

# Worlds Upon Worlds

## The Storyteller

by Angie

*" ..(It) is a stern, melancholy country ... indescribably silent and lonesome.."*

- Washington Irving

Vincent was reading quietly in his chamber, at his favourite time of the night - those wee hours when the tunnel residents were asleep, the trains above were waiting for dawn, and the only disturbance was the quiet half-hourly "all okay" signals of the sentries. He could be sure not to be interrupted.

He was reading *Tales of the Alhambra*, by Washington Irving, stunned again at how a man that was best known for stories like the *Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, could have so beautifully captured the essence of the 14th century Moorish palace he visited in 1829. The man had become enamoured of Spain, done research in the noble libraries of his day, yet The Alhambra was a remnant of another world. So much so that it apparently oozed legends from every stone. Many years after his book was published (1832), Irving became Ambassador to Spain (1842 to 1846).

But, Irving was a native New Yorker, and thus held a special place in Vincent's heart. Residents of his city were far greater thinkers and explorers than others would credit. After all, those who visited this great city seldom left unchanged, if they left at all. Irving had even written a history, under the pseudonym 'Knickerbocker' in 1809. It had gained considerable renown. Sir Walter Scott had described it as a 'jocose history'. For a man in his 20s, it was a considerable accomplishment – and it was definitely tongue-in-cheek, making fun of the early Dutch settlers

There were many images Vincent loved in *'Tales of the Alhambra'*, but one made his heart sing ...

*"Such is the Alhambra - a Moslem pile in a Christian land, and Oriental palace admidst the Gothic edifices of the West, an elegant memento of a brave, intelligent, and graceful people who conquered, ruled and passed away."*

Vincent could not help but compare his own world with that seen by Irving, and wondered, not for the first time, what the famous man would have thought of the tunnel world, had he known about it when he wrote *'A History of New York from the Beginning of the World to the End of the Dutch Dynasty, by Diedrich Knickerbocker'* (1809).

Here too, they were a people apart, separated from the rest of humankind by creed and distance, although commerce did take place, as it had even in Moorish Spain and early New York.

The Alhambra's rich tapestry of tales and histories was not unlike the tunnel world either, although taking place over centuries, rather than the mere handful of decades his own world could boast.

Yet, the stories which Irving expounded in the book could have happened anywhere – and in fact, the tunnel world had them too.

As he thought about it, Vincent realized that no one had written down the stories of his world, at least not officially with the thought of future generations. Oh, of course, everyone knew his own story, a baby cast out in an alley on the coldest night of the year, and that of many other residents, but what of the places here below? Surely they deserved a place in recorded history too? And of course, they were known only because of the people who lived in the tunnels. If others had known them before, they had not recorded them.

The more Vincent thought about it, the more he wanted to be the one to try and create a history of the place he called home – just as the Moors had of The Alhambra, and Irving had of New York. Being caught up in history, and now gone, gave Irving's book a poignancy, of course, but some of their own places were not without stories.

He cast his mind back to the early days, the ones when the tunnel community consisted of Father, John Pater, Pascal Sr, Winslow's father, Narcissa, Anna and Grace. There were others, but some had left for one reason or another – or died, no few of those.

Winslow's father, Warnick, had been a large man. His origin was unknown, but he had arrived in the tunnels with Narcissa and the others. Vincent suspected that some of the tales Warnick told were hers, since she seemed to know a great deal, although how she knew them was a puzzle. Narcissa seemed to listen to the stones, or people perhaps, or her various oracles, but to Vincent they had the ring of truth and, in fact, no one ever questioned their veracity.

Nevertheless, Warnick had been a superb teller of tales and had kept Vincent, Devin, Winslow, and others, spellbound with his tales of the places below. He also swore the tales were all true. Father had never said otherwise, but had declined to elaborate. There were, he said, many tales told about every community; theirs was no different. Warnick's tales, as did the best, often served as moral lessons and warnings too – especially to irrepressible children. Father no doubt was glad of that.

Warnick, of course, had died some time ago, even before Devin had left. Winslow had given his life years ago. Therefore, Vincent felt that he was almost the only one, other than Father and Pascal, who had been much younger, who had been present to hear and remember all the tales as originally told. And who else but he had the time or inclination to record them before they were lost forever?

