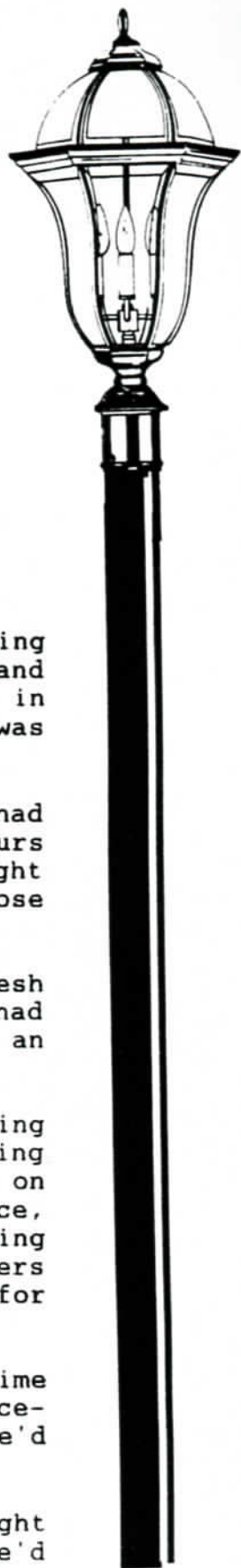


May I Have This Dance?



Catherine strode down the soft-lit tunnel smiling quietly to herself, filled with a sense of satisfaction and well-being. It was, she thought, the feeling of being in the right place at the right time -- finally -- and it was the first time that she'd felt that way all day.

By contrast, the evening preceding this moment had been both tedious and frustrating. She'd spent three hours of it making a politically correct appearance at a light dinner-and-dance honoring some local rising star whose name, even now, managed to escape her.

She trod on a loose stone, and winced at the fresh insult to her already-bruised toes. Her dance partner had proven to be as clumsy as he was persistent -- an unfortunate combination, in her opinion.

The food had been expertly catered. The music, during and after the meal, was divine, encompassing everything from Strauss to Cole Porter. Yet as the evening wore on she found herself filled with a kind of growing impatience, a feeling of standing outside herself looking on... looking past the people around her, glancing over their shoulders and beyond them almost expectantly, as though searching for something, or... *someone*.

When she realized *that*, she'd decided it was past time to cut her losses and go. Slipping away from her dance-partner (easier thought about than accomplished), she'd left the party... and come Below.

I'm not exactly dressed for it, though, she thought wryly, almost turning her ankle on another stone. If she'd

thought, at the beginning of the evening, that she might be visiting the tunnels later, then she could at least have packed her sneakers. But it had been an impulse, quickly thought of and immediately acted upon. She hadn't even gone back to her apartment first to change her clothes. She was going to have to be careful, now, in these heels.

As she stumbled again she heard a distant tapping on the pipes that lined all of the tunnels in this section; and recognizing the code for her own name, she knew she must have passed by one of the hidden sentry-posts. *I'm on my way, all right*, she thought, smiling to herself. *If you're coming to meet me, bring crutches...*

But no one came to meet her, or to guide her through the convoluted route that had grown familiar to her over these past months. Soon she began to recognize outlying landmarks of the "home tunnels"; and once again she felt a sense of satisfaction -- this time, in finding her way, in *knowing* her way.

When she stepped through the doorway of the chamber she sought, she found Vincent sitting at his writing-table. He faced the door in an uncharacteristic slouch, his fingers laced across his middle, long legs outstretched and booted feet crossed.

Startled by his air of waiting, Catherine stopped short. Fighting off the urge to grin, she tried to look reproachful instead. "You didn't come to guide me down."

He cocked his head, his blue eyes twinkling. "But it made you so happy, to do it yourself."

"Yes," she grinned. "It did." Of course, he would have felt it through the bond -- not only her approach, but her emotions throughout. Catherine wondered if that gave him as much satisfaction, tonight, as it gave *her*. "I sometimes think," she said jokingly, "that Father waits until I begin to remember the way in -- and that's the signal he waits for, to have you all change it again."

His brows rose at such irreverence. She swept by him then in a swirl of layered chiffon, just brushing his shoulder with her fingertips as she passed.

He sat up and turned, startled, to see her settling onto the bed beneath the stained glass window. Her smile turned a little apologetic. "Sorry," she said, and reached down to slip her left shoe off. "It's very quiet; I didn't see anyone, all the way here. Are all the children asleep already?"

"They had a big day," he told her. "I took them to the nearer crystal caverns. By the time we returned, they were very tired. The little ones all but fell asleep over their supper. They were glad to go off to bed."

