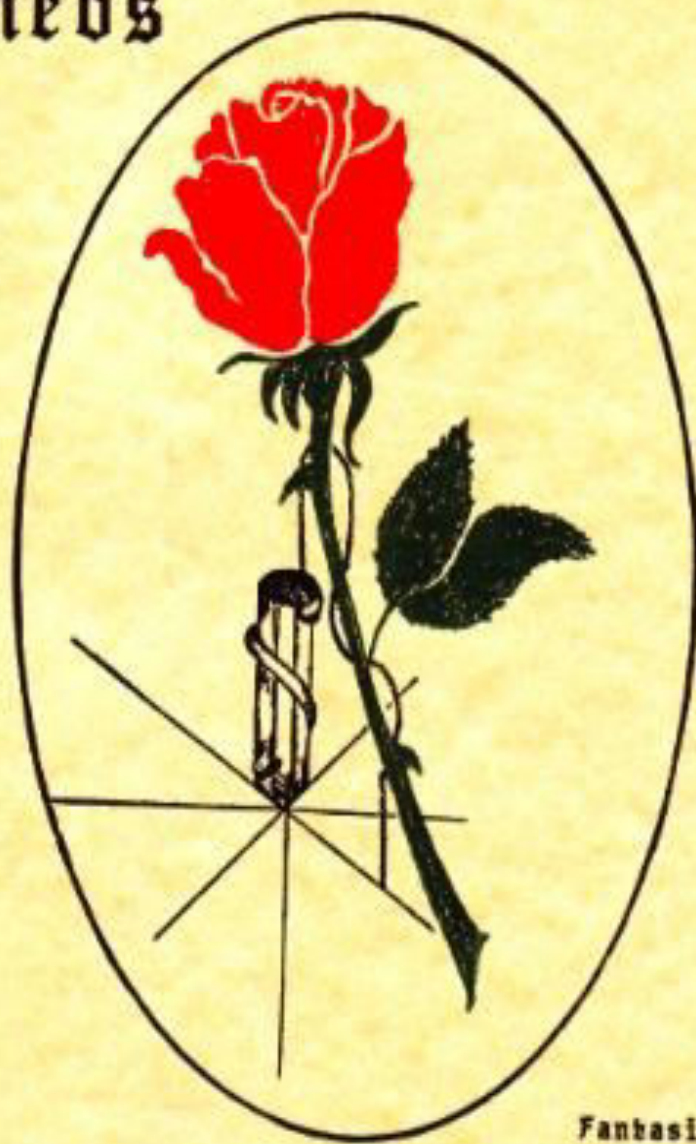


Chamber Cameos



Fantasies and Fables
of
Beauty and the Beast

CHAMBER CAMEOS NINE

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COMING ATTRACTIONS

THY CAMEO FACE
CAROLE MAYBERRY
CHAMBER CAMEOS NINE

*The cameo face
Enthrals my thoughts,
Enhances my being
Of past memories sought.*



*My crystal of love
Encircling thy neck
In yearnful love
Which forever reflects
Our connection.....Our bond
Our link with fate.*



*Oh! How I miss thee
My precious male.
I picture thy face
Within mind
My love doth embrace
Thy cameo face.*

BECAUSE I KNOW

PAULI MURRAY

CHAMBER CAMEOS NINE

Because I know

*That ecstasy and pain
are twin strings thrummed
on the soul's lyre.*

I will not cry

"I love you"

*But pain would say,
"I want you always near."*

AMONGST THE SOFTNESS OF THE SPIRITS

ANDREA DUMASIU

CHAMBER CAMEOS NINE

The cloaked knight fled past the dragon one last time, plunging his sword in deeply as he delivered the final blow. He skillfully pulled on the reigns of his black stallion to turn and face his kill. As it fell in a heap to the ground, the dragon suddenly turned into a beautiful princess, her hazel hair falling across her sweaty and bloodied face-----the face of Catherine.

Joe awoke with a start from his detailed nightmare. Something of familiarity lingered in his subconscious as he started towards the bathroom for a splash of cold water, and although his fear subsided, the feeling of continual concern remained.

For as long as Joe had known Catherine, she was always honest and admirable-----and yet, even before the day she hired into the D.A.'s office, she had begun to keep her private life just that-----private. She seldom spoke of outings with friends, and for as attractive as she was, Joe never noted her dating anyone other than Elliot Burch, and even that relationship was short-lived. No, as far as he knew, she did not date anyone other than that **'friend'** she elected to keep secret. There would be an occasional smile whenever Joe made a teasing remark, but nothing obvious-----no rendezvous luncheons, no private telephone calls, not even flowers sent to the office on her birthday or holidays other than that single red rose she kept in pressed glass, framed and hung over her desk. And furthermore, as far as he could tell, Catherine only met her secret **'friend'** after hours----- and always very discreetly.

Long ago Joe had begun to question other suspicions as well; like why was it that whenever Catherine faced danger, she always pulled through in the end and without a satisfactory explanation? The past few months found his dismay mounting, yet he never pursued her for fear of shedding light on whatever **'it'** was in which she was involved. But tonight's nightmare caused his anxieties that created too much of a struggle to merely continue ignoring things any longer. Catherine would never tolerate questions pertaining to her private life; that fact had already been proven to him. And yet, how could Joe help but wonder if this was as lonely a life for her as he imagined it to be? How could she possibly be happy?

Joe massaged his tense neck muscles, evidence of his fitful night of sleep, and rubbed his tired eyes. Uncontrollably, small fragments of his nightmare returned to torture him, and amongst it all there appeared a single stone swirling downward as if in an endless abyss. Joe opened his eyes abruptly as he felt sorrow and foreboding rise in him anew. Yet, this time he was fully awake.



Vincent's visits to Catherine's balcony this evening once again came to an undesired end. They both noticed how the dark skyline was beginning to reflect shapes of the buildings soon to appear in the light of day. One of those very buildings contained a desk with work which required that Catherine get at least a couple hours of sleep tonight.

Vincent pulled her close, and Catherine rested her head against his broad chest.

"Once more I have taken up much of your time with me personal

discoveries," Vincent said.

Catherine smiled up into his beautiful eyes, vibrantly blue against the early dawn shadows of gray. "Your stories are the only calmness in my otherwise hectic life. Not mere the stories themselves, but your voice, Vincent." Catherine placed her arms around Vincent's waist and hugged her beloved before continuing. "After spending an evening listening and talking with you, I feel more rested than the evenings I sleep all night but apart from your arms."

Together, Vincent and Catherine looked out at the sky. The sun was beginning to spread its first tinges of pine over the city's grayness, and they understood it was time to part.

"I will see Narcissa today about this stone," Vincent replies as he opened his hand to reveal the subject of tonight's conversation.



Earlier that day, as Vincent walked by the Abyss, he had come across the stone laying in the path. He had crouched down to examine it more closely; it was very old, that much was obvious. There were deep carvings in it that were at one time words, letters worn smooth over the vast number of years. Vincent rolled the large, flat stone around in his hand. Tracing the remains of the letters with the tip of his claw, he tried to decipher their message. Nothing. The letters were worn too smooth, and yet Vincent sensed a purpose for this discovery. He put the stone inside his vest to take it to Narcissa, for if there did exist a message in these words her boundless knowledge of the spirit world would open his eyes to it.

Catherine folded Vincent's long fingers back around the stone.

"There's a concert in the park tonight. Claude Debussy----**Suite Bergamasque**" Catherine recalled her adoration of music even as a young girl. She had early, fond memories of sharing the ballet and the theater with her parents. Catherine's memories travelled to the evening she went to this particular Debussy concert alone with her father a few years after her mother's death. It had been a touching evening for them both, because the composition '**Clair De Lune**' had always been her mother's favorite. Tenderness filled Catherine as she recalled her father smiling at her as they held hands throughout the performance.

Vincent was familiar with Debussy's tributes to the 17th and 18th centuries, his baroque art and clarity of form all enhanced by a boldness of colors born of the intervening centuries. The suite was indeed a precious blend of innovation and tradition.

Catherine now looked forward to enjoying this concert with Vincent; and as he gazed into her eyes, he felt honored that she desired to share her part intimacies with him.

"I will come for you at eight o'clock, Catherine," Vincent spoke tenderly.

Catherine stretched to her tallest height to gently kiss Vincent's parted lips. "I will be waiting."

Joe was pouring his third cup of coffee when Catherine arrived at the office.

"Morning, Joe," she muttered.

Joe noticed she looked tired again, but to hinder his uncomfortable misgivings, he opted for a slight tease. "You sure, Cathy? You look a little rough around the edges!"

"Nothing that a strong cup of coffee won't smooth over," she humored back.

"Late night?" he continued.

Catherine shifted her briefcase and jacket in order to grab a quick sip of coffee and smiled over her shoulder before heading in the direction of her desk. "Let's just call it a very early morning!"

Joe opened his file and glanced through the pages and pages of last week's depositions. Yawning, he rubbed his strained eyes briefly in an attempt to regain his concentration, and although he did not understand why, he was once again filled with a sadness.



Vincent walked the deep paths that led down to Narcissa's chamber.

"Hello, child," Narcissa spoke as she sensed Vincent's arrival.

"What brings you here to visit an old woman today?"

Vincent greeted her with an embrace. "Hello, Narcissa. You look well."

"Ah, yes," the old woman chuckled. "I am always well, my child, for these chambers are alive with medicinal lessons when one listens to the voices of the spirits. What I lack in eyesight....."

".....You make up in foresight. That is why I am here." Vincent handed Narcissa the stone.

"No need to stay away so long, Vincent. Your company is always welcome, even to a blind hermit like myself."

Vincent felt admiration envelop him. "That will be a promise, Narcissa."

She nodded as she rolled the large stone around in her hands, black nimble fingers finding the unreadable lettering immediately. "Come, sit with me by the fire."

Dropping to a cross-legged position, Vincent lost himself to Narcissa's magic. He was fascinated how her eyes, useless in this world, saw visions in the fire. And although his own sense of hearing was exceptional, the voices she now listened to went undetected even by him. As the hours passed in silence, he never lost patience, for he knew that when she finally spoke her words of wisdom would hold the truth.

At last she began. "Many years ago there lived a powerful knight, the protector of his village. He was called upon to slay a dragon that had quietly crept into the village during the night. Although the knight argued that the dragon appeared harmless, he did as he was bid. In the last moment before its death, the dragon was transformed into a beautiful princess. Her body lay crumpled before the knight, covered with the slash wounds from his long sword, her gown soaked in blood. He sadly carried her in his arms and buried her in the village churchyard. The villagers erected a monument of stone in her honor and inscribed upon it the lesson they had learned; ***'Perhaps not everything unknown is so terrible'.***"

Narcissa sunk to the ground as she finished her tale, overcome by the exhaustion that always followed her seance experiences. Vincent crawled to her side and wiped the perspiration from her brow. "Narcissa?"

"I am fine, child." She slowly spoke as she rose to lean against him. "This stone you have found-----it is a piece of that very monument. The spirits say that every decade the princess

searches for a strong entity to bring her message to one who lives with fear in his heart. Her chosen one must inspire in the fearful one that not everything in life is as it seems." Narcissa regained her strength and turned to face Vincent. "My child..... 'you ' are her chosen one."



The morning was passing slowly for Joe. He felt restless, anxious, pulled in opposite directions. A glance at the clock gave him an excuse to leave, and he stopped by Catherine's desk on his way out.

"Lunch?" she repeated the invitation. "It's only eleven o'clock!"

"Well, you know me," Joe chuckled. "I have my own timetable as to what to eat and when to eat it!"

Catherine shook her head and giggled in amazement. "I'm still waiting for Toni to pull up some files on this Larson versus Marcus case, so I guess now is as good a time as any!"

Over lunch, Catherine noticed Joe's restrained mood. "Everything okay, Joe?"

"Yeah, sure, Cathy," he maintained. "Just a little distracted today. By the way, I have tickets to the Mets tonight. Are you free?"

"Gee, Joe," she teased. "The Mets? You know me....."

"Let me guess," Joe proclaimed. "You and your '**friend**' are going something '**cultural.**' Maybe the Art Institute? The Museum? A ballet perhaps?"

Catherine laughed. "Close enough. Tomorrow you can tell me who won the game....."

"Sure," Joe interrupted. "And you can tell me all about your **'cultural'** evening, or what you saw of it from your seats in the shadows." As Catherine shrunk back from his sarcasm, Joe immediately shook his head. "I am sorry; that was not deserved. But sometimes, I just can't help worrying about this secret **'friend'** you have. I know you love him, but are you happy? ***I mean, 'really' happy having to lead this double life? Catherine Chandler by day and who knows what by night?***"

Catherine reacted to the sting in Joe's words. ***"I don't know what has brought about this meddling, but we both know this is the path I have chosen. For my own reasons. And yes, I am happy."***

Joe diverted his eyes as he spoke. "Look, Cathy, It's just that I care for you." When he looked back, it was into her still angry face. "I really care, and sometimes I see what these secret nights are doing to you-----coming to work late, forgetting appointments. I swear, I don't mean to meddle. I just want to be sure you are okay."

Catherine softened as she reached across the table to touch his hand. "It's all right, Joe. You are a good friend. But you must believe that what I share with....."

As she hesitated, Joe took her hand into his. "Surely you can at least tell me this guy's name?"

Catherine lowered her eyes and disclosed softly. "I have never spoken so personally about him before to an outsider. A little with Nancy at a time when I was faced with doubts. But the doubts went away." She boldly met his gaze. "His name is Vincent, and what I share with him is everything I care about in life. He is the part of my world that reminds me there is purpose in all that we

do. And in all that we are. I truly love him."

Joe leaned back in his chair and wondered when his feelings for Catherine had deepened from passive curiosity to genuine concern. His emotions went beyond those reserved for friends, and yet he would not label this **'love.'** All he knew is that she had grown to mean very much to him. "If you are happy, Cathy, then I am happy for you. But remember, if this secret ever becomes too much of a burden I am here for you."

Catherine saw the selfless admiration in Joe's eyes, and recalled the type of men she had always been drawn to before she met Vincent; egotistical and somewhat arrogant. Tom Gunther, even Elliot Burch had fit the description. But Joe certainly was not of that mold. He was sincere and generous. "I know that, Joe," Catherine's voice barely rose above a whisper. "You have a warm heart and a good head. If I ever need to talk, I won't hesitate."



Catherine hurriedly toweled off after her shower, and as she stepped into her slippers she pulled a tea-length silk gown over her head. She lay a light shawl on her bed, for she knew the evening air would be cool. As she glanced at her mother's picture on her make-up bureau, fond memories surfaced in anticipation of tonight's concert. Catherine's hair was nearly dry now, and she brushed it into place, pulling the sides back in decorative combs. Her delicate earrings added the final touch before she headed for the basement of her apartment building.

Their embrace was a warm one. Vincent's senses reeled as he took in the honey-almond scent of Catherine's hair and the subtle cologne she wore. "You are so beautiful, Catherine," he gently whispered. She took a step away from him, and he absorbed the

length of her. She shined before him, not merely the dangling earrings and shimmering gown, but her very soul lit up while in his presene. He sensed an aura about her that could only come from being in love.

They walked to where he had previously laid out a quilt, and along the way Catherine encouraged Vincent to speak of his visit with Narcissa. She enjoyed hearing how he spent his days apart from her. Many times while attending a meeting that had begun to drag, or while waiting on a deferring judge, or even while riding in the back seat of a taxi cab, her thoughts would turn to what Vincent might be doning at that very moment. All the tunnel dwellers had their chores and expectations; Catherine related to that quite easily. But what she enjoyed most were Vincent's tales of the more '**colorful**' dwellers-----Mouse, Elizabeth, Narcissa. She had been looking forward to what Narcissa might have to say about Vincent's unusual discovery.

Vincent stopped walking and looked down at Catherine. "Narcissa's words are not just legend," he reminded her. "To Narcissa these spirits live, and what she sees in her blindness is very real." Catherine saw the question in his eyes that had been with him all day since his visit with Narcissa. "Our dream, Catherine-----do you fear the aloneness it bears?"

"No!" she voiced without hesitation. "I have nothing but acceptance of what we are. I have no fear in me. How could I when I have you?"

Vincent continued his train of thought. "Then if it is not 'your' fear, perhaps it is the fear of someone who hold you dear."

Catherine turned away. remembering this afternoon's conversation with Joe and his concern for her happiness. Vincent

registered her confusion. "Narcissa hears the spirits in their trueness. We must heed her wisdom."

"What does her wisdom tell you, Vincent?" Catherine pleaded as an almost mythical expression crossed his unusual features.

"Someone who cares for you is filled with a sadness and fears your life is a lonely one," he replied.

"Lonely when we are apart," Catherine admitted, "and I long for the brief hours we are allowed together." She touched his arm, knowing the contact would further assure him. "But aloneness is not cause for sadness or fear, Vincent."

He only tilted his head, eyes looking upwards, lost in thought.

"And yet," he began, the moonlight dancing upon his mane through the metal grate overhead, "this someone sincerely fears for you."

Catherine drew her shawl tighter around her shoulders as more than just the evening's coolness sent a shivering chill through her. "It is Joe," she stated at last.

He lightly pressed his hand under her chin, drawing her lips to his. The kiss was gentle, yet she felt all of his passion behind it. "By telling the truth of our secret," he began, "maybe Joe needs to learn of my world in order to understand." Vincent gathered his thoughts before cautiously continuing. "But, Catherine, before you share this with him ask yourself if even the slightest doubt lies within you. The truth will only bring him more pain if it reveals a sadness in you."

Catherine took Vincent's face in her hands, her eyes looking deeply into his. "You know me, Vincent. You know my very thoughts." The love was so obvious that the truth in her eyes drew

their mouths more fervently together.

"Yes," he finally whispered huskily. "I know you, Catherine."

She closed her eyes and lay in her arms as the pianist's mood carried her through every change of beat, spanning from one octave to the next. She allowed his music to lull her back in time, memories of her youth and how **'sadness'** was not even a part of her vocabulary. Vincent admired the beautiful music and the talent the young pianist demonstrated to his captive audience. But he was even more overwhelmed by the beauty apparent within his bond, his connection with Catherine. And it was at moments of such oneness as tonight when Vincent truly believed in all that he and Catherine were.

Huddling even closer together beneath the warmth of Vincent's cloak, they enjoyed their private thoughts inspired by the music they loved. And as always, they relished the magical closeness that their loving bond provided.



Joe was grateful for Saturday mornings-----no alarm clock, no rushed shower and shave, no shirt and tie! He started towards the lobby of his apartment for a Saturday paper, and as he pushed the down button to the elevator, the door opened to disclose a surprise visitor. "Cathy!" he exclaimed. "I never expected....."

"Morning, Joe," she said, expressing the words as she did on a Monday morning at the office.

Joe eyed Catherine's evening attire. The gown and jewelry revealed that she had not yet been home. "Don't tell me," Joe winked as he smiled. "Another one of your **'early mornings'?**"

Catherine closed her tired eyes and laughed to herself before replying, "I need to talk with you, Joe. It's important."

He sensed the underlying seriousness and invited her in for coffee.

Catherine remained quiet while she gathered her thoughts, the last remnants of dubiety stirring within her. "Joe, do you believe in myths? Legends? Mediums who communicate with spirits?"

Joe shook his head and laughed. "C'mon, Cathy, you don't seem like the hangover type, but maybe you ought to be drinking this black!" When she lay Vincent's stone on the table, Joe's fun expression turned ash white. "Where did you get this? What is this?" He was wary to touch it for fear he may still be dreaming, and if he dared to make such a move, then Catherine would dissolve to ash.

"This is a piece of an ancient monument," she tried to explain, "Found buried in a length of tunnel below this city."

Joe recalled having read of such tunnels. "I hear there are miles and miles of unmapped territory down there."

Catherine responded with a deep sigh. "Yes, it's true. Forgotten places, but not uninhabited."

Joe leaned forward, his interest aroused. "And this Vincent guy, you mean to tell me he lives down there?"

Catherine fidgeted slightly in her chair. If what Narcissa told Vincent was true, and she had to believe it was if for no other reason than because Vincent himself believed it, then she would continue her part. "Come to my apartment, Joe. I need to change clothes and show you someplace very special. I think you need to

see this."

If discovering the hidden entrance below Catherine's apartment building was not enough to shock Joe, then the fact that she knew her way around this maze of tunnels without the aid of a flashlight or trail markers certainly did. "Don't worry," she assured him. "I know this place well." A sense of guilt filled her. "Forgive me. I don't mean to be mysterious, but what you see here will take some getting used to."

Over the hours, they reached darker depths of the tunnel. Joe observed Catherine's slower pace and her distraction as if looking for something. He reached for her in the darkness and pleaded, "Cathy, yesterday at lunch, maybe I pushed you a bit. But you don't owe me anything."

She started to respond when a cloaked figure appeared in the distance. Catherine relaxed as she stated, "This way, Joe. He will direct us."

Joe studied what he could see of the cloaked stranger, but he had already turned his back in leading the direction further downward. "Vincent," he guessed aloud. "Will I meet him?"

Catherine sympathized with Joe's state of confusion but knew the time was not at hand. "There are differences about Vincent that go beyond imagining. First you will need to listen and learn to believe."

And as Catherine smiled up at Joe, all reassurance returned to him. Despite all that was happening, she did have her sanity. Whatever lay ahead, Joe understood fully that Catherine did have her sanity.

When they neared their destination, a firelight shined brightly in

the small chamber, enabling Catherine and Joe to continue alone. An old woman, obviously blind, turned to welcome them. "Come in, Catherine. Vincent told me you would bring a friend. Is this him?"

Catherine and Joe entered the chamber, and in standing by the fire were able to fend the tunnels' dampness from them. "Hello, Narcissa," she greeted. "This is Joe." The old woman nodded in his direction, fully knowing the purpose of their visit and already sensing its outcome.

"We have brought the stone," Catherine informed her as she placed the object in the aged, outstretched hands.

Narcissa smiled slightly as she once again held the thing of such mystery. The room seemed to darken as her voice filled the chamber in retelling of the myth. A ghostliness befell Joe at hearing his own nightmare recounted through Narcissa's words, but Catherine's trusting eyes begged him to divulge all. He told of the vision in his nightmare. "I see the princess' face. It was her....." he said, indicating Catherine.

Narcissa chuckled, "Of course it was. To you, Catherine appears involved in something lonely. You fear she is never to experience the beauty of love. But please know that love can go beyond beauty. It can become braver and deeper, and the lovers will walk a dark road." Narcissa reached past Joe and placed her hand over Catherine's heart. "There came a time when sadness rose up in Catherine. But once she accepted what was happening, she understood and loved all the more."

Catherine held Narcissa's hand in place over her heart. "I have understood something more as well," she confessed, and no one present beyond Narcissa was aware of the cloaked figure listening

to Catherine's words at the fireside.

"Vincent and I come from two different worlds. He has acquainted me with everyone in his world, both the dwellers Below and the Helpers Above. Yet, I have never acknowledged him to anyone from my world. I have kept him a dark secret. I have hidden our love, and I have come to wonder why."

Narcissa nodded reassuringly, encouraging Catherine to continue. "I needed to protect him, but at what cost? The burden of our secret drove a wedge between my father and I. On his deathbed, I made my peace with him, but I grieved for the years we had lost and the pain I had caused both my father and Vincent; my father, for he knew I held something of myself apart from him; and Vincent for he knew that he was the cause of the estrangement." Tears filled Catherine's eyes as she continued. "If given the chance, I would trust that my love for my father and my love for Vincent would allow them to know and accept each other."

As she wiped at her tears, Catherine was suddenly aware of Vincent's presence and turned her gaze towards his watching eyes. For the briefest moment, she experienced her own spirit leave her body to join with his. She gently kissed his downy cheek as she whispered her fleeting words of love. As her spirit returned, his eyes were no longer there. In their place on the dirt ground of Narcissa's chamber lay a single white rose.

Joe felt emotionally exhausted as they ascended the ladder back to Catherine's apartment building. "There are several topsiders who share in the tunnels' secrets," she relayed to him. There was so much Catherine yearned to share with Joe now, yet she sensed his need to be alone with his thoughts. "They have become the Helpers, and without them life could not continue

Below. They are the lighted way," she explained. She reached out and touched him. "Soon you will come to learn what I continuously do, that the brightest light shine amidst the deepest darkness, and with it you are never alone."

Joe had no words, yet none were necessary now that Catherine had shared her secret with him. Moreover, she had encouraged him to become a part of it. And he now believed that tonight he truly witnessed what he had hoped for Catherine all along-----a life fulfilled; a life with love.

When Catherine returned to her apartment, she was drawn to her balcony, and there discovered the book of Shakespearean sonnets. A single red rose marked the passage;

*'Not marble, nor the gilded monuments
of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme;
But you shall shine more bright in these contents
Than unswept stone besmeared with sluttish time.
When wasteful war shall statues overturn,
And broils root out the work of masonry,
Nor Mars his sword nor war's quick fire shall burn
The living record of your memory.
'Gainst death and all oblivious enmity
Shall you pace forth; your praise shall still find room
Even in the eyes of all posterity
That wear this world out to the ending doom.*

*So, till the judgment that yourself arise,
You live in this, and swell in lover's eyes'*

The beauty of Vincent drew near to join Catherine as she whispered, "A red rose in this world....."

".....But a white in the next. I was there, Catherine," his gentle voice replied engulfing her. "Amongst the softness of the spirits."

"I know," she guaranteed him. "I felt you, touched you, Vincent." Their bond emitted one shared thought; that the magic between them would never die, for tonight even their spirits expressed how deeply bound they were. Forever.

The early morning rays told them their departure was imminent. "There are scarcely a few dozen people in New York City who have even the faintest idea of the tunnels," Catherine thought out loud. "The helpers are few in numbers, but strong and trustworthy."

Vincent looked out at the awakening city. "It was his destiny. All men seek their own, and happiest are those who find it."

And as Catherine and Vincent enjoyed their last moments together, a new helper walked the streets alone. He had lived all his life in New York, but now he felt as if he was seeing the city in all its glory for the very first time.

TERRIBLE DARKNESS
ANONYMOUS MEMBER OF THE FRENCH
RESISTANCE 1943
CHAMBER CAMEOS NINE

Terrible darkness
has fallen upon us,
But we must not surrender to it.
We shall lift lamps fo courage
and find our way
through to the morning.

DARK MOON RISING
MARGARET MANSFIELD
CHAMBER CAMEOS NINE

Catherine walked back toward the tunnel entrance beneath her apartment building with a heavy step. She was exhausted physically as well as emotionally. She felt so empty. Vincent had never seemed so far away from her before. She had never felt so alone, so cut off from him-----so rejected. It was as if there was a solid, thick wall between them. Try as she would, Vincent would not let her breach the wall. It was there to stay for the time being. All the long months Catherine had spent since the time she had come back from Nancy's house trying to build Vincent's self-confidence in himself were lost.

It was almost too much for her to bear. The emptiness which threatened to engulf her seemed to grow with each step she took. Things had been going so well for her and Vincent. Recently, Catherine had felt that they were finally making real progress. Gradually she and Vincent had been coming to an understanding concerning their future together. Since the night she had almost drowned, there had been a new closeness between them-----a new sense of togetherness. Vincent had taken down most of the wall which existed between them and had been open about discussing their future. Although she had not told him, she had even been contemplating cutting back on her work hours in hopes of moving into the tunnels to be with him. Now, her dreams lay in a shambles all around her, and the wall between them was back up, seemingly more unsurmountable than ever.

Sensing where these thoughts were leading her, Catherine struggled to banish them from her mind. Quickly she climbed the

ladder leading into the sub-basement of her building and made her way upstairs. Not even bothering to shower, she shed her clothes and crawled under the sheets. Pulling them up tightly around her, she sought solace in sleep. But sleep was long in coming. The sun had already begun to peek over the horizon long before she dozed off.



Vincent sat stoically in his chamber trying to regain his equilibrium. Outwardly he was calm, but inwardly his thoughts and feelings were chaotic. He finally sensed Catherine drifting off into a light sleep and relaxed somewhat. Her hurt and pain were almost unbearable to him. She had looked so alone tonight when she left. How could he have done that to her? Catherine was the one being in all the world who truly accepted him as he was without reservation. Not even Father had ever given him that degree of acceptance he felt from Catherine. Vincent did not question her acceptance, but horrified with himself, doubted if she really understood exactly what it was she was so willing to accept.

Tonight Catherine had once again seen his uncontrolled violence. Would it never end? His feeling of shame was always acute when Catherine witnessed the transition between his two natures. At times like these, when the beast manifested itself, even Vincent wondered who and what he was. He could hardly face the fear of it himself, much less share it with the woman he loved.

How could anyone possibly understand the fear which accompanied the transition? Overwhelming, it engulfed him totally, leaving the rational part of him trapped inside a raging force that threatened to destroy him.

After Catherine's departure, Father had tried to reason with

him-----had tried to get him to see that what he had done had been necessary. But as Vincent stared down at this still blood-stained hands, Father's words were somehow small consolation. Each time the beast took over, Vincent felt that he had lost just a little bit more of his humanity. How could he tell those he loved most dearly that he truly feared for his sanity? That he felt like he was at the brink of utter darkness.



Catherine sat at her desk waiting for the phone to ring. She had been waiting all morning. One of her sources was supposed to be calling. While she waited she glanced at the stack of files and unfinished paperwork piled high on her desk and sighed. It was going to be another long week.

Picking up the top folder, she opened it and tried to concentrate on the information which she was reading. Suddenly frustrated, she slammed the folder shut and abruptly stood up. Maybe a cold drink of iced tea would help. Even though it was still early, the office was already stifling. Digging some change out of her purse, Catherine headed out the door, hoping the cafeteria would not be crowded at this time of morning. She didn't want to be gone too long.

Hurrying down the hall, she wondered how Vincent was for the hundredth time that morning. Presently, he was all she seemed capable of keeping her mind on. Work was almost at a standstill for her as she went through the motions day after day. The look of shame and self-loathing she had seen on his face during their last moments together was permanently etched in her mind, haunting not only her dreams but her waking hours as well. The fleeting look had had a profound effect on her, bringing into sharp focus

Vincent's fragile grasp on emotional and mental stability.

It had been over one week since she had last seen Vincent. Not that this in itself was unusual, but the manner of their last parting made his absence this time seem threatening to their continued relationship. What was even more worrisome was the fact that she sensed no change in the situation. The bond remained closed. If Catherine did not hear something soon, she would go crazy. She could not concentrate on anything and sleep had been almost impossible.

How could Vincent do this to her? Not even a note! The hurt and sorrow Catherine had initially felt were slowly turning into anger. She deserved better than this and so did he. They could not go on like this for much longer!

Careful not to slosh her tea, she made her way back to the office just in time to see Joe hanging up her phone. Drat! Hurrying over to him she inquired, "Who was it, Joe? Did they leave a message?"

Hearing the urgency in her voice, Joe replied, "Yeah. Some elderly sounding lady wanted to talk to you about cleaning our father's house. She left her name and number."

"My father's house?" Catherine looked at him thoroughly puzzled. "My father only had one house. The house up in Connecticut, and it's been listen with the real estate people over a month. Why would anyone be calling about cleaning it? Nobody's been living in it since my dad died. Even then, he only used it for occasional weekends."

"Beats me, kiddo. That's what the lady said. Why don't you call her back and ask her? Here's her name and number," Joe offered

her the slip of paper he held in his hand.

Still puzzled, Catherine sat down and dialed the number. It took awhile before she got an answer. Explaining who she was and what she wanted, Catherine sat and listened in silence to a woman on the other end of the line. Finally she broke in, "But my Dad doesn't own a house out on Long Island. He never owned a house way out there as far as I know. I'm afraid you have the wrong number."

She continued to listen, becoming more and more puzzled as the conversation continued. "Okay," she finally stated. "I believe you. Listen, just go ahead and clean the house like you always do and send me the bill," Catherine said, giving Joe a puzzled shrug.

"No, I'm afraid my father will no longer be coming to the house," she said with a catch in her voice. "He passed away several months ago."

After a pause Catherine said, "Thank you. Listen, what did you say the address of this place was? And where can I find you to get a key if I should come out there?" Catherine listened and jotted the information down before hanging up.

"Well, if that conversation doesn't beat all," exclaimed Catherine, looking up at Joe, who was still standing by her desk. "Apparently my father had a house out on the end of Long Island I knew nothing about. The lady said she'd been cleaning it periodically for him for years. Wondered why she hadn't heard from him recently and tracked me down when she found his phone number was no longer in service. Said she knew he had a daughter named Catherine who worked for the District Attorney's office. She wanted to know if I would help her get in touch with him."

Joe shrugged his shoulders. "Can't help ya, Cath. Maybe when you get a chance, you should drive out there and see what's what. Right now, kiddo, we got a lot of work to catch up on, so let's get cracking. I need that Johnston file before you go home today."

