

Tyger, Tyger

by Rhonda Collins

"Tyger, Tyger, burning bright..."

Rollie stared with pain-crazed eyes at the liquor store across the street. He hugged the ragged jacket tighter around him: it wasn't the cold he was trying to block out, but the pain. Or, perhaps he was only trying to hold himself together for a little longer. Not sure it's worth the trouble, he thought vaguely. Sometimes, lately, Rollie thought it would be easier just to O.D. and let it go at that.

The stoplight above him blinked in the fog, and Rollie shuddered with another wave of pain. It hurt so bad, and he knew that all he needed was a little money for another fix. One more time. Then I can think. Decide what to do next.

Without further hesitation, Rollie picked up the crowbar and started across the deserted street. With shaking hands, he broke the lock on the outside, then jimmied the door. It was easy. Easier than he'd thought it would be. Prying the cash drawer open was even easier.

Rollie grabbed handfuls of cash and stuffed it in his pockets. He was just about to leave when the first shot rang out...the bullet splintering the box next to the register. Stunned, he hesitated a fraction of a second, and another bullet hit the wall behind him. Panicked, Rollie vaulted over the counter just as the enraged owner shot again. Rollie reached the door by the time the fourth shot finally struck its target. He cried out... turned...and a fifth shot took him in the chest.

Frantic--not feeling the pain as much as he'd thought he would--Rollie ripped the door open and ran. He could hear another shot echoing in the alley behind him as he pelted through the darkness, his feet slapping in the puddles.

Rollie ran blindly for several blocks, down one alley and then through another, going nowhere except away. At last he slowed, stopped and slumped against a wall. Standing in the opalescent foggy glow of a streetlight, Rollie lifted his hand and stared, uncomprehending, at the blood...then down at his chest. Shot. I been shot! He put his head back against the hard bricks and tried to draw breath, and the pain racked him, as it had for days. He was nothing but pain in his world. Even the wound didn't hurt as much as the agony of his withdrawal. He started to slump. Just let it go. Let it be over.

But from somewhere, farther up the alley, music drifted. Not the kind of music Rollie liked, but music all the same. He listened, and from a place deep inside he felt a different pain. Father. Vincent. Gotta get home.

For the first time in years, Rollie wanted home more than he wanted drugs. More than he wanted to die. It wasn't even a conscious thought or decision. Only wanting. But prodded by

that feeling, the wounded eighteen-year-old pushed himself through the growing cold and pain to the tunnels below the city. He collapsed into a channel of shallow water that ran down the middle of the passage.

Presently a black-cloaked figure loomed over him and turned him over. A familiar voice spoke his name in an astonished whisper. "Rollie?"

For over an hour, Vincent had been sitting in the corner of his chamber, vacant since the beginning of his self-imposed exile, watching Father and Ho operate on Rollie. He felt helpless and angry. His curled fists were bracketed tightly between his knees. His muscles felt tight as piano wire. Pianos. Music. He could hear the music in his mind...see the lovably earnest boy sitting, transfixed, at the piano. Practicing for hours. Even through meals. Trying so hard to become the best he could be. The thought only made Vincent more angry. All Rollie had ever wanted in life was the music. And look at him. His dreams are gone. His future stolen from him. Look what has become of him. We failed him, somehow. I failed him.

Vincent anxiously watched Father's intent expression as he worked...noted Ho's worried one. And he was glad--for once--of the loss of his empathy. Because he could no longer feel worried concern. He didn't think he could handle any more pain, right at the moment. He was emotionally and physically exhausted from his long search for Catherine, his grief at her death...and now, from the fruitless hunt for his son.

From his perch across the room, Vincent studied Rollie's sweat-streaked face. A man's face, now, and yet...He is so child-like, still. Despite everything. He wanted to take his friend into his arms and hold him. To pour his love into him. But he knew it was useless. The drugs had taken it all away from Rollie. Now, Rollie felt nothing but the pain. Vincent felt a knife twist in his gut again. The lack of hope was almost more than he could bear. Is there nothing left? No hope for Rollie, no hope for me...my son?

Vincent straightened into alertness as Father finally turned, with a deep sigh, from his patient. "How is he, Father?"

"He's fortunate." Father sounded tired. And worried. "The first bullet passed clean through him. Had it been a few inches lower.... But he's going to have a hard time ahead. Needs all his strength. He hurts. He's going to need help."

Vincent felt a huge sense of relief that momentarily drowned out the anger and hopelessness. Yet even without empathy, he couldn't fail to be aware of the implied appeal in Father's comment. And Vincent didn't feel capable of answering that appeal. Hoping to avoid confronting the matter directly, Vincent responded, "He has his friends around him now. People who love him."

Father wasn't willing to accept the evasion. "Vincent. Why don't you come home? Rollie is not the only one who needs you."

Lowering his head to escape Father's concerned gaze, Vincent replied in a low voice, "I can't Father."

"The children ask after you every day. They miss you."

That was unfair, and Father knew it...using the children as leverage. And the unfairness woke some of Vincent's anger again, though he carefully kept his voice gentle. "The children have you...and Mary...and all the others. But my son...Catherine's child." The pain burst over him again full-force. The dark helplessness. It was useless. He was failing Catherine's son--as he'd failed her--and as he'd somehow failed Rollie. Failure piled on failure until it seemed impossible to do anything that would matter. He turned away with a huge, painful sigh.

"I know," Father said sympathetically. "Look. Why don't you just stay for the night, um? Until Rollie wakes up?"

Accepting the compromise was easier than arguing any more. Vincent nodded tiredly. Just now it seemed too much effort either to go or to stay. And he was concerned about Rollie. "Yes. At least for the night, Father."

Father left then and Ho followed, having completed the suturing. Vincent scarcely noticed.

Going to the bedside, Vincent stood over his friend, watching the labored rise and fall of Rollie's heavily bandaged chest. Vincent smoothed the quilt that Ho had carefully laid over her patient. Tears blurred Vincent's vision as he thought again of the talented, sweet child that Rollie had been. Rollie was never completely convinced that we loved him for himself. Did we ever make him understand that although we valued the beauty he brought us with his music, it was he, himself, whom we loved? Kneeling beside the bed, Vincent took Rollie's hand, whispering, "Where did I lose you, Rollie? And can I find you again? Can I help you find yourself?"

