

McCall of the Wilde

(a B&B/The Equalizer crossover)

by Margaret Basta

"A nun?" The man's voice was incredulous. " 'You' want 'me' to 'babysit' a 'NUN'?" His voice rose with indignation as he stared at his friend, and occasional boss, Control. He downed his drink and placed the glass back on the bar to be refilled. Robert McCall glared at Control, wondering what this Machiavellian master was plotting now. "Don't tell me, let me guess. Has the Company been recruiting nuns again?"

Control allowed the bartender at Pete O'Phelan's, to refill his glass before he replied. " 'She' came to us," Control stiffly said. "A few years ago she saved several of our agents in Pakistan. Now, she's in some sort of mess and feels that the Company is obligated to help her out."

"And you didn't refuse?" McCall finished another scotch. "Control.... if you're not careful, you might develop a conscience." He waved the attentive barkeep away from his empty glass.

"Ever hear of Tony Dinaldo?"

"Mobster. Mainly drugs and prostitution." McCall paused before asking. "And isn't he currently under indictment for drug trafficking?"

"And murder," Control added.

"The nun's a witness," McCall flatly stated.

"Along with a free-lance operative by the name of Kenji Ito. By chance, the nun and Ito witnessed Dinaldo executing a man during a drug deal that went sour."

" 'And'....," McCall asked, knowing that there was a great deal more to this story than what Control had so far revealed. "Shouldn't the nun be under police protection?"

"Ordinarily, yes. But she's a special 'case.' There's already been one attempt on her life, and I do anticipate more. You see, if Dinaldo eliminates the nun, he could go scot free."

"You 'DID' say that there were two witnesses, Control."

"Unfortunately, Kenji Ito has some ties to the Yakusa. His testimony, without substantiation from Sr. Charles Maris, could be destroyed in court. Without the nun, there is no other proof that a murder even took place. As it is, I wish we still had more evidence."

" 'Why'?" McCall was a very suspicious man when it came to Control.

"Let's just say that Sister Charles Maris's reputation has preceded her."

"I know I really shouldn't be asking you this, Control, but I will. What is wrong with the lady? What else has she done?"

"The nun has been rather vociferous about her views on the manufacture of nuclear weapons, government spending on arms - that sort of thing."

"In short, she's been a peace protester, who possibly had even been arrested a time or two?"

"Yes. She's even had a couple of books published on the subject," Control admitted. "And certain radical newspapers quote her every word."

"And you're being strong-armed into protecting her," McCall maliciously said.

Control glared at him. " 'I' was one of those people she saved in Pakistan...."

"*'Must'* you go Above tonight, Vincent?" Father's voice trembled with concern, and weariness.

"*'Must'* you continue to ask me that question, Father, every time that I journey Above?" Vincent teasingly replied, sensing emphatically, that Father's *'weariness'* was a bit too theatrical to be genuine.

Father exhaled a long, exaggerated sigh. "*'Must'* you always read my mind, Vincent?"

Vincent chuckled. "Father, I did not *'read'* your mind. I *'read'* your heart."

Father laughed too. "Give Catherine my regards. Entreat her to visit us for a change." He slowly walked over to embrace Vincent, favoring his game leg.

With concern, Vincent asked. "Your leg troubles you this evening?"

"No more than usual," Father replied, making light of the matter.

Vincent knew better than to take Father's answer at its face value. "I will bring you Mary's special liniment. Or would you rather try the ointment that Narcissa gave you? She swears that it will cure your *'old'* bones."

Father shuddered in mock-horror. "Death also cures all ills, Vincent. If I were foolish enough to try Narcissa's ointment, I do believe that I'd hasten that final cure."

Vincent's low, throaty chuckle resonated about Father's chamber. "You should have more faith in Narcissa's cures, Father. She means well."

"And in order for me to stay well, I'll use Mary's liniment. Vincent, go Above. I'll get one of the children to bring it to me." He clasped his son's shoulder. "Come back to us, Vincent. Safe journey."

Vincent accepted his father's concern for his safety, knowing that it was more proof of his father's love for his son. "I'll be back before dawn."

McCall stirred his coffee as he asked Control, in the back room at O'Phelan's. "How did a nun come to witness a murder?"

"She was teaching at St. Cunnegunda's Parish."

"One of New York's *'better'* neighborhoods," McCall said sarcastically.

"Two years ago, she went there to save the dregs of the neighborhood. The only reason those kids had *'not'* dropped out of high school was because they were dealing drugs in school."

"So, the lady is foolhardy but brave. What happened?"

"She taught them Latin and chess."

McCall sloshed his coffee. "Chess?"

Control smiled for the first time that night. "Yes. Amazing thing is that she got through to 18 of those kids. Some of them even joined the Latin Club. For the first time, she was giving them a real chance."

"How does Dinaldo figure into all of this?"

"Sr. Charles approached local businessmen about making donations to her college scholarship fund for these kids. I don't think she knew what Dinaldo was when she entered his restaurant. By then, it was too late."

McCall dramatically sighed. "When?"

Control hid his surprise at McCall's abrupt concession. "Why?"

McCall poured himself another cup of coffee before answering. With humor slightly coloring his

voice, he replied. "Any woman that can bring you to such a grudging state of admiration, is a woman I want to meet. So, when do I meet this person?"

Control made a tight little smile, betiding McCall's dismay at the answer to his question. "I was thinking in terms of tonight, Robert."

McCall shook his head. "Not a chance, Control. I've been up for almost 36 hours straight. Come for me at five. And you'd better bring breakfast," he warned.

The tapping of Control's finger against his cup was the only outward sign that he agreed to Robert's terms.

Vincent rested against the brick wall of her balcony, knowing that Catherine was within, but sensing that she was not quite ready to receive him. At this moment, he allowed himself to savor the sweet delight of anticipation in seeing Catherine again. Such moments in his life were rare, and Vincent stores these treasures in his heart.

Catherine stroked her silver-backed brush through her hair, humming the melodic line of Mozart's Piano Sonata in A, which was playing in the background. All was in readiness for him on the balcony. She just wanted to make sure that she was ready as well. She dabbed on a bit more of her perfume, knowing that Vincent liked its scent.... Again, tonight, she was trying to do everything possible to tempt him to cross over her threshold, and enter her apartment. Surely, he would one day realize that the sanctuary of her balcony could extend to the entirety of her home?

Catherine stood and slipped over her pure silk hostess pajamas a royal blue silk *'forbidden stitch'* embroidered Mandarin robe. She adjusted the crystal pendant about her neck, then looked out into the darkness of the balcony. He was near. She could feel it.

Vincent stepped into the golden play of light outside her French doors. With a cry of joy she flung her bedroom doors open, then stepped back, knowing that Vincent was looking at her as if he were memorizing every nuance of her appearance.

"Catherine," he hoarsely muttered, mesmerized. "You are...." He paused, suddenly fumbling for the words to describe his feelings. *"If I could write the beauty of your eyes. And in fresh numbers number all your graces. The age to come would say, 'this poet lies'...."*

"Thank you," she whispered in response. For an immeasurable moment, they gazed into each other's eyes, the longing in their souls wanting to be revealed. "How good of you to come," she quietly stated.

He took a step backwards, breaking the spell. Looking about the balcony, he realized that Catherine had made preparations for the evening.

"How good of you to have me," he stiffly replied.

Catherine couldn't help herself. She voiced, "To have and to hold, hmmm?" She moved closer to him, the slight wind fluttering her silken raiment about her.

With open arms he welcomed her, crushing her slender form to him, almost in desperation.

"Catherine," he whispered into the crown of her hair, inhaling deeply her special perfume.

In response, she held him tighter. Reluctantly, she raised her head from its burrowing piece in the softness of his vest to glimpse the starlight in his eyes. "It's only been a few days since I last held you.... Oh, Vincent, it seems as if it were an eternity."

He tenderly moved his fingers through a captured strand of her hair, brushing her elflock away from her face. "It's been the same for me."

She broke away from him and led him to an armchair that flanked her porch table. "Please sit, Vincent. Tell me about Below. Is all well?" As Vincent spoke, Catherine moved about the balcony,

lighting the candles within their hurricane shades. Each new light seemed to add a sparkle to Catherine's countenance, blending with the fires in her soul. As she passed near him to reach the candles on the balcony's edge, Vincent sensed a fleeting feeling from his lady.

"Catherine, you are cold. You must go inside."

"Will you come with me? I could light a fire."

Vincent declined, immediately regretting his decision, yet not knowing what other answer he could give. He dared not test the limits of his self-control in this most private place in Catherine's world.

He'd been sensing Catherine's willingness to cross over his self-imposed boundary of restraint. Vincent knew that Catherine desired more than what he could give her. Vincent dared not touch her. He knew what his claws could do. Vincent ground his fingers into the palms of his hands. Frustrated at having to deny the very thing that his soul, and Catherine's, desired the most.

Catherine moved away from him, softly touching her hand against his chest. "I will return, Vincent." Moments later, She returned wearing a Shetland shawl draped about her shoulders, and carrying a bottle of La Chapelle '61. two wine glasses, and a platter of cheese and crackers.

"Vincent, when you are ready, you will be welcome in my home."

"Catherine, that must never be...." Regret colored his voice. "I can never be a part of your world." Eyes mirroring his longing bored into his soul....

Catherine smiled slightly, as she denied his words. She had thought for days as to the arguments that she would use against his stubbornness.

"Vincent, have I not been a guest in your home? Have I not been alone with you in your chambers? Have I not tended to the needs of your people? Have I not promised to defend with my life, if needs be, your world?" She moved close to him, willing him to place his arms about her again. He held her. "And, have I not learned to love your father, as I do my own? Cannot you learn to come into my world? *'Our'* world?"

"Catherine.... of course everything that you say is true. But in my world, you are safe. Above, I am not."

She rested her hands on his broad shoulders. "True, Vincent. Only, this balcony is now *'our'* world. It could extend to the safe haven of *'our'* apartment. Think upon this, Vincent. And do not use Father's arguments to deny mine."

She had said enough on the matter for this night, not wanting to pressure him further. She knew that if she insisted, he would come into her apartment. But not of his free will. His choice in this was what mattered. She leaned into him, breathing his scent of spice and smoke. She loved the smell of him, momentarily allowing it to distract her.

Vincent felt her bemusement, and would not allow himself to be distracted as well. He glanced down at the table and noticed the wine bottle.

"And what is this bottle, Catherine?"

Catherine resignedly permitted him to change the subject, knowing that he was steadfast in his refusal of her - for now. She spoke lightly. "Vincent, have you ever tasted wine before? A good wine?"

"*Good wine is a good familiar creature if it be well used....*" He picked up the bottle. "I do not recall ever tasting wine from France before. Father sometimes wistfully recalls such thing."

"There was wine at Winterfest," she commented, taking the bottle from him and carefully pouring it into her goblets of the finest Baccarat crystal.

"Chow Li brings rice wine. The Giovannis bring their homemade vintage every year. And several times Father has permitted me to taste the Napoleon brandy he receives from a Helper every

Christmas. I also once tasted beer. I did not care for it. Other than this, the only spirits with which I am familiar, are Narcissa's ghosts."

Catherine laughed. "You've seen Narcissa's ghosts?"

"Only through her heart." He smiled warmly.

Catherine picked up her glass, swirling the ruby liquid about for a moment. Earlier, she had opened the bottle to let it breathe. "This particular wine is considered to be one of the finest vintages of this century," she said casually. "My father gave me this bottle."

"Then I fear such magnificence will be wasted upon me," Vincent ruefully said, as he gingerly accepted the fragile crystal goblet from Catherine's hand. He let his fingers linger against hers, before he gripped the stem.

"I know that I am not casting pearls before.... *'lions'*," she playfully said, releasing with good humor. "Taste it, Vincent. Let the wine flow over your tongue and inundate your senses...."

"Perhaps it would be wiser if I did not," he dryly said.

"Why ever not?"

"If this is such a superb wine, then if I taste it, I will be forever disappointed with any wine that I might drink in the future, condemned by the memory of this wine."

Catherine's smile lit another flame in his spirit. "Vincent, the funny thing about good wine is, that you always want to go in search of the ones that are even better."

"Catherine, some of those people who went *'searching'*, ended up in the tunnels. Father regularly lectures the children about its temptations."

Catherine gazed at him, slightly piqued by his attitude. "What does the Bible say, Vincent? *'For thy love is better than wine'*?"

He turned away from her then. "I am sorry, Catherine. I did not mean to imply a criticism of this gift from your father."

Mollified, she nodded. "I know that, Vincent. Like everything else, wine can be enjoyed or abused. But my father wanted me to share this bottle with someone very special, and you know that there will never be anyone more special to me than you in my life."

With these words, Vincent lifted the goblet to his lips and drank the Elysian nectar within. Another sip, and he started to feel the warmth of this intoxicant flow through his veins. And with its warmth, he sensed its possible danger.

"Catherine, I have had little experience with wine. I do not know its effect upon me."

"Surely, a single glass cannot harm you?" She didn't know the danger behind her words. In Vincent's presence, Catherine needed no intoxicant to befuddle her senses. Unwittingly, after the midnight hour was struck, it would be Vincent who would drink the majority of the bottle.

For Vincent, this was a time of joyous celebration, as Catherine lay against him, in his arms, on the chaise lounge of her balcony. They talked of many things, with Catherine occasionally stirring to change the music and bring another volume of poetry, from which each would read aloud. Vincent could not remember a more perfect evening in his life. Vincent poured the last of the bottle into his glass, as Catherine found a poem to recite.

*"The lot of love is chosen. I learnt that much
Struggling for an image on the track of the whirling Zodiac.
Scarce did he my body touch, scarce sank he from the west
Or found a subterranean rest on the maternal midnight of my breast...."*

I struggled with the horror of daybreak'.... "

Vincent stirred restlessly at her words. The poems were arousing him too much. Trying to gather the mantle of his restraint about him, he spoke formally. "Father wishes that you would come Below. Perhaps, this weekend?"