"Yeah! Okay, Joe," Catherine mumbled, picking up the file she had slammed shut a little earlier. "I'll get right on it." It literally took her the rest of the day to wade through the file, find the information Joe needed, and write it up. She kept losing her train of thought. Between worrying about Vincent and wondering what her father had been up to, she just could not seem to concentrate. Finally she was finished. Looking up she was surprised to see that almost everyone else had already gone home. Joe, however, was still in his office. Picking up her notes, she wandered over to his door and knocked. Hearing his muffled, '*Come on in,*' she entered and plunked the file down on his desk. "There you go, Joe. Done. Now I'm heading for home, a nice cool bath, and early bed. See you tomorrow."

"Thanks, Radcliffe. I knew I could count on you. See ya tomorrow. Have a nice night," he tossed at the retreating figure.

As he watched his co-worker's retreating figure, Joe once again wondered just what was going on with her. He sensed that she was worried about something. Her recent lack of concentration had not gone unnoticed. Very little concerning Catherine Chandler escaped his sharp eye. His feelings for her were something he tried to keep hidden. She had not been on the job very long before he had realized that she meant a lot to him. Her well-being was a constant concern of his. Catherine was a woman of mystery, leading a very private life outside of the office. More than once Joe had tried to get to the bottom of it but had drawn a blank every time. She would let him get just so near and then clam up,

leaving him in the dark as to what was going on in her life.
"Whatever it is," he sighed still watching the retreating back, "she's one hell of an unhappy lady right now."



Silhouetted by the flickering candlelight, Vincent sat deep in his chair battling the demon which lurked within, ever ready to pounce. His keen eyes pierced the darkness beyond the wavering light as if he might see this demon actually take shape before him. Wearily, he leaned his elbows on the table and rubbed his face with his hands, a lone shudder going through his whole body.

He could not shake the creature this time. It had slowly, over the months he had been protecting Catherine, gained strength. Dealing with the outsiders had finally unleashed the demon in almost full strength. He could almost see its presence carefully watching him-----studying him-----waiting patiently for the right moment to pounce.

His dreams were especially troublesome. They were increasingly filled with dark images and thoughts which would bring him suddenly awake to frantically search the darkness of his chamber. Once wakened, he would pace the chamber trying to find peace. Other times he would dress, grab his cloak, and lose himself in the darkness of Above, seeking solace in the stare.

He wished he could go to Catherine. As he fleetingly thought about her, he felt an instant of tearing pain. His need for her was like a living thing, constantly in his mind and on his heart. Vincent wanted to explain to her what was happening----- wanted to ask her forgiveness for closing her out-----for staying away. But he couldn't.

His grip on sanity was loosening. In his distraught condition, he didn't trust himself just now to be around the woman he loved. Vincent, steeped in sadness, sat in mute silence as the candle gave a dying flicker and extinguished itself. Shrouded in darkness he felt hope draining away. The beast was close
-----evident-----powerful.



Catherine slipped the key into the lock of her door and entered the blessedly cool apartment. She was glad she had set the air conditioner to kick on if the temperature rose above 78 degrees. The weatherman had been predicting a heat wave and for once, they were right. Here it was almost nine o'clock, and the temperature was still hovering around 90 degrees.

Kicking off her shoes and heading for the fridge and something cold to drink, she hoped weathermen would be wrong about the duration of the heat wave. People become intolerant when it was this hot. The city could easily turn into a jungle. Tempers flared and confrontations were numerous. Law enforcement agencies were taxed to the limit at times like these. Hospitals were quickly overburdened with victims of heat stroke. Water and electricity rationing, as well as actual shortages, were real possibilities in a city this size.

'All in all, not a very pleasant picture', thought Catherine, pouring herself some Pepsi. Passing through the dining room, she glanced out the glass doors to the balcony beyond. Immediately her thoughts flew to Vincent. *'Where was he? He had rarely stayed away this long before.'* She wondered if she should go Below and make sure everything was all right. Within seconds she rejected that thought, knowing Father would be sure to get word to

her if anything was really amiss. That left Vincent's stubborn pride. Why could he not see that this was something that effected her almost as much as it effected him? Why couldn't he understand that she wanted more than anything else in the world to help him-----to be there for him as he always was for her?

Catherine's anger flared again as she stewed over the situation. She knew that it upset Vincent terribly when she witnessed scenes such as she had their last night together. Father had explained to her more than once that it took all the self-control Vincent possessed to maintain the delicate balance which allowed him to accept himself. It was a constant struggle for him to deal with two such different natures.

The nature he preferred, that of the educated, cultured man devoted to love, compassion, and helping his fellow man, was in direct opposition to his darker side. The side of his nature which would rend and tear without a moment's notice anything which threatened his loved ones. This darker nature which lived within him, Father believed, was without rational thought and showed none of the values which Vincent treasured and believed. His darker side acted by sheer instinct, showing no mercy or compassion.

Not for the first time, Catherine felt her resentment of Father rising within her. Over the last two years, she had come to love and respect this irascible old man, but there were definitely times when he tried her patience. Sometimes Catherine had all she could do not to let him know that she felt he was part of Vincent's problem. How he had handled situations in the past left a lot to be desired in her estimation. She felt that Vincent's refusal to let her share his ordeal was somehow connected to his encounter with Lisa years ago. By not dealing with the situation as if it were the

usual teenage occurrence that, it was, Father had left unhealthy thoughts and conclusions to fester and grow in Vincent. Because of this, Vincent doubted his ability to have a normal relationship with any woman. What a tragic situation.

Catherine also suspected that Father was very vocal in his opinions concerning her present relationship to Vincent. She knew that he saw her as a threat to Vincent's happiness. Catherine sensed that something in Father did not trust her ability to stand by Vincent during the dark times.

It bothered Catherine that Father and the others sometimes took advantage of Vincent. They considered him their protector. Last year when she had tried to arrange their trip to the countryside was proof enough of this for Catherine. She wondered if they realized that in causing Vincent to play this role it put added stress on Vincent? Father and the others felt terrible when Vincent was distressed, but the fact still remained that they all expected him to be there to protect them when danger arose.

Catherine realized that Vincent's dark side threatened his very sanity. But what could she do? He would not even let her near him right now. The bond had remained tightly closed since the night Vincent had sent her Above by herself. She felt angry and frustrated. Most of all she felt alone.

Catherine's sense of aloneness tortured Vincent. He knew that she was having a hard time dealing with his inability to let her share his darkness. But how could he? After feeling what it could do to him, how could he submit her to it, also? Vincent remembered all too vividly what it had been like as a teenager going through that darkness. He remembered all too sharply being trapped in the cold tentacles of fear and despair. He remembered

the raging madness which had almost claimed him for good. Only Father had a glimmering of what it had been like. A repeat of that time was a consuming fear which caused Vincent to push Catherine farther and farther away from him.

Vincent was also acutely aware of Catherine's feelings of anger and frustration but was helpless to do anything about them. He could not seem to help himself right now. He felt trapped in the war which raged deep within him. Still, he felt the need to communicate with her in some way. Not through the bond, however, Vincent could not chance exposing Catherine to the feelings of darkness which threatened to overwhelm him. He knew how much the natural darkness had always bothered her. Since she had been a small child, the dark had terrorized Catherine until her mother had lovingly given her a small candle with which to chase it away. This darkness which threatened to engulf Vincent at any moment was utter and complete and totally consuming-----one from which he might never find his way out. He would not allow the woman he loved to share that with him.

Tossing the disheveled covers back, Vincent rose from the bed and crossed to his writing table. He struggled against the relentless unseen pressure he felt bearing down on him. Sitting, he concentrated on steadying his shaking hand as he felt reality slowly drifting from his grasp. Fighting to keep the darkness at bay, he quickly penned a short note in one split minute of total clarity. Finishing his task, Vincent quickly gathered some supplies and stuffed them into his backpack. Swooping up his cloak, he purposefully strode from his chamber.

Hoping Father would still be awake at this late hour, he covered the short distance between their chambers, trying desperately to

compose his thoughts. Under control for the moment, Vincent entered Father's study and was relieved to see the older man in his chair, engrossed in a book. "Father," Vincent whispered so as not to startle his parent.

"Ah, Vincent. I see you can't sleep either. Come in, come in." Noticing the cloak, Father wondered if Vincent were coming or going. "Would you care for some tea? I was just finishing a book I think you might find interesting."

"No, Father," Vincent abruptly interrupted, splaying his hand over the opened book and bending toward Father to capture his full attention. "No tea. I was wondering if you could do me a favor and see that someone delivers this note to Catherine in the morning. I am going away and wish to let her know."

Father was instantly alert. His son had been acting strangely for over a week now, and he was beginning to worry. In the past when Vincent's dark side manifested itself, he would be upset and out of sorts-----sometimes for days. Although this bothered Father tremendously, he gradually grew accustomed to it. There seemed to be nothing he could do about it, anyway.

Before Vincent had met Catherine, life had been so much simpler for his son. Thinking these thoughts once again caused Father's resentment of Catherine to surface. He had given up trying to get either one of them to listen to reason ages ago. These past two years had aged him considerably. Gradually Father had come to love Catherine deeply for all the happiness she had brought his son. But nonetheless, the fact still remained in his mind. If there were no Catherine, these problems would not exist.

Would these two he held most dear never see the truth? Would they never admit that as long as Catherine remained Above,

woring in the job she had, Vincent was bound to be continuously placed in situations which would threaten his very sanity? The whole thing was madness-----but true love was often blind. Father had to admit, however, in all fairness that had happened last week was not Catherine's fault. This time, she was as much a victim as Vincent, and his heart had gone out to her that night as she had walked off alone.

Momentarily breaking off his thoughts, Father sighed and through tear-blurred eyes looked up at his son, noticing his disheveled appearance. Vincent had secluded himself in his chamber since the night the outsiders had civiously attacked their people, forcing him to kill again-----totally disrupting his son's delicate sense of inner balance. Vincent looked gaunt. Father knew that he had occasionally gone Above during the dead of night to lose himself in the outer darkness. to his knowledge, though, he didn't think Vincent had had any contact with Catherine since that fatal night.

Vincent had not even attended the burial service for their people. Father had fleetingly contemplated asking Catherine to attend but at the last minute decided against it. Better to leave well enough alone. This was between Vincent and Catherine, although Father cringed to think of how it might end. He did not want to see either of these loved ones hurt. Maybe it was for the best this way. Maybe Vincent would finally come to see that he could not continue this relationship without there being dire consequences.

Becoming aware of the lengthening silence in the chamber, Father broke off his thoughts and asked, "Where will you go this time? How long will you be gone?" This wouldn't be the first time his son had disappeared. Father was actually relieved to hear he was going. Always in the past and during the worst times when Vincent felt compelled to distance himself like this from the

community, he would eventually return to them once again in-tune with himself.

"Below into the lower caverns. I feel the need to be by myself, Father. I don't know how long I'll be gone. For as long as it takes. Vincent did not specify what the **'it'** was. Don't worry about me, Father. I'll be okay," Vincent lied, not really knowing if he would.

"Well, you know if there's anything I or any of the others can do, you need only ask, Vincent. Is this something like that time when you were a young man? If it is, maybe you had better not go too far away-----at least not beyond the pipes in case you need me." Father held his breath waiting for an answer.

Vincent hesitated, seeing the look of fear and concern on the old man's face. He hated lying to Father. He knew, however, that Father could not handle another situation like that. He was older, and Vincent knew it would have a far greater effect on him this time. The demon was stronger. No. It was time for him to face this demon alone.

Perhaps it wouldn't come to that anyway. Perhaps he only needed some time alone. Vincent hoped that that was all it was.

Occasionally. during stressful times, he needed to be off by himself. Sometimes he had an overwhelming need to be away from.....Humans.

"No, Father. I will be all right. Just deliver the note for me. And thank you for your concern. I will be back when I have sorted things out in my mind." After hugging Father, Vincent abruptly turned and was gone, his cloak billowing out behind him.

"Dear God!" breathed Father into the empty, still air. "Please be with him and keep him safe."



Catherine came up out of the shallow sleep she had managed to fall into several hours ago, rubbing her gritty, stinging eyes. Searching the still, quiet bedroom, she tried to determine what had so startled her out of sleep. It was not even quite morning yet. Then she felt it-----a slight stirring in her mind. And Catherine knew without a doubt that Vincent's thoughts were focused fully upon her.

This week had been a revelation to her, as far as the bond was concerned. She knew that Vincent was able to sense her very feelings and emotions, but she had never had more than an occasional awareness of his. Lately, however, since he had tried to totally shut her out, Catherine had gradually discovered that the bond was definitely a two-way phenomenon. Since Vincent had closed himself off from her, Catherine had found that her capacity to sense him was somehow easier to discern. His own connection to her had been so stronger than hers to him had been overshadowed and mostly missed.

Lying back against the pillows, she wondered what Vincent was thinking about. This couldn't go on much longer. Catherine wished he could contact her, or better yet come to see her. She longed to be with him-----longed to touch him-----feel him. Her mind was filled to overflowing with thoughts of him. The way he gracefully walked, his unique smell, the way he cocked his head to catch her every word. Catherine could almost feel Vincent's arms surround her, pulling her into his light embrace. Thoughts of past interludes filtered into her consciousness from wherever she had them stored inside her memory. Catherine pictured Vincent in her mind's eye leaning against the railing of the balcony sharing a poem or a random thought concerning some novel he

was presently reading as wisps of his, long burnished hair escaped the hood of which he was so fond. Memories such as these were all Catherine had to warm her now as she waited for whatever would happen next.

She wanted to share with him her new sense of being able to feel him through the bond. One thing was certain to Catherine as she lay in her bed. They were meant to be together. How or why no longer mattered. This thing that connected them was out of the ordinary-----beyond the normal-----not to be denied.

Restless and unable to go back to sleep, Catherine rose to face another stifling day. *'They had better make arrangements to get som fans in that office, or they would all end up with heat prostration'*, she silently thought. The heat wave was in its third day, and tempers were beginning to flare.

Edie especially looked terrible, and Catherine decided that if this kept up much longer, she would ask her friend to come spend the weekend with her. She knew Edie's apartment was not air conditioned. As Catherine wandered into the bathroom for a cool shower, she made a mental note to extend the offer when she got to work later that day.



Leaving Father, Vincent made his way to the community's kitchen where he filled the extra backpack he had brought along. Even though he wasn't really hungry, Vincent ate liberally of the types of food which he knew would not keep on his journey. Usually a light eater, Vincent knew he had enough with him to last for at least a week, especially after the meal he had just consumed. Dousing the torch, he left the kitchen and was soon far away from the main complex, feeling civilization and humanity dropping away from him

with each mile he traversed. At times like these, deep down in the unexplored caverns was the only place he found any semblance of inner peace.

Not stopping, Vincent traveled onward for hours, eventually leaving even the pipes behind. He was in uncharted territory -----deeper than even he had ever gone before. Wondering where his journey would take him, he pressed onward, as a sense of anticipation enveloped him.



Catherine sat listlessly at her desk hoping she looked like she was deeply involved in the file she had spread before her. Her thoughts, however, were far away in another world----- a world of heavy darkness. She sensed that Vincent was in constant motion, moving even farther and farther away from her. She shivered despite the cloying heat and humidity which permeated the office.

Suddenly, she was aware of someone silently standing by her desk. Glancing up, she was surprised to see Jason, one of the tunnel teenagers, standing there. Her heart began to beat faster. Maybe he brought word from Vincent. Wordlessly she accepted the envelope the boy held out to her. Catherine thanked the boy and asked, "Is everyone okay, Jason?"

"It's been pretty quiet since last week," the boy responded, alluding to the trouble with the outsiders. "Not much is happening. Everyone is still upset and mostly keeping to themselves. I guess I'd better be heading back before Father begins to worry," he ended and then added, "It's really sweltering up here."

Indeed, the boy did look extremely uncomfortable, especially

dressed as he was in his layers of tunnel clothing.

"Thank you for delivering the letter, Jason. I appreciate it. Say hello to Father and the others for me. Tell Vincent I miss him."

"I will," he said and was gone.

Catherine glanced around the office. Everyone looked hot and listless. No one had seemed overly interested in her strange visitor. It was not the first time they had seen oddly dressed people visiting her here at the office. In her capacity as assistant District Attorney, Catherine had many sources. Most of them street people.

Slowly she picked up the envelope. Scrawled in a well known hand was the one word. *Catherine*. Finally! Trying to shake off the sensation of Vincent's continued movement away from her, she opened the envelope. Maybe she was wrong. Maybe she couldn't really sense Vincent's movements, and it was all just her imagination. Catherine hoped the message from Vincent was good news. She didn't think he would contact her otherwise. In the best of times like these, he usually didn't communicate with her until he had regained his sense of inner peace. Maybe he was finally ready to see her, and they could talk about this situation.

She did not want this to ever happen again and was determined to let him know just how she felt about the matter. Catherine was beginning to realize that she should have stood her ground that night and stayed there until Vincent had been willing to talk to her. She knew that she could be as stubborn as he once she'd made up her mind about something.

Opening the folded piece of paper, Catherine read the words and didn't know whether to cry or scream in frustration. Above all

though was a continued sense of hurt and loss. Rereading this message, Catherine suddenly realized that what she thought she had been feeling was accurate. It has not been just her imagination. The message was brief, and she could almost hear Vincent saying the words.

'Catherine, I feel your concerns. Please be patient. I need to be alone for a while longer. I am going to be away for a short time. Do not worry. I will contact you when I return.'

Love,

Vincent

Quelling her initial emotions, Catherine's eye focused in on the signature, and she smiled gently. Lovingly she ran her finger over the words. Usually Vincent just signed his name. This was the first time he had signed using the word *'Love.'* It warmed her heart and took some of the ache away. She was still concerned though. Where could he be going? How long would he be gone? Why did he need to get away even from her?

Quickly crowding out those unpleasant thoughts was the realization that there was no chance to seeing Vincent soon. Didn't he understand that she had a desperate need to be with him? Especially now when she knew that he was hurting, Catherine wanted more than anything to share the hurt with him.

With a heaviness of heart, she tucked Vincent's message into her purse and went in search of Edie. Perhaps they could have some

girl-type fin this weekend. One thing was for sure. Catherine did not want to be alone this weekend. She needed company.



Vincent stood at the entrance to the huge cavern and looked around in amazement. Holding his lantern high, he could still barely see the recesses of the huge space stretching out before him. Long before he had reached this place, he knew he would find water here. He had heard it over an hour ago and had veered off from the direction he had been going to find the source of the sound. Water was a commodity Vincent had to limit, hoping to find some along the way. This was not unusual in these deep caverns hidden beneath the surface of the earth. Often times, there were streams, pools, and sometimes even rivers and waterfalls in these unexplored caverns. Nevertheless, Vincent had drunk sparingly of the little supply he had thought to bring along and was presently thirsty.

Following the sound of water he heard in the distance, Vincent eventually found the waterfall. He stared in wonder as it gently bubbled over the rocky precipice high above in the gloom of the upper cavern. It cascaded slowly down a slanted rocky wall into a bowl-shaped indentation in the floor, and it seemed to be the source of a small river which wound its way gently through the middle of the cavern to disappear somewhere out beyond the limits of his light. It was not a large fall, and its sound was a pleasant roar, not the deafening one of some of the larger falls he had occasionally come across in his travels.

On the other side of the narrow river was a short stretch of land which gently sloped up to the cliff face. The cliff ran the length of the cavern, framing the fall on either side. Crystal deposits of

some unknown sort sparkled in the water's spray as Vincent's light exposed their presence. In awe, he stood for a long while just drinking in the natural beauty of the place.

His side of the river was almost beach-like. As Vincent approached the river's edge, his feet sank into a gritty-like substance which reminded him of grainy, coarse sand. Here, too, he could see the sparkle of crystal-like dust scattered in the substance as he walked along swinging his lantern.

For the first time since leaving the main complex over two days ago, Vincent felt the stirrings of peace enter his heart. Taking off his packs and setting them back out of harm's way, he knelt to test the water. He found it sweet and cool. This was surprising to him, as he assumed the water would be frigid. It usually was here this far below the earth's surface. Occasionally, however, he and Mouse had found water which was warm enough to swim in if one didn't stay in too long.

Stripping off his clothing, Vincent cautiously waded out till he was about chest deep. Here he stopped as the ground beneath his feet began to slope downward. The water felt wonderful, and Vincent only wished that he had thought to pack soap and shampoo. He suddenly laughed out loud. He rarely laughed around people and enjoyed the sound of his laughter as it echoed around the cavern. Yesterday seemed ages ago and civilization like it had never existed. He tossed his head back and emitted a deep-throated roar which reverberated off the rocky cliffs, filling the cavern with more eerie echoes.



Edie trailed Cathy into the elevator. This had been one hell of a day, she reflected as the elevator began its ascent to Cathy's

floor. She was glad it was finally Friday. The heat wave still gripped the city, causing life-threatening emergencies all over town. The phone had not stopped its ringing all day. "Edie, check this. Edie, check that!" Sometimes she felt that people thought she was the computer. Every lunatic and petty thief in the city was out roaming around, looking for his piece of the action. She felt like a wet dish rag.

Entering the apartment, Edie stood with her arms spread out, letting the cool air surround her. "Oh, girl. You have no idea how good this feels," she said, as Catherine looked at her. "The only thing that could feel better than this right now would be a cold shower and something long, tall, and cold to drink."

Catherine's understanding laughter tinkled in the quiet apartment. She was already glad Edie had been able to come. Usually her friend was tied up caring for an elderly grandmother, but this weekend Edie was free. Grandma was away visiting relatives.

"Tell you what. Why don't you do just that?" said Catherine. "Put your stuff in the bedroom and jump into the shower. I'll see what I can put together for us to drink. Some food would taste really good about now. It was so hot in that office today I just couldn't even think of eating anything for lunch."

"You're on," said Edie, grinning and heading in the direction of the bedroom. "I'll try and leave you some cold water," she tossed over her shoulder as she disappeared into the darkened bedroom.

Catherine laughed and headed for the kitchen. "Let's see," she said to herself, opening the refrigerator. Wine coolers were the first thing to catch her eye, and she grabbed a couple and put them on the counter. Glancing back into the fridge with a critical eye, Catherine frowned at the sparsity of its interior. Some salad

fixings, cheese, eggs, grapes, beer, more wine coolers, and some left over Chinese from God alone knew when. Holding her nose she deposited the remains of the Chinese in a plastic baggie, sealed it tightly shut, and dumped it in the garbage. Investigation of her pantry shelves turned up a lone can of tuna. "Eureka," she giggled, grabbing the can.

Suddenly it struck Catherine that a heaviness had lifted from her emotions. Standing perfectly still, she focused inward trying to block everything else out of her mind. With practice, she was getting better at this. At first Catherine felt nothing, but slowly she could feel a growing peace envelop her being and realized with a sense of exhilaration that she was once again in-tune with Vincent's inner being. She also became aware of the fact that he had stopped moving away from her, although he still felt far away.

Catherine marveled at what was happening inside her. What a wonderful thing this being connected really was. She was truly just beginning to understand something that Vincent had said to her right after her father had passed away. She remembered clearly what he had wonderingly whispered to her that afternoon by the waterfall, and she could still hear the raspy voice saying, "Catherine, we are something that has never been, and our journey is one that no others have ever taken. Her heart was filled to overflowing with love for Vincent her Vincent. Only one thing was missing to make this truly one of the most perfect moments of Catherine's life. She wished Vincent were here to share it with her. She fleetingly wondered what had happened to cause the peace she felt and only hoped it would last for her love.

"Girl! What are you doing? Praying or something?"

Catherine jumped, dropped the can of tuna, and swung around

with a startled look on her face, the moment shattered. "Oh, Edie. You **scared** the **hell** out of me."

The crestfallen look on her friend's gamine face brought Catherine fully back to the here-and-now. "Edie, it wasn't your fault I was so far away. Come on, help me put this mess together. I'm afraid it's toasted cheese, salad, and grapes, unless you'd prefer tuna."

"Nah. I've had enough tuna for a while. Toasted cheese sounds good. Listen, why don't you go jump in the shower and let me make the sandwiches? I make a wicked toasted cheese. You got any strawberry jam?"

"Strawberry Jam?" asked Catherine puzzled. "Yeah, I think so. Look in that cupboard up there. What do you want with the jam?"

"You'll see. It's a specialty of my Granny's Wait till you taste it. Now, go! And girl, one of these days I want you to explain to me what caused you to look like you did. I stood here for several minutes watching you before I opened my big mouth. You were definitely way out there, girl! And you were enjoying every minute of being wherever you were. I got to try me some of whatever there was. It's definitely got to be a man! Lordy! I'd sure like to find one like that someday. Anybody that can do that to you and not even be here has got to be something else! I'd sure like to meet him. He got any friends?"

Catherine's eyes sparkled with a far-away, mysterious look. She chuckled and threw over her shoulder. "Sorry, Edie. He's definitely one of a kind, and he's all mine."

"Figures," groused Edie, reaching for the jam. "You uptown girls have all the luck."



Enjoying the sound of the dying echoes, Vincent turned in circles, exhilarating in how good he was beginning to feel when suddenly he slid off the ledge into frigid, icy-cold water over his head. The shock of it took his breath away. The water was so cold he was almost paralyzed. Some force felt like it was pulling him down. Fighting his way upward, Vincent noticed that there was a current, and he needed all his strength to regain the gentle bank. Swimming swiftly with long, powerful strokes, he finally made it into shallow water where he collapsed.

Exhaustion settled upon him like a cloak. His breathing was still ragged, and his lungs ached from swallowing the frigid water. He was still freezing. Standing, he left the river and grabbed up his cloak. Pulling it on, he hugged it to himself. Suddenly dizzy, he lay down on the gritty substance of the beach, and it sunk beneath his weight. Closing his eyes, he began to drift off to sleep when a not too distant movement brought him instantly awake. Looking around quickly, he could see nothing unusual when he suddenly heard a voice from beyond the lantern's light.

"I should have warned you about how deep it got out there," said a slightly more raspy voice than his own. ***"You'd better dry off and get dressed,"*** continued the unseen presence.

Vincent was up on his feet before the voice had finished its statement. His face tightened in anger. ***"Where are you?"*** he snarled, a deep growl beginning way down in his chest. He whirled and started all around him, trying to locate the source of the voice.

"I'm right here. And I wish you'd quit growling and

snarling at me. I'm getting tired of it. I'm not going to pounce on a defenseless man! It's taken me years to even get you to hear me. All I want to do is talk to you man to man," the entity chuckled as if at some private joke.

As the sounds of laughter, devoid of any humor, slowly died away, Vincent demanded, ***"Cone out where I can see you."*** When there was no immediate response, a wave of terror and despair washed over him.

Suddenly he heard a deep, tuneful whisper enunciate in exquisite slowness. ***"No. I don't think that's such a wise idea. I think I'll stay right where I am until we've talked a little. Then, maybe, I'll show myself."***

Vincent still felt slightly lightheaded from his experience in the water and wondered if he were just hallucinating. He still could see nothing. Suddenly aware of his state of nakedness, he grabbed his discarded clothing and swiftly dressed. When he was finished, he moved over to where his packs were and began to rummage through one of them, looking for something to eat and trying to act as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. The whole time, however, his mind remained rigidly alert and cold.

"Feeling better, are we?"

Vincent swung around, tossing the pack down. He lunged forward, finding nothing but cool air to connect with. Another snarl began to form deep within his chest.

"I already said I wished you wouldn't do that. All I want to do

is talk to you."

Vincent felt a cold sweat break out all over his body. He also began shaking and sunk back down upon the sand. Suddenly he was glad he had decided to leave the complex. He wouldn't want Father or the others to witness this. Sinking farther back into the sand, Vincent closed his eyes and said in a droll voice filled with resignation. "So talk."



"These are marvelous," said Catherine, liberally spreading jam on the top of her second sandwich and wolfing it down. "I never realized what strawberry jam could do for toasted cheese. Tell your Granny thanks for the recipe. By the way, does she still read those off-beat supermarket serials?"

"Now wait just a minute!: said Edie, around a mouthful of sandwich. "Go easy on my Granny. She's an old lady," she continued, taking a long sip of her wine cooler. "Granny has the gift."

"The gift? What are you talking about?" Catherine patted her full stomach and pushed her plate away. It was pitch black out now, and she stood up to turn on another light.

"You know? The gift. Granny can sense things ordinary people can't. Like a fortune teller. She grew up in Haiti and didn't come here till she was almost twenty years old. She isn't mixed up in any of that voodoo, but she still scares me somethines with the things she knows about people. Everybody in our neighborhood has a healthy respect for old Granny. I know I do. I've been around her all my life and know that whatever it is she's got working for her, it's real."

Catherine fleetingly thought of Narcissa and remembered her warning at Winterfest about the poisoned rose. "I know someone like that, too, Edie. I know what you mean about having a healthy respect for them."

"Yeah, well. Besides that, I have a touch of the gift myself. Probably inherited it from Gram, although it's nowhere near as powerful or accurate as hers. She says not to worry, as if I am. She says the gift grows stronger as you grow older. Not that I'm hoping and holding my breath. It's really spooky sometimes."

The next couple of hours passed quickly as they sat swapping stories about this and that. Catherine got up and switched on the television while they straightened out the kitchen. She wanted to catch the late evening news before going to bed.

Naturally, as she suspected, the news was filled with stories about the heat wave. Just as she was about to switch it off, an emergency bulletin was released informing residents of the city of a dangerous electrical power shortage. Current power would be reduced during the hours between midnight and eight tomorrow morning. Anyone on life-sustaining machinery was asked to contact their utility company immediately. Residents were further asked to refrain from running air conditioners except in emergency situations.

With a bleak look, Catherine resolutely walked over and shut off the air conditioner. "Oh, well," she remarked. "It's cool enough in here now that if we keep the windows and the drapes closed, it should stay tolerable until late tomorrow morning."

"I knew I shouldn't have let you switch the damn television on. I had a feeling."

"Now don't you start that spooky business on me just before I'm about ready to go to bed."

"Okay. I hear you. I'm bushed, too. Those wine coolers finally did me in. Tomorrow's gong to be a joy. I can hardly wait. There goes our plans of staying here in front of the air conditioner all day. Boy, this heat's really getting to me."

Catherine suddenly had the glimmer of an idea. "Edie, listen! I know what we could do tomorrow," and she proceeded to tell her friend all about the strange phone call she had gotten several days ago about her father's mysterious house. "I'd really like to take a run out there and check it out. My friend might be back in town soon, and i don't know when I'd have another free weekend to go way out there. What do you say? Besides, the car's got air, and I'm sure way out there on the Island with all that ocean around, it's bound to be a lot cooler."

"Sounds like a plan to me," grinned Edie, climbing into the bed next to her friend. Despite the heat wave, the room was still chilly and hopefully would remain comfortable at least throughout the rest of the night. "You aren't a sheet hog, are you?" Edie asked suspiciously.

Catherine laughed as she rolled over, hugging the sheets around her. "Not that anyone's ever told me. I guess you'll just have to wait and find out the hard way. Now, roll over and get some sleep, so we can get going at a decent hour tomorrow." With that, Catherine closed her eyes and immediately began drifting into that hazy world of daydreams which claims one right before falling off to sleep.

Lying there enjoying the half thoughts which drifted in and out of her mind of their own volition, Catherine was jolted by the sudden

sensation of fear which gripped her heart. Sitting bolt upright in the bed, she nearly cried out, the feeling was so real.

"Cath! Cathy! Are you all right? What's the matter? You came up out of that bed like you'd seen a ghost!"

"I'm all right. Just a nightmare. Go back to sleep, Edie." Sinking back down, Catherine turned over, pretending sleep. She knew now that sleep would be long in coming. Whatever troubled Vincent was back in full force and stronger than ever. This time it was strong enough that even she could sense its lurking presence.



Vincent stared into the gloom beyond the lantern's light but could see nothing. He really didn't believe anything was actually there. 'So *this is what it feels like to go mad*' he mused. "All you do is talk to yourself," he continued out loud to the empty air.

"You expected to be running amuck ripping and rending your clothes, foaming at the mouth, I suppose?"

Vincent jumped up and ran toward the voice. But there was nothing there when he got to the approximate area.

"I told you. You can't see me yet. Just be a good boy and go back over there and sit down. Let's handle this like civilized men," the disembodied voice chuckled again.

"WHO ARE YOU?" shouted Vincent, pacing back and forth across the sandy beach.

"Shouting won't get you anywhere, Vincent. Calm down. Relax. You already know who I am. Why pretend? Who else would be way down here with you? I'm why you came down here in the first place, aren't I?"

"What do you want from me? You've already taken my sanity. What more do you want?"

"Quit acting like a melodramatic fool. You're as sane as any man."

"You call this sane? Talking to myself?"

"Ah! Now we're on the right track. There. See? That wasn't so difficult, was it? Listen to me. I'm here to keep you from going insane. We wouldn't want that now, would we? What would the pretty Catherine say?"

Vincent let out an ungodly roar, and once again charged the voice only to find nothingness. Frustrated, he roared again and held his head, shaking it from side to side. ***"Go away. Leave me in peace."***

"I can't, Vincent. I wish I could, but I can't. I'm part of you. Wherever you go, I go. We've been together for a long time. Since that episode with Devin. And then there was that disastrous incident when you were a teenager. You didn't handle that very well. I must

add. You damn near did us both in that time. And all over that little tart."

