

ECHOES OF THE HEART

BY RHONDA COLLINS

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

Echoes of the Heart is my first full-length Classic fanzine. This didn't start out as a novelization. It began as an idea for a short story and kind of grew, and I realized as I went that a novelization was the only way to go. Because for me, the series is as stands—from the gentle beginning of romance to the painful end of that same romance...and on to the somehow triumphant aftermath. I find it exceedingly difficult to "tinker" with perfection. With every word—every scene—I ask myself if what I am doing conflicts with our story. Perhaps because of that, this novel took me four times longer to write than any of my other eight. Which seems exceedingly odd to me, considering that the basic storyline was already written.

In any case, I hope the finished product proves interesting, entertaining—and holds "true" to the story and ethics of *Beauty and the Beast*.

Forever Dreams

There are times when one wants to snatch Forever
and put it safely in a box
Knowing that our time here is so short
so lonely and alone.
Yet in a sense Forever lives within us
when we share with one another
the fabric of our lives...our dreams.
When you share your dreams with one another
Forever lives within you
and in them.

Be well. Come dream with me.



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ECHOES OF THE HEART

A Beauty and the Beast novel by Rhonda Collins based on the episodes
"Terrible Savior" and "Siege"

ECHO

poem by Rhonda Collins



For years I walked the city streets
seeking answers to my questions—
Like a stone into still waters
my heart alone was cast.
The ripples finally found a shore
You—my heart's echo.



CHAPTER ONE: ECHO

Vincent pulled himself over the edge of the roof and swung his legs over. Once standing, he took a quick look over the edge of the building to judge distance, then dropped quickly to the balcony below. Settling against the wall Vincent merged with the shadows to wait for Catherine to get home from work.

Pushing his hood back, Vincent glanced up at the sky, shaking his head as the long hair blew across his face. The night was lovely, the air crisp and cool and he felt marvelous. He took a deep breath and smiled, thinking of how his life had changed since last spring. Because last April 12th he'd found Catherine.

I never could have imagined feeling the way I do now, he thought.

Vincent knew Catherine cared for him, trusted him, and that fact still amazed him. People who had not grown up around him or lived with him were never easy around him. His strange, fearsome appearance brought visceral, instinctive fears to the surface. It took most people a long while to grow accustomed to him. With Catherine it hadn't been that way, and for that, Vincent was grateful. But it still astounded him that she could touch him, be near to him...and feel only safe and secure. And loved. Her friendship was precious to him. And her trust.

Vincent was drawn from his reverie by the increasing nearness of the bond. He could sense Catherine's weariness and frustration. *She's coming home,* he thought with a profound happiness.

He waited anxiously as the light came on in her apartment. Waited to allow her time to settle and simply to "be home" for a short time. Through the long minutes he could sense a gradual quieting, felt a sense of peace settle on her as she moved through her routine. He realized she was fixing her supper and he crouched, back against the wall, waiting for her to finish. Unwilling to interrupt. He knew that once she was finished eating she would want to relax and would come to the balcony.

He would wait. And *while* waiting, his thoughts turned back toward his own evening and his discussion with Father.

Vincent hesitated at the threshold of Father's study and waited for the older man to notice him. Peering over his reading glasses and putting away his book, Father asked his son gently, "Going Above?"

"Yes. The children tell me the day has been pleasant. The night should be clear."

"I suppose you'll also be seeing Catherine Chandler."

Vincent descended the stairs and walked over to the small table where Father's chess men were set out, a game in progress. Without answering Father's question, Vincent studied the board, then moved his knight. When he looked up, Father was examining him with a disconcerting intentness.

Vincent wasn't entirely sure why Father disliked his continuing visits with Catherine, but he could *sense* the disapproval acutely. He supposed Father only wished to spare him pain, having made it plain to Vincent that nothing could come of the relationship. Yet even Father's disapproval was ambivalent. It was confusing. Vincent sighed. He wished Father knew Catherine better, but knowing Father's resentment of her, he'd been reluctant to bring her Below. "Most likely," Vincent replied in answer to Father's question. "We've both been very busy this week. I thought perhaps Catherine might enjoy a quiet evening as much as I. If the night is warm enough, that is."

The expected dissertation on the pain of dreaming impossible dreams was not forthcoming, much to Vincent's relief. He'd heard that one all too often recently: as though *dreaming* itself could be dangerous to him. Instead, Father merely sighed, then asked: "How *is* Catherine, Vincent? How is she coping after her attack?"

"She's healing. Her decision to change herself--her career--to one where she could help others has helped her, I think. She has channeled her anger and fear into something positive. Taking charge of her own life has given control back to her." Vincent thought of the night he'd found Catherine, slashed and bleeding in the park where she'd been thrown and left to die. He understood the

assault or rape victim's need to regain control of their lives. He'd seen it time and time again in the refuge that was his home as they came here to heal.

Father seemed skeptical. "A trauma such as the one Catherine endured can have long-lasting results. But perhaps you're right." Father's attention seemed to wander for a moment, then he said quietly, almost more to himself than to Vincent: "It must be very difficult for her. Changing worlds. Exchanging protection and privilege to work for others in a position that leaves her defenseless at times in a hard world." Father blinked, then cleared his throat and looked away, his embarrassment clear to Vincent. "Go on, then. Enjoy yourself, but do be cautious, and remember the council meeting in the morning."

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Vincent shifted restlessly against the brick wall of Catherine's balcony. He knew how much Father resented Catherine, and his relationship with her, but he couldn't really understand why. For Father wasn't even aware of what had happened two months ago....

It was almost immediately after I'd returned to see her after so long....

Vincent had tried so hard to stay away after returning Catherine to her world, but their connection drew him, a silvery thread of emotion that wound itself more tightly day by day. He couldn't ignore the pull and it had been making him miserable to try. Eventually--against Father's advice--he'd gone to her. To see her one last time and take her the volume of *Great Expectations* he'd read to her. So she could finish it. *At least that's what I told myself*, he thought, smiling a little. *When I saw her again...her face so lovely...flawless...I knew I didn't belong here. Yet...still I come, drawn by her beauty and acceptance...by the current of her emotions.*

There had been a time immediately after that night when Vincent questioned his own reaction to Catherine's flawless face, wondering if he'd subconsciously been dismayed to find her face a reflection of her heart--perfect and unblemished--instead of how she'd been when he'd last seen her.

As though my feelings for her had been more acceptable when she was no longer beautiful, he told himself.

But as time went on, the feeling passed and he no longer questioned the tie that drew him to her.

Vincent realized he'd allowed his thoughts to drift away from what had happened that night and forced his mind back to that time not so long past. *She never told me she was searching for the men who'd attacked her. Never mentioned it. Not until later, after it was over.*

It had been one evening, only a few days after he'd seen Catherine again, when it happened. He'd been playing chess with Father when Catherine's mood changed rapidly from satisfaction to concern to full-blown terror. The surge of that terror washed over him and he'd dropped every-

thing, rushing to her aid—offering no explanation to Father.

Vincent shuddered a little and stared off into space. He'd killed before—only once—in defense of his home and the people he loved. His family. That time, he'd been a soldier of a sort. But this had been different. He could barely remember what happened from the time he'd first felt the lash of Catherine's panic and the sharp edge of her terror. He couldn't even remember how he'd gotten there. All he could remember was feeling Catherine's incredible burst of relief and joy at seeing him, his satisfaction of the kill—then her compassion afterwards. He couldn't remember the actual killing. But he could remember his shame and horror afterwards. When he'd killed before, it had been quick and clean—and that had been bad enough. This had been butchery. It sickened and shamed him to think of it.

Vincent shoved himself to his feet and moved to the edge of the balcony. He gripped the iron balcony railing tightly. Shaking back his mane, he lifted his face to the cool evening breeze, hoping to clear his head. *Catherine came to me afterward and took my bloody hands in her own and drew me away...more frightened it seemed for my safety should I be discovered than of me or what I had done.*

Vincent had carefully avoided telling Father about the incident, and eventually Father stopped questioning him about his sudden disappearance.

The clink of dishes again brought Vincent back to the present. Catherine had finished her meal and was clearing the table.

Vincent turned, brushing at his pants, self-consciously adjusting his vest and cloak. *Soon*, he thought. He could hear Catherine humming tunelessly, and walking to the balcony door, tapped gently on the glass.

Immediately, he could sense her attention and anticipation. The door opened and he stepped back.

"Vincent," she said gently, sounding pleasantly surprised.

"Catherine."

"How do you do it? You always seem to know when I want to talk with you."

Vincent turned away from the radiance of her smile. His heart ached with an exquisite pain. He didn't understand the feeling, but he knew it for what it was. It was love. Gazing at the stars, he murmured gently: "It seemed a perfect night for a visit...."

Catherine slipped a companionable arm through his. Comfortable. Completely at ease. Laying her head against his shoulder, she drew him to the edge of the balcony. At once he, too, was comfortable—because *she* felt that way—though her nearness took his breath away.

"It is lovely tonight," Catherine said with a sigh. "I've been restless today, though."

Vincent waited patiently for her to continue. He could have waited all night, content merely to be with her. With the air still holding a hint of chill, he had ample excuse to

continue with his arm around her. Her presence was overwhelmingly sweet.

"Spring is coming before long," Catherine offered.

"Yes," Vincent agreed quietly, knowing what spring must mean to her. To him--as he'd been remembering--it now meant the time he'd found *her*. But he knew that for her, spring had darker connotations now.

"I feel as though I've been climbing mountains. It's been so hard."

Vincent tightened his embrace a little in sympathy. "I know it has been."

"Today Edie was joking with me, like she always does. You know...calling me *Princess*?"

She glanced questioningly at him as though to see if he remembered her telling him about her friend's wry sense of humor. He simply smiled and replied, "Edie has grown to care for you."

"Yeah. She has. And I like *her*. That's what struck me today. It used to bother me when she or Joe Maxwell would tease me about being a *princess* or debutante...like I wasn't...tough enough, or fit to do the job. As though I was only playing at it."

"And now it doesn't?"

"No." She smiled a little ruefully, looking away. "Well, yes. It does bother me when Joe does it. Or someone else. But not Edie." Her eyes questioned him as she turned to him. "What do you think that means? Am I just getting used to it or is it because I know she likes me?"

Vincent stared off across the city. He found it difficult to answer for a moment. To *him*, Catherine was a princess. He could understand Edie's and Joe's reservations. And Father's comment tonight became a little clearer to him. Catherine *had* moved from one world into another: from a world of luxury, privilege and protection into a harder world where no excuses were tolerated for inability or laxness. Catherine had the ability, but she'd never before had to dig deep within herself for the strength or endurance she needed now. And he knew that deep down she always *would* be "Daddy's little girl," expecting life to grant her what she desired. He immediately resolved himself to do his best to make sure she wasn't disappointed...despite life's capriciousness. But right now, she needed reassurance that although she and her life were changing, that it was a *good* change. A positive one. He finally answered carefully. "I believe you are beginning to see below the surface in a way you never did before, Catherine. It is *you* who are changing as well as the way others perceive you."

Catherine was silent as she thought about that. Then she nodded. "Yes."

Strains of music drifted on the wind. A saxophone played from one of the street corners. They listened until it stopped. Then Vincent asked hesitantly: "In the spring, they begin the concerts in the park...do you ever attend?"

"Oh, yes. Daddy and I often go. Or I go with Jenny. Tom never liked to go, but I've always loved them."

"I attend them whenever I can. Since I was a boy...."

Catherine was delighted, and the shiver of that delight ran through the bond. "Really? But how, Vincent? Surely that would be difficult for you."

Embarrassed now, wishing he hadn't brought up the subject, Vincent looked away. "I have a special place. Below the concert shell."

"Below...? Oh! But how wonderful, Vincent! How clever!"

Since he could sense no change in her emotion—no disgust at the idea of attending a concert in a sewer—Vincent was encouraged. "When...when the concerts begin again...", he asked hesitantly, "perhaps you would care to attend one with me?"

Catherine smiled and slipped her arm around him again. "I'd like that. To share the music with you."

Vincent's heart was thudding crazily. It felt like a frightened bird trying to escape the captivity of his ribcage. The pounding was so loud to him he was certain she would hear. Needing a little distance to help him regain his composure, he moved away. "I would enjoy your company. I must go, Catherine. It's late and you have an early morning."

He sensed a tinge of disappointment and hesitated, but a glance at her tired face encouraged him.

When he met her eyes, she nodded. "Yes. I suppose you're right." She came to him and hugged him briefly again—lightly, barely touching—then stepped back. "Thank you for coming. For being here when I needed you."

With a voice hoarse with emotion, Vincent promised: "I will always be here for you, Catherine. *Whenever* you need me."

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After leaving Catherine, Vincent detoured to the roof of her building, where he stood, trembling a little. Once more lifting his head into the cool breeze, he closed his eyes and tried to calm himself. One thought kept running impatiently through his mind: *Catherine will come with me to the concert. With me!*

He couldn't quite believe he'd had the temerity to ask, but he *had* asked. And she'd accepted his invitation. And now, it took all the control he could manage to force himself to descend the building with care instead of leaping crazily from balcony to balcony...heedless of discovery.

After several moments his common sense came to his rescue. *After all, I can hardly escort Catherine to the concert if I foolishly allow myself to be caught Above.* He sighed and began his usual careful descent.

Upon reaching the ground, Vincent detoured through the park for a long walk. He suspected Father would still be awake awaiting his return, although of late, Father often gave up long before Vincent made his appearance. He knew Father worried about his safety Above, but Vincent wished he could make Father realize he was an adult and

that he was well aware of the dangers that awaited him in the city.

Vincent's forays into the park and the dark city streets had become longer and his sleep periods shorter. He didn't know why, but it almost seemed he needed less sleep now. *Perhaps I'm dreaming my dreams while I'm awake*, he thought happily.

It began to rain softly, and the fine mist soon coated Vincent's cloak and hood. Fine droplets clung to his face and hair. Still he walked, despite the chill. Too pleased with the night to give it up just yet.



After Vincent disappeared over the side of her building and into the darkness, Catherine stood a moment in the stillness thinking of how strange her life had become in the past eleven months. But despite the strangeness, she was pleased that Vincent had chosen to make himself a part of that life. There was a part of her that had been empty after her attack...and after Vincent had brought her home to face all the problems of rebuilding her life. For eight months he hadn't returned, and there hadn't been a day when she hadn't wondered where he was, what he was doing. If he ever thought of her. She would have loved to talk to him during that time and discuss everything—all the changes she was going through—but she'd had no way of contacting him. When he'd shown up suddenly on her balcony with a gift—the book, *Great Expectations*, that he'd read to her as she was healing—it was as if a piece had fallen back into place. He belonged in this new life she was beginning. *He's my inspiration. Without him, I forget who I am. Who I want to be.*

It began to mist, and Catherine reluctantly went inside, pulling the doors closed after her.

As Catherine drew her bath, she sat brushing her shoulder length honey blonde hair and thinking of Vincent. *He is so endearing. So unusually kind and gentle.* She smiled, thinking of the concert. *To think for years we've both been attending the same concerts. He could've been sitting right under my feet and I never would have known.* She wondered a little uneasily what it would be like—listening to the concert from a drainage tunnel—a sewer. But she'd said she'd go, and she would. *I wouldn't want to disappoint him.*

She rose, cut the water off and slipped into the hot water. Luxuriating in the tub, she let the rest of her worries go. Work would wait until tomorrow, though she'd brought several files home.

As she soaked—playing with the bubbles—she thought further about what she'd told Vincent. *It wasn't the whole truth*, she decided. The reaction of people in the D.A.'s office was really not so different from that of her co-workers in her father's offices. Except for one major thing: At her father's office, she'd *deserved* the names. *Daddy's little girl, Charles Chandler's daughter.* She

squirmed inwardly as she remembered. *They never said anything outright, but I knew they thought I was a flake. And I was. But I'm not, now. I work hard—as hard as the rest of them—I may not be as good, yet, but I damn sure try!*

Tired muscles and nerves relaxed in the hot water, and as it cooled, Catherine climbed out of the tub to pat herself dry. In the mirror she caught a glimpse of the scar in front of her ear and touched it gently. Even now, it was pink and a little tender. The doctor said she could have it removed when all the deep healing was finished.

Catherine hummed a little to herself, thinking again about the concert in...no...*under the park. Just thinking of him is a comfort.*



The following evening, Vincent rushed to the showers, anxious to rid himself of the caked, crusty mud that covered him practically from head to toe. A water main had burst in the upper tunnels on the east side, and the resultant flood (before the city had managed to repair the damage) had caused major problems Below. Vincent, Mouse, Cullen, Winslow and Kanin had spent most of the day diverting water to the uninhabited tunnels. Overall, they'd been successful, though Mouse was furious that it had taken the city so long to fix the damage. The young man was next-to-last to use the shower and waited with Vincent, complaining about the city's inefficiency. "Could've done it faster, Vincent. By myself."

The boy's blue-eyed gaze amused Vincent. Mouse was always so certain he could come up with a "new" way to do things. Usually he was right. "I'm certain you could have, Mouse."

Mouse pulled off a wet, muddy boot and stared at it forlornly. "Wish Father would'a listened. Could'a fixed it quicker. By myself."

Blinking tiredly, Vincent carefully rubbed an eye with a moderately clean portion on the back of his hand, then tried to explain to Mouse why Father had insisted they leave the repairs to the inefficient city crews. "Mouse, the break was on the topmost level. Since it was such a huge pipe that broke, the city *had* to have been aware of the leak almost as soon as we were. If it had been miraculously fixed, they would have been suspicious."

Vincent glanced up to see Mouse unceremoniously shedding his clothes to get into the shower. He almost laughed at the calico patches of mud and white skin on the boy's bare torso, though he knew he probably looked even more bizarre. He glanced down at his fur-covered hands—now heavily matted with dark, clay-like mud, and with the fur sticking out in sharp, stiff points. He *did* smile, then. "Mouse...if the aqueduct was finished, all this would have been unnecessary...."

The words were no sooner said than Vincent wished he hadn't spoken. Mouse's mood turned surly—something rare

in the cheerful teenager. "Don't want to talk about it! Want to get clean." Mouse turned away and headed for the shower.

"Mouse...." Vincent sighed in frustration. The proposed council meeting that morning had been postponed due to the emergency, but Mouse was already adamant in defense of his "Mouse-hole"—the large chamber he had appropriated as his own—which was below the rest of the living chambers and directly in the path of the large aqueduct that was being proposed. Once built, flood waters from Above would be funneled through that cavern—and others—below to the river.

Kanin came out of the shower, vigorously drying his hair and humming a tune. Vincent decided that now was, perhaps, not the best time to talk to Mouse about the turn the aqueduct project had taken.

The boy had disappeared into the shower when Kanin settled beside Vincent. "So why's Mouse so grim?"

Vincent shrugged and brushed at a clump of mud decorating the back of his hand. "The aqueduct. The Mousehole."

"Oh." Kanin lifted his eyes to the showers. "He'll come around, Vincent. Wait 'til after council tomorrow. Father'll convince him."

Kanin sounded so sure that Vincent thought perhaps he might be being overly pessimistic. By the time Mouse came back out, the boy seemed in a better mood and Vincent felt free to think about removing the mud from his own body and getting into some clean clothes.



Catherine saw Vincent's shadow behind the curtains and put away the file she was reading. Quickly slipping on her robe and tying it, she walked to the door, opened it and peered out. Vincent's dark form stood silhouetted against the glow from the city lights.

Pulling her robe around her a little closer, Catherine sighed. *I wish he'd come inside... just once. It would be so much more comfortable.* But she knew he wouldn't. She'd asked several times, and the withdrawal she'd sensed then had told her there was no point in asking again. Nor was there any point in asking *why*. For all his honesty and determination to have Catherine pour out her heart to him, Vincent was frustratingly obscure when it came to saying *anything* about *himself*. He'd talk about Father and other people she didn't know—tell her about things that happened in his world—but almost never about *himself*.

"Vincent?"

"Catherine. I didn't disturb you?"

Catherine joined him at the balcony railing. "I was working, but I'm always glad for a break." At his concerned look, she smiled. "It wasn't anything important ...and I'm always glad to see you."

He turned and looked out over the city, and when he did, Catherine saw a darker spot of something on his jaw. She reached up and touched it. It was crusty.

Vincent startled and caught her hand. "What is it, Catherine?"

"Something...here."

Brushing at his chin, Vincent smiled. "Mud. I must have missed a spot."

Catherine laughed at the look on his face: a combination of embarrassment and humor. "What on earth have you been doing?"

"A pipe broke. We spent most of the day diverting water. There was...a great deal of mud."

Catherine could only imagine what problems Vincent dealt with daily in his world. She'd seen so little of it when she'd been healing. She felt left out, at times, when he spoke of people she didn't know and places she'd never seen, but he seemed reluctant to take her Below. He always said *perhaps...or another time. I've never even had a chance to properly thank Father for helping to save my life.*

"Are you cold?" Vincent asked gently as she shivered and wrapped the robe tighter.

"A little. It was warm today, but it's cooled down quite a bit."

"Since I spent a good part of the day covered in water and mud, tonight seems a vast improvement." He offered her the circle of his arm and the warmth of his cloak, and she snuggled against his warmth.

"Tell me about the pipe," she asked, feeling wistful. "And about fixing it."

Vincent hesitated, but he must have sensed her sincere desire to know more. "There isn't much to tell. A pipe broke...too close to the upper levels and too large for us to fix. The city would have known. So we diverted the water--mostly with sandbags--and waited for the city crews to fix it."

"No one was hurt, were they?" Catherine always worried a little about what happened, Below, in emergencies.

"No. It wasn't dangerous...only inconvenient."

"Does that happen often? Floods like that?"

He nodded. "Fairly regularly, in fact. Hopefully, before long things will be better. We have an aqueduct planned to funnel floodwaters away from the living areas."

"Oh." Try as she might, Catherine still couldn't visualize it fully. Another entire world. People--families--with lives. All of it going on below her. She wanted to be more a part of it. Know more about it.

"You're quiet tonight," Vincent offered, obviously hoping she'd tell him what she was thinking. She felt a flash of irritation, but then it was gone. Vincent was... Vincent. It's just the way he was. But just because getting *him* to talk was impossible was no reason for *her* to stay silent. "I'd like to see more of your world. I've seen so

little...just the parts when you were bringing me home. You tell me bits and pieces...about people I have no faces for. Places I can't imagine." She turned to him and searched his face, looking for signs that he was receptive, this time. "All these people are in your life. I'd like to know them."

He sighed. "I know. Perhaps someday soon."

Catherine turned away and repressed a frustrated sigh.



The next day, Vincent stood with his head bowed over Father's desk staring at an issue of *The New York Times*. The headline screamed at him. He glanced around at Father and handed the paper back to him.

Vincent had been hearing rumors for days of a killer on the subways. Someone who killed like an animal. The man was alternately hailed as hero or a monster, since he killed to protect people from subway violence. A few of the helpers had begun looking at Vincent oddly.

Father cleared his throat. "Mario is a new helper, Vincent. He needed to know."

Vincent stalked to the other side of the room, remaining facing away from his father. "And does he *know* now?" he asked bitterly.

"I...believe...so," Father said hesitantly.

Vincent turned to face Father. "I wish you'd told me sooner."

Mario had brought the paper down to Father two days before, hesitantly asking if there was any chance that Vincent could be the Subway Slasher. Father had reassured the man that, of course, Vincent was not responsible, but parent-like had hidden the incident from Vincent, seeking to save him embarrassment.

"I only wanted...." Father began, his words helplessly trailing away.

"To spare me. I know. It doesn't matter."

Vincent stalked from the room, for once unconcerned that Father was unhappy. He was tired of always being looked at with suspicion. *I should be accustomed to it by now.*

He passed people in the tunnels and barely acknowl-

edged their presence. He knew this latest incident shouldn't bother him, but it did. All his life, Vincent had walked a narrow line, trying desperately to fit into the niche that Father had created for him in this precarious world of theirs. With everything he did, he used restraint. He moved as gently, as quietly as he could. He modulated his speech to a gentleness he didn't always feel. Because he knew that no matter how hard he tried, the first instinctive reaction of anyone upon seeing him was stark fear. Even those who knew him well had their moments of doubt. Vincent knew this because he could sense it through his empathy. Yet, whenever danger threatened, the first place his friends turned to was to him.

Vincent had no illusions about his place in his world. He was loved and he never doubted that, for he could feel the love every bit as strongly as the fear. His family loved him and depended upon him. He was their protector. And he wondered about the man Above, the man who was called the Subway Slasher. *What is he thinking of, when he kills? Did he mean for it to come to this, or was he pushed into it? He is protecting people, as well....*

The similarities made Vincent uneasy. It was wrong, what both of them were doing...yet...he could see no alternative. Not for himself, in any case. Above, they had police and prisons. *Below, they have only me.*

Late into the night, Vincent padded quietly through the upper tunnels, making his rounds. Checking weak points in their security. He found himself lingering near the subway stations longer than usual, though the stink of places disturbed him. The reek of garbage, cigarette smoke, oil, and the streetwalkers' perfumes was oppressing. From his hidden place in the shadows, Vincent watched the rumbling trains and the straggling mass of humanity and sighed. And thought of Catherine. The gentle thread of her peace as she slept wound through his consciousness. *Without her, I would truly be in a foul mood tonight.* But somehow, as long as Catherine trusted him nothing else mattered very much.



TRUST

poem by Rhonda Collins

There's a place of dreams within me
where I do not stand apart.
Where all doors are open to me.
The place of dreams is in my heart,
And you alone possess the key.

CHAPTER TWO: TRUST

Catherine bent over her desk, intent on the folder in front of her. She was tired, irritated, and a little frustrated. This week, she'd almost gotten a handle on some of the work piled on desk and was starting to feel proud of herself, but despite that, the pile never seemed to get any smaller.

The McCarthy deposition still needed to be typed and proofed for the trial, but the leg work was finished. Catherine was sometimes amazed at the sheer volume of work she found herself doing now. When she'd worked in her father's law firm, so much of her preliminary work had been done by secretaries and paralegals that she'd almost forgotten a lot of her skills. Here, in this overburdened sweatshop, she was relearning them with a vengeance. The legal secretaries were often even more overburdened than the attorneys, so much of the work ended up back on the attorneys' desks. On hers. So she was also learning the extent of her endurance.

As Catherine impatiently pushed her hair back out of her face and shuffled the folder with the deposition onto the stack yet to be done, Edie waltzed past on her way to the coffee machine. She grinned and her beaded braids swung slightly as she jutted her chin back the way she'd come. "Maxwell wants you, Princess."

Catherine's stomach suddenly felt heavy. The stale donut and acid coffee she'd had a little while ago sat there like a bowling ball. For a moment she couldn't move. Her mind snatched at random thoughts, trying to pin something down that she might've done wrong. There was nothing. Her vision eventually cleared and she realized Edie was gone...continuing off toward the elevator where she was engaging in a mock argument with Josh, the office boy. The normal sounds of the office began to penetrate again. *Utter and complete terror. Fear of failure*, she thought with disgust. Catherine recognized the feeling for what it was and shoved it aside.

Taking several deep breaths, slowly counting to ten to settle herself, Catherine thought: *It's only Joe. Boyish Joseph Maxwell. Cute Italian Stallion.* She grinned then at the thought. Somehow, since talking to Vincent, even Joe Maxwell's teasing didn't bother her too badly. Maxwell wasn't so bad, really.

Cathy tidied her desk, straightened her shoulders, then rose and headed for Joe's office at a brisk walk that became

almost a run when District Attorney Moreno passed her and "reminded" her that Maxwell was waiting for her.

The result of her sudden spurt of speed was that she almost skidded into Joe's office on the freshly waxed floor. Not exactly a demure or dignified entrance.

From then on, things went downhill.

Bad enough, the stack of files two feet high waiting on the desk, that she knew immediately were for her. Worse yet was Joe gleefully pointing out that she shouldn't volunteer.

And he was right.

Cathy hadn't been keeping up with the newspapers or even watching television much. She'd been so exhausted every night after finally dragging in, hauling work home with her in her continual effort to catch up, that she rarely had time to do much of anything. Even sleep. She'd heard vague rumors of a couple of killings, but it wasn't anything that was on her plate, so she hadn't paid attention. She only had so much attention to go around, after all.

Then Joe shoved a folder with 8x10 glossies into her hands and her world turned upside down.

"Take a good look," Joe said in a voice that showed his disgust. "Seventeen and sixteen. They look like they tried to go a round with a tiger. Only this animal walks around on two feet and half the city thinks he's a hero."

The instant Catherine saw the pictures--the wounds--she felt her gorge rise. But more than that she felt a sinking, almost visceral feeling of recognition. Her immediate thought was of Vincent. Images flashed through her mind of Vincent after he'd burst through the brick wall at the brownstone last month and attacked the men who were about to kill her. He'd torn them apart. It had been the second time he'd rescued her...and the first time she'd truly realized the extent of his power. The first time he'd rescued her had been when he'd found her in the park after those same men had beaten her, slashed her face and left her for dead.

Cathy's mouth was dry and cottony. The same. The style. The wounds. *God. Vincent.* Another part of her mind argued that it couldn't be him. This... Slasher...this murderer of children couldn't be the gentle man who'd cared for her with such tenderness. She didn't know what to think. Couldn't *think* at all, in fact. All she could do was feel...and recognize with a sick pain the possibility.

Catherine tried to focus on the immediate problem despite Joe teasing her. He obviously thought the case was too bloody for her--that her squeamishness was from the blood and gore.

"You look a little green," Joe joked. "You sure you got the stomach for this?"

Catherine's pride forced her to pay attention. She tore her eyes away from the photos with difficulty. "Sure. What do you want me to do?"

Joe handed her the towering pile of manila folders with his usual lopsided grin. "Our Subway Slasher knows how to take care of himself. So what do you got here? You got your karate schools, kung foo instructors, self defense classes. Be the first deb on your block to collect the whole set. Now. You know the profile we're looking for. Recent crime victims, maybe someone who's lost a family. Flag anything that's subway-related."

As Catherine headed for the door, burdened by the stack of files, Joe leaned against the door and smirked: "Oh. You *have* heard of the subways, right?"

Catherine smiled back and spun away. The twinkle in Joe's eye was unmistakable: he really *did* like her.



Later that afternoon, Catherine *still* wasn't sure how she was going to manage to piece things together in this case. She'd spent hours tracking down listings for various self-defense classes, karate schools, and the like...double checking against the stack of files to make sure they were still in business. After leaving the office, she'd checked out a few of the places in the files, but she wanted to see Isaac before going any further.

Isaac Stubbs. Big, mean and tough. She'd gone to him after her attack to learn self-defense, determined that never again would she be a victim. Isaac was streetwise and knowledgeable. More importantly, Cathy trusted him. She knew Isaac and felt him to be honest. She didn't believe he'd steer her wrong. And if there was anyone out there who was *really* good at anything from street fighting to "Egg Foo Yung," as he cheerfully called karate, Isaac would know.

The gym was dark inside in comparison to the bright daylight outside. Quiet. Sunlight streamed through the high windows. Dust danced in the sunbeams. Catherine's high heels clicked on the wooden floor. Very loud in the dusty quiet.

"Isaac?" she called teasingly, recognizing instantly in the complete stillness a sense of waiting. Isaac loved to fake his students out. Make them see the world around them in different ways. Make them observe. "You can come out, Isaac. I know you're there...."

Isaac's gentle laughter answered her as the burly black man poked his head around the hanging bag. "Can't fool *you* anymore."

Catherine's rush of pride and genuine affection startled her. She'd pleased him. It felt good to have Isaac pleased with her. She'd worked hard to learn what he'd had to teach. Impulsively, Catherine went to the big man and smiling, embraced him. He, as well as Vincent, had aided in the recovery of her sense of self-esteem after her attack. "I had a good teacher. Hi."

Isaac asked jokingly: "So. You come for the refresher course, or is this a social call?"

"Neither, I'm afraid. I need to ask you some questions."

Isaac wiped at his sweaty face with the edge of a towel. "Anything that makes you sound that serious has got to be pret-ty heavy. We talkin' baseball, money, or love, here?"

"We're talking Subway Slasher."

Immediately Isaac became defensive and retreated, turning his back on her and walking off to take a swig of water. "Who'm I talkin' with here? Friend or D.A.?"

A little surprised at his tone, Catherine answered warily, "Me...."

"Wrong answer." Isaac walked past her and began punching at the bag aggressively.

"He's *killing* people, Isaac."

"That so? I notice you don't say, '*innocent*' people." His hamlike fists made solid, smacking sounds to punctuate his terse comments.

"Innocence or guilt is for the courts to decide. If you know something...." His attitude puzzled Catherine. Isaac seemed solidly on the side of the Slasher.

"I don't know nuthin'...and if I *did* I wouldn't tell no D.A."

"Whose side are you on?" she asked, a little shocked. Her basic belief in right and wrong was beginning to be a little shaken. If *Isaac* felt this way, how many others did as well? And were they entirely wrong? Again, she thought of Vincent and pushed the fledgling thought away.

Isaac pointed his finger at her and said intensely, "You give me ten minutes to shower and change, and I'll show you."

Without any further comments, Isaac stalked past her to the showers, leaving Cathy to wonder what had just happened. Isaac was one of the most down-to-earth individuals Catherine knew--a rock of solidity. She knew from his many lectures that he believed in right and wrong--and knew the difference. Cathy wandered to the window and stared through the dirty glass at the golden sunshine outside, wondering why her world seemed so skewed right now.

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Isaac was painfully quiet on the trip, and Cathy hesitated even to ask where they were going. Her friend's attitude indicated that she'd know when they got there. She had a hard time keeping up with his long strides, but she

managed. Isaac didn't make too many allowances for his students: he expected them to keep up.

They came to a brick building and Isaac said finally, "Here it is."

Cathy glanced up and recognized the building. Astonishment flooded through her. "The *Protectors*?"

Isaac's voice held a tinge of amusement: "The nuts...in the white hats...that ride around the subways looking for trouble. Riiight. C'mon."

Isaac went ahead of her, taking the steps two at a time, and she followed, still a little bemused. The *Protectors*. She'd heard of them and always thought them to be a joke, though a rather dangerous one...riding around on the subways with their white hats. As though *daring* someone to step out of line.

But when she followed Isaac inside, she saw that--as in Isaac's classes--the people working out ranged from children to older women, with everything in between. Somehow that was a little reassuring. None of them seemed like the tough, street-smart kids she'd seen walking the streets and riding the subways...the few times she'd ridden them, that is.

Isaac waved a hand abstractedly. "Look around. These people ain't crazed vigilantes in training. Just ordinary people trying to take care of each other. You want to know who's side I'm on? I'm on *their* side."

"Is that responsible?" Cathy was watching a grey-haired woman as she sparred. "A woman that age could get hurt trying to resist a mugger."

A firm, slightly disgusted masculine voice behind her broke in, and Cathy turned to see a lean black man standing beside Isaac. "She didn't resist last time," the man commented. "She couldn't get her wedding ring off her finger. The mugger figured he'd make it easy for her by cutting off the finger. One of our people stopped him."

Isaac smiled and patted the younger man on the back. It was obvious to Cathy they knew one another fairly well. "This is the man who put this whole place together." Isaac introduced Cathy. "Cathy Chandler... Jason Walker."

"Jase, please," the man said, smiling widely.

Cathy couldn't help being impressed by Jason Walker's demeanor and style, despite her ambivalent feelings about this whole thing. She'd seen him on television in his interviews and had felt the same way then. Isaac obviously liked the man, and that made Catherine want to like him. Giving him the benefit of the doubt, Cathy smiled, and reached out to shake Jason's hand. "I've seen *you* on TV."

He laughed. "None of it's true, I swear." Jason turned to Isaac and teased: "So. How does someone as ugly as you happen to know so many beautiful women?"

"Cathy was one of my students," Isaac said smugly.

Jason gave her an incredulous look. "You mean you actually *paid* this man *money*...?"

Cathy enjoyed the banter, so she was watching closely when Isaac told Jason: "She's with the D.A. now...." And

Jason's face changed...a hesitation...a guarding became evident and all Cathy's red flags went up.

"Ooh. Are we in trouble again?" Jason said it jokingly, but Cathy could sense a definite tension beneath the joke.

"I don't know. Have you done anything?" Cathy watched him carefully as she teased, hoping for a reaction.

"Not as much as we'd like to."

Now *that* was the truth. She could read it in his eyes--in his bearing. He felt restricted.

Jason took her by the elbow, gently, politely, as he guided her through the room full of people working out. "There's so much going on in this city...and the cops can't be everywhere at once. People *have* to learn to protect themselves, Cathy. And each other. If the bad guys feel like they're outnumbered, it makes 'em scared." He paused and opened a door then waved her inside. "Come into my parlor...."

"Said the spider to the fly..." Cathy answered quickly, and Jason laughed easily.

"You've come about the Subway Slasher, haven't you?"

"Yes," Cathy admitted. "The man's a psychopathic monster."

Jason shrugged and moved on into the office. Catherine couldn't decide if his attitude annoyed or amused her.

Continuing the conversation, Jason added: "If a transit cop rescued that lady, he'd get a commendation. This guy is minus a badge, so that makes him a psychopathic monster."

"No," Cathy rejoined sarcastically, "Ripping two teenagers to pieces makes him a psychopathic monster. A transit cop would've arrested them."

"Right. Right. Then seein' as how they were juveniles, they would've had to serve a little soft time, then they would've been back on the subway--kickin' another old lady to death. Great system you've got there, Ms. D.A."

His accusation stung--because he was right--and Cathy knew it from personal experience. "It's not perfect," she admitted grudgingly.

"Tell me about it." Jason moved to the window that overlooked the training area, and Cathy followed him and looked down on the room of people learning self-defense. "This is where they come, Cathy. The old people with steel bars on their windows--and they still can't sleep at night. The woman who...who can't understand why the boy who killed her son walks free. The rape victims who scream when their husbands touch them. *This* is where they come... when the plea bargaining is over. Believe me. They *know* the system isn't perfect."

"I don't know a better one," Catherine said quietly. "Do you?" When Jason didn't answer, but just looked away, Cathy sighed. "Of course, you can find failures to point out. But most of the time the system works. It's all we've got." It sounded trite, even to her. Especially after

her own experience, which was not so long in the past that she could safely distance herself.

Jason stared at her with a conviction that shook her. "Well, *we* have *ourselves*! Our courage, our... our strength...our compassion. We have each other. And now we've got him...whoever the hell *he* is," Jason said. Meaning the Slasher.

Catherine looked away with a growing sense of unease. She wasn't entirely sure she liked Jason Walker. Or trusted him. But he was *very* committed to what he believed in. Of *that*, she was certain. She shook her head and tried smiling. "I'll have to think about all this." Sticking her hand out, Catherine shook hands with Jason. "Thank you for showing me around. I appreciate your time."

As Isaac spoke quietly to Jason, thanking him for putting up with their intrusion, Catherine stared out the office window at the students...young and old. Merely people trying to get by. Then, Isaac was finished and back at her side.

"Ready to go?" he asked.

"Sure." She walked out the office door with Isaac close behind. Neither of them spoke until they reached the front door and stepped into the late afternoon sunshine. She paused. "Gave me a lot to think about."

"That was the whole point," Isaac responded.

Catherine hesitated, not sure what to say...how to ask what she needed to know. She sighed and forced herself to speak. "Isaac...if you thought..." she began, then stammered, "if you even *suspected* this vigilante is someone you know...a friend," she said, almost whispering. "What would you do?" As she stared into Isaac's dark eyes, she pleaded with him for advice. There was no one else she *could* ask about this.

Isaac didn't hesitate or look away. "Talk to him. Ask him," he said. As if to emphasize how important honesty was in this, he pointed to her and stared hard into her eyes. "Go to where the man lives and look him dead in the eye. But first I'd be real sure about one thing. I'd be real sure I *wanted* to know."

Catherine dropped her eyes, unable to face Isaac's intense gaze. She felt as though he could see through her. Without raising her head, she nodded. Isaac took Catherine's hand, engulfing it in his and they walked that way for a minute or two. Isaac walked more slowly on the way back to the gym, as though he didn't want to force Catherine into anything right now—even keeping up with him. She appreciated the fact that he asked no questions.

As she left Isaac back at the gym, picked up her car and drove toward home, all she'd learned that day kept repeating in her mind and Isaac's advice nagged at her.

The council meeting was horrible. Never before had Vincent heard so much dissention over something that was so obviously beneficial to the community.

"Won't move. WON'T."

"You're outvoted, Mouse!" William bellowed. "The law is that majority rules. Think of someone other than yourself for a change!"

The atmosphere in Father's study was thick with anger and frustration, and Vincent had been trying desperately to defuse the situation by reasoning with Mouse, but his friend wasn't listening. "Mouse...I will help you find another chamber--or help you carve one--a *better* one...."

"NO! Mousehole is MOUSE'S. Found it, needed it...took it. Belongs to Mouse now. No one wanted it. Can't have it now." Mouse's eyes were fierce under the towheaded bangs.

Vincent sighed and lifted his eyes to Father's. Father shook his head gently and Vincent backed away from Mouse and sat back down.

"Mouse," Father began softly, "we all appreciate your desire to remain where you are, but William is right. We *have* voted, and the general consensus is that the aqueduct would be a benefit to all of us. Yourself included."

Vincent watched Mouse as Father spoke--recognized the firm, stubborn set of the boy's jaw--and sighed again. He glanced around the chamber to the faces of his other friends and family: all showed various stages of distress, anger and frustration. *This is not going to be easy.*

Father was dismissing council with a temporary hold set on the project to give Mouse time to think about his decision. Vincent could hear William grumbling to Pascal as the heavy cook and spindly pipemaster left the chamber together, both headed for their respective chores. As soon as the room had cleared except for Vincent, Father and Mouse, the boy stood, glared at them, then bolted for the stairs.

Vincent started after Mouse, but Father placed a restraining hand on his arm. "Not now. Let him think about it for a time."

"I don't believe time will help, Father."

Running his hand through graying hair, Father grunted. "I suspect you're right." Turning his attention to his son, Father asked quietly, "You've been quiet today... other than in council. After last night I was afraid you might be angry with me...."

Vincent shook his head and turned away, not wanting to discuss the newspaper article or Mario. His stomach was already in knots from the tension during council and the disturbing sense of *wrongness* he'd been feeling from Catherine all morning. "Of course I'm not angry, Father. But I have to go. The children will be waiting for me in class." Smiling gently at his father, Vincent offered: "Chess tonight after evening meal?"

Father's relieved smile made Vincent feel marginally better. "I'd like that."



Catherine unlocked the door to her apartment and as she entered, the phone began to ring. When she reached it, the voice on the other end of the line temporarily put all Catherine's dismal thoughts out of her mind. It was Jenny. Grateful for her friend's bubbly, effervescent tone, Catherine smiled. "Hi, Jen. What's up?"

"I wanted to see if you'd meet me for dinner. I haven't seen you in ages. Not since you started your new job. Please?"

Catherine hesitated. She'd wanted to do more research on those karate schools, but she had to eat, too. She sighed, then smiled at her friend's cheerful begging. "Sure, Jen. Where?"

"Delmonico's? Seven?"

Catherine looked at her watch. She had time to change, if she hurried. "Okay. I'll see you there. Then maybe if you see my Dad you can vouch for me when I tell him that I *do* get out!"

Jenny's tone sobered. "Yeah, but not much. Don't be late."

