



Vincent had been uneasy for some time; his mind was not on the game. Finally Father gave up; exasperation was in his voice as he said, “What is it, for Heaven’s sake? I could get more concentration from Mouse!”

“I’m sorry, Father; you’re right, my mind is elsewhere.” Vincent shook his head, confusion evident on his face. “Something is wrong...I don’t know.... I feel uncomfortable about Catherine. I think she’s asleep, but there’s something...I don’t know.”

“Go and find out!” Father replied. “You’re not going to be able to do anything else until you do know.” He sat back resignedly. It seemed that the game was over for the night, and he had cherished hopes of one of his infrequent wins.

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Vincent stepped down onto the balcony. The lights were on in the living room and bedroom. So...she hasn’t gone to bed, he thought as he tapped lightly on the dining room door. But...something is wrong! He knocked again. When there was no answer, his anxiety drove him to do something unprecedented; he opened the door and stepped hesitantly into the dining room. All seemed in order, but Catherine was not visible. Calling “Catherine?” softly, he crossed the carpet and looked into the bedroom. Immediately his ears told him that water was running in the bathroom. She’s in the shower, he told himself; ...but if she were only showering he would have a sense of her waking presence. Uncertainly, with a strong sense of intrusion, he moved further into the bedroom. The bathroom door was partially open; he crossed to it and spoke her name again, questioningly. No answer; he hesitated for a long moment, then pushed it open and looked inside.

“Catherine!” She was sprawled nude on the bathroom floor, half out of the shower stall, her wet hair spread on the floor around her head, her skin pallid. Terror stricken, his breath stopped, Vincent knelt beside her to ascertain her condition. With a deep gulp he began to breathe again as he realized that she was alive. She was breathing, but she was unconscious, and she was icy cold.

In the shower stall the water was not turned off completely, and a trickle of cold water fell steadily onto her hip and ran down her body. The bath mat under her upper torso was soaking wet with cold water. Her unconsciousness, the icy water and the cold tile floor had made a deadly combination. Life was ebbing lower with every degree of drop in her body temperature.

Quickly Vincent checked her over for injury, and found a large lump on her head; so, she had fallen. Looking around, he surmised that she had hit her head on the side of the wash basin. He could find no other injury but a couple of bruises, probably from the fall. Lifting her carefully into his arms, he carried her into the bedroom where he laid her gently down on the bed. With towels from the bathroom he began to rub her chilled body dry.

But getting her dried was not going to get her warmed, and he had do that immediately. His urgent concern for her made his thinking run in circles, but after distractedly considering and discarding blankets, hot water bottles, and building a fire in the fireplace, he began to strip off his clothes. He himself was by far the best source of heat available.

Without further thought he opened the covers, pulled them over her, and slid in beside her. He drew her close to his body, his arms around her, his legs entwined with hers, touching her in every place that he could. He began to rub her back and her arms, and he breathed on her face and neck, his warm breath bringing a tinge of color back into her blue lips after a few minutes. As he worked over her he whispered words of his love to her, his mouth moving almost without sound, lingering over the beloved name. "Catherine...stay with me...Catherine, Catherine...I love you...Catherine...."

After a long time he thought she seemed warmer, and his anxiety lessened as he began to think that she would be all right. The steady chafing movement of his hands slowed and stopped as color began to creep back into her face; but as his fear for her decreased, a sudden burst of comprehension made him stiffen with shock.

In what position had he put himself as he worked desperately for her survival? He was holding his adored Catherine naked in his arms, pressed tightly against his body. He lay as close to her as one person can be to another, both of them totally unclothed; it was a position not aspired to in his most uncontrolled daydreams. He looked down at her closed eyes, and down further at her breasts pressed tight against his chest; and his arms around her suddenly became not medical necessity, but an embrace.

As the realization of this unbelievable circumstance came home to him he looked spellbound at her lips, a breath away from his, and the impulse to kiss her was almost irresistible. But he was afraid to move at all, to feel his naked body moving against hers; and afraid not to move also, afraid to stay there in that contact at once so wonderful and so impossible. He lay suspended in indecision for a long moment, but in the end his body made the decision for him. His breathing began to quicken as his whole physical being awakened to the reality of this beloved woman at last within his intimate embrace, and he felt an erection quickly asserting itself.

He drew himself frantically away from her; and as he did so, Catherine opened her eyes. Her hand went uncertainly to the side of her head, and she winced as she touched the bruise above her ear. "Oh God! My head hurts! What happened?" Then as she began to look around her, the unusual state of affairs became evident. As her head cleared further, she looked at him questioningly. "Vincent, what happened? How did we get...here?"

Vincent was so embarrassed as to be incapable of coherent speech, a state not usual with him. "I...you were hurt...I didn't think, I didn't...I had to get you warm! I didn't do anything!" He sat up, reached for his pants on the floor beside the bed, and sticking his legs out from under the covers began to pull them on.

Catherine looked confused. "My head hurts...I can't follow that."

He took a deep breath. "I'm sorry. I came in, you were on the bathroom floor, unconscious, and

covered with cold water. You were ice cold. I had to get you warm...I ....”

“I remember now; I slipped in the shower.... Vincent?” She put her hand out and touched his bare back.

He sprang up, galvanized by the touch of her hand. “I...I’ll be right back.” He scooped up the rest of his clothes and disappeared into the living room.

Catherine lay looking after him, her head still swimming, the pain of it making her dizzy. After a couple of minutes he returned, dressed. He handed her the bedside phone with an apologetic shrug. “Here...could you call Peter; I...I don’t know how to do it. You may have a concussion, Catherine, I can’t leave you alone; he should come right away.”

Catherine had some difficulty in organizing her thoughts, but she pulled the phone toward her and picked up the receiver. She found Peter at home. With some faltering and hesitation she explained that she had had a fall, and that Vincent was concerned that she might have a concussion. Peter answered with his usual quick grasp of any situation, “OK, you don’t have to talk any more, I’ll be there in fifteen minutes. Lie still, and don’t go to sleep! You can have aspirin. Goodbye.”

Catherine put the phone down, too concerned with her pounding head to think of anything else. “Oh Vincent...my head hurts!”

Vincent was regaining steadiness now that he was again fully dressed; but as his self possession returned, his head also had begun to ache with his perception of her pain. “Catherine...can I get you anything? Aspirin? Or is there something else...something better?” His knowledge of over the counter analgesics was slight.

“Yes, aspirin, please! Peter said aspirin was OK. In the medicine cabinet.” When he looked nonplused, she explained, “The cabinet on the wall over the sink in the bathroom. The bottle says ‘Bufferin’”.

Peter arrived as promised. Vincent let him in, and then while Peter and Catherine were saying hello he stepped out to the balcony, and was gone.

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Forty eight hours later, Vincent entered his chamber from the bathing room, vigorously toweling his head. Taking a brush from the dresser, he sat down in his big chair and began to use it on his hair. After a long day’s work in the tunnels a hairbrush was about as heavy an implement as he cared to lift. As he worked at the tangles in a desultory fashion, his tired body and the soothing effect of the bath just finished combined to relax his self-discipline, and he let his mind drift to a vision of Catherine as she had appeared to him at their last meeting.

