

THE GIFT

by Debbie Ristick

He had a secret. This simple knowledge gave Vincent a keen sense of satisfaction as he leisurely strolled the golden-hued tunnels towards the sub-basement of Catherine's apartment building. He had an appointment to keep - a date of sorts, and this secret was the reason he went. It's mystery made him smile as he thought of the sacrifices she'd been called upon to make during the past many weeks - sacrifices that she had made with no complaint, and no hesitation.

Stopping before the Spiral Staircase, he bowed his head, the golden tresses of hair falling forward to hide blue eyes suddenly filled with pain. The agony of those weeks still haunted him sometimes, prevented him from sleeping or concentrating, made him appreciate what he had in his life more now than ever before.

"Catherine," he breathed, the secret he kept from her becoming even more important. Her devotion had humbled him. Her courage unmanned him. Her love... well, her love overwhelmed him as he lost himself, her daring that had kept him from losing the battle he waged. She'd stood by him, supported him - even after what he'd done because of Paracelsus' evil.

The alchemist's image appeared before Vincent, taunting, mocking, and mysterious. Paracelsus' impersonation of Father had driven him nearly to the depths of insanity, pushing him far beyond his usual endurance. And, to make matters worse, John Pater's association with the reporter Bernie Spirko had almost meant the end of the world in which he lived.

Yet, after all the suffering, after the despair and fear and insanity, the happiness surrounding him could not be measured. He saw the world through different eyes, with a new attitude, and it all came back to Catherine, to the things she said, did, and most of all, felt. She loved this world as much, if not more, than she did her own. She cared for the people here as though they were her family - and they were her family now, he sighed. Since the death of her father several months ago, she had gradually begun to spend more and more time Below, participating in Council meetings, concerts, social events, and anything else she found interested her. He knew she loved this place, but he also knew she spent this time Below to be near him.

Since his battle with Paracelsus, and the subsequent encounter with his darker side, Catherine worried about him, fretted over him. She needed to see him, touch him, assure herself that he was well. She wanted to be near in case he lost the tenuous hold he maintained on his fragile sanity, to give him her strength.

Starting to climb the stairs before him, Vincent shook his head. They had endured much, both of them, and life was too precious to do nothing about it while you had the chance. And these thoughts led him back to his secret.

How could he tell her of his love for her? How could he allow feelings that should be bottled up inside him entry into a world where they had no hope of survival? What would his decision cost him in anguish?

He wanted to do something for Catherine, give her something very special - something he alone could give her. *But what?* He'd searched his mind constantly, besieging himself and his heart for what it could be, and today, while reading over his journal, the perfect gift had revealed itself from the pages. She asked so little of him, but, he smiled to himself, she wished for so much more.

He decided to grant her request, to make what she wished for come true. His only worry now was that she would be sorry.

Reaching the top of the stairs, Vincent smiled, then turned down the long corridor leading to her home. He felt her approach - sensed the joy she experienced in knowing he was coming to her. Their bond had somehow expanded, opened wider, allowed Catherine to feel him as he's always felt her. The pleasure she felt at this miracle amazed her immensely; it was as though their souls could reach out and touch one another - no matter where they were.

Stepping over the small brick wall leading to her sub-basement, Vincent heard the secret door open, and Catherine's first, tentative steps down the hidden ladder. Before she could safely navigate its eight or so steps, he was behind her, reaching for her, turning her in his arms to look into her surprised but happy face.

"Vincent," she whispered, throwing her arms around his shoulders. "I could feel you - I knew you were coming. I can also tell something's bothering you. Can you tell me what it is?"

A soft chuckle escaped his lips, and he set her down, running his thumb over her cheek in a sensuous journey to her mouth.

"Nothing is wrong, Catherine. You felt my anticipation - that's all."

Frozen into silence by the intimate touch on her face, Catherine sighed, her heart leaping in response. Her eyes softened, and without realizing what she was doing, her lips parted slightly.

"Catherine," Vincent whispered, lowering his head closer to hers. "There are so many things I wish to give you - so many things I never can. There is one thing you wished for, one gift you desire above all others. This gesture, this simple act I have thought about, both long and hard. If you still wish it, I intend to grant your request."

Lost in the spell of his eyes, she nodded. "I wish it..."

"Yes," he replied softly. "I can feel it in you..." His mouth lowered slowly, hesitantly, until his lips gently touched hers.

The contact was electric, capturing each of them in a web of love's delight. The kiss became stronger, each of them casting aside any reservations they might have had before and allowing themselves this long-denied freedom.

The need to breath brought them slowly apart. With opened eyes, they watched each other, small smiles growing on their faces.

With a sense of completeness, Catherine threw her arms around Vincent's waist, burying her head in the soft suede of his fringed vest. There was an aura of satisfaction surrounding her, and her knees buckled as he murmured her name against her hair.

"Catherine," he spoke gruffly, his blood singing with elation at what he'd done. "Forgive me for waiting..."

Gathering her strength, Catherine lifted her head from his chest. "We are something that has never been," she quoted his own words to him softly, reminding him of his vow to her. "We must go with courage, and we must go with care."

Stepping back from her, Vincent took a deep breath. "Our time will come, Catherine. There will be a day, soon, when we will truly be together. Suddenly I feel it - I know it is waiting for us."

"So do I," she smiled, reaching for his hands. "So do I."

As they sat together later by the triple waterfall, Vincent couldn't help but feel a strange sense of irony overtake him. He'd wanted to give Catherine a gift - a kiss - and in so doing, had given his heart permission

to release his soul from the lifetime spent in senseless fear and anxiety. He'd opened his heart and mind to the many marvelous possibilities she'd always assured him there were, and now looked forward to the day their dreams could all come true. In wanting to give her a gift, he had. His gift had been his own heart, free at last to pursue all they had ever dared dream for together.

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