

Winter Solstice

By C.J. La Belle



*"Yours is the light by which my spirit's born. You are my sun,
my moon, and all my stars..."*

~ E.E. Cummings

“Have you ever wanted to make love by the light of the moon, Vincent?”

Vincent sat unmoving, as if Catherine had not spoken. He had been reading to her, but his voice immediately dried in his throat. He lifted his eyes to watch the cascade of sunlit water falling sheer from the head of the Great Falls, not daring to answer such a loaded question.

How could he? That one simple sentence encapsulated just about every one of the unspoken fantasies he kept carefully hidden from any chance discovery. Laying them bare had not been in his plans for this encounter. But the beast lurking within opened his dark eyes and scented the air. Wanton images burst across Vincent’s inner sight.

Catherine, moonlight, naked, heat, love-making and a final fulfilment beyond measure echoing endlessly back and forth between them through all the colours of their bond... Vincent’s throat flexed as he swallowed tightly. Everything within him surged with desire. His whole consciousness became centred on the rising need hardening against his thigh as his body reacted almost violently to the mental imagery invoked by such a simple question.

Where had the strength of his reaction come from and why? He had thought this whole problem had been settled between them once and for all. Going beyond the boundaries of their self-imposed celibacy was at best foolish, and at worse, too dangerous to contemplate. There was too much at stake.

“Not until you mentioned it...” he finally managed a strangled reply. Not the truth, but not a complete lie... “Catherine, I...”

“It will soon be the winter solstice, correct?” Seated with her back against his shoulder, he felt Catherine turn her head to look up at him. “The longest night of the year, the darkest night...” She turned to him, curling her knees beneath her long skirt. “There would be plenty of time for us to be together, somewhere private and away from everyone. And we don’t need to go far away, as we’d planned. We could stay right here.”

Vincent frowned down at her. Something about this particular chamber in his home clearly ignited Catherine’s flights of fancy, causing her to drop her usual sense of caution, give up her restraint. It puzzled him, introducing a wary sensation he didn’t like.

Catherine moved around him, settling within inches of his upraised knee. If she came any closer she would see how much her question had affected him. Vincent dropped the book he had been reading to her into his lap, to cover the obvious state of his arousal. Tight jeans and a short tunic were no cover for the unwary, he found to his chagrin. But he had never expected to be cornered by such an inquiry. Catherine had never addressed the unspoken desire growing between them so directly before. He felt a flush of heat rising in his cheeks as he struggled, without success, to bat down his unexpected condition.

“I’m sure you could find a place for us to be completely alone. If you looked hard enough.” Catherine lowered her head, peering at him

through the cover of her bangs. "I mean, if you truly wanted to..." Before Vincent could react she looked away towards the falls. "We could go Above to my apartment, of course...if we wanted complete privacy. But where is the adventure in that?"

"I have no idea," Vincent replied unsteadily. "I don't understand any of this." Was this supposed to be an adventure? In truth, Vincent had usually pictured something more... furtive. *More*...he tried and failed to picture what that single, fraught word encapsulated.

"You know, I had not thought of it until now." Not seeming to hear him, Catherine lifted her chin towards the falls. "I suddenly realised you also get the sunlight down here. So it must follow that on the nights when the moon is full, she would shine down into this cavern as well. What do you think, Vincent? Could we do it? Make love together in the moonlight on a blanket in a cavern above the falls? It would be magical."

Her gaze swung back to his, the light of speculation making her green eyes gleam with anticipation. "Have you ever explored above the falls, Vincent?"

"When I was young..." Vincent swallowed again. He wanted so much to please her after all they had been through together, but this was utter madness. "It is not a place for the faint-hearted. Catherine, I — "

Instantly she cut off his words with a warning finger across his lips. "No, Vincent, this is what I want, more than anything. You have already convinced me that our leaving the city and driving to Connecticut is out of the question. It would be too risky. I understand that now."

She lifted her eyes once more to the cascade of water. "But up there we could be completely alone and never leave your world. It could become our place, just as much as the summer house at the lake could have been. Is there any way we could climb to the head of the falls and explore? There is not a lot of time left before the night of the solstice arrives."

His own words, about the proposal of that ill-fated trip, damned Vincent to silence. But his mind churned with memory. *"And what of Catherine? Catherine who gives so much and asks for so little? Am I unable to fulfil even her slightest wish?"* His question had remained unanswered...until now.

Not waiting for his answer, Catherine got to her feet, walking the short distance to the rocky edge, her eyes firmly fixed on the great hole in the cliff where the shafts of sunlight and torrents of water issued into the cavern. She set her hands on her hips, head slanted as she studied the problem.

She turned when Vincent didn't follow her lead. "Well?" she asked, somewhat impatiently. "Is there a way we can get up there?"

"It is not an easy climb to the top." Vincent got slowly to his feet, the book of Dylan Thomas poetry still strategically held in front of him. He willed his body to behave, but it was a losing battle. He knew he wanted what she wanted. Possibly even more than she wanted it. And he wanted desperately to make it so.

But the consequences of such actions could be devastating and far-reaching beyond anything they had experienced before. Travelling by van to a house on a lake in Connecticut now seemed tame by comparison. Perhaps he should have simply gone with her when Catherine had first mentioned it.

Now thinking instead of making love in a cavern above the falls where there wasn't a chance of being discovered, made him shake his head in bewilderment. What had gotten into his love to think of such an outrageous plan? This had nothing to do with what either of them wanted. It had to do with what "could" be and what "couldn't" be, between them.

He glanced down at the book in his hands. The words he had last spoken echoed inside his mind. '*And nightly under the simple stars, as I rode to sleep, the owls were bearing the farm away...*' He felt like hurling the book into the lagoon below the falls, but that would be a waste.

It wasn't the poet's fault that they had come to such an impasse. He tried once more to make his love see sense. "Catherine, we cannot go to Connecticut, and we can't climb to the top of the falls. It is simply not possible." He paused, frowning, suspecting he'd just accepted a poem for a sunset, again. Or for something far more dear. But his love, in this new, demanding mood, confused and almost scared him.

"Why not?" She came back to stand before him, chin raised mutinously, ready for battle. "What if I said it was what I wanted beyond anything? How could you deny me, Vincent? It is all I have ever wanted for us. Don't you want it too?"

“I...” With his blood pounding in his veins and his body already on fire with a need that would not be extinguished, Vincent groaned as he gazed down at her helplessly. “There is a path to the top, from the back of the falls...” he couldn’t prevent the words from escaping his control. “If this is truly what you want...”

“More than anything, Vincent.” Catherine went up on her toes before him, raising both arms to thread her fingers into the depths of his mane, drawing his head down to hers. Unable to resist the enticement of this newly-bold Catherine, Vincent allowed her to make contact with him, felt her brushing her mouth back and forth across his, in sensual invitation.

“Make love to me, please, Vincent...” Her breath mingled with his, as she whispered the words against his parted lips. “Now...here. I can’t wait...”

“Catherine...” he groaned her name on a broken whisper that was both a benediction and a prayer. “You are my moon and my stars, the very heart of me...always...”

“I know ...we’re meant to be. Haven’t you always felt it?” She sighed, tightening her grip on his mane, holding him against her to ensure he didn’t pull away. “I love you so much, Vincent...”

“Catherine...” Vincent said again. “You are mine...”

Feeling like a man drowning, but unable to prevent it from happening, his arms went around her waist, lifting her off her feet and against him

fully, from chest to hip. She seemed to glory in the feel of him, so happy that he was finally and fully committed to the more sensual side of their relationship.

Her legs rose to encircle his hips and a soft cry of delight, smothered against his mouth, made him aware she had discovered the heat and strength of his erection, which he was now unable to hide, surging as it was against the softness of her lower belly. She rose high against him, sliding up and down the full length of him, the denim of her jeans the only barrier to their mutual fulfillment.

Drawn and enticed beyond anything he had ever imagined or dreamed, Vincent crushed her against his body, his mouth devouring hers as if nothing else now mattered in this world, but their ultimate union. In the back of his mind a small voice whispered that they might not even make it to the top of the falls, not this first time...but then there would be time later. *Much later...*

No longer bound by fear, or any concern of discovery, Vincent eased them both down to the bare sandy floor beyond the rock against which they had been resting. It offered minimal concealment from any chance arrival through the cavern opening, not that Vincent now cared, as he continued to caress the warm softness beneath him with growing urgency.

“Vincent...” Catherine murmured, when he finally drew marginally back to catch his breath. “Don’t stop now...” She was like quicksilver in his embrace, her hands everywhere, paying homage to every tense muscle, inflaming him further with whispered words of encouragement as she

stroked him. He felt as if he would explode if he did not take her now. Everything within him urged him towards making their longed-for completion, and he had no will to resist.

“Yes...” Catherine’s hands were at his shoulders, tugging at his tunic, her hands urgent and trembling with need. “Vincent...” she shook him gently, as if trying to secure his attention for some need of her own. “Vincent, I need you...Come. Now. Want you.”

“I know, Catherine...” Vincent murmured, frowning at the strange tone of urgency in his love’s voice. The loving sound had been replaced by a jerky candescence. The single words strung together made sense, but they puzzled him.

“Vincent!” The hands shaking his shoulder became urgent. “Need you! Come!”

“Catherine...?” Vincent started, the fog of desire that had been holding him spellbound suddenly evaporating into stark reality.

He hitched himself up on one elbow on the sandy floor of the Great Falls cavern and tumbled into the soft coverings of his own bed. The reality was more shocking than any shower of cold water. Everything heated and yearning within him collapsed into bitter disappointment. His head began to pound as he opened his eyes and groaned.

He had only been dreaming...

“Vincent...?” Catherine’s loving face above his dissolved before his disbelieving gaze to be replaced by Mouse’s worried visage. “You okay, Vincent?” The tinker’s mobile face travelled through many emotions before he finally asked, “You were talking to Catherine, in your sleep.” He suddenly grinned and winked. “Good dream?”

