

DARK MOON RISING

by Margaret Mansfield

(from CHAMBER CAMEOS NINE)

Catherine walked back toward the tunnel entrance beneath her apartment building with a heavy step. She was exhausted physically as well as emotionally. She felt so empty. Vincent had never seemed so far away from her before. She had never felt so alone, so cut off from him - so rejected. It was as if there was a solid, thick wall between them. Try as she would, Vincent would not let her breach the wall. It was there to stay for the time being. All the long months Catherine had spent since the time she had come back from Nancy's house trying to build Vincent's self-confidence in himself were lost.

It was almost too much for her to bear. The emptiness which threatened to engulf her seemed to grow with each step she took. Things had been going so well for her and Vincent. Recently, Catherine had felt that they were finally making real progress. Gradually, she and Vincent had been coming to an understanding concerning their future together. Since the night she had almost drowned, there had been a new closeness between them - a new sense of togetherness. Vincent had taken down most of the wall which existed between them and had been open about discussing their future. Although she had not told him, she had even been contemplating cutting back on her work hours, in hopes of moving into the tunnels to be with him. Now, her dreams lay in a shambles all around her, and the wall between them was back up, seemingly more unsurmountable than ever.

Sensing where these thoughts were leading her, Catherine struggled to banish them from her mind. Quickly, she climbed the ladder leading into the sub-basement of her building and made her way upstairs. Not even bothering to shower, she shed her clothes and crawled under the sheets. Pulling them up tightly around her, she sought solace in sleep. But sleep was long in coming. The sun had already begun to peek over the horizon long before she dozed off.

Vincent sat stoically in his chamber trying to regain his equilibrium. Outwardly he was calm, but inwardly his thoughts and feelings were chaotic. He finally sensed Catherine drifting off into a light sleep and relaxed somewhat. Her hurt and pain were almost unbearable to him. She had looked so alone tonight when she left. How could he have done that to her? Catherine was the one being in all the world who truly accepted him as he was without reservation. Not even Father had ever given him that degree of acceptance he felt from Catherine. Vincent did not question her acceptance, but horrified with himself, doubted if she really understood exactly what it was she was so willing to accept.

Tonight, Catherine had once again seen his uncontrolled violence. Would it never end? His feeling of shame was always acute when Catherine witnessed the transition between his two natures. At times like these, when the beast manifested itself, even Vincent wondered who and what he was. He could hardly face the fear of it himself, much less share it with the woman he loved.

How could anyone possibly understand the fear which accompanied the transition? Overwhelming, it engulfed him totally, leaving the rational part of him trapped inside a raging force that threatened to destroy him.

After Catherine's departure, Father had tried to reason with him - had tried to get him to see that what he had done had been necessary. But as Vincent stared down at his still blood-stained hands, Father's words were somehow small consolation. Each time the beast took over, Vincent felt that he had lost just a little bit more of his humanity. How could he tell those he loved most dearly that he truly feared for his sanity? That he felt like he was at the brink of utter darkness?

Catherine sat at her desk waiting for the phone to ring. She had been waiting all morning. One of her sources was supposed to be calling. While she waited she glanced at the stack of files and unfinished paperwork piled high on her desk and sighed. It was going to be another long week.

Picking up the top folder, she opened it and tried to concentrate on the information which she was reading. Suddenly frustrated, she slammed the folder shut and abruptly stood up. Maybe a cold drink of iced tea would help. Even though it was still early, the office was already stifling. Digging some change out of her purse, Catherine headed out the door, hoping the cafeteria would not be crowded at this time of morning. She didn't want to be gone too long.

Hurrying down the hall, she wondered how Vincent was for the hundredth time that morning. Presently, he was all she seemed capable of keeping her mind on. Work was almost at a standstill for her, as she went through the motions day after day. The look of shame and self-loathing she had seen on his face during their last moments together was permanently etched in her mind, haunting not only her dreams but her waking hours as well. The fleeting look had had a profound effect on her, bringing into sharp focus Vincent's fragile grasp on emotional and mental stability.

It had been over one week since she had last seen Vincent. Not that this in itself was unusual, but the manner of their last parting made his absence this time seem threatening to their continued relationship. What was even more worrisome was the fact that she sensed no change in the situation. The bond remained closed. If Catherine did not hear something soon, she would go crazy. She could not concentrate on anything and sleep had been almost impossible.

How could Vincent do this to her? Not even a note! The hurt and sorrow Catherine had initially felt were slowly turning into anger. She deserved better than this and so did he. They could not go on like this for much longer!

Careful not to slosh her tea, she made her way back to the office just in time to see Joe hanging up her phone. Drat! Hurrying over to him she inquired, "Who was it, Joe? Did they leave a message?"

Hearing the urgency in her voice, Joe replied, "Yeah. Some elderly sounding lady wanted to talk to you about cleaning your father's house. She left her name and number."

"My father's house?" Catherine looked at him thoroughly puzzled. "My father only had one house. The house up in Connecticut, and it's been listed with the real estate people over a month. Why would anyone be calling about cleaning it? Nobody's been living in it since my dad died. Even then, he only used it for occasional weekends."

"Beats me, kiddo. That's what the lady said. Why don't you call her back and ask her? Here's her name and number." Joe offered her the slip of paper he held in his hand.

Still puzzled, Catherine sat down and dialed the number. It took awhile before she got an answer. Explaining who she was and what she wanted, Catherine sat and listened in silence to a woman on the other end of

the line. Finally she broke in, "But my Dad doesn't own a house out on Long Island. He never owned a house way out there as far as I know. I'm afraid you have the wrong number."

She continued to listen, becoming more and more puzzled as the conversation continued. "Okay," she finally stated. "I believe you. Listen, just go ahead and clean the house like you always do and send me the bill," Catherine said, giving Joe a puzzled shrug.

"No, I'm afraid my father will no longer be coming to the house," she said with a catch in her voice. "He passed away several months ago."

After a pause Catherine said, "Thank you. Listen, what did you say the address of this place was? And where can I find you to get a key if I should come out there?" Catherine listened and jotted the information down before hanging up.

"Well, if that conversation doesn't beat all," exclaimed Catherine, looking up at Joe, who was still standing by her desk. "Apparently my father had a house out on the end of Long Island I knew nothing about. The lady said she'd been cleaning it periodically for him for years. Wondered why she hadn't heard from him recently and tracked me down when she found his phone number was no longer in service. Said she knew he had a daughter named Catherine who worked for the District Attorney's office. She wanted to know if I would help her get in touch with him."

Joe shrugged his shoulders. "Can't help ya, Cath. Maybe when you get a chance, you should drive out there and see what's what. Right now, kiddo, we got a lot of work to catch up on, so let's get cracking. I need that Johnston file before you go home today."

"Yeah! Okay, Joe," Catherine mumbled, picking up the file she had slammed shut a little earlier. "I'll get right on it." It literally took her the rest of the day to wade through the file, find the information Joe needed, and write it up. She kept losing her train of thought. Between worrying about Vincent and wondering what her father had been up to, she just could not seem to concentrate. Finally she was finished. Looking up she was surprised to see that almost everyone else had already gone home. Joe, however, was still in his office.

Picking up her notes, she wandered over to his door and knocked. Hearing his muffled, '*Come on in,*' she entered and plunked the file down on his desk. "There you go, Joe. Done. Now I'm heading for home, a nice cool bath, and early bed. See you tomorrow."

"Thanks, Radcliffe. I knew I could count on you. See ya tomorrow. Have a nice night," he tossed at the retreating figure.

As he watched his co-worker's retreating figure, Joe once again wondered just what was going on with her. He sensed that she was worried about something. Her recent lack of concentration had not gone unnoticed. Very little concerning Catherine Chandler escaped his sharp eye. His feelings for her were something he tried to keep hidden. She had not been on the job very long before he had realized that she meant a lot to him. Her well-being was a constant concern of his. Catherine was a woman of mystery, leading a very private life outside of the office. More than once Joe had tried to get to the bottom of it, but had drawn a blank every time. She would let him get just so near and then clam up, leaving him in the dark as to what was going on in her life.

"Whatever it is," he sighed still watching the retreating back, "she's one hell of an unhappy lady right now."

Silhouetted by the flickering candlelight, Vincent sat deep in his chair battling the demon which lurked within, ever ready to pounce. His keen eyes pierced the darkness beyond the wavering light, as if he might see this demon actually take shape before him. Wearily, he leaned his elbows on the table and rubbed his face with his hands, a lone shudder going through his whole body.

He could not shake the creature this time. It had slowly, over the months he had been protecting Catherine, gained strength. Dealing with the outsiders had finally unleashed the demon in almost full strength. He could almost see its presence carefully watching him - studying him - waiting patiently for the right moment to pounce.

His dreams were especially troublesome. They were increasingly filled with dark images and thoughts which would bring him suddenly awake to frantically search the darkness of his chamber. Once awakened, he would pace the chamber trying to find peace. Other times he would dress, grab his cloak, and lose himself in the darkness of Above, seeking solace in the stare.

He wished he could go to Catherine. As he fleetingly thought about her, he felt an instant of tearing pain. His need for her was like a living thing, constantly in his mind and on his heart. Vincent wanted to explain to her what was happening - wanted to ask her forgiveness for closing her out -- for staying away. But he couldn't.

His grip on sanity was loosening. In his distraught condition, he didn't trust himself just now to be around the woman he loved. Vincent, steeped in sadness, sat in mute silence as the candle gave a dying flicker and extinguished itself. Shrouded in darkness he felt hope draining away. The beast was close – evident - powerful.

Catherine slipped the key into the lock of her door and entered the blessedly cool apartment. She was glad she had set the air conditioner to kick on if the temperature rose above 78 degrees. The weatherman had been predicting a heat wave and for once, they were right. Here it was almost nine o'clock, and the temperature was still hovering around 90 degrees.

Kicking off her shoes and heading for the fridge and something cold to drink, she hoped weathermen would be wrong about the duration of the heat wave. People became intolerant when it was this hot. The city could easily turn into a jungle. Tempers flared and confrontations were numerous. Law enforcement agencies were taxed to the limit at times like these. Hospitals were quickly overburdened with victims of heat stroke. Water and electricity rationing, as well as actual shortages, were real possibilities in a city this size.

'All in all, not a very pleasant picture', thought Catherine, pouring herself some Pepsi. Passing through the dining room, she glanced out the glass doors to the balcony beyond. Immediately her thoughts flew to Vincent. *'Where was he? He had rarely stayed away this long before.'* She wondered if she should go Below and make sure everything was all right. Within seconds she rejected that thought, knowing Father would be sure to get word to her if anything was really amiss. That left Vincent's stubborn pride. Why could he not see that this was something that effected her almost as much as it effected him? Why couldn't he understand that she wanted more than anything else in the world to help him - to be there for him as he always was for her?

Catherine's anger flared again as she stewed over the situation. She knew that it upset Vincent terribly when she witnessed scenes such as she had their last night together. Father had explained to her more than once that it took all the self-control Vincent possessed to maintain the delicate balance which allowed him to accept himself. It was a constant struggle for him to deal with two such different natures.

The nature he preferred, that of the educated, cultured man devoted to love, compassion, and helping his fellow man, was in direct opposition to his darker side. The side of his nature which would rend and tear without a moment's notice anything which threatened his loved ones. This darker nature which lived within him, Father believed, was without rational thought and showed none of the values which Vincent treasured and believed. His darker side acted by sheer instinct, showing no mercy or compassion.

Not for the first time, Catherine felt her resentment of Father rising within her. Over the last two years, she

had come to love and respect this irascible old man, but there were definitely times when he tried her patience. Sometimes Catherine had all she could do not to let him know that she felt he was part of Vincent's problem. How he had handled situations in the past left a lot to be desired in her estimation. She felt that Vincent's refusal to let her share his ordeal was somehow connected to his encounter with Lisa years ago. By not dealing with the situation as if it were the usual teenage occurrence that, it was, Father had left unhealthy thoughts and conclusions to fester and grow in Vincent. Because of this, Vincent doubted his ability to have a normal relationship with any woman. What a tragic situation.

Catherine also suspected that Father was very vocal in his opinions concerning her present relationship to Vincent. She knew that he saw her as a threat to Vincent's happiness. Catherine sensed that something in Father did not trust her ability to stand by Vincent during the dark times.

It bothered Catherine that Father and the others sometimes took advantage of Vincent. They considered him their protector. Last year, when she had tried to arrange their trip to the countryside, was proof enough of this for Catherine. She wondered if they realized that in causing Vincent to play this role, it put added stress on Vincent? Father and the others felt terrible when Vincent was distressed, but the fact still remained that they all expected him to be there to protect them when danger arose.

Catherine realized that Vincent's dark side threatened his very sanity. But what could she do? He would not even let her near him right now. The bond had remained tightly closed since the night Vincent had sent her Above by herself. She felt angry and frustrated. Most of all she felt alone.

Catherine's sense of aloneness tortured Vincent. He knew that she was having a hard time dealing with his inability to let her share his darkness. But how could he? After feeling what it could do to him, how could he submit her to it, also? Vincent remembered all too vividly what it had been like as a teenager going through that darkness. He remembered all too sharply being trapped in the cold tentacles of fear and despair. He remembered the raging madness which had almost claimed him for good. Only Father had a glimmering of what it had been like. A repeat of that time was a consuming fear which caused Vincent to push Catherine farther and farther away from him.

Vincent was also acutely aware of Catherine's feelings of anger and frustration, but was helpless to do anything about them. He could not seem to help himself right now. He felt trapped in the war which raged deep within him. Still, he felt the need to communicate with her in some way. Not through the bond, however, Vincent could not chance exposing Catherine to the feelings of darkness which threatened to overwhelm him. He knew how much the natural darkness had always bothered her. Since she had been a small child, the dark had terrorized Catherine until her mother had lovingly given her a small candle with which to chase it away. This darkness which threatened to engulf Vincent at any moment was utter and complete and totally consuming - one from which he might never find his way out. He would not allow the woman he loved to share that with him.

Tossing the disheveled covers back, Vincent rose from the bed and crossed to his writing table. He struggled against the relentless unseen pressure he felt bearing down on him. Sitting, he concentrated on steadying his shaking hand as he felt reality slowly drifting from his grasp. Fighting to keep the darkness at bay, he quickly penned a short note in one split minute of total clarity. Finishing his task, Vincent quickly gathered some supplies and stuffed them into his backpack. Swooping up his cloak, he purposefully strode from his chamber.

Hoping Father would still be awake at this late hour, he covered the short distance between their chambers, trying desperately to compose his thoughts. Under control for the moment, Vincent entered Father's study and was relieved to see the older man in his chair, engrossed in a book.

