

G-I-Z-M-O SPELLS TROUBLE

by Christine Cunningham

Mouse was up to something and no one had a clue as to why he had taken to raiding the kitchen at every opportunity. Even after taking an inventory, William could find nothing missing.

"Man, oh man, that boy is crazier than his raccoon. What is he up to?"

The rest of the community paid little attention to the idiosyncrasies of Mouse, they were used to his odd ways, even if they could not understand them.

Father patted William's shoulder and said, "Mouse is like a magpie, William. You know that. Anything that's bright and shiny, he takes. Takes, not steals, mind you. He's probably making a gizmo, which more than likely has no useful purpose and won't work anyway. Leave him be."

Down in the deeper levels, far away from the other tunnel dwellers, Mouse scampered to his chamber, loaded down with things he had *'taken'* from the kitchen. He busied himself, sorting through his finds, putting aside what he needed for his latest invention. Anyone coming to this chamber would think it was an eyesore, but to Mouse it was home and everything in it was useful for making things. There wasn't a spare piece of space anywhere. Every available surface was littered with pieces of wire, rope, broken pots and pans and stacks of *'How to'* magazines. It was the only reading he was interested in.

Arthur, on seeing Mouse return, began chittering in welcome. No one knew where the raccoon had come from, but his presence was tolerated because he had been the only thing Mouse would allow near him in the early days.

Mouse searched through his *'How to'* magazines. "Here somewhere, know it is. Ah! Found it. Okay good, Okay fine." Smoothing down the crumpled pages, he began to work on his best gizmo yet.

Vincent was bored. There was no work that needed his attention in the tunnels. He didn't feel like it even if there was, and the children had no school, it was the holidays. Some of the Helpers had taken several of them to a sort of summer camp for two weeks and the rest would go when they returned. So all in all, it was a very quiet time.

Rare were the times when Vincent became bored, but when it happened, he came to hate the enforced confinement of his world during the daytime. The nights could never come quick enough, because then he could go Above, to Catherine, and breathe fresh air, but even that could be frustrating as well as pleasurable. Due to the heat Above, he had taken to wearing as little as he could get away with, and now he could feel so much more acutely the contours of Catherine's body when he held her. Just the thought of it brought life to his loins.

Catherine was already waiting when he arrived. "Vincent, I thought you'd never get here." Her eyes travelled over him greedily; there was so much more to see now.

He'd discarded his cloak and sat down on the patio chair facing her, his shirt open at the neck, revealing a wide expanse of hairy chest, which her fingers itched to touch. He caught the way she watched him so avidly and marvelled that he could still feel some embarrassment at the scrutiny, but he got his revenge by caressing her with eyes that burned wherever they looked.

His throaty whisper floated across the distance separating them. "Pour the wine, Catherine."

She glided toward him, her flimsy gown almost transparent in the candlelight, giving him a tantalizing glimpse of a body which moved perfectly in tune with his when they made love. Leaning across him, she reached for the bottle, which was now properly chilled and her breasts crushed against his shoulder, making him swallow convulsively.

"Why do we do this to each other, Catherine? This pleasure and this pain?"

She knew exactly what he meant. How could she not? "Because it's all part of the game, Vincent. Savouring the anticipation until we can bear to be apart another moment. Delicious, isn't it?"

Sensuous fingers danced their way down his cheek, lingering on the nape of his neck and he trembled with the force of feelings she was creating in him. As always happened, the wine never did make it to the glasses.

The candles were snuffed out and the balcony was left deserted as Vincent lifted her in his arms and strode purposely inside. Once there, he let her slide sinuously down the length of his body, until she was standing on her own two feet.

"Delicious torment, Catherine, but my limit has been reached. I can wait for you no longer," he purred. His hands slid the bootlace straps off her shoulders and the silk negligee slithered down her body to land in a frothy pool on the floor. Catherine heard his sharp intake of breath and the sound fuelled her own desires to fever pitch. She was glad he wasn't wearing the usual layers of clothing, she doubted she could have borne the wait. As it was, all she needed to do was lift the shirt over his head and he was bared to the waist.

