

The Masquerade

by Patricia Anne Kehoe

The night sky was purple-blue and clear. It seemed as though one could reach up and touch each star in greeting. It was May and a beautiful night for looking both to the past and the present. A night for dreaming of what could be; what had been. Vincent stood between Father and Catherine with an arm lovingly placed about each of them as he admired the night before him.

"Ah, Father, look. There is Andromeda, see the configuration?" Father looked up and smiled.

"I think you're wrong, Vincent; It looks more like Cassiopeia, see her chair?" Catherine watched this exchange with some amusement; Vincent was so seldom wrong, especially about the stars. He saw and studied them for so many years, for so many nights of his life.

Father's next words made her shake with laughter as she attempted to hide her giggles from Vincent and naturally, failed miserably.

"Well Vincent! It must be you are distracted tonight, hummmm?" And he looked from Vincent to Catherine and back again to his son with an ever widening grin on his lips.

Father knew when Catherine was nearby; his son was occupied solely with thinking of her as a rule. This was accepted by the general tunnel population, as a fact and a foregone conclusion, for some years now. Everyone of his friends knew if they wanted to see him, or ask something of him, they must do it during the week and during the day. For the nights and the week-ends belonged to Catherine: This was Friday and even Father had been both surprised and pleased when Vincent and Catherine had met him in the tunnel corridor as they were heading for this entrance; and had invited him to walk along with them to admire the stars.

Father knew how precious, how cherished their time together was. He felt somehow honored; they included him in their talks tonight. He felt a tug at his arm, Catherine was touching the material of his new cloak that had been a gift from Mary on his birthday. This was the first time he had worn it. It was a deep maroon velvet and wool. Lined with flannel and many, many pockets for storage had been sewn into the deep grey lining.

"Father, this is a beautiful cape: It reminds me of pictures I've seen of the court of Henry the Eighth; the England of the early 1600s when all men dressed in a more decorative style than they do now. Except, of course, the people of your world, and Vincent, in particular."

She smiled this last towards him and he beamed back at her, "thank you, Catherine. It is most gratifying to know you approve of my attire; if you did not, well ... I would have to begin wearing a suit, I imagine ..."

Father *chuckled loudly over this as Catherine gave an unladylike snort at the thoughts her mind was weaving. Vincent in a grey flannel suit. Oh God! That would have been one time that the man certainly would have outshone the clothes!* She tried in her mind's-eyes to see him actually wearing a three piece suit and a tie.

She convulsed with laughter, "Oh, no! Every woman in town would be chasing you: I don't need the competition!"

He looked down at her, a small shy smile darting about his lips. "You shall never have any competition, my love."

Catherine looked away for a moment, thoroughly surprised that he had said this out loud, and in front of Father. Her quick glance to Father told her he was thinking the same thing; he was staring at his son,

mouth slightly agape. Slowly, she cleared her throat and changed the subject back towards her previous ideas.

"Yes, Father. Your new cloak is lovely. Oh I wish I could have lived in those times! The manners of the lords and ladies, the clothes they wore, the jewels! When knighthood was in flower, huh?"

The older man smiled back. "I will tell Mary how much you admire her handiwork, it will please her immensely, I'm sure."

He noticed a strange, unknown look come over Catherine's face for a moment. "My dear, are you all right?" Vincent now also looked down at her; Catherine seemed to be a million miles away, lost in thought.

"Have you left us, Catherine? Where are you?" She looked at both of them, and grinned slyly. She had an idea; one that Father would, *perhaps* go along with, but Vincent?

"I have a great idea! Why don't we have a ball, a masquerade ball! Everyone could come as his or her favourite character from history, or someone they admire: Oh, think of it! To be all dressed up as a lady or gentlemen of "Court", or a movie character. Oh, it would be such fun. Father? Vincent? Well, what do you think? I could provide any costumes anyone needed, or people could make their own. Please? If I can get enough people to agree, could we do it? It *would* be fun.'

Vincent looked first at her then to Father, an enigmatic look on his face, and waited for Father to respond.

He secretly hoped Catherine could be talked out of this idea: Dressing up like a ... a ... dandy was all right for Halloween, but now in the middle of May, for just a party.

Catherine could sense Vincent was less than enthusiastic about her plans, but she also decided that Father would, of course, have the last word! If he agreed, Vincent would go along, perhaps grudgingly at first. She remembered times before when an idea had bothered him initially, then not at all as he let himself relax and be caught up in the change in lifestyle for a few hours. A party or a dance was seldom done in his world just for "no reason at all"! But a costume? This he was not sure of, not at all!

Father was looking up to the Heavens as though for guidance; thinking of how quiet these last months had been. Maybe a change *would* be good for everyone. He surprised Catherine, and stunned his son with a nod of agreement!

"Yes, Catherine! Your idea sounds truly. Quite interesting. I know the ladies would welcome the change in routine, if not the men! Well, Vincent? *You have nothing* to say; this is *most* unusual:"

He narrowed his eyes, glaring at his Father, then almost growled a retort.

"It was not I that Catherine asked an opinion of, Father, but you." He turned and looked at her, hoping she would understand this reluctance of costumes. He was different enough as he was: She knew most of his thoughts already. They were like a finely-tuned violin, one string well aware of the other, they blended together as one sound usually, one heart, one mind. This was not one of those times.

"Oh, Vincent! You don't *have* to wear a costume, if you'd rather not. It was just an idea, for Heaven's sake. Get that LOOK off your face; as though I were leading you to your doom!"

Then Catherine hugged him hard and whispered in his ear so only he could hear her.

"Wear what you like. WEAR NOTHING! Just be there, to dance with me."

The man stood silent, at a loss for words at what she had whispered to him, Wear nothing? Really! He almost choked trying to reply to her teasing.

"I will be happy to dance with you, Catherine. If the other men are not so charmed by your presence they take all your dances away from me."

She giggled and buried her head deeply into his cloak as a flush came over her face. This was a side one rarely saw of Vincent. A teasing, sharp-witted man that could match "tone" with the best of them, if he so chose. He now chose to do just that.

"And naturally, Father you will be coming as King Henry? You already have a ... umm, bit of the paunch he was reputed to have had. Why it will require little padding for the role at all, yes?"

Father was instantly furious, then indignant, finally realizing he was being taunted. Well, this would not do! Where was his son's respect for his parent?

"Please, show a bit of respect, Vincent! I do not have a "paunch - just a bit of a ... a ... Oh, never mind. I'm going to bed! Catherine, your idea is fine with me, and I'm sure *others* in our world will be very excited to hear there will be a party. Unlike the grouch you love, some of us like a different atmosphere now and again! Vincent, good night, I will see you tomorrow, if my huge stomach lets me get up!"

With that sarcasm on his tongue, Father winked at Catherine, and went Below to bed.

She turned to Vincent, "you were quite unkind, you realize? Telling Father he's fat!"

He shook his magnificent head in protest, "I never said he was fat, maybe a bit portly, perhaps ..."

She giggled, "Someday you too may have "love handles"! Remind me to tease YOU then."

He looked a question at her, "Love handles, Catherine? What ...?"

She grabbed lightly at the flesh at either side of his strong, lean hips and pinched what little extra skin there was, "these are love handles, something a person ... umm, hangs onto when loving. Understand?"

Vincent of course understood. He looked to her with hooded eyes, the blueness of them and the glint belieing his next words, "Let's see if YOU have these "handles"! He reached out and gripped her firmly around the waist, tickling her with his thumbs as he held on to her graceful form.

"Stop that, I'm ticklish, you know that. Vincent!"

As she stepped tightly into his arms, he stopped the torture of his hands. Suddenly his hands began to move on her as never before. He slowly raised one to her face and let the other trace over her hips, to her ribs, up her arm, where it joined the other hand to hold her face to his gaze fully. Catherine felt her knees begin to shake from the intensity of his blue eyes staring into hers.

He was looking at her in a way he never had. Searching, for what? Seeking, what? Learning, what? Whatever he had been probing her face for, he seemed to have found. He enfolded her even tighter to his heart, sighing deeply. Vincent saw the love in her eyes as he pulled his gaze from hers; saw also the haunting passion they never talked of, the taboo subject that was the private hell they shared only between themselves for these last three years.

He knew this situation must be resolved soon. He could deny her nothing, except what she had wanted most from him – himself. He loved her more than his own life, his soul, yet denied to her the one act that would unite them fully forever. The simple act of love. He had flirted around the edges of it, the passion, many times as he had held her in the past. She bade a hunger rise in him that at times had nearly consumed him. He had to leave her quickly then, before she sensed these feelings and could react to them.

