

TO DREAM ANEW

by Anne McClelland

(from Dreams in Amethyst)

Dawn was breaking over the massive city of New York. The stillness of the morning soon gave way to the noise and bustle of the traffic in the streets below. It was dull, damp and cold. The mist still hung around the trees in the park, making it look empty and abandoned, although here and there, the morning sun pierced its way through the clouds, giving a ray of hope to those who noticed it. On a balcony high above the park stood a lonely figure, gazing out over the scene before her. She did notice that little ray of sun and, as she watched, she spoke out loud to herself.

"Well, Chandler, what does fate hold in store for you today?" She sighed heavily and turning on her heel walked back inside.

Her rucksack was packed with all the comfortable clothes and boots Vincent had advised her to bring. Her imagination had been running riot over the past week, trying to figure out what all the secrets could be that Vincent had kept from her during the three years they had known each other. It had taken Lisa's return to the tunnels for him to reveal what had happened between them - likewise with Devin. Vincent had never seemed to divulge much information about his past, or his world, unless a crisis had occurred, forcing him to reveal certain things to you,

Trying to be logical, she knew that the hiking boots had to be for a journey deep down in the tunnels, but to where? The Crystal Cavern was a possibility, but hardly a secret, when Vincent had given her a crystal from that very chamber. And what about Vincent's fear of this secret bringing about the end of us. She could not imagine anything coming between them - especially not now, just when Vincent was well and they were reunited again. She went over and over it all, but she was only going round in circles. All it did was give her a headache.

Well, she thought. Within the next few days, all will be revealed.

Surprisingly, Vincent was not at the threshold to meet her. She felt slightly annoyed but anxious too, wondering why he was not there. She set off through the tunnels, puffing a bit as she went, for she was not used to carrying a backpack.

Vincent was pacing up and down in what little floor space there was in his chamber. He knew she was on her way and not too happy about his absence, but he did not want to face all her questions on the way down here to the chambers. He wanted to sit down quietly with her and explain what he could - then, the rest he would have to show her.

When she approached at the door of his chamber, he leapt forward and took her rucksack from her. She was dressed in a lilac skirt suit and her usual high-heeled shoes. She read his face as he cast a

quick glance over her.

"Don't worry. I've brought the other clothes in the backpack. I just wanted to be reasonably presentable when I met you this morning," she smiled, as she walked into his embrace.

"Forgive me for not being there to meet you, Catherine? I have so much to tell you and to show you. I knew you would have many questions, but I did not want to try to explain everything on the journey down here."

"I understand," said Catherine. "Let's talk now, shall we?"

Vincent took her hand and led her from his chamber. Once they were seated at their favourite spot by the Falls, Vincent began.

"Catherine, you know that down here we must live by our own code of behaviour and our own laws. Some of those laws you already know, such as the ones for introducing newcomers to the community gradually - much as we do with new Helpers too. Well, there is one more rule, Catherine. It concerns a part of our world which is very, very important to us. It is a part which you do not know anything about. You will not have heard any of us speak of it - not even accidentally, because if we do need to discuss it in any way, it is done in silence, using paper and pen, the notes being destroyed afterwards. The reasons I couldn't tell you anything about it till now is because of our most important rule - one which cannot be broken under any circumstances - not even you and I falling in love with each other."

As Vincent said those magical words, Catherine let out a short gasp. Verbal expressions of his love for her were so rare, that it delighted her to hear him actually speak of them falling in love.

Vincent continued. "The rule is that any new member of the community must be known to us for at least three years and be completely trustworthy before they can be told about our secret.

"None of the other Helpers know about it, Catherine. It is our safeguard against being discovered here in the tunnels - a final refuge. It took me a long time to persuade the Council to allow you to be told. They relented eventually, but I still had to wait until we had known you for three years. It is three years now and, over the next few days I will tell you and show you everything."

"You can't tell me, here, can you?" Catherine asked quietly.

"No, that is why we are leaving on our journey today - and the reason why I asked you to bring all the suitable clothes for travelling."

Catherine realized that she was going to have to be patient a while longer, so she smiled and hugged Vincent close. To her surprise, he squeezed her even closer, holding her for so long she could hardly breathe. Then, at last, he relaxed and leant forward to gently kiss her on her forehead.

"Happy anniversary, Catherine," he whispered.

"Happy anniversary, Vincent," she replied.

Vincent and Catherine had left familiar places like the Mirror Pool, Chamber of the Winds and even the Catacombs far behind. Catherine was enjoying so much just being with Vincent and seeing him looking so strong and healthy again, that she sometimes almost forgot about the reason for this journey.

"How far have we come now, Vincent?" Catherine asked, several hours later.

"Probably about ten miles," replied Vincent.

"As far as that?"

"Yes. Quite often underground you're not aware of just how far you've travelled - the miles just seem to disappear," he smiled.

"I don't recognize any of these areas at all now," said Catherine.

Vincent was silent for a while, before he replied, "I know. Another few miles and we are going to stop for the night. Tomorrow will be a long and tiring day for both of us. It is important we have a good night's rest."

They stopped in a fairly large cavern, which had a small stream flowing nearby. While they waited for the water to boil for a hot drink with their food, they laid out their sleeping bags next to each other, neither of them wanting to be apart - not even for a moment.

Their meal over, they snuggle down together, too tired even for conversation and were both soon sound asleep.

The next day they travelled on, going deeper than Catherine could ever have imagined.

"Vincent, I know this sounds ridiculous, but are you sure we're still under New York?"

Vincent took a sidelong glance at Catherine's worried face and smiled to himself. "Catherine," he said softly. "I honestly can't say exactly what is above us right now, but I assure you that I know exactly where we are going - and we are not lost!"

Catherine smiled back at him, taking hold of his arm and pulling him even closer to her.

They passed through chambers full of stalagmites and stalactites. One particularly large cavern full of them looked incredibly like a huge cathedral.

