

You Light Up My Life

by Avril Bowles

The man who stood before the Council and most respected, longest inhabitants of the tunnel community, looked around him. Twelve people had been summoned to the '*Hearing*' and six of them had turned their backs on Gil Mason, as an indication of the punishment they supported - banishment from the tunnels.

These included Father, William, Winslow and Mary. A smile twitched the corners of Gil's mouth. It looked as if he had gotten away with it after all. His crime had been stealing a wallet in a crowded Manhattan street. His stupidity - almost getting caught - he'd been followed almost as far as the tunnel entrance before his pursuers lost him. As far as Father was concerned, this was an even more serious breach of the unwritten laws of those who were allowed to live Below, since such an action endangered the lives of everyone.... and one in particular, for whom no other world would offer the relative peace and security of this one.

Father had been beside himself with fury when news of Gil's behaviour reached his ears. If he had chosen to exercise his prerogative as leader of the community and dispensed the punishment by which he was tempted, Gil Mason would have found himself and his belongings outside the tunnel entrance within the hour. Only Vincent had been able to persuade him to call together the full Council and allow a democratic vote. And although he had temporarily diffused Father's anger, that hadn't stopped Vincent delivering his own lecture to Gil on the possible consequences of his irresponsible behaviour.

Gil stared at those still facing him, confident now that since the vote to excommunicate him had failed to achieve a majority, he was safe once more; convenient, since getting kicked out would mean looking for a regular job, so that he could make a down payment of rent on some seedy room, probably on the Lower East Side. They might be a bunch of weirdos down here, but at least it was clean and he got three square meals a day. Then, very slowly and apparently with great reluctance. Vincent bowed his head and turned his back.

"God'*damn*' you, Vincent!" Mason shouted, seeing his easy life of the past six months slithering away from him. The blond head turned around in surprise at the venom in the other man's voice. He spoke quietly and sadly.

"You put the lives of everyone here at risk when you stole that wallet, Gil. It is a miracle that through your greed, our world was not discovered. I cannot turn my back on that kind of betrayal.... I can turn it on you. I have no choice."

"The hell you haven't! You're condemning me; the vote was split till just now. '*You're*' the one that's getting me kicked outta here.... '*YOU*,' Vincent! Who the hell are you to have the power to ruin my life! I got nothin' if I leave here.... You----you goddamn.... freak of nature!"

"Gil! How '*dare*' you insult Vincent! Just ... just get your things together and get out." Father was trembling with rage, but although Vincent felt inside him the stirring of a lifelong ache, from which he was never truly free, he held up a hand in protest.

"Do not upset yourself, Father. I do not need you to defend me. Gil is hurt and angry. Words spoken in haste are less painful than those delivered after consideration." He took a step forward as if to go to Gil, but the other man backed off toward the doorway.

"You're all so *'perfect,'* aren't you? You stay down here, living your pathetic little lives. None of you can remember what it's like up there!" He jabbed his finger towards the ceiling of the Great Hall. "Well, I'm *'glad'* I'm going; at least what's out there is *'real!'* You've all grown soft. I'm sick to death of your sanctimonious rules and regulations.... all the preaching about how *'careful'* we have to be.... how no one must ever find out about this place." He suddenly thrust an arm towards Vincent, pointing a shaking finger at him. " *'HE'S'* the one this is about! That's what it comes down to every time.... *'HIM!'* Because he's the only one who can't go into the *'real'* world like anyone else. Because he isn't *'like'* anyone else, is he? He's not even a real man! He's a goddamn *'mutation!'*"

This time Father and Winslow both sprang into action and lunged at Gil, grabbing his arms and flattening him against the rock wall. His eyes grew frightened for a moment, as the black man's hand menacingly balled into a fist, but suddenly Vincent was there, placing a hand on his friend's and parent's shoulder.

"Father.... Winslow, this will serve no purpose." As they released their hold on Gil, Vincent turned an icy stare on the man and everyone in the room held their breath. His voice retained its usual pitch, but only a fool would have ignored the warning it held when he spoke.

