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by Angie

Double Blessings

*Like to a double cherry, seeming parted,
But yet an union in partition;
Two lovely berries moulded on one stem;
So, with two seeming bodies, but one heart*

- William Shakespeare

Vincent and Catherine were enjoying an evening in their private suite in the brownstone. The wind was howling outside, shaking the house, raising creaks and groans that made them glad to snuggle.

Jacob was asleep in his room and Pirate the cat was presumably improving his mind downstairs in the den. He was now well-behaved, but still preferred Vincent to anyone else. The sight of him on Vincent's shoulder had become so common that no one even commented anymore. Catherine still hoped that the little cat would grow out of this habit, but so far, that had not happened. The kitten had quickly discovered that licking Vincent's nearby ear would allow him this indulgence.

This was their private time of night. Their personal bond was shooting sparks and they were embracing naked on a fake fur rug in front of the fireplace. The fireplace was a real one, not a gas - or heaven-forbid - electric fake. They burned eco-friendly, renewable stuff in it – reconstituted coffee grounds and old wood construction forms. The older teens below had become expert in finding the latter in waste piles and hauling it into the tunnels, where it was cleaned and dried. The big fireplace in the Great Hall and the smaller one in the dining room, were now well-supplied at need with well-seasoned wood. Kanin had created a system of vents which used the steam pipes conduits. Both fireplaces used large vents, as did William's kitchen. That the community always burned very dry wood, meant that there was no risk of smoke being seen above. Fortunately, the builders of the steam vents had wanted their exits to be unremarked above.

Vincent brought some of this wood to the brownstone, which also had a fireplace in the den downstairs

Catherine tried to ignore the freight train-like noise outside. She loved the feel of Vincent's body against hers. He was so furry – and firm - in all the right places. They were caressing each other now and their heat was building.

Vincent put his hand on Catherine's belly and began to stroke it gently. At first she thought it was because she had not quite lost all the roundness after having Jacob. She knew he loved it and she had no real desire to exercise it off. She was a matron now, so a little slackness was allowed. But Vincent suddenly got a strange expression on his face and their bond gave her no revelation. She sensed joy and peace – but something else. He seemed completely absorbed.

“What?” she asked him, running her hands up his furry chest and rubbing a nipple to get his attention.

Vincent shook himself mentally and looked down at her. He captured her mouth in his and gave her a deep, passionate kiss before replying.

“Catherine, you are pregnant.”

Catherine quivered in shock. Vincent enclosed her in his arms.

“Vincent, are you sure?”

“Catherine, you know I'm never wrong about such things. But there's more. You are growing twins.”

“TWINS?!”

Catherine burrowed her face in his chest and he held her closer, nuzzling her hair. She was speechless. She had wanted more children, but had accepted that she would not conceive again, despite their best efforts. Her brain buzzing, she tried to remember when she's had her last period. She had definitely missed one, but that was not uncommon. It seemed to happen at least once a year and Peter had assured her she was healthy. Vincent spoke again, interrupting this train of thought.

“Catherine, there's still more. They're a boy and a girl.”

Catherine's shock and joy rippled along their bond. Vincent quailed a bit, knowing what would come next. She leaned back a little and looked up at his face, her eyes searching his.

“How long have you known this, Vincent? You couldn't possibly know their sex unless they had been maturing for awhile. Why didn't you tell me earlier?”

“Catherine, how could I? It's been eight years since you gave birth to Jacob. I thought no more children were possible for us. I didn't mind and thought no more about it.

“Then I detected something about a month ago, but I could hardly believe it myself. Then I was afraid to say anything right away. You are older – and I am not as other men, so to speak. I did not want you to get your hopes up unnecessarily. I just monitored them until I was sure everything was fine.

“I knew you had twins, but not their sex - until tonight. Now there is every reason to be sure they are fine. They seem quite robust.”

Catherine sighed. Vincent’s guilt was plain to see – but also his deep love for her. How could she berate him for that? She stretched up to kiss him, fully and deeply.

“We’ll have to tell Father and Peter, of course. And Jacob will have to get used to the idea as well. He’s been the centre of our universe for a long time.”

“Catherine, there is still some concern. We don’t know what these children will look like. Jacob has taken after you, mostly, but ...”

Catherine put her finger on his lips to silence him. “Vincent, you know it won’t matter to me what they look like. I will love them with all that I am. If they resemble you more than me, that would be wonderful. They will have a father who loves them and can help them in ways no one else can. And they will have the love of a fine community waiting for them. Don’t worry.”

Vincent hugged her to him and began stroking her back. Before long, they were indulging in some careful lovemaking to cement this new phase of their lives. He did not tell her something he found even more amazing than the fact of her pregnancy – that he already had a thin bond with the twins. It was so much stronger than what he had sensed in Jacob at a much later phase of her pregnancy, that he knew these twins would be special indeed – and most likely resemble him rather than her.

In his bedroom, Jacob could feel his parents love for each other and him. He knew of their private bond. They had explained it to him and he knew they used it so as not to disturb him. He figured it was something adults liked to keep secret. He had seen their looks and knew it was some kind of private game they played. Adults always assumed kids were stupid.

However, sometimes he felt just a hint of that game. It warmed him, even though he did not completely understand it.

Tonight he had been restless with the noise of the storm. He was half-awake when he sensed an unusual emotion in his father, one he did not mask very effectively. He didn’t know what it meant, exactly, but the joy he felt coming from them both later, before they drifted into sleep gave him a clue. It was the kind of joy he had sensed all his life when they looked at him or hugged him. This time it was not directed at him, though. It seemed to be centred in his mother. Well, he knew where babies came from, so he guessed he was going to have a brother or sister.

He was not sure what he thought about that. He was sure they would not stop loving him, but he was not going to get all their attention. He had seen kids below when new babies arrived. Some became kind of angry. He knew he would be able to tell if his parents love for him ever changed. That was something he had which no other kid could boast.

He never talked about it, but Father sometimes asked him where his mother or father was. He always knew. He wondered if he would be able to feel the new baby too. It would be nice to have someone closer to his own age to talk to. Of course, he was going to be nine years old when the baby arrived, but he was sure that it would be special. He would help look after it. He had been taught baby care during Practical Studies, below. That would be fun.

He went to sleep with a smile on his face.

The next morning, when Jacob went downstairs after washing and dressing, he found his mother sitting in his father’s lap in the kitchen. They smiled at him and he went to them to get the hug he loved from them both together. He could tell they were eager to tell him something.

“You don’t have to tell me,” he said. “I know Mom is pregnant.”

Catherine laughed and looked at Vincent with triumph in her eyes.

“I told you we would not be able to keep a secret from our son,” she told him.

“Here Jacob, feel my stomach. Can you tell anything?”

Jacob put his hand hesitantly on her stomach and concentrated, frowning slightly and closing his eyes as he did so. Suddenly his eyes popped open and he looked at them both in surprise.

"I can feel them. Two of them. I think they're a boy and a girl."

Vincent looked at his son with amazement.

"Jacob, how long have you been able to do this?"

Jacob looked a little abashed. "I ... um ... well Samantha asked me one day. She knew you could tell when a woman was pregnant and she wondered if I could. I think she was embarrassed to ask you. Anyway, I could feel something. When I closed my eyes and concentrated, I just knew she was pregnant. A couple of months later, she asked me again and I could tell her it was a boy. I don't know how I knew that, though."

Catherine looked at Vincent.

"That was at least two years ago, Vincent. Well, our wonderful son has already proven he's like you in so many ways. I wonder what our twins will bring into our lives to amaze us."

"Just their existence will be amazing to me," Vincent whispered into her ear.

