

Catherine's Dream

by Angie

*"But there's no need for turning back
'Cause all roads lead to where I stand
And I believe I'll walk them all
No matter what I may have planned"
- Don Mclean (Crossroads)*

Author's Note: This is an alternate history, with a different beginning that changes everything, for both Catherine and Vincent.

Catherine had been working in the DA's office for six months, when she decided her life needed something more. The work was intense, and she loved it – so it was something else, and she knew it would come to her if she gave herself a chance to think.

It had been a very hectic few months, life-changing, she decided, mulling it over, in the hope that a little introspection might trigger the revelation she wanted.

When had it started. Oh yes ...

That horrible night when Tom had dragged her to one of his building promotions had been the final straw. She had resented his intrusion on her chat with Eve, as well as the way he had handled it - and her. As he was giving her a dressing down, she had noticed one of the call girls he had hired in the background – and saw little difference between they two, except one of status. Tom considered her a trophy girlfriend, valuable because of her father.

She had said something final, and left, leaving Tom gaping. In front of the hotel, she paused and considered. It would not be easy to flag down a cab, and the opposite site of the road was Central Park, not far from her apartment building, so she decided to walk home.

She used that time to think. Social evenings where all she did was mingle and chat were not enough anymore, but the finality of this one had made her realize the truth. Her life was as empty as Tom's ice building - and almost as cold.

The very next day, at Chandler and Coolidge, and on time for a change, she had informed her father that she was leaving the practice. She admitted she didn't know what she wanted

to do, but she was sure anything would be better than corporate law - although she didn't tell her father that last. It would have hurt him, and she loved him dearly, She knew he worried about her, but he also let her do as she thought best.

She had spent the rest of the day at home, thinking, considering her options, a rare thing for her. She needed something that would use her legal skills, which she was proud of having achieved academically, but which had not been used in a way that was satisfying.

She liked people and got along well with everyone, but she was tired of her social life, which gave her nothing but an excuse to wear fancy clothing, but was ultimately only marginally more interesting than her working life. She needed a change, a large one.

Her conversation with Eve the previous night had convinced her that she needed more people contact, not necessarily socially. There was one obvious, the office of the District Attorney of New York, if they would accept her. She knew public law was often looked down upon by lawyers of her father's class – but that made it more challenging, and she needed that. No point continuing along a road she detested. She needed to feel she was doing something worthwhile. Corporate law had never given her that sense.

She knew, from legal office friends of friends, that the DA was always short-staffed so she polished up her resumé the next day and made an appointment for a job interview, which they gave her quickly. She sat on a chair while the Assistant DA and the DA himself discussed her in a glassed-in office with the door closed.

They did not seem amused, a good thing, but the Assistant DA did not seem amenable to hiring her. Perhaps he was just a little wary of her social status. That was to be expected. She would have to prove she wasn't bored and just wanted a fling in the lower classes of society. She would have to work - hard. She had the requisite qualifications, although her experience was very different to what they handled in this office – but that was why she was here.

To give them credit, they didn't question her motives to her face, although they must have had their doubts about her. They announced they were pleased to offer her a three month trial, and would then give her an assessment. They quoted her a salary, which she knew was abominable, but she didn't care. She would still get a small monthly fee from her father's law firm, for the accounts she had handled which were still active. She had also inherited a fair sum of money from her mother's estate, that had sat in her bank account since she was 21. Her apartment had been a gift from her father on passing the bar exam and she was rarely home long enough to enjoy it, much less relax. Her overhead, so to speak, was low. She would not need a fancier wardrobe than she already had and her briefcase would be just as useful in the DA's office.

So she was hired for the trial division, where a lot of research was needed to extract facts that ensure a favourable court decision from the presiding judge. At first she had been a little disappointed, wanting more of the action, but over time she came to realize their reasons for starting her at the lower rungs were valid – and her own ignorance of the other half of society could have made her a liability.

She was even grateful, eventually, after she heard about the danger the DA's investigators sometimes faced. She read their reports for inclusion in the trials. Some were frankly horrifying. Some had been injured, others the target of threats, and police resources being what they were, they couldn't always get back-up. One had died – killed by an informant. Her father would not have been silent had she been thrown, innocent as she was, into that end of the DA's work.

Courage was one thing, stupidity another. She had never been exposed to the kinds of

criminals that needed personal interviews. Corporate law tried to keep its clients out of the courtroom and interviews were conducted in an oak-pannelled meeting room with all the visible decor of a lawyer's office plainly visible. Visiting potential witnesses alone in run-down tenements or derelict warehouses could be unhealthy. If she had to interview anyone, for any reason, they came to the office.

She was a good lawyer, though, very thorough, and she loved being told that her work had translated into courtroom convictions. One day, she would get her chance to stand there on the side of law, but in the meantime, she was learning, and gaining experience.

More importantly, she had found personal satisfaction working with disadvantaged people, not something she had ever experienced in her father's law practice. A win for them in the courtroom was very satisfying.

Her boss, Joe Maxwell, the Assistant DA, was happy with her and gave her all the knotty cases. She had not failed him yet – and her three month assessment had been waved away by Joe, who candidly said she had worked her butt off and had great promise – and that he would tell DA Moreno this.

Judges did not always completely agree with the DA's evidence, however. That was to be expected, Joe had told her. Judges were not always predictable. The DA did its best to ensure criminals were removed from society.

So while she was satisfied with her job, she began to be less so with her apartment, which seemed more appropriate to her old life than her new one. It had a lovely view, but it was one she could seldom enjoy now. Either she was tired, or had to put in extra time to complete a case. Either way, her apartment was just a place to sleep, and sometimes she didn't get enough of that either. Weekends, she stayed home and slept or did what necessary shopping their was. She did not usually have to work, unless there was something very urgent. Even Joe knew his people needed some time to unwind.

The apartment was too small, too ... uninspiring, she finally admitted to herself. She wanted something at street level, old, with character, something she could use her design skills, the ones her friends in law school had made fun of. She had the money to create a showplace home, but what she really wanted was something more in the antique fashion, warm and inviting.

So, now what? If she wanted to move, to buy something different, where would she go? Her mind went back to that interrupted conversation at Tom's function, that turning point in her life.

Among the other things she had been talking to Eve about was the renovation her friend had been doing on an old brownstone. Now several months later, how was that going? She decided to find out. Eve might have some recommendations.

So she called up Eve and suggested they go out for a drink. They met in a local hotel bar, and after a couple of drinks and an exchange of gossip, Catherine asked how the work on her house was going.

Eve gave a snort and a rueful laugh. "It's not going anywhere, anytime soon," she revealed. "The workmen claim it's haunted and the work that has been done is only half of what I had hoped. It's livable, but still needs a new furnace and a window upgrade. The rooms also need painting. So I'm still living in my old walk-up flat."

"What?" Catherine could hardly believe her ears. "Have you talked to the contractor?"

"Yes. He refuses to have anything to do with it anymore. I don't know how he stays in business with an attitude like that."

"So what are you going to do?"

"I think I'll sell it. I simply can't deal with this now. My life is ... complicated ... as I told you back ... at that silly function. I'll have to take a loss, I guess."

Catherine thought quickly and made a flash decision.

"Would you sell it to me, Eve? If you wish, we could work a partial swap - my apartment plus cash for your brownstone."

Eve's jaw dropped and she stared at her friend, unable to think of anything to say, but she did some hard thinking. Catherine's apartment would solve a lot of her problems. She wanted to get out of her current place, which had too many negative associations and the house was frankly a write-off. She had been in Cathy's place once. It was compact, and the view was stunning.

"Are you sure, Cathy? I love your place, and frankly, I need a new start. But how are you going to get anyone to finish the brownstone?"

Catherine smiled to herself. She had met Elliot Burch at an art show not long ago, one of her few evening excursions, because she could indulge her love of art and have no social responsibilities. He was definitely pursuing her. He might be able to recommend a contractor.

"Don't worry about that, Eve. What do you want for the brownstone, so that you recoup your work and the purchase price."

Eve quoted a price that gave Catherine no qualms at all. Her apartment was small, but it wasn't cheap because of its location, but it also wasn't a house. The difference would give Eve some extra money and herself a new project to look forward to. She told Eve what her apartment was worth, and Eve smiled, realizing exactly what Catherine had.

"I'm sold Cathy, if you are."

"Are you sure?" Catherine asked.

"Absolutely, Cathy. How soon do you think we could work this?"

"Let me talk to someone about the renos, and I'll draw up some paperwork for the sale. It's late summer now, so if I can get the work set up shortly, it shouldn't be too long a wait. The sooner the better, and definitely before winter."

"Call me when you need me, then," Eve said and thanked her profusely. "You've saved my life, Cathy," she admitted.

"Can I borrow a key and take a look at what needs to be done?" she asked, on a whim.

"Of course, Cathy. You can have all of them. I'll send them around to the DA's office tomorrow. Will that be soon enough?"

"Absolutely! Thank you, Eve."

"Thank YOU," Eve said again, before they said goodbye and went their separate ways.

The next day, the keys, a bunch of mysterious ones of very different vintages, arrived in a manila envelope with a house plan and the receipts for the work done on the brownstone. Eve was efficient, for which Cathy was grateful. Four keys were linked with a ring, which she assumed were two each the front door and back door.

On a whim, she called up Elliot. He answered quickly, which gratified her.

"Cathy! To what do I owe the honour of this call, when you've been MIA for months?"

Catherine laughed. "I want to show you a house, Elliot, and pick your brain. Would early evening today work for you? I think you need to see it in daylight."

"I'll clear my schedule for you," Elliot replied, almost too quickly.

'My, I've certainly had made an impression on the man!'

"What time should I pick you up?" he asked. Catherine gave him a time, determined to leave the office right at 5 pm, for a change, and to have a bite to eat and put on something casual. No being fashionably late this time!

The rest of the day went quickly and she managed to walk out of the office more or less on time. She tossed some completed files on Joe's desk as she left, grateful he wasn't in his office to delay her with chat. She made good her escape and went to a small diner on her way home, luxuriating in a meal she rarely allowed herself. On her return home, she quickly showered and changed and grabbed the manila envelope and keys, before meeting Elliot at her building's entrance. Long daylight hours meant they would have time to get a good look around the house.

Elliot was driving himself, a very shiny black, expensive Mercedes. He got out, opened the passenger door and welcomed her with a smile, asking no questions. She gave him directions to the brownstone and they managed to find a spot to park within a block, which he told her was a good omen.

She had not thought about parking, she realized. Would she need it? She had a car in her building's parking garage, but rarely used it. For anything requiring business, the DA had a fleet of company cars. She was a taxi user, but she might need her car more now. These old neighbourhoods had alleys and separate garages. This one probably did too. She hadn't thought to look at the house plan for it. She would see what was what now.

She led Elliot up the steps and opened the front door, using one of the four keys on the same ring. It opened the door without any fuss. Inside the hall, there were ample signs that workmen had been around, as they had left small piles of scrap drywall and other materials. The house smelled fine, though, not musty. Whatever problems it had, leaks weren't one of them, for which she was grateful. A new roof would be expensive.

She turned on the hall light and admired the dark wood panelling and heavy oak banister leading to the second floor. She led the way to the back of the house, went past a parlour and what was likely a dining room with a connecting door to the kitchen. She was not a cook, but she appreciated that the kitchen appliances were in good shape, and not too old, so she could make meals without risking her life.

She looked out the back door and saw the small garden surrounded by a fence. There was indeed a small wood garage taking up one corner of it. It seemed intact. She sighed. One less problem to worry about.

Elliot put his hand on her shoulder and craned past her to look through the small window in the back door.

"I didn't know you liked gardens," he commented.

"I've never had one," she retorted. "I'm glad there's a garage, so I won't have to park on the street."

"Don't say that until you've looked inside," he advised.

Catherine looked up at him, and nodded. She must think ahead. This was a new experience

for her. She looked out back again and decided examining the garage could wait for another day. They had to examine more important things.

"Um, I hate to break your reverie, but what did you want me here for, besides fighting off rats?" Elliot asked.

"Rats?"

"Can't you hear that scratching? I think your kitchen cupboards might have some unwanted guests."

There were indeed some noises. She had not noticed them until then. What was the attraction? The place was empty and no food had been left around. She could tell that much.

She ignored that problem for now too. She had to focus on necessities while she had Elliot on hand.

"My friend, the owner, has had some work done, but she says the windows all need upgrading and the furnace needs replacing. And the walls painting." She waved the manila envelope.

Elliot took it from her and extracted the bills and such, then got a very intense look as he examined the house plan.

"Now this is something I can relate to," he commented, "although I don't work at this scale."

"I know," Catherine told him, "but there's a problem I'm inheriting with it. Workmen won't work here because they say it's haunted."

Elliot laughed so hard, she wondered if he was having a fit. He stopped at the expression on her face, and cleared his throat.

"Sorry, that just sounds like an excuse from a contractor who found a better job with more money."

Catherine stared at him. "I never thought of that, but looking at these bills, I don't think they were exactly working cheap - although I admit I'm not acquainted with the going rates."