Vincent blessed the heavy quilts and raised knee which concealed his obvious state of arousal. “What do you need, Mouse?” Vincent demanded hoarsely, avoiding the question. Another one loaded with meaning that he couldn’t answer.

“Father said come. Need you. Sent Mouse.”

“Very well...” Vincent sat up, his body still shaking with reaction and disappointment. *If only...* he shook his head. He stared at Mouse, a moment, the young boy not knowing what was wrong with his friend, but knowing something was. His face went through its usual barrage of expressions, worry and concern eventually winning. He frowned deeply, looking perplexed and upset.

“Mouse, it’s all right. Please tell Father I will be there as soon as I can,” Vincent said, aware he couldn’t stand up right this second. At least not without embarrassing himself and his friend.

“Father said – ” Mouse waved his arms.

“In a moment! Please, Mouse, go...” Vincent raised his voice, and the uncompromising tone sent Mouse scrambling from the chamber, shaking his blonde head.

His friend Vincent was usually much more tractable...



“Have you ever wished we could make love by the light of the moon, Vincent?” Catherine sat with her back against Vincent’s shoulder.

The question fell unbidden from her lips and she felt powerless to prevent it. Where it had come from she had no idea. But now that it had been uttered, it could not be taken back. In that moment of utter stillness, she found she didn’t wish to do so. She waited breathlessly for his answer.

Vincent had been reading to her, but he stopped immediately and became completely still. She sensed him lifting his head to watch the cascade of sunlit water falling sheer from the head of the Great Falls. But he didn’t reply. She had proposed a trip to see her childhood home in Connecticut, and he had refused to accompany her. Regretfully, but it was a refusal. They risked too much...

She had come to him in his chamber, sat down on the side of his bed. Smiled at his bewilderment. *'Oh, Vincent, don't you know? You could never lose me. We could never lose each other. As long as we remember...'*

'Remember?' he'd questioned softly.

'Remember love...' she had replied, softly. They had shared a long look. At last Vincent smiled. Catherine leaned forward to rest her head on his chest and he held her, gently caressing her hair.

Catherine bit her inner lip. Now it was no longer enough, had not been so for some time...but she was at a loss as to how to tell him that particular truth. Or even if she should. After all, if he steadfastly refused her, what could she do?

Her heart began to pound. That one simple sentence about making love in the moonlight encapsulated just about every one of her unspoken fantasies. Fantasies she always kept hidden whenever Vincent was close to her. She worried that he would catch glimpses of her vividly erotic imaginings. Images which had only deepened and grown more volatile with the passing of time.

Vincent, moonlight, naked, masculine heat, love-making and a final fulfilment beyond measure she knew could be theirs, if only... She held her breath. Everything within her surged with desire. Her body heated almost violently from the mental imagery invoked by such a simple question.

Where had it come from and why? She was aware Vincent had thought this whole problem had been settled between them once and for all. Going beyond the boundaries of their self-imposed isolation was at best foolish, and at worse, too dangerous to contemplate. He had made that very clear.

“Not until you mentioned it...” Vincent finally replied. “Catherine, I...”

“It will soon be the winter solstice, correct?” Catherine turned her head to look up at him. “The longest night of the year, the darkest night...” She turned to him, curling her knees beneath her full skirt. “There would be plenty of time for us to be together, somewhere private and away from everyone. And we don’t need to go far away, as we’d planned.” To her, here and now, the solution seemed so simple. Why had she not considered it before? No van, no danger of being discovered, it was perfect. *If only Vincent would agree...*

She moved around him, settling within inches of his upraised knee. She came deliberately close, trying to invoke a response to her question. Vincent immediately dropped the book he had been reading to her into his lap. She was pleased to see a faint flush of colour rising in his cheeks as he struggled to remain outwardly calm. But she knew he was not.

She pushed her point. “I am sure you could find a place for us to be completely alone. If you looked hard enough.” Catherine lowered her head, peering at him through the cover of her bangs. “I mean, if you truly wanted to...” Before Vincent could react she looked away towards the

falls. "We could go Above to my apartment, of course...if we wanted complete privacy. But where is the adventure in that?"

If only he knew how hard her heart was pounding. Or perhaps he did...

"I have no idea," Vincent replied unsteadily. "I don't understand any of this."

He didn't, she knew. But she also knew this had been the very spot where he'd considered taking a chance with her. It hadn't happened, true. But he had considered it. That *had* to be a step forward, *right*?

"You know, I hadn't thought of it until now." Not wishing to show she had heard him, Catherine lifted her chin towards the falls. "I suddenly realised you also get the sunlight down here. So it must follow that on the nights when the moon is full, she must shine down into this cavern as well. What do you think, Vincent? Could we do it? Make love together in the moonlight on a blanket in a cavern above the falls? It would be so magical."

She brought her gaze back to his. "Have you ever explored above the falls, Vincent?"

"When I was young..." Vincent muttered warily.

She knew he wanted so much to please her after all they had been through together, but she could sense he thought the whole idea was utter madness. He was tensing up, as if he was about to bolt at any moment.

“It is not a place for the faint-hearted. Catherine, I — ”

Instantly she cut off his words with a warning finger across his lips. “No, Vincent, this is what I want, above anything. You have already convinced me that our leaving the city and driving to Connecticut is out of the question. It would be too risky. I understand that now.”

She nodded quickly as she lifted her eyes once more to the cascade of water. “But up there we could be completely private and never leave your world. It could become our place, just as much as the summer house at the lake could have been. Is there any way we could climb to the head of the falls and explore? There’s not a lot of time left before the night of the solstice arrives.”

Not waiting for his answer, she got to her feet, walking the short distance to the rocky edge, her eyes firmly fixed on the great hole in the cliff where the shafts of sunlight and torrents of water issued into the cavern. She set her hands on her hips, head slanted as she studied the problem.

She turned when Vincent didn’t follow her lead. “Well?” she asked, somewhat impatiently. “Is there a way we can get up there?”

“It is not an easy climb to the top.” Vincent got slowly to his feet, the book of Dylan Thomas poetry still held strategically in front of him, like he was trying to hide something from her.

It wasn't hard to figure what that was. She knew he was feeling uneasy around her now. Catherine glanced at the book in his hands. The words he had last spoken to her echoed inside her mind. '*And nightly under the simple stars, as I rode to sleep, the owls were bearing the farm away...*' It had been those last words that had sparked her thinking. It wasn't the poet's fault that they had come to such an impasse, but something awakening within her drove her on, heedlessly.

Vincent heaved a great sigh. "Catherine, we could not go to Connecticut, and we can't climb to the top of the falls. It is simply not possible."

"Why not?" She came back to stand before him, chin raised mutinously, ready for battle. "What if I said it was what I wanted beyond anything? How could you deny me, Vincent? It is all I have ever wanted for us. Don't you want it too?" With her blood pounding in her veins and her body already on fire with a need that would not be extinguished, Catherine heard Vincent groan as he gazed down at her helplessly.

"There is a path to the top, from the back of the falls..." The words tumbled from him. "If this is truly what you want..."

"More than anything, Vincent." Catherine went up on her toes before him, raising both arms to thread her fingers into the depths of his mane, drawing his head down to hers. Vincent allowed her to make contact with him, as she brushed her mouth back and forth across his in sensual invitation, but his wary stance was full of rigid denial.

“Make love to me, Vincent...” Her breath mingled with his, as she whispered the words against his parted lips. “Now...here. I can’t wait...”

“Catherine...” he groaned her name on a broken whisper that was both a benediction and a prayer. “You are my moon and my stars, the very heart of me...always...”

“I know... we’re meant to be. Haven’t you always felt it?” She sighed, tightening her grip on his mane, holding him against her to ensure he didn’t pull away. “I love you so much, Vincent...”

“Catherine...” Vincent said again. “You are mine...”

She gloried in the feel of his arms tightening around her waist, lifting her off her feet and against him fully, from chest to hip. She had never been so happy. He was finally and fully committed to the more sensual side of their relationship. Her legs rose of their own accord to encircle his hips and she gave a soft cry of delight, smothered against his mouth.

She was vitally aware of the heat and strength of his erection, which he was now unable to hide, surging against the softness of her lower belly. She rose against him, sliding up and down the full length of him, the denim of her jeans the only barrier to their mutual fulfillment. She longed to get rid of them so they could know each other fully...

Vincent crushed her against his body, his mouth plundering hers as if nothing else now mattered in this world but their ultimate union. He didn’t seem concerned that they might not even make it to the top of the falls, not this first time...but then there would be time later. *Much later...*

Vincent eased them both down to the bare sandy floor beyond the rock against which they had been resting. It offered minimal concealment from any chance arrival through the cavern opening, but he no longer seemed to care, as he continued to explore Catherine's warm softness beneath him with growing urgency.

"Vincent..." Catherine murmured, when he finally drew marginally back to catch his breath. "Don't stop now..." She moved within his embrace, her hands stroking everywhere, paying homage to every tense muscle, inflaming him further with whispered words of encouragement as she petted him. She felt as if she would explode if he didn't take her right here, right now. Everything within her urged him towards making their ultimate completion.

"Yes..." Catherine dropped her hands to his shoulders, tugging at his tunic, her hands urgent and trembling with need. "Vincent..." She groaned. "Vincent, I need you...Come. Now. Want you."

She frowned at the sudden change of tone in her own voice. It made no sense, even as she was drowning in sensation. But the single words strung together by a jerky candescence puzzled her. If she wasn't awake and aware of all that was happening, she could have sworn that different voice belonged to Mouse...

"I know, Catherine..." Vincent murmured against the soft skin of her throat, distracting her attention back to the situation at hand.

"Vincent!" That same new voice became demanding. "Need you! Come!"

Catherine frowned in puzzlement, her whole body jerking with the sudden rush of reality. She opened her eyes, squinting through her lashes.

“Catherine...?” In her mind, Vincent’s questioning tone drifted into the distance.