"This place is no longer safe for you.... and you are no longer welcome. Go now, while I am still able to maintain control here." Gil drew a shaky hand across his mouth and bolted from the room.

Mary ran to Vincent, a sob catching in her throat. "How could he say those things to you? To insult you so cruelly in your own home. It's.... it's.... oh, Vincent!" She held his upper arm with both hands and buried her forehead against it. Vincent stroked her hair soothingly, aware that he was surrounded by everyone muttering words of comfort.

"Do not distress yourself, Mary.... or any of you." He looked around at the worried faces. Their expressions of anger and resentment towards Gil reminded him of the esteem in which he was held. Such a demonstration of their love and loyalty helped to soothe and warm his heart; punctured, despite his denial, by Gil Mason's abuse. He nodded gratefully at William and Winslow, both of whom had clapped him on the shoulder with muttered words of reassurance.

"Gil's own guilt prompted him to speak to me in that way. We got along well enough before. Tonight he saw me as the instrument of the punishment he faced. His words cannot hurt me.... they should not hurt any of you."

Over their heads, Vincent saw Father had slumped onto the chair behind his desk. He now sat, with his elbows on the surface, head in hands, in an attitude of defeat. Carefully, Vincent disengaged himself from the caring hands and crossed the room, perching himself on the desk. As the others made their way out of the Great Hall, he placed a clawed hand gently on the old man's shoulder.

"What I said to the others holds true for you as well, Father. Do not upset yourself over this. Words spoken in haste and bitterness do not hurt me," he lied.

"Well, they hurt *'me!'*" growled Father, slapping one hand on the desk top. "You're *'my'* son and I love you! How *'dare anyone'* live among us and speak to you that way. I should never have let him make his home with us."

"But Father, he did make his home here and he was entitled to as much privacy and respect for his opinions as the rest of us. We must not lose sight of what happened here. Gil Mason's transgression was not that of insulting me, but in committing a crime against another human being and almost exposing our world in the process."

Jacob listened to the gentle husky voice of his son and shook his head in amazement. "You have a remarkable capacity for forgiveness, Vincent," he replied, a little unsteadily as he stood up and held out his arms.

"If only it were always so," came the murmured response as Vincent embraced his father.

"So, he packed up and left? He accepted the decision of the Council?" Catherine sat on one of the terrace chairs and watched Vincent, as he leaned on the balcony railing and stared out over the sparkling lights of the city.

"He had no choice. It was a.... majority decision."

"Do you know where he went?"

"No."

"And you haven't come here to ask me to help him?"

"No." Catherine stood up and went to Vincent. She touched his arm and reached up to turn his face gently towards her.

"What is it, Vincent? You seem.... distracted tonight. Are you okay?"

"Yes. It is just.... unpleasant when we find it necessary to ask someone to leave our world. Father looks upon it as his own failure and... my heart echoes those feelings." Catherine ducked under his arms and positioned herself directly in front of him, her back to the railing. She slid her arms around his waist beneath his cloak and linked her fingers.

"He has only himself to blame for what's happened, Vincent. There's no way you could have excused what he did. He got exactly what he deserved."

Vincent looked down into the green eyes, so full of love and concern for him. That part of him that continually ached with the effort of being.... whatever he was.... allowed itself to be assuaged temporarily by the outpouring of love that flowed along the silken bond between himself and Catherine. He took a shuddering breath and wrapped his arms around her, holding her as if she was his anchor in a storm-tossed sea.

"Oh, Catherine!"

"What is it, Vincent? Did something happen that you're not telling me about?" He shook his head and the long strands of his mane tickled her cheeks.

"It's nothing. Forgive me. Nothing is wrong now that you are in my arms. Sometimes, Catherine, I need to hold you.... to reassure myself perhaps, that you are not just a beautiful dream in my subconscious.... that you truly are part of my life."

