

Series 4

Appearances

- by Angie

Five tales about Vincent's unique beauty

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Sight Unseen

*Reason has moons, but moons not hers
Lie mirrored on her seas*

- Ralph Hodgson

Vincent left the bed and padded over to the long shallow niche. A full-length oval mirror stood there, its brass frame limned in gold from the amber light of the stained glass window.

On the wall next to the niche hung Kristopher Gentian's portrait. Catherine had put it there deliberately of course.

He no longer avoided mirrors, but seldom looked in one. What was there to see? He knew what he was. He couldn't shave, his hair was easily brushed and clothes were clothes, as long as they were clean. There had never been a mirror in his chamber. Only the Mirror Pool had ever reflected him – and that memory was painful.

Vincent regarded himself dispassionately. He had never seen himself full length before – and certainly not naked. He looked not unlike other men. He was lean and well-muscled, had all the parts of any man, if on a slightly larger than average scale. His body was hairy, certainly, where it was not furred, and little of his skin showed. What really set him apart were his face, hands and feet. Of those, it was his "aspect" which kept him hidden. However, seen in his entirety, he looked merely different, not alien - and definitely not a beast. Catherine was correct.

He glanced at their portrait. There was very little of himself to be seen, except his face and hair – even his neck and hands were hidden – the former by his hair and the latter with gloves. His face, though, had a severe, determined expression. His eyes were hard and held a warning. He was holding onto Catherine protectively, as if challenging anyone to separate them.

He gazed in the mirror again. His face was certainly fuller now, more relaxed – a true reflection of his inner peace of mind, he decided.

Catherine watched Vincent from the bed. He had been pointedly ignoring the mirror until now. She had sensed his curiosity, but had also known he would approach this new thing in his own way, when he chose to.

She was relieved that he seemed perfectly sanguine, so let her eyes roam over his graceful form. His legs slightly apart, he stood in that silent stillness she knew well. It meant he was thinking deeply. She could not see his reflection but their bond told her he was fascinated by this new look at himself.

She saw him look at the painting, and took her cue. She extracted herself from the soft bed and stole across the chamber to stand in front of him. The chill of the chamber gave her full-body goose bumps, but the reflection of herself naked in front of him warmed her.

Vincent put his arms around her and dropped his head. She watched him inhale her scent for the first time. His eyes were closed as he nuzzled her neck, then tightened his embrace to bring her closer to him. The feel of his warm hirsute body against her made her skin tingle and her heart race.

She glanced at the painting and then at her reflection. She looked less smug now, less stubborn. Her face had softened and she looked as content as she felt.

Catherine leaned her head against him, to mimic the portrait. Vincent looked at her and obligingly positioned himself accordingly – but their reflection lacked poise. He shifted his right arm lower across her breasts, then his left across her pelvic triangle to her right hip. She positioned her hands in relation to his and they regarded themselves critically.

Much better, she thought. His shoulders and chest seemed to almost enclose her, his long legs framed her own, his larger feet almost hid hers. Their reflection was all she had dreamed. They seemed to melt together, just as they had in the painting – but now there were no clothes in the way. Catherine sighed.

Vincent was completely captivated by this new image. The sight of Catherine's small, pale body against his larger, darker one, made him want to surround her, merge their bodies even more. He felt his manhood awaken. Catherine snuggled closer as she felt it too. They looked at their reflected eyes and saw identical passion burning there.

He swept her into his arms, then. His kiss thanked her for the gift of his true reflection as he carried her back to the warmth of their bed.

END

Picture Perfect

Every picture tells a story
- Anon

“Smile, Vincent!”

Catherine had found her old Polaroid camera when she was cleaning out her apartment, and wanted to try to get something she had longed for forever ... a picture of the man who meant everything to her. The film was old and the image might not be very good, but it would be enough for her purposes. She didn't tell Vincent what those were.

Vincent sat stoically in his big chair and lifted the edges of his muzzle a micro-fraction. He could sense Catherine's frustration, but was unable to summon up any enthusiasm for her wish to record his image. In fact, it bothered him not a little. In all the years he had lived in the tunnels, no one had taken his picture. It was too dangerous. Film had to be developed, and although they could do that below, prints and negatives could be misplaced or stolen. Father had never allowed it. Elizabeth had recorded him in her painted tunnels only twice, first as a baby, and then recently in his “beast” aspect when he had fought with Paracelsus' huge henchman. Those pictures, if discovered, would likely be dismissed as the ravings of an eccentric artist.

