

Chess

by Rhonda Collins

Note: This story appears in slightly altered form in the fanzine, LEGACY OF LOVE.

Diana sat staring at the chessboard with such intense concentration that Vincent thought perhaps she was trying to bore a hole through it.

It had been so long since she had looked up or said anything, that Vincent finally asked: "Diana? Have you fallen asleep?"

"Hush. I'm thinking."

Vincent smiled ruefully. When Diana thought, life could get complicated. He sighed, waiting for her to make up her mind. There was no way she could get out of the trap he had her in, but she was determined. He knew she hated to lose, and truly, she did hate chess. As Diana continued staring at the board, Vincent thought back over the last few weeks. He had been so depressed for so long that it seemed a natural state of being by now. Catherine. The name hung in his mind, along with her image constantly. Only the naming ceremony for Jacob had helped at all, and the visits he'd made to Diana's loft. He sighed and let his attention wander farther and let go of anything except his remembrance of Catherine. It was hard to pinpoint what it was he missed about her the most. He missed all of her. The aching emptiness that had replaced the bond was all there was. It seemed she had been lost to him forever, for even before her death the bond had been lost to him. He had thought that losing the connection was the worst thing that could have happened, then when she'd disappeared he'd lost everything...except his desperation. Hope had fled as well, until Diana. Lost in his thoughts, Vincent was startled out of his reverie by Diana's voice.

"Damn. I give up." She sat back and stretched, her hands locked behind her neck. Their eyes met for a moment and she grinned. "I hate chess."

Vincent chuckled, a low rumble resembling a purr. "I know. I also know you only put up with it to keep me occupied. Don't you have other things you should be doing?"

Diana reached over with a forefinger and flicked his king over. "Tons. But I don't want to do them any more than I want to play chess, and I'd rather be here. Avoidance can be an art form."

Vincent sighed hugely once more. He knew about avoidance: he'd become an expert in that long ago. Avoiding Diana's gaze, he rose sinuously, stretched, and wandered across the chamber to the crib where Catherine's child, his son Jacob, slept. He stood looking down at the infant, hiding behind the fall of his chestnut hair as he bent his head in sorrow. When he looked back at Diana, she had turned and rested her arm on the back of the chair. Diana's look was watchful, but not pitying. She never pitied him: or, if she did, he was unaware of it. He was grateful for that. Even in his distraction and sorrow, Vincent was still aware of Diana. He glanced back at her, noting the play of candlelight on her fiery hair. She had left it loose tonight. It is becoming to her worn loose. He was momentarily distracted, caught in her beauty...for he had an innate appreciation of all beautiful things. Realizing what he was doing--that he was staring, he jerked his thoughts aside, and turned back to Jacob.

Behind him, he heard Diana stir, but didn't turn. Finally, he heard her voice, soft as the darkness, behind him...and he turned to her. He noted she had put away the chess set.

"I'll take the set back to Father, Vincent. Perhaps we can take a walk when I get back?" Vincent nodded silently, eyes shadowed. "Perhaps."

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Father looked up from his reading and smiled when he saw Diana in the doorway. "Well? Who won...as if I don't know."

Diana smiled, but not enthusiastically. "He did, of course. Chess just isn't my game. Don't know why; I understand it well enough, and I like puzzles. I guess I'm just not enough of a strategist. I feel things instead, and chess isn't about feelings." She placed the chess set on the desk in front of Father, then thrust her hands into the pockets of her sweatsuit and wandered the room. She obviously wasn't ready to leave. She walked from bookshelf to bookshelf, sometimes craning her neck to read titles on books set upside down or sideways.

Father put aside his book and patted the seat of the chair next to him. His years in the tunnels and his role as father to so many children had given him a sixth sense when it came to knowing when people needed to talk. "Come sit down, my dear. What is it?"

Diana shrugged, but obeyed somewhat meekly, which surprised Father tremendously. Diana didn't seem like either the meek...or obedient sort. For the short time he'd known her she had always seemed extremely independent and strong-willed. He watched her a little critically. When Diana sat, she still said nothing, and didn't quite meet his eyes. She twisted a strand of hair abstractedly while continuing to run her eyes over the room. Finally, Father cleared his throat and asked: "Is it Vincent?"

