

THE ANNIVERSARY THAT WASN'T

by Sandy P Shelton

(from All Things Are Possible Four)

This year, the first week in April brought unusually heavy spring showers. It had been raining almost continuously for a week and the world Below was feeling the effects. Besides the cold, damp feeling in the air, the lower chambers were becoming unsafe because of the drainage overflow. Work details had reported walls in some of the passageways had become so soaked that rock had turned to mud, and several slides had resulted. Long meetings in Father's chambers had been held to find some way to combat the growing problem. They had to evacuate the lower living chambers and barred anyone, except the work details, to return. There was a growing fear that the slides would continue and would soon threaten the foundation of their world.

Along with all of this, Katie had developed a cold and, since Jacob had inherited his father's immune system, Catherine had no experience in dealing with a sick two-month-old infant. Over the last few nights, the dampness in the tunnels did nothing to help a very congested little girl. Although she would wake up crying to be nursed, it was difficult to breathe and nurse at the same time. It had become a very frustrating experience for them both. None of the medications Father had given her was helping and Catherine was getting frantic.

Vincent had been working on shoring up some of the endangered passageways. The whole work detail had been at it all day long and, when he finally returned to their chamber that evening, he was exhausted and very dirty. His mind had been on his sick daughter all day and he could feel Catherine's growing frustration and worry.

'*Why everything at once,*' he wondered as he entered the chamber and saw Catherine again trying to nurse Katie.

She looked up at him and smiled wearily. "Are you all right? You look exhausted."

"I am. How's Mary Catherine?"

She stroked her daughter's soft hair. "She's not running a fever right now and she's been able to get down some nourishment, but she's so congested. It's such a struggle for her to nurse."

"Yes, I can hear it. What did Father say?"

"He's asked Peter to come down tomorrow and look at her. Maybe he'll have some answers." She looked sympathetically at her husband. "How's the situation below?"

"We're doing all we can, but unless the rain stops, it won't do any good. If we get much more, all of the lower structures could give way." He sighed heavily. "If that happens, the upper levels, like this one, could collapse."

"Oh, Vincent!"

"Tomorrow, if it's still raining, I'll recommend that we start sending the children and all but necessary adults Above to stay with Helpers."

"Do you think it will get that bad?"

"I pray not, but I'd rather not take any chances. What good would this place be if lives were lost because we put the protection of our possessions over the safety of its people."

Just then Katie stopped nursing and her harsh breathing got their attention. As Catherine cradled her lovingly, she began to cry. She was immediately lifted up onto her mother's shoulder and her back gently patted. It seemed to help, and soon she quieted and drifted off to sleep. "Vincent, why don't you go take a nice bath and get something to eat."

"That sounds like a good idea. I'll be back soon."

Catherine watched as he slowly made his way out of their chamber. *'He pushed himself so hard sometimes.'* The harshness of this life Below demanded much from everyone, but especially Vincent. All the others could leave and make their way Above, but he could never leave this world. Even his children had choices, but for Vincent, there was no other choice.

Later as they slept, Katie woke up and again began to cry loudly.

"I'll get her," Catherine said sleepily as she began to crawl over Vincent.

"No, I'll get her," Vincent said as he stumbled from the warm bed with his muscles aching. He gently lifted the baby out of the crib and immediately felt her wet diaper. "Here, I'll get a diaper," he said as he handed the baby to her mother.

Catherine was amazed at how patient he could be. He had been so sweet and helpful despite his own difficulties lately. She felt her own patience getting awfully thin.

She changed the diaper and Vincent disposed of the offensive article. "I think I'll check on Jacob while I'm up," he mumbled as he left the chamber.

Catherine struggled again with Katie as she noted the child's congestion was worse and she felt warm. "It's okay, honey. Mommy knows."

When Katie had taken all the nourishment she could, Catherine got up with her and walked back and forth until the baby fell asleep again. The problem was, however, that every time she tried to put her down, she would awaken and start to cry again. This continued even after Vincent returned and they took turns walking with the baby all night. By morning, everyone was exhausted.

Early that next morning, Vincent again was summoned to Father's chamber for an update on the situation. The rest of the family was in the crowded Hospital chamber awaiting Peter.

"It's still raining Above," Cullen reported. "The forecast hasn't changed."

Vincent leaned back wearily against the spiral staircase. "We have no choice then. We must start sending people Above. It's getting too dangerous."

"Yes," Cullen answered. "There was another slide last night."

Father could no longer argue the point. They had to protect lives. "I agree. Start notifying the Helpers, then begin sending people Above. Volunteers will stay Below to do all that is possible."

Vincent knew the pain this was causing his father. He had spent all those years building his dream to see something like rain threaten to destroy it all. He walked over and put his arm around Father's shoulders.

