

Beyond the Veil

By Brian Rathbone

“Don’t cry, Daddy. Mommy’s with God now.”

Those words, coming from Kindra, his then five-year-old daughter, were among the only things that had kept Vincent Pels from falling into an abyss of hopeless despair. Losing Joan would have been enough, but knowing his own negligence had played a part in her death was more than he could bear. If only he’d put air in her tires. At times, only his love for his daughter kept him from giving up completely. Life without Joan seemed dark and cold.

Kindra’s ability to accept and cope with her mother’s death left Vincent feeling ashamed and guilty. How could such grace and wisdom be granted to one so young, yet denied to him?

The tinny peal of a familiar ring tone announced a call from St. Joseph’s Elementary, Kindra’s school, and Vincent failed to keep the anxiety from his voice when he answered.

“Mr. Pels, there’s a problem with Kindra,” said the school nurse, who sounded uncertain and concerned. “She’s complaining that the ‘bad things’ won’t leave her alone, and she’s got scratches on her neck.”

“I’m on my way,” Vincent said as he made a hasty U-turn. Kindra’s complaints about the “bad things” had started a year ago, but they had always been at night, when she was trying to sleep. He had assumed they were little more than an excuse to sleep in his room, but his anxiety grew with each passing moment and tears gathered in his eyes.

In his rush to get to Kindra, Vincent barely saw the road before him or heard the whine of his engine. Scenery flashed by in a blur, and only the high-pitched whistle of a crossing guard brought his attention back to the road. A dirty, green trash truck approached from the other direction; the portly crossing guard waved her arms and shouted.

Over a bump that had never seemed so severe when doing the speed limit, Vincent’s minivan momentarily left the ground then landed hard, sending a shower of sparks into the air. When he regained

control, he drew a sharp breath; in the middle of his lane stood a little girl. She looked up at him. Deep brown eyes swirled with hazel and gold met his. He saw no fear in them, only sorrow and regret.

Instinct took over. Vincent's right foot stabbed the brakes, and he yanked the wheel to the left. The squealing of his tires was accompanied by the wail of the trash truck's overloud horn. Gripping the wheel as his van careened out of control, Vincent Pels watched a grimy bumper part metal and glass. In the moment of his death, he felt no pain; all that existed was an awe-inspiring, yet familiar, white light.

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Azure waters streaked with rivers of color ranging from turquoise to violet and obsidian lapped against a shoreline of translucent stones whose color shifted depending on the angle from which they were viewed. Rounded and polished by the relentless tides, each stone was as fine as any gem. Light seemed to stream from every direction, yet there was no visible source. No sun graced the cloudless sky, only swirls of pastel.

As the sensations of his form began to return, Vincent shook the fog from his mind. Where was he? What was he doing here? When he looked at himself, his confusion grew. Dressed in heavy armor—finer than any he'd ever seen in a museum—he wondered if he were dreaming. When he drew the sword from the scabbard that hung on his belt, it sang a song of pride and death, and he doubted his imagination could create an image of such fierce beauty. Intricate patterns, traced in delicate and precise lines, accentuated highlights of gold and other metals Vincent did not recognize. Worried that he might accidentally hurt himself with the fearsome blade, he sheathed it.

“Welcome back, Kevriel,” came a female voice from behind.

Vincent spun. Facing him was a woman dressed in armor similar to his own. Only her voice gave evidence of her gender, as her face was concealed beneath an ornate helm fashioned into a fierce and baleful glare.

“Where am I?” Vincent asked. “Who are you, and why did you call me Kevriel?”

“You know me,” the woman replied. “We have done this before.”

Her words washed over him like a faded memory, and for an instant he smelled dandelions, but then it was gone, leaving him to wonder if he’d imagined it. Confused and frustrated by her vague answer, Vincent took a step forward. “I have to get to Kindra. She needs me.”

Despite the armor that shrouded this strange woman, Vincent sensed a reaction. “Vincent is dead,” she said. “*Here*, you are Kevriel.”

“I’m not dead. I can’t be,” Vincent said. “Kindra needs me. Who will take care of her?”

“Do not despair, Kevriel. On this side of the veil, you are stronger.”

“I have to go back,” Vincent said, the woman’s words seeming like a distant dream. The world around him began to shimmer and diffuse; only the armored woman’s voice held him there.

“No, Kevriel! You must not go back. Not yet. You must stay to protect Kindra!”

His daughter’s name demanded his attention. Nothing mattered more than Kindra. “How do I protect her?” he asked.

“You won’t believe me. I know you too well. You only believe what you see, and we are running out of time. I must show you.”