Still holding Rollie's hand, Vincent closed his eyes and wept. It was a long while before he found the strength to move back to his chair. Once seated, he tried to sleep-- propped between the chairback and the the cold stone of the chamber wall--but the dark dreams tumbled in his mind, giving him no rest.

Vincent ran through the murky dark. "Things" snatched at him and the ground itself tried to swallow him. Far in the distance a child cried. His child. Catherine's child. He could sense a tenuous connection, thread-thin, calling him. Too tenuous to help him find the child, the connection only frustrated him. Sometimes in these dreams, the child he searched for wasn't his child...sometimes it was Rollie...who was also lost in the dark, and piano music wound through his dreams, haunting and lovely, in bright contrast to the rest of the dream. Inside Vincent, the unforgotten and anonymous beast screamed his rage and confusion.

Some time later, Vincent was wakened by Rollie's distressed cry and feeble, restless motions. He sprang up and moved to his friend's side. Father was there too, though Vincent hadn't noticed his return. Soon, Rollie quieted, and his eyes opened, focusing on them. "You're safe, Rollie," Father assured the boy, smiling. "Safe with friends."

When Rollie woke, he woke slowly. Foul dreams and old memories had hunted him in the

dark he'd tried to hide in. He heard the pipes first. A comforting sound, somehow. But when he tried to move, the pain lanced through him and he groaned. But then, soft voices answered his pain. Familiar voices that stroked him in ways he'd almost forgotten.

"You're safe, Rollie. Safe with friends."

Father. It's Father, Rollie thought, incredulously as his vision cleared. Then shame infused him with dread: he didn't want Father to see him like this. He'd have to tell them what he'd done. But Vincent knew. Rollie could see it in his eyes as his friend motioned Father back and took his place. Somehow, it was easier to talk if he didn't have to meet Father's pitying, disapproving eyes.

Vincent asked gently: "Do you remember what happened?"

Rollie couldn't bear to look directly at Vincent, either, but the soft voice and the love in it demanded answers, so Rollie tried. It still struck him as surprising, what had happened. He'd stolen for his drugs before and never been caught. "I was running. I got shot." He forced himself to face Vincent more fully. "A guy...at the liquor store. I was rippin' 'em off."

Rollie felt a little sick as Vincent turned from him. Then Father came back, and there was a small prick of pain...and the large pain went away.

Vincent turned away as Father came to give Rollie another injection. How is it, that Rollie--so good, so honest--can be reduced to this by this poison?

"He'll rest for a while now," Father commented gently. But he still seemed very concerned...and that, in turn, concerned Vincent.

"What is it, Father? He's going to recover, isn't he?"

"From the gunshot wound, yes. But...you've seen his arms, Vincent."

"Rollie is a heroin addict," Vincent agreed steadily. "You knew that."

"His habit," Father explained, "has built up a tolerance to morphine. I might have to give as much as five times the dosage I would give anyone else, just to numb the pain."

"You don't have it," Vincent said, guessing toward why Father was dwelling so on Rollie's addiction.

But that wasn't it. Or at least not all. Vincent could read that much in Father's expression and slowness in answering.

"I can always send word to Peter," Father responded. "But there's only so much he can do." He shrugged. "And you see, even if we do get the drugs, we're walking a very thin line here. Too much morphine, we risk an overdose. Too little..."

"Then you're saying Rollie might die?" After the seeming reprieve, Vincent was borne down again to realize the specter of death still haunted the chamber. He could almost see it. He feared that Rollie's last chance at life, his dreams, might be snatched away.

"If I ration the morphine...and monitor it day and night," Father replied with careful deliberation, "I can keep him out of danger, but I can't keep him out of pain."

"I see." Vincent clenched his hands. "I understand."

It was the drugs. Always the drugs. It wasn't enough for them to force Rollie to deny all that he was and could be--to force him to lie, cheat and steal...to forget his dreams: they put him in a position where he got shot, then couldn't even grant surcease of the pain because one couldn't give him enough drugs to suppress it without suppressing life itself.

Assured that Rollie would sleep for a time, Vincent left Father to watch over him. He couldn't bear to be still any longer and went wandering the passages, more or less at random. He moved blindly, not even aware of friends who spoke to him...unaware of anything but the pain.

He found himself in the nursery, with no real awareness of how he'd gotten there. It was the young children's playtime. Vincent leaned against the wall, hiding in the shadows-- unwilling to be seen, imwo;;omg tp be greeted. reproached for exiling himiself from them-- watching the children as they played. They are so happy. So carefree. May they remain so.

For a few moments, the rage faded into peace as he watched the children and listened to their laughter. But soon his thoughts--in the circular fashion that thoughts often have-- looped back to his own son and Rollie. And the same problems. The same hopeless longing, restlessness, inertia.

He left the nursery then, before he could be noticed, before his presence and black mood could disturb the play. He stopped at the kitchen to get something to eat.

Although dinner was long over and William elbow-deep in soapsuds, the normally truculent cook made no protest over fixing Vincent a sandwich after hours. Nobody behaved normally toward Vincent anymore. Not even Father. It depressed him.

Nothing. Nothing was the same. He felt like a stranger even to himself. Why should it surprise him when others treated him that way?

My son, he thought. And I've never even seen his face. A stranger. Catherine said...that he is beautiful. So he cannot be like me.

Putting the sandich on a plate and bumping Vincent's arm to make him notice, William asked, "How is he, Vincent?"

Recollecting William must be referring to Rollie, Vincent shook his head, sinking onto a nearby bench. "I don't know, William. Between the gunshot and the drugs...even Father doesn't know."

William dragged out a bench and sat opposite him. "And you? How're you holdin' up?"

For William to be so solicitous, Vincent knew his despair must be showing. I was right to leave the children, he thought. It's contagious. He tried to force a smile. "Well enough. Thank you, William. For the food. And the concern."

"You really ought to come home, Vincent," William couldn't resist commenting. As Father had been unable to resist it. Wanting of him what he couldn't do, didn't have to give. The failure of direct empathy couldn't keep him from feeling the pressure of their expectations, their wanting that, however innocently, only added to his burden. William went on, "No need to stay down there in some damn dark hole, all alone. Everything's fine. It's been weeks now since that damn killer blasted his way down here. If this Gabriel was gonna send somebody else, he'd have done it by now?"