The older man sat there for a moment, looking around at the faces depending on him for leadership and guidance. He slowly stood.

"We have endured much worse than this and survived. The threats to our world have been many, but our faith in each other and our belief in what we have created here have brought us through and they will again. Now, let's get organized and begin the.... move."

Squeezing his shoulder, Vincent whispered to him. "Well said."

Father and son arrived in the Hospital chamber just as Peter finished examining Katie. Peter shook his head and looked into Catherine's concerned eyes.

"She doesn't have Jake's immune system and the cold and dampness down here is harder for her to take, Cathy. She needs to be in a warm, dry place with a vaporizer, If we don't do something now, she could develop pneumonia and I'm really concerned she might get dehydrated as well."

"Peter!" Catherine exclaimed in a frightened voice.

Quickly Vincent stepped forward. "Peter, Father, would you let me speak to Catherine privately."

They both nodded and left quietly. Vincent reached down and lifted Jacob up onto the table as Catherine held Katie closely. "Catherine...." he paused painfully. "The decision has been made to move people Above. The situation here will only worsen before it gets better. Even if Mary Catherine were not ill, I would insist you move back Above."

"My '*place*' is by '*your*' side," she said defiantly.

"No, Catherine. Your place is with '*our*' children right now. They need you."

"And I '*need*' you."

"As I do you, but they are our first concern. Catherine, this is my world - my only true home. I have to stay here and do all I can to save it. I need to know that you and Jacob and Mary Catherine are safe and well. I need to know that no matter what comes, what happens, the three of you will carry on."

"Vincent, I...."

"No," he interrupted. "I must insist on this." He then playfully tickled Jacob. "You understand, Jacob?"

"Yes, sir," the little boy proudly answered. "Don't worry. I take care of Mommy and Katie."

"Good. I know I can count on you." Vincent was so proud of his son's protective instinct for his mother and sister. He looked down at Katie, then stroked her head. "I want her to get well, Catherine. That's the most important thing,"

She sighed in defeat. "You're right. They '*are*' all that matters."

He leaned over and kissed her moist lips. He hadn't kissed her with passion in days, and his body ached for her. "If all goes well, I'll come to you and help with Mary Catherine. I know you're tired."

"And so are you." There was a look between them that spoke of the lost opportunities.

A few hours later, Vincent stood with his family at the entrance to Catherine's sub-basement. The baby was tucked warmly into the carry-all that was strapped to her mother's chest and Jacob was being carried piggy-back by his father. It was going to be a difficult parting and Vincent spoke first. "You can keep in touch with me through the pipes here. I want to know how's she's doing," he said as he touched the baby's cheek. "I'll try to come up when I can."

"I'll miss you terribly," Catherine said as tears gathered in her eyes.

He could feel her pain. "It won't be for long. As soon as the baby is well and the danger has passed, we'll be together."

"I'll be thinking of you every minute."

"And I will you," he answered. A mutual look of grief was exchanged between them before he leaned over and kissed her with passion.

"Daddy, go!" Jacob interrupted.

"Okay son, it's time," Vincent answered after reluctantly breaking the kiss. He stood back and watched her climb up the ladder and disappear into the light. Then he lifted Jacob up to the ladder and watched him disappear behind her.

Out of the silence that threatened to crush him, he heard a soft voice say, "I love you."

Vincent spent the rest of the day helping families move Above. Even though everyone was reluctant to leave, they had accepted the need for it. But regardless of the reason, it was still an emotionally wrenching day. The fact that he would be apart from his own family made each parting even more bittersweet. He stood now in the main passageway listening to the silence. Most of the time, this was the busiest section of the tunnels, with its steady flow of people and the constant chatter on the pipes. Now, there was only an eerie silence and his thoughts turned to Catherine.

She had just settled the kids into the apartment. Jacob was already missing his father and seemed bored with his toys and the television. Katie had been placed in the nursery for the first time and seemed intrigued by all the bright colors and new furnishings. Peter had stopped by and helped her set up the vaporizer and had checked on the baby's condition.

"I think this will help, Cathy. Just make sure you fill it properly and give her plenty of juice. Also, make sure you nurse her in here close to the vaporizer. It'll help her get more nourishment."

"Have you heard anything from Below?"

"Everyone, with the exception of the volunteers, has been moved. It wasn't easy, but it was necessary. It's going to be all right, don't worry," he said as he held her hand. "Vincent will be fine. They all will."

The nights were agonizing for both of them. Vincent shared watch duty with the others but he could not sleep during his off-hours. He was worried about his daughter, she was so congested. Restlessly, he tossed. Whenever he closed his eyes, however, he could feel himself drowning in a sea of mud while his family stood helplessly by. He could even feel Catherine's pain. He would sit up in bed drenched in sweat and call her name.

