

Black Cover

A DARKNESS ON THE EDGE

by M LOUIS

Laying on her stomach, Catherine's head rested on her arms as she sighed softly. She watched as Vincent swam around gracefully beneath the falls then lazily stretched out on his back and floated, his eyes closed, arms stretched out to his sides, his entire golden-fur covered body relaxed. She watched the way the mild current bobbed him, his golden mane swirling like a halo around his head, wishing he would swim without the briefs he wore and Catherine sighed again. Vincent opened his beautiful blue eyes slightly and peered at her.

"Are you bored?" he asked softly.

Catherine chuckled and smiled. "I have another name for what I'm feeling right now, Vincent."

"Dare I guess?" Vincent asked with amusement.

"If you want," Catherine replied casually and Vincent turned over, swimming to her. He placed his hands on the edge of the rock ledge Catherine was laying on and gracefully swept himself up and out of the water, onto the ledge beside her. He stood straight up and shook himself, the excess water flying all over Catherine. Shivering, Catherine began laughing as he walked over to her and knelt next to her with a mischievous smile, his eyes appraising her bikini-clad body with appreciation.

"Vincent!" she exclaimed through her giggles. "You did that on purpose!"

Then she reached out to him and he willingly came into her arms. She shivered a little from the coldness of his wet fur as he pressed himself against her skin, gently nuzzling his nose into her neck, brushing his lips there, tickling her with his tongue.

"Hmmm," she moaned softly and entangled her fingers into his wet mane then she pulled his head over and they kissed tenderly for a moment. Catherine realized once again that the touch of his strange lips against hers fired her up as usual and her hands began caressing the fur on his back, wishing with passion that he would take the one last step further.

Moaning softly, Catherine pushed against him, placing her teeth gently on his ear and bit it. Vincent pulled his head away with a chuckle, gazing into her sparkling green eyes. He kissed her lips again tenderly as he rubbed his wet, furry chest against her, a gentle vibration emitting deep from within him. When Vincent's lips finally left hers, Catherine playfully licked his face from his chin, over his nose to where the fine fur met between his eyes and he snorted, shaking his head abruptly, staring at her incredulously.

Suddenly, they became involved in a full blown tickling contest though Vincent kept his hands

in fists, using his knuckles for the assault so not to injure her with his claws. Catherine didn't have such a disadvantage and she quickly dominated the competition, rolling Vincent onto his back, straddling his midriff and directing his onslaught at his ribs beneath his arms. His head tilted back and his eyes tightly shut, Vincent laughed uncontrollably, pressing his arms against his sides upon her hands to try and halt her fingers, but only succeeded to pressing them harder into himself causing more laughter.

"Father!" he cried out in as best a plaintive falsetto voice he could manage. "Father, get this wicked woman off of me! She's trying to seduce me!"

Leaning down, Catherine attacked his neck at his shoulder with her tongue as he laughed again helplessly, trying to squeeze her face out by pressing his shoulder and head together.

He finally cried out, "Father! Rape! Rape!"

Catherine finally relented her barrage, then sat on his chest in triumph, watching Vincent with a loving smile as his guffaws subsided. Vincent wiped the tears from his eyes and looked at Catherine with fervent desire as she returned his expression.

Reaching up, Vincent gently took her shoulders whispering, "It's been over two years and I still can't believe my good fortune in finding you! You are so beautiful! You make me feel so alive!"

Catherine laughed softly and laid down on him as his arms encircled her. He squeezed her tightly until a little grunt escaped her, then he relaxed his hold. Catherine looked into his gentle blue eyes and touched his chest tenderly. She moved her face close to his and nuzzled the whiskers by his neck and ear as he trembled.

His hands went around her back and began gently caressing her skin there as she continued to nuzzle and kiss his neck. Vincent raised his head and began returning her kisses on her shoulder and rubbed the soft fur of his nose against her, enjoying her clean scent. He gently touched her breast in a warm caress then slipped a finger under the strap of her bikini top.

Catherine silently gasped at this bold move. He had never done this before to her and her heart began pounding with anticipation.

"Vincent?" she whispered as he slowly pulled the strap off her shoulder.

"Shhhh," Vincent responded and raised up, placing his mouth gently against her now exposed breast and tickled her nipple with his tongue. He could feel her desire for him welling up, and it fueled his own growing hunger for the completeness of joining with her. Catherine entangled her fingers into his golden mane and moaned with pleasure as his tongue titillated her, his other hand gently manipulating her other breast. She sighed and released him, unfastening her top and let it fall. Vincent's eyes drank in the sight of her exposed skin.

"Catherine," he said breathlessly, gazing into her eyes with intensity. "I want you."

Catherine gasped silently at his admission and replied softly, "I've waited so long... to hear you say that."

He smiled at her, a gentle loving smile taking both her arms into his hands, pushing her onto

her back. Raising over her he began tenderly caressing her smooth, silken skin, his hand moving slowly across her, enjoying its feel. His hand moved lower to her thighs as she trembled with anticipation.

Gently, Vincent slipped a finger under the waist band of her bikini bottom then slowly began to explore the fine hair that grew between her legs. Leaning down, he kissed her lips tenderly, their tongues searching each other out and entwining. He gently began to probe into the most sensitive area of her body and she tensed, her fingers pressing into his back, his gentle fingers massaging her into moist readiness. Catherine wiggled under his manipulations then struggled to help him remove the last of her covering. Vincent continued to pleasure her gently as her skin prickled with the sensation of him touching her. Catherine's back arched toward him and she could no longer contain herself. She climaxed with intensity, grasping his shoulders and pressing her face into his neck.

Vincent was surprised at the immensity of her arousal over him and he moaned softly in response, feeling her orgasm strongly as his own body cried out for the ultimate release. When Catherine was calmed, she gazed into his blue eyes now darkened with his own anticipation pushing him to his back. She leaned over him and began to gently stroke his readied erection that strained against his briefs. Tugging at them, Vincent raised up slightly helping her to remove the final barrier between them and Catherine sighed with pleasure at the sight of her now naked Vincent. Catherine kissed Vincent's lips once more then slowly positioned herself over him and gently took his hardened evidence of his arousal into her.

A sharp cry escaped his lips and he closed his eyes tightly, overwhelmed by the sensation of being inside Catherine.

Slowly, Catherine began moving up and down on him. Vincent was astounded at the feel of her after her climax as she was still pulsing slightly in the aftermath, tightening around him in flashes of pleasure.

He could feel her building again as his own release drew near. Reaching out Vincent grasped her hips and began moving her up and down on him, his mounting pleasure quickly becoming an insistent demand, he arched his back with a gasp of euphoria. Vincent rocked his head back and forth as he whispered her name with passion, his fingers began kneading her hips gently and a loud moan escaped him. Opening his eyes Vincent raised up upon his elbows, cupping hers in the palm of his hands as she quickened her movements.

Catherine leaned against him, pressing her breast to the fur covering his chest and he pushed his lips against her neck as his moans dissolved into pants. Reaching for her shoulders, he grasped them tightly, pulling her back to himself in order to stop her movements. She stared at him in question and Vincent rolled her onto her back to take over the pace. He began to push himself into her as hard as he dared, his grasp of her shoulders tightening and she sighed in a mixture of pleasure and anticipation.

Vincent cried out her name and his mind went to only the feelings of her desire and his own. He felt himself grow in her and harden more, his groin consuming with fire. Catherine gasped as she felt him on the edge and pushed her hips up to meet his as he drove into her.

Suddenly, Vincent roared fiercely as he climaxed, biting her shoulder and holding her as he pumped her almost too roughly, his hands shaking, his breath in shuddering gasps and sweat covering his body.

Catherine could feel him fill her in pulses and she cried out in her own climax which almost drove him over the edge when she tightened around him. She and Vincent pushed toward each other in rhythm. She raked her nails against his back savagely in response to Vincent's brutal grasp of her with his fangs and claws. He released his hold of her at this and gasped, feeling welts raising on his back slowing his pace to a gentler one. He kissed her tenderly and he ceased his movements, wrapping his shaking arms around her back and squeezing her gently.

"I love you," he whispered into her ear and touched it with the tip of his tongue. "I love you, Catherine."

Catherine nuzzled into his neck and whispered back, "And I love you, Vincent."

Vincent lifted his head staring into her eyes at her admission. He rolled off of her and coaxed her onto her stomach and gently began to massage her shoulders as she moaned in pleasure, resting her head on her arm. Vincent continued his ministrations of her back and shoulders, enjoying the feel of her soft skin under his hands until he could feel her on the edge of dreaming. With a soft sigh of contentment, Vincent laid down beside Catherine, draping his arm across her back and she pressed herself into him. Catherine wrapped her arms around Vincent's neck as he nuzzled into her, then they laid there together in each other's arms for a long quiet moment, dozing lightly.

"Vincent?"

"Hmmm?"

"Tell me something?" she said softly as she enjoyed the feel of his hands.

"What do you want me to tell you?" he replied, kissing her back gently, nuzzling his cheek against her soft skin.

Catherine raised up as Vincent retreated from her and she gazed into his sparkling blue eyes. She chuckled helplessly at his expression of mirth and wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling his head to rest upon her breasts.

"I know it's none of my business," she began softly, as she fondled his silky mane, "but I wondered... have you ever been, I mean really been, with a woman before?"

Suddenly, she felt Vincent's body tense beneath her hands and regretted that she had asked him such a private question. But she knew so little of his past!

Vincent could feel her apprehension and raised up to look at her. His eyes were filled, to her surprise, with shame.

Catherine cupped his chin gently. "I'm sorry, I had no right to ask, Vincent. Forget that I did."

Shaking his head Vincent turned away replying, "You have every right to know... but I cannot

answer your question,” he bowed his head, “at least... not yet... I’m sorry.” Vincent pulled from her and stood up, gathering his clothes.

Catherine wished desperately that she had never broached the subject, for it obviously brought him much pain to remember. Standing up herself, Catherine gathered her own clothing as they both began dressing.

“Vincent?” she called in a small voice. Vincent glanced over at her as he dressed then looked away. “Vincent,” she repeated, “please forgive me, I didn’t mean to cause you so much pain by that question.”

Vincent waved a hand in her direction replying, “Do not trouble yourself over it, Catherine. It is something in my past... I preferred that it never touched your life... I thought it would be better that I forget it, but the time has come to face it.” He turned to her with pain in his eyes. “It is only right that you should know me... at least what I had been... but now is not the time to discuss this. I need... time to organize my thoughts.”

They finished dressing and Vincent gathered the satchel that had been filled with provisions for them for two days. Holding his hand out to her he said, “Come, I’ll guide you back.”

Catherine bit her lip and felt anger at herself. That one stupid question had ruined the entire weekend for them both. They had only just begun, had just made love for the first time, and now Vincent had obviously decided to end their time together she knew, by his statement. Reluctantly, she took his hand and allowed him to lead her on the long journey back to her apartment entrance.

The trip was made in uncomfortable silence and Catherine felt a wall building between Vincent and herself, something that she had thought was torn down long ago. By the time they had reached the basement entrance, Catherine was glad that the time had come for them to part but she was guilt-ridden.

She turned to him, taking his arms gently. “Vincent, I...”

“Catherine,” Vincent gently interrupted her, “I don’t want to hear you apologize for asking for the truth. Please, Catherine,” his eyes were beseeching her. “I need time... then we will talk.”

Catherine nodded sadly pulling from him. She turned toward the entrance and began moving away from him, her head bowed. When she reached the ladder that would lead her back up, she turned to Vincent, but he was already gone. Catherine stepped back toward the tunnel and looked down it but didn’t see him. Sighing with frustration as her heart tore at her again, she wondered what sort of torment Vincent was harboring within himself. Why was it so difficult for him to speak of it? Sadly she turned back to the ladder that would lead her up to her apartment...

“What are you doing here, Radcliffe?” Joe exclaimed with surprise as he approached Catherine’s desk. He stood over her, holding a folder. “I thought you were gonna get away for a few days?”

Raising her head to him Catherine smiled weakly then laid her pencil down. “My plans... sort

of got changed, Joe.”

“Oh?” He queried folding his arms. “What happened?”

Catherine sighed and leaned on her elbows. “My... ‘friend’ had... taken ill. Couldn’t make it, so I decided to cut it short myself and come back here.”

