

KINDRED SPIRITS

by Nan Dibble

(From PHOENIX FIVE)

Author's note: inspired by Ann Rice, whose work breathes life into the Undead

Editor's note: Octavia E Butler also explored this theme in "Kindred" (1979).

He burst out of his crypt with a curse in his throat; startled by the night's coolness. It was dark, just past dusk, and he could smell the spring evening clearly. Fresh-cut grass, the tang of sliced dandelions, crushed spring onions, freshness and life.

Life again. More life. Triumph!

He dusted himself off, noticing in passing the whiteness of his hands, his fingers trembling, his limbs weak, rubbery.....He felt ill.

He had been Gabriel, Angel of the Awakening. He remembered that had once amused him. Now he couldn't even make his mouth say the name. He reminded himself to breathe. No longer necessary, but a habit, and customary

He slid his tongue over his caked lips, tasting the rancid earth and spitting it out. He bit his lip and felt the slimy slippery blood with his tongue; swallowed and tasted the coppery brandy of his own blood, diluted now by months buried in the earth without nourishment - without **life**.

His memory was reforming connections made in this most recent lifetime. He knew his name, the one that had amused him once. He knew he faced the labor of reconnecting to the sources of his power in the mortal world, money more vital than blood in dealing with the living. All prepared, always prepared, himself his own heir down all the centuries ... but a labor and a nuisance, just the same. A chore he resented because it had been forced on him; someone had been impertinent enough to kill him. And foolish enough to assume that meant he'd stay dead longer than it took his shattered organs to reform themselves

A woman, he recalled. Not even the Beast, which would at least have had some symmetry. A mere mortal woman. He'd teach her how foolish she'd been to attract his notice and risk his displeasure. The name. The name escaped him, for the moment. She'd been a nobody, a messenger, a pawn. not worth remembering, except when she'd had the impertinence to level a pistol at him and shoot him through the heart. He remembered steady eyes, auburn hair.....quite a lot of it, carelessly disheveled ... Jael? Artemis? No, those were names dredged from other lives. Marianna? No, not that either.

Leaning on a headstone, frail and depleted in the deepening dark, he shook his head, annoyed, then

dismissed the matter. The name would come back to him in time. In time, everything came back. Except Snow.

Snow, older than he by a thousand years, was as definitively dead as Gabriel knew how to make him. Snow - who'd bestowed the incalculable treasure of immortality casually, on a whim, it had seemed; initiated him into the Kindred and thereby given him power within the breathing world; Snow, bored with mortal things, even with death; Snow, who'd abandoned him, disowned him, then been unwillingly intrigued enough to work for him one last time, to hunt and kill the Beast, Vincent, and failed - was gone at last.

To make sure, Gabriel had burned Snow's corpse and tossed two handfuls of the ash off a rooftop for the winds to take, then mixed the rest with concrete he'd had shaped into an appropriately imposing memorial slab. Respectful ... and final. Even Snow couldn't rise, after that. They were both old enough in their pale, undying flesh to endure the pain of sunlight if they had to; but not even ancient, careless Snow could bring himself back from fragments of ash that could never come together. At last, it was over.

At last, Gabriel was alone.

And yet not altogether alone. There was Julian. His son. The only son he'd ever had, gotten the only way he now could get a son. By choice, by will. He'd raise no self-willed rivals against him, as Snow had done. A baby. It had to be a baby he could mold, teach, and tutor into absolute loyalty before attaining mature growth, the form his son would then hold for all eternity. But not any baby; a rarity of the sort Gabriel enjoyed collecting. A unique child, sired by a unique being and born to a special destiny. Julian.

They'd stolen Julian from him - the Beast and the woman. He'd find the boy, get him back. And when the moment was right, Gabriel would give his son a unique gift. It wasn't merely the incredible power that flowed from the blood of his natural father to which Julian was heir. Not merely Rembrandts and Renoirs, diamonds and platinum, the accumulated riches that Gabriel could give. Gabriel's blood was different too. Very different. To his son, his heir, he'd give that blood, give life! Eternal life! And power over the whole living world.

Then it would all have meaning - everything Gabriel had endured, accumulated, and accomplished. When it was given away. Shared.

Gabriel must become strong, to reclaim his son. From the Beast Vincent.

Gabriel shuddered, facing in his imagination that confrontation. There'd be no bars, no cage, no one to interfere this time. This time, the Beast would submit ... or die.

What a triumph, to own such a rarity as the Beast! But own it, he would - or destroy it. Julian, after all, needed only one father. And that would be Gabriel. Forever.

But first, he had to recover his strength.

He edged along the cemetery's perimeter, emerging onto a highway with its sodium lights bright, almost as daylight, but with no power to hurt. For several minutes, no cars passed. He stumbled to the next intersection and stood leaning against the base of the traffic light until a car approached, slowing. In one motion, Gabriel yanked the passenger door off its hinges and struck down the driver, breaking the man's neck. *So there's still sufficient strength for that, is there?* he thought, then thought of nothing more as he sank his fangs deep into his victim's luscious flesh near the collarbone and drank himself full, like a glutton, mindlessly, grossly, joyously.

A drifting mote settled on the stone. And another. A third. Then a flurry. Like called to like - stronger as the motes accumulated. Calling with a particular magnetism through the winds of the air, through earth, across distance, summoning its own substance, coruscating but not dispersing when the air stirred, when the rains fell. Clinging to the stone, resonating with the like substance that was part of that stone, vibrating with a single harmonic. Until the stone shattered and set free what was not stone, embedded within it. A shape like a mist lay stretched on the midnight grass. Whatever it needed, it took from the moisture of the air, the calcium of a nearby marble pillar, the substance of the earth on which it lay, earth ripe from two centuries of dutiful interment. It had been months in gathering; once gathered, in an instant it solidified into a man.

A man with a lined, terse face of indeterminate maturity, close-cropped white hair, and a wiry build on the edge of gauntness. Whose eyes suddenly opened - startled, surprised.

And his first thought was; *oh, hell.*

Pushing up on an elbow, Snow found himself laying in a scatter of broken stone. All his hyperacute senses knew without thought that it was spring. Then, seeing the moon, he realized he wasn't in the tunnels where he'd been crushed under an avalanche of stone. The fragments around him weren't enough to bury anybody. He picked up a lump; not stone - cement.

As his body had come together, so did his consciousness. Swirling, gathering, then abruptly complete.

Headstones. Weeping marble angels stained with pigeon shit. He was in a goddamn cemetery. How droll.

The Beast must have delivered his body someplace Gabriel would find it, know about it. *That had style*, he thought judiciously. He considered himself a connoisseur of style; individuality in action, essential unadorned character expressed and imposed upon events.

And evidently Gabriel had survived to give him a decent burial. So maybe somebody else had succeeded where Snow had failed, hunting the Beast

Nah.

So - spring. Winter had just been coming on when he'd blasted his way into the tunnels; he must have missed the last act. Surely it would all be finished by now. He vaguely wondered how it had all come out.

Spring in New York, he thought, tilting his head back at an awkward angle to spot the spiky tops of skyscrapers impaling the dark.

Spring. And he was alive. Again. How boring.

Cement, he reflected, considering the lump he held. Then he held it harder, and it collapsed into powder. They didn't make things like they used to. *Not even spring*, he thought idly, looking around again at the various memorials white and gleaming in the moonlight.

The lumps around him were just about enough to have been a headstone. And it had all come apart, un-cemented, as something that wasn't part of it was withdrawn. Little tiny bits. Lots of them. Ash, for instance.

That goddamn bastard had cremated him.

And even that hadn't worked.

"I'm getting too old for this," Snow muttered. Too old for everything. Go-eternal with the goddamn universe, maybe, if not even burning worked anymore, as Kindred legends reported it should - even on the Eldest.

So he'd gone beyond legend now. Beyond the Eldest. Into the utterly unknown. Maybe nothing could kill him now. That suspicion made him deeply uneasy; waiting eons for heat-death and the universal Big Bust of entropy was about the most boring thing he could imagine.

People, though. Only people had style. People were interesting, as much as anything could interest him nowadays. That Beast, now

That had been almost entertaining. Both of them fighting fair - Snow with the best high tech weaponry Gabriel's billions could buy, but no beguilements of Kindred glamour, nothing supernatural, deliberately handicapping himself to mortal limits; the Beast, who'd cracked a steel door off its hinges and swatted guards aside like dummies in that amazing video, not using that preternatural strength except in evasion, running away. Instead, simply outsmarting him; leading him off into unstable strata his own noisy weaponry would dump on him. Cute. Real cute. Great style. He'd almost enjoyed that.

Might be fun to do it again. And then maybe look in on Gabe, see what burning would do for him - that cold-blooded, cremating Machiavellian son-of-a-bitch. Might work; Gabe hadn't died nearly enough times, in nearly enough ways, for his elements to learn to reform from just about anything the material universe could throw at them.

Whatever doesn't kill me makes me stronger, he reflected sourly. *Yeah, right.*

But it still was a pretty night. Because all the parts were so simple, and yet never quite the same twice, somehow you didn't get tired of that so quickly. Moonlight still had its own glamour only slightly tinged with death ... It might be worth looking at and hold his interest for a few more centuries yet. Maybe he'd just hang around harmlessly, a graveyard wraith almost innocent, with the innocence of grass, trees, night air. Watch the moon and the birds, listen to the insect buzz, feel the breeze ... until that got old on him the way everything else had. Because revenge was the most boring thing of all. He had no interest in it. Or not much.

On the other hand, maybe he'd stir around a little, hunt up the Beast, if he was still around, and have a chat or something, find out his name maybe, down there in those tunnels, and have the moonlight in reserve. Something to look forward to when it was over or when he got bored with hunting or when the Beast killed him again, whichever way it came out.

It had been a long time since he'd had anything to look forward to.

People, they could surprise you. Do things you didn't expect. Like cremate you. People stayed interesting. Which was why he'd recruited Gabriel; for company. And look what had come of that. No fun at all.

Gabe, he'd find out. Gabe had come to that stage himself, now, seemed like; wanting company to hold off the boredom and the absolute loneliness a little longer. Feeling the first stirrings of what, among the Kindred, passed for old age. Thinking that having a kid would do it. He'd find out.

Assuming, of course, Gabe survived

He's save the moonlight for later, Snow decided, and enjoy the spring now. Stir around a little, with a rest to look forward to.

He took stock of himself; skinny, naked. Stronger than he looked. *Yeah, right*, he thought disgustingly

when he found out how much effort it took to stand, wavering, leaning heavily on a headstone. Must be like what a freeze-dried chunk of meat felt like after enough water had been dumped on it to make it look right, but all still soggy and uncertain inside. Broken down into little fragments, then reconstituted; and it felt as if every cell in his body knew it, too. Enough substance to *be*, not enough to make him feel solid, whole.

He brushed dirt off himself as best he could, balling fists weak as a babe's, stretching his back, which seemed fragile and brittle as a skeleton's. His throat was parched with a special dryness.

He'd have to drink. Kill, then drink; to get himself solid.

He hadn't killed and drunk in more than a century. Killed, yes - drunk, no.

Back into the goddamn food chain; he thought, grimacing. *What a waste, to turn all those interesting possibilities into dead meat and breakfast.*

He talked to himself, a voiceless mind-natter; ridiculed himself, prodded himself, belittled his scruples and his vainglorious desire to be pure, to be chaste, to be free. Escape the food chain, hunt for the fun of it or not at all. Be purely himself, cycling through phases, ever-changing, simple, elemental as snow, that had been rain, and mist, and seawater, and every damn thing except anything else. And needed not one goddamn thing from any poor walking bloodbag in the food chain.

Having been reduced to ashes left him no choice, no luxury of scruples or pretentious cosmic idealism. Some things, water just couldn't do for you.

He needed blood. Live blood, seconds from leaving a beating heart. The canned stuff in blood banks didn't do it either; he'd tried. Therefore he had to kill again. Quickly, over and over. And drink.

He cursed. Then cursed himself for a fool for resisting the truth, even for an instant.

He saw his victim - a patrolling cemetery guard - and noticed the name embossed on the man's pocket. *Jimmy*. So he had the name; it was all right. Or as nearly all right is it was apt to get, given the rules Snow insisted on playing by to keep at least some sense of honor, to escape the meat market at least that far. He always learned their names.

Strolling towards doomed Jimmy, Snow smiled a good-natured ironic smile. Perhaps the guard took fright at his whiteness - white hair, white skin, white hands - because he stumbled backward, tripped in the grass, fell. Or maybe he just wasn't used to having naked, skinny guys drift toward him during the literal graveyard shift. Snow reached out his right hand a long long way, pulled the guard to him, held him tight in the loving embrace of death, and drank.

Waking from a dream of wet scarlet and black, Vincent stared around him wildly. Jacob was safe in his crib. The pipes were silent. All seemed at peace ... except in his dreams.

Nightmares, Father called them, dismissing them. Trying to tactfully imply, without saying outright, that Vincent had become so accustomed to danger and violence that he now imagined them rather than face the different problems peace, and a life with Jacob but without Catherine, presented.

Visions, Vincent felt them as - erupting into the grieving monotony Father called peace. Dangerous visions of dark unexplored tunnels alive with killers, gleeful in their act, like stalking gargoyles. His fear knew no bounds, for the killers selected their victims at random, young and old, hearty and frail,

male and female - whoever passed, whoever came. And this time

Hunches, Diana called them, when he'd first reported them to her, frustrated both by his urgent, formless sense of threat and by Father's dismissal of it.

He could accept *hunches* - Diana took hunches most seriously. Diana would listen. Diana always listened, which he felt to be one reason he still sought her out, though it had been half a year since Jacob was reclaimed, though Vincent really had no reason anymore to go Above. He still went to find words for things he somehow couldn't say to Father. Sometimes for things he hadn't realized needed words at all, until they came blurring out, surprising him. Drawn, perhaps, by Diana's seemingly endless patience.

Perhaps she could help him understand what posed this threat and therefore how he should meet it.

At least she'd try. He knew that of her now. Depended on it, even. Sometimes, uneasily, he wondered if that was fair to her, that dependence. Generally, though, he simply was grateful and didn't examine it. Didn't seek to look it in the face or know its name. It was enough that it was there.

Dressing hurriedly, delivering his sleeping son into Mary's care, he went through the tunnels and then the alleys, following what had become a familiar route, these past months. Leaping to pull down the bottom section of a fire escape and then climbing, he reached Diana's roof. Standing before her high, slanted windows, he was disappointed to find the loft dark. Often, whatever the hour, he'd find her at her computer, keying as a blur of fingers or gnawing absently on a knuckle, as she considered some hurtful puzzle unrelated to him. It hadn't occurred to him she might be asleep. He hadn't thought about it, intent only on his own agitation.

It's not fair, he reflected of his intrusion, troubled for an instant before that concern was swallowed up by the greater one that had brought him here. He tapped on her skylight. Once. Then again.

Titian hair flopping over her eyes and streaming down her back in a tangle of curls, cheeks flushed with the heat of dreams, pulling a white robe around her, she crossed his line of vision from the bedroom to the roof door.

"What's up?" she asked, joining him on the roof. "Dreams again?"

He sighed and nodded, unsurprised that Diana knew without being told. She often did - one reason he found it so easy, such a relief, to discuss things with her. They turned together and wandered to the roof's outer parapet, where her telescope was.

