

MORE THAN RAGING WATERS

by Jackie Kapke

Catherine and Vincent were walking slowly, hand-in-hand Below. They had been arguing earlier in his chamber. Emotions had run high, though briefly, and they needed this walk to get close again, to forgive, make up and try to ease the pain each felt.

Again, as so often lately, she had asked why their relationship couldn't move forward beyond mere hugs and embraces. Couldn't that kiss he gave her palm, the top of her hair or her forehead, be on his lips instead? Couldn't they even discuss the possibility of intimacy without his getting so upset, without that frustrated pacing?

She instantly knew, when he did indeed start that tormented, restless pacing again, that she had pushed him too hard, pressed him too far.

But today she couldn't stop herself as she asked, almost pleading with him. "Would a kiss be so terrible?"

She desired him so, desired more, and she knew that he did, too. Her dreams were all of him, and she was certain his was filled with her as well.

When he finally answered her, she saw the tears filling his eyes as he whispered, tightly gripping the back of his chair.

"Catherine, you once told me that you accepted your fate gratefully, but... now... you must regret those words. I am sorry...." His head drooped to his chest.

"No, Vincent, I'm sorry." She crossed the room to him, feeling his great pain, and embraced his tense shoulders, leaning her head into his breast. "I'm sorry. I do accept this. It's just that I know in time, the rest will come. I'm so certain of it in my heart. I'm just so... impatient."

She hugged him tightly, feeling him relax a little in her arms.

He sighed, rubbing his cheek on the top of her head. "I pray, Catherine, with all my hart that you are right."

She spoke, pressing her face deep into his chest. "I am, Vincent! I am!" She looked up into his beautiful face. "Hold me?"

How could he refuse her? His arms enveloped her snugly.

"I'm sorry, Catherine. I want desperately to be more for you, to give you more. It is just so difficult to relinquish these fears and doubts I have...."

"I know, I know," she said, squeezing his arms tightly. Kissing his cheek, she took his hand. "Come, let's take that walk you mentioned earlier."

He nodded, sighing. God, how he loved her! Why did she put up with him?

The going was slow, for his left leg was still sore from the injury he'd received two days ago. He had rescued four of the tunnel children from certain death. Had he not come to their aid, they would have perished in the raging flood waters that had broken loose.

It was easy now for Catherine to keep up with him. His usually long strides were now shortened, due to the lingering stiffness and pain. But he felt that exercise would ease the tenderness and strengthen the torn ligaments and muscles.

The rains had been heavy and relentless this spring, causing major flooding Above and Below. The couple's journey took them to *'the pit,'* as the children like to call it, for lack of a better word. It was strictly forbidden to them and roped off. Vincent, ever vigilant for danger, had wanted to check the place before he turned in for the night. If the waters were rising as quickly as he suspected, they might have to close off several adjoining tunnels whose routes intertwined with this one.

With great caution he inched towards the edge, the thundering rush of the water deafening to his sensitive ears. About twenty feet below, the muddy churning water raged ominously, swirling and pulling at the sides of the ledge, only to be savagely torn then yanked into a whirlpool at the far side of the pit. There an intermittent sucking sound was the only evidence that the whirlpool dove beneath the surface to become a steep underground waterfall.

The waters swirling madly before him, Vincent's thoughts reflected back to the terror he had experienced only days earlier.

He had come running, chest heaving with his need for oxygen, as he surveyed the scene before him. He had heard their small high-pitched screams. Samantha and Geoffrey and little Molly and Andrew, both only four-years-old, were on the far side of the cavern, separated from him by a raging torrent, a torrent that only moments before had been non-existent. He could sense their terror and see it clearly on their pale faces.

One of the cavern walls had collapsed, sending an underground lake rushing into this adjoining chamber. The children were soaking wet, the water icy cold. They now stood on a small island that was rapidly becoming smaller, disappearing as the waters rose.

Vincent tried to calm his breathing and still his racing heart, to devise a solution. There were no poles or ropes; he must cross the river himself. For a second he thought of hurrying back for help or tapping out a message, but it would take too much time. The children would be washed away before he could return. The water was rushing in faster than the small outlet could empty.

He hurriedly stripped off his cloak and boots, not wanting more weight than necessary to carry through the relentless waters. He looked down at his heavy shirt and sweater and stripped them off as well. They would certainly not keep him any warmer in the frigid water.

He knew that Geoffrey and Samantha were good swimmers, he had taught them himself, but they could not hope to fight this torrent. He had grave doubts about his own ability, as he cinched the shirt around his waist, tying the sleeves together.

