

FROM THE ASHES

by Sandra Orr

Vincent was, he acknowledged to himself, extremely tired, almost to total exhaustion. He had just come from repairing one of the lower bridges which spanned the Abyss. Now he was now attempting to help Kanin's work group with the completion of a new chamber, by starting a break in the stone wall which had resisted everyone's efforts to crack. Vincent stared blankly at the stone-face which sat impassively, a few slight dents in its surface, witness to the futile efforts of those puny mortals who designed to move it. Briefly his vision blurred; wiping his arm across his eyes, Vincent was aware of every muscle protesting the movement - he really HAD overdone the physical exertion.

Well, one more time! Ensuring the others were well back, Vincent once more raised the hammer and chisel to strike the stubborn rock face. Muscles screamed as he brought the hammer down on the chisel head with all his might; a sudden cracking and Vincent found himself gasping for air as he was enveloped in a shower of rock particles and dust. Coughing, he staggered back into the arms of the work team, who viewing the large crack he had begun, congratulated him on his success. They could now complete the chamber.

Returning to the Central Chamber, Vincent sought out Father. "Father?"

"Yes, Vincent." Looking up and spying his dust-covered, bedraggled son, Father exclaimed, "Good heavens, Vincent, what happened ...?"

"Nothing serious, Father. I helped Kanin's work crew with a particularly stubborn rock face. I need a shower ... also, do you have some liniment? My muscles are protesting ..."

"Hmmm, I'm not surprised. You're pushing yourself too hard."

"No more than ..."

Getting up and moving to his son, Father laid his hands on Vincent's shoulders. "You know you are doing much more than usual. Stop punishing yourself. You are not to blame for Ellie's death, Vincent."

Bowing his head, Vincent replied. "I know, Father. In my mind I know, but my heart says if I had not brought Dimitri here, Ellie would still be alive." Raising his head, he continued. "The work helps me to forget my pain."

"Yes, well, try not to dwell on it too much. I'll get the liniment." He paused, then moved to the sideboard and pulled out a bottle, handing it to Vincent. "The note you received earlier today ... is Catherine unable to stay the weekend as planned?"

"No, Father. She has invited me to dinner this evening. She will arrive, as planned, tomorrow morning." He paused, sighing. "I don't know how good a guest I'll be tonight, perhaps the shower will refresh me." Taking the liniment, Vincent turned and left the chamber.

Later, Vincent awaited Catherine on her balcony. He was early; Catherine had not yet arrived. He felt her frustration and surmised she had been delayed at the office. As he looked out over the city, Vincent suddenly felt very weary, with the suspicion of a headache. Shaking his head, the world suddenly started to spin. Sitting, Vincent felt a sense of alarm; it was as if his muscles had turned to water ... He was so tired.

What's wrong with me? Perhaps I have been overdoing the work.

His head pounded, he was aware of pain when he swallowed ... Shaking his head again, he tried to deny the symptoms.

No, it cannot be! It has been two weeks since Ellie's death. The plague has left us. It must just be exhaustion. I should leave.

Trying to stand only made his head pound more and set him to coughing. Vincent knew he was in no shape to climb down to his world. Sighing, the effort to keep his head upright defeating him, Vincent placed his arms on the table, and laying his head down, fell into a restless sleep.

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Catherine rushed to her apartment. She was late, and was thankful the meal she had planned was ready, requiring only reheating.

Moving to her balcony, Catherine was surprised not to see Vincent standing, waiting patiently for her behind the glass. Had something delayed him? Opening the French doors, Catherine stepped onto her balcony. Moving towards the rail, she spotted a dark form sitting on her patio chair, with its head resting on arms laying on the table top.

"Vincent?" Catherine moved towards him. He didn't respond. Putting out her hand to brush his hair from his face, she gasped as her hand touched hot, dry skin. Vincent moaned, shifting slightly. There was, she noticed, a harshness to his breathing.

" Oh no, Vincent! Not you!" Running back into her apartment, Catherine phoned Peter Alcott.

