

Beyond the Tapestry

by D. YATES

Vincent hurried to Father's chamber. He had been half-expecting to hear Father wanted to see him. However, apparently, it had now become a matter of some urgency. He attempted to clean himself up a bit, as he was still covered in rock dust. Work on the new chambers and tunnels was progressing extremely well.

As soon as Vincent entered Father's chamber, he sensed that all was not well and immediately took the chair opposite him.

"What is it, Father, that you wanted to see me so urgently? I came as soon as I got your message." Vincent spoke quickly, eager to know why he had been summoned.

Father looked serious and taking Vincent's hands said, "I had hoped you would come to me, before I found it necessary to send for you, Vincent. I am very concerned about you, my son. They say you are working yourself into the ground - and I know why."

Vincent had the grace to look somewhat embarrassed and answered. "Work is the only way I can manage to cope with Catherine's absence, Father. I am not sure what I have done that should cause so much anxiety - perhaps you would be kind enough to enlighten me?"

Clearly, Vincent was totally unaware of the way his punishing schedules had been crippling the workforce unfortunate enough to be on his team.

Holding Vincent's hands even tighter, Father began to explain. "Vincent, first of all, you should know that it is only because we all love you and care about what you are doing to yourself, that it has fallen to me to speak to you."

Suddenly, Vincent realized that Jacob was reaching out to him not just as his father, but in his capacity as head of the tunnel community.

Father continued, "Vincent, you forget that no man here has your strength, stamina or staying power and, I fear, after the way you have been working, neither do you! I have been forced to suspend all work on the new tunnels and chambers until further notice. I'm told we are at least two months ahead of schedule!"

Vincent attempted to speak but Father silenced him at once. "Don't interrupt me, Vincent. I have not finished!"

Vincent was stunned. He felt such guilt. Ashamed, he waited for Father to continue.

"We don't know when Catherine will return, Vincent, but I suggest that you try and get some rest and sort yourself out before she does. I also think a good hot bath should be first on your agenda!" At last he smiled and relaxed. "You are not looking your best, Vincent. What if Catherine returned tonight? Seeing you now, it would serve you right if she caught the next plane back to LA."

Vincent winced at this last remark and his voice broke. "Father, I must talk to you. I should have come before; I really don't know why it has taken me so long. I suppose I was trying, as it turned out unsuccessfully, to resolve my own difficulties."

His head dropped and then he looked up into Father's kindly gaze and carried on.

"This time apart from Catherine has been far worse than I ever imagined possible. Perhaps if I could have seen her briefly before she left, it might have helped but just to have Peter call with a letter.

Father, I had already felt her leave. It was a most disturbing experience."

Father nodded sympathetically, his eyes encouraging his son to open up to him and get everything that was troubling him out of his system.

Vincent stood up and began pacing the floor. "Father, since we...." He stopped, unsure how to explain his intimate relationship with Catherine, but Father was ahead of him and prompted.

"Since you became lovers? Vincent, please don't feel awkward or shy. You could not expect that this time apart from each other would not bring its share of heartaches.... for both of you. Vincent, your physical needs are also something new for you to cope with. You have my sympathy in your dilemma, believe me."

Encouraged by Father's insight - he might have known he would understand - Vincent explained that he did not think that it would be wise to resume the sexual side of his relationship with Catherine. It was unthinkable when she could be away for such long periods. He had to admit that the last six weeks had been unbearable.

Father was very thoughtful and told him that only he and Catherine could hope to decide which way their relationship should go. However, he did venture an opinion.

"Vincent, I can't see Catherine liking what you are proposing. Goodness knows, it took long enough for you to allow the poor girl into your bed in the first place. You are going to have to treat this very carefully, my son. Women can be such unpredictable creatures. Be warned!"

Vincent sensed that Father knew far more than he was letting on. He knew, too, that Catherine talked a great deal to Father, especially when she wanted to know anything about him! He felt that something was definitely afoot here, some sort of conspiracy. Obviously, all would be revealed in the fullness of time.

Father announced he was going to retire for the night. Vincent moved at once to help him from his chair immediately gathering him in a close embrace. Father held Vincent's face between his hands, placed a kiss on his forehead and patted his shoulders.

"Now, be off with you and know that we all care very much about you, Vincent, but for the sake of my sanity, just slow down, please?"

Vincent smiled, nodded and then whispered, "Thank you for listening, Father. I don't know what will happen when Catherine returns, but I promise to be careful. I could not bear to lose her."

Vincent was deep in thought as he returned to his chamber. How could he have been so blind? No one had uttered a word of complaint and even during dinner tonight there had been no atmosphere, nothing to indicate how exhausted his friends had become because of him. True, after dinner, Mouse had tried to prevent him from returning to work on his own. He suspected it was Mouse who had gone to Father to tell him about his lone shift work.

