

## ***PASSION TWO***

### ***SOUL OF MY SOUL***

***by Trisha Kehoe***

*Into this world, we come with a heart  
That's wide open.  
And the best of this life  
Is all I ever want for you  
The love you believe in, your every dream,  
Your every passion  
In time, I know you'll come to see -  
Nothing means as much to me.*

*Soul of my soul, heart of my heart  
Some kind of miracle of life -  
That's what you are  
Blood of my blood, light of my life  
You mean much more than you know  
Soul of my soul*

Standing just within the shadows of the culvert leading out into Central Park, Vincent tilted his head back and studied the dense bank of grayish fog rolling in over the city, knowing full well that there would be more rain, and very soon; more incessant, dreadful rain. Narrowing his eyes as cracks of silver-tinged lightning seemed to pursue one another across the sky, he waited for the inevitable, then winced as dual claps of thunder assaulted his highly sensitive ears.

Instinctively tugging the hood of his cloak forward as a precaution against betraying his presence in the

sudden, but not unexpected, glints of light, he shook his head worriedly from side to side, grumbling, "So, it begins again."

Swiping at the cold, stinging droplets of rain which had somehow managed to twist sideways on a current of air and smite him between the eyes, and recalling Kanin's comments earlier, at supper, on returning from an errand Above, Vincent arched an eyebrow and grunted disdainfully. It would seem his friend had been unerringly correct in his observation that it wasn't a *'fit night out for man nor beast.'*

Gathering the edges of his cloak more tightly around him and burrowing down into its warmth, he shivered as gusts of bone-numbing night air managed to snake beneath it to claw at his body like tenacious icy fingers.

Thoroughly chilled, but reluctant to go Below just yet, only to face the grim reality of an empty chamber, Vincent rubbed at the wealth of goose-flesh peppering his skin. To be sure, it wasn't a fit night out for man nor beast - especially this beast.

Lifting apprehensive eyes heavenward, and reflecting on the many hours of arduous work ahead of him, as he and the other members of various work crews challenged the seemingly unending mixture of mud and water threatening to inundate their world, he gnashed his teeth in frustration, wondering when this latest assault would end?

Allowing his gaze to drift lower, to explore the closely huddled framework of buildings just beyond the boundaries of the park, he studied them, finding it as miraculous now, as he had when he was a child, that the dimensions of the spiraling steeples above hadn't long ago crushed the world laying so vulnerable, so fragile, beneath it. His world, the only one he would ever have - ever know.

Without warning, nature's fervent assault intensified. As more flashes of lightning scarred the velvet blackness of the sky, the accompanying rain pelted him with icy beads of moisture before continuing downward to bounce off of the stones at his feet in a harsh, staccato rhythm.

Well, wasn't this just perfect - now he was soaking wet. With a grumble of annoyance, Vincent swiped at his face and ducked quickly back into the refuge of the culvert. Nudging his sodden bangs away from his forehead and brushing at dabs of moisture already beginning to seep into his clothing, he muttered, "Oh ... bother."

The splendid new suede cloak he was wearing had been a Christmas present from Catherine. Knowing that the weather was dreadful Above, how could he have been so thoughtless as to wear it up here, especially tonight?

Edging a bit nearer to the culvert entrance, Vincent peered skyward. *'God, please, enough? Surely, you can't have forgotten that there was supposed to be a concert in the park later this evening? Would you disappoint all of those people in denying them the enchanted strains of Clara Schumann, Frederich Chopin, and Franz Liszt?'*

Suddenly reminded of another concert, and another rainy night some years past, he closed his eyes, smiling contentedly as the mental image unfurled. How he and Catherine had laughed at the rain that night.

Embracing each other, they had gazed upward, listening from their safe place just beneath the bandstand, as lightning interrupted the concert, sending people scurrying this way and that in a mad scramble for any sort of

shelter they could find.

Even now, nearly seven years later, in his mind's-eye he could still see her standing before him clad in a lovely, blue velvet gown, laughing and drenched to the skin; he could still smell the scent of her perfume as she fell into his arms; feel the softness of her body as she pressed against his chest. Most of all, he could still taste the hunger which had knifed through him at that moment - that wondrous moment.

Nothing, not their wet clothing, the rain, nor the lightning, could have diminished their happiness at being together that particular evening. Indeed, later on, as he escorted her to the threshold of her apartment building, Catherine vowed that she had never enjoyed a concert more. Neither had he.

Oh, how he wanted her that night; so much, so very much. Almost from the very beginning of their remarkable relationship, those physical desires had taunted him, never giving him respite, but never as deeply, as ravenously as they had then. When Catherine bid him farewell and turned away, toward the access ladder leading Above, never before had he felt as empty inside, as forlorn, or as wretchedly alone.

For an instant, a heartbeat, it had taken all of his vast reserves of inner strength not to take a step forward - a **single** step, gather her small form into his arms, and carry her Below, to his chamber, to his bed, and surely lose himself, and her, forever - or so he had imagined then.

Some years later, learning to share their thoughts and lives fully, as most lovers do with the passing of time, he and Catherine had discussed that night. To his utter chagrin, he discovered that she had known of his anguish, having felt it breach the calm, inner flow of their connection. She had known everything - everything; precisely what he had been feeling, as well as what he'd been thinking.

Yet, being who she was, and understanding him better than anyone else ever would, or could, his angel had never reproached him for all he had denied them both due to his apprehensions regarding physical intimacy. He had perceived those fears to be valid six years ago. Now, he knew better. Pondering that, Vincent chuckled softly. Oh yes, he must definitely know better.

He was certain now that Catherine had absolutely no fear within her of him, or of what ... who ... might possibly overwhelm him at times of passion. To conquer his trepidation in that respect had taken a great deal of patience on her part, and vast amounts of soul-searching on his, but he finally found the confidence to accept that she trusted him completely, with every part of herself; with her feelings, her heart, and indeed, with her very life. In loving him that much, his dauntless lady could forgive him anything, and everything. One day, perhaps he would be able to forgive himself.

Brooding on all of the things that had nearly been lost to him forever; the extraordinary closeness he and Catherine shared; her kindness; her love; the depth of commitment she gave so freely, indeed joyously; his new-found sense of inner peace - all of the wondrous emotions his misgivings had almost cheated him out of, Vincent's shoulders slumped. His expression glum, he stared down at his hands, thinking, '*I miss her so much.*'

Oh, without her comforting presence, these last nine days had seemed endless! Her love, her sympathetic heart, and her very presence in his life, centered him; it comforted him. Without her, it was as though all of

the safe shores of his existence had been callously sheared away, leaving him to flounder alone in a sea of emotions he could no longer control by himself.

From the very first night, when Catherine moved Below forever, for always, to his delighted surprise, Vincent discovered that he felt a deep and abiding peace reach out and encircle him, bringing with it a contentment he had never known before, nor had imagined possible.

In the weeks that followed, as they walked hand-in-hand through his place of refuge, he began to see his home through her eyes. Things he had always considered to be ordinary, evolved, his world becoming a new and wondrous domain he had never truly seen before. Even the murkiest of corridors seemed to brighten as he and Catherine passed through them, as though the shadowed stones themselves were lit from within in some enchanted, unknown way.

Astonishingly, even the familiar sound of messages being tapped out on the pipes became as music to his ears. Smiling at the remembrance of a time when *'the way was new,'* Vincent reached out and cupped the fingers of his left hand gently around a nearby length of pipe. Perhaps these understood somehow, that at long last a missing member of the community had come home, and had sought to welcome her in a special way of their very own.

With the help of *'a good woman,'* as Winslow had phrased it once, some years before, Vincent found the life he led now unfamiliar, yet wondrous, and utterly satisfying. When he and Catherine tackled necessary chores together, even the simplest of tasks, such as the making of a bed, or rearranging his cluttered chamber to accommodate her things, brought with it a heightened sense of accomplishment. In truth, even the usual, mundane business of day-to-day living had taken on new meaning, and a heightened sense of optimism these past years.

Merely knowing that she was there, in that cozy chamber, waiting for him, made the oftentimes arduous physical labors which were a necessary part of his life, and his world, less somehow - not as wearying to both body and spirit as they had been in former years. With Catherine in his life, and in his bed, everything was simply ... easier. He took more joy now in the common events of any given day; he certainly laughed more, and sometimes at great length, at his lady's quite impish sense of humor.

In those precious, secluded moments, when they lay so close in bed that they almost seemed to share the same skin, and Catherine turned her barked wit on him, he had slowly learned to reciprocate in kind. In the beginning, when they had pledged to share their lives fully with each other, he believed it inconceivable to ever consider teasing her, about anything. Now, he could not only hold his own, as the expression went, in these unique exchanges, oftentimes, to her utter surprise, he even beat her at her own game.

Ah yes, his life was so very different now - and thank Heaven for such differences.

Smiling much more expansively than was usual, and yielding to the glow of inner warmth his retrospection brought, Vincent continued to explore the sensual imagery engulfing him. In the deepest part of who he was, he knew that as long as this remarkable woman was at his side, he would be at peace; he would be complete

in ways he had never dreamt possible - not for him. And this sensation of contentment when she was close, the nearly overwhelming sense of serenity brought forth solely by Catherine's presence, would be savored every moment, until the end of forever.

Yet, here, now, standing alone in this place thinking about the absent half of his very soul, Vincent stiffened as aloneness coiled around his heart anew. Placing one hand over his eyes, he moaned, "Oh my love, how does one endure such isolation? Without you, these last days have seemed like an eternity to me - like *nine* eternities."

Swallowing the pain as the ache in his chest seemed to choke off his breath, he slumped against the stone wall, his soul crying out the rest of the words, for him.

*'Even though we agreed to impose limits on the depth of our bond while you are gone, in the hope that such action would spare us the anguish of this separation, it isn't helping, Catherine, and it has spared me ... nothing. If anything, to feel only one heart beating within my breast merely serves to remind me all the more of how wretchedly lonely I am. Return to me soon, for this emptiness from within I ... cannot endure.'*

Placing his left hand over his fiercely pounding heart, Vincent tried to breathe slowly and evenly, struggling to salvage what remained of his self-control

*'Knowing that you vowed to return as soon as your friend was well enough to leave the hospital simply isn't ... enough, Catherine. My impatience to see you, to hold you in my arms again, burns through me as a flame would, ravaging my very will. Threatening to undermine all of my good intentions, at this moment the temptation to open our connection fully, and therein defile our pledge, shames me.'*

Bowing his head and gulping back the sobs burning in his throat, Vincent swayed to his knees. Curling the nails of his right hand into the dirt at his feet, he tried to regain command of his emotions, reproaching himself.

*'I must cease wallowing in this aspect of self-pity, but dear God, how? How do I do it? The need to have her here, with me, and no where else, with **no one** else, is like a ... a poison ... scalding its way through my veins.'*

Inhaling deeply and letting the breath out again in a rush of air, he slowly rose to his feet, his thoughts steadily focused on the woman who was the best part of all he would ever be. Knowing his heart as no other, even without their bond, surely Catherine could still sense how much he missed her, how lost he felt without the warmth of her embrace, and how desperately eager he was to have her safely home?

Stepping back out into the rain and allowing the wetness to mingle with the tracks of his tears, Vincent stared into the sky, wondering if the storm had beset Connecticut yet? If so, was his beloved gazing heavenward, as he was right now, remembering the concert, the enchantment of that night, and perhaps thinking of him?

Shifting his range of focus to the lofty rank and file of skyscrapers just beyond the confines of the park, he selected one building from among all of those vying for his attention. Proceeding to study it at great length, he allowed his gaze to travel slowly over the glimmers of light spilling from the windows, then gasped, feeling as though the pit of his stomach had been stuck a mighty blow on recognizing the window he's been searching for - one that lay veiled in darkness.

In the last few years, Catherine's apartment had become very familiar to him; perhaps even a bit too familiar. When they needed some time alone - truly alone, as all people did at one time or another, that residence was their refuge from the world; indeed, from both worlds. There, they could snuggle contentedly by a roaring fire without almost continual interruptions of one kind or another, as was customary Below.

In that majestic tower of steel and stone, as he and Catherine shared their bodies, all inhibitions seemed to fall away, especially his. Ah yes, making love there, in a splendid, silk-sheeted bed was ...

Suddenly, from within his mind a voice decreed. *'Cease thinking about what - and who - you cannot have this night, or you will surely go mad.'*

Turning away from a view that was breaking his heart, and knowing that he must start for home soon, Vincent folded his arms across his stomach and clenched his teeth. With his own appetites devouring him, he fought desperately to imprison them, to contain them even as they spread downward toward the center of his groin. Oh ... God, the need to see Catherine again, to hold her again, to **have** her again, was unraveling him from the inside out, almost smothering in its intensity.

"I cannot ... bear this ..."

Taking a deep, cleansing breath and releasing it again as gradually as he could, Vincent took another, and then another, fighting to subdue the tempest raging within him, and the emotions probing at the limits of his strength; thinking that the ache would surely kill him if he didn't find a way to confine it. No, he couldn't bear it, yet what other choice was there but to endure the pain, and pray to survive it? Whenever he and Catherine were parted for even the smallest amount of time, he would suffer as he was now. He had known the certainty of that from the very beginning.

After glancing back over his left shoulder at the shadowed windows one more time, Vincent started forward, then hesitated and groaned her name. Pressing the fullness of a sudden, fierce erection into the coolness of the rock wall, he fought to suppress the feelings rolling through him, but there was no hope for it. Making him cry out, the agony clutching at his body wouldn't be denied. The hunger was there, it was achingly real, and it was ravaging him.

Once having experienced the ecstasy of absolute fulfillment in a lover's gentle embrace, and having felt the reality of her moist femininity caressing his maleness, he knew it would be futile to attempt to block the images and scents arousing him at this moment. If the ardor coursing through him, as potent and voracious on his tongue as it was at the juncture of his thighs, was the price he must pay for pledging himself to Catherine, in every way, then he had no choice but to savor the joy, and endure the ache as best he could. In any way that he could.

Yet, to feel the part of him that was most male crying out for her, and know the entreaty must go unanswered until she came home, tormented him. Ah, such tender, exquisite torment was this.

The depth of his sexual needs, appetites which had been more illusions, phantoms of the unknown, until the act of consummation fanned them from banked embers of pure thought into an uncontrollable blaze of

reality, could no longer be turned aside as easily as they had been before knowing Catherine - before having her in a physical sense.

Although one could question '*possibilities*' dreamt alone in the dark, there was no way to challenge the truth - especially when it was pulsing tenaciously between ones legs.

Whimpering, "No," Vincent cracked the palm of his left hand against the wall, then leaned into it and pressed his forehead into the dampness. "No ... no!"

Lifting trembling fingers up to his eyes, he stared at them for a moment and then reached out to curve his nails firmly into the rough stones, knowing if he didn't, his hand would seek out the throbbing hardness which had seized at the center of his groin. Dear God, he couldn't stop it; he simply couldn't turn his thoughts away from what his body was mercilessly demanding of him; redemption, or release, call it what you would. Once having savored the totality of a healthy, normal ejaculation, the core of his masculinity craved it again, as it was craving it now, in a pitiless, relentless heat.

Vanquished by the emotions lacing through him, Vincent flattened the length of his body against the stones, No longer able to repress a basic physical need, he was finally compelled to yield to it. Weeping quietly, he swept his cloak out of the way, inched his left hand down across the firm planes of his belly, and fiercely yanked his shirt out of the confines of his belt. Moving his hand lower still, he slid his palm inward, along the tensed muscles of his upper thigh. Undoing the snap of his dungarees, he eased down the zipper and quickly snaked his fingers in-between the folds of soft fabric.

Knowing it would induce his release, he cupped his aching flesh firmly at the broad shaft and began to move his pelvis in tune with his hand. Clenching his teeth and groaning deep in his throat, he began stroking almost cruelly, once, then again, and a third and final time, his mind screaming, '*Yes ... faster, harder ... do it. Do it! Only by finishing will you find the slightest respite, and you well know it.*'

Responding to the primal urgencies of his body, Vincent thrust expectantly against his upper palm, waiting ... waiting. Hunching his shoulders and trembling all over as his essence finally gushed forth, he fell forward against the wall and pressed his forehead into the stones. Left shattered from the after effects of such an orgasm, he stayed the motion of his hand, then quickly drew it away from the warm semen dripping through his fingers.

Fighting for breath and sagging to his knees, he urged his spent flesh back into the confines of his breeches and methodically wiped the evidence of his release into the sandy floor. Knowing full well that it would take some time to regain his composure, Vincent sat down, rested his head back against the wall, and closed his eyes.

As much as he loathed the act in itself, masturbation brought with it no feelings of self-reproach. Years before, at the onset of puberty, it had been his only form of respite from sexual tension. In truth, he had supposed then, that it would be the only means of release he would ever know - ever have. Yet, although caressing himself in such a way brought no shame, the utter aloneness of it did. It was no longer enough, if indeed it had

ever been enough. Once having achieved orgasm within Catherine's welcoming heat, anything less than that would always remain unfulfilling. Although self-caress marginally cooled the desire pounding through his body, it could never touch his heart.

Sobbing the words, his voice, when he found it, was muffled by the clamor of thunder reverberating in the night sky.

"Please Catherine, come home soon ... *soon*, before my hunger utterly consumes me - mind, body, and soul?"

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"Cripes, I'm beat!" Placing his hands at his hips and stretching his upper torso first to the left and then to the right, in a futile attempt to ease the kinks in his spine, Cullen grunted, continuing, "I hope that damned repair in Section E holds, at least for a few days."

Rubbing tiredly at the back of his neck, Kanin muttered, "Me, too."

Going over the subject at hand in his mind's-eye, and well aware that their endeavours this night would be temporary, at best, Vincent made no comment.

Stumbling along beside Kanin, Cullen started down the corridor to his right, announcing listlessly, "Well, see ya in the morning." Swiping at his dirty face, he added, "... if I live, that is. Did anybody happen to get the serial number on the tank that ran over me?"

When his own back and neck muscles convulsed in seeming agreement to that, Vincent slowly tilted his head to the left. Then, angling the stout column of his neck in the opposite direction, he winced as his efforts only served to add to his discomfort. Making for his own chamber, he started forward, then paused and turned around again, calling out, "Cullen? Kanin? will one of you be sure to ..."

"I know, I know," Cullen interrupted, his tone impatient and more than a little out-of-sorts. "Don't worry, if we need you, one of us will come and get you. G'night."

"Goodnight."

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Upon entering his chamber, Vincent eyed the shadowed room for a moment, then grimaced and started forward. Shrugging wearily out of his damp boots, socks, and mud-spattered clothing, he walked toward a newly refinished oak chiffonier.

"Oh, dear Lord, not again ..."



Grumbling under his breath on discovering the bureau drawer stuck from all the dampness of the last days, he impatiently curled his nails under the brass handle and yanked the contrary thing open. Removing a patched, but still quite serviceable nightshirt and a pair of equally worn thermal pants, he quickly slid into the clean garments. Numb with fatigue, he sank down on the edge of the bed and tugged a quilt up around his trembling body.

Hmmmmmm, this smelled magnificent. Closing his eyes and inhaling deeply, Vincent buried the tip of his nose into the quilt, savoring the slight trace of perfume clinging to the fabric. Gliding the palm of his left hand slowly back and forth over the material and furrowing his brow, he tried to recall the name of this particular scent. Ah yes, now he remembered, Catherine had told him that this was called *'Byzance.'*

Opening his eyes and allowing his mind to drift back in time, he stared into the shadowed corners of the chamber. One evening, some months ago, they had gone Above, to the apartment, to make love. At the height of their passion, delicate hints of Catherine's perfume had subtly combined with the unique muskiness of his own body chemistry. Unnerving him, the fusion of textural, vocal, and physical sensation had truly driven him to a depth of wildness he had never known existed until that very moment.

Toward dawn, he and his beloved discovered what was *'truly possible'* when passion was allowed to rule not only your head, but your heart as well.

Far into the early hours of the next morning, an insurgent hunger had flared between he and Catherine - one that was both powerful and undeniable. Rising from within as a firestorm, a call to desire with a force and will of its own had utterly possessed them. At that moment, the sensation of making love had been stronger and more intoxicating than any other single concept. An urgency that deep, that ... mindless, ravaged one's strength; it brooked no inhibitions, nor would it tolerate any interference. And, it never forsook an opportunity to remind you that you held absolutely no dominance over it, or who and what you had never imagined yourself to be.

Ah, the passion of that night!

The sparks of flame that heated their blood as they caressed each other was a certainty that never released its grasp on one's very soul, and, as a point of fact, he wanted never to be set free of it - ever.

Even now, months later, in his minds-eye he could still see her smiling up at him, watching him, her eyes luminous in the darkness; he could still hear her cries of pleasure as he thrust downward, again and again, into her lush heat. Dear God, he could still taste the softness of her body at the back of his throat, and on his tongue.

With images, scents, and sounds spiraling upward to a conscious level, Vincent swallowed hard and put one hand to his chest. Fighting to recover his breath, he found himself wondering if any other mortal being had ever experienced such savage ecstasy as he had on that superb, yet utterly disconcerting night?

*'Stop now,'* his consciousness urged, *'lest you be compelled to repeat what occurred earlier tonight, in the culvert. You know to venture any further down this path right now, will lead you precisely ... nowhere.'*

Thinking it better to focus on something else, Vincent inspected the vast amounts of dirt and mud which had hardened to the color and consistency of cement on his skin and hands, particularly under his nails. Knowing that he should bath, he rose to his feet, trying to summon up the energy to make the trek to the Triple Falls. After weaving back and forth for a moment, he groaned softly and sank back down on the bed, too tired right now to even make the effort, and far too cold.

Offhand, he couldn't recall a night in recent years that had seemed quite this chilly, especially to him, and his bout of shivering right now was entirely his own fault. In his haste, earlier, to depart this chamber and its dismal emptiness, he hadn't thought to ask Mary or another member of his extended family to light the brazier in his room. Due to that act of forgetfulness on his part, the chamber was as cold as a tomb, and just about as inviting.

Splaying the fingers of both hands wide apart, Vincent proceeded to tunnel them underneath his hair. Attempting to dry the muddled tendrils as well as he could, he shook the long, amber tresses this way and that until some of the wetness dissipated.

Letting his shoulders slump, he laced his fingers together and regarded them thoughtfully, thinking that he should try to get some rest. With all of the rain from Above flooding first one tunnel, the next, and then the next, plunging ever downward in spirals of dank soil and rock, another disquieting emergency dispatch could come clamoring over the pipes at any time.

Flinging himself backwards on the bed and drawing the covers up to his chin, he placed his left forearm over his eyes, commanding himself, *'You must try to sleep. If you don't, you shall certainly regret it later, for the repairs made earlier tonight aren't going to hold for as long as Cullen hopes they will, and that's the truth of it.'*

Yet, he knew in his heart of hearts that this would be another one of those wretched nights when he tossed and turned every which way, and arose the following morning out of sorts not only with himself, but with the rest of the community as well. He never seemed to really sleep anymore unless Catherine was here, in this chamber, in his arms, with her small, warm body snuggled into him.

Admonishing himself roundly, *'Oh, stop all of your foolishness, and right now, for it serves no good purpose.'* Vincent battered his pillow into a more serviceable lump. Rolling over onto his right hip and clamping his eyes firmly shut, he tried using his great force of will to coerce himself into getting some sleep.

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*"This is absolutely ridiculous. I cannot get comfortable in this, this ... damnable bed!"*

After two hours of teeth-grinding and muttering to himself, Vincent flung off the covers and bolted upright. It was hopeless, his mind simply refused to shut down, or turn off, or whatever it was a mind *did* when a person wanted to get some blessed sleep!

