

Away

by Angie

*If all the year were playing holidays,
To sport would be as tedious as to work;
But when they seldom come, they wish'd for some.*
- William Shakespeare

Chapter 1

Catherine found herself a little annoyed at Vincent ... or perhaps it was Father ... or maybe it was the whole tunnel community.

She shouldn't – and didn't - complain. Much of what she had hoped for had come to pass. The brownstone next door was now in regular use. They had shifted a lot of the community amenities to it from their own, to give themselves more privacy. There were self-defense classes for the sentries, a well-equipped clinic where Father could see special patients, or perform procedures difficult to do below. Even a hospital room. There were rooms where students from below could stay while they attended colleges, and each house had its own private garden. She and Vincent had kept their own spacious suite in the attic and with little Jacob now getting active, it was nice to have more room to themselves.

The problem was that, although Vincent always got home in time for dinner and stayed the night, he was up early and spent very little time at home during the day. Something always happened in the tunnels that needed his muscle or his brain - and kept him there for most of the day.

Catherine couldn't miss the irony of the situation. For over two years, she had lived above and visited below only on weekends. Vincent had never complained, although parting from her after they had become intimate had been difficult on both of them. When she had finally quit her job, after becoming pregnant, and become a permanent part of the community, she and Vincent had finally had a happy life together - except that it seemed less together than ever.

Catherine had created the Foundation and taken over the management of it in the brownstone's office, but the work meant either bringing baby Jacob along, or taking him below to the nursery. There were always lots of willing babysitters, but she felt a bit annoyed that this had fallen on her to arrange. It shouldn't always be necessary, she reasoned. She didn't want Vincent to take Jacob below and leave him in the nursery either. Their son was an active 18 months old, speaking in gobbledygook and investigating everything. She had to watch him every second. Surely the community could spare Vincent some time with his son during the day.

That said, Vincent was a wonderful father, just as she had known he would be. He had been around almost constantly for many months after the baby was born – refused to be parted from them, in fact. On laundry days, they had both gone below, although Father would not allow Catherine to participate in the hard labour because she was breast-feeding Jacob.

Gradually, tunnel responsibilities had intruded more frequently. Although Vincent tried to be around as often as he could, he could not refuse to help when emergencies arose, as they seemed to do with great regularity. That these emergencies were often potentially dangerous as well, worried Catherine more than a little.

Then she realized the only solution possible. They had to go away from the community for a time, and let everyone find ways to adjust to their absence. A holiday – that's what they needed!

The more she thought about it, the more Catherine realized how much she missed being somewhere different, if only once a year for a few days. Arranging it was going to take a lot of planning. This time, she would not let Father or anyone else discourage her and Vincent – and the baby too - from a well-deserved vacation. Vincent needed to be with them - so therefore he would be. Deep in her heart, she also hoped they would be able to get away more often, that wherever she found would allow them this indulgence.

Connecticut, she decided, was no longer practical. It was too far to take the baby and really, there had to be someplace closer and easier to reach that was safe for them all. She no longer wanted complete isolation, either. Vincent deserved as normal a vacation as possible.

She wracked her brain for a solution, but every one she considered had problems. She didn't want to confide in Elliot because she didn't trust him not to be curious and she didn't want to lie to him. Joe and Jenny were expecting their first child. Devin and Charles were somewhere on the other side of the country and Nancy seemed always to have a house full of extended family. Plus, she hadn't yet introduced her friend to Vincent. Somehow, the time never seemed right.

Well, how difficult could it be? Catherine believed in letting knotty problems rest. Sooner or later they solved themselves. This would too. She just hoped it would do so before she went crazy.

As soon as she concentrated on her daily routine, the solution presented itself, almost in its entirety, perfect and elegant. It emerged from a quite unexpected quarter. Not surprisingly, it was from someone who already knew Vincent and the tunnel community well. Catherine would have looked there first, but she had assumed that no one there would have the answer. After all, she didn't want a holiday below ground, but in the open air and sunshine, like other people. Few in the community left the tunnels, except for short trips to scavenge or collect shipments from helpers. Most of the helpers never left the city either.

She had forgotten that there were exceptions – and who knew them best.

Later, Catherine couldn't remember why she had gone to see William. He had always been a sympathetic ear and enjoyed teaching her basic cooking techniques. He and Vincent were good friends and were always playing practical jokes on each other – small harmless things that only they would know about. On this particular visit, William had thanked her for the regular supply of fresh herbs they grew in the brownstone's garden and made a crack about cats basking in the sun, as the reason Vincent loved gardening so much. He was only half-kidding. Although Vincent tended the garden with great care and dedication – between other duties - he also liked to relax on the bench in its shady nook and nap. Catherine wasn't sure if he purred then, because he always woke up when she approached – but she wouldn't have been surprised.

Catherine wistfully commented that it was time her family got some real sunshine and fresh air - on a holiday. William had grown silent for a minute and then looked at her. He had realized immediately that she wasn't joking, for which she was grateful.

"Catherine, how does a farm vacation sound to you?"

Catherine had stared at him in amazement.

"William, that would be wonderful. But where? And how?"

William pulled her into his office and made her sit down. Then he poured them both a cup of tea from a pot he kept on his desk. It was lukewarm, but Catherine hardly tasted it. She looked at William and wondered why she had never thought of him before. Of course he knew a lot of topsiders! All the milk, cream and bulk vegetables they ate came from above, and a lot of it from a farm. She knew that, but had thought no more about it. That was an above habit, she berated herself, and those died hard.

William seemed to sense her self-reproach and smiled.

"Catherine, I've lived here for many years. I've had to learn the procedure for ordering food and the logistics of getting it down here. Why would you question the method or the source?"

"As it happens, I have a sister with a large farm in New Jersey. She supplies a lot of what we need and we send crews out to help her plant, weed and harvest. It's not hard to get to because our special tunnel actually ends beneath a small brick storage building that used to belong to the local farmers' co-op. She owns it and the land it sits on. We extended the tunnel to it a few years ago, when we realized that the little grocery stores in the city couldn't possibly supply us with enough fresh produce and dairy products, without risking bankruptcy.

"Anyhow, my sister's is almost the last working farm left, but it's protected from development because of a small lake used by migratory birds and some very rare trees. When she dies, the property will become a State conservation area. But in the meantime, all you have to do is get there. She'll meet you at the building and take you all in her delivery van to the farm. She has a couple of small cottages used by our tunnel farm workers. No one will bother you and she'd be happy to have you. She'll make sure there's food in your cabin, but if you want to join her for meals, she would probably like the company. She's a great cook.

"She met Vincent once, after we extended the tunnel. He was part of the work party. I'll let him tell you about that. I write letters to her often, so she knows most of the news. She'll be keen to meet Vincent again – as well as you and baby Jacob."

Catherine's mind was awl and she deliberately dampened her emotions. She didn't want Vincent to know about this yet. There were still details to work out and she liked the idea of springing it on him as a surprise.

"William, I'm amazed! That sounds perfect for us. We could help her around the farm too. Vincent in his gardening get-up wouldn't even get a second glance, even if anyone else were around. He gets sunburned. He has to keep covered.

"When can you get word to your sister?"

William was grinning broadly now.

"I'll be collecting some root vegetables from her in three days. I'll send a message with the crew. I'd like to go myself, but my ... um ... girth makes that kind of trip too tiring. Even if they could push me on the cart to get there, I'd still have to walk back. It is a long way. You'll need several days at least, but there are well-stocked way stations. I'll make sure the crews lay in extra provisions. They'll be leaving tomorrow."

He sighed good-naturedly.

"Kipper or one of the others can pass a message along to my sister – whose name is Agatha, by the way. When would you like to go? We'll have another crew going out in about nine days, you could go on that trip."

Catherine thought about that. It was late April now and there was no time like the present. She figured she could make all the necessary preparations in nine days and told William so.

"Right then – a week from next Monday suit you?" he asked.

"Perfect," Catherine smiled. She got up and walked around the desk, giving him a kiss on his pudgy cheek and a hug.

"You don't know how much this means to me, William."

"Oh, I think I do," he remarked, a serious look in his eyes. "I remember when you wanted to take Vincent to Connecticut, the fuss some people made. Later, we talked it out in Council and there were some guilty faces. By that time, it was too late. Vincent'd had a dream, or something. He never mentioned it again, but it has stuck in my craw ever since. He should be able to have a holiday with his family above. I know it would mean a great deal to him. This is as safe as anyone could wish – and I'll say so to Father and the others."

Catherine patted William on the shoulder.

"I don't think that will be necessary this time, but your voice might be needed when everyone realizes Vincent is not at their beck and call."

"Count on me to bellow loudly, Catherine. Be glad to help."

...

Catherine began to make her plans and gather the clothing and other things they would need – including a supply of cloth diapers. Jacob was over a year old, but still had occasional accidents when he got too excited to use a toilet. She made a visit to Annabelle, their seamstress, to see if some light cotton coveralls could be found for all of them. Father called them boiler suits, but they were Vincent's favourite outdoor garment and his son liked them too. She might as well join the team. It would soon be too hot for Vincent's combination underwear, especially out in the open.

Annabelle, predictably, gave her a big hug and declared their vacation was long overdue. The dwarf was grinning from ear to ear as she showed Catherine a box of soft, generously-sized, pale blue cotton coveralls that must have been uniforms. There was a logo of some kind on the breast pocket, but it was one she didn't recognize. No matter. Annabelle promised to cover up the thin spots at knees and elbows with traditional tunnel wear patches and get several of appropriate sizes ready over the next few days.

"Now you make sure that wonderful man has a holiday to remember."

"Oh, you can depend on that," Catherine said as she hugged the tiny woman.

Catherine's happiness soon infected Vincent and she had to tell him what she was doing. Surprisingly, he made no comments at all, just nodded. When she asked him why, he looked a bit sheepish.

"My love, William is a poor keeper of secrets. He mumbles to himself in his kitchen."

Catherine confessed that she never paid much attention. Vincent grinned.

"That is how William spreads information. He never uses the pipes. He knows when someone is nearby and pretends to be talking to his utensils. I felt your happiness after you left him, and since I am naturally curious, I went to the kitchen. He told the stock pot everything.

"William knows that a community needs to keep informed of the small things, as well as the larger ones Pascal

relays. I heard everything he thought I should know. I'm sure I was not the only one. It must be all through the tunnels by now."

Vincent's mouth twitched again. "I remember Agatha. She laughed when she first saw me, that one time. Of all the initial reactions, that was the oddest. I asked her why, after I got up the nerve, and she said that she never expected to see a cross between Aslan and The Scarecrow. I had to laugh too. Her laugh is infectious. You have civilized me somewhat, Catherine, but I think Agatha could still find me a bit comical."

Catherine put her arms around him and hugged him tight.

"Nonsense, Vincent. You aren't comical. She saw through your appearance and recognized you for what you are, a man with both Aslan's nobility and the great heart The Scarecrow sought and eventually found. I like her already. I think we're going to enjoy this vacation."

Whether because William had actually done some public relations work in the background, or because everyone remembered the last attempted vacation, there were no objections to the trip when it was announced by Father the next night at dinner. In fact, there were knowing smiles from many of the older women and many good wishes. Catherine was sure all the implications of their absence had not been taken into account, but she would never have said so. They had deliberately made their vacation period indefinite. Peter would take over the Foundation work while she was gone.

Chapter 2

They were packed and ready to depart. Jacob, still a little sleepy because it was very early, was tied in a sling to Vincent's chest and everything else they needed was divided between two backpacks. The two adults were dressed in casual, stretch pants, because they needed mobility above all. They all wore soft, tunnel-made footwear. Vincent insisted on wearing his cloak and Catherine had put on a long, hooded, denim coat. It would be chilly on the trip. Jacob was wearing denim dungarees, the kind with snaps around the inner leg and crotch, and a windbreaker.

They had decided to travel quickly for a few hours, then have breakfast at a sentry post before continuing on to the way station where they would spend their first night. They would not push themselves, but they had to make steady progress in order to get to the warehouse on the third day. They could call Agatha from a telephone when they got there.

Catherine, who always found the distances below ground more challenging than those above, found the concept of three days of tunnel travel unimaginable. She had never been more than a couple of hours from the home hub at any time – except when she had been abducted by Paracelsus. She didn't remember much of the journey down, but the return journey had been pleasant, alone with Vincent.

The first leg of the journey was more strenuous than Catherine had expected. She was out of shape, she realized belatedly. She no longer trekked around the city or carried anything for long distances. Also, she hadn't pedal-operated the tunnel's infamous washing machines on laundry day for almost two years. When Vincent called a halt at their first stop, after three hours or so of walking, she was ready to sit down. These were nice straight, even-floored tunnels. Whatever would she be like when the going got rougher? They shuffled into the small stone room used by the sentries and Vincent took out a flask of sweet fruit juice. Tea, he told her, would just make her dehydrated and she needed the energy boost.

She looked around. She had never been inside one of these before. There weren't many sentry posts out this far, she knew, and most of those were now unused. This far from the hub, there was not even an entrance to the world above for miles. Irregular patrols kept an eye on possible trouble spots, but these days, everyone agreed Mouse's early warning system of pressure plates and bells was the best defense. He and Jamie checked the various connections regularly.

Vincent sat on a wooden seat against the wall and let Jacob onto the floor. Catherine sat on her husband's lap and let his hug relax her. Jacob quickly wanted to be part of the hug and she lifted him up onto her lap. Their joint bond hummed with mutual contentment.

Their son, though, was too restless to stay there long and wriggled down. Catherine sighed and rooted in the knapsack. They ate some oat muffins spread with peach jam. Jacob was running around the little room before

his parents finished, babbling in his own secret language, and examining every rock and cranny.

Vincent got them all on the move again quickly, for the next leg was longer. Catherine had sympathy for her husband, who she was sure could have done the distance in half the time. He had to shorten his stride, first for herself and then for Jacob, who insisted on trotting along with them every so often.

Four hours later they reached the remote sentry station that was their goal for the day, and found it clean and supplied with several cots, lots of blankets and pillows, and a crate of supplies William had sent with the last crew the day before. Vincent immediately got to work making a fire in the stone pit, which had been placed under a pipe conduit for ventilation.

"This is the last pipe that connects to home," Vincent remarked. "If we have any trouble, it is a two day trek from the warehouse, even for me."

"Well, I don't expect we'll need to put it to the test," Catherine declared, hoping that she was right and crossing her fingers superstitiously. This vacation had to be flawless or there would never be another.

"I will send them a 'hail and farewell' now, though," Vincent said with a slight smile. "Father will want to know we made it this far."

Catherine said nothing to this, merely listened to the tapping of the short code and reflected that it would be strange to be out of range of that communication system. Vincent, she knew, listened to it with one ear all the time – as did everyone below. She blanked the sounds out, largely. If her own name or Vincent's was used, she always knew. That much had become habit.

Vincent made them some scrambled eggs, sausages and tomatoes for supper, liberally extended with some toasted bread. Catherine had seldom felt so hungry – and they weren't even outside yet! Jacob nearly inhaled his portion and was obviously tired afterwards.

Vincent pulled out a poetry book, "A little Treasury of Modern Verse", and opening it at random, began to read John Masefield's *I Could Not Sleep for Thinking of the Sky*.

Catherine and Jacob listened entranced. Vincent's voice was magical, soft and seductive. It barely echoed in the cavern, as if the rocks were listening too. She felt her eyes droop and then Vincent found another poem, this time by Ezra Pound. She felt joy in her breast as he read.

*"Sing we for love and idleness,
Naught else is worth the having.*

*Though I've been in many a land,
There is naught else in living.*

*And I would rather have my sweet,
Though rose-leaves die of grieving,*

*Than do high deeds in Hungary
To pass all men's believing."*

Vincent stopped and sighed. Without further ado, he removed the mattresses from two cots and they bedded down on the floor, Jacob between them. At first, Catherine could not sleep, then she realized why. For the first time in the tunnels, she couldn't hear the tapping of pipes in the background. With that thought she fell asleep, Vincent's feet entwined around her own, his arms surrounding both herself and their son. It was comfort that they all seemed to need at the start of this new adventure.

The next day, Vincent made tea and toasted bread and cheese on a makeshift grill over the fire pit. They left as soon as they had tidied up the station, dumping all their garbage down the waste hole. It had a heavy iron grate and lid which had thwarted Jacob's curiosity quite effectively.

The tunnels became rougher. Although the floor had been kept smooth and wide enough for the passage of the wagons, the tunnel sides were rough and uneven. They were heading downwards gradually and she realized they had to go under a river if they were heading west. Every so often they would emerge into a broader area that looked like it had melted. She realized that these must have been carved by giant whirlpools and wondered where all the water had gone.

"Are these tunnels safe, Vincent?"

"Yes. They were carved by fast water, millennia ago, but the streams have changed their courses many times. Now they are far below us. We will run across the odd steam vent, though, even here. The geothermal springs run under all of New Jersey. We were lucky to be able to tap into this network to get to the warehouse."

"Where are the sewer lines?" Catherine asked. She suddenly realized she had never seen, or smelled, any sign of what must be a very large system under New York.

"They are far above and near the surface, under the roads. They do not come near our network of tunnels. They empty into large conduits far away. Our sewage system below is self-contained."

After a short stop for lunch, they moved on quickly. Jacob was content to ride in the sling on Vincent's chest. He didn't like the close, lumpy darkness and clung to one or the other of them if he was let down. Vincent's lantern cast the only light.

Catherine found her stride and began to enjoy the exercise. By the time they stopped for the day, several hours later, she was feeling less exhausted, although quite hungry. The resting place was a wide, but fairly low cavern. There were wooden pallets arranged for beds and lots of blankets, even cooking utensils. A nearby rivulet had good water and they drank thirstily. Vincent made a hearty lentil, tomato and sausage stew from supplies William had left them. They ate it all between them. Vincent heated a much larger pot of water and using an old galvanized tub in the corner, they all had a sponge bath. Then they fell into their joint bed and were asleep in minutes.

The next day, they expected to reach their destination, so they set out early, determined to reach their goal before they stopped. Vincent was sure that they need not hurry, so they strolled along, one behind the other. The tunnels were narrow, but high enough even for Vincent, and well-ventilated. Some daylight seeped through in places to everyone's delight. Jacob walked just ahead of them when it was bright enough, babbling to himself. Finally, just as Catherine was beginning to feel she'd had enough, they rounded a corner into a very large chamber with a ladder at one end. There were empty pallets, bushel baskets and crates waiting for the next shipment of produce. The place was clean and tidy. Against one wall was a battered line of old lockers, without doors. Within each was a coverall of indefinite hue. One huge bin seemed to be full of rubber boots, and another of hats.

"When the crew comes to help Agatha in the fields, they leave their tunnel clothing here and wear the coveralls," Vincent explained.

He walked over to the ladder and asked Catherine to wait. He clambered up hand-over-hand and she saw a trap door open into brilliant light. It was blinding where it fell on the floor of the cavern. Vincent reappeared quickly and he called down.

"You can come up now. Agatha's truck is coming down the road. She must have guessed our travel time."

Or someone phoned her, Catherine thought – probably after that last pipe message.

She put Jacob on the ladder and supported him from behind. The steps were a little far apart for his short legs, so she had to give him a boost at every rung. Vincent reached down and caught the straps of his dungarees to lift him up as he neared the top, to his whoop of delight. Catherine sighed in relief and got herself up. Their son was getting heavy and she was very tired!

The building was made of concrete blocks and had two narrow windows looking down a long dusty lane. It held stacks of smaller baskets and crates. Catherine looked out to see a battered blue delivery van rumbling closer, a cloud of dust behind it. Jacob was jumping up and down and babbling happily.

Vincent seemed a bit tense, but hugged Catherine when she went to him. This would be his first trip away from the tunnels – or the city. She couldn't imagine what that must feel like. She had a few butterflies in her stomach herself, just from the anticipation.

"How is it you never went to her farm before?" Catherine asked him.

"It was winter and very cold with a lot of snow here. We were happy to be below ground. We were all tired when we were done and slept in that storage room below for a night and a day. Agatha brought us food and we started back home."

Vincent looked out the window. The van stopped just outside and a strong-looking, grey-haired woman jumped down and approached the building. She waved at them and unlocked the door. Vincent stood back as Agatha entered and looked around. She immediately went to Catherine and hugged her. She smelled of hay and fragrant herbs. Her hair was tied into a long ponytail and she was wearing dungarees and rubber boots.

"You must be Catherine. Welcome!"

With a mischievous smile and a wink at Catherine, she walked over to Vincent and regarded him with her head on one side for a few moments. He stood stoically and said nothing.

"Well, you've certainly improved with age, Vincent. Marriage must agree with you. You look too noble to be a clod-busting field hand, though. Maybe I can introduce you to my cows and goats. They are getting quite incorrigible because I spoil them. I suspect you will be able to talk some sense into them. I've heard stories."

Vincent looked at Agatha, who was almost his height, and nodded his head.

"Agatha, you look pretty good yourself – and you are certainly more fit than your brother. We are eager to see your farm. Can we go?"

"You bet, Vincent. Just gather your kith and kinder and climb into the back of the van. I put a couple of hay bales in there. We don't have far to go."

Vincent lifted Catherine and Jacob into the back of the van and hauled himself in after the backpacks. Agatha closed the door. At least it had some light coming from the air vent in the roof, Catherine thought. She didn't like traveling this way, but she supposed the farm crew had to as well.

The van moved with a shuddering motion along the rough road and they bounced around on the hay bales, despite the fact that Agatha was obviously going very slowly. The road must be all holes, Catherine thought, as a particularly large bump made her cling to Vincent's arm. Jacob, sitting between them, was crowing and laughing at every bounce.

Finally the ride smoothed out, but only for a short time, and then they moved over a road Catherine had no problem calling washboard. She wondered if her teeth were going to rattle loose before the van finally came to a stop. The back door opened and all three of them staggered unsteadily to it.

Vincent jumped down and helped Catherine and Jacob to the ground. He looked around and took a deep breath. His joy at the new sensations was tangible. The fields were rich with the smell of turned earth and growing things. Agatha smiled as she looked at him and took Catherine's arm.

"Come with me and I'll take you to the cabin, while your husband fills his lungs with good country air. You can have the one on the end. There's a screened porch on it. You might like to sit out in the evening and it will protect you from any early mosquitoes."

Jacob ran on ahead. A chicken abruptly flew in front of him and he stopped so quickly he fell on his bottom. His face had crumpled by the time Catherine and Agatha reached him, but then a gaggle of geese honking nearby distracted him. He tried to run to them, but Catherine caught him and pointed at the cabin.

"Look Jacob. That's our cottage!" Even she knew that geese could be nasty.

The cabin was in a copse of large maple trees and well-shaded. The screened porch, while not large, had enough room to bed down in. There was a hefty-looking rattan chair with big cushions. Inside, the cabin was one large room stuffed with old couches and a number of bunk beds. A nook on one side held a galley kitchen, boasting a stove, lots of cupboards and a sink. Agatha showed them a lead-lined hole under the sink, the cold-storage cupboard. A small curtained door on the other side of the room led to the bathroom, which had a shower, sink and toilet and a lot of towels and soap in a curtained cupboard. Another curtained nook was a small clothes cupboard. A big wood table with several mis-matched chairs stood near a large window looking down a grassy path. Catherine decided that would be her favourite spot. The view was serene. Agatha's house could be seen out another, smaller window, dwarfed by a line of French poplars. A small window at the back of the cabin was open and a nice cross-draft was blowing through the already-warm cabin.

Catherine took a deep breath and felt Vincent's arms around her. His voice was deep with happiness.

"I have never experienced so many wonderful things at once - the colours, the smells, the wind, the sunshine. Thank you, Agatha. I think I could spend a day just breathing."

Catherine turned to look at him and he planted a soft kiss on her lips that sent a shiver of desire along their bond, which boded well for later. Jacob trotted over and put his arms around their legs, burbling happily.

Agatha laughed suddenly.

