

NO LIMITS

by Christine Cunningham

Vincent was away in the deepest part of the tunnels, a place he sometimes retreated to when he needed to be alone, to escape the pressures and responsibilities that were put on him by the community. The burden became too great at times, even for his large shoulders. Father and the others sometimes forgot what battles he had to endure, walking the fine line between reason and insanity. These times of solitude were necessary to his well-being. The reasons for his absence this time though, were personal and private and Father had agreed to his time away to sort out his feelings with regard to Catherine. But not before they had talked.

"I have seen the two of you together, Vincent, and I am not so old that I don't remember the wanting and desire one feels towards a woman you love. You have tremendous capacity to love and phenomenal self control, but the time has come, has it not, when you want to let go. Vincent, may I ask you something very personal?"

His son inclined his head. "You know you can ask anything, Father."

"Very well then. Do you know if Catherine feels the same way? Have you spoken of it at all?"

Vincent paced his chamber, shaking his head. "No, we have not spoken, but it is there; a living thing between us. She feels it, and our partings are becoming more and more painful. How long can a love like ours survive without physical release?"

Father had known for some time that this conversation was inevitable and for the most part he was glad. The coming together of these two would either tear them apart or cleave them together forever and, if he knew anything at all about Catherine, she would accept Vincent totally.

"What can I tell you, Vincent? How long can it survive? I don't know. But I think that before you leave you should talk to Catherine. Who knows, talking about it face to face may solve the problem."

Father wasn't telling him anything he didn't already know. He knew he must talk to her, but the truth was, he was deeply embarrassed. This was new territory to him. He was completely inexperienced in sexual matters. Oh, he was well versed in the mechanics of it. Father had given him all the appropriate books to read and he'd seen pictures. He and Devin had giggled over them when they were boys, just like all boys did, so he wasn't completely ignorant of the facts. It was just that reading and doing were two totally different things. And, of course there were times, as an adolescent, when his body craved relief and in a secrecy of the night, in his chamber, he had used his hands to obtain release. And over the last few months, his body craved for a release of a different kind, and yet he refused to resort to the only means at his disposal, seeing it as rather sordid and disloyal to Catherine.

Coming to a decision, he looked at Father and said, "You are right as always, although how I am to bring this into the conversation I do not know."

Putting an arm around his son's shoulders, Father chuckled. "Don't fret, Vincent, the words will come without you even having to think about it. You know, I've had this same talk with Devin. It's always the same and all men go through it. You've just taken that little bit longer, that's all. Speak from the heart, my son, and you won't be sorry."

So Vincent went Above, with trepidation in his heart, to see Catherine.

She was not expecting him and so she'd brought home a briefcase, bulging with notes which had to be put in some kind of order, before the trial in a few days. This testimony would put another villain behind bars, no question. The fact that two more would take his place on the streets was a bit depressing, but on the whole she was happy doing what she did. With the papers spread all over the floor and her in the middle of it, she set to work with a vengeance, and became so engrossed that at first she missed the gentle tapping on the balcony doors. When the tapping became more insistent, she looked up, startled.

Seeing Vincent, she momentarily felt alarmed and rushed to open the doors. "Vincent, what's wrong? I thought you were staying Below tonight."

He couldn't help it, his arms seemingly with a will of their own, reached out and pulled her close, almost crushing her.

'Something was wrong here,' she thought. "Vincent, talk to me. What has you so disturbed? Is there trouble Below?"

He smiled wryly. Always she thought of his world first. "Ah, Catherine. Thank you for asking, but all is well Below. It is something entirely different and concerns myself...and you," he quickly added. "May we go inside? This may take some time and it is cold out here."

Catherine was astonished and not sure she had heard him correctly. How many times had she tried to coax him into her apartment and how many times had he refused to cross the boundary he had set for himself.

"You want to come inside?" he heard the surprise in her voice and was surprised himself, because he hadn't meant to say it, but somehow the words came out and he couldn't unsay them.

"Yes, Catherine," he whispered. "I think it's time. Time for a lot of things. Time for certain boundaries to be crossed."

Intrigued was not quite the word, but Catherine couldn't think of another to describe what she was feeling just then. Vincent was nervous and unsure of himself, something she had not been aware of in him before, and yet, underneath the nervousness, she could detect a hint of suppressed excitement. Something was definitely going on here, and though her connection to him was weaker than his to her, she could sense that whatever happened here tonight could very well have a bearing on their whole future.

Her whole heart leapt, not with dismay; she couldn't pick up any negative thoughts from him, it was

more like anticipation. *'Could it be?'* she thought.

Entering her apartment was easier than he had thought it would be. Crossing the line from his world to hers had been but a mere step. Would that the rest of this night would be so.

The first thing he noticed was the array of papers strewn all over the floor. "Catherine, you were working. I'm sorry. I should go."

Part of him was glad to have an excuse to put off the inevitable, but Catherine was having none of it, and without a thought for all the time she had put into those papers, she scooped them up in any order and flung them on the table. Nothing was more important than having Vincent here.

"Stay, please," was all she could manage, half afraid he would change his mind and leave. Looking into her love-filled eyes, Vincent could not deny her. "Sit down, do you want a drink of anything? There's tea, or wine if you prefer." Now that she knew he was staying, his nervousness transferred itself to her, making her prattle and she told herself to stop being so skittish.

