

(Wiseguy, Sonny/Vinnie, 7000 words. This is a different ‘take’ on, and outcome of, the episode “One On One.”)

THE VIVID COLOR OF GODS AND DEVILS

by

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*Gold is the reason for
the wars we wage... -- Bono*

Sonny was gold. Bronze. Sonny was coppery doorknobs, locks and keys of secret rooms you longed to break into even if it meant your death, your soul. Sonny walked in that rich alluring autumn-colored cloud. Attracting. Curious. Irresistible. That color created the feeling of reaching out, of “must touch” even if you knew your hand would be slapped. Because he saw him in this way, Vinnie’s heart was one part field agent, one part Steelgrave protector, defender, best friend.

Sonny was fascinating to be around, enthusiastic about life, interested in everything, even stuff he didn’t quite understand. He had an affectionate charisma that infected those around him. If you were loyal and true, he was open-hearted, generous. He cared if you got hurt, if you were slighted, if you needed something he could provide. But the other side of Sonny, the bitter, angrier side was like a little kid who exploded if he didn’t get his way. Sometimes the explosion was deadly quiet, but you still knew you were in for it. Other times he threw things, broke TVs, slammed baseball bats against car windows. The tantrum child inside Sonny was what made him strong, the kind of leader people feared; the fair, open-hearted, caring man made him well-loved.

Some called Sonny evil. Frank once referred to him as “that devil in an Armani suit.” Others treated him as if he were a god, bowing down to him, kissing his hand, saying yes yes yes to any request, none too grand for the crown prince of Atlantic City. If Sonny was a golden god, then was the Royal Diamond Heaven? If so, then the copper devil in him lived in a Mafioso-created Hell.

Sonny lay back on the taut white sheets of the king-sized bed in Vinnie’s tiny apartment he’d kept apart from his job just outside of Atlantic City. He was gold. He was always gold. But this early wintry evening he was not a god and he was not a devil. He was a

guy naked between the sheets, covered in white bandages, and pretending the pain in his eyes, in his voice was a myth.

Vinnie had just finished changing Sonny's bandages for the first time and Sonny was embarrassed even though they had once exchanged a lover's kiss, even though Sonny had spared...no... *saved* Vinnie's life.

Never once in all the months Vinnie had been on the job working for Frank, working for Sonny, had he ever thought this man would be here now, in his bed, in his apartment. In fact, Vinnie hadn't even set foot in this apartment in six months.

But in the hospital Sonny had said to him, "Don't you have another place? Some place safe? From your other life?"

Vinnie had frowned. "Huh?"

"Please." The brown eyes glanced around the sterile room, then landed on the tube going into his arm. His hands plucked at the thin white sheet, at the edge of the pale blue hospital gown at his waist, a gown that kept falling off his left shoulder, wrinkling under his back. "Get me outta here."

"You can't go back to the Diamond yet."

Sonny glanced away. "I know. It's not safe for you."

"It's okay here," Vinnie said. "All the cops around. Back at the Diamond they all still think you're under arrest."

"I don't want to stay here!"

Vinnie said, "The doctors would never release you."

Sonny winced. Grimaced as he said, a little breathily, "If they knew I was in good hands... I'd never ask you ...any other time...but...I...can't...stand...this!" He punched the side of the hospital bed with his left fist.

Sonny had saved Vinnie's life. Sonny *was* Vinnie's life even if they hadn't discussed it. That one kiss. It had sealed something between them.

When Sidney Royce had accused Vinnie of being a cop and Sonny looked all too convinced, Vinnie had thrown his Rolex at Sonny in the office, finally quit in front of them both and left to go pack. Sonny had followed him.

Sonny came barreling into his suite, into his bedroom and apologized. He had brought back the Rolex. He had seemed so desperate, strangely panicked perhaps. And Vinnie

realized he could say anything, anything at all right then to convince Sonny he wasn't a cop and Sonny would believe him.

He said, "Sid's gonna come down on me real hard."

Sonny replied, "We keep each other alive." Then he leaned in. He hugged Vinnie. He kissed him Italian-style on the cheek. He held him tight. The hug lasted a little too long. Vinnie stood silently, hands at his sides, thinking how lucky he was. Sonny cared. That easily. That openly. But it was disturbing something inside him, inside his heart, and he shuddered without warning, his breath almost a gasp.

Sonny felt it. Pulled back a little. Their eyes met, Sonny looking so regretful and full of longing and perhaps even a little fearful all at the same time. He tilted his head then and softly touched his lips to Vinnie's. A test. A monumental risk. The gamble of a lifetime in a hotel that took bets and played them out every day, all day, all night long. But this wager was life and death. A soul struggle. The devil was betting now and it seemed like the whole world held its breath.