"Father," Vincent whispered, so as not to startle his parent.

"Ah, Vincent. I see you can't sleep either. Come in, come in." Noticing the cloak, Father wondered if Vincent were coming or going. "Would you care for some tea? I was just finishing a book I think you might find interesting."

"No, Father," Vincent abruptly interrupted, splaying his hand over the opened book and bending toward Father to capture his full attention. "No tea. I was wondering if you could do me a favor and see that someone delivers this note to Catherine in the morning. I am going away and wish to let her know."

Father was instantly alert. His son had been acting strangely for over a week now, and he was beginning to worry. In the past when Vincent's dark side manifested itself, he would be upset and out of sorts - sometimes for days. Although this bothered Father tremendously, he gradually grew accustomed to it. There seemed to be nothing he could do about it, anyway.

Before Vincent had met Catherine, life had been so much simpler for his son. Thinking these thoughts once again caused Father's resentment of Catherine to surface. He had given up trying to get either one of them to listen to reason ages ago. These past two years had aged him considerably. Gradually, Father had come to love Catherine deeply for all the happiness she had brought his son. But nonetheless, the fact still remained in his mind. If there were no Catherine, these problems would not exist.

Would these two he held most dear never see the truth? Would they never admit that as long as Catherine remained Above, working in the job she had, Vincent was bound to be continuously placed in situations which would threaten his very sanity? The whole thing was madness - but true love was often blind. Father had to admit, however, in all fairness that had happened last week was not Catherine's fault. This time, she was as much a victim as Vincent, and his heart had gone out to her that night as she had walked off alone.

Momentarily breaking off his thoughts, Father sighed and through tear-blurred eyes looked up at his son, noticing his disheveled appearance. Vincent had secluded himself in his chamber since the night the outsiders had civiously attacked their people, forcing him to kill again - totally disrupting his son's delicate sense of inner balance. Vincent looked gaunt. Father knew that he had occasionally gone Above during the dead of night to lose himself in the outer darkness. to his knowledge, though, he didn't think Vincent had had any contact with Catherine since that fatal night.

Vincent had not even attended the burial service for their people. Father had fleetingly contemplated asking Catherine to attend, but at the last minute decided against it. Better to leave well enough alone. This was between Vincent and Catherine, althoughn Father cringed to think of how it might end. He did not want to see either of these loved ones hurt. Maybe it was for the best this way. Maybe Vincent would finally come to see that he could not continue this relationship without there being dire consequences.

Becoming aware of the lengthening silence in the chamber, Father broke off his thoughts and asked, "Where will you go this time? How long will you be gone?" This wouldn't be the first time his son had disappeared. Father was actually relieved to hear he was going. Always in the past and during the worst times when Vincent felt compelled to distance himself like this from the community, he would eventually return to them once again in-tune with himself.

"Below into the lower caverns. I feel the need to be by myself, Father. I don't know how long I'll be gone. For as long as it takes. Vincent did not specify what the *'it'* was. Don't worry about me, Father. I'll be okay," Vincent lied, not really knowing if he would.

"Well, you know if there's anything I or any of the others can do, you need only ask, Vincent. Is this something like that time when you were a young man? If it is, maybe you had better not go too far away - at least not beyond the pipes in case you need me." Father held his breath waiting for an answer.

Vincent hesitated, seeing the look of fear and concern on the old man's face. He hated lying to Father. He knew, however, that Father could not handle another situation like that. He was older, and Vincent knew it

would have a far greater effect on him this time. The demon was stronger. No. It was time for him to face this demon alone.

Perhaps it wouldn't come to that anyway. Perhaps he only needed some time alone. Vincent hoped that that was all it was. Occasionally, during stressful times, he needed to be off by himself. Sometimes he had an overwhelming need to be away from... Humans.

"No, Father. I will be all right. Just deliver the note for me. And thank you for your concern. I will be back when I have sorted things out in my mind." After hugging Father, Vincent abruptly turned and was gone, his cloak billowing out behind him.

"Dear God!" breathed Father into the empty, still air. "Please be with him and keep him safe."

Catherine came up out of the shallow sleep she had managed to fall into several hours ago, rubbing her gritty, stinging eyes. Searching the still, quiet bedroom, she tried to determine what had so startled her out of sleep. It was not even quite morning yet. Then she felt it - a slight stirring in her mind. And Catherine knew without a doubt that Vincent's thoughts were focused fully upon her.

This week had been a revelation to her, as far as the bond was concerned. She knew that Vincent was able to sense her very feelings and emotions, but she had never had more than an occasional awareness of his. Lately, however, since he had tried to totally shut her out, Catherine had gradually discovered that the bond was definitely a two-way phenomenon. Since Vincent had closed himself off from her, Catherine had found that her capacity to sense him was somehow easier to discern. His own connection to her had been so stronger than hers to him had been overshadowed and mostly missed.

Lying back against the pillows, she wondered what Vincent was thinking about. This couldn't go on much longer. Catherine wished he could contact her, or better yet come to see her. She longed to be with him - longed to touch him - feel him. Her mind was filled to overflowing with thoughts of him. The way he gracefully walked, his unique smell, the way he cocked his head to catch her every word. Catherine could almost feel Vincent's arms surround her, pulling her into his light embrace. Thoughts of past interludes filtered into her consciousness from wherever she had them stored inside her memory. Catherine pictured Vincent in her mind's eye leaning against the railing of the balcony, sharing a poem or a random thought concerning some novel he was presently reading as wisps of his, long burnished hair escaped the hood of which he was so fond. Memories such as these were all Catherine had to warm her now as she waited for whatever would happen next.

She wanted to share with him her new sense of being able to feel him through the bond. One thing was certain to Catherine as she lay in her bed. They were meant to be together. How or why no longer mattered. This thing that connected them was out of the ordinary - beyond the normal - not to be denied.

Restless and unable to go back to sleep, Catherine rose to face another stifling day. *'They had better make arrangements to get some fans in that office, or they would all end up with heat prostration'*, she silently thought. The heat wave was in its third day, and tempers were beginning to flare.

Edie especially looked terrible, and Catherine decided that if this kept up much longer, she would ask her friend to come spend the weekend with her. She knew Edie's apartment was not air-conditioned. As Catherine wandered into the bathroom for a cool shower, she made a mental note to extend the offer when she got to work later that day.

Leaving Father, Vincent made his way to the community's kitchen where he filled the extra backpack he had brought along. Even though he wasn't really hungry, Vincent ate liberally of the types of food which he knew

would not keep on his journey. Usually a light eater, Vincent knew he had enough with him to last for at least a week, especially after the meal he had just consumed. Dousing the torch, he left the kitchen and was soon far away from the main complex, feeling civilization and humanity dropping away from him with each mile he traversed. At times like these, deep down in the unexplored caverns was the only place he found any semblance of inner peace.

Not stopping, Vincent traveled onward for hours, eventually leaving even the pipes behind. He was in uncharted territory - deeper than even he had ever gone before. Wondering where his journey would take him, he pressed onward, as a sense of anticipation enveloped him.

Catherine sat listlessly at her desk hoping she looked like she was deeply involved in the file she had spread before her. Her thoughts, however, were far away in another world - a world of heavy darkness. She sensed that Vincent was in constant motion, moving even farther and farther away from her. She shivered despite the cloying heat and humidity which permeated the office.

Suddenly, she was aware of someone silently standing by her desk. Glancing up, she was surprised to see Jason, one of the tunnel teenagers, standing there. Her heart began to beat faster. Maybe he brought word from Vincent. Wordlessly she accepted the envelope the boy held out to her.

Catherine thanked the boy and asked, "Is everyone okay, Jason?"

"It's been pretty quiet since last week," the boy responded, alluding to the trouble with the outsiders. "Not much is happening. Everyone is still upset and mostly keeping to themselves. I guess I'd better be heading back before Father begins to worry," he ended and then added, "It's really sweltering up here."

Indeed, the boy did look extremely uncomfortable, especially dressed as he was in his layers of tunnel clothing.

"Thank you for delivering the letter, Jason. I appreciate it. Say hello to Father and the others for me. Tell Vincent I miss him."

"I will," he said and was gone.

Catherine glanced around the office. Everyone looked hot and listless. No one had seemed overly interested in her strange visitor. It was not the first time they had seen oddly-dressed people visiting her here at the office. In her capacity as assistant District Attorney, Catherine had many sources. Most of them street people.

Slowly she picked up the envelope. Scrawled in a well known hand was the one word. **Catherine.** Finally! Trying to shake off the sensation of Vincent's continued movement away from her, she opened the envelope. Maybe she was wrong. Maybe she couldn't really sense Vincent's movements, and it was all just her imagination. Catherine hoped the message from Vincent was good news. She didn't think he would contact her otherwise. In the best of times like these, he usually didn't communicate with her until he had regained his sense of inner peace. Maybe he was finally ready to see her, and they could talk about this situation.

She did not want this to ever happen again and was determined to let him know just how she felt about the matter. Catherine was beginning to realize that she should have stood her ground that night and stayed there until Vincent had been willing to talk to her. She knew that she could be as stubborn as he once she'd made up her mind about something.

Opening the folded piece of paper, Catherine read the words and didn't know whether to cry or scream in frustration. Above all though was a continued sense of hurt and loss. Rereading this message, Catherine suddenly realized that what she thought she had been feeling was accurate. It has not been just her

imagination. The message was brief, and she could almost hear Vincent saying the words.

'Catherine, I feel your concerns. Please be patient. I need to be alone for a while longer. I am going to be away for a short time. Do not worry. I will contact you when I return.'

Love,

Vincent'

Quelling her initial emotions, Catherine's eye focused in on the signature, and she smiled gently. Lovingly she ran her finger over the words. Usually Vincent just signed his name. This was the first time he had signed using the word **'Love.'** It warmed her heart and took some of the ache away. She was still concerned though. Where could he be going? How long would he be gone? Why did he need to get away even from her?

Quickly crowding out those unpleasant thoughts was the realization that there was no chance to seeing Vincent soon. Didn't he understand that she had a desperate need to be with him? Especially now when she knew that he was hurting, Catherine wanted more than anything to share the hurt with him.

With a heaviness of heart, she tucked Vincent's message into her purse and went in search of Edie. Perhaps they could have some girl-type fun this weekend. One thing was for sure. Catherine did not want to be alone this weekend. She needed company.

Vincent stood at the entrance to the huge cavern and looked around in amazement. Holding his lantern high, he could still barely see the recesses of the huge space stretching out before him. Long before he had reached this place, he knew he would find water here. He had heard it over an hour ago and had veered off from the direction he had been going to find the source of the sound. Water was a commodity Vincent had to limit, hoping to find some along the way. This was not unusual in these deep caverns hidden beneath the surface of the earth. Often times, there were streams, pools, and sometimes even rivers and waterfalls in these unexplored caverns. Nevertheless, Vincent had drunk sparingly of the little supply he had thought to bring along and was presently thirsty.

Following the sound of water he heard in the distance, Vincent eventually found the waterfall. He stared in wonder as it gently bubbled over the rocky precipice high above in the gloom of the upper cavern. It cascaded slowly down a slanted rocky wall into a bowl-shaped indentation in the floor, and it seemed to be the source of a small river which wound its way gently through the middle of the cavern to disappear somewhere out beyond the limits of his light. It was not a large fall, and its sound was a pleasant roar, not the deafening one of some of the larger falls he had occasionally come across in his travels.

On the other side of the narrow river was a short stretch of land which gently sloped up to the cliff face. The cliff ran the length of the cavern, framing the fall on either side. Crystal deposits of some unknown sort sparkled in the water's spray as Vincent's light exposed their presence. In awe, he stood for a long while just drinking in the natural beauty of the place.

His side of the river was almost beach-like. As Vincent approached the river's edge, his feet sank into a gritty-like substance which reminded him of grainy, coarse sand. Here, too, he could see the sparkle of crystal-like dust scattered in the substance as he walked along swinging his lantern.

For the first time since leaving the main complex over two days ago, Vincent felt the stirrings of peace enter his heart. Taking off his packs and setting them back out of harm's way, he knelt to test the water. He found it sweet and cool. This was surprising to him, as he assumed the water would be frigid. It usually was here, this far below the earth's surface. Occasionally, however, he and Mouse had found water which was warm enough to swim in if one didn't stay in too long.

Stripping off his clothing, Vincent cautiously waded out till he was about chest deep. Here he stopped as the ground beneath his feet began to slope downward. The water felt wonderful, and Vincent only wished that he had thought to pack soap and shampoo. He suddenly laughed out loud. He rarely laughed around people and enjoyed the sound of his laughter as it echoed around the cavern. Yesterday seemed ages ago and civilization like it had never existed. He tossed his head back and emitted a deep-throated roar which reverberated off the rocky cliffs, filling the cavern with more eerie echoes.

Edie trailed Cathy into the elevator. This had been one hell of a day, she reflected, as the elevator began its ascent to Cathy's floor. She was glad it was finally Friday. The heat wave still gripped the city, causing life-threatening emergencies all over town.

The phone had not stopped its ringing all day. "Edie, check this. Edie, check that!" Sometimes she felt that people thought she was the computer. Every lunatic and petty thief in the city was out roaming around, looking for his piece of the action. She felt like a wet dish rag.

Entering the apartment, Edie stood with her arms spread out, letting the cool air surround her.

"Oh, girl. You have no idea how good this feels," she said, as Catherine looked at her. "The only thing that could feel better than this right now would be a cold shower and something long, tall, and cold to drink."

Catherine's understanding laughter tinkled in the quiet apartment. She was already glad Edie had been able to come. Usually her friend was tied up caring for an elderly grandmother, but this weekend Edie was free. Grandma was away visiting relatives.

"Tell you what. Why don't you do just that?" said Catherine. "Put your stuff in the bedroom and jump into the shower. I'll see what I can put together for us to drink. Some food would taste really good about now. It was so hot in that office today I just couldn't even think of eating anything for lunch."

"You're on," said Edie, grinning and heading in the direction of the bedroom. "I'll try and leave you some cold water," she tossed over her shoulder as she disappeared into the darkened bedroom.

Catherine laughed and headed for the kitchen. "Let's see," she said to herself, opening the refrigerator. Wine coolers were the first thing to catch her eye, and she grabbed a couple and put them on the counter. Glancing back into the fridge with a critical eye, Catherine frowned at the sparsity of its interior. Some salad fixings, cheese, eggs, grapes, beer, more wine coolers, and some left over Chinese from God alone knew when. Holding her nose she deposited the remains of the Chinese in a plastic baggie, sealed it tightly shut, and dumped it in the garbage. Investigation of her pantry shelves turned up a lone can of tuna. "Eureka," she giggled, grabbing the can.

