

MERMOUSE

by Anne McClelland

(from *DREAMS IN AMETHYST*)

Vincent turned sharply, baring his fangs, ready to strike out at whatever or whoever was hidden in the shadows. He stopped himself though, just in time, when he realized it was only Mouse.

He sighed a great sigh of relief, his eyes closing and his shoulders relaxing, as the tension left his body.

"Mouse! I thought for a moment... I thought I saw an intruder in the shadows."

"Down here? In *your* chamber?" Mouse asked, amazed.

"It makes no sense," admitted Vincent.

Mouse continued. "Finished the new aqueduct. Little problem!" He wrung the water out of his shirt.

"So I see," Vincent replied, trying to remain serious.

Mouse was feeling a bit shy about admitting defeat, but he blurted out the words anyway. "Need your help."

"To stop the flood?" Vincent asked sincerely.

"No! Fixed it... swimming lessons."

Vincent dropped his head slightly, stifling a chuckle, but not a faint smile....

"Tomorrow, we'll go to the Mirror Pool. I'm going to see Narcissa. Tell Father I'll be back by evening."

Mouse remained in Vincent's chamber....

"Intruders don't scare Mouse," but he panicked as his candle blew out. However, once he was over his fright, he headed back down to his chamber to change out of his wet things.

Arthur scurried off under a table when he saw the state his master was in- *WET*. Arthur, like most domesticated creatures liked his comforts and being too close to someone who was cold and wet - even his favourite human - was not his idea of fun!

"Big day tomorrow, Arthur! Swimming... with Vincent." He carried on the one-sided conversation with Arthur, whilst he changed. He set out some swimming trunks and towels all ready for his great adventure the next day, before jogging off back to the kitchen for his evening meal.

On his return from Narcissa's, Vincent had supper with Father, discussing the day's events. Father almost choked when Vincent told him he would be teaching Mouse how to swim.

Once he had stopped laughing, Vincent scolded him. "I think, it's very sensible of Mouse to want to learn... at last."

Father replied. "Oh yes, I agree, but...", and he was off laughing again.

Vincent shook his head slowly from side to side, the edges of his white fangs gleaming in the

candlelight.

Father, composing himself once more, said, "I remember a time when it took six of us to carry him to the shower chamber! It's amazing to think that he is now willing to go - swimming!"

Both men laughed as each conjured up his own vision of Mouse learning to swim...

Mouse was outside Vincent's chamber at the crack of dawn. He hovered around, hoping that Vincent would not sleep too late. When Vincent did eventually step outside, he held back a groan, remembering his promise to Mouse.

"Breakfast first, Mouse," smiled Vincent.

"Okay, good. Okay, fine," Mouse replied.

They passed the hour after breakfast discussing with the rest of the Tunnel Community, the tasks which had to be accomplished that day.

Catherine yawned and stretched, savouring the feel of the lovely warm sheets next to her legs and the soft fluffy pillows below her head, before she had to get up.

It had been quite a night, discovering Kristopher Gentian and his paintings at the deserted warehouse. She would have to contact Jenny, soon. She could perhaps telephone her from work later this morning.

She gradually got up - a bit at a time. One foot - the rest of that leg - an arm - and so on until she was out of bed and walking *zombie-like* to the bathroom. Once showered she felt a bit more human.

Coffee, she thought, and then I'll be able to face the world.

She was on her way to the kitchen, when she caught a glimpse of *something* on her balcony. Thinking she was seeing things, she went toward the other balcony door and her kitchen, only to come face-to-face with Kristopher, standing outside, complete with baseball cap and huge grin, waving back at her.

Oh no, I've really lost it this time, she thought, rubbing her eyes, but no, he was still there.

Still on automatic pilot, she opened the door for him, stepping aside to let him come in.

"Oh no, Cathy. Vincent doesn't even come in there. I couldn't either!"

"You - what?" Catherine asked.

