

# Water and Tides

*Light breaks where no sun shines  
Where no sea runs, the waters of the heart  
Push in their tides*

- Dylan Thomas

by Angie

## Chapter 1

When Catherine awoke, it was to thin light through the stained glass window and the realization that she did not have to go to work above. She had taken a few days off to live with Vincent below. She planned to make the move permanent as soon as it could be arranged.

There was no sound of trains, meaning it must be early yet. She rolled over to face the chamber and realized she was alone in the enormous bed. Where was Vincent? He had told her he didn't need much sleep, but waking and finding him gone was disconcerting just the same.

"I'm here," he said, catching her concern along their bond as he emerged from the bathroom. He was wearing a dark plaid dressing gown which contrasted starkly with his white nightshirt. The rope tie hung loose and he was barefoot.

His chamber was a mess, she realized. Curious now, she clambered out of the bed, wishing it were not so awkward to do so. She looked around as she put on a warm housecoat and thick socks against the chill. The table and chairs were covered with clothes and a huge chest against the wall was open. Padding over to look inside, Catherine saw toys, children's books and other oddments – a regular squirrel's trove. She realized they must be Vincent's childhood mementos.

"What are you doing?" she asked, finally, watching his rump move as he rummaged through his wardrobe.

"Trying to make some room for your clothes," he said. "I had never realized how many clothes I have that I never wear anymore. I really should take a lot of them to Annabelle to 'recycle.'"

He held up a pair of jeans that were more her size than his and was about to toss them onto a pile on the floor, when she grabbed them.

"Wait."

She noticed that they were well-patched in the usual Tunnel fashion, but very soft from many washings, and almost certainly close to her size. They might be a little large, but that would be good. They had an elastic waist, another bonus.

"I need a pair of work pants," she explained. "I don't have anything suitable Above. I've never needed anything but sweats and designer jeans – and they're not very practical. These should be perfect. I have to work around here and will probably be doing a lot of bending."

The thought of wearing something that had belonged to Vincent as a boy was attractive too, she admitted to herself. It made her feel tingly just thinking about it. She noticed something as she examined the pants.

"No fly," she murmured, looking at the jeans again. Now she thought about it, none of the men wore pants with zippers. She frowned in puzzlement and realized Vincent was chuckling. She looked up to catch him looking at her with amusement.

"Catherine, you will find out on laundry day why we don't use zippers – or buttons either. But for us men, there is a better reason. How many men have you seen ever open the zipper when ... um ... performing a necessary bodily function?"

Catherine had to confess it was not a time when she was generally watching.

"Well, my love, no man I know has ever tried to winkle his ... um ... organ ... through a fly. It's painful. We all just undo the top button and shift down the waistband. The fly is only useful to dress – or undress. We've opted for ties and elastic waists instead."

"Well," Catherine chuckled. "It seems I will be learning more than I expected here below."

Vincent turned and began rooting through a drawer. She caught his embarrassment and smiled.

"Do you need a work shirt as well?" Vincent asked, holding up a much patched denim shirt, probably from the same time period.

Catherine took the shirt and measured it against herself.

"With a t-shirt underneath and a vest on top, this should be fine," she remarked.

Vincent was shuffling clothes in his wardrobe and emerged with small grey wool shirt, a cotton undershirt and a short, grey leather vest with a padded lining. The latter was remarkably well-preserved – and completely unpatched.

“My, how long have you had this,” Catherine asked admiringly, holding up the vest. It would complete her outfit nicely and keep the chill out.

“Devin brought it back from one his ramblings Above. It was too small for him, so he gave it to me. He said a friend had given it to him. Knowing Devin, it was probably an admiring female. Unfortunately, he disappeared not long after that and I did not have the heart to wear it more than once. It reminded me too much of him. I outgrew it quickly anyway, but couldn’t bear to part with it. You’re welcome to it. I wonder if Devin would recognize it on you?”

“Have you heard from him?” Catherine asked.

“Yes, but all we know is that he and Charles are out west somewhere. He sent us a postcard from Billings, Montana, via Peter, a month or so ago. He says he has located a remote cabin and he and Charles are going to live the simple life for a while. We gave him some crystals you know, to sell for cash. We can trust Devin to look after them both.”

She turned over to look at Vincent and caught a faraway look in his eyes.

“What?” she asked.

“I was thinking of Devin.”

Catherine snuggled up to Vincent and put her arms around him.

“You miss him, don’t you?” she whispered into his hairy chest.

“He was a big brother to me. When he came back, it was as if nothing had changed. He can still make me feel like a cloistered monk.”

“Well, cloistered perhaps, but definitely not a monk anymore,” Catherine chuckled. “And if I have anything to say about it, you will not be quite so cloistered in the future either.”

She took his hands and led him back to bed and was about to show him the error of his thoughts, when she felt him stiffen.

“Catherine, ... I ... I’ve never asked. I’ve always believed men ... but, it’s never arisen before,”

Catherine looked in Vincent’s face and thought she knew what he was struggling to say.

“Are you trying to bring up the subject of birth control, Vincent?”

“Yes, Catherine. I’ve been remiss. I should have asked you long before this. I ... um ... didn’t know how to broach the subject. Then I thought you must have already considered it. We must discuss this, before we go any further.” Vincent looked acutely embarrassed.

Catherine took his hands in hers, marveling again at the contrasts she saw and felt there. Size and strength, rough and soft – and so wonderfully gentle. She sighed, reluctantly got her brain back on track.

“Vincent, I have not used birth control since that terrible night when you found me. I don’t want to use it now, nor do I want you to use it. I realize that I may get pregnant. I hope I do. I want to have your child, Vincent. I didn’t bring up the subject before because ... well, it seems irrelevant, now. What will be, will be.”

Vincent looked down at their hands. “Catherine, you humble me. I ... don’t know how I feel about a child, our child. I don’t know if it’s possible, or what it would look like if it is. I admit that I’m afraid that it might be dangerous for you. I’m not as other men, so to speak. I’ve never even owned a prophylactic – don’t know if I could ... um ... use one. The idea is abhorrent, frankly. But I do know that you are my life.”

He gathered her to him and nuzzled her hair. Catherine snuggled against his warm chest. She felt his love flowing along their bond, and realized she would have to allay his fears. She had an idea and found her voice.

“Vincent, I can’t believe there is any danger in my having your child. If it can happen, then I will be as safe as two excellent doctors and modern medicine can make me. But you’ve given me an idea. There should be a clinic and hospital room in the brownstone, for anyone in this community who needs special care or equipment. I’ll talk to

Peter about it. Does that make you feel better?"

Vincent hugged her. "Yes, Catherine. I would not want your life endangered because we lack some modern piece of equipment which needs electricity. The clinic is a fine idea."

"Well, then, my love, that's settled. Now where were we?" Catherine began to busy her hands in places that made Vincent groan and then growl. He responded in kind and they were soon proving that there were no lingering doubts. They both fell into a light sleep afterwards.

When Catherine opened her eyes again, Vincent still held her close, but he was awake and watching her, such love in his eyes that she was left speechless. She put her hand behind his head and pulled his mouth to her. Vincent's kiss was the second best way to start the day, she decided.

Vincent lifted Catherine up to sit beside him, his arm around her. He sighed, knowing that the meal signal would sound soon and the work day begin. He had never felt less like working – although he was quite hungry. But he realized, as he looked around his chamber, that something would have to be done to make more room. Catherine would need some space of her own. He would have to see if an enlargement was possible.

"What will you be doing today," she asked him quietly.

"Monday is our practical teaching day. They will spend a couple of hours in the library with Father, then about mid-morning, I'll take the younger children for swimming lessons," he told her, hugging her to his side. "They have not had one for a while, so I think we should have a longer session today. Then we have lunch and they go to Cullen to learn some tool skills and later still to Annabelle to learn how to mend and patch."

Annabelle was the mistress of the sewing and fabric sorting chamber. She had given Catherine the wonderful privacy rug that now hung in the doorway of the chamber.

Vincent paused, remembering the reason he had not taken the children swimming for a while. How could he explain this dilemma to Catherine? Well, the direct approach was probably best. The thought made his face get warm and he caught her looking at him, aware of his discomfort through their bond.

"What is it Vincent?" she asked.

"Catherine..." he started, suddenly shy. They had never discussed their intimate details. He spoke slowly and quietly.

"Catherine, we swim naked. We don't have bathing suits here. They would just be an impediment, might even be dangerous for novices – and need drying. I have not taken the children swimming for some time, because ... um ... my ... um ... manhood, seemed to be uncontrollably ... um ... aroused ... often. Now that we are lovers, I think I can control it again, but not if you are in sight. I can dampen my side of the bond, but not my eyes. I ..."

Vincent paused and realized, belatedly, that Catherine was enjoying his discomfort.

She smiled. "I understand Vincent. Really. I promise not to search you out while you are swimming – in fact, I probably won't see you much today, except at meals. I should chat with Father about my plans for the future. That should keep me from lascivious thoughts."

She put her head against his chest, shaking with quiet laughter. Vincent hugged her closer and kissed the top of her head.

"Catherine," he said, trying to sound stern. "It isn't funny."

"Oh, but it is, Vincent," she mumbled into his chest fur. "First you could not swim for thoughts of our unconsummated love. Now you may not be able to swim because of the reverse."

She spoke more seriously, looking up into his face.

"My love, you make me so grateful, so proud to be your lover. I would do anything for you – anything. I don't want this community blaming me for your distraction, putting them and you in danger. I promise to keep my ... um ... passion ... under control. As long as you realize it will be a challenge unlike any I have known so far. I will try to restrain my side of the bond as well. I promise."

She hugged him, planted another light kiss on his mouth, then said somewhat sadly.

"I think we should get bathed and dressed – separately - so we are not distracted again. All for the cause."

Without further ado, Catherine slid off the bed and trotted into the bath chamber. Vincent watched her rear end

move out of sight with longing, but resolutely decided he should take her advice.

Not bothering to put his nightshirt back on, he quickly extracted the clothes he would need and then tidied up the mess, piling the discarded clothing on his trunk to take to Annabelle later. Then he padded into the bath chamber, hoping for a glimpse of Catherine in what was becoming his favourite place - but passed her on her way out, wrapped in a towel. Foiled again, he thought, but said nothing. He had just begun his bath when Father stepped into the chamber, a little hesitantly. Vincent immediately noticed that there was no privacy towel on the hook. He wondered whether Father had caught Catherine bathing and had waited discreetly. He decided not to ask.

"Good morning, Father," he called, an invitation for the older man to join him.

"Good morning, Vincent," Jacob replied as he entered the bathing pool with obvious relief and immediately began to soap himself. "I trust you both slept well?"

"Very well indeed, Father," Vincent mumbled through the soap suds on his face. He completed his bath quickly, rinsed, and caught up a towel, suddenly self-conscious, although Father knew his body better than anyone in the Tunnels. Except Catherine, he realized, and quickly wrapped the towel around his hips to hide his slight arousal at that conclusion. He would have to keep his own thoughts under better control, he thought. He could not blame Catherine this time. He sighed.

"I'll see you at breakfast, Father," Vincent called over his shoulder as he left the chamber. He heard Jacob mumble something behind him.

The breakfast bell rang as Vincent was getting dressed and he and Catherine quickly made their way to the dining chamber. They were early, but took seats while they waited for the serving platters to start their rounds.

Vincent saw Father enter and quickly got up to talk to him about expanding his chamber. Father seemed a bit distracted. Vincent then mentioned that he was willing to re-institute swimming lessons for the children. Father brightened considerably and thanked him.

"That will keep the little dickenses out of my library for awhile," he said. Father's library had been reorganized at last and there was a lot of curiosity about what had been discovered. Vincent wondered what treasures were being rumoured. Nothing literary, he was sure.

He returned to his seat and served himself a generous helping of William's famous maple-apple porridge. He turned to Catherine to see if she would like some, and realized she had not waited for him. She was just scraping the bottom of her bowl and looked up at him ruefully.

"You know, I never really had time ... or wanted ... breakfast above. Now, I feel as if I can't go without it. The food here all smells so delicious, I can't resist."

Vincent grinned at her. "You're probably building up some fat against our chilly tunnels," he teased. "Not to mention, storing energy for the work we will be giving you."

"I feel as if I have already had a work-out, Vincent," she commented in a low voice - and was gratified to see him colour slightly. "On the other hand, I'm sure both my heart and my body are getting healthier by the day. Beats sitting in an office chair for 10 hours."

Vincent mumbled that her figure needed no improvement and concentrated on getting his own energy store renewed.

Father rapped on the table for attention and everyone looked at him. He announced that the children's regular schedule would begin again, with Vincent taking the beginner's class for swimming lessons mid-morning, after first classes. With that, he passed the baton to Mary, who read out the daily work routines. It seemed to be a lot of odd jobs today, thought Catherine, then realized she had not been given any work. That wasn't fair! She decided to talk to Mary, after she had talked to Father.

Catherine waited until Father had finished his breakfast and seemed ready to leave and then approached him.

"Hello Father. I need to talk to you."

Father looked at her with an faintly embarrassed expression which Catherine was at a loss to understand.

"Catherine, we can take a pot of tea into my chamber right now, if you wish."

Catherine followed Father, carrying a tray with tea and cups. They sat down together. Father spoke first, after pouring them both a cup of tea.

"It is wonderful to have you here, Catherine. I do hope you are not finding us too difficult. Of course, you have been visiting us for years now, but living among us will have special challenges.

"I think what bothered me most, all those years ago was the lack of colour here - really a whole range of colours. Candlelight tends to soften them, giving everything a more mellow tone. I had forgotten how much I loved the vibrant greens, the blues, the reds - the sunlight. It's the price we pay for being apart and below."