"Before," he told her, "they were all strangers alike to me. Killers and victims both. Now, it seems that I know them - the victims. There's ... a sense of familiarity. And yet I don't know who they are. Merely feel that they're known to me, and in desperate danger. I want to protect them. Warn them. But I don't know who to warn. Or against what."

Putting his back against the parapet, he made a sudden openhanded gesture of frustration. "It's as though the threat is getting closer, Diana. I can almost see it. But not fully enough to prevent it. And tonight ..."

He looked unseeingly across the roof to the darkness beyond. In a flat, factual voice, he said, "Tonight, it seemed to me it was Catherine they slaughtered. And yet it was not. I was too late. Again. And as I lifted her, she had no face. I knew it must be she by the loss I felt ... but the face was only a smooth mask. Without features. It upset me," he confessed in a low voice. "A great deal."

After a thoughtful silence, Diana said, "Well, maybe we can get some detail this time. Something you didn't notice right away, on account of the emotional charge. For instance, precisely how do they kill?"

Knife, gun

"They bite."

"Bite?"

"It's possible," Vincent responded in an even more tense, toneless voice. "You may take my assurance it's possible."

He knew she'd draw the obvious inference. He also knew he'd left her with nothing to say. So he said it; "I have killed so. Once. But ... not willingly. That's not how it is, in the visions. They are not forced to it, the killers. They choose it. Gladly."

A-huh. "I hate to admit it, but you're getting pretty close to my weird threshold now. I can take in symbolic, I can take in literal. But where the one starts shading into the other, I got trouble knowing where the line ought to fall. If I didn't know better ... " She tugged at the sleeve of his cloak. "Come downstairs a minute. There's something I want you to look at."

He obediently followed her down and stood behind her as she clicked the switches and hit the keys that made her computer screen light up. She remarked over her shoulder. "It's something I picked up on CityNet a couple hours ago. I waited up, actually, figuring I'd get a phone call any minute; it's the sort of thing they generally shove my way. The majority weird. But nobody called, so I finally turned in. Glad you came, though; my dreams weren't any big treat either; somebody gave me a present. When I opened it, there was this huge spider inside." Her shoulders pulled tight and she shuddered. "Yeah, here it is." She tipped the screen so he could read the tiny lighted words without bending.

SEVEN DEAD, NECKS BROKEN, BLOOD DRAINED

Victim one: Thomas Brady, 38, Caucasian male, Hylan Boulevard, Staten Island. Occupation: salesman, Northgate Life Insurance Company. Vehicle: 1990 blue Buick sedan, recovered New York City, 62nd Street, Central Park West, abandoned. Time of death, Tuesday, April 28, approximately 7-7:30pm.

Victim two: James White, 55, Caucasian male, Tadt Hill Cemetery, Staten Island. Occupation: night watchman, Tade Hill Cemetery. Time of death, Tuesday, April 28, approximately 7-7:30pm

Victim three: Amanda Cole, 35, black female, near West 59th Street entrance inside Central Park. Occupation: retail clerk, Makeover City. Time of death, Tuesday, April 28, approximately 8:30-9pm

Victim four: Sandra Dillon, 22, Caucasian female, near West 59th Street entrance inside Central Park. Occupation: homemaker. Time of death, Tuesday, April 2, approximately 8:30-9pm/

"You done with this screen?" Diana asked, swiveling her chair to look up into his face. At his nod, she hit a key and more words appeared.

Victim five: John Webb, 40, Caucasian male, 726 West 50th Street, alley behind Paddy's Bar. Occupation: unemployed stevedore. Time of death, Tuesday, April 28, approximately 10-10:30pm

Victim six: Reed Mason, black male, near West 72nd Street entrance inside Central Park. Occupation: secondary teacher. Time of death, Tuesday, April 28, approximately 11-11:30pm

Victim seven: Jaime Rodriguez, 23, Hispanic male, near West 72nd Street entrance inside Central Park. Occupation: proprietor, Speedy Rodriguez Messenger Service. Time of death, Tuesday, April 28, approximately 11:30pm-12 midnight.

"Tonight," Vincent murmured, appalled. "This all happened tonight."

"All the UFO sightings, blue ray stuff, hits CityNet before it hits the tabloids. Through the wonders of modern electronics, we now have instant weird, don't even have to wait for the morning edition. Wait a second: there's more."

While Diana hit other keys, blanking the screen, Vincent reflected, "Four of the seven at or near the park."

"Yeah, that caught me, too. It's not the worst thing that ever happened in Central Park, but I still didn't like it. I thought about telling you, but ... Well, it was weird, and it was past midnight, and I guess you haven't been getting much sleep lately, and ... Well, I didn't want to bother you," Diana concluded with what seemed to Vincent a sudden awkwardness and constraint.

"You're welcome Below at any time, Diana. I thought you knew that. At any time. For any reason."

She shrugged, still with the same constraint. "Well, what with these dreams, hunches, you being having, I didn't want to set you off. Make it worse, I mean." She tapped a fist sharply on the keyboard shelf. "Dammit, I'm not saying this right. You know what I mean, don't you?" She looked around anxiously.

"I'm not so fragile as all that, Diana. I have certainly felt free enough in burdening you with my concerns. I would hope you'd always feel that you could come to me with yours. Especially since they involved me."

"Yeah, well, sometimes it's not so simple as that. Anyhow, you came, so you know, so what does it matter anyway. Here it is, the other chuck."

She leaned aside to give him clear sight of the screen, now displaying other lighted words:

GRAVES AND VANDALISM

Tuesday, April 28. Tadt Hill Cemetery. Staten Island. Crypt of billionaire Gabriel Blake forced open; body stolen. Also, gravesite destroyed, occupant unnamed, called only 'The Warrior, Snow' on headstone, remains missing. Cemetery plot owned by Gabriel Blake.

"And two plus two equals major weird," Diana commented, somewhere between anxious and annoyed. "Because that's the site of vic two. And Gabriel is, if you'll pardon the phrasing, *our* Gabriel. *That* Gabriel. At least the name he was buried under, the name signed to the worst tangle of incestuous corporations and blind subsidiaries they'll be years figuring out ... And you told me about that other hunch you had, before that killer came into the tunnels. Snowstorm, you said. That bad boundary between literal and symbolic. Suppose that man's *name* was Snow! Do you do stuff like that in your dreams? Spin off the name of a man you never heard of, never knew his name at all, into a literal fact? You know how these things strike you, I don't. So - is this what I think it is? A hot candidate for 'The Warrior Snow' here?" She tapped the screen, looking at him.

"I don't know, Diana. I don't know what to think. It seems ... it's not over, after all." The suspicion distressed him. And yet the emerging threat, as it cleared, was energizing. It felt to Vincent like awakening. Like recovering an intensity of life he'd dully assumed was gone forever. Gone with Catherine

Diana said, "Maybe two plus two equals nothing at all. Maybe there's no connection. Just a coincidence some grave-robbers struck at the same time the neck-breaking bloodsucker was hitting the night watchman. And if you believe that, I have this nice swamp property in Florida I'm looking for a buyer for"

"Swamp property?" Vincent echoed blankly.

"Bad joke. Never mind." She swiveled her chair fully around. "Tell you what: I'll call into the 210, find out who's been assigned this choiceness, since I didn't get it. Then ask them for a little backgrounding. Or maybe call Maxwell, see if ..."

At that moment, her phone rang. They both jerked. After a pause and a muted beep, a man's muffled voice began speaking. Diana sprang from her chair and snatched up the receiver. "Yeah, Okay, I'm awake, and is this what I think it is?" She listened, frowning, glancing over at Vincent. Then she told the caller, "Yeah, all right, but what about *your* beauty sleep?" She listened again, then said, "I'll be there in an hour."

She hung up, then turned to Vincent. "That was Maxwell. Decided to dump this in my lap after all. I'll let you know if it starts making any sense."

They went together back up to the roof. The open sky, greying toward dawn. A dangerous openness that nevertheless felt like freedom, with the stirring smell of spring everywhere - multitudinous, diffuse, vibrant with renewed life ... Though he knew he had to, Vincent was reluctant to leave. But the nearest threshold was two blocks away, and the limits of light were closing in.

His mind on other dangers, he said abruptly, "Diana, don't come Below. And especially, don't come into the park."

Arms folded, she responded, "That's gonne be kind of hard ot do, since that's where four of the vics were taken down."

Her tone was one of politely reserved refusal. Her face gave no sign of annoyance but he couldn't tell if his concern was unwelcome, if he'd overstepped by presuming to tell her what to do. Except with Jacob, Vincent's empathic sense still was mostly numb. Lacking that accustomed feedback, he was sure he was often tactless, as well as awkward. Conscious of his handicap, he was doubly hesitant and uncertain. In this present case, he found he didn't care; it was more important that she be safe than that he not risk offending her.

"Not alone, then," he said. "Only with others, police, about you. You now know Arnold, who has the hot-dog concession."

"Dinosaur fan; yeah. Works Wall Street and Canal."

"If you need to get me a message quickly, Arnold can see to it. But don't come Below until this is resolved. Tonight, I'll come to you."

"I'll keep Arnold in mind."

Vincent commented, "That's an evasion."

She hugged herself tighter, though the spring breeze was mild. "Once I take on a case, I go where it leads me. I can't make any promises. But don't worry about me. It's a lot of years since I was careless."

"Careful or careless, it makes no difference," Vincent replied with a stronger sense of foreboding than he'd come with.

"In the dreams," Diana said, understanding, and bowed her head. "Don't worry about me."

As he reached the top of the fire escape, she called, "When you knocked ... was that the first time you were here tonight?"

"Yes. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, nothing. Except when I was hanging around waiting for the 210 or Maxwell to call, I had this weird, strong feeling of being watched. And without even thinking about it, I came up, certain you were here. But there was nobody. And I wondered if maybe you really had come, only changed your mind, then changed it again and came back later. Nothing. Just a feeling."

Or a hunch, Vincent thought, but had no leisure to discuss the matter further. It was too near dawn.

Diana met Joe downtown outside the morgue where he'd parked his beat-up Toyota in a **No Parking** zone. He'd been leaning against the fender. Pushing off, he pitched his coffee cup in a trash can.

Skipping the hellos and other amenities, he said, "You're here. Good. After we look at this mess, I've got something else I want to run by you. A little weird, but nothing you can't handle."

"You want to put me on the grave-robber case too, right?"

Joe gave her a quick look of surprise and exasperation. "Should have known you'd catch that on the net! I know, I know," he said, holding up both hands to stop her expected protest, "you only take on one case at a time. But this is *one* case. Has to be. For starters, we got Gabriel's body stolen. And then some John Doe buried in a plot Gabriel owned, *that* gets stolen, too. Not even a body, this time - just ashes. And who the hell steals *ashes*? Could be, the night watchman saw something he shouldn't, got killed to stop him talking. That scans okay, but then why the rest? Same creepy MO. All seven have to be connected. But how? You're the natural candidate to get some answers."

She shot him a sharp glance, not sure what he was implying. "How come?"

"After that face-painting creep, you know from ashes, right? Running his fingers through his hair and straightening his tie, he trudged ahead to push the morgue door open, holding it for her. Following, he added, "I just thought maybe there'd be something about it that might strike you, you being what you are."

The implications were heavier now, and she liked them even less. "Just what *am* I, Joe?"

"Somebody with a functioning Ouija board. Because *we* haven't got a goddamn clue!"

"You start making cracks about crystal balls, you better be ready to find yourself another ..."

"Peace, Bennett, peace. I been up since two, and this is as good as it gets. I *like* Ouija boards. Right up there next to dart boards, by me. I *admire* and *respect* Ouija boards, as long as they produce results and get the commissioner and the mayor off my back. I'm only the *acting* D.A. and don't have twenty years of old-pol favors to call in if the whole thing isn't wrapped up and tied with a bow by the evening edition. And I'm facing an election soon. Pull in your teeth."

"Sorry," said Diana stiffly as they continued down the stark corridor. Morgues didn't go in for soothing New Age pastels, and the place had probably last been painted when LaGuardia was reading the funnies over the radio.

Joe stopped at the inner two-panel swinging door. "Your old buddy Jamison's the coroner on this

one."

"Oh, great," Diana said sourly.

"He won't like the idea that his report isn't enough for you. Try to be diplomatic about getting a guided tour."

"Right. Teeth are for smiling with." She showed him a wide, insincere smile; Joe rolled his eyes and barged through the door.

She was diplomatic, and Jamison let her inspect each of the bodies. He was puzzled and irritated with the facts he'd gleaned from his autopsies, performed at record speed under orders from the Chief of Police backed up by the mayor and the D.A.'s office (in person) because they needed all relevant information fast, with what was obviously a serial killer on their hands. And despite her dislike of the man, Diana knew Jamison didn't let much get past him. Not incompetent; only an officious, self-important pain in the butt.

It was just about as lurid as the CityNet account. Bodies white as marble, necks broken. No evidence of the victims' struggling - neither the men nor either of the women; no unrelated bruising. Yet no evidence of drugs or cranial damage to suggest how they'd been rendered incapable of struggling. Ragged wounds, probably post mortem - as if someone tried to tear out their throats. A botched try at concealing the puncture marks where the blood was drawn? Done hoping it would be taken for an animal attack?

What sort of animal killed twice in under an hour and then drove into the city to attack an unemployed dockworker and then take down four more available strangers at the margin of Central Park?

She knew one who could, but absolutely hadn't. Not the least doubt in her mind. Anyway, there were no claw marks. Ridiculous even to think about it.

It had been messy. Crude. Brutal. Whoever did this believed they'd never be caught. Made no try at concealing the victims; just let them lie where they fell, it seemed. How had it been done - a syringe? So much blood in a human body - Where had the killer put it? Milk jugs? Gas cans? And the big question; what on earth did the killer want the blood *for*?

They, she thought. More than one. There'd been more than one, in Vincent's dream .. Therefore weirdness squared, to have two killers with the same bizarre MO converging on Central Park

They bite, she thought, and shivered. *Symbolic or literal?* Weirdness squared and cubed

She shook her head, then asked of the air, generally, "Question: Where'd the blood go? That car must have been full of it. But there was no mention ..."

Jamison said, "There wasn't any. *All* drained off, clean as a whistle. Total exsanguination. If he spilled a drop anywhere, *I* haven't heard about it." He sounded pleased, as though he admired the killer's tidiness. The more efficient the murderer, the better Jamison liked it. Professional mob hits, he practically drooled over.

"So. You got any ideas, Bennett?" Joe had waited patiently through her inspection for all seven corpses. She wished she had some answers for him.

"Maybe," she temporized.

"Like what?"

She flashed him another nice smile, snapping off the rubber gloves. She tossed them into the trash and flung the surgical gown into a hamper. Grabbing up her carryall, she barreled through the double

swinging doors. When they were out of Jamison's hearing she paused and turned to Joe.

"Vampires?" she whispered, then continued out of the building, moving fast.

"Wait up, Bennett. Dammit, wait up!"

"I'm waiting," She leaned against his car.

"Listen, come on and we'll get some coffee. Tell me what you make of this. seriously."

Coffee sounded great, but ... "There's no time for that, Joe. Gotta get to the crime scenes while they're fresh. Fax me the autopsy reports ASAP, would you? And don't dismiss the possibilities - *any* of them." she added, poking her finger at his chest.

"What kind of possibility is that - vampires?" Joe demanded scornfully.

