

The Rest Does Not Have to be Silence

by Jackie Kapke

PART ONE

She had stayed with sick friends before, had helped them get through the illness and bad times, but nothing in her previous experience could compare to the intensity of this — not even her father's death, for she had merely been a bystander and it had all been so passive.

Vincent was so ill, so very ill. She had never imagined his strength and seemingly endless health and vitality could ever ebb like this. He frightened her and not for herself or her own safety. Even in his fits of rage and obvious hallucinations, she always seemed to be able to get him back into some semblance of control and eventually calm. He was just so frustratingly unpredictable and it was for him that she feared, feared that he would harm himself the way he hurtled his body around her apartment in his delirium. Father had told her that they had been forced to restrain him once before, but she would rather lose everything in her apartment than to do that to him.

When he roared, she felt sure the entire apartment building shook. Though weak, sudden bursts of power and rage would take hold of him. She never knew when he would erupt, only to eventually collapse, weaker than before.

On two occasions other tenants had rung the doorbell, complaining of the noise. Catherine had made up an excuse about listening to wildlife tapes of Africa and promised it wouldn't happen again in her most apologetic voice.

The very real fear that this illness might kill him gripped her heart tightly. He was indeed fighting for his life; his very existence was at stake, the life that was so precious to her, and his sanity.

Oh, why had she been so ignorant before, not realizing his anguish, his ever-increasing distance and disconnectedness? She never should have left the tunnels or him when he had admitted to her that he had lost himself.

In a lucid moment, not wanting to frighten her, but encouraged by her urging to share his problems with her, he had briefly described what he was feeling. He had told her he could feel and hear his heart pounding in his brain and that his blood burned with a terrible rage. It was as if at any moment he would explode, that something terrible was taking over and he was losing the tenuous hold he had on the last of himself.

The sight of him, so huge and helpless, brought out every bit of her strong maternal instinct, as well as the intense love she felt for him, her beloved, chaste and pure lover.

She wanted to ease his suffering. He tore at her heart strings, especially when he began the shivering at the height of his fever and its breaking. He was like a large young boy who desperately needed to be held, stroked and comforted. His dark blue eyes were hauntingly frightened, pleading desperately for reassurance and relief.

He seemed so fragile, losing himself completely, close to self-destruction and, she shuddered, to death. He raced from delirium to semi-consciousness when he was briefly aware of everything, then back to the hallucinations until he fell into the most frightening unresponsiveness.

His complexion turned from pale to dark and dusky. Both were unnatural, unhealthy colors for him, and almost always his skin was slicked with sweat, his lips swollen and cracked.

When alert enough, he desperately resisted exposing his body, even though she knew, and so must he, that it would help to reduce his fever and make him more comfortable to at least take off his heavily quilted vest and open his shirt. Respecting his wishes, she didn't force the issue. She was thankful for the times he was able to communicate his needs and wishes to her. During those other times, she mourned the loss of her rational Vincent and, as did he, she prayed for his safe return. Throughout the lucid moments of his ordeal, she was aware of how distraught he was at just being inside her apartment. The hallucinations must be terrible for him, she sympathized. He seemed so sure that he saw something lurking, watching. He even had her looking over her shoulder for some intruder. It was unnerving and caused her flesh to crawl, yet it all seemed so real to him.

He wouldn't or couldn't discuss this creature that tormented him, only that it was the Dark One and that he was certain that it meant her harm. Vincent was able to express how terribly upset he was that in his illness he could not protect her properly. She tried to reassure him of the absurdity, that she wasn't in danger, that this creature was gone, but his eyes showed his uncertainty and apprehension. As sick as he was, she, as always, was his main concern. He had little thought of his own safety, but seemed obsessed in maintaining hers.

She didn't realize how truly out-of-control and gravely ill and lost he was until he was incontinent, soaking his trousers and the blanket beneath him in urine during one of the times he lapsed into incoherent confusion. She wept in disbelief as she held him tightly, rocking him. Mercifully, he seemed unaware of any of it, or he would have been mortified.

As he lay there unconscious, she started to remove his wet clothing. He could reprimand her later; she couldn't leave him to awaken soiled like this. Even his socks got wet when she pulled the pants down, so she took them off, as well.

She hurriedly washed and dried him, all the while her hands trembled slightly, not only from fear that he would suddenly wake and find her doing this, but also from the mere sight and touch of him beneath her hands.

She ran to her room and got an extra-large plaid flannel shirt out of the bottom drawer. She had intended to give it to him; the deep golds and oranges in it had caught her eye in the store and reminded her of him.

With some difficulty, she managed to pull off his damp, heavy shirts and maneuver his large frame into the shirt. It was loose enough for ease of movement and covered him to about mid-thigh. As she eased the front closed and fastened the buttons, she wondered why he had ever been ashamed of his body. He was beautifully-built. His muscles were sculpted and sleek and covered with such luxurious, thick, amber hairs, she thought. Even his feet looked elegant, almost delicate. They had claws, like his hands, though smaller. She was a little surprised — four toes, and the soles were quite thick and padded. He was delightful.

She couldn't resist stroking his ample thighs, and in the reproductive department, she mused, well, there was certainly nothing in the least to be ashamed of.

Tears began to fill her eyes. Oh, how she wished this all could be under happier circumstances. She had dreamed for so long of seeing him, touching in this way, but she wanted him to be conscious and able to feel the joy and pleasure, too. She bent, hugging him, as the sobs burst from her heart. She tried to relay all her feelings of acceptance, love, and admiration for him and all that he was through their bond and her embrace. She still felt their bond, but days earlier he had confessed that it was weakening in him, that the madness was pushing it aside. He had cried, fearful that he might not be able to reclaim it. Perhaps all this wove into his illness; maybe their bond was irreparably broken.

"Oh, Vincent," she sobbed, "how can I help you? What can I do? I don't want to lose you. I can't lose you!" She stroked his mane and continued to rock him as she noted the flush in his cheeks. His fever

must be on the rise again, she realized. She knew this would only be a rare moment of peace for him, with the rising fever and the turmoil, the writhing and shivering would return.

Catherine had left a message with Peter Alcott's answering service. She refused their offer of another doctor on call and hoped he would arrive soon, or at least return her call. She had not been able to contact any of the Helpers she knew as yet by phone, and she did not feel comfortable leaving Vincent alone. Who knew what he might do in his delirium, she shuddered. He might even attempt to climb back down off her balcony, and he was in no condition for that. She was constantly on edge when he was out of her sight, and she prayed that she would be able to contact Father soon, for she knew he would be distraught over Vincent's absence.

Catherine washed his clothing and the blanket, continually checking on Vincent where he laid propped up on pillows on the floor behind her love seat. She didn't like seeing him on the floor, but there was no way she could manage to get him onto the bed by herself. With all the thrashing he did, he was probably safer there anyway.

She quickly tossed things into her dryer, knowing how important it would be to him to have his things back as soon as possible. To Catherine's dismay, he began to stir as she worked his slacks back up his legs. As he regained his awareness, she could sense immediately his burning shame, and see the shock and horror in his eyes as he realized what she was doing and what she must have seen.

"Catherine!" he whispered hoarsely in disbelief, as with shaking hands he fumbled for the pant waist, tugging them over his thighs and hips. Humiliation overtook him again as he noted the new shirt he was wearing. He began gasping and panting and was unable to look at her.

She reached to touch his cheek. It was moist with perspiration and, now, tears. She gently pushed the wet bangs that hid his eyes aside.

'Vincent, you were soaking wet. I couldn't leave you like that. I needed to get your clothes clean.'

He dropped his eyes further, his lips trembling with a silent sob.

"Yes, I've seen you now, all of you, and... you are beautiful. You must not be ashamed. You have nothing to be ashamed of, nothing. Vincent. You are an incredibly beautiful man. I find you extremely handsome. Do you sense any repulsion, disgust or distaste? I am sorry if I've embarrassed you, but it had to be done.

"I know you would have done the same for me, because of love. I love you, Vincent, all of you, every inch, every hair. You must believe that! I would do anything for you. Anything. You need help and I want to help you. You are my life. You are everything to me."

He wept, tears streaming down his cheeks and hers. She embraced him and he came willingly to her arms, nestling his face into her breast. "Oh, Catherine," he cried.

Neither knew how long they sat there on the floor, clinging to each other, but finally, seeing he was growing exhausted, she forced him to lie back and positioned the pillows for him before covering him with a quilt.

She got to her feet, went into the kitchen, and brought back a hot cup of tea for him. "Here now, take some of this. You must drink, you need the fluids badly."

He took a few sips, choking a little, and she realized that was all he could handle for the moment.

"Thank you, Catherine," he whispered, his eyes shimmering blue pools lost in dark circles. "Forgive me," he added with quiet melancholy.

"For what, Vincent? What have you done that I need to forgive?"

"For causing you despair, embarrassment, for destroying your things, burdening you with my care, and... your job; I am keeping you from your work."

She pressed her fingers against his lips to silence him. His sorrowful eyes cut deeply into her heart.

He shuddered and suddenly began to shiver. She had him lie back more comfortably and gently took his head in her lap. She began stroking him, as the trembling racked his fevered body.

Quietly, soothingly, she spoke to him. 'Vincent, you're not causing any trouble. You need my help and I, more than anything, want to give it to you. It's as simple as that, my love. I'm so glad that you came to me. We'll get through this together. We will. I know it.

Softly, she ran her fingers down his mane, face and neck, and kneaded his tense shoulders.

"It's all right. You'll get through this, Vincent; you'll get through this."

She kept repeating her gentle words to him, as he shook uncontrollably for hours there in her arms. Her words, her voice and touch, even her aroma were so comforting that he wanted to lose himself in them, but something inside wouldn't let him. It kept screaming that everything was not all right, that something was terribly wrong. There was nothing he could do, as his eyes filled with hot tears.

Peter did not call back and the day turned into evening. Vincent's fever rose and fell through the night. His shivering was so severe that his teeth chattered. He turned his head to look up into her face, his eyes pleading silently for help. His mouth, tongue and lips were exceedingly swollen and dry, but he was unable to keep anything down and she gave up trying.

She was tempted to give him aspirin or Tylenol, but remembered Father's warning about how unfavorably Vincent had reacted to drugs in the past. She decided she had better not risk making him worse, if that indeed could be possible.

Catherine was exhausted herself, but she resolutely stayed beside her beloved Vincent. She was afraid to leave him alone and did not want to part from him for even the few minutes it would take to grab a snack or use the bathroom. Wearily, she held his shuddering body tightly, caressing and stroking him. It seemed to give him some comfort and keep him calmer. She tried to convey all of her love for him through her voice and hands, and attempted to keep his wet, heavy hair off his face and neck.

Peter came quite early the next morning. Catherine was incredibly relieved to have someone knowledgeable sharing in Vincent's care.

"I'm sorry, Cathy. I came as soon as I got your message. I've been out of town." He returned her embrace, surprised by the intensity of her despair. They both moved to kneel beside Vincent. "How long has he been like this?"

Catherine could not help crying as she spoke. All the terror of the past two nights alone with Vincent sought release.

"Oh, Peter, he's been ill since he killed Paracelsus. It started before that. It's been getting worse these last few weeks. He can't concentrate, he's distracted, mumbling to himself. He's so tormented and can't find any peace or sleep. Two evenings ago I found him here, unconscious on the floor. Somehow he'd knocked over the étagère and was lying there among the glass and splinters. He's feverish, weak, hallucinating."

"Is he taking any fluids?"

"He won't drink; well, the little he does won't stay down. I'm scared, Peter. This is the worst I've ever seen him and, from what Father told me, it seems worse than when he was a boy.

"Peter, he's told me that he's losing himself. He says the bond between us is weakening. He can't feel me. His sense of me — where I am, and if I'm well or not — is gone. He's terrified. I still feel our bond, but my sense of it was never as powerful as his."

She thought back to one of the last times she had talked to him Below. She had found him alone by the mirror pool, his trembling hand running across his forehead and through his dishevelled hair.

"Catherine, sometimes... sometimes I feel myself dying."

"Don't say that, Vincent," she said determinedly, as she took his shoulder.

"But, it's true." he said in almost a whimper, as he dropped his golden head.

"You're not going to die. Vincent: I won't let you. Do you hear?" She took his head between her hands and gently shook him.

