

ALLIANCE

by Lorraine Cirelli Gupton

The deep blue of Vincent's eyes swirled in wild confusion, his noble heart hammering painfully against his breast. Nostrils flaring, he inhaled another deep breath of the sweet, intoxicating night air, finding it difficult to wade through the obscure, shapeless images flooding his mind.

This is the third night, he thought with dread. He had desperately tried to suppress the restlessness surging through his being. In his frustration, he had lashed out at the unseen entity, but only succeeded in destroying the contents of his chamber. Unable to remember how or why he had come here, Vincent only knew - without reason, without warning - an invisible force had drawn him to this place.

He stood silently, an omnipotent spectre cloaked in black, just outside the junction door.

However, unlike the previous two evenings when he had shaken himself free of the trance and returned to his chamber. Vincent staggered down the last few feet leading from the safety of his world to the perils of the other. He peered beneath the arch of the drainage opening to scan the surrounding area. Holding up one magnificently-sculpted clawed hand, as if trying to fend off some hidden foe, Vincent discovered he was helpless to resist the brilliance of the full moon and deceptively serene whispers of the shrouding night.

Danger! his subconscious mind warned. Vincent halted in mid-stride, for a moment heeding the admonition. Then, enticed once again by the irresistible unknown, he abandoned the safe haven of the darkness to stand fully illuminated in the moon's basking glow.

Suddenly weak, feeling weightless, he growled low in his throat and slumped against the cement wall of the drainage ditch for support. Bringing a trembling hand to his chest, he covered his heart and whispered her name softly, longingly.

"Catherine."

Shaking his tawny mane in another futile attempt to clear his thoughts, in his heart Vincent knew it was useless. Then, fully bearing his impressive fangs, he threw back his head and roared to the heavens, the savage, commanding cry carrying far beyond the shattered tranquility permeating Central Park.

Several of New York City's now slumbering populace - those who had unwillingly surrendered themselves to the unattainable fantasies or graphic nightmares to their own creation - were violently wrenched back into consciousness. Each inquired of their bedmate if they had also heard it; this thunderous roar of defiance daring anyone to oppose its owner's claims to primal supremacy.

Horrified and embarrassed by such an uncommon display, Vincent quickly ducked back into the concealing darkness. Intent on returning Below, his left hand remained poised along the top edge

of the drainpipe, as if he were not yet ready to relinquish Luna, her worshipping constellations and all their magic.

His regal form visibly shivered once ... twice ... Though his mind was now clear and again controlled by the Man's thoughts, his powerful muscles remained tensed and ready, his entire posture exhibiting that of the Animal which comprised his other half.

A quarter mile away, the receding echoes of Vincent's volatile roar disturbed the sleep of a dozing male lion, the young patriarch of the pride residing temporarily at the park's zoo. Lifting his head, round tufted ears pricked forward in mild interest. Then, his broad nose twitched nervously as he tasted the air, seeking to locate the spoor of the opponent who dared invade his domain.

A disgruntled snort escaped the young king when he detected the recognizable odor of the intruder. It was another of his kind, but something was different ... he sneezed forcefully and swiped at his snout as if to erase the trace of Man that merged with the familiar scent. Unable to comprehend the strangeness embodying it, he growled in response to his bewilderment and leapt to his feet.

His snarl grew more menacing as he anxiously paced the perimeter of his confinement. Opening his jaws to expose lethal fangs, he answered the challenge with his own roar, his majestic form silhouetted against the moonlight as he awaited his rival's reply.

Vincent's head snapped up. Eyes narrowing in concentration, he strained his ears to pick up the whisper of a sound carried across the marked boundaries of the park. The roar was faint, but unmistakable a boastful, taunting dare flung in its direction.

All thoughts of returning to his chamber fled Vincent's mind as his pulse quickened and his heart began to race excitedly underneath the taut muscles of his powerful chest. With a snarl of acceptance, Vincent set off in the direction of the challenge, his slow gait changing to a brisk trot and then to an all-out gallop.

"Father?"

The old man looked up from his reading to find Mouse fidgeting near the entrance of his chamber. Arthur clutched protectively in his arms.

"It's almost midnight, Mouse," Father advanced, closing the book and sinking back into the cushions of his favorite chair.

"Mouse knows," came the slightly piqued answer.

