

# Always

By Jessica Rae



Mouse watched from the sidelines, as Winslow and Pascal helped other members of the Tunnel folk carry Father from the dusty tomb where the recent cave-in had trapped both the patriarch of the tunnels and Vincent.

“I have no words to thank you...” Father’s weak statement, upon realizing that both Catherine and Mouse had been influential in the rescue, still rang in the young man’s ear. Covered in the grey dust of the cave, he sat down on a protruding rock, fiddling with his fingers and the bits of plastic explosives still crumbling from his skin.

“Once there was Silence because Mouse makes gadget, then suddenly everyone happy when Mouse makes gadget.” Mouse mumbled to himself, picking up tiny rocks and dropping them to the floor of the tunnel. “Blow things up is okay when saving people but no experimenting, no, no.”

The passageway grew increasingly quieter as the gathered members followed the injured pair down the corridor toward the hospital chamber. The dust floated in shimmering dust through the air, making the surrounding atmosphere feel dry and barren. Mouse brushed a hand across his face, the rough grit from the rock dusty streaking across his cheeks. It felt like sandpaper on his hands.

“Mouse on his own again, must find water, wash dirt off, dirt in eye a bad thing, very bad.” He moved away from the scene of destruction, making his way through the narrow passage to a tunnel that would lead further into the depths of the earth.

He heard the waterfall long before he got there, its shouting voice a welcome balm to the feeling of aloneness that crept into his thoughts. Now that the crisis was over, the tunnel folk would resume their silence, forbidden to even speak to him because of his ‘stealing’

as they put it. They went up-top and brought things back and it was called 'foraging'. Mouse went up-top and suddenly it was 'stealing'.

He wasn't angry. He was simply hurt, and did not understand how he could do anything that would make the people that he considered family hate him so much that his presence no longer mattered. A glimmer of a tear appeared for a moment, and he stubbornly shook it away. Mouse didn't cry.

The stair-stepping rocks carried him further down the tunnel, where they opened into a beautiful cavern. The tumbling waterfall sounded much bigger than it actually was, as the sound bounced around the walls like a thousand drums. He dipped his hands into the water, watching the different shades of grey swirling through the bubbling surface, washing away the dust of the cavern. Rubbing carefully, he removed the bits of plastic explosives from under his fingernails and splashed the chilly water onto his face. Sitting back on his heels, Mouse gazed across the waterway, his eyes unseeing among the beauty around him. His chest ached. It would be a long month.

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"Easy, Father, you hit your head quite badly." Vincent wiped at the still oozing injury, while Winslow unrolled bandages nearby.

"You should have seen Mouse," Winslow was telling the older man eagerly. "He was like a bulldog. He wasn't going to stop until he got you guys out. Knew about the tunnel that we were able to get through to you both with. We were following the old tunnel maps, and he charged in there and insisted there was another way. Even though he knew we didn't trust him, he was determined to try, even on his own. Don't know how he knew about that tunnel. Wasn't on the map, but he knew."

Father held up one hand, to still the man's recount of the events, his eyes searching for Vincent. "Where is Mouse now?"

Vincent took the older man's hand in both of his own and spoke softly. "He did not come to the hospital chamber with us. Would you like someone to find him?"

The older man nodded silently, swallowing weakly, a small cough escaping his lips.

"Rest now," Vincent whispered, patting the hand he held. "Someone will go get him." Vincent turned to look over his shoulder toward the small crowd of worried tunnel folk.

"I'll go!" Jamie stepped forward, concern for both Father and Vincent evident in her face. Her strong gaze bore ill-will toward anyone denying her the honor of going to find her friend. Vincent nodded once, and she turned, slipping through the crowd.

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Catherine stood next to Vincent, aware that the eyes of the residents were on her, realizing that not many had known of her existence until now. She remembered Mouse's first conversation with her.... *"Express route to the deepest chamber of all, no place for a top sider."*

No place for a top sider.

She rested her head against Vincent's shoulder, as they watched the injured patriarch sleep. Most of the folks had moved on quietly to prepare dinner and get cleaned up after the toilsome afternoon.

She had seen the unique little group pull together, and in the face of danger, become one cohesive mesh of helping hands and muscles. They were a seemingly ragtag group, but she had seen beauty in the way they had worked, and it seemed an other-worldly experience. Now, exhausted from the stress of the afternoon, she was content to sit beside Vincent and be quiet. She was a top-sider. Maybe time could change that.

A slight sound to the right caught both her and Vincent's attention, and they turned at the same time. Standing in the corner, Ellie, Eric and Kipper hovered, abashed nervousness on their little faces. Vincent reached out a hand to them, kindly, and they all rushed to his side, supporting Eric and his sprained ankle between them, and throwing a tangle of small arms into the lion-like man's cloak. He spoke softly, attempting to not wake Father, encircling the small trio in both arms.

