

# CHOICES

by Catherine Edwards

(from *Crosssignals One*)

Catherine looked about doubtfully.

"Vincent ... are you sure this is the right place? Sometimes Mouse ..."

"I'm sure." Vincent paced around the ring of doorways in the darkened chamber. Seeing nothing, he returned to her side. "Mouse has trouble with time, but not places. The only thing that's saved him is his inability to get lost."

"A useful talent," Catherine mused, "especially if you find it occasionally prudent to disappear."

Vincent laughed, reaching for her hand. "Mouse hasn't had time to fall from Father's good graces lately. He's been working down here on... some sort of machine." He lifted his free hand - soft, leathery palm toward the ceiling, in a shrug.

Catherine studied the leonine features with genuine affection. She loved exploring the labyrinth of caverns and tunnels beneath the city with Vincent. His keen eyes missed nothing and she felt safe and warm and secure, despite the weight and chill of the stone that surrounded them. It was easy to believe that the hassles of everyday life in New York were but figments of her imagination, when she walked these sandy paths with him.

"What is he working on? Do you know?"

Vincent pulled an ornate pocket watch from his vest, peering at the tiny numbers. With a sigh, he snapped the watch shut.

"No," he murmured slowly, glancing around once more. He turned to Catherine and made his eyes very round, doing a fair imitation of Mouse. "**Secret!**" he insisted, his inflection almost perfect.

Catherine laughed and poked him in the ribs.

"Behave yourself," she admonished, but she leaned against him and snuggled into the warmth of his body. Vincent rested his head on hers and closed his eyes.

"*Waiting for Mouse*," he thought to himself, "*has its advantages...*"

There was a faint whine from one of the darkened doorways, pitched so low only Vincent's ears caught it. His head snapped around so fast that Catherine was startled.

"What?" she demanded. "What's wrong ..."

"Perhaps we've been waiting unnecessarily," Vincent said softly. He crept stealthily toward the source of the sound, with Catherine dogging his heels. "Mouse may simply be engrossed in his work." As one, they stepped through the tunnel entrance.

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"Whose idea was this anyway?" Geordi asked the air around him.

Will Riker glanced at him over his shoulder.

"Why? Claustrophobic?" he teased, grinning at the engineer's back.

"Not me - I'm an engineer, remember? We're used to being cooped up in small places..." Geordi grinned, teeth flashing whitely against his dark skin. Riker shook his head.

"You're breaking my heart, La Forge," he said with mock sarcasm, then sobered. "You know the story as well as I do - some..." He struggled for an appropriate slur, but none came to mind. "... xenobiologist got a brill in his bonnet. He's convinced that there's evidence that Kzinti were alive and well in New York City during the late 1980's." He managed to make the scientific title sound bad enough to convey his sentiment.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Geordi mumbled. "And since the Enterprise has had more 'time travel experience' - they traded baleful looks, remembering those experiences all too vividly- "we got elected to drop in on King Kong's alma mate ..."

Riker burst out laughing. "Who the devil is 'King Kong'?"

"He's a giant ape that has a thing for a woman - a movie hero dating back as far as the 1930's."

Riker was incredulous. "Movie hero ... you mean celluloid?"

"Uh hum," Geordi muttered absently, fascinated by the tunnel walls. "Parts of this tunnel are natural, but some of it has been carved out," he mused, intrigued.

"So?" Riker probed, abandoning the trivia lesson.

"By hand," Geordi added smugly. He reached to touch the damp walls, marveling in the handiwork.

"By hand? Do you think it might be connected to that energy field we're reading down here?"

Geordi shook his head, shrugging. "Don't know. Maybe. The craftsmanship is incredible - clean, simple..."

Now Riker reached for the wall, clearly interested. "That doesn't sound like the way Ksinti do things..." he began.

Someone - or something - rounded the corner and let out a short yelp of surprise. Both officers whirled in time to catch a glimpse of the retreating figure. Whatever it was, it wasn't Ksinti. It was obviously humanoid - probably human - but a fierce light beamed out of the vicinity of its forehead. In fact, it had to be human - there weren't supposed to be any other humanoids on earth during this time period, and certainly not here, miles beneath the city.

"Get a tricorder fix on that... whatever that was," Riker snapped. Geordi attempted to oblige him.

"Can't," he muttered after a second or two. "Something's interfering with the reading." He checked his phaser as well, putting it on stun and firing harmlessly at the floor. Nothing happened. He exchanged looks with Riker, who was checking his communicator.

"Enterprise - this is Number One. Come in, please."

He received only static.

"What's causing this? Do you think we've found our energy field? Is your visor affected?"

"My visor's fine," Geordi assured his companion. "It runs off the electric impulses in my body. It could be the energy field we were reading that's interfering," he confessed, "but everything worked fine when we beamed down."

He took several large steps back the way they had come. The tricorder picture wavered and blurred,

steadied for an instant, and then dissolved before any sense could be made of the reading. "Yeah - it seems to get worse the further down that tunnel we go, so we must be getting closer. I think it's some sort of damping field, or an energy source on a similar frequency."

Riker frowned and glanced once more in the direction the fleeing figure had gone, then sighed.

"Without instruments, I guess there's not much point in trying to follow," he admitted, clearly disappointed. "Whatever it was, it couldn't have seen enough to do any damage, and it's definitely not Kzin-kin. Let's do what we came down to do and get out before anything else comes by."

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"Captain Picard, I've lost contact with the landing party!" Worf's voice boomed across the spacious bridge.

Picard whirled and squinted in his general direction. "Lost contact? How? You mean they aren't responding or you can't reach them?"

A measured voice spoke from the helm. "Something seems to be interfering with their signal. No doubt the energy reading we took earlier."

Picard launched himself from the Captain's chair and peered over Data's shoulder. The screen showed only static and occasional snow.

Picard flipped two switches and the screen wavered valiantly, but failed to clear up. " 'Nothing can go wrong, Picard' they said," he muttered to himself while glaring at the board. " 'This is a routine assignment, Picard' they said..." Abruptly, he straightened.

"Get down to the transporter room, Mr. Data. Lock on if you're able and beam them back up! We'll lower shields and cloaking on your signal." Data rose smoothly and made for the turbo lift, and Picard turned to Wesley. "Ensign Crusher - check that board. I want to know if it's really interference from the planet or just a system's failure." He turned, searched Deanna Troi's face anxiously.