"Peter, Vincent's ill; I think he's got the plague ... Right. I'll see you in half an hour." Hanging up the phone, Catherine went to her bedroom and prepared her bed; Vincent was going to have a lengthy stay in it. She then went out to the balcony through the bedroom door and sat next to Vincent, stroking his head and face, calling his name, trying to get him to respond to her presence.

"Vincent, Vincent."

His name seemed to come from a great distance. It was Catherine, she sounded upset, he had to go to her, ease her pain. He struggled, slowly his eyes opened, unfocused; Catherine was beside him, but her form was a blur.

"What ..." He stopped, it was as if his throat was lined with knives ... the pain! Now she was standing beside him, urging him to stand. He tried, it was so hard ... His body screamed vehemently. Catherine insisted; she was crying ...

No, Catherine, don't cry.

Using all of his considerable will, Vincent forced his body to stand, swaying uncertainly. Catherine moved closer, placing his arm around her shoulder, she pulled; Vincent followed, staggering to her bedroom. Finally they stood beside her bed. Catherine moved Vincent to stand facing her, while she reached up to push off his cloak. She helped him sit on the edge of the bed, then removed his belt and vest. Freed of the bulky clothes, Vincent fell back and sideways. Catherine sighed with relief. Bending, she removed his boots and, lifting his legs, managed to get him totally on the bed and then covered him. As she moved to the bathroom, a knock on her door had her running to answer it.

Pulling open the door, she gasped, "Peter, thank God!" Grabbing his arm, Catherine pulled a very startled Dr Alcott into her apartment and, throwing herself into his arms, started to cry. Closing the door behind him, Peter queried, "He's bad, then?"

"Yes, he's barely conscious and he's so hot, it burns to touch him. I managed to get him into my bed, but ..."

"Hmmm, does sound bad, although typically Vincent."

Sniffing, Catherine raised her head to look at Peter. "What do you mean?"

Releasing her and moving towards her bedroom, Peter replied, "Vincent seldom gets ill but, when he

does, it is usually extremely virulent. If he follows his usual pattern, he'll have an extremely high, potentially dangerous fever for about three days and, within seven or eight days, will be fully recovered."

Following Peter to where he stood next to the bed, looking down at Vincent's unconscious form, she asked, "If he's ill so infrequently, how come you've managed to plot a pattern?"

"Uh ... Oh, Jacob, of course." Peter looked over and smiled at Catherine. "Ever since Vincent was given into his care, Jacob has recorded every cut, sprain, illness ... in infinite detail. Cumbersome but extremely helpful."

"Hmmm, yes, I can well imagine. Now what?"

"Now we strip him and record vitals. Then I want you to get a big bowl full of iced water and a number of towels."

Catherine shook herself out of shock. "Strip him!" her voice squeaked. Swallowing hard and looking down to avoid Peter's laughing eyes, she added, "He'll never forgive us ... me."

This did make Peter chuckle as he reached forward and tossed aside the covers, tugging to get Vincent in a sitting position. "Probably, but we have to get that fever down ASAP and cold compresses will help immensely." He paused, looking at Catherine. "And I am not strong enough to do it myself. Vincent is heavy!"

"Well, if there's no other way, but you'd better convince him it was your idea."

"No, there's no other way. Not with Vincent."

As they moved to strip Vincent, Catherine queried, "But why now, Peter? Why two weeks after we thought it was all over ... all behind us?"

"I don't know, Cathy," he smiled, shaking his head. "However, I'm not surprised. This isn't the first time Vincent has pulled this little stunt." At Catherine's look of enquiry, Peter continued, "It seems to be a part of his nature, whatever. Every time a childhood disease ran through the children, Vincent would never contract it at the same time as the others. He always waited until everyone else was healthy, then ... wham! Jacob would have his hands full with a suddenly very sick little boy."

Sighing, Peter shook his head. "He always survived - but those fevers of his! That is our primary task, Cathy, to reduce his fever. Once that's under control, he'll recover rapidly." Looking over at her, Peter continued, "You realise you will be unable to leave him, at any time? You, too, will have to be quarantined, as a possible carrier."

