

THE BEAST OF NOTRE DAME

by Linda Mooney

(from Dreams in the Mist)

It was difficult to think. The pain was an ever-present entity. It was the father of Despair and the son of Torment. More than that, it was the step-child of Death.

The heat had become his enemy, as it seared the bloody wounds across his bared back and shoulders. Precious moisture in the form of sweat beaded through his thick hair until it ran down his chest, pooled and evaporated on the wooden trestle beneath him.

How many hours had he been there? It was hard to think, even harder to concentrate. His knees and shins were bloody from being forced to kneel on the worn turntable. His hands were pierced with splinters.

For the moment, most of the crowd had dispersed from the square, some to their own homes where they could temporarily escape the heat and re-energize themselves with food and drink. Although he was glad they were gone, he envied their ability to walk among each other unnoticed and undisturbed. It was a luxury he'd never had his entire life.

Gradually, carefully, Vincent raised his head to peer out between strands of blood-encrusted hair. There was one soldier posted next to him to guard him, but it was no more than a pretext. In fact, he was certain the man was not there to keep others from resuming their pelting him with their spit, their rotten vegetables, and their venomous words. The soldier's duty was to allow the masses to vent themselves on the man-beast shackled to the wheel, and to keep the victim from lashing back at them.

What time is it? It was a vague thought, one that was about laughable. He had been there for hours. His stomach had stopped constricting itself long ago, but he knew his dizziness wasn't entirely due to lack of food. He needed water more than anything. Water. Without water he would perish from the punishment. With water he could persevere until his sentence had been served.

At the far end of the wheel he could see the remnant of some sort of vegetable, a gourd, but what kind he couldn't tell. It was nothing more than an indistinguishable mass, fallen there once it had struck him and exploded on impact.

But it was moist.

Slowly, very, very slowly, Vincent reached out toward the vegetable. The pain burned through him with renewed fire as bruised skin was forced to stretch, as newly-formed scabs were pulled apart, allowing blood to flow again over his back and sides. He managed to touch the mass with one claw. Gritting his teeth against the effort, he nudged the broken vegetable until he finally could close his hand over it. Panting from his exertions, he took tiny bites of the oozing mass, a squash, and swallowed them whole. He dared not chew for fear his stomach would recognize the rotting gourd and make him heave it up. His body craved something, anything, to sustain it, and any little bit could mean the difference between life and death.

"Water."

The heat was the worst part of it. It scorched his back. It clogged his lungs. Breathing sucked more energy from him that he'd believed possible. The ropes tying him to the wheel dug into his flesh, allowing the sun to reach into his body and cook him from the inside out.

"Water."

The beating had begun around mid-morning. They had dragged him into the square, accusing him of something he couldn't quite fathom, but knew had to be false. Despite his incredible strength, the five guards had beaten him about the head and shoulders. The blows had done their job, keeping him semi-conscious and unable to fight back, while they forced him to his knees and lashed him to the device.

Once they were certain he couldn't pull the ropes from their moorings, a big, burly man wearing a stained mask over his face came up the steps. In his hand he held a whip.

Father Leon stood at the far end of the platform. His duties were to see that the prisoner was treated with fairness and Christian kindness, although it was impossible to see how a public whipping could be considered kind or fair. Behind the man with the mask stood a small flank of soldiers. Their job was to keep order and to make sure the sentence was carried out.

An ironic smile twisted Vincent's swollen lips. Such hypocrisy. If anything, the soldiers would need to keep the public from rushing the platform, in case they got caught up in the hysteria that was known to occur during these open blood-lettings.

Conspicuously absent were Vincent's accuser and a physician.

After one of the soldiers, a young Lieutenant who looked vaguely familiar, had read aloud the crimes of which Vincent was accused, and the punishment that would be dealt, the hooded man took his place at the edge of the wheel. Three young boys paid in coin beforehand, began to crank the wheels and rope apparatus which turned the platform. And the whipping began.

The first ones ate into his back, neck and shoulders. The next set drove the leather strips deeper into his flesh, into the meat and muscle despite the ribbons of blood flowing down his thighs and arms until they pooled around his feet and hands.

He held his tongue, forcing himself to endure the torture, praying he wouldn't cry out. The public wanted that. They wanted to see his humiliation. They wanted to hear him cry out for mercy. This was why they attended the public punishments. This was their entertainment. They screamed when droplets of blood flew through the air and splattered on unsuspecting bystanders. They loved the blood, the anguish, and deep within themselves, they were glad it was someone else who was incurring the wrath of the Church.

But this deformed man who rotated slowly under the biting lash never screamed, never made a sound to reveal the pain he endured, and it angered them. They began to throw things at him, hoping to rouse his anger, thinking that if pain couldn't reach him, maybe animal offal and rotten food would.

When the hooded man was finished imposing the sentence, he walked calmly away. His right hand and arm were red with blood. The lash dripped like icicles on a warm day. Vincent's hands were loosened but not untied. He could manage to cover his face, but no more.

"Water."

"Here's yeh water, yeh heathen's offspring!"

A rug landed a foot away. It reeked of urine.

The public disbursed. The best part was over, but watching the freak kneeling on the wheel for the next few hours was not any fun. Father Leon made the sign of the cross over him, whispered a

blessing, then left. All but one of the soldiers exited in precise manner, single file back to their barracks. The one left behind took his place at the foot of the steps leading up to the wheel.

The day grew warmer.

"Water."

Mid-morning became noon. Noon stretched into the worst of the day. The soldier was replaced twice by a fresh man. By the time the sun began to hide beyond the rooftops, the people began to file back into the square. The prisoner would be released soon. That was the time when they could fill the air with their calls of loathing, and laugh as the released man staggered away to whatever sanctuary he could reach. If he could reach it instead of collapsing in some filthy corner of the street.

"Water. Can someone get me water?"

People in the growing crowd began to laugh. To them it was ludicrous that the man should even have the nerve to ask for anything. It was even more laughable that he would expect someone to answer him.

A sudden silence came over the public gathering. It was a wave that slowly moved forward, toward the center of the square, quieting everyone it touched.

Vincent tried to see what had caused the cessation, but his vision remained blurred. One eye was nearly swollen shut from a blow from a rock. He raised up again, his curiosity more urgent than the scabs that had formed across his back, scabs that send additional agony through him with each movement.

The crowd began to part. At first Vincent thought it was someone on horseback, as the townfolk refused to give up their places without a good reason. Yet he could see no one seated above the sea of heads.

As soon as the crowd gave way, they closed behind whoever was advancing toward the wheel, creating a tiny island among the masses. It wasn't until they were almost at the edge of the platform that he finally saw who stood in the middle.

Catherine. The very woman he had been coerced into kidnapping for Paracelsus, his father's brother. Why was she here? What could have brought her to this place at this moment, and why was she coming toward him?

His last question was answered when the last of the crowd stood back, revealing the gypsy girl. She cradled a large wine skin in her arms.

The latest soldier left to guard the prisoner gave the girl a cautious eye but allowed her to ascend. She didn't appear dangerous, and she certainly wasn't in danger herself.

Carefully, she took the steps up. The square remained silent, their curiosity keeping them mute as they watched to see what she would do. They knew the gypsy had been abducted by the monster two days ago. What she was doing here wasn't too hard to deduce ... but why would she be carrying a wine skin?

Vincent couldn't pull away from the beauty of her face. At the time of the abduction he had apologized to her, and assured her he would not harm her. At first she had screamed and kicked and clawed at his face in anger and terror. But she'd soon realized that, despite his bestial appearance, he was honoring his word. If Elliot, a young captain of the guard, had not interfered and taken her away from him, he would not have had charges brought against him.

Unable to conceal his surprise, the man-beast watched as the young woman bent down before him. Opening the wine skin, she cupped her hand beneath the spout and poured its contents into her

palm. It was water.

Tentatively, she held her palm toward him and waited. Vincent knew she was expecting him to lap at it like an animal. They always did. The comparisons were inevitable. However, that was not how he drank.

Bending over her palm, he sipped at the moisture. It was the hardest thing he'd ever done in his life not to gulp the water and lick whatever remained on her hand. She was patient, slowly refilling her palm, keeping the flow going as long as he was able to drink. He stopped frequently to catch his breath, almost panting.

It took an enormous amount of effort to force himself to stop before he was full. He feared that if he drank until his stomach was swollen, at some point he would regurgitate the excess fluid, leaving him in dire circumstances.

"Enough?" the young woman whispered. Her voice was soft but firm. Immediately, Vincent sensed she wasn't there for her own benefit. There was actual concern for him reflected in her eyes.

Perspiration dripped from her arms and ran in tiny rivulets down her neck and shoulders, gathering in the valley below the edge of the white blouse she wore, between her full breasts. One arm danced close to his face as she bent over him, and Vincent could smell ghosts of past meals on her clothing. There was also the faint, dull scent of candlewax and the aroma of goat, like a halo surrounding her. But more than that, her own womanly musk permeated the dulled membrane surrounding his sense. Like a dash of icy water to his face, Vincent found himself more aware of his surroundings and of his own condition.

He pulled away to signal that he would drink no more. But he also didn't wish to soil her further. Already, he could see where the mud and filth had stained the hem of her skirt, although she wore them higher than a *decent* woman would.

Catherine re-corked the wine skin and prepared to get to her feet to leave. Unable to contain his curiosity any longer, Vincent reached out and tugged on the edge of her skirt, seeking her attention one last time. Catherine paused, waiting.

"Why?"