Vincent found a blank journal with a few pages scribbled on, that he had found somewhere above, and ripped out the used leafs. He thought a while and then decided on a title. Yes, that was what it had to be, he decided and smiled to himself. He regarded the first blank page opposite the cover, the obvious place for a title, but he hesitated, pondering his plan.

How interesting that Warnick's last name was the same as the first of that earlier historian. Irving had been named after George Washington, and had been introduced to the great man as a child (and also created a painting of that meeting, Vincent recalled). Perhaps it was fortuitous coincidence. Warnick had loved '*Knickerbocker's History*', claimed to have carried around with him in those early days, to read in daylight when he could, on some park bench.

Vincent reached for the tattered hardcover that rested respectfully next to '*Tales of the Alhambra*'. He opened it and regarded the carefully written name 'Warnick Washington' on the inside cover, and a date, '1930'.

Where to begin? Perhaps he should write this as if someone were visiting their world for the first time. But not all the current passages were known to the tunnel community from the start. The first explorers, the founders of their community, had come a different way, so he must tell the tale as Warnick had done, from the beginning.

Vincent considered how he could present the story, really a series of stories. Could he record them just as Warnick had told them? Should he? His memory was very good, but he quailed at the thought of trying to render the big black man's resonant voice, with its slight southern accent, into print. Should he borrow the mantle of Rudyard Kipling, and begin his tales "*Oh Dearly Beloved*"? That seemed too indulgent, to say nothing of disrespectful.

Then he remembered how he had told the children of the story of Catherine's abduction by Paracelsus. Yes, that would make a good beginning.

He would use Warnick's words as closely as he could, but it would be his own voice which gave them meaning, and it would be told in the third person. That was best.

Under the title, Vincent thought it appropriate to use a quote from '*Knickerbocker's History*', an ironic statement (as were so many in the book), but nevertheless accurate for their community as well. He regarded the blank page and sighed. Now he must begin. He could not pause any longer. He began to write.

## **'World Upon Worlds - A Special History of the World Below**

(as told to Vincent Wells and others by Warnick Washington').

*"The first source of right by which property is acquired in a country is discovery."*

### **Tale 1**

#### The Beginning

*We must never forget what has happened or why, so that the story will live always, so that one day, you can tell your own children.*

A long time ago, before our world existed, a small group of people were huddled around a fire deep in Central Park, in a place almost surrounded by a high rocky outcrop. They were relatively protected from the worst of the howling winds and rain of autumn, but their refuge was still open to the sky.

There were a number of stony places in Central Park, if one knew where to look. Anna explained. The rock was left when the last of the glaciers retreated, 12,000 years previously. They were called 'erratics'. A suitable name also for they who sheltered under them, Warnick thought to himself.

No one bothered them, not even the park police, because they were quiet and the place secluded and almost forgotten. Park goers knew enough not to be adventurous and stayed to well-trafficked areas, especially at night.

They were seven of them in those days.

John and Anna were married, and their clothes while worn, had once been good. John wore oxfords, while Anna wore good but battered leather boots under her long wool skirt and heavy coat with its fur collar. John was a bit taciturn, but Anna was a warm, friendly woman who never hesitated to help or do what needed to be done in their little camp.

Pascal (Sr) was a short man, almost bald. He wore a pea jacket with metal buttons whose shine had long gone, baggy pants and heavy shoes. A former seaman, perhaps, Warnick guessed. New York had many who had given up the maritime life, but could not make a living on land.

Grace was a plain woman who wore trousers under her long skirts and a man's coat. She spoke plainly too, a woman with a practical sense. She often found food when the rest of them failed to. She had found Jacob wandering around the docks one night and brought him back with her.

Jacob was the least tattered of all of them. He wore a good wool coat and carried a leather satchel, but his eyes told them all that the tragedy that had befallen him was recent. They did not pry. He did tell them he was a doctor, something that astonished them. He proved to be a good man when anyone ailed, and with Narcissa, served them well and without complaint.

Narcissa was a bulky black woman, not very tall. She wore a bright headscarf and sash belt where she tied bags of various kinds. Her clothing was unmatched, colourful, but warm and wool, obviously found piecemeal. Her voice had the lilt of the Caribbean. Of all of them, she seemed least bothered by their circumstances and she often told them that they would do better one day. She never complained and often cooked their simple meal in the soup kettle Warnick had found some weeks previously behind a restaurant. It was dented but whole.