He smiled, relieved that he was not the only one to be feeling unsure. "Wine would be good, thank you." Removing his heavy cloak, he sat on the sofa and let his head fall back, closing his eyes to marshall his thoughts into some sort of understandable order. When he opened them again, he found he was uncomfortable in such bright light and rose to turn out the overhead light, leaving only a small lamp in the corner of the room. He returned to the sofa just as Catherine returned with the wine and two glasses.

"Oh! This is much better. Cozier." Pouring the wine, she handed a glass to him and taking her own said, "What shall we drink to, Vincent?"

He looked into the swirling darkness of the wine and considered. Then, raising his eyes to lock onto hers, he said. "To a life without boundaries or limits."

Clinking her glass to his she added, "I'll drink to that, Vincent, and gladly. No limits."

She waited patiently for him to speak and the silence between them was charged with expectancy. Finally....

"Where do I begin? There is so much I have to say."

Catherine laid a hand against his cheek. "Begin at the beginning, Vincent. Tell me."

He covered her hand and brought it towards his mouth, pressing a kiss into her palm.

"When I found you, Catherine, I knew I would love you, always. I knew it and never questioned how I knew. It was and is the truth. And the miracle was, that by the time you were healed, you loved me too. I was happy and content with my life, asking nothing more than to be able to see you and hold you for a few precious moments. As the months went by, my connection to you became stronger and I could sense all your emotions; fear, joy, when you were happy or sad, and I was always with you in spirit. There was no rhyme or reason for it. It just was."

He paused for a moment, taking a breath to calm himself. This was one of the hardest things he had ever had to do and he was afraid of her reaction.

Catherine felt the turmoil in him and held his hands tighter. "Tell me everything, Vincent. There is nothing you can say that would take me away from you."

He held on to that belief as he continued. "For a long time, have been struggling with feelings I

have never known, never expected to know. When I see you, Catherine, my heart threatens to burst from my chest and I never want to leave you. It hurts when I do. Catherine...."

He dropped his head to one side in the way that was unique to him. "I am one with you, heart, soul and mind, and it will always be so, but my body betrays me. Do you understand what I am clumsily trying to say? Forgive me, I have neither the words nor the experience to express what I am feeling inside and I need to know how you feel about what I have just told you." He waited.

Catherine let his words seep into every fiber of her being, savouring the heady realization that he wanted her and had at last brought it out into the open. This feeling between them had been growing all the time, but she could not pressure him; the first step had to be his.

"Oh, Vincent. I know exactly what you have been going through, because I feel it too. The times I've wanted to hold on to you and make you stay with me, but I had to let you make the decision when the time was right for you. Sometimes I thought it would never be and that we would be forever in a state of limbo, never going beyond what we already have. Vincent, I love you and I want you desperately. That is an inescapable truth and when two people love as we do, it is natural and right to wish to express that love through physical union. We are no different than anyone else in that respect. There is nothing we cannot do, or be, together. Just say the word, Vincent, and we will complete each other."

Vincent pulled her into his arms and held her close to his pounding heart. She wanted him. Oh, the blessed relief her words afforded him.

"Catherine, I love you so and you honour me, but I want you to think carefully about what has been said tonight. It would be so easy for me to stay and join with you, with no thought to consequences. You see, it is like a madness within me and I still have doubts about what might happen."

He lifted her face level to his and whispered, "Catherine, I have never been intimate with a woman, you know this, and if I were to let loose what I feel for you physically, there is the great possibility that I would lose control and do you harm. I don't know if it would be that way, but there is a risk. I could not bear it if you turned from me in fear or revulsion."

Catherine put her fingers to his lips to quiet him. "There is nothing to think about. You do not have it in you to hurt me, but even if you did, it would be a pleasure filled pain, born out of love, and I would revel in it. But I will do as you ask, although it will change nothing. I will be waiting. God, I will be in agony, waiting."

She was in agony now, and ventured to ask; "Vincent, will you let me kiss you; really kiss you?"

He swallowed convulsively and nodded weakly, then watched as Catherine moved closer and closer, until he could feel her breath on his face.

"Whatever happens, I will never cease to love you," and her lips finally came to rest on his. He jumped slightly at the first contact. The sensation was new and strange, but he liked it and so he moved his mouth slowly, experimentally, from side to side, and daring to push her lips apart with the tip of his tongue.

Moaning softly, Catherine opened her mouth wider, letting him make all the moves. She was happy to follow his lead. Just a kiss was enough to have her body melt and her love juices start to flow and, laying as she was, she could feel Vincent's erection pulsating against her abdomen.

Vincent dragged himself away. He had to leave now before he disgraced himself entirely. The throbbing in his loins was painful and demanded release. A very cold shower would have to suffice.

"I must leave, Catherine, or my words earlier will prove me false. I am going far Below for a while to think about this, and I want you to use the time I am gone to be sure that it is what you want. Be well, my Catherine," and he was gone, back into the night.

Catherine remained where she was, her body tight with reined in passion. Pulling a cushion towards her, she hugged it to her breast and closing her eyes, relived that kiss over and over again. And it was like she had never been kissed before. If one glorious first kiss could make her feel like this, what would making love do to her?

"Oh, Vincent, together we will burn like a forest fire and the flame will never die." She did need time to think, he was right about that, but not now. All she wanted now was to reflect on that kiss. A beginning.

Vincent packed a bag and left for the deeper tunnels, looking forward to the peace and serenity he needed to contemplate the future with Catherine. It was there, within their reach, no longer an impossible dream, but the way would not be without problems - when was it ever any other way for them - and it behove them to tread carefully, one step at a time.