Perhaps it was all for the best. He now realized that nothing would ease his sense of loneliness or the physical longing for Catherine. What was he going to do? He sighed deeply as he entered his chamber to collect a change of underwear and bathrobe. Silently, he made his way to the room set aside just for him, that was some distance from the other wash areas and, for once, he was grateful to be on his own. After a good soak, he washed himself quite methodically. As his hands soaped and scrubbed at his body, he thought of the shared bathing with Catherine and how much he enjoyed the experience. Inevitably, his mind took over and then his body began to betray him. This had been happening with such frequency that Vincent began to wonder if he would ever be able to bathe in peace again.

Softly cursing himself with a feeling of disgust at what he considered to be his own weakness, he resorted to the only means of relief available. He handled himself quite roughly and then quickly emptied the bath. He went immediately to stand under his cold water shower, just another one of

Mouse's ingenious ideas and, happily for him, was one of the more successful!

The water soon had Vincent gasping for breath, but he forced himself to thoroughly drench his body and ducked his head several times until he could stand the icy downpour no longer. He picked up his towel and dried himself. Dressing in minutes, he was soon on his way back to his chamber.

Once in his bed, sleep did not come easily, as his mind pondered over the discussion with Father and his own insensitivity to those who also loved and cared about him.

He slept fitfully and, as usual, Catherine managed to invade his dreams.

Catherine breathed a sigh as the plane finally came to a halt. One of the stewardesses had promised to get her off as quickly as possible. All she had to do was to see Joe and give him all the documents personally, and then she would be on leave for six weeks. This was the *'deal'* she had struck with Joe when he had insisted that she take this special assignment.

"Six weeks work and six weeks play, or I don't go, Joe. I mean it!"

Catherine smiled as she remembered the look on Joe's face and his *'Okay, Radcliffe, you win.'*

There was also another condition to her taking this job and Joe Maxwell had not realized that Cathy could be quite so determined. She had made it abundantly clear that this would be the last time she would ever go away. Nothing could induce her. If necessary, she would quit first. Rather than lose her, Joe had agreed. Cathy was well liked and very good at her job. This was something they could work around; they had to, he had given his word.

Catherine gathered all her files and document cases together and followed the stewardess to where Joe was waiting for her. His *'Hi, Cathy, good to see you,'* was music to her ears. Joe hugged Catherine and to his surprise, she kissed him.

"Joe! It is so good to be home, have you missed me?"

Joe grinned. "Not so as you'd notice."

Laughing, he returned Cathy's kiss and holding her at arm's length said, "Cathy, I never expected you to be through so soon. You have been working nights, right? You have, I can tell. You look terrible. How many pounds have you lost this time?"

Cathy pulled an outrageous face at him and dismissed the subject quite out of hand with, "Please don't fuss, Joe. Only about ten, maybe twelve."

Joe soon realized that Catherine had been so desperate to get back, she hadn't cared how hard she had pushed herself to achieve her goal.

He playfully put his fist to her chin and smiling broadly said, "Radcliffe, you're impossible, but what would I ever do without you?" They were such good friends and made a terrific team.

"Joe!" Cathy broke into his thoughts. "I have to see someone. It is very important that I do, will you please take all these?" She indicated the various document cases and files.

"Sure, I suppose it's *'what's his name'* again."

Joe loved to tease Cathy and she responded straight away with, "Got it in one, Joe! *'What's his name'* will be expecting me. Will you drop me off at my apartment? My luggage will follow later."

Joe's car was just outside, so in no time at all Catherine was letting herself into her apartment. While she had been away the whole place had been redecorated and this was one of the reasons she had insisted that she would go to Vincent upon her return. She had not been sure just when the work

would be finished. This way, he would not be exposed to danger hanging around waiting for her. She knew he would feel the moment she was back. However, it seemed strange to come home and Vincent not be there.

Cathy undressed quickly and was in and out of the shower in minutes and into a track suit in less. Everything she would need for the next few weeks was soon in a bag. She was ready!

"Oh Vincent, I need you so," she found herself thinking aloud!

Closing the apartment door behind her, Catherine made for the basement. Once inside the tunnel world she walked quickly and felt calmer than she had done since leaving for LA six weeks before. Catherine quickened her pace and was practically running by the time she reached Vincent's chamber.

Catherine knew all the sentry points and had paused just long enough to put her fingers to her lips, which she hoped they would interpret as *'Don't announce me!'*

Once inside Vincent's chamber, Catherine went straight to his bedside. He was completely uncovered and it was very obvious he had been dreaming. The sight of him in his tunnel long johns made her heart race. He looked so vulnerable.

Dropping her coat onto a nearby chair, Catherine was soon out of her track suit and pulled a beautiful pearl grey nightgown from her bag. The bodice fitted perfectly and the lace was so sheer that her nipples were clearly visible. The rest of the gown was silk and caressed every curve. She looked pale and wan, but still very beautiful. Perhaps Vincent would not notice the dark circles under her eyes, or how much weight she had lost.