Catherine turned in his arms to face him, inadvertently pressing herself against him even more. At this, he sat up, removing her from his arms. "I would love to come Below, that is, if you still want me," she innocently said, not consciously aware of what she was doing to him.

Vincent barely whispered. "I will always want you." Trying to adapt a normal attitude, he said. "Catherine, I must go. The '*horror of dawn*' really is too close."

Catherine checked her wristwatch. "Vincent, it is barely three am. Many's the time you've stayed past four."

Vincent paid little attention to her words as he discovered that he had to use the balcony wall as a brace in order to stand.

Surprised at this, Catherine worriedly stated. "Vincent, the wine is effecting you. Sit! I'll make you some tea and sandwiches. And then, you'll take the elevator down to the sub-basement. At this time of the morning, no one will be about."

"I will not take that risk." Vincent leaned into the railing. "I am '*not*' inebriated, Catherine, though your wine was more potent than I expected. I still am able-witted enough to recite Milton's '*Areopagitica*' in its entirety for you, if you wish. Father read it to me a long time ago."

Exasperated, she asked, "What?" And not '*Paradise Lost*' or '*Regained*' as well? Sit down, Vincent, and rest."

He stared at Catherine before he whispered, almost to himself. "But not Milton's '*Passion*.' That I cannot do tonight. I must leave now."

Catherine heard his words, and this convinced her more than anything else that the wine was altering his sense of judgement.

Sternly, she told him. "I'll go check the hallway and call up the elevator, since you insist on leaving. You '*will*' do as I say, Vincent. Please." She hugged him, and then went out into the hallway to get the elevator. She turned to motion to him to come, when she saw that he was not there, she ran back into her living room crying, "Vincent! Dammit! Come back!"

Vincent heard her plea, but he ignored it. He told himself that it was for the best. Reaching the roof, almost out of habit, he realized that he was in the mood to return to the confinement of Below. If he couldn't be with Catherine, at least he could be free for a little while longer. In his need to work off the alcohol in his bloodstream, he started roaming the rooftops, listening to the siren call of the city. Eventually, he worked his way to his favorite perch to view the Statue of Liberty. In the night, with all of the lights glowing, this lady was equally his along with all of the other residents of the city. He was in a reckless mood tonight. And this feeling was as foreign to him as the taste of Catherine's fine wine. Both were temptingly addictive.

McCall uttered a string of rather inventive invectives at the man standing at the foot of his bed.

"I take it you're awake, McCall. Where's the coffee?" Kostmayer casually asked.

"It's barely three o'clock, Kostmayer!" McCall spat out.

"Last time I poke you awake."

McCall reached over and turned on a light. "You're fortunate, Mickey, that I do not go for my gun first, and then ask questions."

"Yeah, I noticed that, McCall. Losing your edge, huh?"

At this insult, McCall glared at Mickey and said. "I'll make the coffee. You don't know now."

Kostmayer was too bloody cheerful to be around at this time in the morning to suit McCall's tastes.

"Why are you here too early?"

"Control thinks Dinaldo is onto the nun, so he had me come to get you. *'Posthaste'* was the word he used. He wants to caravan her to a new safe house."

A short time later McCall found himself riding shotgun, and a Sister of Charity who would not stop talking. McCall was not in a good mood.

In spite of himself, he found the sister interesting. She was a woman of indeterminate age, four-foot-nine, ninety pounds, and according to her, had not yet done everything in life that she found interesting. During the drive McCall learned that she spoke fluently seven languages, had been arrested in nine countries, had taught on a university level, and knew how to smuggle out interesting photographs of the walls of Herculaneum.

McCall was at a loss for words about this. "What?"

Sr. Charlie laughed. "How else do you think I'd get those wild boys to study Latin? Only with the promise that they'd get a chance to view photographs of the *'forbidden'* wall pictures, in all their exotic glory.

"Surely, your pupils could have seen the same thing in Playboy?"

Sr. Charlie Marie sent him one of the infamous withering glares as she retorted. "I take it that you have *'not'* seen those walls, Mr. McCall."

The glare had its effect on Robert McCall. Immediately, he felt as if he were in short pants again. Suddenly, the sharp retort of gunfire dismissed any frivolous commentary from his thoughts.

McCall pulled Sr. Charlie to the van's floor, shielding her with his body, as he withdrew his own weapon. McCall felt the van twist as they sought to elude their pursuers. " *'WHO?'*" McCall yelled out towards Mickey.

The very brevity of his description convinced McCall of the seriousness of the situation. "Drop us off as soon as you can. Try for that! I'll radio Control."

"What's going on?" Sr. Charlie Marie demanded to know, sticking her head out from underneath McCall's shoulder.

"Shut up!" McCall shoved her head back down underneath him. "Stay there."

The sister knew when to listen to the voice of authority. She nodded and began to pray for all of their lives.

"Still solo," Mickey called back.

"Thank God!" McCall whispered, grateful that the pursuit had not yet been joined. They still had a chance.

Kostmayer leaned into the body of the van, getting ready to pull the side door open. And then the van slowed down as it rounded a curve.

"What if they are aware of our original destination, Mickey?" McCall suddenly asked.

"Life's a gamble and then you lose," Mickey replied.

"I'll remember that you said it, Kostmayer," McCall threatened, as he gathered the sister close to him, ready to propel her out the door during the few seconds they might be granted to escape.

" *'NOW!'*" Kostmayer yelled as he yanked the door open.

Moments later McCall half-dragged the sister onto the asphalt. They ran down the nearest dark alley. So far, so good.

Breathless moments passed. McCall shoved the nun behind a dumpster. " 'Quiet!'" he ordered, listening intently into the darkness.

They heard nothing. "Now what?" she pragmatically asked.

McCall looked the other way down the alley, surveying this terrain. "That way, I think."

"You don't know for sure?"

"Sister, I am *'not'* a habitue of back alleys.... at least, not any more."

"Are you done reminiscing? Let's get cracking!"

McCall dragged another deep breath into his aching body before he answered.

"Time to run, Sister Charlie. Stay between me and the wall."

He stuck his head cautiously around the dumpster; he stayed the nun as lights of a car flashed by. For a brief moment, he allowed himself to admit that he did have a niggling fear that perhaps he *'was'* getting too old for this most dangerous of games. He had to prove to himself otherwise. He stood, and then they dashed, with the sister audibly praying as they ran. She was not the only one offering up a prayer. McCall prayed that he was accurately remembering the way to the safe house. In this particular area, all of the warehouses tended to look alike at night.

For a while, McCall honestly thought that they were going to make it. Gunfire cracked the brick barely a few feet in front of them. A curse slipped from McCall's lips as he assessed his options. There appeared to be one way to run - to the right, away from the direction where McCall believed the safe house to be. He shoved the nun around the corner, and braced himself, attempting to determine the exact number of his opponents. He couldn't tell in the blackness of this alley.

"Run, Sister! As far and as fast as you can! I'll hold them off!" He gave Sr. Charlie no alternative, as he waved her from him.

A short time later, she returned. "Mr. McCall, are you familiar with the phrase, *'praise the lord and pass the ammunition'?*"

"What?" He wondered if he'd heard her correctly.

"Dead end. If you have a spare piece, I can use it."

"Incredible.... Sister, I will not have a gun-toting nun on my conscience!"

"It's my life, too. I know where to shoot in order to disable the human body."

He shook his head. Now was not the time to teach this woman that even if she had a gun, shooting to kill was the only way one could survive.

And then the shooting started. He couldn't defend this place, so he grabbed the nun again and ran, till he found some place to hide. There just had to be some sort of door or fire escape. He could not die. Not here. Not this way.

High above them, Vincent opened his eyes. Something had disturbed his catnap. He glanced over at the lady, wondering if it had been the blast from a passing tugboat's horn that had awakened him.

Gunfire then jarred his hearing. With shock, Vincent watched below as four men cornered a man and a nun in the alley. Vincent sensed the desperation in one man's heart as well as its anger.

Vincent sprang up onto the ledge of the roof, and ran the length of the building till he was behind the killers. It was but an easy matter for Vincent to shimmy down a drain pipe, landing silently behind the paid executioners. His superior night vision guided his steps as he stealthily crept up behind them, without anyone paying notice to him.

Robert McCall had faced death innumerable times before in his life. But this time, in his soul, he knew that it was the final time. He had been counting the shots in his clip as he fired, and knew that

he was coming to its end; he knew that these men were too professional to give him a chance to load another clip into his pistol. He was but two bullets away from being defenseless, and the death of the woman under his protection.

Vincent sensed a sudden flare of despairing anger in the defender of the nun; then the man's anguish at his impending failure. Vincent attacked with a roar that stunned everyone in the alley.

For a brief instant, McCall thought that the dark angel of death had personally come to welcome him to hell. But then, he saw the blood on the first of Dinaldo's assassins, as this attacker slashed the man. Using his two remaining bullets, he shot two more of the men who were frozen still in shock at the sight of this roaring beast.

Distant approaching headlights illuminated the scene, capturing the players in halogen lighting. If there was a God in heaven, and surely there must be, since McCall was defending one of God's own, this van had to belong to Kostmayer.

The remaining standing killer ignored all of this as well as his own fallen cohorts. Instead, he advanced on Sister Charlie Marie, and drew a bead with his gun on her. McCall launched himself at the gunman. Vincent attacked at the same instant, from behind, raining savage blows downward. One of his hands accidentally struck McCall, raking him from the shoulder to the elbow, slashing his coat, and slicing through to draw blood.

Vincent looked in horror at McCall, realizing that some of the blood on his claws belonged to the man he had been defending. The eviscerated dead man slid to the ground, Vincent grabbed McCall as his legs started to crumple.

Convinced that he was hallucinating, McCall looked up into the face of his ferocious savior, as the Sister hesitantly moved toward them. "Who are you?" McCall thought he heard a broken voice ask, as his world whirled about him, as he felt the beast release him, slipping down into a pool of warm blood.

Vincent looked up at her words, taking a deep, gasping breath as the blood lust cooled in his veins. But he did not answer. At that moment, Mickey Kostmayer approached Vincent from the back, misinterpreting the situation, and struck him with a heavy length of pipe. Vincent fell face-forward onto the filth-strewn bloodied alley, unconscious.

Catherine shot upright in her bed. The pain in her head was real. So was the agony of her body. "Vincent!" she screamed into the night. And then she lost whatever tenuous thread of feeling it was that she shared with Vincent. Terror filled her soul.

Quickly she dressed, and grabbed her flashlight. It was barely five in the morning when she raced across the park to the nearest tunnel entrance. This entrance was the fastest way Below. It should have been the path that Vincent had taken. She was going to check every pathway until she found Vincent. Something had happened to her beloved.

McCall watched in a state of detachment as Control's minions lifted the body of the beast into a nearby van. He held his coat about his bleeding arm, as he tried to find something upon which to fixate; to regain his sense of equilibrium. He found Control.

"Where?" His voice cracked with stress and pain.

"We're going to a new safe house, a few blocks north of here," was Control's terse response.

"How did you know?" He demanded of his friend.

"You were never lost," Control unemotionally responded.

McCall suddenly understood. "You wanted Dinaldo's people to find us. The sister's testimony

wasn't enough. We were *'bait'* in a better mouse trap!"

Control tried to placate McCall. "You're injured, McCall. Don't start imagining things."

McCall pointed to Vincent with his good hand. "Then *'what'* is *'that'*?"

Kostmayer came over to McCall. "I did not set you up, McCall. I don't know what's going on." He helped McCall into the van, and then escorted the sister as well, inside.

Sr. Charlie immediately went over to Vincent, and gently checked the pulse at his throat and wrist.

McCall looks at her. "Sister, you aren't by chance a doctor, are you?"

She ignored McCall. Instead she stared angrily at Mickey. "Did you *'have'* to hit him so hard, young man?"

Mickey retorted. "I was *'trying'* to save your hide, Sister!"

"He wasn't *'any'* danger to me!" Her voice shook with indignation.

A short time later they arrived at the new safe house - a warehouse, as bleak a place as any McCall had ever manned. It was a holding facility as well, that included makeshift barracks, electronic surveillance headquarters, and cells.

"All the comforts of home," McCall gritted through his teeth. He sat sown on a spartan cot, as Mickey eased McCall's coat and shirt off of his arm. "Do be careful, Mickey," McCall complained. Some of the blood had already started to dry, and Mickey was not being gentle.

"Gotta, McCall. Sorry."

Sr. Charlie Marie came over to them and slapped Mickey's hands away from McCall's shoulder. "You're no medic," she grumbled at Mickey.

Mickey stepped aside, refraining from saying anything.

The nun studied McCall's shoulder and announced, "Stitches." She looked at McCall's face. "You want me to do it, or will they take you to a hospital?" In spite of the pain, she also saw hesitation there. "I *'am'* a doctor, Mr. McCall. Unfortunately, my area was mainly research. They didn't let me practice much."

Mickey leaned into McCall and whispered. "A comfort to be sure, eh, McCall? I wonder why *'they'* didn't let her practice much?"

From behind his back she said, "I *'heard'* that, Kostmayer! And to think that your brother is a priest!"

Mickey gulped. " *'How'd'* she know that?"

A few minutes later, after cleaning the wounds, McCall's only anesthesia was a double shot of whiskey, as the sister deftly stitched up his arm. At this point, McCall collapsed against his cot, relieved to let Control handle things for a while. It was the play of sunbeams tickling his nose that called Robert back to consciousness. They were coming through the barred upper windows. McCall woozily sat up surveying the scene. There were two guards at the floor, Control was on the telephone, and the nun was placing wet compresses on the brow of the beast. The beast.... McCall studied him from across the room. He was locked up in one of the cells, chained not only to his cot but also to the floor and wall of the cell.

Robert assessed his condition and came to the conclusion that he was stiff, he needed a good night's sleep, his shoulder hurt like hell, and that he was fully functional so long as no one asked him to play cricket.

He stood and creakily walked over to Control standing in the doorway of one of the makeshift offices.

"Dare I ask?" McCall warily said.

"They want to move her as soon as possible."