Slowly, Vinnie raised his arms, his hands lightly touching Sonny's waist. Their lips moved very slightly, but that was it. Sonny pulled back. Vinnie dropped his hands. The brown eyes were shiny, full, faith and worry swirling their depths.

Vinnie wondered what his own eyes revealed. His lungs were frozen. He wasn't breathing for the moment.

Sonny glanced aside. Vinnie felt his lungs finally fill, forced a whisper. "Okay. I'll stay."

Sonny's "Yeah," came out fast, like he'd been holding his breath, too. "Great."

Now, in Vinnie's apartment, Sonny lay on his side facing away from Vinnie who sat on the side of the bed. His voice was rough, shaky. "Your guys are lousy shots."

"Yeah, thank God," Vinnie replied.

"Thank you."

Vinnie had pulled the covers over him so the bandages were hidden now. "No need to thank me." After everything he'd caused. Lying. Pretending. Deceiving. Almost getting Sonny killed. And still Sonny had saved him. This was the least he could do in return. "Sonny," he said and felt his voice fade. "I'm so sorry."

"Shut up."

The irony was mad. Pure lunacy. The cop and mobster. Alone in a small room in a cheap apartment in the burbs. Cops and mobsters only spoke to each other if the law was involved, an arrest was being made. Or if the cop was dirty.

Neither was the case here. Not anymore. Vinnie's touch had been tender as he'd changed the dressings. Sonny had been so tense. The bullet hole that had gone straight through Sonny's right side back to front, just below the ribs, was a clean wound. No vital organs were hit. The second injury, a deep bullet graze to the upper thigh, was not. Even as Sonny tried to remain still while Vinnie re-bandaged him, his body trembled. His hands, when he raised them to press tightly against his chest, shook just a little. His eyelashes made tight lines against his eyelids as he kept them closed during the whole ordeal.

Now Sonny said it again. "Just...thanks for bringing me here."

"Don't thank me," Vinnie said, firmer. "I want you here."

Sonny sucked in a breath.

Vinnie touched him lightly on his shoulder. "You don't have to thank me for bringing you here. I wanted to. I want to be with you. Whatever this is between us, it's not fake. It's..."

"Shut up," Sonny said again, softer.

:"I know. It can never work."

"Vinnie..."

Vinnie waited. The almost whisper. The strange pleading tone. But Sonny said nothing more.

"I'm sorry..."

"Don't apologize!" Not a whisper now.

"I almost got you killed!"

"No. It's a dangerous game. I almost got myself killed."

"But you were saving my life!" Every detail was there. Etched on his brain in fine photographic, holographic clarity.

The phone call had come in the middle of the night waking Vinnie from a sound sleep. Sonny's voice rasped on the other end. After that almost too-sweet kiss, Vinnie might've thought Sonny had decided to take further steps between them. Maybe Sonny was

feeling lonely. Vinnie had felt that way, just before sleep, unable to think of nothing all day and into the night *but* that kiss. It didn't disturb him that Sonny was a guy. It was Sonny; *that* was what intrigued him. But this was new territory for him. And no more words had passed between them about it. There was no doubt that their special closeness had become something more. Just beyond the water's edge, where the darker depths lay, swam electric sensations and emotions that had been hovering between them for weeks.

Through the phone line, though, Sonny's tone was far from gentle. It was firm with a tinge of fear. He was all business. Panic shot through Vinnie's stomach like flame. Everything Sonny said and failed to say in that one call spelled 'threat.' He could practically see the red warning light in his mind.

When he hung up, he immediately called Lifeguard. "Something's up. I need back-up."

Uncle Mike wanted to pull him out right then and there. Vinnie thought he might be able to salvage the operation. He wanted back-up but he wanted it distant, invisible. He convinced the Lifeguard to buy him time.

He dressed quickly in jeans. He put on his leather jacket over his white tank.

It was cold out. He didn't care. He wanted to feel the cold. It gave him a much needed edge.

Sonny had instructed him to take a cab to another location. He would then pick him up.

Vinnie knew it was so no one would see them. No one from the Diamond would know that Vinnie had gone off with Sonny and two of Sonny's biggest goons. If Vinnie was going to disappear, all bases had to be covered. They would take him where no one would find the body. The lying, deceiving Fed's body. Probably, to hide his identity even further, they would cut off his hands and head and hide them even more remotely.

