

A Bad Day

by Angie

*"Me – who am as a nerve o'er which do creep
The else unfelt oppressions of this earth."*

– Percy Bysshe Shelley

Vincent growled at his teapot, which was steaming. It seemed to mock his bad mood, which was irritating. At the same time, he was finding the experience novel for its sheer rarity. If some thought he was wallowing in it, well, wasn't that allowed? Other people were allowed to do so, why couldn't he?

He had spoken to no one since the previous morning and no one seemed inclined to break the silence. That gave him rueful satisfaction. Yes, he was finding the experience satisfying, he had to admit. The silence WAS golden. And no one had entered his chamber for just as long. He had forgotten what that was like. He felt, now, like any other resident, all of whose privacy in their chambers was regarded as sacrosanct. It was remarkable ... unique.

His bad mood had started a day ago, from the time he got up, triggered by a series of small incidents that had combined to irritate him beyond bearing. He had often sympathized with Catherine about her "bad days" but had never experienced them himself. Of course, he had known brief annoyances; interruptions to plans or routines, breakdowns of communication, intractable snarls in his hair, work projects which never seemed to finish when they should, tools which had proven inadequate for a job, and even clothing which had inexplicably developed a stain he had not noticed when he took it off. But he had survived all these without developing more than a momentary annoyance. After all, there were solutions to all of these problems. But yesterday, a good many familiar minor annoyances had combined with many of the more unusual ones in the tunnel community. It had been too much for him.

There had been Father's pointed questions about the monthly rat patrol, which was overdue. Then Mouse's long-winded and completely inexplicable description of his latest far-fetched project ... something to do with generating sunlight. Then a cacaphony of pipe messages asking for him to be immediately here, or there. He had barely moved to respond to one, when another had interrupted him. He had been forced to decide which was more urgent. To make it worse, the requests were often petty, something that almost anyone could have handled, but had been sent to him because it was assumed he knew everything. Why was he suddenly the tunnel encyclopaedia and general know-it-all?

He had finally gone to Pascal and told him in no uncertain terms that he did not want any more requests unless the tunnels were in imminent danger of self-destruction. His friend had obligingly sent this message on the main pipe so that virtually everyone would hear it. Tunnel chatter had experienced a hiatus. Vincent smiled grimly at the memory.

Was this what happened above when the temperatures dropped into the sub-zeros for a

protracted period, as now? Even the children had expressed no desire to go above. They were busy trying to find ways of keeping warm in the often chilly draughts that were channeled into the tunnels down the spiral staircase, and sneaked their way into chambers to blow out candles.

For the children had annoyed him also. Their constant racing down the tunnels had caused them to barrel into him several times as he answered the aforementioned supposedly urgent requests. The last time he had roared at the perpetrators. He had caustically suggested they play tag in the Chamber of the Winds, the largest space that the tunnel community boasted, and generally warmer as well, because of the mysterious winds which originated somewhere further below where it was much warmer. He supposed the children had followed his suggestion because he had seen little of them since.

He had made a point of doing absolutely nothing after lunch, in fact had taken a tray back to his chamber. He had done the same at supper time. Then last night, when almost everyone was asleep and even the sentry messages sounded sleepy, he had conducted the rat patrol. His sharp hearing and excellent night vision, to say nothing of his patience and quick action with his taloned hands, had ensured the rodents gave him little sport. He had dropped a dozen of the wretched corpses down into the Abyss.

However, even the chase had not improved his mood and he had not bothered to report to Father that this job was done. Let the patriarch find out for himself! William would no doubt thank the taskmaster for the sudden lack of rat presence, and particularly their droppings. The cook would never think to thank himself, whom everyone knew did the eradication.

He snarled as he remembered the frustrations that had brought him to this point, but it was short-lived. In fact, no one had entered his chamber for over 18 hours now. It was ... unprecedented. He found himself wondering what was going on. The pipe messages were very much to the point now. There was virtually no chatter. Had he accomplished this with a few growls and harsh words? He couldn't believe it – he was not *that* important!

