



Catherine awoke slowly, reluctant to open her eyes. An arm moved, then a leg; she pushed the covers from her shoulders, and finally her eyes drifted open. She lay still then, looking slowly around the room, orienting herself to her apartment once more after her long stay Below. Her clothing from last night lay strewn on the floor, dropped there on her way to the shower, and stepped over on her way back to fall into bed.

As she lay there not wanting to move, it all came back to her. The moans of suffering people, the pale faces of illness, the sickroom smells, the bone-weariness of twenty hour stretches on her feet; but more than these, the anxiety. The constant gnawing fear for the sick remained with her, not for their health, but for their very lives. And then the fear realized; little Ellie, a child still, on the very edge of maturing...only starting to live, and dead, dead in Catherine's arms.

Tears slid slowly from the corners of her eyes. The tears seemed endless; she had shed so many in the past few days...tears for the pain of the sick, and also for the anguish of the well, waiting endless hours to hear if those they loved would ever return to them. She would never forget the faces drawn with anxiety and fatigue, looking up at those coming from the sickroom with hope and fear, speechless, afraid to ask, entreating with stricken eyes for good news.

Well, it was over now, the waiting and wondering. The patients were recovering, the dreadful hours were over. She sighed, pushed the covers down, and sat up. As she glanced at her nightstand, her eye caught the clock. "4:32", it told her with digital certainty. Four thirty? Well, it wasn't four thirty in the morning; daylight streamed in through the sheer curtains. Four thirty in the afternoon? She had slept for 14 hours.

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She sat at the dining table, the remains of a pickup meal on the plate in front of her, sipping at a cup of coffee. Funny how a cup of coffee can offer comfort and relieve anxiety, she thought. Thank Providence for coffee.

The last rays of the sun had left the sky a few minutes earlier, and she turned to glance at the terrace. She wished without much hope that he would appear, but...there was so much to do Below. She had left the night before at Vincent's insistence, after he stopped for a moment to look closely at her, lifting her face with a finger under her chin.

"You're exhausted. You'll be ill; go home and go to bed. You've done so much; I don't see how we'd have gotten through it without you. Go home, Catherine." His look was so tender, in spite of the evident exhaustion on his face also, that her heart turned over. She could only touch his face with a shaky hand, and do as he asked.

So she had gone home, and slept. And now, rested, all she wanted in the world was to go into his arms, and feel his strength and the peace that flowed from his embrace. He would come when he could, and she must wait for that time.

The terrace doors stood open, the gentle fall air breathing the ghost of a breeze now and then, refreshing to her after the long stretch in the sickroom. She breathed deeply, relaxing in her chair, beginning to recover her usual balance after the long ordeal.

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When he came she didn't hear him at once. His soft, "Catherine" made her turn to the open terrace door, where he was standing in the doorway, gazing intently at her. She stood up, anxious to go out to him, but to her astonishment he came to her, stepping over the forbidden threshold and with two long strides reaching her.

His arms came around her swiftly, and with an unaccustomed strength of embrace. She felt his hands on her back, holding her to him tightly, moving over her back, caressing her. His head was down on her shoulder, his face pressed tightly into the angle of her neck. Stunned by his intimate embrace, she reached her arms around him, holding him close, one hand going to the back of his head, to hold him against her shoulder.

"What is it, Vincent? Tell me."

It was a moment before he answered. "...I was so frightened...so frightened," his voice was hoarse, and so soft that she tilted her head to hear him. "I couldn't say anything, I couldn't do anything, I was needed by the sick; but inside I was screaming." He stopped speaking, his voice choked.

She held him to her more tightly, feeling his evident distress. "Tell me. Frightened?"

He raised his head then, to look at her, searching her face as if memorizing it. "When you came into that sickroom, you were in terrible danger, and I was helpless! Helpless to protect you...." His voice was strangled, unlike his usual soft tones, and his face showed his remembered terror. "I knew you'd come, I knew there was no keeping you away, but...Catherine, I was so afraid that I'd lose you, that

you would be stricken down and leave me forever.” His head dropped down until his mouth was against the side of her neck, and she felt his kiss there. A great racking sob was torn from his throat, and then another.