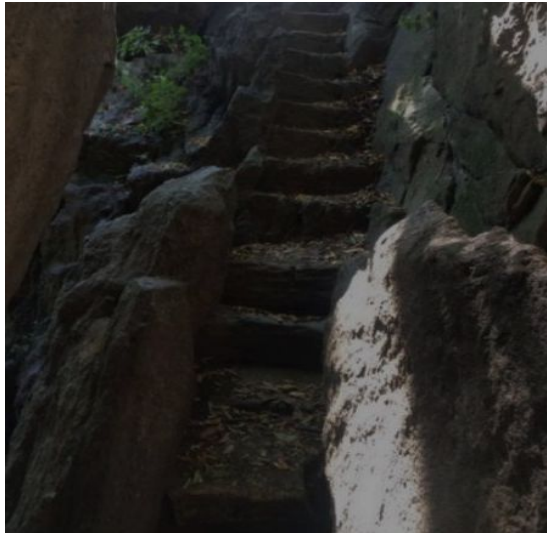
He, Warnick, a black man, had been a labourer and handyman, but had finished high school and loved to read. He found few jobs and ended up on the street, unable to afford an apartment. He had wandered the park for many days before finding their small group, back in the spring. They welcomed him and he turned his hand and strength to whatever he could. He had built their fire pit from rocks in the area.

No one revealed much about themselves. They had come together by accident mostly, but they were not derelicts. All had some education, some quite a lot of it. The fact couldn't be hidden when they talked. How they had come to be 'living rough' was something none told. It didn't matter.

So they sat around their careful fire, all of them, warm on front but now feeling the chill of the autumn night on their backs. Winter was coming and they were concerned about surviving it. It would be cold, very cold, as only New York could boast, and damp with it. They worried about keeping themselves warm enough in their retreat, which for all its advantages, was still outside. They needed to find a place less open to the elements – but no one had a suggestion as to where to go. They did not wish to take their chances with the motley collection of ruffians who lived under bridges. They were a good team and knew they stood a better chance of survival together.

They had eyed the set of little stone stairs going down below ground more than once. Warnick had been down to look and reported it a dead end, and the bottom landing too small to accommodate them and their fire. It was just a smaller version of where they were, still exposed to whatever fell from

the sky. Anna had called the place '*The Ramble*', and remarked that there had been an underground cave at the end of it, but the City had bricked it up many years ago because some men had used its relative isolation to accost women.



Narcissa had nodded at the information, then bade them wait a little while. She would lead them to a place, a special place, where they would be warm and safe. No one questioned her further, already knowing that she kept her own counsel and did not reveal more than she must.

In the meantime, the cooler nights had seen them collecting discarded blankets and cushions, and wearing more layers of heavy clothing and keeping their feet well padded in old but sturdy shoes and boots they had found. They even wore fingerless gloves, which Anna had adapted from ones discarded. Few had two that matched, but they were warm and left their fingers free to do the small jobs – and read books if they wished. John and Warnick were seldom without one. John's seemed to be scientific in nature. He kept them in a large burlap sack under an overhang. Warnick's only books was his old copy of *Knickerbocker's History*.

They had found a charity that gave away old sleeping bags, and they kept all these treasures protected from the weather in the small, shallow overhang. They had hoarded food that would keep well – dried vegetables and fruit, dented canned foods (carefully examined by John to make sure the seal was intact) and even some vegetables not too far past their prime to eat. What could be cooked went into their soup kettle, and was kept going, feeding them a slightly different meal every day, extended with some clean water from a nearby spring. They had also collected old backpacks, dented tin cups and a number of utensils. Nothing valuable or large, but all essential to their life, to survival.

They were all in reasonable health, fortunately, but spoke little. Silence was not unwelcome. They all had their own thoughts. They sat as close to each other as they could, to keep warm, until it was time to sleep, then they laid their sleeping back close together under the overhang.

Then one evening, as they sat mute around the fire, Narcissa arrived, as she often did, quietly and seemingly out of nowhere. She often left them for a day or two, but always returned, usually with something interesting.

"You must pack now. Quickly. It is time." She lit a lantern no one had seen before.

They did not hesitate and quickly bundled up everything. The nights were now quite chilly and the mornings often brought frost. They put out their fire and spread out the ashes to cool.