"Peter, not that I'm arguing but ... explaining this to Joe - it's going to take some doing."

"Well, while I set things up here, we'll have to come up with some sort of story that has a ring of authenticity to it."

On Peter's instructions, as he set up the IV and catheter, Catherine prepared a large bowl of ice water and gathered up several hand towels, placing them on the floor beside her bed. Then she and Peter wet the towels and placed them on Vincent's body, on all those parts where the major blood vessels ran closest to the surface. Catherine found herself blushing as she placed two towels over Vincent's groin, avoiding disturbing the catheter. "He'll be extremely embarrassed, Peter, when he discovers I've seen him naked."

Peter chuckled as he glanced over at her, noting her blush. "Hmm, I wonder who will be most embarrassed. However, this is not the time to consider Vincent's shyness about his body. We have to get his fever down."

For the next hour, Peter and Catherine laboured over Vincent's unconscious form, removing and re-wetting the towels which became dry far too quickly for Catherine's peace of mind and which seemed to make no dent in the fever. Finally, Peter sat back with a sigh of relief. "It's gone down two degrees, Cathy. We can leave off for now." Helping Catherine remove the towels and bowl, Peter sat her down

in the living room.

"I've come up with an explanation that I think will satisfy Joe." Looking at him, Catherine nodded, motioning for him to continue. "Okay. Vincent is an old friend, one you met abroad, who has continued to travel. His visit here was a stopover, until he was to catch his flight out. Upon arrival he called you and tried to call off the dinner engagement as he was suffering from what he thought was a bad cold."

Peter paused. "Are you following me so far?" Catherine nodded. "To continue, you convinced him to come anyway and, half an hour later after arriving here, his symptoms worsened considerably, to the point where you called me. I arrived, took samples and am calling you tomorrow with the bad news - that you are quarantined for at least a full week. Not because I think you are at risk of developing the illness but because you could be a carrier. Well, what do you think?"

Catherine nodded. "It sounds good, Peter. But aren't you going to be in Las Vegas on Wednesday, for that ...?"

"Damn, you're right. Well, hopefully, Vincent will follow his usual pattern and be on the road to recovery, requiring nothing more than rest by the time I have to leave." Looking at his watch, Peter rose. "Well, I should be going." Pausing, Peter looked towards the bedroom. "I'm afraid you're going to have a difficult night of it, Cathy. The important thing is to make sure he doesn't dislodge the IV or catheter. Try to keep him calm. Do the compresses again, first thing in the morning. I have an early morning appointment at the hospital but will stop by here immediately after, with some additional antibiotics to try and to change the bag. I'll also bring written instructions for his care."

Nodding, Catherine followed Peter to the door. "Thank you, Peter. You'll let Father know?"

"Yes. I'll go now and send a message." He paused. "I'll have to tell him to stay away and to make sure no-one from the tunnels comes here. Notwithstanding the risk of reintroducing the infection Below, strange people coming and going from your apartment could cause unnecessary attention."

"Thanks, Peter. I know. See you tomorrow."

Nodding, Peter turned and left the apartment. Closing and locking the door, Catherine moved to the kitchen to prepare herself tea and something to eat. If she was going to be Vincent's sole caretaker, she would need her strength.

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The next morning found Catherine once again working to get Vincent's fever down and praying Peter would come soon. Although he had warned her of how ill Vincent would be, she was alarmed that he seemed still to be totally unconscious; totally unaware of what was being done to him. She sighed as she put the last cloth away and moved to the kitchen to make her breakfast, glancing back at Vincent's still form. Please hurry, Peter. I'm frightened.

* * *

The knock on her apartment door nearly had Catherine jumping out of her skin. Rushing to the door, she was relieved to see Peter, at last!

"You look worried, Cathy. Is he worse?" Peter queried as he moved towards the bedroom. "No, but he's not any better either. I was considering giving him another session with the ice water when you knocked."

"Hmm, probably wouldn't hurt. I'll help you when I'm through here." Peter bent to check Vincent's

vitals and to replace the bag attached to the catheter, while Catherine once again prepared the ice water.

"Are there any antibiotics ..."

