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- by Angie

Kiss Me

*Thy most kiss-worthy face ...
... I needs must kiss again.*

-Sir Philip Sidney

Catherine wanted him to kiss her!

Vincent found the revelation both amazing and frightening. Even if he had not felt her desire through the bond, he had caught her looking at his mouth more than once – in a speculative fashion, as if she was trying to imagine what it would be like to kiss him.

How could she want to kiss *his* mouth?

Vincent had no illusions about his appearance. Catherine and his tunnel family had accepted his ... differences. However, her first reaction to his appearance had hurt, even though it was not an unusual one for newcomers to the tunnels. Catherine had later accepted him and even hugged him at her threshold – but that first scream of horror had been a knife in his heart and had made him regret his appearance for the first time. Even then, he had known what she felt. It seemed only children first found his appearance fascinating rather than horrifying.

He hadn't looked in a mirror for years. He avoided them and had seen himself reflected only in the Mirror Pool. He knew he hadn't changed – except to grow older.

A memory nagged him and he went to his wardrobe and rooted around in the bottom drawer. There! He pulled out a small leather bag and opened the drawstring. It held a small imitation tortoiseshell hand mirror he had found on a park bench one night, long ago. There being no way to find the owner, he had pocketed it. He had wanted to give it to Lisa for her birthday, but she had left before he had been able to. It had languished in the drawer, for no other reason than that he had no one to give it to. Catherine, he decided, would already have a much nicer one.

He sat on the edge of his bed. He had told Catherine there were no mirrors in his chamber – and there weren't any on the walls, or even in his wardrobe. Looking at it now brought some pain, but not as much as he had expected. Catherine was so much more than Lisa would ever have been. Lisa had liked him, but she had not loved him as Catherine did. She had not intended to stay below – couldn't if she wanted to be a dancer. He had known that, but had put the thought aside in his youthful infatuation.

Vincent looked in the mirror and gazed at his image dispassionately. It did not look like a face any woman would want that close to her.

He had never kissed a woman, but he knew without a doubt that his mouth was not made for such things. While his lower lip was quite mobile – he proved this by pursing it – his upper lip was not. He didn't even have an upper lip! He could stretch that part of his mouth out a little, shrink it in a bit – both thanks to his cleft. But pucker up for a kiss? No, that wasn't possible. His muzzle was part of his upper mouth – and although he could lift it to snarl, he couldn't even produce a decent smile – not without showing his canines – and he tried to avoid that!

If that wasn't bad enough, his muzzle was covered with soft, fur-like hair that extended across and over where his upper lip would be, if he had had one. He knew very well what he most resembled. He shuddered. Kissing him would be like kissing a cat! Why would Catherine want to do that?

There was nothing he could do about his facial hair. He had never shaved in his life. It didn't grow any longer than it was now. The few times he had lost a patch as a result of an accident, it had grown back quickly. At least the hair hid his lower face somewhat. Without it, he would quite simply be a hairless cat! Even worse! The thought made him cringe.

So what was he to do? Catherine obviously wanted him to make the first move towards a kiss. She seemed afraid that he would break and run if she pushed too hard for it. Was he really so skittish? Perhaps he was. After all, few women had made overtures. After Lisa left, he had either pretended not to notice, or given them a look of complete disinterest. They had not made a second attempt. He suspected that Father kept a watchful eye out for such advances too. So, he had become the tunnel bachelor – good with children, a big brother, the community's secret protector. He had seen no other roles for himself – until Catherine had come into his life.

Now she made his heart flutter, even from a distance, and he knew he would not be able to refuse her anything. But ... this?

Vincent put the mirror back in its leather pouch and lay it beside him on the bed. He slid off his boots and lay down with his left knee raised, his favourite thinking position. He considered the problem, trying to be impartial.

If Catherine wanted to kiss him, he couldn't help that. But there was another concern. If he kissed her, what would it lead to? Would he be able to stop there? Would she want him to? How far should he allow himself to go? Would he be able to let go once he had her in his arms – because a chaste peck was not something he felt capable of. He *wanted* her in his arms!