"Well Jacob, today being Saturday, we thought we would all go down and join everyone for breakfast. Would you like that?"

"Oh yes," Jacob cried, "but I'd better feed Pirate."

"We did that," Vincent interrupted. "For today, we thought he should stay here. William doesn't like animals in the dining hall and we have some visiting to do. Our news will come as a bit of a shock."

"So everyone ready?" Catherine asked, getting off Vincent's lap. "Let's go!"

The trip to the dining hall was a happy one and their entrance a glad one. They greeted everyone, but made no official announcement. After breakfast, Jacob was left on his own to play with his friends and Catherine and Vincent followed Father to his chamber. Their news, when they gave it, was obviously a shock to the old man and he gripped his chair so hard his knuckles whitened.

"Vincent, are you sure? Silly question. Of course you are. You're better than an ultrasound. Is everything well?"

"Father, Catherine is well and the twins seem to be hearty. It's an unexpected blessing after so long. You will be a grandfather again."

"Yes, that's true. And we've never had twins here before. Vincent you are a constant source of surprises. Catherine, I imagine you are happy too.

"Oh yes, Father. I had given up. We couldn't complain, even if Jacob was our only child. He is such a treasure. We learned today that he has Vincent's talent for detecting pregnancies. Did you know this?"

Father looked surprised. "Why, yes, Catherine. I didn't realize you didn't know. Jacob has been much in demand in that regard. I wonder why he kept it a secret? I never thought to mention it. It did mean that Vincent could get on with more important things, of course. And some of the women did like his hand on them a little too much." Father smiled mischievously.

Catherine laughed.

"I should be jealous of that, I suppose. But it's the only part of Vincent they get to touch, as a rule, so I suppose I must be magnanimous."

Vincent looked embarrassed and Catherine laughed again and took one of his hands in hers.

"And his hands are so beautiful and warm. He still won't believe me." She kissed his palm and gave him a look that made him sit up straight. But he spoke softly.

"Catherine, love is blind. That has never been so true as with your love for me."

Catherine showed a rare flash of anger. "Vincent, how dare you ..."

Father broke in. "Nonsense, Vincent. Catherine is exactly right. It isn't blindness, it's seeing you for who you are – someone very special to all of us. We have learned to look beyond appearances. You taught us that. Catherine needed no such instruction."

Vincent dipped his head. When he spoke, his voice was heavy with emotion.

"I'm sorry, both of you. I've been so happy for so many years and now I have another reason to feel blessed – two

of them, actually. I'm not sure how much more joy I can stand."

Catherine moved to stand in front of him. "Well Vincent, you just sit there and get your brain wrapped around this, because I will not have you disparaging yourself any more. You deserve all the joy there is. I thought you had ... um ... risen above that." She looked at him suggestively.

"Catherine," Vincent said hoarsely, "you know I don't reason well with that part of my anatomy."

Father, who had been watching this exchange with not a little amusement, burst out laughing and took some time to get himself under control.

His guests both had the grace to look slightly embarrassed. Catherine apologized.

"My fault, Father. I'm sure Vincent finds me very trying. I'm still all over him at every opportunity."

Vincent protested. "Catherine, you certainly are trying – to take the blame. Father, it takes two to tango, as someone said. The only surprising thing is that we have not had so many children we *'didn't know what to do'*. For that we must thank the fates."

"Yes, well, the fates have relented it seems. I'm very happy for you both," Father chuckled. "I imagine you have other people to tell."

"Oh, I'm sure Jacob has already told everyone," Vincent remarked. "But we will have to tell Peter. He'll want to officiate, I'm sure. As will you."

"You can depend on that, Vincent. I wouldn't miss this for the world. Twins! My word!"

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The next few months went quickly. Catherine was well, but found herself tired much earlier in her pregnancy. Both Jacob and Vincent never lost an opportunity to feel her stomach and monitor the growth of the twins. They invariably reported that all was well.

Jacob revealed he could feel them along his bond, unintentionally, one night while the three of them were in the den.

Pirate the cat had abandoned Vincent's shoulder and now rested in Catherine's lap, his new favourite place. He could not sit on Catherine's smaller shoulder, but he followed her around the house like a lost sheep.

"I think that cat can feel something different about you," Vincent commented. "It's almost as if he can sense the twins."

"Well, they are pretty strong," Jacob remarked. When both Vincent and Catherine looked at him in amazement, he looked a little guilty.

"Well, it's true," he said defiantly. "I can feel them along my bond."

Vincent sighed. "That's so, Catherine. They are very strong. Much more so than Jacob was. Furthermore, their bond with each other is even stronger. I can sense that too. You might as well know the rest. There is a strong possibility these children will resemble me more closely than you."

Catherine looked at Vincent, speechless for a few moments.

"I've told you before, Vincent, I will love them no matter whom they resemble. But, why can't I feel them too?"

"Catherine, you didn't establish a bond with Jacob until he was born. I suspect the same will be true of the twins. Perhaps there's a self-protection mechanism that prevents you from doing so. They might keep you awake at night or distract you at inopportune moments."

Catherine dumped Pirate off her lap and went to sit on Vincent's. She put her arms around his neck and whispered into his ear.

"Vincent, these children are going to be special. Jacob, come here."

Jacob joined them and the three of them embraced, their bonds singing their love for each other. Pirate, suddenly feeling left out, jumped onto the chair arm and then onto Vincent's shoulder. He immediately began licking Vincent's ear.

Vincent could not prevent himself from transmitting his delight at the sensation, but suddenly all three looked at each other. The unborn twins seemed suddenly aware of it as well. Catherine, although she could not feel them directly, felt the residual happiness through her bond with Vincent and Jacob. It was so unique, so wonderful, that she closed her eyes and let herself drift with it.

“Well,” she said at last. “Now, we are five.”

“And a half,” reminded Jacob, stroking Pirate.

Vincent laughed and looked at Catherine and his son in turn.

“I think we will have interesting times ahead,” he commented.

...

A month before her due date, Catherine had to move downstairs and sleep in the hospital room because she found it too tiring to climb the stairs. Both Peter and Vincent felt that the birth could occur at any time. Her stomach was so large that Catherine felt like the Queen Mary as she navigated the brownstone’s corridors. Vincent refused to go below now. He sensed her time was near and wanted to be present to lend his support, as he had with the birth of Jacob.

A week later, Catherine started to get labour pains. They progressed so quickly that Vincent helped her get into a hospital gown and quickly dressed himself in the hated hospital pants and short gown as well. He helped her down the hall to the clinic and into the bed, then tapped on the pipes to call Peter, waiting impatiently until he arrived, Father in tow. They had been in Father’s chamber playing chess.

Vincent sat behind Catherine on the clinic’s bed, her head on a pillow in the “V” of his legs, as before. She quickly grabbed his hands in hers and held them tightly. He leaned over her and moved their hands until they were over her belly and he could feel the twins. He did not really need the contact, but he felt better for it. He tried to project calm and love to them along the bond. He sensed impatience and discomfort, not unlike what he had felt with Jacob, but very much stronger.

Vincent felt them move violently and sent a desperate look to both Father and Peter, who placed themselves at the ready. Suddenly, Catherine let go of his hands to grip his legs and in almost unseemly ease, the twins were born, within seconds of each other. Both were put on her stomach for a few minutes, but had good lungs, as they quickly demonstrated.

Vincent could see little of his new children, except a mass of bloody hair. Soon enough, their umbilical cords were tied off and Peter carried them over to the table to be weighed and cleaned. Meanwhile, Samantha had come in scrubbed. Vincent lifted his legs out the way so she could give Catherine a warm sponge bath and a clean gown. She and Vincent helped Catherine to sit up, close to him. Then Father and Peter carried a baby each back to the parents.

