young men drew nearer, two playfully hitting one another, one flicking a menacing steel blade as the other joked about another successful hunt.

When she knew it was safe, she stood up, looked around the park and briefly hesitated about the direction that she should take. The excitement that she had felt earlier was no longer prevalent, though still present. Suddenly she realized what the feelings of danger surrounding the tunnel meant. It was the risk of being seen entering the opening. The danger to *him*, discovered by people who would not understand, would fear him, condemn him without giving themselves a chance to know the beauty within that made him so special.

The thought of him at that moment made her feel as though she basked in the warmth of the sun.

Once more she looked up at the sky, and knew that by the time she reached the wooden shack on the roof of the condemned building that she called home, the sun would have summoned the working to begin a new day.

"Father! Father!"

The name made her search for the limping, authoritative figure. A man who still viewed her with caution, wary of her relationship with *him*.

"Vincent!" his name suddenly rang through her and she revelled in the feeling.

"You finish?"

She felt her sleeve being tugged, and she turned to see the stained tooth grin of the man known as Frankie. A man who seemed to bear her no grudge, despite the three marks that she had inflicted on him the night that he tried to kiss her. She had allowed his arms around her shoulders, the comfort he tried to give to her when she had returned briefly after news of the Duchess' death had reached the old lady's friends. It had happened before she had realized what she had done. A growl, a swift strike down the left side of his face that drew blood. He had risen shocked and hurt, holding his cheek. She had disappeared almost immediately. She was sorry that she had wounded him, but he had no right to try and touch her in that way. She had thought to find consolation in the park, but felt only sadness.

"You finish, Moon-Child?" he asked again.

She nodded at him with a smile and he eagerly took her plate. Silently, she acknowledged how right the Duchess had been. The old lady had told her that after a while, she would no longer notice the stench of unwashed bodies or clothes that betrayed the most deprived areas of the city.

"Father!"

She reacted once again to the name but suddenly wondered why he would come Above.

Above? she frowned as memories tried to make themselves known to her. The sound of clanging metal, of candlelight, leather, warmth and safety. She smiled her reaction in such a manner, scanning the hall for someone.

"Hello, Moon-Child," he smiled.

The street had started to reclaim her appearance, but he knew that never again would he see her as anything but beautiful. The memory of the brief time that she had spent with him that night, the way that she had looked and smelt after her bath was too vivid to forget.

"I've missed you, Moon-Child. I was worried about you especially when I didn't see you at the service that was held for the Duch....?"

She made him understand with her gestures and sounds that he was mistaken.

"... You were there? But I didn't see...." She nodded and smiled knowingly.

"Moon-Child, you remember the night that you brought the Duchess to me? How I had hoped that we would have a chance to talk when I got back from the hospital? I wish that you had waited for me. I wanted to tell you that I had decided to help you find your family, your friends. I want to do this for you, Moon-Child!"

She smiled, inwardly grateful for his concern, but not even he could help her. For she now knew that her family was a secret. A secret that she could not share, had not shared even with her own father until it was too late.

"Father!" He turned automatically and once again felt annoyance at the interruption. "Father!"

"I'll have to go, but we'll talk later, Moon-Child. I promise. Moon-Child?"

She simply smiled once more and knew as he suspected that it was a meeting that would not happen. He joined his colleague and suddenly feeling a chill, he turned in time to see her vanish through the open doors of the hall.

"Father, are you all right? Father?"

"Fine. I'll be fine," he replied.

He shuffled along the familiar passageway hoping that his journey would prove successful, that his son would talk about it. Perhaps he would be wrong, but he doubted that very much. He had seen that look too often not to recognize it, and her death had only increased the anguish that that look could cause him. He stopped as he neared the entrance, took a few deep breaths to quell his concern, and then strode on into his son's room with his usual authority.

"Ah, good. I was hoping that I would find you in here, and alone too!" he said almost conspiratorially.