Catherine was faring no better. Katie was having a difficult time and Jake was very restless. She surmised he was sensing the strain his parents were under. It seemed just when she finally got Jake to sleep, Katie would wake up very congested. She would have to walk her most of the night until exhausted, she would doze off in the rocker with the baby over her shoulder.

Each time after closing her eyes, she would find herself standing in the tunnels with Jake and Katie as they watched Vincent walking to them. Before he would reach them, an avalanche of mud would sweep him away and there was nothing she could do but scream his name. She would awaken drenched in sweat and clutching Katie protectively.

A few days later, Catherine listened intently to the weather forecast. The rain was supposed to stop by lunchtime with partial clearing by late afternoon. If it hadn't been for the fact she was nursing the baby, she would have jumped from the chair and ventured into the tunnels. Instead, she smiled broadly and looked at Katie.

"It's almost over, baby, we'll see Daddy soon."

Below, they had gotten word of the forecast but the danger was far from over. Vincent knew it would take days for the overflow to work its way down. Days of watching and worrying and nights without sleep. He stood in Father's chamber studying the drainage routes when he heard a message on the pipes.

'Vincent----we are fine----be home soon----love Catherine.' He smiled to himself and reached out through their bond.

Standing by the pipes in the sub-basement, Catherine felt his mental touch and, for a moment, let his love warm her.

Later that afternoon, Vincent finally lay down for some much needed sleep. As soon as he drifted off, he saw himself walking through the tunnels. Ahead of him, he saw Catherine and the children waiting. As he approached them, he heard a rumbling and turned to see a wall of mud headed for him. Desperately, he tried to run from it, but the thick sticky, ooze surrounded him, knocking him off his feet, carrying him away. He fought vainly to free himself, but even his own great strength was no match for the moving earth. His last vision was of Catherine screaming his name. Again he woke up suddenly, gasping for breath.

Catherine had finished giving Katie her juice and had just put her back in the crib when she felt a violent wave of nausea sweep through her. Her head began to pound, "Vincent?" But just as quickly as it claimed her, the feeling faded away leaving her gasping. She waited, but the feeling did not return and Jake had not expressed any fear. She sighed and rubbed her temples. "When will this end?"

When Peter came by later to check on Katie, Catherine persuaded him to stay with the children so that she could steal a few moments alone with Vincent in the sub-basement. Patiently she waited after sending her message on the pipes.

When Vincent heard the message, he quickly forgot about the long hours of waiting and rushed to the entrance. His heart was pounding with anticipation.

She heard, as well as felt, his approach and turned expectantly to the entrance. Suddenly he was there. He was dirty, breathing hard from his mad rush to her, but he was beautiful. "Vincent."

At first sight of her, all the fatigue and aching muscles were forgotten. He closed the distance between them quickly. The feel of her warm, soft body in his arms was sheer heaven. The scent of her, the feel of her arms around him, and her body pressed close to him relieved every pain but one. That pain was the ache to experience her love again.

For her it was much the same. He felt so strong and alive in her arms. She just wanted to be held close and tight. No, she wanted more than that.

Pulling back and looking into his eyes she said, "Vincent, I've been so worried about you. Are you all right?"

"Yes. How's the baby?"

"Peter said she was better. He said in a few days she'll be fine again. What about the tunnels?"

"The rain has stopped, but it still won't be safe to return until the drainage has returned to normal."

"How long will that be?"

"A few more days."

She dropped her head against his chest and let out her disappointment. "Can you at least come Above for a little while? The children miss you and I need to feel you safe and warm beside me in bed."

"I wish I could, but the watch must be kept. I can't ask the others to take on my responsibilities as well."

"I know." She looked up at him with assessing eyes. "You look awfully tired and you've lost some weight, haven't you? You guys haven't been eating, have you?"

"We manage a little when we can."

"I'll be glad when this is over and we can all sit down to one of William's feasts again."

"So do I."

A moment of silence passed between them. Instinctively, they moved toward each other's lips and met in a moment of sweet passion. A passion that quickly grew despite their fatigue. Catherine's hands clutched at his back and his hands pulled her closer then moved up to hold her head.

In the heat of the moment, she turned her head back and forth in an effort to get even closer. Vincent then held her head more tightly and forced her lips apart with his tongue. She accepted him willingly and responded in kind. Soon his hands moved down her back as hers moved down to his hips. She squeezed tightly as his hands found her hips and caressed them with gentle power.

Without warning, he pulled away gasping. "No, Catherine, not here and not like this."

"Why not? No one will see us."

"I'm tempted, 'VERY' tempted, but I'm dirty and we're both tired. I don't know if I could even.... you know," he blushed.

She smiled wickedly. "Oh, I don't think you could 'ever' let me down. You never have."

"I don't ever remember being this tired."

"Okay, darling. If you don't think you're 'UP' to it." They both laughed.

