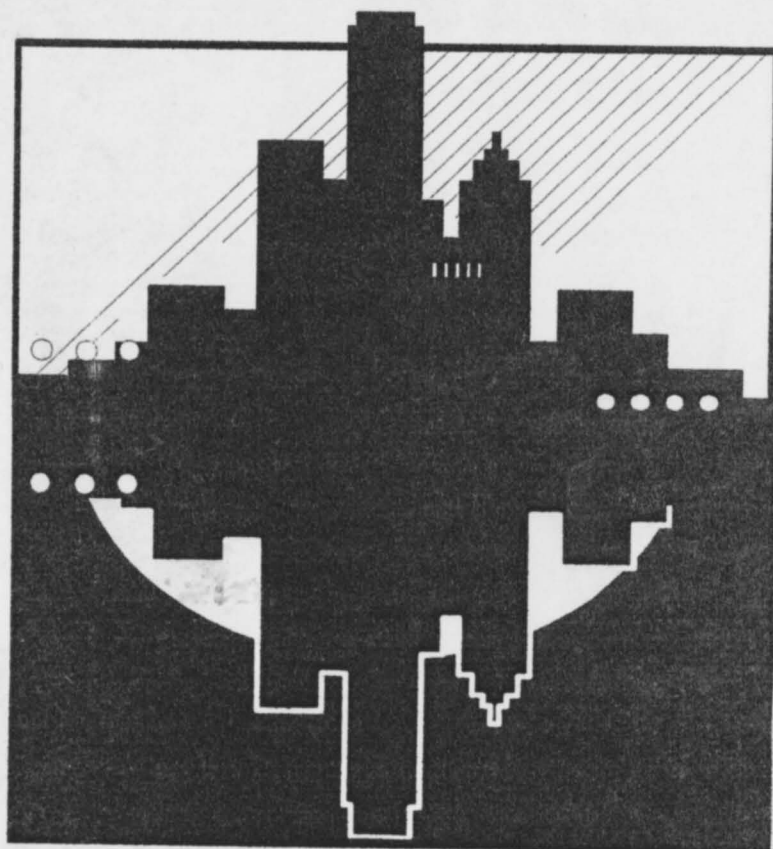


*BEAUTY AND
THE BEAST*



FAITH OF THE HEART



BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

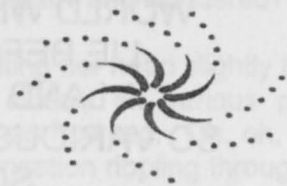
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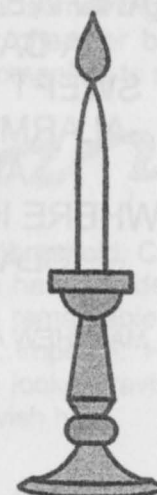
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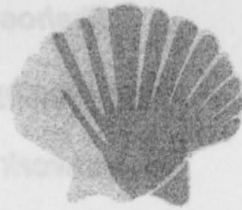
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KEEP THE TUNNEL CANDLES



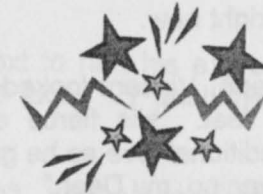
BRIGHTLY BURNING



AH, LOVE, LET US BE TRUE
TO ONE ANOTHER! FOR THE
WORLD WHICH SEEMS TO
LIE BEFORE US LIKE
A LAND OF DREAMS,
SO VARIOUS, SO BEAUTIFUL,
SO NEW,
HATH REALLY NEITHER JOY,
NOR LOVE, NOR LIGHT.
NOR CERTITUDE, NOR
PEACE, NOR HELP FOR PAIN;
AND WE ARE HERE AS ON
A DARKLING PLAIN
SWEPT WITH CONFUSED
ALARMS OF STRUGGLE
AND FLIGHT,
WHERE IGNORANT ARMIES
CLASH BY NIGHT.

MATTHEW ARNOLD - DOVER BEACH

JUST AN "ORDINARY" MAN



At about the midway point between the Hub and the chamber she shared with Vincent, a sudden *surge* in their Bond brought Catherine up short, causing her to stumble.

What on earth had caused *that*? she wondered?

Standing utterly still and tilting her head slightly to the right, she tried to hone in more closely on various perceptions emanating from within, and then frowned. Oh, oh, something was very, very wrong. The sensation rippling through her from the other side of their internal union was one of extreme vexation. At the moment, Vincent was definitely not happy.

After probing their connection thoughtfully, and finally accepting that whatever was distressing him hadn't put him in harms way, her concerned expression eased a bit. But still, he seemed to be quite upset about something. Picking up her pace, she hoped to reach their chamber before he grasped just how near she was and felt compelled to meet her.



Pausing just at the chamber threshold, Catherine smiled at the beautiful being who sat with hands folded under his chin, lost in thought. Vincent looked remarkable sitting there in a massive antique chair; almost...imperial. He seemed to be preoccupied, perplexed, and he looked ravishing. Which was exactly what she'd like to do - ravish him.

"Beloved," she whispered, a trifle apprehensive of disturbing his quietude right now.

Jolted from his reverie, Vincent looked up, smiled faintly, and then rose to his feet. His fierce expression shifted, altering to one of unconditional love as he greeted her. "You're home quite early this evening, my Dear."

"Are you complaining?" she teased.

"Not in the least." Then, just that quickly, his expression turned somber again. "Please accept my apology for not meeting you, but I was..." Catherine would probably never know what he'd been about to say, for instead of finishing the thought Vincent scowled. Then, extending his left hand towards her, palm up, he rumbled, "Do you see *this*?"

At first, she didn't 'see' anything, except his callused leathery palm. Peering closer, she touched a silvery thread he was holding. Or was it a strand of hair? "A hair?" she asked. "Is that what this is?"

"Hmm," he grunted, a growl of displeasure rising from his chest. "My hair."

"Oh."

Clamping down on the inside of her jaw, Catherine shed her jacket, sat on the edge of the bed, and then slipped out of her topside shoes. Reaching for the comfortable, ratty old sneakers she kept under their bed, she swallowed the fit of giggles threatening to well up and explode from within. Tying her shoes, she kept her head down so that he couldn't see her face.

Oh Lord, it was the end of life as they knew it. The 'protector of the tunnels' had found a gray hair. Contact

Pascal, sound the general alarm! There'd be no dancing tonight!

Sitting down next to her, his expression morose, Vincent cast her a pained look. "I shall never understand about follicles."

"W...What don't you understand about them?" she managed to choke out without snorting.

"I cannot comprehend what held this particular piece of hair *in* yesterday?" He then proceeded to wave the bit of hair so close to her face that Catherine nearly went cross-eyed trying to focus on it. When Vincent spoke again, he sounded like the very portend of doom. "Perhaps soon I shall look like Methuselah, or Father." All at once, he looked as though an even more horrific thought had struck him. "Or perhaps I shall be snatched *entirely* bald!"

That did it. Bunching the end of her shirt and stuffing it between her teeth, Catherine flopped backwards on the bed. Shrieking until her ribs hurt, she lost her breath, and very nearly wet her pants.

Affording her a look of consummate displeasure, her wounded-looking companion leaned toward her until they were nose to nose. Narrowing his eyes, he declared indignantly, "I find nothing amusing about this, *Madam*."

With one end of her shirt still stuffed between her teeth, her eyes met his, but she didn't speak. She couldn't. He looked just about ready to annihilate her as it was.

Clamping her teeth together, "Mmfff...!" was all she was capable of by way of a response.

Eyeing her testily, he wondered what was the matter with her? Didn't she comprehend the significance of this occasion?

Drawing himself up to his full height, which was considerable, he peered down that magnificent fuzzy nose of his at the woman he adored, but didn't like very much at the moment. Affording her what some residents thought of as The Look, Vincent declared a trifle disdainfully, "Whenever you are quite through *reveling* at my discomfort, perhaps then you shall be able to hold an intelligent conversation."

Inwardly, Catherine winced. Oh yeah, he was ticked off, all right. When he began using his 'Shakespeare voice', you knew it was time to 'make nice'.

Putting one finger to his lips, she lay her other hand against the tensed muscles of his back, rubbing gently up and down. "Love, it's only a gray hair. Most people get them sooner or later."

"Right now that knowledge brings very little, if anything, by way of comfort." Giving the bit of himself that had been attached to his head yesterday one last sneer of disgust, he brushed it from his hand into a nearby wicker container. "Last month, it was bad enough to discover that I had a 'touch', as Father called it, of arthritis. Having my hair...change color...and then *die*, wasn't necessary to remind me that..." Exhaling a rough breath, he said nothing more.

