

# ***Not Only My Pleasure***

by Jackie Kapke

*(from Flame and Shadow 4)*

Standing on the small landing situated midway along the stone stairway that angled precariously downward in the Chamber of the Winds, Vincent's hair and cape were whipped by the screaming gusts. Like so many places Below, one wrong step, one miscalculated movement, and a fall would bring certain death.

Vincent stood as if mesmerized. The wind had become a siren's hypnotic voice; the twirling whorls of mist and fog, far below, almost enticing. It would be so easy to take that step, that one little step forward ... and be with Catherine once more ... God, he missed her so!

His great head swayed, dropping to his chest, as sobs racked his body. The once proud stature of his powerful body was no longer evident; tears streamed from his eyes. He trembled, fully realizing the closeness of death in this place.

Suddenly, a woman's terrified voice overrode the mournful cries of the wind. Piercing through the black cloud of agony blocking his reason, it reached into his mind and brought him reluctantly back, making him acutely aware of his surroundings, forcing his awareness back to himself. Vincent raised his head, aware of the her presence, but he could not yet turn to look at her.

"Vincent, no! Please ... please don't," she pleaded. She stood, unmoving, several steps behind him.

Finally, he shifted his weight, turning around to look into the face of the beautiful woman who called out to him. The anguish and fear Diana felt was obvious in every tense line of her body. He was drawn by the desperate pleading in her eyes. Sensing her understanding, he hung his head once more, ashamed that she had found him in his present state of mind and been witness to his momentary weakness. Then, again, he was strangely not ashamed.

She held out her hand. It looked so small and frail, but it was his lifeline now, and he took it in his own as he looked once more into her tear-glistened eyes. Claspng his huge hand in her own, Diana felt him squeeze her fingers tightly, and she exhaled with relief, trembling the same as he. Slowly, she drew him away from the precipice. She sat down, her back pressing against the security of the stone wall, and pulled him down to join her.

Vincent slumped to the ground, shuddering, no longer stifling his tears, allowing the agony and the loss he felt to run its course. Diana held him close, stroking his head and mane, encouraging him to press against her warmth. She did not speak, for she knew there were no words to ease his pain. It was something only he could work through. It was something he must come to terms with alone. But he would never be alone; she, Father, and the others would be there for him, when he could finally accept their help, their support.

As Diana sat holding him, the past few moments flashed across her mind. She had come below and, even before reaching his chamber, she had sensed something amiss. The intensity of his desolation and hopelessness suddenly bombarded her. She had been drawn toward the terrifying sensation with an urgency she had never known and, somehow, she knew it was emanating from Vincent.

When she found him, looking over the edge of the great staircase, his huge body hunched over in defeat and utter sorrow, she knew instantly what he was contemplating. She had been at that very same impasse not so very long ago. Though uncertain that he would really take his own life, she didn't dare take the risk, for just the fact that he was even considering suicide made it imperative that he know he was not alone.

When the acuteness of his sorrow had subsided, and he had wiped his tears away, he raised his head to look at her. Once again, he was torn that she had seen his loss of control, but ever grateful that she had been there to help him and, possibly, to have saved his life.

"Let's go home," she said. Pushing back his disheveled mane, her fingers gently caressed his face. They slowly walked back to his chamber.

Mary was sitting by Jacob's cradle and rose to her feet when they entered the chamber. Sensing that the couple needed their privacy, she hugged Vincent, kissed Diana's cheek, and then excused herself.

Vincent stood, swaying slightly, his head bowed as he looked down at his peacefully sleeping son. Diana stood

silently beside the man, who had become so much more than just her friend, waiting for him to speak.

"He is the reason I must continue; I know that, but, sometimes ... sometimes ... " His voice became hoarse, cracking with emotion and he was unable to continue. He turned to face Diana and she could see his struggle, feel his pain so clearly, and so wished that she could be of more help. She hoped that one day, she might be his second best reason to continue. Perhaps, one day, she would.

"I know. I know," she whispered as, hesitantly, he stepped toward her once more and she held him in her arms. He pulled back slightly, shaking his head, "Diana ...," he began.

She shook her head, placing a finger to his lips. "This is between you and me. It shall go no farther than this room. Please, try to sleep now. I know you're exhausted. I'll stay here awhile, if you like."

He pressed his lips together, nodding as he took her hand in his and held it tightly a moment. Then he moved to his bed, sat down and wearily removed his boots. With a deep sigh, he looked a last time at Diana, his gratitude evident. He rolled onto his side, his back to her and, after pulling up the heavy quilts, soon slipped into an exhausted sleep.

She sat curled up in the rocker for several hours, silently watching him and his tiny son. Her heart ached to do more for them both. She loved Vincent and she ardently wished that some day he would find peace within himself. Catherine's death had crushed him. It had changed him, forever. Diana knew he would never again have that innocent hope, the dream of loving a woman, as he had with Catherine.

As the hours slowly passed, she grew weary; but she would not leave Vincent to wake up alone. She propped her head on her arm, her eyelids drooping. Her thoughts drifted back to the time when she had brought him to her loft, injured, uncertain if death would claim him.

Almost as if he had sensed her thoughts, Vincent stirred and rose up on one elbow to look at her. His face was flushed with sleep and his hair was in a wonderful disarray.

"Diana, you're still here. I hadn't intended to sleep so long. I'm sorry.

I ...."

"I'm not," she replied softly. Rising from her chair, she crossed to stand beside his bed. "But I am going to find a guest chamber somewhere and get forty winks myself. Will you be all right?"

"Yes. I'll be fine. I think I can still get a little more sleep."

"Good," she said, as she sat on the bed beside him. He could sense her concern deepen. "Just promise me that you'll come to me if you ever feel that alone, that desperate again. Will you do that?"

He dropped his face, embarrassed that she should have to ask him. Exhaling a deep breath, he raised his head and her huge eyes captured and held his own, as he replied, "I promise."

Relief washed through her as she smiled at him and squeezed his hand. "I'll see you both for breakfast," she said, rising from his side. She grabbed her jacket off the chair as she headed for the doorway.

"Diana?" he called softly after her.

She turned, searching his incredible face.

"Thank *you*," he whispered, looking downward for a brief moment. Then he raised his head and the eye contact he made with her was electric. All that he had left unsaid was clearly spoken in his warm blue gaze.

She nodded, wanting to add *I love you*, but caught her words, knowing now was not the time. She'd only hurt him more. Perhaps, one day, she could tell him.

"Sleep well," she said softly, using the words that she had heard him speak so often.

"And you," he whispered.

When she had gone, he bent over the cradle to make certain little Jacob was still covered, then eased back down under his own quilts. He was still tired and found that without much difficulty, his eyelids were once

more heavy and within moments, he slept again.

The strange dream he had had many times before returned. Diana and himself facing each other in the darkness. She held his face between her hands, as their faces spun around and around in a dizzying circle. She could see him, but it was as if he was both blind and deaf, unresponding to her voice or the incredibly beautiful sight of her holding him so intimately. It was as if he had separated from his physical self and looking on from a distance.

It was an unusual dream and it always troubled him for he was certain it signified something important; yet, he was uncertain of its meaning. Little did he know that Diana was having the very same image dance in her mind as she slept nearby. It was a shared vision and difficult to ascertain from whom it emanated. One thing was certain, however, it was part of the connection he and Diana now shared. They both possessed incredible empathic abilities, and it was inevitable that they would some day share a bond of sorts, different than that which he and Catherine had once known, but miraculous and wonderful in a way all its own.