"Father, I imagine many people in your community feel occasional twinges of desire for the daylight above. I'm fortunate to be a woman of both worlds, as Vincent likes to remind me. However, I want to spend more time here in the future, so I will have to get used to it, like the rest of you. I'm going to quit my job and live with Vincent."

Father looked relieved. "That's wonderful news Catherine."

Catherine continued. "First, Father, I am going to hand in my notice to my boss, when I return to work. I'll have to stay another two weeks after that, but I'll have business to attend to, so I won't be working Joe's usual extended hours - and only to clear up outstanding paperwork. They have plenty of foot soldiers there now. I have other plans for my life - plans that include Vincent, and this community."

She paused for breath, and to give Father a chance to respond.

"I confess I am happy to hear this, Catherine," Jacob remarked. "I wasn't sure this day would ever come, although I hoped it would, for Vincent's sake. He finds being apart from you very difficult. I know you feel the same way."

"It's true, Father. We have found it harder and harder to reconcile my life above with his below. I didn't want it to be that way, but it was inevitable, I suppose. I fought the idea, as you know, but no longer. Vincent has become the most important thing in my life. I want him to be happy and I want to be truly part of his world. You are all like family to me. So, Father, I have an idea - several ideas, actually. They are only ideas and I want your opinion of them.

"It's hard for me to explain, precisely, but I have had a bit of an epiphany since my father died. I realized that I wasn't giving myself room to grow. I like my job in the DA's office, but it has become a hardship, affecting my private life far more than I like. It can also be very discouraging. I want to do something ... rewarding.

"You see, Father, I am now a rich woman, but money means little to me. I have never really been without it, and now I have far more than I can spend in my lifetime. It should do so much more than enrich a bank or stock broker."

Catherine took another breath. Father was sitting attentively, obviously reluctant to interrupt.

"The first idea I have, Father, concerns a brownstone I own. Vincent knows of the building - he saved my life there shortly after I joined the DA's office. I thought it might be a good transition house for this community. It has a basement access into the tunnels and could be used for a variety of purposes - if you wish. It has a number of bedrooms on three levels and a service stairway. I'd like to have a personal suite for Vincent and I on the top floor - the attic actually - and use of the kitchen and a den, but the rest is open to your ideas."

Father looked at her with real affection.

"Catherine, I am at a loss for words. This is a very generous offer and I would be foolish to refuse it. We do need a place where we can meet Helpers, or lodge those who might be candidates to join our community. We also need a place where some of our young people can stay while they attend schools above. It would take the pressure off the few Helpers we would normally call upon. I'll call a Council so we can discuss what you propose."

Encouraged, Catherine continued.

"Father, I'd like to organize some self-defense classes for the sentries, if you're willing. I could teach this myself, but my friend Isaac would be even better and he can be relied upon to not ask questions. He saw Vincent long ago. He has a studio and teaches street fighting. He could give specific training suitable to Tunnel protection. I know you want to be able to handle most incursions without Vincent's help. We both know the toll violence takes on him."

"I agree, Catherine," Father said. "We do need to face the fact that the world above has become more dangerous to our way of life. Your offer is gratefully accepted. I'm sure the Council will agree. I too worry about Vincent. He should not be called upon to protect us unless absolutely necessary."

"Thank you, Father. I have just one other suggestion. I would like to set up a scholarship fund so members of this

community can study Above, if they wish – at any time in their lives. You have created a remarkable community here, but some will want to learn skills or seek careers not possible here – as some have already done. I will need your advice on how to organize this fund – and how to impart it.

“I have been thinking it might be best to set up a foundation so members of this community can work on all these ideas. Peter can hold a power of attorney and confer with myself and the foundation board. That way, I can help at arm’s length, so to speak, acting as a buffer between you and lawyers or city officials, or banks. My skills are at your disposal.”

Catherine stopped, suddenly relieved to have it all off her chest. Father seemed a bit stunned, she thought, but was taking her ideas under consideration. That was as much as she had hoped for.

“Catherine, you have given me a lot to think about. I cannot say how much this means to me. Your generosity is astounding – beyond anything I could have imagined. I do apologize for not being able to do more than thank you at present. I will call a Council as soon as possible and let you know what results. You can be sure they will be as amazed as I am.

“I just have one question. I know it really is none of my business, but what will you do with your apartment above, since you want to move below – and I presume spend some time in the brownstone’s suite with Vincent?”

“It’s a question I have been asking myself, Father. It will be hard to give up my apartment. For so long, it has belonged to Vincent as much as myself, a place where we could be alone to relax and read to each other. But nostalgia can only go so far. The naked truth is that I am torn.”

Father suddenly went quite red and cleared his throat. Catherine, looking at him and reflecting on what she had just said, began to get a suspicion about why he seemed distracted. All because of a towel. She decided to test her theory.

“Well, Father, I think I’ll leave you now. Thank you for your patience and attention.”

She rose to leave, then, as if remembering something else, turned back to Jacob.

“Oh, and by the way Father. I once modeled for a life class at Radcliffe. I am not nearly so modest as Vincent believes. You need not feel any embarrassment on my account. I forgot the ... um ... signal this morning in the bath chamber. I do apologize.”

Looking at Father’s face, Catherine realized she had made a direct hit. He looked at her with something like relief – and was that a twinkle in his eye?

“Um ... thank you for your understanding, Catherine. If you don’t mind, I’d rather we kept this conversation from Vincent. And may I say ... my son is a very lucky man.”

Touché, thought Catherine, as she left with a genuine smile and a nod. It was hard to get one over the old man. This community was like a family in one big house or compound. People visited each other, cared for each other and respected each other.

She decided to visit Annabelle again. Then she remembered the pile of discarded clothes and thought she might as well dispose of them as well. She went back to gather them up – an impressively large stack - and shuffled her way to Annabelle’s chamber. Annabelle was sitting at a sewing table hemming a large blanket. Catherine deposited Vincent’s old clothes on a table, then walked up and touched her on the shoulder, unsure whether she would be heard over the noisy treadle machine. Annabelle immediately ceased her work and turned to look up at her.

“Catherine. Welcome. What can I do for you now? Vincent need something?”

“Oh no, Annabelle, at least not to wear. I wondered if you had anything like a bath sheet – a really big towel. It’s so chilly in his chamber and a full wrap would be wonderful.”

“Ah. Something big enough for both of you, I presume, since Vincent could lose you in a bath sheet,” Annabelle chuckled. “I think I can devise something.”

She rose and went to a shelf containing oddments of terry cloth and carried a few of them to another machine. In short order she had sewn a half dozen pieces into something blanket-sized and stood up, folding it into her arms to display it to Catherine.

“Oh, perfect,” she breathed, giving Annabelle a hug which included the towel. “Vincent will be so surprised. This

towel might be needed sooner than I think.”

“Is there any way I can help you in here?” Catherine asked, looking around at the impressively organized work room. This was a place she could relate to.

Annabelle looked up at her and smiled.

“Well we have a sewing klatch here every Wednesday. There’s lots to do – sorting, mending, sewing – anything you feel you’d like to do.”

“Well,” Catherine confessed, “I’m in no way a hand crafter. Sorting sounds like something I could do, though. I’d be happy to take that on.”

“Then I think you’ll have your work cut out for you here,” Annabelle remarked, directing Catherine’s attention to a far wall where piles of sagging boxes were stacked.

“Oh, my,” Catherine gasped. “Well, soonest started, soonest finished, as my grandmother used to say. See you soon.”

“See you,” Annabelle laughed, returning to her sewing.

## Chapter 2

Vincent was well into the swimming lesson before he realized he was the object of some scrutiny. He finally pinned down the source to Samantha. In the many weeks since his last lesson, she had blossomed. He realized, with a shock, that she was now 14 years old – and a young woman. Her appraisal of him – or rather his body – told him that he had been remiss.

“Samantha,” he said, during a pause in the lesson. “You are a wonderful assistant, but I think you would be better in Jamie’s advanced swimming class now – beginning next week, if you wish. Perhaps you’d like to tell Mary after the lesson?”

“I...” Samantha seemed at a loss for words and had coloured slightly. “Thank you, Vincent. I’d like that.”

She turned away and concentrated on teaching one of the younger children to float.

After the lesson, and a short swim to get the kinks out of his shoulders, Vincent realized he had forgotten a towel. Not wanting to put dry clothes over his wet, hairy, hard-to-dry body, he bundled them up and padded along the tunnels towards his chamber. It was going to be a long, cold trip, so he began to jog. He had not gone far when he realized he was being followed. He stopped and turned to wait. It was Samantha.

“Hi Vincent,” she greeted him cheerily. “I was just going to find Mary and tell her what you said. But I was wondering whether Gregory might be better in the advanced class too.”

Samantha and Gregory had been close since they were very small and Vincent realized he had missed the boy’s obvious growth as well. Samantha did not want to be separated from him.

“Why of course, Samantha. You can tell Mary that as well.”

He rooted in his clothes and extracted a small clipboard, the roster for his class.

“Perhaps you could take this to Mary too. Then I could go straight to my chamber and dry off before I catch cold.”

Samantha took the clipboard, beamed up at him. She was Catherine’s height, he realized as she ran past him on her mission.

Vincent continued his journey upwards to the hub. He was very cold now and moved quickly towards his chamber. He desperately wanted to get into the warmth of the bathing chamber – but wondered if chilblains would result. He sensed Catherine was inside and he saw her jaw drop as he entered. He realized that she had not expected his state of undress. Then the look on her face and what he felt along their bond made him forget everything and he stood still, paralyzed.

Catherine was shocked at Vincent’s entrance. She had never thought to see him so vulnerable. She realized he had come straight from the swimming lessons – and a long trek naked and wet along the cold tunnels. He



was holding his clothes carefully away from himself to keep them dry and was beginning to shiver violently. She immediately realized he was in danger of hypothermia and became very concerned. Their bond was transmitting his distress. She knew that a hot bath was not recommended on a cold body – and had a better idea.

“Vincent, you’re freezing. Give me that bundle and sit on that stool.”

By now, Vincent was shaking uncontrollably and did as she asked. She pulled down the privacy rug, then grabbed the enormous patchwork terrycloth blanket – and wrapped him in it. She began rubbing him furiously, top to bottom, realizing for the first time the disadvantage of having a lot of dense body hair. It had never occurred to her that he would need considerable drying time. So that was what he was doing when he left her alone after their baths!

She could feel his skin begin to warm under her hands, but he was still shivering. She rubbed harder and faster. Satisfied at last that she had his trunk mostly dry, she moved to his legs and feet. She liked the feel of his lean musculature and it soon became obvious that Vincent was enjoying her ministrations no less. She could see his manhood responding and her own heat was rising to match his own.

He tried to capture her as she bent down in front of him to massage his feet, but got thwarted by the towel. She looked him in the eyes then, gave him a quick peck on the mouth and stood back a little.

“Vincent, I think you need something warmer than this towel, which is pretty damp now. We can’t be too careful.”

With that, she slipped off her clothes – all of them – extracted a quilt from the bed and then took him by the hands to get him to stand. She flung the quilt around them both and pressed herself against him. He put his arms around her and held her close.

“You’re right. This is much warmer,” Vincent whispered huskily. He was afire in his loins – as some ancient writer put it. He had never realized the accuracy of that statement before. He could feel Catherine’s response to his arousal and his urgency became extreme.

He tried not to dislodge the quilt, which Catherine was holding closed behind her. There was a solution to that dilemma too. He lifted her by her buttocks and carried her until he could put her back against his wardrobe, cushioned by the quilt – and pressing the open side closed.

She groaned passionately as he began to move his now throbbing manhood against her belly and arched her back as he lifted her further to achieve penetration. She wrapped her legs around his hips and for long moments he could do nothing more. Her warmth and desire for him along their bond made him unwilling to move or think. Then his organ began to swell and he slowly began to thrust, enjoying the sleek, heated wetness of her along his column. He pushed himself against her a little harder, capturing her mouth in his and tasting the sweetness of her love for him. He would never tire of that, he knew.

He felt her passion suddenly soar and thrust himself deep inside her. She moaned and he captured her tongue with his own. Suddenly their joint climax carried them into that special place reserved for lovers.

Vincent’s legs felt suddenly weak. He carried Catherine back to the bed and lay down with her, making sure the quilt covered them both. He sighed, glad he had let her warm him in her own special way.

“Oh Catherine. How long can we go on like this? I can’t get enough of you. Work and duty seems so ... secondary.”

“Vincent,” Catherine breathed huskily. “I think our passion will moderate eventually – but not too soon, I hope. I am loving your body as I have always loved your mind and heart. Let’s not wish it any different. We have waited so long for this.”

Vincent sighed. It was not as if he had a choice in the matter, he reflected. He hugged Catherine to him and kissed her again, his purr softly vibrating between them. She snuggled up to him and they drifted into a light sleep.

Vincent awakened first and heard the lunch signal. Catherine awoke then and after a quick wash, they headed for the dining chamber.

Father collared him as soon as he entered.

“Vincent, there will be a Council meeting after dinner. Will that suit you?”

“Yes, Father, I’ll be there.”

That meant at least some hours of privacy for himself and Catherine. He loaded up a tray with two bowls of pork stew, a stack of biscuits, a pot of tea, slices of William's cinnamon coffee cake and carried it to the table where Catherine waited.

With his afternoon free, Vincent began to think. He and Catherine had not really gone anywhere special Below for some time. He knew she loved to see the Falls, but wanted to show her something more. As he was going through the roster of possible sites they could see before the meeting, Catherine turned to him.

"Do you think there's time to go swimming? I've been dying to see your swimming pool."

Swimming! Of course!

"There's time to go swimming, if you wish, Catherine. I've just remembered a special spot that Devin and I found once, long ago. It's not far, and it's warmer than most of our bathing places - but we should go soon."

They almost ran back to his chamber after lunch. Catherine quickly pulled on a pair of tights and a sweater, slipped into her boots and grabbed a couple of towels and a bag with a brush and comb. The less she wore, she reasoned, the sooner she could take it off and swim.