“Oh, damn...” Catherine rose on one elbow from the sandy floor of the Great Falls cavern and landed in the tumbled coverings of her own bed. She awoke disorientated and annoyed. The reality was more shocking than any shower of cold water. Everything heated and yearning within her collapsed into confusion and disappointment.

The pain in her head was being underscored by the shrill sound of her alarm clock. She wished she could reach out and hurl it at the wall. Instead she flopped back on the pillows, on a gusting sigh.

She had only been dreaming...nothing more than that sad fact.

“Vincent...?” she questioned the dawn shadows, but of course he was not there. He would not answer. Still, her questing hand searched the cool bed linens beside her, for a moment, the action a testament to the vividness of the dream.

He wasn’t there. She knew he wouldn’t be...

“Face it, Chandler, you’re a lost cause...” She threw back the covers and pushed her feet over the side of her bed, her whole body still

shaking with reaction. *If only...* she shook her head as she gathered her dressing gown, pulling it on and belting it tightly before she walked slowly into her bathroom to prepare for yet another busy day.

But everything sensual and romantic inside her yearned to go back to bed and slip back into that dream. Finish what had been started...



“Vincent, is something wrong?” Catherine put a hand to his face, turning his shadowed eyes to her concern. “You look worried. Tell me what is it? Is there trouble Below?”

“No, everything is as it should be.” Vincent eased away from her touch towards the balcony wall to stand looking out over the city. They had not seen each other for a few days, and he had been reluctant to be with her now. Not for his sake, but for hers. The deeply erotic dreams had not lessened. The beast within stirred lazily and flexed his claws. *He* approved of her nearness.

“What can I do to help you?” Catherine pursued him, not allowing him to deny her. “For a moment there you looked so lost. What concerns you so?”

“It is nothing. I...have not been sleeping well lately,” he allowed cautiously. “It will pass.”

“I see.” Catherine sighed. *You don't have that on your own.* “Are you ill?” She was all concern immediately. “Should I call Peter for you? What does Father say?”

“No, and I have not told Father.” Vincent dropped his eyes. “Please, Catherine, it will be all right. I simply need to give it more time.”

“Then you must stay Below until you are better. Coming here to spend half the night with me is not doing you any good. You should stay there until you feel recovered.” It was doing neither of them any good, but she would not stop him from coming.

“I needed to see you, Catherine.” Vincent shook his head at her stern tone, which was not reflected within their bond.

He could sense the waves of her concern growing, at odds with her forthright manner. And beneath it a sense of hesitation, as if she too was carrying a secret regret she could not share. He knew if he chose to come Above to see her, to be with her, she would not deny him. But it was a testament to how distracted he'd been all evening that she thought she needed to give the warning. He returned his gaze to the light-spangled city-scape.

If only he could tell her of the dreams that plagued him now, every time he closed his eyes. Their erotic nature was starting to eat away at his reason, making him doubt himself and his ability to remain passive with Catherine beside him. He desired to reach out and touch her. And every time he gave such thoughts the space to breathe, the beast within him stirred into wakefulness, watching and waiting for its opportunity to act upon those very thoughts. Make her aware of him, as he was so aware of her. The more primal part of him knew her every movement, the sound of her breathing, and most of all her scent, warm, feminine, and so enticing.

He sighed. To make love with her in the moonlight... *Catherine, naked, willing, love-making and then the final fulfilment beyond all measure echoing endlessly through all the colours of their bond...* Vincent jerked his mind back from the edge of the abyss that had suddenly opened at his feet.

He marvelled at the fact that until these last few days, he had been unaware of the subtle pull of her soft womanhood. Or had he been? Had he simply not buried his awareness beneath the veneer of civilized behaviour? It was a veneer he wore uneasily at times, like a ragged cloak that threatened to disintegrate at any moment. But he found he desperately needed that veneer, needed the pretence of it, as he tried to ignore that most basic of human connection, older than language.

Catherine's warmth and beauty surrounded him, drawing him towards her, even as he tried to maintain his distance. Of course it didn't help that she came to him so readily, hugging and caressing him with the

familiarity of long association. She seemed totally unaware of the swirling nature of his need to make her his for all time.

Something had to give, and soon. Even if it was his own sanity...

Catherine watched him struggle with his composure. It broke her heart to see her love like this, so tired, and yet refusing her help. He was always concerned for her welfare, her safety. He would not allow her to be concerned for his. She wished he would take her advice and not come Above again until he was rested.

But that rest had been elusive for her too. Every time she closed her eyes, that scene at the Great Falls rose to haunt her once more, causing her to toss and turn half the night. She had resorted to the sleeping pills she'd been prescribed by Dr. Grafton. But they helped little. She still tossed and turned half the night, waking tired and out of sorts.

Something had to give, and soon.

Even if it was her own sanity... Vincent was unaware that he wasn't the only one of the two of them who was struggling to keep a restless beast under tight control.



The thing that 'had to give' actually turned out to be a major city water main. Which was ironic, all things considered. But its demise was to have far-reaching consequences.

Pascal noticed it first. The steam lines which passed through his pipe chamber simply stopped hissing that morning, as the water pressure inside them dropped. Nothing worked, no matter how heavily he pounded on the lines, trying to hammer them back into life. Finally admitting defeat, he hurried to find help.

In his chamber, Vincent lay on his bed, one arm flung over his eyes. It was early morning still and he was loathe to join the community after another night of restless sleep. Once more he had awoken from a terrifically erotic dream of making love with Catherine...or at least starting to. But his self-imposed isolation was abruptly invaded.

"Vincent, Father says come! You have to come. Now, he said." Mouse's voice was beyond urgent.

Vincent sighed. Why was it always Mouse who broke into his fitful slumber? He sat up. "Mouse, I vow, if you do not stop coming in to summon me as if I were a –"

"Drinking water's gone. Filtration system we made not got a drop. Dry. Mary says everybody needs to fetch water from the falls, where it's clean. Mary says fetch water. Father says Mouse, get Vincent. Vincent says go away. Pascal says Above work crews soon be coming down. Mouse getting sore head. Winslow says we in trouble. Big problems."

The latter had Vincent's attention, even if the rest of it didn't. "The pipe that feeds the filtration system comes off a city water main. If they try to trace the trouble back to the source..." He was already up and moving, pushing his feet into his boots as he went, restless sleep momentarily forgotten.

Outside his chamber, the tunnel residents were a hive of activity. Winslow came by, carrying a bundle of rolled up maps. He looked like he was in a hurry. Pascal was in tow, frowning, tapping his sticks agitatedly against the palm of his hand. A nervous habit that Vincent didn't like to see. It also meant the pipe master was not attending to his duties, a thing Pascal never did without good cause.

"Found him." Mouse hurried to join them, pointing back at Vincent. "Knows we have big trouble."

"You're all panicking for nothing, in my book. The false wall at 42nd street should hold them back," Winslow argued as Vincent fell in step. "It always has. We built that baby to last."

“Maybe not this time.” Pascal shook his balding head, his tapping sticks becoming more agitated. “They’re not following the walls. They’re following the pipes. These aren’t drunks looking for shelter. They’re city work crews. They know there shouldn’t be a wall there. They’ll cut through just to see what’s on the other side. As soon as they see what we’ve been doing up there, somebody will know something’s not right,” Pascal said, taking one of the rolls. “We got to fix it before they figure it out.”

“Where is the damage?” Vincent demanded.

“Been trying to figure that out too.” Pascal shook his head regretfully. “Up top somewhere. We hope. I traced it as far back as 40th street. Kipper says one of the older pipes must have burst not far from there. A big one. Something about a semi carrying an 'I' beam that slipped off and broke through the pavement. It took out the main and caused breakage in some of the other lines. That whole part of the city is running dry. They shut down the flow.” He shrugged. “Could have been much worse, I guess. We could’ve been flooded out, by now.”

Vincent followed the men as they hurried into Father’s chamber. The old man already had several maps rolled out, pinned flat to the table using paperweights and books. He looked up. “I’ve already told Jamie to alert our people away from that area. With any luck, the work crews will fix what needs done, and be on their way,” Jacob said, tracing a series of converging lines across his map with one gloved fingertip.

“Not bothering to look too closely, at 42nd street. We hope,” Pascal interjected. “It’s the best idea we got. I bet City Hall is getting a few angry calls right now. Works for us too.”

“We should keep sentries posted. Make sure we know how close they come,” Vincent replied. “We will have to close everything up in that sector if they get too close. There is no help for it.”

“Okay, good idea.” Winslow nodded. “I’ll get right on it,” he tossed over his shoulder, hurrying the chamber just as William entered.

“Father, I know this isn’t the biggest problem we have, but we can’t draw water in, or drain it out, right now. Not without calling attention to ourselves. Lunch will have to be bread and cheese, but no soup until further notice. The washrooms are all off limits and the breakfast dishes are going to have to sit there.” The cook shrugged.

“We have little choice.” Jacob looked up, nodding his understanding. Any underground river water his people sent flowing through the pipes might attract unwanted notice. They simply couldn’t risk it.

“Have Kipper and some of the boys draw you water from the falls for lunch, William. I know it’s a long way to carry it, but we can at least keep you working on feeding us all. We can’t help you any other way.”

“Yeah, I know.” William inclined his head. “We need to put an ‘all quiet’ on the pipes, too,” he advised. “At least in that section. Just in case. Some nosy guy from the works team might know enough Morse code to

figure out our system. Or at least to wonder what the rattling noise is all about. Might think it's part of the repair problem, and try to trace it."

"I completely agree," Jacob replied. "Pascal, what do you think? An all quiet on every pipe that runs for say..." He frowned at his maps. "Five blocks around the affected area? Would that be sufficient?"

"I think I'd go seven to be safe," Pascal advised. "At least until we know how much pipe they lost and how far the damage has spread. I'll change the tap-code for the rest of the tunnels to an old one of my father's. There are enough people down here who know the basics, and it won't mean anything to a Topsider."