"Wasn't it enough that you gave the grand jury additional proof against Dinaldo by that little scene in the alley? Must we endanger her life again by moving her?"

"They could be on to us."

"If they were, we'd all be dead by now, and you know it, Control."

"Until Dinaldo is behind bars, that woman is one of the walking dead. I won't let anything happen to her. Will you, Robert?"

McCall made the mistake of shaking his head. Now it throbbed even more. "You never did play fair, Control. And.... I'm not even going to ask what else is going on. I doubt if you'd give me an explanation about our hairy friend over there anyway."

"Would you believe me, Robert, if I told you that I don't have an explanation?"

"No," Robert simply said.

"I've called the lab boys. No less a personage than Admiral Lee Crane is going to handle *'it.'* Personally, I think that the Admiral is out to prove that I've cracked. I think he found he hard to believe on the phone."

"I wonder why?" McCall archly asked. "So, what is next, Control?"

"I'll move the nun. You're in no condition to do anything else but guard the creature. All its done during the past four hours is wheeze. Sr. Charles has been tending to it."

"Control, I will not let you turn me into the official Company babysitter! I don't *'officially'* work for you any more, remember?"

Control eyed Robert. "Kostmayer can stay behind to help you until the lab boys show up."

"You are a man of such great compassion, Control," McCall sarcastically commented.

"You are still alive, Robert." Control had to have the last word.

"Catherine!" Mouse cried, delighted to see her. "Help feel Arthur his dinner?" Mouse held up a dish of.... something. Mouse also had no sense of time. If it didn't bother him, why should it bother anyone else?

Catherine grabbed his shoulder. "Mouse! Have you seen Vincent!"

"Vincent? Go Above?"

"I *'know'* that, Mouse." She said in desperation. "Did Vincent come *'back'*?"

Mouse shrugged. "Ask the pipes?" he suggested.

"Take me to Pascal!" Catherine pleaded.

Mouse placed Arthur's dish on the tunnel floor and lit a lantern. "This way," he indicated. "Find Father. Find Pascal. Find Vincent."

Catherine agreed with Mouse's agenda, as she followed him to where Father was supposed to be. He wasn't in his chamber. Catherine turned to Mouse and asked, "Find Pascal. Tell him that Vincent is missing. I'll wait for Father."

"No Vincent?"

"Yes, Mouse. Find Pascal. *'NOW!'*"

Mouse scooted off.

After Mouse left, Catherine stumbled from Father's chamber into the place where Vincent lived. A few candles still burned, illuminating the darkness. She was able to see what she feared.... He was not there. She walked over to the bed, almost reverently touching the shirt that had been tossed there. Gathering it to her, she moved over to Vincent's work table, weakly sitting down in his chair.

Her eyes strayed over to the open page of Vincent's journal. There was only one line written at the top of the page.... *'And now I go to brave Father's sentiments in order to be with the woman I love....'*

Catherine was disconsolate, stepping over to the bed before she fell upon it, sobs racking her body; her desolation filling the chamber. She knew that she must be strong for Vincent's sake, but at the moment, she needed the weakness of her tears.

Father found her like that. The message on the pipes had alarmed him. He knew the moment that he stepped into Vincent's chamber and saw Catherine, that his worst fear for his son had happened. Vincent was missing. He put his hand on her shoulder and asked, "Catherine, what has happened?"

Catherine looked up at him, her fearful eyes giving Father his answer.

She spoke of their evening together, and of the hour that Vincent had left. Father started aimlessly pacing about, trying to accept the events of the night.

"How could Vincent stay so late Above, if he knew of the dangers?"

"It was my fault, Father. It was something that I'd done," Catherine admitted.

Father didn't believe this statement. He knew that Catherine would never deliberately endanger Vincent. "What, child?"

"We were on my balcony, as usual, and I read aloud a poem that upset him."

Father had always been hesitant to quiz Vincent as to exactly what it was that he did with Catherine, but now he had to know. "You were on the balcony? Wasn't it cold?"

"Vincent never enters the interior of my apartment unless it is an emergency.... When he comes to see me, regardless of the weather, we sit and talk on my balcony. He considers it to be *'our'* place."

"But tonight was different?"

"Yes. I read this love poem, and Vincent must've sensed.... anyway, he said he had to leave. I didn't want him to go, Father. What with the wine we'd drunk. I was afraid for him if he went over the rooftops!" She spoke agitatedly, self-condemnation filling her heart. "It is all my fault!"

Father's eyes widened in shock, as he choked out. "Wine? Vincent drank *'wine!'*"

"It was a bottle that my father had given to me. I wanted to share it with Vincent. He must have had at least three glasses." She gripped the late William and Mary style carved oak hall chair in all of its carefully mended glory. She almost pulled the arm off in her distress. "I should have stopped him! I should have insisted that he take the elevator down to the sub-basement entrance. Then he would have been safe!"

"My God, Catherine! *'Three'* glasses! Vincent's physiology is so different from ours! He could have been drunk. Catherine, what you did borders on the criminal!" Father's angry voice filled the chamber as he bitterly condemned her. "Once before, after Winterfest, it took hours before the effects of the alcohol hit Vincent's bloodstream. Vincent was climbing over *'rooftops?'* Oh, my lord! What if he slipped?" Father rested with the implications of it all.

Catherine paled with Father's words. She could say nothing in her own defense. There were no words.

"It's daylight, Above. I must alert the others. We must look for him!" He damned Catherine with a stare. "You could very well be the catalyst that destroys our world!" Father strengthened his resolve, not caring that his words were causing Catherine great pain. She had endangered all of their lives.... and Vincent. He could forgive her for Below, but not for Vincent.

"Go Above, Catherine. You are of more use to us there. Use every contact to discover if Vincent has been captured.... or worse. The Helpers Above will help. Keep in touch with them."

Catherine numbly said, "Yes, Father. I will. I did not intend for this to happen."

"But it did."

A few hours later, a frantic Catherine sent word Below that no one in an official capacity knew of Vincent. No hospital, no police force, no members of the Media.... and no Helpers.

Carefully, she wrung out the cloth before she replaced it upon the beast's brow. Bending over to check his breathing, she whispered. "I hope that you can understand me. I know you're conscious." Vincent continued to lie perfectly still, only the slight rise and fall of his chest betraying that he was alive.

"All right!" the nun said, exasperated. "You're trying to prove to me how smart you really are by not showing that you can understand what is going on. I don't blame you. In fact, it's a tactic I've used myself. But, they want to move me out of here, soon. What then?"

Sr. Charles Marie heard footsteps approaching her from behind.

"Sister, are you okay?" Kostmayer hesitantly asked. "Were you talking to someone?"

"Hasn't Control told you by now that I'm an eccentric? I don't need a second person in order to hold a conversation." She glanced down at the beast and smoothed the fur on his hand. "Actually, I was hoping to communicate with this man."

Kostmayer shook his head in disbelief, as he reluctantly entered the cell, carefully avoiding the range of the manacled creature. He didn't want to be the one to test the beast's strength. Kostmayer was always a cautious agent. That was why he was still alive.

"Sister, Control wants to leave in about five minutes."

"And what of him?"

"McCall is going to handle its transfer to the proper authorities."

"Sounds more like a death sentence to me," the nun acerbically replied. Kostmayer could not answer her. She leaned over Vincent and whispered, "Thank you for saving my life. I will do what I can for you. Amongst God's creatures, what a remarkable being you are...."

She stood and brushed off her hands. "Open the cell door, Mr. Kostmayer. I am not your prisoner. And neither should he be. Let us *'both'* out."

Control walked up to her. "Sister, be thankful that you are still alive. Don't ask for more than that."

"I wouldn't *'be'* still alive, if it weren't for him, Control. No thanks to you and yours," she pointedly commented.

McCall joined the discussion. "Sister, we do not know how much danger you are now in because of this.... creature."

"*'HOGWASH!'*" she succinctly replied. She walked back over to Vincent and took his hand again, gently stroking the patterns of curls in his fur. "Will you let him go, Mr. McCall? I sense in you a humanity that the others lack." She looked up at Robert with an innocent guileless expression - a skill she had perfected over several decades.

"Impossible, Sister Charles. I cannot," McCall spoke with regret. "I do promise you that I will do what I can for him. He will *'not'* become a laboratory *'specimen'*."

She continued to stroke Vincent's hand. "*I like slowly stroking the shocking fuzz of her electric fur....*" she quoted.

McCall was nonplussed. Erotic love poetry was not something he associated with Sisters of Charity.

And then, the beast moved his lips. "E.E. Cummings," he whispered.

McCall and the nun looked at each other, doubting what they had heard. "He *'is'* a human being, McCall! He *'does not'* deserve the fate which awaits him. Save him, Mr. McCall. Or else you are a lesser man than I think you to be."

"Save what?" Control asked, paying attention to their conversation again. "Yeti? Sasquatch? Big Foot?"

"Who's to say he is not?" Sr. Charles Marie indignantly said.

"Right now, it doesn't matter, Sister. Time to go." Control nodded towards two men who came to escort her away.

McCall said his goodbyes, watching the group leave, just in case something more untoward than a poetry quoting yeti should occur.

Moments later, Kostmayer returned. "You wanna take the first shift till the lab guys get here? I've had less sleep than you these past few days, McCall." Mickey stifled a yawn.

"Go take a nap," McCall sighed. "My shoulder shall keep me awake, anyway. With any luck, we shall be in for a dull time of it."

Mickey scoffed at this. "Yeah, sure. A *'dull'* time here with *'the beast of the city'*."

"Kostmayer, I would not care to hear about any of those horror films that you care to watch."

"Not a horror film, McCall. An old Carole Lombard movie."

"Rest, Mickey, before I change my mind."

"What gives, Radcliffe?" Joe sat on the edge of Cathy's desk, moving aside a Brooklyn phone directory.

"What do you mean, Joe?"

"You've been on the phone all morning. And somehow, I get the feeling that it ain't related to work."

"It's.... personal, Joe," Cathy admitted. "A friend of mine is missing.... "

Joe slowly nodded. "Take the rest of the day off, Radcliffe. And if you want to do it here at your desk, that's okay by me."

Cathy stood up and hugged him in relief.

McCall pattered about, heating up a bowl of soup in the microwave, and putting a kettle on to boil. "I'm making myself some soup," McCall announced to the room in general. "And fixing myself some tea. With biscuits."

Vincent tried to sit up, straining against the chains. McCall noticed his movement. "Do you want some?"

Vincent did not reply.

"Come on, I know that you do speak. The good sister and I heard you...." McCall added an extra mug and soup bowl to his tray before he carried it over to the table that was near the cell. "Unless you want me to add *'ventriloquist'* to the list of occupations behind Sr. Charles' name."

For a moment, Vincent did nothing; then he extended his hand through the iron bars, holding open his palm.

Casually, McCall asked, "Tea?" The absurdity of the situation was beginning to get to McCall, along with the pain and his lack of sleep. "With plenty of cream, I presume?" he politely added, as he poured the tea.

With this, Vincent chuckled. "Yes, with cream, please. It is a luxury I occasionally allow myself."

McCall dropped the mug. "You *'DO'* speak!" And then he noticed that he had a mess to mop up. Vincent handed McCall his handkerchief through the bars. McCall took it automatically noting that it was a well-worn fine linen cloth. McCall then refilled the mug, generously adding cream, and handed it to his prisoner. Vincent drained the mug instantly, and handed the mug back to McCall. Robert refilled it again. And again. It wasn't until the fifth go-round, that Vincent finally put the mug down onto the tray.

McCall eyed the small pot of soup that was on the tray. "Perhaps, I'd best heat up some more noodle soup, if you're hungry. I promised the sister that I'd take care of you."

"Quite a remarkable lady," Vincent commented. "I do not regret saving her life, regardless of what is to befall me." Vincent perused McCall as thoroughly as McCall had done to him. "Who are you?"

McCall choked on his tea. "Isn't that *'my'* line?" he gasped McCall then grinned. "Clever, aren't you?" McCall leaned back into his chair a bit, staring at the figure behind bars. "All right. My name is McCall. Robert McCall."

Vincent nodded, accepting the introduction. "Vincent," he replied, carefully extending his hand through the bars again, in anticipation of a formal shaking of the hands. McCall obliged.

"*'What'* are you?" was McCall's next question.

"A beast.... just a beast."

McCall dropped his mug again. "You're quoting Dr. Temple? A Rugby Headmaster? First E.E. Cummings, and now this? *'Impossible!'*"

Vincent carefully studied McCall. For a moment, McCall was not exactly sure just who was in charge of whom. "May I have some soup, please?" he politely asked.

McCall couldn't think of anything else to do so he gave Vincent a bowl. Again, he asked, "What *'are'* you?"

Vincent finished his soup before speaking. "I am sure that your scientists will eventually provide you with an answer." McCall automatically refilled his soup bowl.

"That is out of my hands.... Vincent. Tell me, what do you think you are? Are you a man?"

"What do you think?"

McCall put down his mug, and stood, looking at Vincent saying; "*'What is a man, if his chief good and market of his time. Be but to sleep and feed?'*"

Vincent finished the quote. "*'.... a beast, no more.'* Hamlet, Act IV."

McCall denied this. "You're no beast, even if you *'do'* have a leonine appearance. You saved my life and it was not a random act. You were fully cognizant. Who are you? Where do you come from? What are your origins?" McCall suddenly was filled with questions.

"I have already told you my name, Mr. McCall - Vincent."

"And your surname?"

"Does it matter? In a few hours I will become just another interesting curiosity to be dissected by your scientists. I will become a number, and not a name. Yet, I am a human being. Or so my father tells me."

"You have a *'father'*?" McCall asked, in relief.

"I was adopted as a babe. I know not of my origins."

"Where do you come from, Vincent?"

"Manhattan, Mr. McCall."

McCall shook his head again. "Well, one could almost believe that anything could come from the Village, but in your case, I would have said the third star on the right."

"And straight on till morning?" Vincent added. "Perhaps I did originate in Never-Never Land. That would explain many things."

