

A TIME TO GROW

by Lorraine Beasley

It had been another one of those lovely evenings together, holding each other close in that perfect spot beneath the first row of seats, joining the audience for the concert in the park.

On the programme this evening had been Rachmaninov including the hauntingly beautiful Rhapsody On A Theme by Pagannini, her favourite piece, and it had been heavenly, holding each other, totally immersed in the music.

Conversation had been unnecessary too. They both knew how much the music meant to the other, and how precious the time spent alone together.

And when the music had finally ended, neither of them had wanted to move.

Comfortable.

Contented.

At last, they had walked back in silence too, companionable silence, hand-in-hand, drawing comfort from each other's touch.

Now, the moment of parting had arrived, standing at the entrance to the short walk to the secret door in the basement of her apartment building.

Yet, there was something different about the moment of parting tonight.

She didn't want to leave.

She wanted to stay with him.

He must have sensed her reluctance... this very special man who had come to mean so much to her in such a short space of time... for he pulled her gently against him, his embrace a welcome thing.

She smiled warmly up at him, gazing lovingly into his intense, deep azure eyes.

"Vincent."

"Catherine."

His face drew closer, and instinctively, Catherine knew that the moment that she had been waiting for was almost upon her.

The moment that she had dreamed about... yearned for...

The moment when Vincent himself would take the lead and kiss her... when he would initiate the contact of their lips...

They had kissed before...

Briefly...

Well, to be honest, she had kissed him, most often on the cheek - only once on the lips, when he had been so understanding of her grief, and her need of him as a friend, a rock, when her father had died unexpectedly. And he had welcomed her into his world to cope with her grief, and to heal, and then had been forced to watch her return to the world Above...

So out of his reach... her world...

He had only ever pressed his lips to the top of her head... He had never instigated a meeting of their lips, of his own volition, always moving his face just slightly out of the way, so that she ended up by resting her head against his shoulder.

The air around them positively cracked with anticipation.

The hairs on the back of his neck, and the backs of her hands were standing on end...

Her heart was racing...

Her blood was singing in her veins...

She was alive in a way which she had never been before...

Thanks to him.

Vincent...

He stood before her in all his glory, bathed in the diffused, downcast blue/white light so familiar to her now, an enigma, reviled by some, loved, cherished and adored by many more - herself included, for she was one of the fortunate people who had been able to look beyond the differences of his body, to the beautiful soul, the poet, the musician, the artist, and the romantic who lived within.

Vincent.

Magnificent.

Beautiful.

He stepped closer to her now, finally bridging the gap between them, his strong arms enveloping her, as they had so often before, his beloved leonine face so close now, she could feel his soft, warm breath fanning against her passion flushed cheek.

"Catherine..."

Did she imagine it ... or did he really say her name?

So much anguish in his voice... such need...

Had she imagined them too?

Catherine responded by wrapping her arms more tightly around him, snuggling closer to his strong, warm body, moulding herself against his lean frame, her fingers brushing against the roughness of the chunky woollen waistcoat that he favoured, beneath his voluminous robe.

Her heart was beating in a rhythm to match his, knocking frantically against her ribs, forcing the breath from her lungs.

Any minute now her dream would become a reality...

Any minute now, Vincent would take the next, momentous step in their relationship...

Come on Vincent....

You are almost there

She closed her eyes, hardly daring to breathe for fear of breaking the spell...

At last, his lips touched hers, sending a jolt of pure electricity coursing through her.

The contact was so brief... so light... for an instant, Catherine thought that she had only dreamed it...

And immediately, she sensed him withdraw, somehow knowing that he meant to move away....

A stolen kiss...

Brief...

Tender...

Shy...

How very touching...

But not enough, Vincent....

Not enough...

Overcome with a need more urgent than she had ever known before, a need for him, for more contact with him, Catherine entwined her fingers into Vincent's long, thick, red/gold hair, sinking into its soft velvet thickness, and applied a little gentle forward pressure to the back of his head, guiding his face closer, the soft, downy fur of his cheek, causing a jolt of pure pleasure to run down her spine as it brushed against her own.

The pressure of his closed lips increased against her mouth.

Catherine instinctively opened her mouth to deepen the kiss. Vincent's mouth remained closed, and she could feel his strong, large irregular teeth through his lips. a more erotic sensation than she had ever known....

With her other arm circling his broad, solid waist, Catherine gently increased the pressure, trying to draw his body closer, arching against him in an instinct as old as time itself, involuntarily letting out a low moan of pleasure as she suddenly became aware of his arousal, the hard outline of his maleness against the soft flesh of her belly, the very male scent of him, a heady musk, filling her nostrils and making her heart beat faster.

Just as suddenly, Vincent stiffened in her arms, aware that something had changed...

This was not like any other embrace that they had shared...

Everywhere that Catherine touched him made his flesh quite literally burn...

His knees were suddenly weak, threatening to buckle beneath him, and he wanted nothing more than to crush her against his body and lose himself in the smell and sight and feel of her.....

Then...

Suddenly, with a soft, throaty growl of anguish, Vincent very firmly broke the kiss, and gently put Catherine away from him.

His chest heaving, his heart fit to burst, Vincent regarded the woman that he loved.....

Her face was flushed, a dreamy, faraway expression making Catherine's beautiful features soft, exquisite, her large green eyes fluttering open now, pupils dilated as much by passion as by the darkness of their surroundings, her chest heaving most becomingly too...

But, he was quick to note, her expression was changing now, to one of confusion and bewilderment, and disappointment....

Vincent could not face her, stepped back from her quickly, to hide his shame.

Feeling more than a little disappointed at the sudden breaking of the kiss, Catherine opened her eyes and caught only a flash of something incomprehensible in Vincent's deep set, beautiful blue eyes, before he stepped further back from her and turned away quickly.

"Vincent... She spoke his name in soft tones, stepping forward to take his hand in her own, lifting it up to press its downy softness to her cheek.

He still refused to look at her, and for one awful moment, as she stood there gazing at him, his head bowed, his rich, thick mane of honey/golden hair falling in a curtain, concealing his face from

her, she thought that he was afraid to allow her to see his face, lest she find rejection and revulsion in his eyes...

"Vincent... look at me... please....," she coaxed in her most reassuring tone, gently squeezing his hand.

Vincent did not respond.

He could not.

He could not face her, at least not until he had regained a measure of composure, and yet, he knew that to say nothing at all would be to risk hurting her feelings, alienating her...

He still could not speak.

He had no words.

What could he say that would conceal his shame, and end her frustration....

He knew her need...

Her need of him...

Knew her pain at his rejection...

But it was better than the alternative...

Vincent remained silent for a long moment.

Too long for Catherine to bear.

She could see his shoulders and upper body moving beneath the flowing black cloak, as though he were breathing hard, and a concerned frown marred her brow as she released her grip on his big, furry hand, and stepped around in front of him.

She made no sound on the sandy floor, but he sensed her movement, and turned his burning face away from her curious gaze, ashamed to let her see his shame, afraid to let his eyes behold her again, in case he lose control.

As he almost had a moment before....

Even now, his heart was thudding rapidly in his chest, and he couldn't seem to draw in enough air to feed his starving lungs.

He could still feel Catherine's small, slender, warm, pliant body against his own, and his own urgent need to draw her still closer, to make her a part of himself in a way that he had never experienced before...

"Vincent?" Catherine tentatively reached out her hand to touch his precious face, meaning only to turn it back toward her, so that she could see what he was thinking, feeling....

He shied away from her touch, stepping back towards the shadows, his deep blue eyes smoky with emotion, his expression brooding.

Catherine had never seen him like this before.

And somewhere deep down inside, she felt something wither and die...

What had she done?

Vincent had never tried to conceal his feelings from her before. He had always been so open, his feelings so easy to read in that beautiful face, those soulful eyes...

And sometimes, when they were really close, in mind, in body, or when she was almost on the brink of sleep, the unique bond that he had with her, the connection that allowed him to really know

and feel her emotions, worked both ways, and she was able to get a sense of what he was feeling too.

That happened rarely, but she was always aware of him, there in the back of her mind. - a familiar, comforting presence, like a Guardian Angel watching over her...

Now, for the first time since they had started to become really close, since she had entrusted him with her life, Catherine felt nothing but an icy emptiness...

It was as though he had severed their empathic connection as abruptly as he had broken their embrace.

Catherine felt lost....

Disconnected...

Crushed...

What was he thinking?

What was he feeling?

Did he know what she was thinking... feeling...

The loss of the sense of him was more painful, more empty than anything she had ever experienced in her life before.

"I'm sorry, Vincent... I didn't mean to hurt you..." Unshed tears suddenly blurred his vision and tightened her voice in her throat.

"Hurt me?" Vincent reacted quickly, incredulity in his voice, turning sharply back to face her, and she could see the pain in his eyes... and something more....

Shame...

Guilt...

Catherine yearned to go to him, to lean against the solid wall of his chest, and have him fold her in his cloak, draw her close, hold her with a fierce protection, shield her from pain and danger... to love her...

She remained where she was... rooted to the spot, desolate... feeling the distance between them like a chasm.

"My God, Vincent... I had no idea what a simple kiss could do to you...."

More tears welled up in Catherine's eyes, as she watched the man that she loved more with the passing of every minute, unconditionally, struggle to regain some measure of his composure, under her watchful, innocent gaze.

At least he hadn't just walked away and left her...

And while he was still here, there was a chance for them to talk, to understand, to put things right...

"It was more than just a simple kiss, Catherine, and we both know it..." His deep, husky voice was rough with emotion, and then, his expression earnest; "I was so afraid that I had hurt you....."

He let out a ragged sigh, his shoulders slumping, his head bowed, hiding his eyes from her again.

Catherine heard the pain in his voice, the tension - and something more – fear - and she recognized the truth in his words.

He truly did believe it.

"Well..." Catherine let out a soft sigh too. "...you didn't hurt me, Vincent, believe me... you would have been the second one to know it if you had." She told him with a hint of indignation.

How could he believe that he had hurt her?

With a kiss?

"Oh Vincent..." She went to him now, with her arms held wide open, but he turned away from her again, and began pacing up and down.

She had come to recognize this prowling as his way of dealing with frustration, of expending nervous energy or anger.

Even so, his movements were graceful, his cloak flowing around his booted ankles, little puffs of dust rising into the air with every soft step, his glorious mane tossing around his broad shoulders.

"Why?" Vincent growled softly, turning back to face Catherine at last.

"Why what?" Catherine frowned.

"Why do you do it?"

"Do what, Vincent?" Her voice held a note of confusion, but when she studied his face more closely, noting the smoky, brooding way that he was looking at her, his blue eyes hard and intense, she suddenly began to understand. "The kiss..." She breathed the word softly on a deep sigh.

"The kiss..." Vincent echoed, taking up his pacing again, stopping intermittently to look at her as he awaited her answer.

"The kiss... why did I encourage you?" He nodded. "I... I wanted it, Vincent. I thought you did too." She paused for a moment. "I wanted it - more than I have ever wanted anything in my life...." She confessed softly. "I love you, Vincent....." Tears suddenly brimmed in her eyes, as he stopped dead in his tracks and stared at her in wonder.

He knew the truth of it...

He had felt her growing affection for him... had known the precise moment that affection had deepened into love...

But still, to actually hear the words coming from her lips, made it seem less like a dream, gave it ... substance...

".....And to me, Vincent, a kiss is just a natural expression of that love..." She spoke softly, her face awash with tears, her tender gaze resting on his beloved face.

She took a step closer.

"I feel you in my mind, Vincent...and I have made a place for you in my heart... I know that you feel this ... because of the empathic bond between us, but sometimes, Vincent...." She paused for breath, trying to organize her thoughts, knowing that the words had to be said. He had a right to know the truth about what she was feeling, and she wanted him to know it from her lips, not just from her heart and her mind. "Sometimes, I need to feel your substance -bone, muscle, sinew, flesh, something warm and solid, something tangible..."

Vincent watched Catherine struggle to put into words what he was just now beginning to feel from her once again, their link re-established without any conscious effort on his part, now that his previously heightened emotional state was under some measure of control.

He heard the words, and felt her very real, physical need, and his heart constricted in his chest, and his knees grew weak once more.

Did she feel him in her mind again, now?

Did she know that he understood completely?

Did she know that if she didn't turn away and trot right up that ladder ... he would not be

responsible for his actions.....

She had only ever seen Vincent the restrained, courteous gentleman ... except on the occasions when he had been forced to use violence to protect her life. Around her, he had been the shy, reserved, unworldly Vincent, the controlled, measured, delicately-balanced Vincent...

How would she react if she saw the real hunger in his eyes?

"Sometimes, Vincent..." Catherine continued bravely. "I yearn to hold you so tightly that I can feel your flesh melt into my own..." A delicate flush stained her cheeks then, but a soft smile curved at the corners of her lips too.

Why didn't he know this without her having to say it?

Didn't he feel it too?

He knew everything else that was in her heart and mind, didn't he?

"Catherine..." Her name from his lips was a tortured sound as he wrestled with his need. "I know...." This came on a mere whisper. "I have... felt the same way too..." He confessed roughly, hanging his head once again.

"Vincent..." She took another small step towards him, elation in her eyes.

"No, Catherine..." He growled. **"You do not understand..."** There was such pain in his voice that Catherine did not know how she stopped herself from running to him. "I really believed that I had hurt you..." He confessed raggedly.

"Why Vincent?" Catherine frowned. "Whatever gave you that idea?"

"You cried out..." This in a small, infinitely sad voice, as he lifted his face to reveal to her a look of utter anguish.

"Oh, Vincent..." Catherine expelled a long deep breath, an embarrassed flush settling over her face, a twinkle of amusement in her eyes suddenly, nevertheless. "...My dearest one... Vincent, that was a cry of pleasure, not pain...." She explained with infinite care, taking another step forward, but this time, Vincent raised his hand between them, defensively, preventing her from coming any closer.

"But you still do not understand, Catherine." It was so difficult for him... to voice his fears... but she had to know... all of it...

"Will you stop saying that..." Her tone held impatience now. She took a deep breath before continuing. "...and help me to understand, Vincent." She invited softly, her expression and tone now full of compassion and understanding.

"Catherine.... For a moment... only a moment..." He paused, his breath suddenly coming in sharp, ragged little gasps, his cheeks puffing in and out as he fought to draw in air. "...I... I really could have hurt you..."

There was such raw fear in his voice, that Catherine could not fail to realize how disturbed he was feeling.

She could feel now that their empathic link had been re-established and could sense that whatever it was that he wanted to say, it was very hard for him, costing him dearly in his bid to keep some measure of control.

Whatever it was that was on his mind, it was important that he tell her.

"Vincent..."

"Catherine... There is another side to my nature, a darker, violent side, that I must always fight, to keep restrained. If I forget this, even for one instant.... I could... I could... crush the life from you..."

Catherine regarded him thoughtfully, and Vincent watched as comprehension suddenly dawned in her lovely, wide green eyes.

"No, Vincent...You could never hurt me. Do you hear me? Never...."

"Believe it, Catherine....," he warned her in a low, husky voice, his tone deadly serious. "It is a very real part of me, over which I have little or no control...."

"I understand what you're saying, Vincent. I have seen that side of you, remember?" And although terrifying to behold, she had never once felt frightened that he would turn that rage, that violence against her.

Didn't he know her at all?

"And I'm not a blind fool, Vincent, but I love you, every part of you... .and I trust you. I have never been afraid of you.... I could never be afraid of you..."

But...

Yes, she had been...

In the beginning...

Briefly...

Just for an instant...

Afraid of the unknown...

But she had soon forgotten that fear...

Learned to trust...

Learned to love...

Vincent said nothing, but the slight softening of his expression spoke volumes.

She understood...

And she loved him anyway...

She was an incredible woman.

