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by Angie

# Never Apart

*“Parting is all we know of heaven  
And all we need of hell*

- Emily Dickenson

For the first time in many years, Vincent and Catherine were apart.

Catherine had gone to visit Nancy for a few days because her friend needed her. Nancy had had a miscarriage and was coping badly. Her husband had phoned Catherine and admitted he was at his wit's end. His voice, rough with lack of sleep and despair, had been all she'd needed to galvanize her.

Catherine owed Nancy a debt of gratitude for her help at a time of crisis. Nancy's matter-of-fact talk had helped her realize that the road to a "happy life" was not without bumps and curves. She and Vincent had been at a crossroads in their relationship then. Now, their life was filled with wonders unimagined at the time. Perhaps she could impart that happiness to Nancy.

She packed hurriedly and left with a long goodbye kiss and a promise to return as soon as she could. Understandably, she could not say when that would be.

Now, two days after her departure, Vincent was feeling her physical absence like a pain. Even though their bond kept them close emotionally, it wasn't enough.

Little Jacob, now six, seemed less concerned than his father. He had been occasionally pensive in his classes, according to Brooke, but Vincent could be accused of that too. In fact, he was distracted to a far higher degree. Twice he found himself wandering down a tunnel, with no memory as to how he got there – or worse, what he had set out to do.

Father tried to interest him in sorting a shipment of books that had recently arrived, but when Vincent put a children's book in the reference pile and a mechanics manual in the children's pile, Father had heaved a huge sigh.

"Vincent, your mind isn't on this task, delightful as it is. Vincent?"

Vincent looked up, tried to get his swirling thoughts under control, glanced at the book in his hand blindly, then met Father's eyes. The sympathy he saw there was almost his undoing.

"I ... I'm sorry, Father. I don't know what's wrong with me. I feel ... like I've lost something and forgotten what it is."

Father looked concerned. He didn't have to ask what Vincent thought he had lost.

"Surely, your bond with Catherine is unimpaired. Isn't it?"

"Yes – but her emotions are not the ones I'm used to – that I've known for so long. She's completely absorbed in her friend. I can feel her concern, her pain almost, but ..."

"But those concerns haven't left much room for you. Is that it? Aren't you being a bit selfish, Vincent? After all, Catherine had a life before she met you. She has almost completely divorced herself from it in order to help us and be with you and a mother to Jacob. This time, an old friend needs her. She would not be your Catherine if she had declined to help."

"I know that, Father. It's not selfishness on my part – at least I hope not. I just miss knowing exactly where she is, and knowing she's within reach in minutes, safe. I'm so used to feeling her warmth and love around my heart almost every minute of every day. It's still there, but it seems somehow ... static, distant. That hasn't happened in a very long time."

"Vincent, you know Catherine's safe where she is. Perhaps you need to shunt these thoughts onto a sideline during the day. I think that's what your son does. He can feel Catherine through the bond, just as you can. That's enough comfort for him."

Vincent sighed. How could he explain to Father that it wasn't just her emotions as she thought of him he was missing. He missed her physical presence too, the way she leaned close against him when they hugged, her kisses on his lips, their lovemaking at night, her stroking his manhood into hardness every morning. These special moments were part of his daily existence. He felt lost without those reminders of their love. He caught himself. Just thinking about those reminders made his groin ache.

He looked at Father again and saw the understanding in his eyes. Neither man had to say anything. Then Father's face got a thoughtful expression.

"Vincent, surely Catherine isn't busy all night with her friend. Perhaps you should try to use your bond to ... um ... communicate - in those hours when you are both feeling the separation."

Vincent had been reluctant to try that, mainly because he had no idea what Catherine was doing. Now he reassessed the idea. Surely, if it wasn't convenient, Catherine would let him know along the bond. Yes, it would give him comfort to feel her strongly, however briefly.

"You're right, Father. I'm sure she's feeling the separation too. I have been holding back, not wanting to distract her. But I can't go on like this. Tonight, I'll see what can be done."

The decision gave Vincent some peace of mind and he finished sorting the books with Father, almost enjoying the work. He even saw a title or two that intrigued him. He made a mental note to borrow them when he had reduced the unread pile on his own table somewhat.

He and Jacob stayed below that night. Their son liked to sleep in the boy's dorm as often as he could. Vincent suspected the attraction was the mischief that existed whenever several boys were together, but was just as happy to have his chamber to himself that night. It was a place he had often spent dreaming of Catherine in those early days of their love. It seemed appropriate now.

Vincent took off all his clothes and slid under the heavy quilt. Then he stretched out and cleared his mind of everything except Catherine, making sure that his bond with Jacob was kept apart. He reached out along the bond, seeking the woman who meant everything to him. He had hardly opened himself completely when he felt her surprise and joy. Catherine!

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That first day and night at Nancy's, Catherine missed Vincent desperately. It was worse than being homesick. She could feel his love along their bond, as well as little Jacob's, but it was remote somehow. She missed knowing he was close, missed the feel of his hirsute body next to hers at night, watching him stretch like a cat in the morning, his purr after they made love.

Then she realized he was probably dampening his own reactions to their separation, in order to allow her the emotional freedom to help her friend. She was grateful for that consideration – at least during the day.

Nancy had been a wreck when she'd arrived, listless and thin, with no appetite. Catherine had been shocked at the difference from her last visit. Nancy had aged, of course, as had she, but there was more.

Eight years ago, Nancy had been a pillar of strength and Catherine had cried on her shoulder with the pain she had felt after leaving Vincent in the tunnels, as upset as she. He had told her they should end their relationship, that he couldn't bear to see her upset and know himself the cause. Later, she had realized she had to make a decision – and that he had wanted to give her the space to do so. She couldn't keep dragging him along on her emotional rollercoaster. It wasn't fair. The visit to Nancy's had focused her thoughts. She knew then that she couldn't live without him – and didn't want to. She'd known he would be there waiting at the culvert. His joy was as great as her own when they hugged and kissed. After that, their love had been a constant source of comfort to them both. It had grown and blossomed – and at last given them a gift beyond price – their son, Jacob.

Now it was Nancy who needed to be brought out of herself, to see the love which waited for her. The next day, Catherine had taken Nancy into the garden and sat her down in the gazebo with a pitcher of lemonade and a plate of chocolate brownies. She had held her friend's hand and, for lack of any other topic, had talked about her own life, about what had happened since she'd cried on Nancy's shoulder, and been comforted, those many years ago.

Catherine could not go into great detail, of course. She did not mention the underground world, just that the man in her life was different, but so special, those differences only made her love him more.

Nancy had become interested and then curious. She had asked questions about Vincent, of course, and Catherine had described him in terms any woman would understand. She praised his strength, his voice, his intelligence, his long golden hair, even his lovemaking, but had not mentioned what set him apart. They didn't matter to her, but she couldn't share them with anyone else, not without his knowing. By the time she had finished, she had also hinted at the challenges they had faced as a couple. Nancy was now looking more like her old self, less self-absorbed. Colour had returned to her face and her eyes looked less haunted. She had remembered her long ago curiosity about the special man in Catherine's life.

The big question remained, and Catherine was not surprised when her friend asked it.

"Then why is he forced to remain hidden, Cathy? He sounds like a wonderful man, someone anyone would be privileged to meet."

Catherine's mouth had quirked as she considered her reply. She had spoken softly and looked her friend in the eye.

"He IS very special, Nancy. I love him with all that I am, and he loves me the same way. But he looks very different. Not ugly – at least to me – but ... unique, unusual. To those who can't see beyond appearances, he would be ... frightening.

"But Nancy, he is the most loving, most gentle man I have ever known. He's seen the expression on people's faces when they first meet him. It hurts him – and me. You see, we have an empathic connection. We've been ... connected, ever since he saved my life. He is everything to me. I will shield him from those who can't understand with my last breath. He is my life. And we have Jacob, our son. He doesn't resemble Vincent, but he has his father's greatness of spirit, his passion for learning – and his loving nature. We're very happy. Nothing else can matter in the face of that."

Nancy had risen from her chair and she and Catherine had hugged for long minutes.

"Oh, Cathy," she said at last. "Thanks for telling me this. I won't ask for any more details. Perhaps I can meet your Vincent one day. You make me ashamed of myself. You've dealt with challenges that I can't even imagine, that no one could. Yet here you are – helping a stupid, weak, distraught woman deal with something thousands of other women have survived. I'm blessed with a loving family. I've put them through hell, Cathy!"

Catherine had held her friend's hand and spoken carefully.

"No, Nancy, not hell. They don't judge you, any more than I do. Don't be ashamed. I have shouldered my challenges willingly – but it hasn't always been easy. You didn't choose to have a miscarriage. That's the difference. But it wasn't your fault. And I envy you as much now as I did all those years ago. You have friends and family, children and a husband who can accompany you on vacations, to the opera, the museums. My life will never be completely normal. Nancy, you *are* strong and have so much to be thankful for. Your strength saved me eight years ago. You made me understand my heart. You've always known your own."

Nancy had broken out crying then, and she and Catherine had sat down on the gazebo steps and held each other. Catherine had stroked her hair and rubbed her back. She pulled her love from deep inside and tried to surround Nancy with some of what she and Vincent shared. She'd felt her friend relax. When she had looked up at last, it was with a slight smile. The healing could begin.

That night, her mission a success, Catherine found she needed Vincent desperately. She took off her clothes, lay down on the bed and closed her eyes. Then she opened her side of the bond completely. She knew he was there, loving her as much as she did him, but she wasn't sure if she should initiate anything.

Then she felt him connect to her, so strong and so welcome that her joy exploded down the bond like lightning, before she could stop it. Vincent replied in kind.

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Over the seven years of their lovemaking, Catherine and Vincent had come to know each other's bodies very well. Although they could not read each other's minds, their bond transmitted emotions with great detail. As they engaged in foreplay, their thoughts engendered emotions that were specific to what they were doing and feeling with hand, tongue and lips – but always tempered with other sensations. The feel of their skin touching, their breath on each other, their kisses – all either enhanced or muted their emotional reactions as they touched each other in their secret places – or anywhere else.

For instance, Catherine had discovered that if she explored the cleft in Vincent's upper lip with her tongue, and touched his manhood, he would reach near climax very quickly. Vincent had found that his lips on Catherine's nipples, coupled with his manhood pushing against her thighs, would do the same thing.

Now, separated by distance, they would make new discoveries, impossible any other way.

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Catherine sent Vincent a surge of love and desire, so strong that he felt his manhood rise to attention. He returned it with interest and felt her emotions soften into the deep passion that always warmed him through and through.

She must have been waiting for him to make the overture. She did not have quite the proficiency with their bond that he had, but surely she knew he would be missing her. Well, it didn't matter. Vincent concentrated, wondering whether they could make love along their bond. They both needed the release, he sensed. And there was only one way to find out.

First he had to make sure she wanted to play this lover's game. How could he do that? There was only one way. He couldn't pretend – he'd have to be physically committed as well. He closed his eyes and reached down between his legs. He wrapped his hands around his testicles and hefted them, as he knew Catherine liked to do. The sensation, even in his own hands, made him groan and an erotic shiver ran through him. He knew that would be transmitted along the bond.

After so many years as lovers, Catherine could have no doubt about what he was doing. He waited.

Lying spread-eagled on the bed, naked under the sheets, Catherine felt Vincent's sudden erotic shudder and knew exactly what he had done. Only one thing felt like that to her, but this was more intense, more ... pure. Of course, there were no other distractions now. She let Vincent know she would play with a flash of desire along their bond.

Catherine imagined replacing his hands with her own and began stroking those furry globes, as she loved to do. She could almost feel him purr as she did so. He loved to be touched – anywhere. She knew he felt her fantasy, transmitted via her own love of the sensation she knew so well. She felt what amounted to a gasp along their bond.

Vincent let Catherine fantasize about his testicles and decided that he needed some fantasy of his own. He imagined his hand sliding down between her legs, stroking the curly hair there, softly, sensuously. He didn't try to move any further, yet.

It was Catherine's turn to gasp as she realized what he was doing with those wonderful – if imaginary - hands of his. She sighed, momentarily losing track of what her own hands were supposed to be doing.

Then she got a grip on herself and moved her phantom hands up his shaft, slowly, squeezing just a little. She could imagine it hard and hot under her hands, as it always was by this time in their foreplay. She used both hands now to pull him up, just a little, and surround his crown with her fingers. He was so large, it took both hands to do it justice. Then she imagined moving her hands to one side and sliding her body along him, so that his engorged organ rested between her breasts. She sighed in contentment.

She felt another shudder – one that told her he would explode if she wasn't careful. It was too soon. She relaxed and just held him against her. It was his move now.

Vincent groaned. He had no doubt what she was imagining. She loved to feel his manhood between her breasts and her emotions along the bond at that time were soft and joyous. Then he suddenly felt her stillness and realized it was his turn again.

He imagined he spread apart her labia with his fingers and slowly began to move his index finger into the warm wet slot that waited for him. He found the little nub and coaxed it into swollen anticipation. Then he paused again. He didn't want to bring her to climax just yet.

Catherine shivered as she felt Vincent fantasizing about her clitoris. She felt his joy at the contact, at stroking the moist and fevered place he loved. His fingers were warm and softly-haired and there was just that *frisson* of danger from his nails. Once again, she gave herself over to sensation and forgot her own role. Vincent, she realized at last, had much better control. Get a grip, Chandler, she told herself, and chuckled at the pun.

She realized they were both on the brink of climax now. Perhaps there was no need to prolong the agony. Fire was running along her skin and she felt as if she were going to spontaneously combust. She didn't want that – not without Vincent doing the same. The next move would have to be done with care. Their bond would help her fine-tune it.

She imagined herself moving up his body, until his manhood was between her legs. It would be fully erect now and she would be able to clasp it between her thighs, feel that hot, eager length pulsing with desire. She let him know she was ready to proceed, if he was.

Vincent shuddered as the bond told him what she was doing. Now his manhood was burning, as he realized where she imagined it to be. She paused and he sent a quiver of erotic desire down the bond.

Canting her hips upwards, as if to make sure he was positioned properly, she felt his warmth as she let him slide into the hot wetness waiting for him. Slowly she imagined herself easing onto his shaft until he was buried inside her completely. They became one aching desire.

Vincent groaned as he felt Catherine open to him. He wanted to feel her body and imagined his hands cupping her buttocks. He tilted his hips a little on the bed, as he would have if she was there, and felt her warm moistness surrounding his manhood. He felt himself swell in anticipation, throbbing and filling her.

Suddenly, there was no more separation. They groaned in unison, many miles apart, and knew they had. Their urgency was extreme now. They writhed on their distant beds, moved against each other, felt their heat build to an inferno. Then in a flash, they both surrendered and a luscious orgasm engulfed them, sending waves of sated passion and love back and forth along their bond until their joy carried them into a place of complete surrender and love. Then Vincent's deep, silent roar seemed to shimmer down the bond and Catherine quivered and gasped in delight.

Vincent let his hips fall back to the bed in exhaustion, then felt the warmth of his ejaculation on his stomach and sighed in happiness. He felt Catherine relax in response and realize her own liquid was warming the inside of her thighs. Despite their relative positions, he now felt himself lying atop her. His manhood was between her thighs, flaccid. He could feel her soft warmth under him, her legs resting between his own, her breasts with their hard nipples against his chest.

Catherine felt Vincent relax and knew he was now on top of her in his fantasy. She loved to feel his muscled softness against her this way, iron under velvet. He no longer worried about his weight on her. She imagined herself hugging him close, felt

the slick wetness between them, the tingle of their bond as their love enclosed them.

Then Vincent imagined her lips, open and soft, and gathered them in his mouth, massaged them and stroked them with his tongue. He felt Catherine reach out to him, push her tongue between his teeth and wrap it around his own.

Suddenly, still wrapped in the afterglow of his climax and Catherine's joy, Vincent realized he was purring. He felt better than he had since she left, sated and relaxed.

The calm and delight he sent along the bond told Catherine he was vibrating with his purr and she imagined it running along her body in waves, as it always did. Oh yes, this purr was remarkable. It seeped into her bones and garnered a response from her that seemed to go beyond anything she had felt before. It was as if their bodies had merged at last, were one – even as distant as they were. She held onto that sensation, let it carry her into sleep.

Vincent felt Catherine's response and realized she knew he was purring and that their bond was tangled into a kind of love knot that made them inseparable. He felt her drift into contented sleep and let himself follow her.

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The next day, Catherine went down to breakfast, drawn by the delightful smells. In the kitchen, Nancy was working like a dervish, making pancakes, bacon, sausages and scrambled eggs. Toast was already piled on a plate and the smell of herbed oven fries was coming from the oven. A coffee pot was sending out wonderful waves of fragrant Colombian.

Catherine took over watching the eggs and sausages, while Nancy put the now crisp bacon on a warming platter and opened up the oven to extract the oven fries.

As she was doing this, the rest of the family came into the kitchen and regarded the two women and all the activity with amazement.

Nancy looked at them and laughed. Catherine, who had begun to load up the kitchen table with food, went back for the coffee pot and gave her a smile. She looked at the stunned crowd in the doorway and laughed too.

"Come on, you guys! It's getting cold!"

After breakfast, Nancy and Catherine went to the gazebo again. Nancy was smiling as she looked at her friend. There was something different about Cathy today. She seemed less tense, more relaxed and happy. Nancy knew it was not just her own recovery that had brought that about.

If she had not known it to be impossible, Nancy would have thought Vincent had paid a visit during the night. Then her eyes widened as she looked at Catherine. There was that unmistakable softness around the eyes that always gave lovers away. They *had* been together - but not in the physical sense!

Catherine saw the knowledge appear on her friend's face and nodded. Nothing more was said. Nancy couldn't think of anything that wouldn't be an invasion of the lovers' privacy. She realized it was another aspect of the miracle of their love.

"Oh, Cathy. How can I ever thank you? You've given me a new lease on life."

"Nonsense, Nancy. I think you were ready to heal when I got here. You were groping around in a dark place, though. I merely distracted you so you realized that place was just a line on the ground and you could just step over it."

Nancy hugged Catherine to her, wondering anew why this woman had so much strength in her small frame. Then she knew the answer. She looked at Catherine and saw the agreement there. Catherine smiled.

"Nancy, no thanks are necessary. It's been a pleasure. You know, I believe that life never throws anything at us we can't deal with, if we try, if we have confidence in ourselves. We never see the truly impossible things. We each have to face ourselves first, realize we are strong, and find the solution best for us. Sometimes we have to change our way of thinking, adapt, see a problem from a different angle – but there's always an answer.

"Vincent taught me that. His challenges are very real, but he has never let them define him. He's amazing, Nancy. He has no animosity, no hatred in him. He is what he is – and he has taught me the importance of accepting oneself and giving love in full measure. It's a gift beyond price.

"He complements me, and I him. We are two halves of a whole. There is nothing more I could want."

Nancy smiled again.

"Cathy, if you don't say I can meet this man of yours, I will haunt your dreams until you do."

"All right, Nancy. I don't know when that will be, but I'll try to work out something. Perhaps you can come to New York and

stay with us for a few days. There's a great deal at stake in this – not just Vincent and Jacob. It will take some planning, and you must come alone and never tell anyone what you see. Can you pretend you're just going on a shopping trip, or something, and visiting an old friend?"

Nancy saw that Catherine was serious and wondered what other secrets she was hiding.

"Catherine, you know I would never betray a confidence. You have my word that whatever you say is necessary, I will do – and tell no one. But I want very much to meet your family."

"Then you will, Nancy. I'll pack my bags and go home now. I'll be in touch, as soon as I can. Please be patient."