That frightened him the most. What if he lost control and Catherine became afraid and pulled away? He didn't think he could survive that rejection. He pushed the thought aside and began to imagine what it would be like to kiss those lovely full lips that had often been so close to his. He closed his eyes.

He could almost feel her lips on his! It took him a moment to realize that he wasn't imagining it, and his eyes flicked open. Catherine! He had not even felt her presence – and there was no time to react as he felt Catherine's lips on his! It was as if she had read his mind!

He found himself paralyzed, both at the sensation, which sent a charge straight to his groin, and what he could feel from Catherine along their bond.

She was enjoying the feel of his mouth! He relaxed slightly, closed his eyes again and let her do as she wished, realizing with a shock that all his fears and questions were now irrelevant. He gathered her to him and held her close. She was only half on the bed. He could feel himself responding and turned a little sideways, both to give her more room and to make his arousal less obvious.

When Catherine removed her lips from his, Vincent was rendered speechless. He sighed and opened his eyes to look at her. She was smiling and gazed at him with such love that he was paralyzed again – this time with joy. She put a hand to his cheek and stroked it softly, whispering.

“There, you see, Vincent? Nothing to fear. I decided that if I didn't make the first move, surprise you, we would never know this ... wonder. I won't apologize, but now I'll leave you to think about it.”

She tried to pull away but Vincent found himself reluctant to let her go. He found his voice, although his tongue seemed stuck to the roof of his mouth.

“Catherine,” he croaked. He swallowed and tried again. “There is no need to apologize. It is I who should - and thank you. Please don't go.”

Catherine settled back down on the bed and lay her head against his chest.

“Hold me.”

He was happy to do so and felt her contentment along their bond. He let out another enormous sigh and felt her happiness fizz along the bond. He felt his mouth lift in a smile and wondered if he would ever look at himself the same way again.

“Oh, Catherine,” he whispered.

“Hmmm?”

For an answer, he let go of her and turned her face to him with one furry hand. The sight of that on her chin almost undid him, but he felt her contentment and decided she perhaps liked his hand too. There was no more room for self-flagellation. He dropped his mouth to hers and after enjoying that for a while, he moved to explore her face. He didn't get very far before Catherine moved to capture his mouth again. This time she parted his mouth and slipped her tongue between his lips. A thrill ran along his frame as she explored his cleft. He groaned. He felt himself caught in a spiral of need. Reluctantly, before he lost all motivation, he pulled himself away a little so their lips separated and he could look at her. Her expression was now quite different – a mirror of his own desire.

“Catherine, if we continue, I cannot be responsible for what happens.”

“Promise?”

Vincent chuckled softly and hugged her to him, felt her breath on his neck. How he loved her! She saw through him as if he was transparent. She didn't need the bond to tell her anything - and he certainly didn't want to discourage her.

There was a soft thump as the little mirror in its leather bag, forgotten until now, fell off the bed onto the carpet.

Catherine started.

“What was that?”

“The sum of all my fears,” he answered.

“Kiss me again,” she said into his ear, huskily.

And he did.

END

My Fateful Love

Fixed fate, free will, foreknowledge absolute

- John Milton

Catherine opened her eyes and immediately turned her head to look at Vincent. It was habit. Even after so many years, she still feared she would awaken one day and discover he was a dream ... and she was alone.

He was breathing softly, obviously still asleep. That was unusual. He usually knew immediately when she awakened and met her eyes, as if he knew of this phobia of hers.

She kept her emotions carefully controlled and looked down the wonderful, muscular, naked length of him, head to toe.

She loved his feet. Hairy on the top, like his hands, they were large and well-formed. Sensitive too, as she had discovered. Like the rest of Vincent, his feet had never been touched by a lover until she came along. Oh, what she could do with those feet ... and what he could do with his hands! She wouldn't want to change either. And as for what was in between ... there were no words.