"Oh! Vincent, you really are magnificent." Her hands fumbled with the buckle on his pants, at last freeing him into her waiting hands.

"Please Catherine, stop, or it will be over before it starts," he groaned. "You have too much magic in those dainty fingers. Come lay with me.

She reluctantly released him and allowed herself to be led to the bed, where she sat on the edge and helped him remove the rest of his clothes.

Naked at last, he gently pushed her back and lay beside her, taking deep breaths to dull the passion which was threatening to overtake him. He intended to make sure that she received all the pleasure he was capable of giving her. She deserved no less.

He began by idly tracing the outline of her body with his fingertips, from the top of her head all the way down to her toes, and then working his way back with soft butterfly kisses; her ankles, the soft undersides of her knees, which made her squirm with pleasure.

"I think you've found a new erogenous zone," she panted.

Vincent was intent on his upward journey and only gave her words scant attention. The scent that was her, filled his senses and he craved more. Her smooth, gleaming thighs became his next destination and he gently nudged them apart with his nose, his intention plain. He kissed the soft insides of her upper legs, his lips moving inexorably higher until Catherine felt his tongue graze the inner folds of flesh which was the core of her femininity.

"Oh! Vincent, please!" she gasped, desperately trying to hold onto reality, when all he was doing to her made her want to surrender to the sensation. This intimacy was something she had never allowed with a man before. To her, it was the ultimate intimacy, which could only be shared with a lifetime mate, and she was glad she had waited for Vincent. He was her mate for life. The pleasure he was bestowing on her was indescribably tender and she wanted it to last. Her hands bunched the sheets and her breathing became ragged. Vincent instinctively sensed she was on the edge and looked up, his leonine face glistening with the

dew of her.

"Please, Vincent. Let me touch you. Let me give you what you have given me. What only you can give me."

He kissed his way across her stomach and higher to her breasts, where he suckled first one nipple, and then the other. He loved doing this, it made him think of a child of theirs, taking sustenance from her.

Catherine's connection to Vincent was always stronger when they made love and she picked up his thoughts almost immediately and her heart melted. "One day, it will be so, my love," she whispered, moved to tears that he had imagined the possibility of a child from their union.

Vincent moved up to her mouth and hovered there, just a whisper away. "I love to kiss you, Catherine. Sometimes it is enough. Do you know what I mean?"

Of course she knew. "I know. Sometimes, what we feel for each other is so overwhelming that we have to hold on tight or burn up."

His lips touched hers fleetingly at first, then again and again until her mouth flowered and opened to allow him entry. She could taste herself on his mouth and her tongue snaked inside to taste all the more. Her hands spread across his back, kneading, searching out the places she knew would drive him mad with passion. Lower she went until she felt his buttocks clench at her first touch.

"Catherine, Catherine," he breathed into her mouth.

She pushed at his shoulders to roll him onto his back and then she began her assault on his body. No part of him was safe from her wandering hands and he was powerless to stop her, even if he was crazy enough to want to. He was gripped in a passion only she could assuage. His nipples, even though hidden in a forest of hair, did not escape and she tormented them between her teeth, until she felt Vincent writhe beneath her.

"Now you know how it feels, my love," she crooned.

Even his navel was given equal time, her tongue darting in and out, which made him laugh, and even the sound of laughter was erotic. Moving ever downwards, her lips finally encountered the tip of his engorged flesh. Moaning softly, Catherine kissed and licked the length of him and then took him fully into her mouth. Vincent bucked involuntarily under her ministrations and he watched as she savoured every pulsating inch. To him, the knowledge of her total acceptance of his *'otherness'* was something he thanked God for and knowing it, he truly would not change his state with kings.

He desperately needed to be inside her, to give her every cell of his being, to show her that it was where he belonged, now and forever. Deep within her was home to him. Drawing her away from him, he whispered, "Now, Catherine."

The look in his eyes told her he could hold on no longer, so crawling up his body, she lay full length on top of him so that every part of them touched. Vincent rolled over, trapping her beneath him. Supporting himself on his elbows, he looked deep into her passion-drenched eyes and said, "Know that everything I am is yours, and know that everything I do, is for you, for our dream."