Studying his face, that woebegone, exquisite face, Catherine reached up and brushed his long amber-gold hair away from his eyes. Tucking some of the long tresses behind his delectable ears, she asked gently, "That you're getting older, just like an ordinary man?"

Having no reply to that, at least not one that he could conjure up offhand, a soft vibration of sound suddenly welled up from the back of Vincent's throat. At last comprehending the appalling way he'd been behaving, he embraced her around the waist. "Dearest, please forgive me for being so...churlish?"

"There's no need to apologize." Snuggling up to his lovely warm body, she sighed. "And just so you'll know that you're really not the only one around here who's having their hair 'change color' on them, I found several gray hairs earlier this month."

"You did? Where?"

"Where? On my head, of course!" Keeping the rest to herself Catherine thought, 'I'm not the one in this relationship with hairy *nether regions*.'

"Oh."

"Uh huh." Peering up at him, she asked, "Remember the night you entered the apartment above and found me locked in the bathroom?"

"The night you refused to come out for twenty-seven minutes?"

"Yes. You never asked what I was doing in there for so long."

"I thought perhaps whatever pursuit you were engrossed in was something feminine, and really none of my business."

"Well, the truth is I had my hair parted in about twenty different places, held up with bobby-pins, and I was checking it in the mirror, searching for more nasty little gray bits. And I found them."

Easing slightly away from her, Vincent lifted his hand towards her head and let strands of her hair glide through his fingers. Angling the tresses this way and that in the candlelight, he studied them thoughtfully.

Pulling away, Catherine asked testily, "What are you rooting around for up there, *fleas*?"

"Have you been socializing with Mouse's raccoon?"

"No."

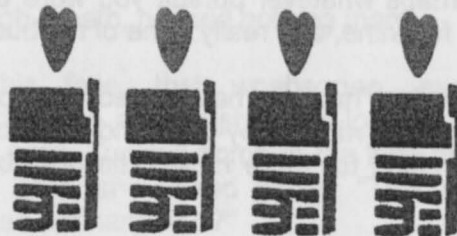
"Then I'm not checking you for fleas. I'm searching for gray, but I can't find even a single strand."

"And thanks to L'Oreal © you won't," she sneered.

"Lor...?"

"Never mind."

Sensing that she was going to keep the knowledge of that particular word to herself, he pulled her closer. "Well, as you say, perhaps I am getting older like an 'ordinary man', my Catherine." Turning her to face him and resting his mouth lightly on hers, Vincent murmured, "But one who is loved by such an *extraordinary* woman."



CURIOSITY, ETC.

Smiling warmly in welcome as Catherine stepped into their chamber, Vincent put down his pen and closed a tattered-looking black and white notebook. "Hello, my Love."

"Hi," she mumbled.

"How was your afternoon?"

Dumping the canvas bag she'd been lugging onto the floor, Catherine afforded him a grimace and then plunked her bottom into the chair across from the desk. Leaning forward on her elbows she answered a tad snidely, "It was just *peachy keen*."

Oh, oh. Vincent's brow furrowed. No hug? No kiss? No...anything? Peering over at her, his expression one of genuine concern, he questioned softly, "What's happened to cause you to be so upset?"

"This...*this* is what 'happened'!" she exclaimed, kicking at the canvas bag with her right foot. "The next time I *volunteer* for anything, remind me of *this*, will you?"

Rising to his feet, he walked over to the object of his Beloved's discord. Sliding gracefully to his knees, he began untying the rope at the top at the top of the ample-sized bag, asking, "What have you volunteered...to do?"

"To untangle that," she sneered. "Mouse, being his usually helpful self, made a mess, and I promised Mary that I'd untangle it for her before her knitting class tomorrow morning. Just *look* in there!" That said, she kicked the contemptible heap of cloth a second time.

Peering down at the contents – balls and balls of tangled skeins of yarn of every texture and color – Vincent very nearly laughed out loud. Recovering his composure just in time, he kept the expression on his face carefully neutral by chomping down on the inside of his jaw. To show amusement at this moment, he knew, would have immediately sealed his doom.

Being the big, good-natured beastie that he was, he offered, "Would you like me to help with all this?" Waiting for her reply, he prayed she'd say "No."

"Thanks, but no," Catherine answered, granting his silent petition. Peering over at the desk, she sighed. "You have lessons to prepare for tomorrow's classes, don't you?"

God was kind. Trying to seem utterly sincere, he gestured to the notebook. "As a matter of fact, yes, I do."

"I thought so. Well..." Crinkling up her nose, she rose slowly to her feet, "...I may as well get started or I'll be here all blessed night." Muttering under her breath, she reached out, grabbed at the canvas bag, and yanked it toward her.

Reopening his book and returning to the class assignments, Vincent kept his head down, hiding a smile. Surely he hadn't just heard his lady curse, or had he? When Catherine dumped the contents of the bag into her lap, still muttering, he tightened the grip he had on his pen,

fighting back the urge to comment. She was cursing. And quite adeptly, too.

Guiltily conscious of the fact that his work could be put aside for a while, he offered again, "Are you sure you don't want me to help?"

Blowing her bangs away from her eyes, Catherine grumbled, "I *SAID* I'd do it."

Okay good.

As his Beloved bent to her odious task, Vincent looked over from time to time, noting her progress. Oh dear. She was nearly chin-deep in yarn. Some had dropped over both sides of the chair and onto her feet as well, giving her the overall appearance of a colorfully shrouded mummy – a quite frustrated, exquisitely beautiful mummy.

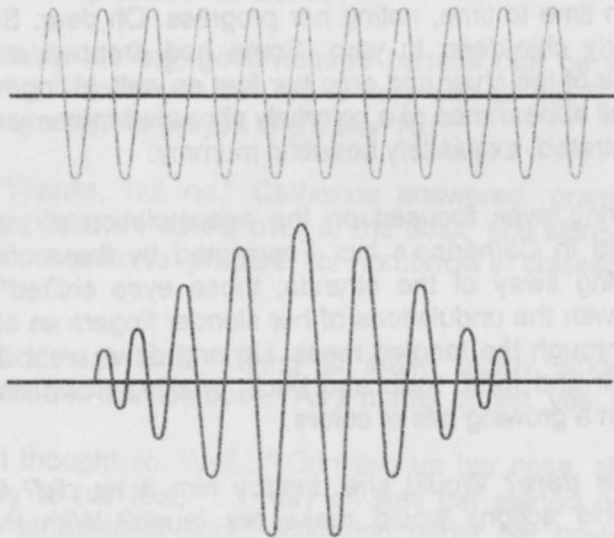
Glittering eyes focused on the accumulation of yarn ensconced in Catherine's lap. Fascinated by the motion and alluring sway of the strands, those eyes shifted in cadence with the undulations of her slender fingers as she worked through the tangled mess. Up and down went the yarn, back and forth, forth and back, snaking down onto the floor in a growing pile of colors.

Did he *dare*? Would she destroy him if he *did*? Or perhaps his actions would make her laugh? With that thought, a look of pure devilry filled Vincent's eyes.

It was a lucky thing for him that Catherine was a woman of infinite patience and had a strong heart as well, for with a rumbling sound somewhere between a growl and a snarl, her majestic hulk of a lover put down his pen, tensed his knees, and *pounced*.

Twisting the yarn once more to all 'hell and gone' between his fingers and sharp nails, he tugged on the dangling end of the yarn that Catherine was fighting to retain possession of.

Dragging her forward in the chair, until her chin was level with his, eyes the color of shimmering sapphires locked to those of grayish-green, as the one she loved growled teasingly, "Mine!"



FAITH OF THE HEART



Standing just inside of the Central Park tunnel entrance, Catherine peered up into the night-sky. Noting with pleasure the silvered glow radiating overhead, she smiled, deciding that the stars looked like tiny jewels illuminating the heavens, glittering much like the extraordinary crystals in the special cavern Vincent had shown her years earlier.

Inhaling deeply of the crisp evening air, she started forward, across the Park. Picking her way carefully over some fallen tree branches and various-sized piles of autumn leaves, she paused at the sudden sound of rustling off to her left.

Straining to see clearly in the moon's butter-hued glow, she detected a chipmunk scurrying back and forth, searching for whatever food it could find among the fallen leaves. Pausing for a moment, it sat up on its hind legs and sniffed the air. Honing in on her presence and perhaps her scent as well, the tiny thing scampered hastily into the shelter of a nearby moss-covered log.

Perhaps it was late for supper, she thought, chuckling softly as she continued on her way. Becoming attuned to sudden traces of renewed activity in the leaves, she realized that the tiny creature was shadowing her. Good, she could use some company right about now.