When Vinnie got into the limo Sonny looked frozen over, cold, hard, pissed.

Even with back-up, Vinnie felt nervous. Back-ups could fail. Get lost. Be life-and-death minutes off in their timing.

Vinnie gave Sonny his old stand-by, the innocent, blue-eyed stare. Sonny only looked away.

For awhile, they tried to reason through all this. Sonny presented the facts. The Quantico driver's license was produced. Vinnie made his argument, going through Sonny's wallet to show that not everything in it looked above-board, either.

Sonny's eyes got shiny and hard as he looked out the window. For awhile, Vinnie thought Sonny would let him off the hook. But the limo continued to drive further and

further away from the city, out toward the countryside and bright stars and fields lost and fallow in the December pre-dawn.

Vinnie took a deep breath as they pulled off the highway and onto a bumpy dirt road. He watched Sonny who never looked away from the side window. Never moved.

The limo stopped. One of the goons opened the door. "Out!" he instructed.

Finally, Sonny moved. He said, "I'll take care of it!" His voice was decisive, firm.

Sonny opened his side door. Without looking up, he motioned Vinnie out. Vinnie stumbled from the car, his heart breaking as he looked up at thousands of stars leaning down from a black, slate sky. Vaguely, he heard Sonny order the other guys to stay put.

"Move," he said to Vinnie, and Vinnie started to walk. They walked silently for a long time, Vinnie trying hard to keep his shaking breath even. But his heart drummed. His hands, which he'd curled into fists, shook. And he kept thinking about their tentative kiss.

They kept moving. A hundred yards. Two hundred yards. The lights from the limo were dim and distant now, the weeds and tall grasses hiding them even more in the dark night.

Surreptitiously, Vinnie tried to look around wondering if back-up had even arrived, if sudden saviors would jump from the field's surrounding shadows and end this horrible nightmare. But there was nothing to see, and no sound save their unsteady breaths, and their footsteps through dirt and dead twigs.

Vinnie bit his lower lip. Hours ago, Sonny's mouth had touched him there. Now Sonny was going to kill him. The man he loved...yes, loved...was going to kill him.

The cold night air was scented with dust and old leaves. As Sonny told him to stop and Vinnie turned, Sonny's cologne wafted over him lightly and was gone. Vinnie looked at him. Sonny was staring down at the ground, hands at his sides. In his right hand he held a gun pointed at the ground.

Vinnie felt his eyes tighten. His lips pressed hard. He said, trying to keep the tremor from his voice, "What happened to 'we keep each other alive'?"

Sonny glanced up, then down again, said, "You're not going to beg?"

Before Vinnie had a chance to answer, Sonny spoke again, head moving back and forth, voice going soft. "How'd you get to be so perfect?"

"What?"

Now Sonny looked up. “I have to do this, Vinnie. They’re all on my ass about you being a cop and they won’t let it go.”

Sharp breath. “You don’t believe them?”

Sonny gave him a crooked, painful smile. “What I believe...doesn’t matter. If you are...I...I...” His eyes took on a strange sheen. “I should hate you. But even if nothing was real for you, it was for me. I can’t kill you, Vinnie. I love you.” He moved his left hand up, touching Vinnie on the cheek. “I’m gonna shoot the gun into the air and you’re gonna run. You can do that, right? You got back-up, right?”

Vinnie felt tears form in the corners of his eyes. The air was so cold they froze against his eyelids. *I love you.* Sonny was breaking every creed and oath for him. *I love you.*

Sonny was letting him go. Sonny was saving him.

As Vinnie watched, Sonny raised the gun up, up. Just as it was over his head he heard the shot. Sonny’s body jerked. But something was off. He hadn’t yet pulled the trigger. Then came another shot. Sonny’s body jerked again and Vinnie caught him as he fell, yelling, “HOLD YOUR FIRE! HOLD YOUR FIRE!”

Sonny’s weight pushed Vinnie to his knees, but he held him tight as he watched blood pool against Sonny’s lower back. He pressed his hand against the flow. “No!”

He heard rustling, men calling out and suddenly the field was flooded with lights.

Sonny shifted in his arms, turned his head. Looking up at him, he smiled softly. “I knew you had back-up, pal. I just knew.”

Vinnie pulled him tighter to his chest, let his mouth press a sob against the top of Sonny’s head. Then they were surrounded and Frank’s voice cut through the mayhem yelling angrily for a medic over and over.

The Federal vehicles’ emergency lights pressed blue and gold and red into the wide sky. They’d lined themselves up and down the road. Vinnie watched them go by as he rode the ambulance with Sonny back to civilization away from shallow graves and lonely, voiceless winds, away from ghosts and death and loss. But that country darkness was in his soul now, and always would be.