She sighed. It was an irritated sound, as if he were a wayward child who needed to have his actions explained to him. Unfortunately, she never got the chance to answer him. A large volume of sound swelled through the now-enlarged crowd, and another parting of the ways began to break from the direction of the cathedral.

Father...

The tall priest who had found the infant with the misshapen face and body, and who had taken him in to raise him as his own, was as respected by the villagers as he was within the Church. Age and infirmity had taken their toll over the past three decades; a cane now aided Don Jacob, who still held sway over the townfolk with his imposing demeanor.

"Release the prisoner," the Father called out, eyeing the lone soldier standing beside the platform. Without question the young officer did as he was told.

As the ropes were withdrawn from his limbs, Vincent found himself unable to get to his feet. The pain and discomfort were indescribable. He looked up, searching the sea of strangers below, trying to catch a glimpse of the gypsy girl, but she had already slipped away.

A sudden familiar shape, a color, a movement, caught his attention from the corner of his eye. Turning, he spotted Paracelsus standing at the farthest edge of the crowd. The moment their eyes

met, the older man threw a lightweight hood over his head, bent over, and melted into the masses. Vincent felt the constrictions tighten in his chest. Fires of pure anger flooded through him and filled him with a brief, heady strength. His eyes narrowed, his clawed hands curled into fists, and his teeth clenched, as the sight of the man who'd brought false charges against him filled his mind with hate. If there would ever come a time when he found himself alone with the man, Vincent swore it would be Paracelsus' last hour on earth.

"Vincent. Come."

Glancing over at the man he loved as a parent, Vincent nodded. He would follow as soon as he was able to move his arms and legs without falling to the ground in agony. Clenching his teeth against the pain, he finally managed to half-walk, half-crawl his way back to the cathedral. The crowds allowed him to pass without further incident, but they couldn't contain their jeers and catcalls.

"Freak!"

"Spawn of the devil!"

"Monster!"

"Should have been smothered with his swaddling blanket."

Deep within the cool, healing confines of the cathedral, Vincent retreated to his familiar rooms at the top of the bell towers. There he nursed his wound, as he mentally replayed that day over and over in his mind. Jacob frequented the upper chambers on a daily basis, sometimes to bring him food, but always to help Vincent apply ointments to the worst of his wounds, which were on his back and unreachable by himself.

The days followed the nights. The townfolk went about their daily lives, never forgetting the beast-like man-creature residing safely within the cathedral walls. Occasionally a note would be left on the door, urging against harboring what they firmly believed to be the devil's spawn. That would be the extent of their protests, as the townspeople were fearful of the priests and the church's hold over their souls in the afterlife.

One morning, soon after Prime, as he was watching the comings and goings of the people below in the square, Vincent noticed a commotion brewing. At first it was difficult to tell what was causing the problem, but the peoples' agitation was undeniable.

He moved to another part of the bell tower to get a better look. By the flurry of activity evident in the square he could tell the executioner's men were readying the gallows. Someone would be hanged that day.

Around noon, the sound of the familiar tap-tap of Father Jacob's cane could be heard ascending the stone steps leading up to Vincent's loft. Eager to see him, Vincent opened the thick oak door and headed down to meet him.

"Ah, Vincent. Thank you," the elderly man said as his adopted son relieved him of the tray he'd been carrying. He followed the man-beast into the stone alcove beneath the huge, arched windows. Vincent motioned the priest to sit on the meager bed of pillows, while he sat on the bare stone floor, cross-legged, and laid the tray in front of him.

"I see the gallows being reinforced below. Do you know the condemned?"

Jacob shook his head. "I know not the accuser, the accused, nor the charges. I was simply told to inform you of your duty." He watched in silence as Vincent ate.

Presently the young man spoke again. "I am guilty while I am innocent."

It was the first spoken confession Vincent had made since the ordeal on the wheel. Jacob bowed his head and sighed as he made the sign of the cross. He blessed the young man, absolving him of his sins, then waited for him to continue.

"I was told the gypsy girl was in danger. I was told to take her away, to a place selected in advance by those who said they were trying to save her."

"Who told you of this danger?"

"Paracelsus."

If the news surprised Dom Jacob, he hid it well. "Go on."

"I found the girl where I was told she would be. I took her, as I was instructed. I honestly believed I was protecting her," he said in earnest.

"Did she fight you?" Jacob asked in a soft voice, although he could well guess the answer.

Vincent wiped his hands on a napkin. It was a gesture most men wouldn't think twice about, but seeing this non-human-looking man perform such humanistic tasks still managed to amaze the priest.

"Yes, she resisted..." the creature admitted wearily. Confession was said to be good for the soul, but it wrecked havoc with the emotions. "... at first."

Jacob started. "At first?" he echoed.

"I spoke to her and explained where I was taking her. Why I had taken her. She was..." Vincent grimaced at the recollection.

"She was what?"

"Surprised."

"Why?"

"That I could speak." He glanced up at the priest. "She admitted she didn't know I could speak."

"How did you reply to that?"

His answer was preceded with a gentle chuckle and a shake of his maned head. "I told her I was also house-broken, and I didn't always lap up my meals with my tongue."

His son's honesty spoke not only of his sincerity, but of his sense of humor as well. Chuckling himself, the priest rubbed a hand over his cheeks and scratched absentmindedly at his short beard. After another quiet moment, he bade the young man continue.

"You took her to the place agreed to beforehand. What happened next?"

"The young soldier named Elliot was on patrol that night. He nearly rode us down on one of the roadways before we reached the rendezvous."

"Did you fight?"

"No, Father. He held a sword to my neck. I feared he would accidentally harm the girl, so I placed her on his saddle and fled."

"So it was Elliot who filed charges against you?"

Vincent's spine stiffened, as did his anger. ***"I don't blame Elliot; I blame Paracelsus. I told the tribunal that I had not taken the girl for myself, but rather at the behest of Paracelsus. They went to him to verify my claim but he denied it. Denied it, Father! He lied to the tribunal!"***

Throwing the napkin onto the tray, he leaped to his feet and strode over to the far end of the alcove. At the end of the room, an extended parapet opened up directly across from the enormous bell tower. Standing on the edge he could view the whole of the town, all the way to the river which wound its way past the streets, and to the forest beyond.

The young man's posture told Dom Jacob many things. It spoke of his frustration and emotional hurt at the betrayal. It conveyed his anger at his unjust sentencing and subsequent torture.

More than that, the priest could see past the wide, powerful wall of his son's back, the muscular legs and arms, and into the presence and strength in the figure. Vincent might not resemble a man in face and features, but he was more than any man could hope to become in his lifetime. There was intelligence and wisdom in the figure people were horrified to even admit was human. And, sadly, Jacob saw little reason to believe things would ever change.

"Vincent. Come. Sit down." He patted a pillow beside him and waited. Vincent turned to give his parent an undecided look, then changed his mind and walked over to where the priest sat. Carefully, knowing his wounds were not yet completely healed, the man-beast lowered himself to the floor.

"Father."

"My son... you know the world is full of cruel people, but it is also full of those who are just and reasonable," the older man began.

"So far the world had tilted more of the cruel ones my way, Father," Vincent interrupted gently.

"True," the priest nodded. "But never forget that God sent you to me. I'm sure you've thought about how your life might have been had he not intervened."

Vincent turned his head away momentarily. The truth had brought a stinging sensation to his face and eyes, as if often did whenever the young man brooded upon his lot in life.

"If, at all, I had been allowed to live," he murmured.

"True. But that is no longer a point we should dwell on. Now we must find a way to clear your good name ..."

"Father, I *have* no name to clear. To the people of this town I am a beast which must be destroyed. Or, at the least, be chained and kept in the deepest part of the Cathedral, away from children and any other innocent who has yet to set eyes upon me."

Jacob gave his only child a long and loving stare. When he finally responded, it was with great tenderness. "Not everyone wishes you dead."

The name exploded in his head before he could think.

Catherine.

Taking a deep breath, Vincent laced his fingers together, then cupped them beneath his chin. "You were watching." It was not a question.

"You are my son, whom I could not love more, even if you were of my own flesh. How could I not watch?"

"Why? Why would she brave the crowd to bring me the wine skin of water?"

"Because she is brave. Because her inner goodness and her compassion for others is stronger than her fears. Because... perhaps... she sees the man beneath the fangs and the claws."

Their conversation was suddenly interrupted by the arrival of several pigeons landing on the parapet. Their noise and flapping reminded the priest he had been up in the tower longer than he'd planned,

and he slowly struggled to his feet with the help of his son.

"Dom Pierre will be looking for me," he explained, accepting the tray to return to the kitchen. "Do not forget, ring the bell before Vespers. You might be able to follow the proceedings from here."

"I won't forget, Father. And... thank you."

Dom Jacob gave the young man a parting smile, laying a hand on the misshapen cheek, before heading back down the winding stairwell. Vincent watched him depart.

Like the priest, he loved the huge cathedral. As a boy, he had danced on the multi-colored patterns thrown on the stone floor by the stained glass windows. He had grown up in awe of the hushed, reverent echoes that emerged from the vaulted ceilings. More than anything, he lived for the calm serenity, the precise order of life. He thrived on the solemnity and the solitude from what he considered to be the disorder and chaos of town life.

The world was not perfect, and neither was he. But while God forgave imperfection, the people outside would not.

He had no desire to become a novice, even if there was a chance he would be accepted. No... his life was here where he now stood, as it now was. He had a purpose and a reason for existing. And he had a parent who loved him for what he was.

Vincent was finished with the outside world. It brought nothing but pain and misery. It showed nothing but ignorance and intolerance. What would it ever offer to him but the worst?

It has Catherine, his heart betrayed.

