

SOMEONE ELSE'S POSSIBILITY

by Rosemarie Hauer

He knew she wouldn't be home, not yet, and so Vincent wasn't surprised to find Catherine's apartment in darkness when he arrived on her balcony. Somehow, he was even grateful for the small respite that gave him the chance to collect his whirling thoughts and calm his frantically beating heart, for what he had to tell her required every ounce of clarity and self-control he could possibly muster.

It had been almost four weeks since he had last seen her after the incident with the outsiders that had brought so much terror and violence to the tunnels. Four weeks of relentless struggle somewhere deep down in the bowels of the earth, away from the ones who had witnessed the raging beast losing himself in destroying those who had threatened his fragile world. That world sheltered bruised hearts and battered spirits, allowed them to grow strong, to face life and embrace it again; it was the only possible world for someone such as him.

Sighing, he clenched his hands in despair, because the time had come to let go of something that wasn't meant for him, a world of sunlight and open skies, of gentle breezes and star-filled nights; Catherine's world. He turned to look out over the city and tears blurred his vision of the illuminated cityscape before him. Any moment, she would be here, and he must make her see that pretending they could share a life by dividing themselves between their worlds would only bring more pain to themselves and to those who cared for and loved them.

Part of him knew that there was another, stronger reason why they must part. It wasn't only that she had witnessed his killings; the inhuman rage against human lives, although that was painful enough. Of late, she must have become aware of other things too; the longing gazes that he was sometimes unable to hide, and moments of desire that flickered to life so strongly between them that it had taken all of his rationality and will-power to turn his hungry senses and yearning heart away from her, from her enticing nearness and the irresistible pull of her eyes. This love of theirs was something that could never be fulfilled, and he mustn't torture her any longer with his struggles and inhibitions.

She was so giving, so full of warmth and life. She must be given the chance to love and be loved as it was meant to be for her. All he could give her were stolen moments in the dark, shy embraces of welcome and goodbye, and denied feelings that roiled beneath a smooth surface of poetry and innocence.

He could hear her unlock the apartment door, and her joy at sensing his presence closed an iron fist of pain around his heart. She didn't turn on the lights, merely dropped her purse and crossed the room to pull the terrace doors open and fling herself into his arms.

The feel of her soft body against his drove each and every well-considered word of explanation from his mind, and her whispered expression of joy at being with him did not help.

"I missed you so," she breathed against his throat, and he shivered under her passionate assault. He could barely bring himself to loosen her tight grip around his waist, but he knew he must, if he ever wanted to regain some semblance of control.

"Catherine," he stammered, and the apprehensive expression that came over her face as she dropped her hands to her sides, tore at his heart. He regarded her silently for a moment, and suddenly all he could feel was her desire to reach out to him, to touch him and hold him again, to soothe the raw agony she could see in him with a tender caress.

In the span of a heartbeat, something within him changed.

He saw himself through her eyes, and that view was so different from his own that it made him stagger backward a step and press his hands against his chest in stunned surrender.

Instantly, she was by his side, reaching out to touch him, but withdrawing her fingers in a helpless gesture of uncertainty. Even now, in all her pain because of the distance he forced between them, she tried to respect his every wish. Gently, he grasped her hand that hung in the air indecisively, and the instant he brought it in contact with his tear-streaked face, the realization struck him.

How great a mistake he had just been about to make. Months ago, there had been a moment when he had felt what it might be like to be someone else's possibility. Now, with Catherine's unconditional love engulfing him, he suddenly knew, and that knowledge was so sweet, so precious to him that he wanted to weep with the sheer beauty of it.

Catherine's possibility - and he had thought he must take it away from her. Yes, she would abide by his decision, not wanting to cause him any further pain, but it would shatter her, for he could clearly see it through her eyes and feel it through her heart - *he*' was Catherine's only possibility, her possibility for living the unfathomable truth of their love, because everything she had ever searched for, everything she had ever wanted, she had found in him.

All of a sudden it seemed so simple and he could see it with absolute clarity, though he was far from understanding it. Strangely, there was not the slightest doubt about it, because it was not a thought he had created, but the reality by which she lived. With infinite tenderness he took her hand from his cheek and placed a soft kiss on her palm, tasting the salt of his tears on her cool skin. A shiver went through her and he stilled it with his embrace, taking it into his body with wonder and delight.