Elliot riffled through the bills and his eyebrows rose. "You're right," he said. "If anything, I'd say your friend was getting a little 'took', although I can't really speak for residential renos with any great authority. They always build in some lard, knowing they have the owner over a barrel. But I do know something about electricity, which is common to all buildings. These quotes seem high for something so relatively simple. Let's go down to the basement to look at what they've done - or not done."

He took her arm and they found the basement stairs. The light worked at least, although it was dim, and the basement smelled no worse than the rest of the house, which was a relief to Catherine.

It was a large basement, and there was a door with a transom that led to outside stairs and the street. She had noticed that some other lower levels were obviously being rented to tenants, or had become hairdressers or other small daytime businesses. This one had obviously never been anything but a basement. The only thing in the main room with the outside door was dust. Another room, not as large, had a huge old wardrobe, the kind she imagined the children in the Narnia adventures would have recognized - and obviously so heavy the last owner had left it in place. It had two big doors, and was over seven feet tall, almost touching the ceiling. She decided not to look inside. It was probably empty and dusty, and full of spiders.

Another room was the laundry, with an older model washer and dryer, which she hoped worked. Beside them was a metal door, obviously to the utility room. Elliot immediately opened it, glanced at the looming metal monster of a furnace, then walked over to the breaker panel and opened the cover. It was obviously new. He turned to Catherine, who had stuck her head around the corner to see the remaining room, a small one, perhaps for storage, or a tiny bedroom in a pinch. There was even a small bathroom tucked into a corner.

Elliot called her and she walked back to him.

"It's looks fairly normal, except for this," Elliot pointed to one breaker.

"What about it?" Catherine asked.

"It's a very large capacity breaker. Was your friend planning to operate a bakery here? A commercial oven might need this."

Catherine considered. "Eve is a potter. Maybe that was for the kiln?"

"Yes, that would explain it. It might be very useful one day," he said.

"For what?"

"Well, these old houses are often hard to heat and cool, so a heat pump might serve you well here, since you have the ducting already. Then you'd need that fuse."

"Good idea, but who can I get to put one in? Do you know any good contractors?"

Elliot smiled at her. "If I don't, I'm in the wrong business. I need their services at a different level, but many of them do have home reno divisions. I'll talk to them and make sure they don't overcharge. So you want a heat pump – and this monster removed - a water heater, new windows and some painting. Anything else?"

"I don't really know," Catherine admitted. "I don't know how well the work was done, and I'll need someone to look at it all so it can be certified."

"I can get one of them to do those things too," Elliot told her. "How soon do you want this?"

"I have to draw up the sale agreement for Eve and close it, so probably a couple of weeks. We have access, so I can give you a key so your guys can get in and give an estimate. She pulled one of the front door keys off the ring and gave it to him.

"Right, I'll see what I can do, Cathy, and get back to you."

"Thank you, Elliot."

"Cathy, I'm happy to be of service. Where to now?"

"I guess I'd better look upstairs and see what that looks like."

They climbed back up to the main level and then went up the main staircase to the second floor. It was a mess, no question. Catherine sighed. Even the closets were full of old drywall and mud and plaster buckets, but it did look as if the work had been done. The walls were clean. They would need painting, that was all.

She considered. "Elliot, I don't want to get fancy. I just want light beige walls, no odd colours."

"I'll have a painter contact you," Elliot promised. "I think you're right. These old houses look best with neutral wall colours because of all the wood framing." He pointed at the ceiling which had a hardwood frame around vintage tin squares. Even the central light fixture was interesting. Old, glass and with character.

"I never noticed all this before, when my friend first showed it to me," she remarked. "It's

beautiful."

"And in good condition," Elliot commented. "The mess is not so great. Clean-up is part of every contract, so those guys should have done it. I suggest you get in the pros to wash and shine these wood floors when all the work is done. You don't want to deal with this on top of your job."

Catherine sighed. Elliot was right. She didn't.

"Okay, I'll call you when all the paperwork is done, so your guys can start the actual work. Let me know if they need more time to look around. I'll set the closing date to work with that."

"Good. I'll let you know what they say," Elliot agreed.

Catherine led the way back downstairs and wondered what to do next. Elliot saved her the problem.

"Sorry to love you and leave you, Cathy, but I have an appointment in a little while," he told her, when they were back in the hallway. I'll drive you home first."

"Thanks, Elliot."

She locked the front door carefully and he dropped her off at home with merely a smile and a wave. Considering that they had already kissed once, she was a bit puzzled, but grateful he wasn't the pushy type - this time. She wasn't entirely sure what she felt about him, but she was certain she didn't want any romantic complications for some time. She was going to be very busy, between the brownstone and work, and she wanted to enjoy what freedom she had to do what she wanted, without a male in the picture. It was a novel experience for her, this feeling, and she wondered if she would be able to sustain it. Perhaps it would become a habit, for a while at least.

Elliot had been very helpful, but she wondered if this was normal for him. After all, they hardly knew each other. After the embarrassment of too many roses and the lobster dinner delivered to her office, she had been too busy to seek him out, and he had left her alone except for occasional cheerful messages on her answering machine. He had not asked her to call him back, so she had not. Neither had he asked her out. He seemed to be busy, for which she was grateful. She needed time to think.

Father let the voices around him chatter on, and closed his eyes. They were in a tizzy, but he refrained from saying that. And all over an old house that sat above - but not nearly far enough above, to be sure - in a rather important section of tunnel on a main route from the home tunnels. He knew it was important, but he was tired of being importuned. What could he do about it? The house had been there a long time, so it wasn't as if the problem was a new one. They should have done something long ago, instead of this ... this ... *nonsense*.

Finally, he forced himself to listen to Mouse, who was - louder this time - telling everyone what he had been doing to discourage anyone working on the house. The story was almost humorous, or would have been had the motive been less serious. It was useless to point out that the house was not going anywhere and they couldn't have expected it to remain empty forever, just to please them. New York real estate was expensive. If the house was demolished - and he had no idea if that was even an option - something far worse and more intrusive might replace it. No, it was better not to meddle any more. Someone might get too curious.

"Tried everything. Scared workman real good. But saw someone new there yesterday. Man and woman - not the other woman. Heard them talk about more work. New owner, Mouse thinks. Scared old one good."

Father interrupted at this point. "Where were you when you heard all this, Mouse?" It was a concern because Mouse often forgot basic precautions.

Mouse had an answer ready. "Didn't see me. I used peephole in basement behind wardrobe Heard them talk about heat pump."

Father sighed. Well, trying to make a house appear haunted had not worked. They would just have to wait and see who moved in, try to find out what kind of people they were, and whether they might be trusted to become Helpers. He said this to the assembly, which momentarily shut them up. Then the noise started again, more acrimonious now. Father put his hands over his ears.

Vincent then broke in. "QUIET!" There was immediate silence. "Father is right. We do not need to do anything yet, and we should not draw attention to the fact that our tunnel is close by. We could use a different route for a time. We have other ways. Mouse, can you arrange something? I think the east tunnel route might work."

"But it's so long," said someone. "And wet," said another.

"Yes," Vincent agreed, "but we must do what we must, for now."

"Can make more scary things," Mouse offered, a little tentatively now. His other efforts, chiefly weird noises, strange messes and missing tools, had only scared away the workmen.

"I will watch and report," Vincent said. He had the feeling that the owner would not leave, any more than the old one had, and targeting workmen was not very effective. There were always more workmen. Actual violence was not to be considered, so there was no point increasing the pressure.

A heat pump was a major undertaking. It would need a buried cable and vents. Peter had had one installed in his brownstone. They did eliminate the need for a furnace. They would have to watch closely.

Father spoke up. "Yes. Vincent, I think you are the one to take this on. Mouse can determine how we are to deal with excavations, if they seem to threaten us."

"Won't be hard," Mouse claimed loudly. "Mouse build fake wall, change ways."

"All right, everyone, that's settled. Any other business?"

There were only minor annoyances after that, and the meeting was adjourned in short order

Vincent looked at the clock and realized there was no point going to the house so late in the day. He went back to his chamber, wrote a few lines in his journal and then went to bed.

The next two weeks disappeared in a whirl of dealing with Elliot, assessment reports, talking to contractors Elliot had recommended, choosing a paint colour, finally getting a firm date on repairs and painting, getting the sales agreement prepared and signed by both of them ... and work.

Catherine didn't know which part of her day was most aggravating. She barely found time to eat - not that unusual, come to think of it - and she fell into bed the minute she got home to

her apartment. The next two weeks were a repeat of the same elements, over and over again, each one moving things slightly forward, both at work and in the brownstone.

She was informed when the heat pump was installed, and on impulse, called up her friend and doctor, Peter Alcott. His brownstone had also needed a lot of renovations, including a heat pump, and she wanted his opinion.

"I can come tonight, if you wish, Cathy, although I don't know what I can tell you. I'm glad you're doing something like this. You've seemed so ... adrift."

"Yes, that's the word all right, Peter," she agreed.

Peter was the first of her friends, besides Elliot, who had been invited to see the house. He lived only a few blocks away, in a very similar brownstone of the same vintage.

She took him on a tour, especially to the basement where the heat pump machinery was quite obvious and the furnace notable by its absence. The brand new water heater was large enough for an army, she thought. She had turned it on to make sure it worked. The water out of the faucets had been a little rusty at first, but they were all working and none leaked. Be thankful for small mercies, she told herself.

"What do you think?" she asked Peter.

He frowned a little. "It must have been a job to get the collector in." They could both hear the growl of the main fan outside.

"They told me they would have to dig down at least 20 feet to get below the frost line. Elliot had his contractor explain it to me. They checked to make sure there were no gas lines or maintenance tunnels."

"Um, yes, they had to do that for me too," Peter remarked.

While they were there, they heard a scratching. Peter started and turned around.

"Rats?" he asked.

"I think not," Catherine said. "Eve said the workman claimed there were ghosts."

Peter laughed, much as Elliot had, but he stopped quickly. "No, not ghosts, I'll warrant," he said.

Catherine frowned at him, but he refused to elaborate. "You'll know soon enough," he promised, mysteriously. "But I can say no more."

They went back upstairs and toured the rest of the house,

"They've done a wonderful job, Cathy," Peter said when they were back in the hallway. "Congratulations on getting our developer mogul to help."

Catherine laughed. "I think he's set his sights on me, Peter, but I prefer to keep him at a distance."

Peter sighed. "Does your father know?"

"I've been giving him updates, but he hasn't been here yet. He doesn't ask about my personal life."

Peter grunted at that and rolled his eyes. His daughter was on the other side of the country, so he was a little jealous. Then his pager beeped and he took it out of his pocket with a sigh.

"Well, I must go. Babies never choose a convenient time to arrive."

"Thanks for coming, Peter. I'll have a housewarming party soon.

She and Eve had agreed she would move out of her apartment and into the brownstone on September 23rd and Eve could take possession the next day, if she wished. Catherine had arranged to give her all the keys that morning. She had arranged for telephone service, put her name and particulars on all the necessary forms for the electric company, and registered herself as the new owner with the local district town hall.

She decided she needed to explore the back yard and garage once everything was delivered to her new home and in its place. Unpacking could wait. She didn't have enough to fill even two rooms of the house, but she could deal with that later. Her bedroom furniture would be in place and the coffee pot would be in the kitchen. She had taken a couple of days off, coincidentally over a weekend, and was planning to make the most of them.

She might even find time to do a little shopping and there would be a lot more ahead of her, including shopping for antiques that would suit the brownstone, which had been built in the early part of the century. She was looking forward to that.

Satisfied that she had finally done everything she set out to do, Catherine flopped onto her bed the night before the move and wondered if she would be able to sleep. That turned out to be easy. She woke at 7 am, had a coffee, finished the last minute packing and left a large suitcase and the box with her coffee maker, coffee and mug near the door.

The movers arrived promptly and had everything out of her apartment in record time. She had arranged for the carpets and drapes to be cleaned and that crew arrived as she was about to leave. They would close up behind her. The door had an automatic lock.

With a sigh, she took the elevator down to the parking garage for the last time, put her suitcase and box into the car trunk and headed for the brownstone. She had determined that there was room to park off the alley behind the house, next to the 'garage', so she did so and hauled her goods through the back gate, up the wooden steps to the back door. The key worked, thankfully - she berated herself for not trying it sooner - and she carried everything into the kitchen.

She had just plugged in her coffee maker when the doorbell rang. The movers put most of her furniture into the front room, carrying only her bedroom furniture and boxes, including a couple of wardrobe boxes, upstairs. Then they quietly left her to her own devices and roared off to the next job.

Well, first things first, she thought, since the day was fading and shopping could wait.

The garage needed to be examined. She had noticed there was a huge, ancient padlock on the garage door itself, but there was also a door into it from the yard. She grabbed the ring of keys she had been given by Eve. Yes, there was a key that could be for a padlock. It certainly didn't look well-used. There was another key that could be to the door.

She went out the back door and decided to try the door first. The key fit and the door reluctantly creaked open. She peered in, realized there was no light responding to the light switch. *Probably burned out*, she thought, and she went to the main door and looked at the padlock. Why didn't she have a can of WD-40? she asked herself.