"Catherine, you can be wicked, can't you?"

"Only when it concerns 'you'."

He caressed her hips once again as if considering her invitation. "Believe me, there's nothing I'd rather do than to throw you to the ground and fulfill our desires, but I'd rather be 'UP' on the occasion as you said."

She laughed heartily. "You can be wicked too, my dear Vincent."

"Only with you, Catherine, only with you." He slid his hands back up to her waist. "Right now, our desires have to be put aside for the health of our children and the survival of our community. There'll be time for our passions later."

She nodded and they stood there for some time talking and touching. When it came time to part, they again kissed passionately and she turned to go. But before she could get to the ladder, he called to her. When she turned, he walked up to her.

"I just want to give you something to think about." At her look of confusion, he raised his hands and placed them inside her jacket to tenderly fondle her breasts through her blouse. Then he lowered his face and kissed each one through the fabric.

She groaned and bit her lip. "Oh Vincent, that's damned unfair of you." He just smiled coyly as he looked up at her with those shining blue eyes. She continued. "Let me give you a little something to think about." She reached down quickly and squeezed the intriguing fullness in the front of his pants.

"Catherine, 'don't'."

"Think about 'that,' my dear. I'll see you later." With an evil smile, she turned and ascended the ladder. After she returned to her apartment, she stepped into the bathroom and with one look in the mirror, she began laughing uncontrollably. There, on the front of her expensive blouse, were two very grimy, but clearly defined, handprints.

It was very difficult for Vincent to collect his thoughts and return to the dreary work detail he faced. Those few moments with Catherine had been heaven and he longed to ascend to that higher plane with her.

That night was tough for both of them. Even though Katie was having her first peaceful night in a while, Catherine couldn't fall asleep right away. She lay in that big bed reliving their brief meeting Below. She folded her arms around herself as she remembered his touch.

"Soon, Vincent, soon," she murmured as she smiled and finally drifted off into dreams.

Vincent walked the empty passageways looking for signs of damage. It seemed the major slides had been in the lower series of mazes and understructures only. So far, the upper levels had escaped the ravages of the rain and, hopefully, that would continue.

He stopped for a moment to lean wearily against the wall. Closing his eyes, he could see her bright loving eyes staring up at him, he could smell her personal scent, and he could feel her warmth again. How he loved her - how he needed her. *'I've got to stop this,'* he thought. *'We'll have plenty of time later.'*

As he walked further into the lower tunnels, he examined the walls closely. At least the running water had stopped and the puddles on the floor had dissipated somewhat. A little further along, though, the condition of the walls concerned him. He decided that several key structures needed to be strengthened so he went back to get the work detail started right away.

Hours later, the work crew was finishing their efforts to secure the section of weak wall. Pascal, Cullen, Vincent and several other volunteers were inspecting their work when Pascal asked Vincent about Catherine and the children.

"The baby's much better, thank you."

"I bet you miss them. I think we all do."

"I cannot tell you how much."

Cullen approached the two. "Yes, I think married life agrees with you, my friend."

"Oh, it does. It really does."

Cullen smiled knowingly at Pascal. "I can remember what those first years were like," he said, as he playfully punched Vincent's arm. He and Pascal both laughed while Vincent blushed.

"If we're finished here, I'd love to get some sleep," Pascal said.

Cullen answered. "I think it will be all right now. I'm really beginning to believe the worst is over."

As they turned to walk away, Vincent stood there a moment thinking over the conversation with his friends. Before Catherine, he had often heard those kinds of conversations among his friends and he remembered standing idly by and feeling so apart from it all. He took a deep breath and felt more relieved than he had in days.

Above, Catherine was sleeping peacefully at last. She was lost somewhere in a deep beautiful dream. Somewhere South of Oz and North of Shangri-La.

Cullen and Pascal turned to Vincent. "Are you coming?" They saw Vincent start to speak, then watched in horror as a wall of mud and water came crashing down on him. "Vincent!"

Suddenly, Catherine woke up from her erotic images of Vincent and screamed his name. She felt the icy fingers of fear grip her heart and the images of her nightmare filled her mind.

Vincent struggled against the tide of wet earth trying to pull him under. His hands were desperately searching for something solid to hold onto and his feet were fighting the mud's deadly grip. His instinct for survival was strong, his thoughts only of Catherine and the children.

Pascal yelled for the rest of the crew to return and Cullen frantically sought something to throw out to Vincent. His searching fingers grasped a rope and he waded out into the mud. The other men returned and they quickly formed a human chain so that Cullen could safely get as close to Vincent as possible.

Sitting up in bed, Catherine's heart was pounding. She sensed the danger but, somehow, Vincent was sending messages of comfort through their bond.