Later, they passed through a chamber with so much green phosphoresce on its walls, that it looked eerie and almost sad.

Catherine shivered. "Give me Central Park at night anytime rather than this!"

Vincent put a comforting arm around her shoulders and said. "Wait till you see the next cavern we come to!"

After about another mile of tunnels, they walked into another large cavern, which had a small underground lake in its centre. Here the walls gave off a shimmering blue light. Catherine felt as if she had walked into the heart of a glittering sapphire. She could hear the rush of water somewhere close by. Vincent led her over to where a foaming waterfall gushed out of a crack in the cavern wall. Under their torch light, the waterfall looked so white against the blue of the cavern.

Catherine gasped at the sheer beauty before her. "Vincent, it's perfect!"

"It is beautiful, Catherine, but tomorrow you will see something even more beautiful, and much more magical, than even this."

Catherine pleaded with him to tell her what it was, but he would say no more.

They continue their journey, stopping here and there for snacks and a rest, until they rounded a sharp corner and walked straight into a large chamber, which was completely furnished.

Catherine stood there, rooted to the spot in amazement. Vincent lit the torches from his rucksack and

put them into the holders on the walls. He then lit several of the large candles, which gave the room the usual glow of the upper tunnels and chambers.

Catherine looked around. One half of the chamber was taken up with some large wooden, carved chairs. Shelves ran round most of the walls, obviously hewn out of the stone. They held everything from books to candles to plates - there was even a teapot. At the other side of the chamber were two huge beds, again made from wood, with old-fashioned stuffed mattresses. As Vincent opened a cupboard and began removing blankets and pillows. Catherine eventually found her voice.

"Vincent! How on earth did you get all these things down here through all those tunnels and climbs we've travelled through?"

She was surprised to hear him laugh. "You'll find out tomorrow, Catherine!" and that was all he would say.

Catherine was becoming more and more annoyed though at his silence. When she realized he still had no intention of telling her about this mysterious secret place, she lost her temper.

"Vincent!" she screamed. "I can't stand this any longer. You told me that all these secrets could mean the end of us-----and you expect me to sleep another night without even a clue about what is going to happen tomorrow? Well, I've got news for you. I'm not going to step further till you tell me exactly where we are going."

Her face flushed with anger, she stomped over to one of the chairs and flopped down on it.

Vincent walked over to her and knelt down in front of her. He lifted one of her hands and, holding it close to his heart, he spoke softly. "I'm so sorry, Catherine. I can feel all of your uncertainties and I'd love to explain it all here and now, but if you would be patient just until tomorrow, then it really shall be easier to show you everything. In fact, I think you will need to see it to believe it."

Catherine looked up at him in wonder. "But how, Vincent? Why?"

"Remember, Catherine, when you first looked upon my face, when you first saw where I lived - I am sure you must have wondered sometimes if it was really happening, or just a dream? If someone had tried to tell you about me and this world, you would have found it very difficult to believe that it was true, because such things just do not happen in your world. Well, when tomorrow comes and you look upon our secret world, you will understand why I could not explain it with more words. I can only ask you to continue to trust me."

"Very well, Vincent. I'll be patient for one more day."

After they had eaten, they settle down on the huge bed to share a book from the shelves. They had read a few chapters of THE HOBBIT, when Catherine stretched out full length and yawned. Vincent closed the book and gently stroked her hair, before reluctantly getting up to put out the torches and all the candles except a long-lasting one.

They held each other close, so happy and contented to be together. Their thoughts wandered over all that had happened to them, until eventually Catherine spoke. "I know we talked about what happened while you were in the coma, but there is so much we did not discuss so much. I want to know about your dreams. Your nightmares."

"You only have to ask, Catherine. What can I tell you?"

"You told me all the facts, Vincent, what happened, but you have not told me how you felt. What your thoughts were? What went through your mind when I was kidnapped? And when I ... died? How did you feel when you discovered we had loved - and had a child."

Vincent held Catherine even closer to him, as if afraid in case she would disappear.

"The dream I had while in the coma was very much like the one I had last year. When I couldn't go to your lake with you. It was so very real ... a waking dream. When you disappeared, Catherine, I was devastated. I remember being on your balcony, waiting for you ... but you never came home. I felt so frustrated, because our bond had gone and I could not find you. I searched for you every night, for weeks ... months, growing more and more afraid and angry. The night I almost reached you brought me even more turmoil. I had come so close, but I was too late. My hatred of those who had taken you was almost enough to consume me, but I had to hold on. I knew that I would find you one day. I never gave up hope of finding you.

"On that night when our son was born, I thought it was your heartbeat that I was following and I was so determined to find you. Then, I thought it was you on board the helicopter and I was heart-broken. I could not believe I had failed you again ... but then I heard your voice. I experienced in one beat of my heart, the greatest joy I have ever known at seeing you again - and also the most terrible sadness I will ever know, when I realized you were dying."

Vincent's voice cracked in pain as he relived the worst awful moment he could remember. Catherine reached for his hand, intending to soothe him, but felt the tears first, rolling down his face.

Vincent continued. "I held you close to me for those last few seconds and although you told me that we had loved and had a son, I did not fully comprehend. I carried you home to your apartment and stayed with you till dawn. When it was time to go, I ... kissed you and promised you ... that while I live - you live - with me - in me - always. Then I had to leave you. I looked upon you one last time and again I promised you - always....."

Vincent wept uncontrollably in Catherine's arms and she simply held him close to her.

"Cry - just cry," she said, knowing that this was something he needed to do - to let go of this nightmare.