"Anything, counselor?"

"I can't get a clear impression through the screens, and cloaking device isn't helping, but - no, I don't feel that they're in any danger." She shook her head slightly, and smiled. "They don't feel that they're in any danger."

Picard snorted in disgust. He had been opposed to this particular assignment from the beginning. Battles, conflicts, negotiations and diplomatic hothouses he could handle, but this - this was intolerable! Not to mention faintly ridiculous.

"And futile," his own personal demon prodded unnecessarily. Picard waved the thought away as though it were a pesky insect. "Not to mention inconvenient..."

Had the whole admiralty gone mad? Even before the disappearance - however temporary it might prove to be - of his chief engineer and first officer, the whole thing had smacked of overkill. The Enterprise - a starship! - had been sent back through time to play archeologist/anthropologist at the insistent bidding of some...- adjectives failed him-"...xenobiologist. Someone must owe someone one heck of a favor..." Picard threw himself into his captain's chair with such force that Wesley Crusher mustered the courage to peep at him from the helm.

Embarrassed, Picard averted his strong jaw and chewed his lower lip in a very un-captainly manner. And sighed. And waited.

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There was a dizzying effect, like falling slowly in a bottomless room, and time seemed to pass very

quickly - or very slowly... Before his mind could pursue the thought, the universe righted itself, and him in it, and Vincent found himself facing a bare wall. Catherine completed her stumble, falling against his broad back.

"Catherine, are you..." He turned to her and stopped cold, blue eyes flying wide with amazement. Catherine whirled, seeing what he saw, and she grew quite pale.

Data stepped out from behind the console, metallic eyes flashing with curiosity. Involuntarily, Catherine gasped and backed up against Vincent, who curved a protective arm around her slender frame and bared his teeth ominously.

No one spoke for the space of several frantic heartbeats. Catherine found her voice at last.

"Where... are we?"

Data took another inquisitive step and Catherine pressed even closer against Vincent.

"I am Commander Data. Welcome to the starship Enterprise."

"Data - did you get them?" a clipped voice demanded from thin air.

Catherine and Vincent whirled, seeking the speaker, but the one who called himself "Data" slapped himself purposefully over the insignia on his left breast.

"Data here."

"Did you get them?" the invisible speaker demanded once more.

There was an almost human pause, while Data regarded the unusual pair standing transfixed on the transporter platform.

"Not exactly..." he began.

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Picard listened with a growing sense of disbelief as Data outlined the strange, inexplicable jump the transporter had made and tactfully announced the arrival of their "visitors." Routine mission indeed! Picard waved unnecessarily to Worf, who was already stepping into the turbolift. "Counselor - go with him," Picard added quickly. "I'll want you there." Deanna trotted toward the turbolift with alacrity and the doors shut, swallowing them both.

"Escort our guests to the visitor's lounge until we can decide what to do. I'm sending a party down to meet you."

Picard sat back in his chair and covered his face with his hands for the space of a few seconds. This was not the sort of mystery he enjoyed.

Data led them down the crowded corridor, blithely commenting on this or that aspect of the... had he called this a "starship"?

Vincent spent the first uncomfortable minutes desperately wishing for his cape, walking with his face carefully averted. Catherine clung to his hand, a comforting warmth. He could feel her excitement and the ebbing of her fear, as they followed Data down the brightly-lit hallways. Curiosity overcame shame and at last; Vincent raised his eyes and peered around. No one so much as gave him a second look.

A woman with a little girl in tow passed them and smiled in a friendly manner. Vincent stared, startled, and the little girl waved.

Without thinking, he raised a furry arm and waved back. The little girl giggled shyly and buried her head in her mother's tunic. The woman stroked her daughter's fair hair fondly and smiled at Vincent.

"Sometimes Silandra's shy," she explained unnecessarily.

Vincent nodded, transfixed, and spoke without thinking. "So am I."

The tunnels - corridors, Vincent corrected himself - seemed endless, curving this way and that through what was obviously an enormous vessel. He half-expected to wake and find himself wandering the endless catacombs, but the chill he felt at the strange surroundings convinced him that this was no dream.

Curiosity had overcome the better part of Catherine's fear and she conversed freely with Data, although her grip on Vincent's hand was very nearly cutting off circulation to his fingers. In the midst of their predicament, Vincent found this vaguely amusing and permitted himself a small smile.

"Are you... where are you from?" Catherine queried cautiously. "I mean you don't seem..." She flushed, feeling incredibly rude.

"I am not human," Data answered promptly, guessing the intent of her inquiry. "I am an android, built by Doctor Noonian Soong."

"An android...!" Catherine said with a small gasp. "A... machine?" Vincent stared, blue eyes wide with shock.

"A very complex machine," Data began with some pride, golden eyes blinking. "I was created---"

He was interrupted by the arrival of Counselor Troi and Worf, two security guards in tow. Catherine took an involuntary step backwards, startled by the Klingon's swarthy experience.

Worf, too, was experiencing some surprise at appearances. In a reaction that was purely instinctive, he pulled his lips back in a snarl and emitted a low, rumbling noise. Vincent took a menacing step forward and bared an even more impressive set of sharp teeth, growling ominously.

Eye to eye, Deanna and Catherine exchanged glances. The women turned at the exact same moment, and spoke as one.

"Stop that!" they admonished, with stern looks at their companions. The women whirled to stare at each other, laughing in surprise. Over their heads, the eyes of two warriors met, and smiled.

Deanna took Catherine's arm, her manner gentle, and led the party down the corridor.

"My name is Deanna Troi and I'm the ship's Counselor. I know that all of this must seem strange to you, and a little bit frightening. Let me explain what happened, and then I'll try to answer your questions, all right?" She smiled at Catherine again, and Catherine had the distinct impression that this woman knew and understood everything that was flitting through her mind. She returned the smile and the death grip on Vincent's hand eased up.

"What has Mr. Data told you so far?"

"That this is a ship - he called it a 'starship', I think," Vincent began helpfully, looking to Catherine for confirmation. She nodded.

"He said that you didn't mean to... I mean, you weren't trying to..." Catherine swallowed, then pursued the conversation doggedly. "He said that we're not supposed to be here, but it's not our fault." She wrinkled her fair brow. "Oh," she added, "and he said that he's... a machine."