Catherine sat down beside Vincent with her back to the covers that he had thrown off and leaned forward to kiss him, her hands caressing his arms. Vincent thought he was still dreaming and responded very lovingly, his arms gently encircling her, holding her to his chest. The kiss continued until Catherine began to think she would suffocate if she didn't come up for air.

Pulling back, she gave a shaky laugh and said, "Now that's what I call a welcome home kiss, Vincent!"

Almost as if he had been physically struck, Vincent was awake and desperately trying to pull himself together before the situation got completely out of hand. He tried to sit up but with Catherine attempting to climb over him into his bed, he gasped.

"Catherine, I thought I was dreaming. How long have you been Below? What are you doing?... we need to talk."

Still trying to climb over him and into bed, Catherine relied, "Talk! We can talk later. Right now, I need you to love me, Vincent. I want to come to bed, to be with you."

Catherine's voice was pleading. He was totally unprepared for this. Coming to him when he had been deeply asleep, she had a distinct advantage over him. However, he was equally determined and held her back with a loud, "No, Catherine. I would prefer that you do not. Please.... we need to talk."

He reached for one of Mary's crocheted blankets and wrapped it around Catherine to protect her from the chill in the air. However, he suspected that it was not the cold that was making her tremble but rather his own behaviour. Obviously, Catherine was trying to be patient and he felt her natural anxiety.

Catherine spoke first. "Vincent, what is it? I thought you would be pleased to see me but, now this!" She freed her right hand from the confines of the blanket that Vincent had wrapped so tightly around her and laid it just above the waist of his underpants. "You can tell me, Vincent. You can tell me anything." Her eyes were beseeching him to explain his rejection of her.

Vincent wished that Catherine had not touched him because he found it almost impossible to

concentrate. Just to have her so close was bad enough, but he knew her touch could make him forget everything except his desire for her.

Taking a deep breath, Vincent tried to explain.

"Catherine, I have missed you so much. I never imagined my life would be so difficult without you. Since we have shared a physical love, I found I was unprepared for the loneliness or the physical longing. I don't think it would be wise for us to resume the sexual side of our relationship.... Catherine, I cannot handle the separations. Now that I know what it feels like to love as a man, I have coped very badly without you. Catherine, I have ached for you. It has been physically painful. I just hope you will help me to come to terms with the limitation I must impose on both of us now you are back."

Catherine was just able to fight back her tears. Obviously, Vincent was expecting her to agree to what he considered to be the only way they could continue their relationship. Her hand gently massaged upwards towards his heart and she whispered, "Vincent.... 'NO!' You can't mean what you are saying. I cannot believe you really don't want to make love to me. I have never wanted you more than I do right now. This separation has been painful for me too, but I need you sexually. I am sorry, Vincent. I cannot agree.... ever. Please don't ask me, it is too cruel. Can't you feel how much I yearn for you, my love?"

This was the moment Vincent had been dreading, and especially as Catherine had discarded the blanket and sat before him, looking so desolate. His heart was full.

Slowly, Catherine edged to sit closer, her hands caressing his arms and then his chest. She lifted his hands and kissed the tips of his fingers and rested her head on his chest, all the time hoping he would respond to her.

When he did not, Catherine sat up and whispered softly, "Vincent, open your eyes, look at me and tell me now you don't want me."

Vincent looked into her beautiful trusting face, so obviously weary for what he was putting her through, but no words would come.

Gently, Catherine pulled the tie at the waist of Vincent's underpants and felt his whole body stiffen. His voice was almost inaudible. "Catherine.... please.... don't!"

Seductively, she traced the outline of his swelling manhood with one finger and, as Vincent let out an involuntary whimper, Catherine mistook this for submission and her hand slipped inside his clothing to take hold of him.

This was too much for Vincent who grabbed both her wrists and held them very firmly, imploring her to let go of him at once. Catherine looked back and quite defiantly told him she couldn't, and he would have to make her. He was suffering so much at this point that Catherine closed down on their bond, so he would not experience the pain his hands were inflicting in their relentless grip. Quite soon, Catherine realized that with the pain she was feeling from Vincent's rejection, coupled with the punishment from his hands, she was in danger of passing out.

Deciding to appeal to Vincent, she begged him to let go and his reply astounded her.

"You let go first, Catherine, then I will. I can't be hurting you or I would feel it."

By this time Catherine had lost the use of her hands and with a heavy heart she let out a strangled moan. "You want 'my' pain, Vincent? Then take it, I'm done with it."

It was then Vincent realized that he was not feeling anything. Catherine had done it again! As Catherine reopened their bond there was just enough time for Vincent to feel the full force of the mental and physical pain that Catherine had been holding back from him, before she fainted. As Vincent felt Catherine begin to leave him, he released her hands, but it was too late. She was out cold.