After a while, Vincent continued. "Our son gave me a reason to continue, a reason and the will to stay alive. I will never forget the wonderful joy I experienced, when I held him in my arms, even though I was a prisoner at the time. He was so beautiful, Catherine. He made me feel happy, almost at peace, as if I had a small part of you to hold again. Even when he was taken from me, I felt the bond with him grow stronger. Gabriel could not destroy it. The more I held him, especially when I took him home to the tunnels, the closer I felt to you. Looking back now, whatever you were doing to bring me out of the coma must have been successful. It was not long then until the nightmare - the dream - ended."

Vincent looked at her so tenderly, in the soft warm glow of the candlelight, that she thought she would melt under his gaze. He smiled and said. "This is a dream come true now, Catherine - a new dream, and how much more there is to come."

"Why have you not told me any more about Diana?" Catherine asked, suddenly realizing that he had not mentioned her.

Vincent sighed, closed his eyes and whispered. "I will explain about Diana tomorrow. Sleep now, Catherine."

After they had breakfasted on coffee and bread toasted on the camping stove with forks, they tidied up the chamber and set off again.

"How far will we walk today, Vincent?"

"It is only a few more miles to where we are going, Catherine. But first I want to make a slight detour. That is why I told you to bring the climbing boots and padding for your elbows and knees, as well as comfortable clothes. The detour requires more than mere walking!"

After an hour of stooping, bending, squeezing and even sometimes crawling, Vincent stopped. He turned to face Catherine, giving her such a sweet smile and one of those looks which she had come to know and love. He took her hand and led her down a slope. At the end, there was a steep drop, from where lots of shimmering light seemed to be coming.

Vincent dropped down first and then reached up to help Catherine down. When she turned around, her eyes opened wide with delight. "The Crystal Cavern! Oh Vincent, I can't believe we're here! I didn't realize how far away it was!"

Vincent nodded. "When I came here for your crystal, I travelled much faster and I did not sleep on the journey. I was so anxious, in case you would be in danger and I could not reach you."

Catherine wandered around touching the gems, looking at Vincent every few minutes as if to make sure this was really happening. She came over to join him and together they stood in silence. Catherine in front of Vincent, leaning back on his chest.

"Thank you, Vincent, for bringing me here. Whatever happens, I'll never forget this time I have spent here with you."

Vincent touched her cheek with one finger, and then gently turned her to face him before speaking. "I am glad you like this place, Catherine. It means so much to me. This cavern is so close to where our journey will end. It is the reason why I chose your crystal from here. I knew in my heart that one day we would make this journey together, and every time I gazed upon the crystal round your neck, it reminded me of what the future would hopefully hold for us.

"Catherine, as I said to you last night, the place I am taking you to now must be seen to be believed - to be understood."

Catherine stared into Vincent's blue eyes, which, with the colours of the gems reflecting in them, seemed to change colour by the second. He calmly looked back at her, wanting her to accept what he had told her.

"Come, Catherine," was all he said, as he helped her climb out of the Crystal Cavern and led her back down the tunnel.

They retraced their steps for about a mile or so and then turned into a different tunnel. Catherine noticed that the walls of the tunnels were becoming lighter somehow, as if made from a different type of rock, a type she had never seen before. Presently, they arrived at what appeared to be a dead end. Vincent reached behind a small rock and pulled a lever. Catherine gasped loudly when a whole section of what had appeared to be solid rock moved to one side. They passed through into the tunnel beyond. Vincent pulling another lever to close off the hidden doorway.

Before they moved off, Vincent spoke huskily, "Catherine, do you remember when I could not go to the lake in the mountains with you? I promised you that one day we would see that lake together?"

"Yes, I remember, but I could not understand why you had that little smile on your face when I was so obviously unhappy."

"I always keep my promises, Catherine. However, I do have a small confession to make. I told a little white lie. It is not your lake we are going to see, my love, but one which is just as beautiful."

Within minutes, Catherine could see a brilliant light at the end of the tunnel. She shielded her eyes as they came to the exit. The scene before her eyes was beyond her wildest imaginings. She had to turn and look back to confirm that she had indeed come from a deep dark tunnel and remind herself that she was many miles below the city of New York.

They were standing in brilliant sunshine. Just as the sun's rays above formed ghostly oriental fans across the sky, as they filtered through the clouds, here they did likewise. The sun's rays here though were like the rays from a dozen different suns as they crisscrossed each other in a multitude of directions.

They were standing on the edge of a beach. Catherine had seen shores all over the world, but never had she feasted her eyes on sand as clean and pure as this. It was so white, it looked almost like snow.

The beach bordered a small lake, the far side of which she could just see because of the brightly coloured sand on the shore. Since she had known Vincent, she had never seen anywhere in her world Above the exact shade of deep blue of Vincent's eyes - but here it was now, in this lake, miles below the city.

There was a young couple walking some distance away from them. With them were two children, obviously playing some sort of chasing game.

To the right of where they stood were high cliffs, which formed part of the rock, from which they had just emerged.

To the left of the lake, there was a narrow path heading up a gentle slope to a few small wooden cottages. They were painted white with red doors and windows and they almost seemed to be smiling at her and Vincent. Outside one of the cottages, sat two elderly men talking to each other. They ceased their conversation on spotting Vincent and waved down to him and Catherine.

On either side of the path, there was lush green grass, which was interspersed with bright yellow daffodils and multicoloured crocuses and tulips. Catherine noticed small streams flowing here and there, from various cracks and openings in the huge cavern's walls, irrigating the land which formed the floor of the cavern.

Eventually, Catherine found her voice. 'The Lost Valley ... Shangri-La ...' was all she could whisper. She sighed. "Vincent, it's so beautiful, but how on earth can the sun be shining down here?"

"We have never discovered why, Catherine, because we have never found a way into the rock above the ceiling of this cavern. To us, it is a miracle. We can only assume that the sun somehow filters through rocks and crevices and is magnified and reflected, perhaps off similar crystals as we saw in the Crystal Cavern, but really, there is no logical explanation. It is real and we have simply accepted it and rejoiced in it."

"No wonder you have to keep it a secret. How far does the caverns go on for?"