"You will need your hands. Carry nothing in them," Narcissa told them, so they filled their backpacks and tied their cups and utensils and tools to the outside, or crammed them in pockets. Anna took charge of the cooking kettle and what food they had left and put it into a large striped bag, when put her arms through the handles. It looked unwieldy, but she tied a rope around it and then around her waist to stop it bouncing. John tied up the sack of books and attached it awkwardly to a backpack with their other belongings. Then each of them picked up firewood and kindling, as much as they could, and roped or stuffed it wherever it would fit, each helping others to get it into place on their packs.

"We look like tinkers," John commented wryly, but nothing rattled, everything being padded with blankets or sleeping bags. They had done that automatically, knowing too well how noise travelled at night and not wanting to attract attention.

Jacob saw what the rest were doing and managed to get his arms through the handles of his satchel but then struggled to get his sleeping bag pulled in next to his body from the top. Warnick helped him, draping what he could over the top of the satchel, even fitting in some firewood. He received a soft 'thank-you' in response.

Perhaps to no one's surprise, Narcissa pointed to The *Ramble*.

"This we will use carefully," she had explained of the lantern. "The way is long in the deep dark. We will need it there."

She turned the flame down, so low it did not cast any light, but was enough to show them where she was. Fortunately, there was a moon, so some white eerie light did illuminate the uneven stone steps that were almost hidden by the growth on one side. The other side was a rock cliff.

So they carefully trod behind her; dark, bulky shapes that the moon did not illuminate. They braced themselves against the stone wall and the sound of their careful shuffling was the only comfort. They might have been descending into hell, Warnick thought.

They reached the bottom and halted behind Narcissa, trying not to bump each other in the small dark bowl topped by a velvet sky and the crescent moon.

Narcissa whispered for them to wait, and moved away. they soon lost sight of her, even the lantern, but they heard her, mumbling, and saw a candle lit. Then suddenly they felt a blast of less chilly air and they sensed something had changed. A smell of wet stone wafted over them, yet there had been no rain for days. The candle had been extinguished.

Narcissa spoke, her stage whisper sounding uncommonly loud in that enclosed place. "Come."

Her lantern, dim as it was, let everyone see a dark hole in the rock, one everyone knew had not been there before. They said nothing however, trusting to their guide, and keeping their curiosity in check.

"Follow closely and do not linger. Do not look back."

Warnick, always the one to comment, if only soto voce (so like his son later), hesitated at the entry, being last in line. He found it difficult to cross the threshold into the unknown.

"How does she know this is the way? I hope she knows what she's doing," he grumbled to himself, not at all liking the dark hole in front of them. He almost turned to take one last look behind, as if they were leaving that world forever, but harked Narcissa's warning and merely grunted.

With a sigh, he followed the rest and the dim light of Narcissa's lantern, now some way ahead. He hurried to catch up. Jacob was in front of him and had stopped to make sure he caught up. Warnick touched his arm, not trusting himself to speak, and they moved on.

The way was indeed long. They went through caverns, some of which smelled damp, past tunnels and holes smelling of worse things. They must be near the main sewers, Warnick guessed. Sometimes Warnick's hand felt brick, or stone, even concrete. He guessed they were still under the Park since they seemed to get heading generally north. Their camping space had been nearer the south end.

For some time the way seemed relatively level, then it began to descend and then to twist and turn. Warnick quickly lost all sense of direction. There was no sound except from the group, the occasional shuffle on an uneven patch of floor. Every so often they would near an opening and dry, stale air blew over them. It was warmer in this underworld and the stone under their feet was dry. There were no smells but that of old rock, dust and sometimes wet rock, for sometimes it ran down the walls, shocking Warnick, who walked near enough to touch it. The floors seemed to be sand, occasionally stone. How had Narcissa known about this ... underworld?

Then they came to signs of civilization, smaller brick-lined passages, and long curved ceiling tunnels, thick with dust, with ragged piles of old broken bricks, and miracle of miracles to their dark-adapted eyes, occasionally with a swinging light bulb, still lit, albeit dimly.

Service tunnels for the subway perhaps, Warnick decided. There was no sound of trains, as it must be still the middle of the night. What night, though, Warnick had no idea. He had lost track of the days long ago, and frankly did not care to know. Each day was just another struggle. Only his book kept him sane and often made him chuckle when he found time to read a page or two in daylight.