Two hours later, Catherine was driving back to New York, her mind full of plans for Nancy's visit. It would be nice to have her friend around for a few days in her city. Vincent would welcome her. The tunnel community would need some advance warning and preparation, but she had no doubt that Nancy would be loved there too. It would happen, but right now, she had more immediate concerns.

Catherine parked the car in the garage she rented down the street from the brownstone. She could feel Vincent's anticipation as she walked down the sidewalk and up the steps to their home. His eagerness to see her was almost overwhelming. She felt a hot flash along their bond that warmed her core as she turned her key in the lock and opened the door. It was dark in the hallway with the door closed. She dropped her suitcase on the floor and waited for her eyes to adjust. Then she saw him. He was standing at the foot of the stairs, completely and beautifully naked.

Without a thought, Catherine tore off her clothes and let them fall to the floor. In a moment she was enveloped in his arms, his delightfully soft and hairy body welded to her own, their passion enclosing them, shutting out everything else. She sighed and looked up at his face. He dropped a kiss on her lips that fired her anew. Without a word, he bent down, lifted her in his arms and carried her upstairs to their bedroom.

Vincent laid Catherine gently on the bed, then stretched out beside her, filling his eyes with her beauty for long moments. She let her eyes travel his length and then come to rest on his penis, aroused in swollen anticipation, with unfettered passion. Then he gathered her in his arms and pulled her to him, winding his legs around hers as if he had to touch her in as many places at once as possible. She felt that need too, and hugged him close, pulling his head down so she could smother his face with kisses, real ones this time. He was wonderfully solid in her arms now. She whispered under his hair into an ear.

"Oh, Vincent."

"Catherine," his voice was the silken rasp she loved above all others, almost a purr.

There were no more words for a long time. They needed none now or ever, together or apart.

END



# Friends and Foes

*Boldness be my friend  
Arm me, audacity.*

- Shakespeare

## Chapter 1

Vincent was leading a literature class which was reading *The Lord of the Rings* - but his mind was elsewhere.

Catherine was ill. He could feel her lethargy, discomfort and mild pain as if it was his own. She was in the clinic being examined by Father, but he worried anyhow. She had not had so much as a sniffle since giving birth to Jacob five years ago.

The children were fidgeting in their seats, since the class was almost over and it was both the last one of the day – they finished at noon on Fridays - and of the week.

He worried about them. There were a lot of children below these days and they were too apt to get into trouble. The Council had invited Isaac Stubbs to give the older children energetic self-defense classes in the Great Hall once a week. In between those lessons, they practiced in groups. But these little ones were the most likely to get into mischief, not least of all his son.

In the summer, they could go into the Park and run around, under supervision. But in the dull days after a long winter, before spring took firm hold, as now, they were twitchy. He wished they could set up some form of Jungle Jim somewhere, but the rocky caverns were not suitable for such things. Every child tried to climb the pipes in Pascal's pipe chamber once – but only once. Luckily, there had been no fatalities, but a lot of twisted ankles, scorched hands – and burning ears. Vincent led swimming classes twice a week, but even that was not enough for the excess energy of the smallest children.

They were now reading *The Two Towers* and the boys in the class were arguing about the weapons used, while the girls were discussing fortress food – and what to feed so many people and how to store it – before they reached that section. They had been reading about the battle with the wargs – the huge and terrible wolves ridden by orcs.

Vincent, half-listening, suddenly had a brainstorm. Wargs! They might be helpful. He played around with the word in his mind, then suddenly he focused on the class and rapped for attention. Jacob, always sensitive to his father's mood, looked up, interested.

"Children! I know you all think this book is fantasy, but there are lessons for us there. Has anyone any ideas what those might be?"

"Messages," Willis, Pascal's youngest, piped up.

"Working together," said another.

"Having good look-outs", said little Cathy.

"Know the enemy," said Jacob, precociously as usual.

"All necessary," Vincent agreed. "But there is more. In the Hornburg, there was an underground place too. We haven't read that part yet, but what do you think the dangers would be there?"

"Getting trapped if the fortress fell," said Willis.

"Explosions might cause cave-ins," remarked another.

"Maybe an orc would find a way in," called out Jacob. He had read ahead, obviously.

"Yes," said Vincent quietly. "Those dangers exist in a slightly different form here too. You all know them, but sometimes you forget them when you play. You already know you should never go wandering outside the home tunnels alone. You know why. If you got into trouble, no one would know where you are."

"But you and Mom always know where I am," Jacob declared.

Vincent sighed and looked sternly at this son.

"Jacob, that is true, but that won't help you if a bank gives way and you slip down the cliff or get buried under a rockslide. I can't be there immediately, neither can your mother. You could be dead before we reached you."

Jacob hung his head and said nothing. At least he was thinking now, Vincent thought with relief. He continued.

"We all know the dangers of our life here below. They are different to those above because they are natural dangers, generally not man-made. We have to be aware all the time, all of us – but especially you children. You have young eyes and are more active than we older folks. You can spot things we might miss. You must be our eyes and ears. So I have a way for you to remember our dangers, and what to watch out for.

"I'm calling them 'WARGS' – water, aliens, rocks, gas and steam."

There was a couple of whoops and a lot of laughter at the name – but the children soon calmed down when Vincent lowered his brows and regarded them with a mock stern expression.

"This is not a joke. It may save your life to remember this. So, let's go through them one by one, so we all understand what is meant. First – 'water'."

"Pipe leaks," said one child.

"What else?" Vincent asked.

"Water can cause mud slides," Jacob piped up. He had been told the story of the long-ago tunnel collapse. That had frightened him away from wet places for days.

"Yes. You have to keep your eyes open for shiny spots on the rock walls and wet floors - and if it's a new one, you must tell Mouse. He knows where all the water lines and streams are and marks leaks on our big map. He will also tell the rest of us.

"Second - 'aliens'. What do I mean by that?"

There was a silence for a moment. Vincent knew they were thinking about visitors from outer space, but also knew they would never say that. They knew the true definition. He waited.

"People who don't belong here. Topsiders. Strangers," chimed in several voices.

"Yes, that is correct. What do you do if you see one?"

"Run away and send a message on the pipes," said Willis.

"Yes. Don't ever try to approach a stranger, they might be armed, or sick, or lost. You must be able to describe them so that those who go to meet them can be prepared.

"Next is 'rocks'."

"That's easy - rock slides," piped up Jacob.

"That is one danger," Vincent agreed. "But how will you know about them if they happen when no one is nearby?"

"Always be careful," said Cathy.

"Yes. Even in places like the Mirror Pool, rocks can fall down and you could injure yourself if you dive or jump in. So wait until someone has checked to make sure it is safe.

"Gas'. How will you know about that?"

"Won't it smell?" asked one boy.

"It might," Vincent agreed. "But some of the most dangerous gasses are odourless. The best way to avoid danger is to know where the gas lines are. Some are very old. We have maps - and you have all been shown where the pipes are. However, pipes can leak unexpectedly. When you go into these areas, make sure you go single file and very carefully. If someone collapses in the front, leave the area quickly and get a message to us immediately. Don't try to rescue the person."

There was silence at this. No one wanted to think about leaving a friend or family member to die. Vincent looked at them and spoke quietly.

"Just because a person falls down, it doesn't mean they're dead. It's our body's self-protection. We need less oxygen when we're unconscious. We don't have much deadly gas here, but it can collect in low pockets in the tunnels. If we can get that person to Father quickly, they will recover. It's most important that you send that message right away so someone can come with a gas mask.

"The last danger is 'steam'. Any suggestions about what to do if you find a steam break?"

"Leave quickly and send a message," said one child.

"Yes. As always. There's something else you can do for this danger - and any other WARGS, you find. What is that?"

"Put a hash mark on the wall or in the dirt," said Jacob.

"Yes. A hash mark. You all carry a big piece of chalk in your pockets. That - and the hash mark, are not for x's and o's. Never forget to do that. It could save someone's life."

There were giggles from some of the girls, but they stopped quickly at Vincent's stern look.

"I will talk to Pascal about a special pipe code for the WARGS, so you can warn us quickly over the pipes. They'll be an announcement later.

"Now, class is over. I want all of you to remember WARGS and keep your eyes open at all times. Always know where your companions are. Do not play hide and seek outside the home tunnels. Never explore alone. In fact, for our next lesson, I want you all to write down at least two existing dangers apiece - and not the same ones. We'll post a list on the blackboard."

There were groans at this bit of homework, but they were mild. The children were obviously considering the dangers more carefully. They filed out quietly.

Vincent felt for Catherine and realized she had gone back to the brownstone. Jacob was standing in the doorway of the classroom. He could feel his mother's discomfort too.

"Please go to the dining hall, Jacob. I'll talk to Pascal and Father and meet you there."

Jacob left and Vincent went to the pipe chamber. Pascal was sitting on his stool with one ear against a main pipe. He looked

puzzled. Vincent stood next to him and waited to be noticed. Pascal jumped when he looked up and then rolled his eyes.

"Vincent, you're too quiet!"

"What are you listening too, Pascal?"

"Something odd. There seems to be a new word on the pipes. I think it's wargs. What on earth is going on?"

Vincent laughed. He explained the WARGS danger lesson he had given to the children.

"They seem to like the idea, but they also need a pipe code so that the danger can be addressed by adults."

Pascal stood up.

"Vincent, that's a brilliant idea! We should have thought of something like this long ago. Now let me think ..."

Pascal was silent for so long that Vincent wondered if he should leave. Catherine needed him and he was becoming anxious. Then Pascal shook himself and looked up at Vincent with a smile.

"I have it. Our codes, as you know, are simplified Morse code. I think we have to use our usual "SOS", and then use the first letter of the danger. The codes are simple enough, and once the SOS has been broadcast, all ears will wait for the letter code. I can't think of anything simpler."

Vincent nodded. "I think your way will work, Pascal. Perhaps you can make an announcement at supper, so that all the children will know what to do. They are now recording all the WARGS we know. We must do this quickly, before they find something new."

"Yes, I'll do that," Pascal promised. "How is Catherine?"

Vincent sighed. There were no secrets in the tunnels.

"Father has examined her and I will go to her shortly. She is not well."

"Well, give her my best wishes," Pascal requested.

"I will. Thanks Pascal. I must go now."

Vincent left on the run, Pascal's goodbye almost lost behind him. He went to the clinic and found Father examining Kipper, whose ripped pants told of a mishap.

"What happened, Kipper?"

"I slipped on the stone stairs."

Father snorted.

"He would have gone over the edge, except that his hood caught on a rock and he was left hanging. Kanin got to him quickly because Samantha sent an SOS and he just happened to be returning from working on a new chamber."

"How did you slip?" Vincent asked. The children were sure-footed long before they reached Kipper's age. Kipper was one of the older teens.

Kipper blushed.

"I ... I was trying to get away from Samantha. She keeps chasing me, always wanting me to go exploring with her. I don't want to."

"Then why not tell her so?" Vincent asked.

Kipper hung his head. "I don't like exploring. I want to help Cullen in his workshop. She always finds me there. This time, I heard her coming and ran."

"Running will not solve anything," Vincent told him. "Samantha will understand."

Kipper said nothing and when Father finished bandaging his leg, he slipped off the table and ran out.

Father sighed. "I think we'll have to have a talk with Samantha."

"I'll do it," Mary called from the medicine cabinet.

"How is Catherine?" Vincent asked.

"I think she has influenza." Father replied. "She must have caught it from one of her clients in the Foundation office. No one here has any signs of it. You'll have to watch her, Vincent. Keep her in bed and feed her clear soups and lots of liquids. I don't like the sound of her breathing. There may be complications."

Mary finished packing up the bandages and came over.

"Vincent, you'll want to nurse Catherine. Why don't you let Jacob stay with us for a couple of days. He likes it here, and he's no trouble. We can always arrange a spare bed in the dorm."

Vincent breathed a sigh of relief.

"Thank you, Mary. I hated to ask. He is a handful and I cannot watch him and care for Catherine too. I will tell Jacob – and get some food from William to take home with me."

He left hurriedly. Mary looked at Father.

"Does Jacob remind you of anyone?"

Father rolled his eyes.

"Who else? And Jacob has none of Vincent's caution."

"He just needs to learn to think before he acts. That will come."

"Soon, I hope," Father muttered.

Vincent found Jacob sitting down at a table, already eating, along with the rest of the tunnel children. The children were fed early and then sent to a new chamber the community had created for playing quiet games. They stayed there until the adults had finished their more relaxed dinner and exchanged news.

"Jacob, Mary has invited you to stay down here for a few days. Would you like that?"

"Sure. Can I see Mom?"

"Of course you can, but not today. She is quite ill with the flu. I will take some soup home and look after her until she is better. If you like, you can bring our meals up from William."

"Okay," Jacob said. "She isn't going to die, is she?"

Vincent took a deep breath and stared at his son.

"Why would you think that, Jacob? She only has the flu."

"I ... I heard people can die from the flu."

"Only if they don't get proper care, Jacob. Your mother will get the best care we can give her."

"Okay."

"You can also help by behaving yourself, son. No exploration parties."

"All right."

Vincent saw Pascal enter the dining hall and waved to him, then went into the kitchen to talk to William. He emerged a short time later with a large lunch hamper. Pascal was standing on a chair and addressing the hall about the new WARGS codes. Vincent nodded at him and left quietly, ruffling his son's hair on the way past.

He walked swiftly to the brownstone, left the hamper in the kitchen and went upstairs. Catherine was flopped on the bed, one boot off, still dressed and half-asleep.

Vincent quickly found a flannelette nightgown and began undressing her. She moaned and woke up, but seemed too lethargic to help much. He finally got the nightgown on her and she put her arms around him.

"Thank you," she whispered, before falling asleep in his arms.

He lay her down and covered her, then went back downstairs to eat. He ate a couple of rough sandwiches from the bread and meat William had included with the thick vegetable soup for him. There was also chicken broth in a covered pot for Catherine and he took it upstairs with a flask of water. They kept a small cabinet of essentials there for those nights they relaxed by the upstairs fireplace.

Vincent built up the fire and put the pot on the fireplace hob to keep warm, also placing the kettle at the ready. He looked at Catherine and could see her shivering under the covers. She must have a fever! Quickly, Vincent shed his clothes and got into bed with her, holding her tight against him and willing her to get well. What he felt along the bond was disturbing. She seemed disconnected, dreamy. However, she murmured something and snuggled into him, so he was pacified. Her skin was clammy as he settled himself in for a long night.

He had dozed off for a while when he was awakened by a coolness. Catherine had kicked the covers off both of them and seemed to be afire. Vincent re-thought his plan. She needed more than just his body. He carefully extracted himself and went into the bathroom, emerging with a couple of aspirins. He poured some warm water from the kettle into a glass and added a little brandy from their store. Catherine always swore it killed any stomach bug, but he knew it was also a good relaxant. Father used it on occasion to ensure his younger patients got to sleep.

Carefully, he woke Catherine up and made her swallow the pills and the drink. She looked at him, her eyes glazed, and she began to shiver violently. Her nightgown was damp, so he found another and managed to get her into it before she fell asleep again. He picked off a warm towel that had been hanging over the hot water radiator and joined her in bed again, wrapping her in it. The room was warm now, so she wasn't shivering from cold. He pulled her into his arms and was gratified

when she stopped shivering and sighed deeply. Once again he let himself fall asleep.

He awakened this time to a kiss on his neck. He looked down to see Catherine looking up at him, obviously no longer feverish.

"Vincent, I need to go to the bathroom, but my legs feel like cooked spaghetti."

Vincent raised himself then lifted Catherine off the bed and carried her to the bathroom in the towel, setting her down inside. He politely turned his head while she relieved herself and stood ready to catch her as she washed her hands. She looked up at him and smiled. He carried her back to bed and helped her get into yet another clean nightgown. She sank under the blankets with a sigh and went immediately to sleep.

Vincent was no longer tired and decided to read until she awakened and he could feed her some soup. He felt for Jacob along the bond and realized he was asleep. Looking at the clock he was shocked to realize it was now evening and he had missed supper. He sighed and sat in a chair by the fireplace, then got up immediately. He was hungry. He had better eat or he would be no use to Catherine.

Downstairs in the kitchen he found another hamper. Jacob must have delivered it while they were sleeping. The scents coming from it made his stomach rumble so he tucked in without further ado. William had sent up a hearty chicken stew, still warm, and a lot of bread, as well as some of his home-made cheese. The latter had been a project a couple of years ago. Now the tunnel community had a small stone larder with big rounds of many kinds of cheese. All their milk and cream came from William's sister Agatha, who had a farm outside the city. They gave her some of William's renowned beer in exchange. Since his and Catherine's visit to her when Jacob was a baby, and her return visit, she had made it her job to ensure they were supplied with everything her farm could provide. And that was substantial. They no longer worried about food below and had been able to accept more refugees from above. Many were orphaned children who were too likely to be unaware of dangers in their new home. Vincent hoped his WARGS idea would help.

Vincent washed down his meal with a bottle of William's dark ale. He sighed with contentment. How fortunate they were to have William! The big man produced meals that even finicky children would eat. And his desserts! Vincent looked in the basket and found a couple of huge fruit scones. He munched on one while he made tea for himself, washed the dishes from the hamper and put them back in it. While his tea steeped he carried the basket down the stairs to the tunnel entry and left it there. Jacob would replace it in the morning.

He carried his teapot upstairs with the remaining scone and sat down in his chair again. He didn't want to leave Catherine to go below, but he couldn't sleep any more either. He looked over at her. She was sleeping normally. Well, he was always complaining that he didn't have enough time to read, so now was his chance. He turned on the lamp and looked at the pile sitting beside the chair, running his eyes over the titles. He picked up the top one and was soon sunk in the lyrical prose of Lord Dunsany.

He read until he felt Catherine awaken and then took her the broth, helping her to sit up and then feeding her.

"You don't have to do this, Vincent," Catherine protested.

"I want to. You are still weak. Indulge me," he insisted.

Catherine sighed, almost choking on a spoonful of broth. Vincent grinned at her as she looked at him in embarrassment.

After she finished, he sat beside her and made a point of listening to her breathing. She rasped a little, he decided.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

"Tired," she replied. "My chest aches."

"You are not breathing well," Vincent told her.

"No. I think I may have an allergy."

"To what?" Vincent asked, surprised.

"Something in my office, or perhaps it's someone – or several someones. A lot of the women I see use heavy perfume. Sometimes I feel as if I'm suffocating," she admitted. "I never realized how unpleasant scents could be in a confined space."

"Why don't you open the window?" he asked.

"It's stuck, and I keep forgetting to mention it," she confessed.

"I'll get Cullen to see to it tomorrow. Now, I think you should drink some warm water and rest again."

"What about you? I miss you here beside me. I need you here, Vincent."

"I'll join you shortly, I promise."

He did so after he had made sure she drank a full cup of warm water. She cuddled up against him and he felt himself drift off with her, despite his worry that he would not be able to sleep. The bond, he thought.

## Chapter 2

They awakened early, before breakfast, and Vincent again carried Catherine to the bathroom, then helped her wash and put on another clean nightgown. He quickly stripped the bed and put on clean sheets while she sat in a chair, wrapped in a quilt. He would have to do some laundry, he realized. She only had one nightgown left. When she was back in bed and resting, he gathered an armload of soiled clothes and linens and went downstairs. He found Father sitting at the kitchen table, reading the morning paper, the breakfast hamper in front of him.

"Father!"

"Good morning, Vincent. How is our patient?"

"Catherine is much improved."