Vincent knew, in the deepest part of all he was, that she loved him. As fully, if not more, than he loved her. Yet his own body repulsed him. How could he share this body with her? It would surely not please her to look on his physical form, it was so different from her own. So he held his longings to himself, and dreamed his passions away as best he could, for as long as he had been able.

The dreams were not helping lately. They only made things harder to endure when he saw her, touched her, lately even just talking to Catherine now was becoming difficult. At times she read to him and if Vincent had been pressed, he could not have told what the words she spoke were. He was lost in looking at her. When she at times absent-mindedly licked one finger to turn a page, he envied that finger, wanted to *be* that page.

Catherine held him and rested her head on his chest as she listened to the quickening beat of his heart beneath her ear. She knew how difficult it was becoming to hold her. Vincent did not need to say the words. Her own mind said them for him, to herself. She wanted him fully. As any woman wanted the man she loved. Catherine yearned for his touch, his body on hers, his lips on hers. Everything, she wanted everything. And it was becoming very, very difficult – to accept less.

When Father put the word out on the tunnel pipelines about the party, people were on the whole really happy about the event. A few of the men didn't want to dress up, just as Vincent had not wanted to, but their wives changed their minds for them! It was a party, everyone better be in the 'spirit' of the moment or else! None of the men wanted to find out what, exactly "or else" meant. When all the children discovered that they too, were invited, the shouting and yelling in excitement nearly drove Father over the edge.

"Yeh, we get to go too! Hey, Father, what'll you be dressed as?"

With a frown over the top of his glasses towards the exuberant children he responded "I haven't really decided yet? I may go as a scary ghost ... BOOOOO!"

The children ran screaming in mock fright from Father. He grinned after them, Well, this was one way to get a bit of peace and quiet. He pondered their question however - what *would* he go as. Then he had an idea that made him chuckle. He would go as a Magician - "Jacobi the Great".

Yes! As a youngster, he had been quite good, well fair anyway, at magic. He had almost forgotten how much fun it had been to perform tricks others could not begin to figure out. Well he better get practicing! With that thought, he started skimming through his books.

"Let's see ... magic ... magic - magic. AHA!"

Vincent was reading and trying to ignore the hubbub outside his Chamber, but Pascal brought the noise in with him.

"Vincent, I need your help! Do you have anything old and green that you could give me? I need to make a jacket. Something you don't want back?"

Vincent thought a moment, "Yes, Pascal. As a matter of fact, I have an old green shirt that really is beyond mending. Would that do? What do you have to have green specifically, for? Oh, let me guess. THE PARTY. UGH. COSTUMES!" Vincent raised his eyes to the ceiling; expecting Pascal to laugh and agree.

But Pascal looked angry instead. "I'm a bit surprised at your attitude, my friend. To hurt Catherine so. Well, your business I suppose! Thanks for the shirt!"

But, before he could leave. Vincent reached out and grabbed him by the back of his coat,

"What did you mean hurt Catherine? She understands I will not be in costume; she didn't appear to be upset by that fact. Have you heard something I have not? TELL ME!"

Pascal grinned. "Well, Mary said that Rita said that Trisha said, that Catherine really wished you would get a bit more into the spirit of the party, that's all. Why, even Winslow is getting a costume. He's going to be Othello. And, I'm going to be Robin Hood: Has Father told you? He's going as a magician! I hope he doesn't pull any "sawing someone in half". I'm not going *near* him all night!"

After Pascal had gone, Vincent sat for a very long time on his bed, thinking ... then slyly smiling.

Catherine, Mary and the other women were giggling together in the kitchen. One of the women had told everyone how she had "enticed" her husband to wear a costume!

"I just told him that if he DIDN'T wear a costume, he may as well stay home and watch the children. They had chicken pox and can't attend. And, they are VERY cranky! Well, he *is* going to dress, I thought he would!"

Catherine asked Mary, "What will you be wearing, or is it a deep dark secret?"

Mary stopped making bread long enough to respond, "It's no secret, my dear. I will be Florence Nightingale. What are you wearing?"

Catherine motioned the other women closer, then whispered to them.

Winslow was carrying chairs and boxes of decorations towards the Great Hall, when a half-familiar voice called out loudly, "Hi! How have you been, Winslow?" He turned and looked back. It was Allegra! Allegra was an old friend, a former tunnel inhabitant for many years. She now lived Above and worked for Dr Alcott. He specialized in head trauma and was a very good doctor. Winslow was so happy to see her.

"Hi, Al. Gosh, it's been nearly a year! How are you? I heard you had been down to see us, but I was away, visiting friends Above and missed you the last time. Are you coming to the party?"

She looked puzzled. "What party? I just came by to say hello to Father, and a few others, including you! What's the party for?"

They walked together towards the Great Hall, Winslow explaining about Catherine's idea. Wow, all the "family" was "gung ho" except Vincent. He refused to dress up for the affair.

"He's being very stubborn about it, Al. Maybe ... Hey! Yeh! He'll listen to you, you're old friends! Why, you, he and Devin practically grew up together!"

Allegra shook her head. "I don't think so, Winslow! If he won't do it for Catherine, well ... he won't do it for anyone. Hoy, he can sure be stubborn. Some things never change, huh?"

A while later, walking towards Father's Chamber, Al heard the laughter coming from the kitchen and peeked in.

"Hi, ladies! What's going on?"

The women almost fell over themselves trying to hug Al. Mary finally pushed the others aside.

"Ladies please, give her room to breathe! Now, sit down, my dear, and tell us all the news. How is Dr Peter? We haven't seen you for quite a while. He's not working you too hard is he?"

Allegra laughed, "Oh, no, he's a teddy bear! But, to change the subject for just a moment – what's this I hear about a Masquerade party? Am I invited too?" Catherine reached over and hugged Al.

"Of course you're invited! We have a lot to catch up on, right ladies? For instance, how's your ... ummm, love life? Catherine teased her friend.

She had gotten to like Allegra very well during her stay in the tunnels when her father had died. Allegra had been very kind to her, Catherine never forgot kindness. And besides, Al was fun! She teased Father and Vincent unmercifully and managed to get away with it most of the time. She had a quick tongue and a keen mind all packed in a tiny little frame of five feet tall and about one hundred pounds, she was a dynamo when she wanted to be. Catherine secretly *almost* envied her the ease in which she could joke with Vincent. They had shared childhood, and had many memories and good times to talk of. Sometimes she had felt quite left out. Why, she had been almost jealous of her. But, as Catherine got to know Allegra better, she liked her very much, and now she treated her as a long absent sister.

"Hey, you haven't called me in months. Too busy for old friends, huh?"

The women continued to talk amongst themselves as they readied the food for the party. This was Wednesday, the party was Saturday, and there was so much to do.

Allegra tiptoed into Father's Chamber. He and Vincent were having a rather heated discussion over a chess move.

"Vincent, you know I would *never* make that move! Why, my hand must have brushed against it accidentally. Really!"

His son looked at him HARD, then shook his head.

“Yes, I can see you did not mean to move the King. You may proceed, Father, I ...”

Vincent looked up and saw Allegra in the doorway holding a finger to her lips as she made her way quietly to Father’s chair, reached up and put her hands over his eyes.

“Guess who?” she squeaked in a falsetto voice, so Father would not recognize her right away. He twisted this way and that, but she held on. “No, you must guess! Father, think ... always gave you the worst time as a youngster? I mean, of course, BESIDES DEVIN.”

Father shook his head, he still didn’t know. She winked at Vincent, “All right, who hid the frog in your bed that scared the hell out of you one rainy night?!”

Father clasped her hands and turned in his chair, “Allegra! My dear, come around here. Let me look at you. Why, you’re still as lovely as ever, isn’t she, Vincent?”

His son smiled up to her and nodded his agreement with that statement.

Al felt herself blush. Damn! She always had a schoolgirl’s crush on Vincent. Hell, all the girls had! But over the years, the crush had turned to deep friendship, one she would always treasure.

Allegra was a very ‘private’ person - no one really knew what she was thinking most of the time. And no one knew she had transferred her love to Devin long ago. She loved him still. She guessed she always would, damn it. She had been thinking these thoughts to herself.

Vincent suddenly said, “He’s not been in touch for months now, Al. We hoped he be home for Christmas but ...”

She looked at Vincent, stunned. She had nearly forgotten his empathic abilities? He had always known what she was feeling and still did. This maddened her. It wasn’t fair.

