BONDSTORIES
THE TRUTH OF ALL WE ARE

Bondstories IV...The Truth of All We Are

September 1992

Dedicated to Cynthia Hatch
whose warm personality, extraordinary
writing talent and philosophy of
"Beauty and the Beast" inspire us.

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Dear Friends,

The dream of Vincent and Catherine endures! Your continued support and enthusiasm for our work means a lot to us as we embark upon yet another journey - Bondstories IV...The Truth of All We Are. Once again we present a collection of stories, poems and art that embraces the romance, explores the mysteries, celebrates the Bond and honors the Dream.

What a delightfully thrilling experience this has been, expressing our visions and feelings, crafting new memories, perpetuating the joy that is inherent within this classic story. Ah, Beauty and the Beast!

This volume re-acquaints you with some familiar friends: Ann R. Brown, Ana Elias-Terry, Andrea Dumasius, Rosemarie Hauer, Leslie Hunten and Joyce Fuller Kleikamp. We are pleased to introduce two new friends in this volume - Renate Haller of Italy, a very talented artist whose stunning pictures make their American debut in this zine; and Arie Raymond, budding poet and genuinely pleasant fellow.

Behind the scenes, we wish to gratefully acknowledge Eileen Siffermann, keyboard queen; Mark Hunten, computer wizard; and Albert M. Elias, Sr., generous printer and consultant.

In our previous volume, Bondstories III...Living the Dream, we asked readers to fill out a questionnaire and return it to us. One questionnaire would be drawn from the pile and that person would win a free copy of the next volume. Congratulations to Gwen Lord of Helper's Network UK, here is your prize! Thanks, everyone, for writing and expressing your thoughts. We truly value your feelings.

We feel confident that there are yet more unexplored depths to Vincent and Catherine's legend, still undiscovered shores, undreamt possibilities, unspoken promises. It seems their story is limitless, gloriously so! Definite plans are set for Bondstories V and a special Bondstories VI: Raven's Rock, a strikingly powerful alternative universe/historical romance by Ann R. Brown. We fully expect that future volumes will be published. Be sure to let us know what kind of stories you enjoy. Keep in touch, as we place great emphasis on your needs and desires for zine reading.

Portions of the proceeds continue to be donated to Dan Leal's Orthotics in Tucson.

Keep the Dream Alive,

Leslie Hunten

Ana Rita Elias-Terry

Joyce Fuller Kleikamp

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The Truth Of All We Are

For all the days of your life
You have believed in me.
Even before our paths crossed,
There was that place,
Deep inside your soul
That remained lit for me,
Brightening my darkness.

It has continued so,
All the days of my life.
For over twenty years now,
Somewhere, deep inside the
Nether regions of my own lifesource,
There exists a companion spark that
Remains lit for you.
Ever willing to share the truth
Of all we are.

Joyce Fuller Kleikamp

To Father

Father...

You have molded my form,
Like the clay which surrounds our home.
You have placed in me a Spirit, that strives like your own.
You have fashioned a world after your own vision...
A vision of hope, and harmony, and love.
You have taken me into your heart as your own.
Which you have done for so many.

Instead of reaching for the stars,
You have burrowed into the depths of darkness.
The darkness of the soul and of the human heart...
And have built there a citadel of light,
Illuminating our path through life.

Father, I love you.
I love you for what you have done.
For who you are,
And for what you will enable me to become.

Arie Raymond

A. ELIAS - TERRY ©

A glimpse into Catherine's past, to that sweet, mysterious moment in time when the seeds of love were planted.

Scent of Rose Petals

Ann R. Brown

Mary hesitated at the entrance to the hospital chamber, afraid to go in. To reassure the community she put up a good front, speaking words of cheer and hope; but now as she stood on the threshold Mary trembled with the fear that she would find Vincent dead, and Father broken by grief. The boy hadn't eaten for days, and the convulsions that racked his body were weakening him severely. No seventeen year old, not even one as strong as Vincent, could endure such torture without breaking down. Snarls and growls rose from behind a green curtain.

Mary's heart sank as she pulled aside the curtain. As a nurse, it was pitifully clear to her that Vincent could not last long. His haggard face was sunken and gray: his eyes glared with the ferocity of a trapped and dying animal. Mary dampened a cloth and wiped his bruised forehead. Dried blood streaked his face and his white shirt. It had taken five men to hold him down when he overturned the cot and bashed himself against the stone wall in a crazed attempt to rid himself of the chains.

It hurt Mary almost as much to see Father, still sitting patiently beside the cot, reading from an old book of poetry. His face was as gray as Vincent's. For weeks Father had kept watch beside the cot, reading from anything, while Vincent screamed and foamed. He couldn't tell if Vincent heard or understood anything at all. But it was a way for the older man to keep vigil, and to keep himself hoping when all hope seemed to be lost.

Mary put a kindly hand on Father's bowed shoulder. She spoke lightly to conceal her own grief. "You're going to collapse if you don't take a break. I'm taking you down to the kitchen for eggs and bacon, and I won't hear any backtalk."

"He's getting weaker, Mary," said Father, unsteadily. His eyes blurred as he looked at his son. Vincent was moaning in his delirium. His battle against the chains was just a series of shudders now. Father touched his clenched fist: Vincent did not respond. "I'm afraid we're going to lose him." His voice trailed away.

Mary's eyes stung with tears, too. "Come along now, don't try to argue with me. I don't want to have to take care of both of you."

Father sighed and got up from his stool, reaching for his cane. He limped out of the hospital chamber, following Mary.

Vincent uttered a groan and licked his dry lips, which were caked with blood. A seizure convulsed him, a wave of red heat that burned through his mind and body, then subsided, leaving him weaker. Just for a moment his mind

cleared slightly, and he knew what he had lost, and why he was chained. The moment of clarity tore a weak moan from Vincent, for already his sanity was slipping away, overwhelmed by a rising red tide of rage. From a despairing heart he said aloud, to Father, or to God, or to anyone, "Let me die."

"Come on, Cathy, let me hypnotize you," Stephen coaxed, waving a medallion on a gold chain. "I want to see if I can regress you to babyhood." In his other hand was a paperback entitled, Conquer the World with MIND POWER!

Even at seventeen, Stephen Bass knew that his father's vast holdings in Manhattan real estate made him a great catch. Most girls fell all over him. Cathy, though, was a challenge. She would give in eventually of course -- she had to -- but she made the game interesting.

Biting her pencil, Cathy looked up from her algebra homework, which was spread across a polished oak table. Her father had furnished their apartment with English antiques: thick rugs in red and green patterns, carved paneling, and paintings of stags. It was warm and home-like. Once on a quick visit with her dad, Cathy had seen the apartment of Stephen's parents -- all steel and glass and black abstractions. *No wonder Stephen likes to hang around here,* she thought.

Cathy said, "I've turned thirteen, I'm a teenager at last. I don't want to be a baby again. Come on, you said you'd help me with these equations." Stephen was a good-looking boy, although Cathy preferred light hair to dark, and blue eyes to brown; but he was so possessive. Stephen had explained to her that girls liked masterful men, but Cathy had her doubts. Besides, he thought he was such a prize.

"Forget the homework when you're with me," Stephen demanded, and snatched her pencil.

Annoyed, Cathy grabbed it back. "I've got to keep my GPA up so I can get into Radcliffe."

Stephen laughed indulgently. Girls were so silly. "You won't need to do anything but sit around and be beautiful, when you're married to me." Already her young face with its full lips and perfect skin gave promise of beauty. Stephen was staking a claim early.

"I don't intend to marry anybody, I'm going to be a famous lawyer, like my Dad." Cathy concentrated, fighting against irritation. "X + 42 = Y + 24. When I get on the Supreme Court I'm going to make this stuff illegal." Algebra was tough enough without being distracted by nonsense.

Stephen spread his hand across the page. "Let me hypnotize you and I won't take you back to the past. I'll take you into the future and you'll see that you belong to me."

Cathy exploded, sweeping the textbook to the floor. "All right! Do it! And then leave me alone!"

He led her to one of the leather wing-chairs that faced a marble

fireplace. Cathy took a seat and gripped the armrests with both hands. She was seething with fury.

Stephen began to swing the medallion before her eyes. "Now just relax, listen to my voice, you're getting sleepy, your eyelids are getting heavy..."

"This is such rubbish, Stephen," Cathy complained. "Just get on with it." She stared at the swinging pendulum and listened to the murmur of his voice.

"When I snap my fingers you will fall into a deep sleep." Stephen stole a peek at the paperback, Chapter 2, entitled, "Conquer Any Woman with MIND POWER."

He quoted from the book, making his voice deep. "Go forward, beyond the limits of distance and space. There is a man in the shadows. You can sense him in your mind. He is the one man you will love all your life. Let his image become clearer, clearer, as you move toward him."

Cathy's eyes closed and she took a deep breath as she began to relax. The voice droned on, giving her commands. "Set your spirit free to move toward the man who longs for you. He is your destiny, your fate. Go toward that image filled with light."

Even with closed eyes Cathy could feel that pendulum swinging back and forth, back and forth, rocking her into sleep.

"Do you see the man, Cathy?" Stephen's voice quivered -- he was almost fainting with excitement. Beyond all expectation, the hypnotism was working.

Her answer was faint. "No. I can't see anything..."

"Keep looking," Stephen swallowed hard. He intended to plant an image of himself in Cathy's mind with the medallion, which was engraved with a motto: 'I love you more than yesterday and less than tomorrow.' He curled her limp fingers around the chain. When she awakened, she would be in love. According to Chapter 2.

"It's all dark..." murmured Cathy. Her head fell forward as a vision engulfed her...

...Darkness -- and movement of her spirit through endless catacombs, winding deeper into the dark earth. Some force was pulling her and Cathy could not resist, though her spirit cried out questions into the blackness as she was swept along like a bubble in a river. Ahead, a tunnel opened into a cavern and there a faint light flickered. She stretched out her hands toward the light, for something urged her to hasten. The light was fading, dying.

A roar of madness and despair echoed throughout the cavern, rumbling like an avalanche. Despite her attempts to pull back she was swept through the entrance like a blown leaf. The dim light came from a beast who was chained to a bed. His face was in shadow; she could not see him clearly. The beast struggled to free himself and uttered another cry of despair, but weaker this time. The spark within him was faltering. The beast was dying.

Although she could not see his features, Cathy could sense his torment.

She was surprised to find herself not afraid. She floated nearer, drawn by his pain.

He strained backwards, beating his head against the pillow. It was the only part of his body he could move. "Let me die. I can't bear this."

That voice, though hoarse with agony, echoed in her deepest self. Now Cathy knew why she was here. Gently she placed one hand on his forehead. Sympathy drove her to say, "Be strong, fight on. You must live."

Her cool hand was a blessing on his burning forehead. The beast broke into racking sobs. "Not like this." The beautiful spirit that touched him did not understand. To live on in chains, tortured by madness, was a crueler fate than death.

His pain made her breathing sharpen, as if there were a bond between them. The words she spoke came from her own soul. "Something wonderful is coming to you, something beautiful that can never happen if you give up."

His only answer was a deep, inarticulate sound of anguish. The spirit believed he could be well again. He wanted to trust her, but he was conscious of his own laboring breaths, and of his failing strength.

She placed her other hand on his chest and felt his faltering heartbeat beneath his rough white shirt.

Though she didn't know why it was so important, Cathy had to give him hope. She said quietly, "You must not give up. I want you to promise me that even if you lose consciousness, you'll keep on breathing."

A sob turned into a bitter laugh. "How can I promise that?"

"Because a promise means more to you than it does to most people," she answered, and truth rang through her words.

For the first time then the beast looked straight at her. Something stirred in the depths of his being. It was courage, the will to fight on. In the shadows his eyes had a clear gleam. "I'll -- try," he whispered.

"That's not good enough," she urged him. His chest rose and fell with a great breath, as if he were drawing strength from her light touch.

At last he said, "I promise."

"Good!" She smiled, and sensed an answering smile in the dimness. Without warning Cathy felt herself being drawn backwards at a fearful speed, as if she were being pulled through a vacuum.

"Wait! Who are you?" cried the beast, tearing at his chains, but she was already gone, flying through tunnels, unable to see where she was going, and terrified of a collision with jutting stones as she was whirled through the darkness.

There was another voice, familiar, squeaking with panic; and the feel of leather under her hands.

"Come back, I command you to come back!" Stephen was snapping his fingers frantically.

Sleepily she waved him away. Her head was spinning. "Where...am

I?" She reached out blindly, warding herself away from walls of stone as she rushed past.

"Are you here? Are you all right?" Stephen grabbed her shoulders and shook her. "You've been out for forty-five minutes. I couldn't wake you up. God! I thought I killed you."

With a groan, Cathy rubbed her face. "I feel so dizzy." Her mind was reeling with images: a maze of tunnels, a flickering light, the clank of chains. And a voice, choking with agony.

Opening her eyes, Cathy saw with surprise the marble fireplace, the red leather wing-chairs, the rows of law books above her father's massive desk. There were no tunnels, no caverns. She was in her own living room. Why was there a sense of loss, as if she had left her real home to return here?

"Why am I thinking, 'don't give up'?" Though she tried to remember it, already the dream was fading.

Stephen leaned over the arm of the chair and made a grab for the gold chain. Cathy kept hold of it. Now she remembered -- Stephen had tried to hypnotize her. "I guess you put me under," she admitted, with a huge yawn. "I hope you didn't make me cluck like a chicken, like I saw on Candid Camera."

Stephen heard footsteps from the study: he grabbed the medallion and stuffed the paperback in his pocket. "That's your father coming. I'd better go." He ran out the door before Charles Chandler appeared.

"Was that young Stephen Bass?" wondered Cathy's father. He wore a smoking jacket and carried a pipe. Under his arm was tucked a book of Sherlock Holmes. "When old man Bass sneezes, Wall Street catches a cold."

The dream had vanished with the medallion. "He wants me to be madly in love with him, Dad," proclaimed Cathy. She stretched her arms upward, yawning.

"That spotty-faced teenager? You can do better than that. Anyway, you're too young to be thinking about love," Chandler protested.

Cathy didn't say what she was thinking, *Dad, I'm way behind some of the girls in my school*. Out loud she said, "Stephen thinks I ought to adore him because his father owns Gargantua Trust."

"Well then you tell him to 'hit the road Mac.' Is that how you kids say it nowadays?" He kissed Cathy on the top of her head.

"It's 'hit the road Jack'," explained Cathy, indulgently. "Dad, do you think a person has a soulmate? That there's really only one love that's meant to be?"

He took a puff at his pipe and wished once again that Cathy's mother were still alive to answer her questions. "Probably not; if you were born in Chicago or St. Louis you'd marry somebody else and be just as happy."

Her algebra was still waiting, looming at her from those scattered papers on the table. Cathy sighed as she picked the textbook off the floor. "I'm not so sure, Dad. I think for me there's going to be only one."

Chandler glanced at a silver-framed photograph on the mantle. "Some of us are like that, Cathy." He slipped an arm around her shoulders. "But if you're going to be a high-powered lawyer like your old man, you've got to

knock the socks off that algebra homework."

"Do you want to help me with this problem? I'm driving myself crazy trying to prove that X is the same as Y, and all the time I'm thinking, why should it be?"

He laughed and pulled up a chair, looking for an ashtray. "I'll try."

"That's not good enough," she responded instantly. Just for an instant Cathy remembered something from the dream: a promise, an answering smile. Then it faded away...

Step by halting step, Father neared the cot. Reluctantly he pulled back the curtain. Vincent was lying so still, and his face was turned to the wall.

"Vincent?" Father's voice shook. "I brought you a cup of broth. And we can finish the Thomas Moore poem...

'Long, long be my heart with such memories filled,
Like the vase in which roses have once been distilled --
You may break, you may shatter the vase if you will,
But the scent of the roses will hang round it still...'"

With a hand that trembled he touched Vincent's shoulder. To his unspeakable relief, Vincent turned his head and looked at him. For the first time in weeks, there was no glare of madness in his blue eyes.

"Are you feeling brighter, Vincent?" wondered Father, pulling his stool closer.

Vincent smiled faintly and nodded as he looked around. The green curtain was familiar, and there was a smell of medications. It was the hospital chamber, but beyond that his thoughts were vague. He murmured, "I was asleep."

Father stroked his shoulder lightly. To hear that simple sentence from Vincent almost made him cry.

"I've been ill?" Vincent wondered.

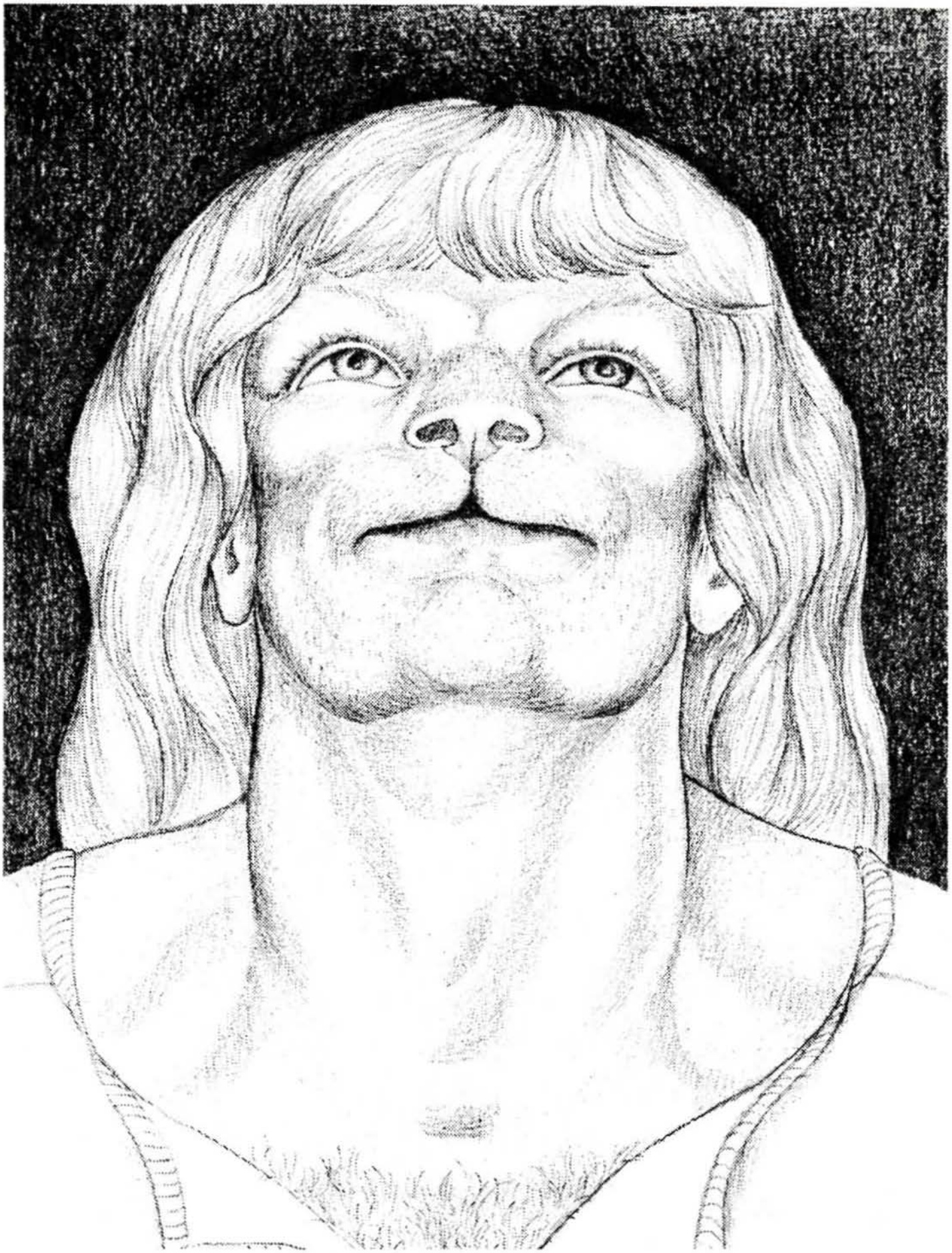
"Very ill," said Father. Tears slipped down his cheeks.

Vincent shifted on the bed but his movements were hampered by chains. His look of bewilderment stabbed Father to the heart. "I'm so sorry we had to do that, my boy. But you lost yourself for a while. We were afraid you would harm yourself, or somebody else."

A deep sigh rose from Vincent. "Don't berate yourself. I lost myself in darkness, I know that." He tried to shift his position and let out a groan. "But unlock them now. Please."

Father hesitated and swallowed hard. Other periods of calm had been followed by sieges of berserk fury. But something was different this time. Though he looked haggard and exhausted, half-starved even, Vincent really seemed to have taken a turn for the better.

There was a decision to be made. Setting his teeth and muttering a



prayer, Father fumbled for a ring of keys at his belt. Half a dozen steel padlocks clattered to the stone floor. While Father held his breath, Vincent stretched and sat up stiffly, rubbing his arms and legs, which were knotted with muscle cramps. Among all his other aches he felt hollow, famished.

"I feel so hungry, Father."

"There's broth here," said the older man. He held the cup between two shaking hands: Vincent took it from him with a smile.

"Are you really better?" Father still hardly dared to hope it. "How did it happen?"

Vincent thought about it as he sipped the broth. "I was dying. My heart was failing, there was a tombstone on my chest. There was nothing left for me but to sink into death. Then I had a dream."

"A dream?" Sudden worry was a twist in Father's gut. Was this another delusion?

As he tried to remember, Vincent gazed upward, as if the visitation had come from the sunlit world Above, from which he was barred. Even while he tried to find words, he could feel the memory fading. "In my dream, a young girl came to me and touched me. She gave me her own strength -- she had faith in me when I had no faith in myself. The spirit, or angel, or whatever it might have been, said that I shouldn't give up, and so I'm here. You don't believe me, I know." Vincent's smile became a little sad, for he would have liked to remember it clearly. Only a faint impression remained, like the scent of rose petals in an empty vase.

Father stroked his boy's hand, overcome with relief and gratefulness. Vincent was becoming himself again. Nothing else mattered. "If a dream brought you back, then I'm all for it."

"I was forced to live." Vincent moved his legs and let the chains rattle to the floor. His legs were stiff as he swung around to sit on the edge of the cot. For a moment his head spun and he almost lost his balance.

"Forced to live?" Father didn't understand.

Vincent hardly understood it himself. With every moment that passed, his recollections became more cloudy. Something wonderful was going to happen? He shook his head, bewildered. "Yes. And whatever happens, I cannot give up. I made a promise."

Father realized suddenly that Mary and the whole community were expecting to hear on the pipes that Vincent had died. Instead, his friends would hear of a miracle: Vincent was coming back to them. Grabbing his cane, Father said, "What was the promise?"

"I don't remember," Vincent confessed, rubbing his forehead. The smile that Father loved to see illuminated his tired face. "But I'm going to keep it anyway."

Father limped out to send a message ringing along the pipes that Vincent was better. Vincent tilted his head back as if he were gazing through tons of solid rock. He was warmed by a new sense of peace and contentment. The dream was gone, but deep inside, beyond forgetting, Vincent knew he was no longer alone.

Matrix

At once powerful as well as fragile,
Bold, yet demure;
Amusing, but stand-at-attention serious.

Clear, simple lines
Over an intricate matrix
Of total complexity.

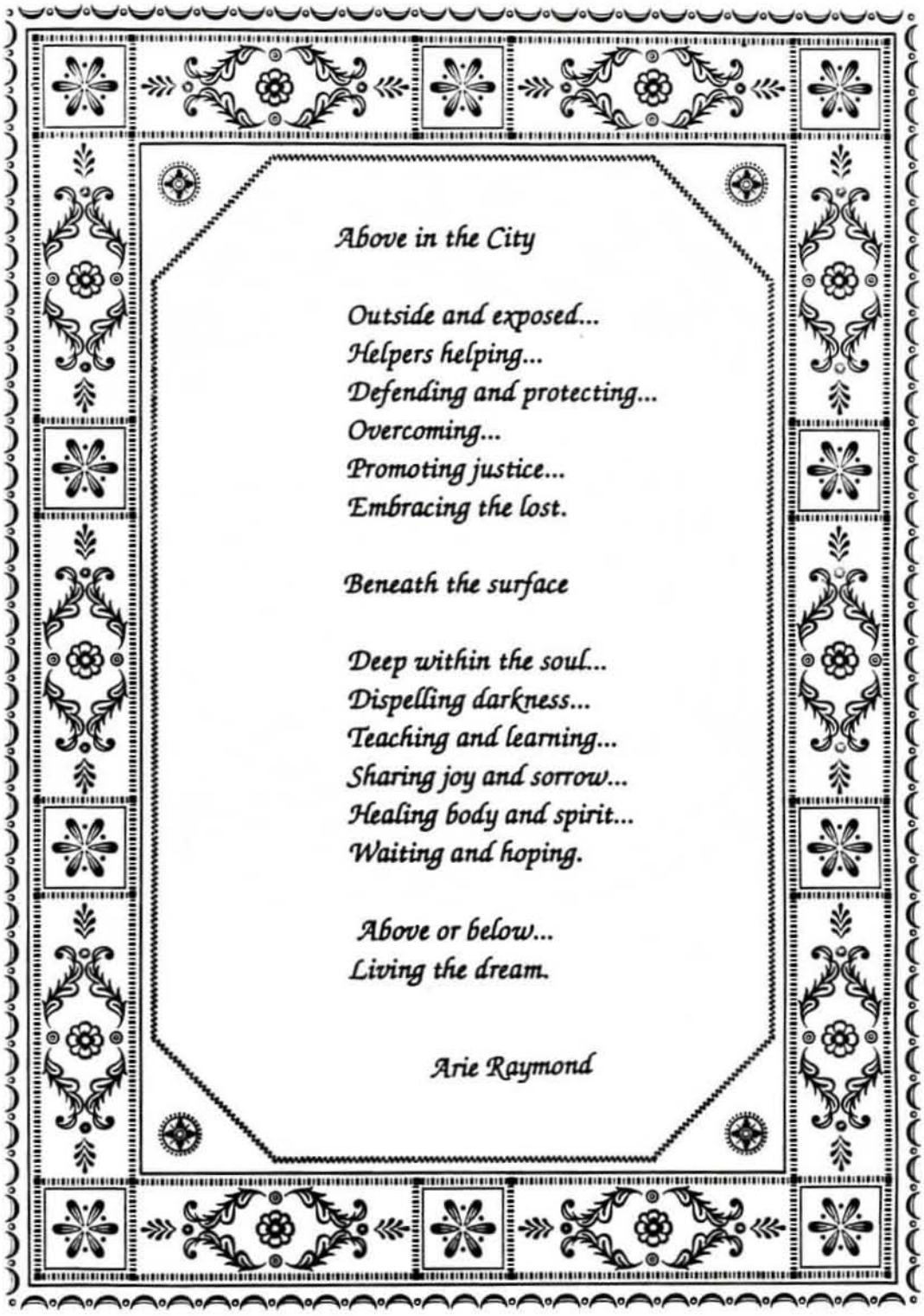
Transparent to all who wish to gaze
Yet blacker-than-black opaque
To any who look with fear.

Quiveringly unsteady on a foundation
Of pure trepidation,
Only to shore up instantly -
Becoming rock-of-Gibralter sturdy.

An exquisite blend of unbearable joy
And soul-lacerating grief and sorrow.

Unimagined cause of planetary alignment,
Probable 'raison d'être' for half of mankind.
Unequaled rival to the ancient
Wisdoms of Earth.

Joyce Fuller Kleikamp



Above in the City

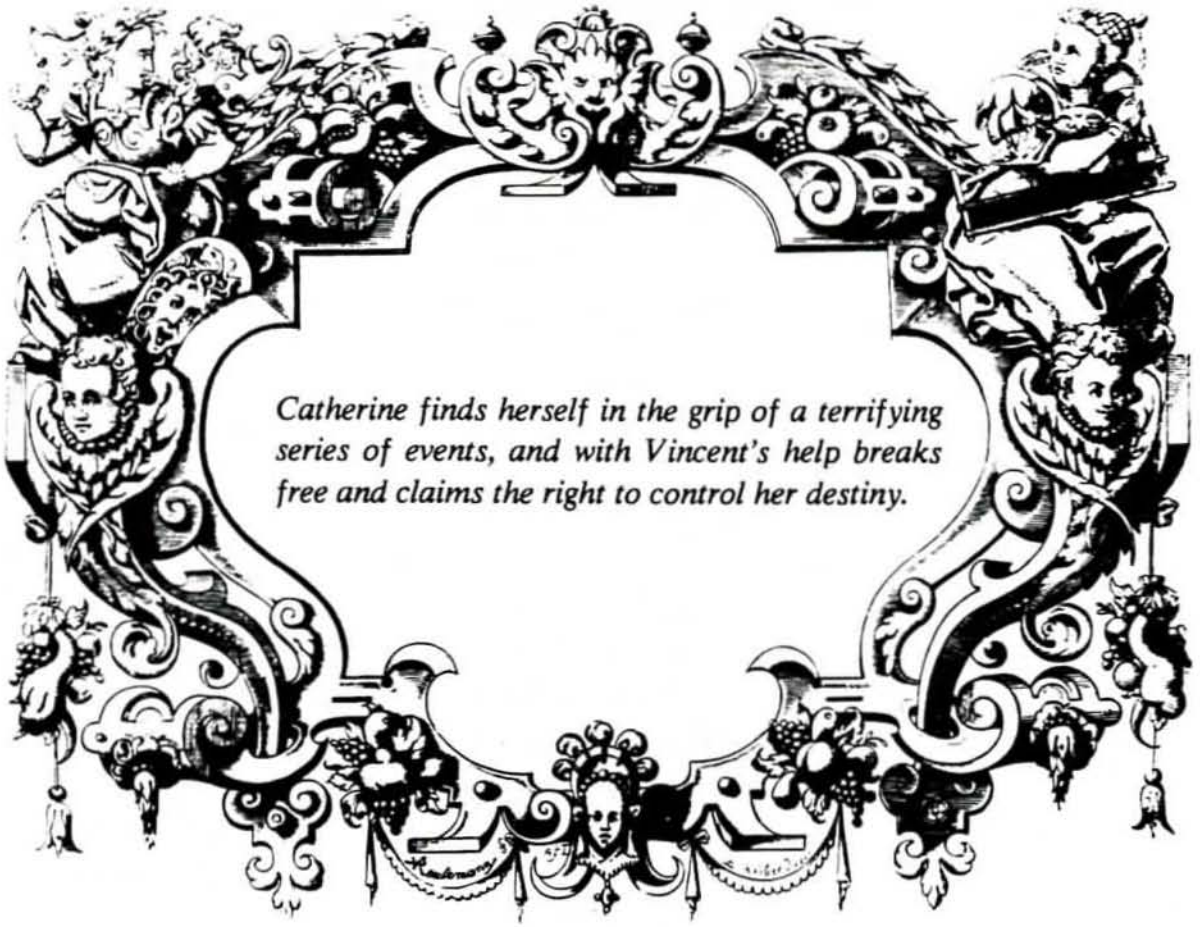
Outside and exposed...
Helpers helping...
Defending and protecting...
Overcoming...
Promoting justice...
Embracing the lost.

Beneath the surface

Deep within the soul...
Dispelling darkness...
Teaching and learning...
Sharing joy and sorrow...
Healing body and spirit...
Waiting and hoping.

Above or below...
Living the dream.

Arie Raymond


Catherine finds herself in the grip of a terrifying series of events, and with Vincent's help breaks free and claims the right to control her destiny.

Mindpuzzles

By Joyce Fuller Kleikamp

Ordinarily, the steady clank-clank-clank of descending footsteps two floors above her would not cause concern, certainly not a pervasive sense of alarm, but the rhythm accelerated in response to her own quickening pace as Catherine made her way down three more flights in the shadowy back stairwell. Rounding the third floor landing, she paused momentarily to catch her bearings and to judge the whereabouts of her pursuer. Harsh breaths born of fear and exertion rasped through her, mixing wildly with thudding heartbeats which slammed against her chest. Vigilant green eyes, widened now, darted madly about the stairwell seeking to warn her of any danger.

White-knuckled fists loosened slightly as keen ears strained to detect any sign of foot-falls on metal or shuffling soles on concrete. Nothing. Maintaining her stance of preparedness, Catherine wondered if there had been no real threat at all; perhaps it was simply a resident of this wretched, stinking tenement building using the back stairs to visit a friend. Praying that were true, the undaunted young crusader from the D.A.'s office realized that she might have been a victim, not of some crack-crazed belligerent but of her own gruesome imagination.

Cautiously peering around the steel banister, Catherine saw only an empty stairway; her hands, moist with cool sweat, grasped the metal for support. Her long sigh of relief was never heard, being overpowered by the heart-stopping metal explosion of the third floor access door bursting open behind her. Nothing Isaac Stubbs could have taught her would have prepared Catherine to render this foe inert. He rushed up and grabbed her viciously by the throat, effectively squeezing off her air flow with his left hand while the right jammed its way up her skirt and tore off her panty hose and panties. The massive hand around her throat crushed so painfully, she wasn't fully aware of the violence happening to her unprotected femininity, nor was she able to recognize that he had slowly grappled her to the edge of the stairway, literally at the very precipice to a sudden, forceful descent.

Blackness loomed in the stairwell; she was losing , but struggled yet more. Struggled for freedom, gasped madly for air that could not pass through to her lungs. Fought with sheer spirit and determination, never giving up. Willing herself to stay conscious, to find the power hidden deep within her. Suddenly there was a reserve of strength bursting forth from the nether regions of Catherine's heart; she convulsed her body into a twisting motion that caught

her tormentor by surprise. His death-grip released long enough for Catherine to drop to the concrete floor and whirl around in back of him, then execute a well-aimed kick.

He doubled over in agony but was immediately consumed by rage and savagery. Scooping her weakened frame from the floor like a pile of laundry, he crumbled her body in a mighty tempest of mad violence and shoved her down the stairs. Ribs cracked as they slammed into the metal steps, blood spurted from nostrils, and flailing arms became tangled hopelessly in the sheets and blanket; Catherine's breathless moan echoed in the quiet bedroom. "No, no."

Bedroom. Sheets, blankets. Heart pounding furiously, limbs trembling, drapes billowing in the pre-dawn breeze. Distant roar of traffic. Catherine bolted upright in her bed and hugged the pillow to her chest. The glowing red L.E.D. mutely proclaimed 4:37 A.M.

"It wasn't real," she comforted herself through still-harsh breaths, "It was a nightmare. Just a nightmare. Get a hold of yourself."

Not wanting to surrender to her tears, Catherine resolved to get out of bed and make a pot of coffee. First, a trip to the bathroom; Catherine's brow knit together in a dissatisfied frown as she examined the puffy grayish-purple bags under her eyes. Tiny creases at the corners of her mouth were reminiscent of her father's.

