

"Would you tell me the truth, Father?"

"Of course."

"Am I a man?"

"Part of you is."

"And the part that is not?"

"I don't know the answer to that, Vincent."

(From the episode: "What Rough Beast")

POINT MADE

by Trisha Kehoe

Probing for weakness in the body it had invaded, the blunt-edged, persistent ache twisted along the left side of Vincent's long jaw, demanding attention. Nudging against it once, twice, then a third and final time, it proceeded to burrow into his awareness, until infinitesimal barbs of discomfort cruelly yanked him from his haven of quiet, dream-filled slumber.

Rubbing the left side of his neck and slowly rolling over to lay on his back, Vincent settled his buttocks down on the mattress, blinked sleepily, then yawned and stretched his long arms out in front of him. Coming fully awake in the shadowed chamber, he lifted his weighty tangle of hair away from the back of his neck, swiped at the unruly bits of it invading his eyes, and released a low grunt of displeasure.

What had awakened him? Focusing troubled azure eyes on the chamber entrance, he frowned, identical amber brows forming a downy vee pattern just over the bridge of his nose. Or who?

Trusting the edicts of what seemed to be a unique intrinsic clock, and realizing it was barely dawn, he peered expectantly into the darkness. But no one hesitated at the threshold awaiting permission to enter. Immediately alert for any evidence of intrusion, or potential menace to the world that protected and sustained his existence, and the lives of those he held most dear, Vincent tensed his upper body and sat up, his posture and expression assuming a guarded appearance. Something was amiss, but what? Unless he was on the roster for an early

morning chore or hastily readying himself to join one of the emergency work crews, he rarely awoke at this hour without some sort of justification.

Tilting his head to the right, he listened carefully to the sparse round of communiqués traveling back and forth on the pipes. Other than two short messages from outposts four and five signaling the 'all's well', and a rather terse dispatch from William, ordering today's breakfast crew to 'Get off of their lazy duffs and down to the kitchen right now', all was quiet.

Satisfied, finally, that there was no reason to be overly concerned, Vincent sighed and allowed the tension in his upper torso to ebb away to a more relaxed state. Whatever, or whomever, had disturbed his rest, the matter seemed to have resolved itself. After slowly angling his head to the left, and then to the right, easing the kinks out of his broad shoulders and unyielding neck muscles, he curled over onto his stomach, settled back down on the bed, and snuffled quietly. Envisioning a few more hours of sleep, he gathered his pillow into a more serviceable mound, curled his long arms under it, and closed his eyes.

At that same moment, from beneath the jumble of quilts came the murmur of a feminine voice, whisper soft and as gentle as a caress upon his heavily muscled forearm.

"Love?" Reaching out to pat him lightly on the curve of the hip with her right hand, Catherine swept her hair away from her eyes with the left and peered over at him, drowsy eyes mirroring her concern. "Is anything wrong?"

"No, my Dear." Curling over on his right hip to lay chin-to-chin with her, Vincent gave his full attention to the woman he cherished. Open adoration softening the rather fierce angles of his face and lower jaw to a gentler, utterly loving appearance, he smiled, whispering, "Good morning."

Still more asleep than awake, his companion concealed an expansive yawn behind one hand. "Morning."

"Please forgive my restlessness? I didn't mean to disturb you."

Burying the tip of her nose into the inviting curve of his neck and draping one arm over the edge of his shoulder, Catherine acknowledged the hushed but totally unnecessary apology with a slight nod of her head and a loving pat to the middle of his tummy. Assuming that Vincent was going back to sleep, she snuggled closer and inhaled deeply. Hmm, he always smelled so good, the scent of his skin reminding her of a sprinkling of candle-smoke, laced with freshly-grated spices.

Suspended in that glorious place halfway between awareness and dreams, her thoughts drifted back to the previous evening...

After a delightful series of poetry readings organized by some of the younger tunnel residents,

Vincent had escorted her to the threshold leading to the sub-basement of her apartment building.

Dearly wishing that this wasn't Monday, one of the nights she usually stayed Above to work on unfinished court summations, chores, phone messages, and other tedious subjects demanding her attention, she'd clomped along beside him, her mind searching frantically for a plausible reason for remaining exactly where she was. Chores could wait. Paperwork could wait. Her job would wait. As a matter of fact it could go straight to the very devil. She wanted to stay here.

When making polite conversation with Vincent seemed to go nowhere, she'd realized something was troubling him, and that he was having a bit of difficulty finding the words necessary to discuss it. Affording him every opportunity to summon up the courage to voice whatever was on his mind, she'd curled her fingers through his and remained silent, content for the moment merely to be with him.

For the last two weeks, with urgencies Above seeming to follow on the heels of those Below, the demands made on both of them had seemed all-consuming. Other than a few hastily stolen kisses and caresses, she and Vincent hadn't really had very much time together at all; at least in the way they wanted and needed to be together. At this point in their lives, stolen kisses and whispered vows of love simply weren't enough anymore. They really never had been.

Sighing happily, Catherine allowed her thoughts to travel further back in time. Had five years truly passed since she and Vincent had at last taken the 'leap of faith' he'd spoken of once? Had it really been that long? To her it seemed like only yesterday when she'd first touched him - and tasted him. Biting back a grin, she thought, *'Perhaps that's why I don't seem to crave desserts as much as I used to. After sampling what Vincent offers by way of taste, scent, and sensual imagery, ordinary hot fudge sundaes just don't cut it anymore - even ones with extra whipped cream on them, and they certainly don't taste as sumptuous as he does. Not by half.'*

Suddenly, thinking of Father, the look in her eyes turned somber. When he'd first come to realize that she and his son had gone far beyond the "limits" he deemed suitable for them, he appeared to come to terms with those facts with a surprising lack of animosity, or at least none he allowed himself to disclose outright.

Sitting with him one evening soon after that day, waiting for the absent part of her soul to return from an expedition to one of the stone quarries with Kanin, she and Vincent's somewhat irascible parent had shared cups of tea and a vast plate of freshly-made scones between them. While she was buttering her snack, Father had excused himself and disappeared into his private quarters for a moment. Returning with a stoneware cache of his precious, and carefully rationed-out, imported marmalade, he offered the jar to her, which as

far as she was concerned was a definite indication that she was no longer on his 'off with her head!' list.

Sitting across from her in his cozy, cluttered library, the man had spooned honey into his tea. Stirring the liquid around and around, he proceeded to chat affably about a discussion he'd had with Vincent on the night his son had sadly declared that she and he stood on opposite banks of the same river, and that on her side of it, she stood alone.

Thinking about that now, Catherine frowned. It was true. At that time in their lives, in an emotional sense, that river had seemed impassable, its waters too deep and its shores much too far apart to ever journey in order to reach the refuge of Vincent's arms, there to help him overcome his fear of physical intimacy. Now, finally, after so many years of anguish and uncertainties, they stood on the same side of that raging river, hand-in-hand, heart-to-heart, and soul-to-soul.

Letting her happiness flow out to him through their emotional unity, she smiled and happily nuzzled closer to the one she loved. Once he'd made up his mind to join not only their lives, but to also fulfill the 'dream' so dear to their hearts completely, in every way, Vincent had done it eagerly, joyously, never faltering, nor hesitating, not even once. After experiencing the reality of bringing the measure of their passion for each other full circle, it was inconceivable for either of them to ever retreat from that particular truth again, even if they'd wanted to - which they didn't. That fact had been made quite obvious when he couldn't seem to let go of her last night - not that she'd minded in the least.

Still seeming unable to give voice to his innermost thoughts, he'd taken her hand gently into his. Brushing the pad of his left thumb slowly along the backs of her fingers, dauntless, yet still so inherently shy eyes, shimmered gold-tinged blue as they searched hers.

Rising to her toes to wrap both arms about his neck, she'd studied the tiny particles of dust from Above that had drifted down to mingle with the muted light of his world, coming to rest as tiny sparkles of silver in her Beloved's long burnished hair. Knowing how very blessed she was to have this dear sweet soul in her life, she'd pressed a soft kiss to the edge of Vincent's mouth - which seemed to be exactly the incentive he'd needed.

So, when that masculine, totally sensuous voice asked her if she could change her plans and remain Below, with him, what woman with a shred of intelligence would have, or could have, said no? Oh yes indeed, some words, some people, and some things were definitely worth waiting for. Definitely. Waking up beside Vincent in his... their... bed, learning every solid plane, supple curve, and sensitive hidden place of his body, being able to touch him and taste him as no other woman ever would, to observe him sleepy-eyed and love-jumbled, was a decided improvement to waking up alone Topside.

* * *

Returning to the present and inhaling greedily, she took more of Vincent's scent deeply into her nostrils and smiled, whispering to herself, or so she thought, "Lady, you're an extremely fortunate woman."

From her left came a gentle rumble of, "At the moment, who is the more fortunate one in this bed is highly debatable."

Looking up and a bit startled to discover dusky mirrors of blue focused on her, she blinked, managing, "Oh... hi. I... I assumed you'd decided to go back to sleep for a little while."

"I made an attempt, but at times the images in my mind refuse to allow me such luxuries," he acknowledged in a lightly teasing voice. When she looked puzzled, he explained, "I was listening."

"To what?"

"To our Bond, and to... your thoughts within it." After softly admitting to such an appalling breach of decorum, he peered over at her and smiled, his eyes glowing with pleasure. "For some reason, at the moment our connection seems to be almost... bouncing... with barely contained energy."

"Oh really?"

That demure, yet utterly sensual expression Vincent seemed to have perfected to an art form could do things to parts of Catherine's body she didn't even have names for. More than a little chagrined that he could hone in on some things all women would rather keep to themselves at times, she tugged on the heavy cotton quilt draping the bed. Lifting it to embrace his wide shoulders, she proceeded to wrap the free end of it around her own slender ones, asking, "And, pray tell, what did the Bond have to say to you this lovely morning?"

"A great many things."

Knowing, of course, that he was teasing her, Catherine blew her hair away from her face and eyed Vincent as calmly as she could.

"Like what for instance?"

Dropping a loving kiss to the tip of her nose, he whispered huskily, "Nothing that I wasn't already aware of."

Conceding defeat, at least for the moment, she settled down under the covers and sighed, asking, "What time is it, please?"

"Just past dawn."

