

# As She Leaves Me

by Flint and Feather

*Author's note: Presenting a heartfelt vignette exploring the inner romantic conflict that we fans of Vincent and Catherine know so well.*

*We lived it with them time and time again, and hoped for so long to see a kiss.*

Vincent's large hand completely engulfed his Catherine's tapered warm fingers, as he escorted her yet once more to the branch of the tunnels that would take her home. His padded palm, shaped by the unique genes of his lion-being, had been rendered coarse by long years of abuse in wrestling blocks of stone and rough lengths of timber, yet Catherine pressed her hand tighter within its cherished strength. Neither ever wished to speak openly of parting.

She clung closer to his side as they walked, he matching his easy stride to hers; she clutching his upper arm for sustaining comfort. In that, she was much less gentle than he required of himself. Since it signified how loathe she was to leave him as they neared her pathway, Vincent welcomed it – and was saddened by it.

Selfish, he thought, to mar the moment with sadness, and he banished it before their bond could speak it fully to her. Catherine was certainly no stranger to that recurring emotion. It had become a shared, inexorable part of their lives together. But they must view it as a most positive sign, she had told him, of how they needed each other, of how deeply their affection ran. No awkward silences existed between them except for this, since they had given up speaking the words that made the inevitable physical loneliness more real. He had never thought before knowing Catherine, that his strength and patience would ever be tested in this way; this constant, continuing extent.

As they ended their walk and stood at the destination, Catherine pivoted to face him, her melting eyes searching deeply into his. Perfectly, delicately beautiful she was, when her heart shone upon him so, that his poet's soul soared beyond inspiration.

Yet he held all within himself. And when she embraced his shoulders and laid her head with utter trust upon his chest, he could never have imagined that his layers of clothing, protection from the chill and damp, created no interference to the warmth she aroused within him.

Without the nurturing of Father, who, what would he have become? What was his

purpose? Once evolved to the intellect of self awareness, all races of Man had never ceased pondering this one question throughout the ages. He had been born to carry himself in no other way but as a man, no question. But to consciously frame the questions, to sift for the answers, only brought him to despair and frustration. And it gave him no satisfying, constructive conclusion.

What would those who had known him, say of him after – *if* he grew old? He'd been protector and caretaker, labourer, teacher, scholar and mentor. All of this, applied and served repetitively, selflessly, and for his entire life in the same underground sanctuary.

Would it ever be said that he'd been a lover, husband, father? By any human standard, he was in the prime of health and strength. Rightfully beset by desires, and potentially able to pursue the next milestone; that which all living beings hoped to achieve.

His academic studies had only made more achingly clear the joyful union that was possible between a man and woman. And he was in every way, desperately in love with Catherine. She had well shown that her heart belonged to only him. This gift of the highest order salved the starvation of his spirit, and forced him to wrestle with his awakening. Should he not permit himself some of the generosity he'd always bestowed on others?

Catherine might not reappear for days, and then only for scant hours. To bid goodbye, good night to her yet again, seemed the unavoidable constant of their lives. Their familiar, invariable song ... played once more. Vincent let his arms fall to his sides with a genteel, resigned grace that Catherine had come to rue. Her fingers clinging to his hand, gave patent voice to her yearning eyes, willing him to accept their expressive, unspoken plea – *If you ask, my Love, I will say yes.*

Would it never be the moment? He placed her happiness foremost, as was his nature. He firmly believed that her best chance for lasting love would materialize in her Above World. Catherine had been raised with her culture's expectations that a developing attachment would take its natural course. She knew that Vincent had lived deprived of such promise, but as far as possible, he governed his actions to meet his own peaceful, honourable standards. She had seen him suffer greatly when he'd been forced to kill in defence of innocents.

But he must come to her, she had resolved, in his own time without doubt, without reservation or a shred of regret. Should she kiss him now, would he simply allow her touch without returned passion and chivalrously release her?

Although they leaned into each other and her arms were around him, his golden head inclined against her cheek, he made no move toward her lips. Not this night.

So she softly exhaled a wistful sigh, one for him to remember. Then heard the fabric of his sleeves rustle with the raising of his arms, as he gathered her firmly against him. It

was no embrace of mere fond farewell between best friends. She'd buried her face in the silken fall of his mane, and now felt her cheeks suffused with a heated blush.

It took her by surprise then, her sudden loss of balance forward. But he was bringing her with him while he backed away, one free hand splayed out in search of the wall. Finding the mark, he crouched down by its pitted surface, and Catherine wonderingly followed the newly bold invitation in his blue eyes, and the sure draw of his hand. He spread out a side of his cloak for her comfort before she sank to her knees at his side.

She sensed nothing tentative in her compelling lover as she pleurably studied him for some seconds. No playful demeanour emerged – but what was she to anticipate? Vincent roved one hand up her arm, pulling her gradually closer to him. Catherine remained locked into his mild, earnest gaze.

“This,” he said in his intimate rumble, “is all I have to offer you.” His other palm rested on the rough-hewn wall. “It is plain, unremarkable, my prison – but it stands as fast as my love for you, Catherine.” He lowered his head, concealing his vulnerability behind the curtain of his mane.

“There is no plain, unremarkable wall between us, Vincent.” Her soft tones of adoration comforted his heart as much as her readily given answer. “Your love will be bound within mine for you, and whatever your prison, I would gratefully share it.”

He raised his exotic eyes to her tender smile, and in that instant, dismissed all long held obstacles of indecision, convention and impossibility. His hands, moulding gently about her shoulders, brought her down by his side. Her dewy cheek nestled against his throat, she held his hand and lay listening to the slow thrum of his heartbeat in the utter silence about them, as he swept the shelter of his cloak over them. For the first time, he had drawn them together intimately close – and not as solicitous caretaker, or because she needed shielding from danger. If he was now proceeding as she hoped...

At her back, she felt his arm tighten around her. She melted into his broad chest and gazed up through half veiled eyes at the flicker of his golden lashes as he leaned to brush his lips across her cheekbone.

Catherine's entire being gloried in the endearing caresses he trailed down her face, until he paused to linger them at the corner of her mouth. With a tiny shiver, Catherine turned to him, her mouth seeking softly at his cleft and full lower lip. He caressed back in kind as he learned from her.

How she wished to know his mind right now – and in answer, his unleashed stirrings rushed to mingle with hers. She took his face between her hands, his smooth fur like warm velvet under her fingertips as she claimed his lips, inviting his full response, again and again.

He flinched when her tongue touched the point of one fang, but she hushed his concerns away and showed him how neatly she could adjust to his leonine weaponry. His deep satisfaction thrilled to her across their bond. Fulfilling as it had been to spend their first year finding intellectual security in each others spiritual integrity, their state of romantic impasse must be allowed to break.

The quiet celebration of their love seated on stone against a semi-dark tunnel wall, could have been no more exquisite had they lounged in the finest palace. She would never question why he had spontaneously chosen this place to act, far from the lure and comfort of his bed. She understood.

“And now,” Catherine sighed, glancing apologetically over her shoulder.

“I’ve kept you here much too long,” Vincent asserted, rising to help her to her feet.

“Vincent, it will never be long enough. I have your priceless gift to take with me tonight. I may not sleep at all!”

Hand in hand, they strolled the short distance to her exit, then stood in each others arms. In the Above, the dawn could not be seen, but it reached Below in Catherine, as she raised her glowing face to Vincent and blissfully heard his most caressing whisper.

“Whatever comes, my Catherine....you have brought me more happiness than I’ve ever known.”

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