She loved him so deeply, and he silently promised to himself that he would give her everything and do anything to make her love as complete as possible. Standing here and cradling her head against his chest, he couldn't imagine that he had ever doubted his own worthiness of her love, for that would have meant doubting Catherine, and that was impossible, now that she had allowed him to see and love himself as she saw and loved him.

She was very still within the circle of his arms, and he knew that she dared not move for fear he would finally say what he had come to say tonight. Again, he loosened her grip, but this time only to tilt her chin up with one gentle finger. When he saw the raw pain in her eyes, he knew that words would take too long to ease it. So he merely dipped his face to hers and kissed her softly, sweetly, pouring all of his newly found confidence into her trembling soul.

Eyes closed, she remained motionless when he drew back slightly to look at her attentively. The flutter of her lids told him she was aware of his fond scrutiny.

"Catherine," he whispered, stroking the soft skin of her cheek with his thumb. "Please, look at me."

She complied wordlessly, and her gaze, finally meeting his, became a crystal clear mirror to all that was in his heart. Her longing to touch him, to explore his face, his body, his soul, washed over him in a passionate wave of desire; and again he took her hand and brought it to his lips, caressing the tips of her fingers with tiny kisses.

She acted on his encouragement by tracing the lines of his face, following every curve, obviously savoring the various textures she found there. Closing his eyes, he sighed softly and gave himself up to the intimacy of her touch, so loving, so tender. This time, he didn't attempt to distance himself from Catherine in order to conceal his growing state of arousal. This time, he even wanted her to know how much her caresses affected him, and incredulously, he noticed that it filled her with deep contentment and joy.

Suddenly a sting of pain reached him from her, and as his eyes flew open in alarm, she withdrew her hand and dropped her gaze to the terrace floor.

Before he could voice his concern, she asked quietly, "When will you tell me, Vincent? How far will you let this go?"

With a twinge of guilt, he realized that she didn't trust him and that she had every reason to wonder. Slowly, he turned away from her and took a step toward the balustrade. Bracing his arms against the railing, he searched the brightly lit skyline for words that could possibly explain to her what had just happened with him.

"I came to you, tonight," he began, "to end the doubts and anguish that have come to our lives, of late."

She had followed him silently and now stood next to him, looking up at him intently. "You came to tell me that you decided to walk out of my life and that you wanted me to stay away from yours," she stated simply.

The undisguised pain in her voice brought his gaze to hers, yet he avoided touching her. Drawing a deep breath, he tried to gather his thoughts in order to resume his explanation.

"Catherine, you must listen to me, please. When I returned from my time of solitude, of thinking and searching for a.... way for us to live our lives without facing dangers and impossibilities day after day, the only answer I had was that we must part and end our.... relationship."

"Didn't it occur to you that there is much more to our relationship than danger and impossibilities?" she retorted, and he didn't miss the tone of hurt that tinged her voice.

He tilted his head and his eyes softened. "Of course there is, Catherine, but...."

"But?....," she prompted.

".... But there are so many things that had changed lately," he continued, letting his gaze return to the city lights, "and there are so many things that will never change."

"Like what?" she coaxed gently, placing one hand on his arm. His eyes were briefly drawn to that single point of contact, but he looked away before he went on. "The way I feel for you has changed, intensified, and made me see all the more clearly that what I am will never change."

She reached for his face and turned it gently toward her. "But something happened, Vincent. What has finally changed your mind?"

Now he was truly at a loss for words. How could he tell her what he had felt, without sounding conceited? He straightened and grasped her small shoulders, his voice hoarse with emotional turmoil.

"I don't know exactly, Catherine, but when you came into my arms tonight, something within me... shifted. I suddenly knew that what I thought I must tell you was wrong." His voice lowered to a whisper as he added, "I felt that our... dream cannot be ended, because it is... .meant to be lived."

He drew her against his body and carefully, tenderly kissed the tears from her cheeks and from the corners of her eyes.

"Oh, Catherine, I don't know how far I can let this go, because what I am has not changed, but when you... touched me earlier, caressed my face, loved me with your eyes, when we... .kissed... it felt so right." With a muffled sigh, he buried his face in her hair, caressing the nape of her neck with trembling fingers.

She pressed her lips against his neck, the coolness of her indrawn breath teasing his warm skin, causing him to moan softly. She hadn't said much so far, but then, he mused silently, he hadn't given her much opportunity to.