Vincent kept his hands on Catherine’s shoulders as the two babies were given to her. They were softly-furred all over and had Catherine’s green eyes and brown hair in kitten faces. Their tiny nails were slightly pointed.

Catherine held the twins on her chest and stroked them, her bond rippling with a double insistence. She was relieved that she could feel them so well, and felt Vincent’s emotions as well, proud and happy. Jacob was still below, but she could sense that he was aware and not paying much attention to his lessons. She was not sure she could handle four bonds at once, so was grateful he was somewhat distracted.

She felt Vincent’s hair touch her face and turned to look at him. His kiss was awkward because of their position, but his eyes promised a much better one soon. She sighed. She felt incredibly tired and fell asleep at the thought.

Vincent felt Catherine drift off and was grateful the birth had gone so smoothly. He pulled a blanket over his wife and their newborns, leaning back himself for a nap. The headboard was no more comfortable than before, but Samantha brought him a pillow which he gratefully put behind him. He felt the sleepiness of the twins as well, and with so much slumber around him, he gave in and joined it.

Peter and Father, smiling at this picture of family bliss, quietly left. Samantha stayed so that someone was on hand in case of need. She had a three-year old child of her own, but Vincent and Catherine's were special. She regarded them with real affection. So much had changed with Catherine's introduction to their world. She had loved Vincent since she was old enough to walk, and had never really lost that feeling, despite the disparity in their ages. However, she could not begrudge him the happiness he had with Catherine. It warmed her just being close to them. She sighed and decided there was something she could do for them.

When Vincent awoke, it was dark outside and the room was lit only by candlelight. There was a mild scent of herbs. Samantha had decided that the ugly fluorescents were not appropriate for such an occasion and had brought up some of Rebecca's special candles. They were safely ensconced in glass bowls and the window was slightly open, letting in a soft evening breeze.

Vincent breathed deeply. He loved the smell of candles, which were part of his earliest memories, but Rebecca's were unique. He looked down at his new children and felt their awareness of him. They were awake and soon their mother was too. She moved a little, trying to get comfortable.

"Vincent, we can't stay like this much longer. My legs are cramping. You must be even more uncomfortable. I'd like to move to the hospital room."

Samantha immediately took the babies, one by one, to a small carrier and placed them in it. Then she helped Catherine sit up so that Vincent could extract himself from the bed.

Catherine felt grubby, and said so. Samantha immediately helped her wash her face and comb her hair.

Vincent, meanwhile, sat on a chair with the carrier in his lap, rocking it lightly. His bond with the twins was so strong that he felt he almost knew their names. What would they call these two special children, he wondered? He ran his hand over their tiny furry torsos and gazed enthralled at their faces. They did indeed resemble him, but were, as Catherine had predicted, beautiful. Had he looked like this as a baby? he wondered. Then again, the very young of any species always seemed adorable.

He put his head into the carrier to nuzzle each child in turn. He felt their delight at the contact. He could feel their strong bond with each other too. They almost moved together, as if they were Siamese twins. He wondered what this would mean in the months and years to come.

Samantha approached him and told him that Catherine was ready to be moved. She took the carrier from him, leaving him free to carry his wife to the next room. He lifted her carefully, planting a deep kiss on her lips as he did so. She snuggled against him, her love for him clear and the thread joining all of them now as strong and smooth as silk.

Vincent had just made Catherine comfortable and seen the twins placed in a crib by her side when Jacob ran in, skidding to a halt. He almost tiptoed over to the crib. Although obviously bubbling with questions, he held himself in check and regarded his new brother and sister with intense concentration.

"Wow," he whispered. "They're awesome. Just like you, Dad. I can feel them too."

Vincent gathered his son into a hug and pulled him over to Catherine. Jacob bent over and gave his mother a kiss. She looked at him and smiled affectionately.

"Well Jacob, I think we're going to need your help with this handful. I'm so glad you are old enough to do so. I ..."

There was a double screech from the crib and Vincent quickly lifted first one twin, then the other to Catherine. She placed them each to a breast and Vincent watched as they greedily began to feed. He realized something then.

"Catherine, I don't think you will have too much milk this time. My services will not be needed," he said sadly.

She looked up at her big hairy husband, still in the hospital pants and short gown, which had fallen open in the front. He was revealing more than he probably realized, but she said nothing. Modesty had gone out the window in this household long ago. She gave him her best lascivious look, although she knew she would not be able to follow through on it for a while.

"Vincent, your services are essential. Without you, my life would be nothing, empty. You have filled me with wonder, love and happiness – to say nothing of three children. What more is there?"

Vincent lifted his eyes from the twins and looked Catherine in the eyes. He sniffed suggestively.

“Diapers,” he said.

Jacob laughed and soon all three of them were laughing. The twins suckled happily for a while longer, then immediately went to sleep. Vincent took them to the table to clean them and put them in their first diapers, then laid them back in their crib. They didn’t awaken. He moved to the bed and gathered both Catherine and Jacob in his arms for a hug. A five-way hug would have to wait a little longer.

“Pirate,” yelled Jacob, extracting himself. He ran out of the room and returned with the cat in his arms, but did not put it down when he caught the warning in his father’s eyes.

“Jacob, Pirate will have to stay out of here. We don’t want cat hair in this hospital room. It’ll just be for a few days, then we’ll all be together again.”

“Yes, all of us,” Catherine added. “Although we’re never really apart any more, are we? Who would have thought we’d come to this? I am so blessed. Three men and a daughter to love.”

“Who all love you too,” Vincent whispered. He bent down to kiss her and she hugged him to her, returning the kiss with interest. Jacob rolled his eyes and left, closing the door behind him. He had felt them retreat to their personal bond. But he could feel the twins’ contentment quite well. That was such a unique sensation that he sat in the den absorbed.

The cat, ignored, curled up in his lap and went to sleep.

END

Snow Day

*Merry and tragical! tedious and brief!
That is, hot ice and wondrous strange snow.*

- William Shakespeare

New York was blanketed by almost three feet of snow and the city was at a virtual standstill. While the amount was not unknown, the fact that it had come all at once had set a 40 year record - and it showed no sign of either letting up or melting because of record cold temperatures as well.

Forty years! Catherine tried to imagine what she had been doing 40 years ago and failed. Well, to be honest, she didn't want to remember. It made her feel old. Her son, patiently sitting beside her, was 18. Her twins were almost 10 years old now. That made her a matron - at the very least.

She and Jacob were in the office of the adjoining brownstone, taking advantage of the lull to clear up some paperwork associated with the Foundation. It was a good thing the two buildings were connected inside, she thought. The sidewalks outside were almost impassable since the most recent half foot of snow. Snow plows kept the streets clear at the expense of pedestrians and Catherine suspected Vladivostok probably had no higher snow banks.

The house was empty but for themselves. The students were on winter break and had returned to the relative sanity of the Tunnels, no doubt keeping William busy making meat pies and sausage rolls – to say nothing of their favourite desserts.

It was difficult to work. Catherine and Jacob's bond was singing with a joy not their own. Vincent and the twins were in the garden of their brownstone, obviously playing in the unusual amount of snow. Catherine sighed and felt Jacob's hand on her own. She looked in the azure eyes, so like his father's, and felt his wry humour.

"Mom, why don't we give in and join them? Perhaps we can channel all that energy into something useful."

"Like what?" she asked.

"Oh, I think there's enough snow out there for a decent slide. The twins have those flying saucers they begged Mouse for – but have never used."

Catherine grinned. "Wonderful idea, Jacob. Let's go!"

They exited the office and trudged back home along the chilly connecting tunnel. They entered the kitchen and looked out the door. The snow banks were so high Catherine couldn't see over them, but a rough pathway led from the door.

