

# Unworthy Knight

by Rhonda Collins

"...these hands are my hands." Catherine cradled his hands in hers, and Vincent's head fell forward, touching hers. He couldn't bear it... this pain. His, and Catherine's. She was so good, and he so very unworthy of her love. He cried until his entire body hurt, and Catherine held him, never letting him go. So unworthy. Yet she loves me.

Later, after leaving her - dawn had come far too soon - Vincent headed reluctantly back to the Hub. The farther from Catherine he traveled, the more he hurt. Something in him wanted only to rush back to her, hold her close to him, and stay there forever.

For the first time, he'd admitted to her in so many words that there could be nothing between them but what they now had. It had broken his heart to do it, to say the words and to tell her of what he'd done. Yet still she didn't understand.

*These hands are beautiful. These are my hands.*

No. She didn't understand, and perhaps she never would.

Frustrated, Vincent pounded the wall until his hand bled. The pain didn't distract him from the emotions, or vent the caged desire or the anger of having to suppress it. He cradled the injured hand in his other, uninjured one and continued home, hoping only for the sanctuary of his chamber.

Knowing Father would already be up and about - he was always an early riser - Vincent tried to make it past Father's study without being seen, but as usual he found it to be impossible.

"Vincent! Come here a moment. I want to share this with you."

Father rose and started toward him, his eyeglasses adjusted to read something in a book he was holding... then he stopped and pushed his glasses up.

"What is it? Good God, Vincent! What've you done to your hand? Quickly, come over here." The book forgotten as it was tossed upon the desk, the physician quickly prepared a basin to wash his son's injury.

As Father gently cleaned the grit and splinters of debris out of the wound, Vincent reassured him. "It is nothing, Father, truly. I...slipped, is all." The lie was difficult for him. He used to never lie to Father. But lately, telling small untruths seemed far easier than explaining large truths.

Father glanced at Vincent quickly, sensing something in his son's voice or perhaps with a father's instincts, he realized that something was not quite right.

"Are you certain, Vincent, that everything is all right? Is Catherine well?"

Vincent nodded, almost frantic to escape Father's queries. "Yes. Yes, of course. Catherine is fine. I have just come from her." He rose after Father finished binding the hand, and flexed it experimentally. It took all his control to hold his facade of normality.

"Thank you, Father. I'm sure it will be fine by tomorrow."

Catherine thought she'd die when Vincent broke down and cried in her arms. He'd cried before, but never quite like this. She wished she understood him better. She was closer to him than she'd ever dreamed she could be to anyone. To know he sensed her every emotion was exhilarating and a little terrifying. To be known like that and still loved for everything she was, was an incredible gift. et sometimes she felt at such a loss. There was so much about him she didn't understand. Might never understand. She repressed a dull surge of resentment and anger at Lisa. And at Father.

Catherine could understand how Lisa could have unthinkingly led Vincent on, then been upset and frightened when she'd realized just how far it had gone. Lisa had been a child. However, the knowledge didn't make Catherine less angry with the girl, or the woman Lisa had become. But her resentment of Lisa only made Catherine wonder how often she, too, had been guilty of the same offense. Granted, Vincent didn't make it any easier on her. She tried very hard to be objective about her past love life and behaviors and found everything sorely lacking. She wasn't aggressive in her sexuality at all. Never had been. he'd always let the man take the initiative. That was the way it was supposed to be, wasn't it? She stayed confused, now.

Vincent, strong and masculine though he was, was always so tentative in any physical contact, and that threw her psychologically.

She moved over to the railing and stood overlooking the park and the city. The terrace seemed so empty without Vincent's presence. Frustrated with the direction her thoughts were taking and needing to think things through, Catherine went inside. She curled up in bed where she was warm and safe. Not as warm or as safe as in Vincent's arms, but it would have to do. She wished that, like Vincent, she could pour her words out onto paper, but she didn't dare. She could never have any written accounts of her life with him that might be found here Above. It was unthinkable. If anything were ever to happen to her, it would be found. So she tried hard to examine their relationship by going over things in her mind.

For so long, she thought, I was frightened of truly being intimate with a man again. I tried, with Elliot, and maybe could have. Elliot would've been a gentle lover. Every time Catherine thought of allowing herself to be as open and vulnerable with a man, as a sexual relationship would have to be for her, she immediately thought of the night of her attack.

She shuddered and started to curl up tighter in the covers. Suddenly, she sat up, startled with herself. Maybe that's why he's never pushed. Because he knew I wasn't ready. But she shook her head. Instinctively she knew that wasn't the reason, or at least not all of it. Most certainly part of it. But more than that, it was this Lisa thing. And the way he looks... the way he feels he is. Vincent had told her a bit of how Father had sent Lisa away afterwards. She'd not said anything, but she'd gotten the impression that Father had shuffled Lisa away the way parents in his time had hurried unwed mothers off to avoid the shame, but this time it was to avoid the issue of Vincent's differences. Catherine had known for a long time that Father simply couldn't quite see Vincent as completely human and he couldn't imagine any woman seeing him as a man. But in his handling of the situation, he'd created a far greater problem than he'd realized.