He was truly blessed...

Standing there before him, her eyes filled with love, for him...

How could he not love her too?

She offered him her heart, her understanding, her life... unconditionally.

And he dared not even contemplate what his life would be without her.

She understood all the dangers in loving him...

And loved him anyway!

"Oh Catherine..." He lowered his hand between them, opened his arms to her, and she came willingly into the comforting circle of his embrace, resting her cheek against his chest, wrapping her arms around his sturdy body.

"Catherine....you do understand?"

"Yes... I understand, Vincent..."

His concern was for her safety, but in all honesty, she had never even begun to think that he might, however innocently, or accidentally hurt her.

"I really do. but sometimes, I need you so much, that it actually hurts..."

"I know..." He let out a long, ragged sigh, knowing the truth of her words.

He felt her need...

Acknowledged his own need of her...

And knew not what to do to help either of them...

Before she had come into his life, he had never dared to dream that such love existed. All his life, he had made himself believe that he would always be alone, denied any, or all, of the possibilities that other men took for granted. Then Catherine had touched his heart, and his soul, and hope had begun, turned into love, and possibility...

With her selfless love, and generosity of spirit, she had brought a magic into his life that he had never dared dream of.

"Catherine, before you came into my life, I was dead, for all intents and purposes, only I did not know it. You have given me hope, something to live for. If anything ever happened to you..."

"Sh, my love.." She squeezed him tightly.

"I love you, Catherine, more than I ever thought possible, but I can never forget that in one unguarded moment, one moment of carelessness, I could destroy the very thing that I love..."

He was breathing hard again, fighting to keep control of his emotions. "I could rend your flesh...."

"No, Vincent... That will never happen."

"I... I... cannot be sure of that, Catherine..."

"I can." She smiled up at him lovingly, and he gazed down at her with all the love that he felt for her in his eyes, and all the sorrow, that he would never be able to express that love for her in the way that she needed....

He dropped his forehead down onto her shoulder, and allowed the scalding tears that were brimming in his eyes to roll unchecked down his cheeks.

He did not contradict her statement, a part of him rejoicing in the love, trust and confidence that she had in him...

But he knew differently.

Restraint.

Control.

That was how he was fated to live his life.

If he relinquished control... even for one moment...

The consequences didn't bare thinking about.

With her head resting gently against his warm chest, feeling the steady rhythm of his breathing and his heart thudding beneath her ear, the gentle movement of his upper body as he wept against her shoulder, Catherine let out a deep sigh.

At least she knew the truth now.

His greatest fear was his lack of control over his darker, more.... animal... nature.

He was afraid that he would overwhelm her with his strength, his desire, his passion...

That he might physically cause her injury if he did not restrain himself...

At least he was not rejecting her.

He already knew that he did desire her... if his physical reaction to her nearness earlier was any indication.

And now, she began to wonder if his reaction to his own body's physical response to her nearness. had taken him by surprise, frightened him, because it was something else over which he had no control...

Catherine began to wonder just how experienced Vincent was in the physical expression of love between a man and a woman...

It wasn't something that she had given much thought to before, but now that she did, she realized that Vincent had never made any attempt to kiss her.

Indeed, although their embraced had been warm and pleasant, they had been strictly platonic.

Holding hands...

The occasional hug...

She had kissed him, on the cheek, a friendly, asexual brushing of her lips against his rough cheek, his mouth, just that once...

There had been nothing more intimate than that.

And whilst she had been dreaming of the day when they would become... closer... she now realized that she really had no idea what Vincent had hoped for out of their relationship.

Friendship...

Respect...

Trust...

Companionship...

Love...

What she had hoped for was a natural progression from all of those things.

Intimacy...

Passion...

Commitment...

She now realized that she knew so little about the way that Vincent felt.

Did he even allow himself to believe that such possibilities lay ahead for him?

Or did he deny that he even had these kinds of basic needs?

No....She didn't know him or understand him nearly as well as she had believed.

The way that he talked about their love... she had believed that he had wanted the same things that she did, and whilst what she wanted was normal, and healthy, was it even something that Vincent was capable of coping with?

Was it even something that he wanted?

Maybe he was content with a friendly hug... holding hands...

Perhaps that was all the intimacy that he was capable of, despite his physical reaction earlier.

Perhaps that physical reaction to her nearness.... his own sudden need... had surprised him... and frightened him too...

No wonder he had broken the kiss so abruptly, and put as much distance between them as he

could...

"Catherine?" His voice was husky and dark, edged with a question as he lifted his head from her shoulder and looked into her face.

Had he sensed the direction of her thoughts?

His presence was there again in her mind, although not as strong as it had been before.

She looked up slowly into his face and smiled softly.

"You seem sad." He ignored her smile, knowing what was truly in her heart, if not the reason for it.

"I have to leave you again, my love... that always makes me sad..." She sighed softly, tentatively reaching up to smooth away his tears with gentle thumbs. "Don't be afraid, Vincent... with love, all things are possible..."

Vincent accepted her answer, sensing that to pursue the truth from her now would serve no purpose, might actually put them at odds with each other... and he did not want that.

He did not want them to part on a sour note...

In all the time that they had known each other, there had been so few such partings....

And now was not the time for another one.....

"We will see each other again, soon," he promised.

"Yes.... Soon," she sighed. "They're playing some of Elgar's Enigma Variations on Friday evening."

"Friday, it is then."

Good night, Vincent..." She stretched up carefully and planted a soft, sisterly kiss on his rough cheek, and then reluctantly, drew away from his embrace. "I love you. See you, Friday."

"Good night, Catherine, keep safe, be well, until Friday..."

For a long time after Catherine left him, Vincent prowled the upper levels of the tunnels, trying to shake off the lingering sense of frustration, disappointment and sorrow that Catherine had carried away with her, and was, even now, still trying to dispel as she made ready for bed, although, he sensed that sleep was a long way off for her ... and for himself...

His mind kept going over the events of the evening...

Especially...

That kiss...

Until frustration sent him rushing back through the labyrinth to his chamber, heedless of the walls he was crashing into, as he made his way hastily to the soft golden light of the home tunnels.

In his chamber, breathing heavily, he pulled off his cloak roughly and let it fall to the ground, then began pacing back and forth, to expend some of his pent up energy. Then, even more breathless, sat down heavily in the big throne like oak chair, which creaked and groaned in protest at his sudden weight upon it.

As he sat, puffing his cheeks in and out as he tried to catch his breath, he felt the tightness in his groin area again, and the heaviness there, as the material of his trousers refused to allow for the sudden ... unaccustomed ... growth there.

He sprang to his feet with a muffled curse.

Damn this weak, wretched body!

He railed silently, a low, throaty growl beginning deep in the back of his throat.

Unable to sit and think, he began to pace back and forth across his chamber once more, but even then, could find no peace, growling his anger and his torment, until he could bare it no longer, and with a howl of pain and anguish that echoed through the surrounding chambers, sent the contents of the nearest table flying across the chamber with one wide sweep of his big arm.

Vincent threw back his head and howled once more, unaware of Father standing just beyond the entrance to his chamber, slim volume of poetry in one hand, gnarled old walking stick in the other, watching his beloved foster son's torment with a frown.

His anger exhausted, his frustration spent, Vincent sank back into the big, throne-like chair, breathing hard, hanging his head in utter despair.

Jacob Wells took this as his cue.

"Feel better?" he asked innocently, as he entered Vincent's chamber and surveyed the wreckage.

Ah well.. he had seen worse.

Still there was nothing here that couldn't be fixed.... most of it just requiring to be picked up and replaced.

Jacob was used to these outbursts. They were intense and destructive in their force, and if you weren't used to them, frightening to watch, but they never lasted more than a minute or two, and fortunately, burned themselves out just as quickly.

Over the years, Vincent had learned, although it had taken time, to vent his frustration and take out his temper on non-breakables and things that were easy to replace.

When Vincent had been a small boy, and then an adolescent, Father had been infinitely grateful on many occasions that here, Below, there were so few doors to slam, for the community would constantly have been at the mercy of splintered woodwork.

Vincent's anger had made him fleet of foot, as well as strong, and it had taken him a long time to learn just how destructive that speed and strength could be to the people and things that got in the way of that anger.

In later years, anger had given way to frustration, as the boy had discovered the limitations of his life, and his world ... and tested them.

It had been a painful process, for all of them, but eventually, the boy had become a man, strengthened by the ability to vent his frustration in a positive, healthy fit of rage, and the outbursts had eventually subsided.

Only rarely now did Vincent get this loud, rowdy and destructive.

Father found himself wondering what had happened between Catherine and Vincent this evening, recalling now that they had had plans ... a concert.

Catherine.

Ah yes, Catherine...

What was it he had told her about her relationship with Vincent?

A tragic mistake...

For both of them...

But that had been before he had been privileged to witness first hand the love that they shared... And before he too had come to care for Catherine.

Ah yes...

Catherine. Charming, warm, courageous, feisty, determined, stubborn, single-minded and fiercely devoted to Vincent.

Jacob had come to respect her. He had come to admire her... And no, it would not take much for him to come to love her.

She had done so much for Vincent, had given him so much hope, a dream to cling to, and had given something for them all to look back and marvel at.

But.. he still had his doubts.... his fears...

There were untold dangers that neither Vincent nor Catherine had given much thought to... They both lived so much for the day... letting the future take care of itself... But he, Jacob Wells, had done nothing but think about the future... Because he would be the one required to pick up the pieces...

Ah well...

Into each life a little rain must fall.....

For now, Vincent was basking in the sunlight that was the love that he had for Catherine, and that which she had for him.

Let him enjoy it while he could...

And perhaps the future would take care of itself.

"No...", Vincent replied, still breathing heavily, watching broodingly as Father looked around the chamber, to the statues, books and clothes strewn on the ground. He felt like a child again, caught out, and on the spot, required to give a satisfactory reason for his behaviour.

"Would you like to talk about it?" Father asked, walking unsteadily over to where Vincent sat, and gently laid a warm, reassuring hand on his son's broad shoulder.

"No," Vincent sighed heavily.

"The music was not to your taste?" Jacob inquired, slowly and carefully easing himself down onto Vincent's big wooden bed.

"It has nothing to do with the music..." Vincent spoke softly, raising his head slowly, to find Father regarding him thoughtfully.

Vincent took another deep, calming breath, knowing that until he got an explanation, Father was not going to give up.

Yet... how did he tell the older man what was really troubling him?

To Vincent's own surprise, he realized that for the first time in his life, he was both embarrassed and ashamed to talk to Father about what had happened to him this evening.

"Let me guess..." Jacob regarded Vincent carefully, and could see that the boy was deeply troubled.

"Father...." Vincent's tone held a warning, as he rose swiftly to his feet, then began pacing back and forth once more.

"Catherine..." Jacob continued, regardless, watching the younger man prowl from one side of the room to the other, noting the tension in the set of his broad shoulders, and the scowl on his leonine face.

"Not now, Father... I'm tired... I wish to go to bed...."

"Don't be ridiculous, Vincent, worked up like that, you wouldn't sleep in a month of Sundays. Will you stop that nonsense, you're making me dizzy..." Father complained.

Vincent stopped dead in his tracks, and regarded Father with disbelief.

"Come and sit down, my boy, and tell me all about it," Father invited casually.

Vincent let out another deep sigh of resignation, and allowed the tension to drain from his body, as he reluctantly returned to his favourite chair.

"There now... that's better." Jacob patted Vincent's fur-overed hands as he folded them defensively in his lap. "Now, tell me what troubles you, my boy. Catherine?"

Vincent remained stubbornly silent, and this surprised Father. He frowned, deeply. This was just not like Vincent at all... and he prided himself in knowing the boy very well.

Usually, the least amount of coaxing would have had the full story tumbling from his mouth in a great rush. The boy had always been able to open up to him, no matter what the subject matter, no matter what was on his mind. That was one of the things that Jacob cherished most about his relationship with this unique young man - the fact that they could sit and talk about anything, at any time, that Vincent felt able to come to him with questions about anything and everything.

Sitting beside Vincent, Father could feel the younger man's tension, his discomfort - and something more....

The way that Vincent was sitting, every muscle bunched, as though he were ready to pounce at the slightest provocation, and the way that he was hunched over in the chair, trying to make himself very small, his hands clasped in his lap, as though he were trying to hide something.

Father found this very troubling.

They had always been able to talk to each other, a trouble shared and all that.

Vincent's reticence, his reluctance to open up to him, gave Father even more cause for concern.

"Have you two quarreled?" he inquired, deliberately keeping his tone casual.

"No....," Vincent mumbled.

"I'm sure it's just a misunderstanding, my boy."

Vincent looked up then, and regarded Father with resignation.

"No, Father," he said flatly.

"Is it serious then?" Jacob probed.

"Very serious." Vincent sighed deeply, hanging his head once more, his beautiful hair falling forward around his face.

Jacob Wells reached out and gently pulled Vincent's hair back from his face, drawing his reluctant lapis lazuli eyes briefly, before they darted away again. It was a tender gesture, meant to resurrect memories from childhood, of times when Vincent had confessed some fear, some unhappiness and Father had always been there to wipe away the tears, and offer comfort. The simple gesture was meant to convey to the young man that his father was still there for him, ready to help, listen, offer comfort and advice... to just be there for him.

"Look at me, Vincent," he coaxed gently. "Tell me...."

"I cannot....," Vincent confessed, again tearing his gaze away from the older man.

Vincent's reluctance to look him in the eye worried Father even more.

"Vincent..." He gently applied a little pressure to Vincent's rough whiskered chin with his index finger, to raise the boy's head and guide it toward him, so that he could get a better look into the younger man's deep azure eyes, suddenly very fearful that Vincent may have, accidentally, hurt... Catherine.

"Vincent, you know that I love you," he assured his young companion "...and you know that I will always love you... no matter what you might have done. Tell me, ...is... is Catherine... all right?"

"Yes, Father." Vincent replied earnestly, knowing instinctively what Father was asking of him.

"Well then." Jacob let out a soft sigh of relief. "...You know that you can talk to me about anything, my boy. I do have a little knowledge in these things..." He smiled now.

Vincent let out a long, ragged sigh, knowing that Father wasn't going to let him off the hook that easily....

And yes... maybe he did need to talk to someone about this.

"Did you and Catherine have a falling out?" Father asked again.

"No..."

"Oh really, my boy..." Father sighed in exasperation. "You haven't been this monosyllabic since you were twelve!" He rolled his eyes heavenward, recalling the many occasions when in trying to decide a fair punishment for some misdemeanour or another, usually involving his natural born son Devin too, trying to get the full story from Vincent had been like trying to get blood out of a stone, So loyal and faithful to his friend, Devin, was the young Vincent that he would willingly take all the blame on himself, answering only yes... no... .maybe...

"You do remember how to use the English language, I suppose?"

"Yes..." His sarcasm was not lost on Vincent as he took a deep breath, stealing himself, and .plunged in, unburdening himself. "Father.... I kissed her... she kissed me ... we... we.." His voice trailed away suddenly.

"Kissed..." Father finished for him, trying to hide a smile of amusement in his beard, from his already embarrassed young companion.

"Yes..." The word was expelled on a hiss of anguish.

"You didn't like it?" Father asked, frowning, and wondered why the boy seemed to be taking it so badly.

"No... yes..," Vincent faltered, putting his head back in his hands.

"Which is it, my boy?"

"Yes!" The confession was ripped from Vincent, and he started to breathe heavily again, his cheeks puffing in and out rapidly. "I... liked it..."

"So what is the problem?" Father knew that there was a hint of both Vincent's tone of voice and expression, as well as in his actual words, but he failed to make a connection.

"I like it too much..." Father frowned at him in puzzlement. **"Do I have to spell it out for you, Father!"** Vincent railed. "I had feelings for Catherine tonight... feelings that I have never experienced before...."