McCall began to relax, enjoying this little duel of wits with this Vincent. "Where on earth, that is, if you *'are'* from earth, did you get your education? You appear to be a learned man."

"I disagree. My father is the most learned man and doctor. He is my teacher. I am only a student of life."

"Your father raised you well, Vincent. You're a scholar and a gentleman. Believe me, in this city, that *'is'* what is truly alien."

Vincent politely smiled. "Thank you, Mr. McCall."

McCall stood and stretched. "I could make some more tea, or would you prefer something more substantial?"

"If it is not too much trouble, something more substantial. I do believe I was unavoidably detained from my breakfast this morning."

McCall ignored this polite criticism as he went to the work area that doubled as a kitchen. "I must admit that I am surprised that I have never heard of you before. I thought my information system was second to none. I should have at least heard of a rumor of your existence before last night."

Warm humor, which under the circumstances was quite remarkable, filled Vincent's words. "Mr. McCall, your information system could not possibly have known of me. Until a few years ago, I always kept to myself, never venturing out of my.... home. Because of my appearance, my father correctly feared for my safety. I was not allowed out during the daylight. The few times I went out at night, I stayed in the shadows."

Shocked comprehension dawned in McCall's eyes as he realized why Vincent kept looking towards the sunshine coming through the windows. "You've never known the daylight?"

Vincent's eyes returned to the windows high above them. "Most of my life has been as this, Mr. McCall. I've treasured every ray of light."

"You've led a very strange life, Vincent," McCall commented. , as he finished making the peanut butter and honey sandwiches. A few minutes later he brewed the tea, and carried the tray back over to the cell. Much to his surprise, he found Vincent sleeping. Quietly, he placed the tray down, and then settled onto his chair, to study his captive.

Concerned about a possible concussion, McCall reached into the cell to wake Vincent up after an hour had passed. Vincent stirred, and then opened his eyes, staring blankly out into space. He automatically tried to sit up and angrily yanked against his chains when he could not.

"Vincent, you are safe," McCall quietly stated.

"No, Mr. McCall. I am not. If being illegally incarcerated against my will, without due process of law, not to mention facing possible vivisection is your definition of *'safe'*, I shudder at the mere thought of your explanation for *'endangered'*."

McCall ruefully acknowledged Vincent's point-of-view. "For someone supposedly unaccustomed to this world, you are quite perspicacious, Vincent."

"Mr. McCall, though my life in the daylight has been somewhat restricted, that does not mean that I am unacquainted with it. I have friends; they, as well as those I love, should be quite frantic by now, at my failure to return to them."

McCall somberly said. "I *'am'* sorry, Vincent. I realize that they are not likely to file a missing person's report about you. If you will trust me with their names and phone numbers, I will contact them for you."

"Mr. McCall, I do appreciate your good intent, but I cannot permit their exposure to your *'Company'*

as well."

"I presume that Sister Charles Marie and I were not the only people that you have saved from harm. I expect that this is how you've made many of your friends."

Vincent stared at him, trying to truly make the measure of this man. The silent accusation in his eyes disturbed McCall. Robert McCall was not a man accustomed to thinking of himself as being in the wrong....

"Yes, Mr. McCall, I have made many friends in my search for justice in your world. And all of these people have respected my right to exist. Would you have me paraphrase Shylock? Am I less of a man because I have been cursed with leonine features? Or, is it that you doubt my very existence? Do you question your own empirical evidence? And if *'you'* disbelieve it, what will everyone else think?"

McCall grudgingly admired Vincent's argument. "Vincent, one could almost believe that you have been consorting with lawyers...." He gave Vincent a slight smile. "Without absolute proof, if I were to tell certain people of your existence, I am sure that I would find myself spending the remainder of my years in a comfortable padded cell."

Vincent shuddered at the use of the word *'cell.'*

"What is it, Vincent? Are you in pain?"

"I was once a prisoner in a *'cell.'* A scientist had captured me in order to gain some sort of nebulous recognition in his little world. But his conscience battled with his ambitions, and I was freed. However, if you send me to a *'cell'*...." He chose not to paraphrase, ".... *'If you poison us, do we not die?'* Imprisonment is *'my'* prison, McCall." Vincent turned away from him, hiding his fears.

McCall walked away from Vincent, disquiet coloring his thoughts. He brewed another pot of tea, and found some fruit. After a few minutes, he placed a tray on the table by the cell. He noticed that Vincent was trying to massage his temples.

"Headache? Nausea? Dizziness?" he worriedly asked.

Vincent tried to sit up again. "I do not think that I have a concussion, Mr. McCall. What I do have is a headache caused by my own foolishness."

McCall wondered if Vincent was regretting the saving of his life....

Vincent continued saying, 'I'd been drinking wine earlier in the night with Ca....' He abruptly stopped speaking, suddenly realizing that he dare not say her name. "Anyway, I'd had a wine, La Chapelle '61, and it seemed to dull my sense of judgment. That is the only reason why that Kostmayer was able to capture me. Ordinarily, I could've avoided his feeble attempt."

"That was an excellent wine, Vincent. Was the lady worth it?"

"What lady?"

"Oh, there *'is'* a lady, Vincent. I could tell by the expression in your voice when you started to speak of her. She is the reason why you were out last night.... isn't she? Is she your girlfriend?"

Vincent's eyes widened in surprise at this possible description of Catherine. He had never thought of her in quite that context before. "She.... is my life."

The simpleness of his words caught at McCall's conscience. McCall had rarely encountered anyone as honest as this man. And then, McCall realized that he was now thinking of Vincent as a *'man'*, instead of a *'beast.'* "How did you meet her?" He poured the tea.

Vincent strained against his cuff, before he dropped his arm, waving away the mug.

McCall sighed, and leaned towards Vincent through the bars. "Sit still, and I'll uncuff you."

"Thank you," Vincent said. Once he was released from his handcuffs, Vincent automatically started to rub his wrists. This time, Vincent took the mug when McCall offered it again. "What can I say of

her?...." Vincent's soft voice resonated about the dreary walls of the cell, filling McCall with a slowly growing wonderment that such a love could even exist, much less 'be.' McCall envied this man/beast before him. For Vincent had found that which McCall had been searching for all of his life - someone to love, and he loved wholeheartedly and unreservedly in return.

He quietly spoke of nursing his lady-love back to health after her injuries. Though he spoke vaguely of the women's position in his life, McCall was given insight into Vincent's soul.

And then there was silence. McCall looked reluctantly at Vincent, afraid to reveal the momentary jealousy he felt towards his captive. "Are you all right, Vincent? Cannot you tell me more about your.... life?"

"I am sure that you are weary of my voice."

"On the contrary, I am fascinated. Family, friends, and a woman who loves you----most men do not have such riches."

"Or treasure them when they do. I have seen far too many men toss away human life because it was expedient to do so. Far too many children...." Vincent ceased speaking, grieving for the innocent children again. Below could only help so many....

McCall understood. "I feel that way, too," McCall softly stated. "Since I left the Company.... all I have tried to do has been in reparation for my past sins.... especially for the children."

Vincent looked at McCall as if he could see his soul. "I know. I feel your pain.... and your need for absolution."

McCall was shocked at his words. "How could you know such a thing about me?"

"I know. I can feel.... things."

McCall tried to understand. "Are you an empath?" Vincent did not answer. "Can you sense what your family and friends are feeling at this very moment? What about this woman you love? What about her?"

Vincent's voice revealed the wounds of his heart as he answered. "I know the pain.... especially 'her' pain...."

"It should be dark soon.... several more hours I believe." Father glanced at the small antique carriage clock that Mouse had miraculously repaired, which was his chamber's only timepiece. All seated about Father's table understood his concerns.

"Soon we will know," Mary evenly stated, her voice not betraying her anxiety.

Though she spoke calmly, every person in the chamber knew of Catherine's grief as she said, "Know what? Know that he is injured? A prisoner? Or worse?" Her voice broke. "And that it is all 'my' fault." Her head turned towards Father, knowing that she still received his censure.

Mary reached over and patted her hand. "There, there, child. No one blames you. Vincent went of his own accord to see you. The fates guided his steps." Catherine sent Mary a silent look of thanks for her words, but Catherine's pain was not alleviated by them.

Mouse bounded into the room. "Vincent?"

Pascal rapidly asked, "Do you have any news of Vincent, Mouse?"

"Vincent not 'here'?" Mouse was puzzled. "Catherine 'here!' Vincent 'come'."

The Council shook their heads sadly, as Mouse scurried out of the room. Father looked at Catherine, seeing the wounded soul in her eyes. He limped over to her, and placed his hand on her shoulder. She looked up at him in surprise. Father spoke, "That boy has such an innocent faith. Like Mouse. We must 'all' believe that Vincent will come. To do otherwise, is unthinkable."

He looked down at Catherine, regret for his harsh treatment of her showing in his eyes. "Vincent *'must'* be safe, otherwise we would have heard by now. Since there is nothing, Vincent must be waiting the advent of nightfall before he can return to us." He caressed her cheek. "Catherine, dear, once before you knew of Vincent's danger when we were trapped in the maze. Do you feel anything now, from Vincent?"

Catherine weakly said, "I know that he is alive. But, as for anything else.... he could be trying to deliberately conceal his feelings from me, in order to spare me. Oh, Father...." she buried her face in her hands.

"Catherine, dear, we must be strong, for Vincent's sake. Your heart is his. He can still feel your emotions, Catherine."

Catherine knew that Father was right, as she tried to stem the flow of her tears. Would that she could stem the tide of her fears as easily. She looked up into Father's understanding face, and knew then, that he was asking for her forgiveness of his harsh words. She captured his hand, and kissed it; the only outward sign of her tacit acceptance of his apology.

"Vincent, what is it?" a worried Robert McCall asked.

Vincent opened his eyes, and handed McCall his plate. For a brief moment, he had felt Catherine's despair, and this had overwhelmed him.

"It is nothing of concern to you, Mr. McCall."

"We have a medical kit here, Vincent. Could something help?"

"I do not think that it would be wise. Not all medicines agree with me." McCall was puzzled at Vincent's words. "Thank you for your concern.... Robert."

Before McCall could say anything, he heard a noise from the barrack area. Moments later, a grumpy Kostmayer walked into the room. "McCall, what time is it? You should've called me." He grabbed a cup and willingly poured himself the dregs of the morning's coffeepot. Mickey didn't notice the taste of it.

"You needed your beauty sleep, Mickey."

Mickey glanced over towards Vincent, who had suddenly curled up onto his side, ignoring his arrival. "How's the sleepin' beast?"

"Vincent?"

Mickey stared at McCall. "You *'named'* the kitty-cat? You're not goin' to adopt him, are you, McCall? I didn't know that Control was runnin' an animal shelter."

McCall ignored Mickey's attempts at wit. "Mis-ter Kostmayer, have you *'ever'* seen a *'kitty-cat'* wear human clothing? Much less one who can carry on with a more intelligent conversation than you?"

Mickey finished off his coffee before he walked over to McCall to stare at the *'kitty-cat.'* "Sure, all the time, McCall."

" *'WHAT?'* "

"Called *'Stupid Pet Tricks'* on David Letterman's talk show."

Vincent growled in his *'sleep.'* Kostmayer was distracted by this. "Talkative pet, you got there, McCall." Mickey glanced at the dirty plates on the table. "Anything good left to eat?"

"No," an annoyed McCall replied. "You want to go get something?"

"Good idea. Want me to get something for *'him'*? Milk or that stuff that Morris eats?"

McCall voiced his disapproval of Mickey's words. "I wouldn't tease him, Mr. Kostmayer. Remember what he did in the alley."

"You got a point, Robert. If he speaks up again, let me know. In the mean time, I'll go get us some burgers." He took out his wallet, opened it and said, "I'm tapped."

McCall wearily sighed, and removed some bills from his own wallet. "Perhaps, when you return, we can play another game of chess. You are sorely in need of another trouncing."

"Sure thing, McCall. But, I don't think that you'll be *'trouncing'* me today. Not unless you want me to tell Sterno that you talk to pussycats...."

Vincent's growl this time, was very menacing.

"I'm outta here," Mickey hastily said, grabbing his jacket and exiting.

"I do apologize, Vincent. Mickey is my friend, but...."

"I understand, Robert." Vincent stretched a bit, leaning back against the wall. "You mentioned chess, Robert. I've played a game or two in my life."

"Apparently," McCall retorted, looking in the direction of Mickey's departure. "That was smoothly done, Vincent. I couldn't have done it better myself. Now, my Mr. Kostmayer thinks that I suffered a blow to my head as well as to my arm."

Vincent grimaced in regret. "I am sorry, Robert," he whispered, reaching out to almost touch the bandaged shoulder. "I did not intend this."

"I know, Vincent." Robert spoke softly, his conscience really beginning to bother him now. "You are taking all of *'this'* well, Vincent."

"My captivity, you mean?" Vincent's slight smile was ironic as he watched McCall nod in agreement. "What other choice do I have? If I try to escape, I would have to hurt you.... That is not my way, Robert. Not, when I have a choice."

"Neither is it mine," McCall affirmed. He went to a cupboard and removed a chess set. "I consider myself to be something of a master at this game, Vincent," he warned.

Robert missed Vincent's sly smile when he set up the board. "I consider myself a student as well, Robert." Vincent drew the black pawn.

"White has the advantage," McCall idly commented as he made his first move.

"I know." Four moves later, Vincent studied the board. "Spanish Four Knight's Proper opening," he announced.

Robert blinked in surprise, but kindly said, "And you are countering with the Rubenstein defense. Rather predictable using such a traditional defense for the beginning game, isn't it?"

Vincent ignored Robert's words, well-used to such spoken diversions from another chess player of his acquaintance. "We seem to be evenly matched, Robert," as he moved his knight.

"Are you suggesting something, Vincent?" McCall easily commented, well-knowing that there was something going on behind Vincent's studious facade. Vincent made the next move in the larger game.

"Perhaps a wager?" Vincent casually replied. "It could make the game more interesting."

