

TOMORROW'S DREAMS

by Joyce Clarke

CHAPTER ONE

The subterranean world below the streets of New York was a vast and bottomless complex. A maze of unfathomable tunnels and passageways, caverns, waterfalls, underground lakes and rivers, cloaked in blackness that had never felt the warmth of the sun.

The people of New York would surely have been amazed to hear the sound of voices in this endless rock hewn labyrinth, miles below their feet, or at the sound of musical instruments being played, and the beautiful choir of children singing in the perfect acoustics of the Great Hall. They would have been even more astounded by the riotous applause that followed, interjected by exuberant cat calls and whistles, with the added cries of '*more*' and '*encore*' filling the air.

Under the guidance of Father, Vincent and Catherine, the children had organized this concert of recital, music and song as part of the Winterfest celebrations. Every year, this day was set aside to commemorate a special anniversary unique to the tunnel world. To give thanks to all those who had helped them survive and maintain the safety of their world, and remind them that even the greatest darkness is nothing, so long as they shared the light.

This year Father's daughter Vivien was officially welcomed into the family, not only because she was Father's daughter, but because she had captured the hearts of the whole community.

When Vivien's adoptive parents had been tragically killed in a road accident, she decided to pursue a long held dream to trace her ancestors. An unexpected source of help came from her close friendship with Peter Alcott, who like herself was a doctor at St. Vincent's Hospital. Through Peter she learned the whereabouts of her father, Jacob Wells, and the existence of her two brothers, Devin and Vincent.

Joe Maxwell for once in his life was lost for words; so overawed was he by the fact that Vincent had spent his entire life in this world without sunlight. He tried to comprehend how Vincent's father, Jacob Wells, had renounced all that he had once held dear, to create this place of safety for his son, and in the process had built this thriving community. Joe also knew that if Catherine had to choose, she would relinquish all she had ever known to be with this extraordinary man - to keep him safe.

During the weeks since Peter Alcott and Vivien had been traumatically abducted, and the subsequent murder of disgraced District Attorney, John Moreno, Joe Maxwell had been sworn in as DA and his first task had been to promote Catherine to his personal assistant.

Even though life, both in the DA's office and Below, had been uneventful of late, no one underestimated the possibility that someone could still be out there watching, biding their time, waiting to strike again.

Christopher Hamilton had lived his entire life in luxurious surroundings, never knowing what it was to go without in the material sense of the word. Due in no small measure to the tragic circumstances of his early life, when most of his family had been wiped out with the scourge of cancer, he had emerged a generous and compassionate man, using his wealth to benefit others

less fortunate than himself. In this world built by Jacob Wells, Christopher Hamilton found a different kind of wealth. A wealth that had little to do with money, and no amount of money could ever replace. He, too, was humbled by it all and deeply honoured to have been made a part of it. It gave him a strangely comforting feeling of hope for the future of Hamilton Lodge.

Vincent's powers of healing and recovery after any injury were nothing less than spectacular. Only a few weeks ago he had smashed his ankle, and had required major surgery to piece it back together again with the aid of surgical plates and screws. Unless troublesome, these would remain in place for the rest of his life. Already he was walking without assistance, although not without some pain, and was the first to admit that running would take a little longer. He had certainly showed a dexterity that no one else could have mastered with such speed and aplomb.

In this convivial atmosphere of friendship and love, the evening was declared by all to be a resounding success; and stronger links with the outside world were forged. At this moment, nothing troubled Vincent, and the relaxed intimacy he now shared with Catherine was there for all to witness. Although it was not common knowledge that she was carrying his child, it very soon would be.

It was Christopher Hamilton who had given Father the opportunity to use his skills as a research physician, in his fully equipped basement laboratory at Hamilton Lodge. Here, with Chris' assistance, he was able to explore the reasons for Vincent's differences. He discovered that not only was Vincent human, but that the '*foreign*' gene that had made him all that he was, could not be passed on to his children. It had been agreed with Peter and Vivien, that until Catherine entered her third month, they would not tempt providence by sharing their news with the rest of the community.

Tonight they danced the waltz close in each other's arms, like all lovers do, surrounded by knowing winks and nods, and much speculation. Father watched with contentment the unquestioning acceptance of the love Catherine and Vincent shared. A unique love - something there had never been. A love that could only survive in this world Below.

As the day of celebration drew to its close, small groups of Helpers were led up to the surface, saying their goodbyes amid much hugging and kissing. When at last the subway trains stopped rattling high above their heads, and the tapping on the pipes ceased, everyone who was not on sentry duty at the perimeter outposts settled for the night, secure in the knowledge that all was well.

In Vincent's chamber he held his love in his arms, content, feeling the gentle tickle of her breath against his neck. Her small fingers curled into the thick golden hair that covered his chest, and his large clawed hand rested lovingly on her naked thigh. The promise made to her father on the night that he died, flitted through his mind. *'Please know this; that I will protect Catherine, watch over her, and love her until my last breath.'*

Vincent smiled as he kissed her sleeping face, and gathered her warm soft body more possessively to his own before closing his eyes - and their world slept.

It was the middle of the night, when Olivia made her way along the dimly-lit tunnels towards Father's chamber. Her son Luke, swathed inside a soft warm blanket, was cuddled up in her arms. He was hot and feverish, and although she had bathed him frequently to keep him cool, she had been unable to bring down his temperature. Luke had been fretful and out of sorts for days, as well as being in some considerable pain due to teething. Nothing she or Mary could do had given him relief. He grizzled miserably at Winterfest, so during the concert, Olivia had slipped quietly away so as not to spoil everyone else's enjoyment.

Luke had suffered some kind of convulsion, or fit, a few minutes earlier. Although it had only lasted for a few seconds, it seemed like forever, and had frightened Olivia; more so because he did not

seem to recover from it but lay still in her arms. To Olivia, this was more distressing than the constant crying.

Olivia had been born in the tunnels thirty-five years before, and it was the only life she had ever known. She had a delightfully warm and caring nature, but at the same time one could not help being aware of her shy unworldliness. Even in her drab tunnel clothes, the beautiful woman that she was could not be disguised. Tall, with thick dark hair and dark eyes, she usually wore her hair loose, or alternatively in a thick heavy braid over one shoulder. It was a style her husband favoured.

Father's bed chamber boasted one of the few doors to be found in their community, and by the time she had reached it Olivia was in a highly distressed state of panic that she could not contain. She was also exhausted. Luke had inherited his father's stature, and was a very sturdy little boy approaching his second birthday. At that moment he seemed to weigh a ton, as Olivia lifted him high onto her shoulder, holding him close with one aching arm whilst beating on Father's door with the other.

"Father, Father."

Without more ado she opened the door and rushed into the darkened interior that held only the pale glow from a single night light.

Father was instantly awake and alert from a lifetime of always being on call. He quickly pushed back the covers and sat up on the edge of the bed to light the bedside lamp. Olivia laid her son on the bed, before automatically reaching for Father's thick dressing gown and helping him on with it as he moved to lean over the still silent child.

"Quickly Olivia, bring my bag please." His practiced hands examined the small body on his bed. Now, with access to his stethoscope and with his slim pencil torch he peered into the boy's eyes, while listening intently to Olivia's account of the child's symptoms.

"What do you think is wrong with him, Father?" Olivia stammered nervously, her lips tremulous and all her instincts screaming that something was very wrong.

"I'm not sure, Olivia. Would you fetch Vivien?" His voice remained non-committal, not wishing to alarm the mother anymore than she already was.

A few minutes later, tousled-haired and with a warm dressing gown over her pajamas, Vivien arrived in Father's bed chamber, followed closely by Olivia.

Over the years, Father had become more of a general practitioner, and his expertise was extensive; but this was something that his daughter specialized in and he valued her expert opinion so stepped aside to allow her to examine the child.

A few seconds later, Vivien looked up from the bed and met Father's gaze, confirming his own fears. She gently tidied the little boy's clothing and wrapped the blanket around him. Gathering him up into her arms, she handed him back to his mother, retaining her hold on both Olivia and the child.

"Olivia," Vivien's voice was calm and quiet. "We need to get Luke to hospital. I suspect he had had some kind of brain hemorrhage."

Olivia looked to Father who nodded his agreement of Vivien's diagnosis. Vivien continued, "We won't know how serious it is until we've done some tests. I'll go and get dressed, but we need to be on our way as quickly as possible."

Vincent, ever sensitive to any disturbance, was awake and listening. He eased his arm from around the warm sleeping woman at his side. His eyes never leaving her beloved face, he marvelled that

she was actually here at all. She was tired and he had no intention of disturbing her, so, gently kissing her hair he inched his way out of bed before silently pulling on his clothes.

He descended the short flight of steps into Father's chamber to see that the only lighting was coming from Father's bed chamber at the far end, beneath the gallery where voices could be heard. Vincent approached as Vivien emerged with Olivia following carrying her son.

"What's happened, Vivien?" His concerned eyes glancing first at the child and then into the chamber beyond where he could see signs of Father getting dressed.

"Luke's very ill, Vincent," Olivia said tearfully. Her voice strained with worry and fear. "We're taking him to the hospital."

Vivien elaborated. "We're not too sure exactly what the trouble is, Vincent, but we suspect a brain hemorrhage."

Immediately grasping the urgency of the situation Vincent said, "I'll bring Catherine. I'm sure she will wish to go with you, Olivia."

"I'm here." Catherine was already on her way across Father's chamber towards them. She had been coming to find out where Vincent had disappeared to in the middle of the night.

As the grey dawn broke over New York, Olivia and Catherine sat waiting in the visitors' room that served the children's ward. It was furnished with functional utility furniture and was the same as countless other hospital visitors' rooms, with nondescript pictures on the walls.

The pile of assorted magazines on the table and few discarded toys somehow gave an unloved feel to the surroundings. Nothing had been heard since Vivien had disappeared through the swing doors into the inner examination rooms with the child in her arms and assurances that all would be well. It was now more than two hours and endless cups of coffee later. Olivia and Catherine continued their lonely silent vigil, as conversation had fizzled out some time ago by mutual agreement. Now it seemed as if they had been forgotten and that none of this had really happened.

The door suddenly opened and Olivia jumped to her feet; but it was only a young nurse bringing them yet another pot of coffee, and apologizing for the lack of news. Olivia began to tremble uncontrollably, as the tears she could no longer hold back spilled down her face, and huge gasping sobs bubbled up from inside her. Catherine drew her into her arms, rocking her to and fro, close to tears herself.

"It will be all right, Olivia. It will be all right," she soothed, speaking words that she was none too sure were true.

"I want Kanin," Olivia wailed. "I need him, Cathy. He should be here with me, not in prison. They've no right to keep him in prison," she sobbed. "Kanin isn't a criminal."

Catherine had never thought of Kanin as a criminal either and agreed that no right was being served by keeping him in prison. His original crime had been an accident and he had served his own personal sentence many times over.

She patted Olivia's back. "Listen Olivia, as soon as we find out what's happening, I'll go and see Joe." She released her hold and pulled away but grasped both of Olivia's hands. "It's a poor do altogether if Manhattan's District Attorney can't speed things up a bit and do something about getting Kanin released."

She gave Olivia a watery smile of reassurance before trying to lighten the mood. "Did I ever tell you that Joe and I are one hell of a formidable team?"

Kanin Evans had been a young man of twenty when, driving home from a party one night, was involved in a car accident in which a little boy had been killed. Kanin was arrested for driving whilst intoxicated; he had had a couple of beers. Until that moment Kanin had the world at his feet. He had a loving family behind him, was doing well at college and was a popular young man with many friends.

However, Kanin had been so terrified by the prospect of going to jail that he had jumped bail and ran. A warrant was put out for his arrest and Kanin became a fugitive, leaving everything he had ever known and loved behind him.

A year later, after giving a plausible account of himself, he was adopted into the tunnel community where he had since remained, giving of his best to become a much loved and respected member of their world. He never stopped trying to make up for the taking of the little boy's life; to give something back; but his pain never went away, and not a day went by without his being reminded of it and of all that he had lost.

His marriage to Olivia some three years before, had given Kanin the kind of happiness he had never believed possible. When Luke was born he had cried with joy; and sadness that his own family was lost to him and would never know their grandson. Then fate had taken a hand and Kanin was spotted in a hardware store by the mother of the little boy he had killed, and his file was reopened - by Catherine Chandler.

The moment Vivien entered the visitors' room they knew something was very wrong. Olivia sat tense, waiting, the fear in her so great, she was unable to speak. Catherine spoke for both of them, reaching for Olivia's hand and gripping it in both of hers.

Vivien. Just tell us."

Vivien pulled up a chair and sat in front of them knowing that there was no easy way to do this. She had learned the hard way that this was no time to show any emotion, but projected a kindly though professional expression. Sometimes she had to steel her heart, often giving the impression that she was hard and unfeeling. Nevertheless, she had to say the words. She took a deep breath and began to explain in layman's terms just what all the tests they had performed on Luke had revealed.

"Olivia, Luke has indeed suffered a brain hemorrhage, which we now have under control, but the extensive scans and X-rays have shown up several small tumors." She paused and lowered her eyes for a moment before continuing, struggling with the words she somehow had to convey to this mother.

"I'm sorry, Olivia. I'm afraid that the siting of these tumors is not good."

Two pairs of eyes stared back at her, filled with horror of all the implications of what she was trying to say. Vivien sighed and looked down at her hands - hands that had helped to heal so many children, but sometimes it was not enough.

She looked up again. "Peter has gone to fetch Father and Mary...." her gaze fell on Catherine, "and to let Vincent know what is happening as well." Her eyes appealed for Catherine's help as she suggested. "Maybe we should wait for them to arrive, before I tell you the rest?"

"No," came Olivia's monosyllabic reply, as Vivien nodded resignedly.

"All right," Vivien's shoulders slumped with the defeat she felt, forcing herself to meet Olivia's eyes. "I'm sorry, but the siting of the tumors makes the odds of removing them with any degree of success extremely low. At best it could turn him into a vegetable, and at worst...." The sentence was left hanging.

They sat in shocked silence whilst the unspoken words were digested. Olivia felt as if she had been slammed into a brick wall. She sat shaking her head from side to side, her pain too great for tears, or even thoughts. It seemed nature's way of distancing her from this nightmare, in which she felt entirely alone.

There was a knock on the door, and Father entered followed by Peter and Mary. In the midst of all this tragedy it seemed strange to Catherine that she should even consider how elegant Mary looked in her '*topsider*' clothes, as she left Olivia's side to relinquish her place to Father. He lay his walking stick onto the floor before gently drawing Olivia to him.

She resisted his show of affection; her body stiffening as she pulled away. Unable to cope with any kind of sympathy or tenderness from anyone. The only person that she really wanted was Kanin. Traumatized by shock, she directed her attention back to Vivien and forced out the words, over a tongue that refused to cooperate and lips that would not function properly.

"If nothing is done, how long has he got?"

Vivien paused before answering her question, glancing over Olivia's shoulder at the desolation on Father's face that matched Catherine's, standing at his side. "We can't be sure, Olivia. A few months - maybe."

The silence in the room was total until Catherine suddenly roused herself. "There is something I have to do." She turned to pick up her purse and jacket from the nearby chair.

"Where are you going, Catherine?" Father asked, his voice coming over more sharply than he had intended.

She did not answer him directly but crouched down in front of Olivia. "Olivia, I'm going to get Kanin out of jail, even if I have to break him out myself." Squeezing the other woman's hand, she pushed herself upright and turned to pat Father's arm, and then she was gone.

Tears streamed unchecked down Catherine's face, as she sped along the hospital corridors, glad at least that there was something she could do.

CHAPTER TWO

Although Joe was dressed he had not been up for very long, and was just enjoying his first cup of coffee of the day when he heard someone frantically banging on his apartment door. He put his coffee cup down on the kitchen work top and went to investigate.

"Yeah, who is it?" he shouted through the door.

"It's me, Joe - Cathy."

He quickly unlocked the door wondering what had happened to warrant such an early Sunday morning visit.

"Joe, I need a favour." Without preamble she entered the apartment. He could see that she was in a high state of agitation, and looked as though she had been crying.

He took her arm, "Sure, Cathy. Come on in, I've got some coffee on."

She followed him through into the kitchen, accepting the cup of coffee he offered, and leaning against the kitchen until she took a sip of the steaming brown liquid. Catherine waited for Joe to give her his full attention before she related all that had happened during the night.

"Jesus," Joe whispered. "How's Olivia?"

Catherine did not answer his question, but came straight to the point and stated what would help.

"She needs her husband, Joe."

He frowned, slightly puzzled not yet familiar with all the families who lived Below, but he acknowledged, "Well, of course she does. Why isn't he with her?"

Catherine took a deep breath and told Joe about the case file on Kanin Evans that had landed on her desk some twelve months before. She told him all about the complications it caused, not only for her, because she knew where he was, but for Kanin and his family Below - not to mention the security of their community. She also told him how Vincent had persuaded him to face the boy's mother, as well as accepting the possibility of going to prison to serve out his sentence.

Joe took a mouthful of his coffee, throwing the remainder down the sink, before rinsing his cup under the tap and placing it upside down on the draining board.

He sighed, "And you want me to get him out?"

"Kanin's not a criminal, Joe. What he did was an accident. He wasn't even technically drunk. It wasn't a hit and run, and he jumped bail out of fear. He was twenty years old, dammit." Catherine put her cup down, instinctively knowing that he would give her the help she needed.

"Joe, Kanin's a good man."

Joe nodded, weighing things up in his mind. "Cathy, has this case gone to trial yet?"

"No. They've given me the seventeenth of next month. He's been held in custody for almost twelve months already," she paused. "Of course, bail was out of the question."

Joe stuffed his hands into his pockets, contemplating the situation. He drew in a deep breath. "The mother of the little boy who was killed. You got to know her pretty well as I remember."

"Yes, Mrs. Davis. She's a nice lady."

"Do you think she'd drop the charges?"

Catherine shrugged her shoulders, unsure of the answer. "We could go and ask her."

"Let's do it."

Anne Davis had lived alone for the past ten months, as yet another relationship had failed. Her home was a modest single story house out in the suburbs north of the city. An attractive woman in her mid-forties, small and slim, and on a good day could easily knock ten years off her age.

Today was not a good day, and the woman who answered the door to Catherine and Joe looked as if she had not slept for a week. Her fine light auburn hair hung limp and lifeless around her small sensitive face, filled with sadness, and right now gazed out at her visitors with vacant indifference.

"Hello, Mrs. Davis," Catherine smiled. "Do you remember me?" She was shocked by the woman's deterioration.

Mrs. Davis nodded. "Is it time for the trial?" Her voice croaked flat and disinterested.

"No, Mrs. Davis - but we have come to ask you a special favour."

The woman hesitated, then nodded, "You'd better come in."

They were shown into a spacious, tastefully-decorated sitting room, and although the furnishings were of an excellent quality, there was a general uncared for feeling about the place. Mrs. Davis was dressed in a pale green jogging suit that looked as if she had not taken it off for a fortnight. Her tension was evident.

"What did you want to ask of me?" She stood nervously wringing her hands.

Catherine took her arm and gently led her over to the couch, where they both sat down. Joe moved over to the window to watch the Sunday morning ritual of car washing, and children racing up and down the street on skate boards and mountain bikes.

Catherine quietly related to Mrs. Davis all that had happened to Kanin's son, and the distress that it had caused them all, especially Olivia without her husband there to comfort her. The difficulty Catherine had maintaining her composure was more than evident to the older woman, whose face was becoming more animated and alert. Suddenly, she reached out to stop Catherine in mid-sentence.

"Miss Chandler. You want me to drop the charges." It was a statement, not a question.

Her directness drew Joe's attention from the window. Catherine could not believe that it was going to be this easy, and she answered.

"Yes, Mrs. Davis. That is what we have come to ask of you. We would like to try and get Kanin released."

"So would I," Mrs. Davis' voice filled with sincerity and emotion. "Can we do that?"

The stunned look of gratitude on Catherine's face brought the merest suggestion of a smile to the older woman's lips; and Joe moved back across the floor to sit opposite them, disbelieving of what he had heard.

"Mrs. Davis... we never expected you to be quite so obliging. Why?" He shrugged and gesticulated with his hands. "You'd have been well-justified in telling us to go to hell."

"Mr.?" She queried, unable to recall his name.

"Maxwell. Joe Maxwell," he supplied hastily, suddenly realizing their lack of introduction on arrival.

"Mr. Maxwell, for sixteen years I thought of Kanin Evans as some kind of monster - a drunken animal who ploughed down my little boy."

She lowered her eyes to hide all the pain and sadness that the last three words stirred up. After a brief pause she continued.

"When I met him that day at the DA's office, I could see that he was as afraid of me as I was of him, and, I could see he was no monster. What I saw was a very caring and sensitive man, who had very obviously suffered over the years as much as I had. I could see that his pain was every bit as deep as mine." Her lips became tremulous, and tears spilled down her face but she carried on.

"That afternoon, Mr. Maxwell, I had an overwhelming urge to gather him into my arms and cry along with him. To give each other comfort and forgiveness; to share each others' pain."

She paused for a few moments, struggling for some composure; Joe and Catherine giving her the time she needed. At last she began again.

"I could quite easily have forgiven him there and then, and dropped all the charges, but I allowed that moment of instinctive feeling to pass, and it has haunted me ever since." She paused again before meeting their eyes with the certain knowledge that she had already figured out for herself.

"I should have left it to rest. I realize now there is nothing to be gained by any of this."

Anne Davis squared her shoulders. Her whole demeanour taking on an air of dignity and self-esteem, as she finally uttered her final words. "We have both lost enough, and suffered enough already."

Joe was lost for words and his eyes pleaded for Catherine's assistance.

"Thank you, Mrs. Davis," she took the woman's hands in both of hers. "This will mean so much to

so many people."

Anne Davis suddenly found herself sobbing her tears of release in Catherine's arms, while Joe quickly rose to his feet and went outside to wait in the car.

CHAPTER THREE

Kanin lay on his bunk, the top tier of two with his hands behind his head and his eyes closed, though he refrained from dreaming of home until after lights out so that no one could see his tears. If he had even thought that privacy was at the premium Below, here it was non-existent with every bodily function open to public gaze, followed by loudly-voiced lewd observations.

The monotony of the days did little to alleviate his all-consuming fear and overwhelming feelings of homesickness, that had dogged his every waking moment over the past twelve months. There was nothing to shut out the incessant clamour and obscenities of the men locked in the cells on either side of this section, or the constant clanging of the metal doors and locks, and the noisier element hanging on the bars of their cells and shouting profanities into the night.

Kanin was a big man, more than six feet and ruggedly built, consequently the bunks were too small and he had never been able to fully stretch out. He lay there paying little attention to the sounds of footsteps echoing along the corridor between the rows of cells, until they stopped with a rattle of keys outside his door. He opened his eyes to see the burly but reasonably civil prison warder unlock his cell and swing the door open.

"Evans. You're wanted in the Governor's office. You've got visitors."

Kanin was mystified and followed the guard without question. He stood before the Governor's desk, hardly daring to hazard a guess why he had been summoned here. Governor Taylor looked up from the open file in front of him. He was a rather stern-faced man in his early fifties. He dismissed the accompanying officer, before turning his attention fully onto Kanin.

"Evans, it seems that you have friends in high places. All the charges have been dropped, and you are free to go."

Kanin's shoulders slumped in stunned disbelief as an incredible wave of relief washed over him and he struggled to assimilate the words.

"I'm free to go?" he repeated, not wanting to misunderstand.

"Yes, that's correct," and the Governor closed the file and dropped it into a tray on his desk. He pushed back his chair and rose to his feet, turning to unlock the door behind him and indicating for Kanin to enter.

"In here you will find your own clothes and belongings. When you are ready, ring the bell on the outer door, and you will be taken to the visitors' room, where you are being collected. I hope that I will not be seeing you here again, Mr. Evans."

Kanin silently conveyed his agreement as he passed through the door and heard it being locked behind him.

Vivien had arranged a private room at the hospital for Olivia, so that she could remain close at hand should she be needed. Luke was in the special care baby unit, and as he had remained stable for some time, Olivia had been persuaded to go and get a few hours rest. It was here that Kanin was sent to find her.

She had not been able to sleep, but stood gazing out of the window, watching the day draw to its close, and the endless trails of red tail lights from commuter traffic stretching far into the distance. She heard a tapping on the door and turned to answer it, while her heart gave a lurch of apprehension with the fear of bad news. She opened the door and there he was.

"Kanin."

She spoke his name but no sound came out as they stood transfixed, just drinking in the sight of each other.

"Livi," he whispered and he enveloped her into his arms, each repeating the other's name over and over until it became a litany. The floods of tears welled up between them, bursting into huge sobs of relief and joy and incredible sadness, as they held on tight, fearing the other might disappear.

Olivia was the first to stir as she pulled her face away to ask, "Have you seen Luke?"

"Yes," he nodded, still staring at her face with some degree of disbelief that they were actually here at all, and that he was not going to wake to the sound of clanking keys and metal doors. He let out a shuddering breath, as his features crumpled with all the pain and fear he could not contain.

"He's so little, Livi, and the sight of it all terrified me, and I ran." He could not meet her eyes. He felt so ashamed because he had not handled the situation at all well.

Olivia lifted his face, forcing him to look at her; and he saw no recrimination, only love and understanding.

"Kanin," her voice came like a caress, "Kanin, there is no right or wrong way to behave in a situation like this. You ran because you love your son - but you didn't run away, you came to me, and I'm here. I'll always be here, Kanin, and we'll give each other the strength to get through it all."

They were still standing inside the doorway, and he crushed her to him, lifting her off her feet and slamming the door behind him with his foot. He carried her into the room, lowering her feet to the floor before they were both overwhelmed by their eagerness; clinging to each other as if drowning in their maelstrom of emotion. Touching, gazing and finally kissing, their faces wet with tears that did nothing to douse their mutual hunger as mouths and tongues failed to satisfy their needs, and Olivia pushed his jacket off his shoulders. Her overwhelming need was to get to his body but Kanin was stilling her hands, and she was struggling against him.

"Kanin, Kanin, what's the matter? What is it? I want you. I want you." She strained against his protests, becoming more and more frustrated by his lack of cooperation.

"Livi, Livi, listen to me a moment. Please love, listen to me." He held her face in his hands kissing her mouth over and over until her struggles subsided. Kanin shuddered but he did not release her.

"Livi, please understand that I only wish to bathe the stink of prison off me first. I don't want any of that to touch you. Cathy has sent Below for a complete change of clothes for me." He removed his jacket and flung it into the corner. "These can be thrown out. They've been to prison too."

"You're never going back?" Her hands flew to her mouth as she gasped and repeated again, "you're never going back," and fresh tears spilled down her face with the joy and relief of knowing that no one would ever separate them again.

Kanin pulled her into his arms before he explained. "Joey, the little boy I killed all those years ago. His mother and I have made peace with one another; and because of that are able to make peace with ourselves."

The room was silent. Olivia stood close, her hands resting on his chest. "I understand," she answered quietly. "Kanin, she must be an exceptional woman to be able to do that."

He nodded. "I think she had come to the conclusion that we had both suffered enough, and it was

time to lay it all to rest."

"HmMMM," and she reached up and kissed his mouth. "I'll go and run you a nice hot bath. I'll even volunteer to scrub your back," she grinned up at him tearfully, suddenly shy.

Kanin raised his eyebrows. "HmMMM. Sounds promising. Is there a shower in there?" His eyes sparkling with desires that he had not dared to think about for so long.

"There certainly is," she smiled, her eyes sparkling with the promise of the same possibilities.

"HmMMM," Kanin replied, "that sounds good."

Olivia removed her blouse to prevent it getting wet whilst she scrubbed Kanin's back and shampooed his hair; but now the cotton camisole she wore underneath was becoming splashed with soapy water as she leaned against the bath.

