

ALL WINTERS END

by Tricia Kehoe

With a weary sigh, Mary patted the great stack of linens and sat back, wiping her forehead. Oh, what a relief to get that chore done, at last! Checking each and every piece of Irish linen was a task she insisted on doing every year herself. It was the same every Winterfest, it seemed - always frayed hems on the tablecloths to be re-stitched, or napkins that had been stained badly to be rewashed by hand.

Taking a needle and thread, Mary sat in the chair next to the one small lamp in her chamber. Sliding eyeglasses onto her nose, she began threading the darning needle, with a small shrug of her shoulders. Oh well, as much as she complained and grumbled, everyone knew how she enjoyed doing this repair work herself. No longer able to climb and help with the decorating of the Great Hall as she once did, this sewing gave her a feeling of being involved; of accomplishing something necessary.

And it freed the other ladies to help William, something Mary herself refused to do at Winterfest. Oh, he was a cantankerous old grouch at times, but at Winterfest, William was a tyrant! Even poor Vincent felt the backlash of his wrath when he was pressed into service, on more than one occasion, at this time of the year. That dear man had the patience of a saint, he truly did! If William had spoken to HER in the tone of voice he used on Vincent, well - Mary would have probably poured the large cauldron of food over his head. But, not Vincent.

He simply nodded and nodded and nodded again, then did exactly what he wanted to do anyway! Mary smiled to herself; it never paid to argue with Vincent, not really. He would listen, seem to agree with you, and then do precisely as he thought right most of the time. He was a dear man, but like William, Vincent was a bit obstinate. Well, perhaps more than just a bit!

Just as she bent to begin her sewing, a shadow covered the chamber entrance. "Mary? It's Catherine. May I come in?"

"Of course, my dear. Hello; it's good to see you."

Gesturing to a chair across from her, Mary smiled at this lovely, young woman, as Catherine dropped thankfully into the seat, groaning.

"Oh, what a morning. I could swear that my husband has been taking in other people's laundry to do; that pile never ends! You haven't seen Vincent, have you, Mary? I've looked everywhere for that man." Catherine smiled. "I think he's deserted me!"

"That will never happen and you know it." Mary smiled, knowing Catherine was only being frivolous. Her tone turned serious. "He's not a total fool and knows very well when he is well off, I'm sure."

Picking up a needle, thread and one of the frayed napkins, Catherine laughed aloud. "I know. I just miss him and wish he would remember to leave me a note, when he goes off before I am up; he knows I worry." She looked a bit embarrassed. "Even when I know it IS silly to worry."

"Well, as long as you ARE aware of that fact..."

Giving each other a look of complete understanding, the women stitched and repaired silently, until suddenly Catherine yelped and plopped her finger into her mouth. "Yow, these needles are sharp!"

She held up the bleeding forefinger. "I've wounded myself!"

Mary glanced up, smiling. "Again? Every time you help with these tiresome linens, you seem to impale yourself on them, my dear. Is it bad?"

"Naturally; would it be Winterfest without my BLOOD as a sacrifice? I'll live." She sucked the finger again. "But, it DOES smart!"

Getting to her feet, Catherine put the piece of cloth she had been working with into the chair. "I think I have a better idea. Since I'm doing my breeding laundry ANYWAY, why don't I wash the dirty napkins and things, instead of TRYING to sew them?"

Mary nodded to the table next to her bed. "There they are; perhaps it would be better, hmm?"

"Okay, I can take a hint. Sorry about that." Picking up the large bundle, Catherine went to the chamber exit. "Don't worry, I promise not to bleed on these! And when you do see THAT man of mine..."

"When I see him? But, I wasn't expecting to." Mary looked puzzled for a moment, then nodded. "Oh yes, he would have felt your distress just then, I had nearly forgotten! I'll shoo him home, immediately."

"Good, because Father SAID if Vincent doesn't unload the crates he had promised to finish a week ago, he's in big trouble! Bye...."

Walking from Mary's, back to his own chamber, Vincent looked down at his throbbing finger, his eyes dancing with amusement as he thought to himself. '*Ah, my Catherine, when will you realize your calling will never be that of a seamstress?*'

Standing in the doorway of their chamber, Vincent looked to the enormous pile of laundry on his desk. "Catherine?"

One hand waved from behind the stack of clean wash. "Hello. Come and unbury me!" She peeked around from the side. "'bout time you got here."

"I told you where I'd be." He looked perplexed. "Didn't I?"

Catherine didn't answer. Sitting on the sofa across from her, Vincent picked up some of the children's clothes and began folding them, as she was doing. "I thought I did."

"Uh uh. Next time, just leave a note, PLEASE? I hate having to go searching for you, you know."

"It won't happen again, this I promise." Reaching over, he captured one of her hands, dropping a light kiss into the palm.

"Good, because IF it does, I'm not going to come looking for you next time, so there!" Catherine eyed him with irritation, but couldn't hold the look. Not with him grinning like that at her.

He kissed her palm again. "Yes, you will."

Tossing a towel over his head, she tried to look mad. "You're mighty sure of yourself, aren't you?"

He tossed the towel back. "Where you are concerned? Yes, I am sure, Catherine. You love me." He leaned forward to play with a silky length of her hair, not looking up. "At least, that is what you said, when you married me."

"You don't fight fair, you know." She pinched a bit of the hair on his hand 'till he winced:

"Are we having a fight? You didn't warn me." His lowered lip quivered, as he bit back a smile.