"Feelings?" Jacob quizzed.

"Yes, Father... stirrings...."

"What kind of feelings, Vincent?" Father quizzed again, his brow drawn together in a deep frown.

"I... I didn't want to stop at just kissing her.... my body.... reacted.... in a way that I could not control..."

With infinite care, Vincent slowly lifted his folded hands from his lap, revealing the large bulge pulling his trousers taut in his groin.

Father followed the younger man's pained, embarrassed gaze down to the stiffness outlined in his lap, and comprehension dawned in his deep sapphire blue eyes.

"Looks painful...."

"It is.....Damnation!" Vincent roared.

"You might want to try a cold shower..." Father's voice was soft now.

"This is so embarrassing!" Vincent exclaimed.

"Only in so much as we probably should have had this conversation twenty years ago...." Father sighed softly.

Vincent looked up at the older man then, and found only compassion and understanding in his gentle face.

"We did, Father..." Vincent sighed, trying not to smile. "You made certain that my education was not lacking in that department, and were I ever to have been a doctor, my knowledge of the workings of the human body.... male and female... would have been very useful. But that in no way prepared me for how it would actually feel..."

"Vincent... my boy. You mean ... you mean to tell me that this has never happened to you before..." Father's gaze travelled down to Vincent's lap, and his still very obvious state of arousal, and then quickly away again.

"No." Vincent let out a deep, ragged sigh.

"So... it would seem that this wonderful love that you share with Catherine... borne of innocence, pure and perfect..." He smiled softly at Vincent. "...Is about to become a more worldly kind of love...."

Jacob regarded Vincent kindly, and began to realize just how difficult it must have been for the younger man, coping with these strange new sensations, emotions, the realization that his body had needs that he had not even contemplated before...

Jacob realized that he had never really given much thought to how Vincent coped with his sexuality, realizing now that he had merely been grateful that there had never been any hint of concern about Vincent's behaviour around the young girls and women here in the community Below.

The subject had just never arisen - and it was not the kind of thing that one talked about in polite company.

After Vincent had passed through puberty, with all its pitfalls and perils, Jacob had naturally assumed that Vincent dealt with those kinds of needs and urges, much as he himself had dealt with them over the years – celibacy - a life uncomplicated by the need for sexual gratification - had been an easy life to fall into. He had other more, pressing needs, other avenues to pursue. He had had the community to consider, and that had kept him too busy to allow his mind to wonder in any other direction.

So, the boy was quite literally on the threshold of manhood, despite the physical maturity of his body a long time ago.....

"I'm so sorry, Vincent... I had no idea..."

"Nor did I....." Vincent hung his head.

"I have let you down, my boy..."

"No, Father..., I just never believed that this could happen, much less that it would...."

"Oh, come now, Vincent, this father didn't raise any fools. You do know about these things. They do

have a habit of happening, you know. You have lived amongst the people of this community long enough to know about falling in love and having children."

"Not for me.... What woman would look twice at me?" This in a sad little voice. "I never dreamed....""I know my boy... I know... but sometimes even the impossible becomes possible... even for you...." Father paused for a moment. "Look, you're well read. I know... surely you must realize that what you felt tonight is... quite normal... quite natural... and quite healthy!"

Vincent did not rally at these words, indeed, he continued to hang his head solemnly.

"Vincent..." Father laid a warm hand on Vincent's arm, drawing his sorrowful sky blue gaze at last. "You have absolutely nothing to be ashamed about," he assured. "I am sure that Catherine understood."

"I don't know... I think she did..."

"You don't know?" Father frowned. "You didn't talk about... how you felt?"

"No," Vincent sighed deeply.

"Did you talk at all?" Father arched an eyebrow, his tone full of incredulity.

"Only about why I stopped... I tried to explain.... my fear of losing control.... of hurting her..."

"I'm sure that Catherine found that a great comfort, Vincent..." There was a hint of sarcasm in Jacob's tone now. **'Insensitive clod...'** he mumbled softly, rolling his eyes heavenward in exasperation.

"How did Catherine react? He asked so that Vincent would hear him this time.

"She understood... She said that I could never hurt her... But Father..."

"I know, Vincent... and you are right to be concerned... wary..." Father sighed again.

"I felt her regret, Father... and her... disappointment...", Vincent confessed.

"Vincent, this kiss... Did Catherine encourage you?"

"Yes...."

"Ah, I see, well... I suppose she wanted to show you how much she loves you, Vincent. That's normal and healthy too... and not totally unexpected."

Vincent regarded Father with a surprised expression, at this remark.

"Oh, I've seen the way that she looks at you, my boy, and I have seen the way you are together... the way you hold each other... the way you look at each other. I'm not so old that I can't remember how it feels..." Father smiled benignly. "Catherine is a normal, healthy young woman... deeply in love... and wanting to express those emotions." Jacob pointed out softly. "And, Vincent... sex... the physical expression of love between two people who really love each other... is a truly beautiful experience... and nothing to fear," he concluded.

"For other men, perhaps. But Father, I thought that I had hurt her tonight, just by kissing her. What if I can't control myself... what if I can't control the darker side, the part that is always threatening to take over... what if I hurt her? I could kill her..." His voice was full of anguish, and Jacob's heart went out to his son.

"I understand your concerns, Vincent... and you are wise to be concerned..." He gently patted Vincent's hand reassuringly. "But, you will never know until the moment is upon you..."

"But that might be too late!" Vincent hissed raggedly.

"Vincent, I know it's a bit late in the day, but you are finally growing up, maturing... and you can't deny who or what you are by denying these very real needs. Making love with the woman that you

love is the most natural thing in the world, but it is about more than just love... passion... Vincent. It is about trust, about opening yourself up to the one that you love, about making yourself vulnerable... and trusting them not to hurt you... physically or emotionally... and trusting in them, not to allow you to hurt them."

Jacob rose slowly from Vincent's low, wooden bed and straightened his old bones carefully.

"Vincent, you must overcome your embarrassment... and your fear... and talk to Catherine. No one is going to make you do something that you're not ready for. But to deny yourself this experience, would be to deny who you really are, Vincent, and deny your true feelings for Catherine."

"You surprise me, Father," Vincent sighed. "I thought that you, of all people... would be against such an.... intimate relationship."

"I can't say that I am not concerned, Vincent... but it is happening, and I have to face facts.... as do you.... and you should know by now, Vincent, that I am not against anything that is going to enrich your life, and make you a better, happier, more complete person."

"Thank you, Father."

"Think about it very carefully, Vincent... it is a big step... and there are many things to take into consideration. Remember your biology lessons, my boy. If you play with matches, you're likely to get burned..."

And with that cryptic remark, Jacob Wells hobbled out of Vincent's chamber, knowing that he had left his son with much food for thought.

Puzzled for a moment by Father's parting remark, Vincent pondered on what he had meant...

His heart suddenly lurched in his chest....

Procreation....

Fatherhood...

The possibility that he could.... impregnate Catherine, with his seed.... his child ... had never occurred to him. But now, the thought of seeing Catherine's belly grow large with his child, to see the radiance in her face, the ethereal glow that he had seen on other pregnant women's faces, and to know that it came from her joy of carrying his child, the life that he had quickened within her... It suddenly caused his knees to tremble, his hands to shake, his palms to sweat, and his stomach to perform somersaults.

This too, he had thought would be denied him.

But, if it were possible....

And Catherine was willing....

What would the child be like?

His child...

Their child....

Tears suddenly sprang to his eyes, as he suddenly saw before him, another child.... like himself.... outcast, and unwanted... Catherine's face... filled with horror and revulsion at the thing that had sprung forth from her womb...

And to bear such a child... might prove too dangerous for Catherine.

Could, indeed, kill her...

Devin's mother had died in childbirth, and even these days, it wasn't unheard of...

And if the child survived...

How could he condemn another soul to the harsh, lonely existence that he had endured... except that this time, he would be there... always... to help the child through it... with understanding, experience, love...

And what if the child were not like him.... What if he or she was like Catherine, perfect, healthy in every way? In which world would they raise him or her? In which world would a child of his belong? How would such a child react to having a father such as he?

Vincent took a long deep breath and expelled it slowly, as he realized that he had been holding onto the arms of his chair with a white-knuckled grip.

His mind was in utter turmoil.....

As if his thoughts were not agony enough....

To consummate his love for Catherine... or not...

To introduce this new element into the equation - the possibility of their union resulting in a child...

It was indeed a lot to think about.

Damn Father ... playing Devil's Advocate!

No, just gently reminding him of his responsibilities, and all the possibilities...

His gaze drifted to the rumpled bed, and he knew that he was not going to get much sleep tonight.

All because of one simple kiss.

Vincent let out another ragged sigh, and absently ran his fingers through his thick, shaggy golden mane.

He stopped suddenly, lowering his hands to stare at the sharp claws on the ends of each of his fur covered fingers.

As he studied his hands, Vincent was suddenly acutely aware of what these hands could do to Catherine's flesh should he ever lose control. One quick swipe of his claw could tear her flesh, slash her throat, leave her with scars more terrible than the ones he had found her with that fateful night her blood seeping away from her body, leeching away her life...

A shudder ran down his spine, and Vincent clenched his eyes tightly shut, not wanting to see the vivid images his mind conjured up for him by such thoughts....

How could he even dream of holding Catherine... of loving Catherine... when he was capable of such violence?

But making love is not an act of violence.... a little voice deep inside his head cried out.

It is a celebration...sweet rapture....

Vincent let out a long, deep groan.... willing himself to think of other, more pleasant images...

A picture of Catherine, smiling, her big green eyes full of love, for him, and yes... trust, swam into focus... her hand reaching out to take his own, leading him into his chamber... to his big, soft, familiar bed... willing... trusting... encouraging him...

An embarrassment heat crept into his cheeks, as Vincent felt again the stirring in his lap. He let out an anguished growl, and taking a deep breath, opened his eyes.

If just thinking about Catherine had this effect on him....

Damn this weak body!

Vincent clamped down on his errant thoughts.

He could be strong.

He would have to be... for to give into these needs would simply be too dangerous....

Catherine meant so much more to him than he had realized, and he would do nothing to put her life in danger... indeed was sworn to protect her....

And he would do so, with his life...

Even if that meant denying himself... to protect Catherine from himself....

But...

Deep down, Vincent knew that Father was right. To deny these needs... these desires... was to deny the truth about the way that he loved Catherine... threatening his very sanity..

If he denied these needs, refused to address the problem, then he was condemning himself to continuing to live his life as only half a man - and risked leaving Catherine with no other option than to find satisfaction and completion in the arms of another man, a man like... Elliot Burch, maybe.

That thought made his heart constrict in his chest.

His body was telling him that he was now physically ready to take this step, meet this challenge. The heavy, and yet, painful aching in his groin bore witness to that, even as his mind balked, and rejected the need.

Letting out a deep sigh, Vincent wondered if he would ever be mentally prepared to take this enormous step.

As a younger man, adolescent really, he had often wondered what it would be like to be as other men, but even then, his imaginings had been based solely on what he had read, the romantic classics that lined the shelves of Father's cornucopian library.

And as a teenager, coping with the almost daily physical changes of his body, the growth of body hair, and lots of it, raging hormones that caused terrible mood swings and bouts of depression, the deepening, huskiness of his voice, Vincent had often overheard the other boys of his age, talking in hushed voices - but this had only increased his frustration and confusion. For although he understood what they were talking about, on an intellectual level, having studied in great depth, anatomy and biology in several of Father's great medical tomes, he did not truly understand, for his own wretched body had not exhibited any of the wondrous stirrings that the others described and sniggered over, to cover their embarrassment.

Father's biology lessons had introduced him to the intricate workings of the human body, keeping nothing from Vincent and his other eager students and their inquiring minds - even the mechanics of sexual intimacy, and its consequences, making certain that all his young charges had a well-rounded education, and were fully cognizant with all the facts.

Jacob Wells could not tolerate ignorance, especially when learning and enlightenment were so easy to come by - even here Below.

It was during these turbulent years that Vincent had learned to temper his anger, control his aggression, and channel them in other more positive directions.

But, he had never had to curb his curiosity about the opposite sex - until the incident with Lisa, of course, because other than the natural curiosity at watching the girls of his age grow taller, develop curvaceous figures, breasts and seductive voices, his body had failed to react in any way.

In a way, he had been relieved, grateful to have been spared.

And then, tonight, Catherine had made it perfectly clear to him in what direction she hoped their

relationship was heading, and he had found himself wanting to follow where she led - but lacking the confidence and the experience to take that last momentous step...

Her need for him made his heart soar and, but for that uncomfortable stirring in his groin, he would have been flattered... no, delighted... that she could have such feelings for him.

But, that he could feel the same way about her... Terrified him.

Why now?

They did not need this further complication in a relationship that was already so measured, so perilous and, turbulent at times...

Catherine had been carried away by her emotions. She hadn't meant to throw him into such turmoil. She loved him... and there was no malice in her.

Only warmth.

Courage.

Spirit.

He admired that... Admired her... Loved her... Needed her too...

Vincent suddenly felt very cramped in his big chair, and he did not like the direction in which his thoughts were wandering.

He couldn't think properly sitting down, so he rose, slowly, and bent to scoop up his cloak from the ground where it had fallen, draping it across the foot of the bed, then he surveyed the books and statues and other clothes that he had knocked to the floor earlier.

There was a well thumbed copy of The Man In The Iron Mask by Alexandre Dumas, and the fragile old copy of R.D. Blackmore's Lorna Doone, that Mary had just returned to him that morning, rolled up charts of the lower chambers that Father had asked him to look at, after Mouse had reported to him that he had found several tunnels in bad repair in the lower levels.

Vincent spent a little time picking up the scattered items, and restoring them to their homes, and when everything was neatly back in its proper place. Vincent had to acknowledge that he liked order in his life.

And, it would seem, Catherine thrived on bringing chaos into his world. Ah... but what chaos?

Vincent sighed thoughtfully, and lay down on his creaky old bed, his hair fanned out around his head, one knee bent and pointed up towards the rocky ceiling, the other stretched out flat against the quilt.

At least with Catherine in his life, he knew that he was alive!

Watching her, it was easy to see her compassion, her understanding, her love of life. And her work, her devotion to it, her near total absorption in it.

She was very like Father in that respect, and she sometimes cared too much, sometimes involving herself too deeply, placing herself in danger. She lived a challenging life. And she thrived on it. And he was part of that challenge, part of that life.

And she was lovely...

Beautiful...

And, she thought that he was beautiful too. She often went out of her way to make him feel...beautiful

With Catherine at his side, Vincent could envisage countless possibilities for his life... daring even to dream that one day, when the time was right, they might even be able to have a life together.

Catherine had never been afraid of the things that made him different. Instead, she had seen and fallen in love with the things that made him *special*.

And so had begun their journey - mutual trust - a voyage of discovery, learning, each, about the other, realizing their strengths, their potential - and overcoming the hurdles that constantly seemed to be thrown up in their way.

In caring for Vincent, Catherine had learned a great deal about herself - that she was strong, that she was capable of great love, that she could overcome her fears and doubts, take stock of her life - and move on.

In the security of his love for her, Catherine had built a new life for herself, one where she found meaning, found herself valued, finding love where she had least expected it -inside herself.

She had given that love to Vincent, and they had been bound to each other by something even stronger, something indefinable, that enabled him to know her every feeling.

And so, they continued their journey, growing closer, growing stronger. Growing together as nature intended. Until that journey had brought them to the events of this evening.

Vincent fervently hoped that that journey was not yet over, sensing that their paths were inextricably linked, only to end with their deaths.

Catherine was his life. Without her, he was nothing. He would not lose her. He could not.

Here he was, with yet another seemingly insurmountable barrier to climb...

But, together... who knew what they could achieve?

Father was right.