Finally, Diana raised her eyes briefly and nodded. She sighed. "I don't know what to do to help, Father, and I can't bear it."

Father shook his head somewhat mournfully. The general air of depression that had settled over their world since Catherine's death was almost overpowering to Father at times. He knew it only made things worse on Vincent, now that his empathic powers had returned with Jacob's birth. Vincent's depression added to the community's as a whole, and he then picked it up empathically. It was a vicious circle. Father blessed the fortune which had brought Diana into Vincent's life when he most needed a friend. "There is little we can do for him, Diana...and little he can do, except bear it. This kind of pain can only be endured until it passes. We can only be here for him, and you are doing that." Father paused a moment and watched the changing emotions on Diana's face. He had learned to read her fairly well past that mask she presented to the world. At least, he felt he could. "I do, however, get the definite impression that there is more you are not telling me."

Diana seemed to pause a moment...even opened her mouth to speak, then snapped her mouth shut, shook her head slightly and smiled. "No. Nothing. Don't mind me, Father. I guess I'm just used to being able to grasp a problem and wrestle with it until I solve it. I feel...helpless...is all. Guess I don't like it much." She rose awkwardly, all long legs and angles, her long red hair down in her face, and brushed the dust off her arm. She grinned at him then and offered: "I could get Mary and we could give this place a good cleaning for you..."

Father looked alarmed. "Don't you dare!"

Her face softening, sobering a little, Diana tapped the desk with her fingertips and glanced up at Father once more. "Thanks. Gotta go. He's taking me for a walk...or I'm taking him. I'm not sure which. Could you keep an eye on Jacob for him? I know he won't want to leave."

Father rose and picked up his book. "Certainly. I'll come with you just to be certain he does."

As they walked back to Vincent's chamber, Father commented to Diana: "You know, chess is a great deal like life, Diana. A lot of things take you by surprise, but there are rules to be followed...and a proper time for everything."

Diana's huge eyes lifted to his and she smiled a slightly depreciating smile. "I know...believe me...I know."

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Entering Vincent's chamber with Father, the sight of Vincent's tall, lithe form took Diana momentarily by surprise. Each time she saw him it was both with expectation and a momentary awe. She felt his pain over his loss of Catherine like a blow. Sometimes it was muted, but it was always there. Diana had begun forming an attachment...a bond of sorts with him almost before she met him, as she immersed herself in Catherine's life. Once she'd actually met him, the bond had grown steadily stronger, more insistent, and she'd fought to keep him from knowing. He needed a friend right now, not a would-be lover. She shivered. And would I ever.... Vincent turned to face them when they entered, his red-gold mane tousled and gleaming from the candlelight. When he turned those incredible azure eyes to hers, though, she looked away. There was an awkward silence as no one spoke. Finally, Father broke in, "I came with Diana to watch Jacob so you could go Above for a walk."

Vincent glanced once more at his son, then smoothed the small quilt with one long-taloned hand. "I hate to leave him, but...thank you, Father." He glanced up at Diana. "It would be more polite to escort my guest at least partway home."

Hurt a little by the implication that Vincent only wished to be with her for politeness' sake, Diana commented a little caustically: "I hardly need an escort, Vincent. I'm a big girl now, but the company would be appreciated."

Vincent sighed, walked to his desk and lifted his mantle from the back of the chair and swung it over his shoulders, then held out a hand for Diana...which she did not take. He dropped the hand back to his side and shrugged. Diana noted the shrug and sighed as well. She knew Vincent had become used to the fact that she did not like to be touched...at least by him. She knew he wondered at times, though, if it were just his differences. She wished she could make him understand that it was not for that reason, but that would reveal too much about herself, and she wasn't ready to do that...wasn't sure he was ready to hear, either.

They walked side by side quietly, not looking at one another. Vincent's dark leather and wool cloak swept against Diana's legs and her arm brushed against his leather sleeve briefly before she drew back. She was feeling so flustered, it took her a few minutes to calm herself and build that mental barrier between them. Once her barrier was built carefully between them, and it was safe to touch him, Diana reached out tentatively to take his hand, and when he felt the warmth, the softness of her hand in his, he stopped and gazed at her.