Growling to, and at, himself, eyes flashing with displeasure searched the room for something to take his mind off of a nearly overwhelming sensation of inner turmoil. Twin pools of glinting turquoise focused on the desk. Perhaps if he read for a while? No, reading would only serve to remind him of Catherine.

Glancing at the ceiling, Vincent wondered if it had stopped raining Above? Even if it hadn't, he could get dressed and go for a walk ... No, that too, reminded him of Catherine. Everything seemed to remind him of her, or rather his lack of her company.

How positively vexing. Gnashing his teeth, feeling more like a lovesick adolescent at the moment than a mature adult, and completely out of patience with this wretched state of affairs. Vincent swiped at the chair next to the bed and spun it around to face the deck.

If he was going to pass what remained of this desolate night mooning over the lady who had taken his heart with her, to Nancy Tucker's house in Connecticut, then he may as well try to set the thoughts to paper. Perhaps seeing the words written down would soothe his restlessness, at least temporarily. Doing something, *anything*, would be better than laying there, in that bed, tossing and turning, which had only served to make him feel quite sick to his stomach.

Settling into the chair with an air of desperation, Vincent yanked his pen off of the desk. Quickly opening his journal, he flipped through it to the next blank page, all the while attempting to group his thoughts into some sort of coherent order. Placing the slim book at the proper angle to suit his left-handed script, he bent forward, over it, and began writing.

*'Having well earned these few hours of repose, most of the community sleeps now. Except for an occasional tapping on the pipes, in the world Above, and friends who rely on her, as I have friends here, who rely on me, brings little, if anything, by way of consolation.*

*Each and every time we are parted, the woman I love takes so much of me with her, perhaps more than even she could fully grasp. With this bond we share purposely encumbered as it is now, my heart feels as if someone has tied a tight cord around its muscled boundaries, and the other end of that cord is attached to Catherine's heart; a heart which is so very far away from home, and from me.*

*Wanting her close, desperate to see her again, to hold her in my arms again, at long last I am shamefully compelled to confront truths which I have refused to give credence to for nearly six years. There is a part of me that would restrict Catherine to one world; mine. In that portion of myself I can never fully trust, lives something ... someone ... I know all too well, and oh, I know what it is capable of. How could I have presumed that these vile feelings of possessiveness and envy where she is concerned, to be overcome? how can they be, when I feel them rolling through me even now - especially now.*

*At times like this, I find myself wondering what else lies just below the surface of my so-called humanness; what perverse emotions linger there, hoping to catch me unawares?*

*It dishonors me to confess that pride is one of those despicable emotions. Knowing that such a beautiful woman loves me, and wants only me, fills me with a sense of male vanity I had never known existed, until it*

*coiled through my body as a snake would, poisoning my heart and my thoughts.*

*And with pride, came selfishness. Part of what I am, of what I shall always be, wants to inhibit Catherine's sojourns Above, and therein end the aloneness which rips through my soul, shearing away the thin veneer of gentility she vows is the 'real me.'*

*On more than one occasion, my beloved has asserted that there is no darkness within me. Not wanting to hurt her feelings by negating her words aloud, I make no response to such statements, yet my mind cries out to renounce them, for I know the truth of it - as I have always known. Those dark places do exist, and part of me nourishes itself on those shadows, and I am lost in them.*

*In this power, in this energy which flows through me, lies something else I must examine more closely conceit. When forced into the role of defending my home and members of my family from the malevolence of the world Above, blind rage controls my actions. In those terrible moments, being who and what I am, I can do what no other creature is capable of doing. Using my hands and my greater strength as my only weapons. I can decimate those who would dare to endanger my home and people whom I love.*

*As much as the deeds I am capable of disgust and shame me, in truth I am thankful to have that force at my command. Dear God, to protect the community which I depend on for my very survival, I have been compelled to do things no one should ever have to do. Loathing acts of violence in all of their myriad forms, I am still gratified that I have the means at my disposal to have accomplished them, and survived the threat more or less intact.*

*Over the years, if I hadn't had the abilities I do, so many people would have perished, including the woman I love, and on more than one occasion. Most of all, I thank whatever God or Gods I must to have the resources at my command to keep her safe.*

*Am I truly all that she claims me to be, or is the reality of exactly what I am too horrible to ever explore fully? Will I ever find the courage, I wonder, to confront that truth in its entirety, and come to terms with it? Where does one find that kind of strength? How does anyone look into the mirror of their own soul and face all of their imperfections - and all of their demons?*

*Although all intelligent creatures, be they human as otherwise, have sark places within them, mine are undeniably unique, and absolutely terrifying. I had imagined I had faced my demons and shadows as fully as was possible some years ago, but that's not entirely true. There are still regions within myself that I dare not probe too deeply even now - especially now, for to explore them would mean sharing whatever I find there with Catherine. This, I simply cannot do.*

*As deeply as I love her, and have vowed to share my life and the truth with her, always, I cannot allow her to know such thoughts continue to torment me. In all good conscience, could I intentionally frighten Catherine in such a way? No. Never.*

*Yet, how can I not tell her? And if I should ever find the courage to share these thoughts with Catherine, what would she say, what would she do? Would she be disappointed in me? Would she leave me; could she? And if*

*she did, could I survive without her? I think not. Truly, I have built my life, and my dreams, on the radiance I see when I look into her eyes. To live without her now, would be inappropriate.*

*Our hearts are bound to one another, yet we stand apart, Catherine and I, our two worlds like stone citadels, dwelling one upon the other. Will our lives ever merge completely, I wonder, or become closer, and in that, bring an end to the questions gnawing at my soul?*

*Nearly eight years ago, a beautiful, precious angel brought the truth of her love into my life, setting me aflame with needs and hungers I had thought never to have intimate knowledge of. Catherine's tranquility **of spirit**, her trust, her generosity to me, and to the world we share, humbles me ... silences me. How can such as I ever hope to become worthy of so many gifts? Inprisoned as I am within my sphere of shadows and night images, what can I offer her in return?*

*What words, what touch, can I bestow as recompense for all that she has brought into my life; for the way in which she has blessed my existence and helped my soul to heal? In truth, I dare not speak of such things to her, for to give voice to those thoughts would be to repay her devotion with covetousness and complaints. Thus, I can only pledge to devote my life to her; to protect her always. Always. Whatever I must do, I will do, to keep Catherine safe from harm.*

*And what of this hunger I feel whenever I look at her? Is this depth of ardor customary for a man in love, or far beyond it? Thinking only to please me, my lady has declared more than once that my passions go far beyond what would be considered ordinary. Yet, this praise she bestows so lovingly, so innocently, fills me with self-reproach, for to know that my desires go beyond 'ordinary', brings with it an aspect of nearly overwhelming vanity. At this hour, in this place, I admit to that appalling truth, but only here, adn only unto myself.*

*So, struggling for serenity of both mind and spirit, here I sit, night after night, waitiing for Catherine to return. Burying these treacherous feelings of possessiveness, and all the rest of what that entails, deeply within my secret, innermost heart, I live moment to moment, from breath to breath, praying for the time when my love and I shall greet one another again. Please God, that day is close at hand.'*

Contemplating the words he had just written, Vincent exhaled a frustrated sigh, well aware that writing down his thoughts and feelings hadn't helped in the least. Letting the journal drift shut, he rested the nape of his neck against the back of the chair and closed his eyes.

Reflecting on the words of a poem he had read and reread many times, mainly in the last few years, he took no notice of the tears coursing down his cheeks, whispering into the shadows. *'We cannot meet; stone citadels stand fast; two worlds do not embrace. Homesteads are bound, attached to a plane, to time, to one day's round.*

*'But, evenings when the drudgery is past, and blinds are drawn, and children safe in bed, and adults sit, and dream, and nod the head, a child within each home can slip apart, run barefoot down the stairs and out to meet his playmate. Breathless, in the dark they greet, and fling each other, wholly ... heart to heart.'*

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After washing his hair thoroughly and scrubbing his flesh until it felt raw, Vincent dove under the nearly scalding water one last time, his early morning bath nearly at an end.

Situated in the sheltered area of a small cavern, fifty yards to the left of the Falls, this site, with its lagoon of slightly acrid water, was one of his favorite retreats. And, whenever there was time for such leisurely pursuits, Catherine also enjoyed coming here to bathe.

Knowing that the memories would do little to ease his hungry heart, he gritted his teeth and allowed the remembrance to evolve anyway. Ah, what sublime hours they had spent here, in this secluded spot. Times of laughter, times of simply being together and scrubbing each other's backs, and one night - one very special night, he and Catherine had loved here.

Locked in each other's embrace, with her softly-scented form clinging to his, they had drifted along in the water, her slim legs wrapped snugly about his hips. Then, as the urgency of their need seemed to explode outward through the bond, their combined passion had urged him to quickly adjust the angle of her body, and his own. The moist tightness enveloping him as he entered her had truly driven him ... beyond thought.

Those treasured moments of intimacy had been one of the rare instances when he lost himself; all sense of who he was, or where he was. But still, even as out of control as he had been that night, he hadn't hurt her. This he knew, for when they arrived back in their chamber, he had insisted on scrutinizing every single inch of Catherine's body - which summarily led to another whirl of quite impassioned love-making.

Putting one hand to his chest and gulping hard, trying unsuccessfully to ease a sudden dryness in his throat, Vincent closed his eyes as a shudder traveled the length and width of his tensed frame. Envisioning that time hadn't helped in the least. He must stop thinking about that night, lest the images exploding behind his eyes, the well-remembered scent of her body, and the superb taste of it, unhinged his mind. Dwelling on her absence had only served to make his heart begin aching all over again, along with the rest of him.

Fighting desperately to keep his hands from seeking out the fire raging between his legs, knowing that he could negate its power in a few swift strokes, he moaned, "I need her so much, I think to surely die of the wanting."

Throwing himself backward in the water, with his long hair floating behind him like a wavering series of long, amber-tone streamers, Vincent studied the rock ceiling over his head, trying to assess the exact time of day from the fusion of light and shadow playing tag across the rock surfaces. It was nearly five am; Kanin, Cullen, Mouse and the remainder of the first shift were to meet in the library at six. He would have to leave this place soon, and he certainly wasn't looking forward to another day of grimy, but necessary, labor.

Flipping over onto his belly, just as his head came level with a rock ledge, Vincent crossed his heavily-muscled forearms one over the other. Allowing his chin to sink forward on them, he sighed, immensely relieved to finally feel clean again - free of the mud and dust from the previous night's drudgery, even if the sensation was

only temporary.

Yesterday, as he and Mouse struggled to contain a rather stubborn rock-slide, his dauntless companion had suggested the possibility of asking Father if they should begin building an Ark. Frowning, he wondered if the inquiry could perhaps have been in earnest? No, it couldn't have been. His eyes narrowed. Oh yes, it could.

Well, whatever scheme Mouse was contemplating would be only for him to know, and for the rest of the community to ponder with the usual amount of trepidation. Shaking his head, Vincent resolved to keep a watchful eye on his friend for the next days. If vast amounts of wood became evident down here, at least he'd know the reason, and hopefully be able to take the proper steps before Father learned of it.

Floating along in the water and envisioned the procession in his mind's-eye. If Mouse's *'flight of fancy'* should include the appropriate animals to a series of twos ... Vincent began laughing so hard, he nearly choked. Swiping at his streaming eyes and wondering where they could possibly find a brace of unicorns this time around, he tried very hard to regain his self-control. But, the mental impression of Father trying to confine lions, tigers, and bears (*oh my!*) into their proper stalls, only made him start laughing all over again, even harder than before.

Then, reflecting on the torrents of rain which had fallen these past days, Vincent sighed, thinking that perhaps Mouse had the right idea, after all. Recalling the vast amounts of mud and rock that had sloshed down on the work crew the previous day, from an upper tunnel, he curled his lower lip into a sneer of displeasure, not relishing the prospect of hauling away more copious amounts of brown-tinged muck.

Suddenly noting the lengthening shadows on the cavern walls, and realizing how much time had passed, he started for shore, silently castigating himself, *'Cease daydreaming. Deliberating on the task won't get it done, now will it?'*

Bracing the palms of his hands on the rock ledge, Vincent hoisted himself gracefully out of the water. Sliding his left hand through his wild tangle of hair, he stretched out the other one to retrieve two immense bath towels that lay folded up next to his clean clothes and work boots. Wrapping one towel around his hips, he started to reach up and dry his hair with the second one, then hesitated.

Angling his head to one side and examining the back of his hand, he studied the densely-layered tufts of hair and the sharp, elongated nails which protruded well beyond the tips of his fingers. Allowing the towel he held to slip to the ground, he turned his hand palm up, inspecting the texture of his skin and the wealth of healed-over callouses marring his flesh.

*'Catherine claims these are beautiful; that they are hers.'*

With that thought, Vincent brought both hands up in front of him. Staring at them, he shook his head sadly from side to side. Reliving that night, and the pain it had brought to tell the woman he loved about Lisa, he murmured, "Although your words were tenderly heartfelt, and brought more than a little comfort to me at that moment. I'm sorry, dearest Catherine, but these are my hands. They shall always be ... my hands."

Inspecting his bronzed, work-ravaged skin, and the scars criss-crossing the palm, Vincent eyed it

dispassionately. Although many parts of his head and body were *'more or less'* human in composition and form, his hands weren't; they were the most unusual, nonhuman part of his entire anatomy. Yet, he accepted them now for what they were, merely hands, because Catherine regarded them as such. To her, his hands were special simply because they were his, no more than that. And she loved them just as they were, nails, callouses, fur, and all.

Boistered by that truth, he shifted his range of focus. Letting his gaze travel the length of his body, his eyes lingered on his chest for a moment, observing the solidity of the pectoral muscles, the abundance of densely-joined, reddish curls, and the tone of his skin. Here, there wasn't all that much difference between his body and the physiques of other males. He was, perhaps, broader in the chest than most, and in truth, a good deal hairier, but those were the major dissimilarities.

The hair ... fur ... whatever, on his stomach, was nearly identical to that covering his upper torso, the major difference being the pattern and thickness of it. On his belly, the hair was shorter and wiry, tapering from a extensive vee just above his navel, to an amber-tinged, velvet-soft point lower down.

Continuing his self-scrutiny, Vincent looked downward, to the inner curve of his thighs, and then lower still. Here, the hair was denser, deeper in texture and tone - a pliable thicket surrounding his primary male organs. His phallus lay gently curled against the inner crease of his left thigh, its puckered circumcised tip a delicious shade of mauve which seemed to rise almost proudly from its nest of spiraling curls.

Having been reared with a great many other boys, he had grasped many years ago, that here, he was indeed different - much larger than his boyhood friends. Tensing his buttocks, he groaned and clamped down on his lower lip, his back arching slightly as the clutching motion of his backside caused his male organ to stir almost lazily before declining again, into its previous position.

Furrowing his brow, Vincent eyed himself circumspectly, making a substantial effort to envision this particular part of his body through Catherine's eyes. More than once, she had vowed that this part of his was *'positively stunning.'* *'Stunning?'* Tilting his head to the right, he focused his complete attention on the plump rise of flesh, but for the life of him, he found nothing stunning here. As far as he was concerned, his male organ and testes were merely that - other than a means to an end. This part of his body contained his life-force, the core of his masculinity, that was all.

Feeling a sudden flush rise from the curve of his neck and continue upward all the way to his ears, Vincent clamped down on the inside of his jaw, fighting the urge to grin. While he would never have admitted aloud to having such vain thoughts, although he found nothing of beauty in this particular portion of his anatomy, he knew that Catherine most certainly did.

*'Now, **that** is more than enough of such pretentiousness ...'* Chastising himself roundly under his breath and hastily toweling himself partially dry, he gathered up his clothing and started for outer cavern.

Hesitating just at the access to the vast grotto, and scanning the area intently for some moments, he listened to sounds which were audible only to him. Once he was satisfied that no one else was up and about this early in the day, he dropped his clothing and towels to the floor and began climbing toward a brace of rocks which jutted almost straight up in the air.

Seeming to keep a vigilant watch over their territory, the massive stones had the appearance of ageless



sentinels; ones that had seen and heard everything with the passing of time, and would keep those secrets unto themselves through infinity and beyond.

Bending forward at the waist, Vincent wrapped his two hands around his calves. Rubbing at the kinks there, he took scant notice of the thick coat of hair encasing his long legs. Much of his power lay here, in his lower limbs. Besides affording him exceptional speed when it was necessary, his legs also provided him with a unique sense of balance.

One night, some weeks past, as he and Catherine began one of their late-night excursions up into the Park, he had outdistanced her somehow. Coming up behind him and swatting him on the backside quite hard, she had eyed him with obvious displeasure, muttering that he had the stride of a *'blasted race horse'*. Bending his knee and snapping one leg out in front of him, then drawing it back to repeat the process with the other one, Vincent glanced down at his muscled calves and then examined his wide, extremely hairy feet. Who knew, with his unknown genealogy, anything was within the realm of plausibility.

Turning around to peer down at the whirling pools of water far below his vantage point, he exhaled roughly. Well, it was now or never. Clenching and unclenching his hands, he curled his toes around the sides of a rock ledge and hesitated for a moment, mustering up the courage for a downward plunge that he knew would be a shock to his system.

Shaking his tumble of damp hair out of his eyes, and filling his lungs with air, Vincent rotated his arms slightly. Bringing his hands up level with his chest, palms down, he bent his legs, arched his back, and vaulted flawlessly into the cold springs twenty feet below.

Breaking the surface only moments later, he gasped for breath. Great God in Heaven, the temperature of this water was positively glacial this morning! It was far too cold even for him to stay in for the usual amount of time. Stroking quickly and cleanly for the rock-strewn bank, he climbed out, trying unsuccessfully to cease shivering.

Reaching for a towel, Vincent grunted as the portion of his anatomy his lady deemed *'positively stunning'* compressed into the warmth of his body - as if to reproach him for what it had just been subjected to.

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Hastily dodging the shovelful of sodden muck that Mouse had just unknowingly hoisted in his direction, Vincent rested one hand on his co-worker's shoulder, urging, "The others are taking a break, so why don't you stop for a while as well? The next shift will arrive soon; then we can start home."

"Can't stop yet." After swiping at his sweaty forehead, Mouse gestured to the ceiling and then to the floor, exclaiming, "Above, Below, between - mess everywhere! Gotta work ..." That said, he leaned forward, preparing to scoop up another shovelful of mud.

"Most of the flooding has been contained at best we can, at least for the time being." Placing one hand on the shovel, Vincent halted Mouse's industrious pace. "Please, you must rest." Eyeing the growing pile of rocks and damp earth at his feet, he observed, "I truly appreciate your help here today, you know. You've always been such a good worker, and I'm proud to have you as part of the primary crew."

Not expecting such a fine compliment, the smaller man half-turned and smiled at him from beneath dusty,

raggedy-edged bangs. "Really?"

Vincent smiled back. "Yes, really."

Immensely pleased, yet embarrassed by such praise, particularly when it came from a man he had great affection for. Mouse hunched his thin shoulders, then bent to his task again, muttering, "Thanks, but I gotta finish. More rain comes, big trouble." Glancing up, he eyed the pick-axe Vincent had slung over his left shoulder. "You work ... I work."

Carefully setting the axe against the wall, Vincent stepped away from it, "And if I stop to rest, then will you?"

"Guess so."

"Very well, I have just declared a work break - for both of us."

Sinking to a nearby boulder, Vincent brushed the dirt off of his face and hands. When a coughing fit suddenly overtook him, he reached toward the pocket of his shirt. Retrieving a roll of candy, he eyed the small packet, noting huskily, "All of the dust floating about in this place has caused my mouth and throat to feel exceedingly dry."

Wiping his face on the cuff of his shirt and swallowing hard, Mouse nodded. "Mine, too." Cranning his neck at the men working further down the passageway, he gestured toward him. "Maybe they have some water left."

"No, I don't think so," Vincent gently contradicted. "Remember? We finished the last of it at noon."

"Oh ... yeah."

Eyeing the rust-colored ooze seeping from the tunnel wall, the crew chief wrinkled up his nose in obvious distaste. "And we certainly cannot drink that." Deftly prying the candy open with a clawed thumb and forefinger, Vincent cautioned, "These should help a bit until the next shift arrives with full canteens." Shaking a few of the treats into his left palm, he extended his hand toward his companion. "Would you like some? As I recall, you enjoy peppermints almost as much as I do."

"Like 'em more." With that, the shovel came to rest beside the axe. Sliding down the wall to sit next to his best friend, Mouse took a few of the sweets and started to pop one into his mouth, then frowned. Remembering his manners, he muttered, "Thanks."

"You are quite welcome, I'm sure."

Deciding to eat two pieces instead of one, the tunnel *'finder and taker'* savored the explosion of flavor on the back of his tongue for a moment. Licking his lips, he sighed, "Candy's good."

Nodding solemnly in agreement, Vincent responded. "Candy is fine."

"Where'd ya get it?"

Studying the blue-wrapped packet, he replied quietly. "Catherine left them on the desk. I didn't think she'd mind if I ... borrowed ... them." Looking just a bit defensive, he hastily added, "I shall replace them, of course, at the very earliest possible opportunity."

"Uh, huh," Mouse acknowledged, grinning from ear to ear. Then, eyeing Vincent and seeming to hone in on one his thoughts, he scowled, declaring glumly, "Just isn't the same down here when your Catherine's away. Even Father's an old grump. I miss her ... a lot."

"So do I." Turning his head slightly to the right to stare bleakly at the cavern wall, and at the same time

conceal the anguish fully visible in his eyes. Vincent gulped back the sob rising in his throat. "I miss her ... very much indeed."

"Hope she'll be home soon. Sooner than soon."

Hunching his shoulders, he replied. "That depends on when her friend is well enough to leave the hospital."

At times, especially close buddies seemed not only to read your mind, but your heart as well.

Hearing the disress in his friend's tone of voice, Mouse rested one hand on his tensed forearm. Squeezing it gently, he observed, "Sometimes having a love must hurt awful bad."

"Yes, sometimes it hurts ... awful bad." Staring down at the roll of candy, Vincent rubbed the pad of his left thumb gently over the blue wrapper and said nothing more.

Sitting quietly together in companionable silence, the friends relished the pungent taste of the peppermints, allowed overworked muscles to unkink, kept their own counsel, and waited patiently for the relief crew to reach them.

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Approximately a mile further back in one of the lesser tunnels, a slender woman with light brown hair and smoky green eyes shifted the five canteens she toted onto her right shoulder and tried to keep up with her more sure-footed companions.

Having arrived home only an hour before, Catherine had almost expected to find Vincent waiting for her at the Park entrance, but, of course, he wasn't there. With the bond as subdued as it was right now, unless he choose to break their pledge by freeing his hold over it, which he would never do without good cause, he had no way of knowing that she was well and truly home, and on her way to join him.

Earlier, walking quickly through the passageway which led to their chamber, she had been about to call out to him as only she would, with her heart, to let him know that she was close, when Pascal's signal had come clattering over the pipes.

*/// Caution. All Level Two residents. Stay out of Shaft E. Repairs underway. Second shift crew report to Father ASAP. ///*

Certain that Vincent had enough to worry about right now without her emotions hindering his concentration, or perhaps even putting him in harm's way, she had sprinted toward the library. Skidding to a halt at the entrance and gasping to catch her breath, she'd been told by Father that all was certainly **not** well. Two of the primary upper tunnels had already flooded twice in the past eight days, the flow of water had been steadily increasing, and was now gushing down in torrents into the newly inhabited lower levels.

