

## A TIME TO MOURN

by Katrina Relf

She ran to him, as she had run to him so many times before. He was the only one who could take away the pain. The only one who truly understood. And he was waiting.

“I need you, I need you,” was all she could say, and somehow, tonight, she knew that she needed more than just his arms, more than just the comfort of his voice.

Vincent knew her need, as he knew her every need; but he knew her sadness too. And he would protect her – as always – from her need of him – from himself.

She sat on the bed, in the quiet of the Guest Chamber, soothed by the candlelit peace of the Tunnels. She felt so tired, so alone, now that he was leaving.

“Vincent.”

He turned.

She wanted to say, *“I need you near me tonight. Please stay.”* And he would have stayed. Perhaps he would have loved her, if he had known how much she craved his love. He could deny her nothing. But she felt it to be wrong. How could she long for Vincent’s love, for his touch, when she was grieving her Father so.

And so she just said “Goodnight.”

Vincent could feel her confusion, her sadness, but there was something else – a need to be close to him that he had never felt before. He wanted to stay, to hold her and take away her pain, but he knew that her grief was too raw for just nearness. Tonight would have been everything, and that, he felt, would have been a violation of her Father’s memory ... and so he left.

He could not sleep. Every part of him longed for Catherine. He was lost in a world of wanting – the feeling rising in him like a tide. To have her so close, so near. Everything he had ever wanted was here in his world. But he must stay

apart – he must let her grieve. He had no idea how long she would stay. He just knew that he must be here for her, must envelop her in a warm, safe web of love. His own feelings were unimportant.

The next morning, he found Catherine in the Chamber of the Falls. She seemed relaxed, calm, yet he could feel the emptiness within her.

She told him, “I want to stay in your world – I don’t want to go back.”

He thought his heart would burst. These were the words that he had hoped against hope to hear – for so long a time. But he knew that they were spoken in grief and that he must not allow himself to set too great a store upon them.

He calmed his voice enough to say, “I don’t want you to go back.” No more. What more was there to say?

That night he could feel her immeasurable sadness. He knew that he must go to her – offer what comfort he could. As he moved through the tunnels, he could hear her weeping. It tore at his heart. Her pain was his pain – and it was unbearable. He reached her chamber to find her sitting on the bed, sobbing. She looked so vulnerable, so small. He sat beside her, wrapping her in his arms.

“Just cry,” he said, and he held her close – his warmth, his love, soothing her.

She felt like a child in his arms. She cried until there were no tears left. But still she clung to him, unable to face the night without him.

“Don’t go.” It was almost a plea.

He lay down beside her, still holding her, wishing never to let go. Her head lay upon his chest, her body pressed against him – the steady, slow beat of his heart lulling her to sleep.

He lay very still, every part of his body pulsating from the nearness of her. He didn’t know how much longer he could bear the closeness, the intimacy, before the darkness within him began to stir. Minutes passed, or was it hours? She moved, turned away from him. Yet still he could feel her – could feel the warmth of her body against him.

He wanted to stay, he wanted to hold her – to love away her pain. But already the hunger was there and he must leave while he still could. Gently he lifted her head to free his arm. Lovingly, he brushed her hair from her eyes. Then, with one final, tender glance, he left the chamber.

He lay on his bed, but sleep eluded him. He could still feel Catherine's body pressed against him, still feel her warmth, her closeness. He cursed his body for its aching need of her, and resigned himself to another sleepless night.

Catherine awoke to the knowledge that she was not alone. She turned to where Vincent had lain, calling his name.

But before she had time to wonder why he would have left her, she heard her father's voice say, "Don't laugh, don't laugh, don't laugh," and there he was, sitting at the foot of her bed. It was certainly her father, and yet she didn't feel as though she was dreaming. He was there, and as they spoke she couldn't hold back the tears. She had missed him so. She felt a new closeness with him, one that had been missing for so long.

He knew about Vincent, he knew about her new life, and he was happy for her. He trusted her. All too soon he had to leave. She knew that she would never see him again, but she also knew that he would always be with her. As he left the chamber he took away the deepest part of her sorrow, and left her peace.

Sadly though, with this new-found peace, came the knowledge that she wanted to return to her world, to her work, that she needed to see the sunshine again. How could she leave without hurting Vincent? How could she tell him? She had forgotten the strength of their bond.

Vincent found her again in the Chamber of the Falls. He listened as she told him of her Father's visit. He already knew her decision. He could see it in her eyes, he could read it in her heart. He wanted there to be no guilt – he had to make it easy for her.

"You found peace with him, but not yet with yourself?"

"I'm not sure."

"Don't ever be afraid of the truth."

"I don't want to hurt you. I don't ever want to disappoint you," she said, her eyes pleading for his understanding.

"By returning above?" he asked, although he already knew the answer.

"I feel that I have failed."

"There is no failure. It doesn't mean our dream can never be. It just means that now is not the right time. You came here to grieve, and to begin to heal, but now your duty is to be in your world. You are a woman of both worlds."

She knew he understood. Of course he understood. She just prayed that he wasn't hurting too much.

"Vincent, do you think that someday ... will we ever be together, truly together?"

"Only if and when we understand how great the sacrifices, how large the fears, and are able to move through them."

She took that thought with her as he walked her back to the threshold. When the time came to leave she suddenly felt as vulnerable as she had all that time ago, when he had first brought her here.

"I'm a little scared," she said.

"I know."

"Isn't that strange?"

"No." And his eyes told her she had the strength, the courage, as he had told her so many times.

She put her arms around him, holding him as tightly as she could, hoping that he knew just how grateful she was – too grateful for mere words. Then she turned and walked away. But suddenly, the realisation of all he had done for her and how dearly it had cost him, stopped her short. There were no words – or perhaps there were. She walked back, reached up and kissed him on the cheek.

She said simply "Thank you, Vincent.." This time she turned again and walked into the light.

Vincent stood, his eyes fixed upon the spot where she had disappeared. His aloneness was surrounding him like a cold grey web, seeping into his heart. At last he turned, unable to see anything, blinded by his tears. Unable to hear anything but his own weeping.