

Captured in Tunnels

by D Yates

The annual children's party was proving to be such a success this year and it was clear who was largely responsible: Catherine! The floor was strewn with party poppers and spent crackers. All the children were dancing about in matching tops and shorts - yet another surprise Cathy had brought down with her.

She and Mary had put their heads together and decided that some '*play*' clothes were appropriate as well as necessary for all the games they had in mind. However, Mary could not be persuaded to join Catherine and wear something similar to the children.

Catherine had chosen a sleeveless vest and matching shorts in pink. She felt it was important to be one of them and her hair tied back in a pony tail, was just the finishing touch.

Catherine's energy and enthusiasm were endless and it was very obvious from all the hugging and kissing that was now taking place, that the children loved every hair on her head. It was so like Catherine to stand and demand a kiss from every child and, even the older boys - normally quite shy - were unable to resist her charms and willingly formed a queue.

Vincent smiled to himself, wishing that he too might dare to stand in line. Almost, as if Catherine read his thoughts, she looked directly at him and caught his wistful expression. A wicked idea entered her head and, as she knew only too well, Vincent would be the first to sense her mischief!

Winking at the children she asked. "Well now, my young friends, tell me, is there anyone else who deserves a kiss?" and immediately turned her attention to the adults.

As she expected, the children joined in the game straightaway and there were shouts of, "William, Pascal" and "Mouse."

Catherine grinned and ran full pelt at William, quite deliberately bouncing off him again and again. This produced screams of laughter, but finally, Catherine got close enough to hug and kiss him and, not to be outdone, William lifted her clean off her feet and swung her round to stand in front of Pascal.

As usual, he was clutching his two communicator pipes - he never went anywhere without them. He wasn't too sure what to do when Catherine confiscated them and told him a kiss was all it took to get them back. With a little coaxing, he soon obliged!

As Catherine advanced on Mouse, he took flight. However, with the help of the children, he was soon cornered. Catherine held his face between her hands and, to his relief, planted a kiss on his forehead. He blushed uncontrollably, but loved every minute, for he absolutely adored Catherine.

All this time, Vincent had been watching the proceedings closely. Catherine's antics were certainly providing a great deal of amusement. Nevertheless, at the same time, he had been edging backwards towards the nearest exit! He was so intent on making his getaway that he collided with Peter Alcott, who had arrived just in time to see what was causing so much excitement. He could also see what Vincent intended and how desperate he was to escape!

As soon as Vincent heard Peter asking, "Leaving already, Vincent?" he knew he was done for. Every head turned in his direction.

The children picked it up immediately and began chanting. "Vincent, Vincent, Vincent."

Very quickly he was surrounded and with a backward glance at Peter, his eyes asked, '*How could*

you?'

With the children now hanging onto his arms, he allowed himself to be caught and found he was being pushed from behind William towards Catherine! For once in his life, Vincent drew himself up to his full height and stood towering above her. He heard her whisper his name and, as he gazed down, she saw how uncomfortable he was; his eyes beseeching her to help him.

Only they knew the struggle that was taking place between them. They had reached a crossroads in their relationship. They both wanted so much more from each other, but as yet, had not progressed beyond the most emotional and tender of embraces.

Vincent had held Catherine to his heart many times and, in rare moments, had ventured to kiss the top of her head, usually to comfort or offer his love and protection. Catherine now felt his embarrassment, as she too realized that their very first kiss would be witnessed by so many who were busy clapping their hands and stamping their feet.

The chanting was getting louder and had changed to, "Kiss, kiss, kiss."

Catherine fingered the massive buckle on Vincent's belt and then leaned against him, resting her head where the pouch containing her rose was rising and falling with Vincent's laboured breathing.

She sighed deeply and turning to the children said, "This is impossible. I simply cannot reach."

Quick as a flash, Mouse appeared with a stool and asked innocently. "Catherine need something to stand on?"

Catherine heard a soft moan escape Vincent and his body stiffened but, at last, he spoke!

"That won't be necessary, Mouse, but thank you."

Everyone fell silent, the atmosphere was one of expectancy. Catherine could hardly believe her ears as she turned back to face Vincent. The look in his eyes made her heart race.

He pulled her very close and then held her shoulders, just for a moment. His left hand travelled upwards and gently tugged at the pink scarf, releasing her pony tail. As her hair tumbled around her face, Vincent held the scarf to his lips and inhaled deeply. He very quickly tucked the scarf inside his tunic and then ran his fingers through her hair.

Tracing one finger along her jawline, he asked, "Where were we? What is it you want of me, Catherine?"

Utterly spellbound by Vincent's actions, Catherine stared back as though in a trance and said softly, "I am supposed to.... kiss you, Vincent!"

His face was much closer now and Catherine could see only tenderness in his eyes as he asked,

"Are you quite sure about this, Catherine?"

Her, "Yes," was so softly spoken that Vincent addressed the children.

"What did she say?"

In one voice they yelled back. " 'YES!' "

Stalling for time, Vincent prolonged his own agony by pretending not to hear and shouted back, "I can't hear you!"

The room was in an uproar as once more, every single person shouted or screamed, " 'YES!' "

With a wave of his hand, Vincent silenced them and, as if now understanding, said, "Okay good, okay fine, but Catherine needs help!"

Everyone laughed at his impression of Mouse.

Catherine stood with her eyes closed and her hands over her ears in an attempt to shut out the noise,

which threatened to deafen her. Suddenly, she felt herself grasped very firmly around her waist and as she left the ground, she opened her eyes and came face-to-face with Vincent, their lips all but touching.

As he spoke, she could feel his hot breath on her mouth. His words were heard by everyone present as he teased her. "Come on, Catherine, kiss me please. I will hold you up all night if I have to!"

Every time she tried to steal a kiss, Vincent made sure that his mouth was just out of reach. The children loved what he was doing, quickly realizing how clever he was to turn this to his own advantage.

Catherine was utterly helpless and she knew it. She tried in vain to struggle free, much to Vincent's delight. All he had to do was use his fingers to tickle her until she collapsed against him in fits of laughter, begging him to stop.

Returning Catherine to the floor, Vincent hugged her very closely and buried his face in her hair, whispering only loud enough for her to hear. "Don't you ever put me on the spot like that again, Catherine."

She returned his caution. "You wanted a kiss too, Vincent. I'll get you for this, believe it!"

Father and Peter came to join them and patting Vincent on the back, Father said, "Well done, Vincent but, if you don't want Catherine's kisses, then perhaps we might have them," and looked appealingly at Catherine.

She finally relaxed as both Father and Peter claimed their kisses and laughed when Father said, "Unlike Vincent, my dear, we promise never to play hard to get!"

Jamie now came to join the party, her sentry duty over, she was ready to help with the last game, which was the children's very own *'Hide and Seek.'* This was a particularly deadly game and, apparently, had far-reaching consequences! So far, nobody had told Catherine just what was involved, but there seemed to be a lot of secrecy and Vincent obviously played a prominent part.

Vincent and Father stood together and everyone waited for the children to assemble themselves at the front. Father asked, "Is everyone here that should be here?"

A loud "Yes," produced a knowing smile, as Jamie handed Father a sheet of paper.

"Well now," Father paused and looked over the top of his glasses towards the children. "It seems that there are a couple of additions to this year's game by order of the Junior Council!"

Vincent's head shot up. *'Dear God,'* he thought. *'What have they cooked up, this time?'*

Seeing his expression, Catherine's eyes questioned his. Vincent just shook his head and sighed in despair and the look she received said, *'I only wish I knew!'*

Father asked Catherine to come forward and with his arm around her shoulders he said, "My dear, I believe you are the only one who does not know what is about to happen. You were away on an assignment last year?" Catherine nodded and smiled. "Well, unfortunately, there is no time now to explain, but one of the additions to this year's *'Hide and Seek'* is that you must have a partner. It is the considered opinion of the Junior Council that the only person qualified to undertake this task is...Vincent! It is many years since he was *'captured'* so I am afraid, my son, the odds are definitely against you this time, with a complete novice, you are well and truly handicapped."

Vincent moved forward and his eyes swept across a sea of cheeky faces as he said, "You really want me that badly, eh? We'll have to see about that!" He then walked between the rows of children, growling softly. Stopping beside Samantha, he lifted her high in the air and said, "If I am captured this year, Samantha, I know that you will be my first victim!"

As Vincent lowered her to the ground, she flung her arms around his waist and laughed back. "I'll look forward to it, Vincent," and the children cheered.

Returning to stand beside Father and Catherine, he put his finger to his lips and the children quieted down as Father began reading again.

"The other addition is an '*Ultimate forfeit*,' whatever that might mean," and the grins from the Junior Council left no doubt in the minds of those present that it would be something quite outrageous.

Father spoke to Catherine. "All I have time to tell you, Catherine, is that for the next few hours - until midnight, to be precise - the Junior Council will rule over this community. Don't look so worried, my dear. I do have the last word!"

Catherine's eyes had opened wide at the thought of what the children might get up to. Father continued.

"The task is for all senior members to leave the Great Hall and gather in my chamber, without getting caught. Doesn't sound too daunting, does it! However, you will only be given five minutes start! Now do you get the picture? My only words of warning.... '*Don't get caught!*'"

The children were bubbling with excitement, they couldn't wait to get started. Father now joined them and, as he abandoned the adults, he offered a fragment of hope.

"As head of the community, Cathy, I accompany the children to ensure a modicum of fair play!"

At this, everyone roared with laughter, including Vincent. They knew that Father would let them get away with anything, after all this was their day.

Father looked over his shoulder and asked if the doors to the Great Hall were secured. As Vincent answered, "Yes," they all realized the game had started without them.

Vincent was up to his old tricks and had already maneuvered Catherine to the foot of the staircase inside the Great Hall without them even noticing. Father found it difficult not to laugh aloud and keeping his amusement under control, commented.

"Ah Vincent, I see you are anxious to begin!"

Even Catherine did not know what next to expect of Vincent, her heart was pounding.

"Very well, as soon as William has mounted the stairs, we will begin counting to a hundred."

Almost before William reached the top, the children were off. "One... two... three..."

Without any warning, Vincent lifted Catherine over his shoulder like a fireman and made his way up the stairs two at a time and was gone. Once in the tunnels, he dropped Catherine to her feet quite unceremoniously and together they raced off, hand-in-hand.

It was quite a ways back to Father's chamber and, fortunately for Catherine, there would be places for her to catch her breath. Vincent tightened his grip on her hand.

"They have stopped counting, Catherine. The chase is on!" and they ran even faster.

Slowing down, Vincent could see that Catherine needed a breather but, as they rested, he implored her.

"Be ready to run as soon as I ask you to, Catherine. I must not be caught. I do have my reputation to consider."

Catherine nodded, slid onto her knees and asked, "How much further? I have lost my sense of direction already."

Vincent was listening intently for the children and just answered. "We've hardly started, Catherine and, before you say another word, you have to make it. I will suffer the consequences if you don't."

Pulling Catherine to her feet, he urged her to run with him again. As they rounded a bend, Vincent found a hiding place and gently lifted Catherine inside and then joined her.

"Vincent, why are we hiding in here?"

He grinned. "Because the children will take the alternative fork in the tunnel and we will be able to escape through a short cut." He added wickedly, "Known only to me."

Catherine chuckled. "So that's how you manage it."

Vincent wrapped her inside the warmth of his cloak and gratefully she snuggled up close. Suddenly, the children thundered past and, as they watched Father limping after them, he hesitated long enough to address the empty tunnel.

"Be careful, my dears. They mean business, this year."

Vincent leaned forward and answered, "Thank you for the warning."

Catherine was amazed. "You two are incredible. How did Father know we were in here and the children did not?"

Vincent chuckled. "Catherine, this is only one of several places Father will expect to find us. We shall have to be more careful, he won't always be able to protect us, but I know he will try."

A few minutes later, they took the short cut and were making excellent progress. Suddenly, Vincent stopped dead in his tracks.

"Ye Gods," he whispered. "The little devils have double-backed. Quickly, Catherine. Take my hand. The nearest hiding place is just ahead."

This was even smaller than before, and although there was no down draught to contend with, it was hardly big enough for one, let alone two! Obviously the Junior Council had considered this when providing Vincent with a partner. *'Hiding'* this year would have more than its share of drawbacks.

Catherine stood with her back to the wall, facing Vincent. He quickly covered his head, knowing that the light from a torch would pick up the colour of his hair immediately. Wrapping his hands in the hemline of his cloak, he covered Catherine's body with his own and then laid his hands against the wall above Catherine's head.

Catherine started to shake with laughter. "Vincent, I can't hear anything at all. We must look pretty ridiculous hiding like this!"

Vincent began to shake with laughter too. "I know, Catherine, but what else can we do? Really believe me, I must not get caught."

Catherine could not understand Vincent's anxiety and asked, "Vincent, please tell me what will happen if you do get caught."

He closed his eyes and sighed. "Don't ask. Catherine, I do not even want to consider the possibility!"

Suddenly, the close proximity of their bodies began to affect them both. "Vincent." Catherine whispered his name.

"What?" he whispered back.

"Do you remember when I said I would get you for what you put me through earlier? What would you do if I tickled you right now? With your arms raised in the air, it is such a temptation." She started to explore the layers of clothing, desperately trying to find a way inside.

Vincent begged. "Please, Catherine, don't."

Her fingers stopped their prodding and she said, "Okay, but on one condition!"

He was beginning to feel more and more uncomfortable and it was not just the way he was being forced to stand. "What is that, as if I didn't know! Catherine, you never give up, do you?"

"Nope," she agreed. "You were the only one to refuse my advances, Vincent. I have my pride too, you know. Well, I'm waiting," and her fingers began their mischief once more.

Vincent let go of his cloak, grabbed her hands and held them to his chest. He was so unsure of

himself. Catherine bent her head and kissed his knuckles, just as she had done when she learned of the unhappy experience of his youth with his first love, Lisa.

Vincent attempted to stand up straighter, to stretch his back. He released Catherine's hands and dropped his hood. Trying to make light of his embarrassment, he said, "I understand it is bad manners for a gentleman to kiss a lady whilst wearing a hat."

He slipped his hands around Catherine's waist and as she raised herself to reach him, her vest left her shorts. Vincent could feel the smoothness of her skin and the warmth of her body. Without even realizing, he found himself caressing her, pushing the vest higher so that he could stroke the whole of her back.

This was more than Catherine had expected, she could hardly believe what was happening, as she allowed her emotions to transmit themselves to Vincent through their bond. She loved him so much and this was a sure way of him knowing! Vincent gasped as he felt her love. It pushed him over the top and in an instant he sank his face into the softness at the side of her neck. She could feel his open-mouthed kisses and she knew how desperate Vincent had become.

They clung together and slowly, he raised his head to look into her eyes. There was just enough light for them to see exactly what they needed to see.

At last, Vincent spoke. "Catherine, did you understand why I couldn't kiss you earlier?"

She stroked his cheek. "I'm not sure. Didn't you want to, or was it because we had an audience?"

Vincent dropped his head. Catherine grasped his chin and made him look at her again. He gave way to a long sigh as he replied. "Oh yes, I wanted to kiss you, Catherine, I have wanted to kiss you for a long time. The truth of the matter is that I have never kissed a living soul on the mouth before. I was afraid I would spoil what we already have."

Catherine's lips were now so close to Vincent's mouth and, as he heard her say softly, "I love you so much, Vincent and I want you to kiss me. I need you."

A tide rose inside him and he moved his body against Catherine's, pinning her to the wall. With a hunger that had to be satisfied, they shared their first kiss. Vincent never dreamed that one kiss would excite him so, but this had been a long time coming and he intended to savour every delicious moment.

Catherine's heart was racing as she felt Vincent's mouth finally cover hers. His kiss was gentle and filled with a tenderness that almost broke her heart. His large mouth was warm and soft and Catherine revelled in the innocence of her gentle giant. How often she had dreamed of this moment, but nothing could have prepared her for such a poignant and sensitive experience.

The coldness of the wall at her back was chilling and she leaned forward into the kiss, encouraging Vincent to take her into his arms. His hands gripped her shoulders and then he placed her arms under his, pinning them to his sides as he gathered her into a protective, intimate embrace. Their mouths never separated for an instant and as the kiss deepened, they froze!

Father's voice boomed out, " *'STOP!'* Hold it right there."

Vincent's immediate reaction was, *'Gladly, Father.'* To kiss and hold Catherine like this had always been a dream, until now. Thankfully, he quickly realized that Father's command was aimed at the children who, at that moment, were within yards of this particular hiding place.

Always alert to any real danger of discovery, Vincent reacted at once. "Quickly, Catherine. There is still time to outwit them." His voice was barely a whisper.

Dropping low enough, he motioned to Catherine to pull up his hood while he again covered the backs of his hands with the corners of his cloak and once more they assumed their hiding positions.

From behind, Vincent looked like a huge black bat. This time he begged, "Hold me, Catherine. I need

to feel your arms around me, for if we are discovered, it will be my heart they will hear. It beats so fast, ready to burst with the love I feel for you."

Catherine's response was almost a sob. "Oh, Vincent," and she pulled him close as she wound her arms around his waist, snuggling into the warmth of his neck.

Father had now joined the children and, as he stood in front of the opening to where he suspected Vincent and Catherine might be hiding, he leaned on his walking stick. It was then he recognized Catherine's small pink silk scarf lying on the ground, the very same one that everybody had seen Vincent tuck inside his tunic. Only the light from a swinging torch had picked it up just long enough for Father to be aware of the threat that this now posed.

Quickly, he addressed the children. "I want you to extinguish your torches, we must save our batteries. We will use only the light from my lantern while I talk to you." And to his relief, once Raymond's torch was switched off, the tell-tale evidence of Vincent and Catherine's whereabouts was no more to be seen.

Father had guessed where they might be, even before he saw the scarf and had kept the children very busy looking in all manner of places, hoping that Vincent would be able to get Catherine further away.

However, it now seemed likely that the children's quick decision to double back had caught the two of them on the hop. *'Was it really possible that they could both get into such a small place?'* he wondered.

The children were waiting, patiently for once, to hear Father's latest instructions. He looked at their expectant faces and said confidentially, "Do you know, I believe we are closer to Vincent and Catherine, than we ever dared to hope."

This produced squeals of excitement.

"But we must now be really thorough in our searching. We have been looking in places where only one person could hide and that was rather silly, because we all know Vincent would never abandon Catherine, or expect her to hide in a place where she might get injured. We must now concentrate our efforts on the places where it is possible for two people to hide, bearing in mind the size of our dear Vincent!"

Looking at Mouse, he rebuked him gently. "Some of the hiding places have been so small, Mouse, I began to wonder if Arthur had gone missing again."

Now the children laughed and Father raised his hand to quell the noise. He went on. "You see, my dears, the more time we waste, the greater the distance Vincent will put between us. I take it you still want to try and capture him?"

The "Yes!" that followed left Vincent in no doubt whatsoever.

Father suddenly felt very torn between his loyalty to his beloved son and to these children, who trusted him. Little did they know that it was only with Father's help that Vincent had evaded capture all these years. It had been a challenge at first and several times the children had been allowed to get close enough to have the run of their lives down the last tunnel. However, it was well known that Vincent could outrun anyone in the tunnels.

Father sighed and realized that, perhaps, the time had finally come down to redress the balance. His thoughts were with Vincent and his heart reached out to him as he vowed silently, *'I will try, Vincent. But this year, you leave me little choice.'*

Jamie touched Father's shoulder. "You are very quiet, Father. Is everything all right? You seem troubled."

Recognizing her anxiety, Father smiled and thoughtfully stroked his chin. "Thank you for your

concern, Jamie, but I'm fine. I was just deep in thought, that's all. An idea has occurred to me!"

He gathered the children close, hoping to convince them of the best way to go about Vincent's capture.

"Ahead of us lie the last two tunnels which lead back to my chamber. One goes off to the left and has many good hiding places. The other to the right only had about four. I suggest that we thoroughly search the left hand tunnel and, whilst we are doing that, we will send two of our best runners along the other tunnel back to my chamber to check whether Vincent and Catherine have managed to arrive back ahead of us"

Vincent had listened very closely to Father's *'idea,'* glad of any vestige of hope that he might be one jump ahead, fully aware that Father probably knew where he and Catherine were hiding, even as he spoke.

The children were full of enthusiasm, anxious to get started and when Father asked for two volunteers to *'tunnel run,'* there were shouts of "Me! Me! Me!" It was decided that Robert and Bart were the ideal pair. As friends, they had become inseparable, having lived Below for most of their fifteen years. Both had been orphaned in infancy. Bart (*short for Bartholomew*) was the colour of ebony, with the most enormous liquid brown eyes and tight curly hair. He possessed a smile that would charm the devil himself.

Physically, Robert was the complete opposite, fair-skinned, blond hair and large blue eyes. He was a restraining influence on Bart, who seemed to have an unquenchable thirst for adventure. There was never a dull moment when the boys were around.

Eagerly, they waited for everyone to gather together at the head of the last two tunnels. For them it was an important part of this last leg of the chase. Father hugged each boy in turn and they were off, promising to be careful and not to try and capture Vincent by themselves. If they encountered him, they were to signal for assistance. This time Father played fair and had whispered what they must do.

As the noise of the children died away, Vincent and Catherine relaxed.

"How much longer do we have before we must make a dash for it, Vincent?" asked Catherine, in no particular hurry to move. She had become rather fond of this hiding place!

Vincent was thoughtful. "Well, I imagine it will take them about twenty minutes to search the left hand tunnel and, by the time they get back together and start down the opposite side, maybe another fifteen after that. Once they begin their search of the right hand tunnel, we are going to have such a run on our hands, Catherine, to make it down the other side and into Father's chamber. I hope you are feeling like some exercise!"

Catherine's answer was to throw back Vincent's hood and draw his head down so that she could nibble his chin. Just the touch of her lips was enough but when he felt her body move against his, it proved too much. His arms reached out and within seconds, Catherine was held more closely than she ever believed possible. His hands caressed her shoulders as he showered her with soft kisses. Catherine realized that it would be up to her to initiate her beloved Vincent in the art of kissing.

Holding his face between her hands, she planted several butterfly kisses on his mouth. Vincent stood perfectly still, allowing all Catherine's emotions to wash over him. She lingered over the next kiss and gently began to suck his lower lip. Vincent was in ecstasy, it was all so new. Catherine kissed him again and again until finally, driven by his own instincts, Vincent's tongue moved rhythmically towards her open mouth.

As she became more aroused he felt no fear from Catherine, only desire and pushed his tongue inside her mouth. In the moments that followed, Vincent proved a very quick learner and delighted Catherine with his intimate attentions. He felt such joy as they hugged each other, both of them were breathless with happiness.

Catherine murmured, "Was it worth the wait, Vincent, or were you teasing me earlier when you said you had never kissed anyone on the mouth before? Not even...."

Vincent silenced her immediately with a light kiss. "Catherine, I realize all too clearly now that what happened so many years ago... we were only children. I was infatuated; puppy love if you like. The way you make me feel, the way my body reacts when I hold you...." Vincent shook his head, for once unable to find the right words.

Catherine's arms snaked around his body and she allowed her hands to caress his buttocks. Vincent's breathing was heavy and when she whispered, "Hold me now, Vincent," he placed one hand on her back and the other over her shorts and crushed her to him. They shared a passionate kiss and as they paused for breath, Catherine implored him, "Vincent, try... tell me what you are feeling."

All shyness had disappeared between these two and Vincent's voice was velvet soft as he breathed. "I can do better than that, Catherine. Give me your hands."

As Catherine leaned back in his arms, their hands met and he opened her palms to kiss them just once. Catherine thought it was such a romantic gesture, but it seemed he was not finished. Squeezing her hands gently he used his to guide them between their bodies and, hesitating only for a split second, he encouraged her to touch the most vulnerable part of his body.

A soft whimper escaped him as he sighed. "Do you understand now, Catherine? For me there is only you. My life has changed forever. I live only to love you. I never knew love until now."

Through the fabric of his pants, Catherine was made aware of the extent of Vincent's acute arousal and her fingers caressed the length of him. Vincent's arms were holding her to him gently as he waited for her to say something, anything....

Lifting her face with his left hand, he just gazed into her eyes and entreated her response.

"Catherine, my love, you're trembling. I don't scare you, do I? Won't you tell me what you are feeling?"

Chuckling softly, Catherine replied, "Oh, Vincent, I should have thought that was obvious!" Her tender teasing was not what Vincent had expected at all.

Dropping his head to rest his forehead against hers, he confided. "I feel your desire for me, Catherine. It rivals only my own. Will you stay Below tonight?"

Her excited, "Yes, yes, yes," was followed by, "Kiss me, hold me. Don't you dare try sending me back, Vincent! Because....I just won't go!"

As they kissed, hungrily, time stood still. They became lost in the wonder of their love for each other. Finally they relaxed their embrace and Vincent spoke. "I could never imagined that I would ever feel the way I do right now, Catherine...."

A discreet cough right behind him brought Vincent back to reality with a bump, as he heard his father say, "No, I don't suppose you did, Vincent!" These words were meant only for Vincent to hear and then Father raised his voice. "The game is up, my son. We claim the Right of Capture."

Vincent turned to face a barrage of torch lights. He helped Catherine from their hiding place and as he looked at Father, his expression was one of, *'Oh, Father. How could you.'*

Returning his gaze with sympathy, Father held up Catherine's small pink scarf and Vincent's hand shot inside his tunic, only to hear Father say, "I think you must have lost this, Vincent. One of the children spotted it as we returned to the last fork in the tunnels. They misunderstood and thought they were to meet back here, where we discussed our plan to capture you." He handed the incriminating *'evidence'* back to Vincent and smiled. "You gave yourselves away. They also heard the sound of voices, you should have been more careful!" Holding out his hand to Vincent, he asked, "No hard

feelings, my son."

Vincent pulled Father into his embrace and as he hugged him, he sighed, "It had to happen sooner or later. I'll survive, Father, I always do!"

By this time the children were jumping up and down, their excitement was at fever pitch. Vincent pulled an outrageous face at all of them and said, "I had a gut feeling that this would be your year." He growled again, but much louder than before and promised, "Know that you won't forget this day in a hurry!" With a nod to Father and Catherine, he allowed himself to be led away.