"Dawn?" she echoed. "I didn't realize it was that early." Crinkling up her nose, she groaned, "Now I know why I'm still tired." Edging her right knee between his, she settled purposefully between them. When a slightly trembling callused palm gently cupped her buttocks, she smiled and nuzzled the tip of her nose against his chest. "Aren't you?"

Sliding the palm of his left hand slowly back and forth across his Beloved's softly rounded bottom, and losing his focus on the gist of their conversation at the same moment, Vincent murmured, "Aren't I... what?"

"Tired?"

Lovingly easing her hair off of her forehead and lightly freckled button of a nose, he admitted, "A bit."

"As well you should be, after last night." Closing her eyes and weaving the fingers of her right hand through his mass of tousled hair, she allowed the amber tendrils to drift slowly through her fingers and back down to his shoulders, observing, "You were up until well after midnight."

His mouth curving into a barely perceptible, somewhat pleased-with-himself smile, Vincent chuckled softly. "Yes, I was, wasn't I?"

Cracking one eye open, she peered up at him. "Excuse me?"

"I was merely agreeing with you that I was 'up' rather late."

Caught completely off-guard by his explicit double entendre, and noting the playful quality in the tone of his voice, now both of Catherine's eyes were open - wide open. Surely Vincent didn't expect to exchange witticisms with her at this hour of the morning, not before she'd even had her first cup of coffee! Affording him an indignant look, she sputtered, "I... I... meant you were awake until after midnight."

"I know precisely what you meant," he replied, his tone utterly serene. When a uniquely slanted eyebrow arched in her direction, Catherine knew that not only had an invisible gauntlet just been thrown, she also felt as though it had clobbered her dead center in the middle of her forehead. Well, well, wasn't he just full of spit and vinegar this morning? Feeling her cheeks flush hotly, she glanced at him from beneath her lashes and then quickly away again. Biting down on the inside of her jaw, determined not to be the first one to succumb to laughter, she thought, *'Oh, he was getting too good at this game, the cheeky little devil!'*

At the beginning of their 'carnal relationship,' as Vincent privately delighted in calling it now, just to gauge her reaction, he'd been unable to tease her at all; it just didn't seem to be part of his nature, or so she thought then. To her delight, and at times to her utter chagrin, she'd soon discovered that teasing was not only a part of his nature; he also possessed a subtle wit and a

mind like the proverbial steel trap. Whenever the opportunity was afforded him, he was exceedingly adept at light, slightly ribald jibes, and seemed to thoroughly enjoy getting the last verbal salvo, notably at her expense.

Sliding over onto her right hip to face the desk, Catherine folded her arms across her stomach and studied the stacks of books cluttering the top of it at great length, then smiled to herself, her eyes flashing with intent. Okay fine, she could play this game, too.

Reaching behind her to purposefully jab him in the rib cage, she growled, "I'm sure you realize that you won't know where, and you won't know when, but I will definitely get you for that one."

"I shall be looking forward to it." After nuzzling the edge of her left shoulder, he nipped it gently. "I'm fully confident that in whatever form you decide to extract your revenge, the retaliation will be well worth waiting for; it usually is."

Oh, what that man's teeth could do to her! Fighting desperately to hold her focus and ignore the wealth of goose bumps peppering her skin, his lady gave a rather disdainful snort, announcing, "And I used to think you were the refined, scholarly type. Ha!" After allowing him to chew on that for a moment, she accused, "You sir, are a wicked, wicked man."

"Am I?" Even though she couldn't see the grin that statement elicited, Catherine seemed to feel it right down to the tips of her toes.

"It could have been worse, you realize." A bristled chin nudged at the lower portion of her back. "After all, I attained a rather... belated start at intimate pleasantries."

With that, a warm, moist, raspy tongue made a loving pilgrimage up the exact center of her spine all the way to the curve of her neck, then proceeded upward to lap delicately at the lobe of her ear. That was followed by a throaty murmur of, "But I do seem to be catching up, wouldn't you agree?"

Unwilling to concede defeat as yet, Catherine stuffed one end of the quilt into her mouth and choked back her giggles, praying that she'd managed to repress them before Vincent sensed how much she was enjoying his remarks. She hadn't.

Chuckling softly and reveling in this unique tête-à-tête, he gathered his red-faced angel into his arms, "Come here to me..." Rolling her over to face him, he brought her to rest pressed up against his chest. "So then, my fine lady..." Putting one finger under the curve of her chin, he coaxed her head up until their noses touched, "...you consider me to be wicked, do you?"

With all of the sincerity she could muster, given the circumstances, Catherine retorted, "Utterly."

Locking glittering eyes to hers, as memories of last night burst upon his mind in a fusion of

colors, scents and sounds, leaving him ravenous for more, Vincent scrutinized her quietly for a moment, wanting to make love to her again and again, until neither he or Catherine had a single coherent thought left between them. "Ah, but I was guided on the path to wickedness by such a rare and solicitous tutor, my Love." Emulating his swiftly rising passion, his gaze shifted from level and tranquil to one of open, utter need, blue eyes darkening to shades of midnight as they imprisoned hers. "My most precious Love."

Knowing exactly what was happening, and struggling to maintain eye contact with him, Catherine smiled, promising, "I'll get you for that one, too."

"I know." Sparkling fangs peeked out at her. "In fact, I shall insist on it."

Deciding that retreat was the better part of valor, at least right now, she wisely changed the subject. "So, why are you awake at such an early hour?"

Swallowing hard to ease a sudden dryness in his throat, Vincent urged her forward in his arms and brushed his lips over the middle of her forehead, stating softly, "I... I don't know."

As traces of uncertainty wafted through the Bond, the impression resembling that of cloud-shadows enveloping the warmth of a summer sun, Catherine frowned, sensing that he wasn't being completely honest with her, which was startling as well as a bit disconcerting. Putting her hand to the side of Vincent's face, she eased away from him just far enough to search his eyes.

"Are you sure you're feeling all right?"

Not wanting her to be concerned over what he considered to be trifling aches and pains, he merely nodded and looked away. Yet, if the truth be told, no, he wasn't feeling 'all right'. But what was causing this particular anguish came more from the soul than from other parts of his body. Catherine was planning to go Above today to have lunch with friends, and at this moment, thinking of how deeply he'd miss her, the utter selfishness of his own thoughts shamed him.

"Is there anything you'd like to discuss?"

"No, not really." Fighting to turn aside a pervading sadness before she became aware of it, he sat up in the bed. Folding his hands tightly together, he peered down at them, his tone of voice lowering to one of utter solemnity. "But I appreciate your concern."

"Of course I'm concerned," she replied, continuing, "And even though you chose not to discuss it, I understand what you're feeling right now."

Glancing at her and then quickly away again he sighed, but made no reply.

Aware of the invisible barrier this shy, vulnerable being had just forged between them,

Catherine rested her left hand on top of Vincent's until he spread his fingers just far enough apart to gently grip hers. More in tune with his innermost thoughts and emotions than any other person ever would be, or could be, she sat up and leaned over to press a nibbling kiss to the side of his velvety cheek.

"I'll miss you very much today, you know. "

When Catherine seemed to have read his thoughts once again, as she did more and more as time passed, Vincent smiled faintly. Of course she knew what he was feeling. She always knew. Staring down at their joined hands, he barely managed to get the words around the lump in his throat.

"As I shall miss you, my Dear."

With a sudden, fierce urge to hold him, she asked, "Will you do something for me?"

"You know full well that I would do anything... for you," came the softest, gentlest of replies.

"Please lay back down and open your arms?" The furrowing of his brow held the question. Needing to close even the slight distance still between them, Catherine placed one hand on the center of his chest. Lovingly twirling the profusion of hair there around the tip of her right forefinger, she smiled up at him. "Will you be my pillow?"

Sinking back to the bed, Vincent threw his arms wide, his eyes aglow with expectation as he waited for her to fill their emptiness. "I would be whatever you would wish me to be."

Rolling over to rest on top of him, she curved her body along the length of his and sighed contentedly. Oh yes, this was much, much better.

Aware, naturally, of what was troubling him, she began, "I've been promising to meet Nancy and Jen for lunch for weeks now. If I cancel out on them one more time... " Hesitating, she wrapped both of her arms around his neck and clasped her fingers tightly together, embracing him as hard she could. Knowing he would hear beyond the words, she peered up at him, observing, "At times, even the best of friends can become far too curious about... matters... that really don't concern them."

"I realize that." Gathering her into his arms, Vincent observed, "At times, they want answers. Yet, some questions simply cannot be answered, at least not in the way you would choose them to be, given different circumstances."

That said, he cupped the side of her face in the palm of his left hand. "I know that on more than one occasion you have canceled your plans and disappointed friends at the last moment because of... me. " Before she could contradict him, he placed one finger gently to the curve of her mouth, inhibiting the words. "We promised long ago never to hide the truth from each other."

"But..."

"Please?" When she nodded and said no more, he continued, "As it is, you and I have 'danced' around the reality of this subject for far too long. Now, finally, this must be said." Pausing, he studied her face somberly for a moment. "One of the truths neither of us has wanted to face is that you are slowly losing touch with your friends, with people you care for, because of your concerns regarding me and my world - our world."

"I promised long ago never to break your trust," she reminded him.

"And you never have. But those concerns still exist, my Love." Giving her a moment to admit to the certainty of his words in her own mind and come to terms with them, Vincent kept his arms wrapped around the woman he cherished above all else and gently rested his right cheek against hers. "Due to secrets you are obliged to keep, your life Above has altered greatly, especially in the last few years."

"It hasn't changed all that much," Catherine disagreed quietly. "I still spend a lot of time Above." When Vincent grunted softly, seeming to dispute that, she eyed him, insisting, "I do. I stay in the apartment two or three nights a week. I still work part time, and now and then I do some shopping..."

"When," he interrupted softly.

"When... what?"

Uncompromising eyes held hers. "When was the last time you went shopping?"

"I..." Hesitating, Catherine shrugged her shoulders and looked away. Damn. Realizing she'd just tumbled headfirst into a cleverly laid trap, she admitted, "Offhand, I can't remember."

"Which is precisely my point," Vincent declared, his tone loving but determined. "What little time you spend Above now is mostly at night in the park, with me." Hoping not to offend her, he implored, "Please don't misinterpret what I'm about to say. As much as I rejoice in having you close - always, I must learn to share you with others; with those you've known for most of your life, those you've known far longer than you have known me." Looking away, he murmured urgently, "I cannot... I must not... allow you to make such sacrifices."