Vincent sat bolt upright as her body slumped over him. Tenderly covering her back with the blanket, he sat her up and gently turned her so that he could place his right arm around the front of her waist and lift her backwards to sit beside him. He straightened the covers and then, to keep her head upright, he placed his lips to her forehead and found himself whispering her name over and over. As Catherine regained consciousness, she was relieved to find herself in Vincent's arms but, more importantly, in his bed.

His tender "Catherine, I am sorry. I never meant for this to happen," was all she needed to hear.

Catherine pressed close to Vincent and murmured. "I know you didn't. I am okay.... really."

Vincent's lips continued to caress Catherine's forehead and his whispered, "My love," followed by hot breathless kisses, left her in no doubt that he was asking for her forgiveness.

She leaned back and opened her eyes to see the love in his heart reflected in his eyes. Holding Catherine a little closer, Vincent kissed her cheek and asked, "Can I get you anything, Catherine---- anything at all?"

Catherine was feeling almost back to normal and, for once, decided to indulge herself.

"Yes, Vincent. I can think of three things I would like very much. First, a drink of water. Second, a nap; and third, an assurance from you that you will come straight back to bed and hold me while we both sleep. Please?"

Vincent smiled. He knew Catherine would get her way.

"You leave me little choice after what has happened. Catherine, your wish is my command."

Very carefully he left the bed, making sure that Catherine was snugly wrapped from tip to toe inside the comforting warmth of Mary's blanket.

Returning with fresh water, he held Catherine while she sipped her drink. As he rose to put the glass on the table, he threw his bathrobe across the foot of the bed.

Catherine reached for his hand and reminded him, "Vincent, you promised. I don't want to wake on my own in the guest chamber."

Vincent chuckled. "I wouldn't dare to do such a thing, Catherine. I have learned my lesson and, you should know, I never break a promise."

As Vincent climbed back over Catherine, she lifted the covers and held out her hand. "Will you kiss me goodnight, Vincent?" she whispered and to her delight, he did, very tenderly.

He could see now how tired Catherine looked and had been made aware of her weight loss when he lifted her earlier. As usual, he knew she had not been eating properly and working much too hard. It seemed that they were both gluttons for punishment.

Something seemed to be troubling Catherine and she tried to rouse herself.

"Vincent, I meant to tell you... I won't...." But sleep was rapidly overtaking this weary traveller. Softly, Vincent soothed her. "Shhhh.... Sleep no. Tell me later."

He held her close as sleep claimed him too.

Some little time later, Vincent woke and, for a moment, allowed himself to dream. Holding Catherine seemed so natural and without thinking he kissed her lip, his tongue tracing the outline of her mouth. He found he could not resist the temptation and gently his tongue sought entry between her lips. Catherine kept her eyes closed and wondered how best to deal with her own emotions. However, the decision was not hers to make. as Vincent was becoming increasingly amorous. Catherine could stand it no longer and opened her mouth to speak, but this was just what Vincent had been waiting for. Immediately his tongue darted all around her mouth, giving her no time to reciprocate. He was thoroughly enjoying taking Catherine by surprise. However, as he kissed her and his tongue nudged

under hers to move rhythmically, sensuously, she prolonged the intimacy. It was an exquisite moment and relaxed them both totally.

Catherine was completely baffled. What did Vincent want of her? She managed to get her arms free and hugged him. As Vincent recovered himself, Catherine playfully bit his lower lip.

"I take it kissing is still allowed then, Vincent?"

He dropped his head and when he looked up again his eyes were so troubled.

"Don't tease me, Catherine," he begged. "I am finding the consequences of your homecoming more than I ever bargained for."

Catherine caught a handful of his hair and roughly pulled his face close.

"Are you still determined not to make love to me, Vincent?" she kissed him passionately.

As Vincent had expected, Catherine would lose no opportunity to try and seduce him all over again. Her hands were moving over his body and he was getting more than a little anxious. Suddenly, he remembered that Catherine had intended to tell him something before sleep had overtaken her. Thankful for the distraction, he reminded Catherine and waited for her to begin.

"Vincent, I should have told you as soon as I arrived home but, if you remember, we didn't exactly get off to a very good start, did we?"

Vincent looked uncomfortable, but she took no notice.

"What I wanted you to know is that there will be no more separations, my love. I have made it quite clear to Joe Maxwell and the department that I am not prepared to accept assignments that will take me away from home."

Vincent could hardly believe his ears. "Catherine, do you really mean it? This is the best news you could possibly bring me. If only I had known...." It was almost a groan.

Catherine planted a resounding kiss on his chest and said, "Well, you know now!"

Her hands were moving again and, this time, Vincent did not object as she carefully caressed his body. Her touch was driving him wild with desire and as she ran her fingers over the front of his pants and then laid her hand on top of his rapidly swelling manhood, he did groan. Massaging him gently, she again used one finger to trace the outline of his penis. He was now highly aroused, but a tortured moan escaped him and he quickly turned onto his side with his back to Catherine. His breathing was very heavy and ragged. He was struggling to regain his composure.