"I won't be. Bye, Jen." Catherine carefully hung up the phone, then caught herself a few moments later, still staring out the window. *Jenny and Dad are right. I haven't slowed down once since I started with the D.A.'s office. I haven't been out, other than the few times before I broke up with Tom...haven't even taken time to see them. Why?*

The question bothered Catherine and tugged at her mind as she showered and dressed. As she stared at her reflection in her makeup mirror, even *she* could see the strain in the gray-green eyes staring back at her. *No wonder they're worried. I certainly don't look like the person I used to be. Without thinking, she traced the scar in front of her ear. I'm not the same person I was then. But if I'm not, then who am I?*

Still staring at her reflection thoughtfully, Catherine finished brushing her hair. Then collected her purse. Without a backward glance, she flipped off the light switch on the way out.



"Well. I have to admit, Cath, at least you're not doing 'fashion law' anymore." Jenny eyed Catherine quietly, her soft brown eyes searching. For what, Cathy had no idea. But Jenny was entirely too perceptive for Catherine's taste.

Catherine took another bite of her filet while she thought carefully of her answer. "No. It's not." Carefully placing her napkin beside her plate, Catherine deliberately met Jenny's gaze. "It's not 'fashion law,' or even corporate law. It's more...." Catherine paused and stammered a little at Jenny's questioning glance, looking away in embarrassment. "I wanted to say that it's more *meaningful*."

Richer. More fulfilling." She felt herself flushing, but forged on. "And it is. I feel like I'm accomplishing something. Doing something to help." As she said this, Catherine had a sudden vision of bodies laying bloody and torn at her feet and, shocked, pushed it away. She carefully placed her fork on her plate, trying hard to keep from shaking.

Jenny reached across the table and patted Catherine's hand. "You are helping. I'm proud of you, Cath. And your father is, too. But...we worry about you. You're pushing yourself. You don't do anything that you used to enjoy."

The sympathy pushed Catherine close to tears, and she couldn't quite meet Jenny's eyes. "It's been hard, Jen. Starting over. Trying to fit in. Trying to change." Catherine still trembled a little from her abrupt memory. *That wasn't my fault...or Vincent's. They would've killed me, just like they killed Carol Stabler.*

Jenny nodded encouragingly and waited.

"I want to change, Jen," Catherine managed, finally. "It's like all my life I've been blind...and now I can see. And you want to know something?"

"What?"

"It's been worth it. I wouldn't want to be blind again. Sometimes the things I see are horrible, but they're *real*. They happen."

"But there are other things in life that are important, too, Cath...that are real. You don't have to give up all the good things your life used to hold just because they belonged to your old life."

Catherine shook her head. "I'm not. Really, Jen. I promise I'll try to moderate things. But right now there's just too much going on."

"Inside?"

Catherine shrugged helplessly as she stared into Jenny's puzzled eyes. "Everywhere. Inside and out. I just have to work through some things." *A lot of things*, she thought to herself. "Then it'll be easier."

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Catherine left Jenny and took a cab back to her apartment. But before going upstairs, she took a trip down to the sub-basement. She was very confused. It had been a long, trying day—one that stretched thin her belief in the system of justice she'd lived by all her life. Having to defend that justice system three times in one day—to Isaac, Jason and to Jenny—really shook her. She tried desperately to put things into perspective and evaluate her own motivations. In her world—the familiar reality she'd grown up in—one counted upon the law enforcement agencies and legal system to protect you. That was what was right. The way it should be. As an attorney, it was what she'd trained for. As the daughter of an attorney, it was what she'd grown up knowing.

Catherine *still* thought that was the way it should be, even after her own attack...as much as that had shaken her faith. Yet, in all honesty, after listening to Isaac and Jason, she'd had to recognize the truth of what they'd told her.

The system *didn't* always work, and it left broken lives in its wake. Hers had been one of them. She recognized, too, the fact that the men who'd attacked her would still be free if she, herself, had not set in motion the investigation that brought them out of hiding. The "system" would have simply filed the case in the dead files. So in a sense she, too, had been a vigilante, though she'd worked from the side of the law. *I had the power and took advantage of it for my own means. But I only wanted justice to be done.*

But in the end, it had been Vincent who'd meted out his own form of justice. And she'd condoned it by her silence...and even her own tacit approval.

Now, carefully maneuvering down the ladder into the tunnels from her sub-basement, Catherine was more agitated and fearful than she'd been all day. The random images of Vincent's feral power as he'd killed for her... and the faces of his victims...the bodies...still kept insinuating themselves into her mind. And the terror would grip her again and again. Terror not entirely *of* Vincent, but perhaps, she thought, of the truth that *was* Vincent. And herself.

When, after leaving Jason, Cathy had asked Isaac what he would do in her situation--if he suspected someone he cared about of being "involved" with the killings--Isaac had told her to go where the man lived and ask, but to make sure she really wanted to know. So now, before she did anything else, that was what she was doing. And she was terrified.

Because Vincent wouldn't lie. She knew that instinctively. And she wasn't at all sure she would be *able* to hear the truth...and face herself.

Once she'd made it down the ladder, Catherine looked around, frustrated. She wasn't sure what to do. She'd never had to summon Vincent before. Since he'd come to her balcony that first time, it seemed he simply showed up whenever she wanted him. He had, however, taught her a code--his name--to bang on the pipes if she needed to see him. She hoped she remembered. A quick search turned up an old length of pipe, which she used to tap out the message. Over and over. After tapping for a good fifteen minutes, her arm was getting tired. She put her ear against the pipe to see if there was any answer, at least. Just in case she'd somehow missed it. *Nothing. He's not coming.*

Her fear had settled to resignation and frustration. *What good's knowing the damned code if he won't respond to it?* But there was also a sense of relief that she hadn't had to face him. Not yet.

Catherine walked back toward the light which fell in a column from her world into his. She stopped, paused and glanced back, feeling helpless...and angry in that helplessness.

Vincent stiffened reflexively when he heard the tapped message on the pipes, pausing with his hand over his queen. He could feel Father's eyes on him and refused to look up. He'd been aware of Catherine's fear and dread all day, and he was also aware, somehow, that she was afraid of *him*. He even suspected the cause, though he wasn't sure he was correct. He hoped he was wrong.

All day, while teaching and while working with Kanin at the excavation site he'd felt the jagged edge of her dread. It was like a knife in his heart. It was difficult to concentrate on anything else.

Carefully closing his fingers on the chess piece, Vincent moved, then met his parent's questioning look. "I believe that is checkmate."

Father frowned and commented: "And I believe that is Catherine on the pipes, Vincent. The... rendition...of your name is a little garbled...perhaps...."

Vincent shook his head. "It is nothing to concern yourself over. I will attend to the problem later."

The tapping went on for a long while as Vincent watched Father carefully put away the chess pieces, but Vincent pointedly ignored it. And outside of a few questioning glances, Father did the same. "Have you spoken to Mouse any more today," Father asked, offhandedly.

"No. I looked for him after classes, but he's gone. I suspect he has gone Below us into the dark, to think." Vincent was a little concerned about Mouse, but not overly so. Mouse, like himself, often went away by himself to think. And rarely welcomed someone intruding. Vincent was far more concerned over Catherine's fear and distress at the moment. "If he doesn't show up in a day or so, I'll go Below and look for him. Try to make him understand." Vincent rose, pushing his heavy chair away. "I must do my rounds now. The game was enjoyable, as always, Father. Thank you."

Father yawned and nodded. His curiosity seemed to be satisfied...about both Mouse and Catherine. Vincent knew that to Father, Catherine was merely another topsider. Vincent avoided bringing Father's attention to his relationship with her. Doing that only brought forth long dissertations on how much time Vincent was spending Above, how dangerous that was, how irresponsible. And how Catherine would hurt him. Vincent refused to even listen, and Father's pleas fell on deaf ears. Trying to sort through Father's conflicting emotions was too difficult for Vincent when he, himself, was still far too confused over his *own* feelings with regard to Catherine.

The current evening paper lay on Father's desk with its glaring headline: SUBWAY SLASHER--PSYCHOPATH OR SAVIOR? Vincent had read the article earlier and discussed it with Father. He walked over to stand beside it. His mane hung past his face, hiding him...isolating him from Father's gaze.

Father's hand settled on his shoulder and Vincent sighed heavily. "Vincent," Father said gently, "Mario never meant to hurt you--asking as he did if you could be involved. And I'm sorry if I hurt you by hiding the information. I only meant to help. Perhaps...perhaps if you spoke with him."

Vincent shook his head in resignation. "It's not that. It was understandable. And logical. For both of you. I am, by now, past concerning myself over misunderstandings concerning my appearance, Father."

Father leaned heavily against the desk. "Then what *is* it that is bothering you? Is it Mouse? I'm sure the boy will come around."

Vincent shook his head. His long-taloned finger traced the headline again, his eyes taking in the bold lettering. All day the bond had brought Catherine's fear to him clearly. It was not a fear of death or personal harm, but the taste of it touched upon his own insecurities. He knew, somehow, that the fear was connected to him. He quietly reminded Father: "Catherine... works for the District Attorney's office."

"Yes? I don't understand...." Then comprehension seemed to dawn in Father's mind...at least a glimmer of understanding. "You believe that if she knows of this...and she must, of course...then *she* will believe you to be the killer. The message on the pipes...?"

Glancing quickly at Father, Vincent nodded then strode away. "It is of no consequence, Father. I must go."

Vincent paused at the top of the metal stair and looked back. "I think perhaps I will have some of our people watch the upper levels," he told Father calmly. "For anything suspicious." Security was Vincent's province, and it was up to him to disperse sentries as he wished. He knew Father might never question him in council, but in the privacy of his chambers was another matter...and Vincent did not wish to stay for those possible questions. Thus, before Father could open his mouth to comment, Vincent left, moving swiftly through the tunnels toward the surface.

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Vincent moved with determination through the Home Tunnels, intent upon reaching the upper, more dangerous levels of the subways and steam tunnels. He knew his sentries were set and there was actually no need to check on them, though he did, routinely. If any emergency arose, everyone--including himself--would hear of it through the pipes. Though he admitted to himself that if he were here, out of reach, he'd be of little assistance. Of course he kept watch for signs of Mouse as he traveled, but he knew instinctively that Mouse would have gone Below, not Above, so the efforts would be useless.

It was equally useless, his being here to look for the killer. He couldn't ride the subway to watch for the man, and there was no way to know when, where, or even *if* the murderer would strike again.

No. Vincent simply had to get away. To *feel* as if he were doing something to fight this. It angered and hurt him that some unknown killer could so alter people's perceptions of *him*. And more importantly, *Catherine's* perception of him. For he knew that Catherine's fear was connected to this man--and to him. He clenched his hands angrily.

The anger was general. The hurt was more specific. Somehow, he'd thought that Catherine would *know* of his innocence.

Irrational and illogical, he thought with frustration. *Why, indeed, should Catherine be different from anyone else? Simply because I have the temerity to love her?*

He closed his eyes a moment and sagged against the smooth concrete of the tunnel wall. He let Catherine's emotions wash over him: the anxiety, distress and the fear. Muted now, as she tried to relax for bed. He wanted to ease her fear, her pain. And he knew that this time there was no way he could do that...he couldn't even ease his own. The sense of loss was too great.

The subway rumbled overhead and Vincent reluctantly headed home. Father would be in bed by now and Catherine would soon be asleep. Vincent felt that perhaps if he returned now, he needn't fear further questions from Father and he could try to rest.

More slowly than he'd left, Vincent returned home. He undressed for bed and tried desperately to settle for the night...to banish his own shadows and disillusionment.



Catherine had fallen asleep in the chair on her balcony. The night was pleasant, and she'd decided to stay outside for a time. Reading a little from *Great Expectations*, she tried to recapture the sense of peace she always felt around Vincent. It helped a little.

In her dream, somehow Catherine knew she slept. When Vincent slipped almost silently over the edge of the balcony, of course she woke. She'd been waiting for him. Wanting him there. So naturally he came. As he always did. She flung herself against him, wrapping her arms around his solidity and strength, expecting to feel welcome there. Protected. As she always did. To have his presence miraculously clear her mind and banish all her confusion. Instead, although he didn't move, or speak, Catherine knew he was angry. "Vincent...?" She glanced up for reassurance...and he began snarling. Suddenly, her fear spread like wildfire as he gripped her arms painfully in his massive hands, shaking her, then throwing her aside.

Catherine woke abruptly...trembling and terrified. A quick, uneasy glance assured her that she was alone. *Of course. A dream.*

Drawing her thin robe closer around her, realizing that the night had cooled considerably, Catherine gathered up

her book and the daily paper with the screaming headlines and retreated inside. *I have to get to the bottom of this. One way or another, I have to know!*

• • • • •

Vincent was on the edge of sleep, himself, when the full force of Catherine's dream struck him. Washed over him and drowned him. He saw--in flashes--himself snarling at her. Vincent felt her terror and bolted from his warm bed to stand, horrified, shivering barefoot in the dark. "Catherine! No! I could *never* harm you!"

Appalled at Catherine's terror of him, Vincent could not stop shaking. After several moments of standing in the silence of his chamber, he moved trembling, over to his desk and lit the candle. Opening his journal, he sat and began to write.

Her fear washes over me like waves. Engulfing me. More horribly still, there is some truth to her dream. For a moment, I was there, and my anger was part of the dream. For I must realize it. Face it. I am angry with her. Without reason. Her doubts and fears...her terror...all are understandable given the circumstances. Why should I have cause to be angry? What does Catherine really know of me? She knows as much of the Beast as of the man. Through our bond I know her heart. But she does not know mine. Why should I have expected her to be different from anyone else who has just met me? Even those who know me well are uneasy with the Beast. No one truly understands. Not even Father. So why should I expect it of Catherine...to understand that I would never harm her...that I would not seek to kill with the purpose that this man has shown? I meet violence with violence only if it reaches out to harm those I love...those I must protect.

Vincent closed his journal. It was useless to torture himself this way. Catherine feared him. Understandably. Now, he must find some way to prove to her that he was not this man. Words were useless. And assuming he was able to find the man, would even that assuage the fear? Once deeply rooted, such terror--such deep knowledge--was difficult to banish. Besides, he remembered Catherine's initial response when she'd seen him. *She feared me then, but it was more shock and surprise than true terror. Yet somewhere within her is the same primal knowledge of what I am that I sense in others.*

That recognition and terror had been buried deeply within her until now. It had been defeated by her trust, and without trust it would never be conquered. Vincent longed to feel her trust again. To know she believed in him implicitly, as before.

And he was very angry. With the man. With her. With himself. Mostly with himself...for being a fool.

It took him a very long time to get back to sleep.

Vincent spent the following morning discussing with certain special sentries what to look for. The older children, too, had offered to keep a lookout in the upper levels even when they weren't on watch. They were to report anything suspicious immediately through the pipes to Pascal, Vincent or Father so it could be acted upon. "Vincent's Underground Irregulars," Father called them with an uneasy smile as he watched Vincent dispatch them.

Vincent crossed his arms and leaned against the smooth concrete wall beside Father as he watched Kipper take off after the others...the last of his troupe of irregulars. Father commented quietly, "I do hope you've cautioned the children to take care in this, Vincent."

Nodding once, then staring off after Kipper, Vincent replied: "The children always ride the subways, Father. They know how dangerous they are. I'm not concerned about them being injured by this man...he is not a danger to them."

"How can you say that?" Father exclaimed. "The man has killed several people, Vincent! There's no telling what he will do next."

"He has no desire to harm the innocent, Father," Vincent said with conviction.

Father's grey eyes stared into his with concern. "How do you know that?"

Vincent's gaze slid past Father's as he turned his vision inwards. There were no words to tell Father how he knew...only feelings...and a sense of kinship. He shrugged and shook his head. "I know."

Vincent tried after Father left to distance himself from Catherine's emotions as much as possible by keeping himself busy with the children and his classes. He wished they'd already begun the aqueduct project. He could've used a little hard, physical labor to keep his mind and body occupied.

Classes were difficult. Vincent even found himself losing his temper with the children. His sharp tone had startled them. And shamed him. None of this was the children's fault.

As he stared down into Samantha's wide, brown eyes, the child's hurt expression forced him to re-evaluate his actions. *This cannot continue. If Catherine mistrusts me, then so be it. But I will not allow this to destroy the children's trust in me.*

Vincent knelt beside Samantha, who he'd just spoken to far more sharply than the child deserved. Brushing her long hair back from her face, apologized gently, "I am sorry, Samantha. Please forgive me."

Samantha threw her arms around Vincent's neck and burrowed her face deep into his thick mane. He could feel her trust and love washing over him, pushing away his own pain and even, momentarily, Catherine's fears. It was what he'd needed to settle him. Wrapping his arms around the

girl, Vincent closed his eyes and simply let himself be loved for a few moments with a child's unconditional love.

When each of them had finished reassuring the other, Vincent drew back and stood. Glancing at the rest of the children, he smiled. "I believe we've all had enough of Shakespeare for today. You may go."

Geoffrey was the most vocal. "Hurrah! Thanks, Vincent!" The boy grabbed his cap off the seat beside him and dashed from the room. The rest of the class were a little less demonstrative, but all were happy to be released from class far earlier than expected.

After dismissing the children, Vincent was left alone and with time on his hands. The aloneness made it difficult

for him not to get caught in Catherine's ever-changing emotional tides, and he considered going farther below to look for Mouse, but it was still too early for that. This morning, though, Catherine seemed more determined than fearful. Vincent walked to the Mirror Pool and sat, staring at his reflection.

He was still there when the current of Catherine's emotion changed, moving from merely frightened to terrified once more, this time with a desperate, soul deep sorrow that shook him to the core.



VISIONS

poem by Rhonda Collins

Visions come to haunt me
of things that I have seen
and done...and blessed
with my silence.

Within the bond we share
are shadows I can sense
and see...and fear
within my dreams.

It isn't you I fear.
It's what I sense within
you...and myself:
what I condone.

CHAPTER THREE: VISIONS

An almost sleepless night hadn't done much for Catherine's mood. She carefully applied her makeup and surveyed the damage. The bags under her eyes were darker than they'd been yesterday. She hoped her emotional state wouldn't be too obvious, or Maxwell would think for sure she wasn't up to the job.

Once she was certain she would pass public scrutiny, Catherine gathered her files for another day.

But she was determined today would be different. She'd dig until she found something, even if she had to dig in places she wasn't authorized to go.

When she swung into the computer room, Catherine could see Edie at her station, inputting data, her carefully braided and beaded coif framing her dark face as she worked.

Apparently Catherine's carefully applied facade did little to mask her weariness. Edie scarcely glanced away from her monitor, but it was apparently enough. "You look sadder than my last date. Anything I can do?"

Catherine plunked her purse down on the desk. It was taking all her determination not to let the anger, frustration, and fear of the past few days show. As it was, she knew her voice had a hard edge. "I need to see the file on a Mrs. Beatrice Dalby."

Edie kept right on typing. "That's the cleaning lady who was saved by the Slasher, right?"

"Right."

Edie finally stopped typing, folded her arms and glared suspiciously as she questioned Catherine. Catherine wasn't authorized to question this particular witness, and Cathy's flip response that she had a "very dirty apartment" solicited only a shake of Edie's head and an amused grin. But it *did* get Cathy the information she wanted: Where Mrs. Dalby

was working, her hours, and what the police gotten from the woman thus far.

It was a long day before Catherine could get out of her office to make it to the building where Mrs. Dalby worked. Joe wanted a report on what Catherine had done thus far, and typing out the information for him took all morning. Especially since she really had to *reach* to find much of anything to report on.

Then Charles Chandler called, wanting her to have lunch with him and she had to decline. There was no way Catherine could have made it through a lunch with her father today. He was entirely too attentive, both as a father and an attorney, to let her appearance or her nerves get past him. And Cathy simply didn't have the strength to try. "I'm sorry, Dad. Can we do it another time? I'm really snowed under."

"That's what you've said every time I've asked you to go with me anywhere lately. You never get out anymore, Cath. Since you took this job you've buried yourself in your work. I can understand dedication, but this is martyrdom."

Cathy forced a laugh, trying to ease the situation, although her father's words struck a nerve. "Really, Dad. It's not so bad as that. I went out for dinner with Jenny last night. It's just that...well... I'm the new kid on the block. You know how that can be. It'll get easier."

"I don't know, Cath...."

Cathy put all the conviction she could manage into her answer. "Well, I do. Now don't worry so."

"I do worry, and you know it. All right. If I can't talk you into lunch, will you consent to dinner this weekend?"

"You're on," she said with relief. "Love you, Dad." Catherine hung up the phone. *First Jenny, now Dad. I think it's a conspiracy.*

She spent the rest of the day pouring over the files Joe had given her, making notes, and glancing at her watch to see if it was late enough to go see Mrs. Dalby.

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After leaving work, Catherine had no problem finding the building where Mrs. Dalby was employed as cleaning lady, and her identification got her inside easily. Finding her *in* the building proved to be more of a challenge. The building was dark, and Catherine's heels clicked with a lonely sound on the marble floor. After finally locating two other cleaning women and questioning them, Catherine was directed to the 10th floor, where she eventually located Mrs. Dalby in the Board Room cleaning up the mess left from a conference. Catherine pushed the door open and walked in.

"Mrs. Dalby?" she asked hopefully.

The older woman looked up, then continued picking up dirty napkins, empty sugar containers and other debris, sweeping them into a garbage container.

"I'm Catherine Chandler, with the District Attorney's office," Catherine said, fidgeting nervously.

Mrs. Dalby started around the table in an obvious effort to leave. "When are you people going to leave me alone? I've got work to do." Catherine moved to intercept Mrs. Dalby at the end of the table, but the woman brushed past her, muttering angrily, "I've already told the police everything I know."

Catherine was desperate. She simply *had* to find out what the woman knew...if she could tell her *anything* that wasn't in the report. The woman was the only lead she had. "This won't take long, I promise." Cathy leaned heavily on the table and stared at the woman's back. "You say...you never got a good look at the Slasher...?" she prompted hopefully.

The woman glanced fiercely back momentarily, then away as she deliberately continued her work. "Don't call him that! That man saved my life, and all you people want to do is hunt him down like some animal!" The woman was clearly furious, but keeping her temper well. "Where *were* you people when those boys were kicking on me? I didn't see him. I told you people that. I told you and I told you. The lights were going on and off." Her tone changed a little, became a little pleading as she stopped and questioned Catherine. "What kind of a subway *is* that, when they can't even keep the lights on?"

Catherine was truly becoming desperate now. Her fear of the truth was increasing, but there was also a fear that this woman would simply walk away with information she needed. "Well," she pleaded, "surely when the lights came on you saw *something*. If only for a second."

The woman's terse answer declared her anger and disillusionment. "I was on the floor, hurtin'. I still have bruises where those boys kicked me." She turned away, and Cathy knew she'd lost her. "I didn't see no part of that man."

Catherine knew she had to do something...*say* something...*anything*...to stop Mrs. Dalby from leaving...to get the woman to tell her what she was hiding. "You're protecting him. Aren't you?" Catherine rushed to the woman's side and grasped her sleeve--just momentarily--then dropped it, fearing she'd frighten the poor woman with her own intensity. She pleaded, then. "Mrs. Dalby. I'm not even supposed to be here. This is personal for me. I have a friend...." *Oh, Vincent!* "I think...I don't know *what* to think." Her voice dropped almost to a whisper. "I'm...afraid... that he was...involved." Near tears, she choked on the last word, but she had the woman's attention again. "If you could tell me what you saw. *Anything*. His face. His hands."

The woman's face had become rapt. Catherine kept still, barely breathing...afraid to break the spell.

"His face...his hands," the woman muttered. "He didn't *have* hands. Just claws." Cathy's heart sank. She'd hoped.... "And his face," the woman continued. "I'll *never* forget that face. He wasn't a man. He wasn't a human man at all."

All that kept Cathy from crying out was her own state of shock. It *had* to be Vincent.

The woman had paused. The look in her eyes was that of a penitent at an altar as she stared into space. "He was like...like an angel. A terrible angel. Come to save me."

Cathy could only whisper, repeating what she'd heard..."A terrible angel." She bobbed her head and murmured, "Thank you," as she stumbled blindly away toward the door, her heart thudding in her chest, her mind cottony with shock.

The woman's voice stopped her, and she turned.

"You won't tell them, will you?" Mrs. Dalby asked in a pleading voice.

Catherine shook her head numbly, not seeing the woman at all, but only seeing Vincent in his terrible, avenging beauty as he'd killed for her. Her own *terrible* angel, come to save her. "No!"

The woman spoke tensely as Cathy tried to get a grip on herself. "I've got to ride that same train tonight, Ms. Chandler."

Nodding in complete understanding, Cathy turned and rushed away, stumbling through the half-darkened building to the street. She was in tears by the time she reached her car, and sat behind the wheel, crying in ragged sobs until no more tears would come.

Eventually she was able to dry her face, steel herself, and start her car.

After reaching her apartment, Cathy washed her face and prepared to go Below. To find Vincent.

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Twenty minutes later Catherine was berating herself for not changing into more suitable clothing.

I didn't think. I was in too big a hurry, too anxious to find out....

Catherine's high heels kept catching on the rocks and even on small cracks in the cement. She had runs in her stockings before she'd been gone more than fifteen minutes. It wasn't long before she knew she was lost.

At first the way had looked familiar and she'd set out with confidence. Then the pathway became less and less familiar and the shadows darker. The dim lighting in the upper tunnels quickly gave way to none, and she had no flashlight. She'd taken a wrong turn somewhere without realizing it. The fear that had followed her for days became sharper, more immediate...and very personal.

Missing her footing in the dark, Catherine slid down an unseen slope into a pool of seepwater. Her slacks and silk blouse were ruined, and now she was wet and cold. Vincent's world wasn't looking very romantic or welcoming right at the moment. Muttering angrily under her breath, Catherine dug a small, almost useless penlight out of her purse to look around.

It was dark, wet, and she was miserable. Catherine hated the dark. She felt along the walls until her hand contacted what she sought: a pipe. Aiming the penlight to the ground, she crawled around, searching for something to bang on the pipes with. Although she wasn't at all sure Vincent would come.

Catherine's hand closed over a loose piece of cement, which she tested on the pipe. The sound was less sharp, more muted than she liked, but it was all she had.

Once more, Catherine pounded until her arms grew tired, but this time, before she'd completely given up, someone came. Not Vincent. It was only a boy. But he was the happiest sight she'd seen in a long while. He said his name was Nathaniel, and he told her Pascal had sent him. Whoever Pascal was. She thought she remembered Vincent mentioning the name. All that mattered to Catherine was that Nathaniel was taking her to Vincent.

As they traveled, the boy chattered, asking Catherine questions to which she offered short, terse answers. He even commented about the Slasher, saying proudly, "I'll bet Vincent'd make short work of him."

To that, Catherine had no answer.

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Vincent glanced up anxiously from the book that lay open in his lap. He hadn't been reading. He'd been waiting. He'd felt Catherine coming closer and closer...felt the fear she carried with her also moving closer and becoming sharper.

He'd been completely unaware she'd been lost in the tunnels until he heard the pipes. The fear she'd been

radiating for days masked her fear of being lost. When he'd heard her message, Vincent started to go to her, then decided against it. Pascal was sending Nathaniel, and Catherine would have nothing to fear, then. Especially from him.

Vincent sighed and slid the book back into place on his shelf. Hands on hips, he paced the chamber while he waited. He wondered how Catherine would approach him. If she was even aware that he knew of her fear...or of the man she sought.

When Catherine reached his chamber, Vincent hesitated before turning, though he felt her presence--a weaving of fear, confusion and relief--behind him. Taking a deep breath, he turned and gasped at the sight of her. She was wet, muddy and obviously chilled to the bone. "Catherine!" he exclaimed. "What happened?" Before she could answer, he turned to Nathaniel. "Stay with her, Nathaniel. I'll be back in a moment."

Rushing from the chamber, Vincent went immediately to Mary, who, at his request provided him with a warm blouse, skirt, thick socks and soft leather boots and patch-work shawl. With a quiet, "Thank you," he hurried back to his chamber.

Catherine turned as he entered, and he could feel her fear and anxiety like a shield around her. But there was a deeper, warmer undercurrent of concern for him that gave him hope. Extending his arm with his burden, careful not to move too abruptly or come too close, Vincent handed her the clothing and backed away. His eyes found Nathaniel's, then returned to Catherine. "Change into these, Catherine. I will return shortly. Come, Nathaniel."



Catherine hugged the worn clothing to her as she watched Vincent back away from her. At his order to change clothes--for order it had been--and from his expression, Catherine could tell that he was aware of her feelings. She'd suspected that he was feeling *something* through that elusive *bond* he had with her. She knew the bond existed, but she still was unsure how much he was aware of. But however it worked, she knew it existed. He'd known last month when he'd rescued her--killed for her--that she'd been terrified.

Catherine moved slowly around the chamber. Remembering it. Letting it remind her of who Vincent was. She let her hand trail over the patched quilts on his bed--the bed where she lay for so long after her attack--and her fingertips delicately traced the spines of his books. *He's saved me twice, now. This is the same man who picked me up, bleeding and in pain and nursed me so tenderly back to health. Who read to me, encouraged me. The man who gave me hope and strength.*

Encouraged, Catherine pulled off her slacks and blouse, replacing them with the soft shirt and skirt, then wrapped the pieced shawl around herself. She kicked off

her ruined shoes and pulled on the thick socks and soft leather boots.

Warmer now, but uncomfortable in the unfamiliar attire, she let her eyes continue roaming over Vincent's room. Her eyes stopped on his statue of Justice. She wrapped her arms around herself to stop the sudden chill that swept over her. *He's also the man who tore those men apart with his bare hands. He was judge, jury, and executioner. And I was grateful.*

Catherine extended her hand and tentatively touched the cool surface of the statue. *Justice.* She shook her head, wondering a little if she still knew what that was, then reached up to rake her tangled hair out of her eyes. Then, with more immediate practicality, she dug in her purse to get a rubber band to pull some of her lank hair back.



Vincent stopped in the chamber door. The storm of Catherine's emotions battered him, and he reached out to brace himself against the rock wall. His heart was hammering. He longed to touch her hair, smooth down the wildly tangled strands. To hold her close and ease her heart. *If only that were possible.* Moving quietly into the chamber, he took a deep breath and found his voice...tried to keep it dispassionate. "It's a good thing we found you, Catherine."

Catherine turned abruptly, her hair flying past her face. Her arms were crossed as she hugged herself. Defensive. Protective of herself. But her voice was plaintive. "I thought I remembered. I must have gotten turned around, somehow. Everything seems so different. Strange."

She knows so little about us, Vincent thought a little sadly, as he was reminded of the disparity of their worlds. "The ways change, Catherine. For every safe road there are hundreds that lead only to darkness." It was taking every ounce of Vincent's control simply to stay where he was, he wanted to go to her so badly.

"I had to come. I had to see you. I was afraid."

"I know," Vincent admitted quietly.

Suddenly Catherine was angry, and her anger battered him, making it more difficult for him to ignore his own anger and pain. "You didn't come! I called! I banged on the pipes. You never came!"

"I could feel your fear, Catherine. Even now, I frighten you." *There,* he thought with relief. *Now, surely she will have to speak of it.*

And Catherine did speak of it, in her own way. She forced herself toward him, her eyes meeting his. "You taught me to face my fears. Always, Vincent. Tell me."

It astonished Vincent that Catherine should automatically assume he knew what she was talking about. On one hand, she felt no bond with him--obviously didn't trust him, or she would not fear him--yet she assumed he knew what

she knew. It confused and irritated him. All he could offer her were words, and words without trust behind them were only words. Furious and hurt, he replied: "What should I tell you? That I am not this shadow...this man-monster that you hunt? Must you hear the words before you trust?"

Her faint nod and the look in her eyes told him that was *exactly* what she wanted.

Vincent drew himself up proudly. "Hear them then. It is not me."

For a moment, he felt a surge of warmth. Of belief. Relieved, he reached for her. "Catherine. I would never hurt you!"

Immediately, Catherine gasped and flinched away. Struck to the heart, Vincent fell back, then flung himself past her.

"Oh! No. Vincent..." She threw herself at him, now...desperate with regret. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean...."

Vincent stalked across the chamber, his anger and frustration seeking an outlet. Almost...he almost lost himself for a moment as he reached reflexively to strike the lamp. But he didn't. His love and reason fought the beast back. *There is no need to frighten her further.* He turned back to her. "I know," he said sadly. "But sometimes, the words that are not spoken are the truest words of all. However much they hurt."

"What are you saying?"

Struggling to make her understand...and perhaps to clarify the situation to himself as well, Vincent extended his hands, claws up, fingers curled. His eyes met hers. "We both know what these hands can do. Have done," he reminded her pointedly. His hands fell to his sides, leaden weights. "Catherine. If your heart does not trust, then no words I speak could help."

Catherine's fear was muted, now, but her confusion was disorienting. His own sorrow was a weight on his heart, distorting even the bond between them. He lifted his cloak from the chair and turned away toward the chamber door. "It is time for you to go home."

He turned to go, leaving her to follow or not as she chose.



Catherine followed Vincent from his chamber, padding quickly after him on the soft leather soles of the boots she'd borrowed. He looked neither right nor left, and although his stride was visibly altered to adjust to hers, he made no effort at conversation. Whenever the way became rough, Catherine noted that he would wait patiently but offered no assistance. She knew it was because he feared rejection...feared her instinctive reaction. *I could kick myself. I told myself he wouldn't lie. And he says he's innocent.*

Catherine took every opportunity to glance his way and studied him. Took in every line of his powerful body and lethal claws. But in doing her inventory, she found herself

remembering his tenderness. *I've hurt him terribly. He wouldn't be so hurt if, in fact, he were the Slasher.* She thought about the boy, Nathaniel. The child certainly didn't believe Vincent was the Slasher. She felt her fears easing some.

Glancing up at Vincent's tightly set profile and rigid shoulders, Catherine wanted to apologize, but knew it would be useless. *What did he tell me? If your heart does not trust, then no words that I speak could help?* She knew that as long as there was any doubt in her mind, he would sense it, so until she'd resolved the issue and banished any doubt from her mind, there was no point in apology.

Their trip back to her apartment building was very short in comparison to her trip down, and certainly far less eventful. With neither of them speaking, Catherine was glad to have it over.

Vincent stopped just short of the last turn and said quietly, tersely: "Goodnight, Catherine," and before she could speak, was gone...simply another shadow among others.

Sad now, more than frightened, she whispered, "Goodnight, Vincent."

Catherine turned regretfully and passed into the shimmering light that fell from the basement, feeling a little as though the light were a magic door. *I wish it were magic and could banish all my fears and solve my problems. Unfortunately, only I can do that.*

Knowing her odd garb would elicit questions, Catherine hurried to get to her apartment. It was late, though, so she wasn't seen as she slipped quickly through the hallways to her door. Once inside, Catherine immediately ran a hot bath to remove all evidence of her adventure. The streaks of mud and tangled hair disgusted her. She carefully folded the clothing Vincent had given her to return them to him another time.

Afterwards, dressed in a clean, soft negligee, she climbed into bed and curled up to try to sleep. She hoped that she'd managed to relax enough to forget about the Slasher. At least in her dreams.

However, as Catherine drifted into a deeper sleep, her mind continued trying to piece things together to form a whole.

The Slasher, robed and hooded, turned toward her. And changed to Vincent, deadly fangs exposed in an angry roar. Catherine was terrified. But then Vincent appeared to her as he'd been in his chamber, and her fear became confusion. The vision said earnestly, "It is not me!" Catherine didn't know what to think. The dream swung again, and Catherine saw Mrs. Dalby with her rapt face, telling her, "...a terrible angel...come to save me."

Catherine tossed and turned restlessly. *Saving people, she thought in her dream. That's what it's about. Jason Walker was in her dream and told her with an enthusiasm that bordered on the fanatic that the Protectors did what*

they could to fight the injustice. She saw him saying, "...not as much as we'd like to." The robed vision of the Slasher returned, and this time...it was Jason, his intense eyes staring straight at her.



After leaving Catherine, Vincent traveled slowly home. He'd felt some lightening of Catherine's fear this evening, and he was relieved. But the fact that it existed at all was a sorrow to him.

When I found Catherine, he thought, I had no thought of love...or of ever finding love. I'd given up all hope of that years ago, and I knew I'd always be alone. But when I found her, all thought stopped. And a new belief in love began. She reawakened longing and desire in a heart that had forgotten these things long ago.

Vincent sighed. He'd read love stories for years. And when Catherine first looked at him as a friend, trusted him, cared for him...he hadn't dared hope for anything more. There had never been any doubt in his mind about his feelings for her. The moment he'd touched her heart, he'd known. He hadn't expected anything from her at all...and yet, incredibly, they'd been growing closer. At least he'd had her trust and friendship.

Reaching the bridge at the Whispering Gallery, he sat, legs dangling over the edge of the bridge. This place had been a magic place for him when he'd been a child, unable to go Above with the others, to play. He could listen to sounds from all over the city from here. It had given him freedom, of a sort. It was more than merely a bridge over the Abyss...it was a bridge between worlds.

Vincent heard a shuffling sound and sensed Father. He knew that Father had heard over the pipes of Catherine's rescue...and known that Vincent had not gone to her.

"Vincent. Are you all right?" Father placed the torch he was carrying into the wall sconce, then limped to the bridge. "I've heard the children talk...of this place," Father said in an introductory way...as though he'd never been here before... though Vincent knew Father *had* been. It was merely a parent's way of easing into a painful conversation.

With his head turned away, bent in sorrow, Vincent could not see Father, but he was acutely aware of Father's pain. For him. For his "different" son.

Always before, Vincent had been able to go to Father with his problems. But with anything involving Catherine, he was hesitant. For anything that touched on Catherine touched *him* too deeply for words. And he knew also of Father's disapproval. Father had an intrinsic mistrust of the world above and all that was in it. *Including, Vincent supposed, Catherine.* He sighed. Lifting his head, Vincent spoke of the bridge, instead...taking the opening Father had given him. "It was our secret place...when I was a child.

I used to come down here with my friends." He smiled a little, remembering. "Hm. We thought it was magic."

"Magic?" Father's tone betrayed the skepticism with which he always treated anything that had no solid, tangible proof.

Vincent secretly thought his parent a little hidebound...too dependent upon the necessity of facts. He supposed it was a hazard for physicians...or scientists. A little magic never hurt. "All the tongues," he said, continuing. "If you stand in just the right place, you can hear sounds. Whispers from the world Above." Vincent cocked his head, listening...and remembering the magic. "Children playing in their homes. Lovers walking in the park. Sounds of a thousand different lives. If you know just where to stand." He glanced up. "The magic places, we called them."

Father limped closer. Vincent could still feel his concern. "It's Catherine, isn't it?" Father asked gently.

"I can hear her fears whispering to me no matter where I stand."

"She cannot help being afraid, Vincent. Her world is built on fear. It's all they know. With the lives they're forced to lead, if they weren't afraid, they'd be insane."

"I know," Vincent admitted.

"We have something they only dream of. A safe place. A secret place beyond their madness and their fear."

Vincent wished he could make Father understand that for him--for Vincent--there was no "safe" place. He tried, in allegorical terms, to explain. "Sometimes, I would run down here, when we played hide and seek. But before the game was over, Father, they always found me. Even here." *So you see, Vincent thought, there are no truly safe places, Father. Especially not from the pain that love can bring.*

Father must have understood some of what Vincent was trying to say. When he clasped Vincent's arm, Vincent felt the comfort flow into him. Father, at least, was always there for him.



After Father left, Vincent stayed where he was, wanting simply to be left alone. Before long, though, another visitor hovered anxiously near him.

Vincent sighed. Pascal, too, had understood there was something amiss between himself and Catherine. Otherwise Vincent would not have been ignoring her messages on the pipes. Pascal usually made it his business to stay *out* of everyone elses' private affairs. If he didn't he'd never have gotten any work done...or had any friends. However, there was little that occurred Below that Pascal was unaware of.

Vincent glanced up and with a nod, indicated that his friend should join him.

Crossing his legs Indian-style, Pascal settled comfortably next to Vincent on the rickety old bridge. "Been a long time since we sat here together."

"Um," Vincent agreed in a noncommittal grunt.

Pascal tossed a pebble over the edge of the bridge and leaned to watch it. Without thinking, Vincent put out a hand to steady him, lest he fall. Pascal grinned up at him. "I wonder when it was you grew up?"

That comment startled Vincent and brought him to full attention. "What?"

"Said, I wonder when you grew up. Seems like only yesterday you were followin' me an' Devin an' Winslow around. Always wanting to follow us and join in games that were too old for you."

Amused at the teasing tone, Vincent said quietly, "You...all of you...were very patient with me."

Pascal laughed. "We had to be. Father would've had us washing dishes for a week if we hadn't been."

A comfortable silence settled, then Pascal said quietly, "I'm glad we found Catherine safely."

"Yes. Thank you for sending Nathaniel."

"No problem. Still no word of the Slasher? I haven't gotten anything on the pipes."

Vincent shook his head. "No."

Pascal sighed. "Once they catch him, she'll feel foolish."

"Yes."

Vincent felt comforted that Pascal understood. Though Pascal and Vincent had never spoken directly of Catherine and Pascal had never met her, his boyhood friend knew Vincent well enough to know of the relationship that was developing. Of course Pascal had noted Vincent's increased forays Above and his debates with Father over them. "It won't be the same, Pascal. I thought she understood. But she doesn't know me."

"Give her time. Hasn't *had* much, you know."

Vincent lifted his eyes to Pascal's. "Were you ever afraid of me, Pascal? I don't remember...."

"Me? Afraid of *you*?" Pascal shook his head, then hesitated. "Maybe a few times. But hey, I've been afraid of Father...of Winslow...even Devin a few times. Doesn't take much to give *me* a fright." He paused then, sobering a little when Vincent's gaze didn't waver. "It may not be the same, Vincent, but it may be better. Learning about each other is part of any relationship. That kind of knowing doesn't just come like lightning out of the blue, you know."

Vincent knew, then, that even Pascal really didn't understand. How he knew Catherine. Knew her heart. Pascal had no conception of the bond between them. But perhaps Pascal *was* right, about Catherine. That for her, knowing would have to come by degrees, if at all. He nodded slowly, and smiled a little. "Perhaps."

Pascal uncurled his legs and rose. "If you wanna sit here all night, you can, I suppose. Me, I've got to get back to the pipes." He dusted his pants and said with a small smile, "Maybe someday I'll get to meet her."

Vincent said nothing, but merely nodded, leaning back against the old post. He watched his friend leave, touched

that Pascal had left his beloved pipes to comfort him. He knew that Pascal would remain in the Pipe Chamber until all the sentries had checked in for the last time, then would be back before the new sentries began work in the early morning.

Over the past hour, Vincent had felt a further change in Catherine's feelings as she slept. Since he'd been awake and had not shared her dream, he wasn't sure what that change meant. The sharpness of terror had changed and once more he felt her familiar determination.

Sighing, Vincent stood and turned toward his own chamber. He was deeply discouraged. His young sentries had as yet reported nothing unusual. The older children had ridden the subways until their tokens were gone and now they haunted the subway stations and the secret side passageways near the stations. Vincent smiled a little grimly. *It is such a game, to them.* He only wished that it were a game.

When he reached his chamber, Vincent began undressing for bed. After blowing out his candles, he closed his eyes and "listened" to the ebb and flow of Catherine's emotions. Her fears had, indeed, subsided, and she slept peacefully. He knew that for now, he, too, could sleep.



AFTER-IMAGES

poem by Rhonda Collins

The shadows are almost forgotten;
only after-images remain
to remind me of your loss of faith.
Your gentle touch banishes all thought
of anger or recrimination.
Nothing so important as your love--
Nothing truer than your new belief.

