

JOURNEY'S END

by Rhonda Collins

This story begins shortly after the ending of The Silent Self. The Legend of the Soul and The Silent Self are basically one continuing storyline in which Vincent realizes through dreams and from Father's journals that he'd been a twin, and that he'd had a sister. In his search for his sister and for answers to questions about their birth, he and Diana found that through Paracelsus' manipulations the bond between himself and his twin had been broken except for her bond to the Other. Through this bond she and the Other had been used basically as breeding stock and had produced one child--Modred. Through a twisted plan of revenge based upon the Arthurian legends, Paracelsus reared the child with one thought in mind--the destruction of Vincent and the tunnel community, and this plan was not halted by Paracelsus' death. When Modred reached young adulthood he sought out his father to kill him at the same time Vincent was seeking Lethe, his sister--the boy's mother.

One positive result of Vincent's search was his gradual and very reluctant acceptance of the Other as an integral part of himself--one that he must not only learn to live with, but learn to negotiate with. However, when the Other (who loved Lethe, and had not known they were siblings) realizes that Modred must be killed, he abandons Vincent to do the killing himself. For the first time Vincent must kill without "losing himself" to the Other. So not only must he kill his own son, but he must do it in cold blood, without benefit of the rage. In this story, he is still trying to come to terms with this action.

On a lighter note, Kristopher Gentian has "moved in" to become companion and protector for the children, much to Vincent's continued consternation.

QUESTIONS

Two things stand like stone,
Kindness in another's trouble,
Courage in your own.¹

Vincent sat quietly in the darkness, hands folded across his chest. He was watching Diana sleep. He would have known it was near dawn even without the luminous clockface across the room. Diana still needed the reassurance of the proper time, here Below, but Vincent relied upon his own inner timeclock far more than the clocks. That, and the ever-changing rumble of the subways as they passed on long memorized schedules.

He shifted his weight in the chair, hesitating as the creak of leather caused Diana to stir. Simply because he couldn't sleep was no reason to wake *his wife*. Once Diana had turned over and her breathing and emotional rhythms returned to a deeper sleep, Vincent relaxed.

Leaning back and closing his eyes, Vincent tried to remember his dream...the one that had awakened him in such a state of unrest.

The dream had been detailed and intense in a manner that other, preceding dreams in recent days had not. It had begun with him holding a child. His son. But not Jacob. The child resembled him and was beautiful. And heartwrenching. Because Vincent knew the child was Modred--the son Paracelsus had reared to become a *thing*...a killing machine without conscience or morals.

Vincent sighed heavily. He'd never held Modred. He'd never known about his son's existence until the day the young man came like an elemental force of nature to destroy both his father and anyone who stood in his path.

Vincent looked down at his hands, which were clutched tightly around the arms of the chair. He forced himself to relax his grip on the seasoned wood. The chair had no need for the added adornment that his claws tended to produce. Leaning forward, he thrust his fists between his knees. He was careless of the fact that the act was a leftover from his childhood, when he'd often sat that way when unsure of himself, or ashamed. Hiding his hands. His differences. The same way he hid his face behind the fall of his hair. There was no one else here, now, to hide from. Except himself.

Lost in thought, Vincent scarcely noticed when the torches were lit on the other side of the stained glass window, producing a soft light. A false dawn. The fan-shaped window glowed softly, casting amber light across the bed and highlighting the bright fall of Diana's hair, which spilled across the pillowcase. *She will wake, soon. I must not upset her.*

Rising quietly and removing his robe, Vincent slipped back into bed. He adjusted his length against Diana and smiled a little as she automatically shifted to accommodate him. *How well we fit now, one to the other--the give and take becoming easier year by year.* It wasn't always that way, though, even now. Some things were simple--others very difficult. Most difficult of all was keeping anything private--with both of them empaths.

As Vincent curled his arm around Diana, her hand found his, even in her sleep, and pressed it to her breast. *Beside you, my waking fits your sleep, my breathing matches your breath. Even our dream shapes often become one. Without thought, you place my hand upon your heart so that even in sleep I should know you keep nightwatch on my soul, beloved.*

Finally closing his eyes, Vincent slept.

The following morning found Diana with Vincent in Father's study attempting to eat breakfast with Father. The children ate their breakfast, predictably fighting over William's blueberry muffins. Toby, Jacob's brother-by-choice, won the battle for the last muffin before the two were sent off to classes. Cathy, both the youngest and most difficult, sat stubbornly at the foot of Father's chair and refused to go with Michael for her lessons. She wanted to go Above with her mother to see "Unca Joe."

Exasperated, Diana knelt next to her daughter. The last time she'd dared to take Cathy Above in daylight and into the city, her appearance had raised the suspicions of a reporter. Although not as blatantly different as her father, Cathy *was* different enough to cause comment and speculation with her pixy-like face, clawed, down-covered hands, and thick golden mane. Diana had learned her lesson and since been much more cautious. "You can't come with me, Cathy. Besides, you need to go to class. Michael's waiting." Diana cast a frustrated look past Cathy at her husband, who seemed distracted. "Vincent...would you *please* help me here?"

With visible effort, Vincent dragged himself away from whatever thoughts had his attention and turned to his daughter, stating firmly: "Catherine. Not today. Perhaps another time, but *not* today." He offered no bribes or counter offers. Only simple refusal. Cathy pouted, but Vincent simply scooped her up and handed her to Michael, who took her without comment. Cathy stared balefully at her father over Michael's shoulder as the young man left the study.

Diana watched Vincent carefully and tried to read the emotional undertones. Something was wrong, but she couldn't quite put her finger on it. Outwardly, Vincent seemed perfectly normal and composed, and even the usual emotional tie between them seemed fine...warm and deeply comforting. There was an undercurrent of anxiety and unhappiness, but whenever she tried to touch deeper the emotions would side-slip away from her. She frowned. Vincent was a master of evasion. He'd learned that an all-out emotional block only alerted her more acutely to a problem and had recently begun subtle evasion tactics. Trying to lock onto one thing lately was like trying to catch a greased football.

Turning back toward Father, Vincent's eyes touched Diana's briefly, then slipped away. He sighed and commented almost apologetically to Father, "Cathy becomes angry at the limits placed upon her."

Father nodded. "I remember when her father did the same."

"He still does," Diana said quietly, placing her hands on Vincent's shoulders, massaging the tight muscles and feeling his shrug.

"Everyone has limits, Diana. Cathy must learn to accept hers--just as I learned to accept mine. We can no more change those limits for her than Father could for me." He captured her hand and turned to face her. "Joe will be waiting for you. I

believe he said nine o'clock. I have time to walk with you to the threshold if you wish."

Diana looked down into Vincent's face--into the calm blue eyes and serene smile--and could tell absolutely nothing of what was going on behind the facade. It was as though he'd put an emotional mask on top of the underlying deeper emotions. *Frustrating man*. She glanced up to see Father watching them over the rims of his glasses. His look was speculative. "No," she demurred softly. "That's okay. I'll catch the subway. Weren't you and Kanin planning on picking up some wood, or timbers or something from Aaron today?"

Vincent nodded and shifted into action, rising abruptly. "Yes. We need the railroad ties to shore up the area we're working on. They will make the excavation a great deal safer. I suppose we *should* get that done early." He turned to Father. "Did you have any message for Aaron?"

Father removed his glasses and began rolling up the map of the excavation site. "No. Just thank him again for me, Vincent. I don't know what we'd do without his assistance."

"I will." Turning his attention back to Diana, Vincent escorted her out of the study. "I shall miss you."

She grinned a little. "No you won't. You'll be much too busy with Kanin, playing with big pick-up sticks. And when I get home, you'll be tired and sore...and glad to see me when I offer you a backrub."

Diana could feel the amusement wash across him, temporarily burying everything else. He smiled slowly. "Probably."

Then Diana sobered. "Oh, damn. I forgot. Tonight I do late sentry. Forget the backrub."

They were walking toward the tunnel split where they would go their separate ways. Vincent slowed. "I could always take you off the schedule."

"Don't you dare!" She'd had to trick him into putting her back *on* the schedule to begin with. She didn't want to give him any excuse to take her off. Just another way for him to "protect" her when she didn't need protection.

"Just a thought. Perhaps I'll join you, instead...to keep you company."

"That's fine, as long as it is only to keep me company and not to play doberman. I don't need a watchdog...or a babysitter."

They reached the split in the tunnels which would take Diana Above to the subway, and stopped. Diana sighed. "Perhaps it is a good idea for you to take the watch with me. I may be late. You know how things go, up there. I have no idea what Joe's throwing at me this time, and I don't want to keep anyone on watch late."

"Very well. I'll meet you."

Vincent watched Diana disappear down the tunnel--heading Above to meet with Joe Maxwell. A part of him would try to stay with her, subconsciously monitoring her moods, although he knew that irritated her. Eventually she'd have to block anyway to protect herself from everyone else. He always worried when she was away from him, as though someday some unknown danger would snatch her from him--as it had Catherine. Already those dangers had come close several times. He refused to stop protecting...and she hated for him to protect her. They had an uneasy truce. Just as they had a similar truce over her doing sentry duty.

He sighed and turned away, trying to focus on the day's work activities. Aaron, their helper from the lumberyard, had managed to get some old railroad ties for them to use as bracing in their constant tunnel excavations. Vincent and Kanin were to bring them down this morning and then deliver them to the current excavation site.

As he was heading back toward the Hub to meet Kanin, Vincent heard his name and a summons on the pipes. *Pascal*. He wondered what Pascal wanted, but determined he had time to drop by the pipe chamber if he hurried. His friendship with the odd little master of the pipes was such that for Pascal to issue a two word message of *Vincent/Come*, meant either disaster had struck, or something

miraculous had occurred. Vincent smiled a little. In this case, he was fairly sure it was good news.

He neared the pipe chamber and could hear Pascal dismissing his son, Zach, to go to class. Zach, like Pascal in his own childhood, went to school twice...once for Father...and once for Pascal. He lived in two worlds, and learned two languages. And like his father, he seemed devoted to both worlds.

Zach, a lanky preadolescent, shot out of the chamber and collided with Vincent. "Oh, shi.... Uh...S'cuse me Vincent. Sorry. Gotta go."

Vincent was amused by Zach's emotions and his rush. *Children his age are always in such a hurry...as though if they slow down they'll miss something.* "Of course...." Vincent glanced around the corner to see Pascal waving at him to come in.

"Is she?" Vincent inquired softly.

Pascal nodded and beamed. "Father got the tests back from Peter. Maria's pregnant again. We can scarcely believe it, Vincent.... It's been so long, since Zach...and since the child she lost. We'd figured..." He shrugged and grinned lopsidedly.

Vincent embraced Pascal warmly. "Congratulations. Is Maria as pleased as you are?"

"More. Oh, she's scared. She's not as young as she used to be, and that last pregnancy and loss nearly killed us both. But Peter and Father seem to think she's fine."

"I'm happy for you both. I'll tell Diana this evening."

Pascal's face sobered a little. "This won't upset her, will it?"

Vincent glanced up briefly. "Of course not. Oh, of course it will bring back memories...just as it will for Maria. But she will be pleased. You'll see."

A staccato rhythm began, coming from several pipes at once, and Pascal leaped to answer or redirect each message. Vincent watched and waited for a few moments, then realized that Pascal had forgotten all about him. He smiled, and thought with amusement: *I do not see how he ever had the time to get Maria pregnant.*

Vincent left the pipe chamber and continued on to meet Kanin. *Pascal and Maria's child will be another life for our world.* Vincent loved the children. His favorite pastime was playing games with his own children and the others as well. Reading to them, and teaching them.

Diana loved children as well. She still mourned the fact that she could have no more. Perhaps, technically, she could. But both Father and Peter all but forbade her to try. She'd had an emergency C-section when their first daughter had been stillborn, then against everyone's advice she'd persevered and delivered Cathy without any problems. Father and Peter both agreed that another pregnancy would be pressing her luck, with conditions being what they were in the tunnels for emergency surgery. Her chances of needing another C-section would always be higher than normal. The fact that Diana *listened* to them, despite her keen desire for another child still amazed Vincent. She still had periods when she would become very depressed--and even now was reluctant to visit the gravesite of the daughter they'd lost--and buried next to Catherine.

Lost in his thoughts, Vincent had traveled farther than he'd thought. He realized he was almost at the junction where he was to meet Kanin. He tried settling his mind for his duties.

Diana was preoccupied with "listening" to Vincent's emotional tone as she rode the subway toward the Criminal Courts Building. He seemed okay for now. Even happy. She couldn't really pick up any more. *At least he's happy. Maybe he'll work it through.* She knew he was still having the dreams. He tried not to let her know, but too often she picked them up. Last night it was the baby again. That one was worse than the others--to see the infant who looked so much like Vincent must have looked as a baby--and like the daughter she'd lost. She stared across the isle at a young

mother with her two children...a boy and a girl. Jacob was as much hers as Cathy was, and Toby had found his way into their family and into their hearts. She knew she should be content. But somehow, deep down, she wasn't. And Vincent's dreams weren't helping.

As the subway rumbled to a stop, Diana pulled her thoughts back to Joe Maxwell and work. Usually her cases came indirectly from Greg Hughes, but Joe had indicated that this was something different. More personal. She hoped it wasn't *too* personal and everything was okay with Joe and Erica.

It was a pleasant day, so Diana walked the rest of the way to the Criminal Courts Building, arriving just before nine o'clock. She rapped on the door of Joe's office and at his terse, "Come...." she opened the door and stuck her head in.

Joe was standing at the window looking out. A manila folder hung at his side, clutched tightly in his hand. The bright morning sunlight only served to accentuate the fine lines around his eyes and mouth.

"Joe?"

The man that turned from the window had a hard cast to his features. The last few years had aged the young district attorney. As Diana had feared, the job was tearing him up. He cared too much, got too close. He motioned to the chair. "Sit."

A little edgy now, Diana sat obediently as she watched Joe pace. She hadn't seen him like this since the Chandler case. He seemed to be trying to settle himself down enough to talk. Finally he faced her and handed her the file. He didn't say a word.

Tentatively, Diana opened the manila folder and stared at the face of a five-year old girl. Wide brown eyes framed by a mop of curly black hair. Adorable. Marcia Price. She read further. The child had been removed from her family by Social Services due to a neighbor's complaint of child abuse. Sexual molestation. She turned another page and hissed through clenched teeth. She rose and tossed the file on Joe's desk, then *she* started pacing. "Damn him. Damn him to hell, Joe! He's done it again."

When she looked up, her eyes met Joe's and he nodded. "Normally, I probably never would've seen this case unless there was more to go on, but Erica's been working over at Social Services on some cases and she came across this. Of course she knows about Jeanie."

Jeanie Price. The girl had found her way to the tunnels four years ago after running from her abusive father. Diana had been put on the case, but once the circumstances were determined, she and Joe as well as Vincent and Father had decided to let Jeanie make the decision of whether to stay in the tunnels or to go back. Jeanie had only been eight and hadn't been strong enough at the time to testify against her father. Her sister had only been a year old. A baby. It had been something that had rankled with Joe...letting the man get away with it. For Jeanie's sake, he'd let it drop. But now....

Diana stood staring for a few moments then resumed pacing. "Marcia's in custody with Child Protective Services. At least she's safe."

"For now," Joe commented through clenched teeth.

"Yeah. For now."

A deadly silence fell, and Diana knew what Joe was asking. "I'll talk to Jeanie. She's older now, and the trauma is less painful, but this is gonna bring it all back, Joe. She's gained a lot of strength, living with us. But there'd be other problems too, y'know. If she just reappears out of nowhere, there's gonna be questions asked. Where has she been; how'd she find out about this...that kind of thing. She'd have to lie, Joe...and she'd be under oath if she testifies."

"She's *got* to testify, Diana. This has to stop."

The spectre of having the tunnels exposed loomed before them. There had to be a way.

Vincent and Kanin had just finished unloading the second batch of railroad ties when Vincent began sensing Diana's frustration and distress. As usual, she blocked her distress from him almost immediately, but enough had gotten through to let Vincent know how upset she was. It wasn't entirely unexpected. Diana's cases always upset her.

Glancing up, Kanin asked, "Everything okay?"

Vincent shook himself. "Yes. Everything is fine, Kanin. Come. Two more loads and then we're finished.

They traveled back the way they'd come.

It proved to be an extremely long and tiring day for both Kanin and Vincent. Each trip back and forth took two hours, and it was heavy work each time. Vincent was relieved that he wasn't included in the excavation crew for the next day or so. As it was, his classes had been suspended for the day. And he still needed to clean up for sentry duty after he showered, ate, and put the children to bed.

Wearily, he traveled to the showers with Kanin. Neither of them was much in the mood for conversation. Afterwards, he picked the children up from Michael and Brooke and took them for supper. Jacob and Toby were cheerfully competing for Vincent's attention all during supper, and Cathy was still upset because Diana wasn't back yet. By the time he had taken them to the showers and gotten them ready for bed, Vincent was extremely tired. He wondered if he'd be able to manage to stay awake long enough to sit with Diana during sentry duty.

Vincent leaned back in the old rocker with Cathy on his lap and Jacob and Toby sitting on pillows at his feet. He read a story at Cathy's request from *The Wind in the Willows*, and when he finished Jacob asked for another. However, Cathy had fallen asleep, and truthfully, Vincent didn't feel far behind her. "No, Jacob. Not tonight. Tomorrow you may choose the story."

Cradling Cathy carefully so as not to wake her, Vincent escorted the children down the passageway to the nursery, where he settled Cathy. He then took the boys next door to the dormitory for the younger boys and put them down. They still weren't quite ready to settle, and Vincent was becoming a little impatient. A cheerful voice chimed in behind him:

"Bedtime already? I just got here!"

Jacob bounced up in bed, scrambling out from under the covers. "Chris!"

Vincent groaned and turned. Kristopher Gentian leaned nonchalantly against the wall. Both boys had tossed the covers off and thrown themselves into Kristopher's arms.

"Kristopher," Vincent said quietly, trying desperately not to betray his annoyance, "I wish you would *not* simply show up without warning."

The ghost grinned. "Sorry." It was obvious that he wasn't.

"Chris," Jacob was tugging at Kristopher's shirt, his face pleading. "You'll read us a story, won't you?"

Vincent found himself gritting his teeth as Kristopher jauntily agreed. Once he forced his jaws to relax, he managed to ask: "Where have you been? The children have wondered."

"Went back to visit old Smythe." The young man settled his Mets cap higher on his head and beamed. "You know, there are some really pretty girls in that bookstore lately. I need to go visit more often. Maybe I can persuade one of them to let me paint her."

Vincent replied hopefully, "Perhaps. I'm sure Mr. Smythe misses you as well."

Kristopher was cheerfully settling himself on Jacob's bed with a boy on either side. Vincent found his ebullience exhausting. "Yeah. But it's nice here, too."

Recognizing defeat when he saw it, Vincent told the boys, "One story. One only, then bed." He stared at Jacob and Toby, and the boys nodded, grinning the whole time. He stared at Kristopher, and the irrepressible spirit also nodded and

grinned. Vincent found his own lips twitching, but he repeated firmly, "One!" Then he turned and left.

Ever since Kristopher had found his way to the tunnels and adopted them as a second home, the children had acquired friend, protector, and sometime art teacher. And Vincent had begun having headaches. It wasn't that Kristopher was terrible to have around, but he *did* tend to set Vincent's teeth on edge at times. Especially when Vincent had other things on his mind. Kristopher was impossible to get rid of, and for the most part totally irresponsible. Vincent couldn't force himself to be rude--but Diana had tried. It didn't help. Once, when Kristopher had taken the children Above without permission Diana had even threatened to bring Father O'Flaherty down for an exorcism, but Kristopher had only laughed. He did, however, promise not to do it again, and he usually kept his promises, so Diana was mollified.

Vincent just rubbed his temples and continued down the passage toward the sentry site where he was to meet Diana. He snarled in surprise as Kristopher's spritely voice drifted out of the darkness. "What's wrong with *you* tonight?"

"Kristopher...." Vincent glowered. "I thought you were reading to the boys."

"I read fast. It's more exciting that way." Kristopher fell in beside Vincent. "Where're you going?"

"Sentry duty," Vincent muttered tersely.

Kristopher sobered and slid a sidelong glance toward Vincent. "Don't worry so much. It'll be okay. Kids are great. Especially fuzzy ones."

Vincent's head snapped up and he whirled to face Kristopher, but the young man was gone. *What does he mean? How could he know about the dreams?* Confused, Vincent turned and continued toward the sentry site. He was vaguely aware of the fact that Diana was already there, waiting, and tried to compose himself and control his emotions. He didn't want to upset her.

Diana stood with one shoulder braced against the tunnel wall. She hadn't had a chance to get home and change, so she wasn't really dressed for sitting comfortably on the dirt floor of the tunnel. Her mind was still preoccupied with the problem Joe had handed her.

She and Joe had spent all afternoon discussing plans, and ended up discarding most of them. Diana simply didn't see a way around it: Jeanie had to testify in order to make sure her father didn't continue abusing her little sister. But there was no way to absolutely assure the safety of the tunnels, either. They could have the girl admit she'd been living with friends away from New York, but that was as far as she could go. Social Services wasn't going to like it. In addition, Jeanie would no doubt be taken into their custody and would be unable to return to the tunnels. At least for awhile. Diana's head spun with indecision. She dreaded having to confront Jeanie with this mess. She raked her heavy mane of hair back from her face.

"Diana." Vincent's gentle voice drifted to her from the darkness, washing over her softly. She turned to him and sighed as he wrapped his arms around her. She would have liked to be able to settle her own mind by basking in the peace the bond usually gave her, but unfortunately neither of them found much peace in the other tonight.

"Hard day, huh?" Diana muttered as she rubbed her face against the leather lacings of his vest and buried her nose in the curve of his shoulder. She took a deep breath, breathing in the mingled scents of home and love.

He nodded. "It seems that yours wasn't any better. Perhaps *you* need the backrub more than I."

"Right now, I need a chair," she hinted.

Vincent settled himself against the tunnel wall and opened his arms. She curled up in his lap gratefully.

They sat together in the darkness, relaxing in the comfort of each other's presence. Everything was quiet tonight. Even the pipes were silent. Neither of them could sense anyone near. The silent dark was a palpable presence around them. Diana was very glad that Vincent had insisted on coming tonight.

Vincent's long hair tickled her neck and she felt the short, soft hair on his nose against her cheek. "Tell me," he said softly.

She was silent for a long moment, then began telling him why Joe had called her. She could feel his outrage in the tense muscles, and sense his frustration at the situation. Her own feelings matched his. "I don't know what to do, Vincent. How do we handle this? There is no way to back off or run away."

"You're assuming that Jeanie will agree to testify. Suppose she still will not?"

