

WINDS OF TIME

by Gloria Handley

In any story, there is a beginning. This one began with an ancient prophecy that foretold the disappearance of a remarkable people with kinship to the lion. But, before any one story begins, there must be others also beginning; each converging at a single point in time. Should one of these stories and unexpectedly, the other stories change, or stop for a while, but never truly end. For an ending is also a creation. Of such unique creation is this story woven. The story of two lovers, separated by countless centuries, yet tied together by a common bond.

Over the ages, only carefully chosen storytellers have been entrusted with this solitary tale. Interacting with the unwary participants, these storytellers have included trusted friends as well as formidable enemies. Their presence is required as a necessary part of the outcome, adding a different twist to the tale each time it unfolds.

And, now, once again, the legend was coming alive. With its origins in the high, verdant, cloud-draped mountains, the vanished world of an ancient warrior stirred to life, and began to breathe again. This time, it reached out to touch a warrior of a different kind. One who lived in wondrous caverns deep within the earth.

Since that ancient time, the legend patiently awaited the occurrence of certain similar events; the birth and merging of all those other singular stories so there would be a culmination of the oft-told tale. With the legend destined to repeat itself, with that magical happening, would the modern warrior's people disappear as did the ancient warrior's people before him? Or would there be the creation of a different ending?

How could that ancient prophecy cross the fragile barriers of time to reach out, ensnare, and threaten the existence of the deep cavern dwellers---as it had those who once inhabited the high mountain caverns? The answer is held, invisible, within the covers of a small, leather book of indeterminate age; a book that is written as the legend unfolds. The secret it holds is to be discovered and unlocked by two lovers willing to give their love, unselfishly, one to the other; a golden-faced man, and a stranger with silvery-wise eyes and, perhaps, by one called the Rememberer.

Time---the enemy of all

It was a dark and stormy night and Mouse was caught out in it. Hiding high up on the concrete abutment under one of the park bridges, not far from the tunnel entrance, he clapped his hands over his ears to protect them from particularly loud crash of thunder and crack of lightning. He wished Vincent was with him. Vincent was his friend. They had been friends a long time. Mouse had once told Catherine, with great pride. *'We hang out together.'*

Lightning crackled high among the tree tops and Mouse slapped his hands over his ears once again, preparing for the enormously loud, ear-shattering noise he knew would follow. His ears still hurt after the last barrage of sound the storm had thrown at him. He felt the storm had singled him out deliberately, just because he was late getting back. Jamie would be furious with him. He smiled suddenly. She could sound much like the storm, when she was really upset with him. Maybe the storm wasn't so bad after all, he mused. Kinda like having Jamie around. She wasn't always mad at him. When she was nice, they had great fun together. He wondered if he and Jamie would ever be

like Vincent and Catherine.

When Vincent had come back from the Crystal Cavern, after finding the crystal to give Catherine, Mouse had been curious.

"What's it like to have a love, Vincent?"

Vincent had told him. "People have been searching for the words for centuries...."

Mouse understood - he had problems with words, too.

Vincent said that for everyone it was different. For him, it was the end of his aloneness. Mouse understood that. He was alone, too.

His raccoon, Arthur, was there - but he was always eating or sniffing around, searching, exploring. Couldn't talk to Mouse. Mouse was still alone.

Jamie was there. But they were pals.... like him and Vincent. Sort of. He remembered one time, on his birthday, she had gotten all dressed up just for Mouse. It had surprised him to see her that way. Jamie all dressed up. He wasn't sure he liked her that way. She looked different. On second thought, he kinda liked '*different*.' Maybe she wouldn't be so made at him for being late.

Suddenly, Mouse stiffened. Just below him, huddled under the inadequate covering of an umbrella, a lone figure had stopped beneath the protective shelter of the bridge. Mouse quickly scuttled backward and upward into the darker shadows hoping to remain unseen by the newcomer. As he watched, the slight figure lowered the umbrella and peered out into the rain-drenched night. Mouse's eyes opened wide in astonishment. A flash of lightning had illuminated a face that stunned Mouse and caused his mouth to drop open. What he saw was impossible! Before he could recover, the figure below him disappeared into the darkness.

Mouse ran wildly through the tunnels, slipping and sliding. He turned a corner and careened into Vincent and Catherine.

"Mouse! What on earth! What's the matter?" Vincent grasped Mouse by the arms in a somewhat futile attempt to hold the young man still. This was no small chore, for Mouse's hair and clothing were dripping wet - a result of the drenching he had taken in the raging storm during his flight across the park.

Breathless, Mouse struggled to pull the words and images together, to make sense of what he had seen Above. He jumped about, pointing first at Vincent, then at Catherine, then toward the rock ceiling above them. Words were failing him again.

"Up top.... like you.... like her.... like you both!"

"Mouse, slow down. What are you talking about?" Vincent took a tighter grip on Mouse and this time his superior muscle power accomplished the task of holding him in one spot.

Mouse struggled for breath, struggled to slow down enough to explain to his friend what he had seen. "Just now. Up top. Saw you. Saw someone like you!"

"Mouse, what do you mean, like me?"

"Same face." He pointed toward Vincent. "Up top. Just now!" Grabbing Vincent's hand, he began to pull him back along the path. "Come!"

"Mouse!" The considerable volume of Vincent's commanding voice stopped Mouse in his tracks. "Please, slow down and explain yourself."

Finally, and with obvious effort, Mouse gathered himself together and related how he had taken shelter under one of the park bridges during the storm. Someone had stopped just below him and when lightning flashed, he saw the person had a face like Vincent. A girl. He thought.

"Mouse, are you sure?"

Indignant, "Mouse doesn't lie!"

"I didn't say you were lying, Mouse." Gently, Vincent sought to reassure Mouse, and the salve the young man's hurt feelings. "Only, perhaps, mistaken.... in the darkness."

Determination and hurt shaped the young man's round features. His finger jabbed the air toward Vincent, "I see you." His finger swung toward Catherine. "I saw her...." His finger jabbed, vehemently, once again upward ".... up top!" He was quiet for a moment, studying the two bewildered friends standing before him.

"Friends are supposed to believe friends." Mouse peered up into Vincent's astonished features. Before Vincent could speak, Mouse muttered, "Some friend," and raced off down the tunnel.

Vincent's hesitation had not stemmed from disbelief at Mouse's revelation; his mind raced between the impossibility and the probability of such news. Before he could gather his faculties and reassure Mouse, the young man had disappeared out of sight down the tunnel passageway. Vincent could only stare after him, silent and wondering, trying to deduce what had actually happened, what it was that Mouse had actually seen. Surely, circumstances, a trick of light, had all combined to fuel an already active and imaginative mind.

Turning her attention from Mouse's fast-disappearing figure and back to Vincent, Catherine witnessed an interesting play of emotions. As Vincent stared after Mouse, a seldom seen expression crossed his leonine features; that of being hopelessly confounded by the young man's words. It was an expression few people could raise on Vincent's usually controlled facade. Mouse seemed able to do it with unequivocal ease. The possibility that Mouse had actually seen someone such as himself would fuel Vincent's own inner turmoil. It could provide the answers to questions never verbalized, and the solving of a lifelong puzzle. Catherine realized her presence had stayed Vincent from following Mouse and clarifying the story,

"Go after him, Vincent," she urged gently. Before he could refuse, she continued. "He needs you now, go to him. It is but a short distance to the park entrance. I can find my way from here alone."

Vincent turned to her. "I can catch up with Mouse later, Catherine. But, judging from Mouse's saturated condition, the storm must still be raging outside. Perhaps we should turn back so you can enter from your basement."

"No, I will be fine going this way. It is closer, and I don't mind the rain. I have a tote-umbrella in my bag. Besides, I think there is another kind of storm raging down here. One that needs your attention."

Catherine felt Vincent's torn loyalties, his love for her and his concern about Mouse. Like herself, she knew Vincent had no desire to sacrifice such a precious commodity as their always too brief time together. And though it was but a short distance to the park entrance, it would be a few more moments they could share. She understood.

"I really do think you need to catch up with Mouse. He seemed quite distressed to think that you might not have believed him." She studied Vincent's mood and concluded rightly. "And, whether what he saw is accurate or not, you have questions only Mouse can answer." Then added softly, the words that had gone unspoken in the past few hectic moments. "A lifetime of questions."

Vincent turned to her and considered her openly for a moment. She was right in both regards. His face was a play of conflicting emotions. He shook his head. "I can't leave you here." He reached out and his large hands gently grasped her arms saying more accurately. "I don't want to leave you."

"Vincent, please, find out for both of us." Moving into his arms, she hugged him close, placed a kiss on his jawline then stepped back. His hesitation was still apparent. She gave him a gentle push, her word spoken softly and with understanding of the conflicts within him. "Go."

She nearly won out. Then, with quiet determination, Vincent reached out, gently enclosed her hand in his, and led her slowly down the semi-dark passageway to the park entrance. She wisely

remained silent. At the junction door, Vincent tripped the control switch. His blue eyes regarded Catherine silently, warmly. The iron door groaned backward into its secret place within the concrete walls and, for this brief moment, their two worlds were almost joined. Only the barred gate separated one from the other. Vincent reached out and pushed the gate open. Bending low, he stepped through the entryway, then turned and assisted Catherine.

He stood, quiet and still, facing her for several moments. Without speaking, he moved forward and gathered her to him. His world, all he had ever yearned for, he now held soft and yielding within the circle of his embrace. His powerful arms held her with infinite tenderness. With the most affectionate care, he gently brushed the muzzle-like portion of his mouth against the silken softness of her temple. His breath warm upon the narrow scar near her ear, his lips placed a lover's kiss upon the area of tender flesh.

Catherine moved closer into him, wonderfully aware of his strength and warmth hard against her body. She savored the inner stillness that surrounded him; a stillness that emanated from him and which, so often, worked the miracle of quieting the turmoil she frequently carried with her from the world Above. She was renewed by his love. And, because it was such a very special kind of love, it surrounded her, made her feel at peace as nothing else in her life ever had. She could never be held close enough to him, be held long enough by him. All too soon, he released her. He took a few steps away from her, turning to move through the iron-barred gate and then down the passageway. Suddenly, he swirled back to her, his cloak flaring out about him like a restless shadow. Then she was once more in his arms, his mouth brushing lightly across her cheek, tracing the curve of her jawline until he found her lips.

"I love you," he whispered warmly against her mouth. The soft, husky pitch of his voice revealed the unspoken words, the hovering emotions behind his farewell. Then he was gone.

The guttering candles added a deeper haze to the already smokey room. Their wavering amber light enhanced the sharp angles of the man's face and added more gilding to his gold half-mask. His deep, cultured voice carried the sound of thunder, an echoing of the storm raging far above them.

'Did he see you?'

'Yes.' The thin-framed girl nodded her head. The candlelight in the room danced shadows across her delicate leonine features.

'Good. Now the game begins.'

Vincent searched for several hours before finally locating Mouse. After his abrupt departure from Vincent and Catherine in the passageway, Mouse had not gone to any of the usual hide-aways. For some reason, he had chosen to seclude himself in the high loft of Vincent's own chamber, close to, but not quite in plain sight of, Vincent. Giving up the search only temporarily, a worried Vincent had returned to his chamber. He had just entered and tossed his cloak onto a chair, when he heard a slight noise coming from the loft above. Reaching out with his empathetic senses, he sought the identity of his unknown visitor and found that his quarry had come to him.

"Mouse?" Vincent studied the semi-dark opening of the small loft-like area. Mouse's tousled blonde head cautiously appeared over the edge of the loft and, looking down, he studied Vincent for a moment.

"Ran off. Came to apologize." Mouse hesitantly smiled down at Vincent, querying, "Friends again?"

"Always friends," Vincent replied, smiling gently. He made a motion with his hand indicating Mouse should climb down the ladder and join him. He quietly urged, "Come down, Mouse. We need to talk."

Smiling a broad, lop-sided grin, Mouse eagerly scuttled down the iron ladder. And so they talked. Mouse, now calmed down from his Up Top experience, related in detail what he had seen. Vincent, quietly questioning and cross-questioning in a manner that encouraged Mouse to relate his story. Once the story had been completed, and he was assured Vincent was truly no longer upset with him, Mouse happily put the episode behind him. Grabbing Vincent's hand, he pulled him down the passageway to his chamber where he proudly displayed the present he had made for Jamie.

On a previous nocturnal visit to that same bridge, Mouse had spotted an abandoned bird's nest with several feathers sticking out of the woven materials. He had returned there tonight to get the feathers in order to finish his project for Jamie. While waiting the storm out under the bridge, he had finished his gift to her. He had fastened the last feathers to a thin, leather strip with beads and a small metal clip so she could hang it from her crossbow or wear in her hair on special occasions.

"So she won't be mad cause Mouse late," Mouse smiled hopefully,

"I'm sure she will like it very much, Mouse," Vincent assured him honestly.

After his talk with Mouse, Vincent slowly walked the shadowy corridors back to his chamber, deep in thought. What Mouse had told him was impossible to believe. Yet, Vincent knew Mouse didn't lie, couldn't lie. His reality was colored only by his perception of it, which he saw in the simplest of equations. What Mouse saw, was the way it was. Period. And, it helped if one knew Mouse and was able to look into his reality with the same perception, Vincent could, and did. But, if he dared to believe Mouse's description of the person he had seen under that bridge, it changed the very fabric of his life - and that disturbed Vincent. The possibility that someone like himself existed, raised ghosts from the past. He forced the apparitions deep into the back of his mind.

Once again, he fought to suppress the yearning of childhood wishes and dreams to solve the mystery of his parentage. Over the years, he had rationalized about his origins, convincing himself that where he came from did not and could not make him any different than he was. Who he was now, and what he did now with his life, was all that really mattered. His family was here in these tunnels. His life was here in these tunnels. That there was no genetic bond with those living in this world, did nothing to negate the loving care that had been showered upon him throughout his life. Still, even in this safe place, Vincent had the natural need to know more about who he was. The desire to connect with those two other beings responsible for giving him life rose like a hungry specter before him. Flashbacks of his childhood and teen years accompanied him through the golden, torch-lit tunnels with such force that he finally surrendered to them.

One of the turning points in his life occurred when he was about age ten. There had been an argument with his brother. Devin had called Vincent a liar and accused him of snitching to Father about Devin having brought a forbidden jackknife. Devin punched Vincent, bloodying his nose. Hurt and angered, Vincent's animal fury rose to the surface and in a feral, red rage, he struck out blindly at Devin, his sharp-clawed fingers rending the flesh of his brother's cheek.

Father treated the wounds the two boys had given to each other - Vincent's bloody nose and the three deep gashes on Devin's cheek - then berated both boys for fighting. Devin, for starting the fight, and Vincent, for striking back at Devin who, although older and taller, did not have Vincent's strength.

Ashamed of what he had done, Vincent had sought, once again, the solitude of those distant caves in search of an answer as to why his anger had culminated in the particularly volatile manner that it had. It seemed to have flared wildly and of its own accord. It was a bit frightening to realize that he had no control over it. What if it should surface stronger and he should hurt someone worse than he had hurt Devin? It was an unwelcome part of his uniqueness that he strove with fierce determination to understand. It was a struggle that would follow him into full manhood.

Then, at age 17, Vincent reached the point in which a maturing young boy struggled with his approaching manhood, and wondered if there would be some one person for him to share his life with. For Vincent, the knowledge that there would be no one for him, affected his entire outlook on life. He had survived both the trauma of having accidentally hurt the young girl Lisa with his claws during a heated, adolescent embrace, and the terrifying '*dark-time*' that followed, by the strength of his spirit. His impending maturity brought with it a quiet desperation to find his place in the community - his own contribution to its survival. That he had become teacher and friend to the growing number of tunnel children helped, but minimally, his growing inner need to be an important and integral part of the tunnel world. There were other teachers to be found within the community, should he not be there, so he felt he was not irreplaceable in that respect.

In an unexpected encounter in which several of the children had not only been threatened, but one of them seriously injured, he found his unique niche in the community. A bully from the outside world had followed the children from the park below to the iron gate. There he stopped them and became furious when they wouldn't answer his questions about why they were there. Picking on one of the smaller ones, he began pummeling the helpless child. Before the other children could react to protect their companion, a roaring Vincent erupted through the iron gate.

In mindless, unthinking fury, he had attacked and killed the intruder. Despite the fact he had been protecting those who could not protect themselves, he was overwhelmed with the realization that he had taken a life in so sudden and savage a manner. His actions had been beyond his control. He had seen an act of violence and had reacted with violence. He became ill with self-loathing. He was certain those in his community must feel repugnance by his very presence among them. He had reacted in an animistic manner, instinctive and unthinking. Searching within himself to find an answer or a justification for why he had done what he had done, brought him no peace of mind.

Father, shocked at first almost as much as Vincent, saw how it had torn at the heart and soul of this most unique son. He sought his own understanding and acceptance of Vincent's actions and then he had sought to give Vincent peace of mind as well. To do that, he knew Vincent would have to find his own way, forgive himself for having taken a life. Vincent would have to find his own answers as to the why of it. In the end, only Vincent could forgive Vincent.

When Vincent finally found his answer, he approached Father with great trepidation, for he knew his parent would most assuredly disapprove of what he was about to suggest. But it made perfect sense to Vincent. He only need convince Father of its rightness. It gave him one answer as to why he was.

"Until that person's violence entered our world, I had not struck out in anger since Devin. What arises within me does so only when our existence here is threatened."

He plowed ahead, afraid if he stopped he would never begin again.

"Father, I have the strength. Let me do this. Let me protect these people as only I can. Perhaps, that is my destiny - why I am here."

Knowing this violent side to his son's nature was but a pulse-beat away beneath the gentler surface of the man that he was, Father knew Vincent had made a decision that would impact the rest of his life. He had assumed a role within the community that no one, other than Vincent, could fill. Young and eager and idealistic, hungry to be an integral part of his world, an unforeseen event had shaped his life.

Father choked down the answer that he could not allow Vincent to take on this role. Instead, he struck a bargain with him. When danger threatened, Vincent would only '*go out*' after talking the situation over with Father and others, and only if no other viable alternative could be found. Father had seen what only one encounter had cost Vincent. He was not eager for his son to experience such violence again. He was filled with sorrow for this child who had taken a step toward his manhood not knowing what his decision was to cost him. Neither could foresee the trauma to

Vincent that would occur in years to come when he tried to reconcile his reverence for life with the need to protect those he loved, nor could they know the mental and physical damage it would do to him.

There were other changes to come from that bloody encounter at the iron gate that would alter his life in another way. In addition to finding his place in the community, in a manner he felt uniquely his own, Vincent had decided that he could not spend the remainder of his life entombed within the caverns of his world. He could not let his life be defined and limited by the boundaries of the caves and tunnels that provided his safe haven.

After killing the bully, he had sought mental and physical sanctuary in the caverns far below the home community. Torches shone in the darkness that possessed the lower reaches near the Catacombs. Vincent had frequently gone this deep into the earth, below the Catacombs. Here he could roar out his pain and anguish and no one would hear. His pain would still be his alone. Sometimes, he needed it that way. A new Vincent had been born in this womb of the earth. He had grown stronger, discovering and accepting strange new aspects of himself, and making peace with them and himself.

But, now, he was no longer a child to hide in dark corners, crying out his frustration. The baptism of blood had brutally thrust him into manhood, and that burgeoning maturity called out for larger, unrestricted spaces. Vincent had made plans to go Above.

When Vincent decided to go Above on his own, not only to explore but also just for the sheer pleasure of the freedom of space it offered, he realized the danger of what he was about to do. He knew he would need some manner of protection to avoid being detected by anyone traveling the darkened streets. He knew the need to blend into the dark places. And he required something to conceal his features should he accidentally confront someone.

He searched the community storeroom and found several varied and sufficiently ample scraps of wool and leather for coverings and bindings. More than enough, he was certain, to cover his fully matured and powerfully built frame. He took what he found to Sarah and explained what he needed. Pressing her to secrecy until the moment when he would tell Father. She nodded her understanding; however, she told him, she would need his help. She had injured her hand and would be unable to do certain aspects of the work herself. If he was willing, she would be glad to have his help in cutting and sewing of the fabric. In any event, she needed his strength to do the leather punching, and the cutting of leather strips. And so they worked together, she was an exacting teacher, instructing him in the necessary steps.

As the days passed, she cut and sewed; he punched and laced. Under her tutelage, he had almost completed the garment himself. Finally, her hand healed sufficiently that she told him that she would be able to do the finishing steps herself. About a week later, she called him to her chamber. The finished garment was more than he had hoped for. It was of black wool and two shades of a dark-colored leather, sewn together with bands of leather and lacing. It was voluminous, the lines softly flowing to blend with the night shadows. There was a hood, large enough to cover his mass of red-gold mane and roomy enough to pull forward over his face. He was surprised to find she had left the right side without a sleeve.

"For your *'sword-arm'*," she explained with quiet logic. She had understood more than he had told her. Should it be necessary to protect himself Above, he would need unrestricted movement. His right arm was his striking arm.

For his *'sword-arm'*, Sarah had told him. That hinting of the darker side of the cloak's purpose occurred less and less often now. It would be long years later that he would discover the plentiful fabric could be efficiently wrapped not only about himself, hiding his face and form from strangers, but also it would be ample enough to enfold a softer, smaller someone. A treasured someone who healed his heart each time he held her in his arms. Catherine. It often protected them when a

sudden rain shower caught them during night walks through the park. He would enfold her in his cloak on the cold winter evenings when they watched the city lights form her terrace. He had wrapped it around her for warmth and comfort after rescuing her from the trunk of a sinking car, where she had been sealed by a crazed voyeur who was intent on her death. In a cavern deep within his world, it had warmed their naked bodies in the sweet, sensual aftermath of their lovemaking.

After finding Catherine, Vincent came to treasure those travels Above even more. Tomorrow night, they would be together for two days of uninterrupted time, sharing his world. She would be eager to learn of what Mouse had seen. Vincent's conversation tonight with Mouse had reawakened painful childhood dreams - old memories of his own growth toward becoming himself, accepting who and what he was and finding himself and his place in this unique world.