At least the air was moving, and just old and stale, he reflected, and their relatively swift pace meant he was actually feeling warm for the first time in many days.

Suddenly, Jacob in front of him stopped and Warnick almost barrelled into him. He peered around and saw that Narcissa stood at a railing. She had opened the lantern to show them what was before them. It was a spiral metal staircase, he realized, attached to the roof of the small rock chamber in which they stood. There was nowhere else to go.

The staircase, when he reached it, seemed to go down forever. He could see Narcissa far below and hear the clumps of everyone's heavy shoes on the metal steps. The whole thing seemed almost too fragile, and it certainly creaked and shook a little under their collective weight. But it held and it was the only way to wherever they were going, he was sure.

Warnick moved a little quicker, anxious to be off the thing, in case it had rusted in places. He held onto the railing on both sides and took deep breaths. He had always hated staircases he could see through, and this one seemed interminable. He was grateful for the dark, although there was some dim light from the walls.

'Phosphorescence', he heard John mutter, beneath him somewhere. The word echoed for a long time. Narcissa hissed a warning and there was no more comment.

They passed a few landings, and what were probably other tunnel openings, forcing Warnick to move carefully until he found the railing again. They could not be completely silent on this quivering metal thing and Warnick felt very alone, even though he could hear the others, below him.

What if someone tripped? Would anyone know until it was too late? The thought made him slow down, but a curve later, he saw Jacob looking up at him, and was amazed to realize there was some light now. Oh joy, another light bulb hung from a wall nearby. He wanted to stay where this remnant of civilization brightened the dark world. He fancied he could even feel the heat from the dim thing. But the rest of the group was getting distant. He could not linger.

He nodded at Jacob, who took a deep breath and continued. The staircase was obviously old and very dusty, but the railings were still painted and not rough. The stairs themselves were ornate, he saw now, in the light from another bulb, and the clanging of their shoes made a cacophony that seemed to build in the shaft, getting louder and louder.

"Who put this here?" he muttered to himself.

Narcissa heard him from the front of their plodding, obviously now somewhat tired group, and whispered loudly enough for all to hear.

"It was built long ago, when men put in pipes for steam, water, so they could get in and out. It is safe. Soon we come to the end. Then we go to a place, a good place."

"And how would she know that?" Warnick muttered, softly enough that she couldn't hear him. He shook his head, as if that would clear the sounds they were making on the staircase. It was hard to think over the racket.

He knew almost nothing about Narcissa. She had strange ways and they were grateful for her knowledge of herbs on occasion. She had found plants to improve their stews, settle upset stomachs, and for infusions to treat blisters and other minor injuries, helped by Jacob, who had a first aid kit in his satchel. Narcissa was not always with them when their soup kettle meals were ready, and she said nothing about where she went. Occasionally, she brought them welcome additions to their kettle, no one asked from where. They had all learned not to be squeamish. Food was food and necessary for life.

At last, the staircase did end, and they all stopped for a few minutes to let their legs adjust to flat ground again. Everyone was wobbly and several leaned against a nearby wall.

"We are almost there," Narcissa said approvingly. "Soon we can rest and sleep."

She moved on and they followed wearily, some distance down another rough tunnel, one that now was anything but silent. Above them somewhere, they could hear the subway trains.

It must be almost morning, Warnick realized, amazed. They had obviously travelled all night and into morning, although he had no idea what time they had started. What was the date, anyhow? He thought back as he trudged wearily, still bringing up the rear. He had seen Halloween decorations here and there in the shop windows. Halloween! Was that what last night had been? He didn't want to think about what that meant, that Narcissa had somehow tapped into earlier at the bottom of The Ramble - but on the other hand, he would not be at all surprised if she had. He decided he didn't care. They had escaped another cold, frosty morning, and that was all that mattered.

His legs still felt like rubber after all those stairs, and he could tell the others were dragging their feet as well. Jacob, the newcomer, was breathing heavily. He would be unused to this much exercise, Warnick guessed. The rest of them walked a great deal, scavenging, but they had now been walking for many hours, up and down, and mostly without being able to see anything - or have any sense of how far they had to go. They had not eaten for some while either. The not knowing where they were going was frightening, something they were unused to. The city did not have such mysteries. He had



no idea where they were in relation to the world they had left. He hoped they could get back to it more easily than this tortured route.

