

# Test of Spirit

by Joyce Murray

(from *DREAMS IN AMETHYST*)

Catherine closed the last file with a sigh. Somehow days off were anything but that these days. She looked at her watch - 4:30. Her hand reached behind her head and massaged the back of her neck, trying to ease the ache that was her constant companion recently. A shower, change and then meet with Vincent for the concert in the park.

The hot water poured down over her head and soothed the headache. She stood just as long as she possibly could and then reluctantly stopped the shower. As she rubbed oil all over her body she thought what a luxury this was. There was a time she'd spend half the day pampering herself in this manner, but that was before, before Vincent. She closed her eyes and smiled at the thought of him.

Standing in front of the wardrobe, she ran her fingers over some of her clothes. She needed something elegant but not too delicate or revealing. After all, it was Vincent she was going to see and the tunnels were famous for sharp edges that could snare and rip clothes that were not tough enough to stand up to them. She settled on a calf length black dress. It was tough enough to stand up to the tunnels. The dress was slit to the thigh but, well, one out of two wasn't bad.

Catherine looked in the mirror. *Not bad* she thought. The dress was close-fitting and had a high neck; she smiled, that would compensate for the leg. Grabbing a coat, she locked up her apartment and left to meet Vincent at the park.

The park was emptying of people as Catherine made her way towards the access to the tunnels. The ground was damp underfoot and droplets of moisture covered the grass. Before long Catherine found herself alone as she continued her journey. The light was beginning to fail.

Catherine looked at her watch, it was just after six. She rebuked herself for taking so long in the shower. *Vanity, thy name is woman*, she could hear her father teasing. A tear formed at the thought of her father, how he would have liked Vincent. How she wished she could have shared her joy with her father, share their relationship with her friends, tell them all about him. Sometimes it was so difficult to keep quiet, to keep his secrets, keep him as her secret.

*Not far now*, she thought. Soon she'd see the light of the tunnel shining out like a beacon to welcome her home.

Suddenly, and with no warning, she felt a blow to the back of her head, stunning her. She turned, staggering unsteadily. Through half-closed eyes she could almost make out two men. One grabbed her, pushing her to the ground, pinning her there as the other began to tear at her dress.

**"No!"** Catherine tried to yell, but the word came out as a whisper. She tried to kick her way free, but the blow to her head and the force of the men holding her down left her powerless. *Vincent*, she thought as she began to lose the battle...

Far below, Vincent was helping unload stores, just arrived from Above, courtesy of a few Helpers. As soon as he felt Catherine's pain, Vincent grabbed his cloak and flew from the room. Running like the wind, he stormed through the tunnels.

Through their bond, Vincent felt Catherine's terror, he tried to run faster, then, just as he turned a sharp bend he collided with William and Cullen and a huge trolley of supplies. Supplies, Cullen and

Vincent clattered to the floor.

Cullen got up and he and William looked down at Vincent.

"He must have hit his head," said William as both men looked down at the motionless Vincent.

Cullen bent down and began to clear the store, as he did so Vincent began to moan. Slowly, he began to regain consciousness.

"How long have I..." began Vincent.

"Just a few moments," replied William. "I'm sorry, Vincent. We just didn't see you."

"It was my fau..., he began then suddenly he remembered. **"Catherine!"** Vincent yelled and rushed off. Running like the wind through the tunnels and finally out into the park. Fear exploded through him as he saw the crumpled body of a woman lying on the grass.

He paused, looking down he saw the torn clothes, the bruised and broken body of Catherine. He was too late. Vincent's body sagged and he fell to his knees, his whole being shaking with fury and despair and failure. Throwing his head back, he yelled out one word.

**"NOOOOooooooooo"**

Catherine tried to cover herself with the torn remnants of what once was her dress. As she did so she felt Vincent cover her with his cloak. She smiled thanks, unable to utter even one small word. Not even to him. Silently, he lifted her up into his arms and began the journey Below.