Grimacing, she pushed the old key into the bottom of the padlock. It was reluctant, but it did go in, and with some considerable force, she got it to move and open the padlock. She took it

off the latch and pulled the two doors apart, grateful that it wasn't the overhead type. It was dusty and dim inside, but she could see there was actually very little there, just some sagging boxes, a large metal garbage can, and an old wardrobe, slightly smaller than the one in the basement - and a lot of dust and spider webs. There was a light bulb in a bare socket, and she made a mental note to replace it.

She walked inside, bouncing a little to test the floor, which was hard. It seemed to be stone slabs, not concrete. It was well-made, because nothing shifted and it hadn't cracked. There was what looked like a large drain in the middle, so the floor sloped slightly to it. She looked at the ceiling and saw no daylight shining through anywhere. Good.

She decided she'd better clean out the dust and detritus before moving her car in. There was an old corn broom in the corner, so she used it in the corners, then across the floor, over the ceiling, down the corners, and finally got the result into a pile to sweep out the doors. She looked in the boxes and found old clothing, some garden tools, old and rusty, and a few clay pots. The wardrobe held a stack of wooden picture frames and a box of nails, long disintegrated into rust. With a sigh, she found the garbage bin and put everything she could into it. The frames might come in useful, but in any case wouldn't fit into the garbage can, so she left them there.

She was about to leave when she heard a scraping noise. She looked back into the garage, saw nothing, so moved in cautiously. Was the roof collapsing? The noise came again and she realized it was coming from under the stone floor. Workmen in the city maintenance tunnels? She knew they were not far below the ground in some streets. She had not thought to find out if any were below her house. It didn't matter - but it did perhaps explain any odd noises Eve's workmen thought they had heard.

Ghosts, indeed! Nonsense, she thought. Elliot and Peter had been right.

Satisfied, Catherine left, put the padlock back on the door, and forced it closed. She would have to buy some lubricant - and light bulbs.

Her clock told her it was late enough to find something to eat, so she grabbed her purse and a jacket and left the house by the front door. She would walk a few blocks to where she had seen a cafe.

It proved to be indeed a typical corner cafe, cheerful and bright and lively with what were probably neighbourhood regulars. She found a small booth and sat down with a sigh. She needed to eat. She was unusually hungry. The waitress brought her a mug and offered the coffee pot, to which Catherine nodded with a smile. The waitress put some cream pods and sugar packets on the table, gave her a menu, and left.

The menu was pretty much what she expected, and she decided on a toasted Denver and fries. Usually a good bet when nothing else appealed. The waitress took her order and Catherine leaned back to relax her back. She hadn't done any work except sweep and fill a garbage can, but she was tired.

The meal arrived quickly and it was delicious. She would definitely be back when she had settled in. Which got her thinking about what needed to be done. There was furniture to buy, enough to make her house look like someone lived there. Her apartment furniture would barely fill one room, and most of it was in the front parlour now. Her bedroom was no better furnished, and there were a lot of empty rooms.

She sighed, not sure she could accomplish much in the two days she had left. She also

needed to buy food and basic necessities.

She finished her meal, left sufficient money on the table to include a generous tip, and left, waving at the waitress, who nodded back.

It was now dark outside, so she walked back to her house swiftly and locked her door carefully. There were several latches, and she used all of them. No telling what the neighbourhood was like.

She looked around the hall, turned on the light and found a flashlight sitting on the curve of the bottom stair. She stared at it. Had that been there earlier? She couldn't remember. Nevertheless, she tried it, and it worked. Probably one of Elliot's workmen had forgotten it.

She needed it. The light at the top of the stairs didn't work, and she fumbled her way up it with the flashlight. Her bedroom light did work, so she put the flashlight on her dresser and decided she might as well go to bed. There was nothing else to do, except unpack, and she would leave that until daylight. She found the sheets and blankets and quickly made the bed. She opened her suitcase and took out a pair of pyjamas she had rarely worn. Warm in the cool house, and certainly not her preferred luxury fabric.

She plugged in and turned on the small bedroom light, on the bedside table, one she had had as a child, then turned off the ceiling light. She turned out the little light after she collapsed gratefully into bed. She was too tired to do anything else, and was asleep quickly.

Sometime during the night, she had a sensation of not being alone in her room. She looked towards the door and saw a large dark form there, which she could just see from the dim light coming in her window from outside, which as yet had no curtains. The streetlight outside wasn't bright, but it was enough to confirm she did have an intruder, and she wasn't dreaming.

Her voice was not quite steady as she spoke up, loudly. "Who are you?"

The shape shifted slightly and a deep raspy voice answered here. "Please forgive my intrusion. I mean you no harm. My name is Vincent. May I know yours?"

'She relaxed at the voice. A robber wouldn't use words like intrusion'.

"Catherine," she answered his question. 'Cathy' was only for friends. The shape moved slightly again and the voice repeated her name. "Catherine."

She had never heard anyone speak her name in just that way and knew immediately that whoever it was was being truthful. He meant her no harm. She could trust a voice like that with her life.

"I need to speak with you," the voice said next.

"You are," she pointed out, puzzled.

There was a chuckle from the door and the figure moved a little closer.

"Yes, but it would be better during the day, not after midnight."

"When?" she asked, determined to get something out of this exchange.

"You will be contacted," he said. "In the meantime, I found this in your back yard."

He moved forward and stretched to put something small on the end of her bed. She could see nothing under his hood as he did so. He quickly stepped back into the doorway and, with

a quick "good-bye", he left silently. She listened, but couldn't hear his footsteps. Was this the ghost they had talked about?

She reached to the foot of the bed and found something soft and warm, which mewed when she picked it up. She placed it next to her pillow, where it seemed content to stay. She could feel it purring. A kitten, obviously, she thought, and wondered how she would handle this extra complication in her life. She was too tired to think more about it and quickly fell back to sleep.

When she awakened, it was to see sunshine through her window and a room that seemed less empty than before. She looked beside her, but didn't see the kitten. Had that and her visitor been a dream? Then she heard a squeak from the floor and moved to look beside the bed. A small ginger kitten was looking up at her. It squeaked again. She had to laugh at the noise, like a squeaky toy.

She got up quickly, put on a housecoat and slippers and looked around. If she had imagined her visitor, where had the kitten come from? Also, she mused, what better way to make sure she understood he and his message were real?

The kitten was thin - she could feel its bones. With a sigh, she captured the kitten and carried it down to the kitchen. She started the coffee and looked in the fridge. She had bought only very basic foods with her, a loaf of bread, some milk, butter and a can of tuna. She looked in the cupboard and found a small, cracked saucer, in fact it was the only thing there. Had it been there all along, or had her visitor left it? She would ask - if she ever saw him again.

She opened the can of tuna with an ancient opener she found in a drawer, and put some on a plate for the kitten. It gobbled it almost before she straightened up, so she poured a little milk into the saucer and watched that disappear almost as quickly.

Where would it sleep? She remember some of the old clothing she had put in the garbage can, and went out and rummaged through it. She found an old scarf and the bottom for a ceramic pot. Then she found a small wood box that for the kitty litter she would have to buy. She put them both in the corner of the kitchen and the kitten immediately went to look at it. As she watched, it curled up on its bed and went to sleep. She ripped up some paper towels for the litter box, just in case.

She signed and rinsed the saucer, reminding herself she'd better get in some supplies pronto. She went back upstairs, had a quick shower with the one towel she had put in her suitcase and then got dressed. She locked the back door on her way out, and drove to the nearest supermarket, one she had seen on her way back from the house with Elliot.

It had all the essentials she wanted, and she picked up a few other things that would be easy to prepare and eat. She remembered light bulbs and WD-40 too.

Then she remembered the cat. She went to the pet aisle and picked up some fish-flavoured kibble, a litter box, a tub of litter pellets, and two pet food dishes. She really couldn't see how a cat would fit into her busy day, but she could pass it and the supplies onto someone else. Perhaps her nighttime visitor would take it.

She had not thought to plug in her clock, but the supermarket receipt said it was about 10:30 am.

She returned home, plugged in her phone, clock and answering machine in the kitchen, the only phone outlet she could find without a search. She was about to leave when she noticed a letter pinned to a small notice board on the wall by the fridge. That stopped her in her

tracks.

Who would have put that there? She was sure it had not been there when she left. She looked around, now a little spooked that all her care in locking up had not prevented this person from invading her privacy again. She was sure that's who it had been. *How the hell had he got in?*

She noted the time on the phone display, then sat down on the nearest chair, in her living room and opened up the envelope.

The notepaper was a small square with two lines of very neat handwriting.

Catherine,

Please be in your basement at 11:30 am. Wear good footwear and a warm jacket.

You are invited to lunch.

Vincent

She had not thought of his name until now. He had said she would know when they would meet again. Mysterious - and why the basement?

She had some time before then, so she started unpacking the kitchen boxes. Again, there wasn't much - she wasn't a cook - and there were a lot of empty cupboards. Perhaps she would take up entertaining some friends. Her apartment had always been too small for that - and her workload didn't give her much time. That would have to change, she decided. The house was only part of the change she wanted - an important part - but there was still more.

At 11:25 am, she put out some kibble and water in the new dishes, put some litter into the box and made sure the kitchen door was firmly closed to prevent the kitten roaming. Then she grabbed her jacket from where she had left it and went down the basement stairs. She was wearing sneakers, which would have to do. She stood near the wardrobe, not really knowing why, except that it was the only thing in the entire basement except for the washer and dryer.

There was a creak, and a grinding noise, and the door to the wardrobe opened to reveal a dark form, obviously the same one she had seen during the night. The light in the basement, quite dim, did not reveal much more. He was still cloaked, with his face hidden under a huge floppy hood that did show some long golden hair escaping around the edge.

"Vincent?" she asked tentatively.

"Yes," came the voice she remembered. "Please come with me. I feel you need to know us better. Our safety depends on you."

"What?" Catherine frowned at the man, but he had turned away and was heading through a door in the back of the wardrobe. Sighing, she followed him and clambered over a door sill and into a much more open space with a sandy floor. A tunnel, well-lit. She looked both directions and saw nothing but more tunnel.

Her host turned his back to her, went back into the opening and closed the wardrobe doors front and back. She noticed there seemed to be a couple of knots missing from the back wall of the unit. Then he dealt with the opening into the tunnel, a section of wall which slid closed

with barely a sound, and was all but invisible when it was. There was a slight deformation of the wall, where he had grasped it. A handle, she supposed. Very neat.

He was about to walk away, she could tell, so she grabbed one of his arms, and stopped him. Enough. Time to get some cooperation. Earlier the better.

"Wait, Vincent. I wish to see your face."

He paused, but did not turn towards her. She reached him and tried to see around his hood, but he moved away.

"Please," she said, wondering why on earth he was being so mysterious.

She heard a sigh from under the hood, and it turned towards her, still somewhat bent, but not enough to prevent her from seeing a face out of myth, cat-like, with a lot of long blonde hair. Okay, lion-like was closer to the reality. *A mask?* she wondered.

As if he read her mind, Vincent replied. "This is my real face, not a mask. I am one reason why this society I'm taking you to must remain secret. I ask that you say nothing to anyone. There is great danger to us. Every person who knows us has had to make this promise."

Catherine didn't hesitate. "I promise to say nothing, ever."

Vincent nodded and took her hand, which was when she realized he was gloved too. What was he hiding inside those, she wondered, but did not dare to ask. It didn't matter now.

They began walking and she quickly lost her sense of direction through the various tunnels and junctions. Was this deliberate? She would never find her way back without help. At one point they jumped over a culvert, a long jump for her, not so for her companion, who merely offered his hand to prevent her slipping on the other side.

"Where are we going?" she asked finally, a little breathless, after they arrived at the top of a spiral metal staircase that seemed to go far below the earth. Her work didn't give her nearly enough exercise, she realized, belatedly. But then, it had never been a job requirement for a lawyer.

Vincent let go of her hand and she grabbed hold of the railing, momentarily dizzy at the sight.

"To my home," Vincent replied. He started down the stairs, and she followed, cautiously. They seemed sturdy enough, although they rang with every step and the vibrations of their passage accompanied them. He paused at a landing and took a sharp left through a brick doorway. Then he waited for her to catch up.

"Catherine, we are approaching my home. There is nothing to fear, and you will be welcomed, but I have not told anyone about you. Please remember your promise. What you see will be ... almost unbelievable."

"I won't forget, Vincent. No one would believe what I've seen up to now." Catherine retorted, trying to catch her breath.

"Yes, that's what I keep telling Father," Vincent replied with a chuckle. He took her hand again and led her on. She gladly went along with her tall companion. He was large, much larger than she had realized from the night before, now she could see him in more light. The tunnels were better lit now - with torches!

Gradually, she became conscious that the smell of rock, earth and water was being replaced by something quite different, something delicious. Food. She also realized she was very hungry, since she had not had anything to eat since the previous evening. The smell became more recognizable - soup or stew, she guessed. Obviously, this community was not just a

bunch of homeless hunched over a camp stove in a maintenance tunnel, whose pictures and stories sometimes made it into the New York press.

The tunnel became even better lit with torches and lanterns. Vincent led her into a large cavern lined with books. He let go of her hand and led the way down a short flight of stairs, then to an older man sitting reading at a table with a beautiful stained glass lamp. Catherine looked around and saw a lot of candles in several arrays, as well as hanging Tiffany-type lamps. And books - a lot of books, everywhere.