"We have reckoned it is roughly two miles across and about three miles long from here."

As they walked towards the cottages, Catherine spoke excitedly. "I have so many questions, Vincent.

Who lives down here? How often do you come? Is this where the furniture was made? Why don't you all live here?"

Vincent laughed out loud before answering. "There are some members of the community who live here permanently. Some of the older ones, like Sam and John over there, need the warmth from the sun and are too infirm to travel much now. Others are farmers, who grow basic foodstuffs for us. Between that and what we receive from our Helpers, we live well - as you already know. Some of us have cottages here - where we spend some of our time. Others do not come very often. When they do, they simply stay with those already here. There is no real danger here, so I stay above in the tunnels to protect those living there.

"Father will eventually come here too, I hope," Vincent smiled. "But he has no intention of giving up for a long while yet!

"There is an area of forest further along the shore. As we use the wood, we replant with new young trees brought down from Above," Vincent chuckled. "With difficulty! We are careful, though, not to use the wood indiscriminately.

"For all of us to live here would be wonderful, but we can only produce a certain amount of food here, which would not be enough for everyone - and we need things like fruit to supplement our diet. We also need to keep up our Helpers' network. We need medicines and various other things which can only come from Above.

"This apart, though, we have many, many good friends Above. We would not like to lose them and we feel it is important to keep up to date with what is happening, in the world Above. We do still live on the same planet!

"Most important of all, we need to be above in the tunnels and available, for those who need us and need a place to come to, where they will be safe and welcome."

They reached the cottages and stopped to speak to Sam and John. Catherine had met Sam before but not John and Vincent introduced them. She grinned warmly at both of them as they expressed their happiness at seeing her down here - at last.

John turned out to be quite a comedian and within minutes he had all of them laughing till they ached. He had one of those faces which could hold a dozen different expressions in mere moments and his dark brown eyes had such a lovely twinkle in them.

Sam was much quieter-natured, his white hair and beard reminding Catherine of a very gentle Father Christmas. He offered them tea, but Vincent declined on behalf of Catherine and himself, because he could sense Catherine's restlessness. He knew she must be desperate to see everything. So, agreeing to see them again at some point over the next few days, Catherine and Vincent continued past the cottages and arrived at the brow of the hill.

The land stretched away below them, but was surrounded on all sides by cliffs, all gleaming white with that same unfamiliar rock she had noticed earlier.

Catherine could see the area of trees Vincent had spoken of, about a mile away.

As they walked down through a mixture of long grass and rocks, Catherine suddenly clutched Vincent's arm.

"Vincent. Rabbits? Down here?"

Vincent's eyes smiled at her. "We bring down the occasional injured animal from Above. Here they

have the opportunity to heal and the peace to live their lives in safety. We do have to neuter the rabbits though, otherwise we would be overrun! Helpers Above take them to a veterinary clinic for their operations. There are several birds too, a few cats and even a dog. They are all quite tame and are fed by us."

One rabbit stopped near Catherine, cocked its head to the side as if to say, Hello, and then continue on its way.

Catherine laughed after it. "Now I really do feel like Alice! Pity it didn't say I'm late."

Vincent halted outside another cottage. It was painted in a cream colour and had a beautiful carved door. The windows on either side of the door had pale blue curtains. Vincent led Catherine to the door and stopped. She could feel the tension mounting in him and asked him what was wrong.

"This is my cottage, Catherine."

"Oh, Vincent. It's lovely. Were you afraid I wouldn't like it?"

"No, but there are things now which I must tell you. Come inside."

There was a small living room with a handmade sofa and two large wooden chairs. There was also a writing desk and a small table.

Catherine wandered through to the little kitchen. It was surprisingly feminine, compared to the more solid look of the living room. There was an old-fashioned stove, the type which had to be stoked up with wood or coal as fuel. On the shelves were pretty plates, cups, saucers and a few pots and pans.

"Where do we get water, Vincent?"

He smile at her. "Look out of the window at the back, Catherine."

She drew back the little curtain to see a small waterfall tumbling down from the nearby rocks. It formed a narrow stream which led to the lake.

On further exploration, Catherine was amazed to find a small bathroom. Vincent had followed her and explained; "We decided to put in some plumbing. The waste goes into a separate stream further down the hill. It is very fast flowing and runs away below the cliffs near the forest."

There were two bedrooms, both quite large. Each had rugs and ornaments and all the little bits and pieces it took to make a home.

Catherine sighed and embraced Vincent tightly.

"Come and sit down, Catherine," he said. "We must talk."

Once seated on the small sofa, Vincent began. "Catherine ...," but before he could continue, Catherine spoke to him.

"Vincent, I don't know why you thought all of this could mean the end of us? It is so beautiful and wonderful, I feel as if I am dreaming." As she spoke, she held his hand, gently stroking the fur on the back of it.

Vincent looked at her. He could sense only her love flowing through the bond. He knew she meant every word. Eventually he spoke. "Catherine, I have spent these past three years trying to be honest and open with you. We have never kept the truth from each other, however, I have had to keep this part of our world a secret - from you - the one I love more than anyone or anything. For two of those years, my only hope of ever revealing all this to you was that someday you would want to come

Below to stay - forever. Even then, I did not know how you would ever be able to forgive me for being so secretive. At the time you did come Below, just after your father's death, I allowed myself to hope, just a little, but deep in my heart I knew that you simply required time to grieve and that once you had begun to heal, you would return Above. The Council only allowed me to tell you our secret after you almost died that night, just after our second anniversary."

Catherine could not keep quiet at this. "But, there were many times when I - you too - have almost died. What made them change their minds?"

Vincent lowered his head, his hair covering his face. After what seemed like an eternity to Catherine, he lifted his head to look at her.