Catherine was equally aroused and desperate to make love. She finally freed herself completely of the confounded blanket, which was doing neither of them a bit of good. Intimate body contact was the only language to make Vincent respond. She was able to toss the blanket completely over Vincent's bowed head and it disappeared off the other side of the bed. Her nightgown followed like a cloud of blue-grey smoke and landed just in front of Vincent's hands. Quickly he grasped it, inhaling the intoxicating perfume that was Catherine. He could now feel Catherine right behind him, gently stroking down his back, then over his buttocks and gradually down his thighs. Catherine's body became an extension of his. She was moulded to him. At last, she spoke.

"Vincent, turn back to me, please. I need you now." Her voice was so tender.

Still, Vincent did not move. When he spoke, his voice was tormented.

"This is what I have been afraid of, Catherine. While you have been absent, I have thought about you, and only you, to the exclusion of everyone and everything else. The way I am feeling cannot be normal. The side of my nature I try so hard to control is taking over. I fear for your safety."

To his astonishment, Catherine sighed deeply and then her lovely chuckle completely disarmed Vincent. Hugging his back she whispered, "So that's what this is all about! Oh, Vincent, there is

nothing abnormal about the way you feel about me. If there is, then I must be abnormal too. You worry about your 'dark' side, don't you? Well, my dark side must be as black as the hobs of hell, because my feelings for you are all-consuming."

Vincent was listening very intently and turned halfway to Catherine. She pulled his arm around her shoulders and snuggled close.

"Vincent, you must realize that whatever happens between the two of us, concerns only us. If we are happy with everything we do when we are alone, then there is nothing that should disturb you. I think it is high time I gave you our present. Perhaps this will help you to understand better what I have been trying to convey to you, sweetheart."

Catherine left the bed and found her bathrobe in Vincent's cupboard.

"Did Peter bring down four packages, Vincent?"

"Yes, he did," he answered. "They are over by the desk, but much too heavy for you to move. Wait, I'll come...."

Before he could move, Catherine had found what she was looking for in her bag and returned to sit cross-legged on the bed beside him. Her excitement was obvious as she showed Vincent some illustrations of beautiful tapestry curtains.

"Vincent, as you never did get to see my secret place, I have found a way to bring it to you."

This was when she produced a photo that took Vincent's breath away. There was the lake, complete with Catherine's glen, the cabin and in the foreground a small deer. Vincent studied every detail. His eyes held hers and for a moment he felt that they were there, just as they had planned months before.

"Catherine, tell me please, what has this to do with the packages Peter brought down. I'm longing to know."

Catherine smiled. "I have had tapestry curtains designed with the same detail as in this photograph but depicting the season of the year."

Vincent was fascinated and at once wanted to see each tapestry in turn. He was out of bed in seconds and soon had the packages opened. They were even more picturesque than he had begun to imagine. Spring was every shade of green possible, with yellow and gold mixed with rich brown tones. Summer was a haze of every possible sky blue, with touches of sunny yellow. Autumn represented a carpet of fallen leaves, every autumnal hue had been woven together. Finally winter was a mixture of evergreens, red berries with silver threads creating a touch of frost.

Catherine could see that Vincent was deeply moved. Even she had not realized how well the photograph would re-produce and the effect was rather devastating on her, too. She could also see by his puzzled expression that an explanation was needed.

"I expect you are wondering why I wanted us to have these, Vincent? Well - we need more privacy and they are to hang over the entrance to your chamber. I did mention this to Father a couple of weeks before I left and he also recognizes that at times it can be like rush-hour traffic in here, the way people come and go."

At once, Vincent realized why Father had wanted him to be careful earlier tonight, so this had been their secret.

Taking his hand, Catherine spoke in earnest. "Vincent, I want to be able to spend much more time Below, to be with you in private - especially now." Catherine kissed the palm of his hand and waited to see how Vincent would react to her suggestion.

Vincent smiled and pulled Catherine to sit beside him on the bed.

"I take it you have already discussed all this with Father. Catherine, what you just said - why,

'especially now'?"

Leaning into his embrace, Catherine held his face between her hands and said, "I wasn't too sure how far I could push Joe Maxwell over this assignment in LA, but I eventually managed to strike a deal - *'six weeks work and then six weeks play.'* So you see, there is nowhere I would rather be for the next six weeks than here with you!"

As she finished speaking, Catherine kissed Vincent tenderly and was relieved to feel his response, as his arms encircled her. He was obviously taken aback to know that all this could have been planned and then accomplished without him suspecting a thing.

Holding Catherine at arm's length so that he could look into her eyes he said, "Tell me - exactly what did Father say?"

Looking somewhat sheepish, Catherine answered. "As I recall, Vincent, he said he had no objections to me spending more time Below, but I would have to seek your permission as, obviously, it would be *'your'* bed I would be sharing and not his!"