The man lifted his reading glasses off and regarded the two of them - and not happily, Catherine thought.

"Vincent. I heard you had gone above."

"Yes, Father, this is Catherine, who owns and lives in the house we were concerned about. There is nothing to worry about. We will introduce her to our community. I already consider her a friend."

"Well, that remains to be seen, Vincent, and you know we have a process"

"Father, this is not the time for that. I have invited Catherine to lunch."

Father made an attempt at a smile and rose and extended his hand.

"Of course. Welcome, Catherine."

"She knows Peter Alcott, Father. He paid her a visit the other day."

Father immediately looked happier.

"Well, why didn't you say so right away? Any friend of Peter's is welcome."

"He's my doctor," Catherine told him. "He brought me into the world. And now I think I understand his cryptic comments while he was looking at my heat pump."

Father coughed. "Well, Peter does like his little jokes. I expect he made you curious."

"Yes, but he refused to explain. Vincent also neglected to mention Peter when he visited me last night."

Vincent dropped his head. "Sometimes, Catherine, one likes to be accepted for what one is, not because of whom one knows. Also, Peter did not tell you about us - but neither has he mentioned you."

Catherine understood Vincent's reasoning, perhaps better than he thought. It had been the reason for her applying to the DA's office for a job, rather than anyone who might know her father. Her social status had certainly given them some qualms. But still - how much more secrecy was there? Peter?! He would have a lot to explain the next time she saw him!

Father chuckled as he looked between the two of them. *That Peter!*

"Well, then, I expect you'd like to see more of our world. I believe lunch is ready."

Replete with thick soup, home-made bread and a gelatin dessert, to say nothing of two cups of tea, Catherine leaned back in her chair, belatedly aware that a lot of conversation was going on around her, although everyone had finished their meal.

Vincent and Father were talking beside her, something about planning for Winterfest, whatever that was, and on the other side, two people, who she understood were Mouse and

Jamie, were chatting about some a 'gizmo' the former wanted help with.

She didn't want to break into any conversation, so she looked around, interested in seeing who was present. There seemed to be a fair number, about 50 she guessed, a sizable community living a fairly good quality of life, for so far underground.

Father had introduced her, but she had not yet met any of them. They seemed a happy group, chatting about work, children, candles She looked around. Yes, candles would be necessary in a place like this, with no natural light, and she saw many in places where the walls allowed. She wondered who was in charge of lighting them - and putting them out. And making them. Lanterns were in evidence too, and she had seen many torches in the tunnels. She supposed electricity was simply impractical to bring this far below.

That got her thinking. She wanted to be considered a friend of this community, and her house could offer some services and benefits. She had a laundry room, for instance, and she would certainly offer her house as an entrance and exit, if they wanted it. And she had lots of room, if they needed a place to stay in her world. She was mulling over starting up a community legal service too. The larger basement room could easily be used as a small office.

"Catherine?"

She started and looked up at Vincent, who was now standing beside her.

"Would you like to see more of our world?"

"Yes, please," she answered. She needed to walk off lunch, if nothing else.

The next two hours were something out of a fantasy novel for Catherine. Waterfalls, winding stairs, a windy junction, a stone spiral staircase, more stairs, more tunnels, and even a couple of hot spring baths. Not everything required illumination - the waterfall in its huge cavern clearly showed evidence of light from the world above - but most places did. Without the torches, this would have been dark and unwelcoming world, no matter what glories it hid.

Not all the sights she saw were the work of the community. Men had been down here before them, perhaps long ago. That spiral staircase she had come down with Vincent, she learned, was part of the structure allowing maintenance of certain pipes. It was no longer used. The city had cut off many of the lower pipes in the interest of easier maintenance.

The pipes! Everywhere she went, there was that tapping sound along the pipes, which Vincent explained was their communication system, adapted from Morse Code to their needs, which allowed them faster more concise messages. The pipes seemed to be everywhere, often in several sizes. No wonder New York had needed maintenance men to come to these levels. Now, Vincent said, the city used pipes closer to the surface, although some of the ones from the thermal springs were still being used here and there by the world above. Water pipes were also important to the City, and those were now elsewhere too, so the community was unlikely to cause any curiosity among Public Works employees. They had their ways of dealing with any curious people - and Catherine guessed it worked along the lines of 'ghosts', which made her laugh quietly to herself.

"What makes you laugh," Vincent asked.

"Ghosts," she replied. "I think I understand how you have kept yourselves secret."

"Yes," Vincent admitted. "Also, I am capable of deterring the more adventurous."

Looking at him, Catherine had no doubt of it. She felt suddenly tired, and was very glad indeed when Vincent proposed they visit Father and have some tea.

Vincent led her back to the cavern ... oops, chamber ... with all the books and they sat down with Father and were offered tea and cookies. Catherine gladly accepted both.

Father cleared his throat and asked the question that he had been aching to ask.

"Well, Catherine, what do you think of our world?"

"It's marvellous," she said, "and I hope I may come to visit again."

"Of course you may," Father said. "We hope to see you whenever you have time. I understand you're a lawyer,"

"Yes, my work with the DA keeps me quite busy, but I think I'm ready for a change."

"What kind of change."

"I'm not exactly sure, but I think I'd like to do some community legal work, helping the disadvantaged."

"Admirable," commented Father,

"I also want to offer my house for anything your community might need it for. I can board people, offer a laundry, exit and entrance, and perhaps more. I want to help. It's a very large house and I need very little of it for myself. Oh, and now I have a kitten, thanks to Vincent. Perhaps we can work a trade."

Father looked at Vincent and frowned. "For obvious reasons, we do not have pets here ... well, except an annoying raccoon that Mouse is supposed to look after."

Vincent cleared his throat. "I'm sure we can work out something, Catherine. Perhaps one of the children can help you care for it, if that would be all right with you."

"That's sounds like a fine idea, Vincent," Catherine said gratefully.

Father spoke then. "Thank you for your offers, Catherine. I will put this forward to our committee and Vincent will let you know if and when we may need your help in this way."

It would be good to have another way out, and sometimes we will need deliveries, Father thought.

"Right now we get deliveries to a warehouse Peter has a share in, when we need medical supplies or other items. Your home would be a lot more convenient."

"I'd be happy to help." Catherine told him. "I'll get spare keys made of the front and basement doors, so you can always use them. Thank you for a wonderful lunch and tour, but I'd better get back and see to the kitten and start unpacking."

"If you need help to find furniture, we have someone here and helpers above who can help you," Father said. *And we have a lot of furniture in dusty caverns,* he reminded himself.

"That would be wonderful. It's a daunting task. I'll have to talk to my father too. I know there's some of our furniture in storage I might be able to use. Getting it coordinated for delivery will be a challenge."

"Which we would be happy to help with," Vincent offered.

She looked at him. Obviously, he wouldn't be answering the door, but she did want to see more of him. She had become fascinated at his knowledge of classics - he had told her quite a lot about himself - and his voice was one she wanted to hear more often. Perhaps he would

read to her when she had a library set up - something she was determined to do. Books were one of her passions and she knew of bookstores in the Village, as a place to start.

"I would like a library and den in one of the main floor rooms," she commented.

"I'm sure someone can help you with that too," Father replied, looking at Vincent, who smiled.

"With pleasure," Vincent said.

"Well, then, I must go," Catherine said as she rose.

"Vincent will lead you back," Father said.

And indeed he did, by a much shorter route than that they had come by. Why was that, she wondered. She looked up at Vincent as they stood by her basement entrance to the tunnels.

"This route is a lot more convenient."

Vincent dropped his head. "We like to show our visitors the more difficult route first, in case they are not suitable for us. We can return that way too."

"How will I let you know when I want to visit?"

"We will keep in touch, Catherine, I promise. You can leave a letter inside the wardrobe, or tap on the pipe over there. I will make sure that you know how."

"And the kitten?" she asked.

"I'm sure one of the children will help – and they can teach you some basic pipe code too. I'll send one or two around later today, if that's convenient. I presume the kitten is in the kitchen."

"Yes. I really don't want it anywhere else until I'm settled in."

"Good. Good bye for now, Catherine."

"Good-bye, Vincent."

Over the next few months, Catherine found herself more involved with the investigative end of the DA's work - and it happened because of Elliot. Joe had dumped a large pile of folders on her desk, and told her they were investigating two large developers in New York for corruption, intimidation and writing dubious construction contracts. The victims were a clutch of old apartment buildings housing mostly elderly people, some of them apparently survivors of the Holocaust. As she read through the files, names jumped out at her - Elliot Burch and Leo Mundy, along with mysterious holding companies.

She tackled Elliot first, via a brief but revealing chat with his lawyer, certain that he was likely behind the attempted evictions of all the old people. He tried to explain away the strong arm tactics he's using, but Catherine declined to be convinced. She told him she didn't want to see him again, and was quietly grateful all the work on her house had been done before this case had been dropped on her desk.

Elliot had left a lot of messages on her answering machine, which she didn't answer, and he even tried calling her at the office, but she had given instructions that she did not want to talk to him. It didn't look good to be talking to a developer under investigation by the DAs office anyhow, she told herself.

The weeks passed swiftly. Catherine met more of the people living in the tunnel community and two helped her find more furniture for her house, some of it from their own storage. Her

father gave her a desk, which she put in the basement as part of her planned office. One of the children came every day to play with the kitten and see it fed and watered in her kitchen, while she was at work.

Two of them, a brother and sister, Eric and Ellie, always came together and did so when they thought she might be home. They loved to chat and told her their story, which was that Vincent had found them thanks to a bit of detective work by some of the other children. They were orphans, so Catherine quickly became their 'auntie'.

The cat was growing quickly and loved attention. She planned to let it into the parlour when that was set up, since there was an old fireplace there that she hoped to use.

Books came to her via the basement in boxes from the tunnel community - ones she was assured by a note from Vincent were superfluous. Her need for a library had got Father looking at his piles of books and the sorting had given a lot of the children something to do. Cullen, who had been helping her find furniture, had taken some assorted sturdy but old bookcases down from her forays - a gift from her for his help. Father had written a letter thanking her. She had had built-in bookcases installed in the library, a far more practical solution.

Then Elliot unexpectedly came into her life again. Kipper came to her in a panic stating that Father and Vincent had been trapped by a rockfall in a place called the Maze, and Mouse was trying to dig through to them before they were killed by more collapses. Catherine followed him back to the tunnels and saw the panic in the community as they tried to hack through solid rock with pickaxes and muscle.

Mouse told her he needed explosive and better equipment. Catherine asked him to give her a list of what he needed and she called Elliot. Again, he agreed to see her right away, and she was thankful, although she knew this time she needed a big favour.

She went to his office and gave him the list, at which he chuckled wryly. She refused to explain, and one look at her face told Elliot she wasn't kidding. He didn't question her. He called up one of his site managers and told him to give her what she wanted. She thanked him and said she would answer his calls at her home - but not in the office.

She was given the materials at the worksite, and delivered them to a warehouse she was told about, as being the easiest place to get the stuff into the tunnels. Winslow and Kanin were there to take it all from her, but she insisted on accompanying them.

Despite all misgivings, Mouse used the plastic explosives to clear the rock wall and Vincent staggered out. Catherine ran to him and gave him a big hug, then noticed Father lying on the ground, covered in dust. The others helped carry him out to the hospital chamber.

She and Vincent parted at her house entry, after both had washed up somewhat, and Vincent thanked her for her help. She smiled up at him, wishing he could be as eager to see her as Elliot was. She admitted to him that she had been really scared they might die. She didn't yet want to admit more, but the look in Vincent's eyes told her he was not unaware of their growing friendship.

But his face changed suddenly, got a pensive expression. She looked up at him and was about to ask what was wrong, when he spoke quietly.

"Catherine, I have not been completely honest with you. Ever since we met, that night months ago in your house, I have felt you ... here." He tapped his chest. "I can form an empathetic bond with people I am close to. I can feel when they are near. However, you I can feel wherever you are, almost as if we were one. I can even guess what you are doing by your

emotions. This has never happened before, Catherine. I don't know what it means."

He hung his head a little. "I felt your presence before Mouse blew up his explosives. It was a great joy to me, Catherine, that you had come, even under those circumstances."

Catherine's jaw had dropped, but she closed it quickly. "How could I not come when you needed my help," she asked. *A bond, huh?* She liked that thought – a lot.

"Will I grow a bond with you too?" she asked after a long pause.

"I do not know, Catherine. Perhaps."

Not long afterwards, Catherine was sitting in her kitchen one morning, grumpily drinking the half cup of coffee she had managed to eke from the now empty coffee tin. She had forgotten to go shopping, not just once, but several times. The DA's office was keeping her busy and the sudden re-appearance of Elliot in her life, one legal, the other personal, had rattled her. She knew now that although he was a friend, he would never be more. But he had helped her help the tunnel world, without demanding an explanation.