Vincent put on a pair of soft pants, a heavy cotton sweater and a pair of short soft boots she had never seen before. He took Catherine's hand and led them out the chamber.

Surprisingly, he did not go in the direction of the Falls or the other bathing pools she knew about. Instead he took her to the spiral staircase and up it to a tunnel she had never seen before. It was very dark, but Vincent could obviously see well, and he warned Catherine of any obstructions. After a few minutes they reached a very narrow but tall tunnel, almost a slit. Some light was coming along it and she saw Vincent suddenly shift sideways. He looked at her.

"Here you'll have to turn sideways as I am. The cut is very narrow, and you'll have to bend at the waist."

He held her hand and gently guided her through a gash that scraped her on both sides at once, then bulged out, forcing her to bend. How on earth had Vincent managed to squeeze through this?

He did though, and in a minute or two she emerged into a large, bright cavern whose floor seemed to be made of fine white sand. In the centre was a pond hazy with mist. She could hear water running in the distance. The light's source could not be seen.

"Where on earth are we?" Catherine asked, amazed.

"Below the park - far below," Vincent answered. "There's a chamber above this where almost all the steam pipes seem to converge. Their heat makes this place very warm - and heats the water, though not as much as in our bathing chamber. Still, it's pleasant, and is big enough and just deep enough to allow some good exercise."

He led her to a large flat rock and began to strip. Catherine placed her bundle on the rock and did the same, still looking around her in wonder. Vincent paused long enough to drink in her beauty before he gave a whoop and made a shallow dive into the water. His head breached the surface some distance away, almost hidden in the mist. He began stroking powerfully around the perimeter of the pool.

"Come," he called to her. "There is something I want to show you."

Catherine made a shallow dive in the water, gasping slightly at its cool temperature. A moment later she broke the surface to breathe and sighed in contentment. The water was actually perfect - like an inland lake in summer. She looked around for Vincent and couldn't see him anywhere. She began to swim towards his last location and gloried in being able to stretch her muscles and the feel of water on her naked body. The water had a slight sulfur scent to it, she noticed, and the bottom was not far below. As she swam, she neared an edge and could see that the pond had a sandy bottom sprinkled with small rocks.

She continued her swim around the perimeter, still not seeing Vincent anywhere. The mist kept shifting. Now she couldn't see where they had come in. Well, he would find her, she was sure.

As she thought this, she was suddenly catapulted out of the water, so quickly she had no time to do more than gasp and grab wildly at the air. She found herself sitting on Vincent's broad shoulders, his hands around her shins. The feel of his hair between her thighs was highly sensual and she could feel heat growing in her crotch. She was sure he could feel it too. He chose to say nothing, however.

"I'm here Catherine. I want you to see a special place."

He carried her along the shore of the pond, then waded through a narrow cut. He emerged into a large, rocky bowl. At one end, streaming down the rocky wall from high above and lit by some rocky airshaft, was a waterfall so fine it looked like angel hair. Vincent walked from the water onto a small sandy shore and lifted Catherine down.

"Here my love, is a wonder unlike any other Below."

"Vincent..." Catherine was speechless. She wondered if this was going to be a regular occurrence in her life with her big, wonderful, hairy lover. No one else could amaze her so effectively. She walked over to the waterfall, which seemed to flow from an unseen source above and descended onto a flat plate before oozing along a channel to the main pool. She went to stand under the water, which was soft and body temperature. It felt wonderful, like being stroked by a fur mitt. Vincent, joined her and they stood side by side for several minutes.

When Catherine finally looked over at Vincent, she saw that he had his arms in the air, as if in worship. His hands, though, were curved and his fingers flexing. She could feel his delight along their bond.

The light coming from far above seemed to have caught him, as if in a sunbeam. The water was streaming down his mane and over his face and body, so finely that his outline seemed blurred, ethereal. His manhood, slightly aroused, was peeking from the flow. She realized that he had completely abandoned himself to sensation. She was mesmerized by his beauty, a golden god basking under a silken waterfall.

His attraction was magnetic and drew her until she could put her arms around him. The feel of his wet, warm and softly hairy body against her own was sheer heaven. Almost in reflex, Vincent put his hands under her bottom and lifted her higher. Automatically, she wrapped her legs around his waist and put her arms around his neck. The feel of his quickly stiffening penis against her crotch made her throb with desire. She removed one hand from his neck to reach below her and cup his wonderful, soft balls, sighing with delight as she felt him shiver down his length. She looked up at him to find him gazing at her in adoration and love.

Her touch on his testicles was electric. Catherine was obviously fascinated with this part of his anatomy, but he was too shy to ask why. One day he would. Meanwhile, he bent his head to kiss her and felt her response shimmer through the bond as she surrendered to him. Their love melded and their passion soared. The waterfall ran down her back and over his hands where they held her, a silken touch that he had found very erotic – and was the reason he had brought her here. He deepened the kiss, became lost in sensation again. She tasted wonderful, her tongue was caressing his cleft, making him short of breath and forcing him to break the kiss so he could breathe. He could feel Catherine's breasts heaving against his chest. He nuzzled her ear and hair.

They were not quite as close as they could be, he reflected finally, and felt Catherine's ache as if it was his own – as perhaps it was. He used one hand to position his manhood, now fully erect, and gently tightened his hold so he could slide her onto it. He entered with an ease that never ceased to surprise him. They both groaned in absolute delight and let themselves drown in the sensation of oneness. Vincent wondered if anything could be more perfect and felt Catherine's joy in having him inside her again. She had kept her hand on his balls and now stroked them softly. Gradually they both felt their arousal heighten further.

Vincent felt Catherine's vaginal muscles tighten around him and they eased into in a softly sensual climax that seemed to meld with the waterfall. He hugged her to him tightly and leaned against the stone wall, his legs suddenly shaking. She put both her arms about his neck and gave him a kiss that thanked him more expressly than words could have. He felt her complete satisfaction, a mirror image to his own. His purr began to resonate through his abdomen and he knew she could feel it.

Suddenly feeling unable to stand, he let Catherine down to the ground, still under the waterfall, and knelt in front of her, hugging her to him, burying his face in her pubic hair. The water ran over them both now, a silken glove along his sensitized skin.

"Oh Catherine," he mumbled, unable to resist nuzzling her in that place he loved best of all.

She was stroking his head, her arms massaging his shoulders. She pushed herself closer to him as his lips massaged her. Without thought, he eased his tongue into her secret place and was surprised when he felt her arch her back and climax almost instantly. He managed to keep her in that state for a short while longer, then hugged her to him, nuzzling her belly button.

Catherine pushed herself up onto her knees in front of him, put her hand under his chin and captured his mouth

in a intensely personal kiss that told him of her love and appreciation – and something else – the need to reciprocate.

She gently pushed him until he lay on his back, her legs between his thighs, his legs outstretched on either side. They were still under the waterfall, and the sensation was exquisite, unlike anything he had ever known. His purr seemed to vibrate stronger than ever. He could feel his manhood responding to the water's gentle touch.

Catherine distracted him by putting both her hands around his testicles and cupping them, moving her mouth down to massage them with her lips. He gave up all thought and lost himself in the moment. He stretched out his arms to his sides, his nails scrabbling reflexively to grab onto something.

He realized he was so close to climax that almost any touch on his penis would set him off. Catherine sensed this too and moved her lips from her delighted exploration up his column to the flared head. Without further ado, she took him into her mouth, bit him lightly under the head and sucked him hard.

Vincent growled and shuddered in release, felt Catherine's smug happiness at his sudden climax.

She kissed his retracting column then lay on top of him, the waterfall running over her back like fine hair. She soon moved up until she could capture his mouth in hers. Then she turned her head to lay on his chest and sighed.

Gradually, both came to realize that they were drifting into sleep. Vincent then remembered another surprise in this place of wonders and ordered his muscles into action.

He lifted a drowsy Catherine in his arms, and left the waterfall area, taking an easier but longer route that had him wading around the pond's perimeter back to the far shore. Then he padded into a grotto and then into a small dim chamber off it. Catherine gasped as a wave of heat enclosed her. Vincent put her down then quickly left her. A moment later, he was back with their towels.

Catherine was standing against one wall, legs and arms outstretched, soaking up the warmth, which seemed to be radiating from the rock.

"How?" she asked, as he approached her with a towel. She was almost dry, he noticed.

"Two large steam pipes run along the ceiling of this chamber," Vincent explained. He towed her hair dry and then began on himself. Catherine stopped him by grabbing the towel and rubbing him down energetically. The heat in the chamber was such that the process was quick.

Satisfied that his body was dry, Catherine began to gently towel his mane, and he bent over to make it easier for her. He loved the feel of her hands on him and felt her love of that sensation as well.

She clasped his wrist and brought a hand up to her mouth to kiss his palm. She looked up at him.

"Vincent, I like to see you basking as you did on my bed and under the waterfall. You curl these hands and purr like a cat.

Vincent regarded her with amazement.

"Catherine, my hands are deadly weapons, my body unlike any other man's – nothing beautiful."

"Vincent, you are magnificent – from your golden mane to your hairy feet. In between is that wonderful organ of yours and your furry balls – which I can't keep my hands off. They are so soft and so delightful to touch."

She sighed and gently cupped them with one hand before releasing them, regretfully, shivering in delight at the growl that rumbled through him, as it did every time she touched his manhood.

"You are a very tactile man, Vincent. I know you like to be touched. Every part of you is interesting – if not downright erotic.

"All these differences which you dwell on make you not less than a man, but more – so much more. They are outward manifestations of a wonderful man – a unique man, a strong, sensual and intelligent man. Yes, those differences impose restrictions on you, but that's not your fault. It's the fault of my world. We label differences, demean them, try to reduce them to a common denominator – make them less than human.

"Look how Charles was being treated – by his own brother – until Devin rescued him. He has such a beautiful soul and a kind heart, trapped in a severely deformed body.

"Your beauty, Vincent, goes deep. I love you for all that you are, inside and out. You are my lover, my friend, my

heart and soul. When we make love, we are one.”

Vincent groaned and pressed himself to her, his purr vibrating on her skin. He couldn't speak. What could he say to that? She pulled him down to the floor onto a towel to sit next to her against the warm stone wall. They rested there, hand in hand, enclosed in that dry warmth, easing into sleep again, completely at peace.

“Oh Vincent,” Catherine whispered. “This is better than a sauna. We will have to try and get Father in here. It would do wonders for his hip. Maybe that entrance can be widened and some wooden benches put in here. What a place to lose the winter chills. I'll bet it never gets cold in here!”

“Catherine, that is a wonderful idea. I wanted you to see this place first, but you are right, it must not be kept for our private amusement – although perhaps we can demand a private time – finder's rights. I have been here in different seasons and the temperature seems constant.”

“Vincent, I have never felt so relaxed. This is another truly magical place – and so close to the home chambers!”

Suddenly, their reverie was interrupted by two stomachs rumbling in hunger. They both laughed.

“Time to get dressed and go to dinner,” Vincent said regretfully.

Leaving the hot chamber for the cooler air of the pool chamber made them both shiver. They ran to where their clothes had been left and stopped, puzzled, then looked at each other. The untidy pile was gone. Looking around in something like a panic, expecting a joke, they quickly spotted a double pile on a flat stone near the entrance to the pool chamber. On examination, they found two neat piles of cream-coloured clothing and two pairs of soft boots. Catherine picked up the top item on what was evidently her pile, next to the smaller pair of boots, and smiled in delight. She held a pair of cream woolen tights with a drawstring waist. Vincent lifted the top item to find the same thing – only bigger. There was no underwear for either of them, and although Vincent didn't wear any, Catherine was not sure if she liked that idea. However, once she put the pants on, she doubted no longer. They were delightful against her skin and had a gauze panel sewn from the crotch to the waist. There was no need for panties.

Vincent noticed the panel in his own pants – and was immediately grateful to their tiny seamstress.

Each then found and put on a soft cotton undershirt, a long-sleeved, quilted shirt with a laced V-neck. Lastly there was a long, thick cotton overtunic.

Catherine was very sure who had been responsible for this new wardrobe and looked at the clothing with interest. The pants, she saw, were probably cut from a thick woollen bedspread and the shirts from an old heritage candlewick quilt. The tunics puzzled her for a moment until she saw the belt – which was obviously the traditional beginner's martial arts tie. The tunic had been made from at least two well-washed judo uniforms, cut at the shoulder to remove the sleeve. The fabric was thick but very supple.

They were both dressed now, except for their boots. They sat on the rock, cleaned the sand off their feet with their towels and tried out the boots. They were lined with something soft and Catherine immediately identified it as sheepskin, probably from an old coat. They seemed to embrace her feet – and needed no socks. Looking over at Vincent, she saw that his eyes were closed and he was enjoying the sensation of softness against his feet. She knew that footwear was difficult for him. His boots were often made of felt or very soft leather, tied for minimal support, because he did not like constricting footwear, and it was undoubtedly painful if it pushed against his hard nails. Nevertheless, he walked with the grace of a cat, as if he hardly touched the floor.

He looked at her and smiled.

“Catherine, I think we must wear this outfit to dinner and then capture and hug Annabelle to within an inch of her life afterwards. I don't know who followed us and exchanged our clothes, but I can guess.”

Catherine smiled. “Mouse. Who else? He always knows where you are.”

They picked up their towels and left the chamber along the tortuous route, careful of their new attire. They had just entered the habitable sections of Below when the meal time signal sounded along the pipes. They tossed the towels into their chamber's laundry basket, noted that their old clothing was sitting folded on Vincent's chair, then moved on to the dining room. Their entrance created a silence and gasps of amazement – before a few of the more vocal members let out some wolf whistles.

Vincent raised his hand for silence.