Despite his dislike, Vincent could not now refuse Catherine anything. She was pregnant ... and with *his* child. Every time he thought of that, his heart skipped a beat. He supposed he would never get over the wonder of it. She had taken a long leave of absence from her job and would not be returning to it full time, if at all. She had other plans, she'd told him, without going into details. The fact of her being with him during the day was a joy that was matched only by the almost unbearable absence when she had to take care of things above. Their new physical intimacy made that separation even more poignant.

This camera apparently had no film that needed developing and Catherine had assured him that neither the camera nor the images would leave the tunnels. She swore she would throw them down the Abyss when they had served their purpose – whatever that was. He didn't ask. He knew it would be a surprise. He also knew she would never do anything that would endanger him – not any more. She was packing up her apartment and they would soon be moving into a brownstone she was having renovated.

Catherine looked at Vincent and thought she could detect a slight upward movement of his lips. It wasn't nearly enough. She could see he was unhappy, although he would not say so.

“Vincent, that's not a smile! Think of something you like – cream puffs, for example – and imagine yourself eating a plateful of them.”

She watched as Vincent contemplated this delights and saw his lips move up a quarter inch or so as he looked at her. She sighed.

She had not seen him smile often – and almost never a full smile, she had to admit. She thought back over those rare times and immediately remembered one in particular. If only she could get him to duplicate that one! It was worth a try.

“Okay, remember that first time you took me to your secret music chamber beneath the park? It was summer and we were listening to Schubert's *Unfinished Symphony*.”

Vincent remembered that night well. It was magical in retrospect – a time when neither of them had any worries and were relaxed with each other in a way that had not happened before, and not often since, until very recently. He glanced over at the corner of his chamber, where the pillows and blankets for their musical interludes were stacked.

It was a precious memory. The fine strains of Schubert ran through his mind and that special evening came back to him. Lightning! Yes, there had been lightning and then it had started to rain. He had been a little annoyed at this interruption of their concert until he realized that Catherine was ecstatic. She had risen and stood under the grate, her face beaming and had almost danced in the rain, as the last strains of the music died away and people ran for cover.

He had never seen her so ... uninhibited ... and he had basked in what he felt along their bond. It had sparked an innocent happiness in himself - a rare thing.

Catherine had looked at him and recognized a heart full of the love for her he seldom let himself show. And she had laughed and smiled at him – and then dived into his arms. Ah, that was a moment frozen in his memory. The feel of Catherine’s warmth through her wet dress, pressed against him, her heart beating with his and her breath against his ear.

There was a flash and Vincent abruptly returned to the present. Catherine was triumphant.

“Wonderful. That’s a keeper, I’m sure. Vincent, did you know you have dimples when you smile like that? You should do it more often. It’s very becoming.”

Vincent looked at her and shook his head – both to clear it of the images he had been recalling, and in negation.

“No, I did not know. There are no mirrors here. I have looked at myself in the Mirror Pool, of course. It is not flattering.”

Catherine looked at the photo which was coming out of the camera and grabbed it by the white edge. The image was clear enough, but somewhat sepia-toned. That didn’t matter. She looked at it and smiled. Yes, that was the Vincent she loved – happy and relaxed. She would make sure he was both those things in the years to come - as often as she could arrange it.

She walked over to him, put the camera on his table and sat on his lap.

“Look. Dimples!”

Vincent looked at it, the first real life image of himself he had ever seen. Kristopher Gentian’s portrait was wonderful, of course, but it was not photo-perfect. He was fascinated and looked closely at the brownish tones – which he assumed were because the film was old. He had a smile on his face that clearly reflected his pleasant memories of a few moments ago. He didn’t look like he was growling and he did look happy. He had a wide smile, true, and his upper teeth were showing and his canines were hinted at. But dimples? No. There were children below who had them. He didn’t see anything of the sort. He was a bit disappointed.

“I do not see dimples, Catherine.”

Catherine snorted.

“Here, right beside your mouth. See?”

Vincent looked, then lifted a furred hand to touch the place on his left cheek where he was supposed to have one. He raised his upper lip and muzzle as much as he could. All he felt was a slight ridge in his skin and a long shallow line beside it. Nothing like the round depressions he had seen on chins and cheeks.