Suddenly it struck Catherine that a heaviness had lifted from her emotions. Standing perfectly still, she focused inward trying to block everything else out of her mind. With practice, she was getting better at this. At first Catherine felt nothing, but slowly she could feel a growing peace envelop her being and realized with a sense of exhilaration that she was once again in-tune with Vincent's inner being. She also became aware of the fact that he had stopped moving away from her, although he still felt far away.

Catherine marveled at what was happening inside her. What a wonderful thing this being connected really was. She was truly just beginning to understand something that Vincent had said to her right after her father had passed away. She remembered clearly what he had wonderingly whispered to her that afternoon by the waterfall, and she could still hear the raspy voice saying, "Catherine, we are something that has never been, and our journey is one that no others have ever taken."

Her heart was filled to overflowing with love for Vincent her Vincent. Only one thing was missing to make this truly one of the most perfect moments of Catherine's life. She wished Vincent were here to share it with

her. She fleetingly wondered what had happened to cause the peace she felt and only hoped it would last for her love.

"Girl! What **are** you doing? Praying or something?"

Catherine jumped, dropped the can of tuna, and swung around with a startled look on her face, the moment shattered.

"Oh, Edie. You **scared** the **hell** out of me."

The crestfallen look on her friend's gamine face brought Catherine fully back to the here-and-now. "Edie, it wasn't your fault I was so far away. Come on, help me put this mess together. I'm afraid it's toasted cheese, salad, and grapes, unless you'd prefer tuna."

"Nah. I've had enough tuna for a while. Toasted cheese sounds good. Listen, why don't you go jump in the shower and let me make the sandwiches? I make a wicked toasted cheese. You got any strawberry jam?"

"Strawberry Jam?" asked Catherine puzzled. "Yeah, I think so. Look in that cupboard up there. What do you want with the jam?"

"You'll see. It's a specialty of my Granny's. Wait till you taste it. Now, go! And girl, one of these days I want you to explain to me what caused you to look like you did. I stood here for several minutes watching you before I opened my big mouth. You were definitely way out there, girl! And you were enjoying every minute of being wherever you were. I got to try me some of whatever there was. It's definitely got to be a man! Lordy! I'd sure like to find one like that someday. Anybody that can do that to you and not even be here has got to be something else! I'd sure like to meet him. He got any friends?"

Catherine's eyes sparkled with a far-away, mysterious look. She chuckled and threw over her shoulder.

"Sorry, Edie. He's definitely one of a kind, and he's all mine."

"Figures," groused Edie, reaching for the jam. "You uptown girls have all the luck."

Enjoying the sound of the dying echoes, Vincent turned in circles, exhilarating in how good he was beginning to feel when suddenly he slid off the ledge into frigid, icy-cold water over his head. The shock of it took his breath away. The water was so cold he was almost paralyzed. Some force felt like it was pulling him down. Fighting his way upward, Vincent noticed that there was a current, and he needed all his strength to regain the gentle bank. Swimming swiftly with long, powerful strokes, he finally made it into shallow water where he collapsed.

Exhaustion settled upon him like a cloak. His breathing was still ragged, and his lungs ached from swallowing the frigid water. He was still freezing. Standing, he left the river and grabbed up his cloak. Pulling it on, he hugged it to himself. Suddenly dizzy, he lay down on the gritty substance of the beach, and it sunk beneath his weight. Closing his eyes, he began to drift off to sleep when a not too distant movement brought him instantly awake. Looking around quickly, he could see nothing unusual when he suddenly heard a voice from beyond the lantern's light.

"I should have warned you about how deep it got out there," said a slightly more raspy voice than his own. **"You'd better dry off and get dressed,"** continued the unseen presence.

Vincent was up on his feet before the voice had finished its statement. His face tightened in anger. **"Where are you?"** he snarled, a deep growl beginning way down in his chest. He whirled and started all around him, trying to locate the source of the voice.

"I'm right here. And I wish you'd quit growling and snarling at me. I'm getting tired of it. I'm not going to pounce on a defenseless man! It's taken me years to even get you to hear me. All I want to do is talk to

you man to man." The entity chuckled as if at some private joke.

As the sounds of laughter, devoid of any humor, slowly died away, Vincent demanded, ***"Cone out where I can see you."*** When there was no immediate response, a wave of terror and despair washed over him.

Suddenly he heard a deep, tuneful whisper enunciate in exquisite slowness. ***"No. I don't think that's such a wise idea. I think I'll stay right where I am until we've talked a little. Then, maybe, I'll show myself."***

Vincent still felt slightly light-headed from his experience in the water and wondered if he were just hallucinating. He still could see nothing. Suddenly aware of his state of nakedness, he grabbed his discarded clothing and swiftly dressed. When he was finished, he moved over to where his packs were and began to rummage through one of them, looking for something to eat and trying to act as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. The whole time, however, his mind remained rigidly alert and cold.

"Feeling better, are we?"

Vincent swung around, tossing the pack down. He lunged forward, finding nothing but cool air to connect with. Another snarl began to form deep within his chest.

"I already said I wished you wouldn't do that. All I want to do is talk to you."

Vincent felt a cold sweat break out all over his body. He also began shaking and sunk back down upon the sand. Suddenly he was glad he had decided to leave the complex. He wouldn't want Father or the others to witness this.

Sinking farther back into the sand, Vincent closed his eyes and said in a droll voice filled with resignation. "So talk."

"These are marvelous," said Catherine, liberally spreading jam on the top of her second sandwich and wolfing it down. "I never realized what strawberry jam could do for toasted cheese. Tell your Granny thanks for the recipe. By the way, does she still read those off-beat supermarket serials?"

"Now wait just a minute!" said Edie, around a mouthful of sandwich. "Go easy on my Granny. She's an old lady," she continued, taking a long sip of her wine cooler. "Granny has the gift."

"The gift? What are you talking about?" Catherine patted her full stomach and pushed her plate away. It was pitch black out now, and she stood up to turn on another light.

"You know? The gift. Granny can sense things ordinary people can't. Like a fortune teller. She grew up in Haiti and didn't come here till she was almost twenty years old. She isn't mixed up in any of that voodoo, but she still scares me sometimes with the things she knows about people. Everybody in our neighborhood has a healthy respect for old Granny. I know I do. I've been around her all my life and know that whatever it is she's got working for her, it's real."

Catherine fleetingly thought of Narcissa and remembered her warning at Winterfest about the poisoned rose. "I know someone like that, too, Edie. I know what you mean about having a healthy respect for them."

"Yeah, well. Besides that, I have a touch of the gift myself. Probably inherited it from Gram, although it's nowhere near as powerful or accurate as hers. She says not to worry, as if I am. She says the gift grows stronger as you grow older. Not that I'm hoping and holding my breath. It's really spooky sometimes."

The next couple of hours passed quickly as they sat swapping stories about this and that. Catherine got up and switched on the television while they straightened out the kitchen. She wanted to catch the late evening news before going to bed.

Naturally, as she suspected, the news was filled with stories about the heat wave. Just as she was about to

switch it off, an emergency bulletin was released informing residents of the city of a dangerous electrical power shortage. Current power would be reduced during the hours between midnight and eight tomorrow morning. Anyone on life-sustaining machinery was asked to contact their utility company immediately. Residents were further asked to refrain from running air conditioners except in emergency situations.

With a bleak look, Catherine resolutely walked over and shut off the air conditioner. "Oh, well," she remarked. "It's cool enough in here now that if we keep the windows and the drapes closed, it should stay tolerable until late tomorrow morning."

"I knew I shouldn't have let you switch the damn television on. I had a feeling."

"Now don't you start that spooky business on me just before I'm about ready to go to bed."

"Okay. I hear you. I'm bushed, too. Those wine coolers finally did me in. Tomorrow's going to be a joy. I can hardly wait. There goes our plans of staying here in front of the air conditioner all day. Boy, this heat's really getting to me."

Catherine suddenly had the glimmer of an idea. "Edie, listen! I know what we could do tomorrow," and she proceeded to tell her friend all about the strange phone call she had gotten several days ago about her father's mysterious house. "I'd really like to take a run out there and check it out. My friend might be back in town soon, and I don't know when I'd have another free weekend to go way out there. What do you say? Besides, the car's got air, and I'm sure way out there on the Island with all that ocean around, it's bound to be a lot cooler."

"Sounds like a plan to me," grinned Edie, climbing into the bed next to her friend. Despite the heat wave, the room was still chilly and hopefully would remain comfortable at least throughout the rest of the night. "You aren't a sheet hog, are you?" Edie asked suspiciously.

Catherine laughed as she rolled over, hugging the sheets around her. "Not that anyone's ever told me. I guess you'll just have to wait and find out the hard way. Now, roll over and get some sleep, so we can get going at a decent hour tomorrow." With that, Catherine closed her eyes and immediately began drifting into that hazy world of daydreams which claims one right before falling off to sleep.

Lying there enjoying the half thoughts which drifted in and out of her mind of their own volition, Catherine was jolted by the sudden sensation of fear which gripped her heart. Sitting bolt upright in the bed, she nearly cried out, the feeling was so real.

"Cath! Cathy! Are you all right? What's the matter? You came up out of that bed like you'd seen a ghost!"

"I'm all right. Just a nightmare. Go back to sleep, Edie." Sinking back down, Catherine turned over, pretending sleep. She knew now that sleep would be long in coming. Whatever troubled Vincent was back in full force and stronger than ever. This time it was strong enough that even she could sense its lurking presence.

Vincent stared into the gloom beyond the lantern's light but could see nothing. He really didn't believe anything was actually there. *'So this is what it feels like to go mad'* he mused. "All you do is talk to yourself," he continued out loud to the empty air.

"You expected to be running amuck ripping and rending your clothes, foaming at the mouth, I suppose?"

Vincent jumped up and ran toward the voice. But there was nothing there when he got to the approximate area.

"I told you. You can't see me yet. Just be a good boy and go back over there and sit down. Let's handle this like civilized men," the disembodied voice chuckled again.

"WHO ARE YOU?" shouted Vincent, pacing back and forth across the sandy beach.

"Shouting won't get you anywhere, Vincent. Calm down. Relax. You already know who I am. Why pretend? Who else would be way down here with you? I'm why you came down here in the first place, aren't I?"

"What do you want from me? You've already taken my sanity. What more do you want?"

"Quit acting like a melodramatic fool. You're as sane as any man."

"You call this sane? Talking to myself?"

"Ah! Now we're on the right track. There. See? That wasn't so difficult, was it? Listen to me. I'm here to keep you from going insane. We wouldn't want that now, would we? What would the pretty Catherine say?"

Vincent let out an ungodly roar, and once again charged the voice only to find nothingness. Frustrated, he roared again and held his head, shaking it from side to side. **"Go away. Leave me in peace."**

"I can't, Vincent. I wish I could, but I can't. I'm part of you. Wherever you go, I go. We've been together for a long time. Since that episode with Devin. And then there was that disastrous incident when you were a teenager. You didn't handle that very well. I must add. You damn near did us both in that time. And all over that little tart."

"Lisa? How can you say that after what I - what we did to her?"

"Did to her? WE didn't do anything to her. Vincent. you were a teenage boy caught up in your first love. All you wanted to do was kiss the girl you were infatuated with. She got scared, because she didn't expect you, of all people, to act like that. Lisa was using you, Vincent. She didn't mean it. She really didn't know exactly what she was doing, teasing you like that. So she pulled away, and in the process your claws got in the way, and she got scratched. That was it. I was there, Vincent, remember? I ought to know! After all, I'm the one who does the dastardly deeds, and I didn't do anything to Lisa. Now if you want to talk about the time I raked Devin's cheek... Well, that's a different story, I admit. I'm ashamed of that one. I'm in much better control of myself now. I've grown up, too, you know."

Unable to stand it any longer, Vincent threw back his head and emitted a hideous howl.

"Are you finished? I do it much better, anyway. Leave that to me in the future. Really. Get a grip on yourself. I want to ask you a few questions. We have to come to an understanding, you and I. We can't go on like this. In all seriousness, you are going to go mad if you keep this up. You'll end up killing us both. Remember, whatever happens to you, happens to me."

"Maybe's that's for the best," breathed Vincent quietly. "A thing such as you shouldn't be loose in the world."

"A thing such as me! And do you really think that by killing me the world will be safer? Tell me, Vincent. When was the last time I raped someone? When have I ever beaten up defenseless old people? How often do I sexually abuse or neglect little children? How much ill-gotten money do I have squirreled away in the bank? When's the last time you saw me selling drugs to school kids? Tell me, how many teenage girls do I have out prostituting for me? Exactly what is it I've done that's so evil? I've killed a few scum. Well, maybe that's an understatement."

"That's all? They're human. We don't have the right to take life."

"Yes, they are! I concede the point. Maybe if they were caught normally and someone was there to help them, they could be rehabilitated. I admit it. That part does bother me. But those were not normal situations we were dealing with. In most of those cases, it was either them or Catherine. We all have

choices to make. They made choices. We made choices. They chose to live lives of evil. What they were doing was evil, Vincent. What you were doing was instinctual. You were fighting back the best way you knew how. Besides, Vincent. You didn't go it, I did. Get that through your big head.

"The part of you that loves and nurtures, that shows mercy and compassion, is the rational part of you -- the part that thinks. We unfortunately are much more of a dichotomy than the average human. I am the part which acts instinctually through a need for self-preservation. When you bonded with the woman you call Catherine, she became part of you, Vincent. Just as I am part of you. Anything that threatens her threatens you and me. When that happens for us, rational thought and instinct takes over.

"And you don't think you're human? Vincent, let me tell you something. There's more humanity in your little finger than in any three of those we killed. Why do you always dwell on the negative? You've been listening to Father for way too long. You're a grown man now, Vincent. You have to start following your own heart. Father doesn't have all the answers to everything, you know. He's not infallible. Where was he when that incident with Lisa occurred? Oh, yes! He was there, but did he handle it right? I am grateful that he was there. I had a lot at stake that time, too. But maybe if he had set you down and explained how it was with teenage boys and girls - told you that what had happened was normal and no big deal, maybe we would have never had the crisis?

"Why has he never been able to see and explain to you that we are a mixture of good and evil just like everyone else? We are just more noticeable and a lot less hypocritical about the darkness within us. There is little guile where we are concerned.

