

Series 15 - Tunnel Love

Fear and Love - p. 2

Tunnel Visions - p. 7

by Angie

Fear and Love

*Death, in itself, is nothing; but we fear,
To be we know not what, we know not where.*

- John Dryden

Vincent stood pressed against the opening of the culvert, his head bowed, his legs apart, and his hands gripping the side of the entrance. His body shuddered in rhythmic waves. He couldn't make himself move away from the solid concrete behind him.

What was wrong with him? He had been wandering the world above at night for years. Why was he now afraid? It wasn't a fear of open spaces that was paralyzing him, but a fear of danger! Why that, now? He had never worried unduly in the past, even after the two unfortunate events that had seen him captured – and fortunately, saved.

With a deep sigh of disgust, he turned into the culvert and nearly ran down the pipe, opened the metal gate, slid through before it was fully opened, then waited breathless for it to close behind him.

With a gasp, he slid down the wall and sat on the sandy floor, resting his head against his knees, tears rolling down his face. What was happening to him? Was he becoming ill again? The thought made him shudder. It couldn't be!

Enough, he decided. He had to talk to Father.

He found the patriarch in the library, poring over an enormous volume with such tiny writing that he had to have his nose almost touching it.

"Father."

Jacob looked up and immediately rose to his feet, sensing a crisis in his son. Vincent pulled up a chair and sat next to him, looking at his hands.

"What is it, Vincent?" the older man asked, gratefully sitting down again.

"Father, I can't go above anymore. My fear is overpowering. What has happened to me?"

Jacob took one of Vincent's hands and held it in his own, something he often did when he was about to say something momentous. Vincent waited. The answer, when it came, was not what he had expected.

"Vincent, a few weeks ago, you asked me if you were a man. I answered you the same way I had answered Catherine, two years ago, when she freed me from the murder charge. I told both of you that part of you is a man, implying that the rest was something ... else."

"Father ..."

Jacob stopped him with a gesture.

"We may never know how you came to be what you are, Vincent. But, you *are* human. Humanity is not related to appearance – it resides inside us. It is measured by how we think, how we feel, how we react to our world and each other. Your physical differences do not make you less human, but more - because you have learned to overcome them. Everyone in this community knows you are human – as does Catherine. Therefore, you are also a man – perhaps more than a man. You are stronger and more compassionate, precisely because of those differences – because you are human.

"Paracelsus was mad – inhuman – when he tried to force you to deny your humanity and turn you into the beast he wanted you to be. You couldn't do it because you are not a beast, Vincent. The mental anguish made you ill, drove you to the brink of insanity. We almost lost you – would have, if Catherine's love had not brought you back. That love, which you responded to, is the most definite proof of your humanity.

"What you are feeling now – this fear of going above – is a direct result of that affirmation of your humanity. It's a natural feeling. You now know how much you almost lost - and how many blessings you have. Your brain is telling you not to put something so precious in danger."

Vincent grunted.

"But Father, I want to visit Catherine. She has been coming below often, but she needs me, we need each other, in her world too. Her balcony is our window into her world – and now I can't be there."

"This will pass, once you and she have reconciled completely. She would do anything for you, Vincent, as you would for her. But ... despite your closeness, I'm guessing there is something missing. Am I right?"

Vincent hung his head. Of course Father was right. Catherine had brought him back to reason in that dark cavern below, and they had held each other, then made short, careful love. Their bond had opened, and all the tension they had suffered had been released in fierce joy. But since then, although they had often held each

other through the long nights as he recovered, they had not again been intimate. He had never told Father what had happened in that cavern. He hardly believed it himself, although the memory was one of his most precious.

"I don't know what's wrong with me, Father. I love Catherine, I want to go to the next step, and I know she does too, but I seem to be impotent." The last word was whispered so quietly, Father almost didn't hear it.

Jacob nodded, thinking to himself that it was ironic that his special son should suffer this, just as he had come to terms with himself and regarded himself as a man.

"You endured considerable mental trauma, Vincent. You haven't yet reconciled yourself to your new mental state, that's all. You have to think it through. That's why I told you that you *are* human – and there is no question of that. What you are experiencing is not uncommon. If you can make yourself believe that, all will be well. Give yourself time."

Vincent nodded and rose, gave Father a soft good-night kiss, and walked slowly to his chamber.

Catherine! She was waiting. He quickened his steps and walked through his chamber door, caught her as she threw herself into his arms. They said nothing for long moments. He felt his groin begin to stir, and felt a twinge of hope.

Catherine moved away a little, so she could look up at him. She could sense he was unhappy.

"What's wrong, Vincent?"

"I tried to come to you again. I cannot."

"That doesn't matter now. I'm here, and I'll always come to you."

"But our nights on your balcony - I thought you enjoyed them!"

"I did, Vincent. They were wonderful, magical. But every time you left me, I was afraid for you. My world is so dangerous, unforgiving. I don't want to lose you."

Vincent felt something nag him at this revelation, but couldn't grasp it. He pursued the discussion further, hoping for enlightenment.

"But Catherine, I have been roaming your world at night for a long time. There is no danger I am not aware of. I am very careful. I will never let myself be caught again."

"I know that, but I can't help being worried. I love you."

Vincent sighed.

"And I love you. I want to give you more ... but, something is wrong."

Catherine stood on her toes to plant a kiss on his lips. She spoke softly.

"I know. But don't worry. That too will pass. I can wait. In fact, it will be easier soon. We'll be together more. I want to move below."

She held up her hand to silence him, much as Father had done minutes before.

"There will be no arguments this time, Vincent. I can make decisions for myself. It's Friday, and I've decided to stay with you this weekend. I brought some clothes down. We'll have time to discuss all this, but I'm determined."

Vincent sensed resolve in her, but there was something else he detected, something he had not bothered to analyze before. He suddenly had an inkling.

"It's late, Catherine. Will you stay with me here tonight, or would you prefer the guest chamber?"

Catherine smiled. "What do you think, Vincent? I want to be close to you. You know that."

"Yes."

They quickly shed their clothes and Vincent slipped on the long white shirt he wore in bed. He didn't bother with bottoms. With Catherine next to him, he was always warm. Now, he hoped for something more – and clothes would only be a deterrent.

He got into his big bed and moved over to give Catherine room. She was wearing only a short silk nightie, which shimmered in the light from the single candle above his bed. He found himself holding his breath. She turned over and spooned herself next to him. He wrapped his arms around her, loving the feel of her bottom against

his thighs. Once again, his groin stirred. He felt her joy at the contact and decided he must do a little careful ... research.

He opened his side of the bond completely and let his love for her slide along it, felt her response. With that as a distraction, he examined her emotions closely, something he had never done before. And he found what he had expected.

Fear! It was not just any fear, though, but a deep and almost overpowering fear. He guessed it was for himself because there was nothing to indicate that Catherine was in danger from anything. Wonderingly, he realized that Father, of all people, had been on the right track. If Catherine wasn't able to control that fear, even in her subconscious state, it would catapult down their bond and he would be unable to think clearly. That must have happened during those times he had tried to go to her. She had known he was trying to reach her and her fear had taken over. He had, in fact, been unable to even discern that the fear was not his own – but hers.

They had not explored the recent awakening of their bond. Both of them, he guessed, were a little afraid of it. He realized he should have talked to her about it sooner. She was not used to feeling him and had tried to dampen her own emotions to shield him while he healed. She didn't realize that their bond wasn't just a single conduit for one emotion, but more like a braid, a complex winding of feelings. In the past, he had often been unable to separate Catherine's roil of emotions, but he realized that too had changed now. Had their recent intimacy made his sense of her more acute as well?

She wasn't yet asleep, so Vincent broached the topic.

"Catherine, what are you afraid of?"

Catherine stirred. Vincent, she knew, was capable of seeing deep into her emotional state. She guessed he had now discovered her secret and felt a sense of relief. It had been difficult to keep this from him, but she had feared making him ill again. Now, belatedly, she realized his current problems might be her fault. She was holding him back, emotionally. She turned over to face him, stroked the side of his face and spoke softly.

"I almost lost you in that dark cavern. You were unconscious, dying. I could feel you retreating from me, as if you had given up on life. I couldn't let you do that, but I didn't know what to do about it. In desperation, I kissed you and felt you quiver. I knew then that you could be reached - that on some level, you knew I was there, wanted me with you.

"Then I did the only other thing I could think of. I touched you where no woman had ever touched you. I read somewhere that a man's sexual organs respond without thought – and yours did. Eventually, you stirred and awakened and we loved.

