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by Angie

# Musical Variations

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*“Give me some music – music, moody food*

*Of us that trade in love*

- William Shakespeare

Catherine was above in her apartment again, rooting through drawers and boxes, chests and closets, trying to decide what to keep and take below, and what to give away. It was a much harder chore than she had expected. How had she managed to collect so much stuff?

She had an overnight bag stuffed with clothing she thought best for tunnel wear, but was making little progress with anything else. She abruptly decided to take a break and make herself a coffee. With that in her hand, she sat on one of her dinky couches and looked around the room. Her eyes fell on her bookcase. It had a fine collection of books she'd enjoyed and could not bear to part with. Some Vincent had given her. All, she knew, would find a home below. Well, why not do something enjoyable and pack them?

She found an empty box and knelt in front of the books, running her hand along their spines reverently. Poetry, classics, so many favourites. She caught sight of one she had not looked at in years and pulled it out. It was a paperback, but a good one. The title suddenly spoke to her.

"*Under Milkwood*," she whispered to herself. Of course! Why had she not thought of it earlier? The perfect book for an evening of private reading. Vincent's voice would lend it a magic that even Richard Burton might have envied, she decided. But this copy was not good enough. She had to find a nice hardcover at Mr Smythe's bookstore. Vincent detested paperbacks, always declared that any book worth reading was worth having in hardcover. He was right, of course.

Catherine looked at the clock. It was late morning and she needed some air – and now. She ran a brush through her hair, grabbed a jacket and her purse and flew out the door, impatiently locking it behind her. Within minutes she had caught a bus and a short time later a tinkly bell was ringing to announce her entrance into the bookstore. Mr Smythe looked up as she approached his desk in the back, where he was sorting a pile of books. He smiled at her but was silent until she was directly opposite him.

Catherine abruptly needed to ask a question which had nothing to do with literature.

"Has Kristopher been around lately," she asked. She had at last accepted that he was some kind of ghostly manifestation, but still hoped to talk to him again.

Smythe got a bemused expression on his face.

"Well, a young lady the other day complimented me on my assistant and purchased the two *Don* books."

"You mean the ones by Mikhail Sholokhov?" asked Catherine.

"Yes. Somehow I knew you would know what I meant. What a pity you did not know Kristopher when he was alive. You might have been great friends."

"I'm glad he's still helping you sell books," Catherine commented. "And he doesn't cost you anything."

"Just my remorse," Smythe replied sadly. "I should have talked to him more."

"I wish I could," Catherine remarked. Smythe looked at her with understanding, but said nothing. Kristopher was a free spirit – literally.

"Now, my dear young lady, what can I do for you today?"

Catherine dragged her mind back to her purpose and sighed. "Well, I'd like a hardback copy of "*Under Milkwood*."

"Ah, Dylan Thomas. A fine work. Just a moment, I think I saw one in this pile. How coincidental."

He moved some of the pile and extracted a thin volume, brushing it off with his sleeve. He opened the cover and showed the flyleaf to Catherine with a flourish. Somehow, she was not surprised to see Kristopher Gentian's bookplate inside. It was a nice emerald leather-bound volume in very good condition.

"I'll take it," Catherine said happily. She paid what Smythe asked, which was more than reasonable. He put it in a bag for her and held it out.

"I think my assistant is around again," he remarked.

"Well, please thank him for me if he condescends to show himself," Catherine asked, looking around.

"My dear young lady, just the fact we have this book, here and now, means he knows you're here. He doesn't show himself to me, you know. He prefers young ladies. But I always know when he's about. The store seems a

bit chilly, more dusty, a little darker.”

“Like now,” asked Catherine, feeling cold fingers running up her spine.

“Like now,” Smyth confirmed, smiling at her.

“Thank you Kristopher,” Catherine shouted. A shelf unit seemed to shift with a groan. She looked at Smythe, who winked at her. She sighed, wished him a good day and left.

Back at her apartment, she decided to call it a day. She was hungry and dinner was not something she wanted to miss below – or any other meal, come to that.

She packed up her overnight bag, locked up her apartment, and went down to her threshold.

A warm hand supported her bum as she descended the ladder. It was such a delightful feeling, she paused. She could feel Vincent’s impatience though, and finished the climb, turning at the bottom to push herself against his waiting body. He was not wearing his cloak, and only a single shirt over his torso. He felt a bit damp.

“I’ve just had a bath,” he remarked.

“Vincent, I hope you are not averse to another, because I want to work you a bit before lunch.”

Vincent nuzzled her hair and hugged her to him. She could feel his manhood pressing on his belly.

“Catherine, I can think of no work I would rather do. But we’ll have to hurry. Lunch will be in an hour or so.”