"No. At least, none that would definitely help us at this time. Vincent doesn't tolerate a lot of medications and, those he does, he rapidly develops an immunity to." Glancing over at Catherine, Peter continued, "I do have an antibiotic in the IV to help boost his immune system. It will need to be changed by tomorrow at the latest, to avoid it losing its effectiveness. Hopefully, it will have begun to work by then."

As they continued to place the cold, wet towels on him, Vincent began to stir. Groaning, he opened his eyes, blinked twice, then returned to the womb of darkness.

"Peter! Did you see ...?"

"Yes, Cathy. Thank goodness. Let's see ... Yes, his temperature is down three degrees this time. I think we can put this away for now."

"Peter," Catherine paused, just outside the bedroom door, "As he improves, how difficult a patient is he?"

Looking down at his patient, Peter then turned to look at Catherine, smiling as the figure she presented, pieces of her hair escaping the ponytail she had tied it in, as he responded, "An impatient one!"

Catherine sighed. "I was afraid of that. How long before you think he can safely return home?"

"Depends on how long the fever lasts, Cathy. I want him to have, at the least, three days of rest after 24 hours without fever." He paused, rubbing his chin, as he considered. "The difficulty is, once he is up and around, Vincent will, in all likelihood, attempt to return Below. The strain could cause a relapse or he could underestimate his strength and fall on his way down."

Catherine shuddered at the thought. "And with you in Vegas, he'll be more recalcitrant ... Well, I can think of one way to keep him here." She paused, mischief dancing briefly in her eyes. "How?" Peter prompted.

"When you leave today, take Vincent's clothes with you. He's not likely to climb about naked." She glared balefully at Peter, who was trying desperately not to laugh.

When he was able to speak, Peter responded, "That will definitely work but what about here? Vincent will need to get out of bed and he ..."

"I have an old housecoat of Dad's, I, uh, 'borrowed' and never returned. It was miles too big for him, so it should fit Vincent - and if it doesn't ... Well, I can always order a new one and have it delivered."

Peter nodded his agreement. "Should work. Well, I should be going. I'll check in with you through the day and stop by tomorrow morning. Take care, Cathy, and don't hesitate to call should he shift the IV or catheter." As he spoke, Peter moved to the apartment door, turning to Catherine as he opened it. "Don't worry too much, Cathy - and don't forget to take care of yourself and eat well. I don't want you sick on my hands as well."

Catherine hugged Peter. "Don't worry. I promise to take care of myself." Stepping back, "Thank you for everything."

"Yes, take care and I'll see you tomorrow."

Closing the door after Peter, Catherine moved to check on Vincent before settling down to make out a grocery list.

The weekend flew by as Catherine shouldered the full responsibility of nursing her patient. Bouts of total unconsciousness alternated with periods of delirious semi-consciousness, during which she quickly discovered the only way to stop Vincent from thrashing about was to hold him. As his fever mounted in the late hours of the day, sleeping beside him ensured a quiet night for both.

As the fever continued into Monday, both Peter and Catherine grew increasingly anxious. None of the antibiotics seemed to help and, although the compresses would reduce his temperature briefly, within a few hours it would rise once again.

Peter called Catherine's office early Monday and spoke directly to Joe, who was extremely concerned about the situation, although somewhat mollified by Peter's assurances that Catherine's inoculation a couple of years earlier made it extremely unlikely she would contract the disease. Peter assured him that he was keeping a close watch on both Catherine and her friend and was sure that she would be able to return to work within seven to ten days.

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Vincent sighed deeply. Brightness beckoned to him as he tried desperately to open-his eyes. After what seemed hours, they opened. Blinking furiously, attempting to focus on his surroundings, Vincent struggled to understand where he was ... what had happened to him. This was not his chamber. As his vision cleared, Vincent recognised Catherine's bedroom. There was a feeling of discomfort in his left arm and in the region of his groin. Shifting his head he noted the tape which held an IV in place on his arm. An attempt to move his other arm elicited the surprising knowledge that it was held in a very firm grasp by Catherine, who lay beside him, her arms wrapped around his right arm, head resting against his shoulder and her body pressed as closely to his as possible. Shaking his head brought a gasp of pain from Vincent and woke Catherine, who raised herself up to look at him.