The outer tunnel made a slight turn as it angled his quarters. Though there was sufficient clearance, Vincent unconsciously ducked slightly enabling his imposing height and size to clear the low ceiling in that part of the passageway leading into his chamber.

Part way through the entryway, he stopped short, surprised to see the ship model he and Devin had made sitting on the floor just inside the chamber door. Puzzled, he bent to pick up the fragile replica of an old, fully-rigged sailing vessel, wondering who could possibly have broken the unwritten code about entering another person's chamber in their absence. To remove something was even more unthinkable. He carefully examined the vessel and found it to be unharmed. He smiled, recalling how he and Devin had sailed that fine ship around the world on many a boyhood adventure. For a brief instant, he was off again, striding the rolling wooden deck, hearing the sails snap as the wind soared around the tall masts, feeling the wind on his face, blowing his mane in wild disarray. Sensations he could only truly bring out of his imagination by going into the Wind chamber near where Narcissa lived. There, as a boy, he would close his eyes and imagine the wind he felt was swirling about a high mast far above his head.

Moving into his chamber, he stopped before the small writing table in the center of his room. A solitary candle provided a golden light, dim but sufficient for his particularly acute sense of sight.

"It wasn't that kind of a ship," the voice said.

Vincent gave a startled growl and whirled around to see who had spoken behind him. The ship model he had been about to carefully place on the table spun out of his hands and careened across the wooden surface, stopping precariously near the table's edge. His keen eyes probed the shadowed corners behind him, then searched the remainder of his chamber. No one was there.

'That was unwise of you to confront him so soon. Now, he will be more wary. It could make your task more difficult.'

Catherine smiled in her sleep. Nocturnal dreams echoed waking dreams. She and Vincent were astride a sleek-coated, powerfully muscled, snow-covered horse. Sitting behind Vincent, she would her arms around his waist and hugged up tightly against the warmth of his back. Covered with softly falling snow, the park wore a garment of crystal-tinged, white velvet. Hushed and quiet, it was miraculously deserted except for the two of them. The only sound was that of the horse's hooves, whispering through the blanket of snow as it stepped lightly along the path that curved down to the tunnel entrance. There, with a graceful toss of its head, it halted.

Alighting first, Vincent turned and lifted Catherine from the horse's back, his hands strong and warm about her waist. They stood close together, their bodies almost touching. Vincent was garbed all in white; his voluminous cloak, even his boots were white. The amber-soft curl of his body hair was visible within the deep, cleft opening of his shirt. His white trousers accentuated his hips and muscular thighs and left no doubt about his masculinity. Her own white garments seemed made of the snowflakes themselves. One instant it shrouded completely, the next instant her naked

body was revealed through the delicate, lacy fabric.

The scene shifted and Catherine became faintly aware of the strangeness of things occurring but, as it is when visiting that dream world, it all seemed natural and not so unusual after all. The horse shook itself and the lush, silky hair along its graceful neck floated outward, sending a glittering shower of frozen-flakes into the air. Then, the animal magically transformed itself into a spiraling column of snow. The sparkling particles drifted silently down, floating soft and caressing, all about them, settling upon Vincent's white cloak and clinging to his golden mane. Catherine felt the coolness of their feathery touch as they delicately graced across her face and lips. Vincent bent toward her. His lips were firm and warm as he placed them lightly upon hers. The cool flakes of snow that dared to settle briefly between their slowly nearing lips, melted at the tender joining.

When the kiss ended, she and Vincent were laying naked in the snow----and the snow was not cold on their skin, but warm and comforting, cradling around their bodies as they made love. She felt the warmth of his powerful, golden-furred body as he pressed against hers. She felt his heat and hardness as he moved over her and into her; felt him with such clarity that it breached the wall separating dream world from reality, the intensity of it almost awakening her. Her fingers stroked the strong muscular curves of his naked back and hips; his flesh was firm and warm beneath her caressing palms. She felt the rhythmic action of his powerful muscles, and her sleeping body became heated and aroused. She stirred restlessly within her sleep, reaching out to him from the dream world. Searching desperately for him, finding him at last and clinging to him as their fiery emotions joined and they soared on the sudden, overwhelming urgency that was driving them toward completion. As their passion rose and their lovemaking intensified, the snow swirled about them, rising into a shrieking, blizzard, its noise ringing painfully in her ears.

The jangling of her bedside telephone jarred Catherine awake. She groped for the receiver and a thick-voiced, decidedly grumpy "Hello" greeted her called.

"I hope I'm not disturbing anything!" The cheery, familiar voice of her friend and confidante, Jenny Aronson, prodded Catherine into further wakefulness.

Catherine fought to bring her body and mind back to the cold reality of the present. She was unable to elicit an immediate response to Jenny's query. She couldn't force a coherent answer through the still fiery remnants of the dream. She searched for an answer. Both, yes and now, would have been appropriate. She grinned, imagining what her friend's reaction might have been given that particular enigmatic answer.

"To make up for whatever it was you interrupted, my intrusive friend, you can answer a question for me." Knowing Jenny's penchant for believing in the portent of them, Catherine queried her about the significance of her dreams. "Jenny, in dreams, what does a horse signify? She explained that, recently, the animal always appeared somewhere in them. "Why am I always dreaming of horses, Jen?"

"Horses represent the emotions, my friend." Jenny's wickedly suggestive chuckle reached Catherine's ear over the phone. "Sounds like you have a man on your mind. Anyone I know?"

"No." Catherine grinned and her voice softened. She granted Jenny the only clue her friend would ever have as to Vincent's identity. "But to satisfy at least *'part'* of your insatiable, match-making curiosity - you could say that it is the man of my dreams." *'The man I love,'* she could have added, but didn't. Her slowly awakening body still clung to the warm, erotic remnants of her dream and recalled how her body felt beneath the weight and feel of his. With monumental effort, she struggled to attend her present conversation with Jenny.

"If he's that good, the next time you meet, ask him if he has a friend." Jenny chirruped back.

Catherine chuckled at her friend's response. "I'll see what I can do."

She turned down an invitation to spend the weekend with Jenny at the opening for one of

Catherine's favorite authors. At any other time, she would have jumped at the chance, but these next few days were to be very special. After the tunnel community's initial celebration of his birthday, she and Vincent planned to spend a day or two exploring areas of his world she had never seen.

Hanging up the phone, she stretched long and luxuriously, delaying for a few moments more the necessity to begin her day. She relived instead, the warm vestiges of her dream, unaware that she was stroking the sheets where she desired him to be. Then, rising from the seductive comfort of her bed and wrapping a robe about herself, she padded barefoot to the terrace doors. During the night, the terrace had been dusted with a light covering of snow. She mused on the strangeness of January's weather. Last night, there had been a thunderstorm of the kind expected only in summer, today - snow. Just before turning away from the doors, she noted telltale footprints in the snow.

"Oh, Vincent," she breathed his name softly, warmed by the thought of him being there, so close, watching over her while she slept. She wished he had awakened her; wished he had come in. She smiled, remembering her dream. He had seemed so close to her near its end. Perhaps, the reality of his closeness had influenced that dream world, for he had been no further away than a few fragile panes of glass. She wondered, could he share her dreams through their bond as he did her emotions? It was an interesting thought, filled with even more interesting possibilities. She stored that idea away for future investigation.

The unobtrusive night sounds of an empty office surrounded Catherine. It was with determined purpose that she had elected to stay late that particular evening. Her upcoming plans did not include backpacking legal briefs home with her every night. These next few days, she wanted freedom from any nagging outside influence. Tossing the last file brief onto a towering stack of similar briefs, she leaned back in her desk chair, rubbed her tired eyes, and breathed a sigh of relief that the work was finally complete; or at least as caught up as it ever got.

Clicking the desk lamp off, she rose from her chair, tired to the bone. She smiled, brightened by the fact that, in a matter of hours, she would meet Vincent and they would share the next few days together with no harried deadlines pressing upon them, and no possibility of interruptions. Noting a light still on in Joe's office, she stopped by to say goodnight.

"You still working, Joe? I thought you and Gina had a date tonight?"

"We did, but she had to cut her trip short and head back to LA. Some problem with one of her clients. Started a row about bookings, contracts, money.... something. Apparently, she is the only one the guy will talk with. She's the only one he trusts and I guess she is the only one who can handle his particular type of hyper."

"She's good at that, I believe." She smiled down at Joe. "I notice she seems to have your number."

"You betcha." Joe grinned back up at her, a twinkle in his dark brown eyes.

Noticing a particular file on his desk, Catherine inquired about the results of the investigation. "Did they turn up anything new on that hospital explosion?"

"They have identified one more person. An orderly. His wife identified him. She said he had told her about some strange things going on out there. Apparently, he told her they were doing some pretty way-out types of plastic surgery or something. He saw this one patient, face all bandaged, and when he was spotted looking in the hospital room, they got real upset. Guess he was almost fired on the spot. He had called home during his evening meal break and was talking to his wife on the phone, telling her about it, when the explosion occurred."

"Rough."

"Yeah." Both were quiet for a short period, thinking of how such a disaster would affect the ones they loved. Joe peered across the desk at his favorite girl. "Hey, Radcliffe, since I have been stood

up for the night, how about joining me for pizza?"

"Thanks, Joe, but I'm going to help someone celebrate a birthday tonight."

"Anyone I know?"

"No."

Joe grinned hopefully. "Anyone I'm going to get to know?"

"No." Catherine smiled sweetly over her shoulder at him as she exited his office. "Nite, Joe."

Joe grinned after her retreating figure, shaking his head at her secretiveness, which he had come to accept as part of Cathy's reticence in talking about her private life.

"Lucky guy," Joe muttered to himself.

An hour later, Catherine, dressed in her party attire, grabbed the already packed canvas carry-all containing her hiking clothes and Vincent's two birthday gifts. Then, she waited impatiently for the elevator to carry her downward. Cautiously, she disembarked two floors before her destination and took to the stairwell, continuing the final leg of her journey, unobserved, downward further still to the threshold where Vincent would be waiting for her. In her heart, they were already together and the dream of last night could be tonight's reality.

'Did she see you?'

'Of course not!'

'It is important the woman be unaware of your presence until the moment is right.'

'Then both will see me?'

'Yes.'

'... and the Messenger?'

'Will arrive at the appropriate time.'

The familiar sounds of the tunnel world faded away behind Vincent. The rhythmic, tapping codes of the pipes and the rumble of distant subways had gradually subsided and disappeared. As he traversed the maze of shadowy upper passageways, the only sounds accompanying him were the faint crunching of his boots upon the sand and the whispering of his heavy, leather and wool cloak.

Reaching the final entrance to his destination, he bent down to clear the low doorway. Stepping through to the other side, he straightened to his full, imposing height, his steps gradually slowing as he approached the threshold where Catherine would come to him. Stopping before the ragged, brick opening that marked the entry to her basement, he paused a moment, surveying the room beyond. Reaching out to sense the presence of the one he loved, he felt her love returning warm and alive back through their miraculous bond. Raising his powerful arms, he reached out, resting large, fur-covered hands on either side of the doorway. Hands whose deadly claws, directed by his unimaginable strength, had ripped apart and killed those who would harm the ones he loved. Hands whose deadly claws could hold the woman he loved with equally unimaginable tenderness. How many times, over the years since they had found each other, had he walked to this spot to meet her, to gather her into his arms and hold her close to his heart, to feel her warmth and softness pressed against him? His mind and his heart could unfold, from memory, each and every coming together and see it before him with perfect clarity.

He found it unbelievable, still, to see the joy in her eyes when she found him waiting for her, to feel it wrapping about him, to know and be enfolded by the exquisite miracle of her love.

She was a dream he had never dared wish for.

Vincent waited. Voices drifted down from above, and a lifelong habit of avoiding discovery found him easing backward into the protective darkness of the nearby shadows. The voices had stirred to life a memory of another time. The bittersweet memory of the first time he had guided Catherine to this threshold. Voices had interrupted their farewell; they had broken apart and he had run away from her.

"Vincent!"

Catherine's cry followed him down the winding tunnel corridors. He fled from her. He ran from his fragile dreams and from the woman he had come to love. A door had been opened offering him a tantalizing view of possibilities and, then, it had been cruelly slammed shut. His flight from her threshold to his world Below had been without conscious direction. He flew back to a place that once had nurtured and comforted him. Now, he saw before him only a cold and empty world filled with an aching loneliness.

Reaching the sanctuary of Below, he burst into his chamber, propelled by a turmoil of emotions, his cloak billowing out about him like tempest-driven sails. During one circuit of his chamber, he slid the weighty fabric from his broad shoulders and tossed it onto a chair. His agitated pacing carried him countless times around the dimly lit chamber, until, finally, he slowed to a breathless halt.

His eyes searched a room filled with memories of her. His head still held the faint imprint of her body. The tunnel clothing she had worn lay folded neatly in a small pile on his chair. He closed his eyes for an instant trying to shut the memories out. But his other senses traitorously reached out to find other traces of her. Her scent hovered in the air about him, taunting him. Behind his closed eyes, the images rose up like phantoms before him. He could see vividly the green of her eyes, the line of her cheek - her mouth. Her voice whispered in his ears. She had stood close against his side saying her goodbye. He had slowly encircled her with his arm and held her then - briefly. He could still feel her warmth and softness pressed against his body, the light touch of her hand on his chest.

How foolish to have run from her. But, he knew, had he remained, he would have held her in his arms and been foolishly tempted to implore her to stay with him. Like a restless animal, he renewed pacing the boundaries of his chamber seeking, futilely, a space that didn't hold her essence. But it was impossible. She was everywhere.

He cursed a fate that, a mere ten days before, had brought them together. How close he had come to not going Above that evening. Returning from his walk that dark, fog-shrouded night, he was nearing the tunnel entrance when headlights rounded the curve roadway just above it. Melding into the shadows, he hid, waiting for the vehicle to pass. A dark van slowed down and he saw a shadowy object flung out the door, as if it were a useless and unimportant *'thing.'* He heard the thud and then winced, suddenly startled, having felt the impact of the body when it hit the frozen ground. The van sped off into the darkness and the park became hushed and quiet; the disturbed fog returned to float ghost-like about the bushes near the roadway.

Cautiously, Vincent approached the unmoving form, and when he touched her shoulder, he felt the faint spark of life, felt her spirit struggle for survival. In that instant, he went against all the tenets of the tunnel world society. He saved her life by carrying her Below to his world and caring for her. Their separate paths had crossed and merged, changing both their lives forever.

"Don't be afraid," he had implored her, when she finally regained consciousness. "Please, don't be afraid."

His words had been, in part, an unspoken plea as much for himself as for her. In attempting to soothe her fears, his own had arisen, dreading her expected response to his appearance when her bandages were removed and, finally, she would see him.

'Don't be afraid when you see me. Please, don't be afraid.'

In the end, she had been unafraid. Her eyes touched his face, her heart saw into his and she had accepted him for what he was. Perhaps, for him, it might have been better if she had feared him. His dreams, sparked by a wildest flickering of hope, might never have been allowed to grow. All too soon, the time came for her to return to her world Above, to begin her life anew. Vincent's heart cried out with the agony of that parting.

"Is she gone?" Father questioned Vincent when he finally returned to the older man's chamber.

"Yes." Vincent's answer was quiet and restrained.

Nothing more was said, and he was grateful for Father's silence. Vincent had a tentative hold on his emotions and struggled to sort them out. A questioning parent was not what he wanted at this time. Idly fingering the queen on the chessboard, Vincent had not seen Father's look of compassion. The older man understood more than he revealed. Vincent was experiencing the anguish of his lost dreams. Father, too, had known the loss of someone dearly loved and the hollow pain of separation. His son had given his heart to this woman from Above and, at that moment, Father hated this person who was the cause of his son's pain.

That night, and for the first time in ten days, Vincent slept in his own bed, surrounded by blankets and pillows still holding the scent of Catherine's body. Gathering them closer, he turned into their rough, woven textures and buried his face, inhaling the memory of her. He felt acute anger and frustration at a fate that made him what he was; a fate that had condemned him to a life survivable only because it was a hidden and secretive existence.

All of his life, Vincent had found himself adapting to the limitations that defined the boundaries of his life; learning to accept the special restrictions imposed particularly upon himself, trying to understand who he was----and 'why' he was. Unlike his fellow companions in the tunnels, his life seemed to be one of constant discovery and rediscovery about himself. But there was no one who could truly understand some of the unexplained mental and physical phenomena that were uniquely his.

He found it difficult to comprehend the special limitations governing his young life; limitations that weren't imposed upon the other children. That they were for his own protection, only helped soothe those frustrations the tiniest bit. On occasion, he would rail against them - go against Father's wishes - and find out the hard way that those rules were there for a very explicit reason. Whenever those restrictions became painfully overwhelming, he would disappear deep into the earth, seeking the caves beyond the Catacombs, going into the remotest caverns where he could test his strength against the immovable rock walls. In that place, far from the tunnel boundaries, he could roar out his frustration unheard by others; let it careen against the stone walls until spent; where his tears could flow unchecked and unseen and, momentarily, wash the hurt and loneliness away. He would return to the upper tunnels only after he had discovered some newer understanding and insight into the reason for being where he was - but the answer to 'why' he was never came.

At age 15, Vincent struggled with the knowledge there would be no one for him. A part of himself had been awakened that he found totally foreign to his nature. He was engulfed with emotions that he was unable to comprehend or find an outlet for, and he found himself turning another, darker, corner.

Lisa had stirred a strange and unfamiliar yearning within him that he was not yet mature enough to understand; a yearning that had awakened something primitive and alien within him that he was unprepared for. The suddenness with which it arose, nearly overcame his essentially controlled and gentle nature, and it frightened him. He had felt powerless against it. Having once been given

a glimpse of that force within himself, he continually and desperately tried to understand it. He feared it would rise up and become uncontrollable; and his body dripped with sweat; until he was weak and shaking with fatigue. Only then did he find relief from his anguish. Only then would the images of his day-desires and night-dreams cease and he could collapse into welcome sleep.

During her sojourn in search of her own inner strengths, struggling through her fears, Vincent felt Catherine reach out to him. She found her strength in his strength, in simply knowing that he was there, not too far distant, beneath the city streets. In a time of horror and darkness, he had been kind to her, making her feel safe in a strange, dark world. And, so, when he felt her reach out to him once again, he was there for her through their bond, giving her his silent understanding.

He sensed that she needed his kindness in a world becoming strange and different. She was changing and she didn't know quite what to do with the new Catherine. Thus, she sought and found relief from her fears by thinking of him.

For one heart-stopping moment, he sensed that she had considered returning to her basement threshold entrance in an attempt to locate him and his world once more. He felt the intensity of her need as she reached out to him. And, each time it happened, the wanting of her grew until it was killing him. For he had shared more than her everyday emotions. In the deep, unprotected hours of sleep, he had shared her dreams of him. In recent nights, Catherine's dreams had been as erotic as those he had of her, and he was overcome by the knowledge that she desired him as well. But he knew, all too painfully, that they could have no life together.

He had sought comfort and understanding in discussing with Father the closeness of the bond he and Catherine shared. Father saw clearly the agony that was driving Vincent, and understood to some degree the inner fire and pain of the unrequited love that burned within his son. Father had listened quietly and with tender compassion as Vincent exposed that pain nakedly before him. He had tried to explain the why of this tenuous connection, warning Vincent not to let his love for Catherine destroy him.

"Maybe, I have no choice," Vincent had replied, the almost whispered response filled with his hurting. His voice and his eyes revealing his misery.

With renewed determination, he fought against the closeness of their bond. He struggled to widen, and perhaps eventually obliterate, the tenuous thread that connected them. There had been a brief period when he thought the bond between them had finally dissipated, only to find it reawakened during an unguarded moment. He had gone to his special place beneath the park where the concert music breached the grating above his head to gently invade his world Below. In the semi-darkened area of this sanctuary just under the park bandshell. He let the music wash over him, giving himself up to the changing rhythms, finding freedom for his soul and a temporary respite for his heart.

In the hushed silence that followed the concert above him, he lingered for a few moments longer, listening as remnants of conversation of the departing crowd were caught on the air and floated down to him. He sat quietly, eyes closed, tawny head resting against the cold stone walls behind him, momentarily at peace. Though it had ceased some moments before, he remained lost in the sound of the vibrant music. The gift of it having enriched his world once more. Then, above his head, he heard the voices of two lovers. Their softly murmured words pierced his aching heart.

His thoughts returned once more to Catherine and his soul cried out against a cruel fate that kept them forever destined to be separate. When she had walked by his side on the trip to Above - to her threshold - he had felt whole; as if the other half of himself had been found. He had been given the briefest glimpse of what a different life could be.

The immovable door that separated their two worlds had slammed shut between them. He would open it for a few brief moments; only long enough to see her; only long enough to deliver the book he had read to her. Since Catherine's departure, the book had gone unread. Instead, he had

carried it as a talisman of their time together, finding comfort in holding something they had shared, however briefly. He would go Above, leave the book on her terrace as a gift. He would stay hidden, avoid any chance she would see him. He told himself, all he wanted to do was see for himself that she was well. Then he would quietly leave, disappearing from her life forever. His wildest dream was that, by chance, he would be fortunate enough to see her, to talk with her. He would tell her to forget him; urge her to find someone to share her dreams with, to forget him and his world. He would face her and lay to rest this constantly persistent dream of her, lay to rest his dreams of sharing any kind of a life with her and gain some measure of peace. Then he would disappear back to the protection of his shadowy world. It would be the hardest thing he would ever have to do.

Eight months after returning Catherine to her world, he re-entered that world, standing just beyond the light, holding to the protective shadows at the end of her terrace. Embarrassed, almost timid, about being found there. He had brought the book with him, leaving it just outside her terrace door. He had taken the book to her as a gift, unconsciously using it as an excuse to visit her. As if he needed an excuse. But it helped get him beyond the thoughts that he should have a reason for going---other than he was dying inside from his need to see her.

Spotting him in the shadows of her terrace, her unrestrained joy at seeing him was warm and unexpected, reaching him before she did. When, without hesitation, her arms enfolded him, and his joy was indescribable. He was afraid to breathe. Afraid he would awaken from this dream.