"What's going on?" she asked aloud. Just then, Jake came running into the bedroom all wide-eyed and frightened and she realized he had felt it too. "Jake, it's okay. Get into bed with Mommy." The little boy crawled in bed beside his mother and she held him tightly. "It's all right, Jake. Daddy's all right."

Vincent realized his struggling was doing more harm than good. He had to stay calm and in control. The mud and water was moving up, threatening to cover his shoulders. *'Don't panic,'* he told himself. *'Just don't panic.'* He could see Cullen and the others moving toward him.

"Be careful," he called to them.

Slowly, ever so slowly, Cullen made his way to within throwing distance of the helpless Vincent. Repeatedly, he tossed the rope to him only to have it fall just short of his outstretched arms. After several frustrating attempts, Vincent finally managed to grab onto it, and began to carefully tie it around his chest as he fought to keep his head above the mire. Cullen and the others started to pull after seeing the rope was secure.

A little at a time, Vincent could feel himself begin to move. It was like his whole body was being weighted down with granite. He pushed into the pull of the rope with all the strength he could muster while, just a few feet in front of him, Cullen and the others were pulling with all their might.

Catherine's emotions were being bombarded from her own fear, Vincent's mixed signals, and Jake's fear. Deep inside of her, she knew he was alive but could feel him struggling and she focused on sending all her strength to him.

Stroking Jake's hair, she said. "Think about Daddy. Send him all the courage and love you can. Concentrate, Jake. Concentrate on helping your dad."

As Vincent struggled to free himself, he suddenly felt the warmth of Catherine's love and strength fill him. He could also feel Jacob sending his strength through their connection. With a sudden surge of super-human strength, he pushed through the mire until his feet found solid ground and he began to move toward his rescuers. Finally free, he collapsed at the feet of his friends and they gathered quickly around him.

"Vincent, are you all right?" Cullen asked.

"Yes," he managed to respond as he gasped for air. Slowly he sat up, took one look at the motley crew around him, and began laughing.

Pascal was surprised at his reaction. "What's so funny?"

"Just look at us."

The exhausted group looked at each other and all began to laugh with Vincent. They were quite a sight, covered head to foot in greenish slime. Days of frustration came to a head and they all laughed so hard they ended up in a huddle around their rescued friend.

In the dim light of Catherine's bedroom, laughter was also heard. Both she and Jake simultaneously felt a wave of joy and relief wash over them.

Jake sat up and announced, "Daddy's okay!"

"Yes, honey. Daddy's okay now," his mother answered then hugged him tightly.

The minute Peter arrived to check on Katie, Catherine was out the door, down to the basement, and down the stairs, into Vincent's waiting arms.

"Vincent, I was so afraid. There was nothing I could do," she sobbed.

"I felt your love and courage, Catherine. You and Jacob gave me the strength to fight harder. The two of you saved me."

She lifted her head to gaze into his eyes. "Sometimes, the strength of our bond is impossible to imagine," she paused. With pleading eyes, she asked. "Come Above tonight."

He knew that look. She wanted the reassurance only a physical bond with him could bring. He paused for a moment, the need to reassure her in the safety of his arms threatening to overcome reason. "There is still much to do before everyone can return safely."

She grasped his vest tightly and pulled him forward. "You are not the sole savior of your world! You are only human and there is only so much you can do for the sake of others. There are times you must put yourself and your safety ahead of your world."

He knew the words were true and that they were not spoken out of selfishness.

"You need your sleep, your children need you, and I need you. One night or two away will not destroy your world. As soon as it is safe, I expect to see you in our apartment. *'Is that understood'?*" She would not be denied. Firmly she pulled him to her and kissed him hard.

It only took a few more of those kisses to overcome his reason. "You've convinced me. I'll be there tonight." She smiled, knowing she had won. "Good. Be prepared to stay for awhile."

Catherine was giving Katie her bath when Jake suddenly jumped up from his spot on the floor and ran into the master bedroom. She smiled, realizing it could only mean Vincent had arrived. Her suspicions were confirmed when she heard that deep, resonant voice and the giggles of a delighted little boy. Within moments, she was rewarded with the sight of the two of them in the doorway. Vincent stood silently as Jacob clung tightly to his neck.

She smiled warmly. "You're just in time to help. Why don't you tuck Jake in for the night while I finish Katie's bath."

Silently he walked over and, with his free hand, stroked Katie's head. "You're looking much better." He leaned over and gently kissed the top of her head. "I love you, Mary Catherine." She cooed up at him.

"She's glad to see you and so am I."

Vincent responded by quickly finding her lips with his own. Their eyes met heatedly and all Catherine could see was the fatigue and lack of sleep that shown through the veil of love. He always tried to be so strong for her, but there were things he simply could not hide.