Vincent smiled in his odd fashion, which made the gesture even more endearing, knowing how difficult such a simple expression was for him.

"Yes. Mary thought that it was time Jacob met some people his own age."

"Oh, of course," replied the older man trying to look serious.

They both laughed and the atmosphere between them seemed lighter than it had for days. However, the old man could not keep silent, or keep up the pretense. And rather did he wish to try as it pained him too much to watch his adopted son suffer.

"Tell me Vincent, please?" He begged.

He knew when his son lowered his head and looked at his fur-backed hands that whatever troubled him ran deep. He heard a heavy sigh escape from his lips, before he heard the one word that had always filled him with apprehension.

"Catherine."

It was a name more than any other, perhaps more than even Paracelsus that he came to fear, especially when spoken by his extraordinary son. Now that it was spoken, he felt that he should have realized what had been troubling Vincent and talked with him sooner.

"I understand, Vincent," he sympathized. "I know how it feels to lose the woman you love. But you know, no one is ever truly lost as long as there is someone to remember them. And there are so many people whose lives she has touched, Vincent. Catherine will never be forgotten."

"I know that, Father."

"And most of all, Vincent, you have Jacob," he encouraged. "Your beautiful little boy. He will have so many questions about his mother as he gets older, that will make you remember those very special times that you shared with her."

"Sometimes words are not enough," he stated quietly.

"But they can be, Vincent, when they are all that you have."

"Not if Catherine is alive."

That reply filled the older man with trepidation. He took his son's hands within his own and kissed them, trying to somehow take away his pain. As a parent would try to soothe a young child who had been physically injured.

"Yes, yes, she is alive, Vincent," he agreed. "Catherine lives on in you and in Jacob."

"No, Father. As alive as you or I."

"Vincent..."

"I have a sense of her."

"You have a sense of her?" he questioned. "You mean like, before?"

"Yes," he breathed. "I can feel our connection, the Bond that we shared."

Father deliberated a few seconds. Tried to reason it through and when he spoke he chose his words with great care.

"Perhaps you sense Jacob?" he suggested.

"No!" he protested. **"It is Catherine!"** he insisted standing. "Our Bond was like nothing that I had ever felt, have felt since," he said calming down. "Now I have a sense of it again."

Father struggled with himself. What could he say or do? It was impossible, but then so was the extraordinary love that had existed between his son and the woman from Above. A love that he had refused to acknowledge. A love that had finally made his son believe, made him believe that whatever else Vincent might be, he was a man. Jacob was the living proof of that. Could that love possibly have conquered even death? Maybe somehow Catherine was reaching out to Vincent from beyond the grave?

Perhaps if Vincent told him why he felt that Catherine was alive, he would be able to rationalize what Vincent was actually feeling.

"Can you tell me, Vincent? Tell me what it is you sense?" Vincent sat down once more, his eyes closed briefly, his head back.

"There have been moments when I would briefly feel her presence but it would not last. I convinced myself that it was merely daydreaming, of wanting her," he admitted.

"Why is now so different?"

"It was a week ago..." He hesitated, recalling the moment to savour once more the joy that he never thought to feel again. "The music, Father... I could feel the music as I always did whenever Catherine and I would listen to the orchestra in the park. It was raining and I could feel her laughter, her smile."

"A memory then."

"No. It was more than that. I wanted to go Above. I have not felt that way since... I was overwhelmed by the thought of seeing her again. The excitement of holding her, feeling her heart beating against mine. I went up to the drainage tunnel to meet her."

"And did you see her?" Father heard himself ask before he could stop the question.

"No," he sighed. "There were only some young men walking through the park."

"Did they **see** you?" he asked with some alarm.

"I am here, Father," was the simple reply.

"... And Catherine?" he asked with some caution.

Vincent did not reply but instead he lowered his head. Speaking out loud to Father how he had been feeling, made it seem unreal. Made him doubt what he had been feeling. Had he just imagined it as Father had said? Did he miss her so badly that he wanted to believe that the impossible was real?