"There is good and evil in all of us. Father has been protecting you all these years. But exactly what has he been protecting you from? Catherine is the best thing that has ever happened to you, Vincent. Is Father happy for you? No! Not really. Part of Father would just as soon have Catherine vanish into thin air. You're safer that way. He's safer that way. Does he really only have your best interests at heart, or is he also projecting what happened between him and Margaret onto you and Catherine? Does he see something of Margaret in Catherine? Is this wholesome and good? Since he lost Margaret, you have been the most important thing in his life, and he in yours. You're his heir, above even Devin which we won't even discuss. You are special, like Margaret was special. Above the ordinary. After having you all to himself for all those years, maybe he finds it hard to share you with anyone else. Wake up, Vincent. This doesn't make Father evil. It makes him human.

"And what would your tunnel world be without you? How long do you think it would survive without you? Where would Father be without you? Those people are no match for the likes of Paracelsus. And where would all the poor souls who are yet to find their way to the tunnels go? Have you thought about Catherine? what will happen to her if you're gone?"

With that, the voice fell silent. Vincent sat long into the night, pondering the questions his other half had left him with.

"Wake up, lazy bones. You said you wanted to get an early start. Well, forget that action. It's already after nine-thirty. Come on. I raided the kitchen," said a cheery Edie, handing a groggy Catherine a cup of steaming black coffee. "This should put some hair on your chest. I hope you like it strong and black. I didn't see any milk out there."

Catherine took a sip of the scalding coffee and almost gagged. "Edie! What are you trying to do, poison me?" She quickly put the cup on the nightstand and swung her legs out of bed. The apartment was already beginning to feel like a sweatbox. "Come on. Let's get dressed and get out of here. I'm going to take a quick shower and then call that lady for some more specific directions to this house."

"Well, you can forget the quick trip out to the Island routine," said Edie, looking out the car window. "Thank God this car is air-conditioned. The traffic on the Long Island Expressway was bumper to bumper. I guess they all had the same idea we did, huh?"

"Oh, it won't be so bad. The farther out we go, the thinner the traffic will get. We'll probably lose most of this as soon as we hit the beaches."

Fortunately, Catherine was correct, and they made good time once they left the beach exits behind them. After taking a few wrong turns, they finally found the little town they were looking for on the end of the island. Finding the lady's house was easy. Not too many people lived way out here.

"It's kind of desolate, don't you think?" asked Edie, as they pulled into the driveway.

"Oh! I don't know," answered Catherine. "We're just used to the big city, that's all. Some people like it way out here by themselves. My father was never a loner though. I can't see him coming way out here. This gets more and more mysterious every minute. Let me just run in and get the key, and then we'll go see what's what. I'll also ask her where we can get some supplies. I'll just be a minute."

Catherine was gone for more than just a minute, and Edie could tell by the look on her face that something was up. Catherine got in the car and blew the hair out of her eyes.

"Boy! Was she strange. Talk about weird. This lady went on and on about disturbing the spirits and upsetting the dead. I don't know what she was talking about. It sure sounded like she didn't want me going to this house though. She kept talking about nobody going into that house besides her and my dad for years. Oh, well! We'll soon see for ourselves. Come on. She said there's a combination gas station/grocery store just down the road. The last outpost of civilization, according to her."

They backed out of the driveway aware that someone was staring at them out of the front window. Edie waved but got no response. Not a mile down the road, they came to the store. The owner looked like he was just getting ready to close. Catherine rushed in and ask if it was too late for them to grab some stuff.

"No, come on in, but make it snappy. I want to get out of here pronto. Where are you two ladies headed anyway? Haven't you heard the weather report?"

They hadn't. They had been too busy gabbing and looking at the scenery on the way up to turn on the radio.

"No, we haven't. Why?"

"Are you city folks?"

"We're from New York, if that's what you mean! What's that got to do with the weather?"

"Oh, nothing really. I just figured you were city folk, cause I ain't ever seen you out this way before. Where you headed, anyway?"

"I don't know what it's called. My dad owned a house out here around the point. Maybe you know where it is? His name was Chandler."

"Oh, yeah. Chandler. He usually comes in here several times a year for supplies. Haven't seen him around lately though. He been sick?"

"My dad passed away recently. I'm trying to settle up his estate. I thought I had it all taken care of, and now it seems he has this house way out here that I didn't even know about. I guess that's all I need," said Catherine, putting the last of her selections on the counter. "Unless you see something else you want, Edie."

Edie quickly looked around and added a few small items to the pile. "That should do it," she said, opening one of the twinkies. "Before we go, what was that about the weather?"

"Almost forgot. We're may be due for a hurricane around here. Better keep a sharp eye out. If things get too nasty out there, I'd head on out if I was you. It's that storm that hit down South and blew out to sea. Supposedly it's out there over the ocean possibly rejuvenating itself and might decide to head on back inland. But the weathermen are always predicting storms like that around here, and all we usually get though is rain. Well, if that's all you need, I want to get on home. The wife has dinner waiting, and she gets her nose out of joint if I'm late. Have a nice stay."

In the short time it took to drive from the store to the house, which they found easily enough, the wind had picked up, the sky had turned overcast and sullen, and the temperature had dropped considerably.

"Here comes the rain," said Edie, as big drops began to splatter across the windshield, making visibility difficult. Catherine turned on the wipers as she spied the name Chandler on a sign near the entrance to a circular driveway. Entering, they steered the car around the curve and Catherine froze.

Edie grabbed the wheel and stepped on the brake. "Cathy. Are you sure you're all right? You've been acting pretty strange these last couple of days. Want to tell me about it?"

Catherine was lost in a montage of images from her childhood; Mommy running down the steps of this house and hugging her while Daddy stood on the porch beaming; Daddy and her playing with the kitten, while Mommy sat in the lawn chair resting; Swimming early in the morning with Mommy as the sun was coming up; Daddy bringing towels and hot cocoa down the long flight of stairs which led to the private little beach; The doctor coming in the middle of the night.

"Cathy, talk to me. You're beginning to scare me. Maybe you'd better move over and let me drive us out of here. You don't look too good, girl."

"Edie. I remember this house," said Catherine, in a flat voice. "I had forgotten all about it. I must have just blocked it out of my mind completely. This is the house my Dad rented the summer my Mother died. We were here for about six weeks that summer, before Mom went into the hospital. We left suddenly the night she went into the hospital, and I never came back here. Dad, though, apparently did. I can still see the inside of the house as if it were yesterday. The whole backend faces the ocean. Mommy loved sitting in these rooms and looking out over the ocean. She would wave to me and Dad when we were down at the beach. Edie, I don't know if I want to go in there. I'm scared of what I might find. Why would Dad buy this house after what happened here?"

"Cathy, I don't know what to tell you, but we can't sit out here in this car. It's getting dark out. I mean really dark. Either we leave, or we get out and go inside. Which do you want to do?"

Catherine hesitated a moment longer. Everything inside her wanted to turn around and leave, but she'd had the strangest sensations all afternoon. The conflicting emotions she had read from Vincent were really strange. Stranger yet was the feeling that the farther out on the island she drove, the nearer to Vincent she came. Besides, she was exhausted physically and emotionally drained.

"Let's stay," Catherine decided, pushing the door open against the wind and getting out.

Quickly she ran up the porch steps and shoved the key in the lock, opening the door. and going inside before she could change her mind. Edie followed with a bag of groceries.

"Cathy, this is lovely," said Edie, looking around. "The view would be magnificent if it weren't so dark out there. Turn on some lights. We do have lights, don't we? Did you think to ask that lady if we have electricity, water, and things like that?" Edie asked nervously.

"Yes. We have all the things we need. She said there's even a phone and a television." They went back out to the car and quickly got the rest of their things inside. Catherine went back out to the front porch and found

the switch which turned on the electricity. Wandering around, she turned on lights in the kitchen and living room, chasing away the gloom of early evening.

The rain was really coming down hard, but Catherine wasn't focused on the weather. Looking at the magazines laying around the living room gave her a sick feeling in her stomach. *'Poor Dad,'* she thought. They dated back to the summer of her mother's death. That gave her an indication of what she'd probably find in the bedroom when she finally steeled her nerves enough to look.

Edie began banging things around the kitchen. Turning on the water tap, she let it run until the water was clean and clear. She was relieved to find the refrigerator totally empty - no surprises. She could already hear the machine humming and knew that it would soon be cold.

Rummaging around in the cupboards, Edie found pots and pans. Putting water on to boil for tea, she went in search of Catherine and found her sitting in the living room by the window.

"We should have hot water for tea soon, Cathy. I put all the rest of the stuff away. You wanna talk?"

Catherine's emotions were roiling just beneath the facade of her calm exterior as she picked bits of tufting off the throw pillow she clutched in her lap. Her lips began to tremble, and her voice cracked as she tried to force the words out.

"Aw, Cath," said Edie softly, sitting down next to her. Putting her arm around her, she gave her friend's shoulder a good squeeze. "You hurtin, ha? If it means anything, I'm glad you're not facing this alone. I'm glad I'm here with you. But it's not only this house, is it? Something's been up with you for a long time, hasn't it? You've never talked about it, and it sure isn't any of my business, but if you need to talk about whatever it is, I'm here."

"Thanks, Edie. I really appreciate your friendship. So much has been happening lately. I've just got a lot on my mind. This thing with my father has really unnerved me. Just look at this place. Straight out of the sixties. He hasn't changed a thing since the day my Mother died. The place is a mausoleum.

Poor Dad. He missed her terribly. He must have felt so alone. I never knew just how alone he must of felt. He kept it from me. I have a hunch he knew that this wasn't exactly healthy and didn't want to expose me to it. It's so sad thinking of him going through all those years alone, missing her like that.

I don't want that to happen to me, Edie. I can't explain it. When I think of my dad and this, I get scared. It's a really scary thing to think of going through life alone without that special somebody. I don't know if I could do it. Even though he did this," said Catherine, sweeping her hand around the room, "He still went ahead with life without her. I don't know if I could do that without...." Catherine's words trailed off.

"Without Vincent?" said Edie, staring straight at Catherine. At Catherine's sharply indrawn breath, Edie grinned. "Keep your pants on. That was nothing. I remembered seeing that little book of poems that time I was at your place. It had his name in it, and I asked you who he was, and you told me he was a special friend. That same book is still there on your table, looking a lot more worn. Like you handle it a lot. Two plus two equals four."

Catherine sighed, relieved to hear her friend's explanation. "I'm sorry, Edie. I can't tell you anymore. I made a promise not to talk about him. But yes, his name is Vincent, and yes he's pretty important to me. About the most important thing in my life. Right now he's away, and I just guess I'm feeling lonely. He should be back soon, however." With that she fell silent again.

"You don't have to say a word, Cath, but I get the feeling that this Vincent leads a pretty strange life. I've had that feeling for a long time. And I also get the feeling that you two are not... Well, you know. You're just still friends. You keep calling him your friend."

"Edie, please. I can't say anymore."

"Well, let's just forget I ever brought the subject up. I'll go fix us some tea. Then we'll decide what to make for dinner. You can stretch out here and rest. You look about done in."

Good to her word, Edie went and got the tea and then left again to return moments later with a blanket and pillows.

"Here! I found these in the bathroom closet. You just relax and enjoy your tea and let ole Edie make magic in the kitchen. If you liked my toasted cheese, just wait till you taste my dinner." With that she was gone, leaving Catherine with her thoughts.

Vincent sat for a long while appreciating the sound of nothing more than the slight roar of the waterfall. He stared off into the cavern not really focusing on, or seeing anything. The voice, mercifully, had stopped. It faded away as if it had never been, and had left him with nothing but unanswered questions. But he knew he would eventually be forced to find answers. His sanity, and future well-being hinged on them.

Not for the first time, was Vincent relieved that he had distanced himself from the others. Watching him go through this was more than he wished to inflict upon them - especially Catherine. Quickly he turned his mind toward other thoughts, fearful of dwelling on her - on what he had at stake.

What the voice had said about the tunnel community and Catherine were all too true. Leaving them unprotected, at the possible mercy of someone as diabolical as Paracelsus, horrified Vincent. Cold fear insidiously snaked through his mind as he thought of the probabilities. If Paracelsus ever thought that he were no longer a viable force to deal with, then Vincent knew beyond a doubt that it would be no time at all before that evil genius would move on Father and the others. Paracelsus' desire to rule and reign supreme in the tunnels would drive him until he accomplished that goal, probably with tragic consequences for the unprotected community. Vincent shook his maned head in an effort to purge the thoughts conjured up by his imagination. All too well he remembered the vivid nightmare he had once had which showed him life in the tunnels under Paracelsus' rule. Vincent's instincts told him that the tunnel world had not yet seen the last of that madman.

Evil versus instinct. That is what the voice had intimated. There was such a thing as evil in the world. Of that, Vincent was convinced. Some people, like Paracelsus, openly chose the evil, knowing full well what they did. They desired it, relishing and rejoicing in it, seeming to feed liberally on its devastating results as if they could not get enough of it. And he thought of all the various mental illnesses and aberrations which ran rampant in the society Above.

In contrast, what happened within him was instinctual, lacking conscious volition - at least none he was aware of. He struck out through a need to protect. Vincent worried, however, that there might possibly be, somewhere deep within him, some hidden place where the things he did in a rage were conceived with consent. If they were, though, he was totally unaware of it.

While this thought brought him some much needed peace and consolation, Vincent was still left to face the inevitable fact that whether through instinct or choice, the results were undeniably the same. Death and carnage - delivered in a terrifying manner. He did not think he could deal with it much longer.

Yet the alternative was to leave those he loved unprotected. Leave them at the mercy of the likes of Paracelsus and others who preyed on the weak and defenseless. But could he find somewhere within him the strength to overcome his sense of self-revulsion and continue to play the role of tunnel protector?

And Father! What the voice said concerning Father also had a slight ring of truth to it. It was a situation he had long put off dealing with because of his love and deep respect for his adoptive parent. Father had always been overprotective. At times, Father even seemed overbearing. Much as he disliked dealing with the situation, more and more lately he found himself at logger-heads with Father -- usually over Catherine.

It was a situation which brought Vincent added sorrow. It would no sooner seem that the two people he cared most deeply about in the world were finally getting along, when Father would erupt over some new incident he saw as a threat to Vincent.

Much as he loved and respected Father, the man needed to finally come to the realization that it was time for Vincent to take charge of his own life. Before Catherine came into his life, there had been very little, if any, conflict between Father and him concerning anything. Vincent was now more than ready to make his own decisions - especially those concerning Catherine. But these thoughts tore at Vincent like sharp knives.

And Lisa? Vincent momentarily cringed even thinking the name - almost abandoning where these thoughts could possibly lead. Thoughts of Lisa were still painful and brought memories of remorse and revulsion. Had she really simply been toying with him as the voice said? Had she simply panicked in fear of where the situation was going? Panicked to think she had pushed him too far?