"Friends, we are as amazed as you at this new sartorial splendor. It appeared magically as we were swimming. I am at a loss to explain it. We want to thank the ... um ... fairies for this gift. We have one in return.

"Long ago, Devin and I found a small warm pool with a warmer waterfall and a heated room. Although not far away, this place is difficult to reach because the passage is very constricted. Catherine and I have fully explored – and experienced – this wonder and want the whole community to enjoy it. Father, we think the hot room would make a good sauna and may give your hip some relief. In any case, perhaps we can organize a work party to make access easier – before winter."

There was a loud round of applause at this statement before everyone started talking at once. Vincent suddenly had another thought – and acted on it before he lost his nerve.

"One more thing, my friends. This clothing seems suitable for something else, something I should have done before today."

Vincent turned to Catherine, took her right hand in his own and knelt down in front of her.

"Catherine would you exchange vows with me and honour me by becoming my wife, partner and mate for all time? Your love has transformed me, filled me, brought me joy beyond my dreams. There can be no life for me without you, Catherine."

Catherine's face was a picture of surprise, joy and love. She looked into Vincent's face and did not hesitate.

"Vincent, I would be honoured to exchange vows with you and be your wife, partner and mate for all time. I am happy beyond anything I have ever known, and you are the reason. You have given me your love and strength for so long that it has become part of who I am. Without you, Vincent, I am nothing."

There was another huge round of applause at this little drama. Vincent rose and turned to face his family, still holding Catherine's hand. He bowed his head in acknowledgement and Catherine did the same.

Then William brought in one of his famous stew pots, and the focus changed. Huge bowls were ladled out and passed around by Jamie and Rebecca. This time, it was a chicken stew with tiny dumplings on top, washed down with another pitcher of beer. Catherine was enthralled and she hungrily dug into hers until nothing remained but a bay leaf, stuck to the side of the bowl. She swigged a glass of beer, feeling more satisfied than ever before.

William stood up and looked around the table.

"We have a tradition here, as most of you know, that whoever finds the bay leaf in their bowl gets a special prize. So ... anyone get it?"

He looked around, spotted Catherine's hand in the air. There were chuckles all around at this. Catherine wondered if this was another pre-planned joke.

"Please come over here, Catherine," William bellowed. She rose and went up to him, grinning at the mischievous smile on his wide, bearded face.

"Congratulations, Catherine. Normally, I would have a special dessert for the winner, but seeing as it's you, I've decided to change the prize."

With that, William quickly bent down to Catherine and planted a big kiss on her mouth, before she could react.

"Let me be the first one to congratulate the bride-to-be," he intoned.

The hall erupted in roars of laughter and Catherine found that every male in the hall seemed to have gravitated to her. She received many more friendly pecks. She was beginning to feel a bit faint from all the attention, when she heard a roar and there was immediate silence.

"Enough," Vincent said into the hush, pushing through the crowd and taking her hand. "Catherine is not the Blarney Stone."

With that, he gave her a very soft kiss and led her back to their seats.

"Where's dessert?" he asked loudly as everyone returned to their places. "William, have you eaten it all yourself? Or was your opportunistic kiss of my fiancée supposed to satisfy us?"

William's face went red at these remarks, but his eyes crinkled and he soon roared with laughter, joined by the rest of the hall. Finally getting his breath, he looked at Vincent.

“Vincent, you know very well that a meal without dessert would be no meal at all – especially for you. I’ve prepared something special – something that might take your mind off your delectable Catherine for half a second. There is one each, by the way. Don’t be greedy.”

Rebecca emerged from the kitchen with a large tray, piled high with small cream puffs. There were hoorays of approval at this. The tray was passed around, each person taking one. Vincent inhaled his so quickly, that Catherine would have missed it if she had not seen him out of the corner of her eye. She quickly extracted one from the platter before passing it along.

She put it into her mouth slowly, savouring it, letting the cream ooze out, eyes closed. She knew such treats were rare Below and wondered what other delights William had in his repertoire. She turned to Vincent to ask him this important question as she prepared to lick the last vestige of cream from around her mouth. Suddenly, she felt a pair of unique lips on hers, plainly working to eliminate the need for any further cleaning. She looked into Vincent’s azure eyes.

“Ummm ... you taste wonderful,” he remarked as he left her lips, smiling like the Cheshire Cat.

Catherine laughed.

“I’m glad dessert was nothing messy,” she remarked. “I would hate to have spilled anything on my new clothes. I think we’d better keep these for special occasions, Vincent.”

‘I agree, Catherine. Which reminds me. We have some special thanks to bestow. Will you join me?’

They clasped hands, rose and walked over to Annabelle, who sat on the far side of the hall. Without preamble, Vincent lifted her out of her chair, eliciting a shriek from the dwarf. He held her high so he could plant a soft kiss on her lips. Then he turned around with her so Catherine could give her a peck on the cheek.

“Annabelle, we are in your debt,” Vincent’s silken voice rumbled, as he put her back in her chair, somewhat breathless, but obviously happy.

“Vincent, you marvelous man! If you give me a kiss like that every time I do something nice for you, no one else would get anything at all. No wonder Catherine wants to move in with you. And I bet the kisses you give her are even better.” Annabelle rolled her eyes and sighed.

The hall erupted in laughter. Catherine looked around. She had not realized they were being watched. When was she going to learn? She laughed too and saw Vincent’s smile.

“Oh, Vincent’s kisses are indeed special,” Catherine stated, looking around at everyone. “If I had not already swallowed my cream puff, he would have kissed it right out of my mouth.”

That brought the house down. Guffaws filled the chamber and tears flowed from Annabelle’s eyes as she joined in with her unique, maniacal laugh. Catherine put her arms around Vincent, her chest heaving with suppressed laughter. Vincent, she could tell, was enjoying the attention immensely. And she used to think he was shy!

### Chapter 3

Vincent picked up a pot of herb tea to take back to their chamber. The signal sounded for the Council meeting just as he put it on the table, so he gave Catherine a quick kiss and a promise to be back soon.

Mary, William, Pascal, and Father were waiting for him.

Father began by outlining what Catherine had told him – the brownstone, her ideas for it, her suggestion for a scholarship fund and proposal for a Foundation and board of directors, with herself acting in any capacity thought appropriate, with Peter as liaison.

There was a silence after this and everyone looked somewhat stunned. As usual, William was the first to speak his mind – in his usual booming voice.

“This is a lot of news to absorb, but we have to move quickly. Catherine, I understand, returns above in a few days and I’m sure does not want to be there longer than necessary. I think we should just give our blanket approval to all of this and leave the details until the appropriate time. Much of this is beyond our experience. We can trust Catherine – and Peter. I see no reason for debate.”

Mary smiled and spoke quietly. "I agree with William. I knew Catherine was wealthy, but this is beyond imagination. She is far more qualified to implement these plans than any of us.

"However, I do think we must decide who is to be Foundation directors. I suggest that one of us represent the Council on a rotating basis, then Catherine of course and Peter, then someone to represent our Helpers and someone from our broader community, also on a rotating basis. We can pick names from a hat. That would make five – a nice democratic number."

"I agree with Mary," Father said. "Can we vote to approve William's suggestion to move forward and Mary's regarding the directors? All in favour, say Aye."

There was a round of 'aye's'.

"Well, that's settled then," Father breathed a sigh of relief. "Vincent, perhaps you can convey this decision to Catherine?"

"Certainly, Father. She will be very pleased. She so wants to help us."

"Right then," continued Father, "I have just one more item on the Agenda. Vincent has proposed to Catherine, and there will undoubtedly be a celebration in the near future. Vincent, have the two of you thought of a date?"

Vincent looked embarrassed.

"No, Father, we have not set a date. Catherine has a lot to do above over the next few weeks, and my proposal was a surprise. I know these things take a lot of planning. I will talk to her about it, I promise."

William stated he was ready to do whatever was necessary, whenever that was, with as much help as he could get to prepare the Great Hall.

"William, will you need any special supplies from above?" Father asked.

"Well, I won't have a shopping list until I know the date and have talked to Vincent and Catherine," William pointed out.

"Fair enough," Father said. "I think that's all for now, everyone. Meeting adjourned. See you all at dinner."

Vincent got up to leave, but was restrained by Father. They waited until everyone had gone, then sat down at Father's desk.

"What is it, Father?"

"Vincent, we have had no time to talk for several days. Catherine has suggested that we begin self-defense classes for our sentries, helped by someone she knows. Isaac, I believe she called him. We both feel that you should not be called upon to be the strong arm man in every situation."

Vincent felt as if a weight has been lifted from him. He had come to the conclusion that he did not want to be the first line of defense if Catherine was to move below. He did not want her to be aware of his rage at such times, as she most certainly would be now that they were so intimate. He looked at father and smiled.

"That is a very practical solution, Father, and one long overdue. I saw Isaac just briefly, but I know Catherine trusts him. He helped her find me – and saved my life. All able-bodied adults should take this training."

Father nodded his head. "Well then, perhaps you can tell Catherine that as well. We might as well get that going as soon as is practical." He paused and smiled at his son.

"And another thing, Vincent. I just wanted you to know that your happiness has not gone unnoticed by myself and that I am glad to be proven wrong about so many things where your ... um ... intimate life is concerned,"

"Father, I am so happy now that I cannot conceive of the reverse. I don't know how I survived before Catherine. We still have much to learn about each other, as any couple does, I suppose, but we have our lives to do that. Thank you for giving us your blessing.

"Oh, and you should know that it's possible you will be a grandfather one day."

Father looked a little aghast.

"Vincent, are you sure this is advisable? We don't know what your combined genes will produce – or even if it is possible – or safe for Catherine!"

"That's all true, Father, but the alternative – abstinence or protection – appeals to neither of us. We have come



so far that we must move onward. Should Catherine become pregnant, we have two fine doctors at our disposal.” Thoughts of Catherine in his chamber, made him remember eager to return to her. He rose to leave.

“Good evening, Father.”

Jacob had no trouble guessing the reason for the sudden retreat and gave his own ‘good evening’ to Vincent’s quickly retreating back.

Catherine let down the privacy rug and when Vincent reappeared and hugged him to her. With her head on his chest she felt his heartbeat under her ear, and sighed. A sudden frisson of fear made her quiver. Vincent caught it immediately.

“Catherine. What’s wrong?”

“Oh love, everything has gone so well. I just wonder how much more joy I can endure.”

“Catherine. Just believe that such joy as we have comes only to a few. It is our duty to pass it on.”

Catherine looked into Vincent’s eyes. Did he mean what she thought he meant? He did!

Vincent carried her to the bed, turned back the sheets, politely removed her new clothing and put it neatly on his big chair, followed by his own. He slid under the sheets where she waited for him and did his dutiful best to make that goal happen more quickly.

Vincent lit a number of braziers in the chilly chamber early in the morning, wanting, for a change, to be able to walk around naked. He liked to see Catherine in that state and was beginning to enjoy the freedom himself, which he had never indulged except in the warmth of the bathing chamber.

Catherine was more than willing when Vincent made love to her again when he returned to bed. She sensed a kind of “quiet desperation” in him. While they were drying off in the big towel after their morning bathe, Catherine pulled his head down to hers and gave him a kiss to get his attention.

“Vincent, I sense something more than the desire to procreate in you. What’s wrong?”

He looked at her, his eyes deep with love.

“Catherine, you must soon return above to do what is necessary. Our opportunities for love-making will be severely curtailed. Just thinking about it makes my, um ... short arm ... ache. I don’t know how I am going to survive such forced abstinence.”

“Vincent, the ache will be no less for me, I assure you. I read somewhere that saltpetre was once put in military rations to, er, dampen the libido. We will just have to keep our bond under strict control. But I will come back at night, I promise – sooner if I can manage it.”

Vincent was about to reply when he got a peculiar expression on his face and dropped his side of the towel. He ran over to a section of the chamber wall with a bulbous extrusion and put his back against it. Catherine noticed that his eyes were closed and his mouth open as he rubbed himself furiously, grunting softly. His nails were scrabbling on the wall. What on earth?

He stopped after a long minute or two and sagged in relief. He walked back to Catherine.

“I’m sorry, my love. My upper back has become one enormous, maddening itch.”

“Turn around, Vincent,” she demanded. He did so and she noticed that the skin under the long hair on his shoulders and upper back was reddened and flaking off.

“It’s the soap,” he told her softly. “Although I bathe every day – sometimes twice a day - I don’t always use soap, as I have lately. It dries out my skin if I use it too often.”

“Vincent, sit down on that stool. I may be able to help.”

Catherine rooted in her overnight bag and brought out her bristle shower brush. She began to stroke it gently over Vincent’s back, relieved to see that she was dislodging the dead skin beneath his hair. How had he stood it for so long? Why had she not noticed? His skin looked inflamed. Nevertheless, under her hand, she could feel him purring. She looked in her bag again and brought out a tube of unscented olive oil cream. She had brought

it for her hands, knowing that the soap below would not have moisturizers. She spread it generously all over the red areas and made sure it was well rubbed in.

"There, that should help for now. I'll make sure I get some more of this when I'm above. Why didn't you tell me, Vincent? Now I feel guilty for soaping you down so often."

"Catherine, how could I mention something so mundane while you were arousing me so? In fact, I'm quite incapable of thinking coherently in that condition, as I'm sure you know."

"Vincent, perhaps I should see if other parts of your anatomy are exhibiting signs of dryness."

Vincent said nothing as Catherine stroked the brush down his back and over his buttocks, then moved to stand in front of him. She then brushed his chest fur, noticing as she did that he was still purring. He had closed his eyes and was breathing through his mouth, exposing his canines.

Catherine looked pointedly down between his legs, clinically noting that her ministrations had caused a reaction there. She felt him shudder as her brush reached his abdomen and then stroked down the hair surrounding his manhood. She ceased brushing to give him a full "short arms inspection." The skin of his sheath was little dry, she thought, and immediately rubbed some of the cream into it. The inevitable response made her crotch throb. She looked into Vincent's face and realized he was watching her, his eyes dark with passion. He picked her up and put her on his lap facing him.