"Excellent idea." Father nodded. "Seven blocks it is, then. Can we still get the news out to those in need?"

"Get Zach and some of the older boys to serve as runners. Tell them to be careful. They must not go too close to the damaged area. There will be flooding on the street level. At least until they managed to shut off the main." Vincent leaned over the maps, and the activity started in earnest around him.

"No time to waste, then, and best get going," Pascal said, picking up the map he wanted from Father's pile. "It's going to be a long day."



Decisions, maps, more decisions, and updates. Helpers brought down whatever news they had. Vincent made constant trips to the Falls, helping carry down what was, for the moment, the tunnels' only potable water. It was a long morning that turned into an even longer afternoon, with Vincent's only relief being at least it kept him from thinking about Catherine. *As much.*

The moment his aching body came to rest, visions danced behind his eyes, and the beast within stirred in recognition that nothing had been settled. That nothing would be settled until Vincent faced his fears and came to some kind of resolution.

"Do you think they will be done with the repairs, soon?" Vincent asked Winslow, as the two men sat at sentry duty hidden behind Winslow's false wall. Its precious secret had held, for now.

Winslow's face expressed his disgust. "I never underestimate the power of a large group of registered voters dependent on flush toilets and hot showers, so yeah. I got a feeling it won't be much longer," he stated. "You hauled a lot of water, today, Vincent. You should go and rest. Get some sleep before morning. It will come soon enough."

“I’ll be all right.” Vincent looked down at his hands, filthy and abraded from carrying endless containers of water. *‘To sleep, perchance to dream--ay, there’s the rub.’* Vincent remembered his *Hamlet* all too well. The beast stirred and approved. *‘Dream on, sweet prince...’* it misquoted with smug satisfaction. *Leave the rest to me...*

Vincent ignored the advice as he looked up at his friend. “Father says it was like this in the beginning. When they had to carry everything by hand and dump it the same way, down one of the sewer drains. They coped then, because they had no choice. Nor do we now.”

Winslow shrugged. “Yeah, I guess so. But that was back when there was only about eight, ten people living down here. We’ve prospered, since.”

They had. The number of children alone was triple that number and they would soon get heartily sick of hauling water instead of playing their own games. Even schoolwork would be preferred.

Vincent sighed. “I think Olivia’s parents came down the year Pascal’s father started to map the ancillary branches of the pipes. Pascal still has the drawings.”

Pascal and his father. Olivia and hers. Families. People who had been down here for a generation. Vincent closed his eyes, imagining how it could be for himself and Catherine, *if only...*

“He’s a genuine pack rat, you know.” Winslow grinned. “That little man ain’t never letting go of anything that looks like a map. He ever let you

see the one that shows the path which goes all the way up behind the falls?”

Vincent frowned, his wandering attention snagged. “I went back there once or twice when I was a lot younger. It’s a dangerous climb. Only Mouse now goes there sometimes to search for treasures. It is not for the faint-hearted.”

“No, that ain’t it.” Winslow put his head to one side. “That’s not the way I mean. That path is way too dangerous. The mist from the falls makes the stones all slick and algae covered. Even you would break your neck. Only Mouse is crazy enough for that way. Damn rodent has nine lives.”

He shrugged. “I’m talking about the path that runs on the inside, almost straight up the stones. Pascal says water cut it, a millennia ago. But the flow of the water got all changed around when the city got built up over its source, and it’s dry now. Says that except for a couple spots, it’s almost like a set of stairs. Comes out just behind the flow of the water. It would be a neat place for a hide away for those who wanted to be completely alone.” Winslow’s dark eyes scanned Vincent closely. “You know, Vincent, I’m just saying...”

Vincent struggled with his composure. *No. You can’t. It would be too perfect...* “Surely you’re mistaken. There’s no path up the inside of the rock. None that I know.”

Winslow nodded. “Pascal says his father wanted it kept that way. Said he blocked the area off with stones so we wouldn’t find it, wouldn’t get

hurt, as kids. Like what happened that time to you and Father in the Maze...”

“Pascal’s father knew us too well,” Vincent said, intrigued.

“Probably was afraid Pascal would climb up there and get too scared to come down. And -- and...Hey, we got water!” Winslow jumped up, hearing the pipe next to his head rumble and shake. In a few moments, condensation began to form on the metal brackets that held it to the wall. A few moments after that, steam began hissing softly through a loose fitting. Both men stared at it, fascinated and delighted by equal measure.

“Well there ya go. God bless the New York City voting public. Crisis averted. Looks like we’re going to get a decent dinner after all,” Winslow stated. He patted his belly. “I don’t know about you, Vincent, but I’m starving, and heartily sick of bread and cheese.” He climbed quickly to his feet. “You coming to celebrate?”

“I’ll be along, in a while,” Vincent replied. “I have something I need to look at, first...”

“Suit yourself.” Winslow headed off down the tunnel. “But don’t be too long or you’ll miss out on the best eats...”



It took a conversation with Pascal and several hours of moving heavy rocks for Vincent to find the entrance he was looking for. But it was indeed there. A fall of stones, decades of lichen disguising the seam and covering in an entrance, gave way to a dustily dry cave, just behind the thundering fall of the water.

There were indeed stone steps cut into the wall. Another one of the places the ancient peoples who had dug some of the deeper chambers must have used. Possibly used for sacred ceremonies, it seemed fitting he had found it.

The reddish granite wall meandered like the water-cut structure it had originally been. Erosion and rock fall had changed the course of the water's flow, leaving this as an access route to the top, after the area had dried itself out. Vincent tested his weight on the stones, finding them secure. There were only a few places where a judiciously used hammer and chisel might be needed, to refresh the few broken parts of the path.

Without even daring to stop and ask why he was doing it, Vincent returned to the populated tunnels and went in search of Kanin to ask for what he needed...



A night and a day spent digging and shifting rock had taken their toll. It wasn't until he was halfway to the top, dust streaked and muscle sore, that Vincent stopped making repairs. What was the point anyway? For the sake of a crazy dream that had no basis in fact...

Yes, stop. Stop this now, his rational mind warned. You know this can never be. No matter how much you wish it to be so...you must rest...

He turned, and sat on the last step he'd just finished making level. The heavy mallet dropped to his feet. The wide chisel, useless without it, set down at his side.

What are you doing? He asked it so loud mentally, he was surprised he hadn't said it aloud.

But he knew what he was doing. He was clearing the way. Doing that both mentally and physically. Or trying to. Physical work kept his mind occupied and sleep at bay. And the beast chained, and silent.

The steep stairway was still broken, in spots. Not seriously, but enough so that some of the steps still needed to be cut more deeply into the rock, and re-shaped.

If he stopped now, he could call it a day. Call it a day, move at least a few of the stones back over the opening, wash off the worst of the stone chips and dust, and go to bed.

And dream about her. You forgot about that, didn't you? But I didn't...
the beast commented with satisfaction.

Vincent knew his dark side was right. No matter how often he avoided the issue, smothering it with physical labour. He'd probably even dream of taking her in here, now that he had seen it. And by this time, *'taking her'* had more than one meaning.

No. You can't. It can't happen.

The previous day had been spent dealing with one emergency after another followed by exhausting labour and then more of that had kept his beast quiescent. Vincent figured that The Other, like every other part of him, was subject to the vagaries of a hideously long episode. Or perhaps that side of him just knew he was about to quit, so there would be no point in trying to push him much further. Vincent didn't know which was more true. He only knew that time had flown by without his notice, and the almost relentless lack of a decent night's sleep had taken their toll. For whatever reason, he never felt more defeated.

Rest... that traitorous voice whispered in the back of his mind. The setting sun was colouring the bottom of the chamber with amber light. Soon a fuller darkness would settle before the moon rose. Vincent reached to ignite the lantern he had carried in, more to give his hands something to do than because he intended to continue working, or needed its light. He could see well enough in the dark.

Tonight would be the darkest and longest night of the year. The advent of the winter solstice made him sigh. He leaned his shoulder against the wall beside him, closing his eyes. His whole body sagged into that place suspended between waking and dreaming. Remnants of his recurring dream returned to tantalise him, dancing behind his closed eyelids. He allowed himself to slip further into the welcoming arms of the dream... admitting the final defeat. At least here he could roam at will...

"Vincent, there you are. I hear you had a long day...you should come down and rest."

Intent on his introspection, Vincent didn't react immediately. But he knew that was Catherine's voice. Catherine's sweet voice, and from some twenty feet, below him, judging by the echo.

He leaned out to look down through half-shuttered eyes. She was standing inside the crevice like entrance, looking up at him, her beautiful face mirroring her concern. *Like a dream-bidden vision of loveliness...*

He'd been so exhausted, so distracted, he hadn't even sensed her approach. Now she was here, right where he had imagined her to be, waiting for him to make the first move, or any kind of move. Of course

she would expect him to climb down and take her to his chamber. Settle them down for an evening of readings and discussion over a meal, before the long trek back to the surface. It was the unspoken agreement between them.

But this was still his dream...*right*? His exhausted mind was confused about that, given his state of fatigue. Perhaps he could make anything happen, if he wanted it enough.

“There have been better days,” Vincent called down to her, loving how beautiful she looked. The beast stirred, also seeing and making a soft growl of approval. This was *its* dream too...

Strange though, Catherine looked as if she had come straight from her office. A dark skirt the colour of warm chocolate embraced her legs, and a silky beige blouse made him think of dark honey. In his previous dreams, Vincent had pictured her in a flowing skirt and simple top, her hair free and swinging.

As he watched, she removed her jacket and was about to step out of her shoes, so she could make her barefoot way up the stairs.

No...Vincent made to stop her with a half-raised hand, but he didn't complete the gesture. He waited as she came closer. The quality of his wistful state intensified into pure longing.

She studied him from a few steps below him. “I asked Father where you were, but he didn't know. They sent a message on the pipes, but didn't get an answer. People are wondering where you are.”