"Coffee out here would be nice, though. The sun's out! It's a beautiful morning. The bluebirds - I mean, the blackbirds are singing..."

He rattled on, and on, until Catherine finally snapped. **"Kristopher - be quiet!"**

"Oh. Oh. Sorry. Late night had we?" he smiled. "Okay, I'll just sit here, quietly, until you're ready!"

Catherine brought breakfast out onto the balcony and she had been right - two cups of coffee always made her see the world in a different light.

"How on earth did you get here?" She asked Kristopher, as he finished off the last croissant.

"Here? I flew, of course."

"Will I ever get a straight answer from you?" she asked, gritting her teeth.

"Why would I do that? Straight answers are *boring*. They kill off all the *mystery*!"

"I give up! I *just give up!*" she smiled.

"Aren't you going to ask me why I'm here?"

"I don't believe this is happening to me. Why me?" Catherine almost shouted.

"Because you can take me to Vincent's house. That's why I'm here."

Catherine began to laugh, at the idea of Vincent's *house*.

"All right, I'm sure Vincent won't mind, not after all we've been through - especially last night! But you're going to have to give me an hour or two to report into work. I'll make a few phone calls and then make an excuse to leave on an errand or something. I'll be back."

Kristopher grinned. "Fine. I'll stay here and enjoy the view."

With all their plans set for the day, Vincent asked Mouse to wait at the dining area until he collected his towel and swimming trunks from his chamber.

He searched all through his closet and chest of drawers, but he could not find his faithful old blue swimming trunks. Where *were* they?"

He jogged down the tunnels to the area next to the shower cubicles, where Mary and some of the other women usually did the day's wash.

"Mary, have you seen my swimming trunks? Did they need repairing?"

"Yes, Vincent," Mary replied. "I thought that since Catherine had left those new ones for you, that I could at least repair the elastic in your old ones."

"New ones?"

"Yes, Vincent. They're in the bottom drawer of your chest!"

Vincent ran back to his chamber, wondering when and how Catherine had managed to give these new ones to Mary for him.

He ransacked his drawer until he found what had to be the new pair - what there was of them!

Why did Catherine buy me competitive trunks? I'm not going to be racing, he thought.

He sighed and wrapped the black trunks in his towel and hurried back to meet Mouse.

As they made their way down towards the Mirror Pool, Vincent stifled a yawn, hoping that Mouse would not notice, but, of course, he did.

"Vincent tired? Out all night - with Catherine?"

"Yes. We were... busy - chasing ghosts."

"Ghosts? Real ones?" Mouse asked, amazed.

"Yes - at least - one," Vincent smiled.

"Catch them?"

"This one *wanted* to be found."

"Oh good. Here!" Mouse said changing the subject as they arrived.

Vincent still enjoyed swimming. His heavy musculature made him a better athlete than swimmer, but the feel of the water against his skin was always soothing.

Normally, he swam in pools in the deepest caverns, where no one disturbed him, but at this time of the morning he knew they should not be disturbed - even at the Mirror Pool.

Mouse wasted no time. In seconds he had his clothes off and swimming trunks on. Before Vincent could stop him, he took a flying leap into the pool, not stopping to consider its depth at all. Before he even hit the water, Vincent had muttered several expletives under his breath, while yanking off his cloak.

As Mouse splashed and sputtered, shouting, **"HELP!"**

Vincent pulled off his boots and padded vest and leapt in to save him. He roared at Mouse.

"Stay still - or I'll get angry!"

Mouse's eyes opened wide in terror. The thought of Vincent being angry with him was much worse than the thought of drowning. He relaxed into Vincent's arms and allowed him to pull him over to the shallower part of the pool.

"Mouse sorry, Vincent. Didn't think."

"I'm sorry too, Mouse, that I had to shout at you." Vincent smiled, nodding his head. His nodding caused his mane to cling to his face. He tried removing the strands of hair from his eyes, mouth and nose, but gave up and instead, ducked under the water, tilting his head back to free his face from the long strands of hair. Not wishing to have to repeat the performance, he slipped off the elastic band he had carried on his wrist and tied his hair back, pony-tail style.