Catherine turned, guiding him with her, to push him gently down on the sofa. As he sat he pulled her down with him, unwilling to let her go for an instant. She sat on his lap, pulled tightly against him, his head still buried on her shoulder, while he wept out his terror and his relief. She cried with him, her heart torn for his agony, and for his courage also, that he had carried his pain with no outward sign until his hands were no longer needed.

In a few minutes, as his sobs slowed and stopped, she put her hand under his chin to turn his face up to hers. His eyes were as blue as sunny skies after a rain, and his face was unmarked by his storm of emotion.

She smiled at the sight of him. “It’s not fair. If I cried that hard, my face would look like the Pillsbury Doughboy’s for two hours.” She took a tissue from the box on the coffee table and dabbed at his eyes.

He chuckled shakily, appreciative of her effort at lightness, and took the tissue from her “I’m sorry to spill this on you,” he said softly, wiping his eyes. “I didn’t expect it...I would never have come here if I thought I would lose control of myself so completely.”

“Vincent, I’m here for you, whatever you’re feeling. Please don’t ever shut me out of your pain, or your joy. I live to share all of my life with you, and you give me the greatest happiness when you do the same with me. Don’t you know how much I want to be a comfort and a support to you, as you are to me?” She reached to hold his face in her hands, gazing deeply into his eyes. “I love you so, Vincent; I...want you so.” She stopped speaking abruptly.

The inconceivable had been spoken without her conscious intent, as her love for him welled up, crying out for expression. As she realized what she had said, she looked away quickly, disconcerted at her frank admission of what had always been unspoken between them.

All movement in Vincent’s body stopped at her words, then in a moment his breath resumed with a deep sigh. Alarmed at what might be the result of her imprudent confession, she straightened her body and began to untangle herself from his close embrace. His arms let her go reluctantly, and to her utter, stunned amazement, before she moved away he bent forward and touched his lips to the corner of her mouth.

Catherine continued to get up, because that had been her intention and there was no further instruction from a stunned brain. The place of his kiss was the focus of all her senses; it throbbed and tingled with the memory of his soft lips.

“Tea...I’ll get...I’ll make some tea.” She stumbled and mumbled her way through the simple statement, her mind stalled at that amazing moment, feeling that soft touch over again.

She walked into the kitchen and stopped to look around her. Why was she here? Oh, tea. She turned on the fire under the kettle, and began to gather the necessary items.

As she worked, suddenly her mind shifted gears and began to race. Had he meant to do it? Well, of course he had, it didn’t happen by itself! Why did he do it? He was grateful for her care of him. That was it, it was just a thank you. A sense of crushing disappointment followed that realization. She

wanted so badly for him to make a step forward, to come closer to her, closer to that dream of being really together.

The kettle began to whistle, and she filled the teapot and lifted the tray. As she turned, Vincent was there, filling the doorway, his hands reaching to take the tray from her. He carried it to the table and set it down, and as she followed behind him, she realized that he was still wearing his cloak. As she thought of it, he pulled the ties and slid the cloak from his shoulders, handing it to her as she reached for it.

She moved to drape it over a chair, and as she turned back she realized that he had followed very close behind her. His face was inches from hers as she raised her head to look up at him, and their gaze locked. The moment drew out as they looked into each others eyes. God...he was going to kiss her...but he spoke instead.

“Catherine, while the tea steeps, come and sit down.” His arm around her, he led her to the sofa. When she moved to sit down, he stopped her. Before she realized his intention, he had swept her up into his arms; and he sat down on the sofa as they had been before, with her in his lap, his head pressed warmly into the angle between her neck and shoulder.

“Vincent, what...what...where are you taking us? Please, I need to know.” She reached to take his chin in her hand, to turn his face up to hers. But he resisted; she felt his hand come up to capture hers, and his face turned into the softness of her throat. To her wonder, she felt his lips again on her skin, and then, unbelievably, his mouth opened, and she felt his teeth, and his tongue.