He had to overcome his fear and embarrassment and talk to Catherine - explain to her, make her understand.

But... that was easier said than done.....

Catherine let herself into her apartment with a soft little sigh of relief, kicking the door shut behind her before carrying the two heavy brown paper sacks of groceries into the kitchen and dropping them down on the counter.

It was the end of a busy couple of days spent in court, and all she really wanted was a long, hot shower, a long cool drink and something to eat.

She quickly stowed the groceries, salad vegetables, butter, a bottle of mineral water, a carafe of dry white wine and a carton of fresh milk in the refrigerator, coffee beans, herb tea and a packet of breakfast cereal in the cupboard just above the refrigerator, fresh carrots, potatoes and a head of cabbage in the vegetable rack beside the door.

That job completed, she went back through the living room, kicking off her shoes as she hit the bedroom, then continued on into the bathroom, where she reached inside the shower stall and turned on the hot faucet, full blast.

As the bathroom filled with steam, she quickly stripped out of her work clothes, and ducked under the refreshing jet of hot water, allowing it to ease the tension out of her neck, back and shoulders, washing away the strain of the day.

At least this shower was more beneficial than the one she had been forced to take on Tuesday night. The cold water and then the cool sheets of her bed doing little to cool her ardour - and sleep had been a long time coming, and so had peace of mind.

In a way, she had been relieved to be so busy with court work. At least it had kept her mind off the

events of Tuesday evening - the last time that she had seen Vincent. And his strange reaction to...

That kiss...

As the water cascaded over her body, and she reached out blindly for shampoo to rub into her hair, she allowed her mind to return to the events of the other evening.

Vincent's expression...

For one awful moment, she had thought that she had frightened him off, and had later cursed herself for her carelessness and wanton behaviour.

Vincent was a much more subtle soul than she was used to dealing with, and she now realized that her approach had been tantamount to caveman tactics - beating him over the head with a big stick and dragging him away to her lair, by the hair!

This brought a smile to her lips, as she rinsed soap from her hair.

Poor Vincent...

She had shocked him with her ardour.... of that she was quite sure.

But there was something more....

Of course, she understood completely, his concern for her safety.

Found it touching..

Yes, he was a big man, and he did have those incredibly big hands – paws - with very sharp claws - but, she had never known anything but gentleness and tenderness from them. She had never felt in the least bit threatened or in danger from them. And hadn't Vincent himself always said that he could never hurt her?

Obviously he had meant in the course of ordinary events.....

She was out of the shower now, and towelling herself down with a warm, fluffy, soft pink towel, her mind not on the task at hand, but on the image of those big hands, caressing her naked flesh.

What would it feel like ... their downy softness tracing lightly all over her body?

She let out a low moan, her eyes flying open as she leaned heavily against the commode.

"Dammit Chandler, quit that, it's not helping..." she panted, disgusted with her lack of self control. **"You'll catch pneumonia if you have to take another cold shower!"** She told herself sternly, and after pulling on a soft baby blue towelling robe, turned her attention to towel drying her long blonde hair.

She tried to think seriously about what she was embarking upon - a sexual relationship with Vincent. The thought made her smile. She felt like a teenager again.

Ah love... It was so wonderful.

And so different every time..

With Vincent, sex would be...

Unique....

She knew it..

But..

You can't just allow yourself to think of the pleasure, Chandler, she told herself sternly.

You have got to go into this relationship with your eyes wide open... the same as you would with any other...

And that meant... Considering the consequences of a union with Vincent. The very real possibility that she might conceive a child... a baby....

She stopped rubbing her hair with the towel and looked down at her flat belly, imagining the growing bump there that would be the very physical evidence of her love for Vincent. His child, living, growing within her body.....

Yes. What could be more natural?

A child exactly like Vincent? A miracle child. An extraordinary child. Their child. Conceived of love.

Oh yes...

What could be more natural indeed?

She smiled softly, letting out a deep sigh.

But this won't do, Chandler! The man is already afraid of the consequences of so much as kissing you!

If he thought for one moment that he might get you pregnant, he'd head for the hills!

You can't afford to think like that.

Vincent would be happy. He would be delighted. He would be.... in awe....

But she couldn't allow her mind to dwell on such things... and not expect him to pick up on them.

Their situation was already complicated enough.

One thing at a time, Chandler.

One thing at a time...

If Vincent did come to her terrace tonight, she wanted to be in control of her emotions. She wanted to put him at his ease, help him to relax, not put even more pressure on him with her wayward thoughts.

Dressed in her running sweats now, in the kitchen, she pulled out the makings of a salad and heated a portion of lasagne from the ice box, sipping at a glass of dry white wine, crisp and biting to her tongue, as she fixed her supper.

Yet, even as she worked, slowly and methodically, washing and slicing salad vegetables, Catherine continued to think about Vincent.

Something else had frightened him, forced him to back off, something other than her forwardness, and his concern for her safety.

A moment that should have been magical and joyous, had ended in embarrassment and awkwardness, like a pair of teenagers, guilty and ashamed about their natural curiosity and the fumbling exploration of each other's bodies.

Vincent's physical reaction to her closeness was unmistakable. She knew male arousal when she saw it - felt it...

A shudder ran down her spine at the memory of the feel of him against her, of the realization of the power that she had over this otherwise powerful and rigidly-controlled man.

And, she recalled, popping a slice of tomato into her mouth, before pouring dressing over her salad, that it had been at that moment that Vincent had withdrawn and broken the kiss.

Had he been ashamed of his body's reaction to her?

She sat at the table in her small dining area, her gaze inevitably drawn to the French windows, and the terrace beyond, but she suspected that he wouldn't come, not tonight.

Tomorrow, they were meant to be going to the Elgar evening in the park, but she couldn't help wondering if Vincent would find it a more noble act to stay away from her.

Damn him and his nobility!

She wished that she could talk to him - she needed to talk to him, to clear the air, to put things right, back the way they were...

But, deep down inside, she knew that that would do no good.

They had stepped over the line between simple, platonic friendship, and things would never be the same again.

Their friendship had lost its naivete, its innocence. Each was aware of the other on a different level now. Now they were both aware that the other had deeper needs.

With her dinner suddenly tasting like ashes in her mouth, Catherine discarded the remains of her meal, and after washing the dishes, and leaving them to drain, she pulled on her gardening gloves and retrieved the broom and secateurs from the broom cupboard and made her way out to the terrace.

The evening was quite warm, the city lights as bright and alluring as ever, the sounds of traffic on the street below soft and soothing.

Her rose bush had been looking a little sorry for itself, she had noticed the other morning, whilst drinking coffee out here, watching the sun rise after Vincent had left her.....

It had rained since then, and the bush had perked up a little, although it could do with a little maintenance, she decided.

Catherine set to her task with care, pruning off the dead wood and cutting back the bush that had flourished in such a short time, nipping off dead blooms, bringing fresh ones carefully to her nose to breathe in their beautiful fragrance.

She suddenly became aware of his presence behind her, and took in a deep, calming breath.

"Hello, Vincent."

"Catherine...Your roses are very beautiful."

"I am just now learning that I have a green thumb." She rose slowly to her full height and turned around to face him. "I thought our date was tomorrow night - the Elgar concert?"

"Yes." A frown tugged at his heavy brow, sensing that she was in a very strange mood. "I came to tell you that I will meet you in the basement at 7:00 pm," he told her in soft tones, suddenly feeling very awkward, not even sure if she was pleased to see him.

"Okay."

"Catherine...," he beseeched.

"No, Vincent." She stopped his advance with a steely determination in her voice.

"Catherine, please, I need to talk to you."

So did she, but, suddenly, she was very angry with him, irrationally so, she acknowledged on some very deep subconscious level, but angry nonetheless. What gave him the right to turn up like this and set her pulse racing, turn her knees to jello, and cause her heart to thunder in her ears! It wasn't fair, dammit - it just wasn't fair!

Standing there, looking innocent as a newborn babe...

What was she going to do with him!

She knew what she would like to do with him... To him.....

"I... don't want to talk, Vincent... so..." She took a step backward and reached for the broom which was leaning against the balcony wall, pulling it to her. **"...unless you've come to take some action... instead of just talking about it... or better yet, totally avoiding the subject..."**

She lifted the broom in front of her, its head aimed directly at his knees, taking a step forward now. **"I suggest that you leave, Vincent... right now."** Her voice was low and intense as she advanced on him with the broom, watching his expression change to one of disbelief, as he sensed what she was about to do. **"Go on... go..."** She waved the broom at him, head first. **"Shoo... scat..."**

He was having to back up now, or else feel contact with the bristled broom head. **"And don't come back until you're ready to ravish me until I'm breathless, Vincent!"** She railed, breathing heavily, losing the battle not to give into a smile at the look of indignation on his beautiful, bemused face.

"Catherine...."

"Go, Vincent... before I do something that we'll both regret."

She lifted the broom once more, waving it at his chest, as she climbed up onto the balcony wall.

"Tomorrow?" He dared to inquire, and she couldn't help admiring his audacity. Only Vincent could ask something like that in a situation like this!

"Don't hold your breath...."

"Catherine..."

"Wait and see, Vincent," she said with a deep sigh, lowering the broom at last. His face was a picture... a sight she would remember to her dying day!

"I'll be there, Catherine..." he said softly, before disappearing into the shadows.

"I'm sorry...", she whispered after him.

Instead of giving into her mirth, Catherine burst into tears, great gulping sobs wracking her slender body, as she gathered her gloves and the rose clippers and the broom, and hurried back inside, closing the French windows on the man that she loved with a decisive click.

She dropped the gardening paraphernalia and rushed to the bedroom, where she flung herself face down on the bed and buried her face in one of the soft, white, lace frilled pillows, her heart heavy as she berated herself for spoiling the one beautiful thing in her life.....

God, they had to do something.....and soon.....she couldn't go on like this much longer.....after all.....she was only human.....

Up on the roof of her building, Vincent gazed absently out at the city lights, his thoughts in total confusion.

What on Earth had he done to deserve that?

Her anger had been so... irrational.

Even now, he could sense her pain, despair, knew that she was crying, aching with a need to tell him that she was sorry, that she hadn't meant it... And a different kind of need...

She had been so overwrought by her need of him, her frustration, that she had given into the need to show him exactly the opposite - that she didn't need him ... want him.

Her behaviour was so out of character, but, he now realized - she was incredibly beautiful when

she was angry...

Still, he thought with a deep sigh, it wasn't exactly his most *triumphant* hour! Set upon by a wild woman with a broom!

That was a first. Ah, so many *firsts* with Catherine. Already shared... And still to look forward to. And, despite his consternation and chagrin, he could not help a smile from lifting his features, and a soft bubble of laughter caught in his throat.

Was her sense of humour, her sense of the absurd, infectious?

Oh, he hoped so. He really hoped so, because he was going to need a sense of humour - and more than a grain or two of patience, to explain this latest escapade to Father. Jacob was going to have a bal. Of that he could be sure.

And it would take a lot of living down, if indeed he ever could live this down.

Vincent was still smiling softly as he gathered his cloak about him, and carefully made his way back Below.

"Vincent... You're back early." Father commented softly, lifting his gaze from the copy of Leo Tolstoy's Anna Karenina, a particular favourite of his for many years, and regarded his son with a frown.

"Yes, Father...", Vincent sighed, pulling back his capacious hood and shrugging off his cloak. "Care for a game of chess?"

"Mmmmm? Oh, no, not tonight...", Father regarded Vincent, and noted that there was something different about his expression – wistful, but with a hint of ... amusement. "How is Catherine this evening?"

"Catherine is....," Vincent faltered, toying with the idea of sparing himself this new humiliation.

"Yes?" Father arched an eyebrow in inquiry.

"In a very strange mood..."

"Oh?"

"She seemed... less than happy to see me."

"I see."

"I could feel her... exasperation... but I had no idea why."

Father had a pretty good idea, but he kept his own council.

"I was not prepared for her reaction...", Vincent confessed.

"What reaction?" Father quizzed.

"She..." Vincent faltered again.

"Mmmmm?"

"She... she... shooed me away with a broom... and told me not to return until I was ready to ravish her until she was breathless."

It was all Father could do to restrain himself from throwing back his head and roaring with laughter. He could just picture the scene so clearly...

Poor Vincent...

This woman that he loved so much, certainly knew how to disconcert him....

"Thank you, Father..." Vincent crossed the room, and pressed a soft kiss to the top of Father's head, whilst the older man tried, without success, to quell his mirth, choking on laughter until he could hold it in no longer, exploding from him in a great shout.

"Vincent.. my boy..."

"Thank you for not disappointing me, Father..." Vincent rolled his eyes heavenward, and let out a soft sigh.

"I'm sorry,," Father sputtered, trying to pull himself together, knuckling away an errant tear. "I didn't mean to be so... insensitive... but... oh my... oh my..."

"Good night, Father." Vincent picked up his cloak, letting out a sigh of resignation, knowing that he would get little sense from the older man until his laughter had run its course.

"Vincent, don't go, please..." Father made a visible effort to pull himself together now. "I'm sorry...." He took a deep breath, knuckling away another tear. "Please, we'll talk..."

"What is there to say?" Vincent shrugged absently, draping his cloak over his shoulder.

"Quite a lot, I would have thought." This brought a frown to Vincent's heavy brow. "Do you understand why Catherine reacted like that?" Father asked, dabbing a small red and white spotted handkerchief to his cheek, to mop up the last of his tears of mirth.

"No...", Vincent confessed on a sigh. "I do not."

"Was she expecting you this evening? Did you have plans?"

"Well, no..."

"So, you just turned up, and expected her to be ready to talk things out with you?"

"Yes..."

"And she refused to.... accommodate you?" Vincent nodded. "She got angry with you?"

"I think we have already established that, Father. Catherine would not normally chase me away with a broom, if she were not angry..."

"Quite, but, I'm not surprised she got angry... if you will insist on prowling around her neighbourhood like the local tom cat looking for an accommodating Queen!"

"Father!" Vincent exploded indignantly.

"Vincent, there is such a thing as subtly..."

"I know..."

"Let me tell you why Catherine reacted the way she did. It probably has something to do with the other evening... when you kissed..."

Vincent's frown grew more pronounced.

"Vincent....." He could hear the exasperation in Father's voice now too. "Where is your common sense these days? On vacation? Catherine is a woman in love, with certain needs."

Father regarded his son, but could see that he was missing the point. **"Damnation, Vincent. You can't toy with her emotions and then leave her dangling!"** He roared. **"You called it exasperation, but Vincent, it's probably more like sexual frustration!"**

"Father! Please!"

"No, Vincent, don't you understand? It is time to make the decision that you have been putting off, before Catherine has no other choice but to find fulfillment and satisfaction somewhere else..."

Unable to believe Father's candour, Vincent's bottom jaw dropped open in shock. His expression was a picture that Father committed to memory instantly, before Vincent turned on his heel and suddenly took his leave.

"You can't run away from this, Vincent - you can't hide from your destiny!" Father called after Vincent, amusement dancing in his eyes, as he recalled the poor boy's poleaxed expression.

This was certainly not an easy time for Vincent... And now, perhaps, he realized that it was not easy on Catherine either.

Father usually didn't like interfering in the lives of those people he loved, mainly because that might lead them to believe that they had the right to do the same for him, but, as one of Vincent's more powerful roars reverberated through the tunnels and echoed off the walls of his chamber like thunder, Jacob, flinching, made a decision.

Like it or not, the boy had to be given a push. And, maybe Catherine needed to be made aware of a few facts too. For both their sakes - and the sake of all the people close to them.

Her note came very early the next morning, delivered into his hand by a breathless young boy named Eric.

Vincent opened the neatly folded slip of pink paper, scented with a subtle hint of rose water, and read the hastily scribbled note, duly noting the smudge where a tear had splotched the still fresh ink....

