

# THE LION AND THE HAWK

(LADYHAWKE)

by Linda Mooney

(from *Dreams in the Mist*)

The cold wind burned his face. Not too far away, the Mouse was running, heading south, toward Aquila. Thinking he had made a successful escape from the lion man on the big black horse, no doubt.

Vincent glanced up at the sky to check the position of the sun. Morning had broken a short time ago, but he needed to be assured he was heading in the right direction. His view, however, was suddenly obstructed by the shadow of the hawk, as it soared above him in a slow spiral. The bird shrieked once before taking a quick dip and began heading south in the direction taken by the young boy. Vincent clicked his tongue, pressing his legs against the stallion's sides, and the pair set off at a slow lope after the boy.

They weren't in any hurry. The best the Mouse could do was a few miles a day, unless he found a traveler on horseback, or someone with a wagon who could offer him a ride. Vincent smiled a humorless smile. Who was he fooling? The Mouse would never ask for a ride, when he could more easily steal one unobserved.

Coming to the top of a rise, Vincent squinted against the blast of frigid wind which slammed into him. The sun disappeared behind a bank of clouds, warning of the change of weather during the night.

The hawk screeched again. Holding out his arm, Vincent allowed the bird to settle. At rest it was a heavy avian, but it was a weight he would never tire of holding. She was a magnificent creature and a formidable hunter. There had been many days when she had snared their only meal, usually a rabbit.

Below the ridge, out in the open, someone had set up a temporary camp - a few ramshackle enclosures, a stack of firewood, and a cooking fire. Vincent stood in his stirrups, hoping to spot some sign of movement around the flimsy encampment. It looked safe enough, although looks were often deceiving. Yet he had no choice but to descend the hillock and circumvent the camp, if he wanted to continue south toward the city.

He nudged the horse forward but kept his senses on alert. Something was wrong. Something felt wrong, even if all appeared perfectly normal.

Giving the camp a wide berth, Vincent finally spotted a lone peasant sitting beside a smaller fire on the far side of one hut, out of the wind. The man gave him a glance but quickly looked away. His face remained expressionless, and that fact alone bothered Vincent. Pulling up the reins, he paused. The animal beneath him snorted, shaking its head impatiently.

"I know, Goliath," he murmured, trying to soothe his mount. "Easy, boy, easy."

Again he raked his eyes over the encampment. A crude compound ... stacks of wood ... a fire ... all the signs of someone nomadic. So ... where were the rest of them? The men may have left to forage for food, taking with them their pack animals and a dog or two, and leaving a solitary guard.

But the women always stayed behind to tend the fire and care for the children.

Vincent frowned. Three huts, three families. The fires looked fresh, the ground around the huts untrampled. The only apparent inhabitant had refused to meet his eyes.

He could feel the hairs on his head rise.

He was cursed, and the curse had marked him for all mankind to see. Those whom he had encountered these past two years had reacted with horror and apprehension upon seeing his face. And yet this lone nomad had acted as if the disfigurement was nothing out of the ordinary. Almost as if... as if... as if he knew what to expect.

He advanced slowly, cautiously, never taking his eyes off the huts. Whoever was inside, if someone was inside, had the advantage of the element of surprise. Vincent felt for his sword.

A scream of pain erupted from behind the furthest hut. Goliath reared in response. Vincent pushed away the hawk and clung to the horse's neck, as his free hand reached for his crossbow.

A guard on horseback appeared from behind one of the huts. A twang, the song of a single note, echoed in the cold air, and an arrow embedded itself in Goliath's saddle so close to his hand that the shaft vibrated against his knuckles. Vincent immediately knew the man had been keeping out of sight until the trap could be sprung. Without thinking, he grabbed his double crossbow instead, lifted, aimed, and shot in one motion. The guard fell.

A second later an arrow from another guard's crossbow streaked through the air. Vincent whirled around in time to see the Mouse running for cover. A gag still hung around the young man's neck; his wrists were rope remnants. A second shaft from Vincent's weapon finished the Mouse's captor, who had finally emerged from the furthest hut. The man slid backwards and nearly melted along his horse's flanks.

A third guard magically materialized from behind the third hut. He wore a knowing grin and spun his sword lazily in his hand. Relying on the fact that his other two comrades had taken down the man in black, and knowing the other's crossbow was empty, he took his time approaching for the kill.

Vincent watched and waited, keeping his horse steady as the guard headed for him at a slow gallop. A heartbeat before they made contact, Vincent turned his body sideways. The point of the sword nicked his black leather armor directly above the heart; the blade slid across like water on glass. Bringing his arm down and around, Vincent rammed the crossbow head-first into the guard's gut. The man wobbled for several seconds, then toppled like a stunned ox, as Vincent tossed away his weapon.

Vincent started as two more soldiers appeared from nowhere. Both aimed their crossbows at him. He drew his sword, even though he knew it was useless.

Unseen by the guard or Vincent, Mouse had been watching the disintegrating ambush from behind a hut. Until the first guard climbed back into his saddle, Mouse had believed the advantage to be Vincent's. The balance suddenly appeared to be shifting, and that couldn't happen. He would much rather stick with the man with the grotesque face, than find out what the Bishop of Aquila had planned for him.

There was a pile of rocks next to the stacked firewood. He grabbed the biggest fist-sized stone and threw it at the guard, not taking the time to get a good aim, but praying it would help.

His prayers were answered when the rock struck the guard's arm, deflecting his aim. The crossbow swung upward instead, as the guard's finger tightened on the trigger, sending the lone shaft safely into the air.

Into the breast of the hawk soaring just above the melee.

The second guard's shot, however, remained true. Vincent wheeled his horse around in time for the arrow to burrow into his chest. The pain hit like a poisonous snake, lancing every nerve. It paralyzed his thoughts, his muscles, his reactions. Unable to correct his horse, which continued to turn around in response to his initial command, Vincent felt himself losing his balance and falling lengthwise across the saddle. In time to see the arrow plunge into the bird.

**"HAWK!"**

Vincent watched, horrified, as the bird cried in pain, plummeted to the ground and landed a short distance away. Dazed with anger and his own torment, he managed to pull himself back upright in time to see the first guard head for him.

He gripped the shaft in his hand and pulled it out of his chest, ignoring the flesh and blood which came with it. Gritting his teeth, he put the last ounce of his strength behind the thrust that buried it up to the quills in the man's stomach. The guard would be dead within hours.

Mouse jerked around at the sound of hoofbeats, but surprisingly the remaining guard was hurrying away from the encampment. He had given up to retreat back to Aquila, where undoubtedly he would receive a new set of commands from the Bishop.

Vincent half-fell off his horse and crawled hand over hand to where the hawk lay panting on her side. He looked around, overwhelmed by his feelings of helplessness and fear, and spotted the young man.

"There's a rug in my saddlebags. Hurry!"

Turning back to the bird, he tried to calm it as it appeared to be going into shock. When Mouse handed him the thin scrap of linen, he never hesitated to wrap the animal inside it. Cautiously, he got to his feet.

"Take her." He shoved the bird into the Mouse's arms but the young man backed away.

"Can't."

"You're the only one I have."

"Bird will die -"

**"Don't you say that!"** Vincent hissed, grabbing the front of Mouse's shirt. "Listen to me carefully," he said to the young man. "Follow that road. Not far from here, at the top of a hill, is a ruined castle. There's a monk who lives there by the name of Jacob. Father Jacob. Give him the bird. He'll know what to do. Now get on my horse."