"About on the same scale as Ouija boards. Now you tell me something; somebody didn't want me on this. It was nearly six before I got the call. So who was the hold-up; you or Travis?"

George Travis was her watch commander, in charge of assignments.

"Me," Joe admitted. He suddenly sounded about as tired as he looked.

"We got a problem, Maxwell?"

"No problem. You weren't my first choice, that's all. You want to know why?"

"I'm listening," Diana rejoined, tensely neutral.

"I didn't want to rake up old memories. You know - Gabriel. You took a lot of heat over that. Killing him. Figured maybe somebody else from the 210 could handle this. You're not the only cop in the world with smarts, you know." The words were belligerent, but not the tone.

Protecting me, Diana thought, somewhere between indignant, annoyed, and touched. *Isn't there anything else men think about?* Something else that *most* men thought about *most* of the time, when it came to women, immediately flashed into her mind. Generally, she would have felt that as funny. Instead, the thought made her sad.

Shy of too much sleep, too, she thought, rubbing her eyes. *Like Joe. Like Vincent*

Joe was continuing, "I told you - I'm only acting DA. There's a limit to how much I want to lean on Travis. That sort of thing comes back at you, sooner or later. So he says you're next on the roster, I got no argument. No problem. But ... Well, you look out for yourself, okay? Because this could shape up into something real nasty."

"You don't know the half of it," Diana responded automatically, without thinking.

"And what's that mean? You know something?"

She waved off the accusation. "Got a few hunches. That's what they pay me for. Not worth a thing without the legwork. Can't take a hunch to court."

"Yeah." For a minute Joe continued to stare at her as though he suspected her of keeping secrets, then let it go and went to his car.

Keeping secrets. He didn't know the half of it.

Standing on the sidewalk as Joe drove off, Diana lifted her head, considering the smoggy city daylight. There'd still be uniforms around the park crime scenes, and Forensics would still be scouring the area. Ditto for the cemetery out on Staten Island. As best she could, she meant to honor Vincent's concerns. Broad daylight, and a dozen or so cops around; that should keep her safe from vampires.

She didn't believe in Ouija boards, either.

Keying in her notes, that night, Diana found it hard to concentrate. She kept glancing over her shoulder, up at the skylights. *He said he'd come. Where is he? What's wrong down there? He told me not to come Below, okay, but it's nearly midnight and where is he?*

Twice, unable to contain her impatience, she went up onto the roof and hung around a few minutes, hoping Vincent would show up. Somehow being on the roof made the suspense worse. She felt exposed, jittery. As though any second the night sky would be lifted off the horizon like a lid from a pot, and she'd find something monstrous gazing down at her. *Craziness. Just nerves*, she thought, disgusted with herself.

Trudging down again, she'd try to settle back to the chore of organizing the data from the autopsies and the crime scenes. She didn't like how it was beginning to add up. And somehow it *got* to her. Her mind kept looping off into crazy speculations, her fingers stilled on the keys, imagining twenty kinds of irrational awfulness, conflicting scenarios that couldn't *all* happen, even supposing *any* of them wasn't totally wacko. Absolutely no sense in being scared of all of them simultaneously. But she couldn't help it.

Where is he? the back of her mind wailed continually.

And yet, at the quick triple click of claws on glass, she jumped about a foot. *Never get used to that*, she thought, spinning out of her chair and dashing for the roof door. *Never in a thousand years*. Always an astonishment to barge up the stairs and find him there - waiting with that massive stillness that was like nobody else, ever, that made her feel twice as jittery and unsure. Like being goddamn seventeen again and scared to death she'd say or do something wrong, something dumb, something that would hurt him, trying to hunch out everything, every look, every breath, every change of expression on that shadowed, golden face, everything inside her at full stretch and vibrating with the need to do whatever, be whatever he needed, wanted, would tolerate. Turn inside out, turn handsprings or cartwheels, whatever, anything ...

And as always, she shut down on it. Hard. He had enough problems, absolutely didn't need hers on top of them. Absolutely didn't need some hysterical woman frantically adoring him, wanting him to *do* something, *say* something, give some least sign he was aware of her as anything but a handy wall for him to lean against whenever he needed to lean and happened to be around.

He still came; she was his favorite wall. That was enough. It had to be.

Without preamble, as she came toward him, he said, "One of us is dead. Murdered."

For a crazy second, she thought he meant one of *them*; herself or him. Stomping that craziness down too, she made herself say, "Somebody Below?"

He nodded. When she set a hand on his arm in concern, she found he was shuddering with tension. Grief. Maybe rage. She wanted to fling both arms around him and hold on. But that would have freaked him. So she held herself still. But she left her hand where it was, even though she was pretty sure he didn't notice. Maybe *because* she was pretty sure he didn't notice.

He said, "Her name was Sarah. I don't believe you knew her. A kind, resolute woman. Loved to read stories to the children in the evening. In the dormitories. Before they slept. Troubled by rheumatoid

arthritis. Made sachets, that were sold Above. Always smelled of lavender. So many children have told me they came to think of that scent as that of kindness itself"

His voice was normal, unemphatic. But she realized then that tears were steadily flowing down the furrows of his face.

It always sounded so dumb to her when she said it to the victims' families. But it was all there was to say, and so she said it; "I'm sorry. Was it?" She didn't know how to finish without sounding callously blunt.

"She was attacked while returning from a delivery Above. Some distance from the Hub. Her throat was torn out. It's begun."

"You mean ... like your hunches."

He nodded heavily. His head stayed bent. "What did you learn today, Diana? What ... of the other deaths?"

Concisely, objectively, like a formal report, she summarized for him what the autopsies had revealed, what the crime scenes showed. Then (what she never would have admitted to anybody else, at this point) the bizarre preliminary conclusions all the rest pointed to.

He didn't protest or argue, as anybody else would have (which was why she'd risk springing such weird stuff on him, straight faced). He didn't interrupt, just listened soberly until she finished, "They never had a chance. It was over in a second, taken completely by surprise. There wasn't even a chance for them to try to run. Just *bang*, and they were dead. I'd think," she added carefully. "they'd have been too surprised to feel much. Before it was too late. I don't think they suffered...."

He didn't respond to her try at consolation. "I'm sorry to disturb you so late," he said, just as though he hadn't come a dozen other times, and last night, much later than this. "And I cannot stay long. The sentries have been drawn in, and we're doing what we can to protect ourselves. Staying together. No one alone. Evacuating the more distant regions, drawing in to the center. We've sent the children Above, to the homes of helpers who will care for them. We are beginning patrols, to search for the killer...."

"You better hope you don't find him," Diana blurted. "If he's what I think, a few poles aren't gonna be any more help than so many matchsticks, unless somebody can make him stand still so you can stake him through the heart. That's supposed to work. I've been reading up on it today. All major, major weird. Who knows what's just moonshine and what's real anymore, a thing like this? They're supposed to sleep all day, too, and I didn't see any handy coffins lying around in that mansion. And at least two times I know of, myself, he was out and around in the daytime. So who knows what could work? What can you do about a thing like that?"

"I won't have to find him," Vincent responded, ignoring the babble. "If he comes Below, he's come for Jacob. He will find me."

The breath caught tight in Diana's chest, because she instantly knew he was right. And she knew there was less than no use in trying to persuade him to go hide out awhile, anything to keep himself from danger. He'd go straight at it, just as he always had. His community was threatened; he'd do whatever he could to protect them. And this time, it would be no use. He was outmatched.

As if he could read her mind, he said, "It's not hopeless. At least one of them was stopped, for a time, by a place prone to rockfalls I lured him into." And then her heart damn near stopped because without any fuss, he put his arms around her and drew her close, saying quietly, "You mustn't be afraid for me. It's my home; I know all of it and its dangers, that can be made allies against an adversary. I will

take all the care I can. I know my limits better now; I won't be foolhardy. The sentries will be safe; not even such as we suspect him to be can pass through a watch-slit, I think, to attack someone behind it."

As she shook her head, not at all reassured by his levelheaded theories about the utterly unknown and infinitely dangerous, he went on, "It's you who must take care. For if ... if I cannot stop him, or even if he's temporarily turned aside, it's you he will be coming after, Diana. Because ... of what you did. For me. And I cannot be in both places. And Above, I ... I don't know if my presence would only increase your danger, offering him both targets at once. I don't know what would be best. But I believe ... my first duty is Below."

"Jacob ..."

"He will *not* find Jacob," Vincent responded sternly. "Never. The children have been sent Above. *All* the children. Jacob, I've entrusted to ... a very particular friend. Who has taken him far away and in turn entrusted him to other hands. There's nothing in his appearance to mark him out as mine. Even I do not know where he is. Though that's hard, Diana. Hard to be parted from him"

He drew a large breath, held it. Let it go. "He is still with me, within. We cannot be truly parted now. He will be safe. Whatever happens. But you." At last, and to her regret, he put her away from him. Holding her at both arms' length, he regarded her gravely. "You must go away, too. At once. That's what I came to tell you. You are in terrible danger. And the world Above is even less capable of protecting you from such danger than anything Below. Diana, you must," he insisted as she began shaking her head, her braid flapping across her shoulders with the force of it.

"I'll hang out garlic, every window and door. Stink for a mile. Take a bath in holy water; I know a priest who's into weird, I can get some. Lots of things are supposed to work; I read up on it today, down at the library. Let me tell you, maybe something you could use ..."

He just stood looking at her. "Will you go, Diana? As I ask?"

"It's all crazy, Vincent. Maybe just a set-up by somebody who wants us to do just what we're doing - panic. Maybe it's all only a scam ..."

"You know it's not."

"I don't know *anything!*" Diana protested, almost a wail.

"Sarah knows it's not. And the others, who have been murdered in that savage way. They know. And you know. I cannot protect everyone. Perhaps ... not anyone. I know my limits better now ... Please. Let me know that you'll be safe. Please."

If she didn't, he'd be worrying about her. Torn between Below and here. Maybe distracted on that account and his risk increased because of it. He didn't use that argument, but it came to her just the same. So she said, "Sure, okay. If that's what you figure is best, I'll take off for awhile."

He looked dubious, as though he accurately suspected her of lying through her teeth. But with his huncher down (as she understood it), no sense of people past what they said or showed, he couldn't be sure. He had to take her word for it or not. And he didn't have the spare time to argue any more when she'd already given in. He bent his head again, as though realizing that. Then he lifted his eyes and gazed at her a long minute with no expression she could read. But she shivered from the force, the intensity of it.

And he said solemnly, as he had once before, "When this is over, I will come for you." And somehow it meant both nothing and everything, just as before. Because she knew he didn't expect to come out

of this alive, either.

And it was damn near impossible to keep the words from exploding from where she kept them shut inside her; *I love you*.

But somehow she did. That was the last thing he needed right now.

"Yeah," she said calmly, "sure. Good. We'll compare notes."

Another long minute vibrant with a huge silence. Then; "I must go."

"Yeah, and I gotta pack. So okay. You take care."

"And you, Diana. Be well."

She didn't, of course. Didn't go pack. Watching from the shadows by a chimney, Snow'd had a bet with himself about it, and he won. Left alone on the rooftop, she just stood, arms wrapped tight around her like the hug she'd lost, just the way he'd known she would.

And he had the name now; *Vincent*. All kosher, all fair and square. Snow could dump the handicap he'd imposed on himself and see about settling another private bet about which of them would come out on top if he *really* cut loose. But the conversation had made it clear that to settle that bet, he'd have to move fast to get there ahead of Gabriel. There weren't going to be any second helpings left over, after that. First one in got the whole prize.

He liked it, that Vincent had sent the kid away. That has style. Gabe wasn't going to get what he wanted even if he did get through the Beast. Snow liked the idea of Gabe being balked that way. And liked the notion of the kid, that Gabe wanted to initiate as his heir, being kept clear of all this. What they were and what they did had nothing to do with kids. Snow had sworn off killing kids a long time ago on the excuse that it was too easy and there generally wasn't even enough blood to make it worth the trouble.

He should get on with it. Instead, he found himself remarking, "So you killed Gabe. I like that in a person."

She whirled, stiff and scared. But she couldn't see him. There was a kind of trick he could do, standing side-on and very still, and a mind simply couldn't take in that anybody was there. Some way, deep down, people knew he was no more truly alive than a stack of bricks. While the eyes were looking for something alive, the mind knew better and refused to process the outline into a shape. Wouldn't focus on it. Handy, sometimes.

She whipped a gun out of the back of her sweatpants, both hands, arms outstretched in proper police stance, both of them knowing it'd be no use at all, she didn't even know where to aim. Of course, there was always the off chance she might hit him, but the chance of it doing more than slow him up a fraction of a second was about nil. But she was in there pitching, he'd give her that. Fierce and determined as a setter pup.

He knew her name; Diana Bennett.

The raw details of Gabriel's death, he'd collected within hours of his waking; Gabriel's people were still in place, in most divisions of city government, and the usual passwords still commanded immediate, unquestioning obedience. Leaving the phone stand, he'd thought it might be interesting to

drop by and take a look at the enigmatic redhead from the Special Crimes Unit not even Gabriel's people knew much about, except her name, address, and that she had a reputation for getting results.

Having a good memory for faces, he'd recognized her almost at once; they'd passed each other in the City Geographer's office in search of maps. Each, he now concluded, on their separate hunts, same target. Well, looked like they'd both found what they'd been looking for.

He hadn't expected that, the big cloaked shape coming off the fire escape last night, tapping at the skylight like somebody knocking at a door, casual and accustomed.

Although he'd waited, not once had she said the Beast's name. Annoying. So he'd come back tonight for a second try. He liked to have the names. Made things tidy. Almost fair.

Idly amused, he said, "He's right, you know; you ought to travel. Gabe, he's a man to hold a grudge. And he won't let you catch him like that a second time."

She readjusted her stance, just a little, head tilting to the side. "Snow."

"I've been known to answer to that. He won't, you know. Come back ... Vincent. Ever. Not a single chance in hell. Gabe's really peeved, this time."

"Tell him. Tell him that Jacob's gone, isn't Below. There's nothing he can find there but the worst fight of his goddamn life. Because ... because Vincent was enough to do for you, buster!"

"I was fighting fair," Snow replied equably. "Gabe won't. Nothing that breathes can stand up to that. He may be peculiar, your Vincent. Even spectacular. But he still breathes."

"He's not *my* Vincent!" she shot back, stung.

"I noticed. And noticed how he didn't. Is the man blind, or what?"

"Or what. Look, how can I get you to tell him, tell Gabriel, that Jacob's out of his reach? Get him to give him up?" The gun sagged, held loosely before her. "I'm nothing to you; can we do a deal here?"

"The Kindred aren't famous for being talked out of things. And Gabe and I ... I don't hardly think so. Sorry. But ..." He moved a little, facing her, letting her see him. Her eyes went wide, and he heard her suck in her breath. Well, he'd taken only the minimum he needed to get solid - not an ounce, not a drop more. So he probably still looked like death slightly warmed over. Finishing his thought, he mentioned, "There could be a way. If you wanted. Nobody can do Gabe any permanent harm except somebody who knows a lot more than you do - *garlic; come on now! Goddamn holy water!*" he interrupted himself disgustedly.

"Then what; tell me!"