Diana was shocked. "She *has* to, Vincent! She's an intelligent girl. She's not a baby anymore, she's twelve, and she's always been responsible." She hesitated, suddenly a little uncertain. "Surely you don't *really* think she'd refuse, do you?"

She felt his shrug. "You'll have to ask *her*. I've sensed in her a growth of responsibility and honor, but she is still intensely private...and the pain runs very deep. It would be difficult for her to face him again...and to tell what happened."

"There's another problem as well," Diana said quietly.

"What is that?"

"Once Jeanie surfaces again, Social Services--Child Protective Services--will take her into custody. She'll be unable to return here. In addition, she will have to explain where she's been these past four years."

Vincent was very still, but Diana could sense his mind turning over the possibilities. "We will face what comes, Diana. But Jeanie must choose, first."

"It's a heavy burden to lay on a child, Vincent."

"Nonetheless, it must be done."

They sat in relative silence for a very long time, only speaking sporadically. Vincent told her of his day--and of his irritation with Kristopher--and that lightened Diana's mood a great deal. It always amused her that Vincent had never become quite accustomed to Kristopher's soundless appearances and total lack of *presence*. The time went passed quickly.

Vincent shifted and Diana felt his strong hands begin to knead her shoulders and neck. She leaned back into the massage. "Um. That's great. But I thought I promised *you* the backrub."

He chuckled. "You did. I expect mine when we get into bed. I hear Marcus coming to relieve us."

Diana sensed the subtle change in Vincent's focus, and a warmth spread through her. Their love swung on a pendulum at times, sometimes gentle, sometimes wilder...almost desperate, and almost always controlled by Vincent's mood and control...or lack of same. He still fought his other half, but more and more he and his dark side--or "Mikey" as Diana playfully called him--were in agreement. Diana suspected that Vincent's resistance was becoming half-hearted. Someday Mikey would fade into the background, Diana knew--absorbed by Vincent--and she sometimes regretted that. It would be okay, though, as long as Vincent kept Mikey's humor and passion...and innocence.

As Marcus rounded the corner, Diana squeezed Vincent's hand. "Let's go home."

The trip to their chamber seemed very long. Diana could feel Vincent's fatigue and his gradually waning desire. After undressing for bed, Vincent was waiting for his massage. She knelt naked over him, her legs straddling him. He lay with his head resting on his crossed arms, eyes half-closed in sleepy anticipation of his backrub. *Sleepy, huh? We'll see about that.* She leaned forward and brushed his hair aside so she could begin kneading his neck and shoulder muscles. They were hard and knotted. "A little tense?"

He moved his head minutely and made an indistinct muffled noise.

As Diana's deft fingers worked their way down through the hard knots, she took time to scratch through the long, bristly mane that grew in a V down almost to the middle of his back. She felt his back arch with pleasure as she scratched, then rubbed the hair up and back. She went back to kneading the muscles, working with fingers and knuckles, interspersing the massage with tiny kisses and love bites. She loved how the heavier hair of his mane tapered off into the soft golden fuzz that covered most of the rest of him. The patches of bare skin around his waist where his waistband rubbed were delicious in contrast. With her thumbs she pressed firmly into the dimples in the firm flesh just below her legs.

Vincent's buttocks flexed under her legs and she laughed as he suddenly turned over, flipping her off. She squealed a little as he deftly trapped her beneath him, growling softly.

She quieted as she looked into his face. His eyes were wide and dark with desire, his mouth open slightly, exposing his canines. He was panting softly, obviously trying to regain control. Mikey was apparently visiting for a while...at least part of him. That was okay with Diana...she just needed to shift gears a little and adjust to the change in Vincent's attitude. While Vincent was locked in his struggle, she petted him softly and murmured to him...to both of them. "S'okay. Don't fight him, Vincent...ease off." She felt him shudder a little, then his muscles relaxed some. The fixed, wild look left his eyes, but Diana knew he'd done as she'd asked and simply eased off. Mikey was still at least partially in residence.

Vincent bent his head to kiss her, and the honey-colored tangle of mane covered everything. The sweet scent of his hair and the taste of him sent her senses reeling. His hands gently but firmly gripped and stroked her--his claws were tiny sparks of brilliance against the heat he was creating.

When Vincent would finally allow Diana to move again, and stroke him--a reciprocal loving--she was almost past thought. Once more the bond caught and held, feeding the desire and emotion one to the other in an explosion of sensation and release.

Later, lying curled warm and contented in the crook of Vincent's arm, with his furry chest pressed against her back and one heavy thigh thrown carelessly across hers--capturing her firmly--Diana wondered sleepily just when Mikey had left.

A baby crying. Abandoned. Alone. Vincent was frantic as he searched the swirling fog and fought the frigid winds. Icicles formed in his hair and streaked the fur around his mouth and clouds of vapor were formed by his panting breaths. The wailing was closer, and even more painful. The child was terrified, angry, and miserable. Vincent felt as though a fist were crushing his heart, and a part of him was enraged as it remembered his own birth and abandonment. He felt Diana's subconscious hovering nearby and ruthlessly thrust her away. The voice in his mind told him, "She must not be here...see this. This is not for her." Nearer now. The ragged crying was becoming faint. Here. Panicked, he dug quickly through the refuse on the garbage heap, finding the box with the tiny infant inside, wrapped in rags. He thrust the small, almost still bundle under his cloak, next to his heart and wrapped the folds of the cloak around himself still tighter to conserve warmth. He could sense nothing from the child, but he knew it still lived from the increasing movement. He fought his way through to warmth, and safety--the warm glow of his chamber--and unwrapped the bundle. He staggered with shock when the face that looked up at him was his own in miniature and wide blue eyes blinked solemnly.

Vincent woke abruptly. Once more, he was seated in his leather chair with no recollection of how he'd come to be there. He tried desperately not to wake Diana, so she wouldn't worry. *What do these dreams mean? Why so consistent in some ways and inconsistent in others? They make no sense.* The child. Was it Modred, or himself? He looked up and saw Diana's "Mikey" leaning against his desk. There was no mockery in the Other's demeanor, but instead thinly veiled anger, and panic

verging on hysteria. *This has to stop, Vincent. Make it **stop!*** The last word was delivered in a panicked plea. It seemed incongruous for the Other to be pleading and making requests of him. Vincent spread his hands in a gesture of futility. *Don't you think I would if I could?* The Other paced the room, his rage evident in the abrupt movements and ferocious scowl. He turned and glared at Vincent. *I haven't been fighting you--I do as she asks and share. Then **this!** If you can't control it, **I will!** Make it stop, or I'll fight you, **I will!** I will not be powerless again...**ever!***

Mirror images, two halves of one whole, they stared at one another for a long moment, then the Other faded. In despair, Vincent lowered his head to his hands.

Diana dreamed as well--after being pushed from Vincent's dream. She watched Vincent and Mikey become one, and felt Vincent's peace...but the dream made her uneasy somehow. She worried that once there was no more Mikey, that Vincent would be different. Would he still be the warrior she loved? She was afraid that the primal force that was Mikey would be submerged beneath Father's ultra-civilized man--Vincent. If so, she would miss that raw force and power. And what of the innocence? Vincent alone was far from "innocent." He knew too much about life to be innocent in the sense that Mikey was. Would that go, as well? She shifted restlessly, and relived their lovemaking. She felt a rush of desire for him as she remembered how, at the end, he'd carefully closed his jaw around the muscles of her shoulder, canines carefully set--holding her. Nothing of the man in that. And so many other wonderful, unique--wild--things about him. Would all those, too, once more become tame, quiet, gentle...as he'd been before their marriage and even at first after their marriage--before he'd begun accepting his desires as normal? Would he no longer desire her with the fierce passion that he'd shown more and more as he and Mikey had grown toward mutual acceptance? Or would Vincent merely be at peace with himself? Finally undivided and whole? She cried softly in her sleep.

Vincent's gentle hands were stroking her, and his soft voice reassured her, brought her awake. "Shh. Hush, love. All is well." Vincent nuzzled her the rest of the way awake. "It was only a dream, Diana."

She was intensely embarrassed and hoped that he'd not picked up *this* particular dream. "Did you...were you...?"

"With you? No." He seemed puzzled. "I picked up snatches of it. Nothing I could understand. It didn't seem a particularly bad dream...but I felt your sorrow, and your fear. What is it?"

She shook her head. "Nothing. It's nothing, Vincent. It's gone now. I can barely remember it," she lied, softly...knowing he felt the lie.

His soft eyes looked hurt, but he said nothing, only held her. That, too, brought tears. "What is it, Diana?"

She swallowed her tears. "Everything." She shifted the focus a little...because some of her anguish had nothing to do with the dream. "Jeanie, mostly." He settled his head against hers, and she watched the golden river of his hair as it slid down over her shoulder. She noted with distinct clarity the contrast of the red of her hair against his own. "How do I tell her, Vincent? How's she gonna take it?"

"Whatever comes, Diana, we are here for her. She will know that."

Diana sat up abruptly, pushing her disheveled hair away from her face. "But she won't be *down* here, Vincent. She'll be trapped Above--in the system. We won't be able to help her."

Vincent's nail trailed down her shoulder, then he raised his hand to her face, turning her to look at him. "You can be there for her, Diana. For as long as it takes. Joe will be there, and Erica. And in her heart she carries all of us. We've given her what we can of our strength, but now she needs to draw on her own." Vincent drew Diana closer, settling her body against his and covering them with the quilts. He wrapped his arms around her and nuzzled her hair back, breathing softly into her ear. "Sleep, now. There is no harm, no hurt that can come to either of us here. Or to Jeanie. In the morning, we will talk to her together. All will be well."

"All right. I'll try." She lay still and tried to quiet her thoughts, and eventually she could feel Vincent's breathing settle into a sleep pattern. She reached out to sense him, and felt his restlessness. He wasn't as complacent and at peace as he pretended. She wished she knew specifically what it was bothering him, and how to fix it. But right now, she had other things to worry about as well. *Like Father keeps telling me, he's a grown man...let him handle it.* She sighed and closed her eyes.

The following morning, after the usual round of breakfast and visiting with the children, Vincent and Diana settled them in their classes with Michael and Brooke, then called Jeanie into their chamber to speak with her. The young girl seemed so comfortable, well-adjusted, and carefree, that Diana hated to tell her the news. When she did, Jeanie's face paled. The dark, curly hair framing her face made that pallor even more noticeable.

"He can't do that. She's just a baby." Her voice was cold as ice.

Diana stared at the girl. This wasn't *quite* the reaction she'd expected, but somehow she wasn't surprised, either. "Well, he can't hurt her right now. Marcia's in custody with Child Welfare, but unless something can be proved...."

Jeanie stared from Diana to Vincent, then back again. "I've gotta go back, don't I?"

Diana nodded slowly. "If we want to stop him, protect your sister...yes, you do."

"If I go back, they're gonna want to know where I've been, aren't they?"

The kid's sharp, Diana thought. "Yes. We have to think of a story. One they won't be able to dig through to wind up down here."

"I'll tell 'em I lived on the streets for a while, then lived with different friends. In a way, that's true, and I won't have to lie."

Diana sat on their bed, bracing her hands at her sides. "Now comes an even harder part. You're going to have to go home first--say you got homesick, or missed your Mom. Then ask about your sister. Somehow find out in a logical manner what's going on. Then go on your own to Social Services and Child Protective Services and tell them your story. They'll bring it to Joe, and then we can do something. Then, they'll take you into custody. You won't be able to come back here...maybe not for a long time."

Jeanie shuddered. "If I go home, he might hurt me again. I won't stay there, Diana. I won't mind foster care for a while. I'd just sneak away after the trial's over, but home...."

Vincent finally spoke. "Of course she cannot stay there. It's absurd to even ask her to go home."

Diana stared at him. "There's no other way, Vincent. She would have no reason to just pop up out of thin air and show up at the D.A.'s office. This has gotta look natural to work."

Jeanie went over and hugged Vincent and closed her eyes as his arms encircled her. Vincent loaned everyone his strength, but he'd taught her responsibility and honor as well. "I'll be okay, Vincent. If he even *tries* to touch me, I'll run. It'll give me the excuse I need. Diana's right." She turned to Diana. "Well. We'd better get some of my stuff together if I'm gonna do this."

Vincent gave Jeanie another hug. "I cannot tell you how proud I am of you, Jeanie. This is taking great courage on your part. Remember we are all with you."

Diana took Jeanie's hand and led her off to gather her things and go Above, and Vincent cringed as he watched them leave. Jeanie looked so small and vulnerable.

Once Diana left to go Above with Jeanie, Vincent joined his class, which Father was teaching for him. The other children wanted to know where Jeanie was. Vincent leaned back against the desk and surveyed the small sea of questioning faces. Most everyone knew why Jeanie was down here. It was difficult to keep secrets in such a small, closed society. Father fidgeted a little and glanced at his son, waiting to see what Vincent would say. Finally, crossing his arms, Vincent said quietly: "Jeanie has gone Above to testify against her father in the courts...to keep him from hurting her young sister." There was a babble of voices and questions, but Vincent raised his hand, and the children quieted and waited expectantly.

Megan asked in a very small voice: "Will she come back, Vincent?"

Vincent hesitated, but then nodded. "Yes, I believe so. But she may be gone for quite a while. We must lend her our strength by thinking of her while she's gone. What she is doing is very courageous." He unwound his long legs and turned to the desk. He picked up the battered leather book lying there and turned back to the class. "For now, I believe we were studying Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Grey*. Let's see if we can surprise Jeanie with how far we have gotten when she returns."

In the far back, Katrina commented: "She'll hate that. She hates make up work."

Once it seemed firmly established that Jeanie would, indeed, return, the class settled into its normal routine. Vincent's eyes met Father's across the chamber, and Father nodded. He seemed pleased with the way it had gone. Vincent only hoped he was correct--that Jeanie *would* return to them and not be swallowed by the world Above. He hoped Diana would be able to provide her with some support, though he couldn't see how this could be accomplished. He had to force himself to listen to the reading.

The day wore its weary way on toward night, and Vincent once more settled their own children by himself. They asked where Diana was, but accepted his explanation easily. Although she worked only sporadically, quite often Diana was out late when working cases. The boys joked with him, teasing him about how *slowly* he read in comparison to Chris.

"Perhaps. But I think this way you can hear the words," Vincent commented dryly.

Jacob giggled, and Vincent's heart turned over. He was so like Catherine when he did that. He tucked them all in, then turned toward his chamber. He decided with determination that tonight he and Diana would take a walk in the park. It had been far too long since they'd done that together.

Spring was almost here, and Vincent was always restless in the spring. He still wandered for hours through the park then--either with Diana or alone. Most often alone, because he often went places that either she couldn't go...or he wouldn't take her. Spring was difficult for both of them. Walking those trails in the park as the months moved toward April was the most difficult of all, but he was drawn there nevertheless. He would remember every detail of the night he found Catherine. Then, for weeks he would become withdrawn as he remembered the two years he'd had with her, and then the way she was taken from him.

Yes, spring was difficult, as the world was renewing itself. And so was summer. The time when he lost her. But each year, by the time summer arrived, he'd already done his grieving a little at a time. Then, he only went for his vigil over her grave...after spending his time with Jacob on his birthday, of course.

Vincent sighed regretfully. Diana tried to share it with him. Had tried, for years. For the most part, it wasn't so bad, now...just a general restlessness. He tried to submerge the grief he still felt in the daily activities of his life with Diana and the children. But he'd realized long ago that as wonderful as his life was now, it could never completely erase the pain of Catherine's loss. Diana had told him more than once that it was appropriate for him to feel that way--that one love could never replace another--that it in no way made less of their love. But he still felt vaguely

guilty, doing this to her year after year. He loved her, heart and soul, but still, she shared him with Catherine and always would.

As he was untying the laces on his boots, Vincent heard a sound at the doorway. He looked up. "Pascal."

His old friend lingered in the threshold for a moment, his eyes anxious, then stepped inside. "Vincent. Diana's still gone?"

Vincent glanced up again from pulling off a boot. "Yes. I suppose she's keeping an eye on Jeanie. Hopefully she will be home soon. Why?"

"You haven't told her yet have you? About Maria."

"No. Somehow, the time just wasn't right. I will try tonight, Pascal."

Vincent sighed and began putting his boot on again, and Pascal looked confused. "You just took that off."

"I know." Vincent stood and reached for his cloak. "I just realized Diana is heading back through the park. I wanted a walk tonight anyway, so I will meet her. I will tell her, Pascal. It will be all right, I'm sure."

"I hope so." Pascal turned to go. "Goodnight, Vincent."

Diana was exhausted. She'd taken Jeanie to her neighborhood, then watched as she went home. Her mother answered the door, and even from a distance, Diana could see the woman's shock. *So much for motherly love*, she thought. To be fair, Mrs. Price *did* give Jeanie an enthusiastic hug after the shock wore off. *I suppose it would be a shock to have your daughter show up out of the blue after four years.*

After Jeanie was "safely" inside, Diana called Joe and filled him in, and was relieved that he and Erica would stay close to the phone. Jeanie had emergency numbers for Joe and Erica and also for Social Services and the police--just in case. But Diana hoped they wouldn't be needed.

As she walked the dark path through the park, Diana thought of the child stuck with that monster. *I hope she'll be okay.* She wished she could sense Jeanie from a distance, as she could Vincent and Cathy. Edgy and upset as she was, Diana was relieved to realize that Vincent was on his way to meet her. Before long, she saw his dark, cloaked figure on the path, and hurried to meet him.

Vincent was even quieter than usual as Diana filled him in on her day. He asked about Jeanie, and expressed his concern that she should be left there. "I could go and keep watch. Perhaps...."

Diana reluctantly had to disagree. "No. There's no way you could help, Vincent. You can't know what's going on in that house. We have to count on Jeanie's common sense. I don't like it any better than you do."

They walked a short way in complete silence, letting the blending of their emotions tell more than words could. Eventually, Vincent spoke. "There is something else I need to tell you, Diana. Something wonderful."

She sighed. "I could use some *wonderful* about now. What is it?"

Vincent hesitated a little and Diana could sense he was uncertain. She wanted to ask what was wrong, but forced herself to wait. Through the years they'd spent together she'd learned that patience was the only way to get to the heart of any problem with Vincent. Eventually he continued, speaking very quietly. "I meant to tell you last night, but we were...."

"Sidetracked?" Diana murmured, smiling a little.

He graced her with one of his sexy sidelong glances and smiled back. "Yes.... Sidetracked." He took her hand and they walked without speaking for a few moments. "Pascal tells me that Maria is pregnant."

Diana stopped abruptly. She felt stunned. Excited--happy for Maria--and jealous as hell. And she hated herself for the jealousy. When she could find her voice, she said, "That's...wonderful, Vincent. They thought for so long they'd never have another child. Maria must be absolutely beside herself with joy." She felt the traitorous tears welling up and forced them back. "I'm happy for them."

Vincent encircled her waist with his arm and leaned over to kiss her softly. "I know. I know it also hurts."

And he *did*. She knew that, could sense it. She closed down on the bond reflexively. "I'll be okay, Vincent. I can't go getting weepy every time somebody gets pregnant, can I? I'm happy for them." She shrugged and pushed the unwanted emotions aside. "Right now, I have Jeanie and Marcia to worry about." She leaned into Vincent's shoulder and they continued their walk toward home. "I want to check in on the children before bed, okay?"

When Sheila Price opened her door and saw her daughter, she stood gaping so long that Jeanie almost laughed. She'd wondered just what her mother would do when she saw her. "Hi, Mom."

Her mother's arms wrapped around her, and Jeanie couldn't help the tears that sprang to her eyes, and she hated herself for them. *She doesn't really care. If she did, she would've gotten rid of him years ago. She chose him over me even though she knew what he was doing.* "Hey, let up. You're choking me!"

"Oh. Jeanie...." Jeanie couldn't believe it. Her Mom was crying. "Jeanie. I can't believe it. You came home!" Her mother pulled her into the house. "You're staying?"

Jeanie shrugged out of her mother's possessive clasp. "Depends. *He's* still here, isn't he?"

The expression that passed across her mother's face was so strange, that Jeanie didn't know what to think. "He's.... Yes. He's still here. Maybe it would be best if you *didn't* stay, Jeanie." She drew her daughter to the table and sat down, pushing a chair out for her. "But tell me...please. Where have you been? Have you been okay, baby? I've thought about you every day since you left."

Jeanie wanted to believe that. She could look into her mother's eyes and see the emotion there. She *wanted* to believe that her mother cared. But somehow, she just couldn't. Couldn't let herself. She got up and wandered around. "Things haven't changed much around here." She stopped and picked up a picture of her sister Marcia that was on a table. "She's grown. I'll bet she wouldn't even know me anymore." She turned to her mother. "Where is she?"

"She's...." Her mother started to say something, but at that moment the door opened and Jon Price came in. He stared awestruck at his daughter.

Time seemed to stop for Jeanie. She felt as though she were eight again and had been waiting for her father to walk in the door. She felt powerless. There was a knot of fear turning her stomach hard and cold. But then she heard a voice...Vincent's...telling her not to be afraid. *You have the power to control your life.* He'd told her that long ago when she felt she *had* no power, and no control over her life. She'd believed him then, and she believed him now. Carefully, she put the picture of Marcia back on the table and turned to the monster who was her father. "Hello, Dad."

By this time, Jon Price had recovered himself, and he was furious. "What in hell makes you think you can just waltz back in here after being gone who knows where for four years?"

Jeanie was beginning to enjoy this. "Who says I'm staying?"

Jon Price was beginning to look confused and hesitant in the face of his daughter's lack of fear. "Why're you here?"

"Jon...." Sheila tried to distract her husband--to defuse the situation--as she'd tried so many times in the past. But Jon's confusion had lasted only a moment, and the customary rage began surfacing.

"Shut up, Sheila! She's only here to make trouble. There's no other reason she could possibly be here."

He advanced on his daughter, and Jeanie cringed reflexively before catching herself. "Maybe I just got homesick."

Her father eyed her speculatively and his demeanor changed. He "put on his nice face"--the one he'd always used when Jeanie was little when he wanted to make her do what he wanted. Jeanie's stomach turned a little sick. "Well. I have to admit it's good to see you. We were worried about you, baby. You could've called at least. It would've set your mother's mind at rest."

Jeanie's finger traced around the edge of the table. "Sorry. I was inconsiderate. I was just a kid, and I'm older now."

Jon Price grinned--the same charming smile that made him the success he was in business--but Jeanie knew what hid behind the smile. "It's late and your room isn't ready for you anymore. But you can stay in Marcia's."

Jeanie didn't dare look up. She was afraid her feelings would be mirrored in her eyes. She asked quietly, "Where is Marcia? I haven't seen her in such a long time. I bet she's grown."

"She's visiting her grandparents. Remember them?"