Clamping down on the inside of her jaw, Catherine glared at the mud and rocks at her feet and then proceeded to kick at them, muttering. "Damn this rain, will it never end?!"

Knowing that the one she loved would certainly perceive her anger if she wasn't very, very careful, she gritted her teeth and tried to keep her emotions on a short leash.

Struggling to maintain her footing on the damp soil, Catherine shifted the canteens onto her left shoulder and

marching along silently behind Jamie, Zach, and the remaining members of the crew, every bit as concerned as they were about what the next few hours might bring.

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Far below the members of the second crew. searching blue eyes studied the ceiling for a moment, then narrowed in fierce concentration. **Catherine?** Angling his head back and then to one side, listening carefully, Vincent examined the softly muted flow of their connection. No, it couldn't be her. Surely she would have let him know if she was on the way home. Perhaps this sudden, heightened sense of her was merely wishful thinking on his part. Releasing the breath he hadn't realized he was holding, he slumped back into his previous position against the wall.

"What?" Mouse asked, his gaze mirroring his friend's worried expression. Thinking the worst, he made a face, exclaiming, "Not more water?!"

"No," Vincent reassured him. "But, for a moment ..." Letting the remainder of the words trail off, he stared at the entrance to the passageway.

Brightening considerably, eager blue eyes searched Vincent's face. "Jamie and the others?"

"Yes, I believe so, and for a moment I felt that Catherine was also very close." Staring at the ceiling again, he went on dispiritedly. "But now, the sensation is ... gone."

"Sure be glad when she's back."

Gulping hard, Vincent swallowed the pain. Trying to keep his tone of voice calm and controlled, he took a deep breath, but the words still came out half whispered, and half choked. "So will I."

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Twenty minutes later, at the sound of approaching footsteps, the members of the work crew struggled wearily to their feet. At long last, after a bone-numbing ten hour shift, they could go back to their chambers, grab a bite to eat, or maybe just fall into bed and *'die'* for the next few hours.

The first member of the secondary crew to turn the bend in the corridor was Zachary. Just as Mouse and Vincent stepped forward to greet him, the remainder of the small band started into the passageway.

In the same instant an intense excitement invaded his body, a sense of all-encompassing joy burst upon Vincent's mind, causing his heart to begin pounding far too rapidly. Relaxing his hold over their connection just a little, he petitioned silently, *'Catherine, my dear, where are you?'*

*'I'm right here, love,'* came the reply. *'My beautiful love.'*

Blinking in surprise, he put one hand to his chest. It was her! He could actually feel her presence now, the sensation strong and true. Whispering her name, he fully released his tight control over the bond. His body language taut and eagerly expectant, questioning, hungry eyes swept over the people walking toward him, searching frantically for his first glimpse of the woman he loved.

When the last of the stragglers came into view, Vincent's eyes widened, then filled with tears as his entire body jerked forward. There she was! His sense of her a moment ago hadn't been in error. Catherine was home. She was there ... there, not seventy yards away, smiling and waving at him for all she was worth.

"Vincent!"

Momentarily forgetting that there were other people milling about the work area, he lurched toward her, moaning this relief aloud. "Oh, thanks be to God ..."

Bending his knees slightly as she threw herself into his arms, he swept her and the canteens she held to his breast, crushing her to him with such obvious delight it warmed her heart, and stole her breath. Placing soft kisses to the crown of her head, Vincent murmured her name over and over again, as if trying to make himself believe that she was truly here.

"It's really me!" Catherine exclaimed, hugging him around the waist. "I'm so glad to see you. It seems like nine years instead of only nine days!" Seizing the front of his shirt and burrowing against him, she crooned, "It's good to feel warm again; to feel safe again."

Trying to stop trembling and to steady his voice, and failing miserably at both endeavors, he managed, "I have missed you so ... very much."

"I've missed you, too." Clutching lengths of his hair in her fingers, she began kissing Vincent's face, his eyes, then his chin, his nose, each and every blessed inch of him that she could reach, interspersing the kisses with, "Being ... away from ... you ... was ... simply awful!"

Unable to respond in words, Vincent buried his face into her hair, groaning as a shiver vibrated through him. She was home. Now, he would be able to breathe properly again; he could sleep tranquilly, and eat again, without choking on the food. And now, his heart would stop hurting.

Unwilling, or unable, to loosen his hold on the woman he cherished more than any other single thing in this or any other world, he tilted his head back just far enough to search her eyes. How could he tell her how much, how desperately, he had missed her? He couldn't find the words, if indeed there were any to convey what he felt right now. And even if he managed to give voice to the emotions pounding through him, the enormous lump in his throat would have surely choked them off.

Snuggling up against the great bear of a man she adored, Catherine glanced to her left. Oh oh. Putting one hand to the side of Vincent's beautiful, mud-splattered face, she smiled up at him, cautioning softly, "Our friends are grinning at us."

"Are they?" Tightening his hold on her waist and staring at her as only he could stare, he bent his head toward her until their mouths were a breath apart. When Vincent spoke again, his words came out half grunted and half a rumbled, throaty growl. "*Let them.*"

When people in love greeted each other after long absences, and to him nine days was certainly that, Vincent knew they usually kissed. Well, for once in his life, he was going to do precisely what he wanted to do, instead of what would be '*expected*' of him. He was going to kiss this woman, right here, right now - and very hard.

And should any of their friends take offense in that, then they could go straight to the very devil.

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Just before the turn that would lead them to their chamber, Catherine came to a sudden stop in the corridor. Pausing as she did, Vincent took her hand into his and brushed his mouth gently over the tips of her fingers. Tilting her chin up, he smiled at her, his voice gruff with emotion. "Is something troubling you, my dearest love?"

"No, not really." Beaming at him, she cupped the sides of his face in her palms. Urging Vincent's head down, she placed a softly nibbling kiss on the left side of his jaw, then rested her forehead against his, sighing, "Oh, I've been aching to touch you, and to hold you."

Feeling as though she had read his mind, Vincent merely nodded his head slowly up and down and curled his left arm around her waist. Unaware of doing it, he tightened his hold just a tiny bit too much.

When it finally became absolutely necessary to draw breath, Catherine eased back a few inches and studied him at great length, from the haphazard part in his ruffled bangs, right down to the smudge of dirt on the curve of his chin. Reaching out to coax Vincent's long hair behind his somewhat flushed ears, she smiled up at him. Even covered in grime, he was so adorable she wanted to just reach out, grab him by those delectable ears, and smother him with kisses.

Placing one finger to the curve of his mouth, Catherine traced his full lover lip for a moment, then moved her hand to stroke his delicately-slanted eyebrows. "I've missed seeing this face, too, and these extraordinary blue eyes that seem to peer into my very soul."

Finding himself more than a little ill-at-ease by such compliments, even now, after so many years, Vincent bent his head slightly and peered at her from beneath his bangs. Locking glinting eyes to hers, he smiled hesitantly, whispering, "As I have missed seeing you, Catherine, except in ... dreams."

"But, dreams don't help very much, do they?"

Unable to answer that aloud, he grunted softly, knowing full well that dreams, even those as vivid as the ones he'd been having, didn't help in the least little bit. They never had.

Stroking the area of his chest that contained his heart, she pressed in gently, observing, "Nine days is a long time."

Reliving the pain of those days, Vincent swallowed hard, managing, "Nine days, six hours, and twenty-three minutes is a ... very ... long time." Needing a moment to regain his inner calm, he glanced down at spatters of mud on his hands and shirt, ruefully stating the obvious. "My skin and clothing are immensely dirty."

"Yes," Catherine replied solemnly, "They are." After brushing at the mud on his chin, she tugged it lovingly. "But a little dirt could never make you any less beautiful to my eyes."

Accepting her words with a look of loving indulgence, mingled with barely concealed pleasure, Vincent made no comment, knowing that to disagree with her over what did or did not constitute '*beauty*' would do him absolutely no good. Where that topic was concerned, his lady would brook no arguments of any kind.

Tilting her love's head to the left to take full advantage of the subdued lighting in the corridor, Catherine frowned. Even though he was smiling, there were new lines around Vincent's mouth that hadn't been there when she left, and she knew that the strenuous work of these last days hadn't caused them. The look on his face radiated great joy at having her safely home, yet those glowing eyes also betrayed his utter exhaustion. And more than that, although he was trying very hard to keep it from her, she sensed what this separation had cost him emotionally.

Knowing that she had put him through hell - again, Catherine swayed forward against his chest and wrapped both of her arms around his neck, needing simply to hold him. These last days had been so empty, so difficult, and as hard as they'd been for her, she knew that they had been even worse for him. How could she not know that?

It had been dreadful leaving him, but when Nancy's husband left an urgent message on her answering machine, saying his wife was going into the hospital for a mastectomy and wanted her to help with the children, *'if she could,'* what was she to do? Nancy was one of her dearest friends, one who had always been there for her, in the past, and friendship was a two way street, wasn't it? Yet, knowing that hadn't helped at all when she had to tell Vincent she was going to be in Connecticut, and she wasn't sure how long she'd be gone.

Bringing her back to the present, Vincent pulled back slightly, watching her, the tilt of his head holding the question.

Playing with the strands of hair gliding over his wide shoulders, she smiled reassuringly. "I'm fine. It's just that sometimes when I look at you, or think about you, I completely lose my train of thought."

Nuzzling into her palm, he inhaled her scent and sighed contentedly, knowing exactly what she meant. In these last days, he had derailed that *'train'* many times.

Frowning, Catherine studied Vincent solemnly for a moment. He looked like he was just about ready to keel over from utter exhaustion. "You've been working double shifts since the rain started, haven't you?"

"Yes, but so has everyone else."

Sensing how worried she was, Vincent decided to try and lighten her mood. Pulling himself up to his full height, he focused sparkling eyes on her, teasing gently, "So, my love, after scrutinizing me at such length, what conclusions have you drawn?"

"Excuse me?"

"Other than being somewhat grimy at the moment, have I passed inspection, or haven't I?" Leaning back against the wall and folding his arms across his chest, he seemed to be waiting patiently for her response.

Realizing that she was being baited, Catherine narrowed her eyes and looked away. Chewing on the inside of her jaw for a moment, she thought, *'Oh, when he chose to play the part, he could be such a cheeky little smartass!'*

"Yeah, I guess you've passed inspection, except ..." Taking the few steps necessary, she rested her hands on either side of Vincent's hips and pressed her fingers in. When she seemed to come in contact with bones instead of flesh, she demanded, "Have you been getting enough to eat?"

Well aware that it would do him absolutely no good to try any kind of subterfuge with her, Vincent merely shrugged.

"That's what I thought." Scanning the dark circles under his eyes, she noted, "And it's obvious that you haven't been sleeping very much, either."

"I couldn't get comfortable," he replied, sighing deeply. "When you are not in it, our bed is ..." Unable to continue, he shook his head dejectedly.

"Oh love, I know. This has been rough on both of us, hasn't it?" Not waiting for a reply, Catherine wrapped both arms around his neck and hung on tightly for a moment, admitting, "I haven't been getting very much

sleep either." Lacing her fingers through his, she tugged gently. "Come on."

Assuming they were headed for their chamber, Vincent started forward, observing, "It will be good to get home."

Shaking her head adamantly back and forth, she contradicted, "We're not going home just yet."

"We're not?"

"No."

He seemed puzzled. "Then, where are we going, Catherine?"

Eyeing him with great determination, she announced, "We're going to stop by the kitchen first, and *you* are going to eat whatever is available, and lots of it."

"But, I ate lunch ... mere hours ago," Vincent assured her.

Stopping dead in her tracks, she threw him a *'Don't you dare try any nonsense with me'* look. "Define *'mere hours ago'*?"

Sensing that he wasn't going to dissuade her in this, Vincent didn't quite meet her eyes. Clearing his throat, he replied, "Well, actually, it was six hours ago ... more or less."

"*'More or less,'* huh?" Her eyes never wavering from his, Catherine, placed her hands on her hips. Unaware that her tone of voice had turned probing, somewhat like a prosecuting attorney's honing in on the honesty of a statement, or in this case, the lack of it, she glowered at him, directing, "And now, will you please define *'lunch'*?"

Dear Lord in Heaven, she could be absolutely relentless. Fighting to contain his amusement at the look of utter exasperation being leveled at him, he stated quietly, "Three pieces of smoked fish, a slice of wheat bread, and a package of raisins."

Aghast, she exclaimed, "And that's all you've had to eat for six whole hours?!"

Actually, it was closer to ten hours, for the early morning emergency message clattering over the pipes had interrupted his breakfast, but he wasn't about to add fuel to the fire of her vexation by divulging that, at least not right now. "Well, yes, but ..."

That was as far as he got.

Tapping one foot on the tunnel floor, his displeased lady declared, "Oh Vincent, how could you?! You know very well that a body, particularly a large-framed one like yours, needs something more substantial than smoked fish and a slice of bread, especially with the kind of work you've been doing."

"Don't forget the raisins," he reminded her, fighting off a grin.

"No, of course," she sniffed sarcastically. "We can't forget those *'delicious'* raisins. You detest raisins; they always get stuck in your teeth." That said, Catherine took him by the hand and started forward again. "Now, you're going to eat, and that's all there is to it."

"Yes, my dear."

Eyeing the softly rounded backside of the little bit of a woman tugging at him, Vincent clamped down on the inside of his jaw, trying very hard to keep a straight face. So, his beloved was insisting on coddling him, was



she? Ah well, such was life.

Having learned some years ago not to argue with this lady when she chose to *'have her way with him'*, he allowed himself to be hauled summarily down the passageway toward the kitchen, for what he knew would most likely be at least three plates of *'whatever was available.'*

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Setting a heaping tuna sandwich, five pickles, a large bowl of turkey soup, a glass of milk, and two blueberry muffins in front of him, Catherine sat down beside Vincent, smiled, and handed him a napkin. "Dig in."

Nodding his head, he reached for one half of the sandwich, then glanced at his hands and hesitated. "I really should wash before handling food."

Eyeing the bits of caked mud, Catherine nearly relented, then a look of impishness came into her eyes. "You won't have to." Picking up half of the sandwich, she broke off a rather large portion and held it out toward him. "Open up."

"Catherine, really!" Vincent protested, pulling back.

"What?"

"I have been feeding myself for some years now," he grumbled, the love in his voice outweighing the obvious reproach.

"Of course you have." Waving the food under his nose, she waited.

This was hopeless, she was absolutely determined to have her own way in this. With a resigned sigh, Vincent leaned forward and carefully took the sandwich into his mouth. Chewing slowly and swallowing, he reached for the glass of milk. After taking three long gulps, he licked his lips, and then proceeded to scowl at her, his eyes a glittering shade of gold-flecked blue in the muted candlelight.

Gesturing to the plate of food, he asserted wryly. "I *can* do this myself, you realize?"

"Uh huh." Breaking off another piece of the sandwich, she held it an inch away from his lips. "But, it's more fun this way ... isn't it?"

"Nuh ..."

When Vincent growled low in his throat, Catherine growled right back.

"*My, you're cute when you're trying to be so fierce. I ...*" Whatever else she had been about to say was gulped back as two of her fingers were captured along with the sandwich. '*Oh, oh.*'

With his eyes locked to hers, Vincent swallowed quickly, getting the food out of his way, then proceeded to bite down cautiously on her warm flesh. Ah yes, this was far more delectable than any mere sustenance ever could be. Taking the taste of her inside, he suckled harder, allowing the surface of his tongue to glide over the fragile bone structure clearly beneath her pale, sweetly-scented skin.

Wide-eyed, Catherine shivered, stammering, "Y ... You should finish your food. If you don't, y ... you'll only be hungry later on."

Slowly relinquishing his hold on her fingers, Vincent captured her hand into his and nipped the palm gently. Curling his left arm around her slim waist and pressing in against her spine, he urged her up firmly to his chest. Leaning slightly forward to trace Catherine's lips with his, he whispered hoarsely, "At this moment, there are ... things ... I would have of you, other than ordinary nourishment." Covetous eyes probed hers, "And if you don't envision what I want, then you don't know me as well as I assumed you did, my beautiful lady."

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Forty minutes later, after kissing Catherine until they were both left shaking and wanting so much more, Vincent quickly finished eating and headed for the small bathing area near his chamber. After taking a '*catch-as-catch-can*' bath, he dressed quickly and started for home.

Knowing it would have been imprudent to ask Catherine to bathe with him, or to have her within reach right now, with Father's chamber only steps away, he had agreed to meet her at the entry of the woman's bathing pool. Taking the final turn in that passageway, he groaned inwardly on discovering Cullen walking toward him with a determined look in his eyes. '*Oh no.*'

"Hey, just the person I was looking for," the smaller man called out by way of greeting. "When you didn't answer Pascal's message, I decided to come looking for you." Stepping up beside Vincent, Cullen smiled, continuing. "Zack told me he saw you heading in this direction."

Blessed Saints, now what? Wrapping the bath towel he'd been drying his hair with around his neck, Vincent acknowledged, "I'm sorry, but I didn't hear the message. I was bathing."

Eyeing his friend's damp hair, the bit of soap clinging to his right ear, and the bath towel slung around his neck, Cullen smirked, "Really? Gee, I thought maybe you were training a swim team or something'. But it felt good to be clean again, huh?"

"Indeed." Not really wanting to know, Vincent still felt obliged to ask. "Why were you looking for me?"

Jerking his thumb toward the corridor leading to the Hub, Cullen began, "It's Father who wants to see you."

"Right now?"

"Uh huh."

"For what purpose?"

Catching the note of displeasure in Vincent's tone of voice, Cullen held his hands out in front of him with the palms up in a gesture of reconciliation. "Hey, I'm only the messenger, okay? They don't shoot them anymore, ya know."

Eyeing him, Vincent thought. '*Perhaps they should.*' Quickly losing patience with this entire discourse, he tried very hard to soften his tone of voice, asking, "Do you know what Father wants of me?"

"Not just you," Cullen grunted, making a face. "He wants all of the work crews, except the ones on duty, to report to him as soon as possible, to discuss the situation with the flooding."

'*Oh ... hellfire and damnation!*' Frowning, Vincent noted, "But, I had assumed that the matter in question was more or less under control?"

"It is, at least for now, but it seems Mouse has come up with a way to handle any further problems more effectively, and with less back-breaking work on our part." Poking Vincent in the ribs, Cullen laughed. "And this time, one of his Looney-Toon ideas might actually be worth checking out!"

"I see," Vincent replied, sighing.

*'My love, I'll be waiting for you in our chamber.'*

Feeling Catherine's understanding glide through the bond, Vincent knew at once that she had felt his disappointment and was endeavoring to comfort him. Tearing his thought away from a home, and who was waiting there for him, he took Cullen firmly by the crook of his elbow. Turning on his heel, and hauling his companion along with him, he started for the library, urging, "Let's be on our way then, shall we? The sooner this meeting commences, the sooner it will end. Then, I'll be able to return to my chamber and get some ... rest."

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Two hours later, after patiently listening to Mouse and Father explain various water tables, drain run-offs, and the like, and agreeing with their findings, at least for now, Vincent strode for home. Touching his consciousness to Catherine's, he hesitated, then stopped short and tilted his head to one side, honing in on echoes only he could perceive - the beating heart of the woman he loved. From the tranquil rhythms whispering to him, he knew at once that she had fallen asleep.

*'Ah well.'* Kicking at the loose stones beneath his feet, he continued on his way, his pace slower and his head bent. Catherine needed rest as much as he did, yet for all of the obvious reasons, this fact did little to repress his longing. He had imagined making love to her at least once tonight before drifting off to sleep held protectively in her embrace.

Grumbling, *"The best laid plans of mice and men ..."* Vincent took the final turn in the corridor and stepped softly into the chamber.

Studying Catherine from across the small room for a moment before approaching the bed, he smiled, his eyes feasting on the vision of loveliness before him. Laying there curled up on her right hip under many quilts, her breathing slow and even, she had her right hand tucked up under her chin and her left one curled under his pillow. *'Beautiful; she was so very beautiful. Dear God, how he wanted her.'*

Slipping out of his boots and clothing, Vincent stole over to the bureau on cat-quiet feet. Taking out a nightshirt and a pair of soft cotton pants, he dressed as quickly as he could. After snuffing out the two candles burning on the desk with the tips of his fingers, he carefully eased over the rise of Catherine's hip and curled his body along the length of her back.

Burying the tip of his nose into her hair, Vincent inhaled deeply and closed his eyes. *'Ah yes, this is what he'd been missing most dreadfully; her scent, her warmth, and her closeness.'* Painstakingly easing one edge of the quilts off of her and gazing down, he was a bit stunned to find Catherine was quite naked.

Admiring the view, exactly as she meant him to, Vincent let his eyes linger on his lady's soft rounded bottom, finding this turn of events to be not only disconcerting, but sexually exciting as well. She never slept in the nude, at least not when she was Below.

Topside, in the apartment, with its central heating and absolute privacy, where the outside world could be shut out whenever they were simply too weary to deal with it, the sleeping arrangements were another matter entirely. Finally at ease there, in that fine bed, most of the time he also slept utterly, wonderfully naked beneath a wealth of fragrant, silken sheets and down-filled, satin coverlets.

Contemplating the rounded, pink bottom that seemed to be crying out for his caress, Vincent reached down, then hesitated and drew his hand away again, knowing that if he began touching her at this moment, he wouldn't stop until he was lost within her. Trying desperately to repress the nearly-overwhelming temptation to do exactly the opposite, he edged a few inches away from her.

Having been awake almost from the moment Vincent had entered the chamber. Catherine kept a taut rein on her emotions and pretended that she was still asleep. Although he was always a sensitive, immensely gentle and giving lover, at times, particularly after being apart for some days, for whatever reasons, his sexuality and longing intensified to a point where they simply exploded. Then, his need for her unfurled to such an extent that even he couldn't always govern the scope of his passion.

In such moments of intimacy, when a male's inherent need to control, even to dominate his partner, were granted free rein to pursue their normal sexual conclusions, though he had never asked this of her, she knew that the one she loved preferred her as she was right now - quiet and submissive. She didn't mind that at all, really she didn't, because on such nights, when he sensed that he was free to do exactly as he pleased, and what he pleased, Vincent was an absolutely dazzling lover.

Smiling to herself, Catherine admitted that she owed this night to him. After all, the last time it was he who had pretended to be asleep, for her enjoyment. *'And oh brother,'* she had enjoyed him all right, every single inch of him, nibbling on his from the lobes of his reddened ears, all the way down to his big, hairy toes - and everywhere in between.

Slowly curling over onto her back, she sighed and then moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue. Knowing that Vincent was watching each and every move she made, she leisurely stretched her arms high over her head, which produced exactly the desired effect - the quilts slid down, exposing her breasts to his eyes.

"Hmmmmm ..."

Making soft unintelligible noises to the back of her throat, Catherine let her left hand drift down between their bodies. After stroking the tips of her nails lightly along the exquisite hardness pressing into her palm, she curled her fingers gently around the distended length.

Reacting immediately to her touch, Vincent's body tensed for a moment, then seemed to go completely boneless. *'Oh, that feels so good. Yes, there, along the tip. Ah, right there! Don't stop ... please don't stop ...'*

Although his beloved was trying her utmost to keep it from him, he knew that she was awake, and she knew he knew it. Closing his eyes and tossing his hair back, out of his way, Vincent bit down hard on his lower lip, trying to contain the harsh panting rhythm his breathing had fallen into, and the succession of raspy growls threatening to erupt from his throat.

*'God help him, her caresses were driving him into a frenzy of lust that would not be controlled for very much longer.* Frantic in his need, he thrust upward, wanting to be even closer to her; craving her healing touch; hungering after it more than any other single thing he could envision.