"Vincent, how can you say that being with you is a sacrifice?" When he held his silence, she continued, "You know that being able to love you and share your life means everything to me." Cupping the edge of his chin in one hand, Catherine held his focus, repeating, "It means everything. After all that we've endured to get to this place in our relationship, surely you don't have any doubts about how much you mean to me?"

He smiled. "No, on that subject there are no doubts. There never shall be again." Cautiously moving the pad of his thumb over her mouth, Vincent savored her response, feeling an

extraordinary sense of pride at the shivers his mere touch invoked in this dauntless, exquisite woman. "Yet, this self-imposed isolation must end, my Love. At times, everyone needs the companionship of friends. If you should ever consider forfeiting your closeness to Nancy and Jenny on my account, I... I wouldn't be able to endure my sense of culpability; especially if I made no attempt to dissuade you from such a decision."

Brushing his bangs back from his eyes, Catherine entreated, "Please stop feeling as though you've interfered with my life! Vincent, you are that life." Leaning forward on his chest and tilting her head to the right, she smiled at him, allowing all of her emotions to enfold him through the Bond. Then, hoping to ease his inner turmoil, she touched her forehead to his, whispering urgently, "You may as well yield on this matter, you know, because nothing you can say will ever make me enjoy even one second of the time I'm not with you."

Aware of the resolute tilt of Catherine's chin, and noting the resolve in her tone of voice, Vincent crushed her to his chest. "I love you so much." Burying his face into the curve of her throat, he groaned, "So very much. I only want what is best for you."

"Well, at last we agree on something." Stroking his hair, she buried her fingers into its ruffled depths. "I want what's best for me, too, and I have that right here. I told you once, long ago, that I would willingly give up everything, for you. I meant it then, and I mean it now." Hugging him fiercely, she vowed, "I would. If it ever came to a choice of having you in my life or my friends, then they'd lose, Vincent, and that's the truth of it. But that choice doesn't have to be made, and it never will. Besides, I'd rather be with you. You've spent far too much time alone as it is."

Sitting up straighter and brushing his lips over the crown of her head, he admitted, "When I'm not with you, I do feel a bit... sorry for myself at times, yet..." Blinking away tears, Vincent touched the area just over his heart. "...I no longer feel alone in here. It's a very curious sensation, yet at the same time an immensely comforting one."

Feeling exactly the same way, Catherine nodded her head slowly up and down. "Your heart knows that wherever I am, I'll always come back to you. Always." Leaning forward, she touched her lips to the side of his face. "At times, loneliness is not only a very powerful force, it can also be an exceedingly destructive one. I promised myself you would never feel abandoned or isolated again - ever, not if I can help it."

"Yet, your connections to the world Above are extremely important, my Dear. Your friends... " Before he could finish the thought, she put one finger to his lips and pressed in gently. "Hush. My friends could never be as important to me as you are. Is that clear?" When he would have looked away, she cupped his face in her hands until he met her eyes. "Oh, my sad, sweet love, please feel the truth of what I'm saying and accept the fact once and for all. You are not only

my dearest friend in the world, you are also the most precious part of my life."

Seeming to stare into her very soul, Vincent whispered, "I believe you."

"Good." Smiling, she reminded him, "I told you once that if this is my destiny, I accept it gladly. Do you remember?" When he made no reply, Catherine gathered a large portion of his hair between her fingers and gave it a quite forceful yank. "I asked you a question."

Feeling her love and devotion soothe his perceptions of guilt in this matter, he quietly acknowledged, "I remember." Luminous eyes met hers. "I remember every word you have ever spoken to me, Catherine."

Putting one hand on his shoulder, she squeezed it gently. "And is it true that we are destined to be together - for always?"

Thinking back over the last few years, Vincent tilted his head to the left and smiled at her. "Oh, I accepted that as truth some time ago."

"Well, I'm glad that's settled." Scowling lovingly at him, she reached up to scratch the bridge of his nose. "Now, I promise to make every effort to visit my friends Above more often, but I don't ever want to have this discussion again. Agreed?"

Seeming properly chastised, the one she loved took her hands into his and held them almost too tightly. "Agreed."

"Good." Settling her bottom down into the curve of his thighs, she insisted, "My life is here, because that's where you are. And I don't want to change one single thing about that life, do you hear? Not one. And as for shopping, I don't need to go shopping. I already have more than enough clothes to last me well into my old age." When that observation invoked a soft chuckle, Catherine arched an eyebrow at him. "Oh, so you agree with that, do you?"

As the rigid set of his shoulders relaxed and the sensation of tightness in his chest eased, allowing him to breathe properly again, Vincent barely managed to contain the laughter bubbling up from within, noting, "I must admit I've never known another woman with such an extensive wardrobe."

Glad that his mood seemed to have lightened a bit, Catherine jabbed him in the tummy. "You better not have known "another" woman with such an extensive wardrobe."

Sensing that this 'I'm not worthy of you' discussion was really and truly at an end, thank goodness, she eased forward and nibbled on the center of Vincent's chest. Then, burrowing down into the area encompassing his gentle, oh, so vulnerable heart, she exposed one tiny bronzed pap. Deciding to have dessert early today, instead of waiting for lunch, Catherine swept the tip of her tongue across the puckered skin and began licking delicately at it, smiling to herself as a long uninterrupted shudder seemed to travel the length and breadth of his

body.

Capturing her by the arms and closing his eyes, he vowed hoarsely, "If you persist in this course of action, you shall be late for your luncheon engagement."

"No, I won't, it's barely dawn." Kissing and tasting her way upward to the luscious curve of his right ear, she inhaled and then blew the breath back out again as slowly as she could. Fueling the flames of both his passion and her own, she reached down to stroke his lengthening virility with the tip of her forefinger. Smiling as the unyielding flesh attained its full promise, Catherine bent her head and nibbled on the vein singing its wild cadence at the curve of Vincent's neck, pausing long enough to whisper teasingly, "Do you want me to stop?"

Arching to meet her touch, he groaned, "Must you have the words?"

"No, but I do enjoy hearing you say them," she replied, nipping him again, harder than before. "I waited quite a few years to hear you say them for the first time. "

"Hear them then." Eyes glittering with sensual expectation narrowed as they met hers. "I am far beyond the point of stopping... now. My need of you, and only you, is as a flame that sweeps through every part of my body, as powerful in the blood pounding through my veins as it is in the yearning centered between my thighs." Callused hands reached out to capture her by the arms. "And if you stop now, I shall surely die of my own... hungers." His hips arched upward again. "Please?"

"Yes, Love." Enjoying the solid, velvety feel of him, Catherine continued her loving torment. Enticing him onward, she stroked the highly sensitive cleft at the crown of his now fully-erect, gently pulsing flesh, asking softly, "Vincent, look at me?"

Fighting desperately to keep his traitorous hands to himself, at least for the moment, Vincent opened his eyes to find himself held captive in a sparkling green sea. Joyously losing himself in her gaze, he thought, *'Earlier I asked this woman to face certain truths, as I must face them. Those truths are there, right there, in her eyes. She has chosen to love me. Me. And that is the sweetest, most precious truth of all.'*

Yielding to a hunger rising from within without fear or hesitation, he knew that to struggle against it, or to try and contain it was not only futile but truly beyond his capabilities. Having tasted carnal desire in all of its infinite combinations of textures, scents and sounds, it had now become a part of all that he was. There would be no more denial ever again. There had been more than enough of that particular wretchedness - a lifetime of it.

Rolling Catherine almost frantically beneath him and quickly centering his body over hers, Vincent captured her slim waist with trembling hands and slid her lower on the bed. Exploding through him, his need of her inhibiting all other sensation but one of sexual urgency, he bent

forward and took her mouth with a hungered wildness he rarely displayed or yielded to. Pulling back just far enough to breathe the words into her mouth, he tensed his pelvis and rolled his hips down. Pressing inward, toward a moist core of heat that he knew existed only for him, he moaned huskily, "And even though, as you say, it is barely dawn, you shall still be late..."

Sometime later, having accepted Catherine's gracious offer to 'scrounge' something for them to eat, Vincent sat on the edge of the bed and stretched his long arms out in front of him. Marshalling all of the forces at his command, which at the moment were woefully sparse in number, he shook his hair out of his eyes and rose slowly to his feet.

"Hmm... "

Reaching around to rub at the center of his back, he groaned as every group of muscled sinew encasing his spine screamed in silent protest at what he'd put them through these past hours.

'Insatiable, that's what you are, you...' Unable to form a word vile enough to call himself, he sighed heavily in self-reproach. *'You seem to have forgotten that Catherine looks to you to set the limits regarding making love, and great fool that you are, once again you've allowed yourself to overstep those needed and necessary boundaries. If you are not more cautious in the future, one day you and she will surely destroy each other with such... such... overly impassioned endeavors.'* Then, reliving the past hours, a lustful glint came into his eyes, lightening their somber hue. *'Ah, but as Catherine herself declared only moments ago, 'To die while making love would be a grand and glorious way to expire.'*

Striding over to the burnished oak wardrobe which took up a good portion of the left wall, Vincent had just reached inside of it to select a clean shirt, socks, and a pair of work-pants when he heard the sound of footsteps just beyond the chamber entrance. Immediately recognizing the hesitant, deliberate gait, he struggled quickly into his trousers, calling out, "Come in, Father."

Entering the room, a man with wire-rimmed glasses perched on the bridge of his nose smiled warmly. "Good morning."

"Good morning." After returning the elderly man's smile with an equally affectionate one, Vincent studied him silently for a moment. Knowing his hip had been causing him a great deal of pain for days now, he inquired solicitously, "Are you well?"

"Today I feel every second of my age, and then some. But thank you for asking." Sinking gratefully into the chair beside the desk, Father eased most of his weight off his right side, trying to alleviate his discomfort. Noting the expression of obvious concern in Vincent's eyes, he arched an eyebrow in his direction, announcing, "I've decided that I may just give Mouse permission to devise that new hip for me after all."

"A new... hip?"

"Yes." Looking away, Father hid a mischievous smile. *Got him.* "He's been asking to show me various designs on the apparatus for quite some time now."