"Lisa? How can you say that after what I-----what we did to her?"

"Did to her? WE didn't do anything to her. Vincent. you were a teenage boy caught up in your first love. All you wanted to do was kiss the girl you were infatuated with. She got scared, because she didn't expect you, of all people, to act like that. Lisa was using you, Vincent. She didn't mean it. She really didn't know exactly what she was doing, teasing you like that. So she pulled away, and in the process your claws got in the way, and she got scratched. That was it. I was there, Vincent, remember? I ought to know! After all, I'm the one who does the dastardly deeds, and I didn't do anything to Lisa. Now if you want to talk about the time I raked Devin's cheek..... Well, that's a different story, I admit. I'm ashamed of that one. I'm in much better control of myself now. I've grown up, too, you know."

Unable to stand it any longer, Vincent threw back his head and emitted a hideous howl.

"Are you finished? I do it much better, anyway. Leave that to me in the future. Really. Get a grip on

yourself. I want to ask you a few questions. We have to come to an understanding, you and I. We can't go on like this. In all seriousness, you are going to go mad if you keep this up. You'll end up killing us both. Remember, whatever happens to you, happens to me."

"Maybe's that's for the best," breathed Vincent quietly. "A thing such as you shouldn't be loose in the world."

"A thing such as me! And do you really think that by killing me the world will be safer? Tell me, Vincent. When was the last time I raped someone? When have I ever beaten up defenseless old people? How often do I sexually abuse or neglect little children? How much ill-gotten money do I have squirreled away in the bank? When's the last time you saw me selling drugs to school kids? Tell me, how many teenage girls do I have out prostituting for me? Exactly what is it I've done that's so evil? I've killed a few scum. Well, maybe that's an understatement."

"That's all? They're human. We don't have the right to take life."

"Yes, they are! I concede the point. Maybe if they were caught normally and someone was there to help them, they could be rehabilitated. I admit it. That part does bother me. But those were not normal

situations we were dealing with. In most of those cases, it was either them or Catherine. We all have choices to make. They made choices. We made choices. They chose to live lives of evil. What they were doing was evil, Vincent. What you were doing was instinctual. You were fighting back the best way you knew how. Besides, Vincent. You didn't go it, I did. Get that through your big head.

"The part of you that loves and nurtures, that shows mercy and compassion, is the rational part of you-----the part that thinks. We unfortunately are much more of a dichotomy than the average human. I am the part which acts instinctually through a need for self-preservation. When you bonded with the woman you call Catherine, she became part of you, Vincent. Just as I am part of you. Anything that threatens her threatens you and me. When that happens for us, rational thought and instinct takes over.

"And you don't think you're human? Vincent, let me tell you something. There's more humanity in your little finger than in any three of those we killed. Why do you always dwell on the negative? You've been listening to Father for way too long. You're a grown

man now, Vincent. You have to start following your own heart. Father doesn't have all the answers to everything, you know. He's not infallible. Where was he when that incident with Lisa occurred? Oh, yes! He was there, but did he handle it right? I am grateful that he was there. I had a lot at stake that time, too. But maybe if he had set you down and explained how it was with teenage boys and girls-----told you that what had happened was normal and no big deal, maybe we would have never had the crisis?

"Why has he never been able to see and explain to you that we are a mixture of good and evil just like everyone else? We are just more noticeable and a lot less hypocritical about the darkness within us. There is little guile where we are concerned.

"There is good and evil in all of us. Father has been protecting you all these years. But exactly what has he been protecting you from? Catherine is the best thing that has ever happened to you, Vincent. Is Father happy for you? No! Not really. Part of Father would just as soon have Catherine vanish into thin air. You're safer that way. He's safer that way. Does he really only have your best interests at heart, or is he also projecting what happened between him and

Margaret onto you and Catherine? Does he see something of Margaret in Catherine? Is this wholesome and good? Since he lost Margaret, you have been the most important thing in his life, and he in yours. You're his heir, above even Devin which we won't even discuss. You are special, like Margaret was special. Above the ordinary. After having you all to himself for all those years, maybe he finds it hard to share you with anyone else. Wake up, Vincent. This doesn't make Father evil. It makes him human.

"And what would your tunnel world be without you? How long do you think it would survive without you? Where would Father be without you? Those people are no match for the likes of Paracelsus. And where would all the poor souls who are yet to find their way to the tunnels go? Have you thought about Catherine? what will happen to her if you're gone?"

With that, the voice fell silent. Vincent sat long into the night, pondering the questions his other half had left him with.



"Wake up, lazy bones. You said you wanted to get an early start. Well, forget that action. It's already after nine-thirty. Come on. I raided the kitchen," said a cheery Edie, handing a groggy Catherine a cup of steaming black coffee. "This should put some hair on your chest. I hope you like it strong and black. I didn't see

any milk out there."

Catherine took a sip of the scalding coffee and almost gagged. "Edie! What are you trying to do, poison me?" She quickly put the cup on the nightstand and swung her legs out of bed. The apartment was already beginning to feel like a sweatbox. "Come on. Let's get dressed and get out of here. I'm going to take a quick shower and then call that lady for some more specific directions to this house."



"Well, you can forget the quick trip out to the Island routine," said Edie, looking out the car window. "Thank God this car is air conditioned. The traffic on the Long Island Expressway was bumper to bumper. I guess they all had the same idea we did, huh?"

"Oh, it won't be so bad. The farther out we go, the thinner the traffic will get. We'll probably lose most of this as soon as we hit the beaches."

Fortunately, Catherine was correct, and they made good time once they left the beach exits behind them. After taking a few wrong turns, they finally found the little town they were looking for on the end of the island. Finding the lady's house was easy. Not too many people lived way out here.

"It's kind of desolate, don't you think?" asked Edie as they pulled into the driveway.

"Oh! I don't know," answered Catherine. "We're just used to the big city, that's all. Some people like it way out here by themselves. My father was never a loner though. I can't see him coming way out here. This gets more and more mysterious every minute. Let

me just run in and get the key, and then we'll go see what's what. I'll also ask her where we can get some supplies. I'll just be a minute."

Catherine was gone for more than just a minute, and Edie could tell by the look on her face that something was up. Catherine got in the car and blew the hair out of her eyes. "Boy! Was she strange. Talk about weird. This lady went on and on about disturbing the spirits and upsetting the dead. I don't know what she was talking about. It sure sounded like she didn't want me going to this house though. She kept talking about nobody going into that house besides her and my dad for years. Oh, well! We'll soon see for ourselves. Come on. She said there's a combination gas station/grocery store just down the road. The last outpost of civilization, according to her."

They backed out of the driveway aware that someone was staring at them out of the front window. Edie waved but got no response. Not a mile down the road, they came to the store. The owner looked like he was just getting ready to close. Catherine rushed in and ask if it was too late for them to grab some stuff.

"No, come on in, but make it snappy. I want to get out of here pronto. Where are you two ladies headed anyway? Haven't you heard the weather report?"

They hadn't. They had been too busy gabbing and looking at the scenery on the way up to turn on the radio.

"No, we haven't. Why?"

"Are you city folks?"

"We're from New York, if that's what you mean! What's that got to do with the weather?"

"Oh, nothing really. I just figured you were city folk, cause I ain't ever seen you out this way before. Where you headed, anyway?"

"I don't know what it's called. My dad owned a house out here around the point. Maybe you know where it is? His name was Chandler."

"Oh, yeah. Chandler. He usually comes in here several times a year for supplies. Haven't seen him around lately though. He been sick?"

"My dad passed away recently. I'm trying to settle up his estate. I thought I had it all taken care of, and now it seems he has this house way out here that I didn't even know about. I guess that's all I need," said Catherine, putting the last of her selections on the counter. "Unless you see something else you want, Edie."

Edie quickly looked around and added a few small items to the pile. "That should do it," she said, opening one of the twinkies. "Before we go, what was that about the weather?"

"Almost forgot. We're may be due for a hurricane around here. Better keep a sharp eye out. If things get too nasty out there, I'd head on out if I was you. It's that storm that hit down South and blew out to sea. Supposedly it's out there over the ocean possibly rejuvenating itself and might decide to head on back inland. But the weathermen are always predicting storms like that around here, and all we usually get though is rain. Well, if that's all you need, I want to get on home. The wife has dinner waiting, and she gets her nose out of joint if I'm late. Have a nice stay."



In the short time it took to drive from the store to the house, which they found easily enough, the wind had picked up, the sky had

turned overcast and sullen, and the temperature had dropped considerably.

"Here comes the rain," said Edie as big drops began to splatter across the windshield, making visibility difficult. Catherine turned on the wipers as she spied the name Chandler on a sign near the entrance to a circular driveway. Entering, they steered the car around the curve and Catherine froze.

Edie grabbed the wheel and stepped on the brake. "Cathy. Are you sure you're all right? You've been acting pretty strange these last couple of days. Want to tell me about it?"

Catherine was lost in a montage of images from her childhood; Mommy running down the steps of this house and hugging her while Daddy stood on the porch beaming; Daddy and her playing with the kitten, while Mommy sat in the lawn chair resting; Swimming early in the morning with Mommy as the sun was coming up; Daddy bringing towels and hot cocoa down the long flight of stairs which led to the private little beach; The doctor coming in the middle of the night.

"Cathy, talk to me. You're beginning to scare me. Maybe you'd better move over and let me drive us out of here. you don't look too good, girl."

"Edie. I remember this house," said Catherine, in a flat voice. "I had forgotten all about it. I must have just blocked it out of my mind completely. This is the house my Dad rented the summer my Mother died. We were here for about six weeks that summer before Mom went into the hospital. We left suddenly the night she went into the hospital, and I never came back here. Dad, though, apparently did. I can still see the inside of the house as if it were yesterday. The whole backend faces the ocean. Mommy loved

sitting in these rooms and looking out over the ocean. She would wave to me and Dad when we were down at the beach. Edie, I don't know if I want to go in there. I'm scared of what I might find. Why would Dad buy this house after what happened here?"

"Cathy, I don't know what to tell you, but we can't sit out here in this car. It's getting dark out. I mean really dark. Either we leave, or we get out and go inside. Which do you want to do?"

Catherine hesitated a moment longer. Everything inside her wanted to turn around and leave, but she'd had the strangest sensations all afternoon. The conflicting emotions she had read from Vincent were really strange. Stranger yet was the feeling that the farther out on the island she drove, the nearer to Vincent she came. Besides, she was exhausted physically and emotionally drained. "Let's stay," Catherine decided, pushing the door open against the wind and getting out.

Quickly she ran up the porch steps and shoved the key in the lock, opening the door. and going inside before she could change her mind. Edie followed with a bag of groceries.

"Cathy, this is lovely," said Edie, looking around. "The view would be magnificent if it weren't so dark out there. Turn on some lights. We do have lights, don't we? Did you think to ask that lady if we have electricity, water, and things like that?" Edie asked nervously.

"Yes. We have all the things we need. She said there's even a phone and a television." They went back out to the car and quickly got the rest of their things inside. Catherine went back out to the front porch and found the switch which turned on the electricity. Wandering around, she turned on lights in the kitchen and living room, chasing away the gloom of early evening.

The rain was really coming down hard, but Catherine wasn't focused on the weather. Looking at the magazines laying around the living room gave her a sick feeling in her stomach. *'Poor Dad,'* she thought. They dated back to the summer of her mother's death. That gave her an indication of what she'd probably find in the bedroom when she finally steeled her nerves enough to look.

Edie began banging things around the kitchen. Turning on the water tap, she let it run until the water was clean and clear. She was relieved to find the refrigerator totally empty----- no surprises. She could already hear the machine humming and knew that it would soon be cold.

Rummaging around in the cupboards, Edie found pots and pans. Putting water on to boil for tea, she went in search of Catherine and found her sitting in the living room by the window.

"We should have hot water for tea soon, Cathy. I put all the rest of the stuff away. You wanna talk?"

Catherine's emotions were roiling just beneath the facade of her calm exterior as she picked bits of tufting off the throw pillow she clutched in her lap. Her lips began to tremble, and her voice cracked as she tried to force the words out.

"Aw, Cath," said Edie softly, sitting down next to her. Putting her arm around her, she gave her friend's shoulder a good squeeze. "You hurtin, ha? If it means anything, I'm glad you're not facing this alone. I'm glad I'm here with you. But it's not only this house, is it? Something's been up with you for a long time, hasn't it? You've never talked about it, and it sure isn't any of my business, but if you need to talk about whatever it is, I'm here."

"Thanks, Edie. I really appreciate your friendship. So much has

been happening lately. I've just got a lot on my mind. This thing with my father has really unnerved me. Just look at this place. Straight out of the sixties. He hasn't changed a thing since the day my Mother died. The place is a mausoleum. Poor Dad. He missed her terribly. He must have felt so alone. I never knew just how alone he must of felt. He kept it from me. I have a hunch he knew that this wasn't exactly healthy and didn't want to expose me to it. It's so sad thinking of him going through all those years alone, missing her like that. I don't want that to happen to me, Edie. I can't explain it. Wehn I think of my dad and this, I get scared. It's a really scary thing to think of going through life alone without that special somebody. I don't know if I could do it. Even though he did this," said Catherine, sweeping her hand around the room, "He still went ahead with life without her. I don't know if I could do that without....." Catherine's words trailed off.

"Without Vincent?" said Edie, staring straight at Catherine. At Catherine's sharply indrawn breath, Edie grinned. "Keep your pants on. That was nothing. I remembered seeing that little book of poems that time i was at your place. It had his name in it, and I asked you who he was, and you told me he was a special friend. That same book is still there on your table, looking a lot more worn. Like you handle it a lot. Two plus two equals four."

Catherine sighed, relieved to hear her friend's explanation. "I'm sorry, Edie. I can't tell you anymore. I made a promise not to talk about him. But yes, his name is Vincent, and yes he's pretty important to me. About the most important thing in my life. Right now he's away, and I just guess I'm feeling lonely. He should be back soon, however." With that she fell silent again.

"You don't have to say a word, Cath, but I get the feeling that this Vincent leads a pretty strange life. I've had that feeling for a long

time. And I also get the feeling that you two are not..... Well, you know. You're just still friends. You keep calling him your friend."

"Edie, please. I can't say anymore."

"Well, let's just forget I ever brought the subject up. I'll go fix us some tea. Then we'll decide what to make for dinner. You can stretch out here and rest. You look about done in."

Good to her word, Edie went and got the tea and then left again to return moments later with a blanket and pillows.

"Here! I found these in the bathroom closet. You just relax and enjoy your tea and let ole Edie make magic in the kitchen. If you liked my toasted cheese, just wait till you taste my dinner." With that she was gone, leaving Catherine with her thoughts.



Vincent sat for a long while appreciating the sound of nothing more than the slight roar of the waterfall. He stared off into the cavern not really focusing on, or seeing anything. The voice, mercifully, had stopped. It faded away as if it had never been, and had left him with nothing but unanswered questions. But he knew he would eventually be forced to find answers. His sanity, and future well-being hinged on them.

Not for the first time was Vincent relieved that he had distanced himself from the others. Watching him go through this was more than he wished to inflict upon them----- especially Catherine. Quickly he turned his mind toward other thoughts, fearful of dwelling on her-----on what he had at stake.

What the voice had said about the tunnel community and Catherine were all too true. Leaving them unprotected, at the

possible mercy of someone as diabolical as Paracelsus, horrified Vincent. Cold fear insidiously snaked through his mind as he thought of the probabilities. If Paracelsus ever thought that he were no longer a viable force to deal with, then Vincent knew beyond a doubt that it would be no time at all before that evil genius would move on Father and the others. Paracelsus' desire to rule and reign supreme in the tunnels would drive him until he accomplished that goal, probably with tragic consequences for the unprotected community. Vincent shook his maned head in an effort to purge the thoughts conjured up by his imagination. All too well he remembered the vivid nightmare he had once had which showed him life in the tunnels under Paracelsus' rule. Vincent's instincts told him that the tunnel world had not yet seen the last of that madman.

Evil versus instinct. That is what the voice had intimated. There was such a thing as evil in the world. Of that, Vincent was convinced. Some people, like Paracelsus, openly chose the evil, knowing full well what they did. They desired it, relishing and rejoicing in it, seeming to feed liberally on its devastating results as if they could not get enough of it. And he thought of all the various mental illnesses and aberrations which ran rampant in the society Above.

In contrast, what happened within him was instinctual, lacking conscious volition-----at least none he was aware of. He struck out through a need to protect. Vincent worried, however, that there might possibly be, somewhere deep within him, some hidden place where the things he did in a rage were conceived with consent. If they were, though, he was totally unaware of it.

While this thought brought him some much needed peace and consolation, Vincent was still left to face the inevitable fact that

whether through instinct or choice, the results were undeniably the same. Death and carnage-----delivered in a terrifying manner. He did not think he could deal with it much longer.

Yet the alternative was to leave those he loved unprotected. Leave them at the mercy of the likes of Paracelsus and others who preyed on the weak and defenseless. But could he find somewhere within him the strength to overcome his sense of self-revulsion and continue to play the role of tunnel protector?

And Father! What the voice said concerning Father also had a slight ring of truth to it. It was a situation he had long put off dealing with because of his love and deep respect for his adoptive parent. Father had always been overprotective. At times, Father even seemed overbearing. Much as he disliked dealing with the situation, more and more lately he found himself at logger-heads with Father-----usually over Catherine.

It was a situation which brought Vincent added sorrow. It would no sooner seem that the two people he cared most deeply about in the world were finally getting along, when Father would erupt over some new incident he saw as a threat to Vincent.

Much as he loved and respected Father, the man needed to finally come to the realization that it was time for Vincent to take charge of his own life. Before Catherine came into his life, there had been very little, if any, conflict between Father and him concerning anything. Vincent was now more than ready to make his own decisions-----especially those concerning Catherine. But these thoughts tore at Vincent like sharp knives.

And Lisa? Vincent momentarily cringed even thinking the name-----almost abandoning where these thoughts could possibly lead. Thoughts of Lisa were still painful and brought

memories of remorse and revulsion. Had she really simply been toying with him as the voice said? Had she simply panicked in fear of where the situation was going? Panicked to think she had pushed him too far?

Lisa, herself, had eventually come back to the tunnels seemingly unafraid of Vincent. She had come back professing a desire for renewed friendship and contact with her tunnel family. She had tried to use her family for her own devious purposes. While there, however, Lisa told Vincent that what had happened between them was ancient history-----child's play. She had lightly brushed off the whole incident as if it had been a mere childish argument.

Could that be all it really was? Catherine seemed to think so, saying that such things happened frequently between teenagers. There Vincent found her observations to be true. Since he had taken up the role of teacher in the tunnels years ago, many of the teens had come to him looking for help and guidance in dealing with things in the emotional realm. Why had he not seen the connection between their problems and his of so long ago? Was it really that simple, or was this what he now desperately wanted to believe?

Why had Father not been able to explain these things at the time the incident occurred? Was he possibly afraid to investigate that avenue? Exactly what did Father see him as? In all these years, they had never once talked openly about this subject. It was and always had been taboo. What was Father afraid of? More importantly, had some of Father's subconscious fears colored Vincent's perceptions of himself?

Hopefully the answers to some of these questions would bring Vincent to the conclusion that he was not that much different from

other people. He was beginning to see that in every one there is the capacity for good and evil in a multiplicity of ways. Many times people have hidden thoughts and desires which, when acted upon inadvertently, bring pain and sorrow to those around them. Father and Lisa were by no means what Vincent would consider evil people. They were human. They had made choices which sometimes ended up being hurtful to others.

This thought brought Vincent to the heart of his biggest problem. This aspect of choice. Consciously or subconsciously others had the luxury of choice. They often times claimed at a later date to not have know what they were doing, but if they searched deep inside and analyzed the situation, they would see where the choice had definitely been made.

This was one of the things which made Vincent feel very different from others. He had no conscious awareness of choice when his instincts took over. What the voice had said about their being a much more splat personality was certainly true. He felt as if there were actually two separate beings living within him. The one rational; capable of making choices, the other acting totally on instinct. Vincent's inability to control the other being he so often sensed deep within himself frightened and outraged him.

Although it could be argued that since Vincent really seemed to have no choice at those times when his instincts took over, he should not worry about it. The truth was, Vincent did. He could not escape the feeling that somewhere buried deep within himself at the center of his being was an unknown place. And it was here he possibiyl made those deadly choices, sending his instincts raging out.

Choice versus instinct. Was this not supposedly what, according

to many authorities, was one of the important aspects that separated man from beast? Was not man's power of conscious, rational, controlling thought one of the deciding factors? Vincent knew that he possessed rational thought as well as speech and the ability to articulate those thoughts. Yet he also lost himself for periods of time in uncontrollable rages which left him unaware of who or what he was.

What was he to think? Questions and more questions. Vincent's head swam. He needed to stop thinking-----needed time to internalize these troublesome thoughts.



Standing stiffly, Vincent flexed his muscles to relieve the cramps and stiffness. He then busied himself with the task of preparing a small meal from the supplies he had brought with him, supplementing the meal with the cool, sweet river water. Vincent looked around his intent on his surroundings for the first time since his initial inspection upon arrival. He was fascinated with what his eyes beheld. As they adjusted to the murky darkness immediately surrounding him, Vincent could see strange, bizarre shaes far down at the end of the cavern on his side of the river. Judging from the distance, he estimated the cavern to be about seventy feet in length. The width was somewhat harder to judge. There was no way of telling until he had walked the whole length if it was uniform. He had the vague impression that there were several places where dark recesses in the cavern's wall indicated branchings leading who knew where.

The whole end of the vast cavern suddenly seemed to be bathed in an iridescent, hazy light which shimmered off teh spray hanging in the air surrounding the falls. Vincent had not noticed this before

and searched the area far above his head trying to locate the source of the pale light filtering down from Above. There could be possible fissures and crevices in the cave's roof responsible for admitting the light. It was something he resolved to investigate after he had some sleep. For now, Vincent contented himself with moving farther down the length of the cave, holding his lantern out in front of him. The wall on his side, he now noticed for the first time, glittered, giving it a sparkling, crystal-like effect. At one time in the not too recent past, there must have been water flowing down the wall to produce the effect he was now observing.

Walking farther on, he eventually came to one of the dark areas in the wall he had seen before starting out on his inspection. As he suspected, it was the entryway to another vast cavern running horizontally to the one he was in. Entering it Vincent immediately noticed that it was immense. Next he noticed that it was crowded with massive stone-like structures. Stalagmites and stalactites. He was familiar with them from other caves he had explored. Their colors were amazing. Never before had he seen such variety in one cave. There were pale reds and yellows mingled with opaque whites and grays. Dark browns and jet black were also in evidence. Most of the pillars were solid color, but here and there Vincent saw an occasional structure which had variations produced by diagonal bands of contrasting color. Some of the columns were tipped with blue and green where the water was still actively working as it dropped from somewhere up Above. the roof soared into utter darkness way overhead.

As Vincent moved on into the vast cavern and walked among the columns and pillars, he could not help feeling as if he had somehow stumbled into a subterranean fairy world. The walls in this cavern looked like draperies which might at any minute billow

out in the cool breeze that came from somewhere in the farthest recesses of the cavern.

Walking along, fascinated with the sights he was beholding, Vincent was suddenly aware of water lapping over his boots and chilling his feet. Quickly he stepped back aware of a stream of cold, fast moving air circulating over the water. Lowering his lantern, he saw a sight which nearly took his breath away. A large pool of bluish-green water glimmered in the lantern's soft, muted glow. Thin, colorful, needle-like spires rose gracefully from various areas of the pool, snaking in a variety of directions. The tips of the spires ended in feather-like appendages. Although stationary and made of limestone, they almost seemed to sway; so graceful did they look.

Vincent felt something crunch under his boot as he turned to leave. Glancing down, he noticed around his feet strange looking pebbles. Bending down he picked up a handful and examined them closely. From reading about caves and caverns in books from Father's extensive library, Vincent knew he held in his hand something rarely seen by men----- cave pearls. They sparkled with a dull sheen. Stooping, Vincent gathered several handfuls from around the perimeter of the pool. Putting them in one of his numerous pockets, he fleetingly wondered if Mouse could possibly fashion them into a rope.



Edie eventually returned with a dinner tray to find Catherine staring fixedly out the window. Her friend seemed a little calmer, and she hoped that the mood would remain. Although she didn't say so to Cathy, this house gave her the creeps. She had a bad feeling about the place that she couldn't put a name to. Sitting

next to Catherine, Edie set the tray on the table in front of the couch. Looking out the window at the blackened sky, she wondered if it were smart to remain here in this isolated place. The wind was howling relentlessly outside, and the sound of waves crashing on the beach below was far from comforting to a city girl.

"Feeling better?" Edie asked, picking up her cup of tea from the tray.

"Yes. Thanks, Edie, for putting up with me. I didn't mean for our weekned to work out this way. We should never have come here. I should have had a realtor handle this, but curiosity got the better of me. I couldn't imagine what my father was doing with a house wy out here that I didn't even know about. There was no mention of this place in any of his legal papers. Not even a deed. I imagine I'll find it here someplace."

"Do you think it's a good idea for you to go poking around here feeling like you do? We could just sleep here, get up early, and leave if you want. You could still have a realtor handle it, Cathy. Youd don't have to put yourself through this."

"No. I'm already here. The damage is done. I might just as well try and locate the deed. Heaven only knows what else I'll find. This house seemed to be like his secret drawer. I better check around while I'm here. There might be some things of my mother's stored here that I'd like to have. Outside of some jewelry, my father never gave me anything of hers, and i know she had some beautiful collector's pieces. I have a feeling they might be stored here somewhere.

"We were only at this house for such a short time, but I remember how much my mother loved it. She fell in love with it the first day

we saw it. I'll have a look around tomorrow in the daylight. Right now, though, this food looks pretty inviting. I'm suddenly starving. Let's eat before it gets cold."



Finally dousing the lantern, Vincent settled down and dozed off into a light, fitful sleep in which his dark side stalked him relentlessly through the murky cavern.

A light shining in his eyes brought Vincent gradually awake. Looking around he wondered where the light was coming from. His lantern remained unlit where he had left it before going to sleep. Peering upwards, he could barely distinguish light filtering down from somewhere up the cliff high above the falls.

Curious as to its source, Vincent relit his lantern and studied the cliff on either side³ of the falls. It didn't seem to look especially dangerous as far as climbing was concerned, but Vincent was hesitant about going back into the water. Yet he could see no other way. Reluctantly he stripped then rolled his clothes into a ball and wrapped them in his cloak. Tying the cloak around his head and neck, Vincent carefully entered the water and waded out to where he could feel it begin to slope. Inching farther out, one foot at a time, he found the drop off point. Giving a mighty heave with his feet, Vincent struck out for the other side, giving the area of the small falls a wide berth. The water in midstream was cold but not the same frigid water as he had encountered down Below. Before long, he had gained the other bank.

His clothes were relatively dry. He retrieved his boots that he had earlier tossed across the river and dressed quickly and began his ascent, searching for the light source. The climb was long but easy. There were plenty of hand and foot holds along the way. It

was almosst like climbing stairs and there were numerous wide ledge areas where he periodically rested.

After he had been climbing for what must have been a couple of hours, Vincent began to wonder just how far up the cliff went. Suddenly there above him, he noticed cracks and fissures in the cliff face not too much higher up. Within minutes he had reached the first of the fissures and found that while most of them were too narrow to allow passage, there were several through which he could squeeze. It was from these fissures that the light which had filtered down to him below was entering.

Squeezing through the largest crevice, Vincent found himself on a narrow ledge overlooking an expanse of water so vast he was unable to absorb the reality of it. He stood mesmerized, staring far out over the water, lost in the primeval beauty of it.

The water was in a constant state of motion, heaving up and down, bearing in upon the unprotected cliff where Vincent perched. Spray from the roiling water shot up, blanketing the area where he stood with a fine mist. Wind billowed around him, whipping his hair in several different directions at once, stinging his face. Breathing deeply, Vincent recognized the smell of salt and realized that far below him stretched the ocean. Looking out over the water till it blended into the far distant horizon, he knew the scene would be permanently etched in his memory.

Suddenly realizeing that he was out in the open and exposed, Vincent quickly scanned the surrounding area but detected nothing threatening. He breathed an audible sigh of relief. He was free to stay and enjoy this unexpected miracle. For years he had yearned to see the ocean, never believing that he would actually ever have the chance. It seemed to him at this moment that he

was at the end of the world. There was nothing but him and the ocean.

Vincent had absolutely no idea where he was. He could not even venture a guess. The paths he had taken Below had twisted and turned in upon themselves so much that even his keen sense of direction had eventually given out, leaving him dependent upon the trail he had marked to eventually find his way home.

Black thunderclouds, so dark they stood out against the lesser darkness of night, raced across the sky almost obliterating the subdued light emanating from the moon. The whole of the cliff side where he perched was in heavy darkness. Glancing up, Vincent caught his breath. There high above, peeking from behind the scudding clouds, hung the largest, darkest moon Vincent had ever seen. Still rising, it had not reached its ascendancy. It slowly traversed its way upward, shining its murky light on the storm swept ocean far below.

Vincent usually loved watching the moon from the culvert in Central Park. Catherine had given him a calendar listing the moon's cycles. He rarely missed going Above to watch on days when there was a full moon. Now, looking at the darkened moon above him, he shivered. It reminded him of the darkness rising within himself. As he watched the moon, his keen eye caught light and movement weakly coming from another source. Off in the distance, Vincent could barely make out the shape of a lighthouse standing lonely sentinel on a narrow spit of land. Once again, he fleetingly wondered where he might be, but the sights and smells and sounds surrounding him quickly recaptured his attention, and he was once again lost in the wild beauty of the water and the night. Hunkering down, Vincent spread his cloak on the rocky ledge and made himself comfortable.



Dinner was long over and still the friends sat, each wrapped in the silence of their own thoughts. The embers of a fire Edie had started hours ago glowed brightly in the fireplace, dispelling the dampness from the room. Outside, the wind had died down somewhat, and the rain for the moment had slowed to a misty drizzle.

"Well, I don't know about you," said Edie, " but I am tired. You look tired, too, Catherine. You're practically falling asleep sitting there. If you plan on doing all the things you want to around here tomorrow, you'd better get some sleep. Com'on."

Catherine roused herself and sluggishly stood up. She was emotionally drained and physically exhausted. All the sleepless night seemed to have caught up with her, leaving her in a state of tired numbness. She slowly followed Edie down the back hallway and into the bedroom, and once again Catherine was transported back to that troubled time in her childhood when her Mother had died.

The room had obviously been left as it had been when her mother had shared it with her father. Mutely keeping her thoughts to herself, Catherine helped Edie strip and change the bed. They talked little as they prepared for bed and soon both women were cozily settled deep in the large feather bed.

Edie kept her own council, suspecting the sad thoughts which were going through her friend's mind. She was increasingly worried about Catherine and decided to talk to Joe about it when they returned to the city. Cathy looked like she needed a good long rest. Maybe Joe could talk her into taking a vacation. It would do Cathy good. Having made this decision, Edie fell into an

uneasy sleep, still bothered by her surroundings.

Catherine lay in the dark wishing sleep would claim her, obliterating the thoughts which kept crowding her mind. Thoughts of her beautiful mother suddenly gone, leaving her a lonely little girl, sharply brought back hurtful memories. She relived the feelings once again experiencing the acute sense of loss. Mercifully, sleep eventually claimed her, blocking out the sorrowful memories.

Sometime later Catherine woke sensing an unseen presence in the room. Startled, she sat up and searched the room. A thin shaft of light filtered through the sheer, summery curtains, shedding enough light into the darkened bedroom for Catherine to see the form standing quietly beside the bed. Catherine's heart skipped a beat as she recognized the beautiful woman. "Mom?" she managed to say and was then lost in the gentle answering smile of the apparition. Edie, half awake, lay curled in a fetal ball, wishing her Granny was present to chase away the spirit.

The next morning, Catherine awoke to the smell of fresh perked coffee blending into the unmistakable odor of bacon sizzling in the fry pan. She felt wonderful. Better than she had in weeks. Catherine stretched lazily, enjoying the weak sunshine which filtered into the room. '*So much for the hurricane*', she thought gratefully. Rising, she made her way to the bathroom for a nice hot shower. She would treasure the memory of her mother's visit forever, never questioning the reality of it. Knowing Vincent had long ago taught her that anything was possible.

As she stood in the shower allowing the hot water to ease the remnanta of tiredness from her body, Catherine remembered every detail about the previous night. She realized that something

else had happened since she had arrived here. Her fears and doubts concerning Vincent and what she must do about their relationship had vanished. Catherine was now more than ever determined to have the happy life she believed that she and Vincent were entitled. Important as her job was to her, Catherine decided once and for all that it was not as important or necessary to her happiness as being with Vincent.

Living a life Above was no longer a consideration either. She would far rather be happy with Vincent Below than lonely and unfulfilled Above. Besides, Vincent's safety and healthy state of mind were of prime concern to Catherine now. This last episode was more than enough to show her that Vincent could no longer continue to be put at risk by the type of job she had. Catherine could no longer bear to put Vincent in danger ever again.