Heaping the last of the clothes on top of the basket, Catherine put one hand on her hip. "Warn you! Can't you TELL I'm mad, you aggravating man!"

He pulled her down on the sofa, his hands gripping her by the arms. "This is the part of our arguments I enjoy, my love. The making up." Holding her squirming body beneath his, Vincent nudged at her shoulders until she lay flat. He tried to kiss her as she fought to avoid his mouth, taunting him.

"Stop that! Anyone could walk in here. Vincent!"

As his lips nibbled on her collarbone, Catherine got a strange look on her face. Okay, have your way, husband. But, you'll be SORRY....

As she returned his kiss, his head drifted back slowly, exposing his throat; wanting her mouth on him. Tugging on his hair, Catherine urged him down to her, and kissing his ear, she dipped her

tongue quickly into the channel. A soft, languid moan rose from his chest; a cadence of rumbling began as Catherine moved her lips to his neck, then his throat and finally, slowly began trailing lower.

He moved as though drugged; Vincent's eyes closed as a sensation of deep, unconditional peace washed over him.

"Hmmm, I love your mouth on my body, Catherine!" Just as he reached to carry her into the bedroom, she pulled back shaking her head. "I asked you to stop, you know."

Flushed and breathing rather heavily, he looked into her eyes, frowning slightly. "I don't understand?"

Catherine started for the bathroom, answering over her shoulder. "That's one of the reasons I was looking for you earlier; I got a message from Moreno." She fluttered long eyelashes at him. "They need me."

"I NEED you!" His voice was heavy with disbelief.

"They asked first..." The bathroom door closed softly.

Snapping his head back in frustration, Vincent held his arms out and he dropped backwards to the couch with a long, rumbling groan, gritting his teeth. Why is it, just when he was about to ignite a blazing bonfire, the gods chose to wet on his matches? Ohhhh.

Sitting at the shallow end of the falls with the twins, Jamie looked over as her name was called, to find Mouse waving at her. She waved back, smiling.

Picking his way carefully over and around different sized children, Mouse plopped himself down next to the woman he loved. "Missed you at breakfast."

"I missed you, too. Where did you get to, so early, anyway?" She kissed his cheek, loving it when his eyes closed, waiting for the second one that usually followed. Jamie liked to kiss him; Mouse would never say no.

"Had things to do." Some of the sand drifted slowly through his fingers, as he looked out over the smaller children's bathing pool.

"What sort of things?"

"Just stuff. Done now. Hungry!" Jumping to his feet, he hesitated. "Coming?"

"Help me get the twins stuff together, they have to have lunch, too. Catherine is Above today, won't be back until late."

Marca and J.D stopped dumping sand over each other long enough to spot their friend Mouse. With blood curdling shrieks, they threw themselves at the man; nearly knocking him down.

"Mouth, Mouth, come play wiff us!"

Chuckling behind his hand at the cute lisp they had, Mouse shook his head, his eyes twinkling.

"Can't. Gotta eat. Wanna come?"

"Yeth!" Marca turned to Jamie, rubbing her stomach. "Jamieeee, I'm HUNGRYYYYY."

Jamie nodded as she began gathering up the blankets, towels and carryall tote. "Okay, soon as we get your stuff together, we'll eat. Come and help me."

Grabbing their toys and all the towels they could, Marca and her brother dumped them into the tote bag, sand and all. Shutting her eyes for a minute, Jamie counted to eleventy jillion for the third time today. Something else to do before Catherine came home - clean the tote bag! With Mouse holding Marca's hand and J.D's in Jamie's, they headed for the dining room, as four stomachs grumbled thankfully.

While the twins made a disaster of their bananas, Jamie turned from wiping a sticky child to find Mouse staring at her. "What?"

"Nothing." He smiled shyly. "Well, gotta go!"

"What are you up to?" Jamie's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Not fireworks..."

"No, promised Father." He shrugged good naturedly. "He said he'd make me eat 'em, next time!"

"Well, next time - ASK, before you almost blow up the Great Hall, Mouse. It WOULD be polite, you know?"

"Just wanted to surprise everyone. Didn't know they'd get mad."

Jamie laughed, remembering last Winterfest's FIASCO, as Vincent called it. "Well, you SURE surprised William all right! That firecracker hitting him on the rear-end scared him half to death!"

Embarrassed blue eyes looked at the floor. "Yeah. BOOM!"

"I thought Father would BOOM you. It's a good thing he had a plate of food in his hands and no where to lay it just then. Boy, was he MAD."

"Not as mad as William. Boom made him jump; he spilled his drink on Mary, too." Jamie giggled. "I remember. She said it was the first time in her life she smelled like a SALOON."

Just as he reached the kitchen doorway, Jamie shouted at him. "Hey, you never answered my question, where are you going now?"

"Can't tell. Bye!"

Hands on her hips, Jamie frowned; Mouse and his SECRETS! Shaking her head, turning back to the twins, Jamie's curiosity was killing her, but she knew better than to push Mouse for the truth until he was ready to talk. When it came to a secret, Mouse was as tight-lipped as... as.... Vincent!

Above, in the brick house she had surprised her husband with, one Christmas, Catherine had their beautiful oak bed covered with clothes. Blowing the hair from her eyes, she tucked it out of the way and sneered at the outfits on the bed.

"I haven't got a thing to wear!"

Reaching down, she picked up the green dress, holding it in front of herself as she turned to the mirror again. Nope; she'd worn this twice already in two months. Dropping the green one, she picked up a blue lace skirt with matching top. Nope, too small now, thanks to the children. Or rather, thanks to her husband FOR the children.