While she sat motionless, in shock, his mouth traveled slowly up the length of her neck, and he softly tongued her earlobe. Then he moved across the breadth of her face, his tongue and just a breath of his sharp incisors gliding slowly across her skin, until he reached her mouth.

“I’m...moving toward love...” His voice was low, breathy, an erotic whisper.

He kissed softly again that same corner of her mouth. His eyes were so close that she could see the darker edge of that lambent blueness. The soft bristles of his cheek were drawn across her cheek and chin as his mouth gently caressed her face. She felt his heart begin to thump in his chest as his mouth moved over her, and his breathing quickened. A small tremor began in his hands that were sliding across her back, feeling the soft planes of her body.

“You’re alive,” he said, very low. “You’re alive, you’re here, in my arms. You’re alive...and so am I.”

His hands began to travel down her back. She felt them touch her lightly at the waist, then move down to caress her hips. As he held her against him there at the hip with one hand, the other slid very slowly up the side of her body, and curled sweetly around her breast.

She held herself absolutely still, afraid almost to breathe, afraid that any movement might make him change his mind, might make him stop this wonderful erotic exploration that he had begun. She felt with amazement and joy his erection surging against her hip. Inside her she felt an answering surge, heat that raced through her with lightning speed, bringing the tips of her breasts up hard and waking her feminine parts to throbbing excitement.

His hand kneaded delicately at her breast, whose erect tip was plainly visible through her light shirt, and his eyes followed what he was doing without a trace of anxiety, with manifest pleasure in what

he saw and what he did. His thumb touched her nipple softly, sliding around it, tracing the contour of the areola. His breath was coming shorter now, and his chest rose and fell quickly where his heart raced with his excitement.

After a moment his hand stopped moving, but remained close and warm around her breast, while his eyes came up to her face. He gazed at her with those shining blue eyes, and spoke softly. "I heard your words of desire for me, Catherine. I love you so much...so much. I want you...so much. Will you make love with me?"

"I...I...w-will I make...oh, Vincent...yes!"

He reached out, and his lips just touched hers. Emotion thickened his voice as he said, "I love you. We belong together. I know that, have always known it, but I was afraid, I let my apprehensions rule me.

"But no longer. This life of yours that I hold here in my arms is so precious...and so fragile. If I had lost you, and this...intimacy that I want so sorely, and that I've known you want as much...if it had never happened, it would have been a crime against your soul, and against mine."

He looked at her for a long moment with his love shining in his face. Then his head moved closer, his arms tightened around her, and at last his mouth came down on hers. Her mouth opened under his at the soft urging of his lips, and she felt with mixed delight and astonishment his tongue begin to explore the interior of her mouth.

He wasn't hesitant. His hands and his mouth were sure and steady on her, except for the tremor that was caused by his growing excitement. When he raised his mouth from hers, it was to murmur to her of his love and his desire.

"Catherine...I need to feel my skin against yours, I need to be closer...oh my love, closer to you.... you feel like...like heaven to me...your breasts so soft, your skin so smooth... please, I want to undress you, let me love you...Catherine, Catherine...my love...my precious love..." While he spoke his mouth moved over her face and her throat, his words slurring as he kissed her while he spoke.

She was almost without words. "Oh, yes...yes..." Her hands were tangled in his hair, and she pulled his head down so she could kiss his face. His eyes, his nose, his cheeks, she kissed everywhere that she could reach, convinced now that he wouldn't pull away in alarm.

And Vincent didn't move, letting her adore his face, drinking in the erotic thrill of this first love-making. When her mouth moved lower to caress his throat he threw his head back to give her room for her explorations. After a moment he began again to talk to her in a husky whisper, "I love you...I love what you're doing...kiss me, Catherine, kiss me...I've wanted this..."

Her hands were at the fastenings of his shirt, fumbling with the ties. "...Let me in, oh, Vincent..." Her eyes were shut, she was blindly trying to get her hands on his skin.