“I think you are mistaken. There is a wrinkle there, not a dimple. I am getting old.”

Catherine turned to him.

“You will never grow old to me, my love.”

She planted a deep kiss on his lips and felt him relax into it. When she moved back, she saw he was wearing a very similar expression to the photo. She touched his cheek and ran her finger down the slight ridge that was still in evidence.

“Those aren’t age lines, Vincent. They’re too well-defined. These were created by smiles. You showed them again after I kissed you. Anyway, the skin on your face is firm. You don’t have any age lines. I think they’re dimples.”

Vincent took up the photo and looked at it again. Well, there seemed to be one of the lines on each side of his face, and they did appear when he smiled. He tried one more argument.

“Catherine, everyone’s face changes when they laugh or smile. Not every crease is a dimple.”

“Well, I think they are. They don’t show any other time, and you have to be really happy.”

Vincent decided to change tack.

“Now what? What do we do with this picture?”

Catherine had been thinking over the response to this. She knew he would not press her if she asked.

“I want to surprise you, Vincent. Please bear with me. Now you take one of me.”

Vincent took the box handed to him and examined it as Catherine pulled up a nearby chair and sat in it.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

“Yes. Just let me call up a pleasant memory and then just press that big button on the top.”

Catherine decided to call up the same memory that had made Vincent smile. Maybe their smiles would look similar. She remembered how Vincent had looked that night. He had been relaxed and had held her close when she hugged him on the cushions. He had not shrunk back and they had remained that way for some time.

A flash woke her from her reverie and it was Vincent’s turn to look triumphant.

Vincent wondered what Catherine had been thinking about. Her smile was open and beautiful. He hoped the camera had caught it. He waited patiently as the camera did nothing for a time and then peered anxiously as the picture began to emerge. Then he smiled over at Catherine and waved the picture.

“It is a good one, I think., he reported.

“Then we’re done for now. Thank you, Vincent.”

She would have liked to thank him in a more intimate fashion, but the supper signal sounded and elicited a rumble from her stomach. She was often hungry these days – a sign Father said was excellent.

The next day, Catherine took the two images elsewhere in the tunnels and made a request. It was greeted by a smile and a promise.

Six months later, baby Jacob entered the world and was received by the tunnel community as the blessing he was. Vincent smiled a lot during this time and Catherine was sure his dimples were becoming more pronounced. When she had recovered, she determined that her surprise was ready. After the Naming Ceremony, she steered Vincent down the tunnels, away from his chamber and the brownstone entrance.

Vincent, who had been eager to see the long-awaited surprise, carried baby Jacob and strolled arm-in-arm with Catherine, letting her guide them.

They rounded a familiar curve and Vincent suddenly knew what the surprise was. He smiled down at Catherine and felt her joy and love for him.

Catherine had arranged for several lanterns to be strategically placed and there, before his eyes, was an image he had never expected to see. He was looking at himself and Catherine, smiling happily. Between them, held by them both, was baby Jacob.

Elizabeth came around the corner and waited.

“Well, what do you think?” she asked at last, in her brusque and somewhat impatient manner.

Vincent and Catherine looked at her and smiled, though they did not realize it, in exact imitation of their images. Elizabeth nodded and smiled back.

“I think you’ve just answered my question,” she said softly. She approached them and gazed at the baby, whose golden hair and deep blue eyes were definitely those of his father. She touched his soft cheek and the perfect nose and mouth. Jacob’s facial structure most resembled Catherine’s and he had her strong jaw.

“I don’t know if he’ll have your dimples, Vincent,” she said at last.

Catherine exploded in laughter, to the embarrassment of Vincent and the puzzlement of Elizabeth, whose eyebrows raised in question.

“You’ve just settled an argument, Elizabeth,” Catherine chortled. “Dimples!”

Vincent began to chuckle and soon all three adults were laughing together. Baby Jacob, who seemed to glory in all the attention, gurgled happily.

END

Mirror Image

“Hold ... the mirror up to nature; to show her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.”

- William Shakespeare

Vincent was passing by the full-length mirror in the bedroom when he stopped mid-step. He turned his head to look at himself and then walked closer for a better look.

Yes, there was no doubt about it, he had developed a slight pot belly.

He sighed. There was very little about his body that he could be proud about, but his physical fitness had been a dependable exception.