She said this aloud, “Hey! That’s not fair! You always know what I’m feeling ... what everyone is feeling! And no one knows what’s going on in the golden head of *yours*! By the way, Vin ... how’s Catherine, huh?”

The question brought a “look” at her from underneath his curved eyebrows. “Catherine is well. Why do you ask? Isn’t she in the kitchen when you passed by just now?”

Allegra reached over and tugged lightly on his hair. “Oh you! Well, I hear that there’s going to be a party soon. And yes, I did see Catherine, smarty, and I am invited to come. What will you be wearing, Father? You, Vin?”

Father looked a bit uncomfortable. He knew Vincent was not going to wear a costume. He waited for him to tell this to Al. Oh brother, this should prove quite interesting! She’d never let him get away with not wearing some kind of outfit.

Vincent looked a bit uncomfortable himself as he replied, “Well, I had thought I would just come as I am, Allegra. You of all people, know how I am about parties!”

Al looked at him smiling. “Yeh! They scare the hell out of you! Or so you’ve always said anyway! I think it’s just your way of getting out of dancing with all the girls, Mr Bashful. HA!”

Just as Al uttered this taunt, Catherine entered the Chamber. She saw that Al and Father were chuckling, and that Vincent was the butt of some sort of teasing. He smiled and went to meet her as she reached the bottom of the stairs.

“Hello, Catherine. We were just, umm, discussing the party. Al, it appears is rather put out that I am not dressing, I told her you understood. Now she’s being her usual self – a pest. Ah, this brings back many old memories. Allegra, remember the time you decided you wanted to go swimming, and didn’t have a suit, why ...”

Her screech of embarrassment ended the “let’s tease” game, for now.

Catherine smiled. “I just stopped by to say good night. I’m exhausted! I’ve never cooked or seen so much food in a long time. I may never eat again! Goodnight, Father. Appropriate!. Al, see you tomorrow? How about lunch? Sal’s, at one? Can you make it?”

The girl nodded back, "Sure: I'll see you then. We can have a real old gab fest, and talk about these guys, huh?"

Just as Vincent and Catherine turned to leave, Al shouted out a final retort to her "brother".

"And we can discuss tomorrow, what to do about his refusal to dress as everyone else is. Hay! I know what I'm going to be – a witch! I have a long black dress, and I can get a mask tomorrow! She didn't hear Vincent's remark under his breath as he took Catherine's arm and led her from the room. "Appropriate!"

He was teasing, but still. It irked him, *why* was EVERYONE so intent on getting him into a damnable costume? He wanted to scream, LET ME ALONE, but held his tongue. Father had once said he had the patience of Job in the Bible. Well, this patience was WEARING thin!

Catherine glanced at him as they walked along in silence to the basement of her apartment. He looked a little angry. Oh! Oh! This caused her to stop and turn to face him.

"Vincent I'm sorry your friends are pushing you so about the, well, you know. Don't let it upset you? Please?"

Vincent sighed. Sometimes Catherine seemed quite able to read his thoughts. How could he explain, make her understand? At times, he hid some of his feelings even from her. He felt out of place enough at times, even here among his family. He hated being the centre of attention. Yet he knew a costume, any costume would naturally, be discussed and looked over by all there. He was too shy to face this. Vincent would much rather just blend into the background, this is the way he enjoyed parties most. He could watch the fun from a distance, and enjoy the gaiety quite well. How could he explain this to Catherine?

"I must tell you my reasons for not wanting a costume, Catherine. You will not agree of course, but I look *different* enough already. Surely I don't need a costume too!"

She looked pained by his words, "Don't say things like that, Vincent, or I will surely cry. You *are* different, yes. But, I think you're the handsomest man I've ever seen or known, you know this to be true. And you don't owe me an explanation, anyway!"

Vincent looked a bit puzzled. "But, I was told you were upset ..."

Catherine snorted a protest. "That's gossip. Of course I was not upset!"

But as the saying went, Vincent thought "she doth protest too much", and now Catherine was telling him what she in her head thought was true. But in her heart, well ...

They now stood face to face at the entrance to her basement. Vincent smiled and held out his arms, and Catherine went very willingly into them. She was immediately aware of how comforting and warm this place was; his arms. Nothing could ever hurt her from this place of safety, she knew this and sighed, deeply grateful for whatever fates had sent this man to her. If she must wait for him forever to complete her unspoken wish, so be it. He was worth it, worth everything to her.

Vincent sensed the peace she was feeling as it washed over him, echoed from her heart and into his. He kissed her gently, then released her with regret on his face, and watched until she was out of sight before turning for home. He had much to do before the party. He had decided *days ago* to wear a costume. But the constant nagging from his friends had made him silent on even admitting this to them. They would just have to wait and see. And perhaps, be a trifle ashamed at their taunting? He smiled a sly smile as he turned for home. He did not know what exactly Catherine would be wearing, but he did know of her penchant for England and the days of the Tudors. He hoped she would like his attire. It was being worn for her sake alone!

Ah, love, what thee can make me do, without a word. I would never knowingly disappoint you, surely you know this? He said this to himself as he ducked his handsome head beneath his bed, searching for the box that held his surprise.

Finally, it was Saturday and six o'clock. Catherine was in Mary's Chamber with Allegra and Jamie. They were helping each other dress, admiring the clothes as they did. First Jamie looked at herself in the mirror; she hardly recognized herself. Instead of her usual "non-gender" clothing, she was dressed quite beautifully as Cinderella. Catherine had loaned her a ball gown from years ago that had been too beautiful to discard. It had hung in her closet many years. She was thankful now that someone would again wear it. Jamie looked so pretty in it.

"Oh, Jamie, that dress fits you like a glove. Why, all you need is a tiara . . ."

Allegra jumped up, "I know who had one!" She ran from the room as fast as her long, black tight gown would let her. Finally, in disgust as being "hobbled", she pulled the gown up to her knees and as the others laughed continued on her errand.

Next, Mary and Jamie helped Catherine dress, exclaiming over and over again at her gown. She was dressed as Elizabeth the First, Queen of England. Her gown was royal blue velvet, sewn over with satin. Small pearls and crystals were scattered here and there on the skirt. She was wearing three hoops and was a bit ungainly and not yet used to them. Her high, starched white collar rose behind her neck imperiously, as it should. Her hair was curled into the tight ringlets she had seen in so many of the Queen's pictures.

As she put on layers of jewelry, Catherine suddenly giggled, "Mary, look at this stuff! Why, if these were real gems, we could buy New York!"

Mary smiled, replying, "Yes ... but would we want to own it?"

This made both Catherine and Jamie laugh as they agreed! No, they did not want to own New York - it was a dirty city. Maybe, Hawaii? They all nodded agreeing. Hawaii, it would be!

Allegra came flying into the room as though being chased. "Those little dickens. The children were actually chasing me! Trying to see if I could fly on a broom, like a real witch! For heaven's sake, I'm glad Father or Vincent didn't see that, I'd never hear the end of it. Look what I found!"

She held out one hand and a small pearl tiara towards Jamie. Although Al now lived Above, she had many trunks stored down here in her old room. Father had promised he would always keep that room vacant for her and he kept promises. Well, she remembered her mother had worn a tiara once, long ago to a party, almost like this one tonight! She was happy Jamie could use it, it looked quite right with her gown.

Then Al's mouth flew open, but no words came out. Catherine looked positively regal! But something was not right ... "Your gown is great, Cath. But, I don't think you can fit through the doorway! Have you tried yet?"

Catherine looked at her, horrified, "NO! I never even thought to it. Damn! Well, let me try. But if I fit, I'll wait there. I'm not going to try it twice!" With that a look of determination came over her face as she hoisted up the voluminous stiff petticoats and started up the few steps. She got stuck the first two times; the damned skirts were too wide!

The other women watched with interest as they saw Catherine's face redden with determination. She looked out into the corridor and yelled, "Hello, is anyone there? Can anybody hear me?" Silence, good! She then lifted the skirts over her head and showing the long, white pantaloons to all present, whisked out into the corridor and dropped her skirt into place with a smug look back at the doorway. "Ha, dumb door, thought you had me, huh?"

The others were hysterical! Catherine very rarely swore. And to lift her skirts like that; to take a chance on someone being out there to see her. Well! As she smoothed her skirts, the others joined her in the corridor, still giggling.