Then, her miniature cohort suddenly darted off into the thick shrubbery and disappeared from view.

"Bye cutie," she called out softly to the small striped creature, "You'd better hurry home. Your family may be worried about you."

Snuggling down into the warmth of her plaid wool jacket, Catherine reached up and adjusted the collar until it covered her ears. Shivering slightly, she approached the path that would lead her out of the Park and to the apartment above, which Vincent teasingly called the 'staging area'.

The only reason she stayed above anymore was when she needed to use her computer, had topside visitors who didn't know of her 'other' life, or to answer her phone messages. She grunted. Or when she needed to retrieve mounds of paperwork for chocolate-cheese-ball-eating friends.

Frowning as she thought about the errand that had taken her away from Vincent tonight, up into the cold darkness of Manhattan, she swore under her breath. Leave it to Joe Maxwell, the slave driver of the Western world, to need some paperwork updated for a case he'd be trying in the morning. And when did he leave her the message with old Sam? Why an hour ago, of course – the jerk.

She could have taken the basement route instead of freezing her buns off up here, but this way was quicker. And she didn't really 'have' to be making this trek alone. Vincent had asked if she wanted his company, but why drag him out needlessly on such a cold night?

Besides, he always seemed to be busy doing 'stuff' lately, like today for example, and exceedingly preoccupied with a list of some sort he never left laying around where she could steal a glance at it – dammit.

Frowning, she wondered what project or projects had captured his attention so completely? Plus, he seemed to be spending much more of his free time with Mouse than was usual. Things that made you go hmm?

Tucking her hands into her pockets as a sudden chill breeze encompassed her, causing a deep shiver to run down her spine, Catherine muttered, "Seven blessed o'clock at night and what am I doing? Why I'm walking through Central Park all by myself, freezing my ass off, *that's* what I'm doing."

Unable to hold on to her anger, she sighed, allowing it to drift away to nothingness. Tonight it seemed that the entire world was her friend. Nothing and no one, not even Joe, could make her angry on such a very special evening.

Scuffing along in the dry, crackling leaves and thinking of Vincent, knowing that he always worried when she came above alone, she sent him a message as only she could – on 'loves light wings'. *I'm fine.*

In a heartbeat he replied, *I know.*

Sensing all of his love washing over her, as well as his eternal vigilance keeping her safe through their extraordinary connection, she pulled the Bond tightly around her, as she would have Vincent's warm winter cloak, and sighed contentedly.

Tonight was the anniversary of the wondrous time all of their hopes and dreams had finally been realized. On this date twelve years ago, Vincent had at last found the courage from within to follow his heart and had made love to her, as only he ever could, or ever would.

Oh, his touch. The scent of his body, the *feel* of him joined to her, the infinite passion he shared when he finally

allowed himself to yield to it, were astounding, breathtaking - nearly overwhelming. She knew then, in an instant, that she'd never forget a single moment of that night; it had become a part of her. as she had become a part of him, forever.

Vincent had been a perfect lover from that very first time, as though he'd been born to give love, to make love. She wondered why she hadn't sensed that earlier in their relationship? And he was extremely sensual, earthy, his entire essence one of impassioned hunger.

Catherine stopped dead in her tracks in the middle of the path as her memories continued to play over the events of that night.

In her minds-eye she could still see his tall frame as he bent nearly double, almost folding his body in half, and then lowered himself to sit beside her on the wrought iron bench on her balcony. Whenever she knew he was on his way above, she'd transfer the bench to the more shadowed area of that space, no longer willing to trust even the darkness to keep him completely safe.

At the beginning of their relationship she'd even managed to browbeat the members of the Tenants Association into allowing a brick wall to be constructed on the right side of their 'vantage point'. That way, her nosy next door neighbor got nada for all of her 'neck straining'.

That night, with his hands folded in his lap, Vincent had listened without comment for many moments as she spoke, and right now she really couldn't recall what she'd been saying. Then, suddenly, he'd interrupted her, something he very rarely did, and whispered the words she'd been waiting for, for such a long time.

It had taken this oh, so special being three years to admit to his feelings for her, or to touch her with a lover's caress; three empty, agonizing years for both of them. And when she wasn't expecting it, and wasn't prepared for it, he managed to give voice to his long-buried desires. As he clenched his fingers around the wrought iron bench, his tone of voice had been low, even for him, it's resonance hesitant; as though a part of him still struggled against admitting to even having such purely physical emotions.

I...I can't fight what I'm feeling anymore, Catherine. I love you so much, so deeply. And I...need you.

To have the words at *last*.

When he'd finally lifted his head and met her gaze, his hair had been a wind-tossed erotic tangle about his face. His extraordinary eyes altered to the shade of a tempestuous sky, flashing as they claimed every part of her - as they claimed what had only been his to claim for three years.

Then, slowly, giving her every opportunity to ease out of his embrace, which of course she didn't, he drew her fully into his arms and spoke her name softly, almost reverently. Trembling all over, he lowered his mouth to hers for the first time. His nuzzling kiss had been delicate, gentle, so very shy and extremely cautious, as though he feared bruising her flesh beneath the roughened texture of his.

At that point, the years of denial and frustration seemed to instantly melt away, flinging both of them beyond all caution. When Vincent groaned hoarsely at the back of his throat and rose shakily to his feet, bringing her with him, and deepened the kiss, her legs had truly been unable to support her.

Seeming to realize this, or perhaps sensing it through their connection, he urgently swept her forward until her shoes rested on the toes of his boots. Breaking the kiss and tilting his head back, he gulped air into his lungs. When he leaned toward her again and exhaled a ragged breath, it had warmed her face, making it tingle, and caused a prickling heat to explode through her like pinpoints of fire.

Peering down at her through eyes that had darkened to the shade of blue velvet, he angled her lower body to rest against the curve of his left arm. Urgently seeking her mouth again, he slanted his to imprison hers as though he'd never let her go – which had been precisely what she hoped for. Nothing, not even her most fervent daydreams, could have prepared her for the reality of him, of being utterly possessed by him forever, from a single kiss.

And then, gasping her name as a bone-deep shudder ran the length of his body, Vincent had suddenly wrenched his mouth away from hers. Wide-eyed and gulping for breath, he stared at her for a moment, and then his hands clenched into fists. Shaking his head fiercely from side to side and lurching backwards a few steps, the expression on his face had been uncertain, apprehensive – and hungered.

Sensing that he feared he'd gone too far, too quickly, and was struggling mightily to suppress his desire, or perhaps even to deny it altogether, she refused to allow him to retreat behind his self-imposed emotional barriers. That wouldn't happen again – ever *again*.

Reaching out and grabbing at lengths of his hair to keep him close, the gesture itself conveyed her complete acceptance of whatever he wanted to happen from that point on. After reassuring him of the depth of her love, the

absolute faith she had in him, she'd held on to him, waited, and prayed.

Growling deep in his chest, an earthy, sensual rumble that seemed to settle into the depths of her womb, he'd placed a shaking, work-callused left hand at her waist, and his right to the curve of her buttocks, urging her toward him; as if she'd needed urging. Eagerly moving closer and positioning his thighs at the outer edges of hers, he'd leaned forward and slid his warm tongue slowly and oh so delicately over the fleshiest part of her lower lip, tasting her, learning her – taunting them both beyond what could be endured.

The scent of his mouth had been that of cinnamon laced with pears, enticing, addictive – an addiction she would happily succumb to. His lips had been incredibly warm, the moistness there exciting her to the point of swooning, something she'd never done in her life. The depth of his passion, the inherent sensuality that seemed to radiate from every part of him, especially his shimmering turquoise eyes, had been that arousing, that extraordinary. It had been everything...*everything*.

And then, suddenly, kisses simply weren't enough – they would never be enough again.

When Vincent had lifted her fully into his arms and quickly opened the door leading into her bedroom with the toe of his boot, she'd clung tightly to him, her heart thudding so loudly that she'd heard the echo of it in her ears. Had he heard it too, she wondered?

With her head pressed to the center of his chest, she'd also heard the rumbling cadence of his heart. It beat erratically, fiercely, as he slowly lowered her to stand on the bedroom carpet.

Caressing the scar on the side of her face with the pad of his thumb, he'd murmured, "You've been so patient, dear Catherine, so caring. I thank you for that. I love you for that. As I have loved you from the moment you first spoke my name."

And with that said, he'd shown her exactly how much he loved her. *Oh, indeed he had.*

Shivering and coming reluctantly back to the present, Catherine struggled to get her thoughts back to the tasks at hand. She had quite a few things to do and very little time to dawdle on this of all nights.



Quietly stepping up behind his muttering-to-himself friend, who was frantically searching his pockets for something, Vincent placed one hand lightly on Mouse's shoulder, asking, "So, have you managed to 'find' everything on the list I gave you last week?"