They moved swiftly to his chamber, Catherine yanking the privacy rug closed as they passed through. She gave a silent thanks, once again, to Annabelle, the community’s innovative seamstress and quartermaster.

Then Catherine remembered the book.

“I have a book to add to your collection,” she remarked softly as she ran her hands over his chest, playing with his nipples through his shirt. “But this one is special. I want you to read it to me.”

“What book?” he asked, suddenly finding himself short of air and getting warmer by the second.

“It’s a Dylan Thomas – *Under Milkwood*.”

“Ah, yes. I know of it, of course. I’m sure we had a copy in Father’s library - once. I haven’t heard it read since I was a teenager. Probably got buried in someone’s chamber. When would you like me to read it?”

“Oh some evening when we can relax in your bed,” she said, undoing the ties on his shirt and running her tongue down the V opening.

Vincent found he could no longer speak coherently and looked down at her, found himself kissing her mouth before he thought about it. He gathered her to him and, in one motion, lifted her up and carried her to his bed. She was furnace hot in his arms and his own heat seemed to be about to set fire to his shirt. He sat Catherine on the edge of the bed, took off his shirt and pants, then peeled off her top and everything else she had on, quickly and efficiently.

He leaned against her and she opened her legs to clamp around his thighs. His manhood was throbbing against her breasts. He was suddenly paralyzed. The feel of his organ against her felt so wonderful, he couldn’t move. When she ran her hands up it, he growled, shuddering uncontrollably. He was about to lift her further onto the bed, when she stopped him with her hands. Looking down, he saw her head bent over the crown of his organ, and before he could react, she was massaging his testicles, running her hands up and down his column. He groaned and put his hands on her shoulders to support himself. His legs muscles clutched spastically with every move of Catherine’s hands.

Catherine put her mouth over him and began to tongue and nuzzle him. He felt his climax building up, like a dynamite stick waiting for a light, and when she suddenly sucked hard, he arched his hips and gave up. His juices shot out into her mouth. He closed his eyes and felt a wave of release wash over him. He sagged in reaction, sitting down heavily beside Catherine, hugging her to him. She rubbed her mouth against his chest, licking him, tasting him.

“Oh, Catherine,” he sighed into her hair, and rubbed his hands up her back. When he could finally move, he lifted her further onto the bed and buried his face in her pubic hair. Her scent and warmth there inflamed him again.

“Catherine,” he mumbled, still unable to think, much less talk, coherently. But he knew he wanted to please her.

He began an exploration of her secret places again. It seemed like eons since his last visit.

He nuzzled her curly hair, licking and tasting her, concentrating on the task. He held her buttocks in his hands, loving the softness of them, stroking them as he began to tongue her, slowly, carefully, just at the start of her slit. He felt her reaction in the tenseness beneath him. He moved down a little further, ran his tongue around the now engorged skin, teased around her clitoris, put his lips on it and sucked gently, enjoying the tastes and scents of her.

Catherine gasped and thrust her hips at him. Her hands were clenched into the blankets, he realized, as he looked along her body. Her mouth was open and he could feel her building to a climax through the bond. He took his time, though, wanting to savour these moments of control. He moved a little further down, licking around her special opening, nipping her lips, sucking and tasting. Then he suddenly cast his tongue deep into her vagina and sucked as hard as he could. Catherine lifted him on her hip thrust and climaxed, sending juices into his mouth and clamping his head between her thighs. He looked up at her and kept on sucking, keeping her in ecstasy as long as he could. He felt her heat envelop him along their bond and fire his groin. Unable to restrain himself, he moved himself up along her and angled his hips to let his manhood find her passage. He hardly had to position it anymore – it seemed to know the way.

He gathered Catherine to him, lifting her off the bed just enough so that his weight would not crush her, and thrust with his pelvis, felt himself throbbing and expanding inside her, urging him to more and deeper thrusts.

Catherine's head was arched back and she was moaning, her arms flailing. He moved to cradle her neck and planted a deep kiss on her lips. She groaned and dug her nails into his back, arousing him to a painful urgency that he was not sure he could sustain for long.

Then she pushed her mouth onto his and grabbed his buttocks to her, making him thrust even deeper. Suddenly she tightened her inner muscles and he roared, unable to prevent a glorious ejaculation. He felt her soar with him, clasped in a windstorm of passion. When it passed, he slumped onto her, resting on his forearms. How was such contentment possible from the simple act of two bodies merging? His purr was sending out waves of vibration from his belly. He wondered if it was getting stronger, or if it was just his imagination.

Catherine's peace mirrored Vincent's, she knew. She looked at him, aware that he was still trying not to let his body lay completely on top of her. She grabbed his arms, forcing him down. She hugged him close to her, kissing his neck and feeling his purr massage her along her length. It seemed stronger than ever before. She looked at his face, caught his eyes on her and saw the question in them.