'Another night of sleep ruined,' she lamented, 'another damned nightmare.'

Slipping into a peach terry cloth robe, Catherine strode with vigor into the kitchen, determined to ignore the annoying reason she was up at such an unforgiving hour. As she scooped the gourmet coffee beans into the grinder, she was overtaken by her own need to have a thorough cry. She acquiesced to the great sobs and folded herself onto the linoleum floor, resigned to her emotional torrent.

By the time the coffee was made, the clock-radio in Catherine's bedroom had switched on at the pre-set time of 5:55 A.M. Dressing in a navy blue suit, Catherine shuddered as she smoothed a tiny wrinkle in the skirt. As the day passed most of the images from the nightmare mercifully vanished, yet a few remained, enough to sustain an adrenalin-fed nervous high that created havoc with Catherine's ability to concentrate on her work.

Rita, naturally perceptive anyway, was immediately drawn to Catherine's desk as she first settled in for the morning. Her expressive dark brown eyes reflected concern, that of a friend, not just a co-worker.

"Cathy, did you have another nightmare last night?" She prompted, lightly touching her hand to Catherine's arm.

Not sure she wanted to talk about it, Catherine rubbed her irritated eyes and looked at the sweetness mirroring forth from Rita's features.

A nod sufficed as the confirmation. Catherine knew it served no purpose to hold it in. Just as she had released some tension by crying on the kitchen floor, perhaps it would help ease the burden to share this with a friend.

"I've never been one who has had many nightmares. Sure, as a child,

but not in adulthood," Catherine explained.

"I don't remember my dreams, so if I did have one, I guess I wouldn't know about it," Rita said, "It must be pretty unnerving, huh?"

"Pretty unnerving," agreed Catherine. "Even after my attack, I didn't experience nightmares like this. You'd think that would have triggered some bad dreams, but now, why now? Nothing's going on that should cause me to have these awful dreams." Catherine was exasperated.

"I've heard that war traumas surface in men's minds up to ten or more years after they come home." Rita offered.

"Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome. I'm familiar with it from a case we had last year, the Joshua Wilson trial. No, I don't think that's the problem. I haven't been dreaming about the attack. Well, to be honest, I have had one or two nightmares about being grabbed, being assaulted, but never cut. Most of the dreams have been so diverse; there's no pattern," Catherine stated.

"Patterns in dreams are symbolic, aren't they? You know, all that Freudian stuff like water being amniotic fluid or semen, falling or flying meaning having sex ..." Rita suggested.

"You think I should see a psychiatrist, Rita?," Catherine was only half joking as she giggled and widened her eyes.

"I don't think you're crazy, if that's what you mean. But maybe it will help you figure some things out." Rita saw Joe approaching the desk, so she deftly altered her course in mid-sentence as he entered ear-shot range. "And I should have the Saucedo and Mendoza depositions completed for you by quitting time." She winked at Catherine as she placed emphasis on the last two words. Turning to leave, Rita flashed a ruby-lipped smile at Joe in an audaciously calculated maneuver to stun him in the light of her smile. It worked. Joe's bottom jaw dropped a notch as he watched Rita saunter back through the maze of desks, file cabinets and people.

He thought he heard the faintest below-the-breath whisper come from Catherine's lips, 'Italian stallion'; but when he regained his senses and met her gaze squarely, she was innocently fluttering her eyelashes and asking, out loud, "What's up, Joe?"

"Uh, the, uh; the," Joe cleared his throat and was able to continue, "the Nelson trial has been postponed indefinitely, it seems there's an extradition order from Texas that we're accepting."

"Cattle rustling?" even though on edge and tired, she still had enough of a sense of humor to quip with her boss.

"Something like that!" he bantered. "Hey, Radcliffe, you look awful."

Her sense of humor evaporated in a cold chill. "Nice, Joe. Go away."

Joe could see she was annoyed with him for being so blunt, but it was obvious something was bothering her, causing her to lose sleep, not just one night's sleep, either. Her usually smooth, vibrant features appeared dull and gaunt. Worry for her outweighed caution and diplomacy, he charged on.

"Okay, tell me it's none of my business. Tell me it's personal, kick my ass outa' your private life, but, dammit Radcliffe, you're my prize investigator, the top lawyer in the office and ..." he halted to see the eyes of nearby desk clerks

and secretaries riveted to him; feeling the burning red coloring his cheeks, he knew he had to blurt this one last confession. Staring them down, they averted their prying eyes and Joe continued, "and, Cathy, please, you're my friend. I'm worried about you. That's all. So tell me it's none of my business and I won't say another thing."

She placed her hand over the fist that was supporting Joe's weight on her desk, keeping him steady emotionally as much as physically. Squeezing it firmly, she gathered it into her grasp and spoke softly.

"Oh, Joe." Her smile melted his nervousness and embarrassment in the first second. "I've been a crab, I'm sorry. There's nothing to worry about. You'll think it's silly when I tell you. I've been bothered by nightmares, I haven't had a good night's sleep in over a week. Stress, maybe? I don't know. But I'll be fine," she revealed her burdens to one more person. It made Joe feel better even though it did nothing to alleviate Catherine's anxiety.

Joe turned after nodding silent encouragement and headed back to his dart board. Calling after him, Catherine smiled as brightly and sincerely as she could, "Thanks for worrying, Joe."

"Any time, kiddo," Joe winked and shuffled through the office traffic to his own desk.

Grabbing the Roll-o-deck, Catherine flipped to the G section and thumbed the cards until she found Grafton, Dr. Scribbling the number on a piece of paper, she stuffed it in her jacket pocket and contemplated whether to phone him for an appointment. She hadn't seen him since last October, nearly four months ago now. Then, she was in the midst of an emotional crisis, trying to swim upstream in the flood waters of her complicated life. To be sure, her life hadn't become much more settled; issues in her relationship with Vincent remained unsolved, like the clues in a mystery novel or the clever answers to a riddle, but things had been progressing naturally, pleasantly with him. Just last week they had kissed while listening to a particularly romantic symphony performed in the bandshell, had embraced intimately in the quilts laid out in their private sanctum under the outdoor amphitheater.

Dismissing Dr. Grafton for the time being, Catherine decided to consult the undisputed authority on mental imagery; her own best friend, the 'dream-queen' as Joe had once irreverently pegged her. Yes, a luncheon date with Jenny was in order. Perhaps she'll shed some insight on this plague of my sleepless nights, Catherine hoped.

Plans were made to meet at Honey Mustard Deli on the next block at 1:00 P.M. The interior of Honey's, as the regulars called it, was nouveau health; huge murals of sprouts and grains decorated the walls and the tables saw only natural, organic foods served on Mexican blue glass plates. Jenny and Catherine had lunched at the deli once before and adored the curry rice and veggies so much they ordered it again.

"Okay, Cathy, you say there's no pattern to these nightmares, but you can't remember most of the details once you're awake. Maybe the pattern is in your subconscious, lurking there causing more nightmares. Some unresolved

conflict in your life." Jenny theorized, as she speared a chunk of carrot and popped it into her mouth.

"Could be. I've told you all I can remember. Even the one this morning is a vague series of unrelated images. Stairs, I was running down stairs and afraid that somebody was following me. I think I was grabbed; then pushed down the flight of stairs. I can't remember anything else."

"What about the fingers?" Jenny prompted.

"All I remember about that dream is that I had silver rings on all ten fingers; the rings began contracting in the sunlight and, one by one, my fingers were ..." she stopped at the horrible memory of seeing her fingers drop to the floor in a gruesome vision of terror.

"But not every nightmare involves bodily harm. Some are just bizarre, right?" Jenny delved deeper.

Catherine rolled her eyes at the comment, "Thank Heaven for small favors, is that it?"

"No, you know what I'm getting at, Cathy. Some of the nightmares are just, well, stupid things. Like the one where you went to the grocery store and bought their entire stock of brussel sprouts. Is that terrifying, dangerous even? But, it sure is weird!" Jenny wrinkled her nose and puckered her upper lip. She reached across the table to claim another hunk of Catherine's untouched green pepper.

"In addition to hating green peppers," she groaned, "I despise brussel sprouts. Buying a cart-full classifies as a nightmare to me!"

The light-hearted quip touched off a burst of teary-eyed giggles, effectively releasing some of the pulsing anxiety that had characterized Catherine's week. Oh, she needed to laugh, to relax. And, it was admittedly possible that unrecognized stress in her life had been the dastardly cause of her sleep-interrupting nightmares.

The two friends split the check and headed back to work. Catherine sat quietly at her desk, head propped up on her open palm, elbow resting on the unopened file. Her eyelids flew at an exhausted half-mast, slowly, steadily drooping closed until the trance was in full effect. Sounds faded, then muted completely. Oblivion settled in around her as awareness was eclipsed by stealthy shadows. The opaque curtain of reality was drawn open revealing another stage upon which rivetingly frightful figures danced and from which discordant melodies echoed...

After six tedious hours in the air, flight 412 from Denver was about to land at JFK. Catherine stretched her arms in the air, fingertips barely brushing the oxygen mask panel, arched her spine and wiggled her shoulders in an effort to re-align her back; stiff from the long trip. Her heart raced with excitement and anticipation over her reunion with Vincent, who she knew had already sensed her presence in the foggy skies over the city. Separation from him was never easy, she had reluctantly traveled to Colorado on behalf of an important case and was relieved to find how quickly the business was wrapped up.

Expecting to hear the little 'ding' followed by the pilot's announcement that landing procedures were imminent, Catherine replaced the airline magazine

and stuffed the unopened packet of honey roasted nuts in her purse. As she was about to fold the tray table into the seat-back compartment, an unusual crackling sound came over the speaker above her head. Wrinkling her brow, she looked up at the small round speaker then around the plane to judge reactions of fellow passengers. No one else seemed curious or mildly disturbed by the static.

Leaning over to ask Mr. Recycled-Paper-Products what he heard, Catherine flinched convulsively as she stared, gaped actually, at his face. Alternately squinting and widening her disbelieving eyes, she was looking into the face of her father. Irrationally, she believed it was truly her own father. "Daddy?" she gushed, "Is it really you?"

The man seemed unaware of her desperate question. Sitting, unmoving, beside her; staring, unblinking. Not even breathing. "Daddy!" Catherine pleaded, "Daddy?!" she cried again, "Please!"

Suddenly louder, the crackling static from the overhead speaker began to break apart into distinct, annoying bursts of sound, snapping like a whip at Catherine's eardrums. Each one caused her to cower in the seat, trying to protect herself. Snap. Click, crackle. Snick, pop, crackle. The electrical pulses shot through her with tormenting intensity. It was horrible. Snick, crack, pop. Snap. Click, snap, pop, pop. Clack, clack, pop. Snap, pop, click, crack, snip, crackle. A voice, distant and nearly imperceptible at first broke the awful cacophony.

"...almost time..." the clicking and snapping had mercifully stopped for the moment, then resumed. Catherine's trembling hands clapped firmly over her ears to ward off the ugly sounds. Muffled, yet still invading her sanity, the clicking took on a distinct rhythm, a noticeable pattern and suddenly Catherine understood. Her father, this breathing ghost, was typing. Typing. Fingers deftly tapping ke y s; click, tap, crackle, snap. Typing.

"... Hazel, how much longer?" That disembodied voice again, only much louder now, somewhat familiar, yet stifled in fog. The clicking had stopped.

"I'm finishing it up right now Mr. Maxwell. Last paragraph and then this Smith Corona takes a rest!" the perky temp assured her anxious boss.

"Okay, thanks. Give a copy to Ca...," he gazed over at a rather disoriented Catherine Chandler whose left cheek appeared moist and red from leaning on her "pillow". Extending a finger to point to Miss Van Winkle, he finished his instructions, "Give a copy to Cathy when you're done... and she's awake." He winked at Catherine who didn't see and shrugged his shoulders at Hazel who didn't understand.

Then Joe raised his hand to amend his decision. "On second thought," he looked at the confused temp with flashing eyes that betrayed his I'm-the-boss-around-here voice, "just route a copy to my desk." Rolling his eyebrows in a mock frown of disapproval, he pretended to reprimand his slouching employee, "You're fired Radcliffe, I mean Miss Chandler. Go home and do your sleeping on your own time." He almost let a chuckle escape his pursed-serious lips.

"Yes sir." Catherine said, hiding a wink for Joe's eyes only.

She rose to her feet, grabbed her sweater and purse and strode proudly across the office feeling an unsettling combination of amusement and anxiety at

her most recent experience with restless sleep. The temp could only stare, with a chin-dropped-to-her-chest look of amazement at what she thought had just happened. She just knew that the morning tabloids would be squawking about it.

It was only 3:30 in the afternoon when Catherine placed her key in the front door lock. She threw her purse on the bed, hung up her sweater and changed into a light sweat shirt and stretch leggings. She yawned, looked at the bed, made a decision; "Forget it," she informed her mattress flatly, unequivocally. "No."

She was tempted to curl up on the sofa with a book, but knew that would only be a prelude to another startling dream once she nodded off. Instead, Catherine sat at her escritoire and paid the monthly bills. Somehow her name managed to show up on every computer print-out of every conceivable charity in the city; she also shuffled through the assortment of solicitations and wrote a check to one that Jenny had mentioned as being reputable. The others were discarded in the waste paper basket.

Catherine took the stack of mail and put it near her purse. Taking care of that small chore had been the most constructive thing she had done all day. The next hour was spent watching local and national news, followed by an entertainment news show. During the commercials she checked on the chicken pot pie in the oven, made coffee and set a place at the table.

After eating and clearing up the few dishes, Catherine put on a large pull-over sweatshirt and went outside on the balcony. There was no doubt in her mind; he would come to comfort her, to hold out his warm embrace and enfold her in his tenderness. Oh, how she needed him, tonight especially.

She could not have guessed if it had been hours or only minutes, he was there, on the balcony now; with her, for her. He felt so strong, so powerful; those protective arms, that massive chest, within which his heart beat steadily in a rhythm of steadfast love. If only she could remain in this cocoon forever.

A full, deep inhalation of air into his lungs preceded his great rumbling sigh. "The nightmares continue," he confirmed what his perceptions had told him.

He did not need to wait for her head nodding against his chest to know the truth. It was not time for words, not right now; Vincent gathered his tormented jewel tighter into his arms and allowed his devotion to pulse through every vein; course through so powerfully that some measure of it might transfuse directly into her and imbue her with spirit and courage born from his heart.

Silently they moved to the darker corner of the balcony and settled onto a chaise lounge pad on the floor, leaning their backs against the brick parapet. There, he huddled his frame over her, around her; she was safe. Soon, she was asleep; dreamlessly, peacefully, mercifully asleep. Vincent grasped the great dark wing of his cape and drew it gently over Catherine's shoulders, covering her body against the slight chill. She remained there, molded to his large, muscled frame; unmoving save for the rhythms of life.

Vincent had joined Catherine in restful sleep; hours passed unacknowledged, the chill intensified then eased, the darkness gradually faded. It was Catherine who awoke first, not startled into reality by some discomforting dream-vision but nudged awake by cramps in her legs and neck. She stirred carefully, not wanting to leave the wonder of Vincent's embrace. She rubbed her eyes and gazed into the face of an angel, who was just now fluttering eyelids in awareness. No miracle of Nature could possibly rival the blending of his blue eyes with her green, especially when this reunion of lover's glances was so pure, so full of life and love.

"Have I been asleep long?" she asked, yawning, rubbing her neck.

A large, softly furred hand gently began massaging her shoulders, "Apparently, as have I."

His voice, usually whispered silk anyway, sounded even more enchanting, magical in the moments of first waking. She wanted to bury herself into his cloak once more and remain there forever. Realizing she had been sleeping for several hours with no dreams to shake her from slumber, Catherine felt elated. Her rushing sense of relief flooded through Vincent's heart as well, he knew the desperation she had felt at her inability to get through a whole night without screaming in terror at horrible night-visions and darkened shadows.

Pink and yellow began to claim the eastern horizon over the city, Vincent was forced to bid his farewell to Catherine and leave while he could still move within the safety of concealing shadows and protection of darkness. Walking into her bedroom, Catherine felt a sense of triumph and security. Noticing the clock, 5:23 A.M., she gambled on another hour of sleep. Burrowing under the covers, snuggling close to her pillow, Catherine relaxed into the depths of oblivion.

Her next conscious thought floated before closed eyelids; it was probably time to get out of bed, get ready for work. Swinging her legs to the edge of the mattress, a pulling sensation drew her attention downwards to her feet. Catherine flung the covers aside and looked in numb disbelief at the string wrapped around her big toe -- a coroner's identification tag dangled there. Her screams brought her out from the clutches of this latest nightmare into the stark realization of the sunny morning; her triumph had been short-lived, she had not yet found her way clear of these ugly mindpuzzles.

While in the shower, Catherine's brain raced through half a dozen decisions; formulated, chosen, then discarded in favor of the next. She'd phone Dr. Grafton. No, that wouldn't help. Call in sick, take a few days off. No good either. Talk to Jenny. Maybe. Discuss the problem with Peter Alcott. Yes, good idea. Make an appointment with a hypnotist. Where on earth did that idea come from? Jump off the balcony. No, I'd change my mind at about the eleventh floor; besides, too messy. Oh, God.

Towel around her head, terry-cloth robe wrapped about her body, the weary soul picked up the phone and dialed Dr. Peter Alcott's office.

"Cathy! How are you, honey?" Peter's voice was nearly as comforting as a reassuring hug.

"Peter..." she attempted to speak but faltered. Both hands cradled the

receiver to her ear; she closed her eyes and allowed silent weeping to claim her.

Knowing Catherine as he did, Peter recognized the nuance of despair and anxiety that edged the sound of her voice as she uttered just his name, understanding all the more by the subsequent stillness on the line.

"Come in to my office this morning, Cathy. We'll work something out. Will you come?"

The answer, laced with tears, came some moments later, "Okay."

Trusting that Peter would know what to do, Catherine felt a small measure of hope creep slowly into her spirit, giving her enough strength of purpose to finish dressing, fix her hair and apply a modest amount of make-up. She then phoned Rita to say she'd be in after ten at the earliest, and no, don't tell Joe unless he asks directly.

Within the hour, Catherine was perched on a chair in the waiting room paging nervously through an issue of "Prevention" magazine, ignoring the contents, trying to figure out what she would tell Peter.

As her own father would have, Peter approached the distracted young woman with a warm smile and gentle eyes, offering the comfort of a "Daddy-will-make-everything-all-better" embrace. Catherine didn't care that the other patients were staring at her; she was aware of only one person on earth at the moment, melting gratefully into his arms. She felt about six years old, coming to Dr. Alcott with a scraped knee. If he could only wield his mercurochrome magic on her now.

"Are you ill?" Peter released his grasp on her just enough, looking into distant, unfocused eyes, seeing pure fatigue reflected there.

"No. I wish it were that simple." she searched the wonderful features in Peter's face, trying to smile but not succeeding.

"Sit down, Cathy. What can you tell me, hum?"

"In a word--nightmares. Lots of nightmares," she rubbed her eyes. "I've not been able to sleep; I keep waking up and realizing that I had been caught in some awful, stupid nightmare. It's getting worse, I'm tired, I can't function, I..." she stopped, raised her eyes to meet Peter's and went on. "I don't know what to do, I don't know why this is happening to me. Am I crazy?"

"In a word--no. No, you're not crazy, Cathy. Being bothered by nightmares, just as you describe, is rather common." Peter reassured Catherine with a firm pat on her arm.

"How do I get them to stop?" desperation laced her question as she gestured forcefully in the air to punctuate her words.

"Three suggestions. Reduce stress," he held up one finger, "take better care of yourself--diet, exercise and the like," a second finger was raised, "and, to interrupt the cycle, take a prescription sedative." Three fingers raised.

"Sounds simple." Catherine remarked.

"It is. Don't worry, Cathy. You'll be fine." he winked and reached for his pen and prescription pad. "Follow the instructions on the bottle, Cathy. These should help you get some rest. Check back with me, will you do that?"

"I'll call you, Peter. Thanks," her bright smile was genuine.

Catherine hailed a cab and settled into the brief ride to Morris

Pharmacy, just two blocks from her office. While waiting for her name to be called she browsed in the greeting card aisle, choosing a few birthday Hallmarks. Twenty minutes later she was on her way to the salt mines. As she hung her London Fog on the rack, Rita breezed by and quipped "Lunch time, Cathy!"

"Already? It seems as if I just arrived; how this morning has flown by!" Cathy beamed.

"Doctor visit must've gone well, you look much better already."

"I think everything's going to be fine," Catherine knew that she was reassuring herself as well as Rita with that statement.

"Great. What did... uh oh, that doctor couldn't help you with all your nightmares..." Rita's expressive eyes rolled dramatically as she bit her lower lip.

"Morning," Joe's voice sailed across the room, he changed directions when he saw Catherine had arrived.

"You okay?" the concern was sweetly apparent.

"Yes, I think so, Joe. Morning," Cathy answered.

"Oh, hold on," Joe tapped his fingers on the desk blotter and swung around to walk towards the file cabinet. It took both hands for him to retrieve the stack of files perched on top. As he walked with his purposeful jaunt in Catherine's direction, she couldn't help but giggle to herself--from somewhere in the recesses of her mind, she heard the ominous bum-bumm, bum-bumm-bum-bumm strains of the "Jaws" music, accompanying him as he moved closer and closer to her desk.

"Here's a present for you." he said as he plunked the stack unceremoniously on the too-empty desk top.

"Joe--you shouldn't have. It's not my birthday---" she smirked, then giggled.

"Yeah, yeah," he turned to leave, then halted in mid-stride. "Glad you're feeling better, Radcliffe."

"Thanks. Me too, believe me," she grinned as she watched him head for his office. The grin evaporated when her attention was called to that uninviting tower of misery upon her desk.

Routine research, telephone calls, depositions and briefs claimed her for hours; Catherine finally escaped the office at 6:45 P.M. and landed gratefully at her doorstep within thirty minutes. She ate the left-over pasta salad and polished off the remaining banana bread. A long, relaxing soak in the tub was next on the agenda, followed by a tiny glass of wine (the last few swallows from Jenny's new favorite), a chapter from "Song From A Sparrow, Whisper From A Meadow", and a blessed sleeping pill. It would be heavenly to wake up after a full night of restful sleep, finally, mercifully, Catherine thought.

Prying the child-proof cap off of the medicine bottle without a vice-grip was at first frustrating, then exceedingly annoying. Images of sledge hammers, chain saws and even wrecking balls danced in her mind as Catherine struggled with the damned cap. It suddenly loosened when she pressed it firmly on the side of the sink, only to pop open in an explosion of tiny orange pills which rained down on the bathroom floor. "I don't believe this," she groaned, stooping to gather the errant pills in her hand. Only two remained in the bottle,

two lousy pills.

Tossing the handful of pills down the toilet, she rubbed her eyes and exhaled in exasperation. Well, at least she could take one tonight. Popping it into her mouth, she swallowed it with water and put the almost-but-for-one-empty bottle in the medicine cabinet. Looking into the mirror, she shook her head at the reflection and bid that weary soul "Goodnight."

Never having taken a sleeping pill before, Catherine didn't know what to expect. She snuggled under the covers and closed her eyes. Was it fatigue or the drug that forced them shut? So drawn into sleep, so heavy were her eyelids, Catherine felt as if her body was no longer in bed, but in a massive vat of warm, soft cotton. She had no sensation of anything else; in moments, her being was eclipsed by nothingness. Pure. Simple. Nothingness.

Unacknowledged, time passed. Moments or hours, she wasn't aware; could not possibly be aware. Ringing sounds didn't rouse her, pounding couldn't awaken her. Worried, desperate yelling failed to reach her. From outside her apartment door, Peter, consumed with panic, knew he had to find out if she was alright, dreading what he'd find. He was aware, painfully aware, of the passage of time. It was 4:30 in the afternoon and Catherine had not shown up for work, hadn't answered her phone, didn't come to the door. God, what was going on?

Anxiously explaining his alarm to the building manager, Peter was able to convince him of the urgency to open Catherine's apartment. Once inside, he rushed madly through the rooms, gasping when he saw her still form in the bed. "Cathy! Cathy?" he strained, checking her pulse, her breathing. His medical auto-pilot kicked in as he methodically, efficiently assessed the situation. She seemed stable, not in any imminent danger, but she was unconscious. He frowned as his eyes darted about the bedroom. Empty wine bottle on the floor, empty glass on the nightstand. Oh God. She should know better...

Rising, he went directly to the medicine cabinet and with shaking hands, opened it. His eyes focused on the should-have-been-full bottle; grabbing it, he ran to the phone, dialed 9-1-1 and instructed the operator to send an ambulance. He could not believe his own voice, his own eyes... "...yes, that's correct, attempted suicide--alcohol mixed with 20 tablets of ..."

While Catherine was in the emergency room having her stomach pumped, Peter sat in the doctor's lounge, filled with a volatile combination of guilt, confusion and anger. How could she do this to herself? Why didn't I see the real reason she wanted that cursed prescription? What on earth has brought her to such desperation? What the hell is happening in there?

Peter bolted out the door, practically running over the attending physician. He quickly informed Peter that Catherine's vital signs continued, miraculously, to be stable and that she appeared to be out of any danger. She should be kept overnight but should be released in the morning--to a psychiatric facility, if possible. Relief was then added to the confluence of emotions, Peter's eyes filled with tears, he asked if he could see her.

"In twenty minutes, when she's settled in. Check with the nurse's

station on Six-West, Peter," Dr. Hauer spoke softly, with obvious concern, "She'll be fine. I'm sorry, I know she's a friend."

"Friend. Yes, more like my own daughter. I delivered her, Ken, she's like a daughter, especially since her own father passed away." Peter shook his head. "I just don't know..."

"About the attempt to kill herself, yeah, it's a shock, must be. Anything I can do..." Hauer offered.

"Thanks Ken." Peter shook his hand and nodded appreciation.

"Take care, Peter."

The two parted at the elevator.

Peter had no idea what he would say to Catherine. It was then that his heart froze in stark realization; my God, what ever would he say to Jacob, to Vincent! They had to be told immediately, but not in a message. He must visit them in person with the impossible news; explaining as best he could, assuring them that she was recovering well, resting comfortably. Suicide. The word was foreign, much more the concept that Catherine Chandler had very nearly succeeded at ending her life. Again, the confusion, the questions, the anguish; all rising within Peter's burdened heart.

He found himself standing mutely unsettled in front of Catherine's hospital room. Placing his hand around the lever, he slowly opened the door and forced himself to peer inside the dimmed room. She appeared, mercifully, to be resting, quietly staring in his direction. Then, as she recognized who had entered, a beautiful, hopeful smile eclipsed the gloom.

"Peter, Peter. Tell me what's going on, the doctor said you'd be here. What's happening?" the sound of desperation edged through her concerted attempt to sound in control.

"I'm here, honey. Everything's going to be fine. I intend to take good care of you, see to it you're getting things in order again." Peter's faltering voice reflected his storming emotions.

Catherine felt her hope jump back in retreat. What did he mean? He sounded disturbed about something, this was more confusing by the minute.

"Peter, the nurse told me my stomach was pumped. I couldn't get her to explain anything; the doctor, I can't remember his name..." Catherine paused, "anyway, he was no help either, just kept telling me things would be fine, that I'd get the 'treatment' I required to recover from this 'ordeal'. What's all this mean?"

"Perhaps you need to tell me, Cathy. I think it's your turn to fill me in." His authority as surrogate father rose clearly now as his brow furrowed and lips pursed.

It was as if Peter was calling her on the carpet for some transgression; and in the next instant, she recognized emotions rising within her that she knew were not rightly hers to bear. Guilt. Shame. Hopeless desperation. These were truly not hers but she experienced them fully now as her narrowed eyes searched for answers in Peter's worried expression. Her experiences with the D.A.'s office--interviewing witnesses, cross-examining defendants, scrutinizing her legal sparring partners, sizing up the jury--had created in her mind a power of deduction that seldom failed to shed light on vital issues. Here, now, studying

the lines and creases of Peter Alcott's face, Catherine's heart jolted at her sudden realization. It snapped through her like a quaking fault. It made her angry as much as ashamed that Peter had drawn such a wildly erroneous conclusion about her situation.

"No," she declared, "Peter, you've misunderstood."

Even then, he could not speak. Somehow he knew she would deny her actions; it was typical post-attempt behavior to play a full hand of excuses, anything to hide their guilt.

"Peter," she repeated. "Please listen to me. Something must have..." her ideas and thoughts were forming as she spoke, coming through a haze of vague, confusing memories, what on earth had happened anyway? Certain that she had to convince Peter that his fearful belief was preposterous, Catherine took a deep breath and continued.

"I guess I had a bad reaction to the sleeping pill. Maybe I'm allergic to that particular..." her theory was summarily dismissed by an intense, barely contained utterance; "Pills. Pills, Cathy. The whole damned bottle of ..." he snapped.

"NO. No, they all fell on the floor when I tried to pry..." she leaped in with her truth, but Peter could not tolerate the scene any longer. He mumbled a gruff excuse and was compelled to leave the room in search of fresh air and calmer waters.

Left alone, Catherine stared in disbelief at the closed door. Why didn't Peter believe her? Closing her stinging-with-tears eyes, she folded herself deep into the hospital bed and concentrated on her unassailable memory. One lousy pill. One. I remember. Oh God.

The pain in her stomach pulsed in a hollow, agonizing rhythm, vying for attention with the slamming inside her head. This was real enough, she thought; pain was a great truth. Perhaps it was her only truth now. All else seemed hopelessly lost. At the very edge of complete surrender, she felt a sweeping sense of peace suddenly tugging, unmistakably at her hands, at her shoulders and arms, pulling her back from the awful precipice. It was faint, quiet at first but it soon intensified.

"Catherine", the gentle, yet insistent voice begged, "Catherine."

She opened her eyes. Vincent was cradling her in his arms; tender, measureless depths of blue gazed directly into her soul, willing her to gain back some fortifying portion of hope. Immediately soothed by his presence in her hospital room, Catherine huddled securely against his strongly muscled chest and allowed his embrace to take her within and keep her safe.

The roar of inner turmoil quieted then, his enfolding devotion wrapped her, protected her, healed her.

"Such anguish, such shoreless desperation, Catherine--as I've never before felt in you." Vincent whispered. "No power could have kept me from your side after feeling this storm."

"Things have gotten worse, Vincent, Peter thinks I've tried to kill myself. He's angry and hurt; he couldn't bear to stay in this room another minute," she explained.

Still holding Catherine in his arms, Vincent cocked his head in bafflement. Peter. Kill herself? "Catherine, I don't understand. What of Peter?" he prompted.

"It was the sleeping pills he prescribed for me yesterday morning. I spilled them in the bathroom and took only one, but I must have been allergic to the drug because it knocked me out for eighteen or more hours and..."she was rambling, faster now as Vincent's attempt to make sense of her story failed completely.

"Catherine, I want to understand, I find this confusing..." Vincent shook his head in apology. "Sleeping pills, Peter..."

"Peter thought that I should take a prescription sedative to break the cycle of nightmares." This clue shed no light on Vincent's utter puzzlement.

"This evening, as we listened to the symphony, you appeared so relaxed, content, yet now, your sleep has been marked by a terrible dream..." Vincent began.

His words shocked Catherine as forcefully as any lightning bolt--'this evening', 'symphony'! Her eyes darted furiously about the shadowed room. She squinted madly, trying to see but unable to visualize in such dim lighting. Heart pounding, lungs seizing, Catherine grabbed Vincent's quilted vest and clung for a remnant of sanity.

"Vincent, what's happening to me?" she pleaded. "Where am I?"

"You're safe, Catherine. In your own bed, in your apartment. Some kind of terrible nightmare has haunted your sleep, but you're awake now. I'm here, Catherine, holding you secure from these images." As he spoke, still embracing this frightened soul in his arms, Vincent reached over to the bedside lamp and clicked the switch.

"I thought I was in the hospital." She observed the familiar surroundings of her bedroom, then looked at Vincent. "I thought you had come to me in the hospital room, but we're here. I'm here." she murmured, still dazed.

"Safe, yes." he reassured her.

"And, the concert. It was a couple of weeks ago. Before all..." she stopped, pausing as Vincent gathered her tighter into his calming embrace.

"Four hours, Catherine, perhaps four and a half. Our concert in the park was just this evening. I left you only a short while ago." his breath rustled warmly in her hair.

"Then, these weeks of nightmares, all the sleeplessness, the worry; it's all taken place in a few minutes--in one crazy dream. One dream." she spoke in amazement.

"Apparently so, Catherine." Vincent agreed.

"What an awful feeling. Experiencing days and nights of fatigue, anxiety, desperation--all in one moment's time. I never want to go through that again." she asserted.

"Better for torment and pain to exist as a dream than for beauty and sweetness to fade from view," he commented, while gently stroking her silky hair with his cheek.

Catherine studied the exquisitely exotic features that she judged both

beautiful and sweet. "I couldn't bear to lose sight of you, Vincent. As long as you are not a formless image. As long as you are real..."

"And you, Catherine."

Expelling a full measure of air from her lungs, Catherine shuddered with the realization that she had indeed been caught in an endless cycle of torment, but that it had lasted only moments, clothed in the garment of a dream.

She should have felt relieved, but frustration and a whirling sensation of anger welled up within her. Why? Why had such a dream claimed her so fearfully? What had precipitated this haunting?

Echoes of her emotions rang clearly through Vincent's body, he felt the intensity of her storm wrap around him with utter force.

"Let those images vanish from your heart, Catherine. You're safe now," Vincent counseled as he tightened his embrace.

Her reply began in thought, but evolved into an instinctive, wild expression of pure physical need. Vincent's breath was suddenly crushed from his chest as Catherine's arms clung to him in an abandoned, urgent hug. Her body, determined and achingly sensual, moved with desire, naked in its intentions. Human communication, stripped to its greatest and most primal, screamed through the bond.

Several hours later, at dawntide, Catherine would have the chance to think upon things rationally, to reflect and muse upon the reasons which had prompted such boldly impulsive behavior--but while it was happening, there was no rational thought, no clear-headed intention--only the raw explosion of her own deepest needs, long-suppressed desires and trembling urgencies. She had been compelled beyond hope of analysis or calculation.

Her body, her womanhood, her very life-source and soul had become as a runaway locomotive, rushing madly, gloriously towards a singularly predetermined destination. And Vincent, her beloved bondmate, had no choice but to experience the thrill of the ride.

There had been no hesitating nor uncertainties in Vincent, for almost immediately, Catherine's kisses had convinced him; her hands had stroked him, the full intimate length of him, and her body had danced upon his in a stunningly erotic invitation of sharing. He could no longer recognize any limits or boundaries-- she had summarily dismissed any lingering doubts with her sudden, almost-mad display of unleashed passion.