It seemed he could not catch his breath as he sat by Sonny’s side. Sonny was conscious for the entire drive. An I.V. was attached to his wrist. He looked hazy and sleepy, but he never looked away from Vinnie, and Vinnie clutched at his fingers as if Sonny was being pulled away from him by invisible hands deep into the sea of death. Sonny tugged a little, said “Ow” once. But Vinnie did not let up. He brought Sonny’s hand closer, then up to his lips and held it there for a long, long time. Sonny let him.

The hospital was a flurry of lights and people in green and blue scrubs writing notes, reading charts, pushing buttons on machines. They moved casually, slowly...too slowly it seemed, attaching things to Sonny, turning him, stripping him, idly cleaning his wounds. It seemed at first there was so much blood. But the flow had stopped. Nothing was stitched. The first bullet ripped clean through his side, and it was a wonder Vinnie hadn't been struck by it since he was standing right in front of Sonny when he was shot. The second had grazed Sonny's thigh. Both were bandaged heavily. Sonny was given lots of drugs, monitored sedately by a graveyard crew and really it was all mostly about waiting and waiting. Sonny slept a little with Vinnie at his side. When he woke he said to Vinnie, "What are you still doing here?"

Vinnie replied sarcastically, "What if you tried to escape?"

"Am I under arrest?"

"No, but isn't that what you want everyone to believe?"

Sonny closed his eyes and sighed.

It was morning before he was admitted from the more public area of the emergency room to a private hospital bedroom. Two nurses introduced themselves. One took blood pressure, then both of them left.

Sonny looked so tired. But he could move. He could walk. And he was alive.

It wasn't until late in the afternoon that he started to complain. And by that evening they were in Vinnie's never-used apartment loaded with bags of fast food, prescriptions and bandages and strict instructions about what to do with it all. Someone had brought Sonny a pair of sweats and a sweatshirt at the hospital. Probably Frank. Vinnie didn't know, but he was pretty sure it was Frank.

But when Vinnie got him to the bedroom, Sonny shucked it all. He'd begged for a shower but Vinnie said he'd have to wait a day. The through and through gunshot wound was like a puncture, and quickly healing on the outside. But the graze was like a burn with lots of skin missing. Getting that wet might make it worse. And it would hurt like hell.

Now Vinnie sat beside him and they were finally talking...a little. But Sonny was so upset. Vinnie was exhausted, so he knew Sonny had to be doubly so.

"I know the dangers of this life," Sonny was saying gruffly. "I wake up every morning knowing. I'm not fooling myself. I chose this life. That's why I was sending you away...before anything really bad could happen to either of us!"

"And I didn't trust you," Vinnie said painfully. "I called for back-up and put your life at risk."

“And you shouldn’t trust me! I risk my own life! Just like you, just doing your job. It’s no different.”

Vinnie did not reply.

He stood up. He was tired of Sonny thanking him. And of himself apologizing, but neither one seemed able to stop. As he stood, Sonny turned in the bed until he was almost on his back. “Where’re you going?”

“I’m tired. I’ll be just outside the room on the couch.”

Sonny’s body jerked. “Vinnie, don’t...” He hesitated, swallowed. “...don’t leave me alone.” He voice almost cracked.

Vinnie felt himself smile a little. He’d been half afraid Sonny wouldn’t want him anymore. Even though it was dangerous, even though it looked as if they would never be able to be together, Sonny still wanted him.

Vinnie simply nodded, then slowly walked around the foot of the bed. He took off his shirt, his shoes, his socks, then his jeans. He left his shorts on. Then he climbed into the bed, glancing down and saw that Sonny was staring at him as if in a trance.

Vinnie settled next to him. Sonny blinked. *You shouldn’t trust me*, he’d said.

Yeah, Vinnie thought. *Right*. He’d never fallen for a guy before, let alone the *bad* guy. But somehow this felt so natural. He stared at Sonny’s face. The look there was so open., so...so fucking devoted. It was the headiest feeling. He said, frowning, “Fuck.” Reached out. “Come here.” He pulled him onto his good side. Sonny curled into him as if they’d been sleeping together for months, years. They fit. Vinnie turned out the lamp and put his hand on Sonny’s bare shoulder. Sonny pushed tighter against him as Vinnie tunneled his other arm underneath Sonny’s pillow. His lips brushed Sonny’s bangs. Sonny’s arm was against Vinnie’s chest, his hand on Vinnie’s arm. He clutched harder and his breathing hitched. Vinnie’s head moved down and he kissed the bridge of Sonny’s nose.