"Even Naomi?" she teased; for that five-year-old, whom he'd rescued from the city streets only months before, was notoriously hard to put to bed and keep there.

"I'm glad she didn't know you were coming Below," he smiled, "or I would never have gotten her off to sleep."

"Actually, I'm sorry I missed her." She began to massage her foot. "God, that feels good!"

His brow furrowed. "Catherine? Are you hurt?"

"Oh... not really." She blushed -- rather becomingly, he thought. "Just a little bit trampled on. And these *shoes*..."

Without another word Vincent got up, drew the heavy reading-chair closer to the bed, and reached out his hand.

Catherine's green eyes widened when he drew her foot onto his knee. "Oh," she breathed, as he began rubbing her instep. Her wrap fell away from her shoulders in unnoticed folds.

"You've been out." His eyes flicked up over the soft pale green of the dress that fell shimmering over her knees. "How was your affair?"

"Affair?" Her eyes widened still further at his use of the slightly outdated term. "It was... all right, I guess."

"Yes you left."

"I wanted to be here," she said simply. *With you.*

There was a sound in the doorway. "Vincent? -- Oh."

They looked up to see Jacob Wells leaning on his walking-stick, his startled eyes taking in the scene; Catherine sitting on the bed, obviously dressed and made up for a more formal sort of evening in another kind of place, her stockinged foot in Vincent's hands; and Vincent, looking back over his shoulder with an expression the patriarch found absolutely unreadable.

"What is it, Father?" he asked.

The old man glanced down, almost apologetically, at a sheet of paper in his hand. "I was thinking we could go over that list of supplies -- that is, er, if you weren't doing anything..." He looked positively pained. While he wasn't exactly sure what Vincent was doing, it was perfectly plain that he was doing *something*. "Of course, I didn't realize -- if you're busy..."

"Tomorrow," Vincent said, with the gravely courteous patience that was characteristic of him. "First thing in the morning. All right?"

"Oh, certainly, certainly. I, ah, I just remembered something I have to speak with Mary about anyway," Father babbled. "Sorry to interrupt. Please, go on with, er, whatever you were doing." And he backed out of the chamber, all but falling over his own cane in his haste to be away.

Only when she was certain he was out of earshot did Catherine give in to the giggles that had been building up inside her since the moment he appeared. "Oh, Vincent, poor Father! What must he be thinking! What will you tell him in the morning?"

He was smiling an uncommon, almost rakish kind of smile. "Nothing," he said. "It will do him no harm, this once, to be left wondering." And he chuckled softly along with her. He loved the sound of Catherine's laughter. It was like music to him; like the music he'd felt echoed in her soul, earlier in the evening.

Catherine, who'd tried discreetly and in vain to remove her foot from his grasp as soon as they were interrupted, looked down at where the fingers of one great hand encircled her ankle.

Vincent looked down too -- and was abruptly reminded of something he'd felt there as she'd tried to pull away. He turned her foot a little and, lowering his head, examined the back of her ankle. There he could just see the sparkle of tiny gemstones. They seemed to be a part of her hosiery. "What are these?" he asked, astonished, for he'd never before seen such a thing.

"Oh. They're just rhinestones, Vincent. It's the latest style. They sell pantyhose with all kinds of -- of decorations like this." Catherine felt herself blushing again. It seemed, well, somehow *indelicate* to be discussing underthings with him this way. And that in itself was ridiculous, she thought, considering the many more intimate aspects of their lives they'd shared. "It's just a fad. Really, it's nothing special."

"Isn't it?" His head was bowed, the long hair falling like massed strands of raw silk over his shoulders. The sheer nylon was silky-soft against his skin. He studied the tiny brilliants, running up the back of her ankle, with fascination. Whoever could have thought of such a thing? he wondered. And they were *green*. Green to match her gown; green to match the earrings that peeked glittering from behind the soft glossy fall of her hair. Green to match her eyes.

Catherine was watching him with delight, and a fascination of her own. It hadn't occurred to her, as she'd made her impulsive way Below, that he might find such a trivial detail so affecting. *Maybe I ought to wear this kind of thing more often*, she thought. "Vincent?"

He seemed to rouse himself almost reluctantly. "Tell me about this evening," he said resuming his ministrations without looking up.

"It was nothing," she shrugged. "It was all very pleasant... until the dancing began."

"But you love to waltz," he said, remembering.

"Well, I was waltzing," she said with a rueful smile. "Unfortunately, my partner seemed to be doing the pachyderm polka."