Nodding a little, Jeanie thought about her grandparents. The'd always thought Jon Price was "Father of the Year."

Sheila hastily stood, pushing back her chair with a noisy clatter. "I'll settle you in Marcia's room, honey. Come on."

Vincent stood in the doorway of the nursery watching Diana as she sat beside Cathy. Their daughter was sleeping peacefully, and Diana simply sat watching her. She'd already visited the boys in the dormitory. For the first time in a very long time, Diana's back was up against him. He could feel nothing from her at all. He sighed and leaned heavily against the cold stone. *Is it Jeanie that's bothering her, or is it Maria's pregnancy? Perhaps both.* He wanted to help, but he wasn't quite sure how. He watched as Diana brushed Cathy's wavy red-blond mane back out of her eyes, then shifted hopefully as Diana rose.

"Diana...."

"I'm coming," she said quietly. "I just wanted to see her. I've missed her and the boys." She looked apologetic. "She *is* my *baby* after all."

"They understand. You've been busy."

"I know they understand. They're growing up too fast. Even Cathy's not really a baby anymore." She sounded so wistful that Vincent's heart churned. Then Diana's thoughts seemed to change direction suddenly. "I hope Jeanie's okay. Damn. I wish I could've stayed there. Maybe...."

"Perhaps I could go check on her," Vincent offered.

Diana looked up hopefully, but then shook her head, saying quietly, "No. You wouldn't be able to do anything anyway. Jeanie's smart. She'll know what to do. All we can do is hope and pray everything will be all right." She looked down at her sleeping daughter. "Cathy's so beautiful, Vincent." She stood and let him hug her. "And Jacob is getting so big...Toby too."

"They're supposed to, you know," Vincent said gently.

Diana chuckled. "What? Be beautiful, or get big?"

"Both." Vincent was glad to see Diana's small smile and feel her chuckle against his chest. He kissed her forehead. "Come. To bed. You can check on Jeanie first thing in the morning. All will be well, I'm sure."

They walked slowly to their chamber, and just before falling asleep, Diana commented very softly...her voice coming out of the darkness: "I'm happy for Maria and Pascal."

Tears filled Vincent's eyes. "I know." He held her close. "I am, too."

Diana could hear a baby's cry and she followed it through a maze of dark tunnels, becoming increasingly anxious. The cries became more insistent, seeming frightened

and hungry, and Diana hurried. She searched the dark, forbidding caverns until finally she found a small bundle wrapped in rags. Reaching out, she carefully unwrapped the bundle to reveal a tiny infant, his small leonine face contorted with his cries. As she picked him up, the baby stopped crying and opened clear blue eyes...and **spoke**. "Who am I?" Diana startled and clutched the child tightly. "Vincent?" She called...questioning. And Vincent's voice came from out of the dark mist surrounding her, saying, "I don't know anymore, myself." She whirled in the dark, and the dream began to change abruptly...and the child was Jeanie... accusing her of leaving her alone and helpless...then changed back to the crying infant.

Vincent tossed and turned restlessly. He was dreaming with Diana...or she with him. Then abruptly the dream-scene changed and Diana was no longer with him. He was alone, walking a corridor of stone. He felt dread rising. He knew this scene. He turned the corner, and there was Modred--all young strength and power--and rage. Vincent wanted to reach out to him, to comfort him, yet when he did he found himself locked in mortal combat once again. As Modred's jaws sought his jugular, Vincent fought for his life. Not with rage, but with desperation and a growing sorrow. As Modred's life's blood poured into his mouth and he felt the power and life drain from his son, Vincent roared his anguish.

Vincent's cry woke both himself and Diana. Confused, they stared at one another, and Diana finally managed to ask, "Are you okay?"

Shaking a little, Vincent tossed back the covers and threw his robe on. "Yes. You?"

She nodded. "A little confused, is all. Strange dreams again." She glanced at him quizzically. "You...cried out."

"I will be fine, Diana. See if you can get back to sleep. You will need to check with Joe in the morning...check on Jeanie somehow. You need your rest." Diana started to get up, but he shook his head. "I will be *fine*, Diana." His expression softened. "Truly. Try to sleep. I will come back to bed shortly."

Diana nodded reluctantly, and curled back up under the covers. Vincent tried projecting soothing thoughts until she finally slept.

Vincent sat across from her in his leather chair, and thought about the dreams. He still couldn't understand the dream of the child. The dream of Modred was straightforward enough. His sorrow at the loss of a son he'd never known, plus his guilt and shame over the killing of him, was more than enough to inspire *that* particular nightmare. But the dream of the child...was it himself, or Modred?

He looked up to see the Other pacing opposite the bed, his dark form merely a shadow amidst other shadows. But when he looked up at Vincent, the eyes burned. *Stop it. I'll destroy you...I'll destroy us both if you don't stop it.*

Vincent knew he could do it. *I'm trying to understand, but you're not helping. Perhaps the dreams are partly Diana's...*

No! Not the dreams of the child. Not that child...of us. Nor the dreams of my son.

Vincent tried to be reasonable, to calm the Other. *The dreams of the child could be Diana's reaching out for the child she cannot have...or the daughter we lost. It could be myself...you...abandoned and alone. Or it could be Modred. It could be all. I do not know. Help me to know.*

The Other leaned across Diana and glared at Vincent. He started to speak, but only a guttural growl emerged. He shook his head violently and disappeared.

Vincent sighed raggedly and lowered his head in defeat. He'd thought his times of madness were over. Outside of killing Modred, he hadn't killed in a very long time...and he hadn't killed Modred because he'd lost himself to the rage...to the Other. In fact, the Other had deserted him completely and left him to kill "their" son in cold blood. Out of necessity. Before that, it had always been the Other who'd killed--sheltering Vincent from direct empathic contact with the kill--and also

enabling him to pretend, in an obscure fashion, that he'd not been at fault because he'd not been in control. Vincent had known all along that wasn't true, but psychologically he'd needed the excuse. As much as he'd hated and feared the Other all these years, he'd finally come to realize just how much his dark half had protected him...and enabled him to stay at least halfway sane. *But what happens when **both** of us go mad?* He had no answer for himself.

Jeanie sat quietly on Marcia's small twin-sized bed. There was a rail on the side outside the wall to keep her from rolling off. She remembered she'd had one like it when she'd been at home. In fact, the entire room seemed familiar to her in a half-remembered sort of way, with the memories being a mixture of good and bad. She felt a lump rise in her throat as she watched her Mom, trying so hard to put her at ease.

Sheila patted the pillows into place and turned the covers back, then turned to Jeanie and smiled. "I still have your clothes and stuff put away, but they'd all be too small for you now. You've grown so much." She touched her daughter's bouncy dark curls lightly--a little wistfully--and commented: "Your hair looks so pretty. Who's been doing it for you?"

Jeanie thought of Rebecca and Brooke and smiled. They'd been cutting it for her lately, trying to make her look more "grown up." "Just some friends, Mom."

Her mother also eyed her clothing. Old jeans and equally old, but still nice blouse and sweater. Jeanie had gotten the pick of the last batch of clothes one of the helpers had sent down. "Where have you been, Jeanie? Who's been taking care of you all this time?"

Jeanie shrugged. "Friends, Mom. Just friends. There're a lot of nice people out there if you look for 'em."

"A lot of bad ones, too. We were worried about you."

Not wanting to start an argument with her mother, Jeanie just replied a little noncommittally. "There're good places and bad places, Mom, and good and bad people everywhere. I was okay." The girl moved away and fingered the lacy pink bedspread. She knew without a doubt that as soon as everything was quiet in the house that her father would come see her. She shuddered a little. Somehow she'd handle it. She could do it.

After her mother left, Jeanie crawled into bed. She didn't even bother to undress as she had a feeling her father would be in shortly. She slid between the cool sheets and wondered how often little Marcia had waited for their dad to come in to "visit" her. There was a sour taste in her mouth that hadn't been there for years. She rolled over and waited, determined that her father wouldn't find it quite as easy to frighten or coerce her as he had when she was eight. Living in the tunnels for the last four years, she'd learned a lot...and not all of it was stuff Father would've approved of. And she was a lot more self-confident than *her* father could possibly expect.

Jeanie lay there in the dark for what seemed a very long time, and eventually she dozed off. She woke when the bed shifted as Jon Price sat on the bed next to her. "Hi, baby. Daddy came to tuck you in."

Instantly awake, Jeanie sat up and snapped on the bedside lamp. Her father's gray eyes glittered in the light. "Touch me and I'll scream so loud they'll hear me in Jersey."

Jon Price's low, cultured voice carried more than a hint of sarcasm. "You'll do exactly what I tell you to do, just as you did before." He reached out and fingered her curls. "You're even prettier than you were before, baby. Daddy's missed you."

Before he could withdraw his hand, Jeanie grabbed it and bit him as hard as she could. It was Jon Price who screamed...then slapped his daughter hard. Jeanie was expecting retaliation, so although the slap made her feel as though her teeth were rattling, she managed not to cry out. Afterwards, she scrambled out of the way

and headed for the door, all the while keeping her eyes on her father. "Where's Marcia, Dad? She's not at Grandma's is she?"

When Jon Price headed for her, Jeanie was out the door and down the hall. She brushed past her mother on her way to the kitchen. As she fumbled through the drawers, she heard her father and mother arguing in the hall...heard him strike her as he pushed her out of the way.

Things were getting out of hand quickly. Jeanie had thought to find a knife--anything to protect herself--but she didn't have time. So she headed for the door, and managed to make it through before her father could stop her.

That few moments her mother had delayed Jeanie's father had enabled the girl to make it out the door and across the street. Diana had told her which neighbor it was who had turned in the complaint against her father, and she headed there as fast as she could run. She pounded on the door, screaming for help. She could see her father rounding the corner, but was relieved to see that he skidded to a halt at the edge of the building. When the door opened and the startled neighbor saw who it was at the door, Jeanie found herself pulled quickly inside.

"Jeanie...Jeanie Price," Mrs. Malloy breathed...obviously astonished. Mrs. Malloy was a kindly woman who had often asked Jeanie how she was, and had tried to find out what was wrong. Jeanie knew that with Marcia, Mrs. Malloy had taken a more direct route, and she was grateful. Catching her breath, Jeanie blurted, "He's after me!"

Mrs. Malloy's expression hardened. She went to the window and looked out. When she came back, she told Jeanie: "He's still out there. He doesn't dare come over here after you...at least not yet." She explained to Jeanie how she'd reported her father for abusing Marcia. "I couldn't stand it any longer. I was not about to watch the same thing happening all over again. If you want, I'll call the police now."

Jeanie nodded. This should be the best way to get herself put in custody where she could tell her story and offer to testify. As Mrs. Malloy spoke to the police on the phone, Jeanie risked a quick glance out the window. She saw her father standing in the shadows at the edge of the alley. But strangely, what seemed to stick in her mind the most was the shadow of her mother in the doorway...watching...just like before. She didn't know whether to feel pity or anger.

CHAPTER TWO

THE ENDURING DEAD

The following morning Diana and Vincent were startled out of sleep by someone knocking on the door to their chamber. It was still very early; even the pipes were still quiet. Vincent was up and pulling his robe on before Diana was even awake enough to focus. He opened the door to find Cullen standing there, his expression one of apology. He'd been on early morning watch at the Canal Street threshold. "Sorry, Vincent. But the message says urgent. For Diana, from Joe." He handed Vincent a small, white envelope with Joe Maxwell's blocky handwriting on the front.

"Thank you, Cullen. I'll give it to her." Vincent watched Cullen turn and walk reluctantly away, then called after him. "I will let you know if it's about Jeanie."

Cullen turned back and nodded silently, a grateful smile lighting his angular features. Cullen had become very fond of Jeanie. He'd never had any children of his own before his wife died. Vincent knew he was worried about the child. But then, everyone was.

Diana was struggling into her robe and fishing with her feet for her fur slippers. "What is it, Vincent?"

Vincent held the envelope out for her. "Message. From Joe. Perhaps...."

Diana grabbed the envelope and ripped it hastily open. She read the note quickly, then handed it to Vincent. While he was reading it, she began dressing.

Vincent read the note:

Diana,

Jeanie is in custody. Erica says she's fine. She has begun telling her story, and I've been contacted. So far, so good.

Joe.

Vincent breathed a sigh of relief. He hadn't realized quite how worried he'd been about Jeanie. The dreams and his worries about Diana had forced him to think of other things. He had confidence in Jeanie's common sense and responsibility, but no matter how mature the girl was, she'd still been in a great deal of danger. But now she was safe. Now the only danger was to the secrecy of the tunnels.

Across the chamber, Diana was digging through a drawer for a lightweight blouse, and grumbling because all her summer clothes were "hidden."

Vincent leaned against the door and watched her with amusement. They went through this every year as the weather Above turned warmer: below, Diana only needed her sweats and sweaters--her winter clothes--but Above, the seasons changed. Every time she worked cases in the spring or summer, she complained she never could find her clothes because they'd been stuffed back into some hard-to-reach corner or shoved under the bed. This time, though, he could sense her relief underneath the grumbles. As she reached into the back of a drawer and expressed a glad sound of recognition, he knew she'd found something she'd sought.

Diana slipped out of her robe and Vincent realized he was holding his breath. It astonished him that his wife's beauty could still take him by surprise. Totally ingenuous in her nakedness, Diana searched for her bits and pieces of clothing. She

suddenly tensed, turning to him as she sensed what he was feeling. She stood there bathed in candlelight--resembling a pale statue of faultless marble--her classic beauty crowned with a stream of wild russet hair. Vincent thought she'd never looked lovelier.

He peeled off his robe as he moved toward her, delighting in the conflicting emotions of desire and relief coming through the bond to him. "Jeanie is fine. It's early yet.... Joe can wait."

Diana came to him with an eagerness that roused him further. It seemed that she, too, needed reassurances after the dreams, and they lost themselves in each other for a time, the seamless ebb and flow of their love becoming all that mattered.

Later Vincent lay on one elbow watching as Diana pulled on her robe. "You should have time for a shower and breakfast. Surely Joe doesn't expect you to come immediately."

Diana shook her head, red mane swaying as she bent to retrieve her fur slippers. "A quick shower, yes. But not breakfast. I'll grab something Above." She glanced up with troubled eyes. "You'll explain to the children why I'm gone? I may be late again."

Vincent rose, gathering his clothing and pulling on his own robe. "Of course I'll talk to them. But they *do* understand, Diana. Even Cathy knows that sometimes you must remain Above. They know you are up there to help Jeanie. They don't understand why or how, but they know it is necessary. You mustn't be concerned."

He touched her face softly and met her eyes. "Come. I will shower with you. It's still very early."

Showering together early in the morning was something Vincent and Diana both loved. Before the children woke, before their world was stirring. It was one of their few private times away from their chamber. With the warm water streaming over them, Diana silently thanked Elliott and Mouse for the gift of warm water in the showers. With the water streaming through his mane, Vincent was burnished gold in the lamplight. While he washed his hair she showered, playfully bumping and teasing him. He finished rinsing his hair, then washed hers for her. By the time they were finished showering, Diana's dread of leaving to go Above had eased a little. She tried to put the their dreams out of her mind: she hadn't time or energy to deal with anything else right now except Jeanie. And Vincent seemed relatively content this morning. It helped.

She dried and dressed, then towel-dried her hair ,while she watched Vincent dress. Just watching him move was a delight to her. Every motion--even while doing something as simple as dressing--was graceful. He raised peaceful azure eyes to hers and smiled. "I shall miss you today."

Diana knew he'd try to keep track of her for as long as he could, though she'd eventually block. There were too many intrusive emotions Above for her to stay unguarded for long. "I'll miss you, too. But you'll be teaching today, so you'll have the children to keep you occupied." She shrugged into a green cardigan and prepared to leave. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

Slipping inside the circle of his arms, she kissed him quickly, then left. It was hard enough to leave, and Jeanie needed her.

After Diana left, Vincent met the children and took them to breakfast in Father's study. Toby and Jacob were excited because Michael was taking all the children to the zoo today. Cathy, of course, couldn't go, and Vincent's memories of his own lonely childhood produced a wrenching pain. He watched Jacob's animated face and saw Catherine--thought how delighted she would have been with their son--and he brushed the tears from Cathy's face and held her close. It was hardly fair to tell Jacob and Toby they couldn't go, but he tried desperately to think of something equally interesting and exciting for Cathy. He was glad Diana had already gone Above. He knew she'd be picking up on Cathy's distress, though, and tried to soothe the child. "Perhaps we can do something else, minx. Just you and I. Would you like that?"

Cathy sniffled, but he could sense a break in the constant distress pattern of her emotions--a touch of interest. "What?"

Vincent sighed. He had classes today--security and maintenance runs to make. He looked up to see Father watching him over the rims of his glasses. Almost as though Father sensed his son's problem, he commented quietly: "I could take classes today, and perhaps the leaks could wait a day or so."

"Security?"

"The pipes are quiet. I'll get Cullen and Marcus to keep an eye out for any problems. You can do a more detailed sweep another time."

Vincent's arms tightened around his daughter just as Michael started down the stairs calling for the boys. Michael had a group of children around and behind him, every one of whom was trying to speak and be heard at the same time. Michael seemed delighted with the noise. "Vincent! Are they ready?"

Jacob and Toby dashed for the stairs, but Vincent called them back. "A goodbye would be nice, for your sister and Grandfather as well as for me." The boys ran back and gave all the appropriate kisses and hugs, then were gone in moments. Cathy's distress was once more clearly felt. His daughter was staring at him with huge, slanted blue eyes--innocent in their trust that he would make things better. "Go where?"

"Where would you like to go?"

A cheerful voice piped up from behind Vincent. "How 'bout the Crystal Cavern? Bet she'd like that."

Cathy had been sitting in Vincent's lap and began scrabbling frantically--and proceeded to plant her heels in Vincent's misdection. Vincent grabbed her quickly to keep her from falling over his shoulder. He was just glad that in her intent scramble she'd missed the more tender parts of his anatomy. Those little heels could've been a lot more painful. Standing, he pulled Cathy back down and turned her so she could see the new arrival. "Kristopher. I do wish you could make your entrances a little more circumspect." Despite the slight irritation that Kristopher's abruptness always tended to raise in him, Vincent was glad to see the young man. His irrepressible

attitude and the sheer magic of his presence never failed to cheer the children. Cathy's disappointment was already less noticeable.

Kristopher shrugged apologetically, but his eyes twinkled. "Sorry. Thought you could use some help here."

Father, who had never quite become accustomed to his world having a resident ghost, tried to pretend interest in a volume of poetry. Vincent glanced back at him and said quietly, "I suppose I could. Don't you agree, Father?"

Father raised his eyes and glanced quickly at Kristopher, then back to his son. He obviously would have loved to pretend Kristopher wasn't there. Science and medicine he could understand, but ghosts and goblins were a little hard on his convictions. Clearing his throat, he muttered: "Yes. Yes. Perhaps so." He glanced back at Kristopher with such a look of confusion that both Vincent and Kristopher laughed.

Cathy was simply delighted at Kristopher's arrival and was attacking him with questions. She was speaking so quickly and almost unintelligibly that even Vincent was having trouble keeping up with her, but Kristopher only nodded cheerfully. Vincent hated to say they couldn't go after Kristopher had mentioned the place, but it was quite a trek for one day--especially with Cathy along--and he said so.

Cathy's eyes immediately filled with tears. "Wanna **go!** P'ease?"

Kristopher mimicked her, scrunching up his face and begging, "Wanna **go!** Wannago. P'ease?"

Vincent felt the laugh beginning and gave in to it. He put up his hands in surrender. "Oh, very well. I'll get William to pack us a lunch."

Diana perched uneasily next to Joe on the hard bench. The courtroom where Jon Price was being arraigned was stuffy and she was a hot. Fortunately, the process only took a short time. It didn't take Judge Anderson long to look through the evidence and decide that there was sufficient cause to bring the case to trial.

Joe had managed to get Diana in because she'd been on the case when Jeanie had disappeared four years prior; it was common knowledge with everyone who knew her that she always followed up her cases--no matter what the outcome.

The most difficult part for Diana was pretending she and Jeanie didn't know one another. As far as anyone knew, she'd never met the child. She had, however, met the father, and Jon Price remembered her: she could tell by his malicious glare.

Diana leaned over and whispered cheerfully to Joe, "Somehow, I don't think Mr. Price is very happy to see either of us."

His lip curled in a wry smile, though he didn't look her way. "Tough tomatoes. I hope he'll be a whole lot less happy as time goes on."

Diana studied Joe Maxwell. He was a different man from the idealistic young Acting District Attorney she'd known during the Chandler investigation. The job had aged and weathered him. But somehow he'd managed to keep his dry sense of humor and quick wit. She was glad he and Erica had resolved their differences and gotten together. *More than anything, I'm glad I introduced him to the tunnels and to Vincent.* Joe had commented more than once that the presence of a little magic in his life had helped keep him sane.

The judge dismissed them and Diana locked eyes with Jon Price as he left the courtroom, escorted by an officer. *No. He doesn't look too happy, Joe.*

Joe nudged her and she rose so they could leave. On the way out, Joe led her over to the social worker who was sitting with Jeanie and Marcia. "Mrs. Martinez. I'd like you to meet Diana Bennett."

Mrs. Martinez smiled and held out her hand. The smile looked nice on her. She was a pleasant, pudgy middle-aged woman with frizzy dark brown hair. She seemed good with kids. Marcia clung to her. When Diana shook the woman's hand and lowered her block, she sensed nothing but concern and love for the children. "Hi. Glad to meet you."

Diana was always a little shy meeting people. It came from a long-established fear of being seen as *different*: something she'd never handled well. She used to cover it with a gruff, cold, all-business facade, but the last four years in the tunnels had changed that. She was still shy, but at least she wasn't constantly expecting rejection.

Mrs. Martinez nodded. "Pleased to meet you, Ms. Bennett. Mr. Maxwell has explained that you were on Jeanie's case when she disappeared. He also told me that you are very good with children and suggested that perhaps you could help me with Marcia and Jeanie."

Joe took Marcia by the hand and nodded to Jeanie, who smiled. "While you two talk, if it's okay, I'll take these two for ice cream."

Marcia hesitated for a few moments, looking as though she might cry, but when Jeanie encouraged her, the child went with Joe.

The two women down the stairs after Joe and the two children. Mrs. Martinez was fanning herself with a paper. "It's so warm in there. I could use some ice cream, too." She hesitated a moment, then glanced up at Diana. "Jeanie seems fine, Ms. Bennett...."

"Call me Diana, please."

Mrs. Martinez nodded again and smiled. "Diana, then. Jeanie seems remarkably well adjusted considering she's supposedly been living on the streets for four years. We can't get much out of her. She claims she's been living with various friends on and off, but won't give their names. Says she doesn't want to get them in trouble." The woman sighed heavily. "It seems she was worried about her sister, and that's why she came back. To check on her. Her father apparently began his abuse with her when she was about the same age."