Near disaster seemed to constantly curl nearby in the darkened, shadowy corridors of the Tunnel community; an unexpected, always unwelcome dweller among those living Below. But with each new adversity, the strength of the individual members and the community pulling together as one living unit, overcame whatever fate chose to throw their way. It had been several months since the gruesome murders of the helpers at the hands of the deranged Gregory Coil. Activity slowly returned to normal Below, and no further crises had occurred. Father and Mary had grown closer. With Vincent's encouragement, she had told Father of her love for him.

Vincent had grown stronger with the support of his family and friends. He was bearing his sorrow remarkably well. Father had once told him that Catherine's love was her gift to him and, slowly, Vincent was finding the strength to accept that gift. Even though the incredibly deep pain of her death surfaced less and less often now, the sweet ache of her absence was continually with him. Vincent knew it always would be so.

Besides, Vincent had a small bundle of relentless energy to keep his thoughts and time otherwise occupied, and he was quickly learning the ins and outs of Fatherhood. The miracle of his son never ceased to amaze him. The child was the living part of Catherine that he would cherish forever.

Help caring for his son had never been very far away; everyone helped. Father and Mary were always on hand to help. Jamie and Brooke were more than eager to sit with little Jacob. And Vincent knew that the same unselfish, loving attention they had showered upon him had been responsible for his own rapid recovery.

Despite the ready assistance he received from the tunnel community, Vincent was finding how exhausting single parenthood could be. It had been more difficult at first, for his mental state and lowered physical stamina had drained the joy away from caring for his son. But, now, with his renewed strength and health he was realizing the rewards and marvels of being a father.

Last, but by far not least, there was Diana. From the moment she had first held little Jacob, she had felt a special tie to him and his incredible father. Vincent had sensed it, too. The bond between himself and his son grew with each passing day. And, though he had been at first reluctant to admit it, there was also a spark between himself and Diana. It was very different from the bond he had shared with Catherine. It was a living thing, softer and more subtle, but there none-the-less. Often, now, he could sense Diana's moods, her emotions, even to knowing when she was on her way Below. She came as often as her work permitted, to keep him company and to help with the baby.

He visited her Above as well. He had even taken his son along on one occasion. But both he and Father had decided this had been risky at best. More and more now, Diana came Below to him, for she did not want him to endanger himself or his son.

Tonight, he was in his chamber bathing the baby in a large basin of water that was situated on the floor. Towels surrounding the small wash-tub, Vincent sat cross-legged beside it, his shirt off and another towel draped across his lap. One arm supported the baby who was wildly splashing the water.

Vincent sensed Diana's approach. He had a moment of panic, realizing she would see his exposed torso. Then he chided himself. For three long days and nights, in her loft, he had been unconscious and near death, and she had tended his wounds and bathed him. Surely, the appearance of his naked torso would not shock her now.

Diana entered his room, halting suddenly when she saw him seated on the floor beside his bed, stripped to the waist. Thinking that she had inadvertently burst in on him as he bathed or dressed, she stammered an apology.

"Vincent, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt your ..."

"No, please, come in," he said, smiling warmly, as he twisted his head to look toward her, feeling only slightly self-conscious. "I'm just bathing Jacob. He tends to splash so much that I've finally learned to remove my shirt *before* it's saturated from his antics." He looked back to his son for a moment, "Normally, we'd go to the bathing pools, but he napped late and I decided to leave him in Brooke's capable hands awhile and bathed alone this evening."

Diana looked at his face a moment, mutely nodding her understanding, noticing for the first time his still damp hair and how beautifully it shimmered in the candle's glow; how soft the glistening strands appeared that framed his face and draped across his broad shoulders.

She tried not to stare, but her eyes were drawn from his thick mane to the powerful build of his strong shoulders and chest. She had almost forgotten how beautiful and golden his body was with its dense, gilded velvet coating of fur.

At that moment, Jacob decided to splash his father, soaking him thoroughly from neck to waist and giggling at Vincent's feigned scowl and rumbling growl.

It was enough of a diversion to help Diana take her eyes from Vincent to his little son. Moving across the small chamber, she knelt near them. She spoke her heart as she caressed the little boy's chest, laughing softly at his antics with his father.

"He is truly beautiful, incredibly ... beautiful," she said wistfully, as she moved her hand to stroke the silken-gold curls on the tiny head, and the smooth, soft skin of his shoulder. Then, she turned, still on her knees, to look at Vincent beside her. A blush rose in her cheeks, for she knew, seeing the look in his eyes, that he had sensed her desire, almost as if he knew the words she had held back, "*like his father.*"

Vincent drew back slightly, tilting his head he studied her face, puzzlement etching his features.

Unable to help herself, she slowly, reached toward him and placed her hand on his chest. She had never felt the need for him so strongly, wanting him to take her in his arms, to feel his embrace.

Vincent sighed, closing his eyes and mouth at her touch. For with that physical contact, he felt her need, the incredible force of her emotions. He tilted his head back, then bent it forward, a flush appearing on his cheeks as well.

She slowly drew her hand away and partially turned her back to him, biting her lip, regretting what she had done. The silence was almost palpable between them. Both were unable to speak for a few moments. The myriad sensations they had both experienced were still too fresh and intense to *voice* or deny.

He lowered his head to run the wash rag over his son's chest and shoulders. So strong were the emotions he sensed from Diana, that it didn't quite register that the bath water was becoming quite cool. Vincent started to hand his son a small bath toy, but unintentionally held it just out of the child's grasp.

Unable to reach the desired toy, Jacob leaned forward slightly, his small hands missing his objective. Splashing the water in his frustration, his energetic actions slapped two big waves of water directly into Vincent's face and hair. Diana pulled her arms up to protect herself, unable to stifle her laughter. Vincent's look of disbelief turned into a broad grin revealing a brief flash of white fangs.

The tension momentarily banished between them, Diana grabbed a towel, mopping the worst of it, as Vincent lifted his son from the water, saying in mock seriousness, "All right, young man, bath-time is over!"

Jacob hung suspended between his father's two great furry hands, wiggling in glee. He squealed in joy, delighting in his airborne position and being the center of his father's playful and undivided attention. Diana wrapped the slippery wet infant in a warm, fleecy towel and took him in her arms, gently scolding him for soaking his father.

Vincent stood blotting himself dry with another towel and doing his best with his sodden bangs. Diana tried not to be too obvious as she watched him, but could not help the way her eyes were drawn again and again to his powerful build and the graceful movements of his body.

He pulled a clean shirt over his head and as he threaded his arms into his quilted vest, he said, "Here, let me hold him a moment. If you get a fresh diaper," his eyes directed her to a stack of them on the shelf by the bed, "we'll get this little *imp* dressed and fed and into bed!" He said the last loudly as Diana handed son back to father. Growling low and deep, Vincent bent his golden head forward, allowing the little boy to tweak the tip of his furry nose before nuzzling against him, evoking tiny giggles, chuckling along with his son at their little game.

Diana laid the necessary items out on the bed and Vincent handed Jacob back to her. "I'll get his bottle ready while you dress him."

She nodded, swallowing, still seeing the traces of wonderment on Vincent's face caused by earlier action.