The image that was burned into his mind was that of her lying in his arms, nude, her breasts crushed against his chest, her mouth only inches from his. He could feel again the softness of her skin as his hands moved over her back, and the contours of her body pressed tightly against him.

The hairbrush slowed and stopped as the vision took on color and solidity. She was there again, pressed against him. His closed eyes saw her, his arms felt her, and his body began its inexorable climb to full sexual readiness. God! How he wanted her!

He jumped up from the chair and began to pace the room, seeking relief in movement. During the past two days, how many times in unwary moments had he followed the same scenario, to end with the same frustration and agonized longing!

His mind drifted back over the years of their relationship, seeking an answer to the endless problem. He’d wanted her since the first moment of their meeting, but his dreams of her had been at first innocent in their love and devotion. As his hunger and frustration grew, however, he went to bed at night apprehensive of what dreams would come to him; his shame at what he dreamed did nothing

to stop the sensual nature of his sleeping thoughts. The touch of her mouth, the feel and taste of her breasts, the sight and the feeling of her naked body against his were not unfamiliar to him in his dreams; and although he knew it was reprehensible, he couldn't say with truth that he was sorry.

Now, as he paced the floor in an effort to control his longing for Catherine, he threw back his head and a low growl came from his throat as he faced his frustration. Since the incident of two nights ago, everything had changed. Now his dreams were not waiting for him to sleep; now the sight and feel of her were with him twenty four hours a day. How was he to stand this? How resign himself to less than what he had seen and felt; her body in his arms, her skin against his?

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Catherine sat in her bed, propped up by a half dozen pillows, musing over a cup of tea. In the forty eight hours since the accident, or more accurately, in the twenty four hours since her monumental headache had moderated, she had thought a great deal about the incident, and about Vincent's part in it. He had saved her life, she felt very sure of it; but it wasn't the first time that had happened.

No. Vincent's agitation and his hurried departure had not been caused by his fear for her safety. He had been driven to the edge of irrationality by the sight and the touch of her naked body. Half unconsciously, she stretched her body with sensuous pleasure, thinking of the effect her nakedness had on him. Heat spiraled through her as she remembered his trembling body and incoherent speech as he sat on the side of her bed pulling on his pants.

She put the cup down on the bedside table and leaned back against the pillows. Her eyes closed, and she gave herself up to a daydream of him. His body, naked...she remembered the sight of his naked chest profusely covered with golden hair, and his back...that broad, muscular back! She saw it again in her imagination, and saw her hand come up to touch it, caressing his skin...she began to breathe faster, her body coming to instant readiness, warmth and wetness blossoming at her center. As he stood to pull up his pants, she had caught a glimpse of muscled buttocks. Those were the muscles that he would use to drive himself deep into her! Oh God, she wanted him so! When...when would it ever happen? It would be harder now to stand the waiting and the wondering. Now she had seen his body; now she knew how beautiful it was in reality, not just in her dreams.

She thought about the whole incident again, replaying in her mind every instant of the sight of him. Then, in her daydream, he turned back to her there in her bed, moving over her, his body heavy and hot on hers. As she dreamed of his lovemaking her body gave her the rapturous release that reality could not; and she sank softly into contented sleep.

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And Vincent, uneasily sleeping, felt also the excitement and then the ecstasy of her body's release, and moaned in his sleep, his body arching upward in blissful gratification. Without waking, he turned over and rested fully at last, replete with his dreaming fulfillment.

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When a sentry reported that Devin had entered the tunnels, Vincent hurried to meet him with relief in his heart. Devin would know; he could talk to Devin!

"I'm very glad to see you; it's almost as though you came in response to my wish!" Vincent held Devin tightly in a large hug, his face hidden from his brother's view.

Devin laughed. "W-o-oh! What's this about? Need your big brother, do you?" Then his body suddenly tensed with his next words "The old man? Is he OK?"

"Yes, yes, he's well." Vincent reassured him quickly. "It's...I'm glad to see you, Devin." They

began to walk down the tunnel, Vincent's arm still around Devin's shoulders. "I'm always glad to see you, you know that. And so is Father, even if it's a little harder to recognize with him." He squeezed the shoulder under his hand sympathetically; the relationship between father and son was still difficult.

"What's the tunnel news, Vincent? Haven't been here in a while. How's Chandler?" He felt Vincent stiffen, and was quickly concerned. "Is she all right?"

"Yes, she's all right...I think so.... It's I who...we need to talk, Devin. I'm glad you're here."

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It was late that night before the opportunity came for them to talk. Vincent came to Devin's chamber with his cloak thrown over his warm flannel nightclothes. "Thank you for staying the night, Devin. It can be difficult to get privacy for any length of time during the day."

"That's OK, I'm enjoying the old familiar atmosphere. Not the old familiar temperature, though; it's cold as hell down here!" He was sitting up in bed, with blankets pulled up tight around him and another draped over his shoulders. He shivered, and grinned at Vincent. "Just like old times, isn't it? I shiver, and you sweat! Now, what's bothering you, little brother?"

Vincent sat on the foot of the bed, dropping off his soft boots and drawing his legs up to sit cross legged, his cloak still draped loosely about his shoulders. He sat silent for several seconds, staring fixedly down at his hands. When he began to speak he didn't look up.

"I don't know quite how to approach this, Devin. It's a difficult subject for me at any time; but I must talk about it. I need to hear what you have to say...I need...the benefit of your experience."

"If it's that difficult, it's about sex. That means it's about Catherine," Devin said quietly. "Tell me about it."

"You know that we...don't...."

"Oh Vincent, still? God, how do you stand it?"

"That's what I need to talk about. Something happened, Devin; something that made it so much harder...I don't know what to do!" His head went down into his hands.

"Tell me."

Vincent looked up, straightened and began to talk. His posture was tense, his face strained but determined; difficult as this subject was for him, some resolution was imperative, and Devin's unexpected visit gave him the opportunity he needed to talk about it.

"Catherine had an accident. She fell in the shower and was knocked unconscious. When I found her she was still unconscious, and she was dying, Dev! Dying of hypothermia, from cold water running on her and the shock of the blow to her head. I...had to get her warm. Had to! I did the first thing that came to my mind...the best thing I could think of to do. I put her in bed, and I...undressed and got in with her."

"That makes sense." The words reassured Vincent; the tightness in his posture relaxed somewhat. Devin had agreed that his course of action was correct, something that he had remained uncomfortable about. He began again to talk, more determined than ever to be frank, however difficult it was.

"It was effective; she got warmed up, and she woke up. And then...there we were, Devin!" He looked up with unhappy eyes, and Devin felt a rush of sympathy for him. "When her eyes opened and I looked down at her, there in my arms...I wanted her so much!" His eyes closed and his head went down again, his face veiled in his hair. His fists were clenched on his knees.