"It hurts, Father. It hurts!" he sobbed.

His tie was hanging loosely around his neck, the top button of his shirt undone, as he played the elastic band over his fingers. He was rocking backwards and forwards in his chair, as he tried unsuccessfully to dismiss the incident from his mind. Suddenly, he sat upright realizing that it was no good. He needed to talk to someone, even if they told him what he already knew that he was crazy.

When he arrived at the gallery, she was deep in conversation with someone whom he assumed was a potential client. He wanted to interrupt but managed to exercise patience. As soon as she realized that someone else had entered the gallery, she glanced over in his direction and found herself smiling. With apologies to her client, she made her way over to him.

"Well, hello stranger," she greeted with a kiss. "Where you been hiding?"

"Oh... you know," he answered with a shrug.

"So... this a business call?" she teased though her expression was serious.

"A *business* call?" he questioned. "Well yes, if you got something under 50 bucks."

"I'll see what I can do," she replied, smiling once more.

As he found himself returning her smile, feeling at ease, he knew that he had made the right decision to seek her out.

"Can you hang on for five?" she asked, holding up five fingers and backing away from him towards her client.

"Sure. You go do whatever you have to." She was as good as her word and they were soon leaving the gallery arm in arm.

"So, where shall we go?" she asked.

"Somewhere quiet. I need to talk without interruptions."

"*Oh*, this sounds serious," she teased again. "You *are* serious," she remarked as she saw the solemn expression on his face. "We ... could go to my place?" she suggested. "Pick up something from the deli first?"

"Sounds perfect," was his subdued reply, as he was reminded why he had sought her company in the first place. Jenny waited patiently, as she watched him down his first cup of coffee and half the Danish before she ventured to question the reason for their unexpected meeting.

"So, what's this all about, Joe? Why'd you need to see me?" He took another gulp of coffee before he answered. He got up from the sofa that he had shared with her and stood with his back to her.

"Cathy," was the whispered reply.

"Sorry, Joe. What did ..."

"Cathy," he repeated, turning around to face a puzzled expression.

"Cathy?" she queried.

"Yeah. I know this is going to sound crazy Jen, but I *saw* her!"

"You *saw* Cathy?" she drawled.

"Yeah. Crazy or what?"

"I'm sorry, Joe. But what Cathy are you talking about?" she asked with a shrug.

"What Cath...?" he repeated. "Chandler. Catherine Chandler, that's who," he stated, amazed that Jenny could have forgotten so quickly.

"Cathy?" she questioned. "No, Joe. That's crazy."

"See?"

"But what did you mean, you *saw her*?" she asked, a frown creasing her brow as she tried to understand.

"Just like I said," he replied, sitting down on the coffee table within arms reach of her. "I *saw* Cathy." he stated.

"But how? Where?"

"Be about a week now, I guess. I was on my way to the office. Car was in the shop, so I took a cab. Gave me a chance to check over some papers. Anyway, we were stopped at some lights. I happened

to look up and...." He found his heart starting to pound as he relived the moment. "There she was walking right by me. As close as you are now, Jen, I swear. We were already moving by the time I realized.... anyhow I got the cab to pull over and ran back, she'd gone down some alleyway. I'd just got to the entrance and called out to her but she kept on walking. I called again as I ran to catch her up and suddenly she turned and.... it was her." He said in awe as he recalled the moment. "It was her smile, her eyes looking right at me. It was Radcliffe," he stated with a certainty that he had not felt before. "I'd know her anywhere."

Silence descended for a few minutes as the two friends tried to make sense of the incident.

"Impossible, right?" Jenny did not give him an answer.

"Jen? It couldn't have been Radcliffe, right?" And still silence greeted him as Jenny got up and walked away from him.

"C'mon Jen, talk to me!" he demanded. "Tell me I'm going nuts!"

"But what if you're *not* crazy, Joe?" she quietly ventured, turning to face him. "What if by some miracle you really did see Cathy that day?" Suddenly logic took over as the DA questioned Jenny.