His tears began to fall. "But it all seems beyond my control. I can't fight it. Not only have I lost myself, I have lost you as well."

"Vincent, you haven't lost me. You could never lose me. What makes you think you've lost me?"

He rested his cheek on her shoulder. "I am losing you, Catherine. Our bond. I no longer feel the stirrings in my heart. It has been fading for weeks now."

He bent his head back, sighing raggedly as he stared up at the cavern ceiling. "It's as if a part of me has been ripped out and now I'm left to bleed. It is death, Catherine. I know it. And... it's not that I'm," he swallowed, "afraid to die. It's just the way it's happening. It hurts... and I had so many things I wanted to experience in the world... and with... you, Catherine." He shook as he silently cried with his arms hanging limply at his sides, and she hugged him close.

"You will, Vincent. We both will — together."

He shook his head, wanting to believe her, but knowing it was too late.

"Well, let me check him over and see if there's something more we can do." Peter's gentle, encouraging words brought Catherine back to the present.

"Vincent, can you hear me? It's Peter."

Vincent's only response was to turn his head slightly toward the sound of Peter's voice. His eyelids fluttered, but did not open, his lower jaw trembled with his chills.

Peter gently took the large head in his hands and manipulated the glands in Vincent's neck and checked for rigidity in his neck, a sign of encephalitis. Then he examined his eyes and throat with a pen flashlight. He listened to Vincent's chest and Catherine helped him turn Vincent's large form to the side so Peter could listen to his back.

"He's burning-up, Catherine. I want to check his temperature, but I don't want to risk having him bite the thermometer in two. Axillary temps have never been accurate."

Catherine knew what he was implying. She nodded and moved closer to help him hold Vincent still.

"Cathy, I'm not sure how he will respond. If alert, he wouldn't like this. You just brace his shoulders and try to keep him on his side."

Peter lubricated the thermometer and drew Vincent's pants down part way, then slipped the rectal thermometer in.

Vincent shifted slightly and opened his eyes wide. Catherine felt his body tense as he straightened his legs and then curled his upper lip back, revealing teeth and emitting a warning snarl. He was definitely alert enough to dislike this invasion of his body. He started to twist backwards towards Peter, raising one lethal hand, but Catherine moved quickly, taking his head and shoulders firmly into her lap.

"No. Vincent, don't. Lie still now. No one's going to hurt you."

"Easy now. Vincent, easy." Peter soothed, gently rubbing Vincent's lower back.

Vincent quieted and settled back into Catherine's arms, his rapid breaths slowed as she stroked his hair and kneaded his shoulders.

"It's all right. Vincent, I'm here. I'm here."

He offered no more resistance as they kept him on his side the required minutes. When Peter removed the thermometer, Vincent hardly seemed to notice.

"It's a hundred-and-six. Cathy. He normally runs a degree or two higher than the rest of us. This is dangerously high, even for him. He could convulse."

They pulled his trousers back up and turned him to his back, as Peter pulled his shirt up to palpate the organs in his abdomen.

"Has he urinated since he's been here, Cathy?"

"Yes, the first night, two nights ago, but not since. Peter, he had no control, he just... Most of the time he doesn't know where he is or what he's doing." Her lovely brow furrowed with worry, as she looked down at Vincent.

Still trembling and panting with the fever, he chose that moment to look up into her face, his lips parted. His eyes softly blinking. Again her heart almost burst as her vision blurred with tears. She softly rubbed the tight cords of his bare neck and tenderly ran a finger up the silky fur on his nose and along the deep fissure of his forehead. He sighed and closed his eyes again, as if reassured by her touch.

Even in that simple act, Peter could see the deep love this couple shared. He turned away, feeling as if he had witnessed some private intimacy he was not meant to watch, and began putting some items away in his bag and taking out others.

"He's severely dehydrated. With such a high fever and no fluid intake, well, he needs fluids badly. His lymph nodes are swollen and his lungs are a little congested. He may be developing a mild pneumonia. And his heart." He tapped the earpiece of his stethoscope on his tooth a moment before he folded and placed it in his bag.

"What about his heart?" she asked urgently.

"Well, it sounds different. The beat, of course, is more rapid. I can't really pin it down, but it seems to be having to work harder. He's been under so much stress. It's almost like a murmur, an unusual beat every now and then. He desperately needs rest. He and his heart are exhausted. I wish I could sedate him, but I'm sure Father has explained to you why that isn't possible; it would only worsen his condition.

"I'm going to start a heparin lock in his arms."

"What's that?"

"It's an intravenous route that can be used over and over. Vincent won't have to be continually hooked up to the tubing. He never could tolerate tubes and wires; they get in his way. We'll give him some antibiotics and a few litres of I.V. solution with saline, dextrose, potassium and electrolytes and see if we can turn his fever and dehydration around. I'll show you how to irrigate the lock and keep the vein open for future use, if we need to give him additional medicines and fluids."

He was thoughtful for a moment, then began laying out the items he would need. "It's a little bit of a juggling act from here. I'm worried about his kidneys. They can shut down and become damaged when there is not enough fluids running through them, but with Vincent's lungs already congested, I don't want to give him too much too quickly, or his pneumonia could worsen and his heart could become over-taxed with the fluid overload. We'll just have to watch him closely and monitor how he responds. That is," he chuckled slightly, "if he'll let me start this I.V."

"All this about his heart and lungs," she shook her head. "He's so ill. Peter. I'm frightened." She looked up at her friend with hugely sad eyes. Peter bent over and hugged her tightly. Still holding Vincent around the neck with one hand, she reached around Peter with the other.

"I know, I know, Cathy," he crooned softly, "but we'll help him."

She wiped her eyes. "It's just so hard to see him like this. He's so brave and strong. I never dreamed, not even in my worst nightmare, that something could hit him this hard. I truly wish Father had pulled the trigger and killed Paracelsus when he had the chance. He does too, now. The man's dead, but I still hate him; I hate him for all he has done!"

She sniffled her tears and watched Peter as he shaved and cleaned Vincent's forearm with betadine.

"Cathy, help me hold his arm still. It's going to prick a little, but just for a second."

Both their grips tightened, as he inserted the needle through Vincent's skin and into the vein. Again Vincent lurched forward, gasping, and began curling his lips back from his long white teeth. Catherine pulled him back into her lap, stroking his face, whispering words of comfort, as Peter drew a blood sample and explained the risks of sending it to the lab, saying they might find some unusual elements in Vincent's unique type. He taped the heparin lock in place, needled the I.V. solution into its plastic stopper, and turned on the flow.

They hung the bag from a near-by floor lamp. Peter injected an antibiotic and promised to let Jacob know that Vincent was safe with her.

"I'm sure he'll come here. Wild horses couldn't keep Jacob from his son. I'll be back as soon as I can. I have two surgeries scheduled. Keep trying to get him to take fluids. Just allow these I.V.'s to run the way I have them set. They'll last eight hours like this."

He kissed her cheek and suddenly she and Vincent were alone again.

Soon after Peter left, Vincent's fever rose alarmingly fast. He writhed and moaned and looked miserable. He shook and panted with deep sighs, while his dark, gaunt face held the expression of one terrified. He appeared almost lost in shadow. His skin shone with perspiration and his hair was damp and heavy.

Tears coursed down her cheeks as she caressed him. *God, how I wish there was more I could do. Why must he suffer like this?*

More demons returned as his scattered thoughts raced around his fevered brain. He was with her again in their special place below the concert bandshell. But what was usually so sweet and treasured, was now a hideous, surrealistic nightmare. The music was muffled, ugly and distorted, even painful to his sensitive ears. He found no solace in what had once given him peace and pleasure.

His Catherine was bizarre, too. Her eyes flamed, as if bewitched. Her actions and voice were grotesque and blunt. Suddenly, all the faces of those he loved raced past, only to change into gruesome spectres that taunted and tormented his very soul. Then, as he looked into a huge mirror, his own face and shape evolved into the other, filthy, dark and evil, crouching as he snarled, his foetid breath sickening to smell, his dirty tangled hair whipping across his blackened features.

Suddenly he saw the Dark One seize Catherine, forcing her underneath him, tearing at her clothes, hurting her. It was more than Vincent could bear and he cried out, "No!" as he lunged at the demon.

She held Vincent tightly as he thrashed, panting and moaning in some horrible dream only he was witness to. He held onto her thigh, as if it was his anchor, the only thing that kept him from the undertow of his destruction. That place on her leg was already purple.

As she turned the moist cloth on his forehead over, he lurched forward, sitting straight up, his wild eyes wide with disbelief and horror as he roared, "No!" Just as quickly, he went heavily limp, crumpling backwards into her lap again. His eyes were still open, yet unseeing. He made no response when she cried his name, lying against her unconscious, mouth open, head thrown back.

She frantically made sure he was still breathing and that his heart was still beating. Then, strangely enough, he slept almost peacefully for several hours. Catherine took the opportunity to bathe, eat, and make sure his I.V. was infusing properly.

She sat reading on the couch as she heard him moan slightly and stir. She watched him, unobserved, as she looked behind herself over the back of the love seat. He shifted his torso and attempted to sit up higher on the pillow behind him. Sighing, he laid back down, shaking his head, his hands trembling.

She came around to kneel beside him. "Vincent, what is it?"

He seemed very nervous and fidgety as he spoke in a very raspy whisper. "Catherine, I... " He looked at her shyly, then back at the floor. "I need to relieve myself, but I can't get to your bathroom. I can't even sit up."

She hid a smile, happy that the I.V. fluids were working and pleased that he was alert enough to ask for help. His kidneys were apparently functioning normally and he looked cuddly in his wrinkled clothing and tousled hair, but she resisted the urge to squeeze him.

She reached across him to the plastic urinal she had placed on the floor beside the couch and held it up in front of him. "Peter left this. He thought you might be able to put it to some use after getting all the fluids we've been putting into your veins."

His eyes lit up and he almost smiled; a smirk tugged at the down-turned corner of his mouth.

Both of them were blushing as Catherine handed it to him and got up. "You go ahead. I'll be back in a few minutes with some tea and I'll take care of it then." She touched his flushed cheek and went to the kitchen.

She started to heat the tea kettle, when she heard something in the next room. Listening closely, she heard Vincent crying softly. She came out and found him laying on his side, curled-up, shaking all over. She dropped beside him, her hand on his trembling shoulder.

"Vincent. what's wrong?"

He slowly shook his head. His mane hid his features as he spoke in barely a whisper. "I can't. I... my hands are so shaky; I'm shaking so that I can't even... "

"Oh, Vincent." She hugged him, as he hung his head even further. "I'll help you. Come on now, let's see these pants."

He took her hand. "Catherine!" he breathed in a tone of disbelief. His eyes pleaded with her as he looked up into her face, then away in humiliation. He felt ashamed to have her see him so weak and helpless.

"Vincent, look at me," she urged softly. He turned to face her, blinking back the tears as he sniffed. "I love you, all of you. I want to help you, but you need to let me. You must let me, my love. There is nothing about you, no part to be ashamed or embarrassed of. Nothing! You are a wondrous man and I love you. Please, Vincent, let me help."

He gazed into her soft eyes, eyes that held only love for him, and sniffed one last time, then bit his lip, nodding in acceptance of her offer.

She bent to gently kiss his cheek, then chin and neck, as he released her hand and lay back on the cushions. She unfastened the reluctant hook on his waist-band. It had become stuck and even she had a difficult time opening it. He felt a little relief when he saw that it had not been easy for her, either. He shuddered. Catherine's hands trembled slightly as she unzipped his pants. She rose to her knees, touching his thigh.

"Now, can you manage?"

Head bent low, he nodded and spoke in a barely audible voice, "Yes."

"I'll be back with some tea."

When she did come back, he had almost overflowed the litre container. He must have been incredibly uncomfortable, she thought to herself silently adding that he must have some bladder capacity.

He smiled shyly up at her, as she took the urinal and handed him a mug of tea. "I'll be right back," she promised, as she headed towards the bathroom.

When she returned, she found him asleep on his side. Most of the tea was gone. She discreetly re-zipped his pants, but intentionally left them unfastened so that he could manage by himself next time.

Evening came and with it a very distraught Father. He was relieved to hear that Vincent was drinking and urinating normally, but was upset at his pallor, weakness, and the dark circles under his eyes. He took turns holding his son, trying to comfort him, so that Catherine could shower, eat, and run out for groceries.