Sonny whispered, “No, Vinnie...”

Vinnie knew why he said it. There was no future for them. Only ‘now’. And the agony of being in love rivaled even that of gunshot wounds, deception, lies.

Vinnie kissed him again, just beside the eye.

“Damn...” And Sonny was breathing harder again, unsteady, wavering. But amidst the shaking of his chest, he was whispering softly. Vinnie closed his eyes and listened to the hushed words made of barely audible breaths. “Goddamnyoulloveyou...”

After awhile, Sonny quieted. Vinnie's palm gently rubbed Sonny's back slower, slower...until they both fell asleep.

Sonny got up a couple times in the night. Vinnie was vaguely aware of him coming back to the bed before falling back into an exhausted sleep.

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The room was gold, like Sonny, in the early dawn. For a cold early December, the weather was fairly bright. Vinnie had turned up the heat. Sonny had thrown the covers back a little. His golden chest rose and fell slowly in quiet rest. Languidly, he opened his eyes, dark and unguarded.

Vinnie suppressed a sigh. What the fuck were they going to do? They had one, maybe two weeks before Sonny healed and went back to his old life and Vinnie would be required on another operation.

Without preamble, Sonny said, "It's funny that you have this apartment under another name but you use your real name for your fake life."

"Yeah, well now all that will probably change. Your guys know I'm a Fed now. I'll have to get a new identity if I'm going undercover again...or work as a field supervisor."

Sonny nodded curtly, said softly, "Fuck."

Vinnie said, "You should hate me a lot right now."

Sonny blinked. "Maybe I sort of do..." Then he reached out and touched Vinnie's chin with the tips of his fingers.

Vinnie leaned his head forward and kissed him. After a few seconds, Sonny squirmed, turning his head away. "There's no future in this, Vincenzo."

The pet name, which usually only his mother and brother ever used and which he had always hated, now made his heart hammer. Hearing it in Sonny's voice, coming from Sonny's mouth... Sonny made the world a different place for Vinnie. Nothing was ever what he expected when he was with Sonny.

Vinnie pulled him close with a sudden roughness he did not expect from himself. Sonny did not tense or grimace but Vinnie thought maybe he was still in pain. All Sonny did was lean his head back on Vinnie's chest and turn it far enough so Vinnie couldn't kiss him anymore.

Vinnie said, "Pretend we're not who we are. Fantasize it was all some sort of fictional story. How does it end? What would we do if we could figure out how to be together in spite of everything, in spite of all this?"

"We could go to Switzerland," Sonny suggested quietly.

"Or Costa Rica."

"Or Canada."

"Then these two guys in this fictional story, would they be happy doing that?"

"Maybe."

"Is 'maybe' enough to risk it?"

"Maybe," Sonny repeated.

They lay together silently for awhile. Then Vinnie said, "You're one of the bravest people I've ever met."

Sonny half-snorted. "Yeah. Sure."

"It's true."

"Naw, I'm just surrounded by a lot of muscle, a lot of money and that buys a lot of power. You, Vinnie, you're the one who never even begged."

"I had back-up...a safety net."

"You weren't sure."

"I was pretty sure. And I had you."

"You thought I wouldn't do it? Shoot you in the middle of nowhere, leave you to rot through the winter like some dumb animal that'd lost its way?"

"I thought you might. But you chose the braver path."

"Brave? I was too chicken-shit..."

"No," Vinnie interrupted. "You were better than all the others like you. Better. Braver. Hell, you're the one lying here without a stitch on in the middle of this bed with me. That's pretty brave. I've never done this...been in this situation before...with a guy. I played it safe and kept my shorts."

Sonny chuckled. “There’s an easy solution to that.” Now Sonny turned slightly, ran his hand down Vinnie’s side. Where Sonny touched, his skin instantly warmed. His fingers tugged lightly at the elastic waistband of Vinnie’s shorts, pushing underneath and teasing the skin over his hipbone. Sonny said quietly, “I haven’t, either. Been in this sort of situation before.”

The stirrings of arousal had nagged at him all night long, even in his sleep. But now a new life sprang into those feelings as Sonny continued to stroke his skin just underneath his waistband. He felt himself harden. Felt his chest tighten. “Canada,” he said between trembling lips. He’d been there before. It was beautiful.