Finally, the tunnel made a turn and Narcissa led them into an echoing darkness. She turned up the lantern to illuminate a large cavern. It was oddly-shaped, on at least two levels, but the walls were smooth, like melted wax. Some underground river had carved it long ago, Warnick was sure. This might have been a whirlpool once. He had read about such places – but never thought to find one under New York. He had however, read of one near New York, a whirlpool that captured an early Dutch sailing ship and spun it about so much that the men on it were rendered senseless until they miraculously beached on the shore of Long Island.

Narcissa broke the silence. “Here we stay for now. It will be our meeting place, to cook and to sleep for tonight. There are other caverns nearby, smaller, which we can use. There is water - I can smell it. We can live here.”

“And how will we live? We will need to go back above to find food. It is such a long way. How can we?” John asked petulantly, his voice cracked and breathless.

“The way we came is only one way, but that is now closed to us now. There are others, one into the park, far from where we were living, but not so far from here. I will show you. Now you must sleep. There is much to do tomorrow.”

Rest! Warwick could hardly find the energy to unroll his sleeping bag. He eased himself into it, not even bothering to remove his shoes. He was feeling chilly now, shivering from the unaccustomed effort. He used his pack as a pillow and closed his eyes with a sigh. He heard the others making their own preparation noises, but was asleep before they finished.

He awakened to the smell of a fire and the sound of water bubbling in their pot. He was not the first awake. Narcissa was watching the kettle and mumbling something. Anna sat on the opposite side of the fire, slumped as if dozing, obviously still tired.

Warwick wrenched himself out of bed, groaned at the stiffness of his muscles, extracted his tin mug from a pocket in his pack, and crawled to the fire, which Narcissa had built into a dip in the floor. He held his mug out for some of the fragrant tea he could smell. She gave him a large pinch and nodded to him.

“It is dry here. We are lucky. This will be home. You will see.” She poured some water into his cup and sat back on her haunches.

“How did you know this was here?” Warnick couldn't resist asking as he sipped the tea, welcoming the warmth on his hands and feeling it travel down his insides.

Narcissa chuckled. “I listen to the talk of old men, under bridges, in soup kitchens. No one minds old black woman. Workmen always talk, talk. Sometimes they leave things.” She nodded at the lantern.

“Here, there are also spirits from long ago. They have been dead long time. But their memories of this place can be read in the bones.” She shook a bag attached to the belt around her waist and Warnick heard it rattle. He said nothing more. He didn't want to know more.

A short while later, the others rose one after another and each had a cup of tea. Narcissa put some dried fruit and beans into the the remaining water and then a few herbs and carefully broke up a celery stalk and carrot. From somewhere else, she produced a large soup bone and added it. The smell was now making stomachs rumble and she chuckled.

"This will take time to cook. Come, I will show you the water."

"And the way out?" John asked. Narcissa nodded. "It is not so far as yesterday. And easier to walk. There is time for all things now."

When they were all upright, albeit with some groans, Narcissa led them by narrow stone tunnels up and down, carrying the lantern blazing in front of her. There was a roaring that was getting closer, and in a short while, she moved out of sight around a bend. The rest followed and stood carefully on a wide ledge, their mouths hanging open at the view.

A huge waterfall was pouring down a cliff face some distance away, easily seen because of the light above it, a kind of opening from who knew where. The roar was deafening, for the water fell at least 100 feet to a rocky pool below.

"Is that our water supply?" John asked, sarcastically.

"It's beautiful," Anna added, frowning at her husband.

Narcissa chuckled. "It is. Behind me is a spring, running down the rock. Good, clean water. Enough for cooking. I can sense also that there is a hot spring, nearby. In the old days New York tapped such places to heat buildings. We may be able to bathe, if there is room. It is not much further."

"You've been here before!" Warnick blurted out, the realization hitting him hard.

Narcissa looked at him, and then the others, and nodded. "Yes. I have a place deeper, away, where I can cast my bones and make my medicines. You have been kind to a crazy old black woman, so I found this place and brought you here. There is much to see that even I do not know. I did not explore, but it is a good place, a safe place."

She led them along the ledge and up a small incline and along another passage, which also opened into an echoing, indistinct chamber. As she held up the lantern, Warnick could see that there was a lot of steam rising from a pool. It was very warm in here, stuffy almost, but there was also the sound of water running, so the pool must have a source and an outlet. The roar from the falls could still be heard.