She pulled her head away from his chest to look up at him. "Something '*did*' happen. I know you'll tell me about it when you're ready, so I won't push you. But I'm no dream, Vincent. I'm real.... I'm here and I love you. And I'll be here for you whenever you need me.... for whatever reason and for however long it takes to make you feel good again. Okay?"

He looked down at her and, in spite of his sadness, smiled. "Okay."

"So, will you come inside now and let me '*show*' you just how much I love you?" He took a deep breath and shook his head.

"Not tonight, Catherine. I feel.... restless. I need to walk for a while. You understand?" He didn't need the bond to recognize her disappointment, but she knew him well enough not to try and force him to stay.

There was a wild part of Vincent that sometimes, when he was filled with rage or unhappiness, even she was unable to reach until he had made peace with himself. At times like those he often needed to walk the

streets and feel the cool, night air on his face.

"Yes, I understand. I'd much rather you stayed here, but I do understand. You are all right, though?"

He smiled. "Yes."

"Promise me you'll be careful. You won't go anywhere dangerous?"

"I promise. And you will come Saturday afternoon for little Amy's Naming ceremony?"

"I'll be there.... at your side." The double meaning of her words wasn't lost on Vincent and he held her tightly, gratefully.

"Until Saturday then." He bent his head to kiss her lips, and as usual the world spun dizzily for both of them. Vincent drew away, leaving Catherine panting. With a final touch of a furred finger to her cheek, he was gone.

"Until Saturday, Vincent," she murmured to the empty balcony.

With very few exceptions, the whole of the tunnel community had assembled in the Great Hall. Little Amy's parents, Matthew and Alison Cooper were great favourites with everyone, having been Helpers, individually, for some years, until they met one Winterfest, married, and approached Father for his permission and blessing on their request to move Below.

The Council convened, and with Father's recommendation, the happy couple moved into the chamber next to Kanin and Olivia, since they were the same age, and the newlyweds had told everyone they intended to try and complete their happiness with a baby as soon as possible. Mary suggested and Father agreed, that it would be nice for the two couples to be near each other. When they announced that Alison was pregnant, everyone celebrated with them.

Presents for little Amy were piled on the table, and after Father had officiated at the Naming ceremony, the formality of the occasion was abandoned and everyone clustered around, eager to see what gifts had been bestowed on the baby. Catherine had bought a tiny gold bangle, intricately decorated with songbirds, daisies and the name 'Amy'. Matching earrings for when the child was older, completed the gift from herself and Vincent, and they stood hand in hand enjoying the gasps of pleasure from the proud parents as they examined the gifts.

"Vincent, there is a definite feminine touch to your gifts, these days," smiled Alison as she reached up to hug him before turning to Catherine.

Vincent inclined his head in acknowledgement. "I confess to having help in selecting appropriate gifts now," he replied.

"But if he didn't approve of anything, it would go straight back to the store," smiled Catherine. "I would never choose anything without Vincent's complete agreement."

Matthew kissed Catherine tenderly on the cheek. "We know that, Catherine. And we all agree that Vincent is a very lucky man."

She gazed up at the tall figure beside her and automatically leaned into him. "I'm the lucky one," she said, and felt the faintest touch of his lips on her hair in response.

Eventually, the stack of presents was down to the last three and Matthew moved to help his wife, as she struggled with a package which was obviously heavy. It was about eighteen inches square and when Alison pulled aside the brown paper wrapping she turned to Vincent in surprise.

"It's for you, Vincent." He stepped forward to inspect the package.

"How can this be?" He picked up the discarded paper and examined it.

"See for yourself," said Alison. "It has Amy's name on the outside but it's very clearly addressed to you on the inner wrapping. And there's no card." Catherine joined Vincent and peered around him to read the words.

"Well," she smiled, "aren't you going to open it?" Vincent lifted the package and moved back from the table.

"Not now. This is Amy's Naming ceremony."

"Oh, go on, Vincent."

"Yes, open it, Vincent!"

"See what is is!"

He looked helplessly at Alison and Matthew as all the children called out to him, and the couple nodded happily. Everyone in the room clustered around, waiting with interest as, with an embarrassed shrug, Vincent began to remove the wrapping paper.

