

The Power of Night

by Rhonda Collins

The idea occurred to Diana suddenly, and she wasn't even sure what started her thinking about it. They'd been watching a movie--some old adaptation of Huckleberry Finn--and Vincent was about as relaxed as he ever got. He was draped across her couch like an overgrown house cat. She sat at the other end of the couch with her feet stretched out, toes barely touching his thigh. Just enough contact. Not too near to be a danger...not so far that the ache would become painful. Since Vincent had become aware of the bond between them, things had become more than a little sticky at times.

"Vincent?"

His head never turned as he watched the screen. "Yes?" Distracted, comfortable.

"Do you ever take vacations?"

His entire body shifted as he turned to her, his expression puzzled. "In a sense. You know I sometimes go away for a day or so...go below the Catacombs to be by myself."

Diana pulled her feet up and wrapped her arms around her legs--chin resting on her knees. "No. I mean go away for fun."

An expression of indescribable sorrow passed swiftly over his face and was gone. Diana wished she dared to lower her emotional block so she could understand a little better, but things were still too sensitive between them...too raw...where the bond was concerned. "No," he said quietly. "Where would I go? Occasionally I go exploring. That is enjoyable. Sometimes Mouse accompanies me." His eyes took on a faraway look and he smiled wistfully. "Once...when Devin and I were children we planned an expedition on a raft. Like Huck and Jim on the Mississippi."

Diana grinned, trying to picture this. She'd never met Devin, but she'd heard stories...mostly from Father, but a few from Vincent. "What happened?"

Chuckling softly, he answered, "The raft sank."

"Oh. Sorry."

"No reason to be sorry. We enjoyed ourselves building it. It was a child's dream."

Vincent rose sinuously and stretched as the movie credits rolled. "I must go, Diana. Thank you for your company."

She grinned a little as their eyes met. He was still always so formal. "Thanks for yours."

Diana made no further comments about vacations, but her mind filed away the thought. She followed him to the roof, and they stood silently regarding one another in the moonlight. There was a sweetness to the peace between them. For once, neither of them was pushing--testing limits.

Before he left, Vincent put out his hand and touched her hair very softly--the gesture infinitely tender--and aching restrained. "Goodnight, Diana."

She nodded and wrapped her arms tightly around herself. "G'night, Vincent. Soon."

As Vincent traversed the darkness of the uninhabited upper tunnels, he thought about Diana's question. No. He did not go on vacations. Only on escapes. Sometimes he felt a little desperate. The closest he ever came to a "vacation" now were the scant hours he spent in Diana's loft, where he had peace of a sort. The nearest he'd ever come to managing an actual "vacation" was when Catherine had wanted them to go to her lake in Connecticut. And that, of course, had proved to be impossible.

As much as he loved his home, every time Vincent turned back from the light of the loft into this darkness it was an effort. He knew that the moment anyone knew he was back, someone would need him for something. It was wonderful being needed, but it was stifling as well. He felt as though he were being parceled out in tiny bits and pieces daily, and he saw no end to it, even for the space of a "vacation." He sighed heavily.

The next few days passed in a flurry of activity for Diana. Her case, which really hadn't been too involved to begin with, ended with a slamming impact that took her breath away. Everything happened so fast that despite Diana's psychic impressions and all her common sense--everything done by the book--it still ended with three cops dead and one in the hospital. The killer was eventually brought down and dragged away, and Diana felt a savage satisfaction...tinged with a lot of bitterness and pain. She'd known those dead cops real well.

Diana insisted on being the one to tell the cops' families of their deaths. One of the men had graduated the Academy with her, and his wife clung to her, sobbing.

Diana felt numb. She didn't dare let the emotion in. It would swallow her if she did.

She still felt numb when she walked into her loft that evening, but the lack of feeling didn't last long. The tight control she'd kept all day began crumbling, and once she'd gotten undressed and into the shower, the emotions all came back in a rush--like a tidal wave of despair. Her tears washed away as the hot water poured over her, and she stood there shaking uncontrollably.

Diana was brought back instantly to attention by a pounding on her bathroom door and Vincent's desperate voice calling out to her. "Diana! Answer me! What is it?"

Stung into immediate action, she grabbed her robe and pulled it around her, tying it savagely. Still dripping, she threw the door open and launched herself into Vincent's waiting arms.

A half-hour later found them sitting quietly on Diana's battered couch. She was huddled as close to Vincent as she could get, and his arms were folded around her like a barrier against the world. She'd cried until there were no more tears. It had astounded Vincent. Diana never cried. As she curled against him and buried her blotched face and red nose in the folds of his shirt, he could feel her emotional pattern settling into what he supposed was normal for her. It was still difficult for him to ascertain just what "normal" was, for Diana. She so seldom allowed him to sense her at all.

He sighed and settled his chin on her head. The last few days had been difficult for him, as well. All he had done since leaving Diana last was deal with one problem after another...minor irritations and major disasters. Over and over again. Today, for example, he'd settled at least five minor disputes, argued in council for the admission of a man he'd found on the streets, helped Kanin do some heavy excavating work...and a dozen other things. All in addition to his normal teaching and security duties. He was tired. He'd hoped for a quiet night with Diana and found turbulence instead. It didn't matter. She'd let him in. She allowed herself to "need" him so seldom. She was the one person who never took advantage of him...even when he wanted her to. This giving felt more like taking. Tonight was hers. He closed his eyes and hummed quietly.

Diana startled him when she spoke--her voice a little harsh from her tears. "I need a vacation."

He settled her more firmly against him. "Take one. Go somewhere quiet. Forget everything."

She shook her head slightly. "Noplace I want to go. I need to be with you."

Vincent didn't speak for several minutes. As Diana once more regained control of her emotions, he could feel her beginning to pull back inside herself slowly, and the bond became impossible to hold. He stroked her back gently. "Come Below if you need to get away. I cannot be with you all the time, but I would be near."

"I'll think about it." She looked up and brushed a strand of amber mane back from his face. "You look tired. I'm sorry--dumping on you like this. Didn't mean to. It just slipped."

He watched her a moment, a little saddened to realize that once again all he could feel of her was the body beneath his hand. Of her emotions there was nothing. He still had conflicting feelings about this new bond. He missed being able to continually sense her, as he had Catherine--but he still felt uneasy about her sensing him. That was something he'd been totally unprepared for.

Since he could no longer feel her emotions, he allowed himself the luxury of his other senses--just a little--for example, her hair caressing his face and the clean scent of it. He managed a smile. "I was planning to dump on you--as I have so often in the past. Turnabout is fair play. Besides...I like it when you're open to me...for whatever reason. You know that."

Diana snuggled in closer. "Tell me. It's your turn."