A soft snort of laughter. "Was there no escape?"

"None," she answered. "Except to leave, finally. And besides, I felt..." She hesitated. How to tell him, without making him uncomfortable, what she'd begun to feel then? In a stranger's arms, she'd been filled with the memory of dancing with Vincent. Scenes from that Winterfest evening had filled her with homesickness and longing. It was as though she'd felt herself once again in his arms, swept away with him to that inner music only they had heard. When she was aware of her Topsider partner at all, it was only to recognize his comparative clumsiness, the irritatingly tentative way he held her in his arms, the intrinsic wrongness of his shape and size. In fact, the need to reject that wrongness had become so overwhelming that toward the end she felt that if he reached for her just one more time, she was going to have to use some of Isaac's self-defense techniques to fend him off.

How could she describe these thoughts and feelings to Vincent, now, without frightening him into another one of his strategic withdrawals?

"Catherine," he said softly. His deepset blue eyes rose to hers. "When you were dancing, I couldn't help but feel -- "

There was a sudden sound -- someone clearing his throat -- from the doorway. Both of them started violently. Vincent turned his head; took a deep breath, and let it out again. "Yes, Mouse," he said to that familiar, disshevelled figure standing there. "What is it?"

The young man was openly ogling them. Catherine was a vision and, with her foot in Vincent's lap, well, what was one to think?

"Mouse," Vincent repeated, a little less patiently.

"-- Uh, right." He blinked owlishly at them, nodding so that the matching flashlights affixed to either side of his "miner's helmet" bobbed wildly. "Got a problem, need your help. Hi, Catherine."

"Hi, Mouse." Her voice had a rather strangled tone that spoke of laughter held in too near the surface.

"What is the problem?" Vincent persisted.

"Oh. Yeah. Gotta finish putting up pipe in the new sections, you know? And I can't make the, the *whatchamacallits* fit."

"The 'whatchamacallits'?" Vincent echoed, feeling Catherine's mirth and carefully not looking at her. Mouse was an engineering genius, but he didn't always remember things by their proper names. "What do you mean?"

"You know," Mouse said impatiently. "The *thingies*, what we use to hook 'em together."

"Oh. Did you ask Kanin?"

"Kanin's having a 'family evening.' Said, 'Not tonight, Mouse.'" He spoke with the scorn he reserved for those who didn't have their priorities quite in order.

"Kanin was right," Vincent told him. "It's too late to start work on anything like that tonight. You ought to get to bed yourself, and make a fresh start on it in the morning. I can help you, if you like, before lunch."

Mouse's face fell. "But it's -- "

"Important. Yes, I know." All of Mouse's projects were "important." "So is a good night's sleep."

"But -- "

"Mouse," Vincent said, "go to bed."

Mouse's eyes widened. He hadn't heard that particular tone since he was much younger, and Vincent was helping Father to raise and "civilize" him. "Sure?" he asked.

"I'm sure," Vincent replied. "Tomorrow I'll help you. I promise."

Mouse appeared to resign himself. "Okay good," he sighed, the flashlights bobbing anew. "Okay fine."

Catherine bit her lip until he was well away; then she grinned wickedly at him, her eyes dancing. "You're very popular tonight."

"So it would seem." He released her foot, and reached down to lift the other one into its place. Her shoe was a pale emerald pump of simple elegance and unequalled workmanship, he noticed as he removed and handed it to her. He couldn't help noticing too, as she took it, that the pearlescent pink of her nail polish matched the shade visible on her toenails. Her foot was small and warm in his hands. "Your partner," he murmured. "Did he step on this one, too?" And he ran his thumb up over the inside arch.

Coming so soon after the laughter, the unexpected sensation

traveled up her leg and into her secret self like a bolt of lightning. Barely breathing, she watched him. His head was bowed, his mood unreadable to her. She tried to tell herself that this was no more than a kindness he would offer to anyone he knew and loved here Below. If Father's feet hurt, or -- or old Elizabeth's, or anybody else's, then *of course* he would offer to rub their feet for them. How could he understand the feelings his touch roused in her? And yet, she realized, how could he *not*?

"You were telling me of your evening," he reminded her, in a voice that could not have been heard even from the door.

"Um... the music was lovely," she said, grasping at the first thing that came into her mind.

"In a way, I could hear it in you," he said, raising his eyes again. "Not the notes, exactly, but... the way that it affected you."

"I... I wondered if you could."

"Catherine, I -- " There were further sounds from the tunnel without and he turned, his irritation plain. When the walkers passed them by, he seemed to make a decision. He lifted her foot from his knee and stood suddenly, stretching his arms above his head like a man who had been too long idle.