"My God, man, I can sure understand that! What did you do?"

"I got out of there as soon as I had made sure she would be cared for."

"No, what did you do there in bed, when she woke up?"

"I...I don't know exactly, I just pulled away from her before she could feel...what was happening to me. I turned over and reached for my pants on the floor, I sat up and put them on. While I was doing that, she reached out and put her hand on my back...on my skin...." His voice dropped almost to a whisper. "I can still feel it there, Dev,...her hand on my skin." It was becoming easier for him to talk now. Devin's quiet acceptance of his words was having an effect.

"Since it happened...since then I can't think of anything else. I see her body in my mind in every waking minute. I see her naked in my arms...." He was silent for a moment, then he said hesitantly, "Dev, there's a certain line of her body...where her arm comes down to meet her breast...when I think of it...it hurts me. Why should it hurt me, Devin?" He threw his head far back, staring upward blindly, and as Devin watched a tear made a bright trail across the side of his face.

"I know what you mean. There are places on a loved woman's body that are heartbreakingly beautiful." Vincent looked at him wordlessly, amazed that he was understood so clearly. Devin saw his astonishment, and smiled. "Men in love are the same everywhere, Vincent. I've been there."

There was a silence, while both men retreated into their memories. But after a few minutes Devin raised his hands and ran them through his hair.

"I guess you came to me for advice, or at least for an opinion. Anyway, you're going to get it. You'll forgive me if I talk plainly here, Vincent. The time is past for polite evasions.

"I've watched Catherine when you and she were together. At the beginning, when I first knew her, I watched her to make sure she was on the level. Well, she is; she's a straight shooter, Vincent." He grinned, a little wryly. "I guess you probably know that."

"I remember watching her at your last birthday celebration. You were walking around the crowd, talking to people, and Catherine and I were sitting off to one side of the room. She was talking to me, but she was watching you. Her eyes never left you, Vincent; but what got me was that her body followed you too. Her body turned, just a little bit, to follow you wherever you went. What she felt for you was so clear that I felt sorry for her." He looked up to hold Vincent's eyes, "If ever there was a woman who wanted a man, she wants you. She's so conscious of you, of your physical presence, that it's painful to watch. She hungers for you, Vincent."

Vincent said nothing, but his face showed his anguish at the thought of Catherine's desire.

Devin straightened and leaned forward, his eyes intent on Vincent's face. "Listen to me now! It's time to face it! She wants you, and God knows you want her. Do it, man! What's holding you back? Are you still stuck in that junk that Father's been feeding you for twenty years? About 'It can never be'? He's wrong, Vincent; he always has been wrong. It can be! Reach out and take it!"

By the time Devin ceased talking Vincent was shaking his head; he cried out, anger and pain in his voice. "There are other things, Devin!"

There was a short silence; Devin's voice was quiet again when he answered. "Tell me."

"As much as you've always wanted to deny it, Dev, I'm...not like other men. I'm...not sure I'm a man--at all. I...I have thoughts, things that are...animal!" His voice dropped almost to a whisper with the last words.

Devin sat silent, waiting for him to go on.

Vincent's head was dropped low over his hands, his hair hiding his face. His voice was still a soft half-whisper. "Sometimes I have...daydreams, fantasies, about...Catherine. Violent fantasies! Things that could hurt her, injure her! I have wanted to...to throw her to the ground, and..."

"And rip off her clothes, and jam yourself into her as hard and fast as you can!" Devin finished the sentence in a light voice, smiling. "Have you had this one too? The one about taking her from behind? Push her to her hands and knees and just stick it to her!" His smile disappeared after a moment, and

he reached out to put his hand on Vincent's knee. "We've all had those fantasies, Vincent, every man alive!" The grin appeared again. "Well, at least all the men I've ever discussed this with."

Vincent could only stare at Devin, stunned.

"Vincent, sex still has its roots deep in our animal past. Sure, we're better now, we've discovered love, and compassion, and caring for others. And those things have made sex at its best a transcendent experience, with incredible spiritual power.

"But that violent animal past remains always a part of us, and the violence that we get a kick out of in our daydreams is where it shows itself; the only place it shows itself, in normal men. Hate to tell you, buddy, but you're normal!"

Vincent was shaking his head, having a hard time digesting this information. "Dev, how can this be? How can it be that the fear, the terror that I've felt over these things is not justified? I've read everything, all the literature...there's not a word anywhere about what you've just told me!"

"Christ, Vincent, I don't know why it's not there! Maybe it is, and you just haven't found it yet. What I'm telling you is true; ask any man!"

"Anyway, conceivably this will finally convince you that it's a good idea to talk your problems over with someone else! If you'd let other people inside more, maybe you'd find that there are other fears that aren't real. For instance, what has Catherine said about this last incident? Has she told you exactly how she feels about it?"

Vincent looked up guiltily. "No. I haven't seen her since it happened."

Devin shook his head, laughing wryly. "Oh, for Chrissakes, Vincent, get up there and talk to her! How do you expect to find a solution to your problems if you don't talk to the other person involved? Get yourself up there! Go right now!"

"It's too late tonight, she'll be asleep."

"And if she is, do you think she'll mind being wakened?"

"...No, I guess not."

"I guess not! Go!"

Vincent went.

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Catherine was not asleep. She was lying awake in the dark, wondering and worrying about Vincent. He had not come to see her in three days, since the accident. She could guess the agony of embarrassment and guilt that was keeping him away; Vincent was particularly talented in the field of guilt. She smiled tenderly into the dark, understanding him so well, and loving him so much.

When she heard the very soft tap at the window she felt a rush of happiness and relief, but she thought 'He's afraid he'll wake me, and hopes he won't. Then he can put off this meeting a while longer. Well, sorry, Vincent, not this time.' She got up, put on her robe, and opened the bedroom door to the balcony. He was standing in front of the dining room door, but she beckoned him to her.

"Come in." When he didn't move, shaking his head, she said, "Peter said I have to stay in bed another day; I have a little concussion. So you'll have to come in here, because I have to go back to bed."

Reluctantly, he crossed the threshold and stepped into her bedroom. It wasn't possible to argue when her well-being was in question.

"What did Peter say? Tell me, I've been thinking about you...." He stopped. He had been thinking about her, but what he had been thinking didn't bear repeating.

Catherine turned on the small bedside lamp and piled pillows against the headboard. She got back into bed, dropping her robe as she did so, and pulling the quilt up to cover herself as she leaned back against the pillows. "He says I'll be fine! My skull isn't cracked, my brain isn't frazzled, and I haven't even got a cold! The worst I can say is that I've got a sore head!" She smiled at him brightly, knowing he needed reassurance that she was all right.

"Good. You have suffered no permanent damage." he replied gravely.

"None at all." She patted the side of the bed. "Sit down, Vincent."

He looked around the room, searching for a chair.

"No, sit here." She patted the bed again.