"It was because you almost drowned in the lake, Catherine, and because of something which happened many years ago. The similarities opened the eyes and ears of those in the Council - opened their hearts to you fully - and to what we shared. They realized just how precious you are to me and decided to make an allowance - for me - for us. However, I was asked to wait till I had known you for the three years."

"What was it, Vincent? What happened all those years ago that influence the Council so much?"

"This cottage did not only belong to me, Catherine. I shared it with someone who was very special to me. Her name was Diana."

Vincent stopped again and looked away from Catherine, staring out of the window. Catherine waited patiently, realizing that for some reason, this was very difficult for him.

"Catherine," he continued, "Diana and I developed a bond between us, similar to the one you and I have, although not quite as strong. The positions were reversed, though. I could only sense from her, the same level of thoughts and feelings I normally sense from other people sometimes, just as you did at first. I could tell if she suddenly felt ill or had injured herself. However, she could sense my thoughts and feelings in the ways I could sense yours."

Vincent stopped abruptly once more as he wept. Catherine held him close in her arms and asked him. "Why are you crying, Vincent?"

When he was ready, he answered, "I felt such a mixture of emotions when I consider all that has happened, Catherine. I know that I would have to tell you about this bond I shared with someone else, but I was so afraid, in case you would think that it diminished in any way what we share.

"It's just that a part of me has always wondered, if the bond between Diana and myself would have become stronger, would it even have led us to love? Then, when I think of what you and I share now, there is no comparison. I love you, with all that I am, Catherine. But I feel such terrible guilt. It is almost as if I am glad that Diana has gone, for she ... she died."

"Tell me, Vincent. Tell me everything."

Vincent sighed loudly and then continued. "Diana came to our world when I was about eleven. She was an orphan, her parents were killed in an accident. She had a sister, who went to stay with an aunt. However, she could not take Diana too. She hated the children's homes where she had to live. She was so unhappy that she ran away. She was tough and determined, although she always seemed to have a certain fragility about her. She could have survived living on the streets for a while, but it was more than likely that she would be found and returned to the children's home.

"It was Devin who found her one day, while he was Above. She had a bad bout of flu and needed

help. He persuaded Father to allow him to bring her to the tunnels. When she was well again, Father asked her if she would like to stay.

"She was a good friend, Catherine." Vincent was quiet for a moment before continuing. "Later, after Devin had left, we grew to be so close. We did so much together - swam, climbed, explored the tunnels, played chess - but what we loved most of all was coming down here with Father. We were just any other family on vacation. We would have picnics, lie on the beach, swim. Diana loved roses, too." He smiled at Catherine.

"She grew the ones in the garden outside. They still bloom after all these years. After Lisa, it was Diana who helped Father to look after me. She shared the pain with me and understood. Father read to me - and so did she. The three of us were so close. I suppose that is why she became a part of my waking dream. She had an inner strength and independence all her own.

"One year, when I was about seventeen, Father, some of the others and myself all gathered together to build this cabin. It was for myself and Diana to share."

Vincent grew quiet, dropping his head lower, so that his face was hidden by his golden mane of hair. Then he continued. "No one ever expected me to marry. If Diana had married, she and her new husband would have built a home of their own - perhaps here or perhaps in the tunnels. So, it suited us at that time to have this cabin between us."

Vincent looked up at Catherine through his deep blue eyes, now moist with tears again.

"The year after we built this cabin, Diana was down here for a while. I remained in the tunnels above, as we were busy doing a lot of reconstruction and repairs.

"Diana used to love diving off the rocks into the lake. She was so fearless, but I used to warn her to be careful. The day she died, she must have hit her head on the bottom on a rock, and became unconscious. She drowned. They found her that evening on the beach.

"When they came to tell me, I felt as if I had died too. I had felt the pain, the loss of the bond, but at that time I did not realize the significance of the feeling. Even if I had, I could not have reached her in time.

"I thought there was nothing left for me. I had lost Devin, then Lisa and then my closest friend in all the world, Diana."

Catherine put her arms around Vincent's neck and held him close, shedding her own tears too for the terrible loss her love had suffered.

Vincent continued his tale. "For weeks, months, even years after she died, I would go Above at night, wandering the back streets and alleys, constantly aware of my aloneness. Then one night, as I crossed the park on my way home to the tunnels, I found you. The rest of the story, you know already."

Catherine gently rubbed Vincent's back, trying to ease some of the tense muscles she felt there.

"Oh, Vincent. You nearly lost me too - in a lake."

"I know. If you had not survived, Catherine, I would have leapt into the Abyss ... I could not have suffered another loss like that, especially not you. I could not live without you. And yet, it was because I almost lost you, that the Council at last conceded and allowed me to tell you about our secret world on our third anniversary."

"Why didn't you tell me about Diana before?"

Vincent tilted his head at an angle to look at his love, in the way he had so often done before.

"I was bound by our laws to keep this place a secret. If I had told you about Diana then I would have had to tell you deliberate lies about how and where she died, and where her grave is."

Realizing what Vincent had said made good sense, she nodded her understanding.

"And you could not lie to me, could you?"

Vincent shook his head. "No. Keeping all this from you has caused me enough grief and pain, but I could never have lied to you, Catherine."

"I understand now why Diana was there with you in your coma, Vincent. Perhaps it was her spirit which brought you back to me?"

"Yes, Catherine, perhaps it truly was."

"I am sorry that you lost Diana, but I want you to know, Vincent, that I love you. There is nothing for me to forgive, no reason for you to feel guilty, and that we will always be together. I love you."

They embraced each other tightly and stayed that way for some time.

"Can we go for some air, please, Vincent," said Catherine eventually. "I need to walk for a while."

They walked on down the path towards the trees, hand-in-hand. Catherine suddenly stopped and turned to face her love, smiling at him.

"You look even more beautiful. Even more majestic in the sunshine."

Vincent returned her smile, dropping his head to one side, feeling a bit embarrassed at her praise, but never taking his eyes from hers.