“There are no pipes in here. Just rings pounded into the wall for torches.” He indicated the same. For the first time he noticed how unseasonably warm the space was. The hot air had no place to go but up, and the small chamber was filled with air that felt almost balmy, thanks to its proximity to the falls. The lantern cast their moving shapes across the walls. *It was all so perfect...*

“It was Pascal who told me where he thought you might be,” Catherine replied. “He told me about the trouble you’ve been having.” She turned to take in the view of the winding stairway. “He said you had come looking for something hidden here.” Her eyes swung back to him. “Looks like you’ve found it.”

“Perhaps...” Vincent sighed. First Mouse had invaded his dreams, now it seemed Pascal was insisting on a place as well. Was there nowhere they could be truly alone? He glanced over his shoulder to the winding staircase behind him.

Catherine followed his gaze. “This is truly amazing. Does it run all the way to the top?” she asked, trying to keep her tone conversational. Her love looked dejected and tired beyond reason, almost asleep with exhaustion. Even his resting body looked wary. She had seen that before, when he was about to bolt and leave her alone.

Vincent shrugged. “So Pascal said. No one knows, for sure. The last man in here was likely his father and he decided to close it up to keep everyone safe.” He studied the winding stones, to where they bent

around a curve in the rock walls. "I doubt even Mouse knows of this place." *And that makes it perfect, doesn't it?*

"Are you fixing the broken places so you can go on to see what's up there?" Catherine asked, unsure of his strange mood.

Perhaps he'd still gotten little sleep. She already knew it had been a trying time for him. It had been for her too, with little sleep and ongoing dreams of such an erotic nature she couldn't avoid them, even if she wished it to be so. She was aware she should leave him to it, leave him to his privacy, but she was reluctant to depart so soon after she had finally found his new hiding place.

Fixing the broken places. Wasn't that a metaphor? Vincent thought.

"I had thought I might try doing so." He picked up the mallet and placed it back inside Kanin's work bag.

"But I think...I think I had best not. Perhaps I do not wish to know what is up there." He sighed heavily. "Perhaps it will remain simply a dream..." He set the mallet down so that the head was in the bag, but the handle was still in his grip. He seemed to not want to let go of it, yet. Not quite ready to let go of this dream. Even if it was a dream he could never have. And this dream was all-pervasive now, colouring his ability to separate reality from illusion...

Catherine, moonlight, naked, heat, love-making and... his throat flexed as he swallowed tightly. Everything within him surged once more with desire, but this time the effect was so intense he felt he could black out,

and lose himself to its seductive lure. Vincent struggled for control, with what little strength remained to him.

Seemingly unaware of his turmoil, Catherine smoothed the skirt under her legs and sat on the step just beneath him. This close he could smell her, the beast within rising to sniff the humid air as her softness came to him on tiny droplets of water spray. Miniature rainbows of colour surrounded her in the light of the lantern, and the westering sunlight.

“It’s not like you to give up,” she observed, picking up the chisel. She tugged the hammer gently away from him. “Maybe you just need a little help. If you won’t come down to me...”

That is the understatement of the decade, he thought.

He stared in fascination as she set the chisel where she wanted it, then picked up the mallet. She caught her bottom lip between her teeth as she closed one eye, obviously trying to line them up.

“Do you have any idea what you’re doing?” he questioned worriedly, trying to shake off both his lethargy and his heightened awareness of her.

“None whatsoever,” she answered with a short laugh, giving the handle of the chisel an experimental tap. Metal banged on wood and she seemed to enjoy the sound.

That would make both of us, then, he decided. “The chisel. The angle you’re holding it at is too steep. You’ll make a gouge, not smooth the

stone. You will only hurt yourself.” He felt the dream slipping away, to be replaced by a more prosaic reality. *He could not allow that to happen, not yet...*

“Oh, okay,” Catherine answered, leaning the chisel back so the angle was not as sharp. “More like this?” she asked, giving it another experimental tap. A tiny sliver of stone fell away, and she seemed very pleased with her efforts.

Vincent forbade his flexing hands to remove the tools from hers. “A little more angle. Almost level with the surface. There.”

She nodded, gave a few more experimental taps, and some dust and more stone chips flew. “Ah! I think I’m getting this,” she said, tapping a little more at the area right beneath where he was sitting.

Vincent felt the tiny vibrations of her work through every fibre of his being. He frowned at her hands, her neatly trimmed nails and soft skin. “You need a pair of gloves. You’ll raise blisters.”

Catherine stopped tapping and held the tools still. She kept her head bent down, and he could feel the confidence in her turn into something else. Something like wariness.

“Maybe,” was all she said. *Dreams didn’t give you blisters, did they?* But she knew he was right and she knew she saw other gloves in the bag. But he wasn’t offering them.

“I have gloves in my coat pocket. I left it outside the doorway,” she said, not raising her eyes. “I can go and get them. If you want my help,” she tacked on.

He knew they were talking about more than the steps. Also knew that she was aware of the nature of what had been going on with him, somehow. Not the particulars, perhaps, but the general idea. Like the reflections of a stone dropped into water, she had caught the ripples. The sensation this was all a dream, and couldn’t be shaken. And in dreams all things were possible and nothing was quite as it seemed... *right?*

He snapped a look at the entrance to the cavern. *This was usually where Mouse came in, or Pascal...*

When nothing happened, he decided to experiment with the boundaries, feeling his way forward. “I’ve been... thinking about this place. Dreaming about it. Being here, with you. Making it our special place. Somewhere we can be alone...together.”

“I don’t think there’s a time you haven’t read to me near those falls I haven’t thought of our finding such a place,” she answered. “I never expected it to be so close.”

Vincent pushed the edges a little further outwards. “The night you came back from your friend, Nancy in Connecticut... the night neither of us was sure what we meant to each other anymore...I was sitting on the other side of that wall.” He nodded to the granite edifice in front of him.

“Thinking I’d lost you. Thinking we were done. And you came back and said...”

“I said we were worth everything.” She set the tools down on the step and simply looked up at him.

Another cautious step forward...“But we haven’t had ‘*everything*.’ Have we, Catherine?”

Catherine caught the swirl of raw emotion, the ripples of something more he was trying to tell her without words. She couldn’t mistake his meaning any more than she could mistake the wondering look in his eyes. He was both asking for something he didn’t know how to ask for, and dreading what her answer might be. *Is any of this real*, he seemed to be saying.

“Are you hoping I’ll say, yes? Or are you hoping I’ll say, no?” she asked, the sympathy in her expression belying the harshness of the charge.

“This is what we make it to be, Vincent. We can imagine all we want. There are no boundaries in this place of ours. We can have everything we have ever wished for, and more. But only here.”

No boundaries, she said...so the dream goes on. Vincent sighed. He felt a rush of disappointment, then dismissed it. If this was all there could be, then let it be so. At least here, the beast within him could do no harm.

He was about to tell her he didn’t know what he wanted, but he knew that wasn’t true. He also knew that whatever else they’d been, they’d

always been honest with each other. Not completely forthcoming perhaps, about some things, but whatever they'd said to each other, it had been the truth. Even if those truths were often difficult ones.

"I'm hoping you'll say... 'Have you ever wanted to make love by the light of the moon?'" he replied quietly, shifting uncomfortably a little, on the seat. "It's a dream I've been having. One I have no answer for. Not really." His eyes drifted to the view, as if he could not look at her and confess all. "The reason I have not been sleeping lately, is you...and yet, I still feel as if I am dreaming all of this..." He waved a hand at the rock walls surrounding them.

"Perhaps we both are." Catherine's green gaze remained uncannily steady. Then she looked past him to the rise of steps above where he now sat. There was a group of three, clustered together, which looked treacherous to climb, without repair. She looked down at the unsuitability of her bare feet and said nothing. Simply by picking up the hammer and chisel and setting to work on the lowest step, she gave her consent. After a moment, she felt him climb up the distance between them.

"Catherine...?" he questioned a short space away from her.

She shook her head, and simply kept working.

"You still don't have your gloves."

She stopped for a few heartbeats, gave a few more taps, then stopped again. She could sense him moving to crouch close to her.

“I’m afraid to stop. Afraid to go down to get them. Afraid if I do, it means we won’t finish the stairs,” she said, keeping her back to him. She was near tears, and couldn’t explain it. And didn’t want him to know. “Afraid that if I go and come back, you will not be here waiting for me. That you will leave me here alone. That none of this is real.”

But he was the last being on earth she could hide an emotion from and they both knew it. Fear that they would lose this precious moment rode her, and she didn’t want to stop carving the way up. To admit defeat was not in her nature.

“Catherine? Tell me?” he asked gently, keeping a few steps beneath her, and to her left. “What do you want to happen?”

She shook her head in the negative. “If we talk about it, we’ll talk our way out of it. And I don’t want that, not anymore.” She looked up at the steps. Perhaps the middle one wasn’t so bad. Perhaps she could hold to the wall and just risk the jump.

“This is madness, you know.” Vincent replied. “Stop now, before you hurt yourself.” *You have no idea how much. I think we’ve been having the same dream. I’m just not sure if I’m having yours or you’re having mine.*

“I know,” Catherine nodded. “Desperate times. Desperate measures.” She kept at the stone, feeling him give her room. She was concentrating on the area where the rise met the wall when she realized he’d gone back down and gotten her gloves for her.

She stopped working, knowing the black leather accessories he held out had arrived just in time. Her right palm was starting to burn. Who knew dreams could actually contain a measure of physical pain?

“These aren’t suitable work gloves,” Vincent observed quietly. “There’s another set in the bag. A little smaller. You should use them,” he offered, picking up the tools she’d been using while she stopped to put on her gloves.

“Why?” she asked.

“They’re lighter. They will be easier for you to use,” he said, adjusting his own gloves as he prepared to get back to work.

“No. Not that. I mean... why?” she asked.