Vincent seemed surprised. "But, who would perform such delicate surgery?" His eyes widened. "Surely you aren't considering that Mouse be involved in any way?"

"No, of course not. Peter could do it."

"Is it a dangerous procedure?"

"Not at all. Many of the hospitals Above perform it routinely these days." Pausing thoughtfully, the Tunnel Elder studied the desk directly in front of him for a moment before continuing, "And I must remember to ask Narcissa to cast one of her most effective spells on the appliance before it's put to use."

If Vincent's eyebrows had risen any higher, they would have become part of his ragged-edged bangs. "Nar... Narcissa?"

"Yes." Calmly eyeing his astounded-looking son, Father went on, "Maybe then I'll be able to dance at Winterfest without causing other people bodily injury."

Finally grasping the actual gist of this conversation, and realizing to his chagrin he had been utterly taken in by every blessed word of it, Vincent moved to stand next to his grinning parent. In just the right mood at the moment to play along with his tomfoolery, he chuckled softly.

"If such is the case, will you please ask Mouse and Narcissa to fashion two new such 'devices' for me while they're about it?"

Glancing up at him, the older man observed, "But you dance beautifully."

"I think my waltz is satisfactory, as long as I remember to count to three." Bending forward to place a kiss on Father's right cheek, Vincent admitted, "But my foxtrot is deplorable, and my attempts at doing the tango leave me abysmally aware of the size of my two left feet."

"Still and all, Mouse's idea might bear looking into. Who knows, maybe he can replace my entire leg while he's at it." Stroking his beard, Father made a great attempt to keep a straight face. "Vincent?"

"Yes?"

"Do you know of any stores that sell brightly-plumed parrots?"

"Pet shops would have them. Why?"

"I always did want to be a pirate."

Just as Father and Vincent burst into uproarious shared laughter, Catherine entered the room. Balancing a large, metal tray on the palms of her two hands, she smiled at them, asking, "What's so funny?"

Nearing her, Vincent took the tray and set it carefully down on the desk. Wiping his eyes and fighting to catch his breath, he turned to face her, managing to choke out, "It seems Father has decided to...sail the ocean blue."

"What?"

Focusing twinkling gray eyes on the woman who had become like a daughter to him, the Tunnel Patriarch greeted her with, "Good morning, my dear, and..." Pausing for effect, he waved his cane over his head, "... brace the mainsail!"

Going wide-eyed, Vincent collapsed onto the bed. Placing his hands on his rib cage, he began laughing with renewed vigor. Delightedly slapping the arm of his chair, Father joined in.

Eyeing them, Catherine frowned, deciding that both men had gone utterly daft. Shrugging, she proceeded to sit down, pour herself a cup of coffee, and stirred sugar into it, waiting patiently until the atmosphere was more conducive to intelligent conversation. When neither Vincent nor Father seemed able to stop laughing, she reached for the plate of muffins on the tray. Carefully breaking one into two pieces, she began ladling jelly onto one half, wondering how many strait-jackets were readily available down here? She might just need a couple of them - and very soon.

* * *

Leaning on the handle of his pickax, Cullen plucked a large hanky out of the back pocket of his jeans and dabbed at his forehead, exclaiming, "I don't know about the rest of you, but my damn stomach's growling! How about stopping for lunch?"

Seeming to agree, the other members of the work crew laid their picks, shovels, and hammers aside for the moment and leaned back against the tunnel walls. After stretching arm and shoulder muscles that ached with fatigue, they paired off in groups of three or four and swiped at the grime covering their faces.

'Whew!' With that, Mouse plunked down next to Vincent and Kanin and brushed his shirtsleeve over the rivulets of sweat running down his face, "Hot work."

"It sure is!" Offering him a canteen filled with water, Kanin inspected the tunnel walls and nodded in satisfaction. "But once all of the beams are in place, this area will make two fine

chambers. With all of the new members we've been getting lately, God knows we can use the room."

Agreeing with that observation, Vincent started to voice his thoughts, then hesitated. Swallowing hard, he put his hand to the left side of his throat. There it was again, that nagging irritation that had been badgering him for some time, and now it seemed to have spread to his upper neck. Pressing his fingers tentatively against the back of his ear, he flinched as the distress intensified. That area was especially tender. What on earth was it? At a loss to resolve the mystery, he frowned, wondering if he should see Father when the day's work was completed.

Eyeing his best friend, Mouse had been watching the activity of the last few moments. Trying to fathom why Vincent was poking at himself, he asked, "You okay?"

"I... I'm not sure," came the raspy, croaked reply. Swallowing again, harder than the first time, Vincent put both of his hands to the sides of his throat and growled. Oh bother, now the... whatever it was... seemed to be affecting his vocal cords as well.

"You sound funny. Look all sweaty, too..." Before Vincent could discourage him, Mouse reached over and slapped one hand against his forehead, observing loudly, "Hot. Hotter than hot!"

"Everyone is warm," Kanin interrupted. "We all sweat, you know - even Vincent."

"Not like this." Taking the stone cutter by the hand, the troubled younger man settled his palm against the forehead in question, ordering, "Feel."

Being a parent, and experienced with sudden illnesses of all kinds, Kanin felt Vincent's forehead, then he frowned. "You do seem to be spiking a beaut of a fever." Noting the look of extreme vexation in the darkening blue of his friend's eyes, he quickly drew his hand away. "Maybe you're coming down with a 'bug' or something."

"Hey," Mouse piped up, "Eric was sick this morning, too!" Not wanting to catch whatever it was, he edged away from everyone, just in case. "Maybe you caught it!"

Tentatively resting one hand on Vincent's shoulder, Kanin urged, "Why don't you go and let Father examine you?"

"N... No," came the rasped denial, "Not... now."

Knowing how Vincent felt about others having to do his share of any given task, Kanin urged, "Aw, go on, the rest of us can finish up here."

Unable to trust his voice, Vincent shook his head adamantly back and forth. Ignoring the pain that brought, as well as the onset of ringing in his ears, his long hair flew in every direction as

Kanin's suggestion was emphatically denied for the second time.

By now, other members of the work crew had started gathering around them.

Hunkering down next to Vincent, Cullen studied him for a moment, then grimaced. "No offense, man, but you sure look like somethin' the cat dragged in, and then decided it really didn't want."

"Yeah," Zack piped up, adding his two cents worth, "You do look kinda sick."

Looking away, Vincent took a deep breath and forced the words from his throat - a throat that was incredibly sore. "Please, don't concern yourselves? I'm fine, truly I am..." Extremely uncomfortable to find himself the center of such well-meaning, but unnecessary scrutiny, he jerked to his feet - and immediately regretted doing it.

As the cavern walls tilted crazily and began taking on odd shapes and colors, Vincent put one hand to his chest. Shaking his head from side to side as the ringing in his ears escalated to a high-pitched whining sound, he blinked rapidly, trying to focus. But suddenly everyone and everything appeared hazy and slightly off-center. Dear God, what was this? What was happening to him? Feeling hands grabbing at him, he growled, warning them off, but then his legs suddenly gave way. Pitching sideways, he grabbed at the wall in a vain attempt to keep from falling as everything faded to gray and then went black.

Throwing himself forward in a vain attempt to break Vincent's fall, Kanin shouted, "Catch him, he's going down!"

* * *

At the same moment that Vincent collapsed, Catherine was walking purposefully along Fifth Avenue. Having bid Nancy and Jen an affectionate farewell, she decided to do a bit of shopping after all, but not for herself. The target of this particular expedition was the man in her life. Intending to give Vincent a good case of the 'guilts' for teasing her this morning, she was going to buy him the most exquisite, expensive, fisherman knit sweater she could find.

Smiling to herself, she had just crossed the threshold of a store titled The Banana Republic® when her throat suddenly felt... scratchy. Reaching into her purse for a mint, she unwrapped it and popped it into her mouth, but it didn't help. If anything, the piece of candy seemed to make swallowing that much more difficult.

Stopping at the foot of the escalator that would take her to the third floor and the Men's Department, Catherine put her hand to her left ear, and then winced. Now her ear hurt, too,

damn it. What on earth? Trying to remember if she'd been near anyone with a cold lately, she swallowed hard, trying to ease the sensation of dryness at the back of her throat. With all of the germs in the air Topside, maybe she'd caught strep somewhere, or one of the other diseases that seemed to run rampant up here. Thinking back to her childhood, she pursed her lips. Well, at least it wasn't tonsillitis; her tonsils had been removed when she seven.

Deciding to finish her shopping and then head home to ask Father to give her something for the discomfort, she stepped onto the escalator, then froze. Oh my God! Turning around and nudging her way through the crowd of shoppers as politely as she could, she sprinted down the moving stairway. "Excuse me. Please excuse me..."

Yes, her tonsils had been removed, but what about Vincent's? In all of the years she'd known him, he never seemed eager to discuss childhood complaints, or anything else along those lines. She hadn't pressed him on the issue, of course, knowing he would speak of those memories when he choose to, and not before.

Suddenly realizing it wasn't her throat that really ached, or her ears that were actually ringing, a look of fear came into Catherine's eyes. Hurrying out of the store, she stood on the sidewalk for a moment, trying to think of the quickest route home. Standing on tiptoe, she craned her neck, wondering if Mister Chan was open today? At times he took Tuesday afternoons off to visit his great-grandchildren. Dashing across the busy street and dodging cars like a true New York pedestrian, she turned the handle on the front door of the China Moon Tea Shop. With her heart pounding much too fast, she sighed in relief when the door swung inward and a bell jingled, announcing her to the unseen proprietor. Moving through the maze of brightly painted tables and chairs, she stepped quickly into the back room.

"Ah, my friend," a softly accented voice drifted down from a ladder at her left, "So good to have you among us once again!"

Visibly startled, she put one hand to her heart, gulped, and looked up. "Oh, hello Mister Chan."

"You stay a while... " He gestured to the front of the shop. "...We have tea and nice long visit."

"I can't today, but thank you for the invitation." Hoping that he wasn't offended, Catherine smiled apologetically and continued moving toward the cellar door.

'Ah, these young people today, always in such a hurry.' Shaking his head sadly and studying Catherine until she disappeared from view, the elderly Helper started slowly down the ladder.