"That's true," Troi confirmed promptly. "Mr. Data is a machine, and you are on a starship - a vessel that travels between worlds. What he didn't tell you is that we're not from your time. By your standards, we won't exist for another four hundred years." She let them digest that information. Neither of them looked disposed toward asking anything, so she continued.

"We're here on a scientific research mission. Two of our officers were transported down to the planet

surface - the same process that brought you here - and we lost contact with them. When we lost contact, Mr. Data locked onto two life forms ..."

"Us," Catherine said thoughtfully, and Troi nodded before continuing.

"- and beamed you aboard. Captain Picard asked me to meet you and make you comfortable until we can decide how to correct this. We're still trying to get back in touch with our officers. The first order of business is to take you both to Sick-Bay and have you checked over. After we're sure you've suffered no ill effects from beaming up, we'll try to answer some of your questions."

Catherine's sharp lawyer's mind was keenly aware of what must have been left out of the explanation, but she felt comfortable with Troi, trusted her. Catherine's trust communicated itself to Vincent, who relaxed enough to take interest in his surroundings again. The women walked and talked, dark heads bent together, while Worf and Vincent hovered behind them, and the security guards hovered, weapons sheathed, behind them.

They rounded another of the endless corridors and Vincent felt the weight of eyes upon him. A young woman, dressed in the garb of security, passed on their right, making a leisurely inspection of Vincent's physique. Despite his relative naivete, the intent behind her perusal was all too obvious, even to him.

Mesmerized, he stopped walking and stared back, blue eyes wide with shock. The two hulking security guards stopped behind him, but hesitated, reluctant to approach. One of them stepped forward uncertainly, but Worf held out a thickly-muscled arm in his path, indicating a halt. Oblivious to this audience, Vincent stood his ground.

There was frank admiration, and open speculation in her eyes, and she looked up into his startled face. One eyebrow cocked, an obvious invitation. For a full second, Vincent stared, then fled down the corridor after Catherine and Troi. Vincent glanced over his shoulder and thudded unceremoniously into Catherine's back. Only his excellent balance prevented them from tumbling to the floor. Catherine and Deanna regarded him curiously, taking in the wide eyes, the dazed expression, the apprehension etched in his tall frame.

"Vincent? Are you okay?" Catherine probed. She reached to touch his shoulder but he caught her hand and held it tightly between his own. He glanced anxiously behind him once more, then gazed gratefully into Catherine's concerned face, more grateful than he could ever remember for the steadying influence of their bond. His next words were barely audible, but unmistakably heartfelt.

"Please - hold my hand."

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"All this way for.. this?" Geordi was thoroughly disgusted with the situation, but the apparatus before him did capture his imagination. Riker stopped beside him, facing the huge machine. It was a glorious hodge-podge of material, taking up fully a third of the chamber they stood in. It looked as though it were held together by sealing wax and odd bits of string - but it obviously worked.

"The energy reading?" he asked, unnecessarily.

"You got it," Geordi confirmed. "And my guess is that this is what's interfering with our equipment." He grinned at Riker, slightly amused by the whole ordeal.

"So much for a higher intelligence."

Riker made a rude noise.

"Do you want me to turn it off? Our equipment should work then," One slender dark hand reached for the control board.

"No," Riker said shortly. "We found it running. We'd better leave it that way. You know how they get about the Prime Directive. Let's just... get away from this thing and see if we can contact the ship. I'm ready to go home." With one more disgusted look at the machine, he turned on heel and left.

Geordi hesitated, casting one final look at the immense machine, then trotted after his superior officer, leaving the room in silence.

Almost. If Geordi's ears had been as good as his eyes, he would have detected the quiet breathing of a creature wedged behind the ponderous equipment - a creature with a light in the middle of its forehead. The light wasn't shining now, but a quick flick of a button solved that problem.

Mouse stood gaping after the retreating figures for a full minute and a half. He gazed at his mechanical handiwork with something akin to amazement. The machine whirred and clicked loudly, and Mouse almost jumped out of his skin. He reached over cautiously and touched the shiny metal surface.

"Okay good, okay fine...," he muttered to himself. "Didn't see a thing."

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"This is Doctor Kathryn Pulaski," Troi said with genuine affection. Catherine and Vincent exchanged glances at the name. "This is Catherine Chandler and... Vincent. They seem to be our guests for a while."

"Yes," she answered Troi briskly. "The Captain told me." She smiled, eyes crinkling with good humor. "Come into my parlor...," Dr. Kathryn Pulaski began, waving them forward.

"... said the spider to the fly," Vincent finished automatically, feeling foolish once the words were spoken. The Doctor fixed him with a delighted smile.

"Yes - Mother Goose, I believe."

Numbly, Vincent nodded, but some small part of him was comforted to know that Mother Goose was still taught.

"I'll come back for you when the Doctor is finished," Troi said quietly, and slipped out. The security guards were stationed inconspicuously by the door and Pulaski glared at their stiff backs for a moment. She sighed, suddenly resigned, and motioned them forward.

"I'd like to do a brief examination, if you'll permit me, to make sure you weren't affected adversely by your little journey." She shook her head, obviously remembering something humorous. "I have a colleague who dislikes the transporter on general principles."

"The transporter is what brought us here - by accident?" Catherine asked, dazed by the immense lab and complex equipment.

Pulaski had turned away, leaving her back unwatched to put them at ease. "Yes." She turned to face them again, patting the examination table. "If you'll come sit here, this won't take but a few minutes, Miss Chandler."

Vincent and Catherine exchanged looks again, apprehensive about being separated. Pulaski sensed their unease. She touched Vincent's shoulder as casually as she had touched the table. "You can stay with her - just don't get underfoot, hmmm?"

The mannerisms, the tone---even the words themselves could have sprung from Father's lips. Vincent relaxed visibly, and Catherine hopped up on the table.

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"This is Number One---anybody up there?"

Geordi turned his visor in Will's direction. "You don't think anything's happened to them, do---"

"This is Picard," the communicator crackled. "Where the devil have you been, Number One? Is everything all right?"

"We're fine. It's a long and boring story. Suffice it to say that we took a little side trip for nothing. Can you beam us up?"

"Affirmative - don't move from that spot. We'll beam you up directly and you can bore me with the details. Transporter - two to beam up - these coordinates."