Finally uncurling from her warm nest, Catherine went to brush her hair. She guessed she couldn't really blame Father. All parents made mistakes. He'd thought he was doing the right thing. Catherine tried as she went through her ritual of brushing, to quiet herself and relieve the stress. Sighing tiredly, she realized she had to get some sleep. Fortunately it was Saturday, so she could sleep most of the day... if she could manage to settle herself. In

addition, she knew Vincent would be picking up how she felt, and she didn't want to make the situation any worse than it was already.

She gazed at her reflection in the mirror and smiled, deliberately easing away the lines of worry and frustration. She'd become very practiced at this in the time she'd known Vincent. It had been a necessity. She'd come to realize over time that by sharing this bond with him she also bore a terrific responsibility.

*Think happy, Cath. Think of the good times.* So she did. She was determined that Vincent would only feel from her the love he deserved, and none of her foolish regrets. By the time she was able to fall asleep, she'd once more succeeded into lulling herself into the belief that all would be well.

Vincent tried to settle for some sleep, but he couldn't. His chamber seemed more an enclosure, a cage, than a sanctuary. He paced restlessly. The sound of the pipes was unnerving, and the rumble of a subway car set his teeth on edge. Around it all, woven through it, was the insistent presence of the bond. A tickle here, a brush there, and a growing ache. He'd felt Catherine's changing emotions after he'd left. They'd confused him even more. Her concern for him had eased finally and she was feeling contented.

Strangely, that very contentment frustrated him... since he was far from that state, himself.

Vincent threw back his head and groaned aloud, the sound growing to a growl. He could feel a pulsing need to escape the boundaries of his life... to lose himself to the darkness. Just for a time.... He was shocked at the thought. He couldn't allow that. Not now. Especially not now. If he lost himself now, here... he would go to Catherine, and....

"No!" Hastily, he scribbled a note for Father, knowing it would be found if he left it on his desk. Rummaging in the corner of his wardrobe, he found the small pack he kept there. It had a few provisions in it... dried meat, a blanket. Little more. He knew he probably wouldn't use any of it in any case. He rarely did. But it was better to take it. At the last moment, almost as an afterthought, he gently placed his journal and pen in the pack. He blew out the candles and left heading far below the Home Tunnels, to the nameless black river that flowed in the darkness.

"I haven't any idea what you're talking about, Joe. The deposition on the McGorty case is on your desk, and I've already started on the notes for the trial. I think I've made good progress."

Joe tossed his coat over his arm and leaned on the desk. "I'm not saying you're not working, Radcliffe. All I'm saying is that you're not really with it, if you know what I mean."

He wagged his fingers dramatically in the air. "Your mind seems to be off in the ether somewhere."

Catherine forced a cheerful grin. "It's okay, boss. Just got a lot on my mind. You keep me pretty busy, you know." She glanced at her watch. "For example, I'm due for a deposition right now, and I'm going to finish this stuff on my desk today! I want to go to a concert tonight, and unless you get out of my way...."

Joe threw up his hands and backed off, laughing as Cathy blundered past him, trying to squeeze through the small space. A stack of files fell with a thud, scattering papers across the floor, and she yelped, "Dammit!"

"Ow! Sorry, Radcliffe. My fault. I'll get 'em. You go on."

"Thanks, Joe." Catherine hurried off to her deposition, stopping only long enough to drop a note for Vincent off with a helper, asking him to meet her at the threshold at 6:30 for the concert. She knew that if he couldn't make it, he'd get a message back to her. That done, she suddenly felt better and the day seemed brighter, somehow. She'd see him tonight... and she'd see how he was doing. If things were still unsettled, she'd make him feel better. She knew she could, but she needed to see him to know what to do, what to say. Can't solve anything if we're not together. Humming a little to herself, she looked forward to the evening with a delightful anticipation.

It had been days, he knew, that he'd been down here. But the time slipped away so easily. He didn't even remember most of what he'd done, though he felt a pleasant sense of belonging. It was quiet here, in the dark. He could think... if he chose to. Which he didn't.

He was tired of thinking. He'd rather feel. A memory tickled, leaving a sense of guilt. He did remember something about a hunt. Yes. He'd hunted something. Something that had died well. A memory surfaced of a huge bearlike man with a club who had threatened him. A dream, he thought, uneasily.

But he knew it wasn't. The man had fought too well, and the taste of blood was still in his mouth. And the blood was on his hands. Sated and lethargic he rolled over, muscles screaming. Yes, a part of him said. It was a good hunt... a good kill.

In the distance, Vincent could sense Catherine. She was happy. Good. Let her be happy, if we cannot be happy together. Perhaps if I stayed away permanently.... Vincent shook his head to clear it, disturbed by a growing sense of guilt... of having once more done something wrong.

He knelt by the river to wash the blood from his hands and hair, for the first time disturbed by it, then stripped to wash his clothing.