Vincent growled again, but poured himself some tea, trying to regain a sense of equilibrium.

Of course, part of his problem was that Catherine was away and would not be back home for at least another three days. He always found himself unhappy at prolonged absences from his love, not least of all because he missed her sunny smile and obvious delight in his company. No one could relax him as she could. Everyone else wanted something from him, some days more than others, but it never failed. Catherine alone was content for him to be just as he was. He had finally admitted to himself that this was not just flattery on her part. She really meant it. It had been a life-changing revelation, and had gone a long way to moving their relationship forward. The rest had followed much more quickly. They were both supremely happy now.

Catherine had often mused about how he had little privacy in his chamber, and that he was expected to be the tunnel warrior, rat catcher and story teller – with no consideration given to his possible desire for peace and privacy, much less whether interruptions were convenient.

That had changed only minimally since Catherine and he had moved into the brownstone. It was assumed that any time he graced the tunnels with his presence, he was available. It was no good telling Father – or anyone – that he had grown up in the tunnels and still felt most at home in them. He also returned because he still had duties to perform, but it seemed some tunnel residents wanted to dominate what few minutes of free time he had and clutter the others with inconsequential requests.

By breakfast, though, Vincent had begun to feel a little less angry. He was also somewhat

sleepy from his rat catching, which always took a good part of the night. The tea had not revived him. He went into the dining hall for breakfast to find everyone giving him a wide berth. He was too tired to be angry at the response and merely walked towards the buffet table. Before he got there William appeared in front of him with a tray loaded with a generous amount of his usual fare.

Vincent nodded his thanks and immediately turned and walked back to his chamber. It was a hint he had chosen not to ignore, since sitting down in the hall would have undoubtedly left him sitting in the centre of a large empty space – alone.

It seemed no one wanted anything from him today, so after breakfast, Vincent decided to read by the Great Falls. It was something he seldom had time to do during the day. He grabbed a book from a pile on his desk, not really caring what it was, and made his way to his favourite ledge, overlooking the falls.

Settling himself down, he looked at the title and sighed deeply. It was the *Panachantra*, a Hindu book of moralistic tales using animals. He had been planning to read it to the children. He opened it at random and read the *Story of the Blue Jackal*, Story 8.

“The moral is,” Damanaka said, “he who abandons his own folk will perish.”

Vincent regarded the falls with something akin to sorrow now. Anger was fine, and it had cleansed his mind as it burned through him, leaving him with more clarity of thought. That had been a worthwhile outcome, for he seldom had time to examine all he did during the average tunnel day, filled as it was with both minor and major crises.

He felt better about everything now, but was unsure how to rectify the distance he had imposed between himself and the tunnel community. Obviously, they were content to let him find his own peace in his own time. Of course, he could go to lunch and stand before his friends and apologize for his ... he had to be truthful and call it by its name ... surliness. But on the other hand, he had been justified in his anger. He *had* been taken imposed upon more than was usual, and the fact that no one had approached him confirmed that they knew it too. So pride would not allow him to simply ask for forgiveness – when the truth was that he was not really to blame. He had merely reacted to a situation largely caused by others.

Uncalled for, another quotation from the book in his hands came to his mind. *“Pride comes before a fall.”*

Vincent sighed and continued to argue with himself. If he merely apologized, everything would return to normal, with himself the object of too many pipe messages. That was not acceptable. Somehow, he must impress upon this community that others needed to take some responsibility for their problems. He could not be on hand all the time, nor should that be expected.

Catherine was correct. And she was also correct in her assessment of whom to blame for the situation. Blame was perhaps a too harsh word, but certainly Father had the authority to more fairly apportion the daily tasks. Big jobs, like fixing leaks or carving chambers were always put on the work sheet at the front of the dining hall, along with the names of the work crew. But who bothered to list a lost book, or a misplaced pair of spectacles, a request to trade sentry shifts, or even a literary reference? That such things became pipe messages was unfortunate. Perhaps there was a solution.