As they came near to the trees, Vincent led Catherine over to a small fenced-off area, inside which there were a few simple crosses marking graves. She saw Diana Wells on the one nearest to her.

They stood in silence for a few minutes, Vincent remembering his dear friend and Catherine saying a quiet Thank you to the stranger who had been Vincent's best friend all those years ago. Whom she was sure, in some way, had led Vincent back to her from the coma and his nightmares.

As they strolled through the trees, the sunlight filtered down through the branches, casting soft shadows over them.

"I still feel as if I am dreaming - and if I wake up I shall be so disappointed," said Catherine.

Chuckling to himself, Vincent replied. "I can assure you that you are not dreaming," and with that he stopped, turned to face Catherine and pulled her into his embrace, their bodies moulding together as one.

"Now I really feel as if I am dreaming," sighed Catherine, when at last they parted. "Why have you always kept your distance from me?"

Vincent took her hand and they began walking towards the cabin once more.

"I did not think it fair of me to allow you to become too close to me, when I had to keep all of this world here hidden from you. I thought you should always be free to choose someone else to love, to have a

life in your world, although I always hoped, deep down, that you would still want me."

"Vincent, if you only knew how much I have wanted you, throughout these three years. I could never want anyone else. I understand now about so many things. You were even afraid that I would not love you any more, because you had kept this part of your life hidden from me?"

"Yes, Catherine. That was my greatest fear. If you had rejected me, I don't know how I could have continued to live."

"Ah, Vincent, don't you know by now just how much I adore you? I could not – cannot - live without you, any more than you can live without me. We are joined together by our bond, by our love, forever and always."

As they arrived back at the cabin, the new world was growing darker. Vincent lit the lamps and they cooked a meal together.

"Vincent, what did Diana look like, if you don't mind me asking, that is?"

Vincent walked through to the living room and opened a small cupboard. He brought out a slightly faded photograph and blew the dust away, and brought it back to Catherine.

Diana's face smiled back at them - bright shining eyes full of joy and happiness and long red tresses hanging over her shoulders.

"She looks so beautiful, Vincent. It's just so sad that I never knew her."

"The photograph was taken in the year we built the cabin."

Catherine handed the photograph back to Vincent, who went to return it to the cupboard.

"No, Vincent, don't put it away. I like her. I'd love to bring a frame for it and set it out on the shelf - there, I think, by the window - if that's all right?"

Vincent smiled. "Diana would have loved you too, Catherine."

After their meal, they washed and changed into fresh clothes. Then Vincent took Catherine's hand and said, "Come with me."

He led her back down the path towards the shore. There were lights in the other cottages now, which gave off a lovely warm glow. The lake shimmered in the twilight, the lights from the cottages reflecting on its surface.

They stepped onto the sand and removed their shoes, enjoying the feel of the soft sand on their feet. They walked along the shore, listening to the sound of silence, broken only by the gentle lapping of the water onto the beach.

Catherine shivered suddenly. Vincent put his arm around her, drawing her close to him. They stood like that for a few minutes, gazing at the lights on the water, savouring every moment.

Catherine broke their reverie, whispering, "Why have we not seen more of the people who live here, Vincent? It has been so quiet all day."

It was so dark by this time that Catherine could not see Vincent's face clearly, but she could feel him smile.

"While you slept last night in the chamber, I came down and left a message on Sam's door asking him to pass the word around that we would appreciate a little privacy, and quiet, at least for our first day!"

"You rascal!" Catherine threw him a mock punch and then hugged him.

"Imagine leaving me all alone in that chamber! If I had woken up and found you gone, I would have been terrified, in case you had been hurt or lost or..."

Vincent laughed. "No, Catherine, you would have been all right. I did leave a message in case you awakened, but since you were still sleeping on my return, I simply destroyed it."

"If you were away during the night, then you have had very little sleep, you must be exhausted, Vincent."

"I am a bit tired."

"Then let's return," she smiled.

Back at the cabin, they lit a fire together in the living room. It was not really cold, but they felt a little chilled after standing by the lake for so long. The fire gave off such a cozy glow that Catherine knelt down close to it and held out her hand towards Vincent, who was still sitting on the sofa.

"Why do you want to sit on the floor when there are seats, Catherine?" Vincent asked.

"Because I want to see the firelight reflected on your hair!" she grinned.

"Of course!" Vincent raised his hands and eyes to the ceiling. "I should have known, shouldn't I?"

He gracefully rolled off the sofa onto the floor, coming to lie with one arm bent, his head resting on the palm of his hand. The other hand reached out again to hold Catherine's. He brought her hand to his lips, bending up one leg to balance himself, as he leaned forward.

Gently kissing her open palm, his eyes suddenly looked up at Catherine's, remembering the last time he had kissed her hand like this, on the night when Elliot Burch had asked for Catherine's help.

Not wanting to let the moment pass this time, Catherine immediately reached out and prevented Vincent from turning away. They both knew that their moment had arrived at last, as their lips, their mouths and their very souls joined together.

As they drew back, breathless with excitement and increasing desire, Vincent sighed heavily.

"Catherine, not yet," was all he could say.

"But why, Vincent? We both want and need each other so much. We've denied ourselves that joy for so long. Are we ever going to be together?"

"There is a time for everything, my Catherine. I have dared to hope that this moment would come for us, and now that it has, I still cannot quite believe it."

Vincent stood up and pulled Catherine to her feet. Turning her, he gently lowered her till she was sitting on the sofa. Then, he knelt down again in front of her. Clasp ing both of her tiny hands in his, he asked in that husky voice, which Catherine adored.

"Catherine, I will never know how you have come to love me - and want me - but you have told me that it is - I - you desire to be with for the rest of your life. I know that what you tell me is true."

He paused for a moment, and then continued. "Will you do me the honour of becoming my wife?" Catherine's eyes opened wide for a second, before she dissolved into a mixture of laughing and crying, all at once. She threw herself at Vincent, almost knocking him over.