Kanin gripped her wrist drawing it to his mouth and blazing a trail of kisses along the inside of her bare arm.

"Take it off, Livi," his eyes sought hers and she saw the hunger burning there. "Take them all off," he husked as all his love and wanting mirrored in his eyes caused her heart to flip, and her whole body to come alive.

All her nerve ends tingled with long denied needs to be touched by his hands, kissed by his lips, and to be a part of him again. She felt an overwhelming urge to claim his mouth, but knew if she succumbed he would drag her into the bath; and she had nothing else to wear. She stood up, her eyes never leaving his face; dried her hands and removed the rest of her clothes.

He leaned forward to pull the plug and the water began to drain away as he hauled himself up to his full height; his strong muscular body honed to perfection, with years of carving living accommodations, tunnels and passageways out of solid rock. Even the twelve months that he had been locked away in prison had done nothing to detract from his physique; he had made sure of that; and it had helped to keep him sane. His eyes drank in the sight of her womanly body, as he took her hands and helped her into the bath to stand before him as the bath water he did not wish her to share swirled away, and Olivia turned the shower faucet to warm.

They both yelled out in shock at the initial freezing spray; naked bodies clinging together until the temperature rose and Olivia smiled girlishly up at him; colour staining her cheeks as she became aware of something else beginning to rise further south.

She pushed her hips teasingly forward, smiling suggestively into his face, as he groaned in ecstasy at her exquisite torture; stilling her hips and finding her mouth, as the fine jet spray cascaded down onto their glistening wet bodies entwined in the enveloping steam.

In the special care baby unit, the dedication of all the doctors and nursing staff was awe-inspiring; all of it spearheaded by Dr. Vivien Hayward, who had placed herself on twenty-four hour call out. Luke was being kept under close observation for any sign of change in his condition.

Kanin and Olivia had spent more than three hours just sitting beside his cot throughout the night, but the doctor on duty persuaded them to go and get some rest, as there was nothing they could do.

Kanin had suffered terribly with queasiness, all the time he was in there, and felt relieved to be away from it, and guilty as hell for feeling the way that he did.

They went for a short walk in the hospital grounds to get some air before returning to find the coffee machine. Little conversation passed between them, as they tried to control their turmoil within, as, in a perverse way, it all seemed to be happening to someone else, placing them somewhere above

it all. Looking on. Maybe it was nature doing her best to ease their pain, until they were more able to cope.

They did need each other's physical closeness. Whether standing, sitting or walking, neither let go of the other. Neither dare give voice to their fears; fears that their son might not survive even for the million to one chance that an operation might give him. Like a magnet, they were drawn back to the Special Care Unit where even Kanin's nauseous reaction to the place could not have kept him away. They both held this unspoken, but none the less mutual sense of premonition.

They arrived at the entrance to the Special Care Unit and rang for attendance, as no one was allowed inside without first toggling up in masks, gowns and shoe covers. It was several tense minutes before Vivien came out to them, pulling her face mask down looking totally drained, tense and pale. Something inside Olivia froze, and she clutched at Kanin who slid an arm around her, and they just hung on to each other, instinctively knowing what was to come.

Vivien's voice came as from another plane as she spoke the words, because there was no other way. "I'm so sorry," a single tear escaped and rolled down her cheek. "Luke had another massive brain hemorrhage a few minutes ago. There was nothing we could do."

CHAPTER FOUR

Christmas that year was tinged with great sadness that touched every member of their community Below. The death of Luke had left them all stunned. He had been an energetic and talkative little boy, who always seemed to be laughing, his mind filled with curiosity and never ending questions. Just to see him striding out on his sturdy little legs, raised a smile to even the grumpiest of their number, and he had won a place in everyone's heart. Now he was no more.

It had been Kanin's and Olivia's wish for his ashes to be scattered in the Mirror Pool as was their custom Below, so he would remain a part of their world. Never to be forgotten, and to be spoken of and remembered with love, thereby remaining a part of their lives. They all drew comfort from their belief that little Luke would not be alone, but with people who cared. There was Pascal's father, Eric's sister Ellie, Winslow and Randolph, to name but a few.

It was agreed that the announcement of Catherine's pregnancy, and indeed any plans they had for a wedding ceremony, would have to be postponed for the time being, in deference to Kanin's and Olivia's time of deep mourning. Their grief was something that they had to endure, had to live through. There was no easy way. Sometimes their pain would feel too great to bear - together with all the emptiness and loss of hope. It was a great blessing that they were able to give each other comfort, and share each other's pain, and gradually give each other the strength to continue. To take each day and live it through, finding that each day becomes just a little easier, a little less painful. Then finally, Kanin went back to work beside Vincent, and Olivia resumed her allotted tasks within the community.

It was nearing the end of January. Catherine was now three months pregnant and all was well with her. Vincent was also fully-recovered from his accident. They were both, not to mention Father, Peter and Vivien, eager to share their news. Mary had already guessed and was as excited about it as they all were. Catherine especially wanted to tell Joe.

However, it was agreed that as soon as Catherine arrived that evening, Kanin and Olivia would be the first to be told their happy news. They knew they would share their joy, even though it would be coloured with their own great sadness.

Catherine had been sleeping at her own apartment for the past two nights due to pressure of work, and had woken each morning feeling decidedly queasy. Today was even worse. *'Here we go with*

the morning sickness.' She sat on the edge of the bed, trying to quell the desire to heave her heart up before making a dash for the bathroom.

Half an hour later, Joe arrived to collect her, a habit they had fallen into since past events had put them on their guard.

He took one look at her chalk-white face and exclaimed with real concern, "Jesus, Cathy. You look terrible."

She forced a smile. "I'm fine, Joe. Come on, don't fuss, let's go," and she picked up her purse, briefcase and coat before reaching for the door.

Joe grabbed her arm. "Not so fast, kiddo. You look as if you're about to throw up."

"Gee, thanks, Joe." She wailed as dropping everything onto the floor, she clamped her hand over her mouth and fled back to the bathroom with Joe in hot pursuit.

He found her doubled over the sink, stomach heaving, but she had already expelled all that there was earlier.

Joe leaned nonchalantly against the door frame and smirked knowingly, "You're pregnant, Radcliffe."

"Tell me about it," she groaned miserably from the sink, turning on the cold water faucet and splashing her face.

Joe entered the bathroom and handed her the towel. "Does Vincent know?" he queried, as he stood watching her patting her face dry.

"Yes, of course he does, Joe." She was suddenly plagued by feelings of guilt because Joe had guessed before she had been able to tell him. She dried her hands and sat down on the side of the bath, acutely conscious of the hurt expression on Joe's face.

"Joe. Please don't be hurt. No one else knows either. After the tragedy of Kanin and Olivia's son, we didn't think the time would be right to make that kind of announcement. Giving them time to grieve was more important,"

Joe nodded in acceptance of that, but she could see that he still was not happy.

"Joe?" she asked worriedly. "You're not pleased for me."

He answered her honestly, his voice filled with concern. "Cathy. Doesn't it worry you? How will you cope with it all? How the hell do you cope with it all, living two separate lives; and now you're expecting his child."

Joe was aware that the pitch of his voice had risen, and that he sounded critical, but he could not help it. "Does Vincent realize all the pressure he's putting on you?"

Catherine shook her head and chuckled quietly before smiling up into his face, glad that her queasiness had abated.

"Joe. Vincent would never pressure me into doing anything. It's more like the other way around."

She draped the towel over the bath and stood up in front of her confused friend. "Vincent has been deprived of so much in his life. Am I wrong to want to give him everything that I can? Don't you think he deserves the same rights as the rest of us?"

She desperately wanted Joe to accept her pregnancy at face value, before she told him that Vincent's differences could not be passed on to their unborn child.

Joe thrust his hands into his pants pockets and slumped against the door frame. "Of course I do, Cathy," he sighed. "But how are you going to juggle everything; especially now?"

Before dispelling his fears for her welfare, she took his arm and guided him out through the bedroom towards the front door. She gathered up her scattered belongings from the floor in readiness to be on their way to work, giving her time to think about her reply. Unfastening the door she paused and turned to face him again.

"Joe. I shall continue to do what I have always done, and say nothing; plead ignorance; side-step any awkward questions."

Joe was about to interrupt but she quickly silenced him. "Yes, I have become a good liar, and I know that it's nothing to boast about."

She stood with her hand on the door but did not pull it open. She met Joe's gaze. Her face filled with pride as she voiced all that she believed in.

"Joe, when it comes to protecting Vincent; all that he is; all that he stands for; then yes, I will do whatever I have to do to protect all of that. I will do all I have to do to protect the man that I love."

Joe stared at her for a long moment before nodding his acquiescence. "Yeah. I'll go along with that, kiddo, because for one thing it's more than just Vincent; and it is worth whatever we have to do to keep it safe."

Impulsively, Catherine hugged him. "Thanks, Joe. Thanks for understanding." And she smiled, contented and grateful that Joe was big enough to accept Vincent and all that he was; and her too, for loving him and bearing his child. She silently promised to allay his fear of there being more little Vincents, when they were not in so much of a hurry.

Catherine thought that she would never get away from work that night. Joe had to stay late. So instead of her usual lift home with him, she had to call a cab.

Deciding against going up to her apartment for a quick shower and a change of clothes, she headed straight for her basement entrance, as she was running late, and knew that Vincent would already be on his way to meet her. She opened the basement doors, but before stepping down onto the rungs of the iron ladder, she slipped the shoulder strap of her purse over her hand and across her chest, flinging her purse behind her out of the way. Her briefcase she held in her left hand, with which she also held onto the side of the ladder, using her right hand to take her weight while descending. An operation she had performed countless times before.

However, on this occasion as she moved below the entrance doors, her leather soled shoes lost their purchase on the rung of the ladder. In that heart-stopping moment of panic she lost her hand hold, screaming out before catapulting backwards down onto the cold stone floor below.

Vincent was taking a steady walk with Father to meet her at her basement entrance, so that the three of them could visit Kanin and Olivia on the way back to share their news. Suddenly, Vincent let out an anguished roar causing Father to jump in alarm, as Vincent took off through the tunnels like a tornado. Father quickly gathered his wits and made his way after him, as quickly as he was able.

"Catherine." Vincent gasped as he saw her crumpled, lifeless form at the base of the ladder, and he collapsed to his knees at the side of her. The briefcase was beneath her and had probably helped to break her fall.

His hands gingerly straightened limbs, gently manipulating every joint to make sure that nothing was broken. Easing the briefcase out from under her, he removed his cloak and covered her over until Father arrived. Vincent drew in breath through his teeth, as another more disturbing thought struck him. His initial thoughts had been only for Catherine, but now he cried out in horror as he remembered their unborn child. He held his breath as he pushed his cloak aside and lifted her skirt;

parting her legs to check for any signs of hemorrhaging. There was nothing, and he released the breath he had been holding and covered her over again.

He desperately wanted to hold her. To gather her close and keep her safe. To carry her home; but he did not dare to until Father had examined her. He was well aware that the fall had knocked her unconscious, quite possibly causing a concussion.

So Vincent knelt there, rocking to and fro on his knees and repeating over and over, "Please hurry, Father. Please God, don't let anything happen to her; not now," and he held her small hand to his lips, before leaning over to place gentle kisses onto her face, and smoothing her hair from her brow with his other hand.

At last he heard Father approaching with several others who had heard Vincent's deafening roar, and had come to investigate. Kanin, Olivia and Jamie appeared through the blue light that shone down from the ceiling, but Vincent only had eyes for Father, and he reached out to steady him as he eased himself down onto the floor at the opposite side of Catherine.

Vincent sobbed out on an expelled breath. "She must have slipped off the ladder, Father," watching whilst the doctor examined his patient, before explaining unnecessarily, "She's out cold, but nothing seems to be broken."

After a few moments Father nodded, satisfied with his son's assessment. He looked up, their eyes meeting with unspoken fears of what other injuries such a fall could cause; but Vincent was able to ease that particular fear.

"I checked, Father. There is no bleeding."

Their eyes met again in their shared understanding and Father answered, "Good. Good," and returned his attention to his patient. He patted her shoulder. "Let's see if we can bring her around."

Father turned towards his small, now bewildered audience. "Jamie, do you have your flask of water with you?"

The young woman came forward, unclipping the requested flask from her belt. After unscrewing the top, she handed it over to Vincent who had produced a handkerchief and quickly soaked it with water.

The shock of cold water on Catherine's face and neck brought her to some sense of awareness, and she mumbled, "Vincent?"

"I'm here." He watched as she slowly focused her eyes onto his face, before asking her, "Catherine, can you move your limbs?"

"My limbs?" She answered, still befuddled; then as understanding dawned she flexed her fingers and circled her ankles.

Father nodded, "good, good," then raised his eyes to Vincent's before he asked her. "Catherine, do you feel any pain from anywhere else?"

She frowned and reached out to Vincent to help her upright as she flinched. "My head."

Vincent supported her whilst Father parted her hair on the back of her head to reveal a large raised angry-looking lump. Vincent pursed his lips as he felt her pain; followed by her sudden distress as she clutched her lower abdomen.

"Vincent. The baby?" Then seeing the fear in his eyes she quickly reassured him. "Vincent, it's all right. I'm not in any pain; but it was such a fall. What if?"

"Catherine," he hugged her to him. "You have no pain; there is no bleeding; our baby will be fine."

Oblivious to the gasps of delighted surprise from their onlookers; Catherine whispered, "You've

looked?" She pulled away from him in complete amazement.

"Of course." He inclined his head with such an air of superiority.

"Hmmm," she crooned, snuggling back close to his body with all the relief that she felt; and Vincent lowered himself sideways to sit on the floor and gathered her to him anew; nuzzling her hair and rocking her to and fro in their mutual relief.

Father, together with his small grinning audience, absorbed the scene being played out before them, and he smiled up at Kanin who rushed forward to help him to his feet.

"I'm sorry you had to find out this way, Kanin," he apologized. "You see, we were on our way to tell you both that Catherine is three months pregnant, before announcing it to the rest of the community."

Kanin released Father's arm and stood back beside his wife.

"You thought that it might upset us?" Olivia queried, as she handed him his walking stick, touched by their concern.

"Well, yes, it's true. You've had little enough time to recover from your own tragedies and heartache. But the main reason that we didn't want to make it public knowledge, was we needed to be absolutely certain that the pregnancy was in fact progressing normally. There's no denying this is something that no one in this community ever even dared to dream."

He looked lovingly down at his son, and the woman who had become very much his daughter, seeing the relief written on their faces for all to see.

"Vincent, I think if you are ready to carry Catherine home, I suggest a few days complete rest to be advisable."

"But Father," Catherine protested, pulling away from Vincent's chest. "I'll be fine."

"Young lady," he frowned, "you will do as you are told." He glanced at Vincent who made no comment, so he continued. "Catherine, you have just survived a very nasty fall, and we cannot be too careful."

His words brooked no argument and Vincent smiled to himself, recognizing the tone of Father's voice, as if he was berating a ten year old child.

"And one more thing, Catherine." Father grimaced at Vincent with the sudden realization of how he must sound, and continued in a much more genial manner. "Any dizziness or double vision, I want to know about it. All right?" he smiled.

"Yes, Father," she nodded submissively, smiling up at Vincent before reaching her arms up around his neck, while he maneuvered himself to lift her easily from the floor ready for their journey home.

As their footsteps receded into silence, a slightly-built figure dressed in a full length close fitting hooded black coat, moved out of the shadows and approached the iron ladder. Passing through the beam of blue light that shone down from the ceiling, the silhouetted shape was that of a woman, and she was smiling.

Tamara nodded to herself, highly satisfied with this new revelation that she had witnessed here tonight.

A child? Vincent's child?" She murmured to herself. "Now that puts a completely new complexion of what I had in mind," she mumbled under her breath, putting sound to her thoughts, and weighing up all the possible implications that had been presented to her.

She listened intently before beckoning forward her companion, who had remained close by but out of sight. A rather powerfully-built man with a thick bull neck came into the light. He was attired in a

sweat-stained vest and buttonless shirt, with a well-worn leather jerkin tied at the front with string. No conversation passed between them, but the woman nodded her assent and the man carried out his prearranged instruction.

He removed a grimy piece of cloth from his trouser pocket, climbed the ladder and began rubbing off the grease that he had smeared over one of the rungs earlier that afternoon. He finished it off with a dusting of fine sand to take up any of the residue, and when he was completely satisfied he jumped down from the ladder.

Catherine was beginning to suffer great discomfort during her journey home; as home it was to her now. The initial anaesthetising shock of the fall was wearing off, and all her aches, pains and bruising were making their presence felt.

Cocooned as she was inside Vincent's cloak did offer her some comfort, but her head felt as if it was going to explode, and she acknowledged that Father was right. She was going to suffer for a few days.

Never mind, there are definitely compensations to all of this, and she wrapped her arms more securely around Vincent's neck, nuzzling and kissing his throat, and smiling.

Vincent sensed her smile and looked down at her. "What is it that you have found so smile about, Catherine?"

She chuckled and kissed him again. "I think, Vincent, that I will enjoy you taking care of me for the next few days."

Vincent's heart soared as he felt her contentment, and sensed her smile as it spread across her face again.

CHAPTER FIVE

The community had always been aware that theirs was not the only inhabited section of this underground labyrinth; that other groups had made it their home, even if only for short periods of time.

The sentried outposts and frequent patrolling of the tunnels had ensured their own security, and invasions were rare. One such occasion was when a vicious band out 'Outsiders' violated their space, causing death, destruction, great distress and terror to them all. It was something that they would never forget. Since that time, more stringent measures had been taken to forewarn them of any possible intrusion.

It was known that Paracelsus had had two bases from which he lived and worked Below; together with his motley band of followers. He began his own reign of terror some eighteen months before; obsessed as he was with overthrowing Father and regaining his imagined rightful place as the Master of their community. As each of his deadly attempts failed, he finally resorted to systematically undermining Vincent's sanity, coming to within a breath of succeeding even after his own death at Vincent's hands.

To all intents and purposes, the habitat of Paracelsus was quiet and almost deserted, now that they were free of his tyranny. As the weeks turned into months, with little sign of movement from these sections, their constant vigil ceased and became more intermittent. Something they would come to regret.

Tamara's childhood had been filled with fearful cruelty, violence and sexual abuse; first by her drunken father and then by a series of 'uncles.' She escaped into a marriage of sorts that proved to be equally as brutal and demoralizing. She gave birth to a son, who for some perverse reason was given the name of Gabriel. That the boy survived to the age of seven, was a miracle, and when his father sold him into a child pornography racket for a few dollars beer money, the young Gabriel was to discover the real meaning of pain and degradation. It was only the intense hatred that he felt for his father that kept him alive, and when, at the age of fifteen he escaped his tormentors, his only thought was to return and murder his father.

The night that he arrived to carry out his long held obsesseion, Tamara watched everything through a spy hole in the door of a closet, that she frequently locked herself into to escape her husband's drunken rages.

She recognized her son, but did nothing to stop him, as he approached the bed where the beer-soaked unconscious form of his father was slumped. Without a moment's hesitation, Gabriel cold-bloodedly strangled him with his bare hands, before calmly leaving the apartment.

For several years, Tamara survived on the streets, and for the most part kept out of trouble. Despite the terrible life she had lived, Tamara had remained a good-looking woman; lithe and strong both in mind and body, but being filled with so much hate and bitterness that she held within, it seemed inevitable that a certain savagery lay just beneath the surface.

She had suspected for some time that someone had been following her. A man, tall and slim dressed entirely in black. When he finally approached her, Tamara felt no fear. Her common sense telling her that if he had wished to harm her, he would have done so by now. After introducing himself as John Pater, she was quite surprised to discover that the service he required was not the kind she usually plied. Instead he offered her a business proposition. She observed that his clothes were of excellent quality, and after only a few minutes of conversation, she judged the man to be both cultured and articulate.

He explained that he was a doctor, and he needed the services of a surrogate mother. He required her to keep their association confidential, a commitment for which she would be well paid and all expenses and accommodation would be found. If she would agree, a substantial sum of money paid to her six weeks after the birth.

Tamara did not hesitate. It was the best offer that she had received in her whole life - to be warm and dry, and well fed. Being pregnant, she felt, was no big deal. She eagerly accepted what was to become a successful partnership with this man who would become known as Paracelsus. A man whose imagination loomed large, fuelled by a desperate need to create a being by experimentation with genetic engineering.

The years passed and Paracelsus, as promised, paid Tamara well. She suited his needs, and in return was always kindly towards her. Whatever he asked of her during the process of his bizarre experiments, he made certain that she suffered no pain and Tamara was a more than willing accomplice.

Unlike his dead wife Anna, Tamara was fascinated by what he was trying to achieve and allowed him to artificially impregnate her many times in his fruitless quest to create a being that was not entirely human. Paracelsus gradually took her more and more into his confidence. They were both pleased to discover that she possessed an extremely receptive mind, and showed capabilities beyond her wildest dreams.

Paracelsus had indeed found an excellent student in Tamara, and was soon teaching her how to manufacture the special drug that grew in profusion Below. This provided their wealth, by selling it to eager contacts that Paracelsus had made in New York, one of whom, by coincidence, was Tamara's son Gabriel.

Though Gabriel knew nothing of his mother's whereabouts, Tamara had made it her business to follow his progress, appreciating that to have her son as a contact was insurance for her future.

Since the sudden death of Paracelsus, Tamara was left alone and bitter. She hated to admit that she missed this complex and evil man, but they had shared a life of sorts together, and he had suited her needs.

Now, since the arrest of Gabriel several months before, Tamara was hell bent on revenge, to continue what Paracelsus had set out to do and reclaim his home that he had told her about - the tunnel world that he had helped to build all those years before.

Even though her mentor was dead, his spirit lived on in her, and he had taught her well; trusted her with all his miscreant deeds, and means of executing them. Now she took up the reins, biding her time, watching, waiting, gathering every piece of information as Paracelsus had taught her to do. The same way he had taught her to play chess.

At first it had been Tamara's plan to kidnap Father's new daughter, who often came Below via the Chandler woman's basement entrance, but now there was a different goal - Vincent's child.

Catherine had spent an uncomfortable and restless night, and Vincent had never left her side. Father came in twice through the long hours to check on her and to administer something for her pain. In the morning she wanted to get up.

"Of course," Father agreed. "You can get up and go as far as the bathroom." He peered benevolently at her over his spectacles, before shaking an insistent finger at her, "But Catherine, that is as far as you go."

She groaned. Father frowned and eased himself down onto the edge of the bed. Vincent stood to one side, arms folded in front of him; knowing his beloved was about to be on the receiving end of one of Father's lectures. He was not wrong, but in this instance it was with Vincent's full approval.

"Catherine," the doctor began, "your system has just suffered a terrible physical shake up; and you are pregnant."

She looked down, already nodding in agreement as he continued. "You must have at least three days complete bed rest to allow everything to settle down again." He took both her hands in his and smiled fondly at her. "We don't want to lose this baby, do we?"

"No," she shook her head. "I'm sorry, Father." Her eyes met Vincent's who nodded his own approval and she grinned at him. "Okay, both of you. I'll do as I'm told."

As word of Catherine's pregnancy spread like wildfire around the community, they had little chance of time to themselves, as their steady stream of visitors came to wish them well.

William, with his usual direct approach, came straight to the point and asked when he could start preparing for the wedding reception.

Catherine grinned at him, quite unperturbed, before gazing up questioningly into Vincent's face.

"I think about a couple of weeks would be good. What do you think, Vincent?"

"I can see no reason to delay our wedding ceremony any longer than absolutely necessary, Catherine."

William lumbered forward to clasp Vincent's hand, shaking it vigorously.

"Never thought we'd see this day, Vincent," he husked, overcome with emotion. "May I kiss the little lady?"

The bed groaned beneath his massive weight as he lowered himself down to place a very chaste

kiss onto her cheek.

Catherine wrapped her arms around his neck and hugged him. "Thank you, William. Thank you for caring. And listen; you must not economize on our wedding reception. Use the very best of everything, William, " and she grinned. "I know that you'll enjoy that; and I'll pick up the tab."

Mouse, like Vincent, had this uncanny natural sense of direction that allowed him to wander off on far flung exploratory expeditions into their vast subterranean world.

William would provide him with three days survival rations, and with water being no great problem Below, off he would scurry on his secret forays into the bowels of the earth, like his namesake implied.

On this occasion, however, he had been gone for four days, and while no one would openly admit being worried, worried indeed they all were. Pascal had been requested to silence the pipes for a few hours, so that any possible distress signal would not be lost in the rest of the traffic. Vincent promised Jamie that if nothing was heard by supper time then they would go together in search of him.

He and Catherine were laying together on the top of the bed. She was more exhausted than she cared to admit after her day filled with visitors. Vincent insisted she should get some rest and was quietly reading to her. Abruptly, he stopped in mid-sentence and looked up; his body tense and alert.

"What is it, Vincent?" Catherine whispered. They both heard the silent pipes suddenly burst into life, and without answering Vincent sprang deftly to his feet. He picked up his cloak from the chair, reached for Catherine's hand to kiss her fingers.

"I will not be long," he assured her as he departed their chamber.

Quite a gathering followed in Vincent's wake along the winding labyrinth; to be greeted by a very weary, dirty and bedraggled looking Mouse; who none the less was grinning from ear to ear, and hopping from one foot to the other in obvious excitement. He beamed up at Vincent who gripped him by his shoulders, shaking him in an affectionate welcome.

"Mouse. It is good to see that you are safe and well. We were all worried about you."

Unconcerned by the worry he had caused, the young man vigorously nodded his head up and down as he eagerly informed his friend.

"Mouse found something, Vincent. Mouse found something really neat."

"You have?" He queried patiently, as Jamie stepped forward and impatiently grabbed his arm.

"Come on Mouse, and tell us what you have found."

He grinned around, as the expectant faces of Pascal, Kanin and the several others who had tagged along; and at last the excited explorer managed to find the words.

"Hidden chambers and passageways, secret entrance, never find." He rummaged in his pocket and pulled out a dirty folded piece of paper, then crouched down and spread it out onto the floor in front of him. A lamp was brought forward and placed beside it, throwing its glow onto an amazingly well drawn layout of a series of connecting caverns and chambers.

Vincent knelt down on one knee, tracing the mapped out drawing with one clawed finger. Mouse looked into his face.

"Good supply of water, Vincent." And he pointed, "here. No sign of flooding or damp."

Vincent inclined his head; his mind going into overdrive. They were becoming desperate for some

alternative accommodation that was both safe and dry; and another location could prove useful. "How far is it, Mouse?"

Mouse pondered. "It took Mouse a day and a half; but a lot less when you know where to go. Good route," he nodded up at Vincent. "Do it easy in a day."

Vincent picked the map up from the floor and rose to his feet drawing Mouse up with him. His mind was racing as he folded the map and handed it back to Mouse.

"We'll organize an expedition, Mouse," announced Vincent. "You say it is a good route?"

Mouse nodded.

"Excellent." He looked around at the others, seeing nothing but enthusiasm on all their faces. "We will take a few of the older children with us; they will enjoy the chance to explore new ground."

Jamie unwrapped one of William's freshly baked meat and potato pies and handed it to Mouse, whose face lit up and he devoured it with relish. Amid animated conversation of plans and suggestions, they escorted Mouse home, where after a meal and a bath he slept soundly in his own bed for the next twelve hours.

By Wednesday, Catherine felt that she was fit enough to go back to work, which was a great relief to Joe, when he visited that night accompanied by Vivien.

Vincent had taken Joe to one side to ask him if he would make sure that Catherine took her rest breaks throughout the day, and to remind her to have lunch.

"Hey, Vincent," Joe assured him. "If there's one thing I'm used to, coming from a large family, is pregnant ladies." He laughed. "You just leave her to me, I'm an old hand."