With misgiving, he sat at the foot of the bed, drawing one leg up under him, the other foot still on the floor. The experiences of the last three days had made him cautious about any contact with her. Sitting on her bed was probably not a good idea, but he was painfully anxious that she not guess any part of the turmoil he'd been going through since her accident.

He had thought carefully of what he would say to her; logical arguments which made it clear that they needed to be less close in the future, without giving away his passionate feelings; but as he faced her the words disappeared, and he had no idea how to start.

"Vincent?" She inquired softly.

He looked up at her. She was so beautiful; her skin glowed, her hair gave back burnished highlights to the soft light of the lamp. He felt a rush of love for her that softened his features, his face letting her see plainly how greatly he cared for her.

She smiled tenderly at him in response to his look, her face gilded by the lamplight, but his face suddenly closed and he looked away; desire was surging in him more powerfully than ever before. The glow of the lamp on her skin showed him also the soft line of her shoulders, the warm hollow of her throat, and below that the swell of her breasts above the edge of the quilt. And now his memory could tell him what lay beneath the quilt...how her breasts curved gently to the rosy nipples at the peaks, how smooth the skin was over her ribs, how the line of her body drew in to her waist; and below that.... He stood up abruptly, and began to pace.

"Vincent...I think we need to talk about what happened. I know that you're very uncomfortable about it. But perhaps I should start, by thanking you for saving my life...again!"

"Don't...don't thank me! I don't deserve it!" He looked up at the ceiling, unable to look at her, frantic with desire, and equally frantic with the desire to hide it from her.

"Don't deserve it? You deserve everything...everything." Her voice throbbed with her love for him, and his body responded to that call with increased heat.

"Catherine...I must go, I can't do this!" He turned for the door.

"No! Vincent, don't leave, don't walk away again! We can't go on like this; not after what happened; not after we were...so close.... We've got to talk!"

He stopped, his back still turned, remembering Devin saying these same words. His voice was agonized when he answered. "Catherine, I can't...you don't know...you don't know what you do to me!"

There was a little silence, then quietly she began to speak. "What do you think you do to me, Vincent? Do you think that you're alone in this? Do you think that I don't feel it too?" She hesitated, and then plunged, her voice soft and caressing, "Vincent, do you want to make love with me?"

He still stood with his back to her, and she saw it stiffen at her words. "You know the answer to that!" he said, without turning. His voice was deep and almost harsh. Words began to pour out, words she had never expected to hear. "I've wanted it since the first moment I saw you; I want it more than... more than I can ever tell you! I dream about making love with you, and when I wake up I'm glad I did. Dreams are better than this constant hunger! I think about you constantly; your lips, your hands, your

breasts....” His head was down, his shoulders hunched, his enormous tension apparent in the lines of his body.

“When I found myself holding you, in bed with you, so close...so warm...it was...it was perfect bliss! But Catherine, I...I wanted to handle your body while you were lying there unconscious...I am an animal!”

“You are not an animal!” Catherine exclaimed heatedly. “You’re a man in love, who has denied and suppressed his natural desire for far too long!” She was totally in earnest, pleading with him for what she wanted more than anything in life. “And I am a woman in love! I dream also...of making love with you, of my skin against your skin, of your hands and your mouth on me...oh, believe me, I dream! And dreams are not enough for me; I want you! In my arms...in my body, Vincent!”

He whirled around, and she was transfixed by the heat and passion of his stare at her. “Catherine, you will make me forget myself! I must go, now, before I do something...ruinous! We will talk again!” His cloak swirled around him as he turned back to the door, and in a second it shut firmly behind him.

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The light of a single candle made soft highlights and dark shadows on Vincent’s face as he sat at his table, pen in hand. His journal lay open in front of him, but he wasn’t writing. His mind was dwelling, as it had been for the day past, on his last conversation with Catherine. How much had been said in those few minutes! He had told her of his desire for her; he had said it, made it real for both of them. There was no going back from that. But there had been no going back anyway, not from the moment that he had looked down to see her bare breasts pressed against him. He wasn’t sure what the future held for them. It seemed so unbelievable that Catherine could ever be his...his...he had trouble saying it even to himself...his lover. To daydream was one thing, but in reality...it must be impossible!

As he sat musing on these hitherto unlikely prospects, a footstep sounded in the doorway. Mouse appeared around the corner, carrying a small package. “Delivery! Fast delivery! From Catherine.”

“Thank you, Mouse. Did Catherine ask you to bring this?”

“Catherine is my friend. Did it for her. Gonna open it? I’ll wait and see it.”

“I don’t think so, Mouse. I’ll open it later. Maybe tomorrow. Good night, now.”

“But...”

“Good night, Mouse.”

Disappointed, Mouse flung himself out the door.

Vincent took the package to the bed, sat down, and carefully opened it. Inside was a porcelain rose, a beautiful thing, white with a shading of deep rose on the petal ends, and leaves of soft green. There was a note:

*The red rose whispers of passion,  
And the white rose breathes of love.  
Oh, the red rose is a falcon,  
And the white rose is a dove.*

*But I send you a cream white rosebud,  
With a flush on its petal tips,  
For the love that is purest and sweetest  
Has a kiss of desire on the lips.*

*--Catherine*

He stared at the poem and the rose for a moment; then he put them carefully back in to their box, and tucking the box into his shirt he went searching for Devin.

Devin was still Below. This evening he was lying on his bed, reading, Vincent sat down on the end of the bed, and reached for the book as Devin put it down. "Max Brand? You didn't find this down here!"

"You'd be amazed at some of the things you can find in Father's library, Vincent." Devin grinned.

"Dev, I've been mining that library for thirty years. I know every book in it, and this isn't one of them. 'The Tenderfoot'?" He shook his head. "Not in Father's library!"

Devin laughed. "You're right. I brought it with me, but I'm going to leave it in the library. Let's see how long it takes him to find it!"

Vincent's face softened; he could imagine Father's indignation. "That will be good. He needs to be shaken up once in a while."

Then he sobered, and took the box out of his shirt. "I got this by Mouse Mail today. Open it carefully, it's fragile."

As Dev examined the rose and read the note, he smiled broadly. "Well, I guess we know what Catherine's sentiments are. She's a great person, Vincent. But why did you show it to me? It's a pretty personal gift to be showing around, isn't it?"

Vincent was horrified. This aspect of his action had not occurred to him. "...I don't know why! I just—" he couldn't continue; his face showed his chagrin at his indiscretion.

"OK, OK, I'll let you off the hook." Devin grinned at him. "I know why you did it, even if you don't. You wanted to hear me say it was OK, that she's right. Well, I do say so. She's right, Vincent, and it's time you admitted it to yourself."

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He found a second package on his bed when he returned from bathing the following day. This box was much larger and heavier; it contained an exquisite small bronze statuette of a chariot, complete with galloping horses and charioteer. The note read:

*Had we but world enough and time,  
This coyness, Vincent, were no crime.  
But at my back I always hear  
Time's wingéd chariot hurrying near;  
And yonder all before us lie  
Deserts of vast eternity.  
The grave's a fine and private place,  
But none I think do there embrace.*

*Let us roll all our strength and all  
Our sweetness up into one ball,  
And tear our pleasures with rough strife  
Through the iron gates of life.*

*Thus, though we cannot make our sun  
Stand still, yet we will make him run.*

*--Catherine*

...