CHAPTER FOUR: AFTER-IMAGES

Catherine took a deep breath before forcing herself to enter Jason Walker's building. After her dream last night, she was almost certain she was on the right track. It was as though her mind was beginning to pick up the pieces and put them together. Once she'd been able to see past Vincent to other obvious suspects, she'd realized how foolish she'd been. And right now, Jason Walker was at the top of her list. He had the ability. He had the psychological background for it...he'd as much as said that he believed in what the Slasher was doing. And there was *something* about his attitude that made Catherine believe she was definitely on the right track.

As she entered Jason's office, the man glanced up, hesitated, then flashed her a charming smile. "Well. I didn't expect to see *you* again so soon. Did you come to sign up?"

So charming, Cathy thought. Well, Cathy could handle charming. "I'd look really silly in one of those white hats."

"I disagree. Besides, the guys in white hats always win."

His tone was so smug that Cathy decided to take a different tack with him. She glanced up, trying to look innocent and quizzical. "Do they?"

Jason moved to get a chair for her and graciously seated her. "No. Just in fairy tales."

As Cathy listened for nuances in his voice...hidden meanings in his words, Jason told her how New Yorkers were really no different than children, still afraid of the dark and still seeking a hero to save them...that they still needed their myths and legends. Seating himself on the edge of his desk, he told her of a man he'd known who'd worked the IRT and sworn he'd seen a monster down in the subways while he was troubleshooting the tracks. How the story wasn't just from the one man...the street people also talked of "some "terrible, fierce creature who haunts the dark places. Some *thing* with the face of a demon and the soul of an angel."

With a peace and sureness springing from newborn trust, Catherine knew he spoke of Vincent, who surely in some people's minds *did* have the face of a demon--but who

now, once again--in *her* mind, at least--had the soul of an angel. And now she was a little concerned for Vincent's safety, his secrecy, in all this. "You can't possibly believe that...can you?" she asked, trying to put as much skepticism as possible into her tone.

"*They* believe it," Jason said earnestly. "Don't you see? Because they *need* to believe. Inside we're all still children...afraid of the dark. Wishing there really *was* a Batman."

Catherine *did* see. More and more clearly, now.

She realized where Jason had gotten the idea for the Slasher. "But Batman was never *half* as formidable as you, was he?" Cathy asked, trying to sound as though she were only joking.

He laughed a little. "I can take care of myself. But I tell you, all the fighting techniques in the *world* don't equal what I learned from Isaac Stubbs in one afternoon. Do you remember his first rule?"

"On the streets there *are* no rules," Catherine said, automatically...then realized what she'd said. She'd fallen right into his hands.

It was the point Jason had been trying to make.

"That's the trouble with doing things your way. You believe in rules. The predators don't."

Confused, Catherine became a little defensive, although she knew that was also exactly what Jason wanted. "So we throw away the rules? Then what's the difference? The color of our hats?"

With a conviction in his voice that shook Catherine, Jason answered: "I don't have to tell you the difference. You know it already or you wouldn't be here."

Unable to quite face him with that truth still ringing in her ears, in her heart, Catherine turned and began examining Jason's weapons wall. He had every imaginable--and some unimaginable--weapons for hand-to-hand combat. Some Catherine was familiar with, others she wasn't.

"Isaac tells me you were his star pupil."

Cathy could tell Jason was trying to divert her. She turned to him with a smile. "Isaac exaggerates. I still have a lot to learn." Cathy turned back to the weapons wall.

"These weapons, for instance. Can you really *use* all of them?"

"No..." Jason steered her away from touching the edge of a Samurai sword. "...and I wouldn't touch that sword. The Samurai kept their swords razor sharp."

His smirk irritated her. "Does that make you a Samurai, Jase?" Catherine turned back and examined the others, again affecting a casual attitude. "What are these?" she asked, touching the edges of some metal objects resembling stars.

"Those are throwing stars." He laughed a little. "I can see you don't make it to many Ninja movies."

Out of the corner of her eye, Cathy watched his reactions as she touched each weapon...waiting to see what he'd do when she got to the one she was *really* interested in: a set of gleaming metal claws that could be tied onto the hands. Catherine had noticed them the last time she'd been there, but hadn't made the connection until last night: wounds made with those claws would closely approximate the wounds Vincent had made on the men he'd killed for her. As she trailed her fingers over the slick, cold surface of the claws, she turned her head questioningly to Jason, and his expression confirmed her suspicion. His face had become closed. His charming smile frozen.

He glanced away, then down to his watch. "I'm sorry, Cathy. I have to cut this short...there's a class coming in soon."

"Of course. I'm sorry, Jason. I've taken up far too much of your time." Cathy tried to appear apologetic, but inside she was seething with delight. The look on his face when she'd touched those metal claws had been far too revealing. There was no doubt in her mind but that Jason Walker was the Slasher. But now she had to prove it.

"I'll walk you out," Jase continued, smoothly.

Jason's hand on her arm felt like ice as he walked her out, but his control was back--as was the charming smile. He shook her hand and Cathy walked to the corner. She didn't look back, but could still feel his eyes on her as she walked. At the first opportunity she hailed a cab and went straight back to the office to talk to Joe Maxwell--sure that he would agree with her assessment of the situation.

Unfortunately, when Catherine got back to the office, Joe only made her feel foolish. Obviously the opinion she'd finally come to after deep soul-searching and digging had already been seen and pounced upon by the eager Assistant D.A.

"Oh..." Joe began in a teasing tone, "This the same Jason Walker who heads the Protectors, right? Heavily into Karate, Akido, jiu-jitsu, nin-jitsu--has been sued maybe half a dozen times by persons brought in on citizen arrests... collects secret Ninja death toys...pops up on T.V. and says how the Subway Slasher is a hero and not a nut case, and isn't it too bad we don't have a dozen guys just like him? Are we talkin' about the same Jason Walker here?"

It turned out that Jason Walker was on 24-hour police surveillance and *had* been since the investigation began.

A little disheartened, but still convinced that Jason was the Slasher, Cathy crossed her arms and watched Joe Maxwell weave his way away from her through the busy, cluttered office. *I'm not wrong*, she thought...telling herself after she'd told Joe the same thing. *I'm not! And I'll prove it, somehow.*



A young girl watched as a man jumped off the train. For one, fleeting instant, she thought it was Vincent...but it couldn't be. She'd just *left* Vincent not more than ten minutes before...way back in the main tunnels as he gave the new sentries directions and orders.

The black-cloaked figure rushed past her and into a passageway, making use of the rolling steel door with its hidden opening lever. Excitement tingeing the slight taste of fear, the girl ran immediately to the nearest main pipe and began tapping out her message to the pipe chamber.



Vincent was down in the Mousehole--searching for Mouse--when Lewis slid to a stop in the doorway. "Vincent..." he puffed, out of breath. "Found you. Good. Lana saw him! Up on Lower East Side...Canal Street tunnel. She's on her way back so she can show you where she saw him."

Hope rose suddenly within Vincent's breast. *Perhaps now...now something could be done.* "Thank you, Lewis. Is Lana going to the Pipe Chamber?"

The boy nodded, his thick, dark hair bouncing.

"Good." He patted the boy's shoulder. He left the Mousehole then, hurrying to meet Lana at the Pipe Chamber, but he got there before she did.

Pascal waved as Vincent came through the threshold, and quickly made his way through the tangle of pipes to stand beside him. "So Lana saw him. Good. Now what do you plan to do?"

Vincent had been asking himself the same question. He shook his head. "I'm not certain, Pascal. I thought perhaps if I told Catherine, we could come up with something, but I'm not certain *what*."

As the two men spoke Lana sprinted into the pipe chamber. She'd hurried all the way and was out of breath. She held her side as though it hurt. Vincent reached out a steadying hand. "Easy. Take deep breaths."

The girl nodded and drew in a slow breath. In a few moments she was able to speak. "Saw him, Vincent. S'gotta be him. I thought it was you, at first. He's got a cloak like yours, with a hood."

Vincent nodded, already knowing the description from the news articles. "Where?"

"Fifth Street station. The old roller-door. He knew just where to look for the lever, Vincent."

Vincent glanced over to Pascal, who shrugged. Vincent said quietly, "I would think that door would be difficult to use. We haven't done maintenance on it in years."

"Obviously *someone* has," Pascal commented.

Turning his attention back to Lana, Vincent asked: "Were you able to see anything else? Where he went?"

She shook her head. "No. Once he was through the door, I knew he'd be gone. There are a bunch of corridors off that threshold. I just ran to signal Pascal as fast as I could." She looked concerned. "Should I have tried to follow him?"

Vincent squeezed her shoulder gently. "No. Of course not, Lana. You did the right thing. It could have been dangerous following him." He smiled. "Go on to supper now. William will be through serving shortly and you wouldn't want to miss his meatloaf."

Lana grimaced, then flashed him a wry grin. "I dunno, Vincent...." Then, shrugging eloquently, the girl turned the corner and was gone.

"He could have gone anywhere through that threshold, Vincent," Pascal offered quietly to Vincent's back. "What good does this do?"

Vincent's shoulders slumped. "Probably none. Except that we *do* know that he has access to the tunnel system, although I don't know how this could happen."

Vincent pushed off from the wall and paced past Pascal, then turned with frustration to face his old friend. "I don't understand, Pascal. I run routine checks of all the thresholds--even the seldom-used ones--how could I have missed evidence of use?"

"You can't be everywhere, Vincent."

"But there would have been evidence!" Vincent insisted. "Footprints, at least."

"Maybe, maybe not."

Vincent sighed heavily. "What bothers me, Pascal, is that this man has access to our world. How long has he known about the tunnels? How often has he been down here--and how far?" He clenched his fists. "I'm in charge of security. I should have known."

Pascal just shook his head. "You're too hard on yourself. You can't be everywhere at once. The important thing, here--now--is if this information helps convince Catherine that you're not responsible for the murders. Do you think it will?"

"I don't know, Pascal. Perhaps. I only know that she deserves to know. She is hunting this man, and it *is* her responsibility. She takes that very seriously."

Pascal didn't answer immediately, and before he could say more another message came across the pipes, requiring an answer. Vincent smiled and told him: "Go and answer. I'll tell Catherine."



At home, Catherine sat wearily at her desk doing paperwork left over from the day. She was glaring at the growing stack with irritation when she heard a sound on the balcony behind her. She turned to see a hooded shadow move away from the window. Immediately forgetting the remaining work on the desk, she hurried outside to find Vincent waiting for her. She was intensely ashamed of herself for her doubts.

Vincent's voice was as soft as the darkness around them. "Catherine."

She wanted to touch him, but hesitated. "I thought I might never see you again." That fear had been very real. She hadn't realized until now just how *worried* she'd been that he might never come back.

"You have enough fear in your world. I could never bring you more."

The guilt was like a knife and she knew he could feel it. Somehow, that thought made it worse. "Vincent, forgive me for doubting you."

He shook his head in negation, obviously determined to keep her from feeling guilty. "Catherine. You were right to be afraid."

"My heart knows how gentle you are."

"Even the gentlest man has a demon locked inside of him."

An involuntary vision of her avenging angel flashed before her, but she said with determination. "Not you. Not a demon."

Vincent sighed heavily and changed the subject. "We've seen your vigilante. He has a secret door from your subways to the older tunnels. The secret tunnels."

Catherine knew that Vincent knew her heart. There was no further need for apology, but she was desperate to make up to him for what she'd done. Or hadn't done: believed in him. "Vincent! If you can show me, I'll go to the police. They'll stake it out!"

Vincent turned away, went to the low balcony railing and looked out over the city, and she followed him. "Catherine, there are a thousand miles of tunnels beneath the city...all of them connected. If the police find his door, they'll search though all of them."

"Then we'll do it another way," she said stubbornly. Putting as much determination into her words as she could. There had to be a way to make up to him for what she'd done...what she'd felt. "From Above. Not below. I promise you, Vincent, I won't betray your world."

Vincent seemed distant, though they were standing so close she could feel the warmth of his body. "They hunt for this man as they might hunt for me, if they dreamed of my existence. You have your laws and your courts to tell right from wrong. Your police to protect you. We have only ourselves. By what right do I condemn him? Am I so very different?"

Catherine could detect no note of entreaty in his voice, merely resignation. The only part of his speech that really registered with her was the last. The rest was lost in her

own anxiety. *She'd* made him feel this way...like a monster. But he *was* different from Jason. He had to be made to understand. She reached out to touch his arm, gently stroking the strong arm under the soft leather. "Yes, Vincent. You are."

He hung his head and the golden mane fell forward to cover his face as he leaned heavily on the railing. There was a moment of hesitation, then he said stonily: "Bring me a map."

And Catherine ran quickly to get a map of the city, delighted to be able to do something constructive.



Vincent waited as Catherine rummaged through her apartment for the map. His stomach felt like coiled snakes and he wasn't certain why he couldn't shake the sick feeling he had. Taking a deep breath of the night air, he closed his eyes and tried to relax. *Catherine knows it isn't me. Her fear of me is gone...as though it never existed.* He opened his eyes and blinked at the stars, surprised to find his vision blurred by tears. He was relieved, but yet...strangely disappointed as well. Catherine still didn't understand. She still refused to acknowledge what her subconscious had told her: that there *was* a beast inside him. Something that frightened her. Something that Vincent, himself, was very aware of.

Catherine's excitement and joy washed at the edges of his mood and slowly eroded away the disappointment. Gratefully, he pushed the darkness away and allowed himself to be drawn into her mood. *We will find this man and it will be over. It will be the way it was, between us.*

By the time she returned with the map, he was able to focus more clearly.

Catherine spread the map out over the table as Vincent carefully cleared the surface of the table and held the curling edges of the map down. "Now. Show me where you saw him," she requested.

"Not me. One of our children saw him. Lana." He pointed with a nail to the Fifth Street station. "Below here, there is a door...a threshold to our world. It is not used often because this area is too busy. Lana saw him exit the train and leave the area by using this door. Moreover, the door is obviously well-known to him because *someone* has been doing maintenance on it."

Her confusion came through to him and he explained. "We don't normally service that door more than once in a great while. Lana said it operated easily and he knew exactly where the lever was. That indicated that he uses it frequently. I checked, and she was correct. The door mechanism has been oiled recently."

Vincent watched her, fascinated, as she seemed to turn this information over in her mind. He could see the emotions moving across her lovely, mobile face... feel them in his heart.

She is so quick...so alive. Yet so innocent, he thought, a little sadly. Despite everything that had happened to her, she was unaccustomed to the devious workings of men's hearts. He hated to see her learn...see that innocence destroyed. Yet he was obscurely proud of her that she was trying so hard *to* learn.

"Yes," she said finally. "That would make sense, Vincent. He must have known about the tunnels for a long time. This is something that required a lot of planning." She met his eyes. "I may have an idea who it is."

Vincent had suspected as much. Her sudden cessation of fear...of him...had made him believe she'd learned something. "Who?"

She shrugged. "Someone Isaac introduced me to. A man named Jason Walker." She went on to explain to him about the Protectors.

"I've heard of them," Vincent said. "They stopped someone from injuring one of our helpers once."

Once more Vincent detected confusion in Catherine and he glanced over at her, unsure of what was causing the confusion.

Catherine glanced up, met his eyes, then looked out over the city. Her hands idly smoothed the map under her hand. "What Isaac and Jason told me made a lot of sense. But it's very confusing for me, Vincent. If it *is* Jason, then he's gone beyond anything our laws can condone." She looked down at her hands, refusing to meet his eyes. "My world isn't yours."

Vincent couldn't answer. That one sentence summed up just about everything.

Catherine sighed, then stared at the map, leaning over to trace an IRT line for a moment. When she looked up, she smiled. "I want to check some things tomorrow. The building that the Protectors operate out of is an old one, and it's built practically on top of the subway system. There's *got* to be a connection. I'd just about bet there's an entrance to the tunnels from inside that building. That's why he's been so hard to find."

Vincent examined the map. "It's possible, though most access routes have been created by us. I could...."

"No," Catherine interrupted. When he looked up, she shook her head. "I don't want you involved in this any more than you have to be. I'll ask Edie to check out the place." Smiling, she added: "It's a start, Vincent." She hesitated, then stroked his arm. "Thank you. For coming to me and telling me about his being sighted. For trusting me...despite everything."

Her touch was like fire, even through the heavy sleeve: it brought to him all the sweetness and pain of the moment...all of her emotion in one swift flood. It took all he could do to remain still--not to retreat. He braced himself against the force of it and looked away. Her hand slowly dropped away and the sensations became more bearable...but oddly, he regretted the loss of intensity. Without looking at her, he held his voice as steady as he could and told her gently: "Listen to what your heart tells

you, Catherine." Before she could answer, he carefully rolled the map and gave it back to her. "It's late. You need your rest."

Catherine took the map and suppressed a yawn. "I suppose you're right. I really *am* tired. But I would've liked to visit some with you."

"There will be other nights," he said quietly.

She smiled up at him, and the radiance of it--the joy, both his and hers--illuminated his night. "Yes," she said quietly. Again, a quick, reassuring touch, then she went inside and Vincent moved away to the shadows where he watched her for a moment--moving in her world: a place of light where he could never be--then he turned away to begin his descent into the dark.

The trip to the Home Tunnels always seemed longer than usual after his visits to Catherine. *Perhaps it's only that I do not wish to leave.* In his trip home, he skirted the more populated areas of the park, staying to the shadows, gradually moving closer to the park threshold.

As Vincent neared the threshold, he hesitated. There were two young people standing in the clearing looking up at the moon. Lovers embracing. Sliding behind a tree only a few feet away, Vincent turned his back to the couple. Wrapping his arms tightly around himself, Vincent waited--trying to make himself as small and unnoticeable as possible. His sense of the young people was not strong, but it was clear. And disturbing after his visit to Catherine. Lifting his eyes to the stars, he tried looking for constellations to distract himself, but it didn't help. He sighed softly. Eventually the couple moved away down the trail, releasing him from his uncomfortable position. A few moments later Vincent was inside the tunnel and opening the steel door.

It was only after the door was safely closed that Vincent allowed himself to relax. Or try to. His nerves felt shredded. He stood just inside the door letting the quiet and the dark surround him. Several deep breaths helped settle him, and he started back toward the Hub.

On the very fringes of the Hub was the forge, and Winslow's chamber. Turning the corner, Vincent saw Winslow coming toward him on his way back from his evening Above.

"Vincent! You in a rush?" Winslow's expression alone would have told Vincent of his friend's mood, without the current of unhappiness that surged from him.

"No," Vincent replied reluctantly. He wasn't at all certain he was in any shape himself to provide comfort to anyone else, and Winslow seemed to want to talk. He followed Winslow into his chamber and leaned uneasily against the rough stone wall.

Winslow's chamber was sparsely furnished, but the walls were decorated with sprawling metal sculptures the smith had made. Some of the sculptures, though small, gave a feeling of massive power, while others were so delicate Vincent wondered how Winslow had managed to create them. Vincent thought the contrast provided an odd

symmetry that reflected Winslow, himself. His friend was gruff and often explosive, but he had an amazingly large heart.

The big black man lit two of the candles on the table beside the bed, then yanked his gloves off and tossed them on the bed. He poured a basin of water and splashed some on his face. Picking up a towel, he turned to Vincent as he dried the beads of moisture from his face and beard. He looked tired.

"What is it, Winslow?" Vincent asked gently. "You're upset."

Winslow shrugged. "A little. I told Margaretta tonight that I can't see her anymore."

"Why?" Vincent asked, surprised and startled. He knew that Winslow had been seeing a young woman from Harlem for several months and cared for her.

Winslow lowered his heavy frame to the bed. "It just got too hard, Vincent. She kept wanting to come to my 'place.' She's been askin' questions I couldn't answer. I realized I wasn't bein' fair to her, not tellin' her 'bout where I live."

Vincent looked away, staring into the candle flames. Aching for his friend. "Did you talk to Father about her? Perhaps...."

"...P'raps he'd say it'd be okay to tell her?" Winslow shook his head furiously. "No. I mean...he might've *wanted* to, for my sake, but he couldn't. I couldn't. I don't think it'd have been safe."

Vincent pulled his gaze from the flickering candles to stare into Winslow's eyes. "Margaretta couldn't keep the secret?"

Winslow smiled sadly. "Not to save her life." He shrugged. "Oh, she wouldn't have *meant* to give it away... she just wouldn't have been able to help it."

"I'm sorry." The words seemed very inadequate, somehow. Vincent looked away and sighed. After a long silence, he said quietly: "Our world is a sanctuary, but sometimes our gift of peace bears too heavy a price...for our friends Above as well as for us." He felt a familiar, sullen anger as he thought of the many people Above that lived with lies in order to protect them...and of all the people Below, like Winslow, who had friends Above who couldn't be told the truth. He shoved aside the useless anger and concentrated on his friend.

Winslow only shook his head. He leaned back on the bed, the springs creaking as his bulk settled. "Naw. I know what you're thinkin'. You're wrong. Anythin' worth doin' has its price." He looked around. "This is home. Margaretta and me...well...it was nice, while it lasted. She's a good woman. But it never would'a worked out anyway. Too many other problems, nuthin' to do with where I live. Besides...it wasn't really *love*...if you know what I mean." Winslow's dark face was solemn in the candlelight. The men were both silent for a moment, then Winslow said abruptly, "Heard on the pipes tonight Lana

saw that guy you been lookin' for...the one they're callin' the Subway Slasher. You find him?"

Vincent blinked at the sudden change of subject. In his concern for Winslow, he'd temporarily put aside his thoughts of the man he and Catherine hunted. "No."

Winslow cracked his knuckles. "Y'know, it just don't seem right, somehow, that man usin' that door."

That seemed an odd comment for Winslow to make. "Why is that?" Vincent asked.

"Well now, even we don't use that one much. It's one of the original doors...just a few modifications that my Pa made. Seems odd that he'd know about it at all." Winslow scratched the back of his head, then shook it in puzzlement.

"Catherine thinks she might know who he is," Vincent commented in the ensuing silence. "If he *is* who she thinks he is, he would possibly have access to the old, buried subway tunnels in that part of town."

Winslow swung his legs off the bed and stared up at Vincent. "Damn. Then how long has he been comin' and goin' without our knowin'? And what're you gonna *do* about it?"

"I don't know. Catherine wanted to handle it from Above...tell the police...."

"She can't *do* that!" Winslow growled, starting up.

Shoving away from the wall, Vincent moved swiftly to place a restraining hand on the blacksmith's shoulder, quieting him. "She knows that, Winslow. Catherine will not betray us. We will find another way."

Winslow's black eyes met his, and Vincent flinched at the fierce denial there.

Winslow shook his head slightly, looking skeptical. "How do you know she's safe, Vincent? You've only known her a couple months. It takes longer than that for us to trust the helpers...."

"I know her," Vincent said quietly but firmly.

Winslow started to speak, but Vincent gestured angrily. "Catherine will *not* betray us."

The two men stared at one another for a several seconds, then Winslow nodded, and the tension eased. "If you're sure."

"I am." Embarrassed then by his outburst, Vincent sighed. "I am sorry about Margaretta, Winslow. But believe me...Catherine will keep our secrets." He lowered his eyes to avoid Winslow's gaze.

Winslow was quiet a moment, then changed the subject. "Found Mouse yet?"

Vincent sighed and shook his head. "No. I haven't really looked very hard, yet. I suppose I must, soon."

"The boy's gotta give in. Too many people get flooded out every year--him included. Surely he can see the sense in diverting that water."

Thinking of Mouse's stubborn nature and of his pride in the Mousehole, Vincent was no longer sure. "Perhaps. I will see what I can do. Goodnight, Winslow."

Leaving Winslow and his questions behind, Vincent turned wearily toward his own chambers...and turned his

thoughts back to Catherine. He loved Winslow fiercely, though they'd argued often as children...and still argued in council. But Winslow's skepticism and argumentativeness was part of who he was. And often, the argument itself was enough to make Vincent rethink his own stance on things. *But not as far as Catherine is concerned*, he told himself firmly. *Winslow doesn't know her. Hasn't met her.*

Entering his chamber, Vincent pulled off his cloak and draped it over his chair, then like Winslow, he lit a few candles and poured a basin of water to wash. Now that he was away from Winslow and his strong sense of unhappiness, Vincent was once more strongly aware of Catherine. She slept peacefully for the first time in days, and Vincent sighed in relief.

After washing, Vincent undressed and pulled on his sleep shirt. Then he settled to write in his journal.

Catherine believes she knows the identity of the killer on the subway. I sense no fear of me in her, but only guilt, now, that she mistrusted me. But perhaps her initial response was the most true...the most honest of all. Subconsciously she knows what I am, and now she refuses to see it. I know what I am. I can no longer be angry with Catherine for seeing me truly. Instead, now I worry that she masks the truth in her own heart in order to see me as she wishes to see me. I tried to speak to her of my concerns, but she wouldn't listen. Am I so different from this man she hunts? This man--this Jason Walker who leads the Protectors--has helped people Above...he protects people who cannot protect themselves. I hunt him not because he's killing people but because his presence threatens me and my world. To me, he seems...a caring man. Brave enough to do what he believes is right...even if he is misguided. Catherine calls him a monster...yet she cannot see the similarities between this man and myself.

Tired, anxious and confused, Vincent rubbed his eyes and put away his pen. He blew out the candles and went to bed, but lay for a long time staring up at the ceiling. He felt empty and alone and sighed. Cautiously, he allowed the empty place within him to be filled with Catherine's presence, and gradually sleep came.

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The following morning, Catherine left her apartment early so she could catch Edie before her friend started working. "I'm really sorry, Edie..." she told the girl as Edie stood, arms crossed waiting to hear what *favor* Cathy needed now. "...but I really need to find out more about that building. There's nobody in the department who knows their way around the computer like you do or can find files the way you can."

Edie raised an eyebrow skeptically, but Cathy could see she was pleased. "Flattery will get you nowhere, girlfriend. Bribery, maybe...."

Cathy grinned. "Flattery it's not. Only the truth and you know it, you bandit. You're the best researcher the department has. Look...I know it's an imposition...again...but I promise I'll make it up to you."

"Lunch out?" Edie suggested hopefully.

"Not today," Cathy admitted, shaking her head regretfully. She really did enjoy Edie's company, and buying her lunch once in a while to return a favor was hardly a problem, and Edie knew it. "All I can offer today is the machines in the lunchroom. Sorry."

Edie shrugged and punched the button on the elevator. "Okay. You know I can't resist your begging. I'll see what I can do."

"Thanks, Edie," Catherine breathed gratefully as the elevator doors closed.

Catherine left Edie when the elevator reached her floor. She continued on to her own desk, where the stack of paperwork was growing like weeds someone was watering. She had a deposition to take at nine, but figured that by lunch she'd be free enough to get the information she needed from Edie and maybe spend the afternoon doing a little research of her own.

Later, as she was working her way through her second cup of the sludge the office called coffee and the Braeswell testimony, Joe Maxwell stopped by her desk. His usual banter was replaced by a somber seriousness. "Any progress on the Slasher case yet? Moreno's screaming at me. They'll take it away from you if you don't show something soon."

Hesitantly, Cathy nodded. In the last attack, the Slasher had wounded a cop who tried to intervene. Whenever a cop was injured or killed, the police--and the D.A.'s office--took it very personally. Catherine had made progress, but not really any she could *report*...and it wasn't enough. "Maybe a little, Joe," she answered cautiously. "I still think that Jason Walker's our man."

"If you can figure a way that the guy gets past our stakeout, that'd be great, Radcliffe, but unless he can make himself invisible or fly, I don't see what that'd be."

"I know," she muttered, then more clearly, "I know, Joe. But I just have a feeling...."

"Feelings are great, Radcliffe, but evidence is better. Moreno would hang us up to dry if we told him, 'Gee, boss...I just got a feelin'. So you get the evidence and we'll both be a lot safer." He grinned and nodded. "See ya."

Catherine glanced at the clock and heaved a sigh then returned to the testimony that Jim Braeswell had given in the deposition she'd taken that morning. She was still heavily involved when she was startled by the sound of Edie's fingernails tapping on the desk.

"Okay, girl. If you want what I've got, come with me. I've only got time for a quick lunch today, since I

spent most of the morning playing with the computer for you."

Catherine shoved the deposition aside and followed her friend down to the lunchroom.

Edie stopped at the vending machines and glared playfully at Cathy, who held out a handful of quarters. Then she whined jokingly, "Why is it that whenever you're paying for lunch, I wind up here?"

"If you found out about that building, we'll have lunch at Four Seasons."

Edie grabbed her selection and headed for the microwave. "That's all right," she responded in a voice laced with playful irony. "The pleasure of your company and a microwave cheeseburger is more than enough."

As she stuck the freeze-wrapped cheeseburger into the microwave and punched the buttons, she chanted gaily: "Push button food, push button job...as soon as they come out with push button men..." she snapped her fingers. "I'm set, Babe."

Catherine laughed, delighted as always by Edie's slightly skewed view of the world.

Edie settled against the wall to wait for her food to heat and began telling Cathy what she'd found out. "The place was built in 1887. I can tell you right now if the city has plans on it, it ain't in *nobody's* computer."

"Did you find out anything about its history?" Cathy leaned over to get a cup of coffee, then sat at the table.

"It was a seamy rooming house for fifty years before the Protectors turned it into Kung Fu Central. Originally, it was a cheap hotel. For sailors. Seaman's Safe Haven. I found mentions in a couple of old newspaper indexes. Just the name. Even the stills aren't on our computer yet."

Cathy's look must have made Edie think she was about to ask another favor. "Don't look at *me*, girlfriend. I'm not going looking through those musty old files. You *know* dust makes my eyes water."

It wasn't much, but it gave Cathy an idea. "Edie, I love you." Rising to leave, she heard Edie's mock-indignant cry behind her: "Hey! Who's gonna pay for my dessert?"

Chuckling at her friend on her way out, Cathy rushed to make the best use of her *own* lunch hour. She grabbed a burger on the way to the Bennett Historical Library to search through the journalism archives. The massive volumes of preserved articles were, just as Edie had feared, dusty and moldy. They were also often hard to read and brittle with age. She spent hours pouring over the files—her finger walking dutifully down each column as her eyes scanned for key words. Meanwhile, the clock behind her continued ticking away the hours.

Just as Catherine was beginning to get discouraged and her stomach was rumbling for something more than the hastily eaten burger, she found what she was looking for in an article entitled: *Dreadful Murders at Seaman's Safe Haven*. Underneath the heading the text continued with:

Twenty sailors thought slain. *Culprits escape through secret tunnels. Byrnes promises arrests.*

Catherine read through the short article quickly, but she'd found what she really needed: proof (at least for herself) that there *was* access to the subway tunnels from Jason's building. There was no doubt left in her mind: Jason was the Slasher. But she still wasn't quite sure what to do about it. *I still can't take this to Joe and tell him why I know Jason is the man. Vincent's right—if they found out about the tunnels, they wouldn't limit their explorations to the upper levels, and it would endanger Vincent and his world.* She chewed her lip in dismay, then looked at her watch. It was getting late, but she needed to get back to the office to put the finishing touches on the Braeswell deposition.

Gathering her things, Catherine approached the librarian who'd been helping her and thanked him...feeling mildly guilty that she couldn't even put away the heavy volumes. As she trotted down the steps she was grateful there was a cab already parked in front of the building. Yanking the cab door open, she gave her directions without thought. "D.A.'s office on 54th Street."

Before she realized what was happening, she was pulled inside by a woman who'd been crouched, unseen, on the floorboard. Catherine tried to lunge for the opposite door, but was held firmly. The driver merely commented calmly: "I wouldn't even think of it Ms. Chandler. I know you're good, but you wouldn't want to go up against the two of us."

The dark-haired woman continued restraining Catherine, adding firmly: "Just take it easy and nobody'll get hurt. Jase just wants to talk to you."

Catherine shook loose and glared. *Jason. He's had me watched...and followed.* Obviously he knew she was getting close. Too close for his comfort and safety. She wasn't afraid. Not exactly. Just wary.

The cab ride was quick and silent. Catherine's mind was racing, trying to figure out just how much Jason knew, and how much danger she was in. She thought seriously about trying again for the door, but changed her mind: the woman had been lightning fast. Glumly, Catherine resigned herself to facing Jason and hoped she could make him see reason.

When they reached the Protector's building, her captors forcefully propelled Catherine before them, never releasing her until they shoved her through the door into Jason's office. She tossed her hair back and smiled into Jason's face. "You didn't have to go to all this trouble. Really." Her mildly sarcastic tone brought a smile to her adversary.

"You don't scare easy, do you? Please. Sit down." He motioned to a chair, and when Cathy didn't move to sit, he rocked back on his heels and locked his hands behind his back, appearing relaxed and genial. "Don't make this difficult, Cathy. There's no reason for melodrama. I'm not going to hurt you."

Cathy's abductors dug in her purse and came out with her notebook, which they handed to Jason. Cathy decided she might as well sit. Jason flipped through the notebook and smiled. "The sailor murders. I'm innocent, I swear."

Cathy watched Jason as he walked slowly around behind her, tapping the notebook into his palm. Obviously he'd had her watched to find out what she knew. And now that it was obvious she knew about the tunnels, he was disturbed, his facade slipping just a little. He continued with a charming smile as he tossed the notebook down onto his desk. "My granddaddy was a sharecropper in Alabama when all this went down."

Cathy just stared at him and watched his charming smile change to a resigned, almost sad expression. "Did you know? When you bought the building?" she asked.

"No, no," he said softly. "We had been doing renovations in the basement and we stumbled on the tunnels. They had been sealed up for almost a century. At the time, we had no idea why they were there." His look changed. He became boyish, enthusiastic. "It was like a regular maze down there. Side tunnels, dead ends. So old you can't imagine."

"Can't I?" Catherine thought of Vincent...of all those old tunnels...impossibly ancient, some built by people long dead...some not even carved by human hands.

Now that Jason was certain that she knew who he was, he seemed almost eager to explain himself to her. He became earnest and serious as he sat behind his desk to face her. "The story, the demon protector. The angel from below. The city needed him. Frightened people *need* symbols to make them feel safe." Catherine could almost *see* Jason's thoughts as his despair began to show. And she sympathized with him. "So many people hurting... frightened. More every day. Day after day. Year after year." He looked away and shrugged, the misery flitting briefly across his face. "I began to doubt...question whether one man could make a difference." When he looked into her eyes, he smiled with satisfaction. "No longer."

Astonished at his attitude, Catherine responded, "You call that making a difference? Killing a few muggers?"

He rose and stared down at her. "The deaths weren't important. The legend was. It's time for *them* to be afraid now."

"What about the policeman?" Catherine challenged, still trying to make him *see* that what he was doing was wrong. "He's still in critical condition."

But the accusation didn't seem to bother Jason, except peripherally, though he walked uneasily around the desk, and his hands moved nervously as he explained himself. "Legends never make mistakes. They never miss or stumble or strike out in panic." He pulled up a bench opposite Cathy and sat, crossing his arms. "And they never hurt those who don't deserve to be hurt. The problem is...men do all those things."

"Too bad your legend doesn't really exist," Catherine said without thinking.

Jason's smile chilled her. "Oh, but he does. And you're going to tell me all about him. Aren't you?"

Suddenly, Catherine was afraid as she met Jason's intense gaze. For herself *and* for Vincent. *They saw him! Vincent!* Now she *really* didn't know what to do. It had suddenly become obvious to her just how far out of her league she was: she'd never dealt with anyone this fanatic before. Murderers, rapists, wife beaters and child molesters--she'd seen them all in the short time she'd been with the D.A.'s office, but *never* had she met anyone with such a fixed idea of what he wanted.

Crossing his arms and leaning back--getting comfortable--Jason grinned. He seemed absolutely delighted.

Her mind was screaming for a way out of this. Furious with herself and concerned for Vincent's safety, Catherine snapped, "How many times have I *told* you, I don't know what you're *talking* about."

Jason sighed and seemed frustrated that she wasn't sharing his enthusiasm. "Cathy, you're trying to protect him. Fine. I *admire* that. But it's pointless. Red *saw* him. He watched you for more than twenty minutes."

She glowered over at the false cabbie, whose red hair had obviously earned him his nickname. She snapped, "*Red* needs a reality check!"

"Hey! I *know* what I saw!" the redhead protested.

"Catherine," Jason said gently, "whoever he is, he has nothing to fear from me." He flashed her another self-satisfied smile. "We're alike, he and I. We're...mirror images...twins. We're the same."

The thought was too much for Catherine. She refused to even *listen* to any more of Jason's lies. She leapt to her feet, only to be presented with the impassive faces of her captors. "I've had enough of this. Am I going to be allowed to leave?"

Sighing heavily, as though this failure saddened him more than angered him. "If you insist." Jason went to the wall and moved the samurai sword upward--and the wall swung inward, revealing a gaping opening to the tunnels... and a ladder leading down.

"After you," Jason muttered as the woman pushed her forward toward the yawning black hole.

Catherine had no choice. She began her descent down the ladder into the unknown.



Having finished his duties for the day, Vincent sat across from the chessboard from Father. He was losing badly because his mind wasn't on the game. His mind was instead on the ebb and flow of Catherine's emotions. All afternoon he'd "listened" to her mood and tried to understand what he was feeling. It was still so new to him--this distant bond he shared with her--so that at times he found it difficult to remove himself. Sometimes it seemed that all

the world was Catherine, because her emotions touched all that he did, now. At first, when he'd returned her to her world, he'd tried to stay separate, knowing that the contact could only cause him pain. But once he'd realized that he *could* still remain in contact with her—that she welcomed his presence in her life—he'd given himself over to the welcoming touch of her presence...and rejoiced in it. He closed his eyes and drifted.

"Vincent?" Father queried in a concerned tone. "Are you all right? You've been very...distracted... this evening."

Pulling himself back with difficulty, Vincent turned his attention to the board—to his hopeless position there. "What did you say, Father?"

"I *asked* if you were all right. Your mind certainly hasn't been in this room or on this game for the past hour."

Like a child caught with his hand in the cookie jar, Vincent was embarrassed and a little hesitant to explain his distraction. Especially since Father's mood always seemed to change for the worse when Catherine's name was mentioned. He ducked his head, allowing his heavy mane to fall forward, screening his expression from Father. A moment later when he'd collected himself, he glanced back up and gestured at the board. "I'm sorry, truly, Father. I'm afraid I haven't been much of an adversary tonight."

Father chuckled. "No. You realize it's mate in two moves?"

Vincent eyed the board and agreed. "I think I'll concede and do some reading instead."

Father began carefully packing his chess set away and studied Vincent over the rims of his glasses. "I *do* hope you can find something light that doesn't require any sort of attention span," he muttered with irritation: though he loved to win at chess, Father preferred to feel the win had been due at least *partially* to his skill and not to total lack of interest on the part of his opponent.

Aware of his parent's disapproval, Vincent was silent for a long moment, then asked something he'd been wondering about: "Father...before I was given the responsibility of security...I don't remember...how did George handle the question of intruders?"

"You know how George handled security, Vincent. For heaven's sake...you use many of his methods now."

At Father's curious expression, Vincent faltered. "I mean...intruders who are truly dangerous...like the man last year who...assaulted...young Marion...."

The rape the previous year of the fourteen-year-old by a man they later found to be an escaped convict had presented many difficult situations for Vincent and the community: the man had no intention of leaving the tunnels—and if he had, might have been as dangerous to them as if he'd stayed. In the end when Vincent had gone to retrieve the girl, he'd been forced to kill the man, whom he found to be armed. It had been self-defense, but it still bothered Vincent. That had been his first kill, and now, in addition to the men he'd killed protecting Catherine—and in light of

what was happening with this man she hunted--the *idea* of these kills--of his killing--bothered him more and more.

Father looked away, not quite able to meet Vincent's eyes. Taking off his glasses, he wiped them methodically with a handkerchief. "Oh. I see." He sighed heavily and replaced the spectacles. "Other than that one time, we've been very fortunate. Once or twice we were forced to withdraw...go into hiding. We put up barriers of false walls to throw the intruders off--as we do now--and it solved the problem."

Father's answer didn't address the problem Vincent was struggling with. "I keep thinking," Vincent said softly, "that there should have been another way. But it happened so quickly, Father. One moment he was there...alive...and the next dead. I reacted to his attack so quickly that I didn't even *think*. I was angry, but not so much so that...."

When Vincent lifted his eyes, Father was nodding. "I understand." Father's hand patted Vincent's gently. "It's long over, Vincent. There are times when one must defend one's home...fight for what one believes in. Our community here..." Father paused and gestured, "is a separate country from that Above. Our laws do not allow for criminals from their world. Sometimes extraordinary circumstances require extraordinary measures. The man was dangerous--in the world Above as well as in our own. He chose his own fate."

Vincent wasn't so certain. Catherine's condemnation of the man she hunted had made him re-think his own behavior...the time before he'd met Catherine and then again when he'd killed to protect her. He--Vincent--should not be above the law, yet both Father and Catherine seemed willing to ignore this fact. With a growing feeling of frustration, he merely nodded and responded with a non-committal, "Perhaps."

Father lifted the box of chess pieces and placed it in a drawer of his desk, and Vincent excused himself. "I believe I will try to read for a time, Father. Good night."

When he left Father, Vincent tried to read, but couldn't concentrate. Catherine's mood was becoming more than a distraction. For the past two hours he'd felt a growing anxiety, and he was becoming concerned. He took his book down to the Whispering Gallery, knowing he most likely would not read. He only waited for true darkness so he could go to Catherine and learn what was disturbing her.

He stood for a time on the old bridge, listening to the random snatches of conversation. He stopped. Music from somewhere Above was drifting down to him with no interruption from the fragmentary whispers. Such a rare occurrence was an unexpected delight. He closed his eyes and listened...expecting it to stop any moment, but for once he was able to listen to the piece to the end. *Beautiful!* As suddenly as it began, the music was gone and he glanced down at the book he carried, deciding to try once more to read.

On his way out of the Gallery he heard a snatch of conversation that stopped him in his tracks.

Talk to him....

Catherine! The voice was Catherine's! He spun and held his breath.

He'll listen to you! If he doesn't, he'll destroy himself and all the good he's done.

Vincent spun and ran from the Gallery, dropping the book, unheeded, to the ground. Catherine's anxiety had sharpened. She was afraid, and this fear was a bone-deep, chilling terror of death.

The bond drew him at a breakneck speed through the Home Tunnels, past friends with startled faces, up into the old steam tunnels. As he drew closer to Catherine, the waves of her terror became stronger. She was trying to calm herself, but in her unguarded moments the emotion swept over him and engulfed him. Panicked, Vincent moved quickly through the darkness more by instinct than thought. Catherine's fear--sharp spikes of it--impaled him and made him gasp.

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As Red hung a lantern on a hook, Catherine took the opportunity to look around the old tunnel. Even with the lantern, it was dimly lit, but it was obviously man-made. There was junk everywhere, broken boxes and cinder blocks. Iron gates, the only remaining recognizable fixtures caught Catherine's attention. *One of the old, unused subway tunnels, then*, she thought--trying very hard to be analytical. She saw that there were steam pipes running through here at angles and thought for a brief moment about trying to signal Vincent.

"Cozy, isn't it?" Jason said...not really asking.

Cathy shrugged, trying to hide her fear. "Not the word I'd choose."

"Watch her," Jason curtly told her guards, then disappeared into the blackness surrounding them.