Catherine put her arm through Father's and as they walked back to his chamber, she asked, "What will happen now, Father?"

Patting her hand, he reassured her. "Don't worry, my dear, once the fun starts, Vincent will forget about everything, but entertaining the children. Being Vincent, he probably won't enjoy the spectacle, especially with you here, but he will give a good account of himself. The children have waited years for this to happen and he won't disappoint them, not now. It must be fifteen years at least since he was last captured, he and Devin as I recall. What a show that was! Now the children will find out for themselves if all the stories they have heard over and over again were fact or fiction. Come along, my dear, you must see and judge for yourself."

News of Vincent's capture spread through the tunnels like a forest fire. Even Helpers who were Below, stayed on to enjoy and share the excitement. Once everyone had assembled in Father's chamber, it was soon decided that the time had come to travel to the Great Pool at Giant Falls. Catherine could not get near Vincent, he was under *'heavy guard'* and all he could do was wave quickly as he was escorted away by the children.

The Great Pool was the largest and safest of all the bathing pools and was fed by warm springs. Below the falls themselves, where Vincent and his childhood friends used to swim naked, the water was very deep. Beyond the falls was a succession of smaller pools. It was quite an enchanted place.

The air was warm from the water and there was sufficient light cast from the huge shafts above the falls. Mouse and William arrived armed with blankets and towels. Quickly, they seated the children, making sure every child could see properly and was comfortable on the blankets they had laid down. It was an impossible task to get them to settle quietly, because Vincent had just been brought in!

The youngsters who had escorted Vincent all the way from Father's chamber now joined their friends sitting on the blankets, while the Junior Council members waited with Father for Vincent to present himself. The Junior Council consisted of Jamie, Mouse, Robert, Bart and the latest and youngest member was Samantha.

Catherine had chosen to stand with Mary, who was smiling and laughing. She knew exactly what was about to take place.

Jamie handed Father the Council's judgement and Father informed all those present that Vincent had been captured fairly and had offered no resistance. It was noted, however, that there had been a certain amount of face-pulling and that he had also been heard to growl, but nobody had seen fit to take him too seriously!

Everyone laughed, including Vincent. Father now faced his son and asked, "Vincent, do you claim the privilege of capture?"

Vincent answered solemnly. "I must certainly do."

Looking over his glasses, Father ventured, "Dare I ask how many, Vincent?"

Pausing only for a moment, he growled softly before answering. "I claim one for every member of the Junior Council."

You could have heard a pin drop and even Father looked a trifle dismayed. He whispered to Peter,

standing close by. "Dear God, the boy's gone mad!"

Vincent heard him of course and leaned forward, his voice very low and whispered back. "On the contrary, Father, in case you have not noticed, the 'boy' is full grown... and has a man's needs!" He directed his last remark at Catherine, who was staggered.

She had suddenly noticed that Vincent's arms were bare, he had nothing on his feet and was totally unprepared for the next shock.

Turning to address his audience, Vincent announced, "Let the show begin!" and removed his cloak with a flourish. Underneath he was wearing a pair of 'Stars & Stripes' boxer shorts and a T-shirt with the words 'DANGEROUS WHEN WET' back and front.

Father was unable to contain his laughter. "Merciful heaven!" he gasped. "What is he wearing? I never ever expected to see that outfit again."

Mary leaned forward and squeezed Father's arm. "I saved it, Jacob. I knew that one day it would be needed again."

Father put his arm around Mary's shoulders and congratulated her. "Well done, Mary. I am quite sure that, even though it is somewhat outrageous for someone of his standing, with Catherine present, Vincent will feel less uncomfortable; at least most of him is covered."

Father continued to stand with his arm around Mary, he had been touched by her sensitivity towards his son, realizing once again, just how much she loved Vincent. To Vincent, she was mother, sister and friend, all rolled into one, but most important of all, she would always be there for him.

The children were applauding and cheering as Vincent gave them a really good look at his costume.

Catherine was beside herself with laughter and commented to Mary and Father. "I've heard about 'strutting your stuff,' but this is really something else!"

Vincent heard Catherine, she intended that he should. To complete his fashion show, he held his cloak in one hand and, with his other hand on his hip, he paraded his way towards her! The children were in hysterics. Even though he was feeling rather ridiculous, her stupefied expression amused him.

As he dressed her in his cloak, he used his index finger to close her mouth and teased softly.

"Catherine, if you have to lust over me, save it for later, please. Not now, not in front of the children." With a cheeky grin he turned and shouted. "This one is for you, Samantha," and ran between the bystanders to execute a perfect racing dive.

The children, lead by Mouse, shouted. "One!" and waited for Vincent to return.

Mary quickly explained to Cathy that for every 'victim' he claimed, Vincent would pay a forfeit and dive for the children. He would count his victims and the children would count his dives. Apparently, it didn't seem to matter who shouted first; the element of surprise added to the excitement.

As promised, he soon found Samantha and she did not back away, aware that she must accept her fate, just as Vincent had accepted his. Scooping her up into his arms, he asked quietly, "You are not afraid?"

Samantha snuggled into his neck and simply answered, "Not any more, Vincent."

Kissing her forehead he whispered, "Don't forget to hold your nose then!" Vincent yelled. "One!" and jumped right out into the pool, disappearing under the water with his precious charge.

Cathy wondered why Vincent would choose Samantha if she was nervous and questioned Father. She learned that because of an accident three years before, Samantha had become terrified of water. It was only Vincent who had been able to help her face her fear. Father also told Catherine that, whenever he could, Vincent swam with the children and it was always those who were the most frightened that responded to him every time.

As Vincent and Samantha broke the surface of the water, there were cheers from the children and they swam back, side-by-side. Vincent encouraged Samantha until at last she just looked at him and in an instant he took her back into his arms and climbed out of the pool.

As he carried her, he took everyone by surprise and shouted, "Two!" before they were ready and quite deliberately used Samantha's legs to knock Mouse off balance and into the water.

Handing Samantha to Mary to dry her hair and wrap her in a blanket, Vincent helped Mouse out of the water and patting him on the back said, "That will teach you to appear with a stool in such a hurry again, my young friend. Did you honestly think I didn't know exactly what you were up to?"

Mouse grinned back. "Sorry, Vincent. Mouse know better, next time!"

Vincent groaned. "Next time?" His mind was ticking over so fast... *'Could this ultimate forfeit have anything to do with kissing?'* he wondered. He didn't put anything past the Junior Council.

The children were shouting, "Two," and Vincent climbed onto a nearby ledge and dived for them again.

Catherine was fascinated. This was a side to Vincent she had never imagined. No wonder the children adored him and they were not the only ones!

Vincent was now swimming strongly around the pool, obviously looking in the crowd for a particular someone. Several times he disappeared to swim under water and the squeals and screams he induced by popping up when least expected were ear piercing.

Turning to face his audience, Vincent surveyed the scene in front of him. He could see three rows of happy children sitting along the edge of the Great Pool. He could also see just how many adults had come to share the fun. There were groups of them surrounding the children on three sides. He realized too that because he was now an adult himself, the older friends present would be keen to see if he could still get up to his old tricks.

Springing easily onto the side of the pool, he quickly reassured the children nearest to him.

"Don't be alarmed, your turn will come another year, perhaps! I have to seek permission before I can claim my third and fourth victims." He moved towards the adults at the side of the children and held out his hands to Sarah. "I have need of my two water babies, Sarah! Trust me, please. They will come to no harm, I promise you."

Sarah grinned her approval and, without hesitation, beckoned her twin sons to join Vincent as she told him. "Once they knew we were all coming here, they insisted on wearing their trunks. They hoped it would be possible to have a swim before bedtime. I don't think you will have to ask them twice!"

Matthew and Michael were identical twins and had been able to confuse everyone over and over again. The only two people who could tell them apart were their mother and Vincent. They were sturdy little boys, full of mischief and fun. What was most noticeable about them, apart from their upper curls, was their absolute devotion to Vincent.

He now knelt before them and playfully prodded their tummies. "So keen, eh? That's what I like to hear. Will you assist me now?"

The words were hardly out of his mouth before he was forced to help the boys out of their new tops and shorts as they had already begun to undress themselves, ready for action.

Vincent smiled. "Good idea, boys, they are rather special and it is one way of telling you apart, providing you don't wear each other's!"

Catherine had thought of everything it seemed. She even had the names of all the tiniest printed on their tee-shirts. The boys, now wearing only their trunks, were pulling at Vincent's tee-shirt and had managed to get it out at the front.

Placing his hands over theirs, he sighed. "I am afraid I have to wear mine a while longer, it is part of

the rules of my capture!" Vincent handed the clothing to Sarah and then picked his way to sit at the front of the children so they could all see and hear him.

As he sat cross-legged, Catherine noticed that the twins immediately climbed inside his lap and Vincent just as automatically wrapped his arms around them. It was such a touching sight and Catherine said as much to Mary, who agreed.

"Yes, but you do seem concerned that the latest '*victims*' are so young, Catherine. Don't be, Vincent knows what he is doing, believe me."

Catherine nodded. "How old are they, Mary... five?"

"They were six last week, but I think I should tell you a little about them. Sarah's husband was killed in an accident several months before the twins were born. She came to us in a very poor state of health. The babies were born here, we nearly lost them and Sarah too. It seems hard to believe now, but I well remember those shifts with Father, Peter and Vincent. We nursed them through the crisis and Vincent became very attached to the twins. I suppose for them, he is the father they have never known. They adore each other, you will see just how much in a few minutes. Now, let's hear what Vincent has to say."

All the children were waiting for Vincent to speak, they knew how deeply he cared about them. Over the years he had shown his love for them in so many ways and today, he was making this occasion very special.

Vincent's hair had started to dry already and he shook his head a couple of times, hoping he might look more like himself. Instinctively the twins smoothed it down for him and then sat patiently as Vincent said, "Before I claim my third and fourth victims, I thought this might be an ideal opportunity to stress how important swimming is for all of us who live Below. It is even more important for you younger ones as it is the finest exercise you can possibly get. There are still some of you who are not sure about the swimming sessions and, I do understand. This is why I decided to claim Matthew and Michael. I hope that between the three of us we can encourage those of you who would like to learn to swim to come and join this particular activity. You will never be asked to do anything you are not entirely happy about. Please think about it, at least."

Catherine could not help noticing that Vincent's body was twitching as he finished speaking. Leaning forward, she could see what was causing the problem. Matthew and Michael had slipped their hands underneath Vincent's tee-shirt and must have been plucking at the hair on his chest! Then she heard an "Ouch!" and realized they were at it again.

Quickly, Vincent had them both on their feet and managed to stuff his tee-shirt back where it belonged. "Are you two ready?" he asked. The twins nodded their heads vigorously in full agreement. "Okay, good. Okay, fine," replied Vincent and the children were soon laughing all over again at his impression of Mouse.

Vincent turned towards the pool with his back to the children and then crouched low enough for the boys to hook themselves onto his arms, with their hands clasped together. Extending his arms over the water, Matthew and Michael hung like the pair of monkeys they were, grinning up at Vincent, waiting for him to give the word.

"When you are ready boys, you can go!"

With a splash, they disappeared under the water as Vincent called, "Three and four."

Once their heads appeared on the surface of the water, bobbing about like a pair of corks, the children shouted, "Three," and Vincent dived between the boys. He used the time available to his advantage and showed the children how to float, every stroke known to man and even life-saving. He then decided to show them the fun side too. He knew he had them in the palm of his hand and, after all this was their day.

"Time for submarines, I think, don't you?" he asked the twins and this certainly had the desired effect on everyone, but especially Matthew and Michael. Vincent had said this would be a day to remember and he was certainly keeping his promise.

Vincent was at the front, lying almost face down in the water, with the twins directly behind him. Matthew grabbed one of his big toes and Michael the other.

Vincent called, "Are we ready?" and the boys shouted back at the top of their voices.

" *'YES, WE ARE!'*"

Slowly at first, Vincent used his arms to propel them and then, as the boys kicked their feet, they moved through the water making a terrific splash, but the best was yet to come. They gradually disappeared under water to reappear quite some distance away. The children went wild. This was far better than anything they had expected.

As the '*submarine*' returned the boys swam alongside Vincent, obviously asking a favour and it seemed he was not too sure, but then nodded.

He called to Sarah. "I understand that you are not totally convinced about a certain kind of diving we have been doing! I have only agreed to do this to prove that you should believe what you hear, Sarah! This is for you."

'*Submarine*' style they made their way to the rock formation in the middle of the pool and Vincent hauled them both out of the water. Standing with his knees bent, the boys used his thighs as stepping stones to climb up his body and onto his broad shoulders. Catherine was goggle-eyed and so was everyone else. Nobody had seen this done before.

Being such keen swimmers it was well known that the twins would find Vincent wherever he was and it was obvious now to this captive audience, that they had managed to persuade him to teach them all manner of things, including diving!

Sarah knew that one of the best times to catch Vincent was very early in the morning and she had found Matthew and Michael asleep, tucked up in Vincent's bed many times after swimming, while he had gone off to work on the lower tunnels.

Vincent was so thoughtful, allowing Sarah to get her rest and, at the same time, quite prepared for the boys to take over his bed.

All eyes were now on Vincent and the twins. Matthew and Michael were poised ready to dive, arms above their heads, thumbs crossed to keep their small hands together.

Vincent gave the order. "Matt, right! Mike, left!" and the twins took flight like fledglings leaving the nest. As soon as he felt the pressure from the boys' feet as they dived, Vincent shouted, "Four," and followed immediately after them.

The simplicity of these standing dives was breathtaking and the three of them surfaced to loud cheering and clapping. Sarah's face was a picture!

Pulling the boys towards him, Vincent encouraged them to climb on his back and '*hitch*' a swim back. He lifted the boys onto the side of the pool and then climbed out himself to sit alongside the children again. He motioned to Sarah to throw him a towel which he wrapped around both Matthew and Michael and sat them on his outstretched thighs.

As he dried the twins he answered all the questions that were being fired at him and it seemed the numbers at the swimming sessions would swell overnight!

Catherine was watching Vincent as he now cradled the twins in his arms. Mary had been right, the three of them adored each other and, yet, he was able to share this with the other children. They understood.

From the moment the twins were born, the entire community had recognized that they would always

been special because, like Vincent, they nearly didn't make it. Sarah would be forever grateful for the tender nursing the three of them had received. To be surrounded by so much love was all it took to feel whole again.

Vincent reached for a couple of small blankets and reluctantly the boys stood up to be wrapped snugly and returned to the group of excited children who sensed what was coming, they had heard all the stories!

Suddenly, Mouse called, "Vincent!"

He turned and at that moment, the Junior Council shouted, "Five!" They were all grinning, realizing that they had stolen a march on their *'captive.'*

Vincent smiled and asked hopefully, "I don't suppose you would settle for a sitting dive, would you?"

The " *'NO!'*" that followed was deafening and then the chanting started all over again, but this time to, "Climb, climb, climb."

Vincent held up his hand and they quieted down as he finally stood to address the Junior Council. "Will you at least allow me one crumb of dignity for this last dive?" and he pointed to his costume. Vincent felt the time had come to find out if Catherine would be able to accept him. He needed to know before he dived for the last time.

The Junior Council put their heads together and then agreed to Vincent's request. He walked back to Mary and peeled off his tee-shirt, and then dropped the ridiculous boxer shorts at her feet. His eyes were twinkling as he squeezed her arm.

"Thank you, Mary. You should have seen some of the costumes!"

Father laughed. "Vincent, you should think yourself very lucky that Mary did! Have you decided who will be your next victim?"

Vincent was feeling in the mood for more fun and leaned towards Father menacingly. "Well, Father...." and immediately his look was full of utter mischief.

Father gasped. "Vincent! You wouldn't dare?"

He chuckled at Father's horrified expression. "No, I don't think I would."

Catherine had been watching what was happening closely and realized at once why Vincent had stripped down to his trunks; he was testing her. He was still unsure how she felt about him physically. Seeing Vincent now, her mind yelled, *'Get a grip of yourself, Chandler, before it's too late!'* Catherine found she was quite unable to control her feelings, they surged within her body and immediately transmitted themselves to Vincent. Her desire overwhelmed them both.

Dressed only in the briefest gold trunks, matching the light golden down covering his torso, he appeared almost naked. His long arms and legs were thickly covered in darker gold hair, tinged with copper, identical to the curly hair on his chest, which graduated to copper as it disappeared inside his trunks.

Cathy was having great difficulty trying to cope with her mixed emotions and decided to allow them to embrace Vincent.

His head turned sharply to look at her and he then walked slowly across to stand directly in front of her. To know what Catherine was feeling was more than he had ever dared to wish for and his voice betrayed his joy as he whispered, "Catherine....our bond....you really like what you see that much?"

Afraid to lay even one finger on him she just whispered back. "You know I do, Vincent! Never doubt our bond. It will always guide us... I love you so much."

Vincent turned to the children. "Under the circumstances, I think it would be fitting - indeed appropriate - if I wore Catherine's colours! It was because of her incriminating evidence that I was

captured today." In full view of the children, Vincent slipped his hand inside his cloak, still worn by Catherine and searched the lining until he found her pink silk scarf. "Would you be kind enough to do the honours, Catherine?" and he held out the scarf to her.

Catherine was dumbfounded. Vincent was really putting her through it today. Not knowing what to do next, she appealed to him with her eyes and he pointed to the side of his hipster trunks. Her fingers were trembling as she fed the scarf between Vincent and his trunks. Cathy's mind was racing. *'I'll get you for this, my lad. You see, if I don't,'* and looked up to see such amusement in his eyes. She blew down her nostrils and knotted the scarf securely.

As he turned, she gave his bottom a playful slap and was rewarded with a cheer from the children, but a backward glance from Vincent spelt trouble with a capital *'T!'* Now he was finally ready, the children began their chanting again.

"Vincent, Vincent, Vincent...." and then it changed just as suddenly to, "Climb, climb, climb."

Vincent and Catherine joined Father, who asked, "Will you be all right, Vincent? Perhaps if I...."

Vincent kissed his father's worried brow and murmured, "Don't worry about me, Father. I know it is a long time, but it isn't as though I have never done it before! Please don't worry, any of you. The water by the falls is certainly deep enough for such a high dive." He touched the side of Catherine's face, stroked her hair and with a reassuring smile, he left them to make his way around to the opposite side of the pool to climb the rock face.

This was obviously the moment the children had been waiting for - to see Vincent dive from the ledge opposite the falls. As he climbed, Catherine watched in awe; Vincent had shared so much of himself with her today. It seemed it would be a day to remember in the hearts of all those who now watched as Vincent climbed onto the ledge itself.

Looking down at them he joked, "The view is terrific, anyone care to join me?" and promptly sat down, swinging his legs from side to side. "Are you still there?" he shouted down.

The children yelled. "Yes, we are!"

"Good, well, I have climbed up here, how soon before you let me climb back down? Mouse, can you hear me?"

Mouse stood right at the front and answered. "Vincent supposed to dive!"

Vincent jumped to his feet and glared down. "Dive? It must be sixty feet from here. I can't!" As he had expected, the response from the children was tremendous as they shouted back.

"Oh yes, you can!" It was real audience participation, just like an English pantomime.

Father was laughing with Mary and confided. "I don't know what's got into Vincent today. I have never seen him like this."

A slow blush appeared in Catherine's cheeks, which did not pass unnoticed by Mary or Father.

Vincent looked down at all the cheeky faces beaming with mischief and shaking his head sighed. "You are not going to change your minds, are you?"

The children shook their heads back at him and answered in one voice. "No, we are not!"

Standing in a dive position with his toes curled over the edge, Vincent suddenly put his hand to his head as if he had forgotten something and crouched down instead.

This was so unexpected that Father was heard to gasp. "What is that errant son of mine up to now?" And then he remembered something Vincent had done, so many years before. He grabbed Mary's arms and whispered, "Mary, you don't think...."

Catherine was even more anxious as she saw Vincent settling his hands over the shelf-like edge. In one movement he lifted his body into a perfect handstand and then pushed himself off the ledge into

a beautiful dive. Just like an arrow, he cut the water beneath him. The sound of cheering that followed was incredible; so was the feeling of relief they all experienced, knowing that Vincent had executed his last dive safely. He had brought so much pleasure to the children Below. Matthew and Michael were literally jumping up and down. Only one thing was wrong, where was Vincent now?

Once under water, Vincent swam out of sight right across the pool and climbed out behind the cover of rocks at the side of the children. As he moved silently at the back of the adults, Pascal half turned; his hearing was so very sensitive. Putting his finger to his lips Vincent's eyes implored Pascal not to give him away. A slow smile crept over Pascal's face as Vincent mouthed, 'CATHERINE, CATHERINE,' at him and at once, Pascal knew he had to help his friend.

Moving between the adults and children, he started to chant "CATHERINE," and everyone picked it up, giving Vincent just the time he so desperately needed.

Catherine was laughing in spite of herself, she knew for sure Vincent was up to something. Then she felt his cloak whipped off her shoulders and turned to face the same look in Vincent's eyes that he had given her when she had playfully slapped him. That damned scarf would be her downfall, she just knew it!

Vincent was in earnest now as he advanced on Catherine. "Strike me, would you? 'FIVE'---- Catherine!"

Catherine backed away. Surely Vincent wouldn't, but the look in his eyes told her otherwise.

"No....Vincent, please...." she pleaded.

Vincent moved towards her again. "Take them off," he hissed.

Cathy's heart almost stopped. "Vincent! What....?"

"If you don't want them to get wet, Catherine, take them off!"

Catherine wanted to run but realized it would be futile; the mood Vincent was in at this moment would only make matters very much worse.

"Take them off?" she repeated, like a parrot; even her voice betrayed her. '*Oh, Vincent,*' her heart was hammering at him, '*stop this, please.*' A blush came to her beautiful face as she stared at him, waiting for him to make the next move.

He moved even closer and said, "Your trainers, Catherine, take them off!"

The children quickly realized that Vincent fully intended that Catherine would be his next victim and were one hundred percent behind him. " 'FIVE.' Catherine," Vincent repeated and the children insisted. " 'FIVE,' Catherine!"

Catherine slipped her sneakers off, preparing herself for what now seemed inevitable. Vincent was determined to get his way. She looked towards Father for help but he pursed his lips and shook his head. The look implied, '*You are on your own in this one, Catherine!*'

Vincent ceased his stalking and warned softly, "Catherine, watch your step, the edge of the pool is just behind you."

As she turned her head - just for a second - to check, Vincent pounced.

"Got you!" he bellowed and Catherine was held in a vice-like grip. "Are you going to come quietly or do I have to use force?" He was enjoying every moment of this capture; she was his victim, all right.

She leaned back to look at him and asked, "Do I really have a choice, Vincent?"

"Of course," he teased, tightening his grip still further.

"Then I had better come quietly, for now," and her look left him in no doubt at all this was not over by a long shot.

Relaxing his hold just a little, Vincent inquired. "Can I ask you something personal, Catherine?"

This was unbelievable. *'Was there no end to this man's tormenting?'* Father was right, she had never seen Vincent like this before, either. Her throat was dry and she swallowed before replying.

"You know you can ask me anything, Vincent."

"Do you dive?"

Catherine just nodded. He was holding her so close she felt sure he would feel her heart pounding, never mind sense it.

"Then dive with me now!" He wrapped his left arm around her body and lifted her off her feet to lie against him. "Catherine, hold my right arm when I raise it above my head and we will attempt a side dive."

The children were enthralled and so was Catherine, but for different reasons. The feel of Vincent's body against her own was dulling her senses to such an extent that all she could think about was him and only him. Vincent would always know and he knew it now, as he lifted her again, higher this time and raised his right arm.

"Come on, Catherine," he begged. "You have to cooperate a little bit, you know!"

The children were all laughing. Vincent was known to have a wicked sense of humour.

"Like this, you mean?" and Catherine put one arm along Vincent's and the other arm between his neck and shoulder. The heat from his body was beginning to affect her and the way he was holding her was proving a dangerous combination.

"Vincent shouted, "Five!" and with a quick spring, they entered the water as one.

"Thank God that's over," breathed Father. It was quite obvious to him that his son had the very devil in him today.

Mary squeezed his arm again. "Jacob, look, they have surfaced."

Vincent and Catherine swam side-by-side to the rock formation. Vincent was out first and then lifted Catherine to stand beside him. The Junior Council and Father were standing together and Vincent suddenly remembered the *'ULTIMATE FORFEIT.'*

"Vincent!" Father called. "I feel we should all thank you for the way you have kept us entertained today. You have certainly lived up to your reputation in more ways than I ever believed possible. However, I have one more duty to perform. It falls to me to ask that you now pay the *'ULTIMATE FORFEIT!'* The Junior Council have decided that you have been less than gallant today."

Vincent groaned inwardly, he knew what was coming!

Father continued. "Because of what happened in the Great Hall and, indeed, your behaviour just now, it is the unanimous decision of the Junior Council that Catherine deserves her kiss."

Vincent looked towards the five members standing with huge grins on their faces. "Please," he beseeched them. "Not...."

Father's eyes were twinkling as he stifled a chuckle at the impudence of the Council members. "Oh yes, Vincent. I have to add that because you claimed five victims, there must be five kisses!"

Now it was Catherine's turn to smile as Vincent looked at her, realizing all too clearly that he would have to pay dearly for his own devilment.

He stammered. "Diving is one thing, Catherine, but...." His voice trailed away.

Catherine moved closer and encouraged him softly. "Oh, come on, Vincent. It isn't as though you haven't done it before!" Her words were tender and meant only for him and they both knew their significance as they brought their foreheads together and laughed.

Vincent stepped back from her and asked, "Are you absolutely sure about this, Catherine?" He looked into her beautiful eyes, her whole being radiated love. He shot Father a quick glance as if he had misheard him the first time. "Five you said?"

Father was really enjoying this too and answered back. "Perhaps you have water in your ears, Vincent! Five is what I said and five it must be. Now get on with it, there's a good chap, we have our tea to look forward to."

Vincent dodged about from one foot to the other and responded, "Okay, good. Okay, fine. Ready or not, here we go!" He pulled Catherine into his body and kissed her forehead so softly. Catherine's eyes closed as she felt his hot breath travel downwards and he kissed her closed lids.