One moment he had been soothing away her fretful tremors with a tender embrace, and the next, explosive moment, he found himself in the eye of a sexual hurricane.

Abandoning all remnants of thought, Vincent had willingly allowed his own body, manhood and soul to stir into a frenzied storm of its own, responding to the beautiful, enchanting tempest that was swirling around him, consuming him in a rush of thrilling ecstasy. Pure sexual energy, nothing to hinder its power, nothing to defuse its magnificent course. They made love, for the first time, as their natural right, their destined fulfillment.

Before parting, they spoke only one word, "Tomorrow," as a promise.

She was waiting for her nascent lover when his leather boots created a hushed footfall upon the stone floor of her balcony. Their reunion was sweet, and sensually inviting as well. The look in their eyes reflected the memory of the night just shared, expectant with the imminent joys yet to be expressed.

"That you love me so completely..." Vincent began, in awe still of her devotion and courage to have done such a pure and noble thing as to take him, in body as well as spirit. He at first averted his gaze, staring instead at the shimmering lights of the city.

Quickly then, he inhaled deeply into his powerful lungs, filling his chest with the sight and smell of his beautiful lover; his eyes claimed hers, a fusing of sea green with sky blue.

"That you, my love, make me so happy..." she answered, smiling, accepting the truth of his gaze so willingly.

Offering her hand to him, she brought him inside, to her bedroom, to her bed and raised her fingertips to his tantalizing mouth. "I know why I had that nightmare, Vincent. It may also explain why I ..." she blushed, even now, even as she slowly began to unlace the ties in his shirt and unashamedly stroke the muscled warmth of that impossibly glorious chest.

He inhaled sharply at first, then allowed the air to expel slowly, teasingly, so that Catherine could explore the sensation of his breathing.

"It does not matter why, Catherine. Only that it happened between us. Only that we have been blessed with such...expressions of physical love." Vincent spoke earnestly, losing concentration now on words, on concepts; focusing on what Catherine's hands and mouth were doing to his body, yearning for more unrestrained sharing. He knew only that he wanted to experience more of what had been so suddenly, magically revealed to him last night.

"Vincent," she murmured into his ear, causing him to tremble, "the impulsiveness, the ... hunger, weren't you curious as to the reason?" she teased, running one soft fingertip along the length of the swelling prince in his trousers.

Planning to continue her deliciously playful actions soon enough, Catherine briefly stopped touching Vincent long enough to provide the explanation. He was admittedly curious to hear her words, but longed for the touch to resume; he grasped her hand and placed it firmly, torturously against his erection and pleaded, "Tell me, tell me."

"I had been a passive victim in those nightmares within the dream; I had no control over my own life, over my own needs. Everything that happened was taunting me, mocking me. I finally realized... I had to take control, I had to fight for my desires. Just before I fell asleep last night, I was thinking about the symphony. You kissed me and it was perfect; I wanted to kiss you again, deepen the kisses, I desperately wanted to reach my hand up under your shirt and caress you, touch you," she demonstrated these wishes now, enchanting Vincent with

her hands and mouth.

"But, as always, the kiss ended, we parted. I wanted more, but all we shared was that one soft, warm, chaste kiss. We were alone even as we sat next to each other. I guess the nightmare was set off from my frustration about our limitations and boundaries. It challenged me to move forward, to show you my needs. All I intended was to kiss you and touch you, but ... my heart claimed more..."

"Claim more," he whispered, as he begged her to continue her adoration of his surging manhood.

The lovers were unclothed and beautiful as they allowed the winds of erotic pleasure to carry them away to uncharted shores. Taking control of their desires, they gloried in losing control in the ultimate expression of their bond.

Expressions of Devotion

Waking up from a dreamless night,
I search the shadows for you,
Knowing that somewhere, somehow,
You are standing watch over me.
Not here in the physical sense but
Here, definitely here, close by.

For when I listen to the silent cadences
Of the young dark night,
I detect the hush of your breath,
Steady, powerful,
And I am comforted.

Echoes of your heartbeat
Rustle through the stillness,
As the warm, gentle caress of
Your embrace touches me at last.

In the darkness of this night
There is only a vibrant truth
Waiting to be discovered.

Tomorrow, my love,
shall be the time for sharing.

Joyce Fuller Kleikamp

Hidden Moments

Silent screams echo
In the dark brilliance
Of my soul
No one cries in pain tonight
Invisible dreams dance
In the shadows of my mind
Everyone cries in pain this night

Blind eyes gaze at unknown images
Discerning nothing and everything
Naked innocence reflected in my eyes

Bloodless lacerations remain unhealed
Forgotten memories float too near
Ethereal tears baptize me
As I sleep

Sweet trembling claims my limbs
With convulsions of joyous fear
Light years away from me
Yet closer to me than near

Two blessed souls
Eternally bound
By a silken thread of love
Hidden moments in a timeless hour
Known only to me and my Beloved
Unbidden desires flow through my veins
And embrace my heart with her touch

Joyce Fuller Kleikamp

A refreshing, romantic story with a sensual tone and a poignant resolution. Life as Jenny Aaronson's best friend is never dull!

Third Star From the Moon

by Andrea Dumasius

Joe lengthened one leg across the corner of his desk, comfortably leaning back in his seat. His face eased into a smile. "Check it out, Radcliffe--when's the last time you even SAW the top of my desk?!"

Catherine responded in a casual, jesting way as she fell into a chair. "Tell me," she teased. "Just how does it FEEL to have all that mess behind us?"

Joe's face spread in an infectious grin, his smile deepening into laughter. "Just great! That guy's gonna be behind bars for even longer than we hoped!" He folded his arms behind his head. "We sure nailed him but good!"

"I heard the news when I got in this morning," Catherine stated. "We had MORE than enough evidence to convince the jury. I'm just glad he got what he deserves."

"And what now?" Joe asked as he swung his leg down and rose to his feet. "You and I've been busting our butts for weeks on this trial. Late hours, missed meals, long weekends--I think a little time off is due us. What do you say, Radcliffe?"

Catherine's brows raised slightly. And as their eyes met, Joe instantly justified his statement.

"Oh, uh, you know..." he stammered. "YOU take time off, I'LL take time off, but not, you know...TOGETHER!"

She scarcely managed to conceal her smile at the rising blush in his cheeks. "Oh, I see," she taunted. "For a moment, I thought you were HINTING, Joe!"

Scratching the back of his head, he half-played along with the notion. "Well, now, hmmm..."

"Cathy! Here you are! Hi, Joe. How're you doing?"

An eager voice invaded his game-of-sorts, and as Catherine glanced over her shoulder, her face lit up.

"Jenny! What a surprise!"

Her friend tossed two airline tickets onto the desk, grinning broadly.

"What's this?" Catherine asked as she reached to open the slim envelope.

"I won!" Jenny blurted. "A 4-day Bahama Cruise...for two!"

Catherine stared at her, then burst out laughing. "What?! You mean that silly contest you entered--you actually WON?!"

"Yeah, can you believe it! I called you at home five times last night. ALL night, in fact! Didn't you listen to your answering machine? Where were you, anyway?"

Catherine paused. "With a friend," she stated, her tone suddenly

becoming secretive.

Joe flinched; that 'friend' again. No name. No particulars. No identity whatsoever. His dark eyebrows drew downward in a frown. A muscle flickered at his jaw, the line of his mouth tightening a fraction. He closed his eyes, feeling utterly miserable as Cathy's 'secret' inwardly ravished him. But as always, Joe conquered his involuntary reaction and his concern for the otherwise level-headed woman he cared so deeply for. His eyes opened and slowly moved to study her face. And his expression stilled as he witnessed Catherine warmly smile and dip her head to mentally relive her private evening with Vincent.

Spending the night together had become a natural facet of their newfound intimacy. The nights they shared in her bed were ones of tender passion and hunger; the ones they didn't were now cold and empty by comparison. But last night, for the first time, it was HIS bed in which they loved.

For the past several weeks, Catherine had been immersed in her upcoming trial, allowing no time for visits Below. Now that the lawsuit was over, Father had invited her to dinner, and the three had shared one of his favorite bottles of wine. The remainder of the evening had been spent browsing through a collection of books Mouse had recently foraged from Above.

After Father retired, Catherine walked with Vincent to his chamber. He carried a boxload of books, while she toted a smaller parcel containing choice selections to take home. Their walk back was quiet--silent but for the steady padding of Vincent's boots along the dirt-matted passages.

Catherine found herself peacefully absorbing her surroundings, the slight effect of Father's wine heightening her senses. The musky redolence of the tunnel's dampness merged with the sweet odor of pathway torches. The distant echo of tapped-messages communicated their continual assurance that all was well in this secret, protected world.

Catherine suddenly halted her steps, reflecting on her contentment. She quietly chuckled, and the sound, though soft, filled the narrow passage.

Vincent's tall figure stopped. He shifted the boxload in his arms and turned to gaze at her, his heart already flooding with private awareness.

"I've really missed this Vincent--spending time Below," Catherine smiled up at him.

"Mmmm, I know," he revealed, the deep glow in his eyes a sensuous flame in the pale light of the torches. "I have felt your pleasure all evening."

"It makes me proud to do justice Above," she stated. "Like this trial."

But her smile faded slightly as she continued. "Yet, there's always that sadness when my life, my job, keeps me away this long."

Vincent's eyes brimmed with tenderness and passion. A gamut of emotions flowed through the bond. But when he spoke, a hesitation, an inner suppression, lingered at the edge of his words. "It's getting late; I should take you home."

A prick of disappointment sparked in Catherine's heart in knowing their evening was ending. "Yes," she acknowledged. "It is getting late."

His eyes swept over her face, the intensity of his gaze an electric current

between them. And though he turned to stride through the doorway of his chamber, a golden wave of passion flowed between them.

Vincent set the box of books on his desk. He walked with nonchalant grace through the chamber to put out all but one candle at the bedside--his usual custom before walking Catherine home. Following him inside, Catherine paused at the threshold. The candle flames cast long shadows across the defined hollows of the tunnel walls, the burnished glow a hypnotic lure. She moved to sit on his bed, patiently waiting for him to complete his task as she leaned against the cushions and pillows, watching him.

When he finished, he lingered a moment; he closed his eyes and breathed deeply. And as he turned to face her, the single, remaining candle cast a low light that rippled across her pale face.

Overwhelmed by her gentle beauty, he approached the bed. Glancing down, he quite openly studied her.

For several long moments, Catherine's eyes searched his steady gaze, spellbound by the language of their bond as it opened between them, revealing each other's thoughts in ways beyond verbal communication. She reached up to take his hand, smiling. "Vincent; it's so cozy like this."

And as he lowered beside her, he encircled her with his arms. "Cozier?" his velvety voice breathed into her hair, closing his eyes and inhaling the clean scent of her.

"Yes," she whispered back in reply as she buried her face against the pulsing hollow at the base of his throat. She planted a brief kiss there before lifting her mouth to his.

She could feel his uneven breathing, his struggling attempt at maintaining control as he lightly pressed the contours of his lips against the soft fullness of her own. He stroked his mouth back and forth across hers like a caress more than a kiss--slowly, deliciously--but a need was sparked by that fleeting contact. She had a burning desire, an aching want for more, and she opened her mouth to further explore his.

Her soft cry, muffled by their deepening kiss, was a hunger that instantly shattered Vincent's fragile composure. Heat rippled along his skin as he felt himself surrender to the flush of sexual desire.

"Catherine..." her name was an aching invocation uttered in a throaty moan. Vincent's hand roamed over the swell of her hip, lifting her skirt. His claws were a whispered caress against her leg as he slowly moved them upwards between her thighs.

His touch was a heated kindling of the fire that flamed within. She arched forward to press against him, and as he roused her passion, his own grew stronger.

Sliding her arm from his waist, Catherine cupped a hand over the taut swelling of his trousers, stroking with her palm. She felt his deep exhale, the barely audible uttering of her name, as each caress, firm and persuasive, pulled at him, enticing more. His body moved to cover hers. And as he spread kisses across her face and along her jaw, a whirling need swept through them.

The feel of Catherine pressed beneath him, the tense molding of his body against the yielding contours of hers, was intoxicating. Vincent opened his mouth, boldly tasting the heated skin of her neck and throat. He traveled the neckline of her blouse, moistening the thin fabric in his way, detailing the secret curves beneath.

Catherine gasped in pleasure at the raw sensuousness. "Don't stop..." her breathless voice pleaded, encouraging Vincent to further, more detailed exploration of her warmth, her mystery. Vincent unbuttoned her blouse, the tips of his fingers sliding it from her shoulders, easing it down to her waist. His gleaming sapphire eyes met the green clearness of Catherine's, and a sense of urgency shot through her. Holding Vincent's gaze, she unfastened the single hook at the front of her bra, drawing the lacy cups apart. And dropping his eyes from her face, Vincent's gaze slid downward.

The tunnel's dampness felt cool against Catherine's naked flesh, but it was non-existent as Vincent's mouth kissed her throat with a tantalizing possessiveness. He seared her breasts, first one, and then the other, before burying his face into the valley between them. All he knew was her name, breathed over and over as an incantation of profound love.

Not trusting himself to speak more, he slowly raised himself onto bent elbows. He studied her face, feature by feature, where it lay tilted against the pillows of his bed. He savored the passion he saw there; he merged with it.

Catherine turned her head, feeling him watching her. The outline of his shoulders could be seen straining against the fabric of his shirt. The candle's reflection glimmered over his handsome face, and gazing up at him, she drank in the seduction of his eyes. They alone could make love to her.

What passed between them hadn't been planned, but it was now met with sweet anticipation. Catherine's whole being seemed filled with waiting, until something intense--a silent reverence--flared through the bond with a start.

Vincent's large hands cupped the nape of Catherine's neck, his sensitive fingers spreading through her hair. The touch of his thumbs caressing her face was an unbearable gentleness, and it was her own voice that broke the silence. "Vincent?"

His burning gaze searched her soul, and in a tone filled with awe, a tender murmur of need, he managed huskily, "Here...now." Her hands stroked his face, her eyes clinging to his. "Yes...now," she replied, almost desperately. And rising to his knees, he unlaced and peeled off his shirt.

Lowering his legs, Vincent kicked off his boots, nudging them aside with his foot. He felt Catherine rise from the bed, standing with her back towards him. Her blouse and undergarments had already been cast aside, and her hands now slid behind her waist, fumbling to unzip her skirt.

Scooting closer, he nestled her between his thighs. He covered her hands with his, gently moving them aside. And lowering the zipper, he slid his thumbs inside the waistband, pulling downward. It dropped to her bare feet.

Leaning forward, the heady sensation of his lips brushed against the small of Catherine's back. "I love you..." he breathed against her skin before caressing

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his mouth up her spine to press kisses between her shoulders. His arms encircled her waist, sliding over hips that tapered into long straight legs. His hands slowly traveled upwards, his fingers outlining the circle of her breasts before cupping them in his fiery-hot palms.

She tossed her head at the deepening pleasure, her hair tumbling down her back in careless abandon. She savored the feel of his name whispering past her lips, "Vincent..."

And in a voice so low, so breathless it could only be heard through the bond, she mouthed the words, "...I love you." Vincent glimpsed her naked silhouette on the tunnel wall, the melting softness of her body. He watched with fasciniation as the shadow of his hand rose to detail the upswept curve of one breast. His heart instantly quickened in his throat. His Catherine... Unwilling and unable to delay her passion any longer, she suddenly swiveled in his slackened embrace. Claiming his mouth with her own, the shadow woman came alive in his arms as they toppled together onto his bed. And in one swift motion, he rolled her over.

Catherine's hands explored the hard lines of Vincent's back, his waist, his hips. Tucking her fingers inside the band of his trousers, she circled a trail to his belt buckle. With unsteady fingers, she loosened and unfastened it. She helped him lower his pant legs and caressed the smooth golden skin beneath. Then longing for his body atop hers, she pulled at him.

But he suddenly shifted his weight. He stretched up and extinguished the last remaining candle, plunging them in a secluded veil of darkness.

Catherine drew back the quilts, bidding Vincent to slide between the thick textures. She slipped beneath him, her senses reeling by the feel of his body lowering onto hers, pressing her deeper into the soft mattress. She arched forward, clasping her body to his, a natural reaction carrying her to greater heights. And aching for the fulfillment of his lovemaking, she took her hand to guide him into herself, finding the tempo that fastened them as one.

She heard his quick intake of breath. And as he sank deeper within her, she took him eagerly, wanting as much as he that final surge of unleashed redemption.

She tightened her grip around him with both arms and legs, a hot tide of passion spiralling upwards through the bond into a mindless realm of sensation and movement. She felt his rhythm quicken, her own heated cadence matching his, and with a final thrust, Vincent cried out, soaring higher until the crest was theirs, exploding in a cloudburst of blazing sensations, colors and images floating away into infinity.

They lay breathless. Catherine could feel the trembling of Vincent's body course down the length of hers, still moist and joined from their lovemaking. She sighed in depletion, but inwardly, she brimmed with a bottomless tranquility of fulfillment.

She moved her hands up the length of his back, running them through his love-tangled mane, pressing soft kisses against the top of his head.

Beads of moisture clung to Vincent's forehead. As his breathing calmed to

a normal rate, Catherine felt the sated warmth of it against her throat, whispering his love for her. She gloried in what they shared, feeling sheathed in a silken cocoon of euphoria. And as they surrendered to the numb sleep of contented lovers, she knew they would cherish this night forever.

The sound of tapping eased into Catherine's sleep. She rolled to one side as a tugging in her subconscious coaxed her awake. Opening her eyes, she was met by a sensation of warmth--the steady, even glow of candles relit during the night--and she began the day with a smile at finding herself in Vincent's bed. She turned within the circle of his arm, snuggling closer. Her head fit perfectly in the hollow between his shoulder and neck as he lay asleep on his back. But unexpectedly, her heart suddenly skipped a beat as apprehension gripped her.

From the onset, she had deeply savored their sexual unions--the inescapabe completion of their bond. It had become a blessed dimension in the magnitude of their love. And upon waking, they would again explore eachother, taking time to arouse and give pleasure before the sunrise separated them. But to share this intimacy here, Below, suddenly made her feel exposed, almost threatened, and she longed for the privacy of her apartment. Catherine raised one leg and stretched it across Vincent in his sleep. She felt his stirring, the physical response to her even before waking, and she smiled to herself. Climbing atop him, she kissed his nose, beginning at the tip and traveling to the deep bridge between his eyes, savoring the excitement of coarse hair against soft lips. She giggled as he wrinkled it at the tingling sensation.

"Vincent?" she asked. "Are you awake?"

"Mmmm, yes," he whispered, smiling suggestively from behind closed eyes. "I am...now."

Hesitating, she faltered, "I...need to leave. I need to get ready for work."

Opening his eyes, Vincent focused on the unpretentious beauty that was Catherine's in the morning. She possessed a brilliance no makeup could improve. Extending one hand, he drew her bangs away from her eyes, enabling himself to read them clearer. Turning her face into the gentle touch, she pressed a kiss in his palm before reminding with a grin, "The tunnels just don't have the plumbing and electricity I'm used to!"

And although he nodded his agreement, he fully sensed her true concern as it flowed from her heart to his. Drawing a lock of her hair between two fingers, he gently caressed it. "Then I will bring you home, Catherine."

The quilts they had so recently made love under slid freely from his body as he rose and offered his hand to help her to her feet. She trembled slightly, the chill in the chamber's air an unwelcome contrast to the warmth of his bed. He quietly turned to gather her garments. But before handing them to her, he suddenly paused.

"Vincent? What is it?"

His head lowered modestly. "Nobody enters my chamber uninvited in the mornings, Catherine. Not even Father."

She smiled to herself; she should have known he'd sense her true reason! Her fingers slid sensuously over his bare back as she leaned against him to kiss

the corded muscles between his shoulder blades. The physical effect on him was instant; he turned and gazed at her, his eyes compelling and magnetic, and they both sensed the question that would one day soon follow: What now? They had made the commitment to love one another completely--to move beyond the spiritual and emotional aspects of their relationship and join with one another physically--but what would become of their union now?

He didn't voice his emotions, but they revealed themselves in the blue depths of his eyes. And as she reached to stroke his mouth, his face, his hair, they spent a long moment fastened within the lover's embrace of their eyes, proposing in silence that which they hadn't yet dared to express out loud.

Catherine's attention was drawn back to the present. With a glint of contentment, she glanced up at her friend. "Sorry, Jen, but I got in late. So, when are you leaving?"

Jenny slid the envelope from her friend's hands. "I was really hoping you would join me?"

Catherine's astonishment was obviously genuine. "Join you?" she repeated.

"Well, there are TWO tickets," Jenny prompted with a wink, alternating a rather mischievous gaze between Catherine and Joe. "And since there's no special man in my life right now..."

Catherine's eyes widened, amused by Jenny's not-so-subtle hint in Joe's presence.

"...well, naturally I hoped YOU would join me," she continued as a pensive glisten shadowed her eyes. Catherine caught herself glancing uneasily over her shoulder at Joe; it all fell into place. "Did you know about this?"

He hesitated, measuring her for a moment. "I was here last night when she called, yeah. I told her you already left, and she said she'd call you at home. You gotta admit, Radcliffe," he spoke the words tentatively, as if testing the idea. "The timing couldn't be more perfect!"

'Not so,' her heart whispered back.

"I don't know, Jen," she fought the haze of emotions. "I'm just not sure about..."

"Come on, Cath!" Jenny urged. "Remember the time, about eight years ago, when we fantasized about travelling to Bermuda? Just the two of us?"

"God, yes!" Catherine laughed at the memory. "With your 'psychic abilities' and my 'investigative nature', we were going to challenge the Bermuda Triangle!"

"Yeah, crazy weren't we?" Jenny's face warmed with nostalgia. "But then again, there's no telling what might have happened back then. We may have ended up lost in a time warp or something as deliciously bizarre!"

As Joe's phone rang, a nod of his head signaled his return to work.

"Enough girl-talk, ladies!" he stated with mock severity. But reaching across the desk, he patted Catherine's arm. The gesture relayed his concern, and she knew it to be his unspoken encouragement. Although they never discussed the point, it had become obvious he worried over her apparent 'secret life'.

Giving him a forced smile, they left his office.

"Jen, I've got to give this some thought," Catherine stated as hesitancy knotted inside her. The look on her friend's face told her she expected this. "You have to grab opportunities when you can, Cath; something tells me you know that in your heart, but..."

Catherine's heart knew Vincent would be pleased for her and that he'd support this opportunity. But her spirit was broken by the reminders of his unjust limitations.

All his life he had relished the voyages gained through books; if only he could experience such things for himself! She understood why he didn't want her disregarding possibilities in the world Above, but she no longer cared for such things if she couldn't share them with him. She felt lured to restricting herself as well. And in that, she found contentment.

"I'm sorry, Jen; I just can't give you an answer right yet. Give me a day or two."

Her friend gently took her by the shoulders. "I've been worried about this isolation of yours, Cath. Ever since your attack."

Catherine sought to erect a wall of defense, but a tense silence enveloped her. She only half-listened as she struggled with her conscience.

"Come on, Cath; it's ME--Jenny! You know I'm not one to judge you--you or whatever this secret is. God only knows I've made enough mistakes in the past to not be one to judge. Ever."

Catherine suddenly felt defensive; she had to guard her actions as well as her words. A nagging in the back of her mind refused to be stilled, but beneath the roar of emotions, she knew Jenny's concern stemmed from love.

In Jenny's eyes flashed the tormenting distress she had carried within for so long. And despite the fact she implored Catherine with heartfelt sincerity, Catherine was painfully conscious of being probed--of finally being confronted. Blood began to pound in her temples; she shuddered inwardly at the thought. Yet in her heart, Catherine understood. It was Jenny's character, her very nature to act on premonitions. It became a dark magnetic attraction, and when she trusted one as strongly as she apparently trusted this one, she would not relinquish until satisfied. She could not.

Taking a deep breath, Catherine closed her eyes and nodded, signaling her understanding.

"Vincent is not a mistake," she whispered in a voice so low it seemed to come from a long way off. "He's the truth in my life." Jenny regarded Catherine quizzically for a moment before her fingers slid down her arms, taking her hands into her own. "So. My suspicions are right. And he's got a name. Vincent."

"I don't mean to be so mysterious Jen, truly I don't. A part of me wishes I could share Vincent with the entire world!"

"But there's something about him that must be kept secret," her friend concluded. "You met him after your attack. Somehow, he was there for you; he helped you. You felt devoted to him, kept his secret. But to your surprise, you fell in love with him. And, he with you."

Catherine's eyes widened at Jenny's ability to so thoroughly figure her out. "It's been that obvious? You saw right through me?"

Jenny gave her hands a gentle squeeze. Her face split into a wide grin as she reminded, "The best mirror is an old friend, Cath!"

The clock on Catherine's nightstand reflected the day was drawing to a close; she would be going Below soon.

As she finished organizing her closet, she dragged out the sole purpose for tonight's cleaning: an old, large box. Opening the lid, she removed the satchels of moth balls and sorted through the collection of knit sweaters, woolen shirts and long, solid-colored skirts.

"Styles of a by-gone era," she reminisced. "And I know a handful of young girls who'll fit into these just perfectly!" Pulling out apparel she hadn't worn in years, she set certain items into a dufflebag on her bed.

"Mmmm, perhaps Jamie," she contemplated as she packed a couple pairs of jeans. "Samantha," she smiled as she stuffed a few sweaters in, mentally noting the youngster had blossomed this past year. She held a deep admiration for the denizens in Vincent's world. But to the adolescent girls, she felt rather like a big sister.

When she reached the last garment, a tin canister lay at the bottom of the box. A sudden warmth rose inside her as she lifted the object and pried open the lid. An assortment of photographs spilled into her lap, and she smiled at the sentimental recollections from her past.

Carrying the canister to her desk, she spent long moments reliving her college days and the early years after graduation. One picture in particular touched her heart, and she straightened the wrinkled corners in studying it. Jenny had stopped by her Father's office for a Christmas drink, and Catherine's father had taken a rather silly shot of them together. Two companions who had grown into professionals, yet who still shared schoolgirl giggles. Two comrades who had stuck by each other's sides, no matter what. Two confidants who had kept no secrets between them. Except for now. One.

Catherine's eyes suddenly brimmed with tears as she recalled Jenny's words from this afternoon, 'I've been worried about this isolation of yours, Cath. Ever since your attack...'

She flinched at the memory, but her heart swore otherwise. "It's not isolation, Jen", she vowed. "It's withdrawal into the best thing that's ever happened to me. And some day, I WILL share it all with you."

Returning the lid on the canister, she wiped at her eyes. "Perhaps I've

forgotten a few things, Jen. But I promise, your concern hasn't escaped me; it's just that the time isn't yet."

Catherine approached the basement entrance, and casting one final glance to assure her privacy, she shouldered aside the concealing boxes. Carefully tossing the duffle bag down the ladder leading Below, she pulled the boxes back into place before climbing down herself. And flinging the strap over her shoulder, she followed the passage leading to Vincent's chamber.

In her haste to bring the bundle Below, she hadn't grabbed a jacket to ward off the tunnels' dampness. Her thoughts drifted to a heavy woolen shirt that lay folded in the duffle bag. "Most definitely will get better use down here!" she acknowledged as she hurried her pace.

As she rounded a dark bend, a hand suddenly reached out, guiding her elbow and drawing her into the shadows.

"Vincent!" She caught her breath and smiled as his hands came up behind her, his arms locking around her waist.

"Will there ever be a time when I can actually SURPRISE you with a visit?"

A faint light twinkled in the depths of his blue eyes as he molded her against him. "Every time I sense your presence, Catherine, it's a surprise and a wonder."

"But will I ever be able to sneak up behind you?" she affectionately teased. "Reach out and snatch YOU unawares!"

A gentleness stole into his expression, and as his chuckle came low and throaty, he had no way of knowing the true impact his smile had on her. To Catherine, it was more than just a spontaneous response to a happy moment; it depicted the unique bond she had with him, the part of herself she could see in him. It was the embodiment of her own identity as well, for he brought to life all the pristine and untouched illusions she had always longed for in her heart, but had been unable to truly attain.

"A...surprise?" he questioned as he ran a finger across the duffle bag she carried.

"Yes, for the GIRLS," she informed with a teasing grin as he shifted the canvas strap from her shoulder to his own. "I did a little spring cleaning today, and decided these clothes will get more use Below."

Catherine felt a warm glow of appreciation flow through Vincent. "Our Helpers provide basics and essentials. But, certain matters DO require a women's touch."

Taking her hand, they turned and walked towards the home chambers. But suddenly, his steps slowed.

"Catherine, what is it? What sadness is it I feel in you tonight?"

She shrugged matter-of-factly in an attempt to disguise her emotions. "I got an invitation from a friend today that I plan to decline. I just don't want to

hurt her feelings." Stopping, Vincent looked at her. His expression filled with curiosity.

"Tell me of this invitation."

"Really, it's nothing. She can invite someone else."

His eyes locked with hers, feeling her rush of emotion through the bond. "This friend wants this for you, but you reject her?" Catherine became annoyed at the transparency of her own feelings. Her irritation showed in her voice. "Vincent, perhaps I just don't want to talk about it!"

He immediately stiffened as though she had struck him, and Catherine quickly chastised herself.

"I'm sorry," she apologized. "It's just that we've been through this before, and I know you don't agree with my reasoning, and I don't feel like discussing it. Can you understand?"

A stab of guilt lay buried in Vincent's heart as he sensed Catherine had once again dismissed an opportunity because of him. He hastily looked away, hiding his expression.

"Vincent, please don't do this to yourself," she pleaded. "Don't do this to ME! I've made the decision, and it makes me happy."

He turned his back, and a long moment of silence passed between them before he finally spoke three quiet words, "You and Devin."

Catherine set her chin in iron determination and placed her hands on her hips. "What of Devin?" she asked, not following the comparison of herself to his brother.

"There was a time when he was the ONLY one who dared to dream dreams for me. And when he left, those dreams were shattered."He suddenly swung around to face her. "But then there was you, Catherine. You brought illusions back to life. You restored my faith in the world Above. You dreamed...as Devin used to dream."

"You're not being fair, Vincent" she began, but the tone of defiance in her words instantly softened. "I dream for you, and for the things I wish could be for you." She moved closer to him, her fingers gently tracing the line of his cheekbone and jaw. "I want NOTHING more than to be with you and to love you. You KNOW that."

"We are lovers, yes," he answered in a rush of words. "But what of friends?"

Catherine was too astonished by his statement to object. There was a determination about him as he continued.

"What of the friend who once sent a special parcel through the mail--a seashell and precious grains of sand from the farthest reaches of this continent? Only YOU could have known how much that would mean to me--a piece of your world sent home to me." He turned away again. "It's my weakness, to long for the things a normal man can have, such as travel."

Catherine stepped closer to him. "It's not weakness, Vincent. It's valor to accept an unfair fate."

Circling to face him, she captured his eyes with hers. "When I sat on the beach that morning, I felt your presence..."

"...as did I," Vincent reminded. "Because of our bond, we can experience our lives empathically together, even though physically apart."

"But you DESERVE to share in and see such things for yourself!" Catherine's hurt lay naked in her eyes as she placed her hands on his shoulders, gazing up into his face. "When I sent that gift, it was because I longed for you to experience it in MORE than just an empathic way."

Vincent's voice lowered to a whisper as he reminded, "Without question, without reluctance, you just did it. And you brought your experience to life."

Taking her hands in his own, he gently squeezed them. "But by dismissing these experiences, I lose them as well."

Catherine hesitated, realizing the truth in his words. "It's become difficult for me to enjoy things without you being there to share in them, Vincent."

His expression softened. "Then enjoy them FOR me," he asked. "Be my eyes, my ears. And bring to me all the sights and sounds through photographs and written words."

It was not a mere justification; he truly meant he would appreciate this special gift--to see through her eyes--experience unique and far-away places.

Vincent's eyes studied hers. He regarded the way her brow deeply creased with anguish, such a rigid contrast when likened to her otherwise soft facial features. He gazed into eyes that constantly mirrored the deep love she held for him, sometimes softly modest, other times adamantly proud, but always forthright and sincere.

"I suppose you're right, Vincent," she admitted. "But it makes me sad to know the nearest you can get to travelling in my world is through photographs."

"A photograph has many capabilities, Catherine."

Her mind suddenly hurdled to the box of old photos. "Yes," she smiled. "It has the ability to help us realize things that at times become lost to us."

"Nothing is ever lost, so long as it affects our present and gives spirit to our future."

Jenny shifted the telephone receiver to her opposite shoulder. She had been hoping for this phone call from Catherine, and when her friend did call this morning, she kept the conversation going for nearly an hour.

"We'll have a great time, Cath," she exclaimed into the telephone receiver. "Imagine--a few days away from it all. New atmosphere, exotic sights, perhaps even some exotic men!"

"And that 'investigative journey'?" Catherine jested.

"Hey, you never know!" Jenny responded. "I once had a friend who claimed to have gotten lost exploring caves. She actually credits surviving her week-long ordeal because she was guided by the spirit of a man who had died there two centuries earlier!"Catherine glanced around the office in hopes that nobody had yet noticed the length of this personal phone call. It seemed such a

long time since she felt this giddy, this heedless to responsibilities.

"Oh, please," Catherine breathed into the receiver as her eyes rolled back in feigned sarcasm. "You don't really..."

"...and not just ANY spirit, mind you," her friend coquettishly continued. "She claims he was protective, romantic, devoted...and handsome to boot!"

Catherine flung her head back in laughter. "You're too much, Jen--and SO persuasive!"

"Well, you just never know what you might find on an exotic, adventuresome get-away!"

And as Catherine hung up the phone, she couldn't resist privately acknowledging, "Or what you'll find beneath the streets of New York!"

(i)

"Before I trust my fate to thee or place my hand in thine,
before I let thy future give color and form to mine,
before I peril all for thee, question thy soul tonight for me."

The moonlight danced freely on Vincent's mane, the evening breeze unseasonably warm on the balcony tonight. He leaned forward on their blanket, glancing from his book to Catherine's closed-eyed face nestled in his lap.

"Mmmm, continue reading," she sighed. She pressed closer against him, her small body encircled by strong thighs he entwined around her.

"I was just checking," he quietly replied.

"To see whether or not I was still awake?"

"Hmmm," he responded. "You haven't moved for three pages."

"I know," she smiled. "I've been trying to decide which is the best part of our last evening together."

"Oh?" he encouraged her to explain.

"This, out here, or what we did in there, an hour ago..." A deep chuckle greeted her teasing. "Well, one act involves more labor than the other..."