"Well, with so much love and happiness around, I'd just get in the way. You just settle in and relax. However, I am planning to eat a good country dinner in about two hours. I'd like you all to join me. There's no need for you to cook. I have lots of food and I like company. I taught William everything he knew about cooking before he left - although I'll warrant he could teach me a few things these days.

"I'll ring the gong when it's time. There's no clock in this cabin. The tunnel field hands get up with the sun and go to bed at dark when they're here. I'm used to feeding a crowd - so bring your appetites."

She left and they watched her walk over to her house, taking long strides.

The sun was high and they were both warm, so they all took a shower in the bathroom. It was gravity fed from a big tank outside. It had been in the sun, so it was warm. Catherine was glad to have a real shower. They had it quickly, though, being unsure how much water was available.

Vincent pulled out one of the pale blue coveralls. Annabelle had inserted her gauze panels below the waist, so he didn't need to wear underwear. He sighed but stood naked for a few minutes to dry off. There never seemed to be enough towels for him.

The coverall was loose and he looked magnificent, Catherine decided, when he finally buttoned it up. On the other hand, there was nothing he didn't look good in, with his height and build.

Catherine put on her own coverall and decided she needed a t-shirt underneath. She too eschewed underwear. Little Jacob was dressed in a pair of lighter coveralls because of the heat. They would have to wear hats outside, Catherine decided. None of them were used to a lot of sun.

Vincent gathered up his hair at the back and deftly tied a length of leather thong around it. He looked at Catherine sideways.

"Maybe I should cut my hair short for this vacation."

She whirled around and looked at him. She knew he was only half-serious, but she was at a loss for words for long moments. His hair! She had never seen it other than it was. What would he look like with short hair? Could it even be cut neatly? It was very thick.

"Vincent, I know you're joking, but now you've got me curious. How long have you had your hair long?"

"Catherine I can't remember a time when it wasn't long. My hair has defined me almost as much as my other ... differences. Father said I would never allow him to cut it. I don't remember that, but I do know that it doesn't grow any longer than it is now. I do try to trim it a little sometimes, but it's impossible to keep neat. I suspect if I cut it short, it would just grow back to its current length, probably in record time."

"Well then, you should just tie it back, as you have." Catherine was firm. She loved his hair - all of it, especially in the sunshine. It was soft and rippled in golden waves. But certainly, if they did any farm work, he would want to keep it out of the way.

They sat down in an old porch swing tied between two maple trees in the yard with Jacob between them to keep him clean. It seemed no time at all before a loud metallic gong sounded. They walked to Agatha's house and long before they reached it, delightful smells accosted them. Vincent sighed. Catherine's stomach was rumbling and Jacob pulled on her arm to get her to move more quickly.

Agatha greeted them at her front door and led them into a big country dining room. She even had a high chair for Jacob that looked like it had seen long use. They all sat down and without further ado, tucked into a huge pot of buttered squash, slabs of tender beef and mashed potatoes. After that, Agatha brought out a huge apple crumble pie. Vincent and Jacob both had second helpings. Catherine rolled her eyes at Agatha, who laughed.

"Well, I think your men have fine appetites, my dear."

"These men would happily eat all day, if we let them," Catherine remarked, with only slight exaggeration. "Wait until they actually do some work around here. By the way, what do you need doing?"

Agatha smiled. "Well, it's early yet, so everything is still growing. I won't need the farm hands for another two weeks or so, when we start harvesting the early crops. Right now, it's mostly weeding and thinning. I don't worry about that too much, just try to keep any invasives out of my fields. I'll show you what those are. I grow more than enough for myself and you folks in the tunnels, so I can have some wastage. But I do need someone to help with the livestock. There are quite a few young ones that need to be fed and watered. And I might find a repair or two to keep Vincent busy.

"But really, you are here to enjoy yourselves too. The chores usually take a couple of hours in the morning, less if we all work together. After that, you can wander about and do as you wish. The nearest neighbour's several miles away. No one will visit me without calling first."

Vincent yawned hugely and Catherine realized they were all weary. They'd done a lot of walking. The sunshine and fresh air - to say nothing of eating a substantial meal - had them so relaxed that a nap would probably be in order. It was only late afternoon, but she wondered if their hostess would forgive them if they retired early.

Agatha smiled at them all.

"I think you all need to get acclimatized for a day or so. Country air always makes newcomers feel tired at first. You tunnel folk aren't used to the heat either. There's nothing here that needs immediate attention. Just before sundown, I'll have a picnic basket of food for you. You'd probably like some time to yourselves. Just come over whenever you're ready."

Catherine snapped to sudden attention, looking at the dirty dishes on the table.

"But we can't leave you to clean up, Agatha. Let us help with the dishes at least."

Agatha laughed and then gave them both a broad smile.

"Well, if that don't beat everything! I have a dishwasher, Catherine. It takes about two minutes to fill and then I push a button. Presto, clean dishes. It dries them too."

Catherine blushed and Vincent smiled. They had never bothered to put a dishwasher in the brownstone. They often ate below, and when they didn't, Catherine tended towards one-pot meals. Vincent did their dishes, although he had to wear rubber gloves. The dish detergent irritated his skin.

Agatha chuckled.

"You've been hanging around William too long. That man is still living in the Stone Age! Oh, I know you don't have much electricity in the tunnels, but I think he takes delight in old-fashioned tools. Do you know he had me send him a gross of long wooden spoons last year? What does he do with them all?"

Vincent laughed then.

"Well, Agatha, you have not seen William for awhile. He needs longer and longer spoons to reach the stove around his ample belly."

Agatha broke out in gales of laughter so infectious, that they all joined in.

"Well, I'd never have guessed that! No wonder he doesn't show up at the warehouse anymore. That brother of mine needs to go on a diet. I'll tell him so in my next letter."

"That will have no effect," Vincent chuckled. "William believes a cook is what he eats. And he samples everything generously."

Catherine leaned against Vincent and captured Jacob, who looked as tired as she felt. Vincent looked down at her and then at Agatha.

"I think we all need a rest," Vincent commented. "Thank you for a marvelous meal, Agatha. But you'd better have some work to keep us fit after today, or you'll have to roll us back into the tunnels."

Agatha smiled. "Oh, a farmer's work is never done, don't you know? But I hear you tunnel folk have pretty busy schedules too. You won't find caves to carve or leaks to fix around here, though. Never mind, I think I'll be able to keep you from getting bored. Have a nice rest now. See you later."

She herded them out the door and they shuffled back to their cabin. Wordlessly, they flopped down on a couple of mattresses pulled from the bunks onto the floor. Catherine had a weird sense of déjà vu – but was too tired to figure out why. Jacob lay between them and was asleep quickly. Catherine looked at Vincent and caught the banked ardour in his eyes and along their bond. They'd have to find a place for some lovemaking. Jacob would

need afternoon naps, so perhaps they could find a quiet spot. They'd never made love outdoors. She leaned closer to Vincent and their lips met with a promise. Then they both drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 3

By the second day, Father had firmly schooled himself not to look up at every slight sound, expecting to see Vincent's large form coming into his chamber. Early on the third day, he was awakened by a panic attack and had to firmly tell himself that the Wells family would not have even left the tunnels yet. They had made it to the furthest sentry post served by the pipe network the night before and Vincent's message had been passed along to him. He knew there was virtually no danger in this trip – inside or outside the tunnels.

So why was he panicking now? Was it because Vincent had seldom been beyond range of the pipes, and then only to places further Below? It was silly to be worried about two adults in their 30s, one of whom was no stranger to the world above. They were going to the safest place possible, under the circumstances.

Father tried to get himself under control, but admitted to himself, at last, that the problem was deeper than just worry. Vincent was the heart and soul of their community. He gave of himself – his strength and his patience – every day. They had come to expect him in the tunnels, even though he now had a family who needed him. He had no doubt that Catherine had wished her husband to help her with their son more often. Somehow, the community had come to rely on Vincent to solve even the more trivial problems. Mouse always had some new gadget that Vincent just had to see, Mary a teething child who needed soothing, William corralled him to haul food and ice up from the deep storage – and he himself expected Vincent to spend hours in his chamber discussing this or that – or playing chess - when he was not teaching children.

Father knew that Vincent was a natural leader and would take over when he passed on, but until now, he had not realized how much of that load Vincent had already shouldered. It wasn't fair. He had sensed that Catherine was a little unhappy at having to shoulder most of the responsibilities related to little Jacob – and she had a right to be, he thought, ruefully. Well, they would all have to learn to lean on each other more over the next few days – or weeks. His son had not said how long they planned to be away, but May on a farm would be delightful. He could not begrudge Vincent enjoying that for as long as he wished.

With a sigh, he rolled over and tried to sleep. The work roster would have to be better organized to take into account Vincent's absence. Perhaps if he kept everyone busy, they would learn more self-reliance. Yes, that's what he would do. The Great Hall needed a good airing and cleaning. Once a year was NOT enough. Those tapestries needed to be looked at and repaired if necessary. And the dining room needed a proper spring cleaning too. The tables needed scrubbing with baking soda and one of their helpers had left them several boxes of mismatched ceramic tiles. They could get that installed on the floors of the kitchen and dining chamber. If any were left, the laundry room floor could definitely use them.

Father smiled to himself. Work, that was the solution. Good hard work.

...

When Vincent awoke, it was to see the sun at a much lower angle. He got up quietly, careful not to disturb Catherine and Jacob, and saw long shadows from the trees outside stretching down the road. It must be almost supper time, he guessed. He padded to the door and breathed deeply. The smell of sun-warmed grass was something new to him. He could also smell the warm wood of the cabin and the drops of tar that had melted off its roof. From somewhere, presumably the barn or the fields, there was the smell of animal dung. For the first time in his life, he couldn't smell candle smoke and he could see for miles without a rock wall or building interfering. It wasn't quiet here, but they were sounds he'd never heard before. Some kind of creature was croaking – frogs perhaps? There were lots of birds. The wind rustled the grass along the road and a dead leaf scritch'd across the path. He remembered a poem by John Masefield in the book he had brought with him, and felt his heart soar.

*"It's a warm wind, the west wind, full of birds' cries;
I never hear the west wind but tears are in my eyes
For it comes from the west lands, the old brown hills,
And April's in the west wind, and daffodils.*

*It's a fine land, the west land, for hearts as tired as mine,
Apple orchards blossom there, and the air's like wine.
There is cool green grass there, where men may lie at rest
And the thrushes are in song there, fluting from the nest.*

He looked down past the other cabin and realized the rough path kept going, out of sight. Where did it go? He'd have to ask Agatha. He wanted to explore everything he could. In the meantime, he'd better go and fetch supper. He slipped on his tunnel shoes and left quietly. He jogged up the road to Agatha's house, feeling as if he had already absorbed the peace of the place into his bones. He knocked on the back screen door and heard Agatha yell for him to enter. He found her in the kitchen packing an enormous hamper.

"Agatha – that looks like more than one meal's worth of food!"

"It is, Vincent. I thought you might want to make a light breakfast tomorrow too. Just until we decide what time works best for a joint one. So there's milk and some granola, if you like cereals. I've also packed in a summer sausage, blackberry jam, butter and bread. You'll find a propane burner in the kitchen and there are pots and pans. Tea and coffee are in the cupboard. There's a bottle of apple cider in here too. What else? Oh, and we can meet for chores here tomorrow, say an hour after sunrise, if you wish. I'll give you the tour then."

Vincent nodded his approval.

"Agatha, where does the path beside the cabins go?"

"Ah, that goes to the lake – well, it's more a large pond. We get a few ducks and geese there all year, but in the spring there are hundreds. They're one reason this farm will be preserved. You can swim there, the water's spring fed, but the bottom's quite muddy. Last year, the tunnel crew made a boardwalk from the shore with a platform at the end to dive off into a place where the bottom is a little more solid.

"Oh, there's a small woods off the north end. That's the other reason. My granddad loved trees and planted some rather rare ones there. Tree of heaven, black walnut, pin cherry, arbutus, elder, Garry oak – others I've forgotten. There's quite a few heritage apple trees of various kinds too. They're all in bloom now. I always send William a few bushels of them."

She broke off when she saw Vincent grin. He moved to hug her.

"Thank you, Agatha. I don't know how this holiday could be better than it is already – but you seem to have endless delights. Catherine has wanted to get away for a long time. Jacob probably won't remember much of this, but he'll have fun too."

Agatha sighed and looked at him.

"Vincent, if you hug me like that again, I'll be tempted to tie you up and keep you prisoner. A spinster like myself doesn't get many male hugs – but yours are special. Catherine looks like a contented woman. I'll bet you're just as good in other areas," she grinned mischievously.

Vincent blushed and spoke softly.

"Agatha, until Catherine came into my life, I never really knew what love was. Now I want to pass it along. I'll hug you as often as you wish. As to my other attributes - well, you'd better talk to Catherine. I'm no judge. But we're happy and I am the luckiest man in the world."

Agatha nodded as if this were not news to her. She changed the subject.

"How long were you thinking of staying? Not that I care, really, but I'll be sending a shipment of last year's potatoes, navy beans and onions in about seven days. I'll also have to deliver my usual milk, butter and eggs to a helper on the outskirts of the city. A week after that, a crew will arrive to help pick some of the early vegetables

– spinach, carrots, and leeks. I have a small greenhouse with tomatoes too.”

Vincent looked out the window. A fortnight or so. Was that long enough? He was sure it would go quickly, but felt that might be long enough to be away from home. He was sure Father was already missing him.

“I think Catherine would probably agree we should help the crew harvest when they come and then go back with them.”

“That sounds like a good plan, Vincent. By that time, it will be quite hot here and you’ll probably find it a bit uncomfortable. The tunnel crew go about half naked, even in May, but I hear you have to be covered to avoid sunburn. Pity. I’ll bet you’re something to see!”

She broke out into gales of laughter which Vincent could not help but join. He hugged her again, then remembered his reason for coming. He could sense that Catherine and Jacob were awake.

“I had better get this food back to the starving or a search party will be sent out. Thank you, Agatha. See you early tomorrow.”

“You bet, Vincent. Oh, and by the way, one favour you could do for me is to collect the mail from my box at the end of the driveway. Sometime in the evening would be fine, if you folks’d like a bit of a walk. There’s never anything urgent so you can just bring it by the next morning when we start the chores. The road ends at this farm, so there’s no traffic I don’t know about.”

“Our pleasure, Agatha,” Vincent declared.

He left the house and nearly ran down the rutted road to the cabin. The hamper was an awkward burden. He found Jacob and Catherine waiting for him at the table, three plates and the cutlery placed at the ready. Both looked as if they would have eaten his spare boots if he had taken any longer.

“Sorry,” he said contritely. “Agatha was telling me more about this place.”

“You’re forgiven because you’ve brought the grub,” Catherine smiled. Jacob started bouncing up and down on his chair.

“How on earth can we be so hungry when all we did is sleep?” Catherine wondered aloud.

“We did walk a great distance on fairly short rations,” Vincent reminded her. “And I think country air is all it is rumoured to be. Oh, and Agatha wants us to pick up her mail every evening. I think we will need a walk after this meal.”

They set to with a vengeance, demolishing most of the summer sausage, and eating great slabs of cheese on the home-made bread. Agatha had included a tin full of home-made cookies for them. All were brightly decorated and brought burbles of delight from Jacob. They were delightfully spicy with cinnamon and ginger. Catherine would have gladly eaten several, but wanted to be able to stand up when she left the table.

Agatha had given them a couple of bottles of milk, which Vincent put into the lead-lined cupboard, with a small basket of eggs and a container of rich-smelling cheese. Goat, he thought, with delight. She had also given them a freezer pack. He loved country living, if this was the way they ate. Used to tunnel rations, he felt as if he was in paradise. He’d have to restrain himself, he thought ruefully, or he would resemble a giant teddy bear when they returned. Either that, or he’d have to be sure to work it off. *That* sounded easier!

It was now getting dim outside and the walk to the mailbox sounded like a good idea to work off supper and tire little Jacob before bedtime. The three of them set off down the lumpy dirt road they had traveled in the van. It was no easier on foot, but Catherine and Vincent each took one of Jacob’s hands and lifted him over the worst of the potholes. He squealed in delight at every one. Eventually, the game paled and he squirmed until they let him go. He ran like a jackrabbit in front of them, stopping only to look back and see how close they were.

It took them about half an hour to reach the mailbox, by which time it was dark and the night sky was a velvet canopy lit with diamonds. The moon was nowhere to be seen, but the stars were so bright they could see their way without too much difficulty. Vincent had good night vision, and Catherine’s had improved with so much tunnel living. Jacob seemed to have inherited Vincent’s natural talent as well. He ran ahead of them after they picked up the few envelopes from the box. Bills, Catherine decided.

She wondered what it cost to keep up the farm and how Agatha paid for it. She knew next to nothing about William or his sister. William had joined the tunnel community after becoming disenchanted with the life of a chef above, or so she’d heard. Perhaps Agatha had a family inheritance – or William had given her his savings before

coming below. The last seemed most likely. He must have earned very good money as a chef - he was a very good one.

Vincent was always remarkably uncurious about people. She had wondered at that in the early days, given his love of any other knowledge. Then she had discovered that people tended to confide in him. He learned all he could wish to know, without prying. His empathic talent seemed to work both ways, to some degree.

By the time they reached the cabin, Jacob was sitting on a porch chair waiting for them. He was obviously tired and made no complaint when Catherine gave him a quick warm bath in the kitchen sink and put him to bed. She had not brought him any pajamas because he was happiest with nothing on – like his father. There were plenty of blankets to keep him warm.

Catherine returned to the porch to find Vincent outside staring up at the night sky.

“Are there mosquitoes?” she asked.

“No, not yet. I think it may be too early for them. It will get chilly tonight because there are no clouds. But Catherine, look at the stars! There are millions and they look close enough to touch! I have never seen the Milky Way like this - so brilliant.”

Catherine laughed. She had seen wonderful night skies before, but not for a long time. In New York, one tended to forget that there was anything besides the moon to see. She leaned against Vincent. He pulled her in front of him and hugged her to him, in a pose reminiscent of Kristopher’s painting, she realized. She could feel his arousal growing against her back and along their bond. She craned her neck to look up at him and he turned her around, pulled her closer and dropped a kiss on her mouth.

“Mmmph. I think it would be nice to test out the porch as a love nest,” she mumbled when he let her breathe at last. They moved to do just that, pulling off several assorted chair cushions to carpet the wooden floor. In a rush, they removed their clothing and clung together, their body heat arousing them still further. Then, they added their own soft noises to the noisier ones of frogs and crickets.

Afterward, Vincent rolled over and lifted Catherine onto his chest. He whispered into an ear.

*“Sex, which breaks up our integrity, our single inviolability, our deep silence
Tearing a cry from us.*

*Sex, which breaks us into voice, sets us calling across the deeps, calling, calling, for the complement,
Singing and calling, and singing again, being answered, having found.”*

“Where did that come from?” whispered Catherine back.

“D H Lawrence’s *Tortoise Shout*,” he told her.

“Good heavens! Is that in your book of poetry too?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll have to read it. Sounds very erotic. Not that I need any encouragement. Mmmmm, you feel wonderful.”

Vincent chuckled and held her closer. It was beginning to cool off, but neither wanted to sleep in the cabin, so he went in to find some blankets, bringing out two that would have done credit to the tunnels. They went to sleep quickly, sated with fresh air, country food and love.

Vincent awakened in the wee hours, as he often did, even at home. He did not need long stretches of sleep. Catherine had turned over, so he carefully extracted himself and went quietly outside. There was not so much as a breeze, and the air, though cool, did not bother his hirsute body. He looked down the grassy path and knew what he wanted to do.

He ran slowly at first and then full speed, glorying in the freedom to be able to do so. He had never run like this in his life. The ground was a soft and cool carpet beneath his feet and his blood sang in his veins as he entered a shadowed area between trees. He made himself slow down and stopped as he came suddenly to a still pond reflecting the night sky. The small boardwalk Agatha had mentioned stretched into it, a wide stripe of deeper black blocking the reflected stars. He walked out to the end and sat down, letting his feet dangle into the water. It was cold, but felt wonderful on his feet. He lay back on the planks and stared at the sky, panting a little. He felt

as if he had been let out of prison. He could never have imagined such a wonderful sensation. To run fast, to lie in the open, naked, without a care in the world, was beyond his wildest dreams.

Catherine sat up and watched Vincent run down the path. She always knew when he left her, although she tried to mask her reaction. She felt his exhilaration to her bones, even as the sight of his receding behind aroused her. She clamped down on that too. He deserved this experience without her.

She waited patiently. When she caught sight of him running back, she gathered up a blanket to cover herself and waited outside. She strained her eyes to catch a glimpse of that part of him she considered wholly hers. How did it feel to run with it flopping around, she wondered. Even though Vincent's organ was sheathed more than most men's, it still hung down. The thought aroused her again and this time she let him know it. She felt his humour as he slowed, then stopped in front of her, panting. He gathered her to him and hugged her close inside the blanket. She let it fall away as his hands lifted her under her buttocks so he could kiss her. She wrapped her legs around his waist and snuggled into his chest. When he spoke at last, it was in a throaty whisper.

"Oh, Catherine, I've never known such joy – to be able to run, really run, in the open – and naked. I may have to swear off teasing William for the rest of my life, in gratitude."

Catherine chuckled. "My love, William needs you just as you are. Even a great cook needs distractions. I think you give him something to anticipate, besides the stew pot."

"I will have to think of some way to thank him. I am ashamed I did not think of Agatha and her farm before."

"Vincent, you have not been encouraged to go above, for any reason. I think the time had come, that's all. Even Father can't be worried about you here."

"Yes, of course. I wonder how they are getting along? In about two weeks, we may find out. Agatha will be sending another shipment of food next week, then a week after that, a crew will come to help harvest the early crops. We could leave with them."

"Oh, Vincent, don't talk of leaving. We've only just arrived. It's bad luck. Let's just take every day as it comes and see what the days bring."

"Yes. I am so used to a life bounded by work rosters, that the concept of a vacation had never occurred to me. It was a wonderful idea, Catherine. Thank you."

He stopped and dropped Catherine to the ground. She sensed another emotion, amazement, as he turned her around.

"Look!"

She looked where he pointed her and saw an arc of large yellow moon rising over the fields. They said nothing as it rose further, shrinking as it did so. She realized Vincent would never have seen a moon like this, above a horizon without buildings.

She heard him sigh as he held her to him.

*"Slowly, silently, now the moon
Walks the night in her silver shoon."*

"What's a *shoon*?" whispered Catherine.

Vincent chuckled into her hair. "I presume some kind of chemise, but even the Oxford dictionary does not know. Maybe it was slang. It makes a good rhyme."

His voice changed and she felt him come back to reality.

"There are no words, Catherine, for the blessings I experienced today. We had better return to bed, though, or we may be cursed by Agatha tomorrow."

They returned to their love nest and lay down. Vincent's joy became a calm serenity that Catherine felt melt into her. He held her close and they fell into a dreamless, peaceful sleep.

Father grunted as he prepared for bed. His leg was unusually stiff. He had walked around a lot more than was normal for him, but all in all, the day had gone reasonably well.

There had been a few pursed lips when he had rotated some of the teenagers into nursery duties and set the rest to scouring the dining chamber. He had decided to leave the Great Hall for another time. He wanted everyone under his eye for a few days, until they all settled down. He'd had to speak to Pascal and ask him not to broadcast his ad hoc code for marking every day Vincent was away. It was hardly fair to Catherine and little Jacob anyway. It wasn't as if it was the first time. Vincent had been away from the hub before – but previously, he had been either on one of his trips to the deeps, or in their brownstone.

He himself had had to take over Vincent's classes. He'd forgotten that his son had been teaching history as well, until the children filed into the library. He'd had to devise an impromptu lesson. He'd have to find Vincent's notes on what he had been teaching. Then there were the swimming lessons. Jamie had taken over those.