Too many cream puffs, he thought. He loved them and William made them regularly now. Well, maybe he should let Catherine or little Jacob eat more of them when the inevitable platter found its way into their refrigerator. Either that or he should re-institute his early morning runs along the tunnels.

He looked at himself dispassionately. Certainly, he was not the stuff of female dreams – he was no Heathcliff or Darcy, or even a Micawber. Not even Dickens' fertile imagination had been able to conjure up anyone remotely like himself. Catherine could say what she would, but the evidence was before him, unvarnished.

He ran his eyes up and down the reflection. Too much hair – that was the worst, he decided. His body was otherwise not unlike other men's – if he ignored his clawed hands and feet and his leonine face. Well, there was one area which Catherine assured him was extraordinary. He looked at that now. It did not seem over-sized for his body, which after all was large too. Catherine was too generous with her compliments.

He closed his eyes to the reflection and tried to imagine what he would look like without all the hair and with normal appendages. Then he mentally modified his face to give it a little less hair around his cheeks and a more 'human' nose. Then he erased the cleft in his upper lip. Yes, now he might approach some acceptable male 'norm'.

His reverie was suddenly interrupted and he gave an involuntary shudder of delight as he felt Catherine mould her naked self to his back and put her arms around his waist. He loved the feel of her breasts against him – anywhere at all. He opened his eyes and caught her mischievous half-grin in the mirror as she peered around him. Her hands began to stroke upwards and cupped his nipples. He groaned.

"Catherine."

"Vincent, you *are* beautiful! Stop castigating yourself. Oh ... and look, my love."

Vincent looked and stiffened in surprise. Seeing his arousal build from his usual perspective – looking down from above - was quite different from seeing it in a mirror. His penis was emerging from its sheath and coming to attention at an alarming speed. His arousal, which he knew was at least partly Catherine's, sent fire along his veins. He had never thought that the sight of himself that way would heighten that fire – but it did.

He groaned again as Catherine pressed her pelvis to his buttocks. Despite the hair, or maybe because of it, he was sensitive to the slightest touch. She knew that and loved to see his reaction. His purr began to vibrate his bones and he found himself short of air.

He could almost see his body shake with his rough, pre-coital purr. He'd never noticed that before either. His manhood was engorged to bursting point. He began to panic. His breathing rasped in his ears. He was close to climax.

Then Catherine suddenly moved her hands southwards and captured his column.

"No," he managed to gasp before he realized it was too late. He watched in horror as he exploded and his juices went airborne. Catherine moved quickly to face him and now ran her sticky hands all over his rounded belly, then moved to cup his testicles, making him growl and then groan. Then she flicked some of his semen onto the mirror – deliberately.

She looked up at him and smiled. It was an expression he could only describe as wanton – but the bond was transmitting her unreserved love – and desire - for him. He sighed. The relief was wonderful but his legs seemed suddenly made of rubber. He pulled Catherine to him for support, felt the strength in her small frame.

She spoke into his chest, her voice deep with passion. He knew she was highly aroused now, but couldn't make himself move from her embrace.

"Vincent, you are a sensual man with a prowess – and stamina - that any other man would envy. And I'll prove it. Come back to bed. Forget the mirror. It has received the only payment it deserves."

She extracted herself from him and took his hand. He let himself be drawn back to the bed. As if he would have resisted anyway. Then, just as Catherine had said, he proved he was far from spent.

Afterwards, Catherine again ran her hand over his slightly rounded belly. She seemed to find it fascinating – and the sensations he could feel from her were making him purr even louder than usual.

He had never thought of a mirror as an erotic device. Beauty – or sexual attraction – was obviously in the eye of both beholders, he thought wryly.

Maybe he wouldn't have to give up the cream puffs after all.

END

Something to See

*“You’re not a stranger to me
And you are something to see”*

- Stevie Nicks (Beauty and the Beast)

Catherine lay in bed and watched Vincent walk across the room from the bathroom. The room was lit only by mellow light from their fireplace, which he had lit before going into the shower. He seemed to have a golden full-body halo – and he was probably still a little damp. She restrained her lascivious thoughts at that last. Another time she would give him a personal rubdown.

Seeing him naked never failed to excite her. He never wore anything in bed either, declaring their brownstone too warm after a lifetime in the tunnels. She herself wore only the minimum, and only because she knew he loved the feel of silk and liked to remove it prior to their lovemaking. His presence next to her kept her warm.