"Good. I thought I'd come and examine her before breakfast. William had a hamper ready, and since Jacob was lurking about the dining hall, we gave him the job of carrying it for me. He rushed back in unseemly haste, as if all the food would all disappear in that short time. That boy never misses a meal! I guess he's no longer worried about his mother."

"I hope he was no trouble, Father."

"None at all. He's very mature for his age. I think we might have a future leader in him – if we can teach him caution."

"Caution isn't always a good thing, Father."

"No, I see what you're getting at, Vincent, but the boy rushes into trouble like, well, like you used to."

"I think I have found a way to make all the children more careful, Father."

"Would that be the WARGS? You know, children were shouting that word all afternoon and evening, and running around the tunnels with little notebooks and pencils – to say nothing of confused pipe codes. I couldn't make sense of it because I ate lunch in my chamber. Finally, I asked Jacob just before supper. I had forgotten Tolkien. That was inspired, Vincent! Make something fun and those incorrigible children will do almost anything. Pascal filled us all in again at supper. Wish I'd thought of it!"

"Father, you had tricks of your own, as I recall."

"They usually involved punishment rather than fun – and weren't much good where you and Devin were concerned, in any case."

To this Vincent dropped his head to prevent Father from seeing his smile. Father didn't know half the adventures he and his brother had managed. He changed the subject.

"Would you like to go up and examine Catherine while I get this laundry in and prepare a breakfast tray?"

"Yes, good idea. And don't think I don't know why you didn't reply, Vincent. The less I know the better, I'll warrant – then and now."

With that, Father grabbed his medical bag and made his way upstairs.

Before he attended to food, Vincent went into their basement and loaded the washing machine and started the cycle. Then he went back upstairs, his stomach rumbling.

He opened the hamper to find a container of porridge, rich with the scent of cinnamon and raisins. He decided that Catherine should eat and filled two bowls, then added a pitcher of milk and a bowl of brown sugar. He carried the tray upstairs and found Father and Catherine laughing over something.

"Breakfast," he announced and put the tray on the bed.

"That looks like just what my patient needs," Father commented. "It smells so delicious, I think I'd better get back below before there's none left for me."

He looked at his son who was obviously waiting for his diagnosis.

"Catherine is much improved, Vincent. She should be able to get up for a while, whenever she feels ready, but she should rest for at least another day. She still has a low grade fever."

"Thank you, Father. I'll make sure she rests."

"Good. I'll tell Jacob the news, but I think he should stay below for today, so we can watch him. Catherine is probably still infectious, so I won't allow other visitors."

"As you wish, Father."

He left them and Vincent and Catherine tucked into their porridge.

"Visitors!" Catherine exclaimed, when she had finished in record time. "I promised Nancy she could come and visit after my

last visit to her. It seems like ages ago. She must think I've forgotten. Do you think Father will mind?"

"No, Catherine. As your friend – and the one who sent you back to me – she is forever my friend too, even though I have never met her. Father will agree. After all, he has met Jenny and Joe already. Nancy deserves to see what you ran home to."

"Not what, Vincent - whom! And come here, I need a hug from my favourite nurse."

Vincent grunted and put the tray on the floor. He gathered Catherine in a careful hug, sensing that she was still a little fuzzy around the edges.

He sighed inwardly. Catherine always corrected him when he used spoke as he had, but despite fathering a child, he would never know exactly what he was. Narcissa, he suspected, knew, but had never deigned to tell him in plain language. She told him once, bluntly, that questions were their own answers and some were best left unspoken. After that, she refused to say anything more. She had once referred to him as a being. He supposed he would have to be content with that.

Catherine pulled back and looked up at him.

"Vincent, don't worry. Nancy will love you, if only for my sake. You are the most wonderful man in the world. You light up my life – and that of many other people. Now, if you can bring me a notebook and pen, I'll try to plan Nancy's visit."

Vincent found what she wanted and then told her he must go below to get Cullen.

"That window will be fixed today," he promised.

"I can't kiss you yet," Catherine said sadly, "even if you are immune to this. But be ready for a big one soon."

"I won't be long," Vincent promised, leaving hurriedly before Catherine saw how her last words affected him.

He took the bowls and broth container down and washed them, then took the hamper with him to return to William. On the way through the tunnels, he kept seeing groups of children, rushing from one area to another, making notes. He shook his head in amazement at all the activity – but then, it was Saturday now. When he reached the dining hall, William was shoos a small group of children from his kitchen.

"OUT OF BOUNDS!" he roared at them. "My kitchen has NO WARGS!"

The children giggled and ran past Vincent. William regarded Vincent with a stern look.

"I hear you started this latest game," he growled.

Vincent felt his face heat up.

"It was not supposed to be a game," he replied. "It was homework."

William laughed so hard he had to sit down on the oversized bar stool he kept in the kitchen to rest on. When he was finally able to control himself, he realized that Vincent had not even smiled. He became serious.

"Vincent, I was joking. What you did was necessary – and no one but you could have motivated the little beggars like this. They may even find some hazards we're missing on our maps. I think we should perhaps do this more often – but more methodically. We aren't all aware of all the dangers."

Vincent got a pensive look. William waited.

"Perhaps we could paint a large map on the dining hall wall and colour-code and number the WARGS. We could make a side key listing the latest additions."

"There's a fairly flat piece of the kitchen common wall," William remarked. "We can get Kanin and a crew to make it smooth. It won't need much."

"Yes, I'll talk to him," Vincent agreed. "I'll get a group of our teens to paint the map later today. The sooner we get this "game" finished, the better, I think."

"Pascal is having fits," William revealed. "The children are hounding him to point out all the pipes with steam and water in them, so they can track them. The gas lines don't go that deep, fortunately."

Vincent sighed. "I will talk to Pascal again. Perhaps he should use the colour-coding on some of his pipes – especially the ones with valves. More of us should know which are which – just in case he's not available."

"I can see you will have a busy day, Vincent. Now I must get back to my cooking. How is Catherine? Will you need a lunch hamper?"

"Catherine is better, but she has a slight fever and her breathing is not good. Father says she must rest today, so a hamper would be appreciated."

"Come back later and I'll have your lunch one ready, Vincent."

"Thank you. I must go."

Vincent rushed to find Cullen and found him in his workshop. He looked harried. Vincent was sure he knew why and sighed inwardly.



"Cullen, the window in Catherine's office is stuck shut and she needs ventilation. Do you have time to fix it?"

Cullen regarded him with surprise, then picked up a small round fan from his workbench.

"I can do better than that, Vincent. Mouse found this somewhere. It's an insert that's installed in a window pane. It allows ventilation, even when it's too cold to open a window."

"Thank you, Cullen. When can you do it?"

"How would right now be? Those dratted kids are running around here like mice. Every time I turn around, one of them is lurking in the doorway. I don't have any WARGS here!"

Vincent laughed and made a fast exit. Next, he sent Pascal a message to forward, calling for all the children to meet in the schoolroom immediately. He waited as they filed in and stood expectantly. Then he looked at the smallest children and spoke, his face stern.

"I think you are taking the WARGS seriously, children, and I commend you. However, you are all getting underfoot – and that could be dangerous, because you are distracting people doing important work. Now here is my plan.

"Kipper, you will talk to Kanin and organize a work party to smooth the end wall in the dining room and then organize a team to paint our main tunnel map on it, as large as you can. You will have to borrow the main map from Father. You can leave now."

He waited until they had left and then faced the others.

"The rest of you children, I need your advice. We are going to add all the WARGS you found to the new wall map as coloured symbols. What symbols and colours should we use?"

Vincent took up a piece of chalk and found a space on the blackboard, which had a rather lopsided and messy list of WARGS.

"First, 'water'."

There was a silence, then little Cathy spoke up.

"I think water should be a drop and coloured blue."

Vincent drew a teardrop in blue chalk.

"Excellent. Next, we have 'aliens'."

"A stick man," suggested Jacob.

"That would take up too much room," Vincent told him. "It has to be a small symbol – easily recognized, but distinctive."

"A star?" asked Willis.

"Why that?" Vincent asked, curious.

"Well, we can't see the stars here - except in the Mirror pool."

"Yes, that is true. Thank-you Willis. That is sensible. I presume it should be yellow.

"Next is 'rocks'."

"A red rock cart," said Kanin's son, sketching a shape with his hands.

"Perfect," Vincent replied, drawing a shape wider at the top and narrowing, with a flat bottom from red chalk.

"Next is 'gas'."

There was a long silence at this and then some giggles, which Vincent stopped with a look.

"A pipe?" asked a small child timidly.

Vincent thought about that and then grinned.

"Excellent," he told them. He drew a vertical line with a hook on the top in green chalk.

"Why green?" he asked them.

"Because gas can make us sick – turn us green," Jacob piped up.

"Yes, Jacob. Thank you. Now, 'steam'."

"A kettle?" someone suggested, to laughs.

"No. Too difficult to draw," Vincent responded.

"A white geyser?" asked Jacob.

There were hoots at that. Vincent called for silence.

"I think that might work," he told them.

He drew a short vertical line with a half circle above it, flat side down, in white chalk. The children clapped.

"Now, I want you to copy the WARGS on this blackboard onto lined paper and mark them with the symbols we've decided on. Colours are not important, but you can add a key for the people painting the map in the dining hall. Then tell Father. He'll arrange to have your lists transferred to the map.

"Now I must go. Remember what I told you. Be considerate and don't get underfoot!"

Vincent left with relief, picked up the hamper William had ready, and headed home. He reached the brownstone entrance to find Cullen leaning against the wall.

"What is it?" Vincent asked.

"I fixed the window, Vincent, but I don't want to go back to my workshop, so I was trying to think of another job outside the home tunnels – and away from kids."

Vincent chuckled.

"You will be safe from them now," he reported. "They are helping create a special map on the wall of the dining hall. No more WARGS, at least for now."

Cullen sighed with relief. "Great news, Vincent. I'm sure you had a part in that. Thank you."

He gave Vincent a rueful look and left.

Vincent watched him walk down the tunnels. It was too bad, he thought, that Cullen had not found a partner below. He still seemed slightly at odds with the community, perhaps still felt guilty about his actions when they had found the treasure ship. Nevertheless, he was a hard worker and seemed patient enough with the older children. Kipper adored him and was becoming an excellent apprentice woodworker.

Vincent shook himself and returned to more immediate problems. He went into the brownstone, put the hamper on the kitchen table and ran upstairs to see Catherine. She was propped up against some pillows in bed, and fast asleep, her notebook beside her. Vincent carefully removed it and was gently pulling the blankets over her when she woke up.

"Vincent," she whispered, pulling him down to her and bestowing a kiss on his cheek.

"Catherine, how do you feel?"

"Much better. Is it lunch time yet?"

"Yes, and if you release me, I will bring it up."

Catherine did so, but gave him a look that went straight to his groin. He turned away quickly and went back downstairs. William had provided enough food for several people, as he usually did. Vincent piled the tray with soup bowls, a plate of cheese rolls, two apples and two glasses of milk. He carried it back upstairs to find Catherine sitting at the small table they used for their evening snacks. She looked smug.

"I don't want to eat in bed, Vincent. The crumbs are annoying."

Vincent grimaced as he put the tray on the table.

"Then you eat and I will change the bedclothes," he told her.

"Can't it wait until after lunch?" she asked.

"It won't take long," he promised, and it didn't, but then he remembered the laundry he had left in the washing machine. It had to put in the dryer before he could do the latest load. He made a mental note to not forget about it too, as he went back upstairs. He needed lunch.

Catherine had made substantial inroads to the food, and had left him his soup but only two cheese rolls. She was munching on an apple as he sat down and watched as he virtually inhaled his share. When he began on his apple, her hand slid onto his lap and he almost choked.

"Catherine," he protested. "You should rest. Father was quite clear about that."

"Well, did he say I couldn't have a little recreation as well?"

"No, but you should not exert yourself yet."

"You could do all the exertion," she said quietly.

"That would be a first," he remarked, looking at her with a mock stern expression.

Catherine laughed.

"You're right. It wouldn't be fair, or as much fun either. All right, Vincent, I'll behave. But I want you to cuddle up to. I think you give me strength."

"We must let our food digest a little. Let me read to you."

"Yes. That would be perfect. But in bed, sitting up."

Vincent sighed. Catherine got up, but looked so unsteady, that Vincent immediately picked her up and carried her to the bed. He helped her to sit up, wondering how she had managed to walk to the table. Her strength was obviously limited.

"Let me take the tray back down and then I will read to you."

"Don't be long," she pleaded.

Vincent carried the remains of their lunch to the kitchen, washed the dishes and again set the basket at the tunnel entrance. He went to check on the laundry and found that the dryer had stopped and the nightgowns were all dry. He put the wet load in the dryer and went back upstairs. When he got to the bedroom, Catherine was again sleeping sitting up. This time, he decided to do nothing to wake her. The room was warm and she did not look uncomfortable. He went back to his book and read. He must have dozed off himself, because he snapped to attention when he heard his name called. Catherine had moved and was under the covers.

"You promised."

Vincent tried to remember what he had promised, and failed. He walked over to the bed, sat on it to remove his boots, then lay on top of the blankets.

Catherine growled. "Vincent, I want you to cuddle. Take off your clothes!"

There seemed no point in arguing, so Vincent complied and then eased under the covers. Catherine immediately turned her back to him and he pulled her to him, feeling her joy at the contact. He wondered if he would ever get used to what he felt along their bond. She was asleep in moments and he let himself drift off as well. Naps were one of his favourite pastimes.

When he awakened, the shadows from the trees outside were stretching across the floor. It was quiet. He felt Catherine stir and she turned over to look at him. Her hands moved up his chest.

"You are so wonderfully soft, Vincent. A teddy bear dream."

Vincent put his hand on her forehead and tried to tell if she had a fever. She did not feel warm anymore.

"I think I'm cured," she declared.

"That may be, but you're still weak," he insisted.

He got no further, because she put a hand behind his neck and pulled his head down to her. He did not resist and gave her the kiss he knew she wanted. With her lips under his, he could no longer deny what they both felt. It rippled along the bond like liquid fire. Catherine struggled to remove her nightgown, separating from him just long enough to fling it from her with a grunt. Then they were pressed together as if they had been separated for weeks.

Vincent was careful, but Catherine soon rendered that attempt worthless. She reached between them and lifted his swelling organ so it was trapped against her stomach, then shifted upwards until it rested between her open thighs and her head was even with his. He groaned and used his hips to rest himself in that warm place he loved best. Catherine pushed him onto his back and straddled him, positioning herself over him and without further ado, eased him in. The sensation sent waves of fire along their bond and they gasped in unison as a joint orgasm flared into a roiling explosion that consumed them, then left them spent on a warm beach of love.

They basked in that blessed relief for long minutes, eyes closed. Vincent found the bed clothes by touch and twitched a corner over them both, then sighed deeply as his purr vibrated his chest. He felt Catherine sliding into sleep and shifted so that she was lying beside him, his organ still pulsing inside her. He held her close and followed her into sleep, sensing that she was indeed much improved.

When he awakened, it was to find Catherine gazing at him.

"What?" he asked.

"You look so beautiful when you're asleep," she whispered, "Innocent, happy, complete."

"I am all those things only because of you," he whispered back.

"Whereas, I dream of you, and those dreams are not innocent," she murmured. "Oh Vincent, I love you so. I still can't quite believe this is not just a dream."

"I too, Catherine. Every time I wake to find you here beside me, it is like the first."

"Our love once seemed impossible. Now it seems unbelievable."

"But we know it is neither, Catherine. It just is. All that we are, we share."

"Yes. Forever."

"Yes."

He hugged her to him and their love and joy flowed along their bond.

Then Catherine's stomach began to growl. Vincent chuckled.

"Your appetite rivals mine," he commented.

"In everything that matters," she remarked. "Do you suppose someone brought us some supper?"

"I suspect that they have. If not, I can cook. If you get up, dress warmly. I will stoke up the fireplace, but it will take a few minutes to warm up this room."

Vincent extracted himself from the bed and poked the fire, added a small log and watched until it caught. He turned to find Catherine looking at him lasciviously and realized he should have taken his own advice, but for a different reason. He gave her a stern look, grabbed his long dressing gown, and tied it on firmly.

"Later," he mumbled, as he made a fast retreat downstairs.

He remembered the drying and folded up all the bedding before carrying the waiting supper hamper upstairs to the kitchen. What had William supplied this time? he wondered. He opened the lid to find two good-sized steak and kidney pies, two bottles of stout and a metal clamshell which he opened to discover a lemon meringue pie. His stomach rumbled in anticipation. He turned on the oven to heat up the meat pies, then arranged plates and glasses on a tray. This time, he decided, he would not leave Catherine alone with the food.

He waited impatiently for the pies to heat, then added them to the tray and carried it carefully upstairs. He found Catherine sitting at their table waiting, knife and fork at the ready. The room was now warm. He put the tray on the table and put the kettle on the hob for tea.

They tucked in with little ceremony and ate with great concentration until the plates and both beer bottles were empty. Vincent leaned back and grunted.

"I think William judged that perfectly – including the stout. We needed some fortification."

Catherine laughed. "I don't think there's enough beer in the world to fortify us. Fortunately, we fortify each other quite adequately."

"Yes. You seem much improved. Would you like some tea?"

"Yes, if you can find some cookies to go with it."

Vincent got up and rummaged through their secret store. He found a tin with a couple of William's oatmeal cookies in it. He made a mental note to ask their cook for more.

"Only one cookie each – but you can have all the tea you wish," he reported.

"Just one cup, and then you must read to me," Catherine told him. "You promised me yesterday."

"But you fell asleep before I could do so," Vincent reminded her.

"This time I want to stay awake. You know I love to hear you read."

"Then that is what we shall do."

"Just as soon as I finish my tea and cookie. Aren't you having any?"

"I will have the cookie later. Just tea, I think, for now. A book ... hmmm.... What about Baron Edward John Moreton Drax Plunkett ..."

"Oh, I love Lord Dunsany, Vincent! What have you got?"

*"Tales of Three Hemispheres"*

They made themselves comfortable in bed and Catherine leaned against his shoulder, holding his arm against her chest, while he held the book with the other. She closed her eyes, as he began to read, letting the tale carry her on the soft waves of his voice.

## A CITY OF WONDER

*Past the upper corner of a precipice the moon rode into view. Night had for some while now hooded the marvellous city. They had planned it to be symmetrical, its maps were orderly, near; in two dimensions, that is length and breadth, its streets met and crossed each other with regular exactitude, with all the dullness of the science of man. The city had laughed as it were and shaken itself free and in the third dimension had soared away to consort with all the careless, irregular things that know not man for their master.*

*Yet even there, even at those altitudes, man had still clung to his symmetry, still claimed that these mountains were houses; in orderly rows the thousand windows stood watching each other precisely, all orderly, all alike, lest any should guess by day that there might be mystery here. So they stood in the daylight. The sun set, still they were orderly, as scientific and regular*

*as the labour of only man and the bees. The mists darken at evening. And first the Woolworth Building goes away, sheer home and away from any allegiance to man, to take his place among mountains; for I saw him stand with the lower slopes invisible in the gloaming, while only his pinnacles showed up in the clearer sky. Thus only mountains stand.*

*Still all the windows of the other buildings stood in their regular rows--all side by side in silence, not yet changed, as though waiting one furtive moment to step from the schemes of man, to slip back to mystery and romance again as cats do when they steal on velvet feet away from familiar hearths in the dark of the moon.*

*Night fell, and the moment came. Someone lit a window, far up another shone with its orange glow. Window by window, and yet not nearly all. Surely if modern man with his clever schemes held any sway here still he would have turned one switch and lit them all together; but we are back with the older man of whom far songs tell, he whose spirit is kin to strange romances and mountains. One by one the windows shine from the precipices; some twinkle, some are dark; man's orderly schemes have gone, and we are amongst vast heights lit by inscrutable beacons.*

*I have seen such cities before, and I have told of them in "The Book of Wonder".*

*Here in New York a poet met a welcome.*

Vincent sensed Catherine was almost asleep. He put the book down beside him and closed his eyes. How amazing that a British lord should see in New York what he himself had seen when he walked the night shadows – a city cloaked in secrets, defying man's plans and dreaming its own dreams.