The next day was Friday, and another package came, on his bed as had been the last one. It contained a small battery driven tape player. A note attached to the top read:

*Push "Play"*

*The song was an old swing ballad from the forties, "Give Me a Kiss to Build a Dream On".*

*Under the player was another note:*

*I'll meet you at the park entrance at dark, to collect that kiss.*

*--Catherine*

He would be there. His heart beat hard at the thought of kissing Catherine; for he fully intended to kiss her, and he didn't intend to stop with a kiss.

Vincent had made up his mind.

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When she came she walked straight into his arms, and the kiss happened without a word spoken; she only lifted her face in silent invitation. He bent his head slowly to her upturned mouth. He was absolutely inexperienced at kissing; his lips touched hers tentatively, softly. He wasn't prepared for the depth of his reaction...the feel of her mouth on his was like a jolt of electricity, and his consciousness narrowed instantly to that point of contact. Then her mouth opened under his, and he was completely lost in the wet warmth inside, sliding his tongue over her teeth, meeting her tongue with delirious, hungry pleasure.

When he raised his head at last, he was without words. His mouth brushed over her face in light kisses; her eyes, her nose, her ears, and then lower to her neck and as far down her body as her open collared shirt allowed. Then back up to her mouth, where he sank again into that new pleasure, still without a word.

Catherine gently broke the kiss this time. Her mouth strayed over his face and down the side of his neck with soft wet kisses, while he stood with eyes closed in rapt immobility, drinking in her loving caresses. She raised her hands, her fingers lost in his hair, and moved his head away from her until she could look into his face.

There was adoration in her eyes. "I'm yours." she said softly.

He gazed at her, his eyes luminous with his love and his desire; then he let go of his tension in a long, shuddering sigh. "Yes...this was meant to be." With a quick motion he lifted her into his arms and stopping only to close the gate behind them, he carried her swiftly down the tunnel. Catherine nestled in his arms, stunned and delighted at the ease of his surrender.

When he set her on her feet, it was in a chamber she had never seen. It was very small, its most prominent feature a large double bed. On the table beside the bed was the porcelain rose that she had sent him.

She looked up at him with surprise. "The rose! You planned for this."

His voice was lowered to its deepest and his speech was halting, nearly incoherent. "It had to happen.... Seeing you...the way you were...touching your body...feeling your skin against mine, looking down at you in my arms...." He began to move toward her like a sleepwalker, unconscious of his surroundings, seeing only her, wanting only to touch her, to feel her against him again. His arms came around her, and his mouth came down on hers.

The kiss was slower, more sensual, than those before it. His tongue made a lingering journey around the inside of her mouth, savoring the feel and taste of her. After a few moments, his hands began to move over her body, stroking her back, moving down to curl around her hips. Catherine melted into his arms. His lovemaking was so wonderful to her that her limbs weakened, her head fell back against his arm, she floated in a haze of sensual pleasure.

Vincent raised his head at last, looking down at her slowly opening eyes and wet mouth. His breath was coming fast and ragged. He moved away from her a step, and his hands strayed over her body, passing lightly over her breasts. Her nipples hardened at that light touch; he was momentarily arrested by the sight of them outlined through the light material of her shirt. Then his fingers began to unbutton the shirt; with shaking hands he pushed it off her shoulders, and she stood before him nude to the waist.

For a long moment he didn't move at all, his eyes devouring the sight of her. Then his hand came up slowly and with the tip of a claw just touched the peak of one breast, at once causing further hardening. His face showed wonder at the effect of his touch on her body as his hand moved to cup the breast, and his thumb stroked delicately the erect nipple.

Catherine's eyes closed as she felt his long fingers on her breast. "Oh, Vincent...touch me, touch me..." Both hands moved over her, stroking her breasts, her shoulders, sliding down over her ribs to come to the waistband of her pants. His breathing was erratic, his hands trembled as he began to unfasten her pants, but her hands came up over his, gently stopping him.

"Let me. Let me undress for you." She looked up at him and smiled, a little shy now that she had said the bold words. A tremor passed over her as she unfastened her pants, her breath coming fast and shallow.

His hands dropped, and he watched as she made herself naked for his pleasure. When she was done she turned to the bed and pulled down the blanket. When she moved to lie down, he stopped her, his hand lightly touching her shoulder. He turned her back to him and she stood still before him as his eyes traveled over her. She felt his look almost as a touch, sliding over her body with tenderness and passion. His gaze came finally to her face, and she saw in his eyes wonder, and joy, and an emerging sense of mastery. Tremors raced through her body; she turned back to the bed, laid herself down and held out her arms for him to join her. Slowly, shaking, his eyes never leaving hers, he let himself down at her side.

She took his hand in hers and guided it over the soft golden brown curls of her pubic mound, down to the cleft between her thighs. She slid his fingers into the cleft, for him to feel the warm wetness there, the signal of her readiness to receive him. "For you, only for you..."

"I...feel it." His voice was ragged. He kissed her again, deeply, his fingers still lingering in the warm place at the meeting of her limbs. Then he raised his head to look into her eyes, as she moved her hand to the side of his face. It slid over the velvety texture of the short hairs that covered his cheeks and chin; then moved further, down the side of his neck to the edge of his heavy sweater. Her fingers curled around the edge of the sweater, moving inside against the skin of his neck, as far as she could

reach.

“Undress for me, Vincent.”

It was a dreaded moment for him, reviving the old fear that she would find him bestial. He pulled himself away from her and sat up quickly on the edge of the bed. His back was to her, he was slumped over the furred, clawed hands that were always in his mind the symbol of his difference.

“Please...I want you.”

He nodded without turning and began to unlace his vest, then stopped. He started to speak, stopped, started again. “...Catherine...I...I am...like an animal!”

She answered, her voice softly caressing, “You are not an animal; you’re the most human person I have ever known. Please, take off your clothes so I can make love to you.”

Taking a deep breath, he began quickly to accomplish the undressing, and in a moment he stood up before her nude, facing his fear, his eyes searching her face for her reaction.

He was magnificent; his mane flowed down over broad shoulders and deep muscular chest, which tapered quickly to slim loins and long smoothly muscled legs. His erection thrust out proudly from the golden hair at his groin. His body was heavily haired, but not grotesquely so. The hair was heaviest on his chest and forearms, forming a soft golden thatch that she found sensuously attractive.

Vincent’s eyes never left hers. He stared intently at her, waiting for some intimation of how she felt. His relief was visible when her arms came up, inviting him to her. “You’re so beautiful, Vincent... come close to me...I want you!” Reassured, he slid down and across the bed into her embrace, feeling her warmth against the full length of him. He pressed his body against her side, his erection hard against her thigh.

