

DREAMS OF LIFE

by Rhonda Collins

"Oh! Man! That was dirty!"

A gasping, choking Devin chased Vincent as he dove under the falls. Shivering, treading water, the dark-haired boy looked for some sign of his so-called friend. Suddenly he was pulled under... then came up sputtering.

After coughing for a minute or two, he yelled, "Darn it, Vincent... stop it! I'm *sorry* already! Truce!"

Vincent popped up behind him and ducked him once more... just for good measure, then they tussled a bit more... the roughhousing warming Devin up some.

Vincent was treading water in front of Devin, watching him solemnly.

"Truly?" Vincent asked him.

"Sure. I was just kidding anyway... you should know that, stupid."

"All right, then." Vincent swam to the edge and pulled himself out. Sitting on the edge of the pool, he put out a hand to help Devin... and Devin looked at it skeptically... wondering whether to trust him or not... and finally deciding Vincent meant only to be friendly, he took it and pulled himself out of the water.

As the two boys dried off with the tattered old towels - the only ones they themselves possessed - they discussed what began the argument.

"It was not amusing, Devin."

Vincent's long shaggy blond mane was frizzing up quite nicely as it dried, and Devin considered another crack, but decided against it.

"Guess not," he admitted. "You sure got mad."

"I don't call you names... not like that anyway. Not names that hurt... even if they fit."

Squirming a little, Devin agreed. "Yeah. Sorry. Really."

"I know you didn't mean to hurt... but it does. When others say things... or look at me funny... it's bad enough. I mean...."

Devin was beginning to get a little angry.

"Look, Vincent.... I've been calling you names like that for years and it's never bothered you before. You know I never mean anything. You call me stupid and bog-brain and anything else you can think of, don't you? Can I help it if you just inspire more imaginative comments?"

Vincent rose suddenly and threw the towel over his shoulder. His pale gold fur shone in the lamplight and Devin watched as he dressed. *I guess it is hard on him sometimes.* But Devin still didn't understand why his calling his brother a shit-for-brains alleycat should have upset him so... after all,

he'd called him far worse.

"Doesn't matter," Vincent said quietly, but when he looked up and Devin saw his eyes, he knew it did.

"What is it, Vincent? Why so touchy all of a sudden?"

"I said it doesn't matter, Devin. Drop it," Vincent responded in a sullen voice.

Devin moved over to Vincent, his slim boyish body almost hairless in comparison to Vincent's. The boys, similar in age at 12 and 13 were very dissimilar in appearance, though Devin was older by probably most of a year... almost 14. Vincent was heavier, bigger boned... with an impression of density of bone and muscle mass that Devin couldn't compete with; and that wasn't all.

As Vincent pulled on his shirt, Devin noticed that the hair on Vincent's lanky arms was lengthening and darkening... and just as Devin was beginning to acquire hair where he'd never had it before, Vincent's was lengthening and coarsening. He noted how carefully Vincent handled the fabric so as not to tear it with his claws and when Vincent's head pulled through the neck of his shirt, Devin looked down... not wanting to be caught staring. He'd never thought that much about Vincent's differences. Vincent just *was*. They'd grown up together, fought, played... loved each other for a long time. They slept in the same bed, shared the same toys. They resented each other and would fight for each other... just as any brothers would, though they were foster brothers by choice, not brothers by blood.

Devin shivered and Vincent commented, "You had best dress. If you catch cold, Father will have a fit."

They looked at each other and grinned. Vincent's long canines flashed as he laughed unselfconsciously... once again totally at ease with his brother. He never did that with anyone else, not even Father.

In unison they chanted, imitating Father; "*You boys keep out of the pool by the falls....it's too deep, too cold, and too dangerous and the current is too strong!*"

Then they burst out laughing, and Devin sneezed.

"Oh shit!" Devin commented.

Vincent just threw back his head and howled with laughter.

That night Devin was more congested. When Father came in to tell them good-night, he noted the boy's sniffing.

"Devin, are you not feeling well?"

"No... I'm fine. *A-choo!*" As he sat there sniffing, Vincent just continued reading - or rather re-reading - *Treasure Island*. He glanced up, then looked down innocently, a small smile playing at the side of his mouth.

Father was solicitous. He called Mary to get the boy some hot tea with sugar and lemon and gave him some decongestant that Peter had left them. He took Devin's temperature.

"Hm. No fever. Perhaps it's just allergies."

Father frowned as Devin responded with a laugh. "Yeah... Maybe I'm allergic to cat hair."

Not bothering to look up, Vincent threw a pillow at him... then went back to his reading.

Father watched the interplay between the two boys with interest, his irritation easing. *Inside joke?*

"Well," he commented, as he packed up the medicine, "perhaps the decongestant will help. Let me

know if you feel any worse."

On his way out of the chamber he noted the two towels carefully hung over one of the chairs to dry and smiled. When he glanced up, he saw Vincent watching him, but the boy dropped his eyes as soon as Father looked his way.

"I see you boys took baths today." Both boys looked up quickly.... guiltily... and Father continued..."Good, *Cleanliness is next to Godliness*. At least that's what I hear. Vincent... lights out."

Father limped out of the chamber, then paused outside the door in the connecting tunnel. The pipes were temporarily quiet and he was able to hear Devin's half-whisper....

"He knows!" Then, smiling to himself, he continued on down the tunnel toward his own chamber.