"He will heal, and all will be right again. Are you children well?"

Kipper nodded, a braveness about his eyes, but a little something still there that Vincent recognized. He reached out a hand and cupped the small face in his hand.

"You turned back down there, Kipper. I told you to run and you hesitated."

The little boy nodded once. "I-I was worried, Vincent. The rocks were falling, and I was afraid."

Vincent smiled gently. "It is okay to be afraid, Kipper."

The boy shook his head, a stubborn frown crossing his face still streaked with grey dust. "I wasn't afraid, for myself, Vincent. I was afraid for you and Father."

His head tilted to one side and Vincent considered the child solemnly. "That was very noble of you, Kipper. You will be a good man one day."

The childlike happiness that flooded the little eyes warmed Catherine's heart, and she cast a pleased smile in Vincent's direction. Ellie spoke softly from her place among Vincent's cloak.

"We are sorry that you and Father were injured, Vincent. We promise to never play anywhere near the maze again, ever."

Vincent patted her head and carefully lifted Eric, mindful of his sprained ankle, onto his lap.

"Lessons were learned today, and I know you will all be the wiser."

"Could you ...?" Ellie twisted her small hand into the fabric that draped around her. "Could - maybe, Vincent, could you tell Father that we are sorry, when he wakes up?"

"Why don't you tell him yourself?" A quiet voice spoke from nearby and they all looked to see Jacob smiling their direction. He held out a hand, welcoming, just as Vincent had, and the three children scrambled to his side to throw their arms around him in relieved excitement.

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“Mouse!”

Jamie moved quickly down the tunnel, her footsteps following the dusty ones that had trailed away from the scene of the rescue. The roar of the waterfall increased with every step she took. Perhaps Mouse had come this way.

“Mouse!”

She carefully descended the damp steps to the floor of the waterfall cavern. Sitting on top of a rock at its thundering base was Mouse, head propped in his hands.

He could not hear her through the intensity of the water rumbling around them.

Jamie picked her way through the random rocks and reached his side. He sensed she was there and turned just as she arrived. For a moment, they simply looked at each other.

“What do you need?” Mouse asked flatly, and Jamie noted the bit of a tear that attempted to escape his eye but was flicked away with a quick motion of his hand.

“Silence, remember, no one talks to Mouse.”

Jamie sighed, and looked away for a moment, before fixing Mouse with a kind smile.

“Father wants to speak with you.”

A glimmer of hope flickered in his eye, then faded. “Mouse not save Father to escape silence. You came to find Mouse first, remember?”

Jamie reached out a placating hand. “I know, Mouse, it’s not about that. I think – I think he wants to thank you and make sure you are okay.”

Mouse shrugged and looked away. “Mouse fine.”

Jamie heaved an exaggerated sigh and perched on top of a rock next to the moping young man.

“Mouse, please. He feels incredibly grateful for your courage and wits. They would have died today without your help. We – Winslow – all of us – we were wrong. We needed you today.”

“Then tell Mouse,” he spoke suddenly, intensely, turning to frown at her. “Tell me, Jamie, why not speak to Mouse because of inventions, but speak to Mouse when need an invention. Invention bad, then invention good, only when people profit.”

Jamie sighed again, gently, and wrapped her arms around her knees. “Mouse, the Silence wasn’t because of your inventions. The Silence is because – well, to keep you safe. Father fears for your safety. It is for love that he does this, and we all hate it. Mouse, no one wants to ignore you, or hurt you. But you do not listen. You do not get it. Up-top, there are men who would put you in a cage, behind bars, and mock you, and hurt you, and use you to find all of us and hurt us. Father worries so much about you, because you are one of us, and he loves you, Mouse. I know that is hard to understand.”

“Love Mouse? Awfully hard to understand.” Mouse nodded, mumbling his response.

“Taking, stealing, all the same. Mouse not try to hurt people.”

Jamie stood, laying a hand on his shoulder. “Mouse, let me explain this in a way that I think you will understand. If I walked into your room, and took an invention off your table, and took it away and took it apart, what would that be?”

“Stealing,” Mouse spoke confidently, his face clearly appalled at the idea of Jamie carelessly dismantling his precious invention.

Jamie nodded encouragingly. “Exactly, that would be stealing. It was not mine to take. But if I were somewhere, and there was an invention in the dumpster, or the garbage can, or the street corner, without a home or a place it should be, and I pick that up and bring it down here, what would that be?”

“Taking, finding,” Mouse replied, his voice contemplative. “So, stealing is taking.”

Jamie groaned. “Yes, Mouse, it is, but stealing means it belongs to someone and they didn’t give you permission to take it.”

Mouse frowned. “But no one gives Vincent permission to go up-top.”