"Vincent, yes, you have reached a new level in your purr. I love it – and you - so much."

She closed her eyes and let the sensation roll across her, felt Vincent's organ, still inside her, vibrating as well.

She sighed deeply and buried her face in his shoulder. She felt him gather a blanket and cover them both, then drifted into a peaceful sleep. Sometime later, she felt Vincent roll onto his side, taking her with him.

Vincent was woken by the lunch signal, which reminded his stomach that he had had a hurried breakfast. Its rumble rivaled his purr, giving the latter a whole new dimension. Catherine laughed – then felt her own stomach growl in sympathy.

"Catherine, we must eat. William will have something delectable- soup I think."

She smiled. "I don't want to miss it, either. Let's go."

They both had a quick cold water wash in the bathroom then got hurriedly dressed. They almost ran to the dining room, their hunger driving them on. On entering, they found a good many people already chowing down on bread and soup. Vincent and Catherine piled up a single plate with bread, which he carried, while she ladled soup into two bowls and transported them to the table. They were soon completely engrossed in eating. Catherine thought she had never had such wonderful soup - some kind of borscht, she thought. Exquisite. She loved the homemade bread, too – sighing with a contentment that seemed to have reached her bones.

"Well, I see the lovers have discovered they have an appetite for food as well," a voice boomed next to them. Catherine looked up to see William, his eyes twinkling in merriment.

"Soup is the food of love" misquoted Vincent, talking through a hunk of well-buttered roll.

“No Vincent, that’s music, as you well know – but I’m sure you would not know the difference at this point. I’ll bet you don’t even know what kind of soup you’re eating. You do seem to be making some beautiful symphonies – and I think I know with whom. But who conducts, I wonder?”

His comment raised a gale of laughter around the dining hall. Catherine realized that everyone was looking at them and smiling expectantly. This, she thought, had been orchestrated. She felt herself flush at the unintentional pun, but could not keep the laughter from bubbling up. She almost choked on her soup. She finally found her voice.

“It’s your fault, William,” she commented, looking up at him. “I don’t know what you are putting in your most wonderful food, but Vincent refuses to miss a meal. I’m afraid I’m quite unable to compete with you. We are forced to eschew symphonies for mere tunes, however beautiful, because they have to fit between work and meal times – to say nothing of sleep. A severe challenge, I can assure you. Why, I’m amazed we’re not reduced to riffs. A conductor can do nothing without the lead violin’s attention.”

Vincent looked at Catherine in amazement as she was making this pronouncement, wondering why he had every doubted her ability to meet the jibes of his family. In the silence that followed, his unrestrained laughter boomed out and the rest of the dining hall joined him. One voice sounded almost maniacal, and Catherine tracked it to Annabelle. She was wiping tears from her eyes, her small face flushed with good humour and her high hairdo quivering with her laughter.

“Well, William, that will teach you to try and outwit a lawyer,” her robust voice shouted across the hall. “Let that be a lesson to the rest of you too.”

Not a bit put out, William gave both Vincent and Catherine a pat on the shoulder and went back into the kitchen. He emerged a few minutes later, to a collective gasp and more hoots, with a large cake covered in garish pink icing. All over it were rings of lacy white chocolate. Stuck in each, endwise, was a distinctly phallic-looking chocolate finger.

Catherine had to put her hand over her mouth to prevent a very-unladylike guffaw from escaping. She could feel a matching humour under restraint from Vincent, and dared not look at him.

William was unrepentant.

“Well it may not be the food of love, but this is a chocolate cake, which I know is Vincent’s favourite. I thought his ... um ... composition ... deserved some recognition. Catherine, you have re-written our Vincent - and the music you play gives us all great joy, whatever its length. We wish you many encores. From what I hear, you are having no problems in that regard.”

There were wolf whistles and a huge round of applause at this, whereupon Father, his face red with laughter, rose and called for order.

“Friends, I think I speak for everyone when I say that Catherine has become a most valued member of our community. On a personal note, as long as she can keep Vincent ... um ... distracted, I might have a chance of winning a chess game.

“Now, let’s try that cake. William please do the honours.”

Another round of applause greeted this remark and plates of cake were passed around. William himself delivered a large piece with generous decorations on a single plate to Vincent and Catherine – with two forks.

Without further ado, the pair dug into the slice, using their forks to feed each other. By the time they had finished the cake, and experimented gleefully with various ways of eating the chocolate lace and fingers, the dining hall was almost empty. Vincent captured Catherine’s hand and kissed it, then licked off the chocolate that had stuck to her fingers. Catherine flushed, felt his passion merge with her own, and looked at him.

“All this talk of music reminds me that that there’s a concert in the park tonight,” he whispered. “Would you care to attend it with me?”

