

WHEN DREAMS COLLIDE

by Lisa K Wildman

"Father....," Vincent pleaded. "Don't you recognize me?" Fear and confusion racked his voice. Tears filled his eyes as he looked to Father, beseeching an answer.

Father stood before him, shock and disbelief filled his aging, bearded face. The voice *'was'* Vincent's; he could not mistake that, but this.... this *'man'* before him, with normal manly features.... it was an obvious ruse, a tasteless trick this person was playing, and Father was anything but amused.

"Enough!" he said. "Enough of this game!" Father's eyes searched the room, seeking his son's hiding place. "Vincent! I am not at all impressed with this charade." He turned back to the man before him. "Who are you, young man, and *'what'* are you doing here?"

Jacob's voice was stern, angry, and confused, but in his eyes was unmistakable fear. Father knew that even the most skilled plastic surgeon, using the most advanced equipment, could never transform his son into the handsome man he saw, much less do it overnight.

Vincent sighed, just a whisper of a word passing through his lips. "Father." The massive form slumped into a highbacked chair, the weight of his body apparently more than he could bear. "I don't understand what has happened to me, Father. I'm frightened, confused. What must I do to convince you that this is not a trick?"

Father stumbled backwards, catching himself on the edge of his cluttered desk. His hand instinctively found his chin, thoughtfully rubbing his graying beard. He stood, transfixed by the anguished young man slumped in the chair. The hair was similar to Vincent's; it was of the same tawny color, only shorter and curlier. The chin and bottom lip were strikingly like Vincent's own. A mustache graced the upper lip, the nose was strong and masculine, the forehead high and noble. But two physical qualities were uniquely Vincent's; the beautiful topaz blue eyes and whispery baritone voice. A voice that was now strained with doubt and trepidation, and eyes that glistened with tears.

"How?" Father said helplessly.

"I.... I don't know." Vincent lifted his head slightly. "But you *'do'* believe that it's I?"

"I'm not entirely sure *'what'* to believe. You *'sound'* like Vincent. And many of your features appear much as I have always believed Vincent's would have been, if...." Even with Father's extensive vocabulary, he was at a loss for a word less harsh than *'normal'*.

Instead, Vincent spared him the search. "You mean you think I look normal? Like a *'man'*, Father? I look like a real man!"

Vincent rose to his full height, a smile crossed his newly formed lips, and the smile revealed beautiful, gleaming white teeth where canine fangs had been.

"Have you seen yourself yet?"

"Yes. When I woke this morning, I *'felt'* different. My hand went to my face and every feature had changed. When I dressed, my body was.... my clothing still fit, but differently. I came here immediately. And after seeing your reaction to me, I know now that I don't want to see more."

"No." Father's voice regained its usual confidence, he didn't want to alarm his son further. "You look different, yes. But only that, different. I believe Shakespeare said it best...."

"*'A rose by any other name'....?*" Vincent supplied the quote.

"Yes." Father went to a heavily laden shelf behind him and retrieved a small silver hand mirror and handed it to Vincent. "Before you look, hear me well. The image of a man is only the reflection of his soul. For that reason, if for no other, Vincent, you have always been beautiful. Because of your beautiful spirit, you receive the love and respect of all the people here, and Catherine loves you for who you are within, not what you appear to be. Now, my son, behold.... the rose."

Vincent held the delicate mirror, marvelling at the bare skin on the back of his hand. Where once a heavy coating of fur had been, now only a few fine strands of hair grew. Slowly, he brought the mirror to his face. Inhaling sharply, Vincent gazed upon his new face for the first time. It was unquestionably the face of a man.

He was silent. His hand touched his features with awe. He was at once excited and confused.

"How can this be?"

The smile on Vincent's lips belied his heavy heart, for the first thought that came into his head was of the reaction that Catherine would have to his new appearance. It would either be a blessing or his damnation. His mind feared the worst, but his heart held the highest hopes.

"Indeed, it appears to be the result of forces beyond our comprehension. How do you feel? Physically? Emotionally?" The physician in Jacob had stepped forward to relieve the confusion of the father.

"Numb."

"Understandably so. Now, how shall we handle this situation?"

Vincent laid down the mirror. His eyes now focused clearly on Father. How *'would'* they explain this sudden change to the rest of their *'family'*, and to Catherine?

"May I make a very difficult suggestion, Vincent?"

"At this point, I'll take whatever solution you can offer. I never imagined that a normal appearance would pose a problem. I always believed that it would solve all of them!"