"Ack!" The shorter man exclaimed, putting one hand to his chest. "Oh...Vincent. Scared me!"

"Please forgive me? I didn't mean to."

"No problem." Gesturing toward a large cardboard box, he announced proudly, "You asked, Mouse got. See?" Carefully opening one corner of the box, he watched with apprehension as Vincent poked a long curved fingernail among the contents for a moment, and then nodded his head, smiling. Whew. Everything okay good, okay fine!

"Excellent, my friend. I appreciate the fact that you've never failed me yet in all these years, on any request." Peering down into the carton one more time, he went on,

"Especially a request as important as this one. Do you think Catherine will approve of my plans?"

"Sure!" Mouse exclaimed, nodding his head vigorously up and down. "You do it, she'll like it. Well, gotta go, late for supper. Jamie'll have my hide!" Turning in mid stride to peer back at Vincent, he smiled shyly. "Funny thing, having a Love, huh? Good though."

"Yes, it's very...good. Thank you, Mouse, for..."

Laughing softly and shaking his head back and forth, Vincent watched as the Tunnel inventor scurried around a corner, disappearing from view before he could be properly thanked. Ah well, he'd catch up with him tomorrow. Right now there was much to be done, and no time for idleness.

Closing the cover of the carton tightly, he then hoisted it onto his left shoulder, grunting softly as its true weight made contact with the muscles there. After adjusting the cumbersome box into a more or less comfortable position, he started down the dimly lit passageway.



Pacing hurriedly down the twisting corridors, Vincent's thoughts drifted back to the first night he'd made love to Catherine. *His* Catherine; his *wife*. To have such an extraordinary woman actually agree to become a part of his world, and his life, was still astounding to him. As it had astounded him when he'd finally accepted that his Beloved wanted his caresses and no one else's; that she well and truly loved him. As he loved her, with every part of himself; with his heart, his mind, his body, and his very soul.

Yet, when she had agreed to live here, with him, and take certain vows of constancy which Father and the Council members required of those adults who shared a chamber, it took some time for him to fully accept the reality of it; to actually believe it.

To awake each morning and feel her small frame cuddled very close to his, and sometimes resting half on top of his, was a true miracle; at least it was to him. To brush her tousled hair away from her eyes with the pads of his fingers, sensing it as she drifted slowly to wakefulness, watching her lips curl upward with pleasure from his slightest touch, was far beyond any dream he'd ever dreamt. To have true knowledge of passion as his own was so much more than he'd ever imagined it could be. And to share such knowledge with such a woman was a gift he'd thought never to have in his life.

In the beginning, after they'd consummated their love unconditionally for the first time and had lain still joined on that wondrous rumped bed, it had been a bit disconcerting to hear one 'truth' in particular of Catherine's.

Snuggling against his chest she had proclaimed him to be a 'wonderfully lusty, extremely sensual man', which had astonished him more than a little. He would have never disagreed with her aloud, not then, but within his heart he simply couldn't resign himself to believe such assertions.

An extended tremor ripped through Vincent as the memories of making love with her over and over again that night, and in so many ways, clutched mercilessly at his body, and then he managed a slightly lopsided smile. Over time his Dearest Treasure had more than proved her avowals where he was concerned to be unerringly accurate.

And when they loved, he knew he brought Catherine great joy, for it was precisely the same thing she afforded him. Did all people in love feel this way, he wondered? If they did, how lucky they were. If not, how very unfortunate.

Turning the last corner towards his destination, Vincent laughed softly, feeling his face grow overly warm as he continued his erotic musings.

The repleteness of having Catherine that first time, of *taking* her, the reality of being lost within her heat, the sated, wondrous tiredness their love-making left in its' wake, had actually left him feeling slightly dazed.

The sensation of heat that had coursed through each and every part of him when he'd first stroked and then tasted the warmth of her flesh had left him gasping for breath, seemed to turn his blood to liquid flame, and left him incredibly aroused. The unrestrained joy with which she welcomed him was beyond description. It was beyond everything.

Ah, what a night it had been.

He had imagined never to feel such passion, nor to be allowed to express it freely, as his lady urged him to. Nothing he asked of her was denied, no need unfulfilled, no...carnal appetite...turned aside.

When he'd first found Catherine so near to death that night in the Park, his entire world had spun completely off-center. With her in his life, all of his ideas of what was possible and not possible had been transformed forever.

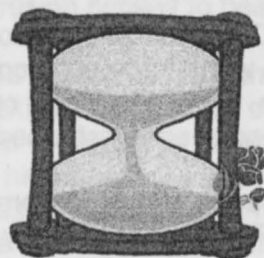
His cherished Angel was so strong a woman, in both emotions and beliefs. Finally, after many years of indecision and anguished soul-searching, he allowed her beliefs, her 'truths', to become his truths as well.

And tonight was the anniversary of that first irrepressible surge of absolute ecstasy.

For many weeks he'd been aware that Catherine was being quite secretive with him through the Bond, as well as in their Chamber. He'd soon discovered that for some unknown reason, or reasons, she'd closed off an infinitesimal part of their connection to him, keeping him from fully sensing her emotions, which would have been worrisome if she hadn't appeared to be quite content and relaxed. She'd tell him the whys and wherefores when she was ready, this he knew, so for now he'd just have to wait, and pray that time came soon.

And if he came into the chamber before she'd sensed his actual nearness, she'd quickly hide something from his view; something quite large and extremely colorful. Assuming that whatever she was involved in was for him, perhaps for their anniversary, he never inquired as to exactly what she was doing, or making. But, oh my, whatever her project was, the colors she was using were somewhat audacious.

Dear Lord, he wondered, could she be making him a sweater in such intense hues, or perhaps a shirt? Ah well, he'd find out soon enough if his suspicions were correct or not. Hopefully...not.



Ducking his head slightly as he entered the chamber, for a potent crack to his skull as a teenager had been more than enough for one lifetime, Vincent paused and peered back over his shoulder.

Sensing Catherine approaching their living area, he strode over to a white tin basin set on a table at the far corner of the room. Hoisting a pitcher filled with water into one hand, he allowed some of it to slosh into the pan. Picking up a large cake of soap, he'd scrubbed vigorously at his hands, barely managing to finish washing the telltale green of flower stems from his fingers just as she entered the room.

Drying his hands on a towel, he smiled in her direction. "Hello."

"Hi there, bunkie."

Unbuttoning her coat, Catherine shrugged out of it, hung it on a nearby antique-looking coat-rack, and then slipped out of her sneakers. Kneeling on the floor and bending forward, she began to shuffle various objects around under the bed. Not finding what she was searching for, she blew her hair away from her face and began muttering under her breath.

Bunkie? Yesterday she'd called him the apple of her eye. And last week he'd been the bees' knees. Earlier in the month she'd favored him with...sweetie. Although he'd never admit to it aloud, even to her, he actually favored the last one.

Taking secret delight in her quite varied and sometimes extremely colorful selection of nicknames for him, Vincent chuckled softly. Eyeing her swaying backside as she dug further under the bed, and fighting to keep his tone of voice from betraying his amusement, as well as a sudden ache at the division of his thighs, he cleared his throat, asking, "How did your

errands turn out?"

"Pretty good actually, once I found Joe's rotten files," Catherine grumbled in response. Sitting back on her heels, she sighed in exasperation. "Have you seen my slippers?"

"N...Not since this morning."

Honing in on the slight catch in his tone of voice, and sensing that he was taking great pleasure in her predicament, she accused, "You ate them, didn't you?"

"As a matter-of-fact I did." When she glanced up at him with a look of surprise, he added, "They were quite delicious when topped with some of William's orange marmalade."

"Oh, go...go soak your head." Peering about the room, Catherine set her hands on the curve of her hips, muttering, "Where are those damn things hiding this time?"

Watching what had come to be an almost nightly ritual, Vincent shook his head back and forth. His sweet lady was always losing those blessed slippers.

Bending forward again and resuming her search, she exclaimed, "There you are, you little suckers." Finally retrieving a quite well worn pair of slippers and getting to her feet, Catherine tugged them on. Sighing, she wriggled her toes back and forth. Oh yeah.

Moving toward Vincent and wrapping her arms around as much of him as she could, she smiled up at the man she adored, and then lifted on her toes to lightly kiss his mouth. Easing back slowly, she teased, "And what did you do this evening when I wasn't here to keep you out of mischief?"

Making no reply, and unable to out-and-out lie to her, he shrugged his shoulders. Then, when it appeared that a single kiss was all he was going to receive, he frowned.