“Oh yes, Vincent. I had completely forgotten about it. I think they are playing Romeo and Juliet. We might even hear some of it,” she added, sotto voce.”

“Oh, I’m sure we will hear it,” Vincent replied. “Remember it? Perhaps not.”

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When they got back to Vincent's chamber, by mutual agreement, the two lovers decided to take care of some personal business before supper.

Catherine went back above, having reluctantly decided to spend a couple of hours tackling her apartment.

Vincent had decided his chamber needed enlarging and went to find Kanin. He followed the sounds of pounding to the laundry chamber, where the community's stonemason was adding another drain hole to the floor. The big room was often awash on laundry day, but for some reason the centre drain had recently been unable to handle the volume of water. The chamber was so often flooded that wooden clogs had become de rigueur.

The problem had come to a head when, during one particularly energetic washing session two weeks previously, the laundry water had overflowed into the passage, drained through a crack in the floor and inexplicably ended up in one of Pascal's main communication pipes. The sound it produced, half-filled with water, had compromised his entire network. Finding that leak – and blocking it – had taken Kanin many hours. It had been decided to suspend laundry until another drain was added. The pile of laundry overflowing the baskets by the door revealed what just one missed laundry session meant. The next laundry detail would be a heavy one.

Kanin finished his work, inserted a metal grid into the hole he had made, and pounded it into place. He ran his hand over it, and found it flush with the stone. He sat back on his feet, then saw the unmistakable shadow of Vincent fall across the floor beside him. He rose, stretched his back, and turned to look at his friend.

"Well Vincent, I don't expect you've come here because you'd like advice on how to achieve the sixteenth position."

Vincent laughed loudly and put his hands on Kanin's shoulders. "Kanin, I doubt I shall ever need such advice now. But I do have a use for your other unique skills. My chamber needs to be enlarged if Catherine is to feel comfortable. Can you tell me if it is possible? Also, a steam pipe runs into the bath chamber. Would it be possible to carve out a small drying room around it, outside the bath chamber?"

"Ah Vincent," Kanin looked at Vincent with a grin. "See what happens when you give up the life of a bachelor? Next you will be telling me you need a baby room. Yes, your chamber is of good solid stone and there is lots of bedrock rock above you. We can join it to that unused storage room.

"As for the drying chamber, I'll bet you are spending too much of your time trying to dry your hairy pelt after a bath – and not enough doing more pleasurable things, eh? Yes, I think it is possible to create a drying room. That pipe is a big one and I could probably carve an annex between the bathing chamber and the extension, maybe off the stairs. Would that be all right?"

"Kanin, that would be ideal. Perhaps we can work on it while Catherine is busy above."

"You bet, Vincent. You will want to help, of course, and I can get Cullen to work on the drying room. I'll talk to Annabelle about what ventilation is needed. That woman is a marvel of an engineer. Even Mouse consults with her now. Haven't you noticed that his more ambitious schemes seem to be less ... er ... weird? I think they actually like each other. She was a wonderful help with the aqueduct when it burst. I don't know why we didn't consult her sooner about a lot of things."

"Well, Kanin," Vincent remarked, "no one thought to enquire about Annabelle's skills, until recently. You know we don't demand to know anyone's past. When she arrived, Annabelle threw herself wholeheartedly into our fabric sorting and sewing room and got everyone working to improve it. She has worked wonders in there. We had no idea about her background as a geothermal engineer until she had you hammer out that wind tunnel of hers to dry and air clothes."

"Yeah," Kanin remarked ruefully. "Then came all the vents to improve air flow. I swear, I never want to hammer out another one of those in my life. I must have done dozens – all into pipe conduits. But they have certainly made a difference."

"Annabelle likes to be accepted for herself," Vincent smiled. "She has never been one to toot her own horn."

The music allusions were flying thick and fast today, he thought. It made him remember that he had a song or two to play back in his chamber, later.

"I should get back. Catherine has some ideas," he said quickly.

Kanin must have caught his look, because his mouth curved up on one side.

“Vincent, I have never seen you so keen to stay in your chamber. Maybe I’d better put some extra vents in there. Must be getting pretty steamy these days.”

Vincent coloured, but gave Kanin a rueful smile.

“My friend, it’s not my chamber that needs vents, but my clothing. I’m getting hot in places I never dreamed.”

Kanin laughed and patted Vincent on the back. “Vincent, you are not the only man in this community with that problem. Annabelle can give you some advice about ... um ... air conditioning. She’s an engineer, you know – and not just in stone. She has made clothing that has helped us working men immensely. Talk to her.”

“I think I’ll do that - right now. Thanks Kanin.”