She turned to them using a quite "imperious" tone of voice, "*WE* find nothing amusing. Pray tell, what had struck thee as so funny!" Her tone now matched her attire, as she fell screaming with giggles into Allegra's arms. Al gulped and tried to regain her composure.

"Oh God, Cath. You're so funny. You sounded like a Queen just then. Vincent would have truly been at a loss for words. Do it again when you see him, okay? Please, I'm dying to see his reaction, *MY QUEEN*" With that, Al bowed deeply to her friend, then gave her a whack on the fanny!

“Come on, your highness!

The four walked towards the great Hall, meeting many others on their way there. The women had all planned to get there early, to be sure the refreshments were as they were supposed to be, check on the music that the teenagers were providing (God help us all) and make sure the husbands and boyfriends were not already dipping too deeply into the punchbowl. Allegra had made the punch from a girlfriend's recipe. It was fruit juice, pineapple and rum, chilled with great frozen vodka! The younger children had been warned, this was NOT for them. The youngsters of course, had their own drinks and juices, they weren't too unhappy at not being allowed to taste the adult's. But still, maybe a quick cup when no one was looking?

Catherine looked around her, well satisfied. The decorations were appropriate, festoons of flowers and crepe paper covered most of the walls, and paper rose petals were scattered about the floor. What a mess to clean later. But, the men would be conscripted into helping! Or coerced, whichever worked!

She heard many people suddenly gasp, and turned to see ... Or Lord, it was Father! He looked like Merlin, from King Arthur's court. A magician, how wonderful! She jumped as did everyone else in the room, when he reached into his sleeve and pulled out paper flowers, then a rabbit and finally a dove. These he set into a large bowl, Winslow carried in from the corridor. Covering it with a cloth, Father waved his hand over it and mumbled something that sounded a lot like "presto changeo", tapped the cloth twice and whisked it away. The rabbit and dove were gone. And the flowers were now real!

Mary gasped, "How did you do that?" Father announced, "The Great Jacobi never tells his secrets! Ah, Catherine, excuse me. Majesty ... why is there money in your hair?"

She reached towards her head puzzled, "What money? Where?" The Great Jacobi put one hand out and plucked many quarters from her head and tossed them to the children, who shouted with glee.

"Yeh, Father, ooops, Jacobi, thanks!"

Winslow laughingly joined the others around Father. Mary noticed for the first time how he was dressed. "Winslow! You must be ... Oh, what's the name I'm searching for? Catherine?"

Catherine suggested, "I think may be Winslow is Othello. Am I right."

Winslow nodded, then spoke in the deep tones of a 'stage actor'. "Yes my dear, you are correct!"

Now, more of the men were entering the room. Some were dressed as pirates, some as cowboys, and Pascal was a very presentable Robin Hood.

Catherine and Allegra turned to each other with the same question, "Where is Vincent?" The words were barely out of their mouths when a tall figure dressed in purple stood in the doorway. A black plumed hat sat forward on his head, almost over one eye, and this figure leaned on a sword, as he brushed aside a black cape and slowly, haughtily, entered the gathering that were now to a man, staring up at him in awe.

It was Vincent! He walked silently over to Elizabeth, the Queen. and with a flourish, bowed deeply and touched his hat to the floor at her feet.

"Your Majesty. Your humble servant the Earl of Essex, awaits your command."

Catherine smiled, as did many of the others that knew their history. The Earl of Essex, it was rumored, was the only true love of Elizabeth I. She had almost given up the throne for love of him. How wonderful for Vincent to dress like this tonight, for Catherine! How fitting. and how noble. He had put aside his feelings of shyness ENTIRELY, for her sake. He tonight, WAS the Earl of Essex and he would act the part.

She curtsied – to him as the music started.

"My Lord, shall we?"

He held out his arm stiffly. "As you wish, milady."

Trying not to be too obvious, everyone watched as he and Catherine danced slowly, regally up and down the room before they too, joined the couple on the dance floor.

Father spun Mary about the room quite lightly, even his bad hip didn't seem to be bothering him, for the moment, anyway. One of the younger "pirates" was leading a blushing Jamie onto the floor and Allegra was dancing with Pascal, laughing over some remark he made as he looked toward Father.

What no one seemed to notice was the figure all in black that now stood silent, watching all below from the stairway. The tall man wore black silk, *all* black silk clothing, black gloves, boots and a "half" mask. He was carrying a whip in his left hand and his right hand cradled the gun tied loosely at his waist. In his belt was a single red rose.

Vincent saw the figure first and frowned slightly. He did not seem to recognize him yet; this was curious. Who was he? The thin black mustache was not painted on, it looked REAL. He knew no one with a mustache like this. He glanced over to Father, then back to the stairway as the man slowly came down the stairs and pushed his way gently through the people dancing until he stood before Catherine!

Vincent tensed, every muscle waiting for whatever move the man made next. Those closest to him could hear a low rumble rising from his chest into a deep growl as the man reached out and took her hand from Vincent's, bowed, and handed her the rose as he waltzed her off into the crowd. Vincent stood where he was, but his eyes were on the man constantly. He would not start trouble, this was not his way. But he was never going to take his eyes off of that stranger, not for a moment!

Then Vincent gasped as Catherine stood still in the middle of the room, eyes wide. Then she threw herself into the man's arms. WHAT WAS THIS? He started towards them as he felt fury rising in his blood. How dare ... He froze in shock, still in mid-step as his senses finally came to his aid.

Then Father, who had been walking just behind him – IN CASE - questioned in a whisper, "Vincent, who ...?" His son smiled back and simply pointed. "

"Father, surely you recognize him. A disguise should not fool a parent!" He looked over as the man in black grinned at him, and rushed up to hug him fiercely, Father yelled in surprise.

"YOW, IT'S Devin! Oh, I should have known! Devin, come here and hug your Father. Come here to me, son. It's good to see you!" Devin walked quickly to his father, then stopped just out of reach.

"My name, Senor, is not Deveen, but ZORRO! Come' sta', Padre?" Then he threw himself into Father's waiting arms with a yell. "Hello!"

Reaching out his hand to his brother, Vincent tried to keep the joy from his voice, but couldn't. "Devin, I've ... we've missed you! How did you know? Where What ...?"

Devin slapped his "BRO" on the back hard.

"I was in town yesterday and heading here when I bumped into Winslow coming out of a hardware store. Seems Mary wanted more thumbtacks for the decorations. Well, he told me of this "gathering" and I asked him not to tell of seeing me. I can see he kept his word! Thanks, Winslow; the surprise went well. Except for a moment there, I thought Vin was going to have my head, as well as the rest of me! Thank God Almighty for his "sixth" sense, huh?

"Hi everyone. It's good to see you ... all of you!" Devin started to say something else when his voice seemed to desert him. Standing in front of him, hands on hips, was a face he knew. A girl he quite admittedly, was surprised to see here. Allegra, his "Llegs". The nickname he had given to her when first old enough to be aware of her long lovely legs, still stuck.

"Llegs, Hi! This is a treat. Come here and hug your old pal!"

Father grimaced. Oh, he hated that nickname, he always had and Devin, naturally knew this, and ignored it! She walked slowly towards him until they stood head to chin.

"Hi yourself!"

With that, Dev picked her up from the ground and whirled her around until they were both quite dizzy. God, she felt good in his arms. He was stunned that a bit of the old feeling for this woman still tormented him, as he let her regain her breath, and stood her on the floor, still holding her around the waist with one muscled arm. He led her over to the stacks of records the teens had provided and dropped one onto the

spindle of the old phonograph, Mouse had somehow wired to "borrowed" electricity. Suddenly the sounds of fast, loud, rock and roll filled the Chamber as Dev called out to everyone.

"This is a party. Let's get down!"

Father tried to pull his magician's hat down over his ears as he prayed to the heavens for strength and patience, either or both, but hurry!

While the hard rock song continued, Vincent asked Catherine if she would care to sit this one out? She knew this was *not* a dance he would do, especially in front of anyone. She took his arm, and they left the Chamber for a breath of air and some peace and quiet!

He turned to her outside the Great Hall smiling. "it seems your party has been a great success, Catherine. I knew it would be! Everything you do seems to turn out well, in one form or another. Are you as pleased with the party as you look, my love?"

She nodded. "Yes, I think everyone is enjoying it! And your outfit left me in shock. When I saw you standing there ... I ... You looked magnificent. Thank you for wearing what you did. How did you know I would be dressed as I am?"

He shrugged. "Truthfully, I didn't know exactly what you would be wearing. But I knew you loved "old English" times, and it was either this costume or Shakespeare!"