Placing his hands on her hips he lifted Catherine until their eyes were level. With that blazing blue eyes locked to those of smoky gray-green. "As to your question of a moment ago, my evening went well. And now, with you safely home and here, in my arms, the day ends perfectly."

Pulling her toward him and letting his gaze wander slowly over her body, Vincent smiled inwardly as her cheeks tinged a delicate shade of pink. He'd realized some years hence that if he looked at his lady in a certain way she would usually blush. If the truth were told, it was enjoyable to be able to catch her off-guard at times. Usually she could read his thoughts, or at least his intentions, notably at moments like this. But every once in a while he could still 'get her', as the expression went. And feeling comfortable enough, finally, to actually tease her from time-to-time was simply delightful, a small miracle unto itself.

Leaning toward her agonizingly slowly, he captured Catherine's mouth in an intense kiss that left them both shaking, and hungry for more. But there was a very special gift waiting for this lady, one he was more than a little impatient for her to see. Making a mental note to take up where they'd left off later, but not too much later, he reluctantly pulled back, breaking their moist connection.

Licking the taste of her into his mouth to savor it completely, Vincent knew if he kissed her again at this moment they wouldn't leave this chamber tonight. Taking a deep breath, he fought very hard to slow the rapid cadence of his heart, and to turn aside a longing that made his body ache all over, but especially in the throbbing heaviness of his groin.

But even his great strength of will sometimes failed him.

Unable to resist, he leaned toward her again, rasping throatily, "Just one more kiss, my Love. Just one - for now..."

Allowing Catherine to descend gradually to her feet, Vincent angled his mouth over hers for full penetration. When her warm tongue darted back and forth, dueling greedily with his, he moaned. Tightening his grip on her waist, he yanked her forward, into the throbbing heat of his body, wanting to utterly devour her. So sweet - her taste was delightful to him, and utterly arousing. After so many empty years of denial and fear, he simply couldn't get enough of her. And he knew full well that that he would *never* get enough.

Breathing harshly and throwing his hair back, out of his eyes, he finally convinced his body to delay its need for completion, at least for the time being. Taking a step away from her, he gestured toward the chamber entrance, declaring softly, "There's something waiting for you...elsewhere."

"What is it?" Catherine questioned, making no effort to contain her excitement.

"It's a surprise."

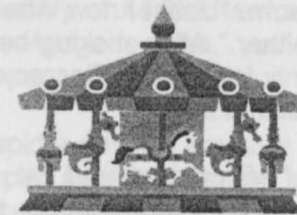
"I love surprises!" Beaming at him, she inquired, "Where is it?"

"As I've said - elsewhere." Aware of a sudden flurry of activity emanating from the Bond, Vincent arched an eyebrow in her direction. Moving to stand at the chamber entrance, he announced, "And the use of...feminine guile...shall not coerce me into saying anything further on the subject."

Scowling at him she griped, "Honestly, at times you're as obstinate as Father." Starting forward, Catherine suddenly gasped and then turned around again, exclaiming, "When you kiss me I forget everything else!" Stepping across the room,

she quickly opened her side of their large oak bureau and took out a large beautifully wrapped package.

Taking her purposefully by the hand as she neared him again, Vincent turned on his heel and let her quickly from the chamber.



Stumbling slightly as she paced beside Vincent, going to some as yet unknown location, Catherine glanced over at him, trying to guess where he was leading her. She'd asked more than once, but he simply wouldn't tell her! Oh, he could be a...a...rock when he wanted to be!

"I really wish I knew where I was being kidnapped to", she teased, struggling to keep up with his long strides.

Silence.

"Oh, I can't stand it!" Reaching out, she yanked on the sleeve of his shirt. "Please...please...please...tell me where we're going?"

"You shall see, soon enough." Noting the slightly breathless tone of her voice, he slowed his pace to match hers. Looking down, he trailed his hand along the large box that she positively refused to let him carry for her. "So, is that the...item...you've been concealing from me these many weeks?"

"Uh huh."

"Uh huh."

Recalling the brightness of some of the colors he'd glimpsed on occasion, before she'd whisk the fabrics out of sight, he asked with feigned indifference, "Is it something to...wear?"

"You never mind!" Catherine exclaimed, clasp the package tightly to her bosom. "Until I know where I'm going, I won't tell you *anything* either." After sticking her tongue out at him, she huffed, "It's only fair, Mister Secrecy." With that, her tongue poked out a second time.

Narrowing his eyes, Vincent stared at her mouth, cautioning, "If you wish to keep *appendage*, milady, then you'd better restrain it from my sight, and *reach*."

Waggling her eyebrows at him, she clamped her lips together.

Reaching out suddenly, he scooped her up into his arms, impatient for her to see his surprise; hoping that she'd be pleased he'd still remembered after all this time.



Approaching the last turn in the corridor before they reached their destination, Vincent paused, entreating, "Please close your eyes."

"And if I don't?" Catherine taunted playfully.

Staring at her as only he could stare, he growled softly, "Close...your...eyes."

"Yes sir."

"Can I *please* open my eyes *now*?" Catherine groaned, feeling his hands lightly gripping her shoulders and turning her towards...what?

Chuckling softly at her somewhat petulant tone of voice, Vincent acknowledged, "Yes, you may open your eyes. Happy anniversary, my Love."

Blinking rapidly several times to regain her perspective, Catherine gasped as a large brass bed covered in pale blue satin loomed before her. On it, numerous bed-pillows were strewn with rose petals and sprays of lilacs.

In various crevices and alcoves of the room stood many candles of all shapes, colors, sizes, and scents, their gently undulating flames producing flickering shadows on the stone walls, and casting flaxen tints of color on the bed.

Oh, that bed. That magnificent bed! On the wall behind it hung six white roses entwined with six deep red ones, tied together with pale green ribbon.

"Vincent, this chamber is absolutely beautiful!"

"I'm pleased you like it."

"Like it? I love it! And it's so big! How thoughtful of you to find the perfect place for us to spend our anniversary. But..." Hesitating, Catherine peered around the room again. "...doesn't this chamber belong to Kanin and his family?"

"No, not anymore. They've moved to larger quarters."

"When?"

"This morning."

She peered up at him. "But I didn't hear anything about a move announced on the pipes."

"I know. I have Pascal to thank for that bit of secrecy."

"Wait until I get my hands on him, the dear little sneak," she grumbled, smiling.

"And Mouse was very helpful as well," he advised her. "He's the one who...found...the flowers for me."

"Oh my", she began, laughing aloud. "Is Central Park stripped completely bare?"

Sighing, Vincent rolled his eyes toward Heaven. "I don't dare even hazard a guess. I did give him some money, but Lord only knows what he actually did with it." After clearing his throat, he confessed, "And Mister Maxwell truly didn't need any paperwork earlier this evening."

"Joe?" Overwhelmed, she shook her head back and forth. "He was in on this, too?"

"Hmm. He's become quite a good Helper these past years. And I do enjoy his company when he finds the time to visit us."

"And when he does visit, you *men* get involved in boring baseball discussions that last forever, until Jen and I want to strangle the both of you."

Making an attempt to appear contrite, he agreed, "We do seem to share a... proclivity...for the sport."

"I'll *proclivity* you." Reaching out to stroke the satin coverlet on the bed, she asked, "But why did Kanin and Livie feel the need to move after all these years?"

"It seems that our friends are going to have a fourth child..."

"Oh, how wonderful for them. After three boys I'll bet Livie is hoping for a girl this time."

Thinking of three young scamps with the names of Luke, Matthew, and Mark, who were sometimes just a bit too rambunctious, Vincent smiled. "Perhaps she is. And circumstances being as they are, just before Winterfest the family will be in dire need of larger quarters."

"But to have had even the slightest hope of obtaining such a coveted chamber, you must have added your name to the housing list at least a year ago."

Pursing his lips thoughtfully, he answered, "I do believe I added my name to the list the same week you moved below, Catherine."

"That long ago?"

"Hmm."

"But why? That chamber has been your home since you were a child," she murmured, searching his eyes. "You did this just for me, didn't you?"

"Not entirely. You've said more than once that my quarters were very much like 'trying to live in Grand Central Station'. After thinking it over and counting the seemingly endless parade of people trooping in and out, I was forced to agree with your assessment."

"Well, it really is a nuisance not having a door we can lock. And it's embarrassing to be interrupted when we're..." Blushing, she chewed at her lower lip and fell silent for a moment. Staring down at her fingers, she then stated softly,

"And Love, you get so loud at times you nearly smother yourself in the bed pillows trying to suppress your... exuberance."

