

Them or Us

by Ginny Shearin

“Thank you for coming with me, Pascal,” Vincent said excitedly. “I know you don’t like going Above, but it’s good to have company for a change.”

“You shouldn’t be up top by yourself. What if someone sees you?”

“It’s dark up there now...almost midnight. I only go when it’s late enough for most of the people Above to have gone home. And I wear dark clothes. I can move quietly...blend into the shadows.”

“Except for all that blonde hair. That doesn’t blend into the shadows too well.”

“I’m always careful,” the eighteen-year-old Vincent assured Pascal with a big, fang revealing smile. “You don’t need to worry.” The statement was made with the full confidence and enthusiasm of youth.

Pascal was a few years older than Vincent, but they had been close friends since they were small children. Pascal wasn’t usually as adventurous as some of the others. Vincent had heard some of the grown-ups smilingly say that Pascal was born an adult. That quality was a part of their friendship. He was a good listener with a good grasp of reality, someone Vincent could talk to about things he didn’t feel comfortable discussing with either the adults or the other children but needed to voice to someone. Pascal, being one of the smallest of the children, and not increasing greatly in physical stature as they grew older, understood something about what it was like to be different. He and Vincent confided in one another when their differences bothered them, each knowing that those thoughts would go unreported elsewhere. It was an easy, undemanding, but important camaraderie for both of them. Since Devin’s departure, Pascal understood Vincent more than anyone else, and Vincent both valued and returned his friend’s loyalty.

“Still, it worries me that you’ve been doing this more often,” Pascal continued.

“I need to breathe the air in the world Above now and then,” Vincent insisted, sounding more animated than usual, which he could see further worried his friend. “I only walk in the most deserted parts of the park, and it isn’t that often. I’ll show you where I go so you won’t worry so much,” Vincent answered, still exuding the excitement of slipping out into the park where he could walk in the soft grass; see the sky, the trees, the things that grew lush and green topside. It was a different world from the hard surfaces of the tunnels. It looked, felt, and smelled different, and it was exhilarating. He knew Pascal was right. Vincent went Above rarely, always without Father’s knowledge, but he was feeling the need for the escape more often. Somewhere deep inside, he knew he was taking chances, but the need for the freedom of unconfined space was a difficult thing to ignore.

“Did you hear that?” Pascal asked quietly.

“Yes,” Vincent answered in kind.

They both came to a stop to listen and identify the source of the sound. They were about halfway between the home tunnels and Above, and no one knew they had left; so they realized they were on their own. They were well versed in the dangers posed by intruders, as well as in the methods of discouraging them by guiding them away from the home tunnels without being seen. Those methods had worked for them several times in the past, and they immediately put out their torch and reduced the light of the lantern to barely enough to allow Pascal to navigate. Taking stock of the situation and the assumed source of the sounds, they whispered plans between them.

Verifying their standard plan for such a situation, they separated and began throwing small rocks to confuse anyone who might be there as to their location and making eerie vocal sounds, Vincent adding a soft but menacing growl that he was willing to use around Pascal. Generally the interlopers would be uncomfortable enough in the dark and the maze of tunnels that they would try to move away from such disturbances. If the tunnel folks kept it up and got closer to the intruders, they could usually herd them back toward the entrance, and eventually, the trespassers would gratefully find their way out.

This one had ventured farther than most, though, and he wasn’t responding the same way. The sounds from the intruder stopped, and the light from a flashlight appeared and revealed Pascal slipping from the junction of two

tunnels. He jumped quickly back into the shadows, but he had already been seen.

“Thought you could scare me, didn’t you?” the large, well-built prowler sneered, quickly moving toward Pascal. “You got a dog with you somewhere? The growling was a nice touch. Little guy like you ain’t likely to give me much trouble, though,” he stated confidently. Moving closer and keeping menacing eye contact, he grabbed Pascal tightly by the arm and placed his flashlight on the tunnel floor so he could see; but when he whipped a knife from his belt, pushed Pascal to the wall, and raised his arm to attack, he was surprised from behind by a much larger opponent. The hand that grabbed his arm was strong enough to frighten him, but he managed to make a small knife wound on Vincent’s hand and get away. He grabbed Pascal again, wrapped his arm under Pascal’s, around his chest to his other shoulder, and pulled him closer, putting the knife to his throat; but by the time he started dragging Pascal with him and backing away, Vincent was no longer in sight.