“Then show me now.”

“Put this on,” she said as she handed him a helm similar to hers, yet with an expression of fury and rage. “Prepare yourself and follow me. Do only as I say.”

Vincent donned the helm. It fit him well and did not block his vision as badly as he had expected. He prepared to follow the strange armored woman, but he was surprised to see her wading into deep water.

“Do not wander or stray,” she said. “Stay near me, and you’ll be fine.”

Vincent hesitated a moment, but his need to get to Kindra drove him into the water. The woman dived beneath the waves, and he followed without another thought. As soon as the water closed around him, though, he became disoriented. Light flowed from everywhere, and he could no longer tell which direction was up. Just as panic began to set in, he caught a glimpse of movement. Desperate, he swam hard to keep up with the

woman's too-distant form. Hampered by his armor, he didn't think he would ever catch her, but then his feet encountered something solid, and he thrust his head above water, gasping for breath as soon as his lips broke the surface.

Standing on the shore, the woman waited impatiently, her arms crossed over her chest. "Hurry," she said, and Vincent scrambled to shore.

The world looked much different than it had when he had entered the water. The air shimmered, and nothing looked quite solid or real. "Where are we?" he asked.

"*Between*," she said. "We are vulnerable here, so be ready for anything. I'm sorry I have to show you this, but there's no other way. Just do what I tell you and nothing else. Be strong and remain true."

"What—?" Vincent began to ask, but she cut him off with a look.

"Be ready, Kevriel," she said, and she drew her sword and spoke, "*Malcifious*."

The word fell like a hammer-blow to Vincent's consciousness, and he thought he might be sick. Revulsion and self-loathing filled him when he recognized and felt a certain kinship to the evil presence summoned by the woman's command.

"*You've been deceived*," said a voice in Vincent's head. "*She is the evil one. Kindra needs you and the woman is the only thing standing in your way. Kill her now and you will be free. Kill her, Vincent. Kill her now!*" Snarling and with his fists clenched, Vincent found himself moving without conscious thought.

"Show yourself, wicked one," the armored woman demanded. "No one will believe your lies after they've seen your true form."

The feeling of cool air on his neck made Vincent realize that something had been perched there only a moment before. The sound of leathery wings drew his eye, and he recoiled. Floating in the air near his face was the vilest creature he'd ever seen. Wrinkled skin hung in folds, and diaphanous wing membranes were streaked with veins, but it was the face that shamed Vincent, for it was much like his own, only twisted into a permanent sneer.

"Vincent does not see what you see," Malcifious hissed. "Vincent sees himself."

“Don’t listen to him, Kevriel. He speaks only lies.”

Vincent didn’t know what to think, and he swayed on his feet, overwhelmed. *“The woman is not your friend. I bet she hasn’t even told you her name,”* Malcifious said in Vincent’s mind. *“She took you away from Kindra. She is why you are here. It’s all her fault.”*

“This demon was created by your actions on the Earth plane,” the woman said. “When you crossed the veil, it was unleashed on this plane.”

“*Lies,*” Malcifious hissed. Then, quicker than thought, the demon lashed out. Before the woman could defend herself, Malcifious was on her, and he yanked the helm from her head.

Long, blonde hair tumbled around the woman’s shoulders as she rolled away from the demon’s attack. High cheekbones and a prominent nose gave her a noble air, but it was her eyes that Vincent recognized: deep brown swirled with hazel and gold. “*You,*” he said. “You ran out in front of me. You caused my death. How could you?” Rage consumed reason as he advanced on the woman whose name he no longer cared to know.

“*Gruesomer,*” Malcifious whispered in his mind.

“*Gruesomer,*” Vincent echoed without realizing it, and Malcifious laughed.

“You fool,” the woman cursed. “Prepare yourself. You’ve no idea of what you’ve—” Her words were cut short as she was sent tumbling through the air. Behind where she had been standing loomed a vision from Vincent’s nightmares.

A creature easily twelve feet tall with the face of a bull, arms like ropes of stone, and legs like buttresses looked down on Vincent. Hefting a wicked-looking axe made of black metal that seemed to absorb light, the beast ran the blade over its bluish black tongue and gave a snort that sent flames curling from its nostrils. “Burn,” it said in a voice like a blast furnace.

Searing pain erupted all over Vincent’s body, but it was especially intense in his neck. When he reached up to fend off the burning sting, his hand closed around Malcifious’s neck. With a yank, he tossed the demon through the air. Malcifious righted himself, hovered, and laughed, his distorted lips dripping with fire.