So Vincent told her of his day--of the petty arguments and the major disasters--his frustration in dealing with all of them day after day. "More and more they come to me instead of to Father. Or perhaps it is merely that there are more of us...more problems to solve...and it is easier to divide the responsibility."

"Have you mentioned it to Father?"

He sighed and shook his head. "No. What would be the point? There are simply some things that people feel more comfortable coming to me about...and some things that Father cannot physically handle, in any case. The others, they take to him. I often wonder, though, how I will handle it once Father is gone. It almost buries me now. It is my life, Diana, and I love them all. It is not that I wish for them to stop. I need to be needed. But sometimes...."

She chuckled. "Sometimes...you need a vacation."

He pulled away and looked at her, startled. "I cannot go anywhere, Diana." He gestured to indicate her loft. "Here is my vacation. With you. The times are brief, but they must be enough."

Diana sat up abruptly and looked into his face. "Maybe." She got up and paced to

the window and turned. "How would you feel about building that raft? You and me. And taking that trip down your river?"

Excitement rose immediately, almost overwhelming Vincent. A trip...with Diana. No one clamoring at me for attention, no problems to solve other than those involved in the trip...and...and.... But then he stopped. With no outside problems to divert them, and with them in close proximity for that long.... No. Too dangerous. Last night it had been all right. There had been no hint of the sexual tension that had been so close to the surface in recent months. But what would happen with them alone--so isolated? In the darkness that the Other loved so much.... "No. I think, perhaps, that would be unwise, Diana."

He watched for her response and was vaguely disappointed when she nodded, seeming to agree. Surprisingly, though, her verbal response was not agreement, but was instead her usual tenacity mixed with uncharacteristic enthusiasm. She got up and began pacing, glancing at him occasionally through unruly strands of red hair, half of which was dry and curling around her face, the other half damp and limp. "I understand your reluctance...I do. But we can handle it. And just think of it! It'd be great! Getting away. Really away. Me with no bad guys to catch...no victims to mourn; you with no one picking at you for constant assistance in minor and major repairs--both public and private. That raft." She grinned. "Just think of the mess we could make while we're making it...the total lack of order...and of the peace we'd have while we're on it."

Vincent couldn't help it. He laughed outright...long canines flashing in the bright light of the loft. He pictured them finally getting the raft built...and it sinking as they left. But it would be fun. God. How long has it been since I had any fun? When he answered, all he said was, "When?"

Two days later, Diana attended the funeral of Mike Mason, the cop she'd known at the Academy. Behind the family and closer friends, she stood stiffly in the late February chill, hands poked deep in her pockets. She watched the dead leaves blowing around her feet and thought about death and how much a part of her life it was. Greg Hughes stood behind her, looking equally uncomfortable. When they left, Greg drove her to the station.

After filing her report Diana asked for vacation. Enough of it to get away for awhile. Greg thought it was a great idea and agreed enthusiastically. He was always trying to get her to take time off. Diana knew he thought she worked too hard. Maybe he's right. God, I'm tired.

She thought about Mike. Dead at thirty-four. Young wife, two kids. She remembered him from the Academy. He'd been so earnest and determined. So sure he'd be able to make a difference. Her vision blurred a little and she

squeezed her eyes shut a moment to force the tears back. Mike had made a difference. So did she, every day, and she knew it. But it was a drop in the bucket. She knew that too, and the thought made her furious. Her Dad had told her time after time that it was every person's responsibility to do what they could in this life to make it a better place. That everyone was given talents that God had meant for them to use to do just that. It was something he'd expected of her, and she'd grown up expecting it of herself. But like Vincent, sometimes she felt as though she gave until there was nothing left to give...and then gave some more. It's time to rest. Just for awhile. Time to get close to someone I care about. A little shiver of anticipation ran up her spine.

When Diana left the station, she still had no real plans made...only vague remnants of ideas. She stopped at a sporting goods store on the way home and did some shopping. She examined the sleeping bags carefully and agonized over whether to buy one that only slept one, or one that slept two...or maybe two singles. Buying too small could discourage Vincent if things happened to go that way--but buying too large could embarrass him and put pressure on him, too. She sighed and fingered the larger sleeping bag. This trip was for them both to rest and relax. She didn't want to cause unnecessary problems. She wasn't sure she was any more ready to hop in the sack--no pun intended--than he was. They had enough to contend with trying to keep their friendship intact with that damned bond interfering. Yeah, there was a sexual pull to the bond...one that was damned near irresistible at times. At first that had been exciting to her--before Vincent had learned about the bond and found that he could sense her. Then at first it had excited him, too. But now neither of them was entirely happy about the inevitability of the entire thing. They both felt a little trapped. Damn. What do I do? Buy one single one for me, two single ones--one for each of us, or one double one just in case? If I just get one for me, who knows, I might be sending him the message that I don't want him. Ditto with the two singles. If I get the double it could be seen as a come on. Oh, Hell. I'm sure he already has something to sleep in. Eventually she gave up and bought the double sleeping bag. She also bought canteens, and a large sack of the "survival rations." Unappetizing looking stuff to take along on a vacation, but it'd be easy to carry and fix.

Dragging her treasures home, she dumped them all on the couch. She called Susan and told her she'd be gone camping awhile. She spent an hour digging through her clothes, trying to decide just what to take with her. Can't take too much. Has to be warm--durable.

On impulse, she dug out a pair of jeans and then rummaged around in the bottom of the closet until she found Mark's old sheepskin vest. After an hour of frustrated cursing and a number of pricked fingers she'd managed to cut the vest into patches and sew the patches over the knees of the jeans. She did the same thing with the elbows of one of her sweatshirts. Vincent had explained that if they did any exploring off the raft that she'd need protection on knees and elbows for

crawling. She put another set of heavy sweats in the knapsack and tossed it on top of the growing pile on the couch.

While she was nibbling on some leftovers, she surveyed her refrigerator. There wasn't much there that would spoil, so she shrugged and left it. She was ready.

All she needed was Vincent.

Vincent and Father discussed the upcoming trip for over an hour. Despite lingering doubts on Vincent's part and some reluctance on Father's, plans were made to cover Vincent's duties while he was gone. Cullen stated he'd be delighted to fill in for him as security and Father agreed to take the classes. Mouse eagerly volunteered to do the maintenance sweeps--which caused Father more apprehension than Vincent felt was warranted. "Mouse is more than capable, Father. Give him a chance to prove himself." Vincent smiled a little at Father's indecision.

"Are you positive, Vincent, that this is a good idea? I mean...you and Diana...down there alone?"

Vincent shrugged uneasily. "No. But Diana seems certain that we can do this. And it seems to mean a great deal to her."

"And perhaps to you, as well," Father commented sagely.

Vincent bowed his head. "Yes. To me, as well. For many reasons."