Vincent bent his head over his plate, avoiding William's solicitous gaze. The last thing he wanted right now was table talk about Gabriel. "Perhaps. But I won't risk it." Choking down the last of the sandwich and feeling it settle into a leaden lump in his stomach, Vincent excused himself and pushed away from the table.

Collecting dishes, William waved him away--hurt, annoyed and resentful. "Go on, then. Feel sorry for yourself. You ain't the only one in the world to have lost people you loved, you know. And you've still got a lot of people here who love you."

Vincent thought dully, I cannot be here, among them. Not now. Then, abruptly, he was angry, in the sudden way anger came to him now--always taking him by surprise, so that he lashed out heedlessly at whatever had provoked it. "And what of my son? Who does he have, William? A madman who cares nothing for honor or love! And what of Rollie? Who will love them?" Without waiting for an answer from the stunned cook, Vincent spun on his heel and left.

It was wrong to have flared out at William that way. But he couldn't seem to help it. And he was still angry. Sometimes it seemed to him he was always angry, with no way to discharge it or silence it. Along with his hope, he'd lost his peace, as well. And so he broke the peace of others, who meant no harm, who did love him: he accepted that, even though he could no longer feel it. There seemed to be no way out of the cycle of hurting himself and hurting others.

He slowly returned to his chamber to relieve Father. Counterfeiting calm, he asked, "How is he?"

"He has some fever, but that's to be expected," Father replied absently. Turning, Father showed Vincent a stern, tight expression. "Peter brought down some morphine, but Vincent...it's not enough. Not nearly enough. And it's all he can get." Father raked fingers through his hair. "I'll have to ration it very carefully...and Rollie isn't going to understand."

"Surely he will, Father. He knows we love him...."

Father shook his head sadly. "All Rollie knows now, Vincent is the drug...and the pain. You

don't understand addiction. Not addiction like Rollie's. A terrible, raging thirst; a hunger that overshadows all else. Terrible even to imagine...." Leaning heavily on his cane, Father patted Vincent's shoulder. "I must go lie down for a while. I gave him another injection and it settled him for the moment. But I don't know how long...." Father's pause was ominous and full of meaning.

"I'll watch over him. Go and rest, Father."

Settling back into his chair, Vincent watched Rollie as he slept. It seemed far too short a time before the young man woke again, crying out in pain. Vincent moved quickly to his side. "Try to lie still, Rollie, your wounds need time to heal."

"It hurts, Vincent." Rollie sounded like a weebegone child. "I feel those...holes in me. Burning...like fire inside."

Despite what Father had said, Vincent found he could visualize that pain only too easily and too well. "Father has given you an injection," he offered.

"It's not enough, Vincent. Doesn't do nuthin'. Help me, Vincent," Rollie pleaded. He pushed away the quilt and started digging awkwardly into a trouser pocket.

"I'm here," Vincent said, because he could find nothing else to say. Because that was all he could do, and knew it wasn't enough. "I won't leave you." Then he stared in shock as Rollie extracted from his pocket a wad of dirty bills, which he thrust at Vincent. "There's this guy on Fourth.... The Bowery. Name's Tony. He's got what I need-- Tony."

Vincent felt as desperate as Rollie looked. His friend was in so much pain. Father couldn't help. He couldn't help. But he couldn't do what Rollie was asking. He couldn't ease the pain by bringing Rollie more of what was responsible for that pain. Madness. And yet Rollie's pain became his own. "You don't want this, Rollie. You don't need it."

"Vincent, please! It hurts so bad."

Vincent's response was fury. At himself, at Rollie, at this impossible dilemma. "Those drugs are poison." he insisted, trying to hold the rage in check. "They're what brought you here."

"Only this once," Rollie begged.

Vincent couldn't endure it. Turning sharply, he said, "Let me go for Father."

Rollie's desperation wouldn't release him. "Vincent. I swear. The last time. I want to kick it--get clean. I will. I promise. But I ain't gonna make it otherwise. Please. I'm beggin' you. I need a friend." Again an accusation. A reproach, more bitter and blunt than William's or Father's but sinking into the same deep places and pulling at him like hooks. Then Rollie made it worse by rolling his head away, implicitly saying that Vincent was no friend: a friend would have helped, made the pain go away somehow. And Vincent couldn't, wouldn't do that. Therefore Vincent was nobody, useless. Only somebody else refusing to answer his need.

Vincent had a name: Tony. It gave the rage a target, a purpose, and outlet. He strode out of his chamber, a murderous, sullen fury sweeping over him in waves.

Rollie lay curled under the quilts. He hurt so badly all he wanted was for it to stop. He couldn't imagine anything that would be better than that. He'd never hurt so bad in his life. Between the gnawing, tightening band of agony he felt from withdrawal, the fierce, burning pain of the wounds was unendurable. He couldn't stand it, yet there was no way to get away from it. The pain was all he could feel or know.

Tears slipped from his eyes: tears of pain, weakness and shame. He remembered his empty promises--lies--to Vincent, and knew his rejection had hurt Vincent, who'd never been anything but kind to him. That wasn't right. But he couldn't seem to help himself. All I do is lie, he thought savagely. To myself, to Vincent. Hurting him because he took the trouble to save my life. And this is what I give him back. Rollie wouldn't even think of what Vincent must think of him. It hurt too much. He began to cry, in great, wracking sobs that only made the pain worse. Why did I come back? I'm just making trouble for everybody else. Hurting everybody else because I hurt. I should have just died. There's nothing left. I just make it worse, being alive. No hope for me any more.

Reaching Fourth Street, Vincent hung back in the shadows watching the nighttime thoroughfare and trying desperately to gain some control over the beast slowly eating its way through his soul. Near the opposite corner stood a young man in a business suit--oddly conspicuous among the other passers-by. They were on their way to somewhere; this man stood, taking only a few paces in any direction: the motions of a man waiting. As Vincent observed, several people in succession approached the man and gave him money. Each was treated differently. Some were met and then sent off with a laugh and a pleasant expression. Others were scowled at or even struck...seemingly not in genuine anger, but almost offhandedly, as though it hardly mattered or a smile was the same as a blow. Vincent didn't understand this dance of power, though he recognized it for what it was. The man was demonstrating that he had the power to reward or punish at whim, to dominate his subordinates...some, literally children.