Mimicking one of his habits, Catherine growled and dropped the blue outfit to the bed like it was full of snakes. She'd NEVER get into a size six again! Crap.

Knowing the blue outfit would look gorgeous on Jamie, Catherine put it over her arm to bring Below and grabbed her purse, as she headed for the door with a look of fierce determination in her eyes. Okay, Bonwits, let's just SEE what you advertise as a SALE!

Huffing and puffing like someone well into their second century of life, Catherine threw herself across the threshold with a grunt. Turning to pick up the clumsy bundles, she almost fell on her face, as a large hand closed over her rear-end possessively. "EEK!" She spun around and fell into a pair of gleaming blue eyes.

"Vincent Wells, you scared me half to death! What are you doing here?" She held out the bundles.

Taking them from her, Vincent started up the stairs to their bedroom. "I live here." He KNEW why he was here!

"You KNOW what I mean. Why are you here all by yourself; you usually wait for me Below, on the weekend."

Standing over the bed, Catherine took the packages and held one out to him. "Your reward for lugging these for me."

He reached for the package almost hesitatingly. "I do not need a reward, Catherine. What have you done?" His mouth curved into a teasing smile. "Are you spending all OUR money again?"

"Yeah, why?" She sat on the side of the bed, pulling off her too tight shoes to rub her toes.

"You are attempting to spoil me. Don't deny it." One large hand dug into the bag, pulling out a large gold box.

"Wasn't going to deny it. Attempting to spoil you, did you say? You ARE spoiled!"

He held the soft silk shirt out in front of him, admiring it. "Perhaps I am. Just a little around the edges." Vincent tilted his head, looking down at her. "Catherine, this is beautiful material. And the color!"

Running his fingers carefully over the mauve-colored silk, he sat beside her on the bed, shaking his head. "I would say this is too good for me, but I know you would strike me, for saying it." He teased, lightly.

Lacing one arm through his, she nudged him in the ribs. "Right you are, buddy. Nothing is too GOOD for you. Now, say thank you."

He placed a chaste kiss on her cheek. "Thank you, Catherine." Reaching up, Vincent began to remove his flannel shirt, itching to try on the new one. A short cry of astonishment leapt from his throat as the shirt was snatched out of his hand.

"Uh!"

Holding the shirt behind her back and out of reach, Catherine watched him, her eyes flashing. "Now say thank you PROPERLY, please."

Leaning forward, Vincent wrapped both hands around her shoulders; pulling her closer so suddenly, she fell against him, off balance... gasping. Murmuring her name, his mouth came down on hers, **hard**. Vincent's tongue was rough... probing, as it sought the delicious heat of hers.

Claiming her mouth boldly with unrestrained passion, he lowered Catherine to the bed, rising over her like a bronzed god. His eyes were somber, almost brooding, as they swept over Catherine wantonly. A starved look came onto his face; he unbuttoned her blouse hastily, trembling with impatience.

"I **need**... you, Catherine."

"As I need you, my love." Reaching down between them, she began to fondle his stiffening flesh, hastening him to full arousal quickly. She ALWAYS needed his touch.

A sound resembling a whimper rose from Vincent as his head fell back. Lost in her touch; he was unable to deny the sweet, stabbing pain of stimulation that pulsed and throbbed deep within his groin. An instinctive urge propelled him to move. **He had to move**. Unable to stop the need to thrust his hips began moving in ever decreasing circles against her body.

Ramming down, the sounds of a man at the edge of unbridled lust seemed torn from him. Eyes wide, unfocused, he grabbed both of her wrists in one hand. "I need you... **now!**"

With rapid, shuddering motions, he swept off her skirt, then the lace pants underneath. Almost sobbing her name, he pleaded with her to understand, knew she must understand; Catherine always did. Vincent's breath was harsh as he lunged to his feet as though crazed, to strip off his clothes. He needed to be completely **free** of them - immediately.

Tossing her blouse aside, Catherine opened her arms to him as he impatiently pressed her legs apart with his knee. Arching his back as her heat encircled him, Vincent guided himself into her desperately.

He was so close already, Catherine knew now he would not stop, could not, until he reached climax. Gripping his shoulders tightly, she moved with him as best she could, sensing how badly he needed this right now. She knew the man she loved was suffering; in agony, as he struggled to hold back... to wait for her. Words of impatience poured from him.

"I... can... not, Catherine, I cannot..."

Trapping a hand between them, she lifted the hair covered, extremely sensitive testicles, into her fingers, rubbing them tenderly as they lifted and pulsed. Looking up into his face, Catherine's words set him free.

"Take what you need. I'm... ready. Vincent, TAKE what you want."

His face streaming with sweat, Vincent's lower lip quivered as their eyes met briefly; then Catherine dug her nails into his arms, crying his name aloud. Feeling her climax rise and grip her suddenly, he clenched his teeth; fighting off for one more moment, the urge to mindlessly fall over the edge with her.

Head thrown back, he ground his hips from side to side in an effort to get even deeper into her body, wanting to be lost inside of her forever. **Forever**. Then, her climax ravaged him, he could no longer stay his **own** hungers.

Eyes narrowed to slits... beyond conscious thought, he sensed the crown of his penis begin a rhythmic, pulsating movement on its own. **Now**. Rising to his knees quickly, he pulled Catherine down hard to his pumping hips and began to drive upwards - into her, with wild abandon.

