

HARLEQUIN HEART BALL

by Kathy Bayne

Catherine Chandler leaned wearily against her apartment door, feeling the warm peacefulness sweep over her, unlocking and soothing tight muscles and frayed nerves.

Of the past four days, today had been the worst, the most nerve-wracking. But... it was finally over, they had won a long, hard-fought battle... against odds that no mere mortal should be asked to oppose. And after the verdict had been handed down in their favor, she'd wasted no time in confronting Joe Maxwell, and she had begged, pleaded, cajoled, and finally threatened him into giving her the rest of the week off. Three whole days - five including Saturday and Sunday - during which the most important decision she would be called upon to make would be when to get up, what to wear, who to see.

She smiled softly to herself; the latter choice would not be difficult at all, though, if she were truly honest with herself, she wanted to spend every second of that free time in peaceful, undemanding solitude....

The thought had no sooner crossed her mind, it seemed, when the doorbell rang loudly. Composing her features into some semblance of politeness, she opened the door the width allowed by the chain.

"Miss Catherine Chandler?"

"Yes....?" A large box wrapped in gold foil blocked her vision; all she could see was shoulder and arm, both clad in black and white diamond-patterned material. If it had been late October, instead of mid-February, she would have suspected a Halloween joke from the guys at the office. But it wasn't, so she held back, warily.

"I have a package and letter for you, Ma'am."

"Leave the package outside the door," she held her hand a few inches from the opening. "I'll take the letter."

"Yes, Ma'am...." He sounded slightly amused.

A square envelope was slipped through, decorated with the same black and white diamond pattern. His sleeve, she noted absently, had a narrow red ruff. This type of courier service was new to her, and she supposed he was easy to see in traffic....

She reached for her purse, taking her eyes off the door for a moment and when she turned back to offer the tip, she found the hallway empty save for the package resting against the door. Closing the door, she waited a minute or two, then released the chain. The hallway was still empty as she retrieved the package. It was large and bulky, with no indication of the sender -- that was probably in the letter.

Curiosity about the gift overrode a more basic question; How had the oddly-dressed messenger entered the building without notification, and then disappeared so quickly.

"Here, Arthur... can't hide all day...." Mouse peered hopefully into cracks and crevices, searching for the elusive feline. Sunlight glared from the roof of the caverns, temporarily displacing the brilliant stars that were normally reflected in the glass smooth pool. Mouse, dropping to all fours, crawled around the curve of the wall, reaching into shallow recesses. "C'mon, Arthur, Mouse won't hurt you... just want to give you a bath." He caught a reflection in the pool, out of the corner of his eyes, and jumped back, startled.

There, standing near the pool in half-light, half-shadow, was the most singular being Mouse had ever seen. More amazed than frightened, he got awkwardly to his feet. "This... this is not your place."

The being smiled, and it, too, was singular. "I have a very special gift for Vincent."

"You know Vincent? Mouse knows Vincent. Mouse Vincent's friend," the young man spoke proudly, and protectively.

"That is... fortunate." The stranger stepped aside, and with a slight bow indicated a box resting against the tunnel wall. "Please, good sir, see to it that Vincent receives this gift. It's very important." At Mouse's lack of response, he added in gentle tones meant to reassure, "Don't worry, Mouse. I mean no hard to Vincent. All is well; ask Jacob Wells, for he knows my story."

Mouse's eyes widened at the mention of Father's name. "Wait. Stranger wait." Eager to please, Mouse spoke quickly and vigorously. "Mouse will bring Vincent. Wait."

"Vincent! Vincent!" Mouse bounded anxiously into Vincent's chamber, finding not Vincent, but Father. He pulled up short, eyes darting about the room. "Father! Where's Vincent?"

Father smiled at the youngster's obvious agitation. "Is there a problem, Mouse?"

"No.... Stranger at the Mirror Pool. Says Father knows him. Stranger brings present for Vincent. Mouse find Vincent."

Jacob Wells, always cautious of outsiders discovering their world, carefully closed the book he was reading and stood.

"Now, Mouse," he said in a comforting tone. "Calm down and tell me *'exactly'* what he said."

