

A QUEEN FOR A KNIGHT

by Janet M Aspinall

"Checkmate!" Catherine declared, her eye bright with victory as she looked across the table at her opponent.

"Humph!" Father, unwilling to admit defeat, studied the chess board disbelievably.

Neither of them had noticed Vincent enter the chamber, returning from the lower tunnels where he had been working. He stood watching them. The two people he loved most in the world - in both their worlds. Catherine felt his gaze upon her, lifting her eyes to him, her face adorned with a soft and welcoming smile.

"Vincent," she spoke his name with reverence; two years and more - and still the mere sight of him filled her heart with wonder.

"I'm late," he apologized, coming further into the room. "But I see Father has kept you entertained." He dropped a light kiss on the old man's brow.

"Is the work progressing well?" Father wanted to know.

"It's finished," his son told him, then returned his attention to Catherine. When he spoke to her again, his voice had altered; deepened and become huskier. "You look so very beautiful with the light of triumph in your eyes."

She said nothing, but – blushing - lowered her head.

"You've taught that girl too well," Father accused cheerfully, thereby dispelling the sense of awkwardness he sometimes felt when in the presence of these two. "She'll even beat you one of these days, Vincent. You mark my words."

"Miracles do happen," he replied with a throaty chuckle.

"I'll give you miracles," she laughed, rising from her chair to hug him.

With his arms about her, his head bent close to hers, the laughter ebbed from him.

"You do, Catherine." He turned her face up to his. "You do give me miracles."

Their eyes held, and in the tender silence that followed, Father made to creep from the chamber.

"Don't go," Vincent called, reluctantly letting Catherine move out of his embrace. "I need to wash this dust off me. Perhaps you could bear the humiliation of another game with Catherine?" He gestured to the chess board.

"No time," she informed them. "I'm cooking dinner tonight. And I could do with some help." She went over and took Father's arm. "And you've just volunteered."

"I trust you cook as well as you play chess?" he grumbled good-naturedly, allowing himself to be led away.

Vincent watched their departure, a calm contentment enfolding him. A moment later, he bounded up the steps leading to his chamber and strode from the room.

When the meal was almost ready to serve, Catherine slipped away for a few minutes to freshen up and

change her clothes. The dress she donned, a blue velvet creation, was one of Vincent's favourites. The colour suited her, she knew, but also guessed that his preference was influenced more by the style; the back was cut daringly low. With her wearing this dress, even the simple act of his putting a guiding hand on her back became something intensely sensual; he could know the pleasure of her naked skin beneath his fingers.

Vincent was lighting the candles on the table when she returned, he and Father having already brought the food through from the kitchen chamber. She watched him as she moved about the table. He was magnificent - there was no other word to describe him. From his tawny mane to his thigh high boots, he was the very essence of masculinity. She let her eyes rove over him, feasting on him. The loose, white shirt did nothing to disguise the breadth of his powerful shoulders. The grey, sheath-like breeches did everything to accentuate the taut muscles of his lower limbs. She lifted her eyes to his face to find him watching her. She was mortified that he had caught her so blatantly eyeing him. And yet also pleased, happy because she knew it had given him immense pleasure.

"You do me.... great honour, Catherine," he said quietly, touched beyond measure by her undisguised admiration.

"Cathy, so there you are." Father turned from the sideboard where he was slicing bread. Taking Vincent's comment to have been meant as a compliment, he added his own praise. "Yes, indeed; you look quite stunning, my dear. Why don't you show her to her place, Vincent?"

He came over to her, his eyes never leaving hers. As she had known he would, he placed his hand low on her back; skin against skin. The thrill of it surged through her like electricity. He felt the jolt and acknowledged it with his eyes; something - just a hair's breath away from arrogance - sparkled in their startlingly blue depths. She saw it - and delighted in it. She had done this for him, by convincing him that it was right and natural for him to desire her - and inconceivable that she should not desire him with equal fierceness - she had given him pride in his own sexuality. And their relationship was undergoing a subtle change as a direct result; an almost imperceptible shift in the balance of power, as he - little by little - began to assert his innate mastery over her. And she revelled in it!