Cathy turned to the woman and shrugged. "So. How 'bout those Mets?" The poker face that stared back at her offered no encouragement, and she scanned the shadows for something to use as a weapon. Finding nothing suitable, she turned back. "Talk to him," she pleaded. "He'll *listen* to you! If he doesn't, he'll destroy himself and all the good he's done!" Red moved closer to her, presenting her with an immovable wall. "He'll betray the trust of people who believe in him...*good* people...like Isaac." Still no response, except the man moved away and the woman came forward again. Catherine was becoming desperate. She *had* to get through to them. "This has gone too far!" You've got to help me reason with him!"

The woman looked up...past her, nodded...and Catherine turned to see a tall, dark figure separating itself from the shadows...cloaked, like Vincent, yet with a shiny black mask that hid the humanity of its wearer behind a

face of implacable determination. Shocked by her first sight of him this way, not quite believing what she was seeing, Catherine whispered: "Jas...Jason?"

"Tell me..."

The voice that came from behind the mask was totally different from Jason's. It sounded more like a demon from hell. Merciless. Cold. Catherine shivered in fear but shook her head tenaciously. "No," she whispered. "Jason...you promised no one would get hurt...."

"Jase would never have hurt you," the dead voice proclaimed.

The woman grabbed Catherine from behind, hissing furiously, her own fear showing. "Don't be stupid! Tell him!"

Jason's hand--now covered by a fur glove tipped with the razor-sharp claws Catherine had seen on the weapons wall--came up gently under Catherine's chin.

At that moment Vincent's roar split the dark silence. Catherine felt her fear dissolve and relief wash over her. She expected Jason and his followers to flee, but Jason threw his hood back and faced his challenger: he immediately launched himself into an astonishing flip that carried him completely *over* Vincent's head.

Catherine turned immediately to the stunned woman behind her. With Vincent here to take care of Jason, she felt more certain about her own ability to handle Jason's demoralized minions. She could hear the battle behind her, but had her own problems to contend with. She kneeled the woman, knocking the wind out of her, but Vincent--who had apparently already dealt with Jason's acrobatics--turned to help her.

Red confronted Vincent and voiced his challenge... which was a pitiful thing next to the savage animal roar that Vincent met it with.

Red turned and ran.

Had Catherine not been in such a state of shock, she'd have laughed.

There was a fraction of an instant when her eyes and Vincent's met--before the sound of Jason's retreat caused Vincent to turn away. Then Vincent was gone, leaving Catherine alone.

Catherine didn't have time to be more than momentarily stunned at Vincent's disappearance. The woman on the ground groaned and started to rise: Catherine grabbed her arm and roughly jerked her to her feet. The shoe was on the other foot, now, and Catherine shoved the woman against the wall. "It's just you and me, now. You may be good, but I think I'm mad enough right now to be just a little bit better."

The woman's eyes darted past Catherine, searching the shadows. Whether she was hoping for help from Red or Jason, or if she was searching for Vincent, Catherine couldn't tell.

"You're by yourself, now," Catherine told her. The woman seemed terrified, but Catherine was only exhausted...wanting nothing more than for it to be *over*. Unfortu-

nately, she knew it wasn't. She still had a job to do, and she wasn't at all sure how to do it. She had no way of restraining her captive, and if she let the woman go there was no certainty that she could be found again. Right now, Catherine was much more concerned about how to protect Vincent. Wearily, she told the frightened woman: "Go on. Get out of here." The woman's eyes flickered with hope, but Catherine continued quickly with a warning that brought fear back into the woman's face. "If you say *anything* to *anybody* about my friend, I'll suddenly remember that you and Red are accessories to murder. Is that clear?"

Her captive sidled away, nodding frantically, then darted into the shadows. Catherine dismissed her from her mind as soon as she was out of sight.

Turning her back on the flickering light from the lantern, Catherine searched the dark tunnel. The only movement she could discern was that of her own shadow. Knowing from recent experience the futility of venturing without a guide into those dark tunnels, and not wishing to leave them by the only route she knew--above through Jason's building--Catherine could only wait. And worry about Vincent.

Now that the personal danger was over, reaction was setting in: she was shivering uncontrollably, her teeth chattering. It wasn't fear, but the adrenaline rush from the combined fear and excitement. Hugging herself tightly, Catherine finally sat in the dirt, hugging her knees, trying to force herself to stop shaking. As the minutes dragged by she had horrible visions of what could be happening. Jason was a killer and she had no doubt in her mind that he was a danger to Vincent. He'd demonstrated his fighting skills only minutes before when he first encountered Vincent. *Oh, God*, she prayed silently and fervently, *please...please let Vincent be all right*.

The darkness gave her back no answer.



When Jason recovered from Vincent's first blow and fled from him it was Vincent's automatic and instinctive reaction to chase him. There was no thought in his mind at all--no concern--over leaving Catherine behind. In his mind, Jason was the threat and the quarry.

Hurling through the old subway tunnels, leaping over piles of broken boxes and litter, Vincent paused at each junction to listen for sounds of Jason's retreat. Then, as he made a turn he found himself on a concrete embankment--with a wide gap between where he was and where he needed to be. He could hear Jason ahead...sense him.... He looked about him and immediately saw the quickest way across: he ripped a low-hanging power line loose and swung across on the sputtering live wire.

Now he was in familiar territory. The long unused aisles he now traveled down, with their railings standing sentinel in the darkness, had been walkways to the subway

turnstiles...and they led directly to the Whispering Gallery and the outer ring of the Hub

Nearer now, Vincent could hear his quarry's footsteps on the bridge. He came to a halt as soon as he turned the corner and faced his enemy.

Jason stood a quarter of the way down the old bridge. For the first time Vincent had a good look at the man he was chasing. The long hooded cloak and furred gloves with the gleaming metal claws could at a glance be mistaken for him--as Lana, indeed, had--but the face, with its glistening mask and fur borders made Jason look even less human than he, himself. Without realizing it, Vincent uttered a growl, then a lower, warning rumble...a challenge which echoed against the rock walls.

It was a challenge that Jason answered immediately with a flying roundhouse kick and a slash with deadly metal claws--drawing first blood in three ragged tears across Vincent's chest.

Vincent drew back in pain and astonishment... then his renewed challenge rocked the stillness as his growl rumbled through the vast cavern. Jason came at him again and Vincent blocked the blow with his right hand, then with his left forearm shoved Jason back and away as he ripped the mask from his face.

Jason rolled with the momentum of Vincent's shove, rather than simply falling back. He came up on his feet several yards farther down the bridge.

The warriors stared at one another for an instant. Vincent's wound stung and the scent of blood goaded him...making rational thought impossible. Rumbling his continuing challenge, he advanced on his cautiously retreating enemy.

Suddenly--without warning--the bridge collapsed under Vincent's weight, the rotting boards splitting with a sickening crack and he fell through, catching himself only by virtue of his width of shoulders and the strength of his arms. The unexpectedness of the fall replaced Vincent's rage with fear. Immediately rational again, he jerked his gaze fearfully up to Jason, fully expecting the death blow to fall.

Jason raised his arm to strike, then hesitated, blinking. Vincent could sense the change in the man's emotions from anger and fear to confusion and pain. The man's eyes flicked back and forth for a moment--as though seeking escape--then Jason reached, catching hold of a rope dangling from the rafters above. Vincent saw what he was going to do only an instant before he did it. There was no time to warn him--even if he would have listened--and it was impossible to stop him physically.

By the time Vincent struggled up through the hole in the bridge and lurched to his feet, Jason was already swinging outwards over the Abyss on the rotten rope--trying to reach the dimly lit portal off to the left of the bridge--then falling with a cry of despair into the emptiness. And Vincent could only stare helplessly after him.

His own nearness to death and then Jason's fall had shaken Vincent to the core. His own conscious fear of dying was marginal, but he'd found his concept of death very different when staring it in the face. He still trembled a little from the let down after his rage and that fear. And he couldn't erase the memory of Jason's eyes staring into his.

Vincent didn't know which was worse, seeing his own death mirrored in Jason's eyes or watching the man's growing realization of what he'd been doing. For Vincent, it had been like looking into some kind of skewed mirror--this unknown man from another world who had never known him, unconsciously becoming in some odd way the beast that Vincent kept caged within. The avenging warrior. The protector. And he knew that Jason Walker had felt the kinship, too.

Jason could easily have performed another of his heroic leaps and leapt *over* Vincent and escaped, but he chose to try for the more difficult escape route. Perhaps because facing the dangers of the Abyss was easier than facing and moving toward his mirror image. Or perhaps he was only confused.

Sighing heavily, Vincent turned and started slowly back to collect Catherine.



The minutes seemed like hours to Catherine. The only sounds in the darkness were the small scufflings of rats in the distance and the occasional rattle of a pipe. Every once in a long while she could hear a faint burst of pipe code from somewhere--with only the regular pattern setting it apart from the other banging--but for the most part she felt completely isolated. Her concern for Vincent's safety was growing by the moment and her frustration at her own helplessness was increasing as well.

Brushing restlessly at the dirt on her skirt, Catherine wandered in a small circle. She could envision the battle that must be taking place and trembled. *Where is he. What's happening?* Her mind shied away from the thought of Vincent killing Jason. She didn't want that. There was a part of her that really liked Jason Walker. But at the same time, if Jason escaped....

Catherine shook her head furiously, feeling the slap of her damp, sweaty hair in her face. The only way Jason would escape was if Vincent were dead. And that wouldn't happen. It couldn't. She simply couldn't visualize all the vitality and life that *was* Vincent dead and still. So, therefore it wouldn't happen. Catherine figured she'd think positive: Vincent would be victorious and...and...and *what am I going to do if Vincent brings Jason back here to me--alive--for me to try in court? What will happen then?*

Catherine couldn't see a happy ending to this. Frightened all over again, she walked back around the corner to the ladder leading to Jason's dojo and craned her neck around so she could see up the ladder. She could barely

discern a glimmer of light coming through--perhaps where the door didn't quite fit perfectly. If Vincent didn't show up soon, she'd have no choice but to leave, then try to find out what had happened to him.

This unpleasant thought had no sooner crossed her mind than she heard the gentle sandpaper rasp of Vincent's voice behind her. "Catherine...."

She whirled to see him standing golden in the circle of lamplight. "Vincent!" Catherine hurled herself the short distance between them and felt his arms close around her, holding her tight against his broad chest. "Oh...Vincent. I was so worried!"

His only answer was the rapid beating of his heart and his breath in her hair. Her cheek was damp where it lay against him, and when she pulled back she realized the wetness was blood.

"You're hurt!"

He shook his head as he wiped at her face. "It's nothing. A scratch."

"Jason?" she asked hesitantly.

His head moved again ever so slightly, never looking away from her. "Gone."

She didn't understand. "Gone? He escaped?" It was inconceivable.

"No. He...the Abyss...." Vincent was hesitant and seemed unsure of what to say, but Catherine thought she understood.

"He fell..." she said softly, trying to ask as gently as she could, but believing that during the battle Jason had gone over. Perhaps with help.

Vincent slumped, leaning with a hand against the wall. He decided there was little sense in explaining. "Yes." He hesitated again. "He swung out over the void on a rope. Trying to reach an escape route. The rope broke." He looked away.

Neither of them spoke as Vincent took her hand and led her back to the ladder. He glanced up at the ribbon of light, then back to her. "It's over, Catherine. It's time to go home."

"I don't want to go back that way," she said quietly, shaking her head.

Vincent walked over to the lantern and took it from the nail it was hanging on. He glanced down at her feet, encased in high heels. "Catherine...it is a long way home through the tunnels...a long walk."

"It doesn't matter!" she cried fiercely. "I won't go back that way, now you're here. Besides," she murmured more gently as she gingerly touched his wound, "this needs tending."

"Father will tend it. It is of no consequence," he told her. But she noticed that he was already moving off into the darkness, accepting her decision. She followed, walking beside him, noticing that he'd shortened his strides to match hers.

They walked slowly and silently. Occasionally Catherine felt Vincent's hand brush hers; she would look up

to see his eyes on her, then his head would turn away again, as though he couldn't quite meet her eyes.

Catherine wanted to talk about what had happened, but could tell he wasn't ready to talk about it, so instead she thought about what she was going to tell Joe. *First I have to find out what Red and the woman plan on doing--where they are--then...then what?* The first order of business when she got back would be to make certain the two witnesses were fully aware of their own culpability in the murders. Catherine chewed her lower lip and wrestled with her conscience, but knowing that the difference between a lie and the truth meant life or death for Vincent was all she needed to make her decision as to right and wrong. *One step at a time, Cathy. One problem at a time*, she told herself.

It didn't take long for Catherine's feet to begin hurting too much for her to continue wearing the heels. When she faltered, Vincent immediately reached out to steady her. "Catherine. Let me carry you...."

"No," she stated adamantly. "I'll just take off the shoes. I'll be fine."

Fortunately they'd reached an area of the tunnels where the floor was sandy and dry, so Vincent nodded, saying, "There is a threshold not far past the old bridge in the Whispering Gallery. From there you can access the subway."

Vincent continued steadying her as she removed her heels, then she followed him down two more old subway tunnels to another branch of natural tunnels. There was a soft glow of light ahead from torches set in the wall. An old wooden bridge with rope handrails spanned a vast emptiness. Vincent stopped and pointed. "This is where it happened, Catherine."

She stared out over the mists of the Abyss and shuddered: she'd never liked heights any more than she had the dark.

Vincent led her to the end of the bridge and pointed at a gap where the boards were missing--obviously broken through. "There is where the fight ended. I had fallen through the rotten boards of the bridge and was caught. He could have killed me easily, but...something happened...I...I saw something awaken in him." At Catherine's curious look, Vincent told her, "I think he saw himself in me."

"He admired you, you know," Catherine said cautiously, unsure how Vincent would accept Jason's admiration.

Vincent ignored Catherine's comment and pointed above the bridge to where a ragged length of rope hung and to a torch burning in a small alcove on the other side of the Abyss. "He caught the rope and swung out over the Abyss. He was trying for that opening. By the time I'd struggled out of the hole in the bridge, it was over."

Weariness swept over Catherine. Her mind was foggy and her eyes sore. She rubbed her eye with the back of her hand. As though he, too, was as exhausted as she, Vincent said very quietly: "Come, Catherine. Soon you will be home. It's over."

She nodded as she followed him, but responded, "No. It's not really over, Vincent. I still have to think of something to tell Joe. And I suggest that you get someone to make sure there's no way that entrance from Jason's building can be used again. Make certain it can't be opened. If the police investigate, they might accidentally trip the mechanism."

He didn't answer for a moment, then agreed. "Yes. I'll see to it immediately."

Then, they were at the threshold. Catherine could hear the unmistakable sounds of the subway station behind the wall. Vincent reached up into a niche and pulled a lever. The door rolled back, but it was still dark beyond...although the sounds were louder. Vincent reached a hand out to help her through the opening. "Take care, Catherine. The way is smooth, but there's no light. Just follow the sounds to the station."

Catherine stepped through the threshold and smiled back at Vincent, feeling the smile fade as the door rolled closed, cutting her off from him and leaving her in the dark. She leaned against the wall to help her balance, put her shoes back on, then walked hesitantly toward the sound of humanity and the gradually strengthening light.



Vincent waited just inside the threshold until he was certain Catherine was safely back in her own world. She was tired--emotionally exhausted--but unhurt. Warily raising his head, Vincent touched the wound on his chest: it wasn't severe enough to be dangerous. The layers of sweaters and leather vest had protected him, keeping the metal claws from sinking too deeply. But it was becoming decidedly uncomfortable.

Sighing with resignation, Vincent turned toward home. He knew he had two choices: he could either treat the wounds himself, then collect his tools and close off the entrance to Jason's building, or he could allow Father to treat him and send someone else. He knew that once Father saw the wounds he wouldn't allow his son to go off immediately to a dirty work site. And this was something Vincent would just as soon keep to himself in any case.

Since by now it was quite late, Vincent had no problem making it back to his chamber without being seen. After lighting several candles, he poured a basin of water, then opened his bottom drawer, where he kept a small supply of first aid materials that he used to cleanse his own minor injuries, and taking the supplies out, he placed them on the table beside the basin.

Shrugging out of his cloak and draping it across his chair, he then began the painful process of removing his vest and shirt. In addition to the fact that the wound itself was painful, the blood had dried and matted his fur to the material of his shirt. Wincing as he gently pried the linen loose, he thought wryly, *I suppose I'll have to mend the*

shirt and vest myself, or Mary will certainly tell Father. 'Oh what a tangled web we weave....'

It certainly would be simpler to tell Father what happened and avoid the subsequent tailoring job, but Vincent didn't have the energy for either explanation or argument tonight. *I know the limits of my own body*, Vincent told himself in an effort to reconcile himself to hiding something from Father. *I know my limits and my strengths, and it is late. There is no need in any case to disturb him. The wound is nothing.*

The material was free, finally, and Vincent pulled the shirt over his head, then stuffed it and the vest under his bed until he could take them to wash and mend. He turned back to the basin and began cleaning the cuts. As he'd suspected, the gashes were clean and even. Father would have said they needed a stitch or two, but Vincent merely closed them each with two butterfly strips, then covered them all with a gauze patch covered with antibiotic cream.

Satisfied with his work, Vincent pulled out an old work shirt and collected his tools and a coil of rope. He knew there was more than enough scrap lumber in the tunnel near the threshold to provide him with material to seal it adequately: it didn't need to be neat, only functional. Or rather, non-functional.

Tired though he was, Vincent left his chamber to retrace his steps to the old threshold under Jason's building. He knew it had to be done *now*—not tomorrow—because he had no idea how quickly the wheels of justice might turn, Above, and as Catherine said, she had to tell her superiors *something*.

By the time he reached the site again, Vincent's chest was aching badly. He'd carried the tool sling over his right shoulder, but since he usually used his left, the change felt strange. He hung the lantern back on the same nail he'd found it on and proceeded to break apart some old apple crates he found nearby, then carried the resulting lumber and stacked it at the foot of the ladder.

"Vincent need help?"

Vincent spun, startled that Mouse had been able come up to him without his knowing. His heart was thudding. "Mouse...you...surprised me."

Mouse pointed to the broken lumber and Vincent's shoulder. "Mouse'll fix door--won't open again."

Gratefully, Vincent passed Mouse the tools and watched as the boy climbed the ladder. Vincent made himself useful by passing the boards to him. It amazed him that Mouse seemed to know about the door and the need for it to be closed. The boy must have been watching him without his being aware of it. Smiling a little to himself, he thought of how difficult it had been to track and catch Mouse before the boy had joined the community. There was no one else Vincent knew who was as at home in the darkness as he, himself, was. And certainly no one else able to follow him without his realizing they were there.

When Mouse finished his work and descended the ladder, the two stared at one another for a moment. Vincent smiled at him and offered: "I'm glad to see you, Mouse. I've missed you."

Mouse didn't return the smile. He shrugged and looked away, digging at the dirt with his toe. "Mouse was around. Everybody mad at Mouse."

Vincent shook his head, took his tools back and picked up a couple of loose boards. The two began walking back toward the Hub. "They're not really angry, Mouse. They just don't understand why you're being so stubborn. The aqueduct is a *good* thing. It will benefit everyone--including you. It will mean that you won't have to move everything when the floods come. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

Mouse was silent and Vincent could sense no lessening of the boy's determination. When they neared the Hub, Mouse stopped. Vincent glanced up and Mouse said fiercely, "Won't move, Vincent. Mousehole *mine*. Home. Mouse thought friends *helped* friends. Not make 'em *move*."

"Mouse..." Vincent began, but the boy was gone. Silently. Gone into the dark as effectively as Vincent could have, and Vincent didn't have the heart to track him. Not tonight. He was acutely aware of Catherine's fatigue and emotional exhaustion and it added to his own. The day had been far too long.

Turning back slowly toward home, Vincent eventually reached the Whispering Gallery--and the bridge. He hesitated a long moment, then walked out onto the bridge and stared down through the hole into the emptiness beyond. Sighing, he sat, cross-legged beside the hole. Whispers from Above still filtered down--fewer though now, at this late hour--and he thought of the strange coincidence that had brought Jason Walker Below. His mirror images from Above. Both protectors, caring for people in the only way they knew. Trying to make a difference. Both dismayed to find the inner beast out of control. *I told Father that this was a magic place... it brought the world Above down Below for me...as a child... and again, tonight. But after tonight, I'm not certain I'll ever see the magic in quite the same way.*

Vincent began nailing the boards across the hole to close it temporarily until he could replace the board properly. When he was finished, he stood and stared at the slowly swinging piece of broken rope above his head. *I was right, Father. There are no safe places...Above or Below.*

Wearily, Vincent secured the rope he'd brought across the entrance to the bridge to prevent--or at least discourage--people from going out onto it. Although the passageway on the opposite side was temporarily closed this month, the children would still come to their "magic place."

After he finished, Vincent returned to his chamber, but it was almost morning by the time he fell into a sleep too deep even for dreams.

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"I know I told you I'd have the Braeswell deposition finished yesterday, Joe," Cathy admitted. She was hunched over her desk still scribbling the final notes for the transcriptionist. Brushing her hair back out of her eyes, she stared up into Joe's accusing glare. "I got tied up, okay?" She shoved the notes across the desk. "Here. Katie'll have it finished by noon, I'm sure."

Joe's crossed arms and unwavering stare unnerved her. He wasn't joking at all today. After a moment, he reached down, picked up the stack of papers and nodded, softening his next statement with his usual quirky smile. "Okay, Radcliffe. Long as it's typed in time for Moreno to go over it before four." He was on his way back toward his office when he stopped and turned. "By the way, Moreno wants to see both of us about the Slasher case. Seems one of the tails he had on Walker told him something interesting."

Cathy suddenly developed a knot in her stomach. "What's that, Joe?" She'd totally forgotten about the police surveillance they had on Jason. When she peered up through her bangs, the knot got heavier: Joe didn't look amused.

"In Moreno's office. I'll meet you there."

Watching Joe's back as he wove his way through the trail of desks kept Cathy from bolting for the door. Her mind was skittering from one event to another, piecing things together. *What an idiot I was! Jason was being watched twenty-four hours a day. I would've been seen entering the building and wasn't seen leaving.* She groaned and buried her face in her hands. This was getting worse and worse. *Calm, Cathy. Calm down. So they saw you go in. They're only human. They could've missed you coming out. They don't know for sure. They can't.*

Catherine saw Joe headed back for Moreno's office and knew she couldn't delay, so she resignedly pushed her chair back and straightened her skirt. The sound of her heels clicking on the tile seemed extremely loud to her. Pausing outside the door, Catherine knocked and waited.

"Come in, Chandler," Moreno barked. It didn't sound good.

Catherine came in and closed the door, trying to look innocent as she glanced from Joe to Moreno and back again. "What is it?"

Brows knit in a furious frown, Moreno sat behind his desk fiddling with a pencil. His look pinned Catherine in her place like a butterfly on a mounting board. "It seems that the man tailing Walker observed you entering Walker's building yesterday around six-thirty. He says you were accompanied by two of the Protectors...a man and a woman with long hair. It appeared that the man was driving a cab." The pencil broke. "The cop waited for you to come out, but he says you never did. His replacement is still out in front of the building and he still insists you haven't left. You got anything to tell me, Chandler?"

Catherine swallowed her panic and shrugged. "Trying to smile through her fear, she asked, "What can I say? I'm obviously here. I can't understand why no one saw me leave."

The tension Catherine felt in the room seemed to ease as Joe chuckled. "Sure, John. I mean, Cathy doesn't have a twin."

Moreno didn't seem impressed. He picked up a toothpick and began chewing it. "Okay. So why don't you tell us how and when you left and what you were doing there...and why the escort?"

Catherine sighed theatrically. "I'd told Mr. Walker if he ever had anything to tell me, to let me know. It seems he has an exaggerated sense of the dramatic. I don't know why the cab, I never found out. I'd gone to the Bennett Historical Library to look through the archives for some information on Jason's building. I figured maybe I could find some way he was getting out of it without being seen."

"Did you find anything?" Joe asked eagerly.

Reluctantly shaking her head, Cathy lied. "No, not really. But when I came out, I saw a taxi and hailed it. Turned out it was two of Jason's Protectors."

"Did they threaten you?" Moreno queried.

Again she lied. "Not exactly. I got the feeling it was like they were playing cops and robbers. Like it was all just a game. They just said Jason wanted to see me."

"So you just went with them willingly?" Joe really didn't look convinced.

Cathy pretended to be getting irritated. Actually, she was scared, but it was easy to channel that into a semblance of anger. "Look. I don't understand what's going on either. I asked Walker to contact me if he wanted to tell me anything. He did. I wasn't threatened. I just went to talk to him. If the surveillance team slipped up and missed me when I left, I can hardly explain *that*."

Joe immediately moved away from Moreno's desk, waving his hand at his superior in an obvious attempt to back him off. "It's okay, Cath. It's just that everybody's confused. What did Walker have to tell you?"

Throwing up her hands in mock frustration, Catherine growled, "Nothing. He just insisted upon his innocence. He talked about his grandfather being a sharecropper in Alabama years ago and told me about the building...showed me around again. It was a totally useless and frustrating experience."

"So when did you leave?" Moreno's piercing gaze never left her.

Running her hands through her hair, Catherine tried to think of what time it got dark. "I'm not sure. About eight-thirty, I think. I was there quite a while. Some of the things he has around there are fascinating."

"Well," Moreno said quietly, his eyes finally dropping momentarily from Cathy to his desk, "it appears you might be the last person to see Jason Walker. He hasn't come out of the building either, and he was reported missing this morning."

"If I saw him last night, isn't it a little too early to file a missing person report?"

Moreno shrugged. "Normally. But since he was under surveillance, we checked it out. We sent a man over there to see if Walker was inside. The woman who escorted you to see Walker answered the door and let the cop in. Walker wasn't there, and she told the cop he'd left."

Cathy breathed a sigh of relief. They didn't *know* anything. "Well," she said quickly, "if they didn't see *me* leave, it's certainly possible for Walker to have slipped by." She glared at Joe. "I *told* you I thought he was our man."

Joe hedged. "We still don't really have enough evidence for a warrant."

"We can wait," Cathy suggested. "There hasn't been a Slasher murder for several days. We can start searching for Walker in the meantime."

Moreno wasn't convinced by either of them. "We don't really need more evidence for a warrant. There's reasonable suspicion. I think a warrant's in order."

Cathy *really* hoped Vincent had finished closing off the threshold by now.



The day passed slowly for Vincent. The wound on his chest ached and was beginning to itch, and he was irritable: He was concerned about Mouse, and Catherine's nervousness was being transmitted through the bond. It wasn't exactly fear, but definitely anxiety.

The combination of physical and psychological discomfort interfered with everything he tried to do. He didn't like it when Catherine was upset.

Classes dragged and Vincent had little patience. Geoffrey disrupted History class by releasing a mouse under Samantha's seat. Samantha's fear and the rest of the children's excitement tipped the scale of his control far enough to allow him to lose his temper.

"Sit down!" Vincent finally roared as he chased the mouse into a corner and caught it, settling the frightened animal against his chest.

A blessed silence ensued, and the hysteria and excitement was replaced with surprise and some delight...but not fear. "Awesome," came ten-year-old Joshua's astonished comment. After the immediate silence came giggles.

Slightly ashamed of his loss of control, but relieved at the change in the emotions around him, Vincent took a deep breath and continued. "Please. That's enough." He glowered at the tousle-headed boy across the room. "That was completely inappropriate, Geoffrey."

The boy shrugged and favored Vincent with an embarrassed grin. "S'just a mouse. No big deal."

Samantha emitted an angry squeal and Vincent interrupted before anything could get started again: "Not to Samantha. And not to me. Class is not the place for pranks."

Carefully placing the mouse in Geoffrey's hand and closing the boy's fingers over it, Vincent told him to take it Above near a dumpster to release it. "That way, William won't find it in the kitchen and be upset...with either of us." He patted Geoffrey gently on the shoulder to emphasize that he wasn't truly angry. "Go, now. I believe class is over for the day."

The class dispersed, breaking up into small groups as the children left to play. But they were subdued. They seemed to realize they'd upset him and Vincent was almost *never* upset with them.

After the last child was gone, Vincent sat gratefully in the silence left in their wake. But it wasn't really silence: he could still feel the resonance of Catherine's anxiety. He wished he knew what was happening Above. He was still staring at the wall, deep in thought, when Father's voice startled him.

"Vincent." Father's cane tapped on the side of the desk in an effort to break his son's concentration. "Whatever are you thinking of? And where is your class?"

Father looked concerned, though what came through to Vincent was more curiosity and amusement, and Vincent smiled back and chuckled. Twice, now, people had been able to surprise him. *I've been spending too much time thinking and not paying attention.* Vincent shook his head and stood, towering over his foster-father. "Nothing important, Father. I suppose I was daydreaming."

Father's amusement with him increased, and the older man smiled gently as he spoke. "You did that constantly as a child, but not so often in recent years. What are you dreaming of today?"

Vincent bowed his head and began raking his notes and papers together, piling them on top of the books. When he didn't answer immediately, the tenor of Father's emotions changed from amusement to annoyance. "Ah. I see," Father commented dryly. "Catherine Chandler. Vincent...."

Vincent shook his head in warning. "Not today, Father. Please," he pleaded softly. "Catherine is my friend...and perhaps a dream." He sighed. "Sometimes dreams are all we have. If I were to stop dreaming...."

A silence fell between them for the space of perhaps a heartbeat or two, then Father looked away, clearing his throat and looking around the deserted chamber. "Yes. Well...where are your students?"

Smiling at his parent's adroit change of subject and his attempt at tact, Vincent simply said, "There was an unfortunate incident with a mouse." He patted Father's shoulder and they turned toward the door. "Let me tell you about it over tea."

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Joe and Catherine pulled up outside the building just behind the squad car. "I still don't understand why you insisted you wanted to come over here, Radcliffe. It's just

routine. They're not gonna find anything, the guy's just gone." He grinned. "Ten to one, he had a fight with his girlfriend and took off. I still don't think he could've managed to get past the surveillance to kill those people...at least not consistently."

Cathy shrugged and opened the door. "Just the same, Joe, I'd like to tag along. I worked hard trying to prove Jason was the Slasher and never came up with anything. I'd like to see if they find anything." Catherine was trying hard to stay calm--to act like this wasn't really so personal--but it was hard. She peered down at Joe through the window after she got out. "So humor me?"

Joe muttered as he got out, but didn't really seem annoyed. Cathy was already dogging the tail of the two officers before Joe managed to get the car locked. The door appeared to be locked--the dojo closed. The officers knocked, and waited.

When the door opened, Catherine stifled an automatic gasp: it was Red's companion of the night before. Their eyes met over the cop's shoulder, and the woman's frightened eyes looked away and back to the officer. "Yeah. Can I help you?"

"Yes Ma'am," the young officer said politely. "We're here with a search warrant. Jason Walker was considered a suspect in the Slasher killings on the subway, and now he's been reported missing."

Cathy kept a careful eye on the woman, noting that she hesitated momentarily before answering, then pulled the door open. "Sure. I was the one who reported him missing. He didn't show up for class last night or this morning, so I closed the school. C'mon in."

As the officers filed past, the woman nodded to Catherine. "Miss Chandler. Nice to see you again."

It wasn't nice at all, and Catherine seconded the emotion, but she nodded. "I'm sorry. I didn't catch your name before...."

"Sukie," the woman said, glancing anxiously past Catherine at Joe.

Joe stuck out a hand and smiled as Sukie took it. "Joe Maxwell. Sorry for the inconvenience."

As they followed the officers through the dojo and into the office, Catherine wondered if she'd ever get a chance to get Sukie alone. She was concerned about whether Vincent had sealed the threshold. Glancing at the dark-haired woman, Catherine thought anxiously, *What's her game? Where's Red?*

Catherine tensed every time one of the officers came close to the weapons wall. She tried not to, but couldn't help it. Once, one of the men reached up to touch the Samurai sword and Sukie cautioned him--just as Jason had cautioned Cathy--"Be careful. I wouldn't touch that. Those swords are sharp."

The young officer pulled his hand back and went on to another exhibit. Catherine breathed a sigh of relief. Her eyes flicked to the bare spot on the wall where the metal claws had been hanging...then away.

Eventually, to try to stay out of the way and remain inconspicuous, Catherine simply leaned against a wall and watched as the officers searched. She could feel Joe's gaze on her and occasionally glanced over and smiled.

After an hour of fruitless searching, the officers gave up. There was nothing in the dojo, the office, or the adjoining storerooms which might implicate Jason in the murders or provide a clue as to his whereabouts.

It had been one of the longest hours of Catherine's life, but it finally ended. The officers gathered their things, including the few odds and ends they'd considered remotely helpful, which they'd tagged and bagged. Still considerate, they told Sukie goodbye and stopped to talk a little with Joe.

Seeing that Joe was occupied, Catherine motioned to Sukie, who came with obvious reluctance to stand beside her. In a low, quiet voice, Catherine asked, "Why did you report him as missing?"

With a quick glance at the officers and Joe, the woman hissed: "I had to do *something*! Somebody has to take over the Protectors. Jason wouldn't want us to just...let it all fall apart. Red just...left. I don't know where. His apartment's empty."

Catherine had to be sure. "And my friend?"

"What friend," the woman said quietly--a little bitterly--staring hard into Catherine's eyes, then looking away. She was quiet a moment, then asked, "All I want to know is...did he kill Jason?"

Catherine could see Joe turning to come toward her, and she shook her head. "No. But he *is* dead. He tried swinging out over a deep Abyss and fell. It's over."

The two women stared at one another--each confirming silently that it was, indeed, over--then Catherine looked away and smiled at Joe.

"Well, Radcliffe, are you satisfied? They couldn't find anything at all." Joe's tone was cheerful, but his eyes betrayed his concern. He could obviously tell Catherine wasn't happy.

Catherine shrugged. "I guess I'll have to be. Until he's found, or the killings begin again."



After evening meal, Vincent sat in the old, overstuffed chair, watching as Father poured over the plans for the new aqueduct. Mouse's resistance to the project was nagging at him. "Father..." he began. Father glanced up curiously, waiting for him to continue. A subway rumbled past, giving Vincent a moment to collect his thoughts, but in the quiet that followed, Father was obviously waiting for Vincent to finish. Vincent rose and went to stand in front of the desk. "Father...if Mouse persists in his disapproval over the project... perhaps we should vote again."

Father removed his glasses and placed them on the edge of the plans, effectively preventing them from rolling up. His finger traced the route of the aqueduct, and

Vincent could tell he was reviewing in his mind all the previous discussions, arguments and alternate plans they'd worked over for the past year. He shook his head. "I don't see that it would do any good, Vincent. We've gone over this until everyone is sick of it. Mouse will simply have to relocate. I'm sorry. He was outvoted."

Vincent could still see Mouse's hurt and angry eyes. The boy still hadn't returned, and Vincent was becoming more than a little concerned. But if the council--and Father--were determined to follow the letter of the law rather than the spirit, there was little he could do.

"Have you any idea of where Mouse is, Vincent?"

Vincent shook his head. "Not really, though I suspect he is around. Watching."

Father began re-rolling the plans. "He'll come around. The aqueduct was Mouse's idea to *begin* with. It can't be helped that the only practical path was through the Mousehole."

Father seemed so sure that Vincent was reassured. Father was seldom wrong. "Perhaps. I will continue watching for him." He turned toward the stairs. "Goodnight, Father."

"Goodnight, son."

Vincent returned to his own chamber and pulled his damaged vest and shirt from his cache under the bed. He examined the tears, then pulled out his sewing kit to mend them. It took him almost an hour to mend the vest, but he managed fairly well. The shirt, however, was another story. His hands, with their claws, were ill-equipped for fine needlework, and he was not overly patient tonight: he was restless and curious as to what was happening Above. And Catherine's restlessness added to his own.

Vincent put away the shirt and tried to write in his journal, but the blank pages simply mocked him. The words wouldn't come. He knew he had to see Catherine or he'd never sleep tonight. She needed him, as well: he could feel it. They were drawn to one another in their confusion and despair over Jason Walker's odd death...in their need for comfort and understanding.

Wanting to wait until Catherine was able to get home and relax for a time, Vincent flipped through the pages of his journal, reviewing his emotions and decisions of the past few days. He became aware as he read that his feelings for Catherine had become far deeper than even *he* had realized. *A dream, indeed, Father.*

Sighing as he rose, Vincent readied himself to go Above. He pulled off his sweater and linen shirt and washed, then quickly checked his wound. It was already closing nicely, though it still itched.

He was just reaching for his clean shirt when he heard Father at the chamber threshold. Quickly pulling the fresh shirt over his head, Vincent turned to face his visitor.

"Vincent..." Father began, then hesitated. "I'm sorry. I only wanted to check with you to see why you've disbanded your 'Irregulars'. You neglected to mention that earlier, and I had to hear it from Mary. But I see you're preparing

to go Above." When their eyes met, Father heaved an exasperated sigh. "Catherine."

Unable to lie, Vincent merely acknowledged Father's guess. "Yes."

"She'll hurt you, Vincent...her world is *not* yours. Can't you see that?"

Vincent shrugged and reached for his vest. Avoiding Father's gaze, he said quietly: "I see things more clearly than you might think, Father." As he tied the laces on his vest, he stared past the old man into the candle flame. "Even dreaming carries its price."

The pipes echoed messages into the sudden silence between them, and Vincent picked up his cloak to leave. "I dismissed the 'Irregulars' because..." he hesitated, wondering just how much to tell Father, then decided that the minimum would probably suffice. "Catherine found the man she sought and the danger is over. I'm going now to discuss with her the details on how things were settled. Good night. Sleep well, and try not to worry." He placed one hand reassuringly on his parent's shoulder for an instant, then left without another word.

Leaving Father behind, Vincent walked quickly, steadily toward the Central Park threshold.

As he exited the tunnels, leaving behind safety and home, Vincent's senses heightened--taking in everything about him--in automatic, instinctive self-preservation. The distant sounds of traffic were mixed with the more natural sounds of the park, just as the stink of gasoline mixed with the fresh scent from the trees and the smell of water from the pond. Occasional snatches of conversation reached his ears, not unlike the snatches heard when one listened in the Whispering Gallery--but these were accompanied by faint echoes of emotion, leaving a taste of reality that the Gallery didn't offer. Whether or not Father would or could admit it, this too, was Vincent's world, and had been for many years. *At least*, Vincent thought a little wryly, *it's mine for the hours of darkness*. "I am one acquainted with the night...." he quoted wistfully.

The scent of spring and of new growth--new beginnings once more reminded him of last spring, when his life had taken on a new meaning when he'd found Catherine. By the time Vincent reached adulthood, dreams had taken second place in his life. He'd long since given up any pretense--in his dreams or otherwise--that he'd ever find someone to share a life with. To be a part of. Until that dark night when he'd touched Catherine and let the flame from her soul touch his. From that moment on, once more he became a dreamer.

Vincent stopped and peeled the bark from a tree and leaned against the trunk as he broke the bark into bits. *Even now...he thought with a touch of awe...even now I cannot understand just what it is about her that draws me.*

Puzzled, Vincent continued on his slow journey toward Catherine. As he walked, he continued trying to understand. Catherine was undeniably beautiful, but that wasn't it: he'd been in love with her before that...before her face

had been repaired. And she was no more brave or strong... or good...than others he'd known...though certainly not any *less* so. No. It was a totality of what Catherine was that made him love her. He shook his head in confusion. Whatever the reasons, it didn't matter. All that mattered was the simple fact of his love for her and that she cared for him. He sighed. *I could wish--dream--for more, but that would not make it fact.*

But nonetheless, the bond between them was real and alive. Deep in his soul, Vincent knew that in some way they belonged together and that the supposedly chance meeting in the park had been fated.

Vincent reached the edge of the park and stood for a long moment staring up at Catherine's building. This was always the hardest part--making it across the well-lit street. He could more easily go to her via the basement access, then up to the roof on top of the elevator, but at times he needed the walk through the park to settle him before seeing her.

It was a long wait, as Vincent watched the traffic and pedestrians passing before him. This was the part he disliked--having to time it...to find a moment when there was a space with almost no traffic, and no one nearby to see him clearly. But eventually a gap appeared and he sprinted across the street into the shadows. At times like these, Vincent blessed the fact that New Yorkers didn't pay much attention to anything odd happening around them.

Vincent stood, breathcaught in the darkness, for a full minute to make certain that no hue and cry was raised against him. Only when the streets surrounding him remained quiet--with only the usual sounds of a busy city--did he relax and turn his attention to the fire escape, which he reached up to pull down. Again, the elevator would have been safer by far, but the outside of the building had its advantages as well.

As he climbed, Vincent paused periodically outside of empty apartments to look out over the park. *It seems so dark and mysterious, set within the jewel of this bright city...* He looked down and sighed, thinking of Jason... and himself. *It is a little like the darknesses that dwell within us all, no matter how bright or beautiful. No matter how hard we try to hold the darkness close and keep it caged.*

Vincent lifted his eyes to the night sky and sighed, finding in the stars only echoes of hopes and dreams.

Eventually Vincent collected his thoughts, returned to the present, and continued climbing the outside of the building--fire escape and balconies--up to Catherine's apartment. When he reached the level above Catherine's balcony, Vincent pulled himself over the edge and sat a moment on the brickwork, considering the short downward drop to the balcony itself. He always had to judge his drop carefully, or he might find himself standing in a flower pot. He smiled: the image that came to mind always amused him.

It would never have occurred to him to ask Catherine to move the pots.

Deciding upon his target point, Vincent dropped to the balcony, landing lightly between one of the cast-iron chairs and a potted ivy, then turned his attention to the French doors of Catherine's apartment, behind whose billowing curtains a shadow moved.

Vincent waited patiently. He knew she'd eventually come to the balcony looking for him--knowing that he'd come to her tonight. Leaning against the rough brick of the wall, Vincent watched the door. His heart leaped as the door opened and Catherine came outside.

He paused. As always, his first sight of Catherine stunned him senseless. Or perhaps more accurately, shocked him into sensual overload. She was dressed for bed, in a silken negligee and filmy robe--soft curves and flowing material all of a piece to form a picture of an angel wreathed in gentle light. When he finally drew breath, Catherine must have heard for she turned to the shadows with a searching look. "Vincent?"

With nowhere to retreat, Vincent could only move forward into the light. "Catherine. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you."

Vincent could sense no hint of embarrassment from Catherine as to her attire--never had, in fact, and she often met him dressed thus--which confounded him further. He wasn't accustomed to women dressing in such revealing clothing, but since it didn't seem to bother Catherine, he could only assume it was acceptable. Above, and tried not to let it disturb him.

By now he'd gotten past the stuttering stage and was generally able to force his mind to other things.

Except when, as now, she came so close--almost touching--and his sense of her, both physical and emotional eclipsed all else.

Catherine's face, so perfect in its pale luminous splendor, upturned, lips parted, her eyes mirrors of her soul--the bond that touched him so deeply--all of it stirred him in ways he'd thought long and safely buried.

She reached out with one delicate hand to touch him, breathing his name softly into the silence between them. "Vincent...." She shook her head and pulled her hand back, crossing her arms nervously. "You didn't startle me. I knew you'd come."

Vincent felt the change in her and wondered momentarily if she sensed how she affected him. Half-afraid, half-hopeful, he tried to sense past her anxiety to see. But her next words convinced him her mind was still completely on what had happened the night before.

Tossing her hair back out of her eyes, Catherine told him: "Moreno issued a search warrant for Jason's building.

The woman...from last night...reported him as missing."

Forcing his thoughts back to Jason, Vincent nodded and murmured, "I closed the threshold last night."