There was a sigh from Jacob, who obviously desired a bath above all else. Warnick felt the same way. He couldn't remember the last time he had been able to have one. He had some soap, even an old towel, but they would need more, much more, to make a life here. He made a list in his head of what they would have to find above – old metal barrels, firewood, gas for the lantern, something to make more lanterns, perhaps wax for candles. And food. They would need that above all.

Narcissa turned to them and spoke quietly. "I will show other caves here, and then after we eat, I will lead you to the world above. We will mark the way.

"It will be night soon. We have all slept well. We must not go out in daylight, as we may be seen leaving. The door I show you must be kept closed, secret, perhaps guarded, if we are to be safe. We will find other ways that can be used in daylight. There are many such. So I have been told."

Pascal Sr had been looking around and tapping on the pipes with a stick. They were attached to walls, disappearing here and there, dusty, some rusty, unused. He spoke now.

"These pipes – they are from the old days. They go everywhere we have been. They could be useful."

Narcissa looked at him and smiled. "There is a place where all pipes meet I will show you later."

Pascal eyes were unfocused as he thought about the implications. John also seemed interested, rare for him. Warnick could not think of any use for old pipes, but declined to say so.

Warnick lost track of time in the darkness as Narcissa showed them the places she had found. Amazement seemed the order of the day (or was it night again?). There were many caverns, all different sizes, including one that was deeper and much larger. John eyed it speculatively, but it was of little interest to the others. They each picked out a smaller cave, close to the main chamber they had slept in, and moved their belongings into it. Privacy and safety were valuable commodities in their vagabond life, and they didn't hesitate to take advantage of it.

There were many other caves unused. Perhaps others would join them. They would need more people if they were to live here, Warnick realized. There was so much they would need to do, just to survive. It was warmer here than outside, but still chilly. Some heat would be needed. How were they to get that?

Then she led them to a place where it seemed every pipe under New York met. It was on several levels. There were many valves with large wheels to open and close them, large pipes, small ones, all making a spaghetti junction in a place that made Warnick's jaw sag. Pascal felt along some of the larger ones eagerly, carefully. Some were obviously hot. He tapped here and there and put his ear to others. He nodded to himself, obviously satisfied. He smiled as he looked around at the rest of them, who did not know what to make of the mass of pipes.

"I have an idea, one that will make our lives easier," he remarked. "I will need a helper, though."

Warnick offered immediately and Pascal nodded his gratitude.

They returned to the central cave, and sat down to eat the soup Narcissa had prepared. The chamber was warmer now, Warnick noticed. Perhaps heat was not so impossible in this place.

It was Jacob who spoke up about what was bothering all of them.

"This is a good, safe place, but it's a long way from the world above, where we must get our food and other things we need. How can we do this? How can we survive here, so far from that world?"

Narcissa nodded and spoke slowly. "You have taken from that world only what you needed, what you could carry or keep with you. Now you must take other things too, to make this place better, a place for everyone. There is much that world throws away, waiting. You know the places. Bring it all here. Tools, clothing, food, furniture ... so many things. You will make this place better. I will show you another place where there is much of use and a place to leave."

There was some conversation after that, each person telling of where they had seen this or that, even books, much else discarded by the world they had left. Warnick was encouraged. He too had seen much in alleys he could not use at that time. Now he would find it and bring it here. Yes, that was a good plan. It would take a long time, but this place was dry and safe and it had fresh water. It was better than anywhere he had been for a long time. He began to relax, not even realizing until then how tense he had been. He saw relief on the faces of his friends too. This thing could be done. They all knew it.

They put their cups into a bucket for washing later. There would have to be duties organized, Warnick realized, if they were to live together. They needed more buckets, something to sit on, something to cook on, basic supplies like soap, towels, more pots. And braziers to make some heat in the caves. And something to burn in them. There was good airflow here, because of the channels built for the pipes. They would not have to worry about fumes building up.

“Now I will show you a way out, then another hidden place where you can see what the world above throws away.”