After Father left, the boys blew out the candles but lay in bed talking. Devin listened to Vincent's rough chuckle, as he teased Devin about catching a cold just from a little swim.

"Well, it must be nice never to get sick," Devin snapped. "I don't ever remember you being sick. Sometimes I think it'd be nice to have some of your differences."

Vincent became quiet again, then he said quietly, "Don't ever say that, Devin. I would give up anything to... well... just to be normal. I wouldn't even care if I were ugly... just if I were normal."

Devin couldn't see Vincent... except as a rough lump in the darkness. He knew, though, that Vincent could see *him* quite well. He coughed, and Vincent sat up.

"You really are getting sick, Devin. We should have listened to Father... it's still too cold for swimming anyway."

Vincent could see Devin turn away to cough again. "Get real, Vincent. It's always cold down here. Sometimes it's just a little colder than at other times. If we always listened to Father, we'd never do anything."

Sitting up, he shook Vincent... and said excitedly. "Oh! By the way, I had an idea the other day. Remember how you said you wished you could see inside the museum?"

Suspiciously, Vincent asked, "Yes?"

Devin explained that he, Pascal, and Winslow had gone to the museum the other day to check things out. "I even looked at some of Father's maps... when he was out, of course... and found a way to sneak in!"

Now Vincent was interested. "Where? How?"

In the midst of coughs, sneezes and blowing his nose, Devin explained to Vincent where the basement of the museum came into contact with an old sewer line. If they could find that sewer line, maybe they could make a hole and get in... they could fix the hole... or make a false wall, and then they'd have an entrance.

"You did all that for me?" Vincent was impressed and touched.

"Yeah, well... we all did. We felt bad... getting to see all that neat stuff and you left here. Didn't seem fair. Besides, you know how Winslow likes projects."

The boys lay quietly for a long while... with the exception of Devin's sneezes and blowing his nose. Finally, in a very small, very quiet voice, Vincent asked Devin, "Devin... when you grow up, when... we grow up... what is it going to be like? I mean... girls and... and things... do you know?"

Devin coughed, then cleared his throat. "I

Devin shifted in the darkness. He thought he had a pretty good idea what Vincent was working up to, and he didn't like the thought of having to answer him, but he was hard to lie to. He always knew.

Long sigh. *Discouraging sound in the darkness*, Devin thought. The only sound was their breathing

and the soft tapping of a sentry checking in.

Vincent commented, "Last time I went swimming with...with everyone... like we used to do when we were little, it was different... I have not done it again."

In the darkness Devin could see Vincent sit up and turn toward him... he was outlined against the dimly lit stained glass window. Devin told him, "I know. You notice I don't swim with the girls anymore either. Stopped awhile ago. Makes me feel funny."

"I know....me too."

"G'night, Vincent."

"Yes. Sleep well, Devin."

Devin's cold got worse, and Father confined him to bed. Vincent stayed with him, playing games, chess, checkers, even Parchesi. Devin tried showing Vincent how to make cat's-cradles with string, but Vincent had problems... his talons got in the way. Games got old, and Vincent read aloud to him. Eventually, even that got old.

Pascal and Winslow stopped by and they discussed their plans for the museum project, with the boys taking turns watching out for Father. Devin sent them to find the sewer line and check it out, so they could plan further, and while they were gone, he hatched plans in his head as to how they were going to hide the hole in the basement wall. Had to be a way. If it was old brick they could make a false wall. *Gotta make it work.*

With his hand-drawn map, Pascal led the other two boys through the connecting tunnels. They'd had to ride the subway for part of the way, and Vincent had pulled what Pascal termed his "Lone Ranger imitation" on the top of the car. Really amazed Pascal. *Hi-Ho Silver--Away! Heck of a horseback ride.*

When they reached the spot on the map that should be under the museum, Winslow volunteered to double check Above, to make sure they weren't going to be breaking into some apartment building or something, instead of the museum. While he was gone, Pascal and Vincent examined the brickwork and tried to figure if they could match it. When Winslow came puffing back, he was grinning ear to ear.

"Sure enough. We got the right building. All we gotta do now is get Devin up and about so we can work together on this."

When the boys made it back to the central living areas, they split and went their separate ways. Vincent stopped by the kitchen for a snack. Whenever their supplies allowed. William usually managed to have something left over for the youngsters... especially Vincent. They were always hungry. Before leaving the kitchen, Vincent slapped together a sandwich for Devin. *If he is not hungry... I will eat it...*

Before he even turned into the chamber door he could hear Devin coughing. The coughs were liquid, and racking. He was not getting any better. Vincent turned and went to Father's chamber.

Standing in the door almost in the dark, outside the warm circle of candlelight, Vincent called quietly to Father.

"Father, may I come in?"

Looking over his glasses, Father put down the book he was reading. "Of course. Is something wrong?"

"Devin. He's worse. He sounds awful."

Father grabbed his medical bag and followed Vincent back to his chamber. After examining Devin, Father told him, "Now you have fever, and you're very congested." He felt Devin's throat. "Hurt there?" Devin nodded. Father sent Vincent to his chamber to get some antibiotics he had put away. *Thank God we have Peter.* Even with his help, antibiotics and other medications were hard to come by.

Inside Father's cluttered chamber, Vincent found the shelf with the medicines easily enough; he just couldn't reach it. He piled some books up and stood on them, then hauled himself up shelf by shelf until he could reach the bottles. He saw the one he needed, grabbed it quickly and jumped down, then took off like a shot back to his chamber. Father gave Devin two tablets of Ampicillin and gave him instructions for the rest.