Vincent left and made his way behind the kitchen to Annabelle’s sanctum. He found the dwarf almost hidden behind huge piles of clothes on a long table. She stood on a ramp that Cullen had constructed so that she could reach the table and work comfortably alongside her normal-sized helpers.

“Annabelle, may I disturb you?” Vincent asked as he reached her.

Annabelle put out her arms and drew him into a hug from her ramp, before leaning back to look up at him. Even from her elevated position, he towered over her.

“Vincent, you are a pleasant disturbance to every adult female within range. You’re always welcome. What can I do for you?”

Her compliment left Vincent flustered. He was not used to such remarks from women, except Catherine. He found his face suddenly warm and was at a loss for words. He shook himself mentally and looked around the room. Annabelle had indeed worked miracles in this place. He had not visited often enough.

Annabelle recognized his discomfort and was saddened that this beautiful man had had to wait so much of his adult life to believe what every female above puberty below had known. She shook her head. Vincent was happier and more relaxed than she had ever seen him. The look in his eyes when he thought of Catherine made her a little envious. She sighed.

“Is it clothes you want, Vincent? I have some new ones here. Just came down yesterday.”

Vincent dragged his mind back to his problem and blushed as he tried to find the words.

“Annabelle, Kanin told me you have some solutions to overheating ... for men. I also need a longer vests and sweaters and looser pants.”

Annabelle did not miss his blush and smiled to herself. Well, what next, she wondered. Baby clothes?

“Yes Vincent, I can help with the overheating – and chafing. Here, see these trousers? I put in a special gauze panel around the waist. Everyone prefers pants without a fly and a lot of the men here now prefer the drawstring waists. No one likes anything tight around their ... um .. sensitive areas. Anyhow, this panel puts a layer of air between you and the pants. It’s the same principle as the cold storage below. Your heat gets dissipated and you feel cooler. Of course, it works best if you don’t wear briefs,” she remarked looking at him with mischief in her eyes.

He chose to ignore the gibe.

“Sounds wonderful, Annabelle,” Vincent said gratefully. “Can I have a couple of fairly loose pairs, when you have time?”

“You bet Vincent. I’ll find some and have the panels inserted by one of the ladies on Wednesday. Catherine can take them back. As for the longer clothing, here, have a look through this stuff. I think it must have come from a Weight Watcher’s club. I seldom see clothing this big. But you’ll have no trouble filling it,” she remarked, grinning up at him from her perch.

Vincent smiled back and gave her another hug before looking at the piles she indicated. They were indeed large – some more William’s size than his.

“Um, I think you should give this to William,” he remarked, holding up a Hawaiian shirt big enough to surround both himself and Catherine, with room left for Annabelle.

Annabelle’s unique laugh echoed around the chamber, the same sound that Catherine had traced to her at lunch. Vincent could not prevent himself from joining her. It was infectious. The thought of William wearing life-sized



pineapples across his girth was one to be treasured.

“Perhaps we should save this one for his birthday,” Vincent grinned at Annabelle. “I owe him a joke.”

“Right you are, Vincent. I’ll put this away with his name on it. Meanwhile, did you find anything for yourself?”

“Yes, I think this sweater would be perfect, and I like this woolen vest.” He held up a thick cream and brown sweater that reached at least a foot below his belt-line and a vest of luscious, nubby green and black wool, of a similar length.

“Well, I’d better find some pants that don’t clash,” remarked Annabelle thoughtfully. “Anything else?”

“I wanted to thank you for that enormous towel you gave Catherine. It came in very useful after I forgot to take one for the swimming lessons. We could use another so we can dry one out in between.”

“Vincent, you are more than welcome. I’ll make up another today and drop it by. How is the door rug working out?”

“Annabelle, it left me speechless when I first saw it. Where on earth did it come from? It’s exquisite, magical.”

“Yes, it is, isn’t it? Just like its new owner,” Annabelle grinned up at him. “I seldom know where our donations come from, Vincent. It could probably tell an interesting story if it could talk.”

“Not as interesting as your own story, Annabelle. We are so very grateful for all the work you do. By the way, my chamber is being enlarged and I’ve asked Kanin to put in a drying room by one of the steam pipes. We’ll need to know what ventilation you suggest, since you’re our resident expert.”

“OK Vincent, I’ll talk to Kanin and we’ll figure something out.”

Vincent thanked her, gave her another hug, and left to return to his chamber.

Annabelle watched him stride out, his feline grace sending her shivers down her spine. He was completely without vanity, unaware of his beauty and somehow vulnerable as well – very attractive traits in any man, she thought, but dynamite in Vincent. She sighed again, wondering how many other women below were pining away for this impossible lover.

Vincent was almost knocked over by Mouse as he entered his chamber. Mouse stopped dead, looked at him, and was silent.

“What is it Mouse?”