There was a sudden eruption as they looked out and one of the twins slid across the path and into the snow wall, followed quickly by the other. Both shook themselves free of the snow, stood up and charged back the way they had come. A moment later Vincent rolled onto the path, no doubt propelled by the twins. He scrambled to his feet and suddenly turned to the door. He caught sight of his audience and his canines gleamed in a smile. He took a step towards them – and was suddenly buried under two smaller forms who pushed him into the snowbank and brought it down on top of them. All three wrestled themselves free this time and stood up on the path, brushing the snow off themselves. Vincent gave his audience a shrug, then ran off down the path, hotly pursued by the twins.

Catherine and Jacob looked at each other and sighed.

"Well, I guess we'd better get on some outdoor clothing," Catherine remarked. "They're having far too much fun out there."

They went upstairs to find something suitable and Catherine looked out the French doors of their bedroom. The yard had very deep drifts, judging by the height against the enclosing wall, although half of it looked as if a herd of elephants had been doing polkas. Her husband and the twins were churning it up further as they pelted snowballs at each other.

The rest of the snow was so pristine in the bright sunshine, it looked like eiderdown.

Catherine found some snow pants buried in the back of her cupboard and put on a thermal shirt and thick sweater over top. Then she dug around for some thick socks, mittens, a scarf and a hat, then headed back downstairs. She grabbed her snow jacket and sturdy boots from the front of the house and carried them to the kitchen. Jacob was almost ready and waited for her to finish so they could exit together.

Catherine took her first breath outside and coughed as the cold hit her throat. She stamped up and down for a few moments to get her circulation moving and then trudged along the path behind Jacob. They emerged into the open near the garden shed, but the drifts were still too high for her to see over them. Jacob was taller and

turned to where he could hear sounds of activity.

The joy was still evident along their bond, but the noise was muffled. Catherine was glad of that, for the sake of the neighbours. Like their father, the twins voices were slightly raspy and not ideal for shouting. She heard the occasional yelp as a something, probably a snowball, found its target.

Jacob took the initiative and raised his voice. "Attention everyone. We are going to construct a snow slide. If you wish to use it, you have to help make it."

There was a momentary silence at this and then three bodies exploded over top of a nearby bank and trudded over to them.

Vincent immediately hugged Catherine to him, panting a little, then released her and gazed at his children. His gaze settled on his eldest.

"What's this plan, Jacob?"

"Well, there's a huge drift against the back left corner of the yard. I saw it from upstairs. I think that would be the best place to start a slide. The twins have saucers and with all of us working, it could be done quickly."

There were soft whoops from Jennifer and Joseph, who immediately began to make their way to the corner, followed by the others.

The snow was somewhat packed and easy to carve. They quickly pounded out a firm slope with steps leading to the top, and began to work their way down to the path, sculpting a curve just before it. Once at the path, Vincent used a shovel to make another curve and began to improve the route to the back step. It was a steep, narrow canyon that shone in the sunlight. Magical almost, Catherine thought as she and Jacob packed the sides behind him. The twins, she realized suddenly, had disappeared.

Whoops came from the direction of the back corner and suddenly the three of them realized they were in the direct path of oncoming traffic. Jacob made a massive spring over the right bank, only half making it, his legs dangling before he hauled himself over, leaving a small avalanche behind him.

Catherine turned but could not follow Jacob's example. She was too short. Fast as thought, Vincent stuck the shovel into snow, grabbed Catherine from behind, and with one hand under her arm and another between her legs, flung her over the left snow bank into the virgin white on the other side. He grabbed the shovel and braced it with one foot, put his other foot against the kitchen door and deflected first one and then the other saucer into the right snowbank and away from the back door. A small avalanche left them half-buried and they yelled as they extracted themselves.

Jacob slid back onto the path, his face stern. Vincent was about to give his two youngest a piece of his mind when he felt a blast of pure fright along his bond. Catherine! He charged over the snowbank leaving his children open-mouthed behind him.

Catherine felt herself airborne with surprise. She always forgot how strong Vincent was. She landed with a whump, face down in a feather-soft snowdrift, then felt it fold around her. Suddenly, she couldn't breathe and the snow was burning her face. Her heart jumped and she flailed in terror. She couldn't seem to get her feet onto solid ground and panicked as she felt herself sinking further into the snowdrift as she tried to find it. Fear engulfed her.

Suddenly, she was yanked from the snow and into a strong pair of arms. Vincent cradled her, and she coughed as she took a wonderful breath of chilly air.

"Catherine," he rasped, brushing the snow off her face and kissing it at the same time.

She could feel his distress through their bond and looked at him, trying to get her heart out of her mouth. She was quivering and gasped breathlessly as she tried to comfort him.

"I'm okay. I couldn't breathe. I panicked."

Vincent planted a kiss on her mouth this time and whispered. "I'm sorry. I forgot you're not as young as the twins – and not to be tossed around."

He carried her back across the yard and down the snowbank to the path, where the twins and Jacob stood looking stunned. Catherine realized they must have felt her distress. She felt her face flush. She was glad

Vincent's arm was still around her, because her legs were rubbery and her voice shook.

"When I was a kid, someone pushed my face into a snowbank. I've never forgotten that feeling of being unable to breathe. It terrified me."

Without a word, they all came together for a joint hug. Their love sang along their bond warming them all to their toes. Catherine sighed as they parted, then looked around at them all, trying to recover some of her dignity.

"Well, don't just stand there – give me a saucer and let me try this luge run we've worked so hard to make. But first, someone made some modifications here so no one ends up in the kitchen. And next time, let the rest of us know you're coming - before you take off!"

Catherine watched as the others flung themselves to the task, creating a solid curved bank with a side path to the back door, then adding an additional few yards through the right snowbank, winding the route almost back on itself.

Satisfied with the construction, Catherine walked back along the path with one of the saucers. She hauled it and herself up the snow steps to the top of the slide.

"FORE!" she yelled as she flung herself onto it. She passed the twins and the other saucer at a dizzying rate of speed, took the curve at the back steps, glimpsing Vincent and Jacob as she passed, then plowed into a snow wall at the end, coming to an abrupt stop and falling off with a thump and a gasp. The saucer was half-buried. Vincent was immediately there to help her up.

"Well, was it fun?" he asked, lifting her and hugging her to him.

"Yes," she whispered, stretching to kiss his neck, which was peeking out of his scarf. "Fastest thrill in New York."

"I think I'll pass," Vincent remarked as a hoarse 'WARE' was heard from the head of the slide. "And we'd better get out of the line of fire."

They carried the saucer back to the kitchen step, just in time to see Joseph whiz by, followed by Jennifer on foot. He whumped into the end, deepening the gouge in the snow wall.

Jacob took the saucer from Vincent, grabbed Joseph's as well, and jogged to the head of the run with the twins scrambling after him, their voices outraged.

Moments later, Catherine and Vincent, now safe on the back door steps, watched Jacob whiz by again, followed by Joseph and Jennifer crammed onto the other saucer. There was a succession of grunts and groans and a yell from Jacob as the three of them extracted themselves from each other and the snowbank fell in on them. They all trudged out and paused in front of their parents, looking somewhat wild-eyed, bedraggled - and covered in snow.

Catherine laughed.

"You look like a bunch of abominable snowmen," she managed to say. "I don't know about the rest of you, but I've had enough. But it's a great sled run!"

They were interrupted by a loud rumble and Catherine realized it was her stomach.

"I think it must be lunch time," she commented. "I can't even think of missing a meal anymore."

"Nor should you – and it IS lunch time," Vincent remarked. "I heard that William is making Coq-au-Vin today. I've reserved us seats."