Shaking his head, Vincent retreated to the upper reaches of the tower to check the ropes. He had to be ready to perform his duty when the time came.

The preparations below never ceased. Once the gallows were readied, the crowd began to gather. Among the masses, vendors circulated, hawking their food and drink.

A trio of jesters climbed onto the gallows platform and began to entertain the townfolk. They juggled, did tumbling routines, and performed skits to the amusement of the crowd. Sometimes coins would be pitched their way in payment for a good laugh.

Vincent kept an eye on the proceedings. As the sun began to descend, he ate a light supper of bread and cheese as he sat on the beam directly above the bell whose rope he would pull once the hanging was over. It was only a matter of time before the prisoner would appear.

There was a shift in the crowd below, followed by a cessation of sound. The mass turned almost as one to face the direction of the prison. They waited, and Vincent could feel the sense of expectancy even where he sat.

Here and there between the homes and shops, he spotted the tumbril slowly rolling through the narrow streets at the far end. It headed toward the center of the square, four soldiers on foot flanking the wagon. There was one figure half-sitting, half-lying on the matted straw, a figure clothed in a stained white robe.

Rubbing his eyes, Vincent tried to get a better look at the condemned. The voice of a small child called to him from within, a voice he couldn't explain or ignore. His heart quickened, and he scrambled down the ladders, down to the lower floors where he could get a closer view.

The small child called to him again, this time with more urgency. The cart stopped before the platform and the prisoner was dragged over the ground and hauled up by several pairs of hands to where the

executioner was waiting. Vincent knew the sentence would be carried out by the same man who'd wielded the lash.

As he reached the lower chambers Vincent could ascertain that the condemned was a woman, her unbound hair hung in matted strips down her back. The single robe she wore was tattered and splotched with filth and blood, and Vincent realized she had been tortured before being brought out.

A soldier climbed the flight of stairs, followed by Father Leon. The priest spoke with the woman, who shook her head twice. Having done his duty, the priest took a stance at the far end of the platform.

"Turn her around." Vincent was taken aback. The order had come from his mouth, although he had not meant to speak, yet his subconscious guided his actions now. Somewhere within himself the small child's voice had taken up the chant.

Turn her around. *Turn her around!*

Turn her around so that he might see the face of the condemned, so that he could rest assured that the broken posture was not that of someone he had come to care about after only a pair of nightmarish meetings. Turn her around so that he could put away the image of her beautiful face and gentle eyes filled with misery and defeat.

A roar suddenly rumbled in his chest until he bared his fangs in anger and fear. **"TURN HER AROUND!"** he bellowed down to the haranguing crowd.

The ensuing silence was like a tomb enclosing those gathered around the gallows. One woman screamed; several pointed up at him. The condemned woman stumbled and swayed on her feet, barely able to remain standing, but she managed to turn her face upward to see who had issued the command.

Vincent felt his blood turn to ice. Every hair on his head and body stood erect as he came eye-to-eye with the prisoner.

Catherine!

"NOOOOOOOOOO!"

It mattered not what crime she might have committed. It mattered not why she had been made to suffer God-knew-what at the hands of her accusers. Nothing mattered but the fact that she could not die, and would not die, that day. Not at their hands. Not by their laws.

"CATHERINE!"

Not far away lay a huge coil of heavy braided rope, the kind used as bell pulls for the enormous and heavy chimes in the cathedral's towers. The coil, Vincent knew, had to be at least long enough so that it could reach the uppermost buttresses.

Quickly, and with the efficiency of years of tying off and repairing the intricate braids, Vincent attached one end of the rope around a balustrade running along the edge of the wall. After making sure it was secure, he began counting out lengths to estimate how much he would need. And every few meters he'd form a knot.

What he had planned was dangerous and tricky, but he felt he had no other choice. He couldn't leave the grounds of the Cathedral. Yet he knew that if he didn't intervene, the young gypsy woman would die.

In the courtyard below the execution continued as planned. Father Leon unrolled a document and read it aloud, enumerating her many crimes. The crowd responded to the charges with their own comments, but none threw the refuse and detritus they'd pelted the man-beast with.

When he was finished, the priest rolled the document back up and slipped it under his arm. A brisk nod of his head instructed the executioner to proceed, and he stepped back to stand beside a soldier.

The executioner positioned the gypsy girl squarely on the small stool. It would only take one good kick to knock it out from under her feet.

The crowd let it be known they were anxious for the hanging to proceed. They were impatient to see every gruesome aspect of the hanging, including the horrific death mask that would contort the beautiful gypsy's features.

Next, the executioner loosened the knot he'd fashioned in the rope and slipped the noose her head so that it rested on her shoulders like a grotesque necklace. He glanced at the tops of the buildings, at the growing darkness and slight sprinkling of stars already visible in the sky, and knew he had to hurry. Vespers would sound at any time now. His orders were to have the prisoner hanged by then.

The crowd had begun chanting, urging him to finish. He tightened the noose and made sure it was snug under her chin. All the while he spoke to the condemned girl, just nonsensical things to keep her off-guard. In his experience the executioner found it kept the prisoner relaxed, and thus easier to snap the neck, than a tense and rigid man whose body was prone to swing for hours as death came slowly from asphyxiation. Whether or not the gypsy broke her neck in the short fall, or simply strangled to death instead was not his concern. Truthfully, he knew that either way she would die. What mattered was that the sentence was eventually carried out.

When she was ready, he kept up his idle chatter as he went to stand next to the lever that would release the trap door beneath her feet. He reached for the handle when a shout went out, and then several screams. The executioner looked out among the crowd to see them waving and pointing overhead. He glanced up just as a force like a huge boulder knocked him off the platform.

Several people started running away, causing a massive stampede to ensue. The soldier, stunned at first by the sight of the immense creature swooping down on them like a golden, avenging angel, tried to draw his weapon. Instead, the sword was brushed away like a pesky insect, and the soldier followed the executioner over the railing.

"What's happening?"

Vincent turned toward the voice filled with terror, toward the woman he'd come to save. "Don't be afraid. I've come to rescue you."

Amid the screams and noise, the young woman stood blind, bound, and helpless, and totally unable to do anything but relent. Vincent hefted her over his shoulder as he reached upward on the rope and began drawing both of them along its length.

He shoved off from the platform, swinging his way back toward the cathedral in the same way he'd descended. The knots he'd placed in the rope served as hand-and-footholds as he climbed back up to the bell tower while the melee continued in the square.

Had this occurred prior to his own incarceration and punishment, Vincent had no doubt that he could have scaled the exterior of the building with little or no effort. However, not enough time had elapsed since his brutal beating. His wounds were covered but not sufficiently healed. As a result, he moved slower than he wanted. A warm wetness spreading across his back made his crude shirt stick to his skin, yet he continued to climb the rope hand over hand as the girl remained silent and still.

A pair of townfolk tried to follow but were unable to keep their grip. The muscles in their arms had not spent decades ringing the enormous bells of the cathedral. Their endurance and strength were no match for someone who daily handled the heavy weights and counterweights used in the upper towers of the cathedral.

Frustrated by their inability to follow the creature, and angered by the loss of their entertainment, the crowd feebly hacked at the rope with knives and swords, eventually giving up to return to their homes. Several, however, began to beat on the front doors of the cathedral to gain the attention of the priests.

Above them, Vincent paused at intervals to catch his breath, to rest his hands, and to adjust his precious load. It took him another quarter of an hour to reach the upper level where the rope was tied across the parapet. He moved instinctively, finding his way to the small alcove by touch as the sun had finally set and darkness descended. He lowered the girl onto the bedding. Vespers had not been rung, and he knew he would be reprimanded for it. Vincent also knew he would have to answer for what had occurred in the square, but that was something he was prepared to endure.

Before returning to check on the young gypsy woman, he lit a lamp and set it beside the balcony. Into a small bowl he placed the rest of his bread and cheese, and filled another bowl with water and a cloth. Carrying these back to the rear of the alcove, he laid them down on the floor next to the bedding and bent over the girl to examine her. Carefully he cut the ropes from her hands and feet. He would let her rest until she awakened on her own.

He covered her with his only blanket and left a small candle burning nearby. Satisfied he'd seen to her immediate needs, Vincent left her and descended the steps to the lower chambers. As he had anticipated, Dom Jacob was preparing to make his way up the stairs. As he had also anticipated, the man was not in a jovial mood.

"You failed to ring Vespers," the priest accused. Jacob had never made allowance for his adopted son when it came to discipline. Although in his younger years Vincent had resented his father's bluntness, he now had come to respect his honesty. Jacob had never punished out of anger, and Vincent had never been allowed to doubt the older man's love.

"Neither did I ring the death knell," he countered.

The priest nodded. "I was coming to ask you what happened. The people are in an uproar. They're demanding you release the gypsy girl. Is she with you?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"They were going to hang her."

"She was found guilty of witchcraft," the priest countered.

The accusation took the man-beast by surprise. "For what reason?" he managed to ask. "I've never seen her do anything resembling the black arts against anyone or against the Church."

"She struck down one of the guards. She's been known to cavort with the devil's familiar."

"Father!" Vincent took a step back, as if the man's words had the ability to strike out on their own.

"Do you hear what you're saying? What familiar?"

"She has a little white goat that always follows her about."

"It's a pet!"

"Not according to her accusers," the older man countered. "How did you manage to bring her here?"

"I... I swung down on a rope and snatched her from the gallows."