Diana could sense Mrs. Martinez' frustration. She could tell that the woman didn't believe Jeanie's story, but somehow, Diana didn't think the woman would press. Jeanie's testimony was too important to the case. Price's attorney would have no such reluctance, however. *We can only hope Jeanie can hold to her story.* "How's Marcia doing?"

"Not as well, I'm afraid. She exhibits the usual symptoms of withdrawal, shyness--fear of strangers--men in particular." She smiled. "Although I notice that Mr. Maxwell had very little trouble getting her to go with him once Jeanie helped. I'm so grateful she came to help Marcia."

Diana murmured quietly, "Sometimes fate steps in at the right time."

They were nearing the ice cream stand, and Mrs. Martinez asked, "I know your credentials: you're the best in your field. But more importantly, Mr. Maxwell told me

that in addition to being good with children you've had a great deal of training in psychology."

"Yes. It was necessary for me to go into behavioral criminology."

"But do you think it will help you in dealing with Marcia's problems--and Jeanie's?"

Diana shrugged. "I've dealt with abused children before. Abused adults, as well. If you want me, I'm available. I'd like to help."

"Would you be able to stay the night at the children's shelter? Marcia's been crying at night. There isn't a place in residential care and we haven't found a foster home for the sisters yet. Having Jeanie show up has slowed us down, since we don't want to separate them. I hate to ask...."

Diana glanced ahead to see the tiny, tousle-headed child sitting in a tight bundle on the bench, the ice cream barely touched. Her eyes swam a moment and she fought for the hard objectivity she used to have. But all she could think of was Cathy, and Jacob--and tough little Toby, who'd come to them from the streets. She thought of the child she'd lost and the one she wanted and couldn't--or shouldn't--have. *Maria's so lucky*, she thought, abstractedly. "Sure. I'll stay."

Immediately Diana began thinking of how to get a message to Vincent. Trying to bond with him was iffy these days...and always chancy at passing messages anyway. She wanted to be sure he knew what the situation was. *Perhaps Joe can take him a message.*

Diana had tried earlier to sense Vincent and Cathy, as she'd been upset by Cathy's distress, but after awhile Cathy's excitement overshadowed Vincent's more elusive emotions. All she could get from Cathy was that they were going somewhere. She remembered belatedly that Vincent had mentioned the zoo trip to her. She felt guilty that it hadn't occurred to her how upset Cathy would be. She was grateful that Vincent had found a way to soothe their daughter...but he was always so good with all the children, not just their own.

As soon as Diana could get Joe off by himself, she explained about what Mrs. Martinez wanted. The social worker asking her to stay at the shelter was just the kind of break Diana needed to have an excuse to provide the support Jeanie--and Marcia--would need. "But I need to get a message to Vincent. Can you...?"

Joe agreed readily. "Sure. This is too good an opportunity for you to pass up. This way you can be there to offer moral support--no questions asked."

Vincent watched his daughter with fond amusement. He allowed himself to become entangled in her innocent enjoyment of her surroundings. These dark caverns had been his world for too long for them to hold many surprises for him, but in experiencing them vicariously through his daughter he was able to see them as if for the first time. To insistent questions of "That! What's that?" he found himself giving simple geology lessons and telling outrageous stories.

For example, Cathy had seen a rock formation that she insisted was a gremlin. They had visited Joe and Erica one night recently and watched a movie--and there had been creatures called gremlins. Vincent hadn't cared for the movie at all, but the

children seemed enamored of it--and Joe had found it amusing. "Why is gremlin here, father?"

Vincent took a deep breath and began to spin a story, thinking about the actions of the gremlins in the movie. "The gremlin wasn't a very nice being...."

Cathy nodded sagely. "He made messes...." She thought hard for a few moments, then obviously came up with the most horrible thing she could think of. "....an' tore up **books!**"

"Ah. Yes. And tore up books." Vincent restrained a smile. Cathy knew about **that** particular misconduct, though she'd only engaged in it once since she was old enough to know better. Needless to say, she'd learned the error of her ways. Vincent cleared his throat and continued: "Everyone warned the gremlin to be good, but he wasn't. So eventually a good fairy came and turned him into a statue of stone so he could learn how to be good by watching the world for a long time. When he has watched long enough the fairy will turn him back."

Her head cocked to the side, Cathy watched him carefully as he told the story. Vincent knew she could tell he was making up a story, and this was verified when she shook her head, tossing her blond mane back--and giggled. "Did **not**."

All wide-eyed innocence (he hoped), Vincent grinned back. "Didn't?"

She shook her head, then buried her face in his thick mane.

Kristopher had listened to the story and agreed with Cathy. "Didn't."

Vincent was amused. "Really? I suppose you know a better story?"

"Sure!"

So for the rest of the trip, Vincent and Cathy listened to Kristopher's story of the gremlin actually being kind and gentle, but tricked by an evil sorcerer down into the caverns and frozen for eternity.

By the time they reached the cavern, Cathy had fallen asleep. Vincent carefully placed lanterns around the small cavern, then woke his daughter so she could share the magic with him.

Cathy rubbed sleepy eyes, blinked and whispered, "Oh."

Vincent seldom saw Cathy speechless...and Kristopher was *never* at a loss for words. The young man danced over the crystal-littered floor and pointed out each formation, pointing out how the crystals made the light shine in so many pretty colors. Cathy just nodded and clung to Vincent's neck. Kristopher came close and whispered, "This is where the rainbows come from. It's magic."

Cathy raised questioning eyes to Vincent, and he considered a moment, knowing Cathy could read an untruth every time. He wanted her to keep her illusions for a time at least. He nodded slightly and smiled. "I cannot say about the rainbows--but of the magic I am certain." He thought back to the first time he and Diana had visited here and thought of magic and rainbows. He'd found possibilities then that he'd never thought he'd find again. He hugged the fragile miracle of his daughter and smiled at Kristopher. "Yes. I'm certain about the magic."

They had their picnic, and after Cathy's initial excitement wore off, she began yawning again. It had been a long trip, and they still had to go back.

Vincent collected the lantern and they turned toward home. They hadn't been long on the road back before Cathy was sound asleep. Vincent was so quiet that it even made Kristopher hesitant to talk, so he shuffled along, his hands stuffed deep in his pockets.

Occasionally Kristopher would cast a sidelong glance at his silent companion. Kristopher was irresponsible and quite impossible at times. He knew that. Knew it, and had no desire to change. He liked himself just fine the way he was. Besides... there were rules to Kristopher's continued existence on this plane, and limits to his *ability* to interfere. Nonsense was often tolerated with more latitude than was serious meddling. However, irrepressible as he was, Kristopher felt he had to try to help...because he cared very deeply for the people he allowed himself to become attached to. He knew Vincent was still extremely disturbed--and he knew why. It was easier for him to express himself through poetry and his art, so he tried quoting a few lines from Shelly. He figured if nothing else, it would set Vincent thinking.

*"He wakes or sleeps with the enduring dead;
Thou canst not soar where he is sitting now--
Dust to the dust! but the pure spirit shall flow
Back to the burning fountain whence it came,
A portion of the Eternal."*²

When Vincent glanced at him in surprise, Kristopher flashed a smile and shrugged. "Shelley."

Vincent looked away and quoted bitterly, "I am ashes where once I was fire."³ Kristopher was silent a moment only, then responded:

*"He hath awakened from the dream of life--
'Tis we, who lost in stormy visions, keep
With phantoms an unprofitable strife,
And in mad trance, strike with our spirit's knife
Invulnerable nothings."*⁴

Vincent shifted Cathy to his other shoulder. "I know you're trying to help, Kristopher. But what I need is to understand my dreams. They mean something, I know."

Kristopher smiled to himself. *Now we're getting somewhere.* "You'll figure it out."

They walked silently for a time, then Kristopher added: "It's not true, you know."

"What isn't?" Vincent asked curiously.

"You talk about ashes and fire like all the life is burned out of you. You know that's not true."

Vincent shrugged. "I know. But there are times when I feel that way. The dreams will not let me rest."

Flashing Vincent another grin, Kristopher laughed a little. "You worry too much about life and death, Vincent. Look at me. I'm *living* proof that death is a state

of mind." Kristopher kicked at the sand a few more times, delighting in watching it fly away from his toes. "So. Your dreams mean something. Reach out and find the meaning. Look for answers."

"Look where? It seems there is nowhere to begin."

"Y'know, your biggest problem is that you've always been afraid to just be yourself. Look inside first, then act on what you find. As for where to begin...begin at the beginning, of course."

They were nearing the Hub. Vincent could hear the pipes. It was comforting, somehow, after the solid silence of the deeper caverns; as was the background hum of everyone's emotions. It was life. When he glanced back to Kristopher to ask him what he meant, his companion was gone.

Vincent dropped Cathy off with Mary in the nursery and went directly to Father's study, where he knew he would find Jacob and Toby. He could feel his son's excitement. When he turned the corner and started down the stairs into the study, Jacob launched himself at his father, and he and Toby took turns describing their day. They'd seen all the animals and had a picnic in the park near the pond, and last of all they'd ridden the carousel before coming home. Vincent had settled into one of Father's chairs with a boy on each knee. He listened intently, enjoying the adventures vicariously and delighting in their stories. He glanced over Jacob's head to Peter, who stood beside Michael. It had been Peter's generosity that had funded this little adventure. He wished Cathy had been able to participate, but she would have her stories to tell the boys as well. Perhaps they could share.

After the chatter died down a little, Father told Vincent quietly, "Joe came Below earlier to let us know Diana would be staying with Jeanie and Marcia tonight."

Vincent put the boys down with instructions to hurry and get ready for bed. He watched indulgently as they wrestled with one another for the dubious honor of making it up the stairs first, and thought wistfully of himself and Devin doing precisely the same thing. His eyes never left the children until they were up the stairs and around the corner, then he turned to Father. "I suspected as much. I sensed her earlier. I believe she was trying to let me know, but it was too difficult. I'm pleased she sent Joe. What else does he say?"

"That the arraignment went as expected. Thus far there are no complications about Jeanie's whereabouts the past four years. It appears that Joe convinced the social worker to allow Diana to help with the children." Father seemed very satisfied. "At least now, Jeanie isn't alone."

Vincent stretched. "I'm glad. But I am also hungry." He eyed Father's tray. "Could William possibly...?"

As if on cue, William appeared at the door with a tray of leftover stew and biscuits. "Thought you might like something when you got back from your little expedition, so I put this aside for you." Then, seeming to feel he'd been too easy, William added roughly, "Don't ask for dessert, though. First come, first served."

Relieved, Vincent thanked the rotund cook, and smiled when William flushed a little. William was usually gruff and often volatile, but he cared deeply for everyone in his very large family. He simply hid his caring behind his bluster.

The stew seemed better than usual for some reason.

Diana rocked Marcia as she slept. She'd accompanied Mrs. Martinez and the children to the children's shelter in the Bronx and had spent the entire afternoon and evening with them. They'd been working on a foster home for the two of them and Mrs. Martinez felt they should have a suitable one in a day or two. Diana had been settled in the children's room on a cot. Marcia had cried repeatedly through the night, and had only settled peacefully once Diana had taken her into her arms in the old rocker. Jeanie slept quietly nearby.

Mrs. Martinez, or Sophia, as she'd asked Diana to call her, had stayed tonight as well. Her own children were at home, well cared for by her husband, she said. She felt she should stay. But Diana had sent her off to bed an hour or so before. "There's no point in both of us staying up. I'll lie down with her in a bit." But she hadn't.

As she sat stroking the dark curls that framed Marcia's tiny face, she thought of her own family. Jacob was "too big" to be rocked, he said, and Diana was convinced that streetwise Toby had *always* felt he was too big to be rocked, though he loved a hug and a cuddle whenever he could get it. Cathy was so unpredictable. One moment she was clingy, the next fiercely independent. It was nice to just sit and rock a child who really needed the love and contact. Again she envied Maria. Soon she'd have a baby. They stayed babies for such a short time. Then they became *people*.

As she finally rose to take Marcia to bed, Diana thought realistically: *I don't really want another baby...I just miss the one I lost...and I can never have her. I should be content.*

It was hard enough that Cathy had *some* of Vincent's physical characteristics. It was hard on the child. Their other daughter had looked *exactly* like her father. Diana had mixed emotions. She would have been delighted to have a son or daughter who looked like Vincent, but at the same time she knew it would hardly be fair to wish that on any child. Diana sighed and curled up next to Marcia, covering them both with the blankets.

It was late--almost dawn--and Vincent still roamed the dark city streets. He'd settled the children for the night, then tried to go to bed himself. Without Diana there, and with his anxiety over his dreams, he decided instead on a walk. The walk had become a journey of discovery.

When he'd first started out into the early spring darkness, Vincent had wanted nothing more than a little fresh air. He should have known better. It was a time of renewal. The sounds and smells that drifted on the air lured him on. Diana wasn't waiting for him. There was nothing to force him home before daylight. It'd seemed to him it had been months since he'd done this...and it probably had. For obvious reasons winter was not his favorite time to range the city. But spring was different.

He'd wandered the paths of the park, covering old territory quickly with his long, fluid strides. At first he'd avoided places whose memories brought him pain, but eventually he found that the pleasure of other memories brought drew him back, nonetheless. He'd lingered in the foliage as he watched lovers pass the spot where he'd found Catherine. *How incongruous*, he'd thought, *to see lovers in a place that had been meant for death*. And yet it was appropriate as well. He'd visited the concert shell and stood looking down into the sewer grate thinking of the many times he and Catherine--and he and Diana--had lay below here listening, letting the music wash over them. He'd even visited Catherine's grave.

But now he roamed the streets, letting them work their magic on him. There was a dark majesty to the city, even viewed from a filthy alley. The Other was quiet. At least there was no visible evidence of him. But Vincent found himself remembering times of violence in these streets and alleyways. There was shame, but that was not surprising. There was always shame for him in the taking of life. Yet he remembered the glory of it as well. For him, there would always be an element of pleasure in the kill. He could no more stop that than stop breathing. He'd begun to accept that, finally. Even now, with no prey in sight--no imminent danger to himself or to anyone he loved--he felt the stir of the hunter, as he always did when he roamed these streets. *Better that than the cold, impersonal way I killed Modred. A murder of simple necessity. At least between hunter and prey there is a bond of respect.*

Look inside, Kristopher had said. *Begin at the beginning.*

Vincent found himself in the alley behind Saint Vincent's Hospital. He leaned against the wall of the building opposite and stared at the stack of garbage that littered the back of the hospital. *Here. It began here*. He shuddered uncontrollably, suddenly chilled to the bone in spite of the gentle night air. He slipped back into the shadows as a janitor opened the door to toss some boxes out on the growing pile.

After the man had disappeared into the building once more, and the door closed, Vincent approached the pile of garbage. He tossed boxes aside and rummaged through the pile...with no purpose in mind...yet he felt compelled. Of course there was nothing of interest here. He'd only soiled his hands, and he rubbed them distastefully on a relatively clean rag he found.

With a huge sigh, Vincent left the alley and wandered farther, deeper into the city. He reached out once to sense Diana and found her sleep images to be troubled. She, too, dreamed of an infant who resembled him...but he knew it was not the same child. *Will she never recover from our loss? Will she ever be able to let her go?*

He shook his head thoughtfully. *I'm hardly one to make judgements on how long to grieve*. A sharp pain lanced through him--as it always did--at the thought of Catherine. He found himself staring up at the building where Catherine had died, with little memory of coming here. He felt a moment's anger. *Every year I do this to myself. Why?* But even as these thoughts crossed his mind, he found himself inside the building. It was no longer in use and was scheduled for renovation. He climbed the steps slowly to the helipad and stood in the middle of the roof--staring bitterly at the spot where Catherine had died. His anger was no longer the red, burning rage it had been then, nor did his heart bleed as badly. *Time tempers all, I suppose, Catherine. Even me. Besides, Gabriel paid for his evil. Diana saw to that.*

The wind was stronger up here, sharper, and it whipped his cape back, tore at his hair. He threw back his head and keened for Catherine. A low, wild melody that was carried away on the wind.

After only an hour or so of sleep, Vincent was up to start his day. He was tired, but at least the sleep he had managed had been peaceful. This morning he joined Jamie and Mouse for breakfast and he was playing with the twins when Pascal and Maria joined them. Maria promptly relieved him of Ellie, leaving Aaron with Vincent. Vincent's own brood had already gone off to play, with instructions to take care of Cathy.

Maria seemed worried that Diana still wasn't home. "Is everything all right, Vincent?"

Vincent chuckled a little as Aaron squirmed to get down. The twins were just learning to walk, and it was difficult to keep them still *too* long. "Everything is fine, Maria. She's Uptop with Jeanie and her sister, trying to offer moral support for Jeanie and also trying to help the social workers deal with Marcia. The child is having problems." He smiled reassuringly at Maria. "This is good for her, Maria. She's happy about your pregnancy, but as we'd feared, it *does* make her think of the child we lost. This will keep her busy and involved with a child who needs her until she settles a little. By the time this is over, she'll be fine. You'll see."

"Oh, I hope so. I feel dreadful, making her unhappy...."

Pascal hugged her. "Vincent's right, Maria. Diana still has a lot of residual grief to deal with. It's probably always going to make her think of her daughter whenever she knows someone who's pregnant. It can't be helped."

Vincent rose, handing Aaron to Jamie. He glanced at Mouse. "Are you ready for rounds?"

Mouse grinned and bobbed his head. "Told Father about man Mouse saw last night on watch. Wasn't happy."

Vincent guessed Father wouldn't be. As the two friends walked through the stone corridors toward the nearest subway station threshold, Vincent commented to Mouse: "Whenever you have something like that, try to tell me, rather than Father. The load he's carrying is becoming too heavy for him. Or tell Cullen, Kanin...or even Marcus. I trust that you four could take care of most problems if I'm not around. I want to take as much strain off Father as possible."

Mouse shrugged and rubbed the back of his neck. "Hard to get used to...not taking problems to Father."

"I know. But Peter tells me that his heart has been acting up. Of course Father would never say anything. But we must protect him.... And Mouse...don't say anything to anyone."

"Okay good, okay fine. Take care of Father. Father always took care of Mouse. Now Mouse's turn." He winked at Vincent. "Our secret."

They neared the station, and Vincent could feel the rumble under his feet as well as hear the trains. They were planning on riding the subways to the problem area to save time. Once there, Vincent waited in the shadows while Mouse boarded,

then just before the train pulled out, he leaped for the top. *So much easier than when they're already moving.*

Once they reached the Lafayette station Vincent waited for Mouse in the shadows. When Mouse joined him they continued on toward the Bowery. Mouse had seen a suspicious man lurking in the darkness far below where a worker or indigent was usually seen. Mouse had followed the man Above, and the man hadn't returned, but Vincent felt the area should be checked. The few entrances to the tunnels in that area could be temporarily closed, if necessary.

Without really realizing it, Vincent found himself slipping into the mindset of the hunter. Mouse trailed silently along beside him, seemingly content with the lack of conversation. There was a sound ahead and Vincent moved automatically to protect Mouse, shielding him with his own body from whatever might be ahead.

A man came into view--a stranger--and upon seeing Vincent he startled, but didn't seem frightened. Mouse peeked around Vincent, then pointed. "That's him, Vincent. That's the man Mouse saw!"

Vincent took in the man's appearance and realized he was not from Above. The ragged clothes in themselves were no testament to where he lived--there were people in the city above them who dressed much the same. No, it was some indefinable air about the man that spoke of living below the city. Perhaps it was the pallor of his skin. But what struck Vincent was that the man was shivering, though the temperature of the tunnels was not really cold. Before Vincent could speak, the man nodded to him.

"You must be Vincent. The Lady said you should come. Sent me to get you."

Vincent was momentarily confused. He could sense very little from the man other than his determination to follow orders and his respect for "the Lady." Then a scent reached him--a scent that lingered in the man's clothing--a sulphurous odor that Vincent recognized from his few descents into Paracelsus' kingdom. *Of course. The man is from Tamara. The scent is from the sulphurous fumes that come from fissures in the rock far below. And the man is cold because he is accustomed to the warmer temperatures down there.* "Why does Tamara seek me?"

"Don't know. Don't ask questions. Just follow orders. Lady says 'Find Vincent and bring him here.' Didn't say *why*" He looked up at Vincent and asked a little plaintively, "You'll come, won't ya? Lady'll be real mad if'n I don't bring ya."

Mouse was tugging at Vincent's shirt. "Mouse go too, Vincent?"

Vincent quieted his friend by settling a hand on his shoulder. "Hush Mouse. Quiet a moment. Let me think." He eyed the stranger suspiciously and tried sensing any falsehood in him and could find none. Vincent had little trust for any of Paracelsus' old followers, and though Tamara had assisted him when he'd sought Modred, he still was a little uncomfortable. However he didn't see any alternative. Whatever Tamara wanted, it could conceivably be important. He glanced back at Mouse, who was waiting anxiously for his answer. "No, Mouse. I think it would be best if you returned home and explained to Father where I have gone." He turned to the stranger. "I will accompany you to see Tamara."

Diana stayed with Jeanie and Marcia throughout most of the day. She sat in on sessions with the therapist and tried to help bring Marcia out of her withdrawn state. Progress was being made through play therapy, but it was slow.

By the time Joe called to inform her that the trial date had been set it was late afternoon. Diana spoke with Sophia about leaving to go home for the night. "I don't know if I should go or not, Sophia."

Sophia leaned back in the rocker. "I've already spoken with my husband. He told me to stay if I need to. My children are older than yours, and I often stay here with a new case. At least when it's something like this. You really ought to go home for the night, at least. Believe me, Marcia will begin adjusting in a few days. Once she begins to feel safer, she will settle." Sophia's warm brown eyes met Diana's. "She really shouldn't become too attached to you, in any case."

Diana nodded reluctantly. Sophia was right. She shouldn't let *herself* become too attached, either. Besides, she wanted to go home badly. Marcia had Jeanie, as well as Sophia for tonight. The sisters had become very close already, and Jeanie was very protective. Sophia assured Diana that they would not separate the girls under any circumstances, and in fact they might place them both in a foster home the following day. "I suppose I should go home for awhile."

"If you'll give me a number, I'll call you if I need you."

"You can reach me through Joe Maxwell. You have his number."

After settling everything with Sophia, Diana spoke with Jeanie, telling her she was going Below. "I'll be back tomorrow, but I need to see the children and Vincent." She was holding Jeanie's hand, and could sense the girl's loneliness. "I know it's hard, Jeanie. Want me to take anybody a message?"

The girl smiled a little. "Yeah. Tell everybody 'Hi.' Tell Vincent I'm okay, and tell Father I'm being good."

"Is that the same? Being okay and being good?"