Vincent had only an instant to duck under Gruesomer’s axe; he would have been finished if not for the

woman. Issuing a high-pitched battle cry, she crashed into the back of the demon's legs, knocking it off balance. Malcifious flitted around her head, nimbly avoiding her swats. "Run!" she yelled. "To the water. You must escape." Vincent hesitated, his conscience unwilling to leave this woman to fight in his stead. "Go. *Now!*" she commanded.

Set into motion by the sheer force of her will, Vincent moved with all the speed he could muster. "Coward," Malcifious said in his mind, but Vincent continued to flee. "*You cannot run from me; you cannot hide. You created me!*"

Vincent dived into the waves, now driven more by the need to escape Malcifious than to obey the woman, but his demon's voice rang once more in his mind, "*You are me.*"

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Disoriented, Vincent found himself once again on the jeweled shore. For a while, he simply watched the waves, waiting for signs of the woman. As time passed, his feelings of guilt grew. "I can't leave her to die," he said to himself, but before he reached the shoreline, there was a stirring amid the waves.

A moment later the armored woman emerged from the water, her face a mask of pain. Blackened flesh was visible through a gash in her armor, and she stumbled in the surf. Vincent helped her to shore. "How badly are you hurt?"

"Bad enough," she said. "You really shouldn't have said that name."

"You owe me some answers."

"Agreed, but I've got to clean this wound first. They hurt as badly here as they do on the Earth plane."

The burning sensation on Vincent's neck gave proof to her words. Gruesomer's axe had left a jagged gash in her breastplate, and sharp edges tore at her flesh. It took all of Vincent's strength to pull the twisted metal away. When he was finally able to pry her breastplate free, the extent of her wounds became clear. Minor gashes and cuts surrounded an angry chasm of severed and charred flesh that wept more than it bled.

“Help me back to the water. I need to be cleansed.”

“Are you certain you wish to wash in the sea? Shouldn’t we find some fresh water?” Vincent asked.

“The water in this place is special and will help to heal me. If you are ever wounded, try to get back to the water.” Vincent watched as she cleaned her wound, and though it did not heal before his eyes, he could already see improvement. The flesh no longer looked as angry and puffy as it had, but then she covered it with a soft cloth.

“Was it you that ran out in front of me?” Vincent asked, his patience at its end.

“Yes,” she said, and she met his eyes. There was no hint of malice. “I *called* you back to this plane.”

“Why would you do such a thing? Why should I not hate you for that?”

She reeled from his words as if he had struck her, and he thought he saw her lip quiver. Something about that sight tugged at the back of his mind, as if there were something he should remember but could not. The woman remained silent, seemingly bereft of words.

“Will you at least tell me your name?” he asked.

She looked up at him before responding. “I’m sorry, but I don’t think you’re ready yet. I promise I’ll tell you soon, but let me tell you some other things first.”

“Did you *call* Joan as well?” Vincent asked. “Is that why she died?”

“The demons killed Joan. They did it to prevent me from calling you back. They didn’t think I would have the strength to take you away from your daughter, knowing it would leave her an orphan. Making you feel responsible for Joan’s death was among their primary goals.”

They had succeeded, Vincent thought, and his heart hurt so bad that he could barely listen, yet he needed to know. “If I’m dead, why isn’t Joan here? Why didn’t she meet me?”

“I’m sorry, Kevriel. Joan challenged the demons too soon—before she was ready—and she was sent back to the Earth plane.”

“Sent back?”

“Yes,” the woman said. “As a newborn child.”

Vincent swayed, the foundation of his beliefs shattered by what he heard. He had always thought that Joan would be there waiting for him when he passed on, but now it seemed he had lost her twice, and the pain was almost more than he could stand.

“Kindra is the incarnation of a rare and old soul,” she said. “This is her first experience on the Earth plane; never before had she been defeated. She was among the most powerful figures on the side of the light. We were hard pressed when she was with us, and we struggle in her absence. The demons have grown in strength and numbers. We need her back.”

Vincent had always known that Kindra was special, but hearing the woman speak of her in such a way filled him with a strange mixture of pride and anger. “No,” he said. “You may not *call* my daughter back to this plane. She’s an innocent little girl and she deserves a happy life. I won’t let you kill her.”

“I don’t want to kill her,” the woman said as she backed away from Vincent’s aggression. “We need her to survive until she is at least in her twenties. If she were to die now, she would not be strong enough. We don’t have time to argue about this now; the dark forces are gathering, and Kindra needs your protection. Some of the demons we will encounter will be of my own making. I’m sorry. I visited the Earth plane only once, and I made many mistakes. I may never be able to atone for what I did there. You’ve already met one of my demons, and I’m ashamed to admit that there are more.”