"I hardly find you dull, Vincent." McCall looked at Vincent, ice-brown eyes captured by sapphires. McCall couldn't see how Vincent's heart was racing as he prayed that Robert could accept his plan. "Under what terms?" McCall carefully asked.

Vincent forged ahead. "My freedom?" he bluntly stated.

McCall was not that surprised. "In exchange for...."

"My word of honor that I will not try to escape from you while in your custody."

"And if I should accompany you when the scientists transport you to their laboratory? What then?"

"Even then," Vincent firmly answered.

McCall glanced at the board, made his next move, and replied, "I cannot accept your offer, Vincent. I am sorry."

Vincent did not try to conceal his anguish at Robert's words. After a moment though, he reached through the bars and moved a pawn.

"Vincent, it is not that I doubt your word of honor.... But you are honor-bound to try to escape. Not for yourself, but for the sake of those who love you. I get the impression that you are a vital part of their lives."

Vincent stared mutely at McCall, his hope fading as despair filled his soul. Below, Catherine stiffened, and cried out. " *VINCENT! NO!*"

A noise from outside the front doors diverted McCall's attention. He whirled around, drawing his gun, worried that it was an intruder. From beyond the door, Mickey yelled, "McCall, the white coats are here. Come and help me with their stuff. I'm not going to sign all this paperwork."

McCall looked at Vincent, replacing his rook on the board. Time had expired. Robert made his decision, tossing his key ring onto Vincent's lap. He pointed towards the back.

"There's an exit there leading into an alley. Hide until I come for you - I drive a black Jaguar. 'Go', Vincent!"

Vincent unlocked his leg shackles and then the door. Robert did the only thing that he could think of to stall Mickey and company - he slumped to the floor and started to moan.

" *'MC-CALL!'*" a scared Mickey yelled. " *'Answer'* me!" Moments later, Mickey cautiously rushed into the room, to kneel beside Robert. "Are you all right?"

McCall moaned again, this time attempting to respond to Mickey's pleading. Mickey tried to help McCall up. McCall was doing everything covertly within his power not to aid Mickey. And then, three clones of Stock ran into the area, their weapons drawn.

"Where's your prisoner?" one of them shouted.

McCall weakly pointed towards the front door. "That way.... minutes ago, I think."

Mickey glanced over towards the cell and noticed the chess game. He stood and ordered loudly, "Out the front, guys! Let's go catch that thing that goes *'roar'* in the night...."

The moment they left the room, McCall knew that he had little time to act. He immediately went into the commander's anteroom and stopped the video tape machine. The Company had a policy of monitoring such safe houses. McCall had even changed the tape in the wee hours earlier. McCall removed the tape in the machine with a cassette that he deliberately jammed. And then he dumped a cup of left-over coffee onto another tape, removing its label. He placed Vincent's two tapes inside the remnants of his ruined cashmere overcoat, hoping that no one would think it strange that he would remove the coat, when all this was over.

Going back into the main room, it was then that McCall noticed it---a small leather pouch lying on the floor beside the cot in the cell. McCall picked up the pouch and placed it inside his breast pocket.

Almost thirty minutes later, Mickey Kostmayer stood beside sleek black Jaguar, wondering if McCall was still acting crazy because of a blow to the head. Now, McCall was standing in a New York City alley, alone in the dark, calling for a kitty-cat.

"Here, kitty, kitty," Mickey whispered.

"Vincent?" McCall shouted, trying not to arouse anyone's suspicions.

Stories above him, Vincent watched the man pace the alley. In a few more minutes the last rays of the sun would fade into the dark of the night, and it would be safe for him to travel the rooftops until

he could reach a familiar entrance for home. Vincent wanted to respond to McCall's voice, but the presence of Kostmayer caused him to hold his tongue. Vincent barely trusted McCall. But he had little reason to trust Kostmayer.

"*'VINCENT!'*" McCall yelled out again, in frustration. "*'DAMMIT!'* I hope that you are safe!" He shook his head as suddenly the pain and the exhaustion of the day washed over him. "I'm not the man I used to be." He grumbled to himself. He walked back to the alley's entrance. "*'DAMMIT, VINCENT, YOU OWE ME A CHESS GAME!'*" was his parting bellow, as he ignored Mickey's incredulous look, and got inside of his car.

"We shall play chess again, Robert McCall! Someday!" Vincent promised the wind. He became one with the night, once more....

Below 'neath the sidewalks of New York, Catherine spilled the glass of brandy that Father had just given to her. She froze for a countless moment, and then she smiled - a beatific smile that filled the room with joy.

Father slumped into his chair, weak with relief. "Vincent's coming home," he said out loud, as if anyone needed the words. The look on Catherine's face was reason enough to know.

Father looked at Catherine. What his son shared with this woman frightened him at times. Somehow this bond between them was becoming stronger - and tighter. Father prayed that it would never break.

Mouse danced about the chamber, chanting the good news. Twenty minutes later the same message was repeated on the pipes.

Catherine, in the meantime, slipped away to Vincent's chamber. She was too overwrought to see him again within the tumult of a crowd. When he was ready, he would come to her, alone."

With an almost sheepish air of apology about him, Vincent entered his father's chamber, thanking all of those who had worried about him for their concern. Swiftly, the people of the tunnels departed, not really wanting to be around for what would come after Father had welcomed home and hugged his son. Father didn't lose his temper often - but when he did, it was fierce. After hugging Vincent for a long, long time, Father pushed him into his chair.

"Well, I suppose that you are a little too large to be punished for your foolishness.""

"What foolishness, Father?" Vincent asked, as humbly as he could.

"Ummm, La Chapelle '61 is what I believe Catherine mentioned at some point, during this taxing, wearisome, long day." Father's mild manner did not disguise the steel in his voice.

"Father, it was not Catherine's fault..."

"Of *'course'* not. *'You'* were the one who drank the wine - the whole bottle I was given to believe."

"Not quite, Father."

"Be that as it may, where did you hide Above? What happened? Are you all right?"

"Father, I am fine. I believe that I've met a new Helper, too. I will tell you the story, later. Right now...." Vincent looked about the chamber expecting to see Catherine at any moment. He knew she was Below.

Father sternly spoke, "Vincent, *'still'*, you *'must be punished!'*"

Vincent looked in surprise at his father. The man's voice was filled with anger and pain, yet there was a twinkle in his eyes. "What, Father?"

"I said, that you must be punished. *'Go to your room, Vincent!'*"

Puzzled, Vincent left Father, wishing he could go in search of Catherine, but not wanting to disobey

his father. And then, he knew. He stuck his head back inside Father's doorway. "I do duly chastened, Father!" he said with the identical serious tone of voice that Father had used.

"Children!" Father commented in disgust, after him. And then he smiled, before he sighed over the mopping up of his precious spilt brandy.

And then he was there, filling the doorway, filling her life, filling her heart. Catherine ran to him, to be engulfed within the universe of his arms. For an infinite moment they stood there, not thinking, just feeling.

Faint scents of spice and sandalwood tinged with traces of musk and leather blended with the smell of roses and Catherine's special scent. The warmth of his breath fanned across the velvet of her cheek. The silk of her hair entwined with the locks of his mane. The touch of gentian blue cashmere as he slipped his fingers gently over her arms before he rested them on her shoulders. The whisper of her lips as they crossed over his left hand before she nuzzled into his breast. These were but some of the little details of the moment that would be engraved in the memories of the hearts. An embrace that could last forever....

Reluctantly, they broke from the other. Catherine reached up and carefully touched the back of his neck, where she knew he had been hit.

"You've been hurt," she sadly whispered. "And I am responsible."

"No, Catherine. You are not responsible. And I shall be fine. I was most fortunate that I encountered a friend last night."

Catherine had many more questions, but she saw the weariness in his eyes, so she led him to his bed, tightly holding his hand as if to reassure herself that he really was there.

"Sit and rest, Vincent. I'll see to your injuries."

"Yes, Catherine," he meekly replied. Too meekly to suit Catherine. She immediately became suspicious.

"If you do not behave, Vincent, I will tell Father."

Vincent laughed out loud. "A most effective threat, Catherine," he teased. "I tremble in fear at the thought of further punishment from Father. That man can be a terror when aroused. Already he has punished me by '*sending*' me to my '*room*', er, chamber."

Catherine started to weakly laugh as the realization of Father's '*punishment*' sank in. Taking advantage of this, Vincent pulled her into his lap. Catherine gasped at this, before she said, "My father, when I was a little girl, used to send me to my room too. Only then, all I had to play with were lots and lots of toys." She gently threaded her fingers through his mane, revealing to her sight for the first time, the shell-like formation of his ear. She leaned closer to him and whispered, "Only now, we can play with each other. It's not exactly a punishment, is it?"

It was Vincent who gulped, then said, "Chess?" Catherine shook her head.

She gazed into the sea of his eyes and felt all control slipping past her desires. Perhaps this could be blamed on their mutual exhaustion and the circumstances. But Catherine needed more from Vincent tonight than a warm hug. And maybe, in his heart, Vincent concurred.

"I thought that I had lost you," Catherine whispered, all playfulness gone from her voice. "If you had died, I would have died as well. You are my life, Vincent. You are my heart."

His eyes held the green fire of hers, lost in the promise that they showed. Slowly he moved towards her, as wonder filled his being - he realized that this was what she wanted and what she needed - his lips pressing against her lips, softness against softness.

"Vincent, you're back!" A high-pitched voice cried out from the door.

"Kipper." Vincent said the child's name almost as if it were an invective. Catherine stared at the interloper. "What is it?" Vincent too-politely asked, trying not to let his dismay at the interruption show.

"Mary sent me. She wishes to know if you'd like something to eat. Nobody else has, you know," he confided. "We've all been worried."

Vincent turned to look at Catherine again. "Did my actions truly cause such overwhelming concern amongst all of you? Surely, you of all people knew that I was alive?"

"Our bond told me that you still lived. And I knew your fer, your pain, and your despair. At one point I even knew that you were smiling about something. But I did not know that you were all right. I sensed your grief *'and'* anger. What *'did'* happen, Vincent?"

Vincent turned to look at Kipper. He instructed, "Tell Mary that I shall be in the commune room shortly. And thank her for her consideration." After Kipper had left, Vincent studied Catherine.

"I was lost for a while, Catherine. And, I shall tell *'you'* the truth. I shall tell Father the abridged version. It is better that way. Much safer for all concerned."

Fearfully, she asked. "What on earth *'did'* happen?"

"I was lost.... and then a nun and a good man found me. He led me back to you. For that, I owe him.... and unrepayable debt."

"A *'nun'*?"

"It *'truly is'* a very long story, Catherine. And, I *'am'* hungry." He stood, scooting her out of his lap. "Come. The sooner we dine, the sooner...." He left his desires unvoiced.

"Oh, my Lord! You *'were'* in danger." Her heart constricted with the guilt.

"The fault is mine, Catherine," he gently said. "I should have gone home after I'd left you. But I did not. Instead, I felt a restlessness---I had to wander about, visiting my favorite haunts. I know that this was foolish. But if I had not gone, two people would have died last night...."

Mickey politely inquired of his driver. "Think we should be stoppin' here, McCall?" It took McCall four attempts to parallel park in front of Pete O'Phelan's. "To pass your license, you've gotta do it in three," Mickey unwisely commented.

"Mickey, you may report me to the state licensing bureau, if you wish. However, you are *'not'* my keeper. And never have been."

"Okay, McCall, okay. In that case, you can be *'mine'* tonight. You *'owe'* it to me." He got out of the car.

McCall voiced no reply as he walked inside of his restaurant. He settled into his favorite table in front of the fireplace, and the barman brought over a bottle of scotch and a pot of coffee.

Saying nothing, Mickey pointedly stared at McCall.

"Coffee," Robert sighed, as he poured himself a cup. "It'd better be decaf." He looked at Mickey. "Satisfied?"

"You're the guy that got the painkillers from the Doc, McCall. Not me." Mickey poured himself a cup of java. "It's decaf," he announced. "Yuck." He took another sip. "You wanna tell me why do I get the feeling that I was the *'pin'* piece in last night's little chess game, McCall?"

"Been reading *'CHESS MAGAZINE'* again, have we?" McCall snidely asked.

Mickey glared at him. "McCall, just supposin', for the sake of argument, that *'kitty-cat'* of yours *'could'* talk. What did you call him - Vincent?"

"What beast, Mickey? Didn't you hear our beloved leader, only hours ago describe the being as an

'escaped prisoner'?"

"Yeah, right. You and I both know that Control would find himself approving passport applications in Peoria if he told the truth, without any proof." Mickey drank his coffee. "You know, McCall, I've been thinking."

"A very dangerous pastime, Mickey."

Kostmayer ignored this. "Funny how the surveillance camera jammed."

"Yes, real *'funny'*," an acerbic voice floated from behind the men. "What is even more peculiar is how both tapes from that shift are worthless."

There was a pregnant moment of silence as McCall innocently drank his coffee, avoiding Control's stare. Mickey quickly spoke up, saying. "I guess I was too groggy to function this morning - and McCall was pretty out of it after getting all those stitches in his shoulder."

Control continued to stare at McCall. "The good sister asked about her *'yeti'*, McCall. She's safe, by the way, and will testify in the morning. For some reason, she seems to think that she ought to keep you in her prayers."

McCall continued to ignore Control. "Time for me to go, Mickey." He nodded. "Control.... Errors in judgment will happen.... Goodnight."

Control called after the retreating McCall. "McCall!"

"Yes, Control?" McCall wearily asked, bracing himself for a reprimand.

"Go to the doctor in the morning," was all Control said.

McCall nodded, accepting Control's tacit agreement of his earlier behavior. "I owe you, Control," he softly stated.

"I know," Control answered, smiling slightly.

After labelling two video tapes '*CALLAN*' and '*THE WICKER MAN*,' McCall hid them amidst the tapes in his library. Then he sat down to open up the hand-sewn sumoniere that Vincent had dropped. Carefully he removed the treasure within - a finely carved antique ivory rose. Offhand, he guessed that the piece was mid-nineteenth century Chinese. He knew one other fact about the rose - he had seen it before... Somewhere. He put the rose back in the pouch, and wondered.