Tilting her face he kissed the end of her nose. The children had been counting each kiss and shouted "Four!" They were waiting and so was Catherine. Vincent lifted her right in the air out of reach of his mouth and Father groaned.

"What in the name of thunder is he up to, now? They will never stand for it a second time," and promptly closed his eyes tight.

As Vincent held Catherine aloft, he brought her back down his body so slowly, it was sensual and Catherine's arms encircled his shoulders as, at last, their mouths joined. It was such a beautiful kiss and for a moment, just for a moment, they were lost in one another.

The children shouted. "Five!" and Mary nudged Father.

"Look, Jacob, it's all right."

Father opened his eyes to see something he never thought he would ever see, his son kissing a beautiful woman and making a thorough job of it.

Vincent quickly realized that the consequences of kissing Catherine were beginning to overtake him. Hearing the fifth kiss being counted, he waved his left hand in a backward gesture, as if to say, '*Go away, can't you see I'm busy!*' and turned Catherine very possessively so that he had his back to those who were expressing their approval of the way he had paid this ultimate forfeit. From behind, he still appeared to be kissing Catherine but, instead, he was whispering urgently against her lips.

"Catherine, forgive me for what I must do now. I have to leave you, otherwise I shall reveal myself in my true colours."

Catherine whispered back. "And what might those be, my love?"

Holding her lower body very much closer to his, he answered, "Whatever befits a highly aroused, hot-blooded eager male, with only one thought in his head!" His mouth once again claimed her as they turned back, finally prepared to separate from his tender embrace. Vincent held Catherine away from him and everyone waited for him to speak but, for once he had nothing to say. Clutching his heart with his right hand, he put the back of his left hand to his brow, swooned and fell backwards into the water. No one knew better than Catherine what it had taken for Vincent to pay his last forfeit and she loved him for it.

Catherine fingered her lips, which still tingled from Vincent's passionate kiss. Father and Peter were holding their sides at Vincent's latest tomfoolery and Catherine shrugged her shoulders at them, her eyes looking upwards in disbelief. It seemed there was no end to his mischief today.

She watched as Vincent swam nearer to speak to Father and the Junior Council and she decided to join him. With a clean dive, she was behind him in minutes and heard him asking, "Is it really over, am I free at last?"

Catherine was now very close to Vincent and breathed in his ear. "Not if I have anything to do with it!"

Vincent seemed surprised to find her so near and was totally unprepared for her to swim in front of him and suddenly embrace him intimately, much to everyone's amusement.

Almost nose to nose she said. "This is what is know as payback time, Vincent," and she hugged him tightly. Her voice was so soft he wondered if he had heard her correctly. It was only when he felt her hands wandering over his stomach in a downwards direction that he realized she fully intended to get her own back for all the things he had done.

Grabbing both her hands, his eyes implored her not to continue this tender punishment in public. Keeping a tight hold on her, he moved them further away and turned sideways to speak to Father, who was more than aware of Catherine's intentions. He felt Vincent deserved whatever she had in mind and was not about to spoil her fun.

Vincent's breathing was rapid. "I'll ask again, Father! Is it over, am I free at last?"

Father smiled. "Yes, but I shudder to think what else you could get up to before midnight! Perhaps you and Cathy should stay and swim some more. See if you can tire him out for us, my dear."

Catherine grinned. "Sounds wonderful to me. How long do we have before the Junior banquet?"

Father stroked his chin thoughtfully. "Well, we usually feed the little ones about now. Our dinner will be at least three hours later, so you should have plenty of time. We will see you both for dinner, Vincent's stomach will let you know when it's time!"

At last Vincent and Catherine were alone. They needed this time on their own away from everything and everybody. They thoroughly enjoy the new experience of swimming together. Vincent never left Catherine's side for a moment; they even explored some of the smaller pools before returning to the Great Pool, which had been the scene of so much excitement. As they drew level with the falls, Catherine climbed out to sit with her knees under her chin admiring the beauty around her. Her expression was so wistful and Vincent felt such a need in her.

He lifted himself out to sit beside her, gently taking her into his arms, kissing the top of her head softly.

Catherine sighed. "Oh, Vincent, you have shared so much of yourself today and yet, there is still something else I want to share, if you will let me?"

Vincent lifted her face and whispered, "Of course, just tell me what it is you want, Catherine."

Still looking wistful, Catherine squeezed Vincent's arms and sighed again. "No, forget I even asked. You probably wouldn't want to do it anyway."

Vincent was not bursting with curiosity and begged. "You know I will do anything for you, Catherine. Please, won't you tell me?"

A wicked chuckle finally escaped her as she insisted. "Take them off!"

Vincent dropped his head, he simply couldn't look at her, his shoulders were shaking.

Her tone was mocking. "Come on, Vincent. You have to cooperate a little bit, you know. *'TAKE THEM OFF!'*" Catherine was soon to realize that she had chosen the wrong day to try and provoke him, as he responded quickly.

"Do you have any special reason in mind?"

She hardly dared to tell him, seeing the roguish look on his face, but decided she was in too deep now to attempt to worm her way out of this one. "Oh, yes. I want to share something from your past, Vincent...." She took a deep breath before telling him. "I long to swim naked with you beneath the falls."

"Is that all?" and he lowered himself into the water, where he removed his trunks and threw them at the back of Catherine. With a cheeky grin, he said, "I much prefer to swim naked, Catherine, thank you for reminding me."

This situation had completely backfired on Catherine and she knew it. She should have known better

than to try and outsmart Vincent.

Watching her closely and trying not to laugh at her predicament, he announced, "I am quite ready, how about you, or have you changed your mind?"

She looked into his eyes, dancing with mischief and, as she hoped, he sensed her embarrassment.

"Catherine," his voice became husky. "Would it help if I turned my back for a couple of minutes? However, I think I should warn you that once you take to the water with me naked, I won't be held responsible for my actions!"

"Vincent! You know what you are, don't you?" she gasped, relieved to find that he recognized and understood her momentary shyness.

"Truly impossible?" he offered and they both laughed.

"Yes, but sensitive in a way that touches a part of me that no one else ever could. Just one of the many reasons why I love you, Vincent," and she motioned for him to turn his back.

Once Vincent heard Catherine enter the water behind him, he turned back and noticed her top and shorts lying near his trunks. His arms reached out instinctively to hold her, but she evaded capture by ducking under water and swimming very fast towards the falls themselves, with Vincent in hot pursuit! The sudden change in the temperature of the water soon had Catherine gasping for breath and it slowed her down quite a pace.

She turned her head to find Vincent right at the back of her. He was a force to be reckoned with at the best of times, but today, he was ten times worse. Now they were alone he was so very attentive and becoming particularly amorous.

"Catherine," the way he spoke her name told her of his longing and she thought she would drown in his eyes. His voice was hypnotic. "Just let me hold you, it will be enough for now. Please, trust me."

Catherine felt all her strength leave her limbs, she couldn't move a muscle as he folded his arms around her and gathered her backwards into his waiting lap. She could feel his hot breath on the nape of her neck as he nuzzled his way around to the side of her throat. Gradually he brought his whole body close to hers. Catherine leaned back in his embrace and gently separated his arms to take his hands, encouraging him to touch her. She knew it was no good pretending otherwise, she wanted him just as much as he wanted her. The only difference was that he would always be able to sense her desire.

As Vincent caressed Catherine's body, she squirmed with pleasure and managed to turn to face him. She kissed him tenderly and ran her hands down his back and then stroked his buttocks, copying his tender advances. At this moment, she felt deeply loved and aware of how carefully Vincent was pacing the development of the sexual side of their relationship.

"Catherine!" he teased. "I said it would be enough to hold you for now!" But he was delighted to know she wanted so much more from him. He grinned. "You still don't understand, do you?" and he pulled her very close to his lower body.

Catherine started to giggle. "So that's where the expression '*go take a cold shower*' originated from. It's certainly cold enough to freeze anybody's tail off in here!"

Vincent threw back his head and roared with laughter. "Trust you to put it so delicately, Catherine." Hugging her tightly, he was still chuckling. "Time to return, but wait while I collect your clothes." He returned quickly to the ledge at the edge of the falls and as he lifted himself almost completely out of the water, the sight of him made her heart skip a beat. She studied him carefully, a mass of wet hair hanging around his shoulders and down his back. His broad shoulders and long arms were finely muscled, he didn't carry an ounce of spare flesh.

'He is so beautiful,' she thought, unaware that every desire now running amok through her body was

unashamedly knocking seven bells out of Vincent! By the time she got to his backside, Vincent was gasping for breath.

"Catherine, enough - if you keep this up, I shall drown in your desire," and he deliberately ducked himself, hoping he would be able to cope with the swim back.

As Vincent and Catherine swam nearer to where they could be able to climb out from the Great Pool, they noticed a curl of smoke. Their eyes followed its trail and they realized that, before leaving, their friends had started a fire burning for them.

As they got nearer they could smell the wood and hear it crackling. They grinned automatically at each other; it would be nice to get themselves thoroughly dry----not to mention their clothes.

Vincent reached the edge of the pool first and turned to wait for Catherine to join him. She noticed that it was now possible for him to stand, but the water was still covering his shoulders. He appeared to be deliberately barring her way, preventing her from leaving the water. It seemed there was something he wanted, his look was one of utter longing.

"Vincent, what is it?" Catherine supported herself by holding on to the ledge overhanging the pool and resting her other hand on his shoulder.

When he spoke his voice was unsteady, not like Vincent at all. "Catherine....back there....did it make you happy to fulfill a special longing?"

Catherine quickly reassured him. "Vincent, you know it did and, what happened afterwards was wonderful too; even if we did have to tread water for such an age. You make me feel so special, thank you, Vincent," and she leaned forward to brush his cheek with her lips.

Vincent was unexpectedly touched by Catherine's total honesty, he felt her love guiding him as he just implored her. "Come here."

She moved into his embrace, placing her hands flat on his chest; acutely aware of their nakedness.

Vincent's hands caressed her back as he tried to relax. "Catherine, I have a special longing too, but I'm not sure if you...." He was unable to continue.

Realizing that he was struggling, Catherine joked back. "Oh, come on, Vincent. I did take them off eventually!" Holding her even closer he nodded, smiling as he acknowledged her attempt to make light of his embarrassment now. "Tell me what you want, Vincent, please. You know I will do anything for you, anything."

His voice was charged with emotion, his breathing had slowed, but he told Catherine, "I long to kiss the length of your back. It is such a beautiful back, my love."

He waited for her to speak but, instead, she turned in his arms and it was almost a moan.

"Know that if you decide to continue with this, Vincent, I won't be held responsible for my actions either!"

Vincent slipped his arm around Catherine's waist as he began to lift her and starting at the nape of her neck he mouthed individual kisses all the way down her spine. At the same time, Catherine placed her hands on the edge of the pool ready to exit the moment he had finished his quite exquisite torture. Just when she thought he had stopped, he held her hips with both hands and kissed the cheeks of her bottom too.

"Catherine, don't be surprised, your back excites me. You owed me one!"

Catherine laughed out loud as she remembered how erotic thoughts had almost devastated him.

"Have you quite finished, Vincent. Am I free?" she begged.

"Never," he growled and smacking her bottom commanded, "Be off with you, woman, before I lose what bit of self-control I have left."

Catherine needed the extra push from Vincent's hands to get herself out of the water. She could still feel where he had blazed a trail of kisses, her legs didn't seem to want to obey her as she stumbled towards the safety of an enormous towel. Vincent climbed out immediately after her and grabbed a nearby blanket. They laughed together at their show of respectability.

"Vincent, there's no one here but us!" Cathy giggled at Vincent's antics to conceal himself. He found a small pile of wood, left a safe distance away and returned to heap it on the fire. Catherine laid another blanket in front of the fire and then spotted a note next to her pink sneakers. There was an arrow with a simple message----*'Enjoy----love, Samantha.'*

Catherine looked back to where the *'arrow'* directed and cried, "Vincent, I don't believe this, look what I've just found."

Samantha must have gone like the wind to provide them with this treat, which was so typical of the caring for one another Below. Vincent and Catherine were deeply touched and sat side-by-side to drink Cathy's favourite herb tea. In spite of the fire and the warm drink, Catherine shivered. She was not cold, it was tension and Vincent would feel it too.

He took her cup and pushed his cup and the thermos safely out of the way. As he stretched on his side, he made sure that his blanket covered the entire length of him and turned his body into a windbreak. He invited Catherine to sit closer and she snuggled her back into his stomach; his body heat was amazing. Neither of them spoke, there was no need for words.

Catherine tried unsuccessfully to calm her thoughts, she found it was impossible and very soon. Vincent was getting signals he could not ignore. "Catherine, are you feeling any warmer?" he asked kindly.

She was sitting in a favourite position, with her knees drawn up and her chin resting on the top. She nodded but still did not speak, knowing that Vincent had shifted his position behind her.

"Catherine." The way he whispered her name was like a soft caress that touched her very soul. "Perhaps this is what you really want," and she turned to find that Vincent had opened his blanket, revealing his body totally naked.

Catherine's voice broke at the sight of him. "You know I do, but the question now, Vincent, is do you want to surrender yourself to me?"

He leaned forward to playfully tug at her towel. "I don't really have a choice. I will probably go quite mad if I don't make love to you, Catherine, or on the other hand, become totally impossible if I do. Once the final barrier comes down between us, I sense my sexual appetite will be insatiable. The choice is yours!" All the time he had been speaking, Vincent's fingers had worked on the towel, which now slipped, exposing Catherine's back.

The feel of his mouth on her back again was a welcome invasion of her body and Catherine sighed with absolute contentment as she felt his hands reach for her. There was an inevitability about what was happening and they were utterly powerless to resist the natural desire that flowed, uncontrolled, between them.

Vincent cloaked Catherine's body with the blanket, drawing her against him and immediately became very possessive.

Catherine gave herself up to the unique sensation of the special intimacy that was now taking place. "Oh, Vincent, this feels so right," she breathed huskily.

Hearing his moaned, "Oh... Catherine!" She encouraged him softly.

"Kiss me, Vincent, hold me, my love, touch me, I won't break, I promise you."

Vincent's voice penetrated the sexual fog, engulfing her. "Holding you like this, I am suddenly so aware, Catherine....of how small you really are!"

She prodded his chest with one finger. "Appearances can be deceiving, you taught me that, Vincent! Trust me now, please."

He was obviously aroused sexually, but his emotions were at a breaking point. His voice rasped, "Catherine, I have to know, you must tell me, please?"

Catherine asked tenderly, "What?"

Vincent gulped for air as he made himself continue. "You must trust me know, I have to know, Catherine, whether a physical love is possible between us."

In the light from the fire, Catherine could see in his eyes, how desperate he had become, but in spite of his own desires, his own needs, he was putting her first, as always. His voice broke.

"Catherine, I would never hurt you, but the side of me I try so hard to conquer...." He gasped as her hands reached to touch and hold him. She was not in the least surprised by the size of Vincent's erection, it was large - like the rest of him - and only what she had expected. A change came over him as her hands stroked and manipulated his manhood. He relaxed totally and nuzzled into her throat and soon, contented grunts were followed by a soft rumbling in his chest. Catherine was quite surprised by this transformation and teased him.

"You like my touch that much, eh?"

Vincent's mouth opened wide and he pretended to bite her and then, just as suddenly answered, "Please... Catherine, you have not told me what I need to know."

Catherine chuckled. "Is a physical love possible between us? It had better be after all this, Vincent, and besides, I can't let you go *'quite mad.'* I must prefer the alternative. I can be pretty demanding too, you know!"

They laughed together, finally acknowledging and admitting to one another their deepest needs. Vincent kissed Catherine with a passion that made her head spin, unprepared for him to uncover her body to gaze in adoration at her nakedness.

"I've kissed your back, my love, now I must indulge my senses again!" His love warmed Catherine as she watched his head travelling all over her body, enjoying every second of his absolute tenderness.

As he parted and stroked the insides of her thighs, his head dropped and Catherine pleaded. "No, Vincent!"

Slowly he raised his head and glared at her. "No, Vincent?" His eyes dared her to deny him. "Yes, Vincent!" he insisted. His probing fingers made an intimate discovery that really excited him.

'Damn it,' thought Catherine. *'Now that Vincent knows how my body is reacting, there will be no holding him.'* It was then that she realized the futility of her attempts to slow him down, he was in deadly earnest and had no intention of being denied anything! He was being driven by his own instincts and a love so powerful that it made Catherine aware there was little she could do physically to prevent him taking exactly what he wanted. She was rapidly losing her tenuous grasp of this impossible situation and decided to appeal to Vincent once more. She managed to speak his name and he raised his head again to look into her beautiful eyes.

She beseeched him. "Vincent, have you any idea just what your touch is doing to me? Any more and I shall be the one to go quite mad. Please....wait....let me catch my breath at least!" Cathy was teetering on the brink of an almighty orgasm and she knew that through their bond, Vincent was picking up vibrations he did not fully understand.

"Catherine!" His voice sounded tortured. "Don't ask me to wait. I have waited all my life to love you and that is what I must do now. I sense your desire, our bond is true. I must follow my heart....I want it all, my love!" He smiled at last and with his eyes twinkling with mischief he teased, "And if you are honest, Catherine, so do you."

Catherine bit her lip, hanging on by only a thread, her control finally slipped away as she answered, "Yes, Vincent."

He was more excited than ever and grinned. "You see, I knew you would agree in the end," and threw back and roared, "*YES, VINCENT!*"

Without wasting another second his hands caressed her thighs intimately and he nuzzled his face inside until he could taste the sweetness of her body. Cathy dug her toes into the blanket, but could not stop herself from crying out in ecstasy, as Vincent proceeded to tantalize her in a way she found irresistible. Within minutes her body shook uncontrollably as orgasm followed orgasm. At once, Vincent took her in his arms to hold her very close until her trembling stopped.

He lifted her chin to look at her flushed face and, with feigned innocence asked, "Now, what was all that about?"

It was clear to Catherine that Vincent was thoroughly enjoying being able to tease her sexually and, for the moment, she was content to let him get away with it. She leaned into his neck and predictably he eased onto his back, while Catherine stroked his arms and then his chest. For once she managed to take him by surprise and started a barrage of kisses down his chest.

"Catherine, what do you think you are doing?" he asked uncertainly.

As Catherine reached the most vulnerable part of him her intentions were obvious and, suddenly, Vincent was finding it very difficult to keep a hold on her. His desire to control their lovemaking became unimportant, her open-mouthed kisses were driving him wild. He didn't think he could stand any more, but it seemed he was going to have to. The moment she saw his hands move to restrain her, she warned him.

"Don't even think about it, Vincent!" and she tested her teeth on the length of him, whispering, "Or I'll give you an injury that will take some explaining to Father! Do I make myself clear, my love?"

Vincent's hands fell away at once, he was stunned. "Catherine, you wouldn't dare!"

Her matter-of-fact reply truly astounded him. "If you keep your hands to yourself and don't interfere, Vincent, I won't have to," and she playfully nibbled him to prove her point.

He could see how much Catherine was enjoying what she was putting him through and grumbled good-naturedly. "Then I must remember not to fall into this position again. You are known for your tenacity, Catherine. It could be fatal!"

Catherine giggled. "On the other hand, Vincent, you could lose out. I might just do this, or this...." and she kissed and nuzzled him until he was begging for mercy.

Finally she swirled her tongue over the tip of his sensitivity, which rendered him almost incapable of saying anything except to plead, "Please...."

When Catherine heard this word, she stopped. The way he said it melted her heart and immediately they were locked in a passionate embrace.

Vincent was soon back in control and, having turned Catherine onto her back, he was over her in seconds. He parted her legs gently and moved his body inside, taking the weight of himself on his elbows. He kissed her softly tracing the outline of her mouth with his tongue. Very gradually he lowered his body over hers and rubbed himself sensuously against her, which provoked an involuntary whimper from her.

He backed off instantly, only to be grabbed and pulled back again by Catherine, her hands holding fast to his buttocks as she choked, "Vincent, you won't hurt me, that noise I made just then was emotional, not physical. I want to hold you close too. Don't worry. I'll let you know when the going gets tough."

Vincent smiled and laughed at the same time, it was like a soft snort of pure contentment as he

relaxed to begin touching and kissing her in ways he had previously only dreamed about. When he felt her hands stroking the sides of his lower abdomen, it was clear to him what she wanted and, without any hesitation, he lifted his body to accommodate her hands.

Vincent was now supporting his weight again on his elbows, his eyes had not left Catherine's face for an instant, he was taking his lead from her. Everything he wanted, everything he had ever dreamed about or longed for was within his grasp. He was about to experience the physical love of a woman. He never believed this would ever be possible, but what was even more incredible the woman was very beautiful and made no secret of how deeply she cared for him. Her name was Catherine, his beloved Catherine. He felt her love embracing him as she encouraged him to make love to her. Vincent dropped his head to kiss her, his tongue gently nudging against her parted lips, he was wooing her, seeking permission for the rest of him.

Catherine sighed dreamily, her eyes told him in that moment how much she loved him. Vincent was almost beyond speech as he felt her begin to maneuver his penis inside her, he wanted to thrust so desperately. Instinctively he sensed Catherine's needs also and obeyed them silently, without question, their love was guiding him now as never before.

Vincent could feel himself being consumed by Catherine's body and was just able to hold on to his sanity. She was whispering softly. "Please don't push yet, my love, let me adjust to your size."

Vincent was overwhelmed by what was taking place between them and answered, "Oh my God, Catherine - *DON'T PUSH* - I want to thrust myself inside you. I never dreamed I would feel this way."

His mouth was suddenly dry and Catherine sensitive to his needs, breathed back at him erotically. "I know, I know. Soon, Vincent. Very soon!"

Seconds later he could feel Catherine's hands bearing down on his buttocks and he recognized instantly what he must do. Hardly breathing he pushed himself completely inside Catherine's body, the relief he felt at last precise moment was a life saver. Unable to resist the demands being made on him by her, he began to thrust imploring her, "You will tell me if I hurt you, please?"

Catherine nodded but answered, "That won't happen now, Vincent. There are no more barriers, every single one is down. We are one, my love, finally we belong to each other - body and soul."

She started to move her body with Vincent's, matching his passion in ways he would never have believed possible. They became lovers physically and consummated their love in an enchanted place; they lost themselves totally in one another. Their love was a precious guide to the future they knew awaited them, life had taken on a new meaning for both of them.

Vincent and Catherine clung to each other, quite unable to separate themselves, savouring every moment of their time alone. They knew, at last, what it meant to be truly together.

Vincent hugged Catherine to him and his voice was full of tenderness and love for her. He spoke in hushed tones. "Catherine, thank you for trusting me, for having faith in me. You have made me complete, I never thought that would ever happen to me."

His emotions were raw and Catherine held him tightly. "Shhhh, Vincent, it's okay, I understand. Think what you have done for me. I have wanted you sexually too for so long, I never thought in my wildest dreams that a physical love would happen between us either." She kissed into his neck and then leaned back to look into his penetrating gaze.

Vincent put his finger to her lips to stop her continuing, he had something more urgent to say.

"Catherine, I want to tell you how much I love you and only you. I could never love another the way I love you. Do you remember the promise I made to your father before he died?" Catherine smiled, her eyes were misty as she nodded. "I make the same promise to you now. I will love you until my last breath."

Vincent held her face between his hands and kissed her. His kiss touched her soul and, kissing him

back, Catherine vowed, "So will I love you, so will I!"

Emotionally they held each other and it did not take long before their love began to consume them. The lovemaking that followed was unexpectedly wild and noisy. It took them both by surprise. It seemed life would be full of surprises from now on.

In the midst of their almost frenzied attack on each other, Vincent grabbed Catherine to hold her still. "Listen, do you hear someone calling?"

Catherine chuckled. "Is this a new ploy to distract me for some reason, Vincent? Do you have an ulterior motive in mind?"

Vincent tightened his hold. "Catherine, please listen!"

"Oh, come on, Vincent. You can do better than this. I don't hear a thing, you are joking?"

Vincent slipped his arms under Catherine and lifted her to him. "There is only one way to silence you it seems, my angel, so while I kiss you, *'PLEASE LISTEN!'*" When he pulled away he asked, "Now do you hear it?"

Catherine realized that he was quite serious and shaking her head, answered, "Vincent, I'm sorry, but no, I don't hear anything. Your hearing is much more acute than mine, remember." She sighed, wishing she could hear whatever it was that was so obvious to Vincent.

Vincent moved his body sensuously against hers and murmured, "Just when I was beginning to get the hang of all this too! It really is with the greatest reluctance that I must withdraw from the most delightful place it has ever been my good fortune to encounter."

Catherine's eyes sparkled as she teased him. "I think we were about finished, weren't we?"

He kissed her deeply and smiled wickedly. "Oh no, Catherine, you are still very much unfinished business," and he eased himself from the one part of Catherine that he knew was his alone.

There was no mistaking now the sound of a man's voice calling. "Vincent!"

Vincent looked at Catherine. "I know who that voice belongs to, Catherine, the only person who would dare to come back here knowing we are alone."

Catherine stared back at him, her voice unsteady. "I hear it too, Vincent. Oh my God, it's...." She buried her face in Vincent's chest, and he stroked her hair as he confirmed her unspoken fear.

"Yes, it's my beloved Father, warning us of his impending arrival!"

Almost immediately, Cathy began to panic, but it was Vincent who took control of what had all the making of an embarrassing situation. "Hey, hold on here, Catherine. We are not a couple of children caught with both hands in the cookie jar, you know," and he raised himself onto his knees. His tone soothed her just enough and Catherine answered with a cheeky grin.

"Well, that's exactly what it feels like, Vincent!"

He just managed to grab her wandering hands before she started something only he could finish. "I suspect Father is worried about your honour, Catherine!" Vincent was attempting to keep this whole business as light as possible.

She burst out laughing. "Well, he's about an hour too late, my love!"

Vincent smiled at her but, deep down, he was far from happy. He knew why Father had returned, he was worried about Catherine's safety. Vincent also realized that all the signs had been there to give Father cause for concern. Father had been observing them all day and must have been able to see for himself how Catherine had aroused him emotionally as well as sexually, despite all his clowning around to disguise the face. He pulled Catherine into a sitting position, his face conveyed none of the inner torment he was feeling at this moment. "Please don't worry yourself. I can handle Father, I've had years of practice!"