They walked along the tunnels whispering happily together. The Queen and her courtier; the lord and his lady fair.

Inside, the faster songs had been temporarily brought to a protested halt by Father. His poor ears!

"The older people may like something a little less, ummm, energetic. We will play more of THAT later, I promise!"

Devin was waltzing Allegra slowly around the room, they stopped and talked to people as they danced, with arms wrapped around each other's waists. Neither seemed able to let go of the other. It had been a long time since they had seen each other - years!

She glanced slyly up at Devin. He seemed about the same. A bit greyer at the temples, a few small lines about the eyes. Other than that, it was the same face she had loved for almost all of her life. He was talking to Pascal and laughing about some remembered prank of childhood as she studied him. His laugh and smile still tore at her. God, she loved him still. Foolish! It was the same as loving air. Air and he were the same. Mostly invisible, breezing in and out of one's life as they wanted to! She looked away from him now, trying to regain her composure.

Devin sensed her hand shaking as she rested it around his waist. He knew her feelings. For he felt the same way. Funny, finally to admit that to himself after all these years! Why had he chosen now he wondered? Old age? Habit? Or was there something in this woman that called to him. Had always done so and he never before, had truly listened?

Devin smiled down at her. "How are you? Really? Your work goes well? Say hello to Dr Alcott for me, okay? I thought maybe he'd be here tonight."

Inside he was cursing, stop yammering, make sense for Christ's sake! He was talking nonsense when what he wanted to do most was just pick her up and take her somewhere quiet. Just the two of them, to talk. To ...

Al lifted her face to his, "I thought Peter was coming, too. Maybe an emergency at the hospital - you know how it is." He wanted polite conversation? Well, fine with her.

As Vincent and Catherine rejoined the party from the left staircase, he narrowed his eyes and looked to the stairs at the other end of the large hall. Catherine's glance followed his; a woman dressed all in white was standing there as though waiting to be acknowledged, waiting to be ushered in. Catherine thought to herself, she's beautiful. And her clothes! Even though she knew the white outfit wasn't a costume, the woman looked like the 'Snow Queen'" in a fairytale read long ago.

As Catherine felt his grip on her arm tighten until it was painful, she looked back to him, then once again to the woman and gasped as she finally recognized who it was! Lisa, the Lisa that had brought so much

pain into Vincent's world. The Lisa that had danced for him, taunted him. Until he reached for her with the abruptness of youth, and she had been repulsed, frightened by his touch and pulled away. His hands had tried to hold her. Vincent had clawed her. This fact and this fact alone, tormented him since then. This was the reason he was so afraid to fully love Catherine. He was terrified he would hurt her as he had Lisa. Catherine looked over again as the woman finally caught Father's eye, and he went to the stairway to meet her.

She gripped Vincent's arm hard, "We can leave. You don't have to go down there if you don't want to, Vincent. You don't have to go!"

He turned and looked at her, fear on his face. "Yes, Catherine, I do have to go. The wounds we gave each other have long healed for her. Maybe now, I can begin to heal my own. Come."

She was stunned at this admission; he had said heal. Could that mean once healed, he would be FREE to finally - love her totally? She shivered a bit as they descended the staircase. And Catherine prayed to herself all the way down, until they crossed the room and stood before Lisa and Father.

Devin saw Lisa a moment before Allegra did. He was amused, then he remembered the story. Vincent, the screams from Lisa, Father's anger at both of them, as he said she must leave the tunnels, for her own good, and Vincent's! He also struggled to remind himself of one other thing, it escaped until he felt Allegra's long nails digging into his flesh. Oh. My God! Allegra had told Lisa never to come Below again. If she did, Al would kill her for the hurt she had caused here.

Devin tried to, for once in his life, play peacemaker. "Now, 'Llegs,' play it cool. For Vincent's sake, okay? PLEASE?"

She just bit her bottom lip and nodded at him, never taking her eyes from Lisa who was clinging to Father's arm as she looked about the room. Her eyes passed over Devin and Allegra, then she shifted back to their stares.

Seemingly unaware or uncaring, of how much her presence was not wanted, Lisa floated over to Dev, gushing, "Oh Dev, it's been so long. How are you? Is this your wife?"

Then Dev smiled as he saw Lisa go quite pale, almost the color of her clothes, as she looked closer at Allegra and recognized her.

Devin grinned. This would prove interesting. He stepped back a few paces and stood beside Vincent, Father and Catherine. Allegra and Lisa just stood and eyed each other warily, like two combatants, two enemies that were finally face to face. Allegra's voice was very low, dangerously low. What do you want here? You are not welcome. Don't you know that? Don't you care about feelings? Vincent's feelings? Didn't I warn you NEVER to come back here again? DIDN'T I, you bitch!"

With that, Lisa struck Allegra across the face. "I don't have to stand here and be insulted by the likes of YOU, my dear! Father has not told me to leave. Who do you think you are, to tell me? *You're* nobody, you never were. You never will be. Guinea trash!"

That's all it took. *That* was enough. Before Vincent or anyone could stop her, Allegra made a small fist and punched Lisa 'dead in the mouth'.

"I may be as you say, a nobody, but I'm also a human being, something you *never* were. You warped, twisted excuse for a woman!" With that she lunged at Lisa and they both toppled to the floor, screaming at each other, pulling hair, and trying to bite the other's arms.

Vincent made a move as though to stop the fight. Catherine put her hand gently on his arm, and said softly, menacingly, "If you interfere, I will never forgive you. Stay out of this. At least until Al punches her one more time - FOR ME!"

He turned and looked at Catherine. stunned, then began to grin as he returned and stood beside her and Father, who had his eyes closed and was wincing with each blow he heard make its way home! Lisa had strong legs being a ballerina, but Allegra was smaller, quicker, and was slowly gaining the upper hand in this melee.

Dev went quietly over and stood behind his brother and Father, "Well, the entertainment has begun, I see!"

Vincent shot him a look of anger, then tried but failed to hide the grin that spread over his golden face, to bury itself in the downward corners of his mouth. His own attitude was troubling him as he watched this turmoil at his feet with interest. He should break this up. Why wasn't he?

He must do something. So he did! He broke into a fit of laughing that took everyone by surprise. Even the two ladies gasping and ranting on the floor stopped mid-punch to look over at him.

Catherine was nearly in shock, "Vincent? Are you all right?"

He turned and took her arm. Yes, I think I am... finally... all right. I really am!"

Then a yell from Pascal forced their attention back to the 'main event'. Allegra had maneuvered Lisa over near the punchbowl. She stood, grabbed the bowl and dumped the red juice and wine completely over Lisa's head!

Lisa screamed and jumped to her feet, "Father! Look what she has done! Can't you stop her? Have you no control over this... this... cat?"

Father answered slowly, "It seems not, Lisa. But I really haven't tried to control her, now have I?" Lisa reached out as though she was going to slap Father.

Vincent grabbed her hand and held it tightly, as he looked into her face for what he hoped was the *last time in his life*.

"You won't do that - not to him. EVER! Now, leave, Lisa, please! Leave. You are not wanted here, you never will be again. Do you understand this? DO YOU?" He had yelled this last at her, she shrank back, away from his words and his tight grip of her hand, trying to maintain her lost dignity as the red punch dripped and dribbled down her hair and onto her lovely white dress and fur coat.

"Well, never let it be said that I stayed where I wasn't welcomed, Goodbye, all my *friends*, you'll not see me again."

Dev winked at Catherine. "I don't see you *now*, my dear."

Fighting back the tears, Lisa turned and stiffly walked to the stairway and was quickly gone. Pascal spoke for all of them gathered there.

"Good riddance, I say!"

Dev put his arm on his brother's. "You okay?"

Vincent looked at him and just shrugged and nodded his head. Even after all that Lisa had done to him, and the lies she told on Allegra years ago, Vincent, still felt a bit sorry for her. She would become a lonely, bitter woman soon enough. This was his thought; this was his gentleness that shone through even now. Even for Lisa. As he walked slowly up to Allegra; who was now sitting down as Catherine helped her clean up a little, he started to smile. Then he broke out into a grin from the look on both women's faces.

Allegra started to laugh, whether from nerves or something else none were sure. She couldn't seem to stop. Then, Catherine joined in; also holding her sides and roaring, until tears were streaming down both of their faces. Al stood with a motion as though she were washing her hands.

"Well, that takes care of that shrew. Now I need a bath to rid myself of the smell of her cheap perfume, PHEW! Christ, talk about smelling like a warehouse!"