At this they both laughed and Vincent chuckled. "You know, Catherine, there are times when my father amazes even me. He has known about us becoming lovers all along! You are quite right, we do need more privacy, the tapestry curtains are an excellent beginning."

Catherine was like an excited child and jumped off the bed to check the entrance to Vincent's chamber. She saw that Cullen had followed her brief instructions perfectly and the iron hooks he had made were in position, ready to receive the wooden poles to support each tapestry in turn.

Vincent rolled and repacked all but the autumn tapestry. Each one came complete with pole and hooks and as Catherine described them *'they were just begging to be hung.'* Vincent was very eager to make reparation for his earlier behaviour and had already stored away the forthcoming seasons. As he turned his head to Catherine, balancing the heavy tapestry and pole across his chest, she well remembered the *'look.'* It had been her first Winterfest and Vincent was just about to lift the huge beam that secured the doors of the Great Hall. It was the same *'watch me'* look and she marvelled at his amazing strength.

Catherine moved right behind Vincent and wrapped her arms around him as he positioned the tapestry in one lift. She certainly knew how to choose her moments! Vincent's hands gripped the pole as he attempted to catch his breath, his voice was charged with emotion as he just uttered, "Catherine!" To know that she was naked again, her breasts rubbing against his back, was more than enough to take his breath away.

Catherine continued to hug him as he fastened the leather straps at the left-hand side. At last he was finished but was still standing with his hands supporting the pole. Catherine had suddenly slipped her hands inside his underpants and he felt the waist slacken, as she unfastened them and began to edge them down over his hips, kissing and nipping as she did so. Her hands caressed his thighs as she stripped him, gently tapping his ankles to make him lift each foot in turn, until he was completely naked. Vincent now felt as though his feet had become nailed to the floor, he could not have moved if his life had depended upon it. He knew it and he suspected Catherine did too!

Vincent had always enjoyed intimate body contact with Catherine and never more than at this moment. His voice was sensuous as he whispered, "Now, are you satisfied, Catherine?"

She giggled. "Not entirely, but it is certainly more promising now that we are both finally undressed!"

Catherine ran her hands down the front of his body to rake her fingers through his pubic curls, making very sure she did not touch his manhood. Vincent sucked in his breath. Her teasing made him tremble. Gently, she worked her fingers back up his body and trailed her tongue all over his back stopping only to test her teeth before playfully biting him.

Vincent's trembling was getting worse and Catherine pleaded, "Tell me what you are feeling, Vincent."

I must know." Her hands finally came to rest on his hips.

Swallowing with much difficulty, he was just able to find his voice again and answered. "Vulnerable but, at the same time, extremely responsive. I'm almost overwhelmed by your love. I have to cope with your emotions as well as my own.... our bond you see...."

Catherine was mouthing his name across his back and her hot breath was exciting Vincent to the point of almost shouting his next words. "Oh Catherine, you must know----must realize what is happening to me, because of what you are doing."

Catherine snaked her arms around Vincent's upper body and hugged him tightly and, then, just as quickly, released him to allow her fingers to tease and explore the particularly sensitive area of his groin. She toyed with the curls at the base of his shaft and her voice betrayed her own needs as she rested her head against Vincent's back.

"Vincent, I hope to arouse you like never before, so that when I beg you to love me, you won't be able to refuse."

At this he grabbed her hands and placed them on his full erection. Vincent had intended that Catherine should know for herself the state he was in and quite purposefully made her feel the length of him, cupping her hands to take the weight of his testes. He was almost incapable of speech as Catherine's hands held him, but did manage finally to say, "is this aroused enough for you, my love?"

Now it was Catherine's turn to gasp. Vincent was so enlarged, no wonder he was trembling. His self-control was amazing.

He almost threw her hands away, causing Catherine to step back a couple of paces, as he turned to face her. He looked magnificent, the rich colours of the tapestry providing a truly superb backdrop. Her breath caught in her throat as her eyes surveyed him greedily, she knew he would sense what she was feeling now, her need was all too obvious. Vincent's eyes were blazing with passion as he stepped towards her and whispered her name just once. He lifted her easily and held her against his body as he covered the short distance to his bed.

Catherine felt the mattress under her shoulders and relaxed her hold on Vincent. Automatically, as he lifted her she had wrapped her arms around his neck and captured his waist between her thighs. Holding her wrists to his lips, he kissed them softly in turn and then examined the superficial bruising. His tone had never been more tender as he whispered. "Am I truly forgiven, Catherine?"

Until that moment, Vincent had not allowed himself to really touch Catherine and now this embrace was so intimate. The feel of her silky smoothness under his hands only served to accelerate his mounting desire. Her soft 'yes' was all he needed to hear and his hands silently caressed her thighs as he eased them down his body. Vincent touched her shoulders and trailed a finger down towards her breast. As he fondled her nipple between his finger and thumb Catherine groaned. Her eyes were smouldering as she allowed her thighs to slide completely down Vincent's body and lowered her back finally onto the bed.