Now to get down to business, he thought.

Catherine had made a plausible excuse to Joe to leave the office just as soon as she could. Within an hour she and Kristopher were on their way Below.

Catherine kept her thoughts and feelings in check, closing off the bond with Vincent as fully as possible, without arousing his suspicion. Having Kristopher with her, she was determined to surprise Vincent.

Vincent reached out of the pool for two of the polystyrene floats they kept for the swimming lessons and proceeded to explain to Mouse what he would like him to do first.

"First of all, Mouse, I'd like you to put your face in the water."

Mouse stared at Vincent, mouth opened, eyes wide in disbelief.

"Face in water? *Can't breathe!*"

Vincent smiled an encouragement. "Just for a few seconds, Mouse. I'll explain in a moment. *Trust me.*"

Mouse certainly trusted his friend, so he leaned forward until his face was submerged. After a few seconds, Vincent pulled him upright again.

"Well done, Mouse. I simply wanted you to feel the water on your face. It takes courage to deliberately put your face into the water. You see, to swim properly you must lie as flat in the water as possible. If you try to keep your face out of the water, your legs will be too low and you'll find it more difficult to swim."

Vincent demonstrated what he'd just explained, using one of the floats, showing Mouse how it was easier to push the float through the water if it was flat, rather than at an angle. He knew that if he could explain the process of swimming in terms which Mouse could easily relate to, then the battle was half won.

Vincent continued in his soft but confident tone.

"Right then, Mouse. I want you to put one of the floats between your legs to help them float and the other in your hands. Then you can feel the correct position in the water."

After a few attempts, Mouse finally succeeded in sandwiching the float between his thighs. Holding the other float out in front of him, he floated straight out in the water. Vincent gave him a gentle push and Mouse automatically began to move his feet. The float bobbed up from between his legs, causing them to sink.

"Mouse, you have the correct idea. To keep your legs afloat, you must kick your feet."

Catherine and Kristopher made their way down from Catherine's basement. When they reached the spiral staircase at the lower south well, Kristopher held out his hand to steady her. As she accepted his offer, she almost felt a tingling sensation in her own hand, but she mentally shook her head, chiding herself for allowing her imagination to run riot.

Vincent suddenly shivered. Thinking that it must be the wet shirt cooling on his back, he decided to remove it - there was only Mouse here and he felt no shyness when he was with his friend. He threw it onto the side of the pool and continued to explain to Mouse about the kicking action he wanted him to try, showing him with his hands how he was to put the right foot down as his left came up, and visa versa.

Mouse nodded. "Okay, good. Okay, fine."

Vincent handed him a float again and told him to stretch out away from him, towards the other side of the pool, so that Vincent could see if he was kicking properly.

Seconds later, a tidal wave of frothy water engulfed Vincent, as Mouse tried his very best to kick as hard as he could.

Wiping his face with his hands, Vincent coughed up the water he had accidentally breathed in - at the wrong moment. This was going to take just a bit longer than he had thought.

Mouse reached the far side and Vincent explained patiently that he would be able to go much faster if he kept his feet in the water, instead of kicking air! He proceeded to demonstrate to Mouse.

"You're doing very well, Mouse. Would you like to try now - without the float?"

Mouse nodded furiously. "Vincent, good teacher."

Vincent shook his head, chuckling from deep in his chest. "I want you to push off and kick again, but at the same time, I want you to *paddle* your hands - the way Arthur digs in the soil. Let me hold your shoulders to help you a bit the first time. I'll pull you while you kick - it will help you to get the feeling of moving - without holding the float."

Trying to remember all the instructions, Mouse pushed off. Vincent moving backwards, supporting Mouse's shoulders. Everything was progressing well, except that Vincent had forgotten about the sudden drop in depth behind him.