Vincent...

So Sorry...Please forgive me...

Tonight? Elgar? The usual place-- 7pm

I love you

Catherine XXXXXXXX

His heart felt as if a lead weight had been lifted from it, as he read her brief, but heartfelt words, sensing the truth in the apology, and he let out a deep sigh as he slipped the paper inside the front cover of the book he had been reading, then went off to join the others for breakfast, feeling a little more like his usual self. A hearty breakfast was what he needed, to put him right for the day ahead, in which he planned to inspect the damage to the lower tunnels, with Mouse.

Just another ordinary day below.

But tonight....

Mouse kept him occupied over the meal, so much so that Vincent did not notice that Father was absent, until they were almost ready to begin their journey, and Mouse was mithering him so much about hurrying up, that he did not have a chance to ask William or Mary where Father was, as he and Mouse set out for the lower tunnels and chambers.

Catherine hurriedly pulled on her boots and sipped a cup of strong black coffee on the run.

She was running late for work, having spent a rough night, tossing and turning one minute, and lying awake, staring at the ceiling, silent tears spilling down over her cheeks, the next.

It had been well into the early hours before she had fallen into a fitful slumber, her dreams filled with Vincent's accusing deep blue eyes and scornful expression.

As soon as she got out of bed, at the crack of dawn, she had penned the note to Vincent, more

unexplained tears rolling down her chin to drip onto the paper.

The quick trip down to the basement in her jogging sweats, should anyone see her, was what had made her so late, and she had only had time for a quick shower, before pulling on a pretty black pin-striped, calf length pencil skirt, plain white blouse, and matching pin-striped waistcoat, black nylons and black high-heeled boots. She looked very businesslike and sombre, and the dark smudges beneath her eyes bespoke of her restless night, and the recent bout of weeping.

With time enough only to roughly pull a comb through her hair, and apply a light coating of coral lipstick to her lips, before grabbing her bag and coat, Catherine knew that breakfast would have to wait... if, indeed, she could stomach anything at all.

As she pulled open her front door, Catherine let out a startled little gasp of surprise as she barrelled into Jacob Wells, and almost knocked him off his feet.

"Father..."

"Good morning, Catherine." He greeted her cordially, raising his hat to her politely. He looked surprisingly handsome in a soft grey suit, white shirt, matching grey tie, and of course, the hat.

"Is something wrong?" She asked in a shaky voice. "Vincent..."

"May I come in?" he asked softly, noting her wide, red rimmed green eyes, looking large and forlorn in her very pale face.

"Well, I was just on my way to work...."

"I really must speak with you, Catherine." His earnest expression, and the very fact that he was here at all, spoke volumes, and Catherine knew that she had no choice.

"Of course, please, come in..."

Catherine pushed open the door and waved Father in over the threshold, then followed him in and closed the door behind her and secured the dead bolts.

"Please, sit down," she invited, indicating the small two-seater couch. He nodded gently, and eased his old bones down into the soft, deep cushions. Catherine remained standing, feeling slightly intimidated at his being here, in her home. "Can I get you something to drink?"

"No, thank you. If you don't mind, I'd like to get straight to the point, if I may?"

"Of course." Catherine sank down on the couch opposite him, folding her hands neatly in her lap, and watched Jacob Wells play nervously with the tip of his walking stick.

"My son, tells me that... er... you... er... had a slight altercation last night..." His gaze travelled toward the French windows. "He tells me that you set about him with... a broom."

"Guilty as charged." Catherine regarded Father with big, forlorn green eyes.

"That was very... brave of you, my dear," Jacob Wells bestowed a warm smile on her.

Catherine let out a deep sigh of relief.

"Thank you. Is he...all right?"

"He's fine. A little bewildered.... and embarrassed... but he'll survive."

"I don't know why I reacted that way...", she began.

"Yes, you do, Catherine," Jacob said softly, cutting her off. "You love Vincent, for good or bad, and... you quite naturally want more from the relationship."

Jacob watched a delicate flush stain her cheeks, but she did not deny the truth in his words.

"I'm rather afraid the boy is a little slow on the uptake..." He smiled ruefully, a twinkle of amusement

in his eyes, and Catherine could see that he was having a wonderful time with this. "You are a very lovely woman, Catherine... and if I were a year or two younger, I'd give Vincent a run for his money..."

"Flatterer." She chuckled softly.

"Catherine, may I be candid with you?"

"Of course. I'm glad someone is prepared to talk to me," she confessed sadly.

"My dear, Vincent is not... he is not as other men... part of him is a man.... the other... well, who can say?" He paused for a moment, then took a deep breath before continuing. "Vincent is not worldly, Catherine. Do you understand?"

"No."

"Catherine, you are.... the first..."

"The first?" She frowned.

"Yes... and I think that you should be aware of certain things..."

"Things?"

"Catherine, I know that you are tired, and overwrought, my dear, but you're not usually this vacant..."

"I'm sorry, Father."

"Vincent... Vincent is an innocent... in every sense..."

"He's not as innocent as all that, Father." She smiled shyly.

"Yes, Catherine, he is." Jacob insisted.

"Are you trying to tell me that Vincent is...." Her voice trailed away, and her eyes grew wide in disbelief.

"A virgin? Yes, my dear. Quite probably."

"Oh, my..."

"Oh, my, is right, Catherine. You've thrown him into quite a tailspin, I can tell you."

"I... I..."

"Catherine, these new feelings, these new desires ... he is finding it quite difficult to come to terms with them..."

"I had no idea...." Catherine sat back on the couch with a deep sigh.

"Really?" Jacob quizzed, arching an eyebrow.

"Well, I did wonder..." She confessed, lowering her gaze.

"Catherine..." Father sat forward carefully in his seat, leaning heavily against his walking stick as he reached out with the other hand to gently rest it against Catherine's. "I know that I haven't been as supportive as I could have been. I have made my doubts known to you, but only because I was concerned for him, and for you... But now..." He let out a deep sigh. "...faced with this new dilemma, I cannot say that I don't have my worries, but what can I do? He has to live his life his way, and he has to be the best kind of man that he can be."

He paused again, briefly and Catherine watched the different play of emotions cross his face, and knew that his worry and love for Vincent were genuine, and knew that this coming here to her... could not have been easy for him.

"I have never held him back... and... no... I haven't always approved of his life choices but, as a parent, I know that I have to let him do as he must, and be there for him, when he needs me."

"Tell me, Father. I love him too...."

"I don't doubt that," he confessed, and Catherine could see that it cost him dearly. "Catherine, Vincent's main concern is that he will hurt you...."

"I know that...," she acknowledged softly.

"And.. it is quite possible that in the throes of passion... well... that he could indeed hurt you. He is very strong, my dear, I know from experience... and I do not think that you would have the strength to deal with him, if things got... out of hand..."

"No, Father. You're wrong. Vincent could never hurt me.....never....," she insisted.

"But you should be aware that that is paramount in his mind, Catherine." He paused briefly. "And there are other considerations, physical considerations... to you, my dear."

Catherine tilted her head slightly on one side, bird like, and regarded him thoughtfully.

"Vincent is a big man... very strong... and he is also well-proportioned... well-endowed. What's the expression the young people are using these days? Ah yes, well hung." Again he noted the soft stain of colour in Catherine's cheeks.

"Father, please. I don't think we should be talking about Vincent like this behind his back," she protested.

"My point, my dear, is that you are very small, and I am not even sure that ... well... that the intimacy that you crave, is even possible."

"Father, with love, all things are possible. I promise that I will be tender, patient and understanding."

"Then I will ask no more, except, be sure and don't rush him if, as it seems, you are determined to at least try..."

"Yes."

"I had to make you aware, Catherine..."

"I know. Thank you."

"There is one other thing. Should you fall pregnant - I mean I'm not even sure that his DNA would be compatible with yours... that he is even capable... but..."

"I would be the happiest woman alive, Father." Catherine assured softly, her sincerity genuine. How could he think that she could ever contemplate taking their relationship one step further, without having considered the outcome? "A child... like Vincent.... I would be truly blessed."

"You really have thought about this, haven't you?"

"Yes."

"And it means that much to you?"

"Yes, Father. What could be more natural? What woman doesn't want her sons to be like their father... look like their father?"

"You are an incredible woman, Catherine Chandler, and my son is very lucky..."

"No, Father, I am the lucky one, and I will never forget that."

"Well, I should go. You're going to be late for work..."

"I don't care about that, Father..."

"I'm glad we had this little chat, my dear.."

"So am I.... I promise I won't hurt him. I love him."

"I know. So do I. We have that much in common, at least..."

Jacob rose from his seat on the couch and walked stiffly across the room.

"You may like to know that I admonished him for his behaviour."

Catherine frowned.

"Coming to see you last night was probably not the best idea. In fact, I told him that your reaction was quite reasonable, in the light of his prowling around the neighbourhood like the local tom cat."

"Father...." Catherine exclaimed, but could not prevent a smile from touching her lips.

Poor Vincent. It really hadn't been his night.....

"Catherine, give the boy time. I have discovered over the years, that the penny does eventually drop."

They both smiled at this.

"Thank you, Father." Catherine rose from her seat on the couch, crossed the room, and pressed a soft kiss to his bewhiskered cheek. "Be well."

"You too, Catherine. You too."

The day was a long and grueling one for both Vincent and Catherine. She finding a stack of files a mile high on her desk when she arrived at the office, fifty minutes late, and Joe Maxwell, her boss, didn't even bother to wait for her to take her coat off before sending her out to Queens, to take a vital statement from a very frail old lady who had witnessed a gang of youths, murdering a youth from a rival gang in a knife fight.

Vincent had trekked to the very bowels of his world, with Mouse in tow, who insisted on nattering away about Arthur, his raccoon, and the latest neat invention that he was working on that would prove vital to the community Below.

Vincent had only been half-listening, but knew from past experience that Mouse was only too pleased to have a captive audience.

Together, they had assessed the damage to the lower tunnels, and decided which were top priority for repairs, and while Mouse recited a list of materials that they would need to do the job, Vincent obligingly scribbled them down on a rough piece of paper.

It was late when they started back toward the home tunnels, and, saying a fond farewell to Mouse, Vincent knew that by the time he had made his preliminary report to Father, he would have time only to change his dusty clothes and brush his hair, before he would have to leave to keep his appointment with Catherine and Sir Edward Elgar.

For Catherine, the bus ride home was a nightmare, her car in the shop having the brakes fixed, and to cap it all, she broke the heel on her practically new pair of boots as she got off the bus, having to alternately hop and shuffle her way to her apartment building, cursing in a most unladylike manner, under her breath, as she entered the lobby and then the elevator, where she immediately pulled off her ruined boots.

She hurriedly changed her clothes, pulling on blue jeans and a lavender sweater over a pastel blue blouse, and sneakers, then a lightweight jacket, in the pocket of which she placed a torch, and at five after seven, pulled her door closed behind her and set out for the basement, ever watchful, in case anyone should take an interest in her destination.

She climbed carefully down the ladder and passed through the eerie beam of blue/white light, the threshold that divided his world from hers.

Vincent was standing just beyond the opening in the brickwork, just beyond the light, his face in shadow, his expression unreadable.

Catherine came to a halt, unsure of the reception that she would get, knowing that he had every right to be angry and upset with her, after her behaviour last night.

He didn't move toward her either wary.

If it wasn't so damned heartbreaking, Catherine thought to herself, it would be funny.

Maybe humour was the way to go, she pondered.

"Vincent..."

"Catherine..."

Well, that didn't help. She got no hint of his mood from his voice.

"It's okay, Vincent. I left the broom at home." She grinned, willing him to follow where she led.

"I am glad. It would have been a most unwelcome guest this evening," he said dryly, as he stepped into the light, and beneath the hood of his cloak, and his fluffy fringe and bangs, she could see a sparkle of amusement in his eyes.

She couldn't help marvelling at him. His sense of humour was coming along very nicely.

"Vincent... I'm so sorry. I don't know what came over me." The apology came out in a rush.

"Forgive me," her eyes beseeched.

"Anything." The word came out on the merest whisper.

She came to him then, throwing her arms around him briefly, and received a warm squeeze from him in return, before drawing away.

"I'm sorry."

"I know. Let's not speak of it again. Elgar awaits."

Catherine made no further comment, knowing that he had firmly closed the door on that opportunity to talk things through.

They walked together, aide by side, not touching, silent, thoughtful, and sat apart, as they listened to Ysobel, Troyte, Nimrod and Romanza, then they walked back to her basement, talking quietly about their day, their friends, Father, Mouse, anything except what really hung between them, both subdued, both wanting to reach out to the other, but neither one brave enough... afraid of the consequences.

They parted without even embracing, and Catherine forced herself to walk away from him without looking back, tears streaming down her face as she carried a heart as cold and heavy as stone back up the ladder to her basement.

It was a most unsatisfactory state of affairs, for both of them, but she had decided that it would be best for both of them if she did not touch him, encourage him...

Being in his arms were sweet torture, so inflammatory...

She couldn't trust herself not to get carried away - and that would only pile on the pressure.

No.

Vincent would have to be the one to come to her, tell her, no, show her that he was indeed ready to take the next step.

If it were the other way around, she knew that he would respect her enough to allow her time to make an informed decision, without pressure.

She heard his low, "Goodnight, Catherine," just as she reached the top of the ladder, and very softly mumbled in return.

"I love you, Vincent....."

Parting is such sweet sorrow.....

The words echoed around Vincent's mind as he sensed her slow return to her apartment, her sorrow, her dissatisfaction with their time spent together, and something more...

Her resolve... to allow him time and space to make a decision about what he wanted from their relationship.

With a heavy heart, Vincent forced himself to walk away, returning to the home tunnels by the longest, most winding route he knew, passing the time of day with a couple of sentries on the way, before finally arriving at his own chamber.

He shrugged out of his cloak, and draped it neatly across the end of the bed, where he once again noticed a small pile of books.

He had seen them earlier, when he had returned from his inspection tour with Mouse, but had been in such a rush to get to his meeting with Catherine, on time, he had dismissed them from his mind until later.

Now, he looked at the pile, noting that they hardly looked as if they had been read.

Curiosity getting the better of him, and finding himself in need of a distraction or two, Vincent idly picked up the book from the top of the pile and thumbed through it absently.

Almost immediately, he dropped the volume, as though it had burned his fingers, and he let out a loud rumble of disgust.

Angry and embarrassed, Vincent scanned the titles of the remainder of the piles of books, feeling his heart sink, and his innards tighten.

"Father..." he hissed in outrage, hardly able to believe his father's tenacity in this.

Father, in his usual less than subtle way, had gathered together all the sex education material from his library that he could find! Quite a selection to satisfy the curiosity of your average horny teenager!

Vincent let out a roar of anger, and spent the remainder of the evening staring at the pile of books, alternating between the urge to throw them across the chamber in disgust, or gathering them up and taking them back to Father, and put him on the spot with some particularly embarrassing questions...

Except that Jacob Wells was a very good physician, and would probably have no qualms about telling him the answers, in graphic detail!

The books remained on his bed, all that Friday night, untouched, until at first light, sick of the sight of them, and tired of willing them to burst into flames of their own volition.

And... disgusted with himself for his weakness... Vincent finally gave into his curiosity.

He had always prided himself on being a good student, a quick study, and despite the acute embarrassment burning in his cheeks, he studied the very graphic pictures contained within the pages of a half-dozen sex manuals, and then, in the hope that no one would see him, he concealed the pile of books within the folds of his capacious cloak, and slunk quickly from his

chamber, to Father's.

"Ah, Vincent... Finished those already?" Jacob Wells's voice made Vincent jump, almost dropping the books as he tried to find a fitting place to put them, away from innocent prying eyes, and before they burned a hole in his chest.

"Father...", Vincent turned on the other man, thrusting the offending pile of books at him.