Vincent looked up.

“I cannot undo my evil deeds. I can only try to offset them with the good I do now.”

Vincent drew a breath and was about to speak, but the woman cut him off.

“My name is Dardra.”

An eruption of memory sent Vincent reeling, and he was nearly overwhelmed by the flood of information and emotion that must have been hiding in the deepest recesses of his soul, waiting to be unleashed.

Dardra loved him and he had both loved and hated her. Each time he was sent to the Earth plane, he fell in love with someone else, but Dardra always waited for him. She was always there to guide him or mislead him, depending on how he looked at it. *We have done this before* rang in his ears. The smell of dandelions once

again drifted to him, and he remembered an afternoon spent rolling in grasses filled with what most considered weeds, but they were Dardra's favorite.

Memory of another soul came to the fore, a mighty and honorable soul, one that he had always adored. Kindra was the name he and Joan had given her when she was born, but her true name was Tiniatha. Faded visions came to Vincent from a distant past, and he saw himself kneeling before her, swearing to protect her.

“There is no more time, Kevriel. We must go. Tiniatha needs you.”

“But your wound—”

Dardra smiled and pulled back the cloth she'd been holding over her wound; her flesh was scarred but whole, and when she turned over her breastplate, it, too, was whole. “Some things work differently here,” she said. “Now let's go!”

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Following Dardra through the shimmering landscape, Vincent tried to orient himself, but everything looked different. People they passed looked like shadows or bursts of light, and he felt no hint of recognition. As they turned a corner, he was repulsed by a wave of vile energy that radiated from a gathering swarm of demons.

Dark forms writhed in a twisted mass of evil that surrounded a tall building. High above, a beam of light poured from a window. Like a beacon of hope, it sliced through the darkness. Vincent was blasted by sudden recognition. This was the building where Joan's parents lived. The light came from their window, and now that light shone bright, unobstructed. Kindra was on the balcony.

Demons clogged the streets, and those with wings filled the air. Distorted cries and howls of anguish assaulted Vincent's courage, but he would not be ruled by fear. The hissing song of his sword sent a rippling shockwave through the forces of darkness.

“It's good to have you back, Kevriel.”

“I am honored to fight by your side,” Vincent said.

In an instant, battle was joined. A demon with the body of a man but the head of a goat swung a studded mace at Vincent’s head, but old instincts returned, and his body moved in ways he had never imagined. His sword moved faster than thought, and the demon fell back. Vincent did not stay to finish off the demon; his only goal was to reach Kindra before it was too late. Dardra moved at his side, her graceful movements and skillful sword strokes helped cut a path before them as they ran.

At the door stood the wavering form of the doorman, whose aura shown soft white. He looked nervous and anxious, but seemed otherwise unaware of the bull-headed demons that flanked him.

“Are those yours?” Vincent asked Dardra.

“Yes.”

Even as she spoke, more demons gathered. Snakelike demons coiled around the legs of their brethren, and smaller, insectlike demons blanketed the flagstone stairway like a seething infection.

“Not all those too?”

“They are mine,” Dardra said, “and I am weakest against them. We must find a way to break through—”

There was no more time for speech, as the demons launched a sudden attack. Pain erupted in Vincent’s side as he was unable to avoid the sheer number of attacks. Spinning and blocking, he staggered back as the demons landed as many blows as he blocked. His side felt warm and sticky, but he was beyond pain.

Dardra flashed by, her blade moving so fast, it was nearly invisible; its whistling song was punctuated by ringing impacts and howls of pain. For an instant, the way was clear.

“Run!” came Dardra’s barked command.

Casting fear and guilt aside, Vincent ran. Demons reached for him and tried to bar his path, but he dodged and spun as he ran. Small demons were crushed under his armored boots, but he could feel the sting of those that remained.

The fuzzy image of the doorman took a step back, as if he sensed Vincent’s desperate approach. Moving with a speed born of primal need, Vincent blasted through the closed door without slowing. The doorman

turned and stared at the door that suddenly swung inward, seemingly of its own volition.

Using Kindra's energy as a beacon, Vincent flowed up the stairs like a swift wind and burst onto the floor where Joan's parents lived. Hovering in front of the door was Malcifious, and he greeted Vincent with a leering grin. From the shadows emerged others, and Vincent shrank away from the sight of them. One looked like a boy he'd bullied in grade school, and he radiated shame; another looked like a girl whose heart he'd broken. Her pain burned through Vincent like a lance. Every lie, every thoughtless word, every shameful moment in Vincent's life stood between him and his daughter.

