

Skin Deep

by Angie

Beauty exists merely in the mind which contemplates (things)

- David Hume

"Vincent, you could look like a ..a ...a .. boar, and I would still love you!"

"Catherine!" Vincent protested.

They were lovers now, but Vincent still hadn't quite come to terms with his self-image. She decided to be forthright.

"Vincent you are the sexiest, most attractive man in your tunnel world. I don't know how you can miss the looks the women give you. I don't - and I agree with them. You have a power, beauty and grace that would make any man from above despair. Your musculature is to die for. You are always gentle, your voice would melt glaciers, and your hands are strong and talented. How can you be unaware of all this?"

Vincent sighed and look down the length of his body, still slightly damp from their lovemaking. What he saw did not impress him.

"Catherine, all the men below have good musculature. We work hard, eat just enough food, so we never get fat - with the possible exception of our cook.

"I'm quite aware that some women find me ... intriguing. Attractive is not the word, Catherine. I can tell the difference. They are curious, mostly. Many have known me all my life. I am not merely different. I am not completely a man - and Catherine, that is an immutable fact."

"I don't believe this," Catherine fumed. "Vincent, I know there are women who would gladly have you in their bed. You are very sexy."

"Catherine, I won't argue with you about what is sexy. I have no knowledge in that area, and no one to compare myself to. The other men are ... men. They are not like me, except in general shape."

"Much more than 'general', Vincent. Your body is large and hairy, certainly, but it isn't deformed, awkward or ugly. You have all the appearance of any man - just in some areas a little more of them."

"Except my face, hands and feet, Catherine. No one else has that 'appearance', in any form."

Catherine rolled onto her side and looked in his eyes, those beautiful turquoise eyes.

"And those don't matter in the general scheme of things, Vincent. They shouldn't in my world, but many people in my world have little understanding or compassion for those who are different in even small ways. You know this. People have lost their ability to feel because they are often overwhelmed. It's inexcusable, but it's a fact.

"And what do you think my feelings are, Vincent?"

Vincent turned over and held her close. She relaxed a little, but was still noticeably stiff in his arms.

"I know you love me with all your heart and soul - and body - Catherine. We are lovers. I know what we have is the ideal. However, I also know that I would not have our ... rapport ... with anyone else. Our bond links us, surrounds us, makes us one. I can feel the emotions of the other women, but it's not the same. Their hearts do not speak to me.

"And Catherine, this bond of ours, it's what sets us ... and me ... apart. It is part of what I am, whatever that is."

Catherine moved apart a little to look him in the eyes again. A mistake, she realized. How could she keep her brain functioning when she could see no guile in those wonderful eyes, only his love, his ... vulnerability. He could be hurt and she could do it. She had no desire to do so. But her arguments weren't working.

"Why do you think I love you, Vincent? Please tell me."

Vincent held her close and she relaxed a little more.

"Catherine," he mumbled into her ear, "I am astounded that you love me. I can feel it. It's real. I don't question it."

"Why not?"

Vincent sagged a little and Catherine could feel that he was upset at the question.

He sighed. "You are not a gift horse, Catherine, but the old cliché stands. I don't look too deeply into your reasons - I'm just glad they exist. I can't read your mind."

Catherine shifted and felt him stiffen against her. She hated herself for this, so she moved until she could look at him again. This time she put her hands on his face and gave him a long kiss, which he returned with interest.

"I'm sorry, my love. It's a question no woman should ask. I was only trying to get you to understand that what we have is because of what you are, not in spite of it.

"I truly do not care about what you consider 'differences'. They don't change what you are inside – caring, compassionate .. and passionate."

Vincent had to chuckle at this last. They both knew he had tried to deny the passion he felt for far too long. Had he truly been afraid of hurting Catherine? It seemed ridiculous now, and he wondered if he had just been erecting a barrier that couldn't be argued against. Thinking back, he had not been rational, because Catherine was so hard to resist. He had spent long hours arguing with himself, and now look where they were.

All barriers were gone ... but he was still what he had always been – different.

He tried to put those thoughts into words.

"My differences, Catherine, do not just affect me. They affect you, us, in ways that perhaps you can't yet admit."

"I think I know what you are going to say, Vincent, but I still say that they don't matter. There are ways I can help."

He looked at her and saw the determined set of her jaw. "How?" he asked.

Catherine had been thinking for some weeks about how to broach this topic, and she was now being given the opening.

"We must make our lives as free as we can, Vincent, in a place we can call our own. I've been thinking about it. I think we need a home, a real home, not my apartment, a place we can grow old together, where you can be as much in my world as is possible, and safely."

Vincent was rendered speechless for several moments. Curiosity finally got the better of him.

"I ... how can this be?"

"I am going to find a house that we can access from the tunnels, Vincent, and purchase it. I can afford it, especially if I sell this apartment."

Vincent wasn't sure how he felt about losing the balcony and all the memories that went with it, but didn't mention that. Instead he reflected that one day he would be old, and it was possible he wouldn't be able to climb onto the roofs of subway trains or elevator cars.

"I ... think this is a good idea, Catherine, but won't it be a lot of work for you? You already work long hours."

"Yes, but that's going to change, Vincent. I will request to be moved to the trial division from investigations, and possibly work only part time."

That made Vincent raise his eyebrows. "This is what you really want, Catherine? You are not just doing this for me?"

"I am doing this for both of us, Vincent. And for others. Vincent we may want to consider more ..."

Vincent interrupted. It was all moving too fast for him.

"Catherine, I know you are not pregnant, I would know, so who are these others?"

"I have been talking with Father. You need someone close to the tunnel community to help some of your children adjust to my world – whether to continue their studies, or to help your community in other ways. Your current Helpers can be there too. I want this house to have enough room to teach, board, support - whatever is needed."

"Do you have a house in mind, Catherine."

"Yes, but it's too soon to speak of it. I'm still negotiating."

Vincent sighed. "As you wish, Catherine. And what will you need me for?"

That was the real question, as he knew he could not help in what she had outlined.

"Vincent, you will be needed to coach, to advise, to offer a perspective that no one else can. Some of the children may need a 'father figure', someone who understands where they come from and what challenges they may face – challenges you know very well."

"But they will never face what I must, Catherine."

"Perhaps not, but some are disabled, some are shy, others fearful or afraid. Appearances do matter in my world, but attitude is even more important. You can teach them that. Your bravery and courage has had to be so much more intense than theirs to survive. They know you, so they will have a role model like no other."

Vincent looked at her and pulled her to him. He was sure there was a lot more to be considered, but right now he just wanted her to be his, all his. Later she would be helping others and he'd have to share her time.

He kissed her and found her more than willing. They were truly one when they made love, and his differences really did not matter. She was his and he was hers. Whatever the future held, this would always be true. Catherine was right about that.

END