Vincent could feel her amorous regard, of course, but affected not to. He was not an exhibitionist – quite the reverse - but he dressed slightly slower than normal because he knew she loved to look at him.

What would a sculptor think of him? she wondered idly. Vincent had just enough muscle - and in all the right places - to be a perfect model.

He pulled a pair of socks from his dresser and pulled them on carefully one at a time, so as not to tear them with his toenails. He balanced on one foot without effort and that gave her a lovely display of the muscles in his lower back and thighs. Could she see a hint of the dangle? She sighed and ran her eyes up his back again. She shouldn't be thinking of that now.

Even though he had more body hair than most men, Vincent's was very fine and soft. Catherine loved to stroke it. She watched the play of muscles under that hair, across his broad shoulders and down his back, the movement of his narrow hips. The sight always reminded her of a big cat in its prime. She would never tell him that, of course. He would probably never lose the sensitivity he had to that comparison, but it was one she allowed herself to make because she loved him, all of him, unreservedly.

He stood for a moment, dressed only in socks, his back to her. He did not turn around, she knew, because he was getting aroused – and today he had urgent work to do below.

Vincent walked with typical feline grace over to the chair where his clothes lay folded. Those legs, she thought, were beautiful. Long, with lean muscle. He moved like a dancer, as silent as a panther. She managed to prevent an audible sigh as he pulled on his patched pants and tied them carefully at the knees. He didn't wear underwear and his pants were snug and seemed to emphasize rather than conceal his form.

Then he grabbed his thermal undershirt and pulled it over his head, followed much more quickly by a much-patched denim shirt and then a grey vest.

He turned to her then, caught her gaze and gave an audible sigh. He walked over to the bed and leaned down to her. He planted a soft kiss on her lips as she turned her face to him, then sat on the edge of the bed. She could now see he was somewhat aroused and smiled up at him.

Vincent sighed again and gave her an exasperated look.

“Catherine, you make it very difficult to leave.”

“I know, but you encourage me.”

“Yes. I can feel your “appreciation”, although I doubt I will ever entirely accept it.”

“What you mean is that you still don't quite believe I can see you that way.”

“Yes. I need that daily reminder that our love is real. It makes me feel ... normal, Catherine.”

This was a subject they had discussed too often. It was surely time to put those misconceptions to rest, but would she lose her second-favourite tradition of the morning? Well, she had to try. She gathered her thoughts and got her brain in gear.

“Vincent, labels like “normal” are for people who need to categorize and rationalize everything, give it an arbitrary value. Good and bad, strong and weak, beautiful and ugly, rich and poor – those concepts mean nothing below – and are generalizations even in the world above.

Below, everyone is truly accepted, equal and ‘normal’. You belong because of what you are, not because of what you aren't. Your ... our ... world is not normal by the standards of the world above, but that's what makes it special.

“The sense of what we are – what we can be – is in our hearts. You taught me that. Below we are all part of each other, without prejudice, without judgement.

“I don’t want you to ever be normal as my world defines it, Vincent. I love you exactly as you are and so does everyone below. Meanwhile, the world above, every day, reminds us why the term normal is meaningless.”

She watched his face as she spoke and now saw that he was deep in thought.

“Yes,” he said at last, quietly, and bent over to give her another kiss. “Perhaps we need some new words, or new definitions.”

“No, Vincent,” Catherine disagreed softly, shaking her head. “All we need is love – and that we have in abundance. I love to watch you dress because I know what a fortunate woman I am. You changed me and my ‘normal’ life into something ... extraordinary.”

Vincent could find no reply to that. He merely nodded, kissed her again and left.

Catherine sighed and smiled to herself. She closed her eyes and imagined him back in bed with her. Her sense of his contentment through their bond sent her sliding into sleep.

END

Hot Stuff

“Thoughts, that breathe, and words, that burn”
-Thomas Gray

Catherine opened her eyes and knew immediately that Vincent had already left the brownstone. She glanced at the clock. It was only 7:15! He seemed to be getting up early these days, and leaving quickly as well – if she didn't distract him before he could do so. That particular distraction allowed her another hour of luxurious sleep. She didn't work to a schedule, but she liked to be in the Foundation office next door by 10:00.

It was chilly in the attic, even with the extra insulation she had had installed during the renovation. The winter seemed extremely cold this year and she shivered as she thought about getting out of the nice warm bed.