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Pulaski was true to her word. In less than ten minutes, she was through with Catherine. Vincent had tried his best to stay out of the way, but the whole process was completely intriguing to him. Father would simply be beside himself in this lab!

"Fit as a fiddle," the Doctor assured Catherine. "Everything works."

"Except my sense of reality," Catherine added wryly. She was beginning to actually accept the situation for what it appeared to be.

Pulaski smiled again, indicating the table.

"Vincent?"

Some of the apprehension and the paralyzing shyness returned and he hesitated.

"I'm only going to do a routine examination - like I just did for Miss Chandler."

Sheepishly, Vincent stepped forward, settling his large frame on the table. With comforting efficiency, Pulaski repeated the process.

"All done. I'll call Counselor Troi and you can go now, if you'd like, but..." She hesitated, and Vincent's heart began to pound.

"With your permission, Vincent - I'd like to take a blood sample, and I'd dearly love to do a gene-scan."

Vincent looked anxious and Catherine stepped forward immediately and clasped his hand, comforting him. "You have my permission," he said at last, his voice barely audible.

"You don't have to say yes - it's entirely up to you." Pulaski assured him. "And I'll be glad to share the results with you---"

Vincent held up his hand. "I... think not." He exchanged looks with Catherine, who nodded encouragingly, but did not try to sway his decision. "I... we have learned that some questions must be answered face to face, over time - not in a laboratory. If I am to know about my birth, I must learn it in my own time, in my own way - not like this."

Again, Pulaski was smiling at him. Her smile extended to include Catherine. "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof...?"

Vincent smiled and bowed his head to her slightly out of respect.

"Something like that," he agreed.

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"Well, he's not an extraterrestrial," Pulaski snorted. "Oh, I'll admit to some superficial similarities to Caitians and Vedala and yes, even Kzinti, but there's no real comparison."



"Then you think he's telling the truth - about being born there." Picard was thoughtful, eyeing his officers in turn. The door whooshed open to admit Counselor Troi.

"Yes."

"Undoubtedly." Pulaski and Troi spoke together, and all eyes turned to the diminutive Counselor. Troi folded her hands together on the table and looked around the ring of faces. "He's very honest, and he has no reason to lie." She smiled suddenly, amused. "I don't think it occurred to him."

"What about the girl?" Riker demanded.

This comment brought baleful glances from every female in the room. Riker was baffled by this open hostility until his mind placed the faux pas. "Woman," he muttered defensively. The dark looks brightened.

"She's... very protective of him. Catherine feels a need to shield him from those who don't know and understand him." Troi recognized the puzzlement on several faces. "We're dealing with the twentieth century, don't forget," she reminded them gently. "This era was marked by a pronounced prejudice against those who were 'different', as Vincent is, and by an extreme prejudice toward beauty. Vincent lives beneath the city because it's not safe for him to walk the heavily populated streets above." The impact of this reminder played plainly across the faces at the table.

"The real question here is - what are we going to do with them?" Riker said flatly. Pulaski gave him a sharp look.

"What do you mean - do with them? We'll have to return them to their world. We certainly can't bring them back through time with us."

"Is that wise, Doctor? With what they've seen? How can we be sure that they won't... tell someone?"

Troi shook her head. "It's highly unlikely. From what Catherine has said, a good part of their life together has to remain secret. I believe we can trust them to safeguard our interests."

"Is that what you think?" Riker said, clearly unconvinced. Troi fixed him with a calm stare, but her dark eyes snapped angrily.

"That's my professional opinion, Mr. Riker." She faced Picard. "Besides - it was our error that brought them here - and we're the ones who don't belong. I don't see that we have a lot of choice."

Picard sighed, uncomfortable with the nuances of the situation. He would have given half his soul right then for a relatively simple solution to this completely complicated problem. When he returned to his own time, Starfleet was going to hear... Abruptly aware that all eyes were on him, Picard snapped back to the present.

"I'll speak with our 'guests' myself this evening at supper. Until then, lets... mull on it, shall we? Now that you're back, Number One, Mr. La Forge - tell us what you found out."

Will Riker sighed and leaned forward across the table. "Not much..."

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The quarters they'd been given were spacious, comfortable. To Vincent's chagrin and relief, they were sharing one living space. Data had taken it upon himself to instruct them about the food processors and the possibility of acquiring clean clothes from the computer.

"The Captain wishes to speak with you tonight at supper. If there is anything else you require before that time, please make it known to myself or to Counselor Troi." He smiled, tilting his head slightly in what was obviously "good-bye," and disappeared through the mechanical doors.

Left completely alone for the first time since their arrival, Catherine sagged against Vincent wearily

and sighed.

"Wake me when this is over," she mumbled into his chest. Vincent smiled and curved his arms around her.

"I thought this was my dream," he teased, but the humor fell flat. Catherine stepped back and looked at him solemnly.

"What do you think will happen to us? What do you think they'll do?" Vincent shook his head, but his gaze was steady.

"I don't know. We may be past the point of returning."

"Father...," Catherine began.

"Yes, I know."

They digested this information for several moments. At last, Catherine squeezed him once more around the waist and stepped away.

"Well," she began philosophically, "as long as we're here, I'm going to take a shower." She eyed her rumpled jeans, the shapeless sweatshirt. "And conjure up something else to wear."

After a few moments of experimentation, with the clothing program, Catherine disappeared into the bathroom with a white terrycloth robe. Vincent heard the water start and, convinced that all was well - as well as possible under the circumstances - he sought a cup of strong tea and stretched out on the long bunk. The tea was soothing and the bunk was somehow easing the tension from his muscles. He closed his eyes for a moment...

The door buzzer jarred him awake. Vincent sat up hastily, immediately alert. Insistent, the buzzer sounded again. Thinking Troi or Data had returned, Vincent stood.

"Come," he said. The doors whooshed open and the young security guard who had eyed him in the hallway stepped through. She still wore her uniform, but the zipper seemed to be stuck at chest level and her hair now fell loosely around her shoulders.

"Hi," she said easily. "I'm Mikalen."

Vincent swallowed with effort, cursing his impromptu cat-nap.

"My name is---"

"Vincent. I asked."

She stepped towards him, obviously interested in pursuing the... conversation. Vincent's knees were against the bunk, and there was no room to retreat.