Jeanie grinned. "Not really." She hugged Diana fiercely. "Don't worry. I really *am* okay, and I'll take care of Marcia."

Before Diana left, Jeanie asked her to please take a special message to Cullen for her that everything was okay, much better than she'd been afraid that it would be, and that she missed him. Diana smiled and squeezed the girl's hand softly. "I will. He'll be glad you're okay."

As Diana left the building, she was feeling much better. She tried to sense Vincent but realized he was far away--off to the south--and he seemed preoccupied and a little distressed. She tried touching deeper, but once more only encountered his sliding resistance to being read. A little irritated, she decided it was time for a talk. Whatever was bothering him was something he needed to talk about. *After all, I haven't shielded him from the fact that I've been upset, even if I do feel a little foolish.*

Vincent sent Mouse back to Father with a message explaining what had happened. He hoped the message managed to make it to its destination. Mouse did have a tendency to read the messages before they reached the intended destination and often lost them afterwards. In any case, Vincent knew Mary would keep track of the children for him until Diana returned. He was more concerned about Diana.

Vincent knew she would be worried about him, especially since he'd been avoiding direct contact with her. Vincent sighed. He wasn't sure which would upset her more--letting her know just how much the dreams were disturbing him or continuing to try to hide that from her. He only knew he wasn't quite ready to discuss the problem with her. Thus far she had not asked him about the dreams, nor had she tried to find out why he was avoiding their bond. This side trip to see Tamara gave him the excuse he needed to be away for a day or so.

Vincent's guide traveled slowly but steadily through the winding corridors of the tunnels. The slowness of the travel irked Vincent, but it occurred to him that some of these tunnels were unfamiliar even to him. He rarely had need or desire to travel under this part of the city. *I wonder why Tamara felt I needed a guide to reach her? I found her once....* Although, remembering the guides he and Mouse had had on his last trip down, he had to admit to himself that he'd had a little help even then.

At one point Vincent felt Diana attempting to reach him, but he avoided the touch...a little regretfully. *I do miss being with her, but I am not ready to share this yet. There is no need to worry her more than necessary.*

Vincent's thoughts returned to his surroundings, to his guide...and ultimately to his destination. *What could Tamara possibly want? It surprises me that she hasn't washed her hands of me and mine by now. Modred was obviously more trouble to her than anything else.*

Modred. Even the thought of the name sent a shock through Vincent. He couldn't imagine what Modred the child had been like...the infant. All he'd known was the young man. Young, strong...and warped beyond redemption by Paracelsus' lies and manipulations. The thought of the young Modred in Paracelsus' care--in his power--sickened him. He remembered Diana's words to him long, long ago when he was first coming out of his grief over Catherine's loss--when they'd stood admiring Jacob--*You never run out of hope for a newborn child. But what if the child grows up with only the hopes of a madman to look to?* Unfortunately, Vincent knew what the results of such warped hopes could be.

His guide slowed and looked back. "Comin' like this as y'are, there'll be those who might take offense. Rememberin' y'know."

The man's statement confused Vincent. He could think of no reason why anyone would take offense at his coming--especially on request--in peace. True, he'd had dealings with some of Paracelsus' followers in the past. The Other was not appreciative of intrusions into his territory. *Nor am I, for that matter.* Vincent's lip twitched in a wry smile. *I wonder if I will ever be able to simply say I and not he--and admit even to myself that he and I are, indeed, one?*

Vincent shrugged. "I come at Tamara's request, otherwise I would not be here at all. If anyone objects peacefully I shall leave."

"And what if they ain't so peaceful?" The man's look was speculative. He seemed honestly to wish to know.

"Then I shall defend myself, of course. But why should they object?"

"On account of you look like him. Like the one you killed. He was trouble, that one. Gave us more trouble'n you ever did, bein' around us like he were."

"What kind of trouble?" Vincent was hungry for *any* information on his son, and even information of this sort was more than he had now.

"You name it. He were a mad one, that one. Spent most of the time later on in the cage, but when he managed to get out there were hell to pay, I can tell ya."

Vincent cringed inwardly. He'd known they'd caged Modred. Tamara had told him that much, but at the time there had been no time to discuss the matter.

"How...." He stumbled over the words, so difficult was the concept for him to face at all. "How did you manage to cage him again when he escaped?"

The man grinned...a nasty grin, Vincent thought. "Master left us plenty of his dust. After a handful or two of that, he got to be a lot easier to handle...tended to confuse him. Still nasty, but we only lost a man or two over that last year."

Vincent's distaste grew. "Was he *always* caged?"

The man shook his head, sending his greasy hair cascading over his eyes. "Not so much 'til the last six months or so. Weren't too bad when he were a young'n. 'Cept at times. Seems he got worse that last six months. Got it into his head he hadda go get you. Lady were afeared if'n he came an' caused trouble that you'd come back on us. An' to have him go Uptop...." He shook his head.

Vincent understood the man's point. If Modred had caused problems Above, *someone* would've wanted to know where he'd come from. Even down here, they had to worry about the secrecy of the tunnels. That was part of the reason their own community had been safe from Paracelsus for so long.

"What...what was he like when he was younger? A child."

His guide shrugged. "About like what you'd expect, I 'spose. Not so bad, though. Mostly he were okay. Kinda wild, but that's how the Master wanted him." The man's rough face took on a grim aspect. "I 'member once when he were 'bout twelve, he killed a kid--might'a been an accident, even--y'know, just one of them things that can happen when boys fight. After all, he were no normal kid and might'a not meant no real harm. Master laughed and said it were good trainin'. After that seems he got worse."

Vincent felt a great depression falling over him, like a darkness. Still, he forced himself to ask more. "What was he like, though, when he was very young...an infant and young child?"

"Like I said, not too bad. Kind'a cute in a way. Always had a bit of a temper, though, and the Master liked that. Wanted him to be strong, he said. Understand his power."

They continued on quietly for a short time, then Vincent asked: "Did Paracelsus love him?"

Vincent's guide glanced up with a sly look. "As much as the Master ever loved anything. Whatever he did, he did to make sure the boy understood his power. Make him understand what he called his *birthright*." The man shook his head ruefully. "Personal like, I think the Master just wanted him mean. An' he *did* manage that. Got the boy to where he didn't care for nobody or nothin'."

Vincent felt dizzy, disoriented. Paracelsus had once told him--Vincent--that. That he was denying his birthright. Paracelsus had taunted Vincent until his carefully built walls had shattered, allowing the beast within to surge free...and Paracelsus had died. Vincent imagined Paracelsus using his warped brilliance against an innocent child--telling him over and over again to *use* the strength of his dark side, playing upon the child's need for love and acceptance--and warping the child irretrievably. Vincent could feel the darkness calling to him in ways it hadn't

for a very long time. He, too, wanted to strike out, to hurt the author of this pain, but it was far too late. He bared his teeth in a silent snarl, heedless of the fact that the man beside him cringed away. The man hurried ahead...staying just close enough so Vincent could follow.

Diana walked swiftly through the tunnels toward the classrooms. She wanted to stop by and see the children at least briefly before checking with Father as to Vincent's whereabouts. She knew vaguely where he was, but not why, and the lack of information disturbed her.

Diana glanced at her watch. Classes should be about over, so she wouldn't be interfering. When she reached Michael's classroom she slowed, then peeked inside. Leaning against the stone wall, she watched Jacob and Toby as they bent over their lessons, Jacob's bright blond head was so close to Toby's that the slightly older boy's dark curls blended with the gold of his friend's hair. Diana smiled. It was good to be home. In the background of her mind she could sense Cathy's excitement. She knew Diana was home, too, and was anxious to see her. Michael looked up and saw Diana, then spoke quietly to Jacob and Toby, who dropped what they were doing and scampered across the room to throw themselves at her.

"Diana! You're back!"

The small arms were hugging her legs fiercely, and Diana bent to gather them into her arms. Hugging them back, Diana returned all the kisses, tousled and then smoothed their hair. "Sure am. Wanna go with me to get Cathy?"

Each boy took a hand and pulled her along toward Brooke's small classroom of toddlers. "Hey, go easy guys! I'm not as young as I used to be just yesterday!"

Before they even reached the classroom, Cathy came barrelling toward them. "Momma! Momma!"

Diana bent and lifted her daughter, loving the feel of the small arms twining around her neck and the sticky kiss the child planted on her cheek. "Brooke brought us candy, an' read us stories, an' we made pictures." Once Cathy started talking it was a steady stream. "Are you gonna stay an' read us 'bout Toad an' eat supper an' everything?"

Suddenly feeling overwhelmingly happy, Diana nodded. "An' everything. But for right now I've gotta see Grandpa. You guys wanna go with me or what?"

"WHAT." Three giggling voices chimed in at the same time. It was an old joke. Between the children's joy and her own relief and pleasure at simply being home, Diana couldn't feel anything at all from Vincent anymore. She refused to let her concern for him ruin her homecoming with the children. She knew he wouldn't want that, either.

The children ran ahead to let Father know Diana was home. *As though the sentries hadn't already reported it on the pipes*, Diana thought, amused.

By the time she reached the entrance to the study, Cathy was already in Father's lap and the boys were sitting on the hassock at his feet. Diana stifled a giggle as she watched Father try to keep Cathy from appropriating his glasses. He set the glasses aside, well out of reach on his desk, and motioned her inside. "Diana,

my dear. Come inside. If our communication system ever failed at least we would have plenty of well-intentioned runners to bear messages."

Jacob Wells set his granddaughter on the floor and crooked his finger to the boys. "If you will be very careful, you may play with the chessmen." He nodded toward where the black box containing his oldest chess set lay. The children loved playing with the rose mechanism to make the box open, and the chess pieces were durable enough even for the roughest play. He then motioned for Diana to sit. "Mouse brought me a message from Vincent about an hour ago. It seems a messenger from Paracelsus' community has contacted Vincent. His presence has been requested by that woman--Tamara--the one he spoke with on his last trip down there."

Diana and Father stared at one another a moment in silence, then Diana sighed. "Damn. What now, Father? Any time he's had dealings with those people it's been trouble...even before I knew him. What on earth could she want with him now?"

"I don't know, Diana. I cannot imagine...in fact, I think I would be *afraid* to give my imagination free rein. Even dead, Paracelsus haunts him, and us." He ran his fingers through his hair and glanced up at his daughter-in-law. "Have you no idea of what's going on? Surely you are in contact with him?"

Diana shook her head. "No. Not really." At Father's inquisitive look, Diana sighed and glanced over at the children. She hated to mention to Vincent's father what she had not even discussed with Vincent. Besides, she knew that he would only tell her that Vincent would work his own problems out in his own way. They'd been through this before. Finally, she met Father's eyes. "He's been having some disturbing dreams lately and hasn't wanted to talk about them. He's learned to kind of side-slip the bond, and since he isn't ready to talk about it, I've tried to honor that."

"I see." Diana could tell that Father would have loved to ask more, but he, too, was trying to allow Vincent his privacy and his own time to work through his problems. He *did* ask one thing: "Do you suppose his dreams could possibly have anything to do with the visit to Tamara?"

Diana rose and stretched. She reached up to run a hand through her hair. "I have no idea, Father. It's possible, I suppose. With Vincent, I've learned that *anything* is possible." She called the children, and as they gathered around her, Jacob asked, "And how are Jeanie and her sister doing?"

"Better. Jeanie is being supportive. She's very good with Marcia, which is a good thing. The child has a lot to work through, and having Jeanie there will help her through it." Grinning mischievously, Diana told Father: "Jeanie said to tell you that she's being good."

"I'm not sure why that report makes me so uneasy...perhaps it's the grin that goes along with it."

"Ah, well. She told me to tell Vincent that she's okay, and said to tell you she's being good. I wondered a bit what the difference was."

At that, Father smiled. Almost grinned, and rubbed his nose. "Perhaps that is because Jeanie tends to play practical jokes on me. I have yet to understand just why she seems to take such pleasure in fooling an old man."

Diana got the definite impression that Jacob Wells *enjoyed* those practical jokes. She leaned forward and kissed him. "It's nice to know that there's someone around who keeps you on your toes." She patted his shoulder. "She'll be back. Just watch."

Diana had evening meal with the children and visited with Jamie and Mouse. Cullen had joined them and asked about Jeanie, and Diana took the opportunity to reassure him that the girl was doing well, and gave him Jeanie's message. Cullen's relieved grin lit his face. "She's great, that kid. I really miss her. You know that she's learning how to work the lathe and how to make cabinets and drawers? She's a natural with wood."

Diana leaned with her elbows on the table, chin in hand, staring at Cullen. "I don't know why you don't just adopt the kid, Cullen. Or apprentice her. You know she adores you."

Cullen blushed and rose, dusting his hands on his pants. "Yeah. Maybe I should. Haf'ta ask her first. She mightn't want to have a rough cob like me for a Dad." He winked at Diana. "But maybe we'll see when she gets back. Maybe we'll just see about that."

After Cullen left, Diana mentioned that she needed to speak with Maria. Jamie and Mouse had offered to take the children to the bathing pool with them. Jamie had smiled reassuringly at Diana, and Diana had drawn strength from her young friend's cheerful nature. Young as she was, Jamie understood Diana fairly well...just as Mouse understood Vincent.

The friendship Diana had with Maria was more tenuous. She and Pascal's petite wife had only just begun truly becoming friends. Maria was by nature very shy and kept to herself much of the time. Her contribution to the work in the tunnels was her pottery, and she was very talented. William and Pascal had built her a kiln in a large chamber near the laundry.

Diana slowed as she neared the chamber, wondering just what she would say to Maria. Before she had a chance to wonder long, Maria came to the chamber door and stopped, startled by Diana's appearance. Flushed from the heat of the kiln, Maria's wispy brown hair escaped in tendrils from the rough ponytail she'd put it in. "Diana! You're home!"

Maria started forward, then stopped, seemingly unsure of her reception. Diana spread her arms and wrapped Maria in a hug. Although she could feel tears moistening her eyes, Diana laughed. "God. You're gonna get fat on me. And here I spent all that time talkin' you into goin' jogging with me and Jamie--now you won't be able to keep up."

Maria's face reflected her relief and she chuckled. "I intend on jogging as long as I can, but you're right...when I start gaining weight I *won't* be able to keep up. Not with *you*. Maybe I can make William come with me."

"Why not Pascal?"

"What? Drag him away from his pipes? I don't think Pascal has gone Above in fifteen years." She giggled. "Can you imagine either of them in a jogging suit?"

Diana began laughing. She couldn't help it. "About as easily as I can imagine Vincent in one." She waved toward the kiln. "Are you finished for tonight?"

"Yes. I've set the last batch out to cool. I'll begin the second glaze tomorrow." She smiled radiantly. "Oh, Diana. I'm so glad you feel okay about this...about the baby, I mean. I didn't want to hurt you."

As they walked toward the pipe chamber so Maria could meet Pascal, Diana put her arm around Maria's shoulders. "It's okay. Really. I've got Cathy and Jacob...and Toby. If I want babies I've got Ellie and Aaron and all the other little ones around here. And now I'll have yours. And don't think Auntie Di won't spoil her rotten."

"Hm. A girl, huh?"

"Or he. Doesn't matter. Just so long as I can babysit."

As he followed his guide, Vincent felt despair hanging over him like a cloud. *I shouldn't have come...shouldn't have asked. Some things are best unknown.*

He felt the dizziness again, and when his vision cleared he could discern the Other pacing next to him. His dark twin shook his head angrily. *I see. Some things are best unknown. Things like me...like our son.* Dark taloned hands gestured expressively to his chest. *Or maybe you're just burying your head in the sand again. He was abused...treated like an animal. And all you want to do is forget the whole thing. Shove it away.*

Vincent's steps faltered and his chest felt tight. *Yes! Yes, I want to forget it. It's past. Paracelsus is dead, unfortunately. We cannot kill him again. There is no point in dredging up the past like rotting garbage pulled from the bottom of a lake. I can do nothing about it. We can do nothing to change what has happened.*

The Other snarled menacingly. *You are so ineffective! Kill them. Kill them all. Do something--anything. Tear your hair, bash your head against the wall. If nothing else, it would make you feel better. You disgust me. You can't stop the dreams, you won't fight...won't take any revenge or mete justice. You can't make the pain go away. I won't take it anymore.*

Vincent stopped and leaned against the wall, panting in quick, short breaths. The dark was oppressive. He felt no kinship with the world around him. Felt severed from reality....

His guide had become worried and returned to stand staring at him. Vincent could see the man standing hesitantly three or four yards away, unsure of what to do. He could feel his fear.

With a mighty effort, Vincent took a deep breath and blinked a few times. The Other was gone. Vincent felt no sense of him at all. Yet, for some reason, Vincent felt uneasy. Something wasn't right. He still felt...odd. Different. Better, though. *At least I can breathe again.* He stared past the rumpled little man standing anxiously waiting for him, and wondered why he felt so alien to this place.

He gave himself a mental shake and walked toward his guide, who retreated a step or two. "Come. Let us finish this. I find myself becoming very weary of this game."

Diana was sitting down at the falls, tired and disappointed. She'd gone from being very happy to being severely depressed. She'd come home to be with her family and she'd spent some wonderful time with the children, but she missed her husband, and was worried about him. What emotions she could sense from him were disjointed and confusing. At first he was obviously disturbed and depressed, then the emotions became more distant.

Her toes dipped into the cold water and she swirled her feet around. She leaned back on her hands and sighed with frustration. *What on earth is the matter with him, anyway? And why won't he talk to me about it?* She kept her feet in the water until they became numb. *Sometimes I wish I were brave enough to do like Vincent used to and fight these falls and the icy water just to wear myself out and make myself numb all over. Things don't worry you when you're too exhausted to think, and you don't hurt if you're too numb to feel the pain.*

That's what she used to do, before she'd come Below. She'd worked until she was too exhausted to think. That way, when the cases got too horrible, too messy...too close...she'd fall into bed in an exhausted sleep, and what dreams she had she usually didn't remember. Vincent used to do the same. When his dreams...and nightmares sought to consume him, he would fight the current in the falls and let the exhaustion and the icy water make him too tired and numb to care about any emotions or dreams that might be bothering him.

Things had been better, though, for years. Nothing had gotten so bad that they couldn't handle it together. *That's what the problem is. We're not handling it together.* Diana rested her chin on her knee and wrapped her arms around her legs. Her feet were still wet and cold, but the true coldness she felt was the loss of any close contact with Vincent. It wasn't like him to continue to hide things from her for any length of time; especially when he knew that the hiding itself was painful to her. Perhaps he meant to spare her pain, but if so he was failing miserably.

After sitting until her feet dried, Diana dusted them off and pulled her thick socks and boots back on. She was still reluctant to leave the falls. It was so late that the pipes were quiet and all that could be heard was the water pouring over the rocks and crashing to the pool below.

The children were peacefully asleep, and Diana knew she should be also. It frustrated her that she'd be unable to stay until Vincent's return. If Jeanie and Marcia were to be placed in a foster home the following day, Diana didn't dare stay Below. Besides, she needed to check with Joe and see if the trial date was set.

Reluctantly, Diana rose, brushed at the seat of her pants and headed back to their chamber. Once there, she undressed and slipped into bed. *God, this bed seems big without him here with me.* She tried to touch him with the bond once more, but again--in fact, even more acutely--it seemed there was little sense of him. His emotions were there, but they were chaotic, sliding in and out like a nest of snakes...impossible to hold to. And there was something different about him that she couldn't put her finger on, but that worried her.

It took her a long while to fall asleep.

Jeanie slept lightly with her arm around Marcia. The younger child kept waking abruptly and crying, but whenever she did, she would find her sister's arms around her and was comforted. The fourth time Marcia woke, Jeanie found it harder to get back to sleep. She lay there thinking of the future, and just what was going to happen. Diana had told her the mechanics of the trial and what to expect. The psychologists were planning on using videotapes of Marcia so the child wouldn't have to testify. But there was no way that Jeanie could get out of it. She, Diana, Joe, and the psychologist had spoken to the Assistant D.A. who would be trying the case. Even Jeanie could see that her testimony was necessary. But it was going to be really hard. *How can I talk about this? How can I look into his eyes--into my Mom's--and actually talk about what he did? Tell people.* In the tunnels, they'd just accepted her. No questions. They all knew why she was there, but no one cared. She didn't get pitied. She just got loved. She missed everybody. *But I miss Cullen most.*

The day after Jeanie had arrived in the tunnels, Cullen had taken her under his wing. Taciturn, yet with a dry sense of humor, Cullen had taken her by the hand and led her into his workshop, where before her eyes, he'd made her a wooden horse. She'd helped him sand and polish it, and it still stood proudly on her battered nightstand in the dorm. After that, she'd spent hours in Cullen's company and found him to be kind, gentle, and not at all quiet once he got to know you. Between him, Vincent, and Father, they'd healed her of hate.

Jeanie checked to make sure Marcia was sleeping, then rolled over to stare up at the ceiling. No. She didn't hate her father. Not anymore. She and Cullen had talked about it in an abstract sort of way. He'd told her how sometimes things happen to people that they don't understand--even themselves--that cause them to do horrible things...even to people they love. He'd been quiet for awhile after that, just working on the chair he'd been sanding. But when he'd looked up at her, he'd told her that love could heal most anything. It couldn't make the past go away, but it could heal you from inside. Jeanie had told him that she didn't think that any amount of love was going to heal her Dad, and he'd nodded, saying, "That's true. Most likely, it won't. But it can heal *you*. Just don't let yourself get eaten away with anger or hate. Life's too short. And forgiveness is a powerful thing."

In the time that followed, Jeanie had learned what forgiveness and love could do. She'd watched as other Topsiders came down to their world for healing, and she'd always marveled at how easy it really was to love people. She'd watched Vincent, golden and shining from within with his goodness, reaching out to the lost children. Cullen, with his quiet, gentle hands always made *something* for the newcomers. William, gruff and blustery, with his facade of an army cook, always had cookies for the children, even when supplies got low. And Father was always there, like the captain of a ship. Strong, steady, and impartial. Jeanie's eyes misted. *I miss 'em all so much. I want to go home.*

Jeanie's reverie was disturbed by Marcia's whimper. The older girl sighed and slid back under the covers. She cuddled her sister next to her, and promised silently, *Sometime soon we'll both go home.* The promise eased her as well, and slowly her eyes closed as sleep claimed her.

It was late by the time Vincent's guide led him to Tamara. Although there was no day or night Below, there was still a routine wake/sleep period, and Vincent's guide told him that there had been a chamber prepared for him. "You can see the Lady when she wakes. Not for nuthin' would I wake her."

Vincent had hoped to see Tamara and be out of here. It was hot this far down, and he was not accustomed to the temperature. Staying a full night here promised to be miserable, but he saw no way around it. "Very well. If you could show me this chamber, I would be appreciative."