"Yes....," Father sighed. He walked toward Vincent and laid a hand on his son's broad shoulder. "It may be best to keep this to ourselves for the time being."

"But.... Father...."

"Listen to me." Jacob's voice filled with paternal sternness.

"How do you propose to make explanations for this sudden, drastic change in your appearance? It will alarm and confuse the entire community. The children will suddenly swear that you have been a *'prince'* all along, just waiting for the kiss of the princess. The others, however, will be hard-pressed to believe this transformation. Not to mention the fear it may invoke."

"Then what will you tell them? Surely someone will ask where I've gone. How will you explain the sudden appearance of a stranger? And tell me, Father, what of Catherine? What am I to tell her? This change may prove to be more of a curse than I realized."

Vincent wanted to explode with a powerful roar; to release the pent-up emotion. His heart pounded, and his ribs felt tight; causing his chest to ache. But no roar came; only the heavy-hearted moan of a man in torment.

"You often take journeys alone into the tunnels, inspecting, making maps, wandering off to meditate. The community will not be difficult to handle, at least for a short time. Catherine, however, presents another problem altogether. As would your sudden '*appearance*' here, considering that we rarely take in new residents without the approval of the Council. I'm afraid that there would be some who would become suspicious once they truly listened to your voice, or looked into your eyes. No, as much as I hate to say this, we must keep this secret for a time, until we have a chance to examine all the possible ramifications."

"Then what.... what am I to do? Where am I to go?" Vincent could hardly contain the tears welling in his eyes. His beastly form had made him an outcast in the world Above. Now his human form threatened to exile him from his home. The pain was incredible.

"Catherine!" Father's tone was hopeful. "We must get word to Catherine. Perhaps she will allow you to stay with her until we solve this situation, or at least determine how we'll handle the questions. Go to your chamber, Vincent. Pack a few things. I will send word to Catherine."

Father's mind was whirling, planning, until he realized that his words might make Vincent feel that he was being banished. Father put his arms around his son. "Don't be afraid. This is still your home. You are still my son and dearest friend, nothing can ever change that, Vincent, nothing. Just think, you will experience the sunlight and the city; you will have the opportunity to share time, unrestricted, with Catherine. Don't fret; all will be well."

"But how do we '*explain*' this sudden change to Catherine?"

"We can offer no explanation. But considering the bond the two of you share, I'm sure she will have no doubt of who you are. We must confide in '*someone*', and Catherine is the obvious choice."

"I understand." Vincent didn't want Father to realize that he felt that he would be leaving the tunnel community without a protector. "I'll go and pack immediately, but.... you must promise me one thing, Father."

"Anything."

"If, for any reason, there is a '*need*' for me, promise to send for me at once."

"You have my word."

"What will you tell Catherine?"

"I'm not entirely sure as of yet. But I will handle it. You must get busy; we have little time before everyone is awake and moving about."

Without further exchange of words, Vincent made his way back to his chamber, anxiety and excitement filling his spirit.

Father sat down at his desk and wrote a note to Catherine, then tapped on the pipes to alert the

runner on duty - there was always someone available to take messages to the Helpers Above at a moment's notice. Father secretly hoped that today it would be someone who would ask little and move quickly.

Kipper appeared at the head of the stairs leading to Father's study. "Yes, Father," he said eagerly.

"Take this to Catherine. And Kipper - run as you have never run before. Tell her it's urgent."

"Yes, Father." The small boy snatched the note from Father's hand and dashed out of the chamber like a desert jackrabbit.

Catherine was busily working on a brief when she felt someone watching her. She peered over the stack of case files to find a small boy gazing at her.

"Kipper!" she whispered. "What is it?"

"Father said to give this to you." The child handed the note to her, it was rumpled from being crammed in his pocket.

After reading the note, she looked up at Kipper, confusion spreading over her face. "Tell Father I will be there at once. And Kipper, don't mention my coming to anyone. Do you understand?"

"You bet, Catherine. Is Vincent all right?" Although Kipper was a young boy, he was street-wise. He figured the note was about Vincent; messages brought to Catherine usually were.

"I'm sure he's fine." Catherine allowed the lie to pass through her lips with a solemn look on her face. She didn't want to let on that anything was out of the ordinary at the moment. She wasn't exactly sure of the situation she was walking into. "Go on now. Tell Father I'm on my way."

Kipper turned and ran out of the office as quickly as he had come in, virtually bowling down Joe Maxwell as he rounded the corner of a cubicle.