"You asked...?" he mumbled, desperately making conversation.

She came still closer.

"Uh huh. We passed in the hallway, remember?"

Eyes wide, Vincent nodded. "Yes."

She shrugged, somehow managing to jar the zipper even lower.

"Well, you looked interesting." She smiled, leaning forward.

Not only was there no where to go, but Vincent was fast running out of safe places to look.

"And I'm interested," Mikalen said, slinking towards him.

"Can I help you?" Catherine asked coolly. She stood in the bathroom doorway, robe wrapped

securely, hair falling wetly down her back and making tiny puddles on the slick floor.

"I came by to see if Vincent... needed anything." One perfectly sculpted eyebrow lifted, taking in Catherine's disheveled appearance. Mikalen summarily dismissed her, looking back to Vincent. "I guess not."

Catherine stepped closer, directly into her line of sight. The security guard blinked, and only years of training kept her from retreating in the face of Catherine's displeasure.

"I guess not," Catherine repeated frostily. She eyed Mikalen scornfully, settling at last on the half-zipped uniform. Flushing, the security guard dropped her eyes and beat a hasty retreat.

Vincent sat down shakily on the bunk, visibly relieved. Concerned, Catherine sank down beside him, searching his face.

"Vincent, are you okay? What did she say?" Catherine reached to touch his face but he pulled away from her, deeply ashamed.

"She came to... we passed in the hallway and she looked at me like..."

"Like...?" Catherine prompted gently.

"She was... interested in me," Vincent admitted at last. His coloring did not allow a blush, but his averted eyes and miserable posture spoke eloquently of his pain.

"Because you're... different?" Catherine probed gently, not understanding.

Vincent shook his head miserably, struggling for the right words to explain. Catherine took his hands in hers, squeezing them tightly, and he did not pull away.

"Because I am not," he said at last. The last was spoken so quietly that Catherine was not certain she'd heard him correctly. She was about to ask him to repeat it, when the meaning behind the words came crashing into her sensibilities. The young woman had found him different and attractive, and came here to act upon that attraction. Vincent, in his innocence, had assumed that he was somehow responsible for the situation, guilty of violating some taboo.

With infinite tenderness, Catherine enfolded him in her arms, holding him tightly. She could sense his confusion and relief as his arms slipped around her waist, feel the quickened beat of his heart.

"Vincent," Catherine said at last, "I don't blame her." She pulled back to look at him and they found themselves face to face, intimately intertwined and quite alone. Their eyes locked and Catherine could feel his breath stirring the drying wisps of hair around her ears. She thought very seriously about kissing him - wondered fleetingly why she never had. This place, this time, was full of possibilities they had never imagined - a place where they might walk hand in hand in the light, share a room and perhaps...

Vincent turned away before she could act, tucking her head beneath his chin and pulling her closer. His voice was husky and low.

"I'm glad you're here."

They were still entangled when the buzzer sounded once more.

"Come," Catherine called, moving not a whit from the sanctuary of his arms. If that woman had come back ...

"Excuse me," Worf said stiffly. "I did not mean ..."

Catherine climbed hastily to her feet and faced the lieutenant.

"Not at all," she said graciously, without a trace of discomfiture. "Did you need to see us?"

There was a moment's pause, then Worf turned and addressed Vincent.

"I wished to know if you would care to accompany me to the gym for exercise. It is my custom to train daily, sometimes with a partner," Worf stated simply.

Vincent looked to Catherine, obviously interested in the invitation, but loathe to leave her alone. She smiled and waved him away. "Go - I'm probably going to take a nap."

Vincent inclined his head toward the Klingon officer. "I thank you," Vincent intoned solemnly, "and I accept your invitation."

Worf did not exactly smile, but he was obviously pleased.

"Good," he said shortly. "I sense that we are much of a kind."

The gym was a magical place. Opponents appeared and disappeared at the press of a button, and the floor seemed unbounded by the walls.

Vincent was fascinated with the concept, and awed by the reality. For the better part of an hour, Vincent and Worf pitted themselves against the shadowy opponents and obstacles the simulator threw at them. Convinced of the harmlessness of the exercise, Vincent allowed his muscles and great voice full expression, noting with shock, and then some amusement, that Worf did the same. Similarities in style ended there however. Worf fought viciously, with rage and abandon. Vincent found the exercise a challenge in tactical maneuvering, and outwitted rather than attacked at every opportunity.

The last shadow fighter fell under the weight of Worf's blow and disappeared from sight. Alien terrain wavered and blurred, and Vincent found himself standing within the confines of the gym once more. The two men sank, exhausted, onto the bench against one nondescript wall. Two hand towels of some wonderfully soft, absorbent stuff materialized on the bench, and they took them gratefully, wiping damp faces and sweaty necks.

Vincent wrapped the towel around his neck and leaned back against the smooth, cool metal wall. "I wish Mouse could see this," Vincent thought, and a sudden pang of regret seized him, reminding him that he might never see Mouse, or home, again. Something in his reluctant posture caught Worf's eye.

"You are truly a powerful warrior." It was not a question.

The pleasure of physical exertion evaporated. Vincent stared at his feet, mindful of his weakness.

"Yes," he admitted. His shame was obvious.

"What? You take no pride in it?" Worf was clearly baffled. Even the most mild-mannered of humans had a streak of pride regarding physical prowess and cunning strategy.

Vincent's voice was very low, but heavy with feeling. "No."

"Yet - you fight ..."

"Yes," Vincent interrupted, pained. "When necessary - when I must - for my home. For my family. For..."

"Your woman...?"

Vincent winced perceptibly, and Worf trailed off.

"Have I erred?" he demanded, the closest thing to a request that Worf had mastered. "Does the woman belong to another?"

"No, she... we aren't..." This conversation was not exactly going the direction that Vincent had hoped

it would, yet he felt compelled to explain. Doggedly, he pressed on. "We are not... lovers - not like that."

Worf was pondering this information, his expression thoughtful.

"You seek another, then?"

"No!" Vincent blurted hastily. "No," he repeated more slowly. "I seek no other."

"And her?"

There was a milosecond of hesitation. "No."

"Then - the woman is yours," Worf insisted. Vincent touched his arm, slowly shaking his head.

"No," he corrected gently. "I am hers."