She smiled briefly at the confusion she felt from him. She was so unlike anyone he'd ever known...aloof, alone...quiet. Because of the barrier she kept carefully between them, he felt none of the emotions that were such a painful presence to him down Below, and he'd told her that the peace he felt in her presence was comforting. She knew that to others she seemed so independent that it lent almost a fierceness to her aspect, which kept people at a distance. She knew what Vincent thought of her...when he did think about her at all, which was only intermittently. He was still looking down at her with those intense blue eyes, and Diana finally

smiled a little self-consciously. "What is it?" She couldn't sense him, when the block was up, either.

He shook his head, looking puzzled. "I don't know. You just puzzle me, Diana. Sometimes I wonder why you bother with me at all. I know I must be a terrible trial to you. I must depress you unutterably...yet, you keep trying to cheer me up."

Diana swallowed through a throat made dry with emotion. "I'm a Helper now...remember? Helpers help. Besides, that's what friends are for. Now shut up and let's go for our walk." She smiled to take the sarcasm from her comment, and squeezed the hand she still held.

They walked for awhile, and Vincent asked her about her current case. Diana's cases both interested and perplexed him. He could never understand how she knew what she knew: there never seemed to be enough information, yet she always seemed to know. Diana smiled briefly when Vincent finally asked, "Are you working tonight?" At least she had his interest.

"Yeah. Have to." she answered. "I still can't figure out what's going on. I know that the warehouse owner was doctoring records, but I still haven't found any clear indications of who killed him. Too many people had reason to want him out of the way." Diana sighed, then cocked her head, taking in the sight of Vincent standing there, leaning against the tree. Looks like some damn mythological hero standing there, the moonlight making his hair silver instead of gold. All he needs is a sword and a sidekick. He already has the cape. She pictured herself dressed as he was, both of them with swords at hand, horses ready to go.... Easy Bennett. Time for a reality check.

Vincent shifted uneasily under her gaze. He seemed to be fighting some kind of battle within himself. Diana temporarily dropped her block to see what she could sense, but strangely felt very little from him. There had been many times in recent weeks when her sense of him had all but disappeared temporarily... always after some deeply painful memory...or after or during those intensely sexual dreams she'd picked up on. Those, she'd tried to block against, embarrassed to be so drawn into his private thoughts, but when she slept she had no control, and the dreams came whether she wished it or not. The images were mixed... mostly Catherine, but more and more frequently she, too, was involved. I wonder if that is his doing, or only mine? Diana's mind sought answers. Something was bothering Vincent. It wasn't just the grief over Catherine's loss. It was far deeper. She had an inkling of an idea...more than a hunch...less than a fact. Are the dreams the key...or are they only symptoms of the problem? He rarely spoke of anything personal, only surface ideas, polite table-talk type of stuff. Except for when he'd been with her in her loft after the explosion on the Compass Rose. Once he'd begun speaking, he'd talked almost compulsively until he reached a certain point. Then, one other time, he'd made the astounding statement that he could not remember when Jacob had been conceived. The desperation she'd felt before he'd broken off and left abruptly, was intense. He needs desperately to talk to someone, to share his pain, but the door to that pain is tightly closed and locked against the world. Before now, Diana had no idea how to turn the key to that lock; how to get him to look beyond that door to face what was inside, and until he did, he could never get beyond his pain. But playing chess tonight had gotten her thinking in terms of challenges...and strategy. Vincent couldn't be bluffed, or coerced: she knew that from her one attempt to teach him poker. But she thought that perhaps he could be challenged, if one were brave enough to try. It also has to be something I stand a chance to win: not like chess. Finally, before she lost her nerve completely, Diana asked: "I need to get back to work. Would you like to come along? Maybe you can come up with something. Perhaps you can see something I missed, or reinforce something I already know."

He hesitated, then agreed. "All right. For a time. I need to get back to Jacob and relieve Father."

"I'll meet you at the loft...the roof. Race?"

"Race? I would beat you easily...even having to detour through the tunnels."