"How can I explain what I felt after that? I loved you more than ever, but I became so very afraid. I feared that, in your fragile state, you might slip away from me again if I didn't keep my emotions under better control. I realized I could now feel you along our bond, but I wanted you to heal, become whole, without any emotional distractions from me.

"But my fears wouldn't leave me alone. I tried to bury them, to concentrate on my love for you and project calm along our bond. But instead of disappearing, the way they should have, they got stronger and stronger. I think they must have been leaking out when I wasn't aware of it, and infecting you."

Vincent looked at this woman he owed his life to, and lifted her hand to kiss it.

"Catherine, I am yours. I thought I had lost you when I lost myself – because how could you love what I had become? I was mad with despair, grief and anger. You came to me and the shock I felt, seeing you there ... was almost too much to bear.

"But now, you must leave your fears behind, for us both to be happy. We cannot be separated by distance, but we cannot move forward, yet. We must share all that we are, all that we fear."

"Yes. I understand, Vincent. I've been a fool."

"No, never that, my love. How could you know that I would feel the fear you were trying to hide?"

"So what should I do??"

"Open yourself to me, to us, Catherine. I will do the same. We must know each other, trust each other."

Catherine closed her eyes and gradually, Vincent felt her barrier fall. His side of the bond was still open, so she

knew he was feeling her release. They said nothing for long minutes as her fear drained away – to be replaced by something else.

Vincent's groin began to pulse in response and he knew she felt his desire awakening. She gave free rein to her own and they basked for a time in the knowledge that, this time, there were no barriers. Slowly, they began to stroke one another and as the tempo increased and their arousal grew, Vincent hugged her closer, rubbed her along his groin, felt her heat envelop him.

They both shed their night clothes and then made luxurious, sensual love in the candlelight. Their joint release made them sigh in unison and they held each other tightly as wave after wave of joy roiled along their bond.

Sated and relaxed as never before, Vincent rolled onto his back, bringing Catherine with him. She lay along his length, loving the feel of the soft fur covering his lean but well-muscled torso and legs. She couldn't resist running her hands along his sides.

Gradually, she noticed something else, something she had not noticed that furtive first time. A slight vibration was running along his skin and growing in tempo. With a thrill of delight, which she knew he could feel, she put a name to it. She raised her head to look in his eyes and saw the confirmation there.

"Vincent, you're ..."

Vincent lay a long-haired, sharp-nailed finger gently on her lips, silencing her.

"Don't say it, Catherine. I know. I had forgotten. The last time was so long ago ... I was a child. You have rejuvenated me."

"No, Vincent! Our love has made us both whole."

"Yes. What are you afraid of now?" Vincent could sense the whisper of something.

"Only that you might not be able to do a repeat performance."

Vincent chuckled, and soon proved that fear groundless too.

END

Tunnel Visions

*Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
Fled is that music: - do I wake or sleep?*

- John Keats

Catherine hugged Vincent at her threshold. She had been busy in her apartment, sorting, tossing and packing in preparation for her impending move Below. She was tired and found her legs would hardly hold her up. She had hauled down a bag with some hastily-thrown in essentials, but was glad when Vincent took it from her.

Vincent needed no more invitation to gather her in his arms and carry her the long route down to the inhabited section of his world. Her bag was slung over his shoulder.

It felt wonderful. She couldn't remember the last time he had carried her. Probably in the middle of some crisis where she was semi-conscious. She had to find more ways to encourage this mode of transport, she decided.

He was so strong and almost soundless as they moved through the quiet tunnels and down the spiral stairs. Catherine let herself drift. The pipes were silent, and the city Above had abandoned its subterranean transport for the night. She had taken the weekend off work. She had let Joe know that times were a-changin' and she would not be his foot soldier for much longer. She had already told him that she would do no more field work. He had complained, but not loudly. Her skills as a researcher were as valuable as her interview skills.

She had seldom stayed overnight below, and she wanted to do so more often, and for all the right reasons. Now that she and Vincent had consummated their love, she wanted more of it. She was not too tired for that tonight, and knew he sensed her anticipation.

They rounded a curve and he turned sideways, bending over her. They were in his chamber. That fantastic stained glass half circle cast its perpetual mellow glow over his bed, turning the many bolsters into sleeping dragons. He placed her among them and removed his cloak. She watched as he positioned a chunky tubular metal coat rack in the entrance way and hung his cloak across its raised arms.

"Anyone who disturbs us now will have to risk our sentry," Vincent whispered dryly.

He immediately removed his shirt and boots then stepped out of his pants, putting his clothes neatly on a chair. Catherine felt a sense of déjà vu as she watched him – then realized she'd better follow suit. She sat up on the bed and managed to kick off her boots, peel off her socks and fling her sweatshirt in the general direction of a chair, but when she tried to wrinkle off her sweatpants, the soft bed defeated her and she fell over on it.

"Let me help," Vincent whispered. She lifted her legs and he pulled her bottoms off, then stood for a moment regarding her, now wearing nothing but a white silk camisole and matching panties. They were a silly indulgence for Below, she knew, but he had not seen her "frillies" before and she wanted to enjoy his reaction. She could feel his gaze burning her, see his passion rising, a sight she was sure she would never tire of watching. She felt her heat respond to his and her labia throbbing and moistening in anticipation.

He reached down and gently peeled off the camisole, bent down to kiss her breasts and nuzzle her neck.

Her chain and his pouch touched, and he carefully removed them and placed them on the ledge under the window as he joined her on the bed.

He ran his hands along her belly and hips and she lifted herself so he could slide off her panties. He flung them behind him somewhere. Her eyes had followed their progress automatically and a very un-erotic snort almost escaped her. Laughter caught her deep in her belly and she gasped explosively, afraid to let it out lest she wake the neighbours. She held Vincent's arms for support, her body rocked by waves of silent laughter that she was powerless to stop.

Vincent paused in his exploration of her body. He was purring now and whispered her name as a question.

Unable to speak, she pointed at the "sentry." He looked around and began to chuckle. Her panties, gleaming white, were draped on top of the coat rack like a silken crown.

"Well, if anyone had any inclination to question what we are about, that should answer them," he whispered.

"Meanwhile"

He grabbed her under her back and flipped her over. She felt the slight rake of his nails along her ribs, knew he was being extra careful. The danger this implied aroused her further. She knew he could feel it - and that he accepted this as another bonus of their lovemaking. He lifted her onto her knees and forearms and leaned over her, his hair tickling her neck and his lips kissing her everywhere he could reach. She loved the feel of his mane and soft facial hair on her. His hands, gentle but tough-skinned with work, now cupped her breasts while his fingers massaged them lightly. His gentleness and passion made her ache with desire for him.

Suddenly, she felt his penis rise between her legs and a moment later felt it enter where she seemed to be

always ready to receive it – and it belonged. She sighed with arousal, his warmth inside her, pushing against her, swelling to fill her, nudging her to a climax that she tried to suppress. But Vincent was hugging her closely, pumping in and out, his chest fur softly rubbing along her back. Restraint suddenly became impossible – and unwanted. He groaned softly, then shuddered along his length as she gasped with desire. She tightened her thighs and he grunted, suddenly exploding inside her, carrying her own climax with his to a new dizzying height. His silent roar seemed to make the chamber vibrate.

He and she were twined into a lover's knot, indistinguishable. She descended slowly, held up by his arms, and sighed.

He held her to him as he lay down pulling her with him, spooned into his hips, still inside her, a soft, moist warmth that was an inexpressible comfort. This, she thought, was the position she most wanted to be in, always. He breathed on her neck, whispering her name, holding her breasts as if he could not let go.

It occurred to her, as such things do at odd moments, that it was probably good that his love roar was so unlike the one he used in less pleasant circumstances. The Tunnel citizens would not have their sleep interrupted with their lovemaking. The thought made her smile. She had never felt so fulfilled, so happy.

How had Vincent known how to please her so? He was inexperienced, or so he said. It couldn't be just the bond, she realized, somewhat tardily, and asked him.

"I can feel what you like through our bond, of course, but I learned much from The Ming Dynasty's *Golden Lotus* and Hokusai's *Loving Couples*," he replied, his voice deep. His purr was reverberating along his length - and hers.

She snuggled closer. She captured his hands and brought his palms to her lips, kissing them lovingly.

"*There is nothing new in heaven or earth*," she quoted.