Joe could tell there was something bothering Catherine deeply and grew concerned as he always did for her. He never knew what sort of trouble she was going to get herself into next, that he might have to bail her out of - although she had mysteriously gotten herself out of many a sticky situation with methods Joe couldn’t fathom. But the fact that she always came out safe, caused Joe to suspend further questions as to how.

“You okay, Cathy?” he asked softly as she bowed her head and shook it. He sighed and leaned on her desk. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s nothing, Joe,” Catherine replied quietly then smiled at him weakly. “It’ll work itself out.”

Joe nodded and narrowed his eyes at her. “If I’m not mistaken, I’d swear you’re acting like you had a fight with a... boyfriend. Am I warm?”

Catherine only gazed at Joe with torment in her eyes. Knowing he would not get an answer, Joe shrugged and laid the folder he was holding on her desk. Okay, enough prying, Maxwell!

Then he tapped the folder with his finger.

“I was gonna do this deposition myself because you were gone, but what for now? I need it by the end of the day, Radcliffe.”

Catherine just stared at it as Joe turned on his heels and walked away. She blew out with frustration and opened it.

“Welcome back, Radcliffe,” she whispered.

Vincent could smell the blood on his hands as he stared at the remains of what used to be a human being. He staggered away as he slowly regained control of himself. How could she had done what she did to him? Why had she threatened him as she did? She told him those awful things... and he had retaliated. Vincent felt terror growing inside himself as he turned away from the body and began running down the alley back to the park. He ran with all his strength, trying to outrun the shame he felt, the guilt of what he had done.

Vincent approached the sewer entrance in the park and knelt down by the small stream of water running out of it. He rinsed his hands of the still moist blood as best he could and continued into the pipe. Once inside, he slowed his pace, his breath now beginning to come out raggedly and in great racking sobs. He went through the secret door into the tunnels, and only then did he allow himself his anguish. Sitting against a wall he leaned his head back and screamed into the tunnels, releasing the agony of his soul...

“NO!” Vincent shouted as he sat up abruptly in his bed. He stared around in fear, his heart racing, his body covered in sweat.

“Vincent?” He heard a quiet voice call.

Vincent looked over sharply to the source of the voice and saw Father standing at the entry to his chamber, his face filled with concern. Vincent swung his legs to the floor and began rubbing his face, saying in a tortured whisper, "Father."

Slowly, Father made his way over to Vincent and sat beside him on his bed. He raised a hand and gently placed it on his shoulder.

"I didn't realize you were back already, Vincent." Father said softly and rubbed the massive shoulder beneath his hand then lowered it. "Two questions." Vincent glanced over at Father and nodded, the echoes of his dream now beginning to fade. "Why are you back?" Father asked quietly.

Vincent closed his eyes and turned away, his face clouded in a frown of anguish. Taking a deep breath, Vincent replied almost inaudibly, "Catherine...asked me a question."

Father's eyebrows raised. "Oh?"

Vincent nodded and lowered his head. "She asked me about... my past."

Frowning then, Father blew out softly with concern. "I see... I think you've answered my second question. You had the dream again."

"Yes..." Vincent replied in a whisper.

Father nodded and placed his hand supportingly on Vincent's shoulder saying, "It didn't really happen, Vincent. Lizzie ended her own life. Why do you keep having this dream?"

"I don't know," Vincent replied, raising his hands with a shrug of bewilderment. He became solemn and shook his head slowly whispering, "Perhaps because I wished that it had happened that way..."

Father cleared his voice uncomfortably then asked gently, "What did Catherine ask you?"

"If..." Vincent began with obvious difficulty, "if I had any past... experiences."

"And what did you tell her?"

Vincent shook his head sadly. "Nothing. I took her back to her apartment. Father," Vincent said watching him with pain in his eyes. "I don't know how to tell her about that period in my life. I don't want to tell her. She would reject me then..."

"You don't know that, Vincent," Father replied and squeezed Vincent's hand, "I think that she'll accept that, just as she has accepted everything else about you."

"Perhaps," Vincent agreed weakly, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth now remembering that enchanting afternoon with her by the falls.

Sighing, Father rose to his feet saying, "You should tell her then, Vincent. I know it was a dark time for you, and there are scars, but now it's time to let the memory of it, and the guilt... go."

Vincent smiled at Father and nodded his head slowly. Father gave him a reassuring smile then left Vincent alone. Standing up, Vincent went to retrieve his clothing for the day and began to dress himself. He decided he would tell Catherine everything - all his deepest fears about what had happened in his confused and tormented youth, which had prompted the

nightmare. And perhaps finally exorcise the shame and the dark dream for his life completely...

Catherine entered her darkened apartment, wearily tossing her bag and purse to one of her couches with a sigh. Slowly she made her way to the bathroom and started to draw a bath, desperately wanting to sink into the warmth of it and soak the terrible exhaustion from her body. It had been a long hard week at work for her and especially disquieting when she returned home.

She knew that Vincent would not come to her until whatever grief she had evoked from him was settled in his mind. She hadn't seen him since the day she had asked him the question that had thrown him into some deep, hidden turmoil he did not wish to share with her. She still condemned herself for the breach of his privacy - and after the first time they ever made love together too! She wouldn't have been surprised if Vincent never returned to her again.

"Serves me right!" she mumbled with ire, as she stripped the last of her clothing from her body.

Shutting off the water, Catherine sank into the bathtub with a sigh of relief, lying back to let the warm water caress the pain and weariness from her body. Catherine tried to feel her connection to Vincent. It was weak but it was still there. She couldn't sense him as strongly as he could her but she still had a connection to him when he was feeling strong emotions. The last week had been sheer torture for her. Vincent had been feeling deep shame and regret.

What could have happened to him that caused him such grief? What had he meant when he said to her that she would know what he had been?

A gentle tapping brought her out of her thoughts and her heart leaped with the knowledge that Vincent had finally come back to her. Hastily, she began to stand up when she heard the French doors open.

"Catherine?" She heard his voice call with apprehension.

"In here, Vincent," Catherine replied, adding quickly, "Just a moment, I'll be right out!"

Quickly Catherine began drying herself and she heard Vincent call, "I am sorry... I didn't realize you were so tired and were occupied..." She heard the French doors open again. "I'll come back another day..."

Oh no you don't! Catherine thought rushing out of her bathroom, unheeding of the fact that she was still wet and totally naked. She ran up behind him grabbing the back of his cloak.

"Dammit, Vincent!" She exclaimed as she wrapped her arms around his waist from behind. "I've been worried sick about you all week and you're not going to walk out of here until you tell me what's been bothering you!"

Vincent had visibly stiffened when she grabbed him, knowing that she had just come out of the bathtub and was probably naked as a newborn. Trembling a little, he sighed then slowly

began to turn to her. Catherine released him and awkwardly wrapped the towel around herself as he turned. Vincent averted his eyes away from her, and she could see it was not without effort.

"I'm sorry," she said quietly, and went for her robe, feeling ashamed that he was so uncomfortable with her nudity even after they had made love.

Vincent couldn't hold his eyes away from her any longer. He glanced at her as she finished drying herself and reached for her robe.

Gasping at her beauty with tragic eyes, he whispered, "You are so very beautiful!" He lowered his head adding quietly, "I do not deserve you!"

Catherine paused with a shocked silence as she drew on her robe. She tied the front of it and went over to him with a sigh of concern.

"Oh Vincent," she said shaking her head sadly, "Of course you do!" Her arms went around him. "You of all people deserve everything! How can you deny it?"

Vincent hesitantly wrapped his arms around her whispering, "What I have to tell you... will fill you with disgust for me and you will wish you had never let me touch you... make love to you."

Catherine pulled away from him. Taking his hand she led him over to a couch and they sat down. Vincent remained silent, his head bowed, his golden mane partially hiding his face.

Catherine reached over and brushed the golden tresses aside saying gently, "Nothing you have done, could make me not love you, Vincent. Whatever happened in your past, made you what you are today... the man that I love."

Vincent gazed at her with torment on his leonine face and in his eyes.

Smiling at him with love and concern Catherine encouraged him gently, "Tell me..."

Vincent watched her shining eyes, saw the gentleness and understanding there... the unconditional love. Inhaling a deep breath he released it slowly, then began to tell her his tale...

Well they're still racing down
at the trestles
But that blood had never burned
in her veins.
Now I hear she's got a house up
in Fairview
in a style that she's trying to
maintain.
Well, if she wants to see me,
you can tell her that I'm
easily found.
Tell her there's a spot out
'neath Abrahm/s Bridge,

you tell her,
There's a darkness on the edge
of town...

Vincent exhaled a breath of the warm humid evening air with exhilaration as the red Camaro screamed by him, the engine roaring, tires squealing as they tried desperately to get traction on the hot asphalt. Vincent pressed himself against the building deeper into the shadows as he watched. He pushed the hood off his head and loosened his cloak against the heat of the summer, his heart racing in excitement. A blue Mustang's engine roared to life in response to the red Camaro and also burned its tires past Vincent. Then both cars drew together, side by side as a young man stood between them holding a green flag high over his head.

The drivers of the two vehicles watched the flagman in concentration as they raised the rpm's of their engine, ready to dump the clutch at the man's signal. Vincent tensed. The man's arm dropped. The night was filled with the roar of shear horsepower and the air with smoke as the two cars left the chalked line and screamed down the measured quarter mile. In the fading sunset, Vincent could see that the Camaro had reached its destination just ahead of the Mustang and he saw their brake lights come on as the drivers stopped their machines. Vincent released the breath he found he was holding and smiled with delight.

Suddenly, the evening was split by the sound of sirens and two police cars seemingly came out from nowhere into view their lights flashing and began pursuing the two racers.

Ducking deeper into the shadows of the building, Vincent watched the Camaro and Mustang come to life and departed in different directions, the police cars splitting up also to follow them. Soon it became quiet again, as the sounds of the sirens and of the engines faded. Vincent pulled his hood upon his head securely and walked into the alley, feeling a little disappointed that the racing had been broken up so soon. He had heard about these illegal drag races from one of the helpers and began coming there finding some small relief from the dark thoughts that still plagued him since Lisa had left...

The sound of the power unleashed in the high performance engines of the cars seemed to be a kindred spirit of sorts for his own darker, raging emotions. He exalted in the deafening noise and reveled in the powerful vibrations from the raw, untamed horsepower. How he wished he could learn to drive one of those machines! Vincent chuckled cynically to himself and thought, how he wished he could learn to drive, period!

Walking with brisk steps toward the open manhole Vincent saw a basketball left abandoned in the alley. With an impromptu surge of boyish playfulness, he gathered it into his huge hands and began dribbling it somewhat clumsily at first, then with coordination after a short time of practice. He saw a cardboard box setting high above his head on a loading dock while he was playing and deemed it suitable for a net. He leapt up and slam-dunked it into the box, smiling with satisfaction and continued toward the manhole. Suddenly, another person entered the alley.

Casually, Vincent moved to the side and leaned against the wall of a building, his head

lowered so his face was concealed and waited for the person to pass. He heard the footsteps come closer then they stopped... in front of him.

"You out here again watching 'em races?" he heard a woman's voice ask.

"Yes," Vincent replied quietly and left his place by the building, continuing to the manhole.

"Where're you going?"

Vincent stopped, his back now to her. He replied quietly, "Home."

"Wait!" the woman called and rushed in front of him.

Vincent stiffened visibly, his heart racing as he saw an attractive girl, she must have been in her mid 20's, older than himself. She was dressed in shorts revealing slender legs that were almost too thin and a halter top covering her small though shapely breasts, her black hair was pinned up against the heat... and she peered curiously up into his hood. Vincent backed away quickly and she pursued him.

"Wait," she exclaimed. "I want to see you!" To his horror, she boldly reached up to his hood and pushed it off his face.

Vincent gasped jerking away but she just stood there peering at him with interest, an expression of delight coming to her brown eyes.

"Wow!" she gasped with a giggle. "You are much better looking up close!"

Vincent was taken aback by the woman's pure pleasure and the fact that she showed no fear of him.

"Up close?" Vincent replied in a wondering voice. "You have seen me before?"

The girl nodded and pointed to a window with a fire-escape above them in the obviously old and dilapidated building.