"Oh, c'mon, Jen. You know that's crazy. We all saw her buried, remember?"

"We all saw a coffin being buried, Joe," she stated.

"Now, wait a minute....!" he cautioned, getting up. "What are you saying?"

"Just that no one saw her in the coffin. It was a closed casket, remember?"

"Yeah, but.... No. **No!** Look, I saw her body. At her apartment that night."

"You were told that Cathy was dead. You didn't have any reason to question it then."

"That's right. And I still don't." He tried to protest but suddenly he was not so sure.

"Okay. Okay. Suppose.... just suppose, that it was Radcliffe I saw. How come she didn't answer me when I called? And why'd she disappear like that?"

"You say that you recognized her?"

"Yes?" he answered cautiously.

"Well, supposing that Cathy didn't recognize you, Joe. I mean, how did she seem when you saw her?" He thought about the moment again and all of a sudden it did not seem to make sense.

"What? What is it, Joe?"

"Well.... the way she looked. She was.... well, she looked like one of them street people. I mean, she had on some dirty old coat, her hair was... Nah, it wasn't Cathy," he reasoned.

"But supposing you're right, Joe. Suppose, just suppose that Cathy didn't die. That they found out that she was still alive and then, for whatever reason, they kept that a secret. To protect her maybe. And what if Cathy got away somehow but she's not well. Maybe she didn't realize who you were, Joe. People don't choose to live on the streets, they just find themselves there, for all kinds of reasons; because they don't know who they are, where they belong ... Cathy could just be lost and not know how to come home."

He started to protest but then found that he could not. What Jenny had said made a kind of sense.

"What we need to do is find her," said Jenny, almost reading his thoughts. "That way we prove or disprove that it really was Cathy."

"And how do you propose we do that?"

"We go look for her around where you saw her," she shrugged. "If Cathy disappeared like you said, then it must mean she knows the place well. And maybe there's even someone out there on the

street that actually knows this woman, or at least where we can find her."

"All right," he nodded in agreement. "And right, we'll do it," he continued with more enthusiasm.

"Now, Joe," she said quietly. "It has to be now."

"Okay. Gimme a minute to call the office....."

They were soon back at the place where Joe thought he had seen a ghost. Cautiously they made their way down the alleyway, but despite his efforts, the condemned building would not give up its way in. He shrugged, but his frustration was obvious.

"Well, I guess that leaves Plan B," she smiled weakly. Joe joined her, wiping his hands together to try to get rid of the grime. It did not bode well and his solemn mood returned. They had been walking around for an hour, when they came across an open patch of ground that held several structures of cardboard and other discarded material that somehow resembled a place to find shelter. Several adults were huddled together as though deep in conversation. The one nearest to them, despite his matted hair, bore three marks down the side of his cheek. Joe was disgusted at the scene for many reasons. How a family, friends, society could allow people to become so lost. Jenny approached the adults with some caution.

"Hi," she smiled genuinely. "I was wondering if you could help me? I'm looking for this woman but I'm not the police or anything like that. I'm her friend and I've lost her. Can you help me? Have you seen her?" she asked showing them a copy of the last photograph that had been taken of her and Catherine together.

The man with the scars took the print, looked at it, then up at Jenny and passed it to the other four people with him. They looked at the picture, at the woman in their midst and then at Frankie. Silently they handed the photograph back to him and he in turn gave it back to Jenny.

"Thanks. Thanks anyway," she said sadly. As she put the photograph back into her purse she pulled out three folded bills and handed them to Frankie.

"Thanks," she smiled sadly as Joe put his arm around her shoulders and began to lead her away, regretting that he had ever mentioned the incident to her.

"Moon-Child." Jenn stopped in her tracks and Joe turned with her.

"That be Moon-Child," he stated.

"Moon-Child?" asked Joe, puzzled.

"Moon-Child," he stated again. "Duchess found her."