One such child approached the man and it suddenly, sickeningly came to Vincent that the boy had been selling drugs for the man and was delivering payment. And the man struck the boy. Vincent pulled in a tight breath and his eyes narrowed dangerously. Within him, the beast clawed and roared, but Vincent maintained control and didn't move.

Somehow this wasn't the red-hot rage he'd felt so often before. This was almost cold. A calculating, deliberate rage that felt no shame, but only righteous anger. In the struck, corrupted child, Vincent saw all the murdered, lost and stolen children...all the lost dreams. He saw Eric and Ellie, Kipper and Samantha, gentle orphaned Geoffrey. He saw his own child, never seen but so vividly imagined, so deeply loved.

The man, Tony, had become in Vincent's mind all the evil he had ever fought.

Having apparently finished this night's business, the man left his post. Crossing the street. As he passed the alley, Vincent called to him softly...almost welcomingly: "Tony."

The man looked around in a way that said he saw only a dim outline: Vincent was experienced in moving through the nighttime streets, knew with precision and exactitude how clearly others could discern him.

"Could be," the man responded carelessly, yet warily. "Who wants to know."

Vincent thought of Rollie, of his suffering. Perhaps, despite appearances, this man was another victim: cruel from his own unknown pain. Vincent was determined to be fair, judicious. Not give himself over to the beast. He replied mildly, "A friend of Rollie's. He's in terrible pain."

"Ain't that too bad," the man sneered. "Maybe I should send flowers."

Vincent tried again. Gave the man a final chance to show compassion. "Rollie thinks you can help."

"Help him? Yeah. I'll help him. I'll help bury him."

If it had been a test, the man had just failed it. And condemned himself by jeering at Rollie's torment. The callous mockery suddenly switched Vincent from the role of judge to that of executioner. He lashed out and caught the man's hand, letting the claws dig in. The man screamed as Vincent replied in a deadly cold voice: "You already did that."

His hand still imprisoned, impaled, the man dropped to his knees. "OH, Jesus. Let go of me man! C'mon. I've got money. I'll give you money."

"I don't want your money. And keep your poison."

"Then what do you want?" the man pleaded, able to envision no violence that wasn't an attempt at extortion or an assertion of brute dominance.

And with his claws biting into the man's flesh, the sharp scent of blood in the air, Vincent thought blankly, What do I want? And without thinking, he blurted, "I want it to stop!" with the sense that it was all the incomprehensible cruelties, all the insane suffering, all the horrible, empty, needless deaths that made of the world a shell bereft of meaning or hope. All of it. He wanted it to stop.

Staring up, crouched at Vincent's feet, faced with a demand so cosmic he couldn't comprehend it, much less satisfy it, Tony asked in a voice of angry bewilderment, "Who are you?"

Vincent hauled the man up and pinned him against the wall, one-handed. Then, deliberately, he moved forward into brighter light...and let the man see him--the face of the beast. "Your nightmare," he declared flatly, knowing that was precisely how Tony would see him...and what he would become.

Tony screamed wildly, horrified, terrified. And though Vincent had intended and expected that reaction, it still hurt. He flung the man from him, tossed him clattering against a row of battered garbage cans. Vincent stood looking down at him. Hating him. Coldly and deliberately he told Tony, "The next time I see you here...I'll kill you."

Then Vincent faded back into the shadows and let the man make his scrabbling, frantic escape. Tony ran crookedly, hunched over his wounded hand, glancing continually over his shoulder in obvious dread of being pursued.

Following but not pursuing, Vincent thought, He's seen. Now he knows. And yet...my son is beautiful....

Tony's escape took him to a diner a few blocks away. Vincent watched while he reported to another man--older, frowning, heavyset, wearing a better-tailored suit; annoyed to be interrupted at his meal. To whom Tony behaved as a subordinate: cringing, whining, protesting, displaying his injury, insisting against skepticism. It was all in their poses. Watching in measured glances through the front window, Vincent didn't have to hear the words. He waited for the fuse to take light from this first spark, moving from lower level to higher. He had no interest in Tony. He simply wanted it to stop--with a wanting that was itself like a fuse, burning within him. When the second man left, picking his teeth and scowling at the news he'd just been given, Vincent followed him.

As the man's car--long, shining, dark as it moved past successive streetlights--glided east, Vincent ran the alleys, keeping it in view. Near the river, it pulled into a warehouse and parked in a chain-link enclosure. The man left the car and went inside. Panting from the long run, Vincent slid up to a grimy window and looked inside. At long tables, men in lab smocks worked with large carboys of chemicals, drums of powder--measuring, mixing, weighing on small, precise scales, holding test tubes up to the light.

The poison was prepared here. For children to sell...to other children.

Flattening himself to the wall, Vincent drew deep breaths until he was certain, until he was ready then found a door he could force without much sound and eased inside. He went silently around ranked shelving to the tables he'd seen through the window. Nobody noticed him until he was standing right behind one of the workers...who glanced around casually, then stood frozen. The drug lab was well lit.

Vincent said curtly, "Get out. Now."

Without a sound, the worker immediately began backing away. The other workers began looking up, seeing, reacting with unquestionable retreat. As the alarm spread, Vincent surveyed the tables and their contents with hating eyes. Now. It was time. The beast's time. He let slip the last of his difficult controls and released the fury.

With one savage heave, he overturned the nearest table and then swept another clean of glass beakers, retorts, and all its other contents, such a hideous parody of medicine, of science. The almost colorless flame of a fallen Bunsen burner set some cotton batting alight. The flames swiftly spread in a foul semell of the chemicals they fed on. It was all blazing, a mirror to the inner blaze Vincent felt. Indiscriminately smashing everything he came to,

everything he saw, he released not only his rage over Rollie, but his fury and frustration over Gabriel and his own lost son.

One man confronted him--briefly--with a gun. Vincent swatted the weapon aside...and then the man. Through the roiling smoke and heat, another armed man came to challenge the intruder. Vincent struck with feral suddenness and, disarmed, the man fled into the fire rather than face what he'd found before him. Turning, Vincent was charged by the heavysset man from the diner--also threatening him with a gun. A backhanded slash ripped the man's throat out before his finger could contract on the trigger.