Catherine looked down. Away from his gaze. "They didn't find anything in the search. The man and woman who were with him...the man is gone...and I don't think the woman will say anything. I think when we don't find Jason the case will just fade away and be shelved, like so many others." She sighed heavily, obviously unhappy, then asked softly, "Did you look for him?"

He knew she meant Jason, but wasn't certain exactly what to say. When he didn't answer immediately, Catherine lifted her eyes to his and he reluctantly shook his head.

"So you never found a body?" She asked gently as she walked slowly toward the railing of the balcony. Vincent followed, carefully keeping a little distant.

"The children say that Abyss goes down forever," he explained softly. "Too deep and dangerous for us to plumb." Turning to her--staring into those sea-green eyes--he said quietly: "He's dead, Catherine, and his shadow is lifted from your heart."

Catherine sighed again and stared out over the lights of the city. "The killings will stop. But they'll never know..." She turned to him, as though to make certain he understood. "...never know if he's dead, or gone...or just...waiting down there until he's needed again. Like King Arthur. I think Jase would like that." She turned back to the city then and asked softly, "How can one man have so much courage and empathy and passion...and so little mercy?"

Vincent wasn't certain that was an accurate description of either Jason Walker or himself--especially as he thought of the dawning look of self-revelation he'd seen in Jason's eyes. He considered discussing it with Catherine...but decided her question was close enough to the truth, so he merely smiled and told her quietly: "Perhaps he lost it somewhere. But he found it again, in the end."

The answer seemed to satisfy her. She nodded and rested her head on his chest, and Vincent put away his self-doubts for a time to enjoy her nearness. There was no point in upsetting Catherine again over something she could never understand.

They stood that way for several long minutes as they watched the city below them and Vincent could sense her sadness and regret. But below that, he could find no fear or anxiety. Things were once more as they should be between them, and for now even his desire was muted to a quiet song, kept carefully--safely--within him. And he was at peace, with her beside him.



AFTERLIGHT

poem by Rhonda Collins

A feather-touch, shimmering and light—
the bond between us is so fragile
 I barely know it's there.

I try sometimes, to reach and touch and hold—
but it slides away like twilight
 after the sun has set.

CHAPTER FIVE: AFTERLIGHT

Catherine was just finishing packing up the files on the Gonzaba-Mireles case and looking forward to going home when Joe Maxwell stopped by on his way out of the office. "Workin' late, Radcliffe?"

She glanced up through strands of loose hair in time to see Joe pop a potato chip into his mouth. *The man is always eating*, she thought with annoyance. *How on earth does he stay so trim?* Her own scales showed a two-pound gain despite her haphazard meal schedule and attempts to lose a pound or two before Jenny's museum benefit. The fact that Joe never seemed to gain an ounce despite his absolutely horrid diet irritated Catherine tremendously. Blowing at strands of hair to get them out of her eyes, Catherine commented with acerbity: "Don't you *ever* eat anything healthy, Joe? I thought good Italian boys loved healthy, hearty meals."

Joe just grinned and it irritated her even more. Catherine knew Edie had told him about her diet, and she could almost *feel* him smirking...just looking for a chance to tease.

Rolling his eyes to the ceiling, Joe sighed theatrically...as though remembering Heaven. "Sure. My Mom makes the best lasagna this side of paradise." He popped another chip in his mouth and crunched. "I'm sure she'd love to have you come over Saturday and join us. How 'bout it?"

Savagely shoving the files into her briefcase, Catherine growled, "No, *thanks!*" Her heels clicked like gunfire on the tiles as she stalked past him and she could hear his footsteps behind her as he tried to catch up.

"Hey, Radcliffe, wait up! I was just kidding."

Catherine stopped and stood with her arms hanging at her sides, the heavy briefcase dragging her down. She threw her head back and groaned. Joe sounded so pitiful that it made *her* feel guilty. She swung around and shrugged helplessly. "It's okay, Joe. I'm just frustrated."

Crumpling up the potato chip bag, Joe aimed for a trash can and tossed it haphazardly--not even noticing that it missed. "C'mon kid. I'll walk you out." His smile warmed her and chipped away at the edge of irritation she'd felt all afternoon. "Besides," he whispered conspiratorially, "you don't need to diet, anyway. You look great."

Catherine just sighed and smiled. "Thanks, Joe. But you wouldn't understand."

They walked together to the elevator and rode down in relative silence. Joe obviously couldn't think of much more to say and seemed a little uneasy.

Catherine didn't know why she'd been so snappish lately. She felt frustrated and unhappy and she wasn't sure why. She looked at herself in the mirror and wasn't happy with her reflection. *And Daddy and Jenny aren't helping, either.* Neither of them could understand her withdrawal from the society scene, and her father was actively trying to push her into dates with acquaintances. Jenny was moderately more subtle, but not much.

Catherine glanced regretfully up into Joe's solemn expression and tried a smile. "I'm sorry, Joe. I know you and Edie mean well. I've just been in a rotten mood lately. It'll pass."

"If there's anything I can do..." Joe began, but Catherine just shook her head.

"No. I've just got some things to work out, but thanks, anyway." She patted his arm. "Bye, Joe."

Joe hailed a cab for her and Catherine sat glumly all through the ride home thinking about her recent sour mood. There didn't really seem to be any solid reason for it. Even the weight thing and her subsequent diet really had nothing to do with her mood: it was just a symptom that she recognized from the old days. *So what is the problem? Maybe Dad and Jenny are right and I just need to get out more. Or at all.*

Then she remembered, a sense of gladness sweeping over her: tonight she was meeting Vincent to attend the concert *below* the park. She smiled with relief. If *anyone* could improve her mood, it'd be Vincent. Somehow, whenever she was around him it was difficult to dwell on her own problems. When with Vincent, she was encouraged to look beyond herself, to see the world around her with new eyes. *With all the problems he must endure*, she thought sadly, *all he has had to face in his life—he never speaks of it. Instead, he looks on life as a gift that he gives back to others.*

Catherine watched the lights of the city as they slid past the cab window and was ashamed. *I have no reason*

to feel sorry for myself, she mused. With that thought, she sat straighter, determined that she would *not* allow her mood to color Vincent's or ruin his evening. *He's been looking forward to this for weeks, now....* And truthfully, so had Catherine. The very thought of listening to a concert from the depths of the New York sewer system intrigued and amused her. She wondered what her father would think. She found herself smiling at *that*. *I really don't think that's what Daddy had in mind when he said I needed to get out more often.*



Vincent had spent the entire day searching for Mouse. There had been times when he'd *known* the boy was near, and he'd tried to coax him out of hiding, but Mouse played his game well. Too well. Vincent was becoming increasingly worried about his friend. Plans were going ahead for the aqueduct project. Kanin, Winslow and Father were all upset with him because he'd missed the planning session and had made himself unavailable to pick up the supplies--the pipes that had been donated by a helper--and left Kanin and Winslow to struggle with the load themselves.

Returning to his chamber after his long, frustrating day, Vincent was immeasurably cheered by the fact that tonight was the concert. The first concert of the season that he was to share with Catherine. He spent a large portion of the late afternoon making ready the small area under the concert shell--taking pillows and blankets to make it comfortable--and the rest of the time getting ready himself.

As anxious as he was for the evening to begin, his mood was colored by his upset over Mouse. Vincent, who had once wholeheartedly endorsed the aqueduct, was now beginning to have reservations. He was brushing his hair for perhaps the fifth time when Mary stopped by, hovering hesitantly in the entranceway. "Vincent...?"

"Yes, Mary?"

Mary was fussing with her shawl, a nervous gesture that was merely an outward manifestation of her anxiety. "Did you...did you find Mouse?"

"No," Vincent admitted. "I didn't, Mary. He was there...watching me some of the time. I could feel it. But he would never answer me or show himself."

"I don't like this. It's not right. Father...and William, Pascal...everyone...seems to think so highly of the aqueduct. But what of Mouse? Aren't *his* wishes important?"

Frustrated, and plagued by the same thoughts himself, Vincent had no real answer. He thought of Mouse as the boy had been when he'd found him--withdrawn, frightened and wild--trusting no one. Preferring to live in the dark rather than risk being hurt by contact with others. Vincent still had no idea how the boy had come to be living alone in the tunnels. Perhaps even Mouse didn't remember. He was afraid that if Mouse was hurt by the people he loved

and trusted, he would retreat again. Sadly, he shook his head. "I don't know what to do, Mary."

"Perhaps if you spoke to Father...?"

"I'll try, Mary. Though perhaps it would be best to bring it up in council."

Mary cheered some. She couldn't bear to have anyone unhappy—especially the children. And Mouse was so much a child in many ways that Mary still considered him one. Now that Mary had reassured herself of Vincent's help, she seemed to notice Vincent was getting ready to go out. "Oh dear. I'm sorry. I'm keeping you, aren't I? Tonight's the concert in the park! You'd better go or you'll miss the beginning!" She turned to go.

Laughing gently, Vincent shook his head. "It's early yet." He patted her hand and released her with a smile. "Don't worry. Things will work out with Mouse. If I can't convince him to go along with the project, I'll bring the problem up in council. Something will be done."

Mary's relief as she left—wishing him an enjoyable evening—was palpable. Vincent just hoped he could carry through on his promise.

But for now, he turned his attention to Catherine. He could tell her mood had improved, as well. *Perhaps she, too, is looking forward to the concert.* The thought of sharing the music with Catherine was exhilarating.



Just as Catherine was leaving her apartment, the phone rang.

Catherine hesitated, thinking she'd let the answering machine pick up, but after the message played and Jenny's voice began a hysterical message, Catherine ran for the phone and grabbed it.

"Jen! What *is* it!"

Jenny Aronson had been Catherine's friend since high school and they'd roomed together in college. Catherine, who'd lost her own mother very young, had also become very attached to Jenny's mother, Anne—who was now in the hospital having emergency surgery. Anne had been in an automobile accident earlier in the evening.

After hanging up the phone, Catherine dashed to the basement to tell Vincent she wouldn't be able to go to the concert.

Unfortunately, he wasn't there.

Standing impatiently at the foot of the ladder, Catherine dug through her purse, looking for something to write on to leave him a note. She found a small scrap of paper and a pen and jotted a few words on it, then put it on the ground at the foot of the ladder. Over it, she placed a small pyramid of stones so he would know there was something there.

Once she felt she'd done all she could do, Catherine left the basement and hurried for the hospital to be with Jenny. She was sure Vincent would understand.

As Vincent traveled toward Catherine's building he felt her mood change still again. She was upset...and frightened. But there was a profound sorrow mixed with Catherine's fright. Once more, the mix of emotions told Vincent she wasn't in danger. He sensed her fear was for someone else. Someone she cared about deeply.

He arrived at the threshold only minutes after Catherine had left.

Vincent wasn't surprised to find the passage empty, but still, upon arriving at the meeting place he stood in the shadows staring at the column of light as though expecting her to appear at any moment.

As he watched the dust motes dance in the light, his gaze traveled downwards to where a small pile of stones caught his eye. They'd obviously been placed there by Catherine. He immediately knelt by the small pyramid and began dismantling it--and found her note.

Vincent, she wrote. Her handwriting was uneven and awkward, betraying the haste in which it was written.

There was an emergency. I'm sorry.

Catherine

The scrap of paper was small. There obviously hadn't been room for her to say more.

Vincent glanced up at the top of the ladder and sighed. He could still sense Catherine's distress, but there was nothing he could do to comfort her.

Vincent was disappointed in the ruin of the evening, but more concerned about Catherine. He worried, wondering what had happened. However, standing in the empty corridor was useless. Catherine was moving away from him and there was no point in staying. He could tell where she was headed--the bond was very specific. He decided to follow her. He wasn't certain what her destination was, but in the back of his mind was the thought that perhaps she might need him later.

Vincent traveled slowly toward Catherine, taking subways, back streets and alleys to eventually reach his destination, where he stood in the shadows across the street from the hospital waiting for her to come out. He watched ambulances arrive and leave, watched the people pass and listened to the heartbeat of the city.

And only occasionally did he think wistfully of the concert going on in the park and the lost opportunity of sharing the music with Catherine. Once, he shrugged to himself and thought realistically: *Catherine doesn't need me to take her to the concert. She could go with anyone... and not have to sit in a sewer to do it. But she does need me now. To comfort her and ease her pain.*

In a sense, the thought was liberating. Vincent was accustomed to filling people's needs. It gave him a purpose

in life. A reason for being. The sense of Catherine's need for him filled him with a peace that overwhelmed his disappointment. If in no other way, in *this* he could be a part of her. *Perhaps it is just as well we didn't go.* He was dismayed suddenly at the possibility that Catherine might have felt disgust at attending the concert from a sewer, or that she might have felt pity for him for his desperate attempt to take her somewhere. He would have known immediately through the bond, and he simply couldn't have borne it.

He turned his thoughts to Catherine and how he could help her. That was what was important.



By the time Catherine reached the hospital the emergency was over. Anne's surgery was over and she was already off the critical list. She was going to be fine. Jenny cried with relief when she saw Catherine--as though she'd been holding everything inside until her friend arrived.

"Oh Cath," Jenny wailed as she threw her arms around Catherine. "She's okay. She'll be okay."

Catherine pulled a Kleenex out of her purse and handed it to her friend. "They stopped the bleeding?"

Jenny nodded as she wiped her eyes. She looked exhausted. "She lost a lot of blood, but they say she'll be fine."

"Have you seen her yet?" Catherine asked gently.

Jenny shook her head. "No. She's still in recovery."

"Then let's go get some coffee. You look like you could use some." Catherine led Jenny down to the hospital cafeteria where they sat talking over several cups of coffee.

As Jenny calmed, she seemed to sag. The anxiety and fear of the last few hours had taken their toll. Catherine looked around her uneasily. Hospitals really bothered Catherine. She tried not to think of losing her own mother, but Anne had become so much a mother-substitute for her later years that the memories were inevitable.

Catherine stopped and gave blood, then stayed with Jenny until she could go in to see her mother. Afterwards, Catherine called a cab to take them home. As they walked out the front door of the hospital, Catherine asked Jenny, "You want me to stay with you tonight?"

"No," Jenny answered quickly. "But thanks. I'll be fine now that I know she'll be okay." She hugged Catherine again. "Thanks so much for coming."

As Catherine hugged Jenny she caught a movement in the shadows of the next building and when she glanced up, she saw Vincent--only for a moment--illuminated in the streetlight. A dense fog billowed around him, making him look even more otherworldly than he was. The tumbled gold of his mane shone brightly in the instant before he stepped back into the shadows. Catherine smiled and hugged Jenny tighter. "If you're sure you don't need me,

I think I'll catch another cab. I was supposed to meet someone earlier. Maybe I can still catch him."

Jenny's eyebrows lifted and she managed a smile. "Him?"

Catherine laughed. "Don't get ideas." It relieved Catherine tremendously that even under such trying circumstances Jenny could *still* tease her about her love life...or lack thereof.

Jenny yawned widely. "Okay. Have it your own way. For now."

"Go to bed. I'll come see Anne tomorrow."

Catherine watched as the cab pulled away, then walked slowly toward Vincent. The fear and despair she'd felt earlier dropped away and she was filled with a joyous sense of peace and safety, just knowing he was there in the darkness waiting for her. Protecting her. She felt connected in a way she hadn't for a very long time.

"Catherine," Vincent's velvet voice reached her before she saw him. "Is everything all right?"

She stepped into the shadows, where the Vincent's dark shape waited. "Yes," she answered and sighed. "Jenny's mother was in an accident. But she'll be all right."

"Good."

He opened his arms and she moved into them, resting her head against his chest. It was a lot like coming home after a long, lonely trip. He sighed, and she could feel a tremor run through him. Lifting her head from the comfort of his chest she looked up into his face. All she could see were deep shadows which accented the harsh angles of his face and his eyes were the deepest shadows of all. "What is it?" she asked. Then, she remembered the concert. "I'm sorry, Vincent...about the concert."

Vincent shook his head as he released her and whispered. "Don't be. It's not important. Your friend. Her mother...are more important. But you're tired, Catherine. You should go home. To bed."

"I *am* exhausted." Catherine hesitated. She wanted desperately to simply collapse into her own bed and sleep until noon, but she didn't want Vincent to feel she was rushing him away. That she didn't need him. His being here for her meant more than she could possibly say...but she knew she didn't have to: he was aware of how she felt. "Would you wait for me while I hail a cab? Just to make sure...."

Vincent's head bent and she could almost see his quiet smile: she'd seen him hide his pleasure that way so often... in the curtain of his hair. The gesture was becoming very familiar, and the very familiarity of it comforted her in a strange way.

"Of course," he said quietly. "Goodnight, Catherine."

"Goodnight, Vincent. Thank you for coming."

She moved confidently away from him, then--out into the light. She could see a cab idling half a block away. She paused to look back to the corner. She could barely discern his figure as a shadow--more dense than the

surrounding darkness. If she hadn't known he was there, she wouldn't have seen him. But she *did* know he was there, and the knowledge made her feel secure. She knew that never again would she hail a cab on a dark corner without thinking of that time last spring: but now, with Vincent guarding her, she felt no fear.

Turning, Catherine walked to the cab and gave her directions. Sliding into the back seat, she took one last look toward the darkness where safety waited. And she smiled.



Catherine's pain and exhaustion--her anxiety--disappeared the moment his arms went around her. Vincent felt them slide away like water slipping between his fingers. The bond flowed between them, wrapping Vincent in a cocoon of *Catherine* herself. He was surrounded by the flow of her emotions. Her relief and acceptance of his protection and love humbled him--more now, after having *lost* that trust and then regaining it--than at any other time. He knew more certainly in that instant than ever before that whatever happened in the future, his life was tied to hers.

Vincent watched as Catherine walked away from him, her honey-blond hair glowing in the light. The sea-green material of her skirt drifted around her legs as softly as mist. A lump formed in Vincent's throat. Her beauty often caught him quite unaware at times. He blinked to clear the tears that formed in his eyes as she turned to look for him.

Though he couldn't read her thoughts through the bond and felt no fear from her, he knew how she must cringe inwardly each time she had to catch a cab, now, for each time must bring back memories of that other dark night when she'd ended up instead in the back of a van...with her attackers. *How brave she is, how determined.*

He continued watching as the cab sped off down the street and out of sight, then turned away to move silently through the busy city night.

Tonight, Vincent had no heart for the city or the park. He was tired, both physically and emotionally. Now that he'd seen Catherine and knew he'd done what he could to comfort her, all he really wanted was to go to bed.

It had been a long day and a still longer night, and Vincent was anxious to return home. He passed sentry points and spoke briefly with his sentries and listened to the pipes as other stations checked in with Pascal. Knowing his friend would be retiring soon himself, Vincent decided to stop by the pipe chamber to check on how things had gone after he'd left. Pascal would give him all the details of the cleanup.

"Pascal," Vincent called, waving to the small man balanced high up on the pipes. The pipe chamber always reminded Vincent of a spiderweb, but a web that caught sound rather than insects...and Pascal was the spider, busily

running between catches. *It's no wonder he stays so slim*, Vincent thought with amusement.

Scuttling down from his perch, the pipemaster dropped to the floor beside his friend. Whereas Vincent was tired, Pascal still seemed fresh though by now it was early morning. "You're back!" Pascal commented, waving Vincent over to the table next to the wall where he kept a pitcher and basin for washing. Obviously he was ready to end his shift. "How was the concert?" Pascal asked.

Vincent looked away from Pascal's gaze. "I didn't go."

Pascal had rolled up his sleeves and was washing his hands and face, but he stopped mid-splash to glance up. "But you *never* miss the first concert of the season! What happened?"

Shrugging as though it was unimportant, Vincent just said quietly, "Something happened that prevented it." His look must have told Pascal he didn't wish to discuss it.

"Too bad," Pascal said, turning to finish washing.

Vincent changed the subject and asked Pascal's opinion about Mouse and the aqueduct. "Have you heard anything about Mouse through the pipes?"

Pascal shook his head. "Not a thing. I take it you didn't find him today, either."

"I'm worried about him, Pascal," Vincent admitted.

Sitting on the side of his bed, Pascal nodded. "To tell the truth, I'm not real easy about the whole thing, myself. The boy is really unhappy."

"Mary and I thought perhaps we should call another council meeting and discuss...well...alternatives."

Pascal eyed him curiously. "What alternatives, Vincent? We've been over this time after time. We voted on it. Mouse was the only holdout."

"Mouse is the only one who is being disrupted," Vincent pointed out. "Made to leave his home."

Pascal threw up his hands in frustration. "It's just a hole in the rock, Vincent. Another one would be just as much his after he moved his junk in."

Rubbing his brow in confusion, Vincent was silent. He didn't have any answers. Looking up, he cocked his head and took a long look at Pascal. "Don't you ever get tired, Pascal?"

The little man grinned. "Oh, I'm tired. Soon as my head hits the pillow, I'll be out like a light. It's been a long day for me, too, you know."

They began walking toward the living chambers and Pascal asked, "You hungry? You didn't come to evening meal."

As though reminded of its emptiness, Vincent's stomach grumbled and Pascal laughed. "Figured as much. I filched a sandwich for you from William, earlier. I knew it was concert night."

Vincent smiled as the sensation of Pascal's love for him warmed him. "Still taking care of me, Pascal?" He remembered how Pascal used to save leftovers for him when he was a boy--still growing by leaps and bounds--

always hungry and always ashamed to ask for more than anyone else when their supplies were so limited.

Pascal ducked his head. "Somebody's gotta do it."

The two friends smiled at one another and walked the rest of the way in silence. When they reached Pascal's chamber, Pascal gave Vincent the wrapped sandwich.

Vincent unwrapped the plastic wrap, carefully folding it afterwards so he could return it to the kitchen, thinking that perhaps William could re-use it. He ate the sandwich quickly while Pascal dressed for bed. He felt much better after he had something in his stomach. He watched as Pascal meticulously laid out his clothes for in the morning, then rose and thanked him. "Thank you, Pascal, for thinking of me. It was kind of you."

"No problem. Goodnight, Vincent."

"Goodnight, Pascal."

Vincent left, then and went to his own chamber. After lighting a few candles, he, too, stripped for bed, then settled to write in his journal. He wasn't certain how to record what he'd felt tonight. Emotions were often elusive.

Tonight I felt something from Catherine--from the bond--that I've never felt before. It is difficult to explain. There are empty places within me...deep as the Abyss and just as fathomless. There is darkness there. Catherine fills this darkness with her light--this has been so from the first moment I saw her--and tonight I realized that no matter what happens in the future she and I will carry one another with us forever. I believe that someday Catherine will move on--away from the circle of my protection--away from my love. And my dream of being a part of her will still be only that. A dream. I believe that. In my heart. It is as it must be, for I must not let my darkness fill her as her light fills me. But for tonight when I felt her love and acceptance surround me, it was eternity. Eternity in that one moment. The thought of what we shared even in that moment could sustain me for a lifetime.

Vincent stopped and stared at the wall for a few moments, thinking of Mouse. Mouse--who had no one, and who had left his dreams behind him in the tinkering he produced in his chamber. His Mousehole. He bent his head over his journal again.

Mouse is still gone. Still alone out in the dark. This is the only home he's ever known...the only love and security. The Mousehole is his. His own place. Something must be done. This is wrong. But how can I force an entire community to forego something that will benefit everyone for the sake of one person?

Frustrated, Vincent blew out the candles and went to bed. As he lay there in the dark silence of his chamber, once more he let Catherine's emotions wash over him. She was peacefully asleep and he allowed himself to be lulled to sleep along with her. Much later he dreamed.

He was searching for Mouse in the darkness down below the Catacombs...calling for him and getting no answer. Frustrated and concerned, Vincent wanted to go home. Wanted Mouse home.

Stirring restlessly, Vincent sought escape from the pain of Mouse's loss. In the dream he felt powerless. He wasn't able to help his friend, and he *should* be able to. His mind drifted to Catherine and the pleasure he took in helping her. It felt good to be needed, but even better to be able to actually help.

In the darkness of his dream, he saw a light ahead and moved toward it. The light was Catherine, who held out her arms for him, and he moved into them gratefully, letting her rest against him where she remained--safe and contented--making him feel once more powerful and protecting. Vincent drifted peacefully until the dream changed again. He realized with vivid clarity that both he and Catherine were naked in one another's arms. And that which he held so tightly chained within himself was growing and changing... becoming stronger than his desire for peace. He felt himself losing control, though he struggled to deny what was happening. And Catherine, who had been content to lie within his embrace--safe and protected--struggled now to be free.

And Vincent woke, sweating--his heart thudding, pounding in his chest. "No!" he growled fervently. "No. I will *not* allow it!"



Catherine rose the next morning feeling as though she hadn't slept at all. Her dreams had been disjointed and disturbing, though she couldn't remember any of them very clearly. She'd had no problems *getting* to sleep: she was so tired that the moment she curled up under the comforter she found herself drifting off. The peace she'd felt in Vincent's presence continued for a long while and she'd felt safe and protected. Later though, Catherine became restless and half-woke more than once, with the feeling of protection she'd felt earlier beginning to take on a different aspect. It wasn't exactly *fright* she'd felt, but more the anxiety of the unknown, as though something in her life was changing and she couldn't quite keep up with the change.

As Catherine stood in the lobby of the Criminal Courts Building waiting for the elevator, she thought glumly, *Why shouldn't my dreams reflect my life? Everything in my life is changing--has been changing--for the past year.* But still, the dreams bothered her. They left her with an oddly unsatisfied feeling. As though there was something she was reaching for, yet couldn't quite touch or understand.

The elevator door opened, and Catherine tried to put her night behind her. She had two depositions to take today and had to go to the hospital to see Anne. Now that the

Slasher case was shelved, she had time to concentrate on the other cases that were piling up.

The day passed slowly and the depositions merely seemed repetitious. Sometimes it seemed to Catherine that the questions she asked people ran together, so many of the responses were the same. *There's nothing new under the sun*, she thought with a touch of bitterness. Or maybe it was just that the type of criminal she was encountering lately all had the same stories. Different viewpoints, but still the same story. She saw the results of their work daily in the beaten wives, rape victims, abused children and it was difficult to find pity for them.

By lunchtime Catherine was more than ready to flee the office. Jenny called to find out what time she wanted to meet her at the hospital.

Catherine glanced at the clock on the wall. "I can finish up here in a few minutes, Jen. I'll meet you there." Catherine hesitated, then asked gently: "How are *you* doing this morning? Have you checked with the hospital?"

Jenny told Catherine that the doctor assured her that her mother was fine, and she'd even spoken to Anne, which relieved Catherine tremendously.

As Catherine was leaving the office, Joe called out to her. "Cathy...wait up."

She turned to see the young assistant D.A. trotting up. "What is it, Joe?"

Joe was slightly winded, apparently from running to catch her. His hair was disheveled and his face flushed. "Just...heard from Edie..." he panted, "that Jenny Aronson's mother...was in an accident last night. She okay?"

Touched by Joe's concern for the mother of someone he knew only slightly, Catherine nodded and told him, "She will be. She had some internal bleeding and they did emergency surgery last night. But the doctor seems to think she'll be fine. It's nice of you to ask, Joe."

Joe flushed, as though someone pointing out his kind nature was embarrassing to him. "Good." He hesitated, scratched his head, then looked past her to where District Attorney Moreno was walking to his office. "Well, go ahead and take as long as you need...for lunch, y'know...."

Joe gestured toward Moreno's office as though hinting he needed to go, and she nodded her understanding. As she watched Joe walking slowly toward Moreno's office, rhythmically slapping his leg with the manila folder he carried, Catherine felt a pang of inexplicable loss. *Joe is such a fine man. I wonder what Dad would think of him?*

Catherine turned away and walked toward the elevator. Deep down, she knew what Charles Chandler would think. He'd like Joe very much, but he wouldn't have considered him suitable for her. *No. Somehow, he'd still believe that someone like Tom Gunther would be more appropriate.* The thought depressed her unutterably.

The trip to the hospital seemed interminable. Traffic was terrible and Catherine longed desperately to be just about *anywhere* else. She tried very hard to do as she'd

done the day before and force her attitude to change so she wouldn't upset Jenny. She succeeded to some degree, mostly by thinking about Vincent and she wondered how she would ever have survived this past year without him to anchor her.

Tears threatened, but the hospital was coming up so she wiped them away. She didn't want to upset Jenny any more than she was already.

By the time Catherine reached the hallway outside Anne's hospital room—where she met Jenny—her tears had dried and she was able to face her friend with a better attitude.

Jenny stood talking to Dr. Abrams, and as Catherine approached, the physician smiled and left. Jenny seemed pleased.

"Good news? Catherine asked brightly.

"The best. Mom's doing great. The gash she had in her thigh—the one that severed the artery—won't cause any permanent damage to the muscle or nerves. At least the doctor doesn't think so. She'll have to have some therapy for a while, but the prognosis is very good." Jenny laughed and added: "She's already had us call in a plastic surgeon to talk about repairing the scar."

Catherine didn't laugh. The mention of plastic surgeons only reminded her of her own past—and future—surgeries. "Can I see her?"

"Sure. She's been anxious to see you."

Catherine was a little hesitant as she went into the hospital room, almost expecting to see Anne Aronson looking ill and wasted, like her mother had been when she'd seen her last. But other than the white surroundings of the hospital room, and the mass of flowers surrounding the patient, nothing else was the same as that day so long ago: Anne was sitting up in bed looking cheerful and delighted to see her "second child."

"Cathy!" Anne crowed. "I'm so glad to see you. Thank you for visiting! It's so dreary here."

Massively relieved, Catherine gingerly bent and hugged the older woman. "You look surprisingly well," she said as she straightened. "...after...well...after last night. I'm glad."

Anne winced a little as she shifted. "Um. I'm not saying I'm perfect. It hurts. But I'll be okay and that's what matters. Right?"

Catherine found a smile. "Right. And I hear the doctor's prognosis is very good."

Anne yawned delicately behind her hand. "Oh. Dear. They give me pain pills...and they *do* help, but they make me terribly sleepy." The older woman patted Catherine's hand, her eyes concerned. "It's so good to see you, Cathy. We haven't seen you much in the past year. I've been worried about you." Anne yawned again, looking sleepier.

Touched that despite the fact Anne was the one in the hospital, she was still concerned about *her*, Catherine smiled again. "I'm fine, Anne. Really."

Jenny had followed Catherine into the room and now came forward to tuck her mother in. Bending to kiss her, Jenny told her: "Why don't you rest now, Mom? It's Cathy's lunchtime, and I'm sure they'll be bringing yours soon. I'll come back up this evening."

Anne nodded and smiled sweetly. "I think I will. And Cathy...thank you for coming. Don't be a stranger."

Ashamed that she'd so let her old friends slip out of her life, Catherine said quickly, "I'll try not to, Anne."

Catherine and Jenny went on to the hospital cafeteria for lunch, and Jenny told Catherine, "You know Mom and Dad are moving back to Connecticut in a few months?"

Surprised, Catherine shook her head. "No. I didn't know, Jen. I know you'll miss them."

"I really will. It's been kind of nice, having them here. Especially with as busy as I am." Jenny sat down with her tray and added, "But she's right about you. It's the same thing your father and I have been telling you for months...no one ever sees you anymore. We miss you, Cath."

Aching with the desire to have some part--the good part--of her old life back, Catherine said quietly, "I miss everyone, too, Jenny. I'll try to do better."

"You *are* coming to the museum benefit on Friday night, aren't you?" Something in Catherine's face must have indicated indecision because Jenny added: "You've *got* to come. The whole thing is just so Elliot Burch can donate his marvelous art collection to the museum! *Incredible*, Cathy!"

Catherine laughed at Jenny's enthusiasm. "The man or the art, Jenny?"

Popping a bite into her mouth, Jenny said with a smile: "Both!"

Catherine had every intention of attending the benefit, but she'd been teasing Jenny about it... pretending to be too busy...except it wasn't entirely pretense. "All right," she said finally, not wanting to string Jenny along any longer. "I'll be there. I promise." The two women smiled at one another and finished their lunches. *It really is time for me to try easing back into the social scene a little. I've been awfully edgy lately.*



Far below the city, below even the deepest inhabited levels, Vincent walked in deep natural caverns among the shadows of forgotten ages. No time existed, here, and there was no sense of presence near to disturb him as he thought through his problems. Mouse and Catherine.

Since adolescence Vincent had come here to escape the pressures of his life. The darkness was humbling and took him out of himself. Here, he could both extend himself and realize his limitations. In the darkness he knew who he was. Alone, he could find himself.

Last night after his dream, he'd come here to re-examine his relationship with Catherine and to put it into

perspective. And perhaps, too...to put into perspective his own ability to protect those he loved.

Standing on a rock precipice overlooking a slow-moving river, Vincent listened to his surroundings: the living rush of the river as it poured its way over the smooth-worn rocks, a soft beat of a bat's wings in the still air and the sound of a tiny drop of water falling behind him.

And even here, he could sense Catherine's despair.

Without knowing the reason for the emotion, still Vincent could not help but feel there was a connection to his dream. To himself. The image of Catherine struggling to free herself from him remained vivid in his imagination.

Yet, the bond drew him to her. It was a shining thread drawing his soul through the labyrinth of his own confused mind. There was no escape—even if he'd *wished* for it. And he could never wish for escape from what he'd desired all his life...to be truly a part of someone else. Someone loved.

There seemed no answer to it: if Vincent allowed himself to remain in Catherine's light, then of necessity he exposed her to the darkness that dwelt within him.

As he stood on that high cliff, surrounded by a total absence of light, in his mind he could see Catherine as she'd come to him the night before: brave and sure, full of love and light. And the purity and promise of that light suffused his very being. He could no more deny it than a starving man could refuse food.

Vincent bent his head in shame at his weakness. After a long moment, he raised his head, sighed and started home. *I will not allow any harm to come to her, nor will I allow the dark to touch her.*

All his life, Vincent had walked the knife-edge balance between two worlds and two lives and now was truly no different. He could manage. He always had.

Or so he told himself.

As Vincent traversed the black passageways, he became aware of a presence. He stopped and held his breath. There was a faint scrape of leather on rock. *Mouse.* He called softly into the darkness. "Mouse...I know you're there."

When Mouse didn't answer, Vincent sat against the wall and waited. The sense of being watched became stronger. "Mouse. If you come home with me, I'll try to convince Father that you shouldn't be forced to move. I can't promise anything...but I'll try."

There was a faint change in the air--the essence he sensed. Very subtle. He waited. Eventually the rustle of fabric came closer and Mouse settled beside him. Enormously relieved, Vincent drew a deep breath. "Hello, Mouse."

"Couldn't find Mouse, could you?" The boy sounded like his usual, cheerful, trusting self.

"No, Mouse. I couldn't. Are you ready to go back, now?"

"Sure. Vincent not let Father take Mousehole."

Uncertainty nagged at Vincent. Mouse was so trusting. *What will happen if I fail?* "I'll try. But I can't promise, Mouse. Do you understand?"

Mouse didn't answer the question. Instead, he stood and started away, obviously anxious to be on his way home. Vincent sighed, shoved himself to his feet and followed.



Catherine collapsed onto her couch, allowing her spine to curl comfortably into the cushions. Kicking off her shoes, she tucked her toes up under one of the throw pillows and hugged another one. *If this day had been one minute longer...* she thought wearily, *I think I'd've died right there at my desk.*

After returning to her office from the hospital, Catherine spent the entire afternoon completing her work on the Gonzaba deposition and going over the typed summary of the Wyman deposition, both of them critical in a trial involving a man who had beaten his wife of thirteen years to death in front of their two children. The work hadn't helped her depression at all, and now that she was home she was completely exhausted.

Catherine was just dozing off when the telephone rang. Groaning, she rolled off the couch and managed to make it to the phone before the answering machine picked up. It was her father asking if she could join him for dinner.

Rubbing aching eyes and pushing her bangs back, Catherine repressed a sigh. All she really wanted to do was sleep, but she'd put her father off too many times, lately. Besides, if she didn't go with him and make it look as though she was enjoying herself--enjoying her *life*--she'd only have to deal with his well-meant interference tomorrow... and the next day and the next. With great effort, Catherine once more forced aside her exhaustion and depression with feigned cheerfulness. "That would be wonderful, Daddy. Could you give me an hour or so to get ready? I just walked in."

As Catherine listened to her father's enthusiastic reply, Catherine thought wistfully of her couch, but after hanging up the phone she dutifully bathed and dressed especially carefully, paying extra attention to the dark circles under her eyes as she applied her makeup. When she was finished, she stared into the mirror, examining herself from all angles. She was satisfied. *I'll pass. It is Friday, after all. I'm entitled to be a little tired.*

Draping a light shawl over her shoulders, Catherine opened the balcony doors and walked outside, planning to wait for her father there. The spring breeze was pleasant as she looked down at the city. Twilight was fading quickly into true dark and the city lights threaded through the night like multicolored fireflies. The park with its mysterious shadows reminded her of Vincent and she wondered where he was. Gradually Catherine felt her

weariness fading and found herself actually looking forward to dinner with her father.

As she stood quietly in the darkness enjoying the spring night, her doorbell rang and she went inside to let her father in.

When she opened the door, Charles Chandler beamed. "Cathy! You look marvelous!"

Enfolded in her father's loving arms, Catherine's remaining reservations over the evening fell away.



Vincent and Mouse managed to make it back to the Hub before evening meal. Together, they went directly to the dining area. Both of them were ravenous: Vincent had eaten nothing since the sandwich Pascal had saved for him, and Mouse had been foraging for days. But neither of them were particularly happy to be the center of attention as they made their way through the crowded chamber.

Vincent waved away questions as to where he'd been--where he'd found Mouse--with a small shake of his head. Mouse was still distant with everyone and stayed close to Vincent. People didn't press, but Vincent could still feel their curiosity.

They managed fairly well until they reached the serving line and encountered William, the cook, with his dour, unforgiving countenance. Vincent stood patiently as William glowered at both of them, serving spoon in hand, arms folded over his ample belly. "Where the dickens have you *been*?" At first, Vincent wasn't certain if William meant him, Mouse, or both of them. But William was ignoring Mouse, so he obviously meant Vincent. "Not here last night, and again today. Had Father beside himself... not that he *said* anything outright, mind."

Vincent's mouth was watering for William's chicken and dumplings. But he could tell that despite his bluster, William had also been concerned for him...and probably for Mouse, as well.

Knowing he was still the center of attention and hating every moment of it, Vincent penitently held out his plate. He'd learned long ago that arguing with William was rarely a satisfying experience. Especially when one is hungry. Besides, Vincent knew William was right. "I'm sorry, William. Truly. I haven't yet spoken to Father, but I regret that I upset everyone." He shrugged. "There was something that needed to be done."

William grunted, stared at Mouse, then filled Vincent's plate, hesitated, then offered him two extra rolls, mumbling under his breath, "Here. I know you like 'em."

Sighing with relief that at least *one* ordeal was over, Vincent smiled at the truculent, red-bearded cook, touched by his solicitude. "Thank you, William," he said softly. "It's much appreciated. I *am* very hungry."

William filled Mouse's plate without a word, but Vincent noticed that the cook put an extra helping on

Mouse's plate, as well. His own sort of "welcome home."

They left the serving line and looked for a quiet place to eat. Vincent knew he was hiding--not yet ready to answer questions--and there was obviously no one better to hide with than Mouse.

He and Mouse ate quietly, with the boy staring out with accusing eyes across the dining room at the rest of his family. He was obviously not ready to be forgiving. Finally, knowing he could put it off no longer, Vincent returned his plates to the kitchen and turned his steps toward Father's study, where he knew the older man would be relaxing after his own evening meal. Mouse followed him until he realized where he was going.

"Mouse goin' home. Vincent talk to Father?"

"I'll do what I can, Mouse."

The boy trotted away down the tunnel and disappeared around the corner, leaving Vincent to face Father alone.

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Catherine and her father strolled casually from the cab to her building. Their dinner had been peaceful, and if Charles Chandler had felt any desire to urge his daughter toward any change in life style, he'd restrained himself. It was as though a tacit truce had been declared for the night.

"It's terrible about Anne's accident," Charles commented as they neared the building. "I saw her yesterday, though, and she's doing well."

Catherine nodded, thinking about Anne's attitude. "I know. She's amazingly resilient." Taking another few steps, she added: "She and David are moving back to Connecticut soon, did she tell you?"

Her father nodded, his expression distant. "Remember the last time we were there together? Your mother, you and me?"

Catherine's memory immediately flashed back to that bright summer when she and her mother had spent so much time together there, at the lake. For a moment the soft lights of the lobby were dimmed by the incandescent memory. "Sometimes," she said softly, "it seems so long ago...and other times...."

"Just yesterday?" Charles Chandler smiled wistfully. "I know." Then, as though the memories had become too close for both of them, he changed the subject back to Anne Aronson. "Connecticut will be good for Anne. I don't think she's ever really loved New York the way Jenny does. They really only moved here to be close to her. I know David's looking forward to his retirement."

They'd reached the lobby of the building, and Catherine stopped, glancing up at her father. Charles Chandler's hair shone whitely in the light, but he still seemed youthful to Catherine. She reached to embrace him fiercely, wishing suddenly that she could be for him the daughter he'd wanted. Wishing she could do for him what he still wanted--marry and settle down, give him grandchildren,

take over his law firm--be happy. But right now, Catherine wasn't even sure what *she* wanted, where she was going, or how she was going to get there. She felt as if she was on a raft in the middle of a sea of quicksand. Everything was unstable and she didn't know *why*. As she hugged her father she thought desperately, *This is crazy. I like the person I'm becoming. Why do I feel so damned...needy all of a sudden.*

As though he sensed Catherine's anxiety, Charles Chandler tightened his embrace and whispered in her ear: "What is it, kitten? Are you all right?"

Catherine didn't lift her head, but only nodded against his shoulder. With one last desperate hug, Catherine stepped back and smiled. "I really am, Daddy. I just love you."

Charles Chandler smiled, then. A small, almost secret smile that touched his eyes and oddly, reminded Catherine vividly of Vincent. He looked absurdly proud of her. "I love you, too, Sweetheart."



Vincent drew a deep breath before turning the corner and stepping onto the iron staircase at the threshold of Father's study. Father was already waiting for him, and Vincent felt skewered by the intense gaze from the unwelcoming grey eyes. "Vincent. Do come in and grace me with your presence."

Vincent hung his head, hiding an inadvertent smile behind his hair. He couldn't quite help himself: Father was *so* predictable. Somehow, the thought helped a little to ease his own sense of guilt over simply disappearing as he had. By the time he'd reached Father's desk, Vincent was indeed, feeling more penitent. He knew his disappearance had worried his parent. "I'm sorry to have worried you, Father. I *did* leave a note."

A heavy silence hung between them for a moment, then Father expelled a frustrated sigh. "I know you did." Reaching for his cane, the older man rose and limped around the desk to sit in an old leather armchair beside a small octagonal table. "Where did you go, Vincent? What took you away?"

Not truly knowing how to answer, and knowing that *whatever* words he chose would be inadequate, Vincent shrugged. "Below. In the dark. I needed to think. To be alone for a time." He paused, then offered gently: "I found Mouse."

"Did you bring him home?"

Vincent nodded. "Yes. Father...I need to talk to the council."

Father gestured for Vincent to sit and Vincent pulled the old rocker over to face him. Father raked his hands through his hair and shook his head. "I'm glad you found Mouse, Vincent...and though I'm not anxious to begin the arguing all over again, I'll call the council together." Father looked as though he wanted to ask more about

Mouse, but changed his mind. A silence fell between them, then Father asked bluntly, "I know you're upset about Mouse, but that's not all that's upsetting you. Could you tell me what it is...that's disturbing you? Perhaps I can I help?"