"We live up there," she answered. "Me and my roommate. I've seen you come here to watch the races." She watched him through narrowed eyes. "I bet you wish you could drive one of those machines, eh?"

Vincent chuckled and nodded his head in response, then he sighed and said, "I must go."

"Why?"

Vincent felt some irritation at her persistence and replied, "You have seen me! You see that I am different!"

"Sure," she replied with amusement, "everyone down on the streets knows you! You're not so much different from us. We're all unaccepted by society, Vincent."

"How do you know my name?" Vincent asked, his head tilted in curiosity.

"I know Jenny," she replied and he shook his head in confusion. "You know, that one hooker you talk to now and then?"

Finally, after some thought he nodded and she continued, "Well, she told me about you."

Vincent became uncomfortable and began to turn away again but the girl was not to be easily

deterred.

"If you don't like it here, Vincent," she said taking his arm, "Why don't you come up to my place? My roommate is gone for the evening and we can talk. You like lemonade?"

Chuckling with surrender, Vincent shook his head at the girl's tenacity. He finally agreed and she smiled at him, showing even white teeth then turned to the doorway in the alley.

When Vincent didn't follow her and instead went to the wall of the building she asked, "Now where're you going?"

Vincent peered at the fire-escape and pointed. "To your apartment."

Then he easily leaped upwards and caught the raised ladder of the fire-escape pulling himself up. He stood at the window of her apartment as she giggled with delight.

"Boy, you really have some wild tricks up those sleeves of yours!" She exclaimed and turned to the door. "Be up there in a flash!"

Vincent remained there patiently at the opened window when he heard the door to the apartment open. "Come on in!" He heard the girl call and he bent down looking into the apartment.

It was fairly bare, one room place, in a fairly poor state of repair. Some of the walls had cracked plaster, part of the ceiling had fallen down. An old couch with a spring poking through, a rough unmade double-bed and a small kitchen table were the only furniture adorning the place. But through all the obvious marked evidence of poverty, the place appeared very clean. Vincent entered the apartment.

"My name's Lizzie," the girl introduced herself and added with humor, "Dizzy Lizzie Smith."

Vincent chuckled at her self-deprecating name for herself asking, "Why Dizzy?"

Lizzie opened a small refrigerator and removed a pitcher with the cold lemonade. She laughed softly and brought down two glasses from the cupboard.

"Rhymes with Lizzie, doesn't it?"

Vincent chuckled again and she indicated the table. Vincent began to sit on one of the chairs.

"Wait," she said suddenly, eyeing his large frame with undisguised admiration.

Vincent halted his movements and she quickly exchanged chairs adding, "That chair ain't too steady, Vincent. Try this one."

Then Vincent sat at the table as she poured the drink into the glasses. Vincent drank some of the cold liquid, feeling its coolness traveling down his throat. He shrugged off his cloak and gazed at Lizzie as she studied him. She liked his long golden mane but his face was the most unusual face she'd ever seen and she thought it attractive. His hands were fur covered as well with what looked like claws instead of fingernails. And did she actually see fangs?

"I was wondering when you'd take that heavy old thing off," she said with a smile. "You were making me hotter seeing you in it."

"Why did you ask me here?" Vincent asked with curiosity.

Lizzie shrugged her slender shoulders and answered, "Just wanted to get to know you, Vincent. One reject to another."

Vincent sighed softly. "What makes you a reject?"

"The color of my skin!" she replied with some heat. "Them uppity white people hate you because they're scared of your differences. They're not scared of me but they hate me all the same!"

Vincent frowned with concern. "You're very bitter, Lizzie. Did something happen to you?"

Lizzie's eyes flashed at him for a moment then she bowed her head and nodded but remained silent.

"I'm sorry," Vincent said softly, uncomfortably, "I shouldn't have asked." He rose to his feet, taking his cloak. "I'll go now..."

Lizzie raised to him sharply and exclaimed, "Why are you so damned anxious to leave?! Sit down, I want you to be my friend."

Vincent returned to his seat and picked up his glass again and watched her with wonder. She was an attractive girl, surely she could make friends easily, but for some reason he couldn't comprehend, she wanted to be friends with him! The thought intrigued him, he had been so reluctant to make friends with another girl since that terrible night with Lisa. But if this kind, lovely girl ever found out what he did to Lisa and what he truly was... He trembled at the thought closing his eyes.

"Looks like you got skeletons in the closet too, Vincent," she said suddenly as he stared at her, "I saw you tremble just then."

Vincent bowed his head sighing and replied, "Yes... I had... something happen to me..."

Lizzie nodded and said softly, "You tell me your story, I'll tell you mine. Deal, Vincent?" Vincent gazed into her warm brown eyes and finally he nodded his head, feeling confidence in this pretty young woman now.

"Okay, me first," she said and sat back in her seat. "I used to live with foster parents a few years back. A couple of rich white dudes who were trying to show how generous and selfless they were to a 'poor black girl'. They were pretty nice to start with..." and she continued her story as Vincent listened with interest...

Vincent entered his chamber breathlessly. He was tired but he felt elated. Lizzie had finally kissed him! Removing his cloak he tossed it on the chair then dropped onto his bed with a chuckle. He rolled onto his stomach and hugged his pillow to himself wishing desperately he was holding Lizzie in his arms again. These past three weeks had been full of intrigue and pleasant surprises for Vincent. To his utter astonishment, Lizzie asked him over again after that first night then again and again.

Vincent started to see Lizzie steadily and slowly their relationship began to blossom into something more. Something that he never thought he would have with a woman! Though he

was younger than Lizzie by some years, he discovered Lizzie was actually attracted to him! He could feel it in her!

“Vincent? Is that you?”

Vincent groaned and felt irritation rising inside himself as he recognized Father’s concerned voice.

“Yes!” he replied with ire and buried his head in his pillow, wishing Father would go away!

Father entered Vincent’s chamber, limped over to him and stood over Vincent.

“Where have you been?” he demanded sternly.

“Out!” Was Vincent’s curt reply.

Father became angered at Vincent’s tone and poked Vincent’s back with his cane repeating. “Where?”

Vincent turned over quickly and bared his fangs at Father. “I said I was out!” And he pushed Father’s cane away.

He stood up and began pacing the chamber impatiently.

Father watched his son with fury and trepidation. Ever since Lisa had left, Vincent had changed. He had slowly become irritable and testy with him, though the incident was now months behind them. He knew Vincent had really come to believe that he had sent Lisa Above!

Before Lisa had teased Vincent into that terrible moment in the Great Hall, she had already decided to move above and had discussed her choice with Father. She even had arrangements made with one of the helpers for a place to stay while she went to school. But she hadn’t told Vincent of her decision. Father didn’t talk to Vincent about it because he thought that Lisa had done so. Then after Vincent had injured her, she left.

Vincent had been convinced it was because of what he did, despite Father’s assurances to the contrary. Then Vincent went through a dark time of illness when he lost control of himself. Father had thought he was going to lose his gentle son, but Vincent came through, but not unscathed by it. Months later, as Vincent had grown taller and filled out, he began to take on characteristics of losing himself again. Father became especially concerned because he knew Vincent would be too powerful for any of the tunnel dwellers to restrain him this time. Even Winslow had halted their playful wrestling matches, after coming to Father with a severely sprained shoulder followed by a very badly upset and apologetic Vincent.

Just recently, Vincent had become irrationally paranoid and started up again about Father sending Lisa Above. He was mistrustful and impatient, sometimes having heated arguments with him, where words that cut deeply were exchanged. After these trying moments, Vincent would disappear for hours Above, leaving Father anxious and worried for his problem child. If only Devin had not left! Vincent could have had someone he looked up to, someone to confide in. Devin always helped Vincent to slow down and put things into perspective, to think things through. But now, to Vincent, even Devin’s disappearance was Father’s fault.

What had happened to the gentle, patient boy that Father had once known? This being who was pacing in the chamber with dire irritation, was a very angry young man indeed!

Sighing softly, Father controlled his anger then asked in a level voice, "Where have you been going to these last few weeks Vincent?"

Vincent looked at Father hard replying, "I do not think it is any of your business, Father!"

"It's up to see that Lizzie," Father said quietly, folding his hands upon his cane. "Isn't it? Vincent, our helper told us..."

"To HELL with the damned helper!" Vincent retorted with venom.

"Vincent!" Father exclaimed, once again losing his own temper. "You will NOT use that tone of voice with ME!"

"Who's to STOP me?" Vincent demanded, pointing a claw at himself then exclaimed. "What the helper said is a lie! Lizzie would never do that! She told me!"

"Vincent," Father said softly with concern now, "how well do you know this woman? What has she told you about herself?"

Vincent calmed at the change in Father's voice and stopped his agitating pacing. He lowered his head and replied quietly, "She has been through some hard times. She wasn't treated very well by certain people. Father," Vincent said then, with an appealing tone, "she doesn't trust anyone but she does trust me... She really likes me, Father. She even kissed me tonight!"

Father bowed his head nodding it. "I can understand why you'd want to protect her, Vincent. But what Lou told me troubles me deeply."

Vincent watched Father's deep concern with warmth then he approached him slowly. He laid his hand on Father's shoulder and said, "She told me herself, Father. She likes me for me, not because I am a... a..."

Father frowned at Vincent's hesitation to continue and exclaimed with anguish.

"You are NOT an animal, Vincent. You are a man! If she means you no harm, why does she keep reminding you of your differences?"

Vincent whirled away from Father angrily and grabbed his cloak. he began storming out of the chamber.

"Vincent!" Father called with anguish. "Where are you going? Vincent?"

Vincent didn't reply and continued on his way out leaving Father sputtering.

Why wouldn't Father leave him alone about Lizzie? The only reason Vincent could think of was that Father must feel threatened by her! She was the one person in Vincent's life whom Father knew he had no control over and couldn't send away from him! Lizzie said that she liked him because he was gentle and kind. Though she didn't share any of the same interests as Vincent, she was still a wonderful girl to be around, always cheerful and always joking with him. So sometimes she did tease him about his appearance and some of her comments had bothered him a little. Vincent was sure it was all in fun and not malicious! She would never

intentionally hurt him! Vincent was sure of it!

Vincent left the tunnels and began his journey back to Lizzie's apartment. Though he had left only a couple hours before, she had told him to come anytime. He knew she would welcome him back tonight gladly. Vincent decided he might even stay for the night with her if she would let him! She had promised him earlier, that there would be so much more to follow eventually after the kiss. Vincent silently gasped with anticipation and found his pulse had quickened. He stepped up his pace to her apartment, his heart singing with joy...

Vincent reached Lizzie's building, climbing the fire-escape gracefully and stepped toward the window, a smile of excitement on his leonine face. Leaning down he peered into the apartment and was shocked. He sank to his knees, staring in bewilderment then fell back against the railing of the fire-escape.

"Did you hear something Lizzie?" Her roommate asked with concern.

Lizzie left the embrace, rising up out of the bed and looked to the window saying, "There's only one guy I know of that uses the fire-escape for a front door."

Lizzie looked back to her lover and winked at her as she asked, "So, Lizzie my dear, do I finally get to meet this lionman of yours?"

"I don't see why not, Tess," Lizzie replied and approached the window. She covered herself with her robe and leaned out. She saw Vincent sitting against the railing, his head raised up, his eyes closed, hand clutched to his heaving chest.

"Vincent?" Lizzie called softly, with concern. "What's wrong?"

Vincent's eyes went to her. They were wide with wonder as he said weakly, "Wrong?" Then he added in a stronger voice, "Nothing is wrong." He shook his head. "I'm sorry, Lizzie. I never should have come back here tonight." He rose slowly and grasped the railing for support. "I'll go now..."

Lizzie stepped out to the fire-escape and grabbed Vincent's cloak from behind. "Why do you keep on trying to run away, Vincent? You know you're welcome here anytime!"

Vincent shook his head again and leaned it back, his golden mane parting from his face.

"What is it?" she asked with concern then. "Tell me, Vincent!"

Vincent lowered his eyes and raised his hand toward the window. "I am... disturbing you..." He stammered and gazed at her. "I did not know that you... you..."

Realizing what Vincent saw, Lizzie began laughing saying, "You think that I prefer women? Oh, Vincent. Dear sweet, exemplary Vincent," her voice was caressing him. "I don't. I just like a change every now and then. Tess was off early tonight and we got bored, so..."