Now, on this night, three years later, he still found it difficult to breathe at the sight of her. He always felt like a tongue-tied youth whenever she appeared before him.

For so long, he had been reluctant to acknowledge the depth of his love for her. There was a frightening vulnerability in such an admission. It had been equally difficult accepting that she loved him. Then he discovered his love for her was constantly new and delicate, and that each encounter brought a newer, ever richer exploration of its depth. Still, as sweetly painful as their love sometimes proved to be, he savored the warm, honey taste of it. At one time, overcome with his love for her, he wondered if he could ever fully understand these feelings. He struggled to comprehend the strangeness and the newness of them and his reactions to these unfamiliar emotions. That was no longer true. The depth of their love for one another was a constantly renewing force in his life; each facet of it a wondrous and marvelous jewel his heart tenderly enclosed.

The rasp of iron grating against iron brought Vincent around to stare into the curtain of blue-white light that radiated downward, shielding the staple-ladder leading from Catherine's basement door. Moving out of the shadows, Vincent paused briefly before the jagged brick entryway, then stepped eagerly over the door sill. He moved with pounding heart toward the ladder, arriving at its base just as Catherine began her descent. It wasn't necessary to do so, but he reached up to steady her, his large hands strong and warm around her small waist. She turned eagerly into his arms, her own seeking at once the broad, comforting expanse of his shoulders. No words were spoken. It was as if all of Vincent's thoughts during his waiting, the past remembering of their first brief days and months together, all the love and longing that had finally been admitted to and consummated, had found its way into her heart and mind. She returned his silent statement of love through their bond, reaffirming the constantly renewing depth and scope of that love.

'The Book. Does she carry it with her?'

'Yes. He will hold it soon - perhaps by tonight.'

'Time is running out.'

'Events will proceed as planned. They always do.'

'Can he be lured away from them, do you think?'

'The ties are strong, but he will follow and events will unfold as before.'

'Times are different now.'

'Indeed. Times are different. This is a world devoid of magic.'

'He is the magic here.'

'Yes. And that is all that is needed.'

Catherine had been pleasantly surprised when she felt Vincent reaching for her before she was barely half-way down the ladder. She had the distinct impression that had she descended a little slower, he would have ascended the ladder and carried her down. She had but a split second to register his presence before he reached for her and she felt his strong hands around her waist, lifting her carefully off the last rungs of the ladder to gather her into his embrace. Until he released her some moments later, her feet never touched the basement floor. She barely had time for her arms to circle his neck, before she was pressed, with an almost fierce possessiveness, against the solid wall of his massive chest. He buried his face in her neck and held her for long, silent moments. So intense were his feelings as they surrounded her, that she could only remain silent and wait for him to speak. She sensed an unusual depth of emotion in his embrace and in his continued silence that she had never experienced before.

The iron band of his arms softened and relaxed a little, but still he held her. He kept his face hidden within the curve of her neck. She lifted one of her hands from under the heavy curtain of his hair and, reaching up, stroked his hair with gentle, soft, soothing movements. Then it stilled and she simply held the back of his head where he rested in the curve of her shoulder and neck.

"Vincent, what is it?"

The husky softness of her voice and the gentle pressure of her lips against his neck enabled Vincent to reclaim his voice. She felt the slight, raspy feel of his muzzle as his mouth found her cheek and he whispered against the creamy, smoothness of her skin.

"I was remembering when we first found each other.... of those eight months when I thought I would never see you again. How icy cold and empty my life became. All the light had gone out of it with your return Above." He gently nuzzled her cheek, his lips tracing a pattern near the corner of her mouth. "I remembered the exquisite joy of that first moment on your terrace when you embraced me. In that moment, I thought my heart would truly burst."

He drew back slightly to rest his hard cheekbone against her temple, his lips barely brushing the silken texture of her hair, kissing the top of her head. He remembered those first trembling days of their growing love, when he had dreamed of placing his mouth on hers. No, never! Surely, she would not wish to touch a mouth such as his. But, she had been the first to initiate that intimate contact. His heart had ceased beating when the unbelievable softness of her lips had touched his so fleetingly. He had been unable to move from where he stood, even after she disappeared up the ladder. He relived that contact moment after moment, wishing for it to happen again, but afraid to reach out to her and initiate that desired intimacy himself. When the dream of doing so at last became reality, he wondered why they had waited so long. Now it was a natural and desired part of their loving.

He was silent against her cheek, searching back, finding that it was the still, somehow, surprised him. He lifted his head and searched her face, his blue eyes, soft and caressing, were filled with more emotion than she had ever seen. He met her steady, loving gaze and when he spoke, his voice was a husky whisper.

"I was not prepared for love - and you. But every moment since that night, every time we are

together, I rejoice that I found you."

"Then, we rejoice together," her voice was thick with unshed tears and, unable to say any more, she turned and found his mouth. The kiss was soft and tender, expressing what she couldn't say in words; that this tender and powerful love they shared was melding them together, wrapping them in an eternal, inseparable bond. Vincent broke the kiss first, his mouth brushed over her lips, cheek and temple as if he didn't want to break contact with her. His arms tightened, gathering her into a tighter circle. His voice was intimate and low, and slightly filled with regret for the words he breathed near her ear.

"This place.... I wish it were tomorrow night. I wish were alone there now." He raised his head the merest distance and gazed into her green eyes, his own revealed feelings far warmer than their kiss had been, and indicated his reluctance to release her. "For now, we have a prior engagement to keep."

"Yes," Catherine spoke huskily, her eyes remaining focused on his lips for an instant longer, wanting them back on hers. She looked upward, finally, into the warm cerulean blue of his eyes and smiled slightly. "I find being held close to you.... like this.... most enjoyable," she bent forward slightly and kissed the tip of his nose, "but, I suppose you are right. We had best leave." She kissed one corner of his mouth. "I have someone I want you to meet." She kissed the opposite side of his mouth. She saw the pulse at the base of his throat change its best to a bit more rapid, unsteady rate. It matched hers.

"Who?" He inquired. His eyebrows went up slightly at her final statement. He knew of no strangers that were coming to the evening's festivities.

"Someone you never met," she kissed the tip of his furry nose lightly once again, smiling mysteriously, "But who should be quite familiar to you." She met his questioning gaze and kept her mysterious smile, adding softly, "As much as I am enjoying this position," she moved her body slightly against him, her hips pressing easily into him, "I think we could travel a bit faster if you let me down."

He lowered her slowly until her feet touched the basement floor. His arms were slow in releasing her. He bent down and gathered the straps of the tote-bag that she had dropped when he had reached for her, how long before? It could have been seconds----or an eternity. Her hand was engulfed in the largeness of his, and they began walking toward the home territory----but not too quickly.

"I wanted you to know the me I was - the child and the girl growing up."

Vincent turned, with infinite care, the leaves of the small book Catherine had given him. With each turned page, he traveled back through time with a Catherine he had never seen and could never have met. His fingers lightly passed over the photos of a smiling child, blonde hair aglow in the sunlight, blowing out birthday candles, a school picture showing a beaming, but somewhat gap-toothed grin, a slightly older version of the same girl sharing the photo page with a dark-maned pony, her riding habit trim and fitted to her tiny body, pride in the prize ribbon fastened in the animal's bridle. Photos at the beach, pail and bucket upside down, making more towers for a sand-castle. A young girl with braces giving a tight smile for the camera as she stood before a green meadow, trees blazing red-gold in the distant background. There were other pictures of a smiling young teenager in graduation gown, her father standing tall beside her. That same father, obviously beaming with pride as his daughter held her law degree.

It was a small book that seemed lost in the delicate grasp of Vincent's large, fur-covered hands. It was much the size of others that lined the bookshelf in his chamber, and could nestle unobtrusively between the older volumes, but this one would hold a very special place in his heart. It gave him Catherine as he could never have seen her. Her gift of the small, book-sized photograph album let

him enter a part of her life and share those times with her that would never have been accessible to him. She had given him a gift beyond price. Words failed him and he could only turn to her and gather her within his arms. He held her for long moments close against his body, his mouth pressed near her cheek. When he finally spoke, his voice was thick with emotion.

"Catherine, thank you, for sharing that part of your life with me. It is a gift I will treasure always." He leaned back to look down at her. His eyes traced the contours of her face. Circled about her tiny waist, his strong arms held her tenderly against his powerful length. The palm of one large hand began a slow, caressing exploration of the tantalizing curve joining waist and hip. the tiniest of grins changed the shape of his mouth. "I am especially fond of the one on the bear rug."

Catherine buried her face in the rough fabric of his vest. Shaking her head back and forth in mock shame. "I debated about that one, but I decided you needed to know it all. The good and the bad. And that one shows it all." She raised her head, her hazel eyes smiling up at him.

His grin broadened. "It certainly does."

His smile softened and warmed as he placed one clawed finger along her cheek and traced its creamy contour. The slightly rough finger pad grazed lightly down the soft, graceful column of her neck, sending a ripple of excitement along Catherine's spine. The finger continued its slow, downward journey, stopping only after it reached the lowest point on the neckline of her dress. There it was halted by his first gift to her which lay, barely visible, nestled intimately between her breasts.

".... and it is all still as soft." His lips retraced the path his hand had taken and Catherine gasped when his mouth came to rest just above the crystal necklace. His lips brushed lightly across the sensitive cleft between her breasts. His breath was a feathery warmth upon her skin. She felt the hard tip of his tongue trace a light, intimate pattern in the warm hollow where her heart now beat wildly. He pressed one final lingering kiss there, then slowly lifted his golden head and met her eyes. His eyes were warmed first by desire, then indecision followed close behind, and, finally, resignation shown within their smokey-blue depths.

"We will be late," he breathed the words out with a sigh and, releasing her, he stepped back, "and I think it best we leave----now."

Reluctantly, Catherine nodded her understanding. Another moment and the party, given for Vincent, would be minus the guest of honor. Enveloping her small hand within his, he led her out of the suddenly too intimate surroundings of his chamber and directed their steps down the candlelit passageway toward the more neutral territory of Father's chamber. They had walked but a short distance when Catherine glanced sideways at Vincent and queried about Mouse's actions a few nights before.

"What did you find out from Mouse?"

The young man has been injured by what he felt was disbelief from his friend regarding what, and who, he had seen during the recent unseasonable thunderstorm. Catherine knew Vincent, with infinite patience and tact, would soothe Mouse's ruffled feelings and learn what had excited the young man so. That their friendship would remain intact was without question. There was too much trust and affection between the two friends.

"He remained true to his story," Vincent related. "At the height of the storm, he apparently took refuge high up on the abutment under a nearby bridge. During a lull in the storm, someone stopped just below him. Lightning flashed and Mouse is adamant about seeing someone with what he insists are my features - a girl, he thought it was. Then, she vanished into the darkness. The rest you know."

"Who do you think it was?"

Vincent halted, shaking his golden head. "I don't know, Catherine. An actor, perhaps. Someone

going to a masquerade, in the brief lightning flash, a certain type mask could make it appear to look like me."

'A lion's mask,' Catherine thought. And with Mouse's active imagination, and the brilliant, but brief flash of lightning, it would look like Vincent. For some unexplained reason, Catherine doubted all of their suppositions.

"At any rate," Vincent continued. "It is a mystery we need not continue trying to solve."

The bringer of the mystery suddenly materialized out of nowhere, as was characteristic of him. With a cheerful greeting, Mouse skittered quickly around them and disappeared ahead of them down the candlelit tunnel corridor. Trailing behind him like a ghostly shadow, he left only the sound of his scurrying feet to mark his passage. Catherine laughed softly. "Mouse is enough of a mystery for us all to handle."

"That he is, Catherine, that he is," Vincent smiled warmly down at her and, clasping her hand tighter in his, they continued their journey.

In the shadows behind them, a quicksilver figure moved unobserved. His presence noted and lost in the blink of an eye. The birthday celebration would end just before midnight. Time enough to prepare the next move in the game. He turned toward Vincent's chamber.

The celebration of Vincent's birthday lasted until nearly midnight. From the moment they walked into Father's chamber, it seemed to Catherine that the room was bathed in candlelight. There were no more candles than usual in Father's chamber, yet, to Catherine's eyes, the room seemed illuminated beyond what was normal. Perhaps, it was that Vincent was nearby and, in a matter of hours, they would be alone, exploring his world---just the two of them. There would be no deadlines to meet, no fractions of seconds to mark their time together. Time, for once, was on their side. The next two days would be leisurely, and richly woven with memories. There would be the sharing of long moments where the only urgency would be the enjoyment of discovering each other. They would push back the boundaries of time and space and savor it all---together. And that was what made both their hearts sing---being together.

After the festivities had ended, Vincent escorted Catherine to the guest chamber. As befitted the lateness of the hour and the expected early arising, their goodnight had been brief, but tender. Vincent would meet her outside of her chamber the next morning, and their time together would begin. Catherine held the wonder of it all before her as she prepared for bed. They would have two days of solitude, the joy of just being alone - together. She kept repeating those words over and over in her mind. *'Alone - together.'* She smiled, dreaming of tomorrow.

In the coolness of the chamber, she removed her clothing rather faster than usual and hurriedly donned the warm tunnel clothing that had been provided for her. It was clothing she had utilized on rare occasions before tonight and its familiarity made her seem even more at home. She snuffed out all but three of the candles in the chamber; one near her bed, one just inside the chamber entrance, and one that was always left lighted just outside the door of the chamber entrance. These provided sufficient illumination for her to see her surroundings and find her way about should she awaken during the night, yet were diffuse enough not to disturb her with their brightness. Turning the covers back, she slid under the warmth of the several blankets and quilts.

Many restless minutes later, she still had been unable to quiet her racing mind. It replayed the evening's events, then played the anticipated adventures of the coming two days. Tossing and turning, she finally forced her mind to some semblance of quietude and was able to relax enough to begin dozing off. On the drowsy edge of sleep, she became aware of a slight scraping sound near the entrance. Rising up on one elbow, she glanced toward the doorway but saw nothing. The candle by the doorway cast no telltale shadow into the room. So it was not an intruder---an unlikely possibility at any rate, here in the tunnels. Knowing it was better to investigate rather than

lie abed worrying about what had caused the almost subliminal disturbance, she rose quietly and tip-toed to the chamber's entrance. Nothing. She moved farther into the hallway and was surprised to see Vincent leaning casually against the stone wall opposite her doorway, his golden head bowed. He appeared deep in thought. When he saw her in the doorway, he seemed momentarily discomfited to be discovered there.

"Vincent?"

"Forgive me for disturbing you, Catherine. I thought you would be asleep. I...."

He lowered his head, once again, and his feet moved restively on the stone floor. However, he did not move toward her or away from her. She was grateful for that. Finding him there, outside her chamber door pleased her, warmed her in some unexplained way. But, why had he returned?

"What is it, Vincent? Is something wrong?"

He raised his eyes to meet hers and quickly assured her. "No, nothing is wrong." At her continued questioning glance, he continued quietly, his voice more softly subdued than usual. "I couldn't sleep and...." He ceased speaking and lifted his hands, as if they could express what he was failing to do with words. Repeating himself, he started to leave.

"Again, I apologize for disturbing you, Catherine. Goodnight."

"No. Don't go!" Her hand reached, but she stayed it before it touched him. It seemed important during this fragile moment that there be no physical contact. She sensed in his few hesitantly spoken words that he didn't want to be apart from her - not just yet. It sufficed that he simply be near her. That he hadn't come to enter her room, or stay the night making love with her, was an unspoken understanding. By his words of admission, he had thought her to be already asleep.

She knew, without doubt, that he would have quietly stayed here in the passageway, undetected, just to be close to her. Had it not been for her own restlessness, she would never have known he had come. Such thoughts evoked a warm, wondrous response within her - that of being truly treasured by this most amazing man. Her throat choked tight and she found it a bit difficult to breathe. He always seemed able to provoke, with such gentle ease and tender quietness, the most profound emotions within her. Her words rushed out to reassure him, to halt his possible departure, and to keep him near her.

"You didn't disturb me. I couldn't sleep either." They had now both admitted, without precise verbalization, that they were impatient for tomorrow. He made a slight indecisive move to leave. "Please, Vincent, don't leave," her voice quietly urged him to stay.

And so he stayed. And they talked - just to talk and be together. They spoke about the celebration and the joyous evening just past. Sounds were easily carried along the tunnel passages and because of the lateness of the hour, they held their voices hushed and low. It added an intimate quality to their meeting. The prospect of the coming days and what they would see did not enter into their conversation.

Although both were impatient for tomorrow, they savored its coming by not talking about it. For now, they were not yet ready to let go of tonight. When Catherine spoke, Vincent stayed still and quiet, giving her his undivided attention as was characteristic of him. His eyes held to her features, noting each gentle inflection of her voice, aware of the soft curves of her body, hardly believing it was possible she was here and they would be together for the next two days. They had spent time together numerous times before, but, somehow, these next two days held a special quality that neither could explain.

Catherine, in her turn, let her gaze measure with loving assessment the planes and angles of Vincent's unique features, and though her eyes appeared not to leave his face, she was acutely aware of the tall, powerfully built figure such a short distance from her. Even in his present relaxed posture, she could feel the gentle strength and the overwhelming sensual power emanating so

unconsciously from him.

During one quiet period, Catherine looked across the narrow passageway toward Vincent and smiled. She had learned something about him tonight from one of the community members. Something that both surprised her and warmed her, some small secret that she had been told about him.

Sarah, the eldest of the tunnel seamstresses, had sat with her for a short time and, in speaking of Vincent, she related a story to Catherine about him that gave her a new insight into the younger Vincent and his search for freedom and independence.

"He came to me," Sarah had told her, "his arms filled with scraps of fabric. *'I want to go Above,'* he said. *'I need' to go Above. Can you make something for me to conceal myself within'?*"

Catherine smiled secretively over at him. "I learned something about you tonight. Something I would never have guessed.

"What was that?" he raised his eyes, expression guarded.

"Sarah revealed a very carefully kept secret about you." His perplexed and slightly discomfited look somehow pleased her just a tiny bit. "She told me you made your cloak."

He nodded, confirming it was so. "Yes."

'Yes.' Catherine heard his simple answer, given to her as if it were the most natural thing in the world that he should have done so. Men from her world would not have felt comfortable admitting to having sewn part of their own wardrobe. Vincent had no such pretensions. Anything that needed to be done, anything Vincent could contribute in his world were simply done without the construction of any such *'manly'* boundaries.

"I always suspected you were a man of unrevealed talents."

Another extended lull in their conversation followed in which they quietly watched each other. Words unspoken, thoughts held private and close, and too precious to share. It seemed the enchantment would break should either of them speak. As she watched him, the play of emotions across Vincent's face had changed to one Catherine could not quite fathom. A far away look that seemed to encompass not only her, but had reached out to some distant place where, for an instant, he had gone and taken her with him. She was curious as to what had drawn him away from this passageway.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked softly.

Vincent remained still and silent for long moments, his eyes never leaving her face. Catherine knew his silence meant he searched for the right words, not that he intended no answer. Then, his head tilted downward, the thick, tawny mane shielding his face. When he looked up at her, she felt the blue warmth of his eyes as he returned her gaze.

"Tomorrow.... and tomorrow.... sharing this world with you.... seeing it through your eyes as you see parts of it for the first time...." He stopped speaking, halting words he wasn't certain he should give voice to. They were words that, perhaps, should only be said tomorrow, when they were alone and far away from the intimacy of this time, this night.

"And....?" Catherine prompted.

She waited, wondering. Would he, after all, express a desire to stay with her through the night? As soon as the thought crossed her mind, she knew in her heart, he wouldn't - that had not been his reason for returning here. Her lips parted to speak, but halted as he levered himself away from the stone wall. A scant step toward her, he halted. The moment had passed and, instead of moving closer, instead of pulling her into his arms and moving with her into the chamber nearby, he moved away from her.

"Goodnight, Catherine."

He turned and slowly made his way back toward his chamber. His unspoken parting revealed the carefully hidden feelings he had held within him as he stood in this passageway with her. Feelings which had brought him to her chamber door at such a late hour. They were why he had come to stand so quietly outside her chamber door. But he had neither spoken nor acted up that desire tonight. And, by his leaving, he had changed the very fabric of the evening, as it necessarily must be changed. For this night was not the one to be chosen to deepen their love. They had two whole days before them. Two glorious days to live those dreams, if they chose. It held the promise of marvelous possibilities. She watched him disappear into the shadows.

"Goodnight, Vincent," she whispered softly after him. Turning, she returned to her bed and eased, at last, into a dreamless sleep.

'Did he find it?'

'No. He didn't return to his chamber until nearly dawn.'

'Why? Where did he go?'

'He returned to her.'

'They mated?'

'No. He stood outside her chamber. When she came to him, they simply stood and talked throughout the night.'

'How strange. Perhaps he no longer fancies her.'

'Oh, he 'fancies' her. If I didn't know better.... it almost seemed he did mate with her there in the passageway, such was the atmosphere around them. But they simply - talked!'

'Mmmmm. If he did not return to his chamber in time to find the clue, we must try another way.'

'How can we lure him away from these people?'

'It is time for the Messenger.'

'When?'

'Tomorrow. They will stop to rest and the Messenger will be there to greet him.'

'And so, the wheel turns once again.'

'Aye.'

And the man in the golden mask smiled in anticipation.

Catherine awoke early the next morning eager to begin this long-awaited day. She dressed hurriedly. Her canvas tote had been packed and ready since the night before; a second birthday gift for Vincent was tucked snugly away in one corner. She would present it to him sometime today, or possibly this evening. Right now, her plan was to surprise him by arriving outside his chamber door before he awoke. She didn't quite make her intended goal. As she exited the room, she stopped short. He was lounging comfortably against the rock wall opposite her chamber entrance, arms crossed over his massive chest, looking as if he had been waiting for hours. For just a moment, she was a bit disconcerted. Surely, he hadn't returned after she slept and waited here all night? He smiled at her confused expression.

"Good morning, Catherine."

It was obvious from the pleased look on his face that he had, somehow, anticipated her plan. Of course, she realized, he had sensed her intentions through their bond and simply moved quicker to surprise her. Sometimes, she hated that part of their bond. She decided she needed to work harder on closing down at certain times.