Father settled back into his chair. "I hear that Cullen and Mouse helped you find all the supplies to build the raft."

"Yes. We even shifted all the supplies down to the river. Taking them through the maze was difficult, to say the least. It took us almost two days."

Father's eyes met Vincent's and both of them smiled. Father removed his glasses and cleaned them industriously. Without looking up, he commented, "I do hope Diana knows what she's letting herself in for. Conditions down there will be very primitive."

Uneasily, not wishing to worry Father, Vincent merely replied, "I have a feeling that Diana always knows what she's letting herself in for. I do not believe that the word 'impulsive' is in her vocabulary."

Later, as Vincent made his way toward Diana's loft to pick her up, his thoughts were running in circles. This is insane. To take Diana below with me...into the dark. To put her at such risk. I must tell her that we cannot do this. Even as he made plans for what he would say, he knew it was useless. She would see through any excuse or evasion and merely brush it aside. But he felt he must, somehow, impress upon her the possible dangers of this enforced and lengthy intimacy.

Reaching her roof, he hesitated. Looking down through the skylight he could see her wandering the loft--but almost immediately she sensed his presence and glanced up at him. The joy that lit her face and shot through him before she closed off the connection made him giddy...and forgetful of his apprehensions.

"Vincent!" Diana threw the door to the loft open and skidded to a halt. Her first impulse was to throw herself into his arms, but she knew he was apprehensive enough about this entire trip. She didn't need to scare him off completely. She stood balanced, swaying just a little, and grinned. "Hi. I'm ready."

The statement elicited a restrained smile. Whereas she felt riotously eager to go, he seemed scared to death. Looks like he thinks I'll bite him.

"I can see that," he commented wryly. "Do you need help with any of your things?"

"Yeah. There's quite a bit."

Vincent followed her down into the loft and stared with a perplexed expression at the mass of gear on her couch. "Diana...is all this necessary?"

Irritated, she enumerated: "Bedroll, food, canteens for water, flashlight and batteries, extra clothes. Yeah. No sense in sleeping on the rock, in the dark, starving and filthy. I told you I'd get us some food."

Vincent gingerly picked up one of the cans of food. His eyebrow raised in such a Spock-like expression that she burst out laughing.

"I thought this kind of food would make it easier to carry. I don't mind roughing it." Then when the look on his face didn't change, she asked, "Whatever's the matter, Vincent?"

He cleared his throat. "Actually, I'd only thought vaguely of food--of having William fix us something--until you said you'd bring it. I suppose I keep thinking the raft will sink."

Their eyes met briefly, and they both smiled. Then Vincent commented, "You must remember, Diana, that normally when I go on my 'escapes' I go alone. I take no food, or even water." He paused and looked away, seeming distracted and embarrassed. "When I go, I am not the Vincent you know. I behave--somewhat immoderately." Continuing to avoid her eyes, he said, "Perhaps this is not a good idea."

She slipped her arm under his and found his hand. "The Vincent I know often behaves immoderately. I kind of like you that way. Besides...I've seen you driven by rage, desire, fear, and grief. I'm not afraid of you in any way, shape, or form. Believe that."

He turned weary blue eyes to her and regarded her for a long moment--seeming to weigh her words. "I do believe it. Sometimes you worry me--because you are not frightened, Diana. You should be."

She shrugged and moved away. Picking up the heavy pack with the food and other supplies, she handed it to him. "If I'm afraid of anything, it's of getting hungry...and I've taken care of that."

Diana refused to be drawn into a deep discussion of his bestial nature. One of these days he's got to find out that what he's really afraid of is that he'll find out he is human, after all, and he can't blame his desires on the 'beast.' "If you'll take that one, I can handle the rest. I'll meet you Below." She gathered up the bedroll and pack with her clothes and headed for the elevator.

Slapping the down button, she turned back and grinned at him. "Race?"

Vincent watched Diana's elevator disappear down the shaft, then shook his head ruefully. He knew it was useless. He could refuse to go, but she'd only badger him for the rest of his life. He'd never live it down. He slung the canvas bag with the food and supplies over his shoulder, securing the straps for climbing. By the time he reached the alley, Diana was leaning against the brick wall of the building, waiting for him.

As he approached, she asked calmly, "You're not getting into the spirit of this at all, are you?"

"You seem to have enough enthusiasm for both of us," he commented in what he hoped passed for a normal tone of voice. He walked past her to the manhole. Moving the heavy iron cover, he lowered the bag into the hole and motioned for Diana to go ahead.

Once they were safely in the tunnel below, he slid the heavy metal cover back

into place. He lit the lantern he'd left there and began walking. He could feel Diana's eyes burning holes in his back. They walked silently for several minutes before Diana responded a little anxiously. "You're not having second thoughts, are you?"

Vincent stopped and glanced up at her. She was magnificent. Totally undaunted by anything they'd been through since they'd met--since she'd found him...a stranger in a strange land. Nothing threw her. She adapted, chameleon-like, to every situation. Yet somehow, she never truly changed. She remained the one constant in his life...besides Jacob. A solid truth. An anchor. In addition, he found her anxiety to please him absolutely charming...though a little unsettling.

Taking a deep breath, he said quietly, "No. But I am entitled to a few misgivings."

"Pessimist."

He joked feebly, "The raft will sink."

"I'll swim."

"You'll get cold."

"That's why I have you."

He sighed and repressed the elation he felt...and the first stirrings of desire. "I give up."

She shouldered her bag and winked. "I knew you would."

As they walked, Vincent told Diana about the supplies they had acquired for the raft and about moving them to the river. He wanted her to know that he, too, wanted this vacation to be a success. "Everything is down there, ready for us to begin building."

"Did you visit Jacob?"

He nodded. "He is already in Mary's care. The vacation has begun, Diana."

She eyed him critically. "Where's your gear? Your clothes and stuff."

"I have a small pack near the maze. I...travel considerably...lighter than you do."

They met Kipper, Zach and Samantha traveling the opposite direction--on their way Above to a movie--and exchanged goodbyes. Parting, alone again, they fell

silent. As they reached the maze and picked up Vincent's absurdly small pack, for some reason the tension eased. Vincent felt a kind of peace settle upon him. They were committed to this. It seemed there was no backing out, so he resolved to attempt to enjoy himself...and still be watchful of the Other. The dark was his place. Surely, forewarned is forearmed.

Vincent warned Diana that after a point there would be no light until they were much deeper. He cautioned against the use of the lantern or flashlight as they would hinder her night sight, making it more difficult in the areas where the lights would prove impossible to carry. He turned off the lantern. "We will need the light for building the raft, but after that we will have to rely upon our night vision as much as possible. You will find that in the deeper tunnels and caverns there is some light from phosphorescent fungi. It is generally enough."