"That was beautiful, Vincent," Catherine whispered. "Nancy will find our world below just as amazing."

"But not at all symmetrical. Dunsany would have approved."

They walked arm in arm to their bed without further talk and were soon snuggled up together for the night, wrapped in dreams of caverns hidden from the moon.

Vincent woke near dawn and stretched and yawned hugely, but silently, only to find Catherine regarding him with unmistakable passion when he turned to look at her. He had slept much more than usual the last two days and felt the need for exercise. He got it in the most pleasant fashion he knew.

Despite the workout, neither felt like sleeping – and it was nearly breakfast time.

"I think we should go and see what our son has been up to, Vincent. And a full breakfast would be very ... fortifying."

"Indeed it would."

They washed and dressed and made their way to the dining hall. Vincent watched Catherine for signs of fatigue and did not push their pace, but she seemed fine. There were a lot of smiles as they entered and Vincent wondered if their recent activity showed on their faces. He couldn't make himself care at all. He looked around for their son and found him conferring with a few other children in front of a huge map painted on the far wall. Kipper was consulting a clipboard of papers. Despite its size, the map seemed to be covered in coloured symbols. Had any of them realized how many dangers there were in their world? he wondered.

Catherine turned to look and stood dumbfounded. Vincent looked at her and gave her a rueful smile.

"My fault, I fear. I gave the children some homework the day before yesterday – and you see the result. WARGS in every yard of the tunnels!"

"Wargs? What are they?"

Some little ears must have been waiting to find a new innocent, because several voices piped up at once – and were joined by every child in the room until the last word was shouted.

"Water, Aliens, Rocks, Gas and STEAM!"

Catherine laughed and looked up at Vincent, who looked embarrassed.

"Congratulations, Vincent. I don't think I've ever seen Jacob so interested in homework!"

"I thought they would be finished by now," he muttered.

Father came in then and greeted them.

"Good morning! How are you feeling, Catherine?"

"Wonderful, Father. I'm sorry I missed all the fun the other day. WARGS, indeed!"

"Be grateful you were indisposed, Catherine. The little dickenses nearly drove us all crazy."

"But you seem to have a very interesting map there."

"Yes, too interesting. Every pipe and crack is marked."

Vincent grunted and walked to the wall, capturing Jacob by the collar.

"What is all this?" he demanded of his son. "We cannot possibly have so many WARGS! What's this collection of symbols behind the kitchen, for instance?"

"That's the garbage chute to the compost cave," Jacob told him.

"And why is that a hazard?"

"Well, it's in the rock, there's often has a wet patch on the ground after William dumps in the waste, and it stinks – which means there may be gas!"

Vincent tried to stifle the laughter that threatened explode in him. He turned away, only to find William glowering from the kitchen entry. He sat down in the nearest chair and dipped his head so that his hair covered his face as he shook with silent laughter. Catherine's hand on his shoulder made him look up and he found William in front of him, his hands on his ample waist, his apron a collage of colours that rivaled the map's. It was too much. His laughter burst from him and then William joined him. Soon the entire hall was laughing uproariously.

The laughter died away slowly and Vincent realized he had to do something about the problem he had created. He stood up and looked over the friendly faces, all red from laughing so hard. He had to grip himself sternly to prevent another gale from overtaking him. He cleared his throat.

"I am truly sorry for the upset my homework assignment has caused. However, we now have a very detailed map of dangers – far too detailed, I think. We do not need to mark every little thing – just the ones which are very dangerous. Mouse, could you help Kipper to sort out the dangers from the mere inconveniences? We must remove any WARGS that are ... um ...

"Dumb," Mouse remarked loudly, and walked up to the map. "Don't need to mark the wooden bridge or the windy stairs, or the waterfall. Need to mark new dangers - ones not fixed. Here in bathing chamber ... here, in school room ... steam pipes, very old. Looking for stuff above to fix."

He continued, pointing at unnecessary WARGS. Kipper made quick notes on his clipboard.

Vincent left them and joined Catherine at the table. She had captured a plateful of muffins and some berry jam. Everyone else had finished and they had the hall almost to themselves. William brought them a teapot and two cups, smiled at them and chuckled as he sauntered back into the kitchen. He had a dishwashing crew to supervise.

Father approached them as they finished.

"Well, Catherine, you do look much better."

"I have the best nurse in the tunnels, Father, no offense."

"None taken. How is your breathing?"

"Better, Father. I understand I now have ventilation in my office. That will help."

"Good. Do let us know if you need anything else, Catherine. It's unconscionable that you should suffer while helping us."

"It's important work, Father, and I'm happy to do it. I was so busy with paperwork, I kept forgetting to mention the stuck window. Speaking of visitors, I'd like to invite my friend Nancy here to meet everyone and see the sights. She's a very dear friend and I know she can be trusted with our secret."

Father frowned a little.

"Well, if you're sure, of course you can invite her, Catherine. When do you think would be a good time."

"I thought the summer. The tunnels will be a welcome place to be in a muggy New York."

"Quite so. Let me know when you have a firm date and I'll see what entertainment we can devise."

"Thank you, Father."

It took several days for Catherine to plan for the introduction of Nancy to her adopted family, and several more to fine tune it, make sure everyone was apprised and determine which dates were best. Then she had to contact Nancy and find out what her schedule was like. After mutual calendar checking, they had finally agreed on a date in mid-summer and that she would stay with them for two nights.

Catherine's chief concern was Vincent. He knew the value she put on her few remaining friends and was trying to be sanguine about meeting someone new, but she could tell he was apprehensive. For her part, she hated it when people shrunk from him, and felt his shame – brief though that was. He had come to terms with his unique appearance long ago, but reminders from new friends were still painful. Catherine decided she would make sure Nancy was as prepared as she could be before actually meeting him.

## Chapter 3

Mid-summer arrived after a spring of distractions and the usual tunnel repairs. The map on the dining hall wall had become a valuable resource and was regularly updated by a rotating team of WARGS-watchers.

Father took charge of organizing some entertainment for their visitor, while Vincent and William conferred on the food.

Nancy arrived at the brownstone well before lunch and Catherine met her at the door alone. She was shown into the den and the two women sat side by side on one of the loveseats, one Catherine had chosen. Then they began to chat.

Nancy could tell Catherine was tense. She tried to work the conversation around to her friend's family, to ease into the secret topic, but Catherine skirted any attempts in true lawyer fashion. Nancy gave an inward sigh. After all, that secret was the whole purpose of this visit. Catherine was rattling on about her work with the Foundation, which while interesting, seemed to be missing half the story. She had a hunch about that other half, so she finally took Catherine's hands to get her attention.

"Cathy, stop it! I didn't come here to gossip. Tell me what you're trying so hard to avoid. I'm ready."

Catherine sighed and looked at her friend. She realized her hands were shaking. She had not felt this nervous, even when Joe and Jenny had met Vincent. But then, there had been baby Jacob to admire and she'd had the support of her tunnel family in the same room - and a new bond with their child. It had been a wonderful party. That time too, she had prepared Joe and Jenny somewhat. She was planning to do the same now.

She felt Vincent's calm support along their bond and knew he was as ready as possible. She was being silly, she told herself. Nancy was a great friend, had helped her through a rough time, when her love for Vincent seemed to be set to self-destruct. She took a deep breath and began.

"I'm sorry. I haven't introduced anyone new to my adopted family since Jacob was a few weeks old. I do have a lot to tell you."

Catherine explained that Vincent had been found abandoned as a baby and had lived in this special community all his life. She told Nancy somewhat about that community, their caring, their separation from the rest of the world, their cooperation - and something of their challenges with each other and the world-at-large.

When she paused for breath, she realized she had still not told Nancy the critical fact - that this community existed far below ground, under their feet in fact. She decided the only way to make that clear was to take Nancy there.

"Nancy, this community is like no other you will see. I've told you everything except where they are and how they live. You'll be seeing them soon. We thought you might enjoy a little fun. And we've been invited to lunch.

"The most important thing is that you tell no one about this place. Jenny and Joe know, of course. They are among our helpers. You must not tell your husband or anyone else, not even a hint. I can't stress this enough. It means Vincent's life if anyone found out. It can be a terrible burden, believe me, so if you don't want to go further, we'll understand. You and I can go shopping and have a girls' night out."

Nancy looked at her friend and saw the intense look and the creases in her forehead she remembered from university, when Cathy was unraveling a particularly knotty problem.

"Cathy, I wouldn't have come if I wasn't willing to make that commitment. You were quite clear about it when we last met - after I threatened to haunt you if you didn't introduce me to this special man of yours."

Catherine laughed and hugged Nancy.

"I'm sorry. You should have been invited long ago. I've become more paranoid than ever since Jacob was born. The world is a dangerous place - and I have a lot to lose. If Vincent were to be killed because of something I did ... I'd want to die, Nancy. It almost happened before I left the DA's office. I wouldn't be able to go on, not even for our son."

Nancy squeezed her friend's hands. She remembered Cathy's face after she had decided to run home to him, all those years ago.

"You obviously have a very unique relationship. When can I meet him?"

Catherine smiled, a little nervously.

"I have to introduce you to our most precious possession first."

She put her arm through Nancy's and led her to the opposite side of the den, and turned her to face the wall. The portrait looked back at them.

Nancy didn't have to pretend amazement. She gasped in delight.

"Is that Vincent? Of course it is! Who painted it? It's ... stunning."

"Kristopher Gentian painted it, Nancy. Don't ask me how. He's dead, but somehow he showed Vincent and me where to find his lost paintings in an old warehouse. Jenny organized a show and sale. Then he left that for me, wrapped in brown paper. It could only have been done months before he met us. It defies everything I thought I knew about reality - but then, so does Vincent."

Nancy looked at the portrait again, the way Vincent's body enclosed Catherine's, the way their hands touched. There was no doubt of the deep love between them. She was sure Vincent had more differences than could be seen in the portrait. Those gloves hinted at them. She sighed.

"He's remarkable, Cathy. Trust you to find someone so incredible! Your love for each other shines out. Is it a good likeness?"

"Yes, but I think you'll find the original even more ... um ... incredible."

"So, I ask again. When will I meet him?"

"Very soon. He's the heart and soul of this community. It would not be what it is without him. They are defined by him, as he is by them. But meeting new people is ... difficult.

"So, are you ready to go on a short trip? You'll need a shawl or light jacket. It's chilly where we're going."

"I have something in my bag," Nancy admitted.

"Oh, where are my manners!" Catherine exclaimed. "I'll take you to your room first. You might want to tidy up. I always feel like a limp lettuce after a long drive."

Catherine led her friend upstairs and to one of the spare rooms, on the floor below their own attic quarters. It had an ensuite and a view over the garden. Nancy was entranced, not least because it looked comfortably homey and hand-made with care. She couldn't see a single designer item in the room, unlike Catherine's old apartment. Many things had changed in her friend's life, including her taste.

"Cathy, this room is so welcoming. That patchwork quilt is exquisite. Who made it - and the curtains? The furniture looks a hundred years old - but loved for every one of those years. And this rug ... beautiful!"

Catherine laughed.

"What you see here is the biggest change in my life, besides Vincent. The community you'll meet has little money. They've had to make do, live frugally, waste nothing, scavenge. It's a lifestyle I find I like - not least because it made Vincent what he is. I've tried to emulate it. The quilt, curtains, rug and such were all made by people in my adopted family. I'm learning to do a few things myself, but there are some very talented individuals. The furniture is all cast-offs that have been repaired and finished. They have a gifted carpenter. I think he could turn a broken door into a Heppelwhite.

"Would you like to take a nap or clean up a little? There's no hurry."

Nancy looked around. More than ever, she wanted to see a community that could produce such wonders.

"Sleep is the last thing I want. Just give me a moment to wash my hands and face - and find that jacket."

Catherine decided she should probably give her own hair a brush too. She almost never looked in mirrors anymore. Vincent loved her in any condition and after an hour playing with young Jacob, she looked like she needed a makeover.

"Nancy, I'm just going to brush my hair and get a jacket. Be right back."

Her friend mumbled something through the closed bathroom door, so Catherine went upstairs. She brushed her hair, then noticed a tiny brown paper package tied with a bow on the dresser. What on earth? She picked it up and read the tag. It was for Nancy. Now why hadn't she thought of a gift from below? She sent a shimmer of gratitude along the bond and felt Vincent's smug response and then a flash of love that mirrored her own.

Catherine grabbed a quilted patchwork jacket she had purloined for tunnel visits and put the little gift box in the pocket. She looked at herself in the mirror. She was wearing a green sweater, a tough pair of black jeans and desert boots. There was no need to dress up. They had decided that Nancy should see them as they were.

She went downstairs again, to find Nancy looking out the window of the guest room.

"Your garden is beautiful, Cathy. When do you find the time to work in it?"

Catherine laughed.

"I don't, much. The Foundation keeps me busy. Vincent is our gardener. He loves being outside and listening to the birds and making things grow. All things he has never been able to do before this."

Nancy said nothing to this revelation; merely put her arm through her friend's.

"Well, I'm ready when you are. Do we need an umbrella? It looks like rain."

"No, we won't need an umbrella. No one worries about weather much where we're going."

They went downstairs and Catherine opened up the door to the basement and turned on the light. She led the way downstairs



and then through the secret door panel, then down the last flight of stairs. She turned to make sure the panel had closed and then pushed a lever. A honey-coloured light shone from the tunnel outside. She walked out and waited for Nancy, who stepped gingerly over the ledge and looked around.

"Cathy, if you had led me through a wardrobe into Narnia, I couldn't be more surprised."

Catherine smiled and straightened the lamp bracket on the wall to close the door.

"You ain't seen nothin' yet."

She took Nancy's arm and they travelled at a moderate pace along a number of tunnels. Catherine kept to the main ways as often as she could. Then she took the unobtrusive side tunnel that led to the hub. The walls were now rough. After a few turns, the sounds of laughter and music met their ears. There was also some delightful smells – popcorn and maple. William must have been busy making treats.

Catherine led her friend into the school chamber. It had a high ceiling, from which dozens of bright paper lanterns hung. They were works of art and the effect was of a fairy grove waiting for a dance, because all the desks had been pushed to one side and stacked. Some now held large bowls of caramel popcorn and pitchers of fruit juice.

Nancy's jaw dropped. The decorations were beautiful, but it was what was going on in the centre of the room that caught her eye. Three teams of two children each were flinging around something like a skipping rope. It took her a few moments to realize that it wasn't rope, but taffy they were pulling with hoots of laughter. As she watched the loop of taffy got dangerously close to the ground on one, and two of the older children caught up the sagging loop, cut it in the middle with a pair of huge scissors, then continued to stretch it with their counterparts. By that time, it was hardening, so with a flourish, the children made extravagant loops and quickly wrested the unwieldy thing over to a table spread with wax paper. They howled with laughter as they regarded the shapes they'd created.

Suddenly there was the sound of a gong and everyone quieted. Nancy watched as everyone turned to an older man. She had time to notice that he was dressed in a collection of unusual clothing – although no more so than the rest of the residents – before he started to speak.

"Thank-you everyone for a truly eardrum-splitting event! I notice we have a guest. I think we must ask her to do the honours and see if she can spot anything recognizable in those contorted things you've created.

"Catherine, would you be so kind as to introduce your friend."

Catherine took Nancy's arm and led her to the centre of the room.

"Friends, this is Nancy. She's come to visit me and meet you all. Nancy, the gentleman with the cane is Father, our fearless leader.

"What's going on here, Father? I thought we were going to break Nancy in gently! She'll think she's been brought into an insane asylum."

There were gales of laughter at that and William waddled out from behind a pile of desks to approach them.

"Catherine, we wanted to do something special. We asked for suggestions and some little devil suggested that we declare today National Toffee-Pulling Day. I thought we were going to just pull a few strands and offer some to our guest, instead we have a gallery of modern sculpture," he rumbled.

"I'll never hear the last of this from Vincent. Jacob got some in his hair, little Cathy got stuck to Luke – we think deliberately – and several of us are carrying candy souvenirs. It took us several tries to get the toffee to cooperate."

He lifted his apron, which seemed to be welded into a very peculiar shape.

"And my apron may never recover."

"Well then, we'd better get busy with our part of the job so we can all have some of that lunch I can smell. Is this dessert, William?"

William's answer was drowned out by shouts of 'yes' and 'NO' and more laughter before Father rang the gong again. William rolled his eyes and made a fast exit – no doubt to the kitchen and relative sanity, Catherine thought.

"Quiet, people. Our judge needs to have some semblance of silence to be able to do her job."

Catherine laughed and was joined by Nancy. They approached the table with the toffee sculptures and walked down the line of them. They were certainly unusual. To Catherine they all looked liked reproductions of Pascal's pipe chamber, but she said nothing. Nancy walked from one to another again, tilting her head and pursing her lips.

"Um, well, this one looks like a bowl of spaghetti that got caught in an electric fan," she said with great gravity.

Cheers broke out among the team who had created it – and boos among the rest.

"And this one looks like wet ticker tape flung at a door."

More cheers and boos.

She stood before another for some time. Catherine wondered if she had run out of similes.

"Hmmm. This looks like a snake fountain."

There were hoots of glee at that.

The last two stumped her even longer. They were the thinnest and smallest of the sculptures, having been made from the cut sections of taffy. They had been pushed so close together they looked like one.

"I think I'd have to say that this looks like a happy squid dancing with a deranged spider."

The room boomed with laughter.

Father stamped his cane on the floor.

"Silence! Our judge has given her view of these works of art. I daresay she cannot choose between them. After all, modern art cannot be compared – even to itself. Am I correct, Nancy?"

"You are, Father. I think a new form of art has been born here. I'm honoured to have been invited to see it – before it disappears, or gets eaten!"

There was more laughter at that and then silence. Nancy could hear a tapping noise and everyone was obviously listening.

"Lunch!" pronounced Father.

The children ran out of the chamber, followed in a more sedate fashion by the adults. Catherine and Nancy found themselves with Father, who could not move quickly. They let him precede them.

They were nearing the dining chamber when a small form catapulted out a side corridor into Catherine, after Father passed.

"Momma! Hurry up! We're all waiting."

"Jacob! Nancy, this is our impatient son. Why aren't you waiting with the others, Jacob?"

Jacob looked down at his feet and Catherine sensed embarrassment – and Vincent's exasperation and humour.

"I ... I ... was jumping in fun while Daddy was trying to get the taffy out of my hair - and I trod on his feet by mistake. He sent me off to find you and make sure you didn't dawdle on the way."

"Well, say hello to my friend, Nancy, and we'll follow you."

Jacob looked up at Nancy and smiled. He extended a hand and shyly welcomed her to the tunnels. Nancy smiled back.

"Well, I can smell wonderful things. I don't want to dawdle any longer."

Jacob ran back ahead down the tunnel and Catherine and Nancy followed him swiftly to the dining chamber, where they could hear him loudly announcing their arrival.