His way now clear, Vincent stalked through the flaming debris and smoke into the glass-fronted office a slim man in the best suit of all crouched cowering, begging for mercy, pleading for his life. The man was unarmed--not a threat--but Vincent was past noticing or caring. Past mercy. Past justice. There was only the red rage and revenge. To stop it. Stop it all.

Afterward, Vincent stood in an alley a block away and listened to the sirens coming. Fire engines, police cars...ambulances. Even from a block away, the fire glared bloodily against the bricks, flashed in shop windows. But the fire within Vincent had burned out, leaving only ashes. He felt numb. Dead inside. The beast was quiet now, satiated; but Vincent knew he couldn't blame this carnage on the Other. He'd done it. And yet he couldn't make himself care. His mind sang an elegy to innocence. And his heart was heavier than before.

He stood, not waiting for anything in particular, until he realized that the shop windows now reflected the more diffuse light of a dim and dangerous dawn. Heaving himself away from the brickwork, he began his slow way home.

Bypassing the living areas, Vincent stopped and washed the blood from his hands, then continued on to his chamber of exile far from the community. Sitting crosslegged on the bare cement floor he at last took up his journal to try to comprehend what had just happened by casting it into words.

Last night

He sighed heavily and paused. The words wouldn't come. That utter ferocity had nothing to do with words and resisted his mind's attempt to define or limit it. He continued with the paraphrase of a quote--someone else's words, someone safely dead and removed from all present turbulence.

All that is necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing. But nothing you can do is enough. Last night, I let rage carry me into darkness. But tonight, up in that city, children will still sell poison to other children. Where is the hope? My child...

The thoughts wouldn't come together any more than the words did. With another heavy sigh, Vincent laid the journal aside. On the same makeshift shelf were other objects: Catherine's ivory rose...and the heavy ring, inlaid with black stone, that the assassin had offered as a token between them...and a lure. Picking up the ring, Vincent held it so the light of his lone candle glinted off its surface. He read the inscription. Veritas de liberabit-- The truth shall set

you free. He curled his fingers into a fist around the ring, feeling it, a thick, cold lump against his palm. There is no truth. No life. It will never stop. Where is the hope?

Setting aside the ring, he picked up his journal again, found the page, and wrote:

The beast and I...are one.

With that chilling comment, he shut the journal and set it on the shelf with finality. Then he stretched out on his mattress and fell into the same disturbing dreams of fear and haunting loneliness and futile search. The same despair that clouded his waking hours.

Vincent dreamed of the beast...but the beast was named Vincent. A thing without a name has no substance, he thought desperately, I will not give the beast my name. Wicked, feral eyes gleamed neon red in the black surround. In the distance he could hear the wailing of children in the distance; the beast's head turned. He beckoned for Vincent to join him loping away to the hunt.

Rollie also lay lost in the darkness of his dreams. Even there, the pain pursued him.

He felt as though he were on fire, and he screamed, but no sound came out. He cried, but the tears caught fire as they slipped down his cheeks. Vincent and Father stood off to the side, their gentle hands outstretched for him, and there was a soft, golden light behind them, hinting of comfort, release from pain. But he couldn't reach them, no matter how hard he tried. Once, he thought he felt comforting hands on him and tried to reach for them, but the pain flared again and engulfed him.

Waking, Rollie was marginally more aware of where he was--Vincent's chamber: where the nightmare-haunted children were privileged to flee for refuge and the comfort of sheltering arms. But no more. He was alone here. And this nightmare wasn't the sort that could be dispelled by a special story told just to you.

He vaguely remembered begging Vincent to go bring him drugs. But Vincent hadn't taken the money. The bills were still there--no longer wadded up but stacked neatly just past the pillows. Yet Vincent had gone...and hadn't come back. In his pain, Rollie couldn't think beyond the fact that he hadn't scored. To get well, fixed, he'd have to go himself.

If I can just get myself fixed, I can think. And if I die up there, that's okay, too.

He managed to pull on his shirt and jacket and stumbled through the empty, half-remembered passageways. But the familiar ways betrayed him: they led him to the cave where the piano was stored. The piano for his concert. The shining, full-sized grand piano he'd never once played.

He turned his head sharply aside and lunged past. He had to get through. Get Above. Get fixed. But that piano...big as a car, almost, with all the unplayed music sleeping inside it.... He could almost hear it, the strong chords and swift arpeggios. Music by Chopin, Beethoven--old dead white guys, all of them, but the music so alive and full of life and no race or color except

the dreams everybody had alike, the good dreams....

He'd hung around too long: Father came looking for him and found him there.

There'd be a lecture. Rollie knew Father. No use running and no interrupting till the old man was done. With a dull emptiness and hopelessness, Rollie waited through what Father had to say about when more morphine would be coming. Another day. Tomorrow. One thing Rollie was certain of was that he wasn't going to make tomorrow.

When Father told him, like it should be news, that his body couldn't survive his habit much longer, Rollie's frustration and anger flared. "Do you think I care?"

Patiently, gravely--hurting too: Rollie knew that--Father told him all the things Rollie already knew. About how everyone carried pain inside; how escape only took them to where they couldn't feel anything--not even the good things. But what Father didn't understand was that to escape the pain, the guilt, you got to where it didn't matter if you didn't feel anything. It was hard to stand there listening to Father remind him about how he used to be, when he was a kid. Before he'd got that nice Miss Kendrick killed, looking for him, for the concert. All his fault: because he'd gone off to be with his big brother, Anthony. Before that, there'd been the music. And Father tried to remind him of that Rollie from before--full of hope and desire.

"That was a long time ago," Rollie said flatly. "He's dead."

"No! Oh, no. He's here!" Father cried and hugged him, patted at him. "Do you remember what you used to dream?"

Passively held, Rollie shook his head, only wanting Father to get finished and leave him alone. "No."

"Well, you told me once..." Father said in his storytelling voice, like it was a secret he was confiding, still patting at Rollie, "you said that you wanted to be good."

"Good at my playing," Rollie declared automatically, in case Father thought he'd been trying to be different from Anthony, better than his brother who'd never been brought to the tunnels but lived wild on the streets. Playing wasn't sissy, like Anthony had said...but it wasn't trying to be better because he'd loved Anthony. Who was dead now. Like Miss Kendrick. Like the music....