Tears came to his eyes when, lucid for a short while, Vincent kept apologizing for his illness and all the trouble and concern he was causing everyone.

Father stroked the damp, golden head. "Vincent, none of this is your fault. There's nothing to apologize for. We just want you to get well. That is our goal now."

Vincent looked up into his father's face. His lips trembled from his chills.

"We are all with you in this, Vincent. We'll help you and this will pass, I know. You just have to be strong, my son. Don't give up hope."

Father was quietly weeping with Vincent asleep in his arms, when Catherine returned with the groceries. She hurried to set them down and remove her jacket, then rushed to his side.

"Father, what is it? Is he worse?"

He wiped his tears. "No, he's the same. It's just so unfair, Catherine. Why must he go through this torment? There is no one on earth who deserves this, least of all him. Why is he destined to suffer so?"

He looked down and noticed the healing cuts on Vincent's right palm. "How did he do this?"

"I don't know. He broke through my patio doors, crushed a lamp and shattered the mirror, then my seven foot *étagère*. I'm just so relieved he wasn't hurt more seriously."

Father was shocked by all the damage his son had done to her lovely home. "We should take him Below."

"No, Father. I think it's better that he stay here, at least until he's stronger."

"But, Catherine, he could hurt you. He's not himself. You've seen how violent, how destructive he can be. It would be better to restrain..." He never completed the sentence.

"No. He's not going to be restrained. Never! I don't care if he breaks a few things. It would kill him to be tied down, and you know it. He won't hurt me; I'm certain of that. I can always reach him, calm him. He trusts me, Father, and it would be a betrayal of that trust to tie him down like some animal. It would destroy the last of his hold on himself, the last of his dignity. It would be more than he could bear right now."

"He could never harm me, and he is staying here with me. Somehow, I know I'm doing the right thing. He came to me. He came Above, and here he'll stay 'til he's better."

She was determined and stubborn in this. Father knew there was no use arguing with her. The only way to get Vincent Below would be to wrestle him from her arms, and he could never do that.

An accepting smile crossed Father's face, as he watched her stroking his adopted son's hair and cheek as Vincent lay, still unconscious in her arms. She was a little tiger and, until now, he never truly realized the fierce love she held for Vincent. She, like his son, would risk everything, even her life, for him.

He nodded and said, "Perhaps you're right. I can tell you're not going to be swayed in this." Groaning with stiffness, he rose to his knees. "I must be getting back." He touched his son, saying, "His hair and clothing are drenched with sweat. Can you bring a change of clothing and a towel and we'll get him dry before I go?"

"Yes, yes, of course."

She brought a large nightshirt. It was one of her father's she just couldn't throw away and had secretly hoped, at one time, that Vincent might wear it when he visited her. They worked together changing his clothing.

Father was embarrassed enough for both himself and his son, as Catherine helped him and saw his son naked, but he could only sense her acceptance and love. She didn't seem in the least shocked by Vincent's furry body or genitals.

She was a remarkable woman. Father smiled again as she wrapped Vincent's wet hair and large head turban-like in a towel, pulling him again into her lap.

Father got up with great effort and shrugged into his coat as he told Catherine some precautions he and the others planned to take while Vincent remained Above with her.

"A sentinel will be stationed at your basement entrance around the clock, if you need any help. If you need to send a message, someone will be by your door at ten in the morning and evening. They won't knock; I don't want to frighten or startle you, but just leave an envelope under your door. We'll leave any messages for you the same way."

"Oh, also..." He reached into his coat pocket. "...here is the number where a Helper can be reached anytime, twenty-four hours a day. You're not alone in this, Catherine. We all want to help. If you need anything, *anything*, just let us know."

"Thank you, Jacob." She brushed the tears from her cheek, smiling up at him.

His eyes blurred with tears, too. "Vincent is very lucky to have you, Catherine, and your love. So am I." His voice broke a little and he bent to kiss her forehead. "Well, I'll be off," he said, as he tried to collect himself and his thoughts. "When he awakens, give him my love."

She nodded and he was gone.

Vincent's fever rose and fell again, saturating his clothes. She got him back into his soft suede shirt and pants.

By late morning, he looked better, more peaceful, as he lay propped up on pillows behind her love seat. She decided to take the time to answer her phone messages. She had just finished talking to Joe, when she heard Vincent's low snarl. Glancing to him, she noticed the wild look in his eyes. His upper lip pulled back threateningly as he peered into her bedroom.

Before she could even stand, he leapt to his feet and lurched forward through her folding doors, splintering them with his sheer force. Her heart sank as she realized he was hallucinating again.

She reached the door in time to see him fall to his knees. He sprawled onto his stomach at the foot of her bed, roaring, raging, his arms braced wide at his sides. His thighs and buttocks arched and tensed, ready for attack. She covered her mouth for an instant in disbelief, then sunk slowly to her knees beside him.

He was still snarling, frantically searching the room for that evil presence, *the other* he had talked about, but the vision had apparently vanished.

Vincent started to sway slightly as she reached for his shoulders, but before she could get a secure hold, he fell forward, his nose and forehead slamming into the rug as he lost consciousness.

"Oh, no. Vincent!" she cried, shaking as she pulled his shoulders and head tightly against herself and sobbed. At least she was assured that he was breathing and she could feel his pulse pounding in his neck.

Taking his head in her hands, she gazed down into his face. Blood trickled from one nostril. She pulled him close again and rocked him. *How much more must he endure? How much more can he endure?* she thought.

Just then the doorbell rang, startling her thoroughly. Had more neighbors heard him? Her mind raced frantically as she began thinking up explanations for what they might have heard. Then came a knock and the call.

"Cathy, it's Peter."

She sighed in relief as she gently laid Vincent back on the floor. She rushed to the door and flung it open, sobbing into Peter's arms. He set down the groceries he had brought and his medical bag and returned her embrace.

Trying to lighten her mood a little, he patted her head saying, "I take it this means he's no better?"

She shook her head, sniffing her tears and wiping her eyes. "He's hallucinating again. He still won't eat and barely drinks."

"Well, let's go have a look at him."

She led him to the bedroom. He stared ominously at the broken doors and splintered wood around Vincent's body. "Maybe we should move him Below."

"No, Peter! He's not moving. I had all this out with Father earlier this morning."

"But he could hurt you."

"No, he won't."

"In his right mind, of course not, but, Cathy, he's not in his right mind. You, more than anyone, should realize that now."

"Peter, believe me, he *won't* hurt me. He needs me and I want to take care of him. He's staying here. There's nothing in him that could ever hurt me.

Peter wanted to argue, but somehow he felt that she knew what she was talking about, so he held his tongue.

"Do you think we could get him into bed, Peter? I hate to see him have to lie on the floor the entire time he's here."

"It's worth a try."

Somehow they managed and tucked the light covers around him.

"I'll run another litre or two of fluids into him; I'm still afraid his kidneys could shut down," Peter told her, as he hooked the needle into the heparin lock and taped it to Vincent's forearm.

After regulating the flow he turned to watch Catherine as she combed her love's hair with her fingers. He mused to himself that Vincent might be a bit uncomfortable waking up in Catherine's bed, yet with the tenderness and love that so obviously flowed between them... *Who knows? Maybe Vincent has already shared her bed.* He shook his head, trying to clear his thoughts. It was none of his business. Their private lives were their own.

"Are you hungry, Cathy? I brought Chinese."

"Yes, I'm hungry. That would be lovely. You're so good to me, Peter."

"Well, just because Vincent isn't eating is no excuse for you not to. You need to keep your strength up and keep well for him."

They ate off the bed next to Vincent. Secretly, she hoped the wonderful smells would tempt Vincent into trying a bite. He always loved oriental food, but he didn't stir and they knew rest was more important to him than food.

They had cleared their dishes and moved to the terrace, when Peter mentioned that he had gotten the lab work back on Vincent's blood sample. Catherine insisted that they keep their voices low, for even in his semi-conscious state, Vincent could easily remember things at a later time if he overheard them. He had confided as much to her in the past.

The bottom line was that the lab thought a mistake had been made and that non-human blood had been sent in. All of Vincent's values were normal, but there were many unusual elements present. Of possible significance was the overwhelming abundance of male hormones and enzymes running

rampant in the blood. They had requested another sample, but Peter told them that there had indeed been a mistake and that he would not be able to obtain another sample.

His news upset Catherine and the tears began again. "He's the most human... being, the most human man I have ever known," she sobbed.

Peter hugged her close a long while. "Cathy, I know you're tired. Why don't you rest? I'll stay here and watch over Vincent while you do."

"Thank you, Peter. I am tired."

It didn't surprise him when she got up on the bed next to Vincent and pulled a quilt over herself. She was soon asleep, snuggled into his warm back.

Several hours later, she awoke much refreshed. Peter had disconnected the I.V. from Vincent and was putting his jacket on. "I've got an emergency C-section. Do you want me to get a Helper to come stay with you?"

"No, Peter, thank you. I'll be fine now. Thank you for everything." They embraced and she hugged him a little extra tightly.

"We have to have faith that he'll get through this, Cathy. He's always been a fighter, and now he has you. No man could ask for more than that."

Tears fell from her eyes as she kissed his cheek. He always knew just the right thing to say.

She double-bolted the door behind him. As she passed the kitchen, she noticed he had cleaned up and put things away. She smiled to herself, thinking how much like her father he was. He had really helped her get through that sad time after her father's death, as well.

She tidied a few things, picked up and did laundry, then realized she was more tired than she had thought. After a quick shower, she brushed her teeth and got back in bed beside Vincent. He was warm, but not feverish. He continued mumbling a poem of lovers and death. Perhaps he sensed his own death, she thought, but she prayed this was not so. She drew herself up closer into the curve of his back. It felt so good to touch him. How often had she dreamed of him here, in her bed, in her arms.

She repeated the poem out loud to herself, then he answered her so calmly, so rationally, that she thought he was fully awake, but he didn't answer her questions. He was only talking in his sleep. He had heard her and responded to her voice and the words she spoke.

She reached an arm around his shoulder and settled her head against his arm, enjoying the strength of him, his warmth, and the safeness she felt with him close. It felt so right to have him here with her.

She was soon lulled back to sleep by his deep easy respirations and the gentle rain that began to fall.

During the night, he turned in his sleep, waking her. He nuzzled her neck and shoulders with his nose and mouth, sighing; his warm, moist breath sent shivers through her. He repeated her name, but did not respond to his own, and was soon lying quietly again. He had only been dreaming. It didn't matter, she thought, though at least this dream had appeared to be a pleasant one. It touched her that he must be dreaming of her.

She hugged him close and stroked his hair. She had always longed for this kind of tender intimacy with him. If only he was able to reciprocate this love, she had no doubt that he would be a wonderful, gentle lover. She prayed for his recovery and with it the chance that they might yet fulfill their dream. Deep in her heart she clung fiercely to this, her fondest wish, but also tugging at her heart was the nagging fear that this was only the calm before the storm, that Vincent had so much yet to endure.

PART TWO

Morning came, and the first thing Catherine saw as her eyes fluttered open was Vincent's tear-streaked face. He had been silently watching her as she slept.

"Vincent, are you all right?" she asked in a worried tone, as she sat up.

"es," he whispered, "I was just thinking how beautiful you are." She caressed his cheek, noticing the blush rising in it.

"Do you want to try sitting up?" she suggested, pleased that he was alert and rational.

He nodded, and she assisted him as he cautiously swung his legs over the side of the bed. He swayed slightly and she had him take slow deep breaths until the dizziness passed.

"Could you help me to the bathroom, Catherine?"

"Do you think you can make it?"

He nodded, and she steadied him as he stood up. She supported him under one arm and he used the bedside table and door frame for additional balance. They succeeded in getting into the bathroom and he shyly lowered his face, his hair obliterating his features.

"I think I can manage now, Catherine."

He was trembling slightly as she released him. He held on to the vanity next to the commode. She knew she had left his pants unfastened and figured he should have no trouble with them this time.

"If you start getting faint, call me. I'll be right outside the door"

"I will," he promised, still somewhat out of breath from the short walk.

She pulled the door shut and waited a little uneasily, but was soon rewarded by the sound of his apparent success. He opened the door and she assisted him back to the edge of the bed, where he sat quite heavily, panting from the exertion.

"Thank you, Catherine."

"Are you hungry, Vincent? I've made some chicken soup."