He guided her to her seat. As she sank into the chair, he let his fingertips trail delicately up her spine - his hand finally coming to rest on her shoulder. He bent his head solicitously towards her.

"Are you comfortable, Catherine?" It took her a moment to define the uncanny tone of his voice. He was teasing her! That he had the confidence in himself to do so gladdened her heart - and brought a pretty flush to her cheeks.

"Vincent," Father called, saving her from making any reply. "Could you fetch the soup tureen to the table?" Vincent continued to look at her for a moment longer, then withdrew his hand with obvious reluctance and turned away from her.

The meal was over, the table cleared, and another game of chess was in progress; Catherine versus Vincent. Father, supposedly watching from the comfort of his armchair, had in fact dozed off. Waking with a start a few minutes later, he had made his apologies and shuffled off to bed. The game was a closely contested one, with Vincent marginally ahead. Catherine moved one of her pieces, causing Vincent to frown down at the board.

"Are you sure you want to do that, Catherine?" he asked, offering her the chance to retract the move.

"Oh, yes." She smiled across at him.

"But you're sacrificing your queen to save a knight."

"I know," she said, unperturbed.

"A queen for a knight? I can't see the logic of that." He scanned the board again, searching for the reasoning behind the maneuver.

"There is no logic, Vincent. She loves him."

"What?" he sputtered, casting her a bemused glance.

"She's in love with him. And she'll do anything to save him. Surely you can understand that!"

"Catherine," he began patiently. "This is a game of chess. you must play with your head, not your heart."

"Ah. Then I must concede defeat, I'm afraid."

"Why?" he questioned, genuinely puzzled by her behaviour.

"Because...." She got up from her seat and moved around the table towards him. "I've been ruled by my heart all evening."

He pushed back his chair and turned it so as to face her approach. "Why? Tell me." His voice took on the familiar tender cadence reserved only for her.

"Because when you came through that door tonight, so dusty and disheveled, I thought you were the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen." She slithered onto his lap, his arms going about her. "And then, when I saw you like this...." She touched at his shirt. "I realized you were also the sexiest."

"Catherine....," he warned gently. There were still limits he did not yet feel able to move beyond.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, rubbing her cheek against him. "I just had to tell you. I just wanted you to know."

"I do know," he assured her, huskily. "I can hardly bring myself to believe it, but I do know."

"I love you so much," she murmured, her lips caressing his jawline. "And I want you so much it hurts."

"Enough, Catherine," he growled, lifting her easily as he rose to his feet and deposited her on the ground.

"Enough," he said again, more gently, watching her warily; unsure as to her likely reaction.

She regarded him steadily, breathing deeply. "This isn't fair of you, Vincent," she told him finally. "The way you were acting earlier, I thought...."

"What, Catherine? That I wanted you?" His voice begun to rise ominously. "Do you still doubt that I do? My God, Catherine! How can you? How can you?"

He spun away from her, his arms rising in a swinging arc. With a tremendous roar, he brought his huge fist smashing down upon the table. She watched, fascinated, as the chessmen - seemingly in slow motion - lifted, somersaulted and came scattering down around the board. She stood her ground bravely. Though the ferocity of his sudden rages still had the power to shock her, she no longer feared them; she knew that she, and only she, had no reason to - not even Father could lay claim to such a privilege.

Vincent leaned on the table supported by both hands, his shaggy head hanging low. As the last chess piece rolled to a halt, the only sound in the chamber was his laboured breathing. Gradually, even that settled into silence. He slowly turned his head towards her.

"Do you really understand me so little, Catherine?" he asked softly.

She could give him no answer, there were times when she felt she knew him as well as she knew herself, and other times - bewildering moments - when he seemed beyond the realms of her comprehension.

"I know what you're thinking," he continued quietly. "You're wondering why, tonight particularly, I

deliberately arouse feelings in you that I have...." he took a deep breath, "no intention, perhaps no means, of appeasing."