As he heated the bottle on their small burner, Vincent kept glancing back to Diana and Jacob. The love and tenderness she felt for the child was obvious as she cooed and talked softly to the baby while she dried, powdered and dressed him.

Vincent handed her the bottle and she settled comfortably on the bed and started to feed Jacob. Pulling up the rocker, Vincent sat, hands clasped, silently watching the tender scene before him, all the while deciding how he would approach to topic that Jacob had so masterfully interrupted.

The warm bath and food soon put the tired infant to sleep, but Diana made no move to give him up. Not only did she enjoy holding the sleeping child in her arms, but she was apprehensive about continuing the earlier discussion with Vincent.

Finally, Vincent spoke, breaking the quiet in the chamber.

"Diana, when I asked you before why you were helping me and Jacob ... I sensed there was something else you wanted to tell me. Something you held back."

He dipped his head to look shyly into her face, his lips parted, the gentle curiosity in his eyes inviting her reply. She did not raise her eyes to meet his, but kept them on the sleeping child in her arms.

"Yes," she whispered, lightly nodding her head, knowing she must tell him the truth. He was always so honest with her. The time had come to tell him her true feelings, even if she risked pushing him away. Her words came out in a stream, as she revealed to him all she had kept inside her for so long.

"I didn't tell you ... I didn't tell you that I think of you almost every day. I dream of you at night. I can't get you out of my thoughts. Everything is different now, everything's changed, for now I see it through your eyes, from your perspective."

She raised eyes glistening with unshed tears to meet his intent gaze, "I love you."

She lowered her eyes again, a little disconcerted by his strangely mild reaction at her statement. It was not as great a surprise to him as she had suspected. On prior occasions, when she touched him, he must have felt the stirrings of her love.

"I thought so," he said softly.

Rising from his chair, he stood and gently removed the sleeping child from her arms. He bent over to lay the infant in the cradle, lightly stroking the tiny back to ease the child into deeper sleep. Before moving away from the side of the child's cradle, he carefully tucked the soft blankets snugly around the tiny form, protection against the chill air of the chamber room. He then returned to sit once again in the rocking chair beside Diana.

Hesitantly, her voice trembling slightly with emotion, she began, "I know you don't ...," she continued, "... that you can't feel the same way about me. But, I can't help what I feel. Nothing can change that. It's as if you've become a part of me; that I'm not separate from you." Then painfully she added, "I'm sorry... I ..." Embarrassed by her own revelation, Diana struggled to hold back her tears.

He saw the tear fall down her cheek and, with his free hand, he cupped her chin, drawing her face back up to look into his. "Diana, don't be sorry. Never apologize for what is in your heart ... and I'm glad that you've told me. I thought it was so, but I wanted to hear you speak the words. I had to hear you say it first."

His deep, soft voice and the gentleness of his blue eyes reached out to her, soothing her.

"For so long, I have been overwhelmed by the loss of Catherine. In my own pain and mourning, I have placed a great burden upon you, as well as the many others that I love."

He gently released her chin, looking at her, but now avoiding the eye contact of moments before. "I still miss her so strongly, with almost every breath, everything I do," he sighed. "She will always live in me, and I sense her with me most of all when I gaze upon our son."

He turned to look down upon the sleeping infant, sighing, his eyes misty with love for his child ... and for Catherine. "I gaze upon him, and I know the emptiness in my heart will never completely disappear." He closed his eyes tightly, speaking more to himself than Diana, "She is ... dead. She's gone now ... and my life must somehow go on." Softly, he ran his hand up and down Jacob's little back, his fingers lingering in the soft curls on the tiny head.

He paused, taking a deep breath, "For so long, I yearned for her love. I so desperately wanted it back. Now, I realize that there is another ... I have been given a second chance for love, a woman's love, the woman before me ... now ... " Slowly, he raised his head until his eyes once more met Diana's.

The unconscious sensual power in the fathomless blue depths of his gaze took her breath away. She felt him gently touch the back of her hand, and her eyes lowered to follow the movement of his clawed fingers as they tenderly caressed her own.

"You have risked everything, for me, for us, all of us Below again and again. I have been blinded by my grief, unable to see your heart opened to mine ... until now. Your deeds stem from more than just kindness. Diana, you are a remarkable woman," he sighed softly, reaching to touch her hair, stroking the silken strands of flame. "You are beautiful, so giving and I have never known anyone with such a unique and imaginative mind. Without you, I would never have found my son; we all would have lost Father. You never cease to amaze me, in every way." He looked more intently into her eyes, his voice lowering in register. "I would be a fool ... to reject a love such as yours."

He dropped his eyes, "I don't want to betray Catherine's memory, but in my heart, I know that she would not want me to mourn, to isolate myself forever. I know that if I had been the one to die, I would have hoped that she would find another to love, another man to be part of. I could not bear to see her waste her life in isolation."

A faint smile crossed his lips as he again turned toward Diana.

"I told you once before that you were a blessing, and you are. Love is the most powerful force on earth. I have found this to be true again and again. It means everything, for without it, there is nothing; and, the love between a man and a woman is the greatest gift of all."

He gazed down at her softly, struggling how to continue.

"I care for you deeply, Diana. How could I not? But, my mind, my heart still wrestles with many things. Is it fair for you to always exist in Catherine's shadow? You must resent her and my inability to forget her, but she is always with me and always will be."

"No, Vincent, I don't resent her. I admire her and know how important she is to you and all the people that I have talked to here Below."

He nodded with her admission. Then, he exhaled, looking to his son again, before giving Diana his attention once more. His voice was strained, shaking slightly as he spoke.

"Diana, I am afraid, hesitant to start another relationship ... with ... you. I don't know if I could bear being hurt again ... or losing someone again. I fear getting close for I am uncertain that I have the courage to face more tragedy in my life, if it should come."

He turned away, grasping the back of his chair tightly. "When one dares to love, one opens oneself to further pain, the chance of loss and sorrow," he dropped his head, his voice determined, as if trying to convince himself. "Yet, there is the other side - joy, happiness, a chance for fulfillment of dreams ..."

He turned to look at her again, "I want to love you, Diana; I need your love and have felt these last few days your need for mine, though you have said nothing ... until now. I can never repay you for all you have done."

She was adamant in her reply, silencing him, humbling him, "Vincent, you owe me nothing. I wanted to help you. Please believe that!"

Her words were the same he had spoken, so very long ago, to Catherine that painful first time he had come to her rescue and lost control in contending with the violence of her world, and it touched him deeply.

"Perhaps, I can be more to you, Diana; more than just a friend." He touched her cheek, then clasped her hand, "I want to try. I would like to be with you in time; but, please, be patient with me. Bear with me, for I truly believe that when I have resolved my grief, I will be able to give you my love, as fully as I sense you desire it."

He dropped his eyes, seeing the blush on her face, as she did the same. "You deserve love and to be loved, Diana. Catherine as taught me this. I only hope that I will not be a disappointment to you."

"Oh, Vincent," was all she could say as, startling him slightly, she wrapped her arms around his neck to give him a squeeze. Her arms relaxed as she pressed her cheek against his breast. Hesitantly, he wrapped one arm about her shoulder, sighing at how right it felt to hold her in his arms.

She pulled away, to take in the soft love on his face, as he wiped a tear from her cheek. "I've never needed someone the way I need you, Vincent. I've never known what love was, until I met you ..."

He nodded, smiling softly down at her. Then, tilting his head, he asked, "Would you stay for supper tonight?"