Knowing full well that Catherine's passion was more than a match for this time night, and that she was

purposefully bent on seducing him, Vincent's mind cried out. *'Let her!'*

Fully-roused, yet not wanting this loving to be vulgar or unfulfilling to her, Vincent stayed the motions of his body. Gulping cool chamber air into his lungs and fighting to calm the rapid cadence of his heart, eyes dark with intent slowly opened to scrutinize his lady's face. Gazing at her almost solemnly, he took in the delicate curve of the long lashes grazing her cheeks, the moist, full lips, then slid his eyes lower, to focus on the curve of her throat and the tiny vein pulsing there. Lovely ... so incredibly lovely.

Laying there, in this chamber bed, with this woman at his side, at times he still found it astounding that such a rare and wondrous creature actually desired him, especially in a physical way, but she did. Inundated by the joy that perception brought, Vincent's mind and heart savored the thought for a moment. Catherine Chandler loved him. She wanted only him - as he wanted only her, forever. For always.

Silently berating himself for the time he had wasted, he sighed deeply. Sliding his right hand down along the curve of Catherine's hip, he stroked the pad of his thumb gently along her warm flesh, wondering *'how in God's name he had managed to hold himself apart from such sensual touches for nearly three years? Merciful Heaven - three years.'*

Although that time had been spiritually fulfilling, in a physical sense those years had been empty and despairing of all hope. In truth, he supposed then that the dream he and Catherine shared was all they would ever share - merely the dream of, in Father's words, *a life that could never be.'*

Glancing down at the face he loved more than mere words could define, Vincent couldn't help but smile, thinking how wrong Father had been, and so had he. As a rule, he could be a very stubborn person, one who had never relished being at fault, about anything. Even when he was very young, his older brother used to tell him that he was as *'stubborn as a Missouri mule, with a head to match, who would probably give out before he gave in'*.

Ducking his head, he concealed an immense gift beneath a curtain of amber hair. Although he would never have admitted to such a thing aloud, perhaps Devin had been right in his observation. Yet, where one dream in particular was concerned, Vincent found that he himself had been unequivocally in the wrong, and in this case, he hadn't minded owning up to that fact in the least - but only to Catherine.

Thankfully, all of the fears regarding that time in their life had receded, supplanted by emotions he had never thought to have full knowledge of. Nor, he finally had that awareness, as well as the experience and confidence of any other man in love. Oh, indeed he did.

It had only taken him a few nights in Catherine's embrace to learn ... quite a bit, and to learn it well. Once having fully grasped the reality of passion. In all of its richness, and all of its joy, he craved it now with every part of himself, depending on those emotions to sustain his very existence.

Turning his thoughts away from the past, Vincent focused on the here and the now - especially on the now. Sitting up and hastily stripping out of his nightwear, he lay back down again, waiting a bit impatiently for Catherine to resume her loving torture. Settling his bottom more firmly onto the bed, he sighed expectantly, knowing from past encounters of this nature that there were still a great many more sensual delights yet to come.

When his lady finally moved her hand again, he began to shiver, holding his breath in expectation of the touch. Bending his left knee and then lowering his leg back to the bed again, affording her easier access to the very core of his maleness, Vincent curled his upper body toward her. Sliding his fingers across the tips of

Catherine's breasts, he stroked their perfection reverently for a moment, and then continued downward to probe gently between her thighs, the caress one of loving intimacy.

Arching into his strokes and expelling a breathless hiss of satisfaction, Catherine shifted on the bed until her taut nipples were pressed up tightly to Vincent's hairy chest. Reaching between their bodies, she inched her fingers down along his firm belly, then lower to his scrotum. After drawing the tips of her nails teasingly back and forth across those perfect twin orbs, she momentarily eased away again, which drew an anguished sob from the throat of her ardent lover. Taking pity on him, she delved beneath the tight sac to scrape gently at the tender, pulsing symmetry of his most sensitive, secret place.

*'Oh, thank God, finally!'* Stiffening, Vincent barely managed to keep from crying out, wanting to roll her beneath him and plunge quickly into her velvet heat, but that would have disrupted what was slowly building between them. The touch of Catherine's small hand seemed to spark something wanton and voracious from within the less cautious and controlled part of his consciousness - the sensation like a static current which blazed up hot and unyielding, spiraled downward hungrily to the center of his groin, and fanned outward in twists of flame, setting every part of his body on fire.

Moments ago, he had realized, of course, that Catherine wanted him to take complete command of their love-making tonight. *'Ah, this is what he wanted, too; what he needed so very much, at least for their initial joining.'*

Keeping his left hand between her thighs, Vincent slid his right palm along the curve of Catherine's chin. Cupping the side of her face in shaking fingers, he stroked the warm flesh with the pad of his thumb and lowered his mouth to hers. Crossing his left forefinger over the middle one, and deepening the erotic stroking with the silkiness of her pulsing sheath, he grazed her warm lips, murmuring huskily, "Even though you are *'asleep'* and cannot hear the words, my Rose, still I would say them."

Knowing full well that the tension building between them would only serve to heighten the pleasure of final release, he nipped at Catherine's lower lip, and then kissed her eyes and small button of a turned-up nose. Touching the tip of his tongue to the vein pulsing just at the curve of her throat and then moving his mouth over the warm flesh, he groaned, "I love you, and need you so much ... so very much." Being extremely cautious of his nails, he slid his questing fingers almost completely within her. "And oh, how I love touching you like ... this."

When her only response was to tighten her hold on him, clasping her hand gently but firmly around the width of his penis, Vincent couldn't contain the growls of pure lust surging upward in his throat. When she clutched him even tighter and began moving her hand up and down, deliciously heightening both his sense of urgency and his passion, his mouth dropped open and whimpered gasps of excitement echoed through the small chamber.

"Yes ... there ... like that," he sobbed, urging, "Don't stop ... please don't stop." Bending his head, he began nuzzling against Catherine's left breast, loving the smell of her, the sweet taste of her flesh, and its scent.

After licking one nipple into a perfect, stiffened peak, Vincent opened his mouth as wide as he could. Capturing the puckered flesh very carefully between his teeth, he began suckling deeply with contented, thirsty sounds, as a ravenous babe would root at its mother for life-giving sustenance. Enclosing Catherine's right breast lovingly into the palm of his hand, he caressed her with his thumb and forefinger, coaxing the tiny bud of a nipple into a mirror-twin of the left one.

Relinquishing his hold of Catherine's breast with a reluctant whimper at the back of his throat, Vincent started

to ease his mouth away. Then, unable to forbid himself one final, tender caress, he gently gathered the stiffened pap between his lips for a fleeting stroke of his tongue. Rocking to his knees, he quickly positioned his tense thighs at the outer curves of her hips.

Knowing that Catherine's eyes were surreptitiously focused on him in the shadowed chamber light, which is precisely what he wanted, for it would only serve to heighten the pleasure of what he was about to do. Vincent reached between his thighs with his left hand and began to fondle himself almost lazily. slowly lifting his head to lock glinting eyes to her face intensified his passion, arousing him to a depth of wantonness that would not be denied, nor controlled for very much longer.

Having no choice but to yield to the hunger, in that same moment, a rapacious sensuality arose from within. This time, instead, of denying its existence, he threw his soul open to it, welcoming the shadowed side of his spirit as a part of him - a part of what and who he has always been; a man; no more than that, and certainly no less.

In that moment, that single beat of his racing heart, never had he felt more unconditionally certain of his humanity, or of his right to love and be loved in return. Catherine belonged with him. She belonged *to* him, as he belonged to her, as all people who loved had belonged to each other since a time when the world was new.

And being not only a man, but an innately sensual one, Vincent was finally forced to succumb to the dictates of his own body. Curling over on his left hip, he grasped his engorged penis in shaking fingers. Sliding the pad of his thumb over the slick wetness already gathered at the broad, velvet-soft tip, he grunted softly, knowing full well that with two or perhaps three clutching strokes of his hand, he could bring forth a swift and plentiful ejaculation. Clasp his taut manhood firmly and biting down on the inside of his jaw to keep from screaming his need aloud, he watched his own hand as it began stroking ardently from the base upward, to the head of the pulsing shaft, and then down again.

Yearning desperately to be released from this torment, the part of him that was inherently bolder and more rapacious yearned to imprison Catherine's hand in his, stroke frantically up and down, and finish this; to watch avidly together as his semen spewed forth.

Fondling the puckered flesh at the top of his aching fullness and tensing his legs, Vincent jerked forward, panting roughly, as though already tasting his completion at the back of his throat. Unable to struggle against a male's basic, natural reaction to such stimulation, he pressed into the sensation. *'Ah yes, like that.'* He was so close - so very close.

Savoring the pleasure arcing through every part of his body, like pricks of flame heating his blood and overriding all control, he felt no shame welling up from within at caressing himself in such a way. This too, had been his beloved's gift to him; the absence of self-reproach over any act which brought either of them such times of unconditional ecstasy.

Sharing this private moment with him, as only she ever would, Catherine rolled over to face the one she loved. Placing one hand at the exact center of Vincent's spine and gently raking her nails down its muscular length, she kissed the side of his face. Putting her other hand at the center of his chest, she coaxed him to lay back on the pillows.

Releasing his straining flesh and seizing the sheets in-between his fingers, Vincent struggled to retain his focus as the room began tilting crazily, watching through hooded eyes as she moved to lay across his belly. *'Oh God, what delectable things was she planning to do to him?!'* Trembling violently as she leaned forward and parted

the hair on his chest, he tensed his frame, waiting ... waiting.

Making a supreme effort not to reach out, seize Catherine by the arms and yank her quickly beneath him, he swallowed hard, fighting to temper his lust with patience. When she turned her head to one side and flicked the tip of her tongue lightly over his tiny, bronzed paps, then blew a cooling breath on the puckered flesh, he cried out, his entire body convulsing in a spasm of pure rapture. Placing one hand to the back of her head, he held her there for a moment, cherishing the feel of her small teeth nibbling at him.

Finally, unable to endure any more such stimulation right now, and finding it becoming more and more difficult to breathe, Vincent was compelled to tighten one hand in Catherine's hair and ease her gently but firmly away from him, the gesture one of loving entreaty. Searching his mind for the words he wanted to say to her - to share with her, finding some things still very burdensome to voice aloud, he angled her chin up to study her face intently and willed himself to turn aside the urgency throbbing just below his belly.

When he managed to regain a semblance of control, eyes brimming with passion, peered down at this lady almost shyly, the expression on his face that of an angel yearning to have its wings singed. Exhaling roughly and barely maintaining eye contact with her, Vincent took Catherine's hand into his. Sliding it down over his flat stomach, he pressed her palm to the inner edge of his left thigh, gasping, "I love the feel of your hands touching me everywhere ... everywhere!"

After squeezing his fingers gently, Catherine let her gaze drift down over Vincent's body all the way to his groin. Looking back up at him, she smiled, the love in her eyes telling him that she was more than eager to satisfy any need he could envision; to complete every dream of years gone by, when he had lain alone here, in this chamber, night after night, in agony, believing that he would never have the reality of a woman's loving caress.

When she leaned forward, over him, Vincent withdrew his hand from hers and curled it into a tensed fist, waiting breathlessly for the single sweet kiss he could tolerate right now. Yet, even when it came he wasn't prepared for it.

Clamping down hard on his lower lip to keep from screaming as her hungry mouth surrounded him, he began to writhe back and forth on the bed. *'Ah yes, like that, faster ... harder! Oh Catherine, I'm almost there, and it feels so good, and I don't want to stop ...'*

Wild to finish and at the limits of his endurance, he struggled to control a sudden, nearly overpowering urge to tighten his hands at the back of this enchantress' head and hold her exactly where she was; yearning to plunge his aching sex into her mouth, thrust upward once, just once, into the back of her throat and utterly lose himself in the moment.

Suddenly, from within his consciousness came an earthly assertive voice, cautioning, *'No, not yet. Don't climax until you-----until we are inside her.'*

*'Yes,'* he groaned silently, responding to the unspoken demand, *'This is what I want, too, more than anything. But, I must join our bodies soon, very soon, or my seed shall be expelled either in her mouth or on her stomach.'*

Utterly aroused, frantic in his need to achieve ejaculation, Vincent took a deep breath and exhaled it again as slowly as he could. Unable to tolerate the throbbing in his groin form even a single moment more, he curved one long arm around Catherine's waist. Urging her quickly down on the bed and lifting his body over hers, he sobbed, "Please don't move, not now, not yet?"



Imprisoning her right hand, he pressed it in firmly against the shaft of his penis one more time, his erection jerking forward, against her fingers, then moaned and curled his body slightly away from her. "Oh my love, as desperately as I want your touch - need your touch, I'm ... too close."

Whimpering at the sensation of her forefinger sliding over the wetness weeping from the crown of his phallus, Vincent reached out and drew her hand away, knowing that one more such caress would bring forth an immediate orgasm.

Clasping his penis in his left hand, he pressed it against her stomach, entreating, "I want to stroke your body with ... this. Let me ... please let me ..." Guiding his swaying phallus ardently back and forth across her silky channel, Vincent caressed the thickening bud of her femininity with the broad tip, drew it agonizingly slowly up across the middle of her tummy, and then pressed it tightly under the fullness of her right breast.

When he finally managed to speak coherently again, the words were more growled than spoken. *"This feels extraordinary - you feel extraordinary."*

Suddenly, other words seemed to explode though both of their minds at the exact same moment. His? Hers? no, theirs. Two souls, two hearts, which now spoke as one.

*'Oh God, how much ecstasy could one person give, or receive, before they simply shattered into bits?!'*

Entangling one hand in her hair and lowering his mouth to rest upon hers, Vincent implored, *"Deny me nothing I would have of you this night, my angel, for I want you, and oh, I shall take you ..."*

Hearing the demanding quality in his tone of voice, and feeling all of his emotions cracking through their empathic link, Catherine realized that the one she loved was on the edge of his passion, and at the limits of his patience. Unable to silence the soft whimpers his actions brought, as the warm, wet length of him glided over her belly, then edged down to the division of her thighs, driving her slowly and quietly out of her mind, she arched upward strongly, trying to impale her body on his distended flesh, her mind crying out to him. *'Vincent, please ... I need you!'*

Placing a softly nuzzling kiss to the curve of her chin, his heart answered for him. *'Yes, my love, soon ... very soon.'*

Tossing her head from side to side, Catherine whimpered in protest as he curled his lower body slightly away from her. Struggling to accept the fact that Vincent simply refused to rush this joining, wanting it to be as pleasurable to her as it would be to him, she bit down hard on the inside of her cheek and tried to do as he asked. Tighening her shaking hands into fists, she made a great effort to remain absolutely still.

Shifting the angle of his pelvis and bending his head, Vincent pressed his enormous frame against hers, then bent forward to move the tip of his moist, raspy tongue slowly over her lips, imploring throatily. "Touch me again? Please, just one more time? The reality of your hand placing sweet caresses to the most intimate part of me is more exciting than any other sensation I would have at this moment."

When Catherine edged one hand down between them and her fingers probed deeply into the lush fragrance seeping from her own body, Vincent jerked upright on the palms of his hands. Anticipating what she was about to do, he swallowed hard, his throat suddenly dry and constricted. *'Oh yes ... Yes.'*

With his heart pounding so loudly it seemed to have moved from his chest up into his ears, he began to rock his pelvis eagerly up and down, emulating the act of love even before they were joined. His excitement obvious, he bared his teeth to reveal gleaming, lethal-looking fangs and let his head drift back, waiting

expectantly for the touch that would both redeem and ravage him.

Teasing him by pausing here and there to scratch lovingly at whatever part of him happened to capture her fancy, and seemed to sear his skin, Catherine leisurely continued downward to the damp mound of amber curls just below his navel, then swept her hand suddenly to the left to encircle him in a mind-shattering grip.

At that moment, a thundrous, passion-filled growl seemed to work its way upward from Vincent's belly, escaping his lips in a breathless rush of air. Writhing above her now, he began to pump against her hand, thrusting his swollen penis harder and faster through her wet, slender fingers. Digging his toes into the mattress, he lurched downward, into the touch. *'Again ... again ... oh please, I love this; I need it so much!'*

Shaking his hair away from his face and inhaling deeply, wanting the scent of her in his nostrils, he trembled on the brink of what he knew would be a sumptuous ejaculation, sobbing. "I need more of you. Oh, my love, my life, do that just ... once more?"

Needing her to bathe him with the essence of her sex again, knowing that the sensation would intensify the frenzied lust cascading through every part of him, Vincent lifted his hips just far enough to afford Catherine easier access to the core of her womanliness, and also to widen his own range of vision in the subdued light. Utterly aroused, he bit down hard on his lower lip, drawing blood, then bowed his head to study his lover's ravaging fingers.

When she anointed him with her dewy warmth a second time, Vincent's entire body convulsed and released, emulating the pulsing between his thighs. Loving this absolutely, he allowed the sensation to utterly dominate him, arousing him to a point of carnality that would not be denied - nor impeded in any way, by anything or anyone, ever again. Not *ever* again.

Unable to endure the separation between them for another moment, he quickly slid his left hand underneath Catherine to catch her buttocks in a grip of steel. In the same moment that he yanked her hips up off of the bed, his mouth and hot tongue seemed to be everywhere, nipping, licking, tasting, searing her flesh; claiming every part of her as belonging only to him - telling her without words that no other man would ever touch her, or have her, not while he drew breath.

Understanding that he needed to hear the words aloud, Catherine spoke them quietly, but with utter sureness. Placing one hand to the back of his head, she stroked his hair gently and broke her silence, whispering, "I've been yours since the moment you found me. I'll remain yours until I die, and perhaps even beyond that, my dearest heart." Closing her eyes and lifting her hand to his shoulder to massage the tenseness building in his muscles, she pledged, "You are the only man I'll ever want, Vincent. I promise you that. I promise ..."

Carefully resting his full weight on her, he cupped Catherine's face in the palm of his right hand and stared down at her. "Beloved," he urged, his voice gruffly impassioned, yet oh, so gentle, "Please open your eyes."

When Catherine's eyelids fluttered open, only to find herself drowning in a turbulent blue ocean, she managed a tremulous smile. Wrapping both of her arms around his neck, she drew his head down and nipped the center of his chin, vowing, "If you don't finish making love to me soon, I'm going to scream."

"If I don't finish making love to you ... right now ... you shall not be the only one who is screaming," Vincent returned wryly. Tilting his head to the left, he studied her solemnly for a moment. "Yet, in my way, I have been making love to you from the moment you first spoke my name, and I shall continue to, until we are both very, very old."

That said, he jerked to his knees. Lifting Catherine's lower body into exactly the angle needed for penetration, he slid his hand down to her slim ankles. Bringing her legs to rest against the outer curve of his hips, he thrust inward very quickly and very hard, his hiss of satisfaction blending with her soft moan as the immense knob of his phallus lodged firmly within her.

Plunging headlong into the sensuality of the moment, Vincent curved his left hand around her breast and wrapped his right forearm tightly around her slender waist. Taking a ragged breath and arching his spine, he pulled back slightly and then drove inward again, piercing her in a single, almost frenzied rotation of his hips.

Gasping at the contact as her sleek inner muscles closed around the stalk of his masculinity, he brought his left hand down between them to press Catherine's thighs further apart. Frantic now to get even deeper into the tender sheath of her body, he began panting, trying to rein in his hunger, and find the patience to allow her quivering muscles to adjust to his size.

After a moment that seemed interminable to him, and powerless to deny either of them what they most needed to have, Vincent lunged strongly against her, his straining flesh advancing another inch, then another, his frame shuddering as her convulsing chamber finally yielded utterly to his loving assault. When he tensed his hips and thrust again, his grace and innate strength were distinctly evident in the movements of his body, in the undulating motions of his pelvis, and in the knotted muscles of his upper thighs.

Crying out in unison at the sensation, the lovers felt the bond pulling at them, urging them on, compelling them to fulfill passion's natural, healthy conclusion. As the feel of Catherine's inner muscles clutching at him drove all intent of patience or refinement completely from his mind, Vincent felt his erection begin to pulse. Powerless to block the ache as his flesh elongated, seeking her core, he tensed his buttocks, plunging downward into the liquid flame spilling from her womb.

Rocking against the woman he loved, his pelvis grinding and rolling in rigid, barely controlled thrusts, Vincent yanked his hips from side to side, compelling her delicate flesh to yield to the urgency of his. When her body jerked off of the bed to press demandingly against him, he tightened his grip, striving to hold Catherine in position to receive the evidence of his passion.

Withdrawing until only the swollen tip of his penis was embedded within her. Vincent held his breath, fighting desperately for the inner strength to confine the urge to thrust inside one more time, just once, and seek release, wanting to savor the ecstasy of this moment for as long as he possibly could. But this time, it was not to be.

Feeling the intensity of the bond encompassing them, the dense fur on his chest rubbing at her overly-sensitive breasts, and the crown of his rigid length nudging at the bud of her femininity, Catherine began to writhe wildly beneath him. Clasp his arms in shaking fingers, she dug her nails into his flesh, crying out, "More ... give it to me. Please ... please!"

"Yes, love," came an excited gasp, "... now ..."

Lowering his weight completely onto her, Vincent pressed his body firmly to Catherine's. Releasing her hips and moving his hands to her buttocks, his fingers encircling her in a grip of steel, he lifted her into his arms, bending his head to set his long incisors against the delicate curve of her throat, he readied himself for ejaculation, knowing that his release would induce hers.

Potent and indomitable, their bond became as an intense, steady beat. Enclosing the lovers within its tender constraint, it urged them forward, its cadence never easing, nor relenting. Compelling them to accept the

union of their bodies for exactly what it was - a moment of turbulent, unyielding passion; it demanded that they surrender to it fully, in every way.

Plunging into Catherine's body once, again, then again, Vincent's penis distended even further, seeking the depths of her womb. Gripping her hips tightly as her inner chamber began contracting and releasing covetously, possessively, around him, he submitted completely to the sensation, gasping, "Don't move ... not yet."

Needing to be released from this exquisite torment, she moaned, "I have to move."

"Don't ... move." Curling his ankles around hers and imprisoning her swaying bottom in a taut embrace, Vincent held her still beneath him. Gasping for air and gathering his strength for one last potent thrust, he rolled his pelvis down and in, crying out, "Now ... move now ...!"

Shattering within the flames of Catherine's passion, and his own, he knew he was lost, and still he flung himself into the sensation mind, body, and soul. Bending his head to fasten his mouth to hers, the prodding of his hot tongue emulating the grinding motions of his pelvis, a lust-induced gasp surged upward from his belly to his throat.

Unfurling like the softest, most fragrant petals of a newly-budding rose, yet tenacious in scope, dual orgasms shimmered through them in a frenzied, all-consuming flame. Sweeping them along, as rolling waves would crash against a storm-tossed shore, the sensation made Catherine scream Vincent's name aloud. His answering groan quickly evolved into a fervent bellow of exaltation as his semen erupted from his body. Spilling against her womb in generous, pulsing bursts, the thick essence overflowed her inner sheath, to drip down onto trembling thighs.

Exhausted, left shaken to the depths of his soul and having no choice but to allow the fire consuming him to evolve and ebb away again at its own pace, and in its own time, Vincent collapsed in Catherine's soothing embrace. Utterly, gloriously sated, he burrowed into the curve of her shoulder and tried to remember how to draw a normal breath.

Making an effort to speak, but unable to voice his thoughts aloud at the moment, or even to gather them into any sort of rational order, he coiled the fingers of his left hand through her tangled hair. Shuddering the length of his body as tiny aftershocks swept through him, he clung to her as though she were his only true lifeline to lucidity in a world gone suddenly, and quite wonderfully mad.