"I believe you are old enough to keep track of it yourself. Take one tablet with each meal and one at bedtime... and take them until they are gone. Can you remember to do that?"

Nodding, Devin said hoarsely, "Yes. Thanks, Father."

Father busied himself with putting his stethoscope away, then turned to the boys. "You know... we do not make rules lightly around here. There are reasons for each and every one. I realize you were swimming in the falls the other day, and you think it was great fun... I am sure it was. But now, we are out of antibiotics. If there is another emergency we will have to wait for Peter to get us more. Also, I am sure the consequences to yourselves are now quite apparent."

The boys looked down, and Vincent shuffled from one foot to the other. Finally Vincent said, "I am sorry, Father."

Devin echoed the sentiment with a sneeze.

Satisfied, Father said goodnight and left the chamber. After Father was gone the boys again talked for awhile in the darkness. Devin let Vincent do most of the talking. His throat hurt.

"The brickwork is the same as down in the water tunnels. We have some of the old brick left from there if we need it. Winslow says he will make a false wall before we even plan to tear it out, and if we are careful no one will be able to tell. It is going to work, Devin!"

Devin just nodded, knowing Vincent's keen night sight would be able to see the gesture.

Vincent pulled out the sandwich he had stashed away and offered it to Devin.

"No, thanks. Mary brought me supper. You eat it... you're always hungry anyway."

Vincent mumbled something between bites, and Devin asked, "What?"

"Nuthin'... *munch*... You should sleep. We need you better so we can start."

"Sure. G'night, Vincent."

Vincent's eyes gleamed in the dim light from the window as he nodded. "Goodnight."

The following morning Mary brought Devin some breakfast, and while Vincent was visiting with him, Lisa and Janet came by. Lisa was totally uninhibited as usual, jumping on the bed next to Devin... and somehow managing to look graceful as she did it. She ruffled his hair and teased him, making him

blush furiously, and Janet pulled her away scowling. "Come on, Lisa... we're going to be late for class."

Lisa reached up and caught Vincent's hand and looked up at him....."Coming, Vincent? Just because Dev's sick doesn't mean you can play hookey too." She tried to pull him along, but with his weight, it was somewhat like dragging a log, so she just flashed a smile and followed Janet.

Vincent watched the girls leave, his face never changing expression. He didn't notice that his hand was still outstretched from when Lisa had dropped it.

Devin cleared his throat. "Hey... Vincent... over here... Mona Lisa's gone."

Startled, Vincent swung his head around, his ears... and brain... finally registering Devin's remark.

"What is *that* supposed to mean?" he asked, defensively.

Grinning, Devin just hooted... then coughed. "Mean.... Vincent's got the hots for Lisa!....HA!"

Vincent stared daggers at Devin. "Don't say things like that!" Vincent summoned what dignity he could manage and scowled at Devin.

"No, little brother... I know... Can't fool me!"

Spinning on his heel, Vincent left without another word, and when he reached Father's chamber, where their literature class was already in session, Father just honored his presence with a nod. It didn't matter in any case, because he barely heard what was said the entire class. When Father , called on him.he had to admit he was lost. It didn't make it any easier when both Lisa and Janet laughed.

After class, Father drew him aside and asked him what was wrong, and Vincent just mumbled something. "You're not getting sick, are you?.... cannot believe *that!*"

Vincent couldn't stand it any longer, and he cried out at Father, "I am fine! I wish everyone would just leave me alone!"

As Vincent ran from the room, Father just rubbed his chin, thinking how unlike Vincent it was to be acting that way. He started after him, but realized he would never catch up to him, so he went back to his desk and sat down.

Vincent first went to the Mirror Pool, but Pascal and Winslow were already there swimming. They invited him to join them, but he shook his head; he didn't want company right now. He turned and walked past the falls up to the Whispering Gallery and sat for awhile on the bridge, listening to the voices. He could hear Chinese being spoken from somewhere... probably drifting down from Chinatown. He wished he were in China right now... anyplace but here... He wished he were anyone else but himself. He looked up when he heard a soft footstep on the bridge.

"Thought you might come here... I saw you rush out... are you okay?" Lisa seemed genuinely concerned, and Vincent's throat was too tight to speak, so he nodded and just looked at her. She sat softly next to him, leaning back on her hands, knees up, eyes closed.

"Listen... there's music. Wish we could hear more of that and less of these crazy voices... but it's neat here anyway." She opened her eyes, and scooting over to him she hugged him... and his heart stopped momentarily. "It's okay. Father wasn't mad at you. He knows you know it almost as well as he does anyway." Looking up into his eyes, she said, "You feel better?"

Vincent still could barely speak, but he nodded and managed to get out a quiet, "Yes."

"Okay. Just wanted to check. Gotta go. See you later..." And she was gone, tripping lightly off the bridge and back down the dark tunnel.

Vincent drew up his knees and folding his long arms over them, rested his chin there.

Math class was later in the day, and Vincent hated math. The only thing that ever made it bearable was when Devin was there, and with him sick Vincent seriously considered playing hookey... but he knew Father would be furious. Of all his classes math was the one he could least afford to skip. He sat through the class and tried to pay attention, and did actually manage to answer a few questions correctly... enough at least to satisfy Father.

As Vincent was on his way out, Father called him back. *What did I do now?* he thought.

"Vincent, I notice that your shirt is beginning to split at the seams again."