As his thick, virile length filled her completely, Vincent bellowed in unconditional pleasure as he thundered into her. Holding her absolutely still to receive him, by clamping his teeth down on her shoulder, he erupted in a surge of scalding life giving seed.

Sitting back on his heels, he released Catherine slowly and struggled to draw a deep, cleansing breath as he collapsed next to her on the bed. Every muscle in her body ached as she tried moving her sore thighs. Who cared if there were bruises on her tired body tomorrow. Not her!

Noticing her stiff movements, Vincent looked at her. "You are all right?"

Struggling not to yelp in pain, Catherine nodded. "I will be, in a minute." Knowing he would sense the pain no matter what she did or said, she told him the truth - in her own way. "I ache like I was just tackled by the Green Bay Packers!" Covering her face with her hands, she began to giggle, then blushed furiously.

Vincent didn't look amused - he looked unnerved, tense. "I hurt you?" Lifting her chin, he scrutinized her face, then gasped. "I did hurt you!"

Wrapping his arms around her, Vincent rocked her to and fro as he buried his face in her neck. "I am so sorry - so terribly sorry. Oh Catherine."

Nudging him with her hip, she kept it up until he would look at her; he was deeply shamed. She reached out and stroked his damp face gently. "Stop it, Vincent. You know I'm all right."

"I... took you. Without thought, without gentleness... I..."

She placed her hand at his lips. "I loved it, so hush up! I'm not made of paper, you know."

Sighing, he gathered her close. "Nor are you made of steel! You are flesh and blood and I hurt you."

Grabbing a small tuft of one eyebrow, Catherine yanked with all her might and held up the hair so he could see it. "There, feel better now? We're even, okay?" She **had** to PREVENT one of his deathlike TRANCES.

"AH! That DID hurt!" He rubbed the spot tenderly and tried not to grin, but he did grin anyway. "I have wed a savage barbarian, it would appear."

She looked at him wide eyed with disbelief. "WHAT did you just... call me?"

Oh, Catherine's expression was priceless! As he sensed she truly was all right, he relaxed, then roared, laughing until he was weak. Collapsing onto Catherine's breasts, as she too began to rock with laughter, Vincent hiccupped until he was forced to hold his breath and go downstairs for the sugar and a paper bag.

Going over the list one more time, Jacob Wells snorted in disgust - he should NEVER have entrusted the Winterfest menu to Allegra's keeping. What had he been thinking of, for Lord's sakes? With her memory not always reliable, what god of fools had talked him into that particular act of lunacy - giving HER the list! Shaking his head, Jacob smiled ruefully. He had not been talked into it - she had snatched the list out of William's hands and said she'd do the necessary shopping this year for Winterfest. Oh GAWD. Then, she lost the list. So, naturally, he gave her another one. The baby ate it.

Trying to uncramp his stiff fingers, Father looked up just as MRS I WILL REMEMBER, entered his chamber.

"Hi, Pops, ready?" She held out her hand for the list with no guilt or even a word of apology.

"This is the last one you get!" He reluctantly held it out. Allegra, looked it over, then grinned at him. "Yeah, yeah, I know."

"Tell me something, Allegra? Do you ever apologize when you are wrong?"

"Sure. When I'm wrong."

He arched one bushy eyebrow at her, then the list. "Well?"

She wrinkled up her nose at him. "Well - what?"

"Say it!" He sat back, folding his arms over his chest, waiting.

Now, Allegra wasn't REALLY stubborn; she just found it very difficult to SAY certain things. Things, like - 'I'm sorry' or 'it was my fault' OR 'I was wrong'. These three sentences seem to lodge in her throat when she tried to spit them OUT. Like now.

"I was wr.... wr...." She tried again. "I WAS.... WRO..." Back pedaling to the stairway, she grinned back at him. "I was NOT right!"

Throwing the pen at her retreating backside, Father barely managed to hold in his explosion of laughter until she was out of sight.

Winterfest morning dawned bitter cold and it was snowing heavily. Snow clung to the top of great trees in the park; icicles hung like pieces of crystal from many branches, ready to clunk the unsuspecting passersby on the noggin at random.

Walking along next to his friend, Mouse shivered down into his thin jacket. "Brrr, TOO cold!"

Settling his hat more firmly around his ears, Kanin agreed. "Sure as hell is. It's freezing out here. Why did you pick today to go after the package, for crying out loud?"

"Couldn't get it before."

Kanin looked puzzled. "Why not?"

"Wasn't ready." Mouse grinned at him. "Gotcha."

Feeling like he'd just been HAD, Kanin threw him a sideways glare. "Cute, Mouse. REAL cute."

"Thought so. Finally here." He turned into an alleyway, then walked to the first door. Pounding on it with his cold hands, Mouse stepped back as it opened just a crack. "Who's there?"

"Mouse. And Kanin."

A pair of bright, twinkling eyes peeked out. "Oh, it is you! Come in, boys, come in out of the cold. Would you like some hot chocolate while I wrap this up?" The woman's gnarled hands held out a small silver box. Settling into a kitchen chair, Kanin nodded. "Thank you, Mrs Munson, that would hit the spot this morning. Huh Mouse?"

"For sure. Thanks."

"Oh, call me Irene, please boys. Why, Mrs Munson makes me sound OLD!"

Mouse looked puzzled. "But, you... "

Kicking Mouse under the table before he could say what Kanin KNEW he was ABOUT to say, the smaller man gave him a fierce look as he rubbed his aching foot.