He opened his eyes and looked down at her. As he watched her he felt a surge of tenderness. Her urgent need of him was so sweet to him, so much more than he had even hoped. "Oh, Catherine, oh my love..." His excitement was raised to a new level by what he saw in her, and with a sweep of his arms around her he was on his feet and she was being carried to the bedroom.

As he laid her on the bed her eyes opened at last, and she smiled up at him brilliantly, blinking back a few happy tears. "Please, Vincent, will you...take off that damn shirt!"

He chuckled, pleased. "Yes, I will do that." As he reached for those stubborn ties, he paused, and his face sobered. "Catherine...are you sure? This is forever...I'm not sure I'd be able to let you go again if you change your mind...after this."

"I'm sure." Her face sobered also. "My love, you must know how sure I am. Can't you feel how much I want you...how much I love you?" Her voice was as serious and intent as her face. "I've been waiting for this moment for as long as I've known you."

He stopped unfastening his shirt to look down at her, surprised. "That long? Not at first, surely."

She smiled, "Well, not just at first, at least not consciously." She thought for a moment. "After you were caught in the cave-in. That's when I knew for sure."

"I felt it. But I couldn't believe it for a long time. I believe now." His eyes traveled over her body. "I feel how you want me." His hands raised his shirt and the undershirt also over his head and off. For a moment, doubt crossed his face, but only for a moment. His face smoothed and he smiled gently at Catherine as the shirt dropped to the floor. He had promised himself that no thought of his own inadequacy would disturb him.

She stared hungrily at his torso, exposed for the first time. "Oh, Vincent...I always knew you had to be gorgeous under all of those clothes." She smiled then at the expression on his face. "You thought for a moment that there might be a problem, didn't you? I know that you've wondered what I would think. Well, I think you're gorgeous. Gorgeous! Come here!"

He shook his head. "Catherine, I think you are very kind."

"Kindness has nothing to do with it! Come here, Vincent."

He dropped to his knees beside the bed and she reached out with a shaking hand to make the first contact with his bare body. As her hand buried itself in his wealth of chest hair, they both sighed deeply. Vincent's head dropped back and his eyes closed as her hand moved over his chest. Catherine sat up, not satisfied to touch him with one hand only. Sitting on the edge of the bed she straddled his body, both hands moving over his chest while he swayed and shivered under her touch. Her mouth joined her hands, and she nuzzled into the soft pelt, searching for the small male nipples hidden there.

His hands came up to slide along her thighs and up to her waist, and he began to pull her shirt out of her waistband. "I need to touch you, Catherine...Catherine..." He jerked suddenly as she found the target of her search. "Ah...God..." His eyes closed and he stilled, feeling with his whole being what she was doing to him.

She reached for the buttons on her shirt, still nuzzling into the golden covering on his chest. Never ceasing with teeth and tongue to excite him further, she unbuttoned her shirt and snapped open the front closure of her bra.

She raised her head then, and slowly he opened his eyes. When he did, what he saw was her body bared to the waist. "Ah, Catherine! I want you so much! Please...please let me touch you..." His hands came up to brush lightly across the outside edges of her breasts. He glanced up at her face,

checking, then looked back at her breasts, a look so full of excitement that she was thrilled anew.

His hands moved slowly and gently, exploring the shape and texture of the soft globes he held. "I...I...want to...." He looked up again, seeking permission.

"I'm yours, Vincent." She said, her face intent.

His head dipped then and she felt his mouth on her breast. A soft moan drifted down to him, telling him that she loved what he was doing, and his hands and mouth redoubled their erotic attack on her breasts. As he drew her nipple deep into his mouth, he pushed her gently back onto the bed and came to rest over her, never relinquishing the nipple. He pulled softly on her, and his tongue swirled around and around the areola.

With a moan, he relinquished his hold on her breast. "I must kiss you..." He raised himself to take her mouth with his. "M.m.m.m.m..." His joy in the contact was demonstrated by the soft groaning noise that he made. He kissed her deeply, exploring the interior of her mouth and then letting her do the same.