"Catherine, is there anything we can do which will not lead to arousal? Perhaps we should find out soon. Parting would then be so much easier on us both."

She replied by lifting herself onto his column and sighing at the warmth of him swelling inside her. The oil gave him a slickness she found delightful. She hugged him close as he tilted her a little on his lap, his hands under her bottom. By mutual consent, they resigned themselves totally to sensation and in due course their climax rolled over them in a giant wave of sensuous heat. Catherine then lay her head against Vincent's chest, delighting in the vibration of his purr, which had taken on a different tempo. He put his arms around her and held her close, breathing into her hair.

"Oh Catherine, my sweet. I am undone again."

"We are both incorrigible, Vincent. As for non-erotic activities, I will think on it. But don't hold your breath. I'm enjoying your body too much."

"I fear hard labour may be the only realistic distraction," Vincent whispered. "And now I think I'd like another bath."

"As you wish Vincent. But let me use my bristle brush on you this time, without soap."

With that, they went swiftly to the bathing chamber. Vincent realized he had not removed the privacy towel, and hoped Father had not been inconvenienced. He stood quietly on the bottom of pool, near the steps so Catherine could reach him.

Catherine found a small bowl and filled it with water. Using broad, soft strokes she carefully brushed Vincent down in the direction of his fur, dipping the brush in water to cleanse him. The bond told her he was enjoying it, if the vibration of his purr under her hands had not made that clear. She made a mental note to get a slightly coarser bristle brush as well, which might work even better on his thick fur. Quite obviously, Vincent had never used a brush. It was best used by someone else. As she finished, she wondered what he used on his hair and immediately decided to try it on that.

"Vincent, sit below me. I want to brush your hair."

Vincent had never felt so relaxed and he realized he was in danger of dozing on his feet. He was grateful when Catherine asked him to sit. He did so, turning his back to her without a word. She gently brushed through his thick mane.

Catherine was entranced at the feel of his soft hair in her hands. She had seldom had the opportunity to explore it. Underneath, his hair was even finer, almost like long fur. She was able to brush it until it rippled in the golden light of the chamber. Moving to his front, she continued her brushing around his face. His eyes were closed and he had given himself up entirely to this unique sensation. She brushed his mane until it formed a thick 'V' below

his chin. This, she thought, was the look she loved most. His unique and beautiful face surrounded by a halo of soft golden hair took her breath away. He opened his eyes and the look of ecstasy in them was all the reward she needed. She bent down and kissed him.

Vincent physically shook himself from his lethargy, once he belatedly realized Catherine had finished her brushing. She had not yet bathed.

“Your turn,” he rasped, lifting her onto the step he had been sitting on. He used her brush to stroke water over her and was rewarded with a sense of delight that he was sure would have been a purr if she had been capable of one. He carefully brushed her between the legs as well, and felt her sigh in contentment.

He carried her into the pool and dunked her, then held her to him. She molded herself into his arms and sighed again.

“Vincent, we must do this more often. That brush is magic. I had never realized how wonderful it feels. It is best done by a lover, though. It’s very ... um ... erotic.”

Just then the mealtime signal rapped over the pipes. Catherine and Vincent looked at each other.

“Well, I guess we have to eat,” she said, regretfully. “I’ve never felt less like it.”

“We must not wear out all our joys at once,” Vincent admonished. “And we need fuel to enjoy them to the utmost.”

Catherine giggled. “Your utmost is most enjoyable, even on an empty stomach,” she quipped. Vincent merely gave her a broad grin that exposed his canines.

They left the pool and dried themselves quickly. Catherine took an extra towel and did her best to get Vincent’s pelt dry. There had to be a better way, she reflected. He should not have to dress damp.

## Chapter 4

Breakfast was the usual jolly affair. Everyone ate heartily of William’s oat bran muffins washed down with tea or coffee. Mary stood up to read the work roster. Laundry duty, to no one’s surprise, was to take precedence. The older children were to help collect and sort it, while the youngest would receive some personal hygiene instruction from Father in his chamber.

“Kanin has been able to complete the drain work and we now have two weeks of wash to deal with. Everyone free should turn out to the laundry room today. Catherine, Olivia, Cullen and Kanin will man the washtubs. Vincent will carry the finished laundry to Annabelle’s drying room, where she and I, Jamie and Samantha, will hang it up. Everyone else will be go-fers. William will provide us with lemonade so we don’t dehydrate – and of course our break snack.

“For the benefit of those who are new to laundry detail, there are coveralls here.” She patted a faded pile next to her. “We also have a number of pairs of wooden clogs for those going back and forth between tubs or manning them.

“Clothing beneath the coveralls should be kept to a minimum as the laundry room is very warm and the work likewise. We meet in the laundry room in half an hour.”

Breakfast over, Catherine obediently picked out a coverall that was reasonably small. She carried it back to their chamber and put it on, wearing only an undershirt and panties under it. Vincent appeared not long afterwards and dropped a pair of clogs on the floor – obviously for her. He was a good judge of her foot size because they fit well. She would not be wearing socks.

Vincent clambered into a very generously-sized coverall. Catherine could not help noticing that he wore nothing at all under it. She caught his eye and grinned. Vincent rolled his eyes and struck a pose like Atlas carrying the globe.

“Catherine, I will be carrying massive laundry baskets of wet stuff. No matter how well you wring it out, I am going to get soaked. Why should I wear anything more than absolutely necessary? I would go naked if that were practical – but that corridor to Annabelle’s is a chilly one. Extremes of hot and cold can cause respiratory problems, Father says. However, I will not be wearing footwear. I won’t need it.”

They left the chamber together and headed to the laundry room, a place that Catherine was now very curious to

see. Vincent's feet she noticed, weren't silent, at least on rock. She could hear the scrape of his nails.

The Tunnel community had found a perfect location for their laundry. The chamber itself, Vincent explained to her on the way, was virtually surrounded by steam pipes. A water pipe had been diverted to run between several of them and dispensed all the warm water they needed. Another provided cold water for rinsing or special washes. Below the hard rock floor was a layer of porous rock which filtered their waste water into the old river, the same destination as the city's storm drains. Since the community used only baking soda and pure soaps, they were not polluting the system. Traps in Kanin's drains filtered out any lint.

The chamber was in the corridor behind William's kitchen – the big dark space she had seen on her way to Annabelle's. It was too huge to make very bright, but a series of lanterns had been placed on ledges near the ceiling to give as much light as possible. The place reminded Catherine of an old theatre. The similarity ended there, though.

Moist heat greeted her and she could not at first take in what she saw. Vincent, she quickly discovered, had not told her the half of it. Since sufficient electricity was unavailable for such purposes, the community had adapted a number of old tub washing machines so they could be agitated by hand or foot cranks. She was sure Mouse had been responsible for a smaller tub, which looked like it was attached to a Rube Goldberg device – some kind of complex crank. Another, much bigger tub was connected to an exercise cycle. That one was for her, she decided. After a few of William's meals, she felt she needed to get her muscles working.

She watched from her bicycle seat as all the machines, including her own, were filled with water by the bucket load and soap was added. Then the cranking began. After a half hour of agitating one load, two young helpers came over to remove the sodden stuff into a basket and two more replaced it with the next load, plus more water. Before the third load, a plug was removed in her tub and the water drained into a long channel carved into the floor. Buckets of warm water were carried over to fill it again and more soap added. Some tubs, she noticed, used only cold water.

By the third load, Catherine felt she could recommend this place to any exercise freak from Above. Moving both laundry and water was hard work.

Once the laundry was washed and rinsed, it had to be wrung. Catherine noticed that it was done separately from the washing and realized it was for one reason alone - it kept an assembly line active. A series of old metal and wood wringers were perched atop big wooden tubs, each with a hole at the bottom which emptied into the stone channels leading to the big drain. The wringers too were people-cranked.

When her wash tub was no longer needed, Catherine helped with the wringing. The hand crank worked her arms as the exercise cycle had worked her legs. She would be bulging with muscle after a few weeks of this, she thought. She had to admit they were efficient – but would certainly be damaging to anything with buttons or zippers. Now she understood what Vincent had alluded to. Hadn't her grandmother once referred to these contraptions as "mangles"?

However, after putting a few pieces of clothing with ties through the wringer, the term mangle became singularly appropriate. Catherine found that the loose ends naturally migrated to the ends of the wringer and immediately got caught in the crank rod. Once she was unable to extract the ties and had to call on Kanin for help. He lifted up the end piece and released the wringers. When it happened again, she released the wringers as he had done – but nearly screamed in frustration when she could not get the cover back down after freeing the ties. Vincent happened to be nearby and must have felt her anger. He put his hand on hers, quietly lifted up the cover from the top, revealing a flexible joint she had not noticed, then slid it into neatly into place. Speech was impossible in the racket, so she grabbed one of his hands and kissed his palm. He patted her behind and left with a smile. Thereafter, Catherine tied a bow in every one of the strings pairs. *Sine qua non*, she thought. Let anyone try to argue her out of it. They could untie them when they were hung to dry, if they so wished.

By mid-morning, Catherine was ready to drop. She and her cohorts had filled two dozen large baskets. She watched in awe as Vincent carried them two at a time on his broad shoulders, down the long tunnel to the drying room.

They all took a break shortly afterwards, drinking William's superb lemonade with gratitude. They sat on upturned tubs on the floor. They were all so wet, it no longer mattered that their perches were damp with soapsuds. The teens obviously thought it all great fun – and were flicking soapsuds at each other from a nearby drain, laughing.

Even Annabelle, usually so carefully attired, was looking a bit bedraggled, Catherine noticed. She was wearing a pink coverall with different coloured buttons. A handkerchief draped from one pocket. Her feet were protected with rubber-soled slip-ons.

Catherine did not want to think about what was involved hanging up all that laundry in Annabelle's drying room. She looked over at Vincent, sitting next to her. His mane was hanging in long strands and his expression was one of resignation and fatigue. He looked like he needed a hug, she thought. She sent him a quick blast of passion down the bond and saw his back stiffen. He looked at her, his eyes burning, then captured one of her hands and kissed it. He sighed as she kissed his in return.

William had also given them a plate of chewy squares. Catherine felt she needed a sugar hit and almost inhaled a couple of them. Her fellow laundry workers, she noticed, did the same. Vincent, however, chewed one reverently, his eyes closed. He looked at her after he swallowed it and what she saw in his eyes made her crotch throb. She sighed. A Phyrriic victory – serve her right. Shortly afterwards, they all got back to work.

Finally, all that remained were the small pieces and more delicate items – hand-made knitted garments and baby clothes – and lots and lots of handkerchiefs. Catherine wondered at the latter, until she thought about it. Cloth handkerchiefs were definitely more practical than paper tissues, where resources were limited. They could be washed and renewed – and should be, often. So much nicer on the nose, too, she thought. She noticed that they were made of a variety of fabrics, including what were obviously old bed linens. Even more sensible, she thought. This community wasted nothing. She decided she needed a few herself and made a mental note to ask Annabelle.

The wools were soon washed, gently flattened between an old press to get most of the water out, then draped over a complex clothes horse in a warm annex at the back of the laundry room. The handkerchiefs were washed in a small washer with its own wringer then pegged to a series of clothes lines attached to pipes. There was a good draft, so Catherine could see they would not take long to dry.

The hard work done, the Catherine and the others began the cleanup. They took large straw brooms and swept the floors clean of water and soap suds. The channels and washing machines were rinsed and all the hampers and tubs upended to dry. With a big sigh, the whole crew sat down on the tubs to rest, all obviously tired. That made Catherine feel better. She was beginning to realize that nothing in her life had prepared her for this kind of work. Character-building, she decided.

Catherine had never really thought about the consequences of her daily clothes changes, but now swore to herself that she would wear the same outfit as long as possible. No one below worried about being seen in the same clothes several days in a row. She would need a more practical wardrobe too, with just enough above clothing to allow her to function in whatever capacity seemed appropriate. She could keep those at the brownstone so as not to crowd Vincent's chamber.

She and the others were chatting tiredly, unwilling to move, when Vincent re-appeared, looking even more disheveled and dripping from top to bottom, just as he had predicted.

He sensed Catherine's fatigue and quietly suggested she might like a warm bath and a nap before lunch. Catherine did not argue and said "goodbye fellow slaves", getting some tired grins in return. She almost stumbled out. As soon as they were out of sight, Vincent picked her up and carried her back to their chamber, let down the privacy rug and went straight with her into the bathing chamber. He put up the privacy towel and then undressed her, leaving her to sink up to her neck in the warm water of the stone ramp. He removed his own soaked clothing and joined her. He realized she was almost asleep, and pulled her onto his chest, putting his legs around hers to hold her in place. He felt himself dozing off as he relaxed. They lay there until the lunch signal sounded. Reluctantly, Vincent hauled himself and Catherine out of the water, wrapped them both in another of Annabelle's enormous towels and padded back into his chamber. Catherine was barely conscious, he realized. He dried her and left her on the bed, well-covered, and decided to get a tray for both of them from William. He furiously rubbed himself dry, then quickly put on some clothes and went to the dining hall.

Father collared him almost as soon as he entered.

"Is Catherine all right, Vincent?"

"Yes, Father. She's sleeping. I feel as if I need a nap as well. Laundry day has been particularly onerous this time."

Father laughed. "There was a lot more laundry today than usual, of course, but I suspect you are tired because other activities are demanding your energy. Am I right?"

Vincent chose not to answer that and merely shrugged. His nose caught the delightful scent of curry, so he made a quick goodbye to Father and went to capture some food. He heard Father's snort behind him.