"Thank you, Joe, for dispelling my fears. I know that you will watch over her."

Vivien had found the excited preparations for the forthcoming expedition into an uncharted section of their tunnel world, infectious. She had four days leave coming to her, and felt that she could not miss an opportunity like this to see more of their world, and asked if she could take part in it. She reasoned that if the children could handle it then she certainly could.

In truth, Vivien desperately wanted to learn more; feel part of her father's environment, and not just an honorary relative. She had not suffered any ill effects from claustrophobia when Vincent had broken his ankle and she had gone to Father's place with the rescue party. There was no reason to suppose that she would do so now.

Vincent welcomed the suggestion, and even Father agreed that at least she would be going in safe hands.

CHAPTER SIX

Tamara could not believe her good fortune. Everything seemed to be working in her favour and all her patient vigilance was paying off. The fates were playing right into her hands, and she chuckled with glee. She had learnt from Paracelsus the ability to move through the tunnels like a silent shadow, to create the illusion of being able to disappear into thin air, causing doubt in the minds of any pursuer of what they had actually seen.

Nothing of Vincent's planned expedition had been kept secret, and Tamara had been able to glean all the information she had needed from the constant chatter on the pipes. She had also managed to purloin a copy of the route they would be taking which provided her with the most strategic part

of her plan.

Tamara had her own suppliers in the outside world for everything that she would need, with ample opportunity and the expertise to prepare and set the stage for an act of sabotage that would rock the foundations of *'Father's world.'*

She did not envisage the possibility of Vincent, nor indeed any other member of their ill-fated expedition surviving what she had so carefully planned. All she could foresee was that a rescue mission would undoubtedly be mounted, depleting their security even further - leaving her free to fulfil Paracelsus' dream - to take over the world that Paracelsus had helped to create, and to raise Vincent's son to realize his full potential.

Tamara smiled, baring her discoloured teeth, content in the knowledge that Paracelsus would have been proud of her.

"Are you sure that you don't mind me going on this trip, Olivia?" Kanin asked, even though he very much needed to get away for a few days to clear his mind and try and set himself back onto an even keel. He needed to think about something else, in an attempt to fill the empty void that his son's death had left within him. This past fifteen months had been one long nightmare after another and to a sensitive man like Kanin, it had all taken its toll. He was only beginning to feel safe again in this world Below that was his home.

Olivia had been born here. She had never known anything else. Kanin on the other hand had known the harsh reality and cruelty of the world Above. He was glad Olivia would never have to experience such a place. This was where he belonged now... with Olivia, and this large family who had adopted him more than seventeen years before. The family he loved as his own.

She moved across their rock hewn candle-lit chamber, still dressed in her night clothes and clutching his rucksack in her arms. She dropped it onto their bed next to the growing pile of spare clothing and odds and ends that he was taking with him.

Kanin was sitting on the edge of the bed watching her, and he reached out to grasp her arm, and pulled her down to sit beside him.

"Tell me, Liv. I won't go if you would rather I didn't."

She picked up his hand, lacing her fingers with him before smiling up into his face. "Kanin, we have to try and get back to normal; and who said anything about it being easy. Besides, Vincent and Mouse need you to go with them; and you need to go. It's what you do."

She reached out for his other hand and rose to her feet to stand before him. "The trip will do you good, and you'll enjoy it, and I love you - so no more arguing."

Her words tumbled out in an emotional rush, because she was so close to tears for all kinds of reasons that she could not have explained to anyone. She leaned forward and kissed his mouth, before hugging him tightly to her, as he dragged her onto his lap and began kissing her more thoroughly.

"I love you, Livi."

"And I love you too," she grinned tearfully. "And that will keep me going until you return." Olivia kissed him again before pulling away. "I will be all right, you know, Kanin. I'm not alone here." She giggled, snuggling closer to his warmth, teasing him with her kisses. "And we will be able to make up for it when you get back."

Kanin and Olivia were just beginning to learn to laugh again: without all their unreasonable feelings of guilt that somehow laughter was not allowed. They would find themselves self-consciously glancing around to see if anyone had noticed them daring to be happy.

The whole heartbreaking shattering experience had, if anything, brought them closer; grateful that each of them could give generously of the right kind of comfort to the other. This was their first long separation since Kanin's release from prison, and if truth be told, Olivia could not bear the pain of seeing him go now - but she would not have stopped him going; not for anything in the world.

In Vincent's chamber the same sorrow of parting was already being anticipated in the all-enveloping silent stillness, before the first subway train passed high overhead, and the early morning wake up calls were being tapped out along the pipes.

Vincent had been awake for some time; savouring the joy of holding his love close; feeling her moulded to his body like a second skin, warm and alive; and his. They had not mad love in the fullest sense since she had fallen from the iron ladder more than a week before; but they had given and received their love and pleasures in other ways.

Vincent's sensual gentleness had overawed Catherine, as she in turn had astounded him with her unrestrained delight in his body.

For Vincent, this was a moment captured in time. He wanted to hold onto it forever, as words that he knew by heart slipped into his thoughts, and in these thoughts he spoke them like a silent prayer.

'I cannot define my satisfaction, yet it is so.

I cannot define my life, yet it is so.

Is there any gift greater than this joy?

Can the soul offer a prayer more perfect, than this tender silence?

A crowd had gathered at the wide junction in the tunnels, to see the expedition party off on its way. It had settled Father's mind when Vivien volunteered to go on this trip, as with five children in the party, anything could happen, even though they were all well-seasoned tunnel travellers, and both Vincent and Kanin were adept at first aid.

Out of all the young people who were old enough to go, and indeed wanted to go, only five could be selected. To ensure fair play all their names had been put into a hat, and the first five names to be drawn were Kipper, Samantha, Geoffrey, Zach, and Eric.

All the equipment, food, blankets and spare clothing were shared out on a weight for weight basis, with Vincent and Kanin carrying the heaviest loads, and Mouse, Jamie and the children all carrying their fair share. Vivien also carried the medical supplies. They all dressed in warm comfortable clothing with extra layers on their knees and elbows as added protection against the rough rock, with gloves worn also for warmth.

The children were excited. They wanted to be on their way. To them this was the equivalent of what a camping trip would be to the topsiders.

Vincent had already said his goodbyes to Catherine when he had escorted her to her basement entrance that morning. He felt much more settled about leaving her, after his talk with Joe the week before. Now he hugged Father, and then Mary. He shook hands with William and Pascal, acknowledging their wishes of a safe journey. Kanin and Olivia held each other close, not really wanting to let go. Then with more cries of, "Safe journey. Take care. See you in three days," ringing in their ears, Mouse led them off to his newly discovered location, deep in the depths of their world.

They had been walking for just over four hours, and according to Mouse making excellent

progress. Everyone was in high spirits; singing, telling funny stories, and playing the usual silly games that are played on these occasions. They all did their share to take Vivien's mind off the solid enveloping blackness that surrounded their small cocoon of light.

Mouse's confident sureness and unerring sense of direction was something that they all trusted in and they followed him unquestioningly, with Kanin and Vincent taking turns to bring up the rear, making sure everyone was safe and accounted for.

Suddenly, Eric stumbled and cried out; sprawling full length onto the rough rock floor before anyone could stop him. His spectacles made contact with a raised lump of rock and smashed. Within that first split second of silent shock, Vincent's large hands encircled his body and lifted him up.

The boy's face was covered in blood, most of it from a nose bleed and a badly grazed chin; but the rest of it was from where a broken sharp point on his spectacles had pierced the skin on his cheek bone, and was now bleeding profusely.

Vivien quickly took charge of the situation and a few minutes later his nose bleed had been stopped; his face cleaned up; and a dressing fixed over the cut on his cheek and his grazed chin. She gave him some medication to help with the pain.

Vincent decided that they should stay where they were and break for lunch, allowing Eric the time he needed to recover, and for them to determine what to do.

The sad fact was, that Eric's spectacles were damaged beyond repair, and without them Eric had great difficulty in seeing very much at all.

It was Jamie who came up with the most logical solution, and after having a quiet word with Zach, took her food and lowered herself to sit cross-legged beside Vincent.

Eric was at the other side of him, leaning his still throbbing and sore head against Vincent's large comfortable frame. With the folds of his cloak wrapped around him, Eric closed his eyes and tried to sleep. After his sister Ellie had died of the plague, it had been Vincent and Father who had given him the comfort he needed. Eric had never been afraid of Vincent, and for a long time now, he, like all the other children, looked to him for comfort and safety and absolute trust.

Vincent gazed down quizzically at Jamie. His head inclined. "Jamie?" He could see that she had some suggestion to make.

"Yes, Vincent," she answered, knowing that he could read her like a book and with her usual direct approach, she continued. "It's obvious to me, Vincent, that Eric can't manage without his glasses. He can't see without them, so it wouldn't be much fun for him anyway, would it?"

"No, Jamie, it would not," and he shook his head sadly. "What do you suggest?" Giving Jamie his full attention his large hand hugged Eric to him in a comforting gesture, understanding the disappointment the boy must be feeling.

"Zach and I will take him home," Jamie stated matter-of-factly. "The route we have taken so far has been well-marked, so that's no problem; and we can always come again."

Vincent sighed. "Yes, Jamie, that does seem to be the best solution. Thank you - both of you." He inclined his head to Zach, and glanced around at the rest of them, acknowledging their agreement which Kanin endorsed with his comment.

"It would certainly be a shame to abandon the whole trip when we have come this far."

Eric stirred against Vincent's side and sat up squinting around, finding great difficulty in making anything out in any significant detail. Vincent's hands still rested on the boy's shoulders, as he turned and tried desperately to bring Vincent's face into focus, but to no avail. His small body slumped in defeat and he sniffed miserably.

"I've got to go back, haven't I, Vincent?" His voice was tremulous, tinged with disappointment.

"It would be best, Eric. Jamie and Zach are taking you." He turned and cupped the boy's small face in his large hands. "It is no fun when you cannot see, Eric, and when Father gets you fitted up with some new spectacles, then I promise we will bring you again. All right?"

Eric nodded in resigned acceptance and Vincent hugged him close.

"Do you think that I should go back with them?" Vivien asked.

"Do you wish to especially, Vivien?" He was suddenly worried. "I know that these surroundings are not compatible with everyone. Are you finding it a problem, Vivien?"

"Oh no, no, I'm fine, really I am," she confidently assured him. "To be honest, I'm enjoying it rather more than I thought I would."

"Good," he relaxed, his eyes smiling at her in proud affection. "Well, that is settled then," and he hauled himself up to his feet, drawing Eric up with him as everyone else began to ready themselves.

Within the next few minutes everyone said their goodbyes, and the two parties went their separate ways, with Mouse's reassurances to Jamie that within the hour she would be able to make contact with Pascal, when they reached the first series of pipes.

As Vincent's party moved off into the dark uncharted reaches of their world, Samantha was heard to say.

"Poor Eric. He doesn't have much luck, does he?"

They had been walking at a steady pace for little over half an hour. The going was good and the tunnel section they had just entered was clear of any obstructions; about twelve feet wide with the ceiling somewhere out of sight in the blackness.

Kipper was up front with Mouse, and Vincent was close behind them. Vivien walked along with Samantha and Geoffrey at either side of her and all were deep in conversation together with Kanin, who was bringing up the rear. A dull unearthly blast suddenly assaulted their ears from some close proximity before them as the ground trembled violently beneath their feet and fearful rumblings resounded around them.

Vincent moved swiftly forward to clutch Mouse and Kipper to him in an instinctive protective gesture. At that precise moment, the ground erupted beneath them. Amid screams of terror, Vincent's mighty roar and the ear-splitting sounds of falling rock in this confined space, Vincent, Kipper and Mouse were swallowed up from sight amid a thick cloud of choking dust.

It forced Kanin back, preventing him from following his own natural instincts of rushing to their aid. Although the four of them were left still on their feet, he, Vivien and the children were bent double coughing the dust from their lungs, and disbelieving what had just happened before their eyes.

The children were on the verge of hysteria and Vivien kept repeating over and over, "Please God, don't let them die."

As the dust began to settle and Kanin straightened up to try and assess the situation, a second explosion rent the air from somewhere close behind them with deafening sounds and shock waves, as tons upon tons of rocks and rubble spewed down from above, and effectively blocking their only exit.

Kanin, using his body as a shield, gathered the screaming Vivien, Samantha and Geoffrey to him; and together they crouched against the tunnel wall and prayed.

Thirty minutes into their return journey home, the sudden sound of a distant explosion brought Jamie, Eric and Zach to an abrupt halt, as seconds later they felt the waves of aftershocks shudder beneath their feet, causing the whole tunnel to tremble around them.

Clouds of dust and small rubble peppered down on top of them as they fled in panic to huddle together close to the tunnel wall; stomachs knotted in fear.

As soon as the noise abated and the tremors ceased, Jamie grabbed a hold on them both and cried with a terror she could not disguise.

"Come on, let's get out of here. We must get to the pipes and send for help." The words had hardly left her lips before they heard and then felt the second more violent explosion, and the reverberation of sound and movement seemed to last an eternity.

They held on tight to each other and kept their heads down as dust and loosened small rocks fell all around them from the vibrating tunnel roof. Everything became silent and still again, the fear of their own safety diminished, only to be replaced by their fear for Vincent and the family they loved, back at the heart of the explosions.

CHAPTER SEVEN

As personal assistant to the recently appointed District Attorney of Manhattan, Catherine occupied a desk in his spacious office to where they had just returned after lunch. It had been Joe's treat, and he had taken her to a popular Italian restaurant adjacent to the DA's building.

Over the past week, since her return to work, this had been a regular occurrence, and even if they had not gone out for lunch, Joe insisted that they had something sent in, and that she sat with her feet up. Catherine smiled, wondering if things would ever return to normal, but graciously accepting what had obviously been engineered by Vincent on Joe's last visit Below. A way of giving him some peace of mind while she was at work.

Catherine resumed her close scrutiny of the case file that she had made a start on before lunch, and Joe had a couple of urgent telephone calls to make before he went down to the conference room. He had just finished making his first call, and he stood with the hand set clutched between his shoulder and his chin, whilst he tapped out the second number and sorted the relevant documentation on his desk. Suddenly, he heard Catherine cry out at the far side of his office, drawing his instant attention.

"Hey Kiddo. You okay?"

It was obvious to him that she was anything but all right, as she sat rigidly at her desk, ashen-faced, shaking violently, with her hand clamped over her mouth, her eyes wide and staring, and filled with undisguised terror. Joe dropped the hand set into his cradle and was across the office in a few strides. He rounded the back of Catherine's desk and spun her chair to face him, as he crouched down in front of her, gripping each side of her chair.

"Cathy, is it the baby? Shall I call Peter?"

Her eyes focused onto his face, and she lowered her hand. Joe noticed the beads of perspiration standing out both on her brow, and above her top lip.

"No." Her mouth was tremulous as she attempted to explain. "It's Vincent, Joe. Something terrible has happened to him. I feel such terror; such fear, and the pain." She suddenly roused herself, gripping Joe's arms. "I've got to go. To warn them that something terrible has happened to the expedition party. They'll be out of range of their communication system by now, with no way of sending for help."

Joe was stunned into silence, as Catherine suddenly galvanized herself into action, turned in her chair and picked up her purse from the floor at the side of her. Joe pushed himself upright and reached for her coat from the stand, and as he helped her on with it, he posed a question.

"Cathy." He rested his hands on her shoulders as he stood behind her. "This empathic bond that you share with Vincent. It's a two-way thing then, is it?"

"Yes, Joe," she nodded sombrely and turned towards him. Joe felt awed by the concept of what he was witness to.

"Then be careful, Kiddo. If you need me, I'm here."

She turned to face him. "I know that, Joe." Their eyes met in affection and understanding, as they hugged each other; before she quickly left the office.

The terrible cacphony of sound and movement that had engulfed them, seemed to last an eternity from which there was no escape. At last it began to ease off, but there were still the stomach churning sounds from the rock strata around them as it shifted and settled. Even this slight movement cause yet more dust and small loosened rocks to rain down on them. Still they held on, all of them whimpering in fear.

Kanin was aware that he had been hit many times, but he had withstood the onslaught, feeling no pain. His only concern had been to protect his three precious charges whose lives had been placed in his hands. He could think no further than that.

Kanin had used as much of his body as he could to shield Vivien and the two children; hoping that the tunnel wall at their backs would hold solid to give them some small chance of survival.

They could hardly breathe in the thick dust-filled atmosphere, but even with the intensity of their fear, and unimaginable discomfort, there was an overriding will to survive.

The eternity that it had seemed was little more than two minutes, from the first explosion to the silence that now reigned. Kanin's tensed muscles seemed as if they had been set in stone as he slowly released his hold, and the children began to cry and cough.

He husked through his grit-caked mouth and lips. "Vivien, Samantha, Geoffrey. Are any of you hurt?" His reply was much more coughing and gasping.

Vivien groaned before croaking out her first thought. "Kanin. Are we alive?" That Vivien should doubt this was understandable, as the blackness that surrounded them was absolute; with the dust and grit making its presence felt in every conceivable nook and cranny. Not to mention eating it as her teeth grated against each other; her mouth and lips coated with gritty dust as she began to cough again. Her recurring thought was that it was like being buried alive.

"We're alive, Vivien," he reassured her, as he moved with care, feeling his way around feet and legs as they all began to stretch out. "I think the most important thing to do first is find the water, and let in some light."

Kanin accepted that he was their lifeline in this nightmare situation, and ignoring his own injuries that were just beginning to make themselves felt, he kept on talking, as he eased off his backpack that had given him some protection. He located the flashlight and switched it on, giving them a most welcome beam of light. He handed it to one of the children, hoping that it would help to ease their terrors.

Kanin knew where everything was to be located in his backpack, and soon had the rolled up pack of candles and flint lighter to hand. Most of the candles were broken, but he lit half a dozen stumps, standing them in their own puddles of melted wax on a flat stone; and the darkness pushed back.

Staring at him through the gloom were three grey frightened faces. Their tears had made furrows of mud down their dust-covered cheeks. Vivien had clutched both of the children to her and they were all trembling violently, both with the shocked reaction and the cold.

Kanin unfastened the pocket in his rucksack that housed his water canister and shook it, relieved to find that it was almost full and had not been damaged. He dare not think about how long it might have to last. He unscrewed the top and handed it to Geoffrey, he being the youngest; holding it with him for fear that he would drop it; coaxing him gently in what to do. "Geoffrey, take a good mouthful of water and swish your mouth around as if you are cleaning your teeth; then spit it out."

He watched him as he performed this operation a couple of times, before having a short drink and handing it on to Samantha.

Whilst Kanin waited for his turn he lit a few more candles, thus illuminating and revealing the terrible plight that they were in.

Geoffrey and Samantha began to cry again. They were so very frightened. Vivien handed him the water with trembling hands that belied her calm exterior; and Kanin covered them with his own around the canister and held them still.

"Vivien," and he glanced at the children to include them. "We are not going to die down here. Jamie, Zach and Eric will have heard and felt the explosions, and they will send for help."

All three of them stared at him, wide-eyed and frightened; then they nodded as the logic of what he had just said sank in and helped to calm them.

Kanin rinsed his own mouth and had a short drink, as thoughts of Olivia waiting at home crept into his mind. She had been his anchor during the whole terrifying experience, and he made a silent vow, *'I'll come back to you, Livi. Even if I have to dig my way through to you with my bare hands. I'll come back to you.'*

Pushing these private thoughts to one side he turned his attention to his three charges feeling much more refreshed. "Hmmm. That's definitely much better," he rose to his feet picking up a candle and holding it up in the air. It flickered. Kanin nodded, "And we have air."

Vivien's initial terror of this alien predicament began to abate slightly, and she scrambled to her feet to stand before him.

"And you're injured, Kanin. Look at the state of your hands, and you've a couple of nasty head wounds too."

He grimaced, acknowledging the fact before resting his wounded hands onto her shoulders, shaking her slightly.

"Vivien. I will live. We are all going to get out of here, because I cannot believe that after all I've been put through of late, that I've been brought down here to die. Life wouldn't be that cruel."

She gave him a wan smile of agreement, and he lowered his hands in front of her submissively holding them out for her inspection.

"If you have something amongst your bag of tricks to wrap around my hands, I will be eternally grateful," he grinned in an effort to bring a little levity to the situation.

Kanin had actually ripped and skinned his knuckles down to the bone. The blood had congealed into a solid crust mixed with the dust and causing him great pain if he clenched his hands. Right now his minor injuries were nothing compared to his fears for Vincent, Mouse and Kipper who had disappeared before their eyes. Kanin was eager to go and investigate the hoped for survival of his friend. He dare not think of any other conclusion.

Vivien found two large padded dressings in her medical supplies. She poured antiseptic liquid over

each knuckle, following by a thick coating of cooling medicated cream then fastened the dressings securely around his hands.

"That's fine, Vivien," he reassured her, then winced as he flexed his hands. Ignoring the pain, he insisted, "The head wounds will wait."

Vivien knew that she had done all she could do for now; knew that for Kanin there were more urgent priorities; but she also wanted to help.

She touched his arm. "Kanin," her voice was quiet. "Don't be alone with all this responsibility. I'm here, and I'm with you. Anything you need me to do, Kanin, I will do. Vincent is my brother; and the rest of you are like family to me," and she hugged the children to her.

Kanin swallowed the lump in his throat. "Thank you, Vivien, that took great courage."

"Courage has nothing to do with it, Kanin," her natural bouncy personality surfacing at last. "It's called protecting your own." She grinned up at him, which right now was just what he needed and with renewed fortitude he hugged them all to him before crouching down in front of Samantha and Geoffrey.

He knew that they needed some reassurance too, and he sighed. "Samantha, Geoffrey; you know that I have to go and find Vincent, Mouse and Kipper?"

"Yes." Their faces looked tense and frightened and Kanin realized that they were still suffering from shock. He also knew that having something to do would perhaps be beneficial.

"Now, listen to me both of you. Whilst I'm away, I don't want you to move out of this circle of light. Okay?" They both nodded and Kanin continued. "I want you to try and help Vivien all you can. Find out exactly what provisions we have; make a list, including the equipment. Have something to eat; and try to keep warm." He dropped down onto his knees and hugged them both to him. "You're doing fine; both of you."

He looked up at Vivien. "All of you, and as soon as I find out what the situation is, I'll come back and let you know."

He unstrapped the coil of rope from his pack and hooked it over his shoulder. He put candles and matches into his pocket and crossing his fingers, unearthed a powerful flashlight from his pack and switched it on, illuminating a large area. Satisfied, he switched it off again and turned to Vivien, resting his arm around her shoulders and gazing down at the children.

"While I'm gone, I want you to remember that there is no shame in being afraid; we're all afraid; but we will come through this together; and I have to go and see if I can find Vincent and the others. So we must all pray that they are alive and safe."

No one spoke, but all of them nodded sombrely as Kanin turned and moved off further up the tunnel, to the gaping crater that the explosion had rent in the tunnel floor.

Vincent lay on his back, disoriented in the silent velvet blackness that surrounded him in the bottom of God knows where. He remembered the horrifying force of the blast, and he remembered falling. The whole of his face and chest felt as if they were on fire and the burning pain was indescribable as a part of him prayed to lose consciousness again, but the other part clawed its way back.

His recollections of what had happened returned with crystal clarity, bringing him to complete awareness; and with his mouth and lips coated with grit he croaked. "Mouse. Kipper. Please God let them be alive," but the sounds that he actually emitted were unrecognizable and barely more than a whisper.

He eased himself up onto one elbow to feel for his backpack; the exertion causing his head to spin,

and he whimpered with the pain that this movement had caused him: though relieved that nothing appeared to be broken.

Every member of the tunnel community was stringently schooled in the art of survival when out of range of their communication network; and Vincent was no exception. When packing their gear, they had to know exactly where the basic necessities were to be located easily in the dark. It could easily make the difference between life and death. Vincent acknowledged the importance of this rule as his hands grasped the familiar surface of his water container, opening it eagerly to rinse the grit from his mouth, before savouring the cool water on the back of his throat. He was tempted to pour the whole container over his face and chest; but thought better of it not knowing where the next supply of water would come from.

At least he now felt much more verbal, and he shouted. "Mouse? Kipper? Please answer me." He listened intently and was rewarded by the sound of a very relieved, but frightened and distressed Mouse, from somewhere to his left and far down.

"Mouse, are you hurt?" He called back to him. as he eased his backpack from his shoulders and unearthed the flashlight from where it had been put for safe keeping, rolled up inside the blankets. Vincent hoped that it was still intact.

Mouse's voice came back again, sobbing with the relief of knowing that Vincent was near; and he gasped out, "Vincent, Mouse hurt and frightened, but Kipper hurt real bad. Not moving."

"Is he breathing, Mouse?"

"Yes, but not good."

Vincent switched on his flashlight, but found that it hurt his eyes and he held it away from him. He called back to Mouse.

"Have you water, light, blankets?" He could hear his young friend crying, which in itself spoke of the trauma he was trying to cope with. Mouse was by nature a resilient and resourceful young man, who was capable of great courage under pressure, even putting his own life at risk to save others.

"Mouse, try and tell me all you can," Vincent encouraged him, knowing that he would be suffering from shock, and possibly not fully coherent.

Finally Mouse began to speak. "We fell long way, Vincent. Nearly lost Kipper over edge. Can't see. Very black down here. On a narrow ledge. Scared to move." Mouse began to cry in earnest, verging on hysteria, and this was something that Vincent was struggling to hold at bay himself as the memory of the second explosion invaded his thoughts.

His fears for his friends; his sister, hit him like a physical blow, but right now he knew that Mouse's needs were the most urgent.

"Mouse, have you lost your packs?"

"Yes. Fall over ledge. Long way down."

Vincent could almost taste the fear that his friend must be experiencing, because it mirrored his own; and he knew he had to get some help to Mouse before his own strength gave out.

He located his supply of candles and matches and soon had several lit and standing in pools of melted wax, whilst continually reassuring Mouse at the same time.

"Mouse just hold on. I will lower water, light and blankets to you. Remember that Jamie and Zach will have heard the explosions and will go for help." Vincent's eyes felt as though they were filled with bricks, and were watering profusely. He was virtually blind, and he called out again.

"Now just keep on talking, Mouse. Guide me to you."

His voice almost gave out, and he took another last drink of water before unfastening the coil of rope from his pack. Working by touch alone, he tied the water canister and flashlight to the end of the rope. He shared out his candles and matches, fastening them up in a handkerchief, before finally securing them all to his blanket roll and making sure that the flashlight was turned on.

Vincent did not trust himself to stand up. His single thought was to lower what was needed down to Mouse, completely overlooking the fact that he was desperate for help himself. This relatively simple task exhausted Vincent more than he would have thought possible, and he was functioning solely on sheer force of will.

"Guide me to you, Mouse," as even his voice began to fade, his head was spinning and he had to fight to remain conscious.

"Vincent hurt bad too?" Mouse asked worriedly from below, the renewed tremor of fear in his voice.

"Yes, Mouse," he husked. "Keep talking. Please, just keep talking."

Somehow Vincent dragged himself and his cargo along the floor, vaguely aware that it inclined gently downwards towards the sound of Mouse's voice telling him to stop, as he could see the glow from the flashlight. The blood was pounding in Vincent's ears, and he knew that he had but seconds before he lost his hold on reality. Even so, he sensed the uncanny sensation of black emptiness before him, as he pushed the pack with his feet until he felt it drop over the edge.

With the last vestige of conscious thought he fed out the rope between his hands until at last Mouse shouted, "Got it, Vincent."

As Vincent slumped back totally spent, he was overwhelmed by an all-consuming feeling of terror that caused his blood to run cold, and he began to shiver uncontrollably as before him in the inky blackness a vision of Catherine appeared clearly before him, in his mind's eye.