"Yes, a little."

She quickly warmed up the soup and brought it to him in his favorite mug. She helped him prop himself up against the headboard and he drank most of the soup. Catherine could tell he was fatigued from these simple tasks, and helped him lie back under the covers.

When she returned from the kitchen after rinsing out the pan and mug, he was sound asleep on his side.

He slept on and off most of the day with no fever or hallucinations. Aided by Catherine, he made several brief walks around her apartment and even sat out of sight from prying eyes on cushions strewn over her terrace floor. It was wonderful, feeling the warmth of the sun and seeing the brilliant blue of the sky.

Catherine noticed that he was very quiet and introspective. She respected his desire for quiet and solitude, but stayed close to be there for him if he should need her.

Later, as the afternoon came to an end and dusk began to fall, he fell asleep in her bed again. She left the french doors open, for there was a lovely mild breeze outside.

She worked on some long-neglected case studies at the dinette, then got up to peek in at Vincent. He stood at her balcony doors, gazing out at the pink and lavender skyline at dusk. Her sheer apricot curtains billowed in the gentle breeze before him. It seemed especially quiet and hushed.

He looked frail and strangely thin, bowed and swaying almost imperceptibly because he was still weak from his ordeal, but now, at least, he was able to stand unassisted.

Tears streamed unheeded down his cheeks, for he knew he must leave and that this might well be the last sunset he would ever see. It was poignantly beautiful. He realized he was not well yet, that his illness was not over. He could sense it, but he could no longer burden Catherine, no matter how much he longed to be close to her and the comfort she gave him.

Quietly, she came to his side. "You're feeling better?" She tried to sense what lay in his face and defeated posture.

"Yes," he whispered softly. He was not lying. He was a little stronger, but he could not tell her he was far from well. "I'm sorry," he said sadly. A small sob escaped him as he dropped his head.

"Oh, Vincent, don't be sorry." She moved one hand to his lower back, the other to his abdomen and rubbed, trying to soothe his hurt. What was he thinking now, she wondered, certainly he didn't think he had to apologize for being ill. Perhaps it was for the things he had damaged, or, she feared, he knew he must leave and hated to pain her further.

His voice was hoarse and broken and he was nearly crying as he spoke the words so painful to him: "It's been my struggle always. Now, just when I have so much to fight for... I'm losing." He hung his head even further.

"Maybe the worst is over," she told him softly, still trying to soothe him with her hands and pained by the exaggerated prominence of the bones beneath her fingers.

He turned slightly to face her. "But, if it's not... it's best that I'm Below. I should go back."

Perhaps he was right, she thought, but she would go with him. "It will be dark soon," she whispered, looking out onto the fading skyline that had attracted his attention.

His voice brought her gaze back to him. His eyes were dark and filled with sadness. "Catherine, I don't know what will happen now."

His words pulled at her heart. *Must he still endure more?* she wondered. "Vincent, you must promise me one thing: Whatever happens, whatever comes, you will share it with me."

He sighed, overcome by the love and acceptance she held for him. He reached over her shoulder and pulled her close to his side. She felt him tremble, his embrace was weakened by his ordeal. He did not have the strength until now to initiate their embraces. It felt good to feel him pull her close. Tears ran down her cheeks, for she had waited for so long to feel him again like this, to have the gentle, warm strength of him around her.

She didn't realize until that very moment how difficult it was to be the strong one. In the past, she had always depended on his strength and support. How she had missed the feel of those arms!

With his touch, she fervently knew that she would do anything to keep him safe and help him get well. She would gladly give her own life, for he meant everything to her. Everything.

Deeply, he breathed in the scent of her skin and silky hair and nuzzled her face with his own as he said, "Whatever happens, whatever comes, know that I love you."

She stood still a moment, unable to respond, letting the words wash over her, flood her with their sincere tenderness. Then she hugged him as tightly as she could. Her words were muffled as she pressed her face into his chest.

"Vincent, it's so wonderful to finally hear those words... though I knew they always lived in your heart."

He kissed the top of her head, then caressed it with his lips as he whispered. "I should have spoken them long ago, Catherine. I knew how much you wanted to hear them, but I... I just couldn't until now."

She squeezed him again. "I know — I know, my love."

They parted to look into each other's faces. Catherine reached up to press her palms gently against his damp cheeks and draw him downward.

Their lips met tenderly. He pulled back for a brief moment and looked deeply into her teary eyes, wishing he could sense her feelings. Then he took her lips with his again, deepening the kiss.

Her arms laced around his neck and his about her waist, as she drew his face to her shoulder and began weeping. She took soft, long, slow strokes down the back of his head, whispering tender words to reassure him of their love and the rightness of its expression.

"Vincent, I don't want you to go back. You're not well, yet. You're still so weak."

"But, Catherine, I must, I... "

"If you must, I'm going with you."

He tilted his head to argue, but before he could speak, she began again.

"I'm not leaving your side 'til you're over this. Something inside of me tells me we must not part, we cannot. I must stay with you."

"Your work... I've already taken up so much of your time. I can't expect you... "

"Vincent, if I have to, I'll take a leave of absence or quit. You are my life now. I don't know what I'd do without you. If something happened to you while we were apart, I'd never forgive myself for allowing you to go back alone. Nothing else matters, if I don't have you. Without you, there is nothing."

He hugged her tightly again, kissing her neck. Her words were a sweet balm for his aching heart. He had desperately wanted to hear her say them, for he felt the same, but he could never have requested her to stay with him, even though he shared the same gut-feeling.

"Now, you're either getting back in bed," she stroked his cheek, then took his shoulder, "or we're both getting ready to go Below, but I'm not leaving you. I won't leave you alone in this."

"I can see that," he sighed. A small smile crossed his half-human lips.

"We need each other. We're in this together, you know. We always have been."

He nodded, taking her hand. He slowly got back into bed and she helped cover him up, then lay beside him on top of the bedspread.

"You'll stay then?"

"Yes," he said softly. "Perhaps another day or two." He chuckled lightly.

"What?"

"I have enjoyed being here with you, Catherine." He scanned her face with adoring eyes. "I only wish I had been conscious for more of it."

She laughed and leaned forward to give him a quick peck on the mouth.

How had he ever been so blessed to find her, he wondered. Her sentiments were the very same.

His voice was deep with emotion as he said, "I love you so, Catherine."

"I know, and I adore you."

She snuggled in closer to him, as they lay facing each other on their sides. They kissed again, and she wrapped her arms around his shoulders as he pressed his face into the hollow of her neck.

He was amazed at how easy it was becoming to kiss her and how wonderful this closeness felt, but he was growing weary and was soon asleep in her arms.

She let him sleep, but the evening was still early, so she got a little work done, and ate and showered before she got ready to retire. As she dried off, she was startled by the sound of shattered glass. She didn't take the time to fasten her robe as she rushed from the bathroom.

The bed was empty. The covers had been thrown back. Her heart was in her throat. Swiveling, she saw a movement on the terrace. Vincent was out there in the dark. He had knocked over the plant stand and it

and the pot lay broken on the floor. He was snarling and hunched over panting, his face glistening with sweat.

As she approached, he whirled around, startled and roaring. His hair and loose shirt were blowing in the wind. He suddenly leapt up onto the ledge as Catherine let out a startled cry. He seemed determined to follow his imaginary demon over the edge.

"No!" she screamed, as she snagged him by the shirt tail, "No, Vincent. He's gone."

He lost his balance and fell backward, landing hard on his bottom. He tossed his head, trying to regain his senses. Her voice and the jolt of the fall snapped him back to reality momentarily. He looked up at Catherine as she knelt beside him.

Still panting, his eyes widened. His lips parted as he took in the bare beauty of her revealed by her open robe as it fluttered in the wind.

She felt her cheeks redden as she caught the look of sudden desire flare in his eyes, dark and ominous, but it was short-lived. His eyes grew unfocused, glassy, and nearly crossed as he swayed in her arms. Somehow, she managed to get him to his feet and guided him into the bed before he collapsed. She was shaking. What if he had fallen from the balcony?

She covered her mouth as she looked down at him, now so quiet. She willed her heart to stop pounding. She was afraid now to let him out of her sight.

His face was slick with sweat, his color very poor.

The rest of the night he was restless with fever and delirium. *Thank God he did not go back Below, she prayed. He would have been restrained for sure after something like the balcony stunt. Maybe it did prevent him from hurting, even killing himself.*

She cradled him close, repeating comforting words of love, as he tossed and drifted wildly. Tonight, her arms and voice were his loving restraints.

In the early morning hours, he finally calmed and Catherine fell into an exhausted sleep. As the faint morning light filtered through her curtains, Vincent woke with a start, his entire body tensing suddenly. He let out a scream that turned her blood to ice and quickened the beat of her heart.

He lurched backward in bed, thrusting his back up against her headboard, nearly tearing it from the bed frame. His chest heaved as he gasped and panted, his blue eyes wide in terror. His glance darted from the curtains to the room in confusion and fear, then landed on Catherine.

What could only be a whimper came from his lips as he recognized her. He exhaled, swallowing hard, then closed his eyes tightly and held his head in his trembling hands, his fingers tightening fiercely as he tugged on his hair in dismay.

Catherine scooted slowly toward him across the mattress. "Vincent?" She touched his thigh. "Vincent, what is it?"

He licked his lower lip, desperately trying to gain control over his breathing and racing heart.

"You're safe, Vincent. You're safe now. What is it?"

He could only whimper her name, as his head dropped into her lap and his arms tightened around her waist. He began to sob. His body shuddered as his flood of tears soaked her skin.

She let him cry and settle down for nearly a half-hour, trying to soothe him with soft words and her gentle touch. Then she asked him what had troubled him so, knowing he must no longer keep everything inside, for it was destroying him.

"Vincent?" she asked, stroking his head, "What did you dream? Please, tell me."

She felt him take a deep breath and in a broken sob he answered her, "Catherine... I, I dreamed of all those I have... killed, all their faces; of how I almost killed that reporter and how I tore the man I thought

to be Father apart with my bare hands. I can still feel the blood, smell it." He trembled as he continued, unable to look up at her. "The light from your curtains... I dreamed I woke again, in the park, in broad daylight for everyone to see. I have never been so terrified to be Above and not know even how I got there." He closed his eyes tightly, as he pressed his cheek into her thigh, drawing his arms and legs up tightly against his shaking body.

Father's words echoed through his mind, *Do you know what they'd do if they found you up there? They'd kill you, or make you wish you were dead.* Images of the Silks beating him, taunting him, of being shot with tranquilizer darts, of being tied down on an examination table and caged like an animal — all swept through him like an icy blast of wind.

"I was so afraid." He tilted his face to look up into hers. "I am afraid." Tears fell from both pairs of eyes. Catherine held him close and rocked him back and forth, until he slept in her arms.

Hundreds of thoughts raced through her mind. Here she had thought he was getting better! Now the old terrors were surfacing again. How was she going to help him? What did he need? He could not take much more of this. If they didn't find a way to exorcise these fears, these demons that haunted his soul, she knew he would perish. It was driving him mad and his body could not stand the physical strain much longer. Both Peter and Father had been adamant about this.

He slept a long time. When he woke, she had him come sit in the living room on the couch, which she had dragged into the sunlight. He ate a little soup and part of a sandwich. He was usually such a hearty eater, she didn't know how he was surviving on the little he had eaten since this had all begun weeks ago.

Again she noticed how thin and gaunt he was becoming. As she cleared the dishes and took them to the kitchen, she could sense his tension and restlessness. He had been very quiet and withdrawn when they ate.

When she returned to the living room, she found him down on his knees pulling out her books. There were already a dozen or more strewn on the floor behind him. His movements became more frantic and erratic as he began tossing them faster behind himself. None seemed to be what he sought. He seemed to have regressed to the state of torment and despair of almost a week ago, when he had admitted to her that he had lost himself. He was snarling and mumbling to himself.

"Vincent, what are you looking for?"

Her soft voice startled him and he leaped to his feet. His face was dusky and glazed with perspiration. Fidgeting, he panted as he spoke: "I was looking, looking for a book. I had a book. Peace, looking for... peace. My... self. I don't know, Catherine. I don't, don't know. I'm so lost." He ran one, then both hands through his hair and began to pace back and forth between her couches to the fireplace and back again.