It was only when they were almost halfway to his chamber that could Catherine manage to speak.

"Vincent, I....," she began. Her words dissolved into a flood of tears. She felt his arms tighten around her.

"Shhhhh, don't try to speak, you're safe now." Vincent looke down into her eyes. How could she look at him, trust him. Would things ever be the same again, after this, after his failure.

Vincent took Catherine straight to the bathing chamber, at her request, picking up a change of clothing on the way. Silently, he waited outside whilst she washed, never taking his eyes off the tunnel, which led straight and then veered to the left. No one would hurt her ever again. No one would come near, not as long as he had breath in his body.

As Catherine emerged slowly from the chamber, Vincent scooped her into his arms and carried her to his chamber. Here she could rest.

Gently, he laid her down on his bed and then sat at the table. He turned the chair slightly. Now he could watch over her and also the entrance to the chamber. After about ten minutes, Vincent could hear the familiar tap, tap of a stick coming nearer and nearer, announcing Father's arrival long before the old man appeared at the door.

"Vincent, tell me, what happened?" Father looke anxiously from Vincent to Catherine, who lay silently in the bed.

"Catherine was attacked," Vincent stumbled over the words, afraid his despair would overwhelm him. He looked at Father, tears welling up in his eyes. Getting up from the chair, he staggered over towards Father. "I was too late. They...." He shook his head, unable to even speak the word.

Immediaely Father understood. "Let me..." Father began to move towards the bed, but was stopped by Vincent, suddenly straight and in control.

"No. I will care for Catherine. She needs no one's care but mine."

"Even so, Vincent, she must be seen by a doctor." Father continued to try to reach Catherine. This time Vincent placed both his hands on his father's chest.

"She needs no one but me!" Vincent's words were clear and precise, his voice raised slightly in order

to emphasize the point.

Father glanced over at Catherine, she seemed quiet and settled for the moment.

"Very well then. I'll see you in the morning." As Father left, he paused in the doorway to see Vincent settle himself down in the chair again. He looked anxiously from Vincent to Catherine, then left for his own chamber, desperately hoping that things would be well for them both. Yet a small voice in his head said that this was not to be. Father shook his head as if to dispel the sense of foreboding that was welling up in him.

Catherine did not sleep, but lay staring silently upwards. Horror filled her face as the events of that night went round and round in her head. Every few minutes her eyes travelled to Vincent and she tried to smile. He took her hand and squeezed her fingers gently. No words were needed, but the reassuring sound of the gentle *rest* that Vincent whispered was both comforting and welcome.

In the early hours of the morning Father returned with a couple of sleeping pills. He paused at the entrance of Vincent's chamber.

"These will help her sleep." Vincent took the pills and thanked Father.

Within half an hour, Catherine was asleep. Vincent remained awake watching over her until morning.

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Peter Alcott greeted Father warmly. "How is Catherine?" Peter laid a small medical bag down on Father's desk.

Father shook his head. "Vincent isn't letting anyone in to see her, not even me. She needs a medical check-up."

"Catherine will understand." Peter sounded emphatic. "I've known her all her life. She will listen, and persuade Vincent against this course of action."

Father smiled in response to his friend's words, hopeful yet not convinced.

Apprehension filled both men as they approached Vincent's chamber. They were surprised to see Catherine up and dressed when they arrived. Vincent was not present, and a feeling of relief filled both men simultaneously.

Peter immediately took Catherine in his arms. "It's okay. How are you? Let me check you over."

Catherine took a step back and tried to smile. "I'm fine, Peter. Vincent has taken care of me. Besides a few bruises, there is no physical damage. I think I'd like some peace and quiet for a few days. Could you get a message to Joe?"

"Sure, but have you considered talking to someone, a counsellor? And i really think you should let Father or myself look you over."

**"No!"** Catherine's abruptness was the only betrayal of the previous night's events. "I'm fine, really."

Both men looked anxiously at Catherine.