"Yes, I'd like that," she replied, smiling back at him.

"Good," he sighed, the sharp tips of his canines showing as his own smile broadened at her hoped for answer.

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A month later, Vincent lay, semi-reclined against the bolsters on his bed reading *Riki Tiki Tavi* to his son. Though it was getting late and the baby needed to go to sleep, he lay nearby in his cradle, wide-awake and contented. He had already been fed and sung to by Diana. Now Vincent was trying his best to lull the child to sleep by reading to him.

Diana, after tidying up some of the baby's things, came over to sit next to Vincent. He obligingly scooted over to make more room for her as she snuggled closer, resting her head on his large shoulder.

She was so drawn to him that she could not help herself. It was so wonderful to feel him close. Since expressing her love to him, many weeks ago, he had tried to be more open to her, not distancing himself. Less reluctantly now, he admitted to himself that he longed for her warmth and closeness. Slowly, they were moving forward in their relationship. So many of their tender moments were filled with pain for him, for so many things still brought back memories of Catherine, but it was a sweet pain, and one he knew he must and could accept now. The delicate threads of Diana's patience, understanding and love, wove gently around his broken heart, strengthening it and giving him hope.



She did not resent his inability to forget Catherine, nor his desire to never forget his first true love. She accepted him and asked nothing in return.

Vincent sighed, pressing his lips to her hair. He was indeed truly blessed. Who would have guessed that two lovely, giving women would love him and, even more incredibly, desire his love in return? Diana was patient, allowing him to work through his grief in his own way, giving him the time he needed, but being there to ease his aloneness, giving him hope for a future and the chance for a happy life and ... so many more possibilities. And, he had to admit, that it was wonderful to feel this woman near; there was no sweeter feeling on earth. Pulling in a deep breath of the elusive scent of her soft, red hair, he glanced over her shoulder toward the cradle, noting Jacob had finally drifted asleep.

Diana gazed toward the sleeping child, too. Then, returning her eyes to Vincent, she noticed he was about to close the book. Reaching out with her hand, she halted his movements and asked if he would finish the story. She had never read it and was enjoying the way he told the tale.

He gave one deep, rumbling chuckle, then obliged her by picking up where he had left off. She snuggled closer, whispering to him how much she loved the sound of his voice, feeling it vibrate in his chest when her head rested there. Catherine had said the same thing many times, and once more he was forced to pause a moment, as several of the intimate moments they had shared flashed across his mind's eye, beginning again, once the wash of the pain had subsided.

As he closed the book, he knew there were two sleeping bodies in his chamber, and he chuckled softly, a little insulted that Diana had not remained awake for the end of the story. Yet, glad his voice lulled her into a much needed sleep. Gently, he shifted Diana, so that she lay back in the bed, pulling the coverlet up around her shoulders, then made certain his son was protected from drafts as well.

He pulled the extra quilt over himself, laying down with his back to Diana. He felt no embarrassment in the arrangement. Diana had fallen asleep in his chamber on other occasions. He knew she seldom got sufficient rest and had admitted to him that she rested better Below. The pressures of her work and life Above didn't touch her here; she felt safe beside him. Indeed, as he felt sleep claim him, love and security did pervade his chamber, filling his heart and soul with joy.

Hours later, Vincent awoke from a peaceful sleep. Without moving or opening his eyes, he sensed that his two 'charges' were still sound asleep. Carefully shifting to his side to face Diana, careful not to awaken her, he propped his chin on the hand of his folded arm and took the liberty of watching her in sleep. She was so very beautiful. Her skin was flawless and pale, a slight peach blush tinted her sculpted cheeks, a faint spattering of freckles sprinkled lightly across her nose. Her lips were not as full and sensuous as Catherine's had been, but they were soft and delicate - and far from uninviting.

Diana stirred slightly, her hair flickering in flaming reds and golds, seeming like a living thing in itself. Though her jawline did not have that determined set of his former love's, it possessed a different strength, an independence, where it met her long, slender neck.

His gaze roved back over her face, admiring the silken lashes that curved gently against her cheek. Almost as if she sensed his focus on her, her luminous, hauntingly huge blue eyes fluttered slowly open. She showed no surprise in seeing him before her, and she smiled.

"Do you remember the last time I lay watching you sleep?" he asked softly, gently lifting back a strand of her hair.

"In my loft and, as I recall, you were lying on the cold, hard floor; a bloody dressing on your temple."

He smiled in remembrance, then his countenance turned more solemn, "You looked like an innocent child, an angel, even then ..."

"So did you," she replied softly, and he dropped his gaze overcome by the sincerity of her words, though unable to believe that anyone could ever compare him to anything even remotely heavenly.

She took his chin, gently pulling his face up, then drew him towards her, stopping just before their lips touched. He swallowed nervously, but the hope and encouragement in her eyes calmed his fears. Then, their mutual sighs of pleasure hung in the air as their lips met.

He was the first to pull back. Silently, he studied her face, comparing, through his empathic ability, her experience of their first kiss with his own. The incredulity and awe on his face and lingering warmth deep in his eyes, touched her deeply.

Touched by the warm emotion lingering deep within his eyes, she threaded her fingers beneath his mane. Cupping the back of his neck in her hand, she drew him forward into another kiss. He accepted her kiss, returning the caress of her mouth tenderly, then with a gentle intensity that necessitated pulling apart, their breathing ragged with emotion.

His body tensed and he exhaled, his head dropping to his chest, his eyes closed as a faint shudder ran the length of his body. He rose quickly from the bed to stand, leaning on the small octagonal table in the center of the room.

Diana knew instantly that she had caused him great pain, but she was uncertain why or how, for she was more than sure that he had enjoyed their kiss.

"Vincent, what is it? What's wrong?"

She rose to stand behind him. As she moved to touch him, he inhaled deeply and turned away from her, his head swaying in denial.

"Nothing, nothing ... is wrong," he sobbed, stifling the tears that threatened to fall. With sorrowful eyes, he looked back into her face, still shaking his head, sighing as the tears that filled his eyes began to stream down his cheeks and he could only hoarsely say her name, "Diana ..."

"I'm sorry, Vincent," she said touching his hand, "I didn't mean to ... I never intended ..."

"I know, Diana, I know," he said, making an attempt to comfort her with the warm clasp of his hand.

He exhaled, explaining, "The kiss we shared ... I remember ... I never kissed Catherine; I never kissed her until she ... she ... was dead. It's not that I never wanted to. There were so many times, so many moments ... wasted, denied us. Gone forever now, because I was afraid. All gone now, like ... Catherine."

He continued to pour out his heart to her and Diana kept a reassuring hand on his.

"The night Jacob was conceived ... I remember so little ... I was very ill, near death, insane with fever and ... and Catherine came alone to me, when no one else dared come close. She brought me back from death, from hell itself, with her love. We loved, in that dark, desolate place. It was our only time, and it is lost to me. I search again and again in my mind for what happened, but there are only glimpses, faded images, vague sensations. I never knew that Catherine carried our child, the child of this union. I discovered she had borne me a son, that she had been pregnant the six months that I searched for her. As she lay dying in my arms, she told me."

Diana's hand moved to his face, and she touched his cheek, regretting that something she had done had caused him more pain, for he looked at her with such forlorn eyes, the tears coming quicker now, as she dropped her hand.