Surprised, Catherine looked up to see the fabric of his clothing stretch tightly over every part of him. She loved to look at him during stolen instants like this -- his wild head thrown back, his self-consciousness momentarily forgotten... It was a sight that gave her a bittersweet pleasure almost verging on pain.

She was still looking when he held out his hand. "Come."

Hurriedly she slipped her shoes back on. "Where are we going?" she asked, coming to her feet to take his hand.

"I... there's something I need to do. Something I promised someone. I'd almost forgotten. Can you walk?"

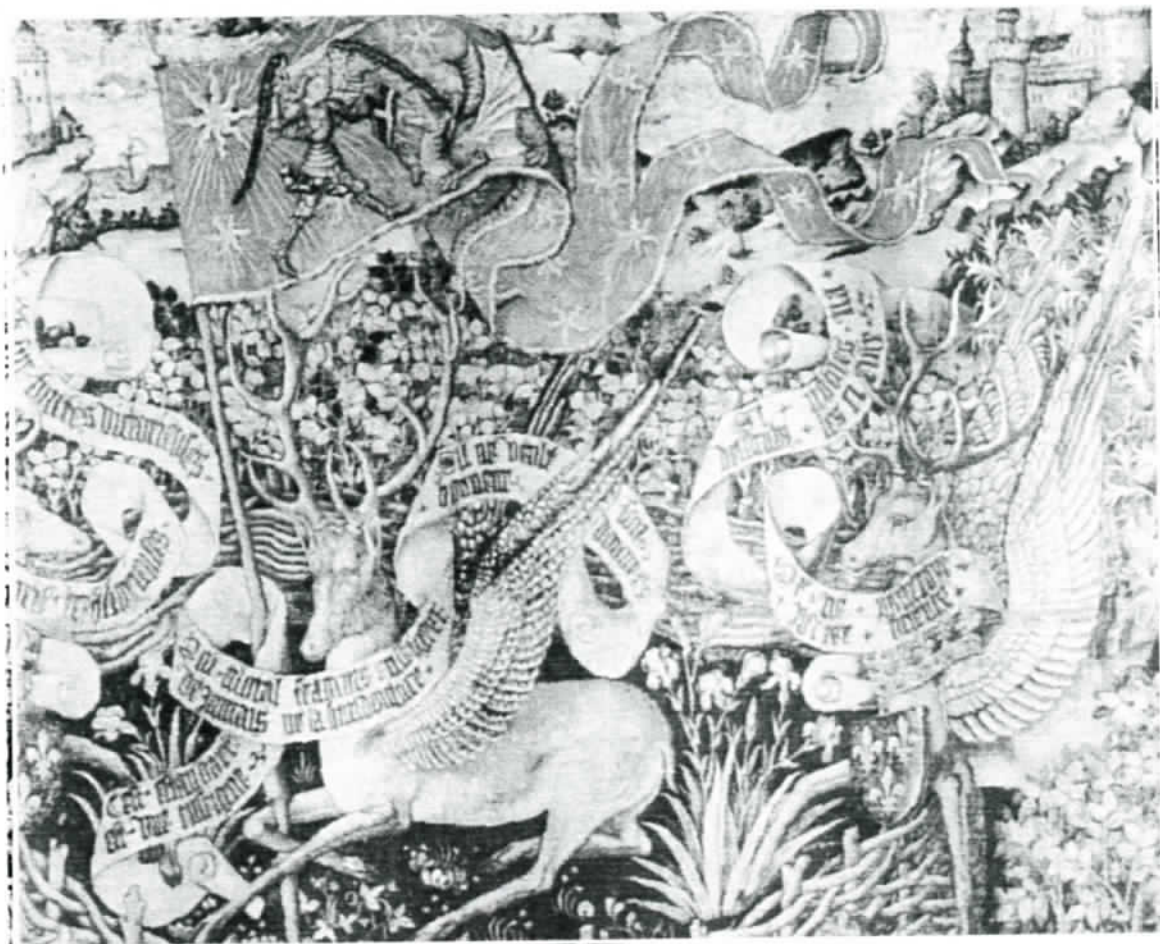
"Of course I can walk." She smiled, suppressing her disappointment that their time together had come so soon to an end. "Where to?"

"It isn't far." He tucked her hand beneath his arm -- as though to steady her, she thought smiling, in her impractical footwear.

On the long stone stair the wind had abated somewhat; or at least, it did not buffet them quite as violently as she remembered. "Sometimes it is stronger than at other times," Vincent nodded. "It was much worse at Winterfest."