Finally regaining his inner focus, some moments later Vincent sighed deeply and stretched his arms over his head. Oh, he felt positively exhausted. Moving his tongue over parched lips, he raised his head just far enough to press his mouth to Catherine's ear. Kissing it and then nuzzling against her, he moaned, "Dear God, are we still alive?"

Giggling as the bristles on his nose tickled her, she reached around the edge of his hip and patted him on the fanny. "I think so." Tracing her forefinger along the firmness of his left buttock, Catherine smiled as the muscles there clenched in surprise. "At least parts of me are. The rest of me is a bit numb."

Pulling back just far enough to meet her eyes, Vincent chuckled softly. "I know the feeling well." Then, as he studied her, the expression in his eyes altered to one of uncertainty. Although he was positive she was merely teasing him, being who he was he felt compelled to voice the question anyway, if only to hear her reassurance one more time. "My dear, are parts of you truly 'numb'?"

Smiling up at him, she conceded, "Yes, but it's a nice kind of numb. It doesn't hurt at all, really it doesn't." Wrapping her arms around his neck, Catherine urged his head down and placed a moist, warm kiss to the exact center of his chin, commanding, "Stop."

Affording her a perplexed look, he asked, "Stop what?"

"Worrying about me. I'm just fine." Stretching both of her arms over her head, she reached for the ceiling. "In fact, I feel just dandy." Her satisfaction obvious, sparkling eyes met his. "You know I always feel like that after we make love."

Nodding his head, Vincent smiled, observing, "Isn't it grand to learn that all of the books are wrong."

"Wrong about what?"

"About not being able to touch the stars." Resting his chin against hers, he breathed the rest of the words into her mouth. "We touch them all of the time, don't we?"

"Yes, we do. They don't seem nearly as far away as they once did," Catherine observed softly. "I never thought I'd reach them, but I have, and it's because of you." Wanting to hug him to within an inch of his life, she cupped his dear face in the palms of her hands. "And perhaps, over the years, Vincent, you and I have even shattered a few of those shimmering points of light."

"Perhaps." As the adoration in Catherine's eyes seemed to unfurl until it swept through every part of his body, a sensation of deep tranquility washed over him. Savoring the feeling for a moment, Vincent snuggled even closer to her. After nipping her gently on the nape of her neck, he eased away far enough to ask, "And if we have caused damage to what does not belong to any mortal, do you think that God has forgiven us?"

With great conviction in her voice, Catherine replied, "I'm certain he has." Brushing her fingers gently over the side of his face, her tone of voice suddenly changed, becoming absolutely serious. "My dearest love, I think God could forgive ... you ... just about anything."

Tilting his head to one side, Vincent considered her words carefully for a moment. "Why would you believe that to be true?"

"Because only someone who could forgive you anything, would have made you so very special in the first place."

"Oh, not special, beloved," he contradicted gently, looking away. "Whatever or whomever created me, merely made me ... different."

Realizing that he had misunderstood her meaning, Catherine gripped the curve of his jaw in her fingers and urged him to look at her. "Vincent, the way you look pleases me very much, you know that."

"Yes." Sighing, he continued, "Yet, for your sake, I wish ..." Letting the words trail off, he shook his head forlornly.

"You wish that you could look exactly like other men," Catherine stated quietly, knowing that this was what he desired most - and could never have. When Vincent made no response, she moved her hand to the left side of his chest and pressed it gently. "This is the part of you that is the most extraordinary. This is where it counts the most, where it *means* the most. Even if you were ordinary in appearance, your giving heart, your capacity to love, and to trust, would set you apart from other men, Vincent. That is what makes you so very, very special."

Taking her hand into his and placing a kiss to the palm, he wove their fingers together. "If what you say is true, then I am truly blessed, for this heart that you claim to be '*most extraordinary*' has found the one person in this world who could know it so well; who grasps all its deepest secrets, and shares its wishes and its dreams."

Tightening his grip on her fingers, he went on, "Some people spend their entire lives so alone, Catherine, never having anyone to love, or to comfort them when the trials of life threaten their hopes and their faith in just about everything." Eyes the color of a bright new day met hers. "Some people ... some men, never have what I have found, in you."

"Thank you, Vincent." Fastening her teeth to his bottom lip, Catherine worried it gently, thinking, '*He speaks the language of love as though he knows exactly what it means. I'm so lucky that this incredible man chose me to share his life.*'

Almost as though he had felt her thoughts, or perhaps it was simply because their minds were so in tune with each other, Vincent observed lovingly, "Oh, it wasn't '*luck*', my dear, never that. It was my destiny to be with you, and only with you - for always."

Beaming at him, she swept his unruly bangs away from his face. "You really know how to steal a woman's heart, don't you?"

"Do I?" Knowing full well that she has sensed his mood and was endeavoring to lighten it, Vincent bent his head until they were nose-to-nose, rumbling, "If I have stolen yours, it's only because my own seems to have been taken from me by a diminutive little imp, and it's said that '*turnabout is fair play*'."

"I'll '*diminutive*' you!" Catherine exclaimed, pretending to be highly insulted. "*I am not short!*"

"Neither are you tall," he rumbled back, enjoying this discourse immensely.

Reaching out to poke him gently on the tip of his nose, she accused, "You're just full of mischief tonight, aren't you, you exasperating man?"

Amused by her choice of words and feigned indignation, Vincent laughed softly. "So it would appear." Taunting blue eyes met luminous green ones. "It must be the company," he observed, then winced as a few hairs on his felt forearm were yanked at by five very determined fingers. '*Ouch.*'

As though suddenly aware that he had been laying on top of her for far too long, and that he was much too heavy to remain in this position, no matter what she always said to the contrary, he wrapped both of his arms around her waist. Making a supreme effort to sustain the way they were joined for as long as he could, he gathered her to his chest and slowly rolled over onto his back.

Feeling Vincent's warm essence seeping from her body, Catherine tightened her inner muscles, unwilling to relinquish any part of him. Sighing contentedly and bending her right leg, she nudged gently at the center of his groin, then jumped, startled as he tapped her smartly on the fanny with the pad of his left forefinger, growling, "*Stop that.*"

Leaning up on his chest and batting her eyelashes at him, she afforded him a look of utter innocence. "Stop what?"

"Attempting to seduce me."

Gliding her hand down over his belly, Catherine twirled the damp, springy curls there around her thumb and grinned up at him. "Now, would I do something like that?"

Not answering the question, Vincent reached down and imprisoned her pesky little fingers. Squeezing them just enough to get her complete attention, he warned, "If you persist in beguiling me any further right now, then I shall be compelled to retaliate."

"Oh, you will, will you?" she sniffed, the challenge explicit.

"Most ... definitely." That said, shimmering turquoise eyes narrowed as they met hers. "You know how extremely sensitive I am to your touch." A clawed hand came up and threaded into her hair. "So, unless you are prepared to begin all over again, lay your head back on my chest, where it *belongs*, and allow me sufficient time to ... recover my strength."

Knowing that she was ahead on points, Catherine burrowed down into the man she adored and buried her nose into his right breast. Shifting the angle of her lower body, she tried to get even closer to him, then winced as various parts of her seemed to go into immediate spasm, complaining against even the slightest movement. Wonderfully exhausted, she sighed, allowing her thoughts to drift where they would.

Vincent never did anything by half measure, that was certain. When he worked, he worked very hard; when he was hungry, he could - and had - polished off vast quantities of food. And when he loved ... Considering that, she arched an eyebrow and grinned. *'Oh yeah.'*

After coaxing his lady's damp hair away from her eyes, Vincent eased his perspiration-soaked mane away from his mouth. Mirroring Catherine's grin with a far more expansive one, he cupped her bottom in his right palm. Rubbing the pad of his thumb over the warm flesh, he let his eyes drift shut, content to remain here, just as he was, for the next sixty years or so.

Ah, was there any other single thing in the world which brought the same amount of gratification, or sublime weariness, as making love to a beautiful woman? Thinking that over, he chuckled softly. *'Not as far as he was concerned.'*

Floating along in that extraordinary place somewhere between reality and dreams, Catherine and Vincent clung tightly to each other. Beating as one, their hearts keeping perfect cadence, the exhausted lovers drifted to sleep at the same moment, both smiling, and sharing the same expectation of a glorious new day.

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Bounding down the few steps leading into the library, Vincent peered around the cluttered room, then frowned, calling out, "Father?"

"Up here," came the acknowledgement. Then, the sound of something quite heavy crashing to the floor with a resounding thud, was followed by a muttered, "Infernal, wretched ...."

Eyeing the upper level, Vincent strode toward the spiral staircase. Taking the steps two at a time, he called out worriedly. "Are you all right?"

Peering around the edge of a somewhat dusty oak bookcase and rubbing at his throbbing right temple, Father grumbled disdainfully. "That would depend entirely on one's point of view."

Eyeing the heaps of magazines and newspapers scattered all over the floor, Vincent stated the obvious. "They fell."

"Yes, they did." Sneering at the objects of discussion, Father charged, "*And landed right on my head, the nefarious pile of ...*"

"That was ... quite rude of them."

Catching the hint of a barely suppressed chuckle in his son's tone, he cast him a look of exasperation. '*So, Vincent found this situation amusing, did he?*' Patting him on the arm, he growled, "Good morning."

"Good morning." Gesturing to the clutter, Vincent offered, "If you wish, I could restore some sort of order up here tomorrow evening."

Moving toward the stairs and shaking his head negatively, Father grunted, "Eric was '*supposed*' to do that yesterday." His irritation quite obvious, he observed, "But you know what teenagers are like when it involves any sort of a commitment - in one ear and out of the other, as they say. So now, even though today is Sunday, the lad will just have to change whatever plans he may have had and fulfill his promise."

Following his parent down the stairs, Vincent glanced back at the upper level, trying to envision spending such a lovely day up there, at such an odious task. Curling his lower lip, he kept his own council.

Turning around at the bottom of the steps, Father eyed him. "You think I'm being overly harsh, don't you?"

"No, of course ... not," came the half-strangled response. Trying not to laugh at the look being leveled at him, Vincent shrugged. "After all, a promise is a promise."

Walking toward his desk, the Tunnel patriarch tugged thoughtfully at the lower edge of his beard. "Perhaps I should furnish Eric with some help in this project." Peering solemnly up at his son, he let him think it over.

Aware of his meaning, Vincent scowled, protesting, "But, it's ... it's Sunday."

'*Ah, got him.*' With his eyes glinting mischievously, Father studied the many piles of books on his desk for a moment, concealing a wide smile. '*Tease me, will he?*' Reaching for his glasses and plucking them down on the bridge of his nose, he finally responded. "I'm well aware that it's Sunday."

"But ... I ... we ..." Grinding his teeth, which he knew very well got on his parent's somewhat brittle nerves, Vincent eased down into a nearby chair. Slumping forward, he studied his hands, stating quietly. "Catherine and I made plans to spend the day together, Above. Now that the rain has finally ceased vexing us, down here, and all essential repairs have been completed, she wanted my help in restoring order to the apartment."

"Restoring order?" Father echoed, frowning. "Has something happened up there which requires your immediate attention?"

"No," Vincent admitted, "Not my '*immediate attention*'." Patting his vest pocket, he continued, "The tasks on the list Catherine had prepared aren't matters of urgency, yet ..." Sighing, he allowed his head to fall forward until a tumble of hair hid his face from view. "Unless I am needed here, I was planning to spend the night in the apartment, with her, and return Below Monday evening."

"Oh, I see." Getting to his feet and coming around the edge of the desk, Father scrutinized the dejected-looking man seated before him. Chewing at his lower lip, he silently reprimanded himself. '*Shame on you, it really isn't fair to tease Vincent in such a way. As the youngsters would so succinctly phrase it, he was just too easy; he always believed you were serious.*'

Resting one hand on his son's broad shoulders, he squeezed it gently and bent forward to place a loving kiss on the side of his face. Deciding to let him off of the hook, the elderly man chuckled softly, conceding, "I was only



teasing you, you know. Naturally, you are free to spend the day as you choose."

Not appreciating the fact that he had just been quite royally *'had'*, Vincent rose quickly to his feet. Arching an eyebrow at Father, he announced somewhat irascibly, "Good, because I was going to do that anyway."

"Oh, you were, were you?" Making a great effort to contain his amusement, he tugged on a length of his son's hair, exclaiming, "Be off with you, you young scamp, before I change my mind!"

Knowing that he wasn't really displeased with him, Vincent grinned widely and proceeded to hug Father to within an inch of his life. "Consider it done." That said, he bolted for the stairs, disappearing as though he'd been shot out of a cannon.

Watching the hasty retreat, the elderly man smiled, wondering where the lad got such boundless energy? Perhaps it had something to do with being young, and absolutely besotted with a woman who had captured your heart.

Having finally come to terms with Catherine's involvement with his son some years earlier, Father shook his head back and forth, suddenly feeling very old, and very alone. Shaking off the sensation and reaching for his cane, he started slowly toward his private quarters, concluding that one should never argue with a man in love, especially when the man happened to be Vincent. You would never be the victor in such an exchange, notably when it came to a choice of spending time doing chores, or spending those same hours in the company of the woman you adored, either in her arms or in her bed. Whichever.

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Fastening the ties at the throat of his cloak and pulling the hood up to shield his face, Vincent started toward the elevator that would take him Above. Walking through the murky corridors, he listened to the few dispatches emanating from the pipes, praying that none of them were forecasts of more rain. Sighing in relief as the final message concluded, signaling the *'all's well,'* he stopped suddenly and tilted his head to the left, listening to other sounds that were drifting back to him from further down that passageway.

"Aw, come on, Geoffrey," griped an adolescent male voice. "I don't wanna go back up there tomorrow! It's still too cold!" Challenging him, the boy shouted, *"Besides, you're not the boss of me!"*

*"You promised to help, Eric,"* came the response, *"And if you don't, then you won't get half of the money, you creep!"*

*'Oh dear.'* Frowning and starting forward, Vincent lengthened his stride. *'This sounded like the preliminary stages of out-and-out war.'* Hastening around the bend in the corridor and eyeing the teenagers walking toward him, he called out, "Eric, Geoffrey, is everything all right?"

"Oh, hi," Eric acknowledged. "Yeah, everything's okay." Jerking his thumb toward his companion, he sneered, *"He's just dissing me."*

Puzzled by the unknown idiom, Vincent furrowed his brow. " *'Dissing'* you?"

Peering up at him through metal-framed, oval glasses, which gave him a somewhat owl-like appearance, Eric explained, "That means he's being a pain in the butt."

Trying desperately to keep his amusement from becoming obvious, Vincent replied, "Thank you very much for clarifying that for me."

"You're welcome."

Before Eric could say anything more, Geoffrey whacked him on the top of the head. "Hey, stop calling me names!" Waving the small bouquet of flowers he was holding, he charged, "Eric promised to help me sell all of these, and now he's trying to back out of our deal."

"Uh uh!" the younger boy exclaimed, glaring at him. "I only promised to help for one day, not two!" Eyeing the flowers, he grumbled. "'Sides, there's only a few left."

"Yeah," Geoffrey intoned ominously, "And we gotta sell them before they get all wilted."

"You mean YOU gotta sell 'em." Pulling himself up to his full height, which was still four inches shorter than his companion, Eric argued, "I'm not gonna spend another afternoon up there freezing my ..."

"Eric ..." Interrupting before the expletive could be voiced aloud, in which case he would be compelled to chastize the lad, Vincent let his eyes drift over the items in question. '*What exquisite lilacs.*' Knowing Catherine would most certainly appreciate these perfumed harbingers of spring, he stroked them with the tip of his finger for a moment. Mentally counting the amount of change in his pocket and hoping it was enough, he asked, "Geoffrey, what price would you regard as for for the entire bunch?"

About to say one dollar, the teenager hesitated, knowing that Vincent never seemed to have very much money. Mentally adding up all of the favors he'd done for him in the past, which included many hours of private tutoring when he just didn't seem to understand a poem by some guy named Swinburne - or want to, he proposed, "Instead of cash, how about making a deal?"

Thinking that he knew exactly where this was leading, Vincent smiled. "What sort of a deal?"

"If you'll help me again, the next time I have to conjugate a poem by nouns, adjectives *and* verbs, then the flowers are yours."

'*Ah, just as he had anticipated.*' "I'll agree to that," he replied solemnly. "Yet, are you certain you want to merely give the lilacs away, without some form of recompense?"

Grinning up at him, Geoffrey advisee. "If I get one more homework assignment like the one I got last week, believe me, You're gonna earn them."

"Very well." Readily accepting the boy's terms, Vincent reached out and took the flowers. Lifting them to his nose, he inhaled deeply of their fragrance, certain that his beloved would enjoy it as much as he did. Having assisted Father in compiling the ensuing week's homework assignment on Chaucer, the community's reigning scholar on all things of a poetic nature, eyed his clever young friend, positive that he would be calling in his I.O.U. quite soon. Gesturing to the small bouquet, he began, "Catherine will ..."

Interrupting him, Eric piped up, "Hey, wait a minute. That's not fair!"

The older boy turned and scowled at him. "Not fair to who?"

"To me!" Knowing Vincent to be an excellent judge of what was right or in this case, wrong, Eric peered up at him. Wisely deciding to leave this matter entirely in the hands of his special friend, he implored, "Sometimes I need help, too, ya know. I hate doing nouns and verbs, especially when they're in some dumb old poem."

Deciding to put an end to this contention very quickly and be on his way, Vincent arched an eyebrow at the outspoken boy, his tone gently chastizing. "Although I don't find poetry in the least bit boring, it seems only fair to help you, too, if or when the occasion arises."

Sneering at Geoffrey, Eric accepted the offer in the jargon of one his age. "Cool."

Understanding his vernacular much more readily than the one used before, Vincent patted him on the shoulder. "Good. I shall see you boys later, then." Starting forward, he hesitated, frowned, and then turned around, inquiring, "Geoffrey, where did you get the lilacs in the first place? It's far too early in the season for them to have blossomed outside, in the open air."

"Mouse gave 'em to me," the boy answered.

With his eyebrows pulling downward into a winged, amber vee just over the bridge of his nose, Vincent echoed, "Mouse?"

"Yeah. He had a big bunch of 'em. He was saving most of them for Jamie and Mary, but he gave the rest to me. Eric and I decided to sell them Above 'n go to the movies next Saturday."

"Mouse has always had a very generous nature," Vincent observed, smiling. "But, where did he get the flowers? Did someone ... give ... them to him?"

Geoffrey shrugged. "I dunno. He just said he found them Above, someplace."

"Oh."

Tilting his head to the left, Vincent stared solemnly down at the bouquet in his hand. *'Merciful Saints, could Mouse have acquired these by an act of outright theft, or had he truly found them?'* Deciding not to pursue this any further for the moment, and perhaps learn more than he really wanted to know, he hastily thrust the lilacs into the folds of his cloak and continued down the corridor.

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Growling, *"Won't yellow, my rose-red rump,"* Catherine glared at the mess before her, continuing, *"Any manufacturer who promises 'their' wax won't turn yellow on your floor ought to be boiled alive in their own product."*

Blowing her hair out of her eyes and leaning forward, she propelled a large sponge-mop across the kitchen linoleum again, scrubbing tenaciously, but it was hopeless, the waxy residue simply refused to budge. After digging at her itchy eyes and swiping at her nose, she reached for a bottle of opaque fluid, then hesitated and left it where it was. If she used any more ammonia tonight, Vincent was going to come here and find her passed out cold on the floor. *'Oh, wouldn't that just make his day?'*

Once most of the excess water had been squeezed out of the mop, Catherine rested it against the far wall and plunked her fanny down into a chair. *'Ah, it felt so good to be off her feet.'* Leaning on her elbow, she drummed the fingers of her other hand on the table and narrowed her eyes, inspecting the room. This dreary job was supposed to have been finished two hours ago, yet here she was, still at it.

Staring glumly off into space, she sneered. *"Spring cleaning sucks - big time."*

'Time?' Suddenly, Catherine's eyes went very wide. 'Time!'

Peering up at the kitchen clock, she groaned. "Oh no, it can't be nearly eight o'clock already! Besides the mess in here, there's still stuff piled up in the living room!"

Jerking to her feet, she began to stash the cleaning products out of sight as quickly as she could, thinking she had to get out of these clothes and take a bath. Vincent was going to be here in about twenty minutes and she was not only sweaty and reeking with the smell of ammonia, she probably looked like the Queen of the Witch Women.

Fairly flying around the tiny kitchen stuffing rags into the trash, sponges, brushes, and icky bottles of liquid under the sink, and various other trappings of her cleaning spree into a closet, Catherine slammed the door shut, stepped back - and immersed her left foot up to the calf in the bucket of sudsy, vile-smelling ammonia. Caught completely off balance, she lurched sideways, her arms flailing at the air, and came crashing to the floor.

"Damn ... damn ... damn!"

In the same moment that expletive passed her lips, from the dining room a voice called out, "My Love, are you all right?"

'Oh no, all of the nights for him to be early!' "Yes, Vincent, I'm just ... fine." 'Yeah, she was just peachy-keen.'

"What on earth is that wretched odor ..."

Pivoting around on her bottom to face the door, she cried, "*No! Don't come in here, not yet! Why don't you sit on the couch and read for a while, or listen to some music, or ...*" At a loss for something, anything, that would keep him occupied for a few moments, and out of the kitchen until she could restore some sort of order, she blurted, "Why don't you go out on the terrace and get some fresh air?"

"But, I only just came in from the terrace," he protested quietly.

"I know, but the fumes from the ammonia and the other cleaning fluids I've been using must be just as bad out there, as they are in here. You really shouldn't be breathing them in."

'Oh, so that's what it was.' Sniffing the air and then wrinkling up his nose, Vincent conceded, "The smell is a trifle strong, but not ... completely overwhelming. You shouldn't be breathing the fumes in, either, Catherine. I'll be more than happy to help you finish up whatever it is you're do ..."

Realizing he was approaching the kitchen, Catherine yelped, "*I don't need any help! Please, just ....*" Going wide-eyed, she clapped both hands over her mouth. Other than the times he had come to her assistance, '*it had taken her three years to get Vincent into the apartment in the first place, and she had nearly told him to go away! Was she crazy?*'

Just beyond the kitchen door, a voice rife with obvious distress intoned solemnly, "As it appears you do not wish for my company at the moment, I ... I shall be outside."

Sensing Vincent's emotions whirling through the bond, Catherine winced. '*Oh, how perfectly wonderful, now she'd hurt his feelings.*' Knowing how easy it was to wound this man with words, and how slowly he recovered from those he thought to be aimed at him, she took a deep breath. Exhaling it slowly, and hoping to sound less hostile, she began, "Vincent, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to yell, and I wasn't really yelling at you. It's just that I've made a God-awful mess in here. Please give me a few minutes to clean it up, okay?"

"Of course, my love." Accepting the apology, Vincent started forward, then hesitated. Torn between doing as she asked and wanting to assist her, he offered again, "Are you quite certain you don't want me to ..."

Clenching her jaw and praying for patience, his over-wrought lady glared at the door. "No ... thank ... you."

"Very well."

Yanking her foot out of the bucket and calling the hunk of plastic a few choice names in the bargain, Catherine jerked to her feet. Straightening out the kitchen as best she could, she towel-dried the floor and shoved items into cupboards and cabinets. After hurriedly repositioning the table and chairs, she sprayed the room with almost an entire can of herb-scented aerosol. When that didn't seem to help very much, she walked over to the stove and turned the venting system on full force. Well, that was all she could do for the time being.