Mouse urgently shook his head. "No. No! Can't!"

"Yes, you can!" Vincent insisted. He pushed the injured bird into the young man's arms.

"Horse won't take me. Only you!" Mouse protested.

In answer, Vincent half-threw him into the saddle. The enormous horse shifted but didn't bolt. Mouse looked uncomfortable in his position.

Grabbing the boy's leg, Vincent gritted his teeth and hissed, **"Be careful. And know this. If she dies, I will know, and I will come after you until I find you, even to the end of my days. Am I clear?"**

Nervously, Mouse nodded his understanding. The misshapen face glaring at him was more than frightening. With his injuries, the lion man's eyes glittered with a pain as much physical as emotional.

His incisors gritted with determination to seek aid for the bird, and he refused to allow his injuries to get the better of him.

Vincent gave Goliath's rump a swat to send them on their way. The horse bolted for a few feet before settling into a hard gallop as they headed toward the castle.

He watched them go with trepidation and a prayer. Overhead, the cloudy sky signaled a warning about a coming storm. Falling to his knees, Vincent winced. He gasped from the throbbing ache in his chest. Yet it wasn't any more debilitating than the black fist under his lungs that was squeezing his life's blood from his heart.

Catherine was hurt, possibly dying. And the one man who might be able to save her, was the one who had betrayed them both.

Thunder rattled again. Far in the distance a bolt of lightning danced from one dark cloud to another. There was the smell of rain in the cold air. Rain, or snow. It didn't matter.

The sun was nearly gone, hiding behind the mountains in the west. A single blade of light, like a final farewell, slid across the rocky plain, across the lone man kneeling in a patch of dead grass, and began crawling up into the air.

Vincent could feel his body changing. Tingling. Stretching like muscles getting ready for battle. Numb, he shakily got to his feet and began to divest himself of his armor.

The winds grew louder, or perhaps it just seemed that way as his hearing became more acute. The smell of blood sang in his nostrils, as his senses were made aware of the carnage that had been wrought moments before.

Taking a deep breath, Vincent drew in the hundred streams of life, the ribbons of taste and touch and smell and sight and sound, that were woven into a fabric that was denser and more powerful as the night closed around him.

The wound in his chest covered over with a glossy layer of fur, soon to be a mere memory before daybreak. More fur broke out over enormous shoulders, and golden tufts grew long down his back and thighs.

For decades the people would talk about the great beast which roamed their lands. A beast which fed, not on two-legged victims, but on the weaker animals, the sickly creatures, as though it knew how to thin the herds.

They would frighten their children with tales of a creature so strange looking, with horrendous fangs and claws, that no name could ever be given to it other than The Beast.

They would tell about hearing the animal during the night, about how it would emit almost human-like cries, as it hunted.

Some even had proof such a beast existed - tracks so huge that unarguably no dog or wolf could have made them.

As the moon sat nearly motionless in the glacier blue sky, a lone animal trotted across a barren field that once held rye and oats. The Beast moved with fluid, silky movements, picking its way across the rocks and hard clods of dirt as delicately as a dancer on tiptoe. Every few minutes it would stop and face the south. Not toward the city of Aquila, but toward a small ruined castle, where inside the fate of a bird, and the fate of the Beast, lay in the hands of a fallen priest.

Facing that way, a sadness would wash over its face, like a human expression, and a low moan would rumble in its throat. Once or twice, a roar almost melancholy in tone, would come from the animal before it lowered its head and continued to move on.

The night continued its journey, and the Beast continued his.

\*\*\*\*\*

She awakened into a darkness filled with blood and fire. Her shoulder, left arm, and hand were mere lumps of flesh and bone, with no sensation to tell her they belonged to her, or that they were even attached to her. Until she tried to move them herself. Then the exquisite agony ripped through her and affirmed the fact that she was once again in mortal form.

A trickle of sweat traced down the side of her face. Catherine slowly moved her head to the side to see the door. It had moved, barely, as though someone or something was hesitant to enter. The figure finally appearing around the jamb was simultaneously a relief and an overpowering fear.

"Vincent...?"

"Vincent's fine. Okay. Good. You?" came the cryptic reply from the towheaded young man.

Sighing loudly, Catherine returned her gaze to the ceiling. In that position, her wound caused her the least amount of discomfort. "Where am I?"

She could ask other questions now, knowing her love was well, if not safe.

"Old castle", Mouse replied. He glanced around, checking to see if the bird and woman both might be in the room, although the answer was already clear. Trembling, he asked, "Lady... are you flesh? Are you spirit?"

Catherine turned a sweat-soaked face toward him. "I am sorrow," she answered listlessly.

The door behind Mouse suddenly flew open. Father Jacob hurried in after his frantic search for the right herbs for a healing poultice. Seeing the young boy standing there, staring at the figure on the rug, he hustled him out with the curt order to stay outside.

\*\*\*\*\*

Dazed, Mouse crumpled. As the door was bolted on the inside, he leaned his forehead against the warped wood frame. He could still hear the low murmurs of the two people talking. He strained to hear what they were saying, but it was difficult.

A frigid gust of wind blew over him. Mouse wrapped his arms around himself and tried to stay warm. Common sense told him this was not the place to remain, if he didn't want to freeze to death. There was a tiny flicker of light coming from an opening in the rock wall a few feet down. Shivering, he followed the light, light meant warmth, possibly a cozy fire.

The opening was a tunnel with a low ceiling. It originally had been one of several corridors leading from the outer fortification to the inner courtyard. The courtyard now was a dilapidated ruin, as run-down as the rest of the castle. In the center, before a circle of stone seats, a small fire had been lit some time ago. Almost burned out, nothing remained but a single flaming log. Mouse noticed a pot of something simmering on the edge of the fire - the priest's dinner. He dipped a finger into it, burning the tip of his digit before licking it clean, but the soup was good, whatever it was. He had had worse, as often as he'd had nothing at all.

The priest found the young man seated by the fire with an empty bowl in his lap. The little thief had also discovered the pitcher of wine that had been stashed in a nearby alcove, and had helped himself to a mug.

Shaking his head, Father Jacob found another somewhat clean mug, wiped it out with the hem of his robe, and dropped himself onto a seat by the fire. The fire crackled and sizzled with renewed energy, from an extra helping of wood. Mouse stirred himself to pour the monk some of the wine, but when he

offered his bowl so the priest could eat, Jacob waved him away.

"Who are you? How have you come to be a part of this... of this..." He took a sip from his mug.

"Mouse... name is Mouse." The young man nodded in the direction of the little room where the wounded woman lay. "She's the hawk?"

*"How much do you know?"* Jacob demanded softly.

Mouse shrugged as he kept his eyes on the fire. "Know little. Know a lot. Know something is wrong." He glanced up. "Are they cursed?"

"Cursed?" Jacob laughed humorlessly. "You could call it a curse. And you and I, little Mouse, are caught up in the middle of it."

In the distance, traveling on the wind, came the sound of a low, mournful howl. It rose slightly, until it rumbled like soft thunder. Mouse's eyes widened until the whites were giant rings.

"Is it him?" He looked back at the priest who had also been listening. "Is it him? The beast man?"