Reaching his destination, a small chamber, which was not man-made, but carved out maybe centuries ago, he lit the torch and placed it in the natural cavity on the rock wall. It was very cold down here and with the kindling he brought with him, lit a small fire. Vincent then emptied his bag and had something to eat and then sat on the floor close to the fire, leaning his back against the wall. There was not a sound down here, not even the wind found its way to these deep tunnels. Perfect.

As the quietness seeped into every pore, he felt all the fears and uncertainties leaving him and in their place, the promise of a life he had never before dared to dream. He remembered saying to Catherine that they were something which had never been and had to go with courage and go with care. He had no idea when or where, or even how their hopes and desires would be fulfilled, but he allowed himself the luxury of at last bringing the dream to the forefront of his mind; testing the words on his lips for the first time.

"I want to make love to Catherine." He said it again. "I want to make love with Catherine." The more he uttered the words, the more natural they sounded. The ground was not going to open up and swallow him for daring to give voice to his innermost feelings.

He smiled at his foolishness, and banished forever the idea that he was not made to give and receive love. He was. They were truly something that had never been and they should glory in it, never fear it.

With his mind now free of fearful thoughts, he envisioned himself and Catherine in the most erotic dance of love, in his bed, her bed, everywhere, and the images he conjured up were so vivid that his body betrayed him yet again and his release was explosive. If mere dreams could do this, what would reality in her arms bring him? With that blissful thought singing through his veins, Vincent slept.

Catherine had barely enough hours in the day to think about Vincent. Every moment was taken up with the trial, but once it was over, she went home, after wrangling a couple of days rest from Joe, disconnected the phone and prepared to go through her life before Vincent and into the promise of limitless possibilities with him.

As she had said to him, the beginning was a good place to start, so she went to her bedside drawer and brought out one of her most prized possessions; her photo album. This was her life before Vincent.

Settling on the bed, she turned the pages, seeing herself as a little girl, pampered and cossetted by devoted parents; denied nothing. She smiled; thinking that at times, she was nothing more than a spoiled brat. On the pages turned, until she came to the picture on her seventeenth birthday. What a milestone that was. Thinking she was an adult and knew it all, she had brazenly approached her boyfriend - Greg, that was his name, carrot-colored hair and freckles - and asked him if he wanted to '*do it.*' Well, he thought he'd won the state lottery. He was already the envy of his classmates, going out with Catherine Chandler and now, here she was, asking him to '*do it*' with her.

Catherine cringed now when she thought about that day. They didn't have a clue, either of them. They were children playing at grown-ups and it had been a disaster from start to finish and something they both agreed not to repeat.

Catherine smiled. "Poor Greg. I wonder what he's doing now?"

The following pictures were of her college days and of a tutor she had become infatuated with. He was older than her twenty years and very sophisticated to boot. Who better, she thought, to teach her about her growing desires as a woman? She plotted and schemed her way into his bed and it had been well worth the effort. He taught her practically everything and their eventual parting was amicable. She mentally thanked that man today. Then there had been Tom, the man her father wanted her to marry. Wealthy, good-looking and a total bore to Catherine. She tried for her father's sake to fall in love with him, but one can't love to order. He had treated her like an empty-headed adornment, to hang on to his every word and smile prettily. Her opinions were of no consequence to him. Even his performance in the bedroom was designed to give only him any pleasure and ending the relationship had been easy for her. But from then on, the closeness with her father deteriorated.

"Phew, this analyzing your life is the pits," she said out loud. "Time for a break."

After a shower and something to eat, she returned to the album, fortified by a bottle of wine, and resumed turning the pages, smiling every now and then, until she stopped at a picture of Elliot laughing out at her.

"Oh, Elliot....I really thought that you were the one." He was the total opposite of Tom in every way. Elliot Burch was mad, bad and dangerous to know and she had jumped right in with both feet. The fun they had together was a part of her life she could never regret. He had brought out the lighter side of her nature and their bedroom activities had been really something. He had encouraged her to be proud of her body and enjoy all aspects of the sexual act, and she had to the fullest. But it wasn't enough; there was the feeling of something missing, something indefinable. Take away the great sex and what was left? Not enough to build a life with and so, she had reluctantly ended their

affair. Laying the album down, Catherine brushed away the tears on her cheeks. "If we had married, Elliot, it wouldn't have lasted and I think you always knew it. The truth is, I used you. Used you to break away from my father; away from the life I lived, the phoniness of it all and I'm sorry for that."

She knew she had treated Elliot badly, and only now could she openly admit it and forgive herself.

More pages were turned until finally, she looked down and saw a woman, with pain in her eyes and scars on her face. This picture was the end of her old life and the start of the new. At the time she had cursed her fate, and of the man who had found her, bleeding and close to death in the park; she cursed him too, for saving her, only to survive, scarred and ugly. But care for her he did, constantly, night and day and his voice had become her lifeline to reality. Her eyes had been bandaged and in time, she had wanted to match the face to the beautiful voice she heard. But the first sight of Vincent was full of fear for her, yet he had been patient, and when she later apologized for her reaction, he had merely smiled his understanding.

As the days passed and her strength returned, she began to see beneath the strange cat-like exterior of this man, to the gentle human soul inside until, one day, she looked into his eyes and loved him totally. And in that moment, she knew what it was that had been missing with Elliot, Tom and the others. It was the love, the sureness that this one man above all others was her destiny, her sole reason for ever having been born at all, and it was also the reason he had saved her. Vincent had known from the beginning that she would be his salvation. People do not choose who they love, it just happens. Sometimes the path is easy and sometimes, as in their case, the road is strewn with obstacles to test them, but when love comes to a man and a woman they must recognize it and hold on to it, because it was worth fighting for.