Father removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes wearily. *You should be in bed yourself, Jacob*, he chided silently. *Tomorrow's calendar is filled with last minute errands to run and you won't be of much help to anyone if you're falling asleep on your feet.*

"Why are you up so late, Mouse?"

"Couldn't sleep."

Father noticed a trace of unease in his voice and smiled in understanding. The excitement of the Summer Solstice Festival usually kept most of the children awake long past their normal bedtime.

"I see. Well," he fiddled with the ends of his glasses, "you have a big day ahead of you. Reciting Poe's '*Annabel Lee*' was quite an undertaking. I'm very proud of you ..."

"Father ..." Mouse repeated the name again, as if he somehow drew strength merely by uttering it.

Father realized the younger man's disquiet was genuine; that it went beyond his nervousness of standing before a group of people and reciting a poem.

Frowning in perplexity, he murmured, "What is it, Mouse? Has something happened?"

Mouse nodded and then hung his head, unwilling or unable to continue.

"Mouse," Father prodded, "What is it?"

"Walking around. Heard something."

"Something?" *Mouse bothered by unknown noises in the night?* he mused. That certainly wasn't like him. "What did you hear?"

"Something," he reiterated, his apprehension again evident as he gazed fearfully over his shoulder into the darkened depths behind him.

"You probably imagined it, Mouse," Father concluded, about to suggest he return to his bed.

"No... no," Mouse whispered, shaking his head emphatically. "Heard something."

"Mouse..."

"Heard Vincent," he blurted out.

"Vincent?" Father leaned forward in his chair. "You heard Vincent? Was he calling for help ...was he hurt, Mouse?"

"Don't know. At least.....thought it was Vincent. Came from his chamber."

"My Lord, Mouse, why didn't you say something sooner?"

Father's succeeding flurry of activity was accomplished in one fluid motion. More than habit, his actions were refined from endless years of inbred training. He struggled to his feet, gripped his cane, retrieved his medical kit and mounted the steps as his tired legs would carry him. Brushing past Mouse as he left the chamber, he hoped his deepest fears had not come true.

Father's demeanor grew more frantic as he drew nearer his son's chamber. Cognizant of Mouse's faltering footsteps behind him, he was too worried to insist the boy go back to his own room. His thoughts were only for his son ... and what he suspected was beginning to happen.

When they reached Vincent's chamber, both halted abruptly, mouths open in horrified silence.

The entire room was in a shambles; books toppled from their shelves, the bed's comforter torn to shreds. Goosedown feathers littered the nearby furniture and scattered across the floor were shards of glass from broken statues and knickknacks Vincent had accumulated over the years.

A half-choked sob escaped Mouse as he lowered Arthur to the ground and wrapped his arms around Father's waist. Burying his blond head in the older man's shoulder, he shielded his eyes from the harrowing sight.

Father hugged Mouse tighter, unsure whether he did so to comfort the boy or seek his own solace. He realized his supposition was indeed true; Vincent's tragic life-long battle had been lost once more. He had succumbed to his darker side.

"Mouse," Father tried unsuccessfully to fight back his tears, "would you please go and fetch Catherine?" The younger man nodded against Father's shoulder in answer, still unable to speak. "I will wake William and Pascal. Hurry, Mouse."

Mouse fled Father's side, his hiccupping sobs reverberating through the tomb-like silence of the Tunnels. Father stooped to pick up the small Statue of Liberty which normally rested on Vincent's bureau. Stroking it gently, his gray eyes welled up in tears as he replaced it and then slowly began straightening up the after effects of Vincent's rampage. Sighing morosely, he inspected the lacerated comforter before sitting on the edge of Vincent's bed and covering his face with his hands.

"Vincent," he murmured sorrowfully. "Can you ever forgive me for not being there at your darkest hour?" His voice broke when he realized there was nothing left for them to do now but find him.

And pray.

Catherine's sleep remained peaceful and unbroken. A seductive, almost imperceptible beckoning tugged at her heartstrings, molding her uneventful dreams into sweetly erotic visions. She moaned Vincent's name and hugged the pillow to her as their empathic connection - the magical link which existed between their two forever bound hearts - resonated with an unfamiliar freedom and newfound jubilance. Had she been awake, it would have been cause for concern. Beneath the bond's caress, though, Catherine's slumber was left undisturbed.