Swallowing, he took several deep breaths, forcing back his fears. No one but Devin knew how terrified of rapid water he was. He had nearly drowned as a toddler. His big brother had rescued him, almost drowning himself. It had been their secret, and they had never revealed it to Father or anyone else.

Vincent was an excellent swimmer. He did not mind deep water, dark water or still water, but there was something that seemed alive in these wild, churning waters. He and Devin had cheated them once of their victim, and it was almost as if they waited now to reclaim their lost prize.

With grim determination, he dove in and swam at an angle, letting some of the cross-currents carry him to the children. He reached the island panting. The effort had drained him, difficult even with the aid of the current, but he knew that going back would be worse, for it would be against the water's

flow most of the way.

The little ones rushed to him, clinging to his legs as they sobbed and cried with fear and relief. He knelt down facing each one, having to shout hoarsely above the pounding noise as he hugged them.

"You will all be fine. I'm here, but I can only take two across at a time. Molly and Andrew, you will go first."

He saw the quiet fear creep across Geoffrey and Samantha's faces. He spoke directly to them now, maintaining steady eye contact, keeping his voice calm. "You two are better swimmers. Once I am across with the others, I will return for you." They nodded, having complete trust and faith in their large friend. He closed his eyes, saying a silent prayer that their trust in him was justified.

He quickly untied the shirt around his waist. "Molly and Andrew, wrap your arms around my neck. Hold on tight." Then he proceeded to tie them onto his back, fastening his shirt across his chest. "Do not let go, no matter what happens." Silently, they nodded.

Vincent then eased into the water and began to swim to the other side. At one point a wave struck him with such force that he went under. The children tightened their grip, almost choking him, but he was eventually able to calm them. At last, out of breath, he reached the far shore and dropped to his knees on the sand, releasing the children.

Panting, he willed the strength to return to his arms and legs. Then he told the children to wait, and began to run upstream again; he would use the current in the same way, to take him back to the island.

Once more, he plunged into the water. As he drew closer to the children, his thoughts returned to the time Father had alluded to his own trepidation in watching Vincent make his way in the world, as though he were watching him swim across a raging river, just as he was doing now. Perhaps it was a coincidence, perhaps the older man had known all along of his unique son's fear. A small smile crossed his lips, as he now knew that what he was doing was more love than courage. Just as Catherine had told him once, when he and Father had nearly died in the Maze. Love could make a person brave; it was worth the risks.

The children were struggling to remain upright in the rising water, now up to their waists. "Hurry, children," he said urgently. They repeated the positions of the two younger ones, as Vincent again wrapped his shirt around them. He silently cursed his weakness, as his numb fingers found tying the sleeves difficult. He gasped as he eased once more into the frigid torrent. It took all his strength to keep his head and theirs above the water.

They were almost halfway across when Samantha lost her grip and the shirt came loose, allowing the current to sweep her away. Quickly, Vincent shifted into the current enough to permit her to grab him. She got a handhold on his mane, tearing his scalp, but he set his jaw, stifling the growl of pain, for he felt only relief that she was once more back with him and Geoffrey.

Their struggling had taken them further downstream from the flat sandy beach where he had deposited Molly and Andrew. It was more a bluff of rough stone that Vincent finally reached, his limbs screaming for rest, out of breath, and stiff from the cold.

The children climbed to safety on the ledge as Vincent scrambled behind them, when suddenly the ledge gave way under his additional weight. A large boulder that had broken loose from the side caught Vincent in the belly, forcing him backwards onto a shallow embankment, settling on his thigh. Vincent tried to shift his weight from under the stone, but his effort only served to cause it to sink deeper into the loose sand, pinning his leg. He tried several more times to push it aside, then lift it, but it was no use; he had no more strength.

The smaller children had reached them by this time. The water was up to Vincent's shoulders and still rapidly rising, as he shouted for them to run for help. "Geoffrey, Samantha, hurry - there is not much time. I cannot free myself. Have the men bring levers and rope. Hurry, now!"

They did not want to leave their friend, but he had yelled at them in a tone that demanded compliance. With one last terrified look at Vincent, the children raced off to get help.

He groaned in pain as the rock shifted once again, forcing his body further beneath it and the water. He didn't think the bone was broken, but he could tell that his muscles had been torn as they spasmed again, screaming in silent pain. He cursed his weakness and the cruel twist of fate, as the waters lapped around his chin. He knew he would not be able to keep his head above water long. The children would never reach help in time.

Panic began to fill his mind and heart. It was one of his worst nightmares, to die like this, all alone; and it was coming true. A wave suddenly washed over him, choking him, and he sputtered and snorted as he gasped for air, his nose and lungs burning.