I must go home soon. Father will be concerned, I know. And eventually I must face Catherine again. But not right now. He finished cleaning himself and allowed his clothes to dry. He dressed carefully, then reached into his pack, bringing out a strip of dried meat. It was his first taste of food since he'd retreated down here. His stomach rebelled, and after a few bites he put the rest away. He pulled out his journal and opened it. There was no light here, though, and even with his acute night sight, he could not read his last entry.

Why did I bring it? I cannot remember. Why can I not remember? Reluctantly, Vincent placed the journal back in his pack. His memories were blurred, but they were returning. Always it was like this, afterwards. After the loss of self. Usually, however, the blurring cleared almost immediately. It disturbed him tremendously that it was taking him so long to separate himself from the Other.

The man he'd fought - Vincent remembered him now - and knew him to be a minion of Paracelsus. One of his simple guards. Vincent encountered them from time to time, but most often he avoided them. He hadn't even tried to avoid a confrontation with the man. That thought disturbed him a great deal. It had been entirely too easy to let himself go, this time.

Vincent closed his eyes and allowed himself to absorb Catherine's happiness. He wondered briefly why she was so pleased, but was happy for her... and with her.

Father fingered Catherine's note restlessly. There was little he could do. Vincent wasn't here, and Father didn't even know what the note said. Angrily, he jotted a few words onto a sheet of

paper and tucked it into an envelope to send back to her... but then he tore it up. I will not become Vincent's messenger. In any case, he was angry with Catherine. Vincent had been with her that night, when he'd come home with his hand bloodied and torn... then disappeared. Whatever has she done to him? Or perhaps it wasn't her at all.

He ran his fingers through his hair. He made decisions constantly as Patriarch of this world. Why can't I seem to decide just how I feel about Catherine? Eventually, he chose to send Kipper back to Catherine's apartment to tell her that Vincent was not available, but was off in the lower tunnels. It wasn't an ideal solution, but it was all he could do. It satisfied his sense of correctness. If Catherine needed more, he was sure she would come down here, or otherwise let him know.

As Catherine was dressing for the concert, she heard a tentative knocking on the door. Puzzled, she pulled on her robe and looked out the view hole. Nobody. Further intrigued, she opened the door to find Kipper standing there...just short enough so she hadn't seen him.

"Hi," the boy said, a little self-consciously... pulling his hat off.

Catherine smiled, though she felt a growing sense of dismay. "Hello, Kipper. What is it?" She brought the boy into the apartment, where he looked around with interest. "Ah. Kipper... did you have a message for me?"

Startled, Kipper blushed. "Oh, yeah. Father says to tell you that Vincent's not home."

Her expression must have been ludicrous because Kipper laughed, then went on to explain. "I mean, he's not in the Home Tunnels. He's way down below the Catacombs. Don't know when he'll be back."

"I see," Catherine murmured. Though she really didn't. It struck her again just how little she really knew about what Vincent did when she wasn't with him. Sometimes she thought he only let her know the surface things, about the children and Father... thinking those were all she'd care about. That thought disturbed her. It was unsettling to once more be reminded that he knew so much about her, and she was virtually deaf and blind as far as he was concerned.

"Well, thank you, Kipper. And thank Father for the message."

She dug in her cookie jar and gave him a cookie. "I'll bring some for everybody next time I come, okay?"

After Kipper left, Catherine walked out to the balcony and sat deliberating for awhile. So. What's he doing down there? Father doesn't say he's working just basically as Kipper said that he's 'not home.' Am I getting the brush off? Then she reconsidered. That's ridiculous, Cathy. Vincent wouldn't do that. Even if he didn't like you, he'd still be polite... and he certainly wouldn't have Father send a message for him. No. He really wasn't home. You're just being hypersensitive.

Then she started worrying. He was really upset when I saw him last. Maybe he's down there thinking I don't love him. But that worry was cast aside as quickly as it formed. Of course Vincent knew she loved him. How could he not, with the bond? Maybe he's still thinking about Lisa. Cathy's chin lifted imperiously. Now that's really ridiculous.

Spinning away from the city, Catherine launched herself at the telephone. She refused to miss her concert just because Vincent was off doing whatever it was he was doing.

She called Jenny. When Jenny's cheerful voice answered, Catherine said, "Hi Jen. How

would you like to go with me to a concert in the park tonight?"

Vincent returned from his trip a few days later. He realized that Catherine had been missing him and he felt a little guilty about worrying Father. After his return, he dutifully sat through Father's lecture about responsibilities (which he'd been neglecting) and the rather tart comments about reducing his parent to a messenger for him. Vincent watched Father through strands of blond mane as the older man sermonized, and restrained a sigh. It might have been humorous had Vincent not felt all too guilty. Most of Father's points were well taken.

Once Father had finished his lecture, it was as though the subject were a book that had been closed and put away. Father had a tendency to do that. Vincent knew Father simply assumed that once one knew where he was in error, the error would not recur. Father was accustomed to dealing with intelligent and reasonable people. Vincent couldn't seem to make him understand that at certain times his son's intelligence was questionable and his reason deserted him completely.