Tomorrow was laundry day. Without Vincent's strong back to carry the baskets of wet laundry to the drying chamber, he didn't know what they would do – but he was determined they would find a way. Perhaps the produce trolleys could be utilized. Yes, that was the obvious solution. If the floor was uneven, they'd have to struggle, but he'd have a work party do something before the next time. Some stone chiseling would remind them that hard work had to be spread around.

The day after tomorrow, they would start laying the ceramic tile. That would give it a week to cure before the next laundry day – supposing they had enough. He had looked at the stack of battered and very heavy boxes, and was certain there would be sufficient. Kanin had declared there would be enough to do some other small projects as well.

Vincent would be surprised when he returned. Father smiled to himself. He enjoyed surprising Vincent. It happened far too rarely. His son seemed to know what was going on almost before it happened. That explained why he was such a good chess player. Father closed his eyes and was soon asleep.

After breakfast the next day, the community got on their wet gear and gathered in the laundry room. Father had to firmly remind himself that Vincent would not be walking through the doorway in his coverall this time. He would be enjoying his first morning on the farm. Laundry would be far from his mind.

Father had William haul out the trolleys from the storage room and they tested the route to Annabelle's drying chamber. It was very rough, but they guessed it was do-able with one man pulling and another pushing. Of course, the weight of the laundry might make more manpower necessary. So be it – there would be no complaints when he organized the work party to smooth out the tunnel floor.

All went well until the last load of laundry had to be transported. Everyone was eager to get the task finished and the trolley was perhaps a bit overloaded. Several men pulled and pushed the balky trolley down the passage. One wheel found a dip and the front axle suddenly snapped in two. The sudden jolt sent the back wheels flying off. One wheel went down a floor vent and disappeared to the groans of the men. The other hit Cullen in the shin and made him yell in pain. He sat down and rubbed the spot furiously, until an egg-sized lump made him curse roundly and fluently. William hauled him into the kitchen and gave him an ice pack and a shot of brandy. Quick reflexes and three banged heads had saved the laundry from spilling onto the by now muddy floor, but Geoffrey and Kanin had got scraped and very muddy in the process as well. Still, it could have been a lot worse, Father reflected. They might have had to wash that laundry again. Then there would have been a mutiny.

It had taken two men apiece to get the last of the heavy laundry baskets to the drying room, where several women waited to hang it up. Kanin and Geoffrey had had to have an immediate bath, removing them from the work party, and Father had to minister to their injuries. Fortunately none were serious, but both men needed bandages.

Dinner that night was quiet. No one said anything until William reminded everyone that the trolley would have to be fixed before the next produce shipment in a week's time. The missing wheel had disappeared and even Kanin, who had carved the vents, had no idea where to look for it – or whether it could be extracted if he did. Cullen thought he could straighten the axle, but warned that it might be too weakened to last for long.

Mouse, who had been rolling his eyes at all the gloomy words, spoke up.

"Mouse can help. Know where there are wheels and axles too. Plenty of them."

That got Father's attention. He didn't like Mouse exposing himself to danger above. There was no Catherine to rescue him this time.

"Where, Mouse?"

Mouse gave a sideways grin. "Old metal scrap yard. No one there now. But have to be quick. Big billboard with picture there, like that other time. Have to work fast."

Cullen looked up, forgetting his pain.

"WHAT? Mouse, how long have you known about this? Why didn't you tell us?"

"Never asked. How would Mouse know what Cullen wants? Take you there tonight if you want. Lots of good stuff. Free. Need lots of bags. Can't take cart. Uphill and then steps and then manhole."

He pulled out a handful of assorted steel balls and put them on the table with a smirk.

"Ball bearings?!" Cullen bellowed. "Ok, that does it. Let's go. Never mind the R & R. I don't need any. Anyone with me?"

Father sighed and broke in. "This will be a long night and we've all worked very hard. I declare tomorrow a holiday. Everyone sleep in. William would you be able to prepare a brunch for around noon?"

There were tired cheers and a grunt of acquiescence from William. Several men stood, a little stiffly, but obviously game to scavenge metal. It was dark enough above to begin. They grabbed very large canvas bags from the storage chamber and followed Mouse.

Several hours later there was a horrendous metallic clatter as a series of bags were hauled along the rough tunnel floors to Cullen's workshop, which was near the laundry room. Father hoped they had got everything they wanted because he didn't think his aging ears could stand that racket a second time.

Sitting on his bed after what seemed like a very long day, Father reflected that the loss of one man had forced him to re-do his work roster, yet again. This time, not only had they lost a trolley because Vincent had literally not shouldered the burden, but fixing it required a special scavenging run and a day's holiday for everyone. The tile work would have to be rescheduled again. He'd also have to assign a crew to smooth out that tunnel floor between the laundry room and the drying chamber. First it would have to be cleaned of all the mud. Maybe a couple of energetic teenagers could do that. Perhaps they should tile that section of floor. Yes, that would certainly avoid any concerns about spilled laundry in the future. He'd have to ask Kanin to see about a proper floor drain as well.

Father consoled himself with the thought that not much more could go wrong. He touched wood superstitiously, just the same.

Chapter 4

Catherine woke to a small arm around her neck and a kiss on her cheek. Jacob had burrowed under their blanket and come up between them. She looked over at Vincent, and saw his eyes twinkle. Jacob must have woken him first. There were worst ways to be awakened, she thought, and hugged their son.

"Well, good morning, sport. And what have you got to say for yourself today?"

"Mumma," he replied and launched into a string of very clear but completely original words.

Vincent laughed and joined the hug.

Catherine looked around. It was still dark outside, but the eastern horizon was lighter than the rest of the sky.

"I think we'd better get some breakfast in us," she remarked as her stomach growled.

She extracted herself from the blanket and realized it was chilly outside.

"Last one in the bathroom's a rotten egg," she declared and ran inside, trailing a blanket and followed closely by Vincent, who had scooped up Jacob.

"Hey, no fair," she protested. as they all piled into the shower stall. Before she could say anything more, Vincent had turned on the water and picked up the sponge and soap. He scrubbed Jacob and himself with great economy and then eyed Catherine. She saw the suggestion in his eyes but shook her head. They didn't have time for that! She took the sponge and quickly cleaned herself. The water was getting cold, so they made a quick rinse and turned it off. Catherine extracted two huge, but ragged towels and dried Jacob. She tried not to look at Vincent as he dried himself, then took Jacob's hand to find them both some clothes. She heard her husband sigh.

Catherine finished her own drying and went back into the main room. Vincent had slipped on his boiler suit from the day before and a pair of rubber boots. Jacob was wearing a miniature version of the coverall, in red. Good, she thought, they should be able to spot him a mile away. She put on her outfit from the previous day too. She'd have to inquire about laundry facilities. They had not brought many changes of clothes.

"Where'd you find the boots?" she asked.

"Over there in the cupboard are a few pairs. I don't think there is anything quite small enough for you, but maybe if you use a pair of my thick socks ..."

Catherine looked where he indicated and found a pair small enough. Yes, a pair of socks would be necessary. Thank goodness it was not too hot yet.

As for Jacob, she rooted in their luggage and found the pair of small rubber boots she had packed. He chuckled happily when she put them on.

"Now for some food," she pronounced.

They rooted in the kitchen cupboard and found the container of granola, and another of currants. Vincent extracted the milk from the cooler and they were soon all crunching away on the homemade cereal. It didn't seem like enough to any of them, so Vincent went back to the kitchen for the rolls, goat cheese and butter from the hamper.

"Tea!" Vincent groaned and got up to put the kettle on the propane stove. A few minutes later, they were waiting for it to steep. Jacob was running around the cabin, peeking under bunks and sticking his fingers through cracks in the floor. Catherine looked at Vincent.

"How are we going to keep him under our eyes? We can't let him stick his fingers into everything."

Vincent gave her a grin which told her he had already come up with a solution.

"There's some fine cord in the drawer in the kitchen. I found it looking for the tea strainer. I'll tie one end to his coverall and the other to whichever one of us is convenient. These coveralls have that handy loop. Once we learn how, we can teach Jacob to feed the livestock."

Well fortified with tea, the three of them put on their sun hats, gathered up the mail and walked down the path to Agatha's house, just as the sun rose above the horizon. It was a little early, but they were eager to see the working portion of the farm. As they reached the steps, Agatha came out and looked down on them, her hands on her hips.

"Well, aren't we the eager ones? That's good. We can get done before the sun is high and I can take you on a tour of the farm. Come with me. The barn and the dairy are where most of the work is done."

She took them into the dairy first, and they watched as she hooked up the dozen or so cows, which had been waiting patiently outside the door, their dugs heavy with milk. The machinery rumbled and Agatha poured water into the long drinking trough and gave each cow some hay.

Then she showed them the dairy, where the milk was collected from the milking machines and pasteurized in large stainless steel vats.

"I don't homogenize the milk, partly because it takes a lot more electricity to heat it up to that temperature, but mostly because this allows me to separate out the cream the old-fashioned way and keep the milk digestible to everyone. Homogenization destroys the natural enzymes."

She showed them the cream skimmer and the cold room where she kept all the milk and made cheese and butter. She also had a large ice-cream maker. The smell was wonderful, Catherine thought. She had always loved cheese, an addiction she shared with Vincent, who loved anything creamy.

"What do you do with all the ice cream," Catherine asked. She could sense Vincent's interest in the buckets of it, which judging from the colours, were many different flavours.

“Oh, William arranges for a helper to drive out here with a refrigerated truck once a month. I can’t supply him with as much as he’d like, but at least you get it. I make it over the winter from the fruit I harvest. I should make some more soon. I’ll show you how. That’s a job that no one minds doing.”

Against one sunny wall of the dairy was a long narrow greenhouse. Inside, Catherine could see small tomatoes on tall vines.

“I grow a lot of early tomatoes here. Out in the fields, I’ll have the big beefsteak ones in a few weeks.”

Next she took them into the big barn to show them where she kept the feed and buckets, and show them the stalls and the grooming equipment. There were a few well-worn saddles.

“Do you have horses?” Catherine asked.

“Oh yes, just two. You can ride them, but they’re pretty mellow beasts, plow horses really. No fancy stuff. I use them sometimes to harrow the fields and cut the hay. I hate using machinery unless I have to.”

Then she led them out another door to where a small fenced off area was noisy with hens and geese. “Just toss a handful ...”

Agatha stopped and caught her breath. Catherine couldn’t at first see anything wrong, then she saw a pile of feathers on the ground outside the fence.

“Stupid bird.” Agatha raged. “I keep their wings clipped and make the fence high, but one always manages to go exploring.”

She marched over to the feathers and grunted. “Not much left of this one. The fox took everything edible.”

Vincent had followed Agatha and now bent down to look more closely at the feathers. His sensitive nose could smell the musk of the fox and wrinkled in disgust. He looked at the fence.

“How did the bird get out?”

“Oh, there’ll be a hole somewhere. The fox is smart. He’ll dig a hole and wait for one of the silly birds to find it. He won’t have to go in the enclosure – they’ll go to him.”

Vincent walked around the fence line and, sure enough, next to the barn, a small dip in the ground extended under the wire.

“Have you got more chicken wire?” he asked Agatha. “I can bury a strip of it just below the fence, all around. It won’t have to be very deep to discourage the fox, I think. Maybe six inches or so. I can add a few rocks as well.”

Agatha looked at him. “I have a big roll of wire in the barn. That’s a terrific idea, Vincent, but a lot of work – which is why I haven’t done it.”

He smiled at her.

“Catherine and Jacob can help feed the livestock, while I do this. I should be finished by lunch. I assume you have some rocks somewhere.”

Agatha pointed at a large pile in a corner of a nearby paddock.

“There. That’s where we put the ones that emerge from the harrowing every spring. They might be a little big though.”

“Have you a sledge hammer?” Vincent asked and Catherine could feel his humour.

“Of course – ah, I see. You’re determined to do some rock-breaking. Feeling homesick?” Agatha broke out into gales of laughter, which Vincent joined.

“Well, I think Catherine and I had better get on with the rest of the chores before my animals riot.”

Vincent gave Catherine the cord they had attached to Jacob and she tied it to her coverall loop. Jacob had not noticed. In this strange place, he seemed willing to stay close. Wait until he sees the animals, she thought. She hoped they would not be a liability to Agatha. Their son had all of Vincent’s curiosity and none of his caution.

“Lead on,” she told Agatha and they followed her into the barn. It was a large structure, and dim. Half of it seemed to be devoted to animal stables. The smell nearly knocked her over and she gasped. Agatha laughed.

“Don’t worry, you won’t notice the smell after a day or so.

“All the animals, except the pigs, are out in the fields already. They only come in here when the weather is bad.

"This is what we feed the pigs. It's kitchen scraps, mostly. I give the soured cream and milk to the sow."

Catherine was amazed by the huge sow and her crowd of little piglets. Jacob crowed in delight and reached through the fence. He was able to touch one piglet, and his face took on an expression she had never seen before. He was ecstatic. Of course, he had never touched an animal before. They didn't have a pet and there were none below except Arthur the raccoon. She had not let Jacob get near him yet.

A large paddock out the back door had goats and sheep browsing the much-cropped grass.

"They eat the grass faster than it can grow," Agatha remarked. "I open up the gate to the next paddock, so this one can recover. We have a few calves this year, so I may retire one of the older cows and have her converted into steaks and roasts for William. I keep a few heifers for meat as well. William sends me an apprentice butcher when I give him the word. That will probably be in a few weeks. I'll have some capons and chickens for him too. I have a cold storage for anything he can't take right away."

"I guess we'd better feed the chickens and geese."

She gave Catherine a wide pan and with a wink, gave a lid to little Jacob and showed them to the grain bin. Jacob watched his mother then stood on a block of wood to reach in and scoop some up. He followed them back to the chicken run, moving carefully so as not to spill any. Catherine and Agatha threw the grain around in a wide arc and were rewarded with a cacophony of clucks and hisses as the birds rushed to the grain. Jacob crowed in delight. He got the idea of feeding one of the geese by hand and stood quietly while a big orange beak daintily took grain off his palm through the chicken wire.

Catherine looked over at Vincent, now half way down the fence line, digging, placing the wire, twisting it with pliers to the old fence and planting rocks from a pile he had collected in a wheelbarrow. He looked completely absorbed – and was. Their bond was quiet.

Agatha shook her head in wonder.

"That man is efficient, like a well-oiled machine. All you tunnel folk are like that. No wasted movements. Best field hands I could have. Must be part of the training."

Catherine looked at Vincent. She had never really thought of hard labour in those terms, but Agatha was right. Without unions and of necessity, the community had learned to be as constructive and efficient as possible. Now she thought about it, the men in the tunnels made above-ground road crews look like they were on holiday. Below, they worked until the job was done, then allowed themselves just enough leisure time to wind down. They worked hard individually, but they were also a team – no matter what they did.

"Let's continue the tour," Agatha suggested. "We don't have much more to do in the way of chores, just check on the youngsters."

Catherine extracted Jacob from his admiring flock, and they followed Agatha past Vincent and around another corner of the barn to a green paddock with a few shade trees. Under one of them, Catherine could see a mare and a long-legged foal. It was nursing with great pulls, forcing the mare to brace herself. She wondered if it hurt. Further down the field, a group of cows were laying down, their calves butting and playing not far away. It was probably the most beautifully bucolic scene she could have imagined. Jacob wanted to get closer, so she let him pull her to close to the mare.

The horse looked up as they approached, but did no more than flick an ear. The colt, though, was curious and walked closer, stilt-legged. It came close to the fence then paused. Agatha pulled up a few stalks of wild grass and handed them to Jacob. He reached them through the fence and the curious foal approached. It ignored the grass, however, and nuzzled Jacob's hand. He chortled, causing the foal to put its ears back, but it continued the examination with soft lips, licking the small boy's hand. Salt, Catherine guessed. Her son's happiness flowed down the bond like clear water. He was a little disappointed when the foal lost interest and bounded away to rejoin its mother, but watched intently.

Catherine went to him and kneeled down beside him.

"Horses," she said, stroking his hair, which was long and golden and probably should be cut one day. It was so much like Vincent's she hated to do it.

"Orss," Jacob repeated and turned to give her a kiss. "Mumma."

Agatha laughed as Catherine hugged her son. He was always affectionate, like his father.

"We'll have him talking before he leaves," Agatha predicted. "He just needs to get his sounds sorted out.

"Would you like to see the pond? There might be few ducks there still. Then I'll make us all some lunch."

"That would be lovely," Catherine said, her stomach already rumbling to the thought of food.

They retraced their steps past the barn and then walked past the house and the cabins. Catherine let Jacob off the leash and he ran ahead of them. By the time they reached the pond, he was tottering down the boardwalk. Catherine ran to him and captured him before he reached the end. She scooped him up and carried him back to Agatha, then re-attached the leash. She rolled her eyes at the older woman. They continued around the pond and a few ducks did indeed leave their bulrush hiding places and swim away, leaving bright V's behind them.

Catherine looked up at the sky, realizing for the first time that the sun had disappeared and grey clouds were rolling in. Agatha looked up too.

"There'll be a bit of rain later, I shouldn't wonder. It's been a few days since we had any, so we need it. Cooling off too. We should get back to the house and start on lunch. We'll gather some eggs from the chickens on the way in. That's the last of the chores."

Catherine turned and was about to follow her, when she gasped. A short distance behind them, the apple orchard trees were a cloud of pink blossom. Too bad the sun had disappeared, she thought, but the sight was still lovely.

Agatha followed her eyes. "That's our orchard. We have some heritage apples and a couple of crabs – and over there are some cherry trees, including two sour cherry. I usually send William a bushel of those. They'll be ripe in a month or so. Make great pies."

"Cherry pie! Oh, I can't wait. But getting my share is difficult in my household. If I get one piece, I never get a second. Last year William made me a small one to hide. I ate it in secret. Delicious."

"Well, you'll never go without here," Agatha declared. "I have some preserved cherries from last year. I'll make a couple of pies. One for the men and one for us girls."

Catherine laughed.

"Now that sounds like a plan."

They headed back to the house, Jacob again running in front of them, but only to the limit of the leash. He didn't seem to mind. They stopped by the chicken run so that Agatha could lift the flap behind the henhouse and extract some eggs. She put them in a bowl she kept under the run. By the time they reached Agatha's doorstep, Catherine sensed Jacob was both tired and hungry.

"I think we've worn our boy out," she told Agatha. "I didn't think that was possible."

"I know exactly how he feels," came Vincent's voice behind them. He looked a little bedraggled and was covered in dust.

"I need a shower. I have to and wash up and change for lunch."

"You don't have to go back to the cabin, Vincent. Use my shower. It's got hot water and all the necessities. I've even got clean coveralls. I keep a few up here for the hands, in case they need a spare. They're always generously-sized. And I do the laundry. I'll wash yours later."

She led him to the bathroom and found him a faded green coverall and extra towels. He thanked her and Catherine soon heard water running.

Agatha returned to the kitchen and immediately began preparing lunch. She pulled out a large container from the fridge and emptied the contents into a pot. Then she turned on two ovens and reached up to lift down a tray of rising bread. She melted butter to baste it and then turned to making pastry.

To Catherine, never a cook, Agatha's efficiency was nothing short of miraculous. By the time Vincent re-appeared, his hair damp and his face shining, the bread was in one oven, two cherry pies in the other and a pot of soup was filling the kitchen with smells which made her stomach rumble. Jacob was sitting on a chair, enthralled by all the activity.

Vincent gathered Catherine to him and kissed the top of her head.

"Well, the fox will have to find another source of food," he declared.

Agatha laughed. "There are plenty of mice around here. He'll have to revert to his normal fare."

"Mice?" Catherine asked. "Don't you have one of those big old farm cats around here somewhere?"

"Oh yes, there's Boots and Turtle and One-eye, but they're getting fat and lazy. They're good mousers when they want to be, but they don't bother much, except in the barn. I'm grateful for that, since I store the grain for the animals there."

"Where are they? We didn't get introduced," Catherine remarked.

"They're probably waiting outside the door right now. They know my schedule. I make them wait to be fed until the chores are done. If they get really hungry, they'll do their job," she laughed.

Nevertheless, she opened up the back door and three black cats paraded in, to sit by the pantry. They meowed at Agatha and she sighed and pulled a carton from the fridge. She filled three bowls and put them outside. The cats followed her.

"Good heavens," remarked Catherine. "All black too."

"Yes, one is the mother and the other two brother and sister. I don't know who the father was – but he might have been black too. I feed them fish from the pond, stretched with grain and cooked eggs. They love it. I don't believe in wasting my money on cat food."

"Father would approve," Vincent said. "We've never had pets in the tunnels – well, except for Mouse's raccoon, Arthur. He's enough trouble – and probably the reason no one dares ask for any other pets."

Agatha laughed. "Oh yes, William has told me stories about Arthur. Even his kitchen has not escaped the depredations."

"Which reminds me. Lunch is served, folks!"

They each had second helpings of the wonderfully fragrant soup and Vincent had thirds and Catherine knew he was considering fourths. Agatha caught the look he gave the pot and dished him out another bowl. Vincent sighed in happiness as he finished and leaned back in his chair, rubbing his stomach.

"Agatha, that was a soup that rivaled anything William has made. What was it?"

"Mulligatawny," she told him. "That's short for something of everything, with curry powder."

Catherine laughed. "William tries to accommodate all tastes, so he might not want to make something quite so spicy. But it was wonderful. Best Indian soup I've ever had."

"Is that what it was?" Agatha asked innocently. "Well, the recipe is one that changes with every attempt. I always feel that's the sign of a winner, as long as it's edible."

"So what would you folks like to do this afternoon – if Vincent can do anything after four bowls of soup and enough bread to feed a scout troop. I bet you still have a corner for cherry pie, though."

Vincent sat up and grinned.

"Always."

Agatha gave them all a slice with homemade ice cream. Vincent and Jacob made short work of theirs. Catherine had a hard time finishing it, but was determined to do so. She wondered if she was going to be able to walk.

"I think we'll have to have a rest, Agatha," Catherine said, looking at Jacob, who looked very tired now. "Then maybe you can show us what field work needs doing and we can get to some of that tomorrow."

"Oh, there's not much field work, as I said. But I have a kitchen garden that needs some attention. I'd appreciate help with that. And I'll take Vincent off to help me with some work in the barn tomorrow. I think you should take the rest of the day off and I'll make you another hamper for later – with more cherry pie, of course."

They made their good-byes and Vincent carried Jacob back to the cabin. Catherine almost wished he would carry her too. They put their son to bed and sat in the porch on one of the rattan couches.

"I think we need a proper mattress out here," Catherine commented.

Vincent gave her a look and went into the cabin, emerging with a couple of bunk bed mattresses, which quickly became an improved love nest on the floor. They lay down and both were asleep in minutes.

Catherine woke up in late afternoon. Vincent was still asleep and she contented herself with watching him for a while. He had worked hard – but what was her excuse? Well, she planned to do her share the next day in the

garden. Jacob might be a nuisance, but perhaps she could find him some way to keep him amused.

She had no idea what time it was, and didn't care. Clocks had not been of much concern since she joined the tunnel community. They kept fairly regular mealtimes, but the time was measured in terms of classes, job rosters, special events. A lot of people had clocks, but mostly for decoration. Pascal made sure everyone knew what was happening and when – and sent out time signals when needed. Vincent had an old grandfather clock in his chamber, but she suspected it had not been wound until she appeared on the scene. Here on the farm, time didn't matter. It was wonderful to join the natural cycle of the days.

It must be near supper time, she guessed. Extracting herself from the bed, she went into the bathroom for a quick wash and then put on a clean coverall. She might as well go up for their hamper now. If it wasn't ready, she could talk to Agatha for a while. Jacob was still asleep and when she passed through the porch, so was Vincent. He had spread out over the bed. He looked very contented and she could feel his happiness. She wondered if he was dreaming.