Mouse made a futile attempt at composure. "A strange man, Father. Mouse not know his name. Looks like... like...." His gaze flitted over various objects, lighting on a worn, faded poster. "...Like that! But... .different."

Father looked uncomprehendingly at the large, gaudy Mardi Gras advertisement. "How different? In what way?"

"Same clothes... different color, black and white squares.... not squares.... points----" Mouse scowled with frustration as he tried to relay in words what he still held in his mind's eye.

"Squares with points?" Jacob frowned, then smiled. "Diamonds? Black and white diamonds?"

"Yes... yes... .He's waiting for Vincent. Is it true? Is he safe?"

"Take me to this.... strange stranger, Mouse, and we'll see why he needs to find Vincent. He sounds familiar, but I'll need to talk to him first."

"He's gone." Mouse's statement was unnecessary, as the Mirror Pool was obviously deserted. Mouse scampered about, looking vainly for the stranger.

"Mouse said wait. Why didn't he wait?"

"I don't know." Jacob gazed about the cavern, but he could detect no presence other than themselves. "He said he had something for Vincent?"

Mouse stopped, nodded vigorously. "He said... he had a *'special gift.'* For Vincent. But he's not here," he added, disappointed.

"Is this the gift?" Father pointed toward a box, and Mouse ran over to it.

"That's it! He left it. It's for Vincent."

"Wait, Mouse; let me look at it." Father picked up a square envelope that lay atop the gold-wrapped package. The envelope was patterned with black and white diamonds, and the name *'Vincent'* was inscribed in gold.

Father nodded, realizing who the stranger had been. "Come, Mouse. We'll find Vincent."

Catherine settled back in the rose-fragranced, frothy bubble bath, the relaxing hot water reaching to her neck. Eyes closed, she hummed quietly; some unnamed tune she'd heard earlier on the radio. Soft, romantic, enchanting.... and she could not recall having ever heard it before. Very mysterious. The whole evening had been mysterious, starting with the odd messenger, the invitation, the wondrous contents of the box, and now the haunting melody that would not leave her.

The package had held an evening gown whose beauty was in its simplicity of design and form; made of the finest silk, the bodice fit snugly, breaking into cascading waves at the hipline. The entire dress was anchored at the left shoulder, the drape falling to the floor. The color was a deep shade of rose, shimmering with pinks and reds when the light touched it. It now waited on a hanger in her bedroom.

She smiled dreamily as she picked up the invitation, careful not to get it wet, and re-read the engraved lines. "Vincent, you're such a romantic. Is it any wonder that I love you so?"

*YOU ARE CORDIALLY INVITED TO ATTEND
THE HARLEQUIN HEART BALL
ON
FEBRUARY THE THIRTEENTH
FROM
ELEVEN O'CLOCK PM
TO ELEVEN O'CLOCK AM FEB. 14TH
AT
HARLEQUIN HALL*

1414 EAST FOURTEENTH
AT THE HARLEQUIN HEART BALL YOU WILL MEET YOUR
HEART'S DESIRE, AND YOU WILL SPEND TWELVE MYSTICAL
HOURS IN LOVE'S EMBRACE.
A NIGHT WHEN FANTASY IS REAL, THE MOOD IS MAGICAL,
AND DREAMS COME TRUE.
PLEASE BRING THIS INVITATION WITH YOU, APPROPRIATE
DRESS HAS BEEN PROVIDED.
AND, REMEMBER....
YOUR TRUE LOVE AWAITS....
AT THE HARLEQUIN BALL....

"What can it mean? How can they know my heart's desire?"

The rush and fall of the cascading water went unnoticed as Vincent read the folded missive. He looked up from the elegantly scripted words, his gaze cool and questioning.

"The Harlequin Ball." Father nodded, arms crossed. "It is as I thought."

"Tell then. What does it mean?"

"In all your readings, Vincent, you have not read the '*Legend of the Harlequin*'?"

"Not that I remember. A Harlequin is only an entertainer - a jester. Why would such a person send me this?"

"No... not at the beginning... A jester is a court buffoon, who amused kings and queens of all eras. The Harlequin is an entirely different sort of creature; his existence has often been questioned, *'if'* he ever existed at all. His appearance is deceiving, but not in an evil way. Deceiving in a way that all humans are, to protect our deepest secrets and fears.