"I'm not that stupid. Anyway, like I was *saying ...*" (A reproof for her interrupting; before she thought, she shifted in apology, then braced, angry. But she'd already reacted. Susceptible, this one. Hypersensitive to the least nuance. He could have taken her then - drinking at her long white throat before she'd even thought to struggle. But if he took her unwilling, she'd have held it against him later; whatever you called it, rape was rape. And women didn't forget, either - even after the Change. Eventually, they'd get you back for it. He could wait, he decided. She was a woman; she'd come to him of her own accord.) "... nobody could give Gabe much trouble except one of the Kindred. And ..." (Forestalling another interruption, likely a plea that he help them out.) "they couldn't be bothered. Predators don't fight each other if they can help it. And we're not exactly famous for being altruistic, either. But something might be arranged." Watching her, he added, "Doesn't take long. Little exchange of bodily fluids, nothing much. But enough. And you could take care of it yourself. You'd

probably still want to. For awhile."

And watching, he saw when she got it. Her eyes went even wider, and her alabaster face went even paler. She'd go for it. Women always did, given half a chance.

Though he'd never done a survey, Snow figured the once-women among the Kindred were about double the once-men. Hell, it is irresistible; never get sick or old, always stay beautiful and eerily attractive to anybody you bothered to notice, so that sometimes they'd come right up to you, offering. Yearning for it - the ultimate high, the orgasmic ecstasy of total surrender. She'd have them begging her; those huge Botticelli eyes, that flawless porcelain skin, all that rich, brilliant hair that would be the same even afterward. The same, forever.

The offer was against his principles. But it would have style, to send her off to kill Gabriel again. This time, in a way that would last. And it might be interesting to have her around until her existence narrowed down to the next feed, the next sleep, nothing much left but appetite and greedy absorption with her own satisfaction. That would take awhile. Years, maybe. And until then, it might be interesting, having another ignorant, eager beginner to show the ropes to, his word and his protection life and death to them, until they were certain they could strike out on their own, generally much earlier, it was true, but you could never tell them, the green beginners. Full of hot, stolen blood, they thought they knew it all.

Gabriel had been like that once. It had been interesting. For awhile. Snow had never recruited anybody else since. Figured he'd learned his lesson. Maybe you never learned. Always hoped this time, it would be different. Company down all the centuries, somebody who really *understood*....

She said cautiously, "You mean what I think you mean?"

Snow was getting bored. "I'm not interested in dancing around, lady. Either you do or you don't. Look, do you really care about this guy or not? And you know and I know he barely knows you're alive *now*. Nothing's going to happen there. Even if he came through this. Which he won't. Because it's not just Gabe. I got my own score to settle and I can't wait around while you make up your mind or I'll lose my chance. Who knows; if you settle Gabe, you might even be able to give me a run for my money, the two of you. Might be interesting. Say it; yes or no?"

"No."

Not her voice. He knew that voice. Off by the fire escape. The outline of maned head, wide, cloaked shoulders lifting above the roof's edge, and he absolutely hadn't known Vincent was still there. He wouldn't have thought any mortal breathing could escape his notice like this. He would have bet on it. and lost.

Swinging around, the woman, Diana, called sharply, "You stay out of this. Go away, back Below. Anything could be happening down there!"

Vincent didn't even look at her, coming to stand between her and Snow, the pose alone saying that to get at her, Snow would have to go through him. All very brave and pathetic. Or maybe not. It might be interesting. Although Snow had instantly gone sideways, expecting to disappear, Vincent kept looking straight at him even when, too fast to see, Snow moved. Vincent's eyes still found him when he stopped.

Snow had vaguely expected the eyes to be yellow, the videotape hadn't shown that detail, but they were blue. And ice-cold.

Well, the Beast was different.

Waiting, watching them talk, Snow hadn't made the least move, the least sound. He couldn't see any way Vincent could have guessed they had an audience.

Curious, he asked, "How'd you guess?"

"You smell," responded Vincent deliberately, "of old blood."

"Well, well, well. Didn't know there was bloodhound in the mix." Snow shifted again. Again the eyes found him. Interesting. Snow said, "I *am* old blood. The oldest blood of all. The lady and I are talking business here." Addressing her, he added, "This is twice. The offer won't be open forever."

"Vincent," said the woman urgently, coming up behind the Beast and grabbing his arm, "there's no time, and I take my own risks. Always have, always will. This is none of your business."

Not looking at her, not shifting his eyes for a second, Vincent replied, "You will not do this thing."

It wasn't until then, Snow thought, that she made up her mind. Telling her what she couldn't do pushed her over the edge, maybe. Made her mad. She let go her hold on Vincent's arm and took a step toward Snow. And in less than a second, Snow was ready to accommodate her, again moving fast, so it would seem he'd magically appeared behind her, his arm around her waist, drawing her close as a lover, bending.

Almost in that same second, almost as fast, a split-second behind, Snow was swatted away, halfway across the roof and skidding on his side before he could react, distracted a little by the woman maybe but still so goddamn *fast*, and the woman had been shoved the other way, staggering back toward the door until she caught her balance and held there, looking a little dazed.

His back to her, Vincent said again, "*You will not do this thing.*"

Rousing, refocusing, she responded, "It's none of your goddamn business what I do! Stay out of it. Where are you?" she called desperately, starting across the roof, scanning, seeing nothing. Snow liked her for that, for her stubbornness. She might last quite a long while before nothing mattered to her but the meat market, her vanity apparently untouched by the offer of eternal youth, eternal beauty, just wanting to get it done with now that she'd made up her mind.

Pushing up on an elbow, Snow thought about seeing how many ribs he could yank straight out before the Beast could take another breath. Show him what fast *really* could be. But the woman would be a nuisance - a handicap. To both of them. Getting in the way. And she'd make him kill her - wouldn't back off otherwise; he'd begun to know her, and she'd been stubborn about that, too. And he only wanted to kill her a little, temporarily. Not for good, for no better reason than that she wouldn't get out of his way.

After all, he'd been trying to do her a goddamn favor.

So he just got up, brushing tarry gravel off his scraped cheek, feeling the wounded flesh coming seamlessly together. "Yeah," he told Vincent in a casual, reasonable tone, "like the lady says. Stay out of it. None of your business. Otherwise, you're both dead."

"Perhaps. But there are worse things than dying. Much worse. We both know that." As Diana went by, Vincent reached out, seized her arm. And she wheeled around ... with the gun in her hands. The muzzle against his chest. Stubborn. Definitely.

"Let go. Now," she directed.

"Never."

"Never," Snow remarked, "is a long time. Third strike, and out. See you around people."

"Wait!" Diana shouted, her eyes searching for him blindly.

But nobody was fooling anybody here; if there'd been a bluff, it'd been called. Any idiot could tell she wasn't going to shoot Vincent, and he wasn't going to turn her loose. Stalemate, plan and simple. And squabbling over something like that had no style at all. Like the undignified tug-of-war over the baby, Jason, Jerry, whatever the brat's name was. No style, just gimme. And both of them, Vincent and the woman, hopeless, helpless. As good as dead, just more doomed castle destined for the mortal meat market. History. Gabriel would take care of that.

Snow had been a fool to bother with them.

Disgusted with himself for the impulsive lapse anyway, sorry he'd ever made the goddamn offer, Snow decided the whole thing bored him. He swung his legs over the parapet and pushed off. Only about a thirty-foot drop; nothing to it.

He strolled away, idly admiring how streetlights cast his shadow on the pavement - ahead, and then suddenly behind, as though he were his own prey, his own pursuer.

Vincent didn't immediately release Diana's arm, with the unformed hope that the contact might spark his empathy sense. So he could know if she were truly angry with him. Know what she felt - whatever that might be. He wanted that very much, with an urgency, a hunger, that took him quite by surprise. But it didn't happen. Yet still it was a reason to be close, touching her. That mattered, too, he found, with a surprise of delight that shook him, made him want to shout or swing her up in his arms or clutch her close. He did none of these things because he couldn't know what she felt and perhaps she was angry with him.

And yet he knew, beyond all knowing. Knew her, and knew himself. With certainty and serenity and such joy that it made all that had been confused and laborous simple again, focused, no need to wonder or doubt because it was simple there and true and beyond mistaking. She loved him beyond any thought of herself, of safety or even of acknowledgment, much less return of that boundless acceptance. And finally undistracted, he knew what it'd been, the unrecognized face in his dreams, dearer to him than all else. Her face. It was an awakening. A heart's homecoming. He was totally, absurdly happy.

And she didn't try to pull free of his grip but instead gradually sagged against him, her head tilted against his shoulder. Slowly he rested his cheek on her hair. Glory. Tears sprang to his eyes. He willingly would have stood so, with her, forever.

"But," she murmured eventually, as though resuming a conversation, "what'll you do now?"

A large question. And yet, now, a simple one. "We," Vincent replied, "will go Below."

She pulled back then, to look at him. Frowning. "What - don't you trust me out of your sight?" she challenged.

"No," he said, and smiled. "Never again."

She ducked her head away. Not knowing what he felt, or that he felt it. Or perhaps merely unsure. "But it's hopeless."

"We have only that time that we have," Vincent responded, quite at peace with himself. With her.

Once, she'd taken a terrible choice from him. Terrible in its repercussions. He would have been someone else, had he killed Gabriel, striking from the heart of that overwhelming anger. There would have been no going back, after that. The rage would have commanded him ever afterward - become all he could feel or know. And she'd taken that terrible choice from him.

Now, he'd taken a terrible choice from her. Forbidden, prevented it. There was a symmetry, he felt. And knew she wasn't angry, any more than he had been. Only profoundly grateful and relieved that, after all, she hadn't had to do this thing - hadn't given up her humanity, that made love possible, in love's name.

She would have done it. Sacrificed more than life itself. For him. And hadn't had to.

He was humbled by her valor. But not diminished by it. For the joy still sang under everything, untroubled and powerful.

"And," he said, "we can only do what we can. Together." His hand slid down her arm until it reached her hand, which curled into a clasp. Tightened hard for a second around and within his. Then relaxed, as she sighed.

Hand-in-hand, they crossed the roof to the fire escape. There, they had to separate, to descend. But as soon as they both were down, Vincent held out his hand again and, a little shyly, still a little uncertain, she clasped it and they went on.

Words wouldn't be enough, he felt, to make her know. Only choices faced and taken, and the life shaped by those choices, would make her truly know. *Time*, he thought; and, in spite of himself, in spite of the joy, for the first time began to be anxious.

The terrors of the visions, as well as the astonished recognition of what they meant, now began to strike him fully.

When they reached the threshold and descended into the tunnels, Diana commented, clearly out of the thinking she'd done as they'd begun walking. "He wasn't there just tonight. He was there last night, too. I could *feel* it. Don't ask me how. A feeling. A hunch. Didn't know what it was, then. But I felt it." She glanced up at him, the look a question.

"I felt nothing," he reported, as they continued down the concrete passage. "I only suspected you wouldn't leave, in spite of what you'd said. So I waited a moment, to see. Then a breeze came. And I smelled the death within him. The death he had fed on. It's hard to describe it ... made my hair rise."

Her glance was quick this time, and sharply amused. Because, as he was certain they both were thinking, that was a lot of hair. And it was so, and didn't embarrass him as it once would have.

"What I was thinking," she said, sobering, "is, could we use that some way? That I knew he was there, even though I didn't realize then that's what it was? My huncher's pretty steady. Pretty reliable, if I just pay attention to it. If I stay open to the possibilities. Could you use me in place of yours, that's still sputtering, comes and goes?"

Surprised, he considered the idea. "Perhaps. For he might be anywhere - Gabriel. Even near us now. Hunch for him, Diana. See if you can feel him near."

She shut her eyes, and he put an arm around her, to steady and guide her while she concentrated with other senses. She was a presence, and yet an absence, within his arms - as when she was working, he realized. That same absolute focus, the mindfulness of one thing only, that she willingly lost herself within and into. Easily, Fearlessly. Not as he feared to lose himself.

He had too many doubts and reservations to cast himself out utterly like that. Too much mistrust of

himself and what he might do when the shackles of conscious control had been slipped. But that freedom, he realized with a sense of wonder, they had - together. She reaching, he steadying her while she reached. Together, they had it, that power.

And he began to think what other strengths might be drawn on, once he put away the misguided conviction that all safety rested on him alone. That he was the final recourse and bore the whole burden.

He'd learned, in the most absolute and painful way, that alone he was surely doomed to failure. That without the willingness to accept help, to recognize his own limitations and surrender his painful arrogance, surrender even himself and those things most important to him to others, to trust them to go where he could not, do what he could not, there could be no hope.

Now, that knowledge gained in his quest for Jacob - what Elliot and Diana herself had taught him, though he'd resisted their lessons with all his might - began to spread through him and connect to old assumptions born of his ineradicable sense of his own aloneness.

He wasn't alone. Could never be alone again. Always, there'd be Jacob. Unchanged by distance, his sense of his son remained a presence within him. Jacob was peacefully asleep. Somewhere. Wherever Peter had taken him, to put the child at a double remove from anything Gabriel might contrive to connect to the tunnels. And now, amazingly, there was Diana. Unfelt, but deeply felt, moving beside him steadily and without hesitation, blind, in the shelter of his arm that would never let her stumble or fall. So simply, so beyond question, that he was still astonished he'd managed to overlook it, blind himself to the realization that he'd been guided and supported just as surely by her in all the past months, in all the terror of his search for Jacob, in all his despairs and even the fires of his furies. Through it all she'd been there, steady, unendingly valiant, focused only on the one thing from the clear perspective only love could grant.

At last he saw her face in his rescue, in the dark she'd led him out of, never stumbling, never allowing him to stumble. Leading him forward with the lightest clasp, barely a touch at all, that he'd barely been conscious of.

Without that steadiness, he would surely have fallen. And yet he hadn't. Because she'd been with him. Not to be lost. Not even to be driven away with cold words. Or with hot. Simply and blessedly there, even unacknowledged and unknown, so he'd still imagined himself alone, and she other than himself.

What foolishness.

He looked at her, her wondrous face, that seemed to be serenely dreaming.

Without opening her eyes, she said, "Don't do that; it's distracting."

He was astonished. And delighted. "Don't do what?"

She tipped her head, turned her face away, as she did sometimes, so that the dear familiarity was a separate joy. "Don't look at me," she complained, "I can feel you looking at me."

"Nothing else?" he asked wistfully.

"It's enough."

"No," he said. "It's not." And he turned her, and as her eyes began to blink open, kissed her slowly, carefully, so as not to startle her any more than could be helped.

His face would be strange to her, he knew. The mouth would not be like a man's mouth. The textures and the shapes would be different. The pressures unfamiliar. It would take time, he knew, for it to be

otherwise to her. Also, he was unpracticed. And probably awkward - in this, as in so much else. The strangeness would be there for him, too, to take such a liberty and believe, simply believe, it wouldn't be unwelcome or frightening merely because he did it badly and because his face could never be except what it was, never a man's face, a man's mouth.

With time, they'd become accustomed to it. Now, there was trust, and hope, rather than knowing. He was content it should be so.

And he took from her the taste of her living mouth, that opened for him with a soft, surprised gasp, the taste of her breath received with no distance between, just as if it were his own breath, shared. And suddenly his sense of her did spark, and he felt it in her, the longing and the surprise, the wonder and the joy, her hunger that wasn't so different from his own but flowed into it, blended with it, as urgent and as fierce but no fear in it, no uncertainty, unlike his. Because she'd never had to learn to mistrust herself so thoroughly, so fundamentally, as he had. A pure, clear reaching, as wholehearted as anything else she did, so very like her that he wondered he hadn't felt it before or even imagined it. So natural to her. So beautiful.