"No," she cried, stepping nearer him.

"Don't, Catherine." He raised himself to his full height. "Don't lie. The truth isn't your enemy here - I am. Look at me, Catherine. Look at me and know why our dreams.... remains a dream."

"No," she said again, shaking her head. "We've come too close to making it reality for me to believe that it's impossible. And, earlier this evening, you believed in the possibility, too. The way you touched me, looked at me, I know you believed."

"No, Catherine." He picked up a chess piece, fingering it gently. "I did not believe - I only dreamed."

A grief more terrible than she thought she could bear clutched at her heart.

"No," she whispered, her legs folding beneath the weight of her despair. "No. No." She sank to the floor huddling there defensively as though he were raining blows upon her.

The only way he could cope with her distress was by closing his mind to it. He stared at the chess piece in his hand.

"The white queen - she's broken," he said, his voice catching in his throat, his tone one of utter hopelessness. "And her knight." He reached for another piece. "Look, Catherine." He held the shattered figures towards her. "Both broken. She sacrificed herself - -and in the end they both lie broken."

"No," she sobbed. "It needn't be like that. I can't end like that. Please, Vincent...."

His soul cried out to her, but he could do no more than stand silent witness to her misery.

"What on earth....?" Father came hobbling into the room. The crash had woken him, the sound of her weeping had brought him rushing to investigate. Vincent continued to stare at the woman, his eyes telling of torture unimaginable. Slowly, he opened his fingers and let the broken figurines fall to the floor.

"Vincent?" Father limped forward.

The full horror of the situation dawned darkly in the furthest reaches of Vincent's mind; his relationship with Catherine lay in ruins, and it was he who had instigated the destruction.

"No," he roared, the sound reverberating through his whole world. He roared again; just noise, no words - for there were no words for what he felt. Then he fled from the chamber, from her punishing presence, staggering blindly to he knew not where.

"Cathy?" Father knelt stiffly beside her as her body became convulsed by sobs. "Oh, Cathy." He wrapped his arms about her, rocking her like a child. "Why do you do this to yourselves? Why do you do it?" It was because he knew the answer that he, too, cried.

PART TWO

It was the cold that first brought him back to a state of awareness. It crept stealthily through his clothes, his flesh, and finally his bones. It registered in his mind that such penetrating cold could kill. It was his first lucid thought for many hours. His instinct for self-preservation demanded that he take stock of his situation. He could not die. For himself it did not matter, for a life without Catherine was nothing but a living death. But so many people depended upon him; they needed his guidance; his protection. And he carried another responsibility too great to ignore, if he died he knew that Catherine's spirit would die with him. She had

given him her very soul, trusting him implicitly with its safe keeping. How could he fail her?

He was lying in a rock-strewn cavern, so dark that even his night-sighted eyes could see nothing but the vaguest shapes. He stretched his stiff limbs experimentally. The pain was excruciating and he growled softly into the darkness. As he staggered to his feet, a wave of dizziness threatened to send him reeling. He leaned heavily against the nearest wall, breathing deeply, letting his head clear. The smell of blood pervaded the air. His back and shoulders were badly lacerated; he could remember running blindly down miles of rough-hewn tunnels too narrow for his bulk, blundering heedlessly against sharp-edged rocks. And somewhere he had fallen; had simply stepped into nothingness. Which was how he had come to be here - wherever *'here'* was.

His keen nose told him that there was water near by; heaving his battered body away from the wall, he set out to find it. It was a largish pool, fed by a fresh water spring. He knelt and drank gratefully from its icy depths. Despite the intense cold, he struggled out of his shirt; it was too thin to provide much warmth and was ripped almost to shreds. He used part of it to bathe his many wounds, the remainder became a makeshift bandage for a particularly deep gash in his left upper arm.

'Father will need to stitch that,' he thought to himself. And with the thought came the first real fear that he might never see Father again. He would not allow himself to think that the same fear applied to Catherine.