A pained smile crossed his lips, "She touched me on the face, just as you did now, the love in her eyes, the last caress of her hand, telling me how much she loved me, how much she thought me beautiful, then ... telling me with her last breath that our love would never die."

*Though lovers be lost, love shall not; And death shall have no dominion.*

Diana dropped her eyes, remembering how she had inadvertently hurt him so deeply by quoting the poem Catherine had spoken to him as she lay dying in his arms.

"I'm sorry, Vincent. I didn't understand how deeply you would be hurt when I repeated those words. I understand now ..."

He continued, "Catherine may not have known herself that she was pregnant, until she was kidnapped and then unable to tell me, or perhaps, she was afraid to tell me, uncertain of how I would take the news, fearful that in my recovery, I would not be able to handle more stress, or afraid that I would be angry with her.

"If she did know ... it must have torn her so, not knowing how or when to tell me. I was still desperately trying to regain what I had lost in the madness and fever." He ran his trembling hand through his mane. "Our bond was gone, the loss of it ... I can not describe. Catherine, Father and Mary were the only faces, at first, that were familiar to me. And, even then, Catherine had to tell me her own name. I could not remember it. It was as if I was a stranger in my own home. Almost my entire memory had been erased. Thank god, it did return, with the help and patience of everyone, especially Catherine. She was determined not to let me forget."

A tender smile crossed his lips, then a look of realization glowed in his crystalline eyes. "Now, as I think back, Catherine eluded on more than one occasion, that miracles happen and the fact that if one gift is lost, another is found. She *must* have known she was with child and trying to tell me, only I was too busy with self-pity to sense *her* need. Again and again, I forced her to wait, wait for a better time, knowing how difficult my recovery was. Not wanting to burden me until I was stronger with the news of our child, she remained silent."

His eyes widened, as another truth was revealed. "I may never know, but, I'm almost certain that this was her purpose in summoning me to her apartment, the night she was taken. It was the first time I journeyed back Above to her home since my illness. Father was afraid that I was not yet strong enough. But I had sensed the urgency in her note, and knew I must try my wings again, cut the apron string, and begin my life once more. I was ready. But, I was unprepared for the loss of her. Nothing will ever make it right, Diana, nothing. No one deserves to be alone, kept from their loved ones to die that way. There could be no crueler confinement."

Diana whispered softly, "I'm glad *you* told me this. It was a terrible thing for you both to endure." She didn't know what more she could say, so merely stood quietly beside him, sensing that with the telling of his pain, his sorrow had lifted minutely.

He sighed, feeling as if a great burden had been lifted. Much of which he had told Diana, he had never revealed to anyone, not even Father. It had helped to cleanse and purge his soul. He glanced again at his son, speaking softly, "had we known what a beautiful child we could create with our love, things might have been different ... yet, it could have gone the other way as well. When I first saw little Jacob, he was completely wrapped in a blanket. My hand was unsteady as I drew back the cloth, certain that I would see the differences that have always set me apart; but, it was truly a miracle that gazed upon. He was so perfect, in every way, so like ... his mother ..."

His voice became wistful as he looked once more at his sleeping son. "He will not be forced to stay Below. He can walk above in the sunlight. He will not have to hide his face ..."

"Vincent," she touched his shoulder and he turned and looked down into her face. "If Jacob had favored *you*, don't think for a minute that he would have been loved any less. He could learn to live with his differences, as you have, and he would not be alone in his uniqueness, for he would have a wonderful father, so very like himself." Her gaze locked with his, her eyes wide with the strength of her belief in what she had said.

He could only nod, then gathered her close against him into a warm embrace, blinking back the last of his tears. Vincent raised her face, to kiss her forehead, sending shivers down her spine as he moved to nuzzle the soft skin behind her ear.

"Please continue to be patient with me, Diana. I know that you already have been, but there are still so many things that I must resolve. The terrible nightmare that we all endured, still haunts me. I still find it so difficult to believe it really happened. Then I look upon Jacob, or see you- and I know that it is all true.

"All the time I searched in vain for Jacob asking, '*where was the hope?*', you were there. I just couldn't see it. You were there, Diana, as you are now," he said taking her hand. "You are my strength, no matter what pains and joys tomorrow brings. You are my gift. Your love is a treasure that I will cherish ... always.

"With the mention of my son, you stopped me from murder. Then, *you* took the blood of my hands on your

own. Diana," he looked into her eyes, his brows knitted, his gaze intense, "can you not see how much a part of me *you* already are? You risked losing your very soul for me, when you took Gabriel's life. You risked everything for me and my son." His voice had lowered with emotion, his gaze softening, "Diana, I could not bear the thought of losing *you* or your love." Releasing her hand, he pulled her into his arms again.

"Oh, Vincent," was all she was capable of saying, as she sighed and leaned against his chest. He kissed her hair and stroked her back, soothing her with his touch and the gentle crooning of his voice, her happiness and relief warming her heart.

When they both were still, calmed by the sensation of each others heartbeats, lulled by the peace they felt in each other, he spoke softly, and Diana raised her head from his breast to study his incredible face, wanting to drown in the hypnotic beauty of his eyes.

His voice was a tremulous whisper as he wrapped his arms tighter around her, "I am truly blessed to have known Catherine's love and ... to have found ... yours. What man could ask for more?" He felt her embrace tighten as he looked down at her cheek pressed against him again.

"I love you so," he heard her murmur. Then, she raised her mouth to meet his kiss.

Their lips lingered, caressing the subtle differences of each other. Then Vincent drew back, his eyes softly gazing down at her. There was a faint blush on her cheeks as she toyed with the rough pattern of his quilted vest.

Looking back up into his eyes, she said, "Vincent, I know that I can never fill the emptiness in your heart, and I don't intend to take Catherine's place, but, if you'd only give me a chance, I could soften the pain a little. I need you so, and anything you're willing to share with me, I'll cherish, believe me."

He could not breathe as he sensed her pain, her need so clearly. Closing his eyes, he tilted his head back, sighing her name. Then, holding out his hand, she slipped her fingers between his. He clasped them tightly, then brought them to his lips.

"You have already given me more than you'll ever know, Diana. You saved my life, nursed me back to health when I was so very near death. You strengthened my resolve in finding my son, and when I let rage and hatred choose my path, you showed me the way, you led me from destruction, you gave me hope.

"I thought Catherine would be the only love of my life; that I could count myself fortunate to have fallen in love and to have someone love me in return, just once. But, I was mistaken for you have offered me your love, as well, Diana, and ... I am ... falling again ..."

"It's the same for me, Vincent," she whispered, "since the first time saw you. You've touched me in a way no one else ever has, ever could."

With her free hand, she reached out to stroke the bangs back from his noble brow, as he gently caressed a strand of her rich auburn hair. Both savored their mutual contentment in touching.

"I was intrigued by the possibility of your existence, but in my wildest dreams, I never imagined how incredible you really were," she sighed.

Suddenly, he felt a deep weariness in her, as she leaned more heavily against him. Grasping her arm gently, he said, "Come," as he sat on the edge of his bed. Scooting back and settling against the cushions, he held his arms open for her and she came, her eyes luminous, blue saucers and they drew him with their magic. They kissed softly once more, then he pulled a pillow down for her and drew up the quilt, whispering, "Rest now," smiling warmly as she snuggled into his side, "Tomorrow will be here sooner than we know."