Catherine relaxed a little. "I'm glad to hear it, Vincent, but what do we do now?"

Wrapping Catherine in his blanket, Vincent told her. "You are *'resting'* and I'm out of here, *'swimming'!*" He crept to the edge of the pool and left the towel Catherine had used, strategically placed while he lowered himself silently into the water. He decided to swim to meet Father and, keeping to the edge of the pool, he soon saw him picking his way carefully between the rocks. He raised his hand and beckoned to Father to come to the water's edge. Without giving him a chance to speak, Vincent asked, "Why are you here, Father?" His manner was very direct and when he saw his father flinch, he added a little more kindly, "Has something happened, Father. Do you have need of me?"

Father leaned heavily on his stick and just replied, "No, there is nothing wrong, Vincent. I decided to come back because... Oh, I don't know, Vincent. I was rather anxious. You have not been yourself all day. I suddenly realized that unwittingly I had thrown you and Catherine together and, naturally, I felt responsible."

He looked so uncomfortable now that Vincent calmed down and completely disarmed his father by laughing softly.

"I suppose you are responsible for what has happened, Father. I should thank you!"

Father did not know what to make of his son, the mood he was in made it difficult to know what to believe anymore.

Vincent turned back in the water. "Come, Father. I think we should talk, don't you?"

The elder man nodded. "Yes, Vincent. That would be a start."

Within a few minutes they were level with where Vincent had dropped the towel and he asked Father to hold it out for him. "Father, I have to confess to skinny-dipping - so either take a big breath or close your eyes."

Father laughed. "I might have guessed as much, Vincent. I can't imagine what has been going on here since I left!"

As Vincent sprang from the pool, he put his mouth to Father's ear and whispered saucily, "Don't even try. It's beyond imagining!"

"Vincent, really!" And he gave his son a smart slap on his bare backside.

"First Catherine and now you, Father. The only two people who would dare to take such a liberty or have I really been so impossible today?" He dried himself while Father settled down on a nearby boulder.

"Vincent, where is Catherine?"

Wrapping his lower body in the towel, he sat beside Father and whispered, "She's resting back there, Father."

The elder man sighed. "Vincent, I thought the idea was for her to tire you out, not the other way about! What have you been doing to the poor child?"

Vincent put his arm around Father's shoulders. "Nothing that Catherine did not want me to do. You should not have worried yourself. Don't you know, I could never hurt her. She is my life, it is that simple. We love each other."

Father looked at Vincent now, so sure of himself and marvelled. "I know, Vincent. I know, but forgive an old man for remembering a time when you were so brutally hurt. I didn't want to be responsible for that happening again. I'm sorry. I should have known, after all this is Catherine we are talking about now."

Vincent nodded. "Yes, Father, so we are! However, I remember that time too, when I walked about

down here thinking no woman would ever be safe to be left alone with me, but it all happened such a long time ago. Eventually, I came to terms with my *'differences.'* I never expected that I would ever know the joy of a woman's love either. You see, Father, when I reached out to hold Catherine, she was there for me, wanting me just as much. Make no mistake about that; I admit to you now I had wanted her for a long time but my mind was filled with so many doubts. It was Catherine who swept them aside and in doing so laid the ghost of Lisa. You have no need to worry yourself on my account anymore. I am really free at last in a way I never thought possible."

Father's eyes were quite suddenly filled with tears. "That's wonderful, Vincent. I'm very happy, for both of you. Have you talked about the future?"

Vincent shook his head. "No, Father. It's very much one day at a time."

Father stood and looked towards where Catherine lay in front of the fire. It was perfectly obvious what had been going on here, an empty place on the crumpled blanket next to her, the clothes laid out to dry, you would have to be blind not to see the evidence.

He turned back to Vincent. "Are you sure Catherine's all right, Vincent? She looks a bit flushed to me."

Catherine managed to get to her feet and, wearing her blanket sarong style, moved towards Father. "Perhaps you should ask her," she whispered as she reached to kiss his cheek and put her arm through his.

Father was overcome. "Cathy, my dear girl! Did we disturb you?" and he returned her kiss.

She smiled at the two men in her life who she knew both really loved her just for herself.

"No, I wasn't really asleep, Father. I felt you and Vincent needed some time together. It's been quite a day, hasn't it?"

Vincent joined them. "And it isn't over yet. The Junior Banquet is still to come."

Catherine pleaded with him. "Vincent, you do promise to be on your best behaviour?"

He put his arms around them and teased back. "I'll try. Oh yes, I'll try!"

Catherine hugged Father. "You mentioned the future, Father? My only answer is that Vincent is my life and my future."

Father kissed Catherine's fingertips and murmured. "No wonder my son loves you to distraction."

Vincent found some more wood for the fire and it was soon burning brightly again. Father announced he would start back ahead of them and Vincent gathered him into a big hug and kissed his forehead.

"Be happy for us, Father. We are happier in ways I only ever dared to dream about, until today. Do we have your blessing?"

Father held out his hands to them and they grasped tightly as he answered simply, "Always... You see, my dears, I love you both very much too." Without another word, they shared an emotional hug and then Father was gone.

Catherine slipped to her knees on the blanket and held out her hands to the warmth of the fire, gazing into the flames. Then she felt Vincent behind her tugging at the blanket urgently.

"Come on, Catherine. We were only left two blankets and you are wrapped in one and sitting on the other. Have a heart, I'm freezing my tail off back here!"

Catherine looked behind her to find Vincent wearing only a smile and it was such a wicked one at that! "Whatever became of your towel, Vincent?" she asked so innocently.

Vincent bounced back at once with, "I laid it down to dry, Catherine. Much too damp to wear now and, besides, I want my blanket back!"

The next moment he was making overtones with his body, wrapping himself around her. She felt the blanket slacken and his hands easing it down her body, caressing her every inch of the way. He slipped his hands under her arms and pulled her backwards to rest against him and as he kissed the nape of her neck, his fingers toyed with her nipples which he knew from his very short experience would excite her as well as relax her. Gradually, Vincent eased them both onto their sides and the blanket was no more than a fond memory. As soon as they were both naked again, he growled softly.

"Now perhaps we can return to some unfinished business, Catherine," and he kissed her passionately.

Catherine wanted him on his back and as he relaxed from kissing her, she managed to push him off balance and toss the blanket over his head. While he wrestled to free himself of the blanket, Catherine sat on her heels drinking in the sight of him.

"Vincent, you are so big," she whispered.

"Please... Catherine!" He was rather taken aback at her frankness.

"Oh, Vincent. I mean all of you, not just that..." and she quite deliberately squeezed him. Her voice was beguiling as she insisted. "Hold still, will you? Please, let me touch you," and much to his surprise, she released her hold on his manhood and began to stroke down his thighs then, using both hands she caressed his calves before turning her attention to his feet. It seemed it was inspection time as she massaged each foot in turn, missing nothing.

Vincent wasn't too sure what to make of everything that was happening to him, but as her hands travelled unrestrained all over him, he thought he would explode with desire. When at last her hands ceased their exploration of his body, her mouth took over. In her own way, she was testing him and his self-control delighted her. It was so reassuring; she felt his confidence growing and knew in that moment how much he loved her.

Very soon, Vincent was moaning his needs and desires and it was becoming pretty obvious to Catherine he wouldn't stand for much more of her sexual tenderness, however well-intentioned. She moved her body to finally rest beside him and working her fingers up and down the length of him again she said urgently, "I think we had better put this where it belongs, Vincent, before it becomes bigger than both of us!"

To feel her fingers tantalizing him so intimately and to hear what she had just said, Vincent lunged and had Catherine beneath him in the space of seconds. He entered her immediately, his need was so great and his passion fully aroused. Now it was Catherine's turn to be on the receiving end of whatever he had in mind. He was driven by a love that would not be denied, seeking a release that only his beloved Catherine could provide. He purposefully thrust himself repeatedly inside her, filling her almost totally.

Catherine heard herself begging him. "Don't stop, Vincent, please don't stop."

He tightened his hold, possessing her more surely than he ever dared to hope and managed to rasp back. "I don't think I could stop now, my love, you really have pushed me to the limit this time!" His voice trailed away. "I'm flesh and blood too, you know...." With one final thrust he buried himself completely inside her and they climaxed simultaneously.

Catherine was overwhelmed by what had happened and kept repeating. "Stay... inside me... don't go, not yet," and gripped Vincent's buttocks, wanting to prolong this incredible moment.

Vincent was well aware of how much she needed him, because the feeling was entirely mutual. He gathered her to him to hold her tenderly and his words soothed her more quickly than anything else possibly could.

"Shhh, Catherine, my love. I'm not going anywhere. Believe me, there is nowhere I would rather be at this moment than here," and he nudged inside her rhythmically to convince her of what he was saying

so earnestly.

"Vincent!" she gasped, his readiness to make love again was staggering. "Since we became lovers... after everything that has happened... I never expected... you could...."

Vincent smiled. "You still have one or two things to learn about me." He stopped, a little uncertain how to explain. "I did warn you, Catherine, about my sexual appetite. You know already how quickly my body reacts and I confess to you now, my love, that my self-control has amazed me too. However, it doesn't alter the fact that I need very little recovery time. Can you handle such a relationship? Can you? This is one of my '*differences*' you will have to accept, Catherine. I cannot change what I am, however much I might want to."

He wondered how Catherine would respond and, unable to bear the hurt of another rejection." He held her arms tightly and implored her, "No, don't answer now. I want you to think about what we have discussed. In the heat of the moment we might both make statements we are not prepared to live with in the cold light of day. I have waited this long to experience your love and I know what is in my heart. I want you to consider very carefully all the implications of loving me. Will you do this for me?"

Catherine's eyes filled with tears. She saw Vincent was hurting and she knew why. Grabbing two handfuls of his hair, she pulled his face close to kiss him before replying, "Oh, Vincent. Don't you know! I love you so much, a life without you is no life at all. Whatever the future holds for me now, must include you. I repeat what I said to Father just now. Vincent, you are my life and my future."

Vincent wanted to believe. It sounded so simple. Still, he was troubled and it showed.

"You ask if I can handle '*such a relationship.*' Well, there is only one way I will even consider it and that is tunnel style. Yes, lover! You're going to have to marry me. That way, whatever you are, whatever is yours will then be mine exclusively. Does that answer your question?"

Vincent found it difficult to speak but his eyes expressed his joy as he answered. "Catherine, I know you mean what you are saying and it's something I never dared hoped for. Marriage? you would be prepared to enter into marriage when I have so little to offer you?"

She interrupted him at once. "Vincent, you have always taught me that love is more important than anything. Our love is everything. I will never ask for more!"

Vincent was clearly shaken and his voice was filled with wonder. "Oh, Catherine. If you think you can be happy to share what little I have and all that I am, then my life will be complete in a way I never believed possible. Are you really sure?"

Kissing him again, she hugged him and just answered. "I'm sure!"

She felt his breath leave his body as he sighed. "You do realize, Catherine, at this moment, just the physical nearness of you; I would be prepared to believe anything at all! This intimacy gives flight to all rational thoughts, but I love you so for allowing me to know all that is in your heart, to glimpse what might be."

He shook his head as if unable to comprehend his good fortune, repeating, "Marriage? We must give ourselves a little more time before we make any pronouncements. We will sleep on it and talk again in the morning. Will you do this for me, Catherine, please?"

Catherine nodded but told him. "It won't change a thing. Vincent, my mind's set and you know how determined I can be to get what I want!" She could see that he was not prepared to discuss this important issue any further and besides, he had begun moving inside her again.

Her body reacted at once, his penetration was tender and loving and when he managed to disentangle himself from Catherine's wild embrace he whispered, "Whatever happens, whatever you decide, I know your love will guide me, always. I want to believe in our dream, that it is almost reality, because I need you... more than I have ever needed anyone or anything in my life before! I love you,

Catherine, and I always will."

He kissed her parted lips softly and, without any embarrassment, got to his feet to put on his trunks and took Catherine's clothes to her. "Come, we must head back and get ready for the Junior Banquet. How does a hot bath sound to you? Are you interested?"

Cathy was still tingling from Vincent's lovemaking and his ardent declaration of his love for her had completely taken her breath away. He stood before her now, aware of her every emotion, tearing at his senses too, through their bond.

He bent to kiss the top of her head and teased, "I know how much you love me, Catherine! I have never been in any doubts about that, but what do you say to a hot bath as soon as we get back in the tunnels?"

Catherine grinned. "Absolutely terrific, but on one condition!"

Vincent's head jerked on his shoulders. "What?" he demanded. It didn't take two guesses to know what Catherine had in mind!

"That you share it with me, Vincent. I have such a short time to work on you before I give you my answer in the morning. I have to use every weapon at my disposal to convince you that this marriage commitment is right for us. Anyway, I know you have the largest bath Below, Vincent, so you can't deny me, can you?" All the time she had been speaking, she had been dressing herself and looked at him with an impish smile.

Vincent dragged her to her feet and lifted her against him; all his defenses were down, he knew it and so did she. He held her tightly to him. "Catherine, you know only too well, I could never deny you anything! I need to bathe too, so we had better hurry. I fancy bathtime tonight could develop into quite a lengthy affair. Thank heaven there is a bolt on the door!"

Clothed in one of the blankets, Catherine picked up the flask and cups, while Vincent, wearing the towel under his cloak, threw the other blanket over his shoulder.

Without any warning, he lifted Catherine up in his arms and, despite her protests, carried her all the way back to the tunnel world.

They made excellent time back. Vincent had intended that they should. The first stop was the laundry chute where they discarded the towel and blankets. On arriving at the Guest chamber, Catherine discovered that Mary had been there already and all her clothes were laid out in preparation for the evening's activities. This is again so typical of the caring for one another Below and Catherine felt more and more she was one of them. Grabbing her bathrobe and toilet bag, she followed Vincent to find that Mary had been to his chamber too!

Vincent left his cloak on the end of his bed and reached for his robe as well. Stopping only to collect fresh towels they made for the privacy of his bathroom.

As soon as they were inside, Vincent slid the massive bolt into place and ran just enough water. This was something Catherine never had to worry about, but down here there were no calling on their resources and it was clear there would be a lot of excited bathers tonight. She pulled a small container from her bag and sprinkled some of the relaxing salts she loved so much into the water. Vincent hooked their robes on the back of the door and they undressed themselves.

Catherine had been right, the bath was enormous, obviously a relic from someone's dim and distant past. Apparently, it had been Below for years before being brought into use for Vincent in his teen years, another example of Father's sensitivity to his son's growing awareness of his differences, thought Catherine.

The bath was cast iron with huge feet and had two grab rails. Cathy smiled at the room itself and its archaic plumbing system. One thing she had learned about living Below, you never asked why or how things worked, you were just grateful they did!

They had no difficulty lying side by side to enjoy a good old-fashioned soak. The water soothed and relaxed them both. Eventually, they sat up and washed themselves and each other. They realized that time was running out and would have to leave to get ready for the banquet.

A knock at the door startled them both. "Vincent, are you still in the bath? There's no sign of Catherine, do you know where she is?" It was Father, making his rounds as usual. Vincent put his finger to his lips imploring Catherine to keep quiet as he answered.

"Yes to the first question, Father. I'm still in the bath and yes also to your second question. I do know where Catherine is, too. Don't worry yourself. She is Below, bathing herself even as we speak. We will both be ready in time for the Junior Banquet. I promise you."

There was silence for a moment and Catherine stifled a giggle. Vincent clamped his hand over her mouth, he was beginning to wonder if he had been wise to allow her in here in the first place.

She was becoming quite impossible to hold, her body was so slippery. "Can you hear me, Father? Are you still there?" Vincent was trying to keep his voice normal but, as Catherine had now twisted out of his grasp and straddled his hips, he was past caring!

"Yes, I'm still here, Vincent. I know you've had an exhausting day one way and another but, whatever you are doing now, do hurry along my boy, everyone will be waiting. See you very soon, I hope? Perhaps Mary will know where to find Catherine and hurry her along too!"

"Mmmmm," agreed Vincent, hardly daring to look at Catherine, he was longing to laugh out loud at their predicament. "Catherine! You...." He couldn't continue, his nerve ends were stretched to breaking point as she worked herself backwards and forwards over his erection. He was gasping at her audacious attack, lying with his head back and his hands holding the grab rails, his knuckles white. "Catherine, there isn't time, is there?"

Already his needs were betraying him and Catherine played on this so beautifully, her voice crooned, "Oh, I think we can make time, Vincent," and her hand disappeared under the water to pull the plunger and the water started to gurgle away. Before he had time to consider the possibility their passion was being fulfilled but, this time, Catherine was solely in charge.

As she created her own rhythm she reminded him, "I said I would use every weapon at my disposal!" and she manipulated his manhood completely inside her. She leaned forward tenderly to kiss his brow and smooth away the hair that had fallen across his face. He had been throwing his head from side to side in an effort to stop himself from roaring in ecstasy at what she was doing to him. Holding his face still, she continued to kiss him but did not allow her rhythm to alter for a second.

Vincent was beside himself, he had never dreamed Catherine would resort to such measures to bind him even closer to her. Just when he thought he could take no more; she tightened her hold on him and a massive orgasm ripped through his body. Catherine relaxed in triumph and gently collapsed on his chest as she climaxed immediately after him.

He caressed her back and hugged her to him. Catherine was in no hurry to move, the heat from Vincent's body was acting like a drug; still she heard him murmur. "I hate to break this up, my love, but we must leave or we are going to be late arriving at the Banquet," and reluctantly Vincent managed to get them both out of the bath. Wrapping Catherine in a towel he rebuked her softly. "Now I know what you mean about being '*pretty demanding too.*' Oh Catherine, what am I going to do with you?"

He began to rub her back and to Catherine it was reminiscent of how he dried the twins earlier. She opened her towel, moulding herself to her naked Vincent, drying him at the same time. She gazed at him and smiled. "I should have thought that was perfectly obvious, my darling. Marry me, of course!"

He reached for her robe and holding it out for her laughed back, "I'm beginning to believe you might be right at that. Come, let's see if we can get back to our chambers without being caught coming out of here," and he pulled on his robe.

Sliding the bolt silently, he opened the door. Fortunately, the coast was clear and, as they parted at Vincent's chamber, they exchanged a loving kiss. Vincent promised faithfully to join Catherine in the Guest chamber just as soon as he was dressed.

In no time at all, he was ready - largely thanks to Mary who had laid out a Russian-style shirt, rich bronze in colour and warm enough to dispense with his tunic top for once. Wearing his brown cords and red leather thigh boots, he grabbed his cloak and rushed off to join Catherine.

He announced his arrival by asking, "Is it safe for me to enter yet, Catherine?"

She laughed back. "For the moment at least!" As she turned to face him, her breath caught in her throat as she looked him up and down. "Oh, Vincent, you look so...." Words failed her.

Vincent opened his arms because the sight of Catherine's beauty had rendered him incapable of saying anything either. Finally they pulled apart and she smiled, "By the way, you are looking at me now. I take it you approve too?" She was attempting to lighten the atmosphere which was heady with the passion surging through them. Vincent nodded as though he had been struck dumb and finally managed a hoarse whisper.

"Oh yes, Catherine, very much!"

She had chosen one of her velvet gowns. It was the deepest blue, with a plunging neckline front and back. In a more daring moment Vincent had once remarked that he wondered how Catherine knew the back from the front. Catherine, feeling just as frivolous had retorted that if she ever did make a mistake he wouldn't wonder for long! She smiled, perhaps he remembered the incident too, his eyes were focused on her cleavage. But then she realized that he was looking at her crystal pendant nestling between her breasts.

Vincent reached inside his shirt and withdrew a small package which he handed to her.

"Please, wear these tonight, Catherine, for me....and for Mouse, he made them!"

Catherine's eyes sparkled with delight as she unwrapped her surprise gift. She was overcome and her eyes filled with tears as she held a pair of exquisite earrings to match her pendant. "Vincent, they are beautiful!" She was obviously very touched by his love, knowing how much he wanted to share a part of his world with her. "There!" She patted them into place and caught both of hands to lift them to her lips and brushed his fingertips with kisses. "Thank you for such a special gift, Vincent. I will cherish them." She rested her chin on his knuckles. "Oh, I do love you!" and she released his hands so that she could hug him.

Vincent's voice was more steady now as he held her close and he confided, "Actually, there is more, but I have to be absolutely sure before I offer you the rest of this '*special collection*,' my love."

Catherine was intrigued. "What?" she asked.

"Wait and see," he answered and picked her lacy shawl off the bed and began pulling her towards the exit to the Guest chamber. "Come, before we forget all about the Junior Banquet; they would never forgive us!"

They hurried off to join their friends and much to Father's relief they arrived with minutes to spare. The evening followed a similar pattern to Winterfest but with so many of the children present there were a lot more games.

As this was such a special occasion the youngest members of the community had been allowed to stay up until the last game, which was their particular favorite. Father had introduced it many years before; an English one, played in nursery schools-- '*The Farmer in His Den*.'

Everyone formed a circle and as usual, Father was chosen to play the Farmer and every year, Mary blushed as he chose her for his wife. This year Mary and Father chose the twins to be their '*child*' as they could not choose one without the other! Jamie was picked to be the nurse and naturally enough

she called upon Mouse to be the dog. The singing was deafening; Catherine was utterly fascinated. Vincent leaned to whisper in her ear. "I quite forgot to tell you about this, Catherine. My turn is next, they never chose anyone else!"

Catherine could hardly contain herself and when she heard everyone singing, '*The dog wants a bone*,' she started to laugh as Vincent was dragged into the circle. The singing got louder and louder. '*We all pat the bone*,' and suddenly the circle broke and every child pounced on Vincent. There was a lot of '*patting*' going on and inevitably, Vincent gave in to be brought down, jumped on, tickled, kissed and hugged. It was a riot but, eventually, Vincent managed to get to his feet with his two worst tormentors held securely -- Matthew under one arm and Michael under the other.

"Sarah, please," he begged. "Take these little monsters off to bed. They are all in and so shall I be if this is allowed to continue!"

The twins promised to behave and pleaded to be allowed to stay, but when Vincent agreed to go along and read them a story they went off happily with her mother. It was way past the tots' bedtime, but everyone recognized this was a very special day for them.

Vincent stuffed his shirt back inside his cords and as the music began he held out his hand to Catherine. "Shall we?" he invited and they waltzed, both remembering when they had danced together for the first time after Winterfest, imagining the music.

Tonight was so perfect and the mood Below was magical. Stopping to catch their breath and to mingle some more, Vincent suggested that Catherine should try some of William's homemade ginger beer. From a young boy he had loved it and certainly Catherine had never tasted anything quite like it.

Vincent suddenly noticed Sarah beckoning to him and he squeezed Catherine's arm. "This won't take long, Catherine, excuse me while I keep a promise to the twins!"

Catherine leaned forward towards him anticipating his kiss. It was becoming so natural for him to do this more openly. She lifted his hand to her cheek and said softly. "My turn will come."

His eyes danced with mischief. "That's one thing I know I can be sure of!" With a wave, he followed Sarah to say goodnight to two very special little boys.

Father and Mary came to join Catherine. It seemed Peter had decided to return Above and needed a guide back up. Catherine volunteered at once. "Will Peter wait while I scribble a note to Vincent, do you think?" she asked.

"Of course he will!" and Peter hugged her from behind. "I'm not in that big a hurry!"

It didn't take her long to find what she needed and she wrote a hurried note, asking Father to give it to Vincent as soon as he came back from reading to the twins.

Mary exchanged shawls with her. It could be very cold in the tunnels and it was perfectly obvious to her that Peter only needed an excuse to get his beloved God-child to himself for once.

They bid everyone goodnight and set off together with Peter's arm around Catherine's shoulders.

As soon as Vincent returned from reading yet another chapter to the twins of their most favourite story - '*The Water Babies*' - he was painfully aware that Catherine was no longer present, she was making her way Above. He went straight to Father, who could see such disappointment written all over his son's face, his heart went out to him.

"Ah, Vincent, good, you're back. I have a...."

Vincent interrupted him at once, '*he*' was so anxious, he had to know. "What had happened, Father? Why did Catherine leave?"

Father tucked his arm through Vincent's and took him on one side. "Don't worry so much. Nothing has

'happened' as you put it. Peter needed a guide back up, that's all, and Catherine, bless her, volunteered. Here, she left a message for you. Do calm down for all our sakes!"

Father turned away while Vincent unfolded his letter. He noticed at once the change in Vincent's breathing as he read what Catherine had written; obviously he was becoming distressed.

'Vincent,

Taking matters into my own hands. It is the only way; need distance between us. Have decided to go Above, vitally important I speak to Joe. You were right. I must follow my heart too. I know now what I have to do. Try and understand. I just hope you will forgive me. Please don't come after me or wait up. I will come to you. Know that today has been the most precious in my life and I will always love you - until my last breath.

Catherine'

Vincent read the letter several times. What was so urgent that had Catherine rushing Above to Joe Maxwell, and why would it be necessary for him to forgive her? His mind was in turmoil, he knew only too well that Joe saved Catherine, she had even told him as much. Vincent felt as if his world was falling apart, the grim realization beginning to steal over him that maybe, after all, Catherine was unable to live with his 'differences.' His mind, once again cluttered with self-doubts, caused him to shudder and Father was at this side in an instant.

"Vincent, what is it, you seem so troubled. Are you going Above?"

Vincent shook his head sadly. "No, Father. Catherine does not wish for me to do so. I must wait until she returns, whenever that might be. I don't know, she didn't say."

His mouth was suddenly so very dry that he reached behind him for a bottle of William's ginger beer and, in a couple of gulps, it was gone. Still thirsty, he reached for another and as he drained it, he realized the taste was familiar, but it was not ginger beer. He studied the label carefully. 'William's Home Brew.' No wonder the taste was familiar. It was normally only used to put a kick in steaming hot tea to warm the men when they were exposed to long sessions working on the lower tunnels.

He was about to leave when Father stopped him. "Vincent, you are disappointed that Catherine has gone Above, that's very natural. You have both shared something wonderful today."