"Vincent, I have looked at my life and there are some things I regret and others that I cherish. All that happened before I met you made me what I am, and all that you have given me since, has made me better. I am ready to move forward with you, to live with you or not, which ever you may choose."

Catherine closed the book of her past life and was finally at peace with herself. Vincent was her fate, her destiny and she would have it no other way. There was no other way for her.

"We will work it out, Vincent. I have faith in our future."

They had been apart for more than a week and frustration ate away at them; each of them thinking. *'How much longer?'*

Vincent returned to the community with a renewed vigour and a smile in his eyes for everyone. Walking into Father's chamber, he greeted him with a beaming smile and a bear hug.

"Hello, Father. It is good to be home again."

Father looked at his son carefully, noting the confidence in his face and the determination in his eyes. "You have resolved the problem, he stated rather than asked.

"Oh yes, Father. I did as you suggested and spoke with Catherine. She felt as I did that it was right and natural to move forward in our relationship, but we have not rushed headlong into the fire.

There is no set time. It will be when it will be and, knowing that it is what we both want, I am content to let matters take their natural course."

Father was relieved to hear that they would take their time and because of their mature reasoning, he no longer had any qualms about their future.

"No two people deserve a life together more than you and Catherine. All of us have watched and agonized with your dilemma, and we have endured with you all the problems you have faced. Now we will celebrate your future. It has been hard won and you both have my blessings. You know, Vincent, I have never enjoyed the role of Devil's Advocate. If I put obstacles in your way, it was only my concern that you would not be hurt. I know now that Catherine is steadfast and her love for us all is constant."

Vincent smiled gratefully. "Your approval will mean a lot to Catherine, Father. Thank you."

He walked to his chamber, anxious to prepare himself to go Above to Catherine. He sent his love winging its way to her along the invisible chains of their bond. It was so strong and powerful, she was bound to feel it.

Catherine had felt a lightness of spirit all day. Maybe it was because she had got rid of all the excess baggage in her life, or maybe it was because Joe was in a good mood and joking with her for once, instead of bawling her out, as per usual.

"You look happy, Radcliffe. What you on? Got any for me, I could use a life!"

She laughed delightedly. "I'm high on love and it's wonderful."

Joe laughed along with her. "Lucky guy," he said seriously, but Catherine missed his tone and said; "No, Joe. Lucky me."

When she got home she made straight for the shower and washed her hair and body in the most expensive toiletries she owned. Patting her skin dry she went through her wardrobe for the most romantic dress she possessed, a pale blue lacy creation which Vincent loved for her to wear.

It was while she was putting the finishing touches to her makeup that she felt the lightning bolt of love crash through her body. Her hands shook and the lipstick dropped from her fingers to clatter on to the dressing table, but it hardly registered in her mind. She looked at her reflection in the mirror and her features softened with overwhelming love.

"I'm waiting, my love. Please hurry. I'm here."

Her heart pounded so hard she thought it would burst. Two years of waiting for this moment and there was not a single doubt that she would wait forever if she had to. She roused herself to turn out the lights and lit the candles all around the apartment, the flickering flames casting a fairy tale glow, which was echoed in her heart. She didn't know if tonight would be the culmination of their dreams, but she wanted everything to be perfect anyway.

The tapping at the window heralded his arrival and she flung them open and was in his arms all within the space of a heartbeat.

"Catherine. Vincent," they cried in unison.

All the love in the world was encompassed in those two words, and never again would one name be uttered without the other, by anyone who knew them and knew their story. They clung to each other for what seemed an eternity until finally Catherine pulled back to look into his dear face.

"I felt you earlier. In here," and she held his hand to her heart.

He smiled. "I could not wait to see you and tell you, so I used our bond." He looked the length of her and caught his breath, spellbound by her beauty. "You are so beautiful, Catherine, and that dress you wear is my favourite. Will you come Below with me? There is a place I want to share with you."

Catherine nodded. "Anywhere. I'll meet you in the basement in five minutes." She went to leave, but turned back and pulled his face down to hers. "I missed you so much and I love you and I want to kiss you hello."

Her mouth touched his and immediately, he responded to her touch. Tongues touched and entwined for breathless moments.

"Hello, Catherine," he whispered so seductively, she shivered. He gentled the kiss and gave her a slight push towards the door. "Five minutes," and he was gone.

He was waiting to help her down the iron ladder, the threshold to their two worlds. He lifted her down the last few rungs, her dress falling in graceful folds around his legs. "Five minutes was too long from you. Can we say hello again?"

She laughed, delighted in the ease in which they entered this new stage of awareness in each other.

Kissing him quickly she said. "Hello again, Vincent. You're right, five minutes was way too long."

Setting her on her feet, he took her hand and began to walk along the familiar paths of the tunnels.

"Father knows you are here, but I want to keep you to myself for a while longer. Do you mind?"

She shook her head. "I think Father can wait to see me. Show me this place of yours."

Vincent had always meant to show Catherine his special place one day, but the timing had to be right. He had arranged for William to provide a meal for them and Father had willingly donated a bottle of his '48 claret. "Special occasions call for the best the house has to offer," he'd said with a smile.