Making no reply to the reality of that truth, and feeling his own face grow just a bit hot at Catherine's observation, Vincent cleared his throat, and then continued, "Kanin made me aware of the ensuing transition three weeks ago. That very day I asked the Council about the availability of these rooms, hoping that there were no other married couples ahead of me on the list. When no one put forth a petition, asking for the chamber, Father and the Council were more than happy to give it to us."

"Give it to us? Do you mean..." Turning, Catherine flung herself at his chest, causing him to grunt at the unexpected enthusiasm of her hug. Embracing him tightly, she began bouncing up and down. "...this is ours now? All ours?"

Dragging air back into his lungs, he managed, "Yes, it most certainly is."

Stepping back, his delighted soul-mate began to spin around and around, announcing breathlessly, "All of this wonderful *privacy* belongs to us!"

Happy that she was pleased with his gift, he replied, "Every stone, Dearest. When Kanin and Olivia celebrated their anniversary here, I remember the sad expression in your eyes as you walked about this room, helping me to ready it."

Ceasing her wild spinning, Catherine walked over a bit unsteadily and rested her head on Vincent's chest. Wrapping his long arms around her, he pressed his cheek to the crown of her head and breathed in her scent, suddenly overwhelmed by a sense of utter tranquility.

Hugging each other tightly for a moment, the lovers enjoyed the stillness that seemed to be enfolding them.

Moments later, when Vincent spoke again, his tone of voice was even huskier than usual. "I also remember your emotions touching me, here." With that he placed his hand over his heart. "You yearned for something I thought never to be able to give you. It...hurt, believing that, and learning to accept it."

"And that pain is gone now," Catherine stated softly. Holding him fiercely to her breast, she could actually feel his inner turmoil as he remembered that time in their relationship.

"How could it not be, Dearest?" Tightening his hold on her, he began rocking her slightly back and forth as tears of gratitude ran down his face. "How could there be any pain, for me, with the *world* in my arms?"

Brushing his shiny, long auburn hair away from his eyes, she led him over to the bed and stood looking down at it, confessing, "I felt so sad that night. I thought I'd...we'd... never know the joy Kanin and Olivia had. I was..." Pausing, she shook her slowly back and forth.

"Envious. So was I. I wanted you so much it was consuming me. At times I could barely keep myself from coming to your terrace and..." Shuddering at the memory of such desperate, nearly uncontrollable hunger, Vincent let the words trail off to silence.

"I know." She leaned back against him. "I always knew. I felt the same way. So many nights I was halfway down the stairs, on my way to you, and turned back, afraid that an emotional confrontation...would separate us forever. I thought to try and force something upon you that frightened you so, would destroy all that we had."

"You were so patient with me, so giving, until I finally found the courage that I'd sought for so long."

Reliving that night, Catherine smiled. "You most certainly did." Turning around, she lifted the gaily-wrapped package from the chair and held it out to him. "Happy anniversary, Vincent."

"Thank you, my Dear." Sitting down on the edge of the bed and examining the beautifully wrapped package ensconced in his lap, he touched the satin ribbon encasing it with the tip of his left forefinger, murmuring half aloud, "What could it be? Anticipation has almost driven me mad."

Proving his statement as fact, for the first time in his life Vincent opened a gift recklessly, momentarily forgetting the thrifty, saving ways of his world.

Watching him, Catherine grinned widely as bits of paper flew left and right, until he gasped with pleasure, staring down at a brightly-colored quilt.

"How exquisite," He whispered appreciatively, stroking various squares of fabric. "Such colors. I never knew there were such colors." Continuing to touch the heavy quilt gently, as though it was a living thing, he lifted wide eyes to meet her loving gaze. "And you made this yourself?"

"Most of it. Mary helped me a bit near the end." Reaching down, she picked up one corner of the coverlet and studied it matter-of-factly. "The different shades of red and blue were easy enough to find. But obtaining the gold, purple, and fuschia shades I wanted was a bit difficult. Do you really like it?"

"Very much indeed. What's the name of this particular hue?" he asked, pointing to a vibrant swatch of material near the center of the oversized quilt.

"That one? Aubergine."

"Auber..." He looked up at her. "Purple?"

"Yes, purple the color of an eggplant. Knowing you as well as I do, and realizing that you'd want more information on some of the colors, I brought those swatches of fabric to Elizabeth and she told me the various names, some of which I'd never heard before..." Hesitating, she grunted softly. "...like aubergine."

As Vincent stood up with the quilt and unfolded it, wanting to examine it more closely, a much smaller one fell to the floor at his feet. It was also wonderfully made, but this one consisted of only two colors, pale pink and ivory.

Staring down at it, he entreated silently, *Oh God, please let what I'm sensing be true.*

Bending forward, he retrieved the small blanket in shaking fingers. Appearing stunned, and with his heart thundering madly in his breast, he met Catherine's luminous gaze. "Does this mean what I think it does?"

Blinking away tears of happiness, she replied, "Yes, my Love, I'm going to bear our child."

"Oh, Catherine." Closing his eyes for a moment, Vincent focused completely on the Bond. Yes, he could feel it. Now that she had ceased to block her excitement, it rushed through him in wave after wave of unconditional joy. Opening his eyes and blinking away tears, he focused on the small quilt, unable to speak.

Sensing his acceptance, as well as his happiness, Catherine was relieved, yet a part of her continued to be just a bit anxious. She knew he'd never deny her this child, but did he welcome it? Truly welcome it?

For a moment she studied the face dearest to her in all the world. Due to his exceptional lineage, and what he considered to be his 'differences', how much of his apprehension where offspring was concerned still remained - even after all this time? She had to know.

Taking a deep breath and releasing it slowly, she began, "Vincent, we've always been honest with each other."

"Yes," he agreed, "Always."

"Will you tell me the absolute truth?"

Nodding his head, he waited for her to continue.

"Are...Are you as happy about this as I am?"

"More," he replied without hesitation, hoping to still her anxieties where he was concerned. Mindful of her delicate 'condition', he gathered her close.

"More?" she echoed a bit uncertainly.

"Your longing for a child is well known to me, Catherine. When we first discussed it five years ago, I hoped that your dearest wish could be fulfilled, one day. And I prayed for the courage to accept it, if it did."

"And you really do accept it?"

"With all of my heart."

"I'm glad." Resting her head against him, she sighed as the tenseness in her body slowly ebbed away. "It's been a long time in coming." Reaching between them, she gently patted her tummy. "The little imp will probably be every bit as stubborn as her father."

"Or her mother."

Leaning back in his embrace, Catherine glared at him. "I'm not the least little bit stubborn."

Barely keeping a straight face, Vincent managed, "No, of course you're...not." Having watched Mary and others knitting baby things down through the years, and knowing the significance of the color pink, he afforded her a sizable grin. "So, our 'little imp' is a daughter."

"Uh huh. I had Peter confirm it yesterday." Horrified, she put one hand to her mouth, gasping, "Vincent, please forgive me for just blurting it out like that! I wanted to tell you later on tonight..."

"I already know."

"You do? But how?" Her eyes narrowed. "Was Doctor Alcott down here blabbing to you after he promised not to?"

"No. I haven't seen Peter in almost a month."

"Then who told you?" she persisted.

He smiled. "The pink quilt 'told me', my Dear."

"Whoops." Chuckling, she admitted, "I forgot about the 'pink thing'."

"And through our connection, I probably would have sensed the babe's gender eventually anyway, in time."

After thinking it over, Catherine nodded. "Yes. Do you think she'll share that connection as well?"

"Perhaps." Tilting his head to the left and lightly touching her stomach, as though terrified of injuring her, Vincent seemed to be focusing intently on sounds only he could hear, and then the expression on his face altered to one of concern mingled with deep sadness.

Reaching up, she touched the side of his face. "What is it?"

There was anguish in his voice as he bowed his head, almost stumbling over the words. "Suddenly, just for a moment, a...a sensation of recognition sped through my soul. It was as though our child reached out to make herself known to me."

Trying very hard not to feel envious, and hoping to know that sensation herself one day, she murmured wistfully, "That must have felt extraordinary."

"It did. But she..."

As sudden sensations of despair touched her heart, she implored, "Won't you please tell me what's upset you so?"

Unable to meet her eyes, Vincent swallowed hard to ease a sudden dryness in his throat. Struggling to say what must be said, he stared down at his hands, murmuring, "There's no way of knowing for certain at this point, but our...our daughter may look like...me, Catherine, and for that I'm truly sorry."

"Don't," she insisted. Forcing his head up, she stared into his eyes, her tone of voice determined. "I simply will *not*

allow you to do this to yourself, do you hear? If she's half as beautiful as her father is, I'll be more than content."