Embarrassed, Vincent said, "I take care of it, Father...of all my clothes."

Father turned him around and examined the shirt. "It is not carelessness, Vincent... it is just growing up. Go and ask Mary if she can start on a larger shirt for you, and when she is finished, she can repair yours and someone else can have it. At this point there is not much point in making you more than one or two - you outgrow them too fast."

Vincent nodded and headed back out the door, and Father called to him softly once more. "Vincent."

Turning, expecting Father had finally remembered what he had wanted to rebuke him over, Vincent stood waiting....

"Don't be so hard on yourself. Now go on... and do get Devin moving. I do believe he is feeling somewhat better."

Watching Vincent leave, Father sighed heavily. He knew growing up was harder on Vincent than on the other boys... everything was harder for him. Watching the child struggle day after day, just to get by, hurt him. It is always hard to be different in any way, and no one was ever as different as Vincent; but he bore it all with a good-hearted gentleness that seemed innate to his nature... despite his frightening appearance.

Pulling out his journal, he wrote:

"I must watch Vincent carefully from here on out. I fear the strains of adolescence are going to be much more difficult than usual with him. I suppose it is good that he and Devin are so close. He needs someone to talk to, and probably the last one he would speak to is me... at least about some things."

Father closed the journal with a thump and picked up Shakespeare instead.

When Vincent reached his chamber, Devin was already getting dressed. He was, indeed, feeling better and was anxious to begin their project.

"The Old Man finished with you for the day?"

"I suppose. Are you sure you are well enough for this?" Vincent asked anxiously.

Eyes gleaming with mischief, Devin just replied, "Sure! Go find Pascal and Winslow... see if Winslow has built the false wall yet, and I'll meet you at the bridge."

Vincent trotted off to find Pascal and Winslow, and found Pascal finishing up his lesson in the Pipe Chamber. His father was teaching him some new codes, but when Vincent appeared in the doorway he told Pascal to go play.

"All work and no play, you know. Take off and have fun. Stay out of trouble."

"Where's Winslow?" Vincent asked.

"Down in the water tunnels. He said he was almost finished with the false wall."

Vincent considered..."You go to the bridge to meet Devin and I'll go get him."

Once Pascal was gone, Vincent could travel much faster by himself... at least until he picked up Winslow. He felt much better now that he was able to get out and do something, and he was excited about the project. He just hoped they didn't get caught. When he found Winslow, Vincent helped him carry the false wall back up to the bridge. A couple of the adults saw them and asked what they were doing, but Winslow told them they were helping to repair a false wall up in the upper east tunnels... which wasn't entirely an untruth. Vincent just kept quiet, though lying by omission bothered him almost as much as an outright lie.

By the time they reached Devin and Pascal at the bridge in the Whispering Gallery, Devin was getting nervous. "C'mon, we've gotta get going."

Vincent shouldered the false wall and they took off through the tunnels toward their destination. They had to travel slowly because of the wall and Vincent was unable to take the subway, so it was late afternoon by the time they reached the narrow tunnel under the basement of the museum.

Reluctantly they decided to leave the wall and crowbar and come back tomorrow. They reached the living areas much faster going back because they were able to ride the subway. Vincent hung back in the shadows waiting, then just as the train began moving, he leaped for the top. He had only recently begun doing this, and it still thrilled him every time he made it... if he hadn't made it, there wouldn't have been enough left of him for anyone to find. *Be quick or be dead*, he thought. Hanging onto the top of the car with it speeding along gave Vincent an adrenaline rush - he loved the speed - and for once he was glad of the differences that allowed him the strength and agility to perform such a feat. He was still on somewhat of a high when he leaped off the top and met the others in the shadows.

"Damn!" Winslow exclaimed. "I'd like to do that!..."

Vincent shook his head, blond mane flying, then said jokingly..."No. You're too heavy, Winslow. You would die trying."

Winslow pushed Vincent hard, making him stagger. "What makes you think I couldn't? I can do anything you can do!"

With his adrenaline already pumped up, Vincent didn't even think twice before he swatted the much bigger boy aside as though he were made of paper. Winslow hit the wall with a thud and looked at Vincent in astonishment, even his quick temper temporarily put aside in awe of Vincent's unaccustomed aggressiveness... and strength. Usually, Vincent just laid back and took whatever anyone handed him. He looked up and the look in Vincent's eyes would have truly made him think twice before trying something like that again... even if he'd wanted to. He and Vincent fought frequently and he called Vincent names... even hit him sometimes, but for the most part he really liked him. Just now he was afraid for the first time.

"Hey...Vincent... sorry, Man. I didn't mean anything."

Then, just as if someone had snuffed a candle, the anger died from Vincent's eyes, and he held out a hand.

"Sorry, Winslow. I didn't mean to push so hard. You took me by surprise." Vincent looked a little puzzled, and a little disturbed, as though he had not really realized what he was doing.

Winslow reached out and took Vincent's hand and Vincent pulled him up. Devin had watched the exchange silently. It had happened so fast... and he'd never seen Vincent lose his temper before.

By the time the boys reached the main living areas, the small spat was forgotten by everyone except Devin and Vincent. They had, of course, missed supper again and snuck by the kitchen to try and find

something. There wasn't much left and they had to make do with a little leftover potatoes and some scraps of meat. Vincent found a couple of apples and they split those.