"I don't know," Vincent said helplessly, sensing Father's genuine desire to help. "Sometimes..." he began. "...sometimes I feel caught up...weightless. Like a leaf carried in a thunderstorm. My life is changing, Father." Vincent's heart was pounding: he felt an excitement and eagerness toward life that both exhilarated and frightened him. He wanted Father to understand and to counsel him. Father had always been the one to guide him through the dark times--to steer him toward control and peace. He needed guidance now, too, for although this was perhaps the brightest time of his life, he was also confused and disoriented. He glanced up hopefully to the man who had been the center of his life for so long, now.

Father leaned with one elbow on the table, his glasses dangling from his hand as he chewed thoughtfully on the earpiece. "How is it changing, Vincent? Can you explain?"

Mutely, Vincent shook his head again. All he could say, was, "Catherine."

Father sighed and carefully placed his glasses on the table. Without looking at his son, he once more ran a hand through his graying hair. "Catherine."

Father looked to Vincent as though he hadn't slept... and he probably hadn't. *He was too concerned for me,* Vincent thought guiltily.

Finally Father said quietly, "Vincent. I know you... care...for Catherine very deeply. But her world is not yours. She's not even a helper...."

Vincent leaned forward eagerly, wanting Father to understand. "But she *would* be, Father. Catherine would never betray us."

Shaking his head--Vincent could sense his sorrow--Father said gently: "Perhaps not. But that's not the point. Catherine is *not* one of us. She never could be. And I fear that your hoping...dreaming for more...will only upset you. As it has already...obviously done."

Suddenly frustrated, Vincent rose abruptly, towering over the older man, who seemed suddenly frail--agonizingly indecisive--when Vincent needed his strength. His understanding. "Then what *is* the point, Father? What, in fact, *is* the *point* of my entire existence?" Then, without giving Father a chance to answer, Vincent left, taking the steps two at a time.

Stalking stiffly down the corridor, Vincent entered his chamber and grabbed his cloak from the chair. *He had to go Above...had to see Catherine.*



Catherine closed the door behind her and leaned against it. She stood there, yawning, without even turning

on the light. Through the filmy curtains on the balcony doors she could see a dark shadow, a silhouette of a cloaked form, and she hurried to meet Vincent.

Throwing open the balcony door, Catherine called softly, expectantly. "Vincent?" She searched the shadows, but could see nothing until he stepped forward into the light, appearing almost magically—as he always did—from the darkness, the vivid gold of his hair silvered by the moonlight and his voice silken and soft as the spring air. "Catherine. I am not...disturbing you?"

He seemed more tentative than was usual—more shy—backing away a step or two as she approached. But when her fingers touched his chest he stopped, though he turned his face away. Looking up, she could see only the blunt silhouette of his face, black against the light of the city sky and the long sweep of his mane as a breeze blew it back. Flattening her palm against him—sensing that the contact somehow anchored him here with her—she answered, "No. You didn't disturb me. I just came in."

He sighed then—a weary-sounding breath, expelled as though it had been held far too long—and turned his face back to her. "You were...sad...tonight. And happy."

Catherine slipped her arm under his elbow and led him to the edge of the balcony, where he wrapped his hands around the railing. And she placed her hand over one of his, noting as she always did how large they were beside hers...how strange and beautiful in their own way. She turned her gaze outwards across the city and leaned on the railing, her weight on her other arm. Not moving her hand from his. "It was...that kind of night. Daddy took me to supper. We talked about Anne—my friend Jenny's mother—and about my mother. Jenny's parents are moving back to Connecticut soon...when she's healed."

He glanced down at her and didn't look away when she met his eyes. "You will miss her mother?"

Nodding wordlessly, she squeezed his hand and thought of the long night ahead of her. Knowing she was going to sleep restlessly.

After a few moments, he offered gently, "You're still unsettled. Would you like me to read to you?"

The thought of listening to his voice, letting it lull her uneasy thoughts brought again that amazing sense of peace—always so unexpected—stealing upon her. "Oh, I'd like that very much. Would you?"

"Of course. What would you like?"

Catherine smiled, patted his arm and said with a laugh, "Wait here!" Dashing back inside, she ran to her nightstand and pulled out an old volume of Lewis Carroll that her mother had given her when she was a child. Drawing a deep breath, she hugged it to her, then ran back to Vincent.

When she held the volume out to him, he took it and ran his fingers over the gilt-edged binding then gave her one of his quiet almost-smiles. "Lewis Carroll." She could have sworn his eyes twinkled with delight. "What is your preference?" He was already settling down on his haunches

to sit and lean against the low wall, and Catherine settled beside him, snuggling in under his arm. She took the book from him and turned to her favorite.

"Ah," he breathed. There was laughter in the sound. "The Walrus and the Carpenter." One of my favorites."

And he began reading.

Catherine closed her eyes and let his voice carry her away...remembering times when her mother had sat next to her reading the same poem night after night. The rhythm of the poem soothed her and the absurdity made her smile. By the time he was finished, she was sleepy and contented, hardly wanting to move.

"Catherine," Vincent whispered, as though not wishing to disturb her. "Are you asleep?"

"Ummm," she murmured. "No. Not quite."

Vincent shifted, starting to rise and Catherine automatically rose with him. Blinking sleepily, Catherine smiled up at him—thinking how oddly normal it seemed to have an Aslan-like lion-man reading to her from Carroll—and told him solemnly: "Thank you."

They stood for a moment in silence, then he placed the book in her hand. "Lewis Carroll often makes life's absurdities oddly comforting. Sleep well, Catherine."

Catherine clutched the book to her chest and nodded. "Goodnight, Vincent." She opened the door to her living room, then turned back, but Vincent was already gone, as silently as though he'd never been there at all. Sighing, she went into her bedroom, placed the book back into her nightstand and began undressing for bed. Now that Vincent was gone, Catherine wished him back. She felt oddly alone.



When Catherine turned to go inside, Vincent stepped back into the shadows on the balcony. He started to leave, but hesitated long enough to see her look back for him. There was such a wistful look of longing on her face it made him want to rush back to her...regardless he had no way of knowing if the look—or the emotions he was sensing—were for him or for whatever had been disturbing her all day. But he didn't go back. Instead, he waited until she'd gone inside to her bedroom and watched her place the book—almost tenderly, it seemed to him—into the nightstand drawer. The book held memories for her. *Pleasant ones, it seems*, he thought as he remembered the poem and the emotions it evoked. He liked it, too. He couldn't begin to remember how many times he'd begged Father to read it to him...it had always seemed so much better when it was read to him.

As he reminisced Vincent let his mind wander and didn't notice that Catherine had started undressing. The gossamer draperies hid very little, and Vincent turned away quickly. Once more, he was caught in a heady whirl of sensation and emotion. His heart was pounding, his body

suddenly fevered. The moment of deep peace he'd shared with Catherine was shattered.

With one last, helpless look back at the now-dark bedroom, he eased over the edge of the balcony and dropped soundlessly to the fire escape below and sought refuge in the shadows of the streets...and then home.

Vincent managed to calm the storm raging within himself before reaching the Hub, but he was left with a vague feeling of dissatisfaction. He felt guilty for having left Father the way he had, knowing as he did how much his father cared. *He believes he is helping. He simply doesn't understand.* Vincent knew that Father's chances of "understanding" were non-existent. Father wanted him to give up his relationship with Catherine...stay away from her and stay Below, where he was safe. But Vincent simply couldn't pretend Catherine didn't exist or ignore the pull toward her: the bond made that impossible. It would be simpler for him to stop breathing.

Vincent stopped at the Mirror Pool to think--before going on to face Father. He sat on a boulder near the water, close enough to see the still reflection of the stars, but far enough away that he couldn't see his own reflection. The reflection of the beast.

Through the bond, with Catherine asleep, Vincent was able to regain the sense of peace they had shared earlier. Her sleep was deep and untroubled. He closed his eyes, sighed and drifted. But after a time, he rose reluctantly to go speak with Father.

As Vincent knew he would be, Father was still awake, awaiting his return. The older man glanced up, putting aside his reading glasses as Vincent came down the stairs. "Vincent! You're back early!" He sounded relieved, and Vincent knew he *was*.

Vincent nodded. "Yes. Catherine was extremely tired. It's been a stressful week for her." He paused, then offered gently, "I'm sorry I lost patience with you earlier, Father." He sat across from his parent, resting his folded

hands on his knees. There was little else to say.

Father cleared his throat. "It doesn't matter. I understand how you must feel. The restrictions of your life here...."

"Are no different now than before," Vincent said quietly. "It's only that...I...am changed. From what I was before Catherine." He lifted his eyes to Father's. "I cannot go back to what I was before, Father."

Father didn't answer and his look was thoughtful as he shuffled among his papers for a bookmark, which he used to mark his place. Eventually, he smiled and put aside his book. "Well then. Did you enjoy your evening?"

Grateful for the respite, Vincent told him about reading "The Walrus and the Carpenter" to Catherine and how much pleasure each of them took from that simple pastime.

"I would think you'd be able to recite the entire poem by heart after as many times as I read it to you...and as often as you've read it to the children," Father laughingly reminded him.

Vincent yawned and stretched. "Possibly. But there's a certain...enjoyment...in the actual reading of it." Rising, Vincent sighed and said quietly, "Thank you, Father."

Obviously caught off-guard, Father asked curiously, "Whatever for?"

"For not being angry...and...for all the times you read me "The Walrus and the Carpenter."

Father just smiled and nodded.

As Vincent left Father, heading toward his chamber, he knew his peace wouldn't last. It didn't matter: he savored it all the more for its rarity. What he'd shared tonight with Catherine—and momentarily with Father—let light slide past the shadows. He was once more imagining the possibilities of life—dreaming dreams too wonderful to speak aloud.



SHADOW IMAGES

poem by Rhonda Collins

My heart was never empty of you
not even for a moment.
Your image rose from sleep in fevered dreams
I attended—nerve-naked.

Neither pride nor prayers offered peace,
for even in idle dreams
the vision of you with another
shadowed the light of your love.

CHAPTER SIX: SHADOW IMAGES

The weather had turned winterish again, with a late cold front, and Vincent was restless. The atmosphere in the tunnels had driven him out into the city, into an early evening rain. A council session still had not been scheduled for Vincent to discuss Mouse's objection to the aqueduct. Various problems kept cropping up, keep one or another of the council members from attending, and a full council was necessary to change anything. Consequently, Mouse was once more becoming withdrawn and Vincent worried the boy would again disappear.

But the situation Below wasn't all that was causing Vincent's nerves: he knew Catherine was out tonight and he was concerned for her. She hadn't said much to him, but he knew this was the first time since her attack almost a year ago that she'd faced a large group of people in a society setting. It was a museum benefit, she'd told him. Elliot Burch, a wealthy builder, had donated his entire art collection to the museum, and Catherine's friend, Jenny, had arranged the entire benefit. So of course she had to go. *It will be good for her. It will help her to move back into her proper place in life. With the proper people,* Vincent told himself sternly.

He felt a little as though Catherine were his child, venturing out into the world on her own for the first time. He knew the feeling was ridiculous, but knowing it was didn't make it go away. He felt helpless and inadequate, and wondered if that was how Father felt when his son left the security of the tunnels. He imagined it was.

Vincent wandered aimlessly through the garbage-filled alleys. The mist rose from the streets and swirled around his feet and the steam from the steam tunnels below billowed through the storm grates. The streets were wet from the earlier rain, but instead of making things smell fresh, like it did in the park, here in the back alleys of the city all the rain did was bring out the stench of the garbage. Vincent wondered why hadn't *stayed* in the park tonight. But in the same moment, his mind supplied the answer. *Because Catherine is out in the city, and short of following*

her to her destination, this is the closest I could come to her.

In actuality, Catherine wasn't far away--only a few blocks--close enough for Vincent to reach her in time if she needed him. *Paranoia?* Most probably, he chided himself sternly.

Up ahead somewhere, Vincent heard piano music. Vincent wasn't certain, but it sounded like Beethoven's "Pathetique" sonata...perhaps the second movement. As he drew closer, he could tell the music was coming from the basement of an old building where an elderly, gray-haired man sat playing. Vincent found a relatively dry place where there was no water dripping from overhead and stopped to listen.

He'd been yearning for this music: the concert he and Catherine had missed had been Beethoven. And Vincent loved this piece of music, from the gentle beginning to the stirring end. He was enjoying the piece, letting himself become immersed in the music, when a large, sleek black car swung into the alley, its lights hitting him full in the face momentarily. His heart pounding, Vincent ducked, and the car glided past him and stopped in front of the basement window. Apparently he hadn't been noticed. The headlights of the car went off and two men got out.

At the same time, the light in the basement went out. Obviously something was not right, and Vincent watched the men suspiciously. Both men lit the dangling fuses of what appeared to Vincent to be homemade firebombs. They tossed the bombs through the window--shattering the glass--then ran back to their car and backed hurriedly out of the alley.

"Help! Somebody help me!" the old man was screaming in panic.

Vincent reacted without thought--instinctively--launching himself feet-first through the window, shattering the remaining glass on his way in. He could see the old man on the other side of the flames, coughing and choking on the roiling smoke.

Pulling his heavy wool and leather cloak from his shoulders, Vincent began beating desperately at the flames, hoping he could get to the old man in time. The flames licked at his hands, singeing his fur and burning his hands and face. The fire crackled around him and breathing became more and more difficult, but gradually he beat the fire back. When the last bright tongue of flame was gone and all that remained was the dense smoke, he searched, coughing, through the half-burned rubble to find the old man, who had collapsed on the floor.

Vincent knelt beside him, checking to see if he was breathing. He was. After assuring himself that the man would recover, Vincent stepped back, unsure of what to do next. The man began coughing again and looked up. Vincent backed away--farther into the shadows--and the man reached out..."Wait! I owe you my *life*!"

"Come no closer," Vincent managed to whisper, hoping the man could not see him clearly from where he was.

"Why do you hide? Let me *see* you."

"No."

"Without your help, those punks would've killed us *all*."

"All?" Vincent asked in an even lower whisper. Only then did it occur to him that the fire might well have taken the entire building, jeopardizing many people. He was even more grateful he'd been there to stop it.

The old man was struggling to get to his feet and was attempting to answer Vincent's question. "The other tenants. Those who refuse to be chased from their apartments."

Puzzling over such an inconceivable thing, Vincent couldn't help asking, "These men who did this...why do they try to drive you from your homes?"

"Because we're old. And there's a dollar to be made."

The man tried again to rise, and reflexively Vincent came forward to assist him, taking his arm. The man looked up and gasped in shock as he glimpsed Vincent's face.

Steadying him before releasing his arm, Vincent then backed away again. "I'm sorry," he apologized, embarrassed and upset that he'd been unsuccessful in hiding himself. "I didn't mean to frighten you. I'll go."

The old man took a step forward, reached out a shaking hand and touched Vincent's face gently then put his hand to his mouth. He stared a moment, then murmured softly, "I can't believe it. Where do you come from?"

Vincent was never quite certain how to answer that question. Since he was unable to tell the man about the tunnels, he merely told as much truth as he was able. He felt no further fear from the old man, but only curiosity. "I live...here. In the city...in a secret place...a safe place."

The old man felt around for a chair and Vincent helped him sit. After a moment or two, the man nodded. "A secret place. It must be so, of course. For one who is so

different. Men do not understand...they want everyone to be the same. And they destroy what is different." His eyes met Vincent's and he smiled. "Do not be afraid to talk to me. I understand differences."

Vincent remained in the shadows, but he asked softly, "Tell me, now. About what is troubling you. Of these men."

"My name is Misha Langer," the man began, nodding. "My wife, Sophie, and I have lived in this apartment building for thirty years. Our children were born here. Grew up here. Our friends are here. The trouble started several months ago. Men in fancy suits came by and offered everyone in the building money--money to leave the building."

"But why?" Vincent was extremely puzzled. "Why would anyone *do* that?"

The man shook his head wearily. "No one was quite sure. Now we know that they want to tear down the building...perhaps to build another. All we know is that none of us want to leave. This is our home. We are not the only ones who have been here for thirty years or more. To leave it all behind...to start over again...."

Vincent could imagine how this man must feel. If he, himself, were to have to leave his home, it would be terrible. Even if it were not for the fact that he had nowhere else to go...still...it was *home*. He thought uneasily of Mouse.

The old man continued, filling the silence with his words. "No one accepted their money. Then threats were made and still no one accepted. And now, they send thugs in the middle of the night to follow up on the threats. So we stay inside behind locked doors like frightened children...they come and they turn off our heat, break the elevator, stuff up the plumbing...."

There was the sound of footsteps--of someone coming in a rush down the basement steps--and a light switched on, startling Vincent and sending him back into the shadows.

"Misha...Misha, are you all right?" a woman called anxiously.

Vincent turned to the man. He needed to leave, but he wanted to leave the man with some hope. "Something will be done. I promise you."

As Vincent turned to leave, the old man reached out and asked, "Will you tell me your name?"

Vincent paused just before pulling himself through the window. He considered only an instant before deciding there was no danger in telling the man his name. "Vincent," he told him, then climbed through the window and dropped to the ground outside. He could hear the woman's voice as she reached the bottom of the stairs: "It's freezing down here...."

As Vincent left--hurrying away down the alley--he decided the best thing to do was to tell Catherine about this and let her investigate. He turned toward her apartment to wait for her to return.

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Catherine wandered through the packed room at the museum benefit, greeting people she knew and making polite conversation. Most of the guests at the benefit who knew her also knew about her attack and she felt their scrutiny acutely...as though they were looking for the scars. But of course people were too polite to ask, and she kept telling herself that it was her imagination. Some of the guests, however, were old friends and she was genuinely glad to see them. And once she became accustomed to being out again, she began enjoying herself. *Vincent told me not to be afraid, and he was right*, she thought as she smiled to herself. *He always is.*

Catherine still hadn't seen the guest of honor except in brief glimpses, though she knew what he looked like from photos and television. She hadn't seen Jenny much, either. Jenny had been too busy making sure everything went without a hitch, but she *did* meet Catherine when she'd first arrived.

Piano music tinkled cheerfully in the background as Catherine peered thoughtfully across the room. Two of her more recent acquaintances were having a conversation about the guest of honor: it was obvious that the woman was particularly impressed with Elliot Burch and it piqued Catherine's interest.

"It's hard to imagine a better private collection," the woman was saying.

"Can you imagine being rich enough to give it away?" The man was clearly envious.

"And he started with *nothing*! Elliot Burch is beyond *anyone's* imagination."

A group of people moved away and Catherine could now see Mr. Burch as he stood in conversation with several reporters. He was graciously giving interviews. *I have to admit, he is very attractive.* Just then Elliot Burch's head turned and his eyes met hers. And he didn't look away.

The reporter was asking him: "Mr. Burch, what is the estimated value of your collection and what prompted you to donate it to the museum?"

The look in Elliot Burch's eyes gave Catherine an odd feeling...one she'd almost forgotten. She was being admired and desired and it gave her an incredible rush. She smiled at him and he smiled back--then he turned his charm back to the reporter. "Can you put a price tag on magic?" he asked. "The true value of great art lies in it's ability to influence and enhance the quality of humanity. And contrary to popular opinion, I *believe* New Yorkers still qualify."

Catherine felt he was overdoing it a bit and was certain the grandstanding was for her benefit. The thought thrilled her.

After the reporters moved on, the guest of honor was occupied with the mayor and several people on the museum board, and Catherine turned away to enjoy the art: there was a lot there *to* enjoy.

A short time later, Catherine was admiring a landscape when she heard a distinctive male voice beside her.

"Incredible, isn't it?"

She turned in time to see Elliot Burch stop beside her. He continued... "Everything happening at the same time... passion, humor, danger...."

Turning back to the painting with another smile, inordinately pleased that he'd come looking for her, Catherine answered: "A little like life."

He sighed hugely and chuckled as though she'd said just the right thing. "More...than a little. I'm Elliot Burch."

"Of course you are." She couldn't resist it. The opening was just too good.

At his look—as though she'd taken the wind out of his sails—she laughed. Flirting was fun. She'd missed it. "I'm sorry. But you *are* the reason we're all here."

Regaining his composure, he seemed pleased as he considered. "I suppose I *am*."

"I'm Catherine Chandler."

He smiled—a little like the Cheshire Cat without the teeth: the effect was the same. "I know."

"You *do*?" she asked, startled.

"UmHum. I asked one of your friends."

He looked smug and Catherine felt herself blushing. She opened her mouth to speak and couldn't for a moment. Turning back to the painting to avoid looking at him, she said meekly, "I guess it was *my* turn to be a little flustered."

"Eyah," he drawled. "It's only fair."

"And..." she admitted, "not entirely unenjoyable." *This is really getting interesting*, Catherine thought, ignoring the butterflies in her stomach. Elliot was standing very close behind her and she could feel the heat from his body. She was very aware of him physically. And she hadn't been flirted with this skillfully in a very long time.

"Do you know," he began, "that it has been a very, very long time since I've been good and flustered?" He turned to her as though her were about to continue when they were interrupted by an apologetic older man with iron-gray hair.

"Elliot, uh...I need a word with you...."

With a pained look of frustration and irritation, Elliot turned briefly to the newcomer, cutting him off peremptorily. "Do you know," he said in a rush, "that I really don't have a moment to spare." He turned back to Catherine with his teasing smile intact. "Louis is my lawyer. He is a professional warrior and I will be in the office very early Saturday." Touching her lightly on the shoulder, he guided her skillfully away. "Catherine, come...."

Catherine chuckled as they walked away with her hand tucked neatly through his arm at the elbow. *Smooth*, she thought, wondering just exactly how her hand had gotten there. "That was...."

"Mean? Tacky? Unprofessional?" he prodded with gentle laughter.

"I was thinking more along the lines of inspired and delightful."

Elliot laughed outright. "Louis is an excellent lawyer, but he can never seem to differentiate between business and pleasure." He turned his gaze to her and Catherine shivered with delight. "As for *myself*, I've always known that some types of pleasure should *never* be mixed with business."

Catherine was finding it difficult to think of anything intelligent to say. She felt tongue-tied. Elliot was not conventionally handsome, but he was incredibly charismatic, and seemed a very long time since she'd traveled in these circles. Eventually, she asked, "So. What made you decide to give your art collection to the museum? I heard what you told the reporter."

Elliot found a relatively quiet corner, away from the press of people. They sat to talk and he sighed a little wearily. "I didn't grow up rich, Cathy," he said in explanation. "I know what it is to do without...not just clothes and food, but culture. Those things matter, too. There's so much out there that many people simply have no access to. I guess...I just want to make a little of it available to those people."

Catherine felt an incredible pull toward this man. Here was someone--other than Vincent...someone in her *own* world--who could perhaps understand her. Understand the changes taking place inside her. "I think I know what you mean. I became an attorney mostly to please my father. I joined his law firm...also mostly to please him." She looked up to see Elliot gazing intently at her and it flustered her, but she continued, deliberately omitting the tale of her attack. If Elliot knew about that, he could ask her. *Besides*, she told herself, *it's not important*. "I was unhappy, but wasn't sure why. Then I joined the D.A.'s office."

"Your father must've been very disappointed when you left his firm," Elliot said with quiet understanding.

"He was," she replied with a nod. "But he wants me to be happy."

"Are you?"

Elliot was listening to her--really listening--and was interested in her views. Understanding how she felt. It felt so good to be able to talk about this to someone in the real world--not just with Vincent, who felt more like a part of her than another person. "The work is relentless. Exhausting." She paused, considering her words. "But sometimes...it feels like...somehow, in some way I make a difference. And that's a good feeling."

"Yeah. It's no fun, starting at the bottom."

"Nobody cuts me any slack." She chuckled. "But when I *do* get a kind word, it's because I'm doing the job, not because I'm the boss' daughter."

"You know," Elliot mused, "you kids who grow up rich, you've got just as much to prove as those of us who grow up poor. We spend our whole lives trying to prove to the whole world that we're worth something. *You* have

to prove it to *yourself*. If your father isn't proud of you, he damn well *should* be."

Elliot's honesty and insight caught Catherine's heart more than any show of wealth or calculated charm could have. He understood. Catherine felt herself becoming totally lost in the evening and in him. After months of struggling to make her friends--her father--understand, here was someone who actually did. And somewhere in the back of her mind she was seeing him as her father would see him...and smiling. Perhaps it *wasn't* entirely impossible to please her father and be happy herself.

They visited for a while longer, then Catherine told him she needed to leave.

"May I take you home?" Elliot's smile told Catherine he knew the answer already.

Photographers snapped pictures as they left, and Catherine knew they'd be on the society page tomorrow. She gave Elliot her address and the limo glided off into the night.

When they pulled up in front of her apartment building and Elliot handed her out of the car, Catherine felt like a princess. It was a feeling she'd almost forgotten. She turned to him with a smile. "Elliot...thank you."

"It was a terrific evening."

"Well, you did something quite wonderful for the city."

"Ohhh..." he said, feigning innocence. "You mean the *art*. I was thinking along completely different lines."

Delighted with Elliot's charming teasing, Catherine started to turn coquettishly away. "Thank you for the ride."

Elliot stopped her with a touch. "Cathy...when can I see you again?"

Rather than answer him directly, Catherine reached into her bag, pleased at the look of indecision on his face. She came out with a card and gave it to him. "Call me," she whispered, then walked away. After a few steps she couldn't resist turning back to look...only to see him doing the same...and his triumphant smile made her toes tingle. *This has definitely been a surprising evening*, she thought happily as she turned and walked lightly up the steps into the foyer, trying not to turn and look again.



Vincent had only traveled a short distance along the alley when he felt a sudden rush of emotion through the bond. *Catherine!* In his concern for the old man he'd temporarily lost touch with her, and now the emotions surging through their connection startled and disturbed him. She was with someone--had met someone--to whom she was very attracted, both physically and emotionally.

Breathless, Vincent slumped against the damp brick wall of a building, resting a trembling hand on a garbage can. *No!* he thought, panicked. *Not yet! It's too soon!* Though he knew his relationship with Catherine had to be only temporary...that someday she'd find someone...forget

about him, he wasn't ready yet. He'd had no time to prepare.

It was a long time before he was able to move at all. Afraid to face Catherine, he seriously considered simply returning home.... But then he remembered: he had to talk to her about Misha. He had promised something would be done. So with deliberate, forced determination Vincent continued on his way. Lately, he felt he was constantly promising things he couldn't deliver. As he walked slowly, dispiritedly, he found a child's notebook tossed aside in a dumpster... complete with a pen clipped to it. He decided the find was fortuitous. He'd leave Catherine a message, instead. *It will be easier...better.*

Once he reached Catherine's balcony, Vincent paced restlessly. He could feel her coming nearer...she was almost home. Her excitement and delight with the evening washed over him in waves, ebbing and flowing so quickly he couldn't keep pace with it and didn't know how to separate from it.

Finally, as a last resort, Vincent sought the darkest corner of the balcony--behind the plants--and sank down, crouching in the shadows. Wrapping his arms around his knees and burying his head there, he tried to contain and quiet himself. He still hadn't decided whether to merely leave the note or risk speaking to her, but whichever he did, he knew he had to settle himself.

A short time later, Vincent heard her come in. She was humming cheerfully. Not ready yet to either meet her or to leave, Vincent remained where he was, trying to swallow his own desire and pain. Trying to be happy for her. It wasn't working, but at least he was eventually able to calm himself enough to rise to his feet, walk to the other side of the balcony and lay the note on the table. Once there, however, he could see Catherine sitting at her mirror, already dressed for bed. It gave him further excuse to retreat.

But Catherine had seen him and rushed to the door, throwing it open and calling out to him. "Vincent?"

He had no choice but to turn back. "Did I...startle you?" he asked hesitantly.

"No," Catherine seemed hesitant. Puzzled.

"I...I came to...to leave you a message," he began lamely, pointing to the paper, which could be seen on the table, an edge tucked under a potted plant. He turned immediately to leave.

Catherine lunged toward the note, pleading desperately: "Don't go...."

Vincent was miserable. He had to stay, now. Catherine felt guilty now, and anxious to please him. He could sense it and didn't like the combination of emotions.

Catherine read the note and lifted puzzled eyes to his. "Misha...Langer?"

Now that he was caught here, Vincent decided he should explain further. "He and his friends are being driven from their homes...terrorized. They've been beaten. Robbed...."

Catherine was staring at him and suddenly she came forward, radiating concern. "You've been hurt!" Reaching up with a trembling hand, she asked in a whisper, "Is that a burn? Let me get you something."

Vincent couldn't bear her solicitous attitude and pulled back. He didn't want coddling. He just wanted to get out of there. He spoke a little shortly with her, then gentled his voice, ashamed of his lack of control. "I'm not the one who needs your help, Catherine! These people are old, terrified. Their homes almost burned tonight."

Seeming to pick up on his restraint, Catherine's voice took on a more business-like tone. "Well, who's doing this to them?"

"The ones hired to chase them out. Can you help?"

"I'll try. Of course."

Now that Catherine had pulled back a little emotionally, Vincent was more able to focus. He felt it was necessary to reassure her that he was still pleased with her. That he wasn't angry. He didn't want her feeling guilty for getting on with her life, for she must. "You have a generous heart, Catherine."

Catherine bent her head and smiled shyly at the compliment. The look on her face almost broke his heart. She *did* care for him...just not the way he wished. It was understandable: he wasn't a man. Wasn't able to give her what this unknown man could.

"Something I learned from *you*," she said with quiet dignity.

He shook his head to deny the statement. "No. That can't be taught. It's from the soul. And you have so much to give."

Catherine's mood had changed again, and she seemed unhappy: sorrowful and confused. She was having trouble meeting his eyes and looked away, and Vincent knew it wasn't just her meeting this man that bothered her. It was *everything* in her life that was affecting her--holding her in this condition of confusion and indecisiveness--and he ached to help her.

"It's all still very new," she murmured, her voice quavering a little. "Sometimes I wonder...how all those little pieces...will ever fit together again." She was very close to tears.

It hurt him to say it, but he knew he must...to free her. To remove at least one conflicting emotion. "Follow your heart, Catherine." She finally looked up to him. "Follow your heart," he repeated. "You must."

Catherine nodded at him, smiling hesitantly, and Vincent turned to leave...leaving her more at ease and his own soul in turmoil.

It was a very long, lonely trip home, and when Vincent reached the Hub, he went straight to his chamber for fresh clothes, then to the bathing pool to rid himself of the acrid smell of smoke.

After bathing and changing clothes, Vincent examined his cloak ruefully. He had a spare, but he knew he would

have to leave this one with Mary to see if she could possibly save parts of it and sew him another.

Slipping on his loose sandals and a thick robe, he returned to his chamber to try to sleep, but instead of sleeping, he lay in the darkness of his chamber. Everything was intensely quiet at this time of night. The pipes were silent, and at the moment no trains were running nearby. He tossed and turned for perhaps an hour before finally rising and trying to write in his journal. Smoothing the page on his journal, he stared into the flickering candle flame for a long moment then began writing.

I knew this time would come, but not so soon. I struggle to accept the fact that my dream will never be...this dream that Catherine and I never had a chance to share. I envy this unknown man and my feelings for Catherine are poisoned by jealousy. I rage against the thought that I must stand by and only watch as she draws farther away. And yet, even now the thought of her love warms me. I felt her love and care tonight, and that must sustain me. For I know what I am and what I will always be. And I must not bind her to that, but let her go. Encourage her to follow her heart, because she must. But mine is breaking.

Vincent lowered his head onto his crossed arms and sighed wearily. After several long minutes, he rose, blew out the guttering candle and went to bed, where he still lay awake. His own restlessness and Catherine's made it impossible to sleep.



Catherine also lay awake for quite a while after Vincent left. His visit and the reason for it had muted her excitement, but she was still too restless to sleep. She was disturbed and didn't quite know why.

Shoving herself to an upright position in bed, she raked her hair back from her face and groaned. *I'm going to be exhausted tomorrow and I'll end up sleeping all day!*

Eventually, however, Catherine drifted off to sleep, disturbed by odd, disconnected dreams of Elliot, Vincent, and old people standing in front of a burning building.

Waking several times during the night, Catherine tried deliberately to put her thoughts in order, but her dreams always drifted back to the odd images.

There was a telephone ringing, but Catherine was in the tunnels below the city, looking for Vincent. She knew there were no telephones there, but she kept trying to find the source of the sound...certain, somehow, that if she didn't answer the phone she'd lose her one chance to regain a normal life...to please her father and to be happy. She rounded a dark corner and saw Vincent standing in a glow of torchlight, his unhuman beauty accented by the shifting gold and shadow. His loving, gentle voice reached out to her even over the ever rising volume of the ringing phone:

"Follow your heart, Catherine. You must." He started to fade, and Catherine panicked: she didn't want Vincent to leave, fearing she'd never see him again, and in leaving he would take a part of her with him. "No!" she called out to him and ran toward him, but he was gone...and the phone was louder. It was so loud, in fact, that she covered her ears and turned in a circle, searching desperately for a way to stop it.

Bolting upright, still holding her hands over her ears, Catherine cried, "Stop it! Oh! Stop it!" Bright sunlight streamed through her bedroom window, indicating it was late morning, and the telephone at the side of her bed was ringing stridently. Disoriented, confused and tired, Catherine reached for the phone. "Hello?"

"Cathy?" Elliot's voice on the other end of the line sounded hesitant, but cheerful. "I'm sorry. Did I wake you?"

Blinking at the change from dark tunnels to bright bedroom...from Vincent to Elliot, Catherine didn't answer immediately.

"Cathy?"

"Um..." she murmured finally. "I'm...sorry...Elliot. I'm a little fuzzy right now."

"I *did* wake you," he said quickly. "I'm sorry, Cathy, but I couldn't wait to see you again. I've been up since dawn and all I could think about was how lovely the sunshine would look in your hair. Could I talk you into a picnic in the park?"

Catherine had started laughing halfway through Elliot's rushed, impassioned speech. "A picnic? Elliot...it's *cold* out there. Winter's come back for a while, remember?"

Elliot paused, then laughed himself. "You're right. I forgot. It's easy to forget winter when you're thinking of sunshine. Lunch, then? Dinner?"

Catherine thought of the task Vincent had given her. She'd wanted to do some checking today, so that when she went in to work on Monday, perhaps she'd be able to settle this quickly, but she really couldn't do much of anything until Monday anyway.... "All right," she agreed, feeling a little guilty. "Lunch sounds good. What time?"

"Great! I'll pick you up at one."

Catherine settled the phone receiver back in its cradle and pushed back the covers. As she dressed, she resigned herself to spending her entire Sunday working in order to make time for doing her detective work. *If I can put the finishing touches on the Lutz case and do the preliminaries on the Salyer deposition, then I can have the morning on Monday to check out Mr. Langer's problem for Vincent.*

But as she fixed her breakfast, Catherine realized she was humming a tune from a song the pianist had been playing the night before, and glancing out the window, she saw the sun shining on the balcony. *Work can wait until tonight,* she thought.

Vincent finished his morning rounds and was free for the rest of the day. Saturday was a rest day, Below, at least as much as possible. There were always certain things that needed tending, but everyone tried to arrange their schedules to be free at least part of the day.

Normally, Vincent enjoyed his free Saturdays—they came so seldom—but today he wished he had a project scheduled or perhaps a trip for the children. His almost sleepless night hadn't done a thing for his peace of mind, and Catherine's cheerful mood today only made things worse. He couldn't be happy for her and he despised himself for being envious of this man, whom he'd never met and never would.

Friends greeted him on his way back to his chamber and he tried to be sociable, but felt he was falling short. People seemed to sense that he was unhappy and tried to cheer him. The efforts, though well-meant, only served to make him more acutely miserable. Yet, he didn't want to be alone, either. Unsure exactly *what* to do, Vincent turned toward the forge. He'd been meaning to visit with Winslow lately anyway, and he knew that Winslow would neither notice or care if he wasn't cheerful, since he, himself, tended to be withdrawn and moody.

The heat from the forge could be felt from several feet outside the entranceway. Vincent hesitated before going in, because he knew Winslow would expect him to strip off his vest and shirt. But the hesitation was minimal and more automatic than thought out: with a few people, like Winslow and Pascal, Vincent was less inclined to modesty. After all, he'd spent years swimming naked with them, even through adolescence.

As he entered the long, low chamber, Vincent began immediately pulling off his vest and long-sleeved shirt. He folded them and dropped them onto a bench next to the wall. Folding his arms across his chest, he stood watching the blacksmith as he worked. The sweat ran in runnels down Winslow's dark body and beaded on his face, and his friend didn't look up. He was intent upon the object he was putting the finishing touches on, and Vincent watched in awe.

Winslow fashioned many things in metal—most of them utilitarian—heavy doors, tables, chairs, and even his own sculptures. The object he was working now was one of the latter, and the grace and beauty of it took Vincent's breath away. The main body of the sculpture had obviously been poured into a mold, but the delicate, leaf-like portions that Winslow now carefully tapped into shape with a tiny hammer had not been.

Winslow now glanced up and smiled. He nodded, then went back to his work. Vincent could see the sculpture more clearly now—Winslow had deliberately shifted so he could see—and he could tell that it was of a woman, her arms upswept and the hands and fingers branching off into delicate leaves. The hair was like coiled, braided rope.

Eventually, Winslow stopped his delicate tap-tapping and brought the sculpture to Vincent, who held it breath-

lessly. "It's marvelous, Winslow," he said gently, as he ran his fingers over the sculpture. The metal was warm and almost felt alive. "You should do something with these."

The big black man shook his head. "Nope. These are just for me. You have your journal. I have these."

Shyly, Vincent asked, "Is it Margaretta?"

Winslow laughed. "Maybe...if she took off about twenty pounds and grew leaves." Then took back the sculpture, placing it lovingly on the heavy table beside the anvil he'd been working on. "No. It's just a woman...or maybe women in general. Maybe someone I'd like to meet someday."

"Like a dream," Vincent said quietly.

"Yeah. Like a dream." Winslow wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his arm. He glanced over at Vincent, and grinned. "You look like you'd like to get outta here. How 'bout a swim? You think we could find someplace—maybe farther up the falls—where no one would bother us? I haven't dunked you in a long time."

Vincent thought of the cold water down past the falls where the rapids ran too quickly for the children. He smiled back at Winslow, sensing that his friend wasn't totally oblivious to his mood. Winslow was right: it'd been years since they'd last gone swimming together and fought to dunk one another. There wasn't anyone else Vincent knew who stood a chance of wrestling him to the ground or of dunking him, either, and for all their adolescent years they'd made a game of it. "I think it's still too cold for most people to be swimming," Vincent commented. He smiled a little wider: Winslow was flexing his massive arm and winking at him. It sounded like a swim with Winslow would wear him out quite nicely, and help take his mind off his problems.



Catherine opened her door when Elliot rang the bell: she was astounded to see him dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt. She'd dressed expecting to be taken to a restaurant.

Elliot just smiled and with a tilt of his head, commented: "I *told* you I was in the mood for a picnic. It's warming up some, and if you don't mind hot dogs I'd love to share the sunshine with you."

Catherine eyed him suspiciously. She wasn't accustomed to men surprising her to quite this extent. "Sweater or coat?" she asked, finally.

"Definitely a heavy sweater. And you might consider changing."

Asking Elliot to wait, Catherine walked leisurely to the bedroom, where she then quickly slipped out of the dress and heels and into jeans and sweatshirt with tennis shoes, then pulled on a long, heavy sweater. Looking at herself in the mirror, she muttered, "He wanted casual, he's got casual."

Later, as they ate their hotdogs while sitting in the sun on a park bench, Catherine realized that Elliot had sprung the park and the hotdogs on her deliberately. She wasn't sure *why* he'd done it, but was glad he had. They were very quiet as they ate, and she watched Elliot tossing crumbs to the pigeons. She felt very comfortable with him, and today the quiet smiles he sent her way seemed very innocent and open. A barrier Catherine hadn't realized she'd built between herself and the world began crumbling, and she was grateful.

They finished their hotdogs and began walking back toward Catherine's apartment. Elliot reached out and took her hand. "Thanks for lunch, Cathy. I didn't have time for much else. I've spent all morning on the phone with Louis, taking care of problems. But I really wanted this."

Cathy pushed her fingers through her hair, which was blowing into her eyes. The wind was picking up and it was cold, but the sun was glorious, the air fresh, and the company wonderful. She felt great. "I'm glad you asked me. It was fun."

As Elliot dropped her off at her door, he traced her cheek gently with an index finger, but didn't attempt a kiss. "Bye, Cathy. See you soon?"

She nodded and met his smile with her own.



"Hold off!" Winslow sputtered angrily, shaking his wet head and pulling forcefully at Vincent's arms. Vincent barely realized Winslow was *with* him, much less that he was almost drowning him. His mind was momentarily completely occupied with the sensual pull of his bond with Catherine. Vincent's own desire and jealousy was transferring into the struggle with Winslow. Vincent could almost *feel* the sun and wind on Catherine's skin and could sense her delight in the man's presence. Her growing attraction to him.

Eventually Winslow's pummeling brought Vincent back to himself. Shocked and ashamed, he abruptly released Winslow, who launched himself, choking, out of the water. Vincent knew from the sheer rage emanating from Winslow that his friend was more angry than hurt, but that didn't make him feel any better. He watched as Winslow climbed out of the water and began toweling himself...by now tossing angry comments toward Vincent. "...what the hell you thought you were doin'!"

"I'm sorry, Winslow..." Vincent began, trying to apologize.

But Winslow was too angry to listen, and continued with his tirade. Winslow's anger battered at Vincent, making him turn away, his hands held tight against his head, trying to hold the anger inside. The world around him grew dark and he was having trouble breathing.

Eventually, Vincent felt a lessening of the barrage against him. His vision cleared and he drew a deep, ragged

breath. The chamber was silent and he turned to look for Winslow.

The burly black man was sitting, silent, on a rock at the side of the water. His pose was reminiscent of Rodin's "Thinker," although this particular thinker was fully clothed. As Vincent approached, Winslow lifted his head and tossed him a towel, which Vincent caught.

"So. You gonna tell me what the problem is? Is it Mouse?" Winslow asked.

Vincent shook his head. He would have liked to tell Winslow, but he simply couldn't. He and Winslow were close, but their relationship was built on other things besides talking. Winslow was the only one he knew strong enough to challenge him...battle him. Even when they were young, at times the game had gotten a little out of hand, and as Vincent grew older, they'd all but quit working out together. *I knew I shouldn't have agreed to this today*, he thought sullenly. But he'd known Winslow had wanted it as much as he had, so he'd accepted.

Climbing out onto shore, the water streaming off him in sheets, Vincent shook his head and started drying off. "I'm truly sorry, Winslow."

"Hell, Vincent. You almost drowned me. And by damn, you *would've* if you hadn't stopped when you did! What were you thinkin' of?"

Vincent sighed as he began pulling on his jeans. He shrugged and answered Winslow's question with another question. "Do your dreams make you happy, Winslow?"

Visibly startled by the seeming change in subject, Winslow said guardedly, "Yeah...I guess so." Then he nodded. "Sure. Why?"

"Even dreams that you know are impossible?" Vincent persisted.

"Yeah. Sometimes." Winslow was staring at him in confusion.

"Like...like your sculpture. Something that never was...that might never be...."

A lot of the confusion seemed to leave Winslow's face, and he nodded sagely, expelling a sigh. "Ah." The big man rose and picked up Vincent's shirt and vest and tossed them to him, chuckling softly as Vincent caught them. "Yeah. Well, sometimes those kind of dreams can get a little frustrating." He walked over and shoved Vincent playfully, catching him by surprise and knocking him off balance momentarily. "Next time you're dreamin' *those* kinda dreams, try not to be wrestlin' with *me*!"