Cathy leaned over and teased, "Relax, Joe. It *'will'* get better, if you only give it a chance." Joe groaned, and pretended to listen intently.

"Les oiseaux dans la charmille....," Joan Sutherland sang.

A few rows over, the quick dart of light brilliant captured the notice of another listener, as he tried to concentrate on the delicately trilled notes of his bel canto soprano. It took this man a few moments to realize that the gleam came from diamond earrings, belonging to a lady who played with her hair. Then Robert McCall began to relax in his seat, paying the proper attention to the '*Olympia*' on the stage.

Robert did not see that his companion had noticed his momentary abstraction. When this act to '*Les Contes d'Hoffmann*' by Offenbach was over, Linda Wilhite whispered into Robert's ear, "I'll introduce her to you if you wish. I've worked with her before. She's with the DA's office as an investigator. Her boss is sitting next to her."

Robert abruptly withdrew from his mullings when he heard Linda's remarks.

"Was I lost for a moment, Linda?" he politely asked.

Linda gave him a carefully controlled smile. "Yes, you were, Robert. I do believe that you have not

even noticed that this set is finished."

Robert smiled guiltily. "I *'am'* sorry, Linda. It is only that when I happened to see Ms. Chandler, I remembered some details about an incident which I need to discuss with her."

"Ms. Chandler's been a *'client'* of yours?" She flicked a strand of long blond hair.

"Not exactly - she's a friend. I've known her for years." The way that Robert said this did not please Linda. She rose from her seat.

"I see," she replied, the picture of polite acceptance.

"Would you care for a drink during the intermission, Linda?"

"Thank you, Robert, but no. I am going to go and powder my nose."

Robert politely stood as Linda exited. He sensed that he had made a tactical error on what could be described as his first official *'date'* with the young widow, who had most recently been his client during a murderous *'game'* of chess.

And then Cathy stepped over to him. "Lovely," she commented, admiring the vintage evening suit that Linda was wearing. "That dramatic a style certainly suits her." McCall fondly gazed at the speaker before he placed a light kiss on her cheek.

"Cathy, you are most becoming tonight," he observed, admiring her ruby silk chemise. But then, Cathy always looked beautiful to Robert.

She leaned up to return the kiss to his cheek. "So are you, Robert - in all ways." Robert tried not to blush as they shared a mutual moment of remembrance. "I did not know that you were seeing Linda Wilhite. She is considered to be a formidable adversary in court."

"Yes, I've heard some of the lady's nicknames. In fact, I believe that some of those names have been used to describe *'you'* as well."

Cathy accepted this as a compliment. "What do you want me to tell her about us?"

Robert's glance was momentarily stolen by the diamond hoops she was wearing. And then he said, "I have already enlightened the lady as to the state of our relationship. That should be sufficient."

Cathy eyed him skeptically. "Robert, sometimes a lady needs a little but more than that. You still do have a lot to learn about women...."

"If she has further doubts, I shall debate the questions."

Cathy laughed. "Only you would consider a good argument as the way to win one's soul.... or one's bed, Robert."

Robert glared sternly at her. He decided to change the subject. "Is the gentleman with you, the love of your lie?"

For a brief instant, pain crossed Cathy's face as she grasped for an answer. Reluctantly, she said. "No, he is not. Joe Maxwell is a good friend - and my boss. Tonight is very first opera. I don't think that he is enjoying it too much."

"At least he's being polite about it...." He studied Cathy's face, wondering about the strain he saw there in her countenance. "Are you truly happy, my dear?"

The glow in her eyes gave him his answer before she said, "Yes, Robert---I am."

From behind then a baritone voice amusedly said, "When am I going to meet this *'paragon'* of yours, Radcliffe? For a while, I thought it was this guy. Guess I was wrong, huh, McCall?" The men shook hands.

Cathy tried teasing to divert Robert's interest. "What *'paragon,'* Joe? How do you know we weren't talking about you behind your back?"

Only Robert realized the extent of her determination to protect her mystery man.

"Belle nuit, o nuit d'armour...."

Catherine closed her eyes, listening to the gloriously sensual duet from this act of *'The Tales of Hoffmann.'* The *'Barcarolle'* was justifiably one of the most beautiful and evocative duets ever composed.

In Catherine's mind's eye, she was envisioning Vincent punting through the mysterious lakes and waterways of Below. They would be alone, far from the plywood canals of this staged scene of Venice. Vincent would be captured by the music, and draw her into his arms, enjoining her to sing, 'Lovely night, O night divine, O night that is made for lovers..' Perhaps their lips would ever meet.... Catherine dreamily sighed up at her invisible lover.... and then realized that it was Joe Maxwell who was holding her hand.

"You know, I could grow to like opera, Radcliffe," he commented.

Vincent put down the book that he had been studying. A serious analysis of the myth of Orpheus was supposed to be tomorrow's lesson plan. But he lost his train of thought to the sensations emanating from Catherine's soul. Vincent strained into the darkness of his chamber to catch every moment. His soul was starved for each note that Catherine would hear. Her feelings flooded his heart, filled with unbidden yet forbidden longings that flared in her soul.... His eyes fell upon a poem that he'd been reading earlier;

*"Like a highborn maiden in a palace tower,
Soothing; her love-laden soul in secret hour,
With music sweet as love,
Which overflows her bower'...."*

"Vincent...." Father called, entering his chamber, placing his hand on his son's shoulder.

Vincent abruptly stirred. "I was merely meditating, Father...."

"In that case, Vincent, why don't you *'meditate'* under the covers?"

"In a while, Father. I was attempting to prepare the older students' lecture for the morrow, in mythology."

Father picked up *'Bullfinch's Mythology.'* "Orpheus and Eurydice? Which of the versions did you pick? The one where Orpheus foolishly disobeys the gods' commands, and loses Eurydice forever to Hades?"

"I've always thought that Eurydice might not have wished to be rescued, Father. Perhaps her heart lay Below."

Father recognized Vincent's oblique reference to Catherine. "Eurydice belonged Above. I prefer the version where Orpheus is given another chance."

"It will be the lady who'll make the choice, Father."

Father was silent, trying to find the words to advise his son. "Sometimes Vincent, it is not the rescue of the lady that is the difficulty. It is the recognition of what is Heaven or Hell, Above or Below, that is the greatest test."

"Father....," Vincent sighed.

"My son, that is a question that the philosophers or fools, have pondered for centuries. Everyone

makes their won decision."

Father bent down and kissed the top of Vincent's head. "Goodnight, my boy. *'O sleep! O gentle sleep! Nature's soft nurse, how have I fringed thee, that thou no more wilt weigh mine eyelids down'....*"

"*'And steep my senses into forgetfulness?'*" Vincent answered.

Father walked slowly over to the chamber door. "You must be very careful, my son, as to the direction of your thoughts. There are some things that *'should never be'*."

"Goodnight, Father," was Vincent's response.

Father offered up a silent prayer that he was guiding his son towards the correct path, as he stiffly walked away from Vincent.

There was a portion of Vincent's heart that resented Father's continuous reminders about the impossibility of his relationship with Catherine. He could acknowledge the wisdom of Father's advice in his mind. But in his dreams, his heart cried out for more than a carefully controlled existence filled with responsibilities.

Vincent rested his eyes again as he tried to recapture Catherine's thoughts.... there were only fragments.

"Scintille, diamant...."

And then there was the recognition of a presence that Vincent had almost forgotten....

Robert's quiet moodiness survived the end of the opera, and lasted as he drove Linda home.

"You do take your work quite seriously, don't you, Robert?" She archly added, "It *'is'* work about which you've been thinking all night, isn't it? And not that the tenor that we heard was never born to play the role of *'Hoffmann'*?"

Robert studied Linda as he brought his car to a stop at her address. "Yes, the tenor was strident, not to mention flat. He seemed far more in love with himself than with any of his ladies. And in answer to your unasked question, I have been a beastly bore all evening...." Robert's voice trailed off as an impossible thought crossed his mind. He quickly recovered with, "And yes, I am trying to solve a puzzle, and I believe that Ms. Chandler is the clue to its resolution."

"And is she my competition?"

Robert was stunned with this question.

"I.... not intentionally, Linda. Not that it matters, but I have reason to believe that the lady is in love with someone else...."

Linda accepted his words. She waited until after he had escorted her from the car before she said, "I've learned to be very careful, Robert, about the people with whom I entrust my heart. If you would be interested, would you care to come for dinner Friday night, schedule permitting?"

McCall choked out. "Really?"

"Some women have been emancipated for a while, Robert. I don't have to be the center of your attention," she teased, surprising McCall with her lightheartedness. "I know the importance of your mission, Robert." She added in a more serious tone of voice. "Will you come?"

"Yes, of course."

She leaned up and kissed him before whispering her goodbyes.

Quite pleased with the events of the evening, Robert drove off after escorting Linda to her apartment. Then his thoughts returned to Catherine, and the name she cried out into the darkness, years ago.... His mind began to choose a path of illogical jumps to conclusion. It was impossible.

Though Vincent would be loathe to admit it to anyone other than his nearest and dearest, the moments that he spent in expectation, on Catherine's balcony, tending her ever-increasing collection of plants, were some of his most special times Above. Besides doing whatever little thing he could to ease Catherine's responsibilities in life, even if it were only something as simple as plucking off dead leaves from a bush, he loved gardening. He found himself so engrossed with her burgeoning floribunda, that it was not until Catherine actually set foot in her building that he noticed that she was returning home.... to him. He could feel the joy in her heart soar into his as she knew that he was waiting for her.

"Catherine....," he whispered, standing by her French doors. She came to him, full of life, full of gladness, and above all, full of love for him.

"Vincent," she cried out, running into his arms.

"You enjoyed the night?" Vincent inquired.

"Oh yes. I tried to share it with you. Did you know?"

"Yes, I did. I gather that Dame Joan Sutherland outshone herself as Olympia and Antonia. I felt your tears when she dies, torn between her love of her father and for Hoffmann."

Catherine nodded into his shoulder, fully appreciating her current position.

"And you met with friends afterwards?" Vincent continued probing.

"Yes.... Joe and some others."

"You drank some wine," Vincent added.

"Please don't tell Father! Promise me?" she dramatically pleaded. "Father handed me some Temperance pamphlets the last time I was Below."

"Consider yourself spared, Catherine."

"Really, oh Vincent, patron saint to vintners?"

"I was forced to endure Father's rendition of *'The Face on the Bar Room Floor,'* performed in front of the Council, in my honor."

"I've heard Father sing," Catherine dryly commented. "It seems I was more fortunate." They simultaneously broke into soft laughter as she hugged him even more.

She then led him to her chaise lounge. They sat, with Catherine cuddling next to him. She drew a portion of his cloak about her shoulders, slipping her fingers partially beneath his vest. "To stave off the night air," she explained.

Vincent understood. "Belle nuit..." he whispered, pulling the cloak about them. For a long time, they clung to each other, neither saying a word, only treasuring this moment. Finally, Vincent stirred and whispered into the night. "*To Mercy, Pity, Peace and Love all pray in their distress....*"

"Blake?" Vincent nodded into her hair, not wanting to look at her. She placed her hand upon the warmth of his cheek. "Vincent, what troubles you? I've felt something...."

Vincent looked at her, his eyes begging for absolution. He confessed, "Catherine, there is something that I must tell you...."

"I know. Your discontent had made itself known to me."

"Can you find it in your heart to forgive a great transgression?"

In exasperation, she said, "Lord, Vincent, what is it?"

He hesitated again. "Wilt thou forgive that sin?"

"John Donne?" she gasped. "What is it?" Suddenly, she was frightened. "Did the Council decide

something about me? Am I to be punished for what I did to you? Or, did I do something I shouldn't have....?"

"No, Catherine. They know that the fault was mine. It is what 'I' did." He bowed his head. "I have lost your rose."

Catherine tried to control her fears as she realized what it was that troubled Vincent - her anger. "When you were lost Above?"

"Yes.... Somehow, it became undone...."

"Thank heaven!" she cried emphatically.

Vincent was shocked. "What? Catherine, it was your mother's rose!"

"You survived, Vincent! You are far more important than an ivory rose, any day, you silly!" Relief colored her voice.

Vincent had never been referred to as a '*silly*,' before. He rather liked hearing it from Catherine's lips.

"I will give you another talisman, Vincent, even if I have to carve you a rose myself. What matters is that '*you*' are safe...." She kissed his cheek.

He embraced her, gratitude filling his heart at her understanding.

A long time later they were leaning against each other, counting the stars. "Vincent," Catherine asked, carefully choosing her words. "What really did happen when you were lost Above? You've told Father even less than me. Father actually politely quizzed me the last time I was Below...."

"How does one tell Father that for a brief moment one reverted to the childish follies of youth? And this time, I got caught?" He felt her shocked puzzlement at his words. "I went what Devin used to call '*roof-hopping*'."

"Even in absentia, I know that Father would definitely not like the sound of that," she knowingly commented.

"I '*hopped*' one roof too far, and encountered good versus evil. I helped '*good*' win, but almost sacrificed myself in doing so. I cannot regret my actions towards the lives I saved. But I do apologize for the grief I caused you and Father."

"And you'd really prefer that Father forget all about this incident because he does worry too much about you?"

"And us...." Vincent softly added.

There was a loud pounding on her apartment door. For a moment, Catherine had thought that it was in her head. Vincent had left barely four hours earlier after whispering his farewells. Since no one had buzzed, Catherine assumed that the noise maker was a denizen of her Underworld with a message. She grabbed her robe, then flung open her front door, expecting to see some bright-eyed child who liked getting up at dawn. Instead, she found herself facing a forcefully cheerful Robert McCall.

"Robert?" she groaned, not moving from her doorstep. "What '*are*' you doing here?" She tightened the belt about her robe. "And, why?"