"Whoa! Radcliffe, I gotta admit that you have some of the strangest characters running in and out of your office. What's the story with the kid?"

Catherine hesitated. "I may have a lead on one of the cases I'm working on. I have to check it out."

"What? You mean, you have kids working as informants for you?"

"No! He was only a messenger. I don't encourage children to involve themselves in things like that. I thought you knew me better than that!" Catherine threw him a look of disgruntled disbelief.

"Hey! I was only joking, Cathy. Come on! I know that you don't like kids informing on dangerous people, risking their safety and all. Anyway, which case are you working on?"

Catherine stumbled over words momentarily, knowing full well that investigating a lead on a case was not her present mission. She hated to lie, one of the things Vincent had always admired about her was her courage to stand up to the truth, regardless of the situation. But right now, that was impossible.

"The Thompson trial," she finally said. "It seems that one of the street people may have seen him leaving the scene. It's worth looking into."

"By all means, check it out. But testimony from street people usually isn't reliable."

Catherine picked up her briefcase, acting as calmly as possible. "I'll be back in a while."

"Hey, Cath," Joe shouted after her, as she walked hurriedly down the hallway. "Be careful!"

"I'll be fine, Joe. Don't worry."

"Yeah," Joe muttered to himself. "You *'never'* get into tight situations. And on the rare occasion when you do, you *'always'* manage to get yourself out of them." Joe turned once again, only to see Catherine step into the elevator. "She must have a guardian angel sitting on her shoulder."

Catherine entered the world Below through the 42nd Street warehouse. It was the closest to her office, and her gut reaction told her that time was of the essence. At the iron-gated entrance, Catherine tapped out her arrival and a request for a guide down. Eric appeared and led her to Father's chamber.

"You know Vincent isn't here."

"What do you mean, Eric?"

"Father said he went exploring early this morning. Said he'll be gone a couple of days, maybe longer."

"Well....," Catherine began. "Actually, I've come to see Father anyway. To see if anyone needed anything from Above."

"Oh," was all the small child replied.

They didn't say anything else for the rest of the journey.

"Catherine." Father breathed a sigh of relief at her arrival. "Thank you for coming so quickly."

Catherine rushed down the stair way to the floor of the study.

"Father, what is it? What's happened to Vincent? Is he all right? Is he hurt? Where is he?" Her questions slammed against him like a battering ram.

"Calm down, child. I will explain everything." Father looked weary. He motioned to the chess table and the chairs sitting opposite one another. "Please sit."

After she sat, he took a seat across from her. She could see the ache in his eyes, and a sense of loss filled his voice. "First," he said. "Understand that what I tell you is in the strictest confidence."

"Of course. I would never betray the trust you have in me, Father. I never have. I never will."

"I know. This is very difficult. The entire situation comes as a complete shock, and without any explanation."

"Please get to the point."

"Very well. You will surely think that I am merely an old man who has lost his mind when you hear what I'm about to say, but rest assured that I am quite sane.

"Last night, by some unseen, unknown, and unexplainable force, there occurred a radical change in Vincent. It has altered his entire appearance. I, myself, didn't believe him to be Vincent until he

was on the verge of tears. Something inside me was moved, forcing me to believe."

"I don't understand."

"Catherine, Vincent is a *'man'*."

She was confused. "I know that, Father. Different.... but human."

"*'No'*. He is a man. A *'normal-looking'* man."

Catherine stared at Father, attempting to comprehend what he had said. "Are you saying that Vincent no longer looks.... as he did? That he's...."

"Normal?" a voice echoed from behind.

Without turning, Catherine knew he was there. He had reached into her soul and begged her not to be afraid, as he had done many times before. He, himself, was frightened of her reaction. She sat without moving.

"Vincent?"

"Yes. Turn and look at me, Catherine. Please." Through their bond, she felt fear. But his voice was threaded with excitement.

Slowly, she pivoted in her seat. When she had turned completely around, she raised her eyes slowly to the top of the stairs. The boots, the clothing, were unmistakably Vincent's, but she could see the drastic changes as she caught sight of the smooth, furless hands. Suddenly, her gaze shot upward, and she saw a man's face, handsome, classical, elegant, just as she had often imagined he might have looked. She looked into his eyes, and was sure - there was no mistaking Vincent's eyes. She watched him move down the steps, watched his same gracefulness. The change in him awed her, in her world, with that face, he would no longer have to be content with her love only. Catherine felt a sharp pang of jealousy before she was able to control her thoughts. But something in his face told her he had felt it.

"Father, would you excuse us for a moment? I would like to speak to Catherine alone."