Pascal cocked his head and listened..."Darn. My father is looking for me... knew I'd get in trouble. Missed my stint on the pipes." He rubbed his hands on his pants and grinned sheepishly at the others. "I'll get double duty tomorrow, but it was worth it."

Winslow took off to go to his family's chambers, tossing a back-handed wave at Vincent and Devin, leaving them to head to their chamber.

As they snuck past Father's chamber, they thought they had managed to make it when they heard Father behind them.

"*Ahem*. It is well past time for lights out, and you missed supper. Where have you two been?"

The boys turned in unison and Devin told Father..."Well, we were out exploring and just lost track of the time..."

Father gave the boys a look that indicated very clearly that he didn't believe a word that Devin said, especially since Vincent wouldn't even look him in the eyes.

"I think that tomorrow you two will be restricted to classes and chores. The rest of the time you can spend on kitchen duty."

Flopping down on the bed, Devin swore. "Damn! Tomorrow I was going to go buy that knife I wanted... the one you helped me collect bottles for. I would have had time before we went back to the museum - and now we can't even do that!"

Vincent lay back, his arms behind his head... thinking more about pushing Winslow... and the way he had felt.

"It's all right, Devin. The knife will still be there, and so will the museum. Besides, you know Father doesn't want you to have a knife anyway." He blew out the candles and turned over.

Devin put his hand in the middle of Vincent's back and pushed him to get his attention. "Hey, Vincent..."

"Yes?"

"You sure swatted Winslow down today."

Vincent turned over and leaned on his elbow. "I wanted to do more than push... for a minute. Why did I do that, Devin?"

Devin shook his head. "Well... Winslow can be aggravating. I get pretty tired of his bossiness sometimes, but when I do I yell at him, or we fight, and it's over. You never do. Maybe you just got tired of it."

"No...", Vincent mused. "That wasn't it. It was something different. I wanted...." Vincent's voice trailed off, and he lay back on the pillow.

"Wanted what?"

"Nothing. Go to sleep, Devin." But long after Devin's breathing slowed and quieted into sleep Vincent lay awake staring into the darkness, thinking of the disturbing urge he had felt, the wave of anger. He shook his head to clear it, then closed his eyes and tried to sleep.

The next day Vincent and Devin spent most of their free time washing dishes for William, sweeping the floors and peeling potatoes.

Devin muttered, "Sweeping dirt floors, peeling stupid potatoes...." He held up his hands... "I've got raisins for hands, they've been in water so much today."

Vincent just smiled a little and tossed a few potato peels at Devin. "Complaints do no one any good, except they entertain me somewhat. Tell me instead about the museum."

"It's great! You'll love it. They even have dinosaur skeletons... and old armor...all kinds of things."

When supper time came, Vincent and Devin had the dubious privilege of helping William serve up dinner, and Vincent had to endure numerous joking comments about his friends not wanting cat hair in their food. Devin even laughed at him because he had tied his hair back to keep it out of his way, and when Lisa and Janet came up to be served, Vincent thought he would die. If he could have crawled under something, he would have.

Devin just poked him in the ribs after the girls left and grinned at him, and that just made it worse. Eventually they finished serving and were able to eat their own supper... but then they had to help clean up again.

By the time they made it back to their chamber they were exhausted; when Father came in to tell them goodnight they were already asleep. He grinned a little as he leaned on his cane. Vincent was asleep lying half off the bed and Devin had thrown one arm over him and was snoring. He blew out the candles and left them.

The next morning when Vincent woke, Devin was already gone. Vincent was a little hurt. He knew Devin had gone to get his knife and that he couldn't go Above anyway... but he still wished he'd waited. He went to breakfast with Father as usual.

"Where's Devin, Vincent?" Father asked.

Vincent, not wanting to lie, thought quickly..."I really don't know for sure, Father." *True in an offhand sort of way - I don't know exactly where he is.* "He was gone when I woke."

Devin was still not back in time for literature class, or social studies. He did finally make it back in time for math....*Thank goodness*, Vincent thought. But Father was not impressed.

"Devin... could you please grace us all with an explanation as to your whereabouts this morning? I suppose you know everything you need to know about Julius Caesar's Rome, and probably everything you need to know about the American Indian. So perhaps you can give us a report on both of them in... oh, three days. You know what we have been covering."

Devin just blushed furiously and everyone laughed except Vincent. Lisa and Janet laughed the hardest.

After class, Father kept Devin to talk more to him, and Vincent waited... pacing the tunnel outside their chamber. When Devin came storming down the tunnel he walked right past Vincent.

"Was it bad?" Vincent asked, trotting after him.

"Of course. You know how he is... he hates me."

"You know that's not true."

"Other people miss class sometimes... but they never have to do reports... or give detailed explanations of where they've been."

Vincent thought about that. "Well... when Pascal missed a few weeks ago, Father did talk to him. I don't know what was said, though."

"He's always harder on me, Vincent... and you know what he said? He said he knew I was not telling the truth - he said I was lying!"

Objective, as always, Vincent replied, "Well, you were, were you not?"

Reaching the Chamber of the Falls the boys perched on boulders, while Devin pulled out his new knife. He showed Vincent all the blades.

"I know! I saw Old Sam and Derek out by the west park tunnel entrance doing some concrete work. It's still damp. I have an idea! C'mon."

They took off out toward the park, and once they reached the tunnel exit they used Devin's knife to carve their names in the still-damp cement. Afterward they swam in the Mirror Pool for a while... the water not being quite as cold as the falls... and not forbidden by Father because of any dangerous rocks and currents. While they were swimming they talked about the girls. Devin apologized to Vincent for teasing him about Lisa.