"Except us, Catherine. I know my ... organ is not quite like that of other men, but the remarkable, large detail of the men in those books made me feel quite inadequate. But it was very ... informative."

"Vincent, you are "remarkable" too. Very much so - and I don't think those books could now inform you of anything. You are a quick study – and a natural lover."

He said nothing, ignoring the compliment, as he so often did.

Catherine chuckled. "Believe me, Vincent, you need have no worries on that score. Frankly, any poster boy for Playgirl would be envious. You are outside anyone's imagination. Exaggeration seems to have been an art form in those love books, anyway. Perhaps they were teaching materials for wives and concubines. But, some of those positions looked impossible."

"You've seen them?" He seemed both intrigued and shocked. She laughed softly.

"A group of us passed a pillow book around at a bridal shower for Peter's daughter a few years ago. We marveled at the detail too. I was impressed, but not for that reason. They loved for the sake of love, Vincent, and the woman was a full partner, not just an outlet for their passion. You already know that most important lesson. It transforms lust into love. Too many men never learn it."

"We are one, Catherine. How can I not respond to what I feel you want, through our bond? Your arousal ignites me and mine yours." Vincent paused, thoughtful.

"Catherine, my book came to us in a box from Peter. It must be the same one. It gave me much to think about before our weekend of love in your apartment. I could feel your need for me – a pain almost. Mine was no less, but I welcomed it because I knew it was an expression of our love, and relief would come soon. We would discover each other in ways I had thought would be forever denied me. Since I contributed almost nothing to our first lovemaking, I did not want to disappoint you."

"You provided the most important ... um ... part, for that lovemaking Vincent. You could never disappoint me. You are part of me – the best part of myself. You amaze me constantly."

She looked over her shoulder at Vincent's face, his hair lit by the stained glass. She knew he had no doubts now. All barriers were down. Kristopher Gentian, dead and careless of barriers himself, certainly seemed to believe that she and Vincent were meant for each other. His painting was looking at her across Vincent's chamber, and it never failed to thrill her. Now it made her think too. It was time for her to reveal her more immediate plans, demolish another barrier. She turned over to face him, reluctantly, since that meant his penis slid out. She sighed

and rushed the words out. She looked into his beautiful, unique face, where his eyes were dark with love for her. “Vincent, I won’t be doing my ‘usual duties’ for much longer. When I move below, I’m going to resign from my job, get Peter to set up a trust for my inheritance, and do a few other things that will improve life for everyone here. “I want to leave my old life and start a new one with you. It has to be done properly and carefully, so that no one will question where I am – particularly my remaining friends. I don’t want your world threatened by any loose ends from my life above. I don’t want you risking your life for mine any more. I put you in terrible danger, I realize now. I took your protection for granted. I was sometimes insensitive about what you felt through our bond. It was outside my rational world experience, but that’s no excuse. My attitude came close to destroying us. I can’t allow that to happen again. You are my life, Vincent.”

Catherine stopped to catch her breath. Vincent took her hands in his.

“Catherine, not all your dangers could be blamed on your life above. We have had trouble here too – as you know. You have given us invaluable help. You have save my life too, several times. And without you, we would not have found Father when he disappeared.”

“I know that Vincent, and I can still help – just in a different way. Remember, the brownstone house where you first came to my rescue? It belonged to a friend who was doing renovations. After the murder and the investigation, he gave up on it.

“Vincent, looking back on that incident, I realize that by indulging in my personal crusade, I betrayed the trust of several people – my friend, my witness, Joe – even Isaac. I forgot all I had learned from him and walked into an ambush – by the very same people who had assaulted me. My witness died because I was too sure of myself. Then I betrayed you – forcing you to save my life in daylight, risking exposure of your world through the hole you had to make in the basement wall.

“I wanted to remember that incident, to remind myself that I’m not infallible. I asked my father to buy the house anonymously, through an agent. It’s part of the estate I inherited.

“It can be a kind of half-way house - one people from below can use, and a safe access between our worlds. And I’d like us to have a suite on the top floor,” she finished in a rush.

Vincent was quiet, his purr gone.

“Catherine, are you very sure about this? What about your career, the work you have been doing, the people you are helping?”

“There are others to do that work, Vincent. And I can help people from here, just as easily, and with less paperwork, exposure, stress and danger. I will set up a Foundation to do exactly that. Your world has so much to offer – and I want you to be able to help people who really need it. I must talk to Father.

“Do you think I will be allowed to live here?” she asked, suddenly remembering that such permission could not to be taken for granted.

Vincent nodded. “I know the Council will be delighted if you want to stay. We discussed it some months ago when you came below to grieve your father. Permission was granted then.

“Catherine, you have so much love to give and have helped us in countless ways already. The children adore you and they need you. Your life above brings us a new dimension. We have been so very isolated. We need an injection of above - your practical understanding and knowledge of a life most of us know nothing about – or left too long ago. Devin does not return often enough to make a difference. You can teach us a great deal. Also, Mary is very fond of you – Father too. They will do all in their power to make you welcome. You will have some learning to do, but everyone will help.

“But I ask again. Are you sure?”

“Yes, Vincent, never more so. I know our bond is strong now and it must be reserved for our love, to link us when we are apart. Fear and danger from above must not be allowed to darken it.”

“You need not worry, Catherine. There is no darkness when you are with me – to return your own words to you. I am bound to you. We are one. I love you more than life.”

“Don’t say that, Vincent. I want you with me in this life. There is no life for me without you. And I hope we may contribute a life of our own, someday. That’s my dream.”

Vincent said nothing to this last, merely hugged her close. She melted into him again, suddenly completely exhausted. He stroked her hair and she felt his love surrounding her as she fell asleep, now with new resolve for their future.

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Catherine awoke to the shaking of subway trains. Or so she thought. The realization of what that meant made her open her eyes. Then she realized that the vibration she could feel in the bed was coming from the man who held her. She tilted her neck to look at his face and found that he was watching her, his eyes filled with a passionate desire.

"Vincent," she whispered. "If you keep looking at me like that - and purring - I will have to take drastic measures. I have no self-control anymore."

"What drastic measures were you considering?" he asked, sotto voce.

She answered him by wrapping her hands around his neck and pulling his face to her so she could plant a long, sensuous kiss on his lips. She was feeling playful now, and wrestled with him on the bed, twining her legs around him, nipping him lightly in one place, kissing or licking in others. He was breathing hotly on her, his rough tongue licking any part of her body within reach. His hands were everywhere, caressing her, his nails a light touch which seemed to send an electric charge over her skin. They grunted and gasped as these new sensations aroused them through their bond. At one point, Catherine found her feet in Vincent's hair, and managed to catch some in her toes. He turned his face and began to suck her toes and rasped his tongue along the soles of her feet, massaging her ankles with his hands. She moaned with delight and arched her back.

Soon they were again wrapped tightly in each others arms and Vincent's manhood was in that place where she wanted it to remain forever. They climaxed in a leisurely, cooperative and very satisfying oneness.

What a wonderful way to wake in the morning, she thought, and sighed. They were still locked in an embrace, but the bed sheets were in a terrible state, she realized, now that the growing light through the stained glass allowed her to see them. Most were on the floor. She spared a thought for whoever did the laundry – then reflected that it might be herself if she were to stay below. That would be a novel experience for her.

Vincent was nuzzling her ear and she felt his purr growing again.

"No!" she protested, batting him playfully on the chest. "Vincent, we can't spend all day in bed again Now who's insatiable? I want to see this private bath you boast about. But first, where is the bathroom? I don't recall using it before."

Vincent sighed mightily, and kissed her mouth softly, before letting her go and pointing at a narrow doorway next to an overflowing bookcase. She extracted herself from the bed and went where he pointed. It was a small room with a bowl and ewer on a tiny table and a toilet carved directly into the rock. The seat was made of wood. She couldn't see the bottom of the opening. A small vent let in a stream of cooler air and the floor was covered in sawdust, warm and soft between her toes.

The cool air on her skin had made Catherine shiver a little by the time she returned. Vincent was standing, waiting for her, and immediately caught her up and carried her around a room divider and down a few steps. The chamber they entered had a high ceiling and was filled with billowing steam above a small, irregularly-shaped rocky pool with wide ledges. The stained glass window sat high on one wall and above, a streak of daylight came down a small shaft in the ceiling. It was magical. Catherine looked at Vincent in wonder. He smiled at her.

"This is where Father and I bathe when we want privacy. He has an entrance across the chamber. But don't worry, he won't bother us. I'll hang up the towel. It's our signal that we want to be alone."