Vincent thought about this for a few minutes, then remembered something Catherine had told him about “bull sessions” in the DA's office. Yes, that should work much better. Pascal would be pleased too, because the pipemaster did not like the pipes to be used for gossip. There were always dangers threatening their world and he feared the consequences if a message

got lost in the general 'noise'. He had complained about it fairly recently, in fact, but although Father had made an admonition to the community at large, the chatter had not declined appreciably. Perhaps this was a service that would solve both problems.

Vincent rose, suddenly determined to have his plan organized by lunch time. He would have to check the storage rooms. On the way, he dropped the book off in his chambre and grabbed a lantern and his cloak.

Two hours later, he had found what he sought, but had become covered in dust and cobwebs in the process. He shouldn't have been surprised. After all, when he had rescued Dimitri from New York harbour, he had carried him to a storage room, one no less dusty than those he had explored today. Later, they had moved him to the hospital chamber – an unfortunate decision, as it turned out, but certainly more hygienic.



Vincent sneezed violently, creating a suitable end to those ruminations, which still gave him pain. However, the storage chambers should not be so filthy. He would suggest that they consider dusting them on a regular schedule, perhaps once a year. People might even find something they could use. He would suggest it after he had made his other proposal. Perhaps Father could add it to his long term job schedule.

He coughed as he tried to brush some dust off his clothing, then made his way back to his chambre with his find. He quickly undressed to use the bathing pool he shared with Father. There was not much time before lunch now. Should he tell Father his idea ahead of time? No. Either his idea would be accepted by everyone on its own merit, or it would not. Either way, he would have made his peace. It would be understood that he was not apologizing so much as offering a viable alternative. Pascal would certainly support the idea.

Consequently, dressed in clean clothing and with his hair still damp, Vincent made his way to the dining hall for lunch, waiting until he was sure most of the community were there. He walked to the front of the room and raised his hand. All talk gradually ceased and everyone looked at him expectantly.

"Friends," he began, and had the satisfaction of seeing many people relax and smile at him. They thought they knew what he was going to say! That he would prove them wrong gave him grim satisfaction

"I offer a solution to the situation which arose yesterday. We have many small problems, but I cannot know the answers to them all, nor should I be expected to."

He raised the large slate blackboard he had found, then leaned it against the wall.

"I propose that this blackboard, be used to write non-urgent notes or requests to the community at large. I also suggest that anyone responding to one, do so by other means than pipe message."

Pascal immediately stood up and raised his pipe rod in the air.

"Wonderful idea, Vincent!" He looked around at the community, and nodded solemnly.

"Vincent has been more than patient with people demanding his time. And I've often said that the pipes shouldn't be used for just anything. Something important might get ... missed." Pascal shuddered. Even thinking about that made him uncomfortable. "I move that we accept Vincent's proposal immediately."

"Hear, here!" came several voices.

Father took the cue and stood up. He tapped his cane on the floor until there was quiet.

"Thank you Vincent," he said, looking at his son. "Pascal is correct. This is too important to leave any longer. All in favour?"

A flurry of hands arose.

"Opposed?"

Silence reigned and no one raised their hand.

"Passed! Kanin could you please put a spike into the wall to hold the blackboard? I'm sure we can find sufficient chalk and an eraser for it. And let's be clear. This board replaces frivolous pipe messages. Notes may be written here, but they must also be erased when they no longer apply. Everyone understand?"

There was a chorus of yays, and everyone returned to their meal. Vincent sat down at his customary place near Father. William immediately put a bowl of soup and a plate of bread in front of him. He had been so relieved his idea had been accepted that he had forgotten to get himself some lunch! He thanked the big cook and set to with gusto.

Father looked over at him as he finished and cleared his throat.

"How are you feeling, Vincent?" he asked at last.

Vincent looked at the patriarch, puzzled. "Fine, Father. You?"

"Hmm – well, much as usual, Vincent. I've missed your company."

Vincent had nothing to say to that, and merely poured himself some tea.

"Is there anything else on your mind, Vincent?" the patriarch asked, after a silence that was apparently not going to be broken.