And *they* had it. It was theirs. Neither of them, alone, but with certainty, together.

Almost as quickly as it had flared, his sense of her faded. He regretted its fading, that he couldn't keep contact with the sweet innerness of her. And yet he didn't regret it because he knew the closeness would come again. More and more easily, more and more often. With time, as his healing, that he'd thought complete, progressed beyond a dull numbness. And other closenesses, too. Ones he knew he couldn't even imagine. But they would come. In time.

She pulled her mouth from his, leaning dizzily against him, holding on tight. "You must," she gasped, "have the lung capacity of a damn elephant!"

He wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not. Then she looked at his uncertain face and laughed. So he knew it was probably an acceptable strangeness to her. Perhaps even a welcome one.

She pushed hair back from her face. He helped her, carefully stroking the loose strands into place with the most exact concentration. Then they looked at one another for what seemed like a long while. It seemed like forever.

"And kissing," she mentioned dryly, "is even more distracting."

"Good," he responded comfortably, and roused a smile from her, wide and delighted and happy.

Looking vaguely around her, she said, "I haven't picked up anything so far. No creepy shivers. No sense of being watched. I don't think he's near here."

He nodded, accepting her judgment altogether and without question. Preparing to act on it, Releasing her, he stooped for a stone. He tapped a message on the nearest pipe and waited for an acknowledgment that the message had been received and understood.

That was another strength he had, they had, to call on; their adversary could not know pipecode.

In defeating Snow that first time, Vincent had thought to draw on only his own knowledge of the tunnels themselves - their intrinsic dangers, that he knew and his adversary did not. But there were, he was realizing, other advantages he could put to use if he once admitted they were available to him. For not only the tunnels were his. The community was, as well. If he'd allow himself to depend upon them, not be so arrogantly determined that all risk, the only risk, be his. And the only strength his as well, which was strength foolishly halved and quartered by ignoring and cutting himself off from the willing and unique strengths of others, that could be added to his own and thereby magnified

manyfold. The strengths of community. Of which he was a part. Only a part of a greater whole that, collectively, was infinitely strong. That, potentially, was immortal.

"I've been a fool," he realized.

"So what else is new?" she rejoined, again grinning, so that he couldn't help smiling in return. Baring, he knew, the sharp white fangs of his mouth that wasn't and could never be a man's mouth. But acceptable to her. Desired by her. And therefore, someday, acceptable to him as well.

It felt very good to smile without constraint, if not wholly without self-consciousness.

The rest, all the things to be discovered and the things to be gradually recognized as unimportant and forgotten, still lay before them, shimmering like far images half discerned through heat-haze. Or like images in a dream.

But he was awake now. And it was wonderful.

He smiled again, and they went on toward the meeting to which his message had summoned friends, family. Other parts of the whole.

"*Vincent, this is utter insanity!*" Father burst out, slamming a book down on his desk behind the table where they'd gathered to talk. Diana flinched at the bang. Vincent just settled resignedly, clearly used to such eruptions.

"Father. Is security not my province?" he asked mildly, turning in his chair to see around Mouse, who ducked against Cullen to get out of the direct line between Vincent and Father.

"Yes, of course. But ... *vampires?*" Father sputtered. "The next thing, you'll suggest the sentries arm themselves with crucifixes! It's the sort of thing I'd expect of Narcissa. Not from you. Have you altogether lost your mind?"

"As to the crucifixes, I would, if I thought it would serve any purpose. But I can't imagine that a creature who casually uses the name of divinity as a curse would be much troubled by that. As to Narcissa, her advice has been asked for. I hope she'll come presently. If not, I'll go to her. I will turn away no one's help, Father. No one's wisdom or insight. If you cannot find it in your heart to contribute yours, and if our discussion troubles you so, we'll remove to the Commons."

He began gathering up the maps layered all over the table.

"Vincent, that's not what I meant at all. It's simply"

"Am I too late?" Jamie blurted, skidding to a halt at the top of the steps, grabbing at the handrail. Except for its chin strap, her mining helmet would have flown off, likely hit the table like a bomb. "I was way out by Ripley, didn't get the word until" Her voice trailed off as she scanned the study, taking in the silence, the stiff poses.

Vincent turned to look at the girl. "I thought it had been agreed that no one stray from the Hub. And especially not alone."

Jamie reddened, straightening, her eyes downcast. "There was a report of something moving. I just thought ... Anyway, You weren't here, so I ..." Her helmeted head drooped. "Sorry, Vincent. I won't do it again. Just don't leave me out of this."

"You're welcome to join the discussion, at least. As for the rest" Vincent continued piling the maps.

One started to slide off the table. Diana grabbed it - carefully; some of them were old and brittle - and passed it to him balanced across both hands. He nodded thanks. "As for the rest, what do you conceive it is that we face here, Jamie? Who or what is our adversary?"

Diana vaguely knew that he generally taught classes, when things were normal. Literature, history, something like that. She could hear it, then in his voice - the cadences of a teacher trying to lead a student to the right answer.

"Gabriel's ghost!"

"No!" Diana burst out, louder than she'd meant.

Even going for three a.m., upset, scared, and half asleep, they were all so goddamn polite down here, even when they were arguing, that she felt like a vice cop sitting in on a faculty tea, everybody with pinkies raised. She didn't care. Well, she *did* care, but she did it anyhow, although with a quick glance at Vincent, whose face showed nothing but attention - polite, naturally.

She shook off the inclination to vague out, just let her eyes get lost in his and drift. He didn't seem to be having any trouble keeping himself to the point. Generally she didn't, either. But generally she wasn't chin-deep in weird and wanting so much to simply lose herself in the memory of his face incredibly moving closer, all she could see, and then the kiss that went on, and on, and on

They were all looking at her. Yanking herself back, she went on, "That's where we've all been going wrong, don't you see? He's not a ghost, he's a vampire."

Mouse looked perplexed; Jamie shrugged.

Diana realized she wasn't getting through to them. "Okay, look," she said, automatically sketching and punctuating ideas with sharp gestures, "forget that. Forget ghost, forget vampire. Because who knows how to deal with that? Not me. Not anybody here, that's for sure. All afternoon, I was reading up on it. Some books say vampires can turn into a mist, or a bat, or a wolf, or any goddamn thing the writer figured was scary, and how you gonna defend against that? Might as well give up right there. If he's whatever we're scared of, whatever it's impossible to defeat, then our worst enemy is our own imaginations. Face somebody with what they're truly most afraid of and they'll freeze up, paralyzed, and just stand there to be collected. Whatever you're most scared of, *he isn't that*. He's only different. But even different has limits."

Deliberately, she twisted her head around to look Vincent straight in the eyes, knowing she was taking everybody else's eyes with her. This time, she didn't get lost.

She was no teacher, probably no good at explaining, but she had a point to make and was determined to make it, no matter how many tries it took.

"Yes," Vincent commented simply, accepting the implied comparison. "Only another kind of difference. But malevolent. And unfamiliar. How do you think we can use this, Diana?"

"What I'm getting at is, I *killed* the man. So maybe he came back, maybe I didn't take him out permanently. But what we can't lose sight of is that first, I killed him. He was *dead*. There was no autopsy. A funeral - big one, the papers said. Everybody scared not to pay their respects, like a mob get-together. And then he was buried. Whole days after I shot him. You see? He didn't go into mist and vanish. He stayed in that goddamn crypt almost six months; two nights ago, now.

"What I'm getting at," Diana continued earnestly, brushing away hair that had escaped the braid and kept straying across her eyes, "is that I slowed him down real bad. With a .22-caliber pocket pistol, a goddamn nickel-plated ladies' purse popgun, not even police issue. To take a full-grown man down

with that, you can't hit bone - in the eye or the throat or between the ribs, preferably at range so close you leave flash burns on his lapels. We're not talking heavy-duty artillery, here. And on silver bullets, no nothing."

Mouse was looking at her a little funny, as if the specifics, the gory details, were losing him again.

Returning to basics, she barged on determinedly. "I took him once through the heart, and he laid there. He was dead. For nearly six months. And by six months from now, who knows what we could learn? We need time. Then keep at it till we *do* finish him. Don't you see? Maybe he's not human, maybe he's major weird, but he's a physical being who can be hurt. Who can be killed. Vincent took his buddy out with a rockfall. Right?"

Appealed to, Vincent nodded. Then, taking the burden from her, he told them, "I encountered him again - the creature called Snow. On Diana's roof. Less than an hour ago. He's strange. He can move incredibly fast. Almost seem to disappear; I could discern him only when he stopped, and only with an effort of will, of concentration. But he didn't mean me to see him at all. That I did surprised him, I believe; Diana couldn't. (She bobbed her head in confirmation without interrupting)

"He can jump from the top of a five-story building and take no harm, not even hesitate. He is a creature of rational discourse. He has plans, intentions, not just mindless malevolence. Just as in the daylight world, Gabriel passed for a man. Snow taught us more than he intended, I think, simply by giving us the opportunity to observe him. What he's capable of ... and what, evidently, he is not. Their powers may be preternatural. But they are finite. Diana's right; we must consider Gabriel as a physical being who can be opposed by merely physical means. For instance; he cannot be all places at once. What did you find, Jamie, while *scouting*?"

His tone made the word the mildest of reproofs.

Helmet tucked under her arm, Jamie came down the stairs. Mouse vacated his chair for her and collected another for himself, sitting on it back to front, arms across the top. Diana noted, if nobody else did, that apparently the offer to move someplace else had been forgotten, and Father hadn't brought it up again, either, perched on the edge of his desk, stick across his knees, very conspicuously not saying anything, but listening. Maybe it was just the spook talk that had set him off. Maybe a vampire you could maybe kill, or at least seriously slow down, was more nearly tolerable.

Seating herself, Jamie reported, "I found footprints at the Ripley junction. Leading up, toward Top Ripley. Lost them on the steps. Shoes, about size nine, narrow. Topsider shoes, with new heels, sharp edges. Stride length would make him middle-sized; under six feet. Average weight or under."

"Sounds right," Diana commented, impressed by the girl's crisp summary.

"How long ago?" Vincent asked.

"The first signal, maybe three hours ago," Jamie estimated. "Took me awhile to get there; you know how far that is. The footprints had been made after the evacuation; they were on top of the other tracks, everywhere I found them. The freshest, newest of the bunch."

Vincent looked at Cullen, who immediately rose, commenting, "I'll see to it. Two sentries?"

"One. Well away from where the tunnel exits. Behind a wall. Dust flour for fifteen feet in. The exit turns; no one can take a right angle in a single bound, especially when he will know of no need to do so."

"Not flour," Mouse put in. "Sand. White sand. From by the Mirror Pool. Not much. Scatter it outside, too. So it looks like it belongs."

Cullen glanced for Vincent's approval, then went quickly up the steps. A minute later, there was the resonant sound of signaling on the pipes - the first that Diana had heard, except for Vincent's, since she'd come Below, now that she thought of it.

"Excellent, Jamie," Vincent told the girl, who scowled and looked stern, to keep from beaming at the praise. "You've been most observant and drawn sound conclusions. It will undoubtedly be useful. The Ripley branches," Vincent explained to Diana, "are extensive, but dead-ended. There's only one way in or out - a disused section of subway tunnel. If Gabriel is there, he will not leave without our knowing, once the sentry is set. Mouse. What traps have you in that area?"

Mouse fumbled through the maps until he found the one he wanted. Putting it on top, he stabbed points with a forefinger. "Net *here*. Blind wall *here*. Trip alarm *here*, but doesn't always work. Batteries bad, I think. Sorry. Oh, and I was working on ... but not finished. Won't work. Never mind. Falling gate *here*, with a trip-wire." Lifting his head to look at Father, crooked bangs across his eyes, Mouse added, "*Meant* to tell you about that one. New. Forgot. Sorry."

As Mouse continued reciting what was, to Diana, an unexpectedly diverse variety of traps and fake dead-ends, Vincent shut his eyes, head tipped back. Visualizing, probably. Trying to think how they might be used. Then his face settled in a way that made Diana suspect he'd fogged out and was drifting. She gave his knee a covert nudge under the table, and the way he jerked and roused confirmed her suspicion.

They were all getting punchy, she thought; thinking in bursts, then trickling down to a dead stop. Pretty soon, that would be a problem, all on its own.

"Another thing," Diana commented. "There's two of 'em. But they're not gonna gang up on us. They hunt alone."

"*On what do you base that rather sweeping conclusion?*" Father's tart question, unexpectedly, from back by the desk.

"Because" She hated that; hated trying to explain how she knew what she knew. Translate all the partial, unrelated scraps, that'd just come together, into linear sequence, left-brain rationality. But she guessed she'd have to try.

"Well, Snow congratulated me on killing Gabriel, for one thing. More or less. No love lost there, seemed like. And... because they're so goddamn lonely. Gabriel wants Jacob. And Snow" Dammit, she was blushing; she knew they'd all take it wrong. "Snow, he was sort of inclined to, well, recruit me. Got the feeling he was kicking himself for bringing it up, like it's not something he does whenever he gets the chance. But he brought it up. I didn't. with the bait that then I'd have whatever edge I needed to have some chance against Gabriel. If I was ... what they are."

"You refused, of course," deduced Father. "Quite right. The ends never justify the means."

She and Vincent shared a glance that agreed they didn't have to go into exactly how that offer had been turned down. Agreed ... and then drifted a little, gazing into each other's eyes. Snapping back, she didn't fail to note that, although Father wouldn't concede vampires, he apparently didn't automatically dismiss Snow's proposition as so much delusion and moonshine. Selling your soul to the devil meant what it meant, even if there was no such thing as a soul, or the devil.

"And Snow said predators don't fight each other if they can help it," she went on, citing further evidence. "So that's how he thinks of what they are; predators. Doesn't matter if it's true - it's how he thinks. But it's mostly true - I've been reading up on it. Predators. And like that," Diana ended feebly, with the uncomfortable suspicion that Vincent, at least, would guess what had set off her fascination

with the habits of the larger predators. The big cats, in particular. She supposed she didn't mind if he guessed. But it was still damned awkward.

She hurried on, "Like they said, '*The grave's a fine and private place.*' But you don't make buddies there. Stay out of each other's way, trade the odd favor, maybe, like a professional courtesy. Like Snow coming into the tunnels, before. But he had nothing at stake, himself."

"Only his pride, I think," Vincent said reflectively. "The challenge of ... unusual prey. He has rituals. Learns names ... as I have learned faces. For the same reason, I think; to give the deaths some meaning. Some dignity." He folded his hands on top of the maps. "Yes. It's a sort of game to him, I think ... the hunt. Once he actually called it so; the endgame. As though it were chess, that we had been about. And Steven dead, and Old Sam, and Brooke bereaved and terrorized"

His knuckles had gone white, under the fur. Diana set her hand on his, and he bent his head, pulling clear of whatever he'd been thinking, remembering. He went on, "And a children's game. He spoke of that, too. '*Ashes, ashes, all fall down.*' They hunger for meaning, with their long, long existence, as much as for what they feed upon. Yes. They are alone. Each of them. They bear one another no affection, no loyalty. Gabriel ... is alone. That's a good thing to know."

Cullen had returned while they'd been talking, leaning a shoulder against the spirala iron staircase. When Vincent fell silent, Cullen said, "Marc's in place; he's steady, won't panic. Rebecca and Livvy are taking the sand, with Paco for an escort. No sign of anything so far, Pascal says."