She nodded, and though her emotional block was still up, there was enough of a resonance between them that he could feel her acceptance. She was unconcerned. He noted the sheepskin patches on her knees and elbows and praised her forethought.

Before long, she'd see for herself how helpful the patches would be.

Vincent stopped at a Y-shaped junction and regarded her thoughtfully "There are two routes to the river, Diana. One way--the way we took the lumber and building supplies--is easier, but it takes far longer. The other is not so much difficult as uncomfortable. It is a series of long, low tunnels where we would need to crawl and drag the packs."

Diana was silent while she considered, then asked, "How much longer is the easier route?"

"About half a day. At least five or six hours."

She shrugged and grinned lopsidedly. "Then we crawl. I have no intention of wasting my vacation."

Vincent went first down the left passage. Before long, the roof of the tunnel sloped downwards sharply until there was only headspace for them on their hands and knees. It was as dark as a tomb, and silent except for their breathing and the sounds they made as they crept along.

Diana never spoke, but Vincent was aware of the gradual lessening of her emotional barrier--and the slow expansion of their connection. With her need for contact and awareness of the world around her, she was instinctively reaching out with her other senses. All of them. The bond flowed between them like running water, and Vincent had to fight to push the Other back...to keep him caged. It was not that at the moment there was anything more between Diana

and himself than companionship--but as he'd feared, the darkness and this place by habit and by consent belonged to his darker half--and the Other was ready to claim his time. The bond only made it more difficult for Vincent to keep control.

Vincent lost track of the time as they traveled...and as he basked in the close bond, but eventually the tunnel opened up and he stood to hand Diana down out of the confined space into a huge cavern.

As Diana emerged from the crawlspace and felt Vincent's hand close upon hers, she gasped. She could still see absolutely nothing. This was total absence of light, yet she could sense the immensity of the cavern around her. With her barriers down, she could sense, through Vincent, even more. She was aware of her surroundings in some odd fashion that she couldn't really explain. There were no words...and no need for them between them. The sensations and senses were all being fed through the bond and through Vincent. She was seeing the dark cavern through his eyes--feeling with his hyperacute senses--and it was incredible. It was the most marvelous thing she'd ever encountered.

Finally, after taking a few moments to orient herself, Diana pointed and spoke. "The river is over there."

Vincent squeezed her hand gently and smiled. She could feel the smile. "Yes. Can you come...without the light?"

"I...I think so. If we move slowly."

Still holding her hand, Vincent moved off slowly, and she followed. She stumbled a few times, but gradually her steps became firmer and more sure. The sound of the water became louder, and before long Vincent stopped.

"We are at the river. At the building site."

Diana laughed a little shakily. "If we're gonna build a raft, I guess we're gonna have to have some light, huh?"

She thought his response was a little hesitant, and she felt a quick stab of sorrow. His, she thought, but wasn't completely sure.

"Yes. A small light, at first...to reaccustom our eyes."

He released her hand and she stood alone. A little cold, suddenly, she wrapped her arms around herself and listened to him rustling around in the dark. There was the sound of a match striking and suddenly there was a blinding light. She blinked and turned away. The light was only the glow of the lantern--with the light

turned low. But after the exquisite darkness, it seemed harsh and intrusive. The massive form standing next to the light, with the deeply shadowed eyes--face all angles and shadows--seemed a stranger. Without realizing it, she had already withdrawn the bond and set up her barriers again. Vincent's voice, coming from this massive form, reassured her.

"In a few moments, your eyes will readjust and we will turn the light up a little more."

Diana nodded and looked around. The pile of building supplies seemed daunting. "I guess we should get started, huh?"

Vincent waited a few moments and turned the lantern up higher, and to them it was like daylight.

They worked for awhile, sorting the lumber and the waterproof wine casks that would supply the floatation they needed. Eventually, Diana stood and stretched. Her back ached. "I don't know about you, but I'm starved. Let's eat something." She looked at her watch. "God, Vincent. It's the middle of the night. I'm surprised we're not exhausted."

He chuckled as he began making a small fire for tea. "Down here, there is no time. It would be best if you simply packed the watch away. It will become confusing after awhile."

Moving to him, she touched his shoulder. The first physical contact they'd had since he'd released her hand hours before. She could feel a slight shudder. He looked up at her, his eyes gentle and a little questioning. "I'm glad we came, Vincent."

Smiling, he answered, "Even if the raft sinks?"

"Even if we turned around right now and went back." She dug in the pack and brought out some rations. "A little something to go with the tea."

As they sat back and ate, Diana commented, "I am a little tired. I guess once you sit down, it catches up with you, huh?"

"It can." His voice held a hint of amusement. "Diana...there is no rush. Remember, we are here to enjoy ourselves...it doesn't even matter if we never finish the raft. The vacation is simply being here."

She yawned. "Sorry. You're right. It's just...it's so much fun!" She yawned again, wider. "God. I really am tired. Guess it's bedtime."

She got up and unrolled her sleeping bag. She stood watching Vincent for a

moment, noticing again how distant he seemed as he sat watching her. She walked over to him and looked down into his face. He wouldn't meet her eyes and looked away. She decided to plunge ahead. "I noticed you didn't bring a sleeping bag. You're welcome, you know."

He jerked as though she'd struck him, and when he answered, his voice was rough. "I will sleep there...against the rock. When I am down here, I need nothing, Diana. It will be all right. Goodnight."

She thought about kissing him goodnight, but decided against it. Instead, she touched his hair gently, letting the rough strands slide through her fingers. "Goodnight, Vincent. Sleep well."

She settled into the sleeping bag, feeling guilty--not for the warmth and comfort of the bag--but of the position she'd put Vincent in. She sighed. I should have thought this thing through a little more, maybe. She knew she had a tendency to "jump into things" impulsively, and commit herself to them. She did that with her cases all the time. If she felt something very strongly, she'd let her feelings--and her empathy--carry her through and not her thought processes. She'd known there would be things that would be hard for him, with her down here and so near, but perhaps she hadn't thought it through well enough. Too late now. Probably anything I did would have been wrong, anyway. She closed her eyes and tried to sleep.

Vincent settled back against a boulder and opened his pack. He pulled out the heavy blanket he'd brought and settled it over himself, then gazed across the embers of the fire at Diana. She was already asleep, her breathing deep and regular--and her emotional barriers were down. It occurred to him only then that to sleep could very well be the worst thing he could possibly do--for then both his subconscious and Diana's would be free--and the bond completely open. And the Other would be waiting for him to let down his guard.

In one fluid motion he threw the blanket off and stood. He paced up and down the riverbank, throwing a quick look now and then at Diana. What am I to do? I must sleep...for to avoid sleep will, in the end, only make matters worse. Once more his frustration with the bond came to a head. If only it would allow us the privacy of our dreams, at least! Perhaps then, the rest would be easier to resolve.