"I'm sorry, Vincent. I know how you feel. Janet makes me crazy."

Vincent felt a little better, knowing that it wasn't just him. It was good, having Devin to talk to. While they were talking, Mitch Denton came by. Mitch was always a troublemaker, and though for awhile Devin and Vincent had tried being friends with him, eventually they quit hanging around him. Devin had no problem staying on Father's bad side without Mitch's help.

Mitch stood by where they had left their clothes and called to them, so they swam over and hung on the side of the pool. They didn't notice how Mitch's eyes kept straying back to Devin's knife. After staying still and talking with Mitch, Devin started getting cold, so they got out and dried off. After Mitch left they continued making plans for their "raid on the museum", and in general had a pretty good time.

Fortunately, they were almost completely dressed when Lisa and Janet entered the chamber. They were planning on swimming and teased the boys for chickening out on them. Janet poked Devin and accused him of not liking them anymore. Lisa headed straight for Vincent, who was struggling as fast as he could to get back into his shirt to cover his pelt, so he wasn't so obviously ... different, at least no more so than usual.

Devin just bantered back and forth with Janet and watched Lisa and Vincent. *Man... he has it bad... and bad choice of girls.* Lisa wasn't interested in anyone but herself and ballet... and having an admiring audience. Unfortunately, Vincent had always been just that. By the time Vincent was dressed, Devin had managed to make their excuses plausible enough and they took off. Vincent looked very flustered, so Devin didn't say anything...he didn't even grin.

A little later, in their chamber Devin came in just in time to see Vincent listening to their old carousel music box... his mind seemed very far away. When Devin called softly to him, Vincent startled and put the music box away...almost guiltily. Devin wondered about that... Vincent had sure been acting strange lately.

Before supper, Father called Vincent into his chamber, and Devin went on without him. When Vincent returned and joined him at the table, he seemed even more withdrawn than usual... even for lately.

"You okay?" Devin asked.

"Yes. Just leave me alone, okay?"

About that time, Father came up and called Devin to his chamber. Vincent followed and told Devin he

would wait for him down in the Chamber of the Winds. As he left, he could hear Father's voice raised... and he hurried off as not to overhear.

Waiting for Devin, Vincent was anxious... Devin and Father never got along well. Oh, at time they did... but those times were few and far between. It seemed as though Father singled him out for every mistake; Devin was not wrong in that respect. It puzzled Vincent, and hurt him because he loved both of them so much. When he heard Devin coming, he looked up...

Devin began accusing him of telling Father about the knife... then accused him of lying when he denied it...and he called him a freak! Vincent was so hurt and angry he didn't know what to do... then Devin hauled off and hit Vincent smack on the nose, causing it to bleed. The sudden pain, the hurt feelings, and the smell of blood, enraged Vincent and without thought he struck instinctively with his claws across Devin's left cheek... leaving three ragged gashes. Then, as suddenly as the rage had taken him, he was sorry... desperately sorry.

"Oh... Devin...I'm sorry. Please... let me help." Vincent tore his only good shirt to put a pad over the gashes..."We need to get you to Father..."

"NO!....Not Father. Mary."

So, they went to Mary and she bandaged the cuts. She put butterflies on them, then a gauze pad. "I don't believe they need stitches, but Father will need to see them." So, taking him by a handful of leather-clad shoulder, Mary dragged him to Father.

In the midst of solicitously doctoring his cheek, Father had to get in his sermon... to both of them..."I cannot believe you two were fighting... *fighting*, of all things. Devin... whatever did you do to provoke Vincent into this? You know he is the gentlest of all the boys. You *must* have provoked him."

Vincent tried desperately to interrupt, to defend Devin, but Father just kept going ... on and on. Once they managed to get out of Father's chamber with a room restriction for the rest of the day and evening, Vincent thought Devin would have been angry with him again, but instead, he put his arm around his shoulders.

"It's okay, Vincent. I finally figured out what happened. I saw Mitch's smug look when he passed by the door of Father's chamber earlier... he must have seen the knife when we were at the pool and come running to Father. I should've known you wouldn't tell on me. *I'm* the one who should be sorry. I just get so angry at Father I don't know what to do sometimes."

Later, they sat taking turns reading out of *A Tale of Two Cities*, which was their current reading assignment... in addition to *Julius Caesar*. When Vincent finished his chapter, Devin laid the book down and looked up into Vincent's face. "I saw you playing with the music box earlier. You haven't done that in years. You've been acting funny lately. Is everything okay?"

Vincent looked around the chamber, idly noting the shadows the candlelight made. Devin, in turn watched Vincent's face. He noted how very much Vincent had changed just in the last few months... he had grown larger, heavier, his pelt had lengthened... he exuded a feeling of power... of immensity. Even though he really wasn't even as tall as Devin himself, he just seemed more "there". In the shadows from the candlelight, Vincent's eyes were so deepset as to appear pools of darkness. Finally, after a long pause, Vincent answered.

"No. I suppose it is not. Things are... changing. I am changing. The way people look at me is changing. I can feel it - I can see it in their eyes when they look at me... Winslow... Lisa... Father... even you." Vincent turned to Devin in the dark and sighed hugely. "I sometimes feel so frustrated I cannot stand it. I feel I just have to get away."