Vincent was the most important thing in her life. Catherine did not want to lose him. She had learned from this trip out to this hideaway of her father's that sharing life with the person one loved was more important than anything else. Her mother's parting message had been that Catherine should begin to lead her happy life and enjoy it, and she planned to do just that. She could not wait to return to the city and tell Vincent of her decision.

Impatient as she was to return to the city though, Catherine could not shake the distinct feeling that Vincent was close by. It was a calming thought, and she wrapped it around her like a blanket and settled into its comforting warmth.



Edie sensed the change in Cathy immediately when her friend walked into the kitchen early the next morning. "I knew the smell of coffee and bacon would eventually lure you out here," she said

to Cathy, giving her a big smile. Edie had pushed the thoughts of what had happened way back in her mind, refusing to think about them. Maybe it had only been a vivid dream. Occasionally she had some really weird ones. At least she hoped that's all it had been. The house, however, had seemed different to Edie this morning when she had awakened. Today, it was just an ordinary beach house devoid of the heavy brooding presence Edie had felt all day yesterday. Whatever had happened last night, Edie was glad it was over-----was glad that the presence seemed to be gone, leaving behind a much more peaceful Cathy.

"That coffee smells wonderful, Edie, and I can't even remember when it was I had eaten last, it was so long ago. It looks delicious," said Catherine, yawning.

"Well, sit down and dig in. I'm going to take a shower. Then maybe we can get into that attic if that's what you still want to do?" She could tell by Cathy's reaction that was precisely what her friend had in mind. Edie left Catherine there to breakfast as she hurried off to take a shower.

Actually, Edie was almost as excited by the prospect of exploring the attic as Catherine. Living in apartment all her life, she had never been in an attic before. She loved poking around musty old places, digging into forgotten mementos of the past. As often as she could, she hunted around the city's antique shops, bringing home this treasure and that when the price was right, and she could afford it. No telling what was in this attic. Yesterday Catherine had told her it ran the whole length of the house. It would be fun to explore it.

Catherine was just finishing up her second cup of coffee when Edie reappeared in old jeans and a sweatshirt obviously excited

about poking around in the attic. Leaving the dishes to soak, they went in search of the entrance to the attic which Catherine vaguely remembered was located in the closet of one of the spare bedrooms. She hoped there would be no surprises up there, but after last night, Catherine doubted there would be. She had the distinct feeling that her Mother had accomplished the purpose for which she had returned. With a lighter step than she'd had in weeks, she opened the closet door, and they easily located the pull-down stairway leading to the attic and began their adventure.



The screeching and clacking of gulls woke Vincent just as the orb of the sun was peeking up over the horizon. He had sat in the wide ledge last night watching the dark moon rising and thinking about all the things the voice, which he half-believed was his conscience, had said to him. Enough time had now passed since the incident with the outsiders to allow his equilibrium to restabilize. For some reason, he felt lucky this time. Vincent's reaction to the outsiders was a serious concern leaving him with a dilemma. He knew that he could not live with any more violence without there being serious consequences. Vincent knew that there could be no more incidents like the one with the outsiders. If there were, he would run the risk of being lost in the darkness the violence produced in his soul, becoming totally engulfed by it.

Pushing these thoughts away, Vincent stretched and stood, never taking his eyes from the rising disk that was now totally visible. Nothing in his memory compared to the sight which was now unfolding before his hungry eyes. Over the years, he had caught a fleeting impression of daylight now and again from some of the more isolated tunnel entryways, but never had he seen anything to compare to this. Watching the sun climb lazily into the sky, he

was amazed at its color. Expecting a yellowish hue, Vincent was surprised at the deep, rich pumpkin-orange color tinged with red. More fascinating was the perfect roundness of the disk hanging in the sky overhead. Vincent felt that he could reach up and pluck it out of the sky, so distinct and separate it was from the leaden setting surrounding it. The ominous appearance of the sky registered only vaguely in comparison to his reaction to the sun's awesome beauty. He was completely captivated by the momentous experience. Never had he expected such concentrated brilliance.

Sometime later, Vincent spotted several tiny specks on the surface of the water moving parallel to the cliff face on which he perched. Curious, he watched them grow larger eventually identifying them as fishing boats. He was not overly concerned about them till they came close enough for him to be able to begin distinguishing shapes moving around the surface of the boats.

Reluctantly, he gathered up his cloak and vanished back into the darkness of the crevice. From this hidden vantage point, Vincent continued to watch the sun for some time longer before beginning his descent to the cavern far below the ground. Finally reaching his camp, Vincent realized he was acutely hungry and set about preparing a meal from the meager remains of his supplies. Calculating how much food was left after he finished, Vincent decided that he best leave for the home tunnels no later than tomorrow morning.

Early tomorrow Vincent knew he would make the climb again to greet the dawn before starting for home. He also was pleased with the thought of future trips to this cavern. There was much here that he had not had a chance to explore. In his mind's eye he envisioned the permanent camp he would like to set up in the

cavern-----well stocked with the necessities needed for an extended stay.



The attic proved to be everything the friends envisioned----- and more. Catherine was delighted with the treasures she found all neatly packed and crated. All the boxes and crates were labeled in her father's neat, precise handwriting. Her mother's belongings were confined to one specific area of the attic, and Catherine soon lost herself in exploring the contents of the various boxes and packing crates.

Edie was delighted by the contents of the remainder of the attic. The house must have been older than she realized judging from the number and age of the antiques scattered around the attic. Soon she, too, was lost investigating the various items contained in a pair of well-worn steamer trunks which looked like they had not been opened in over a hundred years.

They spent several pleasant hours poking through the contents of the attic before Edie declared that she was hungry. Looking up from a picture album she vaguely remembered, Catherine quickly agreed. Standing, Catherine stretched her cramped limbs, giving the treasures around her one last look before joining Edie at the stairway.

Leaving the confines of the dusty attic, they made their way back downstairs to find, according to the kitchen clock, that it was already mid-afternoon.

"No wonder you were hungry," Catherine giggled, looking at her dust covered friend. "Listen. You go get cleaned up while I make us some sandwiches and tea. You've gotten stuck with all the

cooking so far this weekend. I guess I can handle sandwiches," she said ruefully.

"Girl, you are impossible. It would be funny if I didn't know that you were serious. What am I going to do with you? What are you going to do if you ever get married? Feed him sandwiches for every meal? I can see I'm going to have to spend some time giving you cooking lessons," Edie left for her shower happy to see the smile on Catherine's fade. She was glad that her friend's good mood seemed to be holding. She had not known what would happen once Catherine got to that attic earlier. Going through her mother's belongings could have proven a traumatic experience.

Edie reappeared shortly rubbing her wet hair on a towel. Looking at lunch, she had to admit that Catherine had not done too bad a job of it. The ham and cheese sandwiches looked thick and inviting, and Edie lost no time diving in. Soup and salad accompanied the sandwiches, and Edie did not have the heart to tell Catherine that she had burned the soup. It proved unnecessary when moments later Catherine's face crinkled in dislike upon tasting it.

"Not too good, is it?" she stated. "Maybe I should take you up on your offer. Cooking lessons sure couldn't hurt."

After cleaning up the kitchen, Catherine suggested they drive over to the lighthouse, telling Edie that she would enjoy getting out of the house for awhile. "Besides," she told Edie, "If my memory serves me correctly, I remember going there with my father the summer we stayed here. The lighthouse has quite a history. It has stood on the point since the late seventeen hundreds. My father used to joke about the stories it could probably tell if it could only talk."

It was only a short drive over to the lighthouse, no more than several miles at most. They were not there very long before both women noticed a sharp drop in the temperature. It suddenly got very cold. Looking out over the water, Catherine also noticed that the waves were getting higher and higher even as they stood there. The sun was completely hidden behind a solid bank of dark clouds which looked like behemoths clumsily lumbering their way across the sky and rain began falling as the women made a mad dash for the car.

Pulling out of the small lighthouse parking lot, Edie voiced her concern. "Cathy. Since you have had a chance to explore the attic already, maybe we should seriously think about packing up and getting out of here. I know we had decided to drive back early tomorrow morning in time for work, but looking at that sky and those waves makes me uneasy. Maybe that hurricane decided to come back."

"No. I don't think it's the hurricane itself, Edie. It's probably a storm front which has been generated by the hurricane. Kind of like an after effect. They're pretty common in this neck of the woods. But I kind of agree with you. It's still early and look at it out there. Maybe we should just get packed up and leave. It wouldn't take us long to throw our stuff into the car and take off. I can have a professional mover come back in and pick up my mother's things later."

Agreed about leaving, the two friends lost no time making short work of gathering up their belongings and heading the car back towards the city. The wind howled around them and rocked the car, causing them to be even happier about leaving. Being in the storm was one thing. Being in a storm out here in the middle of nowhere with the ocean at your back door was a totally different

story. Neither woman was sorry to be leaving.

Driving down the road, Catherine glanced at the gas gauge and froze. It was on empty. She knew the car well enough to know that she probably had enough gas to drive maybe a dozen miles at best. Not a happy prospect. Suddenly she remembered the little general store, and her spirits lightened considerably. A few miles later, her happy mood dissolved as she read the closed sign on the store's front door. Closed up tighter than a drum.

"They sure pull the sidewalks in and roll them up early around here, don't they?" remarked Edie, anxiously peering around as if she hoped someone would miraculously appear out of nowhere. "Well, now what do we do?" she asked Catherine in a frightened voice. "Any suggestions?"

Catherine stared around, wondering what they could do. She couldn't think of anything but to drive back to the house and either call someone on the telephone or spend the night there at the house. *'They were probably getting upset over nothing, anyway'* thought Catherine. After telling Edie what she thought, the two returned to the car and reluctantly drove off in the direction of the house. A leaded sky had turned almost pitch black by now, and the wind was at fever pitch shaking the car badly as they drove.

Entering the house, they felt somewhat better to be out of the violent wind. Catherine decided that maybe they should try calling someone and letting them know where they were. Crossing over to the phone and picking it up, she was badly shaken to find that there was no dial tone. Simultaneously the lights went out leaving Catherine and Edie in total darkness.



Vincent stirred in his sleep and suddenly came wide awake, sensing a presence in the chamber with him. More than anything, he fervently hoped that whatever it was he sensed in the chamber would not talk to him.

"So, you're finally awake. I was beginning to wonder if you had a sleeping sickness."

Jumping up, Vincent wildly searched the area all around where he stood. Seeing nothing did not surprise him. Silently he waited for the now familiar voice of his nemesis to continue.

"The conclusions you reached concerning the problems we talked about yesterday are a big step in the right direction, but you are still avoiding the primary issue."

An extended pause alerted Vincent to the fact that a response from him was expected. Resigned to the supposition that his visitor would not depart, Vincent finally asked, "And what do you believe is the primary issue?"

"Vincent, Vincent. Don't be obtuse. From day one, our problem has always been the beautiful Catherine. What are we going to do about her?"

A low growl started deep in Vincent's chest. So there it was out in the open. Vincent had been avoiding this issue since the night he had brusquely dismissed Catherine from his life. Even this fleeting thought of her filtering through his mind brought an almost unbearable feeling of loneliness and loss. Vincent didn't want to lose Catherine. She was the only thing he had to lighten the

darkness of his life.

"Well. What ARE we going to do now that we are finally agreed about Catherine?"

Vincent paled and stepped backwards, away from the direction of the voice.

"That bothers you, doesn't it? You don't like me talking about Catherine. And this, my dear Vincent, is the crux of the problem. You are afraid of me-----afraid of what I might do to Catherine. And maybe just a little bit jealous and uneasy over sharing her with me?"

Losing control, Vincent threw back his head and howled. ***"Yes!"*** he roared. ***"I live in constant fear of what you might possibly do to her. How could I not?"*** he added, pacing back and forth across the small, sandy beach.

"Vincent, how could you even think that I would ever do anything to harm Catherine?" The question dropped with velvet softness into the silence of the cavern. Gone was the bantering quality of the voice, replaced by hurt, sadness, and resignation. ***"You have no idea how much I love her."***

"Love?" Vincent's voice dripped with derision. ***"What could you possibly know about love?"***

"I express it in the only way open to me, Vincent. I protect her-----guard her. When she is in danger, it's me that goes to her-----saves her. Can't you

understand that?" The voice was now a strangled cry.
"You cherish her and read poetry to her and share music with her, but it's me who fights to save her life-----kills for her. It's me who hears her cries-----senses her fear."

Vincent could listen to no more. Struggling against the desire to accept the truth of what was being said, he grabbed his cloak and blindly sought the exit to the cavern. All he wanted to do was put distance between himself and the voice. Too much of what had been said rang true. He needed time to assimilate it-----to come to terms with it.

"Don't go, Vincent. Don't avoid it any longer. Deal with it now, or you will run the risk of serious consequences. Catherine will be lost to us forever. Somewhere between here and home you will be eternally lost in the darkness-----lost in madness. We must face this issue once and for all and come to terms with it now while there is still hope for us. Besides," the voice added softly, ***"You have already won."***

Everything inside Vincent wanted to keep going-----to ignore the voice, but he stopped. He wanted to hear what the voice had to say now. Intuitively he knew that if he left, he would be lost to himself and to Catherine.

"How have I already won?" he queried in a bleak voice. "How is this possible?" Vincent continued, feeling that the battle for his

sanity was indeed already lost. Here he was talking to himself-----worse yet, answering himself.

"No, Vincent. You are not talking to yourself. There are truly two of us. There is within everyone the capacity to be more than one personality. In us, it is simply more pronounced. Accept that. It is the key to our solution. One of us will dominate in the end, or both of us will be lost. I am offering you the solution, so listen carefully to what I have to say. Let the woman follow her heart. Let her live her dream. Accept the love she has to offer you. Become one with her. Allow her to stay, be with you, and become part of your daily life. The next time she tells you her job is not as important to her as her feelings and need for you, believe it. Accept this gift she offers you so willingly.

"You must remove the woman from the environment which causes these situations to occur and call me forth. That is the only solution. For most of my life, your personality has been the dominant one.

However, as time moves on, and there is continued need for me to manifest myself, I have been growing stronger and stronger. If this pattern continues, you run the risk of my becoming the dominant force.

Each time I hold the woman in my arms increases my

desire to possess her. You must agree to remove her from these situations so there will be little need in the future for my presence. As time goes on, I will become merely a memory to you-----an awareness of what can happen. I will remain dormant-----an unneeded aspect of your personality.

"In truth, I will always be with you, Vincent. Make no mistake about that. I will always be there somewhere deep within your conscienceness. Know, however, that I would never harm her, Vincent. I could never do anything to harm her in any way. As she is a part of you, so alsod is she a part of me-----the best part. Because she is the best part of who I am, because I, too, love her, I am willing to give her up----to allow her to have her happy life. Take this gift, Vincent. It is the most precious thing you will probably ever be offered. You might never have another chance. it may never be offered again; I might become too strong. At this point, however, the choice is still yours, Vincent. You need only accept the gift of love. Take her, Vincent, and cherish her. Love her and live our possibilities."



Cathy stood rooted to the spot. She was unable to answer Edie's frantic questions. The darkness surrounding them paralyzed her.

Since she had been a tiny baby, the dark had frightened Catherine. She was never able to figure out why; it was just so. As she grew to adulthood, Catherine was able to overcome most of the illogical fear, but this weekend's occurrences had unnerved her badly.

Edie had finally caught her breath and realized that she was in much better shape than her friend. Standing there grasping onto Catherine's arm, she tried to think about what would be the best thing to do. "Think Edie, ***dammit! Think! Stay calm and think!***" she muttered to herself. Once she got herself under control, logic took over.

"I don't suppose you would have a flashlight handy, would you?" Edie asked, hoping to bring her friend out of the paralysis that still seemed to grip her.

"Out in the car. There should be one in the glove compartment," came the response.

"Great!" said Edie, wondering how she was going to get out to the car without killing herself in the process. The wind was howling around the house, rattling the windows with a force that made Edie wonder if they could withstand the battering. It seemed to be blowing through the very glass, causing her to shiver. Suddenly Edie remembered the bright, cheery fire they had made last evening. In her mind's eye, she could see the stacks of wood and kindling on the enclosed porch. She hoped that the box of matches they had used last night was still sitting on the mantle above the fireplace.

Slowly and with infinite care, Edie inched her way to the porch and groped around, eventually finding the bin which held the kindling. Increasingly sure of her surroundings, she made her way back to

the living room and found the fireplace. The matches were sitting right where she hoped they would be. Thank God!

Hurrying, Edie soon had a small fire going, and she and Catherine settled down on the couch, grateful for the warmth and light. "Well, I guess we're stuck here till the storm's over," said Edie philosophically.

With a deep sigh, Catherine responded. "Edie, I'm really sorry I got you into this mess. Really, I am. Some weekend this turned out to be for you. Playing nursemaid and cook. No air conditioning, spooky houses, an hysterical friend, burned soup, and now a gale-storm. What else could happen?"

Catherine would remember that statement for a long time to come. She had no sooner said the words then the whole house rattled and shuddered as the force of the winds ripped at it with increased fury, tearing away part of the porch facing the ocean.

"Don't say anything like that again," pleaded Edie badly shaken. For some reason, Edie had a premonition that something worse was about to happen. Unable to sit still, she jumped up and paced the floor in front of the fireplace, finally wandering over to stare out the vast expanse of window at the angry ocean. This was definitely not an ordinary storm, she realized. This was a gale. She couldn't see much as she peered out. She could hear the waves beating against the cliff face, and she could feel the fury of the wind as it assaulted the house.

Just as Edie was about to turn to go back to the warmth of the fireplace, the house once again shook on its foundation. Glass was suddenly flying all around her as she was picked up bodily by the wind and tossed backwards. The last thing Edie remembered with any clarity was Cathy's terrified screams. They accompanied

her down into the darkness which claimed her.

Catherine escaped relatively unscathed, a few scratches here and there from flying glass. When she reached Edie, she realized that this was not the case with her unconscious friend. There were cuts and abrasions all over Edie's body. Checking her over, Catherine was relieved to find that most of them were superficial. But it was Edie's head that Catherine was immediately concerned about. There was a deep cut on one side and a large, ugly swelling on the other. She had to get her out of this room as it was now totally exposed to the wind howling around them like a banshee.

Grabbing Edie as gently as she could under her arms, Catherine slowly dragged her out of the room and into the hallway. There were no windows here, and she felt safer. The darkness was not complete as some of the diffused light from the fireplace filtered out into the protected hallway.

Examining her friend's wounds again, Catherine really became concerned. The cut was deeper than she had first thought, and it was bleeding profusely. Feeling her way into the bathroom, she cried in frustration when she found nothing in the way of medical supplies except a box of ordinary bandages and some iodine stored in the medicine chest. Grabbing some towels from the closet, she wet several washcloths and made her way back to Edie. Gently she applied pressure to the wound, holding the edges closed as best she could, hoping to get the bleeding stopped. Not knowing what else she could do, Catherine silently screamed Vincent's name, praying that somehow she could get her feelings across to him.



The voice stopped talking and simply faded away, leaving Vincent alone in the huge cavern. He knew the voice was gone for good this time-----knew that everything that needed saying had finally been said. Whether the voice had been his conscience or a separate entity suddenly meant little. What was important now was the decision Vincent had to make. But did he really have any choice? He did not think so. Vincent knew that he either had to give Catherine up for the sake of his sanity or allow her to truly become part of his world.

As he sat thinking about the problem, a thought occurred to him. If he gave Catherine up, all was lost. He could not live without her. If he allowed her to try and become part of his world and all that it would entail, he ran the risk of his greatest fears coming to pass. What if he harmed her in some way? It was a nightmare Vincent had lived with for some time now as he struggled with his growing feeling of physical attraction for Catherine. But what if his fears proved to be imaginary? He had everything to gain. He concludeed that giving her up was a death sentence while taking a chance on allowing her to become part of his world at least offered the possibility of happiness.

Once coming to his decision, Vincent felt better than he had in months. This thing had been brewing deep inside him for a long time now, and he was glad it was finally resolved. He could go home but not before he ahd a chance to see the sun once again. By using his internal clock, Vincent knew it was some time before midnight. He would climb the cliff and spend the remainder of the night outdoors, waiting to greet the rising sun. Then he would start for home.

Sometime later, gaining the ledge outside the crevice, he was surprised to find the furious storm which raged around him.

Vincent had never seen anything like it and took shelter inside the crevice where he stood watching the forces of nature at their strongest. The wind and waves seemed to be in some kind of mad competition to see which could wreck the most havoc. He pitied anyone caught in the storm. Little could survive once caught in its grip.

Settling down inside the crevice opening, Vincent had just enough room to get relatively comfortable. He doubted whether he would see much of the sun tomorrow morning but didn't want to take a chance of missing it. Besides, after the climb up, he was not ready to repeat the descent without resting first. The climb was not hazardous or hard, but it was long.

Sitting there he began to think of home and Catherine. As the bond began to open, Vincent caught his breath as Catherine's fear wrapped itself around his heart. His immediate reactions were of remorse and fear. Remorse that he had left her unprotected and fear that there was no way he could possibly reach her in time. As the bond opened fully, however, he had the curious sensation that she was close by. At first he rejected this feeling as just wishful thinking but still the impression continued and finally grew stronger.

Somehow Catherine was close by and in trouble. He had the feeling that she was not in the same kind of trouble that he usually sensed. What he was feeling from Catherine right now was frustration and terror. Suddenly he became aware of the storm which continued to rage outside the crevice opening, and he intuitively sensed that Catherine was somehow trapped in the storm.

Within a heartbeat, he was out the crevice and climbing the short

distance to the solid land above. Letting the instincts and the impressions which gripped his heart guide him, he set off in the direction in which he felt Catherine. The areas he traveled through seemed to be deserted. There were few houses and those that he passed seemed closed-up and deserted. The farther he traveled, the closer Catherine seemed. He allowed his thoughts to focus on her, hoping he could calm her emotions and let her know that he was on his way.



Gradually the bleeding slowed down and finally stopped. The wound was jagged and ugly looking, and Catherine was sure it would need stitches. Edie was in and out of consciousness. She seemed to know where she was and what had happened, but Catherine was still afraid that she had a concussion. As she sat with Edie in the hallway listening to the storm rage around the house, she heard something else being wrenched off the back porch.

Now that she had the bleeding stopped and Edie was semi-conscious, she had time to worry about what they were going to do. Catherine was trying to keep calm when out of nowhere her heart was filled with an awareness of Vincent's nearness. She didn't understand how this could be in her present situation. Nonetheless she knew it was so and began to cry with relief. Vincent was on his way.

Looking down at Edie, she realized that her friend was aware for the moment of her surroundings. "Don't worry, Edie. Help is on the way. Vincent's coming. He'll get us out of this." Edie just groaned and lost consciousness once again.



Vincent had no trouble zeroing in on the house. It sat alone overlooking the ocean. Although it was relatively dark, Vincent saw light coming from behind the curtains in one room of the house. He also recognized Catherine's car from the special license plates it carried. Wrenching open the door, he called out to Catherine and was relieved to hear her answering voice. Making his way toward its sound, Catherine was safe in his arms within moments, sobbing hysterically.

He held her tightly against his chest, murmuring her name over and over. Gradually she calmed and heaved a heavy sigh as the crying slowed to an occasional shuddering breath. Continuing to hold her close, Vincent became aware of another pair of eyes staring at him and looked down at the crumpled figure lying beside Catherine. Edie just stared up at him through pain-glazed eyes as if she were seeing some supernatural apparition.

"Granny always said you angels were beautiful. I always thought she was kidding. Now, I know she wasn't. We're dead, aren't we?" she inquired of Vincent in a small voice. "I always wondered what that would feel like. If my head didn't hurt so much, I'd say it didn't feel too bad at all. Have you come to take us to heaven?"

Catherine, resting against Vincent and listening to Edie, burst out laughing. "No, Edie. You're definitely not dead. This is Vincent. I told you he's come to get us," she added, giddiness apparent in her voice. "Just lie still and don't move around while we figure out what we're going to do. I don't want that wound to start bleeding again. I had an awful time getting it stopped."

Edie just continued to stare up at Vincent, wondering when she was going to see his wings open up. She was still only partly aware of what was being said. "Well, he sure looks like an angel

to me, and I don't care what his name is. He can take me anywhere he wants." With that Edie lapsed back into the foggy grayness of unconsciousness.

Quickly Vincent and Catherine exchanged stories of how they came to be where they were. Vincent omitted the part about the voice, not wanting to scare Catherine. Catherine omitted the part about her mother's visit, not ready to share that with him in their present crisis.

"If you have no gas in the car, you can't drive out of here," Vincent said. "That leaves only one solution. You will have to come down Below with me. Is there any gas left at all?" he asked.

"Barely," responded Catherine. "Why?"

"If there's enough gas in the car, you can drive us over to the cliff where the cavern is located. I don't think Edie could make it on foot. If we can find some necessary items here in the house like rope and board, I can devise a makeshift sling to use in getting Edie down into the cavern. It will be safer for you there than staying here. If this storm gets any worse, it could take the whole house with it. I wouldn't want to take the chance of your staying here," he finished, feeling the house once again shift on its foundation. "You will both be much safer down Below."

Vincent made his way out to the front porch facing the road and collected a couple pieces of wood. Taking them to the fireplace, he made torches for Catherine and him. They finally located rope and some thin but sturdy boards in the cellar. While Vincent set to work fashioning a sling for Edie, Catherine gathered up blankets and pillows and any remaining food she could find.

Examining Edie after he got her securely tied into the sling.

Vincent was concerned about her head wound. He agreed with Catherine. it would need stitching which they did not have the supplies for here. "Have you any bandages?" he asked Catherine. She quickly got them for him and watched as she overlapped them, making a butterfly arrangement to bind Edie's gaping wound. Finished, Vincent ripped off a piece of sheet and anchored her head to the sling.

Edie regained consciousness as they were putting her in the car. She was aware just long enough to ask Vincent why he needed a car to take them to heaven and was out again. Once they arrived at the cliff Vincent secured the rope to the top of the cliff. This done, he instructed Catherine on making the climb down, assuring her that it was not dangerous. He stayed above and lowered Edie down at the same rate Catherine descended so that Catherine would be there if Edie regained consciousness during the descent. Fortunately she didn't, and they made it to the floor of the cavern with no mishaps.

Catherine lowered the sling to the ground and dragged it far away from the waterfall so Edie would not get wet and chilled from its spray. She was glad to find that Vincent had left his lantern on this side of the river, and its small, steady glow was a source of comfort to her while she had made the climb down to the cavern floor. Shaking it Catherine was concerned when she realized that there was almost no fuel left in it. She hoped that there would be enough fuel to light Vincent's way down. While waiting Catherine stared around at the cavern, lost in its beauty. Lulled by the comfort of knowing Vincent was close by she drifted off into a light sleep with Edie beside her.

Catherine was startled when Vincent shook her awake. He had tied the bundle containing blankets and food to his waist and

brought it down with him. Before waking her, he had made up a bed for Catherine and Edie on this side of the river for the night. He hadn't yet decided on the best way to get Edie across the river and was too tired to give it much thought for the time being. They would be safe enough here for the night.

Vincent was undecided as to whether he should stay with them or cross over and sleep on the other side. The decision was made when Catherine reached out her hand asking him to stay with her saying, "I need to be with you. There are things we need to talk about."

Settling down beside her, she snuggled up against him, and he waited for her to begin. When moments passed, and she didn't say anything, Vincent looked down to find her fast asleep in his arms. Far above them the storm raged on, but here in the cavern there was peace. Vincent closed his eyes and joined his beloved in slumber.

Edie awoke to pitch blackness. Her whole body ached, and her head was killing her. At least she was finally alert. She remembered bits and pieces of what had happened to her since the window had exploded, but everything was foggy. She remembered Cathy dragging her out of the room and trying to get the bleeding stopped. After that things got hazy. She thought she had seen an angel and vaguely remembered Catherine trying to tell her the angel's name was Vincent. That couldn't be right. It was Cathy's boyfriend who was named Vincent. But where was she now? She couldn't hear the storm raging anymore and wondered if it had stopped. She wondered where Cathy was. She hoped she was all right. Deciding to find out, she called out her friend's name and was startled by the raspy-voiced answer she received. "Catherine is still asleep. If you wait a moment, I will

have the lantern lit and then we can talk. My name is Vincent. You have nothing to be afraid of," he continued. Edie could hear the reservation in his voice. "I am Catherine's friend. I came and got you out of the house last night and brought you here to safety," continued the whispery voice, mesmerizing Edie. She had never heard that kind of voice before. She could hardly wait to see this Vincent. She laughed to herself as she remembered the vision of last night. *'The mind will play tricks, especially when one gets walloped on the head'*, she thought as the cavern sprang to life around her in the glow of the lantern.

Looking around she finally found the cloaked figure sitting beside her sleeping friend. The hood of his cloak shadowed his face, and she could not see it.

"Why are you hiding?" she asked curious as to why he had the hood pulled over his face.

"I don't want you to be frightened. Sometimes when people first meet me, they are frightened. I thought maybe we could talk a little before you see me. That way you will know you have nothing to be frightened of."

"So, you're Vincent," said Edie, suspicion growiing in her mind.

"Maybe last night really did happen." Taking the plunge she said, "I kinda think I alread know what you look like. That wasn't an angel last night, was it? That was really you, was't it?" she asked in a calm voice.

"There was no angel last night. I'm afraid it was me. Please don't be frightened. I mean you no harm. I really am a friend of Catherine's."

"I know you are. And no, you don't frighten me. You can take off

the hood now. I won't scream. I think you're kinda neat looking. If you're Cathy's Vincent, I know you have to be a good guy. Besides, I learned long ago not to judge people by what they look like. My race kinda knows how that feels."

Convinced by the sincerity in her voice, Vincent slowly pushed back his hood, allowing his hair to come tumbling out to surround his now exposed face.

Edie's sharply indrawn breath caused Vincent a moment of panic until he heard her say, "Good Lord! Even if you aren't an angel, you're still beautiful."

Vincent remained quiet as she continued to stare.

"Why do you feel liek you gotta hide?" asked Edie, fascinated by this strange being.

"Because some people are not as generous in their acceptance as you. I cause them to fear."

"Well, that's their problem. I think you look just fine. You don't scare me at all. I'm glad I finally got to meet you. Even if I had to get half killed to do it. I've been wondering about you for a long time, fella," she added, giving him a studying look. "Cathy has been pretty quiet about you. She's very mysterious about her private life." Edie proceeded to tell Vincent all about how she knew about him, chattering away like a magpie as if they were old friends.

Catherine lay awake with her eyes closed, listening in amusement as Edie and Vincent began their friendship. She was loathed to let them know that she was awake and spoil the moment. She lay seemingly asleep for awhile longer before she stretched and yawned signaling her awakend state to the two who were still

deep in conversation.

"Well, hello there girlfriend," Edie quipped. "We've been waiting for your lazy bones to wake up, so we could get the show on the road."

"Get the show on the road? What are you talking about?" asked Catherine puzzled.

"Vincent has told me all about you two. I know all about where he lives, and I'm anxious to see it. Only trouble is, we've got to get to the other side of this river before we can get started. Isn't this place amazing? Vincent has been telling me all about the cavern. I hope I get a chance to come back here to explore it when I'm feeling better."

Getting up, Catherine laughed and said, "Let's get home first before we think about coming back." She wandered over and sat next to Vincent.

"Before we do anything, I think we should eat. It will be better to do it here on this side before going across the river. That way," continued Vincent, "we will not have to worry about getting it over to the other side. The less we need to take across the easier the task will be, I am afraid you will have to eat the food cold as there is no wood to make a fire."

"I'm glad we got some canned raviolis and fruit cocktail," said Edie, wrinkling her nose. "They'll do me well for right now. I don't think my stomach could handle the pork and beans."

"Canned Ravioli and fruit cocktail it is," responded Catherine giggling. "At least you won't have to worry about me burning them this time."

Vincent stared as both women broke into gales of laughter, and they had to stop and let him in on the joke. He just smiled and shook his head. He enjoyed seeing the special friendship the two women shared.

After making short work of finishing off the food, Catherine and Vincent got things ready to transport across the river. Neither of them would let Edie do much of anything but lie there and rest until they were ready to pack up the bedding she had used. Vincent was glad he had thought to check the kitchen drawers before leaving Catherine's house last night. The plastic bags he had found would be used to keep their belongings dry. By the time they got everything packed up they had several bags full. Vincent had left one bag free for all of them to put their clothes in as they would have to traverse the river naked.

After explaining to them about the dangerous current running through the center of the river, he suggested that they put their clothes in the bag and tied it tightly so they would have dry clothes to put on when they got to the other side.

Vincent was also concerned about Edie swimming the river in her weakened condition and decided that she should stay between Catherine and him. All three of them were a little reserved about taking off their clothes, so they looked in various directions while they quickly stripped and entered the water. Vincent was glad he had put Edie in the middle as she tired easily and showed signs of fatigue during the crossing. About halfway across, he grabbed onto her hand and literally pulled her along as he swam the remaining distance, stroking through the water with one hand. Vincent was thankful that Catherine was a good swimmer and had no trouble making the crossing.