"You cannot defeat us, Vincent," Malcifious hissed. "We are a part of you. Join us."

Shame and remorse drowned out all other thought. *You are a coward. You are evil. You are anger and pain. You do not deserve to be loved.*

Something inside Vincent snapped, and he teetered on the brink of the abyss, slowly being drawn into the all-too-familiar darkness. In the distance, someone called his name, and for a brief instant, he was touched by the light. "No," he said. "I will not join you. And my *name . . . is Kevriel.*"

Malcifious and the other demons recoiled at the sound of his true name, and Kevriel stepped forward with renewed strength and resolve. The demons tried to stand in his way, but they could not hold back his maddened charge. Beyond the door waited more demons, but most were gathered near the door to the master bedroom. Like distant echoes, Kevriel could hear the cries of Joan's parents as they tried desperately to get to Kindra. The mass of demons surrounding the door somehow gathered enough energy to keep the door shut.

Vincent Pels's demons continued to harry Kevriel, but they had less power over him now. Malcifious came too close, and Kevriel flexed, conveying all his energy into a sword stroke so powerful that it sent the demon hurtling across the room. When Malcifious struck the wall, the impact permeated both sides of the veil; pictures were knocked from the walls, and furniture was tossed aside.

The demons guarding the bedroom door left their post and turned on Kevriel. No longer held shut, the door flew open, and Joan's parents came out, looking frightened and bewildered. Despite their fear, they seemed determined to get to Kindra. Kevriel saw her, standing on the balcony railing, swaying in the wind.

Desperate, he surged toward her. Joan's parents had to retreat as the battle sent their furnishings into the air. Despite his fury, Kevriel was overmatched, and Kindra remained beyond his reach.

"For Kevriel!" came Dardra's cry, and Kevriel turned to see her fighting her way toward him. "For Tiniatha!"

Dardra's words and presence bolstered Kevriel's will. "For Kindra!"

Fighting their way to the balcony, they worked as a team, each weak where the other was strong. Wind gusts threatened to tear Kindra from the balcony railing, and Kevriel cried out to her. Dardra leveled a spinning attack at the last pair of demons standing between him and Kindra. Kevriel charged into the gap. Kindra turned for a moment, as if she sensed his presence, but a dark shape clung to her, its vile lips pressed to her delicate ear.

Missing one arm and with a shattered wing, Malcifious turned to smile at Kevriel. "So, Vincent, you've come to witness your daughter's death? How very sentimental."

"You have no power over me, and you have no power over Kindra," Kevriel said, despite the cold fear that clutched his gut. An attack on Malcifious could be enough to send Kindra tumbling over the edge, and Kevriel hesitated, uncertain.

"Watch her die," Malcifious said with a twisted grin. "Fly, little one," he whispered in Kindra's ear. "One more step, and you can fly."

"Kindra, no!" Kevriel shouted. "Come down from there!" Kindra remained still, balancing on the balls of her feet, adjusting to the shifts in the wind.

"One more step, and you can be with Mommy and Daddy," Malcifious coaxed.

Kevriel roared in anger and charged. Wounded, Malcifious must have known he could not escape Kevriel, for he leaped from Kindra's shoulder and wrapped his barbed tail around her slender throat.

"Fly!" Malcifious shrieked as he yanked with his tail. Kindra rocked forward on her toes, and Kevriel wrapped his arms around her, trying desperately to pull her back, but she continued to move forward. His arms merely passed through her unsubstantial form.

“No!” Kevriel cried. “Hold on to me, my dear one. I love you and I’m here for you.”

His words seemed to slow her forward progress, and he thought she might be able to catch her balance, but then she was snatched from his arms. He cried out but then he realized Joan’s father had pulled Kindra to safety. The demons receded, their energy spent. Kevriel collapsed to his knees and wept.

“You fought well,” Dardra said from the doorway.

“I didn’t understand. I’m sorry.”

“You’re always a stubborn one,” she responded with a wry smile, “but I knew you’d come around.”

“I want to see her safe,” Kevriel said, and Dardra followed him through the chaotic mess. Joan’s parents were already cleaning up, though one of them always stayed near Kindra’s room. Kevriel slipped into Kindra’s room as quietly as he could, as if his movements might wake her.

Moonlight streamed through the window and illuminated Kindra’s innocent face. Kevriel thought he could watch her forever, and he quietly vowed to do just that. A small and peaceful smile came to Kindra’s face.

“Good night, Daddy. I love you.”