Diana grinned. It was working. She could feel his interest. Few people challenged him, even playfully. This might be fun. Has potential. Play this right, Bennett. "Are you sure? Are you willing to bet?"

Vincent looked perplexed, but she could feel his amusement growing. He was so seldom amused by anything lately. "You would lose. Are you so willing to give up something?"

"Um. Depends." I'd give up just about anything, if I thought... She crossed her arms and watched him again a moment. "Yeah. I'm willing...but are you? Are you so very sure you will win?"

Vincent spread his hands and shrugged. "I really have nothing to lose. Very well. What would you like to bet?"

Diana met his gaze boldly. "The loser has to answer any question that the winner puts to him...or her. Anything. And he or she must answer without reservation." Diana could almost see Vincent retreat into himself. She could feel his mind trying to find a way around this. "Not going to renege on me are you?"

Diana sighed heavily. She could almost feel him weighing his options and mentally comparing the separate routes they would have to take to the same destination. He was a born strategist. Finally, he answered uneasily, "No. Are you ready?"

"Yes." Diana grinned.

Vincent turned back toward the tunnels, then nodded. "Go."

Diana ran. She jogged regularly and trained periodically at the NYPD training grounds: she was in top shape, and knew it. Besides...she knew a short-cut.

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Vincent ran steadily through the tunnels to reach the alley near Diana's loft. It was still a little too early to be safely traveling the streets Above for the entire distance; too many people were still abroad. His route was a little longer than Diana's path through the park, but he was still fairly confident. Then he began worrying: he'd seen Diana run. She was fast, and she was tenacious. He decided to try for a train. It was a calculated risk, especially since the subways were often crowded at this time of night...but suddenly, the worry of having to answer her question crowded all other thoughts from his mind. When he got to the station it was far too crowded, and even the shadows were not safe. Cursing under his breath, he muttered a few expletives he'd picked up from Diana...and never used. He turned and headed down the tunnels on an alternate route. He'd lost, and he knew it. Somehow, Diana would get there ahead of him, and he dreaded whatever she would ask. She was far too perceptive. By the time he managed to reach her roof, she was there ahead of him...just barely, and despite the cold, her hair was plastered to her face and neck and her sweats clung wetly to her back and breasts. The sweat glistened on her face. As the wind whipped around the building in a sudden gust, she shivered, and Vincent slipped his cloak off to wrap around her.

She laughed and shrugged it off, handing it back to him. "Come on. Let's go in, and I'll shower and think of my question."

Vincent saw her through the door, then backed up: "Perhaps I should go...you can ask your question another time."

She grabbed his mantle and tugged at him. The action was totally useless. It was somewhat like dragging a log. "Uh Uh. If you get away you'll keep putting me off. No reneging. Besides, I really wanted you to take a look at my file. Maybe you can see something I've missed."

Reluctantly, Vincent allowed himself to be drawn inside. He was intrigued in spite of himself, and drawn out of his shell once more. Whatever does she want to know? He followed Diana into her office space, which made up the greatest part of her loft area. He often lay across her couch, or on the floor, and watched her work, fascinated by her intensity and enjoying the quiet of the loft. Here, the constant cacophony of other's feelings and expectations was non-existent. There was peace. Sometimes he watched tapes or listened to her stereo, but mostly he watched her. Strangely, she didn't seem to mind. Even when his eyes were on her for hours, her intensity never wavered. Often he had to stop her to remind her to take a break. He had never known anyone who could lose themselves that way in what they were doing, except perhaps Pascal with his pipes. He envied them both.

Diana called him over to the computer and he watched as she booted it up, called up the word processing program, selected her file, and began the printout. The noise of the printer seemed very loud as they stared at one another. Suddenly, Diana's scent hit Vincent like a blow. Here, in the closed air of the loft, with no wind to blow the other way, her perspiration brought her scent--heavy and very female--to him. It hung in the air around them, and his desire rose abruptly.