Suddenly, a loud pounding on her apartment door shattered her sensual fantasies. Eyes opening in alarm, she bolted upright in bed, her mind still clouded with the remnants of sleep. The relentless pulsing she sensed through their bond brought her fully awake.

Catherine immediately searched the deepest recesses of their connection and discovered things were not quite as they should be. Frowning, she attempted to sift through the murkiness intermingled inside it, senseing Vincent was not in danger and yet, there was something...

She threw off the coverlet and stepped into her slippers, hurrying to the door before the persistent thumping loosened the hinges. Catherine threw it open and discovered Mouse standing before her, pale features contorted into a mask of anguish, his breathing labored, indicating he had climbed the seventeen flights to her apartment.

"What is it, Mouse?" she whispered anxiously. "What's happened?"

A neighbor's door cracked open and a pair of curious eyes peeked out to investigate the cause for this late night tumult. Catherine hastily pulled Mouse into the apartment and shut the door.

"Is there something wrong with Vincent?"

The question seemed out of place, for Catherine still felt nothing but a strange tingling of excitement and joy emitting through their bond. There was no doubt in her mind Vincent was safe and unharmed; however, this display of emotion flowing so freely was uncharacteristic to his

usually reserved nature. Amazingly, she could also sense his laughter.

"No time to waste. You must come," Mouse insisted, interrupting her reverie. Opening the door, he shoved Catherine ahead of him into the hallway.

"Mouse, I can't go out like this. I have to change."

"No time!" he shouted again. **"Vincent needs you now!"**

Does he? she asked herself.

Closing her eyes and silently calling out the him, Catherine held her breath as she awaited his answer. The unchained elation she received back almost caused her to laugh aloud. *'Free... alive...'* His mind answered. Catherine did not understand what he meant, only knew he was safe and, for a moment, she relaxed.

'Should I come?'

'No.'

'Vincent...'

'There is no need. Stay, Catherine. Stay and dream.'

'So stubborn, Vincent.'

"Mouse," she opened her eyes and touched the elbow, "please calm down. Vincent is all right."

"No!" He began to angrily jam at the elevator button. **"No! Needs you! Needs you NOW!"**

Catherine gently smiled, understanding his anxiety. Mouse loved Vincent like a brother and cherished him above all others. She struggled with the best way to explain to him that she knew Vincent was truly in no danger.

Placing a comforting arm around his shoulder, she soothed, "Mouse, you know Vincent and I share a bond." He nodded without looking at her. "Well, don't you think I would know if he were in danger?"

Mouse glanced in her direction. "Heard him ... heard him roaring," he told her, tears filling his eyes. "Thought about when he almost died. Mouse doesn't want that to ever happen again."

Without warning, Catherine's mind traveled back to the period of time Mouse had mentioned. She, too, recalled her terror and agony at the possibility that she might lose Vincent.

"You can't!" she had shrieked in panic to his motionless form. **"Not without me!"**

After watching Father and the others carry Vincent's lifeless body from the interior of the cave he had retreated to, only her sheer will and determination were able to call him back from the brink of death. Catherine made a desperate attempt to erase the painful memory.

Their lives together had changed dramatically from that night forward. Once he recovered from his illness (*his madness, as Vincent referred to it*), Catherine had convinced him they must traverse the last boundary he had erected between them and consummate their love. In that one passionate, soul-bearing night, Catherine managed to conquer the remainder of Vincent's fears and denials.

That had been two months ago and, though their subsequent lovemaking had been more satisfying than either could have hoped, Catherine was dismayed to find in Vincent a need to hold back. Even

in the throes of release, even as he roared her name in ecstasy, she could feel Vincent's reluctance to fully share himself with her.

She had meant to explore with him his restraint but each time they were together, his nearness, his very essence, begged that she not waste a minute debating such trivial matters.

Catherine had been pleasantly surprised to discover that Vincent, normally so recalcitrant and tentative, no longer possessed the shyness which had kept them physically apart for so long. It appeared that once released, his passion could not be contained and it was usually he who initiated their foreplay.

Not that she was complaining, mind you. Catherine loved Vincent beyond words and welcomed his boldness - thrived on it, in fact. Visions of them in bed flashed through her mind and Catherine smiled without realizing it, her heartbeat quickening, her breath catching, as her body responded to each tender caress her mind recalled.