She was floating and ethereal; but the vision projected an aloneness and terror of such appalling magnitude that Vincent cried out his last worlds, as his very soul reached out to her. "Catherine, I will find you." Then darkness claimed him again.

Kanin stood on the edge of the crater that yawned before him; a hole more than five yards across it, and taking up the full width of the tunnel floor. He shone the beam of his powerful flashlight down inside to reveal what appeared to be a large chamber some twenty feet below him, with the floor falling away in a fairly steep gradient, disappearing beneath the tunnel along which they would have travelled. He lowered himself face down onto the floor to have a better look, and as he settled himself Kanin could just make out the tiniest pinpoints of light, way ahead in the velvet blackness. He shouted. "Hello." and the echo returned. He shouted again. "Vincent, Mouse, Kipper," hearing nothing but the sound of his own voice echoing around the empty blackness. He held his breath and waited.

He did not have to wait long to be rewarded with the faint but audible cry for help that reverberated from deep inside the cavern, and seemed to come from very far down. He clambered to his feet to look around for an output of rock that he could anchor a rope to. Kanin had every intention of going down there to investigate.

As promised, he returned to Vivien and the children to let them know what he had found and heard; as well as to collect water, extra ropes, and a collapsible stretcher that they used on underground rescues.

Satisfied that Vivien and the children were at least safe, and that they knew and accepted that he had to leave them, he returned to the crater.

As a safety measure, and a means of being able to find his way back, Kanin left several candles

burning along the rim of the crater before lowering first the equipment, and then himself, down into the unknown inky blackness below. He made his way cautiously along the inclining floor towards the faint glow ahead that he assumed were candles; also noticing that the chamber was opening out considerably at either side of him. It was obvious to him that the debris from the first explosion had created an avalanche down the incline, hence leaving the floor as it was now; reasonably clear of obstruction.

Kanin's stomach knotted in fearful apprehension, because he knew that this same avalanche would have included Vincent, Mouse and Kipper. His flashlight could pick out nothing before him except blackness; nothing to stop his friends plummeting down into oblivion.

Kanin forcibly halted this train of thought, and shouted again. "Vincent. Mouse. Kipper."

His voice carried in the perfect acoustics, giving him a sense of being alone on stage in an enormous empty auditorium, waiting for the house lights to go up. The illusion remained, as the welcome voice of Mouse was heard coming from the orchestra stalls far below. At that moment, his flashlight picked out Vincent's large bulk, as he lay slumped back from the edge of the drop. Kanin approached the candles that had guided him in, identifying Vincent's pack beside them.

He moved on down to kneel beside Vincent's still form, noticing the coil of rope held loosely in his hand, and trailing down over the edge into the blackness far below. Kanin rested his head onto his friend's chest to listen to the sound of his slow steady heartbeat, reassuring him that Vincent was in no imminent danger of dying. He could, however, see at a glance that Vincent had taken the full force of the blast. His clothes were shredded and singed, as was his hair. There were several deep cuts on his face, and the left side of his jaw was badly burnt.

In this lighting, any bruising he had sustained could not be seen, and Kanin breathed a sigh of relief that no main arteries appeared to have been severed, and all the wounds had congealed with the dust and grit.

Kanin left Vincent for the moment to lay face down on the ground and peer cautiously over the edge where he could see the glow of candlelight far below. He picked up his flashlight from the side of him, shielding its beam with his hand so as not to dazzle his friends; and he called down to them.

"Mouse. Kipper. You okay? How badly are you hurt?" Kanin's heart constricted in fear and he whispered, "Oh my God." He saw for himself the precarious situation they were in, as he heard Mouse's distressed but joyful response to his presence.

Mouse and Kipper had fallen onto a strategically placed protrusion of rock some twenty-five feet below, and Kanin sent up a silent prayer of thanks for their safety.

Mouse was sitting with his back to the rock face, legs outstretched in front of him. Kipper lay at his side covered in blankets, with his head resting on Mouse's thigh. There was little space to warrant any unnecessary movement; certainly no extra space for a rescuer to go down and administer any medical aid.

Kanin's instant diagnosis was that it was going to be all down to him to haul them both up to this relative safety. "Mouse," he asked again, "Just how badly are you injured?" Kanin mentally crossed his fingers as he waited for his friend's reply.

"Got badly knocked about, Kanin. Nearly lost Kipper over ledge. Lost our packs as well. Don't think I've broken anything though."

"And Kipper; how's Kipper?"

Below, in what seemed to Mouse like the edge of the Abyss, he stroked the young boy's hair and called back up to Kanin. "Kipper's hurt real bad. Worse than worse. Head injured. Broken leg;

shoulder out as well."

"Dislocated?" asked Kanin.

"Maybe. Maybe broken. Lots of cuts and scrapes."

"And he's unconscious?"

"Yes."

Kanin knew that it had to be pretty obvious, but needed to be established nonetheless. "That's good, Mouse. It will make it much easier to bring him up." Kanin pushed himself up to his knees and swept the beam of his flashlight around the immediate area, until he found what he was looking for, a stump of rock rising from the floor, enough to anchor Vincent's rope. He shouted down to Mouse. "Can you reach the other end of this rope, Mouse?"

"Yes. Vincent sent us water, light and blankets tied to it."

"That's fine, Mouse." Kanin was relieved to know that at least Vincent had regain full consciousness, and was in charge of all his faculties. "Just sit tight, Mouse, while I organize things at this end."

He turned back to Vincent and withdrew the coil of rope from his limp grasp; then clambering to his feet he moved to wrap the end of the rope around the stump of rock, before calling back down to Mouse.

"Right, Mouse. Secure your end firmly around your waist, and I'll fasten it off here. At least you'll be safe while you're moving about."

Although Mouse had perked up now that he knew he was not alone, the fear and apprehension still sounded in his voice as he answered, "Okay, good. Okay, fine." He knew it was a lot to ask of any man to have to haul himself and Kipper up this long drop; without help. As he finished securing his rope, he called back up to Kanin. "How's Vincent, and Vivien, and....?"

Kanin answered before he had finished his question. "Vincent's not too good, Mouse, but he'll live. Vivien, Geoffrey and Samantha were all very brave in such a terrifying situation, but they came through it very well, frightened but fine."

Kanin continued talking to keep them both calm as he fitted the stretcher together. It worked on the same principle as a slot in tent frame, with straps at either side to wrap around and immobilize the injured person. A rope that had been specially fashioned for this purpose was hooked onto each end, allowing Kipper to be drawn up to the surface horizontally.

Kanin lowered the contraption over the edge, moving back to wrap his end of the rope around the anchoring rock, while continuing to feed it out down to the ledge where Mouse was waiting.

"Okay. Got it." Mouse shouted. "Not much room. Bit scary." His voice trembled, and Kanin acknowledged his understated summation with his assurances that neither he or the stretcher could go anywhere.

It was all he could do for him at the moment, plus his words of encouragement that he was doing fine.

At last Mouse called out that Kipper was ready to be hauled up to the surface, and within the next few exhausting minutes, Kanin was dragging the stretcher and Kipper to safety beside him. He did not even pause to catch his breath before heaving Mouse up to be enveloped gratefully into his arms.

Kanin was both perspiring and breathing heavily, with his muscles screaming from his exertion; but he was more than a little relieved that this part of the rescue had gone without mishap. He rose to his feet.

"I'll go and fetch Vivien and the children down here. Keep us all together. I won't be long, Mouse."

The young man did not answer him, and Kanin, sensing his distress, reached down to grip his shoulder. "Hey, don't worry, Mouse. We have enough supplies for a few days; and we're not going to suffocate."

Mouse gazed up at him with troubled eyes. There was no doubt that they both shared the same fears, but Kanin was trying to be optimistic about it and he crouched down beside him, their faces appearing distorted and eerie in the beam of the flashlight.

"They'll find us, Mouse. Jamie and Zach know where we are. They'll bring help."

Mouse looked down miserably, his shoulders slumped in defeat. "I know that Kanin, but Mouse brought you all here. To this." He was again on the brink of tears as he forced the last few words out. "All Mouse's fault."

Kanin swung himself around on the floor to face his distressed young friend, and gripping both of his shoulders, shook him almost angrily. "No, Mouse. None of this is your fault. You weren't the one to blow us all to kingdom come; but there sure as hell is someone out there who knew that we were coming this way, and laid the trap for us. Someone who wanted us out of the way."

Simultaneously, they gasped with their mutual fears. Kanin's last few words triggered the unmistakable truth of what this was all about. Both were drawn to the slow steady rise and fall of Vincent's chest, as Mouse reached over to pat his shoulder giving voice to this truth.

"Someone wanted Vincent out of the way."

Kanin sighed in answer. "Yes, Mouse. It sure seems that way; and all we can do is to try and keep each other alive and safe. I'll go and fetch Vivien and the children."

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Pipe chamber was alive with the incessant sounds of metallic tapping of coded messages along the spaghetti tangle of pipes, that spread their tentacles throughout the tunnels and passageways of their world, and sometimes far beyond.

Pascal, like his father before him, was the master of this giant hub of their communications network, and it was his keen ear that picked up the somewhat erratic distant distress signal from Jamie, filling him with a sudden cold fear as he asked her to repeat it. He hooked his stethoscope into his ears and placed the listening end onto the located pipe. His eyes grew wide like saucers in a face already glistening with perspiration and his panic rose into his throat almost threatening to choke him. Pascal acknowledged her message with the emergency reply code, and with his stethoscope still dangling from his ears he raced off to Father's chamber.

"Dear God," Father cried out rising from his chair so abruptly that he winced in pain. He gripped his stick until his knuckles showed white, before gingerly straightening up and repeating in disbelief. "Two explosions you say? More than an hour ago?"

So filled with fear for the safety of his family, the patriarch of the tunnel community suddenly felt every year of his age, and for a moment was unable to think. He slumped back down into his chair, all his distress evident, as he remembered the nightmare of when he and Vincent had been trapped by a rock fall in the Maze.

Father had been enjoying afternoon tea with William, Olivia and Mary, before Pascal's untimely arrival. Now Olivia sat rigidly in her chair, her eyes staring out unblinking in her chalk white face as

she kept repeating Kanin's name over and over again, unresponsive to Mary's attempt to comfort her.

William was the first to find his voice as he asked Pascal, "Why was Jamie on her way back when it happened?"

"Eric had an accident and they were bringing him home."

Their conversation brought Father back from his reverie, to inquire. "Who's with her?"

"Zach."

He pondered this information for a moment, before inhaling deeply and drawing himself upright in his chair, his whole demeanour now fully alert and in control.

Olivia, who had also roused herself, moved across to crouch at Father's knee, her face trembling in shocked fear for her husband's safety, which right now was all that concerned her.

"Father, what are we going to do?"

He gripped her hand tightly, as much for his own comfort as for hers, and gazed around at all the worried faces.

"Well now. It seems to me that we have been granted an act of providence here that we must not waste," the confident tone of Father's voice belying the fear that he felt in his heart. "I pray that whatever Eric's accident was, it was not too serious, but the fact is, it has given us the opportunity to put a rescue mission together, to be ready to leave upon Jamie and Zach's return."

William frowned, candidly he voiced his own fatalistic reasoning. "I don't know about anyone else, but it seems to me that if Eric had not had this providential accident, we would have known nothing of this disaster. I doubt that we would have suspected that anything was wrong until the fourth day, and who knows how long it would have taken us to prepare and get ourselves down there to investigate."

He placed his hands at either side of his body where his hips would have been located, his whiskered face mirroring the disquieting thoughts and fears that no one else had yet put into words; but William, forthright as ever, gave substance to these fears.

"Five days, Father," he glanced around to include them all. "Five days before they could hope for rescue, from whatever plight they are in and none of us here even aware of it." He paused to lean forward, placing his hands onto the table before him to glare fearfully into Father's face. "Jamie said she heard two explosions." He glanced at Pascal for confirmation.

"That's right," Pascal nodded and William continued, the tone of his voice changing to a disbelieving husk.

"Someone out there set those explosives, Father. Someone who probably wanted Vincent out of the way." He leaned further forward. "Why, Father? Who else is out there, who would want to wish us harm? Wish Vincent harm?"

Vincent's father shuddered; his voice noticeably wavering as he answered. "I don't know, William. I don't know," and the old man seemed to shrink in fear as he voiced his thoughts. "We all assumed that the only danger now was from Above. But you are right," he paused before adding, "and John Moreno was also killed by explosives."

William grunted and straightened, noticing Olivia's ashen face on the verge of hysteria, as she held on tightly to Father with both hands to stop herself losing control. William could not be silenced as his now growing fears for the safety of his home, and friends who had become his family drove him on.

"Whoever it is, Father, knows our world; our movements; our system of communication; and we

have been left vulnerable enough as it is, without Vincent here to give us his protection."

William's huge shoulders slumped as he delivered his final observation. "In a few days time, half our man power would have been deployed on a rescue mission, leaving our home undermanned and defenseless against whoever means us harm."

"Dear God," Father repeated for the second time in the space of a few minutes. Feeling all of Olivia's distress, he wrapped a protective arm around her shoulders. He tried to still his own fears, both for the safety of his family, and for the rest of the community. He motioned Mary to come and take his place beside Olivia, while he stood and prepared to address them all.

"William is absolutely right about this," Father conceded. "We do have to act on the assumption that we are under threat. The first priority is to bring everyone into the inner circle, though it would help if we knew what it was we were up against."

He purposely filled his lungs with air as he mentally planned his strategy, feeling what he hoped was adrenaline beginning to pump around his veins, and he felt a certain calm as he voiced his plan clearly and precisely.

"Our only stronghold is the Great Hall, and I think all the women and children would be safest there. We have no idea what we are dealing with here, so I advise as little movement about the tunnels as possible; and stay in groups of no less than five. We will need volunteers to go down and light the torches, and to have a thorough check around to see if everything is as it should be."

William made a move. "I'll take charge of that, and I'll need some help transporting some provisions down there." He grimaced. "We could well be there for a few days."

"Yes," Father sighed. "Pascal, will you call everyone into a meeting in my chamber. Use the emergency code; and I don't want a hint of panic, but the whole community has to be told, so that the necessary arrangements can be set in motion."

Pascal nodded in acknowledgement and hurried after William who lumbered towards the chamber's exit, before almost colliding with him as the big man stopped abruptly in his tracks, turning back to face them all as another troubled frown creased his brow, and he asked,

"What are the chances of whoever is out there knowing we are onto them?"

All eyes turned questioningly to Pascal, who could only offer them an uncertain estimated opinion, as he toyed anxiously with his stethoscope.

"The traffic on the pipes was busy. Always is at this time of day. Really it was pure fluke that I was in the right place at the right time, because I knew that they were well out of range, and as I wasn't expecting anything from them, could have easily missed it altogether."

"So the odds are in our favour?" Father asked.

"I would say so."

"Good. Then we'll work on that assumption and follow normal procedure."

William and Pascal both nodded in understanding before disappearing into the tunnel.

Mary, who had remained silent throughout, was more concerned for Olivia, who was only just beginning to recover from the trauma of losing her child, and now she had this new tragedy hanging over her.

The older woman could think of nothing to say that would ease her fears. All she could do was to stay close; another woman sharing her pain.

Suddenly, Mary was struck by another more disturbing thought that brought forth an involuntary gasp, and her hand flew to her mouth. Father glanced up and turned towards the sound.

"Mary. What is it?"

She rose to her feet and moved around to face him. Father, if anything had happened to Vincent, wouldn't Catherine have known? She'd have sensed something surely; and nothing would have prevented her from getting word to us, at the very least."

Father stared at her in open-mouthed shock as she continued. "It's more than an hour and a half since Jamie said she heard those explosions, and you can be certain that Catherine would have been here with us by now. Wouldn't she?"

The significance of Mary's words hit him like a thunderbolt as he stared aghast at the two women before him.

"Oh, dear God," he whispered as his voice almost failed him. "Catherine."

Both Mary and Olivia heard the tremor in his voice, that spoke of the new fear that held him in its grip as he spoke his thoughts aloud.

"We must get a message up to Joe. Make sure that she is safe." He shuddered. "I dare not think about the alternative."

Given the primitive conditions under which she was working, Vivien made Kipper as comfortable as she was able to, after manipulating his dislocated shoulder back into position, and immobilizing his broken leg.

He was very clearly in a deep coma due to the terrible head injuries he had sustained; though in one way, Vivien looked up his unconscious state as a blessing. She only had a limited supply of morphine, and knew from experience that the comatose state was often nature's way of allowing a severely traumatized body to heal.

Finally, she cleansed all the visible cuts and abrasions while praying that there were no serious internal injuries, to endanger the young boy's recovery.

After she had done everything for him that her limited resources could provide, she turned her attention to Vincent. Kneeling beside his mutilated and inert frame she pulled back the blanket with which Kanin had already covered him with, and placed her ear to his chest.

She was relieved to hear the slow steady heartbeat that she had become familiar with in the operating theatre at Hamilton Lodge.

Vivien knew that he had the strength to withstand far greater physical abuse than any ordinary man, and the speed of his recovery was legendary, which was just as well.

Vincent seemed to have taken the full force of the blast, and the deep cuts and abrasions on his beautiful leonine face made her want to weep.

She gently bathed each wound with the liberal use of antiseptic and water, covering them with dressings where she could, before moving on down to examine any wounds to his chest beneath the shredded clothing.

Vivien was relieved to find that his many layers of clothing, topped by his leather jerkin, had saved his body from any serious wounding.

She looked up at the concerned faces of Kanin, Mouse and the two children and smiling wanly she tried to reassure them.

"It could have been a whole lot worse. All I hope is that the blast didn't damage his hearing or his eyes."

She shone the beam of her flashlight into his face, lifting his eyelids one at a time, and satisfied

with the rapid dilation of his pupils, she nodded up at Kanin.

"His eyes are functioning properly and the scratches that I can see will heal."

"Can hear too," Mouse added with his more normal enthusiasm. "Talked to me all right before Kanin found us." Mouse smirked at the look of relief on everyone's faces, and Vivien reached out to grip his wrist, eager for any information he could give.

"Mouse, how did he sound?"

The young man thought about that for a moment before answering. "Drunk. Sounded drunk," he paused while recollecting something else. "Vincent couldn't see either. Asked Mouse, keep talking, guide him."

Vivien grimaced and gave her professional diagnosis. "It seems that Vincent has suffered a pretty bad concussion," and she covered him over with the blankets. It was all she could do for now.

She looked up at Kanin. "Will we be all right here? Kipper shouldn't be moved until he stabilizes; and Vincent," she rested her hand on his chest. "Vincent needs to rest."

Kanin nodded his reassurance. "Yes, Vivien. I'm sure we will be as safe here as anywhere; but we must make absolutely certain that we keep those candles burning on the edge of the crate back there."

"We can help with that," Samantha volunteered. "Can't we, Geoffrey?"

"Yes, sure we can," his young face lit up, glad to be given a task to perform to help take his mind off his fears. Mouse had taught him how to scale a rope, and descend again with complete confidence.

"Good." Kanin looked around at his dust-covered bedraggled friends, knowing by the expectant expression on all their faces that they obviously looked to him to take charge. He took a deep breath.

"Okay, then. We'll bring everything down here. Assess our provisions. Have something to eat; and then rest whilst we can."

CHAPTER NINE

It was almost five o'clock when Joe decided that he had had enough for the day. Cathy had been on his mind all afternoon, and he was still feeling somewhat overawed by the concept of two people being so close that they could share an empathic bond.

Somehow, he could accept the fact of Vincent's affinity with Cathy, but the revelation of their connection being a two way thing just blew his mind.

He picked up his briefcase, took his raincoat from the coat stand, and went through into the outer office to find his secretary still hard at work. She looked up as he approached to inquire.

"Is there anything here wanted for tonight, Andrea?"

She indicated to a small pile of several letters that required his signature. "Only these, Joe, then they can go with the late mail."

He took the proffered pen from her fingers and scrawled his signature onto the bottom of each sheet, before handing back her pen. "If there is nothing else than Andrea, I'm having an early night."

His subdued disposition did not go unnoticed as she answered, "Sure, Joe. I'll see you in the

morning."

Joe wondered whether he would make it through the main office without being delayed any further. He could not rid himself of this illogical need to see Cathy, or at least to reassure himself that she was safe.

As he neared the elevator, the doors slid open and out stepped the familiar tall, thin young man who toured the building each lunch time selling freshly made sandwiches from a large wicker basket. He was still dressed in his usual attire of flat cap, and short anorak, with his long white wrap around chef's apron underneath; but on this occasion he was minus the basket.

The young man prevented the doors to the vacant elevator from closing too, relieved that he had caught the District Attorney before he had left the building. Not waiting for the normal cordial exchange he came straight to the reason for his being in the building at all, at this time of day.

"Excuse me, Mr. Maxwell. Is Catherine still in your office?"

Joe frowned and stared quizzically at the man, wondering at his familiarity which put him instantly on his guard, and he demanded.

"Cathy? Why. What's it to you?"

The young man sighed and glanced around to make sure that no one was within earshot.

"Father needs to know that Catherine is safe, that's all."

"Jesus," Joe uttered as he felt the colour drain from his face, and the illogical unrest that he had felt all afternoon suddenly become a reality. They both instinctively moved into the empty elevator and waited for the doors to close before Joe asked.

"What's gone on down here; you any idea?"

By the time the empty elevator had reached the ground floor, the two men were on first name terms and had pooled what information they were privy to, before arriving at the same conclusion. This whole operation had been masterminded with a great deal of forethought, though for what reason and by whom, neither of them were willing to hazard a guess.

For once in his life, Joe was out of his depth. He had to put his trust into the hands of strangers; Helpers, who had kept a secret for almost forty years; and who would do whatever had to be done to preserve this world Below, and the people who inhabited it.

It was a few minutes after midnight. Kanin had just relieved Mouse to take his turn on the agreed four hour watch; a precaution not only for their security, but to keep Kipper and Vincent under constant observation.

He envied Mouse his ability to just fall asleep where ever he had to. Even the children were thankfully sleeping soundly.

Vivien was restless in this alien environment, and she was uneasy about Kipper's condition. He had developed a slight fever.

There had been no sound or movement from Vincent all evening, though he appeared to be stable, breathing steadily, and giving Vivien no cause for any real concern.

They had made no attempt to move him from where he had slumped earlier, and they remained in a close knit circle around him, with several candles left permanently burning in the centre.

At these levels there was nothing that could be used to make a fire. Everything had to be transported; except for water which though usually plentiful, had to be searched for.

Their only luxury was a small camping stove, that at least enabled them to enjoy a hot drink and to

reconstitute powdered soup.

Vivien gave up trying to sleep. She sat up, stretching her aching limbs, yawning and rubbing her eyes as she did so. She looked up to find Kanin smiling at her, and she returned his smile in the dim candlelight.

"How you doing, Vivien?" he asked.

"Oh, I'm coping, Kanin," she answered him, grateful for his concern. "I refuse to believe that we are going to die down here," she commented philosophically.

"Good for you," Kanin agreed as they sat in companionable silence before Vivien posed another question.

"Do you believe that someone would actually go to these lengths to kill Vincent?"

Kanin shifted his position before answering her question with another. "Did Father tell you about Paracelsus?"

"Yes." She nodded.

"About the tremulous lengths he went to, to systematically drive Vincent insane?"

"Yes," she nodded again, accepting his line of reasoning. "But Paracelsus is dead."

"Hmmm," Kanin pondered, "but just maybe someone else has taken up the challenge."

"Oh Kanin," Vivien sighed in exasperation. "We're going to drive ourselves insane if we don't watch out. Would you like a hot drink?" She raised her eyebrows at him questioningly.

"Yes. I'd love one, thank you."

She was just about to make a move, when an unexpectedly loud sob escaped from Vincent's lips; punctuating the stillness of the cavern and disturbing Mouse and the children. They all sat up, startled, but more concerned than afraid.

Yet another heart wrenching sob was torn from his lips, as if his unconscious soul was crying out, and his breathing became unnaturally laboured.

Vivien moved to his side as his whole body began to shudder uncontrollably, and assuming that he was suffering some terrible nightmare she attempted to soothe him, but he was unaware of her actions, as he abruptly hauled himself up into a sitting position and cried out a single name.

"CATHERINE!"

Catherine's drug induced unconscious state was finally liberated and jolted back to complete awareness, but the beloved sound of Vincent's voice crying out her name. She tried to answer him, but could not generate the energy to deliver the so hungered for reply.

Her whole body felt as heavy as lead, and even her eyelids refused to open; but at least her conscious mind was alive, and it was from somewhere deep within her soul that she cried out his name in frustrated desperation. Knowing that he would hear it. Knowing that he would find her. Knowing that he was alive.

She lay there strangely relaxed and at peace with herself, due in no small measure to this all-encompassing awareness that Vincent was with her. He knew that she was here. The tiny worm of unspeakable horror, that she had been buried alive, had not yet made its presence felt.

Catherine had left the office only a short time after lunch in a highly distressed state. Her only thought was to warn Father that something terrible had happened to Vincent.

She also considered the possibility that the rest of the party; family, friends, children, who were

travelling in this newly charted territory deep below their world, could be facing the same dangers. Whilst to all outward appearances, she was calm and in control, her insides were being gripped by an intense pain. Vincent's pain, coupled with the full force of the terror that he had transmitted to her. It was this that drove her on.

As she hurried out of the elevator on the ground floor of the DA's building, a tall thin woman approached her dressed almost entirely in black, and appearing to be somewhat distressed herself.

"Catherine? It is Catherine?"

"Yes," she answered without breaking her stride, impatient to be on her way. "Do I know you?" Her voice more shrill than she had intended, but refusing to slow her pace.

The woman grabbed her arm in a frustrated attempt to gain her attention. "Catherine. I'm a Helper, and I received a message from Father to seek you out, to reassure him that you are safe."

Catherine slowed her steps, frown lines creasing her brow before stopping altogether to ask, "But why should Father fear for my safety?"

"I don't know, Catherine. I just happened to be on hand to carry out his request."

Catherine nodded, readily accepting her explanation, and in a more companionable tone explained, "That's where I'm heading now."

"Well, in that case, I'll come with you. I know a short cut through the tunnels that'll get us there much more quickly than by road."

"Right." Catherine was happy with her suggestion, knowing that she and Vincent had often done the same thing, and she nodded. "Let's go."

As they sped along the busy sidewalk, the older woman surprisingly setting the pace, there was no doubt that had Catherine seen the jubilant gleam in the woman's eye, it would have set her alarm bells ringing, because unwittingly Catherine had fallen right into Tamara's hands.

Hurrying through the tunnels with this woman she assumed was a Helper, Catherine became so overwhelmed by feelings of abject desolation, as the slender threads of connection that she shared with the man she loved were severed. Her heart, filled with panic thumped loudly in her chest, effectively blocking any premonition that she might have sensed, of the impending danger into which she had unintentionally placed herself into.

She recoiled, and cried out in fear at the unexpected confrontation with two powerfully-built foul smelling men, dressed in ragged tunnel garb, their malevolent intentions patiently obvious.

Catherine was gripped by a hysteria that robbed her of her power of speech, as all the fearful memories of her terrifying encounter with the '*Outsiders*' filled her mind, plus the paralyzing reality that on this occasion, Vincent was unable to come to her aid.

As if reading her thoughts, and adding to her already hopeless plight, she heard the horrifying sinister laugh from the woman beside her and knew that she had walked straight into a trap.

Now, the woman thrust her triumphant face close to Catherine's, sneering viciously at the fear reflected in her eyes.

"Don't expect Vincent to come and rescue you from this, my fine pretty little mother-to-be."

Catherine stared at the woman's distorted face, as the truth of what this was all about hit her like an express train. She lashed out in blind panic, only to be held in a vice-like grip by the woman's two cohorts.

Catherine shrunk backwards as the woman spat into her face, showing nothing but contempt for

who she was, and scathingly informing her of what she could already feel in her heart.