"You will get help, talk to someone." Father's hand reached over to touch Catherine's shoulder. Catherine pulled back and almost simultaneously a low throaty growl could be heard from the chamber entrance.

Vincent had returned, he immediately joined Catherine, putting himself between her and her visitors. "Catherine would like some peace and quiet." Vincent started to take a place nearer Father and Peter. The low rumble had returned.

Father looked angry. **"Vincent, we have come to help. Catherine ought to be checked over by a**

**doctor.** You two are not able to make a judgement on her medical condition."

Peter joined in the conversation. "She needs help, a counsellor. Not to mention the police. Are you aware of the evidence that is destroyed simply by the victim washing?"

Vincent stood staring at the two men not answering their questions. The quiet rumbling, the only evidence of his feelings. Suddenly, he turned.

Catherine sat on the bed, tears falling silently. He immediately sat on the bed beside her. His arms encircled her and they sat silently together. After what seemed like ages and what in fact was only seconds, Vincent lifted Catherine into his arms. He paused as he stormed past Father and Peter.

***"Since you will not leave us in peace, we will leave you."***

Peter looked anxious. "Catherine, please..."

Catherine looked at Father, then at Peter for a moment. It looked as if she was going to say something, then she buried her head against Vincent's neck and almost as if it were a signal, Vincent carried her from the chamber.

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For five days no one saw or heard anything from Vincent and Catherine. Father had decided against sending out search parties. He couldn't forget the look on Vincent's face as he left the chamber so many days ago. At one time, he could influence Vincent, guide him, but now, since Catherine...

He sighed. "Whoever said it was easy being a parent?" Father turned to see Peter standing there. Father shook his head.

"There has been no word from them. I'm beginning to worry. I'm not sure what to do. Under normal circumstances Vincent would never cause me to worry so."

Peter sat on the chair beside Father.

"They'll return in their own time. Maybe this is what they need, some time alone. Catherine will be able to heal, get stronger before she has to face the world Above."

Father nodded. "I hope so. I'm worried about Catherine. But she's strong. She'll cope eventually. It is Vincent I'm worried about. How is he coping with the fact that he didn't get there in time? He didn't save her this time."

Peter sat silently listening to his friend.

"We must be there for both of them. Both will need help. But..." He paused. "We can't do anything until they return."

They sat in silence for a few moments.

"How about some tea?" Father called for Kipper to bring tea and both settled down to look over some medical journals Peter had brought.

Later, as Father was putting away some medical supplies Peter had brought, he had an overwhelming feeling of being watched. Slowly he turned to see Vincent and Catherine standing watching him from the doorway. Father's relief was obvious.

"Thank God. Catherine, how are you? We've all been so worried."

Catherine smiled. "I'm better. I've got to get back, start my life again. I can't hide down here forever."

Vincent stood beside her, his hand holding hers. He said nothing. Father looked at him anxiously, hoping for a word that would dispel the fear growing within him. Growing larger by the minute.

Catherine hugged Father.

"Thank you. For everything; for worrying. Vincent will guide me up now. I'll see you soon. And Father, I'm sorry if we..."

Father shook his head.

"It's all right. You've nothing to apologize for. I'll see you soon."

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Catherine was happy to be home in her own apartment again. She looked at the messages on the answering machine. The number ten was flashing on and off. She picked up her pen and pad and began to listen. Several friends had called, then a voice that turned her blood cold.

***DID YOU HAVE A GOOD TIME WITH US, THE OTHER NIGHT IN THE PARK? WE HAD A REAL GOOD TIME. WE'LL SEE YOU SOON, MISS CHANDLER. WE LEFT YOUR BAG WITH THE GUY AT THE DOOR. OH, AND WE TOOK A LITTLE SOMETHING FOR SERVICES RENDERED.*** A cackling laugh ended the message.

Catherine sat silently on her bed, fury filling her whole being. Fear tried desperately to catch hold of her, but Catherine pushed it from her mind. She would overcome this and catch these monsters, if it was the last thing she did.