“Where’d he go?” he demanded of Pascal.

“I don’t know,” Pascal squeaked, doing his best to breathe through the fear of the knife.

“Come on out where I can see you, or he’s a dead man!” the intruder shouted, hearing his voice echo frighteningly out of the former silence of the tunnel, wondering how someone as large as his adversary could move quietly enough that he couldn’t hear him.

Before the intruder could call out again, Vincent was behind him and had an arm around his neck, squeezing hard.

“I’ll kill him,” he wheezed and tried to pull the knife against Pascal’s throat.

When Vincent tightened his grip on the man’s neck and grabbed his wrist again, the knife clattered to the floor, and the grasp on Pascal’s shoulder was released. Pascal moved hastily to the other tunnel wall as Vincent held his grip; and slowly, the man’s form slid to the floor.

“What do we do with him?” Pascal asked, his voice still shaky.

“I don’t know,” Vincent answered, feeling decidedly unsteady himself.

They had dealt with intruders before, but it was more of a game to see how long it would take to scare them out of the tunnels. Neither of them had ever been exposed to the kind of danger they had just encountered. They had been warned of it; but with the minds of very young adults who had always been protected, they had never truly realized what a serious threat it could be. They couldn’t leave someone that dangerous to wake up and follow them, and thoughts of the dangers Above suddenly took on new meaning.

Looking down at the figure on the dusty floor, Pascal pulled a short metal rod from his pocket and told Vincent, “We have to tell them. We’re in over our heads.”

“I’ll keep him here. Send the message.”

“We’re gonna be in a lot of trouble.”

“I know,” Vincent answered. “Send the message. Now.”

They heard an acknowledgement that help was on the way, but neither of them could relax until there were experienced adults to take charge.

The man was still on the floor when Pascal came back. “What did you do? He’s out cold.”

“I don’t know. He hasn’t moved since you left.”

Pascal took his flashlight, shined it toward the intruder, and laughed nervously. “Looks like you scared him bad. He’s wet his pants.”

Having often worked with Father in the hospital chamber, and having been there during a death recently, Vincent suddenly had a gnawing feeling of dread in the pit of his stomach. He hesitantly dropped to one knee and felt the man’s wrist for a pulse, then checked for a pulse at his neck. Feeling more desperate, he leaned over and placed his ear on the man’s chest.

“What are you doing? What if he wakes up?” Pascal hissed.

Vincent leapt to his feet and flattened himself against the tunnel wall, breathing hard, a look of horror on his face. He felt nauseous...couldn't move or make a sound.

“What’s wrong, Vincent? You’re scaring me.”

After a couple of false starts that simply turned into raspy, frightened breaths, Vincent finally managed to answer between breaths, “I think...he may never...wake up.”

“May never.... No....”

A small, quiet voice, completely devoid of the earlier confidence and exuberance, admitted to Pascal, “There’s no pulse. No heartbeat.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes,” Vincent answered, looking miserable. “There was nothing.” Two or three labored breaths later, he moaned, “What have I done?”

“What have you done?” Pascal responded, forgetting his own fear enough to recognize his friend’s true mental state. “You’ve saved my life. That’s what you’ve done. He had a knife to my throat, and neither one of us has any doubt that he was going to use it.”

“But....”

Vincent’s next words were interrupted by the sound of several men running down the tunnels toward them, one of them Pascal’s father.

“Are you all right?” the elder Pascal asked as he grabbed his son in a relieved hug.

“Yeah, thanks to Vincent. That guy would have killed me otherwise.”

Winslow noticed the look on Vincent’s face and knew something was wrong. “What’s the matter?” he asked. “You all right?”

Vincent only nodded his head.

“He’s down, Vincent. We’ll deal with him now. You did good,” Winslow assured him with a smile, clasp ing the teenager’s shoulder and giving it a brotherly squeeze. It worried him that Vincent didn’t respond...that he couldn’t seem to move his gaze from the man on the tunnel floor.