Moving with his customary quiet, he knelt beside Diana's bedroll and watched her sleep. He felt a desperate urge to run. As far away as he could...to protect her from the Other. But he remembered what Diana had told him--that she'd seen him driven by rage, desire, fear, and grief--and was not afraid. She had met the Other before and had seen the results of his actions. He shook his head thoughtfully. She'd also reminded him over and over again that he'd not harmed

Catherine when he'd lost himself. Perhaps nothing will happen. Reaching out a shaking hand, he brushed a stray strand of hair back from Diana's face. She murmured in her sleep...his name...and smiled. It was too much for him.

He bolted.

He ran as though all the Hounds of Hell were after him. Sure-footed in the darkness he splashed through seep holes and clambered over rocks until gradually some sense began seeping through the fear, and he slowed. He couldn't just run away and leave her alone in the dark. Why did I run?

He turned slowly back the way he'd come. He wanted to reach out and touch the bond with Diana to see if she still slept, but he was too frightened. The thoughts running through his mind terrified him. As he neared the campsite, he slowed. There was no glow from the fire: it had gone out. By the time he reached the river he realized how tired he was. Perhaps all will be well after all.

Vincent knelt at the river and drank, then returned to his boulder to settle himself and try to sleep. The rock and the ground were hard, but the blanket provided a little warmth. He was so tired, emotionally and physically, that before long sleep overtook him.

Sensations of running--burning chest, pumping muscles in thighs and calves. Hunting in the dark for the slightest glimmer of light--the slightest sensation of life to fill the emptiness. Yet, the emptiness and the dark were all one. And they were freedom. They surrounded and encompassed him...let him be. There was no sight, but there was a sensation of warmth, and life nearby. As he focused, the sensation coalesced into a distinct otherness. With the realization of identity came sight--and a form. A woman, who opened her arms to him gladly and the emotion which caressed him was love. He felt the desire wash over him, infusing him with power--and with rage for the hunger, long denied. He was coming full awake. "Abstinence makes the heart grow hungry."

Vincent woke with a start, jerking himself out of the dream connection. Too close. The Other had been so near the surface it had frightened Vincent out of the dream.

"Vincent?" Diana called to him softly.

He could hear a thread of confusion and distress in her voice, but could no longer sense anything. She, too, had been brought awake by what had happened, and her automatic barriers had returned. He knew she couldn't see him, and that made her uneasy. "I'm here, Diana. Go back to sleep."

She kicked back the top of the sleeping bag and padded over to him. "Can't. I'm awake, now." Her hand found his arm and slid upwards to his face. "You okay?"

He almost flinched when she touched him. The arousal remaining from the dream was hard to put away and the touch was like flame. His voice sounded coarse and heavy as he answered, though he tried to control it. "I'm fine. Truly." He paused a moment to collect himself, then gathered her hand in his. "But like you, I am awake. I will make a fire and we can continue with the raft, if you wish. It is almost finished."

She stepped back, a little reluctantly it seemed. "Sure."

Vincent disappeared into the darkness, explaining that nearby there were the remains of trees...an entire grove of them. At one time, this must have been above ground. When he returned with an armload of wood, he knelt to build the fire. Once he'd finished, they ate a little from the canned rations. She commented with what seemed to him a forced cheerfulness, "Kind of bland, but filling. I think I'd even prefer some of William's stew."

After eating, they worked almost in silence for several hours. At first that silence seemed strained, but as time went on their usual ease with one another returned and they found themselves smiling and joking in short, disjointed comments. Vincent became less aware of the darkness pressing around him and more and more aware of the small world they were creating...and their places within it. When the raft was finished they stood back and surveyed their work.

"Not bad," Diana joked, standing with hands on hips. "A little lopsided."

In all seriousness, Vincent replied, "Our packs will compensate and level it, you'll see."

"What do you think Devin would say?"

Vincent glanced over at her to see her smile...and he returned it. Her hair had begun escaping the loose braid and curled softly around her face. She was adorable. "If Devin had helped build it, it probably would sink...he is not as meticulous as you."

She gave him a mock salute. "I aims ta please, Capt'n."

After a short rest and another small meal, they packed the raft and began their journey. Vincent pointed out landmarks as they passed them...the dead grove of trees standing alone in a grey forest of stone, an ancient stair carved into the rock, a waterfall of crystalline minerals. Diana noticed with an odd sensation of relief that the deeper they went, the more of the phosphorescent fungi appeared on the walls and the lighter it seemed to get. If she'd been more honest with

herself, she'd have realized that her own opening awareness was as much responsible for her "sight" as any minute difference the fungi could make. She was also aware of Vincent's increasing psychological discomfort. She once more closed down on the barrier and tried to cheer him as much as possible, drawing his attention away from themselves and into the adventure.

"This is great! It's so...immense. It's another world, Vincent...just for us."

He seemed to hesitate as he gazed out over the black river. He answered slowly, and so quietly she could barely hear. "Yes. It has been here forever, the river and the darkness. And it is...immense. It is almost alive." His head swiveled and he peered at her between strands of mane. "I wanted to share this with you. Because you can understand...the power and mystery of the darkness."

Diana caught a hint of embarrassment and anxiety, but he had turned away again...and though she'd felt the emotions, she knew he would not welcome her recognition of them. So she only answered softly, "Thank you for bringing me. For sharing this with me."

He nodded without speaking, but the tension seemed to ease once more...just a fraction, but it was noticeable.

Diana remained still and purposely opened herself a little more to Vincent. Once again, seeing and sensing things through him, through his heightened senses, she could tell so much more about her surroundings. Shapes became more firm, the air fresher, the darkness more palpable...almost a presence. And Vincent was more aware of her, as well. Though he didn't look back, his entire body tensed. She, too, could feel the powerful pull between them...something that neither of them was quite ready to explore just yet. She closed down on the connection a little, and the tension eased.

Vincent put the guide pole down and let the raft drift with the current. He turned to face her and knelt, staring into her eyes. "The darkness pulls everything in...powers and people. You can feel the energy moving around us...within us. Releasing us."

Looking into those wild eyes, Diana knew the time had come to head back. She needed to defuse this situation. For the first time, she truly knew what Vincent meant when he said he was losing himself. She wasn't frightened...just suddenly very aware of him in ways she'd never been before. And she knew that if he went completely over the edge there would be no controlling him, or the situation. She wasn't sure she'd want to try...and that would be the worst mistake she could ever make. "I can't feel anything, Vincent...except you. There's no darkness here." She reached over and lit the lantern and turned it up to bright, blinding both of them for a few moments, and at the same time she pulled out of the connection completely. The shock seemed to snap him back to himself. Without

a word he turned and went back to guiding the raft.