She nodded silently, kissing the underside of his broad jaw and, as she fell asleep in his arms, he marveled once more at the suppleness of her form against his own. It was soft, sweet pain, feeling a woman's body so intimately again, breathing her scent. It brought back the all too tender pang of memories of times shared with Catherine, reading on her terrace, or Below at the triple falls, of being here in his chamber; but, it was a sensation he had so long craved for, and he would endure, gladly, the faint sorrow that was part of loving ... again.

She entered his chamber, somehow, just having to see for herself that he was all in one *piece* and settled for the night, after such a horrendous day. It was late, eleven or so, and only two candles remained burning on the small table across from his bed. She smiled, seeing the baby paraphernalia that also littered its surface.

He was laying on his right side, his back turned towards the stained glass window. He was very obviously asleep, his hair fanned out over his pillow, his deep, steady respirations testimony to his exhaustion. And, as she had long ago suspected, little Jacob didn't spend all his nighttime hours in his own cradle; most certainly, not tonight.

He was cuddled into his father's breast, the open v-neck of Vincent's soft, cotton nightshirt allowing him access to the golden luxury of the soft, thick hairs in which his little fist was tightly clenched. Vincent's heavy quilt was wrapped around them both at the waist, one powerful arm wrapped protectively about his little boy. Stirring slightly, Vincent pressed his nose into the boy's soft curls, nuzzling as if to reassure himself, even in sleep, that his child was safe.

She drew closer to take one last treasured look at father and son, noticing for the first time, the bruises on Vincent's face, a dressing on his temple, not unlike the one she had placed there, when he stayed in her loft. She closed her eyes, the memory a tender ache in her heart. Opening them again, she now saw the streaks of dried tears on Vincent's cheeks. Tears no doubt for the child that had died today, tears that mingled with those for Catherine. Once again, he blamed himself for events beyond his control. She knew he saw both deaths as failure in himself.

"Oh, Vincent," she thought to herself, "How can we make you see that it's not your fault! You are not responsible for us all." She so wanted to hold him, comfort him, make him see that he was wrong, but she knew until he was ready to believe, it was no use.

Ready to leave, she turned toward the entryway, glad that Father had allowed her to peek in at his son and grandchild. It was from the older Jacob that she had learned of the landslide and the resulting broken water main that had swept seven children away. Vincent's heroic rescue of six of the seven children had been miraculous. All would have perished, but for his strength and sacrifice.

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There had been heavy rains and flooding Above, and the extra load had apparently been too much for their ancient water main pipe to handle. It had burst just as Mary and Vincent had lead a group of youngsters, returning from a geology expedition, around its huge diameter. The force had been greater than any firehose, sweeping the entire party and the ground they stood on into a giant crevasse that ran alongside the enormous pipe. All were taken unaware for there had been no warning.

Vincent had been the first to burst to the surface of the muddy, churning waters with Mary and Jeffery in tow. Everyone else had been swept under an huge overhanging section of limestone and were unable to free themselves, for the force of the water spewing from the broken pipe, kept them effectively pinned against the sides of the crevasse.

Again and again, Vincent returned to plumb the narrow, flooded depths of the ravine, ignoring the bruises and tears to his flesh as he was battered against the rough rock walls. He stifled a roar of pain when a second section of pipe broke loose, crushing his hand. Despite the pain, he retained his grip on little Adam.

Bloody and soaked to the bone, he and Mary made a head count of all the shivering, whimpering children, then stared at each other, eyes wide with fear when they realized that one was missing.

"Libby!" Vincent croaked as he shot back into the waters once more. He came up several times for air, submerging as long as his bursting lungs could bear.

Help had arrived by this time -Pascal and Mouse, for Jeffery had run to the closest pipe to send out an

emergency call, seconds after his own rescue.

Vincent came up for air again, panting and shaking his head in despair, for he could not locate the missing little girl. He could see nothing in the thick, muddied waters. Before submerging for one last look, he tied the rope that Mouse insisted upon around his waist. They had seen his exhaustion and knew he would not stop until he found the lost child or collapsed.

Using his hands to guide him in the opaque water, he found the little child deep inside a narrow fissure. He wrapped the rope around her and tugged on the line. He knew he would need the others' strength to help him return to the surface. Before Mouse and Pascal could pull Vincent and Libby to the top, a final section of the water main, and a huge connecting ring broke loose, plummeting into the water, striking Vincent on the side of the head, instantly knocking him unconscious. All were thankful they had used the lifeline. Without it, Vincent would surely have been swept away and drowned.

They pulled him and the girl out of the water. His respirations were shallow, but his heartbeat was rapid and strong. Libby, however, failed to respond to resuscitation; Father pronounced her dead soon after his arrival on the scene.

Despite the death of one child, Vincent's heroic rescue of the others had been miraculous. All would have perished, but for his superior strength, stamina and sacrifice. He had come so close to death himself. Once again, Father and all the rest had to marvel at the courage of this unique man. Even though he had been unconscious, they had been forced to pry his stiff fingers from the little girl's body. Even though senseless, he had held the dead girl, the lost child he had rescued, tightly in his arms. She was already gone, beyond hope, assaulted by the same deadly objects that had nearly taken Vincent's life, as well.

How petty Diana felt now, as she looked down at him. She had at first felt sorry for herself, neglected and even a little angry, when he hadn't appeared on time. He had promised to come Above to help her on a case and it was so unlike him to be late. Then, she began to worry realizing that something must be wrong Below, something important, and she had even felt a flash of his fear and pain and a strange sense of disorientation; realizing, now, that this must have been when he lost consciousness. She found out from Father that all the time she had been pacing nervously Above, Vincent had been fighting valiantly Below, putting his own life in jeopardy to save the innocent victims of a tragedy.

Moaning slightly, Vincent twisted his head, then opened his eyes, blinking rapidly in momentary disorientation, as he saw Diana above him. Suddenly he remembered that he had not gotten word to her that he could not come Above.

"Diana, I'm sorry, I ..."

"SSSssshhhh," she said, holding her finger to his lips as she sat gingerly on the side of the bed, so as not to awaken little Jacob. "Father told me everything," she whispered. She touched the dressing on the side of his face, then the purple bruise on his cheek, sighing, as with that touch she felt his pain, nOh, Vincent ... " she said softly, shaking her head.

"Libby was killed," he said hoarsely, the pain of her death, the regret, lacing his voice, as he lowered his swaying head. "I couldn't save her."

The little girl had only been Below a few weeks, an abandoned orphan who had instantly 'adopted' Vincent. She couldn't have been more than five or six years old.

"*Here we go again,*" Diana thought to herself, but she wouldn't let him start that guilt trip this time. "You were almost killed yourself, Vincent. You did everything humanly possible and more. Six children who would have died, survived because of you. You are not superman. You can't be responsible for everyone. You can't be everywhere at once. Please stop blaming yourself, Vincent."

His head still lowered, he shook it in defeat, then raised his face and looked into her eyes and nodded.

"God, yes!" she said under her breath, her words had struck home. He wasn't going to carry the burden of this

girl's death, not this time.

"You're right," he sighed, "But, I only wish, I could have done more." He bent his head to kiss the still sleeping little Jacob on the head.

So touched by the tender beauty of the caress he bestowed upon his son, Diana was forced to close her eyes, as they filled with tears. The unselfish love of this man touched her so. To be the recipient of such a sensitive display would be all she could ever hope for, all she would ever want. Vincent was still so hesitant in initiating kisses, real kisses, those other than on her hair or forehead, almost as if he felt he had no right. But, she would not rush him; he had asked for her patience and even his slightest caress was more than she had experienced with any other man.