Keeping his eyes locked on hers, he slowly, so excruciatingly slowly, entered her body and he felt her blossoming for him, opening like a rose to the sun.

Catherine raised her legs and he sank even deeper within her. He no longer worried about hurting her, so he was able to lose himself to pure sensation without fear. "Harder, Vincent, deeper. Oh! Please!" Her hands and body urged him on and her nails scoured his back in a frenzy of unleashed passion. The moment of fulfillment came simultaneously, lending them wings to soar into heaven, if only for a moment. Vincent collapsed on top of her, satiated, exhausted and totally hers.

Catherine's last thought before sleep overtook her was that there was a world of difference between sex

and making love. Sex without love was a fleeting thing at best, but making love with the one you love, encompassed everything that really mattered. They were truly one.

Apart from meal times and work duties, Mouse kept to his chamber, every moment, working on his gizmo and when it was finished, he tried it out on himself. It took his breath away, but after two or so more times, he found it to be a very pleasant experience, which got better and better. '

Show Vincent first,' he thought. *'Vincent, best friend.'*

"Anyone seen Mouse?" asked Father. No one had and he gave an exasperated sigh. "That boy has no sense of time. He promised me faithfully he'd be here to help move all this." *'All this'* was Father's overflow of books. He had spent weeks cataloguing them all, as it had been decided at the last Council meeting to make a proper library for the use of everyone. A chamber had been carved out for the purpose and Mouse was supposed to help move the books to their new home.

Vincent, glad for something to do, said, "I will go and find him, Father. We can do it together." He disappeared through the chamber entrance and Father watched him go with a sadness in his eyes. At times like this he realized the full extend of Vincent's limitations Below. Having nothing to do and not being able to go Above as the others could, must be so frustrating for him, and he was, at last, grateful for Catherine. Each time Vincent came back from seeing her, his spirits were lifted.

Nothing had been said, but Father knew their relationship had progressed to the physical stage and his concerns about what that might mean appeared to be unfounded, so if and when the subject ever came up, he would be happy to give them his blessing.

He came back to the present with a start. "This won't do. The books won't move themselves," and he began to pack away the precious tomes. "They will look good in the library. I should have done this years ago."

Vincent reached Mouse's chamber and called out. "Mouse! Are you here? Father is waiting for you to move the books to the library. Did you forget the time?"

Arthur, the raccoon chattered a welcome and Vincent moved further into the room, shaking his head at the way Mouse lived. Father would have a dozen fits if he could see it, but fortunately, hardly anyone came here, because it was so far away from the rest of the community, which was how Mouse liked it. He was a loner at heart.

"Vincent, is that you? Are you alone?" Mouse whispered. "Got a secret. Want to see?"

Vincent was intrigued by the conspiratorial tone and came fully into the chamber.

"Shhhh! Over here," said Mouse. "Try this. It's good." He handed him a cup of some evil looking liquid and Vincent raised one eyebrow suspiciously. Mouse giggled. "Go on, Vincent."

Raising the cup to his lips, Vincent took a large gulp, hoping he wouldn't be poisoned in the process and swallowed. His eyes smarted and his breath was stolen from his throat. His mouth burned and he looked at Mouse in abject horror. He tried to speak, but nothing would come.

Mouse was laughing. "Good, yes? Better than good. Want more?" and he filled the cup to the brim.

Now that the initial shock had passed, Vincent could feel the warmth spreading through his body. He took the cup and tried another sip. "Hmmm, it's not too bad after a while. What did you use?"

Mouse scooted over so Vincent could sit down and he pulled out his *'How to'* magazine to explain how his gizmo worked. "Used potato skins. Worked fine. Try rice next."

Vincent could hardly believe it, but Mouse had made a still. The thought of illicit hooch should have alarmed

him, but the more he thought about it, the more hilarious it seemed. "Mouse, do you realize what you have here?" he laughed. "You've got bootleg liquor. It's illegal."

Mouse didn't understand any of that. What did it matter anyway. It tasted good. "Legal, not legal," he shrugged. "Mouse likes it and so does Vincent. Our secret."