"You might say that the Harlequin Ball is the forerunner of Mardi Gras, but with a more specific-and romantic-purpose. It was said to be the one time of the year when star-crossed lovers could be together. This legend was born during a time immortals were said to walk the earth, and to love mortals; when half-human and non-human desired mortals. On that day, the night of the Harlequin Ball, it was granted. The spell that was cast for those twelve hours made anything possible."

"And what day was this to be?"

"February Thirteenth."

"And this... spell... lasted for a day?"

"Yes. On the fourteenth, mortals were again united."

Vincent turned away, ignoring for the moment, the richly-woven cloak that had been in the gold-wrapped box. He looked down at the invitation, and closed his eyes as if experiencing a deep inner pain. If what the Legend said was true, if his heart's desire did truly await him there, would it be Catherine? If not, would it mean that their relationship was never meant to be? *'Could'* never be? No,

he could not accept that, *'would'* not accept it. He felt Father's hand rest comfortably on his arm, and looked into his warm, blue eyes.

"You are fearful that your *'love'* will be someone other than Catherine." It was not a question.

Vincent sighed, feeling guilty for having the need to express his deepest fear.

"Or worse, Father, that Catherine's *'true love'* will be someone other than myself...." He picked up the cloak, draped it over one arm. "As for myself, she is the only one I have ever desired."

"Then... perhaps she awaits you there."

The cabbie frowned at the address given him by his late night fare. "Are you sure that's the right address, lady? Ain't much there that I can recall - especially for a pretty lady like you." Even in the dim light from the streetlight, he could see that the face framed by the hooded cape was indeed attractive.

"It's correct. Please take me there - or shall I call another cab?"

"Sure thing, Ma'am."

At ten-fifteen the New York traffic had thinned somewhat, the brilliant city lights doing little to add warmth to cold gray concrete and frosty night air. The yellow cab pulled up before a wide expanse of concrete that led to a narrow gateway. Seemingly from the shadows, a tall, wide-shouldered man approached the cab; he wore standard doorman livery, but the heavy overcoat was black, and the wide, turned up cuffs and broad collar were of black and white diamonds, edged with red cording.

Bowing slightly, he opened the rear door, took Catherine's gloved hand into his, and assisted her from the cab.

The cabbie placed the fare in the cash box, his tip inside his coat pocket. He hesitated a moment, exhaust billowing in the cold night air, uncertain whether he should leave his passenger in such a desolate place. Leaning across the front seat, he opened the front door. "You want me to wait, Miss? In case your date don't show up, or somethin'----"

Catherine drew the black velvet cape around her, the wind gusting its ebony folds about her ankles. "No, thank you. It's not necessary."

With a shrug, the cabbie pulled away from the curb, heading back toward the downtown area

The doorman escorted her to the ornate, black and gold gate, held it open for her to pass through.

"The Harlequin is most honored by your presence, Miss. Chandler." His voice was a deep, pleasant baritone, much like another she was familiar with. "Please present your invitation to the page inside the door. And may you have a magical evening."

The covered walkway was lit, she noticed, by candles; the large, old-fashioned type that burned for hours. How had Vincent found such a place? Even in New York, the surroundings were rather avant garde. It was, of course, a very special Valentine gift, for as she had noted before leaving her apartment, tomorrow would be Valentine's Day - the day for lovers. Perhaps this place was operated by some Helpers, enabling Vincent to come Above to share the holiday with her. The touch of the old-world romantic was unmistakable, and she found herself smiling once more with warm regard for the very special man in her life.... and in her heart.

The double doors swung open in response to her light tap, closed silently behind her as she crossed the threshold.

"May I take your wrap, Miss. Chandler?" The voice belonged to the messenger who had delivered the invitation and gift - someone whom Vincent obviously knew well, and trusted. She allowed the cape to be lifted from her shoulders, then turned to greet her mysterious host.