His ears encased in a headset, Devin bobbed his head in tune with the music, as he turned to hang the second tapestry. Cripes, these weighed a positive ton - UHHH. Shifting the heavy cumbersome thing, he put it over the end of the rickety ladder and reached for the rag in front of him, to wipe down the wall.

Allegra looked up at her husband's wriggling behind and smiled - aww, wasn't he cute up there, with his little radio and his hammer and nails? And his delicious buns?

"Dev, you gotta..." Getting no response, Allegra called out again, louder. Again, nothing.

Correctly assuming the radio was geared to DEAFEN volume, she reached out and gave the ladder a vigorous shake. And almost ended up wearing her husband.

"YAAAHA! Wrapping one hand around the ladder and removing the headset with the other hand, he looked down, a few choice words on his lips until he saw who it was. Naturally, he cursed louder! "God... Why... Son of a.... ALLEGRA, you coulda KILLED me, woman!"

"I called YOU. You didn't answer; how was I **supposed** to get your attention?"

"Would of been safer hitting me in the head with the hammer." He looked down at her, sneering.

"Nah, that wouldn't work; nothing up THERE to hurt!" She looked up to find a large, rug-like object hurtling down at her. "Devinn....."

Olivia had been just about to call out and warn her friend, when the tapestry buried Allegra completely. Now only muffled curses and sneezing could be heard, as Olivia reached under the tapestry and tried lifting it off. Looking up, she glared at Devin. "Well? Help ME, before she smothers under this thing! Devin Wells, get DOWN here!"

"Yes, boss." He climbed down and removed the cloth; carefully trying to keep himself out of firing range of his wife's lethal little feet, as she came out gasping and coughing.

Lunging at him, Allegra caught him on the shin with one booted foot. "You NINNY! That wasn't funny!"

"I thought it was hysterical." Dodging sideways, Devin held her off by putting one hand at her forehead. Now she was swinging and getting nowhere. "Now, baby..."

"Don't you now baby ME, you chauvinistic crud!" Snapping her head down, she captured his fingers between her sharp white teeth, hanging on like a bulldog when he tried shaking her loose.

"Leggo, dammit - that hurts!" Rubbing his wound, Devin dropped to a nearby bench. "So, what'd you want me for, anyway?"

She waggled her eyebrows at him. "Do you love me, Devin?"

Devin groaned; he hated three things more than anything in this world and SHE said all of them. He loathed - 'Ya know, Dev, I've been thinking', 'guess what' but ESPECIALLY 'do you love me, Devin?' The last one usually meant BIG trouble. But, any one of them could mean his fate was sealed.

He looked more than wary. "Okay, what do you need lifted, pushed or shoved this time?"

She looked SO sad. "You don't love me."

"Yes, I DO and you damned well know it! Come on, give; what WONDERFUL job have you volunteered me for, this time!"

Pouting prettily, Allegra rose from the bench with EXTREME dignity; tiny chin out, little rosebud lips pursed in distress. "Never mind, I'll just get somebody else to help me do my shopping."

"For you, there IS nobody ELSE - woman." He pulled her into his lap, grinning.

Dropping a kiss to the scars on his left cheek, she patted his shoulder. "That's a good DO BEE. I NEED YOU, so come with me, Devin old dear."

He got to his feet almost painfully slowly; groaning and muttering as he followed her from the hall. "I'm dead. I know I'm dead. I'm sure of it. 'Llegs, I don't WANNA... GO!"

Twirling in front of the mirror, Catherine nodded at herself, satisfied. Yep, this dress was a winner. Not TOO shabby! Taking a last glance, she held onto the bedpost and stepped into her shoes.

"Catherine!" A sharp intake of breath made her turn to the bathroom door and twirl one more time.

"Nice, huh?"

Touching the deep purple silk with one finger, Vincent's words seemed a bit choked. She intended to let OTHERS/besides himself, SEE her in this? He looked down - there was barely any... front. He felt the back with one hand. There WAS no back; his wife was bare to the waist!

Stepping back, Catherine looked up at him. "You don't like it?"

Taking three or four quick gulps, Vincent tried to smile. To Catherine, his smile looked like a gas pain. She turned back to the mirror, frowning. What was wrong with this dress?

Standing just behind her, Vincent put one hand to her shoulder. "I am too jealous of you, Catherine; in that dress, too much of what I assume to belong only to... ME, is visible to anyone's eyes."

She turned to him, smiling. "You DO like it, then?"

"It is as lovely as you are beautiful." His hand brushed against the delicate silk, thoughtfully. "It is almost as delicate as you are, Catherine."

Catherine decided to make him FEEL good. She spun back to the mirror. "Then, I CAN wear it, Vincent? PLEASE let me?"

Seeing her eyes in the mirror, Vincent gave a knowing snort. As if she would not wear it if he said NO? HA. After all, he WAS married almost five years! HA.

"Of course you may wear it, my love." He nuzzled her neck softly, then turned to get his clothing organized.

As Vincent dressed, Catherine went into the bathroom to finish her own preparations. By the time she stepped out again, he was ready and sitting at his desk, quietly reading.

He stood as she neared the desk. "Ah, you are ready to go now?" Light from the lamp washed through his long hair, turning it to spun gold, as he smiled down on his wife.

Catherine held one hand at his chest, looking him over carefully. Oh GOD - he was gorgeous. That mauve, silk shirt, those black tight pants, along with those shiny leather boots were too much for any normal, red-blooded woman to resist!

"You can't go, Vincent."