The man grinned, showing blackened teeth, and waved Vincent on. He showed him to a smallish, roughly furnished chamber that had already been provided with a washbasin of water and a pitcher. The bed was a small, cast iron cot-like affair that Vincent mentally measured and hoped he'd fit on. He glanced at the floor. There wasn't even room for him to stretch out there. He sighed.

"Make yourself comfortable," his guide commented, then left.

"Indeed," Vincent said to himself, as he began pulling off his heavy layers of clothing. *At least I can make myself cooler. I don't know about anything else.* He was aware, in a distant fashion, that Diana was home and was missing him. He felt her touch and avoided it, unsure just why he did. *I should try to reassure her. I don't know when I will see her again.* He tried then very deliberately to make deeper contact with her--to send reassuring thoughts--but for some reason it seemed difficult. *Perhaps I'm merely tired.* Because he *was* weary. Unreasonably so. He couldn't understand it. He felt as though he simply didn't care anymore--about much of anything.

Vincent finished stripping down to his jeans and was washing with the water he'd been provided when he heard a sound at the door and sensed a presence. He whirled toward the doorway, a low growl rumbling...and a young woman backed away. Her eyes were wide--terrified--but she stood her ground and held out a tray with a bowl of stew and some bread. Her voice was tremulous. "I...they tol' me to bring you this."

Vincent stared at the girl. He was mildly annoyed with the woman. *Do these people have no manners?* In his world, no one would even consider entering another's chambers without announcing themselves first and being invited in. However, in addition to his annoyance, he was a little astonished at himself. Here he was, stripped to the waist and in the presence of some strange woman, and he wasn't at all embarrassed. Vincent was puzzled, but his own ingrained manners surfaced, and he responded: "Forgive me. You startled me." He held out his hands for the heavy tray. "Thank you. I *am* hungry."

Instead of leaving, the woman stood waiting while Vincent ate. Once more, Vincent was puzzled that he felt no embarrassment. He'd always hated eating in front of strangers. Sometimes it even bothered him with people he'd known all his life. He bent his head over the tray and tried to finish quickly so she would leave. He would like to have time to think about his feelings...or lack of them.

"You're not really like him at all," the woman said, suddenly, startling Vincent yet again.

He knew, of course, who she was comparing him to, and was getting a little weary of the comparison. "Of course not. Just because I fathered him doesn't mean

we have to be the same." At the woman's intense gaze, Vincent became curious. "How well did you know Modred?"

She shrugged, and folded her hands over her stomach and her closed expression told Vincent much. He noted absently that the girl was very pregnant. "As much as anybody, I guess. We were about the same age. He was okay when he was younger. Kinda quiet. But the Master always told him he was better than everyone else, and he believed it. He made everybody do what he wanted." She blushed and bent to retrieve his tray. "I gotta go."

Vincent reached out and caught her arm gently. "Don't. Please. Not yet." She was looking away and down, and Vincent asked quietly, "Did he make you do what he wanted, as well?"

She was trembling, but not trying to pull away. "Yeah." She glanced up at him defiantly. "You gonna want something else?"

He dropped his hand. "No. Of course not. Thank you for the food."

The girl left quickly and Vincent found himself wondering what kind of man his son had really been. He sighed resignedly and sat on the bed. He pulled off his boots and lay back on the lumpy mattress to await the "morning." He had to bend his knees to fit on the bed, but he fell asleep quickly despite his discomfort.

He dreamed of the child again, and though in reality he lay drenched in sweat on a lumpy mattress, in the dream he shivered in the cold as a frigid wind whipped around him. The cold he felt came from both inside himself and from his surroundings. The child's cry was a thin wail as Vincent dug through the garbage to find it, and the small body was cold when Vincent held it to his chest.

Vincent woke, shivering. His surroundings felt totally alien, and the darkness of the chamber disturbed him. He could hear small noises in the distance and sense awakening minds around him, so he knew it must be near time for him to be taken to Tamara. Vincent pulled on his shirt and vest. He waited only a short time until someone came. It was the same man who had guided him previously.

"The Lady will see you now. Come."

The man turned and walked away, clearly expecting Vincent to follow, so Vincent snatched up his cloak and followed. They passed few people in the rough-walled tunnels, and those they *did* pass only glanced warily at Vincent and scurried away without speaking. Clearly, they knew him and their attitude indicated fear and respect. Vincent was puzzled. He knew that Modred had caused these people problems--given them reason to fear him. But Vincent, himself, had never done them any harm unless they ventured into the upper levels and threatened his world. The few times that the Other had met with Paracelsus' people it had been in places that the Other considered his own.

They passed a fissure from which a reddish light glowed. Vincent shifted his cloak from one arm to the other. *The sooner this is over, the sooner I can get home and cool off. How can they bear it down here?*

Two more quick turns and Vincent entered a long, low chamber furnished in dark, heavy furniture. He recognized the chamber from the last time he'd been here. The life-like masks on the wall were equally familiar. He walked past his guide to

stand before the life-mask Tamara had made of Modred. He barely noticed when his companion left the chamber. *Modred. My son. My victim.*

He spun as he heard footsteps approaching from the opposite end of the room. Tamara stood in the shadows calmly watching him. "So. Perhaps once more we can help each other."

Vincent glanced bitterly at the mask, then turned his gaze back to the woman. "You need my assistance?"

Tamara settled into the largest of the high-backed chairs and propped her cane next to it. "Sit. There's nothing I hate worse than having to look up at people as I'm talking to them."

Vincent didn't want to sit. He felt like pacing. He didn't like this place. It was too quiet. Without the rumble of the subways and the gentle song of the pipes, the quiet seemed ominous. And the heat made him ill-tempered. But Tamara had done nothing to him and had, in fact, warned Vincent about Modred before the boy had a chance to do even more harm than he had. He forced himself to remember his manners. He chose a chair and sat facing the elderly woman. "Why have you summoned me here, Tamara?"

Tamara's face remained impassive and expressionless. The pinched nose and thin face revealed years of privation. Life here was apparently harsher than in the tunnels above, with less interaction with helpers Above. Vincent could sense little from the woman. She was closed emotionally and physically. Finally Vincent caught it. A sense of anxiety. Tamara was not as emotionless as she seemed. Eventually the woman spoke and her voice was strong. "You have suffered a great loss."

"One that could have been avoided," Vincent stated flatly.

"Perhaps. Mistakes are easily seen when viewed retrospectively." She rose, a little stiffly. Vincent started to rise with her and reached to help her, but she waved him away, motioning him to sit. He settled reluctantly back into the chair. Tamara's attitude was unnerving. *Mistakes. I suppose my son's murder was a mistake as well.*

As though Tamara had read his thoughts, the woman paused by Modred's life-mask and turned back to Vincent. "If you had a chance to do it over again, how would you feel?"

"The past cannot be changed, Tamara. I learned that to my sorrow years ago."

Tamara's basilisk-eyes blinked, then she shook her head. "Not changed. No. But we learn from our mistakes. Suppose I told you that there was to be a child. Modred's child. How would you feel then?"

Stunned, Vincent slumped against the back of the chair. His mind was reeling. *A child. Modred's child. My grandson.* He lifted his eyes to Tamara's and in hers saw a glimmer of amusement. It infuriated him, yet he felt no surge of passionate rage, but merely a dull anger at being manipulated. First by Paracelsus and now by his successor. "How would I feel? How *should* I feel? Why did you summon me here, Tamara? To taunt me?"

"The mother claims she wants nothing to do with the child when it comes. Modred forced his attentions on her and now she has no use for the results of that union. She fears the child will be like the father."

Vincent's thoughts went back immediately to the young woman who had brought him dinner the night before. "When is the baby due?"

"Normally, I would say not for months, but from the looks of the girl, I would have to say soon."

Vincent mulled this over. "Will she keep the child if it does not look like Modred?"

"I don't know. I only know she will *not* keep it if it does."

Vincent and Tamara eyed one another warily. Vincent was unsure just how to respond. He wanted the child and it would break his heart to have it reared away from him--no matter how the child looked. But if the child's mother wanted it, he would have no right to it. He understood what Tamara was offering. A chance--but only that. "I understand. Send for me when the time comes."

The woman nodded, then turned and walked away, leaving Vincent alone in the chamber--alone to find his own way out, and home.

CHAPTER THREE CHILD'S FIRST GRIEF

Oh! Call my brother back to me!
I cannot play alone--¹

Vincent had still not returned by the following morning, and Diana had to return Above. The psychologist was videotaping both Marcia and Jeanie today, and Diana wanted to be present. As she ate quickly with the children, she made plans with Mary to leave them with her until Vincent returned.

"You know it's no problem," Mary responded earnestly. "I adore keeping them."

Diana hugged Cathy, who was wriggling around on her lap, trying to reach for the bacon. She kissed the top of her daughter's head and smiled as the child totally ignored her. *So typically Cathy*, she thought. Sighing, she relinquished her daughter to Mary's tender care and left to return to the world Above.

Upon returning to the emergency shelter, Diana found the place in an uproar and poor Sophia hysterical. The round, disheveled little woman came trotting up to Diana as soon as she spotted her, clutching at her hand to pull her more quickly inside. Immediately catching the waves of distress rolling off the woman, Diana asked quickly, "What on earth is the matter, Sophia? Is it the children?"

"Si...oh...I fell asleep and when I woke, they were both gone. *Gone*, Diana...like the wind. No one has seen them, though how they got out, no one knows. The doors were all locked."

Diana was finding it difficult to separate herself from Sophia's stress, but deep down she was certain the children were fine...though she felt a flash of irritation with Jeanie. She was immediately convinced that Jeanie had panicked and simply stolen her little sister away from any chance of further abuse and taken her *home*. Methodically, Diana forced herself through the long, dreary red tape of reporting the children as missing and eventually found herself facing Joe Maxwell in his office.

Joe's frustration and anger was all too evident to Diana's raw nerves: he'd *really* wanted to see Jonathan Price in prison, and now he wouldn't ever have that satisfaction. After raking his fingers through his hair and obviously counting to ten, he asked, "Are you *sure* that's where the kids are, Diana? Have you checked?"

Shaking her head slowly, Diana answered hesitantly, "No. I'm not completely certain, but I really suspect as much. Mr. Price is still in custody and nobody else has been allowed to see the girls." At Joe's half-anxious, half-hopeful look, she spread her hands helplessly. "I *know* Jeanie, Joe. The kid's resourceful. While we searched the Shelter, we finally found an open window in one of the storerooms...just big enough for a kid to sneak out of. No. She's gone home. I'd bet on it."

Slamming the file folder in front of him closed with a defeated thump, Joe admitted defeat. "That's it, then. Unless we find 'em and bring 'em back up here, we'll have to let the bastard go." Without warning, he slammed his fist down on the desk so hard Diana jumped a foot. "*Damn it* Diana, I *wanted* him!"

Silently, Diana agreed. She'd wanted to see Jeanie's abusive father paying for his crimes, too, but she couldn't help being relieved that Marcia would be spared

¹ From *The Child's First Grief* by Felicia Dorothea Hemans

having to testify. "Look at it this way, Joe. If the kids went Below, then they're safe. Permanently. And Marcia will be spared the further trauma of testifying."

A huge, beaten sigh was Joe's only answer.

As Jeanie led Marcia through the dark, damp sewer tunnels, she kept reassuring the child that all would be well, telling her stories of the people they were going to live with.

"It's dark," Marcia whined petulantly. "...an' I'm hungry."

"S'okay, Marcia," Jeanie told her, tugging persistently on the girl's hand. "You like blueberry pancakes?"

"With syrup?"

"Sure," Jeanie agreed impatiently, anxious to keep her sister moving. "William makes the best blueberry pancakes in the whole *world*. Better'n any you've ever had."

"But it's *dark*," the smaller child insisted.

Flustered, tired and worried that her sister would stop cooperating, Jeanie knelt and pulled the child closer. Patting Marcia's curly head and staring off into the shadows, she murmured, "I know you're hungry and tired, Marcy. I am, too. But really and truly, cross my heart...up ahead there's light from lots of candles and food and all the friends you'd ever want. And Daddy can't *ever* find us."

That last got Marcia's attention. "Not *ever*? No matter how hard he looks?"

"Not *ever*," Jeanie said with certainty. Standing and holding out her hand, she waited until Marcia took it. "And now I'm gonna tell you about the neatest thing of all...a special friend I know you'll like. You remember the Wizard of Oz and the cowardly lion?" At Marcia's interested nod, Jeanie continued as they continued threading their way through the shadows. "Well, Vincent looks a little like the cowardly lion, except he's brave and strong and about the best friend you could ever have, so don't be scared when you see him...."

Vincent didn't know what was wrong with him. He was almost back to the Hub and the home tunnels and he *still* felt odd. Nothing around him seemed quite right--muted and foreign--but he was, at the very least, glad to be out of the oppressive heat and almost back home. The heat had made him irritable. He had no idea in the world how he was going to approach Father...or Diana about the fact that he was going to be a grandfather. Nor about the possibility of bringing the child into their world. *How can I do this?* He was asking himself--his deeper, usually silent self--and waited, half-expecting the once-hated shadow to appear to mock him with his uncertainty, but the darkness within him was quiet. Too quiet. As Vincent approached the end of the maze, he took a deep breath and tried to put aside his deepening anxiety so he could decide how to approach his family with his news.

As he neared Father's study, Vincent tiredly brushed aside questions from friends. Mouse, who'd been watching for him had still managed to miss him. Jogging beside Vincent, the tow-headed young man wanted to know what had happened, but Vincent shook his head. "Not now, Mouse. Later."

"But Vincent...Mouse waited. Jamie wants to know, too."

Vincent reached out one hand and abstractedly patted his friend's shoulder. "I know, Mouse. But not now. For now, I must talk to Father."

Mouse, long accustomed to the inevitability of waiting, reluctantly dropped back and Vincent neared Father's threshold alone. Pausing outside in the corridor, Vincent hung his head and gathered his courage. He wasn't afraid of Father's rejecting the child: Father would never do that. Not to *any* child. Vincent simply didn't want to have to explain how the child had come to be. Steeling himself, he stepped inside the threshold and called softly: "Father?"

Lifting his head from his hands, Father blinked a moment then picked his glasses up and put them on. "Vincent? Oh...Thank God. You've returned." He reached for his cane and stood, then limped his way around the desk. "I'd begun to worry. Mouse told me of your trip...of Tamara summoning you...."

Slowly descending the stairway, Vincent hesitated before approaching his father and embracing him. Images from his own childhood flitted through his mind. *Father will want this child. As he wanted me. Love it as he loved me.* Obviously puzzled by Vincent's fervent embrace and his hesitation, Father asked querulously, "Vincent? What is it?"

Ushering Father to a seat, Vincent paced for a moment, then forced himself to sit opposite the older man. His hands clenched as they rested on his knees, and without quite meeting Father's eyes, he came directly to the point: "Tamara summoned me...because...because there is to be...a child."

At first, Father didn't seem to understand, but after a moment or two, Vincent could see the change in him. Comprehension. Dismay. Resignation and understanding. "A child...I don't.... A child born of that...*thing* that John...Paracelsus...made of...of your son."

Standing then, feeling empty and defeated, Vincent turned away from the solid comfort Father offered. Had always offered. He tucked his hands up under his armpits and stared away from the candlelit study with its comfort to the shadow-haunted darkness beyond...watching for a darker shadow and not seeing it. Looking for his anger there. His rage. And feeling only emptiness. "Yes," he admitted finally. "Modred forced the girl and now...now Tamara says she will not keep the child if it is...."

"Like him. Like you," Father finished. "How did this happen? It was my understanding they kept the boy caged."

Bile rose in Vincent's throat as he pictured his son caged for most of his later life. He bowed his head. *No wonder the boy's rage was so great.* Vincent knew all too well about caging rage and the results of that imprisonment. It was only *one* of the reasons he'd been so fearful of any intimate contact with Catherine for so very long. Rage and self denial combined can be a fearsome combination. Rage and *forced* denial from others--those who should have been his family--must have been even worse. "Yes," he admitted in a harsh whisper. "They kept him caged. But nothing can be imprisoned forever, Father."

"You'll bring the child here, of course," Father offered quite predictably. "There is nothing else to be done. Your grandchild...my heavens...my *great* grandchild...must *not* be reared anywhere else! Certainly not in Paracelsus' domain!"

Vincent spun with frustration, not knowing how to make Father understand the extent of the problem. "And what if the child is normal? And the mother wishes to keep it? I haven't the right to take her child from her."

Father's face was a mask of indecision that matched the turmoil Vincent felt. It was obvious Father was no happier about that prospect than his son. He looked very old and extremely tired. "What will you tell Diana, Vincent?"

Sinking into the worn leather chair beside Father's desk, Vincent shook his head in misery, knowing his decision was going to be difficult. "Nothing. I can tell her nothing, Father. And I don't know *how* I will be able to do that. But if I tell her...."

"And the mother decides to keep the child...." Father prompted sympathetically.

"It will tear her apart. I cannot raise her hopes."

"Which means, of course, that you can tell no one," Father finished for him.

By the time they'd reached the Hub, Jeanie had Marcia convinced she was going on the biggest adventure of her life and that everything would be marvelous. Coming down the steep stairway next to the Abyss was tricky, with Marcia making most of the trip with her eyes closed and Jeanie worried the whole way that she'd slip. When they finally found themselves on the last step, Marcia finally opened her eyes--took one glance at the still-descending Abyss on the right and skittered off into the widening tunnel to the left. "Wait!" Jeanie called frantically, rushing after the child. Around the first bend, the tunnel immediately branched into three and Jeanie had no idea which one Marcia had taken. Frightened, knowing the dangers that lay Below for someone who didn't know the ways, she called loudly, "Marcy! Wait! Oh...no."

Jeanie searched her pockets for her pipe tapper--something no child Below would be caught without--and rapped out an emergency message on the pipes. After a momentary silence, the pipes rang out with Pascal's tapped reply: help was on the way. Jeanie, knowing she could do little else, sat against the wall to wait for the help.

It was already nearing nightfall when Diana finally got away from Joe's office. Since she wasn't directly involved--in a legal sense--in the case, it was torture sitting and listening to the one-sided telephone conversations and trying to figure what was being said on the other side by Joe's end of the conversations and the color and taste of his emotions. All the while, she worried about the girls and where they were--whether they'd made it to safety. *They certainly left a trail of disaster behind them*, Diana thought. Their mother was hysterical, their father had been released and was obviously relieved. Though Jon Price attempted to seem concerned for his children's safety, Diana felt his acting job was pretty superficial. Unfortunately though, as grieving, hysterical parents, the Price's were now suing the police department for false arrest and the children's shelter for negligence. *And they'll probably win, too*, Diana thought angrily. Joe was absolutely furious.

Shrugging aside her worries about the problems Above, Diana hurried toward home to see if the children had made it safely. Descending into the familiar, torch-lit tunnels that radiated from the Hub, she was stopped in her tracks by the hastily tapped emergency message--horrified by the thought of Marcia roaming the tunnels with all their pitfalls alone. Taking careful note of Jeanie's location, Diana took off at a run to get to the spot.

As she traveled, Diana noticed that the pipes had fallen silent, Pascal obviously having called an all-quiet as he awaited news. By the time Diana made it to the junction at the end of the stairway, quite a few people had gathered, including Vincent and Cullen, who were even then preparing to head into the tunnels to search. Out of breath, panting and frantic, Diana skidded around the corner and almost slid into Jamie. She lifted questioning eyes to her husband, but he simply shook his head and turned toward the dark passage before them, directing Cullen down the left-hand side, he took the right. Jamie, Mouse and some of the older children headed down the middle one. Jeanie was crying and Diana turned her attention from the search to comfort the girl. Putting an arm around the sobbing child, Diana asked gently, "How long has she been gone?"

Jeanie shook her head and sniffed. "Don't know. I signaled Pascal as soon as it happened. She just...ran off. I didn't see which tunnel she took and she didn't answer me! What if she gets hurt?"

Diana stared at the milling crowd of concerned friends and family and back at the mouths of those dark tunnels. "It'll be okay, Jeanie. She wasn't gone long. *How far can she have gone, after all?*" Diana tried, though, to think of where those three tunnels led: one led toward the Reach, one turned toward the living areas--both of which were relatively safe, but the third--the one Vincent had taken--led to the maze.

Marcia hadn't really *meant* to run away from Jeanie. She'd just been so excited thinking about her new home and all the new friends, she couldn't wait. Besides, Jeanie kept telling her that nothing could hurt her here, so it *must* be true. When she realized she'd left her sister behind, Marcia turned back, but by then she'd taken a couple of turns and was thoroughly lost. There wasn't any more light here. It was very dark and she was scared. Tears slid down her cheeks and she cried loudly, calling for her sister, but no one came. Suddenly, she heard a voice coming out of the blackness around her. "Hi! Don't be scared."

The voice startled her, but she was so glad to hear a friendly voice she recovered quickly. She peered around, but couldn't see *anything* in the darkness. "I can't see you," she wailed. "It's too dark."

"Oh." The voice sounded puzzled. As though the darkness was a problem it hadn't considered. She felt a hand close around hers, and heard the voice again. "Here I am. What's your name? Mine's Kristopher."

"Marcy. My name's Marcy. Why's it so *dark* Kristopher?" With her free hand, Marcy wiped at her tears. She wasn't scared any more. This must be one of the friends that Jeanie had told her about.

"It's *not* dark for me," the voice said. "C'mon. There're people lookin' for you. You really shouldn't be down here, you know. This way goes to bad places."

Marcia walked fearlessly beside her invisible new friend. It was dark, but she didn't mind. At least now she wasn't lost anymore. Before long she could see a light and hear someone calling her...then suddenly she came around a corner and there, standing in a golden light, was the person Jeanie had told her about: the man who looked like the cowardly lion. Vincent. *Except he doesn't look like him. Not really,* she thought as she stared up at him. It was a long way up. And he looked scared...like he was scared of *her*. She felt sorry for him, that he was scared. She looked around for Kristopher, so he could make Vincent not be scared, but she still couldn't see him.

Vincent knelt in front of her and held out a hand. "Don't be frightened. I won't hurt you." His voice was so soft and gentle that Marcia smiled and ran to him, letting him pick her up and hold her close.

"You must be Marcia," he told her. "I'm Vincent."

Vincent's long hair tickled her nose and she sneezed. She patted his cheek, feeling the soft fuzz that covered his face. "I know. I'm not scared," she told him as she looked around. "Where did Kristopher go?"

Vincent seemed surprised. "Kristopher was here?"

"He was nice," she said with a nod. "I was scared, but when he came, I wasn't anymore."

The big man just held her closer and she heard him whisper, "Thank you, Kristopher."