Tonight, he was costumed in full regalia, a black and white diamond patterned tunic over black tights and black, knee-high boots; an elegant, black and gold sword was at his side, and a bright red sash ran diagonally from waist to shoulder. His face was sharp and angular, yet pleasant to look at; his eyes were a crystal gray, and they regarded her kindly, as a father would a favored child. Black hair swept back from a high forehead, fell in waves over his ears and to his collar.

She smiled as he gave her cape to a female attendant, then offered her hand. "Thank you for your... shall we say, intriguing invitation. I have to admit, though, that I'm still very curious, Mr....?" She left the question, waiting for him to supply the answer.

He bowed, a sweeping, courtly bow. "You may refer to me as the Harlequin, a title is not necessary. I will be glad to answer any question that you may have; perhaps you would like to see the garden as we talk?"

Vincent kept to the darker shadows of the streets and alleyways; he had travelled most of the way through the winding, twisting tunnels. For the last few blocks, though, he chose a more direct, above ground route, trusting to the darkness and the lateness of the hour to avoid detection if anyone should be about. He had found his surroundings no more ominous than any New York street at night, had, in fact, detected nothing threatening in the vicinity of the address where his *'true love'* supposedly waited.

Street lights splashed yellowish pools of light along the broad sidewalk, a black ocean of macadam on one side, and iron railings bracing the other. Behind the protective barriers, dimly seen but strongly felt, multi-story homes that had held several generations of humanity and progress. Vincent knew they would not last, the buildings would come down, their glory and majesty lost forever, to be replaced by parking garages, apartment buildings, office buildings... whatever would be needed by the new generation that had no need for the old.

As if to give reality to his thoughts, a fluttering of yellow plastic caught his attention; demolition machinery was grouped behind the roped off area. The demolition had already begun, beginning, for some reason, in the middle of the block. Number 1414 was toward the end of the block where the stately homes still remained untouched.

As he approached the open gate, another dark form emerged from the shadows, and Vincent shrank back, instinctively. But the voice that greeted him was neither fearful nor demanding; it was, instead, warmly welcoming.

"We are honored by your presence, sir, and by your acceptance of our humble invitation."

"Do you know me? Do you know... who I am?"

"You are Vincent, guest of the Harlequin for this evening."

He had thought, when he had reached the address, that he would somehow sense Catherine's presence... there was something... but not the ethereal contentment he felt when she was near and all was well... nor was it the sharp, insistent pangs of alarm that he always felt whenever she was in danger. It was as if their emotional bond was fusing into their spiritual bond, and that alone was

guiding him, drawing him toward this place, this moment in time....

He allowed himself to be led through the gateway, his escort indicating the front doors. "Please give your invitation to the page inside the door. And may you experience the magic this evening has to offer you...."

The entrance opened onto a quiet, secluded foyer. Rich, warm woods were enhanced by the velvet drapery and the golden glow cast by the softly scented candles. Still concealed by floor length cloak, the large white gloves concealed his hands as well as he offered the invitation to the young girl in a white satin gown.

She smiled, thanking him. Placing the card on a side table, she took his arm lightly, her voice gently persuasive. "May I take your cloak, sir? It will be returned to you when you leave."

Vincent hesitated, drawing the heavy material more closely around him, hoping the hood fell forward far enough to shadow his face from this gentle girl. "

Perhaps I should keep it, thank you."

There was sad understanding in her large brown eyes. "There is nothing to fear, Vincent. You have the regal bearing of the noble lion. You have nothing to hide, not here...." She reached up, carefully pushed back the hood. "You have the soul of a warrior, and the heart of a poet... do not hide these things from us, or yourself...." With that, she unhooked the single clasp, and the cloak fell away into her arms.

Before he could respond, he noticed at the arrival of a third party. He recognized the stranger that Mouse had attempted to describe, now understanding the young man's difficulty in doing so. The man was much like the renditions he had seen of the Harlequin; but none of the artists had managed to capture the mystic aura that surrounded him.

Vincent bowed, his gaze never leaving the other's face. "I am Vincent. You are the master of all this?"

The Harlequin smiled at the term. "More guide than master, good sir." He returned the bow.

"Welcome to the Harlequin Heart Ball, Vincent; for here, your true love awaits."

"Ms. Chandler...."

Catherine turned at the voice of her host, eyes and face alighting with a smile as she saw Vincent just behind him.