Jacob tossed a chunk of wood at the fire, then drained his mug. "Best settle yourself in. It's going to be a long night."

\*\*\*\*\*

The room was cold, but the furs kept her warm enough. The pain in her shoulder was blissfully numb, even if the memory of the arrow being torn from its bed of flesh was still floating on the surface of her consciousness.

Catherine blinked sleepily. She'd heard the low, sad howl floating outside and knew the little man named Mouse had spoken the truth. It had given her a sense of relief, despite the questions that filled her with apprehension.

How had she been wounded? Had Vincent suffered any wounds, as well? Who was this Mouse, and why had he brought her to the castle instead of Vincent? More than anything, who had attacked her, and why? Had it been one of the Bishop's men?

She moved slightly, to ease the cramp caused from lying on her back for so long. Unfortunately, it awoke the new scab under her shoulder. The fire consumed her up to her jaw and ear, and down to her lungs, making her gasp for air. She had to lie perfectly still to wait out the agony.

The creak of an opening door distracted her from her situation. Curiously, she watched the blond head dip around the door jamb, followed by a rueful expression.

"Mouse?"

"Hello, bird lady."

Catherine smiled. He intrigued her. It was a nice feeling after everything else, "Where's Jacob?"

"Outside. Not far. How are you?"

"Sore," she sighed, immediately aware of her immobilized arm. "Will you stay a while? Talk to me? It's awfully quiet in here."

To answer her, the young man closed the door behind him and sat cross-legged on the edge of the fur. This close, they both could get a better look at each other. His scrutiny, however, seemed more than curious.

"What? Why are you staring at me like that?" she asked him.

"You are pretty."

"Thank you."

"Why are you a bird?"

Catherine sighed loudly. "Because an evil man made me this way. Because I dared to love someone else, and he..." She bit her lips as ten explanations fought for a place on her tongue.

"The bad man, he made the lion man?"

A smile came unbidden to her face. "Yes, he made the lion man, too."

"Why?"

"Why do you ask so many questions, Mouse?" she finally countered.

The young man shrugged. "Not normal. Not a real bird. Not a real lion. Not a real man and woman, either."

"We used to be a real man and woman," Catherine hastily corrected him. "The Bishop, however--"

Mouse's reaction to the Bishop's name was instantaneous. Wide-eyed, he backed up slightly. "Bishop Paracelsus?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to frighten you."

Laying her head back, she nervously fingered the fur which covered her. After Jacob had applied his poultice, then bandaged the hole in her shoulder left by the arrow, he'd dressed her in a simple white linen robe. It felt comforting. Clean. It reminded her of the way her life used to be, before the curse had turned her. More than that, for some odd reason, it gave her hope. Taking a deep breath, Catherine tried to lift herself up into a sitting position. Mouse immediately tried to help her.

"You're bleeding," he told her.

She didn't need to look down to know her wound had broken open again. The warmth was trickling down her chest.

"I don't know what Father Jacob gave me, but it really doesn't hurt that much right now." She tried to offer him a smile, but the look of surprise on the young man's face - half curiosity, half pure fear - stopped her. Drawing her arms around herself in a partial hug, Catherine tried to hide the shadows no longer hidden by the dark folds of fur.

Mouse swallowed hard. "Are you a girl?" he asked, re-phrasing his original question.

Now that her secret was out, Catherine found she couldn't stop shivering. Hanging her head as he held herself tighter, she nodded.

"Part girl. Part bird. Like Vincent. It never goes away - not entirely."

"Does he know? Lion man?"

Her laugh was brittle. "How could he not know?"

Mouse thought that one over, but the conclusion he managed to come to didn't make him happy. Rising to his feet, he turned to go, but was stopped by Catherine's next question.

"Is he ... is he taking us back to Aquila?"

"Now. Soon. To fight. To kill."

"Who? Paracelsus?" she gasped. "Why?"

Even in the dim candlelight his look of sadness and compassion was unmistakable. "Tired. Tired of the curse."

"But doesn't he realize that if he kills the Bishop, we'll remain like this for the rest of our lives?" Cold fear filled her heart when she finally understood Vincent's intent. He could see no other end to their suffering than to avenge the curse with Paracelsus' death.

"He loves you," Mouse told her, suddenly switching the subject.

"Mouse."

"Loves you. Bigger than big. Deeper than deep. Stronger than..."

She looked at him. A tiny smile of amusement touched her lips. "Strong?"

"The curse," he responded.

Catherine stared at him. Slowly, in little rivulets of realization, she began to understand. The coldness which had filled her, now spread throughout her body, followed by a paralyzing numbness that terrified her.

"Oh God. He's going to sacrifice himself!"

Mouse nodded at the sad fact.

"No!"

"Oh, but he is," came a voice from behind the young man. Jacob emerged into the faint light. His own weariness etched his face in dark lines. "He loves you so much, he's willing to give himself up to break the curse and allow you to spend the rest of your life back in human form."

**"NO!"** Catherine tried to rise but the agony coursing through her made her gasp. Tears filled her eyes, and she fell back, panting from the exertion, onto the pallet.

"You must stop him," Jacob ordered her.

"H - how? You know Vincent. You know nothing can stop him. What could I do?"

"There might be a way. In the meantime, however, we must follow along. Make him take us to Aquila."

"And then?"

Jacob took a deep breath. "Then, we'll pray we'll find the right answers."

\*\*\*\*\*

The edge of the sun would soon kiss the rim of the mountains. Catherine stared at the rays of light as the sky grew brighter, turning it from a deep royal purple, as shreds of orange and pink outlined the clouds. It would snow today; she could smell it.

Behind her, she could hear the priest and the thief arguing, as they labored to finish the hole they were digging in the snow. Their time was up; she prayed it would suffice.

She had to speak to Vincent. She had to convince him that his quest would not solve anything, but might make their predicament even worse. He wouldn't listen to Father Jacob or to Mouse, but he would listen to her... if God would grant her the chance.

"Catherine?"

She turned around just as the sound of a low, coughing roar came from over her shoulder, somewhere not far from them. Vincent was keeping a low profile in the dead scrub. Even without his human side when he was turned fully into the superb hunting beast, the lion was aware of something happening. It intrigued his natural curiosity, and kept him close to the encampment, when he normally would be loping across the fields.



Jacob heard the sound. He looked away, trying to catch sight of the animal, then glanced back at her. "We're done."

"Will it be big enough?"

"We can only pray."

"Wide enough, yes," Mouse interjected, brushing dirt and snow off his jacket. "Hurry. Get in." He held out a hand to help her down into the freezing hole when a fierce-sounding bellow came from behind them. The trio whirled around to see the tawny lion start across the narrow stretch of frozen water, coming toward them. The animal moved slowly as its claws tried to keep a sure footing on the slippery surface.

Without warning the ice beneath its hind feet popped, then cracked. A second later its footing evaporated, sending the animal into the frigid water underneath.

Catherine screamed, bolting toward the animal as it started to struggle to get out. Jacob yelled for her to stop as he raced after her.

Mouse's first instincts were to go with them, but years of listening to his own inner voice of reason made him stop. If they were going to get the huge animal out of the water, they needed a rope. And something to anchor the rope.

He ran for the wagon.

As fear overrode her reasoning, Catherine stepped on the ice, trying to reach the beast which floundered helplessly. Already she could see it was breathing heavily, tiring quickly as the deadly water sapped its strength.