Sonny moved over him now as if he had no injuries whatsoever, as if the day before had never happened, as if they hadn’t just had a truly bizarre conversation at the onset of dawn beginning to stream through the white curtains at the window, and kissed him softly on the mouth. Vinnie’s arms came around him. Gentle. Avoiding the bandage at Sonny’s back. Sonny’s leg pressed between Vinnie’s. Vinnie caught it with his own leg swinging over the back of it and held him firm against his body.

Sonny was hard against him, naked. Vinnie’s hand moved down, stroking over the curve of one buttock.

Sonny let up, blinking down into Vinnie’s gaze. “This should *not* happen.”

Vinnie bit the inside of his own cheek, hoping the momentary pain would distract him from this greater pain.

“I won’t be able to let you go,” Sonny tried to explain, and his eyes looked all funny and glistening.

“Me, either,” he said finally. There was no answer as to *why* this was happening. Or why it should or should not happen. Simply, it was going to happen.

Sonny said, “Dammit, maybe you could put bars on all the windows, locks on all the doors. Keep me here. Keep me here....”

Like some fictional story, Vinnie thought. *Some dark fairy tale*. “And no one would ever know.”

Sonny shut his eyes tight, leaned down, kissed him again. This time both their mouths opened simultaneously. It was a real kiss now, deep, desperate, burning, and then they were moaning into it and Sonny’s hands were tugging at Vinnie’s shorts as Vinnie turned them in the bed onto their sides. Sonny got Vinnie’s shorts down far enough for Vinnie to kick them off and they pressed together so fine, so hot.

Vinnie felt Sonny pushing warm and aroused against him. But Sonny had been through so much. “Think you can do this with all those drugs coursing through your system?”

“Let’s see how far we get,” was Sonny’s unconcerned reply.

It shouldn’t be.

It couldn’t be.

But it was the sweetest, hottest, most powerful feeling between them.

Vinnie thought, *This guy who lives in a golden palace and has devils for breakfast is kissing me more tenderly, and with a more furious longing than any woman has ever shown me.*

Let’s see how far we get.

But that was never a question. They had been wanting each other, even if not always consciously, for far too long.

It couldn’t last, not now as they exploded so quickly onto each other. Nor into the future. There was no place to take this. No place to go with it. And Vinnie gasped his frustration and pleasure until he felt like sobbing. The orgasm was one part agony, one part over the top intense ecstasy that like that dark countryside where he almost lost his life to Sonny Steelgrave would stay in his soul forever.

This time, he lost his heart.

Sonny’s breath was damp against his neck. Fiery.

Devil’s breathed fire. Didn’t they?

That soft/hard body against him, golden and smooth, kept him tingling all over.

Errant thought: *I have to make a world for you.*

Sonny whispered, “You bastard.”

Vinnie waited, silently, for the punch line.

It came. “Now I’ll never be able to breathe right again.”

After awhile, when they caught their breaths, Vinnie said, “Switzerland?”

Sonny said, “Umph.”

Vinnie said, “Italy?”

Sonny bit him at the shoulder just below his neck, then licked lightly as if in apology.

He thought about them living on a boat at sea and coming ashore maybe only once a month at various exotic ports for supplies.

He thought about them growing their beards long and living like mountain men in cabins they built with their own hands.

He thought about the moon.

All safe places. *Away from the things of Man.*

One of Sonny's hands combed absently through his hair. Vinnie dozed off.

Later, he got up and took a shower, leaving Sonny to sleep and heal some more. He went to the corner market and got them food to last for a few days, then went home to make breakfast.

Sonny had found one of Vinnie's robes. His hair was wet. He'd shaved.

"You took a shower," Vinnie admonished when he came in laden with grocery bags.

Sonny shrugged. He had a glass of water and was busily downing some pills, standing unsteadily at Vinnie's kitchen counter.

Vinnie set the bags down, touched Sonny's forehead the way he'd been taught to feel for a fever. Sonny pushed his hand away but smiled as he did it.

"Feeling better?" Vinnie asked.

"What can I say? I'm a fast healer."

"Did you change your own bandages?"

"I managed."

Later, Vinnie showed Sonny how to play Tetris and Mario on the Nintendo. All day he kept watching Sonny, his eyes straying to his hands, his wrists, to the upper part of his bronze chest exposed by Vinnie's robe. He couldn't help it. He wanted him so much, so badly. The feeling never went away.

Later in the afternoon a smiling Sonny caught his eye, then his arm and led him into the bedroom. Sonny lost his robe in seconds flat revealing white bandages that made Vinnie wince. Vinnie's jeans followed in a heap on the floor.

This time was slower, more beautiful. No surface was left untouched, untasted.