Slowly he raised his hand to touch her breast. He cupped the breast in his palm, and lifted the nipple to meet his mouth. He kissed it softly, once, twice; then drew his head back to look at it, standing firm and pink, shining with the wetness of his mouth. A low moan was drawn from him as he bent his head again. As his lips and tongue closed around the nipple and he took it deep into his mouth she drew in her breath sharply. In a moment she was moaning and writhing as his tongue moved over it, and crying out as she felt the edges of his sharp canines just graze it. He lifted his head only to move his attention to the other breast, moaning softly again as he took it into his mouth. Next his mouth moved lower, and she felt his tongue, and lightly his teeth, as his mouth moved over her body. He caressed her with intensity, his body trembling against her, soft sounds coming from his throat now almost constantly.

She felt her body coming to heights of excitement that she could not control; and his shaking became long tremors moving over his body in waves; he also was coming to the edge of restraint. Too long had they both waited for this moment; it would be quick this first time. She put her hands down and raised his face to her as his mouth neared the triangle of soft brown hair at her groin; her voice shook as she said, “Now...I can’t wait...now!”

He moved himself back up her body until his penis came to the place where he felt the slick wetness of her body’s excitement. He gasped as the head of his shaft nudged at the heated opening of her; his fiery passion surging ever higher as he felt himself where he had been before only in his dreams. But this was not a dream...her body was there, under him, inviting him with its wet heat to enter her at last...at long, long last!

Slowly he slid himself into her, until the full length of him was buried in her body’s heat; then he stopped moving entirely. He waited a moment, rejoicing in her body’s close containment and fighting to check his excitement. “Catherine...Catherine,” His mouth moved over her face, he murmured low words between kisses. “Forever, Catherine, forever...my love, my love...” She gasped in reply, “Oh yes...forever!” Her legs moved up around him, holding him there inside her, pressing him tightly into her while her hands moved over his body, caressing and clinging.

He began to move out very slowly, feeling the unbelievable heat and slickness of her interior passage tightening around him, feeling with joy her hands moving over him and her legs clasping him passionately. On an in-drawn breath he whispered her name again, then paused, struggling to maintain control. In a moment he began to move in a rhythmic thrust, slow at first, but quickly accelerating as his excitement mounted. She moved with him, answering his strokes with lifting hips and with little involuntary motions that made him groan with pleasure.

As he moved within her his perception of sensation rose to heights he would not have believed. His body burned with nerves bared to her touch. At the point of their joining the level of sensitivity was so intense that he cried out as if in pain. And still it raised, with every movement the sensation increased, and increased.

Then her body convulsed in climax. The muscles of her interior throbbed and pulsed with the intensity of her feelings, and as she cried out and clasped him to her, her ecstatic pleasure made him lose all semblance of control and he came to his orgasm.

It came with frightening power, pleasure so intense as he had never dreamed of, with involuntary spasms of climactic release and helpless ecstatic outcry, going on and on, until he collapsed on her, totally drained.

He swam up slowly to full consciousness, gradually accepting as real, not a dream, the marvelous feeling of well-being that permeated every part of his mind and body. As awareness of the world around him returned, he realized that he was crushing Catherine under his great weight. Quickly lifting himself, he raised his weight off her, but he couldn't bring himself to separate from her body. "No, don't leave me!" she said, grasping his hips to hold him to her, sharing his desire to remain in close connection. His arms around her, he rolled them both until they laid on their sides. "Better?" He whispered, kissing her softly. "Much better." She snuggled against him, her leg drawn up to lie over his hip, kissing him wherever she could reach easily, eyes closed, sighing deeply.

Vincent reached down to kiss those eyes. His mouth moved over her upturned face as he savored her there in his arms, slowly accepting the reality of the wondrous thing that had just happened to them. As he looked at her relaxed, sleepy face, his whole being was flooded with happiness and contentment; and in his face shone his love for her.

"Go to sleep." His voice deepened and caressed the words, "Sleep in my arms, my love...my love." He kissed her forehead, her temple, her hair, and reached down to kiss her eyelids. "Sleep."

"Yes, I will...for a little while." Her eyes closed, and she snuggled closer.

Vincent too slept, but not at once. The moments spent there with Catherine so close, asleep in his embrace after love for the first time, seemed too precious to waste in sleep; but as the minutes went by he grew drowsy also. Relaxation of the prolonged tension and the satisfaction of his long denied desire were a prescription for sleep, and soon he slid also into tranquil repose.

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When Catherine next opened her eyes, she was still close in his arms, and he was looking down at her with the same radiant love in his face that had been there when she went to sleep, plain even in the soft candle glow. Without a word, he brought his mouth to hers, and the spiral of excitement began again, their bodies finding each other with passion and with love.

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He was still gazing at her with luminous eyes when she woke again. "Have you slept at all, or

have you spent the whole night just looking at me?" She smiled sleepily at him, her hand coming up to touch his cheek.

He smiled his small smile. "I slept. More than I wanted to...I'd rather have looked at you." His arms tightened around her, and his mouth came down to kiss her with tenderness. But he broke the kiss immediately, knowing that it would be too difficult to stop in a moment. He spoke lightly, "It's the middle of the morning. People will be wondering where I am. I think we must begin to get up."

"And I'm hungry!" She smiled at him, "But first, a bath and some clean clothes. If we show up like we are, Vincent, they'll all know that we...well, they'll know!"

"They'll know anyway, soon enough." He stopped for a moment, pondering. "A bath could present a little difficulty. I'm afraid I didn't show much foresight when I chose this chamber; it's a long way from my bath chamber." He looked down at her with amusement in his eyes. "I wasn't thinking very clearly yesterday!" He thought a minute more. "I believe I can get us back there without disaster if we go now, before everyone starts moving around at lunch time."

They got up and dressed quickly, conspirators plotting their escape. Vincent went to the door, lifted the heavy curtain covering it, and peered out. "Come on, the coast is clear!" He put his hand out behind him without turning, and Catherine took it, laughing delightedly at his light-hearted demeanor while he pulled her swiftly out the door and down the tunnel. She was completely lost within three turns as Vincent led her down little-used back ways, but at last they hustled through the door into Vincent's chamber, having successfully negotiated the most dangerous passage of the journey; and she collapsed in a chair, giggling, "Home free!"

She watched as Vincent moved around the chamber, pulling a change of clothes from his wardrobe. Then he surprised her with a gift; a soft light blue shirt of a velvety fabric, an open woolen vest of dark brown with lighter decorative stitching down the front, and a pair of loose beige corduroy trousers with leather trim and a drawstring top; all of them almost small enough for her. She held them up, amazed. "Where on earth...?"

He smiled. "I wasn't always this size. I was cleaning out some cupboards not long ago, and I came across these; they were my very best clothes when I was about fourteen. I thought when I saw them that they might fit you, so I put them aside; then I forgot all about them until now. A fortunate happenstance!"