That was her excuse for her forgetfulness about her own needs, but she knew it was just an excuse. She wasn't used to having to manage a house. Her apartment had demanded little of her and she had rarely cooked in it. Now she had to think about a cat – no longer a kitten – cleaning supplies (a cleaning company had taken care of her apartment once a month) and food. The tunnel community would welcome her in their dining hall anytime she wanted to show up, but she did not want to take advantage of them. She knew their life was a struggle, not least for food, so she made sure she took bulk goods down to them every time. She remembered to do that, but forgot the empty spaces in her own cupboards.

Now, she had to be at work by 9 am and she had not had enough coffee. The office coffee was frankly disgusting. It was over-brewed right out of the oversized coffee machine, but it certainly gave your day a jolt. *Ugh.*

Then the phone rang. Who on earth would call her at this hour? She picked up the receiver and managed to croak out a 'hello'.

"Hi Cathy!"

"Jenny?"

Her friend spoke in a rush, "Yes, I know it's early, but I had to get you before you went to work. I had a dream last night, Cathy, and you need to know about it."

"Um. Okay ..." Jenny's dreams were often prophetic, so Catherine tried to sound encouraging.

"I saw a large man, a very large man, carrying YOU. And a very dark place, lots of rock, and fire, Cathy. And there was another man, all in black with some kind of mask. There was danger, Cathy. I don't know what this all means, but be careful."

"It sounds fantastical, Jenny, and I can't think why you had that dream," Catherine mumbled, thinking hard. *Vincent? He was large, but not THAT large. And fire? Urk.*

"I just thought you ought to know, Cathy. To be aware. You never know what can happen in this city."

It wasn't the city that was a challenge, Catherine thought. It was her life, her memory, her

friends below ... and a cat.

She thanked Jenny and they quickly said goodbye, both having to get ready for work. It was a Friday, so Catherine hoped for a weekend below with Vincent. She wanted to see more of him.

On Saturday, she made her way to the tunnels carrying a large bag with a lot of dried pulses, barley, and with the biggest bag of rice she could find in her other hand. She had managed to do a significant amount of shopping the night before, so much that she had wondered if her car would carry it all. It had, although it sagged badly at the back. Hauling it all into her house and then down into the basement had been more work. She had learned that the tunnel world got much of its fresh food from Helpers, well, wasn't she one now? She had decided on practical items, less perishable ones. She loved William's stews and soups.

She opened the door from her wardrobe into the tunnels to find Vincent waiting.

"Phew," she said. "I wasn't looking forward to hauling this."

"You are generous, Catherine, and we appreciate your gifts. I suspected you would have something for us."

"I love to do this. After all, you often feed me. If you need anything, please let me know."

"William is the one to ask," Vincent remarked. "He is grateful for what any Helper can provide."

He took the two bags from her, carried them in one hand, and took her hand with the other. She marvelled at his strength. He wasn't winded even after the long walk, and left her in his chamber while he delivered the food to William.

He was back within minutes with a large basket.

"We have a little travelling to do, Catherine, that is if you wish to come. I take some supplies to Narcissa every month or so. Father adds a book or two he thinks she may like, and William provides some less perishable food – dried fruit and some of your beans."

"Narcissa?"

"She is an old seer, Catherine, a woman of much knowledge about the unseen world. She helped Father and the others find this place, but she didn't want to live with us. She has made her home in a cavern beyond the Chamber of the Winds, and somewhat deeper. She lives simply. I've known her since I was a child."

Catherine nodded, now interested to see someone she had somehow never met before – and the idea of a journey with Vincent was also attractive. Anywhere at all would have been fine.

So they walked together, she merely trying to keep pace with Vincent, who held her hand. He was carrying the basket, so he wasn't walking quite as quickly.

They reached a place that Catherine had never seen before, a tall cavern with a lot of half-demolished, or half-built construction, a tier of hallways or galleries with a number of arched doorways beneath.

"What on earth?" Then she felt the winds, and realized this was the place he had mentioned.

"I do not know, Catherine. Perhaps it had once been part of an extension plan for the subway. It is not far above here. But this is where we must find our path to Narcissa. It changes, as do all of our ways. Wait here for a moment."

He put the basket on the ground and went to one of the arched openings, scraped a spot with his foot, then moved onto another. He had obviously found something with the second, because he returned to her.

“Come. She will be waiting. She always knows when she is getting visitors. I can never surprise her.”

The tunnel was mostly downhill now, rough, sometimes quite narrow, but they and the basket made it through, Vincent leading often because they couldn't walk abreast. They emerged at last through a rough archway and he stopped, so she did too.

A few feet away, there were stairs into a well-lit cavern, which seemed to be full of strange and wonderful items – tall old candles, lanterns, bowls, a skull, baskets of stuff she couldn't identify, and cans and bottled equally mysterious. There was the scent of herbs and candle smoke.

“Welcome,” came a deep voice and Catherine dragged her eyes from the collection to look at a large Negro woman wearing a colourful collection of clothing, her hair tied back with a bright bandana.

“Narcissa, I want you to meet Catherine.”

“Ah, the person you need, Vincent. I am happy to meet her. Come down here children. I have something to tell you.”

Catherine's mouth fell open at this, but among the other marvels, she could find nothing to say. Vincent took her hand and led her down the steps, which were uneven and fairly steep. She was glad of his support.

At the bottom, Narcissa pointed to a couple of rocks sitting next to a small round table, so they seated themselves and waited silently. The table had a pattern of coloured sands, small bones and shells. Narcissa touched one of the bones.

“I threw an augury for you both.” She stopped and looked at Catherine. “I see danger for you, fire. Fire and danger for you too, Vincent. I know who endangers you too. The Dark One. His name is ...,” her voice dropped to a whisper, “... Paracelsus!”

Catherine looked alarmed, and Vincent noticed and took her hand. She was thinking of what Jenny had told her, and wondered that two people seemed to see the same thing in her future. She said nothing, though, just listened for more clarity. The old seer seemed to know something Jenny could not have.

“The alchemist?” Vincent asked.

“That is the name he chose. He makes poison for gold,” Narcissa remarked.

“Poison?” asked Catherine, curious now.

“For the weak. Drugs that bring visions before they kill.”

“Street drugs?” she asked. She had heard there were drugs on the street no one could identify, except that they killed. It was being investigated. What if this man was the source! Not that the knowledge helped. How could anyone find him – and she would not want to endanger the tunnel community in the process. She filed the information away though.

“He is dangerous, and those with him are the forgotten ones, the ones who hurt others. He needs them. They do his work.”

“How did he come to be down here?” Vincent asked.

“Ask the Father,” Narcissa told him. “He must tell you that story. It is also yours. You, above all, are a danger to the Dark One.”

“Why me?” Vincent asked, his brow furrowing. “I do not know this man.”

“But he knows you, Vincent. Beware. He is plotting. I can feel it. He will not trouble me, but his silent ones move closer.”

“Thank you for the warning, Narcissa,” Vincent said at last, when she was obviously not going to tell them more. He rose with Catherine and they left her and returned to the home tunnels.

They went straight to Father’s chamber, where the patriarch was sipping tea from a china cup and poring over a large tome. They sat down opposite him and waited for him to look up and acknowledge them, which he did with a start.

“Vincent, Catherine! How was Narcissa? I do wish she would move closer.”

Vincent spoke softly. “Narcissa, I think, does not need us, Father. She is content where she is. She told me you must inform us about Paracelsus, who she says will be a danger to Catherine and I soon.”

“Paracelsus! I’m sorry you had to hear that name, Vincent. I thought him gone, even dead, by now. It has been so long – over 30 years. Why now, I wonder?”

“Who is he, Father.”

Father sighed and spoke carefully, staring down at the book, whose words now look fuzzy and irrelevant. Few still alive in the tunnels knew this story.

“His real name is John Pater. He was with us from the beginning. Narcissa found this place for us. We were a few derelict people who the world above had rejected for various reasons. He was a brilliant man then. He supervised the creation of our world, its chambers and tunnels, and gave us a language we could use on the pipes – a variation of the Morse Code.

“He left ... because his wife betrayed him and gave you to me to care for, Vincent. John had other plans for you – and our community. Plans that would have destroyed us, while giving him the power he craved. His wife, Anna, died ... conveniently ... and in great pain. We could not prove it then, but I suspect he poisoned her.”

“Narcissa says he is still making poisons, now for the world above – for gold,” Vincent remarked.

Father looked up at that and stiffened. “Drugs?”

“Narcissa says so.”

“This is very dangerous, Vincent. He must be stopped. He endangers all of us. If the authorities above should learn where he comes from, we might all be exposed.”

“He has been doing this for some time, Father. I suspect he is very careful. Narcissa did not mention any danger from that direction, but Paracelsus and his followers are dangerous – especially to Catherine and myself.”

Father sighed. “Yes, he would want you with him, badly, Vincent, but why Catherine?”

“I do not know, Father. It is troubling. How would he know of Catherine’s existence?”

“Do not underestimate him, Vincent. He probably has spies, and he knows our pipe code very well, even though we’ve changed it somewhat since he left. He could have taught others. We have no secrets from each other here. He would have learned all he wants to know just by listening, or having others do so.”

“What shall we do then, Father?”

“I will alert the sentries to watch who comes and goes. I know know their entrances and exits. We will monitor them now. Even Paracelsus cannot hide from us for long.”

“And then?” Catherine asked.

“We will have to deal with him ourselves.”

“You mean I must,” Vincent said bleakly. He looked down at this long-nailed hands.

“I hope not, Vincent, but you are the strongest and most capable of us.

“You should perhaps stay above for a while, Catherine, or at least not travel to us alone, ever,” Father suggested. “We don’t know why he is interested in you, but it’s likely because of your friendship with Vincent. You’re a regular visitor and everyone knows you two are friends. That much he would have learned from our pipes. He could use you to get to Vincent.”

“Why does he want me?” Vincent asked.

Father sighed again. “I suspect he still thinks he can use you, Vincent. For his own ends. He knows little about you, but he sees you as a means for him to return here and take over. A power piece in his game.”

“Why would he think such a thing?”

“John is obsessive. He believed he was banned from our community unjustly. He was not. We all agreed. He had become a tyrant, especially in regards to you, Vincent. One day you may find out from the source, although I hope not,” Father said cryptically. “I cannot say more, as I really don’t know the man anymore – but I suspect a great deal. After so long, his hatred of what we are will be all he cares about.

“It’s worrying. He knows this place as well as we do. We cannot be made more secure, but we can be more watchful,” Father concluded.

“I will talk to the sentries too,” Vincent promised. “Narcissa calls him the Dark One.”

Father got a wry expression on his face. “In more ways than one. He always wore black, even in the old days. He spent his money and Anna’s on good clothes, while the rest of us wore whatever we could find and patched it. He never did hard labour like the rest of us, but he had brilliant ideas, many of which we made reality. He was respected for that.

“Then his motives betrayed him to us and we forced him to leave, with all his goods, and without Vincent. We didn’t ask where he was going, but we suspected he found a place far below us. None of us has been that deep - even you, Vincent. I have discouraged exploration that far and deep. He’s below the pipes, certainly. We would know if anyone but us was using them. An irony and another reason for him to hate us.”

“We will be extra careful, Father,” Vincent promised and rose. “I will leave Catherine messages, to keep her informed.”

Father sat back and watched Vincent and Catherine leave, worried. *Why now*, he wondered. *What is John plotting?*

Below the pipes, the man who called himself Paracelsus was completing his plans. He was reasonably sure that Narcissa, the old hag, had warned Vincent of him. No matter, he would deal with her another time. He was more concerned that his giant henchman understood his

job. They had located Catherine's entrance into the tunnel network. Now they merely had to get her into the tunnels at a time of their choosing. There was only one way. Vincent was the key.

Gregory, who had been easy to subvert because he had a hatred for Father, ran up to him then, obviously with news.

"Vincent is looking for you. I heard it on the pipes."

Paracelsus had no doubt this was related to his drug-selling activities. He looked at the green and purple light from his fungus farm and was pleased to see there were enough mature ones to concoct another batch of the drug that was in such high demand.

"Then he shall find me," he intoned, and then turned away to gather his supplies. He would take what he had. They always wanted more, but he made sure they never got enough, to keep the price high.

Soon he was travelling a well-known route to the world above, one he utilized because it was remote, difficult to find, or if found, navigate. He had set traps. He would make the sale he had promised, for the price in gold he had stated, but next time it would cost more. It was becoming risky now that Vincent knew what he was doing. He could not depend on remaining unseen or unmolested – so he added a small packet of insurance to a pocket. Vincent would regret his curiosity.

He emerged in an alley, unaware that he had been spotted by a careful sentry. A message on the pipes told Father this. Jacob decided he must confront John and made his way to the place where the tunnels met the warehouse entry, where Paracelsus had been spotted, and waited. Vincent had tried to discourage him, but Jacob knew his son would be near, just in case.

Paracelsus returned in remarkably short time. He obviously did not linger anywhere. Jacob heard a hatch drop above him and shifted himself to be ready. He did not have to wait long. He recognized the man he had once known, despite the heavy coat and hat. The way he walked was familiar, as was his bearing.

Stepping out of the shadows, Jacob addressed his old friend.

"John."

The man stopped and looked at Jacob. He said nothing and continued to walk on, passing Jacob without so much as a gesture. Jacob followed moving carefully to place his walking stick where it would help his leg on the rough tunnel floor, which was also wet.