Something clicked for Worf, and he nodded in understanding. "A difficult thing."

Vincent sighed slowly and shook his head. "Yes."

Now Worf leaned back, and they stared at the opposite wall as one. "My life is here," Worf said flatly, "yet there is no one - here - for me."

Vincent looked at him quickly, saddened. "No one?" he queried softly. This pain he knew well.

"No one."

Vincent turned back to the bare wall and drew one knee up to his broad chest. "I am truly sorry, Worf," he said at last. There was little else to say.

In true Klingon warrior style, Worf shrugged it off. "I do a lot of reading."

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"Catherine? It's Deanna - may I come in?"

Catherine abandoned her coffee and trotted to the door, remembering too late that the action was unnecessary. She stood sheepishly aside and let Deanna pass.

"Vincent went with Worf," Catherine informed her. "They went to the gym." The lovely Betazoid raised one dark eyebrow, and Catherine wondered fleetingly what that information meant to her. She waved at the long bunk absently, the automatic reflex of a hostess.

"I came by to check on you," Troi said with a warm smile. "Have you been comfortable? Do you need anything?"

Catherine shook her head, long hair swinging over her shoulders.

"Is there anything you'd like to ask - I'll be glad to tell you what I can."

There was a moment of intense silence, and Troi could feel the half-thought fears and questions running like quicksilver through Catherine's mind. Patiently, she waited.

"What's going to happen to us? Are we going to be allowed to go home?"

Troi sighed. "We'll do everything we can to return you to your world."

Catherine sighed too, grateful for the honesty. She tried a smile, and it came out lop-sided. "Can you tell me why you're here? What you're looking for? Maybe if I helped..." She looked up hopefully, and their eyes met. Catherine had the profound feeling that Troi was looking into her very soul, and that feeling, strangely enough, did not trouble her. She looked at Troi, her gaze mild and serene.

"We came back in time at the... request of a xenobiologist ..."

"A what?"

"Someone who studies different life forms, and who believes that there are Kzinti living in this part of your world during this time period."

Catherine's blank look warranted further explanation.

"The Kzinti are a warlike race of beings who have not been particularly friendly with Terrans, and their suspected presence here could be significant. We sent two officers down to investigate an energy reading far beneath the city that could have been the result of advanced technology. We were hoping it would lead us to the Kzinti - if there really are any here, and now. Unfortunately, the same thing that caused the energy reading interfered with their equipment, or ours, or both, and when we tried to beam them up, we got you instead."

"Are your officers back?"

Troi nodded, obviously relieved. "Yes, but they weren't able to tell us much. The energy reading was coming from some sort of machine - highly technically advanced, but obviously not the work of Kzinti." She stopped for a moment and considered thoughtfully.

"Would you know who built the machine?"

"Our friend Mouse likes to tinker, but most of his machines don't work. We were supposed to meet him before... well. It could have been his machine." Catherine leaned forward earnestly. "The Kzinti - did I say that right?- what are they like? I mean, would you know one of these beings if we saw one."

"Undoubtedly," Troi said quickly. "They aren't human. Kzinti are felinoid bipeds---they walk upright and they have a distinctly cat-like appearance." Catherine's head had snapped up and she was staring at Troi.

"Their hands and feet end in sharp claws, and the knee joints bend opposite from the way ours do." This last was said with special emphasis and Troi looked at Catherine carefully to see if she had caught the significance. She had. "As a race, they are extremely hostile and they have an unfortunate tendency to... consume other intelligent life forms."

Catherine's face lost some of its color. "Why does someone think that there are Kzinti in New York - now?"

Troi sat back and clasped her hands together, searching her memory again before speaking. "During the late 1980s, your news media reported a series of slayings over a period of several years, centered here in New York. Each of the victims died from slash wounds similar to the kind the Kzinti would leave, and all remained unexplained. Someone believed.. .what is it?" Troi trailed off suddenly, casting concerned glances at Catherine's face. Catherine's color had gone from pale to pasty, and she was reeling as though she'd been hit. Troi reached for her hands, holding them tightly until she steadied.

While Troi watched, Catherine took a deep shuddering breath and squared her shoulders with determination.

"I think," she began slowly, "that I may be able to explain..."

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"And no one in your world knows about Vincent - about your relationship - except those who live Below, or who are Helpers?" Troi asked carefully. To Catherine's immense relief and surprise, Deanna was far from shocked or horrified.

"I know it must be difficult. My father is human, but my mother is Betazoid, and they sometimes

struggled with differences." Her dark eyes were sympathetic, and Catherine was surprised to find how much better she felt after talking about it to someone.

"I'm getting used to difficult," Catherine said ruefully. She smiled at Deanna shyly, and ducked her head, blushing. "It's all we know. Sometimes, I even forget what it was like to not have to try so hard."

There was a long, pregnant silence, and when Deanna spoke, her voice was very low. "Catherine, it doesn't have to be that way."

Catherine looked up quickly, shaking her head.

"I don't want to end it," she stated firmly.

Deanna touched her arm again. "That's not what I mean. We'll do everything we can to get you safely home, but... you are welcome to stay here - with us - learn a new trade, live a new life."

"I... I don't know." This she had not expected!

"I know this all seems very new to you, but I want you to know all of your options. Here- " She smiled. "- and now, you and Vincent have a completely new set of choices."

"We could stay here - on the ship? In your time?"

Troi smiled. "Not indefinitely," she said gently, "but yes, you'd be welcomed."

"I don't know," Catherine repeated. "I never thought..." She trailed off and covered her face with her hands. "I'm very confused." She looked at Troi through her fingers. "Could we please talk about it, the two of us, before we make a decision?"

"Of course - that's why I came to talk to you now. You can let me know tonight after dinner." Troi could feel her bond with Vincent like a tangible thing, and she reached out suddenly and touched Catherine's face. Catherine looked up in surprise, and their eyes met for a long moment. "There are always hard choices," Troi said simply, "wherever you are."

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Several hours passed before Vincent returned. Catherine looked up when he entered the room, grinning at him like a naughty child. Her hair was dry, and freshly curled. There were damp tendrils of hair framing his face and he looked tired and pleased with himself.

"You look like you had a good time," she teased. Vincent smiled and pulled her to her feet.