“Mouse!” Jamie exclaimed, exasperated. “We are not talking about Vincent! We are talking about you, stealing. Vincent does not go up-top and steal. Focus. Okay, here’s this. How would you feel if Catherine came down here, took Arthur, because she wanted a pet, and took him up-top without asking?”

Mouse glared at her, clearly upset that she would even consider such a terrible thing happening to his racoon pet. “No one take Arthur, Mouse make sure of that. Someone take Arthur, Mouse go up-top and get him.”

Jamie nodded. “Exactly. And if you take something someone else has, they might come down here to get it back. And then they could hurt someone down here, or you, or Father, and then bad people would find us, and Father would go to jail, and Vincent would go into an asylum for people who are different, and they would test him and poke at him, and he would be miserable, and all the kids would go into foster care, Ellie and Kipper and Samantha, and all of them, and they would never see each other again. Mary would be all alone, and Winslow and William, and everyone would be heartbroken. We would all have to go Above, and our home would be destroyed.”

Mouse considered, a troubled expression on his face, before finally nodding. “So taking, bad?”

“If it belongs to someone else, yes.”

A ray of understanding crossed his face, and Mouse nodded. “Mouse understand.”

Jamie stared at him for a moment, and then heaved a sigh of relief. “I am so glad, Mouse. I really am.”

He tilted his head to look up at her awkwardly. “But what if it’s just lying there?”

Jamie groaned again, and rubbed her forehead with her fingers. “How about this, Mouse, just ask someone before you take something, check with Vincent, Father, Pascal, me, how about you ask me. I will help you.”

A crooked smile crossed Mouse’s face. “You help Mouse?”

“Yes,” Jamie exclaimed, in both frustration and relief. “Just ask me, and I will make sure you don’t get in trouble. That way Father won’t worry.”

“You help Mouse?” Mouse asked again, his smile mischievous. Jamie swatted him.

“Don’t make more of it than it is, Mouse. Come on, Father is waiting.”

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They entered the hospital chamber quietly, Mouse a little behind Jamie. Vincent was leaning over Father's bed, readjusting the bandages around his forehead. He turned when he heard the two young people enter the room.

"I brought Mouse," Jamie announced softly. Vincent nodded and held out a hand to the young man. Mouse took it and moved to stand beside the tall man.

"Father," Vincent spoke softly, laying his large hand over the older man's arm. "Mouse has come."

The tunnel patriarch stirred and his eyes searched for Mouse in the dimly lit room.

"Mouse has come," Mouse spoke bravely, and his voice allowed Father to find him in the dim light.

"Mouse, what you – did today – was very – brave."

Mouse chewed his bottom lip slightly and nodded once. "Mouse try to save Vincent and Father. First gadget, didn't work. Needed more stuff. Catherine – she found stuff for Mouse, stuff Mouse couldn't get."

Father smiled tiredly. "You must thank her for me. Mouse, I am sorry I had to be so hard on you. I fear for your safety. I fear for your life. You have made me proud today. And for that I am lifting the Silence, just this once, just this time. Ask for someone's instruction and guidance before you go borrowing things, I ask you."

"Jamie offered to help," Mouse responded quickly, nodding in the girl's direction.

Father nodded in return, apparently satisfied. "Mouse, I hope the silence didn't hurt you. You did understand?"

Mouse grew quiet for a moment, plucking at the sheet with his free hand in thought.

"Mouse – Mouse felt like he wasn't home. Life family was dead, gone. Like he wasn't loved anymore."

Father closed his eyes for a moment, as if considering the ramifications of that choice. He reached a tired hand up and laid it on the side of Mouse's face.

"Mouse, listen and listen carefully. We chose the Silence to remind you of what it would be like if your choices placed you in a situation where you were no longer with us. You would have no one. You would be alone. I am sorry if our Silence hurt you, but it is truly what life would be like. You will always have a home here. You will always have a family here- if nothing ever happens to destroy that. You have my word on that."

Mouse nodded once, understanding clearly written on his face. He smiled crookedly. "Arthur too?"

Father rolled his eyes, patting Mouse's cheek with his palm. "I may regret it someday, Mouse, but yes, Arthur too." He coughed once, and Vincent spoke quietly.

"Rest now, Father. We will all be here when you awake. I will send Mary in with more blankets."

Father smiled slightly. "Thank you, Vincent."

Vincent and Mouse stepped out of the room into the hall, allowing Mary to pass them and enter, carrying blankets and something delicious-looking, steaming in a bowl.

Vincent laid a hand on the young man's shoulder. "Are you okay, Mouse?"

Mouse smiled up at Vincent. "Mouse okay now."

Together, arm in arm, the two men walked away down the tunnel, the dust of the day still settling in the candlelight, floating like glitter in the shadows.

Although they had their differences, the tunnel folk would always be family. Father promised.