Angry with himself, confused, and somewhat frightened, Vincent spun away and paced to the window. He flipped the light off and looked out at the lights of the city, feeling very alone and lonely. And very needy. Taking deep breaths, he closed his eyes and fought the tide that rose within him. Catherine. Catherine. Catherine. He repeated her name...a litany and a chant, trying desperately to put something between himself and this presence which fought with him from inside, as it tried to eat its way through him. He was angry with himself that he could even think or imagine desiring anyone else but Catherine. He'd tried so desperately never to even allow himself to think of Catherine whenever he felt this way. It was... unsuitable...and very dangerous. Finally, he managed to force the feelings to the background. He turned, expecting to see Diana, and was surprised to see she had left the room and left him the printout. He'd been so involved in his inner battle that he'd not even noticed that she'd left. Gratefully, he walked over and picked up the printout, and took it to the couch to read it. He settled back into the comfortably worn cushions, placing one fur-booted foot against the table.

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Vincent was still reading when Diana came back into the room, wrapped comfortably in her worn terrycloth robe over fresh sweats, and heavy socks, her wet hair plastered to her head and beginning to curl softly around her face. Diana stood watching Vincent as he read. She knew he was aware of her, and aware of her scrutiny. She towed her hair and smiled. She'd felt his desire for her before. Score one, Bennett. At least he noticed you're a girl. Unfortunately, her own desire hadn't ebbed in the least. It was going to be a very lonely night tonight after he left. Sighing, she built her barrier once again and walked across to join him on the couch, stepping deliberately across his outstretched legs...which he didn't drop. Finally, re-folding the last page of the printout and straightening the pages, he handed them back to her and stated: "The wife had a lover."

Startled, Diana answered, "Yes. So what?"

"He killed him."

Diana grunted. "I thought of that. But, there's no proof. I have a gut feeling you're right, but one can't convict on that." She shrugged. "I'll get it eventually."

Vincent's quiet voice commented: "You always do." When she glanced up at him, he was smiling. "I've often wondered how someone with a mind like yours could possibly play such an abominable game of chess."

"Just my fate, I suppose. But I'm great at question games."

Vincent sighed resignedly, and hunched further down into the couch cushions. "Very well. You won."

Diana stretched, rose, and walked to the window. She wrapped her arms around herself as she stared out at the lights of the city. Dropping her barrier once more, she felt Vincent's anxiety and curiosity. Carefully, now, Bennett. Watch your step. This is going to be like stepping on a mine. Got to open the wound, it's festering...but watch out for the backlash. Never looking back at him, she stared out the window and finally asked quietly: "Tell me what it was like for you, never to have made love to Catherine. And now...after finally loving her...not to remember...at least not fully. How'd you deal with it then, and how are you dealing with it now?"

She felt his shock at her question, and when she turned, his face was hard, his eyes like dark glass. "I should never have told you that to begin with. You are taking unfair advantage. How can you ask me this?" She could feel his anger rising, and she could see it evident in his face and the rigid set of his shoulders. She flinched a little inside, but her face remained impassive.

"We agreed we could ask anything...and you agreed to answer without reservation. Remember?"

Voice edged with steel, Vincent answered: "I remember."

Walking quickly to the couch and curling up next to him...just as though she didn't feel like she'd just dropped a snake in his lap, Diana drew her legs up under her and leaned on the back cushions. She locked eyes with him. "Then talk. Please. I'm not being nosy or insensitive, truly. There is a reason for this."

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Staring into Diana's eyes, Vincent was quiet for a long moment, then took a deep breath and began. "It was...is... difficult." He stood restlessly, and paced the rug in front of Diana, now almost unaware of her presence. He tried to organize his thoughts, feelings. There was a hard knot in his stomach that was threatening to unravel.

"Catherine was everything to me. A part of me. The desire was there, but the bond made it easier. I could feel her love surround me even without touch. But at times, when we were together...when I could feel the warmth of her body, when I held her close to me...yes. I wanted more. But we were both afraid. She had been brutalized by men: controlled by them. She needed me to protect her, not cause her additional worry. She wanted me. I could feel that. But, she feared losing herself to...to me, I suppose. She was only just beginning to become herself.... Separate from her father, her previous boyfriends...everyone who had always controlled her. To give herself to me...and me being what I am, frightened her. As much as she loved me, that dark part of me frightened her, made her unsure." He shook his head, blond mane flying, gesturing helplessly with his hands. He paced a little faster and clenched and unclenched his hands. "And I...I feared losing control. I might harm her. And, sometimes when I killed for her, the rage and desire were mixed. I was so afraid. There was no way...no way we could get past the fear...until it was almost too late: I, when there was no control...no self left...and she, when she feared that unless she came to me, she would lose me." When he raised his face to her, it was wet with tears, and lined with pain, the eyes shadowed to a deep indigo. "How can you do this to me, Diana? You, who claim to be a friend? No one else would dare."