"Did you find them of any help?" Jacob inquired innocently.

"Father ... this is... .intolerable....," Vincent seethed.

"Really? They're supposed to be the best educational guides on the market today," Jacob continued unabashed. "Have to admit that even I learned a thing or two," He confessed without any visible sign of embarrassment. "If you're done with those, you might find these interesting." He pointed to an even larger pile of books on the corner of his desk.

"Father..." Vincent's tone was beseeching now. "Please..."

"Oh, come on, Vincent... I went to a lot of trouble... Did you even bother to look at them?"

"Yes," Vincent snarled. **"Is that how you are teaching our children about..."**

"Sex?"

"Yes."

"Yes." Father's bland reply made Vincent seethe.

"How could you?"

"Vincent, they're learning about a very important part of life... of growing up. I would be derelict in my duty as a parent, and a teacher, if I did not give my students a thorough grounding in the subject."

"With this... pornography!"

"It is not pornography, Vincent..." Father sighed heavily. "Innocent child..., how have you survived in this cruel world all these years?" Father rolled his eyes heavenward. "Vincent, you know how babies are conceived, you know the biology of how ovum and sperm come together, divide, divide again to form an embryo. Did you think that it was a cold, clinical thing? Haven't you read enough romantic literature over the years to know that there are feelings involved, emotions, necessary physical responses?"

"But, Father..."

"Vincent, there is nothing trivial or titillating about the information in those books. They are meant to throw a little light on a very personal and confusing issue. If you didn't get that much from the text, Vincent, then perhaps you should go back and read them again."

Father thrust the pile of books back at Vincent. "You should know better, Vincent. I will not tolerate ignorance, but even in the course of enlightenment, I will not tolerate coarseness or smut or sordid, disreputable trash as a source of learning. Our young people are learning about something intense, and incredibly personal. I would not trivialize that. There is nothing dirty about making love, Vincent, **so step out of the dark ages and get with the times!**"

Vincent stood rooted to the spot, with his bottom jaw hanging open, as he watched Father hobble and shuffle over to the table where his chessboard was laid out ready for a new game.

Father's attitude amazed and astounded Vincent.

"I know, Vincent..." Jacob Wells sighed deeply as he sat down at his chessboard and studied his men. "There was nothing quite like that around when you were a boy.... Perhaps if there had been,

I wouldn't have raised a prude, and you wouldn't be quite so ignorant and embarrassed now."

He regarded the younger man, who had recovered enough of his wits to close his mouth, and had begun pacing back and forth.

"That talk we had, twenty years ago, Vincent - the one I mentioned to you the other night - perhaps if you hadn't concentrated so hard on learning the medical terminology..." Then in exasperation. Oh, don't be such a prude, Vincent. Improve your mind... and don't be afraid, or ashamed to ask questions... if there is something that you don't understand."

"Father... it is you that I don't understand!" Vincent muttered darkly.

"Why? Because I want you to be the best kind of man that you can be? Because I want to help you to face the hardest choice that you have ever had to make, with all the facts, so that you can make an informed decision? That is what being a good parent is all about... something you will never discover for yourself... if you can't overcome this, Vincent." Father sat back and sighed dejectedly.

Would the boy ever stop fighting him? Would he ever learn to give in graciously?

"Run along, Vincent. There's a good man. Oh, and I'll need those books back by Monday. I have a lifestyles class in the afternoon."

Vincent let out a snort of indignation, concealing the books once more in the folds of his cloak, before slinking away to his own chamber once more.

"I couldn't help overhearing. You were a little hard on him, weren't you?" A soft female voice broke the silence after Vincent's departure.

"Ah, Mary." Father smiled at the still attractive older woman entering his chamber on soft, silent feet to bring him a cup of steaming tea. "Sometimes we have to be cruel to be kind," Jacob remarked, regarding her open, relaxed expression.

"He's a little old to be going through something like this. At his age, shouldn't he be ... menopausal?" She smiled coyly, and Jacob found it most becoming.

"Ah... not quite... yet. Let's just say that he is something of a late developer." Jacob smiled, taking a sip of his tea. "Mmmmm, good tea." He smiled appreciatively. "Just the way I like it."

"Vincent won't thank you for embarrassing him, Father, treating him like an adolescent. He is a lot more mature than the young people who use those books to broaden their minds," she reminded him gently.

"And with all that age, and superior intellect, the boy is still a narrow-minded prude!" Jacob retorted. "And I will have none of it! I'm thinking of his mental health, as well as his physical well-being... and Catherine's too."

"Oh?"

"Yes. She is beginning to feel the strain, Mary, after all, she is only human... with all the needs and drives, and weaknesses that make us what we are. Did I tell you what happened the other evening?"

"No, but I have a feeling that you are about to..."

"Well.....she set about him with a broom, and told him not to come back until he was ready to ravish her until she was breathless!" He chuckled.

"Oh, my. Poor Vincent."

"And poor Catherine. Mary, I despair of the pair of them, but if Vincent can't deal with this, what future do they have?"

"No one can answer that, Father..."

"Oh, Mary. I'm not so old that I can't remember the wonders of discovering love, the joys of love making. Is it so wrong of me to want Vincent to discover those things for himself? He's obviously ready to deal with it now, if he's honest with himself, and I wouldn't be making such a fuss about it, if I didn't believe that he could handle it, that he is ready for such a big step..."

"I just hope it doesn't all end in tears.," Mary sighed softly.

"Doesn't it always?" Jacob commented wryly, and Mary nodded sagely. "But he will be the better for it. Mark my words, Mary. This could be the making of him."

"And what if Catherine falls pregnant?"

"I'm not even sure if that is possible, Mary. Who knows if the components are compatible, but I doubt that that is what at the heart of this. Still, I have asked Catherine that same question, and she told me, quite frankly, that there would be nothing more natural to her than to have a child who looks like his father."

"Catherine is a remarkable woman."

"Yes, and one who has a good old fashioned case of *lust* - the need to express emotions in the age old way... and if there is a child, well, it wouldn't be easy, but we've done it before, you and I, and of course, the young people would be there to take the strain. I don't think it would be hard to love any child produced by these two young people..."

"But would it be wise, Father? Would it be fair? It could destroy them both. How would we feel, how would we live with ourselves, if we could have prevented it?"

"I see the dangers ahead, Mary, I really do, but I have never tried to stop Vincent from being the kind of man that he has to be, no matter what the pitfalls, no matter what the dangers."

Father sighed deeply. "No Mary, for better or worse, Vincent has to live the life that has been ordained for him. Whatever will be, will be. Nothing you or I can do will change that."

"I suppose you're right..." Mary gently patted his hand. "Drink your tea. I will be in the hospital chamber for a while, checking supplies."

"Thank you, Mary."

"What for?" She regarded him innocently.

"For being Mary." He smiled softly, and watched as she blushed a becoming shade of pink, and hurried out of his chamber.

Ah Jacob... One of these days you are going to have to take your own advice...

Back in his chamber, Vincent paced back and forth in time to the rumble of a distant subway train and glared at the offending pile of books on the end of his bed. They still stubbornly refused to burst into flames, unmoved by his black thoughts against them.

When the prowling did not help, he sat down, his head in his hands, his body weary, but his mind in turmoil.

He knew what he must do... He just couldn't bring himself to do it... *Yet...*

Finally, he reached out for the first book, and forced himself to read, telling himself that it was just another project, like the essays that he sometimes wrote about the great works of literature that he enjoyed, or the book reports that he kept to help the children with their book projects, and that, ultimately, it may indeed, he grudgingly admitted to himself... help to bring him some peace of mind.

As he read, Vincent became more and more alarmed by his own ignorance... afraid to admit even to himself, that he was ashamed that he knew even less than the average teenage boys who shared his world, his life...

Father was right.

It was time that he remained ignorant and uneducated no longer!

After a while, Vincent found that if he didn't think about it too much, and approached the subject unemotionally, he could just about keep his mind to the task... and actually learn something!

At the end of another very long day, and night, Vincent closed the last book, and set it aside.

He had read every volume very carefully, pretending not to notice when Father had shuffled in with another pile of heavy tomes, covered in dust, leaving them on the bed, beside a tray of untouched food that Mouse had brought him earlier in the day, and removing the ones that he had discarded.

Vincent had been mightily relieved when Moue had paid him no heed, grateful that the younger man was used to seeing his friend with his nose buried in a book.... and it had been easy to distract him and then shoo him away.

Wisely, Father had made no comment about his apparent concentration on the subject matter, and fortunately, everyone else had left him well alone for the remainder of the day.

Setting the books aside, Vincent lay down on the bed and settled himself for sleep. He was very tired, not having slept for two nights, now, and nor had he been Above since Friday.

Catherine would think that he was avoiding her... And so he was...

And don't come back until you're ready to ravish me until I'm breathless....

Her words echoed in his mind. She would think that he had taken her words at face value

Still, at least next time he did see her, he would be more... knowledgable... than he had been last Tuesday. That gave him the feeling of being a little more in control of the situation.

Still, all this book learning, though broadening his mind, had not really helped him one jot in making the decision that he knew still had to be made.

Did he want to enter into a sexual relationship with Catherine?

Should he even consider such a step?

None of his fears about losing control, and hurting her, had been assuaged.

But the longer he stayed away, the more risk he ran that it would do irreparable harm to his relationship with Catherine.

Letting out a soft sigh, and pulling the covers up over his legs, he planned to sleep just for a couple of hours, and then, when he was refreshed, he would decide whether he would go Above tonight.

He settled back against the many pillows, and closed his eyes, welcoming sleep's tender embrace, and yet, even as he teetered on the brink of slumber, he could not help thinking that just for once, something in his life would be without peril, or complication... That he could just accept it as other men did, and take from the experience what he needed to make him stronger... that he could give to the woman that he loved, all that she needed to fulfill her...

Just once.....

Why couldn't something be simple?

Catherine spent the weekend quietly, but away from her apartment, out of temptation's way.

She went for a walk in Central Park on Saturday morning, before treating herself to lunch and a movie in the afternoon, then she met her friend Jenny for drinks in the evening, before going onto a charity piano recital with another old school friend, Mat Richardson, who had called her at the office late on Friday afternoon, to say that he would be in town over the weekend, and did she want to go out.

She had jumped at the chance.

Sunday, she stayed in bed until noon, eating toast in bed, and reading the newspapers, before dressing casually, and taking herself off to the Bronx Zoo, where she indulged in cotton candy and ice cream and then, in the early evening, she went ten pin bowling... watching young couples with their kids and wondered fleetingly what it would be like to share a life with the man she loved, and their children... before firmly quashing those thoughts, before her imagination presented her with a picture of Vincent's child cradled in her arms, staring up at her with those same beautiful sky blue eyes, full of love and trust ... and drowning her sorrows in a Big Mac and large fries, and a thick chocolate milk shake, not caring if the whole lot turned to fat and settled on her hips!

She had never felt so utterly miserable in her whole life. It wasn't meant to be like *this*.

She should be happy! Head over heels in love. Sharing a deep, passionate and abiding love....

And she shouldn't feel obliged to stay away from her home, just in case Vincent should decide to pay her a call... This was an utterly ridiculous state of affairs.

If *he* didn't do something, and damned soon, she might just have to take matters into her own hands! For the sake of her sanity, and her blood pressure!

Poor Vincent. He wouldn't know what had hit him.

No!

She had promised not to rush him. And just so long as there was cold water in the faucet, she could handle it! But she couldn't handle too many more weekends like this one!

And nor could her waistline!

Monday night. Where had the weekend gone, Vincent wondered as he took a deep breath and swung his cloak around his shoulders, his decision made.

He was going Above. He was going to see Catherine. He simply could not keep away any longer.

To do so would put unwanted strain on their relationship - and he didn't want that.

He wanted to see Catherine.

If he hadn't slept for fourteen hours straight, deeply, and mercifully dreamlessly, he would have gone to her sooner.

He told himself that it would be good to feel the cool, fresh night air on his face again, but he could not deny the lightness of his heart at the thought of seeing Catherine again.

As he strode purposefully out of his chamber, Vincent almost collided with Mouse.

"Vincent..... going Above?" The young man, his hair tousled, his clothes askew, observed, noting that Vincent was clad in his cloak, the hood drawn up over his hair.

"Yes, Mouse."

To Catherine?"

"Yes."

"Okay, good. Okay, fine." Mouse held his open palm out to Vincent, to reveal a marbled, delicate pink rock.

"Is this for Catherine?"

"Yes." Mouse held the palm-sized smooth rock, up to the nearest lantern, which suddenly highlighted delicate striations, pretty layers of coral and red and purple within. "Pretty, yes?"

"Yes, Mouse. Would you like me to take it to Catherine?"

"Okay, good. Okay, fine. Vincent, not forget to tell Catherine it's a gift from Mouse."

"No, Mouse. I won't forget." Vincent pocketed the rock, and squeezed Mouse gently on the shoulder.

"Think Catherine will like?"

"Yes, Mouse. I'm sure Catherine will like it."

"Neat. Be careful, Vincent."

"I will, Mouse."

"Gotta feed Arthur," Mouse mumbled and trotted off down the tunnel. Vincent watched his young friend go with a smile.

He hadn't gone more than ten strides down the hallway in the opposite direction to Mouse, when he met up with Jamie.

"Looking for Mouse?" he inquired politely, then noted the worried expression on her pretty young face.

"No...", she responded distractedly.

"Trouble?"

"I'm looking for Father. one of the children has a fever."

"Which one?"

"Molly." Vincent nodded. The child in question was only five years old, and prone to any minor ailment, and Father, Vincent knew, was concerned about her generally reduced immunity, in so much as it could have a more serious underlying cause.

'Have you tried his chamber?"

'Yes, and the library, and the hospital chamber...."

"He can't be far..." Vincent sighed, wondering what else would happen to prevent him continuing his journey Above this evening. "I will help you look."

"No, Vincent, it's all right. I can see that you are on your way out somewhere."

"I can spare a moment or two to help you, Jamie." Vincent sighed again, then heard a familiar, soft voice calling out his companion's name.

"It's all right, Jamie. I found him." Mary approached somewhat breathlessly. "He was in the kitchen chamber, begging tea and cookies from William." Mary smiled benignly. "He's with Molly now."

"Thank you, Mary. I'll go and give him a hand." Jamie, taking her newly-appointed duties in looking after the younger children in the evenings very seriously, hurried off down the tunnel.

This left Vincent and Mary alone.

"How have you been, Mary?" Vincent inquired politely as they began to walk slowly, side by side.

"Old, Vincent." Mary smiled ruefully. "Since this last winter, I feel my age more every day."

"I, too..."

"You?" Mary scoffed lightly. "You're still a young man, Vincent." She lightly touched his cheek. "And more handsome every day."

"Flatterer." Vincent's voice was husky with amusement.

"Nonsense, my boy. I may be feeling my age, but there's nothing wrong with my eyesight. It's not difficult to see why Catherine loves you so much." She patted his hand affectionately.

"It is Catherine who is aging me, Mary," he chuckled softly. It was true that she had put untold years on him in the last seven days alone!

"Nonsense," Mary smiled softly. "I can see that you are dressed for an outing, and I am holding you up."

"Mary, I always have time for a chat with you."

"Good, because... well... I feel that I must say something to you, my dear...."

"Go on," Vincent invited, intrigued, as they continued to walk.

"It's about Father..." Mary faltered.

"Is he unwell?" Concern edged Vincent's voice now.

"No, dear. He's healthier than all of us..."

"Then, what is it, Mary?" Vincent asked softly.

"I just wanted to say, don't think too badly of him..."

Vincent cocked his head on one side, bird-like, his intense blue eyes regarding Mary steadily.