"Catherine?" Mouse's soft voice broke the sensual spell she was weaving. She shook her head in frustration - it wasn't like her to drift off like that. Secretly, she wondered if these erotic images were not of Vincent's own creation and she had been reveling in his amorous thoughts.

"Let me get dressed, Mouse. Then we'll go find him."

"Vincent is all right?" the young man pressed, still seeking some confirmation.

"Yes," she assured him, opening the door to her apartment and walking toward her bedroom. "I can sense him right now and I swear to you, he's fine."

Mouse remained skeptical. "Didn't see his room," he muttered under his breath as he plunked down in a huff onto her couch.

Vincent had easily scaled the fence surrounding the zoo and stealthily invaded its interior without detection. Some of the slumbering animals were roused from their sleep as he raced by. They sensed a strong kinship to this dark shadow speeding past their cages, and though they cast him curious looks, not one uttered a sound to give his presence away.

A small cluster of antelope huddled together in the far corner of their habitat, an elephant trumpeted an alarm to his mate and the free birds in nearby branches chirped a warning to their brethren held captive inside cages of metal.

The challenge had been accepted. As the wind subsided and the ruffling of the leaves grew still, it seemed as if Mother Nature, herself, was eagerly awaiting the ensuing battle.

Vincent's snarl was vicious and taunting as he paced the length of the male lion's domain - an uneven rocky incline no more than an acre in diameter.

He threw back his head and roared again. With eyes mere slits of blue fire, Vincent watched the male lion pace the edge of the moat, snorting in response to the war cry.

Effortlessly spanning the four-foot fence bordering the enclosure, Vincent's boastful stance was more provoking than the roar issued seconds before.

The two powerful antagonists stared warily at each other. In that brief exchange, Vincent finally

confronted the fears and doubts plaguing him throughout his life, and knew they no longer had any control over him. The darker side of him was no longer dark.

Suddenly, from the outermost reaches of their bond, Catherine's confusion forced its way through Vincent's trance. Though neither quite understood why, following that wondrous night of revelation two months previous when they had made love, their connection had grown extremely sensitive. So much so, that each was now privy to every thought, every feeling of the other.

Without reservation, Vincent opened his heart and allowed her admittance to delight in the awesome sensations flowing through him. He felt her relax and though he'd urged her to remain where she was, knew she was coming to him just the same.

Instinctively releasing his defensive posture, Vincent crouched and peered through the underbrush at his adversary, deciding to wait for her.

"We found him!"

William lumbered down the drainage tunnel to join the small group waiting his return near the junction door. Cullen followed closely behind him and Michael, who had been staying Below during summer break, brought up the rear, both men's eyes relaying a quiet fear.

Father gripped William's shoulder and peered with trepidation into his friend's eyes. "Is he all right? Where did you find him?"

"He's still in Central Park..."

"Thank God." Father's shoulders sagged in gratitude.

William was almost tempted to leave the sentence unfinished. However, pursing his lips, he added, "He's inside the zoo, Father."

"What?!"

Rubbing his forehead, Father searched his mind to try and remember if there were any passages Below leading into that section of the park.

"There are no entrances," William proposed, reading the older man's thoughts.

He'd been racking his own brain for the past half hour trying to locate some simple solution to this crisis. A part of him was angry at Vincent for putting himself in jeopardy. Yet, It was a very small part. William's major concern was for the man they'd all come to rely upon and love - a man whose very existence proved anything was possible and confirmed the fact that miracles truly happened.

"Is he safe?" Father's eyes were pleading, though already in his heart he knew there was no chance that his son's madness was anything other than life-threatening.

William shook his head and muttered, "We don't know. If you ask me, he sounds the same as when he lost control..."

"He's fine." Catherine came up behind them through the opening of the Tunnel with Mouse following close on her heels. Both seemed out of breath, but Catherine's features were serene and unworried.

Clutching Father's elbow, she assured, "Father, I can feel Vincent. He's not in danger. He's... happy..."

rejoicing."

"I'm not arguing the point, Catherine," Cullen cut in, "but you didn't hear him out there. We did. He's near the African Exhibits... by the lions."

"Lions!" Catherine grew concerned again. *What was Vincent thinking? I must go to him!* she said to herself.

"Catherine," Father turned toward her, "you can't be thinking about going ..."