Robert waved a paper bag by her face. "Breakfast," he replied, smoothly stepping around her to enter the living room. He breathed deeply, always liking the faint scent of roses that was Catherine's perfume.

"Robert....," she warned, making a fist and shaking it mockingly.

"Late night with Mr. Maxwell, I see," Robert dryly commented. "Go and get dressed while I fix

breakfast. We have something to discuss."

"I *like* Linda," she said, taking a stab at a topic for conversation.

Robert slightly smiled. "I do, too. However, this is *'business'*."

"Oh." Catherine went into her bedroom, quickly changing into a beige skirt and silk blouse. She'd finished dressing after she kicked Robert out. Ten minutes later she entered her dining room to find the table set with fresh croissants, fruit, jam made by monks from an abbey in New Hampshire, and steaming oatmeal. "I never eat this much, Robert," she called towards the kitchen.

"But, I do." The answer came from her balcony. She turned around to look at Robert through the open doors, standing by her rose bush. "May I?" he asked, pointing towards a bud. She nodded and watched him snip it off. He then entered her dining room.

"What is going on, Robert?"

He glanced down at the rosebud that he held in his hand, and then gave it to Cathy. "Would you do the honors, please?"

She picked up the rose and neatly tucked it into his lapel. Still clutching his suit coat, she threatened. "Talk!"

Robert smiled more broadly now. "First, the bribe.... two tickets to see *'Norma.'* Sutherland and Horne, reuniting for an encore of their greatest triumph. I first saw them in 1969...."

She threatened to rumple his lapels. He stopped his reminiscing.

"All right, Cathy. Let's have breakfast, and I will explain everything to your satisfaction."

"*'That'* would be a first," she galumphed.

"Kipper....," Vincent warned. "Rubber glue is *'not'* used on hair - *'especially'* Samantha's hair."

Samantha suddenly squealed, realizing that Kipper had been trying to dip her braid into a pot of it. She turned around and socked him. Kipper tried to kick back, and missed. He got Eric instead, who fearlessly began to pommel Kipper on his back. It took but a few seconds to turn Vincent's ordinarily peaceful poetry class into a free-for-all.

"*'Chil-dren!'*" Vincent first growled. And then he roared it - to no avail. The only attention that he caught with his yelling was Father's. Standing in the doorway, Father was trying to conceal his laughter at the scene from Vincent.

Vincent ignored Father for a moment, deciding that Kipper had had enough punishment, and went to rescue the lad, carefully removing the still-swinging Eric from the boy's back. "*'ENOUGH!'*" he roared again. But this was too little, too late. An unidentified child's foot swung across Kipper's desk area and accidentally knocked the bottle of rubber glue directly into Vincent's chest. It had been a freshly opened bottle, and still was quite viscous. It spread everywhere over his leather vest - and the ends of his mane. This time, Vincent just roared. The reverberations rattled his stained glass. And the children stopped.

They looked at Vincent, scared of his anger, pleading silently with Father to save them from Vincent's wrath. Father hid his laughter behind several undignified snorts. He limped over to Vincent, eyeing the dripping ends of his son's red-gold hair. "I presume that the lesson is finished for the day. I am sure that William can find some chore for each and every one of you in the kitchen," Father sternly announced to the class.

"That will be *'after'* their lesson is finished, Father," Vincent resolutely stated. "Now, we shall put aside our study of *'The Bells'* by Edgar Allen Poe." He eyed every single one of the transgressors now quietly seated before him behind their lap desks. "I am sure that we *'all'* would prefer to study *'Be-o-wulf.'* Kipper, go and get the texts." The children groaned, as Kipper retreated, searching for

books.

Father took Vincent aside, whispering. "Reminds me of the days when I had to teach this class - with you, Devin and Harry as pupils. I will leave you to your '*Beowulf*.' I know how much you enjoyed studying that epic as a student. I am sure that you will engender similar feelings in the hearts of these children." Father patted his son's chest, and then started to wipe the sticky stuff off of his hand. "After you are done punishing them, Vincent, I believe that Mary has some solvent for this...." He waved his hand about, "stuff. At least, it wasn't tar this time. I remembered what we had to do to your hair after Devin was done with you...."

"Thank you, Father, for reminding me of that indignity as well."

"All in the day of the life of a teacher, my son." Father restrained his laughter until he reached the corridor outside Vincent's chamber.

Vincent sighed, knowing that if ever these children were to acquire an appreciation of '*Beowulf*,' then now was not the time for him to teach it. Vincent motioned for Kipper to be seated. "Not that you deserve this, but I have decided to read aloud, instead."

"We're sorry, Vincent," the children chorused.

Vincent started to recite, "The wind was a torrent of darkness among the gusty trees. The moon was a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas...."

Cathy laughed again as she finished off her coffee. "Robert, I really do have to get to work. Joe is a slave driver in spite of his mild-mannered appearance." She put down her cup. "Now, why did you really come to see me this morning? I am sure that it was not because of a sudden desire for my company."

"Please use those tickets, Cathy - and bring along that special man in your life.... perhaps even the '*paragon*'?"

She stiffened, trying to control her emotions. "I don't know...."

"Surely, whomsoever it is that you are seeing, is an opera aficionado. Or, at least cares enough for you to attend the performance with you."

Catherine fought the sense of panic that was rising at Robert's tenacity. Robert saw glimpses of regret and fear flash over Cathy's face. Only now, he knew what was behind her emotions, so he backed off.

"The real reason I came this morning is because of Shannon Wayne."

"Isn't she a fourth-rate confidence agent?"

"Something like that, Cathy. One could hardly call her a con '*artist*,' since she isn't good enough for that appellation. Anyway, I am currently handling a situation that could use the dubious talents of Ms. Wayne. Unfortunately, your boss is currently holding her as a material witness, so I need your assistance...."

They discussed what Cathy could do until she glanced at her mantel clock and said, "Oh now, I'll be late for work. Scoot, Robert. I'll call you later."

"Of course. Goodbye, Cathy." Robert left, not paying any attention to his white silk scarf that he was leaving behind on her couch. Robert was smiling when he stepped into the elevator. He reached inside of his coat pocket and touched it - the strands of reddish-gold silk that he had discovered tangled up in some thorns on Cathy's terrace. It would only take a few minutes with a microscope to compare it to the strands of hair from the warehouse - a few moments to confirm what he already knew to be the truth in his heart.

Cathy finished getting dressed, still unsettled by Robert's insistence about the opera tickets. Cathy

knew Robert well enough to know that his words had not been spoken casually. There had been an ulterior motive behind his presence at breakfast. For what he needed to know about Shannon Wayne, all he had to have done was to pick up the phone.... Cathy refused to speculate now about his behavior. She didn't have the time.

The early autumn night was nippy, as Robert shuddered from the cold, before he poured himself another cup of coffee from his thermos. Robert wished that there was some other way to find Vincent, but he knew that if he openly confronted Cathy about the man, she would deny everything. Robert did not doubt Cathy's loyalty to this man/beast. So Robert peered through the powerful lens mounted by the side window of his surveillance van, regretting the necessity of having to spy on Cathy.

From the outside, the van appeared to be just another illegally parked vehicle by the park. The cop on the beat knew better. He recognized a professional surveillance set-up when he saw one---- especially when the van had untraceable government license plates. Besides, he knew the man that was sitting inside of it tonight....

Robert shuddered one more time, giving into the need for warmth, and turned on the motor. He wondered if he was on a fool's errand. But, Vincent's hair had been on the balcony, and Robert had noticed no trace of him inside the apartment, so he spied on the balcony. Robert also kept remembering Vincent in chains, talking about a special place in *'their'* world.... The balcony had to be it.

Catherine mindlessly watched the news on television, but her thoughts kept straying back to Robert. Perhaps Robert was insecure about dating Linda and wanted her approval? Catherine immediately dismissed that idea.... and then she heard a gentle tapping at her terrace door.

"Vincent," she cried with a gladdened heart. She picked up an Afghan, draping it about her ice blue silk pajamas, and stepped out onto the terrace.

"Catherine," Vincent whispered, holding her briefly, "what troubles you so? I felt it."

She pulled him into a tighter embrace. "Nothing of consequence, Vincent. I am so glad that you are here. I was thinking about you all evening." She released him, admiring the graceful way he sat down on her chaise. "Tell me about your day. I can sense that you had some difficulties too.": She began to light all of the hurricane candlesticks along the ledge and the table, a tradition now, whenever Vincent appeared.

Vincent ruefully said, "I fought a small war with Kipper today. Kipper won. And Father witnessed all of it." Catherine blew out her taper before she extended her hand to Vincent. He clasped it, and then stopped telling his story. "Catherine, you are chilled. Please put on some warmer clothes."

"Yes, *'Father'*," she teased. "I don't suppose you'd...." she glanced longingly towards the loveseat in her living room. Vincent shook his head. A moment later she came back wearing her pumpkin colored coat and velvet slippers. She twirled about in front of him. "Not the most glamorous outfit I own, but it *'is'* warm."

"Come, sit beside me, Catherine. After Kipper, I started playing a game of chess with Father. He thinks that he has forced a zugzwang (*any legal chess move will worsen their position*) upon me."

"Poor Father, I hope that you do not intend to disillusion him."

"I am afraid that I must. Father's pride would never permit me to deliberately lose a game."

"I know...." She slipped her fingers underneath his cloak, seeking his warmth. Instead, on some of the lacings she found residue of something sticky. She wondered what had really happened with Kipper....

The moment Robert saw the candles being lit, he knew. Waving to Kellach, he crossed the lobby, visibly holding a key. Kellach nodded a greeting, glad that Robert McCall was back in Ms. Chandler's life.

Minutes later, Robert picked Cathy's locks. Silently he entered the dimly lit apartment. Low voices droned from an unheeded television, masking whatever slight noises he might have made, as he moved into the center of her room.

Vincent held Catherine close, her nearness lulling him into security, forgetting his ordinarily cautious behavior when Above. Vincent looked out into the cityscape, only seeing the stars because Catherine was in his arms.

Robert reached over and shut the television off. It took a moment for the lack of noise to register in Catherine. A silent scream filled her throat as she thrust herself from Vincent, standing before him, trying to use her body to block her lover from the sight of the intruder.

"*'GO, VINCENT, RUN!'*" she screamed, taking a step closer to her doors.

Instead, Vincent looked with his superior night vision, into the darkened room, growling out a loud warning to the unknown. And then he sensed that there was something about this intruder that was familiar.

Catherine bravely stepped into her living room praying that Vincent could not be seen in the shadows. Robert reached over and turned on a lamp, lifting up his silk scarf that he had deliberately forgotten that morning.

"Sorry to disturb you, Cathy," he casually said.

"Robert!" she gasped, for the first time frightened in her soul of this man.

Robert took a step closer to her, looking out onto the balcony. "Hello, Vincent. Have you recovered from any ill-effects after your meeting with Mickey?" Nonchalantly he spoke, as if his words were a commonplace occurrence for them all.

"What?" she gasped, turning around to see Vincent enter her living room. She could see that Vincent was not upset by Robert's intrusion - surprised, yes. But not upset. Catherine began to feel as if she had stepped through the looking glass once too often.

"You *'know'* each other?" her voice broke. She looked at Vincent, hoping that he would dispel her confusion. "You *'know'* Robert?" Her voice shook with the disbelief that he could have kept something of this importance from her.

Vincent stood in front of Robert, shaking his hand. "I have recovered. How is your shoulder, Robert?"

"I'm fine, Vincent. Everything is healing nicely."

Catherine sank onto the cushion of her down-filled loveseat, and covered her face with her hands. Now she wondered just exactly what kind of mushroom had been on the pizza that she had eaten for dinner. She knew that she was hallucinating. She *'had'* to be. It was the only explanation.

Vincent noticed Catherine's distress. He sat down next to her, clasping her hand. "Catherine, Robert McCall is my friend."

Vincent watched as Robert walked over to a cabinet, opened a door, removed a decanter, and poured the amber liquid into a snifter. Robert positioned himself opposite Cathy, and handed her the glass. "It's brandy," he calmly stated. She drained the amber fire, placing the Baccarat carefully onto the sofa table. She then stood, gazing icily down at Robert McCall.

"Robert?" she too-casually asked.

"Yes, Cathy?"

She slapped him. "How *'dare'* you break into my apartment! *'YOU HAD NO RIGHT!'*"

Vincent's claws curled into a fist of warning in case Robert was thinking of retaliating against Catherine. Robert shook his head, dolefully rubbing his jaw.

With angry tears, Catherine cried, "I thought that we were *'friends!'*" and then she turned to glare at Vincent. Vincent wondered what it was that *'he'* had done to deserve her ire. "You really should choose more carefully the company that you keep, Vincent." With wounded heart, she turned away from him, not uttering everything that was on her mind.

Robert stood, and spoke as apologetically as he could. "I am sorry for my intrusion into your personal life, Cathy. If it had not been imperative for me to find Vincent, I would not have imposed. When I discovered that you were a contact, I had to do it."

"*'Naturally'*," she spat back at Robert. She whirled to face Vincent. "And *'how'* do *'you'* know this man, Vincent?"

"Robert McCall saved my life," Vincent quietly answered.

At this statement, Catherine sank back onto the loveseat, her anger quickly abating, as the horror of Vincent's statement was understood. She closed her eyes, trying to steady the erratic beat of her heart. Finally, she opened her eyes, to stare up into two concerned faces.

"I *'am'* sorry, Robert.... so very sorry." She reached up and softly touched his cheek. "It's just that you're the first one to ever discover Vincent here like this, and I was scared...."

"I do understand, Cathy. But it still is I who should be asking your forgiveness. Vincent saved my life as well as the life of a nun, and I should have considered the result of my actions."

Catherine sat up. "*'You are'* the man from the alley?" She turned to Vincent for confirmation.

Vincent spoke up. "How is Sr. Charles Marie? Is she safe?"

McCall wickedly grinned. "Oh, yes. Control mentioned to me the other day that her Federal babysitters were telling *'Sr. Charlie stories.'* When she is finished, she will be responsible for putting behind bars some very evil men. Even *'if'* she is a pain in the derriere while doing it...."