The suddenness of stepping backwards into *nothing* disoriented him for a moment. Worse still, was trying to surface and hitting Mouse in the chest instead. Vincent sought to calm himself and moved to the side, to surface next to Mouse.

Mouse had grabbed hold of the rocky side of the pool and yelled through Vincent's sputtering and choking.

"Mouse swam! Mouse swam!"

"I'm, " *cough*, "so," *cough*, "glad... Mouse," Vincent gasped. "Show me... again. I... missed it."
Mouse grinned. "Okay," and he was off, doing a very determined *raccoon* paddle across the pool.
With all the excitement and his energies and concentration focused on Mouse, Vincent had not sensed in the slightest that Catherine had entered the lower tunnels.

Catherine and Kristopher made their way through the various levels, meeting Jamie on the way. She introduced Kristopher to Jamie. They immediately took a liking to each other and chatted for a few minutes, Jamie shyly agreeing to have her portrait done by this happy and charismatic character called Kristopher.

Catherine shouted back after Jamie. **"Where's Vincent, Jamie?"**

"Oh, he's with Mouse at the Mirror Pool... swimming lessons!" she giggled.

Catherine's mouth broadened into a grin- as did Kristopher's. They took one look at the mischievous glint in each other's eyes and collapsed laughing. Catherine calmed herself as quickly as possible.... it was imperative now that she did not give herself away!

Deciding to let Mouse practice for a while, Vincent climbed out of the pool. His denims were cold, hard and wet against his legs, so, warning Mouse to stay over at the shallower part of the pool, he lifted the swimming trunks he had intended wearing and went behind a rock to change. At least they were dry.

He left the wet denims near the entrance to the Mirror Pool chamber, so that they might dry slightly with the breeze coming in from the tunnel outside, and returned to Mouse.

He was so busy showing Mouse the correct way to use his arms for the front crawl, that he did not see the golden head and the dark brown head, sneaking a look round the doorway of the chamber.

Kristopher wore his usual grin, his mind conjuring up his next work of art. Vincent preserved like this on a canvas would be his best work - ever.

Catherine's heart pounded in her chest, as she caught sight of Vincent sporting his black swimming trunks. He looked so different, with his hair caught back in a pony-tail and all that expanse of skin and muscle on show. Her eyes repeated over and over the journey from his head down over his broad hairy chest, along each arm, down across the trunks and finally down each muscle-bound leg, before she tore them away - realizing he was standing, staring at her.

Vincent had stopped in *mid-stroke*, stunned at the sudden onslaught of feeling *something* from Catherine. He had not even realized that she was in the tunnels, never mind so near to him. He quickly tried to analyse the thoughts and feelings radiating from her. All he could feel was an overpowering sense of wonderment, beauty and desire - and all those marvelous feelings were because of - himself. Speechless and rooted to the spot, his mind raced on.

Shall I quickly grab my cloak and cover myself? No! The cloak with these swimming trunks would just look ridiculous - like some boxer or wrestler he had seen on TV's in shop windows Above. He was amazed at himself with the sudden picture which *popped* into his head, of him standing in the wrestling ring, hands above his head, while the crowd cheered. It just as quickly popped out again.

Shall I leap into the water beside Mouse?

Only the thought of having nothing dry left to wear, prevented him from taking that action. *No - all I can do is stand here and pray that Catherine will come no closer.*

Catherine quickly decided not to give him the slightest chance of escaping. She stepped into the

chamber and marched boldly over to him, pulling Kristopher along by the hand.

"Vincent, I'm glad we found you. Kristopher appeared at my apartment this morning and begged me to let him meet you again. He had to leave in such a hurry last night!"

Vincent inclined his head in Catherine's direction, and then Kristopher's as he said simply.

"Catherine... Kristopher..."

He still could not find his tongue, so Catherine did the talking for him.

"Hi, Mouse. Are you enjoying your lesson? I'm sorry we interrupted. If I had known that you and Vincent were going to be swimming, I'd have brought my costume too."