"Well that's a good enough reason to shed these clothes and dress for civilization Below," Jacob declared.

The twins looked a little downcast until Vincent remarked that cream puffs were also on the menu. Then they rushed inside ahead of Catherine and Jacob, who rolled their eyes at each other and followed. Vincent recovered the saucers and shovel, used the latter to tidy up the path, and left everything leaning against the wall near the back door. By the time he got in, everyone had shed their outerwear and hung it on hooks to dry over the radiator. The floor was clotted with melting snow. He sat on a chair to take off his boots, which seemed to be welded on, then tried not to step in the cold water. He found the string mop, gave the floor a few swipes, then went upstairs.

He could hear a lot of noise from the big main bathroom and looked in. His three children were all standing in the oversized shower stall, Jacob obviously trying to get the incorrigible twins to wash without doing damage to himself or each other. There was water everywhere. Well, the bathroom had a good floor drain. He sighed and went into the bedroom.

Hearing the sounds of water from their ensuite, Vincent flung off his remaining clothes and joined Catherine in their own generously-sized shower stall. He closed his eyes and raised his arms into the hot water with a grunt, the movement making him aware that his muscles were a little stiff.

Catherine began to rub him down with the bristle brush, feeling his purr vibrate under her hand. When she finished and had turned off the shower he gathered her to him. Vincent found himself wishing he could lay down and rest for a while. Then his stomach began to growl.

Vincent sighed. "Catherine, I've never felt so tired in my life. Our twins have worn me out. I'm not even sure I can stay awake to eat. And as for anything else"

Catherine chuckled into his chest, "We'll get some food in you, give you time to relax and recover - then we'll see what you are capable of."

"But no more snow play," Vincent declared. "I'll leave that to the youngsters."

"Oh, I don't think we could keep even our more sedate Jacob inside now," Catherine remarked, feeling their children's happiness along their bond. "We may have to find another saucer. But the slide'll keep them amused while we ... um ... do other things." She looked up at him suggestively.

Vincent looked down at her, his mouth twitching. "That must have been my ulterior motive out there."

"If you say so – and your ulterior is delightful," Catherine whispered, her hand reaching down to cup that delightful part and feeling, rather than hearing, his automatic, but tired growl. "And I'll prove it - later."

He bent down and she met his lips in a kiss that cemented her promise. Then she began to rub him down with a towel under the heat lamp.

Vincent sighed. The snow play had been fun, but inside activities were ultimately more satisfying. He gathered Catherine into a hug.

END

Winterfest Fortitude

“Ah, it’s a lovely thing, to know a thing or two.”

- Molière

Chapter 1

Catherine was at the top of a ski slope. Beside her, Vincent was bent over strapping a pair of black leather ski boots into a pair of wooden skis. He was wearing black, stretchy wool stirrup pants, a brightly-patterned ski sweater and a toque. When he stood up, she realized he had pulled down the ski mask part of the hat, so that she could see only vague suggestions of his eyes, nose and mouth through the tiny holes.

He used his wooden poles to approach her from behind, then gave a massive shove on them and scooped her up, her skis between his. They began to go downhill at breakneck speed. Catherine, at first exhilarated, began to get frightened. Snow was blowing into her mouth, which she could not close because she needed air. Her nose seemed plugged, and her face was turning to ice.

They were going faster and faster and trees and people were whizzing by and the slope seemed to go on and on. Then something huge and black loomed ahead of them and she shuddered massively, tried to scream ...

... and woke up, realizing as she did so that a squeak had escaped her and she was enveloped in something warm and comforting.

Vincent! He had his arms around her, pulling her to his soft, furry chest. His lips were caressing her forehead. She wanted to stay that way forever.

"Catherine!" he whispered.

She tilted her head to look into his eyes. She could feel his concern through their bond and was embarrassed at having awakened him.

"I ... um ... had a nightmare."

"I know. I could feel your fear. Tell me."

So she told him, feeling more ridiculous by the moment. When she was finished, Vincent hugged her tighter, ran his hands down her back and cuddled her. She let herself relax and enjoy the love she felt emanating from her special man.

"What brought that on?" Vincent asked quietly.

"I guess I had been remembering winters past earlier," Catherine mused. "Winterfest is coming soon and I was thinking of my college days. One winter break I went with a group to Lake Placid. I had never skied before and they put me on a pair of skis the requisite 9 inches taller than myself, and gave me these enormous Frankenstein boots. I could hardly move. The boots were leather then, with two sets of laces which had to be done up just so.

"The ski rental guy gave me a rudimentary lesson in how to snowplow, so I figured I could go down the beginner's slope that way. But the stupid skis kept crossing over each other, either at the tips or at the back, and in my frustration I lost a ski pole. Then I started going too fast and I panicked. The only thing I could think of was to sit down. So I did that and slid down to the bottom of the hill sitting on top of my skis – backwards. The skiers at the bottom thought it was hilarious - and I was mortified.

"After that I stayed in the clubhouse and swore I would never ski again and that the only way I wanted to enjoy snow was in a sno-cone."

Vincent was doing his best not to chuckle, but Catherine could feel his humour. Then his curiosity got the better of him.

"What's a snow cone?"

"You mean you've never had a sno-cone, Vincent? I would have thought ... being as it's cold enough below, in some parts. But of course, why would you have? Oh, Vincent I have an idea!"

Vincent quickly picked up her excitement and had no trouble guessing her idea – if not exactly how it would manifest.

It was traditional, and encouraged, at Winterfest for people in the community to introduce something special. They kept it a closely-guarded secret, but past Winterfests had been remarkable for the ingenuity displayed. The voluntary surprises could include handicrafts, food, songs, poems, dances – almost anything.

Catherine laughed and Vincent looked at her with raised eyebrows.

"I was just remembering Mouse's snow machine," she chuckled.

One year, Mouse had created a blizzard by painstakingly taking apart scrounged Styrofoam and blowing the pieces around with a hand-cranked fan. The laughter was all Mouse could have hoped for, until everyone realized the "snow" stuck to everything and everyone. The resulting cleanup had taken weeks.

"I'm still finding bits of Styrofoam here and there," Vincent remarked. "It took us hours to sweep the Great Hall – and I know we missed a lot. But you still have not told me what a snow cone is," he reminded her gently.

"Oh, sorry. It's finely crushed ice in a paper cone with fruit syrup poured over it. The snow part is usually spelled without the "w". They're delicious – at least in the summer. But I think it would be just as good in the winter, maybe with something a little stronger than fruit juice over it. Some fancy liqueur perhaps or ... whatever."

Catherine paused, wondering if it would be practical – or even possible.

"I'll have to do some research. The stores used to sell a hand-cranked machine to make them. As I recall, there are two types – one which produces shaved ice, and one which makes something very much like snow. There was even a children's toy version. And I'll have to talk to William about ice."

Vincent nuzzled Catherine's face and moved to her lips, as she thought about this and she was soon so distracted that she gave up and clasped him around that furry part she loved best. There was no more talk for some time and then they both needed to sleep.

Chapter 2

When everyone headed below the next day, Vincent was to read literature to a class of children, including their own five year old twins. Fifteen-year old Jacob had an advanced carpentry class and Catherine went to talk to William. She had to find out if her idea was logistically possible.

She knew William had cold storage, but that it was deep in the caverns. She had no idea how he handled everyday refrigeration. There had been no need to ask. She would need ice enough for a crowd.

The route to William's kitchen, she thought, was almost chilly enough to make ice. It had been a very cold winter. Maybe this was not going to be as difficult as she thought. She wound her way to William's sanctum and found him in his office behind the kitchen. She peeked around the ample doorway to see his broad face lift from a massive ledger with a frown, then ease into a big smile. He got up and lumbered over to her as she entered, enclosing her in a hug that left her breathless because his belly did not leave much room for movement.