He needed to get moving. It was the only way to get some warmth back into his body. But which way? He had fallen into the cavern, if he wanted to retrace his journey it was obvious he must climb out. He searched the roof with his eyes, though it was barely discernible in the gloom. Above the place where he had lain, he could sense a movement of air. He gazed upwards. Yes, there was an opening. And the cavern wall would furnish him with sufficient hand and foot holds. If he were lucky. And if the numbing cold did not further incapacitate his hands and feet.

He stood where he was for a few moments longer, flexing his powerful muscles and gathering his strength. If he were to fall again, he doubted if he'd be in a fit state to even attempt another climb. Suddenly his mind was full of Catherine. He would not fall - she would not let him.

Mary poked her head into the guest chamber. Catherine was sitting on the edge of the bed, tugging on her boots. She was dressed in the clothes that she had arrived in much earlier that evening - casual slacks and a sweater. The blue velvet dress lay in a crumpled heap on the floor, much as Catherine had done, in another chamber, less than an hour before.

"Father sent me to see if you were all right," Mary informed her kindly. "You should be resting."

"I'm fine, Mary - really. Where is Father?" Catherine got to her feet. "I need to talk to him."

"He's herding everyone back to their beds." As Catherine gathered her jacket and gloves, Mary picked up the dress, smoothing its folds before laying it on a chair. "What a beautiful gown," she said softly. When she turned back to the younger woman, her face was full of questioning concern.

"Cathy, I don't mean to pry, but....? We all love Vincent. To hear him in such pain....?" It was Vincent's harrowing roar that had brought the underground community crowding anxiously into Father's living quarters.

"What has Father told you?"

"Only that you and Vincent had some sort of quarrel."

"I'm sorry, Mary. I really can't tell you any more than that. It's too.... personal. I...." Catherine's voice became strangled with the threat of another bout of weeping.

"It's all right," Mary patted her arm consolingly. "You don't have to explain. Just know that we are all here if we can help in any way. Anything at all."

Catherine thanked her for the offer, then set off to find Father.

"Where will he have gone?" She and Father were in Vincent's chamber, as though there they might get some clue as to his whereabouts.

"Below. Deeper Below. But exactly where....?" The old man shook his head helplessly. "Vincent knows places where no one else has ever been."

"I must find him." Her tone was adamant, but not without an undercurrent of desperation.

Father gave a weary sigh. "Yes, I believe that you must. But how?" Again he shook his head.

"You have maps. I've got a torch. I'll find him."

"Catherine, what good are maps when we don't even know what direction he took? I can't let you go wandering around on your own. It's too dangerous. If anything were to happen to you...."

"The worst thing that could happen to me has already happened," she said brokenly. "Somehow I've made him feel that.... that parting is the only way out for us."

Father took her gently by the arm, leading her to sit beside him on the bed.

"I once thought that myself," he told her very quietly. "And I did everything I could to make Vincent see it that way." He smiled sorrowfully at her. "But, you know, I never could convince him. And one day, I was watching the two of you together; he was laughing - really laughing - at the mess you'd make of repairing one of his shirts." They both smiled at the memory. "And you were pretending to be angry. Then suddenly you just looked at him, laughing, and such joy came into your eyes."

The old man's voice broke painfully. It was a while before he could continue the tale. "Then he swept you into his arms - and you kissed him. I hadn't realized that you and he.... well, that you were so physically close; that your relationship had progressed so far. And I was so happy for him. And so proud of you."

Catherine was weeping softly now. "I never tried to talk him into giving you up after that day. I knew it would be a great wrong on my part to do so."

She wiped quickly at her eyes with the back of one hand. "Thank you, Father." She leaned over and kissed her cheek. "Thank you for telling me."

He took her hand and gave it an encouraging squeeze. "What happened to all that happiness, Cathy? Can you tell me?"

She bowed her head, saying nothing.

He regarded her steadily for a time, deciding that the best way to deal with her natural reticence was with some gently questioning. "Did he want you to give up your life Above? To come Below?"