Diana's pale face seemed chiseled from marble. Cold. "I can because I am your friend. Go on. You haven't answered the last part of the question."

Vincent scrubbed angrily at his eyes with the long hair on the back of his hand. "No. This is none of your business. I cannot believe I've said as much as I have. I cannot understand how you manage to drag things out of me that I can barely tell myself, much less anyone else. How I deal with my sex life...or lack of same, is none of your business." He drew himself to his full height, reached deliberately across her for his cloak, which he'd thrown over the back of the couch. "Goodnight, Diana." He strode, without looking back, up the stairs and out the door to the roof.

Once outside, Vincent leaned against the rough brick of the wall and tried to regain his composure. The tears were coming faster now, as though the hole that Diana had punched in the dike had ruptured. He shook with anger that Diana had done this to him: that he had allowed her to do this to him.

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Diana hadn't moved since Vincent left the room. She chewed nervously on a nail, biting off the ragged edge. She had allowed herself to feel what he'd been feeling, and she was devastated. She'd known it was bad, but just how bad, she'd really had no idea. God. What have I done? She looked up toward the loft windows. She could feel him up there. He was so shaken he couldn't leave...and she couldn't go to him. What can I say? Suddenly, she felt nothing from him. Her sense of him was gone. She rushed up the stairs to find the rooftop empty. Where did he go? Why can't I sense him? Diana turned and stumbled down the stairs, tears blurring her vision. You blew it this time, Bennett. She told herself. Chess, indeed. You've got to be the lousiest strategist in the world. You should've known better. What did you expect him to do...or say? This isn't a case...he's not some suspect. You know better than to try to get someone to face their problems by bludgeoning them with them.

Diana paced the loft restlessly, looked out the window awhile, then sat and tried to work. She attacked the keys on the keyboard as though it were the enemy...not her own stupidity. She dug into the file to find any indication that she and Vincent had been right, and let out a whoop when she finally found a tie...a piece of evidence that would probably prove without a doubt that the murder had actually been a crime of passion rather than a retaliation. The lover had killed him, and now she could prove it. She made a quick call to Maxwell, who praised her on her persistence, and she told him she'd have to check with forensics for fingerprints. It had been a relatively unnoticed piece of evidence. She hoped they'd dusted it. Exiting the file and shutting down the computer, she walked to the kitchen to make some coffee, and her thoughts went back to Vincent. She wondered where he was...hoped he was all right. I miss him when I can't feel him. Finally, she could stand it no longer. She threw her coat on, then headed Below. If she got lost, she'd find a sentry, or beat on the pipes. If she irritated Pascal enough, he'd send someone.

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When Vincent left the rooftop, he was becoming more and more upset. That taunting voice inside himself was becoming louder, more frequent lately, and he often saw the image of the creature within himself. He knew the creature was only a projection of his subconscious, but it didn't matter; he was real enough to Vincent. That was all that mattered.

Can't face reality yet, can you? I am you. You don't even remember completely... but I do.

Vincent sought escape, until finally the darkness overtook him and gave him peace. At least for a time. When he came to himself some time later he was down in the maze. He had no sense of the

time, but he knew he needed to get back to Jacob, so he headed back to the living area of the Hub, and hoped Father would not have been too worried.

By the time he reached his chamber, he found Jacob's cradle empty, but could sense the child asleep and well in the nursery, so Father had probably given up on him and taken the baby to Mary. It was late, but he knew Father would probably be waiting up for him, worried, so he made his way to Father's chamber to apologize for the inconvenience.