Somewhere behind her she heard her name. Without warning a body tackled her, grabbing her by the calves and throwing her down. She hit the ice with the side of her face. Stunned, she tried to reach out toward Vincent as she felt herself being dragged backwards. Catherine screamed and tried to free her feet from the hands which clutched them.

**"Rope!"** a voice yelled at her. **"Take a rope!"**

She glanced up to see the sun sliding further up the mountains. In the east the sky was already brighter. The moon had begun to set and sat patiently waiting on the horizon for the rest of the stars to join it. The sigh caused her to panic further.

A body brushed by. She grabbed for it, felt the harsh bite of rope, and held on. Mouse took the lead, rushing toward the trapped animal as he finished tying the rope around his waist. He got down on his hands and knees and began to scoot across the breaking ice. His own fears were heightened by the double danger of either drowning in the freezing water, or being attacked by the terrified lion. Glancing back over his shoulder, he looked deep into Catherine's face. He had to reassure her he was willing to risk his own life to help her, but in return she had to promise she would protect him from the beast should he succeed. She paused, nodded slightly, and continued to pull herself hand-over-hand along the rope.

Reaching the jagged edge of ice, Mouse steadied himself as best he could, then reached out to grab two handfuls of the thick mane along the lion's back. The animal arched backwards when it felt itself being pulled. It tried to leap out of the water, clawing at the air in protest.

**"Mouse!"**

Catherine's cry came too late. The already damaged ice under the young man gave way, and he plunged head-first into the water. Instinctively, he retained his hold on the lion's mane with one hand and tried wrapping his other arm about the animal's neck. Both struggled to keep their heads above

water. If they slipped below the frozen surface, they would never draw another breath of air.

Mouse felt a jerk at his waist. Slowly they were drawn back to a more solid ice pack, but the going was tediously slow. Keeping his grip on the animal was becoming more dangerous, even as the animal's struggles grew weaker.

A pair of hands grabbed him under his armpits and tried to haul him upwards. The ice snapped like frozen tree limbs overburdened and too heavy to hold aloft, and Mouse slipped back under the cold, black water.

The struggling animal wriggled free of his grasp and somehow managed to turn itself around until it faced the young man trying to save it. Breaking the surface, Mouse tossed his head to clear the water from his eyes and found himself looking directly into golden yellow eyes. The lion stared back with an almost human expression of confusion.

"Mouse?"

Two enormous paws flayed upward. Mouse grabbed for them and held them, trying to keep them from coming any closer to his chest and stomach for fear they would rip him into tiny pieces.

The rope pulled him again. This time Mouse felt the ice rim dig into his back. He turned sideways to help himself crawl onto it when the lion shook itself. Its muscles were too strong for the young man to hold onto; Mouse lost his grip as he slid across the frozen surface. He threw himself backwards, burying his hands in the animal's wet fur, and pulled. It was like tugging on an impossibly heavy weight.

Catherine inched herself over the surface until she was even with the pair. The lion growled and tried to swipe at the arms enfolding him. Pushing away the young man, she wrapped herself as firmly as she could along the length of the lion's body, and held fast. Mouse took hold of the rope she'd fixed around her waist and started backwards, back toward more solid ground.

Firmly anchored along the shore, Father Jacob dug his heels into the snow and kept the ropes taut. Beads of perspiration rolled down his reddened face from the exertion.

It was a race against the rising sun, and for many minutes it looked as if the sun would win. Once the boy, Catherine and the beast had collapsed on the snow, panting heavily, Jacob urged Mouse to his feet so they could haul the semi-conscious animal to the hole they'd dug into the ground. The lion protested weakly, too overcome from the ordeal and the debilitating cold.

Catherine forced herself to follow them. After they laid the nearly unconscious lion into the depression, Jacob gave her a hand to help her as she climbed down into the hole.

Vincent lay on his side, facing away from her. Catherine stretched out behind him, pressing her legs, then the whole length of her body along his back, from neck to rump. Tiny ice crystals were forming in the thick pelt, making it feel as if he were wearing a thin sheet of armor. She ran gloved hands through the fur to break up the ice, pulling it out little bits at a time and flinging them into the snow.

How they'd managed to make it before the sun came up, was a miracle she didn't want to question, for fear of breaking the spell. The aurora was shimmering on the crests. With each passing second another ray of pure golden sunlight exploded toward the earth and showered the shivering ground with warmth.

One such ray fell in her direction. Catherine ducked down into the shadows of the pit. Not yet. She couldn't change. Not just yet.

She fell across the lion's ribs, startling it. Vincent raised his head and turned to look at her. Despite his pure animal appearance, there was a spark of humanity in his eyes. He huffed at her, blowing little

clouds of vapor into the dawn.

Catherine removed her glove and reached out to touch his face. Her fingertips brushed his whiskers, which were beginning to shrink back into the muzzle. Quietly she watched as the wheat-colored eyes darkened into a deep blue, and the irises rounded.

The long, lean body filled out; the shoulders widened as the arms and legs grew more defined. With each passing second, Vincent morphed from animal to man as the day gradually grew brighter.

Already Catherine could feel her muscles tensing. She knew her own turning would begin at any moment, if she already wasn't changing. She glanced down at her hand, nervously pulling off the other glove to compare.

"Not yet," she breathed. "Please ... please... just let me ... *please*..."

It had been years since they had gazed at each other, face to face, into eyes full of love and hope and promises of a future together. If there was even the slightest chance...

Vincent rolled over at the sound of her voice. Now fully back into his daylight form, he stared at her, stricken by the beauty of a face he'd only held in memory for the past two years.

Slender fingertips hovered near his face, almost touching, almost caressing. White lances of light kissed the nails and slid up to her knuckles. Her hands responded with a withering curve into the clutch of a claw. Talons sprouted.

"Catherine?"

"Vincent?" came the whispered response. Not now! *Not now!* She had to tell him! Please, dearest God, *she had to speak to him!*

Her green eyes darkened, enlarged. Her face grew compressed as her nose began to change shape and texture. The human expression of desperation crossed what remained of her human features. Her lips opened and closed repeatedly as she tried to tell him she still loved him, that she would always love him, and that he had to stop this awful quest for revenge, but the sounds would no longer come out.

***"Catherine! NO!"***

He grabbed for her, unmindful of the fact that his own hands still bore traces of his beastliness. It didn't matter, though. His thickened nails tore through air. Feathered wings beat against his face. A breath later the fully-developed hawk lifted herself out of the pit and headed toward the sunrise, leaving him behind.

Vincent screamed and launched himself after her. His agony was a fire-hot brand tearing through him, through his heart. Tears rolled down his cheeks.

He knew it was useless. He knew it had been a futile attempt. Yet he wasn't ashamed of having tried. The frustration and heartbreak, however, were more than he could bear at the moment. He buried his face in the snow along the lip of the pit until the cold numbed his face enough to allow him to pull the tattered edges of his emotions back together.

A small sound, like a sigh or the movement of cloth on cloth, came to him. It reminded him that he was not alone. Warily, he raised his head and looked in that direction. The Mouse stood several feet away, bundled tightly against the weather, but shivering nonetheless. Sunlight caught the glassy reflection of tears on his face.

"What?" Vincent croaked hoarsely.

"Time to go," the young man murmured. He sniffled and wiped his nose on the sleeve of his robe.