“Heard you want some work done to make room for Catherine. Wanted to see where. What’s *Under Milkwood*?”

“It’s a present from Catherine – a book that should be recited,” Vincent replied.

“Oh.” Mouse replied and ran out with a quick apology over his shoulder.

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Catherine was making progress with her packing and sorting but she kept distracting herself with thoughts of below, especially one person and his “below.”

She wondered if she was too sex-obsessed - and how she was going to be able to leave Vincent to wind up her affairs in the DA’s office. Right now, even a few hours away from him was physically painful. Then she remembered that Vincent implied he had the same problem and laughed at herself. At least she did not have to get a special wardrobe to hide her arousal – though it might change for another, related reason. That was a thought she kept well-hidden.

In the meantime, she had tried to prevent her own obsession being transmitted through the bond and distracting Vincent – although she knew quite well that he did not need her instigation to get aroused. She had learned to think “behind the scenes” and keep her emotions behind a wall of banality and day-to-day concerns – at least while she was awake. This would help her when she returned to work.

She finished up and packed a few more items into another bag. It was time to get back below.

The evening was upon them. Supper had been quiet after the hilarity of lunch as everyone wound down after a

day of work. Mindful of the upcoming concert in the park, Vincent and Catherine were relaxing on his bed. She was tired and he seemed half asleep. It had been a busy day, but missing the concert was not something either wanted to do. There were too many wonderful memories of those musical nights. Catherine sighed and got up, padding naked to her overnight bag.

She had packed a long cotton dress, something that she felt could be either daywear or a nightgown. It had privacy panels, so she could eschew a bra and underwear. She had discovered that she felt much more comfortable without either. She was not 'well-endowed' and had frequently gone without a bra at home. Now, she wanted to completely 'go natural'. She did not fool herself about the other, more realistic reason – that the less she wore, the easier it was to undress quickly. She suspected she was not the only woman in the tunnels who had learned this lesson.

She slipped the dress over her head and was pulling it down when she felt Vincent's hand around her breasts. She leaned against him, sighing, felt his arousal on her behind. He was wearing thin pants, she realized.

"Vincent, you are making it very difficult for me to concentrate on dressing! I don't want to miss the concert."

"As you wish, Catherine," Vincent's voice projected mock sadness as he released her. "However, I do have one suggestion. It isn't warm in these tunnels and even I wear a cloak on my way above. I have something for you."

Catherine finished adjusting her dress and turned around – to be confronted by a wide expanse of emerald velvet. Vincent was peering at her over the top of it. Without a word, he swept it around her, seating it on her shoulders.

"Oh Vincent, it's splendid! Where did you find it – and my size too?"

"Ah well, Catherine, that's a long story. I've had it for some time. Somehow I never found the occasion to give it to you. Since we have a date - I thought I'd present it, with my love."

Catherine spun around. It was a full poncho, with a hood, which had a large glass, green ball button at the neck. It reached almost to the floor. With her hands inside it, she discovered another useful feature, and surreptitiously slid "*Under Milkwood*" into the pocket as Vincent was putting on his boots. Then she slipped on her desert boots and looked at Vincent.

"I'm ready," she pronounced. "Are you, Sir Vincent?"

He laughed at her, took her into a big hug and then grabbed his own cloak. He was wearing only a dark pullover over his pants. Catherine reflected that she had seldom seen him wearing so little – until their first night of love. She hoped he would continue in this vein. She loved to see the hint of his body under his clothes. Of course, where his manhood was concerned, it was more than a hint. Tonight he did not seem concerned about that, however. The cloak would cover any embarrassment on the way to and from the music chamber. She noticed he was wearing light felt boots. She must find him some better footwear, something suited to his unique feet. Annabelle would have ideas.

They walked hand-in-hand down the long route to their destination. They laid out their cloaks on top of the many cushions and arranged themselves comfortably, just as the orchestra finished its dissonant tuning.

Catherine leaned against Vincent's chest and waited, eyes closed. His arm held her close and she could feel his contentment through their bond.

The first soft strains oozed through the grate and Catherine sighed. There would be no vocals to this particular rendering, so she could enjoy Tchaikovsky's wonderful instrumentals. It was sad, she thought, that his work had been used so often by the world above that much of it had become a cliché. The true beauty and magnificence of his artistry was often buried under advertising banality.

Vincent pulled her closer and put his other arm around her as well. She sank into a place of peace, where the music wove a spell of silk around her. She was exactly where she wanted to be, she realized. Forever.

Vincent felt Catherine's peace and surrendered to it himself. He felt as if he was no longer of his world – or any other. The music wrapped them both in its magical thrall. He drifted into a nap, aware that Catherine was doing the same. He let himself go, reflecting that there was no sensation as wonderful as feeling her asleep through the bond, and knowing that this sensation would now be part of his nights, forever.