Hoping that the smell of the ammonia hadn't made Vincent as nauseous as it had made her, she walked over to the folding door. Sliding it open as quietly as she could and peering cautiously around the edge of it, she closed her eyes for a moment, pleading silently *'God, let me make it into the bedroom without him catching me looking like this?'*

On observing a large silhouette moving back and forth out on the terrace, Catherine grimaced. *'Dandy - now he's pacing.'* Reaching around the edge of the door, she flicked off the kitchen light. Pulling the louvered panels together behind her, she struggled out of her wet sneakers and scurried toward the bedroom as fast as she could.

*'Whew, made it!'* Starting toward the bathroom, Catherine glanced at the vanity as she strode passed it. Catching a glimpse of her reflection in the mirror, she stuck her tongue out at the harridan peering back at her, muttering, "Well, hello gorgeous."

Eyeing her smudged appearance, grungy shirt, baggy pants, and the sweat-soaked black and red bandana tied around her head, she crinkled up her nose in disgust, thinking, *'Cripes, somebody kill it before it gets loose, scares the hell out of Vincent, and devours Manhattan.'*

Finished with his pacing, at least for now, Vincent leaned back on the terrace wall. Tapping his fingers on the stones a bit impatiently, he eyed the doors and frowned, wondering what on earth had happened in the kitchen that Catherine hadn't wanted him to be witness to?

Through his empathic connection to her, he knew that she wasn't injured in a physical sense, but her vexation had been quite evident, and knowing that he wasn't the cause of it brought little by way of consolation. Moments ago, his beloved had been immensely upset about ... something, which in turn had upset him.

When his keen ears detected her presence in the bedroom, and he observed the light being switched on, he smiled and started back into the apartment, thinking that surely it would be all right to go in now.

Leaving the terrace doors slightly ajar in hopes of alleviating the foul stench still hovering in the air, Vincent quickly freed the bouquet of lilacs from the confines of his cloak. Laying them on the dining room table, he hung the cloak up, then proceeded to slide out of his boots, having forgotten to do it earlier, as soon as he arrived, as was his custom. The one time he hadn't removed them, he had left a dreadful series of mud-stains on Catherine's luxurious and probably extremely expensive carpeting.

Naturally, she had tried to persuade him that the mishap wasn't anything to be overly concerned about; that she had planned on having the rugs cleaned soon anyway. But her efforts to alleviate his culpability in the

matter had only served to make him feel even worse. Although he had no way of knowing the cost of such things, he imagined that laundering rugs would most likely require the expenditure of a sizable amount of money. From that night on, the boots had come off at the threshold.

Picking up the small spray of flowers, Vincent studied them intently for a moment, noting that one of them had begun to look slightly wilted. Thinking that they should be set in a glass of water, he eyed the kitchen door and grimaced. Hoping that the fumes emanating from there wouldn't make him retch, he took a deep breath, held it in, and started forward.

Hurriedly rinsing herself off and grabbing two large, pink bath towels, Catherine bent forward and expertly wrapped one around her dripping hair. Draping the second towel around her body and tucking in the ends, she stepped into the bedroom. Walking over to the vanity table and switching on a small lamp, she stood in front of it and studied her reflection for a moment. *'Cripes, that lousy ammonia had really done a number on her eyes, and her nose was so swollen, W.C. Fields would have been envious.'*

Hoping to mask any remaining traces of odor that might still be trapped in her pores, she reached for an antique, delicate-looking crystal bottle. Using the fragile lalique stopper, she dabbed a few drops of perfume on her wrists, behind her ears, on both shoulders, and then at the backs of her knees. Sniffing at her hands suspiciously, she nodded, satisfied that the reek of cleaning fluids seem to be gone; at least her sense of smell wasn't picking up any traces of it. But someone else's nose definitely would.

After stepping into a pair of flowing, blue silk pajama bottoms and shrugging into the lace-trimmed matching top, Catherine unwound the towel from around her head. Leaning forward, she proceeded to brush her damp hair for all it was worth. Then, peering into the mirror, she patted on a bit of face powder, hoping that it would camouflage some of the puffiness in the area around her eyes and nose.

Still facing the mirror, she took a step backward, inspecting herself critically for a moment, and then made a face, not at all satisfied with the way she looked. *'Well, at least she was cleaner than she had been a few minutes ago.'*

Knowing that Vincent loved her no matter how she looked; that even the clothes she'd been wearing when he arrived wouldn't have bothered him in the least, seemed to make it all the more important for her to make an effort to do her best with what God and good genes had given her. After all, just because he loved her was no excuse for letting herself go.

Picking up the dirty clothes and holding them as far away from her body as she could, Catherine headed for the bathroom and plunked them into the hamper. Closing the door and turning around, she pursed her mouth and scanned the bedroom floor. Now, all she needed was her slippers.

When she was alone in the apartment, she usually walked around in bare feet, but she couldn't do that with Mister *'You'll Catch A Cold'* worrying about her - which he always did, and always would. Not that she really minded Vincent's concerns regarding her well-being. Hell, every so often, what woman didn't enjoy a bit of flattering attentiveness from their lover?

After thousands of years in servitude, at the beck and call of the opposite sex, as far as she was concerned every woman in the world had damned well earned whatever they could get. Smiling, she thought, *'Or get away with.'*

Remembering the task at hand, Catherine peered into the shadowed areas of the room, wondering where on earth her miserable slippers had decided to hide this time?

Getting to her knees and lifting one edge of the spread, she peeked under the bed, muttering, "Okay slippers, unless you want *'himself'* pestering me all night, come out, come out, wherever you are ..."

Standing just at the entrance to the bedroom, *'himself'* tilted his head to one side, studying the softly-rounded rump wriggling back and forth just a few feet away from him. *'Hmmmm, what lovely blue pajamas.'* With that observation, Vincent's gaze drifted just a tad lower. And what a even lovelier posterior wearing them.

Focused intently on the woman who would always be the center of all that was gracious and gentle in both his life and his world - a world filled with distrust and anguish for so many frightened, lonely people- eyes aglow with love seemed to radiate glints of flame, their shade darkening to ebony-tinged sapphire as he padded quietly into the room.

Just as Catherine sat back on her haunches glaring at the footwear clutched in her right hand, Vincent rested his palm gently on her arm. "Good eve..."

Nearly jumping out of her skin, his wide-eyed lady spun around to face him. Putting one hand to her chest in an effort to coax her heart back into a more familiar tempo, she fought to catch her breath, gasping. "I thought you were still outside!"

"Forgive me?" Sliding to his knees, he put one hand gently on her shoulder. "I didn't mean to frighten you." Concerned eyes met hers. "If I did, it wasn't intentional."

"I know that." Smiling at him, Catherine declared firmly. "And you didn't frighten me, Vincent, you startled me - there's a difference." Wrapping her arms around his neck, she closed her eyes and tilted her head back. When the kiss she was expecting wasn't forthcoming, she opened her eyes and peered up at him. "Aren't you going to kiss me?"

*'Oh, it felt so good to hold her again.'* Captivated by the scent of her skin in his nostrils, and the feel of her soft body confined in his arms, for a moment Vincent seemed to be a thousand miles away. Looking deeply into her eyes, his expression was pensive, as though he saw something there that would be forever known only to him.

Then, suddenly, his expression changed to one of confusion, Catherine had said something, but for the life of him, he couldn't remember what it was. Frowning his brow, he tried to concentrate, but it was a gesture of futility. Merely looking at her left him utterly disconcerted, and it probably always would.

Seeming to return to her from some distant, nameless place, he shrugged his shoulders, admitting, "I'm sorry, for a moment I was ... lost in you." Trusting her to understand, he lifted his hand to her mouth. Brushing the pad of his thumb ever so carefully back and forth over the softness there, he cleared his throat, managing, "I know you asked me something, but ..." Shaking his head slowly back and forth, he said nothing more.

Understanding exactly what he was feeling, Catherine nipped his finger gently and then moved her tongue over the furred skin before releasing it. "I just wanted to know if you were ever going to kiss me."

"... Yes," he murmured, his breath warming her skin. "I most certainly am."

"When," she asked, her tone of voice slightly teasing, "On my ninetieth birthday?"

"Oh, much sooner than that." The promise given, Vincent continued, "but for now, I simply want to look at you; to fill my eyes with you." A large hand rose to stroke lightly at the right side of her face. "I have missed you so very much these last hours, my dearest love."

Beaming at him, Catherine let her fingers glide through his long, tawny hair. Wanting the feeling of security she always felt when he held her in his arms, she leaned on Vincent's chest and sighed happily, enjoying the swift and steady rhythm of his heart thumping against her ear.

"I've missed you, too."

Tightening his left arm at her waist and putting his right hand to the nape of her neck, he tipped her chin up until their lips barely touched. Needing to hear the words again, he whispered, "Have you?"

"I always do," she reassured him, holding him close. "Even when you're here, laying in bed, and I'm in the other room on the phone, or in the kitchen making coffee, I miss you terribly. When I can't reach out and touch you, or hold you, it's as though part of my heart had vanished, and I have to go and find it before I can feel whole again, and at peace."

Letting the look in his eyes reveal how much her words had pleased him, seeming to warm him to the deepest part of his soul, Vincent suddenly tightened his grip on Catherine's arms. *'Dear God, could this woman ever truly comprehend how much she meant to him?'*

Nudging her legs apart and pulling her up to his chest so forcefully she gasped, he trembled against her, struggling to repress a sudden urge to ease her back to the carpet and simply take what his body was crying out for, right here and right now.

Desperate to have the reality of Catherine's slender form pressed to his, Vincent cradled her soft bottom in one palm and tilted his pelvis up, allowing her to feel the fullness of his arousal. Sensing her body's immediate response, he spread her thighs even further apart, wanting more - needing more.

"Oh, I've been longing to hold you like this ..." Burying his face against her shoulder, he groaned and thrust his pelvis forward again, loving the feel of her, and in that same moment, savoring the pleasure of his own response.

Knowing that when he held Catherine in his arms, he held his destiny as well. Vincent allowed his mind to soar. She brought him such joy, such ecstasy - an ecstasy deeper and more wantonly exciting than he would have believed attainable six years ago. What a sense of privilege it brought, knowing that he could trust himself fully with her; that he was free to yield to his passion now, and allow it to utterly govern his thoughts, and his actions.

Finally managing to regain a semblance of control, at least temporarily, and realizing that Catherine must be extremely tired after five hours of what she termed *'spring cleaning,'* Vincent forced himself to loosen his grip on her arms. Resting his hands on his upper thighs and regarding them thoughtfully, the expression in his eyes one of yearning fused with clearly defined hunger, he fought to keep his traitorous hands to himself by curling them into fists.

"Vincent ... don't." Aware of what he was trying to do, Catherine peered up at him sadly, her eyes filled with tender understanding. "Don't be ashamed of what you're feeling." Taking his hands into his, she kissed the left one, and then the right. Gently prying his fingers apart, she entreated, "I want your arms around me. When they're not and they should be, I miss you then, too."



Letting his eyes alone claim every part of her, he cautioned, "If I touch you again right now, Catherine, I ..."

*'Touch me again.'*

When the loving invitation whispered to him through the bond, instantly negating all of his good intentions, Vincent buried his hands in Catherine's hair and bent forward, over her. Reclaiming what was only his - ever his, his body language taut, barely controlled, and the heat of his eyes utterly possessive, he tipped her head back. After caressing her lips with his tongue, he growled the petition into her open mouth. "Show me how much you have missed me, my love?"

Proceeding to curl the man's toes and leave him trembling in her embrace, his obliging lady did exactly that.

Standing across the kitchen table from Vincent some hours later, Catherine rearranged his gift to her in a slender crystal vase. Bending forward to inhale deeply of the lilacs, she closed her eyes, murmuring, "Oh, this fragrance is heavenly." Opening her eyes, she smiled, then began stroking the delicate florets with the tip of her fingers. "I don't think I've ever seen a more stunning shade of lavender."

"I'm glad you like them," Vincent answered, pleased to know that his small offering was so highly appreciated.

"Like them? I love them!" Coming around the end of the table and standing behind him, Catherine wrapped her arms around his neck. "Wherever did you find lilacs so early in the season?"

Unable to think of a way to avoid answering the question, he sighed, replying, "They were Geoffrey's; he ... gave them to me."

"Oh." Moving to sit in his lap and nestle just under the curve of his chin, she asked the one thing he had prayed she wouldn't. "Where did he get them?"

"From Mouse."

"But where on earth would Mouse ..." Suddenly comprehending that she may well be the receiver of *'stolen goods,'* Catherine tilted her head back and arched a perfectly tweezed eyebrow at her obviously flustered soul-mate. Clamping down hard on the inside of her jaw, she said nothing more for several minutes - and neither did Vincent.

Finally able to trust her voice again, and thinking it would be wiser to focus on another topic of conversation, she gestured toward the living room, "Well, shall we get started out there, or would you rather wait until later?"

"I'd rather do it now, if that's agreeable?"

"Fine with me." Sliding off of his lap and picking up a small stack of dirty dishes, Catherine headed toward the sink. "I'll just put these in to soak for a while ..."

Gliding to his feet and starting toward the door, Vincent hesitated, then turned around. Moving to stand directly behind her, he eased Catherine's hair to one side and placed a softly nuzzling kiss to the nape of her neck. "Thank you, dearest."

Casting him a puzzled look over her right shoulder, she asked, "For what?"

Glancing at the flowers and then back at her, affording her one of the silliest grins she had ever seen, Vincent

leaned forward and kissed the tip of her nose. "For not asking the one question you are positively dying to have answered."

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Bending his knees, Vincent reached for the last of the boxes to be placed in the bedroom closet. But before he could lift it into his arms, Catherine stopped him by putting her hand on his left forearm, exclaiming, "Oh no, you must have torn a hole in your shirt when you lifted the other box!"

"Did I?" Inspecting the tear, he shrugged, observing, "It's a small rip, and easily repaired. I'll mend it later."

"*You'll* mend it later?"

"Yes."

Oh, no you won't, I will."

"But why should you do it?" Vincent disputed softly. "I'm perfectly capable of ..."

Interrupting him, she insisted, "I know you are, but you wouldn't have ripped it in the first place if you hadn't been helping me." Holding out her hand, Catherine decreed, "Please take it off, and I'll sew it now." When he hesitated, she glared at him. "In case you're worried, I *am* able to fix a simple rip in a shirt without making a complete botch of it."

Seeming quite intent on unbuttoning the object of discussion, Vincent stated solemnly. "I never doubted it for a minute." After dropping the garment into her waiting palm, he bent forward again and eased the last of the cartons onto his right shoulder. Steadying it with his left hand, he took a few steps forward, and then stopped in his tracks. "Catherine, if I may ask, what is in this box?"

"Oh, just a few books and odds and ends Jenny asked me to hang onto until she returns from her trip to the Bahamas."

A *'few'* books? Tightening his grip on the carton to keep it from slipping, he grunted and moved forward again. "I'm thankful that you wisely made no attempt to lift this yourself. It must weigh at least thirty pounds, if it weighs an ounce."

Following him into the bedroom, Catherine made no reply, thinking, *'I know how much it weighs, believe me, because I did try to lift it earlier today, and hurt parts of me that I may need later on in life.'*

Sitting on the edge of the bed, she watched surreptitiously as the one she loved hoisted the carton over his head and set it down carefully on the closet shelf. Trying to keep her emotions on a tight rein, Catherine eyed Vincent from beneath her lashes, savoring the blatantly obvious raw power and strength in the physique of this extraordinary man.

Observing the way the muscles of his broad back and huge upper arms tensed and released as he moved, each sinew, bone, and ounce of flesh perfectly in tune with each other, and the way his slim hips and buttocks seemed to be lovingly encased by a pair of tight-fitting jeans, she clenched her fingers in her lap to keep from reaching out to touch him.

It was a good thing Vincent didn't seem to realize what an effect he had on her, she decided, because if he

knew some of the things she was thinking right now, there would be absolutely no living with him. It simply wasn't fair; no man should have the ability to change the rhythms of a woman's heartbeat by just ... lifting a carton.

Eyeing him, she couldn't help but smile just a bit smugly. *'Oh, he has such a gorgeous butt! Of course, if she ever told him that aloud, it would only embarrass him - but dammit, it was true. He's so tall, and just look at those muscles! This man is an astounding lover, and he's all mine.'*

Biting down on the inside of her jaw to stifle a sudden fit of giggles, Catherine ogled him again. Greedily claiming every part of him, she let her eyes drift over Vincent's long, shiny hair, his broad shoulders, his slim hips, his thighs, and lastly, his beautifully-rounded fanny, thinking, *'Mine ... mine ... mine!'*

At the same instant a profusion of conflicting impressions wafted through the bond, Vincent arched an eyebrow, tensing slightly as Catherine's emotions cascaded through every part of him. *'Ah, she was thinking of him in 'that' way again, was she?'* Smiling to himself and flexing his muscles just a bit, as most men would when faced with the same set of circumstances, his motions purposely slow and totally unnecessary, he finished his task, shook his hair back, away from his eyes, and spun around to meet her openly covetous stare.

*'Damn, he'd caught her again.'*

Feeling a blush start at her breasts and work its way up to the top of her head, Catherine immediately leapt to her feet and walked over to the vanity table. Bending forward until her hair concealed the crimson flush on her face, she opened one of the drawers and began poking through the contents, muttering, "I know that there's a needle and some thread in here somewhere ..."

Walking up behind her and wrapping his arms around her waist, Vincent rested his mouth at the curve of her ear. "Unless you have another task for me, I'd like to take a shower now."

"Huh?" Forcing herself to take a step back from him, she turned toward the bed and picked up his shirt. "Oh sure, go ahead." Seeming to intently study the needle and thread she was holding, Catherine reminded him, "Don't forget that the towels are in the bottom of the linen closet."

"Yes, I remember." Gliding his left hand slowly up and down her arm, Vincent embraced her with the other and drew her back to his chest, murmuring, "My shirt can wait, Catherine, but I cannot."

Smiling, she closed her eyes and laced her fingers through the large hand pressed against her stomach. "I thought you were going to take a shower?"

"I am." With that, a hungry mouth bit down gently on the nape of her neck. "But, I have no wish to take it alone." Drawing the tip of his tongue over her flesh, he continued breathlessly. "I need someone to scrub my back."

"Someone?" she echoed, her tone lightly teasing. "Well, if any old *'someone'* will do ..."

Grabbing her almost roughly, when she made a pretense of easing away from him again, Vincent rumbled, "No." when she tried to move a third time, he tightened his hold, refusing to allow any distance between them.

Knowing that it would push him beyond what could be endured right now, Catherine shifted her body just far enough to reach behind her and walk the fingers of her right hand down Vincent's leg to the inner curve of his thigh. Pressing into the hardness there, she stroked slowly back and forth, tormenting him; waiting to see how much longer it would take before he lost all sense of patience.

It didn't take very long at all. But then, it never did, not with such a sensual man as this.

Grunting as an explosion of raw lust ripped through his groin, Vincent scooped Catherine up into his arms. Striding purposefully toward the bathroom, he vowed throatily. "And now that you have had your fun, my lady, I intend to have mine ..."

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Waking up before Vincent did, which was very unusual, Catherine eased back the covers, got out of bed, and tiptoed over to the terrace doors. Opening them as quietly as she could, she peeked up at the sky and inhaled deeply of the crisp air, thinking that this was the kind of a morning you just wanted to reach out and wrap your arms around. Shivering as a sudden gust of wind raised goose-flesh on her body, she stepped away from the door. Leaving it slightly ajar and turning around she moved toward a large bureau. Opening one of the drawers, she took out a pale green, silk negligee and slipped it over her head.

Momentarily regarding the enormous outline of the man hogging most of the bed, Catherine smiled. Vincent was so beautiful, his body alone seemed to give new definition to the word sensuality.

With his left leg bent at the knee and his right stretched the length of the bed, his bronze-tinged penis folded tenderly in upon his left thigh, and two huge muscled arms curved over his head, this exquisite being looked like a god from some long-ago, ancient time; one who waited patiently for a lover's touch to invade his dreams.

When rose-tinged sparks of early morning light suddenly spilled through the bedroom window and came to rest on him; Vincent's entire body seemed to breathe it in, his skin glistening beneath its tender caress. As more light stole into the room, seeming to imprison his form like undulating, coverous fingers, the radiance diffused slowly over his flesh, enhancing its velvet-sleekness, its combination of light and dark tones, and its unique hue of burnished apricot fur.

Vincent looked so carefree, so utterly content in slumber. Laying there, with almost a childlike innocence, he breathed softly in and out, his bearing one of utter relaxation; his brow serene, temporarily relieved of the concerns and obligations of day-to-day life. Spanning the gentle curve of his eyelids, long lashes were a lacy dusting of faint blonde against the deeper shadows of prominent cheekbones. When he inhaled, slightly parted lips revealed a flash of lustrous, sharply-pointed teeth; each delicate exhalation of breath stirring a few twists of the liquid-silk mane that fell in gently spiraling waves across his stubbled cheeks.

"HmMMM ..."

Sighing deeply, Vincent suddenly stretched his long legs toward the foot of the bed and rolled over onto his stomach. Wriggling down into the mattress, he swept his tongue back and forth across his mouth and curled his left arm under his pillow. Tugging the satin mound toward him, he nudged at it until he found a shape that suited him. Wriggling his fanny back and forth in a gesture of sheer, unbridled contentment, he settled down again and snuffled quietly, seemingly content in his new position.

Watching this scene play out, there was only one word which immediately came to Catherine's mind. Stunning. He was absolutely stunning. Not quite able to convince herself that such a dazzling being actually existed, and that he was not only the center of her life, but truly the soul of her soul, she reached out, wanting

to confirm the reality of him through touch, then hesitated and drew her hand away again. No, let him sleep. After making love to her five times in the space of as many hours the previous night, Vincent had certainly earned his rest.

Enjoying the view and savoring the moment, as most women would, she bent her knee and leaned forward on her elbow. Feasting her eyes on him, she was suddenly reminded of a poem she had read once, long ago. Trying to remember the opening lines, she closed her eyes for a moment, then smiled, quoting the words softly to herself; *'When last I ranged and reveled all your length, I vowed to savor your most beauteous curves with such devout and lingering delight, that would etch itself into my brain - to comfort me throughout the prisoned night. But waking early in the frosty dawn, and finding you disheveled and unkempt, my heart arose as though you showed your best. And then I wryly knew myself to be the slave of an habituated love.'*

Expelling a lengthy sigh and trying very hard to regain her inner focus, Catherine eased off of the bed and started into the bathroom. After running a comb through her hair and brushing her teeth, she padded softly toward the kitchen. Her body was demanding a cup of coffee and it wanted it *now*.

Halfway to the kitchen, she put her right hand to the small of her back and winced. *'Oh, that man, did he think she was a contortionist, or a human pretzel?! At the height of his passion, Vincent seemed to forget that her spine could only bend so many ways.'* Eyeing the bedroom door, Catherine grinned. *'But, being a deliciously passionate lover, he kept discovering and rediscovering positions he wanted to try over and over again - and that was certainly worth a few sore muscles. Hell, yes.'*

Bringing her second cup of coffee with her, Catherine tread quietly back into the bedroom and peered over at the bed. Finding Vincent sprawled flat on his back with his long legs claiming the entire lower end of the mattress, his left arm curled over his head, and the fingers of his right hand clutching her pillow, she laughed softly. *'Well, well, still asleep, was he? It would seem a certain someone didn't have the unending stamina he thought he did.'* Lifting her cup to her mouth, she grinned, thinking, *'Got him.'*

Sitting down carefully on the edge of the bed, a very happy woman proceeded to study the *'cover-stealer'* she adored to her heart's content, while she finished her coffee.