"Vincent?"

Vincent carefully turned his head towards her. "Cath ..." His voice caught, his throat protesting this attempt at speech.

"Thank goodness you're finally awake." Catherine moved quickly to stand beside Vincent and, grabbing the water glass she kept on her night stand, bent to help him to a drink. "Careful, slowly ... not too much." When he indicated he had had enough, Catherine laid his head back on the pillow, gently brushing her fingers through his hair before turning to her phone and dialing. She listened for a moment, then, "Peter? Yes, he's awake and has taken a drink. No, not yet, let me check." Smiling down at her bewildered love and brushing his bangs slightly, Catherine queried, "Vincent, how do you feel?"

Vincent considered the question. He vaguely remembered coming to Catherine's balcony and the sudden feeling of weakness that had overcome him. His body was still objecting strenuously to anything he asked of it and he ached all over. Not feeling up to seeking and offering a comforting reply, he responded, "Terrible."

Catherine smiled in sympathy. Moving her hand to his shoulder she spoke to Peter. "He says terrible ... Yes, he still has a fever ... He'll probably object but he's too weak to fight it... All right but you'd better tell him it's doctor's orders." Catherine moved the phone to rest against Vincent's ear and watched as he turned several shades of pink, shock depriving him of speech.

Catherine returned to the phone. "He's speechless, Peter and blushing furiously - but not protesting ... yet! Thanks, I will. See you later."

As Catherine hung up the phone, Vincent found his voice. "Catherine, I ... you can't ..."

"Nonsense, Vincent. I've been doing it since Friday night." She paused, sympathy warring with mischief in her eyes, as his blush deepened. "Besides," she teased, mischief winning out, "A body

like yours is a delight to see. If it wasn't for the worry, I would be thoroughly enjoying this. Now you relax. On doctor's orders I'm giving you another go at cold compresses."

As Catherine moved to the bathroom, Vincent heaved a sigh. He was feeling extremely embarrassed and not a little guilty for what he deemed to be an imposition upon her time. Considering his options, Vincent attempted to sit up, an action he immediately regretted as it left him gasping, his head pounding. He was obviously not going anywhere for the time being.

Catherine returned shortly carrying a large bowl and several towels. "Peter said to forego the ice, as it might give you the chills instead of just lowering the fever. Now, let's get going." As she spoke, Catherine lowered the bowl of water to the floor and began soaking the towels, then, wringing them out one by one, she placed them on him, lowering the blankets as she moved down his body. Embarrassment warred with relief as the cool cloth seemed to ease the burning of the fever. Weariness tugged at him and Vincent lost the struggle to stay awake.

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Voices drew him from the soft cushion of sleep. A red glow filled the sky outside. Turning his head towards the source of the voices, he saw Catherine and Peter standing, talking in the bedroom doorway.

"Catherine ... Peter?" Vincent's voice was hoarse and it still hurt to talk, but he was determined to be a participant in their discussion, particularly since the odds were that he was the subject.

On hearing his voice, both turned and moved towards him. Catherine sat on the bed and Peter stood beside him. Bending to check his vitals, Peter asked, "Do you feel up to drinking some juice? I want to get some real nutrients into you ASAP."

Vincent considered and then, "Yes, please."

At his response Catherine left to get the juice, the bounce in her step expressing clearly her sense of a great load being lifted. Vincent was on the road to recovery. On Catherine's departure, Peter removed the IV and catheter. Checking his vitals once again, he then helped Vincent to sit up against a bank of pillows. His weakness frustrating him, Vincent and Peter talked softly of his condition and Peter's orders.

Catherine, returning with the juice, noticed a distinct pout to Vincent's expression. Her "What's the situation?" was met with an aggrieved complaint from Vincent that Peter would not allow him up for at least another 24 hours - and then he would continue to impose upon Catherine's hospitality for another six days.