Don’t give her words. She’s afraid of them, right now. Afraid I’ll use them to tell her why the two of us can never be. Or why this is unwise. Or why she should choose someone else, align her life with a different man... or that I’ll just say ‘no.’ Something. Something to cause this not to happen.

Inhaling deeply, he took in her rather dishevelled form. The skirt was narrow, and a bad match for physical labour. The blouse was coming untucked. There was dust staining the area where her knees kept it pressed to the hard rock, and a little on her blouse. And she’d never looked more beautiful in her life, as far as he was concerned.

His gloved hand cupped her cheek, and he leaned across the space between them, for a kiss. Dreams released the owner from everyday boundaries...

Soft. Warm. If the lamplight that illuminated the space caused heat to rise, that was nothing, compared to this. Catherine remained passive beneath his touch, willing him to go on with his exploration.

When Vincent finally broke the contact, he took in her slightly dazed expression. "There'll soon be a moon over our heads. On the other side of that wall. Maybe," he whispered, still holding her cheek. "If we wish to climb all the way up to see it."

"I think I can jump, make it to the next step without having to worry," she offered.

"I think you can walk off the pyramids of Egypt," he said, quoting Bronte, as he nudged her out of the way a little, and set the mallet to the heavy handle of the chisel.

Catherine settled her head briefly against the broad sweep of his shoulder, before going back to work. It was an odd thing to be half-sitting, half-crouching on a set of ancient steps together, making small repairs to a couple of them so they could climb to the top and make love. Once more the illogical nature and yet, complete sense of their shared dream, came back to her. Perhaps that is all this is now, another version of the same dream. Just more advanced in its nature. She could cope with a dream...

As Catherine worked, the old fears she held were not nearly distant enough to make her comfortable with this. She was not yet sure what she hoped was going to happen was actually going to happen. Or if she was simply dreaming all of this and it would end once more with the shrill of the telephone, her alarm clock, or the constant intrusion of her world into her dream...

She sped up her pace of work, trying to make a difference. But Vincent was worlds stronger than she was, and faster, just by virtue of the size of the chisel and the power of his arm. The second step was made usable. Then the last one. It had only taken a few minutes.

"Pascal says this comes out right behind the fall of the water, just a little to the left of the falls." Catherine nodded, looking upward to a path that lead to she knew not what.

"The sun has gone down," she said, checking her watch. "The longest night has started."

"The moon will be up soon." Vincent watched as she tugged off her gloves, and dropped them where she stood. "Catherine, how can this be?"

"Because it's what we have both wished for, more than anything," she said simply, looking upward at the path that now marked the way to both their fates.

It seemed they were always climbing up to each other, somehow. Her to her apartment. Him to her balcony. Her into his welcoming embrace, climbing the steps to her French doors.

“I don’t know what happens next. I don’t even know if I’m still dreaming. Or if you are. But I do know I’m going to climb up and go see, while you get your cloak, and my coat,” she said, standing. She brushed most of the dust off of her skirt. She looked back at him. “If you’re not there after a few minutes, I’ll... I’ll understand,” she said. She sighed. “All dreams must end...and we go on as before.”

“Not all of them, Catherine...” he replied, understanding that she was doing what she thought she had to. She was giving him the control of what would happen next. If this truly was a dream, then they would meet at the top. If not, then they would both finally know they were never truly destined to meet here and be with each other. Even in a dream...

They parted from each other three quarters of the way up the now usable stairway. Vincent went down to get their belongings, while Catherine climbed slowly up, her eyes feasting on all the rising moonlight slowly revealed.

Vincent had always felt the difference in their respective elevations. *There was no reason for this moment to be any different*, he reasoned, bagging the tools and going to collect their things. Once clear of the stone stairwell, the air near the water was apt to be cool. After all, a December wind now whipped bare branches, in the world Above. The air would be cold, then, he reasoned. Perhaps even uncomfortably so.

Perhaps he should tell her to forget this insane idea. That if they were going to do this at all, perhaps it should be back in her apartment, or in some distant chamber, somewhere...else. Somewhere...*safe*?

But where's the adventure in that? He froze on the stairs, Catherine's words swirling thought him on wings of fire. Continue to climb, and it would mean something. That she could trust him not to abandon her here in this secret, sacred place.

Fail to climb back, and it would mean something, too.

For a reason Vincent couldn't name, this felt like a tipping point, for them. Catherine wouldn't press him about what would happen next. Or even what wouldn't. But whether it was the fact that he had hours of night left at his disposal, (more hours than he would have on any other night,) or because the only woman he was ever going to love was standing above him, waiting for him, he continued to climb.

Carrying their clothes, he soon realized the air became even warmer, as he moved quickly upwards. Warm air rose. Colder air sank. The area near the ceiling was absolutely tropical, in its leanings.

A narrow crease in the wall opened up before him, and he had to turn his big body sideways to get through. Not seeing Catherine, he knew she must still be ahead of him. He heard the sound of rushing water, not as loud as he'd thought it would be, since they were distant from where it hit the rocks below. The air was still warm. Temperature inversion. The cold air pressed down on the warm, trapping it behind the falls.

There was indeed a moon that night, and it was gloriously full, sailing above a narrow cleft in the rocks above, painting the falling water with diamond shards. And enough of it shone inside the cavern to cast a broken shimmer of white light on the water as it fell off the edge into a wide, ink-black pool. It looked like rippled glass brushed by milk.

It painted the area of the falls just as the water tumbled off the edge of the highest point, and into the waiting pool, below. Moisture clung to the rocks, here, and the air was still unseasonably warm. There was enough moonlight to break a rainbow into the mist of the stony cavern where she stood. And for all the amazing wonder of it, none of it registered, really, in Vincent's brain.

Catherine was naked. Or nearly so. Vincent could not look away. *I am still dreaming, am I not?*

Vincent stopped dead in his tracks, drawing in a long breath of wonder, and in that time his love removed the silky blouse she'd worn to work, and simply dropped it where she'd stood. She was facing the fall of the water, not taking her eyes off the white ribbon of light that cast itself in eerie perfection across the water's crest.

Already barefoot, she was reaching for the zipper tab at the back of her skirt, and Vincent watched in dumbstruck fascination as the fabric parted, revealing the small of her already bare back and the soft silvery colour of her panties.

"Have you ever wanted to make love by the light of the moon, Vincent?"

Vincent suddenly knew he desperately wanted the answer to that to be, “Yes...*always*...” More than anything he had ever wished for in his entire life. *But only with you, Catherine...*

He thought of calling out to her, but then thought the better of it. She’d been mostly quiet, all through this journey, seeming to need him to come to her because he loved her, and in spite of whether or not he thought it wise.

Catherine tugged her panties down and simply stepped clear of them, unselfconscious and uncaring. Either this was going to happen or it wasn’t, but unlike his dream image, they weren’t going to wrestle around on the ground, her jeans between them, and urgency spoiling the beauty of the moment.

Vincent spread her coat on the ground, then put his cloak on top of it. It was not much, but it would have to do.

“Catherine?” He wasn’t sure she heard him, thanks to the sound of the rushing water. Wasn’t sure if crossing herself with her hands was any indication, one way or the other.

“I think we’ve been having the same dream for the last few days,” she told him, keeping her naked back to him. There were dimples on her bottom. Of course there were. Two matching indentations above her trim waist. He wanted to fall to his knees and kiss her there...

“I asked you if you’ve ever made love in the moonlight, and you tell me you’re not sure what anything means. But you kiss me senseless, and

everything inside me is reaching for you. But we still have clothes on, and... and it barely starts before I..."

"I know..." Vincent nodded. He could hear her voice catch on a tear. "I'm afraid Mouse has a lot to answer for. But he is not about to find us here, now..."

"So, the dream continues..." Catherine whispered, her eyes on the water and the falling moonlight. "We have never been here before, have we?"

"No, we have not. And neither of us wishes to wake now," Vincent finished for her, tossing down his gloves and loosening the ties that held his vest. He watched her head nod slowly.

He let her hear the vest hit the ground, knowing either that she wouldn't turn, or she couldn't, right now. In front of her was a view she could barely believe. And behind her was one she felt she could have as long as she didn't dare turn around to catch it.

Vincent remembered and relived the dream in his mind. She's seen that? Known about that? Seen herself as a little defiant, a little fierce? One who would press on to get what she wanted? Make demands where before she would only ask...

And him, the terrified neophyte who only wished it could all happen? Never daring to make it so.

He grabbed the hem of his shirt, tugging it off and tossing it with the growing pile of their clothes. The thermal undershirt came next.

And he knew it was his dream they'd been seeing, and not hers. Or at least, not just hers. In his dream, his fear of disappointing her came out. In hers there could be no such disappointment, she would not allow it. His boots and socks hit the floor, before he skimmed out of his jeans and underwear. So they would go with her dream, it only seemed fair...

Catherine stood waiting. Still she didn't turn.

"Are you afraid to look at me?" he asked, stepping closer. He would understand if she was.

But again, her head shook, sending the soft waves of her silvered hair to brushing the soft space below her neck. A space he wanted to kiss, right now.

"I'm afraid if I turn around you won't be there," she confessed, and the last of it caught on a sob. Crying. She was standing there in the moonlight, looking like a sacrifice to a pagan god, and she was terrified that if she dared to want to see him, he'd disappear. "I am afraid that this is just more of that same dream, and none of it is real. That I will wake up, naked and alone in my own bed. *Again...*"

"We can fix that," he said, knowing he needed to let her feel him. Knowing it would mean so much more than any of the other embraces they'd ever shared.

“We can fix that, Catherine,” he repeated, stepping behind her so she could feel the warmth of him, feel the thick brush of his body hair across her beautiful, bare back.

I refuse to let this be just a dream. I refuse, anymore, he thought, loving the trust she’d just shown in him by undressing, and leaving herself utterly vulnerable.

“We can fix everything,” he said, feeling her heels near his blunt clawed toes as he stepped as close to her as he physically could. “Always...”