Catherine stood back as he lifted the huge hardwood plank that barred the ancient doors, and set it carefully aside. No one else, she'd been told, could lift it without help. He pulled the left-hand door ajar, and reached for her hand.

She allowed herself to be led inside. He shut the door behind them again. The vast spaces of the Great Hall stretched out around them in a silence that was startling after their trip through the howling winds outside. She watched him light several of the torches that waited in sconces set into the walls. "I love this place," she said, as the tapestries flickered into view.



"I know," he said, returning to her side, his eyes following hers around the cavern. "It has always been a special place for me. Now, all the more."

She looked up into his strong leonine face. "Why did you bring me here? What is it you promised to do?" She looked around at the tables and chairs as though expecting to find some piece of furniture in obvious need of repair.

"Shhh... Listen." He cocked his head, as though startled by some little sound nearby.

Catherine found herself listening too. Her heart sinking, she thought, *Oh, no! Surely there isn't someone seeking him out, even down here --*

"Don't you hear it?" he asked her.

She opened her mouth to give him a bewildered *No --* and suddenly she knew what it was that he was "listening" to, and wanted her to hear. "The music?" she whispered, a thrill running down her spine.

"The music," he nodded. His hand was at her waist; she could feel its warmth at once through the fabric of her dress. He stood very still, looking down into her face. "Catherine," he said. "Tonight I... *felt* the music in you."

"I know you did," she answered, thinking that she must have been hoping, even at the time.

"And I felt... other things as well. It affected you so strongly."

"Yes." *And if he'd felt anything, then he'd felt everything,* she realized. She eased nearer, raising one hand to his broad shoulder. "I was thinking of Winterfest -- afterwards, when we danced. I wanted to be with you. All of a sudden, it was all I wanted. It didn't make me sad; it just made me *leave*."

He nodded. "And I felt your happiness, once you were on your way to me."

"I'm glad," she said; for those feelings would speak to him so much more clearly than words ever could.

"And yet..." His eyes searched her face, suddenly troubled to their very depths.

"Tell me," she urged, willing him onward.

"Catherine," he burst out, "how *can* you be happy? What is there in me that can possibly satisfy you? You share in so little, yet you give so much -- "

She silenced him with fingertips pressed gently to his mouth, that mouth that was like no other's; and then, coming up on tiptoe, she replaced her fingertips with her moist and willing lips. His hands slid round her waist, and she felt the dizzying sensation of her body melting to the hard warmth of his.

After a moment he ended the kiss and raised his head, gasping. "Catherine -- "

"You give me everything," she whispered. "Everything." These were words meant for him, that she'd only spoken once in confidence, and to a stranger. Now she gave them to him gladly. "How can you not know that you give me everything?"

He bowed his head to look into her radiant face again, as though to do so took all his courage. "No," he said. "Not everything."

She stroked his gold-bristled cheek. "Vincent," she sighed --

"Catherine, what I felt in you tonight, and -- and what I've felt before..." He drew a ragged breath. "There are needs you feel, which I cannot fulfill."

"Needs you *won't* fulfill," she countered, and saw his eyes widen -- although with mere surprise or panic, she wasn't sure. Before he could begin to argue the point she said, "Tell me why you brought me here tonight." The fact that he *had* -- that he'd given in to such an impulse, for the first time -- was enormously pleasing to her. *Can you feel that too?*, she wondered.

He stood looking down mutely, his soul in his eyes, open and vulnerable to her as he had never been to anyone else.

She pressed on: "You said that you'd 'promised' someone something. Who was it, Vincent?"

He lowered his head and kissed her on the mouth with exquisite gentleness. "It was you."

Tears stung her eyes. "Tell me... what was that promise?"

"Our love is a promise," he whispered. "Our dream is that promise, given wings."

"And whatever happens... tonight, or tomorrow, or ten years from now... *whatever happens*, Vincent, 'it doesn't mean our dream can never be.'" She repeated his own words tenderly, ruthlessly, and saw that he recognized them. "'It only means that now is not the time.' You mustn't lose hope, my love."

"No?" he asked, desperately needing her reassurance.

"No. I told you once, what we have is -- "

" -- Worth everything," he finished. "Yes." *Whatever happens*, he thought. *Whatever comes*. After a moment, he lifted his head. "I... think I can still hear it."

"So can I." She smiled up at him, waiting.

"Catherine," he began, not letting her go for an instant, even though he felt her patience and her love for him were infinite. "My Catherine... may I have this dance?"