Time went by and Father's library was forgotten by both of them. They were having a wonderful time and Mouse was happy that Vincent liked his secret. The bottles were being emptied at an alarming rate and they were both as drunk as skunks.

At the back of Vincent's mind came the thought that they really should not be doing this, but he was having so much fun. "Mouse.... hic! I think we've had.... hic!.... enough." The room was beginning to sway and Mouse could see two Vincents, which he found hysterically funny.

"Which is real Vincent.... hic? Oh! All gone.... Okay good.... hic!.... Okay fine. Make more. No.... hic.... problem."

Vincent tried to stand up but his legs wouldn't support him and he crashed in a heap on the floor and they laughed and laughed, trying in vain to help each other upright.

Father sat in his chamber, surrounded by boxes of books and fumed. "First Mouse, now Vincent. Where the devil are they?"

Mary came by, heard his mutterings and went to see what was wrong. "Having problems, Father?" she asked.

He looked up and grumbled. "All day I've been packing these books. All day mind you, and Mouse should have been here to help. Vincent went off looking for him and now he's disappeared. It's been hours."

Mary asked. "Do you think they might be in trouble? Maybe we should send out a search party for them."

Father shook his head. "No, Mary. I don't believe they are in trouble. I think they are just playing hookey. You know how bored Vincent has been lately and I would hazard a guess that he and Mouse have gone exploring somewhere, and forgotten the time. I don't mind really, but what am I supposed to do with this lot in the meantime?"

Mary shook her head and said, "Come on. You and I can make a start and I'll get some of the others to help."

Taking a box each they began the short walk to the new library. "We are getting too old for this, Mary," puffed Father.

She sniffed. "You speak for yourself," she retorted.

Catherine made her way home after a lousy day at work. The air conditioning had given up the ghost by 11 a.m and tempers had risen steadily throughout the day. Joe Maxwell had it coming after what he had put her through today. Only the thought of a cold shower had kept her going, and she'd started a headache, which didn't seem to belong to her. Weird.

Shutting the door to the apartment, she trailed damp pieces of clothing all the way to the shower. Turning the faucet to '*cold*', she stepped inside the cubicle and gasped as the full force of cold water streamed over her heated body.

"Ohh, bliss!" she moaned.

She stayed in there until goose bumps stood up on her skin, and then with a slight shiver, turned off the water and wrapped herself in a fluffy pink towel, using a smaller one to towel her hair. Searching through her closet, she pulled out a white cotton dress which she hadn't worn in ages, mainly because it wasn't exactly the height of fashion, being very, very short, whereas the trend now was for long skirts. Not caring one whit about fashion, she slipped it on and surveyed herself critically in the full length mirror.

"You've still got the legs, Chandler. Wonder what Vincent will make of this?" She smiled wickedly at the thoughts going through her head. Feelings of last night were still fresh and a repeat was not out of the question, was it?

Picking up a lacy white shawl, Catherine Chandler left the apartment to go Below and play the *'femme fatale'*. Poor Vincent. He wouldn't know what hit him, especially in his condition. Would he even be able to rise to the occasion?

Vincent and Mouse finally managed to stagger to their feet and make their way to Father's chamber. Along the way, Mouse started to sing some nonsense song he made up as he went. Vincent joined in with his own words and the result was not unlike a choir of tom cats on the prowl. The sound carried through the tunnels to reach the ears of the community, who wondered what kind of animal could make such dreadful noises.

Elizabeth saw them first. They had somehow taken a wrong turn and ended up in the Painted Tunnels. "Not Father's chamber.... hic!"

Vincent's shoulders shook with mirth. "Back up, Mouse," he slurred. "Promised Father help with the library."

Elizabeth stood stock still, her brush dripping paint, as she observed the swaying movements of the men in front of her. If she didn't know better, she would swear they were drunk.

Vincent made a gallant effort and performed a very dramatic bow in her general direction. "Please forgive the intrusion. We will take our leave now.... hic!" The courtly speech was almost perfect, except for the unfortunate hiccup at the end. He pressed a hand to his mouth and smiled sheepishly.