“I think he’s...” Vincent couldn’t make himself say the word.

“He’s what? Speak up, man,” Winslow demanded, shaking Vincent’s shoulder in an effort to draw him out of his stupor.

“Vincent thinks he’s...dead,” Pascal intervened quietly, saving his friend from having to verbalize it.

“Dead? You mean...” Winslow answered, dropping his hand from Vincent’s shoulder and lowering his gaze to the unmoving intruder, completely unprepared for such an outcome.

All eyes turned to Vincent.

“He had me pinned against him and had a knife at my neck,” Pascal shouted from behind them. “He said he was going to kill me. Vincent was just trying to stop him.”

Pascal’s father knelt to verify Vincent’s suspicions and found them to be true.

“What happens now?” Vincent asked quietly, trying to fight off tears.

“We take him Above, where somebody can find him and notify his family, if he has one.”

“You’ll just leave him somewhere?” Vincent asked, sounding more than concerned.

“We’ll find a place in the park. One of us will stay close and watch, and the other will find a call box and call the police so somebody can come and find him before morning,” Winslow told him. “No sense some innocent citizen come across him on the way to work...or some kid on the way to school. We’ll be as respectful as we can. Looks like we’ll be treating him with more

respect than he was treating Pascal. But we got to respect his family, too. Somebody may be looking for him, and they had nothing to do with this.”

“Then what?” Pascal asked his father.

“Then we talk to Father about what happened...and why you two were here at this hour of the night. Now get on back home. We’ll take care of this.”

The two young men turned back toward the home tunnels, simultaneously reluctant to face the trouble they knew was coming and glad to return to the safety of home.

Gabe, the third man in the response crew, spoke up then. “You go on back with your boy, Pascal. Send a message that everybody’s safe. Winslow and I will handle the rest.”

The senior Pascal nodded his thanks, sent a pipe message to report that they were safe and on their way home, and accompanied the younger men back.

Reaching the home chambers, the elder Pascal, having heard the whole truth by then, told the two younger men to wait in Vincent’s chamber while he talked to Father. The news he was about to deliver was going to take a heavy toll on his friend, and he thought he owed it to a fellow father to allow him time to assimilate the idea that his son had just killed a man...self defense or not.

“Jacob, I’ve brought our boys back.”

“Are they all right?”

“Yes and no.”

“Were they hurt?”

“Pascal’s father took a deep breath and said, “They’re physically fine, but I think you’d better sit down for the rest.”

“What happened?” Father asked as he sat in a chair next to his friend, his imagination ready to take flight.

“First, I can tell you they both have a better understanding of the danger we’ve been warning them of. This intruder wasn’t as easy to get rid of as the others they’ve encountered. He tried to kill Pascal.”

“Dear God! Are you sure they’re all right? Shouldn’t I examine him?”

“He may have a few bruises, and Vincent has a very small cut on his hand; but that’s the extent of their injuries.”

“What was done with the intruder?”

“He’s dead.”

“You had to kill him?”

“Not exactly. He was already dead.”

“But the message.... No! Our sons?”

“The guy had a knife to Pascal’s throat, and Vincent took care of it.”

“Vincent?” Father paled and put a hand to his forehead, rubbing his fingers there as if he had a terrible headache. “Good lord.”

“Pascal is still scared, and Vincent...he’s in shock. He didn’t say much on the way back unless I pressed him. He let Pascal do most of the talking.”

“And the state of the body?” Father asked hesitantly.

“Not a mark on him that I could see. From what the boys said, the guy may have a few bruises, but that’s likely to be all. I think you’d better go talk to them. They’re both in pretty bad shape.”

Father resignedly stood and walked toward Vincent’s chamber to face the inevitable, Pascal’s father close behind. They entered the chamber to find their sons sitting on the edge of Vincent’s bed, looking like they were about to face a firing squad, or possibly as if they had just escaped one.

“You’ve both had a difficult night,” Father began sternly. “I believe we can talk tomorrow morning about why the two of you were in that section of the tunnels at such an hour of the night. My chamber...ten o’clock sharp. Let me see where you were hurt.”