It was a longish walk, but when John moved into a cavern with long eerie purple lights over what were obviously growing trays, Jacob stood for a while amazed, before moving inwards.

"John," Jacob said again.

"That man is dead. You killed him. My name is Paracelsus." The figure in front of him flung out the words, as he turned to face his visitor.

"John, what is all this? What are you growing here?"

"I am turning a rather noxious fungus into gold, Jacob. It's remarkably easy to produce. I just grow it, dry it and pulverize it. The powder is pure and in great demand."

He turned away and moved into the room, looking into one of the growing trays.

"I must support myself however I can."

“Drugs.”

“Yes, Jacob. Drugs that the world above wants badly enough to pay my price, in gold.” He extracted a coin from his pocket and flipped it so it caught the light.

Jacob said what he had come to say.

“We’ll stop you, John. This cannot continue. The world above is looking for you and you endanger all of us.”

“How are you going to stop me, Jacob? Use your secret weapon, Vincent? Wouldn’t that be against your policy of live and let live? Oh, yes, I have watched your community grow and learned what you claim. I am not afraid of him or you. You can do nothing.”

He left Jacob standing there, and after a while the patriarch hobbled out and back to the home tunnels.

Vincent was waiting for him.

“He will not stop,” Jacob said bluntly, explaining what he had seen and what John had said.

“Then I must convince him,” Vincent replied and left to prepare.

Jacob sat down heavily in his chair. What John had said was correct. They did depend on Vincent to protect them. He never complained, and was seldom needed, but when he was, the effect on him was always the same. Jacob knew he held the Beast in check, and it took a toll on the Man when it was freed. Afterwards, he went on one of his trips to the River and often stayed away for days. This time, though, there would be no killing. Vincent would discourage Paracelsus enough to make him leave, even destroy the fungus farm if he had to.

Vincent travelled to the place where Father said Paracelsus had his growing operation. He was not surprised to find the man still there, and his own sudden appearance did not seem to surprise Paracelsus.

“You have grown, Vincent,” he said. “You now do Jacob’s – pardon me, Father’s bidding.”

“I do what is necessary for the survival of my community,” Vincent said calmly. “You are putting it at risk and it must stop.”

“Ah, I see. And if I decline to follow your orders?”

“I will destroy this place.”

“Well, then I suppose I’d better go.” He moved close to Vincent, who luckily moved back quickly, a sixth sense warning him, as the sleeve stiletto appeared and nicked the side of his heavy vest. Vincent grabbed the arm and roughly shoved Paracelsus into one of his growing trays, which tipped over and caught fire.

Vincent ripped out as many of the cables he could see, and then tipped over the tables. Meanwhile, the fire had spread and suddenly Paracelsus rushed past him shouting, “My gold,” and disappeared into another cave.

The flames soon prevented Vincent from doing any more and Paracelsus had not reappeared. He watched for a while, and then left, certain that he had ended the drug production at least.

Paracelsus, though, had saved as much of the finished product as he could, gathered up his gold, and left by another exit. He had one more sale to make and then there would be no more. And it would cost them for his inconvenience. They would pay. They always did. He

had enough gold, but would not deny himself just a little more. He returned to his home far below and worked on his plan.

The next night he went above again, to another of his buyers, and again he carried the little bag of insurance. He knew he was being watched, and that this time he would not escape Vincent as easily.

He was seen by a tunnel sentry, who reported it as soon as Paracelsus was safely out of earshot of the pipes. Vincent, who had been waiting, made his way to the tunnel where Father had first seen him and followed the path Paracelsus had taken. He must confront him. He hid behind one of the large boxes that littered the passage and waited.

Paracelsus completed his transaction, and made his way back to the alley, but was suddenly waylaid by a man pointing a gun, obviously plainclothes police. He retreated to get his back against a wall, drawing the man closer. When he was almost within arm's length, Paracelsus jumped, releasing the hidden stiletto and stabbed the man upward under his rib cage. He would not survive long enough to tell anyone anything. Paracelsus watched the man fall and continued his journey. He was glad he would not have to travel this way again. It was time to end that particular source of revenue.

He approached the small loading dock that was his entry, and lifted up the metal door just enough to get himself through, and let it down quietly. Then he moved into the cluttered passage and lifted the hatch. At the bottom, He extracted the packet of drugs and moved quietly. If he was to be ambushed, he knew where it would be. Sure enough, he heard something move as he approached the end of his secret tunnel – what had once been a smugglers passage. He moved quickly and turned to see Vincent looming behind him. Without a word, he ran for the other exit, flinging the power from the bag behind him. It glittered as he reached the door. He went through it, then slammed and latched it behind him. He would have liked to stay and watch the effect on Vincent, but he had other things to do.

Vincent knew something was wrong as he rushed after Paracelsus, who ran faster than he thought a man his age could, while he himself seemed to move very slowly. The glittering powder hanging in the air puzzled him and he stopped, panting, then could not recall why he was in this strange place. Before he had taken another step, he had forgotten everything, concluded he was a prisoner and the passage walls seemed to be closing in on him. He barrelled unsteadily to the end of the passage, pushing against the walls to keep them in place, and happened to find the door. With a roar, he rammed it open and fell into the quiet eerily lit tunnel behind it. He got to his feet, took a deep breath and moved onward, not caring where he went now. He was free. He kept going, a long way, until he found a small dark cave that satisfied him. He slid down the wall and tried to understand what had happened.

Gregory, who had been told to watch for him, reported his position to Paracelsus, who nodded, and gave Erlic his instructions, again.

Catherine had had a very bad day. A detective who was investigating the drug case, had been found dead in an alley, stabbed by a very fine thin knife. He was a friendly man and she had often seen him in the DA's office, especially lately. She didn't know how he had happened to be in that alley on his own, but suspected the man Father had told them about, Paracelsus, was responsible for his murder.

She couldn't say anything, of course, and just hoped that Father and Vincent were putting a stop to the drug lab. Vincent had sent her a note telling her they were doing so, and that it would not be long. She had a headache too, which made her grumpy.

Arriving at home, she found a note in her hallway. It surprised her, as Vincent always left his messages in her kitchen, but when she opened it, she realized it was from Father.

“Please come below as soon as you can. Vincent needs your help.”

That last puzzled her. What help could she possibly give Vincent? Her headache was getting worse, so she took a couple of aspirins before quickly changing into a pair of sweat pants and boots, pulling a jacket on quickly before she left through the basement entry.

After she had closed the entry, and was turning to leave, she was grabbed from behind and something was pressed over her mouth. She passed out. Eric grabbed her before she fell and put her over his shoulder. He threw a bent gold coin beside the now-hidden tunnel entrance as he had been instructed, and moved swiftly to where he had been told to go.

Paracelsus was waiting for him. In the distance they could hear a roaring.

“Leave her there. We will wait beyond.”

Catherine muzzily became aware of chilly air and a hard floor. She gasped as her hand touched the floor, which was very cold. Her headache was fierce now. The aspirins had not helped at all.

She managed to sit up but realized she had no idea where she was, but she did remember someone grabbing her outside her tunnel entrance. In the distance she could hear a terrible noise, a roaring, and knew immediately that it was Vincent. She realized it was his pain that was causing her headache, the first time she had felt anything from him, which meant that he was in agony of some kind. Perhaps he did need her, as the note had said.

Where was everyone? That note could not have been from Father, although he might know that Vincent was in trouble now.

She struggled to her feet, resisted the urge to massage her temples, but glad that she had dressed warmly. She put her hands in her jacket pockets, and slowly moved towards the noise, stumbling a little on the uneven floor, which she could barely see. The sounds of Vincent roaring were getting louder, but it was still a longish walk. She found him at last, standing under what was a dim light from above somewhere above, a black cloaked figure with tangled hair, roaring incessantly.

Catherine assessed the situation only briefly. If she could feel him, could he sense her too? She hoped so. She walked slowly to within a few feet of him and waited silently until he became aware of her. His roars lessened somewhat, but he didn't move, merely stared at her as if he couldn't place her. He probably couldn't, she realized. This wasn't the Vincent she knew. Something had driven him mad and she could only think of one thing that might have done that. Drugs – that powder that was killing people above. That meant that Paracelsus was responsible, and it all made a kind of sense.

Except why had they brought her here? Did they think he would kill her and then they could capture him? If they were nearby, they were hiding and she couldn't worry about them. There were things they didn't know about she and Vincent. Now she would have to put them to the test.

She walked closer, slowly, speaking his name softly as she did so.

“Vincent. Vincent. Vincent.”

She reached him and looked up as he roared, somewhat less loudly, with the occasional growl. He was looking down at her, but was not attempting to attack her. She took heart in

that. He wasn't completely gone then. She made the last step and put her arms around him, hugging him tightly, feeling his tension – and then suddenly it was gone and he sagged and was silent. For long moments they stood there, and finally he put his arms around her.

“Catherine,” he signed.

“Vincent,” she whispered. “I felt your pain.”

Vincent looked down at her, but said nothing.

“Very touching,” came a deep voice behind them, and she turned her head to see a man in a dark overcoat and hat. Something glittered on his face. Some kind of mask. As he got closer, she realized it was gold.

“Paracelsus,” Vincent grated out.

Of course, who else could it be. She looked closely at him, the man who was being hunted above and below. Then a very large, very muscular, almost naked man came up behind him.

Vincent immediately put Catherine to one side and shifted away from her. He felt very weak, and this was the largest man he had ever seen. He assumed it was himself they wanted, but he realized his mistake too late. It was Paracelsus who moved towards him and released the deadly stiletto from his sleeve, threatening him with it so that he had to get his back to the wall.

Meanwhile, the large man moved to Catherine, grabbed her quickly, put a white cloth over her face and a bag over her head and carried her off over his shoulder. Vincent watched in despair. Why did Paracelsus want her?

“We will meet again, Vincent,” Paracelsus told him, when big man had been gone for some while. “Do not follow or your lady will be harmed. Erlic has no love of women.

“I have a message for you for the man you call Father. Tell him it is better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven.”

With that he threw down something on the floor, then turned and walked swiftly from the place.

Vincent sagged against the wall. He was in no shape for pursuit, and he knew it. Paracelsus must have known that too. He felt weak and he had a terrible headache. He must get back to Father. He pushed himself from the wall and almost fell over the thing Paracelsus had dropped. He managed to bend down and pick it up. It was a bent gold coin. Was all this in response to him destroying the lab? The man was insane.

Vincent moved slowly, still somewhat muzzy from the drug. He didn't know where he was, but his innate sense of direction didn't fail him, even now. He walked on until he found a tunnel he recognized, one he had not been in for a very long time, but his memory didn't fail him. He knew more tunnels than anyone else, even Mouse.

Paracelsus knew their world well too – and they would have to do something about that, later.

He reached the home tunnels, even more exhausted and went immediately to Father's chamber. The patriarch wasn't there, so Vincent pulled out a chair from the table and collapsed into it, glad to rest. He knew the news of his return had gone over the pipes. Father came in moments later, rushed to him and took him by the shoulders.

“Vincent, are you all right? We were very worried. You've been gone for hours. What's that stuff all over you? Where is Paracelsus?”

Wearily, Vincent tried to get his thoughts in order. He spoke slowly, carefully, taking deep

breaths. He seemed to be lacking oxygen.

“Paracelsus is probably back in his hiding place gloating, Father. He has taken Catherine. He must have lured her to me. I was drugged with what he makes. Catherine brought me back to myself. He didn’t expect that. Paracelsus said to tell you that it is better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven. I have a terrible headache.”

He reached into a pocket, drew out the bent coin and threw it on the table in front of him.

Father eyed the coin, moved to another chair and sat down heavily. “So.”

“So? Is that all you can say, Father?”

“We must rescue Catherine, of course, Vincent.”

“No, Father, I must rescue Catherine. I will leave shortly.”

“At least eat and drink something, Vincent. I’ll have William bring something.”

“Yes, I need to drink and eat, but quickly.”

Father got up and tapped on the pipes, and within minutes William himself arrived with a plate of sandwiches, another of cookies, and a large pitcher of water with a glass, on a tray.

The sight almost made Vincent smile. William was never stingy with food. He thanked the cook and dug in immediately, washing a sandwich and a cookie down with a glass of water. He felt a lot better with that, and ate the rest as Father and William watched silently. He emptied the jug of water and sat back and closed his eyes. William picked up the much lighter tray and left without a word.

Vincent sat back in the chair and tried to organize his mind. He looked at Father.

“I must plan, Father. Does anyone know exactly where Paracelsus is hiding?”

“No, only that it’s very deep down, Vincent. We don’t go anywhere near them.”

“Narcissa will know,” Vincent said, rising from the chair.

“Don’t go alone, Vincent,” Father pleaded as he rose.

“What choice do I have, Father? I am the one he wants to find him, for some reason, wherever he lives. I must save Catherine, but I will not endanger others.”

He left the chamber to return to his own and packed his rucksack with a blanket, a large bottle of water and a box of dried fruit bars that William made for their mapping expeditions. He did not wait, but left for the only entrance he knew that went deeper. Arriving there, he found most of the tunnel community waiting for him. He tried to push past them, but Winslow stopped him.