"Vincent's coming out!" Jeanie cried, being first to notice the light of the lantern. Diana could sense her husband's relief and knew he'd found the child. Turning to the pipes, she immediately tapped out a message for the other searchers, knowing Pascal would pass it on. When Vincent came clear of the passageway, he stooped to let Marcia down. The tiny girl stood close beside him, suddenly shy before all the strangers. Jeanie ran to her sister and hugged her fiercely.

It was only the space of perhaps five minutes before Cullen, Jamie, Mouse and the children returned from their search. The moment Jeanie spotted Cullen, she called out to him, and the concerned expression on the carpenter's lined face broke into a grin. Diana could hear Jeanie introducing him to Marcia, "...and this is my special friend, Cullen."

Vincent broke away from the small excited group, and approached Diana. "What happened? I thought the girls were safely in the children's shelter."

Shrugging, feeling obscurely embarrassed--thinking of Joe's reaction--and feeling the failure of the system personally, Diana explained, "They were. Jeanie panicked. Was afraid testifying would be too hard on Marcia."

"She found the thought of it too difficult to face when she was not much older than Marcia," Vincent reminded Diana. "And she remembered the peace she found here. It is, perhaps, understandable."

Watching Jeanie's animated discussion with Cullen, Diana noticed Marcia listening avidly, her small hand tightly clutching her sister's, her eyes round with interest under her unruly curls. Diana could sense no fear from the child, and was relieved. In fact, Marcia too, seemed drawn to Cullen and from the delight Diana could feel coming off Cullen in waves, she had a feeling the carpenter's lonely days

without a family were over. *Oh well*, she thought with a resigned sigh, *Marcia isn't really a baby anymore either. Before long she'll be as independent as Cathy.* She admitted to herself that for a short time she'd honestly thought perhaps Marcia would join *their* family. *But it's much better for her to stay with Jeanie...and Cullen needs them more than we do.* Vincent's hand closed around hers, and lifting her eyes to his, she knew he understood exactly what she was thinking. Shrugging elaborately, she muttered, "It was a dumb dream. No big deal."

"Not so dumb. Nor anything small." He put his arm around her and drew her away from the slowly dispersing crowd. "Come. Cullen will take Marcia to Father. Must you return Above?"

"No. Not much I can do, there. I need to send a message to Joe, though, that the girls are safe."

Vincent waved to Kipper, who trotted over. "Kipper. Could you take a message to Joe Maxwell for Diana?"

"Sure. I know where they live. What'cha want to tell him?"

Relieved that the message could be taken care of so easily, Diana told the boy, "Just tell Joe that both the girls are safe, here. With Cullen. Tell him to keep us informed, okay?"

"Sure thing!" Kipper darted off in the direction of the stairs and was gone around the first curl of steps in moments.

"Come, now," Vincent told her firmly. "It has been a long day. Let us collect our *own* children and go for supper. I imagine William is getting tired of waiting. Sometimes I think he believes that emergencies are contrived merely to inconvenience him."

Much later, after Marcia's meeting with Father and after evening meal, as Vincent and Diana walked slowly to their chamber, they discussed the evening. Vincent tried "listening" to Diana's emotions, hoping she wouldn't relapse into her depression, but his sense of her seemed muted, quiet. Their own children had been delighted to have her home, so perhaps that had helped. "Marcia seems to be settling in remarkably well," he commented cautiously.

Diana chuckled. "Did you see how close she stayed to Cullen all during evening meal? I think she thought William would bite until he came out with the cookies."

Relieved at his wife's composure, Vincent relaxed. "William can be remarkably intimidating at times, but the children always soften him." He yawned, feeling the events of the past few days closing in on him.

Nudging him with her elbow, Diana teased, "Guess I can't talk you into anything remotely intense tonight, huh?"

Startled, Vincent waited for the usual surge of desire that Diana's teasing usually instilled in him, but none came. *I'm not **that** tired*, he thought. Puzzled at his absence of desire, he'd traveled several paces before he realized he hadn't answered her. Meeting her dancing eyes, he felt moderately guilty--but not at all amorous. He considered trying to see if he could get into the mood, but he knew she'd feel the difference. Finally, as he felt her light mood dimming, he shook his

head. "No. I don't believe so. Not tonight." Holding her a little more tightly, he asked, "Do you mind terribly?"

"No," she answered, eyeing him oddly. "That's okay." But he could tell that though she didn't *mind* particularly, nor blame him, she was puzzled. "You okay? What happened, down below?"

Carefully, Vincent schooled himself to avoid giving too much away. "Not so very much," he said quietly. "Tamara merely wanted some advice on some...problems...that Modred had left her with. I informed her I would assist her if anything further developed. It was nothing you need be concerned with." She still eyed him with a look that plainly said, *I know you're hiding something*, but there was little he could do to make her think otherwise. Diana was accustomed to solving puzzles and she knew *him* entirely too well. He knew he couldn't hide anything from her for too long, so he tried again to make it seem logical that he would still be upset about being reminded of his son. "I'm sorry, Diana. It is nothing so terribly disastrous. It is only that...it is difficult to put...certain things behind me, when Tamara reminds me."

"I suppose so," she admitted thoughtfully. "I'm sorry."

"It's nothing you could have prevented. You are not at fault." He shrugged. "I must simply learn to deal with it." He paused for a long moment before continuing. "Diana, the world Paracelsus built below us is unstable. It always has been and is more so now, so many years after his death. Tamara has been trying to hold it together, but I do not believe it will last much longer."

"From what I know of it, I can't exactly consider that a loss," she stated flatly.

"No," he whispered. "Perhaps not."

They were both silent for some time after that, and even later as they prepared for bed conversation was sporadic. Diana sat crosslegged on the bed brushing her hair and watching him as he wrote in his journal, and he could feel the questions in the soft tangle of emotions that flowed through to him.

"You comin' to bed anytime soon?" she asked gently. Perhaps still hoping for a rekindling of interest on his part.

Regretful that he couldn't interest himself in what she wished, Vincent shook his head as he temporarily put aside his pen and turned toward her. "No. Not for a time." Her hair flowed softly over her shoulders, a spreading wealth of silken fire that contrasted sharply with the cotton nightdress. "You are so lovely, Diana. And so generous with yourself. Don't be concerned for me, Love. I'll be fine." He hesitated a moment, not wanting to bring up something that would hurt her, but wanting to be certain *she* was not *too* disappointed over Marcia. "Are you all right...about the child? About Marcia?"

A shadow crossed her face, but only for a moment. "I'm fine. I only want what's best for *her*. If she needs some mothering, I'll still be here, and Cullen seems delighted."

Vincent smiled then, thinking of the look on his friend's face. "I know. He's already asked me to help him enlarge the room beside his for the girls. It seems Jeanie was more eager than he thought she'd be to have him as family...and he acquired Marcia as a bonus." He rose and went to the bed, sitting next to her to kiss her. "Goodnight, Diana."

"Goodnight."

Diana curled up under the quilts on her side of the bed, and smiling, Vincent left her to sleep. Returning to his journal, he picked up his pen and tried once more to order his thoughts.

Children are the center of all things. They are the beginning of ones' self and the recipients of one's hope for the future. I watch the children grow, here--nurtured by love and understanding--and am so constantly grateful that the infant I was had the fortune to be brought here. As Jeanie and Marcia--and others--are fortunate to have found this refuge.

Glancing back at the bed, Vincent saw that Diana had fallen into an deep sleep untroubled by uneasy dreams. Sighing, he turned and bowed his head to continue writing in the flickering candlelight.

I think sometimes...of the terrible things I've done. Of the rage I've carried most of my life: with one part of me making a sin of abstinence...the other a sin of desire. Burying and caging the part of myself I couldn't face, couldn't control. And the result? Jacob and Modred--both my sons conceived without my knowledge and with horror surrounding them: first the loss of self that led to Jacob's conception and Catherine's murder at his birth--and second, the child the Other fathered, again without my knowledge. And that child reared by Paracelsus as a weapon against me. Do the gods indeed visit the sins of the fathers upon the children? I pray that is not true.

Vincent closed the leather-bound journal and thought back to the time when Catherine put it into his hands. At that moment, it had seemed he could begin a new life--leave behind the uncertainties and pain of the old. But the moment hadn't lasted and the promise of it was destroyed by what came after. But in a very real sense, Catherine's death had been for him a baptism by fire, forcing him to face his rage in ways he'd never thought possible. And in the end he'd found Diana, who had been his hope, his resurrection and his life. *Yet still I battle with myself and walk a tightrope between light and dark. And my past wreaks havoc on my children.* Weary beyond mere tiredness, Vincent blew out the candle and began undressing for bed. Sliding between the sheets, he curled gratefully around Diana's warmth and remembered her body without passion. Tenderly, as he would remember holding a child. And fell into his dreams.

It was dark around him. A vast darkness without stars or warmth. Vincent tried sensing beyond the confines of his physical body, confident he would find the darkness familiar, but he could sense nothing. Nothing. Everything was wrong. It was sensory deprivation of the worst kind. No emotion, nothing tactile...only himself. And even that felt wrong. Frightened, now, unsure even of whether he should--or could--move safely, he felt trapped. Then the crying began, thin and far away...and he took a step toward the sound...and tumbled, falling endlessly, twisting and turning with nothing around him but the darkness and that thin, ragged, distant wail.

Vincent started awake, bolting upright in the darkened chamber. Eyes wide, chest heaving, body covered with a cold sweat, he trembled as Diana slept on,

unaware of his distress, though she turned restlessly as the warmth of his body left hers. He stared wildly around their chamber, noting with growing relief the solid shadows of the furniture. His heart thudded against his ribcage and placing one hand over it he took several deep breaths to calm himself.

Once his heart stopped racing and Vincent could think clearly, it puzzled him that Diana had not sensed his distress or been drawn into his dream. Leaning on his elbow, he watched his wife for several long minutes. He tried sensing her, but realized his sense of her was distant...as though she, herself was far distant from him. Alarmed now, he carefully removed himself from their bed and sat across the room, thinking back over the past day or so. Trying to pinpoint when he had begun feeling the strangeness that he'd been feeling on and off all day. As he tried pulling together his memories of the day, he realized that even his sense of Father had been muted. Still there, but not as intense. Easier to miss. As his own concern over the lost child had been less intense than normal. He hadn't felt the need to rush to Marcia's immediate rescue when the message sounded, being content to believe that the search could be shared. His lack of desire for Diana was the same sort of thing. None of his emotions were as violent or as vivid...or as overwhelmingly important as they normally were. As they should be. Or perhaps more accurately, all of his senses *and* emotions in general were less acute. Lacing his fingers together and leaning elbows on knees, he thought anxiously, *This is wrong. Very wrong.* The first possibility that occurred to him was that he was once more losing his empathy, but he dismissed that almost immediately. This was nothing like the complete burnout he'd experienced after making love to Catherine--when their emotions looped back upon themselves without his being prepared for the intensity of that sharing. No. This was completely different. *Not a lack of empathy, then. More a lack of...of intensity.* Yet, his dream-terror when he fell had certainly lacked no intensity. *What then?* he thought, thoroughly confused. *What is it, precisely, that I am lacking?*

Diana stirred again, turning onto her back and reaching across the bed with one hand--obviously searching for him even in her sleep. Vincent sighed and carefully returned to bed. The last thing he wanted was for Diana to wake and question him...as she inevitably would. As he slid under the covers Diana moved toward him and curled spoonlike against his back, looping one arm over him. Her breathing settled back into her regular sleep pattern and Vincent smiled. *In some ways, my love, you are very predictable.*

Unable to return immediately to sleep himself, he stared off into the darkness, wondering what was wrong with him. Eventually his eyelids grew heavy and he slept once more.

Diana slowly woke to the metallic tapping that characterized life Below. Her subconscious mind, which was accustomed to the background music of the pipes, automatically dismissed and ignored the softer messages that preceded the one that woke her: William's summons for breakfast. When she opened her eyes she saw Vincent just finishing lacing his boots. "Um. 'Mornin'," she greeted him.

He smiled back at her, but seemed distracted and the emotions she read from him were off as well. Just like the previous night. *I'd've expected him to be more pleased I was home and the case resolved so I won't have to go back. Instead he's still*

distant. She rolled out of bed and snatched up the jeans and sweatshirt she'd laid out over the table the night before and began dressing. All the while she watched her husband.

"You can stop worrying, Diana," Vincent said finally, lifting his eyes to hers. "I'm certain it's nothing."

She grinned as she stuffed her feet into her tennis shoes. "Oh, so you admit there *is* something bothering you."

"Perhaps," he admitted reluctantly. "But let me puzzle it out for a time."

The fact that he didn't rise to her teasing, worried her. *He must really be concerned about whatever it is.* Does it have anything to do with Tamara or those people down below?"

"No. Nothing like that." He paused then, and added, "At least I do not believe so."

Vincent took her hand as he rose and she fell in beside him as he headed for the Commons. She asked gently, "Are you *sure* there's nothing I can do to help?"

He seemed to think seriously about the question, then shook his head. "Not at the moment. As I said, let me puzzle it out for a time. Perhaps when I have more pieces for you to work with. Right now, it's only a general feeling of unease."

"The dreams?"

He shrugged, still not quite meeting her eyes. "I do not *know*, Diana. Leave it for now. Please?"

He didn't say any more and she didn't ask. Just watched and waited.

The rest of the day went as normally as one might expect with a newcomer in the tunnels and a long meeting with Father about what had happened, Above. Classes went on as scheduled, and Diana updated the sentry schedule and even did evening rounds on the Manhattan sentry stations--Vincent finally deeming that part of the city less dangerous for her than the rest, which he insisted on doing himself. Though Diana ground her teeth in frustration, she agreed. Simply doing the rounds and saying nothing. Knowing from long experience that one had to sneak up on Vincent a little at a time to change his mind about *anything*. As she finished checking the last of the stations, with a side trip to make sure of the safety of one of the less-used entrances, she thought about Vincent's behavior last night and today. *He seems okay for the most part. Just distracted. Maybe tired, still.* She couldn't help smiling to herself as she thought of how *normal* he'd seemed all day, though. *Blockheaded as usual. No difference there. In fact, if anything he seems easier, somehow.* And he had. Though he'd argued with her about taking over some of his rounds, he'd seemed to back down more quickly, made less fuss. *Maybe by next week I'll have him letting me do the Bowery.* She barked a laugh. "That'll be the day!"

As she headed home, feeling more cheerful than when she'd started out, she couldn't help thinking, *Maybe he was just overtired last night. And if he's in a good mood....* She smiled as she made her plans for conquest, feeling the pleasant tingle of anticipation whetting her desire.

Vincent finished his rounds and waited for Diana to go with him to the bathing pool. He'd already put the children to bed and read to them, and now he was lying

on the bed thinking. It occurred to him that he hadn't seen Kristopher about lately. Not since their trip to the Crystal Cavern with Cathy, although apparently he'd helped Marcia the night before. "Kristopher," Vincent whispered softly. "Are you around?"

He listened closely and waited, but didn't hear a thing. Sighing, he started to get up when Kristopher's greeting coming from directly behind him caused him to jump, even though he'd half expected it. "Kristopher," he muttered with no little irritation, "I *do* wish you wouldn't do that."

Perched on the pillows behind him, Kristopher just smiled. "Well, you *did* call me, didn't you?"

Knowing argument was useless, Vincent merely nodded. "Where have you been? And thank you for helping Marcia last night."

Untangling his legs and hopping off the bed, Kristopher said abstractedly, "Oh. That was nothing. I like kids."

I know you do. You're like one, yourself, Vincent thought, then said aloud, "Last time you talked, you gave me some advice...."

Kristopher glanced over his shoulder, an expression of intense curiosity on his face. "Yeah. So what d'ya think?"

"About *what*? You told me to look to the beginning. The beginning of what, Kristopher? And before that, you spoke of...of a *fuzzy* child. Is the child you spoke of my grandson?"

Kristopher plopped down on the bed again, his look gleeful. "*You're gonna be a grandpa? Great! Bet Cathy would laugh about that!*"

"Don't do that! Please answer the question! You knew, didn't you?" Vincent accused.

"Maybe." Kristopher shrugged and began fading. "Look. I've gotta go. I've said too much already. Just remember: look to the beginning."

Confused, Vincent rose and paced. *Look to the beginning. The beginning of what?* He was still trying to think of what kind of beginning Kristopher could've meant when Diana came in.

"Hi," she said offhandedly as she came through the door. "See? I'm all in one piece. Everything's secure on my end. Yours?"

"Secure? Oh. Yes. Everything's fine. Are you ready to go to the bathing pool?" Vincent pulled his attention back to Diana, who had so wanted to make love last night. He thought that perhaps a romantic interlude in the bathing pool would help get him in the mood.

Her slow smile told him she was pleased with his decision and he could sense her delight. It occurred to him that for the most part he *could* sense Diana--and everyone else--fairly normally. It was his own emotions that were muted. And it was the fact that his own did not meet or blend with those of others in the same manner they always had before that made them *seem* less vivid.

Gathering their robes and towels, they walked slowly toward the pool. "It's still early. I hope it's not occupied."

"We'll have to take our chances," he said as he drew her in closer.

When they reached the pool, Vincent was disappointed to see that the pool was in use, the canvas door cover stretched across. He leaned against the wall and held

Diana as she settled against him. "Do you want to wait? We could use the shower...."

She sighed. "It's not the same. Do you mind if we wait?"

"No. Of course not. It can't be long." At least Vincent *hoped* it wouldn't be. Diana turned toward him, snaked her arms around his neck and nuzzled under his chin. Lacing his fingers behind the small of her back, Vincent pulled her hips in more tightly against him and tried to draw on *her* desire to spark his own. His lips traced her neck, he trailed gentle kisses over her upraised arms as she shifted and nudged her body against him. As delightfully pleasant as these activities were, he was distressed to realize that he simply did *not* particularly want to make love. And worrying about that fact wasn't helping, either.

Diana pulled back, staring questioningly into his face. "Vincent?"

Fortunately Vincent was spared an answer, as they could hear stirring behind the curtain. "I believe the pool will be free in a few minutes," he finally managed.

Diana stepped away from him and they waited more decorously until the curtain opened and Mary stepped out, dressed for bed in her thick robe, her loose hair hanging down her back. She smiled primly at them both--a smile that seemed to clearly say she *knew* what they'd been doing--and murmured a gentle, "Goodnight. I'm sorry to have kept you."

After Mary was safely around the corner, Diana covered her mouth and giggled. Leaning over, she whispered throatily in his ear, "I'm s**** sorry I *kept* you...." then nipped his ear.

He jumped half a foot.

She glared, obviously frustrated. "Whatever is the *matter* with you lately?"

Vincent sighed and forced himself to look at his lovely wife, who currently stood, hands on hips with a singularly unhappy look on her face. "I don't *know* what's wrong," he admitted. "I wish I *did*!"

Diana pushed aside the canvas door and pulled him inside the bathing room. "Okay. I *knew* there was something bothering you." She started pulling off her jeans as he stood stiffly, acutely embarrassed and miserable. Looking up through thick strands of red hair, she told him fiercely, "Get undressed. We both need a bath and we need to figure out what's wrong."

Obediently pulling off his vest and shirt, Vincent sat and began unlacing his boots. Feeling more miserable by the minute, he finally told her, "I suppose I *should* clarify the situation. I *do* know what's wrong. Only I don't know *why*."

Bare and lovely in the candlelight, Diana turned to him before she slipped into the water. "Okay," she told him with a smile. "So we need to figure out *why* I can't get a rise out of you...is that it?"

"I *do* wish you wouldn't put it *quite* that way," he muttered indignantly as he followed her into the pool.

As Diana soaped his back, he told her *some* of what had been happening. "I'm not certain when it began, Diana. But it's as though I don't feel things as urgently...as acutely...as I normally do...so even though I sense *your* desire, it doesn't seem to be enough to make me...well...want to *do* anything about it."

"My turn," Diana said tersely, turning around so Vincent could begin soaping her. "And I suppose you've been obsessing about this, too, huh?" she questioned.

"Wouldn't *you*?" He slid his hands over her back then around her waist.

"Yeah. Well, maybe." Diana was quiet for a few moments as he diligently soaped the rest of her body, sliding his hands gently over slick curves. He was beginning to be...well...just a *little* interested and tried to concentrate on what he was doing. But then Diana started talking again and it distracted him. "So what does all this have to do with your dreams? It's gotta have something to do with those. It's *got* to, Vincent."

His dreams. The baby that resembled him...or Modred. Vincent lost any amorous interest he *might've* been developing. "I don't know," he told her with growing frustration. Of course, now he had to silently add the new child...his grandchild...to the list. The dream *could* have been prophetic, but he couldn't tell that to Diana. But something else *did* occur to him. Something he hadn't mentioned to her. "Diana. He's angry with me."

"He? He who? The baby in the dream?" She turned back to face him, her face set in the determined expression she often had when she was involved in a case.

Vincent thought back to the time when he was traveling to see Tamara--to his conversation with his other half. "The Other," he explained. "Mikey. He's furious with me because I wouldn't kill them."

Diana began a rather business-like job of rinsing the soap off both of them. Brows knit in a frown, she was hardly paying any attention to him at all, now. Almost looking through him in her concentrated effort to figure out what he meant. "Make sense, Vincent. *Who* did Mikey want you to kill?"

"Them. The people who live below us. The people who so badly mistreated my...*his* son. He wanted me to kill them, and I wouldn't. He became furious with me."

Diana remained very still, then nodded, as though that made perfect sense to her. "What did he tell you?"

"He told me I was ineffectual. That I frustrated him beyond his bearing and he wouldn't tolerate it any longer."

"And then he left?"

"Yes." Puzzled, Vincent asked her, "What is it, Diana?"

Diana shook her head and climbed out of the bathing pool. He followed her and waited patiently, drying himself thoroughly as she dressed in her nightgown and robe. She was obviously shuffling the pieces he'd given her and he didn't want to disturb her. *Perhaps it's something about **him**. Diana knows him far better than I do.* He finished drying and was shrugging into his robe when she finally spoke. "That's got to be it, Vincent. You said your emotions were less intense...."

"Except my fear," he interrupted. Qualifying. "In my dream last night, I dreamed I was falling. I was terrified."

Diana picked up their clothes and motioned for him to follow her. They left the bathing chamber and walked slowly toward their own. Eventually Diana explained where her mind had taken her. "It fits. Mikey doesn't know what terror is. But he is your rage...and a good deal of your passion and desire as well. You should *know* that by now. Even when he's not actually in control, normally those emotions are still active inside you. But if he has totally withdrawn, then maybe you wouldn't *have* any access to them. At least not to the most intense form of them."

That thought made Vincent acutely uneasy, though he knew Diana was rarely wrong in things of this sort. But he couldn't allow himself to believe what she was saying. He couldn't think of a thing to say.

By the time they'd reached their chamber, Diana had apparently lost patience with his silence. She told him curtly, "You've never completely accepted him, Vincent. Has it ever occurred to you how much that hurts him?"