As she finished drying and changing Katie, she could hear that voice down the hall reading Jacob's favorite story. They laughed and talked, causing Catherine to smile at the reassuring sounds. Still listening, she sat down in the rocker and began the baby's bedtime nursing.

Rocking and feeding Katie soon distracted her and she was unaware that the sounds down the hall had stopped and Vincent had moved once again into the doorway. When she did finally look up at him, she could see the moisture gathering in his eyes. They looked deeply into each other's eyes for a long moment, then quietly and gracefully he walked over and knelt before her.

He looked much like a man worshipping at an altar as he reverently stroked Catherine's cheek then let his hand slide down her neck, over the swell of her breast, and onto the baby's head. He lifted his head again and stared at her.

"I've missed this so," he said as his free hand tenderly pushed the hair back from her shoulder, then smoothly slid beneath the other shoulder of her robe.

She shivered slightly as she felt his hand find her breast and ever so tenderly, caress it. As if reading her thoughts, he slipped the robe off her shoulder, then began to softly kiss and nuzzle her. His soft warm tugging at one breast, and the baby's hungry nursing at the other, sent unexpected waves of pleasure through her.

This intimacy lasted for some time until Katie had her fill and fell asleep.

"Vincent," Catherine said in a low throaty voice. "Why don't you put her to bed while I go freshen up." He nodded his agreement and reluctantly ceased his pleasurable ministrations.

She took her time in the bathroom preparing herself for him. Brushing her hair, using the right amount of his favorite perfume, and wearing his favorite negligee was her way of guaranteeing his pleasure. *'It has been too long,'* she thought as she made a last minute check in the mirror. "Perfect."

She expected to find him stretched out in bed anxiously awaiting her, but what she found was an exhausted man sleeping peacefully after just managing to get his clothes off, but not quite making it under the covers.

"Oh Vincent," she sighed. Her heart ached at the sight of him. He had lost weight and had dark circles under his eyes. "Poor baby," she whispered as she found a blanket and covered him up. Disappointedly, she shed her gown and snuggle up close to him, just in case he awakened in the night and remembered where he had left off.

When Vincent did wake up, his eyes strained to adjust to the bright sunlight. He stretched and felt the soreness in his muscles as his keen senses sought Catherine. It wasn't until he sat up that he noticed the time. It was almost noon. He had slept almost sixteen hours! And what of their romantic night? He cradled his head in his hands. How embarrassed he was that he had let her down in such a way. How disappointed she must have been after he had aroused her then fell asleep. How angry she must be at him.

Fearing the worst, he quickly dressed in the sweatpants, pull-over sweater, and socks Catherine kept for him whenever she stayed Above for long periods of time. As he looked in the bathroom mirror, he rehearsed an appropriate apology. He still could not believe it. It had been almost two weeks since they'd made love and when everything had seemed perfect and they were both *'in the mood,'* he fell asleep. He took a deep breath to summon his courage and walked into the living room to face her wrath.

There he saw the typical Saturday morning family scene he'd always imagined. Catherine sat cross-legged on the floor across from Jacob as they worked one of those big puzzles for small children. Mary Catherine lay on a blanket next to her mother and seemed to be absorbed in kicking her feet and waving her arms. He stood there for a moment etching the scene in his memory.

Catherine felt his presence in the room, but did not look up until Jake jumped to his feet and sprang into Vincent's arms. After she watched Jake give his father a warm hug and a wet kiss, she finally spoke.

"Good morning.... or should I say, good afternoon, sleepy head."

He never remembered feeling as embarrassed as he did right now. It reminded him of all the times he and Devin had to face Father after one of their misadventures. Still holding Jacob, he walked around the couch and sat on the floor across from her. It was strange, he thought. All the words he had just carefully rehearsed had suddenly fled. The best he could do was.... "I'm sorry.... about last night."

She looked down at the puzzle. "So am I."

"Perhaps...."

"We'll talk about it later, Vincent," she said as she looked at Jake.

Soon they were all involved in the puzzle, that is until Katie decided it was lunchtime. That's when Catherine undid her blouse, lowered the front of her nursing bra, started Katie's feeding, then watched her two men still struggling with the puzzle. She noted that dressed as he was, Vincent looked like any other father enjoying his son on a Saturday afternoon. It was amazing that a twist of genetic fate had altered his life so. *'What would he have been had he been 'normal?'* It was a question she really didn't care to know the answer to.

The rest of the day was strictly a family day. Catherine couldn't help but laugh at the sight of Vincent and Jacob playing airplane up and down the hall and her heart melted when she saw him lying on his back with Katie on his chest. He would pat her back and they'd talk baby talk then Katie would just coo at him.