As he pulled the object out, there was a gasp, followed by low murmurs of outrage from the crowd. Catherine clutched his arm as Vincent stared down and saw something which filled him with loathing and unhappiness; something for which he would sacrifice almost anything never to see again; his own reflection....

The entire room waited to see what Vincent would do.

For what seemed like an eternity he simply gazed downwards, oblivious it seems to Catherine's touch and whispered, "Vincent?"

Then a strangled sound broke from his throat and he tore himself out of Catherine's grasp and raised the mirror as if to hurl it across the room, before changing his mind and striding across the Great Hall, the hated *'gift'* still dangling from his hand.

Father put out a hand to touch Vincent's arm as he passed. "Vincent, don't go. Please don't...." But his words went unheeded. In an instant, he had reached the doorway and disappeared through it.

"Someone go after him!" called Father. Several of the men started for the doorway until Catherine shouted at them.

"No! Let me; he won't listen to any of you right now!" The men turned to Father for affirmation and received his anguished nod.

"Catherine's right. He won't let any of us near him until he's calmed down." He gripped her hand as she went past him. "Help him.... don't let him.... lose himself. I'll give you some time alone and then I'll come. I need to see him too. Do you want anyone to follow you at a safe distance?"

She shook her head. "It'll be okay, Father. Don't worry." She turned to leave, then hesitated. "Who could have done this? It had to be someone who knew about Amy's Naming ceremony. But I just can't believe anyone down here could do something so cruel, to Vincent of all people."

Father shook his head in sorrow. "A sick joke perhaps.... revenge. Rest assured, Catherine, it is no one amongst us now. Now go to him.... please?"

Catherine ran from the room and headed for Vincent's chamber, praying he'd go there instinctively, although she feared that if she didn't reach him in time, he would seek solace in the Catacombs. By the time she reached her destination she was out of breath, both from running and from fear of what she'd find. She skidded to a halt in the doorway, her heart hammering in her chest.

"Vincent?"

He was standing in the centre of the room. He had his back to her so she couldn't see his expression, but his fists were tightly clenched and his shoulders rose and fell with his laboured breathing. Catherine had seen him this way many times before and it frightened her no less now. She knew he was fighting for control with every fibre of his being; fighting not to become what his tortured mind saw in his reflection. The mirror lay on the floor, the glass cracked from top to bottom.

"Vincent? I...."

"Leave me, Catherine."

"No, you have to listen to me. Vincent, someone has played a very cruel joke on you. Someone with a sick, twisted mind; someone who, for some reason, wants to hurt you. You can't allow this to destroy you. Nothing's changed."

She took a few steps into the room and tentatively reached out a hand to touch his arm. Suddenly he snarled.

His head whipped around and he grabbed her by her upper arms. She knew the fear in her heart was probably evident on her face.... fear, not for herself, but for him and what the malicious prankster had done to this beautiful, gentle, compassionate man that was her life. For all his great strength, he was so fragile in some ways; terribly vulnerable to the wounds inflicted on him so easily by a thoughtless or vicious '*human being*.' As her mind searched frantically for the right words, he bent down to pick up the broken mirror and brandished it in front of her where both their reflections stared up at them; separated by the ugly crack in the glass.

"Is '*THIS*' what you wish to spend the rest of your life looking at, Catherine!" he hissed.

"Yes!"

"This.... freak of nature! This '*MUTATION*'!" She twisted in his grip, heartwrenching sobs filling in her throat, threatening to cut off her fractured speech.

"Please d--don't talk that way, Vincent. You are no freak! You're a very special person whose goodness has changed the lives of so many people. Everyone down here respects, admires and '*loves*' you! You know that! Please, please don't let this one cruel act destroy you. Everything is exactly the same as it was before you opened that dreadful package."

His blue eyes glittered and Catherine knew her words had not had the effect she hoped. "Is it? How can you know how '*I feel*,' Catherine? How can you know what it feels like to be me? To know that there is not a soul in this world who would not recoil when they first set eyes on me. You cannot know what that feels like, Catherine! So '*GO!*' Go back to the life you had before you met me."