Now her words vibrated brightly in his soul before their softness touched his ears. "Once you told me, Vincent, that we are something that has never been. Remember?"

Of course he did. How could he ever forget that moment of speaking his heart so openly, as he had dared to,

at that time. His words about going with courage and with care had been the greatest leap of faith he had ever taken. They had contained his dearest dream and all of his secret hopes. But he thought of the sacrifices for him to answer the question trembling in her heart; *Will we ever be together? Truly together?*

Now, standing here in the warm circle of her arms, looking down at her upturned face, he could only nod mutely. Gently withdrawing from his embrace, she smiled and took his hand.

"Come," she said, "let me show you something."

Wordlessly, he allowed himself to be led down the few steps into her living room. Puzzled, he let her take the heavy cloak from his shoulders and followed her as she gripped his hand and tugged insistently, leading him into her bedroom. He watched with curiosity as she turned on a single lamp on the bedside table and opened the door of the closet. It held a full-length mirror, and he felt a familiar shyness and reluctance pull at his nerves.

She turned toward him, grasping his arm and drawing him to stand beside her.

"Look," she begged. "What do you see?"

Slowly, he lifted his eyes to meet his own reflected gaze, flickering with uncertainty. She leaned her head against his shoulder and, fleeing from his own quizzical stare, he searched her face for any indication of what she might possibly expect him to see. With an encouraging nod of her head, she invited him to let his eyes wander across the image before him.

He had always detested seeing himself in a mirror; whether it might be a sheet of silvered glass on a wall or the mirrors of strangers' eyes as they saw him for the first time. Haunting shadows of raw memories taunted him from the edges of his consciousness, and for a moment he pressed his eyes closed to hold them at bay.

Catherine's gentle embrace coaxed them open again, but he turned away from the mirror, toward her concerned face. Regretfully, he shook his head in a gesture of hopelessness, but she lifted one hand to gently guide his gaze back to meet hers in the magical world of silver, glass, and light.

Having her look at him from there felt strange to him, and he fought valiantly not to back away. Her eyes shone with a mysterious radiance and his heartbeat quickened at the heady message they conveyed to him.

Her whispered words hung in the silent air between them and caressed his pounding heart.

"Vincent, you and I are so much more together than either of us could ever be alone. You said that what you are hasn't changed. What I am hasn't changed either, but there is something new now, something that takes all of what each of us has ever been and changes it from something that has never been into something that will always be. That's what our love has shown us, and that's what kept you from telling me to turn away from you, as you wanted to when you came to me tonight."

While listening to her and letting the truth of what she was saying sink in, his gaze had been riveted on his own mirror image, looking back at him calmly now. She had made him see that what they were together could never be threatened by mocking shadows from the past, nor by anything that lay ahead of them, as long as they had faith in what they were - together.

"Something that will always be," he repeated quietly and turned toward her to see her smiling face beaming up at him.

"Yes," she breathed, stroking his cheek with one trembling hand. The intoxicating nearness of her warm body wove an irresistible spell around his senses and a shiver went through him, as he wondered fleetingly how he had found the courage to actually kiss her.

She cast him an impish smile. "You know, I've been planning on dragging you in front of this mirror for quite a while now, Vincent," she said casually. At his slightly raised eyebrow, she continued, "For I wanted you to

see in there what I see whenever I look at you. It's just that... actually, you have not yet seen all of what I wanted to show you."

His heart skipped a beat at the implications of her words, and he suddenly found it hard to breathe as her hands crept up to toy with the fastenings of his leather vest. On other occasions, he would have done anything to prevent her from moving on in so dangerous a direction; now he merely smiled down at her, asking.

"And what would it be that you want to show me, Catherine?" With mild disbelief, he noticed that she was blushing at his seemingly innocent question. Her teasing mood dissolved in a whirl of shy desire that washed over them both. Drawing her close, he pressed reassuring kisses into her hair, and suddenly it took no courage on his part at all to follow the soft line of her neck and jaw with his lips and finally take her mouth with his own, tasting and exploring eagerly what he had been denying them both for so long.

She moaned softly as he allowed his hands to follow the enticing curves of her body, drawing her closer still, and he gasped with surprise as her smooth tongue darted between his lips in an exploration of her own.