Vincent was already awake when he felt Catherine turn her attention to him. He seldom slept for long periods, but sometimes liked to pretend he was asleep so he could bask in what he felt from her along their bond. He knew she loved to look at him, and the pleasure she derived from doing so never failed to thrill him.

He had spent the greater part of his adult life trying to diminish his differences, all the while knowing that his tunnel family relied on his greater strength and natural "weapons" to protect them. He had once asked Father if he was a man, and the patriarch had prevaricated. That answer had merely reinforced his own self-image – that of a man-beast. Catherine, though, had made a point of telling him that he was more than a man – not less – and all of it loveable.

He wondered what his life would have been, had he not met Catherine. He had known, even before that fateful night, something of what he'd been missing and would probably never know. But the depth of those emotions, once aroused, had been a surprise to him. None of the romantic writers had prepared him for the utter delight that he felt when he knew Catherine truly loved him. Him!

He could feel her eyes on him like a caress, matched by the obvious arousal she was never quite able to mask, not from the early days. He had always known what she felt about him, perhaps even before she did, but had schooled himself to deny it. Lisa had taught him the dangers of letting his heart rule, but she wasn't the only reason. There were women below who would have gladly shared his bed, even before Catherine came into his life. He chose to ignore their veiled and always careful overtures. Accepted as he was in his tunnel family, that was an option he had not wanted to encourage. He couldn't believe they wanted him for himself. He had chosen celibacy, as much out of concern for the community, as himself - or the fears about what the act of love might result in. Father had worried about him, he knew, but had no answers to his dilemma. No doubt he would also have done his part to discourage sexual overtures to his special son.

Catherine, being from the world above, had no such restraints or pre-conceptions.

He realized now that he had been a fool, but perhaps it was for the best. He had saved himself for Catherine, albeit unknowingly, and they had discovered and explored their love together. He suspected he would never get enough of that pleasure.

He realized abruptly that his groin was awakening and he would not be able to pretend he was asleep any longer. He made a soft snort, shifted slightly, then turned to look at Catherine. Her mouth turned up in a smile.

"Good morning, Vincent."

Without words, they moved together until they were pressed tightly. Vincent felt his arousal harden against her and sighed in delight. There was no better way to start the day, in his opinion.

“Oh, Catherine.”

He felt her quiver, then detected a shimmer of fear ran along their bond.

“What is it?” he asked into her hair.

Catherine pulled back a little to look in his eyes.

“Sometimes I’m afraid,” she whispered, lifting a hand to gently stroke his cheek. “What if we should be separated, or one of us lose the other? What if the Fates decide we have had enough joy in our lives?”

Vincent turned his face to kiss her hand.

“Catherine, you once said we could never lose each other – as long as we remembered love.”

“That was a long time ago, Vincent - before we became lovers. I don’t believe that anymore. I need you ... here ... with me, always. Not just a memory of you.”

Vincent sighed. He hugged her to him again and felt her relax into him. He spoke softly.

“Hardly a day passed, after I recovered from my sickness at age 15, that I didn’t wonder why I existed – why the Fates had let me live. Sometimes, I cursed them for making me different, forcing me to remain hidden. Not all the love of Father and my family could lessen that ache of aloneness, Catherine. I hated myself. Later, I roamed the nights above, but found only more emptiness in the shadows. I think Fate took a hand the night I found you. Now we are living out our true destiny.”

Catherine sighed.

“Yes. I’ve often thought about what my life would have been, had I not gone to that reception, or not left early. It was if the spheres aligned to ensure we met, just then, when I needed ... you ... most.”

Vincent was silent for a moment then whispered, “I think we were meant for each other. My world fell into its rightful place that night, although I didn’t realize it until later.”

“Yes, mine too. Do you think the three Fates have finished with us then?”

It was Vincent’s turn to sigh.

“Catherine, the Fates are impartial. No one knows why things happen the way they do. We experienced a miracle of fate when Clotho spun our life threads together that night. I don’t know what measure Lachesis will grant us, but we will live until Atropos uses her scissors – and then she will have to cut both our life threads, for we are inseparable.”