"They're beautiful. I love them!" She held them up again to admire them. "I'll look like a tunnel native in these. And it's another fortunate happenstance that I wore boots, they'll be perfect!" She piled the clothes over her arm. "Let's go, Vincent. I want that bath!"

Vincent carried his clean clothes on one arm and two unlit lanterns in the other hand, and they started down the tunnel to the bathing chamber. When they got close to the entrance to the chamber, Vincent put one of the lanterns down on the ground. Catherine turned into the entrance, while he walked a few feet past it to put down the other lantern. She was aware that the lanterns were a signal for privacy, and she blushed a little. She turned her head quickly so that Vincent wouldn't see the telltale stain; then blushed harder at the thought that she cared if he did. 'Catherine, grow up!' she told herself silently, amused at her own embarrassment.

She turned to Vincent, and in his face she caught the excitement that had begun with the thought of their coming nakedness. Amusement disappeared from her face as she read clearly his thought and sensed the heat it generated in him.

Quickly they stripped, and for a long moment a look passed between them that held them spellbound while excitement swelled to a torrent of surging emotion. He held out his hand and they stepped together down into the warm water. When they had moved out until the water nearly covered Catherine's shoulders, Vincent could wait no longer. He turned her to him and pulled her urgently into his embrace. His mouth came down on hers, open and searching; and she responded with equal ardor.

As the kiss deepened, Catherine reflexively moved to bring herself closer, taking advantage of the water's buoyancy to lift herself against him and wrap her legs around his waist. Taken by surprise, he stood still for a moment, then with a small growling sound and without breaking their kiss, he moved quickly to slide himself deep into her body.

The explosion of rapture which followed almost at once was so complete, so extreme, that both of them were stunned. Clashed tightly in each other's arms, together they trembled and moaned their ecstatic release. Their eyes were tightly closed, their heads thrown back; their throats opened in concert and made wordless sounds of exquisite pleasure.

They returned to the present time and place still tightly clasped together. Vincent still stood chest deep in the water, Catherine's legs around his waist. The time since they had entered the water was perhaps three or four minutes; and as they recovered the power to think and act they looked at each other with astonishment at the speed and power of the experience. "Vincent, what was that?" Catherine laughed a little, still tight against him, still feeling him inside her.

"I don't know. It was...extraordinary!" He looked down at her with an expression of wonder. "I love you so, I want you so much, so completely. It...happened."

She kissed him softly. "It certainly did." she replied, smiling at him with tenderness.

Slowly they untangled limbs and separated, still slightly dazed. Vincent shook his head a little, clearing it, and reached for the soap. "Baths. That's what we came here for." He smiled at her more broadly than was his habit, his canines showing a little.

"Yes. Baths." Her returning smile was a grin. They began to soap and rinse each other with sensuous enjoyment and with Catherine's lively laughter making Vincent's happiness complete.

They were nearly done when it happened.

"Vincent, where have you been?" They froze as Father's voice preceded him into the room. "Kanin has been looking for you for an hour! You knew..." Father's voice stopped in mid sentence as he entered and took in the scene before him. "...Dear God!" He turned his back swiftly as Vincent moved to step in front of Catherine. His body was stiff with outrage and his voice was cold as he said, "I will see the two of you in my study as soon as you're...dressed." He limped quickly back through the doorway and was gone.

There was more dismay in Catherine's face than in Vincent's. He looked not anxious, but angry. "This is not his concern." He looked down at her worried face. "You needn't come with me, Catherine. I will deal with Father."

As she looked at the anger that was showing in his face and posture, she smiled a little. "Maybe I'd better be there to protect him!"

"Father is fully capable of protecting himself." Vincent's face did not lighten. "There has been a confrontation coming on this subject for too long. I will have no more interference!"

"I'm coming too. This is for both of us to face, Vincent."

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Devin was standing in Father's study when they entered. "Devin, will you leave us," Father's words were curt; he was still very angry. "We have business here."

Devin glanced at Vincent and Catherine, then took a second longer look. Vincent's arm was around Catherine, protective and proprietary; she leaned against him and looked up at him with open adoration. Devin guessed with no difficulty what had happened and why Father was so angry.

He turned and cast a bitter little smile at Father. "Still ruling the world, I see. Always righteous,

always judgmental! But in this case you're wrong, old man. You always have been wrong. Vincent is a man; no more and certainly no less. Why you've persisted for thirty years in treating him like an animal, I fail to..."

"Enough!" Father roared.

"I'm going. Don't listen to him, you two. He's wrong!" He disappeared through the door.

The silence stretched tightly for a few seconds. Father turned, moved behind his desk, sat in his chair, folding his hands in front of him. He said nothing, frowning darkly.

Vincent spoke first, disrupting Father's melodramatic pause. His voice was controlled, but he spoke forcefully. "Be very careful what you say now, Father. We have come here as you...requested; but I will brook no criticism in this matter. You may do damage that cannot be repaired if you speak without thought." His eyes burned with fury. He was angrier than he had ever been in his life at the man who had been more than father to him, and he made no effort to hide it.

Father stiffened, his anger turning to rage at Vincent's words. "I will not allow this to..."

"Be careful!"

"I will not be careful! You will not speak to me in such a..." He stopped suddenly; his eyes had locked with Vincent's. What he saw there gave him pause; there was no flexibility in that gaze. They stared intensely at one another for a long moment; but it was Father's eyes that dropped. Catherine could see the anger draining from his face and body as he bowed his head over his hands, still folded judicially in front of him on the desk. "It is done. What use to discuss it now? Anger can only drive a wedge between us." He put his hands up to his face, passing them over it as if to wipe away the emotion there. He looked very tired suddenly, and very old.

"Catherine," he said. Vincent stiffened, but Father's hand went up to forestall his words. "Vincent, please; let me speak. Catherine," he repeated, "I know...I have known for a long time, that you are...right for Vincent. But...but the habit of years...to protect him...you understand? I have always wanted, as I want now, only the best...for both of you!"

The look that accompanied his words was almost pleading. It was as close to an apology as his stiff-necked pride could manage. His eyes moved past Catherine, to touch on Vincent; the words were meant for him perhaps more than for her. Vincent said nothing; he was not sure he was ready to forgive. Catherine's welfare and happiness came first...always; but now more than ever before.

Father's eyes moved on then, staring into the dark shadows beyond the candles' glow. He stood up with difficulty, leaning his hands on the desk; and very softly to himself he murmured, "Perhaps Devin was right."

Catherine's quick sympathy was engaged by the pathos of that statement. She flew around the desk to put her arms out to the old man. She gathered him in, his head on her shoulder, while a few difficult tears rolled down his cheeks. "It'll be all right, you'll see, Father...we love you..." She murmured soft words of comfort to him.

In a moment Father looked over Catherine's shoulder to smile shakily up at his big son, as Vincent came to put his arms around them, his anger dissolved. As he gathered them both into his embrace, tears were in his eyes also, for the two he loved most in the world.