Of course he knew his protest would fall on deaf ears. Catherine was already gone.

She fled the small group congregated near the junction door to plunge into the blackness outside. Racing through the trees until she was out of breath, the burning stitch in her side went unnoticed.

Catherine reached the ancient iron fence surrounding the zoo and cried out in despair when she realized there was no way to get inside.

'Vincent?'

'You should not have come.'

'Tell me you're all right?'

'I am safe, Catherine. Please, you must leave.'

"No!" She cried out loud, violently shaking the padlocked gate until her hands hurt. **"I'm not going back! Something's not right, Vincent! You can't expect me ..."**

Suddenly, he was there, staring through the iron bars at her. Catherine gasped, startled for a moment and then pressed her face against the cold metal, peering deeply into his eyes. They were filled with an unexpected peacefulness. In fact, Vincent's entire demeanor was one of serenity.

"Vincent, please tell me what's happened," she implored breathlessly.

He gave no reply. Ascending the fence, he dropped soundlessly next to her. In one fluid motion, he bent and swept Catherine up into his arms and reclimbed the fence easily, despite her added weight.

"Mouse dragged me out of my apartment... Cullen said you were near the lions... Father was so worried, but I knew you were safe, and...." Catherine babbled confusedly.

"I was challenged," he stated firmly, as if she should understand what that meant.

"Challenged?" Her green eyes widened in alarm. "By someone in the park?" Something in his face told her it was not a person. "You can't mean you were going to fight the lions!"

"The thought did cross my mind," he chuckled, nuzzling his face in her hair. "Fortunately, I realized the folly of such an attempt."

"Then why didn't you come back?"

"I was summoned."

"From the *lions?*" Catherine was mesmerized by the gleam of excitement in his azure eyes.

"Vincent, you're not making any sense."

"It was so strong, Catherine, I found it impossible to ignore. It has happened twice before. This

night, I.." He hung his head. "I surrendered to it."

"Did you... did you lose yourself?" She asked it with the greatest of care.

"No." Vincent placed a tender kiss on the corner of her mouth. "I found myself."

Grazing the tips of his fangs along her shoulder, she inhaled sharply. This was totally out of character for him. Pulling back, Catherine looked questioningly at him. *What is it?* her eyes begged. Their bond echoed with the same unvoiced query.

Then he smiled at her. Not his usual, tight-lipped smile, but a broad grin that exposed every lethal incisor.

Immediately, Catherine recognized who was staring down at her. It was not Vincent. It was *'him'*. His other half.

"Vincent?" she whispered, "put me down, please."

"You fear me?" There was pain in his words. *"You have no reason to fear me, Catherine."*

The voice was Vincent's and yet... there was a gruffness to it she'd never heard before. Despite her misgivings, Catherine forced herself to relax in his arms.

"Is it you?" she inquired, searching his face. "For a moment, I thought ..."

"I have not lost myself. I am... whole, free. I cannot explain it. I have ceased fighting him."

"Then you *must* be lost."

"No!" he insisted, settling her on her feet. "I am no longer two halves, Catherine. We have joined."

"I don't understand. You've always battled your darker side. You told me if you ever once stopped waging that war, it would ultimately overpower and consume you."

Vincent took her hand and knelt before her, coaxing her to the ground. Catherine dropped to her knees and brought a hand up to touch his face. The blue of his eyes darkened a shade and again Catherine knew whom she faced.

Yet, as soon as *he* appeared, *he* vanished and the whole thing was beginning to frighten her. She moved to get up. *It wasn't safe here*, she thought. Whatever was happening to Vincent was better handled Below in the security of the Tunnels, surrounded by people who loved him.

"No one will harm me, Catherine. There is no one here but us." The voice was deeper, rougher and she was again in the presence of *him*.

"Leave Vincent alone!" she demanded.

He smiled and murmured soothingly. "Catherine, do not fear for me. We are no longer at odds. You will know a different Vincent from this day forward."

"No! I want MY Vincent back!" she shot back angrily.

Without warning, he reached up to stroke the sensitive skin of her breasts through the thin material of her blouse. Tears sprang to his eyes... as if he had never touched anything so precious.