"Catherine, my dear, what brings you to my den? Vincent looking for something toothsome, besides your delightful self?"

Catherine blushed a little but got her brain in gear. William loved to exchange jibes.

"William, if there is anything he misses living Above, he knows where to find it. You spoil him outrageously with your desserts. And he can smell his favourites a mile away, so he never misses one. They trump me any time.

"But I have a question for you – a Winterfest question, actually. How could I get a very large supply of ice into the Great Hall?"

William looked at bit taken aback at that.

"Ice, Catherine? What are you planning to bring to our festivities – a polar bear?"

"Snow, William. Just snow – made from ice cubes. Like what falls above but more predictable – and tastier."

William was now intrigued. He decided a tour was in order. "Come with me and I'll show you what I have."

He led her to one side of his office, took a sudden right angle and then down a corridor shaped to his bulk, just like the door to the kitchen. Kanin had been busy, she thought, stifling a giggle.

They came to a wooden door that looked like it belonged in a hobbit hole, and William lifted a bar set into the rock wall, and pushed. A cold mist billowed out from the opening and Catherine gasped. Ranged along the floor were huge blocks of ice covered in sawdust. On shelves, there were bricks of ice, arranged like loaves of bread, and smaller trays of cubes. She turned to look at the big cook.

“How on earth do you make ice here?”

William looked smug.

“Well Catherine, it’s easier than you might think. I make large blocks of ice in the ice caverns far below and have a supply brought up here about once a month. In the winter, I can make the smaller pans of ice right here. It’s cold enough - which is convenient, since I need some for Winterfest. Kanin made me a kind of dumbwaiter to get the ice down into the Great Hall. We need it to keep our desserts and wines cool. It’s over there.” He pointed at a small square door into the rock.

Catherine made a decision. Winterfest or not, she could not keep this secret from William, since she needed his help. Maybe he would be willing to collaborate.

“William, we want to make sno-cones for our Winterfest surprise. Do you remember them? I’ll need your help.”

William’s eyes got a little distant and a slight smile turned up his lips.

“Remember them? Catherine, I almost lived on them one summer when I worked on Coney Island. I was just a kid – well, about 18 – and I worked a sno-cone machine and a candy floss maker in a tacky booth. I always gave the nice-looking girls a bit extra. Funny though, when I got my break, I could never find any of them. Shy things they were. Not like you.”

He chuckled and winked at Catherine.

“I’d be happy to help you with your surprise, Catherine. I remember how to make them – and I can provide enough ice - but how do we crush it?”

“I’m going to go looking for a couple of hand-cranked models, William. I’ll take care of the flavouring and cones too. I want my children to do the real work in this venture. They’ll love it.”

William’s eyes twinkled.

“Well, if we can find some patio umbrellas and get the children to make some decorations, we can have a carnival-type sitting out area.”

“A wonderful idea, William,” Catherine declared. “I’ll put Jacob onto that.” She hugged William for a second or two longer than absolutely necessary.

“Gosh, I hope Vincent isn’t around. He’d throw me in the compost heap – just to see if he could,” William remarked with a grin.

Catherine laughed.

“William, your girth is the mark of the best chef above or below. You’ve changed my eating habits and made me a cook – of sorts. Vincent would tell you I had no such talent before, so he can hardly complain if I show my appreciation occasionally.”

With that, she said goodbye and returned to the brownstone. Then she put on her “above” clothes and went to look for sno-cone makers.

Catherine soon found out that the machines ranged in price from a few dollars to several hundred – and that sno-cones had become rather more than just ice and syrup in the interim. She decided to stick with the old-fashioned type and looked for machines that did not need electricity, but would produce a nice soft snow. Shaved ice did not sound appealing in the winter.

She found two good-quality, sturdy-looking metal machines and bought them both, rationalizing that the twins should both be occupied. She then invested in a quantity of paper cones. All she needed now was the toppings. She opted for a variety of liqueurs, alcoholic and none – cream, licorice, cherry, orange, mint, coffee, coconut and pineapple then found some bottles with squeeze pumps to dispense them. She hauled the stuff back in a taxi and put it all into the cupboard under the stairs.

She was sure that William would have already figured out the best way to set up the sno-cone table. If she remembered rightly, some corners of the Great Hall were very cold indeed. The twins would be delighted – and hopefully would not have time to get into trouble.

Her plan now solid, she revealed it to her children. Jacob went to work finding umbrellas and the twins got busy making decorative paper chains and streamers. The cupboard was almost overflowing by the time Winterfest neared. Everyone carried the booty down to the Great Hall the day before and set up the table. Now all that was

needed was the ice.

And to think this all started with a nightmare, Catherine marveled. Even Vincent was amazed at the industry shown by their children.

Chapter 3

Winterfest had been in full swing for hours and was starting to wind down. A good many of the older folk, or helpers with jobs to go to the next day, had already left.

Catherine sat under the tapestries on a big pillow, a handy perch for watching the activities across the Great Hall without being required to participate. Others had taken advantage of this retreat, but for now, she was alone. That suited her fine. She was interested in only one reveler.

Vincent was dancing with one woman after another. He and she had danced a great deal already and she had come up here both because she needed a rest – and because she wanted to watch him. He was one of the few energetic dancers on the floor.

She so seldom saw him move like this. His feline grace was captivating. He seemed hardly to touch the floor and she could feel his happiness through the bond. He was the kind of dancer that every woman loved. No matter how bad you were, with Vincent you danced like Ginger Rogers. In her experience, very few men had that talent.

Come to think of it, few men even liked to dance any more. Look at all the males talking to each other or bunched around William and his beer keg! A good many women were sitting in the “patio” area near the sno-cone booth, eyeing the men, but attracting little attention. No wonder Vincent was in such demand.

He also looked incredibly dashing. He was wearing a turquoise, velvet leisure suit that made his eyes glow, even from where she was sitting. He was wearing a pair of soft black boots she had found for him. Her own outfit was the same colour, but in a low cut, full-length gown. She was wearing soft dancing shoes.

She had sat with the tunnel seamstress, Annabelle, for weeks, designing and overseeing the making of this festive wear. Although it was one piece, Vincent’s outfit looked like two. The jacket was tailored and fell to his thighs with row of silver frogs down the front. She knew well the reason for his insistence on the length and it made her warm just thinking about it.

Then there was the fact that Vincent had refused to wear even his usual thermal undershirt beneath it. That made her feel even warmer. Of course, she had nothing under her own outfit either, but that was because the gown was lined and did not need anything more.

Catherine caught his eyes over the top of Rebecca’s head and knew that his own heat was building as he caught hers. It was now just a matter of how long they had to stay for the sake of politeness. Their son Jacob would take the twins back to the brownstone and let his parents have a few stolen hours below in Vincent’s chamber. She was sure they would be tired by then and be no trouble.

The sno-cone works had been a huge success. Vincent and Jacob had repaired several old patio umbrellas and set out a few chairs and bistro tables. The twins manned the machines and cranked out the ice with great gusto. Their first delighted whoops as they squirted on the flavourings could be heard across the hall. They were a little quieter now, but their energy seemed undiminished. Jacob was making sure that they did not sample the alcoholic toppings, but they had been kept so busy, it seemed likely they had not had much chance to try even the less potent ones.

Catherine leaned back against the wall and closed her eyes. Her senses had improved thanks to her bond with Vincent. It was so strong now that if he sneezed, she would probably reach for a handkerchief, she mused. She let herself inhale the joy and the wonderful odours in the Great Hall and tested herself on her ability to differentiate them.