Mouse leaning against the wall, was very impressed with Vincent's bow and attempted to copy it. But it didn't come off very well because he giggled all the while, saying, "Sorry.... hic! Mouse sorry."

Turning around, they both tried to exit the entrance together and got stuck. "Move Mouse," said Vincent.

His companion shook his head. "Mouse here first, Vincent move."

Elizabeth couldn't help it, she couldn't hold back the laughter. They really were drunk and there was sure to be trouble.

"Where did you get the alcohol, Vincent?"

Mouse put his finger to his lips and looked all around. "Shhhh! Secret."

She shook her head and felt it only fair to warn them of the trouble they were going to be in when Father found out. It was enough to wipe the silly grins off their faces, but not for long. They were in a drunken haze that felt too good to worry about trouble. They looked at each other and then as one, shrugged their shoulders and left to continue the journey. Elizabeth was a solitary person, rather like Mouse, but the urge to follow them was irresistible. Vincent drunk! Hard to believe, but then, one should try everything once.

"Lord, but they will suffer in the morning."

They took an age to get back on the right path, what with one step forward and two steps back. They were giggling all the time and Mouse kept saying, "Shhhh," to no one in particular. Elizabeth, following at a discreet distance, had never heard Vincent giggle. She doubted anyone had. He always appeared much too

dignified for such frivolity, but the sound she heard was pleasant to her ears.

Vincent stopped suddenly and Mouse crashed into his back. "Hey," he was heard to shout; then looking around. "Shhhh."

Through the fog that his mind had become, Vincent felt Catherine on her way to him and he was just about able to pick up what she had in mind. A moronic grin split his lips, baring his fangs and, to those that did not know him, it looked more like a prelude to an attack than a grin.

"Come on, Mouse.....hic! The light of my life is coming and....." his voice dropped to a sexy whisper, ".....I think I've got a present." He snickered as he said it.

It was still very light Above, being only 7:30 p.m, so Catherine kept a cautious lookout as she walked through Central Park towards the tunnels. Several wolf whistles followed her progress and she spread her arms wide, laughing out loud with the sheer joy of everything being right with her two worlds. Her connection to Vincent was not as forceful as his was to her, but since they had become lovers, its power was increasing and she could feel what he was feeling more often now. She was light-headed and for a moment felt dizziness overtake her. She stopped walking and took a deep breath.

"Phew, that was weird."

Putting one foot forward, she found she was having difficulty walking a straight line. Her brow wrinkled thoughtfully. She didn't feel alarmed at her predicament, but rather thought it was funny.

"This is weird. it isn't me, so it must be him. What is he playing at?"

He was not in any danger, that much she did know, but her connection was not yet strong enough for her to figure it out.

Vincent and Mouse lurched unsteadily into Father's chamber and attempted to walk down the spiral iron staircase, which proved almost suicidal. Two steps down, Mouse lost his balance and grasping desperately at a swaying Vincent, only succeeded in pulling them both off balance and they bumped and slithered to the bottom landing in an ungainly heap.

Father and Mary were on their way back for more boxes when they heard the crash. Looking at each other in alarm, they hurried to the chamber, whereupon they found the hapless duo in a tangle of arms and legs on the floor. All concerned, they rushed forward to help.

"What happened? Are you hurt?" they asked in unison.

Vincent grinned up at them. "S'all right, tripped up.... hic!"

Father frowned, looking from one to the other. "Mouse, what happened here?"

He giggled involuntarily, more from nerves than anything else. "Mouse tripped..... hic! Vincent's fault." To which Vincent's jaw dropped at such a blatant lie.

"Liar!"

"Not."

"Are too!"

"Are not!"

Truth dawned very slowly for Father and Mary.

"Surely not!" she said in disbelief.

Father found it doubly hard to believe, especially of Vincent, who rarely drank anything stronger than herbal tea, so he placed the blame squarely on Mouse. The rising anger emanating from him penetrated the bickering going to and fro between Vincent and Mouse and they stared up with sheepish eyes, hoping against hope to placate Father with pleading little-boy-lost looks. Mary saw what they were about and had to turn away to stifle the laughter rising in her throat.