"I can't... go? Am I to be told why I cannot go?" Leaning slightly forward, over her, hands at his hips, he held her eyes with his taunting blue ones.

"You're TOO gorgeous, that's why!"

"I see." He looked at her almost shyly; not too good, even yet, in taking compliments. "I will make a bargain with you, my lovely Catherine."

She eyed him warily. "What sort of a bargain?"

"I will promise to let you be the only one to help me out of this outfit - later, if I am allowed to attend Winterfest this year, in it."

Picking up her shawl and small mesh bag, Catherine laughed as she hustled him out of the room. "Done and done!"

Jamie was about to ask Mouse how the blue outfit from Catherine looked on her, when his stunned, slightly cross-eyed stare gave her the answer.

"Thanks, Mouse."

Startled, he shook his head, then looked up. "Huh?"

"It was nice of Catherine to give this to me, wasn't it? See how full the skirt is!" She spun around and around until she was dizzy and nearly breathless; then flung her arms around Mouse's neck to steady herself.

Without being aware he was going to do it, Mouse pulled her against his body tightly as she gasped in surprise. "Mouse!"

Although they had been lovers over a year now, Mouse was still shy about many things, very tentative in the ways he expressed his love; so was Jamie. One of those things was kissing in a way that people in love found 'natural'. These two shy people found it.... difficult. But, Mouse wanted to try it and he wanted to try it - right now.

"I love you, Jamie. Lots." Keeping her close, he buried his reddening face in her neck, feeling her pulse throbbing under his lips.

"I love you too, Mouse." Jamie hugged him just as hard as she could. She was strong for a slender woman!

"You're squashing me, Jamie."

Relaxing the pressure a little, she giggled. "Sorry."

Cupping his hands around her face, Mouse buried himself in her pretty eyes; his breathing got very fast as he lean forward to kiss her. Pressing his mouth hard against hers, Mouse touched her lips with his tongue, then drew back quickly in case it made her mad and she swung at him.

But Jamie didn't smack him, she moaned. Pulling back, he looked at her again, scared he had hurt her somehow.

"Anything w... w... wrong?"

"N... n... no. Do it again, Mouse?" Jamie crossed her arms over his back as she had seen Catherine do once to Vincent; it felt good to be this close to Mouse. Real good.

This time, when his tongue brushed her lips, Jamie opened her mouth and touched back. Not realizing he was groaning and slowly moving his hips, Mouse held her arms firmly, then pulled her closer, by dropping one hand to her buttocks and gently cupping it's rounded, soft fullness tightly. Why couldn't he get close enough?

They got lost in the kiss. When her hands buried themselves in his hair and her mouth softened under his, Mouse lost all thought of parties, music and everything else - except Jamie. He wanted her now - God, he wanted her now.

Taking a step towards her, Mouse edged her back to the bed following her down, as she gasped in surprise and held him even tighter. Winterfest could wait a little while longer. Mouse couldn't.

Halfway to the Great Hall, Jamie glanced over to see Mouse staring at her, quite knowingly.

"What?"

A small smile curved his mouth up at the edges. "You surprised me."

"You surprised me, too!" She held his hand tightly as Mouse chuckled. "Surprised myself!"

Stopping in the corridor, he leaned back against the wall. "You love me, right?"

"Yes."

"You sure?" Mouse seemed terrified as he waited for the answer.

"Of course I'm SURE! Why?"

Reaching into his vest pocket, he pulled out a small box, all tied up with ribbon. "For you."

Opening the paper without being careful of it for the first time in her life, Jamie looked from the delicate gold ring in the box back to Mouse, then, to the box again. He shifted his weight, getting nervous. She was so quiet; how come she was so quiet?

"You like it, Jamie?"

She couldn't speak; she nodded her head fiercely up and down.

Taking a deep breath, Mouse pushed onward. "You want it? It... It's a... wedding... ring."

Jamie's eyes were filled with tears as she beamed at him. "I want to wear it, Mouse. Put it on my finger, okay?"

"Okay." Slipping it over her knuckle, Mouse took a deep breath; it fit good! Whew!

Turning the ring around and around on her finger,

Mouse ducked his head and kissed her hand. "Winter or summer wedding, your choice. Big or small one?"

"We can discuss when later, Mouse." She flung her arms around his neck. "I don't CARE who you invite - even ARTHUR and his family can come!"

Mouse hugged her tight, smiling. Jamie said his raccoon, Arthur, could actually come to their wedding? Jamie DID love him!

As Catherine and Father danced by slowly, she looked up and saw her husband watching them, a lingering smile on his beautiful face. She waved with the tips of her fingers. Bowing slightly from the waist, Vincent looked at her with such love and pride gleaming from his eyes, Catherine almost stumbled, as she and Father moved on.

"Oops, sorry Father. Did I step on your toes?"

"No, no, I quite understand, Catherine." Smiling, he glanced back to Vincent. "It was good of my son to allow us this dance tonight. I know he does NOT share you easily with anyone, especially during his favorite waltzes." Turning her gently, he led her back to the bottom of the second level as the music ended.

Patting her hand warmly, Father then reclaimed his cane from Devin. "Thank you." He looked at Devin a bit reproachfully. All in black, his son looked a bit like an executioner - all the man needed was a hood!

Devin winked at him, rubbing one hand over his black silk shirt. "Don't say it." Arm in arm, they rejoined Allegra and Mary on the other side of the hall, talking and teasing as they did now, finally at peace with all the pain that stood between them for so many years.