Vincent only stared at her in wonder, blinking his blue eyes, full of innocence. Taking his hand Lizzie pulled him toward her.

"Come inside Vincent. I want you to meet my roommate. She's been dying to meet you!"

Vincent allowed himself to be led into the window and saw Lizzie's roommate as she rose naked out of the bed. She was a tall girl, around his height, probably about 40 years old but still very shapely and attractive though she had a look of weary years about her. She reached out her hand toward Vincent as Lizzie introduced them. Vincent shook her hand gingerly, uncomfortable with her nudity, although she didn't seem to notice. She smiled at him warmly approval obvious in her eyes as she sized him up.

"Grrrr," she said and nudged Lizzie with her elbow. "No wonder you've been hiding him from me, Lizzie."

"I'm afraid Vincent is a little naive, Tess," Lizzie said, explaining Vincent's nervous reticence at being there. "He's kinda new to all this."

"Well," Tess exclaimed and placed her hands on her hips, "we'll just have to try to make him more comfortable!"

Shaking his head Vincent raised his hand, turning away. "I am sorry... I should not be here.:

"He likes to be begged to stay, Tess," Lizzie said with a chuckle.

"He's into that, eh?" Tess replied and quickly blocked Vincent's exit taking his arms gently. "Come on Vinnie, stay with us! We don't bite! Stay awhile, huh? Oh please, oh please?"

Vincent was still weak from the earlier shock and closed his eyes, sighing softly. "I shouldn't..."

Tess pulled his arm and led him to the table where he sat gratefully. He shook his head again and glanced up at the two women, one naked and one just barely covered, who were appraising him with interest in their eyes. Vincent turned away, feeling his face go crimson.

"Get him something to drink," Lizzie advised Tess and they both went to the refrigerator. She called over her shoulder, "Do you drink liquor, Vincent?"

"Liquor?" Vincent asked weakly, then nodded his head. "Perhaps I could use a drink now... Yes..."

Vincent heard the two women talking to each other softly as they prepared his drink. He listened to them whispering and giggling. They were happy he was there, he thought. That was good, though at one point in their conversation he swore he heard Lizzie's voice say, "... put it in a saucer, so he can lap it up like a doggie..." but he knew he must have been mistaken.

The two women approached Vincent again and took chairs on either side of him as he took the drink from Tess's hand. He drank it down quickly, the liquid burning on its journey down his throat. Suddenly, he began to cough, covering his mouth with a furred hand and the women began to gently slap his back, talking to him with soothing voices.

"Easy there, Vinnie!" he heard Tess's voice say softly and her back slapping became caresses. She took one of his hands and stroked the fur, staring at it with fascination.

The hard whiskey hit Vincent almost immediately, for he had not eaten that evening. He finally began to feel at ease, a warmth rising inside him for these two women who were now

both caressing him. They cared for him, he thought, despite his differences. Their hands were soothing, comforting. He began to feel aroused as he held up the glass indicating a refill, his blue eyes in question. Tess took the glass from his hand and went back to the 'fridge removing the bottle.

"My daddy's corn whiskey, Vinnie," she was saying, "I'm surprised you like it. I can't stand it myself."

"It's good..." Vincent replied, his speech already becoming impaired. Then he complained, "I'm hot..."

"Well take off that heavy cloak!" Lizzie exclaimed and began tugging at the sleeves.

Vincent helped her to remove the cloak then voluntarily removed his vest, only his thin cotton shirt covering his chest now. Tess placed the now refilled glass into Vincent's hand as Lizzie began to seductively unbutton his shirt. Then she slipped her hand into it and caressed the soft golden fur on his chest.

Vincent closed his eyes and trembled uncontrollably. He lifted his glass and quickly consumed the liquid. It didn't burn nearly as bad this time and he gripped the glass hard as Lizzie's caressing hands went to his hardening groin. The glass shattered in his hand.

"Oh damn you, Vincent!" Tess shouted with agitation. "We don't have that many glasses, you dipshit!" Vincent gazed at her with an injured expression.

Lizzie shot Tess a hard look and exclaimed, "Shut the fuck up, Tess. He didn't do it on purpose! You're such an asshole sometimes!"

Lizzie looked to Vincent's hand and dreaded to see horrible cuts and blood. She turned it over and to her astonishment, he was uninjured. "Geez, Vincent!" She said softly with amazement, "That glass was thick... but you're not even scratched!"

"I don't ... cut easily," he said softly, his word slurred. Lizzie was close to him, leaning over and he could see her breasts in the parted robe. He reached up and gently cupped one in his hand, holding her tenderly. Lizzie trembled at his unexpected touch, and placed her hand over his, caressing his fur. She looked to Tess and winked.

"Vincent?" Tess said softly and stroked his golden mane gently. "Have you ever had two women at one time?"

Vincent snorted and chuckled then he looked up at her, his head weaving as he exclaimed, "I haven't had one woman, at one time!"

Lizzie peered over at Tess's surprise and said, "Bad scene. Lisa... Remember what I told you?"

Tess shook her head and turned Vincent's face up to her saying, "To hell with Lisa, Vincent! She was just a fuckin' tease!" Tess pressed her breast against Vincent's face adding, "We mean business, don't we, Liz?"

"Sure do!" Lizzie replied and to prove it she unfastened Vincent's jeans where his erection

had been trapped.

Vincent gasped at what she was doing and tried to push her head away from him but she took his hardness into her mouth and began gently sucking him. Vincent cried out and closed his eyes tightly, leaning forward into Tess's ample breasts. He moaned helplessly, overcome with the sensation of a woman's mouth on his most private part. He breathed in the slightly perfumed scent of Tess's bosom as his excitement heightened.

Vincent's hands went to Lizzie's head, entangling his fingers into her hair as she moved up and down on him with her lips and tongue. He leaned his head back, his eyes closed tightly as fire seem to consume his groin and he suddenly climaxed tremendously. Vincent cried out as his seed filled her mouth and he felt her swallowing around him, extending the sensations to the point that was unbearable.

"Oh my God!" he gasped, all his muscles tensing to rock hardness as Lizzie continued to suck him. Tess leaned down and began to mouth his nipples.

Vincent's climax subsided finally, but through Lizzie's continued ministrations, he began to become erect again almost immediately. Lizzie finally halted her actions and Vincent looked to her with turgid desire in his eyes, breathing hard. Both Tess and Lizzie coaxed him to his feet and began removing the remainder of his clothing as he willingly helped. They led him to their bed. They laid him down into it and now Tess took him into her mouth as he gasped again. He enjoyed the feeling of her tongue and lips for a long sensational time but to his surprise, Tess bit him.

Vincent sat up in shock and snarled at her, baring his fangs. Tess only gazed at him with a strange look in her eyes and bit him again. Vincent snarled again with fury and suddenly his hand flew out, striking her face. Vincent was horrified at what he had just done but to his astonishment, Tess gasped with pleasure, her tongue now tasting the blood that trickled out of the corner of her mouth in a motion that was fascinating. Now Lizzie moved over to Vincent and straddled him. She gently settled the moistness between her legs upon him, sheathing his erection into her completely and once again Vincent was startled. He laid back to enjoy this new sensation he had only dreamed about and Tess was once again licking his nipples, mouthing the soft fur that surrounded them.

Vincent watched their manipulation of him in wonder, content to just lay there and enjoy it. He never knew there could be so many different feelings from this thing called making love...No, love wasn't the word. This wasn't making love, this was fucking. Filled with revulsion, Vincent wanted to strike Tess again and throw Lizzie off of him but he was helpless to the sensations they were giving him and the alcohol that impaired his judgment. He was beginning to gasp, feeling himself growing completely hard again.

Tess's tongue traced down Vincent's belly, down the narrow fur line that went to his groin and he began to wonder what she was doing. She laid her head at the base of Vincent's groin, then to his surprise, she began to lick at Lizzie's exposed private parts and she moved up and down on Vincent. Lizzie's head went back and she gasped, her hands encircled Tess's head and spasmed around Vincent's hardness, giving him an all new feeling of pleasure.

Vincent didn't understand what they were doing to him but he was certainly caught up in it. The sights and the sensations overwhelmed him and he felt a feral urge rise up in him, overtaking the sensitive man within him.

Tess continued her tantalizing of Lizzie's pleasure center and she moved her own moistness over toward Vincent's head. She straddled his face and positioned herself over his mouth. Her muskiness filled Vincent's senses and he tentatively tasted her moistness with his tongue. The scent and taste drew him and he began licking her in earnest as she gasped, her juices flowing abundantly as he lapped them up eagerly.

Vincent could feel himself building once again and through his empathic powers, could feel the two women were close to their own releases. He licked at Tess quickly to bring her closer to the edge of the all satisfying completion then he felt himself harden for that final thrust. When he climaxed again, both Tess and Lizzie also cried out with release and the sensation of all that was happening overwhelmed Vincent. He roared fiercely and drove his tongue deep into Tess as she squirmed on his face. Lizzie was pumping Vincent hard as his seed filled her in pulses, her orgasm causing her to tighten around Vincent.

Vincent reached up to Tess's back and grasped her hard, his claws sinking into her flesh, drawing blood. Tess only moaned in pleasure from it. Finally they were all sated and Tess removed herself from Vincent's face as Lizzie rose off of his spent organ. With a satisfied sigh, Lizzie laid back at the foot of the bed, her legs spread wide. Vincent could see the evidence of his climax slowly seeping out of her. Then to Vincent's further surprise, Tess moved between Lizzie's legs and began to lick away Vincent's semen from Lizzie's genitals. Lizzie sighed with pleasure, her own fingers reached out and gently entangled Tess's hair pulling her face against her.

Vincent raised up and watched the two women as one pleased the other than Tess moved around to Lizzie and straddled her face. Lizzie put her mouth to Tess and began tantalizing her in kind. Vincent watched in fascination, never before had he seem such depravity but it excited him and he couldn't tear his astonished blue eyes away. After a few minutes of their pleasuring each other, Tess pulled away from Lizzie's mouth and moved around to position herself toward Vincent. Spreading her legs wide, she was looking over her shoulder at him, silent beckoning.

Watching their earlier actions with each other had aroused Vincent once more and without thinking, he quickly went to his knees and mounted Tess from behind, pushing himself deep into her, groaning softly. He closed his eyes and grasped her hips then began moving in her. He was filled with a primal need and he gripped her hard, a low growl escaping him. Tess pushed herself against him in response, moaning from his hold on her. Suddenly she reached back and pinched Vincent hard beneath his erection with her sharp nails.

Vincent gasped with pain and was filled with rage. He snarled menacingly, grabbing her shoulders and drove himself into her hard as she cried out in a mixture of pain and pleasure. Tess was reveling in Vincent's rough treatment of her and how he changed when she hurt him. Experimentally, she made an attempt to pull away from him. In his mind, a small voice

told him he should let her go. But the sensation of himself driving into her, his climax only moments away, Vincent's darkest self overtook him. He instead dug his claws into her with a threatening growl, forcing her to remain in place with he was finished. Tess whimpered with ecstasy.

By now, Lizzie was just sitting back and watching Vincent change from the gentle, soft spoken man/child to a raging beast, who seemed to be forcing himself upon her roommate. She knew that this was what Tess had purposely provoked Vincent to do, how she wanted him to take her. Lizzie smiled then, her face with a look of contempt and amusement. She was satisfied; Vincent was just what she had hoped for and more! Finally, Vincent climaxed again with a roar of ecstasy. He grasped Tess tightly as he pounded himself into her, his teeth gritted and fangs bared, his eyes shut tightly, his roar dissolving into shuddering moans as he felt his seed filling her.

Tess responded by whimpering in pain from Vincent's hard drive into her and the savage, iron grip of his hands on her shoulders... but there was a smile of pleasure on her face.

Vincent finally slowed his movements, released Tess and fell back to the bed. He was sweat-covered and gasping hard, holding his hand over his heaving chest. Moaning softly Tess moved over by Lizzie. Lizzie gently caressed the bleeding wounds Vincent's claws had left on Tess's back.

"Good?" Lizzie whispered to her.