He forced her to look again at the mirror. "Look at those two images and tell me it is right for them to stand side by side. One can go anywhere in the world and be accepted for what it is.... beautiful.... desirable! The other...."

" '*NO!*' Don't say it! I '*KNOW*' what it feels like to be you, Vincent. I know because you're a part of me. I know because when something hurts you, it hurts me too. I'm feeling the pain in your heart now as clearly as I'm feeling my own! You know what I'm feeling, Vincent; feel it now. Let yourself feel everything I'm feeling now; the hurt.... the sorrow.... the '*love*;' the need to heal the wounds inflicted by this ... this '*evil*' person. '*Feel*' the love, Vincent.... feel the '*desire*' I have for you! '*Feel*' it!"

His face contorted in anguish and indecision. He dropped the mirror and closed his eyes, tilting his head back and shaking it from side to side, gasping for breath as his feelings met her words head on. For a few

seconds, the battle raged within him and Catherine thought she had won. Then suddenly his eyes snapped open and he glared at her.

"'NO!'" he shouted and strode from the chamber before she could stop him.

"'VINCENT!'" she screamed. "Please come back!" At the doorway, although he'd already disappeared from sight she looked only in one direction. It was mid-afternoon, and however distressed Vincent was, his basic instinct for self-preservation would not guide him to the surface. No, he would be on his way to the lower levels; the cold, dank and often dangerous caverns which led eventually to the Catacombs.

Catherine gulped. She had never negotiated the journey alone. Even when she had brought Vincent literally back from the dead that night when the beast had all but destroyed him, she'd had others to lead her to him. This time she was alone. She looked down at her high-heeled shoes and made a decision. Slipping her feet out, she left them where they lay and began to run, praying she'd catch up with him before he got too far ahead.

Every few minutes Catherine stopped and strained to listen. "Damn you, Vincent, where are you?" She ran and ran, totally lost now, realizing the futility of her flight but unwilling to stop, hoping she might just get lucky and find him if she searched long enough.

Suddenly, rounding a corner she screamed and pulled up just before she plunged over the edge of a narrow ledge overlooking a deep chasm. Terrified, she flattened herself against the rocks at her back.

"Vincent!"

He had run to ground as fox will when pursued by hounds, only for Vincent, the hounds were the demons in his mind, released by the mirror and all that it represented. Catherine's reassuring words of love filled his head until he felt it would explode, but still he ran, seeking what? Death.... oblivion.... peace. But even in death there would be no peace without her, so why was he doing this to them both?

Suddenly, terror gripped his heart like one of his own clawed hands. She was in danger! Almost as the same instant he heard her scream and whirled around to listen for the direction from which the sound came.

Perhaps it was the speed with which he turned, or the moistness of the uneven floor; or perhaps it was just his state of mind which made him unusually clumsy. Whatever the reason, Vincent stumbled as he spun around, tripped and fell; his left arm underneath him as he landed heavily on the floor. He grunted in pain as he heard and felt the bone in his wrist snap sickeningly under him. For a few seconds he stayed where he was. Then, fighting down a feeling of nausea induced by the injury, Vincent got slowly to his feet and took several deep breaths. With his right hand he lifted his injured limb and held it across his chest, securing it to his body between the laces of his vest.

Catherine! His head snapped up as he concentrated his attention on the bond. She was somewhere below him but further back. He turned and moved as quickly as possible in the direction his empathic senses led him.

After ten minutes he knew she was close by. He could feel her fear and cursed himself mentally for leading her into danger. He should have known she would follow him; she would follow him to the end of the earth if she had to. How could he have been so thoughtless.... careless of her safety? Now he had another burden to add to those already weighing so heavily on his shoulders. He moved carefully down the passage leading to the chasm. Catherine was here! He stepped forward and peered around the edge of the rock.

"Catherine!"

"Oh, thank God! Vincent, I'm scared!"