"Of course." The older man excused himself, knowing that this was a difficult time for all, but most of all for Vincent. He prayed that Catherine would not force any further confusion into his life now.

"Catherine, surely you do not believe that I would betray my love for you simply because my outward appearance has changed? You have been my life, my heart's blood since we met, and nothing, *'nothing'*, can ever change that. Father said that a man is no more than a reflection of his soul. My *'soul'* has not changed."

"And you are still beautiful, Vincent. But you can't blame me for thinking irrationally for a moment. I had no idea that this could be the change Father spoke of in his message. I.... I'm not sure what to think. Forgive me." Catherine lowered her eyes, away from his gaze, suddenly feeling ashamed of her careless thoughts.

"Catherine, I could never berate you for being human. We all say things, do things, when we are caught in difficult situations."

Vincent's strength prevailed over her weakness, as usual. He, in this moment of crisis and confusion, was comforting *'her'*. It should have been the other way around, and again, she felt ashamed for her frailties.

"Does everyone know? Have they seen you?"

"No." Vincent looked down at his hands, amazement in his face. "Father believes that there would be many who would not believe that it is truly I. We must determine a way to break the news slowly, so as not to wreck havoc in the community."

"What will you do until then?"

"We were hoping that perhaps...."

Catherine could sense that Vincent was becoming uncomfortable, as though he were about to ask for the world. She felt certain what the question would be; she merely wanted to hear him ask it. She felt selfish.

"Father thinks that it would be best if I go Above, move in your world for the time being. Perhaps stay with a Helper. Just until we can solve this mystery."

His pride had failed him. He could not bring himself to ask to stay with her. Perhaps it wasn't pride, but fear of hearing the same answer he had once given her when she had asked to come into his world.

"No." Her reply was firm. "You will come and stay with me."

"I wouldn't want to be a burden or complication to you, Catherine. I could not bear it."

She felt flushed with anger, and this time did not try to disguise it. "*'Burden!'*" she cried. "*'Complication!'* I am the one who has *'burdened'* and *'complicated your'* life, on many occasions. You won't be a burden to me, or a complication! How could you even think such a thing, Vincent? You *'will'* stay with me!"

Her decision was firm and unwavering. Vincent knew that argument would be futile.

He felt embarrassed for doubting her. "I will stay with you if you wish. I would be honored."

A childlike look came into his eyes, and Catherine found she could read his face. The emotions that displayed themselves there had often been hidden behind his curtain of hair before. The leonine image had faded and a few bricks of the wall behind which he had carefully guarded his emotions had tumbled out.

All was settled, and all was silent. Neither knew what to say, lost in the moment of perplexity. Father could hear nothing, and decided that the silence might not be a good omen. As he made his way back into the chamber, he witnessed something he had never seen before. Catherine and Vincent, forced into an uncomfortable silence. He hoped with all his heart that this would pass quickly, for both their sakes.

At the entrance of the chamber, he harrumphed, and sent Vincent to get the things he had already packed. His tone of voice indicated that he would like to have a word alone with Catherine.

"Catherine," he said after Vincent had left. "I deeply appreciate your allowing Vincent to stay with you until we can determine how to best handle this. Please understand that he may not act himself while he is becoming accustomed to his new image. It must be quite a difficult thing to adjust to, waking up one day and finding that you no longer have the same reflection when you look into the mirror."

Catherine looked into Jacob's eyes, silently telling him that she *'could'* understand some of what

Vincent was going through. The memory was still fresh in her mind - the slashes across her face, stitched together by black medical twine. The horror of that first reflection in the bottom of the silver bowl, knowing full well she would never completely be the same, would never leave her. She could understand the torment in Vincent's mind. She also felt the excitement and curiosity in his heart. Changes in image often brought about radical changes in life; she also understood that, but it was those very changes that frightened her most. For Vincent, for herself, for their bond, for their future.

"I am not entirely sure how he will fare Above." Father continued. "He is of such pure heart and his upbringing has been so different from people up there. You must realize, Catherine, that by agreeing to provide him shelter, you are also consenting to help him adjust to a world he does not fully comprehend."

"Sometimes, Father, you underestimate Vincent's ability to deal with life on his own terms. He can handle more than any of us give him credit for. He'll do fine." She hesitated before continuing. "I think your greatest fear is that in sending him Above, he may choose not to come Below again, at least to live."

"Young lady...." Father looked astonished. But Catherine didn't let him continue.