Vincent held out his hand, the small cut hardly seeming to him to be worth Father’s concern.

“What about you, Pascal?”

“Nothing. Maybe a couple of bruises...little pinpricks from the knife point.”

Father took a look and found nothing of concern.

“We’ll talk tomorrow morning. Pascal,” Father said a little less sternly as he clamped a hand on Pascal’s shoulder, “go home now and try to get some rest. I’m glad you’re safe.”

Pascal rose from the bed, turned and looked back and said, “I’m sorry,” and left the room with his father.

Vincent sat stoically on the edge of the bed, his head down, finally feeling he could allow the tears to fall; Father walked to the bed and sat down beside him.

“Can you tell me what happened? We need to talk about this. You know you and Pascal were fortunate to...”

“Fortunate?!” Vincent answered incredulously. “Father, I killed a man. I...”

“Fortunate that he didn’t kill one of you,” Father insisted as if he hadn’t been interrupted. “How did it happen?”

“I’m not sure.” Vincent’s breathing was becoming shallow and raspy again as he relived the scene in his mind, and now the tears were falling freely down his cheeks. An answer took a while. He had trouble arranging his thoughts, articulating his words...then suddenly, the sounds poured out as if they would never come again if he didn’t hurry and say them. He described in detail what had happened, ending with, “He went limp and slid to the

floor. That's when we sent the message. I stayed with him because we thought he might come to any time." He paused for a long moment. "But...he didn't."

"Vincent..."

"Father, I killed him. I didn't mean to. I don't even know how it happened. I didn't use nearly my full strength, and...he was dead. How do I live with that?"

Father took a deep breath before speaking. "Thankfully, Vincent. It saved Pascal's life." Father placed his arm sympathetically around Vincent's shoulders. "Son, there are times when our choices are limited. We have to act. Even in the courts of law Above, in cases of self-defense or the defense of an innocent, killing the perpetrator is considered justified."

Vincent looked at his father but didn't seem to gain any relief from his words. "I believe the term is justifiable homicide," he answered stiffly, remembering books he had read.

Father tightened his arm lovingly around his son's shoulder. "It is considered justifiable, nonetheless. Could you have allowed Pascal to die to avoid what you did?"

"No," he admitted grudgingly. "But it frightens me, Father. It was so easy. I've hardly ever hurt anyone, but tonight...in only moments...without even realizing it..."

Vincent collapsed into Father's shoulder, wrapping his arms around him, looking for comfort. Father held him as he wept, rubbing his back lightly and patting it gently, as he had done when Vincent was small, providing brief consolation from a memory that would never entirely leave his son's consciousness.

Vincent had been walking the perimeter alone when he heard an intruder alert on the pipes. He quickly answered and used his years of experience to formulate a plan.

That afternoon Kanin and Nathan had to go Above for supplies, and he knew they would be returning through that section of the tunnels. Not wanting them to be caught unaware if they had missed the alert, he headed for an area nearer the surface than where the intruders had been reported and worked his way back from there. He proceeded toward the intruders using the advantages of his hearing and instincts to tell him when to put out his lantern, and depending on his knowledge of the tunnels and his ability to see shapes and movement where others could only see darkness. He had no sooner reached the outskirts of the area the prowlers were in, when he caught the sound of his friends returning from Above. He recognized Nathan's voice and Kanin's laugh, then a sentry they passed warned them of the intruders and they were quiet. But the intruders had heard them, too, and grew quiet themselves...and therefore, Vincent knew, more wary, which could make them more dangerous.

Vincent moved farther down the tunnels toward his friends, and between them they confronted the invasion before the intruders could find the hub of the tunnel community. The encounter left all three of the determined and violent intruders dead, and Nathan injured. Others would be sent to see that the bodies were removed. They gathered the weapons, a gun and three knives, and returned home where Father could tend Nathan's wounds.

And where Vincent could find Catherine.