Vincent wanted desperately to see Catherine, but after the intensity of their last time together, and his loss of control, he was too embarrassed. He was unsure of how to approach her. He could feel the bond calling to him. Catherine missed him. But somehow, he couldn't force himself to simply present himself on her balcony. So he waited... unsure just what he was waiting for.

After the concert, Catherine had twice more tried to contact Vincent. Once, she'd sent another note which had again elicited a polite messenger and this time she simply went to the threshold below her apartment and waited. She tried wanting him there as hard as she could, but it didn't help.

She stood in the small circle of light from the threshold, staring out into the darkness. She'd thought for sure if she simply went to him, that he'd meet her as he always did. The only other time he'd not met her when she really wanted him was when she had been so unsure of his culpability in the subway killings. He'd felt her insecurity and fears then and stayed away, his feelings had been hurt by her lack of faith. She knew that now. Now, though, she was a little irritated as well as worried. Can't he feel my love and concern? When she called, Vincent came. He always had. He always will... won't he? She had a brief moment of panic that she pushed away angrily. Of course he will. He'll come back. He has to. I love him.

After waiting for almost forty-five long minutes, Catherine gave up. If he were intending to come, he'd have been there. She thought seriously of trying to find her way down to the Hub, but decided against it. If Vincent truly was gone off somewhere and she became lost.... It was unthinkable. It would be too embarrassing to have to pound on the pipes for a rescue from someone else. Turning away reluctantly, she climbed the ladder and went home.

I'll get him a gift. Something very special. Something that can say what I feel so much better than I can myself. Yes. That's it. The thought of Vincent's face when she offered this gift to him made her feel much better. Of course he'll come back. He loves me.

Vincent could feel Catherine's desire to see him. He sensed her misery at his absence, but he still couldn't quite force himself to go to her. The memory of what he did to Lisa... and of his recent kill were too fresh in his mind. He felt unclean. There was no other way to put it.

He wasn't good enough for her... and in fact wasn't good for her at all.

His desire for her was becoming too great. At some point he knew he would no longer be able to control the Other, and running away would no longer be enough. He needed a distraction. Sighing, he went to see if Father would care for a game of chess.

Catherine went with Joe to the Village for lunch, and as they passed a bookstore, she dragged him inside. Having decided that a gift for Vincent would help heal the rift in their relationship and bring him back, she threw herself into the search with a will. This bookstore looked like a good place to start. Joe was unhappy at being pulled off course. He glanced uneasily at his watch.

"Cathy, how long is this gonna take? We're running late already...." Joe's tone was anxious, but Cathy refused to be budged.

"I just want to browse for a few minutes. I love old books."

Joe grabbed one off a shelf and held it out hopefully. "Here. This one's old."

Dubious, Cathy took it and read the title. "The Collected Sermons of Cotton Mather?" She rolled her eyes and laughed. "Not exactly what I had in mind."

As she was putting the book away, an elderly man rather portly and kind-looking, said politely, "Perhaps I can be of some help."

Joe turned, seeming relieved. "Yeah. She's looking for a book."

The man shrugged and indicated the shelves. "Well...."

Cathy could see that Joe was losing patience, though he was trying hard to stay cheerful. She smiled at the man, obviously the bookstore's owner. "Something very special.

A first edition maybe? Poetry?"

"English poetry is at the end of aisle three. Feel free to browse as long as you want."

Joe sighed and tried to look ferocious. He didn't succeed. "We've only got like... thirty-two minutes...."

With a cheerful lilt, the bookstore owner interrupted... obviously sensing someone with sensitive skin. "Young man. There is a video store on the next block. I understand they have Vampire Cheerleaders in stock...."

Joe bristled. "Hey. I read. I'm a lawyer!"

"We shan't hold that against you."

Cathy couldn't stand it. The grin that had been steadily growing broke into laughter, and Joe turned to her.

"I'll be back in twenty minutes. You're on your own for lunch, Radcliffe!"

"We shall miss you young, man," the owner called after him, then turned to more suitable company.

"Now. This way, please." He showed her down two more aisles and pointed. "I hope you find what you're looking for, miss. If you have a problem, please call."

Cathy laughed. "I will, and thank you." She watched the man as he wandered back through his books, and thought of how Vincent would love this place and appreciate its owner. Fifteen minutes later, as she searched the dusty shelves and read the titles, she was beginning to

get frustrated. Nothing seemed quite right. The book had to say what she was feeling... and she wasn't sure....

There was a soft masculine voice beside her. "Try this one."

Startled, she glanced up to see a rumpled young man in a Mets cap... but what really caught her eye was the book and the man's smile. She took the book and opened it.

"Tennyson. A first edition!" She felt a leap of joy and wonder that this should so serendipitously come her way at this particular time. "This is perfect! Thank you...." But when she looked up from admiring the book, the man was gone. Puzzled, she looked around the corner, but he was nowhere in sight.