"YES! YES! YES!" she cried.

"I am the happiest man on this earth, Catherine."

"The happiest couple on this earth," echoed Catherine. "But there is so much to think of – plan – organize ... How on earth will we manage, Vincent?"

"We have all the time in the world - we'll cope," smiled Vincent. "Come, we will need some sleep tonight, otherwise we'll sleep through tomorrow's sunshine."

"Well, the Grand Canyon is one of the wonders of my world and I certainly think that this is even more wonderful. So, the Grand Cavern is a perfect name for it!" she had explained to Vincent, on her second day there.

Over the next three days. they explored the length and breadth of the Grand Cavern. They had picnics by the lake and Vincent even found the courage to swim with Catherine.

They met everyone who lived there, including all the animals. Catherine fell in love with one of the cats called Felix, after the cartoon character. He was black from head to paws and was so affectionate.

"I could become jealous, Catherine," Vincent joked, as he watched her stroking Felix while they lay on the beach.

"I can't have that. Come here."

Vincent lay on his stomach, with his head on her lap, while she stroked his back, scratching it gently now and again. Felix took the hint, though, and wandered off.

"Poor Felix," Vincent sighed, grinning from ear to ear.

"Oh, he'll come back later, when there's no competition," smiled Catherine.

They had an uneventful trip home and were as excited as two teenagers, telling Father, Mary, William, Pascal, Mouse and Jamie - and everyone they met - their good news about Vincent's proposal and Catherine's acceptance. The pipes retold the happy news over and over again, sounding almost like the rippling peals of wedding bells.

"Catherine, I am honoured that you choose to stand here with me toay. I love you with all my heart, my body, my spirit, and all that I am. All I have is yours. I ask you to be my wife."

"Vincent, in all this world - Above and Below - I could never find another with whom I could stand here today. I am honoured that you have chosen me. I love you with all my heart - my body - my spirit - and all that I am. All I have is yours. I ask you to be my husband."

Master Po lifted Catherine's left hand and gently placed it on Vincent's left hand.

Vincent carefully and reverently placed a gold wedding band on her finger, saying as he did so; "This

ring, Catherine, is a symbol of my love for you. It is a symbol of our lives together - past, present, and future - forever intertwined. With this ring, I wed thee. I promise that I will love you always. I will cherish you and care for you until my last breath - and forever after."

A tear escaped from Vincent's shining blue eyes and dropped only on Catherine's wedding ring.

She stood in awe of this great man, her lover, her protector - powerful, yet so gentle, stone, yet so sensitive, that he could allow his love to overflow in tears of joy.

Catherine slipped her left hand below Vincent's and, placing his wedding ring onto his ring finger, she solemnly said to her love.

"This ring, Vincent, is but a token of my love for you. It is an outward symbol of our lives together - past, present, and future - forever joined as one. With this ring, I wed thee. I promise that I will love you - always. I will be there for you, care for you and comfort you until my very last breath - and forever after."

Master Po, holding their hands in his, spoke to Vincent and Catherine and the congregation of tunnel dwellers and Helpers, gathered in the Great Hall.

"Vincent and Catherine, you are now husband and wife, and I give you both my blessing for your lives together. May you both be happy. May your lives be rich and enrich the lives of others. May you have the children you desire and may they all come to know love as great as yours. May peace reign in your lives always and forever after."

Vincent and Catherine had decided that their first night together would be spent in Vincent's chamber. There could be no other place for them.

It was here that Vincent first cared for Catherine. It was here that she caught her first glimpse of what it meant to really care for others, and her first glimpse of Vincent.

It was here, also, that they became reconciled to each other, after her initial fright, and it was in this place that each of them had once dreamed of them finally coming together.

Vincent had insisted on carrying Catherine most of the way back from the Great Hall. They had tried to leave quietly, without any fuss, but the children spotted them moving closer and closer to the exit and began shouting so that everyone would know.

"Vincent! Catherine! Are you leaving now?"

So, it was after many goodbyes and cheering that they finally left for Vincent's chamber.

Setting Catherine down, they smiled at each other. Catherine, thinking back to their time at the cottage far below the tunnels, said softly. "I wish we could have had a log fire, but the candles are just as beautiful, especially here in your chamber, Vincent."

"Our chamber, Catherine," Vincent corrected. "Tonight, let us make it our chamber."

They did not hurry to claim their hearts' desires. They had waited so long for this night to come that they wanted to savour every second of every touch, every look, every whisper, every caress.

They slowly undressed each other, a kiss greeting each tiny part of flesh revealed by every button or hook undone by slender fingers or gentle claws. Holding each other tightly in their arms at last, Vincent pulled away slightly from Catherine, tilting his head to one side, gazing at her, as if making

sure that she was really here. The soft halo cast round her head by the golden coloured window behind her, was so befitting. To him, she was indeed like a beautiful angel, who had come to bring him peace and love.

"Vincent," Catherine breathed. "Did I ever tell you what that does to me, when you tilt your head like that and look at me in that way?"

Vincent looked surprised. "No, Catherine. I was not aware that I was looking at you in a certain way, except with love."

"Believe me, Vincent. You do ... and when you do, it makes me almost bubble over with sheer joy. Your face is the face that every lost and lonely person longs to see - your love, your caring - your place, are so unique that they shine out of those blue eyes of yours like beacons in the night, showing the safe places - the warm, and welcoming places, which exist in your heart."

They spoke no more. Touch and caress became their words. The sensuality of skin against soft fur became their sentences. At last, their physical joining as husband and wife began a new chapter in their book of life.

Over the next three months, Catherine gradually prepared for her decision to leave her job at the DA's office.