"You what, Vincent...." He turned around, one hand rubbing his diseased hip. His movements were stiffer than normal, his own pain evident in his eyes. Wordlessly, Vincent helped him to a small stool. Dom Jacob nodded his head to acknowledge his son's help. Taking a shuddering breath, the priest

clutched his precious cane. "There is no arguing her case, Vincent. She confessed to the tribunal. You must hand her over to the guards."

Vincent knelt before his parent. "She was tortured, Father. She was forced to confess or face more punishment."

"The Church will not back you, my son, not when it comes to the black arts. They do not find such devices against the law. The gypsy was found guilty. Witchcraft is punishable by death, and you know that."

"Then, on her behalf, I ask for sanctuary," the man-beast requested. He was answered by a nod of the priest's head.

"I expected you to do that." A tiny smile creased the corner of his mouth. "It won't be easy, letting the others know we are harboring the girl."

"You took me in," Vincent said. "They called me the spawn of the devil. How can providing sanctuary for the gypsy be any different?"

"Are you prepared to help protect her?"

"That will not be a problem. I will keep her in the upper rooms, away from her accusers, out of sight."

"But eventually she will have to leave," the older man told him. "We are not an inn."

"I understand. When she is well enough, when it is safe, I will help her gain passage out of town," Vincent promised.

Jacob patted the man-beast's shoulder. "Very well. I trust your word. I just pray this whole incident won't become more difficult than it already is." Giving his son a sad look, he added. "I have never regretted my decision to take you in when I found you abandoned on the steps of the cathedral. I pray you will do the right thing."

To answer him, Vincent leaned over and placed a soft kiss on the priest's temple.

Dom Jacob got to his feet and proceeded to find the bishop to tell him what he had discovered. His son watched him go in his slow and shaky way before ascending the stairs to keep watch over the girl through the night.

The first blush of pink in the eastern sky brought forth a slow brightening of the day. Vincent stretched his limbs to ease the cramping brought about from sleeping on the bare stone floor. He glanced at the young woman and noticed she was still unconscious. Unfortunately, that would not last long. It was time to ring the bells for Prime.

When he returned the gypsy was awake. She remained huddled under the blanket as she eyed her strange surroundings.

"Forgive me for awakening you under such harsh circumstances," he apologized, with what he hoped was a non-threatening tone of voice. He tried to stay in the shadows so as not to alarm her. Too many times people misread his bestial appearance, relying on their sense of sight, instead of listening to what he was attempting to say. "I'm going downstairs to get us something to break our fast. If you wish to freshen yourself, there is a small alcove behind you where you will find a bowl and a jug of water."

Rather than waiting for an answer, he left to get them both something to eat. Upon his return, Vincent found the girl had sat up and withdrawn to a nearby corner, pulling herself into a protective ball, hoping she could melt out of view of whoever was there.

At first glance at the empty pallet, Vincent felt his gut tighten with fear. Seconds later he relaxed when he spotted the girl curled into the dimmest part of the alcove. Squatting down, he beckoned with one hand.

"Come. I've brought us something to eat," he whispered gently.

At first she stared at him, taking everything in. He motioned again, but she didn't respond.

"Can you stand?" he asked. He remembered he hadn't had a chance to examine her wounds, much less dress them. "Are you in pain? I have some unguents."

The gypsy girl remained motionless, clutching the thin blanket to her chest, and eyeing him with an unreadable expression.

Vincent sighed and got to his feet. But the moment he turned away, a small voice inquired. "What is this place?"

He paused. "You're safe. You're in the chambers beneath the bells of Notre Dame." Looking back at her, he added, "I've claimed sanctuary on your behalf."

"I - I... heard the bells. So loud."

"It was time for morning prayers. I rang the bells. It's my duty."

He started to go again, but this time she moved as if to follow him. Holding out a hand, he waited. Slowly, her movements obviously painful, the young woman stood and reached for him. Her small, cold hand was enveloped in his callused but warm one. With unhurried care, he drew her out into the light where he was able to see the damage wrought from her interrogation.

The bruises and bloody welts were too many to take in; Vincent felt his disgust suck the heat from his body. The only consolation he could find was the knowledge that her body would heal and the outside signs of torture would eventually disappear. Yet he knew from his own experiences that the inner signs of torture would never completely go away.

She stumbled. Instinctively, he reached for her with his other hand. At first she shied away from him, avoiding his more intimate touch, until she went down on one knee. Vincent wrapped an arm under her knees and picked her up. Wearily, Catherine rested her head against the wide shoulder.

He laid her on one of the thin pillows, giving her the only other one to keep her off the floor, before pouring her a small cup of watered wine from the tray he'd brought from the kitchen. She accepted it gratefully.

"Would you rather I have Dom Gregory come up to address your injuries?"

Catherine handed the empty cup back to him. "If it is not ... a problem?"

Vincent nodded slightly and refilled her cup. This time he also handed her some bread. "You must eat to keep up your strength."

"What's going to happen to me?"

"I don't know," he admitted. "Your fate is not in my hands."

They ate in silence until the tray was emptied. As Catherine wiped the crumbs from her lap, she hesitated to ask her next question. "Where did you say I could ..."

"There's a small alcove behind where you slept," he answered quickly, to spare her any further embarrassment. "I need to return the tray. I'll also see if Dom Gregory can see to you. I shouldn't be gone long. Will you be able to manage on your own?"

"I believe so, yes."

This time the look she gave him was one of gratitude. After helping her to her feet, Vincent started toward the huge oak door when she stopped him.

"I - I don't know your name."

"I am called Vincent."

He could see her tasting his name, accepting the fact that this man-beast who had helped her and claimed sanctuary for her not only spoke, but actually had a name.

"How did I get here?"

Sweeping an arm out toward the vista below, he replied, "I took a rope and swung down."

She stared wide-eyed at him. "You did what?"

"It was the only thing I could think of on such short notice," he added with a shrug of his shoulders.

"Like a monkey?"

This time, he couldn't help the soft bark of laughter that bubbled up inside him. "Like a monkey."

She tilted her head, studying him. Acknowledging him. "Thank you ... Vincent."

He bowed his head to show he accepted her thanks, then started down the stairwell.

It was nearly a half hour later when he returned, Dom Gregory in tow carrying his satchel of medicines. The elderly priest took the girl to the back area of the alcove where he could examine her privately. Vincent went to sit by the parapet and work on repairing a frayed rope. Presently the priest emerged from the back area. After a quick nod to show he was finished, he left.

Vincent continued his methodical re-weaving of the coarse material, while keeping an eye on the pulse of the townspeople below. It wasn't long before the gypsy girl walked over to him. Carefully, and with much hesitancy, she leaned over the balstrade to look down. Vincent could see her eyes grow wide.

"Look beyond the town, Catherine. Look out past the tops of the buildings, past the fields, past the river and the trees."

He followed her gaze as she took in the beauty of the panoramic view spread out before them.

"It's so very..."

"Lovely?"

"Surprising," she corrected. "I didn't know something like this existed."

"Or something like me?" he softly added.

She turned to stare at him, and this time she didn't back away, but instead studied him more closely, now that he sat unflinching in the full light of day.

"You look different," she admitted.

"Most of us do when we're not covered in mud and other things." He motioned toward a small bundle of cloth he'd left by the stairwell door. "The cathedral often receives clothing, among other things, from the townfolk. The priests give them to those less fortunate. I brought you some items I thought might fit you."

To his surprise, instead of examining the clothing, she gathered the entire bundle in her arms and proceeded back to the alcove. "I'll make them fit," she called over her shoulder. True to her word, she re-emerged a few minutes later looking completely different from the broken and battered woman

he'd rescued from the gallows the night before. But despite her appearance he could still see her pain-filled movements when she gingerly sat on the floor across from him and tucked her bare feet beneath her skirt. He could feel the hairs on the back of his neck rise up at the black and dark purple bruises that were all-too-visible along her arms and neck. There was no way to tell the extent of her injuries, but he could pray she would heal quickly.

"What are you doing?"

"Repairing a bell pull."

"It looks like a rope."

"It *is* a rope," he smiled. "But each piece of rope has a specific purpose. Its length, its thickness, its weave - a piece of rope tells what it's for and why it was made."

"I didn't know that." She wrapped her arms around her drawn-up knees and silently watched him, as though his deft hands fascinated her. "You've lived here all your life, haven't you?"

Vincent nodded. Occasionally, he would glance down at the center of town. He feared he was staring too long and too much at the young woman, and feared she would mistake his attention since she became aware of it.

"How did you learn to do that? Did the priests teach you?"

"This?" He held up the rope he was working on. "Yes, they taught me all my lessons. How to weave. How to cook. How to say my prayers. How to speak several languages. How to read several languages."

"Did they also teach you how to rescue maidens from the hangman's noose?"

Vincent waited several seconds before answering. "They taught me the goodness of God's heart. That includes forgiveness. And patience. And fortitude. I rescued you because I felt a sense of justice. That was something the priests didn't teach me; I learned it on my own."

"Justice?"

"Call it ... returning a favor for a favor," he told her.

Catherine graced him with the smallest of smiles. It surprised him. "I gave you water. You gave me my life. That's not a balanced favor."

Vincent sighed loudly, shaking his head. "I would prefer we not haggle over details. What's done is done." He glanced down again at the goings-on in the square. This time, Catherine also followed his gaze.

"What do you see?" she inquired.

"I see a town where the people are still unhappy over last evening," he admitted.

"What? What are they saying?"

"I spoke with Dom Jacob last night. They've accused you of witchcraft. They insist the Church return you to them so they can go ahead with the execution." Looking her directly in the face, Vincent leaned slightly over and asked, "Are you guilty as they say you are?"