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Diana had finally reached the Hub and found her way to Vincent's chamber only to find it empty. She went then to Father's chamber and asked if he'd seen Vincent.

Father looked perplexed. "I thought he was with you. It is late, but he is often out into the early morning, so I left Jacob with Mary to put down with the infants. Is there something wrong?"

Suddenly realizing that there was no way she could tell Father what was wrong, Diana temporized. "No. Not really. I just...irritated him somewhat, and he left in a huff. I just wanted to check on him, maybe apologize. It's nothing. I'll apologize next time." She turned and was about to leave when Vincent's bulk filled Father's doorway. They stared at one another for a long moment, then Vincent slowly descended the stairs, his mantle a soft whisper against the rails. He spoke to Father, his voice level and seemingly unconcerned.

"I am sorry I was delayed, Father. Was Jacob a problem?"

Father glanced from Diana to Vincent, then back again. Finally, he answered. "No, not at all. Mary has him. Why not just leave him until morning?"

Vincent nodded, then finally swiveled his head her way and acknowledged Diana. "Diana."

Diana was receiving extremely odd impressions from Vincent. One moment he seemed to be glad to see her, and the next his mind swung toward anger. Perhaps we're both confused. She finally asked, somewhat tentatively: "Could I have a word with you, in private?"

"I suppose." Vincent looked to Father. "Excuse us, please. Thank you for keeping Jacob."

Father nodded, saying nothing.

They walked silently side by side toward Vincent's chamber, the only place they could be sure of any privacy. Diana felt as though there were a wall of ice between them, and she cursed her own stupidity. When they reached the chamber, Vincent lit the candles then turned to Diana. He did not invite her to sit. They both seemed to be waiting for the other to speak, but finally, Diana broke the silence.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked. It wasn't my place."

Vincent's gaze never wavered as he answered, his voice a little harsh. "No."

Diana felt his anger, but finally began once more. "I never meant to hurt you...or at least hurt only to help."

Vincent finally dropped his eyes and his fingers explored the curves of the wooden chair next to the desk. "Perhaps. But you cannot know...even if I were to tell you...you cannot know. And it is too much...too large a thing for me to speak of. With anyone." When he raised his eyes, they were filled with pain. "In answer to the second part of your question: I do not deal with it...ever. I cannot, and will not. Now, please. If you would be a friend, leave this.

Diana ached to go to him and embrace him. She wanted to enfold him and protect him from himself, to reach out and let her love blanket him with both the passion and the peace she knew that love could bring him. But the timing was wrong. Finally, she sighed heavily, built her block in her mind and took his hand. As she looked into his gentle face, so scarred with the pain he'd suffered, she nodded. "All right. For now. But I'm here if you need to talk. Whatever you have to say won't shock me...won't make me not like you, or not accept you. You know that, don't you?"

Vincent nodded slightly. "I know. And I know you meant well, though I do not understand your purpose."

Diana squeezed his hand briefly, then rose to leave. "Someday maybe, when you're old enough, you'll understand. G'night."

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As Diana walked past Father's chamber, he motioned her inside. She stood, a little awkwardly on the stairs, balanced as if to run, and asked: "Yes? What is it, Father?"

Father cleared his throat. "I assume all is well again?"

Diana shrugged. "As well as can be expected, I suppose." She met his eyes. "I truly am a poor strategist, Father. But in this game, unlike in chess, people get hurt."

Father leaned against his desk and smiled. "Check, but not mate, eh?"

Diana looked at him oddly, then flashed him an embarrassed grin, her skin mottling in a blush. "No. But I'm working on it."

As Diana left, Father took off his glasses and laid them on the table. He picked up a book from the stack and leafed through it. Finally, he read:

*We are no other than a moving row
Of Magic Shadow-shapes that come and go
Round with the Sun-illumed Lantern held
In Midnight by the Master of the show.
But helpless Pieces of the Game He plays
Upon this Chequer-board of Nights and Days;
Hither and thither moves, and checks, and slays,
And one by one back in the Closet lays.*

He chuckled a little and shook his head. "It's all a game, Vincent, and it all moves much too fast. It is over before you know it. I think you've learned that, and this time, I think the Queen will take the King. Check AND mate.

END