There were more lanterns hanging from the ceiling here and the chamber was the brightest Catherine had ever seen it. They stood for a moment admiring it, then Catherine turned and Nancy copied her.

Catherine was glad to see Vincent wasn't wearing his cloak. It made him look huge. He was dressed very casually in one of his grey vests, the bright blue sweater which matched his eyes, and dark pants.

Nancy watched Vincent approach with astonishment. The portrait had not prepared her for the sheer grace and size of the man as he walked towards them, nor the deep-set azure eyes looking at her from under his golden brows as he got closer. Even his hair was so much more beautiful than the painting. How on earth could anyone so magical exist? She was beginning to believe she had stepped out of the normal world into Narnia after all. If Aslan had deigned to be man-like, surely he would have looked like Vincent, she thought.

All that was eclipsed by his voice when he spoke, so deep and silken, it made her toes curl.

"Hello, Nancy. Welcome to our world."

She stood speechless for long moments then found her tongue and a modicum of control. She resorted to formality to cover her embarrassment.

"Vincent, it's a very great pleasure to meet you at last. I'm truly honoured."

She held out her hand and saw why he hadn't offered his first – and why he wore gloves in the portrait, as she had guessed. She felt a shiver of delight as he gently took hers. No wonder Cathy was in love with him! His hand was warm and seemed to send tingles along her skin. Whatever must he be like in bed? she wondered irreverently.

"Well," boomed a voice from the other side of the chamber. "If the formalities are over, lunch is waiting."

They all turned to look at William, where he stood wearing a clean apron, soup ladle at the ready, and stacks of bowls in front of him. Nancy, for the first time, realized the dining hall was full of people of all ages and all wearing the strangest collection of clothing. It seemed to be made of pieces of other garments. She realized she had been quietly under observation.

Vincent smiled at Nancy and she saw the canine teeth – another omission in the portrait. He seemed to sense her

astonishment and chuckled.

"We must eat. Come, Nancy, Catherine – and Jacob. We have reserved seats."

Vincent led the way to a table where Father was standing. He smiled his welcome.

"We help ourselves at lunch time, Nancy. It's a buffet, nothing fancy," he informed her. "Please – you get first in line."

Nancy took one of the large plates and some sandwiches and then a large chocolate swirled cupcake and William gave her a bowl of creamy soup. Vichyssoise, she wondered? It was indeed, and the best she had tasted, ever. The sandwiches were filled with a rich slabs of buttery cheese with tomatoes and lettuce on wonderful thick oat bread. She noticed that talk was muted in the hall, with everyone concentrating on eating. No wonder, she thought.

At one point she glanced over at Vincent and Jacob, who were sitting side by side on the beyond Catherine, and saw them nearly inhale their cupcakes. She looked at Catherine and saw her amusement.

"Yep, like father, like son," she remarked.

Nancy laughed and tucked into her own. It was delicious – a combination of maple and chocolate with walnuts. She was tempted to eat it in one bite too, but forced herself to be ladylike.

As they sipped on tea and juice, Catherine turned to her friend.

"There is so much to see here that I don't know where to start, Nancy."

Vincent broke in then,

"Why not come back to my chamber first? They we can plan a tour and I'll be happy to come with you."

There was a groan from Jacob.

Vincent looked at his son. "Jacob has a history and then a geography class this afternoon, which are very important. He has already seen all the marvels here below and now has to learn about those above. One day he may see them."

There was a silence after that and Catherine looked at Vincent. Nancy sensed this was an old argument between them.

"My love, what you don't know about the world above doesn't matter. Jacob may indeed see more of it, but I agree, unless he studies, he won't understand what he sees."

Jacob turned red and hung his head.

"We don't get many visitors. I want to come along."

Vincent's tone got firmer.

"Jacob you can see Nancy later. She's staying with us, as you know. I'm sure she will be happy to talk to you."

"Of course," Nancy confirmed. "Although I'm not sure what I can tell you that you don't already know."

"Meanwhile," Vincent continued, "your mother is right. You must study. You will one day be my eyes and ears in the world above. Then it will be I who has to listen and learn."

"I see Father leaving. You'd better go to your class, Jacob."

Jacob left, reluctantly but obediently. Vincent rose and he and Catherine led Nancy to his chamber. Even though Catherine had spent many days – and nights - in this chamber, she still thought of it as Vincent's – as did he, in unguarded moments. It reflected his interests, much more than hers, and every time she walked into it, she could feel his presence, like a balm. It was a relaxing place, even when he wasn't there.

Nancy walked a little ahead of Catherine, behind Vincent and stopped in amazement inside the chamber, so suddenly that her friend almost walked into her. The stained glass window was bright and cast a golden glow. It looked, she thought, like a man's den. If there were any signs of Catherine, they were not immediately apparent. She liked the sense of Vincent she felt there. It was a friendly place. She had never known a man with more in-built serenity. She wondered if that was Catherine's doing, or if it was natural. It suited him.

They sat down on chairs Vincent had set around the table – which he had cleared off for probably the first time in his life, Catherine thought. She had never noticed how beautiful the wood was. He must have shined it too. Even the bookshelves looked a little neater. He had obviously made a special effort. She looked at him and caught a wry look. He would probably complain he couldn't find anything, after Nancy left.

"So please tell me more about this wonderful world of yours," their guest pleaded. "I'm looking forward to a tour, but I'd like hear the story first."

"That could take hours," Vincent remarked, "but we do have a condensed version for visitors. Someday, we must get someone to write it all down."

He proceeded to tell them a little of the history, omitting Paracelsus and some of the other less savoury events, not least because they were painful. He skirted over a lot of his own history as well, but did mention the night he found Catherine.

Nancy now understood why her friend had been so secretive about her ordeal. She was sure there was a lot more she was not being told, but decided it didn't matter. She had learned enough to help her understand why this world was so important and secret.

Vincent was winding up when both he and Catherine suddenly stiffened. Then a series of quick metallic taps sounded in the suddenly silent chamber. Nancy now understood that they were a message, but was startled when Vincent and Catherine both jumped to their feet, then looked at each other. Without a word, Vincent ran from the chamber grabbing his cloak on the way out. Catherine took a deep breath and spoke urgently.

"Sorry, Nancy. There's been an accident. Steam pipe break. We felt Jacob's panic and you heard the SOS on the pipes. Vincent's gone to help. I think we should go to the clinic, in case they need assistance. Do you mind?"

"Let's go," Nancy declared without hesitation. She followed Catherine at a run and they dashed down the tunnels to a chamber where several people were milling about. The two women stood out of the way while children were seated on chairs or cots and Father began his examinations.

## Chapter 4

Catherine looked wildly around. She could feel Jacob's near panic and pain, but couldn't locate him.

"Where's Jacob?" she asked the nearest person. "What happened?"

It was Father who answered.

"A couple of steam pipes apparently burst in the schoolroom. The pipes are old and they split at a joint. Scalding water and steam shot out over the children.

"Thanks for coming Catherine, Nancy. We could use your help. I have some salve for burns. Jacob's still in the schoolroom. He got trapped by the hot water and steam after trying to stop the leak. We're closing off the valve now."

Catherine felt Jacob's relief, suddenly, and guessed that Vincent had reached him. She sighed and began to help Father. There was nothing she could do that Vincent couldn't do better.

Nancy examined a small child whose face had red patches and applied some salve. The children seemed to have only minor scalds. Their thick layers of clothing had protected all but their faces and hands.

Vincent arrived a few moments later, Jacob in his arms. Catherine finished applying salve to her patient and turned to help him. At first she couldn't see anything wrong, and then noticed his hands were hanging limp. She reached for his wrists and a thin scream came from him. His palms were seared red and badly blistered. She and Vincent both did their best to calm him along their bond. Catherine decided not to use the salve and wait for Father to take a look. She turned to get him and found him still treating another small patient.

Vincent carried Jacob to a cot, but changed his mind when he felt his son going into shock. He sat on a chair and held him close, rocking him gently. Soon, Jacob lost his waxy pallor and began to breathe normally. Then he began to shake in reaction. He buried his head in Vincent's chest, crying quietly.

Vincent began reciting a poem in a firm voice - one Catherine recognized as Jacob's favourite. Children nearby turned to listen. Vincent's voice was one they loved.

*"T'was brillig and the slithy toves ...*

*Did gye and gymbal in the waves ...*

*"All mimsy were the borogoves,*

*And the mome raths outgrabe*

"What comes next, Jacob?"

There was a mumble and a small voice recited, still muffled by Vincent's vest.

*"Beware the Jabberwock, my son!*

*The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!*

*Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun*

*The frumious Bandersnatch!"*

Vincent took up the next verse.

*“He took his vorpal sword in hand:  
Long time the manxome foe he sought --  
So rested he by the Tumtum tree,  
And stood awhile in thought.”*

Jacob turned his head and began to recite a little more clearly.

*“And, as in uffish thought he stood,  
The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame,  
Came whiffing through the tulgey wood,  
And burbled as it came!”*

He stopped and looked up at Vincent expectantly. His father smiled at him.

*“One, two! One, two! And through and through  
The vorpal blade went snicker-snack!  
He left it dead, and with its head  
He went galumphing back.”*

Vincent paused again, and Jacob took up the next verse. By now, all the children in the chamber were listening intently and all were smiling, some through tears.

*“And, has thou slain the Jabberwock?  
Come to my arms, my beamish boy!  
O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!’  
He chortled in his joy.*

A chorus of high voices then joined Vincent and Jacob for the final refrain.

*‘Twas brillig, and the slithy toves  
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;  
All mimsy were the borogoves,  
And the mome raths outgrabe.”*

Vincent and Jacob joined the laughter that rang around the hospital chamber.

“Well now, that’s better,” Father said, looking around. “I think we’ll just call a school holiday for the rest of the day. I believe William has some caramel popcorn left. I’m sure he can find you all something to drink too. You should all have a big glass of pink lemonade. Doctor’s orders.”

There was a sudden rush of shuffling – but Father put up his hand.

“Wait, I’ll just let William know.” He used his cane to tap out the order on the pipe nearby and waited until he heard Pascal confirm it. He knew William would have heard the message.

“All right, now. Don’t run. We don’t want any more accidents.”

There were hoots of glee at that and a more uniform shuffle of feet as children left for the dining hall. Nancy was sure they

started running as soon as they were out of earshot. Father rolled his eyes at her, obviously thinking the same thing.

With nearly everyone gone, the attention turned to Vincent and Jacob.

Father went over to them, closely followed by Nancy and Catherine. He turned over Jacob's hands and looked at them.

"My goodness, it looks like the Jabberwock got you," he remarked quietly. "You were very brave to try and stop the steam from escaping and hurting others. But why did you use your hands? I don't think we should bandage them, though, unless they start to bleed. I have something special for burns like this."

Jacob mumbled something unintelligible as Father went over to a cabinet and rooted around for a while, returning with a bottle.

"What did you say, Jacob?" Catherine asked, looking at Vincent. There was still something he hadn't told them, she was sure.

"I used my sweater on the pipe," he mumbled. "Then it got too hot."

Catherine bent down, now really worried. She looked at his sweater, which seemed oddly shaped and lifted it a little. Jacob winced and she sensed he was afraid. She got an inkling and lifted the sweater higher, and gasped. Jacob's stomach was beet red.

"I think we need some more salve. Nancy, do you still have yours?"

Nancy held out the brown jar and Catherine spread some on. Jacob was crying silently. Vincent stroked his hair.

"There's nothing to be afraid of, Jacob. A sweater is nothing to worry about. You thought quickly and it was a brave thing to do."

Father returned and his voice got grim as he saw the boy's stomach.

"Now you just hold a hand out Jacob and we'll try this. It'll stop the pain and help your hands heal quickly."

He poured it on and spread it around carefully. Jacob flinched, but by the time the second hand was done, Catherine could tell he was no longer in a lot of pain.

"Now I'll give you some special cotton mitts for later. Don't get your hands wet and don't hold anything. I want to see you tomorrow morning. Meanwhile, young man, you'll need help to eat and dress."

"Don't worry," Nancy told him. "His mother and I will make sure he's taken care of. He'll love being waited on."

"Well, he can do anything he would normally, just not with his hands," Father remarked. "I think a sling would be best for today."

Father rigged up two slings to keep the hands supported but untouched across his chest.

"Perhaps you can take him with you on your tour. I think everything's under control now."

Catherine looked at Vincent and he nodded. Jacob was smiling now through the tear tracks.

"Do you feel up to joining us, Jacob?" Catherine asked.

"Yes, Mom. Can I lead the way? Where are we going?"

Vincent looked at his son and spoke softly.

"Jacob, I think we should go to the Mirror Pool first. But if you get tired, I'll take you home."

They took Nancy, by design, via the roundabout route down several tunnels with stairs, avoiding any of the even slightly dangerous routes, because of Jacob. She quickly lost all sense of direction.

Finally, she realized they were walking in silence, one so deep their footsteps seemed muffled. They went through a tall opening and emerged into a large, dimly lit area. Nancy started as she realized there was a large pond with dark water just beyond the path, and then she gasped as she realized it was sparkling with stars. She looked up, expecting to see the sky, although she knew it must be still daylight in the world above, But she saw only dark, irregular rock looming above them. Somewhere, there must be a shaft, she thought, and wondered where it emerged in the city.

Vincent seemed to guess her puzzlement.

"This is a magical place. We believe what we see is coming down from far above, down a subway airshaft. The same phenomena occurs in old wells."

"Yes, so I've heard. What a wonderful place! Do you come here often?"

Catherine answered. "It's a lovely place for contemplation. Our children come her often to look at the stars. We also use it to say goodbye to those who pass away in our community. "

She was silent for a moment, obviously remembering something sad, but then smiled.

"It's also where Vincent and our older folk teach the children to swim – with a lot more light, of course."

Nancy looked at Vincent and found the thought of him swimming distracting. She cleared her throat and looked across the still pool.

"Now that's something I would like to do. Do you suppose...?"

Catherine smiled, quite aware of what Nancy was probably thinking. After all, Vincent swimming was one of her favourite sights. "I think we can find time to do that – but not here. We have a special place."

Nancy sighed, the beauty of the spot seemed to hold and relax her.

"I don't believe it," she said finally. "How can this be? This isn't New York, is it? I'm dreaming."

"I know exactly how you feel," Catherine said quietly. "And yet, there are many other wonders here too. We have a waterfall, the Great Hall, the chamber of winds, the crossroads cathedral – and the more mundane things like the laundry room, workshops, Father's library and Mouse's mad scientist chamber. It IS a whole world down here – a very special place."

"Yes," Nancy breathed. "I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen this with my own eyes. Thank you for sharing it with me."

Jacob suddenly yawned, which he tried to unsuccessfully to suppress. Vincent immediately bent down to him.

"I think our little hero is tired now. We should return home and put him to bed."

He picked up Jacob, who did not protest at all, to Catherine's amazement. By the time they reached the hub again, he was asleep in Vincent's arms. They moved quickly to the secret entrance and Vincent carried their son up to his room, while she and Nancy went to the den.

Catherine sighed.

"I'm sorry your visit has been a bit more eventful than we'd planned, Nancy. I'm afraid that life below can be a bit unpredictable. There are always challenges. It's a fragile place, dependent on the discretion and hard work of everyone. It's been threatened several times and twice we nearly lost it. There is such richness in this community. Vincent introduced me to it, and changed my life in the process."

Nancy looked up as Vincent returned. He bent down and gave Catherine a kiss.

"He will be fine, Catherine. I put the mitts on him. It's early for bed, but he needs the sleep. I should go back down and help them fix the damage. Do you mind?"

"No, Vincent, of course not. Nancy and I have plenty to talk about. We'll see you at dinner, if not before. Perhaps you can bring dinner back for us all? I think we should eat here and I have nothing suitable in the house. Jacob will need help, if he wakes up in time."

"Excellent idea, Catherine. I will proposition William. He is always a lot more generous with take-out," he grinned wolfishly.

The two women laughed and Vincent left quickly. That cloak, Nancy decided, was the most appropriate garment she had ever seen on anyone. He looked like something out of a story – a daring-do musketeer or highwayman. She sighed.

"Cathy, you must tell me – what do I have to do to get Vincent to kiss me? Nothing unreasonable refused."

Catherine laughed. "Oh, I think he'll give you one before you leave. You aren't the first, you know. Jenny had to have one too. I don't mind sharing ... once."

Nancy laughed again.

"Oh, Cathy, you don't know how I envy you. Not just for Vincent, but for being part of such a wonderful place."

"Nancy, you are one of us now. If you ever want to visit again, you'll be welcomed, just as you were today. I'm sorry we can't extend the invitation to your whole family, but you see how it is."

"Yes, it's a priceless gift," Nancy remarked.

"Gift!" Catherine exclaimed, reaching into her pocket. She extracted the little package and held it out to Nancy.

"Vincent left this for you. I don't know what it is, exactly. He likes to surprise people."

"As if he himself isn't surprise enough," Nancy smiled. She opened the package to find a piece of translucent pink quartz shot through with white streaks, hung on a fine silver chain. She gasped in delight.

"Oh, Cathy, it's beautiful."

"That comes from another of our wonders below," Catherine remarked. "The same place as this, which you may have noticed before." She showed Nancy her crystal and saw her friend's eyes widen.

"Is that where it came from! I'm truly honoured, Cathy!" She put in on. "It will remind me of your special world – a place of rosy love amid tunnels of wonder."

"Yes," Catherine said softly. "There are many kinds of love, but the truest is that of family and friends, wherever they are."

The two friends discussed their families for awhile and then Nancy expressed a desire to see the garden. Catherine took her

outside and showed her the garden's features. Then they sat down on Vincent's favourite seat and let the warmth of the day seep into them. It had not rained, after all, but the air was muggy and now full of the scent of roses and summer lilac. Vincent liked tall flowers and roses were his particular favourites. Catherine's former balcony rose, with its red and white blossoms, now had pride of place in their bedroom. Vincent looked after it diligently and it had flourished.

Catherine was keeping an inner ear on Jacob, but he was sleeping soundly, for which she was grateful. They were about to move inside when she felt Vincent return and waited for him to find them. He strolled around the corner into their nook and stopped.

Catherine always found the sight of him in daylight wonderful to behold and let him know it along the bond. She felt his aroused response and mild chagrin as his eyes burned into hers. He had been wearing long tunics for a while now, knowing that his response would be obvious. Today was no exception. He smiled at Nancy after a moment.

"We have repaired all we can for now," he reported.

"How did it happen?" Catherine asked. In the rush to help the injured, she had not thought to ask.

"It seems our candy-pulling had an unfortunate result," Vincent replied. "Someone flung a hank of it a little too energetically before you arrived, and it landed on a pipe. Naturally the children pulled at it to remove it and that distorted the pipe and weakened a joint. Those pipes are very old - and that one suddenly couldn't hold the steam pressure any longer. It caused another one to burst as well. We've checked all the pipes in the hub area and will be doing some necessary repairs to a few of them over the next while.

"Meanwhile, I brought back a basket of provisions for our dinner, including some of William's special ale and a bottle of mint wine."

"Do you think we should wake Jacob?" Catherine asked. "He'll be disappointed if he misses a meal with our guest. We did promise him a visit."

"Yes, perhaps we should. If you ladies have seen enough of the garden, we can start preparing for supper and I'll bring Jacob down."

Catherine and Nancy arranged all the food from the enormous hamper and laid the table. Vincent returned with Jacob in his arms a few minutes later, still looking a little sleepy, but only until he saw all the food.

"Please put me down, Dad. There's nothing wrong with my legs, you know."

"No, but you are not allowed to feed yourself. Those hands have to stay quiet. Who would you like to help you?"