Vincent deposited her on the side of the pool and padded around the perimeter to hang up a towel on a metal peg driven into the wall of a narrow tunnel. He jumped into the water, flinging it about him like a child and waded over to her. She realized it was not very deep.

"Come," he said, touching her knees. She leaned into his arms and was surprised to find the water deliciously warm, but not hot. Vincent put his hands under her bottom and carried her to the side, putting her down on a natural seat, half submerged, then sat beside her. He located a bar of soap redolent of honey and herbs and began to soap her, top to bottom.

Catherine was so relaxed that she couldn't think or move. She let Vincent linger over his work, moving her as he wished. He then pulled her face to his chest and soaped her hair, thoroughly, massaging her scalp as he did so. This luxury was so relaxing she almost fell asleep.

Finally, he lifted her off the seat and carried her to the centre of the pool. She put her hands around his neck as he tilted her gently.

"Hold your breath," he ordered, capturing her lips as he did so, as if to prevent her from breathing. He dunked her so that her hair was rinsed and she came up, now very awake, and feeling very pampered – something she had not felt in far too long. Vincent's awareness of that and his delight in it, made her laugh. He carried her back to the seat, planted a kiss on her mouth and left her to complete his own bath.

She leaned back against the warm stone and watched as he soaped and rinsed himself, top to bottom, marveling again at his grace and ease. Her thoughts were anything but objective as she watched. He made a magnificent figure, an Adonis tantalizingly veiled by the roiling steam. She feasted her eyes on him, her arousal building again – and was not surprised to see his manhood respond.

He looked over at her and waded back, lifting her to him, holding her against him as he sat on a lower step, one that allowed her to be submerged almost to her neck. She was floating in his lap, but so was his penis, and the feel of that caressing her thighs increased her tension to an almost painful level. He bent so he could cover her mouth with a passionate kiss and let her down softly over his column, using one hand to position himself for entry. He raised his hips and pushed her down, sliding himself inside her.

She felt a hot flush run over her skin and wondered if she were steaming.

"Oh, why can't we just stay in this position forever," she murmured, as his hands began to massage her breasts.

"Oh Catherine," he whispered into her ear. "Not forever, but as often as you wish – although we owe this community some work in between."

He throbbed inside her now and she moaned in ecstasy, felt her control slipping along with his. She felt as if she was sliding into a deep, warm ocean. He held her tighter and tighter until they eased into a climax together. She sighed and let her head fall back onto his chest, loving the feel of him, the scent of the soap, as he relaxed under her. Then the purr began in his abdomen and she knew she wanted to be nowhere else but with this amazing man, always.

"I'm yours," he said, catching her emotions. "Always, Catherine."

The sound of a subway train rattled somewhere far above and a series of taps rang over the pipes. Catherine was curious about the latter and Vincent explained.

It was MS - Meal Served - in Morse Code – two dits, three dahs, repeated three times and then again after 10 minutes, Vincent explained. Very practical, Catherine thought – and a code that would be useless for anything else. She would have to learn more of the Tunnel codes soon. She would have to talk to Pascal.

"It's breakfast time," Vincent groaned. "We must go, Catherine. It feels like an eon since I ate. I'm weak with hunger."

Catherine felt his hunger too and resolutely decided to focus on her own need for food, which was growing with the thought of one of William's generous spreads.

"Yes, you're right. We must also satisfy the curiosity of your family, Vincent. Let's get dressed and go and face them, before we get distracted again."

Vincent lifted her to stand on the step and extracted two large, much-washed bath sheets from a cupboard set into a niche in the stone wall. He wrapped one around himself and lifted off the signal towel to use on his hair. Catherine stepped out of the water into the large towel he held and he carried her back into his chamber. He started to towel her dry, but she forestalled him.

"No Vincent, you take care of yourself. There will be other times. We must keep our minds on breakfast."

"Oh, buy the way, do you have any Tunnel clothes that will fit me? I don't want to meet your family in a sweat suit. I didn't bring much." She could not, for the life of her, remember exactly what she'd packed. But she wanted to fit in. Her normal jeans or sweat suits would not do.

Vincent left her and opened up the bottom drawer of a huge wardrobe. He lifted out a bundle of cream clothing - a long, petticoat, soft woolen dress and a frothy shawl. She recognized them and he confirmed it.

"Yes, I kept them here when you returned Above after grieving your father. I could not bear to be parted from them."

"Oh Vincent, they're beautiful. True works of love."

She took the clothes from him and lay them on the bed, suddenly spotting something else. She kneeled onto the bed to gather their necklaces, feeling his eyes on her still naked body. She resolutely pretended not to notice and put on her chain. Vincent lowered his head so she could put his pouch around his neck.

The look he gave her confirmed what she had been thinking. Their pledge was now complete.

Vincent now left her for a few minutes, commenting that he needed another towel. In the meantime she slipped on her camisole, retrieved her bikini from the "sentry" and put on the clothing he had given her.

Vincent returned and quickly put on one of the soft, white long-sleeved thermal shirts that were his trademark and then the blue shirt she would love forever. She knew it was no accident when she saw the look in his eyes. As she put on her boots, he finished his dressing with a pair of stretchy gray pants that left no doubt about his slight arousal. He quickly added a long leather overtunic to hide it and gave her a rueful look.

Both of them were fighting to concentrate on breakfast. Catherine was glad of her layered clothes because they hid her stiff nipples. She decided to ask something that had just occurred to her.

"Vincent, there is one thing I need to know. How can I dampen my ...um ... transmissions? I don't want you becoming dangerously distracted"

Vincent's face became serious. "Catherine, it's instinctive. You'll see. Our bond will transmit soft surface emotions – peace, happiness, contentment – only if we seek each other in our thoughts. We must try to cultivate an apartness, at least while we are not in this chamber. You already know how to block to some extent. I hope you will not need to often. Stronger emotions – hate, fear, anger – they are involuntary, harder to repress, and Catherine, should not be. They might save one of us when there is danger. The very deep emotions – sexual passion, deep desire – we can reserve for our private time. They seem to require actual body contact."

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The pipe code sounded again and Vincent took Catherine's hand and led her to the dining hall, where it seemed the whole community was engrossed in demolishing mountains of steaming pancakes and an assortment of other dishes. If this community lacked anything, which she doubted, it was not food – at least at present. She wanted to ensure they never did. That was something she had to work out, later.

Father's voice boomed across the room as they found a pair of seats.

"Glad you two could make it. Welcome to a new day."

"Thank you, Father," Vincent replied, standing and gazing around at everyone, still holding Catherine's hand.

"I have an announcement to make. Catherine has asked to join our community permanently. She has some business to finish before she moves here, but she will be with us over the next two days to meet you all and learn some of what she needs to know. I'm sure you will all welcome her."

The announcement was greeted with cheers, whistles and shouts of greeting that threatened to disrupt breakfast completely. Father held up his hands and demanded order.

"Enough, everyone. We could not be happier, Catherine. You are very welcome. I'm sure I speak for everyone. We'll talk later.

"Now let's get on with breakfast folks, we have a lot of work to do today. Mary, please read out today's work roster."

That comment was greeted by good-natured groans and the food was disappearing quickly as Mary read out the day's chores – all of which sounded urgent to Catherine's untutored ears. This being a Saturday, there were no classes for the children, but they were given some chores, mostly cleaning and tidying. She noticed that Vincent and a few others were to enlarge some cold storage cupboards, and she grinned to herself, carefully concentrating on breakfast. She had a surprise in store for Vincent.

She speared a second stack of pancakes as they passed her and managed to waylay a jar of homemade

raspberry syrup to pour over them. A boarding house had nothing on this place, she was sure.

Vincent, when she had time to take a breath and look at him, had found some sausages and hash browns and was wolfing his way through them as if he had not eaten in a week. She caught his eye.

"I could never feed you like this," she remarked, remembering what she had fed him last – h'ors d'oeuvres. Her cooking skills were minimal.

He shook his head and swallowed hugely. He turned to look at her sideways, sending a shiver up her spine. His eyes glinted with mischief.

"Catherine, you have given me more sustenance than I could have wished for in a lifetime – but I will never have had sufficient."

Catherine felt herself flush - and the sudden look in his eyes as he saw that made her wish they were back in his chamber. She looked away from him quickly, aware suddenly that their exchange had not gone unnoticed by their neighbours. There were guffaws as it was passed around and soon the entire hall was reduced to gales of laughter that threatened to choke those few who thought they could laugh and eat at the same time. Vincent was slightly flushed but remained resolutely focused on his food. She could sense he was pleased. The approval of his family meant a great deal to him. For her part, she decided she would hereafter be difficult to embarrass.

