

It Started With a Kiss

by Avril Bowles

(For everyone who 'loved,' but was left frustrated by 'that' scene in A KINGDOM BY THE SEA)

Catherine entered Vincent's chamber.

"Vincent?"

He didn't look up, but remained sitting in a chair beside his chess board, apparently contemplating the pieces. Suddenly, she noticed his bandaged left hand and stooped to cradle it gently, turning it over in her own.

"You're hurt."

He turned his head briefly, acknowledging her concern, but dismissing the injury before returning his eyes to the chess board.

"The kind of hurt that heals easily." He picked up a king and examined it, his expression one of anguished resignation.

Catherine sank to her knees before him on the floor.

"Elliot is a king in your world," he said softly.

"Yes. In a way."

Vincent replaced the chess piece on the board, pushing it along until it stood beside the queen.

"He can offer you so much. The power to do great good. Beauties, undreamed of." He turned his head to look down at her. "He can walk beside you in the daylight." Looking away again he took a deep breath, his inner turmoil evident on his uniquely beautiful face. "Last night I.... felt your fear for him. The sorrows you shared. Your joy.... when you knew he was alive. And when death was nearest. When he...."

Catherine gazed at him, knowing exactly what was coming next, and the torment he'd been going through ever since they'd both decided she should respond to Elliot Burch's request for her help.

"When he kissed me?"

"Yes. I felt.... that too."

Kneeling at his feet she looked away, choosing her words carefully. She swallowed, fighting down the tears that threatened to spill, as she considered the pain she had unwittingly caused him. Looking back at the beloved face that was afraid to meet her eyes, Catherine spoke from her heart, remembering Vincent had told her never to be afraid of speaking the truth.

"I've never felt closer to Elliot than I did last night. I saw so much of what he's always kept hidden; the boy he once was; the man he could be. We almost died together; and when he kissed me - just for an instant - some small part of me responded, and I wished...."

Vincent turned to look at her. "I wished that it was.... you."

His eyes locked with hers as the truth of her words hit him. A truth that was so very different from what he had feared. Elliot might be a king of sorts in the world Above, but there was one thing he didn't have.... would never have. Catherine's heart.

As he looked down at her lovely face, full of love and concern only for him, Vincent finally realized the significance of those few words. That the precious gift he'd always felt he'd been loaned for a while, until Catherine found someone more deserving, more suitable to give her the life she needed, was his alone, forever.

Slowly, his eyes darkening with a passion he'd feared and controlled too long, he stretched out his bandaged left hand. Catherine knelt up and placed her hands on his thigh. Without taking his eyes from hers, Vincent slid his hand under her hair and drew her head towards him. Leaning forward he touched his lips to hers, softly, but with a confidence he had never shown before. Catherine's eyes closed and she gave a faint groan, as she responded with a fierceness borne of long held yearning.

They both drew back and stared at each other, reeling exotically at the feelings such a gentle kiss had unleashed, then Catherine reached up an arm, threading her fingers through his golden hair and ensuring his mouth was once more safely trapped against her. Her other arm crept beneath his, to his back, and she shuffled forward on her knees, forcing his legs even farther apart to allow her to hold him closer and feel his body against hers.

It was as though their bond exploded, releasing every emotion each of them had ever felt for the other, flowing over them and enveloping them with an excitement and yearning they had never thought to experience. Each had ached to extend the emotional love they shared into a physical one, and whilst Vincent had striven to control and submerge his own desires, Catherine's had surfaced many times during their relationship, applying pressure to Vincent that only someone of his great mental strength could have resisted.

Now, it seemed that resistance was about to be yielded to Catherine's own demands. She broke away, her face flushed and her ragged breathing matching his own. Her eyes were pools of green, deepened to the colour of a rain-slicked forest and she trembled in his arms as she fought for breath.

"Vincent, I *'love'* you.... I need you! I've wanted to show you just how much for so long now.... let me show you, Vincent. Trust me.... it's time."

Rising, he gathered her to him. She refused to release her hold on him and her feet left the floor. "Yes, Catherine. I believe it *'is'* time. If you are really sure about it.... I mean if your heart is *'truly'* certain?"

"Vincent, I've never been so sure of anything in my whole life. I'm committed to you in every way.... my heart, my head.... every part of me needs you.... loves you."

He carried her to his bed and laid her gently on the covers, carefully extricating himself from her desperate embrace.

"I will only be a moment, Catherine," he explained. "... We need privacy."

She sighed, understanding, and watched as he moved quickly about the chamber, lighting a lantern and placing it just outside the entrance before drawing down a heavy tapestry curtain inside.

He turned to look at her, his chest tight with emotion, as she held out her arms to him. She looked so beautiful. He barely saw the borrowed clothes she wore, but felt himself stripped naked in the simmering green pools which were her eyes. It was a disturbing, thrilling realization and the significance of it made his head spin.

"Come to me, Vincent," she whispered, her voice hoarse with emotion.

On legs that threatened to buckle at the sudden unexpected change in their relationship and the prospect of what was to come, Vincent crossed the room and sat down on the bed. Catherine reached for him and wound her arms around him, kissing him fiercely. He returned the embrace, his hands snaking beneath the long waistcoat to trace the outline of her spine through the soft man's shirt she wore. Catherine shuddered against him, pressing harder and harder until Vincent thought they might both die of suffocation without ever completing their lovemaking.

Suddenly, she released him abruptly and tugged at his leather jerkin, dragging it from his shoulders. As he bent down to remove his boots he felt her behind him, her hands beneath his sweater against his skin, her hair brushing softly over his back, and the feeling made him gasp. As she removed the hand knitted woollen garment he shook his head, partly to allow the long, golden curtain of hair to settle once more around his shoulders, and partly to clear his brain; to make sure he wasn't dreaming.

Catherine shrugged out of the waistcoat and directed Vincent's hands to the buttons on her shirt. As he undid them, his claws brushed against the top of her breasts and she trembled, her eyelids fluttering. When the shirt lay discarded on the floor, Catherine took one of Vincent's hands and placed it just below her left breast, watching him carefully and smiling at his sharp intake of breath and the way his chest rose and fell, at the same time pressing her right hand over his heart.

"What do you feel, Vincent?" she asked. The sensation of having her hands on his bare chest was something he had never thought to experience, and Vincent's heart pounded with such ferocity that it was difficult for him to say anything. But as he gazed at her smouldering eyes and moistened, slightly parted lips, there was no denying the strength of what she felt for him. *'He had'* to believe it.... finally.

"I feel your heartbeat, your.... desire.... for me, Catherine," he replied, haltingly.

"And my love."

"Yes. That too."

"Then there is no more doubt in your mind that we belong together, Vincent?"

He expelled a long, shuddering breath as their arms closed around each other and she buried her head against his skin, showering his neck and chest with tiny kisses, first smoothing then ruffling again the traces of golden fur covering his back.

"No, Catherine.... no more doubts. I know you love me.... as I love you.... until my last breath and beyond."

"Then take me, Vincent. I'm yours.... now and forever, my love."

END