Catherine was stunned by her reaction. It was instantaneous, wanton and purely female. Burying her fingers in the tousled golden mane gracing his head, she rained gentle kisses across the silken tresses. Unconsciously, her hands parted the shirt and she arched her back in pleasure as his mouth

moved over her tingling nipples. A soft moan rose in her throat.

When Vincent lifted his head, his eyes were filled with a childlike wonder. Catherine froze when the wonder changed into hot flames of desire.

"Will you love me?" he beseeched. "All of me?"

Without breaking eye contact, she slowly nodded in answer. *What could she do? She loved him, had pledged her very life to him. There was no doubt Vincent had changed, but he was still Vincent - her only reason for living.* She was disturbed to realize that *he* also attracted her in a sensual and very elemental way. *What in the world was wrong with her? She shouldn't feel pleasure in his touch, only Vincent's.*

"The passion I have for you, Catherine, fills my soul and cries out to be released. I can hide nothing from you... can hold nothing back... ever again," he whispered sensually. "Do you trust me, Catherine?"

Was there any other answer but yes? Her consent was given silently, filtering across the tendrils of the connection they shared.

Vincent rose slowly, the moonlight haloing his tawny mane as he towered over her. Bending, he lifted her and began to stride purposely toward the cages in the Exhibit. He laid her gently on a knoll near the lions cage.... near enough for Catherine to hear the rustling of the agitated animals, and the furious roar of an enraged lion. When he began eagerly pushing her back into the grass, Catherine struggled against him.

"Vincent," she pleaded, "Not here... t's not safe."

He hurriedly tasted the air, impatient for their consummation. "We are alone," he assured her.

"Vincent, please, I'm uncomfortable... making love in the grass would be wonderful, but not in front of them..." She nodded her head toward the cages, where the animals were pacing their confines.

He reluctantly moved off her pliant body. "As you wish." It was uttered with a hint of disappointment.

"You know I trust you, Vincent. Come," she murmured invitingly, as she stood and grasped his hand. "Wherever we are, it will be wonderful, but I can think of better places than a zoo!" She gently tugged him to his feet, attempting to lead him back to the Tunnel entrance.

Vincent stood immobile, the pulling on his hand having no visible effect on him. Feet spread apart, muscles tensed for a confrontation, he stared at the cages - at one specific cage - as growls filled the night air.

It is over. No longer will I battle within myself...with my other side. The caged beast ceased his pacing, watching intently. *We are alike, my friend, but there is a difference. When my darker self enveloped me, there was still a small part that was able to reason... that did not surrender... and was able to stop. There is a difference. She is the difference. I wish you happiness in your kingdom. I am returning to mine.*

Catherine stood quietly by his side, uncertain as to what was happening between Vincent and the male lion, but confident that whatever he'd been experiencing was at an end. Strong emotions emanated along their connection, but it was interspersed with an underlying sense of peace.

Whatever had occurred was now over, but she still had a problem discerning Vincent from '*him*.'

"Vincent, can we go home now?"

Smiling down at her, Vincent took her hand and they raced through the park until they reached a section that Catherine was unfamiliar with. Pausing for breath, she frowned and scanned the area.

"Where are we, Vincent?"

"At a Tunnel entrance," he answered with a smile.

"Really?" she asked in surprise. "I didn't know this opening was here."

As she spoke, Vincent guided her along a narrow, dirt pathway, stopping to remove a few branches and leaves from the ground. Yanking up a rusted grate, he descended a metal ladder, reaching up a hand to help her down safely.

When Catherine was two rungs from the bottom, Vincent encircled her tiny waist and gently eased her to the ground.

"Where does it lead?"

"Why not follow me and see?" he answered mysteriously, wrapping his arm around her shoulder and leading her down a dimly lit tunnel.

Catherine suddenly stopped dead in her tracks and exclaimed, "Vincent! It completely slipped my mind. Father and the others will be waiting for some news. We should tell them you're safe."

"Later," he said impatiently.

"We can't enter the Tunnels without anyone seeing us!" she stated emphatically.

"Yes, we can," he answered back just as firmly, leading her around a corner and chuckling at the look of astonishment on her face.

They were directly in front of his chamber.

"I don't believe this!"

"Believe it," he answered back, hustling her into his room.

Once inside, Catherine deftly evaded Vincent's advances, stating firmly, "Before we go '*any*' further, I want to know exactly what's happened. I know you've said your two sides have joined together, but what does that mean?"