Later, when both Jacob and Mary Catherine were down for their nap, Catherine was in the kitchen washing dishes when Vincent walked up behind her. At first he had just stared at her and thought about all she had been through and the battles she fought every day so that they could have some semblance of a life together. But what never ceased to amaze him was her desire for him. She was a beautiful woman by anyone's standards - a woman who once had her choice of any eligible man in New York, but she had chosen him. He was her lover, her husband, and the father of her children. Not Elliot Burch or Tom Gunther, two of the most powerful men in the city. Before her, he had doubted his humanity, but she had some delightful ways of proving him wrong, and he had no more doubts.

She had not been oblivious to his appreciative gaze but she was waiting for more. She realized he wanted to talk about last night, but she was determined to keep him guessing as long as possible.

She felt him walk up close behind her and every nerve in her body tensed at his closeness. She waited. Cautiously, he sniffed her hair and then rubbed his cheek against the softness. Soon he placed his hands on her waist and moved his hips into her. Still she said nothing. Even when he began to rub himself gently back and forth, she remained silent.

"Catherine.... I'm truly sorry about last night. I did not mean to deny you. I was just so tired."

Smiling, she answered. "I know that and you have nothing to be sorry about." She then turned into his arms. "Vincent, how many times have I denied you because I was having my period or I was too pregnant?"

"That's different."

"Is it? Last night you were tired, that's all. Don't berate yourself for that. You know dear, there's a lot more to our relationship than sex. God forbid, but if we no longer had that in our lives, we would still be together." She placed her arms around his neck. "My love for you is not based on the fact that you're great in bed. I love you. Actually, I think *'WE'RE'* great in bed because we love each other so much. We give to each other completely. I'm not angry with you about last night, my love. I do understand."

"You don't know how relieved I am to hear that. It won't happen again."

"Yes, it will. You're only human."

"But I can't bear to waste my time with you sleeping," he started to laugh.

She started laughing too. "I don't either, but with two kids, we've got to sleep sometime."

They both laughed until Vincent pulled her to him and rubbed noses with her until she responded by playfully nipping his bottom lip. Soon their play became much more serious as Catherine leaned back on the sink and he lifted her leg to place it around him. They both continued downward until her hand slipped and

ended up splashing soapy water on both of them.

He groaned and pulled them both back up. "This is '*NOT*' the proper place for this."

"No," she answered then ran her soapy hands through his hair. "We will continue this later."

"If I can wait that long."

" 'I' had to wait '*all*' night. Suffer!" She flicked soap on his nose and laughed as he twitched it violently.

Throughout dinner, Vincent flirted shamelessly. Catherine was glad to see how well he had learned from her years of instruction and she found him irresistibly cute in his unrestrained adoration of her. Several times during the meal, she felt his foot creep over to hers and maneuver its way up her leg. She responded by playing a little game of '*hard to get*.'

As bedtime for the children finally came around, he again read Jacob a story while she nursed the baby. Maybe it was just her sense of time, but Vincent seemed to read very quickly tonight. No sooner had Katie begun nursing heartily, then he appeared in the doorway watching them.

He was always so intrigued to watch Catherine breast-feeding a baby. She wore such a tender look on her face. She seemed to glow as she shared this with their child. Watching her now sent shockwaves of conflicting emotions through him. Her long hair fell over her shoulder and the baby would often reach for it, her smile was one of serenity, and he could feel her sense of fulfillment. He wanted always to remember her like this, even when their children were past the need for nursing.

The scene could also arouse him, as it had last night, and he felt guilty about that. Maybe it was the beauty her body emitted whenever she nursed a child that called to him or maybe it was his own need to be that completely loved and accepted that he felt. He didn't know what it was, he only knew the sight mesmerized him and he wanted to share it with her, so he again went to her.

This time after Katie went to sleep, he did not let her get away from him. He put the baby to bed, then swept his wife up into his arms and carried her into the bedroom.

"Vincent, I should go change and clean up," she said as she glanced down at the breast Katie had just relinquished.

"No, I'll take care of that," he said as he lowered his head and carefully licked all around the nipple. He was rewarded by her look of complete satisfaction and a soft moan.

"You don't intend to let me up, do you?"

"Catherine, I'm the only one getting up right now," he answered, as he opened her robe up all the way and helped her get free of it, exposing her completely to him.

"I thought you might feel that way, so I didn't bother with a gown or underwear."

"It would have been a waste of time," he whispered, as his hands skillfully stroked her anxious body.

"This isn't fair. You're still dressed." She pulled at his sweatpants.

"A condition that will be changed immediately." He got up on his knees and pulled the shirt quickly over his head and tossed it away.

Catherine's hands reached up and pulled the sweatpants down to his knees. As he continued to stand there watching her, she looked hungrily at him, then reached up to stroke him, being sure to encase him completely in her warm hands. She watched the veins in his neck strain and heard his sudden intake of air as she fondled him completely.