Father had not been in the mood for chess. Instead, he was on a heated search for an obscure passage in an equally elusive volume of poetry. Vincent knew better than to get in his way, so he merely stood aside and watched.

"I know I've got it here somewhere, yes I think this.... No. That's not it."

Vincent couldn't help but be amused by Father's search. It amazed him that Father could find anything at all in the untidy piles and shelves that made up his "library."

The older man rummaged about a little more, commenting quietly, as though to himself: "You know, I really must get Mouse to build me some bookshelves... Ah...no. On second thought, I'd better ask Cullen."

While Father was musing, Vincent suddenly had the strangest sensation. It was indescribable... a coldness, like death...yet...strangely joyous at the same time. And it was connected with Catherine... somehow.

He realized he must have shown his consternation because Father asked, "What is it?"

"Nothing." He shook his head in bewilderment and expelled a breath in surprise at himself. "For a moment...I felt a... coldness."

Father stared at him and looked thoroughly disgusted with the lack of a definitive answer.

Vincent shrugged. For lack of a more descriptive answer, he merely said: "It was nothing, Father. Did you find what you were searching for?"

That evening, Catherine made her way across the park with the treasured volume cradled against her breast. Her day had been so strange. There were so many things she wanted to talk to Vincent about. She'd really missed that being able to share the things that happened in her world with him and today's happenings would make him laugh, she knew. She loved to make him laugh, and managed it so seldom. Right now, though, the most important thing was to ease Vincent's mind and make things right between them. Catherine knew she needed to make him understand that no matter what the future held, they would handle it together. That if he wanted to continue their relationship as it was, she understood. Catherine was positive Vincent knew what was best for both of them. He knew her better than she knew herself. He'll know when we're both ready for more.

The feeling of having resolved the issue, at least in her own mind, gave Catherine a sense of satisfaction. She was ready and anxious to face Vincent. Surely he'll come tonight. If he doesn't, I don't know what to try next.

She picked her way through the rough stones and broken concrete to the threshold and



waited outside. It made her a little uneasy to wait in the open like this, in the park. She felt very exposed. But for some reason she couldn't quite name, she felt equally uneasy simply going into the tunnel to the gate as she normally would. She leaned against the concrete wall and waited hopefully.

Vincent proceeded very slowly toward the park threshold. He could no longer postpone his meeting with Catherine. He felt her coming to him... and felt the call pulling him to her. It was not fair to her for him to keep ignoring her call. Nor was it possible for him to continue doing so in any case. It was simply too difficult to stay away. She was so hopeful... but he could feel the sadness flowing beneath that. She'd become discouraged, and the joyousness he'd felt from her earlier in the day had faded.

He pushed back the lever for the steel door and once it had rolled almost soundlessly back, opened the gate. He hesitated before taking the few steps out into the open. She was unaware of his presence. He could still leave. Then there would be no embarrassment, no apologies... and most importantly, no danger for her. But neither would there be the sense of her joy when she saw him... or the scent of her, or the touch of her hands... her hair... nor the sound of her voice as she said his name.

When she turned to leave and he felt her sorrow and disappointment, Vincent took a ragged breath and stooped to clear the tunnel. As he'd anticipated, her joy at the sight of him came through the bond, suffusing him with an equal joy. He wished desperately that he could give back to her the joy she gave to him.

She hesitated... obviously unsure of how to respond to him after his shameful behavior.

"It's been so long. I was afraid..."

"...That I might not come?" He looked away and down... ashamed of the pain he'd caused her. He offered a beginning of an explanation. "I was away. There is a place... miles beneath the city. There is a nameless river that runs through the darkness." He hesitated... only a fraction of a moment, then began again a little awkwardly. "Sometimes I go there." He didn't know what else to say. It seemed, though that further explanations were unnecessary.

She came toward him, holding something out to him. "I...wanted you to have this."

Hesitantly, he took the gift and held it reverently. He would have held anything she'd given him thus... but as he examined it, he felt even more honored at the care she'd taken in her choice. He tried, still, to distance himself a little, lest his emotions overwhelm him.

"Tennyson...a first edition."

She leaned in a little closer, more intimately, her voice soft. She sounded like a little girl... full of hope. "I always loved *'Idylls of the King'*. I even knew some parts of it by heart. Some nights I dreamt of Camelot..." She glanced up at him, meeting his eyes, and the look was full of hidden meanings.

Her emotions confused him. But her next words solidified what she was trying to tell him, and set his heart pounding.

"...and Lancelot."

Lancelot. She had dreamt of that. Knights in shining armor... brave and pure. He tried to liken himself to Lancelot, the flawed knight. To make her understand. He, too, would never be successful in his quest for love... for the one perfect thing in his life. For he, too, was flawed beyond redemption.

"Lancelot was fatally flawed. Destined never to find the grail."

Her answer was intense and determined. Full of meaning for both of them. There could be no mistake in what she was telling him.