"Who's the Duchess?" asked Joe.

"Where can we find her?" asked Jenny, sensing that Joe's patience was running out.

"Can't. Dead."

"Moon-Child?" asked Jenny, panic beginning.

"No! Duchess," stated Frankie.

"Where, where can we find the... Moon-Child?" she asked, relieved.

"Can't."

"Now look, pal."

"Joe!" Jenny admonished. "Please! Please, does anyone know where we can find the Moon-Child?"

"Father. He'd know," said Frankie.

To Joe it seemed to take forever, but finally they had an address and the name of a man who would make sense. Someone that could be trusted. As they were about to leave, Jenny dared to lean over to the scarred cheek and kissed it.

"Thank you," she smiled, tears forming in her eyes.

Frankie slowly raised a shaking hand to the moist spot amongst the welts. A look of awe on his face, revealing stained teeth as he looked up at the smartly-dressed young woman who had dared to touch him. It was too many years to recall when someone had shown him anything other than total contempt. When someone had seen a person and not a something to be ignored.

They had gone to the hall but found that the man they sought had already returned home. Almost three hours later after they had first begun their quest, they finally arrived.

"Father Ryan?" asked Joe.

"Yes, I'm Father Ryan. What can I do for you?"

"Please Father, may we come in?" asked Jenny. He thought for a moment and then allowed them into his home, guiding them into the front room.

"Please sit down," he gestured.

"Thanks," replied Joe as he and Jenny made themselves comfortable.

"Now then, how may I help you, Mr....?"

"Joe. Joe Maxwell. And this is Miss Aronson.

"Well, Mr. Maxwell, Miss Aronson, as I said, how can I help you?"

"Do you know her?" asked Jenny as with trembling hands she handed the photograph to him. Her heart was beginning to pound with anticipation. Something seemed to tell her that the journey had not been in vain.

There was no need to ask, as his smile told them what they had believed only a short while ago to be impossible.

"Moon-Child. Or at least that's what everyone calls her," he explained. "What is her name?" he asked quietly, still looking at the photograph and remembering the night that he had seen her after her bath.

"Oh my God," exclaimed Jenny, as tears suddenly clouded her vision.

"It's Cathy. Catherine Chandler," answered Joe with tears beginning to course down his cheeks.

"I knew it," smiled Father Ryan. "I knew that someone had to be looking for her." He was immediately made aware that his visitors were overwhelmed by the simple news that someone had seen her.

"Oh I'm sorry. Please, please let me get you something. Marie! Marie!" he called, going to the doorway of the room to be met seconds later by his housekeeper.

"Yes Father, what is it?" she asked, just managing a glimpse of two people behind him.

"Marie, some tea please."

"Is... everything all right, Father?" she asked with some concern.

"Yes, everything is just fine. They've come for the Moon-Child," he explained, showing her the photograph that somehow he still possessed. The old woman smiled as she recognized the woman in the photograph, as the one who had taken a bath on the night that the Duchess had died.

"I... could get you something stronger?" he suggested as he watched the two strangers beginning to calm down.

"No. This'll be fine, thank you." Joe answered for both of them, as they gratefully accepted the steaming brew.

"Yes, thank you, Father," said Jenny, wiping away the tears and clearing her nose with a monogrammed handkerchief. Part of a set received from Catherine. "I'm sorry."

"No need to apologize," he reassured. "I would like to know how Moon.... sorry, Cathy came to be on the streets."

"We don't know," shrugged Joe.

"You don't know? I don't understand. You are obviously friends....," he stated puzzled.

"We thought that Cathy was dead, Father," replied Jenny.

"Yeah. Radcliffe worked for the DA's office," explained Joe. "There was this case....." was as far as he could go before he realized that it was still too painful to recall. "Anyhow, Cathy went missing, then turned up dead."

"We thought that we had buried her," said Jenny sadly.

"If you thought that, then how come...."

"... We came looking for her?" Joe completed for him standing up.