He tried to calm himself, but the waves of fear inside him were just as strong as the cold waters slapping against his helpless body. He was more afraid of dying than he'd realized. Though his life was limited, it had been warm and loving. There were so many things he had yet to experience, to do. He wanted dearly to see Father once more, to tell him how grateful he was to the man for raising him as his own son, for bestowing such love on him. And he wished, with all his heart, that he could see Catherine one last time. Tears began to stream down his cold, wet cheeks. She would never know how very much he loved her, how she was truly everything to him, how he wished he had told her.... shown her.

He shuddered, feeling his body grow numb from cold and exhaustion. He no longer noticed the pain in his hip and thigh. He strained for a last breath as the water rushed into his nostrils. There was no more air. It hurt for only a few moments, as he struggled, fought to live, then the struggle was over and it was as if he were falling into a trance. So this was what Catherine had felt when she had nearly drowned! He no longer heard the waters or felt their icy chill. He whispered her name, and Catherine held him.... warmed him.... loved him....

The children had not had to go far before they came around a turn and ran smack into Cullen and William. Cullen had to quiet them down as they all frantically tried to talk at once. Finally, Geoffrey managed to get the story out coherently. Cullen and William had a large wooden beam with them that was intended to serve as a brace for a nearby food storage chamber, close to collapsing from the rains. It could certainly serve as a lever to help free Vincent.

The older children led the way, running full tilt, ignoring their burning lungs and the damp chill of their clothing, as William scooped up the little ones and raced behind Cullen.

Geoffrey and Samantha both screamed when they returned to the spot where they had left Vincent. He was gone! There were only the choppy waters.

"Wait, what's that?" cried William, pointing at something in the water as he set the children down.

There were strands of what appeared to be red seaweed floating by the ledge on the water's surface.

"It's Vincent!" yelled Samantha. "That's his hair!"

"My God!" cried Cullen. Without hesitation, he leapt into the water, carrying the beam. "William, come on!"

Cullen dove below the dark waters, *'seeing'* the scene beneath the surface with his hands. Terror filled him that they were already too late, as he encountered Vincent's lifeless body and the huge stone that had pinned him to the floor of the pool.

Barely taking time for a breath, he cried, "Hurry!" as he positioned the beam to move the stone. He and William were up to their necks in the water as they groaned with the effort it took. Finally the stone shifted and rolled to the side, and Cullen dove and pulled Vincent from the bottom. William climbed out of the water and took Vincent from Cullen's arms, then carefully laid him on the ground. Quickly, he checked for Vincent's pulse.

The children had all moved forward, huddling, the little ones whimpering and crying as they stared at their friend's wet, limp form.

"He's got a pulse, faint, but he's not breathing, Cullen!"

Cullen had climbed out of the water, and he quickly tilted Vincent's head backward, pulling the lower jaw slightly forward. Then he placed his mouth over the half-feline one. It took several attempts before he was able to get a good seal. Vincent's mouth was larger, and the shape of his teeth and upper lip made things a little more difficult. Soon, though, the great chest rose and fell rhythmically with Cullen's breaths.

Intermittently, Cullen stopped and checked to see if Vincent had begun to breathe on his own, and William rechecked their friend's pulse which continued to beat, eventually slowing and strengthening.

Cullen was becoming worried and frustrated that Vincent did not take over breathing on his own. "Come in, Vincent. Come on!" he cried hoarsely. Without thought, he began to shake the large shoulders and then pounded his fist into Vincent's chest.

There was a sudden gagging, then a choking sound as Vincent drew in air, rolled to his side and vomited. Panting, he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, the fire and knives in his chest bringing tears to his eyes. Gradually, the distress faded as Cullen supported Vincent's head and wiped the leonine face with his handkerchief.

"Cullen!" Vincent exclaimed weakly, shaking his head and blinking as he became more aware of his surroundings. He put his trembling hand to his forehead, pushing back his thick wet strands of hair. Suddenly, he lurched forward, exclaiming, "The children?!"

In a moment they were all in his lap, sobbing, "We're okay, Vincent." They squeezed and hugged him until he was almost unable to breathe again. "You saved us! We were so worried that you were going to die!"

Gently, William coaxed the children off their tired friend, as Vincent shuddered and began to shiver, hypothermia and shock beginning to grip him.