"Father, I wouldn't try to persuade him one way or another. You don't seem to realize that I have as much to lose as you. And you are less likely to lose him than I am. You are his family, and this is his home. His history is here among the shadows and stone. Vincent will never leave that totally behind...."

Catherine's voice trailed off, she was already beginning to reconcile herself to the possible loss of her dearest love.

Father could see the grief on her face. Suddenly, he was angry at their own thoughtlessness.

"Listen to us!" he began, his voice shadowed with outrage. "One thing I have learned since Vincent met you, is that he must be allowed to make his own decisions and his own way in life. Here we are, both of us selfishly licking wounds that have yet to be inflicted. Vincent is the one who must be considered most now. He has yet to disappoint me with the choices he has made. Although I have not always agreed with the wisdom of certain decisions, I know that he always thinks things through carefully." Father looked at Catherine, a graying eyebrow raised in thought. "At least '*most*' of the time...."

Catherine caught the dry wit in his tone, and knew that in his way, Father was trying to make light of the predicament. She smiled, acknowledging his intention.

"I'm ready." Vincent stood on the second level of the chamber, worn leather satchel in hand.

"I'll guide you up....," Father began. Realizing the incongruity of his words, he added. "I would like to see you two off safely."

As the trio made their way through the winding passages, Father continued to issue instructions to the couple. "Be sure to send word via one of the Helpers to let me know how you are faring. I'll do the same. Be wary of how many people you come into close contact with, especially the Helpers. Allow Catherine to send and receive messages. I promise we will not delay the inevitable long. Just let me get some things worked out. If you need anything, don't hesitate to contact me."

Father continued with commands, advice, and encouragement until they had reached the

basement entrance to Catherine's Manhattan apartment.

Vincent and Father turned to each other, grasping for words neither of them thought they would ever have to speak.

"Be safe, Vincent," Jacob said. "Listen to Catherine. I love you."

"And I love you, Father. We'll be fine. I feel it in my heart."

The two men embraced, and as they separated, Father's hand touched his son's cheek. Then he turned and, not looking back, started home.

"Let's go in, Vincent," Catherine said gently. "I need to call into work and tell them I won't be back today."

They ascended the ladder, each rung adding to their excitement.

For the first time in their relationship, Vincent entered Catherine's home via the front entrance rather than the balcony doors 18 stories above the city. It was still day outside. Hesitantly, Vincent walked around the living room, marvelling at her art collection, the African statue, the Monet, and the other pieces. Catherine's impeccable taste in furnishings impressed him. The sharp lines and starkness of her apartment were foreign to him, but he found it pleasant and comfortable. The comfort was more a feeling of knowing that these were Catherine's things, her home, her asylum from the madness of the world in which she lived.

"Let me take your things," Catherine broke the silence. She wanted him to feel at home, she was uncomfortable with him standing in the middle of the room, bag in hand. "I'll take the sofa and you'll sleep in the bed."

"Absolutely not," Vincent responded firmly. "I will sleep on the sofa. I won't ask you to give up the comforts of your home to accommodate me. I doubt that I will sleep much anyway."

"Believe me, when the excitement of the day wears off a bit, you'll be exhausted. And besides, you are my guest, and I insist! Not to mention that I'll fit better in the sofa than you will!" Catherine let go of a small chuckle, her green eyes smiling at him, but there was conviction in her voice and no mistaking that she wouldn't take 'no' for an answer.

Vincent, the perfect houseguest, tried to persuade her otherwise, but she simply snatched the leather case from his hand and marched resolutely into the bedroom. He realized that he should accept her hospitality without further argument.

After making a soothing pot of Earl Grey tea for them, Catherine made her call to Joe. She explained that the lead might be running her on a wild goose chase all over the city, but that she had to follow up on it just in case. At any rate, she would not be back to the office that day.

"Well, that takes care of that." Catherine plopped down in a dining room chair, a sudden flurry of anticipation filling her heart. She marvelled that this was all really happening, that she and Vincent were sitting together in daylight, drinking tea in her apartment, just like any other couple. Enthusiasm bubbled over in her like a newly opened bottle of champagne.

"I have a splendid idea, Vincent!" she exclaimed.

"By all means, continue." His eyes sparkled at her exuberance.

"There's a wonderful sidewalk cafe not far from here. They serve marvelous espresso, and pastries. It's close to the park, and it's such a lovely day out, it seems such a shame to stay indoors. After all..." Catherine stopped a moment, considering her words carefully. "But, if you'd rather rest, I understand."