Catherine smiled at him gently, responding that it was no imposition, so long as he behaved himself. Ignoring both Vincent's affronted scowl and Peter's appreciative chuckle, she raised the glass of juice to Vincent's lips, urging him to drink, pointedly ignoring his attempts to convince her that he could hold the glass himself.

Openly grinning now, Peter informed Vincent, "Give it up, Vincent. If I'm not mistaken, Catherine is thoroughly enjoying her role of primary caretaker to yours of helpless invalid. I suggest you just lie back, relax and accept the inevitable."

The look Vincent cast him over the juice glass broke Peter's control completely, his laughter forcing him to sit on the edge of the bed. He succeeded in controlling his laughter only after Catherine had left the room to return the empty glass to the kitchen. Still smiling, Peter informed his thoroughly disgruntled patient that he was to eat everything prepared for him during the next two days, as per the instructions given to Catherine. After that, it was up to either himself or Catherine to decide what he ate - but he was to eat three good meals a day. Catherine's return to the bedroom signalled Peter's departure, with a promise to drop by the next morning before catching his flight out to Vegas.

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Peter called early the next morning as a fidgety Vincent and calm Catherine ate their breakfast. After examining Vincent, Peter confronted Catherine in her kitchen, as she cleaned up. "All right, Cathy, out with it! What are you doing to Vincent?" his voice stern.

Catherine turned concerned eyes on him. "Is he worse?"

Peter sighed explosively. "No, the fever is staying down, but he's as edgy as I've ever seen him. So, what are you doing to make him so nervous?"

Catherine looked at Peter, mischief dancing in her eyes. "Why, nothing, Peter, nothing at all."

"Cathy!" Peter exploded, his voice dearly indicating that he was not accepting her innocent front.

Sighing, Catherine giggled, "Well, the only thing I can think of is the fact that I'm still sleeping with him."

Peter stood, his mouth gaping, as the implications of what she said penetrated. "Catherine!"

Now, now, Peter. I'm a big girl." She patted his cheek lightly. "I know what I'm doing."

"Cathy, what ... how long have you ..." Peter stopped; although concerned, he knew it was really none of his business.

Smiling at Peter, as she leaned against the counter, Catherine explained, "It started Friday when I found the only way to stop Vincent from thrashing around was to stay next to him. I slept with him - and we both slept through the night. I've continued to sleep with him ever since."

"Yes, but he's not hooked up any more, you don't ..."

"Peter, Peter," Catherine's voice held laughter. "I'm well aware it's no longer necessary. However, I've discovered I like sleeping next to Vincent. It feels safe and comfortable."

"Safe!" Peter exploded. "Catherine, it's safe now because Vincent is too ill to do anything, but he's getting better and one night you're going to find yourself climbing into bed with a man, not an invalid."

Catherine had lowered her head as Peter lectured her. When he stopped speaking, she looked up at him, eyes filled with laughter, as she responded, "Oh, I do hope so, Peter. I certainly hope so." She paused, briefly then, "Perhaps you had better order me some birth control pills." Her laughter bubbled over at his expression.

Peter finally found his voice and shaking his head, moved to the phone and picking it up, gave instructions for a prescription to be delivered to Catherine's apartment.

Curious, Catherine moved to stand beside him. "What was that you just ordered?"

Glowering at her, Peter's reply was succinct. "Your birth control pills, and I want you on them as soon as they arrive."

Catherine laughed and hugged Peter, whose severe expression softened. "Take care of him, Cathy. He's an innocent. Handle him with kid gloves." She hugged him again.

"Don't worry, I will."

Looking at his watch, Peter returned her hug, saying, "Well, I must be going. I'll see you Monday morning."

"All right - and don't worry, Peter, everything will be fine." Waving to him as he entered the elevator, Catherine giggled, closed and locked the door and moved to join her improving, though nervously self-conscious, patient.

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"Catherine!" There was a definite growl in Vincent's voice as he confronted her in the doorway of the bedroom.

Catherine smiled up at him, enjoying the sight of Vincent, still slightly damp from his shower, standing solidly on his own two feet once again. Her smile widened as her eyes followed the vee of the housecoat he wore, a much deeper vee than was, she was sure, originally intended by its maker.