Vincent broke in quickly. "Please Father, just let me be on my own, all my life I have coped with disappointment," and he waved the letter in the air before pushing it inside the pocket of his cords. He made it quite clear he was not prepared to discuss the matter any further. Turning back to the crate of bottles he swayed slightly, but managed to grab another bottle before he left.

When Father saw the two empty bottles and realized just what Vincent had been drinking, his eyes widened with alarm. "Dear God, help us all!" he muttered as he went to lay on extra sentries. He would have to know immediately if Vincent tried to go Above. When he returned to the Great Hall, it was almost back to normal. Mary and William were putting the huge candelabra back into place on the banqueting table. There was only the crate with the three missing bottles at the back of a side table.

Father called to them both urgently. "Come, I'm going to need your help. You know there wasn't time enough to take that crate of Home Brew back to stores. We all thought it would be safe enough tucked back there? I know William. I know it was a natural mistake for Zach to make. The appearance of the bottles is very similar to the ginger beer."

William was attempting to justify what had happened but Father did not want to listen. "Another mistake has been made, this time by Vincent. He has already consumed two bottles of what at first he thought was ginger beer and has made off with a third bottle! Yes, my friends, trouble is, he is now fully aware of what he is drinking! I've arranged for extra sentries, however, he must not be allowed to go Above under any circumstances. So far, he's been sighted making for his chamber, let us hope he

stays there. Come, we must make sure. Yes Mary, you come with us too, your gentle touch may be just what we need. William can drop the crate off at the stores on the way. Hurry!"

As Peter and Catherine made their way to the basement of her apartment block, he touched her arm. "Let's rest a while. I want to talk to you."

Catherine grinned, she had been expecting as much. "Sounds serious." Her mouth twitched at the corners. "Am I due for some shots? It can't be time for my check-up yet!"

Peter looked at her beautiful face as she turned to hear what he had to say. He was well aware of what was happening between Vincent and Catherine and he knew that nothing would change the course of events taking place. They had been drawn to one another from the moment they met.

He loved them both dearly and rather tentatively asked Catherine. "Are you happy?"

Her answering smile was proof enough. "Happier than a body has any right to be, Peter. If I get my way, I'll be asking you to my wedding! You will stand in for my father, won't you?"

"Oh, Cathy. Of course I will. I shall be delighted and honoured. I'm just sorry Charles never met Vincent. I know he would have understood."

Catherine leaned against the tunnel wall, her eyes filled with unshed tears at a very special memory.

Peter lifted her hand to his lips and asked gently. "Tell me, Cathy."

Her voice was quite steady but, nevertheless, her emotions caused her to hesitate long enough to regain her composure. "Peter, in a strange way, they did meet. The night my father died... we were there... with him. Vincent encouraged me to return, he told me it was not too late. There was so much I had not been able to tell him! Vincent explained our relationship, he told him about himself, about me... everything! I feel sure Dad heard us both that night, Peter, and then later, when I was Below...."

Peter stopped her. "Vincent told me about that too, Catherine." He pulled her into his comforting arms and hugged her close. "I think it was his way of protecting you, telling your doctor what you chose not to! There are so many things that cannot be explained, Catherine. Believe me, I would have understood, but I also respect your reasons for not coming to me. I know what a very painful and difficult time it was for you, and for Vincent too."

She leaned back and squeezed his arms. "Yes it was, but it became a very special and private time for Vincent and me. He was there for me, Peter, every moment." She dropped her head and then looked up again. "I also know how much it meant to have me that close, how it affected him. Later, I was able to help him when Lisa returned and opened old wounds. In a funny way we healed one another. All those years hurting over Lisa, finally they were forgotten."

At last Cathy smiled. "Do you understand why I could never look at another man, Peter? For me, there is only Vincent. I love him so much. I know we can be happy together, we just have to adjust to me being a woman of both worlds." She grinned. "That's how Vincent once described me. It is the only way and I am going to need your help. Trust me, please. I know what I am about to ask you and I just hope you won't let me down. You see, Peter, I have to take the initiative. Vincent can be so very stubborn?"

They both laughed as they resumed their journey to the basement of Catherine's apartment block. They walked quickly as she told him what she wanted him to do. She had already decided to go Above, she was desperate to make contact with Joe Maxwell and to collect all the items she would need if she was to go Below for a couple of weeks.

Peter kissed her goodnight, promising faithfully to do everything she had asked and went off to collect his car. "See you Sunday, Peter - okay?" she called after him.

Peter turned and nodded. "Okay, good. Okay, fine!" His impersonation was not as good as Vincent's, but they laughed anyway. As he waved, Peter called back. "I can see now Vincent doesn't stand a chance," and with another wave he was gone.

Catherine let herself into her apartment and immediately packed a bag with loads of underwear, several sweaters and a couple of pairs of jeans. She then reached into the top of her wardrobe for a flat box, with a plastic carrying handle the most important item of all; her mother's beautiful guipure (*a heavy lace consisting of embroidered motifs*) wedding gown.

Even when she had been engaged to Steven, she never intended to wear it for their wedding. This was a part of her mother she had not been prepared to share with anyone until now. Her life was about to change in a way that took her breath away.

Anxious to return Below, she pulled the box from the wardrobe and tidied around before reaching for the phone to dial Joe's number. His answering service clicked into action and, as soon as Cathy got the signal to speak, she implored. "Hi, Joe. It's me, Cathy! Joe, I know you're there, pick up the phone. I really do need to talk. If you are still working, taking a break, '*PLEASE!*'" As she expected, an acute whistle of the machine being flicked to manual confirmed her suspicions that he had been listening. "Thank, Joe. I'm not interrupting anything, am I?" she asked, realizing that it was getting late.

"Such as?" he countered with boyish mischief. Choosing to ignore his roguish retaliation, she waited for him to speak again. "Hi, Radcliffe, how ya doing? What is it this time? No, don't tell me, let me guess, more leave I bet. You know, Cath, this guy you're hooked on must be something else, huh?"

Catherine's heart was racing. '*Oh Joe, if you only knew!*' "Yeah, yeah, Joe, but for once I'm up to date. I have been working towards some time off. I've earned it, you said so yourself last week. Joe, don't do this to me - please?"

"Okay, okay, no need to twist my arm. You got it, kiddo, two weeks and no more!"

Cathy was breathless. "Thanks, Joe. You'll never know what this means to me!"

He suppressed a laugh. "Oh, I think I can imagine, Cathy. Enjoy yourselves."

Cathy chuckled. "We will."

"Hey, Radcliffe, remember, my office, two weeks!"

"*'YES'*, Joe!" and she hung up the phone.

Collecting her belongings together, she folded Mary's shawl across the top of her bag, she would need this the moment she was back in the tunnels. Not stopping to change, she made her way to the elevator and, for once, saw no one. This made her exit via the basement so much easier. Once she had walked beyond the shaft of light, she wrapped Mary's shawl around her shoulder and set off back to where she knew her hopes and dreams would be realized with Vincent.

Father and Mary waited while William deposited the crate of '*Home Brew*' safely back into stores and then they proceeded to make their way as quickly as they could to Vincent's chamber. Father entered alone while Mary and William went their separate ways. Mary to collect Father's medical bag and William to fetch fresh drinking water and a pitcher of warm water.

Vincent was immediately aware of his father's presence and lifted his head slightly. "I thought I told you I wanted to be on my own, Father! Why can't you leave me alone?" His tone was weary and Father looked at him lying across the width of his bed, still clutching the unopened bottle.

"I should have thought that was perfectly obvious, Vincent. I am here because I care about what happens to you. You are my son and I love you dearly." Father sat beside him and tapped the back of his hand gently. "Give the bottle to me, Vincent, you have had too much already."

Vincent's fingers tightened and he snarled back. "Not nearly enough, Father. I can still remember!"

Father could see how agitated Vincent was becoming and asked him kindly, "Still remember? Has this anything to do with Catherine's note, Vincent? You have been acting very strangely ever since you read it. Oh my dear boy, won't you tell me what it is that troubles you so? This is madness, the worst possible kind. You are drinking to forget and tomorrow you will hate yourself for what you are doing now."

A tortured moan escaped Vincent. "Father, I dared to dream of a future with Catherine. In my determination to make absolutely sure that it was what she truly wanted I insisted we both '*sleep on it*' before we make any binding decisions. Now do you see why I am so utterly miserable? she has gone, Father, doesn't that tell you that obviously my '*differences*' make a life together impossible?"

He slipped his hand inside his pocket and handed her note to him. "It doesn't end there, Father. Catherine has gone rushing Above to Joe Maxwell and I have been picking up all her emotions ever since she left. Happiness and sadness mingled together but then such joy. Father, she has made contact with Maxwell. I can feel it."

Father read Catherine's letter. Everything Vincent had just told him was correct. He felt such anguish for his son and stroking the back of his hand whispered, "You know Catherine would never break a promise to you. She says she will come to you. Vincent, you have to accept that this is what she will do; trust her, you always have!"

Vincent nodded. "Yes, but how do I accept what I fear she will tell me, Father?" He put the bottle to his mouth and deftly removed the cork with his teeth. Before Father could stop him, he took a couple of nips and then closed his hand over the top. He shut his eyes and sighed. As Mary and William returned, he stirred again and asked, "Why are they here?"

Father smoothed Vincent's hair and murmured, "To help you, of course. We thought it would be a good idea if you tried to sleep this off. You cannot rest properly like this, can you?"

Vincent growled. "Don't humour me, Father, please. I'm not a child."

The alcohol was beginning to affect him and he was not nearly so aggressive, but he was not ready to cooperate either, he made that quite obvious.

Father leaned close to his ear and whispered, "Let us help you, Vincent. You are burning up. Whatever would Catherine think if she found you this way. At least retire for the night properly."

By this time, Mary had found one of Vincent's night shirts and had a bowl of water standing by to bathe him. Normally, in times of stress, Vincent had always responded to Mary's tender care but, tonight was the exception, he was just not ready.

"No, Father. Thank you. I prefer to remain as I am. In fact, I was thinking of going Above. Might as well get it over with as quickly as possible."

This was the moment they had all been dreading.

Father nodded to William who quickly spread himself over Vincent's body, praying as he did that he would be able to summon enough strength to combine with his terrific weight in an attempt to exhaust his tormented friend.

As the use began to leave his arms and legs, Vincent wondered for a moment if he was paralyzed. His eyes snapped open as he felt such pressure and his breathing became rather restricted. The '*Home Brew*' was taking hold of Vincent physically but somehow he was still mentally alert.

"William, my dear chap, how nice of you to drop in." He mimicked Father to perfection and it took

every ounce of self-control for Mary and William not to burst out laughing at Vincent's outrageous behaviour. Vincent decided to try and lift William, but was having difficulty. "I see through your little game, William. I wonder who will tire first? God, you're heavy. You weigh a ton!" and promptly belched in William's face.

"Vincent, really!" Father was aghast. "Apologize at once!"

Vincent snorted back. "Sorry, William, but what do you expect if you insist on squashing the life out of me?" He beckoned Father to him and confided. "Did you know, it was Devin who taught me to belch to order when I was quite young? I bet you didn't know that! Actually, I never mastered the art of breaking wind to order...."

Father put his hand over Vincent's mouth and remarked dryly. "Then we must all be thankful for great mercies, Vincent!"

As soon as he was allowed to speak again, Vincent picked it up straight away. "I could start practicing again if you'd like?"

Father could now see that the fight had gone out of him and rebuked his son tenderly. "I don't think that will be necessary, Vincent, thank you. Oh, and for the record, yes, I well remember what the pair of you use to get up to when you shared your chamber. At times, the noise was simply deafening!"

They all laughed and Vincent closed his eyes again as he grumbled good-naturedly. "Get off me, William. There's no need for this, is there?"

William was such a gentle being, this was not his style at all. He looked at Father and then asked, "Vincent, if I let go of you, will you promise to behave yourself; no more talk of going Above?"

"Okay, good. Okay, fine," came the sleepy response and Vincent felt such relief as William released his hold.

William patted Vincent's thighs and answered, "Good, then you won't be needing these," and he removed his boots.

Mary climbed to sit beside Vincent and bathed his face and neck. Turning his head gently to one side, she motioned to Father to pass her Vincent's brush and carefully she began to groom his hair, repeating the process as she turned his face towards her. From a small boy he had enjoyed having his hair brushed, it always relaxed him.

Suddenly, his right arm went around her and he held her tightly. "She's coming back," he groaned. "Father, she's coming back."

Father smiled knowingly, this connection of theirs was amazing. "It's all right, Vincent, calm down. I will walk to meet Catherine. Promise me you will stay here and behave yourself." He looked at William. "Please don't hurt each other."

It was only a short while before Father saw Catherine hurrying towards him. "Father, what is it, you look exhausted. What's happened?"

Father took her bag and they walked more slowly back to Vincent's chamber. "I can see you intend to stay with us for a while this time, Catherine." He lifted her bag to indicate it was rather heavy. "Your note disturbed him greatly. The trouble is, Vincent believes you have given your heart to another."

"What?" gasped Catherine. "Father, please, I must go to him at once."

The old man nodded his head sympathetically. "Come my dear, but be prepared for a bit of a shock too. Mistakingly, Vincent has consumed a couple of bottles of William's hooch. At first he really did think it was ginger beer." Within minutes they were at the entrance to Vincent's chamber and Father caught her hand. "I think it only fair to warn you that, at this moment, Vincent's doesn't know whether he is batting or bowling!"

The sight that greeted her was almost comic. Vincent still held Mary securely in his right arm, while

William was trying unsuccessfully to pry the bottle out of his left hand. Vincent's flailing legs displayed empty-footed socks, that seemed to be waving *'hello'* of their own volition. At the sound of her voice, Vincent relaxed, totally unprepared for her verbal onslaught.

"Vincent! What do you think you are playing at? I turn my back for no more than two hours and return to find you in this state and, even worse, with your arm around another woman! Let Mary go this minute, do you hear me, Vincent?" Her teasing tone struck just the right balance and Vincent released his hold on poor Mary who, as she scrambled from the bed, hugged Catherine and they kissed briefly.

Vincent was now very tired. His mock battle with William had taken its toll of him. He was full of contrition. "Catherine, is that really you?" It was almost a whimper.

She was at his side in an instant. "Yes," she breathed, immediately taking the place Mary had just vacated.

"You came back?" His voice was almost inaudible.

"I said I would, you know I always keep my word. Anyway, you are here, so where else would I want to be?"

Vincent's breathing was uneven and he appeared to be oblivious to those present as he pleaded, "Catherine, I will agree to anything, just as long as I may see you sometimes. Please... don't walk out of my life... I couldn't bear it!" His arm snaked around her to become a band of steel; to have her so near, he dared to hope again.

"Well, first off, you can get rid of that bottle for me, Vincent!"

His eyes narrowed, he was clearly unsure of himself. "So, you are in this too, are you?" and he deliberately took a good gulp.

Catherine slapped the back of his hand, hard and said, "Okay, if you won't give it up, then at least have the good manners to share it!"

Vincent was stunned - he even allowed Catherine to take the bottle from him and, as she lifted it to her mouth, he begged, "Catherine, please don't."

Immediately, William stepped forward to relieve her of the half-empty bottle. Catherine gathered Vincent's hands together and leaned on top of his chest to ask softly. "What's all this about me walking out of your life, my love? I'm trying so hard to become a very important part of your life."

He gazed back at her beautiful face, so close to his and realized that the joy in her heart was for him. "But you went Above... your note said it was vitally important you speak to Joe..." He had difficulty continuing. "You said you must follow your own heart too, you hoped I would forgive you... I thought... Oh Catherine!" Vincent lifted her hand to hold it to the side of his face. "I thought I'd lost you!"

Catherine kissed his hands and sighed. "Oh, Vincent. I told you once before. You could never lose me, we could never lose each other."

He stopped her. "As long as we remember love!" he finished.

"Yes! Vincent, of course I went to speak to Joe. I can't just disappear for two weeks. I can't come and go just as I please in and out of the DA's office. I have to get permission to go on leave, you know!" He held her close, afraid if he let her go, she might disappear. "Oh, Vincent. What am I going to do with you?" she whispered tenderly.

His reply startled everyone as he shouted. "I should have thought that was perfectly obvious, *'MARRY ME,'* of course, my darling."

Catherine giggled at the astonished looks on the faces of Father, Mary and William as Vincent repeated word for word what she had said to him earlier in his bathroom.

Catherine was overjoyed. "You really mean it, Vincent. You will marry me?"

He nodded his head quite vehemently and then winced as he quickly realized he had all the makings of a hangover.

"Well, in view of everything that I have been planning since I left this evening, I'm so glad to hear you have finally come to your senses! For us, it is the only way." She looked into his beautiful eyes and then leaned to kiss him full on the mouth in front of everyone.

Breaking off she pulled a face and prodded him in the chest. "Vincent! You smell awful and taste terrible. Some bridegroom you are going to make on Sunday. Thank goodness we still have Saturday to get you sorted out." Catherine waited for the impact of what she had just said to register.

Father opened his arms to her and Cathy slipped from the bed to be hugged and kissed by William and Mary too. Vincent was content to lie and watch, his heart was so full, he could not speak.

Catherine turned to him again and asked, "Do you forgive me, Vincent?" He looked puzzled. "For leaving you and arranging everything behind your back and, believe me, I have done just that!" He held out his hand and she pleaded, "Now can we please put you to bed, where you belong?"

She moved to stand between his legs and removed his dangling socks. Next, she unbuckled his belt and managed to drag it free to hand it back to Father. Her fingers purposely unfastened Vincent's trousers, she knew all eyes were upon her, but Catherine was quite determined to demonstrate how much she cared for him. She worked steadily and finally pulled Vincent's shirt free.

Vincent sighed. "That feels much easier, Catherine. Thank you." He watched her face intently as she started to unbutton his shirt and began to fidget.

"Try and relax, Vincent, lie still!" Catherine quickly realized that he was finding her intimate attention hard to deal with.

Father stepped forward. "I rather think you are asking the impossible, Catherine. Perhaps I should...."

Vincent was unable to resist the temptation and pulled Catherine on top of him. The atmosphere between these two was electric and Father blinked when he saw Vincent push Catherine's dress completely off both shoulders and heard him tease. "I like this new game, Catherine," and he proceeded to plague her unmercifully as he attempted to undress her at the same time.

Father decided, in view of Vincent's mood, to leave Catherine to handle him. She seemed to know what she was doing.

However, William was less confident and stood ready to help, if needed.

"Vincent! Please, behave yourself." Catherine couldn't help laughing at his audacity because she was so relieved to see that he had recovered sufficiently to become her tormentor again, a role he had enjoyed for most of the afternoon. Vincent was unwilling to listen to anyone and had already begun to nuzzle into her throat. Open-mouthed kisses quickly followed.

"Vincent, please. Father, Mary and William are here....to help."

"Don't need their help, we can manage by ourselves, send them away," he replied cheekily.

"Vincent, that's enough! I cannot do this alone. I need their help." Catherine stroked his hair and he quieted down, recognizing the truth in her words.

Eventually, they managed to get him lying full length on his bed. Catherine ran her hand under his shirt. He was sweating profusely from the exertion of moving him. The very fact that he was bathed in perspiration made the simple task of removing his trousers more difficult, because his underpants were coming away as well. Cathy looked at these grown men making such a performance out of trying to separate Vincent from his pants and, without thinking exploded.

"Oh for goodness sake, this is no time for false modesty. Vincent, the three of you will be at it all

night!"

She took charge and quickly stripped him of his shirt and, with Mary's help got him into his night shirt. Holding his face between her hands, she asked urgently. "Do you think you could stand up in a moment, not for long? We need to remove your trousers."

"I suppose you do," he agreed, knowing how exhausted they all were, trying to lift his back off the bed to achieve what had become impossible. He smiled. "I will try, Catherine, but I do not think I can stand alone."

"You won't have to, my friend. Come, let me help you," and William pulled him into a sitting position, with his legs hanging over the side of the bed, while Father supported him on the other side.

Cathy grinned and then giggled, "Talk about The Three Stooges! Please rest, take five, while I change." Catherine found her bag and quickly pulled out a warm robe, calling over her shoulder, "Close your eyes back there!"

While she stepped out of her dress, Mary held her robe open ready to slip into. She nudged Catherine to look behind her and she discovered Vincent watching every move as she stood in just her underwear. Without a word, he closed his eyes, but his expression spoke volumes!

Mary smiled to herself as she watched these two people who were so much in love they glowed.

Catherine tied her robe and then reached for Mary's hand. "I would like you to attend me on Sunday, Mary. You will, won't you, be my Matron of Honour?"

Mary's face was a picture. "Catherine, I will be delighted, thank you." She blushed, obviously very touched.

Catherine was so excited. "I know you like this dress, Mary, but wait until you see the one in that box! We will hang it in the Guest chamber, once we have put my fiance to bed."

Mary promised to take care of everything and they returned to the task at hand. Catherine touched Vincent's cheek. "Well, I'm ready. How about the three of you?" and they opened their eyes again.

Catherine was glad to be out of her dress. It had become a nuisance, especially as Vincent had found every opportunity to push it off her shoulders. She hoped the sight of her in a bathrobe would convince him she was here to stay and enable him to calm down.

She stood in front of him smiling broadly and said, "Okay, good. Okay, fine. Ready or not, here we go!" and they all laughed, remembering the fun of the afternoon at Giant Falls. "If you can hold Vincent up for just a couple of minutes, I will do the rest, if that's all right with you, Father?" Cathy was sensible enough not to take over too noticeably.

"Whatever you say, Catherine. I shall be happy just to go to my own bed once this madcap son of mine is settled. When you are ready, William!"

Together they had Vincent on his feet and, because of his height and strength, William took the bulk of Vincent's weight. Catherine pulled the night shirt straight and, without hesitation, her hands moved underneath to ease his clothing down his body.

Vincent was in no mood for games and, as he felt her hands begin to undress him, he warned her softly, "Don't you dare... tickle me.... Catherine, please."

"I'll second that, Catherine," bleated Father. "We shall be the first to suffer if you do!"

Cathy's lovely chuckle was infectious. "The thought never entered my head!" but they all heard the gentle slap of her hand on Vincent's bare backside and he stiffened.

"That's the third time today," he groaned. "I'll get even, I won't forget," and Catherine caught the look in his eyes, which made her heart miss a beat.

Her cheeks, suddenly very pink, she continued and felt Vincent relax when he heard her say, "You

can sit him down now." Cathy dropped to her knees and pulled the trousers, complete with underpants, off in one go.

"Catherine, you are a marvel. Thank you, my dear." Father's warm approval of her actions was so very typical of this wonderful man. Father and William kept Vincent in a sitting position, all three now showing signs of fatigue as they rested together on the bed.

Catherine moved to stand in front of Vincent again and, for once, was able to kiss the top of his head. She reached to stroke Father's cheek, he seemed surprised by her unexpected gesture.

"Yes, Catherine. I am tired too. Is there something?"

Catherine flushed slightly, he was so perceptive. "Yes, Father. Before you leave us, there is something I must ask you."

He sat with his arm through Vincent's, looking at this beautiful young woman, who had come to mean so much to him too. "Anything, anything at all, Catherine, you only have to ask."

She looked first at Vincent and then at Father as she took Father's hand in hers. "I know our marriage can never be legal, Father, but it can be official down here, where it really matters. It would mean so much to me and to Vincent too, if you would perform the ceremony on Sunday, please say you will. I know it is unusual, but then so is everything else about my new life."

Mary beamed her approval, William nodded to Father and Vincent pulled Catherine to sit on his lap, as he whispered, "Please, Father. Just this once, for us?"

Vincent was obviously moved by Catherine's sensitive display of affection for his father and he leaned to kiss her forehead.

This was a request that Father had not expected and he was very touched. He nodded as he answered, "I can't think of anything that could possibly give me as much pleasure. Of course I will!"

Catherine left Vincent's lap and went to kiss Father and helped him to his feet. He took Vincent's face in his hands and kissed his brow.

"Will you be all right now, my son?" he asked, prepared to stay if he was needed.

Vincent squeezed his arm and said, "There is a room very close by that has two things of which I am in dire need. A lavatory and a shower! If William will be my good right arm, I'm pretty sure I can stretch my legs that far."

Father smiled at William. "Can you manage that son of mine?"

William wasted no time in proving he was more than willing to give Vincent all the help he wanted. He collected his bathrobe and promised to make sure he was safely tucked up in bed before leaving him.

Father patted him on his back and responded, "Good. I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm all in...."

Vincent had taken hold of his hand. "Father," he turned to address all of them. "I just want to apologize for what has happened but, for what it's worth, if it had to be anyone who witnessed my drunkenness, I'm thankful it was you. I have never felt so helpless or foolish before. Will you all forgive me?"

William was the first and assured him at once. "It isn't as though it was intentional, Vincent. I know you believed you were drinking ginger beer. Let's not speak of it again. Isn't it time for you to stretch your legs? Come, I'm ready."

Once he was on his feet again, Vincent hugged each one of them and, with his arm held firmly around William's broad back, he joked. "Ready or not, here I go." As he left, he called back to Catherine. "There will be trouble if you are not waiting for me when I return!"

Catherine shook her head at Father. "Don't worry, I'll see he rests. I'm just relieved that we have

managed to achieve so much. We will see you tomorrow and finalize all the arrangements for Sunday."

Mary put her arm around Catherine and whispered, "It's already tomorrow, Cathy, but let's go and have a look at your wedding dress. I'm longing to see it."

The three of them walked back and bid goodnight to Father before continuing their way to the Guest chamber. They carefully lifted the gown free of the layers of tissue paper and Catherine's eyes sparkled as she fingered the lace.

"Isn't it beautiful, Mary? It was my mother's, this is another one of the reasons for returning Above. I wanted to wear this for Vincent."

Mary slipped her arm around her waist. "Oh my dear, you are going to take his breath away with your beauty. I'm so happy for you both, you know that, don't you."

Catherine smiled. "Why do you think I want you for my Matron of Honour, Mary? It has to be someone special and you have always been there for both of us. We love you too, very much."

Mary turned Catherine around and pointed her towards the doorway, smacking her bottom gently. "Be off with you! Go and make sure our bridegroom is behaving himself." She was overcome by the events of the day and would not be sorry to go to bed now, herself. "Sleep tight, Cathy," and Catherine dashed off back to Vincent's chamber.