Sighing, Vincent laid his head back down on the ground. "Yes, I know." But it was several more minutes before he finally crawled from the pit to get dressed.

As Vincent wordlessly pulled on his black leather armor, Mouse went back to the pit to retrieve the clothing Catherine had worn. As he picked up the cape, a single feather drifted onto his foot. Picking it up, he examined it closely, noticing how its chestnut color looked so much like the color of Catherine's hair.

"Mouse, what's taking you so long?" Jacob admonished him from the wagon.

"Coming now!" Still twirling the feather in his fingers, he sniffed it, then tucked it into his pocket.

They were only a day's journey from Aquila.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Tell me again."

Jacob glanced over to where the young woman sat on the driver's seat beside him. With the darkness surrounding them, and the black cape completely covering her, she seemed more like an ethereal shape than a living human being.

He gave the reins a slap along the old donkey's back to keep the animal in step. "There hasn't been a day gone by that I haven't prayed for forgiveness," he bluntly said. "There hasn't been a night when I haven't heard the winds wailing around the walls, and thought it was him. There hasn't been a day when I spotted some bird soaring overhead and believed it was you.

"I've prayed until my knees bled. I've scourged myself until I fell exhausted on the altar. I refused to give up hope, because I believed that in time God would forgive me. And he has. He has forgiven me, praise the Lord Almighty.

"Soon. Very soon, there will come a day without a night, and a night without a day. And when that comes to pass, you and Vincent will face each other once more in your human forms."

"It makes no sense," Catherine interjected.

"To us it makes no sense. But it's God's Word. In time we will come to understand it."

"What makes you so certain this night without day and day without night will happen in Aquila?"

"I don't," he admitted, bowing his head.

He had spent the entire day trying to convince Vincent that his quest to kill Bishop Paracelsus was foolhardy, if not dangerous. The lion man seemed distracted as he listened patiently, almost giving the priest no more attention than he would an annoying fly.

At dusk, the ex-Captain of the guard had climbed down from his horse and tied the stallion to the back of the wagon before climbing into the back of the vehicle where a sturdy cage awaited him. It was part of Vincent's plan to obtain entrance through the outer gates of Aquila. But before he changed into his beastly form, he warned Jacob that he had better find himself inside the city walls when dawn broke, or he would rip the man's head from his shoulders. Jacob knew he spoke the truth so when Catherine joined him in the seat, he was ready with answers. Or, at least, with what answers he could give her.

Catherine stared ahead. The fires of the city were visible from the road. In a few short hours they would be within hailing distance.

In the bed of the wagon, came the muffled snores from one tired little Mouse. Beside him lay the giant golden lion inside his cage of strong wood. A pair of yellow eyes swung up in her direction when she

turned to glance behind, but the beast never moved otherwise.

She turned around and settled her cape back over her legs to protect them from the chill. As she had predicted to herself the evening before, faint flakes of snow were beginning to fall sporadically.

"Vincent will not wait around for your day-night to occur," she commented.

"He won't have to wait long," said Jacob.

"How long is long? A day? A week? A fortnight?" She threw her hands into the air in hopeless resignation. "There is no end to this, Father! Why are you so determined? Why must you insist on something that simply cannot be? Haven't we suffered enough? Haven't we been punished long enough? And for what? Because we love each other!"

"But it can be, Catherine! God has spoken to me. God has told me he has forgiven me. And in forgiving me, has told me how to break the evil placed upon you by the Bishop."

"Don't you understand, my dear? You and Vincent are instrumental to my salvation. God knew that whatever fate befell you, you and Vincent could handle it. You would be able to persevere, and come out of it with a love grown richer and stronger than ever."

"But what did we do to deserve this?" she cried softly. "Why did we have to endure this torment? Do you have even the slightest idea of what we've gone through?"

In the back of the wagon the lion growled softly. He was sensitive to the woman's emotions, and responded to them at the most basic level.

Jacob shook his head. Unconsciously, he reached for her hands and clutched them, his large warm palm encasing her slender, icy cold fingers. "No, I don't have any idea of what you've endured. But I know that what my imagination has conjured in no way reflects the whole truth. In some instances, I may have envisioned far worse. In other ways, less. Either way, I have suffered along with you, if not in actuality, at least mentally, emotionally, and in spirit." He squeezed her hands before releasing them. "If it takes my last breath, Catherine, I promise I will atone for my sin against you and Vincent."

He gave the donkey another slap of the reins, saying no more as they approached the road leading to the city.

Catherine withdrew into herself, retreating into prayer.

In the back of the wagon, the caged lion eyed the snoring figure lying just out of reach. Hunger burned in the pit of its stomach.

It would be a long, long night.

\*\*\*\*\*

A single cloud moved across the sky. The sun was a huge brass coin hanging just above the rooftops, sending streams of heat and light to every dark corner. There would be no snow today.

Vincent finished pulling on his gloves, flexing his fingers until they fit snugly into their pockets. Somewhere above, the hawk brushed her wings against the warming air. She was safe inside the city's compound. No one would dare send an arrow into a bird with jesses tied to its legs; only noblemen owned such birds, and the punishment for killing a nobleman's property often was death.

There had been no problem gaining entry into the city the night before. Jacob had maneuvered the wagon into a small alley close to the cathedral but out of immediate sight. Once dawn had arrived, Vincent had changed back into human form, to find the Mouse deep in slumberland in the bed of the wagon, and the priest fighting sleep while propped against the side of the wagon, close to the cage, yet out of harm's way. Vincent had awakened the man who quickly released him.

"Today's the Day of Atonement," Jacob whispered as he handed over the armor that had been hidden underneath the accoutrements in his wagon. "Paracelsus is due to bless all the priests from the parishes at noon. When the bells announcing Sext are rung, the priests will leave the cathedral. The Bishop will return to his private chambers to pray."

"When will be the best time to confront him?" Vincent asked.

Jacob paused. Seeing the old man's discomfort, Vincent's face grew stern. *"Nothing you can say will deter me from what I have to do,"* he stated bitterly.

"Will you not wait for the sign God has said he will deliver?"

"Wait until what? God hasn't spoken to you. You've gone daft. *That* I understand. Now, where is Goliath?" Leaning over the wagon, he gave the Mouse a rude shake. "Awaken, little man. I have a favor to ask."

"In the stables on the other side of this alley. Vincent, listen to me! Please do not attempt to kill Paracelsus," Jacob pleaded one last time. "Confront him if you must. Demand to remove the curse of you think it will do any good. But do not, *do not* kill your only hope for happiness. Think of Catherine."

The Mouse slowly sat up, rubbing his eyes and yawning. Vincent turned his attention to the young man.

"Can you get me into the cathedral?"

"Doors will be locked."

"Can you unlock them?"

"Can try. Use a pick. Done it before, but not those doors."

"You must unlock them before the bells ring at noon. I have to challenge Paracelsus, and I must do it before witnesses." Vincent straightened up and found, to his surprise, that he was breathing heavily. "They have to see the evil in that man. They must be forced to face the blackness that has filled the Bishop's soul." Giving the young man's shoulders another shake, Vincent said. "You must do this for me, little thief. This is all I will ever ask of you."

Solemnly, the Mouse nodded. Climbing out of the back of the wagon, he gave one final look at both Vincent and the priest, then began trotting down the alley in a direction away from the cathedral. Vincent started to call him back but Jacob quickly quieted him.