Clomping down the cellar stairs and hurrying toward the back wall, Catherine moved a stack of wooden crates to one side. After slipping behind them and pulling the containers back into their previous position, she started down the steps of the concealed passageway. Even though their connection seemed faint and slightly out-of-sync, which worried her all the more, she

could still feel Vincent's pain, as well as his dread. She knew, as he did, that if his tonsils ruptured, or were inflamed beyond the point where medicine could impede the infection, that meant surgery, and with surgery came blood loss.

Blood loss.

With that thought, her heart seemed to crack against her rib cage even harder and faster. Due to his distinct individuality, Vincent was, perhaps, one of only people in the world who couldn't afford to lose any blood, for there was none to replace it - not anywhere.

Sending all of her courage and devotion soaring on 'love's light wings' across the distance separating them, she silently implored, 'My Love, are you all right?'

When there was nothing by way of acknowledgment except a heightened depth of isolation invading the Bond, Catherine increased her strides to a dead-run. Sprinting through the seemingly endless, torch-lit corridors, she tried not to dwell on the notion that he was quite possibly unconscious.

Fighting for every labored breath, her own heart pounding in cadence with his, she put one hand to her chest, thinking, *'I can feel everything he's feeling; everything, even the fear. I'm afraid, too, but I can't acknowledge it - I can't - not even to myself.'* tears streamed from her eyes. *'When we joined our lives completely, in every way, in that same wondrous moment, we joined our souls as well. That too, is part of our destiny. Now, neither of us can hide what we're feeling from the other; even when we try our very best to do... exactly that.'*

Coming to a passageway that branched off into two separate corridors, she hesitated. Tilting her head slightly, she bent forward, listening intently to sounds and reverberations only she would ever be privileged to hear in quite this same way - that of an exceptional, wildly thundering heart. Veering off the main path to the corridor on the left, one that led away from the Hub, Catherine bolted toward the Hospital Chamber, praying silently, *'Dear God, please let him be all right? He has to be all right!'*

Forced to stop for a moment to catch her breath, frantic eyes studied the stone ceiling encompassing the world she had chosen as her home. Pleading with forces ranging far beyond her sphere of influence, she petitioned silently, *'If You really are there, help him now? Please? If that dear, gentle soul You created, is in pain, then so am I; so are all of the people who love him.'*

Swiping at the tears coursing down her face, Catherine started forward again. Hoping to envelop Vincent in a sanctuary made of pure unconditional love, and praying that the scope of their combined energy would shelter and sustain him until she could reach his side, she rounded the last turn in the corridor, whispering urgently, "I'm nearly there, Dearest. Be well. Please be well?"

The first person Catherine met as she charged breathlessly into the Hospital Chamber was a worried-looking Mary. Taking her by the hand, the older woman tried to halt her friend's forward progress, explaining quietly, "Father and Kanin are helping Vincent get into a hospital gown and getting him settled into bed."

Nodding, Catherine eyed the curtained area. "Is he... conscious?"

"No, dear," came the soft reply. "Mouse told us Vincent seemed to be in pain, and that he was having some difficulty speaking. When Kanin and the other men urged him to go to Father to resolve the problem, he refused." Sighing, she continued, "Then, he simply... collapsed."

Wincing as the pain on the left side of her throat intensified, Catherine rubbed at it, noting uneasily, "I think it may be his tonsils."

"Father is examining him now for just such a possibility. But, how did you...?" Not finishing the thought, Mary squeezed her companion's hand gently and made no farther comment.

Narrowing her eyes and staring impatiently at the white curtain isolating her from Vincent, Catherine thought, *'If they don't finish up in there in two seconds, I'm going in!'*

Seeming to enfold the bed like a massive, forbidding shroud, the sphere of faded linen appeared to be taunting her, almost as though it were daring her to breach its gently undulating frontiers. Then, as the curtains finally parted and Kanin stepped out, followed by Father, she eased free of the slender hand clasping hers. "I must go to him..."

As Catherine hurried past Kanin, he started to say something to her, but instead he merely touched her on the arm and smiled sadly. Shoving his hands into his pants-pockets, he started for home, wanting to explain the situation to his wife, Livy.

Having heard Mary speaking with Catherine, as she approached, Father straightened his shoulders, bracing himself for the inevitable round of questions, but she said nothing. Merely nodding to him by way of acknowledgment, she took a deep breath and disappeared behind the curtain.

Fully understanding, of course, that her first priority was to be at Vincent's side, not to ask questions, Father sank down wearily to a nearby stool and rubbed at the bridge of his nose. When Mary walked over and rested one hand lightly on his shoulder, he glanced up at her. Yanking his glasses off, he blinked rapidly for a moment and then shook his head, muttering hoarsely, "I... I've done all that can be done, at least for now."

"How serious..." Hesitating, Mary eyed the curtained area, "...is it?"

"Very bad, I'm afraid. He's still unconscious; he may even be in the initial stages of coma." Seeming to visibly age before her eyes, Father stared into the past "This happened once before. You were living here then, weren't you?"

"Yes." Recalling that terrible time, she frowned. When any form of pain, be it mental or physical, became intolerable to Vincent, his body and mind appeared to simply 'shut down', for want of a more suitable phrase. She remembered Father telling her then that only his son could control those instincts, and that only he could decide whether or not to repress them. She studied her companion worriedly for a moment before asking, "Surely the sulfur drugs will help?"

"With Vincent's unusual physiology, coupled with his known susceptibility to even the most innocuous of remedies, I have no way of knowing for certain if the drug itself will do more harm than good! And any infection as invasive as this one seems to be could very well kill..."

"Jacob!" Mary gasped, tightening her grip on his shoulder. "You mustn't allow yourself to even consider such a thing!"

"I'm afraid we must prepare ourselves for... all possibilities." Ever the pragmatist, the Tunnel Elder cleared his throat and met her eyes. "Facts are facts, Mary. Fact one is that Vincent's fever is still climbing. Fact two is that even with all of the packed ice at our disposal, plus the small amount we've managed to obtain from Above, it hasn't seemed to make even the slightest difference, at least not yet."

Mentally inventorying the supplies on hand, she asked, "When will you begin the surgery?"

"How in bloody hell can I operate on him!" Father exclaimed, angry gray eyes blazing into hers. Slumping forward, he studied his hands. "Please forgive me for that... outburst?"

"Of course." She smiled dispiritedly. "I know how worried you must be. So am I." Thinking of Catherine, Mary sighed. "So is everyone who loves him."

"Dear God, what am I going to do? Vincent's fever is over one hundred and five, and he's not responding to stimuli of any kind. I simply cannot operate under these conditions. Yet, if the surgery isn't performed soon..." As his voice broke, Father buried his face in the palms of his hands, "...we could lose him."

Putting her arms around him, the woman's heart went out to her troubled associate. Jacob was a strong man, a caring man, as well as a highly skilled physician. How helpless he must feel at this moment - and how utterly terrified.

* * *

On the other side of the curtain, Catherine leaned over the bed and put the fingers of her right hand to the side of Vincent's face. Oh God, he was burning up. Taking care not to disturb the

large packs of ice encasing his body, she rested her mouth at the curve of his ear, whispering, "I'm here."

When there was no response, she tried to wake him by sheer force of will, staring at him long and hard for several moments, but there was still no reaction - none.

Needing to be even closer to him, she slipped out of her coat, placed it between herself and the ice, and carefully edged onto the narrow bed. Laying on her right side, she gently eased her arms around Vincent and kissed him on the forehead, and then the eyes, and lastly brushed her mouth over his, imploring, "Please wake up? You have to. You have to."

Sending her soul out in search of his and tightening her arms about him, Catherine touched her forehead to his and purposely allowed her voice to take on a sharp, demanding tone. "I want you to wake up, do you hear me?" Sobbing quietly, she took his hands into hers and squeezed them as hard as she could. "Vincent, please? I love you so much, and I'm very, very frightened. I need you. You must hear me! I need you!"

Pulling at him and pressing closer to confine him to this floating, tranquil place, a velvet blackness which had become a basic need for self-preservation battled against Vincent's enormous force of will. Wanting to remain here, free of the pain, in this simple nothingness, his subconscious fought to drag him back down - back into the shadows. There was no pain there, and no fear. Yet, a voice was calling out to him. Catherine's voice. She needed him. He could sense her foreboding - for him. How could he not answer when she was so very afraid?

Gripping her fingers weakly as her emotions and words seized at the center of his soul, bringing him back to her, Vincent groaned once, and then a second time. Swallowing hard and struggling to form words, he winced, and then his eyes fluttered open. "Cath..."

"Yes, Love, I'm here." Embracing him carefully, she smiled down at him through her tears. "Don't try to talk." After stroking his forehead with the tips of her fingers, she brushed Vincent's wild tangle of hair away from his face and dropped a rain of soft kisses to every part of him that wasn't encased in blankets.

Holding tightly to her hand as though gathering strength from her touch, he tried desperately to focus on Catherine's face. Silently voicing all of the questions he was unable to ask, confused blue eyes stared up at her, the pain and fear in his searching gaze all too obvious.

Seeking to comfort him, she brushed Vincent's hair back over his shoulders and tried to find the words she needed, but only three came immediately to mind. "I love you."

"Thank God, he's finally awake..." Having heard the murmurs of conversation, Father stepped quickly through the curtain. Pulling a stethoscope from his pocket as he moved forward and positioning it in his ears, he eased his patient's hospital gown to one side and pressed the

instrument to his chest. After listening intently for a moment, he sighed, relieved to find that Vincent's heart rate had resumed a more accepted rhythm in the last few moments. Glancing at Catherine, he smiled to himself. Of course it had. Studying his son's face, he inquired hopefully, "Can you hear me?"

The golden head bobbed slowly up and down.

"Good." Taking a metal cylinder from his left vest pocket and unscrewing the top, Father retrieved a thermometer. After shaking it down, he held it out, decreeing softly, "Open your mouth."

Now the golden head shook from side to side.

"Open... your... mouth... please."

Glaring at the man who'd raised him, Vincent did as requested.

"Thank you." After carefully placing the thermometer under his son's tongue, the Tunnel elder stood back, silently counting off the seconds.

"Nuh..."

Disregarding the raspy growl of displeasure leveled at him as a highly sensitive nose and taste buds were assailed by the vile scent and bitterness of the antiseptic, Father placed one hand on Vincent's shoulder and squeezed it gently.