"Stretch out your right hand very slowly along the wall, but do not move towards me until I tell you." Vincent turned to face the wall and held out his right arm. She was about a foot out of reach. Gritting his teeth he placed his injured left arm across the rock wall to brace himself.

"Now, very slowly, move toward me, Catherine, and don't look down," he ordered. Her tear-stained face twisted his heart as she gazed trustingly at him. He had brought her to this. If she fell, it would destroy him too.

Her hand inched towards him. Their fingers were almost touching when, suddenly, her foot brushed against a stone and she lost her balance. With a scream of terror, she slipped over the edge of the rock shelf and clung on with both hands. Vincent gave an anguished cry and dropped to the floor on his stomach, automatically reaching down both arms to her. He grabbed her left wrist with his right hand and Catherine, secure now in the knowledge that he wouldn't let her fall, grabbed hold of his left hand and hung on for dear life. Vincent drew his breath in sharply through clenched teeth as white hot pain pulsated upwards through his arm, and pulled. Getting to one knee, he hauled her up and she fell into his arms, sobbing. Holding her tightly against his body, he rolled them away from the edge and they sat for a moment or two, just holding each other; neither one able to speak, as they recovered from the gut-churning realization that death had threatened to separate them more decisively than any misguided whim on Vincent's part.

"Forgive me, Catherine!" he panted at last. "My own self-pity led you into danger. I will have to live for the rest of my life with the knowledge that you might have been killed because of my selfishness."

She pulled back from his neck and stared at him. "You saved my life again, Vincent," she cried. "Don't torture yourself with this as well. It was my choice to follow you. I had to find you and make you understand how much I love you! You mean everything to me, Vincent.... don't you know that by now?"

He gazed into her tear-filled eyes and saw the pain of his own feelings reflected there. How could he have thought he could send her away just because he'd seen himself in a mirror? Unlike himself, she looked at him every day.... apparently '*enjoyed*' looking at him. He realized how foolish he had been, and how he had nearly destroyed them both. His velvet tones were tremulous and barely audible when he replied.

"Catherine, what would I do now.... without you in my life?"

She swiped at her tears with a shaky hand, then tenderly brushed at his own; smiling at him with so much love in those expressive green eyes that for a moment he thought he'd drown in the silky warmth of it.

"I don't know, Vincent. But you won't ever have to find out, because I'll never let you go." She took his face between her hands. "I want you to love your face, Vincent," she said. "But whether or not you ever do, doesn't make the slightest difference to me. '*I*' love it. You are beautiful; more beautiful inside.... and out, then any man I've ever seen in my life. You stir every emotion in me, Vincent. I feel things for you I've never felt before; things I never '*will*' feel for anyone else.... ever. Do you believe me?" He nodded, her words humbling him further.

"Yes."

"Good. Because I am '*freezing*' in this dress and I'd really like to go back to your chamber to warm up. In case you hadn't noticed, I don't have any shoes on either."

Vincent immediately rose and removed his cloak to place about her shoulders.

"Don't be silly, my wonderful guardian angel; it's much too long. I shall trip over it."

"Not if I carry you," he replied.... rashly, he realized as he swung her into his arms and searing shards of pain shot up his left arm and crept sickly across his neck and shoulders. He gritted his teeth and began the journey back through twisting passageways and steep rock-walled channels.

By the time they reached his chamber, Vincent was very nearly groaning aloud in agony. He set her down and gingerly drew his left arm up to cradle against his chest.

Catherine glanced at him and, for the first time, noticed his expression.

"Vincent! My God, what is it? You're as white as a sheet!" When she reached up to feel his brow and it came away damp with perspiration, she held him around the waist, her lovely face immediately registering anxiety and concern for his welfare. "Here.... sit down!"

"Hmmm." He allowed Catherine to guide him to his favourite chair and hover over him anxiously as he leaned his head back and closed his eyes.

"I ... I believe my wrist is broken," he said with difficulty, wondering now how he'd managed to carry her back.

