



He stood in the half-light raying from the tunnel entrance, his chest rising and falling with the quickened breath of his long run from the waterfall cavern. As he watched, she came, running with desperate speed, never slowing as she neared, rocketing into his arms with an explosion of words:

“Oh, forgive me, forgive me for doubting! What we have is all that matters! It’s worth everything!”

“Everything,” he answered, his arms folding her close to his great body. Their embrace tightened, her body molded to his, her head nestled into that shoulder that had held it so many times, for so many reasons.

She raised her head to look into his blue eyes. As their eyes met and locked, a stillness came to them. Breath stilled, bodies stilled---and slowly, their gaze still locked, his head came down, hers raised to meet it, and their lips touched, and held.

His kiss was suffused with tenderness, his lips soft with his love and care for her. It was over in a moment, her head back on his shoulder, everything the same---and nothing the same.

In a moment he raised his head and brought her face up to his with a finger under her chin.

“Catherine, we must talk. Will you come Below?”

She smiled her assent, and he turned with her, his arm still holding her against him, and began to walk toward the tunnel entrance.

“There is tea. Will you have some?” He moved quietly around his chamber, pouring tea, bringing it to where she sat in his big chair. As she accepted the cup and sipped, he took a place, not as usual on his bed, but kneeling on the floor by her side. His eyes moved over her face, to her lips; then, surprising her, down the column of her throat, lingering at the soft hollow there, and then back to hold her eyes.

“Catherine, I thought I might never see you again.”

Now he had tears in those beautiful blue eyes.

“I thought---I might never be able to say to you what I want to say now...”

He stopped for a moment, took her hands and brought them up to his mouth briefly. His eyes were soft with his love for her when he continued.

“I love you. I love you more than I can ever express. And this love is more powerful than I can withstand any longer.” He stopped again.

“Catherine--- I want you. I want to hold you in my arms, to make love to you.”

She stared in stunned amazement. To hear him say those words was beyond her dreams; a tremor began in her middle, and spread to her limbs. She put the cup down quickly, afraid to drop it. Her words stumbled out, breathless and shaken.

“Oh, Vincent, how I have wanted to hear those words! I have loved you so...I know you care for me, but to hear you say the words is such...such a joy...”

She reached out to him, touching his face lightly with her fingertips. His furred hand came up to stroke her hair, and he leaned slowly closer, drawn by the magic of her loving look. But, being Vincent, he had second thoughts. He straightened, and his hand dropped.

“I need to tell you what my thoughts have been, before...before we go further... When I left you in the tunnel entrance last night, I was convinced of the rightness of my action, convinced that ending our relationship was the least painful, the kindest thing we could do for one another.

“But almost immediately I felt a doubt, I wondered if I had sent you away needlessly. Then I began to know what pain can be.”

His eyes fell away from hers, his head dropped until his face was curtained in his golden mane.

“The memory of you calling after me, begging me to wait...the thought that I had closed the door upon your pain, was almost more than I could bear.”

Her eyes starry with tears, she answered softly, “It did hurt me. That closing door shut out all of my hopes, my dreams--- our dreams. I felt as though nothing mattered, as though I were dead inside.”

His head came up swiftly, his hands reaching for hers, and he brought one to his lips and pressed a soft kiss upon her palm.

“My Catherine---that I should give you such pain---.”

Again he swayed toward her, his longing so apparent in his eyes that her breath caught. Her hand was still in his; holding her gaze, he brought it up until his mouth touched its palm again, and then again, sending pleasure soaring through her....

But he had not yet finished with the explanation that she must hear.

“I have been wrong since the beginning. I thought that I must keep in check the side of me that wanted you so desperately, that has wanted you since my first sight of you. And I thought also that I must protect you from your own need. Catherine---I have known of your desire for me. I felt its first stirring, and its progression until it became a force equal to mine. How I wanted you then!”

His eyes burned with his desire, and he had begun to tremble.

“But I thought that the only way to protect you from the consequences of loving me was to keep us from that final commitment. I was so afraid that if I ever, even once, held you---loved you as I wanted to so much---oh, Catherine, so much!---I was afraid I could never let you go, that I would hold you with me selfishly, at any cost, without considering what was best for you. I--I am still afraid of that; I must guard against it with all my strength.