Cullen gently stroked back the long mane. "I hope you don't plan on making a habit of this, Vincent. I'm not kissing you again, even if it is the kiss of life." Everyone laughed, even Vincent managed a small chuckle. "I'm glad I could pay back at least in part for the debt I owe you, Vincent. I still don't know why you risked your life to save my miserable hide, but I thank the Lord that you did." He took a firm hold on Vincent's arm, and Vincent held tightly to his in return. The sincere look of appreciation in Vincent's eyes dispelled all of Cullen's thoughts that Vincent had ever thought him unworthy of rescue. The love of this extraordinary man truly warmed Cullen.

Vincent began to shiver more noticeably as William stooped down to wrap Vincent in his coat, and Geoffrey repeated the action as he fitted Vincent's cloak snugly around him as well.

Cullen helped Vincent to recline further, supporting the great head on his thigh. "Rest now, my friend, then William and I will see you back home."

He dismissed the children and told them to let Father and Mary know, and to have warm clothes and hot tea and soup ready for their cold, tired friend.

Within the hour Vincent was ushered into his crowded chamber. It appeared that half the tunnel residents were there to see for themselves that he was all right. Once again a throng of children nearly bowled him over. A cheer went up, and he was proclaimed a hero. All of this he accepted in his quiet, gracious way, too tired and relieved to protest. But of all things, at the moment, his bed on the far side of the room was the most inviting. The pain of his throbbing thigh and his weariness began to take precedence over all else.

Then, suddenly, he felt her nearness, her relief, sadness and joy----and out of the crowd stepped Catherine, wiping away her tears. She had known! The crowd abruptly thinned, and the feel of her arms about him was all there was in the world.

No words were needed as their love flowed freely through the bond. She immediately sensed his weariness and helped, as he limped over to his bed, sitting heavily, slumped forward in exhaustion. Father quickly ushered everyone else from the room and then with the utmost discretion and consideration for his modesty, he and Catherine assisted Vincent into a thick warmed nightshirt and tucked him into bed. Vincent was so tired, he had no strength to complain, resist or even be embarrassed. After a quick examination, Father was satisfied that his son was indeed out of danger; he kissed Vincent's brow and departed. He knew the couple would enjoy some time alone and that Catherine was the best *'medicine'* for his son now.

Catherine lay beside Vincent on top of the covers, after wrapping his still-soaking hair in a thick towel. "I was so frightened, Vincent. I felt your fear, then even worse, I felt you leaving me. I felt you ebbing

away. I knew you were.... dying."

He took her in his tired arms and pressed his nose into the hollow of her neck. "I'm sorry, Catherine, to have caused you such pain. I...."

"Oh, Vincent, don't be sorry. Today was the first time I felt what you must feel in me. I want my side of the bond to strengthen; I want to know more about you. I hope I can always be there to save you from danger, as you have saved me so many times."

She held his face in her hands. "I love you, my love."

He nestled closer against her, sighing, almost imperceptibly whispering, "And I love you."

She had heard him, though, and a smile crossed her lips as she cradled his head in her arms, and kissed the top of his head. Soon he was asleep, warm and safe in her love....

The sound of crashing water brought Vincent's mind back to the present. With great care, he backed away from the edge, Catherine's small hand on his arm drawing him back to safety.

"This is worse than I thought, Catherine. We'll have to block off these adjoining tunnels until the waters recede."

They had rounded the ledge, on what appeared to be solid ground, when suddenly Catherine lost her footing, going over the edge before he could lunge forward quickly enough to catch her. A strangled cry escaped his lips.

"Catherine!" and the end of his claws cut her wrist as he tried to grab her hand to stop her fall. The horror on her face was forever etched in his mind, and he heard her scream his name as she disappeared into the water below.

There was not even time for Vincent to toss off his cape, as the entire ledge crumbled beneath his own feet.

Catherine had cleanly hit the icy water, but Vincent was less fortunate in his fall. His face, neck and shoulder were torn by the ragged rocks, and he cried out in pain and rage as, with a final bounce off the side, his injured thigh struck an outcropping. His breath was knocked out of him long before he ever hit the freezing waters.

Sputtering, he broke the surface, drawing in precious air. He felt the warm blood trickling down his face, tasted it, and then grimaced with the renewed pain in his leg. He shook his head, momentarily stunned and disoriented from the fall and the shock of the frigid water.

Hoarsely, he called for Catherine, frantically searching the dark, churning waters. The roaring of the flood hurt his sensitive ears; his head throbbed as he shook it once more, trying to gain control of his thoughts and senses.

Catherine had been terrified. Panic had overwhelmed her as she hit the icy water, hearing Vincent bellow her name. She had feared for his life as well, knowing he would come for her, then heard him hit the water beside her and swam toward him.

Suddenly, in the near darkness, she was in his arms.