He was taller. Much. One impossibly muscular arm came across her belly to pull her to him as the other held her across the shoulder. A shoulder he dropped a gentle kiss onto.

She lifted a hand to grasp his wrist, resting her head back against his throat. She closed her eyes and felt the wonder of him, even as she couldn’t see it. The firm planes of a powerful body she had never known to tire until tonight. The broad thighs that kept him anchored to the earth. The dense brush of hair at the centre of his chest that then arched down his iron-hard belly. The wanton heat of his body. The heat of his sex, as it contacted the small of her back. His mouth was warm on her shoulder, and she felt the trace of his fangs, on her skin.

He felt her shiver. Was she cold? Or terrified?

“Do I frighten you?” he asked, knowing she now knew his size in more ways than one. Now knew that when he kissed her, he couldn’t avoid the touch of his fangs. It was a thing he could minimize. But not

something he could do away with, completely. "It's all right to say 'yes,'" he tacked on. "I am here, I am not going anywhere. Not without you."

"I know that now..." Catherine shook her head, and kept her eyes closed. Silver streaks of moonlight lay in the tracks of her tears. Moonbeams gleamed in the glossy length of her hair that danced across his skin.

"I'm more afraid this long, beautiful night will pass too soon. And I'll have to wait another year to stand here. And that this is all part of the latest version of our dream. And that when I open my eyes... you won't be standing there," she admitted, shifting a little, against him. "That this is nothing but an illusion. All of it."

Did this fear of hers belong to him? Was he to blame? Other people had deserted her before, he knew that.

"It's an old fear," she said, assuaging his guilt. "One I get when... whenever I'm afraid my happiness won't last. That it will get taken away, somehow. Unexpectedly. Like I've been bad, and need to be punished." She lifted a naked shoulder. "I have always been careful what I wish for. Ever since..." she didn't finish but he caught the imagery of her fear.

Ah. Ever since you lost your mother. Suddenly, and with seemingly no warning, Vincent's heart contracted.

"We aren't what we dream of, Catherine. And I refuse to allow us to be what we fear. I've held both, in one of my hands, and yet I have never

held you, as you long to be held. The dream of having you. The nightmare of if it all coming undone...”

She stepped away from him, deliberately putting a small distance between them, deliberately showing him her naked self, her every vulnerability.

“I used to think of myself as two different people,” she confessed. “The one before the attack, and the one after. But that isn’t fair. And it isn’t right. They are both me. I know that now.”

“When I think of myself as two different people, it is not like that. It is not an ‘event’ that divides me. It’s a need.” He had never known she viewed herself with nearly as much dichotomy as he did.

“You’ve always been afraid you’d hurt me,” she stated his fear for him.

A certain truth came to him, for the first time.

“And you’ve been afraid you would hurt me,” he said. “Is it as simple as that?” He prayed it was.

Catherine dropped her eyes, at his assertion. “Jacob said I would. Even as I said I would never. And then I remembered ... that I was once someone who would probably do just that. Someone thoughtless. Someone frightened of her own shadow.” She remembered the directionless daughter who had flouted the rules and wandered in to work at noon. The woman who had held on to Tom Gunther too long

and not let Stephen Bass go soon enough. "Someone afraid even to raise her voice in anger. You freed me to do just that, Vincent."

She bit her lip. "But I'm not two people, Vincent. I'm not. I'm just one. Mistakes, disasters, triumphs, all of it. Just one."

She dropped her head and looked to one side, the moon rising higher, behind her, casting a sliver of light across her torso. She covered her sex with her hands, suddenly self-conscious.

"There's a place inside me that keeps calling to you." She shook her head. "I suppose we all have a beast inside us. But it isn't a 'different Catherine.' It's just a side of the same one. The same me."

Vincent beheld her, not just as a sensual woman but a very, very vulnerable one. Not because she was in a high cavern, naked, with a man who contained a beast. But because she was in love, and that emotion had been ruling her choices for quite some time now.

Was he so different than she?

He lifted one shoulder. "I saw myself as two people, sometimes. Because it was easier than claiming the one I kept locked away. The one who dared to dream dreams I swore I couldn't have."

"I know all about those dreams." Catherine let her hands fall away. "I think you've been seeing mine, for some time."

“And I think you’ve been seeing mine.” Vincent nodded. “That we’ve been sending them to each other, through our bond.”

“Until they became the same dream, and I can’t tell where mine stops and yours begins,” she confessed. “But that dream was still a reflection of what we both desired most in this world.”

Vincent held a clawed hand out her. “Perhaps it doesn’t matter, when they are one and the same,” he said. “Perhaps it only matters that we know they are ours, and we must cherish them.”

She reached a tentative hand out for his, then drew it back. “It’s like I can have you, but only if I agree not to touch you,” she said. She had no idea how much that had mirrored his thoughts, exactly. Thoughts which had only hurt them both.

“It seems both of us are afraid to dream then,” he said softly. “But I am here. I will always be here and I am real. And I swear on the stone staircase that brought me to you, that I am going to stay here with you until I have loved every inch of you... and until I see sunlight shining through that water, rather than moonlight,” he said, keeping his hand right where it was.

An image came before her eyes, and it was of the day he’d led her back to her world. A gap in the path lay before them. A large one, and he’d leapt across it first, to show it could be done. She’d been afraid, and he hadn’t let her give in to her fear. He’d reached his hand out. Just as he was doing, now.

You can do it. Give me your hand. The words echoed across her consciousness.

“You can do it. Give me your hand,” he said, knowing on instinct they were the right words. “I will not let you fall...”

“You were taking me back to my world. Helping me find my strength,” she remembered.

“And now I’m asking you to share my world. Forever. Praying the strength you found inside you is enough for all the sacrifices that lay ahead.” He kept his hand right where it was.

“I should have just run back to your chambers. Run back and pulled the covers over my head, and refused to come out. Perhaps there wouldn’t have been so much distance between us, if I had.” She raised his hand for his.

“No. You had a life to live. You still do. Perhaps I should have come to your balcony from that first night. Let you know I was there. Let you know I... loved you.”

She shook her head. “You couldn’t. I know you couldn’t. I had so much to go through yet, so much to learn.”

She put her hand in his, and he loved the sensation of her soft skin sliding along his palm.

“So did I,” he revealed.

“I have made you regret what you were,” she said it with sadness.

“No, Catherine.” Vincent’s mane danced with the strength of his denial.

“I regretted the limits it brings you. Not the love. With love anything is truly possible.”

“Truly?” Catherine stepped closer, warm against his belly. “We don’t know what the limits are,” she whispered. “Perhaps we don’t have any.”

“Now which one of us is dreaming?” he asked, unable to hide a bit of a smile. “But we can test those limits.”

“Does it matter, if we’re both having the same dream?” she asked, aware of the impossibility they represented, and no longer afraid of it.

“It’s the solstice. We can dream this dream for a long time. If you want to.” He bent his noble head to finally plunder her mouth in a long, drugging kiss.

“Dawn will come,” he warned, then kissed her again. Because he could not resist her beauty.

“That will be a long time from now,” she said finally, when he let her come up for air. “It’s the solstice. Shortest day. Longest night.” She sighed, opening her eyes at last. He beheld her with nothing but love.

“I am absolutely counting on it.” He smiled at her, before he bent to brush his mouth across the burgeoning tip of her breast.

It was moist from her proximity to the falls, and she “oh’d” in surprise that his warm mouth was loving her, there.

Her breasts were sensitive. Not large, but always incredibly nerve-ending covered. She raised a knee on reflex, as if she would climb him, and he simply lifted her, to allow the motion to be complete.

“Please... please...” she cradled his blonde head to her chest as he deepened the kiss, and she did indeed feel the bracketing embrace of his fangs on one turgid nipple.

Previous partners had been rough, there, and even an area of her body long untouched had memory. He felt her both want his touch, and brace against it, waiting for it to hurt. For her needs to be ignored in the heat of the moment.

Vincent slowed, drawing away until he was barely touching her there, with his tongue. And then only his breath. He took her to the ground, letting his soft cloak cradle her as the rest of him was. He exhaled softly across her moist breast again, and felt her answering shiver of delight. It was too perfect.

Softly. Go softly, here.

“If I hurt you, you have to say it,” he said the words to the creamy skin of her chest. In answer, she simply nudged his head to her other, waiting breast.

He feasted with a delicate abandon, letting her fingers in his mane, the arch of her back, the thrum of their bond tell him of her pleasure. The beast he swore lived inside him was either absent or wholly there, and Vincent was utterly unsure of which one was more true. He only knew he was loving her. In a pagan place on a patchwork cloak, while the moisture from the falls began to pearl, on his back.

“My turn,” she said, lifting his head at last. “Please. Please, Vincent.”

He didn’t want to. Didn’t want to let her up, didn’t want to change their position, so he no longer had her pinned beneath him. Except for the part of him that wanted exactly that.

You are not two people, his mind scolded. Just one, who wants two different things.

“I don’t know how long I can bear it,” he said with utter honesty, forcing his weight off her supple form. She rose with him and he turned so that it was he who lay prone, keeping one hand entwined with hers.

“Afraid I’ll escape?” she asked, half-smiling.

“Terrified of it,” he admitted with sheer honesty, not letting go.

She realized her well-meant jibe was no joke to him, and that it had hit an unintended mark. “Be far more afraid that you’ll never get rid of me, after this,” she said, trying to assuage his fears.

Her mouth dipped to his breast, and if her cry had been a surprised “oh” of delight, his was a loud cry of wanton desire. His back arched in a vain attempt to draw what was already as close as it could get even closer, as her warm mouth unerringly found the pebbled pap hidden beneath a soft whorl of chest hair. His hand came up to hold her head there, begging her to feast.

Catherine’s nose took in his scent, and could smell its subtle shift as she suckled him. It was then she remembered that every touch, every gesture from now on would be something he’d never felt before, something he’d never experienced.

He groaned his pleasure, and his solid arm came across her back, anchoring her to him, as she ministered to his sensitive flesh. She shifted so her leg was against his burgeoning erection, giving him some ease.