Catherine took Vincent's hand and raised it to her lips, smiling contentedly at these people, so very dear to her, and now her adopted family.

The hall broke out in a round of applause, and Vincent stood up with her to bow.

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After breakfast, Catherine and Vincent returned to his chamber. He quickly removed everything except his socks, searching through his wardrobe for heavier clothing to insulate himself against the work he had to do in the deepest – and coldest level. He would have to leave soon to join the work party and he would be gone most of the day.

Catherine could feel her womanhood throbbing as she watched him naked, his muscles rippling under his skin. She was waiting for an opportune moment to spring her surprise on him. She asked a question to distract herself.

"How cold is it down there, Vincent?"

His voice came from inside the wardrobe. "About 35 degrees F. Not cold enough to freeze, but excellent for long storage because of the type of rock, which has veins of porous stone. We get a lot of fruit and vegetables that store very well over the winter. One of our helpers has an old family farm. She gives us baskets of apples, onions, carrots and potatoes. William does a lot of canning and makes pies and sauces, but the rest we store."

It wasn't working. Catherine regarded Vincent's behind, and knowing that he would not be expected in the kitchen for final instructions for about an hour – William insisted on getting his kitchen restored to order before any other consideration – she made a decision. She felt Vincent's sudden curiosity.

She routed in her bag for a little item she had packed, which seemed suddenly very appropriate. It was wrapped in several layers of gold tissue paper. She had it made several months ago, after a visit with Jenny. Catherine had seen a pattern in a magazine and the two of them had laughed at the idea.

Jenny had shown her the rudiments of knitting so that she could make it – all the while wanting to know whom it was for, then teased her unmercifully about the extra rows Catherine had insisted upon. She had not wanted to admit that she was working entirely from supposition. Now, she was glad she had been generous with the sizing.

"Vincent, I have something for you – a small gift I made that you might find useful today."

Vincent left his search and stood in front of her, now wearing just a long thermal shirt that did not hide what drew her eyes. Trying to control her arousal, Catherine handed the package to him. Vincent weighed it in his hands, looking at her sideways.

"Catherine, there can't be anything in here. It's too light."

She smiled. "Oh, there is, Vincent. But it will be much heavier in a little while, I think."

Vincent sat down in his huge wooden chair, grunting at the cold on his bare bottom, and unwrapped the package

to reveal a long rib-knit tube of soft, white angora wool. Catherine watched him turn it over, discover that it was closed at one end and had two very long ties at the open end. His obvious puzzlement sent Catherine into giggles, punctuated by a loud hiccup. He looked at her and back at the gift and she was sure he now had an inkling.

"Catherine – is this what I think it is?"

"Well if you think it is something for that most precious part of your anatomy, then you're correct. It's called a "peter heater" – and given where you are going today, I thought you might appreciate it."

Vincent roared with laughter, something she had never heard him do in all the time she had known him. It made her laugh as well, and she found she needed to sit down before her legs collapsed under her. She looked around for a chair, but Vincent pulled her into his lap.

"Catherine, you will have to put this on. I am quite incapable of doing so myself." He did not sound at all put out, as he wiggled his sharp-nailed fingers at her, holding the delicate item in front of her eyes. That, combined with his suggestive "come hither" look gave her goosebumps.

"How can I refuse," she asked huskily.

Sure she did not want to be interrupted in her demonstration, she left his lap to move the "sentry" back into the doorway. She would have to talk to someone today about getting a door covering. Vincent was watching her with an expression that told her she had better hurry. She returned to his lap, but this time sitting to face him, her knees on either side of him. Her dress was in the way, so she carefully drew it and the petticoat over her head and laid it on the table behind Vincent. His thighs were hot under her and his penis was extending like a snake testing the air. Vincent's arousal was just what she wanted.

"Perfect," she said, as she slid the peter heater over him, slowly and carefully, giving herself maximum opportunity to massage him. She watched, her arousal flaming, as he slowly filled the soft tube in her hands. She thanked her stars that she had used a rib knit and made it extra-extra large.

That done, she pressed herself against his chest and reached behind him. Vincent nuzzled her shoulders and neck as she did this and obligingly moved forward enough to allow her to tie the strings above his hips. The ties were long enough, barely, but at least they would not tickle him unduly, she thought. Then she hugged him and planted a soft kiss on his mouth.

He immediately hugged her to him and demanded a full-blown tongue and lip session. She was panting when he released her and got trapped by his eyes, now lit with fire and full of mischief.

With pretended gravity, Vincent whispered, "I see how to put in on now, Catherine, but how do I get it off?"

"Hmmm, I see the problem," she remarked huskily. "I guess I'll have to demonstrate how to remove it."

She carefully reached back to untie it again, while Vincent took advantage of her position and cupped her breasts in his large, warm hands. She would gladly have stayed in that position, but Vincent's urgency was now being transmitted along their bond. Nevertheless, she took her time removing the woolen wisp from his organ, pretending that it was such a tight fit that it was stuck. By the time she had it off and safely tossed onto the table, both of them were panting and Vincent's teeth were nuzzling her ear.

But she was still wearing panties and a camisole. He lifted the camisole off and tossed it behind him, but the panties were not going to be easy to remove in her position. He looked at her, a query in his eyes. She sighed and nodded. With a quick flick of a nail, he slit them between the leg holes and pulled them off from under her. Well, underwear seemed superfluous here anyhow, she thought. Too hard to get out of in a hurry.

Then Vincent lifted her above his now very firm column and slowly let her down onto it. She sighed with that wonderful sense of him swelling inside her. He removed his shirt and she hugged him to her, his soft chest fur warm against her breasts, his arms wrapped around her back. His mouth was firm on hers and his lips moved as if he was tasting her. She realized that he probably was. She probably had vestiges of raspberry syrup and pancakes still around her mouth because she had not yet washed up.

Vincent's mouth, in contrast, tasted of his favourite herbal tea. As their tongues twined, Catherine tightened her thigh muscles around him and he groaned. A shudder ran down his chest. She felt an inferno rising. She reached behind him to grab his buttocks, pulling herself as close to him as she could. She cupped her fingers around his buttock and pulled him to her as he angled his hips up. He lifted his legs to clamp her to him and suddenly they both growled with desire. Vincent rose in the chair as their climax wrapped them in chains of passion that took

their breath away and kept them there for a timeless eon.

When they were able to relax at last, gasping, Catherine lay her head on Vincent's chest as he kissed the top of her head. She looked up to kiss him inside the curtain of his hair, and they sat there, lips fused, for long moments, until the coolness of the chamber finally made itself felt.

Vincent could not believe how relaxed he felt. He wanted to bask in it, but Catherine, he sensed, was more practical. She rose from his lap and the loss of her warmth – and the release of his organ - made him groan. His purr was rising from his abdomen and he closed his eyes, savouring a priceless feeling of complete satisfaction. Food and love left no room for anything else.

She took his hands and pulled until he reluctantly had to open his eyes and rise to his feet. He used the bathroom as if dream-walking and Catherine then led him into the bath chamber and down into the pool. She found the soap and washed his organ gently, thoroughly, possessively. He stood passive, unable to speak, his eyes closed in contentment. He was aware that she soaped herself as well. Then she pulled him further into the water and carefully rinsed him and then herself. She took him by the hand led him to the ledge, collected two towels and led him back into his chamber. She towed him off, as impartially as she could, and then dried herself.

"Catherine," he said finally, capturing her and pressing her to him, feeling her warmth and suddenly very aware he was becoming cool. He had never been naked in his chamber for so long before.

"Catherine, you should get dressed. I had never realized how inconveniently chilly it is in here." He sighed. "How am I to find the strength to leave you all day?"

"I have an idea," she said. She grabbed the "peter heater", wrinkled it onto his now sheathed organ, then quickly tied it on with a double bow behind him.

"This will give you hidden warmth, remind you of more pleasant activities, and ensure that you return to me as soon as you can, to have it taken off. That should be enough incentive to get done in record time."

Vincent looked at her and spoke quietly in the deep voice she seldom heard.

"Catherine, I need no such incentive, but I dare not let anyone see this. I would not want to explain – it's too precious. It will keep me warm with memories of your love – until I return. Then, I will no doubt need your assistance again."