"I did. Worf is an interesting... person, and an exhausting gym partner." He surveyed the mounds of material splayed about the floor of the cabin. "What is this?"

"I've been playing with the clothes programmer," she admitted sheepishly.

"All of this?"

Catherine blushed, embarrassed, and poked him in the ribs.

"Don't give me a hard time about it," she warned him, stooping to lift a jacket that would have engulfed them both. "I had a little trouble with sizing."

Ruefully, Vincent surveyed his grubby clothing. After the workout with Worf, it was definitely not suitable for dinner with the captain. "I'll need something else to wear tonight, I'm afraid."

Catherine nodded. "I'll help - I think I've got the hang of this thing now."

Eyes twinkling, Vincent looked up. "Are you sure...?"

She squelched further comment with a look, and they set about creating something novel for Vincent

to wear.

Vincent stepped from the bathroom, making no sound. Soft suede pants tucked into black knee boots, and there was a rich brocade vest over a soft shirt of some iridescent blue material. Materials aside, it was similar to the clothes he usually wore. Catherine was humming to herself, pinning her hair up off of her neck, and didn't hear him.

She turned towards the mirror, and stopped, staring.

"Oh, Vincent," she whispered, stepping forward to take his hands. "You look wonderful." His hair gleamed softly in the bright light, and the blue of his shirt was reflected in his eyes. Catherine turned her face up to his and smiled. Once again, she wondered what kissing him would be like. As though afraid her thoughts betrayed her, Catherine flushed and turned away. She caught up the dress she had designed for their meeting with the captain and disappeared into the bathroom.

Knowing that Catherine habitually ran fifteen minutes late, Vincent sat down to wait for her. He was surprised when she reappeared almost instantly, and struggled to his feet, transfixed by the vision she made. The dress was blue-green, of some sheet iridescent material that managed to look both crisp and gauzy at the same time. The neckline was low and the dress clung to her slender frame. The bodice was cut to reveal a small diamond of smooth skin, and the skirts swished of their own volition around her slim ankles.

"How beautiful you are," Vincent said huskily. "I can't believe how... beautiful you are." Tentatively, he touched her face. The ribbons which held her hair back from her temples and cascaded down her back brushed against his hand, thrumming with some force of their own. Vincent was mesmerized. Catherine took his hand and held it.

"Vincent, I need to talk to you about something - something Deanna said this afternoon."

Wordlessly, Vincent led her over to the short bunk and they sat. "Tell me."

"Deanna said they would do everything they could to return us to our time, but..." Catherine blushed, looking away, and Vincent squeezed her hand.

"But?"

She looked up quickly, her eyes bright. "But, we don't have to go back. We can stay here, Vincent - together."

Dumbfounded, Vincent stared. "Catherine, I never ..." She silenced him with a hand across his lips.

"Don't argue with me now, and don't answer yet. Think about it during supper, please, Vincent. Think about it, and tell me later."

She tilted her face up to his. Her eyes were large and dark, and she was so close and warm and vibrant...The buzzer sounded before their lips could meet. With a small sigh, Vincent stood, offering his arm. She took it and they followed Data down the long halls to a place called Ten Forward.

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Captain Picard was charming - a soldier with the manners of a gentleman. He held his hand out to Vincent, who took it gingerly. Picard's handshake was warm and firm, and he looked Vincent directly in the eye.

"Father," Vincent thought to himself, "would like this man."

"Captain Jean-Luc Picard," he said easily. "You must be Vincent. I'm sorry I was detained earlier, but I trust our Counselor Troi and Commander Data saw to your needs adequately."

"Your hospitality is unrivaled," Catherine said dryly, eyes twinkling. Picard laughed and took her hand.



"I'm sure," he agreed. "Especially under the circumstances."

They sat, nodding to Worf and Pulaski, Data and Troi. There were two gentlemen at the end of the table that Catherine did not recognize. Picard made the introductions.

"Catherine, Vincent - this is William Riker, my first officer."

Riker stood, and bent his lips to her tiny hand. "At your service," he murmured. For some strange reason, Vincent felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up. Riker looked up as though seeing him for the first time. The two men exchanged wary glances and shook hands.

"And Geordi La Forge - our chief engineer." Geordi's handshake was strong, and he looked – looked? - at Vincent and Catherine with good-natured interest.

"Troi tells me that you two may know who's responsible for knocking out our equipment this afternoon."

"We saw some sort of creature with a light source in its forehead - startled it when we were exploring." That was Riker, all business when there was business about.

Catherine and Vincent exchanged glances. Vincent nodded confirmation of Catherine's hunch.

"That was just Mouse," Catherine explained.

"No - it was definitely humanoid," Riker insisted. Catherine tried her best not to smile, but Troi caught her eye, grinning wickedly.

"Mouse is his name," she said gently. "He's a young man - a young human being - who likes to make things. He's a friend of ours, and he's harmless."

"Oh," Riker scowled. He wanted this day to be over, and their ill-fated mission with it. Picard sensed the encroaching black mood and hastily changed the subject.

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Their snatch of conversation with Riker marked the only official business they talked all through dinner. Catherine thoroughly enjoyed the meal and the conversation, but she was constantly aware of Vincent's nearness. The air seemed electrified, and there was something nice about the way his legs brushed her when he stretched his long legs out before him under the table. She found her mind wandering during conversation, and knew that her state of turmoil was caused as much by the possibilities spread before them, as by their proximity. On several occasions, she caught Troi regarding her closely, her expression kind and knowing, and each time, she felt her cheeks grow warm and averted her eyes. With something akin to surprise, Catherine realized that the dinner was winding down.

Picard stood. "Your company has been charming," he insisted, clasping Catherine's hand. Vincent received another hearty handshake and again, Picard looked him right in the eye. "I wish that we might have met under more uncomplicated circumstances," he said ruefully.

Vincent nodded. "I wish that we might have been less trouble," he responded.

Picard half-smiled. "All in a day's work, Vincent, I'm afraid. You have been precious little trouble to us, compared to the trouble we have been to you." His gaze was piercing. "I trust you'll not hold that against us."

Vincent nodded with understanding. "No," he said simply. "We will not." The belief on Picard's face was almost as pronounced as his obvious relief. He grasped Vincent's elbow with his free hand and nodded solemnly.

"I shall come to see you off," he promised, "whenever you're ready to leave us."