"Labor?" Her hand moved seductively up an inner thigh, baiting him with fingers that stroked only so far, yet had the ability to cause his skin to instantly tingle beneath her touch. He felt his pulse quicken in his throat. "A labor of love," he whispered. "I assure you!"

Catherine chuckled, relishing his unveiled pleasure. And as she curled snugly within the sensual embrace of his thighs, he continued reading to her:

(i) Taken from "A Woman's Question" by Adelaide Ann Proctor

(ii)

"I love you for the part of me that you bring out. I love you for putting your hand into my heaped-up heart and passing over all the foolish weak things that you can't help but dimly see there, and for drawing out into the light all the beautiful belongings that no one else had ever looked quite far enough to find. You have done it without a touch, without a word, without a sign. You have done it by being yourself. Perhaps that is what being a friend means, after all."

In the two nights since he'd last seen Catherine, Vincent found it difficult to focus on anything but her absence.

This wasn't the first time something had come between them; there had always been periods when her job kept them apart, sometimes for days at a time. But this--the countless miles separating them--felt as if a hand had tightened around his heart. That first night found Vincent drawn to Catherine's balcony. There would be no response to his light tapping on her doors, no warm embrace to warm the chill of the midnight hour; Vincent knew this, and yet he deeply hungered for the serenity of being close to her. The physical distance had caused their bonded connection to abate--an almost diluting of sensations--and just the intimate ambience of her apartment brought him comfort.

The second night stormed so profusely, Vincent was forced to remain Below. Seeking a quiet place, he found himself lured to his childhood chamber. The nook attached to Father's had long ago become an extension of his vast library. But at one time, it had been the quarters Vincent and Devin shared as boys. And even after all these years, a solace could still be gained here--a certain measure of contentment, a reassurance.

Settling himself into a familiar corner, Vincent opened a trunk he had found buried in the deep recesses of a cupboard. Dropping cross-legged on the floor, he fanned his cloak around himself. For several long moments, he contemplated the trunk before delicately opening it. And to his surprise, his heavy mood lifted at the sight of so many riches, so many artifacts from his youth.

There was a calmness in his eyes as he browsed through the trunk. A strange, numbing comfort enveloped him. Here, in this quiet corner, no shadows lay across his heart.

But suddenly he gasped as his fingers brushed along the leather cover of a childrens fantasy book.

"Journey Outside..." his voice rose in surprise as he lifted the book. And opening the cover, he was instantly transported to a time when Devin first discovered and shared these pages with him. A time long ago, when they were just children, and his brother understood him in ways nobody else would. In

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(ii) Taken from "Love" by Roy Croft

ways nobody else could.

Vincent surrendered to the memory.

"Devin, please take this crate of books to the classroom for tomorrow's lesson," Father asked. "Nathanial has been kind enough to donate them from his library for the children's Reading Hour."

Devin wrapped his arms around the crate, strong for his young age. "Sure, Father. No problem."

But as he lifted the crate, he noticed a book laying apart on Father's desk. "Hey, almost forgot this one!" he remarked. "Must have fallen off the pile."

Father instantly limped forward. "No," he said sternly. "Not THIS one."

Devin glanced into his father's eyes, taken back by the sudden sternness. "Why not? 'Journey Outside'...sounds interesting enough."

Father quickly snatched up the book. "I said NO. Now please, just do what's been asked of you."

The young boy was puzzled by Father's unexpected response. Casting a quick glance at the book, he mentally memorized the title and author. "Sure," his voice was resigned. "No problem."

That night found Devin restless; why had Father refused this book? Any books Nathanial donated were of high quality; why was Father so obviously opposed to this particular one?

Sleep would not come. Devin climbed out of bed and stomped barefoot toward Father's adjacent chamber, hoping to question the man further. But as he approached, he distinguished voices--two voices--whispering quietly.

"Please, Mary, see to it that this book is returned to Nathanial. I don't want it read by the children--especially Vincent. He's far to young to deal with such questions."

Mary's voice softened to a hushed stillness. "A question can be very bothersome, Father."

A disturbed male voice drifted into the antechamber where Devin stood. "But, sometimes an answer can be even more bothersome."

Devin hesitated, blinking back his confusion. He turned and retreated to his bed. But even in snuggling beneath the warmth of his quilts, he grew increasingly uncomfortable with what he had overheard.

The following morning, Devin awaited an opportunity to search Father's private chamber. It came as no surprise to discover the book had already been removed, more than likely returned to its shelf in Nathanial's library.

He struggled through his morning chores, more intent on a way out than with the daily routine of mundane tasks. He disguised his annoyance in front of the others, but in finding a private moment, he fled the tunnels. He had a title,

an author...he would find this book himself.

Devin determined it had been a donation, and therefore, his taking it would not really be stealing. And even so, his curiosity had multiplied tenfold, and this wasn't the first time Devin's curiosity had steered him towards trouble. Besides...why was he agonizing over this, anyway?!

Because it had something to do with Vincent. And to Devin, his brother was worth whatever trouble he might be headed for.

That night, after Father retired, he drew back his quilts and lit the candle by his bedside. He pulled the book out from beneath his pillow and softly began reading:

(iii)

"Young Dilar of the Raft People suddenly found himself in a different world, a world so beautiful and strange, he could only suppose he had died. A world of Day, Sun, Trees and Sky..."

"Devin? Is that you?" Vincent's sleepy voice broke Devin's concentration. "Shhh, go back to sleep," he whispered as he continued reading:

(iv)

"The story of a search for real answers in a bewildering and strange world that is often as terrifying as it is beautiful..."

The two brothers instantly locked eyes. An earnest, almost eager look flashed across Vincent's expression. "This story--is it about a boy going Above?"

Such innocence rang in his young voice, and Devin couldn't help but smile. "No, Vincent. This is a fiction book--it's not real."

"But, a different world...beautiful and strange..." Vincent reflected on the words as if the answer was obvious.

Devin saw confusion and pain in his brother's eyes, and he instantly knew why Father didn't want this book read by the children. The only memories Father allowed himself of that world were of being cheated and hurt; he never spoke of the good times, the possibilities.

Devin himself had long ago reached the age of questioning the world Above. Vincent was fast approaching that age, and Devin understood Father's concern: of all the children Below, Vincent was the ONLY one who would never be allowed the opportunity of choice. Ever.

"Good night, Vincent," Devin sadly whispered. "It's late."

"Aren't you going to read any more?"

Raw hurt glittered in Devin's dark eyes. "No." And although Vincent

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(iii) and (iv) Taken from the children's novel, "Journey Outside" by Mary Q. Steele

rolled over and fell into the deep sleep of childhood, Devin could not.

Stealing away late at night, he packed the book under his arm and headed for the Waterfall Chamber to read in privacy.

The faint light of the torches flickered around him. It was never truly dark Below, but while sitting near the Waterfall Chamber, the waters seemed to catch and reflect light from the torches, causing a more brilliant radiance.

Devin fidgeted restlessly, tired yet determined as he read of the fictional character, Dilar, who was raised in the bowels of the earth by a people living along underground rivers. Dilar grew up below ground, never walking through or coming to know the world above his home.

And as he continued reading, he came to learn that he and Dilar had even more in common: they both had dreams beyond the barriers of their underground worlds; they both had curiosities drawing them to that brightness Above.

He spent the entire night reading in the Waterfall Chamber. By the time he completed the book, a courage and determination rose inside him like a rock. He knew that despite Father's close-tongued avoidance, he should find a way to bring Vincent Above. Even if just once.

Father chose to elude the subject, but Devin himself had seen the silent plea in his younger brother's eyes. Even if nobody else knew of Vincent's dreams, Devin himself knew. He knew for certain.He sprang up, jumping to his feet so suddenly, that for a moment, he had to struggle for balance. There was a spark of emotion in his eyes as he stared at the gleam from the torches. He had a vision of Vincent never seeing the sun; if he lived to be as old as Father, he might never experience the breathless miracle of the sun and the sky. There were too many risks.

"But...the nighttime," Devin thought out loud. "It holds less danger."

It wouldn't be quite the same, and yet, the moon held a certain glory, too. Devin would talk to the others. Together, they would sneak Vincent Above and give him a dream, an adventure. Devin believed that if anybody could give this gift to Vincent, it would be him.

He darted back through the tunnels and gently shook his brother's shoulder.

"Vincent, wake up. I have something for you."

Rolling over, Vincent rubbed his eyes, slowly coming to focus on Devin's animated face.

"Here," he stated as he handed Vincent the book. "Hide it. Don't let Father know of it."

"The book you were reading? That Father returned? You found it?"

Devin smiled. "Yes; I found...it."

"But won't Father be angry?"

Devin chuckled at the double-meaning. "Not if he never knows, right? Trust me."

The younger brother sat up and turned to the first page, but Devin's fingers clamped over the smaller furred ones.

"Not yet," he whispered. "Put it away until a better time."

"When? After breakfast?"

The warmth of Devin's smile echoed in his voice. "No; just later. Next month...next year..."

Vincent's mouth dropped open, and Devin knew that to him, sneaking was akin to a bold-faced lie.

Reclaiming the book, Devin walked to the corner of their chamber. "Here," he quietly whispered so as not to awaken Father. He loosened a rock in the wall. "Sometimes I keep secrets, Vincent. And this is where I keep them. Promise me you won't go in here for awhile?"

Vincent's young eyes were pensive, and Devin smiled back with a trace of mystery. "One day you'll want to read this book. And when you do, you'll know where it is."

Vincent sighed deeply as his mind burned with the ancient memory. He ran his hand over the bookcover a moment before opening it. Skimming the pages, he came to the ones he had memorized after Devin disappeared from the tunnels, never to be heard from again for many long years.

Quietly he read the first paragraph aloud. But closing his eyes, the words came alive as they danced through his mind...

(v)

> "The darkness was beginning to lift. Opening his eyes, Dilar looked straight up into the pale mists and clouds drifting away: pearly, shining softly, billowing and rolling, letting him glimpse every now and then the endless, depthless, timeless, vast blue curve of the sky..."

...He lay there without moving. Once he had had a dream in which he had beheld the blaze of so many thousand torches that the flickering shadows and darkness disappeared. But in that dream, he had seen only the narrow walls and low ceilings of the tunnel--no dream had ever told him there was this infinite, enormous light-filled nothingness, near enough to touch, yet so far away, a lifetime's travel would bring you no closer to its end.

The light grew brighter and Dilar turned his head to find its source; a huge red ball hanging in the clouds just over the edge of the world. It hurt his eyes to look at it, and he turned his head in the other direction.

He was facing a great expanse of tall things, gray and smooth and round. Trees!

Their top parts were laden with a color, and Dilar knew this must be the color 'green'. This must be what everyone had meant-- a lively color, soft yet brilliant.

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v) Taken in part from the children's novel, "Journey Outside" by Mary Q. Steele

And the trees had heads swathed in this color, their outstretched arms carrying huge burdens of it. Dilar smiled as recognition hit him. Leaves!

Dilar looked beyond the grove of trees. The land seemed to slope steeply downward. He was a little scared; it seemed a strange thing for the world to do, tipping on its side so that everything must slide to a heap at the bottom.

But nothing seemed to be sliding. A line of low trees crept down the hill and Dilar made up his mind that he would run beside them, and just catch hold of one if he started falling.

Suddenly, a bird glided through the air. It stopped in the top of one of the trees, put out little legs to hold itself up, threw back its head, and opened its mouth to make such sounds as Dilar had never heard before.

No underground water murmured so joyously or so sweetly or so triumphantly. Nothing had ever rung upon his ears like that or made his heart feel it must burst open with that songs wild delight. Even when it had ceased, it echoed in his head.

The bird flew up and out of sight, and Dilar put his hand to his head. He was dizzy with marvels. Who would have guessed such beauties? Who would have DREAMED?!"

...Vincent opened his eyes, and his hands gently pressed the book closed. "Devin had dreamed," he whispered. "As you do, Catherine."

"It's so HOT," Catherine protested as she downed the remainder of her iced tea.

"Of course it's hot," Jenny responded, elusively sliding the top of her bathing suit down a notch in checking her tan line.

"But it's 7:00 p.m.!" Catherine muttered as she started towards the swimming pool. "The sun's nearly down!"

Stopping mid-way, Catherine noticed the waiter approaching with a newly-filled pitcher of iced tea, refreshing slices of lime wedged atop. Giving Jenny's glass a sideways glance, Catherine chuckled to herself. Not even empty yet. And noticing the accelerated step in the waiter's gait, she couldn't resist admitting out loud, "Yes, Jen...that scanty swim suit IS all you needed!"

Catherine dove in. The flux of wet coolness was a comfort, but surfacing and shaking out her hair, she decided a shower might truly rinse away the languor of the day.

"Jen, I'm going to head back," she announced as she gave her hair an invigorating towel-drying. "Will you be returning soon?"

Jenny leaned forward on the lounge chair. "José just invited us to a swordfish roast on the beach tonight. Seems like it's the event of the week! The local fishermen want to, you know... entertain the tourists. So, how about it?"

Catherine's towel fell limply around her tanning shoulders. "Swordfish?"

she asked. "JOSÉ?!"

"Hey...I DID promise new atmosphere, foreign sights, AND exotic men!" Jenny bantered.

And whipping the towel off her shoulders, Catherine's aim was impeccable in humorously swatting her friend across the head with it.

Amusement flickered in Catherine's eyes as Jenny pulled the damp towel into her lap, bringing her hand up to stifle her laughter.

Catherine peeled off the clammy pieces of her swimsuit and slipped into a dry robe. The milky color of her skin had reddened considerably over the past couple of days, and the soft cotton was a coolness against her.

Wet hair fell across her forehead. She tossed her head back to run her fingers through it. And as she padded across the small compartment, she glanced through the opened porthole at the setting sun.

Catherine stood motionless for a long time, contemplating the warm tropical breeze and the burnished tint of gold that glistened across her face. A faint light sparkled in her eyes as she peered around her room. With a springy bounce, she padded towards her bureau. Pulling open the top drawer, she withdrew a small diary and pen. And plopping comfortably onto her bunk, a warm flush of devotion washed over her, racing through the bond as her written passions began to flow:

"Dear Vincent,

They say a picture is worth a thousand words; but, how could a single picture hold within its borders all the brilliance of such colors? How could it convey all that my eyes see for you?

No picture could truly capture the aquamarine hue by day when the horizon is non-existent between sea and sky. The depths rebound off one another, fusing into a single ring of brilliance. Never before have I been so dazzled by such a beautiful shade of blue. (Well...almost never!)

And the nights, Vincent; the nights create a magical spell of their own! The sky slowly darkens, transforming itself through every tone of warmth as the sun lowers into the sea. Even the sounds contrast by night--a song in the breeze that by day went unnoticed. A whole new world reveals itself; a world that had been underfoot all along, yet overlooked.

I share this with you, for you have asked me to. But Vincent, it's not I who has done the giving; it's you who have opened my eyes to everyday miracles.

This world you contemplate, I LIVE in. But I have never truly seen it--until now, until seeing it through you and for you. And I have merely come to remember that the world is, indeed, beautiful and wondrous enough to warrant your rousing me back into it.

Love, Catherine."

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She gently closed the diary. Pensively, she looked out into the sunset. And smiling, she whispered aloud, "Thank you, Vincent."

Catherine slipped out of her robe and leaned against the shower door to turn on the hot water faucet. And stepping inside, a tingling enjoyment raced through her while kneading fingers rinsed over her body.

Vincent set a block of soap and a towel on the edge of the bathing pool. Stepping out of his boots, he tucked his socks inside and removed his heavy shirt. Unfastening his buckle, he unzipped and lowered his trousers. And gripping a higher rock-ledge to brace his weight, he removed his pant legs.

Sitting along the poolside, he dangled one foot into the rushing waters, anticipating the pleasure of a deep, long immersion after a hard day's work. His muscles ached after physically focusing his attention all day on lower-tunnel projects.

Dropping into the pool, he submerged for several seconds before reappearing in the center. He rolled onto his back, skimming the surface with the palms of his hands as he slowly glided back towards the rock-ledge. His eyelids shut as a feeling of unabridged relaxation enveloped him.

But suddenly, he startled, and tread water as his keen senses came fully alert. There was an unseen vibrancy encircling him, beckoning him towards the waterfall at the far edge of the bathing pool. He focused his eyes, concentrating, but the enticement of the falls continued to summon him.

With a few brisk strokes, Vincent reached the boulders that stretched below the downpouring waters. And scaling them, he stepped behind the falls to where the water-worn depression was only knee-deep.

Mesmerized, he stood there, blank, amazed. He turned and allowed the waterfall to strike against his back. His drenched mane slapped against his skin. And closing his eyes, he slowly surrendered to the tantalizing effect.

Tilting her head, Catherine rinsed the remaining shampoo from her hair. The warm soapy water flooded down her back and buttocks. As the water rinsed her body, it was like hands sliding over her--fingers stroking, caressing, touching her everywhere. She smiled in pleasure at the lusty sensation, quickly becoming caught up in the sensuous feeling.

Vincent gasped at the sudden tingling in his fingertips. Opening his hands, he studied the calloused palms and the padded tips beneath rounded claws. Something was happening.

He reached through the ligaments of the bond, centering on Catherine's emotions. And although their connection had ebbed with the distance between them, he instantly recognized she was simultaneously experiencing this empathic encounter. For some reason, their physical stirrings coincided so distinctly, it was as if she were here, with him, beneath the waterfall.

His heart pounded as he called to her through the bond.

Catherine staggered in surprise. Running her hands up the length of her arms, she clasped her shoulders in an attempt to shake off the illusion, the effect of too many hours in the sun. She put her hands up to push the wet hair from her face, stunned as the impact suddenly became undeniable to her. And with a glint of wonder, she circled, half-way expecting to see Vincent standing behind her, for his presence had become so tangible.

Catherine gasped as the carnal sensations grew stronger and more compelling. She closed her eyes and allowed her body to slowly unveil itself to him. And yet, her mind could not help but question her very response: it was true their physical union had strengthened their mental bond, but to what degree?

Oftentimes over the past few months, she had physically felt the security of Vincent's embrace surround her, the familar comfort of his heart beating alongside hers although they were miles apart. But she always attributed it to the unique harmony of their bond.

But this? This stirring within that could not be disputed...

Her eyes flashed open. She fell against the ceramic wall, astonished to realize how much her body suddenly ached for him. The warm water caressed her nakedness, but the contact against her skin was his touch, his gentle stroking and exploration of her. And closing her eyes, she tipped her head back in abandonment, reveling in the waves of sensations enveloping her. She breathed one word through the pulsing din of the shower, "Vincent..."

Vincent felt Catherine's recognition wash over him--a slender, delicate thread forming between them. He felt the yielding curves of her shower-drenched body cling to his as she opened to him. Unconsciously, his lips parted. He tilted his head back, his tawny-gold mane scattering across his wet back as delicate kisses swept down his neck. A low growl of pleasure began in his throat. "I love you, Catherine," he whispered beneath the roar of the waterfall.

And through the bond, his voice called to her, fading to a hushed stillness, "Hurry home."

Relaxing and soaking up the night breeze, Catherine leaned back in her lounge chair. She glanced at her watch, hoping Jenny would hurry.

Growing restless, she stood and pushed her hands deep into her pockets. But suddenly, her friend came bouncing around the corner in an outrageously seductive halter dress. "Well?" Jenny's voice was delighted. "Isn't it gorgeous!"

Catherine's eyes roamed over Jenny's figure. "It looks incredible on you!"

Jenny gave a little pirouette and said, "I just love these Caribbean styles--so colorful and flattering!" Her teasing eyes narrowed speculatively. "And I STILL say that oyster sundress looked beguiling on you, Cath; your Vincent would have loved it!"

Catherine's eyes shined like bits of light stone against her sunburned face. "Yes," she playfully conceded. "The dress itself was beautiful--the painting of the escargot and oysters--but the SLANG embroidered on it..."

The breeze kicked across the curls piled atop Jenny's head as she put the matter aside with good humor. "Okay, okay, so 'Eat It Raw' isn't his vernacular! "

Catherine enjoyed the girlish bantering as much as Jenny did. And as they walked towards the docks, her rebuttal was instantaneous. "So tell me about this José--is HE your 'Mr. Exotic'?"

The corners of Jenny's mouth turned up a notch. "He's cute, he's fun, he's..."

"...and this swordfish roast?" Catherine taunted further. "Perhaps your 'New Atmosphere'? Has a little fire been sparked through your 'Psychic Abilities'?"

Jenny joined right into the girlish ribbing as they approached the beach, a bonfire already blazing. "And what about YOU? Certainly you've noticed the way Mr. Handsome's been checking you out? Ten will get you one HE'LL be here tonight, too!"

Catherine gave Jenny a sidelong glance. "His name is Paul, and yes, he's handsome. But 'checking me out'? I don't think so, Jen."

"Come on, Cath!" Jenny found pleasure in this challenge. "The guy seems to pop up wherever you do!"

Catherine's eyes rolled as she stated with an exasperated sigh, "This morning, when I stopped by the tennis courts..."

"See!" Jenny blurted, her teasing gaze riveted on Catherine. "And you can just totally IGNORE him? You can just..."

Jenny suddenly hushed; she grew serious as she noticed the change in Catherine's expression. "This Vincent of yours--he's really worth a secret life? Worth passing up other possibilities?"

"Come on, Jen. Paul's just some guy..."

"I don't mean Mr. Handsome, Cath," Jenny interrupted. "And I don't mean Tom Gunther or Elliot Burch, either."

Jenny's dark eyes exposed the months of confusion as her voice rose in a questioning whisper. "But...JOE? Certainly you can see he's absolutely EVERYTHING a woman could want in a man--attractive, friendly, a gentleman--and he obviously adores you! I just don't understand it, Cath; is Vincent and this secret life really worth it all?"

Catherine paused, glancing out over the sea as it splashed against the bank of white sand and rock. She felt an air of calm and confidence as she turned and faced her friend's concerns.

"How can I describe it, Jen? Vincent is my love; he's my life." Catherine's expression was full of strength, shining with an unwavering and serene peace as she continued. "To fall in love with him..."

She suddenly stopped; and smiling, she corrected, "No...to have Vincent fall in love with ME...is the most overwhelming thing that could have ever happened to me."

She glanced up at the moon and the way the clouds danced across it. "I know it's difficult for you, as my friend, to accept such secrets, Jen. But, I assure you--I won't be so mysterious forever." She lowered her gaze and met her friend's fixed look. "When the time's right, you WILL meet him and become a part of our life."

Jenny's troubled spirits quieted. "You really love him. So much so, that

you don't regret turning your back on the rest of the world."

Catherine felt a strange, numbed comfort as she smiled and assured her friend, "Love isn't what the world holds for you, Jen; it's what you bring to it."

Jenny tried weighing the complete structure of events. "After your attack, you began acting so strangely that I wondered if your elevator ran all the way to the top! I even dreamt about you."

Catherine's laughter was low and throaty as she replied, "You and your dreams!"

But Jenny's hands unconsciously twisted together. "This particular one was so relevant, so prophetic."

Catherine could feel Jenny's eyes boring into her as she continued. "I was seated in the back of a large auditorium, and suddenly you appeared in the front row, standing and facing me. Your scars were healed, and I called to you across the seats. I asked how you were. I figured you'd walk up the aisle to come sit with me, but then a strange thing happened."

Catherine's loneliness and confusion from those days welded together in an upsurge of devouring yearning. "And then what, Jen?"

Jenny reached out and caught Catherine's hand in her own. "You began climbing OVER the seats to come to me. I remember wondering why you didn't just take the easy way, but then I woke up, and I knew you were facing unspoken hurdles."

Jenny's brow creased with apprehension. "It frightened and saddened me that you kept it all to yourself."

Catherine squeezed Jenny's hands. "I'm so sorry Jen; I wasn't able to share it. Even with you."

Jenny nodded her understanding, but a bemused smile touched her lips. "Eventually, you seemed to have this sense of conviction about you--a constant determination that became a part of you." In spite of herself, Jenny chuckled. "I found I wasn't worried any longer--just curious!"

The change of mood pleased Catherine. She delighted in the return of gentle camaraderie between them as Jenny stated with a warm smile, "I hope someday I'll find somebody like your Vincent." Catherine couldn't help bursting out laughing. "There really ISN'T anybody like 'my' Vincent!"

Jenny gazed into her eyes with amused wonder. "How can one person be everything, Cath?"

And drawing a deep breath, Catherine whispered, "I don't even ASK that question anymore..."

Vincent pulled the drawstring of a heavy muslin satchel, and strung it over his head. Slipping his left arm through the thong, he nestled it against his ribs.

There was an air of anticipation about his tall figure as he crossed his chamber. He lifted a bouquet of roses from his desk, and lay them on a stretch of brown paper. Silently, he ran his fingers along a folded parchment containing

Catherine's name. And setting it among the roses, he gently fastened the parcel closed.Suddenly, Vincent's mind and body froze. His eyes brightened with contemplation; Catherine had returned home.

He slipped the parcel down the back of his shirt, wanting to protect the delicate buds while scaling Catherine's apartment building. And grabbing his cloak, he quickly fled the tunnels.

The evening was silent but for the muffled sound of Vincent's boots landing on Catherine's balcony. He swung his legs over the wall, but reaching for the door handle, he hesitated; he had never entered Catherine's home in her absence. Inclining his golden head, he gazed at the satchel around his neck. And with eager anticipation, he swung open the doors.

The full moon shone into the apartment, polishing the soft carpet with its radiance. As Vincent lowered his hood, a shaft of light struck his hair, causing it to shimmer like dark gold. He quietly closed the doors behind him. And removing his cloak, he set it on a chair, laying the parcel of roses atop it.

Glancing around Catherine's apartment, his face kindled with a reverent expression. Her home was furnished with simple yet rich elegance. He was a massive presence among such delicacies.Lifting the satchel from his neck, he loosened the drawstring. Crouching, he withdrew and set on the ground a candle and pewter saucer. Scooting back, he set up a second, third and fourth. Reaching to the bottom of the satchel, he withdrew two splinters of wood, one dipped in sulfur, and the other a grated wooden block. And striking the two together, a small flame ignited.

Vincent lit the four candles. Standing, he straightened his shoulders and gazed one last time around her apartment before turning away. And blending into a dark corner, he leaned against the wall and waited.

The key turned in the lock, but Catherine stood frozen in the doorway. The tantalizing candlelight filled her senses, and she knew immediately. "Vincent?"

She quickly closed the door and set down her suitcase. And as his tall figure stepped out from the shadows, his voice spoke soft and sensual, "Welcome home, Catherine."

He looked like a romantic dream, standing there, his eyes melting into hers. Catherine's gaze lowered and swept over the floor candles. "Four long days?" she identified with a smile.

"Four longer nights," he whispered with quiet emphasis.

The underlying sensuality of his words captivated her, and in one forward motion, she collided against his powerful body. As she threw her arms around him, she could feel his supple muscles tense as he held her hard against him, breathing her name into her hair.

Catherine leaned back to gaze at him, the passion in her eyes beckoned irresistibly. But Vincent merely stared back, stunned, as he cupped her face in his beautiful and strong hands.

"You glow, Catherine." His voice was a velvet murmur. "Like heated

copper."

She chuckled at his obvious enchantment. "A Caribbean tan," she emphasized the distinction. "But two days ago, I looked more like a slab of red meat!"

Vincent's gaze lowered down her throat and along the neckline of her opal blouse. The contrast against her burnished flesh was accentuated by the flicker of candlelight, and the wide-eyed innocence of his eyes betrayed his curiosity.

Lifting one hand, Catherine unfastened the buttons of her blouse and gently parted it. Vincent's gaze riveted at seeing she was braless tonight, but instantly his eyes moved across the white roundness of her breasts, so smooth, so pale--and so little left untanned?

Catherine tried to suppress a giggle as she instantly read his surprise. His naive reaction amused her, and with the tips of her fingers, she traced the wide V of her tanline. "Jenny doesn't have ANY white swimsuit line to mar her all-over tan."

Vincent's eyes widened and instantly shot up to lock with hers. A lingering flash of humor still played across her face. Smiling, she withdrew her fingers and flattened her hands against chest. "But then again," she whispered, "that's Jenny!"

Vincent gathered her back in his arms and she buried her face against his broad chest. She inhaled his musk scent, delighted in the coarse texture of his shirt against her smooth cheek--and suddenly, she realized he wasn't wearing his cloak.

Lifting her head, she glanced around the candle-lit room, and she smiled as she noticed it on the chair, discovering his parcel, as well.

Catherine tilted her head and gazed questioningly up at him. But he merely nodded back without speaking. And withdrawing from his arms, she turned and approached the chair.

Gently opening the parcel, she gasped in surprise at the dozen long stemmed roses. "Vincent," she breathed. "They're beautiful!"

Her name was written on a folded parchment among them--a paper of such fine texture, Catherine knew immediately it came from the pages of Vincent's personal journal--and she read it aloud:

vi.

"There within my brightest dreams,
a possible future shines.
Wherein my soul could scarcely breath,
Untouched, unshared by thine.
If ever two were one,
than surely we."

(vi) Inspired by the works of Adelaid Ann Proctor and Anne Bradstreet

Catherine closed her eyes as tears brimmed the corners. Carried away by her own response, she failed to hear Vincent approach from behind. But she felt his hand brush the hair from her neck before planting a kiss there, and her heart turned over in response. She swiveled in his embrace, and her mouth automatically found its way home.

She pressed her open lips to his, feeling the tightening swell of his passion as she molded against the hardened lines of his body. Desire blazed through her like Caribbean heat, and as her hands gripped his back, she buried her fingers in the thickness of his mane.

"Let me first slip off my coat," she teased as she nibbled at his lower lip. "It would make things easier!"

Vincent's mouth recaptured hers, more demanding this time. She was taken back by her own eager response as a tingling began in the pit of her stomach. He swept her, weightless, into his arms, and carried her towards the bedroom. But tenderly cupping his face, she whispered, "Vincent...wait."

His eyes locked with hers, confused by the outpour of emotions racing through the bond. Easing down, she slipped her coat from her shoulders, letting it fall in a pool at her feet. She glanced at the candles surrounding them. "It's so perfect right here, Vincent...for starters." And slowly, she removed her clothes and stood naked beneath his gaze.

His eyes raked over her suntanned body. He cupped her breast, white in contrast, and outlined the tip with his thumb. The gentle massage sent currents of electricity through her, and she stepped closer to him, molding her curves against his warm contours.

Catherine wound her arms around Vincent's waist. Sliding her fingers inside the top of his trousers, she untucked his shirt. And shivers of delight followed her touch as she began the sensual process of unclothing him.

The lovers lowered to their knees, surrounded by an array of clothing. Pulling her to him, Catherine was conscious of where Vincent's flesh touched hers, meeting hers in a heated clasp. He opened his mouth over hers with a kiss as challenging as it was rewarding, and his hands sent involuntary shivers through her as he explored the hollow of her back, lowering and tightening over her buttocks.

The prolonged anticipation became unbearable. Vincent's hands, massive and strong, slid up her back to lower her to the floor. But before his body could imprison hers in a tangle of arousal, Catherine straightened. She rolled him over, instead. And climbing atop, she gazed down at him, visibly trembling with intensity as he lay beneath her.

Vincent's fingers roamed over Catherine's tanned skin, lingering at the lines where dark and light met. She closed her eyes and softly moaned at his arousing exploration.

The shapely beauty of her body taunted Vincent. His fingers swept across her silken belly. Without warning, his hands slid over her hips and circled her waist to lift her intimately onto himself. And with a gasp of pleasure, their bodies joined, moving in exquisite harmony.

She matched his urgency with a desire that had grown to fiery proportions. The need was pure and explosive, and he ached to surrender to the burning sweetness that seemed captivated within. But as he drew near, he clenched his teeth, bringing himself under control in order to first draw Catherine to the height of passion, freeing in her a burst of sensation before following her release with his own. And as she collapsed atop him, she reached for his hands, entwining her fingers with his much longer ones.

Dragging their joined hands along the floor, Catherine locked her elbows overhead, tangling their fingers in the moist disarray of his mane.

Vincent brought his mouth to hers, his lips warm and sweet as he kissed her. He could not speak, he could only marvel.

As she deepened their kiss, he softly moaned, "THAT was STARTERS, Catherine?"

"Mmmm," she replied as her mouth travelled his jawline, tasting his salty skin. "Perhaps we'll just STAY here..."

"It's not I who has done the giving;
It's you who have opened my eyes
to everyday miracles..."

After lovemaking, Vincent and Catherine had settled on the balcony. Although her apartment had become their private domain, intimate moments were still shared on that special terrain between their separate worlds.

Vincent gently closed Catherine's gift to him--her written words to him--but she recited the last passage aloud as she folded her hands over his:

"I have merely come to remember
that the world is, indeed, beautiful
and wondrous enough to warrant
your rousing me back into it."

Vincent's heart warmed as Catherine finished with a tender voice. He parted his lips and softly exhaled, his eyes brimming with love as they clung to hers, prolonging their moment of intimacy.

Her own eyes grew large and liquid. "I was torn, Vincent; I believed my world was lacking because of your absence in it. But because of you, I have come to remember."

Catherine offered him a grateful smile. "Wait here, Vincent" she whispered mysteriously. "I have something else for you." And as she slid gracefully to her feet, his eyes followed her beyond the french doors.

Vincent tilted his head, glancing up at the full moon. A bright star caught his attention. He was momentarily captivated, recalling the time as a child when

he had found his own way to an entrance Above. He had stood at the threshold, frightened, yet hypnotized by a night sky that sparkled even more brightly than the reflections at the Mirror Pool. And gazing upwards, he had made a request on what he believed might be the Wishing Star. It was brighter than the others; larger, too. And counting the heavenly bodies, Vincent had noticed it was the third star from the moon.

As he peered at the sky from the balcony, his eyes suddenly widened. Once more, the brightest, most largest star, was the third star from the moon.

Catherine returned and stood over him, puzzled. She regarded him with searching wonder. And as his eyes met hers, his gaze seemed to come from a long ways off.

She lowered onto his lap. Giving him a box, her mouth curved into an unconscious smile.

His eyes locked with hers. "A...surprise?"

"To us both," she responded.

Opening the lid, Vincent lifted out a tissue-wrapped parcel. And unfolding the secure covering, his eyes brightened in amazement at the clear vase within, V-shaped and crystal, sealed shut with an edging of black coral.

Tilting the vase, Vincent noticed it was filled with a liquid.

"Rainwater," Catherine explained. "There was a time when my own vision was so blurred, it was like rain scattering my heart into blindness."

She cupped his chin in her delicate hands and lifted his face. "One night, it rained for hours. But even through the storm, I could see the stars and the moon--and it was YOU who opened my eyes."

She gently stroked his cheek. "I gathered the rainwater to bring back with me--a reminder that you were right, and that the world is, indeed, beautiful."