"I want to know right now, Mouse, where you got the alcohol and Lord help you, if I find you've raided the wine chamber and drunk the '48. So help me, a year's silence won't be punishment enough. Do you understand me?"

A sober Mouse would have run for his life, but a drunken Mouse felt as bold as a lion. "Secret. Won't tell.... hic! Shhhh!"

Father was almost apoplectic with fury. "What did you say? Vincent, you will answer me this minute. I demand to know."

Vincent knew the game was up. "Potato skins," he said truthfully. "Not as s-m-o-o-t-h as the '48, but plat... plata... hic! Drinkable!"

This was getting ridiculous. "Potato skins? What are you babbling on about?" shouted an exasperated Father.

Mouse, unable to keep the pride out of his voice, spilled the beans. "Gizmo best yet. Vincent liked it.... hic! Wanna see?"

Father pieced together the garbled information and the conclusion he came to made him raise his hands and groan. "I give up. I just give up!"

Mary crossed to his side and helped him into his chair. "What is it?" she asked.

Father rolled his eyes heavenwards. "He's only gone and made a still! Bootleg liquor, Mary! Dear God, it's a wonder they haven't scrambled their brains. Potato skins. Can you believe that boy?" A fleeting thought took hold. "What a pity his other gizmos don't work as well as this one clearly does."

Elizabeth was standing at the top of the iron staircase taking it all in. If she knew Father, he would endeavour to keep this little escapade a secret from the others and that would never do. Smiling to herself, she turned back to the tunnels, her mind skipping ahead to a perfect all on which to record this episode for posterity.

"Well, we can't leave them like that. Black coffee, I think," said Mary.

"Humph! If I had my way, I'd leave them there, but I don't want this getting out and Mouse is going to have to dismantle that still before anyone finds out about it. Oh, Mary! Who'd be a Father?"

Catherine was walking along the tunnels to Vincent's chamber, anticipation humming through her veins like champagne. Just thinking about what she was planning on doing to Vincent, in that wonderfully large bed, made her warm and wet with desire. Breaking into a run, she covered the last hundred yards in record time, only to be disappointed at not finding him there. She crossed to the bed and arranged herself into a provocative pose and lay back, awaiting his return, but his return was less than romantic. He was half-dragged, half-carried by William, with a disgruntled Father following behind. The first Catherine heard was Vincent in full song. God, it was horrendous. Talk about tone deaf! *'something tells me a night of lust is shot to hell,'* she thought, putting two and two together.

Vincent raised his head and caught a glimpse of smooth, gleaming thigh and he grinned. "Light of my ... hic

... life, I am here. Your prince has returned to claim his prize... hic!"

Catherine's eyes widened at the sight of her *'Prince'* and she snorted. "Huh! Some prince. The only prize you're likely to get is the mother of all headaches."

He caught her tone and put on his most melting look. "She walks in beauty ... hic... like the night of..."

She stopped him mid-sentence. "And you can quit that too, Vincent Wells. Get him on the bed, William."

Father limped in and promptly passed the buck to her without the slightest twinge of guilt. "He's as drunk as a skunk and your responsibility. How does it go? In sickness and in health, for better - for worse. Well, young lady, you've had the better, now you get the worse, and you have my heartfelt sympathy."

"Oh, gee. Thanks a bunch. You're too kind," she threw back.

Vincent lay half on and half off the bed and struggled to sit upright. His brain told him what to do, but his body refused to cooperate.

"Catherine," he whined, "I can't get up... hic!"

She stood, hands on slender hips, glaring at him. "Serves you right!" Even drunk he still looked adorable and she was having a hard time staying mad. "Vincent, what am I going to do with you?"

He waggled his eyebrows suggestively and she had to laugh.

"No way, Jose. In your state, it's a wonder you can raise your eyebrows, let alone anything else," and she lowered her eyes to that part of his body which had now gone to sleep and wouldn't wake up, even for her. She sighed in resignation and turned her attention to Father and William, who had heard the conversation, if the pinkness suffusing Father's cheeks was anything to go by.