Setting the empty coffee cup down on the nightstand, Catherine opened her left hand and inspected the lavender florets resting in her palm. These had been laying on the kitchen table. Eyeing them softly, she assumed that one poor lilac must have been just too far gone to survive its trek Above.

Usually, she kept all of the flowers Vincent so lovingly bestowed on her in tiny lace sachets. When they were placed in bureau drawers, the scent of rose petals, carnations and the like, made everything smell absolutely wonderful - and the fragrance was a sweet reminder of his eternal devotion.

Reaching for a small crystal dish, Catherine hesitated and then eyed the bed. Her eyes sparkling mischievously, she placed half of the lilac buds into the dish, and kept the rest of them in her hand. Leaning forward, she began to gently lace the tiny lavender flowers through the mat of hair on Vincent's chest, then set a few into his tumbled mane, and deftly plaed the rest of them just at the curls encircling his groin. Sitting up, she inspected her handiwork thoughtfully. *'Yes, that looked just about right - an offering to a sleeping diety, or conqueror of time gone by, had been made by his most devoted slave.'*

Considering that for a moment, Catherine scrutinized the unique countenance of the man she loved, then narrowed her eyes, wondering exactly who was slave to who in this scenario? Deciding to find out, she cautiously grazed the middle of his forehead with the tip of her finger. When there was no reaction, she moved her hand in a downward direction, stroking lightly at his eyelids, the tip of his nose, and his full lower lip. When that still got no reaction, she rolled onto her stomach and flicked the tip of her tongue lightly against his navel.

With that, a rumbled grunt of obvious dissatisfaction breached the quiet of the room. "... don't ..."

Choosing to ignore that, Catherine worked her way down Vincent's body. After kissing the inner edge of his left thigh, she made her way leisurely up to his stomach again. Curling her tongue into the exact center of his belly-button and blowing a cooling breath of air into the puckered division, she lifted her head, watching and waiting for his reaction to this latest indignity.

Attempting to free itself of the irksome little nuisance disturbing its repose, the muscles of Vincent's stomach contracted and released again, the solid flesh quivering slightly; as if a series of connecting tissue had just exploded to life, awakening nerve endings that twitched in protest at the invasion.

Mumbling something unintelligible under his breath, the sleeping form on the bed reached out to swat drowsily at the unknown thing that had been badgering him, and missed. Flinging his left forearm over his eyes, he seattled his bottom deeper into the mattress and snorted, his nostrils flaring outward in obvious vexation.

Knowing him all too well, Catherine leaned closer, her expression one of obvious skepticism. *'Was Vincent playing possum?'* Closing the distance between them until they were chin-to-chin, she was just about to drop a teasing kiss to his mouth when his eyes snapped open and twin pools of electric blue captured her like a startled deer caught in the headlights of a swiftly moving car.

Blinking rapidly and squeaking out a breathless, "Oh!" Catherine put one hand to her chest.

"So," a husky voice inquired, "Have you been enjoying yourself?"

Having the good grace to look the tiniest bit ashamed, she studied her hands thoughtfully and nodded.

"Good morning, Catherine."

"G'morning."

Lifting his head slightly, Vincent observed the lavender blossoms adhered to his body. Slowly reaching up to remove those stuck to his mane and the bridge of his nose, he held them out between his thumb and forefinger. Arching an eyebrow in her direction, he grunted wryly, asking, "Have you run out of flowerpots?"

"No." Sensing that she had been forgiven for not only waking him up, but for tormenting him in the bargain, Catherine grinned. "They just look better on you than they did in that old vase."

"Oh, they do, do they?" Making no further comment, Vincent sat up, stretched his long arms for the ceiling and eased his head from side to side, trying to loosen the kinks in his neck and shoulder muscles. Shaking his hair out of his eyes, he slid to the edge of the bed, stood up, stretched again, and then lumbered unsteadily to the bathroom.

Deciding that he just wasn't in the mood for teasing right now, or much of anything else either, for that matter, Catherine eyed his retreating backside, her disappointment obvious. *'Oh well.'*

When she heard the water in the shower being turned on, she crinkled up her nose, thinking, *'Maybe after he bathes and has some breakfast, he'll be more receptive to the idea of making love. Once Vincent's basic 'needs' are met, he usually doesn't need much inducement to satisfy the rest of them.'* When her tummy gurgled loudly, reminding her that she hadn't eaten either, she started to get off of the bed.

At that same moment, a voice gruff with unmistakable passion drifted out of the bathroom, commanding, *"Stay where you are."*

Blinking in surprise, Catherine turned around and faced the door, calling out, "Excuse me?"

*"I asked you to stay where you are."*

Not quite believing the demanding quality in Vincent's tone, one he rarely used when speaking to her, she got to her feet, hesitated, thought it over, and sat back down on the bed again, having no intention of arguing with *'that'* voice. When he expressed himself in that particular way, she knew that any further debate was out of the question. Even though there were times when the one she loved seemed to enjoy what he described as *'verbal clashes,'* this was definitely not one of those times.

Secretly rejoicing in the fact that this basically shy man had finally found the confidence to be just a little bit assertive with her from time to time, Catherine folded her hands in her lap. Smiling expectantly, she patiently focused her full attention on the bathroom door.

Some moments later, Vincent entered the bedroom and moved to stand at the foot of the bed. Clad in a thigh-length, dark blue terrycloth robe, one which revealed quite a bit more of him than it managed to conceal, he swiped at his wet hair with the tips of his fingers. After glancing at the lower portion of his anatomy, he met her eyes, commenting dryly. "See what your playfulness earlier has accomplished?"

Casting an appreciative glance at the rigid length curling away from his groin area, Catherine nodded her head, but said nothing.

*"You and your ... your ... floral decorations,"* he growled, the love in his voice outweighing the obvious chastisement.

"It was only a whim," she announced quietly, barely stifling a giggle. "But you do look quite handsome in purple, you know."

A disdainful snort was his only acknowledgment to that statement.

Arching an eyebrow at him, Catherine asked, "Would you rather I'd kept my hands - and my flowers - to myself?"

"No." Suddenly those beautifully-slanted eyes seemed to erupt with glints of silver-tinged flame, like those of a predator surveying the only thing in the world that could sate his appetite. "Yet, you know how I react to your touch - particularly at this time of the day ..." Striding purposefully around the edge of the bed to cup her chin in the palm of his left hand, Vincent searched her eyes, his expression eloquently ravenous. "... don't you?"

"Uh huh." Smiling up into the face she adored, Catherine had the audacity to wink at him.

"Oh, you vexing, beguiling woman." Conceding defeat, he laughed softly and reached for her. "Come here to me ..."

Gathering her into his arms, he slid his right hand around her hip and rested it against her pliant backside.

Caressing the silk material draping that area of her body with his palm, he reached out with his left hand and eased down the straps of her negligé. Needing the reality of her firm breasts pressed against him, he loosened his hold on her just long enough to slide quickly out of his robe. After whisking her nightgown down over her hips, he smiled as the silk glided almost soundlessly to the bedroom carpet.

Pulling her up tightly to his naked chest and nuzzling into the delicate curve of her ear, Vincent observed hoarsely, "There is an ancient Chinese proverb that cautions '*never awaken a sleeping dragon*'."

Knowing precisely where this was leading, Catherine lifted to her toes and wrapped both arms around Vincent's neck. After placing a wealth of moist kisses to the side of his face, his chin, and the delectable curve of his throat, she rested her ear against his chest, listening happily to the cadence of his wildly pounding heart.

Stroking his taut pectoral muscles with the tips of her fingers, she smiled. "I've heard to '*arouse*' them can be very, very dangerous."

Well aware of her double entendre, Vincent chuckled softly. "Oh, Indeed it can." Urging her to sit on the bed, he scanned his lower body again. Meeting her obviously taunting look with one of his own, he rumbled, "And now that you have chosen to awaken your own personal '*dragon*', my dear, exactly what do you intend to do about ... this ... state of affairs?"

"Whatever you want me to do." Placing one hand at his buttocks and drawing him closer, Catherine stroked the puckered ridge of flesh encircling the top of his penis gently with the pad of her thumb. When the shaft jerked forward, into her touch, she curled her fingers around the base. "Anything at all."

Swallowing a moan, the single word he managed to voice seemed torn from his throat. "Anything?"

"Yes, my dearest love - anything," she murmured, bending toward him.

Knowing that Vincent would be able to sense her deeper emotions through their unique connection, as well as the depth of her love for him flowing from her heart to his, Catherine still wanted him to hear the words aloud. Even now, after all of these years, there were still times when this dear soul needed her reassurance that no wish, no need he had, would be denied, considered offensive, or left unfulfilled.

When his beloved's small hand tightened firmly around the very core of his masculinity, Vincent felt a growl surging upward in his throat. Clenching his teeth and arching into her touch, surrendering utterly to her sweet caresses, he swayed toward the exquisite temptress luring him into madness and placed trembling hands on her slender shoulders, knowing if he didn't, he would surely fall to his knees.

Shivering uncontrollably and making no effort to silence the panting grunts escaping from in-between his teeth, Vincent felt as though his entire body had turned to liquid and was melting from the inside out. Consumed by unconditional lust, as Catherine's fondling sent his mind spinning out of control, his soul cried out the words he simply didn't have breath enough to voice aloud. '*More! Yes, like that. Ah, the sensation is heavenly!*'

Tasting sticky drops of seminal fluid seeping from the notched slit at the crown of his rock-hard phallus, and knowing immediately that Vincent wouldn't be able to withstand any more stimulating right now, Catherine licked the secretions into her mouth and eased away from him. Resting her hands at his hips and stroking the warmth there with the pads of her thumbs, she leaned toward him and placed a tender kiss to the center of his quivering belly, murmuring, "I love you so much."

Fighting to regain his control, Vincent gulped hard several times and pressed his right hand against his chest,



as though the gesture alone would keep his heart from exploding. Finally getting both his mind and eyes to focus, he peered down at her, managing a tremulous smile. "Oh, I have been well aware of that truth for a very long time."

Resting his left hand on the side of Catherine's face, he bent forward and kissed her very quickly and very hard, his tongue gliding smoothly along the inner recesses of her warm mouth. When a sudden temptation to do much more than kiss her nearly overwhelmed him, Vincent shuddered and eased away from her, whispering with gruff tenderness. "You are my most cherished treasure, and I absolutely adore you. I always have - I always will."

Feeling his taut span curve outward and nudge against her stomach, as though begging for her touch, she trailed the fingers of her right hand down his thigh. Tracing the distended hardness with the tips of her nails, she murmured, "Tell me what you want?"

"You," came the breathless response. "Only you ... ever you."

"How do you want me?"

"Must you have the words?" Vincent rasped, barely getting the question around a sudden dryness in his throat.

"No." Bending forward, she captured the crown of his phallus in her mouth and tongued it gently for a moment before continuing, "But I enjoy hearing them."

Wrapping trembling hands in her hair to keep her where he most needed her to be, Vincent widened his stance. Confining Catherine's legs between his, he urged her head lower, groaning excitedly. "I need your mouth on me, and your hands, loving me, as I would also love you ... in this same way. I want that right now, so very much."

"Oh yes," she sighed, reaching for him. "So do I ..."

Tensing expectantly as Catherine leaned forward and curled her fingers into his buttocks, Vincent flung back his head and fought to catch his breath, his heart thundering wildly against his rib cage. Clenching his teeth as she began placing kisses as fragile as the caress of butterfly wings to the center of his stomach, he gripped her shoulders tightly, waiting eagerly for her to move lower still.

When she nuzzled into the thatch of hair embracing his male organ, inhaling deeply of his musky scent before kissing and nipping her way down his body, toward the place where he desperately needed her mouth to be, a series of shudders seemed to play tag for one part of Vincent's frame to the other, leaving his trembling in their wake.

His senses whirling, made dizzy from the pleasure coursing through him, Vincent made a great effort to conserve the remnants of his control. Avidly watching Catherine's moist, warm lips greedily devouring him, he bent forward and brushed his lips over the top of her head. Closing his eyes and rocking his hips toward her, his hiss of satisfaction stirred the air above them. "Yesssss ..." Needing to go deeper and absolutely powerless to control the motion of his body, he began to thrust harder and faster, sobbing, "This sensation is ... incredible."

Holding Vincent in a loving oral embrace, Catherine slid one hand down to the base of his rock-hard flesh. Encircling it with infinite tenderness, she moved her other hand to his buttocks and curled her forefinger into the tight division there, loving it as the muscles of his firm bottom knotted and released in tune with her light

stroking. Sliding her hand over the rigid line of his back, she tugged lightly on the long hair shadowing the length of his spine.

The infinite joy she felt at being able to touch him freely in this way, after so many empty, lonely years, was electrifying, and her lover's sharp gasps of ecstasy not only increased her own pleasure, they also served to make her hungry for more of him - for all of him.

Caught off-guard and completely aroused by the suddenness of Catherine's next act of stimulation, Vincent screamed her name, his hips jerking forward in surprised rapture as her mouth surrounded him, sucking strongly on the overly-sensitive head of his penis.

"Yes," he cried, knowing that one more such caress - just one - would bring forth his ejaculation. "... right there! More ... just once more ... take me deeper!"

Knowing what he wanted and refusing to give it to him, not yet, Catherine licked and kissed her way down one side of this most sensitive region of Vincent's body and proceeded to drive him into a near frenzy of excitement by agonizingly slowly working her way up the other side. When a series of lusty moans seemed to float somewhere over her head, she eased away for a moment, well aware of the effect this would have on him.

"Catherine ... no!" Wild-eyed and panting in an attempt to catch his breath, Vincent lunged upward and tightened his grip on her hair, gasping, "Don't stop! Not now ... not yet!"

"We have all day, my dearest," she murmured reassuringly. Urging him down on the bed, she kissed him with infinite tenderness, promising, "I won't leave you in torment for very long - I'd never do that to you."

Knowing that it aroused him uncontrollably when he could watch her loving him in this way, Catherine tucked her hair behind her ears, affording him a better view, and leaned forward again. Cupping him tenderly, she encircled his penis with her lips and nipped carefully at the swollen crest.

Moving one hand to scratch gently at the pulsing vein spanning the exceedingly responsive underside of his curved stalk, she lifted her other hand to stroke at the hefty sac containing his testes, then moved upward to capture him possessively, her fingers pressing in firmly around his immense span. Taking the pulsing flesh into her mouth, she licked and tasted, sucked and teased, and then pulled a frantic groan from him by edging her tongue around the brim.

Trembling wildly all over and unable to control his response to such ardent stimulation, Vincent's lower body jerked completely off of the bed. Curling his hands into the sheets, he tried to hold back, his mind screaming, '*Not yet ... not yet!*' Feeling his penis begin to throb and then fill with hot blood as it swelled to a deliciously painful erection, he eased his hands from Catherine's hair and touched her lightly on the shoulder, imploring, "Wait ... please? My pleasure shall be incomplete without yours, but it must be now, for I cannot endure this."

Clasping her by the hips and rolling her over, he gently coaxed Catherine to lay on her right hip. Quickly adjusting his position until their bodies were in flawless counterpoint with each other, Vincent allowed his eyes to slowly travel over the mingling of his dusky-gold flesh melded tightly to skin the shade of newly-budding pink roses.

Deliberating on the way that Catherine's delicate curves clung to the hard planes of his, he imagined their forms to be almost like instruments, his the waiting violin, hers the quivering fiddle-bow which played the only music that could ever satisfy the yearning of his innermost soul and wild, hungry heart.

Then, suddenly, as the fragrance rising from Catherine's most feminine place bombarded his senses, Vincent's nostrils flared, hungrily taking it in. Curving his left palm around the wealth of soft curls that he absolutely couldn't resist touching, his own passion enticed him onward, its scope probing at the boundaries of his sexuality. Unable to deny himself the pleasure, he gently eased his left forefinger into her slick heat.

Yet, as exquisite as it was to caress her in this way, it wasn't enough.

Frantic now, to have that scent in his mouth, and losing himself in both his own craving and hers, when Vincent spoke again, his voice was thick with desire, yet hesitantly shy and oh, so seductive. "I want ... I need to taste you, to fill my senses with every part of you."

Writhing on the bed, Catherine groaned, "Yes ... oh please." Bringing him up to her mouth, she pressed a soft kiss to the tip of his phallus, imploring, "Do it now."

Tensing his buttocks, Vincent angled his pelvis forward, fighting back the need to thrust hard and embed himself in her mouth. Ah, this woman was sweetly merciless. She knew how to build his passion; she knew what touch most pleased him, and what touch drove him absolutely wild.

As she continued pressing soft, sweet kisses to his penis and then higher, to the dense curls just below his navel, Vincent forced himself to keep absolutely still, building both her passion and his own. Ah, but there were limits to what could be endured, and limits to patience as well, even his; especially his - especially at this moment.

Cupping his buttocks in one hand, rubbing and squeezing gently at the firm muscles, Catherine slid one finger further into that tempting division, stroking the warm skin in a downward direction until she could just reach the underside of his softly-furred testes.

Undone by this delicious invasion, Vincent bared his teeth, a thunderous snarl curling upward in his throat. Deftly bending his left leg, he pulled his body higher on the bed, offering himself completely to Catherine's tender loving. Urging her thighs wider apart, at the same moment he caught her left ankle in his fingers and brought it up over the curve of his shoulder. Leaning forward and capturing her buttocks in a firm grip, he held her in this position and inclined his head toward the scent unhinging his mind. His intent obvious, he pressed his lower body toward her, needing her mouth to appease the exquisite ache throbbing tenaciously at the base of his scrotum.

Angling her leg higher on his shoulder, in an attempt to get even closer to him, wanting his mouth and hands everywhere on her body, Catherine whimpered, frantic now to have him touch every sensitive, hidden part of her. Seeming to instantly respond to that unspoken need, Vincent growled and swayed forward. When he buried his face against her, she nearly wept in relief. As a rain of moist kisses fell in ever-narrowing circles on her overheated flesh, followed by a searching, hot tongue probing gently within her, she inched one hand between Vincent's thighs, wrapped it around his tight bottom, eased him forward, and began to return his erotic caresses with soul-searing ones of her own.

When her moist lips began gliding up and down over the width of his pulsing erection, Vincent's soft growls accelerated to a continual, expansive rumble which seemed to explode from his body. Strident now, they defined the limitless scope of his pleasure, his excitement, and his appetites.

Curving one long, muscled forearm tightly around her buttocks, holding Catherine's willing captive of his lust, his mouth and tongue moved wildly against her, lapping more and more greedily at smooth, sensitive tissue, and devouring the sweetness flowing from her hidden feminine places.

The instant his lady began suckling even more strongly on his aching flesh, Vincent's thighs tightened around her head, his excitement discernible in the taut lines of his lower body, and the grunts escaping from his throat. *'Yes, like that, like that ... he was nearly ready ... nearly ready.'*

Tensing his legs to hold Catherine in position to receive him, he began to thrust harder and faster into the lush wetness of her mouth. Wanting more of her taste, knowing he would never get enough of it, not if he lived three eternities, he lapped hungrily at her flesh. Pressing his tongue adamantly to the swollen nub of her womanhood, he sought to appease a gnawing thirst that could no longer be repressed, nor turned aside.

When her lower body began to undulate in convulsive, seemingly endless spasms, her ardent lover used his thumb and forefinger to open her to him completely. Gripping her tightly and bending his head, he gently drew the most intimate part of the woman he cherished into his mouth. *'Oh yes, the taste of her on his tongue was so good. She was so wet, so eager for his caress; only his - ever his.'*

Flushed deep pink from his urgent yet adorning assault, the bud of Catherine's femininity quivered before him, glistening from the wet heat of his mouth and her own sexual desires. Finding the tiny, rigid peak absolutely irresistible, arousing his perceptions of taste, touch, and scent, Vincent licked delicately at the tight knot of flesh, and then more and more voraciously. Reminding him of warm, vanilla ice cream, the fragrant liquid spilling onto his tongue compelled him to delve even deeper, sucking lustily at the heady elixir.

Surrendering willingly to the sensuality of the moment, and a carnality that seemed to explode outward from his groin, twist upward through his belly, and seize him to the soul, Vincent inhaled deeply. Gathering just enough breath for a final, loving invasion, he buried his tongue in his beloved's inner heat again, and in that moment, began to thrust his rigid manhood demandingly, almost frantically into her mouth.

Relaxing her throat and taking as much of him as she could, Catherine began suckling harder and faster, knowing that her lover was on the threshold of a sumptuous ejaculation. The taste of Vincent, the scent of his skin in her nostrils, and the soft moans of his satisfaction seemed to curl around her heart, bringing with it a perception of joy that made her feel not only cherished, but whole, complete, and utterly feminine.

With their straining forms pressed tightly together, caught up in undulating waves of mutual passion, and completely in tune with each other's wishes and needs, the lovers moved together as two halves of the same soul, in tight, unrestrained bursts, each needing the other's climax to induce their own.

Realizing that both he and Catherine were very close to orgasm, Vincent curled his body almost completely on top of hers and agonizingly slowly withdrew from her mouth until only the notched crown of his taut erection was still embedded in that safe, snug refuge. Struggling desperately to hold back, waiting for her eagerness to mirror his, he tensed his buttocks and thrust his tongue quickly within her, whimpering as the need for release became physically painful.

In that moment, from behind his eyes, colors seemed to explode in spiraling whirls of flame-red melded with lustrous gold, shades of passion and pleasure which coalesced and fluctuated, taunting him, luring him, demanding he yield every part of himself to them, and to Catherine, the sensation leaving him momentarily dazed.

When more silky wetness suddenly spilled from her body, Vincent captured it on the tip of his tongue, knowing that she was ready, and oh, so was he. Wild to finish, he sank forward and began pumping between Catherine's lips in frenzied, jerking motions. Driving inward once, then again, his body covered in a fine sheen of perspiration, he thrust one more time, hesitated, thrust again, and then sobbed, joy surging through him as

her calves tightened fiercely around his shoulders, her lower body contracted, and she arched against him.

Swallowing eagerly as her completion spilled onto his tongue, Vincent feasted ravenously on the precious fluid, asserting his right to claim every part of this woman in this loving, most intimate of caresses. In that same moment, swept along in the swirling vortex of Catherine's passion like an autumn leaf spiraling downward from a mighty oak, his own need for deliverance reached out, seized at his belly, and then raged like wildfire toward the center of his groin. Immensely proud of the fact that it was he who had brought his beloved such a moment of pure passion, he was frantic now to find his own.

Primed for the ejaculation, wanting it so much he thought to truly go mad without it, Vincent quickly rolled his pelvis down and in, moaning as his scrotum lifted, tightening closer to his body. *'Yes ... now. Oh God, it felt so good!'* He couldn't hold back ... her mouth and tongue were devouring him ... taking him deeper ... deeper ...

Closing his eyes, pumping forcefully, and gripping the sides of Catherine's head with his inner thighs, he arched strongly against her once, then again, his mid keening. *'Yes, keep her there, right there, like that, pressed against your scrotum. You're nearly there ... nearly ...'*

Reaching out blindly and urging her closer until his testes made firm contact with the curve of her chin, the sensation of her lips, teeth, and tongue surrounding his penis utterly vanquished him. Wildly aroused, helpless now against the rising tide of his own lust, Vincent opened his eyes.

Momentarily shifting his range of focus, and ravaged by the sight of his steely fullness entering and withdrawing from the moist sanctuary of his lady's mouth, the reality of witnessing the act itself primed him, readying him to expel his essence. Making no effort to control his sobs of pleasure, he observed the motions of his lower body through eyes that had hooded to narrow slits, unleashing a chesty growl as his hips instinctively jerked forward.