Vincent, now she thought about it, didn't feel the cold as other mere mortals did. The relatively chilly tunnels were still where he felt most comfortable. He was lovely to snuggle up to and he warmed her better than any heater – and right through to her soul.

Why did he leave so early? She seemed to remember hearing him take a shower before she dozed off after their early morning lovemaking.

Now she was curious, an emotion she was sure she had learned from Vincent, whose curiosity was renowned. What on earth was he doing in the tunnels so early anyhow? Some secret project? A major pipe repair?

Catherine put aside the mystery and spent the morning catching up on her work, then decided she might as well go down to the dining hall for lunch. She put on a thick padded jacket and headed below. The upper tunnels were definitely cold and she rushed along, taking the fastest downward route to where the temperature was more moderate. The dining hall, when she reached it, was a lot warmer and full of friends. She spotted Vincent talking to Father and approached him. He turned with an expression on his face she could only call "guilty". Why that, she wondered.

She said nothing and let him hug her and burrowed into his chest. He certainly was wearing fewer layers and yet was still nice and warm. Perhaps he'd been helping William in the kitchen. He held her close until she stopped shivering and then dropped a kiss on her nose when she looked up at him at last.

"Your nose is cold, Catherine."

"I'll bet yours isn't, if I could reach it. You're warm everywhere."

"Catherine, the tip of my nose is probably the coolest part of me ..."

He stopped, flushed a little, and looked uncomfortable.

"What is it, Vincent?" she asked, now very curious. He wasn't particularly sensitive about his appearance anymore. What was bothering him?

"I just remembered I left my gloves in the pipe chamber. I seared my hands on those steam pipes we were fixing before I remembered the gloves."

"Let me see."

She pulled his hands to her and turned them over. They did look a little red.

"I think they're okay," she said, planting a kiss on the palm of one and then the other. They were warm too. She wrapped the hands around hers and let his warmth soak into them. She never tired of the feel of his hands – anywhere. She felt Vincent's reaction to that emotion and smiled to herself.

"Catherine, you are chilly. Let me get you some hot lunch."

He extracted his hands, turned and marched to the buffet, returning with two bowls, and a plate with grainy rolls and brownies. She sat down beside him and tucked in. The soup was a wonderful thick pea with sausages and she wolfed it down, feeling it warm her to her bones. The rolls were spread with a spicy pate – and delicious too. No wonder she couldn't be bothered to cook much! William did it so much better.

"What are you doing this afternoon," she asked him at last, between bites of brownie. She could think of another warming-up activity.

"We are almost finished the repairs. I should be back home by mid-afternoon, after I clean up."

"Nonsense, Vincent. Have a bath – or shower – at home. You don't want to walk the tunnels with wet hair. Maybe I'll join you. We haven't had a bath or shower together in ages. I have to help sort some boxes of donated clothing, and it's a grubby job."

"Yes, some of that stuff has probably been in storage for years. It makes me sneeze. Give my regards to Annabelle."

Annabelle was their seamstress and quartermaster.

“Why don’t you tell her yourself?”

“Catherine, you know I hate being fawned over by a lot of women. They look at me as if sizing me up for ... something ... or just checking my size.”

Catherine laughed.

“Vincent, if anything, you look slimmer than ever. Winter must agree with you. You sure don’t seem to be bundling up like the rest of us.”

“I do not feel the cold. You know that.”

“All right, well, I’ll see you back home later. I’ll bring dinner back with me. We can sit by the fireplace and read to each other.”

“That would be wonderful.”

Vincent finished off his tea and made a fast retreat and worked hard with the other men until the repairs in the pipe chamber were done. Pascal immediately started catching up on messages.

Later that afternoon, Catherine sensed that Vincent was heading home and decided to follow him. She said her good-byes to the sewing group and winked at Annabelle, who nodded. They were old conspirators where Vincent was concerned. She picked up the hamper William had prepared for her, on her way by the kitchen, and thanked him with a kiss that made him blush.

She carefully kept her emotions controlled as she walked home, thinking about sewing, humming quietly to herself. She entered the brownstone equally quietly, dropped the hamper on the kitchen table, and padded upstairs. Vincent had lit the fireplace and she could hear the shower. Perfect.

Since he always left home quickly after his morning shower, was there something about that which was bothering him? What was he hiding? Had he developed a rash? Would she have noticed? Perhaps not. Well, she had to know. It was going to be warm in there, so she quickly shed all her dusty clothes and put on a robe against the chilly room. She could discard it quickly. She was still maintaining a distant calm. She could still surprise him, if she was careful and he was distracted.