As she watched Catherine rush away, Mary sat down on the bed and allowed herself to shed tears of joy for Vincent. Memories came flooding back of his teenage years, when she had first moved Below. All the shared times, so many happy ones and then the misery that followed his first experience of love. Father had enlisted her help and between them they brought Vincent back from the depths of his despair at losing Lisa, as a tender dream was shattered. The three of them became very close and had remained devoted to each other ever since, trusting and caring in a very special way. For Vincent, they had been his salvation, he realized without them his life would have been very different.

Mary dried her eyes and went to collect a clean sheet from the laundry room. Carefully she used it to protect and conceal Catherine's wedding dress. She lifted it from the bed to hang on the outside of the wardrobe. Mary had willingly become an fellow conspirator, she did not intend that anyone should see Catherine's dress until the big day. Nothing must be allowed to spoil the surprise for the rest of the community.

Finally, she left the Guest chamber and returned to her own. She undressed quickly for bed and slipped away to the nearest bathroom. Upon her return she took down her hair and brushed it before drawing it over her left shoulder and fashioning it into a loose plait. As she climbed into bed, she found herself thinking of Jacob. He had looked so very tired when she and Cathy had wished him goodnight. Perhaps tonight he would be able to sleep right through and not embark on his usual early morning walkabout, checking on everyone, including her!

With thought of how much she loved him. running through her mind, she drifted off to sleep, her face bathed in a beautiful smile.

As soon as Father entered the chamber, he was aware that Mary had been there ahead of him! His night clothes were laid out and fresh water was already on his bedside cupboard. He never failed to be touched by her sensitivity towards him, no wonder he loved her.

He was soon into his bed, the events and happenings of the days had rapidly overtaken him. He was exhausted but, as he looked around his chamber, he thought of Mary; all the little touches that

demonstrated her love for him. As he closed his eyes he found himself thinking more and more of her; her tenderness towards Vincent always served to strengthen their relationship. What a day it had been to be sure and, as he yawned, he fell asleep as soon as his head touched the pillow.

Vincent and William arrived at the bathroom without too much difficulty. True, William was puffing a bit, but so was Vincent. It had been rather an effort for both of them. Once inside, William removed Vincent's bathrobe - which Catherine had managed to slip on him - sideways, by tying the sleeves together and making it into a cloak.

Vincent made straight for the lavatory cubicle and, when he reappeared, he grinned at William. "I needed that, my friend!"

With William's help he then walked into the shower alcove and closed the makeshift half-door behind him. By this time his night shirt was ringing wet from the exertions of making it to the bathroom. In the privacy of the alcove, Vincent dragged the garment over his head and dropped it on the floor outside. He reached to turn on the water and gasped when it hit his body, it was so cold.

For a few minutes, Vincent supported himself against the wall and allowed the water to cascade all over him until he felt confident enough to use one hand to soap his body while he continued to support himself with the other against the wall.

William looked at Vincent, now standing almost upright and asked, "Are you okay? Please tell me if you need help."

Vincent turned, closed his eyes and, as he shook his head, he smiled, "I am fine, really." He gathered his hair together to lift it out of the way of the torrent of water now beating against his shoulders and down his back.

At last he was finished and immediately shut off the water. He reached for the towel William offered and dried himself.

Knowing that Vincent was just as sensitive about his body, William suggested that he stand with his back to him while they put on his bathrobe. This was soon accomplished and Vincent gave him a pat on the back as he murmured, "Thank you, William... For your help and also for your understanding." He chuckled softly. "You have certainly seen some sides of me today. At least *'you'* did not slap my bare backside!"

The two men shared a light-hearted moment and then began their journey back to Vincent's chamber. This time, Vincent was walking much straighter, but still needed to lean on William. He was not yet ready to walk alone.

When Catherine heard their voices, she went to meet them and walked the last few yards with her arm around Vincent's waist. The moment they were inside his chamber, Vincent asked William to move his big chair close to the bed and then settled himself comfortably. "I would prefer to sit for a while, William. I promise you I will be perfectly all right. Please don't worry yourself about me."

William nodded and making sure there was nothing else he could do for either of them said, "Goodnight," and turned to leave.

Catherine was at his side instantly and grabbed his arm. "William... what can I say... Thank you seems so inadequate. You have been a true friend. I am very grateful." She kissed his cheek and squeezed his arm.

Somewhat hesitantly, he put a hand on Catherine's shoulder and answered. "Vincent is Vincent! To survive we look out for one another. When I remember all that he has done for us... no thanks are

necessary, Catherine." He held out his hands to Vincent, who gripped them tightly as they both said, "Sleep well, my friend."

Catherine walked with William to the chamber exit and realized, yet again, that love would always prevail as the most precious ingredient in life to this special community.

As Catherine returned, Vincent leaned forward and opened his arms. Smiling, she went into his gentle embrace and, standing between his legs, cradled his head on her chest, holding him tenderly while she kissed his hair.

He leaned back to look at her and whispered, "You'll stay with me tonight, Catherine?"

"Oh, Vincent. I thought I agreed to spend the night Below hours ago!" She held him even closer. "It was after you kissed me for the first time, really kissed me. Don't you remember?"

He nodded and then leaned back in his chair to look at her now, obviously waiting for some kind of response. "Catherine, I had not forgotten but, if you remember, then I was sober. After what you said a short while ago about me and I quote, '*You smell awful and taste terrible*,' I just thought that, perhaps, you might prefer to return to the Guest chamber. I could hardly blame you!" He suddenly looked so vulnerable that Catherine knew in that moment how much he really cared about her.

She grinned. "Well, let me check you out then." She moved to sit on his outstretched thigh and began to sniff into his body. Moving much closer, she opened the top of his robe and sniffed repeatedly into his neck. Vincent was highly amused by her actions and allowed her to continue her close inspection.

Catherine sighed dreamily. "So far so good," she whispered and the open-mouthed kisses along his jaw line were accompanied by the feel of her tongue, tasting him.

Vincent began to fidget again. His arms tightened around her and as her lips brushed his mouth, Catherine implored, "Hold still while I kiss you, I'm nearly finished!" She kissed him thoroughly, enjoying the novelty of being able to take the initiative. She sensed that Vincent was having enough problems with his own reactions. Her tongue teased his as she ended this tender exploration of his mouth. Slowly she trailed kisses down into his neck and began to inhale deeply of the musky warmth that was Vincent.

He could stand the silence no longer and begged, "Catherine, enough! Either I pass muster or I don't!"

Catherine laughed and with one more kiss, this time on the end of his nose, asked, "Vincent, exactly how drunk are you?"

He stared in amazement. "Catherine, this is the first time. I cannot draw on any other experience. I know I feel very tired and my legs seem unwilling to support me. Mostly I know how foolish I have been." He waited again for Catherine to speak.

"Seems to me it is high time that I kept my promise to Father." As Vincent's eyes asked the unspoken question, Catherine stroked his hair and murmured. "That you rest."

He smiled knowingly. "Father's answer to almost everything; but this time he is right."

Catherine moved to leave the circle of Vincent's arms and immediately he held her back.

"Catherine, no, wait! Please don't go, not yet. Open your robe for me, please?" This time he allowed her to stand free while she untied her robe and a blush coloured her cheeks.

"What is it, Vincent?"

"I need you close, my love," and he pushed the robe aside to hold her intimately, inhaling the intoxicating fragrance that was Catherine.

She chuckled softly. "Oh, Vincent. I am so glad we made love this afternoon and didn't '*save ourselves*' until tonight. It could have been one of the most frustrating experiences of my life to share

your bed, but not your body!" She felt a change come over him as he turned his head to begin nuzzling into her neck. Protesting softly, she scolded him tenderly. "Vincent, this is just not fair. Can't you feel how much I want you, now, when I know it is impossible?"

He stopped his intimate attentions and rose from the chair with Catherine held in one arm. His eyes were smouldering with desire as he teased back. "Says who? Open my robe, Catherine."

"What?" she stammered.

"Open my robe, Catherine, and you will see that, drunk or sober, it makes no difference!"

With trembling fingers, Catherine opened Vincent's robe to see that, as always, he was speaking the truth. "Just another one of your differences, I suppose, Vincent?" Catherine's heart was pounding as she joked back at him, her cheeks burning.

"Catherine, are you sure you know what you are taking on? I tried to warn you!" Vincent began to feel a trifle uneasy but, when Catherine opened his robe again and slipped inside, he knew, as she embraced him, that there were no more doubts.

Her urgent repeating of his name, followed by "I love you," was all it took for him to slip her robe completely off her shoulders. Standing before him now, wearing a midnight blue teddy, her smile was beguiling.

Holding her hand, Vincent moved towards the bed, but Catherine stopped him. "Vincent, wait."

Standing on tiptoe, she managed to ease his robe off his massive shoulders and placed it on the foot of the bed. When she turned back, he was sitting on the edge of the bed holding out his arms to her. As soon as he held her close, the tone of his voice melted her heart. "You are everything to me, Catherine. I love you with all that I am." His fingers slipped under the straps of the teddy and in minutes it was a dark pool at Catherine's feet.

Vincent lifted her into his lap, the heat from his body still amazed her. Wrapping her arms around him, she asked, "Is your body always like this, Vincent?"

His eyes twinkled. "Are you referring to my body temperature or arousal?" Clearly he was delighted by Catherine's total acceptance of him. Her answering smile was what he needed to see and the insistent way she was pressing her naked body against his excited him wildly. He choked on her name. "Catherine... Please, I need you so. If only to convince myself that the love we have already shared was not just another dream."

Vincent lifted his legs into bed with Catherine held very firmly in his arms. In seconds he was making love, expressing himself very beautifully, touching Catherine in ways she had only dreamed about. Moments later they lay together, kissing, stroking each other's faces, blissfully content.

"Catherine?" Vincent whispered.

"What?" she whispered back.

"Are you all right? I got a bit carried away just then, didn't I?" His tone was so anxious and at once, she hugged him.

"You did, didn't you?" Vincent sighed but Catherine put her fingers under his jaw to raise his face and kissed him. "You didn't hurt me, Vincent. It was wonderful, that's what this is all about, isn't it?"

He nodded. "It must be William's *'Home Brew.'* I know I let go completely, Catherine, just for a moment I forgot who I am!" He buried his face against the cloud of her hair lying all over his pillow.

"Then I shall have to remind you to forget yourself more often, my love!"

Vincent could hardly believe his ears and lifted his face to gaze at Catherine, her beautiful smile teasing him as she grabbed his hair roughly and pulled him close.

"Tell me how you feel now, Vincent. I need to know!"

Holding her against him, he sighed deeply. "Catherine, there are no words to describe how I feel when we make love. I only know that the more I love you, the more I want to, if that is any sort of answer! Will it always be like this for us?"

Catherine stretched seductively down the length of his body and murmured, "It had better be, or you'll have some explaining to do!" She continued to move against his body, her arm snaking across the broad expanse of his chest. She turned into his shoulder and began to nibble the lobe of his ear.

Vincent's hold tightened. "Catherine!" It was almost a gentle warning.

"Yes?" she answered, stopping her nibbling just long enough for him to realize what she intended. Her hot breath on his neck and the feel of her tongue pushing behind his ear aroused him again. Catherine was well aware of what she was doing and breathed erotically. "Love me again, Vincent, and then I promise to go to sleep!"

Vincent tried to control himself but he felt such joy and happiness, it produced an unexpected roar. As he gathered Catherine into an intimate embrace to begin his lovemaking, she squealed with delight as he tightened his grip and growled menacingly. Between giggles, she growled back, much to his amusement.

"You're really not afraid of me, are you?" he asked, realizing Catherine had called his bluff.

She was too busy squirming her way underneath him to care; the way he was holding her, ready to receive him was all she could cope with as she relaxed, totally spellbound by the look in his eyes.

"You really do promise we shall sleep if I love you?" he teased, holding back deliberately and driving Catherine wild with anticipation.

"I promise," she gasped. Her breath had quickened with excitement. "Vincent, you must know, at this moment, I would agree to do anything. I want you so much!"

Vincent eased himself further down the bed so that it was impossible for her hands to reach their intended goal. He smiled wickedly. "Anything? You can't mean it, Catherine!"

"I do mean it, Vincent. I've told you before. I would do anything for you!" She was unable to see his expression as he had dropped his head to kiss her shoulder. It was only when he lifted his head to kiss the end of her nose she recognized the devilment dancing like wild fire in his darkening eyes. "Vincent?" she asked uncertainly.

"You said it, Catherine... *'ANYTHING!'* So I have decided I should now check you out, it's only fair. Besides, you owe me, remember? I said I would not forget those slaps to my backside!" He tightened his hold on her and he began to sniff into her neck and throat, mimicking her previous actions.

Cathy laughed to find that he could turn the tables so quickly to his own advantage. Her arms encircled his shoulders and then she stroked his hair. His open-mouthed kisses along her jaw line and the feel of his tongue, as he tasted her soon had her moaning his name. He stopped at the sound of her voice. He wasn't sure how much longer he could hold out. Perhaps this had not been such a good idea after all.

All his adult years he had lived for others, never expecting that his life would ever hold the promise it did now. Over the past few months, he had been struggling desperately against his sexual desires and a physical relationship with Catherine. He loved her far too much to risk loving her. His dreams of loving the only woman he had ever wanted sexually had come true in ways that made his heart rejoice. Just to see her, hear her voice, to know that she loved and accepted him really had been enough, until today. How he had yearned and ached for her and now here she was with him, holding nothing back. His excitement mounting almost as fast as his desire, he repeated after her, "Yes, Vincent!" and his hands explored her body very intimately, with the growing knowledge that, at last, they could be truly together.

Vincent smiled down at Catherine as he relaxed his hold on her and kissed his way back to her

mouth. He felt her hands touching him, urging him to make love. Slowly he positioned himself and entered her without hesitation. It was what they both wanted more than anything, to share their love physically. Without even realizing, love itself had crept into their lives, making demands that had to be fulfilled, there could be no escape.

Through their bond, Vincent knew exactly what Catherine wanted now and his lovemaking became so powerful, another roar escaped him. At once, by sheer instinct, Catherine roared back, "Yes, Vincent!" Her cries of pleasure toppled him and his body shook uncontrollably as he climaxed.

He moved onto his side and gathered Catherine to him. Between them they managed to pull the covers back over their bodies. Catherine caressed him and, as her hands trailed over his buttocks she asked, "Have I made reparation for taking such liberties with your beautiful backside, Vincent?"

He kissed her very slowly and answered, "Oh yes, Catherine but, if that is to be my reward, then you have my permission to slap me every day of my life!"

They laughed together and continued to mould themselves into a position to finally share their dreams.

The chamber was now bathed in a mellow light from one huge candle, all the others had burnt away. As Vincent closed his eyes he heard Catherine's tender, "I love you so much," and his heart swelled with happiness as he responded.

"I know, but now you know how much I love you. Sleep well." He kissed her softly, his voice full of tenderness. "Sweet dreams my angel, but if you wake first, promise to kiss me awake. I have dreamed of that!"

Catherine sighed back. "Me too!" Her eyes closed as sleep claimed them both.

For most of his life, Vincent had slept in the chamber next to the one occupied by Father. It had been agreed when Vincent had been first brought to Father that as a doctor, he was the only person who could take care of him. The bond that formed between them was almost as remarkable as the one shared by Vincent and Catherine. The love and respect for each other was instantly recognizable, so it came as no surprise to the community that Father should choose to raise Vincent as his son.

Over the years that followed, Father learned to distinguish between troubled dreams and nightmares - Vincent was renowned for both. As a consequence, Father became a very light sleeper, always ready to respond to any distress signals from his beloved son.

Vincent's sudden roar alerted Father at once, but tonight was different. Catherine was with him. He smiled as he lay back again and realized that the time had come to share this responsibility. He also knew that Catherine fully intended to live the greater part of her life Below. It felt so right and, deep in his heart, he was glad that Vincent would not need to go Above and place himself in constant danger.

Father pursed his lips as the sounds of what was taking place in Vincent's bed continued to invade his chamber as well. His eyes travelled around his chamber as he tried unsuccessfully to ignore what was happening next door and, inevitably his own thoughts turned to Mary. Perhaps it might be possible for them to enjoy a deeper and more meaningful relationship.

Realizing that sleep would be denied him and, making a mental note that he would have to speak to Cullen about a door for Vincent's chamber, Father pulled on his huge dressing gown. He soon found his boots and decided he might as well start his early morning walk.

He rarely encountered anyone, only sentries, who were quite used to him and his habit of checking the Nursery, the Hospital chamber and his last call was always on Mary.

He never suspected that Mary knew of his early morning checks and as he entered her chamber and moved silently toward the bed, her eyes opened.

"Jacob?"

"Yes, it is! I am sorry, my dear. I did not mean to disturb you."

Mary sat up and leaned on her elbow. "You didn't. I was awake, wondering if you would come."

For once, Father was at a loss for words. Mary smiled at him.

"Don't look so concerned, you never disturb me, but I have come to expect you, that's all. I had hoped that, perhaps tonight, you might manage to sleep through. You looked so tired when we wished each other good night."

Father moved closer and pointed to the bed with his stick. "Would you mind if I rested for a minute, Mary?" and as she nodded, he sat down on her bed.

She put her hand on Father's. "Is your hip troubling you again? Is that why you couldn't sleep?"

Father's eyes widened, wondering how best to explain why he had been disturbed. "No, Mary. I'm fine, really. Shall we just say that Vincent and Catherine were enjoying each other's company and got a bit carried away. I really will have to speak to Cullen about fitting a door to Vincent's chamber." He watched Mary's reaction very closely, he had no wish to embarrass her, but what he had told her was the truth.

Her cheeks coloured as she replied, "Quite a turn of events for Vincent and Catherine, my dear. I can't tell you what a joy it is to share their happiness with you, Jacob."

Encouraged by her words, he took her hand and kissed it. "Mary, you have been so patient with me over the years, the consequences of this union will affect both of us too." Mary's heart started to flutter like a bird being held against its will.

Father placed her hand over his heart and sighed, "I wonder if your heart is beating as rapidly as mine. I feel like an adolescent again!"

Shyly, Mary now placed his hand over her heart and Father soon realized that her feelings were just as strong. "You have always known how much I love you, Mary, haven't you?" She suddenly looked so vulnerable, his heart went out to her as he continued. "There was always Vincent, my dear, he needed us more. For us to be together would have only emphasized his aloneness. I never wanted that to happen. Mary, do you understand what I am trying to say?" He took her into his arms to hold her protectively. "Mary, my love, there is now time for us. It's not too late, is it? I suppose, in my usual way, I'm going much too fast, but you must realize that now there is a chance for us to share our lives. I have to ask!"

Her confidence growing, Mary snuggled into his arms. "What exactly are you asking, Jacob?"

He leaned back to look at Mary, her face for once, wearing a mischievous grin. "What I have wanted to ask for a very long time. I would consider it a very great honour if you would agree to become my wife. Please say yes!"

As he finished speaking, Father kissed Mary's forehead and she answered breathlessly, "Yes, Jacob. Because I love you and I have wanted to be your wife for so long."

This time their lips met and they shared a beautifully tender kiss while they embraced each other. Father hugged Mary to him. "I have an idea, Mary. I will send word to the Master and ask him to come with Lin and Henry on Sunday. How does a double wedding sound to you, my dear?"

Mary didn't even need to think about it and agreed instantly. "I'd like that very much. Do you think we might be married first? Can we keep our marriage a secret until the day, it would be such fun, Jacob, to surprise everyone!"

Father could see how much this meant to her and he was delighted to realize that everything was coming together. Just as he had hoped it would. "Yes, to both those questions, Mary. Actually, I rather like the idea of surprising everyone too, especially our son."

Mary thought her heart would burst with happiness. 'Our' son; it almost took her breath away.

Father leaned forward and loosened Mary's plait and running his fingers through the length of her hair, he whispered, "I've wanted to say that for a very long time too!"

They kissed each other again and the promise it held produced an ardent, "I love you," from Mary.

An enormous grin spread across Father's face. "Then I am indeed the most fortunate of men. To have you return my love... means everything." He found his stick and rose to leave. "We will meet later for breakfast, there is much to discuss. Try and rest for a while we have a very big day ahead of us on Sunday. Remember, we are only planning Vincent and Catherine's wedding, the rest is our secret!"

Mary settled herself under the covers again, although she knew there was no way she would sleep. Her mind was too full of wonderful, happy thoughts. Father turned and blew her a kiss as she called after him. "See you for breakfast." He nodded and began the walk back to his chamber.

As soon as he entered he was thankful to note that all was quiet again next door. He pulled off his boots and removed his dressing gown. Father felt he really should try and catch up on a little more sleep and decided to climb back into bed. As he lay down he found himself praying that Vincent would not be plagued by any more nightmares. Now that he and Catherine were able to share a physical relationship, as man and wife, living Below, this should help to ease Vincent's acute anxiety concerning her safety working Above. It was because of what had happened a few months before that Catherine had been relieved of the more dangerous assignments.

Joe Maxwell had recognized, finally, that Catherine had been placed in great danger once too often. To have one of his staff threatened so violently had made him take a long hard look at how his department was operating. Catherine had tried to reason with him but, in the end, accepted that some of the work she had been doing was, as Joe put it bluntly, *'No job for a woman!'*

It was only Catherine who knew why she had survived so many ugly experiences. Vincent had always managed to protect her. This had been the root cause of so many bad dreams. Vincent feared that one day he would not be able to reach her in time. He felt he was living a nightmare and only sheer exhaustion claimed him. He fought sleep because he knew he would only be tormented, not knowing what to believe when he awakened.

Vincent's breakdown followed the death of Paracelsus. Father sighed angrily at the terrible memories that surfaced once more in his mind. Vincent had been deeply affected by the fact that he had killed again. Paracelsus told Vincent cruel and wicked lies about his birth and had goaded him quite deliberately. The very delicate balance that was Vincent had finally snapped, the spirit of this wonderful, sensitive being had been broken. He had struggled helplessly for several days and then made a desperate bid to be with Catherine.

The frustration of finding her apartment empty, caused him to collapse, which was how Catherine found him. The following three days and nights had been spent Above; Catherine had never left him. Peter Alcott had done everything possible and, as soon as he was able, Vincent returned Below.

None of them knew what would happen, Vincent still had a long recovery ahead of him. Catherine had made him promise that *'Whatever comes,'* he would share it with her. When he reached his lowest ebb, after asking Father to send for Catherine, sadly Vincent disappeared down in the deepest caves.

Father could still remember the sound of Vincent's agonized voice, he was so tormented and the roaring had been awesome. Quite unafraid, Catherine had followed Vincent into the cave, her words haunting him still. "Father, he is my life!" Everyone knew that she was the only one who could

approach Vincent, their connection was truly remarkable.

Eventually, they had been able to move Vincent back to his own chamber, where he had slept for several days. Catherine insisted on nursing him, making sure she got plenty of fluids into him, but Father had taken care of his more personal needs. It was certainly the worst time in Vincent's life. His dreams had been so real they became a nightmare, which absolutely terrified him.

The nightmares began with Catherine being abducted and when Vincent finally found her, she had collapsed in his arms and died. It seemed it did not end there, because before she '*died*' she told him that they had loved, there was a child and he was '*beautiful*.'

Father well remembered all the changes that took place whilst they nursed Vincent. He could see him grieving and recognized all the tell-tale dream symptoms instinctively. Afterwards, when Vincent regained consciousness and they were able to discuss his nightmare properly, he realized that the breakthrough had occurred once the child had been rescued and was safe. Vincent's condition improved and shortly after that they were greatly relieved when he was able to wake up again and begin to cope with reality. He had been so weak that the nightmare almost destroyed him. When he did finally manage to wake up, mercifully Catherine was at his side. He had never needed her more than at that moment.

Father had been somewhat surprised to see Catherine kiss Vincent on his mouth, she seemed to be breathing life into him. He smiled as he remembered the conversation with Vincent later.

Vincent openly admitted that Catherine had kissed him before on three different occasions. The first time had been when he was trying to wake up after his nightmare of losing Catherine, when he had glimpsed what life might have been like for those Below, had he died as a child. Father deeply regretted the harsh words he and Vincent exchanged over his intention to visit her special place but, in the end Vincent had stayed. Vincent blamed himself entirely for disappointing Catherine when, at the very last moment, he had told her that to go away together had been '*a beautiful, impossible dream and one they dared not have*.'

Their love for one another helped them but Vincent hated himself for making Catherine so unhappy. The ensuing dream had in a strange way helped him recover from hurting her. The second time she kissed him was when she returned Above after the death of her father. She had needed him so desperately and he had helped her to find herself again. The third kiss, it seemed, was just as much a life-saver as the others. Catherine had narrowly escaped death when Vincent rescued her from drowning in the trunk of the car after her kidnapper pushed it into the lake. They had both been badly frightened by this brush with death.

Later the same evening when Vincent appeared on her balcony, Catherine had rushed into his arms and her kiss then soothed both of them.

During their discussions Father commented that he had noticed Vincent did not respond to Catherine's kiss when he awakened. Vincent explained that as '*HE*' had never kissed anyone on the mouth before, and in view of what had happened with Lisa, he dared not even try. He feared he could spoil what he and Catherine already shared. He declared his love and devotion for her and vowed he would never endanger their bond, he loved her more than life itself.

At the time, this poignant revelation only served to heighten Father's awareness of the rare and beautifully sensitive quality of the fragile relationship that existed between Vincent and Catherine. During the days that followed, the two of them spent every waking moment together. They went for gentle walks, listened to the concerts in the park and read to one another. It had caused some amusement when Catherine first asked to borrow a sleeping bag so that she could '*camp*' in Vincent's chamber. She would not be separated from him, or he from her. If it was possible, they became even closer and their bond, stronger than ever.

As Father recalled all these memories it also helped to remind him that Catherine had become a very special part of Vincent's life. Her love had helped to heal him and gradually Vincent regained his

strength and his health returned to normal.

Father adjusted his pillow and pulled the covers up around the back of his neck as he finally emptied his mind in an attempt to capture a little more sleep. As he felt himself drifting into that happy state of not being awake or asleep either, he offered up a silent prayer for the well-being of the entire community, they were such very special people. Father sighed dreamily as he thought of Mary and the surprise they were planning for everyone on Sunday. There had never been a double wedding before, what an occasion this promised to be.