"Oh," said Father heartily, sincerely, "you were better than that. You were wonderful at playing! You brought great joy--to all of us. And you could again. All you need is the desire."

For the first time in a very long time, Rollie felt something other than a stab of pain. He felt that remembered hope, and he looked up into Father's face to see his own pain and hope reflected back.

"And the courage to feel it," Father continued. "Stay with us, Rollie. Stay with us and try."

Rollie struggled, he wanted to stay...but he just couldn't. The pain and the drugs were stronger than hope and love. "I...can't," he managed. He turned away.

"Please, Rollie. Please...Rollie...." Father's voice, with its own pain followed him as Rollie lurched away through the tunnels toward the surface.

Vincent woke to the silent dark. He lay there awhile trying to place the time, but his time sense seemed to be off. Either he hadn't slept at all, or he'd slept straight through the entire day into night again. Hardly any messages sounded on the pipes. It must be late, then. Disoriented, he rose and began the long ascent to the Home Chambers to check on Rollie.

He found the bed empty...and Father slouched despondently in the chair by the table.

Vincent asked, "Where's Rollie?"

Father looked around, then away. "He's gone," he reported. "I did my best to stop him, but I have a feeling he may have gone back up Above."

Vincent couldn't believe it. How could Father let him go? "There's nothing for him up there but death," he protested. "You know that."

"So," said Father, sternly resigned, "does Rollie."

As Vincent swung around to find the boy, bring him back, Father's voice stopped him before he'd taken more than a single pace. "And if you do find him, what are you going to tell him...that he doesn't already know?"

It was true. It was also intolerable. "Am I to stand aside while he's killing himself?" Vincent demanded.

"If that is a choice that he's made," Father agreed steadily. "You can't be with him every moment, Vincent."

"I am with him every moment. When he destroys himself, he destroys a part of me."

Father rose, finally, and came to him. "This," he commented, with something like wryness, "is what it is to be a father." It went unsaid, but was understood, that the helpless concern Vincent felt for Rollie, Father too had often felt...for him. Speaking the natural following thought, Father asked sympathetically, "Your son. Have you found...anything?"

Vincent averted his eyes, freshly reminded of that other unendurable imperative to cherish and keep safe. "A name," he answered dully. "A name written on the wind. The memory of a face. A name. Nothing."

"So," Father challenged acutely. "This isn't really about Rollie."

"This is about all the lost children," Vincent acknowledged, then abruptly left.

Father was right. Vincent knew it. It would never stop, and still one had to manage to live somehow and be glad or else you'd infect everyone around you with your misery. William was

right. But it didn't matter. He couldn't make it matter to him anymore. It made no difference to him...and no difference to the beast. Common sense was no help. Maybe nothing was. But he had to do something. He had to take some action. All that is necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing. Edmund Burke had been right.

And Vincent was suddenly, fiercely ashamed of having spared the man in the office. Staring at him, listening to him beg for his life, Vincent hadn't exactly pitied the man. More been sickened by him. Disgusted. And, in that disgust, he'd stalked away and let the fate of fire determine what would happen to the wretched, whining helpless child-corrupter in his fine suit.

He shouldn't have let Tony off with just a warning, either. By now, Tony was probably patrolling his corner again, collecting his horribly tainted money. Despite the warning. Tony had seen. But perhaps he still didn't know that Vincent never made idle promises.

If I find him there, I will kill him, Vincent decided with a sense of satisfaction. It will be a start. At least some of it will have been stopped. Gabriel....

Rollie cried as he ran. The bullet wounds hurt: they'd opened. He was bleeding inside his clothes. The withdrawal pains hurt even more, every nerve and every vein shouting its separate need. Have to find Tony. Tony can fix me. But as Rollie ran, Father's face, with all its hope and desperate, pleading love, swam in front of him. Then Vincent's face: full of concern and disappointment. That wraithlike face accused him too with its own sorrow that was his fault, reminding him of his betrayal. It was a lie: Vincent was the closest to a friend I ever had. Better than Anthony. And he's so sad for me that just being alive, I hurt him. Better if I was dead. Better if I was dead. Then the hurting would stop. He wiped angrily at the tears, because now, the pain of remembered dreams, of love he couldn't return or deserve, and of lost hope had become stronger than all the rest.

Resting several times along the way, leaning into bus shelters and slumping on the front steps of brownstones, Rollie finally made his way to the right corner. Finding it vacant, he stumbled on to the diner where Tony generally hung out. Checking that none of the blood showed yet, he went inside. Tony was there, but he was with somebody--a lady with long red hair and an intense expression. Rollie was scared of her. Cop, maybe, though she didn't look like it. Just the suspicion was enough to make Rollie keep clear, sit small and watch from a table, terrified Tony would get busted, get taken away when Rollie was so close.... When the waitress stared at him expectantly he ordered coffee he didn't want just to make her go away and leave him alone.

As Rollie sat not drinking the coffee, a strange thing happened. He began feeling something. As much as he wanted the fix, as much as he was worried about Tony getting busted, those anxieties began to seem very far away like something he'd heard about once in some story. Like it had all happened a long time ago and was really over and imagining otherwise was just pretending. None of it was real. What was real was coming out of the radio the waitress had just fiddled with the knobs on. Not rock, big beat, that baby stuff: just thump, thump, thump, like a hammer--music. Real music. Piano music...and a piece he knew. Once, he'd been able to play anything he heard. That was how it had all started, his hearing a Rachmaninoff sonata

(only he hadn't known the name then, or what a sonata was) on a radio, then getting caught by that old Eli playing the piece on that bad old upright in Eli's basement where he'd been sneaking in to crash, the upright with the sour top E and the pedal rods rusted so stiff he could barely move them.

He knew this music! The Moonlight Sonata. That Beethoven. Miss Kendrick's most special favorite. His favorite, too. Unbidden, his right hand was doing the slow top part on the tabletop while his left hand did the walking, the three note phrases he'd had to stretch for then because his hand hadn't been quite big enough....