Desire rose within her and she strove to keep it under control as she tilted her head and innocently asked, "What is it, love?"

Picking up her desire, Vincent blushed but was determined not to be put off this time. For the last three days Catherine had danced around his question, now he wanted an answer. "Where are my clothes, Catherine?" He moved to stand in front of her, hands on hips. "Tell me."

Smiling, Catherine raised a hand to trace a finger down Vincent's throat to the bottom of the vee in his housecoat. A shudder ran through him but Vincent quelled it, raising a hand to clasp hers firmly. "Catherine?" The growl was more discernible now-as Vincent's patience grew thin.

Giggling, Catherine responded, "At Peter's." Raising herself to her tiptoes, she kissed his cheek as he stared at her, mouth open. "Now, close your mouth and help me with lunch."

Later that evening, as they prepared to retire, Vincent tried to convince Catherine to let him sleep on the bed couch in her living room. "Catherine, please, you don't know ..."

Catherine leaned forward and kissed him, silencing his protest. As she pressed harder, Vincent's hands clutched the blankets, striving to control his body's reactions. Catherine pulled back and smiled at him as he lay, chest heaving, looking at her with a mixture of wonder and fear.

"Vincent, I'm not a child, I know exactly what I'm doing, even if you don't. Now just settle back and go to sleep. Everything will be all right."

Reaching over, she turned out the light and, snuggling up close to Vincent's side, Catherine quickly fell asleep. Vincent sighed; his body felt as if it was on fire from Catherine's touch. Much as he had dreamed of sleeping by her side and had found it a comfort while ill, he was finding the reality frightening as his body recovered its strength and began to react as, he assumed, any healthy male's would, given the present circumstances. Shifting slightly as he settled further down the bed, Vincent felt Catherine's grip tighten. Obviously, he was going nowhere tonight. Sighing deeply, he closed his eyes and was soon asleep.

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The next morning, Vincent awoke to bright sunshine. He lay quietly watching as Catherine removed a pill dispenser from the night table and took out a pill. Curious about this morning ritual which he had observed the past two days, Vincent raised himself up on his elbows. "Good morning."

Catherine smiled at him. "Good morning to you, too." Bending she kissed him softly, then turned and under his curious gaze took the pill. Kissing him again, she moved towards the bathroom.

"Catherine," Vincent's call stopped her and she turned to him, questioning the concern she heard in his voice. "What are those pills you take? Are you well?"

Smiling, Catherine nodded. "Oh yes, I'm perfectly well. As for the pills ..." She paused, her smile widening, "When Peter found out what our sleeping arrangements were, he had those sent to me and made me promise to take them."

"Our sleeping arrangements?" Vincent's confusion was clear.

Catherine giggled. "They're birth control pills," and she continued into the bathroom as Vincent stared after her, open-mouthed.

Shaking his head, Vincent hurriedly put on his housecoat and rushed to confront her. "Catherine, what do you ..." He paused as Catherine looked at him, her eyes dancing with mischief and desire. Moving forward, she wrapped her arms around his neck. "Catherine." Her name was a whisper upon his lips as pressure built within; her desire melding with his. His shaking hands reached up and gently pulled Catherine away. Desire and fear warred within as Vincent backed away, his eyes locked on Catherine's.

Taking a deep breath, he forced his eyes to break from hers and turning, he quickly moved out onto the balcony. The brisk fall air cooled the flame that threatened to consume him. Looking back, Vincent saw Catherine had not followed him and he wondered at the confused feelings of gratitude and regret he felt because she had not. Taking deep breaths to calm himself, Vincent leaned back against the balcony railing. He thought about what Catherine had just told him and, although an innocent, he was well aware of the implications. He shook his head, still finding it difficult to believe, in his mind, that Catherine desired him although his heart, and even more importantly the bond, told him otherwise. He found himself wondering what the night would bring. Fear warred with hope and Vincent felt that this day was going to be a very long one.