Diana turned the lantern down a little and sat still, watching him. The clarity of her surroundings was gone. Without the connection, without her own heightened senses working full-out, it was very dark and oppressive down here. She ached to open up and become lost in that feeling of utter freedom again. It was becoming addicting.

Her mind was working a mile a minute. Pieces were beginning to fall into place. This had been a terrible mistake...coming with him down here. He'd told her that he'd come here to get away, when the pressures became unbearable. When he was "losing himself." She'd thought that he'd meant he'd come here because it was simply away...that here he could vent his anger and frustration and simply be alone. And that was part of it. But by far the largest part of the reason he came was because down here he had to open himself up to all that he was in order to survive--open all his senses--become all that he was. And the darkness down here was almost a presence. One could easily imagine that presence being a part of oneself.

All his life Vincent had denied himself the release of his anger or his desire, considering those to be "dangerous." He felt it was not safe to allow himself to feel these powerful emotions. For obvious reasons: if he became enraged, he could easily kill...had killed. But what of the desire? Until Catherine, there had been no outlet at all, and he'd denied himself that as well until.... Oh, Jesus, Vincent. What am I gonna do with you? Talk about walking into the lion's den.

"Vincent," she said very softly.

His head swiveled to glance back at her. "Yes?"

"How will we get back? I mean...the current is too strong to pole the raft upstream...maybe we'd better start back."

He turned away and shrugged. "Soon."

She knew that "soon" could very well mean "never." Right now, he didn't want to go back to being half of who he was; and if he kept her here long enough, she might get to where she didn't care, either. Before long, however, he poled the raft into an inlet.

"Come. We'll rest here." He helped her unpack the raft and take out the supplies.

"Aren't you gonna make a fire?" Diana wanted that fire. That circle of light to keep out the darkness. To help keep Vincent...and herself...sane and reasonable. He made the fire, but he seemed reluctant. As they ate, Diana tried to make small talk and open the subject of return. "It's gonna take awhile, heading back on

foot."

"Not so long." He seemed distracted, uneasy, as he knelt beside the fire...staring into the flames.

"Long enough," she persisted.

He glanced up, eyes bright in the light of the fire, but gentle as always. "You are ready to leave?"

A stab of remorse at the lie lanced through her. "Yes." As he looked away, she touched his shoulder. "I think we both are. It's been wonderful, Vincent."

He idly tossed a small bit of wood on the tiny fire. They were running out of wood. "You've seen, and felt...something of what it is to be me, Diana. Does it frighten you?"

When she didn't answer immediately, he looked up to meet her eyes. And in his steady gaze, there was a challenge, as though he were expecting her to recoil in fear and loathing. Instead, she reached up and stroked his face with the back of her hand, and she felt him lean into the caress. "Yes. I'm afraid. But what I'm afraid of is us, Vincent. Not just you. It's so tempting just to open up and let it all in...let you in...and me out."

He groaned and turned away abruptly, burying his face in his hands.

Diana hesitated, shifting uneasily from one foot to the other, not knowing what to do. Finally, wrapping her arms tightly around herself to keep from touching him and setting him off, she said gently, "Maybe...maybe we're wrong, Vincent. Maybe we should forget everything we ever learned, or fought against, and just accept who we are for once...." Her voice trailed off, because he'd turned to her then, his expression unreadable.

Vincent stalked past her, fury in every abrupt motion he made. He turned back, crouching, his hands spread wide. With the firelight dancing over his angular features and over the long hair, he looked fearsome...dark and bright, menace and promise all in one. His voice was more of a growl as he addressed her. "Look at me, Diana. This...this is what I am. If we did as you suggest...we would never leave here."

By now, Diana was becoming more angry than frightened. She wasn't sure why, but this whole thing made her very angry. She understood now, why he was so afraid. She was scared too--but she'd all but offered herself to him on a silver platter--couldn't he see into her, as she'd seen into him? Couldn't he see that she'd been willing to risk everything just to try...scared as she was? The bond scared her worse than anything--worse than his killing her, worse than facing

anything Above, in her own world. She wanted to be close to him, but she wanted it on their terms. Well, that's it. If we can't be together, then I'll at least keep hold of who I am! She absolutely refused to lose control of her self--her life--and she damn sure wasn't going to let Vincent lose himself either. Not again. She put all her will into controlling her barriers and spat at him. "Maybe so. Maybe we wouldn't. But then again, it's our choice, isn't it? Or I guess it's your choice. You choose not to try to handle it." She shouldered her sleeping bag and grabbed a smaller bag with some of the provisions and the lamp in it. She stared hard at him. "And I choose to leave. Not because the prospect of spending my life down here with you isn't tempting...because damn it, spending my life anywhere with you is damned tempting. But I want it to be our choice...our terms. Not because we're forced together by this...this damned bond!" She almost growled the last word. She walked past him and into the darkness.

Vincent stared after Diana as she disappeared into the darkness. After a time, he saw a soft glow that was the lantern. The anger simmered a little and he was hurt. She'd left him. Just like everyone else...Lisa, Devin...even Catherine. Walked away--off into the dark--as though she didn't need him. He pictured the various pitfalls that could be awaiting her in that darkness, and anxiety began to creep in, taking the place of the anger. He couldn't just let her stumble around in the dark, but even as the thought of going to help her crossed his mind and he started forward, he stopped--wondering just how he would approach her. In her present frame of mind, he knew that if he dared to suggest she needed him his offer would be rebuffed. Adamantly. He tried to sense her and realized her barrier was up...and very solid. There was nothing there but blankness...which in addition was totally non-directional. If she got too far ahead, he'd have to track her. With a shrug of resignation, he picked up and shouldered his pack and the remaining food and followed her--at a discreet distance.

Some time later, Vincent slowed and stopped. Apparently Diana had decided to settle and rest, because the lamplight was getting closer. So far, Diana had been following the river so there had been little chance for her to become lost. However, up ahead the river flowed through a gorge where the walls came close to the water, and there was no pathway. She'd have to leave the safety of the riverbank, and he knew without doubt there was no way she could find her way back. She would simply have to accept his help. I cannot even remember why I was so angry to begin with, nor do I understand why she reacted as she did. This is ridiculous.

As he made his way carefully down the slope toward her campsite, he saw Diana's head turn in his direction. She'd heard him coming, despite his care. "Go away. Go play in the dark. We're safer apart, remember? It's easier that way. No complications."

"I brought wood for a fire. Would you care for some tea?"

There was a long silence, then Diana nodded. "I guess." She gestured upriver. "The cliffs are up there. I'd forgotten about them." She stared hard at him, as though she'd rather bite her tongue than admit she needed him.