He stayed in the water while Catherine and Edie went up onto the beach and dressed. Only after they moved off down the shore of the river did he come out and dress quickly, joining them.

Edie's fatigue was obvious, and her wound had opened and begun to bleed again. Fixing a bed on the sandy bank, Vincent and Catherine made her lie down. Sitting next to Edie, Catherine put pressure on the wound to stop the flow of blood. Edie drifted off to sleep grumbling to herself that they were treating her like a baby.

While Edie slept, Vincent took the opportunity to show Catherine some of the cavern. She was fascinated by everything he showed her. She had decided sometime that morning not to talk to Vincent about the things on her mind till they got Edie safely home and in Father's good hands. *'They had all the time in the world now',* she figured. *'Whether Vincent liked it or not her mind was made up. She was quitting her job or at the very least cutting down the hours and moving into the tunnels. If she remained working for the District Attorney, it would be with the stipulation that she did no more dangerous field work. Those days were over.'*

Edie felt better after several hours sleep and was ready to begin the journey after a meal of beans and pears. Vincent and Catherine kept the pace slow, so that Edie did not reopen the wound. Even the slow pace, however, was too much for Edie, and Vincent ended up carrying her for long periods at a time. Edie protested until Catherine told her to be quiet and enjoy the ride. After that Edie was much more pliable and settled back in Vincent's powerful arms and did just as she was told. She enjoyed the ride. She chattered away to Vincent who listened with great care to everything she had to say. They were fast becoming friends and found numerous shared interests, among them Catherine. Edie told him all about working for the District

Attorney's office including many cute stories about Catherine which Vincent listened to with relish. She also told him of her life Above and all about her granny who had the gift. Vincent told her more about the tunnel world Below and about Narcissa who also had the gift. Soon he called a halt to their travels, saying they had gone far enough for one day. After eating, they quickly fixed up beds and were fast asleep almost before they lay down.

By late the next evening, they were close to entering familiar territory. Vincent said they should reach Pascal's pipes some time early the next day. Both Catherine and Edie were excited. Catherine knew that Joe and their other co-workers would be frantic wondering what had happened to them, and she wanted to reassure her friends that they were okay. Edie was just excited about seeing the tunnel community Vincent had told her so much about. Early next morning she was first up and anxious to get going. Besides, they had run out of food, and she was hungry.

Eventually that morning, they entered an area which seemed well kept to Edie. Not like the areas they had just come through. Occasionally there was a branching and faintly in the distance she could hear weird metallic noises which grew louder and louder the farther they walked. As they turned a bend in the tunnel they were walking through, Edie caught sight of a pipe running high overhead and realized these must be the communicating pipes Catherine and Vincent had told her about. Her hunch was confirmed as she watched Vincent tap out a message and wait for an answer which quickly came.

"What did they say?" asked Edie, amazed at the whole procedure. "Heck, this is better than the telephone, and you don't even have to pay for it."

"Father will be informed that we are in the far tunnels. Pascal answered my call," replied Vincent. "He will let Father know we are almost home. I am sure we will be getting a response coming to meet us soon. I told them to bring some food and a stretcher."

Edie glared at him, but Vincent ignored it as he scooped her up and once again proceeded on his way with Catherine by his side. A little while later, they stopped to listen to Father's reply.

'Thank God you're home, and Catherine and the other woman are with you. The whole city is in an uproar over their disappearance. We have sent word Above through one of our Helpers that the women are safe and will be in contact with the District Attorney's office shortly. We are starting out to meet you and have the supplies you asked for with us. See you soon.'

Love,

Father.'

"He said all that?" asked a mystified Edie. "Do you think this Father guy will let me become a Helper and learn the code? That is really neat. You know how interested I am in tele-communications. This is a great system. I'd really like to learn it sometime."

Catherine laughed at her friend's enthusiasm. "I'm sure Father will let you become a Helper. There never seems to be enough of them. They are an important part of the tunnel community. Without their help, the tunnel folk could never survive Below. Both Vincent and I will vouch for you. Won't we, Vincent?"

"I would be honored to have you become a Helper, Edie."

Suddenly Vincent heard a noise in the tunnel ahead. He knew that

it was way too soon for them to meet Father and the others. He was relieved to hear a familiar voice call out.

"Vincent, child! Is that you?"

"Yes, Narcissa. It's me. What are you doing way out here?"

"Why, Vincent. You know I wander all over down here. I happened to be nearby when I heard the message. I have some fruit in my basket and thought you might be able to use it while you wait for Father to get here. I see you have the beautiful Catherine with you. Hello, child. And who else is with you, Vincent? I sense someone else."

"Narcissa, this is Edie, Catherine's friend from work." Briefly Vincent told her the story of what had happened to the women and why Edie was here in the tunnels. As Narcissa listened she came forward and placed her hands gently on Edie's face, a knowing smile lighting up her wrinkled, old face. "This one has the sighting power, Vincent. I can feel its emanation strongly in her. She is a good person, a good friend. She will make an excellent Helper." With that enigmatic statement, Narcissa shuffled off back down the tunnel corridor, leaving the trio staring after her.

"Well, don't that just beat all," said Edie shaken. "She acts just like my Granny does. All mysterious about everything."

"Narcissa lives alone in the deepest tunnels, Edie, and we rarely see her. But come, let's move on. Father will be coming to meet us, and I don't want him walking any farther than necessary. His hip is bad, and it's painful for him to walk long distances," said Vincent, moving forward.

Within the hour, they heard voices in the distance and hurried toward the sound. Exhausted, Edie was almost asleep in Vincent's

arms but woke to the commotion of strangely dressed people milling around all trying to talk to Vincent and Catherine at once until a stately-looking gentleman with a cane took charge.

"Vincent, Catherine. Thank God you're both safely home. We have been worried sick about both of you. And this is Edie, I presume," the man said, eyeing her critically. He gently examined Edie's wound which was bleeding again.

"Well, there's not much we can do for you here, young lady. Come, hurry. I need to have her in the hospital chamber before I can tend that wound. It looks infected."

Edie dozed off and seemingly the next moment she was on a table, and the man called '*Father*' was giving her a shot. After that all was darkness for some time. When she awoke, the old man was quietly sitting by her bedside engrossed in a book. Groaning, she went to touch her head which felt bandaged.

"So! You're finally back with us, are you?" said the man, gently capturing her hand and returning it to her side. "Best ot leave that alone. That is a nasty gash you have there. But it should heal nicely with only a hairline scar that you can cover up with hairstyle. You're lucky. Infection has already set in, but I cleaned it all out, and I have you on antibiotics. You should be feeling much better by tomorrow."

"Where's Cathy?" asked Edie, suddenly feeling strange in these surroundings without her friend.

"We felt it wise that she go Above and contact your boss, so that he knows you're safe. She'll be back later tonight or early tomorrow. Don't worry. You are among friends. We could have you taken Above and recommed an excellent doctor, or you can

stay here with us until your wound heals. You lost quite a bit of blood and took quite a nasty blow to the head. Wherever you decide to stay, you need a few days rest and quiet. Which would you rather do?"

"I think I'll wait here at least till Cathy and Vincent get back. I want to thank Vincent for all he did for me."

"No thanks are necessary. Vincent already knows that you are grateful. But, you are more than welcome to wait for them. Try to get some rest now," said the distinguished old man, brusquely patting her hand.



Now that they were alone together, both Catherine and Vincent were reserved. Neither seemed to want to begin the conversation they both sensed would take place. Hand in hand they slowly walked back toward the main complex. Catherine had set Joe's mind at ease as to their safety, telling him that she would be in tomorrow. That gave her tonight to get things straightened out between her and Vincent. Vincent knew that Catherine had something she wished to talk about. He sensed that she had been waiting until they were alone. Knowing that if they returned to the central complex they would be surrounded by friends suggested that they visit the waterfall cavern. It was a special place for them both. Vincent knew it would be deserted at this time of the night.

They sat and silently watched the waterfall for some time. They were each trying to find a way to explain what had happened to them while they were apart.

Vincent was apprehensive about sharing his experiences in the cavern with Catherine. He was reticent about acknowledging the

visitor he had encountered, not quite sure of what it actually was-----his conscience or a separate being.

As he struggled to find the words, Catherine resolved his conflict by softly slipping her arm around his waist and gently her head upon his chest.

"Vincent," she murmured softly, "we need to talk about us and what has happened this past week. I have never felt so alone and cut off from you. It was a terrible feeling, and I never want to feel that way again."

Vincent hung his head in remorse. Having hurt Catherine wounded him deeply. He tenderly reached out his hand and brushed the chestnut colored hair from her emerald-green eyes. He raised her face so her eyes were level with his. As he looked deeply into her beautiful eyes, the trust and love he saw there gave him courage to say, "There is only one logical solution to our problems, Catherine."

Catherine caught her breath, waiting for Vincent to continue.

"I can no longer deal with the violence your job continually generates. It threatens our possibilities-----or any future we may have together. We have reached a point on the road we travel where we must decide whether we will journey on as one or go our separate way."

Fearing Catherine's response, Vincent's eyes left her face and stared vacantly into the chasm which separated them from the waterfall. Time ceased in the silent cavern as he humbly waited her response. He had finally offered Catherine all that he would ever have to give-----himself. His life was now in her hands. His future was hers alone to decide.

Catherine knew full well the agony Vincent must have endured before coming to this decision. What she said now would shape the rest of their lives. Having come to the same conclusion as Vincent, Catherine was overwhelmed by the simple declaration he had made which perfectly mirrored her own heart's desires.

Her heart filled to overflowing with love for this gentle being. Tears slowly gathered in the depths of her eyes and slid down her radiant face as she reached up and put her arms trustingly around Vincent's neck and softly whispered, "Will you marry me?"

Lost in the rapture of love confessed, the evening slipped quickly away as they planned the beginning of the rest of their lives.

THE BOOK OF COUNTED SORROWS

WALTER WANGERIN JR.

CHAMBER CAMEOS NINE

Is there some meaning to this life?

What purpose lies behind the strife?

Whence do we come, where are we bound?

These cold questions echo and rebound

Through each day, each lonely night.

We long to find the splendid light

That will cast a revelatory beam

Upon the meaning of the human dream.

A STRANGER IN A STRANGE LAND

PART TWO

BERNADETTE ELANDER

CHAMBER CAMEOS NINE

It took much doing, but after a great deal of persuasive argument from Father, the charges against Maurice Wells(*the only name Father could think of to give the police*) were dropped. 'Maurice' was consequently remanded into the custody of his father Jacob Wells. Since the young man had no previous criminal record or outstanding warrants, he was let off with a strong reprimand from the veteran desk sargeant.

Father was absolutely livid at Mouse for what he had done, but when he discovered the reason Mouse had gone Above, he was filled with awe and understanding. '*Is every man in love with my wife?*' he thought as he looked sympathetically at the youth who had risked everything to obtain the elusive emerald green glass for Aisling's kaleidoscope.

"Now, Mouse, I want you to go home straight away. Do you understand?"

"Understand fine," Mouse said meekly.

"I'm going to see the Helper who contacted us when you were arrested. Afterwards I'm going to the pawn shop to try and retrieve my wife's locket. I will return to the tunnels in a few hours. Tell Aisling and Vincent where I have gone."

Mouse nodded adamantly, still a bit wary of Father and the wrath of which he was capable.

"There's a good lad," Father said, combing the coarse blonde hair from Mouse's face and patting his cheek.

Mouse smiled up at Father, knowing that all was forgiven.

Father sighed wearily as Mouse turned and eagerly disappeared into the noonday crowd, and he prayed that the young man would make it safely home without further incident.

The wintry streets Father journeyed down were strewn with all manner of humanity's refuse. Drug dealers, prostitutes, and street people littered the dirty sidewalks like so much discarded rubbish. But they seemed quite oblivious to the oppressive surroundings, having been long accustomed to its sad and tiring sameness. Children played in the street among the garbage and crack vials and used hypodermic syringes while old people sat lethargically on icy, concrete stoops, their eyes vacant, looking not to the past nor to the future. The vast hopelessness of the naked city assaulted Father's senses, nauseating him, and he wondered how people could endure such misery. This had once been a city of such opportunity, a land of such hope. How had it come to this?"

Lost in his forlorn contemplation, Father turned into an alley. He had gone only a short distance when he was approached by two young men. *'They were really no more than boys'* Father thought as he tried to pass, but the taller of the two blocked his way.

"Where are you going, old man?"

"Please. Let me by," Father said firmly.

The young man, dressed in grimy black jeans and a worn brown leather jacket, refused Father's request and shoved him roughly backwards.

Distressed and angry, Father tried to remain calm. "I haven't any money, so you might as well leave me alone."

"Don't tell us you don't got no money," said the smaller boy with an air of knowledgeable confidence. "Old people always got money."

"I'm afraid to disillusion you, but it happens to be true."

"You talk real fine for a bum, mister," the tall boy snapped.

Father was quite agitated over this entire scenario and frantic to find a way out of it. He stared harshly at the young man, but that served only to heighten the boy's resolve to intimidate his intended victim even further.

The tall boy, who was obviously the leader of the two, rooted through Father's pockets until he found the wallet. Plucking it smoothly from the inner pocket of the greatcoat, he gave a leering grin, exposing a mouthful of crooked, rotting teeth. But the grin quickly dissolved when he opened the wallet and found only a solitary dollar bill within. Father had secreted two twenties in his shoe, expecting just such an encounter.

"Is this all you've got, old man?"

This time Father did not answer. He brusquely pushed the young man aside with his cane and continued on his way.

"Get him, Frankie!" the tall boy yelled. With that Father was felled by a sharp blow to the back of his head, and he dropped to the ice-covered ground with a muffled groan.

The small boy stood over Father-----as if in triumph----- still holding the sawed-off baseball bat he had used as a truncheon against the helpless stranger. He tapped the bat in the palm of his

hand over and over again, asking of his friend, "What do you want me to do next, Ray?"

Ray slowly walked over to Father's side. Unable to stand, Father drew his body up tightly and covered his head to protect himself from the coming assault. But it was no use. The young man grinned his leering grin again then landed a devastating kick to Father's ribcage with the toe of a heavy soled boot. The violence of the act gave the young man great pleasure, and he felt an enormous rush fill his body as he watched Father crumple in pain. As the adrenaline surged through him, the young man kicked Father repeatedly, stopping only when he himself had tired of the game.

In the midst of the frenzy, Frankie excitedly screamed. "**My turn! My turn!**" and took up his bat once more. Brutally he beat Father until the pain became too much for him to bear. His last coherent thought was of Aisling, and then he slipped into blessed oblivion.

Fearing they had killed the old man, Ray and Frankie fled the alley with nothing but a dollar bill between them to share. Father's wallet and cane(*the cane Cullen had carved for Father's sixtieth birthday*) were hurriedly chucked into nearby dumpster as they ran by. And in that last ditch effort to cover their tracks, Ray and Frankie had successfully hidden their complicity in the brutal crime but in doing so had destroyed the only identification of a stranger named Jacob Wells.

A heavy-set, old, black man with thin graying hair appeared from the back door of the New Jerusalem Shelter for Men carrying two green plastic bags of trash. Seeing the boys, he dropped the trash and shouted, "**Hey! What are you running from? Hey! Come**

back here!" He shook his head and mumbled an off-colored remark then effortlessly tossed the bags of trash into the over-filled dumpster. As he returned to the chores that awaited him in the shelter, he noticed a man lying in the alley. Cautiously he approached the stranger and gazed at him. "You drunk, mistah? Or is you hurt?" he asked the still and silent figure on the ground. When the man did not respond, Calvin began to shake violently and yell for help. ***"Miss Alexandra! Miss Alexandra!"*** he shouted over and over.

Two men and a woman came running from the shelter. Alexandra Stuart, the shelter's director, dropped to her knees at the stranger's side. "Call 911," she directed authoritatively.

The man known as Stoney nodded and ran back to the shelter while the other man named Tyrell was directed to fetch a blanket. Tyrell returned in minutes with a surplus Army blanket, and Alexandra gently covered Father's beaten, bloodied body and prayed as she waited for paramedics to arrive.

Flashing lights and piercing sirens were quite commonplace in this community, so no one was unduly alarmed when the ambulance screamed past them and down into the alley. Those who did stop to briefly ponder the event assumed another drug overdose or a shooting had just occurred then continued on their way with no further thought to the incident.

The paramedics were instantly out of the van and at the victim's side. Once the injuries were assessed, the victim was started on an I.V. and loaded swiftly but carefully into the van.

Alexandra drove the shelter's pickup to the hospital as the old man accompanied her. "Did you see anything?" she asked Calvin as they followed the paramedics' route.

"No ma'am. He was just lying there on the ground bleeding from his mouth and all when I went to throw out the trash. He will be all right, won't he, Miss Alexandra?"

The handsome middle-aged woman squeezed Calvin's hand affectionately and replied, "I do hope so."



The faint, rhythmic clanking of the distant pipes was the only conversation in Father's quiet study as Aisling, Vincent, Galen, and Mary sat around the octagonal, mahogany table and patiently awaited their loved ones' return. Little Jacob lay peacefully asleep in Aisling's arms. His golden curls fanned out across her breast, and his plump, little hand lay curled and tucked tightly under his chin. His father sat opposite reading John Donne's **Songs and Sonnets** while Mary handily crocheted tiny blue and pink booties for Aisling's baby. Galen sat in deep reverie, blissfully watching Aisling and little Jacob, dreaming that the two golden-haired angels belonged to him.

Vincent raised his tawny maned head from the book and gazed toward the chamber's entrance. "Mouse is home," he said, feeling the young man's presence coming nearer.

They each looked at Vincent and then toward the door. Soon Mouse appeared at the entrance and stood rocking back and forth, too embarrassed to come any farther.

"Welcome home, Mouse," Vincent said. With several swift strides, he was at the young man's side. Reaching down, he took Mouse's shaggy blonde head between his furred hands and kissed him gently on the forehead. Shades of another time swirled in Vincent's mind as he saw Father and himself in this simple

gesture.

"Good to be home," Mouse replied smiling.

"Where is Father?"

"Went to visit Helper. Then to pawn shop."

"We're all happy to have you home, Mouse," Aisling said as she, too, welcomed the young man home with a hug and a kiss. Little Jacob, who was still in Aisling's arms but now awake, grabbed a handful of Mouse's hair and pressed his little face to Mouse's head, determined to show his affection as well.

Untangling the determined toddler, Mouse held and cuddled him until Jacob was satisfied that he had been given enough attention.

"Why did you go Above, Mouse darlin'? You know it's unsafe," Aisling queried.

Mouse lowered his head and rolled his big eyes at Vincent and then at Mary and Galen. "Secret," was his only reply. Then he added, "Maybe tell Vincent."

"All right, have your secrets. You're home now and you're safe," Aisling said lovingly.

Mary added her welcome then departed the chamber. Galen spoke briefly to Mouse and returned to the work he had left the night before.

"Perhaps we should have a talk with one another," Vincent said to Mouse.

"Okay good. Okay fine," Mouse replied resolutely. A shy smile creased his mouth as he gave Aisling a little wave then obediently followed Vincent from the chamber.



Father stirred unwillingly from the comforting darkness that had sheltered him from the terrible pain. He tried desperately to return to that unfeeling realm, but a dull, throbbing ache in the back of his head insistently pulled him into consciousness. As he awakened further, unmerciful pain in his side, shoulders, and chest became all-consuming and rendered any other pain insignificant. And in this black and agonizing pain Father felt himself lying on something soft and cool and thought it a cruel paradox. His hands groped at the material beneath him, searching for a faintly remembered texture. But the material that waded and kneaded into his tight fists was something unfamiliar, its strange uniformity and starched clean feel somehow disconcerting. Feeling confused and disoriented and not knowing why, he cautiously opened his eyes. Blinking rapidly, he tried vainly to discern the pale figure who stood over him within the piercing light.

"Are you an angel?" he heard himself helplessly ask, the words strangely familiar yet not his own.

There was a soft, feminine laugh accompanied by a warm, smooth hand upon his brow. "No. I'm not an angel. You haven't met your Maker just yet."

'No, indeed,' Father thought, *'for Heaven would have no such pain. But where was he?'* When he awakened further, his nostrils caught the unmistakable smell of antiseptic and alcohol. He soon became aware of the low humming of a respirator and the muted sounds of other voices close by.

"Ms. Stuart," said a deep, masculine voice. "I should like to have a look at the patient."

Alexandra Stuart politely moved aside as the young physician began his examination of the recently admitted John Doe.

Father lay silent and unprotesting, allowing the young physician to carry out his duties.

"My name is Dr. Radley," the young man said. "Could you tell us who you are?"

Father ran his tongue over his dry, cracked lips and tried to speak. He was perfectly capable to speaking, but then he realized that he was incapable of answering the question. He remained silent.

"That's a tough one, isn't it?" the young doctor asked, thinking that his patient was still in a state of shock. "No matter. You can tell us later. Right now, could you at least tell me how you feel?"

Father nodded feebly then answered. "The pain.....it's agonizing."

"I can imagine," replied Dr. Radley. "The human body isn't designed to take the punishment you have, and I....."

"What happened?" Father rasped, interrupting the doctor's heart-felt indignation.

"You've sustained a terrible beating and have several fractured ribs, a fractured clavicle and vertebrae, a collapsed lung, and a minor concussion as well. Your spleen was ruptured, but it was removed during surgery. You're lucky to be alive."

Lucky was not the word that came to Father's mind. "Where am I?"

"You're in the Intensive Care Unit of St. Anthony of Padua Hospital."

"Can you give me something for the pain?"

Dr. Radley nodded and administered an injection of Demerol. "I'll be back later," he said and left.

Alexandra pulled a plastic, contoured chair next to the hospital bed and sat down. Father searched the woman's face but could not remember meeting her before. Then again, he could not remember much at all.

"My name is Alexandra Stuart," the woman said after some time. "I'm the director of the New Jerusalem Shelter for Men. A man who works for me found you in the alley behind the shelter, and we called paramedics."

"Thank you," Father managed to say as he searched her handsome face. She reminded him vaguely of someone. But who? He could not remember that either. He only knew that this woman was older and perhaps not as pretty, but she had kind blue eyes and a warm, honest smile.



"Oh God! Where could he be?" Aisling cried as she paced back and forth, treading a path into the dirt floor as Vincent and Galen sat helplessly by and watched.

Galen wanted to go to her, to enfold her into his arms, and comfort her, but Aisling would not stay still long enough even for this small kindness.

"We are trying to contact the Helper he went to see, but so far Pascal has been unable to locate her. Please try not to worry so, Aisling. It will not bring Father home any sooner, and it is not good for the baby," Vincent said in his soothing, velvety voice.

"Aye," Aisling replied, dropping into Father's old, tattered upholstered armchair-----more out exhaustion from worry than in compliance with Vincent's wishes.

"He's been gone so long," she said as fresh tears flowed down her already tear-stained cheeks. "He could be dead, and we'd never know it."

"I would know it, Aisling. I can feel Father inside me. Somewhere, in the city Above, he is alive. I assure you."

Aisling's violet eyes searched Vincent's own of china blue. She desperately wanted his words to be true. Vincent believed what he said, but Aisling did not have the same faith. She knew the world too well.

"Here's a nice hot cup of herbal tea," Mary said softly as she handed a mismatched cup and saucer to Aisling. "It's the kind you like so much. Please, try a little bit."

"Thank you." Aisling said as she accepted the tea from Mary. She sipped at it absent-mindedly then put the cup and saucer down on the table and continued her pacing about the study. Mary sighed.

It was well after midnight before Pascal was able to contact the Helper Father had gone to see. He was hesitant to break the news to the family, but it was his duty to inform them of what he knew.

"Father never made it to Kay's house. She waited all day. At five o'clock, she had to leave for work, but a neighbor who keeps an eye on her apartment said no one came by while she was gone. I'm sorry."

Aisling burst into tears once more, but this time Galen was able to

take the exhausted and frantic young woman into his arms.

"There now, Aisling. This doesn't mean anything has happened to Father. He probably decided to visit another Helper since Kay wasn't home. And most likely, he's on his way back to the tunnels this very minute," he said reassuringly. But Galen did not believe what he said anymore than Aisling.



The elevator whined as it slowly ascended the shaft, groaning upwards to the loft, and halted with an abrupt thud and a gnashing of gears when it had reached its destination. Diana opened the creaking gate and shuffled into her empty apartment. She tossed her sweat shirt jacket, purse and mail onto the couch then checked Catherine's rose bush before going into the kitchen to make herself a pot of coffee. The loft seemed a bit lonely with Mark now gone, but Diana welcomed the privacy and above all treasured her independence.

Sipping the much needed cup of steaming, black brew, Diana sat cross-legged on the couch sifting through her mail----- mostly junk mail, a few bills plus a party invitation. Picking up the phone to R.S.V.P. the invitation, Diana started to dial but hesitated.

There was a low, rustling sound outside on her balcony, softly at first, but then it grew louder. *'It was just the wind'*, Diana told herself, and she dialed the phone once more. But her attention was again diverted to the balcony, and this time the noise was closer. Diana replaced the receiver in its cradle and cautiously tiptoed to the window. Yanking the balloon curtains up with a sudden jerk, she found Vincent standing in the shadows just beyond the large picture window. Only his leonine face and piercing blue eyes were illuminated by the light projected from the

loft. The rest of him melded into the darkness, engulfed within its secure and amicable embrace.

"Vincent, what is it?" Diana asked as she ushered him into her home, quite surprised by his unexpected presence.

"Diana, Father is missing."

"He's missing?" When and how long?"

"Five days ago. We have had scouts from the tunnels and Helpers from Above searching for him, but thus far we have had no luck in finding him. We contacted the hospitals in the area where he was last known to be, but no one named Jacob Wells has been admitted."

"Why was he in the city?"

"Mouse had gone Above to *'borrow'* some material from a demolition site and found himself arrested for theft. Since you could not be contacted, Father went to retrieve him. Mouse came home, but Father did not."

"Didn't he accompany Mouse back to the tunnels?"

"No. He wanted to visit with the Helper who had alerted us to Mouse's situation. When Father did not arrive home later that evening, the Helper was contacted. Kay waited all day for him, but Father never came. She assumed he had changed his mind. Could you help us find him, Diana? Aisling is sick with worry, and we are all terribly afraid that she will lose the baby."

"Baby?"

Vincent nodded, and his eyes smiled as he thought of the miracle Aisling carried within her delicate body. "Yes, she's going to have

Father's child."

"Is Father happy about the baby?"

"What are you saying, Diana?"

"Perhaps he's just gone off somewhere to think about everything. So much has changed in his life in such a short time. He's become a grandfather, a husband, and soon a father again. It's a lot to deal with virtually all at once."

"Father would not worry Aisling or the community like this. He had no plans to remain Above any longer than necessary. And if you are intimating that Father is unhappy about the baby....."

"I didn't mean that he's unhappy.....maybe just overwhelmed," Diana broke in.

"I did feel he was concerned over becoming a new father at his age, but I know he wants this child very much. I can see it in his eyes, and I can feel it here," Vincent replied, placing his large, outstretched hand upon his chest.

Diana pursed her lips, and her large, luminescent sapphire eyes grew wide as she spoke. "Well, Vincent, I'll do what I can. Where was he last seen and at what time?"

Vincent briefed Diana on all the pertinent information regarding Father's disappearance. Slim as the facts were, they were all Diana had to go on. She hoped her skills as a behavioral criminologist would prove out in this latest case.



Alexandra visited Father everyday for the next seven weeks. Though Father grew stronger with each day, he could remember

only fragments of the past, and they did not seem to fit into the jagged jigsaw puzzle of his memory. Candles----- hundreds of them-----Ebbet's field on a summer day, a wistfully played Beethoven sonata, and a church's stained glass window were the images that came to mind in random fashion, clearly unrelated to one another, but like all memories they linked together to make a man who and what he was.

"Have you thought about where you will go after you're discharged from the hospital?" Alexandra asked Father during an afternoon visit.

"Actually, I had not given it much thought. I'm not quite sure how I will even renumerate the hospital for all the care I have received."

"Don't worry. The foundation will help pay for the expenses incurred, and we have several generous benefactors who can be relied upon for any additional help."

"That's quite kind of you. I don't know how I can ever replay you for your generosity."

"I do," Alexandra replied with a twinkle in her eye. "I'll be needing an assistant soon, and I'd like to hire you."

"Alexandra, you couldn't possibly do that."

"Any why not?"

"Well, for one thing, you cannot hire someone who has no name and who cannot remember who he is or where he comes from. For all you know, I could be a mass murderer."

"I don't think so," she said, squeezing his hand in a firm and friendly manner.

Father turned his head from Alexandra and stared pensively at the vase of dark purple freesias she had brought him the day before. Their scent was sweet and delicate, and their color reminiscent of something he loved but could not remember. He wanted so desperately to remember who he was. He wanted his identity back and whatever life went with it. Dr. Radley had not given him a very promising prognosis regarding the amnesia. it was rare, but often times such amnesia could last for years. And in some cases, the victim could quite possibly never regain his memory. It seemed like a kind of death sentence to Father. To have everything he had ever known taken away, and to be given nothing in return but a life void of memory, was a fate he could not accept.

"Sometimes, i wish I had died, Alexandra."

"Please, don't even think that!"

"Oblivion would be far better than a meaningless existence."

"If you can't find the life you once had, then you'll have to find a new life filled with new meaning," she replied pragmatically.

"And where does one begin?" he asked somewhat sarcastically then apologized for his abrasiveness.

"With a name."

"A stranger in a strange land," he replied, paraphrasing the Bible and not know why or how.

"Moses. That's what I'll call you. It's as good a name as any."

"I suppose it is."



Life for most of the tunnel dwellers gradually returned to normal-----or something resembling it-----in the weeks following Father's disappearance. But in this uneasy truce with fate and the acceptance of his absence, there was a constant, underlying discomfort in each movement, and indifference to each task accomplished, and the fear that with each passing day life would never be the same; it would simply continue. Even the eternal tattoo of the pipes seemed to take on a dull and melancholy air, never sounding quite as sweet as they once had.

Vincent became responsible for the day-to-day governing of the community and ably, if unenthusiastically, took up Father's duties and burdens, knowing that someday the task would eventually and permanently become his alone.

Aisling coped with Father's absence and the uncertainty of his welfare in her own stubborn fashion. Each day she taught the many tunnel children about the things Father loved best; Shakespeare and science, medicine and Mozart, theatre and theology. In the evening after classes were over, Aisling sat at Father's desk reading for hours on end the books he so loved to read. Lovingly she touched those things he had touched as she dusted and straightened his possessions with devotion and care. Everything from Father's study to his hospital chamber were kept ready, waiting patiently for his return.

As the weeks passed, Aisling's slim body effortlessly adjusted to the rapid and remarkable changes demanded of her by the new life she and Jacob had created. Her once slender, girlish waist now grew taut and rounded beneath her ever swelling breasts. And her very heartbeat in unison with the tiny strangers's rhythmic pulse. Safe within her shelter, the child grew and thrived, taking form and spirit from both mother and father. Aisling's every waking

thought revolved around its existence, her every prayer for its well being.

But in the darkness of night, alone in bed, Aisling's dreams were of Father alone. And in this solitary world, she could indulge herself in the luxury of him. In her dreams, he was beside her. She could hear his even breathing as he slept, and she could feel his body curled next to hers. She could gaze into his handsome face, and she could kiss his lips. She could touch him, and she could make love with him. One night in such a dream, Aisling felt Jacob's hand upon her body. The baby moved in response to its father's hand so close, and she felt contentment fill her soul. But rousing from this dreamy world of unsubstantial happiness, Aisling became aware of a strange and startling reality. Galen was at her side! It was his hand upon her body, his warmth filling the coldness of her bed.

"Galen!" she gasped.

Softly placing a finger to Aisling's trembling lips, Galen tenderly silenced her protest. He kissed her cheek then pulled her close, whispering, "Don't be afraid, my love. I'm here to keep you safe until the one you love returns."

Aisling lay contented in Galen's arms, accepting his comfort and his company. He, like Jacob, was a man of honor. He would not shame her. Peacefully she drifted back to sleep with the memory of his vow echoing in her rapidly dissolving thoughts, "If you ever need my life, it is yours for the asking."

When Aisling awoke the next morning, Galen was no longer beside her. She smiled, thinking he had been a pleasant dream after all. But when Galen brought a cup of herbal tea to her that morning, Aisling knew he had been no dream. "Why did you come

to me last night?" she asked softly as she sat down in Father's favorite chair.

"You needed me."

"Galen, I....."

"Your cries fairly broke my heart, Aisling."

"My cries?" she asked, looking up at him with those huge, violet eyes of her as innocently that Galen thought he could die from the sheer want of her.

"In your dreams, you cry out his name."

"How do you know this?"