Her immediate response was shock. **"No! I have never dealt in the black arts!"**

"They claim your little goat is your familiar. And that you confessed to all charges."

"They made me!" she cried aloud. "They ... h---hurt me. They forced me to." Tears had sprung up in her face, which suddenly mirrored the memories of the past few days of her incarceration. At that

moment, Vincent realized the girl's innocence. He reached out to touch her shoulder, and to provide a small measure of comfort, but she pulled away from his reach. His differences were still too much for her to bear. Vincent tried to hide his disappointment.

He let her cry, knowing the healing property of tears, as he continued to watch below. Presently, she dried her face with the hem of her skirt. However, he was startled when she edged closer toward him.

"Will the priests hand me over to the soldiers?" she asked softly.

"No," Vincent reassured her. "You have sanctuary here. You can stay as long as you need."

Her next question took him totally off-guard. "Did you claim sanctuary here, too?"

The sun's rays had arched through the slits in the facade of the cathedral, pooling little strips of light and warmth along the cold stone floor. Vincent realized that if he remained sitting where he was, the pattern would miss crossing over him. He adjusted his position to wait for its advance.

"Dom Jacob found me on the steps of the cathedral when I was still swaddled. He told me that others had looked upon my face and decried my existence, but because I had been placed at the foot of the Father, he declared that I should be given sanctuary. I didn't ask ... my mother, whoever she was, she asked for me."

Catherine backed away emotionally but not physically. "Your mother abandoned you?"

A hand, clawed and tufted with thick hair, swept upward toward his face. "Can you not blame her?"

The young woman's eyes narrowed, her chin lifting a bit in defiance. "Others denouncing you I can understand, but your mother? What kind of woman abandons her own blood? What kind of woman abandons her child to the mercies of the weather? To the mob?"

"A woman who loves her child," Vincent replied. At Catherine's confused stare, he continued. "It took me many years to understand what Dom Jacob had been saying to me all that time. My mother didn't leave me because she feared me. She left me in the one place that could offer me hope. That could keep me safe from harm. At the one place where I would have the chance to grow up, despite my hideous appearance. She loved me, Catherine. She's the only woman who ever did."

Catherine opened her mouth to say something, then paused, biting her lower lip instead.

Knowing she needed time to think, Vincent relaxed back into the mindless weaving of the rope. The edges of sunshine had finally touched the edge of his foot. Patiently, he watched the light creep closer.

"Are you thirsty?"

She nodded, so he motioned to a small pitcher and a cup sitting on a small table nearby. "The cup is clean. I have not used it."

The gypsy paused for only a second. "It wouldn't matter," she calmly stated, and Vincent realized she meant it.

The minutes passed by in companionable silence. Catherine walked the length of the bell tower, as Vincent finished the bell pull he was working on and traded it for another. The bars of sunlight climbed over his pants legs and began to ascend toward his left arm.

Once she'd had the chance to tour the tower, Catherine returned to the alcove. "It's very peaceful up here, isn't it. I mean, when you're not ringing the bells."

"It can be."

"Don't you ever get ... lonely?"

"I have the priests to talk to. And the birds. And every so often a small child will escape from his mother and go exploring, only to eventually find his way up here." Vincent smiled. "Never to leave his mother's side again, I might add."

Catherine laughed. The sound of her joy was crystalline, purer than the echo of raindrops dancing on the parapets. "You are a strange man, Vincent, but it's a good strange, in my opinion. The people have done you ill by not getting to know you better."

"I will take that as a compliment." He smiled.

She smiled in return. The sudden softness in her eyes gave him comfort, although he couldn't explain why. Her hair, unbound and falling to her shoulders, drifted into her eyes. She tossed it back with a shake of her head. "There's a nice breeze up here."

"Yes. There often is."

"What do you do in the winter? Doesn't the cold bother you?"

Vincent rolled his shoulders, trying to undo the tenseness seeping into those muscles. "Yes, it does," he admitted. "On the worst days the Fathers let me light buckets of pitch up here to keep the worst of the ice and snow at bay. On other days I have to climb the rafters and kick the bells to break the grip of ice on the pulleys."

Catherine chewed on her lower lip, as her gaze alternated between his face and the hypnotic workings of his hands with the rope. "So... what is it I'm supposed to do now?"

"Do?"

"Most certainly. I'm not expected to stay here, am I? After all, this is your... room. Is there a place in the cathedral where I can take a room? Surely, I'll be expected something in return for my board and keep."

He nodded. "When you're ready I can take you down to meet Dom Jacob. He will set you up in one of the spare rooms, then perhaps take you to the kitchens to meet Madam Fontaneau."

"Then I am ready now," Catherine told him.

"Are you certain?"

"Very. I want to begin doing whatever I can to pay the cathedral back for my rescue. And to pay you back."

Sighing, Vincent laid his work aside and reluctantly got to his feet. Gesturing toward the stairwell, he indicated that she should precede him. To his complete surprise, the young woman slipped her small hand into his and allowed him to lead her down the steps.

For several days and nights the gypsy girl was as good as her word. Regardless of the duties put on her, she went about them with few words. Scrubbing floors, wiping the furniture, helping to prepare the meals - all were performed to the satisfaction of the overseeing housekeeper. In turn, the priests allowed the young woman free reign of the cathedral, to explore to her heart's content.

There were a few times when Vincent caught a glimpse of her during his infrequent forays away from the tower. Sometimes, she also spotted him. In those moments she would smile at him or lift her hand to acknowledge his presence. But it was the times when she didn't notice him that he preferred. It was then he could see her at her most unguarded. She was used to hard work; it was easy to see.

Gypsies did not lead luxurious lives. They were nomads, barely eking out a life as they roamed from village to village.

Yet, as the girl settled into the routines and customs of life in the cathedral, the villagers outside grew more and more restless. Twice a representative was sent to protest the alleged witch's presence inside the holy sanctuary. Twice the priests refused to hand the girl over to them for punishment.

One cloudy evening just on the brink of twilight, Vincent heard the distinctive rapping of his father's cane as the man ascended the countless stone steps leading up to the loft. He waited at the top to help the aged priest to a seat just outside the doorway.

"Do you realize you never venture up here after Vespers unless it's bad news?"

Dom Jacob stared at his adoptive son in surprise. "I don't?"

"You don't."

The older man grunted. "Must be getting too set in my ways. Remind me to change them. But, you're right. I'm here not on an errand, but on a mission of mercy. Vincent, you must take Catherine away from here. Soon. Tonight. Now."

"Father..."

"The townspeople have not forgiven you for stealing her away from the flames. They're enraged at the thought of a confessed witch safe within our confines, and my fellow parishioners fear there may be some retaliation."

"Retaliation? How?"

"I cannot even begin to guess," Dom Jacob said with a slight shake of his head. "But if she were to leave these walls, it might deflect the villagers' anger enough to dissipate."

"Father, you don't suppose they'd try to storm the cathedral, do you?"

"We don't know what they would try. We only know that the gypsy girl is the cause of their anger, so she must be removed as swiftly and as inconspicuously as possible to a safer haven. The sooner, the better."

"Why me?" Vincent asked. "Because I was the one responsible for bringing her here?"

Dom Jacob grimaced. "That, and because of ... other things."

The full impact of his words struck Vincent with a blow that sucked the air from his body. In shocked silence, the misshapen man half-fell, half-slid to the floor. It was several long moments before he could speak.

"Thirty years. For thirty years I've lived among them. I've gone out of my way to remain as much part of the shadows as possible. I've hidden from their children and avoided their homes and market places. I've borne the brunt of their hatred, their peltings of rotten food and garbage, their anger, their beatings ... and I have done nothing to deserve such scorn." He looked up at the aged priest with tears sparkling in his leonine cheeks. "I've done *nothing*, Father. So why must I still be punished, when my only crime in life is living?"

"Because to some, that's reason enough."

"When they themselves are not perfect?"

"Because they fear what you are. They fear that, but for God's divine intervention, they could have seen you. They've seen your strength and they envy you. They know that the life you live within the cathedral's walls is better than their own, and for that they envy you. And now there is a young and beautiful, and very desirable, woman living in our midst, and despite the fact that they fear what she may be, there are men who would take her for themselves in the blink of an eye. Yet, she's in here ... with you ... and they envy you."

"It seems I'm damned no matter what I do."

Dom Jacob reached out to place a comforting hand on his son's shoulder. "Not everyone thinks the same way. You have friends, Vincent." Struggling to his feet, the priest cleared his throat. "I've spoken with the Father Abbot and we agreed that your safest way may lie toward the sea. Captain Besoir will allow you and the girl passage on his ship, so all had been arranged. You need to leave tonight. There is a small boat tied at the river you can take to reach the port, but you must hurry. He plans to set sail at within the fortnight."

"To where?" Vincent asked.

Dom Jacob paused. His grey eyes were clear despite the sadness behind them. "Does it matter, as long as it's away from here?" he responded.

"Will I ever be able to return?"

"That I cannot answer," the old man admitted. "That's entirely up to God."

It wasn't difficult for Vincent to pack what he would need. In fact, everything he owned fit into one satchel, which he could carry over his shoulder. With his unusual strength, he figured he could earn enough money for food by offering to do some of the heavier work, wherever they landed. Years of pulling thick ropes had developed his muscles and endurance way beyond any ordinary man's.

Once he'd rung the bells for Compline, Vincent tied down the last of the lines and prepared to depart the tower. After darkness had fallen, the village usually settled into a comfortable restfulness that cloaked the streets like a soft quilt. Occasionally the peace would be broken by revelers who'd stayed too long at one of the taverns, and, once evicted, caterwauled their way home. Vincent and the priests were counting on the friendliness of the night to conceal the couple's departure for the docks.