She knew this habit, reminiscent of the big cat he so resembled. It reflected the great stress and torment he was experiencing. She could feel it rising in him and growing out of control. She did not know if she should try to stop him before things escalated, or let him continue in hopes he might work off some of his misdirected energy. Father had told her he usually tried to get his son to sit down.

She spoke softly, gently, as she sat on the couch and patted the spot next to her. "Vincent, come here. Sit down." she coaxed him.

He stopped pacing and looked down at her, then rapidly began searching the room, as if for an escape. She held out her arms to him. With a look of despair, he dropped to his knees on the floor beside her, tucking himself tightly against her leg and the couch. She rubbed his back and stroked him, as he shed silent tears of dismay. He dug his head deeper into his folded arms.

Evening arrived and his restlessness continued. He kept turning away from her, avoiding eye contact. She never remembered him doing this before. It deeply worried her. He hardly ate or drank what she prepared for supper.

He couldn't concentrate. His thoughts were disjointed and random and many terrified him. He would look at Catherine and feel great shame as his eyes lingered on her full lips or the rise and fall of her soft breasts as she breathed. With tremendous effort, he decided he must not look at her or all would be lost.

She helped him get ready for bed. She was afraid for him again as she watched his hands shake so badly he could not button the nightshirt. He turned away, hanging his head as she helped him. Tears were blurring her vision as she got ready to retire. She did not see Vincent's look of horror as she turned back her side of the covers.

She remembered that she had forgotten to brush her teeth and went to take care of it. She stopped short as she returned from the bathroom. Fear gripped her heart. She felt as if someone had hit her in the stomach. Vincent was gone!

She ran to the terrace and then frantically looked around her apartment. She went back to the terrace, her heart thudding painfully in her chest as she peered over the ledge. Thank god! He had not fallen.

She searched back in her bedroom. His cloak was still draped over the dressing table chair. She took it tightly in her hands. Holding it fiercely to her breast, she bent her head and breathed deeply of his lingering aroma. "Where are you, Vincent?" she called in desperation.

She heard a small sob from her bedroom closet. Slowly, she crossed the room and peered in. He was huddling on the floor in the corner, his knees drawn up. His nose was pressed sideways into the wall and he was crying there in the dark.

"Vincent?" she called softly. Her heart was nearly breaking with what she saw. She opened the door further and dropped slowly to her knees. He gasped and said hoarsely, "Catherine, come no closer."

"Why, Vincent? What is it?" She was terrified at finding him like this.

"You must stay away," he cried in a broken voice. He turned his head, pushing his forehead into the corner as he sobbed, "I've truly lost myself this time."

"Vincent, I'm not afraid," she said firmly, as she advanced closer, half crawling across the closet floor.

"You should be!" he growled suddenly, his eyes flashing wildly. He startled her, but just as quickly he turned his head away.

"Why, Vincent? Why should I be afraid?"

He released a jagged sigh, slowly shaking the huge head that lay forlornly on his chest. "The Other, the Dark One, it is myself — it's me," he groaned. "I am not a man. Who am I trying to fool? I'm that animal, that beast." He wrinkled up his forehead, grimacing in deep pain from the words that had passed his lips.

She looked at him, her eyes filled with sorrow as she inched closer.

He gasped, "Don't touch me. Please." He shook his head. "Please, don't look at me, Catherine." He covered his face with one hand in a pathetic gesture of shame, as he pressed himself deeper into the corner.

Tears fell down his cheeks, mixing with the glistening perspiration. "I... he wants to hurt us, you, his rage... He destroys, kills."

His body shuddered, racked with sobs. He thrust his forehead against the wall with what could only have brought him terrible pain. He dug his face harder into the cool surface, as if trying to force himself through it to escape or disappear.

Was he trying to escape her or merely his torment, she wondered. She wanted to touch him, hold and comfort him, but she knew this was not the right time. This was therapeutic for him. At least, he was verbalizing and rational, no matter how wrong or misconstrued his thoughts.

He hung his head and shook it again. "I'm not strong enough to stop it any longer. He's winning and he wants us, you," he looked to her. His eyes were deep with melancholy. "He wants everything and will not stop until I'm gone."

"Vincent." He turned away. "Vincent, you must listen to me. You cannot do this. You must let him in. Don't stop it. You can't push this part of yourself aside. Give in to it, Vincent."

"Catherine!" he gasped, as he jerked his head back towards her, his eyes wide in disbelief. "How can you even suggest such a thing?" His voice was low with hate and disgust.

"Vincent, you must. You need to merge with this other part of yourself."

She edged closer and touched his bare thigh where it protruded from his nightshirt. He tried to pull away, stiffening, but there was nowhere else to go.

"Vincent?" She softly stroked his leg. "He is part of what you are. I have had time to think a long while about this. I believe you are ill because you have been incomplete. You cannot survive without this other half, yet you are trying, with all that you are, to divide yourself into good and evil."

She gently touched his arm. "There is no evil in you, Vincent. This part that frightens you so is your strength, your will to live, to survive, your stamina. You'll die if you don't become one again."

He shook with fear and revulsion, his voice was raspy with contempt. "I would rather die than have that evil rise up in me again. That blackness feeds on death and lust and I must not be lost in it again."

She squeezed his arm tighter. "No, Vincent, no. You must not say that. We all have this darker side. It gives us our strength, our desire and passion, but it is not evil. It is very *human*. It is just so much more powerful and overwhelming in you. You must not deny it, or refuse it; it's tearing you apart, making you ill, Vincent, it's killing you. Killing me."

Her voice broke with her last statement, as a tear fell from her eye.

"But, Catherine," he spoke softly with the first lengthy eye contact he had given her, "all these dark things are rising up inside me, taking over. I have no more control. The Man is lost; I am lost."

He dropped his head, shaking in despair.

"No, he isn't, Vincent. He isn't." She touched his wet cheek, as she moved to press herself softly against him and hug him. She met no more resistance or stiffness. He let his head fall to her shoulder, his body sobbing limply in her arms.

Gently, she stroked his head from the crown to his back, over and over, trying to soothe his pain. "I know it's a great struggle for you." She held him a little tighter. "We'll get through this together. This is a part of you that needs love and has never known it. You are not evil. What can you be thinking of?"

He sighed and pulled away from her. "I'm a killer, Catherine. A murderer."

"No, Vincent."

"How can you deny it? You've witnessed it. I do not deserve to live. I should be put to death, executed for the monster, the thing that I am, for all I have done."

"Vincent, you are not a murderer. You cannot be judged as other men in this. In this, you are not the same, can never be. I'm as guilty in this as you. You have killed to protect me. You saved my life. I would have died without you. There is no crime in that. You saved the ones you love and protect your home, the only place of refuge for you.

"If I had the means to defend myself at those times, a gun, or a knife, don't you think I would have done the very same? The only difference is your strength. Your weapons are built in and you are programmed

by nature, by your very make-up. Other men have this need to protect their loved ones as well, but in you it is a much stronger drive. You cannot hold back or control this urge to defend. It is instinctive in you, automatic, an integral part of who you are, who you must be. You cannot resist its force. Asking this of you would be impossible. It would be as ridiculous as trying to stop the tides or prevent the sun from rising. Vincent," she took his head between her hands, "you are protecting me in the only way you can, in the way nature has so purposefully equipped you. It's not different than a mother protecting her young, a lion its pride, or a stallion his mare and foals."

She pulled his head to her breast. "If the tables had been turned and you had been the one in danger, I would not have hesitated to save you, and I would not have been ashamed. I would have killed. *Know* that, Vincent. Do you think the men you dispatched would have hesitated a moment to kill either of us?"

She let free a ragged sigh. "I have felt so much guilt for my carelessness, for putting you in the position that forces you to have to protect. I have been reckless. I've seen the way it has hurt you." She pulled his chin up to look into his face, pushing the hair out of his eyes. "I've seen the anguish it has caused you, the deep wounds you've suffered, yet I've placed you in that position over and over again."

She kissed his temple. "Never, Vincent, never again will I do that to you! If it's in my power, I won't. I'm not taking any more dangerous assignments. I'm going to be extra cautious. I don't think you've done wrong, Vincent. You were only protecting me. I'm your life, as you are mine, my love. You will always be my love, my... mate, even if you can't admit it."

He sighed her name, blushing and hanging his head. "But, the way I almost killed that reporter and the way I did kill Paracelsus: He was weaponless, defenseless."

"No, Vincent." she argued, "His were the cruelest weapons of all, far more deadly and evil than a gun or his wicked double-edged blade. He tore you apart, and your humanity, with his vicious lies. He wounded you so deeply you were ready to die to end your torment, to end the life you felt should never have been allowed in the first place. He abused you. He raped your mind and spirit and forced you to lose control.

"We haven't told you, but Father found traces of drugs in your food and the water carafe in your chamber. Paracelsus was drugging you. Oh, Vincent, no wonder you've lost yourself even after the drugs were out of your system.

"This all only served to heighten your feeling of being disconnected, your despair and pain. I think though, instinctively you knew this could not be Jacob. You knew it was not him, but something evil and cruel beyond imagination who threatened you and all you held dear. You knew who it was and that he must be destroyed at all costs. Your heart knew the danger he represented to all those Below."

Her words rang true and eased his turmoil, at least a bit. He wound one arm around her waist.

"No. Vincent, he was not defenseless," she continued, "his weapons were the bitterest of any you have faced. You did what had to be done, I would have surely done the same. I only wish Father had shot him before this had escalated into such a nightmare. Father admitted to me that he, too, wishes he had killed John Pater, as he had intended in the first place."

She squeezed his shoulder as he looked quietly at her, his mouth hanging open in silent disbelief.

"Perhaps together we can temper your rage and channel it somehow. I have always been able to get through to you and bring you back. Maybe we can tap into that circuit or switch. We can learn how, together. You are not a murderer; you protect, and only with great provocation, your home, your life, and mine, and the others you love. You fight for your very existence."

"But that part of myself... I still loathe and despise, I hate it. How can you ask me to accept it? If I could, I would tear it from inside myself."

"You can't divide yourself like that, Vincent. You must stop. Can't you see and feel what it's doing to you?" She put a hand to his chest. "Do you know why your rage engulfs you so? Why you seem to feed

on it? Why you are lost in it? Why it consumes you so?" Her hand moved to his head. He had grown very quiet. "Do you?"

She had certainly captured his undivided attention. He shook his head like some shaggy, small child looking up at a knowledgeable elder sage, hoping she had the answer.

"I've thought about this a great while. There is no other way for you to vent your emotions. You have no other way to release your tension, your fear, rage and, yes, your passion. You are always forced to keep everything inside and hidden, but you feel things so deeply and you have such caring and compassion, yet when are you ever allowed to express them? You need an outlet. Your feelings, like your body, have always been hidden under self-unopposed layer after layer. Talking with me helps, but you need more. We top-siders call it 'blowing off steam.' This dark side of you is not evil, Vincent."

He gasped her name, turning his face again to the corner. She gently pressed her palm against his cheek and turned his head back "Please, Vincent, don't, please don't turn away from me again."

He tilted his head down, blinking quickly in a non-verbal apology to her.

"He is not your enemy, but your fear of him is. He is good."

"No," he said softly as he started to turn away then stopped.

"Vincent, you must accept him. He is your power and, yes, your passion and your desires, and this is what frightens you, but it is not wicked."

She touched his breast. "I love that part of you, too. It makes you who you are."

He shook his head, still not accepting her words.

'You can't allow this division any longer. If you do, you can't expect to survive.'

He was still shaking his head as he choked, "But, these terrible rages, urges, these dark passions I've kept deep inside and hidden. I have had to I have had to fight them all my life. I can't just..."

She took his head and held him close, caressing his hair. "It's true, Vincent, you can't tear this part out. You can't separate yourself and ever expect to be well again."

He looked forlornly up into her eyes.

"It's impossible, my love."

She looked deeply into his eyes and he slowly pressed his forehead against hers, sighing. He cried silently for a long time in her arms.

Catherine tenderly held his face up and kissed away his tears. Her lips lingered on his nose, his cleft, then his lips, those features so unique to him alone. She wiped the last of the tears away with her fingers.

His sad eyes looked beseechingly into hers as he whispered, "Help me, Catherine, please. I'm afraid. I'm so afraid." He let his head fall to her shoulder and she wrapped her arms around him, swaying and rocking gently as she cradled him. Her arms felt good.