She hadn't noticed him move, but she was suddenly staring at the very broad wall of his chest. Raising her eyes, she met the amused gleam in his blue eyes, saw the self-satisfied look on his leonine features.

"I thought you might be planning to sleep the day away." Before she could respond, he bent forward and placed a perfunctory, but very warm, kiss on her mouth. He raised his head slowly, and the blue eyes that surveyed her bemused features hinted at something she could not quite decipher. Happiness? Merriment? Some secret plan? Were it anyone but Vincent, she would have canceled the day immediately. She smiled slowly. *'Beware, Vincent. I just might have secret plans of my own? These next two days could prove to be very interesting.'*

Despite her planned surprise being shot down, the rest of Catherine's day improved immensely. It turned into one of the most miraculous days of her life. With great pride, Vincent lay the wonders of his world before her. The first part of the day, they traveled mostly through areas familiar to her. But, then, there was her first, breathtaking sight of the mammoth three-story vaulted room with its tall pillars soaring far above their heads. She was enchanted by the wide, sinuous, stone stairway that rose upward, disappearing around the curved rock wall to one of the upper levels of that magnificent room. Surprising in its presence and wonderfully refreshing, the wind here was almost as strong as that in the area outside the Great Hall. She wondered how such a marvel could be. He told her this place was called the Tower of the Wind. As a child, it had been one of his favorite places to play.

He took her to the inlet high above the falls where, as children, he and the others had removed all their clothes to bravely swim naked in the icy water.

"Tonight, if you like," he informed her. "We will stop at a place where the water is warmer and we can swim and refresh ourselves."

"*'Skinny-dipping,'* Vincent?" She tried to sound a smidgen shocked, but failed.

"Skinny-dipping, Catherine." His head tilted slightly in affirmative answer, his tone calm and matter-of-fact. Almost. There was too much of a devilish glint in his blue eyes to successfully pull it off.

They revisited the lower falls where he had read to her and they had planned the trip to her meadow. In that place of bittersweet memories, they paused for their mid-day meal, to rest and refresh themselves. Born out of love, that beautiful, impossible dream from the not so distant past was not mentioned on this day. And neither would have wished it otherwise. For now, this place on this day fulfilled the sweet reality of a different dream.

Retrieving a small package from her canvas carry-all, Catherine moved to Vincent's side. Kneeling down beside him, she gave him his second birthday present, watching as he carefully undid the gaily printed paper and ribbon to reveal the treasure within.

"I know how you like myths and legends. I found this book and thought you would enjoy it."

The book had the well-worn look of an old and treasured volume. Its soft leather cover aged a rich, dark, blood-red color. As Vincent carefully examined its pages, Catherine knelt close, pressing lightly against his back, peering over his broad shoulder as he turned the slightly yellowed, parchment-like pages. There were delicate, faded water-color sketches scattered throughout the book, subdued illustrations for a book that obviously was quite old.

"I found this in our Mr. Smythe's bookstore. I don't know how I could have missed not seeing it before. I was about to give up finding something for you, when I saw this one, hidden almost out of sight and pushed way back, sandwiched between two volumes of ancient history. Now that I think about it, I wonder how I managed to even see it. But, suddenly, there it was. The instant I opened it, I knew you would enjoy it."

Vincent was familiar with several of the stories, old favorites that he would enjoy reading once again. There was one he had never read or heard of before. One that caught his attention because

his name was on the page. Catherine reached out with one slender finger to touch the name and informed him, a tone of surprise in her voice. "I don't remember seeing that story in there before. How strange," she mused. "It just proves, the book was obviously meant for you."

A sound far above them distracted any further exploration of the book. The subdued rush of the waterfalls spilling over the cliffs in the distance only barely covered the unusual murmur. Both look upward, searching the high vaulted cavern ceiling, hardly able to believe what they were hearing. It was a sound foreign to these caverns, and disturbed all probabilities by being here. For it was the almost subliminal sound air makes when passing over the wings of a bird. In the world Above, it would have gone unheard but, in this place where sound was captured by the enclosing stone walls, it could be heard.

When nothing appeared, they turned questioningly toward each other. Vincent scanned the area around the falls, his keen eyesight piercing the darkened corners of the vaulted cavern, seeking the source of the sound. He did not believe what his ears were telling him.

Catherine sought the same '*something*.' The sound subconsciously familiar to her, but denying the possibility. It indicated a presence that should not, could not, possibly be here in this stone-embraced world. They saw it almost at the same instant. In her excitement, Catherine raised up on her knees, grasping Vincent's shoulder, she exclaimed in astonishment.

"Vincent, look, it's a bird!"

Catherine rose quickly to her feet, pointing in the direction of the falls where the tiny creature appeared as a darting white object, soaring and dipping half-way between the falls and where they were standing. Vincent followed her upward, standing close behind her. Both were astounded and enthralled by what they were witness to.

A bird! Here in the tunnels? Impossible. The bird's presence here was a paradox, a contradiction of what could be, of what should be. Yet, there it was, soaring in ever-nearing circles toward them. Its wings spread wide, its white body in stark contrast to the dark, stone walls enclosing this subterranean world. As they watched, the tiny creature turned back toward the falls, disappearing in the misty cloud that partially covered the descending water. Unaware they had done so, Vincent and Catherine had clasped hands and stood in silent wonder awaiting its reappearance.

In the silent, expectant moments that followed, Vincent moved to stand in front of Catherine, as if shielding her with his body. There was no need for such a protective stance. Some long-forgotten primal memory had triggered the move and he had done it instinctively and without conscious thought.

Suddenly, the bird appeared out of the mist and dove straight toward them. Its appearance so swift and unexpected that they barely had time to duck as it swooped down about their heads. Vincent spun around, following the bird. Now that he had identified the intruder, he was able to follow the bird's flight path with his keen vision. The bird plummeted toward them again and Vincent grabbed Catherine, his arms protectively encircling her, shielding her body with his own, pulling her down onto the ground and out of the bird's path. As the bird flew back toward the waterfalls, they rose to their feet and watched it disappear into the mist once again.

There was a strangeness in the unaccustomed presence of the tiny visitor in this unlikely place that was accompanied by a sensation, almost of awe, following its seemingly miraculous appearance.

"Vincent, how could it have found its way down here?"

"I don't know, Catherine. It may have entered through one of the many outside entrances, such as the park entrance, then found its way here by accident, or there may be an undiscovered opening above the falls. But it will die unless it can be caught and returned to the world Above."

"How on earth are you planning to do that?"

Vincent shook his head and looked helplessly in the direction the bird had taken. "Perhaps, all it

needs is someone to show it the way out - draw a line of light from here to the surface - so to speak."

"So to speak," Catherine repeated. Part of her understood what he was saying, most of her didn't. "Look! There it is again."

Something had changed in the minutes between the time the bird had vanished into the mist of the falls and when it reappeared, it seemed larger, slower moving, and the feathers seemed to have taken on an opalescent shine. All could have been explained away as a trick of the light of one's eyes becoming accustomed to seeing such a tiny form in this place. Instead of diving toward them as it had done before, it swept around them, gliding and dipping as if following a strong, invisible air current.

Entranced by the bird's graceful soaring movements, Catherine had moved to stand in front of Vincent. His arms encircled her and they stood silent, simply watching the bird's flight. The bird made a wide arc away from them and, on its return, seemed to hover for an instant before them. Catherine felt as if there were an infinitesimal change in time; almost like an unexpected shift from real to unreal, from this time to another. There was the sound of wind rushing through the cavern, as if it were being driven from a high mountain top.

Catherine heard Vincent make a soft, almost startled sound, felt his body tense for an instant. Then the bird disappeared and she felt Vincent's body relax against her. She turned in his arms, her features shaped by a sudden concern for him.

"Vincent, are you all right?"

He was staring into the space where the bird had been, a look of wonder and puzzlement on his face. Sensing Catherine's worry, he quickly assured her there was nothing wrong.

"I'm fine, Catherine." He turned concerned blue eyes toward her, searching her face. "Are you all right?"

She nodded in the affirmative. Though slightly shaken, she had been entranced by the sight of the bird soaring around in this cavern so far beneath the earth. It gave her the impression that it could have flown through the rock walls surrounding them as easily as if it were in the boundless blue sky of her world Above. And the noise she had heard, just before she heard Vincent's reaction.

"I heard you cry out, Vincent, and I felt you suddenly grow tense. What did you hear or see?" She paused, waiting for his reply. When none was forthcoming, she offered her own explanation of what she had heard.

"I heard a sound, like rushing wind. It wasn't caused by the bird, it was more - more like I was standing on a mountain top and the wind was swirling around the peaks. I felt as if at any moment I would be blown over the edge of a precipice."

She looked up into his features awaiting his answer. She saw it there before he answered.

"Yes. I heard and felt something similar, Catherine." He looked away from her and toward the waterfall where the bird had disappeared. "Perhaps, our visitor from Above wished it were there, and our minds, somehow, picked up that desire, pushed aside these rock walls and, for the briefest of moments, we all were transported to those high mountains."

Catherine studied him for a long moment. "I don't know why, Vincent, but whenever you explain things to me like that, it always seems to make perfect sense. My world could have trouble accepting such an idea. Down here it seems - perfectly logical." She smiled up at him and moved closer to him, wrapping her arms around his waist. She felt a bit shaken by the incident for some unexplained reason, and needed the solid feel of his body against hers.

His arms pulled her closer and he pressed his mouth against the top of her head. One claw-tipped hand gently rubbed her back, smoothing away the tension he felt there, but which she was trying

bravely not to show.

From within the comforting circle of Vincent's embrace, Catherine let her gaze travel around the vastness of the waterfall cavern. They had visited the spot before, but nothing like today's events occurred. They came here to be alone, to read to each other, to talk and enjoy the all too rare experience of uninterrupted time together. What had happened today had left Catherine with the impression that two worlds had collided; this one, and one undefined but just as real. In the blink of an eye, the two disparate worlds had overlapped. She and Vincent had shared this place with two other people, shared a life with two other people, been part of two other people. No. *'Been'* those two other people. She suddenly shivered, grasping Vincent more tightly about his waist. His arms tightened and he whispered against her temple.

"What is it, Catherine?" His tone was that of immediate concern for her welfare. "Are you cold?"

"No," she assured him, hugging into him a little tighter. "I'm not cold. I just had the strangest feeling about this place.... and us."

"Tell me."

"I felt as if.... I felt as if we were two other people, in a different place - no, this place, only a very.... very, long time ago." She leaned back slightly to look up at him, and the images in her mind were as clear as if they had just occurred. She moved out of his embrace, taking several steps away from him in the direction of the waterfall. She faced it for a moment before turning back to him.

"We were younger. You brought me here to show me that waterfall. You gave it to me.... as a birthday gift!" She smiled a little self-consciously, too embarrassed to continue. Vincent took several steps, closing the space between them, knowing there was something else.

"There is more."

Catherine reached up and touched his chin, her voice soft, the words expressing her own desires. "We shared a first kiss."

She looked up, uncertain what to expect from Vincent. The expression on his face stopped her. Those feelings had not been hers alone. A slight nod of his head and a very quiet "Yes" came as answer to her unasked question. He had experienced those same sensations of being in that other time, being those other people; those other two, very young, people. Catherine recalled the accompanying emotions that had traversed that cross-time encounter to wash over her. She had felt the blush of innocence, the exploring of new, untouched emotions, the soaring of two hearts. The tremulous sharing of that very special, first kiss. She envied those young people of her imagining.

She looked up into the face of the man she loved and wished she had shared that first, tentative exploration into newly awakening sexual awareness of oneself with him. She wished it had been his lips that had found hers in that first sweet kiss. Her fingers gently caressed his mouth, following the sensuous outline of his bottom lip, tracing across the muzzle-like portion that formed his cleft upper lip, loving the different textures and planes, stopping when the circle was completed. She was remembering how his mouth had felt on hers in the tenderest of kisses, and in the possessive, fiery heat of passion. Her hand paused to rest on his chest, where she could feel his heartbeat beneath her palm. Lowering her hand, she met his blue eyes. The love in them gave her courage to continue what she was almost reluctant to say.

"I wish you had given me my first kiss." Had she the power, she would turn back time to a place where they could have been together to share the exquisitely sweet, and poignantly frightening experience of that special first time together. Her voice was soft and caressing as she expressed another desire. "I wish I had been yours."

Vincent gazed down at her lips. He stood quiet for some moments. They stood near, but not touching. When he spoke it brought tears to her eyes and her heart cried out to him, understanding

the full extent of meaning behind his words.

"You were," he said quietly, his voice husky with emotion. Without touching her, he bent his gold-maned head and lowered his mouth to hers, pausing a breath away. "You are." Time spun backward for them both as the breath of space between them closed and Vincent gently pressed his lips upon hers.

Catherine was lost in him, lost in the emotions that swirled around her. They were not the fiery, passionate emotions of a grown woman. She was sixteen again and this was her first kiss. It was Vincent's first kiss. And they shared the newness and the tender beauty of it.

Her face hurt in the damp cold of the room. The light in the chamber was dim and she strained to see her reflection in the tray. She realized with a chill, that the strange features that stared back at her from the shiny, distorted surface of the tray were not her own. She gasped, the tray nearly fell from her grasp as she realized how very animal-like they were. Why these features?

She forced herself to remember. But, in the remembering, all the pain came back. The one with the gold face had done this to her - to trap 'him,' to lure 'him' into the depths of the earth. Him. By what name had he been called? Vincent? Yes, that was it - Vincent. She wondered about him, wondered about the one called Vincent. What was he like? What was it that drove her mysterious captor to want so desperately to lure this Vincent to this horrible place? 'When you see him, you will know why,' he had told her. She lowered the mirror. He had told her to be patient. She would learn the why of it all tonight.... when she saw Vincent.

The astonishing encounter with the bird had left them quieter than usual during the next period of their travels. How mysterious it was that a bird should find its way down here. As equally puzzling as its appearance was its sudden disappearance. However, the plans Vincent and Catherine had laid out for themselves were only temporarily disturbed by the opal-white bird. This was their time and not even an unexpected winged visitor could interrupt their adventure for very long.

Traveling through the timeless darkness of Vincent's world, Catherine was enthralled by each and every new discovery he placed before her. It was only when he informed her they were nearing their stopping place that she realized just how tired she had become. Her excitement had held her tiredness at bay. But, with his revelation that this day's journey was nearing its conclusion, weariness now washed over her with a vengeance. Never would she have admitted to him how exceedingly glad she was when they finally stopped for the night. They would head back toward home territory tomorrow, making only one stop----an ice cave that was situated not too far below where they would rest tonight.

Their small, evening fire made a circle of light that enclosed them and pushed the darkness back. The shadowy boundaries shifted and changed as the shimmering golden flames flared then dwindled. Catherine stood just at the edge of the darkness, quietly, listening for sound in the impenetrable blackness just beyond. The silence was almost palpable, hanging like a heavy curtain surrounding the cavern room. She and Vincent were the only inhabitant in a fantastically wonderful world that seemed protected, at last, from the world Above.

Far over her head, she knew the noise of the city would be deafening. But, here, deep within the earth, far from the madness of that intrusive world, nothing penetrated to interrupt this perfect night. The word '*perfect*' kept playing and replaying through her mind. A perfect day, a perfect night, a perfect companion - a perfect love. She turned away from the world of shadows and her gaze met Vincent's, and she was lost in the vibrant, cerulean blueness of his deep-set eyes; eyes that always seemed able to penetrate to her very soul. Even the dim light of the fire could not diminish their power. Whenever he directed his gaze toward her, she felt profoundly reassured by him. As now, while she walked across the narrow span of golden firelight toward him, his eyes never left hers.

He was a magnet toward which she was irrevocably pulled.

He held his hand out to her and she moved to sit with him. He maneuvered her so she was seated between his thighs, his arms encircled her and she leaned back using the strong, hard expanse of his broad chest to rest against. She was almost completely surrounded by the mass of him. She never realized how truly large a man he was until they got this close. It always amazed her that someone of his size could move with such grace of movement. She loved to just stand and watch him walk toward her through the tunnels, crossing the small space of her terrace with but a few steps to enfold her in his arms. How safe she always felt! Her name had never been so beautiful until his voice said it. She had never truly known how it felt to be loved, until he made love to her. Now she couldn't get enough of him. She wanted to absorb him, meld into and become a part of him.

"Will you read to me?" She suddenly needed to hear his voice, to get her mind off where her thoughts were leading her. Perhaps, one of the stories in the book of myths would cure her salacious-wandering thoughts.

She started to move out of his arms so he could see the book better, but he held her tight against him, holding the small volume in front of her, reading over her head.

"*In an ancient time, in an ancient place, there were those called the warrior-protectors!*" And, thus, began the tale that told of the vanishment of a mountain people who had kinship with the lion. It was the tale of two children, a human girl who lived near the sea, and a boy who lived in the high mountain caves. They met as children and, as they grew to maturity, discovered they shared a bond that was forbidden by the laws of their land. Should it be discovered that they were connected by this mating bond, they and their families would be banished to opposite ends of their world, for they were of two different species.

The story told of a prophecy about an opalescent bird that would appear when a warrior-protector would mate with a beautiful woman who came from a land of ice and snow. When that occurred, his people would disappear.

Although separated by fate in the early years of their maturity, the lady and the warrior loved too deeply to stay apart. And, as foretold in the prophecy, the legend unfolded to its conclusion. The magical leonine people of the mountains vanished and, with their disappearance, the warrior and his lady hid themselves away. No one ever saw or heard about them again.

But, it has been told in mythical tales, sung by wandering minstrels, voiced by storytellers, and carried down through the ages by those Rememberers entrusted with their story, that if you can find those particular high mountain caverns, and search very carefully, you might see a beautiful lady, and her magical leonine warrior walking hand-in-hand through the rough-hewn, stone passageways, or hear them whispering and laughing together near a hidden waterfall deep within the mountains.

Catherine heard with wonder the story of a magical leonine people who lived in the high mountain caves of an ancient land. Her heart wept silently as the story of the two lovers unfolded. She could empathize with the woman and the warrior she loved. She saw a similarity in that story and in the lives she and Vincent were living.

The story affected both Catherine and Vincent in ways they could not explain. Perhaps because the hero could have been Vincent in an ancient time. For the short duration of the tale, Vincent had a history, a people. True, it was only on the pages of a very old book, but for the brief period that it took to read the story, those people could have been his; that life, could have been his. Certainly, the woman and the warrior loved as deeply as they loved, and they shared a bond similar to the one he and Catherine shared. Perhaps, that was why the story touched them both so deeply. What Vincent and Catherine had dreamed of doing, those two lovers had been able to do freely. They had walked in the sun together, they had lived and traveled in a world where each was accepted as

a natural part of that world. In both worlds, the lovers would not be separated. Their love drew them together against all adversities, flowering and growing amidst endless impossibilities thrown in their path. They, too, had a love that would not be denied.

At the story's ending, Vincent paused for a moment, then slowly closed the book. His arms encircled Catherine, holding her closely against his chest. Vincent understood this ancient warrior. They both loved a woman who came from outside their world, both fought fiercely to protect those they loved. Similarly, he and the ancient warrior lived in caverns hidden away from the world about them. Vincent felt an icy finger shiver its way down his spine. Was he letting his imagination get the better of his reason? He rationalized that there was a very definite difference between that ancient warrior and himself. The warrior had lived high in the sun-washed mountains and had a people like himself. Vincent lived far beneath the earth where the sun's warmth could never reach. Vincent had only himself. There were no others such as he. The ancient warrior had sailed the seas. Vincent had only a childhood model in which he had taken his imaginary sea voyages.

'The ship!'

Vincent felt the icy chill more severely this time. His ship model had been moved from its safe place on the bookshelf and placed on the floor - where he could find it. That ethereal voice had said - what were the words?

'Not that kind of a ship!'

Vincent shook himself mentally. He was searching for too many imagined similarities between the two worlds. The ages were many countless centuries apart. But were they? He had momentarily forgotten the bird soaring over the waterfall, its opalescent wings glistening in the muted light of the cavern. The bird that should never have been in the caverns. The bird with the white, opalescent feathers. The white bird of the prophecy had forewarned that the warrior's people would disappear when he mated with a woman from a land of ice and snow. He and Catherine had joined in the sense of the ancient mating. And, at this time of year, Catherine's world Above was covered with ice and snow.

He had found, perhaps, too many unexplained, too many uncomfortable parallels between the mythical tale and his world. Perhaps, the parallels were too close. There may be a stronger connection than imagined, Vincent chided himself. *'Get back to this world. Apparently, Mouse isn't the only one in these tunnels with a wild imagination.'*

Vincent brought himself back to the reality of the present by wrapping his arms more tightly about Catherine. Placing his mouth over her temple, he inhaled the sweet, warm female scent that was hers. He felt her love touch him through their bond and gathered her closer against his chest, his heart and body warmed by her nearness.

Catherine sighed contentedly, glorying in the powerful arms encircling her, feeling the muscles tightening under the rough fabric of his shirt as Vincent gathered her closer against the broad, comforting hardness of his chest. She tilted her head back, resting it on his shoulder. Her thoughts moved back and forth between the story and, this place, where she and Vincent were wrapped in each others' arms. Her hands grasped his wrists where his arms crossed her body. She held on tightly, almost as if she were afraid he would disappear as those people in the story had disappeared. She turned her face against his chest until she could hear the comforting beat of his heart beneath her cheek.

Closing her eyes, she sat quietly, absorbing the sound and the feel of him. She let herself become lost in him, grateful that whatever gods had played with their separate lives, those same capricious gods had seen fit to bring them together. The warrior's lady must surely have considered the same thing.

"There have been two of us," she whispered aloud, not realizing she had done so.

Vincent's head moved downward, his lips touched her hair. His breath brushed warm against her temple. "Two of us?"

"Yes," Catherine turned slightly in his arms to look up into his face. "Yes. There have been two of us who have been so blessed - to have loved so deeply." She turned more fully in the circle of Vincent's arms. One hand reached up to touch his face. "There have only been two of us who have loved and been given the love of a very special man, a love such as others have never known. Only two of us - the woman in that ancient land.... and me."