Devin went to Al and held her around the waist and winked at her. "A bath sounds good to me too! Shall we?"

Catching Catherine's eye, Al then raised her eyes to Heaven as if to say to Catherine, 'Here he goes again!'

Cath knew how Allegra felt about Dev. She always had since first seeing them together. You would have to be blind not to see it; sparks flew between them all the time. Funny, Vincent never mentioned it, nor Father. But they were men! And, she supposed like most men, didn't always see what was right under their noses! She and Vincent watched them leave. Catherine yelled out to Al.

"Hey! Don't forget! Lunch tomorrow." Allegra acknowledged this with a thumbs up, and she and Devin were gone.

Father looked weary as he held onto Mary's arm. "Mary and I will also say our goodnights. It has been a most interesting party, Catherine. Most!"

He smiled this at her, then looked at Vincent hard. "I will see you in the morning? Have a good night's sleep, Vincent." He reached over and hugged both Catherine and Vincent, then Mary did the same.

Just as they were leaving, Pascal called out, "Wait, I must go too, This costume is starting to itch: I forgot, I'm allergic to wool. Vincent, thanks a lot for the woolen shirt, my FRIEND!"

Catherine giggled as she looked at Pascal itching and digging at his arms. "Vincent, did you know he was allergic to wool?"

Vincent truly had forgotten. Poor Pascal! Now finally, just he and Catherine were alone in the Great Hall.

The others had decided to let the cleaning go until the morning, it was very late or early, depending on how one wished to look at it. It was three a.m.

She tried to stifle a yawn that seemed to be coming from her toes. "It's been quite an evening. I agree with Father on that! Are you certain you are going to be all right, Vincent? You look... I don't how to describe it. Do you want to talk for a while?"

He looked down at her and gently shook his head, "No, we can discuss everything tomorrow, or at least later today. If that is all right?"

She agreed; she knew how tired she felt. Catherine could only guess at what this evening had done to Vincent. A thousand questions ran through her brain, but she truly was too tired to sort them out right now.

They walked along silently until at the basement entrance to her apartment, Catherine turned and started to hug Vincent goodnight, but found herself instead in a forceful embrace and being quite thoroughly kissed. Gasping for air, she took a step backwards, almost tripping over either her own feet, or the gown. She was too stunned to know which at the moment. That kiss HAD been different, very different. She trembled as she stood not knowing how to react.

Momentarily confused; Catherine looked up into Vincent's eyes. They were dark, almost black with passion and desire as he reached out and held her to his body hard, fast ... as if he would never again let her go.

"I heard something tonight I never thought to hear, Catherine. Did you hear what Lisa said when she and Allegra were screaming at each other? No? Shall I tell you?" He felt rather than saw her nod; she was pressed so tightly to his chest, she could barely move. Not that she wanted to. He spoke slowly, as if savoring each word.

"Allegra accused her of some terrible things; most true I imagine. But when Al yelled that the most harm had been done by her to ME, Lisa shouted back she didn't know what Allegra was talking about! She had to be reminded, BE REMINDED, that I had scratched her. Wounded her, I thought, all those years ago. She had to be reminded, Catherine! As though it had been nothing ... NOTHING! I saw her shoulder when Al grabbed her dress; there were no scars. At first, I didn't understand; then I knew. She had had plastic surgery, the scars were gone from her."

He gently wrapped his strong, furred hands into Catherine's hair and drew her lips up as he whispered against them, "the scars are also gone; from me." He then kissed her fully, nudging between her teeth with his tongue until she groaned and opened her mouth to his insistent pressure

The feel of his warm breath in her mouth began to pull waves of need from her body, as she fully responded to his kiss. She dug her nails into his arms as Vincent lowered her body across his left arm and began to caress her with his other hand. She felt him lift her almost completely off the floor with the strength, the passion of this embrace.

Catherine gave herself up to him willingly with a cry of pleasure. "So much time! So long, so long to have waited for this. I love you so much, I need you, all of you, Vincent. Vincent!"

His mouth was on her shoulders, then as he began to push her dress aside at her breasts, she lightly stopped his hand, whispering, "Not like this, not here. Please? I want you in my bed. Naked with me, in bed."

She lowered her fingers to gently caress his obvious arousal, Vincent growled from somewhere new, somewhere never travelled before. From the depths of his soul, sounds now filled his body, his mouth, his brain with hunger. As though a man starved, he was being offered a banquet that would take a lifetime to get his fill of. He needed at least one lifetime, for Catherine. At least that long to get enough of the taste of her, the warmth of her body, the feelings that now consumed him that were emanating from her through the "bond" to his heart, filling it. Flooding it, with the depth of love he felt rising from his Catherine. Vincent took many deep breaths, fighting for some semblance of rationality to come back to his brain. Finally, he won the struggle.

"I think perhaps you need some rest. You look as though you will collapse any moment. Shall I come to you later today? Catherine you know what I want? What we both want; what we will have ... soon now. Rest, my love." He grinned down at her flushed face adding, "If you can!"

She smiled back as he stood her still shaking to her feet. Catherine understood, it was nearly four a.m., dawn would be in a few hours. He would have to leave her then. Silently, she agreed to wait. She could wait, she was quite an expert at it now.

Catherine reached up and lightly stroked his face with her fingers. "Come and have supper with me at seven?"

He grinned and shook his glorious head in agreement. "You might never be rid of me once I'm in your apartment. You know this?"

Catherine hugged him hard, then turned to leave, calling back over her shoulder, "I know. I'm counting on it!"

Below, in the Falls Chamber, Al was floating lazily along, almost trancelike in the blue warm water. Her body ached all over! Damn Lisa!! She could see bruises beginning to rise on her legs and arms where the bitch had kicked her.

Allegra cursed Lisa again, loudly! Just then, she felt a hand on her shoulder from behind. Devin was in the water too! She sank down deeper into the water, mad as hell.

"What do you think you're doing? Are you crazy? I don't have a bathing suit on, do you? No? I didn't think so, get away smart ass! This is NOT funny!"

Dev just grinned at her embarrassment. "But, Llegs, we always *used* to swim like this. What's the big deal!"

She splashed him as though she was trying to drown him. She nearly succeeded.

"What's the big deal! You have to ask! Sure we used to swim naked. That was almost twenty years ago you fool. Now one of us is leaving this pool, NOW, and it better be you! I mean it, Devin. What makes you think you can just ..." Her voice trailed off as she saw the look in his eyes.

Devin wasn't making jokes now. He wanted her. One look at his face and Allegra knew this. She spoke softer, "Dev, please? I can't deal with this right now, okay? Can we talk later?"

Devin grinned finally. She hadn't said no. She hadn't said yes, either but ... Well, he intended to stay awhile until she did. She knew he would. Allegra could see through him like a windowpane. She always had been able to. With a small tight smile, Devin winked at her and started swimming for the edge of the pool, for his clothes. Al was going to shut her eyes, but thought better about it, and just watched as he stood and dried himself. He was aware of her eyes - it didn't bother him. It didn't bother her either.

She and Devin sat and talked well past dawn, they had a lot to catch up on. Nearly a lifetime! But as they talked and kidded each mercilessly, Allegra wondered why she felt as though they had never really been apart for more than a few days. They picked up as though they had been together all these years. Strange. And wonderful.

Devin watched her as she trailed one hand lazily in the water, humming a snatch of some “weird” song he didn’t recognize. “What in hall are you singing? It sounds like a dirge!”

She giggled. “Well, it’s YOUR dirge, remember? You WROTE IT! HA!”

Then he remembered; in those days of youth Dev had wanted very much to be a singer, or a rock star. He had written one and only one song and dedicated it to her. How could he have forgotten?

She nudged him in the ribs asking the same thing. “How could you forget OUR song. Shame on you! I thought you ... 'loved' me. You said that you did when you sang the song for me all those years ago. Fickle, you are fickle!”

Dev reached out his arms and gently urged her to a gentle embrace. “And I suppose you are going to tell me YOU have been FAITHFUL to me ALL THIS TIME, HUH?”

She glanced up at him, blushed and said in a small voice, “Yes, as a matter of fact I have. Damn you, now WHY did I ever TELL YOU THAT?” Al couldn’t look at him, she was too embarrassed at what she had told him without really thinking about it. Oh, boy, would he sure tease her over this. But ... he said nothing.