There was the malty smell of William’s special Winterfest brew, cakes, pies, buttery shortbread, cold cuts. Those were almost strong enough to taste too. She could hear Devin pontificating, probably to Father, then Charles’ low admonition. There was the shuffle of the dancers and the twang of a guitar as the band began to play a polka.

Catherine reached out her mind, to see if her empathic bond could sense anything – and stilled.

Someone was watching her. It wasn’t unfriendly, exactly, just intense. She was careful not to let on she felt

anything and kept her eyes closed, trying to locate the source. She desperately hoped it was not some remnant of Paracelsus' gang bent on revenge – although it seemed a little late in the evening for that. There were many new faces among the helpers and some were not all that well known. Someone could have slipped in.

As her panic grew at this thought, she felt Vincent's sudden awareness. His senses were sharper than her own, so he might be able to pinpoint the person.

Catherine kept her expression neutral but opened her eyes to locate Vincent. He had stopped dancing and was now standing near Devin, looking over the dance floor. She could sense his concern and frustration. He did not seem to be able to find the observer either. Catherine felt a shiver run up her spine and concentrated. If she was the target, she should be able to fine-tune the direction at least. She closed her eyes again and moved her feet, as if in time to the music.

The observer was close by. How was that possible? Catherine opened her eyes and looked slowly around. There was no one close to her at all. She looked at Vincent and saw him turn to her, gaze at the tapestry above her, and suddenly burst into motion, running towards her, the dancers parting to make way for him.

The rug above her head suddenly wobbled furiously. She felt a push at her back, gasped as something tried to get past her - and then a heavy weight fell on top of her. She tried to move, but found herself trapped. Then she tried to take a breath and choked. She had a brief flashback to her nightmare and wondered, idiotically, if she was being buried under an avalanche. Then she blacked out.

Vincent, reached the tapestry a moment after it fell from the wall in a cloud of dust and the ubiquitous styrofoam bits. Through the choking haze, he saw a small form in rags run up the stairs and out of the Great Hall. He had to let it go because he could sense that Catherine, trapped under the massive folds, was unconscious. Kanin and Devin had joined him and with one arm over their mouths, they lifted the rug. Vincent gathered Catherine to him and ran down the stairs to the floor, coughing. He glanced back to see Devin run after the intruder, grabbing something from the coat hooks on the way out. Kanin, still coughing, was looking into a hole suddenly revealed by the fallen tapestry.

Vincent rushed Catherine to the drinks table and Jamie wordlessly poured him a shot of brandy, which he carefully slipped into her mouth. She sputtered and he relaxed a little. Jamie gave him a wet cloth and he wiped her face, amazed at the dirt. No one had thought to beat the rugs since they were hung – as far as he knew.

He looked more closely at Catherine's dress and himself and sighed. Wait until she saw what their new finery looked like now. He gave Catherine another sip of brandy.

Catherine's mouth was on fire and it seemed to be running down her throat. She gasped, flung out her arms and opened her eyes, choking. She realized she was being cradled by Vincent. There was no more music and everyone seemed to be staring at her.

"Gaaa," she said, trying to reconcile a mouth full of dust and delicious blackberry brandy. The latter was William's special distillation – and she had often said it could make the Statue of Liberty dance. Vincent handed her a glass of water and she rinsed her mouth and spat into a towel he held for her, ignoring the proprieties.

"Terrible waste of brandy," she muttered to general laughter. Vincent waved at the spectators.

"Catherine's fine. Back to the party!" he shouted.

Catherine looked at him in surprise. She had almost never heard Vincent raise his voice. But it worked. They were soon left alone but for their son, who was keeping one eye on them and one on the twins - who seemed oblivious to the excitement and were cranking out ice again. The music began again, a jaunty air for energetic dancing.

"Catherine," Vincent whispered, planting a soft kiss on her lips and raising her blood pressure. She pulled his head down for a better one.

"Vincent, you are the best thing to wake up to – always."

Vincent's throat felt rough as well. He took another shot from Jamie and swallowed it himself. He was gruff.

"Nightmares are one thing, Catherine, but this was serious. You could have suffocated. Enough dust was thrown

up to give us all a sample.”

Catherine shivered a little. Vincent picked her up and carried her across the dance floor to where Father, Mary, Charles and some of the other seniors were sitting. Catherine glanced at the tapestry wall and saw a dust cloud still masking the area. Vincent gently placed her on a chair, found her an afghan and sat beside her. Jacob had followed them.

“I’m ok, Jacob. Really,” Catherine managed to rasp out, her throat still choked with dust. “You’d better get back to the terrible two.”

Jacob had turned away to do that when the music suddenly stopped again. Devin had returned and was approaching them holding something large and wriggling wrapped in fabric. The dancers made a path for him and Vincent stood up, curious.

Catherine’s mouth fell open in surprise as Devin reached them. Strangled animal sounds were coming from Devin’s chest. He folded back the cape to reveal the hairy black head of a chimpanzee. It was dressed in the ragged remnants of a clown outfit, its eyes huge. Charles reacted quickly, taking the bundle from Devin and holding it close. The animal was wrapped in Charles’ cape, she realized.

The animal stopped struggling as soon as Charles cradled it. Charles had an affinity with children that never ceased to amaze Catherine. Obviously that talent included animals as well.

“Where did you find him, Devin?” Vincent asked quietly, stroking the chimp’s back and head gently as it clung to Charles.

“It’s a her. She was clinging for dear life to the railing outside the Hall, almost blown off by the wind. She must be near starvation. I would never have caught her otherwise – or been able to carry her. Chimps are much stronger than any man – except perhaps you Vincent.” Devin said this last with a grin.

William had come over now too. “I’ll bet she’s been stealing from my waste pail. Thought it seemed to be taking a bit longer to fill lately. Thought maybe I was hallucinating – or sampling too much of the Winterfest brew,” he chuckled.

There was a general laugh among the small group of observers.

“Let us see, let us see,” came two voices and Catherine looked over to see her twins trying to get between the legs of some of the adults. They emerged just behind Vincent and squeezed to stand in front of Charles looking up open-mouthed.

“A monkey! Can I hold him, Uncle Charles?” Joseph asked. Jennifer was dancing from one foot to another, trying to see more.

Charles hunkered down and moved the chimp so she sat on his lap. She clung to him like a limpet. The twins stood paralyzed, but were now quiet.

“There, see? She’s just a poor thing without any friends,” Charles said quietly. He looked up at Devin.

“Dev, I want to look after her. She needs food. I can feel her bones.”

Devin straightened up.

“Folks, we’ll introduce you all to her later – when she’s fed.”

There were mumbles of disappointment, but the crowd dispersed and Charles sat down on a chair again, the chimp holding onto one of his hands as if afraid to let it go. She kept her face turned into his chest.

Vincent looked at Devin. “You probably have first hand knowledge about the feeding of these animals. What would you suggest?”

Devin looked at Charles and his charge, and sighed. “Yeah, I’ve handled them, Vincent. She’ll need some liquid, nothing cold though, milk would be good, and some fruit – an apple or banana, to start.

“I’ll find her something,” William offered.

“Thanks, William,” Devin smiled. “I’ll come with you.”

Vincent looked down at his twins.

“And you monkeys should get back to your booth. I promise you’ll see the chimp again – after she’s fed and rested. Tomorrow.”

The children moved so slowly, their heads still turned towards Charles, that Vincent had to give them a pat on their behinds to reinforce his command.