"Trust him. He knows what he's doing. You must also keep silent. The guards cannot know you're here. Not yet, anyway. You must remain in the shadows if you're to have any chance at seeing Paracelsus. The man is as cunning as he is evil, and he will certainly have many men around for protection."

A shrill scream came from above them. The two men looked up to see the hawk circling slowly overhead. Vincent gave a whistle, holding out his arm as a perch, and the bird immediately settled on his glove. Quickly he pulled the tiny hood over the hawk's face before handing the animal over to Jacob.

Open-mouthed, the priest accepted the bird.

"You're the only person who can protect her now," Vincent told him. "If i should fail..." He reached inside the saddlebags which the priest had kept. Finding the little knife Catherine often used when she changed, he pressed the dagger into Jacob's palm. "If I should fail, if the bells ring at the end of the mass, you'll know I've failed. At that moment, you must think of Catherine. And, please ... make it swift."

Tears shimmered in the lion man's eyes. Gently, Vincent pressed a kiss to the breast of the bird, which chirped softly in response. Turning his back on them both, he strode quickly away. Jacob watched him go, numb with sadness.

The hawk adjusted her stance on the priest's arm and chirped again. It sounded forlorn, as if she knew she had been abandoned.

"It'll be all right, little one," Jacob tried to reassure her. "I'll protect you. Let's hope God's miracle happens before all is truly lost."

\*\*\*\*\*

In the square before the great doors of the cathedral, Vincent waited for the right moment in which to enter the inner sanctuary. Around the market area, people were running, hiding in their homes, as word spread like an uncomfortable fire that the ex-Captain of the guard had returned to Aquila.

He saw the look of terror in their eyes as he rode into the market. A giant lion of a man, wearing the shiny black armor of the guard, and sitting astride an equally enormous black stallion. Almost like an entity from Hell, where man and beast had been fused, and it was difficult to tell where one creature ended and the other started.

In the cold Spring morning, the sun blazed along the highly polished surfaces of his body, and the wind threw his thick, tawny hair away from a face disfigured from the curse. Vincent turned his visage toward all who were there, wanting finally for them to see and to understand what Paracelsus had done to him; wanting all to no longer rely on heresy and gossip, but to view in the flesh the devastation wrought by the evil Bishop.

He lifted the heavy helmet, holding it in his hands as he stared at the steel plates which would conceal his face. For a moment he weighed the pros and cons of wearing it into the cathedral. In the end he pulled the ungainly piece over his head, then slid his sword from its scabbard, as Goliath brought them closer to the cathedral.

Behind him the townspeople had started to gather. Their angry cries pounded against his back until Vincent whirled around to face them, and found, to his shocked surprise, their vehemence directed not at him, but toward the cathedral. Toward the Bishop. Toward all the injustices and cruelties the man had inflicted upon them, their kinsmen, and their lives for the past two decades.

It would all come to a head today. Now. Upon the shoulders of a man who'd sworn his allegiance to the Church and still stood by it - and not by the man who had sold his soul to Satan. Today, Vincent wouldn't speak for just himself and Catherine. He would speak for all of Aquila, for her people, and for God's justice.

In the back of his mind Vincent could hear Father Jacob's dire prediction. *The darkness must be eradicated. Evil must not ever, EVER take hold in our holy church. It must be yanked out by the roots and destroyed. Burned. Otherwise, it will rot everything. Everything. And nothing will ever grow there again,*

Goliath reared impatiently. The crowd was making him nervous, and he already was shivering with anticipation for battle. Vincent leaned over the animal's neck.

"Soon, old friend. Soon."

Vincent signaled the horse to begin advancing toward the doors. The stallion pranced, its muscles tensed and ready to bolt forward at the tiniest signal from his master.

Vincent glanced upward, hoping to catch one last sight of the beautiful bird that was Catherine, even though he knew she was being kept safe from harm by the priest. It was difficult to swallow his

disappointment.

Suddenly, from his left, a guard on horseback charged him. Standing in his stirrups, Vincent dispatched him with a single blow from his sword. As the man slumped dead to the ground, the lion man continued forward.

A second guard came forward. This one, however, Vincent knew. He was a good man. A family man, and a friend. He blocked the swing, pressing the blade against the guard's chest, and whispered. "I don't want to kill you."

"I must do my duty," Hector hissed back. There was no trace of anger in the voice. Only the strain of the dilemma he was facing. Kill a friend, and possibly the only being capable of stopping the Bishop? Or be killed?

The moment of hesitation was enough for Vincent. A huge fist met the side of the guard's helmet, and the man was knocked unconscious. Confused, the guard's horse remained standing where it was.

Goliath neighed a warning. Turning back around in his saddle, Vincent saw three more guards advancing. The stallion whinnied again and lifted itself onto its rear legs as it cleaved the air with its front hooves. The guards stopped, their weapons raised, when the giant wooden doors of the cathedral blew open, knocking aside the men and their horses. A small blond figure clung to the handle as the portals flew apart. Vincent gave a small salute to the little thief.

Goliath immediately bolted for the entrance. Stunned by the events, the guards did not challenge Vincent as he swept by them.

The stallion's hooves rang on the stone floor of the cathedral like the inside of an empty metal barrel. The sound echoed up to the arched roof, and spread out along the walls, where the gathered priests and dignified parishioners had retreated.

Vincent continued to advance. Every bone, every muscle, every nerve was tense with expectation. Paracelsus would not give up easily. And there was no way Vincent could foresee whatever darkness the man would conjure up in order to protect himself.

The Bishop watched, unmoving, as the lion man grew closer. Through the open doors sunlight flowed in and illuminated the many columns supporting the church's roof. Columns of carved stone bearing the likeness of a hawk and a beast previously unknown to the people of Aquila - a lion.

The sunlight also caught the white robes of the Bishop, glittering over the golden threads woven into his miter, and extended down from the cap into the collar and sleeves of his cope.

Yet nothing had prepared Vincent for the hideous gold mask which covered the entire left side of the Bishop's face. The sight made him draw on the reins, bringing the horse to a halt in the middle of the sanctuary. The monstrosity behind the mask had been a small price for the Bishop to pay when he'd sworn his life to the devil.

"I should bid you welcome," Paracelsus intoned, "When you obviously are not. I suspect, however, that you've come to kill me. Perhaps believing that by doing so you will break whatever evil has inflicted you and the poor girl."

"You know what that evil is, Paracelsus!" Vincent called out. "You're a boil on the face of the church. You're the evil which has infected us and this city. I've come only as a symbol of what God has planned for you."

"Really now." Paracelsus walked forward, further into the light, until the richness of his adornments glowed. He watched, pleased with himself, at the response of those gathered along the walls, as they shrank further against the stones and crossed themselves.



"You're in the house of the Lord," the Bishop continued. "You're on my territory."

"Then prepare to defend it," Vincent ordered.

"And what do you think you'll accomplish if you're so lucky to be rid of me? Do you believe that my death will restore things as they once were? That you'll become a man again? That Catherine... Catherine..." Paracelsus paused. He relished her name on his tongue. With his mouth he caressed the word, the syllables, the inflection.

He quickly snapped out of his reverie and turned black eyes back toward the lion man. "My death will accomplish nothing. Nothing... except to ensure your fate... and hers. Nothing will change. Nothing will go back to what it was. Nothing. Am I making myself clear?"