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"I shall never look at the stars in the same way," Vincent murmured. "I have watched them from the rooftops of your city almost all my life, and yet I never dared dream that..." He shook his head, trailing off.

Catherine smiled and nestled against him. They had a few moments before Troi would come for them, and for their final decision. Final? Catherine shivered, feeling suddenly cold, and Vincent slipped his arms around her, gazing over her shoulder at the display of heaven before them.

"What do you dare to dream, Vincent?" She turned in his arms, searching his face for an answer. His voice was husky.

"You know my dreams." The air grew still, the room suddenly warm. Catherine swayed against him, and it seemed the most natural thing in the world – worlds? - for his arms to press her closer.

"What are you dreaming now?"

"I'm dreaming that we could really have this life - this life together."

"Oh, but we can, Vincent. We can -"

Vincent put a gentle hand over her mouth and shook his head.

"This - all of this - is a dream come true." He smiled, and his eyes were both joyful and sad. "But it is not our dream. It is not our life."

"We could make it ours," she whispered.

There were tears running slowly down her face, and Vincent brushed them away with the back of his hand.

"Catherine, there are choices open to us here that we could only imagine - a new life for us, a new life for *me*." Again, he smiled. "But not *my* life - and not yours."

"I would stay - with you - if you wanted me to," she promised desperately. "We could -"

"No," Vincent insisted. "We could not." He tucked the stray wisps of hair behind her ears, ran his fingers through the brightly colored ribbons. "My life calls to me, even as your life calls to you. Whatever this place may offer us, it is not home."

Resigned, Catherine nodded, leaning against his comforting bulk. They stood in the profound silence and watched the stars until it was time to change - until it was time to go.

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The transporter room door swished open and two figures stepped through before resuming their conversation.

"How could you take a risk like that?" Pulaski demanded. "What if they'd decided to stay, Counselor? What would you have done?"

Deanna stopped walking, turned and watched the pair as they made their way to the transporter platform, hands clasped tightly against the strangeness and a slight fear of the transporter. Vincent stepped into place first, and offered Catherine his hand. She took his hand, smiling up at him with such unadulterated love, that Deanna averted her eyes for a moment. When she looked back up, they were assuming position.

"I knew they wouldn't."

Pulaski, too, has seen the look, and her eyes softened. She touched Deanna's shoulder and both

women watched the couple as they looked around the future for the last time.

"I guess they've made a lot of hard choices," she said, suddenly understanding. "Leaving here isn't..."

"Yes," Deanna said firmly. "Running away is no answer for them - not even to the future."

From across the room, Catherine caught her eye and smiled a heartfelt thank-you. Deanna smiled with effort and her throat felt suspiciously tight. She waved slowly, sadly.

"They'll find their own answers," Pulaski assured her. She hesitated for the slightest of seconds, but it was enough to alert Troi.

"Do you think," Kathryn Pulaski began slowly, "that we should tell them about the children?"

Troi smiled and her dark eyes sparkled.

"No," she said quickly. "Let them find out on their own."

Catherine and Vincent clasped hands once more, closing their eyes against the dizzying effect of the transporter. The sparkle took them, and took them home.

Against the backdrop of rough grey stone, two pillars of shimmering luminescence began to form - one small and petite, the other tall and lanky. The shimmer faded, leaving them slightly dizzy, and disoriented.

"Vincent - are we...?" Catherine looked quickly around as he did the same. They were in the passageway Mouse had indicated, surrounded by the familiar coolness and weight of the stone. "It's like we never left," Catherine mused, surveying the chamber slowly. Abruptly, she turned to Vincent. "It really happened, didn't it?"

Vincent smiled, and there was sadness in the blue depths of his eyes. "It happened."

Catherine's face clouded over and she reached to embrace him. "Oh, Vincent," she began, "I wish there was some way..."

Vincent curved his strong arms around her. "Yes," he said heavily. "So do I."

Catherine turned her face up to his, her long hair falling down her back, over his gentle hands. "Are you sorry?"

Vincent opened his mouth to reply, when a small commotion sounded in the hallway. Catherine's head snapped around and they peered anxiously toward the door.

"Saw them - yes! Strange clothes, strange talk - Catherine and Vincent missing ..."

Mouse and Father came through the doorway, Jamie hovering behind them.

"See!" Mouse demanded triumphantly, a split-second before he saw them standing there. "Told you...!" He stared, stumbling toward them. Father merely rolled his eyes back in his head and leaned on his cane.

"Mouse, if this is your idea of a joke...!"

"No joke!" Mouse reached forward gingerly and touched Vincent's arm. It was solid! Mouse gulped, staring. Catherine touched his arm and he jumped.

"Mouse?" Catherine began innocently. "Is something wrong?" Vincent all but sprouted a halo. White-faced, Mouse stared, then whipped around to address Father.

"No joke..." he insisted miserably. "Saw them..."

"Have you all been here all afternoon?" Father queried. Vincent and Catherine exchanged cautious

looks, then nodded.

Father sighed, and reached to pat Mouse's arm.

"I'm sure you thought you saw something odd, Mouse. Perhaps you did, but whatever it was, it's gone now, isn't it?"

Reluctantly, Mouse nodded. His usually exuberant face was completely downcast and forlorn.

"And I have work to do," Father said firmly. He turned and made his way back down the tunnel.

"I guess I should be going, too." Catherine ad-libbed, pulling Vincent after her. Mouse and Jamie were left alone in the chamber dimness. Jamie stepped forward and hooked her arm through Mouse's. Her brown eyes were sympathetic, and soft as doves.

"I believe you," Jamie whispered loyally. Mouse pulled away, inconsolable.

"Saw them," he muttered, scuffing his toes on the sandy floor. Something sparkled in the dim light. More out of habit than interest, Mouse bent to retrieve the shiny treasure. He held up two long strands of iridescent ribbon - two of the ribbons that had trailed through Catherine's hair. They were warm to the touch, alive and pulsing beneath his fingers.

"Jamie...," he breathed.

She stepped forward, staring. "What is it, Mouse?"

Mouse was gazing down the tunnel that Vincent and Catherine had taken. His brow furrowed with intense concentration, then cleared abruptly. He stuffed the ribbons into his pocket and grasped Jamie's hand firmly for security.

"Nothing," he insisted. "Didn't see a thing."

END