"Catherine! Are you all right?" The relief that she was in his arms washed over Catherine as well.

"Yes." She shivered, touching his face. She regretted that she was barely able to make out his beloved features, then gasped as she felt the sticky warmth on his temple.

"Vincent, you're hurt!"

"It's just a scratch," he sighed. "I'll be fine."

"Oh, it's so cold," she said through chattering teeth, and she began to shiver uncontrollably.

He took her hands, so small in his; they were as cold as ice and her entire body was trembling. He knew she could not maintain her body temperature in the water as long as he. They must find a way out quickly.

"Catherine, hurry, take off your jacket." She did as he asked and stopped treading water, resting her hand on his shoulder as he kept them both above the surface with powerful kicks. She shrugged out of her heavy garment, and with only slight regret watched it float away in the choppy waters. He did the same with his cloak. It could weigh as much as fifty pounds when saturated, and he sighed in relief as he came free from the burden of its weight. He felt more confident now that he was able to kick his legs without entangling them in the garment's folds.

"Now," he said determinedly, "We must find a way out." He turned his back to her, offering his shoulders. "Catherine, put your arms around my neck."

He knew that she didn't want to burden him with her weight, but he could sense that her legs were tired, and that she was nearly beyond her limit. He also sensed her fear for him and for herself, and he was determined to quell his own fear to be strong for her; their very lives depended on it.

She knew it was useless to argue and quietly wrapped her slender arms about his massive body, clasping her hands together and pressing her cheek against his broad back. Her fingers and toes were already numb with cold, no longer stinging, and her legs heavy and all but useless in their effort to reach safety. She knew that Vincent felt all this through their bond, but she did not have the strength to shield him from her discomfort.

Urgently he swam, searching for a handhold, a way up. There was none. With each kick, as he tread water, the knife of pain cut deeper into his thigh. The relentless, muddy current tugged on him, toyed with him, as if he were a small cork, and panic filled his heart. It was the same nightmare, returned. Fear pressed in on his very soul, as he fought the smothering sensation.

All the sides were crumbly and loose. He would manage a handhold, only to have it break away between his fingers. Again and again he forced his claws into the loose gravelly side, only to lose his grip, his fingers becoming raw and bloody with the effort.

He swam as close as he dared to the whirlpool, so desperate was he to find freedom from the hellish place. He could make out solid rock fifteen or twenty feet above them, but there was no way to reach it.

Catherine was sobbing, whimpering, and it tore his heart. He could sense her desperate fear, and how much more chilled she had become, but there was nothing he could do to ease her suffering. There was no way out. What else could he do, but try to stay afloat? Crying out for help would be useless above the din of the rushing water; no one would hear him, and it would only drain his taxed strength more.

Time had no meaning here, only fear and cold; he knew that they could not have been in the water for long, but it felt like it had been hours. Little strength was left in his arms and legs and he felt almost no strength left in Catherine's body, but the courage and determination he felt in her were undiminished.

"Vincent, I'm frightened," she whispered behind his ear. "I'm so cold. I don't know if - if I can hold on much longer. My arms are going numb!"

He sighed, tears of regret filling his eyes with her words. He continued to tread water, but his

movements were weak and slow, as the water lapped hungrily at their chins and shoulders. The muscles in his arms and legs burned and ached from the last of his efforts. He knew they would not respond to his will much longer.

His voice, hoarse and trembling, he whispered, "Catherine, I can't find a way out."

He felt her tremble and tense against his back, then her arms momentarily squeezed him tighter. "I love you," she whispered and kissed the back of his neck, beneath his mane, with frigid lips. Then he felt her go limp, as her arms slipped from his neck. He turned, grabbing her before she slipped below the water.

He held her desperately in his frozen hands. "Catherine! Catherine!"

She opened her eyes a last time. "I'm so cold, Vincent...."

He shook her. "Catherine, you must try to stay awake. Catherine?"

"I can't," she sobbed weakly. "I can't...."

"Catherine!" He pulled her stiff body close, kissing her cheek, sobbing, "I love you, Catherine. I love you... always." A smile crossed her blue lips as her eyes closed, and she slipped into unconsciousness.

Though he knew she still clung to life, the sensation was like a candle being blown out in the wind, and a part of him died. He threw his head back, roaring as the pain squeezed his heart.

Panicking now, he dug his fingers into the wall's sides only to have his hand break loose each time. His fingers were bleeding and raw, but they were beyond pain, they were so numb from the cold. He frequently switched arms, trying to keep Catherine's head above water. He knew he could not last much longer; his legs were so heavy, his entire body felt like lead. He looked to the whirlpool, knowing it would soon claim them both.