Travelling deeper than she had gone before, Catherine was sure she could hear a waterfall. "Are you tired, Catherine? Let me carry you the rest of the way," and before she could utter a protest, she was literally swept off her feet to be cradled high against his chest. Her arms crept around his neck and her head came to rest on his shoulder.

"I feel like I'm in a 1940's movie and I love it. Did you plan all this?"

He smiled a secret smile and winked at her. He actually winked at her, making her laugh, which was his intention, she realized.

"One step at a time. I remember, Vincent. How much further do we have to go?"

"We are here, Catherine," he said and, lifting her head from its resting place, she looked around and gasped out loud.

"Put me down! This is unbelievable. My God, this is....it's.... wonderful, magical. It's just too beautiful for words. Vincent, I will never cease to be surprised by your world."

The waterfall dominated the scene, tons of white, foaming water, originating from who knew where, crashing down to a gentle flowing river.

The cavern they were in was huge and stretched down river for as far as they could see. High above them, a rainbow was formed. *'How in the world could there be a rainbow down here? How could any of it be?'*

"I don't know, Catherine," he answered her unspoken question. "Maybe just one ray of sunlight finds its way here and the reflection from the spray forms a rainbow. No one will ever know how or why. It just is."

The mysteries of this underground world were too numerous to contemplate. "Have you ever followed the river downstream? Find out where it goes?" she asked quietly.

Vincent laughed then. "Yes. Once."

She waited for him to continue, but when he remained silent, she prodded him with her finger.

"Well, don't stop there. What happened?"

He smiled down at her and took the offending finger, brought it to his mouth and bit gently. "Come closer, Catherine, and I will tell you."

Snuggled in his arms, he began to tell her a story. "Years ago, when Devin and I were very young - about ten and twelve, I suppose - we were always getting into mischief and Father was always reading the riot act. More to Devin than me, but I was as much to blame. Anyway, after one particular severe dressing down, Father grounded us and said we were to sort out his books and put them in some kind of order. For Devin, that was a punishment to end all punishments, but for me it was like a holiday.

"So, there we were, day after day, sorting out book after book, until Devin had a fit of temper and threw one of the books across the room. I picked it up and saw that it was all about *'Tom Sawyer'* and *'Huckleberry Finn'*.

I started to read aloud and before long, Devin joined me and we became lost in *'Mark Twain'*. By the end of the story, we both looked at each other and grinned.

"We were young and game for anything and we just had to act out their adventures, so in secret, we made a raft, filled it with supplies and waited until our grounding had been lifted, all the while making plans.

"We dragged the raft down here and this river became the mighty Mississippi and we were intrepid explorers. We managed to go quite a long way before the raft came apart. Devin ended up on one side of the river and me on the other. It was lucky we could swim to safety. Our mistake was not telling anyone where we had gone. We could have been in real trouble. We reasoned that if we told Father he would not have let us go and we wanted to, really badly."

Vincent suddenly realized that he had never told anyone about that day. He and Devin had sworn

never to tell. Father would have skinned them alive. He still might! "Um, Catherine, what I've just told you....You won't mention it to Father, will you? Please."

Catherine solemnly shook her head, although her eyes sparkled with mischief.

"Catherine." He warned.

"All right, all right. I promise, I won't tell."

Mouse and Jamie had done as Vincent had instructed. A brightly coloured rug lay on the ground and several cushions were resting against the rough cavern wall. A picnic basket, covered in a tartan cloth sat to one side and Father's coveted '48 was chilling nicely in a makeshift cooler, which looked suspiciously like William's stone cookie barrel.

"Come and sit, Catherine, and let's see what William has for us." She was starting to feel extremely hungry and her stomach rumbled, making Vincent laugh.

"Methinks the way to your heart is through your stomach," he mis-quoted, tongue in cheek.

Inside the basket was a gourmet's delight. Vincent brought out several kinds of cheese and biscuits, a crusty loaf of bread, still warm, and Catherine's stomach rumbled again

"Oh, lovely. What else?" she asked. There were grapes, two big juicy peaches and two crunchy red apples.

"William has excelled himself, and look, Catherine, Father has put in two of his crystal wine goblets." They were well wrapped and Vincent only hoped Jamie had carried the basket and not Mouse.

They sat together in peaceful harmony, eating the food and sharing the wine, and for the moment the undercurrent of passion simmering between them was stilled. There was no rush, and besides, the anticipation of all that awaited them was something to savour.

"Ummmm! That was delicious. Pass me a peach, Vincent."

He reached across and picked up a plump peach and carried it to her mouth.

"Bite."

Closing her eyes, she opened her mouth and pearly white teeth bit into the ripe flesh, the abundant juice running down her chin. Vincent's body began to smoulder. He had never seen or done anything so erotic in his life and the juice dripping from her chin just begged to be lapped up. Not thinking what he was doing, for instinct took over, he leaned forward and Catherine opened her eyes to look directly into his; seeing his pupils dilate to nearly black and then feeling his tongue move along the line of her jaw, and further down to the throbbing pulse beating in her neck. She let her head fall back to allow him better access and the moan rose in her throat, escaping before she could hold it back.

"Oh, Vincent, what you do to me."

He came to his senses and raised his head and Catherine felt bereft without his touch. "Not here, not now, Catherine. I did not mean to start anything, but you looked so beautiful. I could not help

myself."

She took a deep, calming breath and smiled at him. "Don't ever apologize for wanting me, Vincent. One step at a time our dream unfolds to become reality. We have all the time in the world now, to savour each new discovery about each other."