Catherine was waiting in their chamber when Vincent returned from the night's confrontation. She had felt his responses to the intruders...the struggle, the brief feeling of victory that always accompanied a conquest, just before the reality of the death sunk in and left him disgusted and wanting to run...away from himself as much as away from others. She was there, hand outstretched, to lead him to the falls to talk where they would have more privacy than they might have had in their chamber. They were now joined, and she had finally convinced him to look to her to help him through these times instead of running from her...to allow himself to depend on her strength the way she had always depended on his.

They walked hand in hand, not saying much before they arrived. Catherine moved closer to him, wrapping her arm around his waist as they came closer to their destination, and he draped his arm around her shoulders. His own

shoulders drooped with the weight of the burden of protecting the community...the emotional cost of his contribution to the security of the only place he felt truly safe.

After opening the blanket she had brought and spreading it on the ground, Catherine stood on tip-toes and kissed him, assuring him that he was loved, and said, "Sit down with me and tell me...when you're ready." She then sat down, holding her hand up to invite him to join her. Vincent sat cross-legged beside her, still tense, looking down, fiddling with a small, smooth stone he found on the ground beside him.

Catherine's sense of Vincent had increased significantly with the new closeness in their relationship, and she had known when that night's situation became dangerous. She also knew how much he needed her.

"How old were you when this first happened," she asked quietly, slipping her arm around his and reaching sympathetically for his hand, "when you first had to take a life?"

"Eighteen," he answered after a long moment, and slowly started to relate the events of the evening he and Pascal were going Above; but he never looked up to face her.

"Eighteen. That's so young," Catherine answered when he had finished, rubbing his arm sympathetically.

"No younger than some of the soldiers in your world," Vincent answered, finally looking at her. "They have training before they have to face an enemy, but I doubt any training can prepare them for seeing the life drain from another...and knowing that it was at their hands."

When he looked down again, she could feel the toll that this responsibility took on him. "No, I suppose that's true. But you had no reason to expect it. What happened after that?"

How did the others react...the rest of the community?" Catherine asked. She didn't want to push him too far, but he seemed unusually willing to talk about it, almost needing to talk, and she wanted to hear what he intended to tell her. She would know when she should back away.

“They were surprised. Father told them not to ask me about it, so they asked him...and Winslow, and Gabe, and both Pascals. And some of them put pressure on Father to add me to the sentries who handled intruders.” He looked toward her. “As you can imagine, Father was not happy, but he could hardly refuse to send me when other young men only a few years older were already a part of the teams. Especially when I had exhibited so much talent for such things,” he added acidly, obviously re-living the sinking feeling he had at that discovery.

Vincent took a deep breath and released it as he leaned his head back, looking up at nothing in particular. “I had reached my full height, but not my full strength. When it came to tracking, I knew I had even better instincts than some of the adults. It was a game when I was a child, and I knew that I excelled. The few times I had dealt with more innocuous intruders, it still seemed a game...stalk them, frighten them, and push them back to the surface without being seen. I could move more quietly than others, see more easily, overwhelm an opponent with no trouble. None of it took much effort to learn...some of it simply seemed to be a part of me.

“Winslow had size and strength on his side, too.” He looked down again, still absently playing with the small stone he held. “He was only a few years older than I. He could be gruff and stubborn...and sometimes a little rebellious, but he always had a strong sense of duty...a loyalty to his extended family here.” Vincent paused briefly. “He came to talk to me...to explain how valuable my abilities could be in protecting our community. He was close to my age. We were friends. There were fewer of us then, and it was understood that everyone needed to use whatever talents they possessed for the good of the whole. It suddenly became clear to me that those skills were no longer a part of my childhood. They were to be used...however they were needed. I don’t believe Winslow was sent to speak to me. I believe he came of his own accord...but I never asked. I volunteered the next morning...to save Father from the responsibility of giving me that assignment.” He stopped and released another breath, as if releasing the memory of a sad new awareness. “It was a rude awakening.”

“I’m sorry you’ve been pushed into that place so often.”