Walking up to Agatha's house, Catherine breathed deeply. She had never realized how many smells were missing in New York. The winds carried the smell of sun-warmed grass and dusty roads – and farm manure. The latter was not a smell she would have thought pleasant, normally, but now it seemed to fit. She wondered what Vincent thought of it.

She knocked on the door and heard Agatha yell from inside. She went in and found their hostess in the boot room ministering to a huge dog which seemed mostly St Bernard. She stopped in amazement. Agatha was using a comb to remove burrs and detritus from the dog's coat. It lay patiently while she did so, its tongue hanging out, head on its front paws.

Agatha looked up.

"Goodness, is it that time already? I'm sorry, Catherine. Bo here has returned after one of his love excursions and brought the back-forty with him. Never have a dog with long hair on a farm! This one was a gift – a mutt, as you can see. He's a sweetie, though. No one minds if he impregnates one of their bitches in heat. Just as well, since keeping him inside would be almost impossible."

Catherine laughed.

"I'm early, Agatha, I think. I left the men sleeping. I haven't worked as hard, so I decided to do the food run. What a lovely dog. I can see him playing the role of Nurse in Peter Pan!"

"Well, Bo is very serene. We might put him to work doing exactly that tomorrow, now that you mention it. I imagine your Jacob will be a handful otherwise. We can leave Bo to watch him. He's better than a babysitter, because he can take a lot of abuse. I used to give donkey rides and he was good at keeping the littlest ones from mischief. That's why his puppies are popular. They all seem to have his temperament. There are still a few hobby farms with kids hereabouts.

"How would you like to finish combing him, while I get a food basket prepared?"

"Sure," Catherine said, and took the comb from Agatha. She sat down next to the big dog, who raised his head to give her a curious glance, then rested his head on his paws again. She began to pull the comb, which had wide teeth, through the long coat. She noticed that a lot of undercoat was coming away too. The dog was still shedding his winter coat. She tried to be gentle, but soon found that some of the burrs needed more pulling. The dog did not seem to mind. He must be used to this procedure, she guessed.

She put the results of her combing into a pile, then noticed that Agatha had left a bag, already with a lot of hair and dried vegetation in it. She pushed the dog a little and he obligingly rolled onto his side so she could tackle his belly. Fortunately the hair was shorter there, but the job was no easier. She finished finally and gave the dog's belly a rub. He stretched his head out along the floor, whined and wagged his tail, obviously happy.

"You remind me of someone," Catherine whispered, thinking that someone would probably like a rub himself, later. The thought made her warm and she felt Vincent's matching ardour along the bond. Jacob was awake too, she realized, and both were hungry. She carried the bag of hair to the door and left it with a knot in the top. Bo followed her into the kitchen. Catherine washed her hands and Agatha thanked her.

"Well now, I guess Bo is his handsome self again, although he needs a bath. But not now. We'll take him down to the pond one day, if he doesn't make his way there himself. He likes to swim. I don't believe in washing dogs. He just needs a good drenching and a grooming.

"And here's your basket, Catherine. I think there's enough in there for your hungry men – and yourself. Here's a couple of quarts of home-made beer for you two as well. I have a few cases in the cellar, as well as cider and wine, so let me know if you'd like anything. The field hands will get some of it when they come, but no reason you shouldn't too."

Catherine took the basket and noticed the heft.

"Thank you, Agatha. This feels like plenty – and smells delicious! We'll see you bright and early tomorrow."

"Don't forget to pick up the mail."

"We won't. Thanks for the reminder."

Catherine hauled the basket back to the cabin, glad when she reached it. She found Vincent waiting for her and looking beyond her. She turned around to see Bo, who sat down and regarded them with a doggy smile.

"Gosh, I hope Bo doesn't expect to be fed from this."

"I don't think he's hungry," Vincent said.

He took the basket from Catherine, put it on the table and then went back outside. Catherine watched as he bent over the dog and rubbed its ears. Bo put his head against Vincent's thigh and looked up at him. They seemed to come to some understanding, because Bo rose and moved away, to lay under a nearby tree. Vincent returned and washed his hands before joining the other two at the table.

"What was that all about?" Catherine asked. She had not felt anything except calm along their bond.

"Bo's curious. I think we have a new friend."

"Well, I'm glad. Agatha says he's a good nursemaid too."

Vincent laughed then. "I thought that only happened in Peter Pan."

"Well, apparently not," Catherine told him. "I hope he and Jacob get along, otherwise I'll spend more time chasing our son than weeding tomorrow."

"I'm sure they will be friends," Vincent predicted.

They tucked into the food hamper, which had a container full of devilled eggs, home-made bread, cream cheese, slabs of ham and several apples of a type Catherine couldn't identify. But they were wonderful – despite being last year's crop. Jacob ate everything put in front of him and downed a large glass of milk. The beer was wonderful too. Vincent and Catherine shared a quart, deciding to leave the other for later. They sat back and groaned in unison.

"I think it's a good thing we have to collect the mail every evening," Catherine remarked, looking at the now-empty hamper.

They cleaned up their supper dishes and then made their way to the mailbox again. The buzz of the crickets was soporific, the air as warm as a caress. Bo, she noticed, had not followed them. He had moved into the shade of the cabin and was sound asleep.

Jacob ran ahead of them, stopping here and there to examine something of interest. Vincent flung his head back and breathed deeply. He stopped and drew Catherine into a hug.

"I will not like going back into the tunnels after this," he declared. "Maybe we can bottle some of this air to take back with us."

"Well, maybe not the air, but we can take some of the stuff that produces the smells," Catherine told him. "There are a few flowers and grasses I could dry. But I draw the line at manure."

Vincent laughed. "Remember this?"

*"Now as I was young and easy under the apple boughs
About the lilting house and happy the grass was green,
The night above the dingle starry ..."*

Catherine looked at him. He didn't seem to find it a bad memory, so she relaxed.

"I do indeed. You were reading *Fern Hill*, just before I talked you into going to Connecticut with me. The trip that never was. Three years ago, at least."

Vincent looked down at her and sensed her unease.

"Yes. But you didn't talk me into anything, Catherine, and I talked myself out of it, later, after Pascal and the others made me feel guilty for wanting to get away. Then, I had that terrible dream. That was my guilt speaking too. I don't feel at all guilty now. I wonder how they're doing?"

"Probably nursing sore backs from hauling all those laundry baskets," Catherine remarked. "I don't think Father had really considered all the implications of your being unavailable. But I'll bet he has now."

Vincent grunted. "Much as I hate to say it, you are right. They are all too used to me being there - or within easy call."

There was a whoop ahead of them and they both ran to Jacob, who had captured a large toad.

Vincent knelt down and loosened his son's hands a little.

"Careful now," he told the boy. "You don't want to hurt him. He has to breathe, just like you."

"Ahmaaa," Jacob said softly, looking at Catherine. Then he shrieked and the toad would have dropped, if Vincent hadn't caught it. Jacob's hand was wet. The toad had peed on it.

Catherine giggled.

"I remember they always did that when I picked one up too, as a child. I guess they're frightened, Jacob."

Vincent looked at Catherine and raised his eyebrows.

"You ...you caught toads?"

She laughed and took the toad from him, then walked to the field and put it down carefully. It disappeared into the tall grass. She turned and smiled.

"Yes. I wasn't always wearing pink tulle and black patent leather pumps, you know. I didn't do this kind of thing where my mother could see, but I had boy cousins who liked to explore ponds and such. I went with them when no one was looking. I washed up carefully afterwards. My father knew, just as he knew I liked to climb trees, but we let my mother keep her fantasies about her daughter. I only had one doll in my life. She's in my trunk. A silly thing with almost no nose, but I pretended she was a pixie and could take me to a magic kingdom. Little did I know that a man from a magic kingdom would find me."

She reached up and kissed Vincent. Jacob put his arms around her legs.

"Ummm," Vincent grunted, at last. "We're not getting any closer to that mailbox. We'd better hurry. It's getting very dark."

They marched onwards to the mailbox, pulled out the few envelopes and walked back quickly. Jacob was tiring and when they returned, Catherine gave him a quick sponge bath and put him to bed. She and Vincent undressed and returned to their love nest on the porch and made slow careful love as the moon rose. Both went to sleep relaxed and happy.

Vincent woke in darkness and once again felt the urge to run. He was tempted to go for a swim in the pond, but decided he needed at least a towel and he couldn't be bothered to find one. He left the porch and stood looking down the pathway, shining a little in the moonlight. He sighed and started to run. He had not gone far when he realized he had company and slowed to look behind. It was Bo, running with his tongue hanging out in a doggy smile. Vincent sped up and ran as fast as he could, the dog keeping easy pace beside him.

They reached the pond and Vincent turned to the right, wanting to see the trees in the woodlot this time. He slowed down, then stopped and took a deep breath. The smell of apple blossom was strong. He walked through the orchard, looking at the moon through the trees. He found himself suddenly in a dense patch of tall straight trunks. Some were rough, others smooth. He guessed one was a walnut, but was at a loss to identify one with a very smooth light-coloured trunk. He ran his hands down it, then on impulse hugged it to him. He fancied he could almost feel its life pulsing under his naked body. He turned and sat on the ground with his back to it, sighing. Bo came up to him and laid his head in his lap. Vincent scratched the soft floppy ears with both hands and looked at the moon. He was beyond happy. There were no words. He felt as placid as that silvery orb, as if he had been

transported to a primal time, a world where he fit without question or explanation. It was a priceless sensation and one he knew he would remember forever.

Vincent reached over to rub the dog's ribs and Bo obligingly lay on his back. Vincent rubbed and scratched him gently. The dog rumbled in pleasure and stretched out, his head back and tongue lolling out. Dogs didn't purr, but Vincent guessed the noise was the canine equivalent.

When he stopped, a few minutes later, Bo sat up and licked Vincent's face.

"I guess we're friends now," he whispered, hugging the big soft head to him. "And it is time we returned."

He got to his feet and began the run back, Bo running beside him. When he went into the porch, Bo turned away and flopped under a tree. Vincent slid back into their makeshift porch bed. Catherine immediately spooned herself against his back and put an arm over him. He fell asleep without a word.

...

Father found himself counting the number of days since Vincent had left. Five, wasn't it? Three in the journey and two at Agatha's farm. It was now the sixth day. There had been no word, but then how could there be? If anything had gone wrong, a message would have been relayed, somehow. Agatha would have contacted a helper. She had a telephone. They tended to forget such things existed, reliant as they were on verbal and pipe communication.

Yesterday, they had all enjoyed a rare day of rest and leisure. Father liked to think that he was amenable to such days, but had to admit he had not scheduled them in recent memory. They had their special occasions, of course, but he found he rather liked not having to do anything at all. He slept in, potted around his chamber and the library, found a book he had started and then mislaid, then joined the casual brunch buffet William had prepared. Afterwards he had treated himself to a long warm soak in the bathing chamber.

The rest of the community had been similarly quiet. Even the pipes were almost silent, except for the sentry reports. Thanks to Mouse's early warning systems, they did not have to keep sentries a long way from the hub, but he had insisted that the nearby posts be manned at all times, as they always had, and vigilantly. However, because it was a rest day, the watches had been shortened to three hours, so that the task was spread around and everyone had time to enjoy a rest.

Today it was back to work. After the debacle on laundry day, Father had been much more careful with the work schedules, trying to anticipate problems before they happened. Vincent had often organized them and Jacob began to see that the younger man had a better grasp of the minutiae.

That floor tiling, for instance. No one Below had any experience in laying tile, but he had looked up a reference book and read up on the technique. It had surprised him that floor tiles had to be laid from the middle of the room to the sides. It did not make sense at first, until he read further. He sighed. He had decided that they would practice on the laundry tunnel hallway first. If it worked, they could graduate to the laundry room and finally the kitchen. He decided the dining chamber did not really need a tiled floor. Better they be used where they would actually be useful, not just for decoration. The tiles were rough-topped, which made them perfect for places where they were likely to get wet.

Kanin had mixed up some grouting compound and all went reasonably well, at first. They had all looked at the tunnel floor and decided that the accepted way of laying the tiles would not work in such a narrow space. So they had begun at the drying chamber and gradually worked their way back to the laundry room. Laying the tiles in sheets diagonally. It turned out that three sheets gave them almost the perfect width and they had moved quickly, Zach wetting and pressing down and smoothing the sand they had spread on the floor, Kanin laying the tile sheets and spreading the grout and lastly, Cullen carefully wiping off the excess grout with a sponge. They were not worried about ragged edges at the walls, and filled in the gaps with some loose or broken tiles as far as they could. They had reached the laundry room with the end in sight when Zach jumped at a noise behind him and a ring-tailed body zoomed past, making Kanin put his elbow up and knock over pail of grout. Cullen had moved to catch Arthur, caught him by the tail and then turned and bashed his nose against Mouse's leg, letting go of the raccoon. As he yelled in pain, his foot upset the pail of water. There had been a universal growl from the three men that would have done Vincent proud. Cullen captured Mouse by the scruff, carried him to the laundry room

and tossed him into the dirty laundry bin. Zach and Kanin had quickly saved as much of the grout as they could and mopped up the spilled water. Just as they were ready to start again, Arthur had re-appeared. Cullen, with a swift movement, had scooped him up and tossed him at Mouse, who stood in the laundry room entry dancing from foot to foot, uncertain if he should try and sneak past the men. Father, who had heard some of the ruckus echoing down the tunnels, had arrived just in time to hear Cullen shout.

"Mouse, you keep that beast out of our way or I'll turn him into a coonskin cap!"

Father immediately took charge of Mouse and Arthur and led them away.

"Mouse, you know you aren't allowed to let Arthur run around. I think you'd better put that harness and leash on him – and keep him in your chamber."

"He won't like that," Mouse had protested, but had complied. Cullen's threat, while even Mouse knew he would not carry it out, was an indication of the man's anger. Father had been reading a selection from James Fennimore Cooper during his literature class, and Mouse had become agitated when the coonskin cap was mentioned. Father had been forced to manufacture an explanation as to why Daniel Boone had worn such a hat. Mouse had quieted but had afterwards paid more attention than usual. The suspicion that he was being mollified had been all over his face. Father was sure Vincent would have known the exact history of the coonskin cap.

The tunnel tiling was finished and after a break, they examined the laundry chamber. Immediately, it was obvious that the job would not be straightforward. The floor was not even remotely even and they would have to move all the machines, some of which were lug-bolted to the stone floor to prevent them dancing around as they were cranked.

Father abruptly decided that only the entry way really needed to be tiled, to give them a place to put the laundry baskets going in or out. That left William's kitchen, a logical place for the tiles, and after some discussion with the big cook, they decided to do the job after lunch. It would have to be done quickly, but the floor area was nice and flat. This floor they would have to do the traditional way, from the middle.

William gladly took a break from his kitchen and retired to the music chamber to listen to the children practice for an upcoming concert. Since losing Miss Kendrick, the community had drawn on several other helpers, including Sebastian, whose talents encompassed much more than magic tricks, and an elderly jazz street musician who was often their messenger. He had been convinced to stay below on those days when he was teaching, but refused to live there permanently. Rolley always played the piano accompaniment.

The three men managed to tile the kitchen chamber floor in the accepted manner and filled in the gaps around the stove and cupboards so that William wouldn't trip. They stood up and examined their handiwork.

"This should make cleaning a lot easier for the work parties," Cullen commented. While William oversaw all cleanups in his kitchen, he never helped. It was his one condition, in exchange for which he cooked three meals a day and catered countless special occasions. It was a long job doing dishes for 70 some people a meal, but no one minded much. William always made sure there was some treat for his helpers when they were done. A little sugar to ease the medicine, he rationalized.

When he returned and saw the new kitchen floor, he ran his foot along the tiles.

"Not slippery. Good, but a little water or fat might make them treacherous. I'll have to find some proper scrub brushes for my floor crew. We can ask Sebastian. He brought a couple of brushes down for the percussion section."

Father was pleased. William was sometimes awkward about changes to his kitchen.

"I'll ask him," Father offered and went to the music room to deliver the message.

Sebastian laughed when he was told of William's requirement.

"Well now, I think I can do that – on one condition. That you give me a couple of those ceramic tiles for the brushes here. We could brush up an orchestral windstorm with those."

"Right," Father said and hobbled back to find Kanin and see if any more tiles remained. He found the stonemason in his workshop and was given a couple of the tiles. Father returned to the music room with them and handed them to Sebastian, who was now leading the musicians in a rousing rendition of *'They Call the Wind, Mariah'*. He took the tiles from Father and demonstrated to his musicians how to make the wind noise.

Despite the fact that the practice was going well, Father found himself too tired to really enjoy it. He retreated to

his chamber for a nap.

He needed an assistant, he decided – someone to step and fetch it. He was no longer capable of so much exercise. His hip felt like it was ready to shatter. He went over the roster of children in his head and thought of Eric. He was the most curious of the children and adept at getting into trouble. Having never had a formal education for any length of time, he was often disruptive in class – asking questions at inappropriate times. The other children were much more polite and cautious, having grown up below. Since his sister, Ellie, had died, no one seemed to be able to control Eric. He was small and seemed to be able to wriggle out of sight as soon as a whiff of adult disapproval neared him. Father was sure he could find plenty to keep the boy busy – and he would take on his education personally, since disruptions in class could not be tolerated.

Father fell asleep thinking of all the things that still needed doing. He would have to take another look at the work roster in the morning.

The next day, Father called Eric to him and watched with concern as the boy shuffled in and hung about the door, head bowed and shoulders hunched, as if expecting a tongue lashing. Father immediately wondered what he had been up to this time. The boy was obviously feeling guilty about something – and supposed he had been found out. Jacob decided now was not the time to delve into that. He would be informed in due course, almost certainly. Without Vincent around, all the community's little problems came directly to him. He had never realized how many there were in the average day.

"Come here, Eric. I have something I need your help with." Father spoke calmly but firmly.

Eric looked at Father and straightened his back. Now 10 years old, he was still small for his age and his glasses still looked too large for his face. He spoke quickly and often without thinking. Father wondered what he would have been like if Ellie had lived. He was very much a loner – seemed to glory in it. Except with Vincent. The boy almost revered Vincent. He had been sullen since Vincent had left, now that Father thought about it. Did he feel abandoned?

Having obviously concluded that he wasn't in trouble, Eric walked down the steps and stood in front of the patriarch. Father tried to soften his voice a little.

"Now, Eric, as you can see, I am an old man. I can't move around as well as everyone else, and ..."

"What happened to your leg?" Eric broke in.

Father sighed. The boy was insatiable.

"There was a bad accident a long time ago, Eric. I was caught in a tunnel collapse. My hip was injured and now, because I'm older, it has become arthritic."

"What's arthritic?"

"The bones have lost their padding, Eric, and are grating against each other and the nerves. Now, young man, I didn't call you in here to give you a lecture about my disability. But I do need your help because of it. Do you understand?"

"Sure. You want me to get you some salve or something? Help you dress?"

"No, Eric. I want you to be my assistant – a kind of personal secretary."

Eric was quiet for some moments, his eyes behind the big glasses thoughtful.

"Does that mean I'll be helping you write letters? Isn't that what a secretary does?"

"In the world above, that is exactly what a secretary does, Eric, but I need someone very special. You won't have to write letters. There's nothing wrong with my hands or arms."

Father sighed. The boy could be incredibly dense at times. He'd have to be direct. Vincent had warned him about this with Eric. He was very literal.

"Eric, the community here relies on me to make decisions, but I can't be everywhere at once. Vincent used to do a lot of the legwork, but he's on vacation, and I need someone fit and clever to take messages and carry reports and my clipboard, and keep an eye on things in general."

"Why can't you just tap on the pipes?" Eric asked.

"Because, Eric, the pipes can tell only half the story. Can you eat a pipe message? Can you look at a water leak? Of course not. Pipe messages can tell us much, but they are no substitute for a sharp pair of eyes and a good

brain. I know you have both.”

Eric looked at him, his eyes bright.

“You mean you want me to be like Mouse, listening, exploring, finding things?”

“Well, not exactly, Eric. Mouse has lived with us for a long time. He explores, but he is very careful. This is a dangerous place. We don’t want anyone getting hurt. Mouse checks out new areas, talks to the sentries and reports to me when he sees something dangerous.

“I’ll have different jobs for you to do – small ones at first. If you do those well, I’ll have more important ones. What do you think about that?”

“I guess that’s fair,” Eric said. “You want to know if I have the right stuff.”

The children had been learning about the history of flight. The boy had a good mind, Father reminded himself.

“That’s very true, Eric, but I wouldn’t have chosen you if I didn’t think you had ‘the right stuff’. It’s just that everyone on a new job has to be given some time to learn how to do it. If you learn quickly, as I think you will, you’ll be a very great help to me and everyone.”

“All right,” Eric said. “When do I start?”

“We’ll have breakfast now, and then I’ll see what needs to be done after I read out the work roster.”

“Okay.”

Eric ran out without so much as a goodbye. Father sighed and heaved himself out of his chair to hobble to the dining chamber. It made sense to have Eric occupied. However, Jacob knew that he himself had considerably less patience than Vincent in such matters. Well, it would be a salutary exercise. He should be more concerned with the minutiae of their existence. He *had* let Vincent take on too much of that load.

Chapter 5

Vincent and Catherine woke to find the horizon lightening and quickly went into the cabin to wash, dress and have breakfast. Jacob was jumping around in glee long before they were all ready, and Catherine wondered how she was going to keep an eye on him and weed at the same time. Then she remembered Bo. She knew the dog had followed Vincent on his run during the night. She hoped Agatha was right. Jacob needed a babysitter. She hadn’t thought of that aspect of their working holiday.

It was going to be less hot today, Catherine thought. It was a little overcast and she wondered if there would be rain. Nevertheless, they all wore overalls and hats. The weather could change and they didn’t want to be running back to the cottage for anything. She had put a piece of string on Jacob’s hat so that it would always be around his neck, even if it fell off. She had put a cord on Vincent’s and her own straw hat as well. That way they could fling it onto their backs if they didn’t need it, cowboy style.

They trotted to Agatha’s house, Vincent breathing deeply. He thought he scented rain, but with so many smells around, he couldn’t be sure. At least there were no gasoline fumes here. The lack was delightful.

They found Agatha waiting for them by the back door, a pail in one hand. Bo was standing close by, as if waiting for orders.

“I thought I should get some hay cut in the far field. Then I’ll bale and stack it. The barn needs to be swept first and I have to check out the horse gear.

“Catherine, it’s a good day for weeding. It might even rain a bit later, if my nose tells me the truth. Bo here will keep an eye on Jacob. We can tie his rope to Bo’s collar. I have a few toys from the old days he can play with. There’s an old sandbox near the garden. He can’t get into much trouble there.”

That said, she showed Catherine the vegetable garden and they saw Jacob and his toys to the sandbox. Vincent followed Agatha to the barn. They went into the tack room, and Vincent breathed in the lush smell of oiled leather.

“All the plow horse tack is on that wall,” she told him. “Just check it out to make sure there are no weak sections and grease anything that looks dry. There’s a big pot of grease in that cupboard there, along with rags. We have lots of spares, so pick out the best harness and a couple of collars. Oh, and check the traces – those long reins

at the end. I'll go catch the horses and groom them."

Vincent looked at the complex array of straps and buckles and felt completely out of his depth. He decided the only way to do the job was to start at one end of the wall and work across. He found the grease and put the pot at his feet. He tucked a spare rag into a belt loop on his coverall.

He had made it across half the wall, testing, greasing and rubbing, wiping the metal parts, when his sharp ears caught a rustling noise. He stopped and listened. He was immediately sure it was a rat. He waited, ready to pounce on it as soon as it ventured close enough.

He heard the little feet come closer and poised himself. He could see the beast, a large one, out of the corner of his eye. It was examining the grease pot now. He was just about to pounce when he felt danger above and behind him. Before he could turn to look, something excruciatingly sharp stabbed him in the calf and he yelped loudly in shock and surprise. He knew Catherine had felt his pain along the bond, but thankfully, Jacob had not. He and Catherine had become adept at keeping their bond with their son restricted to special times – and ongoing monitoring.