And that was real, that music. He was hearing it and he could make it. He knew he could. He had to get at a piano. He could feel it in his hands, like Miss Kendrick cursed him out for, as much as ladies like her cursed--called him "Rollie Parrot" because the simpler knowing kept him from wanting to learn to read the notes on paper. The paper was all gone now and so was Miss Kendrick but where the music was alive was in his hands. In him. He could feel it.

Shoving back the chair he ran, then had to walk awhile, then ran, and had to rest, until he came to a manhole cover he could shove aside and get down. Then he ran some more, drawn, compelled, making notes all the time with his fingers in the air like if he stopped, the music might all run out of them again, until he stumbled into the piano chamber and got his ten fingers on those keys. A little stiff--both him and the key action. But he hadn't let the notes run out, he'd gotten back in time, and the music was alive again as though it had never stopped--first from the radio, then back to him again. A contagion of wonder to give away. To make it alive for everybody, giving back for what they'd given him.

When he reached the final chord he collapsed across the keyboard and cried, great wracking sobs that shook him. And there for awhile the pain bothered him again. But what bothered him worse was that he'd flubbed the fingering in the middle part, tried to make the middle finger cross over the third, the music pulling at him and he following without planning out the moves beforehand, like Miss Kendrick had never taught him anything. Old Rollie Parrot, he could imagine her saying, shaking her head and smiling, the way she did.

Leaning back, he scrubbed his arm impatiently once across his eyes, then began that part again, noticing now that this piano needed tuning too, just like that old Eli's had-- nobody taking care of it right, just leaving it to sit here in the damp all these years--and meanwhile getting ready to change the fingering so the notes wouldn't stumble like they had before. And the pain was carried away on the bright wings of joy.

Entering the alley near the corner of Fourth, Vincent automatically tugged up his hood before going on to find out if Tony had returned to his post. As he ducked under a fire escape and started on, a figure came around the building, striding toward him. Although she was just an outline with the light behind her, startled, he recognized her at once--by her walk, her swinging, tied-back hair, her purposefulness...and the fact that he knew she was going to do what she did: walk right up to him and look him straight in the face. Without a flinch. Without a blink.

Diana Bennett.

He was startled, perturbed, and confused. She had no part in this. He'd told her bluntly to forget him. He owed her courtesy and gratitude for rescuing him, but that didn't entitle her to share his jeopardy. He was absolutely determined to hereafter keep all his trouble to himself and involve no one else. Too many had been hurt already.

He couldn't conceive what she was doing here.

With no greeting or preamble, she told him sharply, "Vincent, don't," just as though she'd known, not only where he'd be, but what he'd intended. As if she knew his mind and his moves better than he did himself, to be there ahead of him, facing him.

Deflected from the simple course of violence, he asked in dull perplexity, "How did you know?"

"I know," she responded carelessly, as if there's be no use in explaining why or how she was here, since she was here. "It's what I do." Then she told him, "Joe Maxwell came by to see me this morning. He knows what happened last night. He's looking for you."

The bewilderment was getting worse. Joe Maxwell, Catherine's friend, was somehow involved. And looking for him. That made no sense.

Vincent said, "He won't find me."

"I found you," Diana pointed out.

There was no arguing with that. And Vincent didn't want to argue with her. Didn't want to talk to her, or anyone. He wanted things to be simple again. But he inclined his head in admission to the fact she offered him as though it should mean something or he should care about it. He didn't. Her energy and intentness wore on him. Just looking at her tired him. He offered his own fact, that he'd learned so bitterly well: "There are no safe places for anyone."

It was a dismissal. An end to this bizarre conversation. But as he started past her, her next words stopped him in his tracks.

"The place you destroyed last night belonged to Gabriel." As he swung around, astonished, she added, "It was his. I can't prove it, but I know it's true."

"Gabriel." Vincent repeated incredulously--the name nearly a growl.

He was surprised, and yet not surprised. Things only seemed random. On some level they all connected. Everything leads back to Gabriel. But nothing leads me to him.

Watching him with that searchlight intensity, she again read him accurately, instantly, understanding him in a way he found decidedly unnerving. He wasn't used to being understood.

She demanded, "Vincent why? If you didn't know, why did you do it?"

He felt like a leaking sandbag. The longer he stood here discussing this, the less energy he had to take action. But Diana had asked him a question; and she deserved at least courtesy from him. So he sighed and tried to explain. "I had a friend. His name was Rollie. I did it for him."

It occurred to him immediately that he'd spoken of Rollie as though he were already dead.

"And did it help him?" Diana challenged. "Is he better now?"

Not even Father ever talked to him this way. And yet he couldn't dispute the truth of what she said. No. It didn't help. Rollie is still lost...to me...as Catherine's child is lost. And the hope. Reading it all in his face again, Diana went on, suddenly and poignantly compassionate, "Vincent. I've been there, too, and this is not the way."

His heart broke all over again, convinced Diana was right and equally convinced there was no other way. The clear line of simple action had been lost and he didn't know how to find it again. Without it, he was completely bereft. He burst out, "Then where is the way? What would you have me do? He has my son and I have nothing! But these!" He thrust his hands out for her to look at as he'd forced the sight of himself on Tony, last night, deliberately brutal. His hands: furred, fisted tight and shaking with inexpressible fury, held so as to best display the claws--sledgehammers tipped with razors.

She glanced at his hands as though they'd been vaguely uninteresting parcels he was trying to get her to buy, then locked eyes with him again, undistracted and certainly unintimidated. "Those can't help you find your son."

"They can make Gabriel bleed!" he growled. "Night after night...."

She cut in levelly, "Until you kill him or he kills you. By then it won't matter who wins, Vincent. What kind of father do you want your son to have?"

That was the most unexpected, and struck deep. It hadn't occurred to Vincent to think about actually having the child. All he'd been able to focus on was getting him. And again, she was right: what child could thrive with a beast as his father? Yet that was where the straight line led, if it led anywhere except into darkness, that he felt, and dreaded, and still could neither deny nor avoid. There was nothing else.

Diana went on grimly, with that astonishing pitiless compassion. "If you continue alone in this, you're going to lose everything."

All the sand had run out; for Vincent knew that Diana was right in this, as well. He'd felt it last night and forced it into words in his journal: he would lose himself, and then there would truly be nothing. Staring into Diana's eyes, he saw his own pain reflected back. "Then where is the hope, Diana?" he demanded, almost quietly. "Where is the hope?" He brushed past her without waiting for an answer. There was none.