"I know you are. I know you are, my love. I'll help you. I'm here." She shifted to her knees. "Now come, please, this is no place for you; you don't belong in here on the floor."

Sniffling his tears, his head swayed in defeat. "Sometimes I... I feel like I don't belong anywhere. In heaven's name, what am I?"

"It doesn't matter, Vincent. Listen to me." She took his chin firmly. "I don't care what you are, or what anyone thinks. None of it matters. All I know is that I love you and all that you are, and you love me. I know where you belong, you belong with me. You belong with me!"

His tears started again as she took his trembling hands to help him up off the floor. Hers were shaking as well from the intensity of her feelings and words. It pained her to think Vincent had retreated here to

the only dark place he could find, to hide himself. He had retreated from her eyes, her love, like some poor wounded animal. Perhaps in a way, she thought, that was what he was: wounded. And how sad that she had to tell him her most sincere beliefs about him and her and that he had poured out his heart there on the floor in the corner of the closet.

She took his hands and helped him up. shakily, to his feet, then back to bed. He was still trembling and seemed hesitant and reluctant to let her go.

She held his hand tightly. Pulling the covers back, she got in beside him and then covered them both. She snuggled closer to him, stroking his mythic face.

"I love you, Vincent. Rest now. Let that other part return. Please. I love that part, as well. Do you know why?" He shook his head, looking into her face with the quiet innocence of a child. "Because it's an integral part of who you are. You wouldn't be the same without it. It's part of what you are and of what we are, together."

"Yes," he sighed, and placed his head against her breast and his arm over her waist, needing to feel her close. He whispered low, "You won't leave me?"

She didn't know if he meant just for the time being or forever, but it didn't matter. She would never leave him. "No, I won't leave you, darling, not ever. I'll never leave you, Vincent. Sleep now." She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and kissed the top of his head, and he was soon asleep.

Early in the morning she awoke facing him. Both lay on their sides, his arm still lying limply across her. She couldn't resist watching him as he slept, then kissed his nose and lips.

He awoke from his most peaceful sleep in ages only to see an angel before him. She had been watching him sleep. Had he just imagined her kiss, he wondered. No, he could still feel the lingering presence of her lips on his.

Unconsciously, he ran his tongue over his lower lip and smiled shyly.

"Good morning," she spoke softly.

Not knowing quite what to say to her, he blushed as his smile widened and, to her delight, revealed the sharp points of his beautiful teeth.

She brushed the hair out of his face and let her palm come to rest on the side of his neck as they gazed into each other's eyes.

He could not sense what emotions of his she could feel inside, but he could see it on her face and in her sparkling eyes. He found only love and acceptance there.

She leaned forward and kissed him again, and he allowed her to deepen the kiss. Her hands threaded underneath his mane, pulling him closer and he moved to tug her soft body against his.

Eventually, they released each other and sighed with pleasure. She snuggled closer, resting her head on his upper arm. She began twirling a strand of his hair in her fingers.

"Vincent?"

"Mmm?"

"Why did you come Above to me this last time?"

He thought a moment. It all seemed so long ago and so much of his time here had been spent in a semi-conscious fog. "I'd read a poem and had to share it with you."

"The Dylan Thomas one?"

"Yes."

"The one you kept repeating over and over?"

"I wanted to tell you that our..." he momentarily met her gaze, "... our love would endure, even if I did not."

"So, in your desperation you came to me. In your most urgent time with your worst fears and the losing of yourself, you came to me."

He nodded, "Yes."

"You risked coming Above to tell me this. Why? Why, Vincent?"

He stared as if transfixed and unsure, with his gaze focused somewhere below her ankle.

"Because, Vincent, you knew, deep inside you knew that I could help you. I could give you what you've always needed and longed for. What is it, Vincent? What did you need? What do you need now?"

"I..." He hesitated, his head swaying, and sighed. "I need you, Catherine." He looked into her eyes. "I needed the comfort only your arms could bring, your touch. With the loss of our bond... I ... I was, I am so alone. I'm so empty inside. It hurts, Catherine." His voice choked a little. "It hurts so." he told her, "It wounds me so deeply."

Their eyes grew misty.

"I need you, Catherine."

"Yes?" she urged, gently hold his shoulder, encouraging him to continue.

"I need your love and I... I need you to love me." He tilted his head to look down at her, his mane spilling back over his forehead and cheek. He looked soft, gentle and enchanting.

She hugged him, glad that he had finally said the words. "You need my love, Vincent, as much as I need yours. We're not complete without each other. It's the only way to be whole again and to heal. You must know, as I already do, that you can love as any other man. There is no danger. It will help you recover. I don't think there is any other way, do you, Vincent? Honestly, do you?"

He shook his head, knowing she must be right.

"Then, come," she held out her arms and they embraced. She pulled his hair back from his ear and whispered, "Today we take a final step towards completing our dreams. Today we begin to heal and forge a new bond. You'll see that we can, Vincent."

He pulled back slightly. "You must show me, teach me, Catherine. I want to learn. I want to please you, but I'm not sure I know what to do."

"Yes, you do. You always please me. Everything you've ever done, everything you do pleases me."

"I don't want to lose you." His eyes suddenly glowed with apprehension. "If I, if..."

"You won't lose me. You can never lose me."

"I don't want to disappoint you, Catherine."

"Vincent," she touched his muzzle, running her hand under his lip. "You never have. You never will. If this is disappointment, I hope it will never end." She kissed him and drew back to take in his face. "Keep disappointing me, Vincent."

They both laughed, then kissed again.

Her hands crept under his hair and around his neck once more, pulling him close as he sighed. Releasing her grip, she ran her hands over his collar bones and down his firm chest. He pressed his chin against his chest, watching her as she began unbuttoning his nightshirt. He closed his eyes as her delicate fingers threaded through the densely curled hair and massaged the muscles of his now heaving chest. He licked his lower lip, sighed, then bit down.

She finished unbuttoning the last button, but did not open his shirt all the way, for the intensity of his fear suddenly pounded into her. She had to try to help him overcome his terror in exposing himself to her, she realized.

She gently ran her hands back up his flanks and chest, then rested them on his broad shoulders. His eyes opened and she could see the silent pleading there, as if he was asking her for guidance and reassurance.

She spoke softly, her eyes never leaving his as her hands rubbed his jaw and neck.

"Sometimes, Vincent. I think you are fighting normal male urges. You just don't perceive them or understand them as such. These sensations and desires you're afraid of are no different than those of other men. It's just that you've never been allowed to explore or express your sexuality, as other men have.

"Your first embrace with Lisa was a total disaster, not because you had done anything wrong, but because you both were so unprepared for what was happening between you. And it was not handled as well as it could have been.

"I can tell you of hundreds of other occurrences like that one. I've experienced some myself. You loved her. It was as simple as that, and you had no idea that she would react the way she did. I don't think she feared you, but the passion she felt coming from you. She truly liked you, but the depth of her feelings could not match yours, and she had only intended to tease you a bit with her little flirtations. It was as much her fault as yours, that she was accidentally scratched.

"There is nothing bestial about you or your urges. You merely don't perceive them as normal, excuse the term, because they are new to you and, yes, so close to the rage because there is a loss of self, a letting go of your inhibitions. It is very human to feel this way, because you will lose some control and it is frightening. Other men give in to this willingly, but because of your added strength and some of your different physical attributes, you are afraid of hurting. You fear injury to me, but don't be afraid. You can't, you won't hurt me.

"You must not let this one incident with Lisa haunt you any longer. Please don't let it destroy our chance to be together. I'm not Lisa. I won't pull away. Oh, Vincent, if you only knew the number of times that I've wanted you in my arms like this. The spell you have over me... It didn't matter to me if your fears were true. I didn't care if you hurt me, it was worth it to experience your love."

"Catherine!" he gasped in shock.

"It's true, Vincent, but I know now you could never hurt me."

"Surely, Catherine, other men don't have this raging, this greed, this lust inside them boiling to the surface. I know you've seen it in my eyes and it must disgust you. I am so ashamed..."

"Oh, no." She pulled his drooping face up. "I find it wonderful and exciting that you want me and desire me as well. It's not disgusting, it's passion and desire and love. I have these feelings as well." His eyes widened at her admission. "Yes, I do. If you only knew, Vincent, how much I wanted us together like this." She blushed prettily. "I've undressed you with my eyes and mind over and over again."

His cheeks deepened red, but she only continued. "I've imaged what you looked like under all those protective layers of clothing. I've wanted to touch your body, your secret places, and I've wanted... to feel you inside of me."

He could not look at her as he responded; her words had overwhelmed him too much. "But, this wanting to satisfy only my needs with no consideration of yours, it terrifies me."

"Vincent. I have the very same desires. Stop analyzing yourself. Stop trying to make it seem like you're so different from everybody else. You're not. You're always there to help others, giving all that you can unselfishly, but your needs and desires have always been left unfulfilled, unsatisfied, or locked away, never to be voiced. This once, Vincent, give in to your desires. You deserve this pleasure. There is no

reason that you can't experience love and all its joys. You deserve it and so do I. There is no shame in wanting it, none.

"This is what I have wanted all my life. I've searched all my life for someone like you, and I'm not going to let you get away, not without a fight, anyway." She had Vincent blushing again.

"Vincent, you were created for this, for love."

He hid beneath his hair, embarrassed by her candidness, yet he longed to hear more.

"You are the most sensual, charismatic, loving, gentle, giving man I have ever known. I think I've been under your spell from the very beginning. I have never felt with any man what I feel with you. Destiny, fate, whatever it is, we belong to each other. We belong together, forever."

He whispered her name and rubbed his cheek against her shoulder, then pressed his lips to her delicate skin. "I want to give you, desperately, everything that you need, everything that you want."

"Vincent, you do, you will."

He slowly shook his head. She could sense his doubts, his fear that he could not fulfill her expectations.

"There is nothing about you that displeases me, Vincent. Every part of you is beautiful. You are a very desirable man, whether you believe it, or not. No woman could look upon you and not be moved by your masculine aura, not if she took the time to really look.

"I want your love. I want no other man. I know you'll be gentle. You have been nothing but tender and gentle with me. Show me... now. You want this, don't you?"

He shifted slightly, his shoulders brushed against hers as his face peeped out from under his thatch of gold. "Yes. Yes. You know I do... "

Once again he dropped his eyes shyly.

"But, you're still afraid?" She touched his chin.

With tremendous resolve, he looked her straight in the eyes. then closed his tightly, releasing a heavy sigh. "Yes." he breathed with that slight lisp she so loved.

Her thumb traced the fullness of his lower lip. "Don't be afraid, please, darling, don't be afraid."

Her words were the same he had spoken to her almost three years ago as she lay alone, bruised and broken in his chamber. She had added the "darling." He had become darling to her. How could he not trust this beloved woman?

She held out her arms. "Hold me, Vincent. Love me. You know how, you always have."

He came to her arms and they held each other a long while.

Gently, she pressed against him, forcing him to roll to his back. She pulled the sides of his shirt open and drew it up his arms and off. Kneeling, she eased out of her gown and panties, then settled over the crest of his hip and chest. She heard his breath catch, then a deep, shaky sigh.

The feel of her soft skin sent shivers through him. He moaned her name and closed his eyes, reveling in the wonderful sensation.

She gently rubbed his throat and shoulders, then slowly ran her hands down his chest and abdomen, making his flesh tingle deliciously. She massaged his thighs, then her hands slid inward to cradle his manhood. She smiled with sensual pleasure as she heard his deep sigh and felt his length thicken in her hands, as his legs opened reflexively.

Trembling from her touch, he closed his eyes even tighter, tilting his head back, his mouth open and his lips quivering. His breath grew labored and quick as she, too, felt the shudder run the length of him. He lay perfectly still, unable to move, hesitant to touch her in return, yet powerless to resist her love-touches. How could he want her to stop and to never stop at the same time? He pondered.

Suddenly, her hands did stop. He opened his eyes to look up into her face. His expression was one of wonder and awe and hers of satisfaction at the pleasure she was sparking in him.

"You can touch me, too, Vincent. Please, touch me." She took his hand and placed it to her cheek.

He sighed, blinking, then ran his hand behind her ear and into her hair, caressing it with his fingers, then his lips. He traced his mouth down her temple to her lips and pulled her close. Lightly, his fingers explored the delectable flesh on her shoulders and collarbones. Shaking, his fingers traced the outer curve of her small breasts, then cupped them. His lips then followed suit, kissing the exquisite warmth and softness of her. Overcome by her taste and smell, he lay there limply on his side, his head nestled between her breasts.