He looked down to see a shaft sticking out of his leg, into the meaty part his calf, and yanked it out without a thought. He looked at it. Despite the short metal end and a small blunt point, the arrow was obviously a toy. It was fletched with plastic 'feathers', although it must have been shot from something powerful. A red stain was spreading on the leg of his coverall. Vincent sat down on the floor with a whuff of expelled air, suddenly weak with shock. He looked up and realized the arrow must have come from the hay loft.

There was a yell of "Vincent!" from outside and Catherine came running in, closely followed by Agatha. Agatha took the sight a glance, found the first aid kit and gave it to Catherine.

"Where?" Agatha asked.

Vincent was temporarily mute as he tried to dampen his pain along the bond, but pointed the arrow he was holding at the hay loft, where wisps of straw and dust were now drifting down.

Agatha walked to the loft and looked up. She obviously saw someone she recognized, because her body relaxed slightly. Her face, though, was thunderous.

"Come down from there, you terrible child," she bellowed. The miscreant nearly fell down the ladder and Agatha grabbed a boy of about nine years old by the collar and hauled him across the floor to confront Vincent. He held a small metal crossbow, but was trying to hide it behind him.

"Now look what you've done," she berated him loudly.

Catherine, meanwhile, had cut the leg of the coverall to expose the injury. She quickly spread some alcohol on a cotton ball and dabbed at the hole, wincing with Vincent, and then put on a compress and held it there. Her face was pale and she rubbed her hand up his thigh in sympathy. He groaned, now fighting both arousal and pain. He brought his uninjured knee up to hide the former and looked up at Agatha and the boy, suddenly feeling both ridiculous and exposed. Catherine's sympathy along the bond, when he allowed himself to open it up, calmed him somewhat.

The boy was staring at him in wonder. Vincent sighed.

"What is your name?" he asked, finally finding his voice, since the child seemed tongue-tied.

"His name is Cor, and if he doesn't tell me what he's doing here, sneaking around with a crossbow, I'm going to make him wish he'd never been born." Agatha's voice was deep with fury. The boy cringed.

"I ... I ... saw the rat and was trying to kill it. I missed. I'm sorry, Mister."

"And why are you here in my barn?" Agatha persisted.

"It's ... there's no school. The teachers are having a PD day. I ... wanted to try this out."

He dropped the offending weapon behind him with a clatter and flushed.

"I'm sorry, I really am. I didn't mean to hit you. Who are you?"

That last question meant that he was recovering nicely from his guilt and Agatha picked up on it immediately.

"And just what right do you have to question my guest, especially one you almost killed?"

The boy hung his head and spoke in a small voice.

"I couldn't have killed him, Miz Agatha. Not even if I was closer."

"That may be so, Cor, but what are we going to do with you now? You've seen a very dear, very special friend. We can't let you return home and blab about him to everyone. Maybe I should let him take you to his dungeon and leave you there until you turn to string and dust."

The boy's eyes widened, but his curiosity overcame his fear and Vincent felt a smile quirking his mouth.

"You have a dungeon? Where do you live? In a castle?"

Vincent's winced. Catherine had finished tying on a compress and the pain was at last bearable. He looked at the boy and framed his answer carefully. He was in great danger, and everyone knew it – although Agatha was trying not to sound concerned. He knew enough about small boys to know they could be trusted with secrets, if handled correctly.

"Well, no. I don't live in a castle, but in a very special place. It IS very large and made of stone. As you see, I'm different. My name is Vincent. I don't leave my special place very often. It's dangerous for me to be seen. People fear what they do not understand."

The boy's eye's widened.

"I ... I won't tell anyone, I promise. My mother would kill me if she knew I had this. I bought it with my paper route money. If she found out I'd hurt someone with it ..."

The boy's voice trailed off and he hung his head.

"What is your full name?" Vincent asked.

"Cornelius," the boy answered in a small voice, then turned beet red. "I hate my name. Everyone except Miz Agatha calls me Corny."

"Not very flattering," Vincent agreed. "But I could call you Neal. Would you like that? It means 'champion'."

"Could it be my secret name? Just for when I visit."

"Yes, Neal. But there is something else. Because I live in a secret place, with my family, there are special people who help us. We call them helpers. They would die before they told anyone about us, or me. Do you think you could be a helper? It is a very great responsibility. We might need you to do something special for us sometime, but you would never be able to tell anyone about it. Can you keep a secret that big?"

Neal approached Vincent and held out his hand. It was soon enveloped in Vincent's big hairy one, and the boy was grinning from ear to ear. He looked down at the hand which held his, completely unafraid, but obviously very curious. However, he knew he would be unable to demand more answers just then. He felt Vincent shudder as Catherine continued her ministrations.

"I swear never to tell anyone, anything about you, ever," he intoned.

Agatha put her hand on the boy's shoulder.

"Well then, that's all very fine, but we have work to do here. You've already wasted our time and injured one of my workers. I think you should help Vincent check and grease the tack, since it's difficult for him to stand up," Agatha boomed. "What about that ... um ... Neal?"

"Sure," he said. "I know how."

"Well, let's get Vincent a proper chair to sit in and you and he can work together." She trudged off and returned with a high-backed wooden chair so splashed with paint that it was impossible to tell what colour it had been originally.

"This is a real antique," she told Vincent, with a grin. She helped Vincent to the chair and he sat down with relief.

"How bad is it?" Agatha asked Catherine.

"Oh, not too deep, but it'll bleed if we don't keep a pressure bandage on it for a while. He heals quickly. Luckily no vein was hit."

"What about the hay?" Vincent asked Agatha.

"Well, I don't really need any help today. I'm just going to cut the field. It has to dry for a few days before I can bale it. You just sit there and be good."

Suddenly, there was a series of short, sharp barks from outside, followed by a very human howl. Catherine and Vincent looked at each other.

“Jacob!” Catherine gasped and ran out of the barn.

“Is there something wrong?” Agatha asked Vincent.

“No, he probably just wonders where everyone went.”

Catherine returned quickly, carrying Jacob and followed by Bo. The dog immediately went to Vincent and sniffed his injured leg. He flopped down on the floor beside the chair, his tongue lolling out.

“Well, I think I’ve lost my babysitter,” Catherine commented.

Agatha chuckled. “The weeds can wait for another time. I think you all need to take it easy.

“Um, Neal, why don’t you check the tack and give anything that needs greasing to Vincent. Then you can sweep up all the hay you dropped on my barn floor. After that – well, I’ll think of something.”

Neal looked abashed and hung his head.

“I can’t miss lunch or my mom will wonder where I am,” he said finally, hopefully.

“Oh, I’ll call her and tell her you’re here helping me and that I’ll give you lunch. What do you say to that?”

“Yes, Miz Agatha. Thank you.”

“And what are you going to do with that deadly weapon?”

Neal looked over at the crossbow and winced. “I never want to see it again.”

Vincent took one of the boy’s hands again.

“Neal, we have sentries where we live. I know someone who might like that crossbow. It looks pretty special. It might be good as a training weapon. Would you be willing to give it to me to take home?”

Neal looked at Vincent with obvious relief.

“Yes, Vincent. I haven’t showed it to my mother. Can I visit you sometime?”

Vincent looked at Agatha and caught her slight nod.

“Agatha might be able to make arrangements for you to visit us – we live in New York - but you couldn’t tell anyone where you were going.”

“Maybe I can say I’m going to the Bronx Zoo,” Neal suggested, with a look at Agatha.

“Now, that’s the smartest thing you’ve said,” Agatha commented. “You and I could go together. I think I should visit that brother of mine too. What do you think, Vincent?”

Vincent laughed, suddenly feeling a lot better. He owed William a surprise or two.

“I don’t know if he’d let you in the kitchen, but I’m sure he’d love to see you. You could bring some more spoons – and maybe an elephant-sized apron.”

Agatha gave a roar of laughter, then looked around at everyone.

“Well, this has been ... interesting, but I have work to do. All set, Neal?”

“Yes, Miz Agatha.”

“Right, see you all at lunch.” She grabbed some of the greased tack and left the barn.

Jacob started to fuss, so Catherine put him on Vincent’s lap and took over the greasing duties. When she looked at the pair of them after greasing the last reins, Jacob was asleep and Vincent leaning against the back of the chair, his eyes closed.

“I think we can get Vincent back to our cabin, if you help,” she told Neal. “I’ll need you to bring Jacob along.”

Catherine kissed Vincent awake, and lifted Jacob to the ground. Bo immediately got to his feet. She handed Jacob’s rope to Neal and put her shoulder under Vincent’s arm.

Vincent winced, but got to his feet, leaning on her, but not heavily.

“I’m fine, Catherine. I can walk, just not quickly.”

“Very well, Vincent, but the path is a bit rough. Just hold onto me. Don’t be stubborn.”

They made slow progress back to the cabin, Vincent was very glad when he could sit down. The injury was throbbing. The pain seemed out of all proportion to the damage.

Vincent captured Catherine's arm as she walked by.

"Catherine, this leg hurts abominably. Is it infected, do you think?"

"No, Vincent, the hole isn't very deep, but there's a lot of bruising. It hit you right in the muscle, next to the bone. Those arrows are blunt instruments. Don't worry. This happened to me when I was about 10 – some rotten little kid at a picnic in Connecticut. The point didn't break the skin in my case – it was fired from too far away, but it hit my ankle bone and made one heck of a bruise. It was sore for weeks. I'll see if I can find something to take down the swelling.

"Neal, maybe you should go back and sweep the barn, as Agatha asked. I think it'll be lunch soon. Could you tell her we'll eat here?"

Neal nodded and ran off to do as he was told, followed by Bo.

Catherine found a bottle of witch hazel and poured a little over the compress. Vincent sighed as the cool liquid penetrated. He hugged Catherine to him and soon Jacob joined the hug too, carefully avoiding the injured leg.

"Oh, Vincent, you frightened me when I felt your pain. I couldn't think what had happened – what could happen, out here."

His mouth turned down. "I should have felt that boy's presence. I have become careless."

"Nonsense, Vincent. It was just a boy, not a real danger. We have days ahead of us and there's no hurry to do anything. I think Agatha is just trying to make sure we don't get bored. She doesn't realize that boredom is a luxury we've never had."

"Do you think so?" Vincent asked.

He had never considered that Agatha thought they needed to be entertained – even if it took the form of work. He reflected that she spent most of the year alone in her home and her most regular visitors were probably the tunnel farm crews. Well, Neal must be a regular too. It seemed a very lonely life to him. Why didn't she move below during the winter? Someone could come up and take care of the animals, so she could have a break. He was sure that even Bo would be permitted on a temporary basis. The cats and the other animals just needed to be fed. It would be a good thing for some of their teens to get experience outside the tunnels. He'd have to ask Agatha about that. He guessed she had never been below. He couldn't remember her ever visiting. Well, maybe he could change that. No one should be alone, unless it was by choice.

Catherine saw the pensive look on Vincent's face and guessed he was thinking of Agatha. There couldn't be a lot of work to do on this farm now – and from what she had been told, most of the heavy work was handled by the crews from below. Maybe they needed to come more often. Agatha was not getting any younger and Catherine didn't like the idea of her being alone and working heavy machinery. What if she had an accident when no one was around? She would discuss that with Father when they returned. Someone should be here with her at all times – or perhaps she'd like to spend the winters in the tunnels. The suggestion would have to be made very diplomatically. Maybe William could do that when Agatha visited them. They would have to press for that to be soon – the sooner the better.

"Catherine, I need to ... um ..." Vincent looked embarrassed.

"Oh, sorry. I was woolgathering. Do you need help?"

"No, but I think I'd like to sit out on the porch for awhile. Maybe you can join me. I think Jacob could use a rest."

Catherine took the hint and carried Jacob to his bed. He was very tired and nodded off almost immediately. She moved one of the big rattan couches near the door and found a foot rest. Vincent should keep the leg raised, she thought. He would have to be careful. A hole like that, in a place where there was not much flesh, might take a while to close properly.

"Catherine," came his voice behind her, as his strong arms pulled her to him. She could feel his arousal.

"Vincent ... you must take it easy. That wound is no joke. It'll be sore and I don't want it to start bleeding again."

"Then we will have to get creative ... later," he whispered into an ear. "Come, sit with me. I will read us some more poetry. I have the book."

Catherine settled against right side and Vincent put one arm around her, using his left to open the small book on his lap at random.

“Um ... here’s a beautiful one by D H Lawrence ... *“Moonrise”*

*“And who has seen the moon, who has not seen
Her rise from the chamber of the deep
Flushed and grand and naked, from out the chamber ...”*

Vincent cleared his throat, his arousal now pushing against the coverall.

“Perhaps this one would be better read later ... tonight.”

“No!” Catherine protested. “It’s beautiful. Keep reading ... please.”

He read the next few lines and paused again. Catherine waited. She didn’t know the poem, but she was sure Lawrence would continue in this vein.

*“That perfect, bright experience never falls
To nothingness, and time will dim the moon
Sooner than our full consummation here
In this odd life will tarnish or pass away.”*

“Yes,” whispered Catherine, turning to meet his kiss. He put aside the book and deepened it.

Unable to resist, she undid Vincent’s coverall fly buttons and put her hand inside to stroke his aroused manhood. They both sighed in delight as their bond opened up. Vincent put his injured leg on the footstool and leaned back, unable to speak. Catherine’s hand on him was nothing short of heaven. His breath began to rasp in a rough purr.

Vincent purring never failed to make her core ache with desire. Catherine abruptly decided to get closer. She shifted so that she was sitting on Vincent’s thighs and replaced her hand in its favourite spot. He looked at her then, his eyes burning turquoise and undid her coverall buttons so he could slip his hand around her belly, and then down to where her womanhood was throbbing and hot. She threw back her head as he found her eager nub and she squeezed his penis, hearing him groan. Then, before they could do more, they both exploded into orgasm, Vincent’s juices soaking them both. They removed their hands and met for a kiss that left them both breathless.

“I think we needed that,” Catherine mumbled.

“I always need that,” Vincent remarked, hugging her to him.

“We also need a shower now, my love. And you need a fresh coverall. This one’s not going to be useful anymore.”

“I could cut it down to shorts,” Vincent suggested. “I have never worn those.”

Catherine looked at him. She had never even thought of that, despite having done exactly that with many of her older jeans – well, some time ago. No one wore shorts in the tunnels, so she had few now. What would he look like in shorts? His legs were hairy, no question about it, but no worse than some men she’d seen. His hair was almost blonde in daylight – and he did have wonderful muscle tone.

“You know, that might be best for your wound,” she said at last. “It needs air. If we keep it covered, it’ll just take longer to heal.”

“Then, I think we should bathe and see if we can find a pair of scissors, Catherine.”

Catherine clambered off the couch and stood by, waiting to see if Vincent needed help. He winced as he put his weight on the leg, but moved with barely a limp into the bathroom. They showered together and Catherine dressed in a clean coverall while Vincent dried himself. She looked at the damaged coverall. Shorts were all very fine, but one whiff told her this coverall needed a wash, just as her own did, and for the same reason. She found some soap powder under the sink, then decided to cut off the legs around the knee first and did so. She

gave it a good wash and rinse, then hung it over a line on the porch. When she got back inside, Vincent was standing naked in the middle of the room, looking puzzled. She sighed at the sight. He was one man who could wear absolutely nothing and look dressed. She went up to him and hugged him. He was still a little damp, but he began purring lightly as she ran her hands up his chest.

"I had to wash the coverall, Vincent. It stank of leather and grease. How's your leg."

"Just a little sore. The bandage fell off in the shower, but I don't think I need it."

She hunkered down to look at the calf, and realized she would have little nursing to do. The hole was nicely scabbed and the area around it much less swollen.

"Well, then, I guess you just need a clean coverall. I hung them all up in that closet there."

Vincent picked out another coverall. He stepped into it and shut off her favourite view. He turned to look at her, sensing her disappointment.

"Later," he promised. "Lunch is coming, I think. Just in time."

Catherine hadn't noticed anything, but now she heard a noise and went outside to look down the road. Vincent joined her and hugged her to him. Heading towards them was a large wheelbarrow propelled by Agatha. It seemed to be loaded with baskets. Neal was trotting alongside, carrying a huge thermos and another basket.

When they arrived, Agatha greeted them with a big smile.

"Well, since you couldn't come to me, I decided to bring the whole kit and caboodle to you. Do you mind company? I think the table's big enough. I have some soup to heat up, fresh bread, cheese, ham, a lot of muffins and some big cookies. Can we come in?"

Vincent laughed.

"Agatha, as if we could refuse such bounty. Welcome."

They helped her unload the wheelbarrow and then laid all the various items onto the table. Agatha took a large container into the kitchen, emptied the contents into a pot and turned on the heat.

"Just a few minutes," she told them.

Catherine went to wake Jacob, who sat up quickly when he smelled the soup – something fragrant with herbs and spices. Like Vincent, food was never far from his mind. He was big for his age and seemed likely to be tall as well.

Neal was talking to Vincent about his school project when she brought Jacob to the table. They seemed to be fast friends now. She was glad.

They all sat down, Jacob on several pillows between Vincent and Catherine. They made short work of the food and were almost finished with the muffins and cookies when Agatha began to hum a tune. Catherine picked up the old Stephen Foster song and soon the cabin was ringing with what she thought of as "away" songs. Vincent, she was amazed to learn, had a soft bass. She had never heard him sing and wondered why. She looked at him. He rolled his eyes. The singing drifted into silence and Agatha coughed and poured everyone a glass of apple juice.

"Musicians are given priority," Vincent explained. "Few of us have good voices, but everyone can play something. My voice is not dependable – and not strong. It fades quickly. We like everyone to be involved and learning rhythm is important."

"Well, I'll drink to that," Catherine said, and did so. Agatha and Neal laughed. Agatha looked at the boy, as if just realizing he was still there.

"Young man, I think you should go home. Your mother probably needs your help with chores."

"Yes'm. When can I visit Vincent?"

"Well now, my guests are here for a couple more weeks on vacation. I'll be taking them home, then we'll see what can be arranged. It might take a little while. Okay?"

"Okay. Good-bye." Neal ran off down the long laneway to the road and was soon lost to sight.

Agatha looked at her guests again.

"I've decided to do no more work today. We do need something for dinner, though. How about a fishing trip? There are trout and bass in the pond. Two or three should do us."

Vincent looked up and smiled. Fish! It was one of his favourite foods. They did not get much of it below, except as soup.

"That would be wonderful, Agatha. I guess we need rods."

"Oh, there are some in the other cabin. Think you can walk there, Vincent?"

"Yes. My leg is not painful now. I think the exercise would be good for me after all this food."

They all left the cabin and Agatha ran ahead to the other cabin, emerging with three fishing rods, a bucket and a large net. They continued down the road to the pond.

"You go sit on the end of the pier and I'll get us some bait," she told them. She pulled a hand hoe from the bucket and scabbled under a nearby tree.

"Wrong time of day for good wrigglers, but these should be ok," she remarked, as she joined them and fixed a small worm on each hook.

"Keep your shadow off the water," she warned Vincent as he shifted to put his legs over the side. "These are smart fish. Some are very old and big. It was stocked in my grandfather's day."

They huddled into the centre of the plank walk. Vincent let Jacob sit between his legs and hold the rod. The boy watched the float bobbing on the water intently.

While they sat, they chatted quietly. Vincent asked Agatha about life on the farm and in return he told her about events in the tunnels. They traded stories about William.

The afternoon waned and the sun came out occasionally. The buzz of flies and the swooping of dragonflies made the scene surreal to Catherine. She had never felt so relaxed. She barely listened to the soft conversation beside her and let her mind go blank.

She was reminded of her fishing rod when it was nearly jerked out of her hand. She clutched it reflexively and noticed that the float was bobbing. She looked at Agatha, trying not to yell in excitement. Agatha nodded, and Catherine began to reel in the line, slowly, as her father had once taught her. There were definitely tugs of resistance, so she was not hung up on a weed. The line pulled taut and she had to struggle to bring it in. She wrapped a leg around the pole and kept on winding. Gradually the float reached the dock and she looked over into the water. Something large was thrashing around, but was disturbing so much mud that she couldn't see what it was. She reeled in very carefully now, afraid that the fish was so large it might break the line. Agatha joined her, poising the net just above the water. With a whoop, she captured something that fought hard to escape, then brought up a lot of mud - and an enormous trout.

"Whew, this must be 15 pounds," she gasped at Catherine. "You've caught one of the patriarchs. I think this will be more than enough for all of us today. We'd have to let the mud settle and the fish will be wary now."

Vincent was too amazed to be disappointed he hadn't caught anything. He looked at the long silver fish and held back Jacob, who was trying to escape his arms.

"Look, Jacob - a big fish! No, stay here."

Agatha brought over the fish in the net and let Jacob touch it. He crowed with delight, stroking it as if it were a kitten, looking up at his father with shining eyes.

"Fiss. Big."

"Yes, big fish," Vincent corrected and looked at Catherine. She was smiling in delight. Jacob's vocabulary was definitely improving. Perhaps he would be talking before they returned home, as Agatha said.

They gathered up the fishing equipment and began to make their way back to Agatha's house. The sun was setting.

"I can't believe we sat there so long," Catherine commented. "It was so relaxing."

"You've the right attitude for a fisherman," Agatha laughed. "Well, I'll take this on up to the house and start on some dinner. If you come up in about an hour, I'll have a meal ready."

"Agatha, you shouldn't do this alone. We can help," Catherine protested.

“Nonsense. I never have company and this gives me a chance to show you I can beat William at his own game.” Vincent chuckled. “William has never presented a trout dinner to us, Agatha. We have pretty plain fare below – mostly soups and stews. This will be a treat to remember.”

She left them with a smile and Catherine took Jacob to the porch and sat down.

Vincent got a thoughtful look as he looked along the lane and walked around the back of the cabin. There was a small lean-to there and when he opened up the rickety door, he found what he expected, a couple of battered bicycles. They needed to pick up the mail, so this seemed the ideal vehicle with which to do so.

He wheeled a bike to the front of the cabin and took a good look at it. He didn't know much about them, but Devin had once found a small one and he had ridden it in the larger tunnels, until his whoops had attracted the attention of a sentry and he had been reprimanded. Vincent had never got his turn. What had happened to that bicycle? He couldn't remember. Probably quietly returned above - or dismantled for its parts.

The tires on this one were solid rubber and the bike an ancient, very heavy model with a wicker basket. He may not have ridden before, but he knew the theory. He looked over at Catherine, who was staring at the contraption.

“Are you sure that thing will work, Vincent? It must be a hundred years old!”

“It seems to have all the necessary parts. It is a bit rusty, but solid. I want to get the mail.”

“Damn, I forgot all about that!” Catherine exclaimed. “Some guests we are. One job to do and we can't remember it.”

“I remembered – finally,” he corrected her with a grin. “Now to try this machine.”

Vincent put a leg over the frame and tested out the seat. It was quite low and his legs were going to be very bent as he rode, but he decided to use it anyway. Later, if it worked, he would try and find a wrench to raise the seat – and oil as well. The bike creaked, but the pedals seemed to move, if a little reluctantly. It was a standard model, with no gears and just a back pedal brake, just like the one Devin had found.

Holding onto the handlebars, Vincent put a foot on a pedal and pushed himself off. He immediately tried to get some speed, realizing that the bike would not balance unless he did so. He then found that the bike seemed to have a mind of its own and wanted to tip sideways. He quickly moved the front wheel to compensate and then shifted his weight to the other side. The bike obediently shifted and he almost toppled over. Vincent put a leg on the ground to catch himself and the bike stopped. He had gone only a few yards. The road was rough, but there was a convenient rut he could ride along, if he could get the bike under control. He started up again, finding his balance and finally able to get some speed going. The bike was stiff, but seemed otherwise functional.