He growled under his breath and threw her a starved look. "Later."

She folded her arms. "No, not later... now!"

Sighing, Vincent removed his cloak and placed it on his chair. Sitting on the edge of his bed, he then sought the right words to explain the extraordinary events of this night.

"There is no conflict between us, Catherine. I am whole now and no longer need to suppress my violent side. Finally, I have come to realize the battle was one which should never have been fought."

"Why now, Vincent? What happened to cause this amazing revelation?"

"In a way," he muttered to himself, "I suppose I should thank Paracelsus for opening my eyes. His

deceit regarding my birth, who my mother was... all the lies he placed before me unleashed my other half. Even though I recovered, I have been waging a losing battle ever since."

"That was months ago!" she cried. "You've come so far since that horrible time. You've overcome your fears about us. We've loved, Vincent! We are truly together now!"

"That is true, but the scars were always present, Catherine. '*He*' was always hovering in the background," Vincent replied, his voice breaking. "I just shielded it from you. My darker side demanded acknowledgment. It wanted to love you as well. Tonight, I succumbed to its desperate plea."

"But you're here and you're all right. I don't understand, Vincent, when it happened before you've ..."

"I know, Catherine. This night, I felt certain I was lost, that I would not survive. However," he raised his head and smiled, "I seem to have come through the ordeal without so much as a scratch."

"But you *are* changed!" she persisted. "I can feel a difference in you."

Vincent rose and strode toward her. Reaching down, he slid the disheveled locks of auburn hair from her shoulder and placed a kiss just below her ear. He then captured her lobe between his fangs and gently bit down on it.

"Know this, Catherine. We are one."

She collapsed against him, unaccustomed as she was to this open demonstration of affection... especially from *him*. Vincent was a gentle lover. Her only complaint, one she never dared express vocally, was that he always held back a part of himself.

Not tonight, Catherine thought with excitement. Tonight she knew Vincent would not restrain himself. She would have all of him - both of them - on this night.'

She allowed Vincent to undress her, reveling in the hunger radiating inside his eyes (*his eyes?*) a hunger that reached out to devour her rapidly fleeting senses. She traced a finger along the sensual outline of his lips, realizing it was something she hadn't done in a long time.

His response was immediate. Vincent swept her in his arms and settled them both on his bed. Crushing his mouth down on hers, Catherine's lips parted to receive his thrusting tongue and the sharp stabl of delight it gave wrenched a muffled moan from deep inside her. Her pulse quickened and she felt herself robbed of breath, of sanity. There was an untamed savageness about him tonight. Catherine discovered she liked that - a lot.

His clothing was a barrier she could no longer tolerate and Catherine ripped his shirt from the confining waistband of his denim pants. Vincent shrugged out of it and laid back against the pillows, offering her the opportunity to continue her exploration. She complied with an eagerness that flamed the already blazing passion between them.

Smiling seductively at him, she lowered his zipper inch by inch, and no longer able to restrain himself, Vincent quickly consigned the rest of his clothing to the floor. Moving next to her, his hands slid under her back, caressing fingers burning her skin wherever they touched. A throbbing sweetness coursed through her.

"Vincent," she breathed his name almost reverently.

"I want you, Catherine. More than I have wanted anything in my life."

She gazed up at him and was astonished to see *him* staring down at her. Yet, it was her Vincent, too. One minute he was gentle and slow, his caresses drawing excited cries from between her lips. The next he was forceful, demanding, the thunderous growls emanating from deep within his chest music to her ears.

At last, the warmth of his mouth found her breasts, his tongue and lips gently teasing each nipple in turn. Catherine moaned and spread her palms over the bare skin of his back, pressing him even closer. They roamed down the curve of his hips and over his buttocks, her senses clamoring to smell, touch... taste this hard, male body pressed so tightly against her.

Vincent's tongue danced around hers, the searing evidence of his desire pressed against her thigh. He was filled with a fierce, exalting joy and his need to show her what he'd become, what this joining truly meant, was almost too much to endure.

Growling her name, he stretched out beside her and enveloped her in his arms. Trembling slightly, she thrilled in the solid maleness of him, loving his closeness, loving the feel of her skin against his.