"Good," said Vincent heavily.

With that groundwork laid, those first safeguards set in place, they started the meeting's real business; how to set an ambush for a monster.

By the time the meeting broke up, Diana was about out where she sat. She wasn't even imagining a bed anymore - just vaguely hoping nobody would expect her to move. Completely fogged.

She didn't even notice Vincent standing next to her until he touched her arm.

"Huh? You say something?"

"How would you like to take a very long walk in the dark?"

She tipped her head back, looking into his eyes and replaying the question, but that's really what he'd said. His faint smile didn't mean he was kidding. It meant he knew how outrageous the proposal was, was making it anyway, and invited her to share his resigned amusement at how circumstances sometimes asked the outrageous, the damn near impossible, of you. Sometimes there was nothing to do but laugh at it.

She wasn't up to laughing, but she managed an answering smile. "Sure, I was just wishing for a nice five-mile hike. And if you believe that"

"Swamp property?" he suggested, pulling her chair back while she tried to lever arthritically up from the table.

"Yeah," she said, and the smile got realer.

Somehow, a lot of things had gotten simpler. She was completely whacked and so was he, they both knew it, and yet he was asking her to force herself something like alert, force herself to move and

keep moving. So it must be necessary, important. No need of discussion, explanation. She put her arm under his and got up the study stairs one deliberate step at a time, only weaving a little.

Out in the passage, they were confronted by Jamie and another girl Diana didn't know well enough to put a name to. Pretty, mid-length dark hair under a coronet of rolled multicolored rags; holding a stick a little taller than she was. Jamie had her crossbow slung over her shoulder on a strap. As Jamie and Vincent stared at each other in silence, Mouse came up from the study, sidling uneasily, and took a place behind the two girls, looking at the floor and shifting from one foot to the other.

Without a clue what was going on, leaning against Vincent's side, Diana began to drift off.

"Diana and I," Vincent said finally, "would like to be alone."

The other girl flushed, but Jamie responded coolly. "We don't always get what we want. You're going to check on Narcissa, right?"

Jamie, then Vincent, glanced at Mouse, who hung his head and looked even more uncomfortable.

"Yes" Vincent admitted.

Jamie said, "After the other time, I made myself a promise, Vincent. You might as well accept the company graciously, because you're not going to talk me out of it. And you don't have much chance of dodging us, either." Jamie's glance at Diana identified the obvious handicap to his dodging them.

Vincent's response was another stubborn, arguing silence. Diana must have really faded out then because the next thing she knew they were walking, Vincent's arm gathering her close so she could concentrate on putting one foot in front of the other. Keep moving. Stay with him.

The beam of light ahead that occasionally painted a streak across the tunnel walls, that must be Jamie and her helmet, taking point position. Muttering voices someplace behind said Mouse and the other girl had become the rearguard. So Diana guessed Vincent had given in.

She was glad to know she wasn't too dim to figure out simple stuff like that.

"Narcissa?" she asked - an all-purpose, open-ended question.

"I'm concerned that she didn't acknowledge our messages. Although that's not unusual. Narcissa goes her own way. Lives apart from us. Though I suspect I won't be able to persuade her to come where perhaps she'd be safer, I want to assure myself that all is well with her. And ... I want her advice."

"Resident vampire expert?"

She'd meant it as kidding, but he didn't take it that way. "She knows much ... about many things Father refuses to credit. Perhaps ... about this, too. Our adversaries are physical beings, as you wisely pointed out. But that's not all they are. Some part of what they are is no longer human. Narcissa has always been wise about such things."

Diana tried to think about it as they came through an arch into a broader place with rock to the left and nothing she could see to the right except dark emptiness. Leaning against him, scuffing along the undulating lefthand wall, she asked carefully, "And where do I come into that? Not that I don't like the company, but"

She had the incredulous, angry suspicion she was being dragged along on this errand for no better reason than Vincent's insisting on keeping his eye on her after what'd happened, or nearly happened, on her roof.

He looked around at her, surprised. "You're the safeguard on our journey. For one adversary, we may

expect warning. But the other may be anywhere. I thought ... You said"

His voice trailed off, maybe at her thunderstruck expression. "You mean you're depending on me to be your radar? Now? As fogged as I am? Oh, Vincent, don't; hunching isn't as reliable as weathercasting! Oh, don't tell me you been trusting me to be an early warning boogeyman alert, because I'm not up to that, nowhere near up to that"

As she stood frowning anxiously, utterly dismayed to realize he *had* been trusting her exactly like that, she *did* get the itchy, back-of-the-neck prickles of being watched, and whirled. She and Mouse scared each other practically into a mutual heart attack.

Nothing. Just the rearguard catching up, because they'd stopped. Hopeless.

"It's hopeless," she blurted to Vincent, over Mouse's apologies, as the other girl dashed up too and wanted to know what was wrong, what had happened, what ... "Of course we're being watched; *they're* watching us! I can't tell friendly eyes from unfriendly, I never did this before, I can't discriminate"

Everybody jumped again as Jamie barged back among them waving her loaded crossbow, the patrol's point now recoiling on them too, just because Diana and Vincent had stopped for a second - everybody panicking, jittery, and talking at once. Diana waved her hands with the vague sense of trying to shush the confusion, make it all go away.

Vincent's voice cut through the jabber. "Jamie. We appreciate your concern. But you must go back. The escort is well-meant, but it's making it impossible for Diana to sense beyond it for the true danger. Our adversaries have lost the advantage of surprise; we cannot allow them to regain it. You must go back. All of you."

Jamie's beginning protest faded unspoken as she apparently accepted the dismissal as a matter of stark practicality, no slight to her courage or abilities. Whereas Diana just wanted to ask couldn't they all go back together, take this trek another day? Because it scared her to be trusted like this, everything hanging on her, on abilities barely recognized, much less trained or disciplined. It was worse than Joe Maxwell's crack about Ouija boards because Joe didn't really believe she had some special inside track on the majorly weird; Vincent *did* believe it. And was staking his life on it. Not to mention hers.

But somehow she couldn't think of the right way to put that suggestion until Jamie had nodded and glumly scuffed away, trailed by the other pair. And the second that the beam of Jamie's helmet lantern vanished, Vincent as good as pounced on Diana; backed her against the wall and hauled her into another of those endless, electrifying kisses. But not like the other one. Something urgent, almost desperate about this one; and he was the one breathing hard when he broke it and pulled back.

"I've been wanting to do that for hours," he burst out roughly. "In front of Father. Everyone. It wasn't the time. I knew it wasn't the time. But I felt if the meeting lasted another moment, another second, I ... I'd explode. It all comes in, sometimes. So strong, so discordant. I cannot bear it. I must get away, I must ... I think if this is all the time there is, all the time we are to have together ... And I truly do want to see Narcissa. Ask her if she knows, better than we, what are adversaries are, how they may be defeated. But it comes and goes with no pattern, bursting upon me and then gone. And then to be encumbered with an escort ...! Jamie means well, and I promised myself to accept whatever help was offered, but ... *there must be limits, Diana!*"

His explosive incoherence was almost as startling as the kiss. Diana thought, *I fog out. He scatters*, like notes she should be taking on how each of them reacted to too little sleep, too much stress. In an

odd way, she found it reassuring that there was something inside him that wasn't impenetrably measured, judicious, polite. Reassuring to find he was capable of being tired, exasperated, and frayed around the edges. *Human*, she thought.

"Hey," she said, and rescued him out of his agitation with another kiss - hers this time. Not so long, maybe, but steady and lingering. God, he tasted good. And it seemed as though she could feel him steadying as she held him.

There was no warning at all.

The next thing she knew, she'd been pounced on a different way; yanked out of Vincent's arms, picked up and thrown, arms and legs flailing, no more control over where she was headed than a soccer ball punted at the goal. She barely had time to gasp before she hit, thumping hard on knees and elbows in a sandy pit. The shock absolutely woke her, blazing on adrenaline, scrambling to her feet and scrabbling at the walls. No handhold, foothold. She lunged frantically but couldn't reach the top.

From someplace above her, the lazy, saturnine voice of the Warrior Snow, the vampire Snow, proposed, "Now that all the distractions are taken care of, how about it? Just you and me."

It wasn't Diana he was talking to.

The cavern reechoed to Vincent's roar.

The first flurry of exchanges were simple reflex and rage, Snow judged. Like the video; just barge in and start swinging at anything dumb enough to stay within reach. No particular style, just trying to whack him out of the way so the Beast could check on the woman. But after she sang out from the handy little pothole he'd lobbed her into, letting the Beast know she was only sidelined, not seriously dead, things got a little more entertaining.

He took an openhanded cuff across the face that should have torn his head off but he went with it, let the blow push him instead of bracing against it, and only lost some skin and the sight in his left eye. The Beast led with his right; Snow had noticed that in the video and stored the fact for future reference. His left wasn't bad, either. But no particular finesse. Just powerhouse full-arm swings that likely had always been enough before but weren't much use against a sparring partner as strong, fast, and agile as himself.

Snow had to admit he'd gotten lazy and careless too, for lack of anybody with the least change of standing up to him. Too much hardware. Too many handicaps he arbitrarily imposed on himself to keep the thing even remotely interesting. Still killing, sure, but at least one step up from total meat market, sheep to the slaughter.

This one is no sheep, he thought with a hard, fast grin while the torn muscles flowed together, the ruined eye briefly ran with goo and then blinked clear.

This Vincent, he was pretty resilient, too. Snow got him in the chest and then in the face with a couple of well-timed kicks, anybody else would have gone down and stayed down, but Vincent, he just shook off the damage like a big dog shaking off wet and kept coming. But for him, the damage didn't heal. And it accumulated. Though they were pretty evenly matched, the end wasn't in any doubt this time. Snow could outlast him. As he'd outlasted everything

Shaking off that depressing thought, Snow decided to concentrate on the eyes.

It fairly annoyed him that no matter how fast he moved or how still he stopped, Vincent's eyes stayed with him, not lost and frightened the way they ought to be. Something he didn't like about those eyes. Too human, in that kitty-cat face. Too aware. The incongruity - those eyes in that face - almost made you believe the hogwash people babbled about souls. There were the quick, and there were the dead. That was it. And Snow was definitely of the quick persuasion.

Leave him in one piece (for awhile), he thought, but blind. See if he kept coming after that.

Off in the pit, the woman was still hollering but Snow didn't take any notice. She'd had her chance. His only interest in her now was to keep her out of his way, stop her from making a nuisance of herself.

Snow landed just the least bit off balance after a kick and in compensation swung an arm a little too wide. Vincent grabbed the wrist. Broke the damn thumb, the wrist, and the arm at the elbow, just like that, like cracking a double fistful of dry spaghetti. Leaning, cradling the arm, Snow had to duck away and back off to give the bones a chance to knit. He healed, sure; but he'd known from the beginning that if those big furred hands got good hold of him, his spine would be snapped and then it would be boot time the second he went down. Getting stomped to a messy smear wouldn't be even as much fun as getting crushed by a rockfall. If there'd been no risk, the fight would have been a complete bore. And goddammit, the arm *hurt!*

And what did that moron do, the minute Snow disengaged, but lunge straight for the oubliette, drop to his knees, stick his arm down, and haul the damn woman out!

Snow could't believe it. Here he'd gone to all that trouble to get them alone and her safely out of the way, and here was the guy or whatever who'd been kissing her against the wall not two minutes ago, like he hoped he'd go straight through her and out the other side, dragging her back into it again!

Chivalry, Snow concluded sadly, was definitely dead. Now he'd have to kill them both. Messy. Because women never let you fight fair. Always went straight for the kill. No style. No finesse.

The arm was almost right again. He stretched it, working the joints, flexing the fingers, as he strolled toward them, coming slow enough so even the damn woman, Diana, would be able to see what was coming at them. Moving, Snow put away all pretense of being human and ambled at a comfortable, almost boneless glide, not the herky-jerky controlled stagger that was all mortal flesh allowed. He let them see him, putting out his power to fascinate and enthrall. Death could do that. Death always did that.

The woman shot him. Predictable. Boring. He could slow internal time to watch the bullet coming, heavy and slow as a fat bee buzzing toward him. He probably could have moved out of its way but didn't bother. The fair fight was done. Time to finish it now. Maybe there'd still be a moon if he was quick enough.

The bullet took him high in the left shoulder. In the front, out the back, cracking the shoulderblade and ripping out some meat with its exit. He grimaced but didn't even break stride. One way or another, he'd lost a fair amount of blood and substance in the last few minutes. Probably a feed would be a good idea before he went back topside. The two of them ought to be enough. Then he wouldn't have to collect any volunteers.

Vincent said, "Wait."

Snow cocked his head and smiled incredulously. He reached out his arm, long and fast ... and it was pushed aside. Almost gently. Vincent stood his ground with the woman's pale big-eyed face peeking

around from behind him, just like a replay of the goddamn roof, except that this time the woman wasn't even halfway cooperating. Squinting, hands out before her, aiming to send another goddamn fat bee tumbling toward him.

"No," Vincent said, forcing her arms down with the same sort of care, making sure not to be too sudden, not to hurt her. "Wait." Lifting his head, he looked again at Snow. They were barely a yard apart. Snow could smell the blood - inside and out. The smell of enough injury that Vincent stood just a hair crooked, shoulders just a bit slumped with hurt and tiredness. He said, "I believe you to be a man of honor."

Snow stared, then laughed. "What in hell gave you that impression?"

"You left the ring," Vincent said. "You gave me the name - Gabriel's name. To you, names are power. Yet you gave me what you need not have; what let me find him at last. The action of an honorable man."

They surveyed each other for a minute or so - Vincent with apparent calm; Snow warily, having been accused of virtue, or at least a sentimental preference for the underdog.

"Honor won't keep you alive, Vincent. Not her, either. Shove her back in there; let's get this over with."

"You dislike killing women."

"It's no fun," Snow admitted. "But sometimes, you know," he added with a shrug and a downturned, insinuating smile, "there's just no good way to refuse." As though he was frequently pursued by hordes of women panting for what passed, among the Kindred, for love.

Well, sometimes, he *was*. Though not frequently. And not hordes. But a fairly steady one by one, over the centuries. No fun at all, hunting women, who'd flop down and surrender (*swooning*; now, *that* had been a crazy, suicidal custom!) just when things might have become interesting.

But not the redhead (he found himself avoiding thinking of her by name); glaring at him, yet keeping uncharacteristically still, snuggled tight against her new honey as though daring Snow to make one more move and she'd fling herself at him

Sure she would. Any reason would be a good reason to come. Just like she would have, wanted to, on the roof. *No* was just another way of saying yes. The involuntary fascination, the pull, was still there.

Snow tested, looking her straight in the eyes, and saw them go a little blank ... Then she snapped out of it and glared harder, snuggled tighter, trying to resist and hold to the kind of love she thought she preferred, that maybe wasn't so different as she pretended it was, considering the Beast, another predator

Yeah, she could be had; catch her off guard and she'd come running before she could think to stop. Or thinking it was her own choice, for reasons. Surrender masquerading as attack. But only for the kill now. Common. That, he could have anywhere, anytime. Snow wished she'd stayed the hell out of it, where he'd put her.

Ignoring or unaware of this exchange, Vincent said, "Steven was barely more than a boy. You killed him."