Vinnie traced the smooth skin all around Sonny's bandages. Sonny's body was less hairy than most men's and what hair there was grew uncharacteristically pale, silken. The hair at his groin, though, was dark and rich. Soft to the touch.

Sonny trembled as Vinnie touched him between the legs, exploring, coaxing. He felt the thrum of Sonny's pulse against his palm. Sonny was gorgeous, smooth, even pretty, and very very hard. He groaned, shuddered, gasped, as Vinnie leaned over him. Vinnie was not experienced at giving men oral sex, but he knew what he liked and he did that for Sonny, knowing afterward that he could do that again and again, that he wanted to do it.

Sonny said, still breathing hard, pushing the bangs from Vinnie's eyes, "I warned you. You didn't hafta do that...and swallow."

Vinnie laughed, feeling a strange heat burn in his cheeks. "I wanted to." He grinned. "I want to do it again. But that doesn't mean I expect you..."

Sonny pushed him over, put a hand over his mouth stopping his words. "Vinnie," he breathed softly, "Don't you know I'd do anything for you?"

Of course that was true. Had always been true. And Sonny set about proving it again and again.

They were so into each other. There was never a question they'd be compatible in bed, but still Sonny managed to top all Vinnie's hopeful expectations. When he was with Sonny like this, he realized he didn't have to think, or even worry. He just touched wherever he felt like it, followed his desire. And when he was touched, the intensity surprised him; Sonny was so enthusiastic, so amazing... With women, too many times he'd worried about their response because he couldn't always tell...were they enjoying him? Even if they said yes, he wasn't always sure. He thought too much about what he was doing, what they were doing. It was enjoyable, yes, but never removed from the reality of boy, girl, room, bed. He thought of himself as an attentive lover, considerate, but it had never felt like this, never this seamless, this perfect. With Sonny he fell, got lost. There was no room, no bed, just him, just Sonny and entwining warmth and always impending ecstasy. Not only was it enjoyable, he fucking loved being with him. He craved him.

When Sonny asked softly, "What do you want, babe?" Vinnie replied in a rush of air, "*Everything.*"

He knew he'd fallen fast in love. He thought he'd been in love before, a couple times perhaps, but it had never been like this. Nothing had ever been like this.

If Vinnie was waiting for the child side of Sonny to emerge, bitter and angry, it was going to be a long wait. Because it never did. Sonny was so good to him, so attentive, that sometimes Vinnie thought: *This must be a dream.*

At the end of two weeks, they went on a shopping trip. Sonny still had his wallet and all his credit cards. He bought a new suit.

He'd already been catching up on work via Vinnie's telephone. Vinnie's phone was a secure line put in by the Feds. No one could trace it so even if anyone on Sonny's side was trying to, they wouldn't find Vinnie. They wouldn't know Sonny had been with him now for two whole weeks of rest and utter bliss.

Now he planned to return to work in that new suit.

And Vinnie planned to go back to the OCB and prepare for his next job.

The morning Sonny left, it rained. Earlier, they made love urgently, then lay together in Vinnie's bed listening to the storm. Sonny kept telling him lame jokes, getting him to laugh. Laughing was better than crying. Laughter was what they had left.

When it was time to get up, Vinnie said, "Remember. You can drop by any time. I gave you a key."

Vinnie gave it to him on a gold ring. The key opened his apartment door. But really, it was the key to his heart.

"I know you gave me a key, Vinnie. I was there. You don't possibly think I'd forget."

Vinnie tried not to pout. Sonny was distancing himself now. Getting up. Getting dressed.

He knew this day was coming. His brain understood. But his mind had refused to prepare.

He got up and put on his jeans. He picked up his comb from the bureau and ran it through his hair. "I'll make you breakfast."

"You don't have to," Sonny said, turning away from the mirror where he was tying his tie.

Vinnie threw his comb at the dresser where it banged off the side and landed on the carpet. "None of us has to do anything we do in this life!" His voice came out louder than he'd intended.

Sonny moved toward him then, fast, maybe faster than light, and then he was holding him and murmuring in his ear, "Okay. Okay, you're right. Okay, baby?" His hand clasped the side of Vinnie's head as Vinnie turned away. Sonny let him go.

Blindly, Vinnie left the room and went into the kitchen. He started the coffee maker and then ran out of energy. He sat down at the counter on a barstool listening to the coffee percolate.

Sonny wandered in. He touched Vinnie on top of the head. Vinnie made no response.

Sonny got out the mugs and poured them both cups of coffee. He added one cream and one sugar, just as Vinnie liked it, pushed the mug toward him. Sonny took his coffee black, always.