Jacob looked from one to another and, to no one's surprise, picked Nancy. Catherine protested, nevertheless.

"Jacob!" Catherine declared. "Our guest did not come here to play nursemaid to a precocious boy."

"Nonsense," Nancy retorted. "Jacob is a hero. I'd be honoured to help him eat. Then he can tell me all about his studies and ask all the questions he wants - between mouthfuls."

Vincent and Catherine laughed.

They finished their meal between stories and decided they should go below again. Jacob insisted on joining them, so they left his mitts on and put his hands in the sling again. He seemed a lot happier and made a game out of not using his hands.

They took Nancy to the Whispering Bridge and showed her the Abyss, to further amazements, but decided that the windy stairs and waterfall were too risky for a boy with no hands. They returned to meet Father in his library. The patriarch was playing chess with Geoffrey, but judging by his frown, was not winning. Vincent walked over to take a look at the board and chuckled.

"Father, you will not win this one."

"Nonsense, Vincent. Nothing is impossible. I just need time to think. Geoffrey is too quick. I hardly get a chance to assimilate one move before he is twitching to make another."

Geoffrey looked at Father and smirked.

"Father, if I gave you any more time, we might as well play by correspondence."

Father glared, then snorted. He had raised his finger, no doubt to admonish Geoffrey on his lack of respect, when he noticed Catherine and Nancy.

"Well, now, we'll just have to leave this game for another time, Geoffrey. I must greet our guest."

"Welcome, Nancy. What do you think of our world?"

"I think I need to spend more than two days here," she replied with a grin.

"You would be welcome any time," Father declared. "Catherine can tell you how to find us, should you ever need to."

"Thank you, Father. I'm looking forward to other marvels tomorrow."



"Well, they won't be quite so marvellous," Catherine confessed. "I thought you might like to see more of our working world."

"Oh, I would," Nancy exclaimed.

Father nodded and looked at Jacob. "And how is our recovering hero?"

"I'm fine, Father," Jacob mumbled. "How long do I have to stay like this?"

"Well now, I think you should keep a watch on those hands for a few days at least. I'll see what arrangements we can make." Father replied. "We can't have you missing classes. I'll ask young Cathy if she would like to act as your assistant on Monday."

Jacob blushed. "Couldn't Luke help me? Cathy doesn't like me any more."

"All the more reason for you two to work together. We can't have feuds here.

"Here, let me have a look at your hands. Turn them over for me."

Jacob did as he was told. The patriarch seemed satisfied.

"There's no blood, so I think you'd better just keep these on. Don't get them wet and try not to press on them. In two days or so, we can cut off the gloves and see how the healing is progressing.

"Two more days?" Jacob groaned. "They don't hurt anymore. Maybe they're healed."

Vincent looked at Catherine and they both looked at Father. If Jacob had inherited Vincent's quick healing, Jacob could be correct. Father sighed.

"You keep those bandages on until tomorrow morning and then we'll see. In the meantime, we've arranged for a little entertainment in the Great Hall tonight, in honour of our guest. We should all go there now, before they start without us. We decided we should use the back entrance, to avoid the windy stairs and having to open the Great Doors."

"I'll lead," Vincent offered, knowing that Father would be slow.

They all followed him, along a long passage that led past William's kitchen and several workshops, and then down a set of narrow but even stairs where they had to walk single file. They emerged at last in a kind of anteroom and then turned a corner. The Great Hall opened before them, lit with many lanterns. Nancy's mouth dropped open.

"I don't believe it," she gasped.

Catherine smiled. "I know. It always hits me like that too – even though I've been here many times. Wait till you see the seating."

They all walked from the far end of the hall into an area whose roof seemed to be out of sight. Nancy saw a small balcony with three paintings on a far wall – then realized how far away they were – and that they were tapestries not paintings. She was beyond comment now. She followed, awestruck, and suddenly her hosts stopped. Ahead of them was what looked like cinema seating – and most of it seemed to be full. In front of that was a small stage where an orchestra was tuning up its instruments in the usual discordant fashion.

"How on earth?" Nancy exclaimed.

Father laughed. "You haven't met our most extraordinary scavenger - Mouse. Some years ago, we learned of a cinema that was being demolished. Vincent told us, actually. A rather nasty incident happened there. At any rate, our quartermaster went in and took down the huge velvet drapes, and Mouse decided we had to have some of the seating too. He brought the best of the seats down and then the railings they are attached to. He even brought a few of the love seats. We re-upholstered many of them with pieces of the drapes and cleaned the rest and Mouse made them easily moved by putting wheels under the rails. So now we have a ready-to-use theatre, when we wish it."

Vincent led them to a row that seemed to be waiting for them at the front. He and Catherine took the loveseat at the end and the others filled the seats beside them. Father sat down with a sigh.

"That walk down gets harder every year, but I wouldn't miss this. Our music students wanted to show off, Nancy. They have so few opportunities to do so before strangers. They organized this themselves. Even I don't know what they've planned tonight."

As if on cue, there were two sharp claps. The audience quietened and silence filled the hall. Then, a few low notes sounded, then a few more. Nancy recognized Schubert's Unfinished Symphony. She sat next to Vincent and saw both of them suddenly move and then relax. Catherine lay against his shoulder and Nancy realized they were holding hands. The music must have had some significance to them, she thought, and made a mental note to ask about that later – diplomatically. The playing was superb, she thought as the piece wound down. Then a man began to play Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata on a concert grand she hadn't noticed until then. He played superbly, as if he was playing from his soul, telling his story. Perhaps he was. She realized suddenly, that everyone in the hall must have a story to tell. People did not find this place by accident. Even Catherine had not – or indeed, Vincent himself.

The next piece, also played by the man on the piano, was Grieg's Piano Concerto. Now Nancy knew there was a connection. Catherine had told her of that concert, and why she had left New York earlier than planned. Now the two of them were listening to the music with their eyes closed, as if remembering.

After that the whole orchestra played Pomp and Circumstance so joyfully that people in the audience began to clap. Soon the whole hall rang and when the orchestra finished, everyone stood up and gave them a standing ovation.

Nancy looked at Father and smiled happily. He nodded and walked to the stage, then waited until there was silence.

"I think we all agree that our musical evening has been one for the history books. I think I can say with assurance that our special guest enjoyed it too. Thank you all for coming – and my compliments to our talented musicians. Now, we must all go to bed. There is work to do in the morning! Sleep well, all."

There were a few good-hearted groans at the last, but everyone filed out quietly. Their little group waited and followed, Father again determining the pace. By the time they got back to the home tunnels, Jacob was drooping. Vincent picked him up and with a look at Catherine and Nancy, said good-night to Father. The old man looked almost as tired and waved at them through a yawn.

They walked swiftly back to the brownstone's entrance and all went straight upstairs. Vincent took Jacob to his bedroom and Catherine led Nancy to hers again.

"I think you'll find everything you need, Nancy, but if you don't, please call me. We're just upstairs. We'll be up early, so don't worry about waking us. Sleep in, if you wish. We'll expect you when we see you."

Catherine went upstairs and Nancy quickly prepared for bed. She hoped she would be able to sleep after the excitement of the day. Once in bed, she knew she would. The bed was wonderful and the hum of New York, barely audible, in fact seemed to be soporific.

## Chapter 5

Upstairs, Catherine and Vincent were in bed at last, having waited until Jacob was asleep. They were talking quietly.

"Did you know what music they were going to play, Vincent?"

"No. They made it clear they wanted it to be a surprise."

"How did they know?"

Vincent grunted. "Catherine, you know that there are no secrets here below. I was not the only one who knew of the concerts in the park. As for the Grieg, well, again, a sentry's ears are sharp. Your concert might have been heard in the Whispering Gallery. Any time I met you, word got out. I suspect Rolly had something to do with the Moonlight selection. It's a piece that has a special meaning for him. It was the first piece he played for Miss Kendricks, the first one he learned to play from notation. I'm grateful they didn't play Vivaldi. My memory of that time is not pleasant."

"Yes, you weren't well then. That means someone knew that too. Is there a secret archivist?"

Vincent looked at her in amazement.

"Catherine, you ask a most important question. I had not given it any thought. Father and Mary – and others – often remind us of our history, but not such small details. I can only think of one person who could do this."

"Who?"

"The person who knows everything, all the time."

"Pascal?"

"Yes. He has a memory like an elephant, Catherine. He remembers every code ever used and probably every message ever passed along the pipes. He was born below, as you know. His father was our first pipemaster."

"Well, I guess he has to relax sometime. Should we ask him?"

"I would rather not, but I will tell Father our suspicion and beg him to keep it secret. It may be important some day. I will visit Pascal in his chamber – perhaps to discuss the WARGS. He could not possibly hide so many journals – any more than I can. If they are there, I will see them."

"Sounds like a plan. Will you be able to join us on our tour tomorrow?"

"I believe I can. The repair crews have men far more proficient with a welding torch than I."

"Good. We can start anywhere, I guess, but we should put William's kitchen somewhere in the middle, when he is neither preparing a meal, nor cleaning up after one."

"About mid-morning would be ideal. We can take a recess then."

"Oh, yes! Big cookies and cold lemonade."

Vincent laughed. "Now I know where Jacob gets his love of snacks from."

"As if you didn't know already. Your own fondness is legendary too, you know. But talk of food has made me hungry."

It soon became obvious that Catherine was thinking about something other than food.

"The appetizer is piquant ..." She ran her hands up Vincent's well-furred chest and sucked on the nearest nipple. Vincent closed his eyes and tried to relax.

"And the main course is always worth the wait ..." She reached down and carefully positioned his organ so that she could lay herself atop it, just short of its ultimate goal. Vincent groaned.

"It's always quite exquisitely prepared ..." Vincent was certainly ready, but let Catherine continue her game.

"And most delectable ..." Catherine positioned herself atop the "main course" and let herself slide down his shaft. Vincent spasmed and gasped. His eyes opened and he gazed at her with a passion that never failed to make her hot.

"One should enjoy it slowly, though, so as to miss none of the nuance."

Vincent pulled her to him and held her as he moved his hips.

"Oh ... the dinner is too good to linger over anymore." Catherine gasped, her lips finding his. Very soon, they both soared in an orgasm, returning to the present only slowly.

Catherine sighed.

"And what dessert could possibly add a finale?" she whispered.

She got her answer as Vincent pulsed inside her and she felt the warmth of his juices run down an inner thigh and his purr vibrate along her skin. She laid her head against his neck and stroked his hair. He held her close and kissed an ear. Then he tweaked the sheet over them. He could think of nothing to say. He rubbed his palms over her lovely round rump and sighed. He realized, suddenly, that she had fallen asleep – and soon followed suit himself.

Both awakened at the same time, sensing Jacob's impatience. He would not bother them unless he knew they were awake, but it was broad daylight. Vincent used the ensuite and then wrapped himself in a robe to go and see their son. Catherine yawned and looked at the clock. It was 7:00 am. Definitely time to get up. Breakfast below would be at 8:00, later than usual, because it was a Saturday. With a sigh, she got up and quickly showered and dressed. She heard noises from the floor below and realized that Nancy was awake as well. Good. They could all go to breakfast together.

Vincent returned with Jacob and a bundle of clothes and shoes in his arms.

"I will wash him and myself as well."

"Then, I'll go and see Nancy. She's up. Meet you down in the kitchen. I need a coffee."

Vincent grunted acknowledgement and took Jacob into the ensuite.

Catherine went down the stairs and knocked on the guest room door. Nancy's voice told her to enter. Her friend was dressed and looking out the window.

"You're up bright and early for a guest. Did you sleep well?"

"Oh yes. I don't remember New York being so quiet."

"I had double-glazed windows installed to keep it warmer and quieter. Vincent isn't used to traffic noise and it can get pretty cold in the winter in these old houses – which he's not used to either. The radiators are good, but we only have them on in rooms we use. The temperature below is cool all year, but not cold, except where the air from above leaks down the air shafts."

"How does he like living above ground?"

"He loves it. He never seems to tire of the outdoors. I wish there were more I could do for him, take him to, but ..."

"Yes, his challenges are unique – but you have made him a happy man, Cathy."

"It's one thing I can give him – and he makes me happy too. More than happy."

"Would you like some coffee? Vincent is trying to wash and dress Jacob. We'll go down for breakfast as soon as they're ready – but it'll take a little while."

"I'd love a coffee!"

They went down to the kitchen and Catherine made a pot of coffee. They had just finished their cup when Vincent appeared in the doorway with Jacob. They both looked frustrated. Vincent rolled his eyes when Catherine looked at him.

"We are both a bit ruffled. Our son, Catherine, is not willing to play the invalid. I think Father will have to revise his estimates. Jacob's hands do not seem to be painful any longer."

"Maybe we should go now and get Father to look him over. Breakfast might be more digestible."

"Yes, I think that would be best."

They all trooped down the stairs and into the tunnels, moving swiftly to Father's chamber. The patriarch was sitting at his table with his first cup of tea. He rose when he saw his visitors.

"What on earth? Can't a man have a quiet cup of tea without the world dropping in?," he asked, with mild humour.

Catherine laughed. "Not when the world includes a boy who wants his hands back in use."

"Ah well, I should have guessed. Well, come here young man. Vincent, can you bring me my bag? It's over there by the doorway."

Vincent put the bag on the table and Father rooted around in it until he found a pair of sharp surgical scissors. Jacob held out his gloved hands and the old man carefully cut the gloves from the wrist along the back of each hand, and then each finger. He made one final clip along the back of the thumb and used a pair of tweezers to ease off first one glove, then the other. Jacob turned over his hands and looked triumphant.

"See, they're just a little red now. Awww ... they itch!"

"Yes, they will, my boy. They're still healing, even if they don't look like they are. You'll have to avoid scratching them, or you might open up those barely-healed burns. Do you want another pair of gloves – just to remind you not to?"

Jacob looked uncertain. "Can I touch things and all that now?"

"Oh yes, but you'll have to be careful. No heavy lifting and no swimming or horseplay today. Tomorrow you can wash your hands, but for today, I think some clean gloves ...."

"Ok," Jacob agreed.

Father pulled a pair from his bag along with some of his special salve. "I was going to do this after breakfast, anyway."

He spread the salve on Jacob's palms. The boy sighed as the itching stopped. The gloves went on next and Jacob flexed his fingers.

"Feels better."

"Yes, if your hands start to itch again, come back and I'll spread some more salve on them."

"Ok."

A series of imperative taps sounded on the pipes and all but Nancy stiffened just a little.

"Breakfast is ready," Vincent explained.

"Whoopeeee!" Jacob yelled. "I'll save seats for you," he promised over his shoulder as he ran out.

"Well, then, we'd better get moving," Father exclaimed.

They all went down to the dining hall, where the noise indicated there was a lot of merriment and the smells were very enticing. Vincent looked around as they entered, curious, then noticed that attention seemed to be directed at the map on the wall. He felt laughter growing in him again. The multiple WARGS had been gradually erased over the previous weeks and only real and present dangers were marked with a single symbol. Places which were too dangerous to attempt were now marked with a circle with a diagonal line through it. They had decided on that for the places that were closed. It was a more potent reminder of danger than a WARG symbol, at least to curious children.

But where the entry to William's kitchen was marked, the circle had a small caricature of William's face on top and two bent arms, as if he had his hands on his ample waist.

They sat down either side of Jacob amidst continuing chuckles. Father shook his head.

"All this because of WARGS," he commented wryly. He looked at Jacob, who was sitting next to Nancy.

"While we get our breakfast and eat it, Jacob, why don't you tell Nancy about the WARGS? We had the first real test of our new codes with your "accident".

As the plates of hot muffins, jars of jam and platters of neatly-cut cheese were passed around, Jacob told the story. Nancy found herself intrigued as Jacob explained the system, not omitting to tell her that it had been his father's idea.

"Perhaps you could tell us now why you didn't follow procedure for a WARGS sighting," Vincent suggested to his son.

Jacob hung his head, obviously embarrassed – and perhaps just a little guilty as well, Nancy thought. She had seen that expression on her children's faces. He spoke softly, his face flushed.

"It wasn't a warg then. I ... I saw a piece of toffee stuck to the pipe right by my desk. I was only going to break it off – I wasn't going to eat it, honest. It was stuck and I had to really pull on it. Then I saw the pipe bend and steam and hot water flew out. It was my fault, so I tried to stop it. Then another pipe broke nearby. I yelled for someone to use the WARGS emergency code, but it was so noisy, no one heard. I tried to stop the steam with my sweater, but my stomach got too hot. So I grabbed

some paper off my desk and tried to wrap it around the break. I couldn't see what was happening, but I guess Teacher got everyone out and signalled. Then Dad came and dropped an old towel over the pipe. He carried me to the hospital chamber."

"There were three breaks," Vincent remarked. "But one was minor. The pipes are rusty down this far. We have been replacing the oldest ones gradually, but our stock of pipe is limited. We scavenge all that we can from obsolete lines, but it is a long job. However, Mouse has been rooting around some of the old street manhole accesses and has found a storage room full of old pipe, probably left by a maintenance crew long ago. Much of it is still sound. We are using it to repair several of the lines now."

There was a sudden cascade of loud laughter from diners. Nancy looked away from Jacob to see William was standing in front of the map with his hands on his hips, looking very much like the cartoon. He turned to look around the hall, his mouth twitching.

"I get NO respect," he roared. He pointed at the caricature. "However, if this will keep you little monsters from being underfoot, I'm all for it."

"The tea is ready. Where are my servers?"

Several of the older children trooped up to the front, each taking a teapot and some cups. They moved swiftly to hand out the cups to everyone and fill them.

"Well, that was a story worth listening to," Nancy commented as she drank her tea. "I'm looking forward to seeing some of those WARGS."

"Oh you'll see a few," Catherine promised. "We don't think about them much anymore, so this is a good reminder that this world is not always benign. Today's tour will have a practical theme – then maybe tomorrow we can show you some more of our wonders – and dangers."

"Sounds great to me."

"If everyone has finished, I suggest we get started," Vincent remarked. Jacob jumped up and waited eagerly.

"No running," Catherine cautioned him. "We older folks can't keep up. Where shall we start, Vincent?"

"I suggest the school room, then the laundry room and sewing room, then the workshops. By that time, William will have cleaned up and be ready to boast a little."

The next few hours passed like a slide show for Nancy. She was amazed at how efficient the community was. Although everyone seemed to be wearing motley, the clothing was well-made and imaginatively designed, even beautiful. She found out why when she met Annabelle, the dwarf seamstress and quartermaster. She had her auburn hair piled high on her head, giving her diminutive stature another six inches, and wore a wonderful velvet patchwork long skirt and vest, tastefully decorated with small chains and gold buttons. A look around the sewing chamber revealed shelving full of neat boxes and stacks of neatly-folded fabric.

"I bet I could spend days in here," Nancy commented. "I'll never be happy in my hobby room again."

The laundry room took her aback, though. She had not thought about what an absence of electricity or gas would mean. The people-powered contraptions made her shake her head in disbelief. And every workshop she saw was well-organized and well-equipped with hand tools.

"So neat," she said. "My husband could learn some lessons here."

"Oh, not everyone's workroom is like this," Catherine laughed. "We'll introduce you to Mouse. He's expecting us."

They entered Mouse's workshop and found him pottering at a long table so covered with oddments that Nancy laughed.

"Now that's the most familiar thing I've seen here. Looks like my husband's workbench!"

"Know where everything is," Mouse told her with a slight frown. "No tidying up. Always finding new stuff too. Right Vincent?"

Vincent looked around. "Yes. Mouse is our best scavenger, Nancy. He is also our most talented gadget maker and fixer."