Feeling the love and empathy flowing to him from Catherine, he moved back against the large rock in their favorite place near the falls and held his arm out, inviting Catherine to come with him. The tension relaxed somewhat, and he stretched his legs out, pulled her into his lap, held her close, and accepted the support she was offering, resting his head on her shoulder. “I don’t know what my life would be without you,” he said softly close to her ear. “Your unconditional love allows me to be entirely myself...to tell you anything, and the bond between us allows you to know.... I used to feel so alone. I never wanted to draw you into such dark feelings, but having someone who understands what others can’t is a gift beyond measure. It would be unbearable to be so alone again.”

She held him tighter as he remembered that aloneness and assured him that as long as she lived, he would never need to feel alone. “Don’t stop talking to me. I know the feelings, but not the stories behind them. The stories help me to understand. I know there was danger tonight - and how it ended. Do you want to tell me what happened?”

Vincent lifted his head, but kept her close and told her what had transpired. “All three of us struggled with them, but....”

“But the deaths fell to you?”

“Yes.”

“All three of them?”

“Yes. Kanin...Nathan needed his help.” He looked down again, his hair hiding part of his face.

“I didn’t feel the rage I’ve seen before.”

“No one was trying to hurt *you*.”

“The rage isn’t there otherwise?”

“Anger sometimes, if a friend is in danger, my responses are gauged to necessity, but....”

“Why the rage only when I’m in danger?”

“Because...even when I couldn’t believe you would ever consider me in such a way...I felt I was protecting my mate. Your safety was the most important thing I could imagine. I couldn’t lose you...couldn’t allow them to take you. You were already a part of me.”

“I’m sorry I brought you to that.”

“You would have done the same to protect me if you could,” he answered with certainty

“Yes.” Catherine agreed. “Given the same circumstances, I probably would. I couldn’t let them take you, either.” She paused for a moment and asked, “When it doesn’t involve me, how do you....”

“Controlled. Efficient. Hunter and prey. It shames me that I can remain so calm...that I never had to be taught. Something in me seemed to already know that a man can be hanged by holding him off the ground with a hand and a strong arm...that a well-placed strike from the back of my hand can break a neck...that....”

Catherine felt the tension in him building again and wrapped her arms around his neck, one hand pulling his head back to her shoulder, and whispered, “Shhhh. I want to hear, but you don’t have to say anything else if you don’t want to.”

Vincent let her hold him, and drew her closer until he calmed again. Not moving away from her embrace, he admitted, “I researched lions in Father’s library once. I found that often a lion kills by breaking the neck of its prey...with the strength of its paw.”

“Stop that right now!” Catherine admonished, pulling away to look him defiantly in the eye. “I won’t have you think of yourself that way. Look at how this affects you. It takes humanity to feel remorse. And if it helps to know it, I’ve seen men Above use similar tactics. They probably learned from watching someone else...maybe another who found that something in him seemed to already know. Your strength makes it more....”

“What happens when your law enforcement officers have to take a life?”

“They’re often confined to a desk job, or sometimes suspended until an investigation can be completed to decide whether it was warranted or not. They usually have to turn in their weapons until the investigation is complete.”

“That would be difficult for me,” he answered wryly.

She smiled and stroked his cheek understandingly, and he turned his head to kiss her palm.

“They generally have to see someone for evaluation or counseling before they return to full duty. Something you could have used when you were eighteen. But you withdrew further into yourself, didn’t you?”

He lifted his head again and took her hand, looking down at their entwined fingers. “After Lisa...and having to be restrained during my illness, my differences seemed so large...so obvious that I couldn’t speak of them to anyone else. The things I told Pascal were more trivial...even he never heard them all. I’ve never spoken these things to anyone...until now.”

“So I’m the best excuse you’ve found for a counselor?”

“It seems so,” he answered, finally looking up at her and allowing himself a small smile at her description of herself.

“I’m glad you can talk to me. It lets me know how much you trust me.”

“Always.”

She leaned against his chest again, his arms encircling her; and they sat in comfortable silence, grateful to have one another, as they gradually wound down and relaxed. When Catherine caught herself falling asleep, she raised her head and asked, “Shall we go back now?”

Vincent leaned to kiss her and asked quietly, “Will you take me home and love me before we sleep?”

She returned his kiss and answered, “Always,” before they gathered their blanket and walked back to their chamber hand in hand.