"Rest!" The word almost seemed foreign to him. "I would love to see everything you can show me. I have longed to walk in the sunshine with you, Catherine. It's like a dream.... a dream come true."

"Great! Let me change into some street clothes first." She was out of the chair in a split second, nervously talking all the while. "After the cafe, maybe a walk in the park. Then we can come back here, pack a picnic dinner and go back to the park for the concert on the Green. I believe they're playing *'Rachmaninoff's Rhapsody'* tonight, and the weather is perfect...."

He smiled to himself. He shared her nervousness and was thankful for her eagerness to please him. He had been certain that he would never have the opportunity to walk among those of her world, in the sun, with Catherine by his side. It was a fantasy made real.

Throughout the day, the couple walked and talked, laughed and joked, and avoided the confusion and oddness that had brought them to this point. Catherine took him to Broadway, they strolled outside the theaters and discussed the various playbills. Catherine told him about the different shows that were playing. Then they went to the Metropolitan Museum, and for the first time in his life, Vincent came close to the works of the masters that he admired greatly. The Dalis amazed him, the Picassos overwhelmed him, but it was the Da Vincis that moved him beyond words. Vincent didn't care much for many of the modern artists, the abstract pieces didn't capture the magnificence of life the way the old masters did.

They drove to Long Island and walked along the beaches. They rode the Staten Island Ferry and climbed the Statue of Liberty. It was a symbolic afternoon, one of definite liberty from the confines of physical deformity. But normality held a high price. Although the two enjoyed the freedom to move Above, there was a certain stiffness between them. Afraid to say the wrong thing, make the wrong move, it was as if they had to begin again. There was a degree of sadness for both that perhaps they had lost some timeless magic, and were now wary to venture into the secret recesses of their hearts.

They picnicked in the park that evening, listening to Rachmaninoff's sublime melodies. A small child ran in front of the blanket where they lounged, and stopped, acknowledging Catherine, but looking at Vincent with disgust, as though he were a vile creature unworthy of sharing a moment with her.

"Hello, Kipper." Catherine's voice was shaky, and she felt that she had somehow betrayed the boy, and Vincent. Vincent, for his part, pretended not to know Kipper. It was a difficult thing to do, and left a foul taste in his mouth.

Kipper dashed away without uttering a word. Catherine turned to Vincent, knowing that his heart held a great sorrow for not speaking to his pupil. "Are you all right?" she asked.

"Yes." Vincent stared at the blade of grass he was toying with. "I suppose that I'm afraid of the possibility that my life will never be the same. I see the people I care for the most treating me like a fragile piece of glass. Never before have I been judged, in my world, for my appearance only. We

all look for the true person that lies beneath the surface, and now that the surface has changed, I'm frightened that they will not want to look beneath it. Perhaps my lack of self-confidence has blinded me to the goodness of those in my life. They have never failed me before, why should I doubt them now?"

"Vincent, don't be so hard on yourself. I experienced those same doubts in the hospital, after the attack. I had nightmares about the people I loved no longer caring about me because my face was scarred. But I realized that the people who truly cared about me would still care, regardless of my appearance. I know that it will be the same for you."

Catherine allowed her hand to drift to his. It was odd, touching the baby smoothness of his skin, and knowing that it was Vincent's hand she caressed. They sat, drinking in the music, the stars, enjoying their companionship and wondering what the future held for them.

They stepped into the elevator together and Catherine pressed the button for the 18th floor. Vincent's eyes were fixed on the doors as they closed, he felt a sudden sense of urgency in him.

Catherine noticed his disquiet. "What's wrong?"

Vincent realized the stillness of his fear, and laughed at himself. Turning to Catherine, he said. "I was suddenly afraid of the elevator. I know that's childish, but I've only ridden '*atop*' elevators before, never '*in*' them."

Her eyes widened, and then they both broke into an uncontrollable fit of laughter.

"I believe this is what Shakespeare would have called a '*Comedy of Errors*,'" Vincent gasped between giggles.

"More like comic relief!" Catherine retorted. They laughed throughout the ride up, the comedy of the situation helped to dispel some of the nervousness and anxiety of the day.

Once inside the apartment, Catherine made hot chocolate and the two settled to talk seriously about the future. There were things that must be settled if this arrangement was to work without damaging what they shared. Catherine felt sure she would have to start the conversation, but Vincent surprised her.

"I know that this moment presents itself awkwardly, but I feel a certain unrest in you, Catherine, and I share your distress. What is to become of us?"

