

BEGGARS CAN'T BE CHOOSERS

by Lynette Combs

*This story is respectfully
and affectionately dedicated
to those who were our Friends and Helpers,
once upon a time... but who have now drifted away.*

*You may be gone;
but you are not forgotten.*

Chapter One

It was Father, and Vincent, who happened upon the group of a half-dozen children sitting glumly round the large nursery-chamber.

"What's this?" the elder asked, pausing to lean curiously upon his stick. "I thought you all had gone Above, to the museum." Indeed, he knew they had been looking forward to this weekend excursion for days.

"We were going to see *dinosaurs*," Naomi told Vincent (in case he'd somehow overlooked a week of noisy anticipation); and she came to catch his great hand in both her smaller ones.

"Yes, I know." He smiled down at this littlest girl. "But that was hours ago. What are you all doing back here?" An uneasy silence answered him. He said, "Geoffrey?" and saw the ten-year-old shrug, his brown eyes evasive.

"Geoffrey's sad," Naomi explained, gravely.

"Oh?" prompted Father. "And why is that?"

"He didn't come," the boy said miserably. "It's the second time, Father."

"He didn't...? Oh - Milford, do you mean?"

Geoffrey nodded. "He was supposed to meet us, and take us inside." The others nodded. While it was clear they hadn't wanted to get a friend and Helper 'in trouble' with Father, their relief at speaking out was also plain. "He offered."

Father nodded, remembering. Helpers living near the Park often volunteered as escorts for such outings; it took their connection with the tunnel-community beyond mere donations and formalized holidays like Winterfest. Milford had long been one of these.

"So, he didn't appear after all? Well, perhaps there was some last-minute emergency at home," he excused their old friend glibly.

Suppressing his own irritation, he caught Vincent's eye, and saw that his son was equally disturbed.

"But why wouldn't he send word or something?" Eric demanded, pushing his spectacles back up

his snub nose.

"And he promised us, Father," Samantha reminded him stubbornly.

"Couldn't you," Vincent suggested, "have gone in on your own...?"

Kipper said, "The guards don't like it, if there's no grownup. Besides..." his dark head drooped. "We didn't have any money."

"I see. How long did you wait?"

"Two whole hours. Then we came back down."

The elder was scowling now. He didn't like to think of them, waiting so long out of doors. It was barely spring yet and the wind, whistling through those concrete canyons Above, could still be quite cutting. In what he hoped was a casual gesture, he reached out and felt of Eric's brow.

When he spoke again, his voice was kind. "I'm very sorry, children, that Milford broke his promise to you. I know you were looking forward to visiting the museum."

Vincent saw them all nod, and knew that simply acknowledging their disappointment had begun to ease it. Broken promises were something the tunnel-folk did not take lightly. And, given this Helper's recent ... carelessness ... this was the only apology these youngsters were likely to receive.

"Perhaps in a day or two," he said, "one of us can take you back again. Mary, or Brooke."

"I wish *you* could take us," Naomi said fervently, squeezing his hand.

"So do I, Naomi," he replied, yet even at her tender age, she understood why this could not be so.

Father took a step forward, his eyes twinkling suddenly. "Vincent *has* seen the inside of the museum, though. Has he never told you?"

Their bowed heads lifted; wide eyes darted from Father to Vincent, and back again. "How?" demanded Eric. "How did he?" For surely he could never pass openly through the turnstile, as they all would.

"Well."

Father reached for a chair, glad of an opportunity to cheer them up. As he sat down, Vincent settled likewise onto the foot of the nearest bed. Naomi lost no time, then, in scrambling up into his lap, and Samantha snuggled close as well. Father looked around to make certain that he had everyone's full attention.

"It happened," he began, "when he was just about your age, Kipper and Geoffrey, and very interested in exploring the world Above. Of course, I was equally determined that he remain safely Below. But that summer, the other children had begun visiting the Natural History Museum; and their tales of the wonders that they saw there set our young Vincent afire with the desire to see it all for himself."

He directed a fond, reproving glance toward his tall son, as if seeing instead that one-time wayward boy.

The children looked too; struck by the mention of 'our young Vincent,' they tried to imagine this very large presence in their lives as a youngster like themselves.

"But he couldn't go, could he," Samantha said sadly.