Catherine gave him a quick kiss. "I'll be waiting for you, my love, with willing hands." She looked at him lasciviously and he was trapped in her eyes.

"We'd better get dressed now," she reminded him, playfully patting his behind. "I'm sure you are being awaited, and I must prepare my arguments for Father."

They dressed again, Vincent in several layers of heavy clothing, including long johns, Catherine in her sweat suit. She decided that the delicate wools would be impractical for her plans today. She had work in mind – although she was not sure exactly what form that would take.

They parted with sighs, a quick kiss and a flare of love across their bond. They both knew now that their hearts were one and that, no matter where they were, they were as close as a thought.

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Catherine pulled out the notebook and pen she had packed, sat down at Vincent's table, and began to outline the plans for her new life.

She would not need her apartment, of course, once the brownstone was renovated, but put off deciding what to do with it. She would also have to see Peter and meet with her lawyers. She wanted no loose ends. She wanted her estate to be used to fund a foundation that would ensure the tunnel community never lacked.

Joe would be difficult, but she was sure she could talk him around. Catherine would not regret leaving the DA's office after her experiences there. Yes, she had enjoyed the work, but Vincent was more important. She wanted her life filled with him and her new family. Then one day, she and Vincent would make their own addition to that family. She owed him a happy life, with herself as a full partner beside him. She felt she could meet the

challenges of this new life and be a contributing member of the community.

Lastly, she made a list of the items she wanted to bring below.

She was suddenly tired. Was it too much love in too little time, she wondered. She moved towards Vincent's bed, still rumpled from with their lovemaking. She removed all the sheets and pillow cases and put them into a wicker basket that was obviously for laundry, since it held some of Vincent's soiled clothing. Then she lay on the mattress cover and pulled a colourful quilt over herself. She let herself drift into sleep, completely relaxed and happier than she had ever been in her life.

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Vincent, in the rear of the work party walking down the long, increasingly colder tunnels, felt Catherine's peace and knew she was asleep. He had deliberately avoided contact along their bond to give her privacy to think. His heart swelled with love and contentment. He paused, momentarily distracted, and sighed to himself.

Kanin, ahead of him, paused as well and looked back at Vincent with a question on his lips. He caught an expression on Vincent's face that he had never seen there before. He smiled. He could guess the underlying emotion - he felt it himself after he and Livy made love. He was happy that Vincent had at last found the joy he deserved.

Vincent looked at Kanin and saw the flash of understanding in his friend's face. He had never realized how difficult it was to leave one's beloved. It had been bad enough before his physical union with Catherine. Now he felt as if he was walking through mud that got thicker and colder the further he moved away from her. He had new admiration for Kanin's courage when he had gone above with Catherine to face that old and bitter legal charge - knowing that he might have to serve jail time. Vincent now knew himself incapable of a long forced separation from Catherine.

Kanin gave him a crooked smile. Vincent knew that smile. The whole community would soon know of his distraction. It didn't bother him now. For the first time he felt as if he had joined the human race. Of course, there were still restrictions. He could not change his appearance. But his heart was free, thanks to Catherine's love. Nothing else was of consequence in that reality. With a shake of his shoulders, he started moving again. He and Kanin swiftly caught up with the rest of the work party and continued downwards.

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Waking from her nap, Catherine decided to take care of something important to herself and Vincent. Then she heard the meal signal on the pipes and realized it was lunch time. She followed her nose to the dining chamber and found that William had arranged a kind of buffet of sandwiches and cakes. It was a casual meal, with people wandering in and out as they pleased. Some sat at a table, while others took a tray out - probably to their chambers, she thought. Children were noisily clumped at a small low table, their laughter brightening the hall.

Catherine loaded a plate and sat next to Mary. She ate hungrily, washing the food down with a mug of herbal tea. When she was finished, she turned to the older woman.

"I would like to be considered a working member of this community while I am here this week," Catherine told her. Mary smiled at her and nodded.

"Well, my dear, of course you may help, if you wish - although it is not a requirement, you know. We'd appreciate your help on laundry day, when you are here for good, though. Would you like anything else?"

Catherine smiled at the irony of herself on laundry detail and quietly asked if a curtain could be arranged for the doorway of Vincent's chamber. Mary looked at her with understanding.

"Of course, Catherine. Several of our couples have them already. Let's go and see Annabelle. She will have something suitable. Annabelle is our seamstress. I don't think you've met her, have you? Come, I'll introduce you."

Mary led Catherine behind William's kitchen and into a part of the tunnel network she had never seen before.

Along the way, they passed a huge chamber, which was dark inside, and then a doorway that, from the scents, must have led to Rebecca's candle workshop. Another seemed to have unusual noises coming from it, and she wondered if it was Mouse's. Finally they turned a corner, passed another dark opening and then entered a large chamber that made Catherine's mouth drop in amazement. It was brightly lit from an airshaft. Dangling just below it was a disco ball, its many-faceted reflections making the room look as if it were underwater. There were numerous tables, some with work in progress – leather and fabric pieces arranged into panels. There were many clothes racks, wardrobes and presses. Along one wall was a line of ancient treadle sewing machines. They puzzled Catherine, until she realized that without electricity, foot power was the only alternative. She recognized another huge device as something belonging to another ancient trade, a shoe repair shop.

Dozens of cardboard boxes leaking fabric items were stacked in sagging piles along one wall, obviously waiting to be sorted. Against another, wooden shelves held an assortment of folded blankets. Seeing them, Catherine wondered how anything could be kept from going musty in the tunnels.

A figure appeared from behind a cupboard at the end of the chamber, and at first glance Catherine thought the room must be much bigger than she had realized. Then her perspective changed and she realized Annabelle was a dwarf.

"Hello Annabelle," called Mary. "I have brought a special friend to meet you."

Annabelle, her face beaming in a smile, approached them and hugged Mary, her head reaching just over the older woman's waist.

"So wonderful for you to come and visit me, Mary," Annabelle said a deep husky voice. She looked up at Catherine, and offered her hand. Catherine shook it with a smile of her own and regarded the small figure.

In the world Above, Annabelle would have had trouble finding clothes suitable for an adult – a problem Catherine herself was not unfamiliar with. But Annabelle's short legs and long torso created additional challenges. She had overcome these handicaps with a flair and magnificence that so amazed Catherine, she was rendered speechless.

Annabelle wore a long, beautifully-embroidered and beaded vest over a thick grey wool shirt and breeches made of dark velvet tucked inside soft suede boots. She looked like some creature from a fairy tale – a leprechaun perhaps. Without the hat. Annabelle's hair was a magnificent russet, intricately braided and wrapped into a coil on her head. It gave her another four inches of height.

"I'm glad to meet you Annabelle," Catherine finally managed to say, aware that her examination and admiration had not gone unnoticed.

"And you must be Vincent's Catherine. I have heard about you and I can see that there was no exaggeration. You are very welcome. What can I do for you?"

"I would like to install some kind of privacy curtain in the doorway of Vincent's chamber," Catherine told her, suddenly aware that there could only be one reason for that and felt herself flush. Well, she supposed it no longer mattered. She caught the glitter of amusement – and understanding - in Annabelle's eyes.

"Of course you do. Poor Vincent. He is a very popular fellow and everyone treats him like a favourite uncle with nothing better to do than amuse them - or help them with anything, anytime. Father made it clear, just a few days ago, that Vincent is to be accorded more respect, but the children in particular will find it a hard lesson to remember.

"But I think I have just the thing. Now where did I see that...."

Annabelle darted to a large cardboard box lying on its long side, large enough to have once held a commercial-sized chest freezer, and lifted the flaps. She was reaching into it, raising small riffs of fabric dust, before Catherine and Mary arrived to lend a hand.

"There," Annabelle pointed to a thick, folded pile at the bottom of the box. Catherine and Mary managed to get a hold on it and lifted it out onto the floor. It was massively heavy - a large Turkish rug covered in an intricate pattern of bright, multi-coloured, impossible birds set against a forest of dark brown curved trunks and green leaves. It was so beautiful that Catherine caught her breath and could only gaze at it in wonder. She remembered Kristopher Gentian's quotation about the bluebird and was pleased to see it had one.

Vincent would love it. It would easily cover the door opening, but how could it be attached?

As if she could read her mind, Annabelle took Catherine's hand and led her to a wall where some wooden barrels held a range of curtain rods and thick wooden poles. She chose one of the latter, at least two inches in diameter, and pulled it from the barrel. Catherine was sure it was much longer than the width of Vincent's doorway.