He loaded up a tray with two bowls of curry, a stack of pappodums, a pot of tea, and slices of William's lemon pound cake. Since almost everyone was tired to the point of exhaustion, there was no banter and Vincent made a fast retreat back to his chamber.

Catherine was asleep, but he gently shook her awake and made her sit down on a chair and eat with him, despite her sleepy protest. She mumbled something about *Atlas Shrugged* which Vincent chose not to pursue. He was too tired for talk. Finishing his own meal in his customary quick fashion, Vincent found Catherine's nightgown and slipped it over her head while she ate. Once she was finished, he carried her back to the bed. She was asleep before he reached it. He quickly shed his own clothes and joined her under the blankets, eschewing a nightshirt and gathering her in his arms to keep her warm.

Vincent turned over onto his back, aware that it was now approaching dinner time. They had slept the afternoon away! His stomach was growling and was soon echoed by Catherine's. She awoke, stretched like a cat, and turned over to look at him. He planted a kiss on her lips and informed her that it was almost dinner time. She sighed as she slid out of the bed.

"I'll never look at our laundry basket in quite the same way, Vincent. I'm going to do my best to keep my contributions to a minimum."

While they were dressing Vincent remembered the Council meeting. He went to Catherine and took her small hands in his big hairy ones, sighing at the sight. He would never get used to that.

"Catherine, the Council has unequivocally and unanimously approved all your plans for us – all of them. We all feel that the details of such transactions are best left in your hands. We will offer our help or advice as required. We did decide that your Foundation should have five members – yourself, Peter and three rotating ones – one from the Council, one from the Helpers and one from our community-at-large.

"Father says for you to make whatever arrangements you wish so that Isaac can train our sentries. He will have to come and see us, of course, so you can arrange that too.

"Also, my love, William is keen to have a date for our Joining Ceremony. I told everyone that you had a lot to do above next week and you might want more time to think about it."

Catherine brightened as she looked into Vincent's eyes.

"I'm so glad everyone agrees with my plans," she whispered. "It means a lot to me. I feel as if I am finally part of your family.

"As to a date for our Joining – what do you think, Vincent? We have no anniversary coming up anytime soon – do we? My birthday is at the end of September, though. Would that be time enough to plan? I don't want everyone to go to a lot of fuss and bother. After so long, I feel as if we are already married – in all the ways that matter."

"As you wish, Catherine. I'll pass that information along to Father." He did not tell her that a modest celebration would not be tolerated Below.

They finished dressing and went arm-in-arm to the dining chamber.

Dinner was small pieces of breaded chicken with potatoes, steamed carrots and beans. A savoury sauce in a metal pitcher and the traditional beer jug did the rounds and both Catherine and Vincent ate and drank ravenously. By the time the dessert - small fruit tarts with a dollop of custard – were passed around, followed by tea, both were relaxed to the point of being almost asleep.

Kanin nudged Olivia, sitting next to him, and looked in the direction of the Tunnel's favourite couple. Others around the tables also noticed and with a few conspiratorial glances, the community began to sing a lullaby – coincidentally the one which Catherine had introduced during the plague days. It had become a favourite among the children.

Catherine and Vincent suddenly realized they were being serenaded and looked about the chamber in surprise.

There were chuckles at the expression on their faces, but the goodwill was evident. They both quietly rose, hand in hand. Vincent looked at the faces of his family with genuine love.

“Thank you my friends for that wonderful reminder that we have need of sleep. Good night.”

“Make sure you do sleep this time!” Kanin shouted at their retreating backs, to general laughter.

Back in their chamber, Catherine quickly undressed and decided she did not want the nightgown on again. With Vincent next to her, she didn’t need it – and it just got tangled around her in the night. Not to mention that it was a barrier between her body and that of Vincent’s. She’d had enough of clothing barriers.

Vincent also opted to wear nothing. He seldom felt the cold and was far more comfortable without clothes – plus he could hold the object of his desire closer to him. He snuggled up to her, but she turned out of his arms onto her back. He realized she had something to say and waited.

“Vincent, we’ve never discussed what was done to me before you found me that night in the Park. As you know, I have had nightmares about the man who held me – his arms were heavily tattooed with giant snakes. The man with the knife took delight in slashing me. But there was more. I was raped by them both. I suspect you know this.”

She looked at Vincent and saw that his face had gone rigid and his eyes reflected her pain.

“I thought so,” she continued. “I was not able to think about that night for a long time. About what was done to me besides the damage to my face. For over a year, I battled my demons, trying to rationalize my disgust with myself – the feeling of violation. I could not have had an intimate relationship with any man – even Elliot, had he asked.

“When you and I became close, I was afraid Vincent. Not because of your differences – but because of what makes you human – because you are male. Very much so,” she added smiling softly at him.

“You were very patient with me. I knew you sensed my pain. You let me make the overtures – to hug you when I needed that, to kiss you when I wanted to do that.

“What I’m trying to say, Vincent, is that I don’t believe I would have healed, recovered mentally, without your support and understanding. You never pressured me.

“Oh I know you had reservations of your own – but that’s not my point. When we had our little tryst in the cavern, the last of my barriers fell. I had wanted you physically before that, as you know, but I was always afraid I would shrink away at the last moment and you would blame yourself. Your own fears merely compounded mine. So you see, the reticence was not all yours.

“Vincent, you have made me complete. I have never felt so fulfilled, so at peace with myself. I know you have felt this in me, but I wanted you to know why. That’s why I want to be with you, always, right here – or wherever you are.”

Vincent said nothing to this. What could he say? He invited Catherine into his arms and she hugged him tightly, her tears dampening his chest fur. He stroked her back and felt her relax then slip into sleep. He held his most precious burden until he could keep awake no longer and finally let himself drift into a dreamless sleep.

## Chapter 5

Catherine awoke, felt Vincent spooned against her back, and sighed in deep happiness. Testing the bond, she realized he was awake and turned to look at him. Then she wished she hadn’t. Her back and shoulder muscles protested and she could feel hard knots in her legs and buttocks as well.

“Urgh,” she grunted.

Vincent caught her discomfort and hugged her to him. Truth to tell, he was not unaffected either. Those laundry baskets had been heavier and more numerous than usual. His shoulders and back were stiff.

“It’s early, Catherine,” he whispered. “Why don’t we go to our hot room and enjoy a sauna? I know Kanin has started to widen the entrance. It should be a little easier to get into now.”

“Wonderful idea,” Catherine murmured. “I have something else that would help me – if you’re willing.”

“Anything,” Vincent whispered back, nuzzling an ear.

Catherine reluctantly moved from Vincent's warm embrace and shuffled out of the bed. Rooting around in her overnight bag, she found a small bottle of rubbing oil. She used it to prevent chafing when she was doing hot exercise. She had not even thought of it yesterday. The loose tunnel clothing here did not bother her – but the oil would be great for her purposes. She waved it at Vincent, who had arisen and put on a long woollen robe. He brought another for her – and a couple of towels. Catherine grabbed the bristle brush and then slid her feet into the clogs she had worn the day before. Vincent went barefoot, carrying a lantern.

They walked quickly up the staircase to the new pool chamber. The entrance had indeed been improved. The awkward bend was gone. They bypassed the dim pool – it was not yet daylight Above - and went straight to the hot room.

The heat was wonderful and Catherine sighed, standing still to bask in it, already feeling better. "Vincent, I could lie here on a towel – the sand is soft - and you could give me a back massage. Maybe next time there'll be benches."

She removed her robe, looked around for somewhere to put it and decided to roll it up and use it as a pillow. She lay outstretched and tried to relax. She heard Vincent position himself over her and felt his bottom rest on her upper legs. His manhood was softly touching her, but she did her best to remain calm. Soon, she felt Vincent's hands rubbing oil into her shoulders in firm circular motions and thoughts of anything at all fled. He had wonderful hands! Catherine let herself doze under his ministrations, felt the knots leaving her muscles.

Vincent was well aware of the effect the touch of his organ had on Catherine, but was also determined to do what she needed most before anything else. He finished her shoulders, felt her muscles relax and moved down her back in slow circles, pressing firmly to rub in the oil. Her skin was so smooth and firm, he lost himself in the sensation of his hands moving over her. He felt the scar where Mitch Denton's bullet had hit her and was suddenly very glad she would soon be below where he could watch over her.

As he worked, he felt a brief regret that his body hair made an oil massage impractical. However, there were other ways to do a body rub – as Catherine had discovered. He would never have considered a bristle brush a lovemaking device before her introduction of it.

Thoughts of that made him shudder in remembered pleasure, but he resolutely continued his rubbing down over Catherine's buttocks. Here too, he could feel the tense muscles and rubbed diligently until they too relaxed. Then he moved down her legs.

The room was quite hot, so when he finished, Vincent was very warm and lay back on his towel to bask a little. The heat was wonderful and he felt his shoulders muscles unknot. Unfortunately, his manhood was anything but relaxed and his arousal was becoming insistent.

He felt Catherine stir next to him and knew she could see his predicament. He refused to ask for assistance, though. They were here to soak up the heat, not make love. He closed his eyes and tried to will his errant organ to relax. It wouldn't – and he finally realized that the arousal was not all his. Catherine's own arousal was being transmitted along the bond. If he had not been so focused on her massage, he would have noticed it earlier.

He groaned and sat up, pulling the towel with him so he could slouch against the warm wall. It felt wonderful on his stiff shoulders.

Catherine looked up at him and decided he made a comfortable-looking chair. She rose and sat in his lap, her back against his chest, carefully positioning his organ between her thighs.

He nuzzled her neck and ears, reached around her to cup her breasts, while she stroked his sheath, bringing him to full stiffness. She brought up her legs and lifted herself until she could sit on his column. Then she put her hand under his thighs and urged him to lift his legs. Vincent liked the sensation of having her within the cradle of his legs and wrapped his arms about his legs to bring her closer yet. Catherine tightened her vaginal muscles around him. She felt him tense under her and knew his climax was as close as her own.

Suddenly, neither could restrain themselves any longer. Their love exploded in a shower of sparks and wet warmth.

They sat unmoving, soaking up the heat of the chamber, sated. Catherine was happy with him inside her and relaxed completely, her head under his chin. Vincent felt as if yet another gift had been given to him. His purr



reverberated along his length and he hugged Catherine to him again. They remained there napping until Vincent's stomach began to growl and his innate sense of time told him the breakfast hour was approaching.

He got up and carried Catherine to the pool. They bathed quickly in water that seemed cold in comparison with the hot room. They had not brought any soap, but there was still the brush. Catherine ran back into the hot room for it and returned. Vincent gave her a sideways glance and turned his back to her, his eagerness clearly transmitted through the bond.

Catherine laughed and began to scrub him down with water. She could feel him purring through the brush and leaned against him to feel it on as much of her skin as she could. He was delightful – there was no better word.

Vincent growled and reminded her that she wasn't finished brushing him. She reluctantly shifted away and he turned to face her. She rubbed down his chest, arms and legs, admiring again the dense muscle groups couched under his lean form. He was perfection personified – and completely without conceit. She sighed.

Catherine got a grip on herself and moved to the very delicate operation between his legs. Her ministrations had an effect, but she ignored that. When she was done, she gave the brush to Vincent and turned her back to him. Obliging, he massaged her with the brush. He turned her to face him and gently brushed her front, also taking care as he reached between her legs.

By now they were both aroused. Catherine hugged Vincent to her and looked into his eyes.

"Vincent, we can't. Really. We simply must get back and get ready for breakfast. I wonder if there is a cooler pond here? We both need a cold bath."

"There is something that might suffice, Catherine," Vincent revealed. He paddled over to the rocky wall near the entry way and beckoned to her. Around a bend she had not even noticed, there was another small waterfall – this one very chilly. They both gasped as they stood under it, but felt refreshed – and cooled.

They left it after a minute or two and quickly toweled down in the hot room before putting on their robes.

Vincent gathered up the towels and Catherine's hand and they padded quietly down to their chamber to start another day of work.

## Chapter 6

Catherine would be spending the day with Annabelle in her work chamber, so she put on Vincent's hand-me-downs. She just knew those boxes were going to be dusty. She'd better find some replacement clothing as well. She decided to continue to eschew underwear. Hers was all synthetic and it was too hot under the tunnel layers. The privacy panels worked well and her clothing had never felt so comfortable.

Vincent, she noticed, was wearing less these days as well. He had reduced his layers to a single shirt and padded vest. He would be working too, so did not need the extra clothing. Of course, he never wore anything under his pants, and he caught her watching him as he put them on.

"Catherine," he admonished softly.

She giggled and went over to him, putting her arms around him.

"Your honour is safe for the moment, Vincent. I feel as if I haven't eaten in a week. William is the man for me right now."

"Huh. The way to your heart is through your stomach?" Vincent asked, looking down at her with mischief in his eyes.

"Well Vincent, you should know that I am in no way a cook. Your only meal in my apartment was just lately, for good reason. I'm lucky you don't expect home-cooked meals. I couldn't compete with tunnel food, anyway. So yes, William has a special place in my heart, or my stomach, if you wish."

They both laughed and headed for the dining chamber – the scent of bacon and biscuits meeting them part way there.

They sat down in the noisy chamber, noticing that everyone seemed to be happy and hungry. Father called for order when everyone was settled and asked Mary to read out the day's work roster. Catherine listened with one

ear, fully involved with her third bacon biscuit. She already knew where she was going.

Vincent, she heard, was to accompany Kanin and Cullen to the pool chamber and continue the work there. Vincent stood up at that, and signaled for attention. The chamber went quiet.

"If I may make a suggestion," he said in his most commanding tones. "The entry enlargement is almost done. Just as urgent is the hot room off the pool chamber, which needs some seating and low benches. It's a perfect place to ease aches and pains. There is a warm waterfall across the pond which needs a bench nearby as well. I think we have enough lumber to do a few. Cullen should perhaps do them, while Kanin and I finish the stone work. Also, there needs to be something for hanging up towels and robes. I believe there are some assorted coat racks in Annabelle's work room in need of repair. Perhaps Mouse and Jamie could work on those."