Vincent stood open-mouthed at her latest comment. Mouse waved back to her and shouted, "**Can swim now. Watch.**"

He showed her all that he had learned that morning, before scrambling out of the pool to Vincent. He came right up behind him and slapped a wet, dripping arm round Vincent's bare back, making him jump with the suddenness and the coldness of it.

"Vincent teach Mouse," grinned Mouse. "More lessons soon, Vincent?" he asked.

Vincent whispered huskily. "Yes, Mouse - soon."

Mouse lifted his clothes and went behind the rocks to change.

"Well," smiled Catherine. "Are you going to change too, Vincent? Or are you going home like that?"

Catherine speaking so boldly like this just did not seem real - perhaps he was dreaming? However, his stammering reply assured him that he was most definitely *not* dreaming and that this entire situation was, indeed, very real.

"I... I'm... the... my jeans are still wet," he nodded towards the still damp denims by the chamber exit. "I'll just wrap my cloak around me. The boots and my vest are dry too," he added, finding that he was beginning to string a few words together again.

As they walked back toward the hub of the community and Vincent's chamber, having bid Mouse a hasty goodbye just after they had left the Mirror Pool, Kristopher marvelled at his surroundings.

"Vincent, do you think Father would mind if I visited quite often? There is such a wealth of faces, people, places down here. I'd love to do them all. Now that I know my way here, I don't even need to bother Cathy again."

Catherine and Vincent glanced at each other. Catherine voicing the question of both their minds.

"Why do I get the feeling you already knew your way here, Kristopher? And how do you know about Father?"

Vincent added. "The ways change, Kristopher. I would not like to see you lost or injured in the tunnels."

Kristopher chuckled, "I won't get lost, Vincent. I *never* get lost. Any more questions, Catherine? You know what I think about questions." As if to add to the mystery, he added, "Where are Elizabeth's painted tunnels? No, wait, don't tell me. I'll find them."

He hurried on, remarking on this subject and that, not allowing Vincent or Catherine to dwell on any subject for too long.

Catherine and Kristopher waited in Vincent's chamber, while he went off to change in the bathing cubicles along the tunnel.

Kristopher, seeing Catherine's wistful look as Vincent left to change, said quietly. "Thanks, Cathy,

for bringing me here, but I've got to go now. Go, get him. See you." With a sudden rush out of the chamber... he was gone.

Catherine looked along the nearby tunnels, but there was no sight nor sound of him.

She felt a bit strange, remembering her father's words to her when he had *visited* her after his death, in the guest chamber. He too had suddenly rushed off, saying *I have to go now*.

Shaking her head at the direction her thoughts were taking, she quickly turned them towards Vincent.

Oh well, she thought, *why not?* And smiling to herself, she half-walked, half-ran down the tunnel to the bathing cubicle.

There were six cubicles along one side of the chamber. They had been installed not long after the community had begun down Below, before Vincent had come to the tunnels. The showers had served everyone well and only occasionally required some welding to the pipes, which brought water down from Above.

It had been pure luck that the YMCA swimming pool was almost geographically above Father and Vincent's chambers, and that one of the oldest members of the community had been a keen swimmer. Sam had swum regularly at the pool, which was one of the old-fashioned type of pool, with ancient pipes leading down into its foundations.

On one of his visits, whilst swimming up and down the length of the pool, Sam had suddenly thought about the warm water he was swimming in. Where did the water come from? Whereabouts was it heated? Where did it flow back to?

He had slipped down to the basement that day and crept through a hatch into an ever deeper basement, following the pipes all the way down. Sam went on a bit further until he came to a brick wall in a tunnel.

It did not take long for the rest of the men to re-route some of the hot water along their own planning system down to the levels where most of the community lived.