Lisa herself, had eventually come back to the tunnels seemingly unafraid of Vincent. She had come back professing a desire for renewed friendship and contact with her tunnel family. She had tried to use her family for her own devious purposes. While there, however, Lisa told Vincent that what had happened between them was ancient history - child's play. She had lightly brushed off the whole incident as if it had been a mere childish argument.

Could that be all it really was? Catherine seemed to think so, saying that such things happened frequently between teenagers. There Vincent found her observations to be true. Since he had taken up the role of teacher in the tunnels years ago, many of the teens had come to him looking for help and guidance in dealing with things in the emotional realm. Why had he not seen the connection between their problems and his of so long ago? Was it really that simple, or was this what he now desperately wanted to believe?

Why had Father not been able to explain these things at the time the incident occurred? Was he possibly afraid to investigate that avenue? Exactly what did Father see him as? In all these years, they had never once talked openly about this subject. It was and always had been taboo. What was Father afraid of? More importantly, had some of Father's subconscious fears colored Vincent's perceptions of himself?

Hopefully, the answers to some of these questions would bring Vincent to the conclusion that he was not that much different from other people. He was beginning to see that in every one there is the capacity for good and evil in a multiplicity of ways. Many times people have hidden thoughts and desires which, when acted upon inadvertently, bring pain and sorrow to those around them. Father and Lisa were by no means what Vincent would consider evil people. They were human. They had made choices which sometimes ended up being hurtful to others.

This thought brought Vincent to the heart of his biggest problem. This aspect of choice. Consciously or subconsciously others had the luxury of choice. They often times claimed at a later date to not have known what they were doing, but if they searched deep inside and analyzed the situation, they would see where the choice had definitely been made.

This was one of the things which made Vincent feel very different from others. He had no conscious awareness of choice when his instincts took over. What the voice had said about their being a much more split personality was certainly true. He felt as if there were actually two separate beings living within him. The one rational; capable of making choices, the other acting totally on instinct. Vincent's inability to control the other being he so often sensed deep within himself frightened and outraged him.

Although it could be argued that since Vincent really seemed to have no choice at those times when his instincts took over, he should not worry about it. The truth was, Vincent did. He could not escape the feeling that somewhere buried deep within himself at the center of his being was an unknown place. And it was here he possibly made those deadly choices, sending his instincts raging out.

Choice versus instinct. Was this not supposedly what, according to many authorities, was one of the important aspects that separated man from beast? Was not man's power of conscious, rational, controlling thought one of the deciding factors? Vincent knew that he possessed rational thought as well as speech and the ability to articulate those thoughts. Yet he also lost himself for periods of time in uncontrollable rages which left him unaware of who or what he was.

What was he to think? Questions and more questions. Vincent's head swam. He needed to stop thinking -- needed time to internalize these troublesome thoughts.

Standing stiffly, Vincent flexed his muscles to relieve the cramps and stiffness. He then busied himself with the task of preparing a small meal from the supplies he had brought with him, supplementing the meal with the cool, sweet river water. Vincent looked around his intent on his surroundings for the first time since his initial inspection upon arrival. He was fascinated with what his eyes beheld. As they adjusted to the murky darkness immediately surrounding him, Vincent could see strange, bizarre shapes far down at the end of the cavern on his side of the river. Judging from the distance, he estimated the cavern to be about seventy feet in length. The width was somewhat harder to judge. There was no way of telling until he had walked the whole length if it was uniform. He had the vague impression that there were several places where dark recesses in the cavern's wall indicated branchings leading who knew where.

The whole end of the vast cavern suddenly seemed to be bathed in an iridescent, hazy light which shimmered off the spray hanging in the air surrounding the falls. Vincent had not noticed this before and searched the area far above his head trying to locate the source of the pale light filtering down from Above. There could be possible fissures and crevices in the cave's roof responsible for admitting the light. It was something he resolved to investigate after he had some sleep. For now, Vincent contented himself with moving farther down the length of the cave, holding his lantern out in front of him. The wall on his side, he now noticed for the first time, glittered, giving it a sparkling, crystal-like effect. At one time, in the not too recent past, there must have been water flowing down the wall to produce the effect he was now observing.

Walking farther on, he eventually came to one of the dark areas in the wall he had seen before starting out on his inspection. As he suspected, it was the entryway to another vast cavern running horizontally to the one he was in. Entering it, Vincent immediately noticed that it was immense. Next he noticed that it was crowded with massive stone-like structures. Stalagmites and stalactites. He was familiar with them from other caves he had explored. Their colors were amazing. Never before had he seen such variety in one cave. There were pale reds and yellows mingled with opaque whites and grays. Dark browns and jet black were also in evidence. Most of the pillars were solid color, but here and there Vincent saw an occasional structure which had variations produced by diagonal bands of contrasting color. Some of the columns were tipped with blue and green where the water was still actively working as it dropped from somewhere up Above. the roof soared into utter darkness way overhead.

As Vincent moved on into the vast cavern and walked among the columns and pillars, he could not help feeling as if he had somehow stumbled into a subterranean fairy world. The walls in this cavern looked like draperies which might at any minute billow out in the cool breeze that came from somewhere in the farthest recesses of the cavern.

Walking along, fascinated with the sights he was beholding, Vincent was suddenly aware of water lapping over his boots and chilling his feet. Quickly he stepped back aware of a stream of cold, fast moving air circulating over the water. Lowering his lantern, he saw a sight which nearly took his breath away. A large pool of bluish-green water glimmered in the lantern's soft, muted glow. Thin, colorful, needle-like spires rose gracefully from various areas of the pool, snaking in a variety of directions. The tips of the spires ended

in feather-like appendages. Although stationary and made of limestone, they almost seemed to sway; so graceful did they look.

Vincent felt something crunch under his boot as he turned to leave. Glancing down, he noticed around his feet strange looking pebbles. Bending down he picked up a handful and examined them closely. From reading about caves and caverns in books from Father's extensive library, Vincent knew he held in his hand something rarely seen by men -- cave pearls. They sparkled with a dull sheen. Stooping, Vincent gathered several handfuls from around the perimeter of the pool. Putting them in one of his numerous pockets, he fleetingly wondered if Mouse could possibly fashion them into a rope.

Edie eventually returned with a dinner tray to find Catherine staring fixedly out the window. Her friend seemed a little calmer, and she hoped that the mood would remain. Although she didn't say so to Cathy, this house gave her the creeps. She had a bad feeling about the place that she couldn't put a name to. Sitting next to Catherine, Edie set the tray on the table in front of the couch. Looking out the window at the blackened sky, she wondered if it were smart to remain here in this isolated place. The wind was howling relentlessly outside, and the sound of waves crashing on the beach below was far from comforting to a city girl.

"Feeling better?" Edie asked, picking up her cup of tea from the tray.

"Yes. Thanks, Edie, for putting up with me. I didn't mean for our weekend to work out this way. We should never have come here. I should have had a realtor handle this, but curiosity got the better of me. I couldn't imagine what my father was doing with a house way out here that I didn't even know about. There was no mention of this place in any of his legal papers. Not even a deed. I imagine I'll find it here someplace."

"Do you think it's a good idea for you to go poking around here feeling like you do? We could just sleep here, get up early, and leave if you want. You could still have a realtor handle it, Cathy. You don't have to put yourself through this."

"No. I'm already here. The damage is done. I might just as well try and locate the deed. Heaven only knows what else I'll find. This house seemed to be like his secret drawer. I better check around while I'm here. There might be some things of my mother's stored here that I'd like to have. Outside of some jewelry, my father never gave me anything of hers, and I know she had some beautiful collector's pieces. I have a feeling they might be stored here somewhere.

"We were only at this house for such a short time, but I remember how much my mother loved it. She fell in love with it the first day we saw it. I'll have a look around tomorrow in the daylight. Right now, though, this food looks pretty inviting. I'm suddenly starving. Let's eat before it gets cold."

Finally dousing the lantern, Vincent settled down and dozed off into a light, fitful sleep in which his dark side stalked him relentlessly through the murky cavern.

A light shining in his eyes brought Vincent gradually awake. Looking around he wondered where the light was coming from. His lantern remained unlit where he had left it before going to sleep. Peering upwards, he could barely distinguish light filtering down from somewhere up the cliff high above the falls.

Curious as to its source, Vincent relit his lantern and studied the cliff on either side of the falls. It didn't seem to look especially dangerous as far as climbing was concerned, but Vincent was hesitant about going back into the water. Yet he could see no other way. Reluctantly, he stripped then rolled his clothes into a ball and wrapped them in his cloak. Tying the cloak around his head and neck, Vincent carefully entered the water and waded out to where he could feel it begin to slope. Inching farther out, one foot at a time, he

found the drop off point. Giving a mighty heave with his feet, Vincent struck out for the other side, giving the area of the small falls a wide berth. The water in midstream was cold but not the same frigid water as he had encountered down Below. Before long, he had gained the other bank.

His clothes were relatively dry. He retrieved his boots that he had earlier tossed across the river and dressed quickly and began his ascent, searching for the light source. The climb was long but easy. There were plenty of hand and foot holds along the way. It was almost like climbing stairs and there were numerous wide ledge areas where he periodically rested.

After he had been climbing for what must have been a couple of hours, Vincent began to wonder just how far up the cliff went. Suddenly, there above him, he noticed cracks and fissures in the cliff face not too much higher up. Within minutes he had reached the first of the fissures and found that while most of them were too narrow to allow passage, there were several through which he could squeeze. It was from these fissures that the light which had filtered down to him below was entering.

Squeezing through the largest crevice, Vincent found himself on a narrow ledge overlooking an expanse of water so vast he was unable to absorb the reality of it. He stood mesmerized, staring far out over the water, lost in the primeval beauty of it.

The water was in a constant state of motion, heaving up and down, bearing in upon the unprotected cliff where Vincent perched. Spray from the roiling water shot up, blanketing the area where he stood with a fine mist. Wind billowed around him, whipping his hair in several different directions at once, stinging his face. Breathing deeply, Vincent recognized the smell of salt and realized that far below him stretched the ocean. Looking out over the water till it blended into the far distant horizon, he knew the scene would be permanently etched in his memory.

Suddenly realizing that he was out in the open and exposed, Vincent quickly scanned the surrounding area but detected nothing threatening. He breathed an audible sigh of relief. He was free to stay and enjoy this unexpected miracle. For years he had yearned to see the ocean, never believing that he would actually ever have the chance. It seemed to him at this moment that he was at the end of the world. There was nothing but him and the ocean.

Vincent had absolutely no idea where he was. He could not even venture a guess. The paths he had taken Below had twisted and turned in upon themselves so much that even his keen sense of direction had eventually given out, leaving him dependent upon the trail he had marked to eventually find his way home.

Black thunderclouds, so dark they stood out against the lesser darkness of night, raced across the sky almost obliterating the subdued light emanating from the moon. The whole of the cliff side where he perched was in heavy darkness. Glancing up, Vincent caught his breath. There high above, peeking from behind the scudding clouds, hung the largest, darkest moon Vincent had ever seen. Still rising, it had not reached its ascendancy. It slowly traversed its way upward, shining its murky light on the storm swept ocean far below.

Vincent usually loved watching the moon from the culvert in Central Park. Catherine had given him a calendar listing the moon's cycles. He rarely missed going Above to watch on days when there was a full moon. Now, looking at the darkened moon above him, he shivered. It reminded him of the darkness rising within himself. As he watched the moon, his keen eye caught light and movement weakly coming from another source. Off in the distance, Vincent could barely make out the shape of a lighthouse standing lonely sentinel on a narrow spit of land. Once again, he fleetingly wondered where he might be, but the sights and smells and sounds surrounding him quickly recaptured his attention, and he was once again lost in the wild beauty of the water and the night. Hunkering down, Vincent spread his cloak on the rocky ledge and made himself comfortable.

Dinner was long over and still the friends sat, each wrapped in the silence of their own thoughts. The embers of a fire Edie had started hours ago glowed brightly in the fireplace, dispelling the dampness from the room. Outside, the wind had died down somewhat, and the rain for the moment had slowed to a misty drizzle.

"Well, I don't know about you," said Edie, "but I am tired. You look tired, too, Catherine. You're practically falling asleep sitting there. If you plan on doing all the things you want to around here tomorrow, you'd better get some sleep. Com'on."

Catherine roused herself and sluggishly stood up. She was emotionally drained and physically exhausted. All the sleepless night seemed to have caught up with her, leaving her in a state of tired numbness. She slowly followed Edie down the back hallway and into the bedroom, and once again Catherine was transported back to that troubled time in her childhood when her Mother had died.

The room had obviously been left as it had been when her mother had shared it with her father. Mutely keeping her thoughts to herself, Catherine helped Edie strip and change the bed. They talked little as they prepared for bed and soon both women were cozily settled deep in the large feather bed.

Edie kept her own council, suspecting the sad thoughts which were going through her friend's mind. She was increasingly worried about Catherine and decided to talk to Joe about it when they returned to the city. Cathy looked like she needed a good long rest. Maybe Joe could talk her into taking a vacation. It would do Cathy good. Having made this decision, Edie fell into an uneasy sleep, still bothered by her surroundings.

Catherine lay in the dark wishing sleep would claim her, obliterating the thoughts which kept crowding her mind. Thoughts of her beautiful mother suddenly gone, leaving her a lonely little girl, sharply brought back hurtful memories. She relived the feelings once again experiencing the acute sense of loss. Mercifully, sleep eventually claimed her, blocking out the sorrowful memories.

Sometime later, Catherine woke sensing an unseen presence in the room. Startled, she sat up and searched the room. A thin shaft of light filtered through the sheer, summery curtains, shedding enough light into the darkened bedroom for Catherine to see the form standing quietly beside the bed. Catherine's heart skipped a beat as she recognized the beautiful woman. "Mom?" she managed to say and was then lost in the gentle answering smile of the apparition. Edie, half awake, lay curled in a fetal ball, wishing her Granny was present to chase away the spirit.

The next morning, Catherine awoke to the smell of fresh perked coffee blending into the unmistakable odor of bacon sizzling in the fry pan. She felt wonderful. Better than she had in weeks. Catherine stretched lazily, enjoying the weak sunshine which filtered into the room. *'So much for the hurricane'*, she thought gratefully. Rising, she made her way to the bathroom for a nice hot shower. She would treasure the memory of her mother's visit forever, never questioning the reality of it. Knowing Vincent had long ago taught her that anything was possible.