Catherine's voice was low and husky as she spoke.

"Vincent ... love me now. I beg you. Please don't deny me, or yourself ... don't deny us. I could not bear it."

Deliberately, she spread her thighs and watched for his reaction. It was immediate and his voice was full as he answered, "Catherine, my love, to deny you now. I would have to deny myself the one thing I want most, to be one with you."

When Catherine shivered, he lowered his body over hers without any hesitation and quickly covered them both with bedclothes. As Vincent turned back to embrace Catherine, he found that her eyes were tightly closed. Almost holding his breath, the words were softly spoken.

"Catherine ... you are afraid ... I can feel it. Please, don't be. Tell me what it is that worries you. I

would never hurt you.... well, not knowingly that is.... providing our bond remains unbroken!" He playfully growled, pretending to bite her as a reminder of what had happened earlier when she had shut him out.

Catherine's eyes opened slowly and, to his surprise, a beautiful blush coloured her cheeks at his teasing as she answered, "Vincent, my only fear is that at the last moment you will change your mind and leave me. I am quite shameless, Vincent. I want you, I need you, I always will!"

Vincent dropped his head and felt himself loved so deeply that it swept away all his own doubts.

"I deserved that," he grinned. "Catherine, you must know that wild horses could not drag me away now."

He moved his body against Catherine's and murmured, "You should also know that because of our physical nearness, I am quite capable of leaving this bed."

Once again, Vincent moved his body against Catherine's but, this time, his movements were more exaggerated. Catherine sighed dreamily as wildly erotic sensations swept through her body and immediately transmitted themselves to Vincent. He could hardly believe what was happening to them and his sense reeled.

"Catherine! I never.... thought that...."

His voice trailed away, his face full of wonder as he lowered his lips to hers. Catherine held his face between her hands and whispered, "I know. I know. I wanted you to share what I was feeling."

Vincent's heart was pounding as he kissed Catherine, pushing his tongue deep inside her mouth. Immediately she captured it between her teeth and then her tongue began to explore and tease underneath his, until Vincent was panting with pleasure. Unable to resist any longer, he spread Catherine's thighs and entered her body in one swift movement.

Catherine gasped with the sheer rapture of their joining, breathing, "Oh, Vincent," like a gentle caress that touched every part of him. Vincent chuckled at the response that had so quickly escaped from her lips.

"Oh, Catherine, what a fool I have been. How did I ever imagine I could live without the intimacy of your body. It was nothing short of utter madness."

Just for an instant, he allowed Catherine to invade his being, their bond now open wide was guiding and reassuring, leaving no room for doubt.

All this time, Catherine had been bombarding Vincent's neck and throat with open mouthed kisses, which only served to fuel his passion. Vincent continued to move slowly, prolonging the ecstasy for both of them. Catherine's cries of total surrender and pleasure excited him wildly. As he allowed himself to experience Catherine's needs, which were matched only by his own, he felt his control slip away minute by minute. He was overwhelmed to know that Catherine desired him so completely.

Her voice penetrated his senses as he heard her beg, "Deeper, Vincent.... deeper!" Her hands were driving his buttocks, encouraging him every inch of the way. Vincent held Catherine tighter, closer still, nuzzled his face into the sweet softness at the side of her neck and buried himself completely inside her.

They shared a climax that brought tears of joy. All the weeks of separation and loneliness were forgotten; only now mattered. At last they were one.

In the moments that followed they were surrounded by their love. It embraced them body and soul. Like two survivors of an emotional shipwreck they were now enjoying the waves of euphoria that engulfed them.

Hugging Catherine, Vincent moved them on to their sides. He was not yet ready to withdraw. Even though he already knew the answer, he asked the question anyway. "Are you happy now,

Catherine?"

Her delightful chuckle rang out. "Happy? Vincent, there are no words to describe how you make me feel ... but maybe this will."

Immediately, Catherine used her muscles to squeeze the entire length of him now motionless inside her. The intimacy of what was taking place caught Vincent unawares, but his response was immediate.

"Catherine! Do you know what you are doing to me?" he implored.

Her soft "Yes" was followed by hungry kisses and the lovemaking that ensued left them happy, breathless and more contented than they ever believed possible. They fell into a sleep reserved for lovers, a tangle of arms and legs.

When they stirred hours later, Catherine found herself held very firmly. Her face was in Vincent's neck. His large hands protectively wrapped around her. As she moved, Vincent was awake at once and they lay looking at the tapestry.

As she snuggled close, Catherine asked, "You really approve, Vincent?"

Running his hands up and down her back he replied, "Catherine, I never fail to be amazed by your sensitivity towards me. You know I have always loved the tapestries that hang in the Great Hall---- their mystery. The difference now is that I know the secret behind ours!"

Holding on to Vincent, not wishing to break the mood, Catherine whispered, "How soon will you have to leave for your work, Vincent? It must be time for breakfast and I should get dressed. What if someone came in?"