"Yes."

"I thought I saw her," he shrugged as he began to walk around the room. "I was on my way to work one morning, looked up and there she was. Followed her down some alleyway, but lost her. I thought I was going crazy but.... well, Cathy just ain't the kind of woman you forget once you know her," he answered wistfully. Jenny watched the priest smile and knew that he understood exactly what Joe meant, as he too had fallen under her spell.

"So Father, where do we find her?" asked Joe suddenly. It took the priest by surprise.

"Father?" said Jenny warily.

"I'm sorry, but I can't help you there. I don't know where you'd find her," he stated. "Moon-Child... Cathy isn't like any of the others. She... well she's..." He stopped and thought more carefully about his words. It suddenly seemed very difficult to explain about her. "People on the streets become very distrustful of everything around them."

"Can you blame them, Father?" asked Jenny.

"No, not at all," he smiled at her understanding. "But Cathy.... Cathy's different. So alert. I don't think that she really trusts anyone. I mean most people after a while will let you in, even if it's just a little," he indicated with his fingers. "They'll tell you something of their past lives in their own way, their own time. But Moon-C... oh, you can be with her and talk to her but, I always got the impression that she would be the first to spot danger, avoid it by whatever means necessary." Without warning the picture of her standing against the wall that night flashed into his mind as though to illustrate for him what he was trying to tell them.

"Most of the people I know out there on the streets live together," he continued. "Or, at least within a certain area they will know, where someone could be found. Almost a community, if you can believe that. But Moon-Child doesn't stay with any of them. Not even with the Duchess, when she was still alive. No, wherever she stays I'm sure that she's alone. Probably feels safest that way."

"How come you never asked her name?" asked Joe as the question suddenly came to mind. And then almost immediately he was angry. If the priest had called them, they would have been spared all those months of misery and Cathy would have been safe. He would have seen to that because he would not have failed her a second time. Why had the priest allowed the travesty to continue? Why?

"Well?" he asked again, his anger just beginning to tinge his voice.

Jenny rebuked his tone of voice with a look. The priest remained calm, understanding.

"I don't think there would have been any point asking the Moon-Child for her real name because, I don't think that she knows who she really is."

Joe looked at Jenny. Her instincts about Cathy had been right.

When she found herself awake, it was beginning to get dark. She smiled, as soon people would be safely tucked away in their homes. At least in that part of the city that she now occupied, only those who knew the streets and how to use them, could take care of themselves, would dare to venture out when there was no need. She was one such person. To be part of the night, there was nothing like it. But somehow, she sensed that this night was different. She felt an excitement like nothing that she could remember and then suddenly she knew the reason. She was going home! Below where she would be safe. Because Below was where he would be waiting for her. Now, somehow, it was time.

By some instinct that she could not define, she found herself walking with a purpose in a direction that she did not recognize but which she knew would take her Below. She sensed them before she saw them, about five young men. There was nowhere that she could hide without being seen or worse, followed. As she tried to move away towards a wall the circled around her moving all the time.

"Well, lookahere. Hiya babe. And *where* are you headed, huh?" he asked with a beaming grin.

"Oh, leave it, will yer. I ain't in the mood," sighed another, the oldest of the group.

"Oh c'mon! Man, you been in a mood lately," said the youngest, easily influenced.

"Yeah, well, maybe I'm just tired of all this stuff. Bored even."

"Well then, why don't you make it interesting?" said the one with a smile.

"Yeah, an how you gonna do that?" asked the one with an earring in his left ear.

"Do us one," he smirked.

"Don't we always?" said another with enthusiasm.

"I don't mean just that. I mean, *do one*."

There was silence as they looked from one to the other. Suddenly the meaning became clear.

"You *gotta* be kidding me," replied the eldest with a disgusted look on his face.

"It's female, ain't it?" he replied with a sneer.

"What you reckon it's like?" asked the youngest.

"Ain't that what we're about to find out?" said the enthusiast.