For a moment Devin was stunned. Was she telling him the truth - she must be. He knew her, she was not a person that lied. Not then, not now. Weaving his fingers into her dark hair, he drew her face up and close to his. As he searched her eyes, then narrowed his from what was reflected back from her, Devin lowered his mouth to Allegra’s and kissed her tenderly, softly. With a moan of pleasure, he deepened the kiss, drunk with her taste. Devin couldn’t get deep enough into her mouth, wanted to capture all of her as he pressed her back across his lap and lowered his body to hers. He lay alongside her and slowly came back to this world from where she had taken him.

As much as he wanted her and was aware Allegra felt the same way for him, Devin was raised an honorable man. Thank God some of Father’s teachings had stayed with him. He used them, needed them ... now. For once in his life, he wasn’t going to rush. He wanted to savor every moment with this woman. Keep it to warm himself on in the long, cold years ahead of him.

He was going to stay around home this time for as long as he was able. Tunnel life stifled him, it always had. Allegra knew this. But she had asked for nothing from him. Which is exactly why Devin would give her everything he had and that included something no one had taken before like this ... his love. He had been with many women, too many. But not like this, never had he felt like this before. Devin wanted to protect Allegra from all hurt, all harm. And he wanted to do it for the rest of his life.

This fact scared the total HELL out of him! He knew Al would never ask for a commitment from him. She was and had always been a proud, independent woman. Any move, any declaration would have to come from him first.

He whispered into her small ear as he kissed the edges of it. “Shall I hang around for a while. I’d like to get to know you all over again ‘Llegs’” Then as she nodded her head, Devin pulled her into his arms tightly. “Allegra, my Allegra. Am I going to fall in love with you all over again?”

She smiled as she gently smoothed back his unruly hair, “Why, Dev. When did you ever *stop* loving me?” She felt him tremble at her words and from her touch. Al buried her face to his chest and smiled; she knew. *Devin Wells, you are a goner this time, my man. Got you. And I’m gonna keep ya, this time.*

Vincent was early arriving at Catherine’s ; she was dressing when he tapped on the balcony door, then stepped inside without being asked, "Catherine? Is it all right to come in? Catherine?"

She wiggled into her dress and came flying out of the bedroom and into his arms. "I can't believe you're actually here. Finally, here in my home, your home, for as long as you want it to be. At any time. Come, sit down...." She led him to a small flowered couch near her fireplace.

As Vincent removed his cape, he looked around. For a very long time he had wanted to be here with Catherine. His eyes took in everything; the soft pastel colors of the furniture, her small decorations, paintings. This was a warm room, a comfortable room. He sighed as he sat down on the couch and held out his arms for her.

As Catherine snuggled against him, he grinned. "Catherine, the entire back of your dress is unzipped, do you know this?"

She turned her head towards him. "You were early. I don't mind but I'm a bit ... frazzled by you being here at all! Oh Vincent. I have wanted you here for so long, so long:" Catherine motioned for him to help zip her up, then turned to question Vincent when he didn't. "Vincent, what....?"

The look in his eyes was new to her; fierce, hungry. Passion now was turning his face almost bronze as Vincent looked back to her.

"No, I will not zip the dress. But I will help you take it off later - or NOW?" Catherine got to her feet pulling Vincent along with her. She said only one word. They didn't need words. Not then, they never had. She led him towards the bedroom. 'NOW'.

Father was playing a game of Chess with Dr Peter Alcott when Devin and Vincent entered the Chamber. Peter saw them first.

"Hello, Dev. Vincent. How are you? I haven't seen either of you for weeks - not since the party Catherine gave. What have you two been doing with yourselves if I may ask?"

Devin tried and failed to stifle a small chuckle as Vincent poked him in the ribs, HARD. Devin knew what Vincent had been doing! One look at his face two weeks ago and it was like he was broadcasting it. He and Catherine had finally taken the "jump", the fear was gone. Thank God. Devin just let the smile tug at his mouth as Vincent lowered himself to a chair at Father's side to watch the chess match. He was silent, keeping a huge grin from his face with a most concerted effort!

"I have been spending time Above with Catherine. We've had a lot to talk about, many plans." His voice trailed off as he heard his older brother guffaw out loud at his poor excuse for the look he now had on his face. He looked 'love-jumbled' and he was! He glared back to Devin and knit his fierce slanted eyebrows together. Devin shut up and sat down next to Dr Alcott and just looked around the room as if he were searching for something. He didn't dare look at Vin!

Devin had learned long ago when he could 'push his luck' with his baby brother... and when he could not. Right now, he could NOT.

He suddenly got to his feet, "I'm sorry to have to run so soon, but I have a date with Allegra. See you later!" With that, Devin took the steps in one leap and was gone.

Vincent stood and said almost the same things, except the name Catherine instead of Allegra. He was off too..

Father looked a bit worried as he caught Peter's eye. "I hope they know what they're ... doing. The dangers ..."

Peter smiled as he replied, "Jacob leave them be; all of them! They're not small anymore, you know. They're adults; they'll make the right decisions,"

He looked at Jacob as he let his words sink in, it was hard being a parent, just as hard learning to 'let go'. Peter knew in time, Jacob would come to terms with all the changes of these last weeks. Catherine and

Vincent now totally sharing a love that lit the room when they were in it. And Devin and Allegra, now that was something! Devin still here, after over two weeks. The man MUST be in love!

Both men sat over their game, thinking their own thoughts. Peter smiled as Jacob made a move ... a very wrong one!

Above, Allegra and Devin sat in a corner booth at Sal's Italian restaurant, sharing a huge plate of ravioli and fighting over the last meatball.

"Come on, Dev. You had five already! I've had two!"

He shook his head. "You, my dear, have had SIX! I CAN count!"

Finally poor Sal could stand it no more. He walked quickly over to the table, took Devin's knife and cut the meatball *deftly* in half.

"Cutta this out you two, always you fight! You should be happy - no fighting at each other like children! Stop, come on, please? For Sal?"

Al giggled. "Oh, Sal. We're only teasing each other! We never fight anymore. Do we, Dev?"

With a straight face, Devin shook his head no, then warned Al, "But ... if you dare touch that meatball"

Sal left them, shaking his head. These young ones would drive you nuts!

Much later over coffee, Dev looked slyly to the pretty woman across from him, a question on his lips, "So were you telling me the truth, Al? You said you've been faithful. It's been a very long time. Why were you?"

She looked over and gave him an enigmatic smile, "I have been faithful, Devin ... in my fashion!"

He wouldn't touch that sentence with a fork, or a knife either! He merely smiled back.

As they rose to leave, Sal was at their elbow, "You come back soon, yes? Tella Father hello for me, and Vincent! Hey, you come by next Friday, I'll have pizza and chianti for you and your friends. Howsa dat?" Nodding in agreement, Devin and Allegra stepped out into the crisp night air.

He asked noncommittally, "Where to now?"

Al just shrugged, "Up to you."

He headed for the park ... and her apartment Below, that was always there for her. Walking along silently in the tunnel corridor, Allegra's heart was beating so hard, she was sure Devin could hear it: She felt like a schoolgirl, with her first crush for Christ sakes! Why was she being so jumpy? It was only Devin. She smiled secretly to herself. That was it. It was DEVIN! And, she knew where he was leading her, and why. Without words, he was telling her it was time, finally, for them to make love. They had been nibbling around the edges of it for weeks now; long enough.

She lit the few small candles in her Chamber. Al shivered. The room was chilly. Or was it just her nerves?

She didn't know and further thought of it was driven quickly from her mind as Devin reached out and pulled her to his body fiercely with a deep groan.

"Al, my dear 'Llegs,' I want you, need you so much. These weeks have been torture. I wanted to give you time, give both of us time. I had to be sure of this, of us. These feelings that rise in me from just touching you. I don't know how to handle this. I ... I love you. Allegra. I love you."

She looked at him stunned for a moment, an eternity to him. Then sighed and led him slowly over to the large bed in her room, and pulled down the quilt. Devin reached out for her again. He wanted to lose himself in the feel of her body, the taste of her mouth as it softened under his, returning the passion that now was rising and filling them with liquid flame. Allegra felt herself falling, falling, lost in the depths of his

eyes that blazed down on her and darkened more with each passing second as Devin began to caress her, touch her and kiss her as she had never been before. And never would again.

Allegra was not a woman to say aloud her true feelings; she had been hurt much in the past. She had closed a part of herself, of her heart off from ever being so hurt again. Now locked in Devin's arms, the hidden tender, secret places of her heart, her spirit were opening to this man she had known so long. Loved so long.