"I think this will hold the rug. I'll show you how to attach it to the pole, then we'll get Jamie to pound a couple of sturdy ring spikes into the wall to hold the rod. The extra length will allow you to draw it aside when Vincent is open for business," Annabelle explained with a chuckle, seeing her puzzlement.

"But first, we'd better get this rug clean. Lord knows how long its been in storage."

Between the three of them, they carried the awkward bundle into a long room where the wind blew like a gale. Catherine noticed that there were an assortment of poles wedged between the walls.

"This is my airing and drying room," Annabelle explained. "We get a lot of musty materials here. I hang them up and let the wind work on them. On laundry day, this is the community drying room. This rug, though, has to be beaten. Help me get it over that pole."

She used a pronged pole to lift up one end of the rug by its fringe, giving another pole to Catherine. They draped the rug over a thick rod above their heads. They all grabbed kerchiefs to tie over their mouths and Annabelle handed out wicker beaters. The three of them pounded away at the rug, raising clouds of dust which wafted away down the room and down an ever narrowing cone. Without a thought, Catherine worked on the reverse side, which put her in the dust cloud, but saved them from having to take the rug down and re-position it. It was hot work and when they were done, Catherine realized her face and hair was probably coated in dust. Her clothes definitely were. Mary and Annabelle were panting but jubilant – and only slightly less coated. They laughed as they looked at each other. They cleaned up their faces and hands in a sink, but anything more would have to wait.

They carried the rug back to a table and Annabelle showed Catherine how to tie the fringe ends onto the pole, so it would be secure, but still drawn easily. Catherine sat next to Annabelle and they soon had it tied. Catherine thanked the dwarf profusely and asked how she could ever thank her. Annabelle smiled and looked at Catherine sideways.

"Well, this place always needs some willing hands to sort and sew," she commented. "We usually have a regular 'hen party' on Wednesdays. William brings us our lunch so we don't have to go to the dining chamber. You'd be most welcome anytime you can make it."

"I'm not much of handicrafter," Catherine confessed, "but I'd be more than willing to help any way I can, perhaps with sorting."

"We'll expect you when we see you then," Annabelle smiled at her and gave her a hug. "You'll get a chance to meet the women who do the real work in this community. We begin right after breakfast."

Mary, who had been gathering some blankets and sheets from a nearby shelf, returned.

Catherine remembered her earlier curiosity. "How do you keep all this fabric from going musty in the damp?" she asked.

Annabelle's eyes were merry.

"How very practical you are," she commented. "Do you know that no one has ever asked me that before? Yet, I chose this chamber for that very necessary property. If you look at the globe, you'll see that it is rotating slowly. There is fine fresh air coming down that shaft from one of the subway vents. The secret to preventing mold and mildew is air movement, not temperature. The air is warmer above, but by the time it gets here it has lost any moisture it had. It gets drawn into this chamber by the cooler air here, mingles for awhile then exits through some vents at floor level. Those vents exist in just about every chamber. You'll see them if you look. Otherwise we would never be able to live here. Molds can be very hazardous. We have to keep a fine balance. That's why we don't use braziers much. They create condensation on rock walls – and we have to worry about the fumes. We prefer the steam pipes for heat. They're more efficient because they warm the rock as well as the air."

Catherine was flabbergasted by the explanation and must have looked it.

Annabelle smiled broadly again. "I studied geothermal engineering, you know," she said. "But my handicap meant I was not really taken seriously. Too many pieces of equipment were literally out of my reach."

"I found out about the Tunnels quite by accident. I had been following the old steam pipes below the city and was studying their condition. My size was actually an advantage in my research. I was sure the pipes could be utilized

again – and after all, the heat source was natural and free.

“Anyway, I was crawling along, following one of them and came out in this room, almost at Mary’s feet. She became my first real friend. When I told her what I was doing, she was shocked. I would threaten their existence if I published my report. Needless to say, I didn’t. It was a personal project anyway. I just reported that the pipes were too old and rusted to be useful and left it at that. I came down permanently about four years ago. I’ve always been good with my hands and now I am combining those skills with my engineering knowledge. I’m very strong for my size and there have been several modifications made for me. I am very grateful to everyone.

“Well I must get back to work. It takes me days to get ready for Wednesday.”

Mary and Catherine said their good-byes and together carried the rug assembly back to Vincent’s chamber. Mary placed the pile of linens she had been carrying onto Vincent’s bed and picked up the laundry basket.

“I thought you might need some replacements,” she commented, quietly. “Come, let’s find Jamie. She should be with William right about now. He is always demanding more hooks in his kitchen.”

An hour or so later, the rug was in place and Jamie gave Catherine a hug. “I’m so happy for both of you,” she said, “and so glad you’ll be joining us.”

Catherine tested the assembly and discovered that, even with the long pole, the rug was so thick that it could not be completely drawn away from the entrance. She found an old belt of Vincent’s and tied it around the middle of the rug, leaving only the top extending into the entry. That, she decided, would have to suffice. She would look for something more decorative to tie it with when she saw Annabelle again.

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By mid-afternoon, Vincent reflected that Catherine had been correct. The unaccustomed softness on his manhood reminded him of her every time he moved his legs. He was very glad that William’s storage room was in fairly porous rock and that the expansion, including long lengths of rock hewn shelves, was done well before dinner time. For by that time another imperative had gradually been making itself felt – one he had not considered when he had encouraged Catherine to tie on her “gift. He was almost at a run by the time he entered his chamber, hitting his head on something so unexpectedly heavy in his doorway that it almost toppled him. He was well aware that Catherine was there and waiting for him. He dropped his pants and long johns.

“Catherine,” he groaned, loudly. “You must remove this thing. I need to use the bathroom.”

Catherine was behind him quickly and removed it without a word. Vincent staggered into the bathroom, trying not to trip over his pants. His relief, when he was finally able to empty his bladder, was so intense it left him momentarily weak. He stood there for long moments, trying to get his composure back. Well, at least he had not felt the cold, he reflected. He felt Catherine’s amusement. He pulled up his long johns but removed all his outerwear, which was covered in rock dust. He threw the clothes into the laundry basket, then looked around for Catherine.

Vincent’s appearance had caught Catherine by surprise. She had not realized how much of the day had gone. Holding the “gift” and twirling it around her hand absently, she looked at the rug in the door, realizing that she had not taken Vincent’s height into sufficient consideration. However, if he had not been in such a hurry, he probably would not have hit it, she thought. In any case, it was time to display it. She released the belt and pulled the rug over the entrance. It completely covered it, the lower fringe dragging on the floor. The lovely colours were mellowed by the light from the stained glass window and the slight draft moving it from behind made it shimmer as if a breeze were shaking the forest of birds. The backing, she knew was light enough to be visible to anyone approaching their doorway, especially if they carried a lantern. She was sure that Mary would tell Father and the children about this new development. Gossip would take care of anyone else.

Vincent found Catherine twirling his peter heater and examining the very thing that had hindered his entrance. He padded over and stood behind her looking at the rug. His breath caught in his throat.

“Catherine,” he breathed into her hair. “Where on earth did you find that? It rivals the tapestries in the Great Hall.

You have brought a magical forest into my ... our ... chamber.”

He put his arms around her, hugged her to him, feeling his manhood stiffening against his long johns – and knew that she felt it too.

She turned into his embrace and hugged him tightly, whispering into his chest which was covered only by an undershirt.

“Isn’t it marvelous? Annabelle found it for me, and a pole. Jamie installed it for me.”

“Ah, so you’ve met our tiny treasure.”

“Yes Vincent. She has a heart as big as yours – in a body one-quarter the size.”

Vincent laughed, hugging her tighter.

“Well, this body desperately needs a bath. Care to join me?”

Catherine looked up at him, her eyes glittering.

“After beating that rug, which must have been in an attic for a century, I could use one too,” she conceded, as she hung up the pete heater on a knob of Vincent’s wardrobe. She looked down at herself, realized she looked as filthy as she felt. Getting the rug installed had been her first priority.

Without further ado, they shed their clothes and holding hands, padded to the bath chamber. Vincent put a towel on the privacy hook, just in case, then showed Catherine where a very gentle ramp allowed them to move their bodies down until they floated in the warm water, their shoulders nudging the stone. He kept his arm under her neck so he could hold her if she floated away. Her head rested lightly on the stone ramp.