She slid quietly along the floor to the bathroom door and waited until she heard Vincent turn off the shower, step out of the tub and begin to dry himself. Then she heard him grunting as he rubbed.

Was he in pain? She had to know. She shrugged out of her robe, whisked open the door and dashed in.

“You didn’t wait for me,” she chided as she closed the door behind her.

Vincent spun around to look at her and what she saw made her jaw drop.

He seemed to be surrounded by a halo. It took her a moment to realize what it was.

He looked at the ceiling and rolled his eyes, his mouth turned down in embarrassment, his face now beet red.

“Catherine!”

He was something to see - and not just in the usual place, although that was as impressive as always. Every hair on his head seemed to be twice its volume. His nose hair was fluffed up and his chin and cheek hair looked almost misty. He looked larger than normal because his body hair stood out like an aura around him.

Catherine realized, belatedly, that there WAS more of his hair than she was used to. Then she understood.

She was dying to get her hands on him and he must have caught her intent, because he stood still. She moved to lean against him, running her hands up his thighs, then around his waist and up his back. He dropped the towel and drew her close with a huge sigh.

“Oh Vincent, you’re so beautifully soft – even more than usual! Why didn’t you tell me?”

“That I grow more fur in the winter, like every other beast in this hemisphere? Catherine!”

She looked up at him, sharp anger inside her.

“Don’t you ever use that word in that way again, Vincent! You are not a beast, and you’re certainly like no one else on this planet! How many times do I have to tell you? I love you, all of you, in all ways and all seasons. Is this why you were leaving so early?”

Vincent hung his head.

“You do not understand. I must take a long walk in the cool tunnels, just to get my facial hair to return to normal. I look like a guinea pig.”

Something nagged at Catherine – and suddenly she realized what it was.

“You mean this is something new for you?”

“Yes. I’ve spent all my life underground. There are cold places, ice caves even, but the living tunnels are much the same temperature all year. It’s cool, but I’m used to it.

“However, since moving into this brownstone, I’ve been outside in the garden and our attic is cold. My ...um ... fur has thickened. I have to wear less clothing.”

“And exactly what is wrong with being warm in the winter, Vincent? I’m certainly glad you are.”

She proved it by snuggling up even closer to him and felt his arousal against her stomach in response to her own. Vincent sighed again. In retrospect, he could not have kept this from Catherine for long. She was a trained observer.

She looked up at him, still sensing his unease.

“I can understand how you might not want to go below with your face all fluffed up, but there’s an easier way than long walks in cold places.”

“And what would that be?” Vincent asked, sure he already knew the answer.

“Just open the bathroom door and the window, and put on the fan. Without the steam, you won’t fluff up – or if you do, it’ll go back to normal quickly.”

“But that will create a cold draft that will make the attic even colder,” Vincent reasoned. And you have to get up and get ready for work.”

“Vincent, we can light the fire, but I don’t mind if our bedroom is chilly. Wakes me up. But I know what else will work.”

She reached down between them and he groaned. He knew what she was thinking.

“Catherine, if we make love every time I have a shower, we will both be late.”

“You don’t have to come back to bed, just do some morning floor exercises. You know, like ... whatever. I’ll watch you and let you know when it’s worked. Nicer than cold walks in the tunnels.”

“Yes. But you know what will happen if you watch me.”

Catherine snorted. He was right of course. She sighed.

“Okay then, just do your exercises in the spare room. But don’t leave so early! We can have breakfast together at least.”

“Very well.”

“And speaking of food, we have dinner waiting down in the kitchen. But first I want a shower. I’d love a helping hand.”

Vincent lifted her into the shower, turned on the water and jumped in after her.

Catherine felt his delight as he washed her and realized she had missed their joint showers as much as he. Drying afterwards was even better. It led to the inevitable – but that was fine too.

“Hot stuff,” Catherine remarked later, over the hot and wonderful stew William had provided them.

“William is a treasure,” Vincent agreed, after he had swallowed a mouthful of buttered rye bread.

“I meant you, my love,” Catherine corrected him.

Vincent looked at her, his wonderment plain on his face. He shook his head in amazement.

Catherine smiled at him. There was no need for words. Their love flowed along their bond, warming them both.

END