

AND OTHER PALMS WERE WON

by Lyn Roewade

Father pattered about in the Hospital chamber, smiling a little to himself. Children were the same as they had been since time began; they would run as fast as they could, and fall and scrape knees, elbows, hands and sometimes foreheads. He's spent the last hour and a half patching up casualties in the younger age group, alternately comforting and mildly scolding.

Mary said, "I've stacked the gauzes, Father. We are running a bit low on plaster bandages though, and more antiseptic cream will be needed." Her clear eyes beamed softly at him.

"Oh fine - thank you, Mary. I'll get word to our Helpers about that." He nodded affectionately at the woman who'd been his trained nurse, qualified midwife and capable medical assistant for so many years - not to mention being his staunch friend.

His thoughts drifted to Jessica, the attractive photographer he'd loved so intensely, but so briefly. Except as good friends, they had grown too far apart now. As the weeks went by, he was wryly surprised at the lessening of the pain of separation.

Using his peripheral vision, he noted Mary's deft but unobtrusive activities. How had he failed to notice the selfless, modest love which humbly made do with his mere presence and words? Vincent had told him (*in complete confidence*) of Mary's heartfelt outpouring in his - Father's - absence Above. And when Mary had joined her memory and knowledge to Diana's invaluable intuition, Vincent had been able to rescue him from the coffin in which Gregory had buried him alive. As he had re-entered the Council chamber where the others were meeting, Jessica had rushed to hug him. Over her shoulder, he'd seen the joy, relief *'and love'* shining out of Mary as he spoke her name; but one thing was almost inappropriate. Ah yes - she had murmured "Father," even at such a time.

He waited until she was finished with the minor chores, and was calmly facing him.

"You know, I've been called *'Father'* for so long and by so many, that sometimes I also forget my name," he smiled. "But I'd really appreciate it if - only when we're alone together, as we are now," (*he added that quickly, taking one verbal step at a time with her*) "You would call me Jacob."

Mary blushed a little and considered this. "It feels strange, breaking the habit of so many years. But... I suppose I did that when I first came to the tunnels anyway." He smiled at her encouragingly. She continued, "All right, I'll try it - Jacob."

He knew that she, of all people, would use his name sparingly even then; but that very few had a better right to use it.

"Very well, Ben - take four men and begin sealing up that entrance. Ever since the assassin destroyed it, and Diana was attacked there, I have felt uneasy about it. It's late now; start tomorrow morning."

Ben nodded - pleased, at Vincent as he received the word to begin work. Security measures like

this needed word from the right source.

Vincent sighed softly. These days, he was called upon for so many decisions, big and small. Amused, he recalled the two children's disputes he had settled this morning. The young ones could become so indignant, but at least they accepted what he finally told them. Geoffrey and Dustin argued more vehemently, and his formidable presence alone had controlled matters yesterday, until calm was restored. He had assented to supplies being utilized - his head reeled from all of it.

He did not mind; making decisions of all kinds came naturally to him. He came to the conclusion that the tunnel folk were used to him and his ways, his size and strength, and that that was why they sought and followed his leadership now. It went against his entire nature for him to realize this soon, that he was underestimating them and - even more so - himself.

He talked about these changes with Diana. They stood on the roof-patio of her loft, admiring the stars. She had persuaded him to use her telescope and he was fascinated by the new clarity of familiar constellations. She enjoyed his spontaneous reactions and wonder. To herself she marvelled; a great scholar, a man of so many accomplishments, of such physical and personal strength; and yet here he was on her patio delighted as a child with a new toy! She hugged herself, smiling, the maroon sweater enveloping her slim height, the superb titian hair cascading down her back.

Vincent turned around to look gratefully into her large, shining eyes.

"This is so kind of you, Diana. I have a whole new perspective on the night sky now."

"I'm glad," she told him. "You look so relaxed. Such a pleasant change from life-and-death situations." She leaned against the low wall, glancing out over New York's bright lights.

He turned towards her, cloak swinging in the light October breeze. He strolled over to lean on the wall beside her, light glinting on his richly golden hair.

"It's been unfortunate that we have had to meet so many times for such reasons. Thank you for sharing this pleasure with me."

As usual when he complimented or thanked her, looking at her directly with those disarming blue eyes - she blushed faintly, looked aside, and became a little flustered.

"You're.... you're very welcome, Vincent."

"As a matter-of-fact, there is something else I'd like to talk over with you - but simply as a friend." He looked down shyly, sorting his thoughts, and went on. "Ever since Father's stay Above with Jessica, many in our world have turned to me for decisions. I can well understand when it concerns our safety and security, but they have been seeking judgements from me, and directions about many, very different matters. I know you are a caring person and a true Helper - Diana, tell me if you think Father has noticed this?"