They stayed in the cavern, enjoying their new closeness for a long time, until it became a little cool.

"It must be very late, Catherine. Come, we should go back."

Catherine was loathe to move, she was so comfortable in a dreamy state of drowsiness and she snuggled deeper into the warmth of his shoulder.

"Ummmm, must we?" she mumbled.

"Yes, my kitten, we must!" he laughed softly in her ear. "We could freeze down here."

She caught the reference to a kitten and purred as she stretched. "Okay, spoilsport, let's hit the road."

He cocked his head inquiringly. "Hit the road, Catherine? What with?"

Catherine grimaced. "Your head, if you are not careful. I'll crack the jokes, thank you."

In silent companionship they packed away the picnic basket, bring extra careful with Father's crystal goblets, and with their arms about each other, bade a soft farewell to the river and started home.

"It's been a wonderful evening, Vincent. Thank you for sharing your special place with me."

They were almost back in the heart of the community now, and she was doing her utmost to stretch out their time together, not wanting to leave his world and enter the loneliness of hers. Vincent pulled her closer to his side, his mind following her every thought. He too, dreaded the separation.

But wait. *'She could stay. Why not?'* It was what they both wanted and they were now at ease with the advancement of their relationship.

'Go for it, Vincent,' a tiny voice whispered. *'A faint heart never won a fair lady.'* Looking down into Catherine's love-softened features, he went for it boldly. "Sharing everything with you is all I have ever wanted in life, Catherine, so stay with me tonight."

She hugged him close, her first reaction being elation, but she had to be sure that it was what he really wanted and not something he felt he had to say because he could read her thoughts.

"Are you really certain, Vincent? I couldn't bear to begin and then find that you still have doubts. Be sure, Vincent, for both our sakes."

He smiled confidently and tapped her forehead with one clawed finger.

"One day, Catherine, your connection to me will be as strong as mine is to you and we will have no need for words, for you will know my every thought, and questions such as the one you just asked will be unnecessary. Do not worry, my love, I am sure. Come, let's go home to my chamber."

Father saw them coming and started towards them, his intention being to invite them both to supper, but as he came closer he saw that they only had eyes for each other.

"So, that's the way of it," he muttered. "Supper with me is the last thing they will be wanting. Ah

well, maybe Mary is free for the evening." And with a last fond look at the soon-to-be lovers, he retreated into the shadows and hurried to find Mary.

Catherine had been in Vincent's chamber countless times, but tonight, all she could see was his bed, dominating the room, beckoning to her, waiting to welcome them. Vincent had thought that once the time came he would be overcome with shyness, having to leave all the initiative to Catherine, but he found it was not so. He felt invincible, confident he could please his Catherine and in doing so, find his own satisfaction. His hands came to rest on her shoulders and gently but firmly, he turned her towards him.

Without giving her time to think, he lowered his head and kissed her with a passion he was not afraid to unleash. His tongue boldly pushed its way past her lips and he felt her groan in response.

"Oh Vincent, yes," she moaned, and her hands finally came to life, pulling at his clothes frantically.

The first touch of her fingers on his chest caused a shudder to ripple through him and feeling it, Catherine became more adventurous, rolling his nipples between finger and thumb, encouraged by the fact that he really was ready. His hands found their way to the back of her dress, and he discovered another reason why this dress was his favourite. There were no fiddly little buttons to hamper his progress. In his impatience he might well have torn it off her back and ruined it beyond repair. He mentally thanked whoever had invented the zipper. He hooked a finger in the zipper and pulled it slowly and sensuously down the length of her back, coming to a stop at the base of her spine.

Catherine stood still, letting him take the lead, but it was difficult for her to remain passive now, her legs were rapidly turning to jelly, but the feelings he evoked in her were so delicious.

The position they were in afforded Vincent the tantalizing view of the bare expanse of her back in the full size mirror, standing in the corner of the chamber, and he watched his clawed hands, hands in which could lay open a man's throat, skim gently over her velvet smooth skin. Only with her could he be so. It was another gift from her, the knowledge that even in the throes of such blinding passion, he could never harm her. He would cut off his hands first.

"Catherine, your skin is the softest velvet."

She dropped her hands from his chest and the dress fell off her shoulders and slithered down her body, halted only by Vincent's arm curved around his waist. Taking a step back from him, he was forced to release his hold and the lacy confection continued its downward journey, to land in a frothy pool at her feet, leaving her clad only in the skimpiest of blue silken panties.

Lifting her arms to him in unconscious appeal and keeping her eyes locked on his, she whispered, "Take me, Vincent. Take what's been yours since the moment we met."

Vincent could not tear his eyes from the beauty filling his vision, the proud thrust of her breasts, begging for his touch, the trembling of her limbs, not in fear, but tremendous arousal, and all for him. She offered him everything she was, without fear or doubt and he could do no less for her.

Without hesitation, he removed the rest of his clothes, knowing she would find him as beautiful as he found her. Naked and vulnerable he stood in front of her, completely aroused. Catherine's eyes feasted on her man, seeing him as any woman who loved her man would. Beautiful.

"Vincent. Love me, please," she breathed.

Lifting her in his arms, they both felt the shock of skin on skin, hard and soft, smooth and rugged and it took their breath away. Lying side by side, their hands explored, seeking out every throbbing pulse from neck to ankle. No words were spoken between them because none were needed. Every sigh, every touch, conveyed their wants and needs.