"There are those more blessed." Vincent lowered his head until his lips touched hers. "They are the ones who were loved." His lips took hers, tentatively at first, in a gentle reaffirmation of his love. Then his arms tightened around her, pulling her closer. One large hand found the back of her head, his claws sliding through the silky texture of her hair, holding her still beneath the increasingly passionate claiming of his mouth.

Vincent's lips hardened, pressing almost ruthlessly against hers. He freed one hand and reached to unfasten her jacket. His fingers felt cool as they pushed under the edge of her sweater and brushed lightly against her naked skin. His hand moved upwards purposefully, the long fingers stroked her, closing over the thrust of her breasts, pausing at the little moan she gave as he touched them. He was filled with a sudden raging, insatiable hunger. He felt an answering surge of desire shiver through her.

Catherine pressed against him.... her lips parting, opening to him, her hands going up to caress his throat and his face. Her fingers sought and twisted in the unbelievable thickness of his mane as she gave herself up to the throbbing desire consuming her.

Keeping his mouth over her own, his arms crushing her body, with a swift, lithe twist, he moved her under him, pinning her beneath the weight of his body. There was no mistaking the passionate intensity with which he held her, nor the hunger that was apparent in the way his hands moved over her body and his mouth desperately clung to hers. A mindless hunger had gripped them both. Hands feverishly sought openings, clothing was pushed aside, their bodies seeking only to quench the scorching need for fulfillment.

At his first thrust, ecstasy swept through her. They came together with thoughts only of satisfaction; their bodies converging, exploding into flame. His hands moved urgently down her body, sliding under her, holding her securely against his driving hips. His mouth left hers, seeking the curve of her cheek, then the silken column of her neck. He buried his face in the curve, his lips grasping the flesh between neck and shoulder. His breath hot and labored against her skin.

His flesh pressed into her even more and she responded. Her hands moved down and her arms encircled him, locking around his chest and she arched towards him. She barely knew what she was doing, trembling and helpless in the grip of her wild response to him. Catherine rose to meet him a final time, and they were one for a timeless moment. Hanging suspended in the fiery pinnacle, unable to do anything except let the pulsing fierceness of the climax grip their bodies until it subsided. Their arms grasping each other closer, their hips driving together in one final spasm of ecstasy.

Still held close against him, Catherine could feel Vincent tremble in the aftermath of his lovemaking. She felt the passion gradually release its control of him. She could feel the pounding of his heart where he still lay heavily upon her. Her own body was slow to return to normal, trembling as did his, her wildly beating heart matching his.

At last, he withdrew from her body and pushed himself away from her. Rising to his feet, he stood with his back to her, his shoulders moving as if he were still trying to control himself. It took her a moment to realize what was happening. With an exclamation, she hurried over to him and, looking up into his eyes, she found them glittering with tears.

"Catherine, forgive me. I didn't mean for this to happen." His voice was a hoarse whisper, reflecting

the passion that still hovered close to the surface. His body ceased trembling and he gently gathered her within his arms. "I wanted tonight to be.... gentler. I am afraid I have frightened you instead."

"Oh, Vincent," her voice was husky with her own tears. "Please, it's all right. I'm all right. I am not afraid. I welcome your touch, any time, in any way you chose to come to me."

She pulled his head down to her, kissing the tears from his cheeks, her own mingling with his. Her lips sought his and she whispered against them.

"I was as aggressive and as swept away as you."

He drew back at last and, in the dim light, she saw the distress of his actions painfully bared within his eyes. She needed to reassure him that his desire had been a reflection of her own as well. They had both been consumed by the raw, primal need for fulfillment.

She knew to do only one thing, so she stepped into him and wrapped her arms around his body, holding him close. His body was stiff against her, the muscles drawn taut and rigid under her hands. He made a move to displace her arms from around his chest, but she cling tighter. In her passionate frenzy. She had undone his buttons and torn open his shirt. She placed her mouth within the deep 'V' opening, and spoke against the dampness of his chest.

"Vincent, we were caught in an overwhelming, emotional flash-fire and, under the circumstances, I am not about to apologize for my reaction to your actions." She moved in closer still against his powerful body. Gathering all her love for him, she sent it through their bond to surround him, the intensity of her words emphasizing the truth of what she was telling him. "I have loved you with my first breath. I shall love you with my last."

She rested her head against the hard wall of his chest, hearing the still quickened beating of his heart. As she clung to him, she heard its rhythm quiet down and even out, regaining its normal slow and steady beat. She felt the hardened tenseness in his muscles gradually subside where her fingertips stroked his back. His hand came up under her chin, gently forcing her eyes upward to meet his.

The firelight cast shadows across his face, creating golden glints that danced in his eyes, giving their blue brilliance an almost magical tenderness as he looked down at her.

"I treasure each coming together, Catherine." His voice was broken by emotion. "The miracle of it never wanes. What happened, here, tonight. You've no idea how I've dreamed about it night after night.... I've imagined holding you close, kissing you...."

"You couldn't have wanted me more than I've wanted you," she said softly.

"But, in those dreams," he went on, grief tinged his voice for what had not been, "our lovemaking was slow and gentle - savoring each kiss and caress."

Catherine reached up, capturing his hand where it lay softly against her cheek. She turned her lips and placed a lingering kiss into his palm. A small sound caught in his throat as she breathed against the warm flesh of his palm.

"There is still time to fulfill that dream."

Vincent cupped Catherine's face within his palms. Studying her for a moment, he slowly bent to place a tender kiss upon her mouth. His lips light and undemanding. Raising his head, he kept his eyes fastened to her lips, imagining the taste of them when he had taken her in the wildness of his passion. His lips had parted to speak when his head suddenly jerked upward, his eyes staring into the purple darkness of the cavern entrance.... unbelieving of what he saw there just within the shadows.

Catherine spun around to see what Vincent was seeing. The figure disappeared into the purple shadows, but not before Catherine saw the face. She gasped, the features were a more delicate

leonine version of Vincent's. Before she could stop him, Vincent ran into the darkened tunnel passageway after the disappearing apparition.

'Why have you done this to me?' she cried out to the gold-faced one.

'You are to be part of a great experiment, to bring the greatest warrior born to me. With you to lure him down here, I will make him a god. Here, he will find his greatness at last. And you have been chosen to help bring this about. When he is finally mine, from the two of you will come the strongest offspring ever conceived. We will rule this world as one before ever have.'

As he had directed, she had gone to the cave where the lovers would be. She had watched them as they made love. And, knowing it would be their last time together, she had cried out for them and for herself. Then, 'HE' had seen her standing in the shadowy doorway. For a brief instant, she had looked into his eyes. My God! He was magnificent. More than she had imagined. Seeing his face answered all of her questions. Then, she turned and ran and he followed her. Thus, like the Judas goat, she led him down to where the trap was set. Because that was what she had been ordered to do. What she had no choice but to do. She had been promised death if he did not follow her.

For a brief moment, Vincent froze, held immobile by the sight of that shadowy intruder; the face a mirror image of his own. His eyes told him it was impossible. His mind rationalized that it was a phantom, a figment of his imagination, a trick of the light. Then, the dark shadows slid forward swallowing the face, and the apparition disappeared into the blackness of the tunnels beyond. As it vanished, Vincent's reason returned. His muscles lost their paralysis and he sprang into action, brushing past Catherine as he raced toward the entryway, pursuing his ghost-like counterpart.

Fear clutched at Catherine's heart. She felt danger, horrible and immediate danger for Vincent. She spun around, racing to follow him. But she was driven back by a sudden blast of wind and sand particles just as she reached the arched doorway. In a quick, reflexive action, she threw her arms and hands up to protect her face from the sudden onslaught of wind-driven debris, in a cave where only the smallest breeze could be felt, a miniature sandstorm drove her backward into the cavern room. It was but seconds before the storm ceased and she could lower her arms again. But, by then, Vincent had disappeared with no chance of her finding which way he had gone. She leaned against the ragged rock wall of the chamber, tears of frustration coursing down her cheeks. A new kind of fear spiraled around her.

She collapsed with her back leaning against the stone wall near the entryway, her eyes fixed on a huge, thumb-shaped boulder not far from their small bonfire. In the Stygian blackness near the firelight's edge, the darkness seemed to waver and pulsate. She blinked her eyes, straining to see what this new threat could be. As Catherine watched, particles of darkness gathered together into darker shadows. A ball-like spot grew just atop the boulder, stretching itself upward into a spiraling column of blackness that gradually coalesced into a long cigar-shaped object. As she watched, dumb-founded, the shape and color changed, the outline shimmering until gradually settling into that of a very thin, male form squatting atop the boulder. Everything about him was silver-gray - as if he were covered from head to foot with a sparkling ash. Even his eyes were a bright silver-grey. It was his eyes that kept her from any thought of escaping into the outer passageway. He beamed an infectious smile at her that increased the hint of merriment lighting up his face and eyes.

"Please, dear lady," his voice was soft and quiet, sounding like the whispering of the wind through pines. "Do not be frightened. I will not harm you."

Catherine stood immobile, mesmerized by the little gray man perched atop the boulder. He appeared to have manifest out of it and was much of the same color.

"Let me introduce myself. I am called a Rememberer. I specialize in...." He stopped speaking and tilted his head as if listening. "He will return any moment. He is afraid for you. He thinks you are in danger."

"You frightened me. He can feel it." Catherine surprised herself by how matter-of-factly she spoke to the little gray man, as if she were accustomed to speaking to people who materialized out of solid rock.

"You were frightened before me," the little man pointed out, his eyes twinkling gray lights.

"He and I are connected...." Catherine continued.

"Yes, I know," the little man answered. "You are connected in many ways. Far more than you will ever know, far more than you can understand." He was silent for a moment, staring at Catherine as if looking into her very soul. His silvery-gray eyes gazed at her benignly, yet, Catherine felt as if he were seeing and reading her life story. A soft, sighing sound came out of his thin lips. A sound of contentment, of observation, of satisfaction in affirming something he suspected as being possible and finding that it was so. He smiled at her.

"He shares your dreams, you know - your nocturnal dreams," he emphasized that latter most pointedly. "As you have often shared his." He paused a moment, tilting his head as he watched her. "And the nightmares."

"And the nightmares?" Thinking back to when they first met, her nightmarish reliving of her ordeal, Catherine shuddered. "Oh, Vincent!"

"I was given a task, a quest of sorts, to find you and...."

He never finished his sentence for at that moment, Vincent burst back into the cavern, a warning growl rumbled a challenge from deep within his throat. His precipitous chase of the mysterious figure had been brought up short by the overwhelming suddenness of Catherine's fear. Almost as the same instant, the leonine-faced phantom he had been pursuing disappeared as if the surrounding rock walls had consumed the fleeing figure, leaving no trace.

Vincent and the little ash-gray man silently measured one another. Vincent stood motionless just inside the entryway. He did not turn to look directly at Catherine. Reaching out through their bond, he felt a wary calmness, mixed with curiosity, as she stood eyeing the figure perched atop the boulder.

Vincent's eyes never wavered from those of the little gray man. In watchful stillness, he assessed the newcomer's measure as a threat to himself and Catherine. The little man settled himself more comfortably atop his perch and returned a similar steady, evaluating gaze at Vincent. He studied Vincent with unabashed admiration, seeming almost relieved and pleased that he had returned as promptly. His ploy, in manifesting the storm and appearing before this woman, had effectively brought Vincent back to the safety of this cavern room. It was he who now broke the tense silence between them.

"As I was telling your lady here, I mean you no harm. I am called a Rememberer. I was given a task, a quest of sorts, to record in a book what happens to a specific individual - uh, individuals - within these tunnels and caverns; to record the lives and events of those who have lived here.... live here," he corrected himself. He frowned suddenly. "I am not saying this right." He looked across the small firelit circle toward Vincent and Catherine. "You, dear lady, gave him a present for his birthday - an ancient book of legends, did you not?"

"Yes, I did," Catherine seemed mildly astonished. "How did you know.?"

Instead of answering, the silver-gray eyes turned toward Vincent. He marveled at the size of the powerfully built man-beast. Everything about his outward appearance spoke of the predator; the leonine features, the bared fangs that had been briefly visible when he charged into the chamber moments before, the large, clawed hands could easily dispatch a foe in seconds, the powerful

muscles of chest, arms and shoulders that could, in an instant, carry that magnificent body through the act of evisceration - or protection. The reflexes were designed for killing quickly without hesitation or conscious thought. He also saw the gentleness beneath the unimaginable strength, for the intensely steady gaze of the blue eyes revealed the beauty of the soul. This being was a beautiful work of tenderness and power.

The little gray man also sensed the extraordinary empathetic abilities. Of course, the bond between these two would still be there. The centuries could not take that away from them. It was what had drawn this man and this woman together. However, he noted keenly, the woman's was not as finely tuned. Perhaps it was because of the world she had come from, lived in still. It was a world of chaos and confusion. She was wise. It was safer to close down. It could return, he knew, under the right circumstances.

In an almost imperceptible flow of motion, the little gray man moved from his perch on the boulder to stand leaning against its front side. He heard the low warning growl rise from deep within Vincent's massive chest. He respected it by remaining still.

"I know you can dispatch me in the blink of an eye, Vincent," the little man waved his hand in the air as if to illustrate his words. "But, before you entertain such a thought, much less initiate it, hear me out.... please?"

Vincent nodded wordlessly in answer, then moved to stand protectively near Catherine. His unwavering gaze intensified at a slight movement made by the intruder, and there as an unspoken warning in his eyes that the little man read and understood.

"Who am I? What am I? How many times have you asked yourself those questions, Vincent? But the answers were never forthcoming, were they? They always eluded you."

Encouraged by the absence of a warning growl from Vincent, the little man cautiously moved away from the boulder to stand nearer the fire. He stood just opposite Vincent and Catherine and stared down into the flames. For some moments it seemed to draw his complete attention. Raising his eyes, he again sought Vincent's. His voice whispered across the narrow space separating them.

"The past.... the present.... and the future all occupy this space where we stand." One long, bony finger pointed downward to the sand-covered floor. "In a blink of an eye, we can be wherever you choose, whenever you choose. We could watch your moment of birth, know your parentage, all the questions you have asked of yourself over your lifetime would finally have answers - should you so choose," he added meaningfully. "But, I say this to you, do not seek your origins too diligently, Vincent. You do not need to know from whence you came. Your life is tied to this place. Other than your alliance with this woman, do not let it become enmeshed with that world up there."

His chin made an upward movement to indicate the city and the world above them. Then he looked at Catherine, ".... and it is tied irrevocably - as it has been for eons - with this woman you love."

Catherine moved closer to Vincent and lightly touched his arm, not to get his attention, just to be in contact with him. She had sensed the thoughts that swirled about him. How well she knew and understood his desire to know that part about himself that, though not talked about, gnawed at him like a worrisome thing. Everyone sought knowledge of their origins, his were more mysterious than most. But, what the little man was saying was a painful truth.

"There are other words you are not saying," Vincent addressed the little man. "What are they? Say them now." The look in his eyes informed the little man he had said as much as was right for now. Something was stirring in the darkness about them, and it was now time to reveal what was behind this game.

The Rememberer, as he called himself, had given Vincent the opportunity to look upon the beginnings of his lifetime and was more than pleased that Vincent had chosen not to do so. Now, the next step could be taken. So he told them.

"First, I urge you both to return to your home territory tomorrow. You will be safe tonight, but so do not tarry in this place. There is danger for you here."

"What kind of danger?" Vincent spoke softly, his voice low and filled with caution.

The silver-gray eyes of the little man captured Vincent's gaze, holding it with steady concentration, looking beyond what was reflected within the smokey-blue eyes, seeking a truth that could only be reflected there.

"It is the magic of this place - and the love - that protects it, keeps it alive, keeps it safe. There is someone with a half-gold face. He hides in the lower regions. He plots to steal from this world in an attempt to create his own. But, his would only be a hollow illusion. He holds the fate of many people within his hands. The person you chased after tonight, Vincent. She is part of that danger."

"*'She'?*" Vincent had not given thought to the gender of the person he had chased.

"She is not like you, Vincent. Your origins are not the same. The evil one I spoke of created her to lure you from this safe place to imprison you. His mind conceives an evil purpose. She is not evil, only desperate. He feeds that desperation back to her - and she is starving from it."

He made a quicksilver movement with his hand and took a small step toward them. Catherine gasped as the book he had given Vincent was suddenly there in the little gray man's long, thin hands.

"Many people have written, and are writing, this story. He is one of them; greedy only for the ending he desires. But, you, Vincent, are the one who will define its boundaries - possibly, its ending. For possession of this book is to hold one's own fate, be responsible for the path taken." He stopped speaking and watched Vincent.

"Explain," Vincent moved like a tall, powerful, dark-cloaked shadow toward the fire and waited for his answer.

"This book," the little gray man held up the well-worn volume, "is more than filled with myths and legends. It is filled with your origins, your life - then, and now. It tells of what has been and portends what is yet to come - given certain circumstances, of course, circumstances over which you, Vincent, exert control."

Catherine stepped closer to the fire. "Are you telling us our lives are already written in that book?" She shook her head. "No, little man, I have read that book and heard the stories within. It only tells of an ancient time, an ancient place, a very ancient - and quite extinct people. Our life story is not there."

"Oh, dear lady," the man smiled gently at her. "You are quite wrong. Your life story is being written on these pages at this very moment. You have already read part of it earlier this evening. I grant you it was not of the present, but it is a mirror image containing today's possibilities. The rest is yet to happen. That, too, has been foretold on these pages."

He waved the ancient volume in the air to emphasize his words. "The young warrior related to his lady an ancient prophecy which foretold that after the appearance of a white, opalescent bird, a warrior of his people would mate with a beautiful woman who came from a land of ice and snow, and that with their mating, his people would disappear."

Leaning toward them over the fire, he pointed toward Catherine, his silvery-gray eyes glittering with reflected firelight. "You came down today from a land covered with ice and snow. Did the two of you not see the winged messenger near the waterfall? Earlier this evening did you not...." He waved his hand toward the ground where they had made love. "... complete the prophecy in this very cavern?"

Catherine counted the events as he enumerated them and blushed at the last one, realizing they had not been alone.

"You have read the story, you have read the prophecy. What more explanation do you require?"

"Tell me about the girl," Vincent stepped closer to the fire, closer to the little gray man. "You said.... someone with a half-gold face - created her to lure me away from this place. How did he create her? Why?"

When the little gray man finished the story of the man and his inhuman scheme involving the girl and Vincent, and told of the deaths that had already occurred, a choking, icy cold fear struck the hearts of both Catherine and Vincent. The identity of the man with the half-gold face was clearly apparent. His dreaded name seared through both their minds.

"Paracelsus," Vincent whispered.

"Yes, I believe he calls himself by that name," the little man acknowledged.

"What tilt of his mind could conceive such an outlandish plan? It is the plan of a madman."

Suddenly weak-limbed, Catherine dropped to her knees on the cavern floor, covering her face with her hands. "Oh, that poor girl."

Something about the little gray man and his revelations bothered Vincent. This stranger had appeared before them in a most unorthodox manner. He plied them with an unimaginable tale about a book, and their alleged past connection with the warrior-protector in that same book of myths. Vincent accepted most mythical things that occurred in his life. Should he believe this little man? Dare he believe him? How could he accept as truth what they had just been told? And why had this stranger appeared at this particular time?

Vincent admitted to himself that he had found an uncomfortable parallel with the story in that aged volume and with his world. He understood the ancient warrior, perhaps too well. They both loved a woman who came from outside their world; both fought fiercely to protect those they loved. Perhaps there was a closer parallel between the two of them, a stronger connection than imagined. And, there was the undeniable evidence of the figure he had pursued in the tunnel. But what was the reality behind that phenomena?

Still, a cautious part of him found it difficult to accept the truth of what this shadow-gray stranger was telling them. To do so could be heading them into a trap that very possibly was all part of a cunning scheme devised by Paracelsus. This little man could be just another carefully orchestrated lure. Two, almost simultaneous appearances seemed almost too coincidental. The first appeared to lure him away from Catherine and this small cavern; while, almost instantaneously, a second manifest before her to frighten her and bring him back, enabling the first person to get away and prevent closer inspection of what appeared to be a perfect duplicate of someone like himself.

With the little man's appearance and the telling of the present circumstances, which included warning them about Paracelsus, it somehow seemed to be an interference of the chances of fate.

"If all you have said is true, you have interfered with fate by coming here and warning us about Paracelsus," Vincent challenged.

".... Or, as you are thinking, I could be one with Paracelsus?" The little man looked up at Vincent. His silvery-gray eyes twinkled with delight, pleased that Vincent had not accepted him at face value.

"As you watch this unique tale that is your life unfold, Vincent, you will find, in time, what I have told you is true. Whatever you may choose to believe about me, I am called a Rememberer."

"What on earth is a *'Rememberer'*?" Catherine queried.

"A Rememberer, dear lady, is one who follows the life - or lifetimes - of one person.... or, in your cases, two people who have been joined throughout time for a very special purpose. Which purpose I cannot divulge," he added hastily. HE raised his hands to indicate the two of them. "In this case, we have been *'assigned'* each other. And a most pleasant association it has been - at

least for me. To put it simply, you live your life as you choose. I see that it is consigned to the pages of this book."

He tossed the book to Vincent, who caught it deftly in mid-air, his large hand gently enveloping the small, fragile leather volume.

"The next person to possess that book will read *'your'* story in it." He moved and the next instant was sitting cross-legged, once more atop the boulder. He turned and spoke his farewell to them.

"The Warrior and the Lady - they shared a bond as you share a bond. His people lived in the mountain caverns, as yours live here, Vincent. First, the bird appeared---a happy portent for the lovers, not so for the people. The people began to disappear. His mate became ill and death was near. But, at the last, he was left alone. His world healed in stone."

Before they could stop him, the Rememberer exited in the same unorthodox manner as he had appeared before Catherine. A sound escaped Vincent's throat and he vaulted across the fire, landing at the base of the boulder. He hurriedly circled the massive stone searching for evidence of how the little man had disappeared.