"I'm outta here," said the oldest backing away from the group but not leaving the scene either.

"More fun for us then. Hey, babe, how about having us some fun, huh? Been a while for you, I'll bet," said the one wearing an earring as he approached her. "How about giving me a look see?"

He had dared to place his hand on her shoulder to spin her around to face him. But she was much

too fast for him. As she swung around she moved back and out of the way, her hair swinging to cover her face. No one seemed to notice the guttural noise that was starting to emanate from her throat, or the way in which her hands clawed down at her sides.

"Aw, now come in babe, don't be like that. I just want me a little look see. Hey, where you going?" he asked as she was allowed to back away towards the wall.

"How's she look?" asked the youngest moving beside his friend.

"Not too old I reckon," said the one with an earring.

"Well, why don't I try and get a better look, huh?" said the youngest moving forward.

"No, don't. Just leave her!" the oldest tried to warn, but too late. As the youngest reached out to flick the hair away from her face to get a better look, she lashed out drawing blood before she struck a blow hard across his throat. He began to choke almost immediately. The damage would prove fatal. The one with the earring who was the closest reacted first.

"What the f....?"

The growl was growing louder, her lips curled back revealing her teeth. She was standing ready to strike again if necessary.

The others gathered around the injured young man now writhing on the ground, his hands holding his throat, as he tried to breathe.

"You Bitch!" the earring yelled, as he lunged at her. But he was much too slow. She pulled the earring from his ear before he realized what she had done. As the blood began to spurt from the torn lobe he screamed in pain. By the time he reacted to the wound, she had already shoved him hard against the wall. As the Moon-Child moved to strike again, she was stopped in her tracks as were her would-be attackers by the roar that commanded attention. The young men turned to look in *his* direction.

The hunters did not see the smile brighten her features, the look of love that shone in her eyes. Nor did they appear to notice that the man-beast stood mesmerized, as always, by the beauty that loved him. Despite everything that he had believed himself to be, despite everything that she had seen him do to protect her, he knew without question, that she loved him, as he loved her.

"What the f.....is going on here?" screamed the one with the smile, except that expression had long since left his features to be replaced by bewilderment and anger.

"Somebody get that bitch! And this. this is mine," he spat. "C'mon. C'mon whatever you are. Come and get some." He motioned to Vincent as a blade flicked open manacingly in his hand as if by magic. **"I'm gonna carve me a piece of you,"** he warned through gritted teeth. **"C'mon."**

Behind them, the two remaining men simply stood, uncertain as to whether they should obey the instruction to attack the Moon-Child. Suddenly all movement ceased, except for heads turning in the direction of the mechanical wailing.

"Cops!" announced the oldest unnecessarily.

"I'm outta here!" said the enthusiast who promptly ran into the night. The Moon-Child and Vincent looked at one another. Vincent looked back in the direction of the siren, then back to reassure the Moon-Child, only to see her disappearing from view.

"No! Catherine!" The one with the smile dared to try and stop him, but Vincent was no longer of a mind to reason with him. He was *not* going to lose her again, not now. As the young man tried to swing his blade, Vincent merely tossed him aside as one might discard a piece of paper. The oldest member of the group simply stood and surveyed what had been left behind. As he tried to leave the scene, two police officers commanded him to remain where he stood and he silently obeyed.

Vincent had managed to see her disappearing into an abandoned building and followed. Even for him

the darkness required a few seconds for his eyes to adjust, and yet he could make out her shape which had not slowed down once to allow her time to get her bearings. It seemed as though the darkness did not impede her progress in the slightest. He stopped his pursuit, as suddenly there was silence.

"Catherine?" he questioned, looking at the place he had last seen here. "Catherine?" he asked again. And once more, nothing but silence answered his plea except for footsteps running toward him. Muffled voices advised that the two police officers had tried to pursue them. Vincent had no choice but to wait until they departed. He did not have long to wait, as they seemed eager to return to their prisoner and wait for the backup they had requested. From the parts of the conversation that were audible, Vincent knew that once their colleagues arrived, a more thorough search of the area would commence. As soon as he believed that it would be safe, he made his way down Below, his emotions in turmoil as he replayed their brief meeting.