“But as I have thought about our relationship, I see how much damage our abstinence has caused. We have both made ourselves ill with longing. I have been so nearly mad with it at times that I have been terrified of what the consequences might be, if I turned my strength in that madness on an innocent bystander...or Heaven forbid, on you.

“And your reaction when you wanted me with you to listen to the Grieg, wanted me to the point of pain; your agony as you told me how much you wanted to be with me---I can't know, but I believe that it was desire denied that made you want me there so desperately. I believe you would not have felt such pain had you known that when you were away from me, you could come back into my arms; not only to the love, but the lovemaking that you have deserved to have from the beginning.”

Now his tremors had become more evident, and his arms crept around her, drawing her into his embrace. Her response was immediate and ardent. She slid forward in the chair to bring her whole body into contact with his. Her knees parted to let him between so he could draw closer, and he drew a ragged breath as he felt her body against him, her legs close around him.

Now at last his mouth came down on hers. This second kiss was unashamedly sensuous, both of them in a haze of desire and longing. Her lips parted, his followed quickly, and she felt his tongue explore her lips, then slide softly into her mouth to taste her entirely. The sensation of his mouth upon hers, the feel of his lips and tongue as they caressed her, were more than she had ever dreamed.

Desire became all of her consciousness, her whole being aching toward him. Through the mist of her longing, she felt his hands sliding down to her hips to pull her closer to him, to that place where she could feel his growing erection pressing its welcome heat against her.

As he raised his head at last, she looked at him in wonder at his ardor, this straightforward expression of his longing, after the long suppression of it in the past. But a greater surprise awaited her with his next words.

“Catherine---” his voice was unbelievably deep and throaty. “Will you be my lover---will you come to my bed---will you receive me into your body, let me be engulfed in you, let me love you completely, utterly? Please, please, my darling, my love, let me love you as I have dreamed.”

Tears ran down her face. Her voice was ragged and broken as she replied. “Oh, Vincent, I am yours---always and entirely. I have dreamed also, you know! I want you so much---I love you so much!.”

His arms around her, he lifted her effortlessly even as he stood up. Her tears called him to kiss them away, and he did so, his mouth hot against her cheeks, as he carried her in his great arms to his bed.

As he laid her on the pillows, he slid down after without a break in his fluid movement. Lying slightly to the side to keep his great weight from her, he pressed against her for his full length.

His mouth found hers again and softly he began to explore the possibilities of this wonderful contact. She also explored, her tongue sliding slowly over that marvelous cleft upper lip, to find the hidden places of his erotic joy. And find them she did, for he froze and moaned softly, to her great delight.

The kiss deepened and he began to growl softly in his throat; she heard it with joy, her excitement enhanced by the low sound of his pleasure. As his arousal grew, she felt his erection grow larger, hot and pulsing, against her thigh.

She raised her leg slightly, to press against him more closely, to feel that wonderful heat and life of him that was for her, for her only. He answered her movement with a sinuous twist of his body that left their

legs intertwined, her thigh caught between his muscular legs, his erection pressed even more closely to her.

At last he broke the kiss slowly, reluctantly. Gazing down at her, he spoke in a half-whisper. "I need...to see you. May I...take this off?"

He touched her blouse, then let his fingers run softly over it, feeling the breast beneath. His claws left trails across the fabric and across her breast beneath it that were nearly visible to her, she felt them so intensely.

She was stunned by the assurance and overtness of his desire. He asked for what he wanted without hesitation or diffidence, and she was glad of it. She knew that he had never before been with a woman, but here was no tyro, unsure of himself and of her. Here was a man, in the full assurance of his manhood, loving his woman, and certain of her positive response to him.

He unbuttoned the blouse slowly, and drew it back to expose her breasts. The front closure of her bra stymied him, but she reached up and flipped it open with one hand, and her breasts were there, in his view. He stopped completely-- looking, looking. At last his hand came up to cup a breast, and his thumb rubbed slowly over a nipple that rose gladly to his touch. Always careful of his claws, he began to caress her, to feel her skin in his hand, to touch the erect peak again and again. She began to breathe erratically as his touch made her flesh more and more sensitive, more and more responsive to the masculine hand making love to it.