Jacob stirred and his eyes opened wide to stare up at the face of his father. The feline features hovering over him became one gigantic, toothy, smile as Vincent spoke in a gentle rumble, "Hello, my little one." Jacob kicked and waved his small arms and legs, emitting delighted giggles and coos.

Diana stood spellbound, for it seemed they could almost talk to one another in their own special way.

"So, you're hungry again, are you? Well, I think we can remedy that." Vincent made ready to rise from the bed, but Diana put her hand gently on his shoulder to stop him.

"I'll fix his bottle. You stay there and keep him entertained." She knew where the cans of formula were kept and how to use the small gas burner. She was enjoying herself as she snuck glimpses of Vincent diapering his son. He always kept wash cloths and an extra diaper or two at the bedside. The child was squealing joyously as his father tickled his little tummy with his large, furry nose and velvet muzzle. The little fellow had a tight grip on a strand of mane, wanting his father to continue their little game.

After heating the bottle, she walked back to the bed, holding it out to Vincent.

"Would you feed him?" he asked, a sparkle in his eyes.

Diana beamed. Vincent had known the answer to that one.

"I'm still a little awkward with this hand," and he held up the massive dressing covering his left lower arm and hand. She chuckled a little, for somehow he had managed a diaper and safety pins, no less. She knew that he was just making excuses, and she loved him for it.

She handed him the bottle as she made ready to scoot the rocking chair closer to the bed. Jacob had gotten a whiff of the formula and a glimpse of the bottle, suddenly kicking and writhing with the prospect of food close at hand. Vincent could not help chuckling at the boy's antics.

Vincent, spoke her name softly, then scooted over in the bed, fluffing up several bolsters for her to lean on, encouraging her to sit beside him on the bed, as she started to trade the wiggling boy from his arms. She quickly climbed in beside Vincent before he could change his mind, then took both boy and bottle in her arms, leaning into Vincent's massive shoulder.

It couldn't have been cozier. The pain of the little girl's death, momentarily forgotten. The sight of his son's eagerness and his wide-eyed appreciation of both the nourishment and Diana's lovely features, warmed Vincent's heart.

The hungry infant polished off the feeding in no time, and though now a bit more lethargic, Jacob was far from asleep. After he proudly rewarded Diana with a tremendous burp, Vincent informed her that his son now requested a short story.

"Does he have something special in mind?" she teased back, loving Vincent's relaxed humor, the wonderful feel of his breath so close to her face.

"No, not tonight," Vincent chuckled softly, as he ran his long fingers through his son's golden curls. "He leaves that to your discretion."

"I see, well, I have just the story - *Peter Rabbit*," so, she began.

Vincent nodded, his lips pressed together in a smile, pleased with her choice. Silently, he listened to the soft inflection of Diana's voice, now so familiar to him and his son. He watched the scene of love before him as little Jacob studied her. His son's tiny blue eyes widening delightfully as she told of Mr. McGregor chasing the ill-fated bunny. Settling further down into the bed, Vincent realized that his eyelids were becoming heavy and he no longer heard the words Diana spoke, so intent was he on the sound of her melodic voice.

She paused a moment, as he snuggled closer against her side, reveling in the sweet warmth of his breath and the relaxation of his massive body as it pressed deliciously against her. There was little doubt in her mind, that the exhaustion from his earlier ordeal was overtaking him once more and silently she smiled, happy that he could relax with her so close, and drop his defenses in total trust.

He was asleep before his son, his cheek pressed heavily against the pillow of her thigh. His unique lips slightly parted as his respirations came, deep and easy. Diana took a moment to study the peacefulness of his features, the combination of awesomeness and innocence that was the enigma of this incredible man. Watching him, it was so difficult to resist touching his face. Her fingers ached to feel the varied textures her eyes only allowed her mind to imagine.

Unable to resist temptation, she softly stroked the fine, living velvet of his upper lip. Sighing, she thought to herself how he was such a gorgeous thing, such an incredibly desirable man. His innate gentleness, combined with his virile masculinity was a dichotomy that no woman in her right mind could resist. So much of him was a marvel. No wonder Catherine had loved him so.

Jacob quietly followed his father, his tight little fist in his mouth, making pleased little moist sucking sounds as he slept. Now, she had two beautiful males asleep in her arms. Whatever was she to do?

She chuckled to herself, "Are you kidding? You are going to enjoy this delightful arrangement!" Slowly, she scooted down in bed until she was reclining beside Vincent. She had supported his great head, so as not to awaken him, and now it rested on her belly along with Jacob. She pulled the quilts up over Vincent and his child, relishing the pleasant weight of both father and son as they slept peacefully in her arms and beside her.

It was not long, before she drifted into a wonderfully contented sleep. She felt peaceful and safe in the snug cocoon of darkness and warmth about her, lulled to sleep by the soft melodies of clanking pipes and muted breaths.

Slowly, she awoke from pleasant dreams, dreams where Vincent lay basking in open meadows, the cloudless sky rivaling the clear blue of his eyes. Dreams where he ran without fear in the sunlight beside her, his mane blowing in the wind, his features golden and warm without shadow. Where he was free to smile.

As the meadow dream faded away, the spinning dream returned. For a moment, it was the same, but slowly the motion of their faces stopped, and she could tell that Vincent saw her now, and he smiled softly as she spoke his name. With great care, he scanned her features. Joy crept into her heart, for he truly saw her now, heard her, as his eyes gazed affectionately upon her.

Diana awoke a little disoriented, the dream forgotten, then, finally realizing where she was, she wondered, "*Was it morning? Who could tell down here?*" She laughed to herself, knowing the one person who always knew still lay heavy in sleep beside her. She groaned slightly, discovering that her arm had gone asleep around Jacob. Shifting slightly, she felt Vincent stir. Turning her head, she watched him as he groggily came awake, stretching his mighty arms and torso in what she knew to be an unconsciously sensuous manner. God, he took her breath away!

He raised his head to blink softly down at her, his eyes sparkling with love and he smiled, saying softly, "Good morning."

Well, at least now she knew the time of day. How could she not smile back at him, blushing ever so slightly as she returned his greeting.

He bent his head, his mane flickering in the light from the stained glass window as it veiled their faces, kissing



her forehead as he sighed, "Thank you, Diana."

He didn't need to thank her, but he always did, none-the-less. She knew he was grateful for the way she had eased the despair he had felt last evening, for her being there to soften so many of his burdens, and for most importantly ... her love. Loving him came so easily and naturally, there was no need for thanks. It was so easy to love him and fall in love with him and he gave her so much in return: a feeling of being needed, a sense of being whole that she had never experienced before and knew without doubt that she would never experience again, with any man.

They both suddenly felt the need to express more than appreciation. In that brief moment, Vincent had sensed the depth of her love, her devotion to him, a compelling force, to say the least. He felt her undeniable need, her desire rock into him like the aftermath of an earthquake. Her physical need was the same as his own and he could not suppress the urge to taste her once more, nor the burning invitation of her need for him.

Raising his upper body on one arm, his great shoulders rose closer and he dipped his head, looking so intently into her eyes that her heart had skipped a wild beat. His eyes lowered to study her mouth, and just as his lips parted, he closed his eyes, sighing and started to draw back.