"Gizmo," Mouse corrected him, to general laughter.

He turned from them and rooted around on his workbench, snorted in disgust and ran to the other side, where Nancy realized a raccoon was playing with something in its agile hands. Mouse grabbed the plaything.

"No, Arthur. Not yours. Bad."

He returned to his guests with a wry grin on his face.

"Sorry. Arthur likes shiny things."

He handed Nancy a small silver box. She thanked Mouse and opened it in wonder. Inside was a pair of earrings to match her necklace.

"How beautiful! So you are the jeweler, are you? Thank you so much!"

She took a step forward and gave Mouse a quick kiss on his cheek. Mouse flushed and mumbled, "You're welcome. Gotta get back to work." He dashed into the back of his workshop and busied himself with something. Arthur followed him, chittering.

Vincent sighed. Mouse still lacked some of the niceties of social discourse. It was unlikely he would ever acquire them.

"Since we're no longer wanted here, I think we should go and have a mid-morning snack," Vincent suggested.

"YES," said Jacob loudly. He had been obviously bored for some time. Vincent looked at his son sternly and he hung his head.

"Why don't you go and let William know we're coming," he told his son.

Jacob ran off and Vincent sighed. Catherine rolled her eyes. "Well, maybe now he won't want to come with us tomorrow. I'm sure Father can find something for him to do."

"A chess game, perhaps," Vincent suggested with a smile. "Jacob has not been properly introduced to it yet – and Father prefers to begin their education young."

"Because that way he has a chance to win – for a little while," Catherine explained to Nancy, as they made their way along the tunnels.

Their entry into the dining hall brought William out with a tray of cookies, a jug of lemonade and several glasses. Jacob was sitting down and looked up with obvious delight.

"Careful of your hands," Vincent reminded him, and Jacob nodded, picking up a cookie off the platter gingerly with the finger tips of both hands.

The others sat beside him and Nancy found the cookies to be the best she had ever tasted – rich with nuts and many spices. The lemonade was wonderful too. Why had she stopped making it from scratch? she wondered. The tunnel food reminded her of all the flavours she had missed for years. She made a mental note to try and do more of her own cooking and less eating out of boxes. She sighed. Catherine looked at her and caught her expression, one she knew well.

"Doesn't everything taste wonderful here?" she asked. "I was never much of a cook before I met Vincent, and soon lost all interest in becoming one. William's food is special."

"How on earth did he end up down here?" Nancy asked, curious.

"Well, that's a long story – and one he should tell you – but in short, he became tired of being taken for granted and being asked to produce art instead of food," Catherine told her.

Vincent nodded. "Our fare is usually simple, but always tasty. William is a master of making-do."

"As are you all, from what I can see," Nancy commented.

"We need so little," Vincent told her. "Food and clothing. These tunnels are our shelter and we have our family, our books, our music. We know that the world above has many luxuries, but down here, we have no need of them."

"Well, we have a few of those luxuries in our house, of course," Catherine admitted. "We decided that we could save some of the burden by doing our own laundry. The kitchen is fully-equipped, so sometimes we cook too – but William's meals are hard to miss. And although we sleep in our house, we are below often. Vincent still uses his chamber between classes and I like to get away from my desk occasionally and help in the sewing room. This community survives because we all pitch in – but it gives us far more than we can repay."

"Catherine has repaid us many times over," Vincent corrected his wife. "Her generosity has helped us often and her knowledge of the world above has kept us safe."

"None of which would have been possible had you not saved me from myself," Catherine remarked.

Nancy knew this was an old refrain between them, but seeing the expression on their faces as they said so was something she would always remember.

Jacob had been quiet through all this and Vincent suddenly wondered why. He looked over at his son and sensed he was not happy. His fists were clenched.

"What is it Jacob?"

"My hands itch," he groaned.

"Then I think you should go back to Father and have him rub some more salve onto them. Afterwards, why don't you ask him to teach you how to play chess?"

Jacob brightened at this. "Do you think he would, Dad? Won't he say I'm too young?"

"Not if you can be patient and listen to what he tells you."

"Okay. Can I go now?"

"Yes. We will see you at lunch."

Jacob ran out and the Vincent turned to Nancy.

"I think you should meet William now. He will be in his kitchen, but not yet too busy."

They trooped through the doorway to the kitchen, Catherine managing not to snigger at the caricature next to it, which had not been removed. It occurred to her that William probably enjoyed having it there. He was not as ornery as he liked to appear.

## Chapter 6

Inside the kitchen, they found the tunnel chef sitting on his stool, watching a couple of enormous pots on a huge iron range. Nancy realized it was either coal or wood-fired and saw that it vented through a large opening above it.

William got up as they approached and took a long wooden spoon to one of the pots. A gale of laughter broke out behind him and he looked around at his visitors, puzzled.

"What? He demanded loudly. No one could answer him for long moments. Vincent was trying to keep a straight face and the effort rendered him speechless. Nancy and Catherine were laughing, tears running down their cheeks.

Vincent managed to gain control of his tongue, but only managed to get out "your seat" before joining in the laughter.

"What the ..."

William looked at the stool he had been sitting on, puzzled, causing more laughter to break out.

"Not that," Vincent managed to say, at last. "Your behind. It has a white hoof print on it!"

William's brows knitted and he put his hands on his ample waist, waiting for order to be restored. Again, he looked so much like his caricature that Catherine had to close her mouth tightly to prevent more gales of laughter escaping.

Vincent walked to the stool and looked at it closely. He ran a finger over it and showed William a white streak.

"Chalk," he reported. "Who would have done this?"

"I know exactly who it was," William growled. "That Samantha. She wants to learn about "nutrition" and has taken it upon herself to lecture me in my own kitchen! As if anyone here lacks proper nutrition!"

"Least of all you," Vincent could not resist saying.

William turned on him.

"That's right, Vincent – remind me of my girth! I slave all day in this kitchen, hardly have time to take a ...". He suddenly looked embarrassed. "... well, you know," he finished lamely. "And this is the respect I get. Cartoons, jokes to my face, hoofprints on my backside! Harumph!"

Vincent was now curious. He looked sternly at the two ladies, who immediately got a serious expression on their faces.

"Did you say Samantha? Does she want to apprentice with you?"

William grunted. "I wish I knew. She stands gazing around the kitchen, or roots through my bins and cupboards when I take a break, and I find her making notes and clicking her tongue. She's a damned – pardon me - annoyance and I chase her out – figuratively," he said, the latter for Nancy's benefit.

"I think Father had better speak with her," Vincent said. "She's being a nuisance elsewhere too. We must find her something constructive to do. In the meantime, William, we have an eager guest who wants to know all your secrets."

William looked at Nancy and chuckled.

"There are no secrets in this place, as Vincent can tell you. Even the spiders have ears."

"Spiders?" Catherine asked, looking around at the ceiling.

"Oh yes, lots of those. I never saw such large ones until I came down here. Under that stove is a monster. He comes out when I do cleanup."

"Ah, a house spider," Vincent guessed. "It hunts from a web tunnel and bites. It could bite you."

"That's what Father said too. But we have an understanding, Goliath and I," William explained. "I don't sweep under the stove, and he takes care of anything with more than four legs."

Vincent laughed.

"Sounds like a bargain," Catherine commented dryly. She had no particular phobias about insects, but large spiders were not something she wanted to meet. She was sure the tunnels had plenty of other things best not considered. She cleared

her throat.

"Well, I don't know if Nancy has any questions, but we are introducing her to everything – and everyone – we can."

"Ask away," William invited.

Nancy looked around. She didn't want to get technical.

"What's your favourite food," she asked him.

Vincent chuckled and William glowered at him.

"Before Vincent says it, I'll say it for him. I like 'most anything, as my girth proves. I grew up on a farm. My sister still works it. Plain solid fare is what I do and what I eat. We don't get many upside treats here, so I make a few for us."

"He's taught me to make great stews," Catherine admitted. "Vincent isn't a fussy eater, neither is Jacob."

"They learn to eat what they get, and be thankful for it," William declared.

"We are very thankful for William," Vincent told Nancy. "He has been here a long time. Without him, our celebrations would be much ... diminished."

"Well, I don't like to see anyone go without," the big cook rumbled. "Some of the children we took in were near starvation and even some of the adults were not eatin' right. Everybody has to work here, so I make good solid food."

"You even make beer and wine – and cheese too, I hear," Nancy commented.

"Well, over the years, I've learned to do 'most anything. We have the right climate here for brewing and wine and cheese-making. My sister sends us the raw materials. We never have a lot of it, but no one goes without either."

"We should let William get on with his work," Vincent hinted. "We have time to visit a very special place before lunch."

William waved them out of the kitchen with his spoon and the two women followed Vincent. The way wound through a lot of tunnels and Nancy was wondering how anyone could keep their sense of direction when they emerged through an arch into an open, well-lit, sandy-floored space. The light seemed to be coming from everywhere.

"This is the Crossroads Cathedral," Catherine told her.

"I often ran through here when I needed to reach Catherine at a park entrance – hoping to get there before she gave up and went home," Vincent remarked.

"Now we go this way." He led the way through a tall arch to the left and they began to move downwards.

Catherine watched Vincent move ahead of them and wondered why she didn't walk behind him more often. The sight of that well-muscled rump was well worth a little lagging. She sighed inwardly and felt Vincent respond with a mental "tsk tsk". She smiled to herself, wondering what Nancy thought. When she looked at her friend, it was to see an expression she was sure had been on her own face. Even in his cloak, Vincent could not hide his animal grace and power. Catherine nudged her friend, and smirked a little, nodding at their leader. Nancy looked rueful.

"Don't be embarrassed," Catherine whispered to her. "I'll never understand how he managed to stay unattached for over 30 years. I can only assume that either the women down here were blind or they all thought of him as a big brother."

Vincent's sharp ears caught the exchange, but he said nothing. Catherine knew very well why he had remained a bachelor. Perhaps familiarity was partly the reason no women had tried very hard, he mused, while admitting he had not encouraged them, after Lisa left. Catherine, a stranger, had found her way into his heart without even trying.

The three soon found the tunnels getting brighter and Nancy heard a distant roaring. As it got louder and louder, she realized it was a sound she had never expected to hear below – rushing water. A few minutes later, they all emerged onto a wide ledge against a stone cliff and Nancy gasped as she looked around. The cave was enormous, and a large waterfall was pouring from broad daylight down a long rocky cliff opposite, so far away it seemed impossible.

"I'm dreaming," she stated. "How can this be? Where does it come from?"

"We are not sure," Vincent told her. "Even we think of it as magical. The water is pure and cold. Perhaps it is best left unexplained."

"Would you like to sit for a while? We have time."

"Oh yes," Nancy exclaimed.

Vincent disappeared around a corner beside the entry and came back with a large basket. He opened it to reveal three glasses, a bottle of wine and a blanket.

Catherine looked at him and caught the glimmer of mischief in his eyes. He had been planning this all along! They sat down on the blanket and Vincent opened the bottle of wine and poured them all a glass. They sipped appreciatively.

"My, that's lovely. What is it?" Nancy asked.

"Dandelion, I was told. This was made by his sister Agatha, on her farm."



"Dandelion Wine," Catherine mused. "That's my favourite book by Ray Bradbury. Remember that one, Nancy?"

"Oh indeed. It taught us girls a lot about boys – and men."

"Yes, it was special," Vincent agreed.

Catherine looked at him, wondering what he thought of a boy and his small town life. Vincent looked at her and smiled.

"Boys are the same everywhere," he declared. "They dream, want special things, get into mischief and believe in magic."

They sat in companionable silence for a long while after that.

Finally Catherine sighed.

"A cup of wine, a loaf of bread' ... what, no bread, Vincent?"

"I didn't want to spoil our appetites for lunch."

Catherine snorted. "As if anything could for you!"

"Perhaps not, but you ladies ..."

"Might have 'past regrets and future fears'?"

"Yes."

"Better be merry with the fruitful grape'," Nancy quoted.

"And 'fill the cup that clears'," Catherine added.

"Alas, we must 'turn down an empty glass'," Vincent replied, which wrung groans from the ladies. "We must to that subtle alchemist, that in a trice ..."

"Ok, ok, I give up," Catherine declared. "No one can beat you at quotations. I think he has a photographic memory," she told Nancy, as she passed their glasses to Vincent.

They rose and Vincent packed up the basket and led them back along the tunnels, arriving at the dining hall without passing through the cathedral junction again, Nancy noticed. The place must be a regular rabbit warren, she decided.

Lunch was a thick and hearty minestrone stew, rich with the scent of herbs and just slight little spicy hot. There were baskets of grainy rolls and squares of cheese to go with it. Nancy ate with a gusto that surprised her. Dessert was little pots of crème caramel that disappeared far too quickly. She sighed and looked over at her friend.

"I think I could eat all day here!"

Catherine laughed. "I know. Until Vincent brought me here, I don't think I had ever appreciated that there need be no distinction between soup and stew."

They finished off with a round of tea and the dining hall emptied quickly. Jacob was eating with some of the other children left with them. It was a Sunday, so Nancy wondered at that, but didn't want to ask. She looked at the wall at the front of the hall and her curiosity got the better of her.

"May I take a closer look at that map? I assume that's of the tunnels. It looks fascinating."

"Of course," Vincent replied and they all moved to stand around the colorful painting. Father joined them and looked at Nancy.

"As you can see, our world is quite a maze. We used to keep our maps on paper, but they were city hall blueprints and some have deteriorated quite badly. Actually, this map developed from Vincent's WARGS idea, a timely one, I might add. We decided to base the design on the London Subway map, one of the most effective maps ever made. We can't name our tunnels, but we have devised a similar design. The thick lines are the main hub tunnels, such as we are in now, and the lines get noticeably thinner as they get further away or deeper. The lines tell us how far away they are at a glance. Each has something that identifies it to us. Nearly all have a WARGS markings, but others we know because they have steep turns or go downwards with steps – see this tunnel line goes from thick to quite thin. That's one of our main routes, down the windy stairs, to the Great Hall and the catacombs and the Mirror Pool.

"Do you hand this map out?" Nancy asked, thinking that she wouldn't mind having one to study.

"No, we've always kept our maps in my chamber, used only there and only by our Council at need. We dare not produce anything that might go astray. This wall is our sole community map. People who join us now have to learn it by heart. It doesn't take long. For the first month or so, newcomers are always accompanied by one of us, but now that time can be shortened. This map, with all the WARGS has been immensely helpful.

"Would you like to come and see our library," Father asked, then.

"Oh yes. Catherine has boasted about it. I love books!"

"And then we can go for a swim," Vincent suggested. "We have a fine bathing chamber here warmed by the natural hot springs."

"That sound wonderful," Nancy declared.

They followed Father, Nancy taking the older man's arm. Her entrance into the chamber made her gasp.

"Wow! How did you ever collect so many books?"

"Helpers above give us many, mostly older volumes that are neither old enough to be valuable or modern enough to interest today's readers. We have a good selection in just about every field, I believe."

Catherine looked around. She didn't come here often anymore, but she remembered when she and Vincent had taken on the job of organizing this library with some of the older children. That had been years ago, before Jacob was born. Although their efforts had not been in vain, Father had certainly not kept up the system. It looked almost as bad as it ever had. She signed and caught Vincent's look. He rolled his eyes and she chuckled.

Father looked at her then and caught the expression on her face. He got a wry expression.

"Catherine knows what this library looked like when she first came to us. After a herculean effort with Vincent, and many others, it was organized. I'm afraid it has almost returned to its previous state. Everyone uses it, but almost no one – including myself – ever puts books back where they belong."

"I think it could be restored to order," Vincent commented as he looked around. "There are piles of books, to be sure, but I think our system is still discernable. I will organize a work party tomorrow. The school room will be out of bounds until the pipes are fixed, so this will give the children something to do."

"Excellent," commented Father, without much enthusiasm. He knew he would not be able to study with all the commotion – and he'd probably spend a lot of time trying to find anything afterwards. Vincent put an arm over his shoulder, guessing his thoughts.

"Perhaps you and old Sam can enjoy a sauna tomorrow," he suggested.

"Yes, that might be the best solution. If I stay here, my blood pressure will skyrocket," Father conceded.

Nancy was touring the library, peering at the shelves and shaking her head in wonderment. She went up the metal stairs to the upper gallery and found it to be the reference section. What a place for a child to explore, she thought. Here was the accumulated knowledge of many centuries. Without the distraction of radio or television – to say nothing of movies – this place would open minds and encourage learning. She leaned on a railing to look up a top shelf and suddenly found it give way. She yelled in fright as she felt herself falling backwards. The railing swinging away from her like a gate. She closed her eyes and waited for a hard fall. She couldn't remember what was underneath the gallery.

The hard landing never came. Instead Nancy found herself in a pair of strong arms. Vincent!

"Oh ..," she croaked, looking up at him as he carried her to the others. She closed her eyes in relief. He was very strong and she felt safer than she had ever felt in her life. No wonder Catherine loved him!

Nancy opened her eyes again as she heard Father and Catherine's voices. Vincent carefully put her on her feet, but she held onto his arm for support. Her legs felt like rubber and were shaking. Catherine immediately took her other arm and they led her to a chair.

Father voice was tight. He was flushed and obviously furious at himself.

"Nancy, the fault is mine. I've been remiss. Thank goodness you weren't hurt! Vincent, I want all those railings checked and double-welded, tomorrow! Tell Mouse and Cullen immediately. They can take some time off from the pipe repairs. I'll make myself scarce so the books can be sorted too."

Vincent went to a pipe near the chamber entrance. Using a small metal bar, obviously put there for the purpose, he tapped out a message and waited for a response. He nodded to the others and returned to where Nancy was sitting.

"I think we might take that swim now," he said softly. "We can use the sauna too. Would you like that Nancy?"

Nancy looked up at him and smiled. "I think that would be wonderful. Let me try and get my legs under me"

She stood up and sighed as her legs took her weight. Catherine held her arm and they made their way along the tunnels, Vincent leading the way to his chamber. Catherine led Nancy to the big chair and sat her down again.

"Are you ok now?"

"Yes, I think so. Where is the bathing chamber?"

"Ah, well, the community swimming chamber is not far away. Vincent found it one day a few years ago. An amazing place. We all use it to relax in – not wash in. We have smaller bathing chambers for that. This chamber has one that we share with Father, behind the stained glass window."

Nancy looked at that window and felt amazement roll over her again. How many secrets did this world have? She found herself wishing she could spend at least a week discovering them.

"Well, I'm ready. What do we wear?"

There was a short silence at that. Catherine cleared her throat.

"We don't. We swim naked – but we do have thick terrycloth robes to wear there and lots of towels."

"Sounds wonderful to me," Nancy exclaimed. "Is Jacob joining us?"

"I think he and the children are up to something," Catherine remarked, looking at Vincent. "They're being unusually quiet."

"They want to surprise us," Vincent said and began rooting in an enormous wardrobe. He emerged with a handful of patchwork terry. He shook one out and gave it to Nancy and gave another to Catherine.

"I'll ...um ... change in the bathing chamber," he told them and disappeared around the back of a wardrobe. Nancy craned her neck and realized there was a set of stone stairs there. What next? she wondered.

She and Catherine quickly shed their clothes and put on the thick robes, which Nancy saw were a miracle of terrycloth patches. Catherine saw the look on her face and laughed.

"Annabelle has taught us how to save the good parts of towels and sew them together to make robes and more towels. This community wastes nothing. The worn sections of towel get used for cleaning."

"What do we wear on our feet," Nancy asked, looking down.