There was no time for preliminaries now, urgency overtook them and only physical union could assuage the spiralling passion within them.

Vincent cupped her face in his hands. "Catherine, now." He gritted, desperately trying to hold on to a vestige of control.

"Yes, Vincent. Let it happen. I want to feel you so deep inside me. Yes, my love, now!"

He was not foolproof against such erotic images and he finally let go of his iron control. His hands slipped down and removed her sodden panties as Catherine's legs fell apart in mute invitation, and Vincent, with one sure thrust, entered her body and knew in his soul that he had come home. Her legs automatically came up and clamped on his back, forcing him still further within her.

For an infinitesimal moment, neither moved. They lay, joined as one, praising the miracle of their joining, the culmination of two years of trials and tribulations, now overcome and part of the past. Catherine was the first to move, raising her hips and then lowering them, until Vincent caught her rhythm and began to thrust and withdraw, each stroke taking them higher and proving to her that this was truly the first time for them both. No previous encounter could have prepared her for what was happening now. Love was the difference.

Those other men faded from her memory as though they had never been. His love had banished them forever.

"Yes, yes," she panted.

He was very near to release and he felt the tiny ripples inside her body which signalled her own climax.

Pushing further into her body, and moving faster with every thrust, Catherine's release exploded in and around them, like nothing she had ever experienced. It went on and on and on, her nails scoring his back and buttocks and he did not feel any pain; all his emotions were centered on giving her everything he had.

"Harder....deeper. Oh! God, Vincent!" Her voice almost became a scream and he clamped his mouth on hers, swallowing her words. He did not want this ecstasy to end, but even in his inexperience, he knew that it must. One could die of such passion. Catherine writhed beneath him.

"I love you. God, how I love you."

Those last words took Vincent over the edge of conscious thought and pure sensation was all he knew, as with one final thrust, he spent his life force into her womb, a roar of exultation echoing throughout the world Below. They had broken down the final barriers and now there was nothing they could not do or be together. Limbs entwined, still joined, they slept. Two worlds, two souls, united in love.

Vincent woke some time later, thinking it had all been a wonderful dream, but turning his head he saw Catherine, the other half of himself, still asleep beside him. Not a dream then, but a waking truth, which was better a hundredfold than any dream. He needed to tell her what she had given

him, and he leaned across and gently kissed her awake.

Catherine opened her eyes and stretched. Smiling into his dear face she said, "Hello you. How long did we sleep?"

"Not too long, about an hour. Can we talk, Catherine? I have so much to tell you."

She snuggled closer, one hand resting on his chest and one leg thrown across his thighs.

"Mmmmm! Go ahead, I'm listening. Talk all you want."

Vincent's hand stroked her shoulder caressingly.

"Whenever Father expressed his concerns about our relationship - and he did, often - I always insisted that you opened up a world of possibilities for me. And you did, Catherine. You brightened every corner of my existence, brought sunshine into the darkness of my world. I really believed I should be content with that. I thought I was, until you showed me paradise."

He tightened his hold on her, his voice breaking. "I did not know, Catherine. How could I possibly have known what awaited me in your arms. There are no words to tell you what you have given me. I am only sorry for the time I've wasted."

Catherine shook her head. "No, Vincent. Don't ever be sorry. Our time is never wasted. Each moment we spend together is precious and a victory. Now, I am going to tell you something."

Turning his face towards her and planting a kiss on his mouth she said, "I want you to believe that I came to you as new as you came to me. I mean, that never in my life have I made love. I realize that now. Before, it was only sex and it was as nothing, compared to what you have given me. Sex is a physical gratification of the body, clinical, and lasts but a moment and is forgotten. Making love is spiritual as well as physical, Vincent. It involved the heart and soul and is always remembered. We gave each other everything. The French call it *'the little death,'* that moment when time stops and everything is pure feeling. Even now, I can feel little aftershocks and it's a new experience for me. That's what you have given me, my love."

Vincent was humbled by her words and also a mite proud that only he could make her feel so, and thinking about all that had happened made him want her all over again, a fact which did not escape Catherine. Her hand strayed lower until her fingers encompassed the swollen length of him.

Vincent thought she might be offended by his haste. "I'm sorry, Catherine, but I...."

"Shush, Vincent, it's all right. We couldn't wait before and we missed out on the looking and touching, but now we can take our time, make love slowly and tenderly. We have all night. Besides, you are not alone in your desires. We have a lot of time to catch up on."

It was almost dark in the chamber, the candles just about extinguished. "More light, Vincent, I want to see you."

He threw back the covers and rose from the bed, his nakedness no longer any concern to him. In fact, he could not remember a time, at least not since he was eight-years-old, that he had gone without wearing something to cover him from prying eyes, and he felt a freedom of movement he had forgotten. Another gift from Catherine.

In the dimness she could follow his progress as he walked around the chamber, lighting new candles, and with each one lit, the room got brighter, enabling her to study him more closely. Any

way you looked at it, he was a magnificent animal. The first thing she noticed was how tall he was, his back ramrod straight. If she were honest with herself, she expected to find his whole body covered in a fine layer of fur, but it was not so. Not that she would have cared. She'd take him any way she could get him. Methodically, she began at his feet, nothing unusual there, ordinary feet, if a little large. His calves were muscular and his thighs were strong and powerful. A silken dusting of golden hair covered his legs and upper torso and it was barely visible really. Elliot had been much darker and hairier, so nothing unusual there either. He was all male.