“I’ll come with you, Vincent. You can’t do this alone. It’s too dangerous. I can help if you meet ... trouble.”

That was true. Winslow would be a good ally in a fight. He was as large as Vincent.

“I want to go too,” Pascal said. “I know where all the pipes run and how deep.”

Vincent nodded, realizing that there was some logic in allowing him as well. They were both good friends and he would need them on this trip.

“And me.” That was Jamie, and she was carrying her bow, a quiver of arrows on her back.

“No,” all three of them said in unison. Jamie looked at them and left silently.

The two men had brought packs, so there was no need to wait. They left after some hugs and

goodbyes, and began their trek. The first step was to find Narcissa, Vincent informed his friends.

Reminiscing about the last few months, Catherine realized that she had become part of the community below, that the life there had more meaning for her than any social events she still attended in her own world. Her father saw her occasionally, but she saw Vincent far more often. She had been able to help them in various ways, and then Vincent had rescued her from Paracelsus.

That had been the turning point in their relationship, she realized. It was almost a year since they had met, if you could call as shadow in her bedroom one night, leaving her a kitten, a meeting.

She now knew she loved Vincent, and was sure he felt the same about her. They had never discussed it, but that trip back from the deep place where Paracelsus was hiding, was something she could never have imagined. Nowhere in the world she had been, and she had been to many places, could compare to that cavern they had boated across, Vincent punting it with a long pole. It had been completely out of this world, a fantasy brought to life, as indeed was Vincent himself.

She had learned that saving her had cost Winslow his life, and she damned Paracelsus for all time and wished him all the ill she could imagine. She knew nothing had been resolved, since he had not gotten what he wanted from Vincent, whatever that was, and he had escaped when Vincent saved her from the fire, after his fight with Eric. The big man, at least, would not trouble anyone again. Paracelsus would almost certainly return to plotting – but now he was being watched. He would not surprise any of the tunnel community again.

Now she had to do something. She had planned a cosy dinner with Vincent in her house and had invited him. She wanted to give him something to mark their anniversary, and to talk to him. Her job was not preventing her from having a social life, although working more closely with the Trial Division had given her more work. The only social life she cared about was what the world below had to offer. They – and he - were more important than anything. She had to make that clear to Vincent.

She made her plans carefully for a simple but tasty meal, that would end with dessert and coffee or tea in her den/library. It was chilly, so she would light the fire in the fireplace. She visited Rebecca, whom she often helped make candles for the tunnel chambers, to ask for a few to light around the house. She was determined not to use electric lights for this occasion. Rebecca had smiled at her and asked her to return in a couple of days. She would make something special for the two of them – she knew without asking that Catherine wanted them to make Vincent feel at home.

Vincent had been spending more time with her in her house, and the cat loved him. When Vincent arrived it was there, waiting for him, and if he sat down, the cat immediately went to his lap and then his shoulder, even as it grew older and larger. It was not a large cat, fortunately, and Vincent had broad shoulders.

The kitten had been nameless for some while, and then one of the children had started calling it Ginger, for obvious reasons, and the name had stuck. That made it officially part of her household, Catherine realized. That had not been her intention, but she realized she would miss it if it was not there, meowing at the door when she got home.

She kept most of the house doors closed and out of bounds to the cat, but it had a free run of the kitchen and downstairs. She often found it curled up in a basket she had made up for it near the laundry room, with a litter box. The cat knew that it's visitors often came through the wardrobe and watched it expectantly. She found a couch in a second hand store and kept that down there too, with a good rug to give the room warmth. There was a small fireplace too, but she had never used it. Perhaps this winter it would be welcome. She had not had time to think about that last year. She had to buy something to burn in a fireplace, and mentally put that on her list for the next shopping trip.

Vincent found himself anticipating an evening with Catherine to celebrate what she called their anniversary. That night had changed everything for him, although it had taken him some time to realize it. He was not used to being considered a beau. The women he knew were all friends and almost like sisters. He loved them all, as he did everyone, but there was nothing at all romantic about it. He hadn't avoided any overtures because there hadn't been any, not since Lisa.

Even Lisa had forgotten about him as soon as she left the tunnels, hard as that had been for him to accept.. No one had heard from her, although they saw her name and photos in the newspapers being celebrated as a ballet dancer. That part of his life was unknown to Catherine, but he was sure she would understand. He had been a teenager, and Lisa had been his first and only romantic interest. Father had helped him over that period of his life, when he felt like the beast he resembled for the first time in his life.

Now he accepted that his differences would likely keep him a bachelor, at least as far as the women in the tunnels were concerned. Father, without saying a word, had been an effective deterrent, elevating him to second-in-command since their near-death experience in the Maze. That and his teaching duties kept him very busy, and when he was not, he still liked to roam the City above their heads. Romance had not found him, until Catherine came into his life. Ironic that it was protection of the tunnel world that had led him to investigate her.

Father had watched their friendship grow, but said little. Vincent was a mature man now, fully capable of making his own decisions, and Catherine had proven herself invaluable both to the community and to Vincent himself, some time ago. If he had any reservations, he kept them to himself. The rest of the community welcomed her, especially the children.

An anniversary demanded something special, and Vincent decided to make a trip to the crystal cave. He would give Catherine something from his world. He had gone there often enough to know he would find something. He usually brought back interesting pieces and gave them to Mouse or Cullen to make into gifts for others. This time he would have them make something for him to give Catherine.

Catherine had decided on her menu, and also decided she didn't want to spend hours in the kitchen, so she had ordered a variety of items from a catering company, to be delivered to her door an hour before Vincent was to arrive. She would heat or chill what needed it, then arrange the hors d'oeuvres, put finishing touches on the table, light the candles she had received from Rebecca, and prepare the library for their after-dinner delights.

She had a set of her mother's china and was happy to be able to use it. It wasn't the 'guest' set, which was ornate and seemed fragile, but it was the set she remembered from the special meals, just for the three of them. Her father had been happy to give it to her, since he

rarely ate at home, or entertained. He spent a great deal of time with Marilyn, his personal secretary and partner, who had been almost a mother to Catherine when her own had died. She was a lovely person, and the only one, besides her father, that she missed at Chandler and Coolidge.

Catherine sighed. She knew her father and Marilyn both worried about her, but what could she tell them, except that she was perfectly happy with her house, her job and her social life. They didn't pry, but she knew they were curious, especially about that last. She should visit them more often.

The caterers delivered the meal on time and Catherine set about arranging it on platters and in serving bowls and put the hot dishes in the oven to keep warm. It looked and smelled delicious. She really must find time to teach herself to cook.

Vincent arrived on time too, as he always had, and the two of them enjoyed a long welcome hug. He was wearing a frilly shirt and plain pants under the cloak and his hair shone. He looked stunning.

She had decided on a snug but plain black dress with a deep 'V' neck. She wore a cameo pin at the bottom of the 'V', one which had belonged to her mother.

What should they do first?

"Would you like some wine in the den?" she asked, kicking herself inwardly for not thinking of this. She had been concentrating on the dinner and afters, but of course the hors d'oeuvres were for before the meal. They were light and varied, just appetizers really. Another platter had assorted pastries and cakes ... for dessert later.

"Yes, Catherine, please."

She got out a bottle of Rosé wine and a corkscrew, two glasses, and put them on a small, round tray. Vincent, without a word, picked it up and carried it out of the kitchen. She followed him with a plate of hors d'oeuvres from the fridge and followed him.

He was industriously applying the corkscrew to the bottle when she got there, and she watched him with interest, knowing quite well that such luxuries were rare in the tunnels. He did it slowly but well and the cork came out without protest and whole – better than she would have likely done.

She put the platter down on a small high table where she had put the napkins and some small plates, and turned to find Vincent holding out a glass of wine to her.

"To us," he said softly. "Wine is sunlight held together with water."

Catherine chuckled. "Who said that?"

"Galileo."

"Good heavens!"

"Exactly, Catherine."

Catherine nearly lost her mouthful of wine at this quip, managed not to, but did cough as the slightly sparkling wine tried to go up her nose.

When she could look up, she saw that Vincent looked a little stricken.

"I'm sorry Catherine. That was a poor time for a joke."

Catherine laughed for real this time. "Vincent, that was perfect. I've never heard you crack a

joke. You took me by surprise. Now, it's my turn.

"What I do and what I dream include thee, as the wine must taste of its own grapes."

"Ah, Elizabeth Browning, of course," Vincent said quietly, looking at her solemnly. "I dream of thee as well, Catherine. This is a very nice wine."

"Would you like a snack," she asked, aware she had flushed at the compliment, and needing to distract them both. This was happening too quickly. There was still dinner to come.

"Thank-you," Vincent said and loaded up a little plate before sitting down in a loveseat she had placed near the fireplace, now settled into a nice warming glow, since she had lit it at least an hour ago, after several tries, trying to remember the technique from visits to her grandmother. She used bought 'logs', which smelled slightly of coffee, a not unpleasant background scent. The candles were herbal, and gave off a slight scent of their own. It was all quite pleasantly homey, she thought.

She took a small plate too, and when he patted the seat next to him, she gladly did so. She sat back in the well-stuffed chair with it's high back gratefully and sighed. She had not realized how tired she was until just then. She had not sat down for hours!

"Cheers, then," she said. Vincent repeated it, and they both finished their wine. He put both their glasses on a small end table. He looked at the plate in his other hand and wondered what to try.

"What are all these, Catherine?" he asked.

She chuckled. "I think there is some caviar, some lox ... um, various cheeses ... meats. I really don't know what this one is ... (it had green sauce on something ... a shrimp?)."

"It all looks delicious, Catherine." He sampled one, and then another. Catherine quickly ate two, and while she was deciding between caviar and lox, Vincent finished his.

"Delicious, but I'd better not spoil my appetite for dinner. Would you like some more wine, Catherine," he asked.

"Yes please."

He rose, and took the two glasses to the tray and poured them each another.

A bell rang from the kitchen, and Catherine suddenly remembered her duties as hostess.

"Oh drat, that's the timer. I think we'd better consider starting dinner," she informed Vincent.

"That sounds fine to me," he told her and helped her out of the chair. She gathered up the platter of the remaining hors d'oeuvres, but left the plates and serviettes.

"Should I bring the wine and glasses?" he asked.

"Yes, please," she replied, and she led the way to the dining room, actually a small nook in the kitchen she had separated with a screen. It had a window over the back yard (a work project for better weather), and she often ate her own meals there. It wasn't large enough for a party, but very nice for just the two of them. She had put up lacy curtains for privacy. It was dark out, so she had closed the shutters too. They were original, somewhat aged, but made the nook cosy and just antique enough to be charming, nicely complementing the round oak table she had placed there.

She put the platter of appetizers into the fridge, took out another bottle of wine, then extracted the entrees from the oven, while Vincent opened the new bottle of wine and refilled their wine glasses. Lastly, she took a basket of assorted bread rolls with little pats of butter

from the cupboard. It all barely fit on the table, with their plates, but it looked and smelled wonderful. She could see that Vincent was eager to try it.

She had ordered small entrees – beef tenderloin wrapped in bacon, chicken cordon blue, and pork tenderloin wrapped around a stuffed portobello mushroom. The vegetables include small roast potatoes, curried carrots and sauteed artichokes. She had chosen dishes she knew the tunnel community did not get. William was a practical cook, using whatever came to hand, to produce nutritious meals for the hardworking people. Plain but hearty fare, which this was not.

It was all delicious. Catherine ate one of each and her share of vegetables, but there were going to be leftovers tomorrow, which she didn't mind. Vincent ate more, but even he did not attempt to eat everything there was, although he clearly had a good appetite.

She watched him eat, somehow not surprised that his table manners were British. Father of course. Her mother had insisted she handle her cutlery that way too. It was what polite society did, she was informed, and she had not minded, except that the cutlery on special occasions, when she was a child, had always seemed too heavy and awkward. Not that it would have been lighter handled any other way.

She had hated that cutlery also because it was silver, and required polishing before every use, a job she loathed. That set was hers now too, safely stored away where it might never see daylight. She couldn't bring herself to use it, although she had never stated her hatred of it to her father, who had given it to her. She used a lighter, more practical modern set of Oneida steel for everything. It was elegant without the fuss.

They both sat back, satisfied, and Catherine bestirred herself to move the remaining food into the fridge. She took out another platter, of small desserts, a mouth-watering variety. She hoped Vincent had room for some.

"Would you like coffee, Vincent? Or I can make tea."

"Coffee would be fine, Catherine."

She got out a couple of china mugs and started the coffee maker on some expensive coffee she had bought for the occasion. Not espresso or cappuccino, but close. She had not become enamoured of those complicated coffees, at least in her own kitchen. They were great in restaurants, when she didn't have to make them.

"Let's go back into the library," Catherine suggested, and she led the way with the platter of desserts.

"Have a seat," she told him. "I'll bring in the coffee."

Vincent sat where he had before, so she used the same table for the desserts and went to get the coffee, which smelled delicious.

A minute later, she returned carrying a tray with the mugs, an insulated jug of coffee, spoons, sugar and cream. She poured two cups and looked to Vincent for direction.

He had risen look at the desserts, placing four onto a small plate, then took a napkin and sat down again.

"Two sugars and lots of cream."