Vincent felt empty. Empty even of the rage. Its passing had left him a shell without hope or

rage to be a beacon or a goad, to keep him going. Diana had been right to stop him--he would have destroyed himself completely tonight--but now--there was nothing.

His legs felt leaden as he walked--drawn merely by the inertia of habit--through the upper tunnels and to the deeper levels.

All at once Vincent heard music--so faint and distant he thought he must be imagining it: the Moonlight Sonata. He paused only a moment. Then he moved faster, pursuing the sound whose strengthening told him where he was going long before he arrived: the chamber where Rollie's piano was stored. And Rollie was there. Intently, serenely playing. The music sure and flowing and measured, not a note hurried or retarded. Somber, deliberate music. And yet, in itself and in the fact of it, soaringly triumphant.

Stopped, staring, barely daring to breathe or to believe, Vincent found tears springing to his eyes. His heart hurt. And within himself he said, Here, Diana. Here is my hope. Things do not always shatter and fail and die. There is a resilience that can return even from the most horrible illness and tragedy. It doesn't all rest on me, to somehow force it. It comes. Of itself, out of the strength of love, it still comes.

Then his eyes blurred so badly he couldn't see Rollie, or the chamber, as anything but a bright blur. He didn't have to see. All he had to do was listen and let the hope slowly insinuate itself deep into his soul.

He was startled by a light touch on his shoulder. He turned to find Father standing behind him...with tears in his own eyes.

Father's hand squeezed his shoulder. "He'll be all right, now. He's found his dreams again."

Vincent couldn't speak at all. His throat seemed to have shut completely. Instead, he clasped Father desperately close and hung on as the patient voice told him, "It will come right eventually, Vincent. We're here for you."

Releasing Father, Vincent wiped at the tears with the heel of his hand and merely nodded. Grateful that Father didn't again try to persuade him to return, he walked slowly back to the bare, simple chamber where he was now most nearly comfortable and again sought to force the inexpressible into words:

Rollie is home; and I think this time, he is home for good. He has found himself. Found his music. Found hope. And perhaps I have not yet lost everything. Once before, Diana warned me that if I continued in this alone I would fail. Tonight she stopped me from walking into a darkness from which there can be no returning. And she reminded me yet again that if I continued alone in this I would lose everything. That Rollie has not only survived but triumphed persuades me I must seek help. Or at least accept it where it is so adamantly offered. Elliot's fate notwithstanding. There is no certainty. No safe place. For any of us. Yet we must live. As best we can. And trust that all may yet not fail. Or nothing is worthwhile.

Laying his journal over his knee, Vincent again reached and took up the assassin's ring. He turned it and considered it for a long moment. From the back of the journal he carefully tore a page, wrote a quick note, then wrapped it around the ring before he had time to change his

mind. He'd have to ask Father for an envelope....

Picturing Diana, so determined and fierce as she'd faced him down in the alley, he resumed writing.

Help has been at hand--my hand, that would not reach out and take it, whether from pride or fear of failure or despair that my touch is a mortal infection--for some time. And I will take it, for there is no one more worthy of trust than Diana. She shines like a beacon--a bright flame--in the forests of this dark night. I will take her help and her hand and let her lead me. She is my only hope.

It was several weeks later, and after much more heartache and pain, before Vincent-- with Diana's help--finally brought his own son home.

It was a quiet homecoming--just Vincent and Father. And of course the baby, whom Vincent found infinitely and heartbreakingly beautiful. Like all his memories of Catherine.

Standing over the crib, Vincent contentedly, wonderingly watched the infant sleep. He couldn't hold his son: his hands were thickly bandaged to protect the burns he'd received from Gabriel's electrified cage, and Father had forbidden him to care for the child until the danger of infection passed. Coerced by both a father's and a doctor's authority, Vincent had at least negotiated the concession that the baby remain here, with him in his chamber.

Home.

In perhaps another week, when the bandages could be safely removed, there was to be a Naming Ceremony for his son.

His son....

He heard a soft sound in the entry passage and looked up to find Rollie waiting permission to enter, smiling hesitantly, his arms tucked up tight under his armpits.

"Rollie!" Vincent was delighted. Rollie looked much better. Recovering his music had somehow given Rollie the strength to hold out through the pain while being gradually weaned from the drugs. Vincent said, "I'm sorry...that I wasn't here--"

Rollie shook his head. "You were. Every time I thought of givin' up, you were here," he pointed to his chest...to his heart. "Besides," he added, his gaze straying to the crib, "you had other things you had to do." Glancing back at Vincent, he asked, "Can I?"

"See him? Of course. Come."

Vincent watched as the young man stared down at the child--who, except for coloring, bore no visible sign of his paternity. Vincent was pleased when others wished to look at his child. He never tired of gazing at him; it seemed only reasonable that everyone would want to, as well.

How could anyone not love such a child?

Sitting on his heels, Rollie reached out most carefully to touch the child's hair, then unfurl one impossibly small pink hand. Rollie whispered wonderingly, "He's so little, Vincent. Hardly nuthin'."

"I'm told he will grow."

At that dry, amused comment, Rollie glanced up again. "Yeah. He will. He'll grow into somethin'...somebody good. You never lost hope, did you, Vincent?"

Vincent placed a hand on Rollie's shoulder. "Oh...yes. But afterward, I thought of you. It helped." He didn't want to burden or embarrass Rollie by trying to express how much it had helped.

Rollie grinned, and Vincent thought then of Diana as she'd been that night in the alley. So determined. It is she who truly never surrendered. Never gave up either. Not on me...and not on finding Gabriel and my son.

And he thought of Father. Who had reminded him of what it truly meant to be a father. The inescapable sorrows...and now the joys.

Between the three of them--Father, Diana and Rollie--they'd given him his hope back. And now his child."

"How long you figure," Rollie asked seriously, "before he's ready for piano lessons?"

AA

Note from the author:

I've put a couple of samples of my earlier works online, but I thought in all fairness I should put out something that I've done later, just to give you a sample of the difference in writing style. It always makes me a little uneasy having people "judge me" by my earlier writing efforts. This piece appears in Nan Dibble's wonderful fanzine PHOENIX 5.

END