As she stood in the shower allowing the hot water to ease the remnants of tiredness from her body, Catherine remembered every detail about the previous night. She realized that something else had happened since she had arrived here. Her fears and doubts concerning Vincent and what she must do about their relationship had vanished. Catherine was now more than ever determined to have the happy life she believed that she and Vincent were entitled. Important as her job was to her, Catherine decided once and for all that it was not as important or necessary to her happiness as being with Vincent.

Living a life Above was no longer a consideration either. She would far rather be happy with Vincent Below than lonely and unfulfilled Above. Besides, Vincent's safety and healthy state of mind were of prime concern to Catherine now. This last episode was more than enough to show her that Vincent could no longer continue to be put at risk by the type of job she had. Catherine could no longer bear to put Vincent in

danger ever again.

Vincent was the most important thing in her life. Catherine did not want to lose him. She had learned from this trip out to this hideaway of her father's that sharing life with the person one loved was more important than anything else. Her mother's parting message had been that Catherine should begin to lead her happy life and enjoy it, and she planned to do just that. She could not wait to return to the city and tell Vincent of her decision.

Impatient as she was to return to the city though, Catherine could not shake the distinct feeling that Vincent was close by. It was a calming thought, and she wrapped it around her like a blanket and settled into its comforting warmth.

Edie sensed the change in Cathy immediately when her friend walked into the kitchen early the next morning. "I knew the smell of coffee and bacon would eventually lure you out here," she said to Cathy, giving her a big smile.

Edie had pushed the thoughts of what had happened way back in her mind, refusing to think about them. Maybe it had only been a vivid dream. Occasionally she had some really weird ones. At least she hoped that's all it had been. The house, however, had seemed different to Edie this morning when she had awakened. Today, it was just an ordinary beach house devoid of the heavy brooding presence Edie had felt all day yesterday. Whatever had happened last night, Edie was glad it was over - was glad that the presence seemed to be gone, leaving behind a much more peaceful Cathy.

"That coffee smells wonderful, Edie, and I can't even remember when it was I had eaten last, it was so long ago. It looks delicious," said Catherine, yawning.

"Well, sit down and dig in. I'm going to take a shower. Then maybe we can get into that attic if that's what you still want to do?" She could tell by Cathy's reaction that was precisely what her friend had in mind. Edie left Catherine there to breakfast as she hurried off to take a shower.

Actually, Edie was almost as excited by the prospect of exploring the attic as Catherine. Living in apartment all her life, she had never been in an attic before. She loved poking around musty old places, digging into forgotten mementos of the past. As often as she could, she hunted around the city's antique shops, bringing home this treasure and that when the price was right, and she could afford it. No telling what was in this attic. Yesterday, Catherine had told her it ran the whole length of the house. It would be fun to explore it.

Catherine was just finishing up her second cup of coffee when Edie reappeared in old jeans and a sweatshirt obviously excited about poking around in the attic. Leaving the dishes to soak, they went in search of the entrance to the attic which Catherine vaguely remembered was located in the closet of one of the spare bedrooms. She hoped there would be no surprises up there, but after last night, Catherine doubted there would be. She had the distinct feeling that her Mother had accomplished the purpose for which she had returned. With a lighter step than she'd had in weeks, she opened the closet door, and they easily located the pull-down stairway leading to the attic and began their adventure.

The screeching and clacking of gulls woke Vincent just as the orb of the sun was peeking up over the horizon. He had sat in the wide ledge last night watching the dark moon rising and thinking about all the things the voice, which he half-believed was his conscience, had said to him. Enough time had now passed since the incident with the outsiders to allow his equilibrium to restabilize. For some reason, he felt lucky this time. Vincent's reaction to the outsiders was a serious concern, leaving him with a dilemma. He knew that he could not live with any more violence without there being serious consequences. Vincent knew that there could be no more incidents like the one with the outsiders. If there were, he would run the risk of

being lost in the darkness the violence produced in his soul, becoming totally engulfed by it.

Pushing these thoughts away, Vincent stretched and stood, never taking his eyes from the rising disk that was now totally visible. Nothing in his memory compared to the sight which was now unfolding before his hungry eyes. Over the years, he had caught a fleeting impression of daylight now and again from some of the more isolated tunnel entryways, but never had he seen anything to compare to this. Watching the sun climb lazily into the sky, he was amazed at its color. Expecting a yellowish hue, Vincent was surprised at the deep, rich pumpkin-orange color tinged with red. More fascinating was the perfect roundness of the disk hanging in the sky overhead. Vincent felt that he could reach up and pluck it out of the sky, so distinct and separate it was from the leaden setting surrounding it. The ominous appearance of the sky registered only vaguely in comparison to his reaction to the sun's awesome beauty. He was completely captivated by the momentous experience. Never had he expected such concentrated brilliance.

Sometime later, Vincent spotted several tiny specks on the surface of the water moving parallel to the cliff face on which he perched. Curious, he watched them grow larger eventually identifying them as fishing boats. He was not overly concerned about them till they came close enough for him to be able to begin distinguishing shapes moving around the surface of the boats.

Reluctantly, he gathered up his cloak and vanished back into the darkness of the crevice. From this hidden vantage point, Vincent continued to watch the sun for some time longer before beginning his descent to the cavern far below the ground. Finally reaching his camp, Vincent realized he was acutely hungry and set about preparing a meal from the meager remains of his supplies. Calculating how much food was left after he finished, Vincent decided that he best leave for the home tunnels no later than tomorrow morning.

Early tomorrow, Vincent knew he would make the climb again to greet the dawn before starting for home. He also was pleased with the thought of future trips to this cavern. There was much here that he had not had a chance to explore. In his mind's eye he envisioned the permanent camp he would like to set up in the cavern - well stocked with the necessities needed for an extended stay.

The attic proved to be everything the friends envisioned --and more. Catherine was delighted with the treasures she found all neatly packed and crated. All the boxes and crates were labeled in her father's neat, precise handwriting. Her mother's belongings were confined to one specific area of the attic, and Catherine soon lost herself in exploring the contents of the various boxes and packing crates.

Edie was delighted by the contents of the remainder of the attic. The house must have been older than she realized, judging from the number and age of the antiques scattered around the attic. Soon she too, was lost investigating the various items contained in a pair of well-worn steamer trunks which looked like they had not been opened in over a hundred years.

They spent several pleasant hours poking through the contents of the attic before Edie declared that she was hungry. Looking up from a picture album she vaguely remembered, Catherine quickly agreed. Standing, Catherine stretched her cramped limbs, giving the treasures around her one last look before joining Edie at the stairway.

Leaving the confines of the dusty attic, they made their way back downstairs to find, according to the kitchen clock, that it was already mid-afternoon.

"No wonder you were hungry," Catherine giggled, looking at her dust covered friend. "Listen. You go get cleaned up while I make us some sandwiches and tea. You've gotten stuck with all the cooking so far this weekend. I guess I can handle sandwiches," she said ruefully.

"Girl, you are impossible. It would be funny if I didn't know that you were serious. What am I going to do with you? What are you going to do if you ever get married? Feed him sandwiches for every meal? I can see

I'm going to have to spend some time giving you cooking lessons," Edie left for her shower, happy to see the smile on Catherine's fade. She was glad that her friend's good mood seemed to be holding. She had not known what would happen once Catherine got to that attic earlier. Going through her mother's belongings could have proven a traumatic experience.

Edie reappeared shortly rubbing her wet hair on a towel. Looking at lunch, she had to admit that Catherine had not done too bad a job of it. The ham and cheese sandwiches looked thick and inviting, and Edie lost no time diving in. Soup and salad accompanied the sandwiches, and Edie did not have the heart to tell Catherine that she had burned the soup. It proved unnecessary when moments later Catherine's face crinkled in dislike upon tasting it.

"Not too good, is it?" she stated. "Maybe I should take you up on your offer. Cooking lessons sure couldn't hurt."

After cleaning up the kitchen, Catherine suggested they drive over to the lighthouse, telling Edie that she would enjoy getting out of the house for awhile.

"Besides," she told Edie, "If my memory serves me correctly, I remember going there with my father the summer we stayed here. The lighthouse has quite a history. It has stood on the point since the late 1700's. My father used to joke about the stories it could probably tell if it could only talk."

It was only a short drive over to the lighthouse, no more than several miles at most. They were not there very long before both women noticed a sharp drop in the temperature. It suddenly got very cold. Looking out over the water, Catherine also noticed that the waves were getting higher and higher even as they stood there. The sun was completely hidden behind a solid bank of dark clouds which looked like behemoths clumsily lumbering their way across the sky and rain began falling as the women made a mad dash for the car.

Pulling out of the small lighthouse parking lot, Edie voiced her concern. "Cathy. Since you have had a chance to explore the attic already, maybe we should seriously think about packing up and getting out of here. I know we had decided to drive back early tomorrow morning in time for work, but looking at that sky and those waves makes me uneasy. Maybe that hurricane decided to come back."

"No. I don't think it's the hurricane itself, Edie. It's probably a storm front which has been generated by the hurricane. Kind of like an after effect. They're pretty common in this neck of the woods. But I kind of agree with you. It's still early and look at it out there. Maybe we should just get packed up and leave. It wouldn't take us long to throw our stuff into the car and take off. I can have a professional mover come back in and pick up my mother's things later."

Agreed about leaving, the two friends lost no time making short work of gathering up their belongings and heading the car back towards the city. The wind howled around them and rocked the car, causing them to be even happier about leaving. Being in the storm was one thing. Being in a storm out here in the middle of nowhere with the ocean at your back door was a totally different story. Neither woman was sorry to be leaving.

Driving down the road, Catherine glanced at the gas gauge and froze. It was on empty. She knew the car well enough to know that she probably had enough gas to drive maybe a dozen miles at best. Not a happy prospect. Suddenly, she remembered the little general store, and her spirits lightened considerably. A few miles later, her happy mood dissolved as she read the closed sign on the store's front door. Closed up tighter than a drum.

"They sure pull the sidewalks in and roll them up early around here, don't they?" remarked Edie, anxiously peering around as if she hoped someone would miraculously appear out of nowhere. "Well, now what do we do?" she asked Catherine in a frightened voice. "Any suggestions?"

Catherine stared around, wondering what they could do. She couldn't think of anything but to drive back to the house and either call someone on the telephone or spend the night there at the house. *'They were probably getting upset over nothing, anyway'* thought Catherine. After telling Edie what she thought, the two returned to the car and reluctantly drove off in the direction of the house. A leaded sky had turned almost pitch black by now, and the wind was at fever pitch shaking the car badly as they drove.

Entering the house, they felt somewhat better to be out of the violent wind. Catherine decided that maybe they should try calling someone and letting them know where they were. Crossing over to the phone and picking it up, she was badly shaken to find that there was no dial tone. Simultaneously the lights went out leaving Catherine and Edie in total darkness.

Vincent stirred in his sleep and suddenly came wide awake, sensing a presence in the chamber with him. More than anything, he fervently hoped that whatever it was he sensed in the chamber would not talk to him.

"So, you're finally awake. I was beginning to wonder if you had a sleeping sickness."

Jumping up, Vincent wildly searched the area all around where he stood. Seeing nothing did not surprise him. Silently he waited for the now familiar voice of his nemesis to continue.

"The conclusions you reached concerning the problems we talked about yesterday are a big step in the right direction, but you are still avoiding the primary issue."

An extended pause alerted Vincent to the fact that a response from him was expected. Resigned to the supposition that his visitor would not depart, Vincent finally asked, "And what do you believe is the primary issue?"

"Vincent, Vincent. Don't be obtuse. From day one, our problem has always been the beautiful Catherine. What are we going to do about her?"

A low growl started deep in Vincent's chest. So there it was out in the open. Vincent had been avoiding this issue since the night he had brusquely dismissed Catherine from his life. Even this fleeting thought of her filtering through his mind brought an almost unbearable feeling of loneliness and loss. Vincent didn't want to lose Catherine. She was the only thing he had to lighten the darkness of his life.

"Well. What ARE we going to do now that we are finally agreed about Catherine?"

Vincent paled and stepped backwards, away from the direction of the voice.

"That bothers you, doesn't it? You don't like me talking about Catherine. And this, my dear Vincent, is the crux of the problem. You are afraid of me - afraid of what I might do to Catherine. And maybe just a little bit jealous and uneasy over sharing her with me?"

Losing control, Vincent threw back his head and howled. ***"Yes!"*** he roared. ***"I live in constant fear of what you might possibly do to her. How could I not?"*** he added, pacing back and forth across the small, sandy beach.

"Vincent, how could you even think that I would ever do anything to harm Catherine?" The question dropped with velvet softness into the silence of the cavern. Gone was the bantering quality of the voice, replaced by hurt, sadness, and resignation. ***"You have no idea how much I love her."***

"Love?" Vincent's voice dripped with derision. ***"What could you possibly know about love?"***

"I express it in the only way open to me, Vincent. I protect her - guard her. When she is in danger, it's me that goes to her - saves her. Can't you understand that?" The voice was now a strangled cry. ***"You cherish her and read poetry to her and share music with her, but it's me who fights to save her life - kills for her."***

It's me who hears her cries - senses her fear."

Vincent could listen to no more. Struggling against the desire to accept the truth of what was being said, he grabbed his cloak and blindly sought the exit to the cavern. All he wanted to do was put distance between himself and the voice. Too much of what had been said rang true. He needed time to assimilate it - to come to terms with it.

"Don't go, Vincent. Don't avoid it any longer. Deal with it now, or you will run the risk of serious consequences. Catherine will be lost to us forever. Somewhere between here and home you will be eternally lost in the darkness - lost in madness. We must face this issue once and for all and come to terms with it now while there is still hope for us. Besides," the voice added softly, ***"You have already won."***

Everything inside Vincent wanted to keep going -- to ignore the voice, but he stopped. He wanted to hear what the voice had to say now. Intuitively, he knew that if he left he would be lost to himself and to Catherine.

"How have I already won?" he queried in a bleak voice. "How is this possible?" Vincent continued, feeling that the battle for his sanity was indeed already lost. Here he was talking to himself - worse yet, answering himself.

"No, Vincent. You are not talking to yourself. There are truly two of us. There is within everyone the capacity to be more than one personality. In us, it is simply more pronounced. Accept that. It is the key to our solution. One of us will dominate in the end, or both of us will be lost. I am offering you the solution, so listen carefully to what I have to say. Let the woman follow her heart. Let her live her dream. Accept the love she has to offer you. Become one with her. Allow her to stay, be with you, and become part of your daily life. The next time she tells you her job is not as important to her as her feelings and need for you, believe it. Accept this gift she offers you so willingly."