Vincent looked up and thought for a moment. Indeed, the blackboard would not solve all his problems. There was still the matter of his chamber, which was like Grand Central Station some days. The peace of the last 24 hours had been wonderful, despite the cause.

"I would like to be accorded the same respect and right to privacy as others," he said softly, at last.

Father nodded as if he had expected this and stood up. He stamped his cane on the floor again, and waited until there was silence. He cleared his throat.

"Friends, there is one more matter that we need to address, right now, while we are all in a receptive mood. Vincent has been more than patient with all of us wandering into his chamber at all hours and with barely any advance notice. This must stop. We do not do this with any

other member of the community, not even myself. And Vincent is not always alone.

“So in future, after ... 9 pm in the evening, and before 6 am in the morning ...,” he paused to look at Vincent, who nodded his assent. “... Vincent is not to be disturbed, if he is present. Anyone who wishes him for an emergency, may inform him in the normal way, by pipe message. At any other time, day or night, anyone wishing to visit Vincent should knock. A knocking device will be installed at the tunnel entrance leading to his chamber.

“It so happens that I know we have many such devices in stock, from old doors we use for other purposes. Cullen, will you see to that, please, today? And anyone else who wishes this done, may approach Cullen also. In fact, I would like a knocker at both entrances to my chamber, if you please. It's an elegant solution that will save candles and oil by eliminating the lanterns we generally use for this purpose.

“Any comment? Do you understand this, Mouse?”

There was some laughter as everyone looked at Mouse, undoubtedly the most intransigent of visitors, since he never knew, or cared, what time it was. The pipes declared the time every hour, but Mouse seemed oblivious.

The scruffy engineer stood up now and gazed around.

“Mouse understands. No visiting anyone without knocking. No visiting Vincent at night. Means no one comes to visit Mouse without knocking either. Right Father?”

“That's correct, Mouse.”

Vincent tried not to grin at this exchange. Of them all, Mouse valued his solitude most - but at least he also recognized other's need for it.

“Ok, good,” Mouse nodded, then left in his customary hurry, no doubt to install his own version of a door knocker. That might prove interesting later. Vincent looked around. This was working out better than he had hoped.

Lunch over, Vincent returned to his chamber and had barely sat in his chair before he heard Cullen shout “Knock, knock,” from outside.

Vincent restrained himself from replying '*who's there*', knowing Cullen's penchant for jokes, and instead called back. “Come in,”

Cullen entered, grinning widely, a fact that Vincent immediately recognized as preparatory to a joke. It seemed there would be no escape. Their carpenter carried a metal toolbox and a bag that seemed to be very heavy. Vincent waited for an explanation.

Cullen, realizing Vincent wasn't going to play a guessing game, sighed and reached into the bag. He pulled out an enormous brass knocker with a lion's head in its centre. Vincent regarded it, rendered incapable of speech.



"Do you think this will work?" Cullen asked, unnecessarily. "It's not like the usual ones I've seen. Most have the knocker ring hanging from the mouth, which means it has to hit the door. The ring on this one pivots from the top and hits the metal back plate around the head. I can keep it in place with a three spikes."

Vincent suddenly couldn't prevent himself laughing. Far from being insulted, he found the allusion apt, especially considering his recent mood. Cullen was momentarily stunned speechless.

"Perfect for bearding the lion," Cullen remarked, after Vincent had himself under control again.

"Yes," Vincent agreed hoarsely, dropping his head and hiding inside his long hair. Cullen heard a strangled noise coming from his friend, but chose to ignore it.

"Well then, I'll install this. Won't take more than a few minutes." Cullen left and the appalling noise of something being pounded into solid rock soon followed. When silence reigned at last, Vincent's ears were ringing.

Vincent looked at the doorway and sighed. It had felt extremely good to laugh, after the events of the past day. Yes, his mood had certainly reversed.

"*They are the blessed who are visited by friends,*" he thought, remembering yet another passage from the *Panchatantra*.

Shaking his head in amazement, he picked up the book. The children would enjoy a few selections. Perhaps, there was an moral story about running around corners without looking ...

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