"For nights I have been unable to sleep, sick with worry about Father. I roam the tunnels thinking how I can be of help. One night, I passed by your chamber. The lamp on Father's desk was lit, so I came in believing you were awake. It's then I heard you thrashing about in your bed, crying for him. You sounded so afraid, so alone. Each night I came by, and it was always the same. I couldn't bear it any longer. I had to come to you, to comfort you."

Aisling fought the tears, but they flowed despite her effort to hold them in check. "He's not coming back, is he?"

"I don't know, Aisling."

"If he....." she began to say when she caught her breath in mid-sentence. A radiant smile flowed over her face, erasing the pain and sadness that had beent here only moments before.

"What is it?"

"Here," she replied, "Give me your hand." Galen reached out his hand, and Aisling grabbed it, placing it to her abdomen. "There! Do you feel it?"

Galen bit at his lower lip and looked at Aisling and then at her swollen girth. His brow furrowed then smoothed as a smile fo his own lit his handsome face. "Yes, yes. I felt it. I felt it move," he said excitedly.

Aisling sat back and savored the moment, her own hand resting upon Galen's. Galen's free arm reached around Aisling's shoulders, and he drew closer to her. He could smell the sweet fragrance of her silky hair as she lay her head lightly upon his shoulder, and he wanted her more than ever. He buried his face into the soft, golden mass and whispered, "I love you, Aisling." But Aisling heard only the beating of Jacob's heart within her.



"What do you think?" Alexandra asked as Father looked about his new home.

Father was quite overcome by the bustling, cheerful shelter. He had expected it to be a dull, dark place filled with hopeless men in ragged clothes who reeked of alcohol, but instead he found it to be a sober, well organized center complete with a modern kitchen, a well equipped office, comfortable dormitories, clean bathrooms, and several classrooms and workshops. The men who inhabited the shelter were dressed in clean, modest clothes, and they all working in some manner whether in the shelter or outside. And many took classes that the shelter offered in everything from English to auto mechanics.

Alexandra had turned a once run-down store front mission into a

million dollar shelter thanks to her considerable talent and connections. The shelter now housed sixty-two men and daily served twice that many lunch and dinner.

"It's remarkable, Alexandra."

"Yes, it is, but it takes a great deal of work to keep it running. Everyone does his share of the work, but the administration is something else. That's where you come in."

"I'm not really sure if I am capable of being an administrator, but I will do my best."

"Administrative assistant," Alexandra corrected, not quite ready to relinquish her job to him. She knew Moses would do quite well in the job she was offering. It had taken her only minutes talking with him that first day in the hospital to know that this stranger was no alcoholic derelict from off the streets, despite the shabby clothing he had been wearing. He was a bright, erudite man, even if he did not know it himself., who was well spoken and who had an air of confident authority about him. Alexandra had watched her new charge carefully in those many weeks she had visited him in the hospital, and she found that he had a special way with people. Moses was a gentleman. He was gracious, polite, concerned for his fellow patients, never complained, and was keenly interested in every aspect of the hospital. He would make a marvelous assistant.

Alexandra was a wonderful judge of character. She was an intelligent, warm, friendly woman with the tenacity of a corporate raider. And she had never been wrong about a man yet.

"My room is lovely," Father said as Alexandra showed him his private quarters, "but do you think it's quite right for me to have a

room of my own?"

"Of course it is. You are now the administrative assistant of the New Jerusalem Shelter for Men who just happens to reside here. You are not a shelter resident."

"Ah, I see. Thank you for clarifying that for me, but I really cannot see where I am any different from all these other men. After all, I, too, am homeless."

'Not anymore," Alexendra replied smiling.

Father bowed his head and smiled with gratitude.

"Here. I have something for youj," Alexandra said as she took a festively wrapped package from behind the door.

"What's this?"

"Well, open it and see."

Father unwrapped the long, thin package to find a curious looking stick.

"It's called a Shillelagh. It was my grandfather's. I know it's still difficult for you to walk, and it seemed so much more dignified than this old thing," she replied, taking Father's hospital issued cane and replacing it wiht her grandfather's gnarled and knotted blackthorn walking stick.

"It's beautiful. Thank you so much, indeed."

"You're very welcome," Alexandra said as she gazed into his delighted blue-gray eyes. "Now, there's something else I'd like to give you."

"I couldn't possible accept anything else, Alexandra. You have

been much too generous as it is what with buying me new glasses, clothes, shoes, and giving me this fine walking stick as well."

"What I want to give you now won't cost a penny."

"Are you sure?"

"Quite sure."

"What is it then?"

"A haircut and maybe little trim for that unruly beard of yours."

Father ran his fingers through his wavy, gray-brown hair and then across his chin and cheeks. He was rather in need of a good trimming.

"You will be gentle, won't you?" he asked with a shy grin.

"Infinitely so," Alexandra replied.



Kipper scurried into Vincent's chamber to inform him that Diana was in the tunnels.

"Go and tell Aisling, Mary and Galen to meet Diana and me in Father's study," Vincent directed.

"Right!"

"And, Kipper....."

"Yes, Vincent?"

"Don't get sidetracked along the way."

The boy smiled and was off with a bolt.

Vincent met Diana at the park entrance to the tunnels and escorted her Below.

"It still amuses me how you find your way around here," Diana said admiringly.

"One always knows the way home," Vincent softly replied.

When they had reached Father's study, Aisling had taken up her now familiar routine of pacing about while Mary and Galen simply stood helplessly by and watched as usual.

"Diana!" Aisling shouted as she rushed to the young woman entering the chamber. "What news do you have of Jacob?"

Diana pursed her lips and sighed. "All my leads have run dry. Don't be too disappointed, Aisling. I feel as Vincent does. I know Father is alive, but there's a reason for him not coming home. I don't know what it is. He may be hurt."

"Hurt!" Mary blurted.

Aisling remained silent, not wanting to discuss this horrid possibility.

"Have you contacted the pawn shop he was going to and talked with all the neighbors?" Galen asked.

"That's where I started."

"And no one saw him?"

"If they did, they aren't saying. People in that area of town are usually pretty tight-lipped when it comes to giving out information. And they can see a cop ten blocks away in a snow storm."

"We could offer a reward," Vincent said.

"Yes, a reward," Aisling chimed in enthusiastically.

"I never thought about that, but I suppose we could. I'll have the guys in the graphic arts department run off some posters. Can the kids help me put them up?"

"I'll be glad to help, Diana," Galen offered.

Before Diana could accept his offer, Aisling cried out. **"No!"**

They all looked questioningly at her.

"Why not?" he asked.

"Because Jacob doesn't want you to go Above. He's afraid if something happened to you, you'd be deported."

"Nothing is going to happen to me."

"To be safe, Galen, we shall send out volunteers. I am confident that we will have plenty," Vincent interjected. "But thank you. I know Father would be pleased by your selflessness."

"I'm grateful for your offer, Galen. Thank you," Aisling said as she slipped her arms around his neck and hugged him.

Diana and several tunnel volunteers distributed leaflets and tacked up posters regarding Father's disappearance. And shortly after the posters appeared, there were an average of two to three calls a day to Diana's office. But they all turned out to be dead ends.



"What's this about a reward?" Frankie asked as Ray leaned lazily against a light pole where one of the reward posters had been pasted.

"Reward?" Ray asked, suddenly energetic.

"Yah, right there next to your head."

Ray looked up to see the word '*reward*' followed by a description of a missing man. "Sounds like some old bum to me," he mused. "What kind of reward do you think we'd get for somebody like that down here? Now if it was a movie star or a politician....."

"Well, I was just thinking. It's an easy way to make money."

"Ain't no easy way to make money, Frankie. No easy way at all 'cept maybe drugs. If we could score a load of snow then....."

"Ray! You'd better read this," Frankie said as he looked at the poster again.

The description of the missing man sounded terribly familiar to Frankie, but when he read the description of the man's clothing and cane. Frankie knew exactly who it was.

"It's him, Ray! I know it! And we killed him!"

"We didn't kill nobody, Frankie. We just had a little fun with him, that's all."

"Then why he's missing?"

"Like I said before. He was just an old bum. Maybe all his bum friends missed him and got together to put up a reward. Who knows."

"I think we should take these posters down, Ray, just in case."

Ray looked Frankie over and then nodded his head. "Yah, maybe you're right. Can't be too careful, can we?"

"No, we can't, Ray."

Ray and Frankie scoured the neighborhood, taking down every poster they could find. Soon, even the dead end calls quite coming into Diana's office.



Alexandra sat at her desk across the office from Father's desk, looking over her black half-glasses at him, and smiling. Father sat muttering at the personal computer, trying his best to make it work. His muttering was relieved periodically by pauses of unabashed delight when he could unexpectedly make the machine work properly. Often he would glance up at Alexandra and smile back, and she would wink and give him a thumbs up signal in return.

Teaching her new administrative assistant about personal computers, fax machines, microwave ovens, coffee makers, and electric pencil sharpeners was a sheer joy for Alexandra who had come to take so many things in life for granted----- just as most people take for granted their jobs and homes and families. The day he learned to use the electric pencil sharpener was a day she would not soon forget. After demonstrating it to him, Father attempted to sharpen a brand new, yellow pencil for himself. He placed the tip of the pencil into the machine and confidently watched as it neatly ground down to a tiny stub. The look of utter shock and dismay on his face at that moment was absolutely precious. And at that moment, Alexandra fell helplessly and hopelessly in love with the stranger she called Moses.



The weeks dragged by and soon became months, and Aisling grew more and more despondent. Her hope that Jacob was alive grew fainter and fainter. There were times when Aisling thought

she could not bear to go on without him even for the sake of the baby. And it was during these darkest of times when hope seemed nothing more than a distant memory that Galen would come to her. There was a bond between them now-----a connection. And whenever Aisling needed Galen most, she would think about him, and he would be there.

Galen sat evening after evening reading to Aisling all the classics he had always intended to read but somehow never did-----until now. He told her marvelous stories about the kangaroos and jumpbucks(*male sheep*) in Australia and the Eskimos and cowboys in Canada. He spent hours singing bright madrigals and doing magic tricks, anything to keep her happy, to bring a smile to her face, to give her hope. And Galen continued to come to Aisling in the night and chastely hold her as she slept. He was careful to go late enough so no one would see him and leave early enough before the other tunnel dwellers were awake.

Galen had never been as close to a woman as he was to Aisling. Never before had he slept with a woman and not made love to her. And never had he known true love and how to behave properly with it until she came into his life. Aisling was the world to him.

Diana did not give up on Father's case. Weekly she returned to the neighborhood where he was last known to have been and questioned the reluctant residents. She shortly discovered why the phone tips had stopped. She could not find one poster that she and the tunnel folk had put up. Diana thought it strange that every poster had disappeared and made arrangements for new posters to be printed.

On one of her excursions to the lower east side, Diana came

across an old, ragged man. He was shuffling down the walk with no particular place to go, but he seemed to be enjoying his journey as he swung his cane with a jaunty twist back and forth. Diana knew at once that the old man's cane belonged to Father.

"Excuse me," Diana said politely as she walked at the old man's side. "That's a beautiful cane you have."

The old man mumbled something and continued on his way.

"I have a friend who had a cane just like that, but he lost it. Where did you get yours? My friend's cane was a birthday gift. A man named Cullen carved it for him. Did a friend of yours make your cane?" Diana asked undaunted by the old man's indifference.

"This is my cane," he snorted.

"I'm sure it is. You wouldn't want to sell it to me, would you?"

"Sell my cane?"

"Yes. I thought I could replace the one my friend lost with this one. It seems to have been made by the same person, you see, and my friend is a great admirer of the carver's work. Could you tell me who carved your cane?"

"Don't know," he replied tersely.

"Could you tell me where you got it?"

"That's my business."

"How much would you want for your cane?"

"You mean, I could set my own price?"

"Of course, it's your cane. But I would like to know if it was carved by the same person, so could you tell me where you bought it?"

"I'll sell it to you for fifty bucks."

"Done." Diana said, pulling a wad of bills from the pocket of her jeans. She stretched out her hand and offered the old man the money. He looked her over suspiciously then took the crumpled bills and shoved them inside his coat. "Thank you," Diana said, taking the cane.

The old man chuckled, shook his head, and began to walk away.

"Wait! You didn't tell me where you bought it!"

"Didn't buy it. Found it," he said and openly laughed, thinking that he had gotten one over on the young woman.

"Where? You have to tell me where."

"In a dumpster near Jerusalem," he said and was on his way, apparently drunk one too many bottles of Thunderbird. She looked at the cane and began asking herself a series of questions out loud. "What did he mean by Jerusalem? Why hasn't Father contacted Vincent or Aisling? He hasn't contacted them because he can't. And why can't he? Is he unable? Is he in trouble? What does Jerusalem mean?"

She walked for blocks asking herself these questions over and over again. Some folks stared at the stranger in their midst but most ignored her. When Diana had decided to turn around and go back to her office, something across the street caught her eye. Jerusalem! The New Jerusalem Shelter for Men. This had to be what the old man had been talking about. She cut across the street and backtracked down the block. There was an alley running the length of the street where the shelter was located, so Diana turned and walked cautiously down it. *'Why would Father go down this alley?'* she asked herself. It was at least a mile from

Kay's house, and there were no pawn shops for several blocks around. But there were at least half a dozen dumpsters in the alley and one directly behind the New Jerusalem Shelter for Men.

Diana made her way to the front of the shelter and went in. She looked around at the many residents, and one asked if he could be of help.

"My name is Diana Bennett. I'm a detective, and i would like to know if you've seen the man who fits this description," she asked, showing the missing persons flyer to the old man.

"Well, he sure do sound familiar," Calvin said, scratching his head, "but you'll have to ask Miss Alexandra. She know more than me."

"Where could I find her?"

"Why, this is Sunday, child," he said, looking at Diana like she had no better sense then to ask for the unknown woman on this particular day of the week. "She don't work on Sundays. She's a Christian woman. She has the day off."

"Will she be in tomorrow?"

"Sure enough."

"Thanks," Diana said with a smile.

"You're welcome."

"Oh, by the way, please give her this flyer," Diana said as she turned to leave.

"I will, and I'll show Mr. Moses, too. You know, he sounds just like this fella. Must be his twin."

Diana stopped instantly. "Twin?" she asked.

"Well, I don't reckon it's really Mr. Moses' twin. I was just making conversation. You know, I found Mr. Moses after them boys beat him up. If it weren't for old Calvin, he would have died right there in the alley."

Diana swallowed hard. The man Calvin spoke of had been attacked in the alley behind the shelter, and the old man she had bought Father's cane from had gotten it from the dumpster behind the very same shelter. Father and Mr. Moses had to be one and the same. But why would Father be using such a name? And where was he now?

"Could I speak with Mr. Moses'?" Diana politely asked.

"He's not here either. He went to Miss Alexandra's for supper."

"Thank you for the information. I'll be back tomorrow," Diana said and left, her mind buzzing with questions.



"That was a fine meal," Father said gratefully. "I cannot remember when I had such a lovely Sunday supper."

"I don't imagine you can," Alexandra replied drolly.

Father chuckled then added off-handedly. "William would envy your culinary talents."

"Who?"

"Excuse me?" Father asked, his mind now on another subject.

"You just said something about a man named William."

"Did I?"

"Yes. You said he'd envy my culinary talents. Think! Do you know

a cook named William?"

Father tried to think of someone named William but drew a blank as usual. "Probably a cook I knew in the Army."

"You were in the Army?"

"How could I know, Alexandra? It was just a figure of speech. I'm sure most men my own age were in the Army at one point in their lives."

"But don't you see?"

"See what?"

"If you had been in the Army, there would be records. Fingerprints on file. Dental records."

"Dear God, Alexandra, you're right! We could send my fingerprints to Army headquarters in Washington."

"Yes! Oh, Moses! I don't know why I didn't think of it before. When I take you back to the shelter, we'll make a set of your fingerprints, using the ink pad."

"That would be wonderful. How long do you think it would take to get the information?"

"Knowing a government organization, a year and a day," Alexandra replied, then she realized what it would mean for Moses to have his identity restored. And she hoped that it would take just that long. "Would you like a cup of coffee?" she asked, changing the subject.

"That would be lovely. May I help?"

"No thanks; it'll only take a minute. Why don't you make yourself

comfortable in the living room?"

Father shambled with the aid of his shillelagh around the spacious Park Avenue apartment, looking at the fine porcelain figurines, the bookcase of rare first editions, and the stunning collection of original lithographs. Alexandra Stuart and many born to wealth and power, of which her taste attested, and may found it difficult to understand why the Bryn Mawr graduate with a Master's degree in Business Administration had turned her talents to sheltering the homeless instead of creating tax shelters for the rich. But Alexandra was one of those rare individuals who had used her wealth and power for the betterment of others. In that respect she reminded him of.....'of whom', Father thought? That, too, he could not remember.

"Here's your coffee, Moses," Alexandra said, handing Father the delicate Wedgewood teacup and saucer filled with the finest Jamaican Blue.

"Thank you. Hmmmm. This is marvelous as well. Is there no end to your talents?"

Alexandra smiled bashfully and sipped her coffee.

They sat in companionable silence for some time, then Father rose from the couch and made his way around the living room once more. He remarked about the lithographs and asked several questions about Alexandra's collection of rare first editions. Eventually his attention wandered to the family portraits-----all in silver frames-----that sat atop the grand piano in the corner of the living room. There were pictures of Alexandra as a child, her parents, sisters, brother, assorted cousins and the like, as well as several photos of a baby. Father gazed at the healthy, happy baby with soft blonde curls, and a fond smile tipped the

corners of his mouth.

"Is this your child?" he asked.

Alexandra blushed. **"Sir!"** she exclaimed dramatically, "I'm a single woman if you recall."

Now Father blushed. "Excuse me. I did not mean to imply....."

"I know, I know. I'm only kidding. That's Terrance. He's my sister Julia's son and the only grandchild my parents are likely to have. Terrance is a freshman in high school now, so the photo is rather out-of-date. He was such a precious baby and so spoiled.

Everyone....."

"She's going to have a baby, you know," Father said, interrupting Alexandra. But he did not seem to notice as he tried desperately to hold onto the flash of memory that had just rocketed through his brain.

Alexandra sat silently as she watched Father struggle with the fleeting memory. His face filled with such pain at being unable to remember his life that it broke Alexandra's heart. Against her will, she asked, "Who?"

"I don't know. I don't know." Father cried as he slumped down into the couch next to her. **"I don't know."**

Alexandra encircled Father into her arms and held him fast. "You'll remember one day, Moses," she whispered softly.

"Will I? Will I ever remember who and what I am? Will I remember my life and those I loved and who loved me?"

"Of course," she replied, hoping against hope that he not.

"Oh, Alexandra," Father began to say when her lips silenced his

words.



Aisling sat in Father's favorite chair pensively contemplating the soft music of the pipes. It still amazed her how the tunnel folk carried on intricate conversations with one another even from the farthest boundaries of the community. One day soon she hoped to hear the joyous message announcing Father's homecoming. And she in turn would send her own message ringing through the pipes. *'I love you, Jacob. I love you. It matters not where you've been, only that you're home.'* Aisling thought that she had better write down the sequence of the code, fearing that when Father did indeed come home, she would be too excited to remember how to send the message if it was not in writing.

Rooting through the bottom drawer of Father's desk where he kept his stationary and pens, Aisling found a thick stack of letters carefully bound with red satin ribbon. Some of the letters looked old and worn while others appeared to be relatively new. But they all smelled of a heady musk perfume. Although she chastised herself for doing so, Aisling surprisingly found her trembling fingers opening the letters at random. She swallowed hard and bit back the tears as the words stung her heart;

Dearest Jacob,

I am now in Paris, the city of Love, and how I long for you to be with me. Often I think back to those few short weeks we spent together, and I wonder if I made a wise decision in leaving you.

Perhaps I was too selfish, too stubborn; but at the time I thought I was being noble. Now I can see the folly of it all and how I must have hurt you. I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me, my dearest. I await your answer.

all My love'

Jessica

Aisling carefully refolded this letter and the others and returned them to their envelopes. She retied the bundle and slipped it back into the desk.



Calvin hummed an old Blues song in time with the mop as he made figure eights across the gray linoleum floor. He was lost in thoughts of days gone by when he played that old saxophone of his like a man makes love with a woman----- slow, sweet, and tender. Music had been his one true love until he met the seductive Irish Rose. She made him feel so good when he was down, but when the money ran out, she was gone. By then, no one would hire a drunken old black man, and Calvin resorted to panhandling spare change from strangers on the street just to have one more night with Rose. When he was lucky, he would have enough money to buy two bottles. He would stay drunk in her company for the entire night, but by morning he would be alone once again. Calvin had stumbled upon The New Jerusalem Shelter for Men eight years ago. Alexandra had taken him in and sobered him up. He had been with her ever since.

"Excuse me," Diana said.

Calvin looked up from his work and offered the red-haired beauty a gentle smile. "Why, Miss Bennett. Yous said you'd be back this morning, and heres you is."

"Hello, Calvin. It's nice to see you again. Is Miss Stualet in now?"

"Why, she surely is. Right there in her office, the last door," he replied, pointing down the newly mopped hall.

"Thanks," Diana said. But as she turned to leave, she slipped on the wet floor and fell gracelessly on her backside.

"Yous okay, miss?"

"Fine, Calvin. Just a bit embarrassed."

Father rounded the corner just in time to see the stranger being hauled to her feet by Calvin. "What has happened here?" he asked worriedly.

Diana gasped as she looked at Father who stood looking back at her with alarmed concern. When he said nothing further to her, she extended her hand to his. "I'm Diana..... Diana Bennett."

"I am pleased to meet you, Miss Bennett," Father replied politely and without any hint of cognizance. "I am the assistant director of New Jerusalem. May I be of some help?"

Diana stared incredulously at Father. He truly did not recognize her, or at least he was putting on an Oscar winning performance of not recognizing her. But why?

"I'm a detective," Diana said, clearing her mind of the thousand whirling thoughts and questions. "I would like to ask Miss Stuart a few questions regarding a case I'm working on."

"Very well," Father replied. "Follow me."

Diana followed Father down the hall and into Alexandra Stuart's spartan office.

"Alexandra," Father said to the Diane Sawyer look-a-like behind the metal desk. "We have a visitor. This is Miss Bennett, a police detective. Miss Bennett, this is our director, Alexandra Stuart."

"Please, have a seat, Miss Bennett," Alexandra said warmly.

"Thanks," Diana replied, sitting down in the chair across from Alexandra.

"If you don't need me, I will be in the kitchen," Father interrupted.

"Thank you, Moses," Alexandra said as Father withdrew.

Diana watched Father leave the office and wondered just what on earth was going on.

"Now! What can I do for you?"

"I'm here on a missing persons case," Diana said matter-of-factly as she handed Alexandra one of the recently printed flyers detailing the statistics of Jacob Wells.

"Missing person?" Alexandra asked, a chill enveloping the warmth of her voice. She eyed the flyer then looked back at Diana across the top of her half glasses.

"Yes. I have reason to believe that the man I'm searching for, Jacob Wells, may be here."

"He certainly does fit the description of several of the men in the shelter, but I'm afraid there is no one here by that name."

"I see," Diana replied tersely. "Well, thank you for your time, she

added.

"You're very welcome," Alexandra replied with relief.

"Oh, by the way. Your assistant, Mr....."

"Moses?"

"Yes. How long has he worked here?"

"Why.....about one year now, I believe."

"You know, he fits this missing persons description right down to the limp."

"Does he? I really didn't see any similarity," Alexandra replied agitated.

"I suppose it's just wishful thinking. I've been on the case for some time now, and I keep running into dead ends. Thanks anyway."

"My pleasure. If there is anything I can do to help, let me know."

"I bet," Diana said to herself. "I will," she said to Miss Stuart.

Diana left The New Jerusalem Shelter for Men with even more questions. Alexandra Stuart had lied to her, by why? She had nothing to fear. Did she think that she was protecting one of her own? And just what did she think the man whom she called Moses had done that he needed her protection? Why did Father not recognize her? It had to be him, or it was true that every person in the world did have an identical twin. But Diana did not believe that. She believed in facts, and the facts were all there, unsettling as they may be. Father was living in a men's shelter, going by the name of Moses, and his employer had lied about him. How was she going to tell Aisling what she had found Father, but he was not coming home? Diana hoped Vincent would have an answer

for her.



"How does the wee one sound?" Aisling asked as Mary moved the stethoscope across her swollen belly.

"We have a strong, healthy heartbeat," she replied smiling. "I'd say the baby is doing just fine, and I'm confident Peter will confirm that for us when he sees you next week."

Aisling sighed contentedly.

"But you know, my dear, you need to eat more. You're as thin as a rail. The baby takes so much from you. Are you taking the vitamins Peter gave you?"

"Aye, twice a day. And I will try to eat more, Mary. It's just that it's so hard. I have no appetite with Jacob gone," she said as tears welled up in her beautiful violent eyes.

"Oh, Aisling. Forgive me. I know what an ordeal you've been through these past months. We have all suffered, but you have suffered most." Mary replied as she enfolded Aisling into her comforting embrace. Tears of her own welled up in Mary's eyes and spilled down her cheeks. "Now, you mustn't cry. I've taken care of dozen of expectant mothers and their babies, and every one of them have been just fine. You will be, too. And when Father returns, he'll have a healthy wife and baby waiting for him."

"But he won't be coming home," Aisling whispered under her breath.



The dusty tunnel floor rose up around their feet in tiny clouds of

grit as Mouse led Diana through the dark, twisting tunnels to Vincent's chamber. Mouse, having lived in the tunnels for years, took no notice of the grime. But Diana wondered how she would ever come to be comfortable in such a world. It was not only the dirt which bothered her , but the primitive living conditions as well. Yet everyone who dwelled Below seemed well and healthy and most importantly-----content.

Vincent sat at his table reading the sonnets Catherine had so loved to read while little Jacob lay fast asleep in his crib, dreaming of what children dream.

"Diana!" Vincent said, surprised by her unexpected visit. "Is there news of Father?"

Diana pursed her lips and turned and looked at Mouse. "Mouse, I want to talk with Vincent alone."

"Not fair. Mouse worried, too. Want to know about Father. Can help."

"Mouse!" Vincent said in a firm, even tone.

"Okay. But not okay good. Not okay fine. Get Aisling," he said with a pout as he stormed out of the chamber.

"I found him, Vincent."

"You found Father? Where is he?"

"You'd better sit back down."

Vincent's face filled with puzzlement and concern. "Whatever do you mean, Diana?"

"Father is living in a men's shelter on the lower east side. He didn't recognize me, Vincent. I don't know what's going on. He's using

an assumed name, and the shelter director lied to me."

"What about?"

"She said that Father, the man she calls Moses, has worked in the shelter for about a year. An old man who lives there told me that he had found Father in the alley behind the shelter. Apparently Father had been beaten quite severely and left for dead. Anyway, he's there now. He seems to be well physically, but I think he has amnesia. That's the only reason I can think of why he didn't recognize me."

"You **have** to return, Diana, and tell Father to come home."

"It's not that easy, Vincent. If he is suffering from amnesia, then we have to be extremely careful. Any further shock might worsen his condition."

"Vincent?" Galen asked as he entered the chamber. "Am I interrupting?" Then he added, "Hello, Diana."

"No. Not at all. Come in. Diana has news of Father."

A bright smile of hope lit Galen's face. "News of Father? Does Aisling know? I'll go fetch her."

"No. **Galen!**"

Galen was stopped in mid stride by the firmness in Vincent's usually soft voice. He turned slowly and stared incredulously at his friend, quite unable to understand why Vincent would withhold such wonderful news from Aisling unless of course.... "Has something happened to Father?"

"In a way, yes," Vincent replied. "Diana found him, but he has no memory of who he is or where he belongs."

"Amnesia?"

"I believe so," Diana replied.

"But how can this be?" Galen asked bewildered.

"I'm not sure but most likely from a trauma. A severe beating could induce such a state. I was told that Father had suffered just such a beating."

"If you've found him, then what difference does it make that he doesn't remember? We'll bring him home, and in time everything will come back to him," Galen offered confidently.

"It's not that simple?"

"But why?"

"Look, Galen, I'm no doctor. But I do know that Father's mind is very fragile right now. We can't afford to upset that delicate balance it has achieved in order to deal with the pain and trauma his body has suffered."

"What are we going to tell Aisling?" he asked.

Diana shook her head, unable to come up with any reasonable responses. "Vincent, do you know?"

"I do understand that you wish to shield Father from any harm, but Aisling does have the right to know what has happened to her husband."

"And what ***has*** happened to my husband?" Aisling asked softly at the threshold of Vincent's chamber.

They all turned to see Aisling standing before them, trembling as she held her breath and awaited the grim tidings.

Galen's eyes darted pleadingly from Vincent to Diana, silently begging them to spare Aisling this cruellest of fate's unkind twists.

"What's happened to Jacob? What?" she demanded as hysteria tinged her voice. Her worst fears were about to be confirmed. **"What are you keeping from me? What?"** Aisling now broke down completely, no longer able to endure the torment of not knowing what had happened to her beloved husband. Had he left to be with Jessica? Had he been hurt? Killed? But before anyone could answer her anguished questions, Aisling clutched at her abdomen and collapsed to the floor.

Vincent gently gathered Aisling into his embrace and carried her to his bed. Jacob had been awakened by Aisling's frantic pleas and now stood wailing in his crib.

"I'll take care of him, Vincent," Diana said reassuringly as she took the crying child into her arms.

"Is she all right?" Galen asked.

Vincent nodded then said, "Ask Mary to come at once."

"Yes, Vincent," Galen replied and was gone.

After a brief search, Galen found Mary in the sewing room.

"Mary! You must come at once!"

"Galen! What's wrong?"

"It's Aisling. She's fainted."

"Dear Lord," Mary replied as she put down the dress she was sewing and followed Galen's lead.

When they returned to Vincent's chamber, Aisling had regained

consciousness, but she was having severe abdominal pains. Feeling Aisling's belly, Mary carefully monitored each cramp and each movement the baby made.

"She's gone into premature labor. We must get Peter at once."

"She needs her husband!" Galen responded angrily. ***"He's the one who should be caring for her now!"***

Little Jacob had stopped crying and was now interested in the goings on in the chamber. Diana replaced him in his crib then offered, "I'll get Peter, Vincent. It will be faster if I go."

"Tell him to hurry, Diana. Please!" Vincent said then added gratefully. "Thank you."

Diana gave Vincent a little smile and nodded. As she left the tunnels, she looked about for Galen. But he had quietly departed without saying good-bye. Only the rhythmic clanking of the pipes echoed his retreating steps.



Galen roamed the dirty, rubbish filled streets of the lower east side for the better part of the afternoon, looking for Father and The New Jerusalem Shelter for Men. In his haste to go Above, Galen had only gotten the shelter's name from Vincent but no directions. Perhaps it was just as well. If he had pressed Vincent for directions, he may have tried to stop him from going. But Galen knew it was up to him to find Father. He knew Aisling would die of a broken heart if Father did not return to her soon. And if she died, so, too, would he. Each day that Galen watched Aisling suffer was a day that he died a little more.

An old bum reeking of cheap wine shambled bleary-eyed past

him. Galen asked if he knew the way to the shelter, but the old bum just belched and continued on his way. Further down the street, he met a cluster of children dressed in worn clothes, playing stick ball. Galen ran after a high fly ball and caught it with one hand.

"You pretty good, mistah. You wanna play on our team?" asked a small, brown boy with shining black eyes.

"I'd like that, but I'm on my way to see a friend. Only trouble is, I'm not too sure where he lives. Could you tell me where the New Jerusalem Shelter is?"

"Sure, man. Down the street three blocks and turn left, then go another three blocks. You can't miss it."

"Thanks," Galen said, straightening the boy's New York Yankees ball cap.

"Hey, mistah!

Galen looked over his shoulder as he walked down the street, "What?"

"You play ball with us when you come back?"

"Righto," Galen called back.

The boy smiled and ran back to his friends and the game.

Galen followed the boy's directions and found the shelter. A long line of ragged looking men of all sizes, shapes, and colors had queued up at the entrance. Galen went to the front of the line to see what was going on, but he was pushed aside by several rough-looking individuals and told in no uncertain terms to get to the rear. Begrudgingly, Galen took his place at the end of the

queue.

The stream of down-trodden men slowly inched its way through the entrance and into the shelter and out its back door. A serving line manned by shelter residents pleasantly doled out large portions of food and hot coffee to each man. As Galen waited for his turn to be served, he looked carefully around the shelter, trying to get a glimpse of Father. He saw many men, but Father was nowhere to be found. He accepted the plate of food offered and just when he was about to follow the others outside to the alley to eat, Father came out of the kitchen carrying a large, rectangular stainless steel pan heaped full of stew.

"Is everything going smoothly, Stoney?" he asked a thin, scruffy blonde who was serving coffee.

"Just fine, Moz, but we have a crowd tonight that won't quit. We'll be needing extra grub before long and another container of coffee, too."

"I'll see to it," Father replied and headed back to the kitchen.

Galen broke from the queue and followed Father back to the kitchen. But halfway there, Father was joined by a woman dressed in a business suit. She talked at some length to him then disappeared down the hall.