He could sense that she was not far from death. Unfastening his belt, he then looped it under Catherine's arm, around and over his opposite shoulder, strapping her across his chest. If they were to perish, they would do so together. He would never again be parted from her. If they must, they would enter the vortex of hell - together.

With wretched sighs, he prayed, "Please, God, not this way. Please have mercy." Twice he sank below the surface, then struggled to return above, gasping for air.

Weakness and the cold were paralyzing his limbs and his mind, his thoughts becoming confused and cloudy. One last time, his hand felt the loose gravel, hope nearly dead in him as he probed for a handhold, but he touched a small crevice of smooth rock. It hardly meant salvation, but it restored Vincent's courage. He felt a fierce burst of determination.

Kissing the top of Catherine's head he vowed, just under his breath. "We will not die here. You will not claim us." Gathering the last of his strength, he rammed his fist into the crevice as his shout of rage and pain echoed throughout the chamber. The sound of his own voice haunted him, and then... there was nothing....

When he awoke again she was there, sitting next to him on the bed. She was running her fingers down through his tangled mane and stroking his cheek, gingerly fingering the stitches closing the gash in his temple.

"Catherine," he sighed, looking up at her. He had never seen a more beautiful sight.

"How are you feeling?" she asked softly, her eyes melting into his.

"Sore," he admitted, laughing. "But very, very thankful... and you?"

She pulled the quilt tighter around her shoulders. "I'll be fine, but I'm still so cold; I don't know if I'll ever get warm again."

He rose on his elbows, taking her small hand in his. For the first time he noticed that his hands had been dressed and wrapped, and were quite sore, stinging from his injuries.

As he turned her hand over, he saw the scratches that he had inflicted when he had tried to catch her. He lowered his head, closing his eyes tightly, the image of the slashes on her pale, delicate wrists forcing a sigh of pain and regret from him.

"Vincent?" she asked, taking his face in her hands. "Look at me."

He did and saw only her love for him there - and felt it so strongly through their bond.

"They're only scratches. Please don't overreact. You were trying to save me. You have always kept me safe. I have complete trust in you."

Her fingers were like ice, as he gently pulled them from his face and kissed each one. He had almost lost her again.

"Catherine, you are still freezing!" He spoke in disbelief, as the bond opened fully, and he sensed the lingering evidence of her hypothermia. She could not stifle the shiver that ran through her, and he felt the chill in her to his very bones. Overcome by the sensation, he compressed her hands between his and then held them tightly to his cheek, then to his lips.

With only a moment's hesitation, he pulled back the covers, turning his face away, then shyly raising it once more to speak, saying, "Please, come in with me... I can warm you."

He saw the look of astonishment on her face and once more averted his eyes, uncertain that he should have asked such a thing and all too certain that she had noticed the blush that burned his cheeks. But somehow he summoned the courage to look once again into her loving face, and saw with wonder the hope in her expression, and the need. And through the bond, there was only her joy and excited anticipation.

"You're certain, Vincent?" she asked softly, not quite believing what she had heard.

He nodded, closing his partially open mouth, pressing his unique lips firmly together.

"Yes," he whispered in that slight lisp, as he pulled the covers back further, becoming a little flustered as he realized that he wore only his dressing gown. More of his anatomy was being revealed than he had intended, but it did not matter. He would not back down now. He and Catherine must move forward. There was no other direction. And he needed to feel her close beside him, as much as she needed his warmth.

She let the quilt fall and snuggled in next to him, her back to his chest.

He sighed with the sensation of her soft body pressing against his. She molded to him so perfectly, almost as if she had always belonged here next to him. She was indeed cold, but he could sense her cool flesh soften and warm with his body heat. He had never known such heaven before.

Catherine was thinking the very same thing. Even through the flannel gown she wore, she could feel the texture and strength of his body. She had not looked upon him long, afraid that he would take back his offer, or that she might awaken from this dream come true. But he was so beautiful! Her breath had stopped momentarily when she saw the thick mat of golden hair cascading from the lapels of his robe.

"Oh, you're so warm!" she sighed, and snuggled closer.

He smiled, wrapping his heavy arms around her, and pressed her tiny hands once more between his, bringing them to his mouth and warming them with his breath. He kissed the back of her neck, and she seemed to melt into his embrace.

Carefully, he moved closer, pressing his length against her spine, and wrapped her ankles in his. Every movement he made was controlled and restrained. He was there to warm her, protect her - he sighed in rapture - and that was all he could give her.

Then in the softest, most loving tone he could manage without revealing the passion so close to surfacing, he whispered, "Rest now."