"You must remove the woman from the environment which causes these situations to occur and call me forth. That is the only solution. For most of my life, your personality has been the dominant one. However, as time moves on, and there is continued need for me to manifest myself, I have been growing stronger and stronger. If this pattern continues, you run the risk of my becoming the dominant force. Each time I hold the woman in my arms increases my desire to possess her. You must agree to remove her from these situations so there will be little need in the future for my presence. As time goes on, I will become merely a memory to you - an awareness of what can happen. I will remain dormant -- an unneeded aspect of your personality."

"In truth, I will always be with you, Vincent. Make no mistake about that. I will always be there somewhere deep within your conscienceness. Know, however, that I would never harm her, Vincent. I could never do anything to harm her in any way. As she is a part of you, so also is she a part of me - the best part. Because she is the best part of who I am, because I, too, love her, I am willing to give her up - to allow her to have her happy life. Take this gift, Vincent. It is the most precious thing you will probably ever be offered. You might never have another chance. It may never be offered again; I might become too strong. At this point, however, the choice is still yours, Vincent. You need only accept the gift of love. Take her, Vincent, and cherish her. Love her and live our possibilities."

Cathy stood rooted to the spot. She was unable to answer Edie's frantic questions. The darkness surrounding them paralyzed her. Since she had been a tiny baby, the dark had frightened Catherine. She was never able to figure out why; it was just so. As she grew to adulthood, Catherine was able to overcome most of the illogical fear, but this weekend's occurrences had unnerved her badly.

Edie had finally caught her breath and realized that she was in much better shape than her friend. Standing

there grasping onto Catherine's arm, she tried to think about what would be the best thing to do. "Think Edie, **dammit! Think! Stay calm and think!**" she muttered to herself. Once she got herself under control, logic took over.

"I don't suppose you would have a flashlight handy, would you?" Edie asked, hoping to bring her friend out of the paralysis that still seemed to grip her.

"Out in the car. There should be one in the glove compartment," came the response.

"Great!" said Edie, wondering how she was going to get out to the car without killing herself in the process. The wind was howling around the house, rattling the windows with a force that made Edie wonder if they could withstand the battering. It seemed to be blowing through the very glass, causing her to shiver. Suddenly, Edie remembered the bright, cheery fire they had made last evening. In her mind's eye, she could see the stacks of wood and kindling on the enclosed porch. She hoped that the box of matches they had used last night was still sitting on the mantle above the fireplace.

Slowly and with infinite care, Edie inched her way to the porch and groped around, eventually finding the bin which held the kindling. Increasingly sure of her surroundings, she made her way back to the living room and found the fireplace. The matches were sitting right where she hoped they would be. Thank God!

Hurrying, Edie soon had a small fire going, and she and Catherine settled down on the couch, grateful for the warmth and light. "Well, I guess we're stuck here till the storm's over," said Edie philosophically.

With a deep sigh, Catherine responded. "Edie, I'm really sorry I got you into this mess. Really, I am. Some weekend this turned out to be for you. Playing nursemaid and cook. No air conditioning, spooky houses, an hysterical friend, burned soup, and now a gale-storm. What else could happen?"

Catherine would remember that statement for a long time to come. She had no sooner said the words than the whole house rattled and shuddered as the force of the winds ripped at it with increased fury, tearing away part of the porch facing the ocean.

"Don't say anything like that again," pleaded Edie badly shaken. For some reason, Edie had a premonition that something worse was about to happen. Unable to sit still, she jumped up and paced the floor in front of the fireplace, finally wandering over to stare out the vast expanse of window at the angry ocean. This was definitely not an ordinary storm, she realized. This was a gale. She couldn't see much as she peered out. She could hear the waves beating against the cliff face, and she could feel the fury of the wind as it assaulted the house.

Just as Edie was about to turn to go back to the warmth of the fireplace, the house once again shook on its foundation. Glass was suddenly flying all around her as she was picked up bodily by the wind and tossed backwards. The last thing Edie remembered with any clarity was Cathy's terrified screams. They accompanied her down into the darkness which claimed her.

Catherine escaped relatively unscathed, a few scratches here and there from flying glass. When she reached Edie, she realized that this was not the case with her unconscious friend. There were cuts and abrasions all over Edie's body. Checking her over, Catherine was relieved to find that most of them were superficial. But it was Edie's head that Catherine was immediately concerned about. There was a deep cut on one side and a large, ugly swelling on the other. She had to get her out of this room as it was now totally exposed to the wind howling around them like a banshee.

Grabbing Edie as gently as she could under her arms, Catherine slowly dragged her out of the room and into the hallway. There were no windows here, and she felt safer. The darkness was not complete as some of the diffused light from the fireplace filtered out into the protected hallway.

Examining her friend's wounds again, Catherine really became concerned. The cut was deeper than she had

first thought, and it was bleeding profusely. Feeling her way into the bathroom, she cried in frustration when she found nothing in the way of medical supplies except a box of ordinary bandages and some iodine stored in the medicine chest. Grabbing some towels from the closet, she wet several washcloths and made her way back to Edie. Gently, she applied pressure to the wound, holding the edges closed as best she could, hoping to get the bleeding stopped. Not knowing what else she could do, Catherine silently screamed Vincent's name, praying that somehow she could get her feelings across to him.

The voice stopped talking and simply faded away, leaving Vincent alone in the huge cavern. He knew the voice was gone for good this time - knew that everything that needed saying had finally been said. Whether the voice had been his conscience or a separate entity suddenly meant little. What was important now was the decision Vincent had to make. But did he really have any choice? He did not think so. Vincent knew that he either had to give Catherine up for the sake of his sanity or allow her to truly become part of his world.

As he sat thinking about the problem, a thought occurred to him. If he gave Catherine up, all was lost. He could not live without her. If he allowed her to try and become part of his world and all that it would entail, he ran the risk of his greatest fears coming to pass. What if he harmed her in some way? It was a nightmare Vincent had lived with for some time now, as he struggled with his growing feeling of physical attraction for Catherine. But what if his fears proved to be imaginary? He had everything to gain. He concluded that giving her up was a death sentence while taking a chance on allowing her to become part of his world at least offered the possibility of happiness.

Once coming to his decision, Vincent felt better than he had in months. This thing had been brewing deep inside him for a long time now, and he was glad it was finally resolved. He could go home but not before he had a chance to see the sun once again. By using his internal clock, Vincent knew it was some time before midnight. He would climb the cliff and spend the remainder of the night outdoors, waiting to greet the rising sun. Then he would start for home.

Sometime later, gaining the ledge outside the crevice, he was surprised to find the furious storm which raged around him. Vincent had never seen anything like it and took shelter inside the crevice where he stood watching the forces of nature at their strongest. The wind and waves seemed to be in some kind of mad competition to see which could wreck the most havoc. He pitied anyone caught in the storm. Little could survive once caught in its grip.

Settling down inside the crevice opening, Vincent had just enough room to get relatively comfortable. He doubted whether he would see much of the sun tomorrow morning but didn't want to take a chance of missing it. Besides, after the climb up, he was not ready to repeat the descent without resting first. The climb was not hazardous or hard, but it was long.

Sitting there he began to think of home and Catherine. As the bond began to open, Vincent caught his breath as Catherine's fear wrapped itself around his heart. His immediate reactions were of remorse and fear. Remorse that he had left her unprotected and fear that there was no way he could possibly reach her in time. As the bond opened fully, however, he had the curious sensation that she was close by. At first he rejected this feeling as just wishful thinking but still the impression continued and finally grew stronger.

Somehow Catherine was close by and in trouble. He had the feeling that she was not in the same kind of trouble that he usually sensed. What he was feeling from Catherine right now was frustration and terror. Suddenly, he became aware of the storm which continued to rage outside the crevice opening, and he intuitively sensed that Catherine was somehow trapped in the storm.

Within a heartbeat, he was out the crevice and climbing the short distance to the solid land above. Letting the instincts and the impressions which gripped his heart guide him, he set off in the direction in which he

felt Catherine. The areas he traveled through seemed to be deserted. There were few houses and those that he passed seemed closed-up and deserted. The farther he traveled, the closer Catherine seemed. He allowed his thoughts to focus on her, hoping he could calm her emotions and let her know that he was on his way.

Gradually the bleeding slowed down and finally stopped. The wound was jagged and ugly looking, and Catherine was sure it would need stitches. Edie was in and out of consciousness. She seemed to know where she was and what had happened, but Catherine was still afraid that she had a concussion. As she sat with Edie in the hallway listening to the storm rage around the house, she heard something else being wrenched off the back porch.

Now that she had the bleeding stopped and Edie was semi-conscious, she had time to worry about what they were going to do. Catherine was trying to keep calm when out of nowhere her heart was filled with an awareness of Vincent's nearness. She didn't understand how this could be in her present situation. Nonetheless she knew it was so and began to cry with relief. Vincent was on his way.

Looking down at Edie, she realized that her friend was aware for the moment of her surroundings. "Don't worry, Edie. Help is on the way. Vincent's coming. He'll get us out of this." Edie just groaned and lost consciousness once again.

Vincent had no trouble zeroing in on the house. It sat alone overlooking the ocean. Although it was relatively dark, Vincent saw light coming from behind the curtains in one room of the house. He also recognized Catherine's car from the special license plates it carried. Wrenching open the door, he called out to Catherine and was relieved to hear her answering voice. Making his way toward its sound, Catherine was safe in his arms within moments, sobbing hysterically.

He held her tightly against his chest, murmuring her name over and over. Gradually she calmed and heaved a heavy sigh as the crying slowed to an occasional shuddering breath. Continuing to hold her close, Vincent became aware of another pair of eyes staring at him and looked down at the crumpled figure lying beside Catherine. Edie just stared up at him through pain-glazed eyes as if she were seeing some supernatural apparition.

"Granny always said you angels were beautiful. I always thought she was kidding. Now, I know she wasn't. We're dead, aren't we?" she inquired of Vincent in a small voice. "I always wondered what that would feel like. If my head didn't hurt so much, I'd say it didn't feel too bad at all. Have you come to take us to heaven?"

Catherine, resting against Vincent and listening to Edie, burst out laughing. "No, Edie. You're definitely not dead. This is Vincent. I told you he's come to get us," she added, giddiness apparent in her voice. "Just lie still and don't move around while we figure out what we're going to do. I don't want that wound to start bleeding again. I had an awful time getting it stopped."

Edie just continued to stare up at Vincent, wondering when she was going to see his wings open up. She was still only partly aware of what was being said. "Well, he sure looks like an angel to me, and I don't care what his name is. He can take me anywhere he wants." With that Edie lapsed back into the foggy grayness of unconsciousness.

Quickly, Vincent and Catherine exchanged stories of how they came to be where they were. Vincent omitted the part about the voice, not wanting to scare Catherine. Catherine omitted the part about her mother's visit, not ready to share that with him in their present crisis.

"If you have no gas in the car, you can't drive out of here," Vincent said. "That leaves only one solution. You will have to come down Below with me. Is there any gas left at all?" he asked.

"Barely," responded Catherine. "Why?"

"If there's enough gas in the car, you can drive us over to the cliff where the cavern is located. I don't think Edie could make it on foot. If we can find some necessary items here in the house like rope and board, I can devise a makeshift sling to use in getting Edie down into the cavern. It will be safer for you there than staying here. If this storm gets any worse, it could take the whole house with it. I wouldn't want to take the chance of your staying here," he finished, feeling the house once again shift on its foundation. "You will both be much safer down Below."

Vincent made his way out to the front porch facing the road and collected a couple pieces of wood. Taking them to the fireplace, he made torches for Catherine and him. They finally located rope and some thin but sturdy boards in the cellar. While Vincent set to work fashioning a sling for Edie, Catherine gathered up blankets and pillows and any remaining food she could find.

Examining Edie after he got her securely tied into the sling. Vincent was concerned about her head wound. He agreed with Catherine. It would need stitching which they did not have the supplies for here. "Have you any bandages?" he asked Catherine. She quickly got them for him and watched as she overlapped them, making a butterfly arrangement to bind Edie's gaping wound. Finished, Vincent ripped off a piece of sheet and anchored her head to the sling.

Edie regained consciousness as they were putting her in the car. She was aware just long enough to ask Vincent why he needed a car to take them to heaven and was out again. Once they arrived at the cliff Vincent secured the rope to the top of the cliff. This done, he instructed Catherine on making the climb down, assuring her that it was not dangerous. He stayed above and lowered Edie down at the same rate Catherine descended so that Catherine would be there if Edie regained consciousness during the descent. Fortunately, she didn't and they made it to the floor of the cavern with no mishaps.

Catherine lowered the sling to the ground and dragged it far away from the waterfall so Edie would not get wet and chilled from its spray. She was glad to find that Vincent had left his lantern on this side of the river, and its small, steady glow was a source of comfort to her while she had made the climb down to the cavern floor. Shaking it Catherine was concerned when she realized that there was almost no fuel left in it. She hoped that there would be enough fuel to light Vincent's way down. While waiting Catherine stared around at the cavern, lost in its beauty. Lulled by the comfort of knowing Vincent was close by she drifted off into a light sleep with Edie beside her.

Catherine was startled when Vincent shook her awake. He had tied the bundle containing blankets and food to his waist and brought it down with him. Before waking her, he had made up a bed for Catherine and Edie on this side of the river for the night. He hadn't yet decided on the best way to get Edie across the river and was too tired to give it much thought for the time being. They would be safe enough here for the night.

Vincent was undecided as to whether he should stay with them or cross over and sleep on the other side. The decision was made when Catherine reached out her hand asking him to stay with her saying, "I need to be with you. There are things we need to talk about."

Settling down beside her, she snuggled up against him, and he waited for her to begin. When moments passed, and she didn't say anything, Vincent looked down to find her fast asleep in his arms. Far above them the storm raged on, but here in the cavern there was peace. Vincent closed his eyes and joined his beloved in slumber.

Edie awoke to pitch blackness. Her whole body ached, and her head was killing her. At least she was finally alert. She remembered bits and pieces of what had happened to her since the window had exploded, but

everything was foggy. She remembered Cathy dragging her out of the room and trying to get the bleeding stopped. After that things got hazy. She thought she had seen an angel and vaguely remembered Catherine trying to tell her the angel's name was Vincent. That couldn't be right. It was Cathy's boyfriend who was named Vincent.

But where was she now? She couldn't hear the storm raging anymore and wondered if it had stopped. She wondered where Cathy was. She hoped she was all right. Deciding to find out, she called out her friend's name and was startled by the raspy-voiced answer she received.

"Catherine is still asleep. If you wait a moment, I will have the lantern lit and then we can talk. My name is Vincent. You have nothing to be afraid of," he continued. Edie could hear the reservation in his voice. "I am Catherine's friend. I came and got you out of the house last night and brought you here to safety," continued the whispery voice, mesmerizing Edie.