"If you haven't already guessed as much, it's your tonsils. They're going to have to be removed, and very soon, as well as your adenoids." When Vincent merely stared at him, he explained, "They're beyond saving at this point." Reaching out, he reclaimed the thermometer. After scanning it, he nodded, satisfied with the results. The fever was finally edging in a downward direction. Leaning closer, he eyed his son resolutely. "Over the years, you've studied enough of my medical journals to grasp the possible implications of an adenoidal infection this severe, haven't you?"

Again, a slight nod.

'Well, I haven't read your journals," Catherine declared, frowning. "Besides the... obvious concerns, what else could happen?"

For a moment, Father made no comment. Turning to the bedside table, he wrung out a cloth in a basin of water. After placing it on Vincent's forehead, he waited for him to decide, knowing whether to tell her all of the facts of the situation or not was his decision to make, and only his.

Reaching out and taking Catherine by the hand, Vincent drew her down on the bed and laced his fingers through hers. Wishing there were more time to prepare her for this, or some way to

spare her entirely, he tried to project only feelings of love and serenity through their Bond. She must be told; he knew she would have it no other way. Meeting Father's somber gaze, he nodded.

Taking a deep breath, the older man straightened his shoulders, beginning, "To answer your question, Cathy, other matters may complicate Vincent's surgery, but I won't know the full extent of the matter until he can... tell me himself."

"You said that his adenoids are badly infected?"

"Yes."

A puzzled frown creased her forehead. "But, doesn't that condition usually accompany tonsillitis?"

"In some instances. And in this case, Otitis Media, an inflammation of the middle ear, is going to increase the more obvious risks." When she still seemed at a loss, Father reached out to touch her gently on the shoulder. "Even if the surgery goes flawlessly, and the loss of blood is kept to a minimum..." Hesitating, he looked away.

"Tell me," she urged, her eyes clinging to Vincent's. "Just... say it."

"The illness, or the surgery, or perhaps a combination of both, may leave Vincent... profoundly deaf."

* * *

Less than an hour later, Catherine drew on a hospital gown, paper slippers, and a pale blue surgical mask. After taking a deep breath and exhaling it slowly, she stepped into the operating area of the Hospital Chamber and sat down on the metal stool Mary had placed beside Vincent's bed.

Father and Vincent had both made an attempt to dissuade her from watching the impending operation, but she'd insisted. He wasn't going to endure this alone. He just wasn't. Wanting him to feel her presence as well as sense it, she slowly eased her fingers around the tubes running from her Beloved's left forearm and clung tightly to his hand. When his fingers curled gently around hers, she straightened her shoulders and prayed to each and every deity she could think of, waiting tensely for the surgery to begin.

Lifting his head slightly, to peer over the bags of sand placed at either side of his neck for the express purpose of keeping him immobile, Vincent focused all of his attention on Catherine's face and afforded her a shaky smile. With his expressive, crystal blue eyes announcing

everything she would ever need to know, he brought her slightly trembling left hand to his mouth, placed a soft kiss to the palm, and then slowly allowed their clasped fingers to settle back to the bed.

Not trusting her voice at the moment, Catherine tried to smile, putting all of her courage and love into the slight upward curve of lips. Gripping his hand tightly, and trying to conceal her panic, she took a lingering breath. When that did nothing to alleviate the churning sensation in the pit of her stomach, she closed her eyes, gulping hard as Mary and Father moved toward the bed.

"Very well," the doctor announced quietly, "We're ready to begin. Mary, please remember to inject the solution into the IV at precisely one eighth of an ounce at a time; no more than that."

Meeting his eyes over the top of her surgical mask, his assistant nodded. Totally focused on their tasks, while Mary prepared a mild intravenous anesthetic, Father readied three syringes filled with Xylocaine, which were to accompany the IV drip. Three was the maximum amount of medication he dared give his oh-so-special patient. Gradually, Vincent would drift into a 'twilight sleep.' Even though he'd be unable to actually feel the scalpel cutting into his flesh, he would still know that it was... there.

As Mary neared the head of the bed, Vincent reached out and tugged on the end of her surgical gown. Leaning closer, she inquired solicitously, "Yes dear?"

Being extremely careful not to dislodge any of the plastic sheathing taped to his inner arm, he gestured to the pad of paper and pen lying on the bedside table. When Mary handed him the items he wanted, Vincent scribbled something down and then turned the pad around so that Father could read the words - Where am I going to wake up?

Frowning, the elderly physician replied, "Why, here of course." Then, realizing what his son was truly asking him, Father blinked away tears. "I shall do my utmost to see that you wake up here, Vincent. Right here." Clenching his jaw and nodding to Mary, he turned and uncovered a tray containing a vast assortment of gleaming medical instruments.

* * *

Thinking that perhaps Vincent would rest easier without her anxieties intruding on his dreams, Catherine kissed him gently, and tiptoed away from the bed. Dear God, the surgery had been a terrible ordeal, especially for him, but he seemed to have come through it all right. Now it was just a matter of waiting to find out if there would be any impairment to his hearing. When

Vincent was fully conscious again Father told both of them that he wouldn't be able to determine the extent of any possible damage for approximately twenty-four hours.

Contemplating those seemingly endless hours, she sighed wearily, then, peering back over her shoulder, she smiled at the large figure fast asleep in bed on the far side of the room. Whatever the outcome was, Vincent must be made to realize, and accept, that nothing could ever change how much she loved him; absolutely nothing.

Blinking away tears, she thought, *'That will have to made very, very clear to him. I know he thinks his place in this world is that he bear the brunt of the responsibility where protecting it is concerned, and in doing so, safeguard those who shelter him. If he can't hear, because of who he is Vincent would consider himself unable to fulfill his duties as before, and that would truly break his spirit, as well as his heart. Thinking to release me from the 'burden' of loving him, he might even try to send me away. If he ever tried to do that to me... to us, again, I won't allow it; I simply won't!'*

Sighing, she considered how it would affect him to know that he wouldn't be able to patrol the outposts alone anymore, or to hear any possible alarms chiming on the pipes. At that thought the look in her eyes grew fiercely determined. If the worse happened, and it wouldn't - it simply couldn't - then Vincent would have to come to terms with certain... restrictions. But everybody had those, in one way or another. He'd still be able to stand watch with other Helpers. He'd still be able to feel the pipes with his hands and learn to read the messages that way, as their friend Laura did. And she'd be here to help him; to stand by him 'whatever happens, whatever comes.'

Curling her hands into tensed fists, Catherine fought to contain her anger, as well as the sobs rising in her throat. Oh God, didn't he have more than enough to endure as it was? Peering up at the ceiling, she implored silently, 'No more? Damn it, no more!'

It was said that when something was taken away from you, in a physical sense, it was made up to you in other ways. She glared upward. *'If that's true, then someone owes Vincent big time. He's owed trips to the seashore, to the mountains; he's owed a simple walk through the city streets during the Holiday season, to marvel at the decorations. And he's owed about thirty-five years of sunshine!'*

Not liking the path her thoughts had taken, Catherine shifted her range of focus to a second bed, and to the youngster curled up on it, fast asleep. Eyeing Eric, she shook her head sadly from side to side. Poor kid - and for that matter, poor Father. He'd barely finished Vincent's surgery when Eric had stumbled into the Hospital with one hand to his throat. Uh huh, infected tonsils and a high fever. Now, she and Mary had two patients to contend with. Knowing Vincent's abhorrence to being coddled or fawned over, even with the best of

intentions, she couldn't help but smile. Only time would tell which of the hospital's patients would prove to be easier to manage.

Stepping quietly into the room, Mary held a large tray containing a small coffeepot, spoons, two large mugs, sugar, linen napkins, and a plate of cookies out before her. Walking towards Catherine she set the tray down on a small wooden table next to her. "I thought we could both do with something hot to drink and a few of William's oatmeal cookies."

As the aroma of freshly brewed coffee and homemade cookies wafted through the air, Catherine's nostrils began to twitch. Unclenching her hands, she sank down on a spare hospital bed and shook her fingers as hard as she could, in a vain attempt to ease the cramps in them. Looking up as her friend approached, she reached to take the cup being offered to her. "Thank you, Mary, this is just what I needed."

"You're quite welcome, dear." Glancing across the room, the older woman exhaled tiredly and put one hand to her lower back. Stretching carefully, she groaned, "Oh my, two operations in as many hours. I feel as though I've aged at least ten years."

Curling her chilled fingers around the cup to warm them, Catherine nodded. "Me, too."

"This has all been quite a strain, hasn't it?"

Her eyes taking the same path that Mary's had, Catherine whispered, "On all of us." Then, tear-filled green eyes met sympathetic brown ones. "But everything went very well, didn't it?"

"Yes it did - for both of them," her friend replied, smiling. "Thank goodness Eric came to Father when he did; it made things so much easier. And we were very fortunate that Vincent's blood loss was kept to a minimum. With enough rest, he should be just fine." Noting the tired slump of Catherine's shoulders, Mary suggested, "You should really try get some rest, you know."

Nodding in agreement, Catherine gestured to the bed. "I might lay down here for a little while. If Vincent should wake up, if only for a moment, and I'm not close..." Letting the rest of the words trail off, she tightened her grip on the cup she was holding. Barely managing to keep it from crashing to the floor, she stared down at it, whispering, "Oh, Mary..."

"I know. But you mustn't worry. Perhaps the worst is over."

"But, what if his hearing..." Unable to voice her worse fears aloud, she bit down hard on her bottom lip.

"We can only pray that when the swelling subsides all will be well." Hoping to turn her companion's thoughts away from the uncertainties of the moment, Mary leaned back on the stone wall and began stirring her coffee around and around, entreating, "You must try to have faith."

"Faith," Catherine echoed solemnly. "That word doesn't help very much right now."

"To Vincent, faith was a way of life," the older woman chided gently, her tone of voice easing the sting of the words. "Faith was truly all he had, until the night he was fortunate enough to find you." When Catherine awarded her with a teary-eyed smile, she continued, "Even as a child he always had such courage, and such great inner strength. From the very day I met him, I was fascinated by the effect he seemed to have on everyone here."

Nodding in agreement, the younger woman observed, "He does have a way about him, doesn't he?"