"Perfectly."

With slow and deliberate movements, Vincent urged the horse forward as he twirled the heavy sword over his head and settled into a striking stance.

The helmet proved its worthlessness as the tip of another blade passed within a hair's distance from his face and neck. Goliath uttered a shrill scream as the sword bit into the leather saddle, through the thick layers, and buried part of the edge into the animal's flesh.

With a roar, Vincent threw away the headpiece, knocking the sword from the saddle, and he turned to face his new adversary.

Marquet steadied his horse as he stared at the lion man's face. Blood drained from his skin, and he felt his hands turn colder than the steel of his blade. With a sudden burst of energy, he screamed and charged the man with upraised sword.

***"Spawn of demons!"***

Vincent parried the swing, meeting him thrust for thrust. Marquet had been his best lieutenant, his best swordsman. After he had been exiled from Aquila, Marquet had been tapped to be the new Captain of the Bishop's guards.

Like Vincent before him, he had sworn his life to the service of the church. Yet, unlike Vincent, he had been blind to Paracelsus' evil ways. To him, Vincent's return was a threat to overthrow both his position and the church itself. His unwillingness to relinquish his standing in the guards was fueled by his religious fervor.

Vincent felt the man's blows down to his bones. He took the defensive, hoping the man would tire himself out. Yet Marquet kept at it, beating sword against sword, looking for a weakness, a sign of resignation, anything which would tell him the end was almost near.

At one point, Vincent's weapon clipped the leg of Marquet's mount. The horse went down, throwing Marquet out of his saddle. Knowing his own horse was injured, Vincent took the fight to ground level.

Rolling to one side, Vincent tried to dodge an unexpected swipe at his head. Marquet turned and brought the tip straight down, aiming for the gut. Vincent grabbed a handful of the man's cape and pulled. The jerk threw Marquet off-balance. He fell to one knee and ducked, just as Vincent's sword glanced off the side of his helmet.

Frustrated, Marquet removed his own headgear, and with a cry of irritation, threw it as far away from him as he could. His aim, however, was wild. The headpiece soared lazily up toward the vaulted ceiling, toward the century-old stained glass window overlooking the sanctuary.

The sound of broken glass was like tiny bells exploding in song. Bits of broken rainbows showered onto the stone floor, and the sun blazed behind the opening. Both men were oblivious to the distant

rumble of thunder.

They circled each other, parrying and thrusting, using all the wiles and wisdom gained from battle to overthrow the other. Marquet's advantage lay in the fact that he had kept his skills honed to perfection the past two years, while Vincent had unsheathed his weapon only a handful of times. Yet there was something which made Vincent superior in both cunning and ability.

He was no longer just a man. He was half a man. And half lion. Together, he was stronger, more agile, and could endure more than any mortal being. His fierceness overrode all fear of defeat or dying. His need for justice outpaced his thirst for revenge.

It wasn't long before Marquet realized he was totally outmatched. At that moment, the battle shifted, and Vincent went from being defensive to offensive.

No longer the aggressor, Marquet started to pray for a quick end to the conflict. He was not afraid, but he understood that if he wasn't able to stop the lion man, then nothing would remain in the way of the man's need to reach the Bishop.

He renewed his attack. Steel on steel clanged in harsh harmony. Once more thunder growled overhead. Unnoticed by all, the sky began to darken.

Vincent pivoted on one foot and kept his sword low, aiming for a non-vital spot. He did not want to kill Marquet, even though the man wanted him dead. His fight was not with the Captain of the guard, but with the Bishop. To reach the Bishop, though, he had to kill or disable the man long enough to go after Paracelsus.

It was as if God's Hand made that decision for him.

Marquet made a two-handed swing upward, hoping to catch the man in the groin. Vincent hopped backwards to avoid the stroke, when his feet went out from under him. He crashed to the floor, pinning his own weapon beneath him.

He rolled quickly, praying he was fast enough to dodge what would surely be Marquet's next move.

Bringing the sword over his head, Marquet stepped onto Vincent's cape, stopping the lion man from completing his roll, and brought the tip of his weapon straight down toward the man's heart.

The jerk on his cape was unexpected, yet his equilibrium continued to move. As a result, Vincent's sword rolled away from underneath him. The tip rose along his ribs.

Marquet leaned forward, putting all his weight into the killing thrust.

Vincent continued to roll, letting his sword follow behind him.

A look of surprise crossed Marquet's face as the sword sliced into his abdomen, under his ribcage, and exited through his back. He coughed, dropping his weapon as his hands sought the blade buried in him.

Vincent continued rolling and smoothly leaped to his feet. He watched the dying man with great sadness. He hadn't deserved to die. He didn't deserve, at least, this kind of death - protecting the vilest of men.

Thunder rumbled again. This time it was loud enough to attract attention.

Vincent glanced up at the broken window. Something was going to happen. He shivered, unable to name the worry growing inside.

***"Geeeeet hiiim!"***

Vincent crouched, bared his inhuman teeth, and roared. The sound echoed through every corner of

the room, and sent the congregation pressing harder along the walls.

A full dozen soldiers, who had been watching Marquet's defeat from the sidelines, charged at the sound of the Bishop's order. Several engaged him, beating ineffectively against such a terrifying entity, while the others retreated, crossing themselves in fright.

Vincent beat them away with little effort. Standing with his feet spread and blood dripping off his armor, the lion man turned to face the man who suddenly didn't seem so sure of himself.

Slowly, deliberately, Vincent advanced toward the Bishop. His only weapons were his clawed, deformed hands.

"Better think again what you're about to do," Paracelsus said quickly, backing away from the dais where he'd watch the fight. "Kill me and you kill any hope of being human again. Kill me and you kill... Catherine."

The Bishop's attention was suddenly drawn toward the bell tower ropes at the far end of the hall. Vincent saw his distraction and whirled around to see a guard begin to toll a single warning bell which would bring countless more soldiers to the sanctuary. If that happened, all would be lost, and the Bishop would have won again. Forever.

He ran toward the guard, scooping up Marquet's fallen sword. Bringing his arm back behind his head, Vincent aimed in one heartbeat and threw the sword as hard as his incredible strength would allow.

The weapon found its mark. The guard crumbled, pitching forward. But to Vincent's horror, the body tangled in the ropes, and the man's weight was enough to start the bells tolling.

The townspeople would hear the toll, thinking it was time for noon prayers.

The guards would come to the church.

And Jacob... Jacob would think Vincent had failed in his quest.

Shaking at the realization, Vincent blinked hot tears that raced down his face. Gasping for breath, he nearly stumbled; his legs felt as if they would no longer support him. "Make it quick, Father. P--- please."

"You've lost, Vincent. You'll always lose when you try to beat me, because when you fight me, you fight the holy Roman church."

He turned back around to stare at the deranged man holding the crozier.

***"How dare you blaspheme the name of this place by comparing it to you!"*** Vincent began to walk toward the man. ***"How dare you think that you are invincible. How dare you believe that you are above all the laws of this land."***

His pace grew quicker. His anger grew hotter. With furrowed brow, Vincent launched himself toward the man.

***"How dare you think you can control people's lives. How dare you use the powers of Satan himself to punish those who would defy you!"***

Fury built inside him like a force of nature. With clenched fists he started running toward his enemy.