Vincent rode into the rut and clattered noisily down the lane to the mailbox. He quickly emptied it and put the letters into the basket. He was somewhat exposed, but did not feel endangered. He looked down the road and saw nothing at all – not even a light. The darkness was falling quickly and he stood for a moment, savouring the absolute quiet. Not even insects were buzzing at the moment.

He turned the bicycle and began the ride back, enjoying the feeling of speed, something unknown to him before this. He reached the cabin somewhat breathless. It had been hard work keeping the bike on the rutted track. He braked the bike and it skidded a short distance on the sandy path.

Catherine and Jacob ran to meet him. Jacob raised his arms to Vincent and was hauled onto his father's shoulders. Vincent leaned the bike against the side of the cabin.

“It badly needs some oil, but I think I will take over the mail duties from now on, Catherine. I have never ridden a bicycle before – and may never again, once we return.”

“I had never realized how many things you've missed out on Below, Vincent. Shorts, fish, a bicycle ...”

“And don't forget fresh country air and being able to run ... um ... unencumbered,” Vincent reminded her.

“Yes, that's a sight I'll never tire of,” Catherine sighed. She hugged him. Jacob crowed from Vincent's shoulders and they both laughed.

“I think we should clean up a bit and head to Agatha's,” Catherine declared. She took down the coverall shorts, which were dry, and looked at Vincent.

“Tomorrow,” she told him, “I want to see you model these.”

They washed the dust from themselves and made good use of a brush. Jacob's hair, despite being fairly long, was obedient, but Vincent's hair was in tangles. Catherine sat him down and carefully drew first the brush, then a comb through it. Jacob clambered onto Vincent's lap and sat quietly. She could feel the happiness of both her men and was sure Vincent was purring. His long amber waves were so soft, she put her face to his head and kissed it, as he often did hers. He smelled of fresh air and sunshine, she thought, a far cry from the usual candle smoke.

"Um ... you smell and feel wonderful," she told him, nuzzling a hidden ear.

There was a loud clang from outside and they realized the dinner gong had sounded.

"I think that's our cue," Catherine remarked, as she rose and picked up the mail. "Let's go."

They walked slowly up to the house, breathing deeply. Jacob held onto Vincent's hand, occasionally taking a swipe at a flying insect.

Not far from the door, they all stopped as they smelled the aroma of grilled fish. Vincent closed his eyes. Surely, nothing could taste as good as that smelled! He looked at Catherine and grinned.

"Oh, Vincent. You're in for a treat. We'll have to get a barbecue for the brownstone. You are being terribly spoiled – but I've been lazy and deprived you of something special."

"No, Catherine, you have not. I have been enjoying our meals here, but I do not want to duplicate them at home. As I understand it, a holiday is best remembered – including the food. I suspect we may be returning."

Catherine looked up at him in amazement. That thought had been in the back of her mind since she hatched her vacation plan, but she had not expected Vincent to come to that conclusion. He was so fixated on doing his work in the tunnels. He had seldom gone anywhere, except to think.

He caught her surprise and hugged her.

"Catherine, this fresh air has not gone to my head. I realize now that our son will need this break as much as I. And I do want to be with him, experience with him. I had feared I would never be able to do so in this way."

They said no more and quickly made their way to Agatha's back door. The front door, they had decided, was too formal. Agatha was watching for them.

"Well, I hope you brought your appetites."

Vincent laughed. "Always, Agatha."

They all arranged themselves around the table, Jacob again in the high chair between his parents. The centre of the table was fragrant with potato salad, pearl onions and a variety of obviously home made pickles. Catherine found her mouth watering.

Agatha carefully placed a huge platter in the middle of the table. The trout had been split and roasted in lemon, butter and herbs. Catherine's eyes widened at the size of it. She glanced at Vincent and could have sworn he was almost drooling in anticipation. His hunger could be felt along their bond. Jacob was bouncing up and down in the high chair making happy sounds.

"Well, don't just sit there like a lot of hungry robins. Eat!"

Vincent politely took the serving fork Agatha gave him and gave Catherine and Jacob a serving, then himself. He did the same with the potato salad, then noticed that Catherine had given herself a selection of pickles and did the same for himself and Jacob.

When he finally had everything on his plate, Vincent paused, but hunger won out and he carefully picked up a piece of the trout and put it in his mouth. Immediately, the subtle flavours captured him and he chewed daintily and then swallowed with a sigh. When he looked up, he saw that Catherine and Agatha were watching him and smiling.

"Well, I think he likes the fish," Agatha commented.

"I'd say he loves it," Catherine agreed.

Vincent returned to his meal, his face warm. Nothing was going to distract him from this meal! Let them laugh.

Jacob meanwhile, was gobbling down everything on his plate, using a small spoon that Agatha had found for him. Catherine found herself staring at her son in amazement. She forced herself to concentrate on her own

meal. Vincent had given her generous portions, but she managed to eat it all. Before she finished, Jacob was howling for more. Vincent admonished him sternly and he quieted. Catherine gave him a smaller portion of everything and noticed that Vincent seemed to be working on second helpings as well – either that, or he was an even slower eater than herself. She hadn't seen him take them. He grinned at her.

They finished their main meal and Vincent sat back and sighed.

"Agatha, that was marvelous, but do not tell William I said so, please. He will make my life miserable for a month."

"Really, Vincent? Just because you had a fish dinner? And what would that brother of mine do?"

Catherine rolled her eyes and interrupted.

"Agatha, Vincent and William are always playing jokes on each other. I don't know when it started, but they're like small boys – always trying to do one better. Any excuse will do. Often it's just verbal jibes in the dining hall, but at Winterfest and other occasions, their jokes become more ... material. I don't know half of them. They're very secretive - strictly between the two of them, most of the time."

Agatha laughed.

"I never thought of my brother as having much of a sense of humour, but I'm glad he's happy."

Vincent cleared his throat. "Agatha, William could live nowhere else. He loves all of us and truly, he is a great cook. He produces wonders with limited resources. His humour is ... dry. He and I are well-matched – and no one else will joke with us, except Catherine. No one else dares – I don't know why."

Catherine snorted.

"Yes, you do, Vincent. Your tongues are barbed. The rest of us are in awe – and appropriately cautious. William allows me some leeway, because of you, but my digs are mild compared to yours – or his."

"Well, now, that would be worth a visit," Agatha commented. "And here I thought life in the tunnels was all sweat and rock dust."

"There is plenty of that, Agatha," Vincent remarked. "But just as surely, we need our diversions. We are a close community – in all ways. Humour is a great stress reliever."

"Speaking of relief – I think we need a little dessert. I thought you might not want anything too heavy, so I made something light."

She got up, quickly moved the mostly empty serving platters to the counter, then reached inside the fridge. When she put the plate on the table, Vincent and Catherine broke out laughing.

"What's so funny?"

A mountain of cream puffs, with chocolate tops, now dominated the table.

"Oh, Agatha, these are Vincent's favourite dessert. William is always teasing him about them."

"Well, then, enjoy. Let's make sure Jacob gets a couple before Vincent eats them all, though."

She carefully extracted two and gave them to Jacob, whose eyes had grown big with anticipation.

Catherine, watching her son, sighed. It was obvious that he shared more than his hair with his father. She carefully took a cream puff from the pile, just managing to beat Vincent, who looked at her sideways, as he took two. They had disappeared before she finished hers.

Agatha laughed.

"I don't think I've ever seen them disappear so quickly. Your husband is a magician, Catherine."

"Oh yes, Agatha, he is – but not a very good one. Once these disappear, they're gone for good."

Undaunted, Vincent purloined another. Jacob had eaten his as well, so Vincent gave him one too, before making his own disappear again.

"Three!" he chortled. "William has never allowed me three in my life! Another first. I am forever in your debt, Agatha."

"And I shall think of some way to collect that," she remarked, with a grin. "Perhaps another hug."

Catherine pretended shock. "You mean, he's already given you one? Didn't wait long, did he?"

Vincent's hugs were legendary in the tunnels, as Catherine had discovered, long before she married him. She thought back to the very first one, that first time he had taken her to her threshold, after he had saved her life. Yes, even then, she had known she would do almost anything for another. His hugs were as addictive as cream puffs – and given only at need.

Vincent looked between the two women and wondered at their obvious sincerity. It was true he liked to hug people on special occasions – anyone – and that no one ever objected. His differences at those times didn't matter – and the comfort went both ways. But that someone should actively seek one of his hugs was something of a surprise. He'd assumed Agatha had been joking, that first time.

Catherine caught his surprise and wondered at it. Could he possibly not know how highly his hugs were valued? Vincent was an affectionate man – and sensed when a hug was needed. They were healing, almost.

Agatha, to give her credit, seemed to sense the emotions in her two adult guests. Jacob had gone quiet and seemed to be listening closely. She realized that this holiday was an education on several levels.

"I think I've put my foot in it," she remarked at last. "I'm sorry."

Vincent looked at her and abruptly got up and walked around to her.

"Come," he said, quietly.

Agatha got up from her chair and was enveloped in a hug that would have left her weak, had it gone on for much longer. Vincent released her and took her hands.

"Agatha, nothing you do or say could possibly be offensive. We are a little like city mice in the country. The fault is ours."

"Nonsense, Vincent. Anything you wish is yours while you stay with me. I love seeing you all enjoy yourselves. As I told you, I don't get much company. Your lives are so different, that it's I who is the odd person out. Don't be afraid to tell me if I step over a line."

"You never could, Agatha," Catherine assured her.

Jacob suddenly gave a huge yawn, another feature that reminded her of his father – only without the canines.

"I think our little man is tired," she remarked. "We'd better get him, and ourselves, to bed, if we're to be any help tomorrow."

"Well, now, I've been thinking about that last," Agatha declared. "There is no need for you to do any hard work. This is supposed to be a holiday. As it happens, I think tomorrow it'll rain, so if you want to, you can come up here anytime you wish, and we'll just visit."

"That would be wonderful, Agatha," Vincent told her, then moved to pick up Jacob, who was nodding in the high chair.

"You take him back to the cabin, Vincent," Catherine said. "I'll stay and help Agatha get the food put away and the dishes in the dishwasher."

"Yes," Vincent replied, and with a smile at Agatha, left with Jacob.

"That isn't necessary, you know," Agatha protested.

"Yes, it is," Catherine insisted. "I know there isn't much left, but the plates can't go into a dishwasher like this. Even I know that."

The two women quickly cleaned off the plates and Agatha filled a small dish with the remains of the fish and potato salad.

"For my late night snack," she remarked.

Catherine looked at the clock. It was only seven o'clock. It seemed much later. She sighed.

"I don't care about time here, but I'm still shocked at how it flies – or doesn't," she said.

"Ah, that's the secret to country living," Agatha told her. "Make hay while the sun shines and grab precious moments of relaxation when it doesn't. And I think your time of relaxation is now," she concluded.

Catherine gave the older woman a hug.

"Thank you for everything. Vincent is already talking about our next visit."

"I'm glad. I've never met anyone who so deserved a holiday."

"Yes, he works hard. I'm betting that Father and the others are missing him in ways they never expected. And not his hugs either!" she laughed.

"Perhaps not, but I'll bet those will be the most welcome on his return," Agatha laughed. "Now you get along to your men – before it starts raining."

"Good-night, Agatha."

"Sleep well, Catherine," she chuckled suggestively.

Catherine grinned and felt her face flush. Agatha grinned.

"Ah, young love," she said, and turned to load the dishwasher.

Catherine trotted back to the cabin, feeling the first sprinkles of rain. Rain! She seldom thought about it in New York – and never in the tunnels. What would they do with themselves? She knew what she wanted to do, but that would not be practical with Jacob nearby. She sighed.

When she got back, she saw that their love nest had gone. Vincent had moved the mattresses back into the cabin and laid them near the back window. Jacob was already asleep. Vincent had rigged up a curtain across the cabin, from two top bunks, giving them some measure of privacy. He stood waiting for her where two blankets met, completely naked and obviously ready for love. Catherine wasted no time getting her clothes off and moving into his embrace. There was no need for words as they lay down in their new nest.

Soon the sound of rain on the roof accompanied them as they made quiet love. Afterwards, they both lay contented, cooling to the softly-damp breeze coming in the small window, bringing with it the scent of wet fields and wood. They both sighed and moved into one of those special Vincent hugs. They fell asleep, tangled in each other's limbs. Sometime during the night, Vincent must have pulled up a blanket, because Catherine awoke to a delicious warmth and the softness of him spooned against her backside. She didn't remember turning over, but wouldn't have wished him anywhere else for the world. She went back to sleep with his breath softly caressing her neck hair.

Chapter 6

Father congratulated himself. Eric had proven to be a quick study and the previous day, had been dashing about on errands various and numerous. The boy had been almost wearisome in his eagerness, but had proven to be observant as well.

Jacob did not use the pipe communication system much, preferring to listen and send his own messages by hand. Some things were just too complicated to transmit in the shortened code they used on the pipes – and really, that should be used for reports, not personal messages. He'd have to talk sternly to everyone again. Some day, a really important message was going to get lost among the picayune details of everyday living. Well, not lost, perhaps – Pascal would never allow that - but delayed.

In the meantime, life had settled down again in the tunnels. There were no major projects to undertake and no crises had emerged. Vincent and his family had now been gone an entire week. William seemed unusually quiet lately, and the Council meeting the day before had ended after only a few minutes. No one had anything to contribute. Father struggled to remember why he had called it – and failed. Maybe he had just wanted to connect with his peers. Everyone seemed to be apart, as if the glue which held them together was drying out. Even the children were subdued.

It was the lack of Vincent, of course. His presence was missing, his large form, his quiet voice – and yes, his hugs. He almost ached for one of those himself.

The community seemed to be in limbo, waiting. It couldn't go on, Father decided. Vincent was important, yes, but they must get used to his being absent. Perhaps they needed some entertainment. He wracked his brain for something that would brighten spirits, but finally admitted to himself that he was not the best person to organize such things. Vincent had been far better at it – and moreover, knew what talents everyone had. Jacob admitted to himself that he was somewhat uninformed these days.

That gave him an idea. After a quieter-than-normal breakfast, he had Eric take a clipboard and pad and begin a poll of everyone in the community. It was time they had a formal list of everyone's hobbies and talents – musical, sports, crafts – whatever. It had never been done, as far as he knew. Relying on memory was just not good enough. This would get everyone thinking and might give him some inspiration. He'd better do something soon. Vincent must return to a serene community – but not the despondent one they had now. He had to get a grip on things – and quickly.

...

Vincent woke to the smell of damp earth and the smell of bacon frying. He had slept in!

He rose quickly and grabbed a blanket, wrapping it around himself as he padded to the bathroom. It was chilly this morning. He glanced at the kitchen and gave Catherine a grin. She looked triumphant, as well she might. He couldn't remember her ever being up before him in the morning.

Jacob was sitting on the floor stroking Bo. The dog looked up at him with an expression that seemed to say "well, it's about time."

Vincent quickly emptied his bladder and had a shower. He dried carefully, and then padded back to the closet for something to wear. He clambered into a pair of combination underwear, before putting on a clean coverall. No shorts today, he thought regretfully.

He turned to the table, just as Catherine brought plates of bacon, scrambled eggs, sausages and tomatoes to it. The smell made his stomach rumble and he lifted Jacob off the floor, took him into the bathroom for a quick hand wash, and then sat him on his well-cushioned chair. Catherine sat beside him.

"Sleep well, Vincent?" she asked innocently.

"Very. Obviously."

He said no more but tucked into the food.

"Where did all this come from. Last time I looked, all we had left was cheese and granola."

"Agatha brought it about an hour ago. She has a rain cape that would cover all of us. She left us a couple, in case we want to go out. I didn't bring any raingear, other than boots for Jacob. Never occurred to me."

"Umph. Well, that is not surprising. Weather is not something I think about much either – unless I go above. I try not to do that when it's raining. My cloak gets waterlogged. This is delicious, Catherine. Everything tastes so much better here."

"Yes, I think it's a combination of country air and lack of candle smoke," Catherine commented.

"And don't forget our love nest," Vincent reminded her. He did not want to think that candle smoke got into the food below, but Catherine was probably right. Well, that was reality. He had lived with it all his life. Still, a change was nice.

"How is your leg," Catherine asked.

Vincent had to think back to realize what she was asking. So much had happened. He had never realized how full the days could be in the country. He reached down and felt his calf. There was no pain, just a small bump that was the scab.

"I just have a small scab, Catherine. No pain at all."

Something else came to him then. "Where's the crossbow?"

"I put it in your backpack and hung it on a high hook in the cupboard."

"You have been busy this morning," Vincent commented, a little wryly.

"Do you realize we've been gone a week, now?" Catherine asked.

"Yes. It has gone quickly. If I remember rightly, Agatha will be sending a shipment below in two days. We should help her get it packed. She mentioned picking some vegetables. Tomorrow, we'd better do that. I'll ask her."

"We can go for a walk later and see what she needs doing. I'm sure she'll want us up there for dinner again."

Wonder what she'll give us this time?"

Vincent laughed.

"You are still eating breakfast and already you are thinking about dinner? Catherine, you are becoming fixated on food!"

"Like you, you mean."

Vincent grinned. "Yes. I admit it. But there is more of me to feed. You could live on a sip of water and a knock at the cupboard door – as one helper used to say."

"An exaggeration, Vincent, but I take your point."

"By the way, we need to do some laundry. We're all down to our last outfits. Jacob has dirtied all his bibs too. I think I'll take it all up to Agatha after breakfast and ask to use her facilities."

"Good idea, Catherine."

Something was nagging at Vincent, and suddenly he realized what it was. His journal. In all the excitement, he had not thought about writing in it. He must do so today, before he forgot everything.

"Um, I have some work to do here," he remarked.

Catherine looked at him. He had to be referring to his journal. She knew he wrote in it often, but never when she was around. Perhaps she distracted him, or what he wrote was personal. She never peeked, nor did she begrudge him this privacy.

"I understand," she whispered. "I'll take Jacob with me to Agatha's and give you some time alone."

Vincent looked at her then, realized she knew exactly what he wanted to do, and sighed.

"Thank you," he said softly. Really, she was amazing. There was almost no need for words between them.

"I'll do the dishes, if you want to leave now. I think it's stopped raining."

Catherine looked out the window. It had indeed – but the sky was dark and threatening. Yes, they'd better go now.

"All right, Vincent. Thank you."

She rose and moved to him, bending down to meet his lips.

"I love you."

"I know. I love you with all that I am."

Catherine sighed. Those words from his lips never failed to thrill her. She looked into his azure eyes and saw a matching flame. He rose to hug her to him.

"Ah, Catherine. Parting is such sweet sorrow."

"I know. But the reunion is sweeter yet."

"Yes."

Jacob suddenly made a yell of frustration. He hated being left out of hugs. Catherine reluctantly extracted herself from Vincent's warm embrace and went to lift Jacob down. She hugged him to her.

"There, there, Sport. We have some work to do. Can you get his boots on while I collect the laundry, Vincent?"

"Of course."

Catherine found a clean burlap sack in the cupboard and loaded it with their soiled clothes, then their bed sheets and pillow cases as well. Might as well do it all.

She found Jacob ready and Bo standing expectantly, looking at her. She quickly pulled on a pair of rubber boots over thick socks and grabbed one of the rain capes. It was big enough for herself, Jacob and the dog, she thought.

Vincent gave her a quick kiss and opened the door for her.

"Can you manage?" he asked.

"Oh, sure." She threw the bag over a shoulder and took Jacob's hand. See you later. Be good. I'll ask about the

vegetable picking.”

“Yes. Good idea. Give Agatha my thanks.”

Catherine gave him a smile and marched down the wet road. Jacob let go of her hand quickly and ran ahead, jumping in every puddle. She sighed. That coverall would need a wash before they arrived at Agatha’s. Maybe she had something he could wear while it was in the laundry.

They knocked on the back door and heard Agatha’s “Come in” from inside. They entered, and Catherine took off their boots, then followed the sounds to the kitchen. Agatha was making cookies and it seemed had been doing so for a while, judging from the delicious smell coming from the oven. Ginger, she guessed, her mouth watering. Jacob crowed as he realized it as well.

“We thought today might be a good day to do laundry,” she remarked, watching in awe as Agatha formed the cookies with factory efficiency.

“Good idea. Your little man looks a little grubby.”

“He was clean when we left,” Catherine said wryly. “Now he’s in his last outfit. He’ll have to spend the next little while in nothing but his diaper. Serve him right!”

Agatha laughed,

“Oh, I might have something you can use. I always kept some old children’s dungarees around when I had the little hands-on farm. People never seemed to realize that little girls in frilly dresses and pumps can’t commune with horse dung and chicken feathers. It saved awkward scenes to make wearing one of the overalls part of the experience.”

Catherine laughed. “Agatha, that’s brilliant. Where are they? I’ll dig them out and get started on the laundry, if that’s okay.”

“You’ll find a wicker trunk in the laundry room. They’re all in there, clean, but not ironed.”

“That won’t matter. I never iron anything anymore. My mother would be shocked.”

“I only ironed for the tourists. They seem to equate lack of wrinkles with cleanliness.”

Catherine joined Agatha’s long hoot of merriment. She lifted Jacob onto a chair so he could watch the cookie making, then carried her bag into the laundry room. She found the trunk and extracted a much-patched, but serviceable coverall. It was probably a little big, but she could roll up the sleeves and legs. She carried it back and lifted Jacob to the floor, ignoring his protest.

“Be still, Jacob. You got dirty, so now you need clean clothes.”

She quickly stripped him and put on the clean coverall, then lifted him back to the chair.

“I hope you don’t mind an audience,” she remarked.

“In about five minutes, that audience can have a sample,” Agatha remarked.

“Oh, my. I’ll have to hurry and get the laundry in. I love hot cookies.”

Catherine found the washing machine to be a big one and decided to do just one load. She never worried about colours. Everything they had was much-washed. She put in the soap and clothes and set it to a warm wash. Then she returned to the kitchen, to find Agatha removing a large tray of cookies from the oven, and then a second. She put them on a rack on the counter. Jacob’s eyes had grown very large.

“They just need to sit a minute before I can take them off,” she remarked. “But we can eat one right away.”

She extracted three on a spatula and put one on the table in front of Jacob.

“Mind, it’s hot,” she told him. He touched it tentatively and looked at Catherine.

“Hot.”

Catherine giggled and juggled the one Agatha gave her between her hands until it cooled enough to hold. Then she took a bite.

“Delicious! Vincent will be so jealous.”

“Where is he?” Agatha asked.

“He likes to have privacy to write in his journal. He’s been writing in them since he was a boy.”

"A man of many parts, is your Vincent," Agatha commented, with a wink and a grin.

"Oh, yes – and all of them wonderful," Catherine replied, smiling suggestively.

"He wanted me to thank you for the wonderful breakfast supplies, by the way. You know, I don't think he's ever slept in like that before. He's usually up long before me."

"I'll take that as a sign he's finally relaxed and on vacation," Agatha commented.

"Yes, good point. It's good for him to have nothing on the schedule. It might be the first time in his life."

They were silent for awhile, all eating their cookies. Jacob clambered down to the floor and sat next to Bo, who was regarding the cookies on the counter with a doleful look. Agatha laughed and got them all another one – and gave one to Bo. The dog ate it in one gulp.

...

The poll had gone well and Eric had proven adept at questioning every tunnel inhabitant about their skills. Father was pleased. He started a ledger and began compiling the information Eric had collected. Rather than try to do these records alphabetically, by person, he had decided instead to make a list of skills and record names under them. He added that day's date as well. He soon found that the community boasted a staggeringly large number of multi-talented individuals. He himself was one of the few who could boast only one or two.

He devoted one page to those who were good organizers and coordinators and put Vincent's name under that category. Those skills were rare. He himself, although one of the founders, could not claim to be much of an organizer. What organization they had, had been created over time and of necessity – the sentries, the work crews, laundry day, education, foraging parties, and so on.