Catherine stood next to her husband, looking down at Devin and Father ruefully, shaking her head. "Those two are sure something, aren't they? If there was an Olympic medal for living through the most battles, they'd share a gold one!"

Vincent chuckled, nodding. "Share it, my love? No, brother would manage to get the medal away from Father, I am quite certain."

She nudged his hip gently. "Something the Wells men seem to share; the ability to charm the birds from the trees, when they want to."

As Vincent broke into a deep rolling laugh, Mouse and Jamie came up the stairs, towards them. "Catherine, Vincent, hi!" Catherine took Jamie's hands in hers. "Oh, let me look at you! Oh, that dress never looked that nice on me. Blue is your color, Jamie. I..."

Catherine glanced down at the young woman's hand, then to her husband, her eyes reflecting the elation in Jamie's. Mouse blushed furiously and took hold of the woman's elbow.

"Asked her to marry me. Said yes. Neat ring, huh?"

After kissing Jamie on the cheek, Vincent pulled poor Mouse into a bear-hug, that nearly crushed his bones.

"Well it is about time you gathered your courage together, Mouse. This is delightful news! Have you told your friends or Father?"

"Nope. You and Catherine first, right Jamie?" He looked at her through shining eyes.

"That's right. We're going to tell Father now." She sighed as though not relishing THIS at all. Catherine hugged them both as they turned for the stairs, giving them a few words of encouragement.

"Don't worry, Father will be very happy for you. You'll see."

Mouse's boyish face looked suddenly quite a bit more mature; older. "Hope he's glad!" He peered up at Vincent with a determined look. "Sad or glad - we're getting married and that's that!"

Whispering in his ear, his dearest friend in the world congratulated him once more. "I am very glad of this."

When they were alone again, Catherine turned to look at him. "What did you say to Mouse? My, didn't he look grown up and so fiercely resolute?"

"Yes, he did. I merely told no matter WHAT Father said, Mouse would not be swayed from his decision to marry." His voice dropped, "He has shown more courage than I did seven years ago, when Father..." He lowered his head, turning to the tapestries at his back.

Rubbing his arm, Catherine put a hand on his shoulder. "When Father spoke to you of a life that could never... be?"

"Yes. I... " There was great sadness in his tone. "I allowed myself to believe him and my doubts nearly destroyed... us." His arm went around her waist, pulling her closer against him. "The waste, Catherine, the deplorable waste of almost three years of your life - and my own."

"No, NOT a waste, Vincent. Never that, my love. We were together, that's what mattered. We evolved in that time together, from two separate beings into one heart - one soul." She rested her head on his shoulder, her voice soft, remembering. "We found our own paths through all the pain, all the fears, didn't we?"

Tightening his fingers at her hips, Vincent's words were practically inaudible - a soft whisper that wrapped around Catherine's heart like a reviving balm.

"Your love and patience guided me from darkness; showed me what life WAS, all it COULD be, even for me. It has BEEN all you said it would be and more. So much more, my courageous Catherine."

He dropped his mouth to her hair, rubbing his lips gently back and forth for a moment. "All you vowed would become mine - is mine. Your strength freed... both... of us."

She couldn't answer, not in words. Leaning into his embrace, Catherine blinked rapidly; fighting back tears as his infinite love and gentle nobility sent her heart soaring.

Seated next to Peter Alcott at the long table, Jacob felt his friend's eyes on him. "Peter, what is it?"

Peter seemed perplexed as he shook his head. "It's just that you amaze me at times, my old friend, you really do."

"And why is that, may I ask?" Father threw him a searching look. "You've called me many things over the years, but never in my memory, have you called me 'amazing' before, Peter. My, my! So, there's hope for me yet, hmmm."

Throwing him a disdainful look, Peter grunted rudely. "Ha, I don't know about HOPE, but when Mouse and Jamie told you their news, your warmth and open acceptance surprised me - as it surprised others!"

"And why should I object when Mouse and Jamie wish to marry! I think they'll be happy."

Peter poked Jacob's arm hard. "Because I KNOW you, that's why. I know you think Mouse is irresponsible and at times, even dangerous, with his gizmos and gadgets. Yet you were not opposed to the marriage. Why?"

Father looked a bit ashamed of himself. "Oh, you would ask! I just felt, that with Jamie to... perhaps center him a bit, he'd show more caution and restraint, that is all." He shrugged apprehensively. "Maybe with a wife to influence him, Mouse will be swayed from some of his more... dangerous... pursuits, like the destruction of this world, for example!"

Laughing in good fellowship, the two old friends walked over to get another cup of William's homemade ale, before the other adults finished it all.

This year's Winterfest was drawing to an end. As all those gathered made the circle closing the day's festivities, everyone looked a bit wistful; as though not wanting to have this day come to an end so soon.

Allegra stood between Devin and Mary, looking radiant in black lace as she threw her husband a wickedly devilish grin - which he returned without hesitation, shifting their sleeping son in his embrace.

Devin felt a gentle tug on his arm as Father drew him closer on the left and Vincent closer on the right. *Father seemed really jolly today*, Devin thought; *wonder how he'll feel in the morning - he never seemed to remember how William's brew always affected him!*

Throwing Vincent a pointed look, Devin tilted his head toward their father, smirking. His brother nodded in response, also watching Father. One amber eyebrow arched upwards; Vincent reminded himself to bring Father some tea in the morning. He would most definitely need it.