It was only when he felt her warm palm on the bare skin of his exposed chest that he realized she was still working at the fastenings of his clothes. Always his body had been hidden under layers and layers of clothing. Never before had he been touched in this way, and it drew a strangled sob from him that caused Catherine to look up with concern.

He shook his head in mute denial, but she wouldn't be deceived. "What is it, Vincent?" she asked, wiping a single tear from his cheek.

"It's just that having you caress me like this simply overwhelms me, Catherine," he answered honestly, his voice fragile with vulnerability.

"I'm sorry, Vincent. I...."

He stilled her intended apology by tenderly grasping her hand and bringing it back to his chest.

"No," he breathed. "Please, Catherine, you shall never be sorry for loving me. I cannot live without your love, never again. But I cannot foresee my reactions to... your touches. I cannot guarantee...."

"We'll find out together, Vincent," she interrupted him gently; and with a smile she added, "Maybe you'll be surprised at the effect your caresses will have on me."

He gathered her close again and hid his blush in her hair as he quietly admitted, "I can hardly wait to find out, Catherine."

The giddy joy he felt within her at his shy confession made him tighten his arms around her and draw her to himself more intently. Still a bit hesitant, he followed an inner urge to move against her and intensify the sensation of their touching bodies.

She welcomed his every movement with soft sighs and moans that danced about his mind like tiny sparks of starlight. Oh, that there could be so deep a need, so great a desire as the one he sensed in her. Or was it his own? It didn't matter any longer. To fulfill a yearning such as this... what other reason could there be for living? For going through any possible pain? Wasn't it worth everything?

The questions became answers when she blessed his soul with her intimate caresses and sacrificed his body with her own. His spirit soared with the knowledge that he was able to give to her what she had been longing for so desperately; himself. What a simple truth, and yet it filled his universe with deep meaning, with incredible beauty and utter joy. Holding her, knowing her, loving her, healed the wounds of a lifetime full of doubts and fears.

Oh, Catherine! She made him free, she made him new by loving him, all of him. With wonder he realized

that he would never again be able to think of his body as a threat or an enemy, but always as another possibility of becoming one of Catherine, very much like the bond that was already connecting their spirits and souls.

Lightly, he floated in the ecstasy and completeness they brought each other, and gladly, he drowned in the wave of her fulfillment, baptizing her with his own. A perfect eternity within a single heartbeat of love. There is nothing beyond.

"Vincent? What is it? Vincent, please talk to me!"

The concern in her voice drew her gaze from the first streaks of daylight toward her worried face. He turned his head and gave her a weary smile before he returned his attention to the unfamiliar view out her bedroom window.

"Don't worry, Catherine," he said softly. "It is just that...."

"Yes?" she said, stepping closer.

He hesitated briefly before he continued. "When I awoke in your bed, finding myself alone, there was a moment when I didn't quite know how I got there. And then I... remembered an overwhelmingly beautiful dream." He paused, and his silence tore at her heart.

"Do you still think it was a dream, Vincent?"

Slowly shaking his head no, he turned around to face her. "I know that it was not a dream, Catherine, but the thought that it could have been nearly destroyed me."

Her relief washed over him immediately and smiling she said, "You can't possibly imagine what a sight you presented to me when I stepped out of the bathroom."

It was only then that he became aware of his state of undress and, in an involuntary gesture, his hands folded in front of his body.

He didn't miss the hint of wickedness in her voice as she continued, "That was when I almost thought that I was dreaming."

That brought a smile from him and she came into his arms, burying her face against his furred chest.

"I love you so much," she whispered, rubbing his back with long, slow strokes. "and I wish you'd never have to wake up alone."

He kissed the top of her head, inhaling the familiar scent of her, and whispered, "And I wish that I would never have to leave you again, as I must now." He could feel her nod beneath his chin and gently brought her face up to look into her eyes.

"What you gave me, Catherine... I have no words to tell you what you have done for me, how deeply you have affected me, how much... I love you."

He could have bathed in her bright gaze forever, but the first rays of sunlight already grazed the terrace and he knew it was time. With a move of his head in the direction of the bedroom closet, he said, "I have read many fairy tales about magical mirrors, but yours is a very special one." At her quizzical look, he added, "It has opened my eyes to what you have been trying to show me for so long now."

Nodding her agreement, she stated, "The man that I love."

"Yes, and something that will always be," he completed, returning her happy smile with one of his own.