Medical skills. He put himself under that category, along with Mary, Rebecca and others who were occasional nurses. Samantha was already taking nursing training above, but would return to the tunnels.

Father began to cough. He had spent too much time in his library, he thought. The dust was affecting him. Perhaps he should try and clean it up a bit before Vincent returned. He needed some air.

He rose and hobbled out of the chamber and down to the Whispering Gallery. The breeze was light, but the fresh air was invigorating. There were not many sounds, but he reflected that it was very early in the morning.

A coughing fit shook him and he grabbed onto the rope railing for support. The echoes of the coughs shocked him. He really should do something about it. Doctor, heal thyself, he thought sternly.

He left hurriedly and went to the clinic. Quickly, he found his home-made cough remedy and gave himself a generous tablespoonful. The liquid soothed his throat, but a few minutes later, he was coughing again, a horrible bark that did not bode well. Surely, he could not have caught any bug. No one had been ill.

Mary came in as he sat and coughed, no longer able to stand up. She took one look at him and tapped on the pipes for Pascal to send a messenger to Peter. Father looked at her, and said nothing. He felt terrible, and was beginning to sweat.

"Come, Jacob. You should be in bed. I think you've been working yourself too hard these last few days. Let me help."

Father staggered to his feet, letting Mary help him back to his chamber. His breathing was bad, he realized. He managed to mumble a thank you and then pointed at the ledger.

"That's what I was working on. Eric is gathering information."

"Yes, I know, Jacob. He's quite an interrogator. But he's discovered skills I bet some of us had forgotten about. Now you undress and get into bed. I'll bring Peter when he arrives."

Mary left him and returned to the clinic. She was worried. Jacob obviously had a fever and that cough was nasty. She suspected the worst. She tried to remember the last time he had been ill and failed. He shouldn't have pushed himself so hard. He was not young anymore. He had always been reluctant to delegate. Vincent, had quietly taken most of his responsibilities, without him noticing, mainly by bypassing the old man. It wasn't good that they were so reliant on one man. Vincent had his family to think about. Well, that would stop now. She and

some of the other women were quite capable of organizing work parties and taking reports. With Eric's help, they should be able to spread the responsibilities around more. It was long overdue.

Peter rushed in as she was preparing a list of jobs that needed doing. He looked a bit flustered.

"Where is he?"

"In his chamber, Peter. I think he has pneumonia. He's been working too hard – trying to do all those little but necessary jobs Vincent was doing. I'm going to organize some of the women to do some of that work. You just make him well."

"Good idea, Mary. But don't tell him yet. He'll just worry. I'll go along and see him now. Oh, by the way, do you have any antibiotics down here?"

"Some, Peter, but perhaps not the right ones. They're in the cabinet over there."

Peter took a look in the cabinet and the meagre supply of medicines. He sighed. Most of them were now kept in the brownstone clinic, but he didn't want to take Jacob up there. It was too far to go. Well, he could send one of his trainee nurses to get what he needed. He went along to see Father and frowned when he saw the old man. He was very flushed and his eyes were glazed.

"Jacob?"

He was greeted by a fit of coughing that gave him even more concern. This was bad. He began his examination and soon confirmed what Mary had suspected. He reconsidered. The chamber was damp and smoky. Father needed to be above, in the brownstone's hospital room, where the air was clean and warm. He quickly left and went to find Mary. She was still in the clinic.

"Mary, we need to get Father to the hospital room in the brownstone. I can't treat him properly under these conditions. He has pneumonia – and I'm not sure which kind without tests. Can we get a stretcher crew organized?"

"Certainly, Peter. Just a moment."

Mary went to the pipes and tapped out a brief message. She got an acknowledgement from Pascal and waited while he sent out a call for a stretcher crew. Four men arrived quickly and assembled the stretcher. They went to Father's chamber and over his weak protests, got him onto the stretcher and then followed Peter down the long route to the brownstone. Peter was glad that they'd decided to convert part of the basement into a second hospital room for the tunnel community. It had only two small high windows in rain wells, but it was bright and clean, and best of all, didn't require them to haul the stretcher up steep stairs to the main floor.

With the men's help, Peter got Father comfortable and put him on an antibiotic drip. He took a blood sample and went upstairs to the lab to examine it. Mary came in shortly afterwards and asked if she could help.

"We'll need someone here all the time. Is Samantha free, do you know?"

"She's been volunteering in one of the downtown clinics. Her classes are over for the term. I'll get a message to her."

"Thank you, Mary. Do you think we should inform Vincent and Catherine? I can call Agatha, if need be."

"How serious is it, Peter? I'd hate for us to trouble them if we don't have to."

"Well, it's serious enough, but let's see how he responds in the next few hours. Vincent will never forgive us, you know, if we don't tell him. When are they returning?"

"They didn't say. I know that William has sent a crew out to collect some vegetables from Agatha. They'll be two more days getting to the warehouse. Perhaps, after she's given them the supplies, Agatha can drive Vincent and Catherine to a closer tunnel entrance in her truck. That would get them home faster – if you think it's urgent."

"I'll watch Jacob until Samantha arrives, and let you know later today. Let's say nothing at present. We have two days to decide. I can call Agatha as soon as we know. In the meantime, perhaps you could have William send up some plain broth – a meat one, not a vegetable one. We need to keep Father's strength up."

"I'll do that," Mary said and left hurriedly. She berated herself for not keeping a better watch on Father. Now their favourite couple might have to cut short their first vacation. It was too bad.

...

Vincent was enjoying recording the events of the last few days in his journal, although it wasn't the deeds, so much as his impressions he recorded. He had experienced so many delights that his heart was bursting with joy. He could feel the happiness of Catherine and Jacob along their bond and that brought him contentment as well. They were obviously having fun with Agatha. He suspected he was missing out on some treat, but was also sure he would get his share in time. Catherine never forgot him.

He wrote quickly, occasionally looking out the window, watching the rain fall again. After long pages, he looked up again to see that the sun had found an opening in the sky, even though it was still raining. That meant only one thing. He went outside and looked around.

There, over Agatha's house, was a rainbow, so brilliant that he could see the secondary one. He had never seen a complete rainbow before and stood entranced, oblivious to the fact he was getting wet. It faded as the sun went behind a cloud and Vincent sighed and went inside. His hair was dripping, so he found a towel and roughly dried it, then put the towel over his shoulders. His coverall was damp, but he had no other, so he couldn't change. But he did have his cloak. He stripped off the coverall and hung it in the kitchen, where the gas pilot light provided what heat there was. He still had on his combination underwear, fortunately not damp, and went to the closet to find his cloak. It was lightweight wool, where it wasn't leather, and quite warm. It felt good to put it on, he reflected. Like an old friend.

He returned to the table and quickly finished his journal entries, not forgetting to mention the rainbow. He sat back and stretched out his legs, gazing out the window.

He was about to get up and make some tea for himself, when he felt suddenly uneasy. He tried to pin down what was bothering him and failed. Perhaps he was having some kind of premonition. Maybe there was a thunderstorm brewing. He often felt uneasy when one threatened. He shook his head and got up to make tea. Then, with a conviction he had come to recognize, he had the answer.

Father! Was he injured, sick? The latter, Vincent thought. What should he do? He knew that if it was anything serious, Peter would phone Agatha. In the meantime, he shook off his unease before Catherine could detect it. They must continue their vacation. There was work to do tomorrow. They owed it to Agatha to help. If necessary, they could return with the crew in two days' time.

Vincent would have liked to have gone up to the house, but didn't want to do so with only long underwear under his cloak. He felt the coverall. It was damp, but not really wet. He looked around. There had to be a way to dry it. He made his tea, and then turned on the oven. The heat soon spread around the small nook and Vincent pattered about, putting away the washed dishes and taking an inventory of their supplies. He found a couple of forgotten cookies and went back to sit at the table, contentedly munching and drinking tea. Patience, he told himself. If there was trouble back home, he would find out soon enough.

He added a couple more paragraphs to his journal, reflecting that he seemed to have lost his customary literacy. How could he describe this vacation? It was completely outside his experience. His senses were overloaded and he had only now begun to separate out the various influences. He had never been so aware of smells and sights – and even the feel of dampness on his skin and the sounds of insects and birds. It wasn't really silent here, he mused, but it seemed so, compared to the endless rattle of trains in the tunnels, the pipe communication – and the traffic and bustle that was New York. Here, it was the quiet of a natural world that moved independent of man, oblivious. It was a completely impartial quiet. He closed his eyes and let himself enjoy what his senses told him.

He must have dozed off briefly, because suddenly his nose told him something was overheating. The oven! He rushed to the kitchen and turned it off. It was very hot in the kitchen now. His coverall was dry, and the bottoms of the legs were curling up. He shook them off the line quickly and examined them. Fortunately, they hadn't burned. Catherine would never let him forget that! With relief, he put them on and returned his cloak to the closet.

He was wondering whether to go up to the house when he heard the gong sound. Was it dinner time already? He guessed it was mid-afternoon, but it was hard to tell, it was so dim outside now. It was pouring and the wind was blowing a gale. He grabbed the other rain cape, put on a pair of rubber boots and tramped up to Agatha's back door. He knocked on the door and heard a hail from inside. He left the rain cape and boots next to Catherine's and padded in stocking feet into the kitchen. The counter seemed to be piled high with cookies of various types. His nose picked out ginger and cinnamon, peanut butter – and chocolate. Catherine and Agatha were busy near the stove and just waved at him.

Jacob ran to him and hugged him around the knees.

“Da.”

Vincent lifted his son up and gave him a kiss.

“What have you been doing? Did you make all these cookies?”

“Cookie,” Jacob repeated and held up all the fingers on one hand. “Lots.”

“You ate five?” Vincent tried to sound shocked, but succeeded only in sounding envious.

Jacob laughed and hugged him around the neck. He smelled of peanut butter. Now Vincent could feel his stomach rumbling. He looked over at the stove. What on earth were they doing over there? He moved to find out and suddenly Catherine turned and came towards him.

“Come into the dining room, Vincent. We’ll be serving in a minute.”

Vincent followed her obediently and put Jacob in the high chair. Then he pulled Catherine to him and gave her a hug.

“Had fun?” he asked, unnecessarily.

“Oh, yes. And Agatha is teaching me some tricks even William doesn’t know.”

“So we are having a tricky dinner, I take it.”

“Especially tricky,” Catherine agreed, pulling his head down for a kiss.

She pulled him to the table and they sat down. A moment later, Agatha entered with a platter piled high with something Vincent couldn’t identify, except that it seemed to include cheese and fish. He stared at it as Agatha put it in the middle of the table, followed by two bowls of salad – one which seemed to be an aspic and the other tomatoes and spinach.

“Those are my own greenhouse veggies,” Agatha said, indicating the salad.

“The ones we have to pick for the delivery?” Vincent asked.

“Yes, but there’s plenty more. We can do that tomorrow. It’s supposed to clear up later.”

“And what is that?” Vincent finally asked, gazing at the platter, since no one seemed to want to enlighten him.

“A soufflé,” Catherine told him, grinning from ear to ear.

“It looks delicious. I have never had one.”

“I was pretty sure of that,” Catherine remarked. “It’s all part of your vacation education.”

Vincent grinned at her. Agatha began cutting up the soufflé and he helped himself and then gave some to Jacob and Catherine. He took some of the salads as well for himself and Jacob. There was silence for some time as everyone concentrated on eating.

The soufflé was delicious, but Vincent felt as if he’d eaten not much more than a large cream puff. He wondered if he was going to feel hungry again in a couple of hours. Then he remembered the cookies. Probably not, he concluded.

Agatha had made them coffee and tea and they moved to the sitting room to enjoy their drinks and some cookies. Vincent tried one of each kind and then went for seconds. Jacob, who had climbed onto Vincent’s lap, seemed content with one. He must have had a lot of them already, Vincent supposed.

“I saw a rainbow, earlier,” he commented as he finished the last cookie and emptied his cup of tea. He was feeling uneasy again and wanted to distract himself. He didn’t want to dampen the happiness he could feel around him.

“Oh, we missed it,” Catherine wailed. “I’ll bet it was splendid without anything to block it.”

“Yes. It was magical – a double one too. Another first for me. I don’t know how many more delights I can stand.”

He looked down at his son, the greatest delight of his life, and realized he was asleep. He looked over at Catherine and exchanged a look with her. Catherine stood up.

“I think we need to get our son to bed, Agatha. He’s used to having an afternoon nap.”

“You go and do that,” Agatha boomed. “I’ll give you a garbage bag for your laundry. It’s still blowing out there. Or would you rather stay here in the house? I have plenty of room.”

Vincent thought about that and looked at Catherine. What he saw there told him that she had other plans – ones

that needed privacy. He smiled at Agatha.

"Thank you, but we have become rather fond of our little cabin. Besides, we have to pick up the mail. I'll do that on the bike again."

"Good heavens," Agatha exclaimed. "You used one of those old things? I think they go back to the war years."

"I thought as much, but it was quite serviceable."

"Well, you come up here after sunset and I'll give you a supper basket. Then tomorrow, if you can help me pick the vegetables, we can get the delivery order packed for the warehouse."

"We'd be happy to, Agatha. It is the least we can do to thank you for your hospitality. Truly, it has been a wonderful vacation," Vincent told her. Privately, he wondered if this wasn't their last day of innocence, but he said nothing.

They all clambered into their rain gear and Vincent carried Jacob while Catherine picked up the plastic bag of clean laundry. The wind blew the door open and pushed them down the path to the cottage.

"Whew, that was wild," Catherine commented as they hung up their dripping raincoats in the porch. She carried the boots inside and left them near the door.

"It's certainly warm and dry in here."

Vincent carried Jacob to his bed and laid him down. He didn't wake up.

He looked around the room, chose a battered but well-stuffed couch, and flopped down on it. Catherine joined him, snuggling up to him in the dim cabin.

"I think we could use some light," she commented at last. "I want to hear you read more of that poetry book."

Vincent got up and found a lantern in the kitchen. He shook it and guessed it had enough gas to last a few hours, so he lit it and carried it to a small table near the couch. He found his book and sat down again, riffling through the pages. His mood was a little sombre tonight, and suddenly a stanza by T S Eliot caught his eye. He began to read.

*"Garlic and sapphires in the mud
Clot the bedded axle-tree.
The trilling wire in the blood
Sings below inveterate scars
Appeasing long forgotten wars.
The dance along the artery
The circulation of the lymph
Are figured in the drift of stars.
Ascend to summer in the tree
We move above the moving tree
In light upon the figured leaf
And hear upon the sodden floor
Below, the boarhound and the boar
Pursue their pattern as before
But reconciled among the stars."*

He paused and Catherine looked at him, sensing something that worried her.

"What is it, Vincent? You've been quiet for hours now. Is something wrong?"

He hugged her closer and kissed her forehead. He sighed. There was no keeping his unease from Catherine anymore. Perhaps that was best. The burden was too heavy and needed to be shared. He spoke quietly.

"Earlier today, I became uneasy, without knowing why. Then I realized I was sensing that Father is not well. I

know that Peter will call Agatha if need be, but I am concerned, nevertheless. Our holiday may have to end rather sooner than we hoped, Catherine.”

She stroked the big hand around her shoulder and squeezed it.

“Vincent, we have already had a wonderful vacation. If it has to end, if we’re needed back home, that’s all right. We can come again, perhaps in the summer – or even the winter. Next time, Jacob will be older too.

“Don’t be sorry. It isn’t your fault.”

“I suppose all idylls must end. I had hoped ours would end the normal way, with a calm return trip.”

“We’ll know soon enough. Try not to worry. Father will be well cared for. All we can do is wait. Peter wouldn’t dare not keep us informed.”

Vincent’s lips quirked. “Yes, I know. I’m not really in the mood for reading, do you mind? I should go and get the mail. Then I’ll pick up the supper basket from Agatha.”

“I wouldn’t take the bike. Riding in mud is horrible even on a good bike. Which that isn’t.”

Vincent laughed.

“I think I’ll put on a cape and run there and back. I need to stretch my legs. I sat down too long today. I’m not used to being sedentary.”

“Too bad it’s a bit damp, or you could run naked,” Catherine commented. “I don’t think I’ll ever forget that image. It’s definitely one I’m taking home with us – in my memory.”

Vincent hugged her.

“One of the many joys of these last few days.”

He rose and looked outside. The daylight was fading and it was raining softly. There was no wind now. He looked at the rubber boots and abruptly decided they would be a hindrance. He took off his socks, and on impulse, stepped out of his coveralls and underwear as well. He put on the rain cape. It was long enough for modesty but would give him the freedom to run. He looked over at Catherine, who was grinning.

“Couldn’t resist, eh? Just don’t forget to come back here and get decent before you go to Agatha’s.”

“Catherine!”

She laughed and he left quickly.

The run was pleasant, despite the rain. The road had softened and Vincent could feel cool mud squishing between his toes, another new sensation he found delightful. He picked up speed and ran carefully down the middle of the road, not daring to risk his bare feet in among the ruts and rocks. He could see well enough to avoid anything painful. He reached the mailbox, tucked the contents into the inner pocket he found in the cape and headed back. Really, he decided, this was the best way to be out in the rain. No clothing to get dirty and everything easily washed. He found the sensation of the rubber cape against his skin almost erotic. By the time he got back to the cabin, he was aroused and realized he was feeling Catherine as well. He extracted the mail and left the cape on a hook in the porch.

Inside, Catherine stood waiting for him and was as naked as he. She pushed her warmth against him and he sighed in delight. She began to play with his testicles and he grunted, wondering what to do next. His feet and lower legs were filthy. He didn’t want to dirty the mattresses.

Catherine had not ceased her ministrations and suddenly he realized he was not going to be able to hold on much longer. He looked around. There was only one place to go. He scooped her up under her lovely rear end and she wrapped her legs around his waist. He carried her into the shower stall and leaned her against the wall. She found his mouth and began a lip massage that set his groin aflame. It had been some time since they had made love in a shower stall, but he remembered that first time vividly. He captured her mouth and moved to position himself, felt her fire answer his as he found her warm channel.

The joy of that intimate contact made them both sigh. Their bond flared and their climax came quickly. Vincent, his legs suddenly weak, sank to the floor of the stall and leaned against the side, bringing Catherine with him. She stroked his face and chest, finally leaning against him as he began to purr.

“Oh, Catherine.”

"I know. We're incorrigible."

"I was going to say insatiable."

"That too."

"Will you join me for a shower?"

"What do you think?"

Vincent rose and turned on the shower. It was barely warm, but perhaps that was best, he thought. They washed each other with great economy and rinsed carefully, managing to finish before the water became really cold.

Vincent carried Catherine out, pulled a towel from the pile and rubbed her dry. She did the same for him and they felt their fires rise again. They reluctantly banked them and left the bathroom to get dressed again. Vincent gave her a kiss, then put on his boots and cape and left to pick up the supper basket.

It had stopped raining and he looked up to see a few stars peeking through the night-dark clouds. It was very quiet now, as if the whole world was sleeping. He knocked on Agatha's door and she came quickly to let him in.

"Ah, I see it's stopped raining. That's good. Come in. I have a basket, and some news for you."

"News? About Father?"

"How did you know? Peter said you might. Yes, he's got pneumonia. Peter says he's responding to medication, so not to worry, but he'll need a lot of rest. Samantha is caring for him in the brownstone's hospital room. Peter suggests you might want to return. I can drive you to a city tunnel entrance after we deliver the vegetables day after tomorrow. He predicts that in two days, Father will have to be convinced to stay put. Your strength – and the power of your persuasion – may be needed."

Vincent smiled wryly. Father was the worst possible patient and a truly abominable invalid. He had not been ill for a long time, but the stories were almost legendary.

"I think that's an excellent suggestion, Agatha. Catherine and I agreed earlier that this merits cutting our vacation short. We have no regrets. It has been a wonderful experience."

Vincent hugged their hostess and Agatha sighed.

"You are most welcome, Vincent. We'll pick the vegetables tomorrow and get them to the warehouse first thing the next day. The crew is already on their way, so we won't have to wait for them."

"Thank you, Agatha. We are in your debt. I hope you will visit us soon."

"Oh, I'd love to – as soon as I figure out how to care for the animals while I'm gone."

"Nothing could be simpler. We will send someone here to take your place. We must have someone below with farm experience. You can bring Bo and stay with us."

"Very well, Vincent. I guess you've made a case. I have no more excuses."

"Good, and thanks again for the food. See you tomorrow morning. I think the rain is over."

"Yes, tomorrow will be fine – take it from me. At least you'll see sunshine for one more day. Have a good evening, Vincent."

"You too."

Vincent carried the heavy basket back to the cabin, wondering what on earth Agatha had packed for them this time. It smelled wonderful.

He put the basket on the table and began to unpack it while Catherine roused Jacob. Then he remembered the remaining bottle of beer in the cooler and added it, with a bottle of milk, to the collection. Agatha had packed more milk in the hamper, which Vincent put into the cooler. Best drink the oldest first, he thought.

They found several kinds of meat sandwiches, large dill pickles, apples, a wedge of creamy cheese and a container of devilled eggs. A brown bag held a large selection of the day's cookies.

"How does she do all this on such short notice?" Catherine asked. "I'm going to miss her cooking."

"I too – but I think Jacob will miss her cookies most."

They looked at their son, who had eaten one sandwich and now made a grab for the brown bag. Catherine

helped him extract a cookie.

"Cookie," he crowed.

"Well, he may not have much of a vocabulary, but he knows what he likes. Like father, like son."

Vincent chuckled, then grabbed another sandwich and took a long pull of beer. Suddenly, he realized he hadn't told Catherine the news.

"Agatha has heard from Peter. Father has pneumonia. He thinks we should return the day after tomorrow, after Agatha's made her delivery. She can drop us closer to the home tunnels."

Catherine nodded, not surprised.

"I'll bet Peter needs some help keeping Father in bed," she remarked.

"Exactly. He must take it easy for some time. I can sit on him if necessary," Vincent promised.

They finished their meal in relative silence, then played with Jacob for a while, until he started to yawn. They put him to bed and then took to their own bed. Both were tired. Catherine spooned herself against Vincent's back and was asleep in minutes. Vincent followed her soon after.

Chapter 7

Father woke to a warm darkness and the sense that he had been asleep for a long time. He couldn't see anything, but he knew he was not in the tunnels. The quiet was a different one – not silent. He could hear the muffled sounds of a city. He must be in the auxiliary brownstone's hospital room. He had no idea how he had come to be there.

He felt better, but his chest felt tight. He didn't have to guess what was wrong with him. He should have delegated more responsibilities, he realized belatedly. He was too old and out of shape to run around the way he had. Vincent would no doubt tell him so when he returned. No doubt that would be soon. That should not have been necessary either. He felt guilty to have been the cause of that. Somehow, he would have to make it up to them. He fell asleep.

Peter looked in later and found Jacob awake and lucid. He looked tired, though, and seemed content to lie still.

"Good morning, Jacob. How are you feeling?"

"As if a train has run over me, Peter. I can hardly get up the strength to change position."

"You won't have to, Jacob. I've made sure every modern miracle is at your disposal. There are folk who will help you move. You need to rest and sleep. I've got you on a nutrient IV and I'll add something stronger to it, if you're uncomfortable."

Jacob nodded then asked the question uppermost in his mind.

"Vincent?"

"I talked to Agatha last night. She will deliver the supplies to the warehouse tomorrow, as planned and then drive our favourite family to the nearest city tunnel entrance. They'll be here in the afternoon, at the latest."

"I'm sorry to hear that. I hope they've had a good time."

"According to Agatha, they've been a delight – and delighted. You need not feel guilty. You know Vincent will never berate you – Catherine either. I think this holiday has been good for them."

"And for us," Jacob mumbled. "I learned my shortcomings very quickly."

"Don't worry. Everything's in hand. Mary has taken charge below and is organizing the women to be more proactive. When you're well, you'll be able to retire to your books and put your feet up."