Catherine opened her eyes for a few seconds to gaze up adoringly at him. The soft light behind him shining through the stained glass window created a golden edge along one side of Vincent's body. It shadowed his face and she lifted her hand to one prominent cheekbone, running it down its length to permanently lock the touch of it into her fingers.

Vincent's eyes suddenly focused on her, '*his*' smile causing Catherine a fleeting moment of panic. It didn't last long.

"I will love you as you have never been loved," he vowed, running his fangs along the sensitive cord of her neck. Without warning, he covered her entire throat with his mouth and she instinctively knew what it was he desired. Silently, she offered him her trust, giving him the power to take her very life if he wished.

His snarl was filled with an undercurrent of raw sex, Vincent's uniquely masculine odor surrounding her, stirring her senses. Taking a deep, intoxicating breath, she filled her lungs with his essence.

"Now, Catherine," he urged in a ragged whisper. "I want you now."

"I was always yours for the taking, Vincent," she answered just as breathlessly.

His mouth ground down on hers, the bed quaking beneath them. The savage power of the kiss branded her lips. She hadn't realized her fists were clenched until they slowly opened and she splayed them across the hard planes of his upper back. Her fingers crept up past his shoulders and muscular neck to slide into his thick, rumpled hair. It felt so good to have this heavy, virile body crushing hers.

It was obvious who was in control now, and Catherine almost screamed with the sheet ecstasy of that knowledge. No pretense, no hesitation, only the overwhelming feeling of passion. Vincent was pure male, pure heat, pure arousal.

Her thighs opened to him willingly, eagerly. Her own sense of identity was lost. She was his to do as he wished. Whimpering into his ear, Catherine dug her fingers into his scalp. She could feel him throbbing with desire as he entered her, plunging all the way to heavenly bliss.

Guttural sounds rumbled deep within his throat as the air exploded around them. Ragged words rose chokingly to his lips and all she could do was answer with wild cries of her own.

He couldn't get his fill of her! No matter how tightly he embraced her, how strongly he held her shaking form, it wasn't enough. A savagery took hold of him and his body began to shudder as incoherent sounds of pleasure rushed out of his mouth. Flames of desire erupted inside her and Catherine writhed beneath him, shamelessly wrapping her legs tighter around his waist.

All the other times, when this loss of control threatened to overwhelm him, Vincent would begin to withdraw. Not physically, but he would force himself to maintain a tight rein on his emotions. Though he climaxed, a part of him never experienced the pure rapture of release.

This time, he did not pull away. Vincent thrust himself into her one final time, filling her with the sweetest wonder of all - the sensation of him inside her heart, her mind, her soul. Knowing that he shared this feeling with her, that the frenzy consuming her was also enveloping him, increased her joy.

Vincent's roar was deafening, his heart sang the song of all lovers, and she answered with her own cry of release. For that short moment, the last vestiges of rational thought fled and they basked in the sensation of total completion.

They lay together, a tangle of legs and arms. Catherine was unable to speak. What had just happened was more miraculous than anything they had ever shared before. No words were needed to express what had occurred.

Vincent felt awed, astonished at what she had given to him. Her trust was a gift he would treasure forever. Before he allowed himself to relinquish his hold on reality and drift off to sleep, he delighted in the feel of the locks of her hair reaching across his chest like silken bonds.

A bond he now knew nothing in this universe could ever break.

The persistent tapping on the pipes dragged Catherine back to consciousness. She opened her eyes to find Vincent intently watching her. He smiled and gently brushed a few strands of unruly hair from her forehead.

She returned her smile and shyly joked, "Who are you supposed to be now?"

Vincent chuckled and lowered his head, his lips barely touching her ear. "Don't you know?" he whispered seductively.

"Well... I could take an educated guess." Unwillingly, the words of an almost forgotten 1960's song flashed across her mind; *I've got two lovers and I ain't ashamed. Two lovers and I love them both the same....'*

Catherine softly hummed the lyrics and then sang the last line of the tune out loud. "Cause you've a split personality, and in reality, both of them are you."

"Catherine?"

Her teasing was interrupted by the frantic message sent along the pipes. "Vincent, they still don't

know you're in the Tunnels..." She paused and sat up, listening further. "And they're worried about both of us."

"I know, Catherine," he replied calmly.

"We have to let them know everything's all right."

"I agree. We should inform them all is well." Encircling her waist, he pulled her down into the soft bedding. "Later."

END