Vincent caught her look, and an inner tension relaxed somewhat. "Catherine, you are here." His voice was calm, but the intensity of his gaze betrayed an inner emotion.

"Yes, Vincent. I'd thought at first that you had arranged all this, but the Harlequin has explained otherwise." She went over to him, placed a hand on his forearm. "I do not fear him; I truly believe that he means us no harm."

"As do I." He placed his hand gently over hers, drawing her closer. "Our host is indeed a... unique... individual."

The Harlequin gave them an appraising smile. "Then, you will accept my humble invitation?"

"Yes, gladly."

Vincent nodded, still reserved. "For now, yes. As long as you understand that Catherine is under my protection." Vincent's look was not lost on the Harlequin, his meaning clear.

"Understood, Noble Sir...." The tone was almost impish, revealing, for a moment, his true nature; then

he bowed graciously, straightened, and waved an arm to encompass the elegantly furnished room and the atrium beyond the French doors. "For now, then, this is your domain. To be used as you will. And to that purpose, I offer an additional... shall we say, inducement?" He stepped back, and surveyed them minutely; nodding as he spoke. "Yes... yes, you are suited for one another; there is only one thing that separates you...." He raised a hand to forestall their comments. "Please, allow me to finish. I am the Harlequin, and I possess certain powers. Since before your race began, I was the instigator, and nurturer, of romance... romance of the soul, of the spirit, that reached beyond mortal understanding. For the gods, all was possible; but for mortals, very little...."

"Yes," Vincent interrupted. "I have heard that part of your legend."

"Legend? Yes, I suppose you would look upon the story as a legend. But I am the one who bring star-crossed lovers together; I," he added with a note of pride, "am the one who makes it possible for all beings to express love."

"How? How can that be made possible?"

The Harlequin picked up what appeared to be an ornamental object from a white and gold Baroque-style side table. He held it aloft, and the light broke over its curved surface, creating a myriad of rainbow arcs and flashes.

"A crystal ball?" Vincent's scowl was not encouraging to further conversation.

Again, the Harlequin gave his enigmatic smile. "Vincent, surely you should know how unwise it is to accept things at face value."

"Then what is it?" Catherine asked. "And what does it have to do with us?"

"It is crystal, but it is a sphere - perfect in every way, and each such crystal has its own individual properties and power, for one who has the ability to employ it. This sphere was chosen especially for you, Vincent...." The Harlequin's gaze was steady, serious... yet gentle. "When I touched it, you were revealed to me; and through you, Ms. Chandler. I perceived your unique bond, the love you have for one another...." He paused. "And I called you to me, and you answered."

He saw the unspoken question in their eyes, and he approached them, held the sphere at eye-level before them. An indistinct, cloudy form appeared in the center, shimmering and swirling. As it held their gaze, he spoke quietly.

"Have you never wondered, Vincent, how you would be if you were completely human?"

Vincent's head jerked back, mane flying as he locked eyes with the Harlequin; however, his initial anger faded quickly, as there was no rancor in the Harlequin's demeanor. He felt Catherine's hand tighten on his arm, and he attempted to maintain an aloof dignity.

"I fail to see----"

"No, no, no... forget your pride; you know the answer, even if you are unable to speak it...."

"Vincent *'is'* human, in many ways, and in many ways, he's more than human," Catherine cut in, angered by this stranger's prying.

"I have no doubt of that; otherwise, I would not have brought him here. Or you. Now, Vincent," he turned his attention once more to his leonine guest. "Truthfully, now... if you *'could'* be human, if only for a short time, would you accept it? For with this crystal I have the power to do just that."

"Human? I would be human?" Vincent dared not hope that such a thing could be possible. The enormity of the quietly spoken suggestion gave him pause, and brought to mind all the times that he had dreamed, prayed, and despaired of ever being like everyone else. Human. A miracle... or magic.

"You would be human in every way. As you would have been if the fates had willed it. But it would last a short time. For twelve hours, you can live as a human."

Vincent hesitated, looking down into Catherine's stricken face. She glanced away, back to the crystal; the form within was taking on a definite shape, darkly translucent.