“Yes. And in the meantime, we must live as if each day were our last, to the full.”

She reached between them and Vincent groaned.

“We need no such excuse,” he told her.

“I know, but this is the position I want to be in when our threads come to an end.”

Vincent found that speech has deserted him as he and Catherine enjoyed the touch and feel of each other. He roared in ecstasy when they joined at last and their love and passion flowed, thick and sweet as honey, along their bond.

“But not yet,” Catherine stated at last, and she lay atop Vincent, glorying in the smooth vibration of his post-coital purr.

“No, never,” Vincent whispered with a sigh. The Fates, according to legend, did not look back and couldn’t be influenced. He was glad of that. He suspected that he and Catherine might otherwise instill just a little jealousy - in even those faceless Fates.

END

A Natural Man

*'There is something in this more than natural, if
philosophy could find it out.'*

- William Shakespeare (Hamlet)

Catherine watched Vincent as he paced across the small stage in Father's chamber, reciting passages from Hamlet. The challenge had been to take passages from one of Shakespeare's plays and turn them into something different to the original. The two of them had worked on this, but he still astounded her.

No one, not even the best of the world above, she thought, could do it better. Vincent put his whole heart and soul into everything he did. It didn't matter that he could never be physically mistaken for Hamlet – his voice carried such conviction that such details were inconsequential.

That made her think. She was part of the community below only because of Vincent, if she were honest. She loved them all, but he was the reason she helped them, because by helping them, she helped him – and was able to see him in his world more often.

He had been ill and she had cared for him, insisted upon it. After that dark time in the cavern, when he had been mad with anger and fear, there were no more secrets between them. She had kissed him and he had kissed her back. They had both known then that their love was forever and that the next step – the one he had resisted for so long – was inevitable, necessary even. As soon as he was well, they had consummated their love, and it had been as wonderful as she had expected. They were still discovering the extent of their love, and their bond. She could feel him, like a soft hand on her breast. A tingle ran through her as she watched him, graceful as ever.

Hamlet - it was one of his favourite roles. He was speaking of himself in many of the lines.

"Tis not alone my inky cloak

That can denote me truly."

How well did Father, or anyone, know Vincent, she wondered, not for the first time? How could they truly understand someone whose home was only the tunnels, because of what he was? They had all chosen to come to these tunnels, some had been born here, but all could live above if they had to. Vincent alone could not.

This community, loving as it was, did not question people, and did not pressure them to say more than they would.

Vincent was a man of few words at the best of times, and had more than his share of self-doubts. It had taken her years to overcome them, have him accept her love as his due, give his heart to her completely, trust her and him. She had no doubts about the cause of his illness. He had been fighting himself in that dark cavern, trying to rid himself of all the baggage of doubt and self-disgust built up over a lifetime. He was breaking down the walls he had erected to prevent his fear from affecting those he loved.

Well, that was over now. He was a more placid, happy man.

"What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason ... in form and moving, how express and admirable ..."

Indeed, she decided, he was noble beyond belief. No one in her world could match him physically or mentally. How could they? He was unique. His life was unique. It could have been one of a beast, would have if Paracelsus had had his way. Instead he was the quintessential man – literate, loving, strong, compassionate.

She sighed as he dominated the small stage, his voice strong with the passion of his speeches, his face showing emotions Shakespeare would envy, careless of his canines, which seemed apt somehow, his long hair likewise.

She loved his hair. It flowed over his shoulders and flew around his face as he spoke. That was another marvel, she realized. She had grown her hair long for a time, when that was the fashion, and then in frustration had it cut to its current length. Less fuss. It had been an annoyance - plus it took ages to wash and dry.

Vincent, however, paid no attention to his hair. She had never seen him brush it, fling it, twist it, or adjust it at all. He seemed not to notice it – it was just there. He must brush it, she realized, when she was not there. She had done that for him when he was ill, but remarkably, it did not tangle as much as she expected. It was almost as if it had a life of its own.