He took both her hands and then rolled over onto his back pulling her with him. He placed her hands on the lowered sweatpants indicating he wanted her to finish removing them. She did so quickly and tossed them aside.

"I think I've got you spoiled," she said, as her eyes appreciatively roamed his nude body.

"How so?" he asked.

"Undressing you. You're old enough to undress yourself."

"But, it's much more enjoyable having you do it. I'll think of any excuse to get you to touch me."

"Honey, you don't need an excuse. I love to touch you." She had an idea to show him how much. "Flip over. I want to massage you."

"Catherine, can't you do that *'afterwards'*?"

She tilted her head sideways. "After what?" she asked, smiling innocently.

Although he had a strong urge to *'cut to the chase'*, as she called it, that look told him she wanted to play. Truthfully, he had to admit he enjoyed it more that way. She would play him, tease him to the painful brink, then try something else until she knew he could stand no more. It always made the release more powerful and that pleased her.

Straddling him, she began the massage. He tried desperately to relax, but the feel of her hands firmly kneading his lower back was pushing the limit. All hopes of playing the game fled when she massaged his buttocks then slipped her hand between his legs. Trying to stop the instinctive movements of his hips was impossible. Being no longer able to contain the urge, he rolled over, placing a leg on each side of her. When he reached for her, she pushed him back and let her tongue and lips explore him.

Tightly he clenched the sheets, as she continued to stimulate him. Opening his eyes and watching her was his big mistake. He simply could not take any more and grabbed her shoulders then rolled her over onto her back. Swiftly, he separated her legs with his own and began to kiss her passionately and deeply. He moved down her neck and concentrated on her breasts, letting his lips and tongue inflame her.

As he lovingly attended to her body, her hands were feverishly moving over his back and down to his hips. She loved to feel the power of his muscles as they sought release in her. She could feel him positioning himself for entry and she tried to open as fully as she could to him. When he finally penetrated, she arched up to him and began to move with him physically as well as emotionally. Their connection was much more than physical, it went beyond the heart and into the spirit.

Vincent had learned to pace himself to match her rhythm. Climaxing too fast made him feel as if he had deprived her of the maximum orgasm, so he concentrated on the rhythm of her body that he could sense through the bond. Despite the fevered anticipation he feared would bring him along too fast, his timing was just right. He thrust deeply to meet her need and then felt his own triumphant release. She moaned loudly, moved to him a few more times, then fell back completely spent. He collapsed into her waiting arms.

They lay like that for some time before he finally lifted himself up and they rolled over so that he lay on his back and she was draped across him. Contentedly, she let her fingers play with the golden hair on his chest.

"*'That'* was worth the wait."

He sighed slowly. "I agree."

She lifted herself up to look at his face.

"Is something wrong?" he asked as she continued to study his face.

"No. I just love that contented look on your face after we make love."

He blushed a little. "Did I ever tell you how much I love that sound you make when you climax?"

It was her turn to blush. "I didn't realize you noticed."

"I notice everything about you and I love it all."

"Maybe I should be more careful."

"No, I want you to be you. To see you completely let go like that, and to know you only feel that way with me, tells me how much you love me. Don't ever change that."

"And don't you ever change that innocent enthusiasm you have when we love."

"We are two very fortunate people, Catherine. We have and share what most people can only dream of."

"I know, and I am grateful for every day, every minute we share."

They shared a warm kiss and then snuggled up to drift off to sleep.

The clock radio by the bed came on and Catherine jumped at the loud booming voice.

"Damn," she swore under her breath, then reached out to shut it off. But before she reached it, she heard the announcer say, '*Good morning on this April thirteenth....*'

She hit the shut off button. It took a moment for it to sink in, but when it did, she started to laugh.

Vincent had heard everything, but his mind didn't digest it right away. Upon hearing Catherine's laughter, he turned to her. "What's wrong?" She didn't answer him right away. "Catherine?"

She rolled over to face him. "Didn't you hear that?"

"Yes," he said, still confused.

"Vincent, this is April thirteenth."

Slowly realization dawned on him. "Oh Catherine, yesterday was our anniversary."

"That's right. Can you believe it? We got so caught up with everything that we both completely forgot it."

"I'm so sorry."

"So am I. Do you suppose this means the romance is dead?"

"You can ask *that* after last night? No, I think not."

"Maybe it means we've become just like all the other old married couples around."

"Catherine, we are hardly your everyday old married couple." He let his hands find her under the sheet.

"Come here."

"What if the kids come in?"

"Then they'll begin their sex education. What better way to learn than from people who love each other."

"You are naughty today, aren't you?"

"I don't think naughty's the word." He playfully pulled her close and pinched her bottom. "Happy anniversary, Catherine. May the next fifty years be as happy as the last five have been."

"I heartily agree. Vincent, I love you. Know that."

"I do, Catherine. I do."