"Still, he was the greatest knight of all."

Suddenly, she was in his arms, and nothing else mattered. Nothing. She was his... and he was hers. Despite everything, unworthy though he was... Catherine loved him. He had to accept that, since there was no other explanation. Unbelievably, she loved him. Therefore all that he was, all that he could ever be was for her. Perhaps they would never have anything more than this. But it was enough. For this, her trust, her love, he would gladly die. He would be her knight. Never would he let anything harm her. He would love her in the way of a knight to the lady he champions. Purely. Devoutly. And surely there could be no harm.

Catherine woke with a splitting headache. She was supposed to meet Vincent later, and she hadn't been feeling very well, so she'd taken a nap, hoping it would help. It hadn't. Groaning, she walked to the bathroom, turned on the water and washed her face.

Well, she thought, if I'm going to see him, I had best begin to feel human, at least. Undressing quickly, she turned on the shower and stepped inside. As she showered, with the warm water refreshing her, she thought about the upcoming evening and began to feel better. She washed her hair and rinsed it. It'll be okay. I do feel a lot better. Catherine styled her hair with the blow dryer, then sat at her makeup mirror to do her face. The headache was still a dull thudding behind her eyes. After putting on her makeup, she opened the medicine cabinet and took out the aspirin bottle and shook a few into her hand. A couple of aspirin and I'll be fine.

Stepping into the bedroom, she pulled a lovely blue-green dress out of the closet and examined it critically. It was new, and Vincent had never seen it. Finally nodding to herself, she smiled. It'll be perfect.

When Catherine stepped into his arms from the stream of light, Vincent gasped softly.

"You're lovely tonight, Catherine."

Her laughter was as soft and teasing. "Only tonight?"

Catherine's teasing always took Vincent a little off guard. He looked down briefly, his golden mane hiding his face. "Always. Only some times, more so than others."

When he felt he could look at her without the smile spreading all the way across his face, he glanced up. "Are you ready for our evening?" He offered his arm, and she slipped her hand through, capturing him firmly.

"Of course."

As they walked slowly toward the park, Vincent shortened his strides to match Catherine's. At times like these he wished he could simply sweep her up and carry her.

Catherine was very quiet, and Vincent could feel that she was restive.

"Is there something disturbing you, Catherine?" he asked gently. She shook her head, then leaned it against his shoulder.

"No. I think I'm only tired, is all. We finally got the conviction on the Marvell case today."

"But that should please you. I know you have worked hard to put that man behind bars."

Catherine sighed. "It does. But it was a long and grueling case, and I'm tired. That's all it is, I'm sure." She stopped, and when he turned to face her, she reached up and stroked his cheek. "Please don't worry so. I've looked forward to our evening all day. You said you had a surprise for me."

Vincent smiled once more, the smile touching his eyes. "Yes. Come." He took her hand and led her a little farther toward the concert shell. They could hear the first strains of music as the orchestra began playing. When they rounded the next corner, Catherine laughed delightedly. "Vincent! You've been busy!"

Vincent had brought quilts and candles and set up a lovely nest for them under the concert shell. There was even a small picnic basket from William. Catherine threw her arms around his neck and snuggled into his shoulder, and Vincent tentatively enclosed her with one arm. He held her close for a moment only, closing his eyes and savoring the feel of her.

Then, suddenly, she had him by both hands, dragging him over to the basket. Before he knew it, Catherine was opening the basket and attacking the fried chicken like a five-year-old. Amazed, Vincent just watched, as she alternately chattered and ate, taking time to listen closely to favorite pieces of music. She has the enthusiasm of a child, he thought.

Vincent ate a few pieces of chicken himself, and poured them some of William's ice tea, which he had brought in an old thermos. As they finished, Catherine finally slowed down, then flushed.

Meeting his eyes, she commented, "I've been babbling, haven't I?"

Reaching up to brush back a strand of hair, Vincent commented with a smile, "Delightfully."

Catherine finished cleaning up the remains of the chicken and closed the basket. She slid over, and with an uncustomary boldness, settled herself firmly in Vincent's lap - to his astonishment.

"Catherine!"

Looking up at him, a totally ingenuous expression on her face, Catherine tipped her face up and gently kissed the tip of his nose.

"Oh hush. You are so stuffy sometimes. Here we are in this wonderfully fun place... You've gone to all the trouble of bringing a picnic, and blankets, and candles... then you sit six feet away."

Vincent was stunned by the waves of sheer mischief and enjoyment rolling off her. Suddenly, it did seem just a trifle silly, even to him. He wrapped his arms around her and began laughing, the laugh starting gently, rolling around in his chest as a soft rumble, then resembling a roar as he tossed his head back, sending his mane tumbling over his shoulders.

When he finally composed himself, he noted that the music had stopped. The concert was over. Catherine laid her head against his chest and wrapped her arms around him. He felt her sadness that the evening was to end.

"I don't want to go home, Vincent. I want to stay here, with you."

When she raised her eyes to his, they begged for him not to contradict her... not this time.