It was not to be.

It started out as a soft yellow glow coming from the far end of town. Vincent had first noticed it when traversing the uppermost balustrades while tying down tethers that had come loose in the wind. Curious, he watched the glow progress to the center of town, weaving along the streets before heading toward the courtyard. It wasn't until the brightening light began spilling out into the courtyard that he realized what it was. A shiver of fear jolted him, causing him to freeze momentarily, until his sense of self-preservation took over, releasing him from horror's grip.

Vincent bolted for the stairwell, almost flying down the narrow stone steps. Enough time had elapsed that prayers would be over, allowing each priest to retire to their beds or to private meditation. By arrangement he was supposed to meet Dom Jacob in the kitchen as soon as lights-out was called. There the priest would have Catherine ready and waiting with him. As he had hoped, two dim figures in the near-darkness were standing near the back door.

"Father. Catherine. Come! It's not safe," Vincent called *sotto voce*. He made large motions with his arm, hoping they could see him signaling.

"What do you mean?" Dom Jacob whispered back.

"The cathedral is about to be stormed. The townspeople are gathering outside as we speak."

The trio left the kitchen, hurrying into one of the vestibules just off the main hall. "It's not safe to leave just yet," Vincent added.

Catherine glanced at one of the thick-paned windows, and at the dancing shadows of light reflected behind it. "Can the cathedral withstand an attack?"

"I'm going to find Father Abbot. Hopefully, he can talk them out of whatever they plan to do. Vincent, perhaps it will be safer if you take Catherine back up to the bell tower until this is all over."

"But won't the ship sail without us if we don't appear by morning?" Catherine argued.

"There are other ships," Vincent told her. He grabbed her hand and began to lead her into another section of the cathedral, one she was less familiar with, to where another set of stairs led to the upper levels. She followed him quietly, and Vincent realized she gripped his hand trustingly, not pulling away in disgust.

By the time they reached the top they could hear the crowd gathered below. A peek between the stone gargoyles which decorated the facade of the cathedral revealed a swarming ant bed of angered villagers directly in front of the cathedral. Lighted torches floated above their heads, dotting the masses with tiny tongues of flames. Someone beat upon the huge double doors; his cry floated up to where Vincent and Catherine stood watching in the shadows.

"Bring us the girl!" he was backed by additional cries.

"Release the witch!"

"Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live!"

In the darkness Vincent sensed her shivering. "Cold?" he whispered, although he knew his voice wouldn't have been heard by the people below.

She shook her head but wrapped her arms about herself. "It's not the cold I feel." She glanced up and tried to see him. "Will they be able to get in?"

"A cathedral is not built to keep the people out," he explained. "However, history has taught us to protect ourselves. If they persist, they could eventually fight their way through, but it will take a lot of strength to do so."

He felt her shiver again. "All this ... because they want me dead?"

"I don't believe it's all for you. I believe you are the catalyst. First me ... then you."

The gypsy girl moved closer to him, seeking him for warmth and protection. The touch of her hand on his vest sent a bolt of energy through him; Vincent took a deep, hissing breath of air upon contact. He had never had a woman voluntarily reach for him. He had never had a woman dependent upon him, needing him. Despite the urgency and possible danger to them both, Vincent reveled in their contact. He wanted to put his arms around her, to hold her safely, but he resisted the urge, afraid the tenuous bond between would be broken.

The crowd began to disburse, breaking off in small clumps from the main throng. Vincent drew away from the parapet, laying a gentle hand to her arm.

"Come. This may be our chance."

They descended the stairs in pitch blackness. Vincent knew the way by heart, and could feel for the junctions along the way. Catherine clutched his free arm and stumbled behind him. Once they reached the vestibule, Vincent grabbed their packs and slung them over his shoulder. Dom Jacob was gone, as were the other priests, and it felt as if the building was deserted.

No sound echoed in the hallways as they traversed the long walk. "Where is everyone?" Catherine whispered.

"I don't know. Perhaps they're in the rectory."

"Are we going back to the kitchen?"

"Yes. The street behind it runs straight to the docks. It's the shortest route."

"But what if someone is there?" she asked. Not if someone was at the docks, but would they be met at the outer door while trying to escape? Vincent felt it strange but comforting to know that he understood her. It was almost at a subconscious level.

As they'd expected, the kitchen was barren. The cooking fires had long gone cold - the weather was still too warm to keep the hearth tended. The large wooden door leading out toward the gardens and the street beyond the low wall was to their left. Vincent cautiously approached the portal and placed his ear against it. Catherine waited, not speaking.

"I think it's safe," he murmured. "First, let me check." Suddenly, he was gone, slipped out through the small opening he'd made. Catherine tried to grab him before he disappeared, but wasn't fast enough.

It felt as if hours passed before the door handle clicked. A moment later, he returned. She could not mistake the scent of smoke he carried with him. He had brought with it a growing sense of fear.

"They did not all leave," she stated flatly.

"It doesn't look good. Come. We need to go back up to the bell tower."

"Why? If they manage to breach the doors, won't we be trapped up there?"

Even in the darkness she could tell when he smiled at her. A touch of irony colored his response.

"Remember, some of the ropes can reach the streets."

One more time they climbed the steep stone steps. Catherine halted partway and leaned against the rounded wall. "A moment, please, to catch my breath."

"Are you ill?"

She managed to chuckle. "Forgive me. I'm not used to this. Not like you are."

"Then let me carry you," Vincent offered. Before she could protest, he swept her up in his arms and continued upward. Now their contact was more intense, closer, and headier. Her scent filled his lungs as her warmth washed through his body. Taking the greatest care not to crush her to him, Vincent tried to memorize every point of her body where it touched him. It was almost as if he were living a dream. Only he had to take care that it didn't turn into the nightmare he feared it would become.

He lowered her to the floor once they reached the bell tower. Letting go, he rushed to the parapet to peer below. What he saw caused his anger to boil, and he beat a fist against the stone wall.

"Damn him!"

"What? What, Vincent?" Catherine looked below but her eyesight was not as good as his. "What do you see?"

"What do you see?" he asked her.

In the flickering fires his appearance had taken on an almost demonic vision. Yet, for some reason she felt more afraid of the people below than she did of the man beside her. The masses had returned, almost strengthened in numbers. And this time they'd brought a battering ram.

A cloaked figure at the head of the mob appeared to be leading the charge. Catherine cringed inside.

"Who is that?"

"Paracelsus," Vincent told her through clenched teeth.

"What are we going to do?"

"You're going to retreat to the alcove while I fight them," He ordered her.

"From up here?"

"Just go and stay there!" he growled. Already he had hurried across the way and was pulling out buckets of pitch.

She watched his movements in the dancing shadows. When she'd gotten the idea of what he was up to, she began dragging the buckets from where he'd left them to the edge of the wall.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm helping," she snapped. **"It's not just my life we're trying to save."**

Vincent paused for a heartbeat to realize the depth of the gypsy girl's inner strength and conviction. "Toss the pitch under the urns. Then fetch a torch."

"Lit?"

"Yes. For the pitch."

As she worked, he hurried to another part of the tower where chunks of lead were stored. The lead was used in the creation of new bells, or to patch bells which had cracked. The pieces were tossed into the urns now heating up from the fires beneath them.

Behind the alcove lay piles of wood, some logs as big as a wild boar. The wood was used in the production of the bells; now it served an additional purpose.

"Take the smaller pieces to keep the urns hot," he instructed her.

"What are you going to do?"

He stopped to catch his breath. "The best defense is the one they don't expect," He replied cryptically. "Is the lead melting yet?"

She peered into the nearest urn. "Beginning to, yes."

He continued to fill the urn with pieces of metal while Catherine kept the fires stoked. In the courtyard the villagers continued to flood the area until a large group emerged to advance on the cathedral. They banged on the double doors without getting a response. Paracelsus remained nearby, out of their way.

"Why doesn't someone answer?" Catherine asked.

"Because there is the chance they may storm the door once it's opened. If the walls are breached, all may be lost."

Unable to get someone to come to the door, the villagers began throwing rocks. The sound of shattering glass was like a scream in the night. In her mind she could see the panes of multi-colored pictures lying like broken rainbows on the ground.

Softly, Catherine began to cry. "All that beautiful work. How could they?"

"Glass can be replaced. Lives cannot. Is the lead melted?"

Wiping her face on her skirt, she checked. "Yes. Almost all. What are you going to do with it?"

"Wait," he answered. "Wait to see."

The townspeople had taken axes, swords, and other sharp objects to the immense wooden doors of the cathedral, to no avail. Within their group Vincent could spot the soldiers who had taken up their cause, and he knew there would be no punishment for the men who had abandoned their posts to take up arms with the villagers.

With most of the stained windows damaged, and the doors impervious to their hand weapons, the people took up the battering ram. And it was then Vincent went into action. Grabbing a huge limb, he used it as a lever to lift the first urn, tilting it outward. Boiling lead cascaded over the wall and splashed across the villagers. Their screams of pain echoed in the air.

Catherine watched in horror as injured and dying men and women retreated back toward the center of the courtyard. Tears glistened in her eyes as she turned to stare at the man standing at the parapet.

Vincent caught her look but in the poor light it was impossible to read her expression. Somehow, though, it was as if he could sense her emotions. And despite her repugnance at what he'd just done, she didn't condemn him for it.

Below, the people quickly rallied, angrier than before. They hefted the huge tree trunk to begin another run on the doors, when Vincent lifted the second urn of molten lead. Another wall of death fell in sheets. More people died as it rained down on them. And, again, the townfolk backed off.