"Oh, that he does." Recalling a special memory, Mary chuckled. "I believe many of the women here feel the same way."

"How long have you known him?"

"For well over thirty years." Thinking about that, she sighed wistfully. "My goodness, where had the time gone? He was only six, or perhaps seven, when I came Below to live. I remember that the older girls would vie with one another for the privilege of watching him, or reading him a story or two."

Gazing over at the person in question, Catherine noted, "He seems to have an uncanny ability to affect almost everyone in that way. You just want to hug the very devil out of him, and kiss every blessed inch of him that you can reach." Realizing what she'd just said, she flushed and looked away. "I wish I could have known him then." Shifting slightly to sit cross-legged on the bed, she asked, "What was Vincent like as a child?"

"Very agreeable and well-behaved. But, he could also be quite stubborn at times..." Recalling one incident in particular, when fistfuls of vegetables had come hurtling in her direction, Mary arched an eyebrow. "... especially when he didn't approve of what was being served for supper."

"Was he a good eater?"

Pursing her lips, the older woman tried to remember. "Although he seemed to enjoy fish, chicken, carrots and corn, the child absolutely refused to eat lamb, peas, or lima beans."

Catherine laughed softly. "He still won't eat those foods."

"Yes, I know." Shaking her head, Mary exclaimed, "Oh, at times he could be quite the young scamp! Of course, it was our own fault - we all spoiled him so. But it was very hard not to allow such an extraordinary child certain... privileges." Meeting Catherine's eyes, she smiled warmly. "I'm certain that you, of all people, can understand that."

"Yes." Catherine smiled back. "Was Vincent quiet, even then, and as patient as he is now?"

"For the most part. He was such a shy, dear little thing, always worried about bothering anyone. I can still remember the day he stood in the doorway of the Library, waiting for someone to notice him and give him permission to enter. There was a council meeting being held, as I recall, and he knew he wasn't supposed to intrude without good cause."

"Why did he?"

"When I asked him what was the matter, the child put his hand to the left side of his neck. Peering up at me in that endearing way of his, he told me that his 'throat hurt'."

"Those damn tonsils," Catherine muttered half aloud.

Understanding the anger behind the remark, Mary chose to ignore it, continuing, "They were terribly infected. After examining him, Father believed he'd be compelled to remove them that very night."

"Yet, he didn't"

"No."

"Please tell me why?"

"Just before the surgery was to begin, the problem subsided of its own accord."

"The infection just... went away?" Catherine asked, her expression puzzled.

"Yes. Vincent seemed to bounce back to health rather quickly, and all seemed well." Pausing, Mary set her cup down on the tray rather forcefully. "Until now."

Looking up just as Vincent groaned and rolled over to lie on his back, Catherine leapt to her feet. Tightening her jaw, she started forward, observing angrily, "And this time, the damn infection came back with a vengeance."

* * *

"C...Catherine?"

"Yes Love, I'm here." Nearing the bed, she smiled to find drowsy crystal blue eyes focused anxiously on her, waiting impatiently for her to move closer. Doing just that, she bent down to kiss Vincent gently on the mouth, and then touched the side of his face. "How are you feeling?"

As Catherine spoke, Vincent stared at her mouth for the measure of a single beat of his heart, and then went wide-eyed, his dejection quite obvious. Seeming to become increasingly agitated, he gestured to his ears and then shook his head from side to side, his expression one

of absolute despair. Balling his hands into fists, he stared down at them.

Oh God. Knowing he had learned how to sign as well as read lips from Laura, a member of the community who was hearing-challenged, Catherine fought to keep a tight rein on her emotions, but from within her heart was crying, 'No. No!' Placing two fingers under the curve of Vincent's chin, she urged his head up. When he finally met her eyes, she edged her fingers between his and squeezed them gently, trying to speak slowly and carefully. "You... can't hear me?"

He shook his head again.

"Can you hear sounds - anything at all?" As tears spilled down his face, the one she loved slowly shook his head a third time.

Having been forewarned that this might occur, Catherine had prepared for it in advance. Sitting down on the chair next to the bed, she bent over and picked up the canvas bag she'd placed there earlier in the day. Reaching into it, she retrieved a large packet of legal-sized lined yellow paper and his favorite pen. Handing the pen to Vincent, she took a second one out of her vest pocket and began to write.

Remember that Father said there was a chance that this might happen. When she finished, Vincent read the words, and nodded. Silently damning her atrocious penmanship, she bent over the pad again, adding, He also told us the surgery went well, and that any hearing damage, if indeed there is any, should be minor. But he doesn't want you to even try to speak for at least twenty-four hours. Hopefully, that will give the antibiotics enough time to conquer the infection. When the swelling in your eardrums subsides, it could make all of the difference.

Taking the pad of paper, Vincent wisely divided it in two and handed half of it back to her. Still a bit wobbly from the aftereffects of his surgery, he awkwardly unscrewed the cap of his fountain pen. Fighting to keep it steady, he labored to inscribe his thoughts, which he managed to do rather succinctly, under the circumstances. When he turned the paper around so she could read the words, Catherine felt her heart constrict.

Could make a difference. What if it doesn't? What then?

Picking up her pen, she answered, *Then we'll face it together, as we've always faced everything.* After he'd scanned her reply, Catherine put her left hand to the side of his face. When he looked up, she repeated aloud, "Together."

As Vincent angled his head to the left and afforded her a hesitant smile, the gesture immediately eased his somber expression, allowing all of his love and belief in her to play tag across the sharp angles of his face.

Smiling back at him, Catherine was suddenly reminded of something he'd said to her five years

earlier, at a time that had truly tested the limits of everything they meant to each other. Reaching out to capture his chin in her fingers, she held his focus and mouthed those same words now, reminding him to take each day as the gift that it was, in whatever form it was given to you. *'Whatever happens, whatever comes, Vincent, know that I love you.'*

* * *

Above and Below, the ensuing twenty-four hours hung heavy on every person connected to the Tunnel world. Having been made aware that a very special member of the community was indisposed, and that the circumstances might get even worse, Vincent's family gathered just beyond the entrance of the Hospital Chamber. Talking quietly in small groups, those not on duty and those with chores that could be put on hold, gathered to wait, to hope, and to pray. Allowing gravity to do most of the work, Jamie slid down the rock wall, glanced over at Mouse, and then nudged him in the ribs. "Hi."

"Hi."

"I was looking for you everywhere this morning."

"So?"

"So where were you?"

He shrugged. "Around."

Eyeing him worriedly, she asked, "Are you okay?"

"Yeah."

"Are you here to visit Eric?"

"Uh huh," he answered, his tone of voice disheartened.

"Me, too." Crossing her arms over her chest, she sighed. "How's Vincent doing today?"

Mouse stared at the floor. "Father said 'No change'."

"He'll be fine, you'll see." When her friend shrugged and swiped at his runny nose with the sleeve of his shirt, Jamie grimaced. Sheesh, didn't he ever carry a hankie? "At the meeting this morning, Father said he can't have any visitors yet, except for Catherine. But when he can, are you gonna bawl all over him?" When he just sniffled louder, she made a face. "Oh great, getting Vincent all wet will really help things."

"Won't get him wet - promise." Teary eyes met hers. "Just worried, that's all."

"So am I," Jamie admitted. "But you don't see me crying like a baby, do you?"

Eyeing her glumly, Mouse retorted, "Didn't see you, but could sure hear you down at the Triple Falls last night, Miss Hard-As-Nails."

"I didn't see you there."

"Good," he whispered, shyly ducking his head.

Narrowing her eyes, Jamie glared at him suspiciously. "What were you doing there, spying on me?"

"Was not!" Looking highly insulted, Mouse exclaimed, "Was taking a bath! Couldn't let you see me all... all... naked!"

"No, I... um... guess not." Turning away slightly to conceal a grin, Jamie informed him, "Well, anyway, I wasn't crying."

"Were, too."

"No, I..." Hesitating, the young woman swore to herself and bit down hard on her bottom lip in a futile effort to keep it from trembling.

Knowing his chum all too well, Mouse wrapped one arm around Jamie's slim shoulders and shyly tightened his grip. "It's okay to cry. Helps maybe."

"Oh, it's so... so... unfair!" Burying her face into the front of his vest, Jamie began sobbing for all she was worth. But she discovered that Mouse had been wrong - crying didn't help, it just made you feel really sick to your stomach.

* * *

Attempting to twist his sizable frame into a more comfortable position on the narrow hospital cot, Vincent tossed this way and that. Angry with himself for neglecting his tonsils in the first place and ending up in this... damnable muddle, and completely out of sorts, he narrowed his eyes as the lower portion of his body, including his long legs, became entangled in the bedcovers. Slapping them away, he rolled over onto his left side, but the sheets and blanket followed him. Blessed Saints, the damnable things were trying to smother him! Enough.

Never one to surrender easily, he caught the edge of the covers on the end of his big toe, swiftly jerked his leg up and out, and wrestled the bunched fabric to the floor. So... there.

Flinging himself over onto his back and drumming the tips of his fingers on the mattress, he glared at the ceiling. Why had Father insisted on keeping him here, in this abysmal place? His

temperature had lowered considerably since yesterday's surgery. This morning it had only been ninety-nine, point six, which was nearly normal, for him.

Reminding his parent of that figure earlier today had accomplished precisely nothing; he simply refused to discuss the matter.

Folding his arms across his chest Vincent curled his bottom lip and growled, extremely unhappy with this entire state of affairs. For a tenth of one degree, he was being kept a prisoner in this wretched, lonely, far-too-small bed. A look of extreme vexation came into his eyes. And to learn that Catherine had taken Father's side in this matter was absolutely galling. Glancing across the room, he noted that Eric was sitting up in bed playing with the electronic learning device that Catherine had been generous enough to purchase for him Above. She'd explained to him that each time a correct answer was given to a question, the machine's mechanisms whirred and buzzed, praising its operator. Vincent's expression grew even more dispirited. He would have enjoyed hearing that. Right now he would enjoy hearing... just about anything.

Having observed Eric partaking of a rather substantial bowl of soup at midday, he knew his young friend was well on the way to a complete recovery. With that thought, Vincent growled again. Yes, Eric was fine. Eric hadn't neglected his tonsils, ergo, Eric could now swallow. Eric's throat was much, much better. And Eric didn't have a wretched, perverse, tenth of a one-degree fever. Well, hurray for Eric.