She and Vincent had considered all the possible options and decided that they would spend a few years at least bringing up their children - together. If they were to have the family they both so dearly wanted, then they had a responsibility to those children who came along, to give them their love and support as parents. They were nothing if not practical, and knew how much time and energy would be required to be the parents they wanted to be.

They agreed that when they both felt that the time was right, Catherine could return to work at the DA's office, if she wished to do so.

If they had simply decided just to spend all of their time together and have no commitments to others, then they agreed that it would be an empty and somewhat selfish existence. However, baby Jacob was there and required parents, so Vincent and Catherine asked the Council if they might be considered as adoptive parents for him.

Four months after their wedding, that particular dream did come true. Baby Jacob had been abandoned Above and therefore an official adoption was possible. However, a simple ceremony was held in Father's chamber with all of the members of the Council in attendance, as well as the happy new mother and father. Promising to be all that they could be for Jacob and to be there for him, as his parents, Father presented them with their first son.

They spent the next year adjusting to life Below. They became a family - growing together, teaching each other, and learning from each other.

On their second wedding anniversary, Vincent and Catherine were blessed with their second child - a son.

Helping Catherine through her long labour that day, Vincent remembered the last time he had carried out this role - with Lena. That had been special to him, but to share the work, the pain and the joy with his Catherine, through their bond, was beyond words.

He helped to deliver his own son and placed him in Catherine's waiting arms, where he immediately began feeding at his mother's breast. Vincent had come to know happiness, peace and contentment with Catherine and Jacob, but watching Catherine feed their newborn son, made his heart want to burst with a joy he had never thought possible.

On his Naming Day, this time Catherine and Vincent stood proudly together with little Jacob as they named their son - Michael.

Life was never dull for the growing family. Catherine discovered new talents within herself, day by day, month after month. Mary became like a second mother to her and she also became the official grandmother to her children, when she, at last, became Father's wife.

Catherine occasionally went Above to keep in contact with her old colleagues at the DA's office, especially Joe.

At the time she had left the department, she told him that she could still be reached through her apartment, which she continue to rent for possible future use, but that she would not often be there in person.

She was sorry that she could not introduce Joe to Vincent, but she knew that Joe's curiosity and determination for truth in all matters, would only put Vincent and his world - her world too now - at risk. However, she did go as far as to explain to Joe that Vincent had certain deformities. She hated having to say such things about her beloved's face, but she knew that in doing so, she would protect him from Joe's, and perhaps others, curiosity.

Catherine did ask Vincent to introduce himself to Joe by recording a message onto a tape for him. Vincent expressed his regret at not being able to meet Joe in person, but went onto explain briefly about his difficulties with the general public. He spoke at length about the love he and Catherine shared and of the dreams they had for a life together.

Listening to Vincent's voice on the tape, Joe somehow understood about his need for privacy and also, just how much Catherine and Vincent loved one another. He accepted the situation, although deep down he knew he would always have a place in his heart for Catherine.

Catherine's two closest friends, Jenny Aronson and Nancy Tucker, were also introduced to Vincent in the same way. Vincent and Catherine did plan though, that later, gradually Nancy and Jenny would be introduced properly to Vincent, because they were Catherine's closest friends. When the time did come for them to meet Vincent they felt that they already knew him thorough the regular audio tapes they had received. The community Below gained an excellent Helper in Jenny and a very dear and loyal friend in Nancy.

After their own little daughter, Ellie, was born, Vincent and Catherine decided that their little family was complete. When Ellie was about six months old, they moved down to the Grand Cavern with the intent of spending three years there, enjoying the sunshine with the children, while they were young and learning how to work the farmland, in case the time ever came when they would have to live there permanently.

The extension of the pipes almost as far as the Grand Cavern and more intricate listening devices and amplifiers, courtesy of Mouse, meant that Vincent could be summoned immediately in an emergency. Travelling at speed, he could be back with the main community within a day.

With the death of Paracelsus, life in the tunnels had been relatively peaceful, and the Council agreed that all the benefits which Vincent, Catherine and their family would receive living in the Grand Cavern - for a while at least - far outweighed the slight risk they faced without Vincent being nearby.

On their fifth anniversary, walking along the shore of the lake in the Grand Cavern, Catherine and Vincent stopped to listen to the silence.

"Remember that first time when we stood here in the twilight of evening?" Catherine whispered to her husband.

"I remember."

"I thought it was the happiest day of my life, Vincent, and when you asked me to marry you that night ..." Catherine sighed heavily, words failing her.

Vincent smiled, holding her gaze with his own. "Yes, I know, and we have had many hundreds of happy days since then, haven't we?"

"Yes," agreed Catherine. "This past year especially, living here, enjoying the peace and love which surrounds us in this place, walking with you in the sunlight - as well as the moonlight - it is so beautiful."

The sound of running footsteps made them look up, as little Jacob few towards them.

"Mother! Father! The kittens are born. Come see."

Vincent and Catherine looked at each other, smiled, and ran with Jacob back to the cottage, where Jamie was babysitting for them.

They entered through the side entrance, where the extension had been built onto the cottage.

"See. There are four of them," shouted Jacob excitedly.

"Yes, there are," agreed Vincent. "What shall you call them, Jacob?"

Jacob examined the four kittens for a few minutes, obviously deep in thought. "The white one has to be Snowy - she'll remind me of the snow in the park Above. The black one Sooty", giggled Jacob. "He'll remind me of how dark the tunnels can be - and dirty! The ginger stripy one I'd like to call Tigger - he reminds me of my favourite stories."

"And what of this little one here?" asked Catherine.

Jacob picked her up carefully and looked at her thoughtfully. She was almost all white, apart from markings on her face and tail. On her nose was a little black mark, which on closer examination turned out to be a tiny heart.

"I know," cried Jacob. "I'll call her Valentina, because she has a little heart on her nose and because ..." He suddenly went quiet and more solemn. "Because it reminds me of your hearts, Mother and Father, and all the love that you share with us ..."

END