Just out of reach of danger, Paracelsus continued to urge the crowd onward, condemning those who fought back, and keeping the people's anger at a fever pitch.

This time, with the priest's help, the people turned their anger upward, shouting and waving their fists and weapons at the enemy on the upper balcony. Despite the damage done, however, their members remained strong.

"They'll go for the doors again," Catherine asked knowingly. "Is there any lead left?"

"It's all been used," Vincent replied. He watched as she gazed at the remaining single urn. At her unspoken question, he answered, "When it is emptied, I'll throw something else."

The people reassembled more quickly than the last time. Some had emerged from their houses with large pieces of hide to cover themselves, as if the skins could avert the burning drops of metal like rain on a roof. Once more they lifted the battering ram, chanting a count to begin their next run. Once more the lead came down. Once more people fell where they stood, dying instantly. Others ran off, screaming in agony, suffering debilitating burns on their bodies. Some of them would die later after much suffering.

Getting to her feet, Catherine wiped the sweat from her face with the back of her hand. "Now?" she asked.

Vincent shook his head. "They know they have us trapped. They just can't get to us."

"But we're out of lead."

"They don't know that. They'll try the ram again. Eventually. And if that doesn't work, they'll lay siege. Try to starve us out. One way or another they'll get inside."

"What will they do when they reach us?" she asked.

"Burn us." A sad smile crossed his distorted lips. "An eye for an eye."

Slowly, Catherine walked over and pressed her face into his vest. She shivered from fear, from the devastation she'd just helped commit, from the stark reality of their situation. "I'm afraid, Vincent."

"So am I."

"No. You don't understand. I'm afraid of what they'll do to you."

Her remark startled him. "What do you mean?"

Looking up at him, she said, "They won't be happy to just burn you like they'll do to me. You know

that. They'll want to humiliate you first. Destroy you on the inside before they destroy you on the outside. If I have to witness that, it will kill me before the fire does its job."

"Catherine..."

"Hush." She held a finger to his lips. There was no hesitancy in her actions. "Our hours are numbered. Please, hold me until then." Then, by her own accord, she slipped her arms about his waist and pressed herself closer to him. Gently, tenderly, Vincent drew her to him and held her, hearing her sigh of contentment in their nearness.

A sudden explosion rent the air. The shock was so great the massive bells above them quivered. Vincent and Catherine rushed to lean over the low wall to see that a half-dozen carts and tumbrils had been loaded with dry tender, shoved against the doors of the cathedral, and set afire. The suddenness of the compacted kindling erupting into flames sent smoke and cinders high into the air.

Striding back to their pile of wood, Vincent lifted a large tree trunk and carried it over to the parapet, heaving it over the side. The trunk managed to crush one man in the fall. A second piece of wood followed, then a third. Catherine joined him in throwing the chunks of wood, knowing that, although her pieces were smaller, they could still do considerable damage after falling from that height.

Even though they no longer faced the scalding lead, the hail of wood sent the townspeople back to the courtyard once more to reassemble. The load of tender they'd set ablaze was doing its job, albeit slowly. The wooden doors were burning, but they'd been coated to withstand years of harsh weather. Eventually they would fall, but it would take a long while.

Vincent collapsed on his haunches. Exhausted, Catherine cuddled next to him. They didn't speak. Instead, they took the time to catch their breath. To think. To share in each other's nearness. One small hand played with the lacing on the pocket of his vest. Vincent noticed she had burned her fingers in the fight, and wondered if she felt the pain.

Dawn wasn't too far away. He tried to think. Tried to second-guess what the people were up to. If they continue to try and ram their way in. If they would continue the assault after the morning had broken. As his weary mind dwelled on the possibilities, his eyes roved across the open area of the bell tower, searching for more weapons.

"Strange," a voice by his hip said in a distant tone.

"What is strange?"

"You have wood up here. And lead. Where is the stone?"

"Stone?"

Shifting her weight, Catherine turned to look up at him. "This cathedral is made of stone. Why don't you have stone up here?"

Her question was like the sun suddenly appearing in the heavens. Stone!

Vincent got to his feet so quickly, Catherine slid backwards, almost hitting her head against the alcove wall. "When the cathedral was finished, the stonemasons removed most of the debris to a pit behind the abbey."

"Can we reach it safely?"

"Yes!"

"How can we get the pieces up here?"

His eyes landed on the satchels left beside the stairwell. Grabbing them, he dumped the contents and reached for her hand. She took his, and together they began to hurry back downstairs.

They managed to take about a dozen steps when they heard a muffled sound, a booming sound, coming from outside. Vincent placed a palm on the wall and waited. Moments later, there was another one. Catherine voiced the obvious. "The battering ram?"

"We must hurry."

The booming sound continued, almost rhythmic in its pounding as the assault continued on the front doors. Vincent and Catherine rushed from the vestibule, through the hallway, and past several chambers unrecognizable to the young woman in the dark. But she trusted her protector knew his way, having grown up in the labyrinthian cathedral.

Inside the giant hollow shell of the nave Vincent pulled back, dragging Catherine against him as he used one of the immense columns as a shield. The impact from the battering ram was like a giant hammer, the sound of it almost unbearable. Vincent felt pressure on his arm where her grip tightened.

"Will it hold?"

"After the burning? Not much longer. Come!"

They managed to cross the nave when they heard the splintering. Another boom, and the sound of a triumphant crowd cheering their success filled the room. Catherine let out a little squeak of terror. Knowing their time now was limited. Vincent shoved her into the nearest side room and shut the door between them. Immediately the gypsy girl began to beat upon the door separating them.

"Vincent! Let me go with you! Don't do it, Vincent! Don't do it! Let me out! Let me go with you! Vincent! Vincent!"

The townspeople were pouring into the cathedral. They bore their crude weapons, their axes and scythes and rocks and sticks, like banners from a conquering army. Striding alongside, but not leading them, was a figure in the dark brown woolen vestments of a monk.

Vincent felt the flame of his anger grow hotter. Its searing heat spread through him, giving his weary muscles renewed energy. The villagers were pawns in Paracelsus' hands, doing his dirty work and leaving him to appear innocent of their maddened attack.

Their whole aim was to reach the girl. If he stood in their way, Vincent knew they'd have no problem tearing him to shreds to get to her. And all the while Paracelsus would stand in the shadows gloating. Mocking. Savoring the conquest.

The first of the townsfolk spotted him and sounded the alarm. As a whole, the body of people surged in his direction.

Deep within Vincent felt the primal abilities he knew he had but had dampened all his life. This time he rejoiced in his differences. He thanked the heavens for his unique abilities, his incredible strength, and his fearsome appearance. For it gave him the advantage over the masses that could mean his life and the life of the gypsy girl. Taking a deep breath, the misshapened man rose to his full height and let out a bloodcurdling roar. His hands curved into claws; his face reflected his anger and defensiveness.

Several people screamed in fear, backing away. Two of the more brave souls advanced, brandishing a torch and a club. Vincent dismissed them with a swipe of his arm. Again a few more men tried to take down the beast of Notre Dame, only to find themselves lying, some bleeding, on the floor.

"He's only one man!" a voice cried over the melee. ***"Attack him as one!"***

Vincent whirled around at the sound of the order to see a pair of dark eyes glittering from beneath a hooded cowl. Before he could take a step toward the priest he was struck on the leg with an axe. The swing was awkward; the blade struck him flat and glanced off his calf, but it was enough to knock him

to one side away from the door. Grunting from the blow, Vincent reached for the torch ascending toward his head and managed to deflect it. Another roar bubbled from his chest as he protested the attack.

The villagers continued to advance, but they were hampered by the narrowness of the passageway leading off the nave. This narrowing allowed only a few men to advance at one time toward Vincent, a disadvantage he hoped would be a blessing.

As he continued to hold his ground against the advancing weapons and sea of angry people, the cloaked figure moved unobtrusively toward the small room. Behind a statue of the Virgin Mary he found what he was seeking - a low, hidden doorway. Vincent had enclosed the gypsy in a room the priests used as a secret through-way from the nave to the inner chambers.

He pulled the tiny latch in the door, which swung inward. It was pitch black inside the room, but the light from the villagers' torches gave him enough illumination to see the almost invisible outline of the girl standing across the room. The figure had paused after hearing the sudden increase in noise when he'd opened the little door.

"Who are you?" she asked in a trembling voice.

"No one significant," Paracelsus smiled. The knife he'd kept in the folds of his robe was warm from contact with his skin. Outside the stone walls they could hear the muffled cries and clash of weapons.

"Wha...what do you want?"

Paracelsus removed his hood and put on his best beguiling smile. He advanced toward the young woman who'd braced herself against the larger doorway as if she could somehow seep through the wood.

"I've come to help you," he told her. His voice was soft, comforting. This was going to be easier than he'd first believed. With the creature held at bay outside the room, he had almost all the time in the world to dispatch the witch and then escape the same way he'd entered. No one the wiser.

He held out a hand. "Come. Let me show you the way out."

Catherine glanced at the door to her back. "How did you get in here?"

"No time for questions. Come with me," Paracelsus repeated. He was so near now. Almost close enough to reach her with the short-bladed knife. "Come! There's not much time left before the mob manages to reach the door."

Tentatively, Catherine reached out to take his hand. Immediately Paracelsus yanked her toward him and raised the knife, swinging it downward toward her chest. Catherine screamed, pulling away while at the same time jerking her arm out of his grasp. The knife grazed the inside of her arm. She screamed again and shoved at the dark figure. Caught off-guard, Paracelsus stumbled backwards. Catherine took the advantage to run past him, ducking through the little door. Paracelsus cried out in aggravation and went after her.