Sensing that he could momentarily proceed no further, she resumed her own explorations, as she gently moved against him. Even though she could sense his apprehension, the waves of his ecstasy were also flowing to her, and she was determined not to stop, not when they had already come so far.

He allowed her caresses and more than that, he hungered for them. She touched his long-hidden places, the private places he had shared with no one, and his body begged for more, moving with a will all its own as he throbbed in her hands. Unshed tears filled his eyes as he watched her gentle hands, then he closed them again.

She knew the courage it took as she learned of him, accepted him, and desired him, as well. Catherine had never loved him and all that he was more than at this moment. This nearness and intimacy with him was amplifying her sense of the bond beyond imagination. No wonder it had been such a devastating loss to him, when he was losing it and it actually left. Only now could she truly understand the enormity of that loss. My poor, poor darling, she mourned.

"Catherine," his voice was hoarse and his eyes looked beseechingly up at her, "when you touch my body... especially that part..." his eyes strayed between his thighs to where she still held him.

"You like it, don't you?" she asked, her eyelids heavy with her own pleasure.

"Yes," he sighed emphatically, "but, if you continue, I'll soon have no control. I'm afraid of what will happen. I don't want to hurt you." Even his voice trembled.

"You must trust me enough to let yourself feel love and give love. It's not the same blind rage you've felt before. Please, trust me and let go for once, just let go."

She left one hand where it was and ran the other down the deep fissure in his forehead, his nose, and the cleft in his upper lip, until it finally settled on his full lower lip. She could feel him swell and lift under her other hand as his body responded to her touch, despite the reservations he felt, and something inside of him ached to be a part of her.

She continued her ministrations, as his pulse thudded almost painfully in his head and chest. His ears rang, as she caused sparks to fly and waves of heat to spread through him. All these sensations only intensified as he pressed closer and his breath quickened to gasps.

"Are you still afraid?"

"Yes." He dared not open his eyes and see her beauty. "It is such a terrible, savage need."

"Yes it is, but it's no different than that of any man or, for that matter, me."

"You?" His eyes opened wide.

"Yes. I have the same need. If you could feel our bond now, you'd know. I'd probably shock you. It's a hunger that must be satisfied. You are pulled relentlessly towards it until you find completion."

"Yes," he sighed raspily in acknowledgment. She knew, she did know.

"Vincent, you've always given to others. Now it's your turn to receive. I want to give you so much. She placed her hands on the sides of his face. 'You deserve this. You deserve everything. We need this, Vincent, and I want you so much.'"

He pulled her down and their lips merged, as did their souls. He rolled to his back, taking her with him in his rapture.

Her eyes never left his. She knelt beside him, then putting her legs on either side of his hips, she mounted him. She could feel his erection straining between her thighs. Slowly, she eased herself down over him, taking his hardness inside and groaning in harmony with him.

His head arched back, revealing the powerful cords of his neck. He shuddered, his chest heaving with his quickened breath and racing heart. He trembled with the incredible sensations he had never dreamed were possible.

She spoke in a deep, husky voice. "This is where you belong, Vincent." She leaned to kiss his mouth. "Where you've always belonged." She placed a kiss over his heart.

Silent tears streamed down his face. His heart felt as if it would burst from his chest with his love for her.

With their joining, Catherine had felt, all at once, his turmoil and the overwhelming aloneness he had always borne. It was an emptiness begging to be filled, but in an instant the misery and separateness began to dissolve and flicker out, like a candle in the wind. The bond had never been stronger in her as his unspeakable joy, one he had never known before, washed over her and mingled with her own joy.

She opened her eyes to see that his were still tightly closed, his tears of revelation still silently falling. She lay down over his torso, careful to keep him inside of her. As he looked into her face, he was unable to speak or voice any of the emotions rolling inside of him.

"No more tears. We've had enough sadness and denial. It's time, as you once so aptly put it, Vincent, to savor the joy." She ran her hand down his coarse mane, taking in every detail of his awesome face. "No more tears."

Yet as she spoke, her own tears fell to mock her words and she began to sniff at them as she laughed. He joined in, looking up into her face with adoration. He worshipped her.

He wiped the tears tenderly from first her cheeks, then his own. "Only tears of happiness," he sighed, smiling up at her.

"Yes. Let those be the only kind." Her smile matched his.

He wrapped his arms around her, sinking his nose into her hair. He rubbed his cheek across her silky head, gently kissing her. His warm breath and lips sent shivers through her.

She shifted slightly in his arms and tilted her head back, inviting him to kiss her neck, which he did, as well as her shoulders and breasts.

His lips moved again up her throat, lingering under her chin. She lowered her head until her lips met his and he accepted them without hesitation. His upper lip was indescribably velvety and soft.

He tightened his arms around her and, to her great pleasure, intensified the kiss.

She delighted in the gentle strength of him and the novel sensation of his warm, tender mouth, the taste of him and the feel of his powerful, densely-furred body tight against hers. There was also the spark of his new found possessiveness and the possibilities the release of his desire entailed. It thrilled and excited her beyond belief, as he engulfed her with his body and arms 'til there was nothing but Vincent. The exquisite force of his love grew around her and welled inside of her, until it seemed he totally enveloped her.

She raised up to rock above him, feeling him become even more aroused and swollen. He almost whimpered as his hands dropped to the sides of the bed and he dug his claws into the sheets, clinging to them as tightly as he could.

Vincent's chest heaved and he began to pant as he felt the Beast emerging within him. It still terrified him, no matter what Catherine had said, this urge to take her without thought of her wishes or the outcome. Panting, his hands left the sheets to run up her smooth thighs and hips and finally settle around her waist. Then he felt the burning need rise uncontrollably inside, the lust, rage, blinding him with its red haze as his body tensed. A deep rumbling began in his chest, suddenly breaking forth into a savage roar. With one commanding movement, he flipped her over onto her back. His body swiftly regained entry and he pressed his heavy frame onto her. Almost unrelentingly he kissed her, then dipped his head quickly to take the base of her neck in his mouth. He held her with his teeth. His pants were jagged, his body poised and tensed with the fever.

It all happened so fast that he truly startled her, but strangely, she was not afraid. She knew she must help him through this and that it must be handled correctly, or he would never again be able to attempt the consummation of their love. If she did the wrong thing, it would destroy him.

He hovered over her, paralyzed by the battle raging inside him, caught between his lust and his fear of hurting Catherine. Her neck was wet from his mouth. He continued to pant between his teeth, but could not release his grip on her. A voice at the back of his mind was screaming Let her go!, but some other power beyond all reason, beyond his control, forced him to hold her down.

She had no concern for her own safety, for underneath this awesome savagery she could sense his deep love and concern for her. The man he was was not gone, just somehow overpowered for the moment. She must turn him around and get the Vincent she knew back before he did something he would regret for the rest of his life.

Softly, she spoke his name over and over as she carefully moved her arms around his neck. She gently massaged the tense muscles in his shoulders and back. This at first evoked a low snarl, but he soon grew quiet and leaned into the feel of her hands.

Her fingers lowered from the bare skin of his shoulders to the short fine hairs of the small of his back, which were now standing on end. Catherine gently began rubbing this spot as she continued to talk to Vincent in a warm soothing voice.

His breathing slowed and deepened. He still loomed over her, but he loosened his hold on her neck and drew back slightly, which allowed her to turn her head and look up into his face. He seemed torn between worry and desire. The glassy stare of his eyes gradually cleared. His ominously large pupils once again constricted to their normal size.

Catherine continued to stroke and talk to him. She reached up to hold his face as she kissed it again and again. He swallowed and ran his tongue across his lips. His chest was still heaving. He shook his head wildly several times, as if to clear it, and the stupor he had felt subsided; the red haze cleared from his vision.

Suddenly, he was overcome by the realization of what he had done and what he was about to do. He gasped, pulling back from her in horror. "No," he croaked hoarsely, shaking his head in disbelief.

"Vincent, it's all right." She took his shoulders once more and shocked him by wrapping her legs tightly around his thighs, which absolutely prevented any further retreat on his part and kept him still safely inside her, as well.

"Catherine, I... I..." He swallowed hard and shook his head again as he tried to collect his thoughts and sort through his conflicting emotions.

She continued to calm his fears and to gentle him with her soft touches with the crooning of her voice as she firmly kneaded his taut muscles. "Vincent, it's all right. You're not losing yourself. Please, don't be afraid. There is nothing evil in you. Nothing. It's just a great need in you that must be satisfied."

She gently caressed his chest and abdomen.

"Vincent, your struggle has always been to accept who and what you are, and your sexuality, as well. That time is here. Don't turn away now, not when you've come so far. You are in control."

He could feel his control returning and more importantly, he could tell she still wanted him. She was not afraid or repulsed by what he had done. She wanted him to complete what they had started. She begged with her voice and hands for him to return, and he was powerless to resist.

"Please come back. Come back to me, Vincent. Love me." She touched his face, then raised to kiss it.

His eyes glistened with tears, as he complied and gently lowered himself back upon her. He wrapped one hand around her waist and the other behind her neck, then kissed her with the most exquisite tenderness she had ever known.

"Oh, Vincent," she sighed, knowing she had him back.

Breathily he whispered, "I love you, Catherine. Please, though I don't wish to hurt you, I can no longer sense your pain. You must stop me if I ever hurt you or do something that displeases you. I don't know what possessed me to..." He lifted the hair from her shoulder to inspect the place his teeth had been. Trembling, he sighed in relief, for there was no apparent injury.

"I will tell you, Vincent. I can stop you, but I know you won't hurt me. You can't hurt me and you've never displeased me."

"But, Catherine, when... "

"Vincent, I'm fine. You only surprised me. Actually, it was very exciting." She blushed. "It was the most thrilling thing I've ever experienced with a man." Emphatically she assured him, "I'm safe, I'm with you. No harm will come to either of us."

She ran her fingers through his thick tresses with a look of certainty in her eyes.

He sighed, overcome by her words and her love and breathed her name like a prayer.

He momentarily rose up on his elbows to study her and take in every detail, then showered kisses upon her face, neck, shoulders and breasts.

She giggled at first, but soon they both felt the fire of their renewed passion and he held her tightly to himself. Once more he took her mouth in his in an ardent kiss, as he eased himself slowly further inside of her, groaning from the delicious sensations. Neither had ever known heaven like this and, as they moved together, their desires became one.

Their release was almost simultaneous. They cried out each other's names. She thought he looked magnificent with his head thrown back and his wild mane shining in the sunlight.

To Vincent, Catherine had never been more beautiful as now with her lips swollen from his kisses and her skin as flushed and moist as his own.

Gradually, as their excitement ebbed, she could sense in him through the bond a contentment and peace he had never known. She was happy, very happy, that their dream, after so much pain, denial and sadness had come true. The possibilities now were endless.

Vincent was so exhausted from their loving that he sagged against her, unable to support himself above her any longer. She welcomed his weight and the wonderful feel of his powerful body on top of her. She felt tears on her shoulder and realized that she, too, was crying. She brushed his hair back and wished he could feel her great joy.

She wrapped her arms around him and pulled him into the circle of her love and tenderness. He had so desperately wanted to please her, and he had. He had needed her healing touch and the giving of herself, and he had given himself in return, all that he could, all that he was, all that she had ever wanted, and it was beautiful.

She could still feel his heart pounding against her, but his breathing slowed and he lay still.

"Vincent, are you all right?"

He did not respond, nor move from where he lay.

Oh, no, she thought. Maybe it has been too much for him and his already over-taxed heart!

"Vincent?" she called once more, her voice filled with concern.

Blinking back tears of ecstasy, he silently nodded in affirmation. He was so overcome by the sensations that still bombarded him that he was trembling.

She held him close and they remained that way a wonderfully long time. After a time his finger traced along her shoulder and he asked, "Did it please you, Catherine?" He fervently wished he could sense her feelings, but he could only imagine what they might be now.

She could strongly sense his relaxed satisfaction. "Vincent, I've never experienced anything so incredible! I've always dreamed it would be this way with you, and yes, it pleased me. You were extraordinary. "

He raised his head to look at her again and they kissed softly, tenderly.

He sighed and laid back down with his head on her breast.