Suddenly, the ringing of the telephone jolted her. It was Greg Hughes.

"Miss Chandler, we've got a guy down here who seems to be in possession of your credit card. Could you come down and identify it?"

Catherine felt her blood run cold.

"I'll be right there."

Twenty minutes later, she was entering Greg Hughes' office. He handed her the card.

"Are you going to tell me who this punk is that got your credit card and why you haven't reported it missing? There has been a substantial sum run up on it over the last few days."

Catherine bowed her head.

"I wasn't aware it was missing," she said feebly. "I've not been well the past few days. Someone must have stolen it before I took ill."

Greg looked at her, disbelief written all over his face.

"You expect me to believe that?"

Catherine looked him straight in the eyes. "Yes," she answered.

"Very well then. The guy will be charged with theft. His lawyer will probably have him out of here within the hour."

Catherine nodded.

"You'd better get in touch with the credit card company ASAP."

Catherine thanked him and left. Luck was on her side, as a cab pulled in just as she left the police precinct. She breathed a sigh of relief as she sat safely in the cab and returned to her apartment.

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Vincent was sitting quietly at his table, his mind buried in plans of the tunnels. Father stood by the entrance watching him for a while before he spoke.

"Is there something I can help you with, Vincent?"

Vincent turned. "No." Without saying another word, he went back to the plans which were unwrapped before him on the table.

"What are you doing?" Father joined Vincent at the table.

Vincent sighed. "I am trying to find a short cut up to the park. If we cut a tunnel here and here," Vincent pointed to two places on the plans. "It would take twenty minutes off the journey."

Father toyed with a pen nervously. "And it would take us weeks to cut through. Not to mention the amount of people we'd have to take off other projects. It is simply not practical."

Vincent stood up, a look of fury filling his face. He banged his file down on the table and then with one sweep of his hand cleaned everything from it.

**"Then let us not bother. What is Catherine's safety compared with a few weeks work."** Vincent stormed from the chamber.

Father sat down, his head buried in his hands. He wasn't aware of Mary's presence until he felt her hand on his shoulder.

"This won't last, Father. He'll soon be back to normal."

Father looked at Mary's smiling face. "I hope so, Mary. I really do hope so."

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Much later, Vincent found himself on Catherine's balcony. He sat watching, whilst unaware of his presence, she had dinner, read, took a few phone calls, had a shower and then finally went to bed and fell asleep. Silently, he removed his cloak and prepared to spend the night guarding her. If she wouldn't stay Below with him, then he would watch over her Above, in silence. By the early hours, he was asleep.

Suddenly, a noise tore him from his sleep. The sound of two gunshots had him on his feet immediately.

He darted into Catherine's apartment to see her standing over the bodies of two men. Catherine stood with the gun in her hand. Vincent looked from her to the bodies.

"Are they the ones, the ones who...?"

Catherine nodded. "You'd better go. I'll have to phone the police."

Vincent closed his eyes and stood motionless for a moment. Then he turned and left. Catherine sat and waited for the police.

Below the building Vincent collapsed against the wall of the tunnel and slumped to the ground. He'd wait until he could return to her.

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There seemed to be police all over her apartment. Catherine sighed as the officer in charge asked her to give him the details for the umpteenth time.

"From the beginning, Miss Chandler," he said as he made himself comfortable on the small couch opposite to where Catherine sat. With the sound of tedium creeping into her voice, Catherine began to retell the story that she thought the police would believe. She explained about the missing credit card, her *illness* for the past few days, and the fact that she panicked when she became aware of intruders in her apartment, and how she had pulled the gun and shot them before she realized what she had done. The police officer stared hard at her, as if he knew there was more to this story than she was admitting to.

"Fine, Miss Chandler. We'll leave it there for now. I would ask you not to leave New York for the moment."