She had never heard that kind of voice before. She could hardly wait to see this Vincent. She laughed to herself as she remembered the vision of last night. *'The mind will play tricks, especially when one gets walloped on the head'*, she thought as the cavern sprang to life around her in the glow of the lantern.

Looking around she finally found the cloaked figure sitting beside her sleeping friend. The hood of his cloak shadowed his face, and she could not see it.

"Why are you hiding?" she asked, curious as to why he had the hood pulled over his face.

"I don't want you to be frightened. Sometimes when people first meet me, they are frightened. I thought maybe we could talk a little before you see me. That way you will know you have nothing to be frightened of."

"So, you're Vincent," said Edie, suspicion growing in her mind. "Maybe last night really did happen." Taking the plunge she said, "I kinda think I already know what you look like. That wasn't an angel last night, was it? That was really you, wasn't it?" she asked in a calm voice.

"There was no angel last night. I'm afraid it was me. Please don't be frightened. I mean you no harm. I really am a friend of Catherine's."

"I know you are. And no, you don't frighten me. You can take off the hood now. I won't scream. I think you're kinda neat looking. If you're Cathy's Vincent, I know you have to be a good guy. Besides, I learned long ago not to judge people by what they look like. My race kinda knows how that feels."

Convinced by the sincerity in her voice, Vincent slowly pushed back his hood, allowing his hair to come tumbling out to surround his now exposed face.

Edie's sharply indrawn breath caused Vincent a moment of panic until he heard her say, "Good Lord! Even if you aren't an angel, you're still beautiful."

Vincent remained quiet as she continued to stare.

"Why do you feel like you gotta hide?" asked Edie, fascinated by this strange being.

"Because some people are not as generous in their acceptance as you. I cause them to fear."

"Well, that's their problem. I think you look just fine. You don't scare me at all. I'm glad I finally got to meet you. Even if I had to get half killed to do it. I've been wondering about you for a long time, fella," she added, giving him a studying look. "Cathy has been pretty quiet about you. She's very mysterious about her private life."

Edie proceeded to tell Vincent all about how she knew about him, chattering away like a magpie as if they were old friends.

Catherine lay awake with her eyes closed, listening in amusement as Edie and Vincent began their friendship. She was loathe to let them know that she was awake and spoil the moment. She lay seemingly asleep for awhile longer before she stretched and yawned, signaling her awakened state to the two who were still deep in conversation.

"Well, hello there girlfriend," Edie quipped. "We've been waiting for your lazy bones to wake up, so we could get the show on the road."

"Get the show on the road? What are you talking about?" asked Catherine, puzzled.

"Vincent has told me all about you two. I know all about where he lives, and I'm anxious to see it. Only trouble is, we've got to get to the other side of this river before we can get started. Isn't this place amazing? Vincent has been telling me all about the cavern. I hope I get a chance to come back here to explore it when I'm feeling better."

Getting up, Catherine laughed and said, "Let's get home first before we think about coming back." She wandered over and sat next to Vincent.

"Before we do anything, I think we should eat. It will be better to do it here on this side before going across the river. That way," continued Vincent, "we will not have to worry about getting it over to the other side. The less we need to take across the easier the task will be, I am afraid you will have to eat the food cold as there is no wood to make a fire."

"I'm glad we got some canned raviolis and fruit cocktail," said Edie, wrinkling her nose. "They'll do me well for right now. I don't think my stomach could handle the pork and beans."

"Canned Ravioli and fruit cocktail it is," responded Catherine giggling. "At least you won't have to worry about me burning them this time."

Vincent stared as both women broke into gales of laughter, and they had to stop and let him in on the joke. He just smiled and shook his head. He enjoyed seeing the special friendship the two women shared.

After making short work of finishing off the food, Catherine and Vincent got things ready to transport across the river. Neither of them would let Edie do much of anything but lie there and rest until they were ready to pack up the bedding she had used. Vincent was glad he had thought to check the kitchen drawers before leaving Catherine's house last night. The plastic bags he had found would be used to keep their belongings dry. By the time they got everything packed up they had several bags full. Vincent had left one bag free for all of them to put their clothes in as they would have to traverse the river naked.

After explaining to them about the dangerous current running through the center of the river, he suggested that they put their clothes in the bag and tied it tightly so they would have dry clothes to put on when they got to the other side.

Vincent was also concerned about Edie swimming the river in her weakened condition and decided that she should stay between Catherine and him. All three of them were a little reserved about taking off their clothes, so they looked in various directions while they quickly stripped and entered the water. Vincent was glad he had put Edie in the middle as she tired easily and showed signs of fatigue during the crossing. About halfway across, he grabbed onto her hand and literally pulled her along as he swam the remaining distance, stroking through the water with one hand. Vincent was thankful that Catherine was a good swimmer and had no trouble making the crossing.

He stayed in the water while Catherine and Edie went up onto the beach and dressed. Only after they moved off down the shore of the river did he come out and dress quickly, joining them.

Edie's fatigue was obvious, and her wound had opened and begun to bleed again. Fixing a bed on the sandy bank, Vincent and Catherine made her lie down. Sitting next to Edie, Catherine put pressure on the wound

to stop the flow of blood. Edie drifted off to sleep grumbling to herself that they were treating her like a baby.

While Edie slept, Vincent took the opportunity to show Catherine some of the cavern. She was fascinated by everything he showed her. She had decided sometime that morning not to talk to Vincent about the things on her mind till they got Edie safely home and in Father's good hands.

'They had all the time in the world now', she figured. 'Whether Vincent liked it or not her mind was made up. She was quitting her job or at the very least cutting down the hours and moving into the tunnels. If she remained working for the District Attorney, it would be with the stipulation that she did no more dangerous field work. Those days were over.'

Edie felt better after several hours sleep and was ready to begin the journey after a meal of beans and pears. Vincent and Catherine kept the pace slow, so that Edie did not reopen the wound. Even the slow pace, however, was too much for Edie, and Vincent ended up carrying her for long periods at a time. Edie protested until Catherine told her to be quiet and enjoy the ride. After that Edie was much more pliable and settled back in Vincent's powerful arms and did just as she was told.

She enjoyed the ride. She chattered away to Vincent who listened with great care to everything she had to say. They were fast becoming friends and found numerous shared interests, among them Catherine. Edie told him all about working for the District Attorney's office including many cute stories about Catherine which Vincent listened to with relish. She also told him of her life Above and all about her granny who had the gift.

Vincent told her more about the tunnel world Below and about Narcissa who also had the gift. Soon he called a halt to their travels, saying they had gone far enough for one day. After eating, they quickly fixed up beds and were fast asleep almost before they lay down.

By late the next evening, they were close to entering familiar territory. Vincent said they should reach Pascal's pipes some time early the next day. Both Catherine and Edie were excited. Catherine knew that Joe and their other co-workers would be frantic wondering what had happened to them, and she wanted to reassure her friends that they were okay. Edie was just excited about seeing the tunnel community Vincent had told her so much about. Early next morning she was first up and anxious to get going. Besides, they had run out of food, and she was hungry.

Eventually, that morning they entered an area which seemed well kept to Edie. Not like the areas they had just come through. Occasionally there was a branching and faintly in the distance she could hear weird metallic noises which grew louder and louder the farther they walked. As they turned a bend in the tunnel they were walking through, Edie caught sight of a pipe running high overhead and realized these must be the communicating pipes Catherine and Vincent had told her about. Her hunch was confirmed as she watched Vincent tap out a message and wait for an answer which quickly came.

"What did they say?" asked Edie, amazed at the whole procedure. "Heck, this is better than the telephone, and you don't even have to pay for it."

"Father will be informed that we are in the far tunnels. Pascal answered my call," replied Vincent. "He will let Father know we are almost home. I am sure we will be getting a response coming to meet us soon. I told them to bring some food and a stretcher."

Edie glared at him, but Vincent ignored it as he scooped her up and once again proceeded on his way with Catherine by his side. A little while later, they stopped to listen to Father's reply.

'Thank God you're home, and Catherine and the other woman are with you. The whole city is in an uproar over their disappearance. We have sent word Above through one of our Helpers that the women are safe and will be in contact with the District Attorney's office shortly. We are starting out to meet you and have

the supplies you asked for with us. See you soon.

Love,

Father.'

"He said all that?" asked a mystified Edie. "Do you think this Father guy will let me become a Helper and learn the code? That is really neat. You know how interested I am in telecommunications. This is a great system. I'd really like to learn it sometime."

Catherine laughed at her friend's enthusiasm. "I'm sure Father will let you become a Helper. There never seems to be enough of them. They are an important part of the tunnel community. Without their help, the tunnel folk could never survive Below. Both Vincent and I will vouch for you. Won't we, Vincent?"

"I would be honored to have you become a Helper, Edie."

Suddenly, Vincent heard a noise in the tunnel ahead. He knew that it was way too soon for them to meet Father and the others. He was relieved to hear a familiar voice call out.

"Vincent, child! Is that you?"

"Yes, Narcissa. It's me. What are you doing way out here?"

"Why, Vincent. You know I wander all over down here. I happened to be nearby when I heard the message. I have some fruit in my basket and thought you might be able to use it while you wait for Father to get here. I see you have the beautiful Catherine with you. Hello, child. And who else is with you, Vincent? I sense someone else."

"Narcissa, this is Edie, Catherine's friend from work." Briefly Vincent told her the story of what had happened to the women and why Edie was here in the tunnels. As Narcissa listened she came forward and placed her hands gently on Edie's face, a knowing smile lighting up her wrinkled, old face. "This one has the sighting power, Vincent. I can feel its emanation strongly in her. She is a good person, a good friend. She will make an excellent Helper."

With that enigmatic statement, Narcissa shuffled off back down the tunnel corridor, leaving the trio staring after her.

"Well, don't that just beat all," said Edie shaken. "She acts just like my Granny does. All mysterious about everything."

"Narcissa lives alone in the deepest tunnels, Edie, and we rarely see her. But come, let's move on. Father will be coming to meet us, and I don't want him walking any farther than necessary. His hip is bad, and it's painful for him to walk long distances," said Vincent, moving forward.

Within the hour, they heard voices in the distance and hurried toward the sound. Exhausted, Edie was almost asleep in Vincent's arms but woke to the commotion of strangely-dressed people milling around all trying to talk to Vincent and Catherine at once until a stately-looking gentleman with a cane took charge.

"Vincent, Catherine. Thank God you're both safely home. We have been worried sick about both of you. And this is Edie, I presume," the man said, eyeing her critically. He gently examined Edie's wound which was bleeding again.

"Well, there's not much we can do for you here, young lady. Come, hurry. I need to have her in the hospital chamber before I can tend that wound. It looks infected."

Edie dozed off and seemingly the next moment she was on a table, and the man called '*Father*' was giving her a shot. After that all was darkness for some time. When she awoke, the old man was quietly sitting by her bedside engrossed in a book. Groaning, she went to touch her head which felt bandaged.

"So! You're finally back with us, are you?" said the man, gently capturing her hand and returning it to her side. "Best ot leave that alone. That is a nasty gash you have there. But it should heal nicely with only a hairline scar that you can cover up with hairstyle. You're lucky. Infection has already set in, but I cleaned it all out, and I have you on antibiotics. You should be feeling much better by tomorrow."

"Where's Cathy?" asked Edie, suddenly feeling strange in these surroundings without her friend.

"We felt it wise that she go Above and contact your boss, so that he knows you're safe. She'll be back later tonight or early tomorrow. Don't worry. You are among friends. We could have you taken Above and recommend an excellent doctor, or you can stay here with us until your wound heals. You lost quite a bit of blood and took quite a nasty blow to the head. Wherever you decide to stay, you need a few days rest and quiet. Which would you rather do?"

"I think I'll wait here at least till Cathy and Vincent get back. I want to thank Vincent for all he did for me."

"No thanks are necessary. Vincent already knows that you are grateful. But, you are more than welcome to wait for them. Try to get some rest now," said the distinguished old man, brusquely patting her hand.

Now that they were alone together, both Catherine and Vincent were reserved. Neither seemed to want to begin the conversation they both sensed would take place. Hand-in-hand they slowly walked back toward the main complex. Catherine had set Joe's mind at ease as to their safety, telling him that she would be in tomorrow. That gave her tonight to get things straightened out between her and Vincent. Vincent knew that Catherine had something she wished to talk about. He sensed that she had been waiting until they were alone. Knowing that if they returned to the central complex they would be surrounded by friends suggested that they visit the waterfall cavern. It was a special place for them both. Vincent knew it would be deserted at this time of the night.

They sat and silently watched the waterfall for some time. They were each trying to find a way to explain what had happened to them while they were apart.

Vincent was apprehensive about sharing his experiences in the cavern with Catherine. He was reticent about acknowledging the visitor he had encountered, not quite sure of what it actually was - his conscience or a separate being.

As he struggled to find the words, Catherine resolved his conflict by softly slipping her arm around his waist and gently her head upon his chest.

"Vincent," she murmured softly, "we need to talk about **us** and what has happened this past week. I have never felt so alone and cut off from you. It was a terrible feeling, and I never want to feel that way again."

Vincent hung his head in remorse. Having hurt Catherine wounded him deeply. He tenderly reached out his hand and brushed the chestnut colored hair from her emerald-green eyes. He raised her face so her eyes were level with his.

As he looked deeply into her beautiful eyes, the trust and love he saw there gave him courage to say, "There is only one logical solution to our problems, Catherine."

Catherine caught her breath, waiting for Vincent to continue.

"I can no longer deal with the violence your job continually generates. It threatens our possibilities - or any future we may have together. We have reached a point on the road we travel where we must decide whether we will journey on as one or go our separate ways."

Fearing Catherine's response, Vincent's eyes left her face and stared vacantly into the chasm which separated them from the waterfall. Time ceased in the silent cavern as he humbly waited her response. He

had finally offered Catherine all that he would ever have to give - himself. His life was now in her hands. His future was hers alone to decide.

Catherine knew full well the agony Vincent must have endured before coming to this decision. What she said now would shape the rest of their lives. Having come to the same conclusion as Vincent, Catherine was overwhelmed by the simple declaration he had made which perfectly mirrored her own heart's desires.

Her heart filled to overflowing with love for this gentle being. Tears slowly gathered in the depths of her eyes and slid down her radiant face as she reached up and put her arms trustingly around Vincent's neck and softly whispered, "Will you marry me?"

Lost in the rapture of love confessed, the evening slipped quickly away as they planned the beginning of the rest of their lives.