Looking around the circle, Catherine's eyes flickered lightly upon each friend for a moment. Everyone was here this year, all those that had been ill or distant last year, as well as many new tunnel residents, enjoying their first Winterfest.

Catherine thought back to her first time in the Great Hall; remembering how Vincent guided her inside, his fingers entwined with hers shyly. She remembered Father's voice as he asked her to become one of them, by joining the circle, for the closing short ceremony. How pleased Vincent was when Father had finally made that small gesture of true acceptance; it had taken him a long time to do that.

Feeling his glance, she looked up to the right side, meeting those incandescent eyes that shone like twin sapphires under the chandelier's candlelight. She loved him so much. Taking his arm, she gently stroked the heads of the two half asleep children nestled against his chest. Marca and J.D, their children. His beautiful children.

Looking around the circle as Father began the closing short speech, her eyes stopped for a moment on each beloved face. Olivia, Kanin and Luke, their son. Devin and his Allegra, with D.J; finally settled at last, into their own happy life.

Mouse and a glowing Jamie; oh, what wonders lay before them! William and Peter. She sighed, seeing as though for the first time, how tired Peter looked. Years were passing too quickly.

There stood Mary, trying to help Samantha with three cranky young children; always the gentle, dear Mary, with her endless patience.

Looking directly across the circle, Catherine watched as Cullen and one of the new tunnel women held a quiet conversation; what was brewing there?

Next to Cullen stood Brooke and her best friend, Jan, also a new tunnel member. At Jan's side was Lena and her daughter, Cathy, a lovely girl, with long golden hair to her waist. She was studying to become a pianist; Rollie had been a great help to her.

Catherine was glad Rollie had finally found his way back to them. Vincent had been beside himself with joy, to see Rollie sitting at HIS piano once again; playing all the wonderful music as only he could.

Hearing the end of Father's words, Catherine stepped forward with the others; raising her arms high as Vincent held her hand firmly clasped in his.

Passing the twins to Allegra's waiting arms, Catherine hugged her tightly for a minute. "It's been a good Winterfest, huh, Allie?"

"Yeah. As Mouse would say gooder than good! Well, we better get these two settled down with D.J; all hell's gonna bust loose in the morning when Marca finds herself STUCK with the boys again. She'll kill them yet! Night."

Allegra called out to Vincent as he went around the Hall, snuffing out all the candles. "Hey SMALL ONE, see ya later."

His booming voice echoed off the walls. "Not if I see you first, 'Legra. Remind Devin - he has to get the movie for tomorrow night yet, will you? Goodnight."

Alone in the Hall with her husband, Catherine slipped off her shoes and reached for the new furry slippers that had been a Christmas present from her slightly nutty friend, Allegra. Two impish looking, furry gold cats named Garfield, looked up at her with slightly crossed eyes. Their long, black whiskers tickled her legs slightly as she walked with a flip-flopping sound over to stand beside Vincent, with her hands behind her back.

"Not many candles left now."

He stood on his toes to reach the last one in the chandelier. "Yes, the one near the door will be enough to guide us out, when we are ready to leave."

"Guide US out? Guide ME out, you mean! You can see without any candles. What do you mean, ready to leave? We aren't ready yet?"

Picking a bit of candlewax from his fingers, Vincent shook his head. "Oh no, not yet. There is something I must do first." Picking up a small tape cassette, he flicked it on with one long nail. "I must dance with my wife."

"But, you did dance with me, many times, in fact. It was fun, especially when you dipped me in front of Father. I thought he'd choke on his drink!"

He laughed softly. "Yes, that maneuver did seem to surprise him just a bit. I am sure I shall hear more of it, in the morning." Vincent put one hand at his hip, his eyes narrowed. "So, do you want to dance again, Catherine?"

Stepping out of her fuzzy slippers, Catherine rose on her toes, holding out her arms. "Must you ask me, Vincent."

The soft strains of Devin's Christmas present to his brother filled the Great Hall, with a song from the early 80's, as Catherine and Vincent lost themselves in the music of Anne Murray.

§§ I cried a tear, you wiped it dry/ I was confused, you eased my mind/ I sold my soul, you bought it back, for me/ and raised me up and gave me dignity/ Somehow, you needed me./ You gave me strength to stand alone again./ To face the world, out on my own again. /You put me high, upon a pedestal,/ so high that I could almost see eternity /- you needed me - you needed me./ And, I can't believe it's true, I can't believe it's you - I needed you and you were there./ I'll never leave. Why should I leave, I'd be a fool. /I've found the one who really cares....§§

Nuzzling his face softly against Catherine's cheek, Vincent began to unconsciously hum along with the song, to her delight. His mighty baritone voice purred low, gently in her ear, tickling a little as she closed her eyes. A smile came to her lips; she knew he had chosen this song - for the obvious reasons.

Coaxing her nearer, Vincent's eyes began to shut slowly as his legs brushed against his wife's. To hold her like this, to feel her happiness mingle with his own, was beyond a miracle - for him. He thought back to the closing words his father had said: 'there is no darkness, as long as we share the light. All winters end.'

It was true; all winters did end and with that ending, came the spring - everything new and green, so filled with promise and life! So much life.

Vincent and Catherine had all the time in the world to enjoy this life they had made for themselves. They had earned that right and now, nothing - no one - could take it from them, ever again.

Winterfest! A time of celebration and joy; to share and remember fondly the past, with those you love. A time to look back without sorrow, to look ahead, with hope - all the hope and promise of a new year.

Vincent and Catherine - a life, a love, that would always - **BE!**

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