Rest was the last thing on her mind! Her heart was beating like a tiny bird's as she felt each rise and fall of his breast against her back, and his long, powerful legs against hers. She knew the courage it took for him to allow this intimacy, to initiate it. Oh, how she loved him so!

She kissed his hand and stroked his arm. "Thank you again, for saving my life, Vincent. Father told me when you were sleeping what you had done."

"What I had done?" he asked softly, puzzled. "Catherine, I only remember sinking, realizing that we were both going to drown. What did I do?"

She rolled in his embrace to face him, realizing now that he truly did not remember.

"Vincent, you tied me around you with your belt and somehow you thrust your hand into a crevice; it was wedged in there so tightly that they had to chip away the stone to free it. You tethered yourself to the side of the pit and we floated, our heads above the surface until help arrived. Mouse had heard you cry out. You saved us, my love."

He looked at her with gaping mouth, and she realized that he truly had no memory of what had transpired.

She kissed his neck, then turned over again, pressing her back once more into his chest, and rewrapped his huge arms about her, like a luxurious fur stole. Soon she was asleep, safe, warm and peaceful at last, in his arms.

Vincent was still somewhat in shock. Early in their conversation he had felt her spark of desire, and had immediately quelled his own. He had forced himself to restrain the needs of his body, the arousal that her touch, her closeness evoked. As he had told her, they must go with care and caution. This was certainly further than he had ever dared to tread in their intimacy. This warm embrace was enough for now, and he pulled her a little closer against his warmth.

He had sensed her drifting moods of peace and contentment as she fell asleep in his arms. He had never dreamed that he would have the courage to lie close to Catherine like this, and be able to restrain himself. He was in control, and he was awed by the gigantic step he had taken. He had only dreamed of such a moment, and now, feeling her so sweet and soft next to him, the tears began to fall from his eyes. He nestled closer to her, gently pressing his nose to her hair and sighed, as he too returned to the land of dreams.

Hours later, he sensed that she was awake, but she lay motionless beside him.

Father had entered the chamber, tiptoeing in to check on the couple, and was now, just as quietly leaving. Vincent thought that, seeing them together, he perhaps felt discretion to be the better part of valor, for the time being. Vincent feigned sleep, as did Catherine, and he had to chuckle a little, despite himself, for it reminded him of the many nights when he and Devin had done the same thing

to avoid Father's wrath.

Sensing his silent mirth, Catherine turned in his arms to face Vincent, their noses almost touching, her breast pressed against his, and they both sighed with the sensation of their closeness. She marveled at the extraordinary face and being that lay beside her in the soft, gilded light. He, in turn, was speechless as his eyes roved that delicate her, momentarily unable to speak or move.

Finally she asked in a hushed whisper. "Is he gone?"

He nodded, a small smile appearing on the corners of his mouth, unable to take his eyes from hers. He was certain that this must all be a dream, having her close like this, and knew if his eyes left her face for an instant that she would dissolve away. But no, she was indeed here, so warm and soft, and through the bond he felt nothing but her happiness and contentment.

"Do you think he'll be angry with us?" she asked.

Vincent closed his eyes, reaching out to touch Father's heart, and he felt... embarrassment, and happiness, but no anger.

He opened his eyes to her and shook his head. "No, he's not angry. A little shocked, perhaps. "You're warmer," he said, half a question, half a statement, tilting his head.

She nodded, smiling broadly. Her lips looked so pink and full.

She dropped her gaze to his lips and then looked back up into his eyes. Without even consulting the bond, he understood as if she had spoken aloud.

He leaned forward, closing the meager gap between them, then hesitated, his eyes revealing to her his sudden uncertainty. With none of the same hesitation, Catherine gently took his chin in her hand, continuing his forward movement, and he sighed as he slowly, tenderly pressed his lips to hers in their first kiss. She discovered what she had always imagined, that his lips were incredibly soft and velvety, as he tentatively explored hers.

The taste of her lips was a delicacy he had never dared dream of.

She reached to caress his cheeks with both hands, and whispered, "Thank you for coming into my life and for saving it once more." Then she gave him another gentle kiss on the mouth.

He sighed, closing his eyes, and then looked back at her with adoration and devotion, the warmth of her love engulfing him, as did the caress of her hands.

"You are so remarkable, Catherine. You have saved my life, as well. You have saved me from the darkness." Kissing her cheek, he nuzzled her face, his voice trembling with his deeply felt emotion.

"I would die, if I were ever to lose you..."

She pulled him close as they lay back down, facing one another.

She said simply, "I know... It is the same for me," then tucked her head into his arm and chest, and he gently laid his head on top of hers.