Several villagers caught sight of the gypsy girl racing down the nave and called out. They began to chase after her, followed by more of the townsfolk as they peeled off of their attack on the beast to pursue their original target.

Numb, bewildered, Vincent slumped against the door. The crowd's sudden turnabout came without warning, leaving him exhausted in their wake. He shook his head and tried to figure out why they'd shifted their focus. It was as if they'd found new prey to attack

Vincent threw open the door to the inner chamber to find it empty. At the far end, set low in the wall, a small doorway stood ajar.

"CATHERINE!"

She ran without looking back because to look back was to risk capture. By God's grace, she remembered this part of the cathedral. Instinctively, she raced past the ornate statues and slipped into another narrow passageway that led to a private meditation chamber. From the chamber a door opened into a tiny garden. Along the walkway she barely noticed the faint lightning in the sky. A fog was drifting in off the river and would soon envelope the cathedral and town.

The priest with the knife was not far behind. His voluminous garments slowed him down to the point that the crowd had almost caught up with him, which helped. Her years of leading the nomadic life had kept her fast on her feet. A gypsy never knew when a quick retreat would be the best solution to a sticky problem.

The walkway through the garden led to another door into the cathedral. This door opened into the dining area where the priests took their meals. From the dining hall to the kitchen, then the corridor where she easily found the stairwell up to the bell tower.

She paused to catch her breath. Her mind felt frozen in fear, and she worried about what had happened to Vincent. Where the knife had sliced into her arm still bled, but she would have to wait until she made it upstairs before she could bandage it. As the sound of the approaching mob drew closer, Catherine closed the tower door behind her and began to ascend the stone steps.

Once they'd entered the dining hall the townspeople had lost sight of the gypsy girl. They milled about the room, some seating themselves at the table for a brief rest while others checked out the corridors and rooms leading off of the dining area.

Paracelsus stared at the tiring crowd and realized they didn't have much fight left in them. The gypsy girl had eluded them and the beast had beaten down their defenses. They were hungry and tired and ready to retire to their homes. Dawn was approaching. There was always another day they could try to capture the witch.

Paracelsus clenched his fists. There would not be another chance for him, now that the beast had seen him and knew what he was up to. Yet he still needed the mob to keep Dom Jacob's adopted son at bay while he finished off the girl. He had no doubt the beast would follow the villagers. That meant he had to throw them off the trail.

"Gentlemen!" he called out, waving his arms for their attention. "We must hurry or the witch will get away."

"We don't know which way she went," one man answered.

"There's only one way she could have gone. Through the kitchen and out into the garden. But you must be fast. There's a gate from the garden leading to a road. Once she reaches the road she won't have anywhere to hide. Now's your chance to finally capture her!"

With renewed vigor the crowd hurried out of the dining hall, trusting the priest to tell them the truth and help rid their town of the devil's infestation. Paracelsus watched them go with a small smile. Once they had abandoned the room, he turned and headed straight for the stairwell.

The door to the towers were closed, but there were splatters of blood on the stone floor. The girl had gone this way as he had guessed. Holding his robe, he started up the stairs and tried to listen for sounds above and below him. He knew the risk he took going up to the parapet. But the witch had to die, and there was no one else capable of doing it, and no other chance to accomplish it, not as long as she claimed sanctuary.

The sound of scraping came from above. Paracelsus paused to listen, trying to figure out what was causing the noise. He continued upward with greater caution. The gypsy could be possessed of some sort of magic. Had to be, he surmised, because there could be no other reason why she had managed to live this long.

"Run, witch! You have nowhere to go!"

He found the door opening to the towers were closed. Slowly he opened it, prepared to be pounced upon by the witch's familiar or some other demon she may have had time to conjure.

"Reveal yourself, in the holy name of God!"

He took a step onto the parapet, pushing the door forward. Above the horizon the morning sun was breaking through the fog, sending shafts of light across the sky. The brightness of the dawn momentarily blinded him, and he threw an arm up to shield his eyes, when a thick, heavy coil of rope struck him across the back of the head. Stunned, the priest fell to his hands and knees, but not before he managed to grab the hem of her skirt.

Catherine dropped the rope to pull on her skirt, trying to release it from the man's grasp. Half-dragging the man across the stones, she was unable to release his hold although she continued to struggle.

Paracelsus managed to repair his balance. He gripped another handful of cloth with his other hand and used her struggle to aid him to his feet. Catherine fought his slow but steady advance, pummeling him with her fists once he managed to stand.

"You have cost me too much, gypsy girl," he told her.

"Why? What have I done to you?"

He smiled at the sound of her fear. "For thirty years I have had to tolerate the celebrated beast man of Notre Dame. I have nurtured the town's fear toward him. Taught them to hate him as much as I do. Gave them reason to desire him dead. But you ... you had to show him pity. *Pity*. You had to treat him as though he was human."

"He *is* human," Catherine argued.

Lifting the slim knife, he twisted the blade so that the rays of the sun glistened off its polished surface. "He is no more human than the rats that run through the streets. He is no better than the official I scrap off my boots every night. For you to show that *thing* any remorse, makes the townspeople start to wonder if they've been wrong to be so cruel for all these years. And I can't have them think that way. Don't you understand?"

Catherine rolled her eyes toward the man who was moments away from spilling her life's blood on the tower floor. "It was you," she breathed. "You were the one who ordered them to torture me. It was you who told them I was in league with the devil."

Chuckling, Paracelsus smiled seductively, drawing his face closer to hers. The point of the blade nicked her throat just under the jaw. "Teaching the people to hate is not difficult."

"But you're a man of the cloth. You're a man of God, and God does not condone hate."

"If God does not condone hate, then explain to me why Cain was allowed to kill Abel. Why he used the Red Sea to drown thousands of Pharaoh's men, all of them soldiers who were merely following orders. Tell me why there is page after page in the Good Book describing murder. Rape. Desecration. Hate."

"Why ... why do you hate Vincent so much?" Catherine could feel the icy tip of the knife slowly

penetrating her neck. It was both a heat and a cold that immobilized her in the priest's arms. Her death would not be long now.

"For the same reason I hated his mother when she bore him. But I was too late to stop her from leaving him on the steps before I killed her."

A soft sob came from deep within her breast. Catherine finally understood. "You're Vincent's real father. You broke from the sanctity of the cathedral; you broke your vows. So that every time you looked upon him you were reminded of your guilt and sin."

"My only sin was to create that monster."

"I see no monster but the one before me," she challenged.

Angered all the more, Paracelsus started to drive the knife into her neck.

"CATHERINE!"

The stairwell door swung open with a loud bang. Bruised and bloody, panting from his exertions, Vincent staggered into the bell tower. Without hesitation he lunged for the priest and managed to swipe the arm holding the knife.

Paracelsus yelled and swung at the beast-man. Vincent ducked, then rushed at him, catching him about the waist as their combined momentum took them to the edge of the banister.

Grabbing the beast-man's vest, Paracelsus begged for mercy. **"Vincent! No!"**

Gazing down at the priest leaning precariously over the side of the wall, Vincent felt his anger dissipating. He was not a killer, but he couldn't allow this man to continue on. The look on his face changed to disgust; he searched Catherine's face for some clue or hint as to what he should do. In his confusion, he didn't see the little knife until it plunged into his chest up to the hilt.

"VINCENT!"

As Catherine screamed, Vincent roared in pain. He released the priest to reach for the weapon protruding just below his throat.

But Paracelsus had misjudged his balance. He grabbed for the railing to save himself, missing it by inches. With a cry of fear, the priest fell to his death to the courtyard below.

Vincent slumped to the floor. Already blood was pouring from the wound. He could feel its warmth seeping into his lungs, and he realized he could drown.

Catherine dropped next to him and pulled out the knife. Tearing strips of cloth from her skirt, she tried to plug the hole as best she could, all the while assuring him he would live. Vincent coughed, bringing up a pink, frothy foam. While he felt no real pain, he had a sense of light-headedness. The gypsy girl was cradling him in her lap and her contact gave him joy.

"You will not die, do you hear me?" She whispered fiercely. "You will live to take me away from here. Some place where people won't think of me as a witch and who won't judge you for your appearance."

"You know as well as I there is no such place," he managed to say with a small smile. Noticing her wound for the first time, he tried to reach up and touch it. "He hurt you."

She swatted his arm where it lay against her leg. Tears spilled down her cheeks. "We have defeated our enemy. We have the right to live our lives now. You must live, Vincent. You must live ... for me. I - I - I need you to show me how to mend a rope. I need you to show me how to ring the bells for prayer. I need you, Vincent. Please ... please ... Live for me."

Her cool hand felt good on his sweaty face. Her gentle touch was a song. A beam of sunlight brightened her hair, and Vincent saw that it was morning.

"Father will be angry with me. I didn't ring the bells."

"Vincent," she whispered.

"Tell Father ... I'll remember next time," he managed to say before his lungs completely filled with fluid.

In the soft, warm morning, the pigeons awoke in their loft above the parapet. The giant bells stirred listlessly in the warm breeze, their ropes still holding them secure.

In the villages below, the villagers gathered in the courtyard to survey the damage they'd caused during the night, and prepared to do penance for their misdeeds. One woman found the broken body of the dead priest and threw her apron over it. It would be added to the others being carted away for burial.

In the bell tower high above, a woman leaned over the man who had been her friend, her benefactor, and her savior, and wished that they could have had more. As she wept and prayed for his soul, she bade him goodbye with a final, loving kiss.

END