"Yes, the lady does have that effect on people." Vincent turned to Catherine. "I'd like Father to meet her one day. I think he'd find her intriguing," Vincent mused.

Then he stood, remembering his manners even towards an uninvited guest. "Would you care for some tea, Robert?" He glanced over at Catherine's liquor cabinet, and immediately realized that Robert had known of its existence. More stiffly, he added, "Or perhaps, something stronger?"

"I'll go make the tea," a wary Catherine said, wondering at the change of atmosphere in the room.

Robert walked over to the cabinet, and poured himself a scotch. Vincent noticed that Robert did not need to check the Hawkes' decanters for labels to identify the liquid contents. Robert already knew what was inside of each piece of finely cut crystal. Catherine returned carrying a small cut glass ice bucket. She automatically handed it to Robert so he could finish making his drink.

"All right, gentlemen. I've learned how the two of you have met. Robert, I *'never'* told you about Vincent. How did you know that I knew him?"

"Elementary, my dear Catherine," Robert teased, on her look of protest.

Robert relaxed against a stuffed pillow and laughed. "I beg to differ, Cathy. You *'did'* tell me. You just didn't realize it at the time." Suddenly Robert began to understand what he might have to explain to Vincent about his relationship with Cathy.

Catherine shot a worried look at Vincent. "How, Robert?"

Robert carefully chose his words. "Several years ago, when I had first met you, Cathy mentioned on occasion the name *'Vincent.'* I thought little of it at the time, except perhaps to wish that one day she would say my name with the same intensity of feeling that she reserved for *'Vincent.'*"

"Many men are named *Vincent*," Cathy rapidly said.

Vincent froze as the little tendrils of emotion that Catherine was trying to conceal from him, seeped into his consciousness. Now he knew why Robert had seemed so familiar to him from the very beginning.

Catherine looked on in horror as she sensed the awakening of this knowledge in Vincent. "Vincent. . . .," she softly said, at a loss for words, beginning to comprehend for the first time, what their bond had done to her beloved two years ago.

At this moment, the tea kettle began to whistle.

"Please attend to the tea, Catherine," Vincent hoarsely asked.

Catherine left the room, trying to control the panicky beating of her heart.

Vincent started pacing about the living room. "You loved her,": he finally stated, coming to rest directly in front of McCall. Vincent could sense the pain of loss in this man.

"Yes," Robert tersely replied, not wanting to reveal everything.

"Did *she* love you?"

"No."

Vincent accepted this answer and began pacing again.

Robert hastily spoke, to correct any false impression. "Cathy cared for me. At the time, we even thought that it might be love. But it wasn't true love - not like what I believe the two of you share. She spoke of you to me, you know."

Vincent stopped pacing again. this time he faced Robert as he sat down.

"What did she say?"

"Cathy never deliberately mentioned you by name. I think that I can guess as to how you met her. But it was months later when you came back into her life that she broke it off with me. She.... said that she'd found something she'd been searching for all of her life - you. I no longer mattered to her except as a friend."

Vincent looked up to see Cathy rattling the cups on her service tray in order to alert them that she was returning. For a moment, they were quiet, each politely responding to Cathy's polite inquiries as she remembered how to properly fix each of their teas. Cathy placed her Meissen *'Blue Onion'* pattern tea cup back onto the tray, and stared at Robert again.

"Robert, how did you know that Vincent knew me?"

"I must confess, Catherine, that when I was Control's prisoner, Robert asked me several questions. Something I must have said...."

"Not exactly, Vincent," Robert interjected. "Though I must confess that when I replayed the tapes, I noticed that you started to mention a lady's name, and then corrected yourself. At the time, it meant nothing to me."

Robert looked at Cathy. "Even your story about the missing ten days in your life after the attack, made sense to me now."

Catherine focused on the one terrifying statement that Robert had made, ignoring the rest. "*'TAPES'?*" she choked out.

"Yes, Cathy. Two video tapes." He stood and went over to his top coat and removed a large envelope. "These are the originals. There are no copies. And I am the only one who knows of their existence. This is why I had to find Vincent."

Catherine's hand shook as she took the tapes from Robert. She could see that Vincent didn't understand all of the implications. "They made videotapes of you when you were captured. If these

tapes had fallen into the wrong hands, there could've been armies looking for you, Vincent. These could have led to the destruction of the.... everything."

Vincent began to understand. Modern technology had not quite caught up with the Underworld. Only now was he beginning to grasp the importance of Robert's gift, and the threat to Below.

"I owe you more than my life, Robert McCall. I am in your debt." Vincent formally said.

Robert started laughing. "Yes, I believe that you do owe me something, Vincent - a chess game, if I recall correctly. And I was winning."

Vincent politely corrected Robert, with a gleam in his eye. "No, you were *'not'* winning. One day I will have to introduce you to my father." Vincent grinned at Catherine. "I believe that I have found a player in Father's league, Catherine."

Catherine started to giggle - in sheer relief, and in thankfulness that the danger was over. Her laughter was infectious as both Robert and Vincent shared it. This time, when she poured more tea, both men appreciated it.

However, Catherine still had a few points to clear up. "I didn't really tell you about Vincent. Even with your wild guesses, you had no evidence that *'my'* Vincent was *'your'* Vincent. So, that hardly excuses your breaking into my apartment. And if Vincent didn't tell you about me, how *'did'* you come to your conclusions?"

Robert reached into his suitcoat pocket. "This," he simply stated, handing a small leather pouch over to Vincent. "You dropped it."

Vincent's heart was full of gratitude and happiness as he opened up the pouch to inspect Catherine's ivory rose.

"Cathy, I noticed the rose here one day, midst all of your other collectibles. I really wasn't prying, but its exquisite detailing captured my attention. When I saw it again, I knew that it was familiar to me. It was only a matter of time before I remembered where."

"So, that's why you brought over croissants this morning?" Catherine dryly asked. "To see if I still had my rose?"

"And to see if there were any strands of long gold hair laying about," Robert added. "I found some, and knew then, for sure."

"On my rose bush," Catherine commented. "You really are too good, Robert." Catherine moved closer to Vincent on the loveseat. "Stop scowling, Vincent. You don't want to turn into Father, do you? Besides, only Robert would've thought to check my thorns."

"Your special place is still safe, Vincent," Robert sincerely said.

Robert began to feel that his presence was no longer needed. "Vincent, is there a way that I may contact you directly? I genuinely would like to be of assistance. How you've managed to exist all of these years on the streets, and never be known, is a mystery to me."

"Oh, there are legends, Robert," Catherine smilingly said.

Vincent said thoughtfully, "Robert, perhaps in the future I will be able to accept your offer, as well as play a game of chess with you. However, my secret is not mine alone. I must first ask the permission of others before I may reveal it to you."

"All right, then one more question before I go." Vincent nodded. "Are there any more like you out there?"

"I believe that I am *sui generis* (*Latin for unique*), though this is not something that I can state with absolute certainty."

Lightly stroking Vincent's arm, Catherine added. "Oh yes, you are unique, Vincent."

"Unique.... yes, an accurate assessment, Cathy. Goodnight." He ambled over to his coat, picked up

his scarf, and left behind Catherine still clutching the arm of an inwardly blushing Vincent.

The moment Robert left, Vincent stood and stepped back out onto the balcony. Sighing in frustration, Catherine went after him. For a few brief moments this night she had reveled in being perceived as a *'couple'* with Vincent. Now, Vincent was retreating from this intimacy.

"He is a good man," Vincent quietly said, striving to control the turmoil in his heart. "Perhaps one day he will become a Helper."

"Yes, Robert is that sort of man. He will keep our secrets." She slipped her arm about him again.

"And for more reasons than one," Vincent darkly whispered, trying to fight the jealousy in his heart.

She faced him. "Robert was kind and dear to me when I desperately needed it, Vincent. He gave me so much and asked for so little."

Bitterly, Vincent added, "And he held you in his arms, as I cannot."

"Cannot or *'will'* not, Vincent? He is just a man as *'you'* are a man."

"I am *'not'* just a man, Catherine."

"*'NO!'*"

He turned on her. With an anguished cry, he held out his hands. "*'Look'* at me, Catherine! What do you see? A beast who can *'kill'* with his bare hands! And they are not even *'human'* hands. I have claws, Catherine - *'claws!'*" His voice dropped to a whisper of pain. "I can never intimately hold you.... touch you. I cannot even kiss you for fear of what harm I would inflict. I must never allow myself to hurt you, Catherine. Death would be preferable." He lowered his head, his long hair shielding his face from her. "I want to hold you, Catherine. Yes, to kiss you as any man might. But it must never be."

"You don't mean these things, Vincent! You would *'never'* hurt me!" She clutched his hands. "These are hands of *'life'*, Vincent - *'my'* life!" She brought them to her lips, but he roughly pulled away from her.

"I am an instrument of death. It is inevitable." His voice was bleak.

"It is the same for Robert, Vincent. He *'will'* kill again. It is inevitable for him, too. The shadowy world over which he reigns has death in it. I did not condemn him for that. He was defending and protecting those who could not defend and protect themselves - just as you do. You do what any good man must need do when their world is threatened...."

Vincent denied her words. "I will *'not'* argue this matter with you, Catherine. You deserve the love of a *'man'*."

"I already *'have'* the love of a man, Vincent. In your heart, you *'know'* I am right." She pulled his hand to her lips, softly tracing his lifelines with her lips. Vincent shuddered at her touch. He could not help himself. He pulled Catherine into his arms, and held her as close as he dared.

Catherine pressed up against him, lifting her head to gently kiss the pulse throbbing on the side of his neck. In response, he pressed his lips against her brow, wondering if she would notice their *'deformities.'* When she did not recoil from him, he braved another such kiss on the bridge of her nose. Catherine closed her eyes and sighed. This sound was pleasing to him. She stood still, willing him with all of her heart, to continue. He dared to dream, hesitantly placing another kiss on the tip of her nose. Impatiently, Catherine moved, needing more from him. She moved her lips upwards until they brushed against his lips, with a feather light touch of a kiss. Vincent froze as her emotions confused him. He realized what he was doing and broke away from her. Turning, he went to the edge, looking down at the street.

Sadly she sighed, knowing that he was fighting for control again. "*too long a sacrifice can make a stone of the heart,*" she quoted. "Someday you will know my love. I pray that this will happen before

you discover the truth of Yeats' words."

He could not look at her. "You were angry with me tonight... more than you said. Why? What was it that I had done to displease you?"

She nervously laughed. "I was upset when I realized that Robert could cause you to come inside of my apartment, but I never could. I was jealous."

"Catherine, I dare not come inside when we are alone together. I do not trust myself."

She wearily accepted his words. "I understand.... But Vincent, I trust you."

He went to the balcony door. "The hour grows late." He looked over his shoulder. "Catherine, I know that I have many imperfections. Until tonight, I never knew that jealousy was one of them. But, I *'am'* jealous of Robert McCall."

She walked up to him, pulling him into a comforting embrace. "There is a part of me that find this fault endearing, Vincent. I'm not so noble that I can't want you to be jealous, Vincent. It only makes you more human." When he did not respond, she found more courage to ask, "Before we finished reading *'Great Expectations,'* and I did not know of our bond, did I hurt you greatly by my.... caring for Robert?"

"Yes."

Catherine's heart constricted at the depth of pain she felt behind that one word. He turned around in her arms to hold her too, succumbing to her touch, one more time.

"But, the pleasure was great, too." He was embarrassed as he said, "I did not really know of love before. You have shown me such beauty, Catherine."

Catherine smiled into his chest. "You still have lessons to be learned."

Vincent brushed the silk of her hair again, with his lips, not wanting to release her. "If thou wilt ease thine heart, of love and all its smart, then sleep dear, sleep...."

Catherine raised her head to gaze into his eyes for the last time that night. "Vincent, I don't think that Father would approve of us quoting poetry until dawn, again...."

McCall studied the drink before him, wondering if Pete was watering his drink. No matter. He was not going to get drunk tonight, and he was not driving home, since he'd returned the van less than an hour ago. He nodded a greeting to the man who plopped down on the barstool next to him.

"Greetings, McCall," Mickey said, motioning to the barman for a beer. "Oscar said you'd borrowed some of his equipment tonight. Anything up? I'm free at the moment."

"Nothing of concern to you - unless you can take care of these...." He placed four parking tickets on the bar from the van.

"Hah!" Kostmayer scoffed. "Give 'em to Control." He knew something was bugging McCall. McCall was in a morose mood. "Want to talk about it?"

McCall tightly smiled, not wanting to admit that at times, he was a lesser man. "I lost, that's all, Mickey. And I'm finding it somewhat hard to accept. Only human, after all."

"Linda cancelled her date with you Friday night?" Mickey inquired.

McCall rolled his eyes. "Is nothing a secret any more? Or are you tapping my phone line again?" He amended himself. "No, you've been tapping *'her'* phone. Stop it now, Mickey, or I'll tell the lady."

A voice from the other side of Robert added, "And the lawyer lady would just *'love'* to tackle the government over such an invasion of privacy, wouldn't she, Robert?" Control decided to add.

"Line's already off, Robert."

"Linda *'didn't'* cancel our date." Robert lifted his glass towards the sky, his thoughts returning to a

candle-lit balcony heavy with the scent of roses. "*We are all in the gutter,*" he pronounced, pointedly looking at his friends. "*But some of us are looking at the stars.*"

"*'Lady Windemere's fan'?*" Control asked.

"Uh oh," Mickey muttered, "McCall's quotin' again. Time to take him home."

"Thank you for the ride, Mickey," McCall politely replied, not quite as drunk as Kostmayer thought he was. McCall shoved the parking tickets over to Control. "Here. These belong to you. I'll pick up the bar tab."

After they left, Control flipped over the tickets. A moment later he called out to Pete O'Phelan.

"Pete, if you still have the '48 Chateau Phillipe Rothschild, I'll take it." He took off his bowtie. "And put the wine on McCall's bill."

END