Tess sighed with release and nodded her head whispering back, "The best!" Then they raised up to look at Vincent, smiling with satiation.

Vincent's eyes opened and went to them as he regained his composure. They widened when he looked to Tess's bleeding back and he sat up reaching to her.

"My God! What have I done?" His voice harsh with anguish and regret. "Tess, I am sorry!" he said, his throat tightening, his face in torment.

"Don't worry, my Pretty-Kitty," Tess cooed with mirth as she took his hand and kissed it.

Vincent stared at them with confusion. Instead of pain and horror on their faces he saw satisfaction and pleasure, he could feel it in them as well. They giggled at his expression of puzzlement then converged on him and pushed him to his back, cuddling into his arms on either side of him. Vincent only sighed staring at the ceiling, the feelings of satisfaction from them and the alcohol coursing through his own sated body, coaxing him into a troubled slumber.

Well everybody's got a secret,
sonny
something that they just can't
face
Some folks spend their whole

life
trying to keep it
They carry it with them with
every step that they take
Till someday, they just cut it
loose
Cut it loose or let it drag
them down
When no one asks any questions
or looks too long in your face
in the
darkness on the edge of town...

Vincent's eyes jerked open and he glanced to both his sides in surprise. He saw the two women cuddled against him, deeply asleep and he remembered what had transpired earlier that night. Suddenly he was consumed in deep shame. Vincent gently disentangled himself from them and moved to the foot of the bed, sliding off the end and standing up. He peered back at the women as they remained asleep, not even indicating that they were aware he was gone.

Quickly Vincent found his clothing and dressed himself, his head still reeling from the whiskey. He carefully exited through the window, pausing long enough to look back at Lizzie and Tess once more than he left the apartment. He landed on his feet unsteadily in the alley and glanced both ways then began running back to his home. When Vincent arrived in the park, the realization of what he had done back there at the apartment impacted on him. His stomach churned from the shame he felt and was soured from the whiskey he had drank. Vincent was suddenly violently ill. He remained bent over, heaving until he was sure his internal organs would soon follow, his hands holding his stomach tightly, grasping at the spasms that shook him.

He finally contained himself and leaned weakly against a tree, gasping for air. Slowly, he continued his journey toward the sewer outlet feeling relief when he finally entered it. Vincent was still unsteady on his feet as he opened the secret door and stumbled into the tunnels. He flipped the lever to close the door, wishing desperately the door would close over the images that were racing through his mind. When Vincent reached his chamber, he didn't even bother to remove his cloak or boots and fell down into his bed. He clutched his pillow to his face and buried it in it as terrible thoughts crossed his mind.

The two women had thoroughly seduced him tonight and the things they did to him he had only imagined in his darkest dreams and heard in whispered conversations. Father had only spoken briefly once to Vincent about the type of relationship the two women had. He then

hastily covered the other aspects of sexual relationships between a man and a woman, involving more than two people, that left Vincent confused with a lot of unanswered questions. Father didn't say what Vincent had done tonight was wrong but he indicated that it wasn't in good taste and that only... only lower standard people indulged in that type of sexual play. He added that the only truly right sexual relationship was that between a man and a woman in love.

Lower standard people, Vincent thought. He had hurt Lisa in the throes of his passionate desire and now he performed actions with these two women that Father had shown obvious disdain for. And Vincent had enjoyed what he did with Lizzie and Tess even now craving more! So, that's what I am, he thought. He would never be worthy of a decent woman's love, so it was time to accept what he truly was. A lower standard person. Lizzie and Tess and their decadent ways of love was all he was worth. Closing his eyes tightly as the tears came Vincent wept in sorrow, in bitterness and shame...

Father was sitting impatiently at his desk in the study. He knew it was morning and heard stirrings of other people awakened and moving in the outer tunnels, the pipes slowly becoming alive with tapped messages. Father had not gone to bed that night, instead stayed up waiting and worrying for Vincent. It was still unbelievable to him, but Vincent had become more of a heartache and a troublemaker than Devin had been in all of his years in the tunnels put together.

Father sighed his weariness then closing the volume he had been trying to read to comfort the awful images that kept coming to his mind. Visions of Vincent's capture and... other things. He tried to warn Vincent to take care and be wary of topsiders. But reasoning with Vincent had become more and more difficult in the past months and since he met Lizzie, it had become impossible.

No matter how Father tried using anger, logic, appealing to his higher sense of reason even, Vincent would not hear the words Father had to tell him, must tell him! And even if he did hear the words, Vincent remained unconvinced. There had been some disturbing talk on the streets about this girl Vincent had begun to see frequently. Vincent was truly enamored over her. Apparently, Lizzie was showing the type of desire for Vincent that he knew his son sorely craved, especially after Lisa's rejection of him during one of Vincent's most vulnerable moments;

But the types of things this Lizzie had a reputation for frightened Father. She and her roommate were prostitutes well known for their violent sexual appetites and heavily into hard drugs, though Lizzie must have denied all this to Vincent. Vincent in his desire to be accepted, would believe her lies to him. Father feared that the two women would eventually lure his vulnerable son into their den on uninhibited and decadent passions, if they hadn't already. Father stood up and sighed again wearily moving to the tea kettle. His hip was aching miserably, crying out for him to retreat to his chamber and take the weight off of it. Father grimaced in pain as he remembered the accident that had caused his already arthritic

hip further injury.

Vincent had been caught up in one of the later, extremely violent throes of his 'illness' after Lisa and unintentionally had struck out at Father. The frightening impact of the blow had sent Father reeling across the upper library and over the railing. Father had landed with a sickening crack on the floor of the study. At the sound of Father's cries for help, Winslow and the other men had come brandishing crowbars and rope and restrained Vincent, eventually tying Vincent to his bed with the heavy nylon rope to avoid further injury to others and to himself.

Even after Dr. Peter had treated Father's arthritic and now fractured hip, Father had gone against the doctor's advise of bedrest. Dr. Peter had warned Father that his hip would not heal correctly if he continued to move on it, possibly causing a permanent limp and lifetime pain. Father had decided he would stay by Vincent's side instead. Father was there through all the pain and violent upheavals, the tears and denials, the horrible dreams. These times were not so hard for Father to withstand and he continued to read diligently to Vincent through these seizures. But what Father couldn't take and broke his heart, were his gentle son's coherent pleas for Father to end his life.

Father had gently denied Vincent this release, assuring him that his illness would soon pass though he himself was not sure at all that it would. He continued to read to Vincent from Dickens, Shakespeare, Hemmingway, anyone and everything as his own tears streamed down his face. When Vincent had recovered from the illness, he had queried Father as to why he seemed to be limping more. Grateful that Vincent hadn't recalled the incident, Father told him he had fallen while Vincent had been ill, sparing him further guilt and the self-loathing Vincent still felt after recovering. Then Vincent had gently admonished Father, telling him he must be more careful. Father had promised Vincent he would.

A noise made Father look up hopefully towards Vincent's chamber. He remained still and listened carefully, wishing the pipes would be silent and people would stop walking by. Then unmistakably, he heard a sob come from the chamber. Father set his mug down and quickly made his way to the circular staircase climbing it though it was hard on his hip. If Vincent was in trouble, he wanted to be there for him right now!

When Father reached Vincent's chamber, he found his son sitting on the edge of the bed, his head in his hands and heaving uncontrollably though nothing was coming out. Father went to his side quickly and knelt by him, wrapping his arm around the leonine man's shoulders.

"Vincent?" Father exclaimed gently. "What happened? Why are you ill?"

Vincent held his arms about his stomach groaning miserably then leaned into Father's embrace for comfort.

"Father... I want to die..." Vincent whispered with torment.

Father held him close, gently stroking Vincent's golden mane then he caught a whiff of Vincent's breath. He smelled alcohol and bile on it and understood why Vincent was sick. He felt anger rise inside himself, knowing that it must have been Lizzie that did this to his son.

Father sighed and began to remove Vincent's clothing and he pushed Father's hands away, protesting weakly.

"No, Father," he said softly. "It is almost morning and I have a class with the children..."

"No, you don't, Vincent!" Father replied firmly and made Vincent lay back in his bed. Father finished undressing him, covering Vincent with the quilt and gently tucked him in as he used to when Vincent was younger.

Then he added, "I'll ask Michael to take over for your reading class today."

"But... Michael is only a child!" Vincent began to protest.

"Michael reads just fine and you are sick, child, Vincent..."

"I am not a child!" Vincent retorted in a weak but indignant voice.

"Despite your size, Vincent, you are still a child!" Father said sternly, pointing at him to make his statement clear. "You will remain here and rest. No arguments!"

Vincent nodded with surrender and closed his eyes tightly. Then Father knew that it was more than Vincent's stomach that was bothering him. Shaking his head with regret, Father left the chamber returning to his study and met Mary there.

"Ah, Mary," Father said with relief. "I was just about to contact you."

"Oh?" she replied. "What can I do for you?" Father went to his old dresser and opened it. He looked at the old suit from years ago as Mary watched him curiously. "Father?" she said apprehensively. "What are you doing?"

"I am going Above," he replied and removed the old suit from the dresser staring at the clothing. "Vincent is ill and I want you to stay here and see that he remains in bed."

"Vincent is ill?" Father nodded. "You're going Above?" Mary said incredulously. "But Father, whatever for?"

"Personal reasons, Mary," Father replied firmly and his tone indicated more inquiries would not be tolerated. "Just watch over Vincent for me until I return and Mary," he turned to her and looked at her with sternness in his grey eyes. "Don't tell Vincent where I've gone!"

Mary nodded silently, her face in a frown of concern as Father disappeared into his chamber carrying the old clothes from a time he had wished to forget...

Lizzie and Tess were still asleep now in each other's arms when the firm knock at the door had awakened them. They stirred and groaned.

"Aw," Tess moaned plaintively, "Who the hell can that be?"

Lizzie rose out of the bed and took her robe. Drawing it on, she replied, "I'll get rid of their asses, whoever they are. Just go back to sleep."

Tess rolled over and complied readily, falling back to sleep almost immediately. The knock sounded at the door again impatiently and Lizzie called, "Hold your pants on! I'm coming!"

She opened the door and saw a distinguished older gentleman standing there. He had the unmistakable air of a scholar about him and his proud stance impressed Lizzie.

“Well,” she said enticingly, her eyebrows raised, “a little early for tricks, ain’t it professor?”

“I wish only to speak with you,” Father replied stonily, failing even to remove his hat, normally awarded when greeting a lady. Lizzie noticed his disdain and stiff manner immediately and stepped aside, her own inviting manner now turning cool as Father entered her apartment.

He peered at the other woman who was obviously deeply asleep. “Don’t worry,” Lizzie said at his glance. “It’d take an atomic bomb to wake her ass up.”

“I am not concerned that I wake her,” Father said coldly. “What I have to say, she should hear also.”

Lizzie shrugged then went to the ‘fridge and removed the bottle of corn whiskey pouring herself a shot. Father watched in disgust as she tossed the drink down. “What can I do you out of, professor?” Lizzie asked casually.

“I want you two to leave my son alone.” Father replied sternly, folding both hands over his cane.

“Your son?” Lizzie asked with puzzlement and shrugged. “Who?”

“Vincent,” Father replied, his grey eyes piercing Lizzie’s.

She involuntarily looked away from the hard glare, poured herself another drink and said shrugging, “Vincent’s a big boy now, Pops. He can make his own decisions.”

“You do not know him,” Father replied, his voice had an edge of steel in it. “You have no idea of the grave injury you are causing him.”

“Shit!” She said and laughed harshly then turned to her roommate and called, “Tess, roll over and show Pops here your back!” Tess moaned wearily and turned onto her stomach. The evidence of Vincent’s claws showed clearly on her back, blood dried and caked around the injuries.

Father’s eyes widened slightly but he retained his firm composure. He turned back to Lizzie asking, “What are you trying to do to him?”

“Ain’t nothing I’m trying to do to him,” Lizzie replied haughtily. “Just trying to show an animal how us humans have fun!”

Father was stricken by her loose reference to Vincent, but remained staid as Lizzie continued, “What the hell is he anyway, professor? Half cat? Half dog? Did you make him?” Her eyes veiled and she added, “At least the part that counts is human enough!”

“What you two don’t understand,” Father said sternly, “is exactly how Vincent is. He has been under extreme stress and emotional turmoil recently.”