"Vincent is dead. Do you hear me? He's dead; and I killed him," and she laughed in the face of Catherine's pain and heartbreak.

Catherine knew that she was lost. All their dreams - Tomorrow's Dreams. That were never to be.

She slumped in absolute defeat, not even summoning up the strength to put up a struggle, as she watched the woman fill a disposable needle from a small bottle, before injecting it into her arm; and her last conscious thoughts were of Vincent.

She listened to the absolute silence that surrounded her. Except for the steady beat of her own heart, and the comfortingly familiar empathic awareness that Vincent was, in fact, still alive, she could not rid herself of the macabre vision of being nothing more than a pulse beat with a functioning brain, and nothing more.

She had no awareness of the rest of her body, and yet felt perfectly calm and comfortable, though terribly thirsty. Her tongue licked around her lips before the realization that she could now open her eyes more easily; only to be confronted again by the seemingly solid velvet blackness.

Catherine lay, as if in limbo, and time held no meaning for her as she gradually became conscious of the sensation of pins and needles in her extremities, which quickly spread to the rest of her body. Not exactly a painful experience; but not pleasant either, as she tried to coordinate her limbs.

As the sensitivity in her hands became almost complete, she reasoned that she had probably been given some kind of muscle relaxing drug and she began to tentatively explore her surroundings.

Catherine found that she was lying on a soft mattress. She had a pillow beneath her head and was covered by a single blanket. She was dressed in only a skirt and blouse, and her shoes had been removed. As she continued to explore blindly in the darkness, she gasped with the sudden shock of contacting smooth rock walls on either side of her, without even having to straighten out her arms.

"God, where am I?" She whispered tremulously, as icy slivers of fear held her heart in its grip. She cautiously reached up above her, and with her elbows still bent, touched the unyielding flat rock ceiling.

Catherine could not contain the stomach churning claustrophobic terror that consumed her, and with the impact of discovering that she had been entombed alive, she lost all control, and began to scream.

"*CATHERINE!*" Vincent howled across the vast empty blackness, gripped by a fear too unspeakable to contemplate. "*CATHERINE!*" He roared out her name again in a desperate bid to calm the terror he could feel emitting from her.

The fear twisted and knotted his insides with a pain that would not ease, making him feel physically sick. Vincent rose up to his full height; the surge of unfettered power within him inconceivable to all around, as he cried out yet again.

"Catherine. Hold on. I'm coming for you," and tears of unmitigated anger and frustration spilled down his mutilated face, as he collapsed onto his knees and howled out in his pain.

Kanin, Vivien, Mouse and the children all stood openly weeping, sharing in Vincent's pain, as the deafening tumult of sound slowly faded into silence. That he had recovered so quickly came as no real surprise to any of them, but it was Vivien who moved to stand before his kneeling frame.

She gently gathered his head to her body, and just soothed him whilst he cried.

When at last he began to calm and quiet, Vivien asked him. "Vincent. Tell me what it is that has

caused you so much pain? Is it Catherine?"

He looked up into her face, and the horror she could see in his eyes made her shudder, forcing her to ask again. "Vincent. Tell us? Please?"

He drew in a ragged breath and expelled the words from his lips. "I feel that Catherine has been buried alive. Entombed; and I must find a way to her."

He hauled himself up to his feet, grateful for Vivien's gentle assistance, as he tried to control his renewed feelings of panic that were mounting within him again, aware that they were not entirely of his own making. They were coming from Catherine, and they were tearing him apart.

He turned to face his small group of friends, seeing his own distress mirrored in their faces, eerie in the distorting candlelight. His gaze fell to the slight still form of Kipper who remained comatose on the ground. He raised his eyes to Vivien as his natural concern and responsibility for the safety of his friends, his family; surfaces through his own anguish.

"How badly is Kipper injured, Vivien?"

She drew in breath. "He's comatose, Vincent; which right now is no bad thing," and she listed all of his other known injuries before reassuring him that the boy was at least holding his own, and that the rest of them had suffered only minor injuries.

He inclined his head in acknowledgement before reaching out his arms to Samantha and Geoffrey, who came readily into his embrace, and he turned his full attention to Kanin.

"What's the situation, Kanin?"

Kanin sighed and moved closer into the candlelight. "Without a lot of help, there is no way out, Vincent. Only seconds after the first explosion that claimed you, Mouse and Kipper, there was a second explosion that brought the whole mountain down behind us."

Vincent made no response, but allowed him to continue. "God knows how far through it is, Vincent; and there's no way of connecting up to the tunnel that we were travelling along. No way to reach it. There's just a massive gaping hole the full width of the tunnel."

Vincent knew that Kanin was no defeatist. He knew that had there been a way, Kanin would have found it. He looked down at the two children clutching around his waist, and he held their heads to his body.

"You're not hurt, either of you?"

"No," Samantha answered. "Just scared."

"Yes, I know that you are," his voice was like a soft caress as he kissed each of their heads in turn, and made no move to release them. The responsibility he felt for the safety of them all weighed heavily, plus being torn apart inside by the overwhelming terror that seemed to be almost tangible. He could feel all that Catherine was enduring, and Catherine was part of him.

He was unaware of the play of emotions flitting across his face, but Kanin could see clearly all the agony that he was suffering, as could both Vivien and Mouse.

There were no strangers here, and they all knew, and had no reservations about the depth of Vincent's empathic abilities, especially when it concerned Catherine.

Kanin was the first to voice the dilemma that he knew Vincent was struggling to come to terms with.

"Vincent, I am sure that I speak for us all. If there is the remotest possibility of you being able to go to Catherine's assistance, then of course you must go. We will all help in any way we can."

There were sounds of encouragement all around, and Kanin continued. "We're safe enough here, Vincent. We have enough food for three days at least. Mouse has found a water supply; not

abundant, but constant; so we'll manage until help gets through." He glanced down at the badly injured boy on the ground. "And it would not be safe to move Kipper yet anyway."

Vincent gazed around at them all feeling humbled by their generosity in the face of their own fears; and he felt two small hands patting his lower back, as Samantha and Geoffrey let him know that it was all right with them too.

He looked down at their grimy, still worried faces. "Thank you," he husked, before raising his eyes. "Thank you, all of you." He didn't know what else to say.

It was, however, an observation from Vivien, that made it abundantly clear as to what direction he would be taking.

"Vincent, when you cried out Catherine's name just now, it was out there," and she pointed, "over the drop?"

"Yes," he inclined his head in agreement before adding, "and down. Far down." He glanced around at them all whilst still holding the children close. "I believe that Catherine has been forcibly entombed in the Catacombs."

Vivien and Mouse visibly shuddered, but Kanin refused to dwell on these abhorrent thoughts. Ever practical he picked up his flashlight from their small collection of equipment, and handed it to Mouse; but his request came over more brusque than he had intended.

"Go see if you can find a large boulder to heave over the side, Mouse. Give us some idea of how far down it is."

Mouse nodded, took the flashlight and scurried away on his given task. Vivien made her contribution to the practicalities by picking up the small tin kettle they had brought along with them to boil water in, waving it determinedly at Vincent.

"And before you go anywhere, brother dear, you will have a hot drink and something to eat, whilst Kanin sorts the ropes out."

Both men raised their eyebrows at her, and she grinned. "Well, someone has got to get you organized," but the tremor in her voice did not go unnoticed. Vincent sensed all of her natural fears that she was attempting to keep under control. He appreciated all too well that she was new to these surroundings, and this was not what he had envisaged for her first foray into the unknown depths of their world.

He watched her pour water into the kettle and light the small camping stove. He lowered himself to the ground with the children still close at his side, and clasped a small hand into each of his, giving them the comfort of his presence for as long as he was able to.

Metaphorically speaking, Vincent would have jumped off into Dante's inferno to save Catherine, but his own common sense told him that there was no way that he could get off this ridge without a great deal of help. He knew it would serve no useful purpose to embark on such a hazardous mission without the minimum of preparation. Vincent entertained no illusions that the going would be easy and he also had to admit that he was terribly hungry.

Though he knew that the first part of the journey would be in unknown territory, it held no real fears for him. It was, after all, his natural habitat, and it was this that he quietly tried to reassure them all about, his own safety.

CHAPTER TEN

As Vincent abseiled down the seemingly endless drop before landing safely on the bottom, their rescue party led by Jamie and Zach, arrived at the site of the second tunnel explosion, sealing off any further progress.

They stood staring aghast, in silent horror at the magnitude of the rock fall that loomed above them floor to ceiling; surveying the huge boulders, and enormous slabs of granite that so effectively blocked their way and made any prospect of rescue impossible.

Even if they'd had access to heavy earth moving machinery, they all knew there was no way to transport it down to where they were; and the option of using further explosives was out of the question.

A cloud of hopeless despair hung over the small group of desperate friends. No one was willing to admit that there was nothing to be done, until Jamie suddenly rallied herself, almost shouting as the idea struck her.

"Wait a minute. When Father and Vincent were trapped by that rock fall in the Maze, Mouse approached the rescue from another direction. Couldn't we attempt that? At least give it a try?"

There was a definite glimmer of hope that lit the faces of Pascal, Cullen and the rest of the team, but it was Cullen who was the first to acknowledge the plausibility of her suggestion.

Pascal agreed and hugged her to him, before offering his own constructive contribution.

"It shouldn't take us long to actually chart the route down here, and work out where to enter the relevant tunnel section from the opposite direction. There has to be a way in from somewhere."

"That's good enough reasoning," Cullen concurred, together with the collective nodding of heads.

Pascal reached into his backpack and withdrew the metal tubes that were the tools of his craft. He approached the rock fall and tapped several times onto a large slab of granite, listening with an experienced ear to the sound, as it echoed around their remaining section of the high domed tunnel. He turned back to his friends and stated what was the only action that they could take for now.

"We will stay until we make contact with them, and find out what the situation is. I refuse to believe that they have all been killed."

It was very late. Father, William and Olivia were engaged in hushed whispers in the lower passageway off the Great Hall, which at the moment resembled a vast dormitory, as their community settled for the night. The accommodation was far from ideal, but at least they were all safe and warm, and there were plenty of provisions on hand.

The Pipe chamber was empty and silent, as were all the normally sentried outposts. Everyone had been recalled to the inner circle as a precaution. Whether the wisdom of this was right or wrong, Father did not wish to put any more lives at risk - and there was of course safety in numbers.

Mouse's simple but effective early warning alarms had been put in place beyond the inner circle. Ordinarily they were only installed at the little-used or sealed up entrances to their tunnel world. On this occasion, although Father meant no disrespect to Mouse's proven abilities, he placed two men to stand watch over each approach to their inner circle, feeling that it was better to be over cautious, than to be taken by surprise.

Father, like almost every member of their tunnel community had known fear, but this was altogether different. It was not only the fear he held for their own safety, but the unacceptable fear for his adored son, newly-found daughter, and the rest of his adopted family Below. And what of Catherine?

The only information that they had, was what Jamie and Zach could tell them. They would have to continue to wait in fearful anticipation, until someone from the rescue party returned, hopefully in the early hours of the morning.

The message that Father had received from Joe earlier during the evening, seemed to confirm his worst foreboding, that Catherine had indeed been abducted. He was unable to shake off his overpowering feelings of guilt, because Vincent had left her in his care.

That Catherine was a grown woman, and not entirely his responsibility, nor even Joe's, did not help to ease the abhorrent thoughts that had tormented him all evening. Maybe their unborn child was what this was all about. Perhaps someone unscrupulous had knowledge of the pregnancy, and its imagined potential.

"Dear God," Father whispered under his breath, not daring to give voice to his nightmare.

Vincent had been following an underground fast-flowing river for some time and making excellent progress. His navigational skills innate to his nature, were honed to perfection to the beat of Catherine's heart, onto the immensity of the terror that she was trying so desperately to control. He could feel it like a physical pain.

He tried to ease her distress through their empathic connection, to reach out and give her comfort; to let her know that he would be there for her. Soon.

As Vincent moved sure-footedly along the edge of the river that ran on into the darkness far below the streets of New York, he suddenly gasped in despair as his last gleam of optimism deserted him.

He could see up ahead that he had reached a dead end. He watched in dismay as the river disappeared beneath the solid rock wall, effectively sealing off the end of the gorge that he had been travelling along for the past ninety minutes.

Vincent wasted no time in pondering the situation, because he knew that he had no alternative but to go into the water, and swim beneath the rock face. He could see that there was less than twelve inches of clearance between the water level and the roof, but he pushed these unknown dangers firmly to the back of his mind, discarded his cloak and waded in.

His only small comfort, was the certainty that the rushing water was actually going somewhere; but before inhaling a deep breath and plunging beneath the rock face, he sent up a silent prayer, *'Please God, let me ride it out and arrive wherever the river takes me, alive.'*

Tamara stood at a table in the large high candle-lit chamber, where she had worked and schemed with Paracelsus. Plaster and clay models and busts adorned every available surface around the chamber, many with grotesque open-mouthed expression on the frozen mask-like faces. It gave the chamber a ghoulish, macabre atmosphere.

Several of the very life-like masks were more than recognizable, including the plaster cast that Tamara had taken of Catherine, while she had been unconscious.

Tamara smiled, revealing discoloured teeth and receding gums, in a face that boded well with its surroundings, her eyes glinting with fiendish thoughts, devoid of conscience for the sanctity of human life.

However, even Tamara had become desperate for a few hours sleep, and she left the facade of Catharine's face to set, totally indifferent to the terror she was inflicting on her captive entombed in the Catacombs far below.

If Tamara gave the matter any thought at all, it was but to acknowledge that her captive and future offspring, were perfectly safe for the time being.

Secure in her belief that Vincent was dead, and that no one else would ever be able to find the mother of his child, Tamara moved silently around the chamber, extinguishing most of the candles before retiring to her bed.

Vincent had lost all sense of time as he hurtled along the fast flowing river like a stray piece of flotsam, completely at the mercy of the swirling foaming powerful currents that fling his already battered body crashing into the jagged rock walls.

Disoriented, and almost drowned, he clung to consciousness with his last ebbing vestige of strength. Even now, his befuddled water-logged brain, so starved of oxygen, refused to give in to its maker.

For Vincent, there was a far more powerful force willing him to hold on for just a few more seconds.

As if by rebirth, Vincent was disgorged from beneath the steep escarpment of rock just as dawn was breaking. Slivers of light danced on the swirling rushing spume that roared in his ears as it swept him along. In this sparkling cascade of water Vincent was catapulted over the edge, and down into oblivion.

Father had not closed his eyes for more than a few seconds, before he felt himself being insistently shaken out of his sleep-drugged stupor. The excited urgency in the raised voices around him dragged him back to reality, as he recognized Mary's voice, close to his ear.

"Father. Father. Come on. Wake up," she sobbed out the words that he had prayed to hear. "Vincent's home."

His eyes shot open, and hands helped him to sit upright as he focused his eyes, recognizing the drawn exhausted faces of Jamie, Pascal, Cullen and Zach; but he could not see Vincent, until he followed everyone's gaze.

On the top of a long table nearby, was the blanket-covered still form of his precious son. Father's stomach knotted in momentary sick fear, as he scrutinized the terrible condition that Vincent was in.

His tangled hair was wet through, matted and thick with blood from two separate head wounds. His face, a mess of deep cuts and abrasions, several of which were new and still seeping blood, that trickled slowly down the short soft fur that covered the lower half of his face.

Now, Dr. Jacob Wells galvanized himself into action, and battenning down all emotion he drew back the blankets.

"Oh dear God," he murmured as he reached out for, and Mary automatically handed him his stethoscope. He hooked it into his ears, and listened in wonder to Vincent's amazingly steady heartbeat.

Father looked up, relief showing on his face.

"Where did you find him? How in God's name did he get into a state like this?" All the turmoil of fearful anger sounded in his voice.

Pascal explained, his speech slightly slurred as he fought to stay on his feet.

"We were returning through the gorge in the Chamber of the Falls. It was just after daybreak and we couldn't have timed it better. Wherever the daylight comes from in there, it made Vincent visible to us. There is no doubt that we would have missed him in the dark."

Father nodded, refusing to even consider that possibility.

"So where was he?"

"At the water's edge."

"Alone?"

"Yes."

Everyone heard Olivia's gasp in distress, with her obvious concern for Kanin, but right now Father's only priority was Vincent, making him warm and dry, and attending to all his many wounds.

Father cast his professional eye over his son's body, noting that although there was a lot of blood, most of his injuries were superficial, though prolific, and surrounded by a profusion of bruises in every hue.

Mary called for hot water, and plenty of it, then she and Father, working together like the well-oiled team that over the years they had become, cut Vincent out of what remained of his blood-stained tattered clothing.

A tapestry screen was produced to give them some privacy, as they continued to painstakingly bathe and cleanse with antiseptic and hot water; stitching up where necessary, before finally dressing him in the clean dry clothes that Olivia had miraculously produced and placed beside them in a neat pile.

Meanwhile, Jamie and Pascal had been able to reassure Olivia that they had managed to make contact with Kanin, and apart from Kipper, who was injured, everyone else was safe and well, with enough provisions to last them a few days.

Understandably, the relief that Olivia felt was enormous, and the tight rein that she had held onto her emotions gave way like the opening of the floodgates, and she and Jamie wept together, sharing their release from the pain of not knowing.

Vincent was finally carried over to be settled into Father's temporary bed on the floor of the Great Hall. Apart from his visible injuries, Father had diagnosed a slight concussion, but would discover more when he regained consciousness.

His own tiredness now forgotten, Father listened intently to Jamie and Pascal who had stayed behind to tell him all they could about the situation at the site of the explosions. He was naturally concerned for Kipper, but knew that Vivien would take care of him; and much of his tension drained away on learning that everyone else was safe and well.

He was in full agreement with Jamie's idea of trying to discover the access to that section of the tunnels from the opposite direction, but he was very much aware that like the other members of the rescue team, they were both almost out on their feet.

Father reassured them that he would do all he could to put the plan into operation without delay, and if necessary, enlist the help of their friends Above. He thanked them warmly for all that they had done, before insisting that they joined the others, and get some rest.

He stood beside his son, looking down at the terrible mutilation of his unique features. In his mind's eye, he saw the lacerations and bruising to the rest of his body.

"Why?" He asked Mary. "Why would Vincent leave Kanin, Vivien, Mouse and the children, to risk his own life, when they were not apparently in a life-threatening situation?"

Father knew the answer to that before he had even finished asking the question. The only reason that Vincent would storm the Gates of Hell if he had to, would be for Catherine.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Once Catherine had discovered that there was a source of ventilation, and had accepted that at least she was not going to suffocate, the first phase of her hysterical panic subsided, but it had left her totally exhausted.

Her hand went to her throat, searching for the chain that held Vincent's crystal. Drawing it around her neck she captured the familiar token of love and pressed it to her lips. It was something of Vincent to hold on to, knowing he was thinking of her.

She slept fitfully, and time held no meaning as she flitted between dreams, nightmares and reality; sometimes not being able to distinguish one from the other. Suddenly startled into complete awareness and finding herself bathed in perspiration, she cried out in abject misery.

Catherine had been dreaming that she was in her own apartment, preparing to go Below to Vincent, and making a final visit to her bathroom before she left. Her nightmare was in discovering the reality that her bladder could no longer hold its contents, and that there was absolutely nothing she could do about it.

She began to silently sob with the shocked disgust that she felt, lying there in the wetness of her own urine. The horror of her plight rekindled itself, instigating a further fit of hysteria that she was unable to control. The sound of her screams hurt her ears within the close confines of her rock-walled tomb.

She was stunned into silence, only after banging her head sharply, causing her to see stars in the velvet blackness that enveloped her. She felt the trickle of blood running down her forehead and wiped it away with her fingers, causing her to experience an overwhelming sensation of nausea that she frantically tried to ignore, but with little success.

The intensity of her distress reached out along the fine cords of connection, unfettered by the confinement of rock or distance, and bringing Vincent back to full consciousness. His eyes blinked open, still unfocused, but feeling the full gamut of her emotions - all her terror, panic and fear together with her sickening claustrophobia.

He growled and grunted with the exertion of trying to raise himself from the bed, shaking his shaggy head and whimpering out her name in frustration.

"Vincent, it's all right; easy now, you're home and safe."

Father, who had been close by tried to ease him back down again, but his son struggled against his ministrations continuing to sob out Catherine's name in his desperation. Then, without a hint of forewarning, almost as if he had been plugged into some unseen power source, Vincent thrust Father aside, and with a mighty roar hauled himself upright from the bed. Some unbidden thought prompted him to drag the thick warm quilt with him, and taking the steps up the wooden staircase two at a time, he fled the Great Hall.

Father knew that no force on earth could have stopped his son, irrespective of the fact that he was dressed in only a pair of light woollen pants, cotton shirt and thick woollen socks.

Vincent gave no thought to his own physical pain and discomfort, only to the more powerful force that drove him onwards deeper into the earth; to the Catacombs, and to the women who was the

other half of himself. Gripped by the terrible unbearable knowing, that her fear was infinitely greater than anyone should ever be forced to endure, and to the anguish of knowing that she was also carrying his child.

He could feel that she was close by as he unerringly sped along the narrow maze of tunnels. Finally, he ducked beneath a low archway to find himself in a large high domed cavern, lit by a single burning torch secured in a wall fixture by the entrance.

The walls appeared to have been honeycombed with hewn out holes and ledges, where the oriental communities of past centuries had laid their dead to rest. Vincent shuddered involuntarily, because it was here that Catherine was entombed. In the centre of the floor was an oblong ornate stone casket, of the kind found in old church yards. It was topped by a slab, where the inscription of its occupant would normally be found.

"Catherine." Vincent whispered in the stillness, as he laid his hands on the smooth surface, exploring around the edges for some evidence that the stone slab could be moved more easily than with force alone. His applied common sense was rewarded, but as he straightened up slightly before attempting to free Catherine, he heard a sound from behind him and spun around.

Inside the low archway that was the entrance to the chamber stood a woman, her gaunt-lined face set in a mask of shocked disbelief as she mouthed the single word.

'Vincent.'

He backed up against the stone casket and stared at the tall thin woman before him, dressed entirely in black. Vincent's sixth sense picked up inexplicable vibes from her that instigated feelings of dread within him, and without taking his eyes from her face he stated.

"You know who I am."

"Yes, I know exactly who you are, Vincent." Her contemptuous sneer confounded Vincent. "And I am very disappointed that my plans for your death have ended in failure."

The snarl that erupted from his lips quickly died in puzzlement, when he detected no hint of fear in her.

"You are not afraid of me." Again it was not a question.

Tamara moved into the chamber seemingly indifferent to both his presence, and his appearance, but stood before him defiant, and with a mirthless smile on her face that did nothing to enhance her features.

"It is not in your nature, Vincent, to attack a defenseless woman."

He inclined his head imperceptibly in acknowledgement of her observation, before pushing his thigh hard against the point of access to the tomb where Catherine had been incarcerated, and moving it several inches. He was about to turn and complete the operation when the woman began talking again, and the threatening tone in her voice caused him to pause and cast his eyes back in her direction.

"Do you imagine, for one moment, Vincent, that I will allow you to walk out of here, with your woman and your unborn child?"

Vincent drew himself up to his full height and faced her squarely, suddenly aware that this woman possessed an air of familiarity that brought back memories he thought were dead and buried forever; and he shuddered.

"Who are you?"

The woman shrugged, untroubled by his curiosity. "My name is Tamara, and I have lived and worked beside John Pater, the man you killed; for the past twenty-five years. I know all about you,

Vincent, and your world. I will succeed, where the man you knew as Paracelsus failed."

Vincent drew his head up, and Tamara both felt and saw the unmistakable threat of menace in his eyes as he growled.

"Do not presume that you know me, Tamara, because to protect what is mine, I will do whatever has to be done."

She shook her head, mocking his words. "Look at yourself, Vincent. You're a wreck; and you can be very sure, that I too will do whatever has to be done, to fulfill the dream that Paracelsus strived for, from the day he found you," and taking a step backwards she clicked her fingers.

At her signal, Tamara's two protectors appeared from under the archway and straightened up. Vincent was instantly aware that he was outnumbered, and even had he been fully fit, would have had his work cut out with these two muscle-bound Goliaths, one of whom was a good head taller than he was, and more powerfully built.

There was no adherence to the Queensbury Rules as Tamara's two bodyguards attacked without warning, and all of Vincent's innate skills that erupted with his first primal roar was on this occasion insufficient for him to gain his accustomed victory. Even his ear-splitting roars, flaying teeth and claws did little to halt their mission of death, as they systematically beat him and crushed him; picking him up bodily and crashing him to the floor. Vincent was already losing all hope of coming out of this alive.

Broken and beaten, and on the very edge of consciousness, Vincent heard unexpected angry shouts from another quarter. He shook his head in an attempt to clear the red haze that filled his vision, before comprehending that his attackers were themselves being attacked. Skulls and limbs were being cracked and bludgeoned by heavy staffs of wood. Vincent heard the familiar voice of William, almost unrecognizable as the depth of his outrage added phenomenal power to his onslaught, and he heard him almost roar out the order to kill.

Vincent crawled painfully over to slump against the casket out of harm's way. He was only half alive, covered in blood and practically naked. He counted four men with William, two had joined with him intent on beating his assassins into submission or death, and from the maniacal frenzy of their assault the outcome would most certainly be death. The remaining two men held Tamara under close arrest, but either one of them was ready to move in should they be needed.

At last, the sounds of battle ceased, and William moved to Vincent's side before he had even caught his breath.

"Where's Catherine?" he demanded, knowing full well that her safety was what this bloodbath was all about.

"She's inside the casket," Vincent rasped out. "I managed to release the lock; just push hard and the stone slab will swivel round."

Vincent did not question as to whether he would have found the strength to release Catherine himself, because the question did not arise. He knew that without William's timely arrival he would most certainly, not have survived at all.

The stone slab gave easily against William's weight, but he momentarily recoiled at the stench of vomit and urine that he had released from the confines of her tomb. He swallowed, as the bile rose up into his throat, but ignoring the unpleasantness, he leaned over her, sharing in the hideous terrors that this special woman had been subjected to.

"Catherine. Can you hear me?" he asked gently, observing her almost trance-like state.

She moved her head slightly, focusing her eyes onto his face, before hesitantly mouthing his name.

'William?'

He could see the fearful panic in her eyes as she found her voice and struggled unsuccessfully to sit up.

"Where's Vincent? Where's Vincent?"

"I'm here," and with super human effort he reached his arm over the side of the casket, to feel his bloodied hand being clasped in both of hers.

William moved to the head of the casket, to help her up into a sitting position as she remained a tight hold of Vincent's head.

"Come on little lady," he husked as tears filled his eyes. "Let's get you out of here."

She looked up into his whiskered face, splattered with blood and suddenly became aware of the disgusting state she was in. She began to sob and tremble uncontrollably with relief that she was at last free from her tomb, apologizing over and over for her filthy condition.

William's briskness was an understandable attempt to cover his own outrage, as he quickly reassured her.

"The only thing that's important, Catherine, is that you're both safe. Nothing else matters." And he carefully lifted her trembling body from the casket and lowered her to the floor beside the battered and bleeding love of her life, and watched in awe as they just held each other.

Vincent ignored the physical pain this caused him; both of them oblivious to all the horror; only that they were at last together.

The quilt that Vincent had brought with him was found and used to cover them, but apart from giving them water to drink, it seemed for the moment this was the only comfort that could be offered to them.

William dispatched Simon and Robin to fetch help, but not before relieving them of their jackets and a soft cushion shirt that Simon was more than happy to part with, accepting that it would be torn into strips for bandages.

They had already estimated that it would be at least a couple of hours before they could hope for help to arrive, but William was intent on making Vincent and Catherine as comfortable as he was able to, with what little resources they had available.