Snow remembered the name. He remembered all the names. He shrugged and spread his hands. "Seemed like a good way to get your attention. What's your point here, Vincent?"

"If you are a man of honor, your word can be trusted. I have a ... proposition to offer you. We have what you lack."

"What - blood? Not for long."

"And you have what we desperately need. Knowledge. I propose a trade. Tell us how Gabriel may be defeated and you may live here. Among us. As a friend."

Again, Snow laughed. "You gotta be kidding!"

"This community is tolerant of ... differences. Your long memory would be of value to us. My father, especially, would come to appreciate that. And you'd find me, I think, an even more interesting opponent ... at chess. And the children are an endless delight. An endless miracle ... Jamie." All at once, Vincent's voice changed. Firm and formal. "You must not attempt to intervene in this. It is a private matter."

"But *Vincent* ..." complained a girl's voice, just on the edge of whining ... nowhere nearby but close enough to hear and answer.

Snow swung around, taken by surprise and not liking it at all. Didn't *anybody* in these goddamn tunnels make any noise?

"Jamie," said Vincent, with that same patient exasperation, "you must not interfere. Stay where you are. All of you."

All? How many *were* there? Should have been selling goddamn tickets!

Snow caught a muttered exchange - just the voices, not the words; young voices, like the first - and knew this wasn't a scam; there really were kids perched somewhere up there, on some ledge or something.

Sure; the escort Vincent had dismissed. Hearing the noise of the fight, they'd come back, sneaking to the rescue. Armed with God knew what - slingshots, maybe. Peashooters.

That reinforcements had arrived (or at least a potential diversion that might have confused things and kept Snow occupied while Vincent and his lady ducked out) and that they were plainly damn near as unwelcome to Vincent as they were to him, finally convinced Snow that Vincent might actually mean what he was saying.

To which Vincent immediately returned, now that the interruption had been dealt with. "If you were willing to give your word no one else would be harmed - no one at all, Above or Below - I would undertake to sponsor you for citizenship among us." Vincent blinked at him quite calmly with those unsettling eyes. "It's not too late, you see. You can come back. As much as it's possible for any of us to come back from irrevocable things"

Snow tipped his head. "I don't know who's dumber - you for talking this garbage, or me for listening to it."

"I would speak for you. And though mine is not the only voice, it carries ... a certain weight in our councils. Some will not credit what you are. Others won't care, if they're assured you're trustworthy. If you give me your assurance, I would give them mine."

"You're crazy."

"Perhaps. Nevertheless. Have we a bargain?"

"So, let me get this straight. I tell you how to put Gabe away ... and who does it? *You?*" Snow asked derisively.

"If I can. If I must. With whatever help is willing and available to me." Vincent put an arm around Diana's back, claiming her help, and her, as his own.

She looked about as skeptical as Snow felt about this offer. He turned his head aside. He found he didn't like looking at her anymore. So pathetically helpless, yet stubborn to the last; so luminously fragile; so goddamn *mortal*. Almost as much of a distraction as those slanted blue eyes that confidently looked for possibilities where there weren't any.

Ridiculous. Knowing him for what he was, no mortal community would accept him. Hysterical rustics with pitchforks was more likely. (*But they accepted him*, a small voice inside him pointed out.) And committing himself to a perpetual fast was just as ridiculous. Like locking the cat in with the mice, expecting them to be all just good buddies together. The lion taking a snooze with the lambs. He didn't want to be a part of the meat market. He sure couldn't pass for one of the lambs.

It was ridiculous. Impossible. He liked it. Of course it would be a disaster in the end, but in the meantime it would definitely be novel. Something he hadn't done in so long he'd forgotten what it felt like - being part of a living community. Company. Friends, even. People to talk to. Kiddies asking for bedtime stories about monsters. The whole sentimental nine yards of hopeful crap

"You're too damn crazy to kill," Snow decided abruptly. "Probably something in the blood. It might be catching."

Turning on his heel, he left them there.

As soon as he was certain Snow was gone, Vincent pressed an arm against his side, swaying. Diana kept his descent to the floor from being an uncontrolled collapse.

"How bad is it?"

He tried to find a position that let him draw shallow breaths without producing stabs of dizzying pain. Diana reacted by hitching herself closer to support him. In a brief tactile dialogue, they adjusted against each other; testing and reacting with small motions, inquiries and answers of breath held or sharply drawn, tension or relaxation, pressure and stillness. Remarkably intimate, and yet not; unquestioned and strangely natural.

Except for the pain, it would have been very pleasant.

Finding the nearest thing possible to ease, Vincent let his head tip back and shut his eyes. "I think ... some broken ribs. Nothing severe. Except ... that there is still Gabriel"

"You gonna make him the same offer?" Diana asked in a way that conveyed a deep and disapproving skepticism.

"Gabriel ... is not a man of honor. And ... it would serve no purpose," he admitted.

"You're lucky Snow didn't take you up on it."

"I thought he might." As the pain eased, Vincent found himself slipping into drowsiness and sliding lower against her, until he was lying nearly flat, his head comfortably cushioned in her lap. It felt very good to lie that way. "I doubted he would. But it served; it stopped him.

"You scared him off!" she realized - delighted, yet puzzled. "I don't see why it should, though. He tries to kill you, you offer him a home. Sounds like a good deal to me. Way past generous."

"As you said; he is so alone. I know what that is. And know that sometimes ... hope can be more terrifying than the threat of death." He tried to force himself into greater alertness but knew he was

losing. "And I had to do something - had the fight continued any longer"

He left unsaid the admission that his strength hadn't been enough. And was now less than it had been. And there remained Gabriel

Jamie, Mouse, and Brooke arrived then, demanding to know how badly he was hurt, what he'd done to make Snow withdraw. For a moment he could feel their anxious concern. Then the awareness faded.

"I'm only ... tired," he said, leaning on an elbow and willing himself to make the effort of rising to prove he could.

Diana set both hands on his shoulders and he decided he could allow himself to rest a little longer.

As he settled back, Diana told Jamie, "I don't know about anybody else, but I've had all the fun and games I can take, tonight. This Narcissa she got anything that would pass for a bed, that she'd let somebody crash for a few hours? And how far off"

"Ah, children; here you are," Narcissa's lilting voice interrupted, mildly scolding, as though she'd expected them hour ago and had come looking for them.

Perhaps she had.

Vincent smiled as Narcissa joined them, her arms folded across the points of a fringed scarf. Pushing carefully, by stages, moving and then waiting for the pain to subside a little, Vincent got to his feet.

"Narcissa, this is Diana."

"Of course it is," agreed Narcissa warmly, taking Diana's mystified hands. Again, Vincent found himself smiling.

He asked, "Narcissa, do you know what errand has brought us to you?"

"Of course you need a place to rest before you continue your journey. And there is still such a long way to go. Come," Narcissa invited, starting away.

For a moment, Vincent stood wondering whether Narcissa had mistaken the situation ... or if he had. He supposed it didn't matter. He put an arm around Diana's shoulders, and her arm came around his back. He leaned against her - for the companionship as much as for the support - and they wandered on, following.

There was contentment in being this tired, with the prospect of rest; and comfort in being so close to someone he cared for. Yet suddenly the thought came to him, stronger and more urgently than before; *But if this is all the time we have.....*

With that thought, all his contentment and comfort vanished. Because it wasn't enough, wasn't nearly enough. Barely a beginning, and the fear of its ending as all other loves he'd ever found had ended, threatened to destroy the present joy he took from it. Which might be all there's ever be, and wasted on pain, sleep, and dread of the future.

Against the fear, he drew Diana closer despite his ribs' immediate protest, and told her. "We will have four children, very quickly. Perhaps twins. Their names will be Dorothy, Dulcinea, Michael and Morris. We'll all live as a family, but when it's possible, Mary will care for the children during the day. While we're working. They'll each speak at least five languages and begin reading before they're three. They'll all have chickenpox together but none will have measles. And on Saturdays, when you're tired, we'll ask Brooke to stay with them and go somewhere all by ourselves and not come back until Sunday night. When the"

Diana interrupted, "*Twins?*"

"Of course. So as not to waste any time. Peter will deliver them Below, so I can be with you. I'll help; I'm very good at practicing the breathing."

"Why not have quads, get it all over with at once?" Diana proposed, regarding him bemusedly.

"Certainly, if you prefer. Or we could have eight - two sets of quadruplets would save even more time. I'm sure we could get help with the diapers. Yes, that's an excellent idea. Their all arriving at college age, virtually together, will present a certain difficulty, but we'll have lots of time to plan beforehand. I'm sure some arrangement can be worked out, and there's Jacob's trust fund"

"They're all going to college, huh?"

"Certainly. Unless they choose ... Unless any of them"

" has a beautiful smile with longer teeth than average?" Diana finished for him, very gently.

He bent his head against hers. The fantasy was fragile as a soap bubble. The least touch collapsed it.

"I guess *Dorothy's* okay," Diana commented judiciously after a moment, "but *Dulcinea* is a definite non-starter. And how come *Morris?*"

"I couldn't think of enough names that begin with V," Vincent confessed softly.

"I guess you're not into juniors. So how about Valerian?"

"Too old-fashioned."

"I knew a Valerian in junior high - Valerian Rybecker. Really! Oh, all right - scratch *Valerian*. Hey, I got one for you."

He lifted his head to look at her. She was disheveled, plainly exhausted, and yet as intent as he'd ever seen her. And so inexpressibly dear, reinflating and protecting his foolish soap bubble of imaginary tomorrows. He could almost see it; balanced on her careful fingertips, shimmering with all the colors of hope.

"*Vichyssoise*," she proposed triumphantly.

Laughing hurt.

"Don't do that," he told her when he could find the breath.

She tipped her head against his. "We can work it out later. There'll be time, babe. Time enough for everything."

There were four descending steps without a rail. Vincent concentrated on taking them carefully, sideways, realizing only when he was down that they'd come into the candle-lit cavern that was Narcissa's outer parlor. The chamber was almost as cluttered as Father's study, though its clutter consisted of herbs hanging to dry, collections of stones in graduated sizes, large bunches of feathers, baskets of roots and of bones, and a variety of small mirrors that reflected the light from unexpected places and angles.

Its smell was something between a kitchen and a freshly-cut meadow.

"This way," Narcissa said, beckoning them to a farther chamber almost completely filled by an enormous mattress or perhaps several laid together on the floor, covered with a variety of colorful patchwork quilts.

"Yeah, great," Diana muttered fervently and all but dove onto the welcoming softness.

Vincent sank to his knees, then slowly eased himself the rest of the way until he could stretch out

blessedly flat.

The ribs would have to be bound. Later. And

Trying to concentrate, hold off sleep a few moments longer, he said, "Jamie, you must awaken me if the alarm comes. From Ripley."

As Mouse thumped, full-length, father down the mattress, Vincent had to brace against the impact. Snuggling down, Diana was trying to pull a quilt over her shoulder. Vincent awkwardly lifted to free the part he was lying on. Diana's eyes were already shut; he heard her mutter in a blurred voice, "*Twins.*" She was smiling.

Jamie, apparently appointing herself to sentry duty, was turning to leave. "Don't worry about it," she said with an offhandedness that reminded Vincent of his request ... and roused his misgivings.

"Jamie, I must know"

"Don't worry about it. Kanin and Cullen have fixed it."

With considerable effort, Vincent levered himself up on an elbow to look at the girl. "Jamie"

"It's okay. Gabriel's not going anyplace; they walled him in."

It was some time before Gabriel realized this tangled warren of tunnels and stairs was wholly deserted. He'd found what clearly were dwelling places, but all were empty and showed signs of hasty departure.

They must have found the woman he'd drained, and taken alarm. A full-scale evacuation, it seemed. But then where had they gone? How far could these tunnels possibly extend? He'd already walked miles, mostly in darkness punctuated by the dying flames of candles burning down, untended, in dwelling caves and along the walls. And except for the lone woman, he'd found no one down here, but ample signs of a more numerous settlement than he'd expected.

To the degree he'd thought about it at all, he'd assumed Vincent lived alone down here, the guardian monster of this labyrinth. Plainly, that wasn't so. But who would live here? And on what compulsion? And where had they all gone?

Puzzled by this and increasingly tired - although, like breathing, sleep wasn't a necessity, it was a well-established habit; and immortality was no defense against simple weariness - he collected a lantern while he could still see and rested for awhile before starting back the way he'd come - or thought he'd come. He'd taken no particular care to notice landmarks on his way in. And the twisting, roughly shaped stone passages presented a daunting sameness once he did try to notice. So it was, again, some time before he fully realized that he was passing the same turnings, climbing and descending the same stairs. That he was, in fact, hopelessly lost in what amounted to a vertical village with stairs and passages instead of streets.

At first it had felt like entering another country, one absurdly primitive compared to the urban civilization to which he'd become accustomed. Increasingly, it felt as though he'd entered a different dimension where nothing was reliable or conformed to normal rules - not even stone; the earth itself.

It was as though he'd blundered into an Escher drawing, where stairs folded back on themselves upside down like a Mobius strip. Every way, he found either dead-ended or looped onto itself in

endless recursion. And everything set at haphazard zigzag diagonals; not an honest horizontal anywhere.

A city dweller for centuries, he'd never had a particularly strong sense of direction. He couldn't even judge whether he'd climbed higher than his entry point or descended below it. All he knew was that he couldn't find it.

Gabriel could thread his way unerringly through the intricacies of corporate structure, law, government bureaucracies, and men's greedy, ambitious hearts; the simple brute facts of stone and vacancy left him at a loss.

Only then did it occur to him that in being so quick to kill the woman, he'd deprived himself of an unwitting guide he might have followed right to the heart of the Beast's lair. But he'd never imagined a whole community down here, or a labyrinth so extensive that he'd need guidance. Still, in retrospect he realized he'd been careless, and was angry with himself as he continued to blindly search for a way out.

Reaching for perhaps the tenth time, a junction formed of a Y of directions - level and straight ahead; a rising stair; a short, dead-ended alcove - he began to suspect the truth; that there *was* no way out. That this insane maze had only one entrance, through which he'd come but which had since been sealed ... deliberately.

Even the suspicion sent him into a fury. He raged through the passages, wrecking the contents of every dwelling, gathering armloads of personal possessions and hurling them off the corkscrew courses of a stair whose broad shaft connected several levels. Three, to be precise. Though the stair offered no true exit, Gabriel eventually realized its vertical bore could serve as a point of reference in a maze that otherwise consisted of tunnels and steps that wandered with seeming randomness, virtually impossible to distinguish or visualize in three dimensions.

Using the stair as a base, he took the highest passage it offered and followed it down, trying to avoid side turnings, though it was often a toss-up which was the main thoroughfare and which the offshoot. He ended at the junction. Then, retracing his way, he again found the spiral stair and chose the middle passage ... and got lost, finding himself back on the stair at its lowest point, though still with unguessable depths of shaft still below. Venting his frustration, he wrecked the next half-dozen dwellings he came to, then stormed on through empty sections of stone corridor ... and found he'd returned to the junction.

All the passages converged here. Therefore the way out had to be here, as well. All he had to do was find it.

That realization steadied him. He sat down on the sandy floor and rested. Except that his lantern hadn't yet burned out, he couldn't tell if it had been days or weeks that he'd been bumping and buzzing futilely around like a bee in this complex bottle. But no - there was another indicator; his thirst. What he'd drunk from his last kill had been blazed away, wasted on pointless fury. His depleted veins had begun to pull and sing to him - a soundless inner keening like a carrier wave of need. Almost as severe as when he'd first emerged from his crypt.