Diana considered her reply carefully. Vincent was so sensitive, that she must phrase this with precision.

"It seems to me that you're worried he may resent all this?"

He nodded, but waited for more of her words. She attempted further clarification.

"Perhaps he's a bit miffed? Feels unappreciated?"

"I had wondered if he felt as though superseded. My hope is that he does not feel as though I am

usurping his position. He helped *'build'* our world, Diana; and when I came, there was a place for me."

She smiled. "I know how devoted you are to him, Vincent. Frankly, I'd never accuse Father of jealousy. But I'm wondering if he feels that now he is back, he should remain in charge? You really must find a way to ask him yourself, you know."

"I know," he sighed. "It has to come. I simply wished to speculate about it. As you know, I have no desire to supplant him, only to help him." He straightened, and turned back to the telescope. He tilted his head questioningly, and Diana waved him towards the instrument. He turned it towards another celestial selection.

One evening, Vincent was sitting in his huge armchair in Father's chamber. The soft glow of many candles was soothing. He'd won at chess as usual, they had had some tea, and now both were browsing through books. His father was staring at an anthology of poems.

"What are you reading, Father, that absorbs you so? May I hear it?"

The older man looked up, his eyes lighting up, as usual, when his beloved son spoke.

"As a matter-of-fact, I read a few lines that are even sweeter, out of context." He smiled, looking at the candelabrum as though he'd never seen it before.

Vincent ventured to question him. "How does your heart feel now, Father? Has the pain of love subsided a little?" His soft, gravelly voice and obvious affection robbed the queries of any hint of presumption.

Father moved around a little in his chair, put his book down, picked it up again, and finally met the clear, sapphire depths of those loving eyes, with a rueful smile.

"As you may have surmised, Vincent, I am gradually adjusting to the distance from Jessica, in every sense. What I don't understand is how foolish I was not to have realized that Mary loves me." He stopped, looking at his son as if inviting comment. Vincent complied.

"I never appreciated her fully before, and must learn to show her that I took her for granted. Let me read you the lines of poetry which moved me just now;

*'Full many a gem of purest ray serene
The dark unfathomed caves of ocean bear
Full many a flower is born to blush unseen
And waste its sweetness on the desert air'.*"

(Thomas Gray - Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard)

They looked at each other for a few minutes, easy in mutual understanding. Then Vincent sat forward, placing his book on the table, in front of him.

"There is something else I wish to ask you, Father. A few days ago, Ben came to me for complete instructions as to the repair of the entrance destroyed by that assassin. I have had to arbitrate in young people's arguments. I have managed to convince William that the work Mouse and Jamie

are doing to improve ventilation in the Dining hall, takes precedence over their turns at dishwashing."

He stopped, as Father laughed.

"I wish I had seen that discussion."

Vincent allowed himself a smile, and went on. "It seemed strange to me to be having it at all, when you are available. I - feel as though I am taking on responsibilities which are not mine to take. If this is so, then I am sorry."

Father reassured him. "Oh Vincent, you have nothing to be sorry for. They came to you, not only because of your natural leadership, but because they can trust you. Your compassion, understanding and fairness of mind calls forth all the respect and love everyone feels for you, my son."

Vincent looked up, warmed but wondering, tears in his eyes. He had never seen himself in such a light, and he now appreciated Diana's tact. She - he was sure - had known of all this, but felt herself in no position to embarrass him in the least.

"Father, now that you are fully amongst us, please take charge again. I have no desire to usurp any prerogative of yours."

To his surprise, his father leaned back in the armchair, shaking his head and chuckling.

"Oh no; I like it the way it is now. I'm not going to end up as a cantankerous, aging tyrant, needing you to back up my ever whim!"

"You could never be like that!" Vincent protested.

"It's about time you assumed at least some of the mantle of even the most loving authority, officially, which has so far been unofficial."

"If that is your wish...."

"I need your help, more than ever now that you really are a mature man." Father rose, using his stick for leverage. His heart full, Vincent stood and went to him. They hugged each other silently, secure in their love and trust.

Diana was delighted and amused. "I told you so!" she teased. "Father's gone up in my esteem." Vincent smiled at that. "It's what you deserve," she said. "You work so long and hard for others, you should have the recognition!"

Shyly, Vincent thanked her for her kind words and for *'being there'* for him. She pointed out that she was only reciprocating. After all, he'd *'been there'* for her, as well as for all the tunnel people.

He turned to place his hands on the wall, and to look out over the night-lit sky.

"Diana, life never ceases to amaze me. When one way is blocked, another becomes clear. There is so much to live for, after all."

She turned to gaze out over New York as well, by his side, although they were not touching. They looked at the lights companionably. A light wind lifted Vincent's hair, and caught at his cloak, one corner of it blew around her shoulders.

Until the next time