After what seemed forever the entire police entourage left her alone in her apartment. Her immediate instinct was to flee Below to Vincent. Grabbing her purse, she opened the door and froze. Outside her door was a policeman sitting on a small chair a little way off. Catherine took a deep breath and retreated back inside her apartment. What she needed was fresh air and a moment or two to think. She fled to the sanctuary of her balcony. There she half-hoped Vincent would be waiting, but knew somewhere deep inside he would not be. Not with all these police all over the place. Again she was reminded of the difficulties of their relationship. They had to do something. No, she had to do something.

Two alternatives sprang to mind, either she moved Below with Vincent and gave up her life here or she ended their relationship. Immediately, she pushed the latter thought from her mind. That was just not an option. Without him, what was there? Nothing, she answered herself.

Yet she knew the implications of what she had done. No one could go around shooting people. Her life could be over anyway. God, she needed Vincent. She needed his strength. She needed help. Only one person sprang to mind. Returning inside, she picked up the phone.

God, she thought as the phone rang out. Please be there.

"Hello, Joe Maxwell," came Joe's voice. Catherine slumped down on the bed.

"Joe, I need help. Can you come over. I've got to talk."

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Far Below, Vincent was picking up a plethora of mixed emotions from Catherine. Desperately he tried to rationalize the events of the past few days. Everything that had happened, all of it, was his fault.

If he hadn't collided with William and Cullen, if he didn't have to hide Below like an.....If he hadn't met her, if they hadn't fallen in love. If he could only be with her, protecting her. Thoughts flowed through his whole being, mocking him, tormenting him, till he couldn't cope. All he could think to do was run but his feet wouldn't move. He wanted to run far into the earth where he could drown in the black darkness that was his domain. That was all he was fit for now, now he had failed her. He had no right, no right to even glance at her, no right to have any part in her life.

Suddenly a crescendo of despair tore from his soul. Vincent slumped to the tunnel floor, roaring out of control, growling and snarling at everything that moved, even the smallest and most innocent of insects that dared to catch his eye.

From behind the viewing wall Mouse stared in disbelief and fear. Vincent needed help. Immediately he sent a message to Father. He would know what to do.

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Flashing his identity card at the officer outside Catherine's apartment, Joe rushed through the open door and into Catherine's arms.

Later, over coffee, Catherine finished telling Joe everything. The only detail she left out was Vincent's appearance. Joe looked at her in astonishment.

"This place .... Below. There are no criminals hiding out down there?"

Catherine shook her head "No."

"These guys are the ones who....?"

"They were the ones who raped me. I don't mind you saying the word." Catherine picked up the coffee mugs and left for the kitchen.

Joe looked around Catherine's apartment. "Well then, where's this guy, Vincent? Why ain't he here?"

Catherine suddenly felt afraid. and it dawned on her that telling Joe about the tunnels was suddenly not such a brilliant idea.

"It isn't possible for him to be here right now."

Joe stared at her in disbelief. ***"Isn't possible for him to be here? God, Radcliffe. What kind of guy is this? Is his world so precious to him that he leaves you at a time like this? Does he not have a modicum of feeling or does he have a wife that may just need too many explanations?"***

Catherine felt anger and distress well up in her. "No, Joe. There is no wife, and he is the most feeling man I have ever known. This will be killing him, the fact that he can't come to me. It's just ... I'm sorry, I can't say anymore. I've said too much already."

Joe tried to look more compassionate. "I'm sorry, kiddo. I'll see if I can get something from that guy who is heading the case. What's his name? Lieutenant Graham, wasn't it?"

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Father had lost no time getting to the viewing wall Mouse had called from. Mouse quickly told Father what he had seen earlier and together they looked through the peephole. Vincent stood passively against the wall. Father had no reason to disbelieve Mouse, but did look from Vincent to Mouse and back again. Taking a deep breath, Father joined Vincent where he stood.

"Is everything all right, Vincent?"

Vincent stood silent for a moment, then looked at Father. "No," he replied simply. "I have decided to go away for a while. Catherine is devastated and I cannot even comfort her. I couldn't protect her. I must end our relationship. She must be allowed to develop a new life. A life not complicated by me."