Wrapping his cloak around them both, Vincent hugged Catherine tightly against him and shook his head. He could sense her need to be with him tonight, and he had no heart for leaving himself. Resting his head upon hers, he settled against the cold tunnel wall and

closed his eyes.

Vincent woke somewhat later with the feeling of soft lips on his. Afraid to open his eyes, Vincent allowed the "dream" to continue for awhile. He suddenly realized then that he wasn't dreaming. When he opened his eyes, he was gazing into Catherine's mischievous green ones. Realizing suddenly that the "dream" had continued a little past the kissing stage, he reluctantly, but gently put Catherine from him, straightening her clothing and his own.

He groaned a little as he sensed her distress. "I'm sorry, Catherine. Come. It's time for me to take you home."

Catherine pouted all the way home. She was angry and Vincent knew it. However, he simply didn't feel comfortable or secure enough in his own control to let himself make love to her. Not right now. But, he knew she wouldn't understand. He sighed raggedly.

However, by the time they reached the threshold, Catherine wasn't angry any longer. In fact, she seemed very tired. She reached up and twined the fingers of her right hand in his mane and traced his lower lip with the fingers of her left.

"I'm sorry, Vincent. My fault. Besides... it's time to go home. I'm suddenly very tired." She kissed him very gently.

Catherine all but staggered up to her apartment. She couldn't believe how miserable she felt suddenly. At first she'd been angry with Vincent, but right now all she could think of was of going to bed. Her head ached horribly and her throat was sore. She checked her temperature and found it to be 101 degrees.

"Oh great. Now I'm getting sick. Good going. First time I really try to seduce him and it's at the same time a bug is getting me. No wonder I didn't do too well. I was beginning to think I'd lost my touch from lack of practice!"

Feeling a little better, at least psychologically, Cathy took two more aspirin and stumbled off to bed.

The next day was miserable for Catherine. She called Joe and told him she wouldn't be in, that she had the flu, and she stayed in bed and slept. Vincent came to her balcony the night after the concert. He had felt all along that something was wrong, but the feeling had not been acute, so he had just assumed she was still a little upset with him. When he was finally able to get away, he had come to check on her. When he tapped on the balcony window she mustered enough energy to go to him and explain.

He was concerned. "Catherine, you must go back to bed. Is there anything I can do? Have you seen the doctor?"

"No. My doctor is on vacation. I spoke to Peter, and he said just to rest and drink plenty of fluids. You're wonderful, but even you can't make the flu go away any faster."

She hugged him and he watched as she went back off to bed.

As Vincent entered Father's chamber, he was lost in thought. Father and Pascal were playing a game of chess, and Pascal saw Vincent.

"Vincent."

Vincent's head snapped up. "Pascal." He nodded to Father. "Father."

Vincent placed his hand on Pascal's shoulder and asked quietly, "Pascal. Would you mind if I spoke with Father privately?"

Pascal shook his head and rose. "Not at all. I'm losing anyway."

Father looked from Vincent to Pascal and sighed. "It is a conspiracy. I know it is. I was finally winning one."

Momentarily, Vincent didn't realize what Father meant, then he smiled. "No, Father. I assure you, it is no conspiracy." Vincent nodded to Pascal, who grinned briefly and left. After Pascal was gone, Vincent sat with Father.

"Father, Catherine is ill with the flu. Her physician is out of town, and Peter gave her instructions to rest, but...."

Father was already up and reaching for his cane. "But, you want me to check her?"

Relieved, Vincent sighed. "Yes. Please."

Catherine was feeling better already, and she was a little irritated with Vincent for having inconvenienced Father. "Really, Father, I'm fine. If I continue doing as well as I am, I'll probably go back to work tomorrow... or perhaps day after."

Father was busy re-packing his bag. "You're doing well. Just don't push it. You can relapse, you know."

Once Father left, Catherine snuggled back down in bed, wishing Vincent were here with her. She was feeling almost well enough to pick up where she'd left off evening before last. Sighing, she fell asleep, hoping for pleasant dreams.

"Hold that still, Vincent!" Winslow yelled. The railroad tie Vincent was helping Winslow carry began sliding as Vincent's head spun. The tie tumbled to the ground amid Winslow's loud curses.

"What the hell, Vincent! I almost wrenched my shoulder trying to hold that!" Winslow's tone changed from anger to concern as he saw Vincent sitting on the floor holding his head.

"What's the matter? Are you all right?"

When Vincent raised his eyes to Winslow's, his head hurt so badly from the movement, he thought his head was coming off. He stared up at Winslow with a puzzled expression.

"I don't think I am, actually."

Winslow slid his arm under Vincent's arm and around his shoulders. "Come on, my friend. Let me get you to Father."

Winslow dropped Vincent off in his own chamber, then went to get Father, who grabbed his bag and hobbled quickly down the tunnels. Any sign of illness in Vincent was something to definitely be concerned about. By the time he reached Vincent's bedside, his son was miserable. Father and Winslow helped him undress, then Father took his temperature, which was 105 degrees. This was high, even for him.