The question cut at her carefully held composure and the tears that she had held back all day came spilling forth. "Vincent.... forgive me for feeling.... for thinking...."

"Catherine, there is nothing to forgive you for; simply say what is in your heart."

"I saw your reaction when you couldn't acknowledge Kipper. I hurt so for you! This change puts your life, your past at risk, and forces you into a society that scorned you and even, at times, wished you dead. Is there no way to have '*both*' worlds without conflict?" She paused a moment, and then said despondently, "Of course there isn't."

"Now I must confess something to you," Vincent said. "At that very moment in the park, when Kipper looked at me with such disgust, it caused me great pain. At that moment, I wished that I was the way I used to be.... Do not misunderstand me, I wouldn't change this day for anything in the

world. To walk with you, in your world, unnoticed, was more than I had ever dared to dream. To look out upon the ocean from the torch of the Statue of Liberty was amazing, and the museum...."

Vincent's voice turned somber. Looking deep into Catherine's eyes, he continued. "But I feel I should be waking up now; however grateful I am to whatever force allowed this.... hiatus. I feel I must return to my duties and the responsibilities of the life, the *'only'* life, I have ever known. Can you understand? Even with a new face, I will never be truly a part of your world, and I am afraid of losing my place in my home. Even though I was an outcast in *'normal'* society, I at least had a home and family, now I am a man without even so little a comfort as that. I am a man with no home."

As with Catherine, the emotion of the day betrayed him and the tears flooded his eyes.

Catherine went to him and they sat holding onto each other as if for life itself. Silence intruded into the bond they shared, each was afraid to feel anything.

Time was lost.

Catherine pulled back from his embrace and looked into his tearful blue eyes. Placing a hand on either side of his face, she kissed him. It was slow at first, an innocent kiss that began to build. He responded to the touch of her lips, savoring the incredible sweetness of the moment. He felt her sending strong messages to him through their bond, telling him that she loved *'him'*, in any form he might assume, with a love that would never falter or change. If going back to his *'old'* self would make him happy, she would welcome the change.

He sprang upright in bed. For a moment he was disoriented, then he looked to his hands, bewildered and surprised to see fur and talons there.

'How can this be?' he thought.

Leaping out of bed, he rushed to the dresser and picked up the silver bowl of a car headlight, but he knew what he would see before he even looked. There, slightly distorted in the curve of the metal, was his own familiar face.

'Had it all been a dream, or had Catherine's whispering thoughts caused this second transformation?'

Catherine felt a jolt like lightning pierce her soul. Almost in pain, she sat on the edge of the bed, trying to distinguish reality from illusion.

"What's happened?" she murmured aloud. She had felt his lips on hers, the brush of his hand on the small of her back, and then.... he was gone, and she was alone in her bed. *'Was it possible? Could it really have happened?'*

He felt her strong emotions, the remnants of passion evoked by the other world that, somehow, he knew they had truly shared. No matter by what method, dream or some unexplainable form of reality, she *'had'* been there, and now she sat as confused as he. He had no choice but to go to her.

She dressed hurriedly. She had to see Vincent. Everything seemed displaced. She felt as if she were moving in slow motion. Normal things, like dressing took an eternity. She could hear fragments of music on her mind, and she knew it was from the concert in the park.

'Could he hear the music too?'

She took flight, racing to the basement entrance to the tunnels. She could feel his heart beat as he raced through the passages to meet her. She had never before felt so intensely connected to him, feeling his inner experience as he must feel hers. The urgency to see one another grew until it filled the space between them.

As she rounded the corner to the tunnel entrance, he was there. His white rib-collared shirt was untucked from his trousers, as though he had also dressed in a hurry. He had not even taken time to put on his cloak.

He looked at her, devoid of makeup and dressed in a rumpled jogging suit. Her joy radiated in her face, glowing like a guiding light beckoning the voyager to safety. She was beautiful beyond words.

They stood for a moment, staring at one another, mesmerized by the shared experience that neither could explain.

Then, as their emotions had melted together, so did they. No words came, just the final and logical consummation of the bond they shared. They held steadfast to each other; bearing up under the enormous flow of passion.

When the first flood had slowed, they looked at each other. As though some outside force guided them, they kissed. At first it was a gentle, slow kiss, and then it began to build. Vincent could feel her thoughts clearly, as though she were sending them through the bond. *'You are my love, Vincent, and I love you always and with all that I am. Don't turn me away now! You know that this must be. Love me. Love me, Vincent, please.'*

Without question, he took her hand and guided her through the tunnels to a safe place where they could be alone and undiscovered for a time. There would be no resistance from him now. He could no longer postpone what his body told him must happen. It was their time, and nothing must spoil it. Instinct had taken over, nature had provided a way, and they could not argue.