Vincent's gaze was soft as a caress as it travelled her face and searched her eyes. "It is YOU, Catherine, who has done the giving; it is YOU who has opened MY eyes to miracles."

His breath was warm as he continued. "Your love alone has created a colorful, magical spell in my life. My surroundings have unfolded new meanings--a whole new nature has been revealed even within myself, since finding you."

Putting a large hand against the nape of her neck, Vincent drew her closer against himself. Catherine could feel his heart beat against her cheek as he whispered into her hair, "It is I who has come to believe that the world is, indeed, beautiful."

His hand reached for her face she had buried against his chest. With the soft furred backs of his fingers, Vincent caressed her cheek. And slowly tracing her jawline, his hand moved to cup her chin, lifting her eyes to his.

Catherine smiled at him, and as he smiled back, she leaned forward to gently kiss him with a love of purity more so than passion. Her lips moved slow and thoughtful across his. Her hands travelled around his shoulders and moved into his hair, the course thickness of his mane weaving through her slender fingers.

But Catherine did not deepen their kiss. Rather, she drew back and stared at him with rounded eyes. "All taste, all pleasure, all desire, are you combined, Vincent," she spoke in a voice as calm and steady as her gaze. "And if there is beauty in the world, that beauty is surely this."

Connecticut

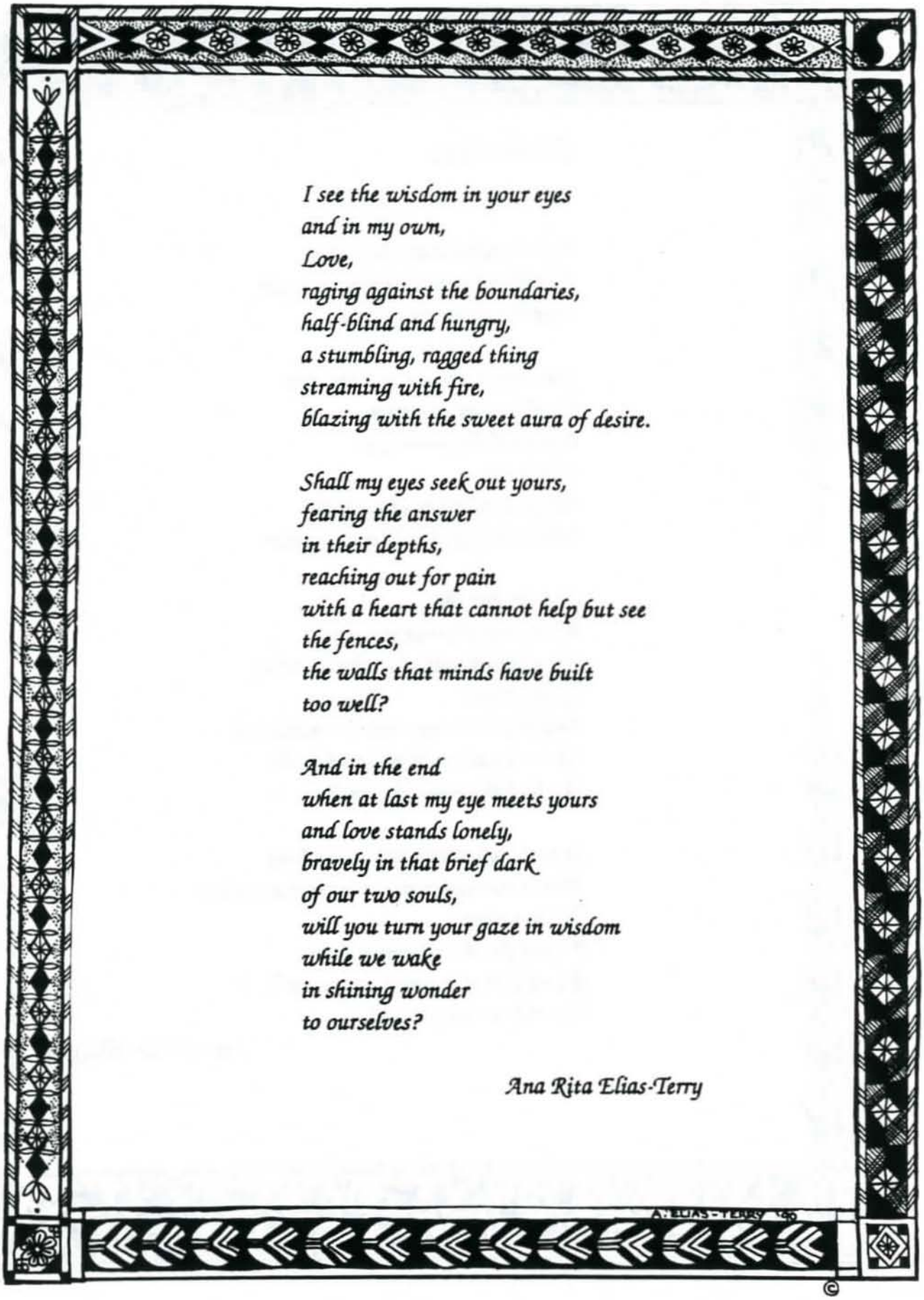
A quiet pond is discovered on
A cool Spring morning as we walk
Together upon the ground.

Greenery shimmers and sparkles
On the water's surface.
It is as if the green hues
Of the trees
Merge inexorably, exquisitely
With the blue ripples of the water.

Or is it that the
Refreshing blues in the sky
Have joined with the vibrant colors
Of the trees.
And this harmony, this lovemaking of
Nature's palette is reflected in the
Truth of the morning pond?

Something unimagined, something
Wondrous occurs on the sparkling surface
Of the water.
A quiet pond is discovered on
A cool Spring morning as we walk
Together on the ground.

Joyce Fuller Kleikamp



I see the wisdom in your eyes
and in my own,
Love,
raging against the boundaries,
half-blind and hungry,
a stumbling, ragged thing
streaming with fire,
blazing with the sweet aura of desire.

Shall my eyes seek out yours,
fearing the answer
in their depths,
reaching out for pain
with a heart that cannot help but see
the fences,
the walls that minds have built
too well?

And in the end
when at last my eye meets yours
and love stands lonely,
bravely in that brief dark
of our two souls,
will you turn your gaze in wisdom
while we wake
in shining wonder
to ourselves?

Ana Rita Elias-Terry

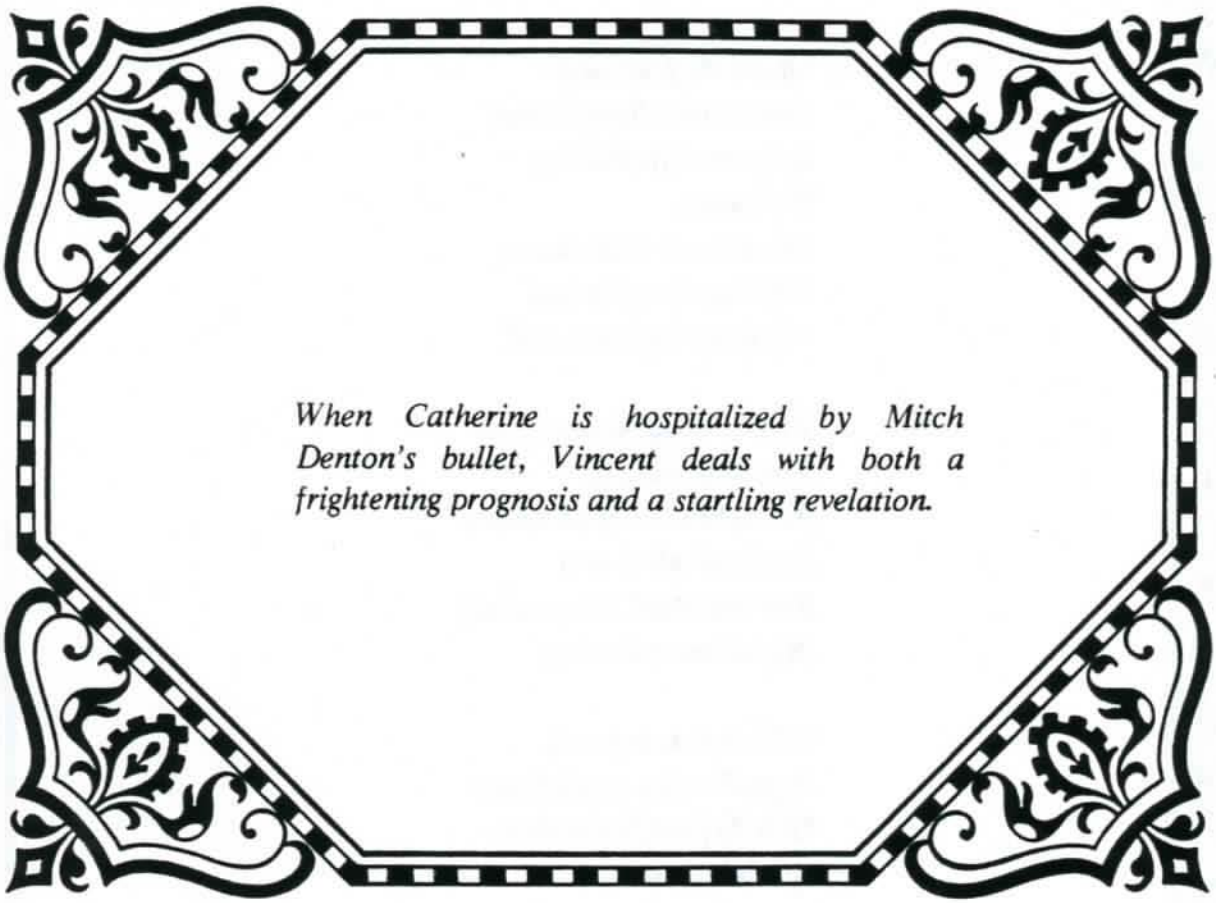
Fear of Ultimate Destiny

Of all the fears and
Terrors that have loomed
Large and forbidding
Before me,
There is one that causes
My breath to flee and
My heart to freeze still.

Ironic, really, how great a
Fear this truly is,
Yet, when analysed with a
Rational mind, or a
Fair standard, it represents
My ultimate destiny.

Who is not, in truth,
Apprehensive at the least,
Utterly petrified at best,
Of their Destiny?

Joyce Fuller Kleikamp



When Catherine is hospitalized by Mitch Denton's bullet, Vincent deals with both a frightening prognosis and a startling revelation.

Peter's Prescription

by Ann R Brown

"Vincent?" Catherine's sight was blurred by the painkiller that Dr. Peter Alcott had made her swallow. Everything was confused and her chest hurt cruelly.

"Sshhh." Vincent leaned over the hospital bed, gripping the railing. Catherine's face was so pale and drawn that his heart contracted. Still, she had survived Mitch's bullet and the emergency surgery, and Vincent told himself that the worst was over.

"You -- here?" Even half asleep, she wondered how he had gotten to her room.

"I'm here." It was a quiet statement. What it meant was: I'd like to see anything or anyone keep me from you.

"I had a dream about you." Catherine's voice was a thread of sound. The medication was powerful. Red circles were beginning to revolve in her mind...

In wonder, Vincent exclaimed, "About me?"

Frowning slightly, Catherine tried to remember. "We were walking down Fifth Avenue. The sky was blue..." Her thoughts trailed off.

"And then?" He knew she should sleep, but it meant everything to Vincent to see her awake after the black terror of the past few hours.

"You bought me ice cream." She smiled faintly.

Vincent tried to smile too, but the horror was too recent.

"And no one looked twice." Catherine was drifting away. The red circles were booming now, growing larger and smaller, larger and smaller...

He leaned farther over the bed railing in a gesture of protection that was instinctive. If she had died, it would have meant the end of everything for him.

Catherine stirred in her sleep. She reached up a little, then her hand slipped down to the coverlet. "No more parting for you and me," she whispered. "Vincent. I want to marry you."

Her eyes were closed; she didn't see the shock that exploded through Vincent. Stunned, he fell back against the wall, pressing one hand to his chest, as if he had been struck by lightning.

For an endless moment he supported himself against the wall, feeling his heart lurching, as he tried in vain to gather his scattered thoughts. In a puzzled way Vincent looked around the hospital room, as if reality had skipped a beat along with his heart. His first vague thought was, *But that's -- impossible.*

Suddenly dizzy, he drew a long ragged gasp, and then another, as if he had been holding his breath. "Catherine, what did you say?" His broken voice sounded strange in his own ears.

Slowly, cautiously, Vincent repeated the words over to himself, trying to order his thoughts. "No more parting. I want to..." He couldn't finish, and looked down at Catherine for help.

Sweetly sleeping, her face was pale, but peaceful, and so beautiful that tears blurred Vincent's eyes and spilled down his face. He leaned over the bedrail again and clasped Catherine's fingers. That touch was true. Though his mind was reeling, Vincent could trust that touch.

Deep inside, Vincent began to tremble with the possibility. If it were true...if it could be true... For months Vincent had waged war on his own feelings, battling against dreams that blessed and burned, vowing again and again that she must be free to follow her own path. And now, beyond all hope, Catherine had told him that her path led straight to his open arms.

With one sob, Vincent let himself believe.

Catherine didn't hear the broken words that choked from Vincent as he touched her hair that spilled across the pillow.

"Oh, Catherine! My love. My wife. For one night, to hold you -- if my life were the price I would pay it. Catherine, this has shaken me, I don't know how to bear this happiness. If ever that night happened, would you welcome me? Just as I am, will I do? If these hands of mine ever touched you, would you be glad?"

The image of Catherine in his bed was so vivid that Vincent felt a sudden pang of shame. Then, with a gasp of release, he set his imagination free. He was allowed to dream, now.

Helpless with glory, Vincent lifted Catherine's hand to his lips and kissed it again and again. "My dearest heart, I know you can't hear me. That may be best, I'm talking wildly, and you need to sleep to grow strong once more. Be well soon. When you're strong and smiling again, I'll try to tell you how I love you. Until then, just rest, and dream of ice cream, and skies of blue."

Catherine was deeply asleep; she didn't stir when he leaned over the bedrail and gently touched his lips to her forehead. Vincent could only hope that somehow Catherine's heart would hear and understand.

It was almost dawn when Vincent crossed the park and closed the iron grille of the tunnel entrance behind him. There he halted, unable to go farther. His mind was crashing from thought to thought, from anxiety for Catherine to blazing joy at her revelation. He leaned back against the wall, breathing hard, as if fighting suffocation. From around a corner limped Father, who had been watching anxiously for Vincent's return.

"Tell me you're not hurt," exclaimed Father.

"Catherine has been shot."

Father staggered. "She's not --"

Vincent shook his head. "I carried her to Lang General and laid her on the steps. Dr. Peter Alcott is on the staff there. She was rushed into surgery and I saw her for a few moments in her room. She was able to speak, and smile."

"She's in no danger, then?" Father leaned heavily on his cane. He was getting too old for such shocks.

"I think not." Vincent had to believe that. He also had to talk to someone or he would explode. "But I want to speak with you, Father."

"Of course."

Side by side they descended the great iron staircase and crossed an abandoned subway line. It was a long way to Father's chamber through brick tunnels and stone passageways that led ever downward.

Once inside his own chamber, Father sank down on one of the library steps. Long walking hurt his hip. It was Vincent, though, he was concerned about, rather than himself. "You look all in," was Father's worried comment.

"It is joy that has unsteadied me," Vincent answered. He circled the room twice before he could speak. His words came haltingly, between ragged breaths. "Father, from my childhood you taught me that love between a man and a woman could never be for me."

"I meant to spare you heartbreak," Father insisted.

"I know that. And after Lisa, I did not allow myself even to dream."

Vincent paced the chamber, clutching his head with both hands. His words were an explosion of the feelings he had held in for so long. "But now. I'm dreaming, Father! I'm dreaming!"

The older man set his teeth, shook his head. He had dreaded this from the beginning. "Vincent, this must not be. We have all tried to be indulgent and let the nonsense run its course, but you cannot let this go any further. You must end it."

Vincent laughed, but the sound ended in a sob. "That is impossible. There is nothing in me that does not love her."

Father's anger erupted. All his careful training, and still Vincent refused to see. "And yet the love you give Catherine must always be incomplete."

Vincent opened his hands. "These hands would never hurt Catherine. This body -- tell me, Father, am I forever bound to know love only in poems? Because of -- an accident of appearance, must I live and die alone?" His father's stubborn disapproval was inciting Vincent to anger. The old fears still had power but he was absolutely determined not to surrender again to Father's apprehensions or to his own.

To believe meant blessedness; days and nights -- years -- living heart to heart with Catherine. No longer would he have to torture himself with doubts and hesitations. He could love her completely, sharing everything, giving everything.

Surrendering to doubt meant a life without hope, without Catherine; loneliness that would deepen into years that ached with solitude and endless helpless wishing.

Vincent paced the chamber like a caged animal. "The one dream of my solitary existence and you tell me to refuse it? You tell me it is my life's destiny to chain myself back while at the same time I'm starving to death for her touch."

Father choked down anger to plead with Vincent. "You have nothing to offer her, nothing to give."

Vincent clutched his own shirt as if he were being torn apart by longing. "You are right. I have nothing to offer her but myself, and my whole love. If

these hands and this body are acceptable to Catherine, then to doubt myself any longer would be to doubt her. And to doubt Catherine is to wrong her. I have nothing more to say." He strode from the chamber, ignoring Father's pleas.

In his own chamber, Vincent sat down at a desk and dropped his head on his arms. Glory was rolling through him like a torrent, sweeping away all obstacles that had been built by his better judgment, as the hope that Catherine had given him battled and won against the fears of a lifetime.

He groaned, "Oh God, let it be true. Let it be true!"

Vincent could do nothing but dream. He would try to sleep and then get up again to circle the chamber restlessly. He lit a candle and tried to read some poetry but there was nothing written anywhere that expressed what he was feeling. At last Vincent could not bear the confines of the chamber any longer and he headed down the tunnel to the Whispering Gallery.

On the swaying bridge over the abyss, Vincent took a stand. He felt a rumbling in his chest and he threw his head back. His roar had the force of his whole being behind it. It was not a roar of savagery or rage, but a cry of triumph. The last barrier had fallen, the one that seemed to rise between them like a wall of iron.

The dreams he had never dared to imagine were all coming true. They would stand together in the great hall, in front of the community, and receive Father's blessing. Catherine would take his hand in front of them all as they pledged their love and their lives to each other. And then she would lie in his arms, in his bed. She might ... and she might let him ...

His exultation was so fierce that Vincent roared again. He couldn't help it.

His outburst echoed through the Whispering Gallery, reverberating against the stone walls like rolls of thunder. The ecstasy of that release drove him into another explosion, and then another as every repressed desire detonated in his imagination: himself and Catherine on his bed, her bed, the wet grass of the moonlit park, a ridge overlooking the waterfall, their spot in the tunnel beneath the bandshell. And Catherine would ... and she would want him to ...

Vincent kept on roaring until his voice was gone. At last, hoarse and laughing a little at himself, he returned to the Tunnels and to Father's chamber, to borrow a bottle of cough syrup.

When he pushed through the curtain Vincent saw that his father was not alone. Dr. Peter Alcott was with him on the library balcony, an open medical book in his hand. Tall and grave, Peter towered over his old friend.

Vincent looked up, questioning with his eyes: he'd lost his voice completely.

Peter descended the steps slowly and placed a hand on Vincent's shoulder. "I have some news for you, Vincent. It's not good news. We had to rush Catherine back into surgery for internal bleeding. The bullet pierced her lung, you know, and the first surgery just kept her alive until we could call a specialist in."

The shock went through Vincent like shrapnel. Like a soldier mortally wounded, he put a hand to his chest. Vincent just looked at Peter. He couldn't

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speak, anyway. Father, on the balcony above, turned away and stared at the medical book. He couldn't stand to see Vincent's face.

Peter went on. "He's the best, Dr. Kleindienst. And he's doing everything he can for Catherine. I have to get back to the hospital but Jacob can drop by this afternoon and I'll let him know the latest. Jacob, does that sound good to you?"

Vincent was still staring at Peter with the expression of a condemned prisoner looking at his judge. The fall from glory to despair was so sudden and the crash so devastating that he was only half aware.

Father coughed, wiped his eyes, and said, "Of course, Peter. Certainly."

Peter shook Vincent's shoulder in encouragement and hurried out through the curtained arch.

Father limped down the balcony staircase. There was so little he could say that didn't sound foolish. But he couldn't bear to see Vincent just standing there looking as if a trap door had opened under his feet and he was doomed to fall, forever, in darkness.

He took hold of Vincent's arm. "Get some rest."

Vincent didn't seem to hear him. After a long moment he turned though, and walked stiffly out of the chamber, one step at a time. Father could only watch him go and ache for him -- there was nothing he could do.

When he reached his own chamber, Vincent fell on the bed face down. He didn't cry. He was too numb for that. Vaguely he knew that his throat hurt him, but he couldn't remember why.

The next four days were trying ones for the community. Many Below had learned to care for Catherine, and her fight for life affected them all. Every afternoon Father put on his suit and his hat and went Above, riding the subway across town to Lang General. Then he and Peter would go together into Catherine's room, where she lay white and still under an oxygen tent. Tubes dripped liquids into her arms. All around her, machines beeped, gauges quivered, monitors traced patterns on a screen. Father would try to gather a little hopeful information to take back to the Tunnels.

"She's holding her own," Father told her friends the first day.

The second day: "She has the best doctors. Kleindienst worked with De Bakey."

The third day: "Catherine is strong, you know. She's fighting."

The fourth day: "We can all pray for her, we can help her that way." To Mary, Father spoke in an undertone. "Where is Vincent?"

"He went to the waterfall," said Mary. Her face was creased with worry. "He came to the refectory and tried to eat with the rest of us. Some of the children gathered around and patted him, in sympathy. I think he appreciated it. But after about half a bowl of soup he doubled over and threw up. I heard on the pipes he was seen heading for the waterfall." Hesitantly, Mary added, "How

is she really?"

Father rubbed his eyes in utter weariness, then glanced up to see Peter coming into the chamber.

"Where is Vincent?" asked Peter.

Wordlessly, because he was afraid to ask, Father led Peter down the stone corridor, past a workroom where Rebecca was dipping candles, past the pipe-chamber with its constant rattle of messages, past Cullen's woodworking den with its scent of pine shavings. A narrow passageway turned south from the main tunnels and down the slanting track walked Father and Peter.

They could hear the roar of the falls long before they reached the ledge. The view was spectacular -- a white cascade foaming into the abyss -- but neither of the men were interested in the view that day. Vincent was sitting on the ledge, looking into nothingness. When he heard the two men's footsteps he got up and faced them. He put out a vague hand to steady himself against the wall, but missed it.

Peter said, "I have some news for you, and this time it's good news. Catherine has taken a turn for the better, she's turned the corner. Kleindienst is very pleased."

Vincent didn't believe him. "She's gone?"

Impatiently, Peter shook his rigid shoulder. "No, Vincent, she's better!"

"Better?" Vincent turned his eyes toward Father, who said quickly, to reassure him, "Much better."

Vincent stood quietly for a moment, absorbing the information. Catherine was better. Much better. She had turned the corner. Catherine was going to live. Kleindienst was pleased.

Vincent's eyes closed and he crashed like a tree.

Peter opened the door for Catherine using her key. She walked slowly, stiffly across the living room, steadying herself with a hand on the furniture. Despite her pain, she sighed happily, glad to be home. Very carefully she sat down on the couch, saying, "Ten days in Lang General was a week and a half too long."

Peter frowned, lifting a suave eyebrow. Thirty years ago Peter had delivered Catherine and he still had paternal feelings. "You should have stayed another couple of days. You almost didn't make it."

Catherine's face was pale and thin, but she could still smile. "I know. I overheard the nurses say I rated a nine on the buzzard scale." She said it humorously but Peter wasn't amused. There was nothing funny about the bullet that had pierced her lung or the surgeries that saved her life.

"You shouldn't be alone while you're recuperating," he cautioned her. "One of my paramedics is a Helper -- she'll be checking on you twice a day. Kleindienst will never forgive me if his triumph is reversed."

That smile again warmed her thin face. "I won't be alone this evening.

Just unlock the balcony doors and I'll be fine."

Peter searched in his black bag and discovered a bottle of pills. "You seemed more worried about Vincent these last days than about yourself."

Catherine turned too suddenly and white-hot pain seared through her back and chest. "He's all right -- Vincent I mean?"

Peter shook his head slowly, remembering. "I suppose he is now. I've seen a lot of grief in the past thirty years but I hope I never again have to see heartbreak like that."

Tears stung Catherine's eyes. She had seen Vincent only once since Mitch Denton had gunned her down, and that was in the hospital the first night, before her condition suddenly worsened and she was moved to intensive care.

Peter placed a small bottle in her hand. "Now you take one of these pain killers. Same thing I gave you after your first surgery. It's a new experimental drug -- you won't know a thing."

"I want to stay awake a while," she pleaded.

"Swallow it now or I won't leave."

She had no choice, it seemed. It was a long pill striped black and green.

As he snapped his bag shut, Peter glimpsed a shadow moving across the balcony. He unlatched the double doors and spoke in an undertone to Vincent. "A cup of broth or orange juice if she wakes up."

"Thank you, Peter. Thank you for everything," said Vincent quietly.

To Catherine, Peter remarked, "All right, I'm gone. I'll drop by tomorrow evening."

"I'm grateful, too." Catherine caught his hand as he passed.

Peter kissed her cheek and was gone out the door.

Catherine couldn't turn very easily, she could only just tilt her head a little as the double doors opened wider. Three long strides brought Vincent to the couch and then he was sitting beside Catherine with his arms reaching around her shoulders, so gently, so carefully.

For a long while they didn't speak. Catherine leaned against his chest. There was such comfort in his nearness and in the sweep of his cloak around her shoulders. Vincent didn't want to cry and upset her so he choked down what he was feeling.

At last Catherine said, "I'm all right now."

Vincent gathered all his self-mastery and managed to say, "Never in my life have I been so afraid."

Catherine found it hard to concentrate: she thought hazily that it must be the medication. Vaguely she asked, "Mitch?"

"In jail."

"I'm glad, for Sam's sake, that you didn't..." Her voice trailed off. She tried to rouse herself: sleep wasn't what she wanted after ten days of separation from Vincent. Peter's prescription put her in a fog and Catherine wished that she had refused the pill.

"Are you in pain?" Vincent asked her.

"Not at the moment," she answered. "Not with your arms around me."

After a while Catherine murmured, "You got in to the hospital and spoke

to me, didn't you, that first night?"

"Yes." He pressed a kiss into her hair.

"That's all I remember," she confessed. "The medication knocked me out."

With that comment of Catherine's, Vincent began to realize that her memories of that night were very hazy. He told himself not to say anything that might upset her. She still seemed so frail. Cautiously he asked, "Is there anything that you recall?"

"I was really dopey. Did I talk a lot of foolishness?" Catherine smiled sleepily and snuggled closer.

Vincent waited a long time before he could answer. Catherine was alive. That was the important thing. His hour of triumph, roaring on the bridge, was far in the past and overshadowed by the terrors of the past ten days. He could not afford to be ungrateful or brood about the dream that was turning to ashes in his hands.

Softly Vincent said, "You were dreaming."

"About ice cream?" That was all that Catherine could remember.

"Yes, about that too," he answered.

Catherine looked up into his face, startled by the note of pain in his voice. "Vincent, you look awful."

He smiled then. "You should have seen me six or seven days ago."

With gentle fingers she wiped tears from his cheek. Despite all her efforts to stay alert, she murmured, "So sleepy. I'm fading out."

Very cautiously Vincent lifted her in his arms and carried her into the bedroom. He tucked a coverlet over her legs and pulled a chair close for himself. She lived, and so he could live too. That had to be happiness enough.

"Sorry ..." Red circles were rolling over her mind, carrying her away. Like her thoughts, Catherine's feelings were becoming confused.

With deep tenderness, as he brushed hair away from Catherine's eyes, Vincent put aside his own dreams. He could sense through the bond that Catherine's ordeal had left her emotions muddled and hazy.

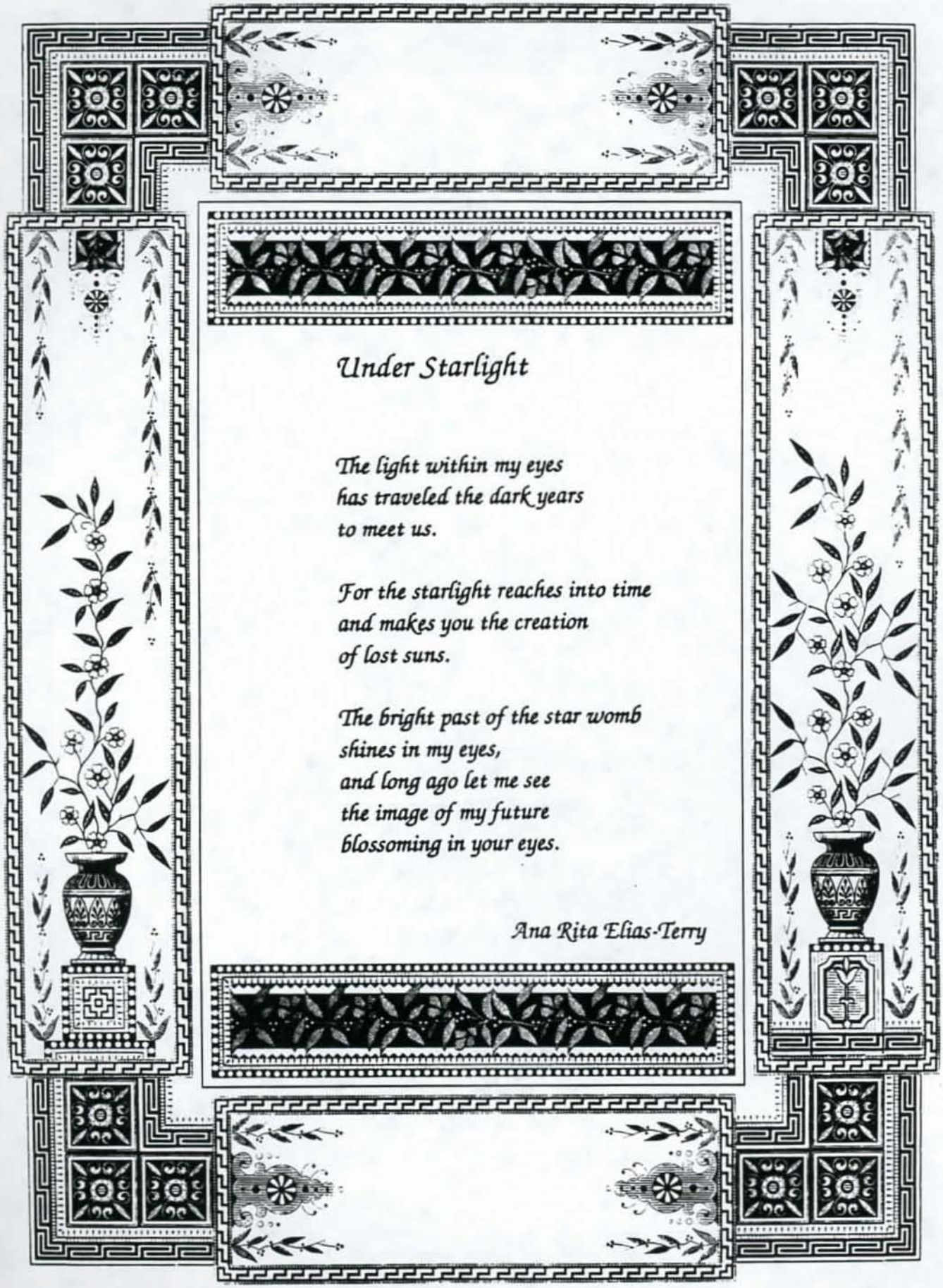
"Don't be sorry." It was something very precious to sit beside Catherine, to see her dreaming face, and to stroke her hand.

Even asleep she responded to his touch. "Vincent, I want it -- to be forever. I want to marry you."

Vincent leaned forward and rested his head near hers on the pillow. Whether the medication made her talk foolishness or whether, like a truth serum, it brought out her real feelings, Vincent could not know. He only knew that when morning came and the medication wore off, she would not remember.

Perhaps, someday the idea would come to Catherine during her waking hours, and it would seem so inevitable because she had dreamed it before. Perhaps, if he and she were dreaming the same dream, it was already coming true.

"You have my forever, Catherine," he said, though he knew she could not hear. As he rested his head near hers on the pillow, Vincent could only hope that somehow Catherine's heart could hear, and understand.



Under Starlight

The light within my eyes
has traveled the dark years
to meet us.

For the starlight reaches into time
and makes you the creation
of lost suns.

The bright past of the star womb
shines in my eyes,
and long ago let me see
the image of my future
blossoming in your eyes.

Ana Rita Elias-Terry

This Truth

Within the flame
Of a single candle
There exists the meaning of
My love for thee.