As the subject of this wordless discourse looked up and waved at him from across the room, Vincent waved back. Feeling exceedingly ashamed of himself, he watched at the boy scribbled something down on a piece of paper, folded it in half, and started to get out of bed. Hesitating, he peered over at the entryway, his thick, round-rimmed spectacles giving him an endearing owl-like appearance. Nodding happily to find no one lurking about, he shoved his feet into his slippers and started quickly across the room.

As Eric approached him, Vincent struggled to sit up and furrowed his brow, his expression saying... much.

"I know, I know," the boy announced, closing the distance between them until there were almost nose-to-nose, "I ain't s'posed to be out of bed yet." After making certain that Vincent could see his mouth and follow what he was saying, he straightened to his full height and waggled his eyebrows at him, speaking slowly and clearly. "But here I am."

Still eyeing him, Vincent frowned again.

"Oh come on, lighten up, will ya?" Folding his arms over his chest, Eric proceeded to glower back at him over the rims of his glasses. Then, in a surprisingly accurate parody of Father, he

announced, "I know that I could have a 'grave relapse; I could find myself in formidable difficulties by behaving so irresponsibly,' etc., and so forth."

Nodding in agreement to that, Vincent swallowed the laughter threatening to overwhelm him, thinking that to show the boy even the slightest encouragement in such rudeness will be extremely ill-advised. Knowing his jibes were made with love, not mean-spiritedness, he had to admit, even if only to himself, that the mimicry had been not only amusing, it had been, as the saying went, 'dead on'.

Waiting for Vincent to forgive him, Eric grimaced. Sheesh, he was getting to be an old worrywart, just like Father. Easing down on the edge of the bed, he stared down at the piece of paper in his hand.

"I just wanted to visit ya and say hi. Are you feeling..." Suddenly remembering that his friend couldn't hear him, he frowned and offered Vincent the bit of folded paper. On the outside of it was written: *This is for you. I figured you might like to pass the time solving a few riddles. They're really hard ones.*

Placing one hand to his mouth and then moving it away again, the gesture one of silent thanks, Vincent felt even more ashamed of his thoughts of a few moments earlier. Eric felt better because he had done exactly what he was supposed to do. When you felt ill, you went to Father immediately. You didn't wait until you had to be carried into his presence on a slab of wood, as he had been. He felt dreadful, he couldn't swallow, he couldn't hear - and it was his own fault.

"Hey... " Tapping Vincent on the arm to get his attention, Eric made a face. "I better get back in bed, I guess, before Mary comes back and catches me. Feel better soon, okay?"

Crossing his fingers, Vincent held them up and nodded his head. With that, the boy smiled and shuffled away, anxious to get back to the awesome new game Catherine had given him.

Settling his pelvis down onto the wretched, unyielding cot, Vincent curled one hand into the mattress and stroked the tips of his nails back and forth along its nefarious framework, thinking, 'Yes, I have to feel better soon - quite soon. It's either get well, and get out of here today, or I shall destroy this hellish thing in one fell swoop.'

* * *

As Catherine stepped into the Hospital Chamber, her eyes went immediately to the far corner of the room, not really surprised to discover Vincent sitting up with his hands clasped, waiting for her. Staring at the entrance, his radiant blue eyes were eagerly expectant as she waved to

him.

Moving forward and sitting down on the edge of the bed, she smiled as two powerfully-built arms reached out and pulled her close, thinking, *'I'm so pleased our Bond allows him to know where I am, and that all is well. Without that extraordinary connection, especially now, when he can't hear anything, Vincent would have truly been alone. Oh, he has the company of friends, of course, but he would have still felt himself to be... isolated. Whether it's across a city or across an entire continent, he knows now that he's not alone, and never will be again - not ever.'*

Snuggling against him, Catherine greeted her gentle lover by wrapping both arms tightly around his waist. Burying the tip of her nose into Vincent's tousled, sweet-scented hair, she sighed happily. Oh yes, here in his arms she was well and truly home.

She had only meant to be gone for about half an hour, but buying what she wanted had taken longer than expected. Easing back to reach for some paper so she that could explain about the crowded stores and their wretchedly long lines, Catherine picked up the pad, then looked up, startled as a callused hand reached out and closed gently around her wrist. Searching Vincent's eyes, she mouthed, *'What?'*

Tapping one finger lightly on the crystal surface of her watch, he smiled and put one hand to his throat. Noting the time, Catherine nodded her head and smiled back, wondering how he could have known that as of this very minute Father's edict about not speaking for twenty-four hours had just come full circle? Making certain he was looking at her, she put one hand to the side of his face, whispering encouragingly, "Do you want to try now?" When he nodded and cleared his throat nervously several times, she waited, praying silently that the pain he'd been in earlier was gone, or at least diminished.

"I... " Hesitating and licking his lips, Vincent reached for the carafe of water on the nightstand. After several long swallows, he took a deep breath, held tightly to her hands, and tried again, beginning huskily, "I... I have missed you, m... my Catherine."

As the sound of her name seemed to dissolve the pain around her heart, she beamed at him. Bringing his hand to her mouth, she moved her lips gently over the backs of his fingers. Looking up, she smiled. "I've missed you, too." Stroking the side of his face, she declared softly, "And I've missed hearing your voice so much." Then she frowned and leaned back to contemplate him, stating earnestly, "But if it hurts to speak..."

Placing his left forefinger to her lips, Vincent shook his head back and forth. "It's a bit uncomfortable, but there is no need to be overly concerned." Then, he furrowed his brow and shook his head from side to side, his ears suddenly feeling very... peculiar. A most disagreeable prickling sensation that began at the base of his throat was moving upward now, into the

middle of his ears. All at once, there was a sharp popping sound, and after that a tumult of high-pitched buzzing noises that seemed to be coming from his right.

When Catherine touched him on the hand, Vincent tilted his head toward the curtain and smiled, observing, "It would seem that Eric just answered another question correctly."

"Yes, he really seems to be enjoying..." She stared at him. "You heard that?"

Yanking the woman he cherished to his breast, Vincent released a throaty sob. "Yes, my Dearest Love, I most definitely heard that."

Gripping handfuls of his hair, Catherine clung tightly to him and lifted grateful eyes heavenward. *'Thank You. Oh, thank You!'*

* * *

Finishing the last of the delectable ice cream at the bottom, Vincent licked the spoon one more time and then placed it in the bowl. Catherine had informed him this treat was known as Ben & Jerry's Chunky Monkey©. He glanced down at the few specks of dark chocolate still clinging to the spoon. Good Lord, what a curious name for something so utterly delicious.

Setting the bowl down on a nearby tray, he sighed. "Thank you, my Dear, that was a splendid treat."

"You're welcome. Did it help your throat at all?"

Deciding to find out, Vincent swallowed hard several times. "Yes, it does feel a bit improved."

"I'm glad." Emulating his actions of a few moments past, Catherine ran the tip of her tongue along the edges of her spoon. Adding up the truckload of calories she'd just consumed, she muttered, "This stuff is too damn good."

"Excuse me?"

"Nothing. If you enjoyed it, then the ice cream was worth standing in line for." Knowing how much he relished savoring new foods of all kinds, but especially desserts, she grinned impishly at him. Peering down into his empty bowl, she asked, "Did you make all gone?"

Narrowing his eyes, Vincent glanced sideways at her, but made no response.

"Oh, I see that you ate it all up." Unable to resist, Catherine reached over and patted him on the tummy. "What a good..."

"Don't say it," came a warning grumble. Suddenly noting how extremely tired she looked, as well as sensing it through their unique connection, Vincent observed, "You should really be in

bed." At that thought, he scowled, adding indignantly, "And I should be there with you."

"Now Love, please be reasonable?"

"I don't wish to be reasonable."

Catherine tried again. "You know that your temperature is still a bit elevated. Father told you that there's a possibility you can go back to your... our... chamber later this evening. We'll just have to wait until he examines you one more time."

"Another examination? No."

"But, what if... "

"No," Vincent repeated emphatically, interrupting her, which wasn't at all like him, his tone of voice more than a little displeased. "A pox on all physicians and their instruments of torture..."

"That said, he flung off the bedcovers and scrambled into his slippers.

"Where are you going?"

"Home," came the somewhat testy reply.

"But..."

"No buts, no what ifs, and no more of Father's tedious inspections. What does he think to find down my throat, the... the... Holy Grail?"

Biting down on the inside of her jaw, Catherine barely managed to contain her laughter, knowing that to even smile right now would probably result in a pillow being hurled in her direction.

"Unless you climb in here with me," Vincent declared gruffly, "And you cannot do that because the blasted thing is far too small, I absolutely refuse to spend another moment in this highly uncomfortable bed." As he reached for his bathrobe, determined blue eyes locked to startled green ones. "And should you choose to go and drag Father back here, then it's best that you do it forthwith."

'*Blasted thing?*' Trying very hard to maintain her composure at the challenging look being leveled at her, Catherine bowed her head and examined her nails at great length.

With one hand clutching the edge of his bathrobe, Vincent hesitated, waiting, but his Beloved made no mention of his despicable one tenth of a degree fever. Nor did she say anything else. He cast her a furtive glance. Wasn't she going to argue with him? He eyed her a second time. No, she wasn't. She was simply going to let him think about it for a moment, until guilt set in. Which is already had.

"Oh...very well." Allowing the bathrobe to slip from his fingers, he settled back against the

pillows. Folding his arms across his chest, he afforded her a lengthy sigh. "Because you desire it, I shall allow Father to poke and prod at me one more time. But after all, the surgery was only on my adenoids and tonsils, not on a... a... major organ."

Crawling onto the bed and settling back on her heels, Catherine put one finger under his chin and tilted his head back until their eyes met.

"Yes Dear, I know it was only your tonsils, and you had to have them removed." Knowing he would hear beyond the words, she smiled, silently daring him to challenge the observation. "How very human of you."

Knowing that to contradict the statement would do him absolutely no good - not with this tenacious lady - Vincent arched an eyebrow in her direction and grunted softly. "Point made." Grinning widely, Catherine flung herself into his waiting arms. "And about time, too!"

END

*** Today, it's generally accepted that healthy tonsils and adenoids serve as protective agents in the human body. ** (Madison Sprague, M.D., Harvard Medical School)*