The joy of seeing for himself what his heart had already known, that she was *alive*. Beyond doubt, beyond question, it was Catherine. He could never mistake those eyes; the overwhelming feeling of love that filled his being whenever he was in her presence. No other person had ever given him that sense of hope for a *life that could never be*, as a life that was possible. For short though it may have been, they had lived the impossible. And Catherine had made the unattainable real. She had given him a son, a beautiful child. A dream that he had not even dared to dream. And now, once again, when she had needed him to keep her safe, he had failed her. He had lost her in more ways than one.

He recalled the way in which she had defended herself. Reflected in her actions he had seen himself, the dark side. That part of him which he had once feared. What had happened to her?

He could feel the anger surge as he had not felt it since he had held her in his arms that one last time knowing that someone had deliberately brought about her death. The anger that had continued until the search that finally ended when they had found Jacob alive and well and had taken him home.

There were also moments in those months after her death as he'd watched their son that an anger would threaten. The thought of Jacob growing up not knowing his mother would cause the rage to simmer, but ultimately it would be suppressed completely by the memory of her smile, her laughter and by the overwhelming sense of loss he felt that not even their son could full dispel.

Suddenly, there was no longer time to dwell on such thoughts as he was taken out of his melancholia by the intruder alert. As he listened to the urgent tapping, another sensation overpowered all others, as he realized with certainty who the intruder would prove to be.

"Catherine!" and he ran in the direction of his inner voice, his heart pounding hard within his chest as he ran to meet her...

"Not possible, Mouse. Won't work, Mouse. Nothing there, Mouse," he muttered to himself. "Was possible. Did work. Found it," he said with glee. Although an untrained ear would not have heard it at all, the singular young man with the tousled hair became aware of the muffled insistent clanging sound.

"Intruder. Mouse will find," he said still exhilarated from his recent success. He had not gone very far down the rough rock tunnel when he was conscious of another presence. He stooped and backed up against the wall, listening. All that could be heard was the metallic language still pounded out its warning. He dared to move away from the wall and continue on his way. And then without any form of prior warning, he saw her. At least her features outlined, masked in part by shadow.

"Who's there?" The figure did not seem to move, but unseen was surveying the surroundings. Possible escape was to retrace her steps, but that she knew would take her away from *him*. And now that she had found her way Below, she felt compelled to find him, to be with him. Nothing was more important, no one would be allowed to stop her.

"Who's there?" he repeated and increased the beams to its full power on the makeshift lights of his helmet to illuminate the area ahead of him. Immediately she brought her head up to look directly at him, her hair falling back to give him a clear view of the woman who, although some distance from him, he could never mistake her for anyone else.

"Cath... Catherine?" he stammered. He seemed oblivious to the low guttural sound that had begun, nor did he appear to notice the position of her hands that had been brought waist high and clawed.

"Catherine!" he repeated with growing excitement, a beaming smile lighting his features. "Catherine, this is good. This is *better than good*," he enthused, as he began to move towards her. He seemed not to notice that the guttural sound was growing in volume and could clearly be heard between the distant banging on the pipes. Nor did he seem to realize that she had bared her teeth and that her stance foretold that if he moved any closer to her, she would strike.

"Catherine!" *his* voice commanded her attention and it was instantly given. Her hands dropped to her sides, her body visibly relaxed.

"Catherine," he murmured, for the first time able to look, to *really look* at her.

Slowly, he raised his right arm, holding out his hand. Without hesitation, she ran to him and felt his arms and cloak surround her as she pulled him close. She smiled through tears as she heard, felt his heart beating in time with her own.

"Catherine, Catherine," was all that he seemed able to say as he rested his cheek on the top of her head, enjoying the feel, the scent of her...

END