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Vincent deliberately made their entrance to the dining chamber one that everyone present saw. As they entered, he stopped Catherine in the wide arched doorway and put both of his arms around her from behind, in a pose very much like the one in the painting which hung in his chamber. They stood

still for a moment while he bent his head close to her ear to speak to her; just a few words, but the intimacy in his attitude was plain. Then he moved beside her with one arm still around her waist, and they proceeded into the room.

Catherine looked up at him amazed. He seemed to be perfectly assured, without any embarrassment; he was even smiling a little as he returned her look. "They have to know. The sooner it's understood by everyone, the sooner we'll be able to have some privacy in my chamber." As he seated her at an empty table he continued, "Twenty years of immediate access to me at any time is a habit that could be hard to curb. Lanterns in the passage may not be as effective in my case as they are for others." He frowned as he sat down. "Father certainly missed the signal this morning!"

They were accorded privacy as they ate. No one joined them at their table, although many speculative glances were directed at them, and Mouse had to be forcibly walked to a table across the room, Pascal on one side, Jamie on the other. His voice could be heard raised in vociferous objection, and he only quieted when Jamie spoke into his ear with some intensity. Even then, he could be heard by those near him grumbling.

"Can we spend tonight Above, in your apartment?" Vincent spoke with a whimsical glance at Mouse. "I think we can be sure of at least one visitor this evening, lanterns or no, if we stay Below. "

"I'd love that. I was hoping it would happen soon." She smiled at him with mischief in her eyes. "I have a reason. I've always longed to see and hear your reaction when you step into a hot shower!"

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Vincent stepped across the threshold into Catherine's bedroom, following her with none of his former hesitation. As she reached for the light switch she was grasped from behind and pulled firmly against him.

"I can't wait to hold you again; it has to be now!" His mouth was moving over the side of her neck as he spoke, one hand coming up over her breast, his hips nudging against her with urgent motion. His other hand was at her belly, holding her against him, his swelling erection made plainly evident as he pressed himself to her.

Catherine was electrified by his ardent amorous attack, so unexpected and so intense. He murmured against her skin as he turned her to face him, his mouth never leaving her face and neck. "How could I stand it, how could I not touch you...so beautiful...I've been demented, lunatic, all day at the sight of you, and the scent...oh, Catherine...the scent of you!" He bent further, to bury his face in the warm angle between her face and her shoulder, breathing deeply, drawing in that essence of her that his keen senses alone could detect.

She never remembered how their clothes were removed, or when they lay down. It seemed that there never had been clothes between them; she only remembered the feel of his soft chest hair against her breasts, his muscular back under her hands, and then his hot mouth moving down her body. He kissed her everywhere, his sharp canines in evidence, dragging lightly across her skin, making little thrills of arousal glide over her. And her body gave generously of the liquid proof of her excitement; she felt it, warm and slick, lubricating the swollen tissues, readying her for him.

As Vincent's mouth moved down her body to her mound of soft curls, he felt a compulsion that became irresistible; something that he had dreamed of with guilty yearning for all the days of his long hopeless desire. He was nearly past coherent speech; but he must ask..., "Catherine, I want to put my mouth...here...", His hand moved to the curls covering her groin. "I want it...very much!" He was panting hard, his eyes wild with desire as he looked up at her, pleading, unsure of her response.

Catherine said nothing, but her face spoke of her pleasure at his request. She smiled at him as

her hands came down to cradle his head, moving it lower, urging him to the place of his desire. When she felt his mouth on her, she cried out wordlessly, her hands still holding him to her; as her hips tilted up to give him everything, everything he wanted of her, anything he asked.

His mouth felt unbelievable. His teeth were not in evidence here, his mouth was as soft as velvet on her. He licked delicately with his tongue while his lips covered her with hot wetness. Moving a little deeper with each stroke of his tongue, he found her little bud under his mouth. She moaned as his tongue touched it, and she lifted her knees up and out, opening herself to him more completely. When his tongue flicked against the spot, she arched her back and moaned: "Oh love, touch me there!" And he did, again and again; wanting her to want it, wanting her to love it as much as he did. And she showed him without words that she did; her excitement level escalated in giant steps. Her head began to whip back and forth as she squirmed under his mouth, until she was moving in a frenzy of sensation, out of any conscious control.

When her climax came it was violent; her body arched up and she exploded with a long wailing cry, every muscle flexed to its greatest tension. Then as her body's contractions slowly grew less, her muscles relaxed, and with a final deep breath she opened her eyes, to see him watching her intently.

Vincent had been with her every moment, sensing every intimation that her body gave of her great pleasure, while struggling to stay in control of his own raging desire. Her pleasure was communicated to him with such intensity that his body fought against that control, but he wanted to feel it happen to her, all of it. He wanted to experience it with her, to absorb her sensations into him; her tumultuous ascent to the peak of excitement, the glorious topple over the summit, and the slow calming of the aftermath.

But now his own excitement, fueled by what he had just witnessed, was surging at the bounds of his control. With frenzied haste he rolled to place himself over her and to thrust himself inside. Their cries were simultaneous as together they felt the first sensations of their joining; the throbbing of his penis as he felt the wet heat of her enclosing him, and the contraction of her inner muscles around his loving, welcome invasion of her final privacy.

Catherine's excitement matched his; she would wonder later at her own seeming insatiability. But that was later; now the moment's need for him was as great as it had ever been, and the feeling of his body against her, and inside her...oh, yes, inside her!...

The explosion, when it came for both of them, left them limp and trembling; and almost at once, together, they sank into dreamless sleep.

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Vincent's first shower was everything she had hoped for. She stood in the bathroom listening and chuckling while Vincent moaned and sighed with pleasure as the hot water cascaded over his shoulders and down his back. Laughing, Catherine told him that the noises he was making were reminiscent of the noises he made while making love; and he admitted, speaking between groans of pleasure, that it was second only to that activity for sensuous enjoyment.

"Catherine, this is wonderful! This is...A-h-h-h...one thing we must have Below! Mouse could do this! M-m-m-m-m!...it can't be that difficult! Oh-h-h, Catherine, this is incredible!" He turned around to let the stream of steaming water run over his face and down the front of his body.

While his back was turned Catherine slipped into the shower enclosure behind him. As he turned again he found her there, standing very close; his arms came around her at once to pull her against him. Looking down at her he saw the water running down her face, sparkling drops hanging from her eyelashes, sliding over her neck, streaming down from the dripping ends of her hair into the valley between her breasts that were crushed against his chest.

But as well as seeing her physical beauty and feeling the compelling need he had for her body,

he saw her eyes glowing with love, her caressing smile, the devotion that flowed out from her whole being; and his arms about her tightened as the reality of their love broke over him anew.

The joy he felt in their present closeness welled up in him. Their love for each other had been so much enriched by this new tender intimacy, and that was a joy that would remain when the first ecstasy of their physical love had subsided; a joy that would last forever. When he spoke into her ear, holding her in a close, tender embrace while the hot water cascaded over them both, his voice was hoarse with his emotion.

“Oh, my Catherine...this love of ours...this is truly, truly, a miracle beyond belief!”

END