Devin reached out and touched his shoulder, but when Vincent felt the compassion... the sorrow flowing from that touch, he moved away, unable to bear the sympathy. "I'm sorry, Devin, but lately, also... whenever anyone touches me... the feelings are too strong."

Devin knew Vincent could "feel" things from other people. He'd read some about people like that... empaths. "Sorry. Must be hard, huh?"

Vincent turned to Devin, and in the dim candlelight from the one or two remaining candles Devin could see the wetness there. Vincent said quietly, "Goodnight, Devin," and turned away, ending the conversation.

Devin lay awake for a long time, looking across the room to the shadow of the music box ... and he hatched another plan.

The next day, Devin was once again missing from some classes, and in the ones he was there for, he was distracted. Father called him on the carpet twice and berated him for neglecting his studies and in general being irresponsible. Devin fidgeted, but seemed far more concerned with getting away than in paying attention. Later that afternoon, Pascal and Winslow wanted to see about re-starting on the museum project, but Devin proposed a different plan. He called several of the children to the west park entrance before supper and told them what he planned...

"I checked out the park carousel today... the operator showed me how it runs, and I know how to hot-wire it. I think we should take Vincent and go for a ride tonight."

Winslow and a few of the others were skeptical. "We're too old for that carousel anyway. Besides... why not just wait for tomorrow and go ride it?"

"Think! Vincent can't ride a carousel." Devin wanted so badly to make up to Vincent for blaming him for the knife... and maybe lighten his mood a little.

When the children approached Vincent with their idea, he was delighted. They snuck out and Winslow stood guard while Devin and Vincent broke the lock on the carousel and got the door open. Once inside, Devin quickly managed to get the motor started, and soon they were having a great time. Vincent thought it was wonderful... the lights, the colors, the music... and mostly the warmth of knowing he had friends who cared enough to go to this much trouble for him.

Suddenly they heard an angry voice calling out.

"What's going on here!"

Everyone started scrambling to get out and away, and everyone scattered in different directions... but eventually headed towards the tunnels. The mounted policeman snagged Devin, but Vincent's roar turned his attention to him. He released Devin and reached for his gun, aiming it at Vincent! Devin grabbed a rock and threw... fortunately his aim was good. The boys ran for their lives... and made it safely home.

Father, of course heard about the incident. Devin could not imagine who had told, but in the end it didn't matter anyway. Father was furious, Devin had heard it all before... how he was the oldest and should know better, how Vincent looked up to him... How irresponsible he was.

"You risked his life! And for what? A ride on a merry-go-round? Maybe you did it deliberately! Is that it? You seem to take a perverse pleasure in defying me and exposing Vincent to danger. Did you want him to get caught? Was that it? Was that your way for getting back at him for your fight?"

Finally, Devin couldn't take it any more. He loved Vincent, but sometimes this was just too much.

Nothing he ever did was right. He wanted Father to love him, and all he could do was make him angry... even when he was trying to do something nice for someone.

"Yes! I wanted him to get caught! He's a little freak and I hate him!" Devin ran from the room and went straight to his and Vincent's chamber, grabbed his coat and his knife and left.

Once Devin's disappearance was discovered, everyone searched. Vincent searched hardest of all. He knew how hard it was for Devin to remain friends with him, with Father always comparing the two of them... always blaming Devin for everything and Vincent for nothing. The fact was that nine times out of ten Vincent was just as guilty... at least on a participation basis. Vincent always *tried* to make Father see, but once he started a tirade it was hard to get him stopped, and by the time he did, the damage was done.

Vincent searched all the places he and Devin explored... and the places Devin would go to be alone. He scoured the Maze... a place they were never supposed to go, and did anyway. With his night-sight Vincent was especially good in the Maze, and knew it like no one else did, but Devin wasn't there.

Father became especially morose, and Vincent caught him crying several times. Vincent tried a few times to talk with Father about Devin, but the feeling of overwhelming sorrow Father felt flooded through him when he touched him. Eventually, Vincent stopped speaking of Devin... or trying to, but he never stopped missing him.

Once Devin was gone, Vincent found himself alone more and more often. The museum project had never been finished. He and Winslow had never been very close because of Winslow's quick temper. They remained friends, but there was always an uneasy truce between them. Pascal was becoming more and more involved with the pipe codes. They still spent time together, but without Devin there, the group just more or less broke up. Devin had been the glue that bound them all together.

Vincent found himself more and more seeking out Lisa... which delighted her. Vincent had always been her favorite of all the boys because she could get him to do anything she wanted... and Lisa always liked an adoring audience. Besides, she genuinely liked Vincent. He enjoyed the ballet, and music and would listen or watch for hours. She felt as though no one else really cared. He had taken her to her first ballet recently, and she had been touched that he had gone to the trouble to find a way to share it with her. She wanted to prove to him that she really could become a ballerina. She practiced for days, and she worked on her skirt, so she could perform her own ballet for him.

Vincent lay across the bed in his chamber. He was bored and restless... and was missing Devin. He had been exploring day before yesterday and had gone deeper than he had ever gone before, and found a river flowing through the darkness. Devin would have loved it! They could have made a raft and pretended it was the Mississippi.

He'd been gone so long, though, that Father had been upset with him. It seemed he had been gone all night... but it had been so quiet down there, so peaceful that he had lost track of how long he'd been gone. Now that Devin was gone, Father seemed to focus his attention on him - but it was in a

positive way, for the most part. Vincent yawned, his canines flashing. He had apparently missed a while night's sleep without realizing it. He laid his head across his arm and fell asleep, and woke only when Pascal came by to see if he wanted to go to supper with him.