There was no disturbance anywhere on the sandy ground that would indicate their mysterious visitor's appearance and disappearance might have been a trick or illusion. And, there was no trace of footprints where the little gray man had stood.

Catherine felt trapped in a bad dream. Her reason was being tested to the limits. The unbelievability of the events that had occurred since they set foot in this cavern were next to impossible for her certainty-oriented mind to assimilate. Her eyes went to Vincent. He was pacing slowly around the cavern room, apparently still searching for some evidence that the little gray man's presence was part of an elaborate illusion, possibly masterminded by Paracelsus.

Catherine began her own form of pacing, back and forth in one narrow, circumscribed spot. None of the avenues her lawyer's mind traveled succeeded in providing her with a sensible answer to the unnerving events spread before them this night. Their time together had been beautiful, all she had ever dreamed, right up to the moment Vincent saw that figure standing in the entryway. Then the craziness and the horror had come screaming into their lives. She stopped her nervous pacing and looked across the fire toward Vincent. A new fear had crept into her mind. He was going to hunt for the girl.

Vincent had stopped on the opposite side of their tiny fire and, turning, met her worried green eyes. He had felt her fear and knew the source of it. He had no choice. He had to go. Catherine was shaking her head silently. *'No.'*

"I must find her, Catherine," his rough voice answered before she could make the statement, ask him not to go. "If Paracelsus had done this to her, she will not survive."

"Surely, you don't believe that strange little man's story?" She was still finding it hard to assimilate what he had told them. She found it difficult to believe what she had seen with her own eyes. Paracelsus was clever. She knew he would go to any lengths to control Vincent. She also knew him to be a master illusionist. Sebastian was also an illusionist. They could go to him and see how such a trick could be accomplished. For she clung to the more comfortable, rational explanation that the little gray man's appearance and disappearance had been just that - an illusion.

Vincent approached her and placed his large hands gently on her shoulders, a haunted look in his eyes. "I dare not disbelieve it, Catherine. If what we were told is true, Paracelsus had condemned that girl to a life in the dark. I was born this way, Catherine. She was not. She will not survive." His voice echoed the grief he felt for that stranger, that desperate young person who would consent to such an undertaking. What had driven her to make such an irreversible choice? The icy realization that maybe she had been given no choice edged through his mind.

"You are thinking exactly as Paracelsus wants you to think Vincent. He knows you will only be

concerned about the welfare of that poor girl." Words choked in her throat, "that is the trap that Paracelsus has set for you. He shows you a glimpse of the girl, sends someone disguised as a 'messenger' who tells you a fantastic story and knows, with absolute certainty, that you will walk straight into his tantalizing, extremely well-set trap." An icy core of terror mushroomed in the pit of her stomach. "You will be lost to me, Vincent. This time, he will not let you escape!"

'You failed to bring him to me!' The glittering hatred in the man's eyes drove the terrified, lion-faced girl cowering back against the stone wall. "Now he is aware of our plan. Your face is now irreversible. Unless he finds you, you will become a permanent part of this subterranean world. Enjoy it, while you can.'

The flickering light from the torch the man held slowly edged to the farthest corner of the small chamber, where it was cut off by the closing of the rock-surfaced door. He had sealed her in, and when the small candle he had left with her burned down, she would be surrounded only by the terrifying blackness. Her screaming never reached the walkway on the opposite side of the stone-thick doorway.

Much to his dismay, Vincent was unable to immediately return to the lower cavern where he and Catherine had spent their first night. After escorting Catherine Above, he returned Below with the intention of leaving on his search early the next morning, but was met instead with a tunnel emergency.

A ruptured water main Above had resulted in a flash flood, presenting the community with the imminent collapse of a much-used passageway and half-stairway leading to the entryways of several Helpers. Because these were the entries through which much of their food supplies were delivered, its urgent restoration demanded not only his attention, but that of much of the tunnel community as well.

During the day and a half it took to repair, Vincent used the time to mentally travel the winding multitudinous passageways, caves and cavern-like rooms in the lower reaches where the girl and Paracelsus might seclude themselves. His mental search always returned to the area where he and Catherine had first seen the girl - and the dark passageway where she had vanished.

Once freed of his obligations, Vincent retraced his journey. Alone, he was able to travel faster and it took him less than a day to reach the cave where the girl first appeared. It took another day before he discovered the cleverly disguised door concealing the room where the tragic girl was entombed.

Exiting the passageway where the figure had disappeared, he stepped out onto a rock ledge that curved around a solid wall on his left, and disappeared off into a fathomless black chasm on his right. He had been stopped just short of this place when he had sensed Catherine's fear and imminent danger, and he had returned to her side. Almost at the same moment, the mysterious person racing ahead of him had vanished.

For a moment, after finding the ledge, he feared perhaps she had miscalculated in the darkened passageway and fallen over the edge. He traversed the area several times, exploring in minute detail the connecting passageways, only to return to this same ledge. Each time, rejecting the possibility anything was there. The decision to examine the area one final time, found him leaning one large hand against the wall, about mid-way of the outward curve of the ledge. An unexpected sideways movement caused him to grab for balance. The ledge had seemed to tilt. Leaning back against the rock wall, and away from its chasm edge, he felt the wall give behind him. He realized that, had he continued chasing the girl for but a few feet further, he would have seen the opening. And followed the girl into what? What lay beyond the false door?

Another span of time passed as he painstakingly sought for a way to open the false doorway. At last, with a groan of rock against rock, the massive door swung slowly open, revealing the black interior of a small cave-like room. Holding his lantern high, he cautiously entered the darkened room. As the lantern's light spread slowly across the blackness, it fell upon the figure of a small female huddled near a wall at the back of the chamber. He stared unbelieving at a face that mirrored his own.

The Rememberer had told them the truth. Without thinking, he had taken another step into the room before he realized the door was swinging shut behind him. They would both be trapped. He spun around and with a great roar, threw all his powerful strength crashing against the rock door, smashing it from its hinges, knocking it off the mechanical track. It tilted crazily, before the broken and splintered part of it slid slowly over the walkway and disappeared into the blackness beyond, landing with a muted shattering sound far below. He turned back into the cave and raising his lantern, searched the corners of the small chamber to find the girl had struggled to a semi-sitting position and was cowering in a far corner, her back to him.

She had lost track of how long she had been imprisoned in this cave and the sudden invasion of light hurt her eyes. Her lips were dry and cracked, her tongue felt swollen within the dryness of her mouth. Her throat was still raw from the hours of terrified screaming. She blinked, then focused her eyes. For a long moment, she looked back over her shoulder at him. He appeared a gigantic, cloaked figure towering over her. When he raised the lantern, her despairing, benumbed mind cleared and she finally recognized him. Vincent. Impossible! He couldn't be in here. He had turned back. The man with the gold-face had sealed her in here to die. No one could find her. She was certain now she was hallucinating. Of little matter, she thought. It will soon be over. She moved her claw-tipped hands closer into her lap for warmth. They hurt terribly.

"Do not be afraid. I mean you no harm." Vincent's soothing voice had an infinitely compassionate tone.

The girl watched him warily as he moved slowly toward her. She studied his face unhurriedly, feature to feature. How had he found her? A chilling, fatalistic thought froze in her brain - Paracelsus had sent him to kill her.

Vincent hesitated, measuring her actions for a moment. Her life force was barely discernible. He assessed correctly that thirst and hunger contributed to her state of weakness. He sensed, as well, she was uncertain of his reality. Her unsettled mental state compounded by her dark imprisonment. A flicker of fear had arisen within her as well. It had flared but briefly and he felt something almost like resignation come from her. Then a quietness settled over her as her eyes slowly closed, shutting him from her sight. So his presence would not further frighten her, he placed the lantern part way between them, retreated a step or two, but putting himself in her line of vision, and squatted down at a distance from her where she would feel less threatened.

"Tell me your name." His softly spoken words reached out to her across the small distance separating them.

A barely discernible negative movement of her head indicated she would not tell him. She placed her head against the rock wall nearby and seemed to sag lower into herself. Cautiously, Vincent reached into his knapsack and pulled out his canteen of water. He approached her and tentatively touched her shoulder. When she did not respond, he knelt beside her and, holding her head, placed the neck of the canteen lightly against her mouth. A small trickle of water moistened her dry and cracked lips. She swallowed weakly, accepting what little water he allowed to pass into her mouth.

"Thank you." She could hardly lift her voice above a whisper.

Her small frame trembled, not from fear but from the lower temperature to which her body had dropped. She heard him move closer beside her, felt him gather her with utmost tenderness into

his arms. Throughout most of her unfortunate life, a bitter cold despair had dwelt in the caves of her lonely soul. What had been a promise of love and warmth had proven to be hollow lies couched in even more virulent lies.

"You have nothing more to fear. I have come to take you back with me." His voice surrounded her, soft and comforting. "My father is a doctor, a gentle man who will take care of you. There are other people in my world who will welcome you, care for you, accept you as they have accepted me." Vincent felt the weakness in her body, felt her shiver against the warmth of his body. "You will find love in abundance there."

For a brief glorious moment, hope flared brightly, then died as quickly as it had arisen. She regretted only that this man, called Vincent, had not come sooner. But, even had that happened, even should she survive, with what had been forced upon her, she knew she faced a lightless future. These dark caves and tunnels would have been her home - now they were to be her tomb. She had decided earlier that she would not suffer any longer. She would no longer let others direct the path of her life. She would give herself up to the darkness, but it would be done at her choice.

The only truly kind gesture she had ever known were the arms gently cradling her now. When she had seen him in that cave, she had, at first, feared him - feared what the one with the mask has said was destined for them. Then she had looked into Vincent's eyes and had seen the magnificence there. Something she had never seen in the eyes of any person before. This man-beast held the true spirit of love and beauty within his soul. She knew now he had not come to kill her. He had come to rescue her. With him, she possibly might have found her way back to the light. But it was too late now. She had made an irrevocable decision only moments before he had come; before she had become too weak to carry it out. She found a measure of contentment in that he had been the one to find her. She would know him for this fleeting moment. She was dying. She felt the icy fingers seep into every pore---except where she was cradled against his warm strength.

Vincent felt the life slip from her fragile body. He closed his eyes, his heart aching with pain for her lost soul. He held her tenderly for some time before finally lowering her gently to the ground. Then he saw her hands. The anguish and sadness consumed him and it could not be contained within. He roared it out, releasing it into the surrounding walls and passageways - for them both.

Hidden within fold of her clothing, he found her life written on tattered scraps of paper.

My name is Leanne. A lovely name, but fate had chosen to play a cruel trick upon me and gave me features that were otherwise. My family, and all those others who could only find pleasures in cruelly taunting one less fortunate, called me by a combination of my birth name and my appearance - Leanderthal.

All of my life I have lived without hope, without compassion from those around me. Until the man with the golden face found me. He told me he would pay for reconstructive surgery. I would ever after have a life filled with love, live in a magical place, a safe place, far from the taunts of the cruel world about me.

It was only after the bandages were removed that I found he had perpetrated the cruelest of tricks upon me. My face was that of an animal! My hands, even my teeth had been altered to those characteristic of an animal. He said I would understand why when I saw the one called Vincent. I was directed to a cave where Vincent and his woman would be found. I stood in the shadows of the passageway and watched them make love. I was drawn into their passion, consumed by it. When it was over, he rose from her, and she went to stand beside him, to embrace him. Then, suddenly, he looked up and saw me in the shadows. I looked into his eyes and for an instant, I couldn't breathe. I saw into his soul, and I will never be the same again. For I have seen, for the first time in my life, love and compassion and true beauty of spirit. He was magnificent. But he failed to follow me into the trap that had been set for him. Now, I am to die in this dark place. The

candle will burn out soon and I will die alone in the terrifying darkness. I will not allow the gold-faced one to control my destiny to that cruel extent.

I wish I could have known him before, known the one called - Vincent.

During his journey, Vincent felt Catherine's love reach out to touch him; he also sensed her unease. Before he left her, Catherine had held him close and urged him to be extra cautious while he searched for the girl. The danger before him was not to be discounted. They both knew how treacherous Paracelsus could be. Then, upon finding the girl's tomb-like prison, he had been so consumed with a barrage of emotions that for a short period, he had temporarily lost all touch with Catherine. The manner of the unknown girl's inhumane death, and his sorrow at her dying, clung to him during his return trip.

He had been traveling homeward for several hours when he felt Catherine reach out to touch him with such force, it brought him to a halt. Disjointed images swirled about him. Over their years together, he had come to recognize such images as fragments of her dreams; only these had a nightmarish quality about them. Something was wrong. Catherine was ill and needed him. He raced for home territory and Catherine.

The intensity of the illness which had gripped Catherine upon her return from Below had increased within the last hour. She was alternately besieged with fever and then bone-rattling chills. Her mind became fuzzy and she was overcome with an overwhelming weakness. She had been unable to shake it with her usual home remedies. When she had tried reaching her family physician and friend, Dr. Peter Alcott, she was told that he was out of the country. She had forgotten Peter had planned to leave on a much needed Caribbean vacation this month. Too weak to exert the effort to call anyone else, she crawled under the covers and decided to stay in bed and *'fight it out.'*

In and out of the burning fever, Catherine's confused mind led her to believe that the mysterious illness was related to the recent journey she and Vincent had just completed. Perhaps, she had somehow been given a potion by Paracelsus to make her ill.

'NO.' She mustn't think such a thing. She must keep her illness and any unease she might feel a secret from Vincent. No need for him to halt his search for the girl and Paracelsus and return to her; something she knew he would do should he sense her distress. He would probably be gone several days hunting for that poor unfortunate girl, the girl with a face like his. Perhaps, the girl wasn't so unfortunate after all, Catherine's feverish mind convinced her. Through the ever she saw herself, her face transformed, looking like Vincent. He patted her on the head, smiled at her, then turned and walked away from her through a tunnel wall. She couldn't follow. She cried out and beat her hands against the stone wall until they bled.

In her delirium, Catherine relived, once more, the trauma of the attack on herself. The pain of her lacerated face, the ugliness of her attacker's hands pummeling and mauling her body, and the subconscious remembering of being thrown from the van. It all came back with excruciating clarity. Crying out for help, she screamed aloud until she found herself, once more, in Vincent's bed, her face wrapped in bandages. She quieted as she held his huge fur-covered hand. Lost in the fever-induced nightmares, she is completely unaware that he had returned to her.

Vincent did not stop for some much needed sleep the night he arrived home late from his journey. Connected by their bond, he shared Catherine's nightmare of the event that first brought them together. Even though she had awakened in a strange place, her eyes covered with bandages, he realized she had felt safe. And, therefore, even in her nightmares, she sought the safe sanctuary of his chamber to escape her fears.

Receiving no response when he tapped on her windows, Vincent peered into the darkened bedroom and saw her tossing and turning on her bed. Through the French door windows, he could see the moisture on her skin, and could feel the fear and rage that had invaded her dreams.

Hesitantly, and somewhat self-consciously, he opened the terrace doors and entered her darkened bedroom. It felt like an intrusion of her privacy. The fact that she lay helpless on her bed and needed his help, did little to assuage the feeling. Perhaps, it was because he entered without her knowledge. But, this was no ordinary circumstances and he pushed his feelings of unease aside.

His booted footsteps were muted by the thick carpeting as he approached her bed. Gently reaching out to touch her, he could feel the heat of her body before his hand contacted her shoulder. The cotton nightgown she wore was damp with perspiration. Kneeling beside her bed, his large, fur-covered hand hovered over her, then lowered. His long, claw-tipped fingers gently wiped away the fever moisture from her forehead. She was totally unaware of his presence, even to the slight pressure of his huge hand as he gently turned her face to him.

"Catherine," his voice softly called to her, reaching out to her, a loving beacon for her besieged mind to follow.

Suddenly, her body stopped its agitated tossing and turning and she became so still, he feared for her. Had it not been for their bond, and the flicker of life he could feel coming through that tenuous link, he would have thought her life had ceased. It was painfully evident to him, she was dangerously close to dying. Fear gripped his heart. He knew he could help her in only one way. He took her Below.

For two days, Catherine lay on a cot in the Hospital chamber; Vincent and Father were in constant attendance. Her condition alternated between bouts of fever and periods of a death-like stillness. Everything they tried was of no avail. The medications Father had given her were ineffectual as well. It was evident to Father it was Vincent's will that was keeping Catherine alive and in this world. The strength of his love for her was the tenuous link she clung to that kept her from slipping away from them. During the last hour, the fever had given way to severe, bone-shaking chills. Nothing they did to warm her seemed to help.

Exhausted and heartbroken, Father looked helplessly toward Vincent. "I'm sorry, Vincent. Nothing seems to help."

Heated blankets had just been tucked around Catherine in an attempt to warm her and, still, the current seizure of violent chills continued. Vincent knelt beside the cot, his arms stretched across her body, holding the blankets around her shivering body. Rising to his feet, he stood quiet and unmoving beside Catherine's hospital cot for several moments.

"There is something, Father." Vincent's quiet voice reached Father, who stood but a few feet away.

Under Father's astonished gaze, Vincent bent over and his strong arms gathered up Catherine and the blankets they had wrapped about her. His precious treasure cradled tenderly in his strong arms, Vincent carried Catherine from the Hospital chamber and through the winding, candlelit passageways to his own chamber. Lowering her gently into his bed, he removed most of his clothing and crawled in beside her. Pulling her cold, shivering body into the curve of his, he held her close, heating her with his warmth. This dread sickness would not take her from him. He refused to acknowledge she might die. He would fight this battle with death - go to any lengths to keep Catherine safe and with him.

"You are my world," he whispered against her feverish forehead. He enfolded her with his massive body, arms encircling her, powerful legs entwining with hers to spread as much warmth between them as was possible. His cleft mouth touched the top of her head. His voice was husky with emotion as he spoke softly to her from his heart, willing her back to him. "Be here with me, Catherine."

Only in the farthest recesses of his distraught mind was he aware of the words the Rememberer had quoted to them just before he vanished. *'His mate became ill and death was near. But, at last, he was left alone. His world healed in stone.'* Vincent would not acknowledge the possibility of such a dire outcome. He had taken *'his world'* - Catherine - down to the tunnel world to be healed. And

she would be healed.

Even surrounded by the comforting protection of Vincent's arms, the horror of Catherine's dreams found her. In the depths of her nightmares, she could feel the tenacious grasp of hands, clutching at her, pulling her into the blackness. Turning around in that black void, she saw Vincent teetering on the brink of a crumbling ledge. His clawed fingers grasping at the empty air for a hand-hold. She reached out, struggling to catch him. But those invisible spectral hands clutched at her, pulling her back and then they reached out to shove Vincent over the edge and into the bottomless chasm. In horror, she watched him fall backward into the black void. His empty cloak silently, slowly, fluttering downward into the blackness. She screamed.

Her mind reached out, searching for Vincent. His voice penetrated the curtain of sleep, shoving aside the terrors, and she calmed. The trip upward through the thick fog from unconsciousness to wakefulness was a slow journey.

She awakened in the comforting circle of his strong arms. She had been sweating profusely and her thin cotton nightgown was damp and clung to her skin. But, her mind had finally cleared, and she was fully aware of her surroundings. Struggling to open her heavy-lidded eyes, she found his concerned blue ones searching her face, seeking reassurance that she was truly all right. She had survived the ordeal of her mysterious illness, and instinctively knowing his love had a large part to do with her recovery, she curled up closer to him. The warm pressure of his strong arms held her securely next to the comforting strength of his body. Her own body felt weak and languid, as if it were made of water. In a sudden rush of memory, she struggled to form the words.

"The girl," she urged him. "Vincent, tell me."

"Shhhh, I will tell you later. Rest now." The compassion within this woman overwhelmed him. The wings of death had brushed against her, almost carrying her away from him, but all she could think of upon awakening was an unfortunate stranger. His arms held her more firmly, his hand gently stroked the damp hair from her forehead.

She turned into him, her head resting within the curve of his shoulder. Her hand at his side, weakly clutched the fabric of his shirt; needing that reassuring connection. His soft voice soothed her back to sleep. One claw-tipped hand, the span of it nearly covering the breadth of her back, gently caressed her until she finally succumbed to a deep, healing sleep.

They slept for many hours. Vincent, awakening but moments before Catherine, was afforded the sweet pleasure of watching her sleep, soft and contented, within the hard, protective curve of his body. His arms held her gently, warm against his side. As he watched, the feathery arc of her eyelashes lifted and clear, green eyes raised to meet him.

"Just before I awakened, I felt so safe. I thought I was dreaming all this." Her small hand had been resting lightly upon his chest; she raised it to touch his face. She felt the remnants of her illness, evident in an acute feeling of weakness and exhaustion. But, she gloried in the sensation of being safe in this place, and free from the nightmares at last. And, more miraculously, the delicious comfort of Vincent holding her in his arms.

"You are safe," the slightly rough sound of his voice whispered soft and comforting in answer. "You will always be safe in my arms, Catherine. Always."

She fell silent. Her fingers trembled slightly against the sensual fullness of his lower lip. She had been terribly ill, and though she felt more than slightly weak, she knew any strength she had now came from him, from his love. She wanted more than just the warmth and strength of his body next to her. She desperately longed for him in another way., She needed him in every way a woman can need a man. She wanted more than merely being held tenderly in his arms and treasured by his loving care.

"Make love to me, Vincent." She felt his hesitancy. "Please."

Her quiet plea reached his heart and he carefully rolled toward her. Raising up on one arm, he looked warmly down at her. He both saw in her eyes and felt through their gentle bond, what she had not said with her words. She needed him to make love to her, not the heated passion that blocks out all reason, but the tenderness of gentle consummation. The physical healing brought about not only the joining of two bodies, but by the uniting of two spirits that were so intimately and so closely interwoven.

He did not try to dissuade her, did not argue with her that she was still too physically weak for even the gentlest lovemaking. Instead, he looked down at her with the greatest tenderness and understanding and held her carefully, partly beneath him. The weight of his body exerting only the slightest pressure against hers. One large, claw-tipped hand lovingly stroked her forehead and cheek, lifting the still damp hairs away. His mouth warmed her cool lips and the kiss he pressed there imparted all the love and tenderness he felt for this woman he treasured above all else. He felt her weak response to his kiss. While his lips increased their slight pressure, he pulled her closer against his body, his free hand traced down her side, stopping at the curve of her hip. He tightened his embrace, most minimally, and continued his slow, gentle assault.