She knew he had hidden his face in his hair on occasion, at tactic she supposed he had learned as a child. Vincent had bangs of a sort, yet they never seemed to be in his eyes, or if they were, they didn't bother him and

need brushing away. How did he do it?

She was brought back to the present abruptly as he caught her eye and held it. She listened and felt her heart swell with love.

'To die, to sleep. To sleep, perchance to dream. Ay, there's the rub. For in that sleep of death, what dreams may come ...

'Thus conscience does make cowards of us all ...'

'The traveller returns'

The fair Catherine ... in thy orisons be all my sins remembered.'

"*And forgiven,*" Vincent intoned as he smiled at her and their eyes locked. The 'revised' passages from Hamlet, she realized a little belatedly, were his admittance that he was prone to all the same foibles. He was admitting he was a man.

He waited expectantly. Mentally shaking herself back into the moment, Catherine walked onto the stage. Ophelia's lines had never seemed more apt.

"With them words of such sweet breath compos'd, as made things more rich. Could beauty have better commerce than with honesty? You made me believe so. You are as good as a chorus.

"For bonny sweet Vincent is all my joy."

There was a pause from beyond the stage as the stood straight, indicating the end of their drama. Then, as one, their audience gave them a standing ovation.

Vincent drew Catherine close to his side and holding hands they bowed together. She felt the warmth of his love in her heart, knew he felt hers as well. There were no more words necessary.

END

Spring Time

Blossom by blossom, the spring begins

-Algernon Charles Swinburne

Vincent sat on the rocky ledge gazing at the waterfall, trying to find inspiration in its beauty. He was trying to compose a poem to Catherine. Although he could quote from memory poems he knew she loved, he could not find the words for one of his own that did not sound either trite or plagiarized. Had all the great poems been written perhaps? He doubted it, but it made him feel slightly better to know that the task wasn't easy and couldn't be rushed.

Catherine was above, doing a few necessary things before the weekend. She would come to him soon, but in the meantime, he found that concentrating was difficult. Spring was in the air after a long winter with record amounts of snow. For weeks, he had been unable to use the culvert, or any of the other park entrances, both because they were high with snow and because he couldn't risk leaving footprints – even if few people used the park in the winter.

Anyone arriving or leaving the tunnels had been forced to use one of the basement entries guarded by helpers. He and Catherine had smuggled some goods and people through their brownstone, but had to be careful not to have more than could be easily explained as a part-time legal consultant. There had been several impromptu parties around their fireplace when weather had closed in unexpectedly and those caught in it had needed their clothes and boots dried before returning below.

Catherine was now shopping to replace what the latest of these gatherings had consumed – chiefly crackers and various ingredients for hors d'oeuvres. Those were exotic items that William did not stock, but for which Vincent – as well as several tunnel dwellers - had acquired a taste, thanks to Catherine. He particularly liked those with fish and spicy condiments. Fish was not often served below, and then most often as a chowder. Hot spices were not used by the tunnel cook either, for fear of upsetting some of the more delicate stomachs.

Well, there would be no more of those parties until next winter. The snow was melting quickly, and now there were concerns about flooding in some of the tunnels – fortunately not in the hub area. Regular patrols were keeping an eye on all the likely trouble spots, just in case.

Vincent had almost given up his poetic ambitions when he felt Catherine nearby and rose to greet her. She ran into his arms and hugged him tight. Despite the long trek through the tunnels, his sensitive nose caught the scents of fresh air and sunshine – and something earthy. Spring of course. He sighed.

He remembered how Father had once bemoaned the lack of bright greens below, but in truth, anyone except himself could go above and experience them anywhere in sunshine. He alone could experience those delights only in the garden of their brownstone during the day. Nice, but not the same. He longed for the freedom of open spaces in daylight occasionally.

Catherine looked up at him and seemed to sense his slight envy. She stood back and smiled at him.

“Vincent, something wonderful has happened! You must come to the park culvert with me right away.”

“Is it clear of snow at last?”

“Oh yes, and we'll use it. Just be prepared for some water around your feet.”