A smile had been playing around Vincent's mouth all the time Catherine had been talking. Finally he laughed out loud. "Catherine, don't worry, no one will come in. You obviously don't know the other secret of the tapestry."

Catherine leaned to look into Vincent's face and waited for him to explain.

"Catherine, to cover a chamber entrance.... is by way of a declaration.... No one will venture beyond the tapestry! I hope you know our fate is now sealed. I have to make an honest woman of you."

For once Catherine was almost lost for words.

"Vincent, I had no idea...."

Recovering quickly, she blurted out. "I talked to Father ... he never said a word!"

This only made Vincent laugh even louder. "Oh, Catherine. Obviously, he thought you knew!"

Suddenly Catherine realized the implications of her actions. She blushed quite uncontrollably and her voice shook. "Oh, Vincent. I can't possibly go into breakfast this morning!"

Vincent gathered Catherine to him and whispered, "Oh yes you can. You see, I have some apologizing to do and your presence will help me." Not understanding, Catherine pulled back in his embrace to hear what Vincent wanted to tell her.

"Catherine, while you were away, I behaved very badly. I admit it was not intentional but, nonetheless, I have caused my friends to suffer because I was thoughtless and pushed them all too hard. They became exhausted working with me. As Father reminded me last night, they do not have my strength and so he has been forced to suspend all work on the new tunnels and chambers until further notice. There is now an unofficial holiday down here. Catherine, you do see why it is important that we join the family for breakfast this morning - we must."

Catherine hugged him back and smiled. "Yes, of course I understand. Come, let's get ready and go together. I know now what it feels like to be part of this very special family."

A quick dash to the nearest wash area and they were soon ready to face the entire community, if necessary. Hand-in-hand they entered William's kitchen, the smell of freshly baked bread filling their nostrils. Catherine's earlier fears of embarrassment was unfounded as they were both greeted naturally and very warmly. It was obvious that everyone was pleased she was back. Vincent had already decided to make his apology straight away and after speaking to Father he then addressed everyone else.

"My friends, I want to apologize to all of you for the way I have behaved during the past six weeks. For obvious reasons I was not myself, but this does not excuse what has happened. Now that Catherine is back and has assured me that she will not be accepting any more assignments that take her away. I can promise you that I will never be so thoughtless or inconsiderate again. Please.... believe me, I am truly sorry."

After this everyone crowded around them both, kissing and hugging. Breakfast proved to be a very enjoyable experience and because of the unexpected *'holiday'* everybody was in a jovial mood.

Once the clearing up was done, Father beckoned Vincent and Catherine to follow him. Vincent knew what was coming but Catherine was not that well informed!

Father settled himself in his big chair and then looked over his glasses at the pair of them standing in front of him. His tone when he spoke was unusually warm.

"Vincent, Catherine; well, I'm glad that you two have sorted yourselves out. You had us all worried for a while there. However, you know our customs here, Vincent. I see that you have covered the entrance to your chamber, well?"

Cathy was puzzled. *'What is going on,'* she thought.

Vincent looked at both of them and his heart rejoiced to be with the two people he loved more than life itself. He nodded to Father and smiling, answered. "Yes, I am well aware of our ways, Father!" He turned to Catherine and, taking her in his arms, said with a huge grin. "I told you Father would expect me to make an honest woman of you, Catherine!" In the space of seconds, she blushed to the roots of her hair, but her eyes were bright and as her blush deepened, she realized they were both enjoying every minute of their teasing.

Now, Vincent was the one to feel anxious as he turned back to face his father.

"The answer to your question, Father.... is.... yes. I do want to marry Catherine but I still have to ask her."

Catherine trembled. They had come so far. This was the moment she had waited for.

Before saying another word, Vincent kissed her tenderly, right in front of Father. Holding her at arm's length he said, "Catherine," his voice soft and gentle. "I love you with everything that I am and, if you think you could be happy to share my life, I should be honoured if you would agree to become my wife."

A sob caught in Catherine's throat as she collapsed against him and reached up to kiss Vincent's lips. Catherine answered with her heart. "You are my life, Vincent. There is no one but you for me. Yes, yes, yes, a thousand times yes! I long to be your wife."

Their excitement was infectious. They kissed each other, then Father and each other again. Father lifted Catherine's hand and kissed her fingertips. He had been deeply touched to witness Vincent's marriage proposal and Catherine's oh so tender acceptance left him in no doubt that their love would endure.

Still holding her hand, Father looked into Catherine's beautiful eyes, sparkling with happiness and said, "Catherine, I wonder if you realize just how often I have tried to imagine what the future would hold for my son? Well, now I know - *'YOU'* are his future. He is a very remarkable young man, but I am quite sure you know that already. You both deserve your happiness. Go now and plan your

future."

Finally, Vincent and Catherine hugged Father and walked from his chamber hand in hand. Father smiled as he watched them go. They were two of the lucky ones. They had found their destiny, in each other.

END