Astonished that Diana would take *his* side, Vincent stared at her with total incomprehension. How could she ask him to *accept* the rage...the killing and the blood? Because he couldn't simply accept the desire. If he accepted one emotion, he necessarily accepted the other. As being a part of himself. The thought was so abhorrent to him that he almost retched.

As though she knew his thoughts--as perhaps she did--Diana simply told him gently, "Maybe he *is* the baby in your dreams, Vincent. Maybe the dream represents his desire to be accepted by you. Rescued by you. Loved by you." Vincent tried to turn away, but catching his hand and stopping him, Diana continued her explanation. "Nobody loves him. Nobody wants him. Nobody needs him. Except me. He knows that. He's angry because you can't accept the fact of *his* grief and overwhelming rage...can't help him deal with it."

Moving into his arms, Diana rested against his chest, nuzzled his neck, and he held her tightly. Frightened to face the fact of what she was saying. He buried his face in the soft scented mass of her hair, and trembled. "I *can't*, Diana...I can't."

"I did," she told him. Simply. Gently. Her expression was calm and sure. He could almost hear her thoughts: *If I accepted all that you are, loved all that you are, then you can, too.*

A knock on their door woke Vincent abruptly not long after he'd finally settled into an uneasy sleep. Diana was still mumbling incoherently when he bolted from the bed: Any time someone disturbed his rest in the middle of the night, Vincent knew it was important. And the fact that the summons hadn't come over the pipes meant it wasn't an intruder. That would've been reported by one of the late-night sentries. Dragging his robe on, Vincent pulled the heavy door open far enough to see the messenger: Father, whose face was as set and concerned as Vincent had ever seen it.

"What is it, Father?"

The older man jerked his head toward the outside passage, indicating he wanted his son to join him there. With a glance and murmured "Go back to sleep," to Diana, who was still blinking sleepily, he joined his father outside.

"A messenger just came to me--in my chamber--with a message for *you*, Vincent." Father seemed irritated, indignant. But Vincent realized it was because the stranger had been able to simply walk into Father's chamber without anyone knowing. Not at being roused.

"Tamara?"

Father bobbed his head. "Apparently the girl is in labor. Tamara felt you would want to know."

Vincent sagged against the door. "It is happening sooner than I'd expected. Father...if Diana asks...tell her I will return shortly."

He turned to open the door and Father put a hand on his arm. Glancing back, he met his father's eyes. "It will come right, Vincent. Somehow."

"I hope so, Father."

When Vincent slipped back inside the chamber, Diana was still peacefully asleep, and he was immensely grateful. He hadn't known how he was to explain to her where he was going. He watched her sleep as he silently pulled on his clothes and boots, preparing for his journey...wondering what the outcome was to be. When he was finished, he eased out of the chamber as silently as he'd entered.

Traveling swiftly through the more familiar passages, Vincent slowed once he found his way into the warmer, darker tunnels that marked the beginning of Paracelsus' old domain. In addition to the oppressive heat, he could never quite forget who built this community, and he always felt uneasy down here. *Old wounds heal slowly...if at all*, he thought as he turned a corner and almost ran into someone. Startled into an involuntary roar, Vincent leaped backwards and landed crouched and ready for battle. And immediately felt more *there* than he had in the past two days as he let himself go. Relieved to sense the familiar rage rise. This time Vincent gratefully let the Other have control.

A cheerful chuckle drifted his way, making the Other grind his teeth before Kristopher ever rounded the corner. "Bool," Kristopher chirped. "It worked, didn't it?"

Lashing out with one hand, the Other grabbed Kristopher by the front of his shirt, digging his claws into the fabric and jerking the young man closer. The impious sprite's obnoxious grin didn't fade at all, and it infuriated the beast further, but just as he lifted his other hand for the killing stroke, Kristopher's form became insubstantial in his hand and slipped through his fingers. Momentarily astonished, the Other spun, searching for his prey and found nothing. He then heard another voice and turned to see Vincent leaning against the wall, his arms folded across his chest.

"I never thought I'd say it, but it's good to see you," Vincent commented with a smile.

The Other glanced down at his hands and flexed them. They were solid. Real. It was Vincent who was unsubstantial. He'd never before been in control--totally in control--without having to fight for it in some manner and force Vincent into the cage...and from the cage you *had* no say. Oh, sometimes one could slip out, sneak around the edges and become--as Vincent was now--an image. But that image had no real power. Wary and suspicious, he peered at Vincent through strands of hair. He didn't trust easy victories. "You gave it to me. Why?"

Vincent's image shrugged, pushed away from the wall and joined him. "Perhaps because Kristopher irritates me, as well. You couldn't kill him anyway. And because I wanted to talk to you."

The Other snorted in disdain. "You *never* want to talk to me. You'd rather pretend I don't exist."

They were walking together now, and Vincent was silent for a few paces. Then he said quietly, "I've been wrong."

The Other laughed at that: a huge, booming sound that echoed off the rock. "You? Admitting you were wrong? And about *me*?" He stopped abruptly and shoved a knuckle into his ear. "That's impossible. I must've heard you wrong."

Vincent circled him with a curious look on his face. "No. Your hearing is acute as ever. I just realized, finally, what Diana has known all along: that I need you. That without you I cannot be the person I've always been or even who I wish to be."

Even more suspicious than before, the Other followed Vincent's motion with a swiveling head. When Vincent stopped circling, the Other sniffed the air. Smelled sulphur. Realized how warm it was, and remembered where they were. "I know where we are," he told Vincent's shadow. "Did you finally decide to let me kill them?"

"No." Vincent sighed, and to the Other's vast amazement, placed a sympathetic hand on his shoulder. He could *feel* the hand...as he'd felt Vincent when he'd fought physically with him years back. He hadn't tried that much in later years. Fighting yourself is singularly painful, they'd both found. He stared as Vincent continued. "No, you can't kill them. These poor people are not our enemy. *Paracelsus* was. And we've already killed *him*."

"They *caged* my son!"

"In self defense," Vincent reminded him. "Anyone is entitled to defend themselves. They are not rightful prey."

Confused, now, the Other fell silent. He was unaccustomed to thinking things out. That was Vincent's job. "All right," he said, tacitly admitting the possibility that Vincent might be right. "Then why are we here?"

"The woman...the girl, rather...is in labor."

Truly and completely baffled, the Other asked blankly, "What girl?"

Vincent stopped. Stared. "You don't *know*? You *always* know what I know. Where have you *been*?"

They stared blankly at one another for several long moments as the Other thought carefully. When he couldn't remember anything, he tossed his mane back and muttered, "I don't know. I was mad at you. Then I was here."

"I see," Vincent said, though his frown indicated he didn't. But he tried to explain. "There is to be a child. Modred's child. And Tamara says the mother will not keep it if it looks like me."

The Other slumped suddenly, feeling as though he'd taken a massive blow. He leaned back, supporting his weight against the warm stone. His heart was racing, his breathing shallow. He didn't know what was wrong with him. Though the stone and the air around him was uncomfortably warm, he was suddenly chilled. Icy. He could feel the touch of snow as it settled on him, and shivered.

Again he felt Vincent's comforting touch on his shoulder. "I know. I understand," Vincent was saying soothingly. "It's all right."

The Other was trying to collect himself, and the strength that flowed from Vincent to him helped, but he was still confused by the nightmare visions of his dreams. Of the freezing child, wailing in the night. The pain of a loss he couldn't understand. "It's summer now, Above," he muttered. "Not cold. Will they find him?"

"No one has to find him. This child will never know the cold. It will be loved. All will be well," Vincent assured him.

Still shaking, but feeling warmer--stronger--the Other's vision cleared. "I will kill them all and *take* the child." The decision settled him, chasing away the tremors. He began walking again, following the course he'd taken before to Tamara.

"No," Vincent was saying as he paced again at his side. "You must not do that. The girl--the mother--this wasn't her fault. None of these people are at fault...at least not enough to justify killing. If the child does not look like Modred the mother will keep it. And if it does look like him, she will give it to us. Either way, it will be loved. Wanted. As you are...now. And the dreams will stop."

The Other slowed, letting Vincent's words settle into his brain. *How would it have been*, he thought, *to have been loved?* Wanted. He didn't know. But Vincent was saying other things...that he *was* wanted...and loved, now. And not only by Diana. And turning to the shadow that paced beside him, the Other realized suddenly that it was true. Vincent's calm gaze was marred by the track of tears. Tears that mirrored the ones he felt on his own face.

In a halting voice, Vincent continued, speaking so softly that even his twin almost couldn't hear. "Diana was right," he said in a tone that was at once apologetic and fervent. "We are like brothers, you and me. And where brothers do not always agree...and even fight...as Devin and I do...there can still be love. And trust." Vincent swallowed tears for a moment and continued in a stronger voice, so the Other was able to hear him more clearly. "I feared you. Feared what you would do to those I loved, never realizing until recent months that you could never harm those I loved because you loved them, too. I don't...*like*...what you do. What *we* do. I never will. But...I understand. And I...thank you for your strength. For sometimes taking the simple, direct path when it is called for. When I cannot."

The Other didn't know what to say. He'd no experience in being a brother. Nor a son. The very thought was, at the moment, too large for him. He had no words to answer Vincent's offering of trust and acceptance. Once more, he felt an all-encompassing weakness and trembled, shaking so hard he felt certain he'd fall. He wanted to tell Vincent that he, too, had come to realize how much he needed Vincent's calm wisdom. His reason. That he'd come at times to envy it as he envied the love Vincent received and that was denied him. But he couldn't say these things, for words were not always easy for him. But from the way his twin was watching him, holding his hand out to him, he didn't think he had to, for Vincent knew.

"Come," Vincent was saying. "Let us go see our grandchild. Embrace the future and find what it holds." Gathering his strength, the Other took Vincent's hand a moment, then released it. They walked on together silently for a long while, then finally Vincent asked, "Do you like the name Diana has given you? Mikey?"

The Other shrugged, feeling slightly embarrassed. Anything that Diana gave him, he accepted with joy. He had no experience in being *brother* or *son*, perhaps, but Diana had given him some experience as *lover*. "It is a name. And it pleases her to call me so." He couldn't stop the wolfish grin that Vincent mirrored. "Besides," Mikey told him with a touch of humor, "at least it's not *Vincent*!"

As they neared the community, Mikey became nervous. "Take it. You are more suited to this than I. It is too easy to kill when I am here."

"I trust you," Vincent said with astonishing calm. "But if you wish, I will take it. Stay close, though."

There was a blurring of senses and Mikey realized Vincent was back in control. Relieved of responsibility, he allowed himself the luxury of remaining close...alert and attentive. Completely with Vincent's knowledge. With his trust. It was an odd feeling, but one he thought he could learn to like.

Vincent felt better than he had for some time. Despite the heat and his concern over what the child's mother would decide, he felt remarkably optimistic that--as Father had told him--things would indeed be well in the end. *I suppose*, he thought with a touch of irony, *I must thank Kristopher again*.

The walls around him were noticeably lined with an increasing amount of flickering torches, which only added to the heat, but Vincent drew comfort from the fact that the torches also meant he was closer to his goal. He began noticing--and sensing--people around him. Staying carefully distant, the watchers would glance at him, then scurry away. Not overtly fearful, but still cautious.

He became frustrated because he had no idea where he needed to go and no one seemed likely to tell him. It seemed discourteous that the messenger Tamara had sent for him hadn't waited to guide him. Stopping and listening to his surroundings, he could hear nothing beyond the slight stirrings and scufflings of the hidden watchers. He tried concentrating on the emotions around him, thinking perhaps that could lead him. His bond with Jacob had led him to Catherine, and though that had involved the tentative bond between father and son, he felt that from this distance he might be able to sense the mother's pain and *that* might lead him. He reached and scanned. *Nearby, the expected curiosity. Fear. Anger. Then, more distant...Pain...Pain...Fear.* There! Turning toward the west, Vincent lengthened his stride and hurried toward the pain and fear that drew him. Cyclic...rising and falling. Peaking and then dying off suddenly. As with Catherine. And Diana. And the closer he got, the more painful it became, sometimes stopping him and almost doubling him over. *I don't know how women do it*, he thought with sympathy. Thanks to Diana's instructions, he could now lessen the intensity of what he received--block out some, but not all so he could still use it as a guide. He'd shared *all* the pain with Diana, but he was certainly no masochist and had no intention of doing so this time.

Rounding a corner, Vincent startled a group of people waiting outside the chamber where the birth was occurring. One of the men was the man who had led him to Tamara several days ago. The man came forward to greet him. The rest of the crowd dispersed and disappeared within moments. "Sorry I didn't stay. Rita wanted me here."

"Rita is the mother's name?"

"My daughter," the man offered, almost a challenge.

The two men stared at one another, then Vincent bowed his head. "I'm sorry. I didn't know." He understood, now, why the messenger didn't wait. Another pain came, catching Vincent by surprise and he stumbled back, clutching his abdomen. The girl's father watched him in astonishment.

"What's wrong?" the girl's father asked anxiously.

The pain went on and on and a wretched screaming from the adjoining chamber shredded Vincent's nerves. Then there was a blessed peace and silence.

Wiping sweat from his dripping brow, Vincent stretched with relief and leaned back against the wall.

"What is it?" the man asked again.

Vincent shook his head. "Nothing. I'm fine. I believe the child has been born."

The man turned and dashed to the threshold to peer inside, falling back immediately as Tamara met him at the door. "Is she all right? Is the baby...."

"She's fine, Eloy," Tamara reassured him. "The baby is a boy." She lifted her eyes to Vincent's. "And she wants to see you, Vincent."

"An' me?" Rita's father asked. "Can I go in?"

Tamara shook her head. "Not right now, Eloy. She asked me to talk to you."

The disappointment clouding Eloy's face radiated to Vincent in a wave. He certainly understood how the man must feel, but he'd not made the request so there was little he could do about it. Turning away, he walked slowly past the two people into the birth chamber.

The exhausted girl lying on the bed seemed barely older than Samantha. It was, indeed, the young girl who had brought him his dinner when he'd been here before. The child she held so carefully to her breast--hidden from his sight by a light sheet blanket--was held lovingly. "I hear...the child is a boy." Vincent managed finally.

She smiled tiredly and moved one hand to touch the baby's face, then motioned for Vincent to come closer so he could see. His heart aching--with loss or joy, he wasn't certain--Vincent moved to the bedside and peered down.

Into the face of his dreams. The baby looked like him. Like his son, Modred. He couldn't tear his eyes away as he touched the silken down on the tiny forearm, touched the delicate fingers and nails. Stared into eyes as blue as his own. He could feel Mikey's awe at the child and his frustration at the knowledge of impending loss. Looking across the bed, Vincent could see his other half staring unwaveringly at the infant. *She will keep him*, Mikey said, and Vincent could sense the same ambivalence in his twin that he was feeling.

Remembering his dreams. Mikey's dreams of his own birth and abandonment, Vincent thought wonderingly, *This child will be loved. That's what matters.*

The mother's voice broke the spell and Mikey was gone. "I can't keep him," she said, her voice breaking. "I can't."

Vincent lifted his eyes to the girl's and realized her sorrow. And his own hope. He struggled to allow her the choice. To keep from encouraging her to give her son away. "You could keep him. No one would take him from you. You are in a safe place."

Holding the baby closer, rocking him, she shook her head. "No, I can't. Look around. This place is dyin'. Just the old people are left an' a few of us kids. Anybody with any sense is clearin' out. An' I can't take him. An' I can't stay here. People remember his father."

Shoving his hands up under his armpits in an attempt to keep from reaching for the baby, Vincent thought of the two worlds above them: the glittering city on the surface with its complex joys and sorrows that this girl knew nothing of--that would eat her alive in weeks--and his own gentle candle-lit community of friends that could

offer guidance, love and hope for the future. "You *can* leave and still keep him. If you wish."

"How?" The hope mirrored in that young face, tilted up to his warmed him. "Come home with me. My grandchild...and his mother...will be safe and cared for there." At her smile of acceptance, he asked gently, "May I hold him?"

She nodded wearily, gratefully. "Could you send my father in?"

Nodding silently to her, Vincent told Mikey, *Take him. Hold your grandson.* Then, standing aside, he watched as Mikey took the child, cradling him close. And Mikey quietly left the chamber to send Eloy in to speak with his daughter.

A week later, Vincent reflected upon how easily things had fallen into place. The dreams were gone, Jeanie and Marcia had settled in the new room beside Cullen (which he and Marcus had spent all week helping enlarge), and Marcia fit into the community so well she might have been born here. As for himself, he and Mikey were seeing less and less of one another. They were no longer prisoners of one another, but brothers, and perhaps the reason he saw little of Mikey was because his darker half was now content and truly free for the first time in his life. But the oddest thing to Vincent was Diana's delight in becoming a grandmother. Aside from the immediate shock of the news, her most obvious reaction was to tease *him* about his age, but there seemed to be no sorrow left in her and she'd merely told him that now she *finally* had the child of *her* dreams to love. Vincent knew as he watched his family that their time of nightmares was over.

Sitting in his chair across from the bed, Vincent watched and listened while Rita changed the baby--who in turn was being scrutinized by Jacob, Toby and Cathy, who were all fascinated by the new arrival. Diana lounged across the bed, her gaze flicking across his from time to time, a secret smile on her face.

"Why's he got such little toes?" Cathy asked curiously as she craned her head, nose almost touching the small digits...and in distinct danger of being kicked by flailing feet.

"Because *he's* little," Rita answered absently, too busy to pay much attention to anything else but the task of learning how to be a mother to this squirming, kicking newcomer.

"He looks just like father," Jacob said. Meaning Vincent because Jacob Wells was *Grandfather*.

Toby was quiet as he frowned and examined the snaps on the tiny sleeper that Rita was struggling to put on the baby, and Vincent suspected a touch of sibling rivalry at work. He reached over and tweaked Toby's toe, which waved shoeless in the air. Surprised to attention, the boy turned to Vincent. "He gonna stay?"

Vincent smiled. "Most assuredly. And you and Jacob have the honor of helping him learn and grow. Quite a responsibility. You'll get to stand beside Rita with Jacob and Cathy at the Naming Ceremony tomorrow."

Jacob whispered something to Toby, then the two boys slithered off the bed and pelted out the door and down the passage. Cathy hesitated a long moment, obviously torn between the fascination she felt for the baby and her desire to go play.

Finally the boys' quickly fading voices drew her and she hopped off the bed and raced after them.

Rita breathed a sigh of relief as she straightened, shoving hair back from her face. Her son blinked up at her, perfectly silent and perfectly content. And still. "Now he's still!" she muttered.

Vincent chuckled, remembering his first times trying to dress Jacob. "Jacob was much the same. And Cathy. It becomes less difficult, with practice," he told Rita.

Rita picked the baby up and offered him to Diana, who nuzzled the child and spoke softly to him. Allowed him to hold her finger. Vincent could sense her contentment. Lifting her gaze from the baby, she told Vincent, "Did you know that Kristopher has left us a new painting in the Painted Tunnels?"

"Who's Kristopher?" Rita asked curiously.

"Our resident ghost," Diana responded with a quirk of a smile, watching for Rita's reaction. Vincent suppressed his own grin at Rita's obvious disbelief, knowing she'd eventually meet Kristopher and understand, but for now, she was obviously wondering if Diana was teasing her. "You will meet Kristopher," he told her with conviction. "Trust me. He is, indeed, a ghost."

When Rita left with the baby, Vincent rose from his seat across the room, closed the doors to the chamber and joined Diana on the bed. As he stretched his length out next to her, she reached up tenderly to trace the lines around his eyes. "Is Grandpa getting sleepy?" she queried with a sweet, teasing smile. While awaiting his answer, she lay back on the pillows, her hair a bright sunburst of color under the more subdued soft blues and golds of their window. Her smile was an invitation.

The past week had been so busy, what with the hours Vincent spent helping to enlarge Cullen's rooms and Diana assisting with Marcia's adjustment to their world that they'd hardly had time to explore Vincent's "recovery." He quickly assessed the situation: the doors were closed, the children off playing until evening meal. Though never locked, the doors themselves were far too heavy for the children to open by themselves, and no adult would be so rude as to enter without announcing themselves. Caressing the silken strands of hair spread across his pillow, Vincent replied gently, "If I were tired, such a sight would assuredly revitalize me." Diana tenderly wrapped her arms around his neck, drawing him to her and Vincent realized with delight that the statement was more than mere words: he felt as though he *had* been sleeping and now was completely, thoroughly awake for the first time in his life. His body ached with desire for her and went into her arms eagerly.

The candles guttered and went out before they were finally disturbed. Cullen's voice on the other side of the door sounded amused and tolerant. "Vincent! William's serving and the kids are lookin' for you." Vincent shrugged into his robe and went to the door, half-expecting to see his entire family congregated on the other side, but it was only Cullen. Alone. The lanky carpenter grinned crookedly. "I sent the kids on ahead. I kinda figured you two might like a little time alone: you haven't had much lately."

"Thank you, Cullen," Vincent told him with a grateful nod. "We'll be there shortly."

Returning to the bed, Vincent opened a drawer in their dresser and reached inside to find a fresh candle to replace the spent one on the table. Carefully removing

the old one and replacing it with the new, he lit the wick and joined his wife, who opened her arms for him. As he snuggled in closer, burying his face in the most delightful places, Diana giggled and told him, "If you keep that up, we'll miss dinner and have half the community outside the door thinking we died."

"Of old age, no doubt," he said, laughing as she pushed him away. "Oh, very well. I suppose we'd best go."

Dressing quickly, they walked hand in hand down the deserted passageway, to join their family. "I know now," Vincent told her with solemn joy, "why at the root of many fairy tales there is a child. Children represent life and innocence. And love. And a hope for the future."

"Fairy tales are about life, Vincent," she responded. "Life and love. And we both know that love never dies."

Reaching around her with one arm, Vincent drew her close, thinking of all the ways love had changed his life. The many people whose love had touched him. Changed him with that love and with their shared dreams. *There is no journey's end to dreams*, he reflected with a vast sense of peace.

Kristopher scanned the tunnel wall as he paced slowly beside the mural, admiring Elizabeth's early works of the tunnel community. And Vincent. Later portraits included Catherine. And Jacob. But when he reached the portrait he'd done of Vincent and Diana, he paused only a moment before moving on to his latest one: the portrait of Vincent, Diana and all their children--and Rita and Vincent's grandchild. He sighed and turned away reluctantly. The wall was finished and the crisis was over. It was time to go. Old Smythe was missing him and needed his company far more than his friends here did. Shoving his hands deep in his pockets, the young man walked through the wall and disappeared.

"For each age is a dream that is dying,
Or one that is coming to birth."²

²From: Ode: 'We are the Music Makers' by Arthur William Edgar O'Shaughnessy