"Shur. Yesh. Good," was Mouse's muffled response around a full mouth. Jamie waved her hand in acknowledgement her mouth also full.

Vincent sat down and Mary thanked him for the suggestions.

"Anyone else have comments?"

Mary sat down and made notes on her roster.

Catherine put her hand on Vincent's knee. He turned to her and she smiled.

"We may soon have to make appointments to use that hot room," she whispered.

Vincent smiled back, thinking that having their own hot room would be even better. At least it would be private.

He gave her a peck before rising and joining Kanin. They would get their tools and head right to work.

Catherine finished up and went to Annabelle's work chamber. She found Mouse and Jamie already there, examining a lop-sided tangle of coat racks. They extracted four of them and lugged them out of the chamber to the carpentry work room, which was just down the hall. Curious, Catherine followed them and found a broad chamber fitted with work benches and various hand-operated equipment. A vast piece of pegboard held more hand tools than she had ever seen outside a hardware store. Against one wall was an assortment of lumber and wood, the latter obviously from old furniture. She saw oak doors and wardrobe panels. She shook her head in amazement and left, almost bumping into Cullen. He smiled at her and began examining the wood for possible benches.

Catherine went back to the sewing chamber and found Annabelle and Mary already sorting a huge pile of clothing on one long table. Rebecca and Olivia entered behind her.

Catherine approached Annabelle, who was standing on her special ramp, and remembered her 'shopping list – another set of work clothes for herself, some Tunnel wear, boots for Vincent, handkerchiefs. Annabelle listened and grinned.

"Last week, Vincent asked for some pants with gauze panels," Annabelle commented. "We'll make those up today and you can take them back. As for the clothes, we'll be sorting out this table full of stuff and you are welcome to take anything you feel might fit you. Oh, and there's one other thing you should know we have on hand ..."

Annabelle held up a pair of maternity pants with a stretch panel, a mischievous glint in her brown eyes.

Catherine laughed and hugged her. "You'll be the first to know when I need those," she whispered.

"As for Vincent's footwear," Annabelle continued. "Did he like the ones I made to go with your his-and-hers outfits?"

"Annabelle, he was in heaven. I've never seen him look so ecstatic about footwear."

"Well then," said the dwarf. "I must try and find some more sheepskin. There may be some about here in an unsorted box. When we're done this table and settled down to sewing, perhaps you can start on those boxes I showed you the other day."

Catherine looked over at the wall and noticed that the boxes on the bottom had collapsed under the weight above them, at last.

"Somehow, we never see to get to those," Annabelle commented, seeing her furrowed brow. "You can be our official sorter, if you wish. You'll never lack for work."

Catherine was grateful she would not be required to demonstrate her manual dexterity with a needle or sewing machine.

"That would be fine with me," she stated with enthusiasm. Who knew what she would discover there? She loved rooting through mysterious boxes. It had taken her weeks to clear out her father's apartment for that very reason.

"First, I think I'd better give you a brief tour," Annabelle said, and took Catherine's hand as she stepped off the ramp. She introduced Catherine to the various shelves and what they held. Everything was neatly organized into fabric types and several long shelves had nothing but clothing in neat piles. Another table was piled with repair work waiting to be done and yet another with work-in-progress.

Catherine was flabbergasted. How did they ever get on top of all this work? Annabelle looked at her soberly when she voiced her curiosity.

"We don't," she admitted. "We do the most urgent work and then move to that less urgent. We will never be done here. But we do manage to keep everyone clothed. The children are taught to mend and patch their own clothing. The older ones, boys and girls, come once a week for sewing instruction. We have big bins of scraps of all kinds," she said, pointing at several large round cardboard bins against another wall. "They are sorted by fabric type. We keep one for fabrics that can be used to make quilts and such. Another has scraps of denim and leather, best for patching. Yet another is cottons for sheets and towels. We waste nothing. Cullen and Kanin get rags for their workshops from what is truly unusable. And handkerchiefs – we need hundreds – are made from old sheets and pillowcases." She pointed at a small open cupboard, stacked with small neat piles.

"Help yourself," she told Catherine. "I suggest five to start, unless you have a cold or chronic condition. When they need washing, just put them into a small basket we keep just inside the laundry room. We do them separately, as you noticed. That way they don't get lost inside pant legs or sheets."

Logical, thought Catherine, admiringly. They thought of everything here!

Lastly, Annabelle showed Catherine a white board stored behind a table against the wall, where she recorded everyone's measurements. She admitted that she had a good eye and did not need to refer to it often – except for growing children, or if someone either gained or lost a lot of weight. Still, the chart was useful for the women who wanted to make clothing for their families, she remarked, as they returned to the big table. Mary, Rebecca and Olivia were already busy sorting clothes into piles according to size and utility.

After a while, the table now piled higher than her own head, Catherine took it upon herself to carry the sorted clothing to its proper location and stack it on the shelves. Annabelle looked at her with a smile. Here was a helper who would not need to be told what to do!

They took a short break after a couple of hours and drank some lemonade with one of Williams' big oat cookies, then got back to work. The table was clear by then and Annabelle, Mary and Olivia started sewing on the treadle machines. The noise of the machines made talk impossible, so Catherine grabbed a low stool and tackled the sagging boxes of stuff.

They broke for lunch and sat around a small table chatting and eating William's excellent paté sandwiches, washed down with strong tea. He had sent them some sugar cookies with big smiley faces on them in bright orange icing. Catherine had to laugh. Work in this community was so easy to enjoy because everyone involved was happy. She wished her job above had been able to offer half as much. It merely confirmed to her that her decision was correct. Work here felt right. It was good, useful, necessary work. She wanted to build on that and make her own niche – as Annabelle had done. She sighed, tired but happy.

Mary looked at her and understood her emotion immediately from the set of Catherine's jaw. She had felt that way herself, often. She smiled at her and saw the younger woman's gratitude. She thanked the fates again for bringing them this beautiful and talented woman. She had transformed Vincent and the Tunnel community – without ever imposing herself on them. She had true class – a very rare attribute.

Vincent meanwhile had helped Kanin widen the entrance of the pool chamber to a normal width. Mouse and Jamie brought in the repaired clothes racks and then had helped Cullen bring up the wooden benches.

Kanin and Vincent placed the furniture strategically.

The hard work over, Kanin, Cullen and Vincent decided to have a swim. The three men splashed around the

pool. They had not been there long when Father came in to look around. Vincent got out, put a towel around his waist and showed Father the hot room. The older man was immediately taken with it.

"This is marvelous, Vincent. It feels wonderful already. I think I shall try it out later."

The other two men had followed them and immediately sat down on one of the benches against a warm wall, sighing in unison.

"Just what I need," remarked Kanin. He and Cullen eyed Father.

"You'll need a lot less clothing on Father, if you're really going to enjoy this," Cullen suggested.

Father took the hint and removed all his clothes except his undershirt and shorts and sat on a bench. Vincent carried them out to one of the clothes racks and brought back a towel.

The four of them sat in companionable silence for some time before they realized Father was snoring. Vincent quietly left and got dressed. Signaling to Kanin, he handed Father's clothes to him and then carefully scooped up his parent. Father awoke and protested, but did not struggle. Cullen threw all the towels over him to keep him warm and Vincent carried him back down the stairs to his chamber, followed by the other two men.

Vincent put Father on his bed and pulled a quilt over him.

Father looked at his son and smiled.

"Vincent, I can't remember the last time I felt so relaxed. Thanks for carrying me back. I don't think you've ever done that before. And it may not be the last," he chuckled and closed his eyes.

Vincent left Father's chamber. Kanin and Cullen followed him out. Once out of earshot, Vincent turned to his friends.

"Well, I think we've finished for today – unless you have some other work you need help with."

"No, Vincent – that was the main job. But you should make a map of the "features" of the pool room."

"Good idea, Kanin. I'll do that now, before dinner. I'll post it on the community bulletin board in the dining hall."

Vincent went back to his chamber and immediately set about making the map. It was true that some of the features, like the cold and warm waterfalls, were not obvious.

By late afternoon, Catherine had made a considerable dent in the backlog of boxes and found enough clothing to meet her needs. Annabelle was thrilled with her progress.

"I could use you in here a couple of times a week," she remarked.

"Well, I'd be more than willing to come," Catherine stated. "I don't have any real duties here, so I'd love to help you. Who knows what I might find at the bottom there." She pointed at a line of squashed boxes that were now revealed in all their ugliness.

"I can come back, say on Fridays, as well. Would that work?"

Annabelle beamed up at her.

"That would be wonderful, Catherine. I never know when more deliveries are coming, but I'm sure there will always be something for you to do. Have you found all the clothes and such you needed?"

"I think I've made a good start," Catherine said. She looked around and realized that she and Annabelle were alone. She remarked that it must be getting near dinner time.

"Oh, in about an hour," Annabelle said with a smile.

"Goodness, is it that late? I'd better get my stuff back to our chamber."

Annabelle helped her tie up her pile of clothes and handkerchiefs for the trip back. Catherine found the bundle heavier than she expected, but manageable. She heaved it onto her shoulder and trotted out, waving to Annabelle, who was watching her with a wide grin.

Catherine was beginning to stagger by the time she came in sight of Vincent's chamber and was just beginning to wonder whether she would make it through the door when Vincent himself appeared in front of her, relieved her of the bundle without a word and carried it the rest of the way. She followed him, feeling as if she was suddenly walking on air.

When she got inside, she immediately had a sneezing fit and had to sit down in his chair.

"Oh," she gasped between snorts. "I spend all day sorting clothes without so much as a sniffle, and now when I get back here, I start sneezing."

Vincent laughed. "Delayed reaction," he suggested. He separated a handkerchief from the pile and handed it to her. She blew into it furiously, honking so loudly that Vincent laughed again.

"It's not funny, Vincent," she gasped. "How am I going to go to dinner sneezing. William will have a fit. Very unhygienic."

"Well, there is a solution," he said slowly, looking sideways at her. "Get undressed and come into the bathing pool. The moist heat will help."

Catherine decided she needed a bath anyway, after a day of rooting through dusty boxes. She quickly stripped and nearly ran into the bathing chamber, trying to beat the next sneeze.

Vincent followed her and put up the privacy towel. He did not need a bath himself, but decided to strip anyway and bask a little in the steamy air. He sat down on the outside ledge on a towel, his back against the warm wall, and crossed his legs.

Catherine was soaping herself down and he watched with delight. She looked, he thought, like Venus rising from a half-shell. Her skin was so white – and as firmly beautiful as it looked. He felt his penis responding and drew his knees up to hide it from her. She moved to the middle of the pond and sank herself into it far enough to rinse off. Then she turned around and looked at him. She waded over to his side of the pool and sat down beside him, sighing. He put his arm around her and she leaned into his chest.

"You were right. I'm cured. How did you know?"

Vincent looked away, a little embarrassed at the memory.

"Catherine, my differences – whether more than human or more beast-like – are acute. I can see better in dim light, hear better and scent more finely than anyone else in the Tunnels. The latter allows me to sense dangerous gases, for instance. When I was a child, a methane pocket exploded and resulted in a massive tunnel collapse under the river where we were excavating. Father was injured – his hip problem originates with that – and another man, our best stonemason, was killed. This talent of mine was discovered in a lesser incident, much later. That's why I am now always the point man in new excavations.

"My sense of smell also means that I am sensitive to allergens. I get sneezing fits when exposed to too much highly concentrated scents or dust. My fits were always the source of much hilarity among the children. Mine are literally "cat sneezes" – short, sharp and frequent. I am unable to do anything in the midst of one – except sit down. It was Devin who discovered that steam stopped the attacks. He had read somewhere that it was impossible to sneeze in high humidity. It works."

Catherine turned to plant a soft kiss on his mouth.

"Vincent, your "differences" are what attract me to you. You are perfect in ways I had never imagined – and not just physically, although you are definitely a "hunk" in that department too."

She reached down and cupped his furry balls. He gave a low rumbling growl in reaction and closed his eyes.

"You have a beauty of spirit that is truly remarkable, Vincent. It's so much a part of you that it shines in everything you do. You don't judge others without due cause – but you are very hard on yourself. Stop trying to compare yourself to anyone else – and don't ever change. What you are is what we all love."

Vincent opened his eyes and regarded her.

"Catherine, I *have* changed. You have changed me into something sensual, a man so much more aware of sexual tensions, that a whole new dimension has opened up for me – a sixth sense, almost."

He pulled her onto his lap and gave her a deep kiss that left them both gasping for air. They sat wrapped in each other's arms until the meal signal sounded over the pipes. They groaned in unison.

"Why does food always trump sex," Catherine whispered, her stomach now rumbling with the thought of dinner.

Vincent chuckled. "Nature has decreed what is most important. Food before procreation. We'd better get dressed."

They padded into their chamber and Catherine dried herself quickly. Then she remembered something.

"Vincent, I'd like to take you to come with me to the brownstone tomorrow, if you can. Do you think Kanin, Cullen and Mouse could come with us to look at the basement entrance and such?"

"I'll ask Father before dinner, Catherine. But I don't think the work roster is over-full at present. A couple of hours will not inconvenience us."

They dressed quickly and joined the Tunnel community in the dining room. A truly wonderful smell greeted Catherine's nose as she lined up for William's special. She ladled a thick goulash into a bowl, put a huge dollop of sour cream on top of it and grabbed a couple of rolls. She and Vincent picked a seat next to Father for a change. He smiled at them as they tucked into the food. Vincent had a bowl the size of a soup tureen and was eating like it was his last meal. Father distracted her from this amazing sight.

"Catherine," he remarked. "You seem to like our food. It must be different to what you are used to."