As he made this tender love to her, he spoke in that deepest voice that seemed to come from him only in loving.

"Catherine, my own love, you are so beautiful, your skin so soft, you are everything that I have wanted. And your response---I feel it with every part of me, making every touch so much sweeter, because I know how much you want it too. I thank you for these things, with all my heart." And he bent to kiss her mouth.

Soon it was evident that there was still too much clothing between them. When she indicated by sliding her hand under his sweater and then up to raise it, that she wanted him to take it off, she saw the first sign of diffidence he had shown. A lifetime of hesitance and shame over the differences of his body was evident in his tension as he bared his upper body, although he raised himself up and did it quickly, knowing that it must be done.

His body was magnificent. There was no other word. The immensely wide shoulders tapered quickly to a slim waist, the whole sculpted with finely articulated muscle, and finally, to complete the perfect picture, covered with soft golden fur.

She put up her hands to stop him from lying down again so that she could look. And look. As the seconds stretched out, his tense body relaxed; the admiration in her eyes was evident. He finally began to smile.

"Catherine, have mercy!"

She sat up in her turn, and slipped the opened blouse off her shoulders. Then she deliberately unbuttoned the waistband of her trousers, unzipped them, and lay down again, lifting her legs in the air. He quickly grasped the bottom of the pants and drew them off.

Then he stopped, perfectly still, looking down at her. She was clad now only in a scrap of silk panties, and his eyes lit with the sight of her there on his bed, naked, waiting for him to come to her.

As he looked, he unfastened his pants. Pants and boots were disposed of, and he was back on the bed, his body again tight against hers, now with nothing between them.

As they kissed, his desire for her became a force so barely within his control that he backed away a little.

She made a small noise of protest and he smiled and whispered, "I'm not finished looking yet."

He looked for only a moment; he had to touch. A tender kiss, then his mouth traveled slowly, with

sensuous intent, from her mouth down the side of her throat, to her collarbone, to her breast, where it found a nipple. She moaned with pleasure as he drew her into his mouth. He remained there at her breasts, suckling with eager mouth. She trembled and moaned and writhed in her pleasure.

At last his mouth left her breast and moved lower. She felt lips, tongue and teeth as he traversed her ribs, her waist and her belly, leaving a trail of sensitized, responsive flesh wherever his mouth touched her.

He reached the scrap of silk that was all she was wearing. She heard it rip, and it was gone. He knelt between her knees, she saw his golden mane sink slowly toward the center of her, and an instant later felt his lips and tongue lazily moving up her thighs, across her pubic curls, and then, at last, he reached her center, and his lips and tongue were there, bringing sensations that made her body convulse in pleasure. Her hands came down to bury her fingers in his mane, to hold him to her.

At the moment when she thought she could stand no more, when her mind was dissolving in pure sensation, he lifted his head. He looked up at her and smiled, triumphant in his ability to give her this incredible pleasure. Then he moved back up her body with deliberation, kissing his way.

As he reached her mouth he slid over her to place the turgid head of his shaft where she wanted it to be. Her legs opened farther to let him come to her---

"Please, please" she moaned into his ear. He moved against her and his penis slid softly inside. He stopped, arrested by the unbelievable feeling of her around him, caressing him with her body.

Joy blew through him like a wild wind, and he thrust again to bring himself all the way into her, all the way to the heavenly pleasure waiting there inside. He moved slowly on her, listening to her breathing, measuring her excitement, making no more speed and force than would give her the greatest intensity of feeling. Every nuance of her pleasure was his great pleasure too.

As desire mounted within them both, his thrusts became faster, deeper, making control more difficult, until finally all control was gone, finally he was only conscious of exquisite sensation.

There was no stopping the desire that burst through both of them with tidal force. As ecstasy came upon them inevitably she cried out, writhing under him, and his roar of completion mingled with her cry. -----

He woke and turned his head to see her lying there, her tangled hair half-hiding her sleeping face, her shoulders and one breast bare of covers. How beautiful she was!

As memory of the act of love flooded back, he silently thanked whatever gods there were for the joy of her. He reached out and carefully covered her bare shoulders, then turned himself to face her, where he could look at her until he went back to sleep.

END