Catherine smiled suddenly, for there on his buttocks, were two of the cutest dimples she had ever seen. "I'd love to bite your buns, Vincent."

He whirled around so fast he almost lost his balance, positive he must have misheard her. Blushing profusely, he stammered, "Wha....what did you say?" The look on his face cracked her up and she fell back on the bed laughing, fit to bust.

"God, Vincent, you're priceless. You heard me well enough. I *'said'* I'd like to bite your buns. Those dimples are adorable."

Now that he was facing her, the laughter faded and she just stared at him, swallowing convulsively. He stood there, hands on hips, proud and gloriously aroused. He advanced purposely towards her. "You were saying, Catherine?"

It seemed the tables had turned as he took his time, devouring every inch of her body with eyes that burned, and for the life of her she couldn't move, trapped there by the intensity of his gaze.

"Lord, I swear you are the most manly of men. When we are old and grey, I will look at you, just as I'm doing now, and will want you just as fiercely. I love you so."

Vincent smiled gently at her words. "Looking through the eyes of love is what you are doing, Catherine, although I have to agree with you. You will always be beautiful in my eyes."

She wrinkled her brow in concentration at his first words. "What is it, Catherine?"

She looked up. "It's on the tip of my tongue. Those words you just said. Ha! Got it! Gene Pitney song. Looking through the eyes of love." She tried remembering the lyrics but they eluded her. It was a very old song. "I'll get a copy of it. In the meantime, come here, I've looked long enough and now I want to touch."

He took the hand she held out and allowed her to tug him down beside her. She hardly remembered how he had felt under her hands earlier, their union had been so urgent and desperate, and now she took her time, letting her fingertips learn every contour of his gorgeous body. His face and hands she already knew intimately, so she let her palms caress his broad shoulders and upper arms, feeling the gentle strength in his muscles. A rough outside with a gentle heart. She'd read that somewhere and how apt a description for her man. Sweeping her hands across her chest, her fingers tangled in the hair hiding his nipples from her view, and lowering her head she captured first one, then the other between her lips. The musky scent of him intoxicated her and she filled her lungs with his essence.

Travelling lower she finally reached the shaft of his desire and her fingers curled around him, holding and stroking the velvety skin. Vincent let himself be carried away by the loving touch of her hands, his eyes closing, too heavy to keep open any longer.

"Oh! Catherine," he growled deep in his throat. "Don't stop."

She had no intention of stopping and gave in to the impulsive action of bestowing on him the ultimate kiss. Lowering her head, her lips fleetingly grazed the sensitive tip of his engorged flesh and his eyes flew open. He wasn't shocked by her actions, but any more of it and he would explode.

"Catherine, I know I said don't stop, but I'm afraid I can't take any more of that. I'm new at this, give me a fighting chance."

God, he was so adorable, she could eat him up. "Sorry, I got carried away. Turnabout is fair play, I'm all yours."

Laying back against the pillows, she waited to see what he would do. She soon discovered that he needed no help, instinctively knowing how and where to touch. There wasn't a single part of her that remained a secret from him, and when he repeated her actions earlier, suckling her nipples, her stomach contracted and she was putty in his hands. Vincent could have stayed exactly where he was, head pillowed on one breast as his mouth suckled the other, but there were still other discoveries to make. Lifting his mouth, he deposited a quick kiss on her parted lips. "I love you," he said, and continued his leisurely explorations.

He was careful to keep from scratching her with his claws, but once, when he accidentally caught her skin and she moaned and writhed, he could see that she liked the pleasure-pain and every now and then, his claws would gently scrape a sensitive spot, especially her inner thighs. Vincent looked down and his hand was inches away from the core of her, the fair shadowy triangle at the junction of her thighs, hiding her from his gaze. As soon as he touched the nub of her femininity, she began to tremble and he realized he'd gone too far; he was pushing her over the edge.

He quickly covered her body with his, nudging her legs apart. "Now without me, Catherine," he whispered seductively. "Open your eyes, let me see your feelings."

Her eyes opened at the exact moment he entered her body and she felt the tears welling up at the exquisiteness of this joining. Vincent kissed away the salty tears, his voice turning her blood to liquid fire.

"I'm drowning in you, my Catherine. Feel what you do to me and know that this is where I belong; where I need to be. Feel it, my precious love."

She was crying now, his words washing over her and her release came softly like the ripples on a pond spreading outward, making her whimper helplessly. Vincent watched every expression in her eyes, knowing beyond a doubt that this was a voyage she had not travelled before. Never in his life had he treated another human being with such gentleness; he hadn't known he could be so tender.

"Catherine, take all that I am. I give it to you with heartfelt love." And with one last movement of his hips, he gave her his very essence, letting her see the endless joy he received in return.

Catherine held on to him, afraid to let go. "Vincent, don't ever stop loving me."

He buried his face in her neck, holding her equally as hard. "Never, never. You hold my heart and I don't ever want it back."

She pulled his head up to look at him. "Vincent. Have you any idea of the tremendous power you have over me? Do you know how scary that is for me, knowing how lost I would be if I didn't have

you?"

The smile he gave her was all knowing. "How could I not know, Catherine, but never forget you hold that same power over me. When I am with you like this, I am a man and nothing more. Not different. No one but you could ever make me feel so total a human being and I don't ever want to lose that feeling."

Once upon a time, Vincent and Catherine were something which had never been, but could be. Now they were something that should be, and were. No more barriers, no more obstacles to test them. The future opened up before them, stretching away into eternity, offering limitless possibilities.