Vincent regarded Catherine’s body as she drifted beside him, half submerged, and he was again taken with her seemingly fragile beauty – in reality steel sheathed in silk. Her breasts, relieved of gravity, floated just below the surface of the water, her nipples slightly aroused, above it. Her limbs were firm and white, the only darkness that lovely triangle between her legs.

Thinking about that made his sheathed manhood rise in the water and he closed his eyes, enjoying the sensation of water lapping around his testicles, caressing his column. He was much more sensitive to any kind of touch now, he realized. His urges were no longer something to ignore and repress – but something that could be satisfied with the woman he loved beyond everything. He was happy and felt a purr growing in his abdomen.

Catherine felt the peace emanating from the man next to her and let it soak into her with the warm water. She had never felt so gloriously relaxed. She loved swimming naked, but had seldom found the opportunity to do so – and had never liked the idea of group hot tubs. This freedom in warm water was heady and she felt her arousal growing as the water kissed her private places. She spread her legs a bit wider to expose more of herself to it and let her head slump against Vincent’s shoulder, grateful for his arm under her neck. He was the perfect anchor, being larger and heavier. She opened one eye, just a little, and saw the obvious indication of his arousal. She knew he could feel hers as well, but also knew that he did not want to break the spell any more than she did. She could feel his purr vibrating in the water and wondered if anything, Above or Below, could make her happier than she felt right now. She fancied she could feel the steamy air kissing her face and nipples like a benediction.

They lay there for long minutes, the shifting steam curtain a calming influence. Then Vincent pulled Catherine closer to him, realizing that they were both in danger of falling asleep. He let himself slide down a bit further into the water and lifted her until she lay along the top his body, her buttocks on his pelvis. He felt her arousal and moved so that his manhood rose between her legs. She closed them, trapping him between her thighs and he growled in reaction. The sensation of water lapping around them with its soft caress, made Vincent suddenly feel as if he could climax without further encouragement. But he ached to have her warmth around him again.

He relaxed against the stone and manoeuvred himself beneath Catherine so he could position his manhood for entry, then lifted himself into her. They both sighed in happiness as their warmth merged. He crossed his longer limbs over hers and arched his hips, lifting her a little. He was now throbbing inside her.

Catherine wondered if anything could ever match the sheer joy she felt when Vincent was inside, swelling to fill

her. She could feel his belly tighten under her as he felt her arousal. She turned her head back to try and nuzzle his neck. Failing to quite reach it, she put her arms behind it instead and locked her hands together to give herself leverage. He whuffed on her hair, arched his back as she tightened her grip and worked her vaginal muscles, feeling him tense inside her. Catherine shuddered in pleasure as Vincent pumped his hips, making little wavelets in the water, moving himself almost out of her and then pushing in slowly, so slowly that she felt herself losing control in sheer anticipation.

Vincent realized that he could not delay much longer. He looked along Catherine's body and saw her nipples erect and her stomach heaving with tension. When she suddenly tightened her inner muscles, he was transported into an orgasm that carried her with him, a deep and mutual joy that made them both groan in pleasure. He gathered her to him, slid down a little further into the water, allowing her to float in his arms. They floated this way for several minutes, letting their love for each other fill every part of them. Then, his purr vibrating against them, he let his legs drop so that his feet touched the bottom of the pool and lifted Catherine in his arms, letting his penis slide out and turning her to face him.

"Oh Catherine," he whispered in one of her delightful ears. "How is such joy possible?"

"Because we want it so," she whispered.

Their reverie was suddenly interrupted by the meal signal. They looked at each other. Vincent's expression was one of surprise. He had not realized how late it was.

"I guess that means we'd better attend to more mundane things – like food," Catherine murmured, feeling suddenly hungry. She rolled off Vincent and pulled him to the ramp, finding a bar of soap. Vincent quietly took it from her.

"My turn," he said. He soaped her gently, quickly and efficiently, everywhere, and then himself. Once again, he carried her to the centre of the pool and dunked her, then let her stand on the bottom while he rinsed himself. Then he carried her out of the pool and wrapped her in a large bath towel and carried her back to his chamber. He would have liked to have taken his time drying her, but once again, there were other considerations.

Catherine dried quickly, combed out her damp hair. while Vincent padded back for another towel. Catherine put on her tunnel garb and tossed her filthy sweats into the laundry basket. She would need another change of clothes, she realized. Vincent returned looking much drier in a few minutes and quickly put on a pair of thick socks, soft pants, a long undershirt and a grey sweater that reached well down his thighs. He topped this with an even longer vest, then looked at her, realizing that she had been watching him for some time.

"What?"

"Your sartorial splendor never ceases to amaze me," she said huskily. "Vincent, I think you would look sexy to me no matter what you wore. Maybe its because I now know what you are hiding under all those layers."

Vincent said nothing, not wanting Catherine to know that his layers had another purpose now. What he was "hiding" was the reason he might have to wear longer clothing – and looser pants – from now on.

Everything she said or did – even her looking at him - seemed to go straight to his groin. His reaction was all too visible in his usual garb. He wondered if this was going to be a permanent problem, and laughed. Not so long ago he could never have imagined he would be in such a predicament.

"What's funny," Catherine asked, sensing that Vincent was also slightly embarrassed, but unsure of its cause.

Vincent dissembled. He still had some vestige of modesty left, even with Catherine.

"I think I will need some looser clothing soon. All this unusual ...um ... activity has is making me ... um ... sensitive."

"I hope that doesn't mean you'll be wearing underwear," Catherine joked. "I like the idea that you are just a layer away from me on the bottom - most of the time."

Vincent looked at her with mock sternness. "Catherine, there are other considerations besides ease of access."

Catherine laughed loudly and Vincent was unable to refrain from joining her.

Smiling happily, they left the chamber holding hands and made their way to the dining chamber.

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Dinner Below was a much more sombre affair than breakfast or lunch. There was none of the banter, just a sense of community satisfaction. Nobody seemed inclined to talk much and many were obviously tired after a long day of work. Even the children were subdued. Catherine managed to catch Annabelle's eye and give her a smile and "thumbs up."

William's food, this time a beef bourgignon with hot rolls, was enough to satisfy anyone, Catherine thought. She gratefully sopped up every drop of the rich gravy and sighed. A pitcher of beer was passed around and although she did not usually like beer, she found the malty brew – presumably one made below - an ideal accompaniment. She could feel it mellowing her as well. No bad thing, she realized.

When the dessert, an apple cobbler, made the rounds, she was able to pack away a sizeable piece of that with whipping cream. Her appetite amazed her. Was it just the lovemaking? She loved being able to eat like this. Food had never tasted so good to her.

Vincent watched surreptitiously as Catherine ate her hearty way through everything offered. He realized she was truly enjoying her meal. This surprised him, given her access to the best Above had to offer. He had no experience with the eateries above, but he had assumed they had ingredients and tastes foreign to the tunnels.

When everyone was relaxing over tea, he sighed and clasped Catherine's hand in his own. He could not remember ever feeling so complete, so satiated, in every sense of the word.

He looked around at his extended family and realized that several people had caught the look on his face and were grinning at him. Cullen and Kanin were almost leering. Even Father had a twinkle in his eye. They all looked quickly elsewhere when he focused on them. No one said anything, and he was grateful for that, for Catherine's sake. She seemed drowsy, which was a bonus. She would need time to get used to the usual Tunnel banter and everyone's awareness of each other, which manifested itself openly in so many ways.

As people started drifting away to their Chambers, Vincent was obviously keen to leave as well. Catherine followed him, smiling at Father and her other friends as they left, arm in arm. Back in his Chamber, he sat in his big chair and she wrapped her arms around his neck and leaned over to kiss him.

She stroked his hair and found a delectable ear.

"I think I'll get into bed," she whispered into it. "I'm pooped."

She took off her clothes, crawled over the bolsters and pulled up a sheet and blanket – they had forgotten to make the bed – then sighed happily and drifted off to sleep.

Vincent, who had been watching Catherine prepare for bed, was so tired that he was almost unable to move. He undressed and got into bed carefully, tardily realized the bed was unmade. He decided he couldn't care less. He eased close enough to Catherine to keep her warm and put his arm over her. She snuggled into his chest. He pulled the blankets over them both.

He felt such a vast happiness that he sighed. This was the first complete day and night they had ever spent together below, as a couple, in his chamber. And the second in his bed. It was too much to get his mind around – so he didn't try. He quickly fell asleep, his purr quivering along their bodies.

Catherine, who had half-awakened, felt as if she was lying on a vibrating waterbed. What could be better? Maybe she would find out – another day.

END