Pascal and Vincent joined Winslow at the long table, and Winslow immediately began asking Vincent where he had been.

"Can't ever find you here lately when we need help. Now Devin's gone, you're useless."

Resignedly, Vincent just shrugged. "Father puts me to work, Winslow, and I get my jobs done."

Pascal shook his head at Winslow and made a cut-off motion, and for once Winslow took the hint. He wasn't mean, just short-tempered. Pascal began telling him about how well he was doing in the Pipe chamber.

"My father says I'm just about mastered all the codes. He wants me to start spending a regular shift there." Pascal's animation and obvious love for what he was going made Vincent somewhat envious.

Even Winslow liked the fact that eventually he would take over the forge for his father. He enjoyed working with metal and building things, and was well-suited to it.

Sometimes, Vincent felt as though he was only a burden to the community. He couldn't go Above, and he had no father to learn a skill from as Winslow and Pascal did, he brought nothing to the community at all. While they were finishing up, Janet brought Vincent a note from Lisa, and giggled as she walked away. Winslow just raised his eyebrows, but bit back any comment he was about to make, and Pascal took one look at Vincent's face and decided that he, too, would forgo any teasing at the moment.

"Excuse me," Vincent said quietly, and picked up his plate to return it to William. He still had not opened the note. Walking slowly... at what he hoped was his normal pace, he left the dinner hall and went to his chamber, where he opened the note and read, "*Meet me in the Great Hall after supper.*" Vincent carefully folded the note and placed it in a book, then wiping his sweaty hands on his pants, he left for the Great Hall.

With the wind tearing at his hair, he wrestled the huge bar off the door and pulled the door open... he could have gone around the other way... it was easier, but going in the proper door seemed more... impressive.

Lisa was waiting for him, and she looked beautiful. She took his breath away. She had new toe shoes and her long skirt floated around her legs like a cloud. She had been practicing one of the scenes from the opera they had seen together and wanted to show him. She told him to stand still and be "her prince" and danced around him.

Vincent was so bemused he could barely stand it. He kept reaching for her as she would dance away out of reach. She twirled around him, lightly touching his shoulders... giving him light butterfly kisses... his head was spinning, and a feeling was breaking over him like a tide. The pull he felt to her was impossible to resist... he had to hold her.

He reached out and quickly caught her to him, but immediately she pulled back afraid...suddenly this wasn't a game anymore. It wasn't that she was afraid of Vincent for what he was... but simply because the game had gotten out of hand. But when Vincent looked up into her eyes and saw that fear, felt it flowing from her into him, he became desperate to make her understand, and his grip tightened reflexively even as she pulled away. He could feel her skin part under his hand... smelled the blood... felt her pain and fear. Just at that moment a hand fell on his shoulder and pulled him back, and the tide of passion... and now rage that anyone would keep him from what he desired... peaked and he whirled and roared.

"NO! Vincent... No."

Father's firm but gentle voice broke through to Vincent... and he realized what had happened, what

he had done. He sobbed against Father's shoulder. He cried for everything... his loss of Devin... his brother and friend, his differences... what he had done to Lisa. He cried for the sudden insight this had given him into just what his differences meant.

Vincent collapsed in the Hall, and Father had him taken to his chamber. Once he had seen to him and assured himself that he would recover, he dealt with Lisa. Her scratches were just that, and he treated them and had her pack. He had already made plans for her to go Above. *It is unfortunate that I was short-sighted enough to let it go on this long. It is past time for her to leave us.*

Lisa would be studying ballet Above and living with a helper; if he had done this earlier... if he'd only been more foresightful, Vincent would have been safe from the pain she had caused him.

Vincent had come to briefly after collapsing, then fallen into a more or less natural sleep, but that sleep was now becoming restless. He dreamed he was back in the Great Hall, with Lisa, and he saw it all as an outsider... an onlooker to himself; and the self he saw was a monster. He could feel the hunger and the rage seeking to find an outlet, and the beast-thing that was somehow himself looked up at him and smiled... a grotesque parody of a smile.

Vincent strained... seeking to reach him... to stop him, and he could not. He could only watch as this other self reached for Lisa. When she pulled away and her skin parted, the scent of the blood... the sight of her fear brought the hunger to a sharper pitch, Vincent had to watch still as Father tried to stop him, and "The Other" spun and tore his throat out, then turned again to Lisa.

"NO!" Vincent roared, starting up in bed, eyes staring, his body cold with sweat and fear. Throwing back the covers, he pulled on his boots and ran... as far away as he could go... to the river he had found far Below... where he could hide his shame in the quiet dark.

After treating Lisa and arranging for her to leave, Father sat briefly at his desk and made an entry in his journal.

November 28, 1969

Dear God, it has happened...what exactly it is, I cannot be sure, but when I came upon Vincent and Lisa in the Great Hall, I cannot help but believe she had enticed him just a little too far this time. She must have realized what she had gotten herself into and pulled away, but his claws left deep furrows in her shoulder and back. Vincent is devastated by his lack of control... and even more by the fear of him he saw in her. I waited too long, and how the damage is done, but I refuse to allow anything else to happen. I have sent her to stay with a Helper and arranged a ballet teacher. Perhaps time will help Vincent over this. Lisa will be fine. She will always be fine.

END