She knew it had been an immense effort for him because he was still so weak, but even in his weakened condition, his strength was awe-inspiring. Despite his strength, he was exceptionally gentle. He had been beautiful and tender, a dichotomy of love.

Vincent was soon asleep. It was her dream come true to be able to hold him in her arms like this. It touched her to know that he had given himself to her completely, had given her all of his trust, and had overcome his worst fears in order to be with her.

As she day-dreamed, she treasured the knowledge that he was still inside of her. How right it felt, how wonderful to sense his peace, even in this most intimate of acts. All the turmoil and agony of the past was gone. She could not tear her eyes from his unique features as he slept. Soon, she too fell asleep and her dreams were of him.

Well past noon, she awoke and carefully pulled apart from him, without disturbing his sleep. Nature was calling and she had to obey. He was still soundly slumbering when she returned. She felt his chest and forehead. There was no perspiration or sign of fever; his skin and hair was powder dry. His color almost normal. His face was peaceful, his respirations quiet and easy.

Very carefully, she pulled the covers up over his nude form.

He slept the entire day, hardly stirring, with no evidence of restlessness or nightmares. She made certain that the phone and doorbell would not disturb his rest. She sensed that this was part of his healing mechanism. Father had told her repeatedly that Vincent was amazing and quite unique in his ability to heal. He had even witnessed his son in a healing trance of his own making upon more than one occasion.

She did some office work, but kept finding herself returning to his side. She could not resist watching him in his sleep, touching him. She laughed to herself as she thought about the irresistible force that drew her to his side. Perhaps he had placed a spell on her. No matter, she would gladly remain under his spell forever.

He slept on as dusk fell and evening grew late. Catherine bathed and slipped into one of her favorite gowns and read in bed beside him. Admittedly, she did not get much of the book read. Her attention always seemed to be drawn back to him, eventually.

He was making her giggle softly from the difficulty she had keeping him decently covered. He grew more active in his sleep and the covers would not stay over him. He finally came to rest against her outstretched leg. He sensuously rubbed his face against her thigh, sighing; he was making a rumbling,

purring sound. It all thoroughly delighted her. Soon he was still again, but he placed one possessive hand over that treasured thigh of hers.

She turned off the bedside lamp and snuggled close to him. It took no time for the exhaustion of the past several days to overtake her. The luxurious warmth of him and his soft, easy breathing soon lulled her to blissful sleep.

Catherine came suddenly awake. It was still dark out and something seemed amiss. She glanced at the luminous dial on her bedside clock and saw it was only five a.m.

She reached out to touch Vincent, but found only the folded back bedspread. Terrified, she sat up, but when she turned towards the terrace, she noticed the light coming from under the bathroom door. She heard the toilet flush and running water at the sink, then the light went out and the door opened.

She sank back into the mattress with a sigh of relief, her heart still racing.

Vincent slowly tip-toed around the foot of the bed and climbed back in on his side. He could see her watching him. "I'm sorry I woke you, Catherine"

"I'm not." She rolled closer to him and touched his cheek. "How are you feeling?"

He kissed her fingers, then her palm. "Much stronger. I'm healing."

"I know, I can feel it. Vincent. I can really feel it."

"I haven't told you yet, but yesterday... it was the most beautiful thing I've ever experienced. Thank you for not giving up, for believing in the possibility of our love."

"It was the same for me, Vincent."

They kissed and embraced, then she laid back in his arms with her head snug against his shoulder. He was silent a long time and she was content just to feel him near.

Finally she just had to ask, "Tell me what you're feeling."

He sighed heavily, then nuzzled her hair and whispered in her ear. His warm moist breath was soothing and exciting at the same time. "I never knew a person could feel these things, feel this way... I've allowed myself to dream what it might be like..." he nuzzled her neck and hair sensuously, "...to make love to you, Catherine, but the reality..." He could only expel a deep sigh which sent more shivers down her spine. "You are so very beautiful." His fingers touched her shoulder then continued down her flank and thigh.

"Mmm, so are you, Vincent."

He gave a little laugh. "You make me feel beautiful, Catherine." He swallowed and was quiet again. She felt a sudden change in his mood, a sadness that had not been there before.

She reached up to touch the underside of his jaw. "What is it, Vincent? Why do I sense melancholy in you?"

He lowered his head again, effectively hiding his face behind his long mane, as he felt the heat rise in his cheeks. He was ashamed to tell her what he was feeling, but he knew he must never again turn away from her. After all she had sacrificed for him, he must share everything with her, no matter how much it hurt, embarrassed, or even humiliated him to tell her. He would not deny her. If she wanted to know him, he would tell her anything, everything.

Hesitantly he began, "I fear I am becoming selfish, desirous... greedy. Catherine."

She bent, trying to see beneath his bangs. "Why? What makes you think that?"

Slowly, he raised his head and looked at her with hugely pitiful eyes. "I want you again, Catherine. Already, I long for the sensations inside me when... you touch me. So many of my thoughts are..." He dropped his head. "I want to be with you, I want you to let me back inside, Catherine."

She blushed slightly at his admission. What did he think, that these feelings were only to be allowed expression one time for him? That it was wrong to want to make love again so soon? Did he think that his desire was any different from that of other men or even her?

She whispered his name, kissing his face and hugging him. "Do you think this desire is any different from anyone else? Don't you know it is my wish as well?"

His eyes were wide in amazement as they met hers. He had never imagined such a thing. His apparent shock and his gaping mouth caused her to giggle. She took his shoulders in her hands and pulled him down on top of herself, relishing the feel of him and knowing that the joy was mutual.

His heart began to thud wildly inside of him. *I love her so! What she has given me!*

She lightly ran her hands over his magnificent face, a face only she was privileged to see this longing and desire in, then gently kissed his brow and lips as she told him it was meant to be. "You needed this, Vincent, to heal and recover. You've needed it for a long time now, and so have I."

The longing in her eyes was not lost on him. He pressed closer and without hesitation took her lips in his and again they made love.

The Other rose to the surface as before, but this time it did not frighten Vincent. He accepted it, as did Catherine. He felt the control of the man and was able to experience their love without apprehension this time. He had the complete trust that she would guide him and not allow him to hurt her.

They slept afterward. When he woke, he found her there in his arms. Also, for the first time in many weeks, he felt what could only be the stirrings of the bond he had been so certain was lost to him.

Am I just imagining this? Do I just think it has returned, only because I am so desperate for it to be so? He reached into his own mind and heart. No, it was real. He could feel the merest flutter, like angels wings in his soul. It was returning.

He woke Catherine by softly caressing her cheek with the back of his hand. She hugged him fiercely when he told her his news, then she proceeded to take his large head in her hands and rain kisses over every inch of his face, until he could only stop her by pressing the fullness of his own lips against hers.

The madness, the fever, the turmoil was past. Now there was only peace and acceptance and weariness, but it was such a wonderful weariness and tinged with great joy.

Little did they know that this was not the stirring of their old bond, but the beginning of a new life within Catherine's body that Vincent sensed. A child was conceived from the loving seed he had so tenderly planted within her.

"Catherine," he sighed, "it is so beautiful. Thank you. Thank you," he whispered low, nuzzling her face and neck. "The demons, are gone. I accept my darkness. I can accept this and more with your help."

With her love and patience, he would bond with her again.

She kissed him tenderly on the mouth. He was better and she knew he must return Below soon, but she was going too, despite any protests from him. She doubted there would be any protests from him now, but she would have to start arming herself against Father's. She would make sure Vincent was nursed properly and she planned on giving him her individualized attention.

She turned towards the curtains and noticed the sunrise. The lovely pastel pinks and lavenders were silhouetting the massive skyscrapers.

"Vincent, look."

He turned around and sighed at the view, then pulled her back against his torso. She, in turn, sighed. He held her tightly as, in silence, they watched nature's display before them, pressed together on their sides.

Much later, Catherine turned in his arms to face him. "Can I tell you something?" she asked, but kissed him fiercely before he could reply.

"Anything," he admitted breathlessly, as their mouths parted.

"From the very first time I truly saw your face, when I touched your hood and lowered it to reveal your unique features, I knew that I was one of the privileged few to be allowed a sight exquisite and rare in its beauty and power."

He dropped his head, embarrassed by her words.

"It's true," she stressed with sincerity. He looked back up into her face, tilting his head slightly as he listened. "Your face has a majestic grace, an awesome loveliness; every line, every indentation, curve, hair, whisker, every speck of color in those wonderful eyes of yours. The depth of your innocent love and quiet strength spoke to me then, as it does now." She touched and kissed every feature she had just described. "Even then I loved you, more than I knew. Our fates were sealed, Vincent, even then."

He hugged her close, sighing, then pulled back to look into her eyes. "In those first few days by your side, Catherine, I knew I had found my one true love, my soul-mate. I knew I would love you forever, but I never dreamed that one day you could, you would feel the same about me. I gladly bore it; it was all that I had.

"The memory of those days beside you were the most exquisite of my life. If it was all I was to have, I would treasure it all the more. Then, when I saw you again, when I came Above to see you just one more time, the joy I felt in you and the love... it nearly broke my heart. And when you didn't want me to go, you actually wanted me to stay, oh, Catherine, I felt hope. I felt the whisper of hope in my soul.

"And now, Catherine, you have given us our dream. There will never be another for me, never. You have accepted me completely. How one as beautiful as you can sacrifice so much, it..." A tear fell from his eye.

"Vincent," she whispered, wiping it away, "I have sacrificed *nothing!* And what I feel for you, oh, Vincent, you must know it is so much more than acceptance. There is so much to see and love in you. I have never known such a wonderful, extraordinary person. One day you will believe it, as well.

"I want to be with you, Vincent. I want to live my life with you, to grow old by your side, and when my time comes to die, I want to die in your arms." She took his hand and kissed the thick hairs.

Her words moved him. Their sincerity and intensity was so deep, he could only whisper to her, "Oh, Catherine."

For a moment he pulled her so close she couldn't breathe, but she would have gladly died right there in his embrace. His tears fell again on her shoulders and his grip softened. She could sense his tranquility and fatigue and she began to hum and sing until he slept in her arms.

He dozed into the afternoon. She remained beside him, propped up on pillows against the headboard, reading. Again, he snuggled into the warmth of her thigh and hardly moved the entire time.

When he woke, she bent over to kiss him, then straightened back up to her sitting position. He looked so adorable, gazing up at her, his head beside her hip, his hair all tousled from sleep. If only she could keep him there always, she thought, keep him safe forever from any more harm or pain.

He shifted his weight and she pulled his head into her lap and they kissed again.

"Vincent, it's been so long since you've had the opportunity to bathe. Would you like to take a shower?" she asked, playing with his thick shag as she thought to herself it could use a good brushing. She could see the faint blush in his cheek.

"Yes, I would like that, Catherine. I know I'm filthy. I must smell... "

"You don't look or smell dirty, but I know you must feel that way. You must have layers of salt on your skin, and I just found another little splinter and piece of glass in your hair." She held them up. "I just thought it would make you feel much better."

He nodded.

"You go ahead and get started. I'll be in in a moment to see if you need anything."

He discreetly wrapped a small blanket from the foot of the bed around his bare middle and went into the bathroom, closing the door behind himself.

She heard him start the shower as she lingered a moment in bed. She scooted down from her pillows to lie in the warmth where he had just been. She smelled the sheets, then his pillow, and pulled it tightly to her nose, marveling at how good his unique scent was, how very masculine. She ran her hand over the moisture, his moisture, still clinging to the sheets.

As she entered the bathroom a moment later, she tightened her bathrobe belt a little. "Are you doing all right, Vincent?"

There was a period of silence with no reply from the shower stall. Thinking perhaps he hadn't heard her, she stepped a little closer and asked a little louder, "Vincent, do you need anything?"

The shower door clicked open and he emerged from the billowing steam, looking for all the world like some feline god from the bowels of the earth. His beauty took her breath away as she watched water rivulets cascade down his magnificent body.

Blushing, she asked once more with a slight stammer, "I... I just wondered if you needed anything?" She watched him as he nodded, and she tried to keep her attention focused on his face so that she would not embarrass him or herself any further.

He tilted his head and slowly held out his hand to her.

She sighed his name softly. For a moment, just a moment, her heart stopped, then beat again in a rapid staccato. Her robe was quickly dropped and she stepped into the shower and his waiting arms.

The End