Diana's inner voice cried, "*Oh, no you don't, big guy!*" as she rapidly and firmly took his chin between the fingers of her left hand. He stared, blinking at her in near astonishment, his breathing rapid as she continued to hold him captive.

Diana didn't need to voice her plea, it was evident in her eyes, in the tension of her delicate features, in the strength of her grip and most of all, the passion that slammed into him like a sledge hammer. Every part of her cried "*Kiss me, Vincent. Please, kiss me. Don't pull away again.*"

Slowly, she pulled her hand back, making it his choice to move forward or draw away from her.

There was a moment of indecision, then taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly, Vincent once more drew forward, his intent clear in his eyes as he gently, softly placed his lips to hers. Tenderly, he pulled the duality of his mouth back and forth across hers. His caress ceased and he pulled back just enough to gauge her reaction.

She sighed wistfully, touching his breast, and there was no mistaking that her desire for him to continue was the same as his own. He repeated the kiss, their warm breaths mingling in mutual pleasure and satisfaction. Drawing apart, once more, they both sighed, pulses rapid, gazes locked, and time stood still.

Diana whispered, "You're welcome," her voice breathless.

Vincent could not halt the small grin her statement evoked. He knew why she was more than a little shaken. This had not been like his other kisses of gentle thanks or platonic love. He had felt the difference, too, even as he initiated the caress. It had been a sexual discovery, a sensual exploration. He had long suspected, and now was certain, that with their combined empathic abilities, intimacies, no matter how mundane and common occurrences among others would prove to be something truly remarkable between Diana and himself. Theirs would truly be a wondrous journey, that is, if he found the courage within himself to embark upon the unknown realm of their love.

Diana grunted slightly, moving her arm stiffly as she looked down at Jacob's sleeping form. "Do you think you could take Jacob? It seems my arm has gone asleep."

He snuffed softly as he rose over her, then turned and lifted his son with extreme tenderness from her arms. He placed a kiss on the tiny cheek. Then, with much practiced ease, he turned the child on his stomach in the cradle without waking him.

Gracefully, he returned to sit on the bed beside Diana, one powerful leg drawn up beneath him. With her back to him, he began to rub life back into the prickling numbness of her abused arm. Neither spoke, both seeming to need a quiet time to settle the rush of emotions from moments ago. Finally, he broke the silence, the tone of his voice deeper with the solemnity of his words.

"I could have died easily... yesterday. There was a moment when I considered ... letting go, but, when I was forced to fight or give in, I chose life. I wanted life. No matter how painful the memories still are, no matter the sorrow and loss I may still face, more than anything, I wanted to live.

"In the flash of a moment, I realized all that I would lose: my home, my son, Father, all those others whose love I have received in return and ... you, you most of all, Diana."

She looked into the crystalline pools of his eyes, seeing there his pledge of devotion to her and to the possibility of a shared life.

He exhaled, looking to his lap, then slowly raised his head to capture her eyes in his gaze, once more. "I don't want any more regrets, regrets of what might have been ... for us ..."

She knew her question would cause him pain, but she had to ask it. She had to be certain. Softly, she stroked the back of his hand where it rested on the bed between them.

"Vincent. If Catherine came back, if by some miracle she hadn't died, but returned to you, would you still hesitate to love her in the way you both had dreamed?"

Her question distressed him, for the possibility of Catherine's return was a dream forever taken from him, a hope now dead and cold as her body had become in his arms. But, there was no hesitation in his answer.

"No, no. I would deny her nothing. I would be all that I could be ... for her. I would give my heart to her in every way she desired."

Diana turned and reached up to him, stroking his cheek, then dropped her hand asking, "You wouldn't hesitate to make love to her?"

She saw the hint of a blush on his cheeks, as his face became partially hidden in the shaggy gold of his hair, but then, almost stoically, he shook his head, "No, I would not hesitate," he whispered.

She nodded, lowering her eyes. "I'm not Catherine, but my love for you, is just as strong. I know it is. I love you beyond anything, beyond everything I could ever imagine, and a part of me knows that I can make you happy ... if you'll let me try."

She toyed with the ends of his mane where it lay in a soft golden fall over his shoulders, not looking in his eyes as she decided how to continue.

"Those days you lay unconscious in my apartment, so near death, I ... I've never been moved by anyone so greatly. No one has ever made me feel ... feel that way; feel ... " she paused unable to find the words to express her emotions.

Sensing her inner turmoil, Vincent tilted his head, his eyes encouraging her to continue.

"What I'm trying to say," she blurted out, almost in frustration, "is that I was falling in love with you. I was already so fascinated by all the clues I had discovered about you. But, having you there," she swallowed, "Touching you, feeling the beat of your heart, wondering whether you would live or not ..." She shook her head, dropping her eyes, then raising her head back up to meet his steady gaze. "I loved you ... even then."

He raised his eyebrow, uncertain what to say, but his eyes conveyed his understanding, and his appreciation that she had voiced her true feelings to *him*.

"Vincent," she took his hand in hers, "Catherine showed you that love is possible, that you are as deserving of it as any man. I think we've both been given a wonderful gift. Something we can share for the rest of our lives. So much is possible for us. Let's not lose our chance to know how beautiful the expression of love between a man and woman can be. Neither of us has to be lonely anymore ... You said that you told Catherine to follow her heart. I'm only following mine, Vincent. Can you follow yours?" Her voice was tremulous. Her eyes, he'd never seen them more beautiful.

He sighed softly, nodding as he whispered in his slight lisp, "Yes."

They both smiled, the corners of his mouth raising a degree higher as he noted the nervous shrug of her

shoulders.

"The dream we share. The one you told me about?" he asked softly.

Her eyes widened, as she suddenly remembered having had it. Had he experienced the different ending as well?

"Yes?" she asked softly, hoping it was true.

"It was different last night. I think I understand now. A good omen, perhaps?" His eyes sparkled in a way she had never seen before.

She could only nod. He had dreamed it as well!

Feeling her joy, he took a moment to study her. She wore the soft, black cotton sweater with the deep, asymmetrical "V" neck. It beautifully bared the top of one of her small breasts and most of the opposite shoulder. It had become one of the things he loved seeing her in the most, and he realized that he had never told her how lovely she was in it.

She cleared her throat, shifting a little nervously on the bed, for she had sensed the change in him, and had caught a glimpse of the sensual look of approval in his glimmering eyes. Her voice cracking a little as she said, "Now, it's just, where do we begin?"

He pressed his lips together, giving her that enigmatic smile of his, as he tilted his head once more in his most unconsciously endearing fashion. Slowly, he reached around her slender waist, fanning out his large, powerful hands as he pulled her back into his chest, ignoring the pain in his injured hand, for he wanted to hold her, needed to hold her. He wrapped his arms snugly about her and she took his arms with her hands, tilting her head back to rest upon his shoulder, sighing her contentment in his embrace.

He pressed the velvet of his muzzle to her shoulder, sensing the smile that spread radiant heat to the very heart of her, warming the dark places in his soul as well with her light. His breath warm upon her back, he said, "We already have, Diana. We already have ... "

He sensed a light sparking to life within her as she exhaled softly; moving to rest her head against the side of his, the smile on her lips widened as his breath, warm and sensual, caressed her bare shoulder and he whispered, almost imperceptibly in his thick honey voice, "How could I not love you?"

END