"I knew that it is really none of my business...." Realization suddenly dawned in Vincent's eyes. "... but, well, I couldn't help overhearing you both the other day... please...don't be angry with him, Vincent... he loves you, and wants what is best for you.."

"I know that, Mary." Anger edged Vincent's tone, although he kept a tight rein on it. He would definitely be in Father's bad books if he started growling and snarling at Mary.

"I know that sometimes his methods leave a lot to be desired... sometimes he feels that he has to be cruel to be kind," Mary continued uneasily.

"I know that too. I have been on the receiving end of that philosophy many times in my life." Vincent took a deep, calming breath, and wondered if he was ever going to get a truly private moment in his life. Did the whole community know his most intimate secrets?

"Vincent. Father's methods may not always be diplomatic or subtle, but they do work."

"Thank you, Mary," Vincent sighed deeply.

"And, he is right about this, my dear." She told him bluntly, coming to a stop in front of him. "What I am trying to say, rather badly, it would seem... dear Vincent... is that you shouldn't allow fear, embarrassment or uncertainty to stop you from becoming the man you want and need to be."

She looked him straight in the eye, much as she had done in his youth, when she had had to tell him off about some unsavoury bit of behaviour, or explain about some nasty truth about the world Above, and the people in it, and what they would make of him... that no one else was brave

enough to tell him, with the exception of Father.

"You have a great capacity to love, Vincent, and you have an instinctive gentleness, tenderness and generosity." She told him with loving eyes and a warm smile. "I have never known you to not meet a challenge, no matter how many times you stumbled and fell." She suddenly took one of his hands in her own. "Vincent, all Father really wants is for you to fulfill your potential, and that means pursuing all of life's experiences. All the people here love you, Vincent, and trust in you, Catherine included. We can't all be wrong, can we?"

"Mary..."

"Vincent, you don't have to rush into anything, but you do have to be honest - with Catherine and yourself - and you may learn something about yourself and the woman that you love. Never forget, that this is an experience that happens to two people. You are not alone in this, Vincent. You never could be. It takes two to tango, as the old saying goes." She winked at him in a most becoming manner and Vincent could not prevent a smile from lifting his features.

"Bless you, Mary. Ever the voice of reason.." This wise, dear lady had made him realize the truth of the matter. "Thank you."

"You're welcome, my dear." She smiled up at him, suddenly taking his dear face between her hands gently. "You are on the brink of something wonderful, Vincent... and your life will never be the same. Savour it, my dear, and remember, you have nothing to fear but fear itself, and Catherine would never let anything bad happen to you. You love each other, and it is an extraordinary kind of love that warms us all. If you have faith in each other, and trust, you can overcome anything."

She released his face then, and Vincent bent slightly to press a soft kiss to the top of her head.

"Thank you, Mary....."

"Your destiny awaits, my dear. Don't let me keep you from it....."

She watched him stride away with a renewed purpose, and could not help smiling broadly. He really was an incredible man. And Catherine Chandler was a very lucky young woman.

It did not take Vincent long to reach the surface, and he carefully made his way across the park, and then picked his way across the roofs until he reached Catherine's building.

As he carefully climbed down to the eighteenth floor, then scaled the low wall to her balcony terrace, he could hear soft music. Chopin. He thought he recognized the piano Largo introduction from The Prelude in C Minor..

He jumped down gracefully onto her terrace, noting the soft glow of candlelight coming from beyond the closed French windows, and the music too, came from within, only it couldn't be Chopin, he decided, because how there was a soft male voice singing along ... Spirit move me, every time I'm near you, whirling like a cyclone in my mind...

Vincent paused for a moment, his hand raised to tap against the glass, listening to the lyrics, sensing that Catherine was near, that she also knew that he was close, and that she had deliberately chosen the song coming from her stereo... because it had a message, specifically for him.

Baby, I love you, come, come, come into my arms, let me know the wonder of all of you... Baby, I want you, now, now, now and hold on fast....Could this be the magic at last?

Catherine knew Vincent was on the balcony, even before she saw his shadow cross the French windows.

Barry Manilow continued to croon Could It Be Magic, with the Largo introduction by Chopin, and the beautifully haunting lyrics by Adrienne Anderson... and Catherine hoped that Vincent would take the beautiful words at face value... and act on them.

I could love you... build my world around you... never leave you till my life is done..." Barry Manilow continued to weave his special brand of magic as Vincent tapped lightly against the glass in the French windows.

Slowly, Catherine crossed the room and opened the doors, but she did not step out onto the terrace.

Vincent had moved back to the low wall, gazing out over the city, but he turned to face her when he heard the doors click open.

"Catherine..."

"Vincent..."

They gazed at each other, both recalling the last time that he had paid a visit to her terrace... the subsequent events... and.... the ultimatum that she had laid down.

Don't come back until you're ready to ravish me...

The words echoed in both their minds at the same instant.

Neither spoke.

Neither moved.

Both wanted to reach out to the other...

Baby, I love you....come, come, come into my arms..... Barry Manilow implored, as the silence stretched between the two of them. Let me know the wonder of all of you.....

Vincent could withstand the pull of the music, and the blatant invitation in the lyrics, and in Catherine's beautiful green eyes no longer.

He moved quickly and gracefully, and in two steps was before her, his arms wide open, his deep azure eyes blazing with love.

"Catherine..."

"Vincent..." She surprised him by stepping back, putting more of the threshold between them.

".....we need to talk....." She choked out, afraid to give into the impulse to throw herself into his welcoming embrace.

"Catherine?" His tone held incredulity. "I thought... I thought you wanted... action... not words..." he stammered.

"I do, Vincent. Just not... here... or your chamber either...." She had thought long and hard about where they would go, knowing that neutral ground would be best, for both of them. She didn't want him to feel the added discomfort of the strangeness of her bedroom, and she didn't want to go to his chamber, where anyone could just walk in on them... Other than that, she had no idea where they might go to be alone, private, relaxed...

"Where then?" he asked softly.

"I'll meet you in the basement in five minutes. We can go Below, walk a little... talk... a lot.." Her voice trailed away, and he nodded in gentle agreement.

Catherine closed the French windows, blew out the few candles that she had lit, for mood, and listened to the last haunting bars of the song on the stereo, before clicking it off.

"Thanks, Barry... I owe you one..." She giggled softly, gathering up a warm jacket, her keys and a

torch, before pulling the door closed behind her. "I guess this could be the magic... at last..." She paraphrased one to the lines of the song, in a whisper, as she rang for the elevator.

Down in the basement, Vincent was waiting for her, his hand out toward her as she stepped through that eerie beam of blue/white light.

She took his hand, and they began to walk, in silence, each just happy to be with the other, savouring the small contact of the other's hand greedily, after the days apart, their path always taking them down, although Catherine did not recognize their route, both silent, contemplative, Catherine keeping a tight rein on her emotions, and her thoughts, not wanting Vincent to realize what she had planned, should he be unable to make the first move... he was conscious of the fact that she was shutting him out of her thoughts, clamping down on their empathic link - and wondering how she was able to do that, and why, until, at last, they emerged from a narrow tunnel, into a golden grotto of stalagmites and stalactites, and soft golden sand like powder beneath their feet.

The air was warm here, not uncomfortably so, and from some way off, Catherine could hear the soft bubble of water.

The deeper they went, the warmer, and more moist the air grew, and Catherine was suddenly aware of steam rising from the ground a little way ahead.

His world was so full of surprises, Catherine marvelled... as was Vincent himself.

Who would have dreamed that beneath the city, this wondrous world of waterfalls, and echo chambers, the Abyss, the Mirror Pool, the Maze and the Great Hall could exist.

That a man like Vincent could exist. But he did. And she loved him. And she loved the world that had nurtured him too.

"A hot spring? Here?" She marveled, as they approached the slightly steaming water.

"Yes." Vincent remarked casually. "I spent many a happy hour here, as a child." He told her. "The Mirror Pool is wonderful for swimming, but too cold in the winter. I used to come here, and laze in the water, reading Moby Dick or The Rhyme Of The Ancient Mariner, The Old Man And The Sea, Treasure Island - pretending that I was a castaway like Robinson Crusoe, caught up in the adventures of Captain Horatio Hornblower. It was easy to lose myself here, warm and comfortable, transported to the high seas..."

They were happy times for him, Catherine could hear it in his voice and smiled at the pleasure the memories gave him.

"Like being back in the womb," she remarked without thinking.

"I can't say - I have no memory of that."

"Not many of us do, Vincent." She sighed heavily.

"Mouse gave me this, for you." He suddenly remembered, reaching into his pocket and withdrew the pretty stone that Mouse had given to him earlier. "He expressly wanted you to know that it was a gift from him."

"Oh, Vincent, it's beautiful." Catherine held the rock up to the light and turned it gently, the pretty layers of colour within dancing like the colours in a kaleidoscope. "Thank him for me, Vincent, and try to find out if there is anything that he really needs, or would like."

"Of course. But Catherine, there really is no need..."

"I know, but I would like to repay his kindness...."

"Catherine...", he began after a long silence, then hesitated.

"It's all right, Vincent." She smiled softly. "We don't have to do anything. We don't have to say anything. We could just enjoy this place, being together. I've missed you." She smiled again, wistfully.

"I have missed you too," he confessed softly.

"Vincent, I am so sorry. I don't know how things got so complicated. If I'd known I would never have...."

"Kissed me?"

She nodded sadly.

"Then I would never have known the joy of that moment, Catherine. I would never have known how deeply you love me, and trust me.... need me... want me..." He sighed softly, his voice was very low, and very intense. "Catherine, I cannot thank you enough for that kiss..."

She suddenly regarded him with surprise. That was the last thing she expected from him.

"As a boy, I remember reading the fairy story about the Princess kissing the frog, who then turned into a handsome Prince..."

"I know it..." Catherine responded in a small voice.

"And I also remember thinking that no matter how many times a Princess came into my life... as if any ever would, of course... but then, I was very young and idealistic." He paused, and she could not help smiling softly. "...that she would never even dare to kiss me... that I was doomed to remain a frog.... metaphorically, of course..." He sighed sadly. "And then, you came into my life, Catherine, and you dared to love me, to kiss me, and although I didn't physically change into a handsome prince, on the inside... something changed. I became... a man... like any other, with the same needs, the same physical responses, to the beautiful woman that I love. And despite the agony.... and the ecstasy of the past few days, I do not regret that kiss, Catherine, not for one moment. It was the closest to heaven that I have ever been... with you... sweet angel..."

"Oh, Vincent... There is so much more, if only you would open yourself up to it, to me..."

"Yes, I know." He told her then about Jacob's quest to educate him in such matters, and his unorthodox methods, and she could not suppress a giggle.

"I'm so sorry, Vincent." She reached out for his hand now. "So, Father was right." He cocked his head to one side, bird-like, and regarded her curiously. "Don't be angry with him, he loves you very much and I think he may even be warming to me, just a little."

She told him about Father's visit to her apartment, then, although she did not disclose just how intimate the conversation had been, especially about his physique - and he let her do the talking, sighing deeply when she concluded.

"So, has the penny dropped now?"

He regarded her thoughtfully for a moment. "I do believe it has, my fair lady Catherine," he quipped.

"About time too," Catherine groaned, and buried her face in the solid wall of his chest, breathing deeply the heady musk of his maleness, before looking up into his smoky, passion-filled blue eyes, and planting a soft, tender kiss smack on the lips.

She felt him draw in a long, deep breath, then release it very slowly.

"Oh, Vincent..." Would he step away from her again, if she tried to show him, teach him, guide him,

in the ways of physical love? "I could love you, build my world around you, never leave you till my life is done..." She whispered the lyrics to Could It Be Magic against his chest. "If you'll only let me, Vincent, let me love you, come into my arms, and let me know the wonder of all of you..." She cooed softly, suddenly feeling his arm come up around her back, his large, strong hand cradling the back of her head as he bent slightly, to press his lips against her own.

At last.....

He had made the first move.... Oh Vincent.... so shy.... so sweet.... so tender... So.... delicious...

Catherine let out a soft, low moan of pleasure as his mouth gently teased her lips, slowly moving with gentle pressure against her mouth.

She reached out with one hand, entwining her fingers in his lovely velvet mane, and applied a little pressure to the back of his head, urging him to be a little more adventurous in his exploration of her lips, fleetingly wondering if he would pull away again, as with her other hand, she lightly traced the firm line of his spine, all the way down to his lovely, firm, rounded buttocks.

Vincent tore his mouth from hers suddenly... to let out a soft moan of pleasure....

Catherine looked into his passion flushed face, and smiled softly. His eyes were wide with awe, as though he were surprised by his own vocalization of the pleasure her touch wrought.

"Catherine...", he breathed huskily, his heart fit to burst at the love and need that he found on her face. He could feel his body stirring, quickening, and marveled at the look of pure hunger in her eyes, as Catherine felt him grow, and stiffen against the tender flesh of her belly.

"Do you want to stop, Vincent...", she asked, her breathing laboured, and he loved her more than he thought possible, for her thoughtfulness, and selflessness and consideration. She was giving him a chance to cool things off before they got out of hand.

"No," he replied in a very low, husky voice. "No, Catherine..."

She smiled lovingly up at him then, and drawing away slightly, shrugged out of her jacket, allowing it to fall to the ground, then she reached up, and gently tried to ease his cloak away from his shoulders, unaware that this one had a clasp to keep it secured. To her surprise, Vincent gently pushed away her fumbling fingers, found the clasp and deftly unhooked it, his cloak whispering softly to the ground in a heap around his booted ankles.

Vincent then lowered his hands to his sides, uncertain, standing very passively, as Catherine eagerly reached up and began to work at the intricate lace fastening of his waistcoat, and then, his shirt front, pulling both garments wide open to reveal the thick, velvet down on his neck and chest and abdomen, and the hairless, tender pink flesh around his dusky male nipples.

Very carefully, Catherine laid her cheek against his naked chest, felt him shudder convulsively and rock against her, and a low, throaty moan escaped from his lips as he tipped his head back, hair falling back from his face and shoulders, eyes closed, cheeks puffing in and out as he breathed hard.

Catherine pressed soft, fairy kisses in a straight line down the centre of his broad chest, feeling every muscle in his flat belly bunch, then quiver as they reacted to her light touch.

"Catherine..." He growled her name as her mouth grew level with the soft leather belt securing the waistband of his trousers, and he captured her hair gently with his fingers, tipping her head back so that he could bend and claim her lips once more.

But that didn't stop Catherine from touching him... everywhere... deftly... artfully... his chest, his belly, his back, her touch so tender and so exquisite... showing him the delights of heaven....

drawing a shuddering breath from his lips as he groaned with delight...

Suddenly, Catherine withdrew from him, and his eyes flew open, expecting to see rejection.... although what he was sensing from her was far from anything of the sort... but, instead, he found her face delicately-flushed, her eyes wide, pupils dilated, her full lips slightly parted as she ran her tongue over their dryness.

He watched her in wonder, as she took one of his big hands and placed it gently against the delicate flare of her hip, then the other, before closing each of her hands over his, and guided him to lift the soft, fluffy, pale blue woollen sweater that she was wearing, up and over her head, which then fell to the floor, forgotten.

Vincent gazed at her with naked hunger in his eyes which brought a knowing smile to Catherine's lips.

He had never seen her in quite such a state of undress before... but then again, neither had she seen him without the layers of patched and mended homespun that he covered himself in... and she could see the effect that it was having on him - his chest heaving and rippling as he tried to keep up with the racing of his heart.

Without hesitation or embarrassment, Catherine reached behind her back and unhooked her bra, then slowly reached out for his hands again, bringing them up to her shoulders, where she guided him to push the straps of the garment away, a delicious little shiver running down her spine as the downy softness of his hands made light contact with the tender flesh of her shoulders and upper arms.