They both roused when the music stopped for the intermission. The next piece was to be the 1812 Overture. Catherine turned to look at Vincent and planted a soft kiss on his mouth as he turned to her.

“Oh Vincent, this place is magical.”

Then she remembered her gift, and sat up a little, dislodging Vincent’s arms so she could root in her cape. There it was. She turned to him, knelt beside him and handed him *Under Milkwood* with a smile.

“I found it in Mr Smythe’s shop.”

Vincent looked at the book closely, weighing it appreciatively. He liked the feel of hardcovers, the sense of purpose they implied – that the book was worth the time and energy to make it last – and have it passed it on to future readers.

“Catherine, I would love to read this to you tonight. It’s not very long. But I fear the “1812” might drown out my voice – to say nothing of being a somewhat inappropriate accompaniment. Should we leave our concert and go somewhere quieter – or postpone the reading?”

Catherine considered the question carefully. She felt so wonderfully relaxed. The sound of cannons would detract from that mood. And she desperately wanted to hear Vincent read the book.

“Vincent, let’s return to your ... our ... chamber. The concert will just have to proceed without us.”

They rose, wrapped their capes around themselves again, and made their way back to their chamber. Vincent heard the sentry report over the pipes that they were headed inward.

Wanting to be sure she did not fall asleep this time, Catherine sat in a chair, keeping her cloak around herself for warmth. Vincent moved his massive chair around to face her and opened up the book. He opened the cover, saw the bookplate and paused. He was riffling through the introduction pages when Annabelle, Father, Kanin, Olivia, Mary and William entered the chamber one after the other. Each unfolded an ancient wooden chair, sat down in a semi-circle, then looked at Vincent expectantly.

Catherine looked her surprise and then giggled uncontrollably. It was contagious. Soon the entire chamber was shaking with soft laughter. Vincent was smiling, but did not appear at all surprised.

“How did you know?” she managed to ask eventually.

Father looked sheepish. “Well, Mouse asked me about *Under Milkwood* when he saw it on your table this morning. He didn’t know what that meant and asked me. I told him, then I told Mary – and we hatched our plot. Since then, we have waited for some indication of when Vincent was going to read it. When the sentry reported that you two left the music chamber early, before the “1812”, we could only think of one reason ... well, two actually, but we thought it was more likely to be *Under Milkwood*. The children are all in bed - and since your privacy curtain was not down ... well, here we are!

“This will be a reading to remember. I’m ashamed I had not thought of it before. You are to be commended, Catherine!”

Father sat back with a smug expression on his face.

Vincent looked faintly embarrassed now, Catherine noticed.

“Father, such subterfuge was unnecessary. All you had to do was ask and I would have been happy to read this anywhere, anytime.”

“Ah, that’s what you say now, Vincent,” Father disagreed. “But we know that the charms of Catherine trump all other considerations. We could not be sure you would want to read to us – at least until you had finished your private reading. This way, we save you the trouble of reading it twice. For now,” Father concluded.

“Enough small talk,” William boomed. “Quiet everyone. Vincent has the floor.”

So it was that Vincent began the reading that became part of the history of the Tunnels. Even Catherine, who had fallen in love with his voice before she had seen his remarkable face, was captivated. She was soon engrossed in the people of Dylan Thomas’ small town. She closed her eyes after she saw several others do the same. The only sound in the chamber was Vincent’s soft, silken voice.

“*To begin at the beginning ...*”

*“It is spring, moonless night in the small town, starless and bible-black, the cobblestreets silent and the hunched, courters’-and-rabbits’ wood limping invisible to the sloeback, slow, black, crowblack, fishingboat-bobbing sea.”*

They all sat, barely breathing, until much later, Vincent finished:

*“... the suddenly wind-shaken wood springs awake for the second dark time this one Spring day.”*

There was a collective sigh and eyes eased open around the room. Catherine looked at Vincent and saw him regarding the group with an amused – but satisfied – expression. She voiced what everyone thought.

“Vincent, that was superb. I think you *will* be reading it again.”

Vincent looked at her, obviously pleased with the reaction.

“Well, if that is the case, we may have to find a larger venue. However, ladies and gentlemen, Catherine and I have had a strenuous day and need our rest. Tomorrow, I believe, is laundry day. That should bring us all down to earth.”

There were groans at that last and everyone rose. One after the other, they approached Vincent and hugged him. The ladies and Father gave him a peck on the cheek as well. Annabelle, who was last, took Vincent’s hands in his and squeezed them. He bent down so she could plant a peck on his cheek.

Vincent then rose to help Father back to his chamber, carrying the folding chair. Annabelle stayed to talk to Catherine, taking her hands in her own tiny ones.