"Oh Father, it is," Catherine agreed. "I have never had such wonderful stews and soups – to say nothing of the porridge, pancakes, bread, desserts, sandwiches, muffins and cookies. I am sure I would resemble William in shape if I was allowed more of it."

"So would we all, Catherine," Father laughed. "But we are careful about the amount we eat, in proportion to the work we do. I for instance, eat less because it is only my brain working, most of the time. Vincent now, is our strongman. He needs more than any of us."

"And William?" asked Catherine.

"Ah, well he has the odious job of sampling the ingredients, as well as the final product, to make sure it all meets his standards."

Catherine laughed. "Well, I for one would never deny William the right to sample as much as he wishes. I have never felt as hungry as I have since coming below. It must be the air."

"More likely, Air on the G-string," quipped William, who had come up behind them. There were a few giggles from those around them who had caught the jibe. The cook had delighted in jokes, ever since he learned that Vincent and Catherine listened to concerts below the park.

Catherine blushed and focused on her meal.

"William," moaned Vincent, between slurps. "Are you still belabouring those musical allusions. They're as flat and dead as your griddle at midnight."

"Vincent," boomed William, "don't tell me what is flat and dead at midnight. I've seen what covers your chamber door often – day and night. Your Cat needs no hot tin roof, I'll warrant."

"William," Catherine admonished him. "This Cat is fast asleep at midnight – because this big one next to me is the best sleeping pill I know. But, I presume you did not come over here to discuss our love life."

William chuckled.

"Right you are Catherine. I need to know if you and Vincent have set a date for your Joining Ceremony."

Vincent looked up.

"We have William. It will be on September 27th – Catherine's birthday, if that is enough time for you to assemble the necessities."

"Oh, I think I can manage that – just. Do you have any preferences, or should I just use my imagination?"

Catherine looked up at the big man. "William, I am no cook, as Vincent will attest – and my knowledge of catering is even less. You are welcome to do whatever you wish. I'm sure we'll love it. Just let me know if you need any special supplies and I'll make sure you get them.

"But I do want this reception to be modest, William – just for the Tunnel community, please. You are my new family and I want this day to be for us alone. Okay?"

"As you wish, Catherine. It shall be done." William left them with a mischievous smile on his face, which would have given Catherine pause had she seen it. Vincent had and knew that whatever William planned would not be simple. It was not his way. He said nothing, but when he looked at Catherine, she had a set to her jaw which he had come to recognize as trouble, if ignored.

"Catherine, you look ... determined."

"Vincent, I want our joining reception to be an intimate affair – just this community, our family. I'm not ready yet to introduce any of my friends down here. I want to get my own plans underway first – and they will take a little more time to be done properly. With any luck, we will be able to invite them into the brownstone for a ceremony of a different kind next year. That's my wish. I want to induct them quietly – not in the midst of a wedding party. Do you think you could get Devin and Charles back here in time?"

"I'll write to him, Catherine. One can never be sure of anything where Devin is concerned."

They were now eating their dessert, a wonderful lemon cupcake with just a hint of nutmeg. Catherine could easily have eaten two or even three – but one was the limit. She sighed and yawned massively.

"Vincent, I feel as if I have run the marathon today. Let's have a quiet evening together, reading - or whatever."

"*Whatever*, you wish, Catherine."

They rose and went back to their Chamber. Catherine stripped off her clothes and crawled into bed sighing.

"Who would have thought that sorting boxes of fabric would be so tiring."

Vincent slid under the covers and lay next to her. She immediately put her head in his lap and he began to stroke her hair. The feel of it through his fingers so relaxing, he began to follow Catherine into a nap. Then she suddenly stirred and looked up at him.

"Vincent, our joining ceremony must be special. I want the actual ceremony to be somewhere we love. I've thought of the Mirror Pool or the Chamber of the Falls, but they're too remote - or difficult. The Great Hall is too big. I think I'd like it to be here, in your ... our ... chamber. I want it intimate – you, me, Father, Peter, Devin, Charles and Mary, a few others. Then we can have a party in the dining hall or someplace. Whatever William thinks appropriate. What do you think?"

Vincent looked around their chamber, thinking that it was a good thing the expansion work would be done next week while Catherine was above. The extra room would allow him to clear a big enough space for their guests – and the inevitable decorations.

"I think it can be done, Catherine. Leave the details to me. I'll work them out while you're above next week."

Catherine sighed. "Thank you Vincent." She turned towards him. "And now for some of that *whatever*, Vincent."

She slid her hand over to where his manhood bulged under the covers and began to massage it.

Vincent growled and looked down at her, still a little embarrassed at this automatic response. Their bond indicated that Catherine found the sound erotic. She was smiling up at him and moved to plant a kiss on the peak in the sheets. It was beautiful agony – and he both wanted it to continue – and wanted relief.

"Catherine ... "

She rose from his lap and looked at him, planting a kiss on his lips that made him quiver. They began slow foreplay into the joining they most enjoyed. Vincent felt that their lovemaking was deepening, becoming richer, now that their initial passion had to some extent abated.

He also realized that he was now feeling Catherine's sense of himself inside her, his swelling manhood filling her, touching her vaginal walls, his hands on her breasts, as if those sensations were his. He looked in her eyes and realized that she was also feeling his sensations – his penis moving along her slick passage, his joy at the tactile sensations she aroused as she stroked his fur with her hands.

He hugged her closer to him, as if he could merge their skins. She sighed into his chest and teased one of his nipples. He felt her joy now, and his own reactions, as if they were one.

They released themselves to sensation together. Their climax was beautiful, multi-layered now – a full banquet of sensations that centred where they joined, but spread out in concentric circles. They both gasped as their passion soared and reached its peak, their nerves singing between them, their song a single paean to love.

Vincent's almost-silent roar and Catherine's moan of happiness rose to the stone walls and surrounded them.

He sighed and hugged her to him as she wrapped her legs around him. Her pressure on his body still made him tingle and he wondered if that would ever change. He found he liked these deeper, slower, somehow just as passionate sessions – although he had no objection to the furious sessions either. Catherine could get him aroused with very little effort – and he, he realized with a shock. Another revelation!

Now that he considered it, something else was evident, and a new level of wonder raced through him.

Catherine looked up at him, a question in her eyes. She had sensed something unusual. He looked at her and smiled, a little ruefully. He hugged her to him and whispered in one delightful ear.

“Catherine my love, some time over the past day or so – you have become pregnant.”

He felt her stiffen in his arms, then relax. He looked at her so see her eyes shining.

“Vincent, are you sure? How can you know that?”

“I am sure – but I can’t tell you how I know. It’s a sense I’ve always had. I just know – I think it may be related to my sense of smell – but I’m never wrong. You won’t need a test. In a few weeks, I’ll be able to tell you whether it’s a boy or girl – and if the fetus is healthy. I won’t be able to tell you the colour of its eyes or who it will resemble – just that it will come into this world loved.”

Catherine threw her arms around his neck and hugged him so tightly, he found himself short of air.

“Vincent, you are amazing. Yes, this child will be loved by both of us. You will make a wonderful father.”

She planted a kiss on his lips that made him shiver down his length, as his purr grew to an almost-growl. She turned her back to him, spooned her bottom into his pelvis. He hugged her to him. Now in their favourite position, Catherine quickly went to sleep. The feel of her descent into oblivion was too much for him. He gave up and followed her. His last thought was that he had never had as many full nights of sleep as he had since they began their lovemaking.

## Chapter 7

Vincent and Catherine awakened together, their bond seeming to make it almost inevitable now. They were becoming one, in more ways than either had imagined.

For her part, Catherine, noticed that she was becoming more aware of scents. She had always loved the smell of Rebecca’s paraffin and tallow candles, most of which, if scented at all, were of the herbs she sometimes embedded in them. The wax smell permeated everything. The slight pall from the candle smoke acted like the soft lens used in old movies to flatter the female star. It was magical.

She could also smell leather – in book bindings, Vincent’s clothes, her boots. Then there was the soft soap smell of their laundered sheets, the herbal bath soap on their skins and hair, the sawdust on the floor of the smallest room. Underlying all of these things was the cold rock smell of the chamber walls and tunnels themselves, the old carpet on the chamber floor. She fancied she could even smell William’s kitchen, but maybe that was just a memory.

Was she noticing these things because she had now spent several days here, or was her bond with Vincent – and their intimacy - somehow heightening her sense of smell? She realized she had felt some of his delight at her scent when they made love.

She found the depth of scents below fascinating because she had never really noticed them before. She wondered if she would be able to discriminate above, where so many scents vied for attention.

She wondered how many others of her senses would improve with the strong connection to her big, wonderful lover.

Vincent was more aware of the woman he loved than ever before. He could sense her emotional state through the bond, of course, but he also enjoyed her many scents, the sound of her breathing, her textures and temperatures – and her green eyes, which changed colour with her moods.

He could also smell the residue of their lovemaking. He put his arms around her as she awoke and turned into his embrace and looked in her eyes. He nuzzled one of her ears. She sighed in absolute contentment.

He moved away far enough to plant a kiss on her mouth, which she deepened until he gasped from arousal, as well as lack of oxygen. She pushed him down onto his back and gave him a thorough face and chest massage, before easing him into her slowly, so slowly he groaned in anticipation. He arched his hips and Catherine put her hands under his buttocks, arching herself over him like the prow of a sailing ship. She could feel that this sight



was too much for him. He cupped her breasts and she reached a little further back to stroke his balls. They both gasped as a sensual climax carried then on a warm wave that seemed to hold them suspended for eons, before letting them down as gently as a feather on a still day.

She collapsed on top of him and put her arms behind him, closing her legs to trap him inside her a while longer. She sighed. "I guess I'd better tell Annabelle to save some of those maternity clothes for me after all."

"And I'd better tell Cullen to find a cradle," Vincent mused. "But not yet, my love. Let's keep this a secret for a while longer."

"You're right, Vincent. I want to savour the joy of this with you for a while – and I don't want anyone fussing over me – not even you. We can announce it at our Joining. What do you think?"

"Catherine, that would be an ideal time. All our family will be on hand and it will only need to be said once. By that time, I should be able to sense more too."

"Vincent, I want a bath. It must be getting near breakfast time,"

"Oh, there is plenty of time yet, my love. But a bath would be most welcome."

He picked her up, scrambled off the bed and carried her into the bath chamber, leaving her just long enough to put up the privacy towel. Catherine had found the bristle brush and was waving it at him. He sighed and planted himself near to her. She immediately began to brush water along his arms and legs. He found the latter did not want to support him and turned so he could sit on the step below her. She brushed his back and everywhere she could reach, including his mane, and then moved to stand in front of him.

"Come over to the ramp, Vincent."

He did so and lay down on it as she directed. She used to brush to wash his chest arms and legs, then carefully cleaned around his manhood, putting just a little soap to work. She left him there purring, while she did her own ablutions, and then returned to lay atop him, keeping the brush close by.

"Vincent, you are the most gracious cat I have ever brushed. Your purr makes me wish I could do more to show my appreciation. Instead I can only show you this way." She kissed his mouth and wrapped her tongue around his. Vincent groaned.

"And this way." She moved to nuzzle one ear, and then the other. Vincent gasped.

"And this way" She shifted to the side and sank her face onto his manhood, cupped his testicles with both hands as she nuzzled his penis. Vincent growled.

Vincent thought he would burst with desire. His penis was now pointed upwards and his back was arched in arousal. Then Catherine had another idea. She picked up the brush began to gently stroke around his testicles and then slowly up his column with the brush, which she had kept close by. He felt as if light fire was running up him and the sensation was so overwhelmingly that he growled in ecstasy, his legs shuddering in reaction.

"Catherine..." he ground out between gasps. He had to take action.

He captured her waist, swung her around onto the ramp and kneeled over her, sinking down quickly to get his penis inside her before he exploded. He put his arms behind her to keep her off the hard stone, then pulled her up to his hips. She wrapped her legs around him, put her arms around his neck. The brush was resting against his neck. He gave a massive shudder.

They climaxed in such glorious near-pain that Vincent's roar of release was almost a squeak. He felt her satisfaction and lifted her onto his lap so that he could sit on the side of the pool. He bent his head over her shoulder, nuzzled it, completely spent. And the day had not yet started! He was speechless again.

"Oh Vincent," Catherine mumbled. "You are incredible. The sensations I feel – they defy words. I must get another of these brushes. We could brush each other, together. But maybe we'd better not do it where we might drown."

Vincent found his voice, lurking somewhere around his toes. It sounded creaky and hoarse to his ears.

"Catherine, that brush should come with a warning about the dangers of addiction. Two of them might mean we'll never be able to do anything else and become mere slaves to the pig bristle."

Catherine giggled into his chest.

"So be it, Vincent. I can't think of a better way to pass the time."

Vincent roused himself, picked up the bar of soap and carried Catherine to the centre of the pool, dunking her and then sitting down himself, too relaxed to do more than clean himself by hand. She did the same as she sat next to him, almost floating, then turned and ran her hands over his chest fur.

"Vincent, I love the feel of you. I can't believe no one has tried to rub their hands over your chest or put their fingers through your hair."

Vincent sighed. "Catherine, no one but you ever sees my pelt except in the swimming pool. Our child will be the first to give you competition in that regard."

"Yes, I can imagine that a warm, furry chest would do wonders for putting a baby to sleep. It certainly works for me," Catherine whispered.

"And soon we'll be able to put that theory to the test."

Vincent said nothing to that. A new chapter had opened in his life and, like a new book, he was uncertain exactly what he would discover. Dylan Thomas seemed to have the right words.

'The waters of the heart' did indeed push his tide. Catherine's love washed over him and he sank into it gratefully, happily, wanting nothing more.

He gathered Catherine in his arms and dozed with her 'where no sun shines', under a mellow gleam that seemed to permeate everything. That gleam, he knew, was more than the stained glass window above them. It the light of love.

END