She got up and led them through tunnels beyond the caves they had chosen, along more tunnels, and then up another stairway, this one a stone spiral, long, but not as long as the other. They emerged into a partially-lit tunnel of concrete and stone, and then Narcissa turned left and they were looking at a very heavy metal door. She went to a lever on the wall and pulled it. The door ground along the floor and into a slot in the wall revealing an old city park gate, rusty and padlocked. Beyond it was night, but a streetlight shone beyond what was obviously a culvert. It was the Park! They could smell green things and they all sighed. After so long underground, they welcomed that smell, even though it also meant rain and frost ... and cold.

“This is an old workman's gate. Not used now. You can fix the gate to be used, but appear locked. There is another lever outside to open this big door. A workman told of it.”

Warnick approached the metal gate and rattled it a little. It was solid, but a few chisel blows would sever the link just enough to free the latch, yet allow it to close solidly. The heavy chain would discourage the curious.

“Now I will take you to a better entrance, a place I heard had many things, long forgotten.”

She went back down the short corridor and turned left onto the main tunnel. They followed her down larger and larger tunnels, then to something Warnick had never expected to see – a freight elevator. It was dusty around it, no sign it had been used for a long time, and the door was rusting, but it moved when he yanked on it and opened with protesting screeches.

“Does it work?” Warnick asked.

“Yes. Goes to old warehouse basement, not used, boarded up from outside. But there are ways. You will make them. Come.”

They all crowded into the elevator and Warnick pushed the up button. There was a violent groan and then the elevator shuddered and moved slowly upwards. It stopped after a minute or so of creaky progress and Warnick yanked open the cage door. It was dim beyond, but their night-adjusted eyes saw some light seeping through a dirty window. The basement was not empty. They could see the silhouettes of old wardrobes, chairs, stacks of crumpled cardboard boxes. Not junk anymore, Warnick thought, amazed. This was stuff they could fix and use.

“How did it get here?” Warnick asked, of no one in particular.

John cackled. “It's obvious. This is what the world calls wastage. Items damaged in shipping, or from water or fire. Nothing that can be sold - and therefore worthless.”

Warnick gave a sniff and realized there was a slight burnt odour, and the place smelled damp too.

They walked around the basement, trying to see into boxes, touching this and that. They needed more lanterns and flashlights, Warnick reminded himself. His foot hit something and he reached down to find a dented Coleman lantern. He shook it. Empty of course, but it seemed intact. More wastage, he supposed. Nearby were some lumpy, musty-smelling bundles – old canvas tents, he guessed from their weight and shape – and smell, when he prodded them. There was no mistaking that! Then he spotted something more important – a Coleman stove with two burners, also battered. He picked it up, grunted at the weight, and carried it to the elevator. The others were also filling it with finds. He returned to the pile of equipment and found a rusty tool box with a broken lid. Carrying it to the dim

light of the window, he found a broken chisel and the head of a ballpean hammer, along with other things he couldn't identify without better light. There were some wood handles too, probably warped, but they would serve. He tied the toolbox shut with some rope he found and carried it to the elevator.

"A good start to our home-making," John commented, his voice loud in the silence. He whispered then, letting them know what he had found; chemicals, beakers, a Bunsen burner, a microscope; neatly in a wooden box, part of a set for children, apparently. He hoped for more. Jacob looked interested and moved to talk to him.

After that, no one said anything aloud, afraid of attracting attention. The place echoed somewhat, so they moved things carefully, as quietly as they could. They filled the elevator and then took it down, unloading everything into the tunnel, then returning for more. Pascal had found an old wood dolly with a bent axle. They piled as much on it as they dared, then hauled it using some thick rope Warnick found, to the spiral stone staircase. Warnick, Jacob and John, the largest of their group, picked up the heavier items and they wound their way back to the main cave. Pascal, Narcissa and Anna had returned with more by the time they had finished. Hours passed this way, and they were all very tired by the time the last item had been piled in the shadows of the cave where their cooking fire still smouldered.

Anna took the bucket to the water and filled it, returning with clean cups for all of them. They gratefully took more of the soup and sat back with tired sighs, sitting on the canvas tents Warnick had found; better than sitting on the cold floor.

"Tomorrow we must find food," Anna commented as they returned their cups to the bucket, too tired to think much.

Warnick nodded and produced the toolbox. "I'll fix the park gate so we can use that entrance."

"Tomorrow is soon enough," Narcissa told them. "We have eaten and we are all tired. Sleep now."

*And that dear friends, was the beginning of our world, this place we live and love.*

*There are more stories to tell, and you will hear them all in time.*