“Catherine, you have worked wonders on below’s most eligible – and, we feared - confirmed bachelor. We are all envious,” she added quietly. She smiled and left with her smaller chair and a spring in her step.

When Vincent returned, Catherine put down the privacy rug and looked at him. He seemed a bit stunned by all the attention. He sat down in his chair again and held the book reverently. She moved to him and lifted herself onto his lap, put her arms around his neck, and kissed him full on the lips. He reached out a long arm to put the book on the table before hugging her close and deepening the kiss. When they finally found the strength to part, Catherine looked into his wonderful azure eyes.

“Vincent, your voice is exquisitely beautiful. I have always known that, of course, since you first read *Great Expectations* to me. But tonight, I felt as there was magic in it as well. Thank you my love, for that most wonderful experience. I will never be satisfied, now, with any other reading of *Under Milkwood*.”

She hugged him to her, her head on his chest, felt his heartbeat under her ear, and sighed. She looked over at the painting by Kristopher Gentian and gave him a silent thanks for the book. The candles suddenly dimmed, then flared brighter than before.

Catherine and Vincent looked at each other. Catherine giggled.

“I think our ghostly friend was listening to your reading and has given his approval,” she remarked.

“Well, I hope he has the decency to know when to leave,” Vincent murmured as he carried her to the bed and they began to undress. They had just finished and Vincent was turning around to blow out the candles, when they all went out.

“A useful fellow to have around,” grunted Vincent as he felt his way into the bed and Catherine’s warmth.

“Thank you Kristopher,” Catherine whispered, just before she felt Vincent’s unique mouth on hers. After that, there was no more talk, and if they had an observer, he was very discreet.

END

# Love Knot

*Into the crowned knot of fire  
And the fire and the rose are one*

-T.S. Eliot

It had taken Catherine a long time to devise a way to easily brush Vincent's hair. She wanted to be able to face him, reach his head easily - and for them both to be comfortable and relaxed.

It was Friday night – their night for indulgences. They were in the attic of the brownstone under the skylights. It was a clear night in early winter and the room was lit only by starshine and a crescent moon. The room was comfortably warm and they were both naked – their favourite state these days.

They faced each other atop a fake fur throw laid on a large floor cushion. Catherine sat on a low, furry hassock in the “V” of Vincent's legs, facing him. Her legs were on either side of his hips. He was resting one elbow on another hassock behind him. The other rested on her stomach, where the bulge of her pregnancy was rounding it. He was stroking her softly, distracting her. His eyes were closed.

The ethereal brilliance of Vivaldi's “Winter” was playing softly from a corner of the room, sending shivers up her spine as she drew the brush through Vincent's hair. She paused and closed her eyes.

“Tell me,” Vincent demanded, quite aware that she saw images in the music, knowing that they would be different to his own.

Catherine began to brush again. She could feel Vincent's purr where her legs touched him.

“Every time I hear this, I think of those beautiful winter scenes in *Dr Zhivago* – the woods, the big summer house in Varykino, coated in ice inside and out, the snow drifts around the tiny cottage, the air so cold that the smoke from the chimney is barely able to rise.”

She had introduced Vincent to some of the better movies on videotape. The visual images enthralled him. He never tired of *Dr Zhivago*.

“Then I see a forest of firs after a new snowfall. The sun is bright and the trees are silhouettes against the blue-white snow. The snow has drifted in soft mounds to cover everything. Then a glittering shower drifts down from a branch far above, dancing in the sun like fairy dust. It's silent and peaceful and the sky is clear, a perfect winter blue.

“Then night falls and the aurora borealis begins to ripple across the heavens. There's a fairy tinkling, as if from a harp made of ice. Everything seems suspended until the aurora fades.”

Catherine dropped the brush beside her and began to run a comb through Vincent's hair. It was as fine and soft as kitten fur. He had tilted his head as if basking in the music. She bent over to plant a soft kiss on his lips. His purr deepened.

“Yes,” he whispered, dropping his hand to stroke her calf lightly. “I can see it.”

Catherine, now combing the denser, mane-like hair underneath, had an inspiration. Pretending to have found out a tangle, she grasped a small hank of hair and with a few deft twists made a tiny braid in it. She smiled.

Vincent opened his eyes and looked at her, sensing a smug happiness he could not account for.

“What?”

Catherine picked up a hand mirror and showed him. She saw the recognition in his eyes, realized he knew exactly what she had done.

He looked at her with an intensity that lit a fire in her core. She rose from the hassock, kicked it away to roll across the room. He pushed his away with a quick swipe and she sat down, easing herself into his lap until she could feel him warming her.

They kissed deeply and then snuggled, letting their heat crown until they could wait no longer. Then under the night sky, they formed a love knot of a different kind.

END