"Yet, to be as I am, to be forced to live a life of shadows and secrets; to endure the taunts of other children..." Ignoring the tears coursing down his face, he gulped hard and tried to shake off the painful memories clutching at his heart. "What do I say to my child if she's condemned to a life with so many boundaries, if she's forced to live without knowing the feel of sunshine on her face, because of...*me*?"

"If what you sense is true, our daughter will have you beside her, to teach her what our world, here below, means, for her, to her; how important it is to so many people. But mostly, she'll eventually understand this world's importance to you. As she gets older she'll learn from your courage and example."

"Yet, the limitations she would have to deal with..." Unable to continue, he shook his head sadly back and forth.

Leaning against him, she caressed lengths of his hair with the tips of her fingers. "Should our baby be faced with...limitations...of *any* kind, Vincent, she'll have you to turn to, to teach her how to deal with whatever those limits are." Lacing their fingers together and bringing their joined hands to her mouth, Catherine kissed his fingers lightly, reminding him, "I told you once, long ago, that there is no life without limits."

"I remember."

"Our child will learn that for herself. And how could she not be influenced by you, and admire you, for all that you've struggled against, all that you've endured and triumphed over; how fine and decent you are?" Lifting his free hand and placing it against her stomach, she went on, "This baby will have a mother and a father, Vincent, plus an extended

family that will surely love her. She won't be alone, as you were most of the time."

"No," he quietly agreed, "She won't be alone."

"Don't be unhappy for our child if she looks like you, my Best Beloved. Please? Try to have faith that everything will be all right."

When that brought no response, Catherine stiffened her resolve. She hadn't been prepared for this, but then again, maybe subconsciously she had. She knew one thing for certain; she was absolutely *not* going to go through almost nine months of pregnancy worried about Vincent's state of mind.

She understood his concerns; she knew what he'd lived through as a child, a teenager, and as an adult. But this guilt trip would end, and it would end *tonight*. The question before her now was, how could she get him to focus on something else when he appeared so determined to feel blame for unknown 'possibilities'?

Forcing his chin up, she stared into his eyes and tried to keep her tone of voice tightly under control. "And if our child should look like you, do you feel that you won't be able to love her as much?"

Going wide-eyed, Vincent gasped, "Of course I'll love her just as much!"

"Oh, so you'll just be ashamed of her then?"

"Catherine, how can you even think that!" The expression on his face one of shock mingled with outrage, he turned and began pacing about the room. "What parent could be ashamed of their own child!"

"Some parents are, Vincent. I see it every week in the child abuse cases we have on file. We manage to rescue some of those children." Pausing, she sighed heavily and peered down at the floor. "But there are so many more that we reach too late to save."

Watching him for a moment, she searched her mind, as well as her heart, for the words she needed. "I don't think that you'll be ashamed of our daughter, Vincent, truly I don't. And I know you'll love her more than your own life, in the same way that you love me."

Turning on his heel, he afforded her a puzzled frown. "Then why did you just ask me such... abhorrent questions?"

"I wanted you to learn, and to understand, what it is to come to the defense of your own offspring. I know you'll be a very good father, Vincent, the best daddy in the world. And I needed you to believe that, too." Moving closer, Catherine peered up at him, loving him so much it never ceased to amaze her anew. "No possible 'differences' will ever hurt your daughter - you'll see to that. And so will I."

Allowing his anger to dissipate, he exhaled roughly. "And by making me say the words aloud, you've not only discovered the depth of my commitment to our child, you've also taken my mind off of my... concerns... regarding myself, at least for the time-being."

"Yes." Smiling, she stood on tiptoe and brushed her mouth over his. "After all, we'll be a family, and as I've learned here, a family sticks together through anything, through *everything*."

Unexpectedly stunned by the reality of impending fatherhood, Vincent sat down very hard, and very suddenly, on the edge of the bed. Him - a father. The wonder of it, the

miracle of having a child of his very own to love, to teach, to raise, was nearly overwhelming. Taking a deep cleansing breath and exhaling it slowly, he barely got the words around the lump in his throat. "I pray never to disappoint either of you as a parent, or in any...other way."

"You could never disappoint me."

"I have in the past," he reminded her, his voice gruff with emotion.

"Do you really want to reopen that door right now?" she asked softly.

"No, I suppose not," he grunted.

Sitting down next to Vincent on the bed, Catherine grasped him by the shoulder and gently moved her other hand up and down his back, trying to calm him, and hoping to soothe his remaining doubts.

"There'll never be a better parent or a more patient and loving teacher for a child, than you. She'll learn the joys of following her dreams, to have the courage to stand on her own two feet and face whatever life thrusts upon her; to savor each day as the gift it truly is." Praying it would coax him into a better mood, she added dourly, "And I'm certain that Father will have a hand in her upbringing as well, whether we agree to it or not."

Right on cue, Vincent's mouth curved upward. Swiping at his tearstained face and exhaling a rough breath, he admitted, "I hadn't even considered how he'll take our 'impending event'. I won't presume to even hazard a guess as to what sort of... discourse... we're in for when he learns of the child."

"Oh, I bet I know what he'll say," Catherine declared grumpily. "He'll worry and fuss, like he does about *everything*, and then he'll berate you...me...us...for allowing such a thing to happen."

"But in the end, he'll be just as proud as any new grandfather would be," Vincent asserted. "I fear he shall spoil our daughter outrageously, and quite surreptitiously."

"Probably," she agreed, smiling. "I'm glad he finally seems to accept me as your wife."

He grunted. "So am I. On the day the three of us first discussed you moving below for good, he was most contentious."

"Boy, was he ever! But you won him over."

"Yes I did, in the end."

"As I recall, Father *very politely* asked me to leave before that part of the 'debate' started, so that you and he could discuss certain 'facts' alone."

"For the most part, *he* discussed. *I* listened," he declared gruffly, sighing.

"You've never did tell me exactly how you managed to win him over."

"I merely told him that if he wasn't agreeable to you moving below, to live with me, then I would move above, to your apartment, and live with you. Or in lieu of that, we'd refurbish an old chamber, away from the Hub, and live there, alone - entirely alone. He understood my meaning, and nothing further was ever said on that particular subject."

"You didn't really *challenge* him like that?"

"Didn't I?" When Vincent peered up at her, his eyes had narrowed and his long jaw was tensed, which she knew from past experience was his obstinate look. When that expression crossed his face there was no arguing, or reasoning, with him. He was completely immovable. And yet, he was of the opinion that *she* was the stubborn one?

"You were really prepared to give up everything, your home, your friends, your way of life, for me?" Catherine appeared more than a little astonished. "You wanted me...that much?"

"After the many ways I've loved you, touched you, and...tasted you, how can you even pose such a question?"

Reaching out, she embraced him with a fierce sense of protectiveness. "You never cease to amaze me." Sighing happily, Catherine observed, "It took Father quite a long time, but I think he's managed to forgive me for 'stealing your affections'. He loves you very much."

"And although it's hard to believe at times, he also loves you."

"I know. But sometimes he can really be an old curmudgeon."

"Yes, but he's *our*...old curmudgeon. He's made some dreadful mistakes in the past, notably regarding us. But he's admitted to those errors and learned from them, so hopefully the years to come will be less...trying, on all of us." Contemplating the future, Vincent stared at the chamber's far wall for a moment before continuing. "I fear that all too soon the day will come when I'll take a turn in a corridor and pause, listening for the slow cadence of

Father's cane tapping against the stone floor, and hear only the sounds of...silence."

Accepting the truth of his words, as well as what he meant by them, Catherine whispered, "Yes. And when that time comes, I'll miss him dreadfully. It will be much too quiet around here...then." Stepping out of his embrace, she stretched widely and then began walking about the room, blowing out almost all of the candles. Deciding to focus on the here and now, instead of the future, she observed, "We've got to plan how, and when, *you're* going to tell Father our news."

Releasing the hold he had on the quilt, which he was in the process of folding toward the foot of the bed, Vincent studied her. "How *I'm* going to tell him?"

"Well, I certainly can't do it."

"May I ask why not?"

She tried her very best to look horrified. "You want *me* to face Father in my...delicate condition?"

Delicate condition, indeed, he thought, eyeing her. *This woman was about as delicate as a piece of granite when she set her mind on getting her own way. But, ah, she was such a lovely piece of granite.*

Not buying what she was trying to sell, Vincent shook his head adamantly back and forth. "We shall tell him together."

"But why do I have to be there?"

"Because 'misery loves company.'"

"Oh fun," she groaned, pulling a face. "I really don't want to be there when you deliver the news."

"Why not?" Eyes flashing with devilry locked to hers. "As I recall, you were quite willing to be there when I...wrote the headline."

"Vincent, that remark was almost lewd!"