Erupting copiously from his unyielding sex, his seed spurted thickly up into the back of Catherine's throat in hot, pulsing bursts. Yielding to the waves of eroticism coursing through every part of him, savoring it with all that he was, or could ever become, Vincent reached down and clenched shaking fists in his beloved's tangled hair. Easing slightly away from her mouth, he hesitated, groaned, rolled his hips forward one last time, powerless to repress the urgency, and then he was finished.

With tiny aftershocks of the orgasm curling through him in a sensation of tingling warmth, his entire body seemed to explode into a million flickering shards of light. Shuddering mightily and gasping for breath, he groaned and fell back to the bed, his hunger temporarily, wondrously sated. Reaching out for Catherine, needing her healing touch to center him now, when he was this wildly out of control, Vincent searched blindly for her hand, then sighed thankfully as her slender fingers pressed into his palm.

"I'm here," she whispered reassuringly, knowing that he relied on the sound of her voice to help him regain his composure at moments like this. "I'll always be here - for you."

Finally managing to pull more oxygen into his lungs, he moaned, "To know that, and to trust in it completely, is the joy of my existence."

Bringing her small hand to his mouth, Vincent brushed his lips over the tips of her fingers. Wanting to observe her response first, to what he was about to do, before sensing it through the bond, he held her a willing captive in a blaze of turquoise. Relaxing his jaw just enough to afford her a splendid view of gleaming, elongated teeth, he set them against her palm and nipped at the delicate flesh.

"Vincent!" Not prepared for the sexuality of the act, nor the suddenness of it, Catherine's eyes went wide, but she didn't pull away from him. She would never do that - not to him.

Knowing he had surprised her, which is exactly what he had intended to do, and that she had cried out his name in pleasure, not pain, he edged his tongue over the love-bite, growling, *"Ah Catherine, how I love the taste of you in my mouth."*

Unable to find her voice, she simply stared at him, waiting expectantly for what he would do next.

Burying the tip of his nose into her palm and inhaling deeply of the fusion of scents there, Vincent's nostrils flared and an impassioned groan surged upward from the pit of his stomach. Knowing that the fragrance was a blend of his own musky semen mingled with the delicate traces of her femininity from an earlier self-caress, he tightened his grip on her fingers and hungrily lapped the physical evidence of their passion into his mouth.

At the feel of his raspy tongue licking voraciously at her, Catherine's entire body seemed to be consumed in a spiraling heat. *'Oh, he could do things with his tongue and teeth that were positively unnerving!'*

When Vincent sighed and eased his mouth away from her hand, his craving seeming to be satisfied, at least temporarily, Catherine shifted her position on the bed. Embracing as much of him as she could and snuggling into his damp chest, she placed her ear to the area just over his thundering heart, and gave him the pledge of hers. "I love you so much. I'll always be here for you - always, for as long as I live. And if there is a life after this one - somewhere, I'll belong to you there, too, and you'll belong to me."

"Yes," he murmured, in that unique, breathy tone that always seemed to melt into her flesh. "I shall always belong only to you. Yet ..." Unable, or unwilling to continue, Vincent shook his head slowly back and forth.

Seeing the conflict in his eyes just before he looked away, and feeling a deep sadness reverberating through the bond, she put her fingers to the curve of his chin and gently urged his head up. Squeezing the powerful fingers clasped in hers, she implored, "Tell me what's causing such dreadful turmoil within you, particularly now?"

Not at all surprised to learn that it had taken so little time for her to surmount the invisible barriers he had just placed between them, hoping to shield her from his chaotic emotions, Vincent tilted his head to one side and studied Catherine thoughtfully. "You can ... feel it?"

Smiling at him, she murmured, "I can almost hear it."

"I'm sorry."

"For what?"

When he hesitated, as though searching for the words he wanted, and then stared down at his hands, she curled her fingers through his. "You know there's nothing you can't say to me - nothing you can't tell me."

Straightening his shoulders, he exhaled roughly and met her eyes. "At times, when I reflect on what I've done in allowing you to bind yourself to this life, and to me - to the limits I tolerate, which you accept, through love, feelings of self-reproach ... rip at my heart."

Dreading his reply, she asked the question anyway. "Are you sorry that you fell in love with me, Vincent?"

"No ..." he whispered adamantly, his eyes prisms of blue flame in the shadowed light, "... never. Until I found you, Catherine, I wasn't truly alive. Oh, I breathed, I nourished my body, I worked, and I dreamed. Oh, how I dreamed! I watched so many of my friends, women and men whom I had grown up with, start to *'keep*

*company, 'fall in love, marry, have children, and I wanted those things, I wanted them so desperately I thought to surely die of the ... not having."*

Taking a deep breath and releasing it slowly, he went on, "Then, as I matured, I faced the truth, or what I considered the truth to be. Most of my dreams would never come true - could never come true. So many nights ... Dear God, such endless nights! ... I lay in bed, my body and mind beset not by physical needs, but by images." Peering down at his hands, Vincent grunted. "Images of those holding a woman in my arms, with my head resting at her breast, tormented me almost into madness. Those visions would not be controlled, and they could not be dreamt away. Thinking to truly die of my aloneness, I used to weep bitterly, asking God, and myself, if there wasn't more to life than ... merely existing."

Rising to her knees, Catherine wrapped her arms around Vincent's shoulders, clinging to him with every bit of her strength. What this dear soul had endured was beyond her capacity to fully comprehend. She tried to imagine how any child could have gone through what he had, but she couldn't; she had no acceptable frame of reference, no way of comparing her childhood to his. Although she had been quite young when she lost her mother, she'd still had her dad, and she had him all to herself. She didn't have to share him, or his love, with countless other children.

*'Never again,'* she thought, pulling Vincent closer. *'He'd never feel alone or unloved ever again.'* She had made that promise to him, and to herself, on the night of their third anniversary, and no matter what it took, no matter what she had to do, she intended to keep that pledge.

Wanting to say so many things to him, yet sensing that there was more he needed to free his heart of, Catherine held her silence. Perhaps by the time he finished sharing his pain with her, she'd be able to help him deal with such despairing remembrances of times past. Then those memories could be put to rest forever. Burrowing against him, and using their connection to send him wave after wave of love and understanding, she waited for him to continue.

Sighing in relief as her emotions seemed to gently envelop his troubled heart, instantly soothing it into a more restful tempo, Vincent placed his left hand on the delicate curve of her right shoulder. Feeling the tenseness there, and knowing full well that he was the cause of it, he caressed knotted muscles and swallowed hard, trying to get the words around the lump in his throat.

"I know that you love me, as I love you, and are devoted to sharing your life with me. One day, perhaps I shall come to fully believe I have the right to such constancy on your part, or to ... deserve it."

"Oh my love, you do deserve it," Catherine insisted. "You always have. I told you once, many years ago, that you deserve everything. Everything." Smiling, she peered up at him. "Remember?"

Moved to tears by her words, and too emotionally overcome to respond to them aloud, Vincent nodded his head. This dauntless woman asked if he remembered that time in their lives; the pain of it, and the joy of finally allowing himself to believe in her completely; to accept the depth of her feelings for him, and truly understand that he would never feel alone and unloved ever again?

Oh yes, he remembered everything; how he had clung to her that night, weeping for things he thought would be forever beyond his reach; afraid to hope - afraid not to hope, and utterly powerless against a rising tide of passion which had seemed to heat his blood and in that same moment, erupt through every part of his body.

Making no effort to conceal the wetness spilling from his eyes, Vincent brushed his lips over his soul-mate's small, yet surprisingly strong, hand. Urging her down to the bed and settling her soft form to lay on top of him,

he clung tightly to the woman who had not only brought him out of the darkness into the radiance of her love, but had also made him believe that he was unquestionably male - in every wondrous sense of the word.

Kissing the top of Catherine's head and sighing contentedly, he closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep, holding his destiny pressed firmly to his heart.

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Blinking himself awake some hours later, Vincent buried his nose into his pillow and growled silently at the internal alarm clock that had the audacity to disturb his slumber. Patting the left side of the bed, drowsy blue eyes scanned the other side of it.

"Here I am." From behind him, two eager hands worked their way deeply into his tangled hair and supple breasts pressed down into his lower back.

Forcing himself to come fully awake, and suddenly aware of a slender body stretched over the length of his, Vincent smiled, rumbling, "Hello, my dear."

"Hello."

"Did you sleep well?"

"Hmmm, I certainly did," With that, a warm mouth nibbled on his left shoulder.

When Catherine wriggled upward and flicked her tongue against the nape of his neck, it caused a series of uncontrollable shivers to hurtle the entire length of Vincent's frame. Barely remembering how to form such mundane things as lucid speech, he rasped, "Are you ... quite comfortable back there?"

"Uh huh," she mumbled happily.

"And now, please tell me ... why ... you are back there?"

"You've told me often enough that my weight on you *'feels as light as rose petals'*," Catherine reminded him. Allowing her body to go absolutely limp, she asked, "Well, am I still a rose, or am I a very large boulder squashing the life out of you!"

"A ... what?" Nearly choking as laughter momentarily cut off his breath, Vincent carefully rolled over to meet an impish grin and sparkling green eyes. Deciding to *'give as good as he got'*, he studied her solemnly for a moment, as though deciding, then announced, "You are still a rose, but only just barely." Suddenly, the glint of humor in his eyes altered to one of utter seriousness. "You shall always be a rose to me."

*'Oh, oh,'* Catherine thought, *'He's getting 'that' tone in his voice again.'*

Before his grave mood could develop any further and disturb the quiet ebb and flow of this very special moment, his lady made a fist and bopped him gently on the bridge of his nose. Immediately stroking the spot she'd just hit with the pad of her thumb, she observed, "You're just an adorable little charmer, aren't you?"

Her words had the desired effect.

Capturing her thumb in his mouth, Vincent proceeded to chomp down gently on it, knowing that she actually enjoyed the feel of his teeth. Freeing her hand and affording her a look that said *'whatever am I going to do*



*with you?*' he declared wryly, "I've been called a great many things in my life, but never before has anyone ever told me that I was an *adorable*' ... anything."

"Well, you are," she insisted, reaching up to hug him fiercely around the neck. "You're a big, adorable hunk."

Before he could comment on her rather bizarre phraseology, Vincent's stomach produced a rather loud and highly embarrassing series of noises.

"Good Lord." Glowering disapprovingly at that ill-mannered part of his body as it gurgled again, even louder than before, he grimaced, noting, "Although the rest of me is utterly satisfied, it would seem that this portion of my anatomy is still hungry."

Not daring to meet his eyes, knowing if she did, she would surely fall face down on the bed and quietly die laughing, Catherine kept her thoughts to herself. *'Either that, or that tummy of yours is about to explode.'* Patting him on the arm, she started to get to her feet. "Well, I'm starving, too, so I'll go and see what I can find in the refrigerator that looks interesting, but hasn't grown legs yet."

"Catherine," came that sexy voice, "If you wouldn't mind, I would like to prepare our meal."

"Why?" Suddenly suspicious of his motives, she accused, "You don't like my cooking, do you?"

"Of course I do," he insisted, not quite meeting her eyes.

"I want the truth."

Thinking, *'No, you don't, and if I'm not extremely careful right now, I'll be in very serious trouble,'* Vincent cleared his throat, managing, "You are a ... superb cook, my love."

"Yeah, sure." Sensing that he was lying through those beautiful teeth of his, which was surprising, for he was *'usually'* completely honest, she cast him a narrow-eyed glare and sniffed indignantly, informing him, "I'll have you know that I haven't poisoned anyone for a very long time, and that man was only sick for a few days."

Caught off-guard, Vincent stammered, "A f ... few days?"

"Uh huh." Arching an eyebrow in his direction, Catherine growled onimously. "And then he shriveled up and died."

Realizing that he had just swallowed the bait, hook, line, and sinker, as the expression went, Vincent gnashed his teeth. His beloved imp had just struck again - and she still looked quite vexed with him. Deciding that complete candor was the only thing that would get him out of this predicament with his *'whatever'* intact, he admitted, "The truth of it is, the wealth of modern appliances in your ... our ... kitchen, absolutely fascinate me."

"Oh." Looking more than a little ashamed of herself, Catherine wrinkled up her nose. "Sorry."

Eyeing her thoughtfully for a moment, and barely containing the urge to turn her over his knee and cuff her firmly on the rump - just once, Vincent sighed, knowing of course, that he was going to forgive her; he always did.

Where Catherine was concerned, he had discovered long ago that he simply couldn't sustain his anger for any length of time - and she damned well took full advantage of that fact where and when she could.

Allowing his gaze to travel over her features, and noting her innocent smile, serene brow, and the mischievous glint in her eyes, Vincent grunted to himself. *'Who knew, perhaps this propensity for mentally torturing their*

*mates was all a part of what was known as the feminine mystique.'*

Suddenly remembering who had fixed supper the night before, Catherine settled down on the bed, proclaiming, "Okay - you cook, It's your turn anyway."

His tone of voice just a tad brusque, he grumbled, "I knew that when we began this conversation."

Sitting up and extending both arms high over his head, Vincent moaned softly as tight shoulder muscles cramped even more, as though in protest at being forced to shift positions. Peering around the room, he frowned, and then sank forward on his stomach, muttering, "Where on earth did I ... Ah, there it is ..."

Staring avidly at his round, dimpled bottom as it came into view, Catherine grinned and kept her lascivious thoughts to herself.

Stretching one long arm over the lower end of the bed, a clawed finger scooped a short, blue bathrobe up off of the carpet. After slipping it on and tying it loosely at the waist, Vincent reached up with his left hand and smoothed back his wild tumble of hair, asking, "So, my dear, have you decided what you would like to eat?"

Now, he didn't *really* want her to answer that question truthfully - did he?

Eyeing her lover's heavily muscled, half-naked thighs, his partially-bared chest, and glancing down at the slightly erect phallus which seemed to be playing a rather erotic game of peek-a-boo with her from in-between the folds of his robe, Catherine kept her tone of voice tightly under control.

"I'd like some scrambled eggs, a large piece of cantaloupe, coffee, and about ... oh ... four slices of wheat toast, please."

Thinking that he must have misunderstood, he peered at her uncertainly. "Did you say ... four slices?"

"Uh huh. And smother them in butter and raspberry jam."

"As you wish." Getting to his feet, he started forward, hesitated, and then turned around. "How many eggs would you like?"

Seeming to consider that for a moment, Catherine pursed her lips. Coming to a decision, she solemnly announced, "Six."

"S ... six?"

Smirking as Vincent's eyebrows shot up into his hairline, his own personal little imp clapped her hands together, exclaiming gleefully. "Gotcha again!"

"Yes, that makes two times ... doesn't it," came a growl that seemed to hone in on her spine.

'*Oh, oh.*' Catching the look of '*Come-uppance*' in his eyes as her infuriated lover strode purposefully toward the bed, Catherine leapt to her feet and made a mad dash for the bathroom, but she didn't quite make it.

"Yikes!"

Yelping as two powerful arms curled around her hips, yanked her from the floor, and tossed her sideways to the bed, she landed face down and decided to stay that way - then winced as a calloused palm made intimate contact with her backside.

"Hey, that wasn't very nice!"

Tearing his bathrobe off and settling in behind her, Vincent put his mouth to her right ear. After nipping the

lobe, he licked at it, rumbling, "Where is it written that I must be unendingly *'nice'?*"

Reaching behind her to rub at her assaulted flesh, she griped, "I hope you're planning to kiss any part of my body you decide to *'wound'.*"

Sliding his left hand underneath her and stroking his thumb along the curve of her breasts, Vincent possessively cupped his right one around the nest of curls just below her belly, vowing, "Oh, I'm planning on doing much more than merely *'kissing'* a great many parts of you."

"Deal." Stifling her giggles in the pillow, Catherine lifted her bottom just far enough to nudge against the tip of his quickly hardening masculinity. When he moaned her name and instantly changed the angle of his hips, she smiled to herself, thinking, *'If you thought I 'got you' before, you're in for a surprise, kiddo.'*

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Sitting across from Vincent at the kitchen table, Catherine finished the last of her toast, licked the traces of jam off of her fingers, and then sat back, groaning, "Oh, that was good." Patting her stomach, she smiled at him. "Thanks."

Mirroring her smile with an even larger one, he replied, "You're welcome."

When those crystal blue eyes focused on her, Catherine felt a blush stealing over her face.

"I'm well aware of that."

Glancing at the clock and realizing that Vincent would have to leave soon, she sighed and slowly got to her feet. Then she eyed the sink and frowned, wondering why it was that when men cooked they seemed to use every blessed pot and pan they could lay their hands on.

Sneering at the stack of dishes, she began, "Well, I'd better put those in the dishwasher, and then go and change my clothes."

"But, why change," he asked, seeming puzzled. "We're going directly home, aren't we?"

*'Home.'* Deciding that she really loved that word, Catherine smiled. "Yes, but ..." Gesturing to the jogging top she wore, one that ended just at the lower curve of her breasts and showed off her cleavage to its best advantage, and then sliding her hand over the very tight shorts she was wearing, she made a face. "... if Father sees me in this get-up, he'll certainly have something to say about it."

"I don't think so," Vincent contradicted gently.

Moving to stand in front of him, she arched an eyebrow. "He won't?"

"No." Letting his eyes travel slowly over her body, he observed, "If he should happen to see you dressed like that, Father won't be ... able ... to voice any disapproval whatsoever, my dear." Reaching for her, he lightly stroked the underside of her left breast with the tips of his fingers. "For the shock will probably cause him to temporarily lose the power of speech."

Doing a bit of feminine *'fishing,'* she put her hands at her hips and beamed at him. "Sexy, huh?"

"Hmmm, very." Peering down at her scantily-clad legs, and the space between them, Vincent shook his head

from side-to-side, reminding her, "If you recall, the first time I saw you clad in this particular attire, I lost the ability to form complete sentences for ... some moments."

Making no effort to conceal her delight, Catherine lifted the ends of his hair in her fingers and then let them drift lazily back to his shoulders. "You really like what I'm wearing, don't you?"

Scrutinizing the items of discussion, he retorted, "No, not really."

Not expecting that, Catherine gave him a puzzled look. "Why not?"

Wrapping one hand at her waist, he brought her closer, murmuring huskily, "Because it conceals parts of you that I have grown ... exceedingly fond ... of looking at."

"Oh." Winking at him, she reached down and began to undo the ties of his robe. "And while we're on the subject of clothing ..."

Tilting his head to the right, Vincent glanced down at the movement of her hands, thinking, *'So, we begin again, do we? Good.'* When she eased his robe open and then pushed it back off of his shoulders, a fierce shudder seemed to work its way from the top of his head right down to the soles of his feet. Placing his left hand at the edge of her hip, he used the other one to close the distance separating them.

Contemplating the image of his face mirrored in her eyes, he allowed himself to get lost there for a moment, then warned in a low, throaty growl, "If you insist on pursuing ... this ... any farther, you shall be treading on dangerous ground, my dearest love."

Sliding her right hand over the column of his throat, Catherine caressed his ear gently with the pad of her thumb and leaned closer. When their mouths were a breath apart, she whispered, "Is that a threat, or a promise?"

"Neither one." Eyes the color of a tempest-tossed sea met hers. "It's a simple statement of fact."

Sighing, she afforded him a winsome pout. "I was hoping it was a promise."

"Oh, you bewitching, utterly disconcerting woman!"

Lunging to his feet so suddenly she jumped, startled by his speed, Vincent swept one muscled forearm around her waist and captured her legs with the other one. Urgently scooping her into his arms, he strode out of the kitchen.

Stepping into the bedroom and suddenly remembering that he had told Father that he would return Below Monday evening, he quickly calculated the time. There was approximately an hour left until dusk. *'Ah well, that would have to do. For now.'*

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Walking arm-in-arm with the one she loved, Catherine greeted various members of the community passing by with a beaming smile and a wave of her hand, remarking, "Everyone seems very happy to see us."

"Yes." Keeping his eyes focused on the corridor ahead of them, his voice dropped to a barely discernible whisper. "How could anyone see ... you, and not be happy?"

Glancing up and noting the upward curve of Vincent's mouth, Catherine tugged gently at his arm. "What?"  
"Nothing ..."

Trying to muffle her feelings of disappointment, she trod along beside him and held her silence.

When the hurt she was trying so desperately to conceal drifted through the bond, disturbing its tranquil rhythm, Vincent hesitated, and then came to a complete stop. Knowing that it wasn't fair to keep secrets from this lady, and that he had vowed never to do it again after the episode involving Lisa, he cast her a look of apology, admitting, "It's just that I never thought to be this at ease in the presence of other people with a woman on my arm."

Not meeting his eyes, she stated quietly. "And it embarrassed you."

"Catherine, please, let me finish?" Turning to face her, he bent forward and lovingly kissed the tip of her nose. "Knowing how much I cherish your touch, how could you even think that?" Gripping her chin firmly, he urged her head back until their eyes met. "You are the woman that I love, the soul of my soul, and all of our family knows that you are ... only mine, which pleases me much more than it ... should."

Aware of the pride in his tone of voice, and sensing that he was trying very hard to suppress it, Catherine blinked away tears, knowing that he still considered that emotion '*poisonous*', and contrary to everything he believed it.

"Thank you for telling me, Vincent. I realize how much courage it took for you to admit such a thing aloud." Taking him by the hand, Catherine brushed her lips over his work-hardened palm, and then hesitated. Frowning, she turned his hand over and stared down at the slight bump on the inner curve of his wrist. "How did this happen?"

Eyeing the small blister, Vincent hunched his shoulders, "I'm not sure. It may have happened earlier, when I was preparing our meal."

Thinking of a past incident, Catherine tensed her stomach muscles and tried very hard to keep a straight face. "Did the toaster attack you ... again?"

"No, that '*devil's tool*' and I seemed to have made our peace with each other, or at least we have reached a temporary truce." Curling his lower lip in obvious displeasure, he continued, "But, for some unknown reason, our wretched, copper-bottom frying pan seems to thoroughly ... resent me."

"Oh, the bad old thing." Tugging him by the arm, she urged, "Come on, we're almost home. And when we get there, I'm going to put some ointment on that dreadful blister; that should help."

"And will you kiss it, too," he asked softly. "And after you kiss it, will you bandage it, worry over it, and change the dressing every four hours so that it won't become infected?"

Well aware that she was being teased, Catherine eyed him. "If that's what you want me to do."

"It's not what I '*want*' you to do, it's what you are obliged to do." With a look of unmistakable passion in his uniquely slanted eyes - one that caused her heart to turn several hand-stands and made her knees buckle, Vincent reached out and clasped her tightly around the waist.

When Catherine regained her equilibrium, he leaned forward until their mouths were a single breath apart, growling lovingly. "After all, it's said that 'we are responsible for what, or who, we ... tame'."

*Everything you are, everything you'll be, touches the current of love so deep inside of me. Every sigh in the night, every tear that you cry, seduces me.*

*And all that I am, all that I'll be, means nothing at all, if you can't be with me. Your most innocent kiss, or your sweetest caress, seduces me.*

*I don't care about tomorrow, I've given up on yesterday. Here and now is all that matters. Right here with you, is where I'll stay. Everything in this world, every voice in the night, every little thing of beauty, comes shining through in your eyes. And all that is you, becomes a part of me, too. Cause all that you do - seduces me.*

*And if I should die tomorrow, I'd go down with a smile on my face. I thank God I've ever known you, I fall down on my knees for all of the love we've made. Every sigh in the night, every tear that you cry, seduces me.*

END