He complained of a sore throat and violent headache, and Father confirmed that his throat was, indeed, rather raw-looking.

Father simply shook his head and commented to Mary, "Of all things, Mary. He is immune to the plague, measles... everything else he's been exposed to, then he comes down with the flu... I suppose it has managed to mutate into something his system could accommodate."

"I feel so cold, Father," Vincent complained, hugging himself and dragging the quilts over himself.

Father whispered to Mary, and she hurried off to find more blankets. Father was more concerned about Vincent's possibly becoming delirious with his fever. As the night wore on, Father and Mary watched Vincent as he slipped in and out of consciousness, and they sponged him with cool water to bring the fever down.

"Does Catherine know?" Mary asked.

Father shook his head. "No, and I don't want her to. She's just recovering from this herself, and she doesn't need a relapse. She'd be down here if she knew."

As they watched, Vincent tossed and turned violently. If he continued, they would be forced to restrain him.

Vincent dreamed he was back in the tunnels with Catherine, and she was kissing him. When he opened his eyes and looked into hers, he ached to continue.

"Don't stop now," she told him.

Lowering his head to hers, he kissed her deeply, drawing her still closer. Lowering her to the quilts he trailed his fingers gently over her neck and shoulders, parting the soft folds of her dress. His lips trailed slowly along the line of her jaw, then down her neck. He could feel her desire, and that desire fed his own. As he tried divesting himself of his own clothing, he became more and more frustrated. The lacings wouldn't come open, they broke as he struggled with them; buttons wouldn't loosen. He roared his frustration.

Father was becoming more and more concerned. Vincent was becoming increasingly agitated, and was tearing at his clothing. His nightshirt was coming apart at the seams. He sent Mary to get Winslow and Pascal, but when they arrived, Catherine was with them.

Pascal shrugged. "She was pounding on the pipes, and nothing could get through. I had to send someone for her."

Catherine went immediately to Vincent, and glanced up at Father. "I felt somehow that there was something wrong. Is there anything you can do?"

Helplessly, Father shook his head. "I'm afraid not. He cannot even tolerate aspirin."

Grimly, Catherine told Father. "Then leave us, please, Father. I'll stay with him. He'll be fine."

Hesitant, Father motioned to Winslow and Pascal to leave, then went to Vincent. Vincent's fever was down somewhat, and he was quieter since Catherine had arrived, so Father nodded.

"Very well. But if you need anyone...."

Nodding, Catherine agreed. "If I need anyone, I'll call."

Once Father left, Catherine slid in bed next to Vincent and wrapped her arms around him. His response to her presence was a little more ardent than she had expected from someone in his condition. She chuckled a little as he pulled her roughly against him. His urgent explorations continued for a brief time, then he subsided and slept. Catherine brushed his

damp hair back from his face and kissed his nose.

"Shucks. Just when it was getting interesting!"

She slipped out of bed and went to assure Father and Mary that he was fine. She told them she would stay with him, and told them not to worry. This time when she slipped back into bed, she undressed and pulled on one of Vincent's shirts. Snuggling next to him, she smiled as his arm automatically encircled her and she felt his muzzle nuzzling her neck.

The next morning, Catherine was awakened by the teasing roughness of Vincent's fur on her neck. She opened her eyes and smiled sleepily.

"G'morning."

Vincent looked confused and somewhat embarrassed. "Catherine. How? Why are you here?"

Catherine was about to explain, when Father's soft call at the door sent Vincent scooting across the bed with a look of alarm on his face. She giggled, and the look he sent her had nothing to do with pure love.

"Vincent?" Father called again.

Vincent cleared his throat, and answered quietly. "Father. Yes. Come in."

When the older man stepped inside the chamber, he flushed. "Good morning. I see you're feeling somewhat...better."

After examining his son, Father told both of them, "You both still need to rest, so I'm ordering complete bedrest for at least two more days." He glared at both of them. "And that means in separate beds!"

Vincent looked away, acutely embarrassed, and Catherine broke down into a fit of giggles.

Father continued sternly. "Catherine, you should know better! I'm moving you to the guest chamber immediately."

After Father left so Catherine could dress for the move, Vincent settled back into the pillows and watched her. He had the strangest look on his face.

"Whatever is the matter?"

"You are absolutely impossible. You simply do not understand what...."

Catherine grinned. "What's to understand?"

When she reached deliberately across him to pick up her blouse, the thin cotton night shirt did little to conceal what was underneath, and Vincent drew in his breath sharply as she brushed across him.

"Catherine!" He reached for her, and she skipped out of the way. Shaking her finger at him, she commented, "You should have taken me up on my offer after the concert."

Vincent groaned, but a tiny smile was twitching at the corners of his mouth.

"Catherine, I do believe you are the devil in disguise... to tempt me so.

As she headed out the door, she looked back and shook her head. "No, my love, only an angel trying to lead you to Paradise."

END