“Yeah, because of that bitch Lisa!” Lizzie said through the side of her mouth and retrieved a nail buffer. “At least we don’t tease him, professor! We fuck ‘im, even if he ain’t a man! What’s the matter? Afraid we’d hurt him?”

“No,” Father said and sighed, trying to control his rising temper, “I’m not concerned about his safety...”

Lizzie grew a little uncomfortable at what Father didn’t say just then but remained composed.

“Then what? Afraid the kid’s going to have a nervous breakdown?” Lizzie asked with boredom and toyed with her nails.

Father shook his head gravely and replied, “No... he doesn’t have nervous breakdowns, at least not as you know one.” He shifted on his feet uneasily, not willing to tell the woman the extent of Vincent’s breakdowns but continued, “He can become extremely violent. I’m sure you’re already aware that his strength is much greater than any of us. Vincent could end up... killing you.”

Father let that sink in as Lizzie stared at him with apprehension now, the state of her nails forgotten.

Then she suddenly shrugged and said carelessly, “You aren’t scaring me, Pops, if that’s what you’re trying to do. Vinnie is a big kitty now and housebroken, thank God! Let him decide for himself. So just take your ass out of here and save your threats for some punk who might be frightened of you.”

Father realized that she didn’t want to listen to him or believe what he told her about Vincent. He also realized what these women wanted Vincent for and his heart grew heavy. He had half-hoped that the rumors on the streets about these two had been false, but now looking at her hooded eyes filled with malice he realized the street talk had been true after all.

He also realized that reasoning with her was not the answer, that he could get through to her in the only way that she understood. Through the streets.

“Then if you persist,” Father said, his head held high, “I shall have to retaliate and I warn you,” Father’s eyes narrowed, “you will not be pleased. You insist on ignoring the fact that I am not only telling you this for Vincent’s well-being. When Vincent returns to you tonight, you should send him away. If you do not, I shall know.” Father turned back to the door and started for it.

“Hey, Pops,” Tess then called sleepily. “Anyone ever tell you your kid is a good fuck? He learn that from you?” Father stiffened visibly at the question but did not turn to her and award her the fact that he’d heard her.

But Tess continued, “I mean he’s got the stamina of a jack-rabbit! He cums and goes and cums and goes...”

Father let himself out of the apartment, the laughter of the two women fading behind him as he closed the door quietly. He sighed heavily, closing his eyes with relief. Father silently congratulated himself that he hadn’t lost his composure during the conversation in there. That he hadn’t slammed the door behind him and most of all, he had resisted the overwhelming urge to beat these two women senseless with his cane...

Vincent awoke and his eyes were crusty from the tears that had dried there. Throwing off the covers, he rubbed his eyes and sat up. His head pounded unmercifully and he groaned holding it between his hands. Mary entered the chamber and he peered up at her through squinted eyes. Even the dim light of his chamber was painful.

Mary approached him with a warm cup of tea and said, "Here, Vincent, this will help settle your stomach and ease your headache."

Vincent smiled gratefully at her and accepted the steaming cup. He sipped at it sparingly. What had happened to him? he wondered. His memory was fuzzy and his head was swimming. His stomach churned though it was beginning to settle with the tea. He felt a little worried because he had never been sick before and he looked to Mary with fear on his face.

"Mary, what's wrong with me?" he asked bewildered. "Why am I sick?"

Mary stared at him with surprise. "You don't remember, child?"

Vincent shook his head and found that was not a good idea. He groaned again and answered, "No."

Mary chuckled and replied softly. "You have a hangover, Vincent."

Vincent frowned. "A hangover? I have never had one before!"

"I don't think you've ever had hard whiskey before." Mary replied and stroked his golden mane gently.

Suddenly, the memory of all that he had done last night surfaced. His hands began to tremble and Mary took the cup from him quickly before he dropped it. Closing his eyes tightly, Vincent fell back onto his bed moaning softly.

Then he looked to Mary beseechingly and said, "Please Mary. I wish to be alone right now."

Mary nodded and set the cup of tea on the nightstand by him. She gave him one last worried look and left his chamber. Vincent rose up wearily and retrieved his cloak, noticing now he was almost naked wearing only his briefs. He didn't remember getting undressed, he thought with confusion. He retrieved a clean change of clothing and he drew on his cloak heading for the bathing chambers, his clothing and bathing utensils stuffed under one arm.

Vincent's mouth felt tainted and his body ached. All he wanted to do was slip into a warm quiet bath with no interruptions. He hoped he wouldn't be accosted by any children on the way. As he journeyed toward the chamber where the warm spring for bathing was, he let his thoughts drift back to the sensations of the night before. He knew he had enjoyed what the two women did for him, but he wondered why he felt no joy in the memory of it now? Lizzie had indeed surprised him with her unbounded desire for him. And the other woman, what was her name? Oh, but his mind was so fuzzy... Tess, that was it. She too had joined in to pleasure him though she had a very strange and somewhat gruesome way of doing it, indeed! Vincent felt a little remorseful for his rough treatment of her but it seemed to make her desire him more. Vincent wanted her to want him as Lizzie did.

After Lisa's rejection of his love for her, Lizzie and Tess made him feel somewhat elated at

being the object of their desire, but not euphoric, as Lisa would have had she accepted his love. With regret, he didn't feel his self-worth was increased by Lizzie and Tess's attentions. Vincent was a little ashamed to admit he didn't have any respect for Tess at all and very little for Lizzie. But Lizzie had a rough life, perhaps with his guidance, he could help her improve herself...No, he thought, then she too would reject him as Lisa had! Leave well enough alone! Vincent remembered that Father had looked down on the type of relationship he had had with the women last night. But how could something that gave so much pleasure be wrong, Vincent wondered. Lower standard people, Father had told Vincent, indulged in such activity. Lower than Father's standards. Well, then I guess I am lower standard people, Vincent thought. He then remembered that he had declared that upon himself last night as a curse.

Vincent trembled as he entered the bathing chamber. He dropped his clothing and his cloak then dove into the water. He swam underneath for a moment, letting the soothing water flow over his aching body and spirit then surfaced blowing out hard, shaking his mane out of his face. He relaxed and floated on his back for awhile, his eyes closed. Oh, to feel the hands of a woman who truly loved him! But Lizzie did love him! Somehow though, he felt unconvinced, that perhaps she was using him for... for what? Vincent sighed heavily and shook his head.

Was he now forever condemned to know only the hands of Lizzie and women like her? Who would want a deformed misfit as himself besides them? Did he deserve any better anyway? Vincent cursed and swam over to his bathing utensils. He tried to put the thought out of his mind as he soaped and cleansed himself. He wished that Father had let him die when he had been ill. With that thought in his mind, Vincent finished bathing himself, feeling a desperate urge to return to Lizzie. To let her draw him into her macabre world of sublime pleasures and to leave the world of his aloneness and a life that could never be, far behind him for a short respite...

Panting with release Lizzie fell to the side of the bed as Vincent blew out with exhaustion. He raised his shaggy head and looked at the dull, sweat-soaked golden fur on his body laying flat against it.

"Tough that Tess had to work tonight, eh?" Lizzie said breathlessly.

Vincent glanced over to her and replied, "No, I don't mind spending time alone with you."

Lizzie chuckled crawling onto his chest and began caressing the damp fur there. Then she said with a smile, "Oh? I figured we had you pretty well spoiled by now."

Vincent chuckled, gently pushed her off of him and rose to his feet unsteadily. He stood still a moment, trying to regain his balance, then he walked over to the whiskey bottle and took it. He returned with it to the bed and offered it to Lizzie. She inclined her head and took a drink from it, then Vincent retrieved it and took a long pull from it himself.

Lizzie rose out of bed herself and got a cigarette lighting it, inhaling deeply and blowing the smoke into the air. Then she turned back to Vincent and studied him as he laid on the bed and closed his eyes. He still fascinated her to no end. What was he? He wasn't a man that

was for sure, she thought. But yet he projected more maleness than any man she had ever known - and he seem to keep her aroused the whole time he was with her.

At first, Vincent had tried to be romantic and loving with her and Tess. After a few attempts on his part Tess had made it clear to Vincent that she wasn't into him for romance, though Lizzie had to admit she herself did enjoy his little emotional touches sometimes, such as a flower or some poem by Shake-whoever. Now and then Lizzie even allowed Vincent his insatiable need for just cuddling and holding her.

Once while Tess was gone for the night and they were alone, still fully clothed, Lizzie actually fell asleep in Vincent's lap while he gently held her and caressed her back. They stayed that way the whole night and didn't screw one time! It was okay once in a while.

But her roommate Tess enjoyed her 'Pretty-Kitty' Vincent for more physical reasons, even though he refused to partake in any of her 'bondage' games. Tess genuinely liked it when Vincent was hitting her or screwing her roughly but she had to really hurt him in order to rile up his alter ego enough to strike her or claw her.

In fact, Tess was always hitting him and calling him names to rile him up, Lizzie thought. Tess had hit Vincent so much recently with things like a chain once, a big lead pipe - which he finally destroyed with his bare hands - and hit him with her big whip that now he had to suppress a growl every time he saw her! Despite his fearsome appearance and whether Tess liked it or not, Vincent was really a very gentle being... and still very much a child. No more than 17, 18 tops, Lizzie thought. Tess could be his mother! Oedipus complex... with a twist.

Her eyes went to his claws. No those weren't human hands that were deformed, those were claws! Those magnificent, inhuman, claws! Lizzie thought back to when Vincent had finally given Tess her ultimate pleasure and had raked Tess so badly that Lizzie had to drag her bleeding ass to the hospital. Lizzie had one hell of a time trying to explain what had happened to her! Tess kinda deserved it though, Lizzie thought, as she watched Vincent take another pull at the bottle. Tess shouldn't have whipped Vincent like she did after Lizzie had cuffed him to the steam pipe by the bed when he was asleep. He obviously had an extreme abhorrence to being bound and totally lost it when he awoke to Tess' whipping. He not only hurt Tess badly, but he had ripped that pipe completely out of the wall! That had cost them over a hundred bucks to get fixed!

Lizzie almost tsked with pity as she watched Vincent laying there. Being with her and Tess these last few months had made Vincent a very sick kitty indeed, she thought. He was no longer the stocky, magnificent lionman she had first seduced and his once clear blue eyes were dull and dark-ringed. And together, she and Tess had almost killed that romantic soul inside of him as well. Now to her, Vincent resembled nothing more than a skinny ol' sick alley-cat. Lizzie drew on the cigarette again. Vincent had his head laid back, his eyes were closed and her eyes were drawn to the fur on his body.

It too showed his state of ill-health. It was no longer glossy and soft as it once had been but it still intrigued her. Surprisingly, Vincent wasn't nearly as hairy as some of the men she had slept with but then... Vincent wasn't a man either.

"Skinny ol' sick alley-cat," she mumbled under her breath and drew on her cigarette again.

"I heard you," Vincent said softly. His eyes remaining closed he asked, "Why do I feel contempt from you toward me, Lizzie?"

Lizzie sighed and approached him. She sat back down next to Vincent and took his hand.

"Oh sweet naive Vincent... haven't you ever heard the old saying, 'familiarity breeds contempt'?"

Vincent only watched her quietly with his sleepy blue eyes and shrugged then she continued, "We're like married, you know. I mean, you're always here and I haven't had another... man, since I met you."

"Married?" Vincent frowned in confusion and asked, "Then why can't you tell me that you love me, Lizzie?"

"Why can't you tell me, Vincent?" Lizzie replied softly. Vincent moaned softly with pain that wasn't only from the state of his body but from deep inside his soul. He sat up then took another drink from the bottle.

Lizzie frowned at him. "Hitting that stuff kinda hard lately, aren't you?"

Vincent only shrugged. "So what? Does it bother you?" he asked testily.

Lizzie shook her head and replied, "I wouldn't care if you tooted 'coke' Vincent, you know that. Just that most people drink to forget. Is that why you drink?"

"Yes," Vincent replied without hesitation and shrugged. "I drink to forget about my home while I am here, and I drink at my home to forget about you while I am there. So, I am drunk nearly all the time and very forgetful."

"Hmmm... You drink at home to forget me?" she asked in a husky voice that was almost a purr.