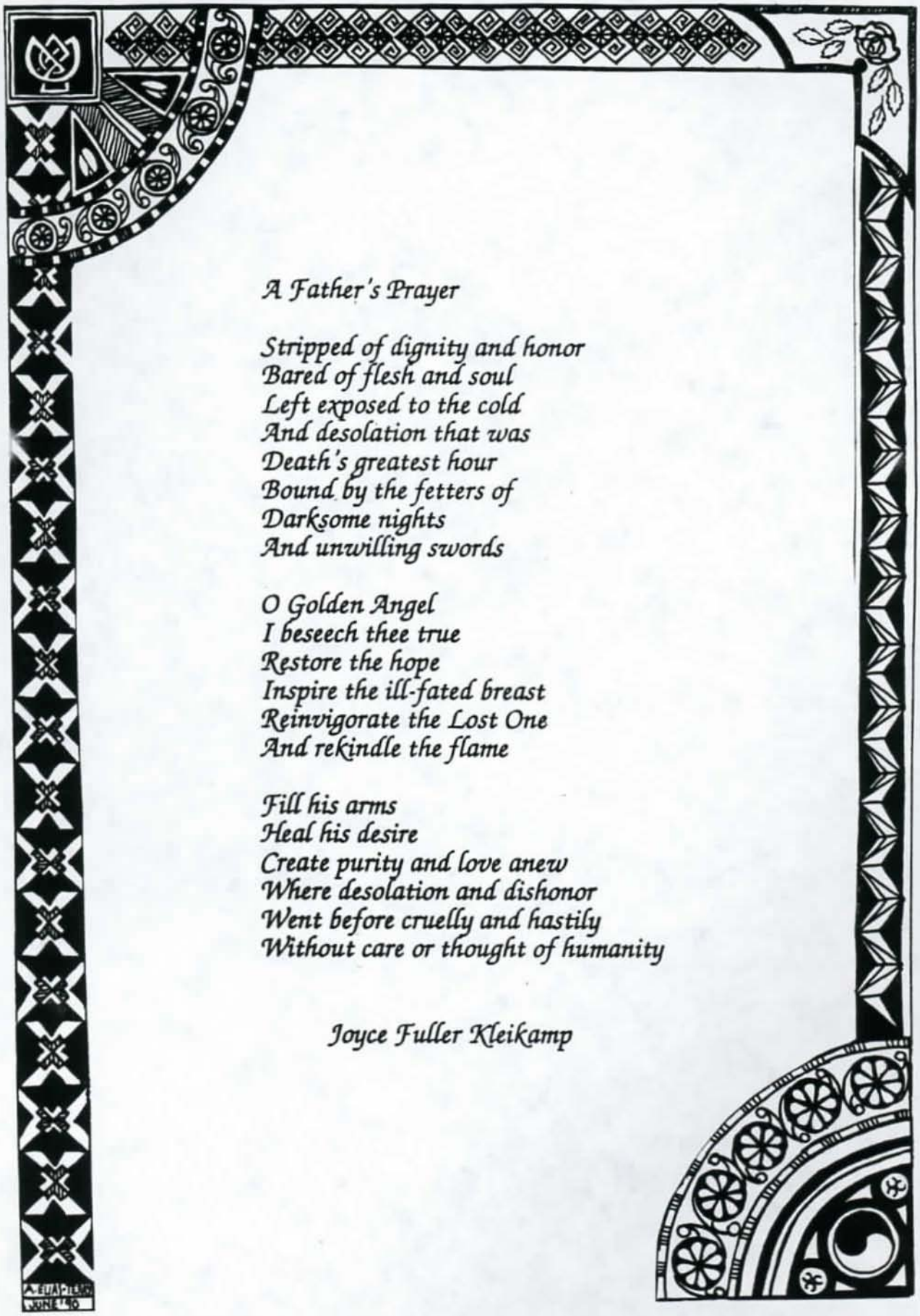
Quiet, solitary, brave and
Utterly steadfast;
Willing to create a warmth and
Comfort from the
Dampness and shadows.

For you, always for you,
This insignificant bit of
Wax and wick allows itself
To be consumed by the fire
Of devotion and the heat
Of desire.

Yet, dare I make this truth
Known to thee?
I tremble, I quiver
At the very thought!
How might I express the
Essence of my heart?
How indeed, without causing
A flash, too intense, of
All-consuming emotion.

No, my love,
The flickers and dancing
Of this, my loveflame
Shall continue to blaze
Silently in my heart,
And exist, unseen, as the
Conflagration in my soul.

Joyce Fuller Kleikamp



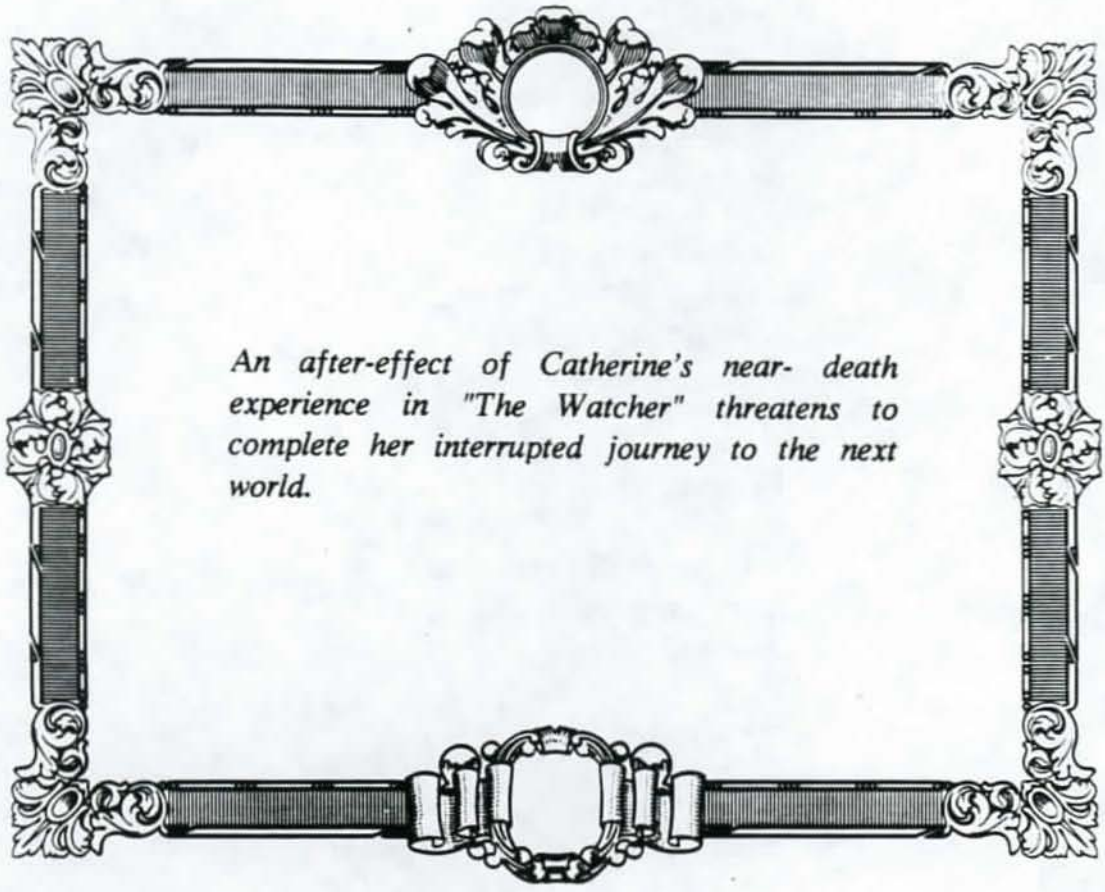
A Father's Prayer

Stripped of dignity and honor
Bared of flesh and soul
Left exposed to the cold
And desolation that was
Death's greatest hour
Bound by the fetters of
Darksome nights
And unwilling swords

O Golden Angel
I beseech thee true
Restore the hope
Inspire the ill-fated breast
Reinvigorate the Lost One
And rekindle the flame

Fill his arms
Heal his desire
Create purity and love anew
Where desolation and dishonor
Went before cruelly and hastily
Without care or thought of humanity

Joyce Fuller Kleikamp



An after-effect of Catherine's near- death experience in "The Watcher" threatens to complete her interrupted journey to the next world.

Halfway to Heaven

By Ann R. Brown

"I felt you go. I felt you go."

Vincent's voice was unsteady but his arms were strong to shield Catherine from harm.

Catherine clutched him, feeling her knees weaken. "Hold me tighter. Tighter!" Her near-death experience in the trunk of the car still sent shudders through her body. Even now, hours later, she remembered that cramped space, the seeping water, her own desperate struggles that gradually turned to despair and then to peace as death drew nearer. She was almost gone when Vincent had torn off the trunk lid and carried her to shore.

Catherine's legs sagged. As Vincent helped her to the couch she leaned against him gratefully. There was such comfort in his strength and in his unwavering love.

"You're still in shock," said Vincent. He wrapped his cloak around her. "Perhaps a doctor--"

Catherine shook her head, clutching his vest with both hands. "That's not it, Vincent. It's not just shock."

"He can't hurt you now. The danger is over." A lightning swipe of Vincent's clawed hand had finished the madman.

"The danger isn't over." Her voice was muffled in his quilted shirt.

His embrace tightened with the instinct to protect her. "How can that be?"

It was hard to explain to Vincent that she had died in the trunk of that car. "There was a bridge, to the life beyond. My mother and father were there to greet me and draw me into the light. If they had touched me I would have gone with them. You pulled me back to life. But in Joe's car, coming back here, I fell asleep, and I saw them again. They're still calling me."

Catherine's eyes were wide and wild in her pale face. "I can feel the pull -- almost see that pure light. Vincent! The bridge is still here! I could still go."

His throat closed as if a noose had tightened. For one unbearable moment on the shore, he had felt her heartbeat fail, sensed the release of her spirit. To face that again -- that black horror of loss? To face the prospect of having to live on without Catherine? No. Not again. Never again.

"Not while I have life to prevent it," said Vincent, grimly. His arms wrapped around her as if to ward off anything that might try to take her.

"Then help me. Keep me here," pleaded Catherine. "The light is beautiful but I want to live."

"Hold on to me and I'll defy death itself."

His promise was a comfort to Catherine. For a moment she relaxed, leaning against his massive chest, feeling his breathing and the strong heart that beat against her cheek. Then she said, "I have to stay awake. I'd better get some tea."

"I'll get it."

Catherine shook her head, saying, "The more I do myself, the more awake I'll be." They crossed to the kitchen and Catherine put on a pot of tea, concentrating on the task.

His heart contracted when he saw her in the light. Her face was deathly pale and her eyes unfocused. There was a tremor in her hand as she poured out two cups. She spilled a little on the counter and stood staring at the mess.

Vincent put an enormous hand gently on her arm. He reminded her, "Catherine, I'm with you. Nothing can reach you without going through me."

"I know." She tried to smile. "There's milk in the fridge." Holding on to the counter, she began the long walk back to the living room.

Vincent turned and opened the fridge. The milk carton was behind a pitcher of orange juice. Before he could move the pitcher he heard a crash.

Vincent whirled and made a spring. He caught Catherine before she could fall.

Tea stained her robe from the cup she had dropped. Her eyes were open but her gaze was wild and distant. "Mother?" she asked.

Vincent begged her. "Catherine, no. Come back."

There was a glimmering in the darkness of the living room, a haze that gathered and stretched into an arch. To Vincent's utter horror, he recognized it as a bridge. Mad with fear, he picked Catherine up and carried her back to the kitchen and splashed cold water on her face.

"Wake up, Catherine!"

"I'm all right," she said at last, dazed. "I didn't cross."

His hands were trembling, too, as he gathered her close, pressing a kiss into her damp hair.

"You saw it too," said Catherine.

"I'll bring the tea on to the balcony. The cold air may revive you." He did not want her sitting in the same room where the bridge had appeared.

It was chilly on the balcony: a cold breeze rustled the curtains of the open double doors. They drank their tea sitting at the patio table under one of the potted trees.

It was a relief beyond imagining when Vincent could see that Catherine was looking more alert. He kept a grip on her hand as she released a long sigh.

"If I can hold out until morning I'm sure it will fade."

"You'll hold out," said Vincent. "Because I'll tear that bridge apart before I let you cross."

Catherine smiled faintly. She even tried to jest with him a little bit. "Sometimes I think you do love me after all."

"I think that's a safe assumption," was his dry answer.

"The tea helps." She stretched her arms upward, shaking off tightness. "I'll get another cup."

"Stay here. I don't want you crossing the living room."

Catherine smiled as she saw him stride into the kitchen. There was no one anywhere like Vincent. In appearance, of course, he was himself alone. But also in depth of soul, in kindness, in his power of loving, there was no man to match him. She tilted her chair back, leaned her head against the bricks, and closed her eyes.

Returning with the tea, Vincent paused at the double doors. He stopped breathing and for a moment his heart stopped, too. The teapot dropped from his fingers and rolled across the terrace. Catherine stood on the terrace wall, eighteen stories above the street. Her eyes were open but unseeing. At her feet, stretching into the night, a blue bridge arched. Two darkly radiant spirits stood on the bridge,

beckoning, and a black light shone behind them.

One step forward and she would fall.

Paralyzed, Vincent could not make his thoughts coherent. He was afraid to move, afraid to startle her. He was even afraid to speak her name aloud.

All he could do was call to her through the bond, the connection they shared, and pray she heard.

Come back. Don't go. Don't leave me, Catherine.

The light grew brighter behind the two spirits: it was a dark light, a vortex. A faint whisper of music, so sweet and seductive, drifted through the air, calling Catherine to bliss.

Don't. Please! Don't leave me.

In his mind, Vincent was screaming. Slowly she turned her head: their gazes locked. She reached out a hand to Vincent as she wavered on the narrow ledge. With one leap he caught her and dragged her to safety.

Her arms linked around his neck as a drowning woman clutches a spar. Her face, though, still turned toward the music.

The music lingered, calling Catherine to come, even while the bridge and the two spirits began to dissolve. Then the seductive music changed to a wail of the utter emptiness of hunger and the mad knowledge that the hunger, too, was a void that had no end and no beginning.

"Can't you hear it, Vincent?" she murmured. There was vague bliss in her expression. "So lovely."

Vincent's control broke. He kissed her desperately, and then kissed her again until he felt her lips warm and part in response.

Roused by his intensity, she clutched him, appalled at the nearness of death. "Vincent, what happened?"

He swallowed hard before he could speak. "I saw a black light behind the spirits, a gaping hole. And the spirits themselves radiated a dark aura. Catherine, those are not your parents!"

Her eyes narrowed then as she looked over her shoulder at the balustrade. "I think you're right, I can sense something evil. I nearly fell. That angers me! Now I'm not feeling passive any longer. I want to go Below with you, where they can't urge me to jump."

"It may have been your parents at the lake, but those two on the balcony were part of something darker. Nothing will hurt you Below. I'll watch over you. Until you're safe, I'm not leaving your side."

Vincent pulled his hood over his face and got into the elevator with Catherine. She was still barefooted, wearing the pink robe stained with tea. They could only hope that there would be no other passengers at that late hour.

The elevator halted at the sub-basement. Only a couple of bare lightbulbs illuminated the furnace rooms. Vincent moved a stack of boxes aside and both of them climbed down a shaft of light into a brick tunnel.

He breathed more easily in his own world. Catherine walked alongside him, her hand tucked within his.

It was a relief to both of them to reach his chamber.

Catherine was so weary that she sat down heavily on the edge of his bed and dropped her head into her hands. It was a temptation to sleep but it was safer to stay awake and angry.

Despite her resolution, though, Catherine slipped back onto the bed and let her eyes close. Golden light filtered through the stained glass window, shining on her face and on her hair that spilled across the pillow. With deep tenderness, Vincent pulled up a quilt. To see her dreaming face deepened the ache of love that never left him, never eased.

It wasn't safe, though, for her to sleep, and Vincent raised her to a sitting position. She lolled against him, deep in dreams.

The change was so gradual that Vincent didn't notice it at first. The light through the stained glass window was changing color. The chamber, once warm with golden light, chilled with blue that seeped into every corner and washed over the bed like a drowning tide. It was Catherine who realized the danger first. She cried out in anger and staggered to her feet. Vincent shielded her with his body from a hole that opened in the wall: a dark spinning funnel. There were teeth in the depths of the whirlwind. Two spirits reached blue arms from the swirling entrance, beckoning.

Raging wind whirled the quilt off the bed and sucked it into the funnel, scattering the papers on Vincent's desk like snow. He gripped the bedpost behind him, shielding Catherine, taking the force of the twister himself. It tore off his cloak and sucked it in and Vincent braced himself against the enormous hunger that was yearning to devour them.

Deep within the funnel, pieces of souls revolved endlessly, mewing like cats in their powerless pain.

"You won't take her," Vincent shouted. "Catherine, stay behind me." He felt her slipping to the side even as he battled with all his strength to keep his footing. The hungry maw starved for them both.

He could hardly hear Catherine's shout over the moaning wind.

"We can't fight this alone. Let's try to make it to Father's chamber."

As Vincent turned, he lost his footing and fell. He grabbed at a table leg as the teeth in the mouth champed and the trapped souls whirled faster, mewing. He couldn't keep his hold: the table leg snapped. He felt himself sliding across the floor, feet first, and he uttered a despairing cry.

Catherine flung herself down on the floor beside him, gripped the bed frame with one hand and Vincent's wrist with the other.

"If you go, I go with you," she said, panting. "Fight, Vincent, fight!"

Somehow Vincent got to his hands and knees, battling the dragging force. The wind was so violent he could hardly breathe. Little by little he crawled forward until he could reach an arm around Catherine's waist. Keeping low, they fought through the blast toward the chamber entrance. Chairs and a splintered bookcase battered Vincent, hurled by the two spirits.

As soon as they crawled into the tunnel, Vincent lurched to his feet and grabbed Catherine's hand. They began to run up the tunnel. The rocks cut her bare feet but Catherine kept running. A glance over her shoulder let her know that the tornado was following. It filled up the tunnel behind them, revolving, wide open, quivering with greed.

As he ran, Vincent banged on the pipes with a rock, calling for help. To Catherine he said, "The bridge your parents extended to you was taken over by this thing -- this being."

Catherine agreed, shuddering. "It sensed a gap in the veil between life and death."

When they stumbled through the curtain into Father's chamber, the others were already there, dragged from their beds by his alarm. Father, in a shabby robe; Mary,

her hair down over her shoulders; William, burly and bearded; Rebecca with her mop of butter-colored curls, and Pascal. The pipe-master feared nothing...except the supernatural.

"It's after us," said Catherine, panting. "But it can't take us if we stay together."

"What?" began Pascal. Then he knew, for the thing burst through the entrance, scattering stones. It was black with starvation and rage. The two spirits were merely part of it, like tentacles swirling around the rim. Pascal was a brave man but he looked as though he might faint.

"Make a circle," said Mary. Quickly they all joined trembling hands to form a ring. With their arms around each other, Vincent and Catherine stood in the center.

Rebecca shouted at the gnashing maw. "You won't get them. They're ours."

Catherine was shuddering but she faced the twister bravely. Vincent's roar of defiance rose to meet the moaning wind.

It circled the chamber, splintering everything in its path, looking for an opening to swallow them all.

Father shouted, "Go back to your own realm. We defy you."

The shape of the whirlwind altered, becoming a gigantic cone, point up. It rose in the air and dropped over all of the people huddled together.

They couldn't see each other for the black wind and the rags of souls that spun in the cone. Rebecca, terrified, felt her grip loosening. William clutched her hand so tightly it hurt.

In the center, Vincent and Catherine stood together, taking the full blast of the howling wind. The teeth drew nearer and the two blue tentacles struck them as they spun. Vincent raised his head, looking directly into the black spinning center.

He said, "No. You don't have the power to take any of us while we stand together."

Pascal couldn't see Vincent, but he called out, "We won't let go and we won't break down." He clutched Mary's hand and Father's, gathering strength from their grip.

Mary closed her eyes against the stinging wind. "You've lost," she said, keeping up the bravado.

"We win," said William, and felt Rebecca squeeze his hand and repeat, "We win."

"You lose," said Pascal.

"You lose," repeated Father. The wind knocked him to his knees, but he stumbled to his feet, keeping his grip on the hands of Pascal and Rebecca.

Catherine flung back her head. "We're laughing at you!" The noises she made didn't sound much like real laughter but she was joined by the hoots and catcalls of William and Pascal. Over and over they laughed and shouted, celebrating a victory that was not certain.

The vortex spun out of control. It let out one unbearable wail of unending hunger that shrieked for a timeless moment that seemed like a thousand years to the people huddled together in its wake. The thing began to draw its coils up into itself, shrinking into a black hole. With a last dash around the chamber it vanished, leaving nothing behind but a room full of broken furniture and some wisps of souls that flitted aimlessly across the ceiling, whimpering.

Vincent staggered: Father and Pascal grabbed him before he could fall. He was stunned, amazed to be alive. "We won?"

Catherine laughed weakly, and this time it was for real. William hugged Rebecca, Pascal hugged Father and Mary, who was crying with relief.

"Our unity gave us strength," said Father. But he didn't feel so strong all of a sudden and he sat down heavily on an overturned desk to take his own pulse rate.

Everyone found their own way to regain a sense of peace and normality. Mary wiped her eyes and began to twist her tangled hair into a bun: the crisis was over and propriety reasserted itself.

Pascal stood tall. He planned in his mind an all-points bulletin that starred himself – among others.

Slapping his belly, William announced, "I'll put on a pot of coffee. And there may be a few doughnuts left from breakfast."

Catherine waved a weary hand. "Not for me. I'm too tired." She did embrace them all, though, and kiss each one in gratitude.

William used the opportunity to kiss Rebecca. She didn't object, saying to him, "I could handle a doughnut, if you have any cinnamon."

"If I don't, I'll stir some batter and fry one," the cook declared.

Vincent only said quietly, "Thank you." He had a long memory for kindness. He would not forget how his friends had gathered around and risked their own lives and souls to hold back the powers of darkness.

Mary was taking Father's pulse for him and feeling his forehead when Vincent and Catherine finally were able to finish hugging everyone and slip away.

Slowly, for there was no reason to hurry now, Vincent and Catherine made their way back to his chamber. A scorch mark six feet across blackened one wall. All his possessions were scattered and the furniture was in splinters. The overturned bed, though, was still in one piece and it was the work of a moment to straighten it out and collect a few pillows and quilts from the floor.

"You sleep here, there's a guest chamber with a cot down the passage," said Vincent. Before she could protest, he added, "Devin and I used to fight over who got to sleep on the cot. We thought it was 'camping out'."

Catherine stretched out on the bed and let Vincent tuck her in with a quilt. Her face, though pale, held no trace of fear. She looked at Vincent with such open love that his heart turned over.

She said, "On the balcony tonight -- you kissed me."

Vincent looked away. He remembered those frantic kisses as he tried desperately to revive her. And he remembered how her mouth had warmed and parted in response.

"I'm afraid I did," he confessed.

Seeing his embarrassment, Catherine couldn't resist teasing him a little. "It was almost worth being drowned for – almost."

Vincent smiled faintly but he still looked away.

Catherine went on. "Do I have to be halfway to heaven before you kiss me again?"

Vincent risked a look at her face. What he saw there was so loving, so welcoming, that he could not stop himself from taking her face between his hands and kissing her again.

She sighed happily as she linked her hands behind his neck. "Sometimes I think you do love me after all, Vincent."

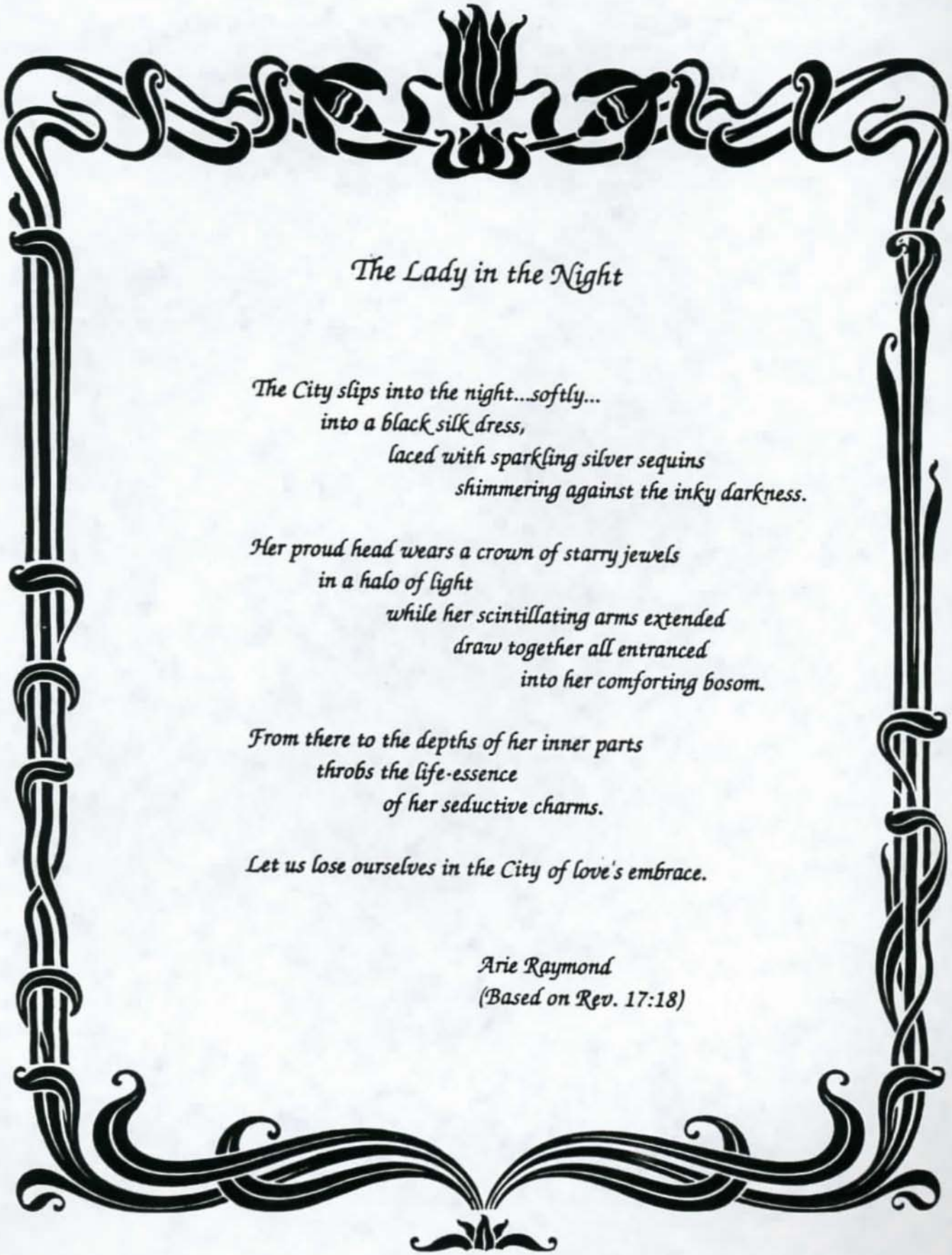
"You're fairly close to being right," he answered. She had a warm, rumpled look that stirred him deeply.

Catherine whispered, "Wouldn't you like to hold me tighter?"

Vincent kissed her again -- he couldn't help it -- but answered, "You've gone through a terrible ordeal. Rest now." He backed toward the door, treasuring the sight of her in his bed.

Her final words as she snuggled under the quilt warmed Vincent through and through. He thought about them all that night as he lay on the little cot with his feet sticking out over the end. He would doze, and wake again, and remember her mischievous look of regret, and say them over to himself.

"Ah well, too bad. Only halfway to heaven."



The Lady in the Night

The City slips into the night...softly...
into a black silk dress,
laced with sparkling silver sequins
shimmering against the inky darkness.

Her proud head wears a crown of starry jewels
in a halo of light
while her scintillating arms extended
draw together all entranced
into her comforting bosom.

From there to the depths of her inner parts
throbs the life-essence
of her seductive charms.

Let us lose ourselves in the City of love's embrace.

Arie Raymond
(Based on Rev. 17:18)

No Safe Haven

I struggle to open my eyes
But there is only blackness about.
Where has the pain-filled torment
Thrown me but in a deeper pit
Of night and despair.
Walls of brick, streets of stone
Shattered windows glitter
In the moonlight.
There is no sanctuary, nor
Place of respite.
I must flee.

What a cruel thing--this city;
Living, breathing, pulsing with life,
Yet dead. More so than any other
Lifeless corpse under the earth.
Cold, still, rotting--this city.
The rain can never wash away the filth
Just as the sun could never
Warm the hearts.
This is no refuge nor place of comfort.
I must flee.

When was it that the people here
Became faceless?
Are there no traces of compassion left,
Nor remnants of goodwill?
Crowds surge forward, oblivious to the
Screams of the frightened, the
Cries of the lost.
No one dares a momentary glance.
This is no safe haven.
I must flee.

Joyce Fuller Kleikamp

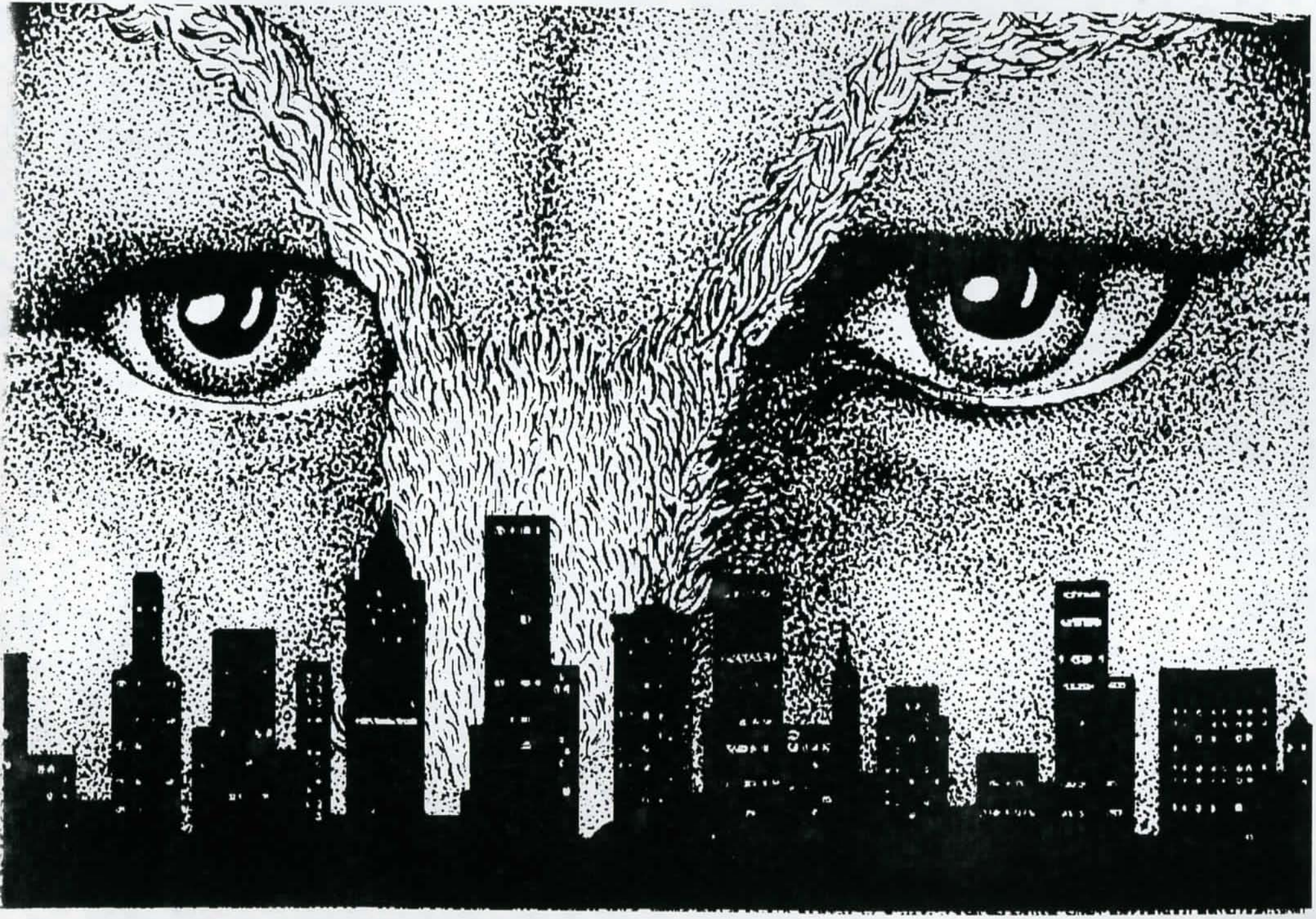
I Walk Through the City Alone

I walk through the city alone at night,
driven by the bond that still holds us tight.
The sights and sounds that surround me, I feel,
can help a broken heart to heal.

The buildings that rise up to the stars,
remind me of the towering love that was ours.
The children in the park that laugh and play
remind me of the joy that came our way.
The music that plays along the street
recalls the harmony when our souls would meet.
The highways, like arteries, connect every part.
And Catherine's compassion flowed from her heart,
Bestowing on others who, in their strife,
needed her love for a new lease on life.

When my walk is done, I go to the Park,
find the tunnels, and enter the dark.
The City still holds my body, I know.
But Catherine - my love - still holds my soul.

Arie Raymond

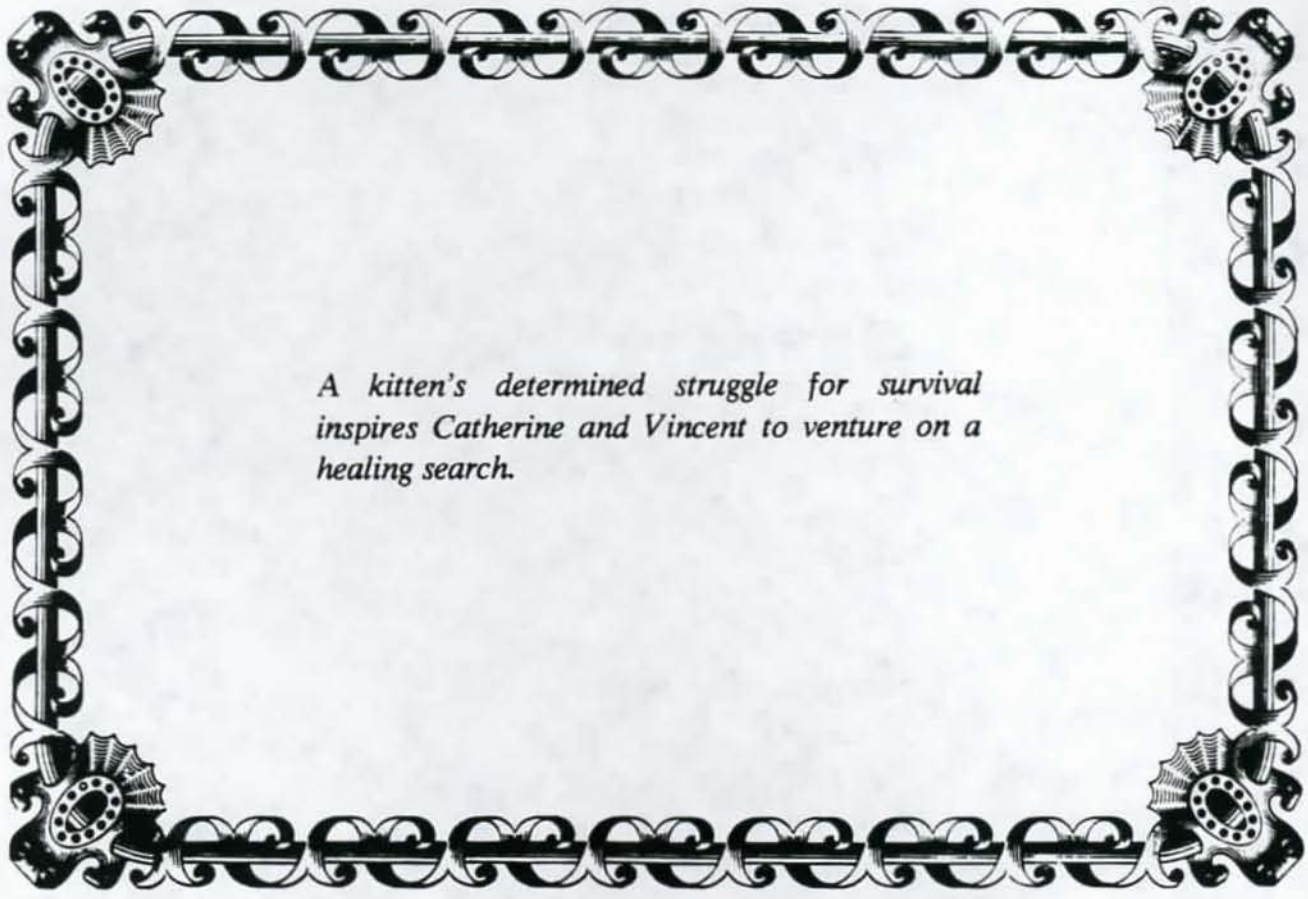


Searching Shadows

As I sit here now,
Alone in the darkness,
I wonder about the sanity
That might have been mine.
Or, at the least, in brighter moments
Might have been borrowed
For a time, then cast aside
In truth, for a lesser façade--
The mask of shadows, or
The fate of my cursed days.