"Yes, I suppose it was," he admitted, grinning so widely his sharp white teeth came fully into view. Which was a very rare occurrence, even in front of her. "I shall try harder next time."

Ready to explode, she sat down on the edge of the bed, warning him, "If you make me laugh right now I'll have an accident."

"Ah well, so be it. I've slept on...wet spots...before."

Well now, wasn't he just full of spit and vinegar, the cheeky little devil.

Tightening her jaw, she barely contained the howls of laughter threatening to burst from her throat. "What on earth had gotten into you?"

Preparing to spring off of the bed, just in case her forewarning of soaked sheets came to pass, he tensed his legs, retorting, "As I'm not the one carrying a child, I would think the question should be what on earth has gotten into...you."

"Dammit!" With that expletive, Catherine fairly leapt off of the bed. Grabbing her sweater, she stomped toward the chamber entrance.

"What's wrong," he inquired in the most innocent tone

he could muster - under the circumstances.

"Nothing. I'll be right back."

Knowing precisely where Catherine was heading, just to gauge her reaction he asked the question anyway. "Where are you going, my Love?"

"Guess."

"Try not to sneeze before you get there."

Tensing her inner muscles and affording him a withering look over her right shoulder, she muttered, "You are an evil, evil man."



Having attended to her 'emergency', Catherine reentered the chamber, still determined to have her own way in the matter of exactly who was telling Father precisely what.

Unbuttoning her blouse and then shimmying out of her jeans, she started to get ready for bed. Removing her slippers, she studied them for a moment, and then threw the left one at the exact center of Vincent's forehead. "If you make me go with you to see Father, you're just plain mean."

Quite able to hold his own, as the expression went, in these verbal duels now, the one she loved caught the footwear mid-throw, observing, "I've been called many names in my life, but to my recollection never before has ever accused me of being...plain."

"Beast."

Turning slightly away from her at that comment, and fighting not to choke on his own laughter, he growled, "Impertinent wench."

"One that you cherish above all others," she retorted.

"Most of the time."

Deciding to let his lady-fair chew on that verbal swat on the hind-end for a moment or two, Vincent struggled out of his boots, whisked off his stockings, stripped off all of his clothing, and slid down under the crisp linen sheets. Ah yes, this felt splendid. And it would feel even better if a certain woman would stop fussing about and get in here with him.

Nearing the bed, Catherine asked sweetly – too sweetly, "Love of my life, will you do me one teeny favor when we talk to Father?"

"That all depends." Knowing her tricks all too well, Vincent rumbled, "First, tell me the favor."

"If he starts warning me about *weight control*, *bladder infections*, *swollen ankles*, or anything else equally nasty, will you bite him, just for me?"

"Of course." Yanking the thick blanket and underlying sheet up to his chin, he concluded, "But only if you take *your life* in *your hands* and bite him first."

"My hero."

When his lady finally settled her delectable rump into the bed, Vincent shifted to face her. Reaching over the

curve of her hip, he caressed her backside lovingly, running the pads of his fingers slowly over her skin until she shivered and moved closer to him.

"Hmm, that feels wonderful," Catherine murmured against the middle of his chest, stirring the reddish-gold curls there with her warm breath. "More."

"How much more?"

"Oh, about eight and a half months worth."

"My arm shall fall off long before then."

"I promise to pin it back on."

"Yes, you would have to use pins."

"Why 'have to'?"

"Because frankly Dear Heart, your sewing skills are somewhat...dire."

"Hey!" Catherine exclaimed, reaching out to smack him on the left forearm – which was much the same as hitting a tree with a feather, "I made two quilts!"

"And earlier this month, when you made an attempt to patch my favorite pair of jeans, you stitched the knees to the sweater you were wearing." Keeping his expression carefully neutral, he sighed dramatically. "And, oh my, the words you used when you'd realized what you'd done..."

Unable to remember, she frowned. "What words?"

"Well, let's just say that I half expected the air over our heads to turn a bright shade of blue."

Pretending to ignore both him and his remarks for a moment, Catherine peered thoughtfully around the room.

Glancing up, Vincent's eyes followed the path hers had taken. "What are you looking for."

"My mind." Pursing her lips, she announced, "It's a good thing we're getting this new chamber."

"Why is that?"

"Because you and I are going to have our own private mini-zoo."

"What?"

"You have the memory of an elephant." Grimacing, she continued, "And a few months I'm going to look like a cow."

"As time progresses, in my eyes you shall become even more beautiful."

"A beautiful cow," she retorted glumly.

Reaching out to gently pat her tummy, he vowed, "If that is the case, then so be it." Pausing for effect, Vincent added, "I've always wanted to own a cattle ranch."

"Smart ass." Grabbing one of the bed-pillows, she thumped him roundly on top of the head.



Sometime later, have kissed him into next Tuesday, Catherine placed both hands on Vincent's heavily muscled shoulders. Stroking them delicately, she savored the *feel* of him, appreciating the size of his long strong frame, and enjoying the musky scent of his skin in her nostrils.

When he was as thoroughly aroused as he was right now, his scent was especially strong, and she absolutely loved it. Tilting her head back to look up at him, she whispered, "Happy anniversary."

"The same to you, my Angel. And may the next fifty years be just as happy, and more so." Bending slightly forward, he dropped a soft kiss to the center of her forehead. "I love you, Catherine, and at this moment I want you so much, I...I haven't the words to..."

"I know how much you want me." Trailing her right hand down over his leg, she touched lightly at the very heart of him, causing a prolonged shudder to travel from the top of his head to the curve of his buttocks. Gently clasping the fullness that expanded even more at her touch, she whispered, "This much."

Arching his back, Vincent tried desperately to get even closer to her seductive stoking. Oh God, her slightest caress was too much, far too much – yet not nearly enough.

Moving his free hand gently across her tummy, he started to journey lower, then hesitated. Reaching up, he tilted her head back until their eyes met. "I want to make love to you, with you, but if there's even the slightest possibility of danger to the child..." Leaving the rest unspoken, he waited.

Knowing he'd insist on having the absolute truth, she admitted quietly, "Well, Peter did say that for the first trimester we should be very careful."

Instantly clamping down on his passion, Vincent nodded and started to shift his lower body over to his own side of the bed.

"But there are others ways..." Knowing that he'd understand her meaning, and unwilling to leave either one of them unfulfilled, especially tonight, she let the sentence trail off to silence.

"So I've learned."

Wanting to give her freer access to the part of him that ached for her loving touch, Vincent drew his knees upward. Edging his thighs further apart before allowing his legs to drift back down to the bed, deep-set blue eyes flashed expectantly as they met hers.

But just as Catherine began to move closer to him, he suddenly bolted upright on the bed, startling her, and tilted his head toward the chamber entrance.

"What is it," she asked, and then groaned. "And if you tell me that we're going to have company, I'll scream."

"It's all right," he declared softly. "No one is approaching. Yet, there's something..." Shifting his upper body, he leaned toward her, whispering, "Can you hear it?"

Sitting up, Catherine made a great effort to focus on what had captured his attention. Then, all at once the melodious strains of a waltz wafted through the chamber. "Yes, I hear it. But, it must be nearly midnight, if not later. No one would be playing music at this hour, or listening to a radio. So where's the sound coming from?"

He smiled. "Surely you haven't forgotten? You told me once that I could hear the music, if I tried." Urging her closer, until his lips hovered just a hairs-breath away from hers, he murmured, "It's the music of the night."

A heartbeat before Vincent urgently sought her mouth, Catherine flung both of her arms around his neck. "You dear sweet man, don't you know, haven't you learned yet, that *you* are the music of the night?"



Victoria Rose

And in a world of shadows, secrets, and eternal love, Vincent and Catherine's 'dream' continues – for always.



FAITH OF THE HEART *



**IT'S BEEN A LONG ROAD, GETTING FROM THERE
TO HERE. IT'S BEEN A LONG TIME, BUT OUR TIME IS
FINALLY NEAR. WE WILL SEE OUR DREAM COME
ALIVE - AT LAST, WE WILL TOUCH THE SKY. AND
THEY'RE NOT GONNA HOLD US DOWN - NO MORE,
THEY'RE NOT GONNA CHANGE OUR MINDS. 'CUZ WE
HAVE FAITH OF THE HEART, GOING WHERE OUR
HEARTS WILL TAKE US. WE'VE GOT THE FAITH TO
BELIEVE TOGETHER WE CAN DO ANYTHING. WE'VE
GOT STRENGTH OF THE SOUL, NO ONE'S GONNA
BEND OR BREAK US. WE CAN REACH ANY STAR.
WE'VE GOT FAITH - FAITH OF THE HEART**

*Variation on the theme song
from the TV series 'Enterprise'