Vincent ducked his head, feeling more than a little embarrassed. "I'll keep that in mind."

"You do that!" Winslow chuckled and shook his head. "Now, hurry up and get dressed and let's go get some dinner."

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Catherine no sooner made it inside the door of her apartment than the phone rang. Rushing to the phone,

Catherine pulled her earring off and answered--a little breathlessly--"Hello...."

"Well," Jenny's cheerful voice began..."are you going to tell me what he's like, or not?"

Catherine couldn't help laughing. "I should've known it was you, Jen." She glanced down at her blinking answering machine with its three messages. "I suppose the other three calls are from you, too."

"You're darned right! What'dya expect? You disappear with the most luscious--to say nothing of the richest--eligible bachelor in town and I don't hear by noon...of *course* I'm gonna call! Well?"

"Well, what?" It was delightfully like old times. It seemed to Catherine like it had been *years* since she and Jenny had joked like this. It was delightful to have something--*someone* to joke *about*. She felt human again.

"CaTHY! Come *on*!" Jenny begged.

"Okay, okay. I give up." Catherine began telling Jenny about her short time with Elliot Saturday night, but she didn't tell her friend that Elliot seemed to understand her in ways that no one else--including Jenny--had. No one except Vincent. "He's delightful, handsome, charming and persistent. We went to the park earlier today for hotdogs--that's where I was when you called."

Jenny was ecstatic. "I can't believe it! When you get back in the swing of things, you don't do it half-way, do you?"

Catherine's eye fell on the stack of manila folders she'd brought home, and her mood dampened some. "Jen, I'd love to sit here and have a good, long talk, but I brought some work home that I really need to get done before Monday."

"*Work?*" Jenny squeaked. "How can you even *think* about work right now?"

"It's not easy," Catherine answered drily. "But I promised I'd do something for a friend Monday, and I can't unless I dig myself out from under some of these files."

"Well. Just don't forget to make some time for Elliot Burch. Gorgeous hunks like him don't come around every day."

Catherine laughingly agreed to *that*. "No, they certainly *don't*. And I promise not to neglect him."

After her conversation with Jenny, Catherine reluctantly collected her files and settled at the table in the kitchen nook. The sunshine on the balcony drew her, and she considered taking the work out there, but she resisted the temptation: working at the table would force her to concentrate on the work, not the weather. Besides...she knew it was colder than it looked out there. With a huge sigh, she bent to the boring task of sorting through the transcriptionist's summary of the Salyer deposition. *At least by getting this out of the way, I'll be free on Monday to do what Vincent asked of me. It's little enough...he gives so much and asks so little.*

DOORS AND WINDOWS

poem by Rhonda Collins

You are both door and window
to a tall, lighted, beautiful world.
Though I may gaze through the window,
I cannot pass through the door,
But can only watch you walk away.

CHAPTER SEVEN: DOORS AND WINDOWS

Bright and early Monday morning Catherine was ready to investigate Vincent's story. As she dressed, she re-read the note he'd given her. It had the address and the man's name on it, with a brief description of the problem.

Catherine propped the note up beside her makeup mirror and started putting on her makeup. Her mind went back to Friday night, and for the first time in days she thought about Vincent's appearance. He'd obviously been in a fire: his face was burned and even his hair was singed. He'd smelled strongly of smoke—not just candle smoke, but the acrid tang of a fire. And he'd been upset. *Of course he was upset!* Catherine told herself sternly as she dusted her face with powder. *He'd just fought a fire and saved that old man's life.* But Catherine was more than a little curious why he hadn't come back to see her this weekend: he usually came most frequently on the weekends because he knew she wasn't working. *Maybe he was giving me time to investigate the situation,* she thought with a twinge of guilt.

Catherine wasn't certain, though, that Vincent wasn't over-reacting. He was unfamiliar with buildings in general. A fire *could* be just a fire. The building might just be old and ill-kept and all these things coincidental. The old people involved might be over-reacting as well. But whatever the case might be, Catherine wasn't about to put the investigation off any longer: either way, the situation had to be dealt with and those people helped.

Catherine called Joe to let him know she'd be a little late getting in. He wanted to know about what she was investigating and if she'd be ready for the Salyer and Lutz cases. "Everything is ready on the depositions. I worked on the cases over the weekend specifically so I'd have time to do this morning. Thanks, Joe."

After she got off the phone with Joe, she put in a call to the Downtown Cab Co. and had them send a cab for her, and by the time she'd finished her makeup and made it downstairs, the cab was waiting.

The weather was still chilly, though it was warming. Catherine wore her coat and gloves, but she could see some people wearing only shirtsleeves. The thought of a *true* spring was warming in itself.

The cab pulled up outside the Langers' apartment building and Catherine could see several people outside, talking. In fact, there were quite a *few* people standing

around, most of them looking irritated and unhappy. Moving men carried boxes out of the building and down the stairs to a small moving van. One small group appeared to be breaking up, and one of the older men--a heavy-set man with a white beard--matched the description Vincent had given her of Misha Langer. Not wanting to lose the opportunity to speak with him, Catherine quickly paid the cabbie and called out to him as she shoved the cab door open. "Mr. Langer?"

The elderly man turned, his look questioning. "Yes?"

"I'm Catherine Chandler," Catherine explained as she put out a gloved hand to shake his. "I'm an investigator with the District Attorney's office"

Now the man looked astonished, but he took her hand. "You've heard about what's going on here?"

"Why don't you tell me in your own words."

"These people must be *stopped*!" Mr. Langer stated vehemently, his anger immediately surfacing. "They send punks to rough us up. Vandalize our apartments."

A small, frail, elderly woman beside him--*his wife, Sophie*--Catherine guessed, interjected: "The elevator is broken...for weeks. They don't fix it. We have to climb...."

"Now we don't have any hot water...." Mr. Langer continued.

Catherine stared in amazement from one to the other. These people were obviously very distressed and angry. *Perhaps there is more to this than simply an old building and poor upkeep.* "And you think all of this is organized?"

The old man was emphatic. "This is a rent-controlled building. The law says that they cannot evict us or raise our rents. The only way they can make us move is to drive us out."

Catherine was confused and frustrated. Mr. Langer was so angry, he wasn't giving her any of the details she needed. "Who is *they*?" she asked in perplexity.

Mr. Langer pointed stiffly off to the right, to where another elderly couple stood talking with a stocky man in a business suit. "Over there! He's the one who sends the punks to try to scare us off!" Mr. Langer pushed past Catherine and stomped across the few yards to the group. His irate voice rose over the crowd. "I *told* you to stay away! Leave us alone!"

Catherine followed rather helplessly in his wake, wondering just what was going on and trying to gather what information she could.

Smiling congenially, with an effusiveness that sounded polished and false, the newcomer gushed cheerfully, "I just came by to congratulate Herman and Sylvia on the deal they made. *Five thousand dollars* and new condominiums in *Jersey....*"

As he spread his hands in a helpless gesture and shrugged, the man's attitude was one of an adult dealing with children, and it angered Catherine even though she wasn't the recipient. *No wonder the man upsets Mr. Langer.*

The man continued: "The offer is more than generous."

"Our *life* is here," Misha Langer spat angrily. "We are not *interested* in your offer. This is our *home*."

Catherine watched Sophie Langer during this exchange and she could see the fear written on her face. This man might *appear* benevolent, but there was a lot more going on here than he was letting on. Catherine turned back to watch him and listened closely.

"I don't know how much more I can *do* for you people. The company won't wait forever. *Please*. Think it over very hard. What if they have the building condemned, huh? Then what? You'd be out on the street with nothing. Would your pride keep you warm then?"

Sensing the threat inherent in the statement, Catherine finally stepped forward to address the stranger. "Are you threatening these people?"

The man smiled at Catherine then, and it wasn't a pleasant smile. "I'm just telling it the way it is. Be careful in this neighborhood, lady. It can get pretty rough." The man turned, then, and walked casually away.

Catherine turned her attention back to Mr. Langer. "Do you know his name?"

"Mundy. He works for the management company that took over when they sold the building two months ago. I've dealt with bullies like him before...only then, they wore the brown shirts."

"Brown shirts?" Catherine asked, totally confused. *Is there something else in this that I don't know about?* she thought anxiously.

Sophie Langer stepped forward and took her husband's arm, patting him to settle him. It seemed to work. "The Gestapo, Ms. Chandler," she explained. "Thank you for trying to help us. We didn't know...where to turn anymore."

Catherine glanced at her watch. It was getting late and she wanted to get something a little more definite to show to Joe. She shook hands with Mr. and Mrs. Langer and reassured them as best she could. "I'll see what I can find out. And please...call me Cathy."

Mrs. Langer smiled gently. "And you must call us Sophie and Misha. Thank you again."

Before Catherine left them, Misha asked, "How did you find out about us?"

"Vincent told me."

The man's face transformed as Catherine mentioned Vincent's name. "Ah."

They smiled at one another for a moment, then Catherine hailed another cab.

As soon as she made it into the office, Catherine dropped off the work she'd done over the weekend with one of the legal assistants, then asked Phil Scholwinski to run her a rap sheet on Mundy. While she was waiting for the rap sheet to come through, she called City Hall to find out who owned the Langers' building. All she could find was the management company's name and the name of another company that owned the management company. Further checking revealed that the same company was trying to buy all the land in the immediate area. That fact gave her something to stew about until Phil came through with Mundy's rap sheet. After reading the scoop on Mundy, she headed with determination for Joe's office.

"Come on in," Joe answered when she knocked, his voice sounding muffled behind the door. When he saw Catherine, Joe smiled and came around the desk to meet her. "Well? Did you get anything on your mysterious punks?"

"No. Not yet. But I *did* find out a few interesting things about the building in question and about Mr. Mundy." She presented the rap sheet with a flourish.

Joe glanced through the papers Catherine handed him and scratched his nose. When he looked up at her, she could tell that he agreed with her assessment, but he turned away, walking slowly around his desk as he read the sheets aloud. "Leo Mundy. What a prince. Bounced off the force on a brutality beef in seventy-eight. Six arrests since then--all strong-arm stuff. No convictions." He shook his head. "Bad and smart. That's a tough combination." Joe's tone turned slightly sarcastic as he pursed his lips and purred: "Now he calls himself a security consultant. Hangs out in a downtown saloon. Boy, this guy's a class act all the way." Parking himself on the edge of his desk, he lifted his eyes to hers.

"Can we move on him?" she asked hopefully.

Joe looked at her like she'd lost her mind. "I take this to the boss, and he ventilates my shorts for wastin' his time. You got nuthin' tying Mundy into these punks."

Catherine's only slightly buried frustration with the system came to a head and she rounded on Joe, though she knew it wasn't his fault. "Does he have to *kill* one of them before we do something...."

"Whoa...whoa, whoa! Penalty play!" Joe pulled a Time-Out and reminded her of a few unpleasant truths. "Now, we can't do the outraged 'the system stinks' rap. We're part of it! You give me the tools..." he spread his hands helplessly... "I do the job on *him*."

Catherine hesitated only a moment, but as much as she hated to admit it, Joe was right. There was nothing he

could do without more to go on, and Catherine knew he was probably as frustrated as she was.

Delicately snatching the rap sheet Joe was waving at her, she turned on her heel and exited the office. "Okay." It was a challenge, and she was determined to get to get the evidence Joe needed to get to the bottom of this mess.

Outside Joe's door, Catherine hesitated for a few moments, standing with her hands on her hips as she surveyed the busy office in front of her. She was considering her plan of action. *I'll have to go to Edie, again. She's the only one I know who might be able to unsnarl the paper trail.* Then, her course decided, Catherine sought out her friend.

Catherine found Edie just as she was returning from her morning break and asked her about doing a further search of Mundy's work records and social security records in the hopes of tracking his employer.

"Oh, sure. You waltz in here just about lunch time and want me to do your work," Edie grumbled, but Catherine wasn't fooled. She could see the twinkle in her friend's eyes. Edie loved a challenge.

"Yeah, I know. I'm pretty low. But I've got friends in high places."

Edie just batted her eyes at Catherine, then began explaining why what Catherine wanted would be impossible for various reasons. She was explaining the whys as she followed Catherine to her own desk. "...no because you need a special authorization just to gain access!" As they neared Catherine's desk, Edie changed her tune. "Whoa... ho, *ho!* Girlfriend, you must be a *great* first date! This vase alone must cost about a thousand bucks! Who's this guy?"

Catherine's desk sported a huge crystal vase full of long-stemmed red roses and baby's breath. Catherine knew immediately who the flowers had to be from, and she really wasn't surprised: Elliot had been so persistent. Still, she plucked the card from the bouquet with a flourish and read it with delight.

I love sunshine. Don't you?

Elliot's bold handwriting flowed across the card, with no name included. He obviously knew that none would be needed.

"C'mon, what's the story?" Edie teased. "Does he have a darker brother? I expect all the juicy details at eleven!"

"There *are* no juicy details...yet!" Catherine teased, but secretly she was beginning to think there *might* be, at some point.

Edie just grinned and sauntered away, but Catherine suddenly realized she had still another favor to ask of her friend...she'd gotten distracted by their byplay over the flowers. "Not so fast!"

Edie turned back and Catherine pulled her notes out of her purse. "Would you check out this guy for me? I also

need particulars on any real estate transactions in that area in the last year. Looks like someone's trying to buy themselves a whole block down there. I want to know who."

Edie looked predictably frustrated, and this time it was honest. "It's gonna take a minute. They got me swamped here."

Catherine took off her coat and began settling at her desk. "You *know* I wouldn't ask...."

"...if it wasn't important. I *know*. I'm so good to you."

Catherine laughed to herself as she watched Edie walk away. Edie was a jewel. Catherine knew she would have the information for her before the day was out.

The phone rang and Catherine picked it up, figuring it was time for her to actually get down to the work she was being paid for. But when she answered, she was pleasantly surprised: it was Elliot, asking if she'd gotten the flowers, and inviting her out to dinner. Although pleased with Elliot's invitation, Catherine hesitated. *Surely Vincent will come by soon...if nothing else, to check my progress.* But even as the thought crossed her mind, she put it aside, because she felt strongly that Vincent would want her to go. "I'd like that. Okay. Eight o'clock, then."

Catherine hung up the phone and gazed at the vase of roses. It was exceedingly difficult to get her mind back onto work.



Vincent couldn't remember a time when his classes had moved as slowly as they did this morning. He didn't think he'd *ever* be able to get his points across, and it wasn't the children's fault; it was his. Concentration was difficult because his mood seemed to change every moment, though he tried desperately to appear normal for the children. His own depression warred with Catherine's ebullience, and at this point he hardly knew which was most difficult to deal with. When Pascal finally signalled tea time, Vincent released the children and turned his scattered attention to his next problem.

Vincent's normal routine would be to join Father for his tea time, which was why Pascal always signalled when William had it ready. Today, Vincent hated to go because he knew Father would immediately see through any attempt at normalcy. *Father will know something is wrong: he always does.*

Vincent's steps slowed as he neared the threshold to Father's study. Taking a deep breath, he tried once more to pull himself together, to block out the bond and enable himself to look past his sense of her and his own despondency to other things. But Catherine's sensual delight filtered through the bond despite his best efforts: Catherine was happy, and her happiness made him miserable.

For the first time, Vincent began to realize what his life would be like if Catherine was truly in love with this

man. Because for himself, there would be no escape--ever--for he knew of no way to block the bond except by intense and deliberate concentration. He was unable to be happy for her because the love he felt was poisoned by envy. *I'll spend the rest of my life in desperation and jealousy--wishing her happiness and hating myself because I can't accept that happiness.* Vincent was disgusted with himself. And he felt as never before the weight of the stone above him, crushing him and the stone walls around him: his prison.

Wearily, he stepped inside the threshold, pausing as Father looked up and greeted him.

"Vincent! Come in. William has made us genuine English scones this morning. I don't know how he manages."

Seating himself across from Father, Vincent absently took the teacup Father passed him and curled his fingers around the warmth. Father was so pleased over the scones that Vincent wished he could muster some enthusiasm.

"How was class today?" Father asked, his gaze troubled.

Sighing, Vincent lifted his eyes to the scones and took one, though he only held it, and didn't eat. He wanted to talk to Father about Catherine, but didn't know how to begin, and he was certain Father wouldn't understand the immensity of the problem in any case. So he found himself simply answering flatly, "Class went well." After a few moments, he put the uneaten scone down onto a napkin and shuffled some of the books on Father's desk.

The books were arranged in stacks: some were paperback, some hardback. All of them were old. "Where did these come from?" Vincent asked as he read the back of a paperback contemporary mystery novel and put it back on the stack.

"David Levine sent them down to us. He found them at a bookstore that was going out of business and bought them all for a song." Father didn't say any more for a minute or two, then said quietly, "Drink your tea, Vincent. It's getting cold."

Obediently, Vincent drank, and eventually the tea and the scone disappeared, though Vincent didn't remember when he might have eaten it, or if he *had*.

"Vincent, what weighs so heavy. Hmm? Please. Tell me."

Father's concern, which had been growing steadily stronger, now washed over Vincent. Between his own misery and Father's worry, all trace of Catherine's joy was gone. He knew he would have to try to explain. Unable to look at Father--unable to meet those worried gray eyes--Vincent pushed himself to his feet and started to walk away. But he didn't go far. His desire to simply throw himself into Father's arms, as he had when he was a child, was almost overwhelming. But he couldn't do that. Not anymore. He knew that hugs and wise philosophy wouldn't solve his problems anymore.

Stopping beside a bronze statue of young girl, he let his hand caress the smooth, cold surface, briefly remembering Winslow's dream statue and their conversation. "She met a man," he finally said. Knowing Father would understand he meant Catherine. "She's falling in love."

"Let her," Father said with determination and a vast sense of relief that Vincent sensed with annoyance. "Let her fall in love, Vincent."

As though I have a choice of allowing or not allowing it... Vincent thought sadly. Still unable to look at Father, Vincent continued...still hoping that perhaps Father had some comfort...some wisdom to offer him. "My mind tells me to rejoice for her. That she deserves the happiness." He struggled to find the words that could convey to Father how he felt. "But my heart...is dying. I'm poisoned by feelings I've never felt before." On the verge of tears, Vincent half-turned to Father—wanting to face him, but still unable. He just wanted Father to *fix* it, like he'd always been able to in the past. "Father...it hurts."

Father rose from the table and taking up his cane, limped around the table toward his son. "I've always...dreaded this moment...for you. And I...suppose...I've always known it would come. The day when your heart would cause you to long for a life...that can never be, Vincent."

Echoes of words he'd spoken to Winslow and to himself—and thought—over and over. The truth was painful. Father had no answer to Vincent's questions. "Yes," Vincent murmured. "A life that can never be."

Father stroked Vincent's hair, as he had when Vincent was a child, but there was no comfort in it. Vincent pulled away and walked slowly out of the room, hesitating at the iron railing. He wasn't certain he had the energy to climb the stairs. And besides... there was no place to go. *And no reason to go anywhere in any case*, he thought bitterly. But he continued walking because there was nothing else to be done *but* continue. *I have rounds to do. Maintenance. Security.* The fact that he was needed, here—in his world—gave him some reason to exist, so he clung to that.



That evening Catherine dined with Elliot at Four Seasons—a far cry from the hot dogs in the park—and afterwards they walked the streets of Manhattan together. It was still cold out, but with Elliot's arm around her, Catherine hardly felt the chill. They'd been talking all night, and the more she learned about Elliot, the more she admired him. And seeing the city through his eyes reminded her that there was more here than the ugliness she'd concentrated on for so long. He was making her feel as though she belonged, again.

"I *do* love this city," Elliot was telling her. "And the thing is, you can't walk a block without seeing someone or *something* that just absolutely knocks you out. Stuns you."

The thought amused Catherine. She'd seen some pretty strange things walking the city...but she knew that wasn't entirely what Elliot meant. Chuckling, she offered: "It goes from the bad to the utterly absurd."

"Yeah...yeah," Elliot said with a chuckle. "And it's constantly changing. Constantly transforming, reinventing itself. Unbelievable, isn't it? It's always expanding."

"With a little help from you," Catherine said gently. Elliot's little-boy amazement and enthusiasm at what Catherine had spent her life taking for granted touched her, and she wanted to remind him that he'd had a hand in that growth and transformation.

"I've been lucky enough to realize some of my dreams," Elliot admitted modestly. They stopped for a few moments to listen to a sax player playing jazz on the street corner--another of those pleasant surprises that the city offered--then walked on, with Elliot continuing the discussion. "Not everyone is as fortunate as I've been, Cathy."

"It's a hard world out there, on the other side of the lights."

Elliot gazed at her with evident admiration. "You're such a puzzle, Cathy. You represent everything I've struggled all my life to reach--power, beauty and wealth--and yet here you are, climbing *down* the ladder into the world I struggled rung by rung to climb up out of."

Embarrassed, Catherine felt herself blushing, and shrugged. "I enjoy what I do, Elliot. You like to feel that you make a difference. Well, so do I." But Catherine's thoughts slid back to Vincent and how much he'd taught her--not by telling her, or even *showing* her, but simply by being who he was. She would never have had the strength to do anything for *anybody*--much less for herself--if it hadn't been for him. She felt a slight pang of depression. She missed him.

"I like to make a difference, Cathy," Elliot was saying, "but it's easy to buy something and hand it out to people--it's no more difficult than dropping some coins in a beggar's cup--but what *you're* doing takes more courage than I'd ever have."

Elliot's admiration for her pleased Catherine, but it made her vaguely uneasy as well. Somehow, it felt undeserved. *How can I tell him that I do this as much for myself as for others? That doing it makes me feel safer?* Again, she thought of Vincent, who helped people as naturally as he breathed, venturing out into dangerous city streets where anyone who saw him might well call him *freak* and try to kill him. *Or does it matter at all--the motive--or is the fact of the giving all that really matters?*

They walked on in silence for a block or so, until they came to a fountain. The view was spectacular from there, and they stopped to enjoy it. Elliot's touch pulled Catherine back from her thoughts...and the look in his eyes made her hormones riot. His lips came down over hers, claiming her, and a jolt of desire swept through her. Some small part of her screamed at her to stop before something terrible happened, but her body had other ideas. Her

mouth opened under his gentle invasion. Catherine hadn't felt this way in a very long time: she felt alive and free... suddenly free of all the fear of physical contact she'd harbored this past year. But as Elliot persisted, clearly desiring more, Catherine panicked and pulled away, her hands pressed firmly against his chest. "No, Elliot. Not yet. I have to have some time."

Clearly disappointed, Elliot accepted Catherine's decision with grace. Brushing her hair back from her face with a gentle hand, he merely smiled and said softly, "All the time you need, Cathy."

Leaning into the embrace Elliot offered, Cathy slipped her arm around him and they began their slow walk back to Elliot's limo, which they'd left several blocks back.



Vincent tried everything he could think of to distract himself, but nothing worked. It seemed that every book he picked up had either stories of star-crossed lovers or passionate love poems. With a low growl, he tossed the book he'd been leafing through onto the bedside table and collapsed back onto the bed cushions, wondering if love was *meant* to be this way: miserable. *Surely not*, he thought to himself. *Mankind would have died out. It must simply be me.*

His feeble attempt at humor didn't make him feel any better.

Restless and miserable, Vincent finally decided to check on Misha and Sophie Langer. Since Catherine obviously hadn't found out anything to help them, they could still be in danger.

Vincent threw his cloak over his shoulders and started out through the tunnels to his destination. It felt good just to be moving. To have made any decision at all. And to do something useful.

As Vincent traveled through the alleys, he was keenly aware of the fact that Catherine was once more out for the evening. With the man she'd met. The knowledge didn't improve his mood. He was approaching the Langers' building when he realized that several blocks ahead an elderly couple was being followed: as he neared, he saw it was Misha and Sophie Langer.

Keeping to the shadows, Vincent followed the man who was stalking the couple. A car screeched to a halt beside them. Another man leaped out of the car just as the first man pushed Misha against the wall—then struck him.

Rage erupted violently within Vincent. Already frustrated and jealous, it would have taken very little to push him over the edge to violence: *this* was more than enough.

Roaring a challenge to the attackers, Vincent launched himself with mindless fury toward the men. His roar echoed through the night, bouncing off the brick walls around them, confusing his prey and freezing them in place.

Their eyes searched the darkness, never seeing him until he was upon them.

Snarling his rage, Vincent roughly grabbed the first man he reached and flung him into a clump of garbage cans, where the man sprawled helplessly, staring up at Vincent in utter horror. Vincent grasped the jacket of the man's companion as he turned to run--the jacket came away, falling to the ground as its wearer slipped out of it in a further effort to get away--then Vincent shoved his captive forcefully against the wall. Lifting him, Vincent slammed the man against the brick again. It felt *good*: it made him feel powerful--in control--at least for the moment. The man's head connected with the brick with a satisfying crack, but when his feet hit the ground, he attempted to turn--to run--and Vincent slashed at his back with his claws, missing flesh but tearing the material of his shirt. The man fell and lay at Vincent's feet. The prey's eyes met his, and roaring his frustration, Vincent fought the urge to kill. Then a blow to the back of Vincent's head jerked his attention away, disorienting him momentarily. The man scrambled away...pulling himself through the window of the car, where his partner waited. The car backed crazily out of the alley and screeched off down the street.

Vincent screamed his anger at their escape...then the horrified expressions of the two old people cowered against the wall registered in his fevered mind, cooling his rage like ice water on a fire. When he lowered his eyes in shame, he noticed the jacket and what had fallen out of it. Snatching the object--a wallet or checkbook--he ran frantically from the scene, anxious to get away from the image of the beast he'd seen reflected in the Langers' innocent eyes.

After running blindly through several dark streets and alleys, Vincent stumbled and slowed. Tears blurred his vision and the flashing lights from a nearby bar made blurry rainbows in the darkness. The few minutes of violence had purged his anger, and now he felt sick with the aftermath. He leaned against a wall, gulping the cold night air, gradually coming to the slow realization that he still clutched something in his hand.

He lowered his eyes to the object he held: it was, as he'd suspected, a checkbook. And there was a driver's license tucked into a plastic pocket in one side. Identification. He felt a surge of triumph. He had something that could help Catherine stop these men. He tucked the checkbook into his vest.

Reorienting himself as to his surroundings, Vincent realized he wasn't far from home. In fact, the park threshold was only blocks--and a short jog--away.

Trotting through the park toward the threshold, Vincent tried justifying the night to himself. *I didn't harm them. Not permanently. I kept that much control. And perhaps now, they'll stay away.*

Just as he reached the mouth of the drainage tunnel, it hit him: the surge of heat--the music of Catherine's desire--that was not for him. He whirled, gasping for air to stand

rigidly, mouth dry, fists clenched at his sides...yearning for a dream. *A life that can never be*, he thought bitterly.

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Catherine closed the door and leaned against it. The night with Elliot had been magical. Even now, the afterlight of desire made her feel awake and alive...though a small voice nagged at her, telling her it was all going too fast...Elliot was too sure of himself. Too certain of her. He was giving her no time to assess the situation...sweeping her away by his sheer persistence. Without taking off her coat, Catherine went straight to the balcony, throwing the door open and walking outside.

Eyes searching the shadows, Catherine's buoyant mood ebbed a little. *I half-expect to see him here. I want him here. I need to talk to him. See him.* It occurred to her that there might be more to Vincent's absence than she'd supposed. She walked to the railing and leaned out over the city, staring down at the vast shadow of Central Park. *He's out there, somewhere. And he knows...about Elliot.*

The thought made Catherine feel odd. Not exactly guilty, but uneasy. *I wish I knew what he was feeling. Is he happy for me? Is this right?*

Catherine looked away from the park—out over the city lights. Lights that Elliot belonged with. Her world. She felt torn. Vincent was a part of her: their bond was a part of her. It was the only *certain* part of her life. It didn't matter that for her, the thread was so thin that she couldn't sense his emotions. She sensed the connection itself: knew it existed—and without it she would be bereft—that was what was important. *Knowing that we're "connected"—that no matter what, there is always someone who knows ME...who I am...no matter how much I change...and who is there for me....* The thought trailed away. Catherine couldn't think past any thought of losing Vincent. It was like imagining your own death—how you could never quite force yourself to imagine the fact of it—even in dreams.

Suddenly cold, Catherine hurried inside and began drawing a hot bath to warm her suddenly chilled body. As she undressed, a firm resolve took shape in her mind. *If I don't hear from him soon, I'll go to him. Make him understand how important he is to me...that nothing and no one can take away what we have between us.*

Again, that faint voice within asked her mockingly: *Then where is he?*

Catherine's dreams that night were pleasant, but decidedly odd.

Catherine and Elliot were dancing, swirling through a huge, brightly lit ballroom...the chandeliers glinted with flickering, sparkling light. Elliot smiled down at her and she felt loved and desired. Spinning out from Elliot's arms, Catherine found herself alone in a candle-lit room, the soft golden radiance surrounding her in warmth. In that warm glow she searched, but couldn't find Vincent, though she

knew he was here: his gentle voice wrapped around her, soothing her. Encouraging her. "Follow your heart, Catherine. Follow your heart."

"Vincent...." she whispered, turning her face into her pillow and clutching the covers closer. A tear slid down her face and soaked into the pillow.

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DREAMS

poem by Rhonda Collins

Below the brightness of the dream
The shadow of another heart
Waited.

This love I live is but a dream
Dreamed by you and at your whim
Denied.

CHAPTER EIGHT: DREAMS

Catherine's morning was busy, but profitable. Edie was still working on the list she'd given her, so Catherine spent most of her time catching up on the new cases Joe kept piling on her desk. *No rest for the wicked, it seems*, she thought wryly, *and there seem to be so very many of them around....*

Elliot called to ask her to lunch, but she had to beg off. "I'm sorry, Elliot. I just can't. I'm still digging myself out from under several cases."

Elliot made appropriately disappointed noises, then let her get back to work, but Catherine didn't get off that easy: she had to field calls from both Jenny *and* her father, as well. It seemed that Charles Chandler had seen his daughter's picture in the society pages and was making delighted inquiries. Jenny called to warn her that her father would be calling, and as soon as she hung up, he did. Catherine squirmed a little under his questions, but managed to make it through the call.

"I'm really sorry I haven't called, Daddy, but I *have* been busy...yes...I *know* the pictures were in the paper. No, No, I just met him a few days ago, so of course it's not serious."

By the time she got off the phone, she'd lost a good half-hour. Sighing, she grabbed her purse and left to check on a couple of business names over at City Hall, and as she walked out the front door, she ran into Bennie, a young man who made deliveries for the office—who just happened to also be a Helper. Weaving fearlessly on his bike through the thick traffic, Bennie stopped his bike next to her.

"Hi, Bennie!" Catherine greeted him gladly, hoping for a message from Vincent.

Pulling the earphones of his walkman out of his ear so he could hear, the boy grinned and chuckled. "Hi, gorgeous."

"Wish I could ride like you."

"Nobody rides like Bennie," the boy said with a laugh. Pulling a long, brown envelope from his jacket, he handed it to her with a flourish, then ruffled her hair playfully. "Special delivery!"

Catherine just smiled. Anxious to see what Vincent was sending her, she immediately opened the envelope.

She was puzzled to find a checkbook and a note, which she opened and read.

This might help.

V.

A taxi was pulling out a few cars down, and Catherine quickly hailed it before she lost it. After giving the cabbie her destination, she examined the checkbook. There didn't seem to be anything unusual about it, but she knew that if Vincent sent it and said it might help, then it must be important.

While she waited at City Hall for the clerk to get her the information she needed, Catherine made a quick call to a friend at police headquarters to ask about the name on the driver's license: it was just a hunch, but she knew it had to be important. It was: the man whose name was on the license was a small-time hood who'd been arrested several times for assault. Not only that, the officer who gave Catherine *that* information also supplied the name of the man's partner, who almost always worked with him.

The clerk came back with Catherine's information and she headed back to the office. Restlessly, she fingered the note Vincent had sent with the checkbook, opened it and re-read it. *He could've given me a little more information. It's not like him to be this obscure.* Frowning, Catherine refolded the note and tucked it into her purse along with the checkbook.

Once she reached her desk, Catherine decided that the most sensible thing to do would be to call the Langers and find out if they knew anything about this. Perhaps they'd given Vincent the checkbook.

She stared at the checkbook as she called the Langers' number. Misha Langer answered, and Catherine asked him if anything had happened, or if he'd seen Vincent since she'd seen him last. She listened to the old man's impassioned description of their rescue the night before, and broke in gently, "Did the men who attacked you...leave anything... when they ran away? Did you find anything?"

Mr. Langer told her that the man's coat had been left when they ran and that Vincent had picked something up, but they didn't know what it was.

Catherine smiled. She'd been right. "Mr. Langer, we have a good lead on the men who attacked you. When we pick them up, we'll need you to identify them in a lineup. Are you prepared to testify when they come to trial?"

The old man's enthusiastic response warmed her. She released a relieved sigh.

Apparently both Misha and Sophie Langer were prepared to testify. Catherine felt as though *finally* she could help these people and tell Vincent. She hung up the phone, prepared to go do battle with Joe over the arrest, but was detained by Edie, who had gotten what information she could. Unfortunately, it wasn't as much as Catherine would have liked. All Edie could find out was that all the buildings on the block were owned by different holding companies. Three of the empty buildings were scheduled for demolition, and the only thing stopping whoever wanted that block was the old people who were living in the Langers' building.

Catherine was disappointed. She'd hoped to find one name to tie all the buildings, but instead there were just more pieces to a very large puzzle. At her discouraged look, Edie asked her why she wasn't looking thrilled, and Catherine told her. Good friend that she was, Edie snatched the paper back and left to dig some more, with the promise that she'd find it.

Sighing heavily, Catherine picked up the checkbook and headed for Joe's office. She hesitated outside Joe's door, hoping what she had was enough. She decided to fib...just a little. Finally, she knocked on the door and poked her head in. "Joe? You got a minute?"

Joe looked up, and putting his pencil aside, gestured her in. "Sure. C'mon in. What's up?"

Catherine held out the checkbook and Joe took it with a puzzled look. "Misha and Sophie Langer were attacked again last night and the men were chased off by a good samaritan. One of the men dropped that."

"Well, well. That's one of 'em."

Catherine grinned. "Actually, probably both of them. I called Jimmy over at the precinct and he ran a rap sheet on him. It seems he usually runs with a partner."

Joe handed the checkbook back to her. "Good work, Radcliffe." He picked up the phone and made the call Catherine was hoping for.

"Yeah, Parker? I need a couple of arrests made." He grinned up at Catherine. "Yep. Same one Chandler called on. That's right. Aggravated assault. Hey, don't sweat it, all right? You pick them up and eyewitnesses will testify." Joe glanced up at her, questioning just to be sure, and she nodded. Satisfied, he continued, "I want to know the second you've got these guys."

As soon as Joe hung up, Catherine asked, "What about Leo Mundy?"

"What *about* him? The old folks say *he* beat 'em up? Look. We're gettin' two hard-cases off the streets. That's better'n nuthin'." Joe picked up the file he'd been working on when she came in and headed for the file cabinet.

Catherine was crushed. She knew Joe was right, but there just *had* to be a way to get Mundy. The thought of his self-satisfied smirk infuriated her. She pushed. "Will they deal? Let them plead to lesser charges if they testify against Mundy."

She could see Joe's half-grin, though he tried to hide it. "Now she's playing public defender. You're pushy, Radcliffe. I like your style. Let's just say...it's possible, okay?" He closed the file drawer with a sharp bang as he looked up and out the window into the main office. "What the hell is goin' on out here?"

Cathy walked over to join him and was chagrined to see that Elliot--accompanied by a waiter and tray covered with food--was making his way through the aisles to her desk.

Joe's eyes danced as he grinned. "I don't see you brown-baggin' it like the rest of us workin' stiffs, eh, Chandler?"

Joe was teasing, but Catherine didn't know *what* to think...a mixture of delight, embarrassment and irritation kept her from thinking at *all*.

Spinning on her heel, she left Joe's office to go talk to Elliot. The closer she came, the less irritated she became--Elliot had obviously done this thinking she'd like it--but she was also very aware of the sharp attention of her co-workers. The same co-workers she'd been trying so hard to convince that she was one of them and not somebody *playing* at working.

Elliot turned with a cheerful smile. "You said you were too busy for lunch, so I brought lunch to you. I hope you like lobster."

The waiter lifted the cover to a huge plate of lobster and Catherine tried to think of something polite to say. "Elliot...it's a very...sweet gesture...but...." She glanced around with embarrassment.

Elliot was too caught up in his own delight in surprising her to notice that she wasn't exactly overjoyed. "Fresh raspberries and cream...try one..."

"No...thank you..." she whispered, barely able to get the words out.

He held up a raspberry impaled on a fork... "*please* try one."

Feeling herself flushing, Catherine planted a hand on his chest and shoved him back as she looked around at the sea of faces. They looked away. "*Elliot!*" At his hurt look, she tried to smile through her chagrin. She murmured in an intense tone: "This is my *office*. I work here."

Elliot's look turned slowly from hurt to stunned realization as he, too, finally became aware of the curiosity of the onlookers. It was *his* turn to be embarrassed, and he looked down--but he smiled--and said, "I'm *really* very sorry, Catherine."

A champagne cork popped and Catherine's co-workers began laughing. She and Elliot eyes met and they joined in the laughter. He shook his head. "All I can say is it seemed like a wonderful idea at the time."

"Another time...." Catherine responded with a chuckle.

Elliot met her eyes and nodded, seeming to understand she was asking for a rain check. Turning to the waiter, he waved toward the door. "Out!" Shoving his hands deep into his pockets, he turned to her with a boyish look. "Still friends?"

Catherine laughed and nodded. She watched him as he sauntered, seemingly unconcerned, past all the onlookers--in an office that had been totally disrupted by his innocent surprise--and knew she had to go after him. Dashing through the room, she caught him just on the other side of the door. "Elliot!"

He stopped and waited for her.

"Don't think it was a total waste. The gesture was lovely."

"Eh? Well then...will I see you tonight?"

Without hesitation, Catherine answered, "Absolutely."

When he leaned over to kiss her, it seemed the most natural thing in the world.

But when she came back through the door into the office, people were still buzzing about the incident. Jeff Hoberman laughed out loud as she passed, but when she glared over at him, he sobered immediately, wagging his fingers in an apologetic wave. By the time she got back to her desk, Edie was there, arms crossed and tapping one foot impatiently. "Wouldn't you know that the instant I leave, somethin' good happens."

Catherine just shook her head as she slid into her chair. "It wasn't anything important...just crossed signals."

Bending over so that her braids brushed Catherine's nose, Edie whispered conspiratorially, "Hmmm. He could cross *my* signals any day...." then walked away, hips swaying.

Catherine laughed helplessly, burying her face in her hands. Catching her breath finally, she realized Joe was waving to her. Expecting another assault of bad jokes, Cathy braced herself and walked slowly over.

"Cops picked up your men," he said shortly. "You need to bring the Langers over to identify 'em."

"Already? That's wonderful! I'll go pick them up right away!" Catherine hadn't been expecting such quick results.

A few minutes later, after calling Sophie and letting her know she was coming, Catherine was sitting at her desk and getting her things together. Vincent's note fell out of her purse and she picked it up. She stared at it for a moment and sighed. Picking up a piece of her stationery, she wrote a quick note to him, asking him to meet her tonight at eight at the park threshold. She folded it and put it in an envelope. *I hope he'll come. Surely he will.* But she remembered how when she'd thought he was the Subway Slasher--when she'd doubted him--how he'd known and stayed away. *Why hasn't he come to me...if for no other reason than to ask about Misha and Sophie? Have I hurt him somehow?*

Catherine wondered uneasily what Vincent might be thinking about her feelings for Elliot. It occurred to her that he might feel a little like a voyeur, and truthfully, she wasn't entirely comfortable with the fact that he could sense her emotions right now...more because it wasn't fair to *him* than anything else. For her, sharing her feelings with Vincent seemed natural. Normal.

As Catherine walked out into the sunshine, she could hear Clarence, the black sax player on the corner. Clarence, too, was a helper. Catherine wondered a little at times how many people *were* helpers and knew about the tunnels--and about Vincent--because it sometimes seemed to her that everyone in New York knew...she just didn't know *them*. It occurred to her that she knew more helpers than she did people who lived in Vincent's world. Again, she counted to herself the few she knew: Father, Mary...and the boy, Nataniel, who'd come for her when she'd gotten lost. *And I can hardly even say truthfully that I know Father.*

Catherine stood listening to Clarence play for a moment--long enough to catch his eye, so he would know she was dropping a message--then tossed him the note, wrapped in a five-dollar bill.

Catherine took her car to the Langers' building. Normally, she preferred using a cab, but she wanted to go to the park later and wouldn't be back to the office. Catherine parked in front, and walked from the bright sunshine into the dimly lit lobby of the old building.

The elevator was working, but only just: it stopped jerkily a couple of times, giving Catherine an uneasy feeling. She determined that if the Langers were up to it, they'd take the stairs down.

Getting off on the fourth floor, Catherine went to the Langers' apartment and knocked. It took several minutes before Sophie's voice asked who it was and let her in. "We've been waiting for you," Misha said quietly, with a welcoming smile. "We're so pleased you were able to find these thugs."

"You're certain you aren't nervous about identifying them?"

"No. It must be done." Misha was adamant, and Sophie nodded.

Pleased and relieved, Catherine ushered them out. "Would you object to using the stairs?" she asked, a little embarrassed. "Quite frankly, it scared me a little when I was coming up...it stopped twice and jerked like it was going to fall."

Sophie agreed readily. "It does that sometimes. It *is* frightening. Going down is not so bad."

Catherine took Sophie's arm and steadied the older woman as they descended, and the trip down was much easier on Catherine's nerves than the trip up had been.

When they reached the street, Catherine held the door to the cab as the older couple climbed in. Lifting her head, she noticed a dark car across the street. Mundy was at the

wheel--watching them. Misha must have noticed her look, and asked: "Trouble?"

"Don't worry. He's just trying to frighten you so you won't testify."

Catherine intended to ignore Mundy's scare tactics, but as she walked around the car, she simply couldn't stand it: she stopped, turned and stared. Furious at Mundy's imperious look, she walked deliberately over to him.

He merely smiled. "You got a problem lady?"

"My witnesses are testifying. And if any harm comes to them, I'll know where to look. So stay away."

Mundy's smile just widened. The cool, smug attitude turned her stomach. He shook his head slightly. "I don't know what you're talkin' about."

"Well then you'd better do a bed check, Mundy. Two of your campers are in a holding cell downtown." She could tell he hadn't yet heard--from the look of momentary indecision that crossed his face. She couldn't help rubbing it in. "I'm going to put you away. You and whoever you work for."

But Mundy's smile was back in place. He was completely undisturbed. He glanced away, then said mockingly, "Maybe someday you and me will get a chance to dance together, lady." His eyes flicked up and met hers. "In the dark. I'd like that."

A shiver passed through Catherine, but she forced a smile and turned away, refusing to give him the satisfaction of seeing that he'd frightened her. She walked back to the car, got inside and started the engine.

"Is everything all right?" Sophie asked anxiously.

"Everything's fine. I just wanted him to know we've got his number."

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Vincent looked out over the set faces in council and placed a comforting hand on Mouse's shoulder. As an example, he'd used the problem the Langers were having. He thought that by comparing the situations, it would make people more sympathetic of Mouse's dilemma. He knew the community would close ranks to protect their own--even against themselves--once they realized how similar they were becoming to the world Above. At least...that was what he was counting on.