Relaxing totally, Father slipped into a contented sleep.

As soon as Catherine opened her eyes, she could tell by one glance that Vincent appeared to be sleeping soundly. It had been her intention to keep her promise and kiss him awake, but her natural instinct was to allow him to sleep undisturbed. It was very obvious from the look of pure contentment on his face he was enjoying a totally abandoned and peaceful sleep. Both his arms were flung above his head and his face was turned towards her.

It took all her willpower not to kiss him and Catherine decided the only way to cope with her emotions was to go as quickly as possible and take a very cold shower.

Making sure that Vincent was still sleeping, Catherine managed to slip unnoticed from his bed. She picked up her bathrobe, put on her sneakers and then gathered together the items of her clothing scattered about the floor. After she tied her robe together, she pulled an enormous red sweater and a pair of jeans out of her bag ready for when she returned. With one last check on Vincent, she ran quickly to his bathroom to take the shower she desperately needed!

As she returned, she bumped into Father who was just leaving to join Mary for breakfast. He put his arm around her shoulders as they walked to the entrance to Vincent's chamber. Catherine put her finger to her lips as she whispered, "Sleep seems more important than food right now. Vincent is sleeping like a baby, in there!"

Father kissed her forehead and smiled. "Quite so, my dear. I can see he is in excellent hands. Catherine, you look a picture of health this morning."

She blushed. "Thank you, Father, but since I forgot to take a towel with me, I am rather a damp one! I must get myself properly dry, see you and Mary later."

With a quick hug and kiss she disappeared into the privacy of Vincent's chamber. After a quick rub down with one of Vincent's towels, she pulled her sweater over her head and began to feel warmer almost immediately. She dried her feet and was about to pull on some warm socks when she heard Vincent whisper her name and turned to find him about to wake up. She climbed back onto the bed and lay down on her tummy beside him.

His eyes flickered and he did seem surprised to see Catherine leaning on his chest. Remembering her promise, she began to rain kisses on his face, finally concentrating on his mouth.

Vincent opened his eyes again briefly and a very contented rumble came from deep within him. Catherine continued to kiss him and slowly he started to respond. She leaned into his neck and then reached to playfully bite his chin.

Her hands caressed his upper arms as she whispered, "Come on, sleepy head. Wake up!"

Vincent opened his eyes, looked around him and then stared rather pointedly at her. "I think I have been dreaming again, Catherine," he stammered.

"Are you okay, Vincent?" she asked anxiously.

"Mmmmm....oh yes!" He breathed a sleepy response.

"Vincent! Are you going to share your dream?" Catherine was curious.

He opened his eyes to look at her but then closed them again as he answered, "Oh Catherine, I really don't think I could!"

"Why?" was all she said.

"Because I would not know where to begin," he replied with absolute candour.

"Some dream, eh?" she teased, prompting him again.

"Yes it was, Catherine but, for once, I did not want to wake up!" He was looking at her very strangely again.

Catherine wondered whether the effects of the '*Home Brew*' were responsible and asked, "Are you sure you are okay, Vincent?"

He stretched and shook his head before replying. "My head feels a bit muzzy and I'm not sure what day it is. Are you here early because it is the day of the children's party?"

Catherine realized she would have to tread very carefully and, as she smoothed his hair, she whispered, "No, Vincent. That is not why I am here, although it is because of the party that I stayed Below. Try and remember, the party was yesterday, my love. Today is Saturday." She waited for the significance of what she had said to register.

Vincent was aghast. "Catherine, '*No.*' It cannot be. What has been happening with me, with us?" He peered under the bedclothes and confirmed his worst fear. He '*WAS*' naked!

Catherine held his face between her hands and kissed him thoroughly. "Does '*that*' begin to answer your question, Vincent? I thought you were sleeping soundly and all the time you were enjoying total recall! William's '*Home Brew*' has a lot to answer for, you really are confused, aren't you?"

Vincent groaned. "Oh Catherine, was I very drunk? I'm having trouble separating my dreams from reality again. Please, help me. I must know!"

Catherine looked into his trusting eyes and whispered, "What scares you so much, Vincent, the fact that we did make love, or that perhaps we did not?" Her directness disarmed him completely.

"Catherine, please." The way he said '*please*' told her of his unspoken anxiety.

"Vincent, in your dream we loved, didn't we?"

He turned his face away, he couldn't look at her but answered softly, "Yes," and then he did look back into her tender gaze and sighed. "Several times, Catherine. There are no words to describe how it made me feel."

Catherine hugged him. "Vincent, from the first moment you kissed me in the tunnels when we were hiding from the children, I knew in my heart that when we loved it would be everything I had ever dreamed about. When I thought you were sleeping, you must have been awake, enjoying total recall, as I said. No wonder you had such a look of contentment on your face! You weren't dreaming at all, my love. You were remembering! Are you happy now?"

Any anxiety he had been feeling lifted as he turned onto his side and gathered Catherine into his arms. Just for a second he hesitated and then his mouth claimed hers in a long and tender kiss. He continued to hold her close as he responded, "Happier than I ever dared to dream about!" and they both laughed. "We had quite a day yesterday, didn't we, Catherine? It seems I was captured in more ways than one!"

She suddenly shivered and Vincent held her tightly.

"What is it, Catherine, is there something you have not told me?"

She moaned. "Yes, I'm freezing my tail off out here!"

Vincent raised himself up and discovered that because of the way he was holding Catherine, her sweater no longer covered her bottom. The sight of her nakedness aroused him immediately and he ran his hands over her buttocks in an attempt to disguise his desire which threatened to get the better of him. "Is this a new fashion, Catherine, or is it your intention to drive me quite mad?" His hands continued to touch her and moved her sweater higher and higher up her body until in one movement, he pulled it over her head.

Catherine was equally as aroused as Vincent and teased, "Who's hogging all the blankets now, Vincent?"

He laughed out loud as he remembered the last time they had shared a blanket and quickly pulled Catherine on top of him while he threw all the covers back.

"Vincent! What do you think you are playing at?" she demanded, laughing in spite of herself.

He lifted her easily and then rolled her back into his bed as he covered them both with bedclothes. He pulled her against him as he growled softly. "I'm not playing, or dreaming, this is for real, Catherine!" His need to make love had never been more urgent, he was like a man possessed. He kissed her with a passion that surprised them both and the lovemaking that followed was breathtaking in its intensity. Vincent stayed deep inside her, unwilling to withdraw. Catherine knew that it would only be a matter of moments before he would love her again and her body began to ache for him, anticipating the ecstasy that would follow.

Through their bond, Vincent could sense Catherine's desires and teased her, "Now I know what you mean about being pretty demanding!"

Catherine giggled against his chest. "I don't hear you complaining, Vincent!"

He lifted his head to take her lips in a long soft kiss as he began moving again. This time, his hands supported her buttocks to give him an even deeper penetration. "Nor will you, my love, nor will you!" His voice trailed away as he surrendered himself to the reality of expressing his love for Catherine in the sexual union of their bodies. When he heard her gasp his name, he gripped her tightly as he continued to thrust himself repeatedly inside her.

Within minutes they both lay quivering in the aftermath of their passion. Vincent held her against him and murmured very tenderly. "Catherine, you are the most beautiful part of my life. You make this act of love very special for me. Have you any idea how much you mean to me?" He kissed her brow and found her pushing back in his arms to find his mouth.

Her kiss was sweetness itself as she told him. "I think at last I do, Vincent! This is why we are getting married tomorrow. I'm making quite sure you are all mine. I've never loved anyone the way I love you, or wanted anyone as much either. You are my life, Vincent, you must believe it!" Catherine's words of love delighted him so much that he pulled the covers over their heads in an attempt to drown out his roar of happiness. As Catherine surfaced for air, she laughed, "Vincent, I think the time has come to join the others, they will be wondering where we are."

Vincent nodded. "Okay, good. Okay, fine. Whatever you say, Catherine, but I rather think they know where we are, don't you?" Catherine scrambled from the bed and dodged Vincent who climbed after her. With athletic grace he captured her in his arms and confided, "I'm beginning to think I shall spend the rest of my life in a state of permanent arousal!"

Catherine was well aware of his bodily reactions and made the mistake of slapping his backside. As soon as she saw the look in his eyes she tried to struggle free, but Vincent held her fast and demanded his *'reward.'*

Catherine couldn't believe her ears and teased him with, "In your dreams, lover."

Vincent crossed the distance to the bed in a couple of strides and soon had her pinned down. As he

moved his body over hers, he pushed himself between her legs and then waited for her reaction. He took the weight of his body on his right elbow and was about to use his left hand to guide his erection to its destiny. Something in her eyes made him stop and he smiled.

"You do it, Catherine, and then I'll be sure that you want me too!"

She shivered as she realized the extent of Vincent's love. He was prepared to stop if that was what she truly wanted. The moment she touched him it was a foregone conclusion. Vincent knew in that split second that Catherine would never be able to deny him.

"Oh Vincent, you're impossible, you know that, don't you?"

He felt himself being captured by her body in a way that excited him wildly and it showed. He buried his head into the side of Catherine's pillow and a roar escaped him, as he claimed his reward.

At last he spoke, his breathing was regular again, but he was obviously very excited and happy. "Catherine, I am overwhelmed to know that you could want me just as much as I want you. What happened between us....when you touched me....proved beyond any doubt the truth of your love for me."

Catherine trembled as she admitted. "Vincent, now I know what it is like to join with you. I also know that I will never be able to deny you. I love you so much, Vincent, and I always will."

Vincent turned them onto their sides as he nuzzled into her neck. He was touched by her declaration of love for him and whispered against her throat. "Oh, Catherine. I love you so!"

She held him close, stroking his hair. "This is something else you enjoy, isn't it, my love?" she continued to groom his hair with her fingers.

Vincent nuzzled deeper into her neck and he kissed her before replying, "Yes, Catherine, I do, very much. From a small child it has always had a particularly soothing effect on me."

They lay together, content in their love, the intimacies and the shared secrets warmed them both. Briefly they slept and as soon as Vincent was awake he was out of bed in minutes. He tossed Catherine her bathrobe and as he pulled on his own he asked her, "How soon can you be washed and dressed, Catherine? I have a surprise planned and there is still time before we join everyone for lunch!"

Catherine was out of bed almost as quickly as Vincent. "Providing we don't share your bathroom, very quickly! Now be off with you!" and Vincent found himself being pushed from behind by a very determined young woman.

"Okay, okay, Catherine. I'm out of here!" and she laughed as he dropped into *'DA office banter.'*

Within about fifteen minutes they were both ready and Cathy was itching to know what it was all about, but Vincent wasn't giving anything away. It took just over half an hour to reach their destination and Catherine gasped at the beauty that surrounded her; she should have guessed. Vincent's special place!

He laid his cloak on the ground and invited her to sit beside him. Vincent held her at arms length and looked into her beautiful face. For a moment he seemed to be stuck for words and Catherine prompted him gently.

"Vincent, what is it?"

He kissed her eyes, the end of her nose and then her lips. "This is my special place, Catherine. and I wanted to create a moment for us to treasure. All my life I have dreamed of this place and because I have shared it with you, it is even more special. From the moment I found you, I have loved you with all that I am. Catherine, I want you to accept a token, a symbol of my love. I am asking you to become my wife because without you, my life would be nothing." Vincent's left hand searched his pocket and he unwrapped a small package. In the palm of his hand lay a ring which he offered to Catherine.

Her eyes filled with unshed tears as she gazed at this outward symbol of his love.

"Vincent, it is beautiful and so are you!"

Together they put the ring on her finger. it was a touching tribute and Catherine was deeply moved. She stared at the ring on her engagement finger; two beautiful stones, one deep red and the other white as fire.

"Vincent, the fit is perfect. How could you possibly know my size?"

He gave a snort of amusement as he sheepishly admitted. "I kept a pair of your gloves, the very fine leather ones that fit like a second skin! You never missed them?"

Catherine nodded. "I wondered what became of them!" She moved to sit on his lap.

His arms held her in a gentle embrace and tightened as he whispered, "Now you know! Mouse and I packed the appropriate finger and made what we hoped would be the correct adjustment. This is part of that special collection I mentioned to you. He will be delighted to see you wearing your ring, Catherine, but during the time we worked together, I'm very glad to say the significance rather escaped him! Mouse can be secretive at the best of times, but where you are concerned, even more so. No task is too much for him and, happily for me, he guarded this one zealously."

Catherine leaned against Vincent and when she spoke her voice was low and husky. "Vincent, I shall remember this moment forever. Believe me, without you, there is no life for me either. Our love for each other is worth everything." Her mouth found his and again she whispered, "Everything!"

It was an emotional moment for both of them, but they realized they must leave soon and join the others. Their forthcoming marriage was to be announced by Father when everyone was assembled for lunch.

It had been Mary's idea to bring the family together at least once a week and even though they had only just had the Junior Banquet. '*Saturday Lunch*' had become a ritual.

Almost reluctantly they prepared to leave. Vincent picked up his cloak and gave it a good shake before swinging it over his shoulders. Catherine smiled at him. "You know, Vincent, this really is the most tranquil and secluded place. No pipes!"

Vincent nodded and smiled back. "You're absolutely right, Catherine. We are well below the pipe system. Sometimes the silence made it difficult to sleep."

Catherine turned sharply. "You've slept down here? When? Where?"

Vincent sighed as he remembered the lonelier times in his life. "There have been moments when I have needed to be by myself. This is the only place where this can happen because, until I shared it with you, only I knew of its existence. Come, I'll show you." He took her hand and they moved toward the blackness at the back of the cavern. Vincent's eyes were so accustomed to the dark, he soon found what he was looking for. Concealed behind a boulder was a lantern and a box of matches. The lantern soon burned brightly, and Vincent took Catherine's hand again as they entered a small chamber.

Catherine gasped. It was a hideaway of Vincent's making. There was a large mattress, a couple of pillows, a small paraffin stove and a few basic cooking utensils. Vincent watched Catherine's reaction; he was almost as fascinated as she, seeing it through her eyes.

"It's dry as a bone in here, Catherine. No bugs, I promise you!"

She laughed, pulling a face at the word '*bugs*' and then asked, "Why didn't you show me in here before, Vincent?"

He shrugged, caught on the hop for a moment and then leaned towards her, his tone teasing.

"You might have thought I had an ulterior motive, Catherine. After all, there is little more than a bed in

here, is there? When I come here, I bring bedding and supplies, no one but me comes!"

Suddenly, he sensed a change in her; she was up to something, he just knew it. The way she was looking at him convinced him that, whatever she wanted, he would agree.

"Vincent!" The moment she breathed his name it acted like a drug. He could feel any self-control ebbing away. "When it is polite for us to take our leave of everyone tomorrow, do you think we might spend our wedding night here? You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

Catherine heard Vincent draw breath, he was almost bowled over. "Catherine, yes, and you would be prepared to rough it down here with me? Not exactly what we planned or I expected for us, but we would be alone!" He grinned, his excitement was beginning to take over. "There are certain advantages too. We have our own waterfall where we can bathe. There's plenty of firewood, bedding and supplies would not present a problem. Catherine, if I arrange everything, would you come?" He was pacing again. To share his special place in such a way and at this time was something he never expected.

Catherine had to grab him and hold him still. He lifted her against him and his eyes held hers. Catherine's expression was answer enough, but her soft, "Yes," with gentle kisses along his mouth produced a very contented, "Oh Catherine, you won't be sorry," from him.

Patting his shoulders, she reminded him. "We must go, Vincent; lunch time, remember?"

Returning her to the ground, he collected the lantern and they resumed their journey back to the tunnels.

It was lunch time when they put in an appearance. Father and Mary were the first to greet them. Father's announcement certainly caused a great deal of clapping and cheering. Afterwards, there seemed to be a constant procession of friends coming to congratulate Vincent and to wish them both *'a lifetime of happiness.'*

As Vincent had predicted, Mouse was delighted to see Catherine wearing her ring. He didn't even mind when she kissed him in front of everyone. He adored her and worshipped Vincent. Their friendship meant everything to this often misunderstood and exuberant youngster.

Catherine and William discussed the food that Peter was arranging to be delivered to Lin and Henry's. William agreed to organize a trolley collection and the older boys were very willing to help. Catherine had decided on a cold buffet, but William recommended hot soup and vegetables as well, not to mention homemade bread, which would be practically straight from the oven! He rightly pointed out that they had no way of knowing how many to cater for, so Catherine was very glad that he had a few ideas of his own.

She slipped her arm through his and hugged him. "Perhaps it might be as well if you supervise the ginger beer this time. I want my bridegroom upright!"

William nodded quickly and they shared a special moment. "Consider it done, Catherine!" and he made another note on his rapidly growing list of duties.

Discussions almost at an end, Pascal left to send out the message everyone was waiting to hear, that the ceremony would commence at twelve noon in the Great Hall. Everyone agreed it gave enough time for all the guests and Helpers to arrive and to ferry the food by trolley from Lin and Henry's for the wedding banquet. It was amazing how much had been accomplished in so short a space of time.

Vincent and Catherine went walking. It was an ideal way of seeing everyone else and the rest of the afternoon slipped away very quickly. Soon it was time for their evening meal. It turned out to be quite a festive occasion.

They enjoyed a very pleasant hour with Mary and Father, William, Pascal, Elizabeth, Jamie and Mouse. Apparently, Narcissa had been found and was resting in preparation for the *'big day.'* Vincent and Catherine found themselves surrounded by so much love, it touched them deeply.

For the sake of convention, Vincent and Catherine had already agreed that they would sleep separately the night before their wedding. Mary had promised to call and make sure that Catherine had everything she needed in the guest chamber. The atmosphere Below tonight, was filled with excitement. Everyone could feel the happiness of these two very special people and was able to share it. This was what living Below was all about.

Father and Mary walked part of the way with Vincent and Catherine and as they bid each other goodnight, it did not escape their notice that Father seemed to hold Mary in a tender embrace as he kissed her forehead. As they went their separate ways, Vincent watched them until they were out of sight. "Must be catching," he whispered almost to himself.

"What?" asked Catherine.

"Love, happiness, everything," and he opened his arms wide.

At once, Catherine slipped her arms around his waist, moulding herself to him. "Sleep well, Vincent. Dare I say, sweet dreams?"

He laughed and hugged her tight. "Indeed you may, my love. My dreams became reality the moment I discovered what would happen when I kissed you!" He leaned to kiss her now. His large mouth covered hers, his kiss was sweet and gentle. "Until tomorrow, Catherine," and he kissed the top of her head with a whispered, "I love you so."

Catherine felt such a pull inside her as he turned to go and cried after him. "Vincent!"

He looked back. It was obvious from her expression that she needed to tell him something. He put his head to one side, waiting for her to speak.

Catherine moved closer and raised Vincent's hands to her lips. She kissed her way across the tops of his knuckles and then turned them over to kiss each palm. The tone of her voice told him of her total commitment as she spoke. "Vincent, you are my life. I will only ever love you!"

It was a difficult parting. For a moment, Vincent was unable to answer, he just nodded his head. His heart was so full but then, as he prepared to walk away, he smiled. "You won't be sorry, Catherine. I promise you."

She watched as he walked away and then turned into the entrance of the guest chamber. Mary had already done so much for her to prepare for the ceremony. She noticed her wedding gown hanging on the outside of the wardrobe concealed in a crisp white sheet; she really had thought of everything.

There would just be time before Mary joined her, to go for a quick shower. Catherine collected everything she needed and headed for the nearest wash area. Mary was waiting for her when she returned and rose to greet her before they finalized the last minute preparations.

Seeing how tired Catherine had suddenly become, Mary frog-marched her to the bed. "You really should sleep now, Cathy. We have a big day ahead of us tomorrow. Would you like me to bring you a tray in the morning, we could eat breakfast together?"

Cathy nodded and eased her arms out of her robe while Mary bundled her into bed. She realized the older woman was quite right, she did need to rest. The last forty-eight hours had been the most wonderful ones of her life, but also the most exhausting.

"You spoil me, Mary, you remind me of my mother. She was always there for me, caring and making sure I knew she loved me!" Catherine smiled as she hugged her. "You are also like the sister I never had and a very special friend all rolled into one. Oh Mary, I'm so happy, but so tired. I promise to go straight to sleep, but come as early as you like in the morning. I want us to spend the entire morning together. Weill you, Mary, will you be able to do this for me?"

Mary sat on the bed and smoothed Catherine's hair. "Tomorrow is such a special day for all of us, Cathy, thank you for sharing so much of it with me. See you for breakfast then, perhaps you will help

me decide what I should wear?"

A very sleepy "Of course!" reassured Mary, who watched Catherine fall asleep as soon as her head touched the pillow.

Mary moved quietly around the chamber snuffing out candles until only one large one was left. It burned brightly and cast a warm glow around the bed where Catherine slept. She tiptoed her way outside and then walked thoughtfully back to her own chamber, it was the even of her wedding too!

Since Catherine had become a part of life Below, Mary had witnessed the gradual development of the very deep love shared between Vincent and Catherine. Because of this, it was now possible for her to love Jacob openly, although she suspected that the community knew how much she cared for him, she had never looked at anyone else! Her heart was almost bursting with happiness as she continued the walk back. It would be the last time she would sleep in this room alone. Jacob had suggested that eventually Vincent and Catherine might need his chamber for a nursery, so it was agreed that he would move in with Mary.

When Catherine opened her eyes she came face to face with Vincent, who was kneeling beside her bed. "Vincent! You are not supposed to be here."

He grinned. "I know, but that is not why I am here! I couldn't leave without telling you, could I?"

Catherine struggled to sit up, but Vincent restrained her.

"Lie still, I only wanted you to know that I will be spending the night in our special place. I thought I would take most of what we will need to lighten the load tomorrow. I'll be asleep well before midnight. Don't worry about me, I know my way about. This is my world, remember. I don't need any maps!"

Catherine's hands reached for him and he gathered her into his arms to kiss her hungrily.

Breaking away, he chuckled. "Enough of that, my angel! I don't relish the prospect of trying to explain my way out of being caught in the guest chamber bed by Mary when she arrives with your breakfast in the morning!"

Catherine giggled back, "Okay lover, but you are very much unfinished business, do you hear me?"

"Loud and clear! I'll see you in the Great Hall, we have a date at noon, remember?" Vincent rose to his feet and stood, towering above the bed, holding the sight of Catherine's beauty locked right in his mind. "Rest now, beloved, sweet dreams. If you dare, dream of me!"

Her eyes twinkled as she blew him a kiss. With a swirl of his cloak he departed and Catherine slid deeper under the covers. She hugged the secret to herself of where Vincent was going and what he was doing. Catherine closed her eyes once more, content in the knowledge that her life had taken an unexpected turn towards untold joys and a future of love and hope with the only man she would ever want, her beloved Vincent.

It seemed only minutes later that she was being awakened by Mary stroking her cheek and asking, "How is our bride feeling today?"

Catherine blinked and could smell breakfast. "Oooh, Mary. I'm fine. I had a wonderful sleep. What time is it? I'm starving!"

Mary laughed. "When are you not? it is eight am. There is plenty of time for what we have to do. You will be glad to hear that the first trolley has already arrived back and, in case you are wondering, so has Vincent! He told me to tell you '*mission accomplished*,' whatever that means! Zach has brought three packages for you, they are outside."

Catherine sat up immediately. "Wonderful! Let's eat breakfast and then open our surprises!"

Mary had prepared a simple breakfast for them both; Juice, boiled eggs, toast and a couple of muffins with some of her homemade jam; washed down with hot tea and Cathy was in ecstasy.

Spreading her arms above her head and then reaching for her robe she announced, "Mary, that was the best breakfast I have had in ages!"

Mary smacked the backs of Catherine's hands and promptly answered, "I expect it is the only breakfast you have had in ages."

Cathy agreed. "You are probably right, but it was good. Now, where are those packages?"

The smallest of the three boxes contained fresh roses and freesias (*purple and white flowers*)

"I thought we could decorate our hair with these, what do you think?"

Mary was overcome by the 'we.' When Catherine had invited her to spend the morning with her and said they would '*do everything together,*' she never dreamed it would be like this. She fingered the roses and looked at Catherine. "How beautiful they are; red and white. I know how much these blooms mean to both of you."

Catherine checked the second box and then passed it to Mary. "This is for you. It is my privilege, as the bride to choose your dress. I hope you like it. I asked Peter to get Lin to pick something out especially for you. I don't know what we are getting here, but it should be a '*delicate gold*'."

Mary sat down beside her and for a moment, she was unable to say anything.

Catherine put an arm around her shoulders and whispered, "Come on Mary, open it up, I'm dying to see, aren't you?"

Mary swallowed quickly and managed to pull herself together. The dress was everything Catherine hoped it would be. High neck, long sleeves and beautifully panelled which would suit Mary's slight figure. The colour was perfect, but it was the embroidery that actually turned the dress into a work of art. The bodice and sleeves were carefully picked out with sprays of delicate flowers, laced together with threads of silver gossamer. Each flower contained a tiny crystal that winked at them like twinkling stars.

Mary was absolutely speechless, her eyes had widened with delight and once she got over the initial shock. She was in for another! Beneath the layers of tissue, Lin had included some beautiful lingerie and a pair of golden slippers.

Catherine was so happy that she danced Mary around the guest chamber. "Oh Mary, you are going to look sensational. Just wait until everyone sees my beautiful Matron of Honour!"

Mary hugged her and gasped, "Catherine, you are amazing. This is the nicest thing you could have done for me. I am thrilled. Thank you, my dear. I shall be honoured to stand beside you." Her mind was ticking over so fast... '*What will Jacob think?*' she wondered.

Almost, as if she read Mary's thoughts, Catherine asked, "Did you see Father as well this morning, Mary?"

Mary busied herself with her precious gifts, careful not to give anything away. "No, we agreed that he would look after Vincent and I would spend the morning with you. We will all come together for the ceremony in the Great Hall." She laughed softly. "Vincent woke me just after seven, with a cup of tea. He had a small favour to ask."

Catherine waited for Mary to continue, she was intrigued.