Vincent settled on his haunches facing away from her and built the small fire. He offered an alternative. "I could draw you a map, but it would be easier to go with you. Would you allow me to accompany you?"

He heard her come up behind him and struggled to keep his composure as she leaned against him, sliding her hands up under his mane and caressing his neck. The length of her thighs against his back felt warm and welcoming. "Yes. You can come."

There was no sense of the bond to heighten their responses to one another--only the physical touch--but a warmth spread from that touch, and a giddy feeling of delight. It felt, to him, like the first taste of food after a long fast...the sweetness of honey in hot tea. He fought desperately to force his mind back to the issue at hand.

"Diana.... Please. If we are...to travel together...safely...you must not...."

"Touch you?" She sounded hurt, and he couldn't bear that he'd hurt her.

"Yes." Vincent stood and turned to face her. Without thought, he drew her, trembling, into his arms, holding tightly for a moment. Then he forced himself to release her. "Another time, perhaps...but here...this place...I cannot hold myself apart from you...or the Other. Please understand."

She raised her eyes to his, and in the dim firelight he thought he saw a glimmer of emotion...hope, perhaps. Then she turned away. "I guess we'd better get some rest if we're going spelunking later, huh?" Her voice was nonchalant--as though nothing had occurred.

He envied her control. He knelt again to tend the fire, and asked softly, "Do you still wish to have some tea?"

Diana opened her pack and rummaged inside. "Yeah. Sounds good. Thanks." She started down to the river, and Vincent startled.

"Where are you going?"

When she turned, he couldn't see her expression, but she had a clean pair of sweats under her arm. "I'm going to get cleaned up. I'll be back by the time the water boils."

Vincent's mouth went dry--thinking of her bathing only scant feet away--but he could hardly ask her to forego bathing simply to humor him. He looked down and busied his hands with the fire. "Be careful. The river is slow-moving here, but watch the depth. Stay close to shore." He hoped he sounded confident in her ability to protect herself.

He watched her walk away and died a small death as she disappeared around the bend. Holding the handle of the small aluminum pan, he stayed immobile for so long that he burned his hand. Growling a little to himself, he thrust the edge of his palm into his mouth. He looked down. The water was boiling. She wasn't back. He paced nervously a moment, then removed the water from the fire. Busying his shaking hands with the tin cups and teabags, he tried to sense her and of course felt nothing. After pouring the water, he stood and started toward the river. I must know...must see...that she is well. He stopped abruptly as she rounded the corner, coming back--and unaccountably felt a sense of disappointment...though he wasn't sure why. "The tea...", he began lamely.

"Good. I'm a little chilly after that dip. The river's cold."

She did look cold. Vincent dug in his pack and pulled out his blanket. Without a word, he wrapped it around her, then handed her the hot tea with the small jar of honey she'd brought to sweeten it.

They sat for awhile, drinking their tea and watching the fire, and Diana commented on the difference the firelight made down here. "It's like there's nothing except us and this fire--the small area here, in the light. It's easier to ignore the immensity of that darkness pressing around."

Vincent had relaxed some, and leaned against a rock watching her. She'd taken her hair down and was brushing it out. Colors were muted here, but in the firelight her hair was a mixture of bright and dark--shimmering. The ache began again deep within him. A hunger for touch and sensation--and a deeper hunger for the touch of the bond along with it. His entire body seemed to vibrate with his need. He pressed his head hard back against the rock and closed his eyes, hoping that the pain would distract him.

"Vincent? Are you okay?" Her voice was anxious.

Taking a deep breath, Vincent opened his eyes and answered quietly, "Yes. I'm fine."

"Well, I think I'll get some sleep. How much longer before we make it back, do you think?" She stretched, flattening the material of the sweatshirt across her breasts.

"I...don't know." He looked away, down at the fire. "Perhaps another sleep. Remember, there is no time down here." She stood across the fire from him, with the firelight casting dancing shadows over her face and form. He could sense the warmth and life in her from here...such a contrast to the cold stone and quiet dark. He knew that if he touched her that warmth would spread through him, awakening his senses. He forced himself away from thoughts of the caressing warmth of her...to realize she was speaking to him.

"....going to get some sleep too? You must be tired."

Vincent rose and gathered up the teacups to take to the river and rinse. "I will sleep later. Go, and get some rest."

Diana said goodnight and slipped into her sleeping bag. Once she was settled, Vincent turned and went down to the river to rinse the teacups. His hands lingered long in the cold water, and he thought that perhaps he, too, could do with a bath. A little shock of icy water would do him good, about now. I simply will not sleep. I will remain awake until she is safely home...until we are well out of this place.

Vincent walked upriver to a place where the water was deep, and stripped. He waded out into the deeper water, where the current ran slowly. Diana was right. It was cold. Not as cold as the water under the falls, but cold enough. He swam the width of the river several times and dove to the bottom. His body became numb with the cold, and finally he left the water and shook himself dry. He sat shivering, trying very hard not to think of the warmth of the fire, or the sleeping bag, or Diana.

There was a sense of presence beside him, and he turned to see the Other, standing next to him, his visage dark and threatening.

This is my place. Why did you bring her here, if not to meet me?

Vincent began dressing, and looked away from the apparition. She has no need of you. She protects herself.

The Other cocked his head mockingly...falsely innocent-appearing. Has no need of me? Don't you know yet that there are deeper needs than that of protection? Deeper desires than those of the kill? He grinned then. Although I must admit, she would make wonderful prey. Think of it, Vincent! Hunting her through these caverns...in the dark. She would be marvelous to hunt...and even more incredible once caught.

Vincent snarled and leapt toward him, but the figure merely reappeared behind him. Of course, who's to say what the outcome would be...love or death? The Other laughed, as he added...I suppose it would depend upon what I felt like at

the moment.

Then he was gone. And Vincent was alone again. Yet not alone. Apart, yet never truly parted. Together, yet never whole. He wept silently as the picture of Diana fleeing him through these dark caverns flitted across his mind's eye.

Never!

He dressed and returned to the campsite and the fire, which was now only embers. Moving as quietly as possible, he positioned himself once more against a rock and wearily dragged his blanket over him. I will not sleep, but only rest. I will keep her safe...will not allow him to touch her.

As the hours wore on, Vincent dozed lightly several times, but never deeply enough to allow the dreams to come. When eventually he heard Diana stir, he rose and took the remaining wood to make their last fire. Hopefully, they would be back in the Home Tunnels before they slept again.

Diana watched Vincent as she followed him through the series of narrow tunnels that led back to the river. He'd been even more silent than usual since they'd left the campsite, and she didn't dare lower her barriers to try to sense his emotions. They'd traveled for hours and she was tiring. Without the bond working between them and the expansion it offered her senses, the darkness had become oppressive...and the silence was worse. Then she fell and skinned her knee.