Galen was not sure what to do, so he followed Father right into the bustling kitchen.

"What's yous doing in here?" Calvin asked the stranger.

For a moment, all work stopped in the kitchen as the residents eyed the intruder.

"I.....I wanted to talk with the man who just came in."

Satisfied that the newcomer was not going to make any trouble, the workers returned to their tasks. Calvin rubbed his beard-stubbed chin and looked Galen up and down.

"What you want to talk to Mr. Moses for?"

"I need a job and a place to stay."

"Why wees pretty full up right now, but you can ask. It don't do no harm to ask. You wait right here, and I'll go and fetch Mr. Moses."

Galen sat down on a folding chair in the corner of the kitchen, far away from the frenetic pace of the workers, and silently ate his now cold stew. With his last bite of dinner, Calvin returned with the man called Mr. Moses.

Rising from the chair, Galen extended his hand toward Father. Father firmly shook the hand offered as he looked Galen over, thinking that the young man was somehow familiar. But he could not remember ever meeting him. Perhaps he was simply one of the lost men who shuffled through the shelter's chow line on a daily basis. After awhile the faces blurred, and they began to look alike-----hopeless, despondent, and lethargic. Yet, this young man was bright, eager, and energetic.

"I understand you are looking for work and a place to stay."

"Yes, Fa.....sir."

Father's blue-gray eyes hardened, and his brows knitted sternly together as he stared at Galen. His heart pounded fiercely as his body filled with uncontrollable hatred, and he was quite taken aback that he could feel such irrational hostility for the stranger and not know why.

"Have you been here before?" Father asked sharply.

"Why, no, sir. I'm new here."

"You're an Englishman. Somerset? Dorset? Wiltshire? Devon?" he heard himself demand.

"I come from Wiltshire."

But Father did not hear Galen's reply. Devon, Devon, Devon, the word cadenced through his brain as his lips repeated it over and over again. "Devon, is it?" he finally asked.

"No, sir. Wilts."

"Ah, yes. Wiltshire," Father mumbled gruffly. Then he relaxed, and his brows unfurrowed as his face softened, and the curious anger abated. He nodded his head and continued. "Well, you're in luck, young man. We just so happen to have a bunk available. One of our residents was hired by a company across the river, and he leaves tomorrow. We could put you up on a cot for the night. Now, you do understand that you will have to work in order to stay here?"

Galen nervously kneaded his fingers together as he eyed Father in dismay, ignoring his question. Diana was right. Something had happened to his memory. So what was he to do now? "My name is Galen," he offered when he could think of nothing else. "Galen Ross."

"Well, good to have you here, Galen," Father said, again shaking hands with the handsome newcomer. "Calvin will help you get settled. See me after dinner, and we'll set you up on a work detail for tomorrow."

"Glad to be here," Galen replied. "I'll work hard. You won't be sorry," he added hastily.

"I'm sure you will," Father replied as he looked Galen over once more. And again that odd sense of hostility rose within him. He left the kitchen uneasily, and as he walked down the hall towards Alexandra's office, the word '*Devon*' echoed again in his brain. And Father thought, '*So this is madness.*'



Peter pulled the stethoscope from around his neck and sighed heavily as he gazed down at this fragile, young patient. "I've given you something to help you sleep, Aisling. Now, I want you to stay in bed for at least the next two weeks. And until the baby is born, you mustn't do anything strenuous; no lifting, no walking up stairs, and no cleaning. And I don't want you getting upset. Is that understood?"

Aisling nodded weakly as her eyes grew heavy beneath the thick, lush lashes. "Jacob's not coming back, is he?" she asked faintly.

"He'll come home, Aisling."

"No, he won't. He ran away. He didn't want the baby," she cried softly as a single, glistening tear ran down her cheek. "He didn't want me." The thought of the mysterious Jessica haunted Aisling, and she feared that Jacob was lost to her forever.

"I'll be back tomorrow to check on you," Peter added, tenderly patting her hand. He hated to admit it, but he was afraid that Aisling may be right. After all, Father had left his life in the world Above and fled to the tunnels after he had been disgraced by The Committee on UnAmerican Activities. Was it so inconceivable that he could abandon the life he had known for the last thirty-five years and lose himself in the anonymity of a men's shelter as a homeless amnesiac, especially if he was unable to cope with the

events that had come to pass? With a heavy heart, Peter thought not.

"She really should be in the hospital, Mary," Peter said, walking across the chamber to where Mary sat anxiously twisting her hands together.

"I know, Peter, but she won't leave the tunnels, not with Father still gone. Will she be all right here?"

"I've managed to arrest the labor, but what happens next depends on Aisling. I'm afraid she isn't up to the fight, Mary. She's very weak and has no spirit. The baby could, indeed, be lost and Aisling as well."

Mary began to sob, and Peter placed a comforting hand upon her shoulder. "You have to be strong. Aisling needs your strength."

"Oh, Peter! I feel so ashamed," Mary replied, bowing her head.

"Why? What is it, Mary?"

"I resented Aisling when she came into our lives. When Father fell in love with her, I knew all hope of him ever loving me was gone forever. And I resented her beauty and her youth. But more than that, I envied her ability to have his child."

"Mary....."

"Please, Peter. Let me finish. Aisling knew I loved Father, yer she wasn't jealous. She accepted my love for him, and she accepted me. Yet, I was still afraid that she would hurt him, that she would break his heart. How could I have known it would be Father who would hurt her so deeply? How could I have known it would be she who would suffer?"

"None of us have crystal ball to see the future, Mary. Sometimes we misjudge and make mistakes. Don't be so hard on yourself."

Mary looked up through misty eyes and smiled a bittersweet smile.

"That's better. Now, I want you to take care of yourself as well. We all depend on you, you know."

"Peter?"

"Yes, Mary?"

"Thank you. I'm very grateful that you came so quickly. I know Father would thank you, too, if he could."

"I'm sure he would." Peter replied as he kissed Mary's cheek. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Tomorrow."



"What a night," Father said as he fell exhausted into the chair next to Alexandra's desk.

"We certainly were swamped. But Calvin, Stoney, and their crew pulled it off again. I don't know how they do it, but they always manage," she replied admirably.

"That they do."

"How about joining me for a drink?" Alexandra asked, subtly changing the subject. "My place?"

Father grinned shyly. "I shouldn't, but actually I would be delighted."

"Good."

"By the by, did you have a chance to mail the letter and my fingerprints to Washington?"

"As a matter-of-fact, I did," Alexandra lied unhesitatingly, knowing full well that the set of prints they had made earlier in the day still sat in the top drawer of her desk; they would go no farther. Her conscience twinged slightly, but her heart was strong and unwavering. She loved Moses too much to chance losing him now.



Galen settled into shelter life after several uncomfortable days. He found it strange living Above again. He missed the life he had made in the tunnel community, and he desperately missed Aisling. Yet, this was probably for the best, him being away from her. After all, when Father returned Below, Galen would no longer share Aisling's life as he had in the past several months. No longer would he share her days. No longer would he share her bed at night. She would never be his. Her child would never call him *'Father.'* But Aisling was worth any sacrifice. Her happiness was everything to Galen. She was everything.

The following week brought several changes to The New Jerusalem Shelter for Men. The foundation had received an enormous bequest from a late philanthropist which enabled it to purchase the store front property on each side of the shelter, thereby enlarging the existing structure. Alexandra had requested Father's assistance on the project, and along with architects they began work on a dormitory expansion and a much needed dispensary.

There was a turnover in the shelter population that week when several of the residents were reintegrated into the community and new residents were accepted. One new resident named Cletus took the bunk below Galen's. Cletus was a sullen and solitary drifter from Georgia who had found his way to New York after some years as a migrant farm worker. The dark-haired, mean-eyed loner kept himself apart from the other shelter residents and refused all offers of friendship. He especially avoided Galen, having a strong dislike and distrust of all foreigners. And he liked blacks even less.

Calvin, in his usual jovial manner, tried to make the newcomer feel welcome, but he was insulted and harassed for his efforts. Galen became quite angered over one particular incident and knew that he better take care when dealing with Cletus. This cracker was trouble.



Mouse sat hunched over his workbench, painstakingly piecing together the glass for Aisling's kaleidoscope. As usual Arthur was indifferent to his master's work and contented himself by busily rooting through the debris of tools, material, and odds and ends scattered across the table. Mouse grumbled, and the raccoon looked up from the pile of walnuts he had discovered next to a discarded fuel pump. When the boy made no further noises, Arthur eagerly helped himself to the treat.

"How's the project coming along?" Vincent asked as he entered the cluttered, unkempt chamber.

Mouse sighed and without looking up replied disappointedly, "Still need good green glass. Can't find any."

"Perhaps this will help." Vincent said as he handed his young friend a dirty, dark green soda pop bottle. "Kipper found this on one of his excursions Above. He had planned to turn it in for the deposit, but he brought it back to me instead."

"Why? Just an old pop bottle."

"Well, it is very old, so I assume the glass would be of high quality. Why not try it?"

Mouse inspected the bottle and after careful deliberation agreed with Vincent. The bottle was very old, indeed. Once washed, the glass would be the perfect emerald green he needed for his tube of colors. He smiled in triumph at the towering form above him and said happily. "Thanks, Vincent. Now Mouse can put together Aisling's present. Make her smile."

"Yes, you can."

"Vincent?" Mouse asked as Vincent turned to leave the chamber.

"Yes?"

"Aisling still sick?" he asked, the happiness in his voice now gone and replaced with concern. "Maybe lose baby?"

"She is weak, but the baby is no longer in danger."

"Good," Mouse replied relieved. "Better than good."

"Yes, Mouse. Better than good," Vincent's velvety voice echoed the young man's heartfelt sentiment.

After visiting with Mouse, Vincent went onto Father's chamber where Aisling lay confined to bed. She looked as pale as she had the day she collapsed in his chamber. Vincent sat down softly on the edge of the bed and tenderly squeezed Aisling's small hand,

gloved as usual against the tunnels' damp chill. She roused from her light sleep, greeting him with a faint smile. As Vincent returned her brave smile, his conviction that a person could, indeed, die of a broken heart was validated beyond question. But a death such as this was terribly slow and agonizingly painful.

"How are you feeling today?" Vincent asked as he tucked the patchwork quilt snugly around Aislings' neck. "It seems colder than usual in here, don't you think? Would you like an extra blanket?"

"No, Vincent. I'm fine. Don't be worrying yourself so over the likes of me. As I told your father, we Irish are a strong lot. I'll be on me feet in no time a'tall. And once this wee one is born," she said, patting her belly, "I'll get back to teaching school, too. I miss the children so, but they do come and visit me everyday. Such little darlin's , they are. Why, just yesterday, Samantha brought me this lovely bouquet."

Vincent cocked his head and looked inquisitively at Aisling. He glanced around the dimly lit chamber, but his keen blue eyes could not detect any flowers, nor could he discern any fragrance.

"Here they are, Vincent," Aisling said almost in a whisper. "Here are me flowers." From beneath her large, plump pillow, Aisling pulled out a sheet of construction paper. On it was pasted a variety of gay flowers made from all sorts of colorful scrap paper, tissue, foil, string, and yarn.

"They are quite lovely," Vincent replied as he admired Samantha's artwork.

"Aye," Aisling replied, sighing wearily. "I wanted to show them to Galen, but he hasn't been to see me in days. Are you working the

lad too hard, Vincent?"

"I suppose so," he replied uneasily. Vincent was unaccustomed to lying, but Aisling had enough to worry about as it was without coping with Galen's absence. Knowing full well where he had gone, Vincent had sent a scout Above to retrieve him, but Kevin returned alone. Galen refused to come home without Father.

"Go back to sleep, Aisling. I will return later."

"I'd like that, Vincent. And when you do, bring little Jacob."

"I shall. Now rest."

"Aye," she replied, drifting back to sleep, still clutching the paper treasure in her hand.

A solitary tear rolled down Vincent's cheek, and he could feel his heart breaking for Aisling. "Please, Father," he prayed aloud, "Please come home."



"A Limey and a nigger! What a combination!" Cletus growled as he stood menacingly over the table where Galen and Calvin sat playing draughts(*checkers*).

"Apologize to Calvin at once," Galen demanded as he glared up at the foul-mouthed bigot.

"Who's gonna **make me? This old blackie?**" Cletus replied, prodding Calvin in the shoulder.

Calvin bowed his head in shame, too afraid to fight back. But the prodding soon gave way to punches.

"Stop it!" Galen warned as he pushed his chair away and rose

to his feet.

Cletus was surprised to find that Galen stood several inches above him. But he gave a leering grin as a flash of thin silver materialized from his back pocket. "All right, Limey. You **make** me apologize."

"Please, Galen. There's no need to get hurt. You just let him be," begged Calvin.

"That's right. You listen to old Uncle Tom, or you'll be slashed to pieces when I get through with you. And then there won't be enough left of you to feed them dogs outside in the alley," Cletus drawled.

Seeing that Galen would not back down, Calvin rose from his chair and offered the Cracker his hand. "I don't want no trouble, mistah. Let's shake hands and be done with it."

Cletus grinned and snorted. He disgustedly eyed both men up and down then spat on the floor and lunged at Calvin, the knife glistening as it cut through the distance between them.

With satisfaction Cletus felt the knife's thin blade plunge solidly into soft flesh. Then he gave the knife a hard, upward jerk, burying it to the handle. He grunted and pushed himself back only to discover in surprised dismay that he had missed his intended target.

Galen's eyes went wide with shock, and his face grew ashen as he desperately clutched at the knife lodged in his abdomen. Helplessly, he watched the warm, red rivulet of life gush between his trembling fingers and soak his pale white hand a brilliant crimson. As the pool of blood spread evenly across his shirt, Galen fell to the floor with a groaning thud.

Seeking an escape, Cletus backed haltingly away, his frightened eyes darting back and forth. But before he could flee, Stoney wrestled him to the floor and landed several devastating blows to his face. Cletus blubbered like a child as his nose began to bleed, and he begged Stoney to stop.

"Yous be all right," Calvin said as he took Galen into his arms, tears falling down his dark, weathered face. "Don't you worry none. We'll get a doctor. Yous be just fine. Old Calvin won't lets you die."

Father had been summoned and now knelt at Galen's side. From an unknown place deep within the center of his being, he instinctively knew what to do. Swiftly he removed the knife and placed his handkerchief over the wound, directing Calvin to hold it tautly in place until help arrived. He took Galen's pulse and examined his pupils. Galen was quickly losing consciousness, and Father spoke firmly to him, desperately trying to keep him lucid. "Stay with me, Galen. You'll be fine. Just hang on."

Alexandra stood over the men, watching in horror. She swallowed hard then weakly rasped. "I've called the police and paramedics."

Father acknowledged her statement with a curt nod of his head, but he spoke only to the young man who lay dying before him. "The paramedics will be here momentarily, Galen. Galen! Do you understand?"

A feeble but audible "yes" parted Galen's lips.

"Good, lad. Now stay with me."

Galen spoke again. "Forgive me, Father," he said hoarsely, struggling to maintain his thoughts as he was pulled deeper into the black sea of pain.

"Do you want a priest?" Father asked.

Galen managed to shake his head and continued to speak. "I loved her, too. Tell her."

"Tell who, Galen?"

"My golden angel. My....." As the words faded from his lips, Galen gasped then let out a long, deep, labored breath. Slowly he closed his eyes, and his body relaxed within Calvin's strong embrace.

Calvin stared helplessly at Father, but all he could do was sadly shake his head and offer his sympathetic condolence.



Aisling woke with a start. Galen sat at her side, lightly stroking the fine golden curls that framed her lovely face.

"Galen," Aisling said, smiling as she stretched out her arms. "I've missed you, lad."

Galen bent down and met her loving embrace. Then he gently withdrew, replying, "I've come to say goodbye, Aisling."

"You're leaving?" she queried as tears filled her eyes.

"Yes. I'm going home."

"Home?"

Galen nodded and brushed away the tears that now streamed down Aisling's cheeks. The touch of his hand was almost unbearable in its tenderness.

"Galen, you can't go. You can't leave me," she cried.

"I must," he murmured as he pressed his cheek against hers.
"Don't cry, Aisling. We'll see each other again some day. I promise. Be happy and take care of the baby. Father will return soon, then everything will be as it should."

She closed her eyes and hugged Galen tightly as great sobs shuddered through her body.

"Hush, Aisling, hush. You mustn't cry. Sleep now," he gently ordered, once again stroking the silken tendrils that lay curled upon her cheeks and brow. Softly he caressed her heart-shaped face with his hand, then his lips brushed against hers and covered her mouth with a sweet kiss.

In a dreamy consciousness, Aisling returned Galen's kiss. And as his lips parted from hers, he whispered, "I love you."

He rose from the bed, saying nothing more, and walked to the chamber entrance where he disappeared into the golden shaft of light from beyond.



"Would you like me to read to you?" Vincent asked as he pulled a chair next to Aisling's bed.

"Aye, that would be lovely."

"You have your choice. 'Jane Eyre' or 'Les Miserables?'

" 'Jane Eyre' would be nice."

"Then 'Jane Eyre' it shall be," he replied as his large, fur-covered hands tenderly opened the well worn leather-bound volume.

As Vincent read, Aisling admired the comfortably familiar room. Even here Father's books were not far from reach, and their

bedchamber looked as if he had simply gone downstairs for the moment to get a cup of tea. His long homespun cloak lay draped across a chair, and his boots sat propped up against the night stand. His multi-colored Indian blankeet robe hung on a tarnished brass hook that had been drilled into the wall, and his nightshirt lay at the foot of the bed. Aisling smiled at the thought of Jacob reading in bed next to her as she cuddled close to his side. At such times, she would tease him unmercifully about his devotion to his books-----saying that he loved them more than her-----and snuggle ever closer until Jacob grumbled in mock frustration, snapping the book shut. Tossing it to the floor and smiling that devilish smile of his, he would then pull Aisling into his arms and ravish her with kisses. They would make love until both were too tired for anything but sleep. Aisling sighed thinking of these precious moments, but she was no longer sad. Jacob would soon be home. She turned to Vincent and spoke as much to herself as to her friend. "How long do you think it will take Galen to get home?"

Vincent abruptly stopped reading and stared at Aisling with puzzled innocence. She paid no attention, however, and continued with her thoughts out loud. "It's been two days since he came to say goodbye. If he took a ship, he'd be home by the end of the week. Isn't that so?"

Vincent did not know how to reply. "That's quite possible," he offered.

"I'll miss the lad," she added wistfully.

"Yes," came the succinct response.



The loft was well lit, and Vincent could perceive the movement of only a single person within. He rapped lightly upon the window and waited but moments before Diana answered his aignal.

"Vincent! What is it?" she asked as she joined him on the balcony. The night was warm, and a gentle breeze had begun to blow. Vincent's hair billowed softly in tiny wisps around his leonine face, softening his features, and giving him the air of a romantic hero. Diana could not help notice how her heart raced at the sight of him.

"I think something may be amiss with Galen."

"What do you mean?"

"Aisling said something quite strange to me this afternoon while I was reading to her."

"She's still confined to bed?"

"Yes," he replied then continued. "I really don't think she was paying much attention to what I was reading. Aisling seemed almost as if in another world. Then she asked me how long it would take for Galen to get home. She said that he had come by two days before to bid farewell."

"Galen went home? That can't be."

"I thought so myself. I asked Mary, Jamie, Brooke, Mouse, and everyone else who had been by to visit Aisling that day if they had seen Galen, but no one had."

"Could Aisling be having delusions? Is she under any medications?"

"No. Not any longer. Peter had given her something to arrest the

premature labor and to help her sleep, but Aisling has had nothing stronger than herbal tea for over a week now."

"Do you want me to go to the shelter and check on Galen?"

"I would appreciate it very much, Diana."

"Fine. I'll go first thing tomorrow. And I'll see how Father's doing as well. Perhaps he has regained some of his memory by now."

"Thank you. You are a kind friend."

Diana smiled as her large sapphire eyes gazed adoringly up into Vincent's handsome face.

Alexandra and Father sat silently together in their mutual office, each deep in thought, grieving over Galen's death. Father was quite guilt-ridden that he had felt such enmity for the young man, and he still could not understand the reason for it. He was also terribly perplexed by his own futile attempt to save him. But he now knew beyond any doubt that he had once been a doctor, although not a very good one in his estimation. Yet, Father could not remember where or when he practiced this art of medicine. Slowly, random bits and pieces of memory were beginning to surface since the tragic event. He faintly remembered a dimly lit operating room, flashes going off all around, and being rushed by a crowd of people. He remembered the agonizing feeling of being crushed and suffocated by darkness, and he remembered walking downward into an endless, black spiral. Bright images as well now zigzagged through his memory. In his mind's eye, he saw a parl all green and fragrant on a summer's day, a beautiful young woman getting out of a taxi, and children looking up at him with adoration.

"Moses?" Alexandra asked, rousing Father from his reverie.

"Yes?"

"A penny for your thoughts?"

Father was about to tell Alexandra what he had been thinking when there was a knock on the door. "I'll answer it," he said rising. "Why, Miss Bennett. Come in."

Diana walked casually into the office and sat down in the chair offered.

"I thought we had given the police all the information they needed the day of the murder," Alexandra said before Diana could say anything.

"Murder?"

"Why, yes. Aren't you here about that?"

"Actually, no. Who was murdered and when?" Diana spoke authoritatively, becoming all detective.

"Monday, a resident of ours named Galen Ross was stabbed to death. Such a tragedy. He was such a nice young man."

Diana chewed at her bottom lip, trying to remain detached and professional. "Who was the detective on the case?"

"A Warwick Browning. Do you know him?"

"Yes," Diana replied. "Even in a city the size of New York, I know a good many of the detectives."

"I imagine you do," Alexandra said a little too politely. "What was it that you came about today, Miss Bennett?"

"It's not important," Diana replied, suppressing the anger and grief roiling inside her. She grabbed her purse and headed for the door.

"Oh, by the way," she said, stopping at the threshold, "the baby's due next week." Diana turned and walked into the hall, tears filling her eyes.

Alexandra stared at Father as if he should know what the young woman was talking about. He looked away, confused, his mind spinning in bewilderment.

The message sang through the pipes, and although it was a somewhat crude transmission, Pascal interpreted it easily. "Take this message to Vincent at once," Pascal told his helper, a small, wiry boy of ten. "And let no one else see it." The boy nodded and was off.

Diana paced back and forth at the tunnel entrance anxiously waiting for Vincent, trying to find the words to tell him what had happened to his friend.

"*Vincent!*" she cried as she ran her hand through her thick red hair.

"What news do you have of Galen?"

"It's bad, Vincent. Worse than you feared."

"Tell me, Diana."

"He's dead."

"*He can't be! When? How?*"

"Stabbed. Two days ago. We can't let Aisling know. This would be too much for her."

"But he came and said goodbye to her. She told me so herself."

"It was a dream, Vincent. Her mind's confused."

"Perhaps, but I do agree that Aisling mustn't know anything about this. She and Galen were very close. She thinks he has gone home, and that in itself is a comfort to her."

"I'm so sorry," Diana said, reaching out her hand to touch Vincent's broad shoulder.

He graciously accepted her sympathy, remaining silent for a few moments as the reality of the situation tenuously sank into his consciousness.

"Where is he now?"

"The downtown morgue. I could make arrangements to send his body home to England."

"He would like that," Vincent replied somberly.



Father rummaged through his clothes, selecting the garments which needed drycleaning. He studied his greatcoat and pondered whether or not to send it to the cleaners now or wait another few weeks. Expecting an early winter as the weather had turned cool, he tossed it into the pile destined for the cleaners. But almost as soon as he had thrown the coat into the pile, Father retrieved it and gave the pockets a quick once over. In the inner breast pocket, he felt a slip of paper. Removing it, he was just about to crumple the paper up and toss it into the trash when he absent-mindedly opened it. There in the crease of the paper lay Aisling's shamrock----- green and delicate, a memento from a strange and far off land.

"Do you have the drycleaning ready, Moses?" Alexandra asked as she walked through the open door and into Father's room.

He turned with a start and stared at her, his face a mixture of surprise, anxiety, wonder, desperation, joy, and confusion.

"Moses? What is it?" she asked, taking the slip of paper from Father's trembling hands. "Oh, a shamrock. How lovely."

"My.....my wife gave it to me," he rasped softly. "Dear God, Alexandra, I've left a wife behind! I remember it all now; my life, my family.....and Galen. Oh, dear God! Poor Galen! He was sent to bring me home, Alexandra."

"Are you sure?" a small, tight, quavering voice asked.

"As sure as I am that my name is Jacob Wells. I come from a very special place, Alexandra, where there are people who love me and whom I love. My wife Aisling is the one I love above all. She is young and quite beautiful, as incredible as it may seem, she's very much in love with me. Heaven knows why she wants to share her life with me, but she does."

"It's not so incredible, Jacob," Alexandra offered as she placed her hand upon his arm.

"Aisling is with child," he continued. "And if my memory can be trusted, she's due any week....."

"That's what Diana must have meant!" Alexandra interrupted, remembering the beautiful detective's parting words.

"I must go to my wife at once." Father replied and hastily began to gather up his belongings.

Alexandra bravely held back the tears and nodded in agreement.

"Thank you for everything," Father said as Alexandra walked him to the front door.

"No thanks needed, my friend."

A crooked smile pulled at the corners of his mouth, and as his eyes met hers all the unspoken words between them were understood.



Mouse shuffled hesitantly into Aisling's bedchamber, the kaleidoscope wrapped in festive paper and tucked under his arm. "You okay, Aisling?" he asked apprehensively, knowing that something was definitely wrong.

Aisling writhed in pain and clutched the bedsheets, moaning incoherently.

"Say again, Aisling. Tell Mouse what's wrong. Don't know what to do."

This time she was able to force out the words between the bursts of stabbing pain. "Get Mary! The baby's coming!"

Mouse fled the chamber like a frightened deer, and Aisling sighed in relief that someone had at last come by. It had been hours since the pain began.

"Peter has been called, Aisling, and he'll be here soon. But until he arrives, it will be just you, Vincent, and me. But not to worry; everything will be fine. Now, you have to calm down. Do you understand?" Mary said as she mopped the glistening perspiration from Aisling's brow.

"It pains me, Mary. Is it suppose to hurt this much?"

"It's different with each baby," Mary replied with a motherly smile. But she knew full well that this was a particularly difficult labor.

"Vincent," Mary said. "I need Father's medical bag."

He was gone before she had finished the sentence.



Father stood at the top of the circular stair and took a slow, deep breath before beginning his downward journey home. Never had this underground world looked so bright and inviting as it did this very moment. As Dorothy had said in the *'Wizard of Oz'*, *'There's no place like home. There's no place like home.'* Repeating the words over and over again, he hurriedly made his way down the stairs and into the lower tunnels.

As Vincent ran with the grace of a large cat toward the hospital chamber, his keen ears discerned the faint message, mixed and muted among the many other communications, announcing Father's presence in the tunnels. Grabbing a large, flat stone from off the ground, he sent out his own message for an *'All clear'* on the pipes. Soon the singing pipes fell silent, and Vincent rapidly tapped out, "Hurry, Father. Aisling in labor."

Father anxiously responded on the nearest pipes as his heart beat wildly with excitement. "Message received. Rendezvous in my chamber."

"Father is on his way home," Vincent said as he handed Mary the medical bag.

"I know. Pascal's messenger was already here and told us the news."

"How are you doing, Aisling?"

Aisling bit down hard on her lower lip, the pain was becoming too much for her to bear. She drew in a deep breath then said, "Tell

him to hurry."

Vincent took Aisling's hand and squeezed it firmly. "I already have."

Aisling's own small hand tightened fiercely around Vincent's as she searched his face for strength and comfort.

He gazed lovingly back, and a smile creased his mouth.

"Father!" Vincent cried out as the long-absent tunnel patriarch entered his much beloved chamber.

Vincent stood and hugged his father briefly. "Are you all right, Father?"

"Yes, I am fine now," he replied withdrawing. Father bent down to Aisling, taking her into his lonely, aching arms. "Oh, my love. My love. Forgive me for worrying you so," he said as large, salty tears poured down his cheeks, lodging in his beard. He brushed the golden hair from her face, and as he did Aisling reached out and laced her fingers with his.

"Welcome home, Jacob," she whispered as he pressed his cheek to hers. "We've missed you so, darlin', I....." she began to say when a searing pain sliced through her abdomen, cutting off her words.

"How close are the contractions, Mary?" Father asked his trusted midwife.

"Less than a minute apart," came the reply.

"Our child will be here shortly, Aisling. I know it's quite painful, but from now on you must do exactly what I say," he said with quiet emphasis.

"Aye," came the faint reply.

"Breathe as I showed you, Aisling," Mary said, talking the young woman through each step Father directed.

Panting, holding her breath, pushing, panting, holding her breath, and pushing again, Aisling followed the pattern Father dictated. Growing fainter and fainter with each repetition, she was about to succumb to the pain until Father's sharp command brought her to her senses. ***"One more push, Aisling. Now!"***

With all her might Aisling bore down, and moments later a pink, slippery bundle met Father's strong, experienced hands. Tears of happiness blurred his vision as he cradled the robust infant who lay wailing like a banshee in the crook of his arm. After examining his daughter carefully, Father gently wrapped her in Aisling's own soft, red shawl. "We have a little girl, my dearest," he said as he placed the baby in her mother's outstretched, waiting arms.

Aisling's face was dripping wet, and her hair lay in a thick tangle across the pillow as she cuddled her baby girl gently to her breast. "Oh, Jacob," she sighed, tenderly caressing the infant's tiny hand with her fingertips, "she's beautiful. A little angel she is."

"She's the image of her mother," Father replied as his heart filled with more love than he ever thought possible. Stroking back the damp curls from Aisling's face, he brushed a kiss upon her forehead then softly placed a kiss upon his daughter's brow. Gazing into his wife's brilliant violet eyes, Father lost himself in the love he saw reflected within their shimmering depths. No one else existed at this moment but these three.



Diana guided a wide-eyed, disbelieving Alexandra through the

winding maze of dimly lit tunnels and finally into Father's study where the community, along with friends and Helpers from Above, had assembled for the naming ceremony. Alexandra stared in awe at the vaulted, circular chamber chiseled out of the earth and filled from ceiling to floor with books of every imaginable title. People of all shapes, colors, and ages stood on both levels of the chamber, each holding a candle and offering a friendly smile to the newcomer as she passed. In the center of the chamber, children in rags and patches good-naturedly tussled and pushed one another as each vied to be the first to get a look at the baby held by a beautiful woman sitting in a battered, old chair.

"Welcome to our world, Alexandra," Father said as he made his way haltingly through the crowd, his rough homespun cloak swaying gently back and forth as he walked. He hugged his friend affectionately then took her by the hand to introduce her to his wife and family. "Alexandra, this is my wife Aislingand our baby daughter."

Aisling looked up smiling and graciously offered her small, half-gloved hand. "I thank you for coming today," came the lilting and unexpected brogue. "And I thank you for my husband's life."

But instead of shaking the hand proffered, Alexandra bent down and slipped her arms around Aisling's shoulders and hugged her tightly. "You're welcome, my dear," she replied in earnest as tears lodged in the base of her throat.

Alexandra was next introduced to a handsome, dark-haired man in his mid-thirties whose left cheek bore three, long paralleling scars. "My son, Devin," Father said with a catch in his voice. He was so happy that Devin had come home in time for the naming ceremony. Devin himself had been quite astonished over the

events which had taken place since his last homecoming and even more astonished over his father's young wife.

There was one other who remained to be introduced to Alexandra. Vincent stood next to the octagonal, mahogany table resplendently dressed in his white ruffled shirt, black trousers, and black knee-boots. His china blue eyes looked up through thick tawny lashes as she approached, and he felt his heart skip erratically as it always did when a stranger was so near.

"Alexandra, may I introduce....."

"You must be Jacob's younger son," Alexandra said, extending her hand.

"Yes. My name is Vincent," he replied, shaking her hand politely.

Father looked inquisitively at Alexandra and asked, "But how did you know?"

"Diana told me that all your children were beautiful."

A smile ruffled Father's thin lips as he humbly bowed his head.

" 'it is said that the child is the meaning of this life'. And today we assemble to give thanks for two lives, one much beloved who has returned safely to us and one newly given and most welcomed," said Vincent as the strength of his deep, velvet voice radiated through the quiet chamber. "And as it is our custom, 'we welcome the child this day with love so that she may be able to love. We welcome the child with gifts so taht she may learn generosity. And finally, we welcome the child with a name'."

Father stood proudly cradling his little daughter who lay contentedly asleep within his loving embrace. Taking his wife's hand firmly in his own, he looked about the chamber and fondly

gazed at his family and friends, then both his sons, his baby, and finally Aisling. "We have named our daughter Desiree Grace." Father announced then added softly so that only Aisling could hear, "the desired one."

Soft murmurs of approval floated on the thin chamber air like delicately sung madrigals as the members of the community came forth with gifts for Desiree.

"I have a gift for you as well, Father," Diana said after handing Aisling a silver rattle for the baby.