"Ah we have something special," Catherine told her and went to a box next to the chamber door. She extracted a pair of wooden clogs for Nancy and herself, then a larger pair for Vincent.

"Wow, they look like Dutch clogs," Nancy exclaimed.

"Similar," Catherine agreed. "Not quite as heavy. These are what we use on laundry day – you saw the laundry room. It swims in water."

"You've thought of everything," Nancy remarked admiringly.

"Well, we have few of the distractions of the world above, so we can spend time improving our lifestyle. We have a good life here."

They put on the footwear and Vincent re-emerged, enveloped in a long loose robe that had a faded turquoise pattern which looked vaguely Navaho. It was stunning and Nancy said so. Vincent flushed a little but merely asked, "Everyone ready?"

"Yes, let's go," Catherine

Vincent led the way down the tunnels, down the winding stairs and then into a side tunnel and then through a very narrow tunnel that barely let them squeeze through. They emerged into a large cavern that seemed lit by a million tiny lights. Vincent led them to a rock outcropping and, without further ado, stepped out of his clogs and walked into a narrow gap between two tall boulders. A moment later, his robe flew onto one and Nancy heard a splash. She was a bit disappointed at not seeing him disrobe, but told herself she must behave. Catherine followed Vincent and then Nancy followed her.

The cut in the rock emerged onto a small stretch of coarse sand that eased into the water. She stuck a toe into the water and was surprised to find it warm. With a sign, she shed the terry robe and let herself into the water. She looked around and spotted Vincent and Catherine not far away, gazing at the ceiling. She looked up and saw that it was ablaze with speckled light. She had no idea how sunlight could possibly be making its way this far below the surface, but decided that like so much else in this place, it was better to just enjoy it.

She swam over to them and smiled as they turned to her. The water was pleasant, just slightly cooler than body temperature. It was fairly murky though, but not with mud, but bubbles. The air had a slight sulphur tang.

"I don't know how many more surprises I can stand," she told them frankly as she found reached for the bottom of the pool with her toes. The water was just up to her neck, but it was a relief not to have to tread water. "Each one seems more amazing than the last. How is this place possible?"

"It is a small miracle," Vincent agreed. "Hot steam pipes and a natural spring come together here. I found it by accident while trying to find the source of a broken water pipe. This pool isn't very deep, but it has a lot of dissolved minerals. Over there at the far end, there is enough heat to make a small sauna room. Behind the rocks over there, is a small cool waterfall."

"I think I could stand to live down here," Nancy said a bit wistfully. "Except that I think I would miss the sun. This is nice, but not like autumn in Vermont."

Vincent looked a little sad, but quickly turned away. Catherine looked at him and changed the subject.

"Well, should we swim or should we talk?"

She pushed off and began to stroke strongly to the far end of the pool. Nancy followed her. Vincent, she noticed, headed for the area he said had a waterfall. She tried to keep up with Catherine, but found herself getting further and further behind. She realized she was badly out of practice.

"Whoa!" she gasped to her friend. Catherine immediately stopped and waited for her.

"I think I'd like to try the sauna," she confessed. Swimming was nice, but her fall in Father's library had not been without effect. She had also done a lot more walking than she had done in many months. Her back felt stiff.

Catherine smiled at her. "I think we've pushed you a little hard," she guessed. "I'm so used to the hard uneven floors and long tunnels that I forget I was once new to them too. The first time Vincent took me to the waterfall my legs ached for days. I didn't admit it of course, but he knew. Come, I'll lead the way to the sauna. It really is special."

Catherine swam over to a spot some distance from where they had entered the pool and waited for Nancy. They walked up a rough stone ramp and out into the cooler air of the cavern. Catherine ran ahead and through a doorway and Nancy was met by wonderful dry heat. Catherine handed her an enormous patchwork towel and led her to a wood slat bench. They both wrapped themselves up and sat down, leaning against the cave wall, which was also quite warm.

Nancy sighed.

"Wonderful. Just what I need. Where's Vincent?"

"Oh, he just loves to stand under the waterfall for a while. It's his special place and I often just stand there and watch him. His life is so restricted, even now with Jacob and our brownstone, that to see him so happy is a treat. Nancy, he's so beautiful, but I don't think he quite believes it, even now."

"Well, I have no trouble believing it," Nancy declared. "I just wish I could see more of him," she added quietly.

Catherine laughed. "You don't have to be circumspect with me, you know. Vincent is not particularly shy, except around strangers. Everyone here knows what he looks like, but, well, he doesn't show off, although he IS something to see. There isn't a conceited bone in his body."

"And what is a conceited bone?" Vincent asked from the doorway. Both women looked at each other, guessed the other's thought immediately, and giggled.

"Best you don't get an answer to that," Catherine told him raking her eyes up and down him, as if she could see through his towel.

Vincent looked at her, his face plainly showing he knew exactly what she was thinking. He joined them on the bench and let out a great breath.

"This is the only place below where we can be truly warm," he commented. "There are other bathing chambers, but this is the only natural sauna we have found."

"It's fantastic," Nancy murmured, feeling so relaxed she felt she could sleep. She must have dozed off, because she felt a nudge and opened her eyes to see Catherine in front of her holding her robe. She looked apologetic.

"Sorry, you looked so peaceful, but it's almost supper time. We thought we'd better get back and make ourselves decent."

Nancy gathered her wits and moved into the robe Catherine held for her, dropping the towel and tying the robe.

"Wow, I think I could come to love this place! I feel wonderful!"

Vincent spoke as she turned around. He was well wrapped up in his robe. "You are welcome any time you want to come, Nancy. You can call Catherine at our office in the brownstone."

"It sounds like a plan," Nancy admitted, "but I don't think I can get away much. We lead such hectic lives. The kids are in high school and there always seems to be someone visiting. Thanks for the offer, though. This has been a very special weekend. I can't believe it's almost over."

"It's not over yet, but it has gone quickly," Catherine agreed. "We'll have some time to sit and talk after dinner. I thought we could sit our den in the brownstone."

"I have something I have to do, later," Vincent remarked. "It shouldn't take long."

Catherine exchanged a glance at him and nodded. "Well, let's be off. I hate to be late for meals."

## Chapter 7

The party made the return trip to Vincent's chamber. Nancy and Catherine again changed in the main chamber, while Vincent took his clothes into the small bathroom. They dressed quickly and before they had a chance to wonder at the time, the dinner signal sounded over the pipes. They strolled to the dining room. Father and Jacob looked up expectantly as they entered and the group arranged themselves beside him, Vincent next to his son.

"And what have you been up to?" he asked the boy.

"I helped mop up the school room," Jacob replied, looking a little ashamed. "Mouse fixed the broken pipes."

"Good." Vincent ruffled the boy's hair, which was the colour of his own.

They were interrupted by a bowl of stew being placed in front of them by the night's servers. Vincent made an appreciative sound at the scent of the rich bouillabaisse. Baskets of grainy rolls were passed around and soon there was no more talk.

Nancy found herself very hungry and the stew delicious. Pots of tea also made the rounds and the flavour was remarkable. She looked at Catherine.

"What is this tea? It's wonderful!"

"Um, I don't think William could tell you. Helpers give us quite a lot of tea, always loose and usually unidentified. I think people get it as gifts and forget about it for years because they either don't drink much tea or prefer tea bags. William mixes it into a big bin. Every day it's a little different."

"What an idea!" Nancy declared. "I must try that myself. I have little tins of loose tea at the back of a cupboard. Some is probably decades old."

"See? And if you find it too much for you, just send it to me and I'll give it to William."

"Now here's dessert. Oh, William's outdone himself again. I think it's honey cake."

Trays were passed around with thick slices of cake, richly scented with spices and dotted with what Nancy guessed were chopped dates. She took a bite and found it moist and rich.

"Wonderful," she commented after a second bite. She happened to look at Vincent. His plate was empty, as was that of Jacob's. They must have inhaled it, she thought, as she accepted more tea. This pot was slightly different, as Catherine had said, but just as good.

Catherine smiled at her, guessing her thoughts. "William says the secret is to steep it properly. I think he's right – but it can take a bit of getting used to if you prefer your tea weak."

"I don't think I'll ever want weak tea again," Nancy remarked with a sigh.

Father stood up then and addressed the Hall.

"Friends, I have a couple of announcements. My library must be sorted out tomorrow and I've suggested that the normal Monday morning literature class do this. More importantly, the railings in the gallery must all be checked and repaired if necessary. Nancy almost had a terrible accident earlier today, when one gave way."

There were gasps at this, but Father continued.

"Between this incident and the burst pipes, I think we must put a greater priority on repairs for the next few days. Vincent will post a work schedule tomorrow morning. All other work will be suspended until we've re-examined every pipe in the home tunnels, along with any metal supports."

"Now I wish you all a good evening,"

The hall emptied quickly and after goodbyes to Father, Vincent led the way to the brownstone and then up into the den. Jacob didn't look too happy at being with a group of adults obviously planning a chitchat, and was obviously tired too, although Nancy was sure he wouldn't admit it.

Vincent looked at his son and felt his fatigue. He glanced at Catherine, who nodded, and addressed Jacob.

"Son, come upstairs with me and I'll read you a story. Nancy and your mother would like to talk without us."

Jacob rose without complaint and they both went upstairs. Nancy looked at Catherine.

"I'm so glad I came," she remarked. "Not just to meet Jacob and Vincent at last, but to see how you live. I don't think I'll ever take anything for granted again."

"Yes, it becomes second nature to think about re-using, making-do. We don't have a bad life, just one without frills."

"Oh, I disagree," Nancy declared. "You have wonderful food, clothing that is remarkable for its imagination, a community that works together and cares for its children. What we consider 'frills' in our world are just indulgences, I see that now. They aren't necessary to be happy. I envy you."

"Why envy? There's a lot we'll never have."

"That may be, but you have something even better - contentment. Cathy, I've never seen you so happy. Vincent and Jacob – everyone I've met – are the same. Life in the tunnels must be difficult at times, but no one seems ... stressed."

"I hadn't thought of that, but you're right," Catherine stated. "I guess I've learned to look at life as Vincent does – and the tunnel community. We do our best and don't worry overly. We deal with challenges as a group. To everything there is a time."

They sat quietly for some time, Nancy looking around the room. She rose to look at the portrait again. It seemed more appropriate than ever. Did his arms seem just a little tighter around her? Had Cathy buried her head just a little more into his shoulder? Were they just about to burst into smiles? Nancy liked to think so. She signed and turned around to find Vincent had returned and that he and Catherine were looking at her.

"I ... I think this is amazing. It seems alive, almost."

"Yes," Vincent agreed. "We tried to imitate it. I found that the position would be very uncomfortable for me, but I think that is what makes the painting dynamic, even though it looks posed."

"Why did he have you wearing gloves, I wonder?" Nancy asked.

Vincent held out his hands and gazed at them with an expression Nancy couldn't decipher.

"I think he wanted to avoid drawing the eye to them," he said at last. "Without that distraction, attention naturally focuses on our faces and to the position of our hands."

"Yes," Catherine agreed. "Elizabeth has painted us in a more realistic fashion."

"Elizabeth?"

"Yes, she is our official painter. I thought perhaps you'd like to see the painted tunnels. A last treat. Vincent has something to do, so you and I can browse them."

"I'd love to see them. How is Jacob?"

"He barely got into bed before he was asleep" Vincent reported. "I'll lead you to the painted tunnels, but then I must leave you for a little while."

Vincent picked up a lantern in the basement of the brownstone and lit it. They made their way back into the tunnels and Vincent let the way. He turned just before a ragged brick entry.

"I'll leave you now. Give my regards to Elizabeth if you see her. Here, take my lantern."

Catherine led Nancy through the entry and around a curve. Then she stopped and held up the lantern. Nancy gasped at the images she saw. One was obviously Father, with Vincent as a baby. There were images from the world above, events she recognized, others she didn't. One had Vincent attacking what looked like a huge cave man. She looked at Catherine, who got a distant look in her eyes for a moment.

"Elizabeth records accurately," Catherine remarked, looking at the image, "but the whole story is often too complicated. Vincent was saving me in that one. I had been kidnapped. No, don't ask. It was a long time ago. We have our dark chapters, even here."

As they walked, Nancy noticed a large dark painting of a skyscraper. It looked like something from Lord of the Rings. She looked at Catherine, a question in her eyes.

"That was Burch Tower – as it would have looked if it had been built."

"I sense a story in that," Nancy remarked.

"Yes, another long story," Catherine said softly. "This world was on the verge of being destroyed. We ... the DA's office, finally stopped the construction. It was ... a trying time. I had never felt so powerless. I feared for Vincent, for everyone – and then I found out Elliot would do anything to get his tower – even break the law."

Nancy locked her arm around Catherine's and moved along. There! It was a portrait of Catherine and Vincent with baby Jacob. They were sitting on a blanket, the long bright torrent in the Chamber of Falls behind them.

"Beautiful," Nancy whispered.

"Yes. Elizabeth is very talented."

"Did I hear my name?"

They turned and Nancy saw a small old woman, well wrapped in shawls.

"Elizabeth, I'd like you to meet my friend Nancy," Catherine exclaimed.

"I saw you in the dining hall yesterday," Elizabeth remarked. "I have a surprise for you both. Come."

They followed her around another curve, where more paintings greeted them. Nancy saw people she had met – William, Annabelle, Mouse, all in their work places.

"I'm trying to record everyone and what they do," Elizabeth explained. "Over here, I record our visitors."

Nancy saw images of Jenny and Joe and then stopped in amazement. There was an image of herself and Catherine, finished but for the legs and feet.

"I'll finish it tomorrow, but I understand this is your last night with us. I wanted you to see it."

"Oh it's wonderful. I've never seen a portrait of myself before."

Catherine smiled. "I didn't know about this either. Thank-you Elizabeth. Vincent sends his love, by the way."

"Ah, Vincent. I wanted to do a better portrait of him too. After all he works too. Over there. What do you think?"

Catherine and Nancy found themselves gazing at a life-sized portrait of Vincent. He was wearing a frilly shirt and leather vest over black pants, with thigh high red leather boots. Catherine sighed.

"That's how I love to see him. He only dresses like that for special occasions."

"True, but then he's our host too, and very important," Elizabeth commented. "Other times, he's just Vincent."

"Yes," Catherine whispered. "Has he seen it yet?"

"No. I thought he would come with you. Well, it makes no never mind." Elizabeth chuckled. "These walls will still be here tomorrow."

"These walls are amazing. You have such talent, Elizabeth," Nancy exclaimed.

"I just do what I see from people's stories – and my own eyes," the old woman stated. "I'm almost finished now. Then I will go in peace."

"What?" asked Catherine, shocked.

"Vincent understands," Elizabeth replied. "You have to finish what you start. But don't worry, child. Not just yet. Soon. I can't live forever, you know."

Catherine drew her into a hug.

"These tunnels would be empty without you. The walls need you – we need you. You have warmed us with your art."

"But I will leave my heart and soul on these walls when I go. The rest is no never mind."

"Well, we'd better get back, now. I'll tell Vincent to come and see you."

"Oh, he's like Mouse. He comes here to see me, to see what I'm doing – and to remind me about mealtimes or some such. I can hear the pipes you know," she said, a little petulantly.

"He worries about you," Catherine remarked softly.

"I know, child. But he needn't. I can look after myself – and so many people come to visit. Sometimes I wonder how I get any work done at all."

Catherine and Nancy laughed with her.

"We can take a hint," Catherine laughed. "Good night, Elizabeth."

"Good night."

The two women walked back to the brownstone and sat in the kitchen sipping tea. Vincent found them there a while later and sat down to join them.

"Elizabeth has something she wants to show you," Catherine told him.

Vincent raised his eyebrows.

"Oh? I visited her a few days ago and she refused to let me into part of the tunnels. Said she had a lot of paint cans and brushes soaking and didn't want my big feet knocking them over."

"Huh!" Catherine exclaimed. "She knows you are never clumsy like that. But I guess she wanted to keep her surprise until it was finished. It's worth it. Anyhow, I don't know about you two, but I'm half asleep. I'm for bed. What time did you want to leave tomorrow, Nancy?"

"I think I should leave around mid-morning, to avoid rush hour and get home by early afternoon."

"Good, then you can join us for a last breakfast."

"I'd love to."

Catherine led the way out, followed by Nancy. Their guest turned abruptly to look at Vincent who was just behind her. Now or never, she thought. She grasped his hands, holding them firmly - my they were lovely and warm - and looked him in the eyes.

"You saved my life today and I've never thanked you," she told him. She waited and he sensed what she wanted and dropped his head to hers. Nancy took the opportunity to bestow a kiss full on his mouth. The sensation was unique, she decided as she released him. She had felt his full lower lip respond and his upper lip was soft as eiderdown. Delightful! Nancy sighed and looked up at him again as he straightened.

"Catherine told me I'm only allowed one of those," she remarked. "I hope she meant per visit."

She turned and caught Catherine giving her husband a triumphant smile. It puzzled her, until she remembered what she had been told about him - and realized he was completely lacking in conceit. A very attractive trait in a man, she decided. They all made their way upstairs to their rooms and not long afterwards, Catherine and Vincent were wrapped in each other's arms in bed.

"Now this is what I call a perfect end to the day," Catherine whispered. "Did you find out anything from Pascal?"

"Yes. He was a little reluctant at first. He does have a small library, but not what I expected. They look like ledgers. There are a great many of them. He caught me looking at them and finally admitted that he kept records of the messages in them. He has almost perfect recall, Catherine. He told me he records the message, the day, the time, who sent it and its destination."

"Does he record every message?"

"Oh no, just the ones that go through the pipe chamber, which are all the important ones, including all the sentry and repair crew reports – and the WARGS warnings."

"Not the chatter, in other words," Catherine remarked. "So how did that information translate into a concert?"

"Exactly what I asked him," Vincent replied. "He looked a little sheepish and showed me some entries in one ledger from a few years ago – the one he referred to when plans were being made. Pascal sits on the music committee. He ..."

"Let me guess," Catherine interrupted. "I'll bet he has a column to record whom the message was about too – maybe just using a two or three letter code."

Vincent chuckled. "Yes. Since there are no surnames used down here, he uses the first three letters. I am 'Vin'."

"And a very fine wine, indeed," Catherine quipped. She reached between them where his penis was bent into an uncomfortable position, and eased it upright between them. Vincent sighed in relief.

"Well, that solves that mystery," Catherine continued. "I wonder if a history of the tunnels could be written from those messages?"

"I think it could. Pascal told me his father started the ledgers. However, it would be a herculean task to write a history from them. I think Elizabeth's painted walls are much more ... descriptive."

"After all, a picture is worth a thousand words," Catherine whispered. "A written history could never include everything. And you, my love, would defy description."

"Thank goodness," Vincent said quietly. "I am defined by you, by Jacob, by everyone in our world. That is enough."

"And by friends, and by this ..." Catherine repositioned herself a little and looked up at him. He pressed his mouth to hers and groaned when he felt himself slide inside. They said nothing for long moments, savouring the sensation, their sense of each other along their bond. Then they made slow love that brought them to a hot boil and left them sighing in happiness.

"That was perfect for two tired hosts," Catherine whispered in his ear. "I never thought being a tour guide would be so exhausting."

"Perhaps because the pace we use is not our natural one," Vincent suggested.

"Yes, that must be it. The upside is that I was reminded how lucky I am. Nancy is smitten with you, you know."

As so often happened, even now, Vincent didn't respond to the compliment. "No more lucky than I."

Catherine sighed as Vincent covered her mouth with a kiss and soon they were spooned together and fast asleep.

END