"Why on earth didn't you tell me? My God. I pulled myself up on that arm; *'and'* you carried me all the way back here! Vincent, you are *'crazy.'* Stay right there; I'll get Father!"

"No need. I'm here." The old man came through the doorway, carrying his medical bag, a habit he had acquired more years ago than he cared to remember, after experience had taught him that ever since childhood, Vincent frequently seemed to be in need of some sort of medical attention after one of his forays Above or Below. "Thank God you're all right, Vincent."

"He isn't all right, Father, his wrist is broken. Help him, please!" Jacob sat down opposite his son and gently pried his left wrist away from his body, studying the pale, sweat-beaded face before him for signs of shock. With practiced fingers, he manipulated the hand as gently as possible but was unsurprised when Vincent appeared to hold his breath throughout the examination.

"Sorry Vincent, I realize that must have been extremely painful. Now, I have to set the bone. It's not going to be pleasant without a painkiller. What do you think?"

"I have endured worse than this, but I should be grateful if you would be as quick as you can, Father," Vincent replied.

"Very well. Do you wish Catherine to remain here?"

"I'm not leaving. If Vincent's going to be hurt, I want to be with him.... I can help him."

Father looked up and his expression softened. "Yes, I believe you probably can," he nodded. "Now, I believe you should lie down, Vincent, while I set your wrist."

"I am quite all right, Father."

"Vincent.... please. I am speaking to you as a doctor now. I should prefer you to lie down on the bed."

Giving a faint growl of exasperation, Vincent stood up and crossed to the bed where he stretched out on its welcoming softness, his feet at the pillowed end in order to allow Father easier access to his left arm.

Catherine took a pillow and placed it under his head, then linked her fingers through his right hand and held it tightly.

Vincent couldn't resist a weak smile of amusement. "Catherine, I am not about to be sawn in half. Don't look so worried."

She gave a rueful smile and gripped his hand even tighter. "Sorry, Vincent. I just can't *'imagine'* having a bone set without an anesthetic. I'd faint. I know I would."

He raised a golden eyebrow. "Well, I might too, if you continue to cut off the blood supply to my hand."

Guiltily she released the pressure on his fingers and apologized again.

"Perhaps we can begin now?" Father asked.

Catherine turned Vincent's face towards her and her eyes never left his while Father worked. Knowing her touch always soothed him she laid a hand on his chest in order to determine how much pain he was suffering by the rapidity of his heartbeat. He lay unflinching, until Father glanced meaningfully at Catherine and she nodded in understanding. Fighting back tears she kissed his fingers knowing what was coming.

As Father suddenly ground the two ends of Vincent's wrist bone together, to heal, Vincent sucked in his breath and shut his eyes. Catherine moved her fingers on his chest, stroking him through his shirt in an attempt to calm his breathing. After a moment or two Vincent opened his eyes and Catherine released a breath she hadn't even realized she was holding. Two huge tears fell on to Vincent's golden cheeks and she hurriedly released his hand to gently wipe them away.

"Thank you, Father," he murmured, as the old man squeezed his shoulder and repacked his bag. "I know that could not have been pleasant for you."

"Nor for you, my son."

Turning his head on the pillow, Vincent covered the small hand that still lay on his chest, with his own furred one. "Thank you, Catherine. Having you close is more comforting than any anaesthetic."

"God, Vincent, that was awful," she replied, her voice cracking with emotion. "I can't bear it when you're in pain."

He smiled. "Not so awful. Forgive me for causing you such worry and suffering, Catherine." At his words, she flung herself down and sobbed into his neck until he teasingly asked for a towel for them both.

An hour later, Vincent and Catherine had finished the tray of tea Mary had brought and were preparing to receive Alison and Matthew, together with other members of the community anxious to reassure themselves that Vincent had recovered from his ordeal. He greeted them from his chair, having eventually convinced his doting parent and lady love that he was not about to collapse if he stood up.

Father led them in, having elicited a promise from each one not to stay more than a few minutes. They filed in and clustered around him, some of the men shaking his good hand or squeezing his shoulder, while the women all bent to kiss or pat his cheek.