"What we're doing is *wrong*," he told the gathered council adamantly. "We have to be different...fairer...than the world Above. Our community was formed to create a better place. Where each person is important... and respected for who they are. It is a place to heal...and to live...in harmony. Mouse came to us for a home and he found one. He trusts us. Now we want to take his home from him. Does the fact that the aqueduct would benefit us all make up for the pain moving will cause Mouse? Is our convenience more important than Mouse's pain?"

Winslow shifted nervously, but William still stood with crossed arms, belligerently arguing. "We ain't doin' nasty

things to him like those people are doin' Above to those people. We all voted. It's our way. It's the law."

Vincent didn't back down. He was right, and he knew it. "What is being done Above may be illegal and what we are doing may not be...but does being *legal* make it *ethical*? Or honorable? Or even kind?"

Mary put a protective arm around Mouse. "I agree with Vincent. We've lived a lot of years with the yearly flooding. We know when it's coming--expect it. Mouse is just as inconvenienced as the rest of us. I think we should look for another solution."

"There *ain't* another solution! We've tried!" William was still insistent.

Vincent called for quiet as the murmur rose. "The issue is not whether there is another solution, but whether the solution we *have* allows us to be judicious...and charitable. We gave Mouse time to think about his decision, and now I propose we all take time to think about what we have discussed."

Amidst the murmur that followed, Father adjourned the meeting.

Vincent sensed the meeting had been a success. In fact, he felt more hopeful than he had in weeks.

Vincent considered his friends: William and Winslow were obstinate, but both were good-hearted and they cared for Mouse. Mary and Pascal were already firmly on Mouse's side. Kanin and Olivia were still unsure. Even Father was beginning to lean toward Mouse's side, as Vincent knew he would. The others were more unsure, but Vincent felt in the end they would all see Mouse's side.

Now that the problem with Mouse was being dealt with, and the situation with the Langers in Catherine's hands, Vincent had only to deal with his own emotions about Catherine. The first thing he'd done this morning was send Nathaniel with a note with the checkbook and driver's license to Bennie. He hoped Catherine would know what to do with it, but no matter what happened Above, he realized that the situation was in Catherine's hands. Just as, ultimately, her own life was. He knew he had to resign himself to the fact that he must let her go and be content with his life here Below. Without her. *I was content before Catherine came into my life. I must be again.* Vincent didn't know *how* he would manage this miracle: he only knew he must face the fact of life without her eventually. If not now, then someday.

In his preoccupation, Vincent had lapsed into silence. Kanin apparently noticed his withdrawal and tried to include him in the conversation. "The children are playing tonight in Father's study, Vincent."

"Playing?" Vincent asked absently, still not quite focusing on what Kanin was saying.

"Giving a concert. You're coming, aren't you? Livvy and I haven't seen much of you lately."

The thought of joining Kanin and Olivia--two people very much in love--was more than Vincent could have handled right now. He shook his head. "No. Not tonight,

Kanin. Thank you, but I have other plans." The only other plans Vincent had were to arrange to be as far from everyone as possible so he could be miserable by himself. Although he was feeling better than he had been, he still had no wish to inflict his unhappiness on his friends.

"Too bad. Livvy would've enjoyed visiting."

After Vincent spoke with Father, thanking him for calling the meeting, he and Mouse left to do security rounds. Mouse had spent a good deal of time "helping" Vincent in the past few days, tagging along whenever he could. Mouse was remarkably quiet and was observing Vincent with acute attention. Shifting uneasily under his friend's scrutiny, Vincent finally asked, "What is it, Mouse?"

Wide, innocent eyes stared back at him from under a shaggy thatch of blond hair as they walked slowly through the half-lit tunnels. "Vincent mad at kids?"

"No! Of course not, Mouse. Why would you think such a thing?"

Mouse looked away and kicked a rock as he walked. "Kids'll be disappointed—Vincent not come."

"Perhaps. I'll make it up to them." Vincent knew Mouse was correct, and the admonition stung.

"If Mouse sang, would Vincent come?" Mouse asked, without looking up.

Touched, Vincent smiled softly. "Yes, Mouse. If you were singing, of course I'd come."

"Then why not come tonight? Samantha sings good... not like Mouse. Jamie says Mouse sounds like frog." The boy was smiling now, becoming more animated. "Ever hear frog sing, Vincent?"

Nodding, Vincent admitted he had.

Mouse stuffed his hands into his pockets and shrugged. "Mouse likes the way frogs sing. *Ribbit, Riiibit*. Sounds nice when lots of frogs sing." He glanced mournfully up at Vincent. "Tried to sing with frogs at pond once, but scared 'em. Guess Jamie's wrong, huh?"

"Frogs rarely sing when they know anyone is near, Mouse. I doubt it was your voice." He leaned over and whispered to his friend. "I can't sing, either, Mouse. Perhaps we should both go sing with the frogs."

The boy brightened perceptibly. "Okay good! Okay...fine! Bye! Tell Jamie!" The boy dashed away in a spurt of energy that left Vincent feeling drained. Mouse seemed totally convinced that Vincent had "fixed" everything. The aqueduct obviously wasn't even an issue with him any longer.

Vincent was almost sad to see Mouse go. It was difficult to remain depressed continually, and somehow, a conversation with Mouse was a little like reading "The Walrus and the Carpenter:" it made the absurdities of life easier to handle.

Vincent spent the rest of his day thinking about what he would tell Catherine the next time he saw her. And wondering at the same time if he even *should* see her. By the time he finished and was on his way back, he had about

decided to go to the children's concert. It was time to get on with his life and try to find some solace in the things he used to enjoy.

Then Zach found him and delivered Catherine's message. With trembling fingers, Vincent opened it the folded note gently.

Vincent,

Please meet me at 8:00 pm at the park threshold. I have news.

Catherine.

He read the note with disappointment. *I have news.* Then it wasn't personal. It was about the task he'd given her. He sighed, glad that she'd apparently made progress--glad for the Langers--but undeniably disappointed at the same time.

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After finishing at the station and returning Sophie and Misha back home, Catherine drove to the park. With the men who'd attacked them put away, Catherine felt she could at least go to Vincent and let him know what she'd done. That the Langers would be safe, now. Besides...it gave her an excuse to see him.

Catherine's heels caught on the rocks and uneven concrete as she walked, but she hadn't wanted to waste time by going home to change. She needed to see Vincent and make sure he wasn't upset with her. She wanted to talk to him. She missed him. But she wasn't at all sure he would come, just as he hadn't come to her when she'd doubted him during the Slasher investigation.

Just as Catherine ducked inside the vestibule-like area outside the steel door, the door rolled back and Vincent stood silhouetted in the golden light cast by torches somewhere in the tunnel behind him.

He just stood there, silently waiting.

"I'm...glad you came," she finally said gently. "I wasn't sure you would."

He walked woodenly across the small enclosed area, carefully--it seemed to her--keeping distance between them. His usual fluid grace was gone and the action reminded her of a wind-up doll. Turning to her, he asked softly, "Have you been well?"

Catherine hated seeing him like this...hated the distance between them. She rushed to say what she'd come to tell him, hoping it would spark some show of interest. "Yes. We've been able to help your friend, Misha...and his friends." Vincent's face was illuminated by the torchlight, though his eyes were hidden in shadow. She wished he would come closer. "We've already put two men in jail. It's only a beginning, but the violence should stop."

"Good."

Catherine couldn't stand it any longer. The few steps between them seemed like miles. She lurched forward a step and pleaded, "Vincent...." but she stopped when she saw the pain on his face. "I don't want to cause you any pain...." Catherine didn't know what to do. She wanted him to *tell* her what was wrong...what she'd done.

He looked away. "Don't struggle, Catherine. There is no need."

"No need? Why?" She was floundering. He sounded so miserable. All she wanted to do was to go to him and have him enclose her in those strong, loving arms and make all the indecisiveness go away. If he'd only tell her what to *do*, she could fix it...they could fix it together, like they fixed everything....

He turned to her, his impassioned, light-filled face blazing in the darkness. "Because we know," he said sadly, with resignation deeper than any pain, "...we *always* knew that this...bond...between us was only a dream we shared."

"A dream? No, Vincent!" *No!* she thought frantically. Not that concrete, solid certainty of his caring...their connection. That wasn't a dream. It was real. She went to him, pleading: "Our bond is the most real thing I've ever known. More than anything in my life."

"Do you love this man?" Vincent asked softly.

That question threw her, though she'd been half-expecting it. "I don't know," she said honestly, not knowing what *else* to say. "But if I do, it won't change anything. I won't *let* it."

"Someday, someone will come," he told her. "And you'll live another life...and dream another dream."

"I don't want to lose you, Vincent." She didn't. At this moment, Catherine began to realize how much she truly cared for this strange, unbelievable being...this *man*. How completely lost she'd be without him. And how absolutely ridiculous her last comment had been. But she could think of nothing else to say...and obviously neither could he, because he didn't answer, only stared a moment, then walked past her, back to the threshold.

Stopping before the threshold door, Vincent turned back to look at her, and the look in his eyes made her fear that she would truly never see him again. He turned and ducked through the doorway, pulling the lever as he went, and the door closed behind him, leaving her in the darkness.

Frustrated, feeling lost and hurt, Catherine stood a

moment in the darkness, then turned and made her way back out of the drainage tunnel into the night. The difficulty of navigating the water in the center and the curved concrete walls occupied her complete attention, and once outside in the park, she hurried to get back to her car... before some unpleasant character accosted her.

While she was driving home she watched the bright, twinkling lights of the city slide past and wiped away tears. She felt as though she'd lost her best friend.

It's not fair, she thought sadly. *I can't choose, Vincent...I can't.* It wasn't just a choice between Vincent and Elliot. It was a choice between worlds. Between lives. *Besides. Before tonight, I didn't realize I had a choice to make!* But it was obvious from Vincent's reaction that she *did*. She hadn't been aware that Vincent loved her as a man loves a woman. In fact, Catherine wasn't at all certain she'd seen him as a *man* at all. It hadn't occurred to her before. Vincent was... Vincent. She cursed the fact that for her, the bond wasn't strong enough to sense Vincent's emotions. Hadn't warned her of this. All she was certain of was that she *did* love him. But there was also Elliot.... Catherine pulled into the parking garage at her apartment. Stopping the car and burying her face in her hands, Catherine sighed in frustration. *God...how I must have hurt him.* 'Do you love this man?' he'd asked. And the look in his eyes had told her all she'd ever need to know.



When the door rolled closed, Vincent slumped helplessly against the concrete wall. He was shaking with reaction. *How can Catherine possibly believe that nothing will change between us if she loves this man?* Perhaps he'd been wrong in believing that they'd shared a dream at all...or if they had, she certainly had a different perception of that dream. He was confused more than angry. He could hardly blame Catherine for not understanding the depth of his love for her, nor could he blame her for falling in love with this man. And yet, as he stood there—eyes closed, heart open to her—he could feel the bond between them, like a pure, silver thread joining them. He knew she felt it, too, and that she'd been telling her deepest, heartfelt truth when she'd said the bond was the most *real* thing in her life.

To confuse him further, the bond itself seemed tighter, stronger than ever before.

He decided not to attend the concert after all.

CHAPTER NINE:

THY SWEET LOVE REMEMBERED

The following morning, Catherine was determined to finish up what she'd started on the Langers' case. The men who'd attacked them were in jail, and surely it was only a matter of time before they rolled over and gave up information on Mundy. But Catherine wanted the man who'd *sent* Mundy. She wanted something more solid to give Vincent...some reason to seek him out again. She knew if she didn't she wouldn't see him again. The look of finality in his eyes shook her.

When she got in and went through her messages, she found a note from Edie asking her to come by, so she rushed to find out what her friend had found.

Leaning on the desk beside Edie, Catherine asked hopefully, "Paydirt?"

But Edie only shook her head in frustration. "Hey... still a long way *from* it. I've been punchin' into these holding companies, trying to find out who the principal players are...and I mean somebody has gone through *lot* of trouble to make that damn near impossible. I mean, I *know* the serious drug Czars run this kind of game to launder money...I can't imagine any names...but there's this: three of those holding companies use the same law firm as agent and New York business address." She punched up a screen and pointed. "That one."

Catherine dug out her notebook and quickly wrote the name down. Smiling at Edie, Catherine told her: "Have I told you lately that you're *amazing*?"

With a pleased, half-embarrassed shrug, Edie just laughed. "Yeah. Me an' the Mets...who *are*, by the way, at Shea Sunday, should you trip across a spare ticket or two...say in your Daddy's..." she slipped on a pair of dark glasses and beamed... "private box."

"You're a *bandit*!" Catherine gave a delighted chuckle as she spun away...with Edie still adding on to her list of wants and desires behind her.

Catherine rushed through the office back to her desk to pick up her purse. Joe sauntered past, asking her what her rush was.

"I've got a name," she told him breathlessly. "A name of a law firm who is listed as the agent and New York business address of all the buildings."

Joe popped something into his mouth and chewed, looking thoughtful as Cathy grimaced. *It's probably his breakfast*, she thought. After a moment or two, he reminded her: "That, by itself doesn't mean anything, you know. You've got to find out which attorney handles 'em, and then who hires the attorney."

"But it's a start," she said, swinging her purse strap over her shoulder. "It's a start."

The trip to the address she'd gotten from Edie didn't take long, and as Catherine waited in the lobby for the elevator, she read over the list of attorneys listed with the firm and noted the name of the oldest partner.

The elevator opened and she rode with several gray-suited attorneys up to the fourteenth floor, where it decanted them into a luxurious waiting room. The secretary beamed at the men, greeting them by name and then turned her attention to Catherine. "May I help you?"

Pulling out her card, Catherine presented it to the woman. "I'm from the District Attorney's office, and I need to speak with Mr. Arthur, please."

The secretary hesitated for a moment, then pressed the intercom button. "Mr. Arthur, there's someone here from the District Attorney's office to talk to you."

The voice coming back over the speaker was vaguely familiar to Catherine, but she couldn't place it. "Really? Very well, Christine. Send them in."

Christine walked regally around her desk and gestured for Catherine to follow her, stopping at a heavy oak door and going inside. "Mr. Arthur, Catherine Chandler." After delivering her, Christine disappeared smoothly and quietly.

Catherine stood, stunned, as Mr. Arthur stood and greeted her. His memory didn't seem to be as sharp as hers. His look was puzzled, as though he knew he'd seen her, but wasn't certain where. "Ms. Chandler. Have we met?"

"Almost," she commented dryly. "The other night at the museum opening."

"Oh...yes, of course." Elliot Burch's lawyer came around his desk to lean against it, facing her. "You're Elliot's uh...new friend." He gestured at a chair. "Here. Sit down. How may I help you."

Catherine sat. She wasted no time with preamble. "You're the agent of record for these corporations, Mr. Arthur. I'd very much like to contact the principals regarding an investigation I'm working on."

The man looked dutifully at papers Catherine handed him and raised his eyebrows. "Oh." Clearing his throat, he stated flatly, "I'm afraid I can't do *that*. These names are privileged information. However, if there's anything else I can help you with...."

Catherine lowered her eyes. She had a growing—and very unhappy feeling—that she was asking questions to which she didn't want to know the answers. But she had no choice: she'd come this far. When she spoke, it was very difficult to keep her voice even, she felt so sick to her stomach. "You can tell me if these companies are owned by Elliot Burch."

"Ms. Chandler," Mr. Arthur chided as he leaned forward. "Surely you can respect my position regarding confidentiality."

"I'll get a court order if need be."

"Indeed you *will*, Ms. Chandler." Mr. Arthur rose abruptly and returned to the other side of his desk. "Now. You *really* must excuse me. I have...."

"A busy calendar?" Catherine picked up her purse and stood. "I know." Walking quickly to the door, she let herself out.

By the time Catherine made it back to the Criminal Courts Building, she was beginning to get angry. She tried all the way back to defend Elliot--make up reasons why it wasn't him...had to be someone else--but deep down, she knew.

Tossing everything down onto her desk, she called a friend at the precinct to see what the status was on the punks the Langers had identified...only to find, to her horror, that they'd been released. The bail had been paid that morning. Catherine was more furious than she could remember being for a very long time. She slammed the receiver down and stalked through the aisles of cluttered desks straight to Joe Maxwell's office.

Catherine opened Joe's door without knocking, only to pull back instinctively, slamming the door again as a dart sailed past her nose to lodge itself in the dartboard by the door.

"Come in..." Joe sang out.

Rushing inside, she confronted him. "I just found out Mundy's leg breakers are back on the street!"

Joe at least had the grace to look embarrassed and upset. "Yeah...I know," he admitted. "It kind of surprised me, too, bail being as high as it was. No self-respecting bondsman would touch 'em."

Catherine was so furious and frustrated that she couldn't stand still. "Spare change to...whoever signs Leo Mundy's paycheck," she snapped.

"You find a name?"

"I have a hunch. I don't want to jinx it." Joe stared curiously at her, and she looked away. "Well...can we get police protection for our witnesses?"

Joe released an explosive laugh. "No way! This is penny-ante stuff. Will you hand me those darts please?"

Automatically, Catherine went and collected the darts. "We are *talking*," she said angrily between pulling darts out of the board, "about two old people brave enough to do their part for us. We *owe* them." She returned to Joe, the darts angrily clenched in fists. Joe had to hold his hand out to remind her she had them. "You know those thugs will be right *back*!"

"All right," Joe said finally. "Look. I'll see if I can increase patrols in the area." He lifted his eyes to hers. "Now that's the best I can do."

Too angry to speak...with herself for being gullible, with Joe for being part of the system, and *furious* with Elliot, Catherine turned and stormed out.

Her anger carried her all the way to Elliot Burch's office building, where she rode the elevator up--stonily staring at the upholstered walls--then charged past his secretary, who yelled out at her that she couldn't go in.

Catherine was marginally aware of the mass of reporters and cameras in the office, who were obviously waiting to interview the "great man." She ground her teeth and threw the door open.

Elliot's surprised--and guilty--look only confirmed her suspicions. Obviously his attorney had called him the moment she'd left. "Cathy! I've been trying to reach you all morning.... I just got off the phone with Arthur. He just...."

Catherine could barely speak she was so angry. Angry, humiliated and hurt. "Do you own the building?" The question came out as a hoarse whisper.

Stopped before he could start his explanation, Elliot hesitated, then admitted quietly, "Well, yes. I...I had no idea what was going on."

It was like opening Pandora's box. Catherine could still hardly believe it, even with Elliot himself telling her. "Leo Mundy works for *your* management company?"

"Cathy..." Elliot answered with a sigh of resignation. He leaned forward to explain. "I've got hundreds and hundreds of employees. I can't monitor every one of them. Listen! I'm appalled at the things that have been going on."

"I'm not so sure, Elliot."

"Aw...please." He rose and turned away from her, as though he couldn't meet her eyes.

"I think those old people are just obstacles to you," she accused him. "To be removed, regardless of the price."

Indignant, Elliot turned and pointed. "That's not true!"

Then, as if he wasn't in deep enough, Elliot dug himself in even deeper as Catherine listened, more and more dismayed as he came to her and lost himself in an impassioned speech indicating that to him the ethics of it didn't matter...only the results. "And if it was true, what are we talkin'? We're talkin' about thirty people? Fifty people? The project that I'm planning for that block will employ ten *thousand* people! When it's completed, it will generate millions of dollars in new jobs--revitalize the entire neighborhood!"

"At what price? We're talking about human *beings*!" If Elliot had suddenly grown horns and a tail, Catherine couldn't have been more shocked or surprised.

"Listen, I've been very, very generous to these people."

"You are rationalizing everything you've done! Men on your payroll have tried to murder people!"

Elliot made the mistake, then, of trying to play upon Catherine's relationship with him, softly saying, "Honey, that is a pretty wild accusation."

The patronization was the last straw for Catherine. Backing away, she said flatly. "I don't have enough to go public yet, but I promise you, this isn't over."

Turning away, she walked toward the door, with Elliot calling after her, "Cathy...don't walk away." When she didn't stop, he came after her. "Cathy! Cathy...."

She turned in time to see him stop dead as he realized he was walking straight into reporters waiting for him for the press conference.

He put on his best political face and smiled. "Gentlemen...."

Sickened, disgusted that he cared more for his public appearance than for how he appeared to her, Catherine whirled and walked out of the room.

The tears caught up with her in the elevator and she wept as she walked out the front door. All she could think of was how it had all been false: a dream more unreal and insubstantial than any she had while asleep. *Vincent was wrong*, she thought. *What we share isn't a dream. It's real. What I shared with Elliot was the dream...and it's turning into a nightmare.*



Vincent's day had been quiet: the normal rounds of teaching and work. But he'd begun to settle into his routine, less disturbed by Catherine's emotions. Part of it was that something within the bond had changed, and his jealousy abated.

Today, Catherine's emotions were confused and troubled, and although Vincent hated for her to be unhappy, he was relieved that he no longer sensed her desire--her caring--as being so intimately directed to someone else. He didn't understand what had happened, but his mind was clear. His heart was no longer so heavy. He spent the evening reading Shakespeare's sonnets, lingering on the twenty-ninth.

After reading for an hour or so, he tried to put his feelings down in his journal.

Before I met Catherine, the words of love--the emotions of love and desire--that I'd read of in books were abstract and dry. I could never have imagined how those emotions--and that of jealousy--can change one's life. Catherine's love opened doors to new, unimagined worlds...but I found those doors to be only windows...barred and impassable for me. Before she met this man, I was content to watch through those windows, but when I realized that all I could do was watch another man take her from me, I became desperate. Tennyson said, "Tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all." I still believe that. For a time, though, I lost myself to envy and despair. For that time, Catherine, herself, was lost to me. My jealousy would not even allow me to be happy for her--with her--as I should be. I forgot for a time that I could never lose the love we share: the bond enables me to touch her...to be with her

wherever she is. What matter that she is happy with another, as long as she is happy?

More at peace than he'd been in many days--more resigned--Vincent closed the journal and went for a walk before bed. He stopped by Winslow's chamber.

"Winslow?"

Winslow glanced up from the sketch he was working on. "Vincent? Come on in."

Vincent walked over to the bed and glanced down at the sketch. "Another statue?"

Winslow handed the sketch to him. "Figured it could stand beside the other one."

"The woman?" Vincent saw that the sketch was a self portrait of Winslow. He gave the paper back. "I see you haven't given up your dreams."

"Nope." Craning his head up to stare up at Vincent, Winslow asked: "You?"

Shaking his head, Vincent stated flatly: "I think, perhaps Father is right. My dreams can only cause me pain."

Winslow rolled over and swung his legs off the bed. "That's bullshit, Vincent. If you give up your dreams, you might as well lay down and die. Just because Margareta couldn't be trusted don't mean Catherine can't be. She's known about us for a year, now...and she hasn't told anybody. And if you ain't scared her off yet..."

Vincent glanced up to see Winslow grinning at him. "Then what?" he asked in genuine curiosity.

"Then *anything* can happen. Give it time." When Vincent didn't answer, Winslow shrugged. "Think about it."

Touched--in spite of the fact that Winslow's advice was too late--Vincent nodded. "I will."

"Council meets tomorrow morning...in case that's why you stopped by. Make sure you're there."

"That was the reason I stopped. I will be. Thank you, Winslow."

Vincent left Winslow still working on his sketch and continued his walk.

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As Catherine stalked away from Elliot's building, she wept tears of loss, bitter anger and despair. There was little she could do at this point to prove Elliot's involvement in this, despite his admitting it to her. She had to have solid proof to present to Joe and Moreno. And, with everything else going on, she'd forgotten for a time that she needed to warn the Langers that their attackers were free. She felt as though she'd betrayed them. Betrayed Vincent. She'd allowed Elliot to blind her. *No more*, she thought as she wiped away the tears.

Hailing a cab, Catherine went straight from Elliot to see the elderly couple. As the cab pulled up in front of the old building and she paid the cabbie, it was just beginning

to get dark and the lights of the city were beginning to wink on. The evening was chilly enough to make her shiver.

Catherine looked up at the building that was the cause of this tangled web. It really had very little to recommend it. The neighborhood was bad and the building itself wasn't in the best of shape. But to Misha and Sophie it was home. She sighed as she climbed the steps and went inside.

After waiting for five full minutes for the elevator, Catherine began to suspect it wasn't working and turned toward the stairs. She eyed the long, dark stairwell and groaned. *C'mon, kid. They say climbing stairs is really good exercise.* She pitied the Langers. If as young as she was, *she* didn't feel enthusiastic about climbing those stairs, how would seventy-five-year-old Misha or sixty-eight-year-old Sophie feel about it?

After three flights, Catherine's legs ached. *I haven't been jogging enough!* After four flights, she was ready to sit down, but fortunately this was their floor. Catherine walked down the hallway until she found the number of the Langers' apartment. She knocked softly and waited. She thought she heard someone say something, but couldn't make out what it was. A few moments later, Sophie asked, "Who's there?" The timid question revealed the woman's fear.

"Sophie...it's Cathy."

When the door opened, Catherine could hear soft music playing in the background, and Sophie smiled at her, saying, "Just in time. I'm making dinner."

When Catherine turned and locked the door from inside, Sophie must have realized something was wrong, and asked anxiously, "Something new about the case?"

"Mundy's thugs got out of jail."

The old woman seemed very frail to Catherine. Sophie walked to the sofa and sat as Catherine explained to her that there was someone very powerful behind their problems--that she'd requested more police protection. Catherine asked about Misha, and Sophie told her he was all right, lying down. That all this had been very difficult for him. "You should have known him when he was young. Full of energy. Strong. They broke him. Crushed his spirit. Made him old."

Sophie asked Catherine to eat with them, and she accepted, but nervously got up to go put the chain on the door. She warned Sophie that things might get worse, and asked her if it was worth all the danger, but Sophie was adamant. "Oh yes," the old woman said. "Someone has to stand up to them. Say, 'No!' and refuse to run! It starts with one person. Even an old man or an old woman. If nobody says 'No,' stands up...fights this madness, then the nightmare begins again." She pulled up her sleeve to reveal the tattoo given her in a concentration camp, and Catherine then realized what she and Misha had been through and why they were so determined not to be taken from their homes again. "Believe me," Sophie whispered. "We know."

As they were talking, Misha woke. Supper wasn't quite ready, so Sophie pulled out an old photo album—one of the few things they'd managed to retain through the madness of the war. It was delightful for Catherine, listening to the stories and seeing them so young and carefree.

The peace was disturbed by the telephone: another neighbor had spotted strange men in the building. Sophie told them to call the police, but as she was speaking, the line went dead and the lights went out. Catherine looked around fearfully—more afraid for her friends than for herself—but Misha took charge as they headed out into the hallway with flashlights.

Sophie didn't want them to split up. "We'll fight. All of us together."

But Misha was adamant. "Please, Mama. Go with Catherine. I'll get the others. The last apartment on the left is empty."

Taking Sophie's hand, Catherine led her to the end apartment. She could hear Misha's soft tread as he left them. Closing the apartment door behind them, she and Sophie waited in the darkness, listening for the sound of footsteps. They didn't have to wait long. A few minutes later they could hear men in the hallway, and one of them said, "Kick them all in!" The order was followed by the sound of a door being forced—and a scream. The sounds moved closer...a door at a time as the men worked their way down the hallway. Catherine was terrified, but she was also determined not to allow Sophie to be harmed. Backing into a corner, Catherine spread her arms, trapping the woman behind her—protecting her—and turned to face the doorway.

A moment later, the door burst open and dark figures were silhouetted there. Framed like some crazy impressionistic painting. One of the figures raised the flashlight it held and pinpointed her, then a voice she knew said mockingly: "Well, sweetheart. It looks like we're gonna get a chance to dance after all, huh?"

Mundy. It was what he'd told her when she'd confronted him in front of the building when she was taking the Langers to identify their attackers: that someday he'd like a chance to dance with her...in the dark. Catherine shuddered. But as Mundy pulled his mask off, arrogantly revealing himself, Catherine lunged forward, landing a punch in his solar plexus, followed by another to his head which knocked him down. She ran, then, hoping he'd follow her and forget Sophie.

Once out in the hallway, she ran directly into a melee she wasn't expecting: Misha and many of the other tenants were fighting with the men Mundy had brought with him, and Catherine dove into the fray, kicking, biting and slugging anything that got within reach. She was grabbed from behind and screamed...but then the sound of breaking glass and Vincent's furious roar brought the fight to a temporary standstill.

Vincent heard Catherine cry out a warning just as another blow took him in the back. He spun to face this new attacker and was struck again. By now, the fight had moved closer to the window, where the light from the street was in Vincent's face. He could see the shock and disbelief on the face of his attacker as the man backed away from him. For a moment, there was nothing else for Vincent but the man and himself. The flimsy draperies drifted in the breeze behind his adversary, blue-lit from the neon lights outside. The raucous cries behind him had died to whispers of sound. Vincent's rage drained away, leaving him empty.

But the man, not understanding that it was over, continued backing away, too frightened to see what Vincent saw: the window gaping open behind him. At the same moment the man's knees hit the windowsill, Vincent leaped for him, but reached him too late. He could only watch as the man plummeted to the street below, to fall directly in front of a moving car.

Vincent turned to Catherine, sensing her concern...now all for him. The bluish light from outside shone off her white sweater, making her look ethereal—with a halo—like an angel.

"I'm all right," she assured him breathlessly. "Go!"

He and Catherine gazed at one another for a long moment, and Vincent could feel her love for him—stronger now than ever before—the bond twisting its way around his heart. Capturing him more completely than any net.

Catherine's worry for him jolted Vincent to realization of his own peril, and he turned to climb through the window—upwards this time—to the roof. He could see a crowd gathering below, around the body.

As he left, he could hear someone ask, "Did you see that? What was it?"

And Misha answered, "Enough! He's a friend. A friend like this one."

Relief spread through Vincent as he stood on the rooftop in the fresh spring air. Catherine's heart was no longer divided...and he sensed he had a place there, now.

Police and ambulance sirens screamed as they arrived, and Vincent searched for the safest way away from the scene. Gathering himself, he leaped across the wide gap between buildings and ran across the rooftop of that building to the next, not stopping to descend to the street until he'd traveled several blocks.

Vincent once more caught a train to quickly reach home. Excited by the change in Catherine's attitude—her feelings toward him—he felt bold enough to leave her a gift. He hurried through the tunnels, past sentries to whom he gave an 'All's well' wave, back to his chamber.

Picking up the volume of sonnets he'd been reading earlier in the evening, he paused to write his message on the flyleaf.

As he was on his way back out, Father caught him at the entranceway.

"Vincent! Where have you been? The pipes reported that you were seen running out of here some time ago—and now you're leaving again?"

Vincent paused long enough to sweep Father up in a hug and kiss his cheek. "Not now, Father. There is no time." At Father's worried look, he smiled. "Don't worry, Father. All is well...now."

On the way back Above, he took time to stop at a small flower shop owned by a helper—to pick up a single red rose to mark the poem he wanted Catherine to read.

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Wearily, Catherine talked to the police as they arrived. She watched the bodies being zipped into the body bags and listened to the whispers over the unexplained wounds.

Joe had come as soon as Catherine called, and stood listening to Catherine's explanation with a dubious expression.

"I don't know, Joe. I don't know *how* they got those wounds. We were *all* fighting in the dark. No one could see anything."

Catherine could tell Joe didn't buy her explanation, but neither could he find a murder weapon, either, nor any one person to point to. All stood equally guilty or innocent.

The rest of the tenants said the same: that everyone was fighting with anything they could find as a weapon, but no one had any idea how the two men had finally died. As for Mundy, he had backed out the window when he was trying to get away from them. They tried to stop him, but he was over, and gone, too quickly.

Everyone was taken to the station for questioning, and after hours of questions and reports, they were all allowed to leave.

Joe walked Catherine out to the street to hail a cab for her. Raking her disheveled hair out of her face, Catherine thanked him. "At least it's over."

Joe shook his head in disbelief over some of the things Catherine told him. "I can't believe Elliot Burch was behind all this."

"Believe it," Catherine said grimly.

"You okay with that?" he asked in a worried tone. "I mean, you an' him...you were...he was...."

"I dated him a few times, Joe," Catherine said defensively. "Anybody can make a mistake in judgement. Believe me, it won't happen again."

Joe didn't answer, but instead whistled for a cab. As it pulled up, he opened the door for her. "Go on home, Radcliffe. I think on this one, you went beyond the call of duty."

"Thanks, Joe."

Catherine slid into the back seat of the cab with a sigh and gave the cabbie her address. All the excitement of the evening had drained away, leaving her completely spent. When the cab pulled up in front of her apartment, she just felt glad to be home.

As she slammed the door and turned toward the building, she heard a voice that stopped her dead. She'd hoped she wouldn't have to face Elliot again so soon.

"Catherine!" Elliot rushed up to her. He'd obviously been parked across from her apartment waiting for her to return. "I've been waiting here for you...look...there's been a terrible misunderstanding."

Catherine was doubly furious that she'd been fighting for her life with the men Elliot had hired, while he was sitting here waiting to explain to her how *innocent* he was. *How stupid does he think I am?* "Only on your part," Catherine retorted angrily. "Those people are *not* moving! I've got enough on your management company to stop the project."

"No...." Elliot was stunned.

"Yes. The building...stays."

She spun and walked away, pausing to turn and glare at him triumphantly before she turned away for good.

Catherine's anger carried her all the way up to her apartment, where she stripped off her filthy clothes, took a long, hot shower and washed her hair. Only then, when she felt more human, did the excitement and exertions of the evening--and the day--catch up with her. Listlessly, she blew her hair dry and dressed for bed, all the while chastising herself for having been such a fool over Elliot, hurting Vincent...and for not realizing where her heart *really* wanted to lead her. *Follow your heart*, Vincent had told her repeatedly. And despite the bond, Catherine had honestly thought it was leading her away from him.

Catherine crawled into bed--totally exhausted--only to realize she hadn't had supper and her stomach was growling. After lying under the covers for half an hour, too tired to get up, but too hungry to sleep, she eventually forced herself to get up and warm a can of soup.

She felt better after the soup, but was no longer sleepy, so she opened the doors to the balcony and stepped outside. She didn't really expect to see Vincent waiting for her, but it would've been nice. She stood, staring at the stars for a minute, then dropped her gaze. Vincent *had* been to see her: there was a small, red-leather bound volume of Shakespeare's sonnets lying on the table.

Hands trembling, Catherine lifted the book and opened it. In Vincent's bold, flowing script, the flyleaf proclaimed: *Shakespeare knew everything.*

She smiled softly, then let the book fall open to the place he'd marked with a rose. The sentiment of the gesture was hardly lost on her, and her eyes filled with tears as she read:

*When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,
I all alone beweep my outcast state
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries
And look upon myself and curse my fate,
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featured like him, like him with friends possess'd,
Desiring this man's art and that man's scope,*

*With what I most enjoy contented least;
Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising.
Haply, I think on thee, and then my state,
Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate;
For thy sweet love remember'd such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.*

Tears ran freely down Catherine's face and she made no move to wipe them away: she was crying for so many things she couldn't count them. *I wonder if this is how a butterfly feels when it breaks free from its chrysalis—a new creature.*

Lifting the rose from its nest within the pages, she took it inside and put it carefully in a bud vase on the table by her bed. Then, with the book tucked in beside her, Catherine pulled her quilted silk bedspread up around her shoulders and fell into a deep, untroubled sleep.



Far above the city, Vincent sat motionless as a statue on the rooftop of a old building. After he'd left the volume of poetry and the rose on Catherine's balcony—his message to her—he'd left quickly to avoid changing his mind. Then he'd come here to wait for her reaction.

The cool wind sent his mane straying restlessly across his still face. The city pulsed beneath him and once more he felt himself to be a part of it. Alive. Connected. The moon shone overhead, a bright ornament to the velvet sky, and the echoes of the bond came softly back to him.

When Catherine picked up the book and began reading, Vincent closed his eyes and let her emotions sweep over him. He wept with her—but for both of them, they were tears of release, not unhappiness. He could sense no rejection of his love in Catherine's tears. Nor yet complete acceptance of her own feelings for *him*. But, he thought with a sigh, *as Winslow said, 'anything is possible.'*

Eventually Vincent tired of the glittering expanse below him and longed for home. As he stood, he scattered pigeons that had settled beside his still, silent form. He chuckled as they fluttered away—only to light a few feet away and grudgingly settle back down. He stretched a moment to loosen muscles made stiff by his long stillness, then began his climb down.



Two days later, the final council session was held to discuss the aqueduct project. As Vincent knew it would be, the project was shelved—with the proviso that Mouse find some other way to divert the water. The solution was something everyone could live with.

After everyone left to return to their own respective tasks, Vincent remained behind to talk with Father. He sat quietly, watching as Father rolled and put away the plans

for the aqueduct. He thought his parent seemed inordinately pleased with the outcome, and he wondered why, since Father had been one of the project's staunchest supporters. "You seem pleased that the aqueduct won't be built."

Father laughed gently. "No. The aqueduct would have been a marvelous benefit to everyone. Just think, Vincent...no more shuffling and moving every year." He chuckled again. "No. It's not that at all." He limped over and settled in the old wooden rocker across from his son. "It's just that it...pleases me that our world--and our family--chose compassion over progress. I must admit that even I had lost sight of our ideals in the promise of less work and increased safety. But sometimes, when things become too easy, people become complacent. They forget what is really important." Reaching out to place a hand on Vincent's knee, he said quietly: "I'm very proud of you, Vincent."

Vincent, who was always a little embarrassed with praise, ducked his head and changed the subject. "*Mouse* is certainly pleased. He not only keeps the Mousehole, but he's been given an actual *assignment*. He feels quite...responsible."

Father leaned back in the rocker, rocking contentedly. "I know. Heaven help us all."

As they were laughing together at Father's comment...envisioning *Mouse's* possible--and *impossible*--solutions, Kipper announced himself from the threshold.

"Father! Vincent! Got a message from *Catherine*. Bennie sent it."

Kipper's voice was almost reverential, and Vincent wondered a little at the tone, but dismissed the thought immediately as he rose to accept the small envelope from Kipper. He stood holding it for a moment...hesitant to open it with anyone else present.

"Vincent? Aren't you going to open it?" Kipper asked innocently.

Running his thumb across Catherine's small script, Vincent glanced at Father, who looked away. "Yes. Of course, Kipper. But not at the moment." He smiled down at the eager child. "Thank you for bringing it."

"S'okay." The boy grinned. "Gotta go. Zach's waitin' for me down at the Reach. See ya." He clattered up the stairs and was gone in moments.

When Vincent glanced back at Father again, Father was diligently examining his glasses for smudges. Obviously trying very hard to keep from asking questions. Vincent excused himself gently and left.

Vincent waited until he reached his chamber before opening the envelope. Even then, he paused hesitantly--afraid to see what Catherine's response was to his impetuous gift and the message which was implicit in it. Deciding there was nothing else he could do but open it and find out, Vincent sat gingerly on the edge of his bed and slid a nail delicately under the flap, working the envelope open without tearing it.

Vincent,

Thank you for the book. And the rose. I'd like to see you tonight. Will you meet me at the threshold below my apartment at eight?

Catherine.

She wanted to see him. Vincent didn't know whether to be frightened or ecstatic. The note itself held no answers for him.

Though it was still far too early, Vincent grabbed his cloak and left his chamber...only to spend the next few hours pacing the tunnels between the Hub and Catherine's apartment building.

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Catherine spent a great deal of time trying to decide what to wear when she saw Vincent that evening. Everything seemed wrong. Too plain. Too seductive. Too old. Too new. Nothing said what she wanted to say: *I love you. I need you.*

It wasn't something she was ready to say, yet. Not in so many words. Even if she'd been ready, she knew instinctively that Vincent wasn't. *I feel as if I'm walking on a thin layer of ice, and any step we take could mean disaster.* Catherine knew that just loving someone wasn't enough. She'd had enough experience in love to know that life and love had to be negotiated carefully at the best of times. And with Vincent, Catherine had an idea things were *never* going to be simple.

Catherine stared ruefully at her reflection and sighed, thinking of all the problems inherent in this strange relationship. Elliot, she could've at least taken home to meet her father. She could tell her friends about him. Brows knit in an angry frown, Catherine hissed aloud: "I will *not* even think of Vincent and that...that *liar* in the same breath!" But as she spun away from the mirror, a thought formed. A way to tell Vincent without words what she wanted to say.

Kneeling in front of her dresser, Catherine pulled out the bottom drawer and lifted the carefully folded pile of soft linen, wool and leather clothing she'd worn home from Vincent's world. She stroked the soft shawl and held it to her face breathing in the scent of his world...the same scent Vincent carried everywhere he went: candlewax and smoke. It wasn't quite the same, though, and for a moment she wondered why. Then she smiled, remembering. Vincent carried his own scent along with his clothes—a very masculine scent—though before now, she'd never really thought of it in quite that way. Again, it was just a part of who he was.

Excited now, Catherine dressed carefully—lovingly smoothing down the layers of clothing as she put them on. The heavy socks were warm and came almost to her

knees, and the soft skirt fell to her feet. The sweater and shawl--obviously hand-knit--were almost too warm for her apartment. Catherine brushed her hair one last time, pulled on the soft leather boots and a long, lightweight trenchcoat to cover her odd clothing.

By now, Catherine was far too hot. But she knew that Below it would be cool and comfortable. And Vincent would be there. She smiled as she closed the door to her apartment and took the elevator down to the basement.

A few other tenants rode with Catherine on the trip down, but fortunately, no one else was interested in going to the sub-basement and she made the last leg of the trip alone.

Once she'd carefully pushed the empty boxes back out of the way and descended into the darkness, Catherine breathed a sigh of relief. She shed her trenchcoat and folded it, placing it on the ground beside the ladder. She could pick it up later...or another time. It wasn't important. What *was* important was that Vincent see her garbed in the clothes from his world. That his father see her that way when she went down to see *him*. It was time to go Below and thank the *other* man who had saved her life.

Catherine glanced at her watch. *Five after eight. Maybe it's fast. He's never late.* She stared with concern off into the darkness. *What if he doesn't come this time?* Feeling uncomfortable in the unfamiliar clothing, Catherine closed her eyes and took a deep breath. *He'll come. He'll come,* she chanted to herself.

"Catherine."

Vincent's voice shattered her doubts. It washed over her like gentle spring sunshine, warming her. She opened her eyes to see his shadowed, cloaked form standing in the darkness. Catherine felt an overwhelming urge to cross her arms--hug herself--she was so nervous. But she resisted the impulse. Instead, she moved forward into the darkness to find Vincent's sleeve. His arm. She'd never felt so shy. Or so inadequate. "Vincent. The book is lovely." She paused as she found his hand, curling her fingers around its warmth. "And the poem."

He didn't speak for the longest time, and when he did she thought his voice seemed rougher than usual. She wished she could see his face. "I'm glad you liked them... Catherine...?"

"Yes?" she asked, trying to sound totally innocent.

"Is there...is there a reason why you're wearing those clothes?"

They were dancing around so many issues it boggled Catherine's mind...and none of them could be met head-on. But she thought he'd understand what she meant. Squeezing his hand, Catherine began walking into the darkness...immensely relieved when he fell into step with her. "I kind of thought you might like to take me home to meet your father."

"But you've met Father, Catherine...."

Vincent sounded so puzzled that Catherine couldn't help laughing. The sound was cheerful in the darkness

...but not nearly as comforting as Vincent's hand in hers and his strong, loving presence beside her.

Dressed in her newest fashion statement, Catherine had never felt happier. Or more at home. They had a long way to go, but at least she felt they were pointed in the right direction.

THE END