“Cather...ine,” he begged, breaking the syllable in half on his tremor of passion. She raised her head and blew softly across the damp skin she’d just visited. His chest was a wall of muscle, and his solar plexus was tense with need.

“I’m not going to tease you,” she said, planting kisses across his chest so she could telegraph her desire to treat his right breast with the same loving affection she’d treated his left one.

“Please,” he asked, not knowing what he was asking for, exactly. It was all right. She did.

Even ready for her kiss and knowing what to expect, he couldn't stop his reaction. Again, his great back bowed, on the ground, and he lifted her effortlessly, trying to take in the sensation of being loved by her as the cool mist of the falls contrasted utterly with the warmth of her soft mouth.

Perfect, perfect, perfect. His brain kept repeating the word. She was perfect and she was ministering to him, and he was astonished that he almost hadn't let her. His skin felt rawly sensitive and his like every blood bearing capillary was pushed wide open. His sex was a rod of need and he reached down to cup her bottom, holding her firmly against him as she shifted over to cover him fully, as she dined.

Perfect. Too perfect. God, if this is a dream, never let me wake. Please.

"This isn't going to end," she said as if she'd read his mind. Perhaps she had. "This is no longer a dream...It's just beginning," she assured, kissing the centre of his chest and then letting kisses trail down.

He cried out with the joy of that, loving the feel of her soft lips against his hard abdomen. Muscles he was barely aware he had tensed for her, and she seemed to adore the area just around his navel. She brushed the thinner hair there over, with her free hand, and kissed her way across it as if it were something sacred.

Vincent, who'd never been loved by a woman before, was now being revered by one, and even in his unschooled experience, he knew the difference.

He lifted against her, letting her feel his impatient erection, letting her know he could bear no more of it, no matter how gorgeous, how sumptuous it felt. His growl was utterly unintentional, but no less sincere, for that.

She seemed to know she couldn't push him too far, especially not this time.

Her body rose over his so quickly, he barely felt her break contact with his abdomen before she was astride him, and it was only then he remembered that her small form was lithe, as well. She pinned him with her negligible strength, and the instant she brought her sex against his, he knew why.

Wet. She was wet. Wetter than the falls and wet for him. Wet because of him, and she was coating him with it, for both her care and his.

He groaned, placing his hands at her hips, moving her across him as she moved herself, her small hands braced on his massive chest, revelling.

"Ohhhhhh," she drew out the sound, long and low, green eyes closed and head tilted gently, to one side.

She feels me, he thought, watching her revel in that very sensation. Could she possibly know how often he'd dreamed of this very moment? She was not afraid. She was not even vaguely worried. It was then that he was certain this was going to happen. And then he knew how very much he wanted to kiss her.

“Kiss me,” he both begged and commanded, sitting up to bring his mouth closer to hers. He rocked her back a little, and she opened her eyes to see him pushing himself up on his elbows, and then sitting erect, his manhood still nestled sensually between them.

“Take me inside you when we kiss,” he asked, now even aware it was something he wanted, until now. He would be a virgin when the kiss began, and her lover when it ended. And they both knew it.

“Are you sure?” she asked, giving him one last chance to back away. It was a chance he no longer wanted. And wondered that he ever did.

They sat on his now very rumpled cloak, her left shoulder to the falls and his right one to it. The moon was shifting across the water’s surface, casting prisms of scattered light, as it went.

“I am. I only wish it could change me into the prince you deserve,” he said, knowing that their lovemaking would leave them forever changed, and that it would take many choices out of her hands, forever.

“You are already a prince,” she said, brushing back his now misted bangs. “And far more than I deserve.”

It wasn’t that he thought either statement was true. It was that he could tell by the look in her eyes that she thought both were. Was this what love did? Clouded your judgment until you could not see the truth? Or cleared it, so you could see the truth more clearly than you ever had?

He didn't know which answer was the right one. He only knew that he adored her utterly, and wanted to be that prince for her, wanted to be so impossibly good that he drove all others from her mind, from her possibility.

"I promise to love only you. I'll die if that isn't enough,"

"I feel exactly the same way," she answered, feeling the passion thrumming beneath his skin, and just between her legs. He was perfectly formed.

His blue eyes opened wide and he drank her in. *His woman. His.* A thing he could never own but could always treasure.

She shifted impatiently, feeling her heat build, thanks to her contact with him. He was making her uncomfortable. And in a very interesting way.

"Love me?" he asked, threading his fingers in the hair at the nape of her neck, bringing her face to his, for a kiss. He watched her half-dazed eyes close.

"Yes," she breathed it, closing her mouth over his.

It was a gentle duel, and neither would win. He traced the outline of her mouth with his, begging her to do the same. She drew the tip of her tongue along his unique upper lip, and traced each long fang in turn, showing him he was accepted, showing him he was loved.

When he could endure no more he tightened his hold, subtly, stroking inside her mouth with the motion that simulated sex, asking for reprieve, and for completion. He felt her hand move between them. When it grasped him he saw stars.

When he slid into her like a damp hand to a hot glove, he saw heaven.

Sweet. Warm. Muscular and strong. Two words he'd not expected for this, and there they were. Heat. Moonlight on her shoulder, and the moon had a flavour as he gasped in surprise, against it, then laved it as she rode. He pressed his hand to the dimpled small of her back, feeling it increase her pleasure. Her hands locked around his neck and she gave a feminine mewl of delight as her body grew accustomed to his.

And then grew demanding of it.

Her shoulder was damp from the mist of the falls, and the skin where they touched was damp from something else, entirely. He tasted one but smelled both as she held him deep and elongated her back for what he knew was her final push. Colours sharper than the rainbows that were now breaking themselves into starlight around the cavern scattered behind her eyes, and she buried her mouth into the column of his throat when she came, crying out her joy into the vulnerable place where his lifeblood flowed, and his life's love brought him over, just a beat behind her.

Consciousness shattered and the beast in him drove upward as he came, needing her on her back again, needing to make a claim.

Her climax wracked them both as he turned her and laid her down, adoring the sumptuous feeling of her legs coming up around his waist as he emptied himself into her. It seemed as if he could not drive deep enough. It seemed as if he was already so deep he was forever lost. The dichotomy that had always dogged him blessed him now, as everything felt possible and nothing felt outside his grasp.

The moonlight in the room painted a pagan prince silver, and the roar of his completion was carried away by the water of the falls, into the longest night, and into the mysteries of the black pool below.

His orgasm triggered another one of her own, and he adored the sensation of her pulsing around him again, as he jetted into her, one final time.

This is not real. This is not real. It can't be, his mind insisted. And then.... *No. This is real. This is the reality. It's all the rest of it that's false.* The warm answer purred in his brain, just as the warm woman beneath him purred in his arms. He nuzzled her the side of her face and kissed the scar there, loving her for keeping it. For keeping him.

In a way, she'd been trying to tell him that they were headed for this night ever since their first anniversary. Ever since she'd revealed to him that she wanted to keep the small, rivening mark on her cheek.

He felt her against him, beneath him. Her heartbeat was a bird caught in a gilded cage. Her skin was damp, her hands loosely holding his sides. He knew he had to draw away from her. Knew his weight would crush.

“Mmmm” she “mmmd” feeling him withdraw from her warm, replete body. She was nearly off the cloak, her hair was close to the sand. And she was no more capable of speech than he was.

He kissed her eyelids in apology for his inevitable departure, and again felt the mist of the falls near her temples.

No. Not mist. Tears. He tasted salt, on his lips.

“Catherine?” he whispered, concerned, for a moment. Had he hurt her?

“They’re happy ones,” she murmured, not opening her eyes. Her arms drew up and pulled him back down, asking him to cover her with his warmth as he covered her with his great body. He could do nothing but oblige her.

They used to make love here, he thought, not knowing why he thought it or how he knew. *And on exactly this night. Because it’s the longest night. And they prayed the dawn-light would not rise too soon...*

Catherine turned her head to look at the falls. The persistent moon was moving off, trailing platinum in its wake. Only part of the water was now affected. The rest had dissolved once more into inky blackness.

“We still have all night,” she reassured him, stroking his tousled mane, lovingly. “We don’t need to go anywhere.”

He felt exhausted from not just the night’s efforts, but of the previous day’s as well, and of the days before that, when the dreams had

tormented him. And on the other hand, he'd never felt more vital, more alive. He wanted to ask how long they had to wait for a second time, on the one hand, and on the other, he wanted to wrap her in his cape and walk naked down the tunnel hallways with her, until he reached his chambers. Wanted to tuck her beneath his quilts and dream next to her, then rouse her so he could make love to her again. All were opposites. And he kept managing to hold them both in his mind as she stroked his hair with her soft, feminine fingers.

"We have longer than that, if you want it," he said at last, when the ability to form a sentence would finally come. He stretched his long body, overtop of hers, feeling every muscle flex, and let tension go. He felt marvellously replete.

"I do," she said, knowing they were marriage words, though not knowing for certain if that was what he intended.

"I know there will still be times when we barely have a minute for each other," she said, letting him know that she understood their situation, that whatever change this caused, it would have to be a thing they both agreed to, and were comfortable with.

"Yes, there will be." He kissed her beloved fingers. One of which was showing the beginnings of a blister, from handling the mallet. He gathered her closer against him, sharing his warmth, enfolding her completely in his embrace.

"But I also know there will be others when we have all night," he returned, vowing that it would be so. "And we have this place now."

Always..." Vincent looked up at the moon, high above, sailing on without a care.

Catherine smiled, following his gaze, and knowing he was right. And it would always be that way now, because they had made promises, one to the other. Sacred vows spoken in a sacred place, by the light of the full moon.

By the power of the winter solstice...

Always...



~THE END~

"There is a waterfall in every dream. Cool and crystal clear, it falls gently on the sleeper, cleansing the mind and soothing the soul..."

~ Virginia Alison