Death couldn't hold him. Neither would this absurdly feeble attempt to wall him up in a second tomb, for all that it had balked and confused him for a time. A mere delay; a detour. No mortal limits could stand against him.

And when he'd broken out, he'd kill the first living thing he found. And the next. And the next. And then, energized by hot, fresh blood, he'd confront the Beast Vincent and reclaim what was his own -

the one hostage surrendered in exchange for the lives of the many.

He'd expected Vincent to be alone down here. That Vincent was not merely made the Beast vulnerable. Connection was weakness. Vincent plainly hadn't learned what Gabriel had known ... forever, it seemed to him; that you could never get attached to anything. That you must offer no potential hostages to fortune, the threat of whole loss or harm could coerce you against your own best interests. That victory inevitably came to the one who would sacrifice anyone or anything to achieve his purpose; the one who, despite whatever legions of expendable subordinates surrounded him, was absolutely alone.

It was then, idly gathering up a handful of sand and letting it flow away through his fist, that he noticed the footprints. Heel and toe both rounded, barely distinguishable; therefore not his own, which he found he could recognize, toemarks pointing toward him. Entering. And around and under that single line of distinct shoemarks, many of the more formless prints overlaid on one another. Leading toward the brick-backed alcove.

Brick ... where everything else he'd seen was stolid stone.

He leaped up with a shout and flung himself at the deceiving wall whose courses were so freshly laid that damp mortar smeared his funeral suit as the bricks exploded outward and he burst through.

It was Mouse who woke her, clambering off the mattress. For an instant Diana hung dimly, unable to place where she was or why something hard was digging into her spine. Then she heard Vincent's voice and realized he was no longer beside her. And the lump trying to poke a hole in her back was her holstered pistol. That woke her up fully and fast. She struggled free of the heavy, warm quilts and lunged into the outer room, arms wrapped around herself, shivering with the suddenness.

Stripped to the waist, Vincent was standing with arms slightly raised to let Jamie and Narcissa wrap a length of faded green canvas around his chest, passing the loose end back and forth between them. But Diana's quick glance, and Vincent's answer of downcast eyes, wasn't about embarrassment or modesty. It said that her first fear had been right; he'd been at least considering letting her sleep. Leaving without her. Her scowl, as she readjusted her clip-on holster, said what she thought of that.

She asked bluntly, "How bad is it?"

It was Jamie, trying to insert a large safety pin without getting any of Vincent in the process, who answered her. "He's out and climbing. None of Mouse's traps held him for long. If we don't stop him at the Gallery bridge"

"... there'll be nothing." finished the other girl, pale and anxious, holding onto her upright staff like something out of Robin Hood, "to keep him out of the House Chambers."

Gabriel, loose in the community - that was enough to make Diana anxious too.

And Vincent looked like the afters of a losing prizefight.

A big purpling bruise splashed across his chest and upper shoulder above the wrapping; another marked the whole left side of his face. That eye was swollen shut. As the canvas was secured by a final pin, he took a slow, deep experimental breath, then reached for his shirt. That motion, too, was cautious, stiff, slow. He got his arm into one sleeve but he couldn't turn far enough to poke for the other one. Diana held the shirt for him and then helped him draw it across his shoulders, but he

brushed her hands aside when she would have started on the lacing. She stepped back and let him do it, understanding that despite his resolutions, it was still hard for him to admit he needed help or to accept it for anything short of utter inability.

"I would have wakened you," he said, glancing up briefly, having to turn his head a little to see her with his uninjured eye.

"Yeah. Okay, Good." She supposed she believed him. "So what's the drill?"

He took up his vest and carefully shrugged into it. "We can't hope to reach the bridge before he does. So the bridge must be cut. Now. I've sent Mouse to signal."

"Which will leave everybody else on one side, and us and Gabriel on the other," Diana said, checking that she had the picture right.

He nodded. "If the signal reaches them in time, and if they act on it. Cullen and Kanin were foolhardy enough to throw up a wall to block the outlet of the Ripley Junction. That Gabriel didn't come upon them before their barrier was finished"

"It worked, didn't it?" Jamie argued. "Bought us a little time. And that's what we need, right? Diana said so." She looked to Diana for confirmation which Diana uneasily gave. She hadn't expected to be taken so literally or quoted in a disagreement Vincent was on the other side of.

He didn't waste any more time discussing it. Holding out his hand to Diana, he said, "Come."

He wasn't up to running, he tried and had to stop, leaning hard against a wall and grimly aware, she was sure, he was using more time recovering than the sprint had saved. When he moved again, Diana found his fast walk (less jarring to the ribs) hard enough to match. She had to jog to stay level; and it was all uphill. It was lucky, she thought, that she'd made a habit of doing laps down at the 'Y' a couple times a week. Otherwise, she'd have been winded before they reached Mouse and collected him into their motion.

"Acknowledged," Mouse reported. "Didn't signal yet that they did it."

Vincent's face got a look that, with anybody else, would have accompanied swearing. But he only recalled Jamie and Brooke from ranging too far ahead. He even picked up his own pace, carrying Diana from a jog to a run. That made her realize they could cross paths with Gabriel anytime, and probably with no more warning than they'd had with Snow. Hunching didn't work; she felt as though eyes were on her every second. Just nerves. Probably.

Her compromise with her growing sense of danger was to unhitch the holster and clip it in front, though the difference in grab-time would be insignificant. She didn't dare draw the pistol yet. Running with a loaded gun was real dumb; besides, she was scared she'd drop it over the edge of one of the ascending staircases Vincent took in bounds of three or four steps at a time.

When they overtook Jamie and the other girl and passed them by, Diana realized he really *was* running now, full-out and with no sign of pain. For a second she thought he'd just warmed up, worked out the stiffness. But that wasn't it. Glancing aside at his bruised face, she recognized that look; full fight mode. Blanking pain. Narrowing focus to the one thing - the hunt; the target. Shutting out everything else.

She hadn't seen that look in a long time; since Gabriel's nursery. But she knew it - even better than she had then. Because since then she'd realized it was the exact mirror of how she was herself, working on a case. She knew exactly how it felt to switch into high gear, forgetting meals and sleep, cruising on that hunter's intensity.

The wildness pulled at her and carried her along, running beside him for all she was worth, matching him pace for pace. Scared, and yet crazily wanting to laugh from sheer exhilaration. And feeling this, too, as love.

Snow had no more interest in the tunnels. All the same, when Gabe rocketed furiously past, Snow drifted along behind, unnoticed, watching with malicious satisfaction as Gabe triggered and then struggled free of various crude traps and blundered into and then out of dead-ended passages, looking for somebody to kill. Looking for Vincent.

Although he'd sidelined himself, Snow found he was still mildly curious about the civilized Gabe, who for centuries had fastidiously delegated his fighting, would do under field conditions, so to speak. Gabe was dressed for the streets, not the tunnels; his custom-tailored suit was now about as elegant as a farmhand's muddy overalls. Though banging into walls or tripping on the rough footing couldn't make much impression on hard, white, Kindred flesh, cloth wasn't as durable; one pants knee was ripped out, and a jacket sleeve had given at the shoulder seam, dangling scraps of crimson silk lining. Shoes made for plush-carpeted boardrooms didn't stand up well to the rough footing, either.

You'd think to look at him, he'd never carried a sword into battle. Leaning against a rock, very still, Snow watched Gabe walk straight into the trigger-rope of a net that clapped hands around him, up out of the dust, and hauled him aloft like a possum in a sack. Gabe was a good five minutes getting himself out of that one. Not the Folies Bergiere or Madame Melba on tour, but it would do for entertainment.

Snow thought idly about building a fire under the net, but there was no fuel handy and it had only been a passing speculation. The net would have burned first anyway. And just toasting Gabe a little hardly seemed worth the trouble. No style.

And he knew if he didn't do the job thoroughly, once and for all, Gabe would come after him. Or, more likely, hire it done. That could be a nuisance. Back when Snow had taken honor seriously, they'd had a feud going for centuries, he and Gabe; the damage to the pawns and the go-betweens had been considerable before Snow had tired of it and simply walked away.

That was one of the problems with living so long - grudges tended to fester, and most of the Kindred were as arrogant as aristocrats, which they generally were or considered themselves to be. They'd avenge any slight, real or imagined, until the body count got absolutely absurd. Eventually, the survivors (if any) got bored enough to drop out of breathing society altogether, knowing it for a farce and a sham. The only style that mattered was deeper than that, and concerned itself only with mortal matters, not whether shoe buckles, powered wigs, and artificial warts were currently in or out, at court

The Eldest always hunted alone.

Meandering past storerooms, hastily abandoned dwellings, assorted empty workshops, Snow wondered what it was like to live down here in voluntary Medieval austerity, with the whole of New York only a couple hundred yards down, glittering and available as a whore. Why would anybody want to come, unless they were in flight from the cops or from outraged knife-wielding husbands, brothers, whatever? Debts? The Drafts.

Vincent, sure; that was obvious. The alternative was some freak show, vivisection, mounted and

stuffed maybe - rampant behind glass in the Museum of Natural History, labeled *UNKNOWN* in Latin. But the rest of them. The community. Why would they choose a hole in the ground rather than the streets? And, even having chosen, why would they stay? Habit? Laziness? Inability to cope with modern complexities? Did they take an oath of poverty? And the children. Snow thought he recollected Vincent saying something about children

Gabe had come to a rope-and-slat bridge spanning a big drop. On the far side were a couple lanterns and five or six people in patchwork clothes milling around, arguing, getting in each other's way.

Polish fire drill, Snow thought, hanging back in the passage. But it wasn't as disorganized as it looked; one guy apparently had his hand on one of the ropes, like a net judge at a tennis match. The second Gabe set foot on the bridge, the guy yelled, and two other guys raised what looked like machetes, ready to chop the ropes where they attached to the end-posts. Not *doing* it - just ready.

Gabe had turned side-on, so they probably couldn't see him. But they sure knew he was there. Kindred still had weight, mass. You could flout death, not gravity. Any advancing step would register on the ropes and on the sag of the bridge. Without a word, they were daring him to try it. A cable that thick wouldn't cut through at the first whack. It would take at least two or three. And the uplifted, expectant faces asked Gabe how luck he was feeling today. Did he figure he could cross the distance at least far enough to jump, before they could cut the bridge's supports and have a fair chance of dumping him into the chasm?

Snow estimated it would have taken him about three running strides to get across. Maybe two seconds, being generous. At a whack a second, it was about even odds whether they could cut the cables before Gabriel was upon them. At which point, their machetes wouldn't be much help. Gabriel would tear them apart.

They'd have been smarter to cut the bridge and be done with it. But maybe they didn't know that. Or maybe they liked the odds; some of those traps had been pretty ingenious, though unfortunately made to confine, not kill.

Risky. But interesting. Snow leaned his shoulder against the passage wall where he had the best view of the bridge from end to end.

All those sheep, just waiting to be drained; the temptation was too strong. Gabe decided to take the bet and almost made it. The instant he moved, the choppers chopped, and the second stroke did it. The bridge fell away before Gabe could jump.

As the crew on the far ledge exploded into whooping and triumphant yells, Snow flattened against the stone at the sound of running steps coming toward him from farther down the passage. Vincent and the woman, naturally - plunging past, only Vincent knowing what lay beyond, putting on the brakes in time and grabbing the woman's arm to keep her from dashing straight off the edge. As the people on the far side started jubilantly yelling the news of what they'd done, maybe Snow was the only one who saw the remaining near-side ropes twitch.

The cut bridge would have slapped the rock face hard. But once dangling and still, the slats would make a decent ladder for anybody able to hang on through the first impact - or even the cables themselves.

Snow knew he could have done it. Therefore

For most of a minute, nothing. Listening, maybe; placing the people. Then Gabriel swung over the edge and onto his feet, one motion, an arm around the woman's neck, dragging her backward out of reach of a grab or a swat.

It was depressingly simple. Gabriel never did fight fair, and liked hostages. Liked to make people do what they hated out of fear for somebody they cared about.

"Give me Julian," Gabriel ordered, leaning to get his face clear of the woman's abundant hair. "Or she's dead."

Gabriel wasn't restraining her arms. So she came up with the pistol, jammed it past her own side, and blazed away. She got off two shots before Gabriel shook her hard enough to make her lose the gun, which hit the stone and skidded off the edge. And when Gabriel finished shaking, the woman wasn't moving.

Snow knew there was no baby handy for surrender, even if the Beast had wanted to, so he wasn't surprised that Vincent wasn't going to dicker, discuss the matter. Vincent just flung himself at Gabriel ... and Diana, unconscious or worse, in the middle.

"Oh, hell," Snow commented, and took Gabriel from behind and by surprise.

Jamming his arms under Gabriel's, he popped Diana loose, trusting Vincent to catch her and get her clear. Then things got very fast, twirling in a blur on the ledge. A lot of blood-smell; at least one of the shots had hit. But already the wound would have closed. And Gabriel knew that fighting Kindred was like killing bugs; first you immobilize, pull the legs off. Then go for the kill. He knew because Snow had taught him.

In a fraction of a second, both Snow's arms were broken. But he'd learned a lesson from Vincent; use the terrain. Dumping himself flat, not caring how he hit, he kicked backward and caught Gabriel just below the knees. Rolling onto his back, Snow got a better angle on the second kick. Looking more indignant than surprised, Gabriel was flung a good six feet past the edge of the drop.

Whether Gabe succeeded in grabbing the bridge again didn't make a whole lot of difference; Vincent yanked the posts straight out of the rock and hurled them into the crevasse, bridge and all. Then Vincent stood looking down long enough that, when he turned and dropped onto his knees beside Diana, Snow figured Vincent had satisfied himself Gabe was nowhere in sight.

It was a little awkward to get up without using your hands, but Snow managed. The pain would pass, and the arms would heal, in a couple of minutes.

Diana was breathing. Heart beating, the flush of blood in her face, luminous under the skin. She probably would have made a lousy vampire anyway, Snow thought.

Surveying the chasm, he asked, "How far down does it go?"

"We've never found a bottom," replied Vincent absently, not even bothering to look at him, which wasn't smart. Nobody should *ever* turn his back on one of the Kindred. Lifting Diana, gathering her into his arms, Vincent added, still not looking around, "Thank you."

"Yeah, well, it's annoying when somebody cremates me. And I never much liked using hostages, myself. Messy." Snow shifted from foot to foot, waiting for the goddamn arms to be usable again. He watched Diana's eyes flutter open, wide and unfocused like the days when women stuck belladonna drops in their eyes to dilate them, make them look sexy. Stupidest damn custom.

Other footsteps in the passage now; the escort finally catching up.

Snow said casually, "About that offer"

"Yes?"

"I was wondering"

Snow hadn't expected to get skewered by a crossbow bolt, right between his ribs. He might have pulled it out, hurled it back, but his arms weren't up to that yet. And the bolt didn't do much damage ... except that it pushed him a step backward. A step past where the ledge ended. And when he went to grab, his arms still wouldn't move.

Two girls, barely more than kids, had come out of the passage. The one holding the crossbow was staring straight at him.

Tipping backward, Snow smiled at being able to put to the face its proper name; "Brooke," he greeted her. Thinking, *It probably never would have worked out anyway*, he fell.

END