Knowing she could not respond more fully, he lifted his lips a breath from her mouth and placed them against her cheek. The hand that had been caressing her hip, moved upward until it found the center of her back once more. With gentle, circular movements, he massaged the soft flesh of her back. He felt her relax against him, her breathing slow and regular.

Raising his golden head, he gazed lovingly down at her. A tender smile caused the minutest change in his mouth as he watched her features relax into that of deep sleep. Placing a light kiss upon her mouth, he lay back, gathering her into the curve of his shoulder. He sighed and, holding his world safely within his arms, he too, was soon asleep.

It was the gentle tapping of the pipes that awakened Catherine some time later. The tunnel community was beginning to stir, the inhabitants sending out their early morning messages. She heard a secondary, thunder-like noise just under her right ear. She smiled, holding perfectly still so as not to disturb the owner. She wanted no disruption of sound or position that might alter her circumstances. She was still cradled against Vincent, his arm curved loosely around her, holding her against his side. One of her arms was flung across his broad chest and one of her legs had come to rest intimately atop one of his muscular thighs. A very wonderful position to find herself in, and one she would like to find herself in upon awakening every morning. She snuggled closer against him, sighing contentedly.

His arm tightened a fraction and his voice rumbled from deep in his chest, thrumming pleasantly beneath his ear. "Good morning."

Keeping her eyes closed, she smiled, loving the unique experience of awakening in his arms. "Good morning." She was silent a heartbeat or two, then added softly. "We should awaken this way more often. I like it."

For answer, he lifted his head from his pillow, dropped a kiss atop her head, then lay back down, content. Another of his dreams had become reality. They lay at peace, curved together in each other's arms, neither wanting to break the intimacy. Suddenly, Vincent gently eased himself away from Catherine and rose lithely to his feet. Lifting the short length of his rough-woven, multi-pieced robe from a nearby chair, his long arms slid into the loose sleeves as he stepped toward the doorway.

"Good morning, Mary."

"Good morning, Vincent," Mary's soft voice reached Catherine before her slight figure appeared in the doorway. Vincent had heard her approaching long before and thus, to avoid embarrassing the sweet lady, had arisen and made himself more presentable for her arrival.

"I brought some breakfast for you and Catherine," Mary replied. Entering the room at his invitation,

she placed the small tray on the octagonal table in the center of the room. Turning, she smiled down at Catherine as if it were the most natural thing in the world to see her in Vincent's bed.

"We are all so glad you are feeling better, Catherine. If you need anything, just send Vincent or one of the children for me. Rest now."

With a final smile and a wave of her hand, she left the chamber. In that moment of efficient and practiced assessment, Mary would carry an accurate report of Catherine's condition back to Father.

Vincent had anticipated her question and smiled down at Catherine's perplexed look. "I was up earlier. I went to see Father and Mary, letting them know you are better."

She smiled inwardly, a touch of it escaping to shape a delicate curve to her lips. She liked the mental image of Vincent leaving their bed and then returning, willingly, to rejoin her under the warm coverlets. He would, at one time, have arisen and then stayed at a distance. But for him to return to her side, to gather her close against him, created a particularly warm tingling in her middle.

Vincent helped her with breakfast, then sent for Mary to assist Catherine with the more intimate task of wash-basin bathing. Catherine wished she and Vincent had been able to enjoy the warmth of that special '*bathing place*' he had told her about. Perhaps in a day or two.

Mary helped her back to bed and, after settling her comfortably, removed the bathing and eating utensils. A smiling Jamie appeared, unannounced, after hearing Catherine had recovered, offering her help. The ladies had been gone but a few moments when Vincent returned. His hair appeared slightly damp at its thicker parts, evidence that he, too, had refreshed himself. He stood gazing down at Catherine, his heart warmed by the sight of the delicate peach color returning to her cheeks.

"In the deepest horror of my dreams, I felt you were close by." Her hand reached out to him, wanting to touch him, wanting him closer.

He knelt beside her bed. Gathering her fingers in his hand, he pressed them against his lips. Catherine raised both their hands to her mouth and placed a kiss on his fingers, loving the silky feel of the fur covering the back of his hand as it brushed against her lips.

Mary had told her how Vincent had never left her side, going without sleep and food until he was certain she would be well. "He loves you so deeply, my dear. I don't want to think about what would have become of him had you not recovered."

Catherine knew how his constant love and attention had saved her life. She had felt him close to her; felt his strength reach out through her nightmares to conquer her fears. But, it had been more than the strength and warmth of his body next to hers that had healed her. His heart had reached out to hers, wrapping her in his unselfish love. It had been that miraculous love that had brought her through her mysterious illness. She shivered at the thought of what might have been the end result had he not come to her, had he not brought her down here to this safe place.

He noticed her tiny shiver and feared she might be having a relapse. "Catherine, are you all right? May I get you anything?" Instant concern for her caused his voice to deepen even more than was usual.

"Come back to me, Vincent. I need your warmth." She eased back slightly in the bed to make room for him.

There was but a moment of hesitation before he rejoined her; reclining not under the covers, but on top of them. Sliding across the bed toward her, the cleft in his night shirt was pulled aside exposing his broad, fur-covered chest. When he gathered Catherine to him, she buried her face in the opening. Her lips pressed against him and she inhaled the rich warm aroma of his body. He gasped in wonder at the touch of her mouth. Always, something stirred within him at the wondrous miracle of being touched by her. Before Catherine, he had never experienced the joy of knowing the intimate caress of another person. That made Catherine's touch even sweeter.

"What is it, Vincent?" She sensed an unspoken emotion within him. A hesitation to express himself. He lay quietly beside her for several long moments.

"After I found you in the park, Catherine, and then throughout those long months after you went Above," his hoarse whisper broke the silence. "I would lie in this bed and dream of you."

"Dream of me?" She was pleased by his having thought of her at such an early time in their knowing each other. And warmed, even more, by the knowledge that, in admitting his feelings to her, he had opened up to her another small, secret part of himself that he had kept hidden. It took a great deal of trust from him to reveal those emotions to her.

"Yes." His voice whispered against her forehead, hushed and intimate. "I imagined you here, with me." A moment of silence before he reached out, gathering her closer against his side. His eyes were half-closed, veiled further by the thick, golden lashes.

Catherine never dreamed that, when they were still but strangers, he had felt so strongly about her, that he had desired her in that way. And, with the bond that tied them so intimately together, she was overcome with the emotional image of what it must have been like for him when she had returned Above. She could only move closer to his side now and ask shyly, ".... and then?"

How could he answer her? Words were insufficient to describe the emotions that flooded through him at that time. The dreams he had never dared to dream because they made his days---and his nights---seem lonelier.

"Someday, I will show you *'and then,'* Catherine," he answered enigmatically. "For now," the only other answer he gave was to pull her closer still against his side, and press a kiss atop her hair.

His silence spoke more to her than any words could have. A quiet tear escaped the corner of her eye, bathing first the softness of her cheek, then traced the curve until, sliding further downward, it reached the warmth of his naked flesh and silently disappeared in the silken fur covering his chest.

'Is the danger past for them?'

'The present danger, yes. But there will be other trying times, other tests of their love and trust.'

'That comes to all lovers.'

'Yes.'

'Will you tell them goodbye?'

'Yes. They deserve that courtesy.'

Catherine was relieved when Vincent told her that Peter had contacted Joe telling him she was ill and under his care. To assuage Joe's concerns over her welfare, Peter had informed him in his most professional doctor tones, that he wasn't certain what brought it on; but thought it most probably was a delayed stress reaction to the violent attack on her three years ago. Such reaction, frequently, could surface years later. Joe could understand that explanation far better than had he been told she was stricken with some mysterious illness. He would have been too consumed with questions that no one could, or wanted to, answer.

Catherine had a more urgent concern involving another male she cared about. For the last couple of days, Vincent had seemed more than customarily withdrawn. This was especially puzzling considering that Catherine was out of danger and that, during her convalescence, they had been sharing quiet mornings and evenings together. Catherine finally realized that it could only be related to what had taken place when he went after the girl. He had been quite communicative about the entire episode. As far as she knew, the search ended unsuccessfully and the girl, and Paracelsus, were still in hiding. Her concern for him gave her the courage to confront him with it.

When she queried him about what had happened on his search, he dropped his head, covering his face with his golden mane and merely shook his head.

"I will tell you about it later, Catherine."

"No. Not later." She advanced a step toward him and he moved away from her to the opposite side of the table. She frowned. "Something happened down there and it is eating away at you, Vincent."

Catherine looked across the room at him. Could her illness have something to do with his reluctance to discuss it with her? He could very well feel she was not well enough as yet, and didn't want to inject any unpleasantness into her life right now. "I am not so fragile you cannot tell me what happened down there. If it has affected you that strongly, you need to talk about it. Now. Don't let it eat away inside you;. That will help no one."

She studied him closely. Every line of his face and body were tightly infused with the distressing memory of whatever it was that had happened down there. He was holding it still within him, as if letting it out would be as painful as when it took place. If he didn't let it out, she feared he would become ill with it.

"Please, Vincent, talk to me."

He continued his agitated pacing around the small confines of his chamber. Then, as if the words themselves were unpleasant passing through his mouth, almost brusquely, he told her about finding the girl. She was injured and dying. He buried her below. There was no sign of Paracelsus.

She realized with some little anger, that was all he intended to tell her. A warning sign went off. The tone of his voice hinted at something deeper, almost painful, that he couldn't bring out.

"You have told me only the surface. Something happened down there that affected you so deeply that it still draws you back." She stood in front of him, feeling the agony that festered inside him. The unspoken anguish of what had occurred in that dark place Below surrounded him like a secondary cloak. At times, when they were together, he seemed to be elsewhere. It was totally unlike him. When Vincent was with someone, he gave them his full, undivided attention. "There is more, Vincent. I can feel it. What is it you are not telling me?"

He continued his long-legged strides around the room, as if he were trying to escape something. "It is not a pretty story, Catherine. It is filled with the ugliness of a man's soul."

"I know the ugliness within Paracelsus, Vincent. I have been witness to it, remember? I recall vividly what he did to all those people Above, and especially to you."

"She's right, you know. You need to tell her."

They both spun around, looking upward, startled by a voice coming from the small loft area near the ceiling of Vincent's chamber. The Rememberer was sitting on what would be the loft floor, his long legs dangling over the edge.

"What are you doing here?" Vincent demanded.

"My task is not as yet finished. I came back to say goodbye."

"Goodbye."

"My, how inhospitable."

"I do not *feel* hospitable."

"How unlike you."

"Yes," Catherine remarked, looking at Vincent, surprised at his unfriendly manner.

Vincent glared up at the small gray man, barely contained anger evident in every line of his powerful body. "You could have done something to save her and you didn't."

"I am a Rememberer," he reminded them. "As a Rememberer, I chronicle the stories of one, or two

persons, such as the two of you." He waved his hand at them. "I am given knowledge of possible events that will, or could, happen. But I cannot interfere in those events. Only the person I am assigned has the freedom to do that. In recording those stories over the eons, centuries, similar events can happen---most likely with a subtle change caused by outside events and people who have entered their lives."

He stopped speaking, and Catherine thought the little man looked uncommonly sad when giving his answer. The silvery-gray eyes he turned toward Vincent seemed a darker, duller gray.

"I could not have saved her, Vincent. She had already written the outcome of her life. All that was left was for you to find her."

"Why?" The anguish choked Vincent. His anger was fed by remembrance of what he had seen in that black, tomb-like room. The way the girl's life had ended was incomprehensible to him. "What was the purpose behind it all?"

"So, at least once in her life, she would know gentleness and compassion. Now she will go forward and be able to find a life filled with light."

"You talk in riddles," Catherine replied.

The Rememberer simply shook his head. "You will come to understand the why of it someday, dear Catherine."

"Leave us," Vincent ordered the visitor.

Catherine looked up at him. He was uncharacteristically hostile toward this little man. Catherine, herself, was not overly fond of the man, but Vincent's attitude toward him puzzled her. She had never seen this side of him before. That kind of hostility usually only surfaced when someone threatened his home and community. So far as she could determine, this little gray man had done nothing other than come into their lives, relate fanciful tales about their lives being written in a book since ancient times, and that Vincent and the girl were not of the same origins.

She stopped her train of thought, remembering back to what he had previously told them. He said that after the warrior and his lady had mated that his people disappeared. What else was it? She searched her memory. *'Run it through your mind clearly, Chandler. Count the lies this little man told you. Oh, yes. The warrior's lady would be near death, the warrior would be alone.... and his people would disappear.'*

A chill went through her. She had been near death. But had survived. A lie. The warrior's people would disappear. Another lie, if you could believe that one, then all the people here in the tunnels should have vanished by now.

"What stories have you come to tell us now, little man?" She challenged. "Your other ones were a little thin on truth."

He smiled down at her. "Were they? Check them again, dear lady." Once again, as when they met in the cavern far below, the little gray man held up his long fingers and enumerated the events.

"The winged messenger came, you and your warrior definitely joined in mating. You became ill and he brought you down here *'to be healed in stone'*." His arms made a wide arc indicating the stone chamber they were in. "And, you are alive, are you not?"

At that instant, the sound of the pipes tapping out their busy messages seemed to resound louder than was normal in the room. "The tunnel people are very much in evidence. None of them have disappeared," Catherine commented, perhaps a bit too quickly.

"Haven't they?" the little man answered back.

"Catherine is right," Vincent spoke out. "These people, my people, have not disappeared."

"Yes, they have," the little man corrected him. "They have hidden themselves away in this safe place. Protecting you as you protect them. Each giving life to the other."

Catherine was almost convinced. "Did that ancient warrior's people disappear in the same manner? Did they find a place like this?"

"No," came the quiet answer. "They disappeared as all people do. But it took many centuries for that to happen. The warrior's people merely went into hiding. They had been threatened and they hid to protect themselves. They hid here." He indicated the surrounding chambers and passageways.

"But this is beneath the city," Catherine challenged. "If you recall your story, they lived in the mountains."

The Rememberer smiled indulgently down at her. "In the past, this place was part of a high mountain range. That is why it has felt so familiar to you, Vincent. That is why you have the least difficulty of all who live here in finding your way around."

The little man seemed to be fading into the half-shadows of the loft. "I'm sorry, it is time for me to leave." He tossed a book down to Vincent. "I wanted you to have this. It is to be a continuation of the first volume. As you will see, most of the pages are blank, but what is there, I believe you will find quite interesting."

He held up his hand in an attitude of caution. "It is your life as it is written, or it will change as you see fit to change it. You are free to read it or to put it aside and let your life grow as it will. It is your choice. If you read it, and don't care for what you read, you can change it, you know. It's up to you. It is my farewell gift to you."

As they watched astonished, their visitor almost faded from sight, then solidified once more. "One more thing, Vincent. You are what you are. You have become who you are because of what went before you."

"That is true of us all," Vincent answered.

"Yes. Now, you have one more task to complete before that book can begin." Vincent stared silently up at the little man, giving no reply. "Before you begin the next chapter of your life, tell your lady about the room."

This time the little man faded entirely from view. A faint "Farewell, dear friends," came faintly down to them.

Vincent turned the tiny volume over in his hands. If what the strange little man said was true, it contained the story of his life, and Catherine's. He had no desire to know what was in store for them. He turned and walked back across the room and placed the book on the shelf between the other well-worn volumes. He turned his back on it and leaned against the shelf, arms crossed over his broad chest.

The part of his mind that believed in the mythical reality, understood what the little gray man had just told them. His rational mind disbelieved what they had just been told. He would sort this whole affair out when his mind wasn't in such conflict. Later, he would hold it up and analyze it to the fullest. The expression on Catherine's face told him she, too, had many doubts about what had just occurred.

Vincent studied the features of this woman he loved, and was suddenly embarrassed by the way he had been behaving. He had excluded her from a part of his life she had every right to be included in. He justified it by reasoning to himself that he had done it to keep her from the ugliness. When, in reality, he had been unable to face the pain and tragedy of it.

Catherine saw the conflict within Vincent, not fully understanding what it was, but, when he held out his hand to her, she went to him. He was about to remove an impediment from the relationship; a barrier he had erected because he did not trust her enough to share this pain with her. For love was not only sharing the joys and the happiness, it was also encompassing the pain, and making that pain less by the sharing.

Vincent sat on the edge of his bed, indicating Catherine should sit beside him. He rested his elbows on his padded knees, his hands clasped before him. His golden head was bowed in deep thought. Catherine could see it was a difficult task for him to even begin telling the story of what happened during his search for the girl. But, at last, he began, his words slowly forcing their way out.

"After she died, I searched for some clue to her identity." Rising, he went to the wardrobe-storage closet near his bed and pulled out a small packet of scraps of paper. He held them out for her to examine. "I found these in her clothing." He sat next to her once again, their hips touching, and resumed his former pose.

"Her life had become a bitter battle, Catherine. Paracelsus found her, and convinced her with his cunning, that he could give her a life free of whatever it was she ran from. The reconstructive surgery had been done without her consent. He had told her their alliance would be other than it turned out to be. She was to... bear my children. Her attempt to lead me into his trap... failed. So, he sealed her in that tomb. He devised a fiendishly clever way to imprison her. The door was secured so she couldn't get out - or be readily found. It was designed to prolong the agony of her dying. Each day the tension holding the door closed would lessen a fraction more, and each day the door slid into the grooves just a little deeper - permitting sufficient air to enter the chamber, but not allowing anyone to detect the door from the rock wall. I passed it several times. Had it not moved when I leaned against it, she would never have been found. She would have starved to death - a slow, horrible way to die."

He rose to his feet and walked across the room. When he turned back to face Catherine, his eyes were filled with the anguish and grief of what he had witnessed, his cheeks were wet with tears.

"She chose her own fate, Catherine." His voice broke off, his emotions too intense for him to continue. The pictures were seared in his mind. He would never forget the sight of her hands. "She chewed into her own flesh - she bled to death."

With a cry, Catherine rose and went to him, gathering him in her arms. No wonder he would not talk with her about it. He felt too great an amount of responsibility for the girl's death. Catherine realized with horror that, had he not felt her fear that night by the fire and returned to her, he would have been imprisoned with the girl in that cave.

There was something else he had not taken into consideration. Because of their bond, her fear for him, and at the appearance of the little gray man, had drawn him back to her side. Therefore, in her eyes, she and Vincent shared joint responsibility for the girl's death.

"If we are going to lay blame for the girl's death, I am as responsible as you."

"No, Catherine!" Vincent's shocked refusal to accept her reasoning was fully expected by Catherine. "I was the target of his mad scheme. Not you."

"It was our bond that saved your life, Vincent. Therefore, I am as responsible as you for it happening." She tried to reason with him. "Had you not felt my fear, Vincent, and come back to me, you would have been trapped with the girl." She thought about the sequence of events from the moment Vincent had spotted the girl in the doorway, until he returned.

"Vincent, there is something else you should know." She related the events of the sandstorm that drove her back; kept her from following him. She reasoned that the little gray man had, in his own way, saved Vincent's life and let the girl conclude her life as she had chosen to do. She saw Vincent's disbelief in her revelation. He was not quite convinced yet that neither the little gray man nor himself were totally without some fault in this regard. Catherine felt otherwise. It was obvious that it would take time for her to convince Vincent that he was free of blame for the sequence of events that had occurred that night. No matter how long it took, she was willing to spend the time and energy to help him release his feeling of guilt.

Vincent urged Catherine to stay Below longer to make certain she had fully recuperated from her mysterious illness. It took some clever lawyer-like arguments, but she finally convinced him she was well and strong enough to return Above and attend to her job. It was with great reluctance that he escorted her back to her threshold. Before parting, they had agreed that, this year, they would celebrate their anniversary Below.

'What is in store for them this year?'

'A trip to the past - so to speak.'

'What do you mean 'so to speak?'

'He will take her to a place with special meaning for him and, in a way, for her as well. He left some of his lost dreams there. She will find them and give them back to him.'

The snows and chilling cold of January gave way to the gentler days of spring. Catherine had given Joe ample notice that she would be unavailable for a particular two day period in April and, despite a last ditch effort to keep her at her desk, Joe conceded defeat and with a cheery "Go get him, Radcliffe!", bid her a happy vacation.

Months had passed since Vincent and Catherine had journeyed together through his world, and they had left each other with a reluctant goodbye at her threshold. There had been rare evenings watching the city from her balcony and an occasional walk through the night shrouded park. But, both had been consumed by job and community duties and it had been a couple of weeks since they had managed to be together. As with all lovers, any time separated seemed an eternity. But, tonight, they would be together again and joy hurried their footsteps to their rendezvous.

As they began the return trip Below, Vincent enigmatically informed Catherine that they were going to see a place she had expressed interest in during her illness. Catherine frowned, momentarily puzzled by Vincent's remark. There were vacant spaces within her memory as to what occurred during her illness. She was, nonetheless, willing and eager to see this place she couldn't remember.

They passed by the turnoff that led to the deep Catacombs, crossed a flat, mesa-like area and up a second stone-carved stairway into another vast cavern. They continued walking for almost an hour before Vincent slowed his pace and turned to Catherine.

"Remember. I promised someday I would show you *'and then?'*"

With those last two words, the memory returned. He had told her how he had dreamed about her during those first eight months after she had returned Above. To prod him into revealing what he had dreamed, she had asked *'and then?'* It appeared she was about to find out the answer at last.

At Catherine's nod, Vincent clasped her hand and they passed through the jagged outline of an arched doorway entering what appeared to be a small vaulted cave. There was the faint sound of water dripping somewhere in the blackness surrounding them.

"After you returned Above, I thought I would never see you again. I would come down here, away from the others, to be alone. I was.... enlarging this small cave when I broke through the back wall and found a second larger cave. I never imagined anything like this could be, especially down here. No one else knows it exists."