First, the two bodies were unceremoniously dragged away out of sight, and without the slightest glimmer of remorse, William ascertained that they were in fact dead.

Tamara was bound hand and foot and made to sit on the floor against the wall, within sight of them all, until they could decide what was to be done with her.

Meanwhile, Catherine was given Simon's warm jacket to wear, and with the rest of their freely volunteered clothing, they managed to fashion Vincent a reasonably comfortable bed on the floor; with cover for Catherine to sit close by his side.

He was barely coherent and in terrible pain, and there was nothing to give him relief, except Catherine, and his gratitude to his friends for arriving when they did.

"But why?" He croaked. "How did you know where to find me?"

William explained that a rescue party had gone below, and although there was no hope of breaching the rock fall, they did manage to make contact with Kanin and exchange messages.

Even though Vincent had closed his eyes, and appeared to be no longer listening, William continued talking, explaining to Catherine how Vincent was found in the Chamber of the Falls upon their return, how they carried him home knowing that he had failed in his mission.

"It was a long shot, Catherine," William concluded his reason for being in the right place at the right

time. "But we had to try."

"I'm glad you did, William, " she smiled wanly. "I promise I will give you a big hug of thanks later, when I'm smelling a bit sweeter than I do right now."

It was mutually agreed that there should be no exchange of conversation with Tamara, after she had given them her embittered explanation of who she was. Her punishment would be something for Father and the Council to decide upon. Though William had no qualms about what he would like to do to her, for once in his life, he stoically maintained his silence.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Once again, Father and Mary painstakingly bathed, stitched and dressed Vincent's shattered body; marvelling that the only broken bone was the little finger of his right hand, which was easily splinted, and three cracked ribs which would heal in time, with rest and care.

That he had lapsed into unconsciousness yet again, came as no surprise to anyone, considering the unimaginable trauma he had endured over the past twenty-four hours, Father was well aware that it would most certainly have killed a lesser man.

Because of the unique love she shared with Vincent, Catherine too had found an inner strength that few people are ever called upon to put to the test. It was this inner strength that had helped her to survive her own horrific experience.

Catherine was feeling more human after a bath and change of clothes, but she looked haunted and frightened, still suffering from the after effects of her ordeal, which she knew would give her nightmares for a long time to come.

Tamara was being held in one of the vacated smaller bed chambers, with a two man guard on the narrow entrance. It was agreed that she would be kept in solitary confinement until Kanin, Vivien, Mouse and the children were safely home. The intervening time would also allow Vincent and Catherine to begin to recover from their ordeal.

Now it had been established that there was no further threat of danger to their community; everyone returned to their own chambers to begin catching up on their neglected tasks. Jamie, Cullen, Pascal, and the rest of their eager volunteers who made up the rescue team, made ready to depart again. On this occasion, however, Olivia was going along with them, and no one made any attempt to stop her.

An access point had in fact been located, allowing them passage through the tunnels from the opposite direction, and hopefully clear to connect up to where their families and friends were trapped.

Pascal was placing all his faith on his interpretation of the coded message that Kanin had tapped out through the rock fall - that the approach from the other side would bring them to a very large deep crater.

Fortified with messages of love, hope and God speed, they embarked on their journey early in the afternoon.

Father was desperate for some assistance. He was totally exhausted and could not remember the last time he had donned his night clothes and climbed into his own bed.

Though worried to distraction about his son's many external injuries, he was even more concerned for any possible internal damage that he was unable to detect. He knew that even Vincent's

superior strength and powers of healing, could not protect him from everything.

Catherine's state of mind also troubled him, suspecting as he did that she was going to require a great deal of help. The kind of help that he felt ill-equipped to provide for her.

Physically, she seemed to be unharmed and her pregnancy appeared to be progressing normally, in spite of the so recent trauma. Even so, after the nightmare Catherine had endured, Father knew it would leave her with scars that would take a long time to heal. If indeed they ever did heal completely.

She had refused to leave Vincent's bedside in the Hospital chamber; and was terrified of closing her eyes even for a moment. Her childhood fear of the dark, which had been overcome with the passage of time, had now escalated out of control and she had requested extra candles to be lit around the chamber in an attempt to ease her fears.

Father had already sent word to Joe, that Catherine and Vincent were safe, but now he hastily penned another request for him to contact Peter and Christopher Hamilton.

Catherine sat beside Vincent's narrow hospital bed, never taking her eyes from his face and clasping his left hand in both of hers. In a mind, so tortured with unspeakable horrors, she felt that her one hold on sanity was to keep him in her sight, to feel him physically near. She needed this constant reassurance, to prove to her that it was in fact all over, and they were safe.

For some reason, she recalled again the time that Vincent had rescued her from the marauding terror of the Outsiders, killing them all in her name. Later in Father's chamber, he was so lost in the abhorrence of the whole incident, he had refused her help and comfort and had sent her away. He suffered alone the pain and horror of what he had been forced to do. He had been lost in it.

Such was her love for this man, that even in the midst of her own torment, she could now fully understand why, and how, he had been pushed to the very brink of self destruction, twice in his lifetime. Even though Vincent only ever killed to protect the people he loved, it was Vincent who had to live with the memory of it all, afterwards.

Catherine had lived through the nightmare of being abducted,; suffered the anguish of believing that Vincent was dead and of being entombed alive. She relived the disgust of being forced to lie in her own excrement. She too was lost in it.

She began to tremble as the memory of it all became real, losing the tenuous hold on her control, and in her terror she opened her mouth and began to scream.

Later that evening, Joe, Peter and Chris were guided down to Father's chamber where they sat around the table in shocked silence, as William and Father related the hideous details of all they had been subjected to over the past endless hours.

Ashen-faced, Joe asked, "Can I see Cathy?"

Father smiled wistfully at him before nodding. "Of course you can, Joe," and he paused, "but I'm afraid that I've had to sedate her."

He sighed and his shoulders slumped before continuing. "About two hours ago she began to scream and there was no pacifying her. God alone knows what she has suffered, Joe," and he shrugged with despair. "There is no doubt that Vincent would know, but he is also still unconscious."

They entered the Hospital chamber to find that a second narrow bed had been pushed up close beside Vincent's, where Catherine was now sleeping, though not peacefully as they watched her

face and limbs twitching spasmodically with her subconscious torment.

Even so, she was still clasping Vincent's left hand in both of hers and her sleeping position appeared to be most uncomfortable, as she refused to release her hold on him.

"Catherine's going to need a great deal of help and support to come to terms with all she has suffered," observed Peter, knowing that he was stating the obvious, but saying it anyway.

Peter had known Catherine all of her life. He had brought her into the world, and their joke about her being naked the first time they had met, was something that always raised a smile amongst their friends. Right now the thought brought him almost to the verge of tears.

Christopher lowered his large frame onto one of the nearby beds, before asking, "Jacob, would you like me to take them back to Hamilton Lodge tonight? A change of surroundings might help."

Father thought about this for a moment before answering. "In theory, it would be a fine idea, for them to recuperate there, Chris, and thank you for offering," but his voice somehow lacked the expected enthusiasm.

"But?" Chris raised his eyebrows questioningly.

"Well," and Father paused, screwing up his face while he thought of what to say, not wishing to hurt Chris' feelings, or reject his generous offer. "I really think that in view of Catherine's state of mind, they should stay here, at least until Vincent regains consciousness."

Chris' eyes were drawn back to the two sleeping forms and he nodded in agreement. "Yes, Jacob. I think maybe you're right about that, but I don't believe it to be the real reason for declining my offer, and I do understand your fears for Vincent's safety."

"That fear never leaves me," his eyes drawing back onto his son's face. "And I make no apologies for it, Chris."

"No apologies are needed, Jacob. But if I was not absolutely confident of Vincent's safety, then I would not have made the offer," and he paused. "But if they would like to come for a short stay, would you have any objections?"

"How can I object? My son is a grown man, and is well aware of all the dangers - he has lived with them all of his life."

Chris nodded in understanding before offering Father some words of reassurance. "Jacob, even as a comparative newcomer to your world, I am confident that they will bring each other through their trauma, as no professional ever could."

Father acknowledged the truth of his words, and his own inner stresses were beginning to subside with the support and presence of his friends. They had pooled their medical experience, and reassured him that he had done everything humanly possible. They would stay until morning so that he could get a much needed good night's sleep.

Joe had been sitting quietly beside Catherine, as the three doctors conferred on what they knew best. He was still troubled by feelings of guilt, for not figuring out at the time that her life could be at risk - for allowing her to leave the office alone, the previous afternoon.

Now, Joe's legal intellect kicked into gear, as he began to deliberate over the perpetrator of these atrocities. He was well aware that for the security of their world Below, and also for Vincent's safety, there was no way this woman, Tamara, could be tried in a court of law, because of what she knew. He was, however, in no doubt at all that she would have been sent down to serve a very long prison sentence.

Joe wondered what alternative form of punishment their Community Council could impose, though he sensed that now was not the right time to raise the subject. He did, however, fully intend to sit in

on their Council meeting, because Joe had an idea of his own, that would probably meet with everyone's approval.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The rescue party had a relatively uneventful journey down to the site of the enormous crater that the explosion had rent in the tunnel floor. The candles that Kanin had insisted on keeping lit along the rim had helped to guide them in, but of course they had to exercise extreme caution on their approach to the crater's edge.

As they stood around on the brink of this black void, they could just make out a faint glow of light from its depths. Jamie played her flashlight across the full width of the chasm to discover that from their side it was a much deeper descent.

Pascal moved closer to the edge and shouted. "Kanin, Mouse," and they all waited for the expected answer.

"Hey, Pascal," Kanin's joyous voice echoed around the vast cavern far below. "You've made good time down here. Any problems?"

Pascal did not get to answer, as Olivia dropped down to her knees and cried out her husband's name, with tears of elation spilling down her face. Kanin answered her, his well-loved voice amplified in the natural acoustics. They traced his movements from the beam of his flashlight as he came to stand at a point just beneath them, thus confirming their first impression that it was, indeed, a long way down.

Cullen grabbed onto Olivia's jacket, fearing that she would leap over the edge in her eagerness to get to her husband.

"Calm down, Olivia," he appealed to her. "We'll get him to you as soon as we can." He turned to Pascal and the rest of their team, satisfied that Olivia was going to stay put, and stated what they had already worked out for themselves.

"This rescue isn't going to be plain sailing, even from this angle."

In any event, the whole rescue went without mishap. The lifting gear that they had brought along with them ironed out many of the problems, though it was still painstakingly slow and laborious. Olivia was beside herself, because of course with Kanin being in charge of operations below, he was automatically the last man to be brought up to the surface.

As he appeared above the rim of the crater and was hauled onto the floor of the main tunnel, Olivia flung herself into his arms and was crushed to his chest. They stood together trembling; just holding onto each other until their fears subsided.

Still retaining his hold on Olivia, Kanin raised his head to see the relief and joy written on everyone's faces. His throat had constricted with emotion, but it did not prevent him from voicing his grateful thanks. With one free arm, he hugged first Jamie and then Pascal, before being handed a hot drink and beginning to catch up on all the news.

They were all distressed to hear how Vincent and Catherine had suffered, and although several graphic options were put forward for Tamara's fate, the depth of their outrage was kept to reasonable levels for the sake of the children.

Vivien stayed close beside Kipper as she became more concerned for the young boy's comatose state, even though he was holding his own. It gave them all comfort to know that he would soon have access to the very best that medical expertise could bestow.

Finally, all their gear was collected together and they began the long trail home.

Peter and Chris had taken turns to watch over Vincent and Catherine throughout the night, thus allowing Mary the opportunity to catch up on her lost sleep as well.

Peter was on the second shift, when a few minutes before dawn Vincent stirred, whispered Catherine's name, and opened his eyes. The doctor did not rush to his side, but waited for a few seconds to see if he had in fact recovered fully from his unconscious state.

Vincent felt strangely calm, sensing that he was home, and his eyes were drawn to the sleeping form beside him. In sleep, she had moulded herself to the length of his body, still clutching his hand in hers.

As Peter approached the bed, his sudden movement caught Vincent's eyes and recognition dawned.

"Peter?" He husked.

"Vincent. How are you feeling?"

He averted his eyes for a moment while he thought about his reply, and it came in the same husked tone. "I think I'll live, Peter," and he lowered his worried gaze back onto the woman beside him. "How is Catherine?"

Peter sat on the edge of the bed, reaching across Vincent's torso to lightly stroke Catherine's hair in an affectionate gesture. He sighed. "Physically, Vincent, she's fine, with everything progressing normally."

Vincent fixed him with steely blue eyes and asked, "But mentally?"

Peter sighed again and his shoulders slumped, before giving Vincent his professional assessment.

"Mentally, Vincent, Catherine has been horrendously scarred. She is going to need a great deal of help to bring her through it. We all believe that it is the kind of help that only you can give her - with your empathic awareness of all she has endured, and the deep understanding of what she needs."

Vincent nodded in agreement before observing. "I can sense that she has been sedated."

"Yes, I'm afraid it was necessary."

His face softened with emotion, and he inclined his head in reply before asking.

"Peter, would you mind doing something for me?"

"Anything, Vincent. Anything at all."

The vaguest suggestion of a smile crossed Vincent's face as he explained. "My request is but a simple one, Peter. I could drink a whole pot of tea."

"Yes, of course, " but as he rose to his feet, Vincent called him back.

"Peter. There are two books on the top of my bookcase in front of the window in my chamber. Would you mind fetching them for me as well, please."

"My pleasure, Vincent," and he turned and left the chamber.

Father's first call before breakfast was of course the Hospital chamber. Slowing his steps as he neared the entrance, he heard the soothing tones of his son's voice reading from the easily recognized, *'Great Expectations.'*

He quietly entered the chamber unnoticed, and watched in wonder as Vincent lay propped up with

pillows reading to Catherine who had now vacated her small hospital bed and was curled up beside Vincent on his narrow bunk with her head on his shoulder. Though her eyes were closed, her face was composed and she was peacefully listening to this well-loved tale.

Father's heart soared with the almost certain knowledge that things would eventually return to normal, and he moved quietly away to go in search of some breakfast.

In the middle of the morning, a message came through on the pipes that the rescue mission had been successful and they would be home for lunch. It was followed by the more serious communique from Vivien, for preparations to be made for Kipper to be taken straight to Hamilton Lodge, as his condition had deteriorated.

Upon their arrival, Father quickly realized by Vivien's professional manner that the boy's condition was now critical. No time was wasted, and after a swift hug of welcome, she was hastily guided up to the Fourteenth Street entrance. Chris was on standby, waiting to whisk them both to the comfort, safety and extensive medical facilities of Hamilton Lodge.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Council meeting convened at seven-thirty that evening in Father's chamber, a time convenient to all, including Joe, who Father had requested to be present.

Earlier in the day, Joe had telephoned Peter, Chris and Vivien to discuss the feasibility of having Tamara detained, in an acceptably secure environment Above.

He had also been in conference with Father, Vincent and Catherine a short time before the meeting, and all were in full agreement that Joe's suggestion not only seemed to be the most realistic option, but the safest one for the whole community.

Vincent was transported from the Hospital chamber in an ancient wheelchair, which none the less served its purpose, as his feet had been badly damaged during his demented flight to the Catacombs.

Catherine walked beside him, but still retained her pale haunted appearance. Joe volunteered to push the wheelchair, and Father had taken Catherine's arm to give her his much needed support.

Joe gasped in awe as they stood above the short flight of steps that led down into Father's chamber. Every available space and vantage point was filled. Even the gallery was lined with expectant faces. Every step down the spiral staircase had someone sitting on it with their legs dangling over the edge; and the whole chamber was ablaze with flickering candles.

Kanin and William lifted Vincent and his wheelchair down the steps, to be pushed into the vacant space at the table where Catherine, Joe and Father joined him. The rest of the main Council was, of course, already seated and waiting for Father to take the chair.

In time-honoured tradition, Father rose to his feet before banging on the table with his polished wooden gavel, bringing the meeting to order.

"Quiet, please. Everyone," he shouted as his eyes scanned the chamber and he waited. Within seconds, except for the odd bout of coughing and the shuffling of feet, Father had the full attention of his whole community, and he began to speak.

"Well now. First, I would like to welcome you all, and thank you for being here on such short notice." He paused to clear his throat. "Due to the traumatic events of the past few days, I have decided that this was not an issue for our Council to debate on alone. This is something that concerns all of us, and the continued safety of our world."

He gazed down at Vincent sitting beside him, before proudly gripping his shoulder and addressing his audience.

"Let us not forget that under normal circumstances, this is the only place in which Vincent can live in freedom from persecution."

He glanced down with renewed wonder at his son, and the woman beside him leaning against his chair with her small hand clasped snugly in both of his. Father smiled, and nodded to himself before continuing.

"We have always maintained our own laws, and system of justice, endeavoured to measure out the punishment to fit the crime." He fixed Mouse with an affectionate stare causing the young man to smirk, blush, and avert his eyes. "Above all," Father emphasized, raising his voice, "we have always tried to be fair, and temper even our punishments with compassion."

There was much nodding and whispered agreement around the chamber. Father resumed his introductory speech, though his whole demeanour now conveyed a sternness that had not been present before, and he waited again for complete silence.

"However, on this occasion, not only has the safety of our world been threatened, but many lives have been put at great risk due to a series of heinous crimes. This we cannot condone - not when it endangers our children, family and loved ones. Not when the laws in the world Above would undoubtedly commit the perpetrator to spend many, many years in prison."

He glanced at Joe before voicing the fear that was shared by them all. "Let us not forget that young Kipper's life is still hanging on a thread. Let us hope and pray that he will make a full recovery."

There were many sounds of agreement from around the chamber, and Father leaned forward resting his hands onto the table and shifting his weight slightly, to ease his aching hip. It did little to help, so ignoring the incessant nagging pain, he straightened up, to continue with the proceedings.

His voice, precise and clear in the silence of the chamber, Father commanded.

"Bring in the accused."

Tamara was led down the steps to stand in front of Father's desk in full view of everyone. Her manner was one of indifference, but with the ever present contemptuous sneer on her lips.

Father suspected that this was only bravado. He, like everyone else, could see how old and frail she appeared to be, after losing all that she had strived to gain for her own evil pursuits. Failing in her bid to destroy something she could never hope to hold.

Father picked up his stick and limped the few paces to stand before her. He made an imposing figure. Patriarch of this world he had created. Right at this moment, he was quite astounded that this seemingly frail-looking woman of his generation could inflict so much suffering, so much terror, so much pain, onto other human beings - without conscience or shame.

A sudden overwhelming urge to grab her scrawny neck in his bare hands and throttle her, forced him to step back out of reach in an attempt to compose himself before addressing her.

"You go by the name of Tamara?"

"Yes," she answered without emotion.

"You have admitted to a catalogue of crimes against my family, and members of my community."

"Yes."

"Have you anything to say in your own defense?"

"Nothing," she answered, her cold dead eyes staring back at him.

Father shook his head, perplexed at her total lack of interest in her own fate. Drawing in a deep

breath, he asked her another question.

"Well, In that case, Tamara, I demand to know why you set out on such a hopeless venture?"

She bared her discoloured teeth with a cheerless grin, and with a contemptuous sneer informed him. "It wasn't all that hopeless. I almost succeeded, didn't I? Father," she almost spat out his given name.

A low menacing growl emitted from Vincent's throat, instigating a string of catcalls and hisses from other members of the audience, which Father was forced to silence because he had not yet finished his questioning.

"Tamara, it is obvious to us all, that you are totally unrepentant for what you have tried to do. So, before I hand you over to my representative from the outside world, who will then pass sentence on you, I demand to know what has driven you to commit such unspeakable atrocities against people who have done you no harm.

Fire sparked in those dead eyes, her gaunt face suddenly animated and alive, as she squared herself before her inquisitor, spitting out her words like a rush of venom.

"What I tried to do, Father?" she sneered, emphasizing again, the honorary title bestowed upon him by his community, with the same contempt shown by Paracelsus almost two years before. He stood before her unmoved, fixing her with unworried blue-grey eyes, as he permitted her to continue with her tirade.

"No," she leered at him. "I almost succeeded in taking back and destroying all you have created in your pious little world; including Vincent's life."

Her lip curled as she added, "My retribution for his killing of Paracelsus, as well as everything you stole from the man who was John Pater, before you banished him from his home.

"You," she cried out contemptuously, whilst trying unsuccessfully to break free of the restraining hands that held her. "All that he had helped you to build down here. You took his ideas, his vision, his dream to rule this community - and you kept Vincent. The child he loved and would have raised as his son."

Father remained unflinching, though not immune to some truths in what she had said, but he inclined his head with exaggerated encouragement.

"Go on, Tamara. Tell us more."

Now she had started, nothing would have stopped her from having her say.

"Paracelsus would have raised Vincent to achieve his full potential. To be what he was meant to be. Not soft and compassionate," and she spat onto the floor in contempt. "But a warrior, to instigate fear, to possess power, to control," and her voice rose to a high pitched screech, as if teetering on the very brink of madness.

The atmosphere of sickening disgust was almost tangible around his chamber, as Father incited her to continue. He wanted his community to have first hand knowledge of what this world they all loved would have been like, had his *'friend'* John Pater been allowed to take the upper hand all those years before.

Her eyes were ablaze with evil as she almost gleefully voiced her final testimony. "I was going to keep Vincent's whore alive, until the freak growing inside her was far enough advanced to survive alone."

Vincent's ear-splitting roar reverberated around the chamber, as half incensed, he attempted to leap across the table with the same compulsion Father had felt earlier. Many hands, including Catherine's held him back, and an order of sorts was restored, with Tamara being firmly held under

close arrest.

Joe had heard some testimonies in his time, but this was something else again. There was no doubt in his mind that they had reached the right solution, thus avoiding the very definite dangers of going through the courts. He glanced over at Catherine's chalk-white face, and still could not help but wonder about her future and that of her child.

He was about to rise to his feet to make his contribution to this unconventional trial, but Father held up his hand to forestall him, and he dropped back down into his seat.

"Joe," the tone of Father's voice was genial and free from anxiety. "Before you pronounce sentence, there is something that I would like to make clear to Tamara, something that she overlooked because it has not been made known beyond the immediate family."

Joe frowned, equally puzzled, and watched as Father smiled affectionately at Catherine and his son, before turning away from them to address their prisoner.

"Well now, Tamara. A few months ago I was given the opportunity to find out for myself once and for all why Vincent is the way that he is," and he smiled smugly to himself. "At the time I had to admit to a perverse wish that Paracelsus could be there to witness it," and he chuckled. "It really would have fouled up all his evil plans and destroyed his formidable dreams."

This provoked a gleam of interest in Tamara's eyes, and Father, leaning heavily onto his stick took the several paces forward to stand in an almost conspiratorial manner before her.

"What I discovered, Tamara, was the indisputable fact that any child Vincent and Catherine conceive will not inherit any trace of his father's differences. The very small part of Vincent that made him what he is, cannot be passed on."

The shocked disbelief on Tamara's face, for Father, made up for some of the pain and it gave him immense pleasure to endorse his findings.

"Vincent is very definitely a unique, but very human being."

"Yeah." Joe shouted before punching the air, then reaching out to grip Catherine's hands, together with Vincent's. His joyful outburst was followed by more cries of jubilation and applause from around the chamber. Tamara, however, was apparently still in some state of shock.

Catherine released herself from Joe and Vincent. She purposefully pushed her chair back from the table and rose somewhat shakily to her feet. Indicating to Father that she would like to say a few words, he raised his hand, and within seconds silence reigned once again.

"Yes, Catherine," he asked her. "You have something to add?"

"Yes, I most certainly do, Father," and she moved out from her place at the table to stand behind Vincent's wheelchair. Wrapping her arms around his shoulders, she hugged him to her and gazed with her still haunted eyes up at Father, Tamara and everyone else within her line of vision.

Leaving her hands resting on Vincent's shoulders, she straightened up and prepared to voice her innermost thoughts, her eyes fixed pointedly on Tamara's face. Catherine instinctively knew that that this confrontation would help to purge the terror that this monstrous woman had put her through, and help her face her fears.

"Tamara," she began, "it would make no difference to me, nor to anyone here, if this child I am carrying was to inherit his father's differences," and her hand dropped to rest protectively onto her lower abdomen. "I know that I am not alone in thinking that never to see Vincent's likeness again, would be a terribly sad loss."

There were murmurs of agreement from all corners of the chamber, but Tamara remained indifferent to her words. Catherine did not waver from what she wanted to say, and disregarded the

woman's impassive manner.

"The one and only comfort for all of us, is to know that our child will not have to suffer the unimaginable pain of having to hide from strangers, in order to live any kind of life at all." Her hands caressed his shoulders, her fingers intertwining with his hair as she added. "And our child will be able to walk freely under the warm sun."

Catherine stood tall, proud and unafraid, her hands remaining possessively upon the shoulders of her man. She spoke for them all.

"Anyone who really knows Vincent, would not wish him to be any different." Catherine was determined to take her to task.

"That is the difference between us, Tamara. You, and Paracelsus before you, thrived on hate, cruelty and destruction. You have no heart. Neither of you. You have tried to take what does not belong to you, and when that did not work, you set out to destroy by whatever means at your disposal, this world and the people in it."

Catherine was conscious of Vincent's calming influence and knew that she could afford to show a certain compassion, but the contempt she felt could not be so easily contained, and showed on her face as she concluded.

"This world that has been created here will survive long after we are gone, and there is nothing you could ever do to stop it. Because of Vincent, and Father, the spirit to keep it flourishing, that burns bright within all of us, will be passed on through the children, to their children."

Catherine began to visibly slump, as this effort she had made, not only for herself but for the whole community, finally took its toll and Father reached out to steady her, guiding her back to the table, and to Vincent's side.

It was obvious to all, that Catherine's words had in fact made some impact. Tamara stood, held between Kanin and William, as if slowly shrinking before their eyes, the fire within her completely snuffed out. She now awaited her fate.

Father nodded to Joe, who pushed back his chair and rose to his feet to address the woman before him.

"Tamara, you have been found guilty by your own admission of many atrocities against this community, a community not equipped to deal with the kind of punishment that must be imposed on you. You are a vengeful woman, hell bent on destruction, and left to your own devices you would undoubtedly discover some depraved way to strike again. Even from a prison cell. This, therefore, is not a viable option, without endangering this place of safety and everyone in it."

Joe paused to remove three signed documents from a folder on the table, before he pronounced her sentence.

"Tamara, I have written authorization here to support the only source of action which remains open to us." Joe hesitated to seek Father's final assent which came as a brief nod, and Joe continued. "You have been committed to the secure psychiatric block at Belle View Sanatorium, where you will be detained for the rest of your days."

She stared back at him blankely, as if she had not heard, but Joe continued, on the assumption that she had.

"You have been declared insane by three eminent doctors; Vivien Hayward, Peter Alcott and Christopher Hamilton, and I have with me here, copies of their signed statements to that effect. You will be escorted from here tonight, and taken to Belle View, where they are waiting to receive you. Anything you say, or do, will be looked upon as the actions or ramblings of a sick, deranged and dangerous woman; and the appropriate restraints and treatments will be applied."

There was not a sound from anyone as, without more ado, Tamara was led almost ceremoniously from the chamber, on her final journey through the tunnels to begin her sentence that would last for the rest of her natural life.

It was after ten o'clock. Father was at last alone and sat quietly reading at his desk, winding down after the events of the evening. The pipes had been quiet for some time and Father assumed that everyone had settled early for the night.

There was a sudden commotion in the entrance to his chamber, and he looked up to see Kanin, William and Joe, together with the rest of Tamara's escort to the surface, and they all appeared to be in some distress.

William burst forward. "Father, we were going up the stone circle, and don't ask me how, but Tamara broke free and jumped over the edge," and the words rushed out without pause for breath. He shrugged and frowned as he tried to rationalize the situation to Father. "She didn't even scream. One moment she was there; and the next moment she'd gone."