The flimsy piece of white silk fell to the ground soundlessly, and she stood before him, still, save for the steady rise and fall of her chest, watching as his gaze took in her naked beauty, her small, perfect breasts, pert, softly swollen, the nipples dark, dusky pink in contrast to the whiteness of her flesh, already beginning to draw together into tight, little buds.

And as he watched, her delicate fingers worked on the belt buckle, button and zip fasteners of her jeans, before she wriggled her hips in a very seductive and tantalizing fashion, and allowed the denim fabric to slide gracefully down her silky legs to the floor.

Vincent's gaze followed the garment to the ground, taking in the soft, creamy white of her thighs, her beautiful knees and delicate calves, as he watched her step, firstly out of low heeled black court shoes, then her jeans, and finally, flimsy white silk panties...

He swallowed... hard....

Catherine smiled invitingly. "Touch me, Vincent... please... You know you want to... I know you want to.... She spoke in a low, husky voice.

"Yes..." He spoke without even realizing it, as he took a step toward her, gathering her naked flesh gently against his lean, hard, frame... Instinct, he suddenly realized. far outweighing anything he might have learned in any of Father's books...

Follow your heart... he had once told Catherine, and now realized just what good advice it had been.

There was nothing truer than what he was feeling in his heart at that moment.

He bent to claim her lips once more, and while he savoured the honeyed sweetness of her mouth, rocked with a jolt of pure pleasure that shot through his whole body as their tongues clashed in gentle exploration, Catherine deftly worked on the simple soft leather fastening of his belt, and the button on his trousers, and freed him from them, and his rough, homespun underwear.

Catherine reached up and wrapped both her arms tightly around Vincent's neck, moulding herself against his hard, masculine length, rubbing herself suggestively against him, as she pressed her

naked flesh against him.

Vincent broke the kiss, drawing air into his starving lungs, tipping his head back slightly as Catherine nuzzled against his chest, neck, throat, pressing hot lips against his flesh, and sending liquid fire through his veins.

Catherine seemed happy to be taking the initiative - and he was happy to play a passive role - lest his inexperience show, needing the sense of at least some control of the situation.

He could still stop it...

If he wanted to...

Catherine was applying pressure to his shoulders now, he realized, and he sank to his knees, as she followed him down, then lay back, using her jacket as a pillow, drawing him down to kneel over her.

She reached for his chin, and gently drew his mouth down onto her own for another, long, drugging kiss, then with a shy little smile that he found most becoming, took her hand from around his waist, and placed it on her own breast, cupping it gently, then kneading the silken white flesh with her palm and delicate fingers, before stroking the taut nipple with the tip of a neatly manicured thumbnail.

Vincent saw the look of pure ecstasy on her face, felt her lips writhe beneath him - and knew instinctively that she was showing him what she liked, what she wanted him to do to her....

Shyly, hesitantly, he touched her delicate pink blushed flesh and followed her lead, his big left hand engulfing her small left breast, his thumb stroking rhythmically across the delicate swell, and then the tight, roseate little nub.

"Oh, Vincent..." She moaned and writhed beneath him, reaching up to pull his lips down onto her own once more, then leaving his lips to press soft butterfly kisses to his chin, and the strong column of his throat, his very prominent Adam's apple, gently lifting herself up into a sitting position, pushing him back slowly, so that he rose with her, as she continued on down his chest, nipping very gently with her teeth at his collarbone, sending wave after wave of fire through his body, until reaching one of his very erect male nipples, enclosed her mouth around it and took possession, suckling gently one moment, then rolling it gently with her tongue, before moving to press soft wet kisses in the centre of his chest, as Vincent again tipped his head back, breathing hard as a low growl escaped from his lips ... and his chest heaved violently under her tender ministrations.

Paying him no heed, Catherine slowly moved on, taking the other nipple into her warm, wet mouth, to pay it similar homage.

"Catherine!" His voice was very low, very hoarse, surprised by her boldness, and his acute reaction to her tender ministrations, as he lowered his head to watch her trace light little circles around his nipple with her tongue, his hair cascading down over his shoulders, tickling in the wetness where Catherine's tongue was lazily drawing delicious circles of fire...

"Your turn," she breathed huskily, reaching up to cup his face. *Touch me, Vincent, like that - exactly like that. I want to feel what you felt... please...."*

Sliding her arms back around his broad shoulders, Catherine pulled Vincent down with her as she slowly lay back against her jacket, arching her back slightly to thrust her beautiful pert breasts upward toward his face, feeling his warm breath coming in ragged little gasps, as she pulled his mouth down to meet one, swollen erect peak.

Vincent's breath caught in his throat as his tongue made contact with the hard little bud, and Catherine maintained the gentle pressure on the back of his head, as he experimentally drew his tongue across the taut nipple. She bucked wildly beneath him, and expelled a strangulated little

moan, her pleasure obvious, encouraging him to continue, to drink deeply, before nuzzling the little valley between her breasts with his nose, and carrying out the same tender caressing and suckling of her other breast.

Catherine arched against him, feeling the ache deep inside her getting stronger and stronger...

"Vincent....." He lifted his head to gaze into her passion flushed face, his lovely hair tickling her kiss dampened flesh, sending a jolt of pure pleasure through Catherine. "Now..."

"Now?" he echoed huskily, confused for just a moment, his mind in a wonderful haze.

"Now," she acknowledged, wriggling beneath him, carefully positioning herself, legs parted invitingly, hips lifted slightly to receive him - all of him...

She sensed his hesitation, his unease, and wondered if he would pull away, back off...

It would be pure torture, for both of them if he did, but she would cope. She would find a way to make it right for him....

Vincent knew that Catherine could sense his uncertainty, knew that she was already beginning to try to accept his rejection, his reluctance to proceed....

But he wasn't rejecting her. He did want to proceed.

"Oh, Catherine... I love you," he whispered huskily, capturing her hands in his, lifting them over her head as he deliberately dragged the hard length of his body down hers, before gently thrusting with his hips, breaching all her feminine barriers with a thrust that was as hard and full and certain as his kiss to her passion-swollen lips was tender.

Catherine cried out at the shuddering impact, digging her nails into the downy velvet soft fur of his broad back. Vincent shuddered too, then stilled, holding his breath, gazing down at her with fear in his intense lapis lazuli eyes.

"It's all right, Vincent." She smiled wickedly up at him, tenderly pushing his perspiration damp hair from his face.

Ah, Father... another one of your theories goes out the window! she thought silently, but he sensed her amusement, and relief, a frown drawing together his heavy brow. "It's all right... really..." she assured softly.

"But..."

"Shh..." She stroked his fringe back out of his eyes and smiled.

Suddenly, silk and ivory legs twined themselves around his middle, drawing him deeper, and tears were suddenly brimming in his eyes, as Vincent knew that it was the sweetest of embraces... acceptance... need... shared desire.

And he was free...

The dam of restraint broken with the tidal wave of desire...

Smoldering flames grew to leaping fires, a storm that was both fury and peace....

Sweet ecstasy...

Flesh burning flesh, while their souls flew higher and higher, only to float suspended in the beauty of the possession.

Catherine cried out his name wildly as she matched him, stroke for stroke, her voice mingled with the sweet murmur of her name on his lips, as stars burst forth, an explosion in both body and mind, that sent her into spasms of pure pleasure, leaving her drained, floating languidly, satiated, and more content than she had ever been.

Vincent knew her joy, right down to his soul, their empathic link allowing him a unique insight into her climax, tipping him over the edge, erupting within her with a force that he had never expected, and, unable to stop himself, he threw back his head and let out a mighty roar, before falling, breathless, against Catherine, shaken to his core, spent and utterly elated...

Breathing hard, Catherine felt his collapse against her and drew her arms around his shuddering body, interspersed with the odd little convulsion here and there, his face resting lightly against the damp sweetness of her breast, his warm breath fanning her breast and sending delicious little aftershocks through her entire body.

She could suddenly hear a soft, rolling, rumbling sound, breathy and guttural, and could even feel the vibrations coming from his chest, through her ribcage. She was suddenly concerned that he had hurt himself...

Before finally realizing, with a soft smile of wonder ... that he was actually *purring*... It was a very satisfying sound... a very satisfying *feeling*, to know that he was so.... contented...

"Well, I certainly got what I asked for...", she panted softly, her warm breath catching the delicate hairs of his fringe, revealing his intense blue eyes, filled with wonder, and love.

"*Ravished* until you are *breathless*...", he murmured languidly.

"Well, I'm certainly *breathless*," she chuckled, her finger tracing the strong line of his spine absently.

"So glad that I could oblige, my lady," he rumbled in amusement.

They lay, locked together, he still unexpectedly big and hard within her, for a long time, neither moving, neither prepared to break the warm, loving contented closeness. Catherine smiling broadly as she lovingly stroked and teased his hair, be content just to lay against her, to feel how perfectly they fitted together, until at last, she began to move beneath him, changing position carefully, to relieve aching, protesting muscles, and he realized that he must be too heavy for her.

He carefully lifted himself up from her, and rolled away, then slipped beside her, drawing his cloak up over them both as he pulled her back into his arms, her head resting against the solid wall of his still heaving chest, his arm draped casually around her narrow waist.

Catherine's arm involuntarily came up around his middle, wanting to draw him even closer, accidentally brushing against his still obvious arousal, and she looked up at him in surprise.

"Vincent...."

"It's all right, Catherine...." He smiled shyly, still marvelling at the intensity and the beauty of their union.

"Can't get enough of me, eh?"

"Never...", he confessed raggedly.

"By Jove, I think he's got it," she chuckled softly. "Oh Vincent, we don't do things by halves, do we?" She sighed deeply, her warm breath fanning his chest now.

"Catherine?" He frowned.

"Well..." She lowered her gaze, suddenly shy now. "I've... it's... well... it's *never* been like *that* before, Vincent - in my *mind*, as well as in my body....," she confessed softly.

"Our *bond*," he acknowledged.

"Our bond...", she echoed dreamily.

"For *you* too?" he asked incredulously.

"For me too," she confirmed.

"Oh, Catherine..." He gathered her close, never wanting to let her go. "You are an incredible woman, and I love you so much..."

"I know, Vincent... I can feel it."

She snuggled up closer, wrapping a leg possessively over his hips, then lifting herself up in one swift movement, straddled him, gently lowering herself down over his hardness.

Taken by surprise for a moment, Vincent could do nothing but marvel at the glorious sensations shooting through his mind and body, as she rocked gently back and forth against him, sending him to dizzying heights once again, before she collapsed against him, shuddering and convulsing, crying out his name, breathless and weeping with the sheer joy of the bonding of both mind and body.

Later...

Much later...

Days later, when it seemed that they had barely moved from each other's embrace, except to eat and answer the call of nature - and then only reluctantly.

They again lay together, completely exhausted, satiated, floating in that warm, comfortable place just before sleep, entwined, in the big wooden bed in Vincent's cozy chamber.....

Vincent, his head resting gently on her flat belly, hair fanned out in a fluffy red/gold curtain, brushing the sensitive flesh of her navel every time she breathed.

Suddenly, he opened his eyes and gazed up into her beautiful, contented face, knowing that in her trusting, tender, loving arms, he had been born again.

She was so beautiful... so incredible... so unique.....

And now, she was his... completely.....

"Vincent?" She regarded him with a thoughtful expression, and wondered what he was thinking about, his deep blue eyes unfathomable. "What is it, my love?" she asked, pushing back a stray tendril of perspiration damp hair from his face.

"I was just thinking..." He hesitated, his voice trailing away, and from their unique link, Catherine suddenly got a sense of what was on his mind, and smiled. "There..."

"....could be a child?" She finished for him. Vincent nodded gently, his fluffy bangs tickling her stomach deliciously.

"Perhaps, my love, it's not within the realms of impossibility. After all, we haven't done anything to *prevent* it," she confessed. "It's been so long since the last time, I stopped taking the pill - it disagreed with me...", she explained shyly.

"Pregnancy... could disagree with you even more, Catherine," he pointed out, and there was something different in his voice as he spoke.

"Don't you want a family, Vincent?" She frowned.

"You know that I do, Catherine, but not at the expense of *your life*..."

"Vincent...."

"I know, I know. You think that I am placing obstacles in our path before I need to, but..."

"Vincent, nothing would give me greater pleasure than to present you with a whole football squad

of sons... with the odd daughter in-between to break the monotony..." She grinned wickedly, and he could not prevent a smile from touching his lips. "And if every one of them looked like you, I could ask for nothing more," she assured him in soft tones, gently stroking his hair.

"Oh, Catherine...." He squeezed her tightly against him. "I am so glad to hear you say that... because..."

She looked down at him expectantly, and waited for him to finish. She was suddenly taken aback by the look in his eyes – fear, wonder, intense pride, relief ... joy.

"What is it, Vincent?"

He suddenly lent forward and placed a soft, warm kiss on her flat belly, and Catherine had to smile. For a man who had taken almost two years to overcome his shyness and touch her at all, he suddenly couldn't get *enough* of touching her.

Not that she was complaining, of course.

"Vincent?" she asked again, responding to the peculiar look of... wonder on his face.

"Catherine, you'll probably think that I am *completely* mad..." He lifted his head to gaze lovingly up at her. "...but... you are pregnant..."

"Pregnant... How can *you* know that? Already?" she stammered.

"Just *know* that I *do*... I can... *feel*... *him*..."

"Really? *Already*?"

He merely nodded, his deep azure gaze never wavering from her face, gauging her reaction.

"*How?*" she whispered.

"Our bond. I... became aware of another... consciousness. Catherine..."

"You mean...."

"Yes, Catherine, I was bonded with our son at the very moment of conception..."

"Oh, Vincent....," she marvelled, squeezing him tightly. "How wonderful for you." She sighed deeply. "To have that connection, with our child..."

Our child.... He very much liked the sound of *that*.

And Catherine seemed to be perfectly happy with the notion, if what she was feeling was anything to go by, a joy that went beyond words.

"Oh, my." Catherine suddenly sat up, unconcerned by her nakedness, and regarded him with concern.

"What? What is it, Catherine?" He asked earnestly, sitting up too, responding to the look on her face, not the ripple of amusement that he could feel through their bond.

"Vincent, if you and I are connected, and I am pregnant..."

"You *are*....," he confirmed with certainty, suddenly looking hurt that she could disbelieve him, doubt him about something *this* important and *wonderful*.

"Well then, *you* had better be *prepared* for, *morning sickness, mood swings, weird food cravings, heartburn, floods of unexplained tears, indigestion, swollen ankles, backache ... and labour pains* - because, whatever *I* feel, I'm damned sure that I'm going to share it *all* with *you*!" She laughed out loud, and it was a joyous sound.

Vincent could not help smiling.

"I will gladly share it *all* with you, Catherine.... so long as you... and our son are well...."

"That's all *any* expectant father can ask, Vincent - but *you* will have a unique insight." She reached up and planted a soft kiss full on his lips.

"We are something that has never been before, Catherine."

"Yes, I know, but there is a first time for *everything*, Vincent." She snuggled up close against him, nuzzling his beautiful, hard, warm body, as he gathered the covers up over them once again, suddenly feeling deliciously drowsy, her eyelids fluttering closed, ready to succumb to sleep. "I love you, my dear one... and didn't I always tell you, that with love, *all things* are possible?" she mumbled sleepily against his chest.

"You did... and made a believer out of me."

"Good, now let me get my beauty sleep. We're both going to need all the rest we can get. Babies are not great respecters of a full night's sleep, Vincent, so we'd better make the most of it, while we still can.."

He could hear the smile in her voice, as she snuggled up closer under the covers, her arm possessively draped over his midriff.

"Of course, Catherine. *Anything* you say, Catherine, but not *tonight*, Catherine....," he rumbled huskily, and gathered her into his strong arms once more, his hungry mouth eager, no longer afraid to claim her willing lips, as he kissed her until she was, once again... breathless...

END