When it was time for Sonny to leave, Vinnie felt slightly panicky, the same way he'd felt in the middle of the night when Sonny had walked him to the center of the dead, December field on the outskirts of Atlantic City. Only this time there was no back up.

He never begged.

Still, it felt as if Sonny were putting a gun to his head.

Sonny kissed him on the cheek. The cab was waiting outside, a Christmas wreath decorating its front grid. The rain was falling. When Vinnie shut the door his body felt far far away, as if he were floating on the stormy sky. It felt like the rain from that sky pelted his face, cold and unforgiving.

*

EPILOG

Frank had been going over the details of the new case with Vinnie for days now. Vinnie had learned everything in a day, but Frank was never easily convinced. Vinnie's photographic memory, and his ability to assess a situation intuitively in seconds flat was still under suspicion from Frank. As a result, he was bored. Grumpy.

Frank just looked at him. "I thought a vacation would do you good. Two weeks. That's enough time, isn't it? And we don't start this case officially until after Christmas."

Vinnie just rolled his eyes.

Frank got up, poured himself a cup of coffee, then one for Vinnie. He brought it over. It was black. No sugar. No cream.

Frank ignored Vinnie's frustrated sigh. "So what'd you do?"

"Huh?"

"For two weeks? I never asked you. What'd you do?"

Vinnie shrugged.

“After Steelgrave bullied himself out of the hospital, you also vanished. Where’d you go? I lost track of you. You never called.”

“I hung out at my apartment mostly.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it.”

“Is everything all right with your family?”

“I guess. I haven’t talked to them in awhile.”

Frowning now, Frank said, “I only ask because you seem distant maybe. Moody. I know the Steelgrave case was hard, but it’s over now.”

“Yeah.”

“Vince, you can talk to me. You know that.”

Vinnie glanced at his field supervisor, at the big, silly round glasses, the pale blue eyes beneath. Frank might seem gruff, but he was a softie underneath it all. Vinnie knew that yes, in fact he could talk to the man. But he didn’t want to talk. He didn’t want to talk to anyone about Sonny. Ever. It was just too crazy. If nothing else, he didn’t think he could withstand the looks of confusion, of horror at his admission that he’d spent two glorious weeks with that mob-king. *You and Sonny Steelgrave? Are you nuts?*

“Yeah. I know,” Vinnie finally replied.

Frank waited awhile. Drank some coffee. Finally, he cleared his throat. “Okay, then let’s get back to work.”

Vinnie glanced down at the paperwork wondering how much longer Frank would want to go over it and over it, how much longer before he could just go away for awhile, escape this town and lose himself in another case.

Just then, Frank’s phone rang. Frank picked it up, listened for a moment, then handed it to Vinnie. “It’s your answering service.”

Vinnie took the phone, listened. The number they gave him to return the call was locked in his memory. He didn’t need to write it down. When he hung up he turned to Frank. “I gotta make a call.”

“Here. Use my phone.”

Vinnie hesitated.

Frank said, "Don't mind me."

Vinnie looked at the phone, then without waiting he dialed the number he knew by heart. If the OCB flagged it, well so be it.

It was a direct line. It did not go through Sonny's secretary. Sonny answered on the second ring.

Vinnie had not heard that voice since the morning Sonny left. It had been five days.

"It's me. I'm at work."

"Yeah you," Sonny said softly. "I've been thinkin'."

"Don't hurt yourself," Vinnie muttered, but before he even finished those words, Sonny was saying something that made his stomach flip, his breath stop. "Canada. I've been thinking Christmas in Canada. And maybe more."

Vinnie took a shaky breath and his eyes got suddenly warm. Frank was looking at him strangely. Vinnie put a hand over his eyes to block Frank's stare, then laughed gruffly. "Me, too. Me, too."

"I'm gonna use my key. Okay if I let myself in?"

"You moron, what took you so long?"

"Had some things I had to take care of."

"I'm coming home," Vinnie said, and hung up.

He stood, still not looking at Frank. "I'm cutting out for the rest of the day."

"What? Who was that?"

Now Vinnie looked up. "And Frank? I don't know if I'm the right person for this case."

"What are you talking about?"

"I think I might be moving."

"Moving?"

"Yeah."

“Where?”

“Canada.”

(end)

Notes: The quote “Away from the things of Man” is from the very wonderful, very funny existential movie “Joe vs. The Volcano” circa 1990. The title of this story is stolen from a modern translation of a very ancient Chinese poem by Han Yu.