Father glanced questioningly at Joe who nodded, "That's about the size of it; in the blink of an eye. I'm just relieved that she didn't take it into her head to drag a couple of us off with her."

Father drew in a deep breath and narrowed his lips. "Well," he sighed, "there's nothing we can do. It was obviously the choice she wanted to make." He wearily ran his fingers through his hair before adding, "and though I hate to be cynical about it, at least there is no way that she can terrorize us ever again."

After the trial was over, Vincent had suggested that he and Catherine be taken to his chamber, where she would find the surroundings more comforting and familiar, as would he.

It was here that for the past couple of hours, Vincent had been sitting up in bed with Catherine in his arms, reading to her until she had finally fallen asleep. He was very conscious of the tight coil of fear within her, even as she slept, and he stayed awake to watch over her.

Before long, he began to sense the onset of another nightmare and was tempted to wake her, but he knew from his own experiences that she had to discover for herself that the nightmares were not real. To find that she was safe would, in itself, help to ease her fears.

He shared in the terrified panic rising within her, and he held her close, smoothing her hair and reassuring her with his words.

"It's all right, Catherine. I'm here. You are safe. Shhh. Everything is all right." Gradually her distress subsided, her breathing became steady, and Vincent relaxed himself, until he too drifted off into a deep exhausted sleep.

It was her sudden screams that jolted him awake again, to find her thrashing about and bathed in perspiration. Her arms flayed out in all directions in her mindless terror, hitting him in the face. He held her gently but firmly to him and tried to wake her up.

Her eyes were glassy and trance-like, as she stared up at him, before slumping back into an unresponsive stupor. Vincent climbed out of bed, grimacing at the pain from his badly lacerated feet beneath the dressings as they took his weight. He ignored it and poured some water into a bowl. Collecting a clean wash cloth from the cabinet he was about to bathe her face, when he heard Father enter the chamber.

"Vincent, what's happened?" he asked, laying his stick across the bottom of the bed and moving closer to stand behind Vincent's back, observing his ministrations.

"She had had a bad nightmare, Father. I was expecting it."

"Yes. So was I. Would you like me to give her another sedative?"

"No." His rejection came more abruptly than he had intended, and he turned towards him apologetically. "No, Father. Thank you. It is better that she comes to terms with what she has suffered with her own inner strength."

Father was somewhat taken aback by his son's attitude, and quickly pointed out to him, "Vincent, don't you think that you are being a bit harsh? Catherine doesn't have your resilience, you know, and come to think of it, your own state of health is not much better than hers is."

"I will survive, Father, and so will Catherine. She has much to survive for. We all have, and I will help her. Catherine is not alone with her fears. I will always be with her."

Father lowered himself onto the edge of the bed and grasped his son's arm. "Vincent, don't expect her to recover from this ordeal overnight, will you?" His voice was edged with concern. "You do know that it could take some time?"

Vincent sighed and put the cloth down before turning around to face him. Father could see the deep understanding etched into his son's face, knowing that he had spoken out of turn in his fatherly concern for her welfare.

Vincent looked down at his hands while searching for the words to explain his reasoning, and after a few seconds he looked up.

"Father, I think we both know that Catherine will never completely recover from the ordeal that she has endured. It is not something you recover from, is it?"

He did not wait for his father's reply but continued almost to himself. "It is something that you learn to live with. She will be haunted by these nightmares for the rest of her life. They will become less frequent, but they will still return from time to time, and like mine, Catherine will learn to live with them."

Father was well aware of all Vincent's recurring nightmares. Had he not sat and nursed him through them, night after night as a boy? And stood witness to them, in the none too distant past.

He could not help commenting again. "But Catherine is not like you, Vincent. You can't expect her to have your kind of strength. She could even become fearful of these surroundings." He inclined his head questioningly. "Have you thought of that?"

Vincent reached out to take his shoulders, shaking him gently before quietly insisting. "Yes, I have considered that possibility, Father, but Catherine is, like me. She is the other half of who I am. She will be fine." He shook Father again, and as if to emphasize the point, he added, "I have to believe that."

Father sighed and nodded, a tight-lipped smile of acceptance on his face. He hoisted himself up to his feet and picked up his stick. "So there's nothing I can do to help?"

"Of course there is, Father," and Vincent squeezed his arm affectionately, "Just be there for us."

Father's face softened with affection. "Well, I cannot promise to be always here, but for as long as I am able, I will be. For both of you."

Vincent met his gaze. "I can ask for nothing more."

Before Father finally departed Vincent's chamber, he told him of Tamara's suicide. His son showed no more sorrow at the woman's passing, then he had himself. His only reaction was to shrug and comment, "She took the easy way out."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Over the next few days there was a dramatic improvement within Father's world, as the atmosphere of all enveloping relief made its presence felt. The sounds of laughter and excited chatter filled the air, together with the welcome voices of children singing.

Kipper was over the worst and was making steady progress in the comfortable surroundings of Hamilton Lodge, and would soo be well enough to return home.

For the first few days, Catherine and Vincent remained quietly in their chamber, providing each other with exactly the right kind of help they needed. Their empathic connection, heightened by the recent trauma, gave them a more intimate understanding of the other's feelings. This unique closeness was more naturally beneficial to healing their deep mental scars than any medication or professional counselling ever could be.

Neither of them as yet, possessed either the energy or the inclination to actually make love, but they never left each other's side, even for the briefest moment. They were always physically close, holding, touching.

Catherine was beginning to manage several hours of uninterrupted sleep, which enabled Vincent' to do the same. As the days passed, both began to lose their haunted appearance, becoming more animated and talkative.

Vincent's physical injuries were mending with their usual speed, and he was fast becoming vertically mobile. At last they ventured forth and began to seek out company, both of them privately conceding to the unanimous feelings of relief that Tamara had chosen to end her own life.

Fortunately, Catherine's pregnancy had not suffered any ill effects, and she seemed to be amazingly free from problems and progressing well. Father informed everyone by asking Pascal to put a short bulletin out on the pipes.

Kanin and Olivia were also very much in the throes of not being able to get enough of each other since their emotional reconciliation. No one passed any remarks when the occasional meal times came and went without them, though there were a few benevolent and knowing smiles when their chairs remained empty.

Like Vincent and Catherine, Kanin and Olivia were quietly recovering from all the recent traumatic events, grateful that they could take this time to recuperate and begin to feel safe again. They both agreed that it had been right for Kanin to go on the expedition and Olivia openly admitted to being glad that she had not tried to stop him.

This thought was thankfully acknowledged by the whole community, as the experiences that they had all endured at Tamara's hands were fully revealed over the next few days. There was no doubt in anyone's mind that without Kanin, the outcome could have been very different.

A week had elapsed since the dramatic rescues, and Kipper was now well enough to be brought home. Chris and Vivien conveyed him to the park entrance one evening after dark. He was met by the full complement of Vincent, Kanin, Mouse and Jamie, together with the four children, Eric, Samantha, Zach and Geoffrey.

They were all overjoyed that no permanent damage had been done and he would, with time, make a complete recovery. The young boy was very tearful and overcome by the love and warmth of their welcome, and although the surroundings Below were drab in comparison with the comforts at Hamilton Lodge, Kipper was obviously glad to be home again.

After Kipper had been settled in, Chris asked if a private meeting could be arranged at some time during the evening. He had something of a serious nature that he wished to discuss, but refused to

elaborate further.

Mystified and a little apprehensive, Father asked, "Dear God, what is there now to be so serious about and who do you want in on this private meeting?"

Chris grinned, genial as ever. "Well, you, me, Vincent, Catherine and Vivien," and he specified more somberly, before adding. "I have tried to contact Devin, but without success."

They sat in puzzled anticipation around the table in Father's chamber. Mary had supplied tea for all of them with an extra pot of hot water should it be needed, before bidding them goodnight and leaving them to their meeting.

No one had any interest in pouring the tea. All eyes were focused onto Chris' face, waiting expectantly for him to speak. The moment of silence stretched for longer than any of them could tolerate, and it was Vincent who finally asked.

"Chris, exactly what is it that you wish to discuss with us?"

He met Vincent's questioning gaze with eyes that reflected the good-natured expression on his face. Vincent felt an easy empathy with the man, sensing that whatever he had to share with them, would cause no further pain.

Chris leaned forward in his chair, his elbows resting on the well worn upholstered arms. "Truth is, Vincent, I had a nice little speech planned, but now I don't know where to begin."

"The beginning would be good," Father suggested, not quite as perceptive as Vincent.

"The beginning, Jacob, goes back a very long way and since then, I think you will agree that our lives have run along amazingly parallel lines that somehow seemed destined to cross."

Father silently acknowledged his words and allowed him to continue.

"We have both suffered great tragedy and loss, Jacob, but out of it all has come a tremendous amount of good. Out of it all, we have both been given the opportunity to take the world by the scruff of the neck, shake it down, and have another go." He smiled affectionately at his friend. "We allowed the pain of all we had suffered to make us stronger, more compassionately, more understanding - and we have used that to build on."

Only Father and Chris knew that he was quoting the words of their mutual friend, Alan Taft, and both of them smiled in acknowledgement, because they had both unknowingly followed the same path. Held the same beliefs. The same values.

Chris began talking again, his voice tinged with the regret that he could not conceal.

"Jacob. As you know, I have no heir to inherit my estate. No heir, to continue with the traditions that I have upheld and strive for over the last thirty-five years or so."

He leaned forward onto the table addressing them all. "My remaining living relatives have waived all claims to Hamilton Lodge. They all have their own dynasties to run, and although in principle they have always approved whole-heartedly of what I have tried to do, they hold no interest whatsoever, in any physical or financial sense."

Catherine frowned as her legal brain kicked into gear and asked, "Chris, surely you have made a will? Surely there is someone who would carry on your work, and honour your traditions and obligations?"

"I suspect, Catherine," Vivien interrupted her with a small but constructive observation. "That it is the force of Chris's personality which has made Hamilton Lodge all that it is today."

Chris smiled, and let out a deep sigh before admitting. "It has always been my whole life, Vivien.

The family I have never been able to have, and replacing the family that was taken from us. It is to my regret that I have never found a woman strong enough to share my life. A life that demands a very special kind of love," and his eyes scanned his listening audience. "Neither have I ever found anyone that I would be happy to relinquish it all to," and almost as an after thought he added, "until now."

He breathed in a deep breath, and smiled at Catherine. "As for me making a will, Catherine, yes, I'm afraid that was forced upon me some years ago, and the only option that I could come up with then, was to leave it all to charity."

"But you're not happy with that," she stated.

"No. I have always tried to maintain a family atmosphere, Catherine, with me as the father figure and fiercely protective of them all."

He turned back to Father. "Pretty much like your world, Jacob, which apart from the tight budget and lack of modern facilities, matches all that I have tried to achieve at the Lodge," and before anyone else could interrupt, Chris came straight out with what he wanted to say.

"Which brings me to the real reason for my calling this meeting," and he drew in a large breath. "To my mind, there is only one family to whom I would be more than willing and happy to leave Hamilton Lodge; to share it all with - and that is with you. All of you."

He acknowledged the silent shock on all their faces, but now that he had started, there was no stopping him and the words came tumbling out.

"There are fifteen acres of land, enough for you, Vivien, to build your own home on it if you so wish. Jacob, you can spend your autumn years in comfort...." But Father began frantically waving his arms about.

"Chris. Chris. Dear God. Stop it." His voice rising to a crescendo. "What on earth are you talking about? Me leaving Vincent here Below. Alone?"

Chris stared at him with the sudden realization that he had been completely misunderstood. He rose to his feet and moved around the table, to stand in the space between where Vincent and Catherine were seated.

"Jacob. Vivien. Catherine." He paused. "And Devin will also be included in this on his next visit home." He purposely omitted Vincent's name for the moment. "I am almost sixty years old, and have been worrying about the future of the Lodge for some years, because I am the end of the line." He paused again, knowing that he had their full attention.

"A few months ago I had the good fortune to meet a young man. I knew instantly, without the slightest doubt in my mind, that this was the man to whom I could entrust the care of my charges. This is the man who would really understand the terrible difficulties that many of them have to try and live with; psychologically as well as physically." And he glanced down at the man in question beside him. "Since then, it has been an honour to have been made a part of all this, and has endorsed my earlier conviction."

His hand moved to rest on the broad shoulder beside him as he spoke the single name. "Vincent."

Vincent's head spun around and gazed up at him in shock. Father's face was incredulous as he stuttered. "But Vincent can't live Above. It isn't safe. He'd be seen." He pushed his chair back and rose to his feet as panic gripped him and he cried out. "It's not safe, Chris. I can't allow my son's life to be put at such great risk."

"Jacob. Look at me," Chris ordered, unaware that he was gripping Vincent's shoulder. "I am offering you the opportunity to do exactly the same thing as you have done here, but in more comfort; and to spend your remaining years in the sunshine."

Father slumped in his chair, still shaking his head and repeating. "I can't do it. I can't go back - and I can't allow Vincent to be made vulnerable to so many dangers."

Chris smiled, more than satisfied with his friend's response, knowing that he would have reacted in exactly the same way and quietly commiserated. "I know, Jacob, and I'm not asking you to."

He moved from behind Vincent to stand within full view of them all, but fixing his gaze upon Vincent's face, and perceiving the mixed emotions written there. He drew in a deep breath.

"Vincent, the only certainty in life is that some day we will die. When that day comes for me, no matter how hard I try, or how well I plan, I can neither guarantee the future of Hamilton Lodge, nor the quality of life for all the many people and children who call it home. Who live, and grow there, secure in the knowledge that they are safe, and away from prying eyes.

Chris had emphasized the last sentence, and hesitated for a moment before continuing with what he had to say. He drew himself up almost to attention, as if he was about to make an official announcement, and then he smiled.

"I am asking you to do me the honour of becoming my heir. To inherit Hamilton Lodge and all that I own. To give me some peace of mind; and to help me to fulfill a dream," he gazed around, "for all of us." He waited for some reaction, but nobody spoke and he leaned forward with his hands on the table. His eyes locked with Vincent's, unwavering and free from doubt.

"Vincent, last year when you left the Lodge, do you remember our parting words?"

"I do."

"We shared a dream, Vincent. To see you and Catherine, with your family, able to move freely around Hamilton Lodge as if it were your second home."

"I remember," and he looked lovingly down at Catherine's expectant face, then across to Vivien and Father.

"Vincent," Chris pleaded. "Will you at least trust me enough to try?"

Vincent's eyes never left Chris's face, but he reached out to clasp Catherine's hands in both of his. Taking a deep breath, he answered, "Yes, Chris. I would like to try."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

To any parent, the prospect of a much loved son or daughter leaving home and going out to face the world alone, is a traumatic and worrying experience. Equally, one of the most difficult roles to learn, is the ability to let go with a good heart.

Like any loving parent, Father wanted the very best for his son, but they had both spent their lives coming to terms with the limitations of what this implied.

That was until Catherine became a part of their world.

In spite of Father's initial hostility towards her; convinced that she would only cause Vincent pain; Catherine finally won his trust, and his love. She had helped to push back Vincent's horizon, loved him and all that he was, and she had given him a dream. Something for which Father was ever grateful.

Vincent's life had changed dramatically over the past two years, and Father had shared in their joy of fulfilling what seemed like impossible dreams. He also shared in all the pain and trauma, that they had suffered along the way. Though witnessing now the depth of their love, and the child waiting to be born, this was a miracle that Father had never even dared to wish for. He had always

believed it was something that could never be. Without the slightest qualm, Father was the first to admit that it had all been worth it.

Vincent was never a man to rush into anything. Always, he took the time he needed to think things through, even if he did occasionally arrive at the wrong conclusion. He would sometimes disappear into the depths of their world alone for several days to work problems through in his mind.

Sometimes, he would be consumed by the uncontrollable urge to vent all his suppressed anger and frustrations at all the limitations placed upon him. And it was here, in this black unpeopled space miles below New York City, that he would unleash his unfettered rage.

On this occasion, however, Vincent was in no fit state to go anywhere, to indulge in his lonesome thinking. He had no alternative but to take the only course of action open to him, turning for advice to the two people who knew him best. Catherine and Father.

There was no doubt that as the impact of the evening's discussions began to sink in, so did their mutual anxieties about their future. Much to Chris's surprise, they declined his offer of returning to Hamilton Lodge with him that night.

Now, in the quiet familiarity of Vincent's chamber, these three apprehensive people pondered on the events of the evening, certain that for the moment, it was something that concerned no one else but themselves. Vivien had returned Above, accepting that in this instance, there was little that she could do to help them. It had to be their decision.

"Vincent, what will you do?" Father asked, trying to keep the tremor out of his voice, but without much success.

"Don't worry, Father," and he reached out to place a comforting hand on his arm. "Right now, I am not going to do anything. How can I?"

They were seated around the small table in the centre of his chamber, drinking the tea that Mary had left for them. Vincent rotated his cup in a concentrated effort to still the inner turmoil that he shared with Catherine.

"This is my home, Father," he whispered, his voice thick with emotion. "The only home I have ever known. The only place I can live and feel safe. Knowing that it is my very presence, that somehow reassures everyone else. How can I leave it? How can I leave them?" He sighed, but before Father could offer any kind of answer, Vincent suddenly demanded to know of him. "Could you leave here, Father?"

He met his son's eyes, and shook his head. "No, Vincent. The outside world holds nothing for me. Not any more. It has become a very frightening place to live." He pursed his lips. "My stay at Hamilton Lodge was, a pleasant change, but it brought back memories of all the pain and bitterness, tears and anger, at all the injustice that I had to endure, which almost killed me." He grimaced and shook his head. "I didn't feel safe, Vincent, and I was glad to come home."

Catherine had contributed very little to the evening's startling events. Even now, she just sat quietly listening beside Vincent, knowing that he could feel her unrest, just as she could feel his.

All her common sense and reason was telling her that this was an unbelievable offer that no sane person could possibly refuse, but this had nothing to do with sanity, and a still small voice inside her head was screaming, 'No.'

As the silent moments passed, Vincent became conscious of the calming effect that their conversation was beginning to have on Catherine, and he reached for her hand, enveloping it in both of his, gently stroking her fingers.

"Catherine," he gazed lovingly down at her. "You have said very little. Please, tell us what you think."

She frowned and took a deep breath before voicing her thoughts. "Vincent, Father." She paused. "After all the horror that Tamara put us through, put me through, I was worried that these surroundings might have frightened me," and she hesitated. "I mean by association."

"Yes," Father nodded. "We were concerned about that happening too."

"Hmmm," she acknowledged. "The fact is, this is where I want to be. This is where I feel safe," and she smiled up at Vincent. "I meant all I said to Tamara. That this world will continue long after we are gone. Because the spirit to keep it going is within all of us, and will be passed on through our children. And it's that bright spirit, shining like a diamond in our midst, that you have created, Vincent. You and Father. We have to keep polishing it to keep it bright." She drew Vincent's hand up to her lips and kissed it, her eyes meeting his in complete understanding.

She dragged her eyes away from Vincent's, turning her attention back to Father across the table, her face softening with the great affection that she felt for him. "And now, this had become my home too. All of this," and she held out her arms to encompass the chamber. "All of this is where I come home to. Father, I love this city. I love being home. I love the work that I do, and I love Joe. This, is my life. To be a woman of both worlds."

Her lips trembled as she gazed up into Vincent's face. "How can we leave it all, Vincent? All that we have here. How can any of us leave this community. Friends, who are like family to us and the children who look to you, Vincent. Not only for the protection you give them, but your love, and so very much more."

The two adoring men smiled at her, and Vincent asked. "Then what do you suggest, Catherine?"

She screwed up her face with intense concentration. "What should we do?" She muttered almost to herself, as all her legal training kicked into gear and she smiled.

"Well, I think we seem to have decided that moving to Hamilton Lodge is not for us?" She raised her eyebrows questioningly, and the two men nodded in agreement. "In that case, I suggest that we put forward an alternative to Chris when we arrange another meeting."

"Go on, Catherine." Vincent encouraged.

"We could suggest that he makes us the executors to his will; to include Vivien and Devin, of course. That way, we couldn't personally inherit any of his estate. If he agrees, it could be left in trust for our children, and in effect, we would become the legal guardians, or caretakers of Chris's estate."

She paused to catch her breath before resuming her proposal. "This will serve as an added benefit; enabling us to watch over and protect all that Chris has worked for and uphold his traditions." She grimaced. "Of course, most of that will be irrelevant, hopefully for many years. Chris is still a relatively young man."

There were several moments of silence, while they waited for Father to give his final acceptance, and they patiently waited until he had digested all that Catherine had said.

"Well now," Father seemed to rouse himself from his contemplation. "I can well imagine Christopher thinking that we are quite mad, rejecting the opportunity to live in such comfort. I'm not too sure how Vivien and Devin will react to our decision either, but on the face of it, that appears to be that. Are we all agreed?"

"Yes." Catherine smiled up at Vincent, who nodded. "We are all agreed," and the three of them reached out and clasped hands in the centre of the table, sealing their decision.

Chris returned Below the following evening accompanied by Vivien. Devin had still not been located, but Vincent reassured them all that he would be properly informed upon his next visit home.

On this occasion, they all gathered around Vincent's table, bathed in the amber glow from the half-moon window, and enhanced by the glowing candles all around them. This was considered to be a more private location than the open plan of Father's chamber.

Chris's disappointment was plainly evident, as Father began to explain the reasons for their decision. None of them felt the need to apologize for the fact that this was their home, and that this was where they wished to stay.

Vivien was also somewhat amazed by their rejection of Chris's bequest, but at the same time had not expected them to behave any differently. It filled her with pride, admiration, and a solid conviction that they had their priorities absolutely right.

Chris's dreams for Vincent, his family, and the future of Hamilton Lodge, were not going to materialize exactly the way he had envisaged. Sadly, he sat and listened attentively as Catherine, with Father's approval, voiced all their misgivings and unforeseen dangers to him.

"Chris, please try to understand. Everyone in this community, and our Helpers and friends Above, accept Vincent, respect him, and love him the way that he is. But Chris, there are no guarantees that everyone at the Lodge will do the same." She sighed. "Chris, to accept Vincent, and the love we share, is something that goes deeper than friendship, or even love."

Complete understanding dawned on Chris's face as Catherine emphasized the point she was trying to make.

"Chris, there are people out there who would wish Vincent harm, and you must know this." With some reluctance, he nodded, "Of course," and she continued. "There are people out there, Chris, who would also wish me harm, for loving Vincent. And, as recent events have already proved, even our children would not be completely free from danger."

Vincent added a comment of his own, in an attempt to ensure that this generous caring man was not offended in any way by their decision.

"Chris, this in no way detracts from all you have tried to do for us," and he inclined his head, his face softening into a wistful smile. "And for the moment, we could allow ourselves to dream. But you see, there really is no place for me in your world."

Chris conceded. "I understand," and he sighed. "I have always been blind to your differences, Vincent. I saw through them, to the man within. It is something that I have trained myself to do over the years, and I have never been disappointed by what I have found."

"It always comes as a miracle, when a stranger accepts me as I am. Chris, it is a gift that is so rarely bestowed upon me, and when it is, it is treasured."

Chris's natural warmth and sincerity showed in his eyes, as did his respect and admiration for all that Vincent represented. It was not in his nature to stay serious for very long, and he grinned at Vincent.

"Okay. I can accept that you are the hinge pin of this world that has been created down here. But, it is still my wish that in the event of my death, the affairs of my estate are placed into your safe and capable hands. Even if you are never able to take charge in person, Vincent, I am confident that your influence will be all that is needed. It's certainly something that I hope I may call upon in the years to come."

He surveyed the select group of friends around the table; friends who had become his second family; and he made his final comment. "I can foresee no reason why this union between our two 'houses' cannot prove beneficial to us all."

Vincent inclined his head in acknowledgement. "Thank you, Chris. It will be our pleasure to give of our assistance in any way we can."

They all voiced their agreement, clasping hands to form a circle around the table; thus sealing their commitment to each other.

Over the next few weeks, there were to be many meetings between them, with Joe and Catherine personally handling all the legalities as pertaining to the holdings of Hamilton Lodge; which were vast. It was Father's wish to remain as anonymous as his son.

At last, one cold afternoon early in March, all the original documents were signed, sealed, and stored away in the Hamilton's security bank vault in the city. A copy was held in safekeeping in Vincent's chamber Below.

Vincent and Catherine never did feel the need to recuperate at Hamilton Lodge. Catherine was more than content spending the ten days at home Below with Vincent, just being together. Healing. Making love, and coming alive again.

It was with great reluctance that Catherine returned to work. Though now, with Joe not only her boss, and friend, but her ever watchful '*minder*' whilst she was Above, Vincent rested more easily.

Over the past few months, Joe had been made very much aware of the danger that Catherine had to live with. He fully understood that if she was to remain a woman of both worlds, as Vincent encouraged her to be, then he was going to make damn sure that Catherine could do just that. As his personal assistant, it certainly freed her from all the dangerous situations she previously felt duty bound to thrust herself into.

For a long time, and to her shame, Catherine had no idea that learning to face her own fears, took such a terrible toll on Vincent. She had been unaware of the risks he faced coming to her rescue, unaware of the depth of his own self revulsion, and the recurrent nightmares he suffered because these rescue missions invariably ended in bloodshed and death.

No matter how justified the reason, for Vincent to be forced into using his innate abilities to kill, went against everything he believed in and caused him unimaginable anguish and self recrimination.

At least from now on, they felt they had been given the chance to live a more normal and peaceful existence.

One evening, after Vincent had been to meet Catherine from her basement entrance after work, they returned to their chamber to find Kanin and Olivia waiting for them. They greeted each other with hugs and handshakes, as good friends will, then curiously, all conversation ceased.

Vincent's natural empathy to people's emotions, especially when they were close friends, forced him to inquire. "Kanin. Olivia. Is there something that you wish to tell us?"

Kanin grinned, hugging Olivia to him. His pride and his excitement plain for all to see. "We're pregnant, Vincent."

"Both of you?" giggled Catherine in amusement, as Olivia released herself from her husband and the two women hugged and kissed each other sharing their mutual joy. The two men shook hands and hugged each other warmly in congratulations.

"We wanted you to be the first to know," Kanin explained, "before we make any formal announcements," and he turned to Olivia as the atmosphere seemed to take on a more serious tone.

Catherine frowned, sensing for herself that there was something more that they wished to say. She removed her gloves and coat and dropped them onto the bed. Vincent followed suit, draping his cloak over the back of his chair, before indicating that they should all sit down around the table.

Vincent leaned forward, and with his arms resting on the table he gazed questioningly at their two friends.

"Well, there is obviously something troubling you both. Are you going to tell us what it is?" It was patently clear that they were both indecisive about saying anything at all, but in the event the responsibility fell to Olivia.

"I hope you won't think I'm intruding on something that is none of my business," she almost stuttered out the words.

"Go on," Catherine encouraged.

"Well, when Father confirmed my pregnancy, of course he was delighted for both of us and he jokingly commented that the tunnel world seemed to be procreating rather well at the moment with two other births almost imminent."

She looked down sheepishly before coming to the point. "I don't really think Father meant to say what he did, at least not to me, but he's worried that neither of you have mentioned anything about getting married."

For a few moments Olivia wondered if she had in fact made a serious mistake in saying anything at all, then Vincent rose solemnly to his feet, to stand beside Catherine's chair. She gazed up into his beloved face as he took her hand and went down onto one knee before her.

There was no concealing the look of love that passed between them as he asked, "Catherine, will you do me the honour of becoming my wife?"

Her whole face lit up with happiness and the sense of occasion. Without hesitation she answered, "Yes, Vincent. Of course I will."

He leaned forward and kissed her lips, before drawing her up to her feet to face their two beaming witnesses.