Vincent's innate sense of time told him it was late afternoon, but still daylight. He refrained from pointing this out. Catherine knew the dangers as well as he. What could she have in mind?

They made their way to the sliding metal door and Catherine pulled down the lever that opened it, then pushed open the gate. The daylight was blinding after the tunnels, but Catherine didn't hesitate. Vincent did though. Years of caution made him stop before reaching the culvert itself, where a murky rivulet was rushing noisily down into the drain. Catherine turned around and then chuckled ruefully.

“Sorry, I should have told you. The Park is officially closed for three days, so crews can clean out the drains near the entrances. Right now there are some quite large lakes there. There's been no activity near this entrance, I checked, and anyhow, it's past quitting time for municipal employees. I wanted you to see something special. I found it while jogging last year about this time.”

She took one hand and Vincent allowed himself to be pulled down the culvert while he pulled his hood over his head. They both had to straddle the fast moving stream. When they reached the exit, both looked around out of habit, but Vincent could sense that there was no one close by – in fact, no one in the park at all. It was such an unusual occurrence that he stood amazed in the dream-like sunshine.

A dense mist was rising from the remaining snow, wreathing the park in shifting veils that reduced visibility to just a few yards, but glitteringly bright with a hint of rose where the low sun pierced it. Looking straight up, he could catch fleeting glimpses of blue sky and feel the slight warmth, like a blessing, even so early in the spring. The sunshine and silence seemed to transform the park into something magical and reduce the bustling city to nothing more than a memory. He could imagine the path nearby leading to the lost world of Faerie.

Vincent breathed deeply and filled his lungs and nose with the scents of melting snow and earth released from frost. Although the grass he could see was still flattened, brown and soggy, he could see tiny green spears poking up. The trees looked as if they were just awaiting a signal before breaking into leaf.

Catherine waited patiently as Vincent enjoyed what his senses told him. When he looked at her again, wordless and happy, she smiled.

“Come.”

She took his hand again and led him up the slope and towards the lake. A few minutes later, she took a side path and then stopped suddenly and turned to where a copse of birch encircled a little knoll. In a patch of damp dead grass at the top of this little rise, which surrounded by melting snow, was a riot of purple, yellow and white flowers – snowdrops, crocus and aconite.

Vincent gazed at the sight, enthralled. He had known little about flowers until they moved into the brownstone, but had embraced gardening with a passion. However, their yard was so shaded by the surrounding buildings, it was still deep in snow. Any bulbs he had planted would not appear for some time.

He sighed, and inspiration came to him, at last.

*“Ah, my snowdrop, can you know
What joy you bring me through the snow
Can you feel what my heart sings?
Your love is brighter than the Spring.”*

“Beautiful! Wordsworth?” asked Catherine.

“Um ... no. Wells.”

She chuckled and hugged him as he blushed, pleased nevertheless to be compared to one of the great poets.

“Well, Mr Wells, you have untapped talents!”

“This place is an inspiration. Thank you.”

Gazing around, he saw tiny catkins on the birches and felt his blood singing, as well as his heart. He felt energized and breathed deeply again. He looked down at Catherine who moved to put her arms around him and share his happiness.

“Spring demands a celebration,” he suggested quietly. “Are we fully-stocked again?”

“Yes – enough even for your appetite. And afterwards, I think I can find a use for some of that energy I can feel boiling up in you.”

Vincent sighed and hugged her tightly.

“My snowdrop knows all,” he quipped softly into her hair. “Shall we return?”

“Oh, yes – and by the way, *‘your glowing love makes my heart bright – as springtime, sunny, aconite.’*”

Vincent laughed.

“I never claimed to be a poet,” Catherine said, a little haughtily.

“No, but you have other talents - and it takes two to tango.”

“Shall we?”

“Yes.”

They did a few elongated tango steps and Catherine got much closer to her partner than was usual – close enough to feel that his sap was indeed rising. She looked up at him suggestively and his mouth twitched. They ceased their dance and ran hand in hand to the culvert.

They made it back to their home in record time.

END