She gave herself the same and delivered his mug to him. She picked two desserts, hoping she could do them justice.

They ate and drank coffee in companionable silence on the loveseat, which was fortunately

of a good size. When they were finished they both sighed.

"That was wonderful, Catherine," Vincent said softly. I have never had such a variety of wonderful foods."

Catherine rose and took Vincent's empty plate and cup and put them on the tray with hers. She looked at him. He looked very content. He rose and took her hands in his.

She looked up at him, happy he had taken the initiative. "This is our special night, Vincent, so I have a gift for you."

"And I for you, Catherine. You first."

He let her go, reluctantly, and she went to a Chinese box on the mantelpiece and extracted a leather bag, one she had made days before. She carefully extracted the small, white ivory rose it contained and held it and the bag out to Vincent.

"I wanted you to have a part of me to hold close. When I was little, I was terrified of the dark. And I used to have an awful time falling asleep. So my mother gave me this. She told me that whenever I got frightened, to hold the rose and to think of her. And to know that wherever she was, she was thinking of me. It helped me to go to sleep."

Vincent bowed his head, and she returned the rose to its pouch and hung it over his head. It looked like it belonged there, and she was glad.

He was speechless. Catherine continued, speaking softly.

"That night you came into my bedroom was the most unusual of my life. It has been a chaotic year, but one that has allowed me to find myself, to realize what is really important, and to realize some of my dreams, some I didn't know I had. You and the tunnel community have done that for me."

"No Catherine, you are who you always have been. You have just found something outside yourself to love and enjoy. The world above, I think, demands too much, forces people to react to the world, rather than look inward. We all love you too.

"I have something for you, a piece of my world."

He dug into a pocket of his pants and held up a long clear crystal on a gold chain, thanking the stars that Mouse had been able to make the chain, for nothing else would do.

"Vincent, it's beautiful." She took the crystal in her hands and looked up at him. He put it over her head, where it hung in the 'V' just above the cameo. It seemed to belong there.

"It comes from our deepest chamber. It reminds me of a piece of eternity."

"I will cherish it forever, Vincent. I have never had such a beautiful gift."

They looked into each others eyes, and a message passed between their hearts. Vincent leaned down and gathered her into a kiss. It was deep, heartfelt, and Catherine felt her legs weaken in happiness. *At last!* She had not realized how much she wanted this.

Vincent held her closely, and she wrapped her arms as far as she could around him. When they finally parted, they were both a little breathless, but Vincent was looking at her with unmistakable love in his eyes.

She gathered her courage and asked the question she had never asked him.

"Would you stay the night, Vincent?"

He gave her a smile that exposed some of his teeth, the sight of which excited her even more. He felt that, and she knew it and returned the smile.

“Catherine, I would be honoured. How could I refuse? You are my life. I would do anything you asked. Where to?” he asked practically.

“Upstairs,” she whispered.

Without further ado, he bent down to lift her and carried her up the stairs in his arms. She pointed at the proper door and he took her into the big master bedroom, and placed her back on her feet.

She had left a couple of candles burning here, more of Rebecca’s, just enough to give them light to see each other. That was important to her. There was no need to hide here.

They looked at each other for some time, as if uncertain how to proceed. Vincent was somewhat at a loss, but Catherine knew what she was doing and he stayed still to let her take the lead. She began to undo his shirt, often looking up at him and smiling.

Things progressed logically from that point and soon they were both standing naked except for their gifts around their necks. They couldn’t remain there, so Catherine pointed at a Ukrainian painted wood bowl she had found in a storage room below, and they left their gifts there for safekeeping.

Vincent lifted Catherine up to him and gave her a full mouth kiss. She wrapped her legs around him and returned it with pleasure. He then moved to place her on the bed and the hours that followed throbbed with their love-making and discoveries.

By morning they were deeply asleep and the rising of the sun merely made them move closer together. It was a Sunday, after all. When they finally did awaken it was to move into each other’s arms. There seemed to be nothing left to say. They had both learned all they needed to know about each other, and their explorations had been joyful and satisfying.

It was Catherine who, being practical, asked the necessary question.

“What now, Vincent. Will we have to tell Father, get married, begin a life together?”

Vincent looked down at her fondly. “Father will have guessed. Marriage is a choice, Catherine, not a necessity with us. And I have been coming here for some time now, although I will always have obligations and duties to take care of in my world, as you will in yours.”

“True,” she conceded. “As long as we can find time to be together, I will be happy.”

“And I could wish for nothing more, ask for nothing more,” Vincent assured her. “Although I suspect I will want more ... and more.”

“And you will get it, my love,” Catherine promised.

A couple of months after that, Vincent invited her below to meet Elizabeth, who was painting walls with New York and tunnel history. Catherine was astonished at how beautiful the images were. Then the tunnels rocked with an earthquake and Vincent quickly took hold of her. He explained that the foundation of a new skyscraper was digging very deeply into the bedrock and putting their world at risk. And the developer was Elliot Burch.

The tower had also been on the DA’s radar, for the principals were again hiding offshore and demolishing an old neighbourhood of low income flats to make room for condominiums and a private parks. This time, another name came up, Luz Corrales, a woman Catherine had known in law school.

Luz was being targeted with a campaign of misinformation by someone with a lot of money, but as it turned out, some of her donors really were suspect, so Catherine could not depend

on her to stop the tower. She wondered if Elliot would stop it if she asked, and quickly found out that he wouldn't - but did ask her to marry him. She had rarely seen him in recent months, and she wondered at that, but he told her he had wanted her since he first met her.

His confession that he admired and loved her made Catherine uneasy, but she was more concerned about stopping the tower. She did some more digging, found out where the numbered companies were located, and realized that no other developer in New York could possibly have secret investors in the Cayman Islands. She was able to provide the irrefutable evidence and the tower excavations were halted by the DA.

She happily told Vincent the news and he hugged her close, thanking her for saving his world.

Although she still went below when she could, that had not been often, as her workload had increased, because the promotion to Trials was sometimes very intense and needed overtime. Nevertheless, Vincent came to her at night, when he could, and the relaxation offered by their love-making helped them both.

Then there were several days when she and he were both busy, or they missed each other on the rare occasions she made it below. He too was working, mostly on repairs, but sometimes on making new chambers in the hard rock.

Then suddenly, on visit she managed at last, she entered Father's library to find he and Vincent talking to Peter, asking the doctor for some medical deliveries for a plague outbreak. She willingly helped to ferry the boxes from Peter's car through her house and down into the tunnels from her basement entry. But she had been told not to wait, to just leave them there and signal. They disappeared before she could return for more.

Peter told her they were worried about infecting her. Her cat helpers had not come for the same reason. She frowned at this, because the precautions were needless. She had had all her vaccinations two years previously for a tour of Egypt, so decided she had to see if she could help. That Saturday, she locked Ginger in the basement with food and toys, before heading down to the basement access. The cat would sleep and likely never miss her.

She knew how to tap out a request for a guide, and she did this, and then had to wait and wonder if anyone would respond. As it happened, it was Vincent who came and she smiled up at him, glad to see him again, and to know that he was well.

"I ... I thought you might need some help with the sick," she told him. "I'm vaccinated."

Vincent nodded and thanked her. He gave her a small smile and his hand and they took the less arduous way to the home tunnels.

"How did this happen?" she asked him, as they walked quickly back to the home tunnels.

Vincent looked uncomfortable and spoke quietly. "I rescued a drowning Russian sailor at the docks. I just happened by because one of our Helpers lives near there and I've always been fascinated by the ships in the harbour."

He told her the rest, that after several days, when the sailor didn't recover and then died, Father took a blood sample and discovered he had died of pneumonic plague. Ellie had been serving him food and drink and had become infected, as had a few others, before they realized the danger. Father had quickly set up a quarantine area and contacted Peter.

"All this is my fault."

"You couldn't have known, Vincent." But he said nothing, merely shook his head.

He took her to the hospital chamber, where she was shocked to see Ellie in bed, looking very feverish. She wasn't responding to the antibiotics, Vincent told her.

Catherine knew she and her brother had been rescued by a helper who had located a street gang recruiting children. She had become fond of both of them. They were frequent visitors for cat-sitting.

The hours passed for Catherine in a rush of changing bed linens, helping patients get comfortable, getting drinks of water, passing out medications Father gave her - and trying to remain cheerful. Some of the bed-ridden were very sick and breathing badly. Ellie was not improving, and Catherine at one point sat down beside her and sang to her. The girl took her hand and thanked her with a raspy voice. Then she closed her eyes and seemed to collapse into herself.

With a shock, Catherine suddenly realized she was dead and found herself unable to let go of the hand still in hers. She sat there for a long time, until Vincent found her and with quick realization, separated her hand and lifted her into a hug.

"Why?" Catherine sobbed. Vincent couldn't answer. He was devastated himself. Eric would need help now, and he had no idea how to break the loss of his sister to him.

"I must talk to Eric," Vincent said. "He has wanted to see Ellie for days, but he is uninfected. We couldn't allow him to. The others were caught in time and are recovering. He won't understand."

"Let me," Catherine offered, moving back to look up at him.

"No, I must do this," Vincent replied. "I am responsible and he must come to terms with that too."

"You are NOT responsible," Catherine told him. "You helped someone in need. I love you because you do what you must. It's what you are."

"Father has told me again and again not to bring people we don't know to the tunnels. Sometimes I arrive too late. I wish I had with this one. Some time ago, a woman was thrown out of a van in the Park, not far from the culvert. When I got there, she was already dead and beyond help. So I had Kipper phone the police from a booth. That was all we could do for her."

"I think I know about that one," Catherine commented. "She was an escort, and I recognized her photo from a reception I attended that same night. The DA had to assume she had annoyed her employer. I gave my information to the police, but it didn't help. We never found her attackers."

"Such deaths do not worry the authorities," Vincent remarked. "Are you all right now, Catherine? I must talk to Eric."

She nodded and he left. She covered Ellie's face with the sheet and sat down heavily on the bed, wondering what to do next. She was unused to dealing with death.

Father came by and seeing the form on the bed, sagged.

"Oh no. We've lost her, haven't we? If only I had thought to check that sailor for disease sooner."

Catherine rose and gathered him into a hug. She could feel how tired he was.

"Father, you can't blame yourself - any more than Vincent can blame himself for this. You are both doing all you can, and just because an act of kindness resulted in ... this .. you cannot

stop being kind. It's why I love this world you've created."

Father moved to sit on the foot of the bed and Catherine sat beside him.

"What you say is true, Catherine, but it's very hard. We don't see much disease here because we are mostly isolated. Vincent seems immune to everything and often makes nighttime visits to our Helpers. But death does find us, as it does everyone.

"Thank you for your help today, by the way. We didn't have many vaccinated people to help, and the others had to be protected."

"You're very welcome, Father," she told him. "What happens now?"

"Can you help me take her to our parlour? It's just a small chamber, but that's where we prepare our people for burial. Mary will help."

The two of them managed to carry Ellie's body to the little chamber and left it there on the table that took up much of the space. Father lit a couple of candles on heavy stands at the head and foot, and then tapped out a message to Mary over the pipes.

Meanwhile, Vincent's talk with Eric had not gone well and the boy had run off. They found him later in a wardrobe in a storage room, apparently writing a goodbye letter to his sister – with all the things he had wanted to tell her, but had not been allowed to, for risk of infection.

Father talked to him then, and asked for some paper to write a letter too. Eric passed a sheet through the crack in the doors.

Vincent watched, his grief visible on his face as tears ran down it.

The idea of letters was a good one, taken up by everyone. It was Father who suggested the burning ceremony at the Mirror Pool.

It was one of the saddest, but also the most heart-easing experience of Catherine's life. She watched the smoke from their fire rise high into the stone roof and through a small hole where a star could be seen. The hurt in her heart was still there, but she knew she would remember this lovely ceremony and think of Ellie, hoping she was watching it and them.

Vincent was very quiet. He put his letter on the fire after everyone else and stood there watching it burn. *Forgive me, Ellie*, he asked silently and watched as a small piece of his letter rose with the heat. *I love you*.

Catherine walked up to him and took his hand. Vincent looked down at her, and marvelled at her knowing just what to do. He felt her strength and compassion when they held hands, like a tingle to his heart, and his love for her, already large, now gained more depth as well.

Catherine, for her part, urged him to walk and he led them to the waterfall cavern. The sound of water and the sheer space in the cavern was restful to sore hearts. They sat on a large flat rock there for some time. Finally, Vincent sighed.

"You must be hungry, Catherine, and William has prepared some food. Will you join us?"

"Thanks, yes, I'd like that, Vincent. I'm starving. I have a new respect for nurses after these last few days. Enough to know that I hope never to be one."

"Yet, you did what had to be done, because it needed to be done, Catherine. There is no better way to serve and show your love."

"And you, my love, need to learn that lesson too. After we eat, I think you need a reminder of the power of love ..."

Vincent sighed and smiled at her. "I believe you are right, Catherine."
They got up and went hand-in-hand to the dining hall.

*"So, there's no need for turning back
'Cause all roads lead to where we stand
And I believe we'll walk them all
No matter what we may have planned"
- Don Mclean (Crossroads)*

END