Father looked uneasy. "Vincent, please wait. Let things settle down. Talk to Catherine. She doesn't expect you to..."

***"She doesn't expect anything,"*** Vincent yelled back at Father. ***"Don't you understand, Father? Of course she doesn't expect anything of me, how could she? I'm useless, impotent. I can do nothing to help her, Father. I can't even comfort her. Now it seems I can't even protect her. I can do one thing for her now and that is to leave. Allow her to live a normal life, and that is what I intend to do now."***

He stepped forward and hugged his father. Biting back the tears, he whispered, "I'll be in touch. As soon as I'm able to. Please explain to Catherine I don't wish to see her again. I'll return when I have heard word from you that she has promised not to return Below." Vincent strode off down the tunnel, leaving Father speechless and distraught.

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Joe had been on the telephone for ages. Catherine paced up and down nervously. Anxiously looking towards Joe every moment or two. Eventually, he put the phone down and grinned over to Catherine.

"Both guys were armed. Not only were they armed, the guns had been fired recently. Graham reckons he'll put it down to self-defense."

Catherine slumped into a small chair. "Thank God, Joe. How can I thank you?"

"There's no need. How about another coffee?"

Catherine nodded and Joe left for the kitchen.

"Radcliffe, you got any sugar?" Joe called from the other room.

Catherine stood up. "It's in the...," she began, suddenly feeling cold and clammy. The next thing she knew Joe was looking down at her and she was lying on her bed. "Joe, call Peter Alcott. I feel..."

"Sure." Joe fumbled through Catherine's addressbook until he got the doctor's number and soon was anxiously giving the details to Peter.

Peter sat listening to the latest dramatic events earnestly. "You've got to take some time off, Cathy. Six weeks at least till you get some kind of peace back into your life."

Joe smiled down at her. "I agree. You know you haven't had a break in eighteen months. Now I'm going to leave you in the doctor's capable hands and I don't want to see you in the office till you're fighting fit. Okay?"

Catherine smiled up at him. Joe thought to give her a hug and then changed his mind.

"I'll call you, Cathy, and don't worry about anything." Joe said the last word slowly, unaware that Peter was familiar with the tunnel world.

Catherine closed her eyes and then opened them slowly. She glanced over to the window. Darkness was falling.

"Peter, get Vincent."

Peter nodded. "I won't be long. Have a rest for a few minutes."

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Far below the city, Vincent had begun his journey into the bowels of the earth. Each step tearing him apart. Suddenly, he stopped. Someone was approaching. Then almost out of nowhere stepped Narcissa.

"Vincent, child, so far from home."

"Narcissa, I need to be alone for a while."

Narcissa looked at him intensely, and Vincent knew that the old woman could see straight into his heart.

"You are running away?"

"It's for the best, Narcissa."

"For whom is it best, Vincent? Not for you. Not for the woman. She calls for you. Can you not hear her calling?"

"Narcissa, please."

Narcissa pulled herself up as if to try to make herself taller. "You leave her and she is lost to you. She calls your name and when you ignore her, she withers and dies like the flower, child." Narcissa pulled a dried rose from her bag. "*This* is your Catherine without you. A dried flower that's lost its perfume and its bloom, ready to crumble to the dust."

Vincent looked at the flower crumbling in the old woman's hands.

"Go, child. Go to her and learn of all the wonderful flowers that will be known to you and her ... together."

Vincent raised his head suddenly, knowing what he must do. Narcissa watched smiling, as Vincent flew through the tunnels upwards, till some time later he burst into Catherine's room.

Catherine lay in her bed, staring blankly at the ceiling. Father and Peter were by her bedside and Father was desperately trying to explain his meeting with Vincent earlier.

Vincent picked Catherine up into his arm. "I've come to take you home."

Catherine's eyes lit up. "For always?"

Vincent nodded. "Yes, for always."

END