Allegra was trembling as she whispered to him. "I love you, Devin. I always have. I always will. Forever."

Devin was a bit stunned. He had never expected to hear these words from her. But, to hear the words! To know deep in the hidden parts of all he was, that she meant every one. He felt tears rise in his eyes. Devin struggled to hold them back, but a few trickled down his face, unnoticed.

Al put her lips to his face and licked the salty tears away with her tongue. The feel of that was more than he could endure. Devin said her name, just that, no more. It was a prayer, a question and a vow. That one word was his future. Allegra. They undressed each other slowly, tenderly, and climbed into the big bed and under the covers quickly. It was not any warmer in the room. It soon would be. Urging her back to the pillows, Devin spread her hair out lovingly with his fingers to the pillow's edges. Then never taking his eyes from hers, he began letting his fingers wander, trace a path from her lips to her shoulders. From shoulders to breasts, and downward, to her centre, to all she was. She moaned and arched her back from his touch. As he softly began stroking her at the point of friction that hardened to his fingers, Devin was lost. Gave himself up entirely to the warm moistness that now covered his hand. He lowered himself until he was kissing and licking slowly, painfully slowly, along her inner thighs as she wrapped her hands in his hair, and writhed under his touch, his mouth on her there. He could feel her release almost at the same moment she felt it rising, throbbing towards him. Devin began licking deeper and harder into her. The taste of her was driving him towards madness. Passion now controlled them completely as he moaned and grasped her tightly by the hips as she filled his mouth with her orgasm of sweetness, of nectar ...

When Allegra finally stopped shaking, he pulled himself up to the pillow and looked into her eyes. There were tears there. She smiled and he knew the tears were from happiness. Al could feel the hardness of him pushing at her leg, insistent, raging for its own release. She kissed him here and there about the face, then took his tongue into her mouth, sucking and licking until he thought he would go quite mad.

"Ah, yes Al, yes. Please? Let me ... I must do this now. Now."

She opened her legs as he knelt over her. Her breath was hot on his shoulder, "Do it. Take it. Take me. Fill me, DEVIN."

He thrust his hips forward, joining his body fully to hers as she wrapped her legs around his back. The penetration was deep, fierce and forever. He wanted to stay here forever. Devin began to move now, pulling her with him. He kept the pressure where she needed it as he began to thrust towards and away from her harder now. Quicker. Deeper. He felt it rising to fill him, needing it, welcoming it. With a cry of unrelenting lust, with a roar that was known yet not his own, Devin filled her with the seed of his love, as Allegra accepted it and gave her own in return ... to him.

Gasping finally at the ending, the temporary ending of their first mating, he lowered himself until he lay half on her body and half on the bed. Devin couldn't get enough of her warmth. He began licking her breasts, drawing each tip into his mouth and running his tongue over them, then nibbling at her with his teeth. \

They made love many times that night, in many ways, each move pleasurable than the one before. Finally, totally exhausted, they slept wrapped tightly together as though there were bonded, joined forever. As they surely were.

Father heard the laughing first, then turned as *his* children entered the Chamber. First Vincent and Catherine, arms wrapped about each other, whispering with their heads together of some private joke.

Then Devin and Allegra ran down the steps taunting and teasing each other, as lovers do. Behind them ... Father was surprised.

“Sal! How wonderful to see you! I’ve been meaning to visit, but you know how it is ...” Sal just smiled at his friend and shook his head. He knew his friend had many responsibilities. Everyone depended on him, for everything.

“Wella Father, tonight you get to rest, I brought you your favorite Pizza and Chianti. For all of you. Now, sit down and eat, eat! Everybody come on, before it’s all cold! Andiamo!”

An hour later, the large boxes of pizza were gone, only scraps of crust were left. Devin poked through as though looking for more to eat, then shook his head. He was full.

He sat back in his chair and patted his belly, “Ah, that was great. Almost better than sex. Whoops, excuse me, Father.”

Father just looked over and leaned his head a bit to one side, “Why excuse you? It *was* almost better than sex.”

Devin was glad his mouth was not full of food. Those words made him sputter out the wine he had just swallowed!

Vincent turned and looked somberly at his brother. “What is the matter with you?”

He had been engrossed in counting the freckles on Catherine’s nose and had not overheard the previous exchange between Dev and Father. Allegra leaned over and whispered to he and Cath, telling them what Dev had said and Father’s reply!

Now, Catherine began laughing. Vincent too. His long canine teeth glistening under the candles’ light. He was shocked!

“Father, I do believe you have had too much wine.”

Before answering his son, Jacob looked at him carefully. “How much wine have YOU had? Now, you know better, you can’t ...”

Dev poked his brother in the arm, “Oh, let him be. He’s only had about six .. or eight glasses anyway!”

Father stared at Vincent now. Six or EIGHT glasses! He should have had only one, and a small one at that. His chemistry didn’t allow for getting drunk! He would most certainly *not* be a pleasant companion tomorrow. Even, even for Catherine! Oh. God!

Before he could chastise him, Vincent rose, holding himself stiffly with great dignity, “I must use the “facilities”, excuse me, everyone.”

Devin brought the house down with his next words, “Yeh. That’s the trouble with drinking, you can’t keep it, only RENT it!”

The laughing and partying continued until way past two a.m.

Father walked agonizingly, painfully slowly towards the kitchen at nine the next morning. He held his head, his poor throbbing head in one hand, and leaned on the wall with the other. OHHH, that wine! He had forgotten how Salvatore’s homemade wine affected him! It was very strong! Now, he remembered the last time he had been this ... hungover; it was the last time he had been drinking Sal’s wine. OHHHH!

Entering the kitchen, Father heard low mumbles coming from one of the larger tables in the corner. It was Allegra, Dev, Vincent and Catherine! He mustered forth a look of sobriety as he joined them in the room.

“Well! Good morning, everyone! How did you sleep”? Isn’t it a delightful morning?”

Catherine looked up to him with slightly bloodshot eyes. “Father! Must you shout?” Vincent joined this statement with one of his own. “Yes, please! It’s already noisy in here! Father, will you restrain your speech, please!”

Father looked around the room, noisy? “Vincent, what is noisy?”

His son lowered his head to the table, as though praying for the strength to speak. “Father, can’t you hear it. That HAM! It’s frying so so ... loud!”

He turned to Devin at the stove. He and Allegra were cooking what smelled vile. Ugh! Ham and Eggs. On a normal morning, this would have been a very good breakfast, but *this* morning ... even the smell was too much. He poured himself a cup of coffee and sat down opposite Vincent. He stifled a chuckle as he noticed Vincent was wearing a rather strange “hat”.

Catherine had plunked an icepack on his head. “Here, next time don’t drink so much. You know better!” Vincent turned his head (even blinking hurt!) and looked at her.

“I ... I KNOW BETTER! Well, my love, SO DO YOU.”

Catherine smiled at him then lowered her head and rested on his shoulder. “Touché, and shut up.”

Devin approached the table with plates of food. For some unknown reason, he and Allegra weren’t QUITE as bad off as those that sat there. Maybe, it was their OWN chemistry that had allowed them to drink and yet wake up FAIRLY HUMAN this morning. Dev looked over to Al, motioned with his head to Vincent, ‘watch this!’ He softly put the plate just under Vincent’s nose, and stepped back. Way back!

With a snarl, Vincent pushed the plate from him, as far as he could. “I’m not hungry. Leave me be, I say.”

Dev and Al sat down to eat, feeling a bit sorry for the others that were so miserable this morning. To her surprise, Devin pushed his plate away from him with a moan. She looked and saw to her dismay ... *he* was turning quite a lovely shade of green! A delayed reaction? WHATEVER!

Vincent looked over and noticed this at the same moment she did ... and he smiled, and narrowed his lovely eyes. “Here, you are, Devin. Take this plate.” He waved it back and forth under his brother’s protesting lips.

Devin had had it. He ran from the room holding his mouth. Al ran after him, trying not to laugh.

Catherine turned her eyes to his. “Vincent, that was not kind. You surprise me sometimes. Your own brother! How could be so uncaring?”

He scowled at her, a low growl on his lips. A growl of love, but still a definite growl. “Who said I have to always be kind? Dev waved that ... that ... FOOD under my nose first. Fair is fair!”

Father laughed aloud agreeing. “Devin has gotten just what he deserved. Why he ...” Father said no more. He wasn’t able to.

As one voice, Catherine and Vincent yelled together, ‘BE QUIET! He was silent as Catherine took the icepack from Vincent and placed it on her own head.

THE END