"No," her voice was very small, barely audible. "It wasn't that."

Father considered this for a moment. If that wasn't the problem, then it had to be what he most feared.

"Cathy, don't be afraid to tell me. It means no disloyalty to Vincent. Did he - I'm afraid there's no delicate way to put this - did he try to force you....?"

"No!" she cried, vehemently. Then; "No," she repeated in a whisper. "It was me. It was me that wanted.... Oh, Father." She fell against him, burying her face in his rough jerkin. "I love you so much. I love him so much."

"I know," he soothed, holding her close. "I know that you do."

Her confession, whilst not what he had expected, did not come as a total surprise. He had long believed that something like this was going to happen, though he had always supposed that it would be Vincent who forced the issue. That it was the other way around seemed to indicate problems even more complex than he had foreseen. He kept a patient silence, ready to listen if she wanted to talk; willing to drop the subject if she did not.

"Father?" she began hesitantly, pulling away from him a little. He waited, giving her time to formulate the question. "Is there.... I don't know.... some physical reason....?" Without giving him time to reply, she plunged on. "I mean, I know Vincent's different from ordinary men, but I can see no reason why we can't....? Please, Father. You raised him. And you're a doctor. You must know."

When he answered, he did so as honestly and as unemotionally as he could; "Anatomically, it must be possible for him to consummate the relationship. Psychologically, I just don't know. In view of tonight's events, I would have to say it looks unlikely."

She stared down at her hands as they lay in her lap, considering all that she now knew, or surmised, until she reached a conclusion. "He's afraid of hurting me. I thought we'd conquered that fear, but he's still.... haunted by the fear of hurting me."

"Cathy...." She lifted her eyes to his. "I can't help but think that such a fear is not without foundation. We all know that there's a dark side to Vincent's '*otherness*;' a side he fights a constant battle to control - and not always successfully. In the heat of any given moment...."

"No," she cut in. "Not with me. There is no darkness in our love." About to say more, their attention was caught by a quick movement at the chamber door.

"Mouse!" Father hailed him crossly. "Didn't I tell you....?"

"Mouse wants to help." The boy came darting in. "Help Catherine find Vincent. Mouse knows a place; very deep place. Vincent say; '*Mouse don't go there; very bad, very dangerous.*' But Mouse take Catherine there. Find Vincent."

"No. Absolutely not." Father forbade them, but Catherine was already on her feet. "We don't even know that Vincent's there," he protested strongly.

"Yes, we do." She smiled at Mouse. "I can feel it." She put a hand to her heart. "In here."

"Long walk. Four, maybe five hours. Cold place." Mouse chattered on. "Go now, Catherine?"

"Soon, Mouse." She bustled about, collecting things into a bundle. "We'll need warm clothes for Vincent; his cloak, a sweater. I've got my torch."

Father, seeing defeat staring him in the eye, began to limp from the room. "I'll get you a few medical supplies - just in case." At the door, he paused to scowl at the boy. "Young man, if anything happens to Catherine...."

"Mouse knows," he cheerfully interrupted. "Vincent will kill me."

"That's probably truer than you think," the old man muttered as he hobbled away.

The wound on his arm was bleeding badly, the tattered bandage already saturated with blood. But he had done it; he had made the climb. And he was warmer; the exertion having driven the debilitating chill from his body. Best to keep moving. Without conscious thought, relying purely in instinct, he set off unerringly in the direction of home - and of her.

He moved at a steady lope. Thinking clearly now, and able to see reasonably well, he nearly avoided the jutting outcrops of rocks; the same rocks that had punished him so severely during his headlong flight to oblivion.

He was returning to her, with nothing resolved; their relationship still fraught with tensions he would not put a name to. But how had he ever thought that parting could provide the solution? Better a half-life with her than the purgatory that awaited him without her. She was as essential to his being as breathing, and he'd as soon not take another breath than to never again know the joy that only she could bring him.