"Yes," Vincent admitted.

"Why?"

Vincent looked over to her sharply and frowned. He shook his head and replied softly, "You make me feel... feel like I am less than a... man."

"Aren't you?"

Vincent stared at her with an expression of shock but only saw Lizzie gazing back at him with veiled eyes, a slight thin smile on her lips.

Suddenly, the door to the apartment swung open and a very highly agitated Tess stormed in shouting at Vincent, "Your FUCKING old man!"

Slamming the door shut she threw her purse at Vincent hard. He snarled at her, baring his fangs. "That son-a bitchin' MUTHER!" Tess screamed at the walls.

"Who?" Vincent finally demanded with bewilderment. "Who are you talking about, Tess?"

"YOUR OLD MAN, Vincent!" Tess screamed at him again, standing there stamping her feet.

“He came here a couple months back and told us to leave YOU alone! If we didn’t he’d know!” She started pacing with anger and shouted, “I wondered why it’s been SO hard for me to turn a trick in the last few weeks so I did some checking tonight!”

She swung on Vincent with narrowed eyes. “Your old man is in pretty tight with some of the street people ain’t he?”

Vincent leaped to his feet abruptly and began dressing himself, cursing under his breath. “Where’re you going?” Lizzie asked plaintively.

“To see my FUCKIN’ OLD MAN!” Vincent replied with a snarl.

Father was studying some plans that one of the helpers from Above had given him to help solve the drainage problem of the lower chambers. He was looking at them with interest when Vincent stormed into the chamber. Father glanced up at Vincent with only mild curiosity then his eyes returned to the plans.

“How dare you!” Vincent shouted to him.

Father peered up to Vincent removing his glasses and sighed. Recently, Father had grown tired of Vincent’s occasional accusations and unreasonable demands.

He said to Vincent wearily, “Now what?”

“Why did you go to them behind my back?” Vincent demanded angrily, his shaking fists at his sides. “How could you? I am a man now! I can make my own decisions!”

“Are you?” Father said speculatively and Vincent’s expression of anger changed to that of astonishment. Then Father demanded, “Do you really still believe that, Vincent?”

“Father?!” he whispered in an injured tone.

“I want to know, Vincent,” Father continued and rose to his feet. “Is that why you keep going to them? Because they treat you like a man? Or because they treat you like something else?”

Vincent turned away from Father and stood there trembling... and Father couldn’t take anymore. He had cooled off to Vincent in the last few weeks when Vincent continued to go to those women against his warnings. He ignored Vincent’s comings and goings, never queried him as to where he had been and said nothing to him about his drinking. Father had only requested that Vincent stay away from the children. There had been no more arguments and cutting words between them, but now Father could remain silent to the young man no more. He lashed at Vincent unmercifully with his words.

“Do you want to know what the helpers have been hearing from the streets?” Father shouted at him. “That your two ‘friends’ have been telling everyone that they have a ‘doggie’ at home they like to play with and teach new tricks to!”

Vincent’s blue eyes widened and he shook his head in denial. “No...”

“That their ‘doggie’ knows how to ‘play nice’ with them,” Father continued harshly. “That he is a stray that some people ‘mistake’ for a man!”

Vincent was shaking violently and shouted at Father, “SHUT UP . You are lying to me! You hate them because you can’t control them! And you can’t control me because of them!”

“I couldn’t control you when you were a five years old, but that is beside the point!” Father said, with a wave of his hand then continued angrily.

“Have you looked at yourself lately, Vincent? I mean REALLY taken a good luck at yourself? You’ve lost weight, you are pale, and when you are not drunk, you are passed out! You are never sober enough to teach your class, you’ve broken the children’s hearts with your absence and I do not believe that you ever get sober enough to have a hangover!”

Vincent glared at him with fury, but Father’s words were hitting home. He began to feel a tightness welling up in his chest and he said in a trembling voice.

“Why should I care? I am not a true man and I only deserve what I am getting! Lizzie is the closest thing to a wife that I will ever have!”

Father looked to Vincent sharply, anguish on his face and said softly, “Is that what you really believe, Vincent?”

Vincent’s stricken expression was breaking Father’s heart and he continued quietly, “Not I, nor anyone else in these tunnels, have ever led you to believe that. You bestowed that curse upon yourself... and these two women,” he glared at Vincent hard again, “are sealing your fate!”

Father and Vincent stared at each other for a long silent moment. Then Father shook his head and began walking toward his chamber saying over his shoulder.

“I have said enough. It’s up to you now, Vincent.” Vincent was silent as he watched Father’s retreating back. The words Father had spoken to him echoed in his throbbing head.

Quickly, Vincent returned to his own chamber where he hadn’t slept in weeks and packed up a few provisions. He began walking briskly down a tunnel toward the deeper chambers... to the underground river where he used to go to be alone. He hadn’t wanted to be alone with himself since Lisa had left, for he had feared what he would find. Vincent thought that the time had come now. Time for him to go there and take a close look into his heart. To struggle with his identity and rediscover himself again...

“...Growl like a doggie for me, Vincent...Com’ on, GROWL!!!...”

Vincent heard the echoes of those words and felt the sting of the whip. From who? He was unable to identify the source, as his mind muddled and ran the images through his head as if it were a movie gone haywire. These things were swimming in his head as another wave of nausea and tremors racked his muscles. He moaned helplessly as he rolled onto his side and pulled his cloak and the blanket tighter around his spasms. Only a few more hours of this, he thought as his teeth chattered loudly. He tried to stop them, for he had already bitten his tongue once. Clenching his teeth together tightly, he moaned again.

It was strange. Even though his body cried out for the soothing drink of alcohol, knowing that

relief was not more than a few steps away, his mind was as if it were separate from his body. Although awful images seeped into his consciousness of the torture and pleasure of the life he was living, his own voice and reasoning mind cried out, I am NOT like that! That is not WHO I am.

Vincent suddenly threw off the blanket and his cloak as a wave of fire consumed his body. He wiped at his forehead as sweat broke out and shakily he climbed to his feet. He began pacing weakly, staggering, supporting himself by holding one hand against the rock wall. He pressed his cheek against it and closed his eyes, sighing in relief at the cool feel of the stone.

“...my mother always told me ALL men were animals,” Lizzie said soothingly to him and added, “only some more than others. Well, the joke was on her, Vincent... You aren’t a man at all...”

“NO!” Vincent shouted in the vast cavern, his anguished cry echoing down to the nameless river. He pushed himself away from the wall peering down to the water. It would be so refreshing just to wade into it, relieve this fever that was now rending his weakened body. No, he thought, when the chills and cramps hit him again, as he now knew they would, he could wind up drowning. His body continued to cry to him painfully for relief, but his soul also cried out for healing. He ignored his body.

He trembled to think of those whom he loved and respected, wondering what they must feel about him now? Fortunately, he had avoided most of them during the last few months. They had mostly missed seeing what he had become. Some, such as the children, he had not seen at all as he steeled himself through the tunnels upon his return from ‘his girls’ up Above. He would secret himself in his chamber, where he rarely stayed anymore, and drink. Or he would go to the falls where he knew he would not be disturbed, and drink.

He would think about his aloneness. How he was so different from everyone else. So, different that he would stay away from the tunnel people, for they didn’t want anyone to get close to him. He didn’t want them to know him because they would have weapons to use against him to hurt him. Then he would feel even lonelier, and drink some more. Only Lizzie, he had begun to think, really understood him.

Vincent snarled a little and his body betrayed him once more as the chills and stomach cramps began. He quickly retrieved his cloak and blanket, sitting cross-legged on the ground. Wrapping the blanket around his seizing loins he began rocking to and fro, his breathing coming out in shuddering gasps now. He chuckled softly. The noises he was making now sounded so much like the noise he made when he was in the throes of lust with ‘his girls’. What self-loathing had caused him to bend to those passions without dignity, without reasoning thought, without... love?

The things he had done did not relieve the anguish he felt after Lisa. They only compounded them. He felt more shame now than he had before. Vincent’s teeth chattered again and he whimpered softly as he bit his tongue once more. Wiping the blood from his mouth, he placed a leather thong between his teeth and bit down tightly. Just as his body was crying out for the relief that a simple drink of whiskey would bring him, it also cried to him for the highest

physical release and pleasure it could provide him as well. He would not let his body rule his mind any longer.

What Father had said to him only hours before was the truth. He knew he could believe Father, for he had never lied to him. Father had spoken only the truth when he said that nobody down there in his world had ever thought of him as anything less than a man. Only he... and Lizzie did.

But Tess? She was a puzzle. "...You're my Pretty-Kitty, Vinnie..." Tess whispered into his ear sweetly, then struck him again with the chain she wielded. He snarled at her menacingly reaching out quickly and seized the chain, ripping it from her hand throwing it out the window, struggling with himself to keep his dark side from rending her from limb to limb. Tess had cried out, holding her now bleeding hand as she gazed at him with awe in her eyes... and desire...

In his mind, Vincent had hated Tess for her purposeful cruelty to him. He despised what she did to herself and wondered what awful incidence, perhaps in her childhood, had caused her to crave such self-destruction? But through all the macabre displays of wanton lust, she had been truthful to him. Most of the time though, the reasons eluded him entirely, she would hurt him just so she could comfort him after.

And then there was Lizzie. "... let him be, Tess!" Lizzie exclaimed to her, but not because Tess was hitting him, but because she was soothing him afterward.

"Vincent ain't human!" Lizzie added contemptuously, "You don't go apologizing to an animal for hitting it."

"Maybe not a human to you, lil Miz Lizard," Tess had retorted and pulled Vincent protectively against her breast, "but to me he's more human than anyone I know..."

Vincent had felt surprised at Tess' admonishment of Lizzie in his defense, but even more so that Lizzie said what she had quite loudly about him. Normally, she would veil her comments in whispers. And if Vincent caught some of what she'd said, lie to him afterward, claim she had actually said something else entirely.

The words Lizzie had pronounced had hurt Vincent worse than any of Tess's hurt/comfort games ever had. Vincent thought that Lizzie had loved him in the only way she was capable of, and never learned how to tell him properly. Though even he denied it to himself, he had been seriously wrong about Lizzie all along. Vincent's judgment was impaired by what he was doing to his body and it was also destroying his mind as well... the thing he most prided himself in.

He would listen to Lizzie's lies and allowed her to use him in the most sordid way, because of the physical pleasure she would bring him. Though she had never hurt Vincent physically, as Tess was so apt to do, he allowed her to play cruel mind games with him in return for the sensational release she could bring to his body. Then she would compare him to her past lovers, making it sound like she favored him, but there was much more to be read into her meaning. Lizzie despised herself and was using Vincent as a self-induced punishment – and

he had only recently begun to recognize that.

Because of the abuse he was serving his mind, to him lies were becoming truth, and truth lies. But when you wanted something like acceptance by a lover as badly as Vincent craved it, it was easy to open another bottle, spread Lizzie's legs and implant himself into her, masking the truth and living with the lies. Thinking with his 'pecker', Vincent chuckled to himself lightly, as he well remembered Father's accusation to him just before Father had stopped trying to talk to him.

Vincent knew now those he once trusted the most in his life had not betrayed him, nor would they. And even when he came through this thing... this horrible withdrawal from the alcohol and his life with Lizzie, they would still think of him as they always did and no less. The only betrayal there had been was Vincent to Vincent.

"...I wish my father had killed me," he whispered to Lizzie, as she laid sated in his arms. "My life isn't worth living anymore."

"Of course it is, Vincent," Lizzie cooed at him, "if not for yourself... then for me..."

He now realized that what he was giving up for his life with Lizzie, WAS his life. That shallow existence of physical sensations and mind-wrenching confusion was not worth his death. Not for anything... not for her.

"Lizzie!" Vincent cried out to the dark, fathomless river. "I am not what you want me to be! And I won't become it! I want to LIVE!" He sighed softly with pain as he trembled violently.

Soon... only a few more hours of this, he would be Vincent again. And he was looking forward to it. One day, when this was behind him and he had a chance to put his real life back together again, he could confront Lizzie and demand her reasons for using him as he did. Vincent laid onto his side pulling his cloak and blanket tightly around him, began crying...