Vincent soon drifted to sleep beside her, after releasing a huge sigh of contentment, the world in his arms.

Much later, he awoke still groggy from a deeply satisfying sleep. Slowly he opened one eye, feeling Catherine close. His second eye popped open rapidly at the deep brown eyes staring at him. They could only be Samantha's.

He sat up, a little startled.

"I just had to see for myself that you were all right, even though Father told me not to disturb you. I'm sorry I woke you up." She ducked her head, to hide her face below her bangs and began shuffling her feet.

He took her hand and patted it, saying softly. "You did not wake me, Samantha. And I am fine. Thank you for your concern."

She blushed, then smiled and quickly wrapped her arms around his neck to hug him fiercely.

Suddenly the lump of covers in front of Vincent and under Samantha groaned and moved, as Catherine pulled the blankets from her tousled hair and sleepy face.

Samantha jumped back from the bed, her eyes wide in astonishment.

"Catherine! What are you doing in there?"

Catherine sat up, pushing her hair back as she got her bearings, then quickly looked up into Vincent's flushed face, seeing a slight smirk at the corner of his delighted mouth.

Catherine was blushing now, as she turned back to face the little girl. "Well, I was... I mean... I... Vincent can tell you."

Samantha and Catherine turned their heads in unison, quietly waiting for a reply.

His face turned a slightly deeper shade of pink, as he raised an eyebrow at Catherine.

With a deep breath, he began his quiet explanation.

"Samantha, do you remember how cold you were after being in those raging waters?"

She nodded her head.

"Well, as you know, Catherine and I were forced to remain in those waters even longer than you and the other children. We suffered what is called hypothermia, and it takes a long time for the body to get warm again. I was already warm, but Catherine was still freezing. You know that she and I care deeply for one another."

He looked to his loved one's face and she looked warmly into his, encouraging him to continue.

"I could not just leave her to be chilled, so I offered her the warmth of my bed, as I have you and the other children when you are cold or have had nightmares. Do you understand?"

Again she nodded. "Are you warmed up now, Catherine?"

"Oh, yes." Catherine smiled. "I'm fine now, see?" She held out her warm hands for Samantha to feel.

The little girl seemed satisfied, feeling the soft, warmed hands in her own. She started to step away, calling back as she left.

"Don't miss breakfast. William is making his special blueberry muffins."

"We'll be there," Vincent called softly after her, exhaling, then chuckling.

"What's so special about William's muffins?"

He turned back to her, pulling a stray hair from her forehead. His shimmering eyes were searching her entire face, once more taken aback by her flawless beauty.

"Like William, they're very large and very delicious."

"I see." She laughed softly. "I enjoyed your explanation of why I was here with you...."

She tugged softly on a wisp of his hair, her other hand on his chest.

"Well, you should," he said in mock disgruntlement, fascinated by her stroking hand. "You rather left me in the lurch."

She began to chuckle and so did he. "Well, after all, it's your bed and it was your invitation...."

She looked up into his face, once more attempting to sense his feelings. "I thought maybe you should be the one to enlighten us about your motives."

Vincent blushed and admitted. "You were right to think so, Catherine."

She looked away, her tone becoming more serious. "But what you told Samantha, was that the only reason you invited me into your bed?"

As she looked back into his face, he ducked his head shyly, but his eyes immediately showed her that it was not the only reason, and their lips found each other once more. The bond filled to overflowing with the sincerity of his love and devotion.

They pulled apart and embraced a long while. Catherine spoke once more as her hands smoothed the incredibly soft fur on his chest.

"What if Samantha starts rumors flying, about my being in your bed, and your keeping me warm and all?"

He nuzzled her cheek and kissed the top of her sweet-smelling hair, as he pondered a moment; Catherine could sense the smile on his lips.

"Well, it could prove a bit... awkward, but we'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

She nodded and looked up into his eyes.

"You know, I have an electric blanket at home, but it's not nearly as fun as this!"

"I don't imagine it is," he chuckled softly. They both began laughing and to his surprise and sheer delight, she tickled him under his ribs. His brief writhing ended in one last kiss between them. Milestones had certainly been passed these last few days. He and Catherine were both joyous with their progress.

Sighing, he threw back the covers, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. The movement had caused a twinge of pain to his abused left hip, but he hardly noticed the discomfort.

"Those muffins await us, Catherine."

With regret she arose from the warm nest of his bed, taking his hand. But with the touch of that hand, she knew there would be many more adventures to come, and that they would share them together. He had taken the most difficult first step and was now ready to continue on their love's journey.

END