"Down there?" Catherine was doubtful. The tunnel inclined steeply, her torch beam bouncing off the many rocks and boulders that littered the floor. "Are you sure, Mouse?"

"Big cavern," he enthused. "River with silver sand. And light - silver light. Mouse knows. Vincent tell Mouse."

"But you said it was a bad place? It sounds beautiful to me."

"Bad place beyond silver cavern. Come. Mouse show you." Hoisting his backpack higher on his shoulders, he began the precarious descent. She had no choice but to follow.

The cavern was as he'd described it, and it was, indeed, beautiful. The strange luminosity of which he'd spoken bathed everything in silver, like moonlight on snow. From whence the light came was a mystery, as were so many things in this subterranean world, but the respite from darkness was a blessing that gladdened her heart.

"We'll rest a moment, Mouse, and catch our breaths." She looked about her with wonder. Then she voiced a thought that had seeped into her mind from nowhere. "I think our journey might be over."

"Not so, Catherine. Feel the air." He held out his arms. "Not cold here. Place Vincent talk of much farther, deeper, that way." He pointed in the direction taken by the silent river.

"Well, we'll rest awhile, anyway." She smiled a secret smile. "And perhaps Vincent will find us."

They deposited their burdens onto the silver sand, then Mouse set off to investigate - leaving her alone.

It did strike warm here after the clamminess of the tunnels, but Vincent would still be glad of his cloak for the journey home. And he was coming home, she was sure of it. She peeled off her gloves and jacket before settling comfortably on the sand, then pulled his bundled cloak onto her bent knees and buried her face in it. It smelt of leather and wool and candlewax - and of him. Something stirred low in her belly; the first bittersweet pang of desire.

Vincent rounded a bend in the tunnel, seeing the shimmer of light ahead. His step faltered, it was more than just light that flooded his inner vision; it was her. Very close. Thinking of him. Needing him.

A small figure came darting into view. "Mouse?" he called quietly. "Mouse, is that you?" Vincent brushed aside the boy's concern over his injuries; his one thought now was to be with Catherine.

Mouse kept a discreet distance as Vincent strode over the sand towards her. She raised her head slowly, letting the cloak roll, forgotten from her hands. She scrambled to her feet. He started to run and so did she. They met; two souls collided, becoming one. His powerful arms almost crushed the breath from her body; and she'd gladly have died at that moment, for that moment, for the miracle of being loved by him.

They were lost in each other; faintly aware of Mouse's scampering form as he raided the backpack.

"Mouse, take spare torch," he muttered happily. "Go tell Father everything good now. Okay, good. Okay,

fine." He beamed a smile at them. "Mouse go now?"

He looked questioningly at Vincent, who granted permission with a nod of his head. Catherine glanced from one to the other, sensing a silent collusion, and the protest she had been about to make withered and died.

She knelt before his reclining form, frowning slightly as her careful fingers removed the gory bandage from his arm. She cleaned the angry wound with antiseptic from Father's supplies, biting her lip as she tried not to think of the pain she must be causing him. He did not flinch, just watched her silently. She bound the wound with a fresh bandage, then - refusing to meet his hypnotic gaze - moved behind him to attend to the numerous cuts and grazes on his back. She never really knew what happened after that; one minute she was bathing his injuries, the next she was touching him, exploring him, her hands very small against the muscled expanse of his massive shoulders. She felt his flesh tighten beneath her fingers.

"Catherine....?" The inflection in his voice, the warning, was horribly familiar.

"No, Vincent," she whispered, brushing her lips over the short golden hair that grew in abundance across his shoulders. "It's time." Her arms went about him, her hands on his chest. "It's time."

She remembered a low, rumbling growl, a blur of movement, then she was on her back with him leaning over her.

"Catherine." It was the same growl - and yet also her name. She could see in his eyes that there was no turning back. Even as he kissed her, he was tugging clumsily at her clothes.

"Wait," she said, pushing at his chest. For a moment, something quite terrible blazed in his eyes. "It's all right," she was not afraid. "I want to help you."