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Night came and Vincent stood beside the bed, looking down at Catherine, his expression clearly expressing stubborn resistance. They had reached an impasse. His body quivered with desire that came from within and from Catherine. From her also, he felt a strong determination as she held onto his hands, refusing to let him go. Suddenly his hands were released as Catherine jumped to her feet and wrapped her arms around his neck, pressing him to her. Time stopped; when it resumed, Vincent found himself standing, his hands holding onto Catherine's slender waist as her hand burrowed under the collar of his housecoat, pushing it off his shoulders. His head pressed against her breast, Vincent tried to still the flames her touch was igniting.

Raising his head, he managed to gasp, "Catherine," before her lips found his, pressing hard and, obedient to the pressure he opened his mouth slightly, allowing her access. His body stiffened as wave after wave of sensation travelled its length. Slowly, hesitantly he responded, following Catherine's lead as she pulled him down onto the bed, where every dream Vincent had ever had was proved to be nothing but short of the rapture Catherine now gave him. For what seemed an eternity, yet no time at all, they explored each other, learning how to give and receive pleasure, until finally, satiated, happily exhausted, they fell into a deep sleep.

At first Catherine was uncertain what had awakened her. Turning her head she looked into Vincent's blue eyes, as he gazed at her in wonder. Leaning over to kiss him, a knocking alerted them that someone stood outside the apartment door. Confusion giving way to the realisation it was Monday, had Catherine scrambling to put on a tracksuit and quickly running to the door.

"Peter!" she gasped breathlessly, throwing her arms around him and giving him a strong hug. "How are you? How was your trip?" The questions tripped off her tongue as she pulled him into her apartment and dosed the door.

Laughing, Peter put down the case he was carrying and held up his hands. "Whoa, I'm fine and the trip was very instructive." Looking over to the bedroom, he asked, "How's the patient?"

Vincent, on hearing Peter's voice, came into the living room, looking somewhat ruffled but definitely healthier, responded, "The patient is fine, Peter." Looking down at the case next to Peter's feet he added, "I hope that contains my clothes."

Laughing, Peter responded, "Yes, it does but ..." He swung the case behind him as Vincent moved forward to take it. "You don't get them until I've examined you. Now don't sulk - get into the bedroom. The sooner I examine you the sooner you get your clothes."

Closing his mouth on his protest, Vincent turned and walked with great dignity back into the bedroom, followed by chuckling Peter.

"I'll make tea," Catherine called out and went into the kitchen.

* * *

Later, after bidding Peter a fond adieu, Catherine and Vincent sat cuddled together in front of the fire. Snuggling deeper into his arms, she sighed, a sudden sense of sadness enveloping her.

"Catherine, what is it? What's wrong?" Vincent's soft voice was filled with concern and he brushed his lips against her forehead.

Looking up at him Catherine blinked furiously, trying to stem the tears that threatened to flow. "It's just that I don't want this to end. I don't want to stop sharing my nights, my bed, with you." She smiled wanly, raising a hand to gently trace his lips. "Whether you can accept it or not, Vincent, you're highly addictive and are so entwined within me that I don't think I can exist without regular doses."

Catching her hand, Vincent kissed each fingertip, then laced his fingers through hers. "I'm not sure I like the analogy but ... it is a descriptive one and I too, having tasted what I believed, for me, was forbidden fruit, find I want more." Sighing deeply, Vincent stared at the dancing flames for a moment then, turning to face Catherine, he stared intently into her eyes, as if to read an answer to his question.

Praying he was right, Vincent made his decision and, gathering his courage asked, "Catherine, will you marry me?"

For a moment, Catherine sat still, her mouth opened slightly, as Vincent asked the question she had often dreamed he would ask. Shifting herself so that she sat in his lap, Catherine reached up and wrapped her arms around his neck.

Smiling into his pensive face she kissed him softly. "Oh, yes," another, harder kiss. "Yes."

When she kissed him a third time Vincent, shaking himself out of his surprise at her eager acceptance of his proposal, wrapped his arms around her and, as passions surged, rolled her to the floor, where they reaffirmed their commitment to each other, before their journey Below to tell their friends and family the joyful news.

END