He moved forward, and raised his lantern higher. "To answer your question, Catherine, this is *'and then'.*"

Catherine looked around her at the room that he had literally carved out of solid rock. She was awed by the realization of what he had done. She tried to imagine the power within him, the physical strength it must have taken for him to single-handedly chisel out the small cave-like room

they had just passed through. And, though he had not and would not, verbalize it, she somehow understood that he had come here to exorcise her from his dreams; to expand his dream-induced, pent-up sexual energy against the solid rock walls of this world. The realization of the past she had played in accentuating his aloneness and frustration, humbled her. She wanted to cry out for him, for what he had suffered because of her. But, as she was to discover, something wonderful and a treasure hidden away behind a thin rock wall. He gently squeezed her hand.

"Close your eyes." When she did so, he urged her quietly. "Stay here." Though he tried, his beautifully resonant voice could not dispute his underlying excitement.

Taking the lantern, Vincent circled one edge of a dark, mist-draped pool until he reached the opposite side. There, he placed the lantern on a small outcropping of rock overhanging the black waters. Catherine heard his muffled footsteps as he returned to her side. Standing just behind her, he gently urged. "Now."

Catherine slowly opened her eyes to a magical, unbelievable sight. The cavern walls glittered wherever the wavering golden light from the lantern touched them. The lantern's light reflected in the inky waters of the pond casting back a golden mirror image.

"Oh, Vincent, what is it? It is like a fairyland. What makes the walls shimmer so?"

"Crystals," he answered. "The walls are covered with multi-colored crystals."

"Unbelievable," was all Catherine could find to say. It was a word totally inadequate to describe the beauty displayed around them. The light caught the crystals embedded in the walls. Wherever the flickering lantern light caught them, they glittered like fireflies. Her hand flew up and touched the beloved crystal between her breasts. She was suddenly excited. "Oh, Vincent, is this where my crystal came from?"

"No," he answered softly. "Yours came from the Crystal Cavern.... far from here." His arm arced through the air, indicating the surrounding walls. "This is something entirely different. I never knew so many different colors could grow in the same place. It is a rare and highly unusual phenomenon."

He took her hand and led her nearer the edge of the pool. Looking down, the black water was alive with pinpoints of dancing lights, shot into the water by the lantern light reflecting off the crystalline covered walls. So entranced was she, that Vincent had to pull her back away from the pool's edge.

"Be careful, Catherine," he cautioned her. "We will enjoy that later." When she peered up at him, questioning his meaning, he smiled down at her. "This is the warm pool I told you about on our last visit."

As if becoming aware of the pool for the first time, she studied it intently for a moment, then grinned up at him, checking his meaning. And doubly happy that he was now able to refer to their previous trip without his voice tense and filled with pain.

"Skinny-dipping, Vincent?"

"Skinny-dipping, Catherine," he affirmed, meaningfully.

She was silent for a long moment, standing in an attitude of listening to the surrounding blackness.

"Catherine, what?"

"I feel as if we were being watched - again."

Understanding her meaning, he moved closer, his smoky blue eyes tender with assurance. "I promise you we are alone. I would sense if he were here again."

"You didn't notice last time," she reminded him, her green eyes smiling up at him.

"I was otherwise occupied then," he reminded her, with a tilt of his golden head and an equally meaningful gleam warming the blue of his eyes.

"Your intentions now?" She left the question hanging in the air between them and moved closer, her body almost touching his. Her eyes were filled with more than the excitement of the surrounding wonders of the cave as she waited for his response. He merely stood tall above her, calmly assessing the emotions coming through their bond. He swallowed and took a step backward. Catherine's eyebrows rose a curious fraction.

"Camp first....," came his brisk, business-like reply. Another step backward and he began preparing the evening's camp.

"Procrastinator," Catherine spat out at him, grinning impishly as she moved to help.

Pitching in, they shared the few chores necessary for settling in for the night. While Vincent prepared the small bonfire, Catherine spread their bedding nearby. After a light meal, they settled back to enjoy the rarity of a peaceful evening together - alone.

She watched as Vincent rummaged through his knapsack, and was more than a little surprised to find him extracting the small book the Rememberer had given to him. The book supposedly documented Vincent's lifetime. Recalling the strength of purpose with which Vincent had initially rejected the book she found it even more intriguing that he should bring it with him. Especially, as he had declared quite vehemently that he had no desire to know what lay ahead. Perhaps, Catherine mused, he had brought the book with him on impulse. Now, he sat quietly examining the small volume.

Catherine moved up behind him, peering over his shoulder, curious. "I thought you had no interest in that little book. You were so adamant about not wanting to know its contents when he gave it to you. What changed your mind?"

His head dropped forward, hiding his face within the thick, tawny curtain of his mane. Considering the unhappy circumstances that had precipitated his previous anger, when he spoke now, his voice was steady and unemotional.

"I will never forget the cruel injustice of it all, Catherine. But, I have become reconciled with what happened. I came to realize there was nothing he nor I could have done to save that poor girl. I am now able to read this book a bit more removed from the intense emotions of that moment." He hesitated briefly before continuing, saying, almost matter-of-factly. "If this volume does present my life, and if what the Rememberer told is true, about that ancient mythic warrior also being myself - well.... I thought I might find within its pages what this night holds for us."

She stared at him totally unbelieving of his actions and his words. This was uncharacteristic of Vincent. He would never live his life according to the words in a book - and a definitely suspect book at that.

Sitting back on her heels, for a few brief moments she let him explore the book and savor the joy of this new, yet somewhat old gift. Then she stretched up slightly and nuzzled his cheek, her breath warm and intimate. As she placed a kiss just in front of his ear. Her breath tickled his ear and Vincent reacted slightly by tilting his head and turning his cheek into her hand where it rested on his shoulder. The soft bristles of his jaw lightly scraped her hand.

Only momentarily distracted, Vincent returned to searching the pages of the book, examining the drawings and, now and again, reading a line or two he had found interesting.

Catherine decided the time had come for some serious distracting. She pressed the softness of her breasts more firmly against his back and, reaching out with her fingers, she lightly brushed them along the high plane of one marvelously sculpted cheek. Then, stroking them against the roughness of his facial hair, she slowly traced the strong line of his jaw. He reacted almost exactly as she wished, catching her fingers between his teeth. One of his fangs nudged a captive finger and his lips held her hand gently, but firmly, entrapped. Pressing closer still against his shoulder, she lifted the heavy weight of his mane near his already assaulted ear with her nose, and nipped

lightly at his neck.

Before she could speak or react, he had turned suddenly, twisting lithely around and she found herself a captive beneath the weight of his massive body. He still held her hand tenderly imprisoned between his teeth.

"I have heard," he intoned meaningfully, the sound of his voice a soft and slightly raspy whisper around her fingers. "That, once freed from their restraints, taunted mythic heroes were known to turn on and ravage their female tormentors."

Catherine moved one long finger within the warm prison of his mouth and found the nearest fang. She impishly stroked the sharp outline and grinned up into Vincent's predator-blue eyes.

"I have heard," she intoned softly back, her voice husky with growing desire. "That the captives of these mythic heroes were able to free themselves by stimulating certain responsive parts of their captor's anatomy."

Only partially entrapped under Vincent's long, powerful length, Catherine moved slightly against him, her hip brushing a strategic part of him, her thigh easily insinuating itself between his. Another well-orchestrated move and she felt the desired reaction from him that she was hoping for.

She heard a sound rumble deep within Vincent's throat, faint at first, then gradually deepening. A groan of despair, a growl of capitulation. His teeth parted a mere fraction and her fingers were freed from his mouth. Desire was a blue flame in his eyes as he looked down at her. He shifted his weight slightly and she felt one padded knee open, and easily invade, the space between her legs.

Then his powerful upper thigh was rubbing slowly, seductively, back and forth between the 'V' he had created. She gasped for breath just as his mouth lowered to claim hers. His kiss was a gentle assault that left no doubt about where this contest was headed. He released her lips, his whiskered muzzle gently brushing the soft area beside her mouth, his lips lightly teasing, making her follow when he drew his mouth away from hers, coming only close enough for her to anticipate contact. But this lover's game was beginning to affect him as well. He was suddenly still above her. His lips separated from hers by the merest breath of air.

The open love and desire evident in the warm, azure-blue depths of his gaze flooded her with joy and warmth, and Catherine raised her head to steal a kiss from his sensuous lips. The light pressure intending nothing more than an affirmation of her love for him. The depth of her love for him was reflected back to him in her sea-green eyes.

"Vincent, when you came here.... when you did this...."

He stopped her by placing one long, claw-tipped finger lightly upon her lips, stilling her unspoken words. It stayed to trace the soft, sensual outline of her mouth.

"When I came here.... I thought you were lost to me, Catherine," he answered quietly. "Because I dared not dream, because I feared to dream. My desires did this."

Again, he had opened up and let her see into that secret part within himself. The evidence of the mental and physical torment he had endured because she had entered his life was evident all around them.

It was almost more than she could bear. With a small cry, she reached up and pulled him down to her, cradling his massive body against her.

Vincent nuzzled her neck and answered softly. "It was worth it, Catherine. I would dare the dream all over again to have you with me."

"Tell me your dream, Vincent. Has it come true?"

He raised his head slowly from the curve of her neck. His eyes met and held hers for long moments before he spoke. His words came almost too softly spoken to hear, yet her heart heard them with crystal clearness, and she felt caressed by each and every syllable.

"Yes, more than I could have wished for."

"Do you have other dreams?"

For a heartbeat longer, he brushed his lips across the softness of her chest, pausing near her mouth. The soft husky pitch of his voice seemed to vibrate through her, warm and caressing.

"I dream of my hand - exploring the hollow of your back."

'Dream - not dreamt.' He no longer thought in the past tense. He was no longer afraid to dream of her. She had at least been able to give him that. She didn't know how to answer him, couldn't have answered him, and so she remained silent. The image of his large, furred hand intimately exploring the curved, naked hollow of her back awoke the warm sensations of remembered passion; the image held her voiceless and immobile.

For a brief instant, she could feel his touch. She yearned to feel the warmth of his hand caressing that sensitive part of her body. In the golden firelight, the play of light and shadow sculpted an even more leonine appearance upon his beautifully unique features. She cradled his face between her palms.

"I have the same dream, Vincent." With his soft, ragged, in-drawn sigh, she felt his chest press against her breasts.

Gently, she reached up and pushed against him, shoving him away from her, freeing herself from beneath the slight confining weight of his body. Rising to her knees, she lifted her gaze from his beloved face to look around her at the evidence of how his dreams had driven him. In denying the possibility of such dreams, he had pounded away at the barriers placed before him and inadvertently smashed through them to discover the unimaginable beauty few people are ever fortunate enough to experience.

Catherine recognized the first cave as Vincent's *'and then'* - the place he fought his internal battles with himself. He carved out solid stone to fight against his aloneness and to release the agonizing frustration caused by the erotic dreams of Catherine. The second cave represented the hidden beauty that came into his life when he broke through the barriers separating their two worlds. First, when he found and brought her into his world. Then, when he accepted that he had the right to a woman's touch and her love. And, finally, when at last he was able to find and see and accept what he and Catherine could have together. To get to his heart, she had had to chisel away at one of the stone barriers he had erected - that he was not worthy to receive her love.

Catherine turned and looked down at him, immediately lost in the blue of his eyes. This man above all others deserved to receive love. Her eyes filled with the promise of giving him her unending love, a promise that he would never again be alone. She had told him this in the past, and he had shyly accepted her proclamation of love. Tonight, she would tell him in another way of the surety and strength of that love. She would take the dreams he had left hidden in this cavern and give them back to him. Those dreams from so long ago, she would give to him tonight. Whatever he had dreamt about her and discharged into the air of this beautiful cave; she would find and make his reality for tonight.

Her hands went to him and she removed his voluminous cloak, letting it fall away of its own weight. Their eyes met and held as she began unbuttoning his shirt, pulling it from the waistband of his trousers, freeing it to fall away from his broad shoulders as well. Leaning back, she let him make the next move. Sound and time were suspended, hushed and quiet, between them. Then, Vincent moved toward her.

Surrounded by the dancing crystals, they slowly and with loving care undressed each other. The place where clothing had been was replaced with kisses and caresses. When they were done, Catherine was wearing nothing but the clear crystal necklace he had given her. Vincent knelt naked before her, the lantern cast its light upon his body, accentuating and sculpting the powerful

muscles. The fur on his body turning into a burnished gold covering, further emphasizing his strength and viral sensuality.

She reached out to touch him, wanting to touch him inside where his heart had, for so long, carefully hidden his hurt, his pain, and his aloneness. She wanted to caress it away so he would only remember, from now on, the gentle touch of her loving hands.

She reached out, placing her hands on his shoulders, stroking them with her palms, feeling the incomprehensible power beneath the muscles. Her hands traced the line of his arms, her fingers sliding through the light fur covering his upper arms, then combing through the longer fur of his forearms. These were the arms that exerted the extraordinary power to drive the chisel and hammer, that pushed the walls back, that carved out the rooms they were in. These were the arms that were driven by a burning desire of the body and the heart to have an impossible dream. This was the desire that finally broke down all barriers keeping them apart.

She reached out and pressed her hand against his chest, stroking it down toward his stomach, halting just before reaching his groin. Leaning forward, she placed her mouth in the warm dip at the base of his throat where his pulse was racing madly. She ran a trail of kisses from there to the center of his chest; halting over his heart. She felt its heightened pounding beneath her lips. Moving slightly, she searched out his hardened nipples within the golden fur covering his body.

She lowered her mouth to his flat, hard stomach and, when she moved lower, she heard the sharp inhalation of his breath. She pressed his legs further apart and placed kisses along the insides of his strong thighs. His hips tilted forward and she felt his flesh quiver with excitement under her ministrations. He pulled her up to him, his large hands pressing her hips against the swollen evidence of his arousal. His mouth feverishly sought hers.

"No, Vincent," she murmured softly against the corners of his uniquely shaped mouth. Her arms went around his neck and she briefly held herself against the heat of his naked body. "Let me do this. Tonight is for you.... for all the dreams that brought you here."

Freeing herself from his embrace, she gently eased him down and onto his back. Leaning over him, she began trailing a path of kisses from his mouth back down the angles and planes of his body. Finding and tracing the hard, tempered muscles beneath his skin with her lips and hands. With each tender touch of her hands, she would seek them out. Give them back to him with her caresses and her love. These two small caves had been carved out of his pain. Now, she would disperse that pain and that aloneness of long ago. From this night on, they would nevermore haunt these glittering rock walls.

Vincent was awash in the feel of her caresses and the love flowing through their bond. He had never felt the depth of her love so intensely as he did tonight. It flowed from her, filling every pore of his body, every recess of his mind, with its power and warmth. No part of his body was left untouched by her lovemaking. His head went back, eyes closing as his breath escaped in a ragged groan.

She found and caressed the hardened, swollen flesh between his thighs, drew him to the limits of physical sensation without pushing him over the edge. She satisfied him with every part of her being. Her hands, her mouth, all gave him what he had yearned for in those past dreams, gave him what he had been denied. She created new needs in him and then satisfied them.

She judged when his trembling body could stand no more and moved her body over him, his thighs held captive between hers. Her body hovered over his and she leaned forward placing her hands on either side of him to support the weight of her body. Her swollen breasts lightly brushed across his chest as she leaned forward to place a warm kiss upon his mouth. When their groins briefly touched, his hips arched upward and Vincent moaned, pulling her up over him. His hands found her waist and her slender hips, holding her steady. He guided himself into her, helping her body assimilate and adapt to the hard, pulsing heat of him. She moaned softly as he pressed himself to

her entrance. Her hands clutched his massive shoulders as she felt his probing thickness slowly accommodated and engulfed by the warm sheath of her body.

His hand returned to her waist and then grasped her hips, caressing her rounded buttocks, encouraging her into a smooth, slow rhythm. She placed her hands on his powerful shoulders and pushed slightly away from him. She began the erotic rhythm of easing away from him and then returning at her own pace, her eyes never leaving his, watching each nuance of feeling that crossed his beautiful features.

She slowed her movements and stopped to lay upon his chest, her face nuzzling his neck, allowing their bodies to slow and quiet down. Her full lips moved close to his cleft ones, then moved away just before contact. Once more, she rose above him, her hips beginning a newer erotic rhythm. He let her lead, as much as his body would allow him. His heart thundered in his chest with watch slowing and increasing nuance of her change of pace upon him. Finally, his body took over and he was no longer in control. His hands grasped her hips and he pushed deeper into her, holding her in place. His hips and groin trembling with the intensity of the sexual charge. She felt him pulsate within her and her body reacted by clutching tightly around him. A heat began to build in the center of her belly and her groin; her breath began to come in short gasps. The heated sensations she was building in him circle through their bond to consume them both.

His hand traveled up the silken flash of her body to curve around and capture her breasts. His large hands cupped the swollen mounds and he brushed the nipples between his clawed thumb and forefinger. He pulled her toward him and took one rosy-tipped breast in his mouth, his tongue played across the sensitive nipple causing her to momentarily halt the movement of her hips. He began a gentle sucking motion, pulling at her breast, until Catherine gasped with the intense arousal it caused. Her hips began a quicker motion, and Vincent arched upward to meet her, grabbing her waist to make them move as one.

Catherine felt herself rising quickly to the crest. The rhythm of her body now matched by Vincent's. He felt her convulsions begin and, grasping her hips tightly, pushed himself deeper still into the clutching sheath of her body. Catherine felt as one with Vincent as their bond joined them and merged their separate releases into one. She cried his name out and heard her name as a final growling sound that rumbled from deep within Vincent's throat. She collapsed on top of him, her chest heaving, the moisture from her body combining with his. Vincent's arms held her desperately against his heaving chest for a few moments. Then one hand returned to her hips, holding her securely in place; his manhood still engorged, pulsated within her. His breath was warm against her ear as he whispered her name over and over again.

She lifted her head to look at him and saw passion still smoldering within the blue depths of his eyes. He turned, rolling Catherine over onto her back, and his mouth came hungrily down on hers. Fueled by the passion-fire that roared anew through their bodies, it was as if their previous consummation had never been extinguished. She felt the hardness of him throbbing between her thighs. Locked into the spread of her legs, his hips bucked forward, and she was filled with the rhythm and fullness of him once again. As she felt the movement of him within her, an answering wave of desire flared through her again and she clung to him. Her renewed passion meeting and matching his. Driven now by a body that had become consumed by a more uncontrolled intense physical need, instant only on the fiery completion. And they soared to the heights again. The aftershocks of their first release mingling with the new tremors. Driven by the force of this second completion, their loins convulsed and drove into each other, leaving them both satiated, content and pleasantly exhausted.

The cool air in the small cave touched the fine sheen of moisture covering their naked bodies, chilling them. Shivering, they remained entwined together. Vincent reached behind him and, finding his cloak, spread it over them providing a temporary warmth. His last memory was of gathering Catherine into the curves of his body and feeling her lips pressing a kiss against his throat.

He awoke some time later. His body felt weightless, pleasantly lethargic and he was suffused with a feeling of utter contentment. Catherine began to stir soft and warm against him. One of her arms slid upward across his chest, curving around his neck. Gathering her into his arms, he rose effortlessly to his feet. Carrying her to the edge of the pool, he waded slowly out into the warm waters until he was about waist deep. He held her cradled against him for a moment more, then gently lowered her legs. The water wrapped about her thighs and buttocks and she felt as if she were wrapped in soft, warm velvet. Her arm curved about Vincent's shoulders and she buried her face in his neck. He still carried the musky odor of their lovemaking. She inhaled, filling her nostrils with the glorious scent of him.

His arms wrapped about her small waist and he held her full length along his body. Her body was partly submerged in the warmth of the water. Though her feet did not touch the pool's bottom, she would have been incapable of standing on her own had Vincent released her. She was still too languorous and replete with the aftermath of their lovemaking, to attempt standing on her own. She was more amenable to being exactly where she was. Content, she kept her face buried under Vincent's bewhiskered chin. She liked the feeling of their wet naked bodies touching. She liked the way his powerful arms held her securely, tenderly against the hard, slippery length of his body.

Vincent walked further out into the depth of the pool until the water reached him about mid-chest. He brought one arm up to hold Catherine's shoulders closer and to partly cover them, making certain she was not chilled where the water did not cover.

"Are you warm enough?" His voice murmured softly against her cheek. The scar on her cheek received the tender touch of his lips. Catherine nodded drowsily in the curve of his shoulder and neck. They were silent for long moments. Catherine smiled against his skin.

"Vincent?"

"Mmmmm."

"I like skinny-dipping."

"As do I," Vincent smiled down at her.

She pulled back enough to look into his face, touching it with one of her hands. His mane floated golden in the water, draping across one of her shoulders, a gentle extension of him.

She pressed her mouth against the underside of his bristled jaw and whispered softly, "I wanted to give you all those long ago dreams tonight, Vincent. I wanted to take away all the loneliness and pain you went through because of me. I wanted that to be my gift to you on this very special night."

"You give me that gift, Catherine, every time we are together."

"I don't ever want to stop giving it to you, Vincent. You are my love, my life. Without you, my life would be blacker than this cave before you brought your light into it."

He pulled her closer against his body and she gloried in the feel of their naked bodies pressed together. One of his fingers could merely brush one of hers in passing and it made her complete and whole. A glance from him and she felt treasured beyond belief. All she wanted in her life was to make him feel the same---and much, much more. If she could succeed in that, she would have accomplished her purpose in this lifetime.

She murmured softly against his warm, moist flesh beneath her mouth. "After we decided to be together... did you return here often, Vincent?"

He knew the hidden meaning behind her words, the love that came with them. Did he still have times of physical frustration when he desired her?

"I.... occasionally work on it," he admitted shyly.

"When will the cave be finished, Vincent?"

Holding her securely against him with one arm, his large hand traced the gentle curve of her spine until he found and began a slow, sensual exploration of the secret hollow of her back.

"It was completed tonight, Catherine."

A thin, gray form had settled comfortably in a far corner of the small cavern earlier in the evening. A contented smile crossed his features. His work was done. He would leave them now. Their life together spread out before them with all its twists and turns, but he knew they would have the strength to handle whatever was thrown across their path. Because they now were not two separate paths, but one marvelously conjoined with the strongest connection of all Love.

END