"A gift for me?"

"Ah huh," she said, presenting him the cane that Cullen had carved in honor of his sixtieth birthday.

"My word! It's my cane! However did you....."

"It doesn't matter."

"No, indeed. Thank you, Diana," he replied, kissing her cheek with gratitude.

"Aisling?" Mouse said in a small, shy voice. He was the last well-wisher to bring forth a gift.

"Yes, Mouse darlin'," she replied sweetly.

"Have gift, too. But for you. Father's got one already. And baby's too small," he said as he held out the gaily wrapped kaleidoscope.

Aisling tore open the festive paper, and a bright smile lit her face when she saw what the package contained.

"Look inside. See all the colors?" Mouse said excitedly.

Aisling put the polished brass tube to her eye and gasped in

delight as the dazzling colors and designs sparkled and changed with her every turn.

"See the green?"

"Aye."

"That's Ireland."

"Well, so it is, Mouse. It's the very green of Ireland herself," Aisling said as she kissed him. "Thank you ever so much. It's a brilliant gift. I'll treasure it always."

Mouse colored fiercely then scurried off without another word.

"This is my own gift, my wee love," Aisling said as she slipped her gold locket around the baby's neck.

"Where did you get your locket, Aisling?" Father asked, quite pleased that his wife's precious keepsake had been retrieved.

"Galen brought it to me," she replied without hesitation as she handed him the kaleidoscope and took Desiree into her arms.

Father and Vincent stared incredulously at one another and then at Aisling. But she paid them no heed as she gazed serenely at her daughter and then out over the throng to the chamber's threshold. She smiled, then nodded briefly as a single, pearl-like tear rolled down her ivory cheek. "Godspeed, my friend," she softly whispered. "Godspeed."

LOYALTY, FRIENDSHIP, LOVE

ANONYMOUS

CHAMBER CAMEOS NINE

*Over four hundred years ago
in the ancient village of Gladdagh
just outside Galway city a goldsmith
named Richard Joyce designed and
fashioned the first Gladdagh ring*



*His creation was simple yet unique
He forged a heart, hand and a crown
Into a visual portrayal symbolizing
an eternal bond, that of friendship,
loyalty and love.*



*The heart stands for love, life's
finest impulse. From it generosity and
compassion flow*



*The hands of friendship are clasped
around the heart in a gesture of*

*giving. As they cradle the heart
gently, the hands are both protective
and strong like true friendship*



*The crown is symbolic of loyalty. It
represents the reward of love, the
highest achievement the human spirit
has yet accomplished.*



*Each stands alone as a powerful
expression of human emotion, but together
they form an even stronger message to
all people*



*The Claddagh speaks to us across the
centuries of the noblest feelings in life
that are as near to heaven as we are likely
to know on earth.*



'You are held in warm affection,' says the heart.

'You have a faithful friend,' says the hands.

*'Your friend is ever true,' says the crown
To give the Gladdagh is to forge the bonds
of love, friendship and loyalty forever.*

CRYSTAL CAVERNS AND WATERY GRAVES

INEZ PASKAL

CHAMBER CAMEOS NINE

It did not seem possible that two years had passed since Catherine had been gone. Vincent was sitting morosely at his writing desk leafing through his memories. Each anniversary tugged him back to exact moments and feelings, and he truly felt as though there was no such thing as time. Within his mind every experience happened simultaneously and all he had to do was reach for it and relive it.

Jacob touched and grabbed at each memento as Vincent placed it on the table-----the beloved volume of '*Great Expectations*' and '*Shakespeare's Sonnets*,' a pressed rose, the white-feathered owl masque, her crystal and his white ivory rose. Vincent fingered his rose absentmindedly, his thoughts years away.

A shrill baby scream brought him back to Jacob, lip bleeding, a gold chain dangling from his mouth. he had caught his lip between a very sharp little tooth and the crystal. Vincent took it away and gently wiped away the drops of blood. The precocious toddler let out another scream and grabbed for the chain, pulling at it with all his childish strength. It took Vincent by surprise and the crystal slipped from his fingers. He was often amazed that so much power could be stored in such small hands.

Little Jacob was fascinated by the lights dancing off the facets. Vincent took his son's small hand in his own large, strong furred one and held it up so that the crystal twisted to and fro in the candle's dancing glow. It sparkled and twinkled and Jacob

squealed, "How pretty! Daddy! Daddy!"

Vincent, looking into his young son's eyes, saw the same wonder that had shown in Catherine's eyes the night he had given her the crystal. He had always planned on taking her to the Crystal Cavern. He could well imagine her saw and wonder at the walls of shimmering crystals, but he never had the opportunity. Another day would be soon enough; but there had been no '*other day*.' If nothing else, he learned to act on his inspirations. Life is fragile; tomorrow may not have breath.

"Jacob, how would you like to take a journey with Daddy? I want to show you a special place, a room that shines just like this."

"Go! Jacob, go," he demanded, sliding off Vincent's lap and tugging at his leg.

"We must get ready. Tomorrow, when you wake up. Tomorrow we will go."



Vincent carefully padded the sling he used to carry Jacob. Wanting his son to be comfortable on this two-day journey; they were soon ready. Jacob was snug in his sling, their provision pack strapped to Vincent's back under his cloak. Goodbyes were said amid little Jacob's high-pitched mewling and big Jacob's frowns.

"Jacob, settle down or we will go nowhere," admonished Vincent, placing a hand on the wall to brace himself. Jacob was bouncing so much that it was having an unsteady effect on the usually surefooted Vincent.

"No. Fun!"

"No! We go no further." Vincent rested his back against the wall

and swayed gently to calm Jacob; then, in almost the same rhythm, he started out again. Jacob was soon asleep, allowing Vincent to make some headway. Arriving at the Chamber of the Winds, he looked on, amazed, as Jacob's long blond hair flew out from around his little head just as Vincent's fanned out about his shoulders.

The first day's journey was uneventful, but as Vincent rounded the corner near the little chamber where he had planned to spend their first night, he came upon a cave-in. There was no way open along his original, planned route. They would have to double back and take another passage, which eventually, would lead around the pile of fallen rocks.

He pressed forward looking for an area large enough for him and his son to be comfortable for the night. Jacob needed room to run around a bit as his little legs had been cramped in one position most of the day. All at once Vincent heard a familiar sound, the sound of rushing water. Had he gotten turned around somehow and returned to the waterfall cavern?

The passageway was getting narrower and Vincent soon had to take off his sling and pack to move sideways through the converging walls. Setting Jacob down at his feet, tying the pack and sling around his waist to drag them behind, he held onto a straining Jacob with one hand and the lantern with the other.

Finally making it through what was by now a mere slit in the sheer rock cliff, Vincent knew they were below the level of the Crystal Cavern and from his estimate of their location, much further east than he had ever explored.

The natural subterranean light which faintly illuminated the tunnels Below, had always amazed Vincent, but this area was

unbelievable. No one had ever figured out where the illumination came from, but this looked as if it were reflected, magnified, and bounced off of every crystal lining the walls. They myriad colors exploded, as crystal prisms refracted the unknown light into rainbows and reflected them off a rising mist.

Jacob broke free of Vincent's grasp and went chasing after an elusive rainbow playing in a wisp of fog. Vincent caught him just on the brink of land for he realized that there was; indeed, rushing water under that magical, iridescent, rainbow cloud.

"This looks like a wonderful spot for us, Jacob, but you must be very careful. Do not come near here," and Vincent pointed to the edge of the water. A very emphatic **"No!"** emphasized his point.

Jacob looked up sheepishly and Vincent knew his warning of danger had been understood. "You may play over there, against the pretty wall." Vincent took out a few toys to occupy Jacob and then began to set up their camp. They ate dinner, played together for a while and soon fell asleep, Jacob curled in his father's arms.

Vincent's slumber was disturbed, but being exhausted, the pull of sleep was greater than a dream of wading through waves in the sunlight. Jacob suddenly started gasping and thrashing about, as if he were drowning. Vincent started awake to find water curling around his son's little head and Jacob, struggling to stay above it.

Vincent immediately leaped to his feet, grabbing Jacob out of the water. He looked around and realized that they were in some sort of underground tidal basin and it was high tide. He felt under the quickly rising water for their supplies but they had either been carried off by the current or he just couldn't locate them under the water. Clutching his cape, as it slid off his shoulders, Vincent pulled it around a shivering, screaming Jacob and turned for the

crevice opening in the rock. There was no way out, for water was gushing from the opening.

Vincent tied his cape over one shoulder and under his opposite arm in order to loose it quickly should it begin to drag him down. He untied his vest, put Jacob under his sweater and retied the vest. A terrified Jacob was quite content to be so engulfed by his father.

Vincent knew he would be able to stay afloat on his back for quite a while. If only they could reach a level above the high water mark, they would be safe until ebb tide.

"Hang on, Jacob, and lie still. Know that your Daddy loves you and will protect you." The words sounded hollow in his ears. How many times had they been said to Catherine? There were just some things love could not fix. Wtih a mighty kick, Vincent pushed off from the land's end into the icy, churning water.

Floating atop the rising water for what seemed like hours, he could no longer feel his arms and legs, and water had filled his ears. He came close to losing consciousness many times, but Jacob's weight nestled in the down on his chest gave him reason to stay afloat. Even with that, his endurance was nearing its end. The water had risen above the crystal reflections and the cavern was now dim. Vincent could spy no opening or ledge to swim for, not at all certain that he could move his arms or even kick. He let out a long, slow breath and lost consciousness.....The dark was comforting as it closed around him. There was no longer any cold and the total relaxation caused his body to sag as he began to sink into blackness.



A pathetic little boy sat on the floor on a thick, white bearskin rug next to the bed where his father lay. Sobbing, his cheeks tear-stained, he had been sitting, dejectedly, crying for hours. A kindly old man, much like his grandfather, had come and tried to feed him, lure him away, pick him up, and put him to bed, but little Jacob wouldn't budge from his father's side. Finally, after falling asleep on the floor, a sailor in a blue and white striped shirt tried to pick him up, but the little boy awoke kicking and screaming, ***"Daddy! Daddy! Help me! Help me!"***

Vincent struggled to reach the place in the distance from where his son was calling to him. He could barely hear, but sensed Jacob's need. Why were his eyelids so heavy? '..... *Concentrate, Vincent. Open your eyes.....*'

Breathing heavier and deeper, a low rumbling growl escaped from his throat. The sailor turned just as Vincent opened his eyes. Jacob was immediately brought to the bed, where the little one threw himself at his father, holding onto the arm nearest the wall.

Vincent tried to lift his head, but it throbbed and his ears ached. He was very hot, yet he shivered. He couldn't be sure if the room was moving up and down or if he were just dizzy.

"Well, hello, young man. I am glad you have decided to remain among the land of the living. Welcome. I am Captain Vishnu and you are aboard the Temporis Collectus. My men pulled you and your little boy out of the water just as you were about to give in."

"We are alive?" Vincent's throat was sore and the usual husky voice was barely audible.

"Yes, very much alive. Just look at our bruises and scratches from trying to care for your son. By the way, he has not eaten, but right

now, I think he needs you more."

They looked down at the now sleeping Jacob, nestled contentedly beside Vincent, one small fist still gripping his father's arm.

"What is his name.....our little warrior?"

"He is Jacob, and I am Vincent."

"Well, Vincent, I shall have some warm tea brought into you and then leave you to the sleep you both need."



Two days passed with Jacob huddled next to the wall as Vincent drifted in and out of consciousness. Finally, the morning arrived when Vincent awoke clear headed; the sun streaming in through the portholes. The distinct aroma of brewed coffee reminded him of his hunger. As he sat up in bed, little Jacob popped a blond head up from the corner of the bunk near his father's right foot. A bag of cookies and a mug, along with a little blanket lay in a pile-----Jacob had acquired a few possessions.

Vincent, wearing a night shirt of luxurious silk, was attacked by his son, who was very happy to see his father awake and sitting up. The bed where he lay, was a built-in bunk, the walls and sides made of mahogany. Beautiful, deep blue drapes hung in front of the bunk and were tied back with gold cord. Vincent swung his feet over the edge of the bed, where they promptly sank deep into the fur of a plush white rug. Was this some kind of luxury ship? Where were they? How had they been rescued? So many questions rattled around in his brain.

After a lovely breakfast of fresh fruit, freshly brewed coffee and fresh baked rolls with creamery butter, Vincent's clothes were

brought to him, clean and mended. Even his cloak had been rescued and laundered. Jacob also had a new suit of clothes. A sailor entered their quarters with a carved horse for young Jacob's playtime.

"You may walk about if you wish, sir. Captain Vishnu will join you in the lounge in half an hour."

Jacob, holding tightly to his father's hand, explored the strange vessel which in many ways, reminded Vincent of Captain Nemo's Nautilus from literature. It was very large, with ornate decor, but there seemed no way to get out into the fresh air, even though Vincent could see the sky and water through portholes.

As he entered the lounge, the Captain noticed Vincent caressing the mythological figurines standing sedately on a chessboard. "Do you play?" he asked.

"I learned at my father's knee," replied Vincent.

"Good! Good! I have been waiting for a challenging partner," responded the captain enthusiastically. "Come.....sit down. There is much I need to explain and much, I think, you have been waiting to hear."

Vincent was certain he had stepped through the pages of 'Twenty Thousand Leagues Under The Sea' after Captain Vishnu finished his story. The captain's demeanor became very serious and sonorous, adding to his credibility, as he recounted his tale. It seems that the Temporis Collectus was a vessel from the between world and Captain Vishnu had been given the task of protecting all that was rare, or one of a kind, which were left to extinction by the carelessness of human civilization. This was the god's ark and the captain had been sailing the world since the

beginning of Earth's history.

"Have you heard of the Loch Ness monster, Vincent?"

"Yes, of course."

"He is one of our charges. The best part is that he is not always in the Loch. There are underground waterways which connect all the waters of the Earth and we found you in one of those waterways. We were compelled to take you with us even though we are on a tight timetable. You see, our latest mission is much anticipated and getting there in time is of the utmost importance."

"Where is your destination?"

"Ireland. We are more than halfway across the ocean, now."

"The Atlantic? This is the Atlantic Ocean?" asked Vincent, astounded.

"Yes, we sail above now, but as soon as we approach land we will submerge."

"Under water? We will be under the sea? Then this is a submarine, just like....."

"Yes," the captain chuckled, "Just like the Nautilus. I know that this is quite a lot for you to take in, but I assure you, it is all true. You and your son are safe. We just happened to be resting on the bottom of that particular basin waiting for high tide. It was quite fortunate for all of us. Now, I must bid you '*good day*', Vincent." And with that he left the lounge.

Father and son returned to their cabin. Vincent mulled over the strange story, thinking that perhaps this was a ship of madmen. His logic told him that all this could not be, yet when he passed

the full length mirror in his cabin and caught a glimpse of himself, he stopped and stared. If he could exist, why not Captain Vishnu; if Jacob could exist, why not the Temporis Collectus; and if they could survive a watery grave, then why not the truth of the captain's fantastic tale.

The next morning the order was given to submerge for their approach to the northwestern shore of Ireland. Vincent had often dreamed of an ocean voyage; another impossibility now coming to pass. There was a knock on the cabin door. Vincent was informed by a crewman that his presence was requested by the captain. He followed the sailor and found the captain in a very serious mood.

"Vincent, I know now that it was no accident that we rescued you and your son. You were sent to us. It is you who must complete this mission."

"But I know nothing of you or your ways," argued Vincent.

"My men will guide and instruct you, but it is only by your hand that she will come. It is only your beckoning she will follow."

"What do you know of me? How do you know that I am the one of whom you speak?"

"You did not question the story which I related to you; you did not question our existence or our mission; you simply accepted."

"You accepted me. How can I, of all creatures, question another's existence?"

"Vincent, indeed, you are our champion. Will you aid us? We will care for Jacob. He is even now like my own grandson."

"Will there be any danger to life in this undertaking?"

"Our mission is and always has been to preserve life; we protect and save-----we do not harm."

"Then I shall do what I can." Vincent agreed out of gratitude and curiosity. In fact, many things intrigued him and he seemed to be drawn by a need to play this out.

"You will be going on a hunt, but it is a specific animal we seek. Do not frown. She is ours, and just as '*Nessie*' is ours -----yet free to go where he chooses, Mariah has been put to pasture for a year. It is time we bring her home."

"And for this you require my assistance?"

"She will respond only to your voice. Tomorrow we will surface near Ballycastle at the foot of the Trostan Mountains. If you would be so kind as to be ready to disembark when the order is given, I would be most grateful."

"Will I then be given more information?" asked Vincent.

"Along the way. Now, have a good night and spend the day revelling in the wonder of your son. Bon Soir, Vincent."

"Good night, Captain."

Everything seemed simple and innocent enough, but why did they need him? It made no sense, but then sense wasn't what all this was about.

Vincent had been told to be ready to leave when the vessel began to surface and could already feel the upward surge of the boat and detected slight variations in cabin pressure. Time to leave was drawing near.

"Daddy has to go away for a little while, but I will be back."

The little boy's blue eyes clouded and a pout quivered the beautiful little mouth, so much like his mother's.

"Now, you be brave. Everyone here is your friend. They will play with you and take care of you." Vincent embraced Jacob, who clung around his neck. They made their way to the hatchway where Vincent handed Jacob over to Captain Vishnu and, for just a moment, doubt crossed Vincent's mind, but the kind captain had already gained Jacob's confidence.

The hatch was opened and Vincent followed four seamen up the ladder. The view which greeted Vincent was another impossible dream come true. The moon cut a path over the water as waves rippled and crested ever so slightly. Mountains, wrapped in midnight blue, as the moonlight reflected up from the water lifted from the coast. Nestled between the sea and the mountains was a small city.

"That is Ballycastle. It is very old and has been used as an outpost since ancient times," informed Anton.

"This is a sight I thought never to see. It is wonderful," responded Vincent.

They rowed silently toward the shore, disembarked and hid the boat.

"We must go through the town to reach the pass. There is no other way, but it is late and all is quiet," explained Hans. "Stay close, Vincent."

The town was indeed very old, quaint would be a good description, and peculiar to the Irish. The houses were made of large, gray stone walls, thatched roofs, silled windows with shutters, and large chimneys. The streets, narrow and

cobblestoned, all led upward toward the pass.

Suddenly, Vincent stopped short. There, in the window of a bookshop, was a picture of Brigit O'Donnell. She was to be in town in two days time for a book signing.....a new book of poems. He stepped slowly to the window and placed a large, spread-eagled hand against the cool glass. He longed to see her; to speak to her of Catherine and their parallel tragedies.

"Will we still be here in two days?" asked Vincent, staring into the shop window.

"It is possible," answered Anton.

Vincent decided he would definitely try to seek out Brigit.



The five companions climbed to the base of a tower structure which, upon entering, reminded Vincent of home. It was dark with lit torches lining the stone walls and steps circling up to a landing which led to a tunnel continuing upward. Finally, they came to a room that looked like the hall of a great castle. Swords and shields, armor and coats of arms hung on the walls, but the focal of the room was the massive wooden doors.

"What is all this?" questioned Vincent.

"Out there, beyond those doors is the pass to the Trostans. Throughout the centuries, Ballycastle has remained prosperous from tolls charged to those who travelled from sea to mountains. It has only been in the last ten years that they have allowed free access," explained William.

Anton and Kareem pushed open the massive doors and the wind blew in from the pass. It smelled of heather and clover

-----sweet----- and seemed to draw Vincent out into the waiting arms of the mountains. He had never thought to see mountains, and now he was in their very midst. He caught his breath as he looked around, peaks and valleys shimmering in the moonlight.

"We will travel till we reach Bryne Castle. There we will wait for dawn," said Hans.

No one spoke on the way to Bryne Castle. Vincent followed, but felt a bit uneasy. His four companions were deep in thought and seemed almost sinister.....*'What have i gotten myself into?.....*he wondered.

The old castle was in ruins. The only sturdy structure was a fieldstone corral with an Iron grate for a gate. It was part of what had once been a corner tower, as it jutted up to jagged shadows as many of the stones had tumbled into odd shapes and patterns. Remnants of stone steps were here and there, encircling the strange structure. There was hay in the corners of a roofless stable and the five men settled for the night, trying to make themselves as comfortable as possible.

The first thin rays of sun warmed Vincent's arms and he marveled at the light as it moved slowly across his chest. Never having awakened to a sunrise, he sat up and faced east, staring at the brightest spot in the niche between two peaks. For just an instant there was a blinding green flash and then the sun crested in a fiery arc. It blinded him for a moment, but he savored this special gift, because he might never again see such wonder once he returned home.

Home.....Father would be very worried. They might even think that he and Jacob were dead. He thought of his son and

wondered how they were going to get home. Would Captain Vishnu agree to make the return trip?

He didn't have much time to ponder this question, for the sailors were up and passing around sea biscuits and cheese. The mountain air made Vincent ravenous, and he still felt hungry after having eaten his share. It would have to be enough.

"We will travel through the day and reach Trualee Glen by evening. That is our destination. It may take most of the night to find Mariah, so just stay close, Vincent," instructed William.

.....At least this won't take too long.....' thought Vincent. He wanted to get back to meet Brigit.

Most of the day's journey was easy, but as night approached, the trail turned into a path and the sheer rock walls seemed to close in around them.

"We're getting close," announced Hans.

They stopped, ate a meal and waited for nightfall. Soon it grew dark and the sailors moved stealthily up a hidden trail to a crevice between the steep walls. Passing through, they crawled along the flat top of the rock until they reached the far edge.

"Lie flat, Vincent, We cannot chance being seen," warned Kareem.

.....Seen? By whom?.....' wondered Vincent, but as they approached the edge he heard music and laughter, singing and joyous shouting.

What he saw as he peered over the rim caused him to think he was losing his mind, or at the very least, hallucinating. The valley below was an ancient crater shaped like a witch's cauldron. There

were campfires everywhere, throwing eerie, flickering shadows across the black tors. The makers of the merriment were *'the little people'*-----leprechauns----- passing around jugs of ale, playing harps, singing and dancing around the fires. A place of pure magic, Vincent was certain.

"We will wait until they sleep and from the amount of ale and whiskey flowing down there, it will be a sound sleep," chuckled Anton.

Vincent was feeling rather left out and alone. His companions only spoke to him when they were explaining or giving instructions.

"We should rest now," advised Hans.

Vincent, drawing his cape around his shoulders, soon fell asleep; the lively music, with its magical lilt, lulled him to sleep and filled his dreams.

' "Catherine," murmured Vincent as she appeared before him, wearing a lovely, white, embroidered blouse; full skirt with ribbon trim; white stockings and black slippers with a strap across the instep. She gave him an impish glance, smiled and started to dance a jig. She held out her hands. Taking her slender fingers in his great furred hands, they danced in a circle, spinning faster and faster. They were soon laughing joyously and she collapsed breathlessly against him, and he held her tightly in a loving embrace. She lifted on tiptoe and tilted her head back, eyes closed. He bent down, kissed her gently, and they flew away together.'

"Wake up, it's time," ordered Hans.

As always, Vincent felt desolate when he awoke from his dream of Catherine. He felt he would die with longing for her. Their love

was forever, and now, so was his aloneness.

The way down was not easily seen, in fact, there looked to be no way down, but they soon found a ledge which led to a cave where torches were hidden. Each man took a torch and lit it, then proceeded down the interior passage toward the floor of the crater.

"All right, Vincent. Call to her," whispered Kareem.

"I just call, '*Mariah*'?"

"We will walk close to the walls in the circle and you call out."

"Mariah!"

The moon was now high in the sky and starting to bathe the crater floor in silver light. It was a bright evening and they could see '*the little people*' sleeping, curled near the embers of their dying fires. They walked around almost the entire circle.

"Mariah!"

Unexpectedly, a beautiful white horse, shimmering in the moonlight, stepped from a thicket-----Mariah. Vincent stood spellbound. Never had he seen anything so powerfully exquisite. She stood quietly at the edge of the thicket, then reared, her front hooves flashing high in the air.

"Call to her again," Kareem urged.

"Mariah!"

Still she did not come.

"Vincent, you go to her," suggested William.

Slowly, Vincent started toward Mariah. A strange feeling----- just

a feeling, an overshadowing-----grew stronger as he neared her. As he got closer he held out a hand and, to his great surprise, she came, allowing him to rub her nose and pat her head. He turned to rejoin the others and she followed close on his heels.

"There, that wasn't so difficult, was it?" commented Anton.

Mariah followed along, slowly and surefootedly, her nose ever so often nudging at Vincent's back. Whenever she seemed to hesitate, Vincent would turn and gentle her by rubbing her nose or crooning her name. The most difficult part of the return journey was getting her down from the bluff. The crevice was barely wide enough for Vincent and she scraped the sides often. Finally, they all made it through to the canyon floor. It seemed to take hardly any time at all to get back to Bryne Castle.

Hans and Anton attempted to get her into the corral but she bucked and shied, kicking out with hind hooves and striking out with her forelegs. They could not manage her and Vincent was needed once again. Walking into the corral, he called to her softly. Mariah lowered her head and went to him. He stayed with her while Kareem and Anton put down clean straw, then they all left and closed the gate.

It had taken all night for Mariah to be located and brought to the castle. It was now mid-morning and while the men slept, Mariah rested. All seemed peaceful and quiet. They awoke at sunset and as they ate their evening meal, Mariah started to act up.....whinnying constantly.....almost as if she were calling out. Vincent went to the gate and felt her discontent.

"Must we keep her locked up?" Vincent asked, remembering his own imprisonment at the hands of the arch-criminal Gabriel.

"It is for her own good. We cannot have her wandering off, now, can we?" explained William.

"I suppose not, but she seemes very agitated about something."

"Why don't you go down to the town tonight. Don't worry, we won't let anything happen to her."



It was a dark and moonless night, as Vincent made his way back down the tower and carefully through the town, a storm threatened to unleash its fury. He went to the only inn in town and peered through the window, trying to locate Brigit. The lower floor contained the kitchen, dining room and common room, but Brigit was not there. He looked up to the second floor where three windows were lit. There were vines growing up the sides of the walls that looked sturdy enough to hold his weight, but he climbed part way and tested them by pulling down hard. They had probably been growing there long enough to become part of the walls and roof.

Peeking into the first lit window, Vincent saw a man sitting before a fireplace, sipping a toddy. He moved over two windows to the next which was lit and his heart warmed as he saw Brigit sitting at a desk, writing. He tapped lightly at the window to get her attention. She looked up but chose to ignore the sound. He tapped twice more, louder, and then twice again. This time she came to the window to see what could be making such a rhythmic sound. Opening the window, she stood and stared, a quizzical, cock-headed look on her face. "Vincent?" he smiled as she opened the window wider. "By all the Saints.....how on Earth did yah get here? How in the world did yah get to this God-forsaken coast of Northern Ireland?"

"Would you come out so that we may speak?" asked Vincent.

"Surely. Give me a moment. I'll meet yah down behind the stable."

Vincent climbed back down the vines and stole through the shadows to the rendezvous point and waited. It was barely five minutes before he saw Brigit coming toward him, a spring in her step and a sweet smile of welcome on her face.

"I'm still dodgin' me bodyguards," she admitted impishly. "Well now, yah are the very last person I ever expected tah see, but tis happy I am yur here. So.....tell me.....How is Catherine?"

She was as inquisitive and open as he remembered.....and as compassionate, as he related the events surrounding Catherine's kidnapping and subsequent death. Brigit wept along with Vincent as he finished his tale.

"Aye, Vincent.....tis a pain that never ends. But tah have become a part of someone and then have that someone taken from us, while the powers-that-be tell us we must go on, tis almost more than a body can endure. But we must go on," consoled Brigit.

Vincent then told her of his son, Jacob, and these two years of joy and wonder at watching him grow and learn.

"Aye, yur Catherine left yah with such a precious, wee gift. I can well understand your reason tah to on living', Vincent. I have so often wished that Ian and I had had a child. I have me writin' but tah have a child-----a livin' reminder of yur lost loved one....." Brigit looked off, tears spilling from the pools which had formed in her eyes.

He finally told her the strange story of his rescue and adventure

across the sea.

"Now there's a tale for a writer tah put tah paper and yur talkin' tah one who believes in the old magic. Why I've even seen the little people a time or two. Yah must have been tah Banshee Cauldron then, have yah? I've only heard of it, mahself."

"Yes, there are strange impressions there which I am struggling to understand," said Vincent.

"I can see that. I can also see that there's somes sinister doin's afoot. Could yah take me tah Bryne Castle, Vincent? I've never seen a Mariah," asked Brigit.

"It will not take long, but you should be prepared for some climbing," advised Vincent.

"I have all I need, let's go!"

Brigit followed Vincent closely, feeling like a little girl again. There was an air of excitement surrounding Vincent an she found it refreshing in her guarded life. As they neared Bryne Castle, they could hear a terrible noise coming from the corral. The whinnying and screeching was deafening.

Vincent and Brigit stayed in the shadows of a collapsing stairway. The four seamen, sitting in a circle playing dice, seemed unaffected by the torments of that beautiful animal.

"What's happenin' here, Vincent?" asked Brigit.

"I don't know. All was well when I left."

They circled around and up a ramp to the top of a wall; from there they could look down into the corral. Mariah, bucking and throwing herself against the rough stone walls, had already opened up so many gashes on her white flanks that the blood was flowing down

her sides in rivulets of scarlet.

"Oh, Vincent, yah must do somethin'," cried Brigit.

He jumped lightly into the corral and soothed the white horse.

"What is it, girl? You don't like being confined? I understand.... quiet now.....I'm here. I'll take care of you," he crooned, softly, all the while stroking the velvety white neck of the frightened mare.

"Vincent, I'm comin' down," warned Brigit. He turned around in time to catch her as she jumped.

She paced slowly to Mariah and placed a gentle palm along the mare's heaving flanks, then along her neck and finally, stroked down under the proud head. "Vincent, I believe this mare is pregnant and about tah give birth. Poor darlin'."

Vincent unexpectedly grabbed Brigit and pressed her against the cold stone wall of the rock corral as Hans came to investigate Mariah's sudden silence. She stood in the center of the corral, pawing the ground and snorting, but as nothing seemed wrong, he returned to the game.

"We must help her, Vincent. Yah say yah took her from the little people, and that she's been here a year? Did yah see her mate?"

"No. She just came out of the thicket when I called," Vincent went to Mariah and put both palms along her neck. 'She wants to be with him. She needs to be free. She does not want her baby born in captivity.....' his voice trailed off.

"I know, Vincent. It's all too familiar to yah."

"I must take her back. I cannot bear that I was the means of such treachery."

"Remember, Vincent, she belongs tah Captain Vishnu. He probably left her here so that she could mate. By rights, the foal is his. He may not take kindly tah yur interference," reminded Brigit.

"Also, he has little Jacob. I will take Mariah back first and then see to Jacob. You had best go back to the inn, Brigit. I will take you as far as the tower."

"No yah don't, Vincent. Yur no goin' tah get rid of me that easy. I intend tah haelp. Besides, I'll not miss the chance tah see Banshee Cauldron and the little people," insisted Brigit.

"It may be dangerous," warned Vincent.

"There is no safety, Vincent. Remember-----'*There are times when we must walk empty-handed among our enemies*'. "

Vincent smiled as they recited her words together.

"Come, we will wait until they are sleeping," said Vincent, as he turned and moved into the shadows of the corral to sit down.

As anguished and loud as Mariah had been before, now she was quiet. She even seemed to be walking on muffled hooves as they slipped her past the sleeping seamen. Brigit held a steadying hand on her flank as Vincent led the way. They arrived at Trualee Glen well before dawn, and found their way easily through the crevice. They were standing on the top of the bluff as the sun rose over the opposite rim of the Cauldron.

"I never thought I would actually see this place of the old magic. It's just as described by the minstrals of old. This is mah heritage, Vincent; the things that make the history of mah people."

"It must be very reassuring to have a history," Vincent mused sadly.

"How do we get down?" Brigit asked, looking down into the crater.

"Follow closely. The footing on this ledge is tricky."

They were soon through the cave and winding their way down. As they emerged into the sunlight, Mariah broke loose and raced to the thicket.

"She's home, Vincent.....where she wants tah be."

"Yes," drawled Vincent. "Where she can give birth in safety with her loved one near."

There was no reason to remain longer in the Cauldron, so they re-entered the cave and without warning a net fell over them; bars lowered to close off the entrance and exit of the tunnel. They were trapped.

TO BE CONTINUED.....

COMING ATTRACTIONS

CHAMBER CAMEOS TEN

CRYSTAL CAVERNS-----WATERY GRAVES

Vincent has to rescue Jacob and he gets help from an unusual source as well as from beyond the grave.

FULL CIRCLE

Her schooling drawing to a close, Alyana is torn between going home and continuing her father's work and staying to be with the mysterious stranger she had met at school.

GIFT OF THE GODS

THE MAN-----VILLAIN

THE BEAST-----HERO

THE CHILD-----OBSESSION

THE GIFTS-----CATHERINE

POSSIBLY A VALENTINE STORY OR TWO