Thunder loomed overhead. The sanctuary shook before going dark, as black as the night.

Vincent was unaware of the change until he reached Paracelsus. He grabbed a handful of the Bishop's robes, and it was then he saw that the man's wide-eyed gaze was directed over his shoulder.

Jerking around, Vincent stared, rapt, through the broken window as the sun continued to darken, all

light blotted out. Light and heat vanished, leaving the interior of the church cold and hushed. Vincent shuddered.

*A day without a night, and a night without a day.* "Jacob... Jacob... what have I done?"

"Indeed. What have you done?" the voice behind him echoed.

Vincent roared at the sound of Paracelsus' ridicule. Lifting the man until his feet no longer touched the floor, the lion man raised his free hand and drew it back. It would be a single blow meant to maim and kill in the most painful and ugly way. And then it would all be over.

"Vincent?"

The murdering hand stayed, frozen in mid-air. Vincent felt his heart stop beating.

Unable to believe, he lowered the Bishop back to his feet and slowly turned to face the sound his mind refused to trust.

In the dim light provided by the candelabra surrounding the sanctuary, a slender form took a step forward. A hand reached out in his direction. Golden light cast its glow over features long-buried in his dreams.

"Vincent..."

"Ca---Catherine?"

A hand smeared with gore reached out toward her. His mind tried to convince him it was all a lie, but his heart knew the truth. Tears blurred his vision.

Like a vengeful demon, Vincent threw the Bishop onto the floor and thrust his face nose-to-nose with the man.

**"LOOK AT ME!"**

Unable to ignore the command, Paracelsus stared into the lion man's unblinking eyes.

Vincent waited for several heartbeats, then thrust a finger in the woman's direction.

**"LOOK AT HER!"**

Paracelsus obeyed and stared at the woman, caught in the grip of something he could neither explain nor refuse.

Not breaking his gaze, Vincent backed away, half-crawling across the floor until he was directly in line with her.

"Now... **LOOK AT US!"**

Several long seconds passed. Seconds quiet with tension, with hope and reality. A shaft of weak sunlight landed on the floor a few feet away from where the once-cursed couple stood. It grew brighter and wider, and through the broken window the sun could be seen emerging from behind the blackness which almost swallowed it forever.

For a moment the man and the woman shimmered. Finally, as the light broke over them both, their forms solidified. Permanent.

Somehow Vincent managed to find his way over to where she stood. At the last moment he collapsed at her feet, overcome by everything that had happened.

Gentle fingers touched his hair, then his face. It was as if she imparted her strength to him, giving him the energy to grasp her hands.

Slowly, Catherine brought the bloody hands to her lips and kissed them. Vincent raised his head to finally gaze into her eyes, watching as her expression turned to stone.

Releasing her hands from his grasp, she walked toward the Bishop with a singleness of purpose. This was her chance now to let the man know what the last two years had cost her, and nothing would rob her of it.

Paracelsus smiled. He was unable to explain why both transformations had occurred, but never doubted his superiority over them. His glee was short-lived when she stopped before him and held out her hands. In them she carried the jesses and hood she'd been forced to wear the past two years. Disgustedly, she dropped them at the Bishop's feet, then deliberately turned her back on the man and started to walk away.

It was over. Shock ran through him, burning him, mocking him. Paracelsus gripped his crozier in disbelief. Pain centered in his gut, eating away at his very soul.

*It was over!*

"No," he murmured. "It can't be." Dragging himself with the scepter, he cried out in denial. ***"It can't be!"*** Shaking his head, he tried to tear his eyes away from the couple about to reunite.

This wasn't right. This wasn't the way it was supposed to end. Vincent wasn't supposed to win. Vincent wasn't supposed to have Catherine. Catherine was *his!* Catherine had *always* been meant for him!

"You're mine!" the Bishop called out. "Listen to me! Mine! *Mine!*"

At the last moment he called upon all remaining shreds of power left to him by the demons of Hell. Called upon their black and evil strength to regain what should have been his. Straightening up, Paracelsus grabbed his crozier to aim the sharpened deadly end at the back of the retreating woman. If he couldn't have Catherine...

***"Then no man shall!"***

His scream of domination was answered by a roar of undeniable hatred. Marquet's sword flew through the air to pierce the Bishop's heart, the blow pinning the man to the altar behind him. In a solitary moment it was finished. It was done.

Catherine gasped, then started to tremble. Vincent rushed to her side to keep her from falling. As they made contact, the world ceased to be.

"Is it really you?" he whispered. He started to wipe her tears from her cheeks when he saw his hands. Horrified, he reached for his face, but she stopped him.

"It's all right."

"My face..."

"Is you," she smiled, still weeping. "Look at me. Touch me. Feel me." She clasped his cheek, his shoulder, then laid her hand on his chest where his heart was galloping.

"But, I'm still a beast. A monstrosity."

"The curse is lifted. We're alive, and we have the rest of our lives together now."

"Catherine, how could you bear to be with a man who is no longer a man?" Vincent continued to protest.

She shook her head. "Could you live with a woman who is no longer a woman?" she answered.

At his puzzled look, she stepped away, then lifted her arms toward the ceiling, throwing back her

head as if she were about to fly away. The skin attaching her arms to her body, from armpit to waist, was covered with delicate downy feathers that changed from russet to golden brown in the sunlight.

"The curse is lifted," she repeated. "But we still have each other. We'll always have each other."

"I love you, Catherine," Vincent breathed, almost choking. "As God as my witness, I never stopped loving you."

"Nor I, you. Vincent. My Vincent." Her voice softened as she clung to him, wrapping her arms about his neck. Her movements were jerky, desperate, afraid something might still come between them.

Vincent held her tightly, lifting her off the ground, not caring if the other priests and parishioners in the church saw or heard them. "Forgive me if I cannot accept what has happened just yet. Forgive me if I cannot..."

"Ssshhhhh." Catherine placed a finger over his lips until he stopped. Then she removed the digit and replaced it with her own mouth.

Neither one heard the cheers ringing through the church and all of Aquila.

It was a miracle.

\*\*\*\*\*

Mouse fell to the ground in an exhausted heap beneath the enormous oak tree which bordered the road. The fresh green grass smelled clean and inviting, and he buried his face in it to breathe its scent.

He had not stopped running since he'd left Aquila, until now. His legs ached from the exertion; his lungs felt ready to explode. Dizzy and a little disoriented, he threw himself onto his back and gazed up at the scattered bits of blue sky visible between the leaves and branches.

It was late in the evening. The city was far away. A few weeks ago, he would have sworn never to go back there. Never ever again.

Now...

He felt inside his pants pocket for the feather he'd put there days ago. Pulling it out, he sniffed it again. It was still there. Her smell. Still clinging to the fragile pinion like a memory.

He smiled. It was all he had to remind him of what had taken place. Of the miracle that happened today in the cathedral. He decided memories were wonderful things, and more wonderful things would come from them.

*See this? This feather? Have a story to tell you. Good story. Better than good. Story filled with love and danger and magic. Wanna hear it?*

Running the quill along his chin, Mouse sighed contentedly. It was a very good story, and one people would talk about for years and years to come.

And he would be the one to bring it to the people to hear. It might even make him famous one day. Smiling, he realized he had made lifetime friends, and he would never have to fear again. All because of a single feather.

"Okay, fine," he murmured happily. "Okay.... good."

END