The sanctum was not far. At times, the chamber was used when isolation for illness was necessary, or when someone needed solitude from the world, regardless of which world it was. It was usually Vincent who frequented the isolated room. It was sparsely appointed, it held only a wash basin, a small storage chest, two chairs, a few books. A large four-poster bed was carefully placed in one corner.

As they entered the room, Vincent looked to Catherine for reassurance, not for himself but for her. He had to be sure that this was not dream-induced desire. But when he gazed into her eyes, her soul was bare to him, and he knew that she longed for him as much as he did for her.

For a moment they stood motionless. Then he took her hand in his, bringing it to his lips, gently kissing each fingertip, and then the palm. He caressed the smooth flesh as a jeweler would stroke a valuable gem. He marveled at her delicate coloring and the strength that was evident in her hands.

Gently, she took her hand from his grasp and brought it up to touch his face, tracing the curve of his jaw, lightly touching his mouth. With both hands she massaged his temples, letting his hair fall over her fingers, she could feel the rapid rhythm of his heartbeat there.

He closed his eyes and concentrated on her touch, allowing passion to gain a strong foothold, forbidding any retreat.

Finally, he could bear it no longer, and he kissed her with a fervent hunger, desperate to be satisfied. Her hunger equaled his, and with her tongue she gently parted his lips. The taste of her drove his heart into his throat, and he let go of the last remnants of his self-imposed control, no longer holding back that which he had denied himself for so long.

He slipped his hands under the waist of her skirt, reveling in the feel of her satiny skin. He ventured further, marveling at the feel of her body. She moved away from his touch and pulled her sweatshirt over her head, giving him freedom to continue his exploration. He stood in awe as she offered herself to him completely.

She moved close again and swiftly removed his shirt. His chest was extraordinary, masculine, well-defined, centrally covered with thick tawny-gold hair which thinned towards the shoulders and stomach until only a fine line disappeared below the waist of his breeches. She ran her fingers through the curls.

Her touch left trails of fire in each muscle, each nerve. His hands moved upward to stroke her firm breasts, and he could feel her stiffen. For a moment he hesitated, but then he realized that it wasn't from pain or distress; it was ecstasy. Her emotions, through their bond, intensified the overwhelming joy he felt.

"How can this be?" His words trailed off into nothing.

"Because love allows it." Her voice was confident. "And I love you so much..."

"Catherine..." She knew that in his way, he had responded in kind. Her lips on his quelled any further discussion.

With gentle strength, he lifted her into his arms and moved towards the bed. He laid her down on it and began to explore with his mouth that territory his hands had discovered earlier. With each kiss, Catherine's feelings grew sharper and stronger. She was stunned by his uncanny knowledge of where to touch, how to touch.

Their bodies began to demand further intimacies. There would be time for more exploration later, but now they must satisfy the need that had brought them here, to be finally and truly joined. The last pieces of clothing were shed, leaving hearts and bodies exposed. Placing a pillow under her head, he trailed his fingertips down the length of her body, his claws barely brushing her, feeling her skin come alive beneath his touch. Almost, his resolution failed him, but he looked into her eyes again, and found there the courage to continue.

She pulled him down on top of her, and kissed him again, exploring his mouth with her tongue. She reached down to guide him, and at her touch, he drew a sharp breath.

They moved in unison, unconsciously using their bond to amplify and reinforce each other's sensations, creating a friction that was explosive. Together they climbed, matching height for height, and finally, with an outcry of joy, they began the long slow fall to earth again.

They slept in each other's arms, spent. No dreams invaded their minds, only peaceful satisfied slumber.

She woke first, and gazed lovingly upon the man who had given her so much pleasure and joy. For her, there could never be another. She would never be able to bear a life without him.

He must have felt her eyes on him. He stirred, opened his eyes, a smile on his lips. He returned her loving look.

"We shared so much tonight." His words felt meager in the wake of their love.

"Indeed, we did." She smiled, and there was a devilish glint in her eyes. She felt like a schoolgirl again, giddy. "The dream, Vincent, what made it seem so real?"

"Which dream was that?" he asked.

Jokingly she poked at his side. "The sleeping one! The dream that brought us here."

"Perhaps it was desire. Perhaps it was desperation to make our ultimate union, but whatever the reason for it, Catherine, we are now one..."

"Forever."

END