"Catherine...."

She heard the question in his voice, saw it in his eyes. And she knew, without any words between them, what it meant to him; the unexpected fulfillment of a futile, lifelong dream. She would neither encourage nor discourage Vincent's decision - for to her, there would be no difference.

"Follow your heart, Vincent," she said softly. "And know that I love you always."

She felt his embrace tighten, then ease as he stepped aside.

"How is it done?"

"Very simply," the Harlequin smiled, "for twelve hours you will be human; and if, at any time during that period, you wish to return to your true self, you need only to come into physical contact with the crystal. Otherwise, the spell will end and you will return whether you are in contact with the crystal or not. Understand?"

"Yes."

He held the crystal at arms' length. "Place your left hand over the sphere."

Vincent did so, finding his gaze drawn to the crystal's flawless depths. There was a sense of displacement, a cool tingling coursing through him; it ebbed and surged, then flowed away, bringing in its wake a comforting warmth that infused his entire being. It was something outside his experience, and though not unpleasant, its very nature was disquieting.

To Catherine's limited senses, a fine, glittering mist formed almost imperceptibly, encircling Vincent from head to toe. The shifting particles glowed brilliantly, sparkling pinpoints that whirled in convoluted spirals to first reveal, then conceal the mystical transformation taking place. Then the glow dimmed, and the particles coalesced and swirled around the crystal sphere. The sparkling motes disappeared into the crystal, reforming into Vincent's leonine presence.

Then he found himself looking at the reflection in the crystal, into eyes that he had known forever; into a face that was familiar in expression, if not character. He looked like everyone he'd ever known, and no one he'd known.

Neither noticed the departure of the Harlequin; they stood, instead, looking at each other in wonderment.

"How I have longed to touch you," he said, voice low and husky; the voice she had fallen in love with before ever seeing his face. His hand brushed her cheek lightly, at first unused to the lack of claws; then his arms were around her, and they shared their first true kiss.

"Catherine," Vincent had broken the embrace and held her at arms' length. "You look at me so strangely. Do you not like what you see?"

"You look beautiful," she looked up into the familiar leonine face. "You are always beautiful to me... but...." her eyes caught sight of the Harlequin standing in the doorway. He put his finger to his lips and shook his head. Catherine understood.

The Harlequin was suddenly standing next to them, appearing as if from thin air. He spoke to them softly.

"You have only twelve hours, use the time wisely. Perhaps you would enjoy a walk in our garden." He

swept his hand in the air and pointed at what looked like a solid wall. Mysteriously the wall faded into an archway leading to a colorful flower garden alive in the sunshine.

"How can the sun be shining? We came here at night." Catherine asked their strange host.

"Twelve hours, my friends. If you question all you see, your time will be wasted." With a gracious bow and an enigmatic smile, the Harlequin disappeared.

"He's right, you know," Vincent's voice broke the silence. "We must make the most of this time together."

Catherine smiled at him, and took his arm. "Shall we walk in the garden then. In the sunshine."

"I would like that." He returned her smile and led the way out the door.

The sunshine felt good on Vincent's face. '*A face like any other man*' he thought to himself. The couple walked in silence, until they reached a small pond. Two swans lazily swam by, ignoring their guests.

"Are you enjoying yourself, Catherine?"

"I'm enjoying being with you, here in the daylight." She reached up and kissed him, slipping her arms around his neck.

Vincent returned her kiss and whispered. "I love you. I wish we could stay this way forever and always." He stared into the clear blue water and scrutinized his reflection. "In a few hours it will be over and I will be myself again. All of this just a pleasant dream"

Catherine also peered into the water, seeing only the likeness of Vincent's wonderful face. She wondered what '*he*' was seeing. Slowly, the water began to swirl, blurring her vision. When it calmed, she saw a face vaguely familiar. Startled, she jumped back.

"Are you all right, Catherine? What frightened you?" Vincent was looking at her with concern. Her Vincent, with his exotic features and sapphire eyes. She gazed back into the water and saw a stranger. Then she realized the reflection in the water was Vincent as he now saw himself. She studied the watery face. It was strong and chiseled, with long golden hair. Not unlike her true love, but the eyes didn't seem so blue, so full of wonder.