Still not fully understanding, he drew back from her; his eyes watchful. She undressed with great haste and a total lack of finesse; there was no time - and certainly no need - to tease him. Naked, she crawled back into his clutching embrace. Panting now, she struggled to remove his boots and breeches; it was not easy, not with his hands all over her, his mouth searching out places that ached for his touch. She was weak with desire when he turned her away from him, but instinct drove her to find the strength to support herself on hands and knees. She was whimpering as he moved over her, his body engulfing hers.

Then he was in her, she was full of him, and she almost fainted with the indescribable joy of truly being on with him. His hips moved with powerful, rhythmic thrusts. She would have fallen, been driven into the silver sand, without the iron-hard circle of one of his arms around her. She felt his mouth on the back of her neck, his teeth grazing her soft skin. It did not register as pain; it was a searing delight to add to the plethora of sensations that were racking her body with pleasure.

When she knew she simply could not bear another moment of such agonizing arousal, exquisite release such as she had never known ripped through her. She knew she was sobbing his name, over and over - and could do nothing to stop it. The sound pulsed through him, adding to the surge of sensation that rushed to his loins. Her satisfaction was his triumph, and his own ultimate release. Deep in his throat, he moaned her name - and gave himself up to her totally.

She hung limp from his supporting arm. Gently, he lowered her to lie on the sand and she felt him slip smoothly out of her. Replete as she was, she still felt a pang of regret at no longer having him inside her. She could hear him, still breathing heavily, above her.

Then; "Catherine!" There was such wonder in his voice. She felt too exhausted to move, but more than anything she wanted to look into his face; to read those beautiful eyes. Sensing her thoughts, he lifted himself just far enough from her to allow her to turn beneath him. Their eyes bonded. "Oh, Catherine." He slowly shook his head, not quite believing that what had happened had really happened.

She tried to speak, but got no further than his name before emotion robbed her of her voice. He gathered

her into his arms, sitting back on his heels to hold her cradled against him. They both wept; tears of pure joy, quite unadulterated by sadness.

They were nearing his home; the surroundings familiar even to Catherine, their way now lit by the flare of wall torches. He came to a halt and she looked questioningly up at him. His explanation was a little shame-faced; "I.... I feel so reluctant to share you with anyone - even Father. And I realized how selfish that is of me."

"Then I share that selfishness," she assured him, leaning against him. His strong arms wrapped around her protectively, holding her close.

"You're so small," he said, marvelling. "So fragile. And I thought...." He hesitated to say more.

"Tell me." She turned her face back up to him.

"I feared your fragility, Catherine. I feared it would prove no match for the strength of my desire."

"You were afraid you might hurt me," she simplified her confession for him, knowing how difficult it was for him to admit to such a thing.

"Yes." His arms tightened about her. "And if that had happened, I would not have been able to live with it, Catherine."

She wanted desperately to erase the ghost of that fear from him. Her tone became coy and beguiling. "And can you live with the consequences of what did happen?"

"What is it?" he questioned, already knowing the answer would please him.

"That I shall want you to make love to me at every given opportunity from now until kingdom come."

"Oh, yes," he breathed. "I'm sure I can live with that."

"Then take me home, Vincent. Take me home and into your bed."

Without another word, he grabbed her hand and dragged her, giggling her protest, towards his chamber.

In the privacy and comfort of his chamber, they discovered new and even more wondrous delights. He leant the piquancy of restraining his desire; that he could control it, and in doing so prolong the pleasure for both of them. And she? She learned that her dream of total union, when compared to the reality, was as a candle eclipsed by the sun.

In the outer chamber, the chess board was set up ready for play to commence. Whilst waiting for the lovers to return, Father had occupied himself by repairing the broken pieces. The white queen and her knight still bore the scars of their misfortune, but they were whole - and they were stronger than ever before. Anxiety must have made Father a little absent-minded, for the knight was incorrectly positioned, standing proudly beside his queen. It was a strange mistake for the old man to make. Or, perhaps, it was not a mistake at all!

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