Clearing her throat she asked, "How did it happen? I've never seen him like this before."

Having passed responsibility to her, Father began to see the funny side. "Mouse made a gizmo that worked rather too well. He made a still, can you believe it? God knows how much they put away. I'll leave you to it. I've got to sort out Mouse. He's just as bad. And you can tell Vincent from me, that neither of them are going to get off lightly. I nearly had a cardiac, carting those books and I'm not letting them forget it in a hurry. Come on, William."

Catherine turned back to Vincent who was watching her warily. "You'll protect me, Catherine... hic! Say you will. Come over here, I'm lonely without you," he slurred.

"Oh, shut up!" she sputtered.

She was fighting a losing battle against laughter. Vincent being a naughty boy was another side of his nature she had to assimilate. It made her think of other times in his childhood when he must have got up to mischief like any other child. She must remember to ask Father about it. *'I bet he did things that would make my hair curl,'* she thought.

Going back to the bed, she muttered. "There's nothing I'd like better, but you are literally not up to it!"

He slumped back against the pillows, the truth of her statement finally penetrating his drink-sodden brain and as he lay there, he suddenly had the strangest feeling. "Catherine, stand still, will you, you're making my head spin. Ooohhh!" he groaned.

"It's not me, Vincent. You're starting to sober up, that's all. Try to get some sleep." She smoothed several strands of hair from his face. "You are going to feel terrible in the morning."

He didn't look too good now. Vincent closed his eyes. "Don't leave me," he mumbled. Very soon, the even sound of his breathing told Catherine he was deeply asleep.

"Poor baby," she crooned. "I bet you won't do this again in a hurry."

Catherine woke up about 6:30 the next morning and seeing Vincent was still asleep, decided to leave him be. After a quick wash and running a comb through her hair, she made her way to the kitchen, looking forward to William's steaming porridge. She was starving, having eaten nothing the night before.

After the '*good morning*' greetings, she found a place to sit. There was only William, Pascal, Jamie, Mary and Father. The children that were left Below were asleep and of Mouse there was no sign.

"I've left him to sleep it off, Father."

He looked across the top of his mug. "Humph! That will never do. William, go and fetch him. His breakfast will get cold."

Catherine saw the look that passed between them and realized what they were about. They wouldn't, would they? Father was the picture of innocence, sitting there, drinking his tea.

They all heard the roar, which was cut off mid-stream and William appeared back in the safety of his kitchen in double-quick time. "Man, you ain't gettin; me to do that again. No way."

Father just smiled. "You have your breakfast, William. I'll see to Vincent's."

The object of the discussion stumbled through the entrance holding his head in his hands, lest it should fall off his shoulders, and gingerly sat down at the table. There were little gremlins hammering inside his head. He knew there was and it was all William's fault. He cast a resentful glare across to him and attempted a growl, but it hurt too much. Lord, even his teeth and hair hurt.

"Good morning, Vincent!" Father bellowed. "I hope you slept well." Vincent cringed and held his head harder. "You must be ravenous, so I did extra," and he banged down the most enormous plate of bacon, eggs and fried bread, just swimming in grease. "There you go, get that inside you. Breakfast is the most important meal of the day, you know."

Everyone sat there waiting to see what Vincent would do. He smelled it before he saw it and his stomach lurched uncomfortably. Opening his eyes he looked down and what he saw turned his face a sickly shade of green and his stomach finally rebelled. Staggering to his feet, knocking over the chair in the process, he clapped a hand over his mouth and ran.

Satisfied, Father resumed his place at the table and nonchalantly picked up his mug to tea. "Well now. That should cure him, don't you think?" he asked of no one in particular.

Mary was smiling. "Yes, Jacob. I should think that would cure anybody. Ugh! Just look at that plate. I feel somewhat queasy myself."

Jamie was falling apart, laughing. "Poor Vincent. Do we have to go through all that again with Mouse? I can't stand it," and she held her stomach, tears of mirth running down her face.