"Come, Catherine. Let us enjoy our time together in this wondrous garden." Looking up cautiously, she saw the face she loved above all others. Smiling, she followed him down one of the many paths.

"Did you know I was a Girl Scout?" Catherine announced proudly. "Got two badges for flora and fauna. Not bad for a city girl. Let me see if I can remember all the blossoms' names." She pulled Vincent behind her as she made her way further into the maze of flowerbeds and shrubbery. Stopping at an abundantly flowering bush.

"Snowballs!" Catherine exclaimed. "I used to love these when I was a little girl. They came in all different colors. The pink were my favorite." Catherine sighed wistfully. "We had four bushes of them in front of our house in Connecticut. My mother used to pick them and make bouquets. I would pretend to be a bride. My mother even threw rice at me from the porch. And then I would toss the flowers over my shoulder."

"You will be a beautiful bride one day, Catherine." Vincent kissed her hand.

"Is that a proposal?"

Vincent put his head down and breathed heavy. "You know I would want nothing more, Catherine, then to spend my life with you, forever."

They continued walking, until they came to a meadow. In its center, a blanket had been laid out, complete with picnic basket.

"Last one to the blanket is a rotten egg." Catherine yelled and took off toward the awaiting meal.

Vincent's long legs made short work of the distance, and he was opening the wicker basket by the time Catherine arrived.

"Anything good in there? I'm starving." She said, peering over his shoulder.

"Let's see.... cheese, crackers, some cold shrimp, grapes, cherries and... ah... a bottle of wine." Vincent pulled the treasures from the basket.

They were both sated, and laid content in each others' arms studying the cloud formations.

"Have you ever watched the clouds before today, Vincent?"

"No. It was a luxury I was never afforded."

"It's amazing how much I've taken for granted over the years. Sunshine, flowers, clouds, even a kiss. They all are so special when shared with you."

Vincent lifted Catherine into his embrace, and covered her face and throat with kisses. "How long I have wanted to love you. To tell you, to show you... how I felt in my heart, my soul."

There in the sunshine, they made love. Each knowing the other through their bond. Each taking and receiving. Sharing themselves.

The sun was beginning to set, and a cool dampness filled the air. Catherine sat with her back to Vincent, his arms around her protectively.

"We better get back to the house," Catherine said.

"Yes, we should leave before our time is up." Vincent's voice was sad.

"Our time will never be up," she kissed softly, deliberately. "In fact, ourtime has just started."

The walk back seemed much shorter. Maybe it was the path they took, but before long they stood in front of the elegant mansion.

"I believe twelve hours has just about past, Catherine. I thank you for sharing my dream, and making so many more dreams come true."

Just then the heavens opened, and it began to rain. They were about to run for the house, but found they were in a deserted lot. In the distance was bulldozing equipment, and the foundation of what used to be an elegant mansion.

"Vincent, where is everything?"

"It's gone, Catherine, all of it." Vincent was staring at his hands, furred and clawed. "I'm sorry. I had no right. I knew it wouldn't last. How can you stand to be near me, now that I am myself again?"

"Vincent, look at me." She lifted his head. Her eyes searching the depths of his, willing him to understand. "You only changed in your mind."

"That's not true! I saw myself in the crystal ball, in the pond. I changed, Catherine, I was human!" He pulled away from her and ran.

"Vincent, Vincent," Catherine called into the darkness. When her cries went unheeded, she ran after him. Her once beautiful gown, wet and mud-caked. The rain was becoming heavier, and her visibility lessened. She caught sight of him, in the glare of a half-lit street light.

"Vincent, stop running. you can't run away anymore." She fell to her knees, unable to take another step. Immediately he was by her side, holding her, kissing her wet hair.

"Vincent, I love you. I love you. How many times must I say it before you believe me, no magic could ever change that. You are and always will be the man I love. Just the way you are."

"Catherine, I do believe you. I do, I do. What have I done to deserve you? I love you so much." He looked at her, now wet and bedraggled, and the bond of their love strong and true. He kissed her and felt her joy in him.

In the distance was the sound of tinkering bells, as the Harlequin faded from the horizon.

END