The stone and brick passageways
Absorb the cries, leaving me
In silence once more.
Had I truly wailed my anguish
Or was that, too, my inner voice
My private torment?
Perhaps I have been silent for eternity.

Joyce Fuller Kleikamp



A kitten's determined struggle for survival inspires Catherine and Vincent to venture on a healing search.

Mother's Day

by Ann R Brown

"You're tramping snow all over my clean kitchen, Vincent," complained William. He took a second look at Vincent's cupped hands and asked him, "What you got there?"

Vincent sat down at one of the work tables and pulled a fold of his cloak over his lap, then showed William what he had found.

"Kittens. Six of them. I found them in the park -- the mother had been run over." He held six wriggling black spots, squeaking with hunger.

"Their eyes aren't open yet," said William. "They'll never make it without Mom."

"We'll see. We'll give them a chance, anyway." In his mind was the thought: *someone did the same for me.*

William was gruff, but he was tremendously soft-hearted. "Poor little rats. I'll warm some evaporated milk. Mix an egg yolk in it. You'll need to get a doll's bottle from one of the girls."

Smiling, Vincent pulled a doll bottle from his vest pocket. "Samantha's donation to the upkeep of the cats."

It was almost comical to watch Vincent feed a kitten which was half the size of his big hand, but it was touching, too. He held each one carefully while it sucked mightily at the bottle.

William went on rolling piecrust as Vincent said, "I'll need a box, and newspapers, and a clock. Mary told me these kittens have to be fed every two hours."

"Better you than me," exclaimed William. He watched with cynical curiosity as Vincent returned the whimpering specks to his cloak pocket. "Why bother?"

A shadow crossed Vincent's face. He didn't want to say, *I was thrown away by my mother. It hurts me to see any creature abandoned.* Instead, he answered, "I saw a mouse in the great hall."

William shook his head, amused, as Vincent left the kitchen with a cardboard box in one hand and a can of evaporated milk in the other.

As Vincent passed the children's wing, Samantha came running out to meet him, followed by little Jack, a recent addition to the Tunnel's children. Samantha's hands were sticky with paste and bits of red paper.

"My doll bottle works good," Samantha announced. She put a careful finger into Vincent's pocket and stroked one of the squeaking mites. Jack looked through a curtain of black bangs and said nothing. A Helper had rescued Jack from a violent mother and brought him Below, but not soon enough.

"We're making Mother's Day cards," said Samantha. "Most of us are

making cards for Mary since our real mothers are gone or whatever. Oh, Vincent, this one's quit!"

Limp and lifeless, it hung in her hand.

"Five left," said Vincent, a little sadly. "I'll bury this one and you, Samantha, can ask Mouse to take my sentry duty tonight. I'm on two-hour shifts for the next few days, it seems."

During the next couple of days, the status of the kittens was reported regularly on the pipes. During playtime the children looked in to Vincent's chamber to check on the three who were still alive. Usually Samantha came, since she had a vested interest in their wellbeing; sometimes Zack, who hoped to be a vet; and sometimes Jack. For hours the boy sat on the floor and watched the squirming heap, but never touched one or spoke.

Between feedings the kittens crawled around a box pushed under a desk. That's where Catherine found Vincent, wrapping a hot water bottle and a ticking clock in a towel.

"What on earth have you got?" she wondered, and dropped to her knees beside Vincent. "Oh my goodness, they're so little."

Their eyes were starting to open, slits of milky blue.

"May I feed one?"

"Please," he answered. In the past few days Vincent had gotten pretty efficient at feeding the kittens but it was clear that Catherine was a natural.

"Have you picked out names for them yet?" she wondered.

Vincent shook his head. "Father wants Portia, Caliban, and Mercutio. I can't picture Mercutio for a creature two and a half inches long. The children suggested Ninja, Rocky, and Rambo. Mary likes Fluffy, Sweetie, and Puff. William likes Ketchup, Mustard, and Relish."

Both of them laughed. As Catherine lowered the kittens back onto the hotwater bottle, she said, "I'm afraid this one's going."

Vincent picked up the dying kitten in his big gentle hand. It was too weak to swallow: the milk came out its nose. "Can't do it, can you," Vincent said softly. "You just can't manage it. Well, don't be afraid. I've got you."

Tears blurred Catherine's eyes, less for the sake of the kitten than in response to the kindness in Vincent's touch and the sadness in his voice.

"Is there something else that's making you sad?" she asked him quietly.

He hesitated, then tipped back his head a little, thinking. "Around Mother's Day I sometimes think about my own mother, whoever she might have been. I tell myself she must have been under unbearable stress to abandon me, and yet it still hurts me. Doesn't that seem strange after all these years. A person cannot miss what he has never had."

Catherine knew that proverb was as wrong as a proverb could be. She touched his shoulder in sympathy. "You know nothing about her?"

"Nothing, only where I was found, behind St. Vincent's, and the day. I've never been back there." He shrugged it off with a half-smile. "There's no point, it was so long ago." And remembering it revived old bitterness that Vincent thought he had outlived.

Catherine's eyes narrowed. "Vincent -- would you like me to do a little

A. ELIAS-TERRY

investigating? See if I can look up the old hospital records for that day? As a D.A., I can get into files. I'll do it if you want."

Vincent thought for a long time. He was still holding the kitten, who had died peacefully in the palm of his hand. "Father was all the parent I needed. I had friends, even a brother, when I include Devin. It almost seems like a betrayal of their love, to still wonder about her. It only makes me angry to think about her. It shames me to be angry over an incident thirty-four years in the past."

"Don't be ashamed of being angry," said Catherine. Her hand still rested on his shoulder, in complete sympathy. "I was angry at my mother for years after she died and left me."

Vincent sighed and his gaze was far away. He spoke, then, from his deepest pain. "If only I could know she didn't throw me away."

"I can't promise anything, but I'll see what I can find out," said Catherine.

Even after Catherine was gone Vincent still knelt on the floor beside the desk. To himself he said, "Mother, I was different. Did I revolt you? Were you frightened by my strangeness? If only I could know that in the few hours we were together, you cared for me. But that's something I'm never going to know."

Catherine parked her car in a visitor's space and checked the map again. Yes, this four-story gray brick building used to be old St. Vincent's Hospital. It still had a clinical look, perhaps because of the double wings and the ambulance parked in front. But the sign above the entrance read, "Green Pastures Retirement Home."

The receptionist was brisk and smiled with all her teeth, no doubt hoping that Catherine had a loved one to deposit there.

Catherine showed her I.D. "Are the records of St. Vincent's Hospital kept here?"

"Oh, no, Miss Chandler. All that old rubbish was boxed up and packed away in some unknown warehouse fifteen years ago. We only keep up to date records of our guests here."

Frustrated, Catherine clenched her fists. Her quest was stalled at the start.

To herself she muttered, "Stalled? Shot down dead."

There was a line of wheelchairs slowly, inch by inch, being pushed into the dining hall. Heaps of clothing slumped in each one. Little clawed hands poked out from the heaps, sometimes a turtle head.

"Is there anyone still working here who worked at St. Vincent's?" asked Catherine.

The teeth gleamed again. "They're all gone years ago. Except old Barney Ruggles. He was night watchman then. He still sweeps up. But he'll be no use to you." The receptionist pecked a button with a red fingernail.

The old man who shuffled around the corner wore a custodian's uniform five or six sizes too big for him. He used his broom for a cane. He threw a worried look at the receptionist and started to say, "I'm working on the back steps..."

The receptionist interrupted, "Miss Chandler is from the D.A.'s office so you'd better get your stories straight."

Catherine took Mr. Ruggles' arm in a friendly grip and they both went out under the glassed-in porch. There were trees in pots around garden furniture but the plants were all dead.

She could see the old man was worried about his job, and she said, smiling, "Mr. Ruggles, you have a good memory for long ago, don't you?"

Immediately he perked up. "In 1949 I drove across Death Valley in my Studebaker. Had a water bag strapped to the radiator. That car was a peach."

"That's wonderful, you do remember. How about 1954?"

Mr. Ruggles scratched his stubbled chin. "Drove to Florida. Same Studebaker. Broke down in Citrusville and never would run again."

"You worked here then, as night watchman. Do you remember the winters, how cold they were that January in 1954?"

"Why sure I do," said Mr. Ruggles. "Coldest winter I ever seen, except for the winter of '43, when I was in Saskatchewan. Drove a Packard then. It was a peach."

Catherine had endless patience and she felt for the old man. "January 12, 1954. A child was found outside in the snow, behind St. Vincent's Hospital."

Mr. Ruggles scratched his head. "Don't remember a child. Remember a woman, though, in a snowdrift."

At that bombshell, Catherine lost her breath. She stared at Mr. Ruggles in suspended animation. After thirty-four years was the mystery about to be solved?

The old man squinted ferociously. "I had it in my mind but I forget," he admitted. "Sorry but it's clean gone out of my head, I guess I can't help you."

Catherine released a sigh of bitter disappointment. She didn't want to hurt the old fellow's feelings, though; it wasn't his fault he was elderly and forgetful. Without much hope she tucked a business card into his pocket. "You'll call me if you remember more, Mr. Ruggles?"

"I sure will, Miss ... Miss ..."

"It's on the card," she said, smiling. Arm in arm they walked back through the lobby.

"Mr. Ruggles was a great help to me," said Catherine, and felt him stand taller.

"Well! I can't imagine that!" said the receptionist, and Catherine felt him deflate. As she left the building for the parking lot, Catherine saw that the lunch line had advanced about ten inches.

That night, as soon as it was dark, Catherine flung open the balcony doors. Vincent was standing in the shadows, a figure of mystery in his sweeping cloak.

She took both his hands and said, "I have a lead, an old night watchman. His memory is failing but he remembers seeing a woman that night, outside in the snow."

Vincent's grip tightened, but he said, "Catherine, I'm not certain I want to know. She dropped me there, wrapped in rags, in the snow. Nothing can change that."

A faint squeaking came from his cloak pocket. Vincent spoke to the tiny thing. "It's too cold for you out here, I'll feed you later."

"Only one left?" asked Catherine.

"Only one. But he's a tough one," said Vincent.

"Let me keep on looking," Catherine pleaded. "Such a burden of mystery for you to carry for so many years. Let me try."

Vincent took Catherine in his arms and held her gently, wrapped in the folds of his cloak. Perhaps she was the one who really wanted to know. Perhaps his mysteries burdened her, as well. Vincent knew in his deepest being that nothing she discovered could alter his love for Catherine. Vincent could only hope that the truth -- whatever it might be -- would not alter her love for him.

Softly Vincent said, "Very well. Then I will tell you this. Mary saves everything -- string, pencil stubs, everything. She still has the old rags in which I was wrapped. Jamie can bring you the parcel tomorrow afternoon."

"Can she!" Catherine was struck through. "That might tell me a great deal." She sensed his unease and added, "Whatever we may learn, I love you completely."

It was storytelling time in the schoolroom, which was festooned with red heart Mother's Day cards. Mary was taking a well-earned break while Vincent sat in a circle of children with a picture book in his hand.

"...so the three Billy Goats Gruff crossed the bridge and got fat on the fine green grass," said Vincent. He showed them the picture of the troll being carried away down the river.

"Read us another one, Vincent," the children begged.

"Mary will be returning in a moment," he answered. "Besides, I have to warm some milk for my friend here." Smiling, Vincent lifted the kitten from his pocket and all the children gasped in delight.

A little girl asked, "Is that cat your best bud?"

"My brother's my best bud," called another child.

Everyone seemed to have a buddy except Jack, who sat apart, watching everything silently from behind his bangs. Out of the corner of his eye, though, Vincent could see that the child was edging closer, inch by inch. Vincent kept on talking as he got the bottle from his vest pocket. Jack crept nearer and nearer until he was sitting next to Vincent.

The kitten was mewing for its milk. Jack opened his mouth as if he would mew, too, but did not make a sound.

Vincent spoke very quietly to Jack. "Maybe when he gets bigger, he can be your buddy."

An older boy shouted, "Joke doesn't have any buddies. He doesn't even talk."

A look from Vincent's blue eyes silenced the boy into paralysis. "Jack has two buddies. A big one and a small one." Gently he rubbed Jack's thin shoulderblades.

Jack didn't answer in words. One small finger stole out and touched the black tail.

Mary bustled back in, winding a piece of string around a yarn ball. She saved everything. As he got to his feet and handed her back the class, Vincent wished with a sudden stab of trepidation that Mary had thrown a few things away.

It was almost with reluctance that he climbed over the balcony railing that night. When Catherine opened the doors, he turned away and stared at the stars.

He said, almost gruffly, "I know that Jamie brought you the parcel. But you could learn nothing from those rags."

Her hand on his arm was very gentle. "Vincent, I learned a great deal. Let me show you."

Vincent stared out into the night. Suddenly with all his strength he didn't want to know. Old resentment against the woman who had thrown him carelessly aside to die surfaced in Vincent, despite the fact that he thought he had forgiven and forgotten long ago. He wanted to toss the bundle over the railing with the same carelessness.

Vincent looked down into Catherine's face. Love and concern shone there for him, and something else. Happiness. She wanted to show him what she had found. It took a terrible effort to do as she wished. He battled inward pain that almost choked him and at last said, "Very well."

Catherine and Vincent sat on the balcony, the parcel on her lap. The brown paper was dry with age and the string was stiff. Inside it were bits of white cloth and yarn.

"Vincent, your mother made these things," she said quietly. "This isn't rough readymade stuff from Taiwan. Every stitch on this little shirt was made by hand, one by one. She wanted you." Gently Catherine stroked the tiny garment. It was hard to imagine Vincent so small.

Pain closed his throat like an old wound. "Somebody else could have sewn it."

"Nobody but a mother would do it," said Catherine. "Every patient stitch, for weeks and weeks, while she dreamed of the baby to come. This little blanket may look like a rag but it's hand crocheted. Look at those shells, every one perfect."

Vincent reached out to touch the blanket, then pulled his hand back. "Then after she saw me she dropped me in the snow and walked on."

Catherine spoke in deep sincerity. "I don't think she could have, Vincent. I think you can trust these stitches to be telling you the truth."

The phone jangled. Catherine left the parcel beside Vincent as she stepped into the living room. An instant later, she gestured wildly for him to come in.

Catherine whispered, "Take this phone, I'll get the line in the bedroom. It's the old night watchman from St. Vincent's."

Vincent stood rigid, the phone a couple of inches from his ear.

From the bedroom extension, Catherine urged the old man on. "Hello, Mr. Ruggles, I'm so glad you called me."

"I remembered something, Miss. And I didn't lose your card, neither. January 12, 1954. Coldest night of the coldest winter. Froze up my Studebaker and I had to take a bus to work that night. I stepped out the back for a smoke -- I always smoked Lucky Strikes. L.S.M.F.T. I remember that slogan. Lucky Strike Means Fine Tobacco. There was a woman in the snow."

Vincent's grip on the receiver almost crushed the plastic.

"I carried her inside. Pretty face, but so sad. Saddest face I ever seen. Frozen, she was, just about. She only lived a little while and she kept grabbin' at the doctor's sleeve with her cold fingers and sayin, "Get him in! Get him in!" Finally I couldn't stand it so I took a look around the back steps. Lots of footprints but nothing else. If she'd lost somethin' somebody else had picked it up. So I went back inside and I seen she was dyin.' She grabbed my sleeve and looked at me with those eyes and I couldn't stand it so I told her, "We got him in." She gave me a grateful look -- my gosh, I'll never forget it -- and she kept that look even after she was gone."

Catherine swallowed hard and said, "Thank you, Mr. Ruggles, thank you a thousand times. I'll write a letter to Green Pastures and tell them how much you helped us at the D.A.'s office."

"Glad to do it, miss," said Mr. Ruggles. "That woman. She was a peach."

"I think she was," said Catherine.

She put down the phone and crossed into the living room and opened her arms to hold Vincent while he cried. It was a lifetime of grief that he had to sob out, rough sounds that tore his chest, while Catherine held him.

"Just cry," she said.

When at last his sobs loosened into gasping, Vincent wiped his eyes on his sleeve. "I never realized how deeply that old pain still hurt me, until now."

Catherine still kept hold. "A cruel burden has been lifted from you, at last."

"What you've done for me, Catherine, what you've given me. You've given me back my own mother."

Vincent steadied himself against the back of the couch and drew Catherine into his arms. After a long moment he said, "There is something I must do."

"I'm with you, if you want me," said Catherine.

His look was as grateful as the look his mother had given Mr. Ruggles. "I must do it alone, this time."

When he swung over the balcony, the parcel was tucked inside his vest.

Vincent walked slowly across the park and through the twilight of the tunnels. As Catherine had said, a great burden had been lifted from his heart, an old wound healed. He pushed through the curtain into his own chamber: Jack was sitting on the floor, the kitten in his lap and a bottle in his hand.

Vincent sat down beside the boy and watched him quietly. "Pretty soon he'll be too big for a bottle. You'll have to find a saucer for him."

"Bud," said Jack.

"That's his name?" asked Vincent.

Jack nodded.

Vincent rubbed the child's thin shoulderblades. "That's a good name. Because he's your friend."

Something that was almost a smile flickered over Jack's face. He looked at Vincent as if he knew he had two.

Vincent had an errand: he knew that Jack and Bud would be fine there on the floor. On his way up the tunnels he stopped for a few moments in the schoolroom, which was dark and quiet. Then he continued his journey up a side passage that rose eventually to a subway platform. It was so late at night that trains were few. Vincent knew every schedule by heart, though, and it wasn't that long before the train he wanted pulled in and he swung himself to the roof.

When he reached his destination near the ferry, Vincent jumped down, crossed a deserted platform, and climbed a long flight of dark stairs. Across the snow-grimed street, beside a bankrupt S & L, stood a double-winged building of gray brick. The sign above the entrance was only half illuminated: GR EN PAS

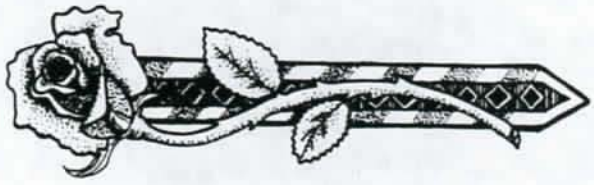
Vincent went around the back. The snow was deeper there, piled against the walls in dirty drifts. Someone was playing a radio in one of the rooms.

From within his vest Vincent pulled a red paper heart. There was nothing on it, no decoration or words. Still, as he taped it to the brick wall, Vincent knew it would serve its purpose. Maybe she would see it, somehow. Or maybe not.

Maybe Vincent would someday know more: her name, what had driven her through the night and the snow. Or maybe not.

There was nothing she could have done for him that she had not done. Nothing Vincent could do for her now. Or maybe there was.

He lifted his head a little and spoke. "I'm all right. I grew strong and tall, among people who love me. Thank you for all those handdone stitches. I love you. Happy Mother's Day."



I have seen you before
and yet, never.
A thousand dreams and poems
blaze to ashes
in my fire for your gaze.
The legions that have written of devotion,
cannot hold one flame
to the comfort of your eyes,
your words,
your hands.

Poor hands that suffered,
your own cruel nightmares,
fed only on the actions
of your innocent desperation.

I will take them and gentle out their sorrow
in my wonder at your love.

I will offer you my tears,
you have offered me your life,
and I could not leave you
any more than you could ever leave me,
Vincent.

Ana Rita Elias-Terry

ELIAS-TERRY

Reflections of Vincent

Behind the mirrors of Vincent's soul
I seek the meaning of my inward goal.
In dark recesses of Vincent's mind
I pass myself reflected in time.
I find in them the joy of life,
warmth and love, and happiness bright,
which issue from his gentle gaze.

But others look into those eyes,
perceiving not their sacred phase.
They hate and rail, demean and snear,
with violence they project their fear.
Once their violence has begun,
vengence is done with justice won.
The eyes flash back whatever they see,
and Vincent reflects both them and me.

Arie Raymond

HAUER 91

Validity

There is no greater joy in my life
Than knowing you hold me dear
In your heart.
Nestled safely within the
Deepest recesses of your being.

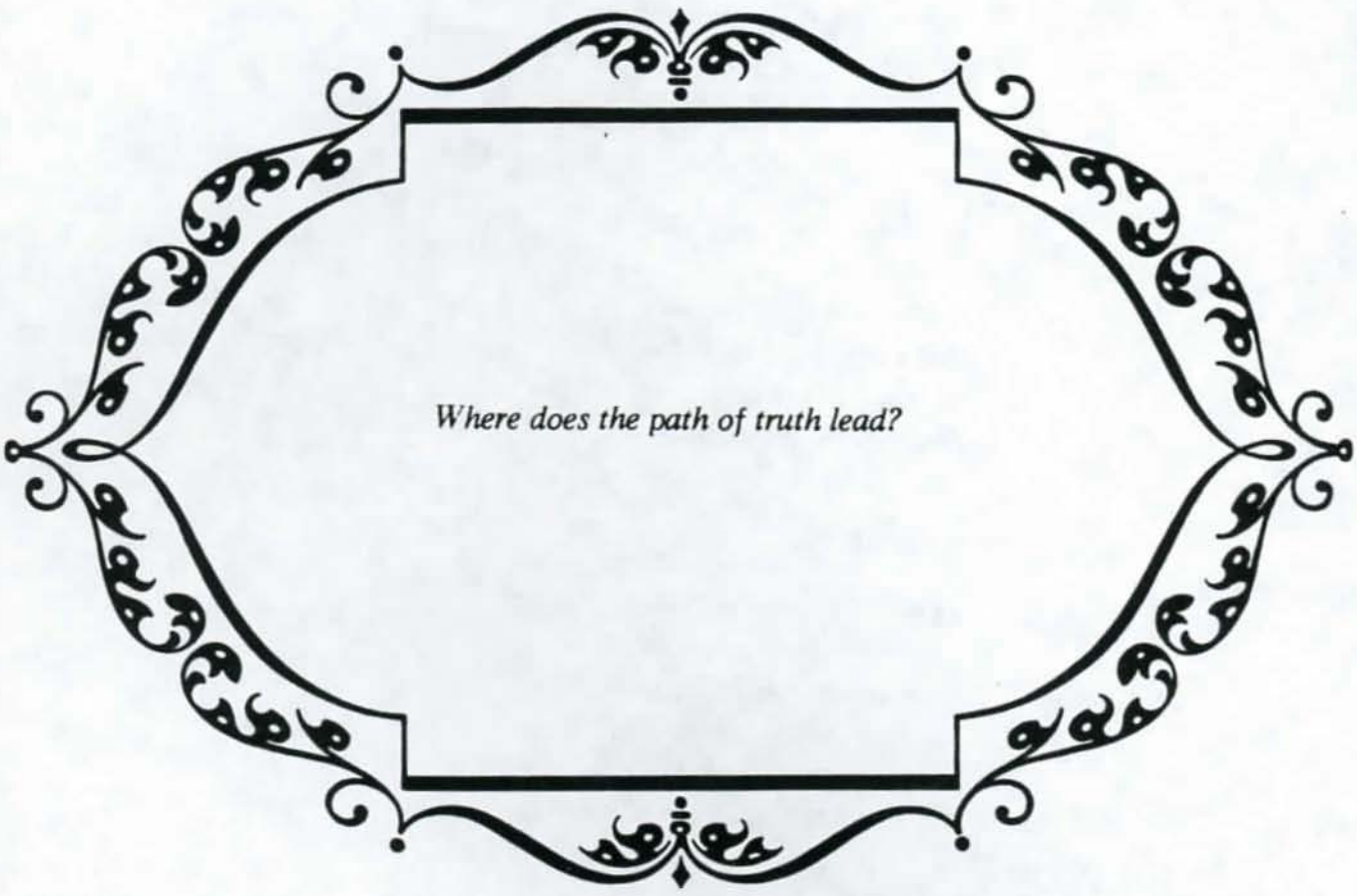
It was not a conscious thought
Or even a deliberate choice
This avocation of yours,
Not a duty, nor a burden
But a priviledge, an honor.
As much a sacred trust as
Any that has ever existed
Or shall ever be given.

Similar to the tender seedling
It took root fiercely, boldly
Yet hidden to all who might inquire
Growing with an urgency that
No other natural phenomenon
Has e'er before shown forth to
The forces and powers of our world.

Steadfast, undaunted, worthy of
An angel's sanction.
Fadeless splendour and brilliant
Glory, evolving on the surest path
No longer concealed, but
Emblazoned now upon the brow
Of love itself.

How could anyone look upon this
Unequaled countenance of Truth
And doubt the validity of its
Course or question the rightness of
Its soul?

Joyce Fuller Kleikamp


Where does the path of truth lead?

Out Of Innocence

by Rosemarie Hauer

Father had been right. Having Catherine so close was not easy on Vincent. He could sense her far more clearly and was constantly aware of her every emotion, of her every need. That was something he would have to get used to. Especially because he knew that he mustn't act on her sadness and despair as he would have liked. Catherine must be given time to mourn and to work through her loss on her own.

But what was reaching him now was different. Vincent was at a loss as to how to explain those feelings emanating from her tonight. She had been in the tunnels for several days now, and all the time he had been aware of the constant ebb and flow of her inner turmoil. Sometimes he'd let her struggle alone, knowing that she wanted it this way. At other times, he had gone to her, holding and comforting her when he felt that she had no strength left to extricate herself from the all-consuming grief that engulfed her.

But what she was exuding now puzzled and disturbed him. Somehow, it even made him feel guilty. He shook his head in an attempt to clear his mind. Maybe it was wrong to go to her while she was in a state like this, but he just couldn't help it.

The guest chamber lay in darkness. If not for the silent sobs, one might have thought it was empty. Softly, he called her name.

"Catherine?"

The sobbing ceased. Hesitantly, Vincent ventured closer. He could see her delicate form, wrapped in a quilt and huddled up on the bed. She straightened as he approached, and her voice was small and quivering as she spoke.

"I didn't mean to...I mean...I hope I didn't wake you."

"No, Catherine. No, you didn't. I was still up, writing and...thinking."

With a sigh of relief she wiped her eyes with the back of one hand and turned her head as if to face him. Knowing that she couldn't see him in the dark, as he could her, he asked quietly, "Would you have me light a candle?"

Catherine nodded mutely and drew the quilt more tightly around her shoulders. Her eyes shimmered in the candlelight as she gazed at him,

thoughtfully, for a moment before she averted her face in a gesture of...embarrassment? Was that what he had been feeling from her? Or even shame?

Vincent's confusion grew. Knowing that she was aware of his attempt to read her emotions, he queried cautiously, "What is it, Catherine? Can you tell me what is troubling you?"

She slowly lifted her head.

"Oh, Vincent, I don't know if that would be wise."

"Wisdom is not what I'm seeking right now - only honesty."

She searched his face for a trace of blame or accusation.

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I think that your inner turmoil has something to do with me. I sense a conflict, I feel guilty about something I cannot even grasp. Does that make any sense to you? It doesn't to me."

Catherine shook her head slightly. "No, it's not your fault. I can't even say that it is mine, but maybe, somehow, it is."

"Your words don't help me to see any clearer."

At that, she smiled. "I know. But I'm not sure whether I'll be able to find words that might help. I'll try. But please, Vincent, come and sit with me."

She patted the bed beside her. Slowly, Vincent moved toward her and settled his large frame at the foot of the bed, watching her face attentively as she began to speak.

"I don't know where to start, Vincent. You know me so well. You can sense my love for you, always, but what I have been feeling lately, and what I try so hard to suppress, is...desire."

Could she ever know how her words affected him? He dared not move, for fear she might lose her courage to continue. His heart beat so loudly that he thought she must hear it. He fervently wished for her to resume her confession, and at the same time prayed that she stop, or he might lose his resolve to face whatever had caused her so much pain...and shame.

He had to push these thoughts away when she continued to speak, her green eyes fixed so trustingly on his face that it tore his heart.

"Vincent, I feel so much for you, things I've never felt before. And there are wishes and dreams that...I mean...what I'm trying to say is that I never meant to touch your purity with that side of me that isn't pure at all."

Her voice trailed off, and her words left him stunned and bewildered in their wake. He didn't know what he had expected to hear, but certainly, least of all, this. Her solemn gaze made him struggle for words.

"Do you think me a saint?"

She smiled, that bright and open smile he loved so much.

"Well, maybe not exactly that, but..."

"...but...?"

"I believe that the purity of your heart is an essential part of who you are, because it makes you reach for things that so many others have given up and lost along the way. I always felt that what you have been dreaming for us is so much more than what I'm able to find words for or even to comprehend. There is

something about you that silences the selfish urges in me. I always knew I mustn't rush things between us, lest I break something that cannot be mended."

His voice was hoarse when he asked what he almost didn't dare to.

"And what would that be?"

"Innocence," came the shy reply.

"Innocence is not what we are headed for, Catherine. It's where we come from."

"Then, what are we headed for, Vincent? Can you tell me?"

"I'm afraid mere words will never be enough to describe that final goal that is meant to be our eternal destiny."

"Please try."

"Beauty. Truth. God."

"Love."

"Yes."

"Unfortunately, these words have been abused most of all. Why, Vincent? Why would people spoil them and betray their true meanings?"

"Maybe these are things that happen to people who only took the first step on their journey to the final goal."

"What first step?"

"The one out of innocence, away from it."

"And what would cause that loss of innocence?"

"Finding themselves alone in the center of their needs and wishes, and remaining there."

Catherine's look became pensive as she mulled over what he had just said. Then she whispered, "Is that why I feel so guilty about wanting you, longing for you in every way?"

"There is nothing wrong with longing, Catherine. Its wings are passion and joy, and it is headed for love and light. But there are always those forces that make flying so cumbersome, such as possessiveness, greed and envy. Those take the lightness of innocence away from us and tear us down."

She took her eyes from his face and looked at her hands that lay folded in her lap.

"Did we already take that step away from innocence, Vincent?"

He stood up and moved to sit beside her. Tenderly, he touched her chin with his finger and lifted her gaze to his. His voice was barely above a whisper when he responded.

"Yes, I think so. With out thoughts, in our dreams. But we won't remain where we are. We shall always move on."

Her breath was warm on his face. When he leaned forward, just a bit, she closed her eyes, her long lashes still glistening with forgotten tears. Tenderly stroking her chin with his thumb, he kissed her forehead first, then her cheek, lingering there before he went on to meet her trembling lips. Her arms came up to encircle his neck as she leaned into his kiss with abandon. He deepened the embrace, drawing her to his body more tightly. She was so soft and warm and he knew that he wanted to lose himself in the depths of her longing, in the light of her love.

Slowly he broke the kiss and opened his eyes, just as she opened hers.

"I need you so," he whispered close to her mouth, "and I want you with all that I am. But most of all, I love you, Catherine. And wherever we shall go from here, we shall go together. We shall have it all, passion and joy, and we'll meet their darker brothers along our way. But as long as we are one, we are already there..."

She leaned her forehead against his, asking, "Where, Vincent?"

"At our final goal, Catherine. No matter what name you give to it."

With that, he sought her lips again.