Catherine thought they were being rather unkind and was about to defend her Vincent, when the other half of the duo make his appearance in the kitchen, looking for all the world as though nothing untoward had happened the previous day.

"Late, Mouse sorry." He squeezed in between Catherine and Mary and then spotted the breakfast Vincent had left. "Mouse thanks William," and to the astonishment of everyone, proceeded to wolf down the congealed greasy mess as though he hadn't eaten for a week. Using the last slice of bread he mopped the plate clean. "Stuffed. Good. Better than good. Got to go. Work to do," and he was out of the kitchen like a whirlwind.

Father shrugged philosophically. "Hoist by my own petard. Ah well, one out of two isn't bad." Changing the subject he began discussing the day's duties and Catherine was able to leave the table.

"Excuse me," she said and went to find her errant lover. Pascal followed her out, his grin letting them know that the pipes would soon be singing about this escapade.

Catherine found him in his chamber towelling his hair dry. Walking towards him, she said, "did the shower help? You look a bit better around the gills."

He felt awful and the worst of it was he couldn't remember a damn thing. He was ashamed to ask, but he had to know. "Catherine, what did I do? What did I say? The last I remember was sitting with Mouse drinking some noxious brew."

She was sorely tempted to tease him in revenge for her disappointment the previous night, but looking into his pleading eyes, she could do no less than tell the truth. "You got roaring drunk, excuse the pun, and Father was none too pleased I can tell you. From all accounts you really put some away. That stuff rots your brain cells and leaves you nine cents short of a dollar. If you want to get loaded, Vincent, use the vintage, please."

She laughed suddenly. "I think you've copped Mouse's hangover as well. He came breezing into the kitchen, sat down and ate that revolting breakfast. He cleared the plate, honest."

He felt his stomach roll again. "Oh, don't! Please, don't!" Just thinking about that evil, disgusting excuse for a meal made him want to throw up. Putting his hand on his heart he said, "I promise I will never do it again. The after effects are unbearable."

She hugged him to her. "Never mind, Vincent. Go back to bed and sleep. And when you wake up, you can have your present. How does that sound?"

Laying carefully back on the pillows, he mumbled, "Sounds like heaven to me." His last thought before sleep claimed him was, he'd suffer any torment if he knew he could be inside Catherine at the end. It was where he belonged.

While Vincent slept, Mouse was on the receiving end of a severe dressing down by Father. "What am I going to do about you, Mouse? Don't you know you could have poisoned yourself, not to mention Vincent. He's got a terrible hangover and he's having to sleep it off. That still will have to be dismantled immediately. Do I make myself clear?"

Mouse really wished he had a hangover too, whatever that was, then he would be asleep like Vincent and escape Father's anger. It wasn't fair. "Mouse is sorry, but gizmo worked fine. Father says always try your best and Mouse did, so why angry?"

Father was defeated by his simple logic. In Mouse's eyes he did nothing wrong. How could he make him understand? "Look Mouse, your gizmo was very clever and it worked fine, but it was the wrong kind of gizmo to make. There are lots of other things you could make for us, which would be of more use. Why don't you go and fetch your 'How to' books and we can find a really useful gizmo for you to build for all of us. How does that sound?"

Mouse still didn't really understand what he was supposed to have done wrong, but he recognized an 'out' when he saw one and grabbed it with both hands. "Okay, good. Okay, fine," and he disappeared out of the chamber, relieved that all would be well again. He would go and cheer up Vincent later.

Catherine and Mary strolled into Father's chamber just in time to catch the tail end of the conversation with Mouse and they smiled at each other.

Catherine hugged him. "I'm glad you weren't too hard on Mouse. Besides, we all had a good laugh out of it,

except Vincent, perhaps."

Father did feel a tad sorry about the breakfast debacle. "How Mouse could have actually eaten that mess defies all logic. I was a bit unkind, I know, but I think Vincent has learned his lesson and with a bit of luck, maybe I can channel Mouse's enthusiasm in a more productive way in future."

Mary laughed out loud. "Who says nothing ever happens down here? It's a laugh a minute. Remember the time when Vincent and Devin set fire to William's kitchen.....?"

But that's another story.

END