Vincent had been gone for several days. Father laid aside his pen, listening hopefully toward Vincent's chamber and though he didn't have the empathic gifts Vincent had, he always felt when Vincent was in his chamber. Father felt no presence of his son. He feared that Vincent had finally gone Above to stay and that he would never see his son again.

Father stared at his pen and the letter he had been writing, one that he was going to send to Vincent in care of the women's address. He wanted to apologize for the things he said to him days ago, the things he said that drove his son away from him and his home. Then Father angrily crumpled the letter and threw it aside.

"I will NOT apologize for stating the truth!" Father harshly exclaimed aloud to himself. Then he felt it. Father glanced up to Vincent's chamber expectantly and knew it was no longer vacant.

Bracing himself for the painful climb, Father began ascending the circular staircase to the level that would take him to Vincent's chamber. He limped quickly to the darkened room and stopped in the doorway. In the dim light of Vincent's stained glass window, he could see the shaggy outline of his son as he slowly removed the last of his clothing then weakly slipped under the covers of his bed.

“Vincent!” Father called softly in anguish and relief.

“Father?” Vincent replied in a weak voice, barely above a whisper.

Father approached his son and sat on the bedside. He reached out to Vincent as he weakly raised up to go into his father’s warm embrace. Father held him tightly while stroking the golden mane and he could feel Vincent trembling in his arms. Then Father knew Vincent was going to be fine. He held him tenderly and kissed the top of his head gently.

Vincent must have bathed before his return, for Father could feel his hair was soft and damp and Vincent no longer had the foul odor that had become so characteristic to him of late - that of someone who was quite ill. Father smiled fondly with memory as he caressed Vincent’s mane and held him tightly. Now his son’s scent was that Father remembered - of Vincent right after he himself had bathed him when he was still a baby. He kissed the top of his head again with love as Vincent pressed himself into Father’s chest.

“Shhhh,” Father whispered to him as he rocked him slightly, “the worst is over.” Father felt his son relax in his embrace and then Vincent began to cry quietly, “the worst is over now, Vincent.” Father repeated reassuringly and tilted Vincent’s head up to face him.

Father looked into the tear-streaked, though clear blue eyes he remembered... it seemed like years since he had seen them! Father’s own tears were blurring his vision as he said to his son, “Welcome back, Vincent. You’ve come home...”

Well, I’ll be damned! Vinnie!” Tess cried with pleasure. “Come on in!” Vincent leaned over to the window peering past her shoulder at the man laying in the bed.

Tess turned to where his eyes were saying, “Oh, that’s only Mack, my new boyfriend. Come on in out of the cold! I haven’t seen you in ages! You’re looking great! Come in, come in!”

Vincent shook his head raising his hand and replied, “I only came for a short time, Tess. I must see Lizzie.”

“Oh...” Tess said with some apprehension now. “Uh, Lizzie’s gone. Moved in with some dude up in Fairview.”

Vincent’s heart fell when she said that and he frowned at her incredulously. Lizzie left without even saying goodbye to him? Why hadn’t she contacted him through one of the helpers to tell him she was leaving? Had he then truly meant, so little to her? There were so many things Vincent had wanted to talk about with Lizzie but she was gone. Vincent decided he would speak with Tess then. Her answers would probably be closer to the truth than Lizzie’s.

“Tess, you made your reasons obvious to me why you wanted me.”

Tess stared at Vincent with astonishment then her eyes darted away from him, her head bowed.

Vincent continued, “Though I look back with shame at what I allowed you to do to me and I to you, you were always honest. You never led me to believe that there was anything other than sex between us. Lizzie’s reasons for wanting me were not so obvious however.”

Tess was visibly uncomfortable with where Vincent was heading with his statements, and she sighed nervously.

“Tess, I need to know,” Vincent began slowly, his blue eyes gazing at her with intensity. “Why, did Lizzie want me?”

Tess finally raised her head and gazed into Vincent’s eyes, a silent appeal in hers begging him not to press her for the answer. “Believe me, Vincent,” she said in a small voice, “you don’t want to know.”

Vincent nodded, bowing his head and closing his eyes. he released a heavy sigh and whispered, “Just as I thought...”

To Vincent’s surprise Tess reached out and actually caressed his face gently in an involuntary gesture of compassion and understanding.

Then she suddenly wrapped her arms around herself, rubbing her arms briskly and exclaimed, “Brrrrrr! It’s cold out here!” She was retreating back into the apartment saying, “It was real nice to see you again, Vinnie!”

“Wait!” Vincent called softly with pain and Tess stopped unwillingly in the window, turning back to him slowly. In a tight voice he said, “If she wants to see me, you can tell her that I’m easy to find. Just to look in the dark alleys and the shadows of the night.”

Vincent watched Tess one last time with sorrow shining in his blue eyes. “Tell her... I have become friends with the darkness...” Vincent quickly turned away and leaped down to the street gracefully.

Tess watched with remorse as Vincent’s majestic, cloaked silhouette blended into the shadows and vanished. She sighed with some sadness and whispered. “Goodbye, my Pretty-Kitty...”

Vincent boldly sat on the bench under a street lamp at the college. He used to do this as a child with Devin, when his face was swathed in scarves and his differences hidden by the layers of clothing. Father always over-dressed him with for the cold weather. Now only gloves concealed the inhuman hands, the hood of his cloak and a scarf concealing his lion-featured face.

It was early evening, and already dark as the season drew towards a new year. Vincent watched as the students walked by some hand in hand, glowing with young love, and he sighed with longing at them. Vincent had come there tonight because he was supposed to be in mourning.

Earlier in the day a helper from Above had informed him that Lizzie’s body had been found at her home in Fairview. Apparently, she had overdosed on something, taking her own life. There had been no note, none of her friends had any idea why she had done it and she had died alone. The reason why she had taken her own life would remain a mystery to them and would be buried with her in her grave. Vincent knew the reason, though. He wasn’t surprised when he heard about it and he had truly mourned her passing, but only briefly. Then he

thought about the months of anguish and confusion when he was with her, and although it was now some years later, the guilt he still carried within himself overwhelmed him.

When Vincent had been told the news of Lizzie's passing, for a fleeting moment, Vincent had felt relief. The emotion shamed him and he had to get out. Vincent left the tunnels to walk in the exceptionally cold winter night, to ponder his insensitive reaction to the passing of his 'wife', his shameful past with her, and consider his possible future. He had moved about the dark parts of the city a long time, finally finding himself at the school. Vincent came to the school because the young people around him filled him with hope and expectation of what could be, and he could leave the guilt of what had been behind him for the moment.

Vincent shamelessly admitted to himself that he also came there to watch girls. He smiled at the clean, pretty women walking by him, who were not even aware of the melancholy young man sitting there. All sizes, shapes and ages and all so incredibly beautiful to him! He could feel them as they passed him and they were so full of hope and promise! If only...

He sighed heavily. Quite suddenly, his attention was drawn to a single young woman. It was as if she had called to him... but he hadn't heard anything! Her eyes looked directly at him and without hesitation she sat on the bench next to him, her arms piled high in books and one dropped to the ground. Vincent reached quickly to retrieve it as did she and they gazed into one another's eyes for a moment.

She was equally bundled in a colorful scarf of very expensive material only her expressive smiling green eyes showing. Vincent felt his face flush and he awkwardly handed her the book.

In a soft voice she said, "Thank you!"

"You are welcome," Vincent replied equally soft and they sat back.

The girl was friendly, and she asked him, "Going to school here?"

"No," Vincent replied with some yearning in his voice, "I only came here to watch the people." He sighed quietly adding, "The young people here always seem so happy and hopeful!"

Laughing warmly the girl said, "Who are you calling old? You can't be much older than me!"

Vincent chuckled. "No, I am not. I feel old at this moment. I like watching people... when I feel like this."

The girl watched with compassion in her eyes saying, "I know what you mean. I do that too sometimes but I go to Central Park. So many different people there!"

Don't I know, Vincent thought and said aloud, "What brings you out tonight? It is somewhat cold for you to be watching people."

"But not for you, right?" she replied, and Vincent chuckled again. Then she said, "I've just finished with class. I'm waiting for my boyfriend to pick me up. We're going to see the opera tonight."

Vincent peered over at her with interest asking, "Aida!"

"Yes!" she replied obviously pleased. "You follow the opera?"

"When I can," Vincent replied and added, "I do not get out very much."

"You should," the girl admonished him gently. "Go alone or take your girlfriends with you."

Vincent chuckled sadly shaking his head. "I do not have a girlfriend."

The girl sensed a sadness from this strange young man and impulsively she touched his hand, startling him.

"You're not the type to date around, I can tell," she told him gently. "One day, you'll find someone..."

Just then a red Corvette pulled to the curb, "Cathy!" A young man called from the car with irritation.

"Oopps!" she said to Vincent. "That's my boyfriend. He's a little bit possessive." She stood up gathering her books and said to the man in the car, "Just a minute, Stephen!" Then she turned back to Vincent asking, "Do you come here often?"

Vincent shook his head replying, "Only on days such as this."

The horn honked impatiently and the girl glared at the driver of the car. He returned her expression with one of anger.

Then she said nervously, "I have to go now..."

Vincent could see the driver slap the steering wheel of the car angrily and his eyes met Vincent's. They watched each other for a long moment... the driver turned away, staring out his window the opposite direction rubbing his face uncomfortably. The girl watched her boyfriend for a moment then turned back to Vincent and seemed somewhat in awe. Vincent only gazed at her wordlessly.

She began walking away then turned back to him saying quietly, "maybe we'll find each other again another day?"

Vincent smiled at her glowing green eyes then nodded. "Perhaps..."

With a wave of her hand, the girl was gone. Vincent rose from his seat and watched as the tail lights of the Corvette disappeared into the just now falling snow. His heart leaped with hope after the conversation with the young woman and he began to return home, humming the overture to 'Aida' under his breath.

Catherine stared at Vincent with astonishment. She picked up the towel and draped it across the lower part of Vincent's face.

"I don't believe it!" she said and began laughing as did Vincent.

"It is incredible!" Vincent agreed with amazement. "The hope that was given to me back then to find you, was given by..."

"Yes...", Catherine said breathlessly and then they held onto each other tenderly for a long moment. Catherine lightly kissed his cheek. "I'm glad you told me about your past, Vincent," Catherine said softly and fondled his silky mane gently. "And I don't feel any different toward

you.”

“Yes,” Vincent replied in almost a whisper with wonder in his voice. “I can feel it.”

She smiled at him tenderly. “Vincent?”

Vincent looked to her with serenity on his leonine face and he tilted his head inquiringly. Catherine took his hand and held it. “Tell me... is that why you waited so long? Before you...” she trailed off.

Vincent bowed his head and nodded. “Yes... That day at the falls, was the first time. I had forgotten about that part of my life.” He closed his eyes and sighed. “That day, Catherine, all there was in my life... was you. And I allowed myself,” Vincent gazed into Catherine’s eyes with love, “to desire you.”

Catherine smiled and looked into his eyes tenderly, whispering, “And now?”

“And now,” Vincent said softly, “I can allow myself, to let my past go... to do that...”

She moved toward him and gently pressed her lips against his, reaching up to caress his cheek with her fingertips. When she finally drew back, Vincent’s eyes were closed, his lips slightly parted. He slowly let out the breath he had been holding.

Catherine sighed softly, happily, lying on him and nuzzling into his lap. “Thank you for telling me about this, Vincent, and for telling me about Father’s part in your life then. I have a new respect for him.”

“I’m glad,” Vincent said smiling at her gently, “I wanted you to know, he was always there for me.” Then he caressed her face tenderly, adding softly, “as you always have been...”

Catherine reached up, entangling her fingers into Vincent’s golden mane and gently pulled his head down to her. Their lips joined lovingly for a long tender moment and when they parted, they just gazed into each others eyes...

Well some folks are born into a
good life
and other folks get it any way
any how
Well I lost my money and I lost
my wife
Them things don’t seem to
matter much to me now

Tonight I’ll get on my hill
‘cause I can’t stop
I’ll be on my hill
with everything that I got

With the lives on the lines
where dreams are found and lost
Well I’ll be there on top

where I'll pay any cost

For wanting things
that can only be found
in the
darkness on the edge of town...

A darkness on the Edge of Town by Bruce Springsteen

END