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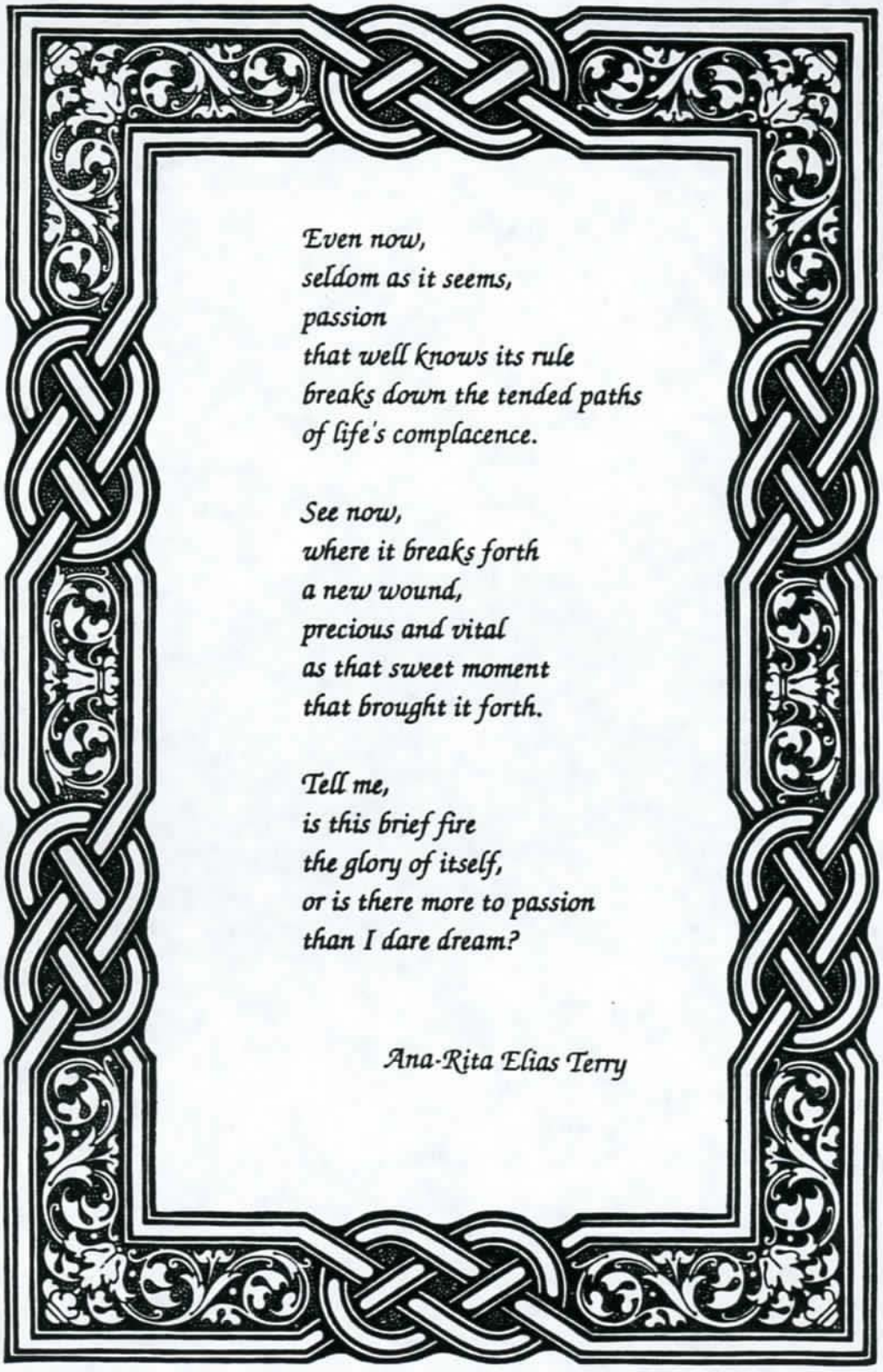
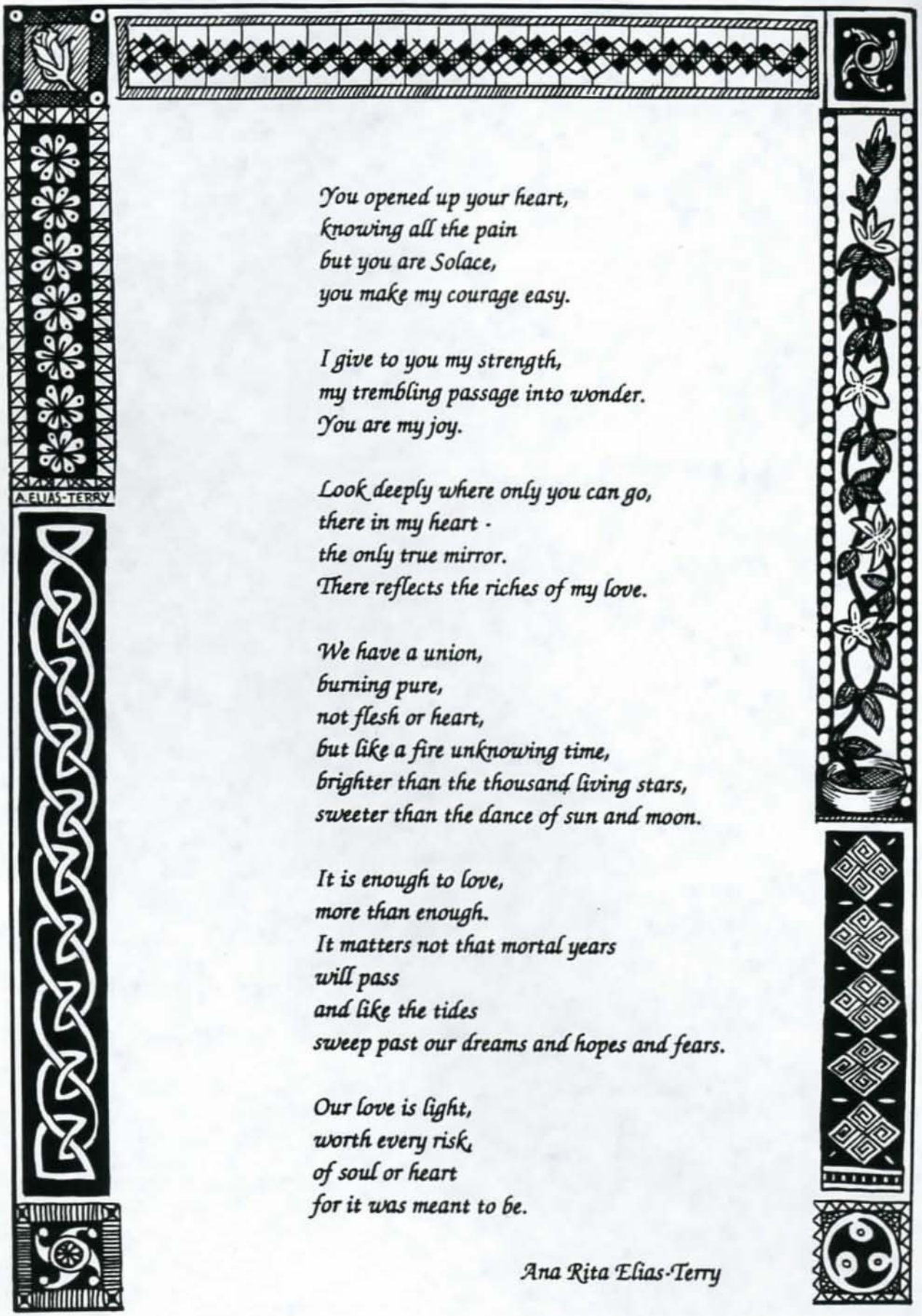


Even now,
seldom as it seems,
passion
that well knows its rule
breaks down the tended paths
of life's complacence.

See now,
where it breaks forth
a new wound,
precious and vital
as that sweet moment
that brought it forth.

Tell me,
is this brief fire
the glory of itself,
or is there more to passion
than I dare dream?

Ana-Rita Elias Terry



You opened up your heart,
knowing all the pain
but you are Solace,
you make my courage easy.

I give to you my strength,
my trembling passage into wonder.
You are my joy.

Look deeply where only you can go,
there in my heart -
the only true mirror.
There reflects the riches of my love.

We have a union,
burning pure,
not flesh or heart,
but like a fire unknowing time,
brighter than the thousand living stars,
sweeter than the dance of sun and moon.

It is enough to love,
more than enough.
It matters not that mortal years
will pass
and like the tides
sweep past our dreams and hopes and fears.

Our love is light,
worth every risk,
of soul or heart
for it was meant to be.

Ana Rita Elias-Terry

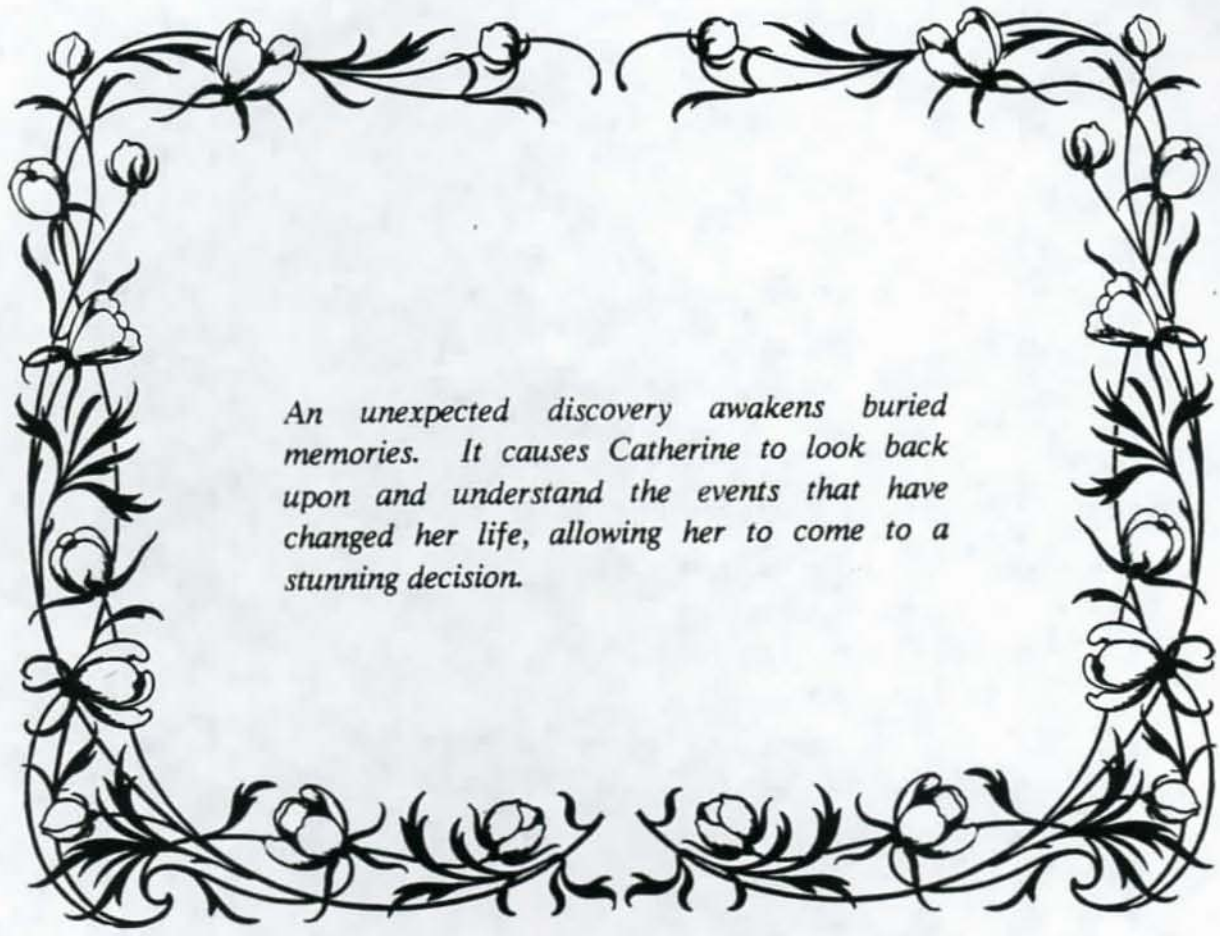
Confession

Although my touch appears gentle,
My love,
It pulses with a bitter rage.
Keep yourself safe from this.

Greater, still, is the power of my gaze,
You may find it endearing,
Even sweet.
But know that it burns through your soul--
A lance of blue--
There is no mercy, no lightness of heart
Hidden there.

See it then
Fear it.
Keep yourself safe from this too.

Joyce Fuller Kleikamp


An unexpected discovery awakens buried memories. It causes Catherine to look back upon and understand the events that have changed her life, allowing her to come to a stunning decision.

One Perfect Whole

By Joyce Fuller Kleikamp

Slipping from her hands, the silky black fabric of the evening gown fell into a crumpled heap at Catherine's feet. Over a year had passed since this blood-stained, tattered garment had been rolled into a tight ball, stuffed into an empty shoe box and shoved to the very back of the closet. With that act of banishment, most of the memory and some of the pain had been sequestered in a forgotten niche on the top shelf, until now.

As she stared blindly down at the inanimate object, every remnant of conscious thought became eclipsed by a surging death-grip of remembered pain, of re-lived fear. Her features twisted sharply into a grimace as her trembling voice uttered a cry, "No!" It was at once a plea from the past and a sanity-preserving command of the present. Her white-knuckled fists covered her face in protective reflex as her entire body convulsed with one massive jolt. And then it was past. Rational thought filtered back to the surface and Catherine regained awareness and control. *You're safe. You're safe now.*

What had innocently begun as a constructive way to spend a rainy Saturday morning suddenly became a terrible yet cleansing experience of discovery, pensive reflection and conscious realization. The project of spring cleaning had propelled Catherine into a staggering exercise of personal enlightenment; astounding in its intensity, glorious in all its implications.

A fierce shudder claimed her body as she bent down to retrieve the dress from the floor. Holding the once elegant, wildly expensive dress that she had worn that fateful night with Tom Gunther in front of her narrowing green eyes, Catherine, now calmer, recalled snatches of conversation.

His body, removed in distance yet one with hers in spirit knew this shudder as well.

> *"Christ," Tom muttered under his breath, his features revealing obvious disapproval.*
> *"What?" a defensive tone accented Cathy's voice as she impatiently spoke.*
> *"I thought I told you to dress appropriately. And look at your hair," he grumbled.*

Hugging the dress to her chest, Catherine acknowledged how shallow and purposeless her life had been then. It was as if the man she was with at any given time was the definition of who she was. Admittedly, being Tom Gunther's

girlfriend was more validating than being Charles Chandler's daughter. At least that favored her as being an adult. She could not have loved her father more or felt greater admiration and pride towards him, but somehow this limited her. Catherine had never been one to tolerate limits, especially limits on her personal life. Ever since she had been a small girl, she had been offered elaborate choices. Indeed, she had grown to expect this privilege and took full advantage of it.

Within the social framework of the 'seventies and 'eighties, however sexually liberated they were, women continued to be seen in the shadow of men. Catherine followed the rules of the game, played it adeptly, exulted in her victories -- still unaware that it was not the only game -- years away from the understanding that it was Catherine Chandler who would ultimately define who she really was.

Looking back upon her finely manicured, flawlessly coifed existence, Catherine recognized a pattern that had remained obscured until now. Her priorities, her desires and ambitions were mute responses to the demands, expectations and needs of the men who controlled her life. There were only imperceptible traces of the young woman's ideals, as they had never been nurtured nor encouraged to develop. She had been a passive participant in her own existence. Had been. Fortunes, mercifully, had taken a glorious, revitalizing turn on that dark, frightening night, the very night she had worn this pitifully damaged dress and began her new life.

Moving to the bed, Catherine draped the stark garment across the pillows and arranged the fabric neatly as if to simulate the appearance of her own battered and savaged body lying across the mattress. She needed to imagine the horrible scene; create the memory that had been secreted away from her conscious thoughts.

Had others come across her discarded form that night in the cold shadows of the park? Had they witnessed the face of bloody shreds, the very countenance of death? Run from her in fear and disgust? Or merely walked past in steeled indifference to one more nameless victim. Bless the angel who guided him to me, she thought. He took a great risk that night, moving so closely to the park perimeter, just a few yards from the street. Even then, without knowing me, his priority was for my safety and well being. How much more so now.

Everything she had become, all of her strength and courage, she attributed to him. Not born from expectation or demand, but evolved from encouragement and support. Vincent offered limitless, unconditional strength and devotion as a tender gift for Catherine. She learned that it was her own decision to embrace that gift. And in these moments of blossoming realization, Catherine understood for the first time that she had never truly acknowledged nor accepted this most precious treasure unto herself.

Fluttering excitedly through her now, was the delightful sensation of solving a puzzle or discovering the cleverly guarded entrance to a secret passage.

Vincent, not knowing why, placed his trembling left hand over his chest and allowed the waves of emotion to course through his being.

Catherine had never before taken the time to analyze Vincent's love for her; she knew it existed, realized it was strong and true, but she had failed to

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recognize its unique and exquisite fragrance and hue. Although, she rationalized, the petals had not yet opened in full bloom, she had not ventured close enough to gaze upon its subtle beauty, inhale its intoxicating scent.

Spring is the season for appreciating the wonders of nature, afresh with possibilities and celebration. Perhaps this special time in the physical world should inspire some exploration into the inner world of the heart, Catherine mused. A gentle smile brightened her features as she gathered the long-forgotten garment into her arms. This was the last outfit I wore as socialite Cathy Chandler, she acknowledged in solemn awareness. Fate has altered my identity twice since donning this; first I became Carol and nearly lost my life. Then I became Catherine and was reborn into a new life. As Catherine Chandler, I am finally learning who I truly am.

Catherine's smile widened as she ran her finger across the fabric. The jagged tears had been mended, lovingly sewn together by the hand of some skilled tunnel seamstress. Although the garment had been washed, faint bronze blood stains clung stubbornly to the fibers as if in defiant protest or taunting proclamation. A sudden forbidden memory burst through Catherine's mind, playing vividly before her.

> *Approaching her apartment for the first time in ten days, Catherine turned the key in the lock and pushed the door open. A strange disquietude pressed against her, effectively halting any movement. Standing at the threshold, peering cautiously inside, Catherine swallowed hard in alarm as she realized that nothing appeared familiar to her. For a disordered moment in time, Catherine could not recognize her own possessions. Her heart burst forth with a confusing swirl of panic and uncertainty; as her brow furrowed and mouth gaped, electric currents of pain clawed at her sutured lacerations sending her into a wicked spiral of torturous suffering that ended only when she experienced what she would, a full sixteen months later, recognize as an empathic spell cast over her to exorcise the source of torment.*

Clear green eyes continued their exploration of the innocent garment. Soft fingertips traced random patterns across the material, every fiber of this terrible yet glorious artifact held such impossibly compelling memories for Catherine, images that she had long ago driven from her in a desperate act of self-preservation. The depth of fear, the intensity of affliction had threatened to incapacitate her lest she fix her gaze upon a brighter horizon. The choice had been clear, but resolving to stand proud and face the dawn meant her back was to the looming, terrible shadows of the darker shore. Would she have the courage? Could she make the journey? *You have the strength. You do.*

> *Although his head was bowed low as he knelt before her, it was not from shame or weakness. There was a mantle of sweetness that encircled his gentle heart as obvious and magnificent as the intriguing cloak that flowed across his broad shoulders. She gazed upon her beloved rescuer, trying to*

discern the nuances of his hypnotic expression; willing him to meet her gaze in subtle communion. As if her singular wish had been understood, he raised his eyes to hers in a perfect reunion -- ancient and eternal souls, joined in this moment as if they had never been apart nor ever would be separated in all the heavenly worlds of the universe -- existing as one perfect whole; a single, exquisitely formed rose, redolent with the breath of angels and resplendent with the color of ever-abiding love.

Remembrances of those eyes, that gaze, became the foundation of her strength during the ensuing months. Catherine often discerned the echoes of Vincent's mellifluous voice caressing her heart, she periodically felt the warm reassurance of his empathic touch upon her soul, yet she was never even for a fraction of a heartbeat, without the awareness of that depthless gaze upon her deepest sense of being. He was as he had promised her, always with her, forever a part of her, though she would never see him again. For this blessing, she was humbled and awed beyond her capacity to adequately express the truth of this bestowal. All she could do was try to be worthy of the gift and never loose sight of the treasure in her possession.

Returning a scrutinizing eye to the dress, Catherine realized that her fingernails had been plucking at the tiny threads, tracing the crooked patterns of mended fabric. Stitches in fine cloth, not unlike sutures in supple skin; she remembered this gruesome comparison gnawing its way to her consciousness. At the time of her plastic surgery, she was desperate to remove those disfigurements; nearly mad in the process of reclaiming her life. Some months later, after the initial scramble to re-establish a sense of normalcy to her life, the awareness finally came; filtering through the toughened-by-fear layers of emotional turmoil to reach the innermost recesses of her heart. In her despairing need to push the horror behind an impenetrable wall, she had effectively banished much of the wonder inherent in her experience Below. Unable to face the nightmares that haunted her, she had turned her back on the glorious visions as well. It had been an unfortunate, but necessary consequence.

Fortified by new-found determination and confidence, she had made a striking decision; now that her strength and health were fully restored, she would seek employment in a firm that served the community in some way. She would no longer accept being "the daughter of a fine corporate lawyer"; a boldly independent definition would be hers to create.

It was then that it came, the recognition of a deeper healing. She had been brought to the tunnels, not only as an injured woman with cruelly inflicted lacerations and violently broken ribs, but as one whose wounds and needs were of another plane. Emotional. Psychological. Spiritual. While her cuts were cleaned, sutured, her ribs bound fast, her body nourished, so too were her fears dispelled, her doubts lightened, her wavering heart caressed with empathic support; it was this that truly saved her life.

Rising slowly from the bed, Catherine stood by the nightstand and searched the room for other traces of forgotten memories. "I live here," she whispered, turning her gaze in the direction of the balcony doors, her eyes

focused upon the single step and drapery hem. She visualized Vincent's booted foot resting there. *I'll watch over you.*

"I live here," she repeated, the tenderness in her voice reflecting in her expressive green eyes, "but it has never been my home."

"My heart is your home."

Suddenly, the voice of her bondmate seemed no longer a memory-shadow, but an audible, wonderfully real and glorious promise spoken aloud. Stunned into paralysis, Catherine thought that her mental free-fall had intensified beyond the usual realm of emotional and psychological imagery into a twilight zone of the supra-normal. It really sounded as if Vincent had spoken to her, in person!

"It's the middle of the aft..." she began but was struck dumb by the impossible sound of Vincent's call to her from the balcony.

"Catherine..."

Not believing she would see him, Catherine cautiously moved to the drapes and flung them aside. Even if she had expected to look upon Vincent standing by the French doors, she would not have expected him to appear as he did at this moment -- drenched to the bone in rain-soaked clothing, standing on the stone floor of the high rise terrace in the near-night-darkness of an ominous New York downpour.

"Vincent!" she cried, still unsure if he was truly there and not an apparition. "Is that you?"

"I'm afraid it is," he affirmed as the doors were flung wider and his arm was literally captured by an insistent dynamo.

There was no banter about whether or not he would enter her apartment; by the time he parted his lips to utter a protest, he was already four feet inside the inner sanctum and dripping madly on the carpet. There was even less opportunity for him to mutter something ridiculous about how he was ruining her floor and furnishings; within a skipped heartbeat, his cloak was draped over the tub, his outer garments were hung on the shower rod and his fairly-damp inner layers, allowing for modesty, were being dried as he stood by the fireplace.

After the whirlwind quieted, Catherine realized that Vincent had come to her because he had experienced the turbulent rush of her emotions; the raging flashes of perception and consciousness had rivaled the deluge that was drenching the city. She had been so enraptured by her staggering journey, even the dark storm clouds and pelting rain had not claimed her attention for even a moment. But the violence of Nature could not prevent Vincent from reaching her side.

One perfect, steady gaze between them revealed what no mortal utterance could; communication that transcended the limitations of language, profoundly removed from the simple exchange of conversation. Catherine was certain that she was not only fixed upon the ineffably stunning shade of blue in Vincent's eyes but that she was actually regarding the pure shade of the Bond itself, reflected therein.

Vincent, as well, perceived the physical evidence of that Miracle within

the sea green hues of his beloved's eyes. He would not have been more blessed if he had been studying the face of an angel herself.

Slowly, reluctantly, the empathic waltz ended and the harmony of emotions faded into a soothing caress of sweet echoes. Although their bodies had not touched, Vincent and Catherine knew the reality of their joining, acknowledged the completeness of their union as if there could be no greater truth in any physical coupling; lovers now, as they had always been.

Her words were spoken aloud, yet Vincent thought he had no further need of speech, after having experienced such profound intimacy.

"I have so much to tell you," she whispered, "Memories of the past, dreams of the future."

"Yes," was all he managed to respond.

"The weather was so miserable today, I decided to do some serious spring cleaning. When I cleared off the top shelf of my bedroom closet, I found a box that had been buried under a ton of stuff." Catherine sprang from the couch and retrieved the black dress from the bed.

Holding it in outstretched hands, she allowed it to tumble from her grasp into Vincent's lap in conscious imitation of his long-ago action. *"It's time for you to go now."*

"This is what I found inside." she murmured, staring first at the way his massive hands were cradling the dress, then at his downward gaze, focused trance-like upon the black folds that waved through his gentle fingers. She saw his powerful chest rise as he claimed a full measure of air into his lungs, watched it tremble with a shuddering exhalation as an expressive sigh rumbled through her ears.

"I understand." He forced his eyes to break free then in order to seek hers.

"I hadn't remembered putting it there," she continued, excited for this chance to share her discoveries with Vincent. "I haven't been able to remember much of anything -- I've been afraid to try ..." she admitted. "Until I stumbled onto the dress today, I hadn't allowed myself to revisit that time. I guess it was too horrible; a classic reaction to the trauma of a violent attack."

Even as she explained her experiences to Vincent, new, more startling realizations pushed their way to the surface and she began to speak directly from her heart without the interference of logical thought. After hearing her own voice tumble madly through the astounding narration, Catherine was convinced that she had never seen her life through a more perfect mirror nor understood her desires more clearly.

"When I think about the first time we met, I remember you reading to me. I can still hear your comforting, gentle voice, so full of reassurance. Offering me tea or more soup, telling me about your safe world. I didn't care if I never heard the sound of another voice as long as you continued to talk to me. That was enough for me," she enfolded him with her loving gaze. "It still is."

He had no power to avert his wondring blue eyes from her then, as her enchanting voice wrapped tighter around his being. This singular voice could sustain him for eternity. As long as there was her ...

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"It's strange -- I don't really think about the attack or my injuries. It doesn't matter why I was Below; the important thing was that I was there, with you. Seeing the dress brought back a recognition of the fear, the pain I had gone through. I guess I pushed all that in the back of my mind; just like I shoved this dress in the closet, I wanted to rid myself of the awful truth."

Clutching the garment to her chest, Catherine took a deep breath and held it for a moment as she contemplated what to do next, what decision to make at this critical juncture in her self-discovery.

"Never fear the truth, Catherine." Vincent spoke, his voice laced with utter devotion.

"The only truth I need, Vincent, is you." Catherine vowed, her green eyes blazing with steadfast resolution.

"The truth of all I am."

Again, for a moment removed from time, the reunion of eternal souls appeared manifest within the intertwined gaze of two lovers who exist as one perfect whole. No other love could claim this station, no other world could boast of this honor.

"Vincent, I'm beginning to remember so much! It's more than a little frightening, but it's wonderful at the same time. All the images cause me to discover more about myself ...more about us ..." Catherine's eyes widened suddenly, in amazement, then a delightful giggle escaped her full lips, tumbling about.

"Yes," the hint of an echoed giggle was buried beneath the rumble.

"Ten days Below. Healing," she began again, "for ten days. It was real; your world, the sound of the pipes, the taste of the soup, the warmth of your touch, but when I returned Above, it was as if all of it had been an illusion. I couldn't judge reality any more, even my own apartment -- it was an illusion too, I was lost, truly lost. Until you gave me the strength and the direction to go on."

"Me?" Was it a whisper or just his steady blue gaze that queried.

"I felt your hand on my shoulder, heard your voice surround me. Suddenly, I knew where I was, I had found my way." Catherine explained.

"I would be your beacon in any tempest, Catherine. In the blackest, deepest cavern ..." Vincent pledged.

"Knowing that was my foundation, Vincent. When I entered the apartment, I functioned on instinct alone. For the first time, I remember ..." Catherine travelled through the limits of temporal space.

Moving cautiously through the living room, into the bedroom; ears straining to detect the echoes of familiar sounds yet perceiving only the solitary din of early morning traffic emanating from the street below. Eyes darting nervously, searching for some object or piece of furniture that would comfort her in this coldly unfamiliar apartment. Everything was just as she'd left it; bathrobe draped at the foot of the bed, three cocktail dresses discarded as runners up to the black elegant one she had purchased on that afternoon ten days ago, half-eaten and now rock-stale croissant on the night stand, lingerie drawer cocked open and the drapes closed.

Catherine floated over to the balcony doors and pulled the cord. Squinting suddenly in the fierce light, she then winced at the pain from her still-healing wounds. Yanking the drapes together with a swipe of her hand, Catherine turned abruptly and crumpled on the bed. Long past the point of crying, all she could do was fix her gaze on the decorative ceiling panels and utter a mute sigh. She found that if she examined the pattern with intense scrutiny, the shadows and echoes that grappled with her consciousness faded into blessed oblivion.

Explosions of terror suddenly ripped through the silence, causing the beleaguered woman to bolt upright in fearful defence. What now? Only after another moment in convulsive disturbance did Catherine recognize the tormenting sounds in her ears -- the bedside telephone, innocently ringing a merciless chant.

It was as if she had to trudge through a fog of confusion; staring at the receiver, blindly unaware of how she could stop the damned sound. Finally, her arm flung out and wiped the phone onto the carpet in an unforgiving motion that also claimed the answering machine, paperback book, stale pastry and the small reading lamp. Still no tears; only a heart that threatened to burst forth from her chest and lungs that pulsed heavy with ragged breaths.

Whoever it was on the line had been summarily dismissed, yet previous calls blinked dutifully on the answering machine's display. Catherine could not bring herself to push the button. No voice but his would invade her thoughts now. "You're safe. You're safe now." Oh God, how she fought the urge to run back down to the basement threshold, descend the ladder and beg him to hold her until all the madness subsided.

"You have the courage. You do." Just as the temptation to escape became its most intense, she felt the vibrancy of his wondrously blue eyes seek the dulled-with-trepidation hue in her own. As if the richness, the strength, the potency of his gaze became real, physical, massive -- she felt an infusion of courage pour into her trembling form, nourishing her very life-source with unimagined splendor. This was his gift to her, and she knew she must accept it.

"I'll make you proud of me, Vincent."

"I'll make you proud of me," Catherine whispered, now repeating that solemn promise first uttered over sixteen months ago.

"I am proud of all your accomplishments, Catherine." Vincent assured her, reaching to her both empathically and physically, enfolding her in his adoring arms.

"All my life, Vincent, I had been taken care of; guided, pampered, privileged. As I grew older, I began to get restless, but I never knew why. Something inside me was longing to be set free, but I hadn't realized yet that the cage I was in was my own passive willingness to accept what was handed to me," a sadness crept slowly across Catherine's smooth features.

"And now?", Vincent prompted.

"And now, I understand so much," she answered, placing her open palms upon the rugged quilting of Vincent's heavy cotton shirt. She could discern the sudden, jolting intake of air that roared through Vincent's ridgedly muscled chest and knew that he held this enormous breath for long moments, finally releasing the shuddering sigh within a low grumble.

"I understand that I do have the courage. And perhaps that was why I had to prove it to myself, why I had to fight alone for those first eight months. Something made me realize that the time was right. It was my chance to fly free of that cage, into the wild, into the open spaces," she explained.

"Then my struggle was worth everything," Vincent spoke, barely a whisper; perhaps only a thought.

Catherine's gaze returned to Vincent's shoreless eyes; had he spoken, or had he just felt something so strongly, believed something so intensely, that she actually perceived it?

"Your struggle, tell me of it," Catherine asked softly, merging sea-green with sky-blue.

"My struggle," now his impossibly gentle voice spoke aloud, in truth. "My struggle was to allow you that freedom; to soar into the heavens, unrestrained and glorious. You spoke of your wish to 'escape' Below, to run back into my world ..." Vincent heard his own inner voice utter the phrase *'and into my arms'*, but knew he held it from his tongue; "and yet, you knew it must not be," he couldn't seek her features, not now. "You were always with me, and I with you," he placed his strong hands over his heart in emphasis, "and every moment I longed to see you one more time. To see you ..." his voice cracked and failed.

"But you stayed away; for me. That was your struggle, to deny your heart." Catherine's eyes glistened with unshed tears.

"Yes," he admitted with one deep nod.

"Even now, you stay away." Catherine challenged.

"You don't ... "Vincent intended to be forthright about his assertion that Catherine did not need him, but he was immediately interrupted with Catherine's declaration.

"No, I don't need you! You're right; I don't need air to breathe, I don't need water to drink, blood to flow through my veins -- certainly I don't need you!" Catherine cried in determined style.

"Catherine," Vincent began, but was again halted by the desperate truth.

"Vincent, it may have been the case that I needed to strike out alone on my new path, but your guidance and support was always there for me. In ten days, you gave me more direction, more strength than I had gotten in years from my Dad, my friends, men in my life... Somehow, you were the spark that created the wonder in my soul. To think that I didn't need you!" she continued to fill in all the holes in Vincent's self-depreciating logic.

"That was -- a long time ago." he tried.

"No less true now, no less true for all time, Vincent." she expertly testified in his behalf. "Don't you know? Well, perhaps I'm being unfair, it's

only been this crazy journey through my own memories; I didn't even recognize it until today. But, Vincent, it's a tremendous thing, our relationship. Built on encouragement, trust, respect. You don't expect anything of me and that makes me want to be everything you could possibly desire. You are completely selfless, to a fault, I might add; and without an ounce of arrogance in your body. You demand nothing, but I would willingly do anything for you. Anything," she vowed, completely at his mercy, should he decide to move.

"You have given me the world, Catherine, I could not draw breath to ask anything of you," the purity of his own heart shone through the clear depths of his eyes, stunning Catherine into a state of complete helplessness.

"Vincent, you have given that same world, ever more beautiful and fragrant, to me in return. Surely you have the right to ask of me what you would have me do; small favor though it might be," Catherine shyly murmured, knowing Vincent would not yet feel comfortable acting upon her assertion.

"My one desire is for your happiness," was his promise, a single declaration of the most elemental force in his being.

"You are my happiness, nothing else matters," she whispered, "I care only to hear the melody of your voice, see the sweetness of your smile, feel the warmth of your breath across my face ..."

Ripping through his heart was another reality and it eclipsed the bright optimism in her face as surely and completely as the night overtook the day. "Then you limit your happiness," he judged.

"Never," she answered, the tone in her voice revealed the steadfast determination cradled in her heart. "Never."

Suddenly, a warm mantle of certainty enfolded her as she again took up the struggle to uncover all the mysteries.

"Just because the bird flew free from the cage doesn't mean it must continue to do so. It explores the heavens, perches atop the highest tree branches, swoops and flutters about in delightful play and challenging stunts, but eventually, the bird must find its true home and be at peace with itself," she explained. "When I began to find out who Catherine Chandler was, I knew that I had been imprisoned by my own passivity and weakness. I'm no longer that person, Vincent, I'm strong now, capable of dealing with unexpected challenges, I know who Catherine Chandler is. I feel proud of her," she opened her widened smile into a full-faced brilliance.

Seeing her beaming features held only a fraction of the joy that perceiving her emotions through their miracle of empathic communication afforded. So vivid were the shades of pure, depthless feeling, that Vincent was caught unawares as he heard Catherine's request.

"It's time for me to come home, Vincent."

Searching her gaze for confirmation, Vincent found a full measure of adoration and courage laid bare before him; and upon acknowledging the sincerity, the utter assuredness in her voice, Vincent allowed himself to hope.

Drawing into his lungs a long, unsteady breath, Vincent interlaced his trembling fingers in an unsuccessful attempt to ward away the onslaught of exhilaration that threatened to consume him. "Home?"

Were he to dream a thousand nights and wish upon a million magical stars, he never could have imagined what she would reply to that question.

"Yes, Vincent. Home. If you'll have me, I want to come home. Home Below; home to you."

Tears, flowing freely, streaming across smooth and sculptured cheeks mingled with kisses as once again, in an enchanted moment, two eternal lovers found reunion in the sanctuary of ever-abiding love; bound in devotion, joined in celebration, united in betrothal.

"Your heart, truly is my home, Vincent," Catherine vowed, her green eyes mirroring forth the purity of her declaration.

There was no sense of fear nor doubt emanating from the Bond; for the first time in his life, Vincent experienced what could only be defined as a vivid and unerring perception of timeless existence; bestowing upon him the ability to understand and acknowledge hidden mysteries that would eventually unfold in natural evolution. As quickly as this empathic fragrance filled his nostrils, it vanished with his next awareness, yet sweet, indescribable traces of its redolence lingered within his being allowing him to feel an unalterable certainty that this was indeed the time for her homecoming.

Opening his arms, Vincent brought his beloved Catherine into his protective embrace, pressing her slender body so close to him as to nearly crush the breath from her. His warm, soothing breath wove through her hair as he spoke.

"Welcome home, my love."