Charles and Vincent, between them, stripped off the ragged clothes, which were soiled and rank. Then they did a perfunctory clean with a facecloth and wrapped the chimp in the towel. She would not take her eyes off Charles' face and kept hold of one hand or the other, throughout the process. Any effort to separate her from him made her squeal. She did not seem to mind Vincent's touch though, Catherine noticed. Vincent's affinity with animals was legendary.

Devin brought a basket of fruit and a bowl of milk and the chimp shrank back a little when she spotted him. Devin sighed and handed the food to Vincent.

"I wasn't gentle – but it was the only way I could capture her. She was half mad with fright."

"You did what was necessary, Devin," Vincent told him. "You saved her life. She's emaciated. I wonder where she came from."

Charles was cuddling her in his lap again and Vincent handed her a banana and watched as she peeled it and began to eat, still grasping Charles hand, as if to confirm he was still there. She finished quickly and Vincent held the bowl of milk out to her. She seemed familiar with containers for she grasped it and drank thirstily.

Catherine was at a loss for words. This was what had been spying on her? The chimp must have smelled all the Winterfest food and gone almost mad with hunger. Her sitting against the tapestry, blocking the route, must have made it desperate enough to try and force its way out.

Father, shuffled over and took a chair nearby. He gazed at the chimp in amazement.

"I can't believe that creature has been living among us without us knowing. How did she get here?"

Kanin came up to them as Father spoke. "I had little Robby follow the hole where the chimp had been hiding. It leads to one of the main pipe conduits. The chimp could easily move along that to pilfer here and there. I know that conduit. One branch comes out in the kitchen ceiling – one of the vents I made for the stove. It's too small for any of us.

"As to how she got here, Luke told me there used to be an old guy with a performing chimp in the park. He and some of the children used to take him sandwiches and cakes left over from lunch – and fruit for the chimp. He didn't think either of them ate much any other time. Apparently he hasn't been seen for a couple of months. The children haven't been able to find him. He might have died and the chimp could have followed the children back without them knowing. She'd remember them. That chimp had a clown suit, according to Luke."

The chimp had now calmed down completely and Charles wrapped her in his cape again. She pulled his hand to her chest and a few seconds later her eyelids drooped and she was sound asleep.

Charles smiled affectionately at his new charge and looked over at Devin, who shook his head, glancing at Catherine with a wry grin.

"Well, if I have any plans for tonight, they'd better include a neurotic chimp.

Vincent looked over at his brother and Catherine could feel his annoyance.

"Devin, that's not very kind. This creature has been traumatized. She needs care for awhile. Charles is the perfect caregiver."

Father chuckled. "Perhaps we can find an old cradle for her, if she'll allow herself to be separated from Charles."

Charles spoke up. "She can sleep in my cape with me as long as she wants. But she needs a bath. Could you help me do that Vincent?"

Vincent nodded and looked at Catherine.

"I think Catherine and I will leave now. We need to remove our finery, which is somewhat the worse for wear. Then I'll give you a hand, Charles. We can use the laundry room."

Catherine gazed down at her dress for the first time. It looked as if she had been caught in a sand storm. She tried not to think what her face and hair looked like. Vincent, was bedraggled and grubby too. They were hardly fit for polite company. She sighed.

"Why is it that every Winterfest has some kind of unplanned, often messy excitement?" she asked to no one in particular.

Father chuckled. "Well, we do encourage surprises. We just never know what form they're going to take. Your sno-cone idea was brilliant, Catherine. It may become a regular part of Winterfest.

"But we'll have to see to those tapestries. I had no idea they were so badly hung – or so dirty. You've had an unpleasant end to the evening."

Kanin spoke up. "The tapestry wasn't loose Father. The chimp literally ripped it off the wall. It must have been desperate. It's going to take a lot of work to get it back up."

"A good opportunity to beat it – and the others - clean then. I'll add that job to the work roster," Father declared.

Vincent and Catherine got up to go and said their goodbyes to everyone.

"Meet you in the laundry room in a few minutes, Charles," Vincent added.

He and Catherine left the Great Hall. Catherine legs were still shaky, so Vincent carried her up the stairs and to his chamber. They immediately stripped off their finery and draped it over a chair. With a steamy but regretful look at Vincent's perfect nakedness, which he tried hard to ignore, Catherine went into their bath chamber to clean up. Vincent sighed, put on a coverall and clogs and trudged to the laundry room.

Charles was already there, the chimp now awake and watchful. Vincent quickly filled two wooden tubs with warm water and found a bar of soap, a washcloth and a towel. He smiled at Charles, who was still cuddling the chimp in his cloak.

"You'd better let me wash her, Charles. You don't want to get all wet. You just hold her hand to keep her calm. She doesn't seem to mind me – but it's you she loves."

Vincent washed the chimp gently. She seemed calm, but once gripped Charles' hand so hard that he winced. Once she was clean, Vincent moved her to the other tub and rinsed her, then lifted her out into the towel. He held her in his lap and carefully dried her. Charles stroked the chimp's hand softly, his face beaming with a smile.

"She's beautiful, Vincent. What shall we call her?"

Charles' smile was infectious and Vincent tried to form his mouth into one. He could never match his friend's, though. His face just wasn't formed that way.

"She may have a name already, Charles. We'll have to ask Luke and the children.

"I think she may be a bonobo – a smaller chimp species which can walk upright some of the time. The females are very affectionate. She's probably quite old – see the grey hair around her muzzle? But chimps can live a long time – up to 60 years. She's had a hard life, though, so she may not be more than 30."

Charles looked at Vincent. "I'll make sure she has a good life now, Vincent. Do you think Devin will mind?"

Vincent smiled at his friend. "Devin will do anything for you - you know that Charles. He's not as hard as he likes us to think."

Charles hung his head and spoke slowly. "Yes, Vincent, I know. I wouldn't be here if not for Dev. He's looked after me and taken me places and been my friend."

He looked at Vincent. "I wish he could take you places, Vincent."

Vincent's mouth quirked. Charles had said this often. Vincent's reply was almost rote.

"Charles, I have much to be thankful for. I have three children and a wife who loves me as much as I love her. I'm happy. Every life has limitations. Catherine had made my life much less constricted. I've even become a gardener."

Charles moved to hug Vincent, the chimp between them. The love which poured from the big, deformed man always surprised Vincent. He was remarkable. The horrors of his early life had merely made him more loving and affectionate.

The chimp, cuddled between two large men, shifted a little and put her arms around both necks, looking from one face to the other, as if trying to decide which one she liked best. As the two men separated a little to give her room, she planted a big-lipped kiss on each of their cheeks.

"Well," whispered Vincent. "She's quite the gal. And very diplomatic. Now, let's take her back to your chamber and get her to bed. She's had a hard day."

"And tomorrow is the first day of the rest of her life," remarked Charles, grinning at Vincent.

“And we’ve had another memorable Winterfest,” Vincent remarked. “Father’s right – we never know what to expect.”

“Except that we are always among friends,” Charles said gently.

“And that is the best gift of all,” Vincent declared softly, as they rose. Charles held the chimp like a baby, her head over his shoulder. She was fast asleep again.

“And the only one that really matters,” he added as he left Charles at the guest chamber and continued on to his own. He could sense Catherine waiting for him, half asleep herself. Jacob and the twins were on their way to the brownstone.

With mild regret, he realized that he hadn’t even tried a sno-cone, but was equally sure he had not seen the last of them.

Winterfest always ended well, whatever surprises manifested themselves, Vincent reflected. That was part of its magic. How could it be otherwise when love was the motivating factor?

And now he wanted to dispense a little of his own. He felt Catherine’s eager anticipation as he moved through the privacy curtain.

A little later, Vincent realized that Winterfest had another benefit – the utter and contented quiet of a sated community.

A few minutes later, two more joined that happy confluence.

END