"It's no more than I deserve, Peter. I held the reins too long, not realizing that there was nothing on the other end."

"Nonsense, Jacob. You have accomplished wonders below. But there comes a time when you must let go, let others help."

"Yes. Devin said as much once. He always said I was too dictatorial."

"You were strong, Jacob, when that was necessary. Others are strong now, because you helped make them so. Vincent is your star pupil."

"Vincent will lead us. But he must not take on this burden alone. He has a family to think of – a luxury I never allowed myself."

"Jacob, Vincent knows that – and his holiday will have reinforced that priority. Be prepared to see a new man."

Peter stopped. Jacob had fallen asleep again. He sighed. Samantha arrived shortly afterwards and he went below to talk to Mary. They had to keep Father from fretting.

He found her in Father's chamber, looking at a large ledger.

"What's that?"

"Father's latest project – a kind of census of all our skills."

"Now, that's a good idea. How is it coming?"

Mary looked at him and smiled.

"Amazing. I had no idea. Two of our community list milking cows and feeding livestock. Not much use for that here – but I was thinking that perhaps Agatha might want to use them sometime. We owe her a great deal."

"Yes, indeed. I'll talk to Vincent when he returns. I suspect she's already been invited, but a farm needs care. A holiday would be good for her, too."

"How is Father, Peter?"

"He'll be fine. Right now he's too tired to do much, but wait a couple of days. Perhaps he can continue with his project from bed. That will keep his mind occupied."

"Yes. I think he can do that. Eric is collecting the information. He could easily take it to the brownstone."

"Good. Well, I must return to my office. Let me know if you need anything."

"Thank you, Peter – for everything."

Peter smiled at her and left.

...

The day did indeed dawn bright. After a quick breakfast of granola and tea, Vincent and Catherine took Jacob up to the house. Bo was waiting for them and Jacob ran to him and hugged him. Catherine looked at Vincent.

"I think we're going to have a hard time separating those two," she remarked.

"Yes, but I think he should stay with Agatha. He would not like the confinement of our brownstone for long. No ladies there."

Catherine laughed. "I'd forgotten about his extra-curricular activities. You're right, of course."

Agatha came out and greeted them.

"All ready to be trainee field hands? Bo will keep an eye on Jacob. Come, before it gets too hot in the greenhouse."

They spent the next several hours carefully picking the ripe and almost ripe tomatoes and cutting spinach, green onions and some early cucumbers and snub carrots. The smell of the rich soil kept distracting Vincent. He paused to smell it often. Their own garden at the brownstone needed some food crops, he decided. Perhaps he could build a small greenhouse too.

After filling several bushel baskets, they carried the baskets into the barn, and piled them next to some sacks of potatoes and the remaining apples from the previous year – mostly Spys now, large and rich-scented still.

"We'll give them some more dairy products too. We can load all but those into the truck tonight, and then we can take off right after breakfast tomorrow."

"Good idea, Agatha. After dark?"

"Yes, after you've picked up the mail, perhaps, and before supper. It still cools off quickly here at night. Now for some dinner. You probably want to clean up, so I'll get going on it and ring the gong when I'm ready."

“Agatha, how do you find the energy? I’m pooped,” Catherine confessed.

“Just practice – and a good breakfast,” Agatha laughed.

Catherine, who had never been much of a breakfast person before meeting Vincent, recognized the truth of that. She could never last the morning with just a coffee any more.

“Just the same, I think you have some secret vitamin,” she joked.

“No, just fresh air and sunshine – when it doesn’t rain,” Agatha returned. “You people in the city don’t realize how bad air affects your energy level. Haven’t you felt stronger and hungrier out here?”

Vincent looked around at the still wet fields and road and breathed deeply. Jacob was holding onto his leg and he lifted his son up.

“Yes. I wish I could bottle some of this air and take it back with us.”

“Unfortunately, that’s still impossible, but I do have something you can take as a reminder. I’ll give it to you at dinner.”

They went back to their cabin and had a joint shower and a fresh change of clothes.

“I think we should launder these before we go back tomorrow,” Catherine remarked. “Laundry day is something that I don’t want to think about – and I hate the idea of hauling dirty clothes.”

“Yes, I agree. I hope Father is behaving. There will have to be some changes when we return. I cannot shoulder all of the load, either. It isn’t fair to you and Jacob. I have to learn to delegate, just as Father has.”

Catherine hugged him.

“Yes, Vincent, but you’d be unhappy if you didn’t participate in life below. Everything in moderation.”

“Except love.”

“Yes. I don’t believe there is such a thing as too much love. Luckily for us. In the meantime, we should get the mail. There may not be time later. I think it’s my turn,” Catherine commented.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. I want to enjoy the great outdoors one last time.”

She pulled on her boots and coat and tramped down the lane. She felt a little guilty, knowing that Vincent would probably have liked to go, but she had not been for a walk on her own since they arrived. She felt the sun on her back and breathed deeply. She could well understand how this place affected Vincent. She reached the mailbox and pulled out the contents, absently stuffing them into one of the large pockets.

On the way back, she reflected that their holiday had done wonders for both of them. They had gained some perspective, and she was sure they would be coming to the farm again. Knowing that made her feel joyous, blessed. She had never seen Vincent so happy and carefree. That was worth any sacrifice – and none had been necessary.

She sighed and reached the cottage just as the gong sounded. Vincent emerged with Jacob, almost immediately, and they walked up to the house. Agatha met them at the door and seemed wreathed in delicious smells. Catherine handed over the mail to Agatha’s sigh and mumbled “more bills”.

Vincent was distracted and smiled. There was a smell he recognized! He took Catherine’s arm and followed their hostess into the dining room. In the middle of the table was a beautifully-browned pork roast surrounded by apples and spiced with rosemary. He sighed.

“Agatha – another meal fit for a king!”

“No, just good plain country fare – and all my own produce. Nothing better.”

They ate with gusto, everyone taking seconds, and Vincent thirds. After a decent interval, Agatha cleared the table to make room for a huge, hot apple pie, a bowl of whipped cream and slabs of cheddar. There was no talk for a long time as they ate these delights.

Vincent finally sat back and patted his stomach.

“I must I have put on 10 pounds since we arrived.”

Catherine looked at him.

"Nonsense, Vincent. You never put on weight. I don't know where you put all that food, though. My grandmother would have said you have hollow legs, except that they don't look hollow to me."

Vincent laughed and was joined by Agatha's guffaw.

"I'll have to take your word for that. Pity!"

Catherine laughed too. "I made him a pair of shorts, but the weather was uncooperative. Which reminds me, Agatha, can we do a quick load of laundry? The stuff we wore today needs a wash. Then we can pack all clean clothes."

"Certainly. Just bring it up later and I'll put it in. It can dry while we load the truck and you can take it back with you. If you want a snack before bed, just come up. If not, I'll see you at daybreak. I'll have a special breakfast."

"Agatha, you are too kind. I hope you will visit soon," Vincent remarked. "We will miss you – and this place."

"Whoops! I almost forgot." Agatha went into the kitchen and brought back a bottle of pale wine.

"Dandelion wine," she told them. "Bottled sunshine and fresh air."

Catherine gasped. "I've heard of it, but never seen it. Ray Bradbury wrote an anthology with that title - one of my all time favourites - and I've always wanted to try it."

"He was right," Agatha declared. "There is no finer drink on this earth. I don't make much because it takes a lot of dandelions, but every bottle is a miracle. Enjoy."

"Oh, we will. Thank you so much!"

"Now, I think we should go back and pack," Vincent declared. "If you give us a basket, we can bring up the remaining perishables in the morning."

"Thanks. That would be a big help. See you later."

They helped Agatha rinse the dishes and load the dishwasher, then took their leave with a basket. The afternoon was waning, but it was warm.

Jacob ran ahead, followed by Bo.

They packed in a leisurely fashion, making sure the crossbow and dandelion wine were well padded by clothes, then put their packs by the door, untied, for any last minute items in the morning. They checked every nook to make sure they had missed nothing, but in truth, they had not brought much.

Vincent took an inventory in the kitchen. There was certainly enough food for their light supper. He brought out a bottle of cider and sat it on the table with two glasses and a mug. There was enough cheese, crackers, pickles and fruit for a nice snack. Even Vincent did not feel like a large meal now. Perhaps he had filled his hollow legs at last, he mused.

"I think this would be a nice way to enjoy our last sunset on this farm," he remarked to Catherine with a grin.

"Yes, let's do that. Jacob could have some too. It's been a hectic day. He'll rest better."

"That is my thought too."

They moved onto the porch and sat sipping the cider and watching as the shadows grew in front of the cabin.

Vincent sighed and lifted Jacob onto his lap, then put an arm around Catherine. Bo, ignored, gave a massive yawn and lay across Vincent's feet.

They said nothing, their bond transmitting a calm and happiness that needed no words.

When the sun set at last, they put Jacob to bed. He went to sleep almost immediately. They walked up to the house, put the basket of perishables inside the back door and strolled over to the barn. Agatha was backing up the truck.

It took them about an hour to pack in all the bushel baskets and crates. Agatha strung a net across the back to keep them from shifting then stopped and put her hands on her hips.

"I'm an idiot!" she exclaimed. "Come with me, Vincent."

She led him to a stall at the end of the barn and pointed to a rickety rattan loveseat with a worn cushion.

"I think that will make your journey a little less uncomfortable tomorrow. We have further to go. I can't have you

bouncing around on hay bales – and there's no room anyhow."

They carried the couch back to the truck and Agatha secured it with the net.

"It's a pretty tight fit, and I still need to get in the dairy chest, but I can take your packs in the front with me."

"This will be fine, Agatha. We can hold onto each other. Thank you."

Agatha grinned at them both.

"Last night of freedom. Enjoy it and I'll see you in the morning – just before dawn. The gang will probably be waiting by the time we get to the warehouse."

"Good-night, Agatha," Catherine whispered, giving the older woman a big hug and a kiss on her cheek. "You've been the best hostess anyone could want. We owe you, big time."

"You owe me nothing. It's been a pleasure. I'll give your laundry to you in the morning. Good-night my dears."

Vincent and Catherine walked slowly back to the cabin, hand in hand. It was a warm, calm night. Both were trying to think of something they could do to mark this last night – besides the obvious, which would certainly be part of it.

They walked past the cabin as the moon came out from behind a cloud. There was a sheen to a large patch of ground between the two cabins and they stopped. Grass! Vincent walked to it and bent to feel it. It was dry and he looked up at Catherine, a question in his eyes.

"Yes," she whispered.

They removed their clothes and lay naked on the soft grass. Catherine wondered how it had come to be there and then noticed a battered croquet set under a sheet of clear plastic, leaning against the other cabin. She laughed and kissed Vincent.

"What's funny?"

"We're making love on a croquet green."

"That explains why it's so soft. Almost as soft as you."

They made slow and luscious love on their green cushion, then and lay side by side in the moonlight.

Catherine snuggled under Vincent's arm and whispered.

"I bet you have a poem for this occasion too."

"No. My brain is not functioning well at present. I can only think of one.

'The moon was a ghostly galleon

Tossed upon cloudy seas...' "

Catherine giggled.

"The moon never looked more like a ghostly galleon. Look at those clouds. Ah, Vincent, if I live to be a hundred, I'll never forget tonight – our first lovemaking outdoors."

"And on a croquet green. But I think we'd better get to bed. We have an early day tomorrow."

"Yes, my love – my one and only love."

She nuzzled his lower lip and in moments they were again wrapped in love, their climax as soft as the grass beneath them.

"Oh, Vincent. I'll never tire of you. Every time is like the first – but better."

"Yes. Our bond makes us one, completely. Each day is different and we change a little every day, so our lovemaking is never the same twice."

"And you, my big hairy love, have never looked more wonderful."

Vincent grinned and with a big scoop, gathered their clothes and Catherine into his arms and carried her back to the cabin. They hung up the coveralls and lay down in their love nest, spooning together. They were soon asleep.

Chapter 8

Vincent woke first and looked around with relief, half afraid he had slept in. It was still dark, but he could sense that daybreak was near. He stroked the soft hip beside him and Catherine woke with a groan, then turned to him and pressed herself to him.

"Hmmm ... you are the most delightful wake-up call."

"Catherine, we must shower and get ready. It's almost sunrise."

"All right. Let's take Jacob into the shower with us, or we may get distracted."

"Good idea."

They washed carefully and put on their coveralls, not forgetting their underwear this time. The tunnels would be chilly. Catherine sat Jacob and then Vincent down and brushed their hair. So alike, she thought. Perhaps Jacob should keep his hair long. They packed the rest of their items and left the cabin, not without a sigh. Jacob was quiet, sensing something different was happening.

They knocked on Agatha's door and walked in. She was just piling up a plate with tiny pancakes and beckoned them to the kitchen table.

"I thought we'd be casual this morning. I made some porridge too. Help yourselves. I'll bring the tea and coffee."

They sat down and served Jacob a bowl of porridge. He ate it quickly, one eye on the pancakes. Catherine gave him several and poured on some syrup. She fed him and watched him wolf them down. Had he even tasted them?

They were drinking their tea and coffee when a tapping sounded at the back door.

Agatha got up, puzzled, and went to see who it was. She came back with Neal.

The boy ran to Vincent, who had turned in his chair, ready for flight if necessary. He hugged the child, then pulled back to look at him. He had obviously been crying. Catherine never ceased to be amazed at how children took to Vincent, without thought. If only adults would do the same.

"Tell me," Vincent demanded quietly of Neal.

"My father came back yesterday, while I was at school. He was gone before I got home, but he hurt my mother. She was crying. I don't know what to do. I'm afraid he'll come back. My mother told me to come to Miz Agatha and stay away, just in case."

Agatha frowned.

"Are you sure it was your father, Neal?"

"Yes – I remember from the last time. It was a long time ago. He smokes those awful little cigars and gets drunk. There was an empty bottle."

Catherine spoke quietly.

"What's your last name, Neal – and your mother and father's first name?"

"Porter. My mother is Muriel and my father's name is Conan."

"When did your father visit last, Neal?"

"A couple of years ago. He's not supposed to. My mother told me."

Catherine knelt down in front of the boy.

"Neal, you must keep safe. I'll try and help as soon as we get back to New York. That won't be until noon or so. Can you find a place to hide until then?"

"He can stay here," Agatha declared. "I'll phone his mother and tell her. Neal won't get into trouble, will you?" she asked him.

"No, Miz Agatha. I won't do anything."

"Well, you can sit in the living room and read. Stay inside, ok? There's a couple of pancakes and a lot of cookies in the jar. Bo will keep you company. I'll be back as soon as I can, probably early afternoon."

“Okay.”

“Well, folks, we’d better make tracks. I’ll just pile the dishes in the dishwasher and make that phone call and we can go. Oh, your laundry is piled on that chair over there. Don’t forget it.”

They crammed the clothes into Catherine’s backpack and waited for Agatha. They heard her talking and a minute later, she joined them.

“Muriel is okay, but frightened. She’s happy Neal is safe.”

The boy stood at the door as they all left and waved to them. Vincent waved back and hoped Catherine would be able to help quickly.

“That boy has been through a lot.” Agatha commented. “His mother is a lovely person, but she married a brute. Thank goodness Neal has a good head. He’s never seen much of his father. That man is trouble.”

Agatha and Vincent quickly loaded the dairy products into a lined metal trunk and carried it into the van. The loveseat just fit at the back, but there was little room for their legs. Vincent sat sideways, and Jacob sat between his legs, while Catherine fit on the other end. They would not have to worry about falling off. Agatha drove quickly along the bumpy roads to the warehouse. When they arrived, they put Jacob in the front seat while they carried all the root vegetable and apple baskets into the warehouse. Agatha knocked on the floor hatch and it was soon pushed up from below.

Geoffrey and Kipper clambered up, followed by Cullen and Zach.

There were hugs and greetings all around before Vincent was able to ask the question uppermost in his mind.

“How is Father?”

“We left before he became ill, but the news on the pipes is that he’s being good. He’s resting and recovering.”

“Good. Agatha’s driving us to the city. We’ll see you back home.”

Cullen made a face.

“Wish we could find a faster way. But at least we have a good trolley now.”

Vincent looked puzzled and was about to ask what he meant, when Cullen made a dismissive gesture.

“Don’t ask, Vincent. Long story. You’ll hear all about it when you get home.”

“Right,” Agatha exclaimed. “We should be on our way. I can make this trip easier on you. I’ll take all the perishable vegetables, as well as the dairy products, this time, since I’m going into the city. That will make your trip faster. I guess I’ll have a crew a week from now to pick?”

“Yep,” Zach replied.

“Judging by the bright eyes of these three, it was a nice vacation,” Cullen remarked with a grin.

“It was fantastic,” Vincent agreed.

They waved at the tunnel crew and left. Agatha and Vincent tied the chair closer to the front of the van and she gave them their backpacks.

“What entrance should I aim for, Vincent?”

“I think the warehouse entrance we use for major deliveries would be best. You can drive the truck right inside and we can go down the freight elevator with all the goods. Remember that, Catherine? Can you give Agatha directions? I know the underground route to get there, but not by road from Above ”

“Indeed I do.” She gave Agatha directions and set off without further ado. That old warehouse was where she had first learned that Peter was a helper, in those awful days of the plague. Later, she had discovered that he owned the building with her father. It was used by a small charity that took some of the hundreds of found bicycles in the police yards, fixed them up, and shipped them in a container to poor African states. That was done once a year. The rest of the time, the warehouse was at the disposal of the tunnel community. A fine arrangement all around.

The ride was long and the three passengers managed to nap a little. Once they entered the outskirts of the city, Vincent became tense and Catherine found the smells made her want to gag. How had she managed to breathe in New York? Eventually, the van stopped and Agatha knocked on the panel, then opened the back doors.

“I think this is the place.”

They all got out and looked around. Vincent moved to the elevator and tapped on a pipe nearby as Agatha backed up the truck. A few minutes later, a deep rumble sounded from far underground and the large cage arrived and the gate lifted. Mouse waited for them, a big smile on his face and a trolley fitted with a large box.

"Home again. Good. Come on. Father waiting."

Catherine held onto Jacob, who was itching to run somewhere, while the Vincent and the others unloaded the truck and piled the goods on the trolley, putting the milk bottles and other dairy products into the box. When they were done, they all stood quietly, unwilling to say goodbye. Catherine gave Agatha a long hug.

"I'll phone you with any news about Neal's father," Catherine promised. "Oh, I'd better have Neal's address too."

Agatha gave it to her and thanked her. She waved at everyone, climbed back into the van and drove away. Catherine had seen tears in her eyes and felt her own burn a little. She hoped they would meet again soon.

Vincent sighed and took Jacob's hand as they picked up their packs and joined Mouse in the elevator. A crew met them to take the food. The walk to the home tunnels seemed dreamlike. Catherine found it hard to believe they had been on a farm only a short time before. At least the air was better below. It wasn't long before the scent of candles met her and she sighed. Home. Yes, this was home.

They entered the brownstone's secret entrance and Vincent went straight to Father with little Jacob. Catherine strode upstairs to the office and called Joe – hoping that he was working on a Saturday. He answered right away.

"Joe? What are you doing in the office? I'm glad you are. I need your help. It's urgent."

"And a very good day to you too, Radcliffe! Yes, I'm fine. Thanks for asking. You need to relax, Radcliffe. You're losing it. The gentry must be working you too hard."

Catherine laughed.

"Sorry, Joe, but a child is in danger – and his mother has been assaulted. Can you look up a guy by the name of Conan Porter? I'll wait on the line."

There was a clunk and she could hear the sounds of a filing cabinet drawer and then a pause. Joe came back quickly.

"Where did you meet this guy, Cathy? He doesn't seem like your type. He's wanted in three states for assault, robbery, extortion and DUI. A real prince."

"I haven't met him, Joe, but I can tell you where he was yesterday. Maybe the local cops can watch for him. He said he would be back."

She gave Neal's address.

"Right, Radcliffe. I'll get the locals onto it. Don't worry. These guys are predictable. He's careless because he's near home. They'll find him."

"Will you let me know as soon as you hear anything, Joe? It would mean a lot to me."

"Of course, Cathy. I'll get on the blower now. Keep this line open."

"Will do. Thanks Joe."

Catherine sat down and sighed with relief. She would have to be within range of the telephone for the next few hours, but that was nothing new. Vincent came in as she started to go through the papers on her desk.

"Working already, Catherine?"

"I got hold of Joe, Vincent. He's going to tell the local police about Neal's father. There are several warrants out for his arrest. I have to stay close to the phone."

"No, you do not. I will wait here while you go to see Father. He wants to speak with you. Jacob is below with Rebecca."

"Thank you, Vincent."

Catherine went down the stairs to the basement hospital room and found Father sitting up. He looked tired, but his colour was good. She sat down in a chair next to the bed. He smiled at her, a little guiltily.

"How are you feeling, Father?"

"Better, Catherine. I'm sorry you cut short your vacation. It wasn't necessary, you know. I told Vincent so. I'm a

tough old bird.”

“Well, Vincent would have worried, you know. Don’t feel guilty. We had a wonderful time. I think we need to do something for Agatha, though. She’s so alone there. I worry about her.”

“Yes,” Father agreed. “I had never really thought about that aspect. She gives us so much. Also, those trips to her warehouse aren’t very convenient for us – and very long. She drove you back today, didn’t she? Maybe she’d be willing to make deliveries that way on occasion. Then she could stay for a meal, at least.”

“Father, that’s a wonderful idea. We want her to visit for a few days, if we can get a crew to do her chores. They’d have to go the old way, though.”

“Yes, we don’t want to close that tunnel, just make moving goods more convenient. It won’t hurt the crews to walk there. They’re used to it – and I believe they enjoy getting away and working in the fresh air.”

“Good. I’ll be talking to Agatha again soon. I’ll tell her.”

Father nodded.

“Catherine, there’s something else. I realized I had been putting too much of a burden on Vincent. I tend to forget he has family responsibilities. Mary has been re-doing the rosters and delegating some of the jobs. Eric has become my personal assistant. I took on too much when you and Vincent went away – with this result. I’m forcing myself to retire from all but the most sedentary responsibilities.

“I’m sorry, Catherine. I was blind. Vincent will be our leader one day, but he has to live his private life too. Not like me. I let my work trump my family. I almost lost Devin as a result. Your vacation has been an education for me. Long overdue. I hope you can forgive an old man’s petulance.”

“Father, there’s nothing to forgive. Just get well. The children love you and your stories - and I’m sure they’re missing them.”

“It’s Vincent they really miss, but thank you for the kind words, Catherine. You will find some changes below. Those wouldn’t have happened if you hadn’t gone on holiday. I’m glad you had a good time. Vincent seems much happier. I’m sure it was a wonderful experience for him. You must do it more often. I’m in your debt – and very grateful you are one of us.”

Father yawned. “I’m afraid I have to nap now. Thank you for your understanding, Catherine.”

She took his hand and kissed it. “Any time, Father.”

She left him dozing off and returned to the office. Vincent was on the phone, but holding it away from his ear. He was obviously talking to Joe; she could hear his voice from the doorway. She waited until he put the phone down and then put her arms around his neck and kissed a hidden ear.

“News?”

“Yes. They caught the man quickly. He was driving back to the farm. He will not bother them again.”

“Good. I’d better phone Neal, but I’ll ask him to not leave until Agatha gets back. Otherwise she’ll worry.”

Catherine made the call, telling Neal the news and to stay there. She turned around in her chair and sighed.

“Well, I think we can finally settle back in our home, Vincent.”

“Yes, and I believe there are clean sheets on the bed, Catherine.”

“You don’t mean”

“Yes. What better way to declare ourselves home?”

They went hand-in-hand upstairs and discovered that the joy of love in clean sheets under the skylight was just as wonderful as that on grass. Their bond sang with joy as they lay contented, holding hands, afterwards.

This vacation, Catherine mused, had been a catalyst for many things. The next one would be easier.

END