Vincent bowed gallantly to Olivia, his eyes sparkling with fun. "Are you happy with that, Olivia?"

"I'm thrilled, Vincent," and she stood up and hugged him.

"Then I suggest that we go and find Father, and ease his troubled mind."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Every corner of the Great Hall was illuminated with dancing candle flames, set out of harm's way in decorative wall fixtures. The great circular chandeliers had been lit and raised by their ropes to hang suspended from the roof of the chamber - a focal point, lending their own brilliance to the carpeted centre aisle.

Beautiful displays of fresh spring flowers were everywhere, their delicate perfume filling the air, and a source of much delight and pleasure amongst their fellow guests.

Along the hall's length against the wall, were trestle tables bedecked with a king's feast, though at the moment it was all covered with a heavy damask cloth. There was not an inch of space to be found on its surface, as gifts on display overspilled from the table to be placed close by on the floor.

However, these were not ordinary wedding presents in the accepted traditional sense. Catherine had requested that anyone wishing to bring a gift should make it a contribution for the community

as a whole. Reading books and writing materials for the School chamber. Anything for William's kitchen. Essentials like soup and toiletries, washing powder, medical supplies, bedding. The list was endless.

A miscellaneous collection of benches and chairs had been arranged in rows at either side of the centre aisle, and were quickly occupied. All the children were seated on the carpeted floor at the front, though many of their Helpers and friends had to stand at the back of the hall, as well as down each side, wherever there was room.

Everyone had arrived dressed in their finest clothes, bringing a profusion of colour to this dull grey world and the hubbub of noise and laughter was almost deafening as the excitement mounted.

On the front row, Vincent sat waiting for his bride. He could feel through their bond all of her excited happiness, her reassurance and her love.

At the appointed time, she would be led down the aisle on Peter's arm, with Jamie and Samantha as bridesmaids, and Vivien as Matron of Honour.

Devin sat beside him, proud and honoured to have been contacted in time to be Vincent's best man. This was something that he had never even dared to dream of for this man whom he loved like a brother, and respected more than anyone in the world.

He marvelled at Catherine's courage to love him, to love his world and all that it stood for, to keep it all safe from outside influences - and most of all, for giving Vincent a dream and then making that dream a reality.

Devin smiled contentedly, glad that someone had been able to give his adored brother everything that he so richly deserved. He remembered all too well the pain and great sense of loss that he felt at having to leave him behind all those years before, when they were little more than boys.

Father was conversing with Chris and Joe when he received the signal that Catherine was ready. Vincent and Devin rose to their feet and moved forward, as the tunnel orchestra struck up with the Wedding March. A hush fell over the packed Hall, as heads and necks craned to watch her walk down the aisle.

Catherine was a vision in her full length white lace wedding dress, well cut on simple lines to disguise her slightly visible pregnant state. It had long sleeves and a high neck, with a garland of flowers to hold her veil in place, and she carried a small posy. Vincent watched transfixed, disbelieving that within a few minutes she would be his wife.

He stood replendent in a cream ruffled shirt with full sleeves, and a light brown tunic top and matching pants. His eyes, so blue in the unaccustomed brightness, never left her face, until at last her hand was safely captured in his and he drew her beside him to stand before Father.

Father stood smiling down on them from his raised podium, almost overcome with pride and love. He cleared his throat behind his hand, before gazing out at the sea of expectant happy faces before him, many with tears glistening and tremulous lips as emotion threatened to overwhelm them.

"Well now," he started hoping that he could maintain his own composure. "I would like to thank each and every one of you for being here on this happy, happy day. To stand witness to a miracle, and to give thanks for something that we all thought could never be."

His face softened with deep affection as he gazed down at his family, and he smiled and sighed. "It is Vincent's wish for Catherine to remain a woman of both worlds, and this will inevitably call for great sacrifice by both of them. As you are all well aware, there is no safe place for my son in the outside world. So, for Catherine to succeed in the long term, she will need the support of you all."

"You're sure got that here, Kiddo," and Joe grinned cheekily from the front row, with the same

sentiment being echoed around the Hall.

Father paused, conscious of the great warmth of friendship and love that was almost tangible, and a calm confidence settled over him as he continued.

"I have been neither ordained nor lawfully elected to perform the marriage ceremony but, like the captain of a ship, in this world we have created here I have been given the honour of carrying out this very special task on many occasions. The vows that will be exchanged here today, are no less binding than if they were to be made in a church. I pray that each and every one of us believes that God is smiling on this union, and giving it his blessing."

Father paused to unfold his spectacles and perch them onto the end of his nose, before picking up the prayer book and opening it at the marked page. He looked up and smiled before again addressing his audience.

"Both Catherine and Vincent have requested the traditional marriage service with hymns we all know and love. Catherine fully accepts that in the eyes of the laws that govern the outside world, she will still be an unmarried mother; except to a chosen few. But here in our world, the marriage will be duly recorded in the time honoured custom, and is bound by our own laws."

Father's face took on a more serious expression as he gazed his congregation, recognizing the vast majority of them. He sighed before stating that which concerned him.

"Everyone here today has known the blessing of Vincent's friendship and generosity of spirit. Knows that he is always here should any one of you need his help."

Father stared at the top of Vincent's head, but his son refused to meet his gaze. Undaunted he continued.

"Before we commence with the ceremony, there is a question that I need each and every one of you to consider for a moment; and with God's help it need never be mentioned again." He drew a deep breath. "If any man, or woman, can show any just cause why Catherine and Vincent may not be joined together in marriage, let him now speak, or else hereafter forever hold his peace."

He stood and waited unaware that he was holding his breath until he exhaled with relief to the total silence, meeting the mirrored relief in his son's eyes, and the unconditional acceptance of their whole community, friends and Helpers.

Father relaxed and smiled down at the man and woman before him. Then peering over his spectacles he inquired. "Vincent. Catherine. Are you ready to take your vows?"

"Yes, Father. We are," they answered solemnly in unison.

"Good."

He did not need to read from the prayer book the words he knew by heart, and this same heart soared as he spoke.

"Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God, and in the face of this congregation, to join this man and this woman in Holy Matrimony; which is an honourable estate...

It was late, and somehow as with all newlyweds, it had taken them a great deal of courage to bid everyone 'goodnight.' Their mistaken hopes of being able to just slip away unobtrusively were very quickly dashed, besieged as they were by giggling family and friends throwing confetti, rice and ever flower petals all over them

At last, flushed and happy they were allowed to escape from the Great Hall, with the sounds of

laughter and music from the still ongoing wedding celebration, as it faded into the distance behind them.

They were both drunk with euphoria. The air around them charged with electricity as their mutual desires raged within, and they clung together for warmth beneath Vincent's enveloping cloak.

At the entrance to their chamber they slowed their pace, faces glowing, savouring the anticipation of what was to come. Vincent's eyes glinted with hunger, in the flame from a nearby torch light as he gazed down at her.

"Catherine. I believe it is the custom for the bride to be carried across the threshold?"

"Hmmm," she crooned at him seductively, making no attempt to disguise the matching hunger that was devouring her. She wrapped her arms around his powerful shoulders as he in turn slid his hand beneath her knees and gathered her up close to his body.

Intoxicated with the scent of him, she nuzzled her face into his neck and thus they entered their chamber. Each mouth searching for the other, warm and soft, parting slightly in welcome. Their tongues caressed intimately and lay still as he lowered her feet to the floor.

She disrobed him of his cloak and it fell in a heap at their feet to be ignored. They found themselves beside the bed, still kissing sensually, savouring the myriad sensations that their mouths and tongues were transmitting to their sexual core as the heat began to build within them.

Vincent's fingers found the zipper in the back of her wedding dress and pulled it down to the base of her spine, before easing the lacy material from her shoulders. It slithered down over the satin slip she wore beneath to pool at her feet.

The satin felt wonderful as his hands caressed her body. Catherine just as eagerly unbuttoned his tunic and shirt, her stomach contracting with her deep carnal urges at finding only Vincent beneath. She groaned, burying her face into the thick golden curls that covered his chest, kissing upward to where the curls ended at the base of his throat and pulling away to gaze wondrously into his face.

"Vincent. My husband," her voice filled with awe. "You are all mine. Every tiny square inch of you, is all mine."

They are surrounded by silence and flickering candlelight. The only sound was the beating of their own hearts. Vincent looked down into her face transfixed by her admission. His blue eyes impaled hers, reaching into her very soul. Catherine's hand moved of its own volition to touch his face, tracing one finger slowly around his beautiful leonine mouth.

He stilled her hand. "Catherine, does the sight of me really please you?"

A strangled animal-like sound erupted from within her as she moulded her body to his and murmured seductively, close to his mouth. "Vincent, you know all of what I feel about you."

He sensed her smile, and he answered, "Yes." He did know. He knew exactly what she was feeling. His heart began to pound in his ears as he buried his hands into her hair and kissed every inch of her face, her hair, her neck and her shoulders.

Lifting her bodily onto the bed he moved away, allowing Catherine her obvious delight in watching him remove the rest of his clothes. With slow animal-like grace he stretched himself out beside her, before easing himself up onto one elbow.

Leaning over her, he watched her face as his clawed hand slid gently over her shoulder pulling the narrow strap of her slip with it and revealing her full firm breast.

His eyes met hers for a moment as he gently cupped the soft flesh in his hand then leaned forward to kiss the nipple. She groaned in her eagerness to feel his hands on the rest of her body, wriggling out of her slip and panties allowing him free access. His hand continued on down to tenderly

encompass the base of her visibly expanding stomach, where it stayed.

Their eyes met again in love and understanding; sharing in this miracle as he tried to form his own empathic bond with their growing child within. Content, he inclined his head and smiled into her eyes. His hand pursuing its goal along the edge of her outer thigh, and then her more vulnerable inner thigh; smoothing, caressing the soft white skin, sure of her absolute trust in him as she parted her legs giving herself completely.

They had loved before, but Catherine had sensed that Vincent had always held himself in check, afraid to really let go. Afraid of hurting her.

He looked up to meet her eyes, and their silent message was loud and clear. Catherine watched him, her whole body pulsating with pleasure, as the warm wetness of his mouth and tongue joined his hands in their tender exploration.

He excited her as she had never been excited before, and she cried out, "Vincent, don't stop. Please, don't stop," and Vincent had not the slightest inclination to stop. Her roused readiness matched his own, and intensified with her mounting ecstasy as they finally joined with a power and a force that made them both cry out. They clung together; holding on, until they slowly spiralled down to the peaceful safe haven of their love.

They lay quietly for sometime, their naked bodies entwined, bathed in the gentle candlelight. They were totally spent and at peace. Vincent's large clawed hand moved to hold her head to his shoulder and he nuzzled her hair.

"Catherine," he whispered. "Are you all right?"

"I feel wonderful, Vincent," she crooned, squirming around so that by leaning onto his chest she could look at him. Her face was still flushed with love, and she met his eyes. "You know how I'm feeling."

"Yes," he husked, "but do you not think that maybe we loved too well. I mean, you are pregnant. Might it have put our child at risk?"

She reached up and kissed his chin. "I do love you, Vincent," she husked, emphasizing every word. "You're so worried because you didn't hold yourself in check, like you always have up to now?"

"Yes," he answered, mildly surprised. "Was it always that obvious?"

She smiled and knelt up at the side of him, with his arm holding her close around her thigh and his large hand spread on the small of her back.

"Vincent, don't ever be afraid to love me. Don't ever be afraid to enjoy it, and to let go. Nothing you could do to me would ever harm me, or our child growing inside me." She paused to allow her loving words of encouragement to sink in before adding. "If you ever did accidentally cause me the slightest physical pain, Vincent, wouldn't you know it, instantly?"

"Yes, of course I would," he answered her with a look of such utter disbelief that it was all so simple. He reached out and drew her to him kissing her mouth and alloweing his other hand to freely caress her body. "Catherine," he whispered, "I have only one fear left now," and she drew away, holding her breath in anticipation as he explained. "My only fear is of wanting to love you too much."

Catherine groaned and collapsed onto his chest in exaggerated despair, clenching her small fist under his chin for effect.

"Vincent Wells. What am I going to do with you? We share this amazingly unique empathic connection. Do you really think you won't know when I develop a headache, or just want to curl up

in your arms and go to sleep?"

She grinned at him, but without waiting for his reply kissed him sensually on his lips before murmuring huskily. "Now just shut up and love me."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Early in May, Father was confined to his bed with bronchitis. Even though he received the best of care, his hacking cough persisted without improvement for over a week, wracking his whole body, leaving him weakened and aching in every limb.

He had no appetite and his loss of weight was noticeable, together with his pallid complexion and exhaustion through lack of sleep.

During this worrying time, Catherine, much to her dismay, found she was forced to finish work. She hated admitting defeat but the additional visits Below, because of her concern for Father, proved too much, as her pregnancy progressed into its seventh month.

When Father took a turn for the worse, both Vivien and Peter agreed the same diagnosis, that his bronchitis had developed into pneumonia. Even Vincent had to agree that the environment Below would not help his recovery. There was no alternative but to get him into hospital as soon as possible, with the obvious choice being Hamilton Lodge.

Kanin was dispatched Above to telephone Chris, enabling him to prepare for Father's arrival at the Lodge. Within the hour the tunnel's patriarch was stretchered up to the Fourteenth Street entrance, to where Kanin had delivered Peter's ambulance. He was waiting with the engine running, keeping the interior warm to welcome this very sick patient.

For the next two weeks, Father received around the clock care in the hospital wing at Hamilton Lodge before, to everyone's relief, he began to show a marked sign of improvement.

Below, everyone had been worried. Father was no longer a young man, and the past year had taken its toll on him too. Vincent was out of his mind with worry, and the added frustration of not being able to go and see him. Father had sent a very distressed message from his sick bed, that under no circumstances was Catherine to visit him because of her condition. She was also thoroughly outvoted when she protested to anyone Below.

It was half way through the third week of Father's hospitalization that Chris paid them a surprise visit, just before ten o'clock one evening. He was guided to Father's chamber, where Vincent and Catherine were enjoying a bedtime drink of cocoa with Kanin, Olivia and Vivien, who stayed Below most nights while Father had been ill, in case she was needed.

Of course, Chris's arrival had stirred up much anxious curiosity throughout the community as word of his presence in the tunnels spread, and Father's chamber suddenly became rather crowded.

Chris reassured them all that the news was good, and that Father was recovering well. He refused their offer of cocoa but accepted a chair next to Catherine, giving her now rotund girth a fatherly pat.

"Pregnancy certainly suits you, Catherine," he grinned at her. "You look absolutely wonderful, don't you think so, Vincent?" Before Vincent could make any kind of reply, Chris added. "But whenever you sit down, Catherine, you should remember to put your feet up."

Catherine grimaced affectionately before reassuring him. "Chris, since I finished work, I seem to spend most of my days in a horizontal position." She blushed pinkly, as she heard the restrained giggles from around the chamber, and realized the implications of what she had just said.

Vincent came instantly to her rescue by explaining. "I'm afraid, Chris, that everyone here watches over her like a gaggle of mother hens."

"I'm glad to hear it, Vincent, and I'm also pleased that everyone's here tonight, because I have a suggestion to make." He paused, gazing around while everyone patiently waited for him to enlighten them. Chris was almost having second thoughts, wondering if his good intentions would be rejected.

"Are you going to tell us what it is?" encouraged Vincent, reaching for Catherine's hand almost as if this would help him to listen more intently.

"Yes, of course, Vincent. I've just moved your father out of the hospital wing and into the main house, where he will be more comfortable, and be able to enjoy his convalescence." He did not allow Vincent to interrupt his train of thought as he spelled it out.

"For Jacob to make a full recovery, Vincent, from something that came very close to finishing him off, he is going to need plenty of sunshine and fresh air, good food and no worries."

"Of course," Vincent answered. "I'm in full agreement with you, Chris."

"You are?" he answered, somewhat surprised.

Vincent smiled and looked down, shaking his shaggy head slightly before giving Chris his full attention.

"I am well aware that it can sometimes take months to recover from pneumonia, and that relapses do occur. Chris, none of us would want Father to return home until he is ready," and he chuckled. "But I do not envy you your task of holding Father at the Lodge once he's up and about."

Chris laughed heartily. "How right you are, Vincent. He's already itching to come home at the end of the week - and there lies my suggestion." His words rushing out before Vincent could pass any further comment. "That you and Catherine come and keep him company for two or three days. You would both benefit from the fresh air and sunshine. June is a beautiful month to be outside."

Vincent's face clouded, and he shook his head dejectedly. "I'm sorry, Chris. It would not be worth all the risks, which are many. Not only for me Above, and all the added responsibility to you, but leaving this community unprotected with Father away as well."

"Would you mind if I put that to a general vote, Vincent?"

Vincent released Catherine's hand, and opened his own in a gesture of submission, already predetermining what he imagined the outcome would be.

Chris took to the floor, his natural charisma seeming to fill the chamber and assume command as he raised his hand to still the debating chatter.

"Please allow me to explain to you all, and assure you that Vincent and Catherine will be in safe hands." Heads nodded, prepared to listen, and the chamber became silent again as they all waited for him to continue.

"My own private quarters at the Lodge are exactly that. Private." He grinned. "Even I need time to myself sometimes. If I thought for one moment that either Vincent or Catherine were going to be in the slightest danger, I wouldn't even suggest this. There is also an added bonus. Opening out from my sitting room on the side of the house, I have a very large walled garden, situated so that nothing from the rest of the Lodge overlooks it. It receives sunshine for most of the day and you, Vincent, will be able to enjoy it without the fear of being discovered. The wall is high. No one can see over it and no one is allowed to enter unless I personally let them in." He raised his eyebrows to Vincent. "I have rules too."

William was first to speak. "Well, I think you should go, Vincent," before pointing out the

practicalities. "There's nothing going to spoil here for a few days.

Mouse scurried forward, seeming to accept all Chris's reassurances and adding his own comments. "Vincent goes on journeys alone Below like Mouse. Sometimes for days." He shrugged. "No different. But come back soon." Everyone smiled at him.

Mary offered her own observation. "I know the children will cooperate and keep out of mischief whilst you are away, Vincent, and I also know that they all wished many times for you to see the sunshine," and she smiled at him as a mother would smile at her son. "Each season had a beauty all of its own and early summer is breathtaking. I believe I speak for everyone. Please don't refuse this gift, Vincent. It is a wish for you, that all of us share. You and Catherine, free to walk out under the warm sun, together."

A lump rose into Vincent's throat and he had to swallow hard to keep it down. He turned his head to gaze into Catherine's expectant face, her eyes sparkling with tears. He expelled the breath he had been holding and looked up directly at Chris.

"Then, how can I refuse? Thank you, Chris. Thank you, all of you," and unanimous sounds of agreement filled the chamber.

Catherine awoke, wondering for the moment where she was, especially with the absence of Vincent's warm body beside her. She opened her eyes, blinking several time to clear them of sleep before catching her breath at the sight of him standing in front of the open French windows.

He looked so completely relaxed, dressed in only a short towelling bathrobe. His rapt face, framed by his golden mane, was highlighted from the glow of the brilliant sunrise that held the promise of a perfect summer's day.

Suddenly conscious of the noisy orchestration of bird song outside the window, her heart swelled, sharing in all the joy with Vincent, as if she too was hearing it all for the first time.

She gripped the side of the bed, rolling herself around and into a sitting position, a procedure that made her feel like a huge hippopotamus. With a little over four weeks to go, Catherine had reached the stage of just wanting it all to be over.

She waddled over to him, sliding her arm around his waist. He gently gathered her heavily pregnant body to him and kissed her upturned face.

"Morning," he whispered, too overawed by the sights and the sounds to say much else.

She hugged him to her, understanding and smiling with the wonder of the vista before them. Like a child, she was seeing it all with his eyes and overcome by the thrill of sharing all of this with the man she loved, who had been deprived of so much.

They stood silently gazing out at the blaze of colours stretching before them in the early morning sunlight. An extensive and beautiful secret garden. There were high stone walls on three sides covered with all manner of climbing plants - variegated ivy, roses, honeysuckle and even vines.

Chris had transformed it into the kind of country garden that one would expect to find at a manor house, filled with a profusion of flowers, bushes, trees and a huge lawn. There was even a swing hanging from a sturdy branch of an ancient oak tree. Nearby, beneath the same tree, was a picnic table and chairs.

Beneath the sprawling orchard at the bottom of the garden a natural stream meandered just inside the perimeter wall, sparkling in the sunlight - the finishing touch to a beautiful picture to savour and keep in their minds' eye forever.

Father's mouth dropped open in disbelief, that quickly turned to pure delight as he glanced up to see Vincent and Catherine enter his bedroom. He still looked pale and shrunken after his illness, but the joy that sparkled in his eyes was well worth any doubts or fears that Vincent might have had for leaving the safety of the tunnels. They both hugged and kissed him warmly, reassuring him in no uncertain terms that he was not suffering from any delusion. No doctor on earth could have prescribed a better medicine.

Chris was equally delighted with his well-organized surprise on seeing the immense pleasure and improvement it had given to his patient. He joined them for a very enjoyable breakfast, before leaving the three of them relaxing in his comfortable sitting room that opened out to the garden.

As the sun blazed down from the clear blue sky, the temperature rose invitingly and Catherine suggested that they would all benefit from some fresh air. Vincent was instantly on his feet to help Father outside onto the tiled patio in front of the French windows. He settled him onto one of three well upholstered sun loungers, and Catherine tucked a rug around him, making sure that there were no draughts to chill him.

Sensing their reluctance to leave him alone, Father insisted that he was going to enjoy a little nap in the sunshine, while they went for a walk around the garden.

Vincent smiled his grateful thanks and taking Catherine's hand, he drew it over his arm before reassuring Father. "We won't be long."

"Vincent," Father smiled as he halted them in their tracks. "Take as long as you like. This is what I have always dreamed of showing you. Please enjoy it, both of you, and make this old man very happy."

He watched entranced, as they strolled down the lush green grass arm-in-arm with the sunlight shining golden in their hair. Father's heart was full to overflowing, and he smiled tremulously, while quietly sending up a grateful prayer of thanks for being allowed to witness this miracle in his lifetime.

There was no one to see the tears of joy that spilled unashamedly down Father's cheeks blurring his vision. He smiled, savouring the sweet pain of the fulfillment of a lifelong dream. To see his son free to walk tall and proud, unfettered by his concealing cloak, under the warm sun.

They skirted the lawn in silence. Catherine was unable to drag her eyes away from the wondrous play of emotions flitting across Vincent's face. He would stop every few yards to kneel beside the flower beds, to stare in wonder and touch the delicate formation of each flower. Mesmerized by the multitude of colours and all the different varieties, as he drew in their heady perfume. For Vincent, this was a beauty that he could never have imagined.

He gazed up into Catherine's face, his excited fascination infectious as he watched the worker bees crawling right inside the flower heads collecting their nectar. A butterfly landed close by, the brilliant colouring on its outspread wings appeared to have been painted by hand, and Vincent held his breath captivated by its fragile perfection.

Catherine, suddenly touched by Vincent's joy in everything he saw, released the tears of happiness she could no longer contain. They trickled down her face and she smiled and dashed them away.

The butterfly took flight, and Vincent rose to his feet to reach out for Catherine's hand. He looked into her eyes, surprised at seeing her lashes wet with tears. He gently drew her into his arms, searching her face, feeling through their bond for any signs of distress, but there were none. Puzzled, he asked, "Catherine, why the tears on a day as wondrous as this?"

She nuzzled her nose into his chest before smiling up at him, conscious of the quiver in her lips as emotion threatened to engulf her again. "Because I'm so happy, Vincent." Her tremulous laughter mixing with her tears as she tried to explain her feelings. "Because it's what I wished for. More than anything." And her eyes sparkled into his; filled with love. "I dreamed of this, Vincent. The two of us,

in the sunshine," and she smiled up into his face before confiding in him.

"That's what brought me back to you, Vincent. During that awful time when I suffered all those doubts about the love we shared. Do you remember, Vincent? When you said that it must end, because you couldn't bear to see me in so much pain, knowing you were the cause of that pain? And I didn't even know if I had the strength to continue." She sighed, shaking her head at the memory of it.

"I remember," he answered, not really wishing to remember those dark and distant days filled with loneliness, and all his fears of daring to love this woman who stood before him. His wife.

He relaxed, throwing his head back to feel the warmth of the sun's rays on his face. After a moment, he gazed back down at her. "Tell me, Catherine? Tell me what it was that brought you back to me during your time of great turmoil?"

Her emotions had calmed now, and she took his hand to guide him towards the trees. She smiled adoringly up into his face. "I dreamt of this, Vincent," and she squeezed the hand she was holding, swinging her other hand out and around to encompass their beautiful surroundings. "You and me walking out in the sunshine, having a picnic in the park. We were sitting on a rug, with the food and a bottle of wine all laid out in front of us, and I could never ever remember feeling so happy in my life. It was wonderful, Vincent. I wanted it to last forever."

Vincent could feel the full gamut of her remembered happiness vibrating through their cords of connection.

"So what happened then?"

Her face crumpled with the bittersweet pain of her memory, as she recounted her dream and they stopped walking. "We drew slowly together for our first kiss, Vincent. I closed my eyes anticipating the pleasure of it; but when I opened them again, it wasn't you. It was someone I knew, a friend, but it wasn't you. Vincent, with everything in me, I wanted it to be you. Not anyone else."

He watched her face, feeling all of her remembered distress, and he stated. "But there is more."

"Yes. I glanced over my friend's shoulder and to my horror I saw you, walking away. The pain of that was unbearable and I screamed out your name. That's what woke me up," and she clutched hold of his shirt front. "I was in a terrible state, Vincent. Nancy sat with me till the early hours of the morning, and we talked about all the choices we make in life. How we all take different paths; and it doesn't make then wrong. Only different."

Catherine paused and smiled, lowering her eyes. Still smiling, she looked back into his face. "What she actually said, Vincent, was that you have to follow your heart. It's the only thing you can ever really count on."

He nodded, recognizing his own words. "I'm glad Nancy was there for you."

"Mmmmm," she agreed. "After that, Vincent, everything seemed to just fall into place. I knew then, without the slightest doubt in my mind, that no power on earth would ever keep me from you."

Vincent hesitated, moistening his lips before asking her. "Catherine, did you feel the same way about me then, as you do now?"

"Oh yes, Vincent," and the truth of her words shone from her eyes. "I wanted you then, as I want you now. I loved you then, as I love you now. Vincent, I would rather have died at your hands in that cave below the Catacombs, than have to live my life without you."

Vincent was unaware of the tension in him, until he felt it ebb away. He sighed, surveying their surroundings as if seeing it all for the first time. His eyes so filled with love, came to rest on Catherine's upturned face.

"It seems to me, Catherine, that we have wasted an extraordinary amount of precious time agonizing about exactly the same fears for a dream we both shared."

"Hmmm, maybe. But dreams are never wasted, Vincent, and all of what we have endured has served to make us stronger. And I wouldn't have missed any of it; not for anything," and she smiled. "It has made us what we are. And our dreams of tomorrow, Vincent. They helped us to survive and live through it all. Helped us to come out the other side with our heads on straight."

"Yes." His eyes misted over with tears as he reached out to spread his large hands over the heavily pregnant bulge beneath her breasts. "And this, is all our *'tomorrow's dreams'*."

They stood, surrounded by bird song, flowers, blue sky and sunshine. He took her face into his hands, loving every part of her with his eyes as blue as the sky. Slowly their lips drew together and kissed like the touch of a butterfly's wing.

Catherine pulled away to gaze dreamily into his beloved face, before suddenly giggling. "Just checking that it is you, Vincent."

He smiled at her in mock exasperation. "Now just who else would it be?"

"Well, I just needed to reassure myself that I'm not dreaming."

"Oh, my love. I can reassure you of that," he husked, as his mouth claimed hers.

And Father smiled on them.

The END