When he raised his head at last, he was panting. "I...didn't know...I had no idea that kissing you could be so...arousing, so erotic..." He bent his head to taste again the excitement of her mouth. But not for long. There was so much yet that he wanted, that he had dreamed of. He lifted his head to look down at her. "Catherine...Catherine", He reached for the button at her waist. "I...need to see...all of you..."

"Me too!" she said, smiling.

He sat up and began to remove his boots, while she slid herself out of her jeans. Without turning back to her he stood and pulled off the rest of his clothes. There was a pause. He stood still, not turning.

"Vincent?"

"I...have been afraid...how do we know that I...that we will...fit together?" He still stood with his back to her.

"I guess we'll just have to see, won't we? Turn around, Vincent."

He turned slowly. She looked for a moment, then said, "Well, I can see why you had some hesitation. That is...impressive. But Vincent, we were made for each other. Come here..."

He hesitated. "Catherine I must not hurt you...but I can't stand here and look down at you, waiting for me, and not try. I can't." He moved to lie down beside her. "I want you so much. I'm possessed with longing for you. Let me...oh, let me..." His mouth came down on hers, hot and open, while his hand moved down her body to touch her at her center. He lifted his head to say, "I want this, this part of you. I want to feel it around me...God! The thought excites me...you will let me know if...?"

"Vincent, the bond will tell you. Trust in the bond."

"Yes. Yes, I will know. You're right. I can do this..." His hand moved over her reaching down between her legs to find the hot wet center of her. A long sigh escaped him at the feeling of that wetness, that promise of her acceptance.

They laid pressed together for all their lengths and kissed, deep soft wet loving kisses, while Vincent's hand roamed over her, and she pushed her fingers through his deep thatch of chest hair to find the skin beneath. Then her hands began to explore further down, and he groaned as her fingers moved over his buttocks.

She could feel his erection surging against her, and knew that he wasn't going to last very long. "Now Vincent, now, please? I'm ready."

Without words, he moved to kneel between her legs. He looked down at her for a moment, seeing the deep flush covering her chest and throat. "You are so wonderful." He came down on his elbows over her, and his penis pressed gently against her center.

"All right?" He said, pressing just a little bit harder.

Her legs came up to lock around his back. "Come into me Vincent, I want you..."

"Oh, God, and I want you!" He pressed firmly, and slid inside her with no problem, and with a great sigh of satisfaction and relief. He stayed absolutely still for a few moments, relishing the thought of what was happening between them, but the desire to feel the friction of her interior was too much. He began a slow in and out motion, not wanting this to be over too soon.

It was Catherine who called for a quicker rhythm, "Oh, love me, I can't wait..."

He was electrified by her plea. His motion became faster and harder, and before many seconds they both came to ecstasy. Vincent's body flexed mightily, and a soft roar was drawn from him in the moment. He felt the strong contractions of her body with astonishment and delight, as they both came down slowly from the peak of pleasure.

Vincent's body relaxed heavily upon her for a moment, but as he came back to himself, he raised off her hurriedly. "I'm sorry, I'm heavy..."

She smiled. Her arms and legs let him go reluctantly. "If you only knew how much I love it...the weight of you there, over me...your whole body against me..."

He lay beside her, close against her, his arm across her middle. "Over you...yes,...oh, yes...my very darling, how much I love you..."

They lay quietly for a few moments, both coming down slowly from the momentous act just over.

Vincent spoke then, softly, into her ear. "I...had no idea...it was so much more...than I thought it could be..." He stopped, overcome by his emotions. "Oh, Catherine, I love you so! This...this act...is the crown and scepter of our love, this...this melding of our spirits into one...glorious whole. I thought that we were close before, but this..." He stopped for a moment, overcome by his feelings. "...This act transcends the physical, reaching into the mystical union of souls. Now...now we are truly one."

"...And the two became one..." Catherine smiled sleepily, and snuggled closer. They slept then, serene in the knowledge of their love for each other, and the rightness of their joining.

END