Two short lead-off pipes with taps - one with hot water and one with cold - joined to form a shower-head, providing showers at any time of the day or night. Everyone simply shared the facility in the way that most things were shared in their world. More cubicles or places for baths would have meant using more water, and the last thing anyone wanted to do was arouse suspicion up Above. So, they made do with what they had and were grateful.

Only one curtain was closed. *Vincent's*, thought Catherine.

Vincent sensed her approach this time and was a bit more prepared for her, hastily pulling on his fresh denims. However, before he had time to reach for his sweater, Catherine, feeling in a really dare-devil mood, pulled back the curtain quickly and snatched it from him.

"Catherine! What has gotten into you today?" asked Vincent, in total surprise at her actions.

"Oh, Vincent, you should see the *look* on your face. I *wish* I had a camera."

She stopped chuckling and gave him a sweet, innocent smile, although her eyes still twinkled with mischief.

"I don't know what's gotten into me today, Vincent. Perhaps Kristopher's sense of fun and adventure. I feel so light-hearted and happy. Remember the night we were listening to Schubert's *Unfinished Symphony*? And it started to rain?"

Vincent's eyes lit up and he could not help but smile too at the memory that scene invoked - Catherine *showering* herself in the thunderstorm and tossing her head and laughing that night - something he rarely did.

"Care to repeat it?" she laughed, pushing him back into the cubicle and quickly turning on the taps. The spray soaked them both in seconds and Vincent and Catherine gasped, as they tried to catch their breaths. Her happy mood was so infectious, that he could resist no longer. His shoulders merely shook at first. Then, he laughed silently, his mouth widening into that lovely smile he had shared with her that other night in the rain. Finally, he dissolved into a full-bodied laugh. A roar escaped every few seconds, which made Catherine all the more helpless. She sank to her knees, pulling Vincent down beside her. She threw herself onto his bare chest and waited for the *rain* and the laughter to cease.

The closeness of him and feeling his soft warm skin and hair next to her face had a calming effect on her and it was only a few minutes later that they lay quietly in each other's arms.

"Catherine, the rain won't go off unless one of us turns it off," smiled Vincent. "And don't you have to go back to work?"

"Okay then - spoil sport!" retorted Catherine as she clambered up to turn off the tap. "But, no, I don't have to go back to work - yet!"

Vincent suddenly realized how close he was to Catherine's body. The intimacy they had shared during the previous few hours and minutes, gave him the courage to wrap his arms round her legs and bury his face against them.

"Oh, Catherine, what are you doing to me?" he whispered, trying to keep control of his voice - and his emotions.

Catherine reached down and stroked his hair, whispering gently to him. "Loving you - that's all."

"Loving me?" he looked up at her.

"Yes, Vincent. Love takes many forms - you know that." She thought for a moment before continuing. "There's the love we've known until now, where we would give our very lives for each other. The deepest kind of love of all. Then there is the other side of that, where we have simply enjoyed holding each other, being with each other, spending time together, reading, listening to music, and so on. We are very lucky to share a very special love through our bond where we can actually feel what the other is feeling - although you're better at that than I am," she smiled. "Then, there's the kind of love which you've discovered today. Vincent, which can bring fun, warmth and happiness.

"Of course, *flirting* can lead to more serious feelings, as you've known all along, feelings of desire, a deep wanting in your heart to be so close as physically possible to the one you love..."

Vincent pulled himself up to stand with her. He slowly shook his head.

"Catherine, I've asked myself over and over again, why have I been so lucky to have you come into my life?" Vincent spoke softly, reaching out to hold Catherine's tiny waist. "Earlier, when you saw me... undressed, I thought my heart was going to burst with joy at the feelings you had... and they were all because of... *me*. Do you really want – me - so much?"

Catherine nodded her head firmly. "Yes, Vincent. Yes, I do."

"Then I only have one more question to ask."

Catherine tilted her head towards him, waiting for him to ask it.

Vincent, hesitant as ever, whispered shyly. "Will you give me more *loving* lessons - soon."

Catherine returned his smile. "Soon, Vincent - very soon."

END