"Ow! Dammit!"

Instantly, Vincent was at her side, examining the injury, his strong hands gentle as he pulled the torn cloth away from the injured area. But she saw that his hands trembled, and when she looked into his face, he looked away. He poured a small amount of water onto a piece of cloth (torn against her wishes from his shirt) and delicately cleaned the scrape. It was ludicrous. She'd hurt herself more bumping into furniture in her own loft. But it was also touching and endearing. Her hand closed over his. "It's okay, Vincent. I'm not bleeding to death."

He recoiled as though she'd struck him. "Of course. Forgive me, Diana."

He started to back off, and Diana wrapped her fingers in his mane, saying gently, "There's nothing to forgive. It's okay...you're okay." When he glanced up, she smiled. "We're okay. Anything you do is fine with me, Vincent. Anything..."

There was a long moment when time seemed suspended. She thought for sure he was going to kiss her...he even tilted his head and moved toward her. But then, suddenly, he stood, taking her hand and drawing her with him. His

expression was strange--totally enigmatic. "You must go, Diana. Get out of here. Can you...can you find your way to the point we started from...the entrance to the maze?"

Diana watched him, puzzled, trying to figure this new angle. The pieces weren't fitting. "Yeah. I think so. But why? Hey. I'm not going without you. I won't leave you if there's something wrong."

He took a deep breath and let it out in a ragged sigh. "You must, Diana. Please. I cannot control my thoughts...or my actions...much longer."

Diana understood that completely. The dark, this place, her constant presence, were all acting to release in him those emotions he always held in check...just as it had begun working on her, before...on them. She stood her ground, refusing to be pushed away. "No."

His eyes were dark pools, and his breath came in harsh pants. "You must...leave me. Now. Run."

She tightened her barriers so as not to add to the problem, and said shakily, even as she put her arm around him, "No. I won't run from you. To you, yes. But never from you. I guess we got no choice, huh? We've gotta meet this head on sometime. Maybe now is better. Let's get out in the open, though...I feel like all this rock is gonna fall on me somehow."

She moved ahead quickly, allowing him no time to argue, and noted with satisfaction that he was following. When they came out of the tunnels into the larger cavern and the light from the lantern danced over the water, she turned and set the lantern down, and unrolled her sleeping bag.

She turned to face him, pulled off her sweatshirt and began slowly and deliberately dissolving her emotional barrier...and began losing herself in him. It frightened her beyond belief, until she began feeling his panic. She forced herself to concentrate on how much she cared for him--not desired him, but merely loved him for who he was. She tried to retain enough control to sort through his sheer need and to reach for the underlying love and respect for her that was also there.

Vincent stood, panic-stricken, as Diana began casually undressing. She can't...I can't.... Then he felt the connection, the bond, begin to flow--one to the other--and felt her trust of him. She trusts me... despite everything. Looking past her, Vincent could see the Other reaching for her. The apparition flashed him an obscene grin, and commented rather obscurely, She refuses to become prey. Interesting.

Vincent's fear rose, but he could neither run, nor hide. As the figure of his darker self faded and he lost the image from his mind, all he could think of was how exquisite Diana was, standing there. She'd released her hair from the ponytail and it streamed over her shoulders in a red river--red even in the light of the lantern. It flowed like blood over her pale luminous skin, and the fire that burned within him threatened to devour him. His hands clenched and flexed reflexively and he shuddered as he felt the red, shifting haze of desire settle over him. He knew Diana felt it too. He could no longer separate his own desires from hers. No longer wanted to.

When Vincent reached for her, Diana put a hand solidly on his chest and pushed him away. The supposed resistance elicited a low warning growl. But apparently she'd only meant to help him undress, and in his confusion he allowed the delay. He found himself watching her fingers, which were working diligently at the layers of cloth and various ties. He reached to assist her. The sensual contrast between her slender white fingers and his own--furred and clawed as they were--provided a gentle distraction from the heavier, more insistent desire for completion. Together, they slowly removed each layer of his cloth and leather "armor"--and with each layer they removed, there fell away a deeper, psychological barrier. And somewhere along the way, the red haze lifted and some semblance of control returned.

After a moment or an hour--Vincent wasn't sure which--he found himself warmly snuggled next to Diana inside the large sleeping bag. His mind was clear and he was at peace. It had been extraordinary and strange. Nothing at all as they'd expected. Either of them. All his fears of harming her and his reluctance to allow her "inside" had come to nothing. As had her fears of "losing herself" inside him...or her fears that he would not accept her. They were together now in the bond--a completion of a kind he'd never expected--this double sharing; this openness. And there was more, so much more, waiting for them to learn and experience about themselves and each other.

Vincent reflected on the acceptance Diana had for the Other. No one had ever accepted his dark side as she had. In the end, Catherine loved both of my aspects, and she accepted on faith and love alone. Diana accepts because she understands. I am still unsure which is the greater gift.

Feeling Diana's silken body shift against him, Vincent adjusted his own, fitting his angles to her curves. The bond was more open between them than it had ever been, and the desire was still present--a sweet ache. It seemed they'd had a choice, after all, and choice had been important to both of them. With this power of choice they'd chosen to explore the new dimensions to their relationship at their own speed. They'd not made love, but only touched, petted and explored one another--more empathically than physically. It was a revelation to both of them that it was they who controlled the bond, not the other way around.

Diana's voice drifted to him in the soft, welcoming darkness that enveloped them. "I was so scared that you wouldn't like me...and...of getting lost."

His arms tightened around her and he buried his face in her hair. "Thoreau said: 'Not until we are lost do we begin to find ourselves.' I think we both have a great deal to find in ourselves and in each other that we are only beginning to learn...and we need to 'lose ourselves' more often."

She chuckled, the sound deep and satisfied. "I'm ready for another session...of intensive study."

He noticed that although she said this, she didn't stir from within the circle of his arms. He found her hand and clasped it. "No. Not yet. For now there is peace and a deep silence within. For too long we have hidden from shadows and darkness. We must learn to be mirrors for one another and chase those shadows together." He brushed her hair aside, reveling in the touch of the silken strands and the soft resiliency of her flesh under his callused palm. He gently kissed the back of her neck. "For now, we sleep. I find I am very weary...and now I have no fear of the dreams."

Diana snuggled in closer and seemed contented with his answer. Before long they both drifted off to sleep, secure in the knowledge that whatever dreams might come, the bond would not steal away their choices. With all he could desire quite literally at hand, Vincent found himself to be content. For now. Tomorrow was another day.

*Not until we are lost...do we begin to find ourselves,
and realize where we are
and the infinite extent of our relations.*

--Thoreau

END