"He wanted me to give his hair a trim! Normally he hacks at it himself but, in view of the importance of today and because he is very excited, he seemed disinclined to tackle it. So I agreed to smarten him up a bit! He then helped me to organize our breakfast tray."

Cathy chuckled to herself as she remembered what Vincent had said about being caught in her bed by Mary.

Mary laughed again. "When I asked him where he had spent the night, he clutched his heart and groaned, *'Well away from temptation, Mary, well away!'* Oh Catherine, he loves you so, I'm very happy for you both."

Catherine leaned to kiss her cheek. "You are a real treasure, you know that, don't you, Mary. What would we do without you?"

There was now one large box left and Catherine peeked inside before sharing its secret with her. She lifted a magnificent cloak from the layers of tissue and giving it a little shake confessed;

"I had it made only recently, I was saving it for Winterfest. Do you think Vincent will like it? I asked Peter to collect it from my apartment."

Mary beamed. "Of course he will. His cloak is rather the worse for wear."

Catherine touched the garment lovingly and confided. "I know how fond Vincent is of the one you made him all those years ago, so I asked them to make it almost identical."

Mary stroked Catherine's back. "You are so thoughtful, Catherine. We do appreciate how much you care about all of us."

Catherine closed the lid and replied, "Mary, I get far more back, believe me!"

Mary loaded their breakfast tray and promised, "I'll be back before you miss me. Shall I arrange for one of the boys to call for Vincent's new cloak and see he gets it just before he leaves for the Great Hall? He would look rather splendid, don't you think?"

Catherine was delighted. "You think of everything! Hurry back, I need you."

While Mary was aware, Catherine uncovered her dress and then hung Mary's along side it on the outside of the wardrobe. She made the bed and placed the lingerie where Mary would see it the moment she returned. When Mary walked back inside the guest chamber she gasped, suddenly very aware of what was happening with her too.

"Catherine, I've never worn anything so fine. Promise to pinch me every so often just to remind me I'm not dreaming!"

Catherine laughed and they gathered together everything they would need before they set off for the bathroom that had been reserved exclusively for them.

Once inside, Catherine recognized at once that Mary had been there too. Fresh towels were in abundance, bath oils and a selection of soaps were arranged neatly. She pounced on one of the fragrances she loved---a subtle hint of roses. This bathroom was the nearest one to the guest chamber and was divided in two by a half-screen, to afford the minimum amount of privacy. There were two baths and a small lavatory cubicle.

It did not take long to fill the baths and within minutes they were both enjoying a relaxing time lying in bubbles, realizing that time was now beginning to run out for both of them. The ceremony was fast approaching.

"We had better think about getting ourselves washed. Catherine, do you agree?" Mary sat up and began to sponge herself.

"Okay, good. Okay, fine," came Catherine's happy response.

As soon as Mary had wrapped herself in a towel, she came round to Catherine's side of the screen. "Come on, young lady, my treat. I'll give your back a scrub!"

Catherine leaned forward immediately. "You are an angel, make me tingle, please. It might just help to get me going. You know how I love to laze in water!"

Holding Catherine's hair to one side, Mary soon had her glowing.

"That feels wonderful, Mary. Thank you." She rinsed her body and stepped into a huge towel held out for her.

"Can you manage now, Cathy? I had better get dry and put my robe on. I can hardly wait to try on my new wardrobe!"

Catherine smiled, It was proving to be a very happy experience sharing her morning with her.

"We will get you ready first, Mary, and then it will be my turn. I might as well admit it, I'm beginning to get butterflies. I don't feel nervous, just very excited!"

Mary held her hands. "then you are in good company with Vincent, he couldn't hold still this morning. I really don't know how I managed to do anything with his hair. He was going for a shower with Father. I don't know who is keeping an eye on who!" She sighed as if to say they were all as bad as each other.

As they walked back to the guest chamber, they met Jamie and Samantha who were now able to use the 'reserved' bathroom. Everyone was certainly in high spirits and it made Catherine even more aware of how wonderful it was to be part of this very special family.

Mary waved to Mouse who was speeding towards them. "Good boy, I knew I could rely on you, Mouse. Are Father and Vincent almost ready to leave for the Great Hall?"

He nodded. "Come for Catherine's package for Vincent! I'll make sure he gets it, Catherine, because I'm Best Man." He was so delighted that he had been chosen to undertake a special task. For once, he looked tidy, his hair was well brushed and his face shone.

Catherine hugged him. "Thank you for taking care of this special errand, Mouse. Now, let's hurry and then straight back to Vincent, okay?"

"Okay, good. Okay, fine," he chortled. He was getting used to everyone copying him; in fact, he rather liked it. Mouse waited while Catherine went inside the guest chamber and then reappeared with her gift for Vincent. He took the package off her. "Heavy! Do you have a message for Vincent?"

She smiled. "Yes, tell him...." she faltered.

"That you love him," Mouse finished, grinning cheekily.

"Yes, very much! Now go, you young scamp and take care."

By the time Catherine returned to Mary, she was already dressed in her new underwear and looked very pleased with herself.

"Started without me, eh?" and in a few minutes, Catherine was into her underwear. She turned to find Mary about to pile her hair on top as usual. "No, Mary. I'd like to do it for you, may I?"

Mary sat down on the bed, it was wonderful having Catherine fuss over her like this. Cathy carefully groomed her hair and pinned it back, forming individual curls down the back of her head, into the nape of her neck. She reached for the sprays of freesias and positioned them on a level with Mary's eyes so that they framed her face. A light touch of makeup and she looked stunning. Catherine was well satisfied with her handiwork.

"You can look now, Mary. What do you think?" Cathy waited excitedly for her reaction as she gazed at her reflection in the full length mirror. She hoped Mary would be pleased----and she was!

Her smile broadened. "Oh, Catherine. Thank you. I look so...."

"Beautiful?" prompted Catherine.

She laughed now. "I was going to say 'different,' but I feel beautiful," and she blushed.

Catherine squeezed her hands and whispered, "So you are, Mary, within and without! Come on,

Chandler. Now it's your turn." She brushed her hair back off her face and fashioned it into a chignon (*a knot or coil of hair*) at the nape of her neck. Mary came forward with a veil she had discovered underneath the tissue in the box.

"You are going to wear this, aren't you, my dear?"

"Do you think I should? Not too much?"

Mary patted her shoulder. "Let's take a look at you." She placed the veil in position and her breath caught in her throat. Catherine was beautiful but concealed behind a wedding veil her eyes conveyed the beauty of her soul. For a moment, Mary couldn't speak. Catherine looked at her staring at her.

"Too much, eh?"

Mary stopped Catherine's hands from removing her veil. "You leave that where it is, young lady. I have promised everyone a beautiful bride and you are so beautiful, Catherine. They should see you like this too!"

Catherine agreed and in a matter of minutes, they decorated her hair with tiny rosebuds. The effect was just what Mary hoped for---utterly breathtaking.

Catherine helped Mary into her dress first and then Mary held Catherine's wedding gown, ready for her to step into. She waited patiently while Mary fastened all the tiny buttons down the back of this Victorian style wedding gown.

The overall picture was something Mary would never forget. Catherine was wearing her crystal pendant and it looked so perfect lying on the exquisite guipure lace. She handed her the crystal earrings and then her engagement ring. Catherine moved forward and stepped into her white satin slippers. At last she was ready.

"Will I do?" she asked, and a familiar voice behind them brought huge smiles from Mary and Catherine.

"Cathy, you look gorgeous. Come, let me be the first man to kiss you today!" Peter hugged her to him and whispered, "You look every bit as beautiful as your mother, she would have been so proud of you!"

Catherine pulled back in his arms, her lip trembled, but only for an instant. "Thank you, Peter, that is a lovely compliment."

He stepped back and pulled Mary towards them. All three now stood holding each other.

"This is a wonderful day, to see my two best girls looking so beautiful and, believe me, you are both just that. I can hardly wait to show you off!"

Catherine kissed his cheek and then moved towards the box of flowers. There were three red roses left. "Will you wear one of my roses, Peter? I want to give them to the special men in my life. I have one for Vincent and another for Father."

Peter smiled. "You are a sweet child, has anyone ever told you?"

Cathy grinned as she nodded. "Yes, but not lately though." She was thoughtful for a moment. "Mary, if I take a rose for Vincent, will you take the other one for Father? I can't do both."

Mary did not have time to answer before Peter broke in. "I think that is a lovely idea. Of course you will, Mary, won't you?"

She looked at their expectant faces and realized she had no choice in the matter, it had already been decided.

While Catherine put a rose in the button hole of Peter's grey jacket, Mary watched them, wondering whether Jacob had been able to speak to him about their wedding plans. She knew she could rely on Peter's discretion not to leak the secret, but so far, he had given her no indication that he was aware

of a thing!"

Breaking the momentary silence, Mary asked, "I suppose it must be almost time for us to leave, Peter?"

He smiled knowingly. "Getting anxious? No need, everyone is heading for the Great Hall. It's been like a mass exodus all morning. I have never seen anything quite like it, the tunnels are so deserted. This really is the event of the century down here, my dear."

In that moment, Mary knew he shared her secret and would give her to Jacob at the ceremony. Catherine smiled at them both.

"Well, just say when you are ready and we will join the family. I have an important date with Vincent!"

Peter lifted Catherine's left hand and then reached for Mary's. Holding them gently he kissed both together and his eyes twinkled. "Well then my beauties, I think it is high time I kept my promise to see you safely to the Great Hall. I shall only have Vincent to deal with if I am late!" At this they all laughed and he added, "I don't think he has forgiven me for giving him away at the Junior Banquet, or perhaps it was just the push he needed, eh, Cathy?"

"Believe me, Peter. We will both be eternally grateful. You do realize you are probably responsible for what is happening today and I love you for it!"

Mouse hurried back with his package and almost collided with Vincent who was pacing backwards and forwards inside the entrance to his chamber.

"Mouse, are you all right?" Vincent realized that his eager friend was breathless with excitement.

He recovered quickly and blurted out. "Package from Catherine and I am a young scamp and she loves you very much."

Vincent tried to conceal his amusement. *'What had Mouse been up to this time,'* he wondered.

"For me?" he asked.

"Yes, and you are to open it at once!" Mouse was feeling very important, he liked being able to surprise Vincent.

"Come then, we had better do exactly as you say, Mouse!" Vincent walked back inside his chamber, closely followed by Mouse.

Father was sitting in Vincent's big chair looking a trifle weary. "Vincent, is there the slightest chance you might sit down, even for a short while? You are making me quite dizzy watching you pace about so much. How old are you? Thirty-five? Ye gods, you were more manageable at five, believe me!"

Vincent came to stand beside him and kissed his brow. "I have a package from Catherine, shall we open it together?"

Father was somewhat relieved to note that the arrival of this surprise from Catherine had a certain calming effect on Vincent. However, it was to be very short-lived, because the moment Vincent lifted the new cloak from the layers of tissue, he became more excited than ever.

"Father! Isn't she wonderful!" he bellowed.

"Wonderful," echoed Father. "Come Vincent, Mouse, I really think it is time we made our way to the Great Hall. We are doing no good here, this carpet will be threadbare if you continue pacing on it, my son."

Vincent grinned broadly as he swung his new cloak around his huge shoulders. "How do I look,

Father? It feels rather grand!" His boyish charm won his father's heart immediately.

Holding out his arms he hugged Vincent close and whispered so tenderly. "That's because a grand chap is wearing it! Let's be off! Have we got everything?"

Vincent turned to Mouse who immediately produced Catherine's wedding ring and was about to say "Okay, good. Okay fine," but Father and Vincent beat him to it. The three of them laughed as they began their journey to the Great Hall. They laughed most of the way there.

Vincent was in fine form and Father's reminiscences of Vincent's boyhood pranks certainly kept them amused. It was a wonderful moment when at last they entered the Great Hall. Everyone began clapping and cheering. Vincent was quite taken aback to see just how many people had come to share this special moment in his life.

Suddenly there was a message of the pipes to let them know that the bride was on her way. This sent Vincent into a flat spin, he was becoming totally impossible, his excitement was at fever pitch. Father tried to reason with him, but once he was in this mood, it was a waste of time.

Father smiled to himself, abandoning any thoughts of trying to quiet him down. Everyone recognized the depths of Vincent's love for Catherine so, perhaps they would also see how very happy this made him.

Vincent greeted Lin and Henry warmly and then bowed to the Master. He had not expected to see him and wondered if Father had sent for him to perform the ceremony after all.

Just as he was pondering the thought, a silence fell over the assembled gathering. Catherine had arrived!

Father beckoned to Vincent to stand beside him and they turned to watch first Mary descend the inner staircase, followed by Catherine and Peter. Once the three of them were safely down, Peter offered his other arm to Mary, who was overjoyed to hear him whisper only loud enough for her to hear. "I promised Jacob."

The three of them moved down the centre of the Great Hall to where Father and Vincent were standing waiting for them. Both men were entranced, completely unaware that in that instant their love for these special ladies was there for all to see.

There was no hesitation from Vincent. He stepped forward immediately to stand beside Catherine and lifted her hand to his lips; it was such a romantic gesture.

Not to be outdone, Father quickly followed his example, much to Mary's delight. It had been Mary who had persuaded Catherine to cover her face with her wedding veil just before she entered the Great Hall. She wanted everyone to be captivated by her beauty, as she had been in the guest chamber.

When Catherine saw the way Vincent was looking at her now, she realized why Mary had been so insistent, he was absolutely spellbound. Almost reverently he lifted her veil back off her face and the look they shared was filled with a sweetness that was theirs alone. They had eyes for no one but each other. So much so that it was quite a surprise to find the Master, as he had affectionately become known, standing at the front of the assembled gathering.

A hush fell as everyone waited for him to address them. He spoke with the utmost clarity.

"It is an honour and a privilege to be invited here today. It will give me great personal pleasure to officiate at this wedding of two people who are especially dear to me. Father has also asked me to participate in a ceremony of blessing." He looked at Catherine and Mary. "I see you carry red roses, perhaps you would like to give them to your loved ones."

Mary pushed the shortened stem of her rose through the fabric of Father's tunic and patted his chest. Catherine secured her rose in the ornate clasp that held Vincent's cloak together and raised her hand to stroke the side of his face. Instinctively, he turned his head so that he might kiss her palm. It was a

touching sight and the significance of these gestures escaped no one.

The Master was waiting to begin. He smiled at the five friends standing before him and then his eyes travelled across the sea of faces that extended to the back of the Great Hall. As he began to speak, you could have heard a pin drop. "Today we see before us a couple who know they want to commit themselves in marriage. We rejoice in the fact that, at last, they can be truly together and share a life that for them will be made more meaningful by becoming husband and wife. They have expressed their great affection for one another and we join them with love as they pledge themselves each to the other in this special place."

Vincent reached to hold Catherine's hand and he did wonder whether it would disappoint her that Father appeared to have changed his mind about marrying them. He felt her squeeze his hand, it was very reassuring.

Suddenly, Father moved to stand at the side of his old friend who asked him, "Are you ready, Jacob?"

Father nodded and they shook hands. A smile played around Father's mouth as he returned Vincent's questioning look. Vincent gripped Catherine's hand tightly, his eyes never left his father's face. His expression teased him, he was definitely up to something, he could feel it.

He did not have to wait any longer to discover the reason for Father's relaxed demeanour and his *'wait and see'* look. The old Mandarin turned to Mary. "Who gives you in marriage, Mary?"

She smiled and answered clearly, "Peter Alcott."

Peter took Mary's hand and held it towards Father, while those present gasped at this sudden turn of events.

The happy smiles that appeared on the faces of this congregation were only what Father had expected to see and he nodded happily, acknowledging the ripple of applause. Vincent and Catherine looked at each other and grinned. This was the most wonderful surprise and they watched eagerly as the ceremony continued.

The Master asked, "Jacob, will you take the hand of Mary offered in love and friendship by Peter Alcott?"

Father reached to claim her and answered tenderly. "Yes, it is my dearest wish that Mary become my wife."

Turning now to Mary, he asked, "Will you accept the gift of love offered by Jacob?"

Mary held Father's hand to her cheek, suddenly overcome by the moment but, when she spoke, her voice was steady. "Yes, it is my dearest wish that Jacob become my husband."

The wedding service continued with the exchange of formal vows and Father gave Mary his mother's wedding ring, which had been beautifully engraved by Mouse.

As soon as the Mandarin said, "I now pronounce you man and wife," a cheer went up and the applause that followed was tumultuous.

Vincent and Catherine were the first to congratulate the happy couple and the four of them shared an emotional moment, holding each other. With a twinkle in his eye, Vincent dared to whisper to Father, "Who says you can't teach an old dog new tricks?"

Out of sight of the others, Father tweaked his nose and retaliated. "I have to keep the ascendancy, you cheeky young pup. Now it's your turn!"

After the excitement died down, Father raised his hand and everyone fell silent.

"This is really the moment you have all been waiting for, the marriage of Vincent and Catherine. I have to admit that I was deeply moved when Catherine first asked me if I would perform the ceremony that would bind her to Vincent in matrimony. You see, they are already bound to each other

in a way that is truly remarkable, no legal document or words of mine could make it more so, their connection is unique. Come my dears, you have been very patient and have waited quite long enough!"

Vincent led Catherine to stand at the front before Father and the Master. Peter held her other hand.

Father asked, "Catherine, who gives you in marriage?"

She spoke distinctly as Peter kissed her hand and held it towards Vincent. Father turned now to look at Vincent, who immediately squared his shoulders and drew himself up to his full height. He looked magnificent.

As he towered above his father, the look that passed between them conveyed the love they felt for each other. "Vincent, my son, will you accept the hand of Catherine offered in love and friendship, by Peter Alcott?"

Vincent took Catherine into his arms and held her close as he answered simply. "Yes, Father. Catherine is my reason for living!"

Father then asked, "Catherine, will you accept the gift of love now offered by Vincent?"

Her response touched every heart in the Great Hall. "Yes, Father, because he is my life!"

The atmosphere had become beautifully sympathetic to the love shared between them. They hung on every word of the marriage vows and to hear Vincent pledge himself to Catherine was a privilege and a joy.

When they both repeated "Foresaking all others," it left no doubt in the minds of those present that they meant every word. Father beckoned to Mouse to join them and he proudly produced Catherine's wedding ring.

Vincent tenderly removed Catherine's engagement ring and repeated after Father. "With this ring I thee wed, with my body I thee worship and everything that I have with thee I share."

He slipped the wedding ring onto her finger and then put back her engagement ring.

Catherine looked at the two rings. The wedding band was inlaid with tiny red and white stones to match her engagement ring; they looked so beautiful. She caught sight of Mouse peeking from behind Vincent's elbow, his expression----as always----one of adoration for Catherine. Her heart was beating rapidly, but she managed a very watery smile for him.

The final vow was one that Vincent had told Father he would include, unknown to Catherine and deliver without prompting. As they were pronounced man and wife, Vincent held Catherine at arms length and his voice was very tender as he caressed her with his eyes.

"Know that I will love only you, until my last breath!" Then he kissed her lips softly, drawing her again gently into his arms.

Catherine leaned back in his embrace and, as a tear escaped, Vincent captured it with his thumb and moistened his lower lip, tasting it with an intimacy that was intensely moving.

She recovered quickly and kissed his thumb as she vowed, "I will love only you, Vincent, until my last breath!"

This marriage ceremony had been breathtaking from beginning to end. The Mandarin stepped forward to bind their left hands together with a silk sash. Holding their hands very firmly he blessed their marriage. "May the happiness that is in your hearts at this moment remain as constant as the joy you give to each other."

There was hardly a dry eye in the Great Hall as Vincent and Catherine joined Mary and Father. Again the four of them stood holding each other; this had been a very special day for the tunnel community, one that would be remembered forever.

The wedding buffet was also something that would be remembered forever. Peter had excelled himself and provided all sorts of delicacies, including giant tubs of ice cream for the children. William's experience and skill ensured the success of the catering; it was incredible what had been achieved.

Catherine slipped her arm through Peter's and hugged him. "You really have thought of everything, Peter, even hiring all the china, glass and cutlery." Her eyes spotted champagne glasses. "What have you been up to?"

He held her hand and admitted, "I provided the toast for your parents at their wedding, so I thought it was the least I could do for you and Vincent. I think it must be time to cut the cake and toast the four of you." Making sure that everyone had a full glass, Peter banged on the table to attract everyone's attention as he prepared to propose the toast. He raised his glass. "To Mary and Jacob; Vincent and Catherine. May every possible happiness surround you and your future lives hold untold joys!"

The toast was repeated all around the Great Hall and a handful of keen musicians appeared and began to play a haunting waltz melody. Vincent and Catherine looked to Mary and Father and the four of them took to the floor to start the dancing. Catherine whispered to Vincent and he nodded. As soon as they were close enough, Vincent bowed to Mary and they changed partners.

This produced a round of applause, it was a delightful touch and, as they completed their turn around the dance floor, Father bowed to Catherine and took Mary back into his arms.

A little while later, Vincent and Catherine stopped dancing and worked their way around the Great Hall, missing no one. Narcissa was being looked after by Jamie and Mouse, who were very attentive. Narcissa held Catherine's hand and whispered to Vincent, "Take great care of this child, Vincent, she is even more special than you realize. You have found your destiny, your lives are now inextricably linked."

Vincent leaned over to stroke the old woman's cheek. "I only know that for me, life has taken on a new meaning, Narcissa. Catherine is everything to me, everything."

"Good boy, Vincent. Keep that sentiment safe and you will be blessed with what your heart desires!"

As they moved on, Vincent smiled at Catherine. "There are times when Narcissa sees straight through me, it is most unnerving."

They both knew what he desired, a perfect child like the one he dreamed about. Catherine squeezed his hand and he stopped to listen to what he wanted to hear more than anything. He could feel her love through their bond, it was so strong.

"Vincent, believe me, he will be beautiful. I just know it."

Hugging her tight he whispered in her ear. "I love you, I need you and I want you."

Her eyes shone with love for him. "Then we had better do something about it, my love. The time has come to leave for our special place!"

There was a small chamber off the Great Hall and Mary had arranged for some travelling clothes to be left for her to change into. With her help. Catherine was soon ready and she reappeared to find Vincent waiting with one of Cullen's hampers and his travel bag bulging at the seams.

Father came to speak to them as they prepared to leave. "This place you are going to, Vincent, you will be safe?"

"Don't worry about us, Father. I will take great care of my wife, I promise you."

"Good, then you had better be off but, before you go, I thought you might like to know that the wedding present Mary and I have chosen for you is of a rather practical nature!"

Vincent and Catherine waited for him to continue, his expression was one of total mischief.

"I have arranged for Cullen to fit a door to your chamber, Vincent, and then we might all get some

sleep!"

Vincent put down his bag and hamper and made a grab for Father, who he lifted off the ground. Holding him in a bear hug, he bounced back. "Better get him to fit one to yours then, Father, I am known to be a very light sleeper too!"

The two men enjoyed a private moment and then Vincent let Father go.

Peter strolled to join Catherine. Now that she was about to leave, his old anxieties concerning a sexual relationship with Vincent nagged at the back of his mind. He touched her arm and was rewarded with a huge smile and he hugged her close. "Cathy, if you ever need to discuss....if you have any difficulties....I will speak to Vincent before you leave, if that's what you want?" He finished lamely, knowing he was on delicate ground, especially as Vincent was behind him and had heard every word.

Catherine indicated to Peter with her eyes that Vincent had suddenly appeared. She reached for Vincent's hand and then Peter's. The three of them moved to where they could speak without being overheard.

"Peter, I love you for worrying about me, about us but, believe me there is no need." She gripped his hand tightly. "Vincent and I have loved already. There are no difficulties, no differences, we belong together." With a very provocative glance at Vincent, she disclosed, "He's a very quick learner!" It eased this awkward moment and Vincent placed his hand on Peter's shoulder and gave it a mighty squeeze.

"I might add, Peter, that Catherine has taught me all I know!"

He nodded. "Pretty demanding, eh? I think it is time you two were out of here!"

With a last embrace and a wave for the community, Vincent and Catherine began their journey to a part of his world that belonged only to them.

When at last they reached their special place, Vincent lit the lantern and led Catherine into the chamber where they would spend the next few days loving and learning things about each other they might never have known but for that one kiss that had started an avalanche of emotions.

Catherine looked around, amazed to see how Vincent had transformed this room for them. There were fresh flowers and a tray with two glasses. She shot him an inquiring look.

"The bottle is chilling in a pool at the side of our waterfall, Catherine. If you are not too tired, I would like to take you walking to show you more of what means so much to me, my world. Everything will still be here when we come back, I promise you!"

Catherine had stooped down to touch the crisp sheets that Vincent had put over the mattress. On her pillow lay a single red rose, with a note attached in Vincent's own handwriting. "With love, all things are possible."

She looked up into his adoring gaze and said, "You promise?"

Together, they explored the wonders of this cavern where time stood still for these two lovers whose paths had finally become one.

The months that followed proved to be a time of adjustment for both Vincent and Catherine. But together they faced each challenge and their love deepened with each passing moment.

Vincent lay on his side gazing at her. "Are you sure you are all right, Catherine? What happened just now, it was some ordeal you put us both through." He tenderly swept her damp hair off her forehead

and gently sponged her face and neck. Unable to resist the closeness, he held her to him and his mouth covered hers to take her lips in a sweet kiss.

Catherine returned his kiss. "I'm okay, Vincent. Really. It was worth everything!"

He sighed. "Our bond makes it impossible for me not to experience your pain, Catherine. Say it again, please," he pleaded, coaxing her to say what she had said several time already.

As he lifted her, she repeated again, "He is beautiful, Vincent. Our son is beautiful!"

He leaned with Catherine to peek inside the crib at the side of their bed.

"Yes, he is, just like his mother!"

Catherine had given birth to a fine healthy boy only a hour before. Father had delivered him with Vincent and Mary standing by to encourage Catherine every step of the way. It was the happiest of times for all of them.

She looked at Vincent. "Are we decided then?"

"Yes, my darling, we are. Jacob Charles it shall be!"

Catherine turned into Vincent's body and whispered, "He may resemble me, but he had inherited the colour of your eyes, Vincent, and I know he will have the beauty of your soul!"

Vincent's arms enclosed her and they knew that in the end their love was worth everything.

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