Puzzled, Vincent noticed nearly all of them had tears in their eyes. "Thank you all for coming," he said somewhat in awe of the attention he was receiving. "But you really need not have disrupted your evening. I promise you I am not badly hurt."

Rebecca stepped forward. "Vincent, I know I speak for all of us when I say this. Of course we're upset you were hurt this afternoon, but that's not the only reason we wanted to see you."

Vincent's brows creased in confusion. "What other reason brings you here?" he asked gently. Rebecca's voice quavered a little when she spoke.

"We wanted to tell you that.... whatever you may have felt today when.... well, you know...."

"Go on."

"Dammit, we *love* you, Vincent! We all love you just the way you are! We know how much you've suffered and how unhappy you are sometimes, but we want you to know how much we care.... how much you mean to us and.... how thrilled we are now that you have Catherine."

She had to stop for a moment while she tried to swallow the lump in her throat. "You ... you deserve the very best in life, Vincent. You've never had it before but we believe you do now."

She smiled across at Catherine, whose eyes were brimming with tears along with everyone else in the room. "And if she ever hurts you.... well, she'll have all of us to deal with."

Vincent looked slowly around his chamber. Everyone was nodding their agreement, and as Rebecca stepped forward to hug him, he felt something constrict in his throat and a glow of warmth spread through his chest, so strongly that he was unable to say a word in response. Rather than embarrass him further, his friends and family left him alone once more with Catherine and Father. For a moment, the three of them sat in silence.

Then Father cleared his throat as if to try out his voice to make sure it wasn't going to betray him when he spoke. "Well, er.... I'll leave you and Catherine alone," he muttered. He stepped up to Vincent's chair and gently pulled his son's head against him, caressing the amber strands. "See you in the morning, Vincent. Make sure you get some rest. Goodnight. Goodnight, Catherine."

Vincent covered the hand Father had rested on the arm of the chair. "Thank you, Father. I will see you tomorrow."

"Goodnight, Father." Catherine kissed the old man on the cheek and he limped from the chamber.

It was very quiet after he'd gone. Vincent looked up at Catherine and held out his hand. She took it and lowered herself carefully to sit on his lap. Putting her arm around his shoulders, she leaned her forehead against his.

"How are you feeling?"

"There are no words, Catherine."

"Try to tell me."

He sighed and slid his right arm around her waist, stroking her ribcage gently. "I never realized.... I truly never realized how much light there was in my life."

"Whoever pulled that cruel stunt on you, Vincent, he was the loser, because I guarantee you, his life isn't filled with love the way yours is."

"I believe I know who it was, Catherine, and you are right. He is a very bitter, sad man with no one in his life. I am blessed with true friends, a loving family.... and you. You most of all."

She began to kiss him then, beginning with his forehead, moving on to his eyes, then the soft golden hair on his nose and cheeks.

Pulling back for a moment, she looked deep into his eyes. "Have I told you today how much I love you?"

He smiled. "I believe you did.... more than once."

"Oh. You don't want to hear it again then?"

"Catherine, every time I hear you say those words, it is like a miracle to me." He assumed a most un-Vincent-like *'little-lion-lost'* look. "Tell me again?"

"I love you. I adore you. I'll never leave you. Is that okay for now?"

He tilted his head slightly and whispered. "When the darkness threatens to close in on me, Catherine.... you light up my life.... you give me hope to carry on."

Almost before he had finished speaking, she turned her attention to the exotic mouth she found so desirable, and as their lips met, Catherine felt the strangest sensation. If she hadn't known better she would have sworn that the chair had dropped away beneath them; leaving her to whirl dizzily around in a void where there was nothing but Vincent....

He consumed her.... the feel of him and the fragrance of him.... the touch of his hair feathering her face as

he surrounded her with the whole of his sensual masculinity. Catherine felt as if she was drowning in it. And it was a feeling so powerful, it excited every nerve in her system until she never wanted to be anywhere else but in his arms for the rest of her life.

END