"No. It was impossible, of course."

"'Cause somebody might see him?" guessed Naomi.

"That's right. It would have been very dangerous for him. So, naturally, I forbade his going Above

to attempt it."

"*Did* it work?" Eric wanted to know.

Father looked again at Vincent, his eyebrows rising ironically. "Did it work?"

The shadow of a wry smile touched that leonine face. "It didn't, I'm afraid."

The children grinned and elbowed one another with delight. *That* was the story. Vincent had been like them once, adventurous and mischievous; *of course* it hadn't worked.

"To be fair," Father went on, "it must have been very frustrating for him - to have it there so close, virtually in his own back yard ... and not to be able to explore it to his heart's content."

Naomi turned to look up into Vincent's face. "Vincent, what did you do?"

It was a question he'd often asked her, in just that way, and he chuckled softly. "I went to the Museum."

"But," Samantha frowned, "if Father said you couldn't go Above ..."

"Oh, he didn't go Above, exactly," the elder said, enigmatically. "Not in a manner of speaking." Like any master storyteller he was drawing it out as far as possible, watching his listeners, gauging their eagerness.

"Then how did he get there?" Geoffrey demanded, his earlier disappointment forgotten.

"Well, you see, children, this museum ... like all museums, I should imagine ... had been built with a great deal of storage space under the public levels; a place to keep all those things they didn't always have room to display, but which museums go on collecting as a matter of course."

"Dinosaur bones?"

"Er ... yes, Naomi. And Indian artifacts, and petrified wood, and all manner of historical treasures. And for all of this they needed storage rooms, and basements, and sub-basements..."

"And tunnels!" several of the children exclaimed at once.

"Yes, tunnels. Although, of course, it took someone like Vincent's brother, Devin, to find the way in."

There was another round of chuckles and elbow-poking among the children. They liked hearing stories about Devin. Before he'd gone away, he was always getting into trouble, and getting everybody else into trouble ... and none of them, so far as they knew, had ever been able to make Father quite as mad as Devin had.

"It wasn't a real tunnel," Vincent remembered. "More like a crack in the foundation. We ... had to squeeze. I think Devin had done some work to open it further, before he showed it to us. I remember that Winslow had a very hard time getting through..."

"Winslow?!" Father exclaimed. "You never told me Winslow was involved in this." His eyes narrowed. "Who else?"

Vincent cocked his head, as if wondering whether the statute of limitations had run out on this particular crime. Then he smiled. "Pascal."

"*Pascal*?" Kipper grinned at the thought of their Pipe-master, usually the very picture of propriety, daring such an adventure.

"The Four Musketeers." Father nodded, ruefully; a glance around showed him that the children were delighted by this revelation. "I might have known. And you never mentioned it, all these years."

"Vincent is the *best* at keeping secrets," Naomi boasted.

"But still," Samantha persisted, "If you told him not to go Above..."

"Well, I think he thought he was getting round that, you see. If he didn't go out, Above, to get to the museum, but went up through an inner tunnel instead ..."

"Like when I went to visit Catherine!" Naomi exclaimed.

"Yes, exactly like that." Father scowled in a belated effort to be stern, remembering the details of that incident. The little adventuress had actually come up through Catherine's sub-basement and begun ringing doorbells in search of her, starting from the ground floor and working her way upward. Only the alertness of a young Helper living there in the building had saved the child from possible disaster.*

"And I was just as angry with him, when I found out, as I was with you for the same reason, later on."

They sat blinking at him ... the two transgressors ... with eyes almost identically blue and innocent.

"What happened then, Father?" Eric asked him, tugging his sleeve in a blatant effort to distract.

"How did you find out?"

"Did somebody tell?"

"Somebody, indeed," Father said drily. "The guilty party gave *himself* away. He and Devin got back late that night, and I got nowhere, questioning them together ..."

"Divide and conquer," came Vincent's teasing murmur.

Father studied him for a moment, eyes narrowed, and his expression was one that every child in that chamber was familiar with. They were fascinated to see it directed at Vincent, though - and to see him facing it down with such equanimity. Finally Father cleared his throat, out-bluffed.

"... Yes, well. At any rate, they stubbornly refused to tell me where they'd been ... but there are so many places to explore here Below, that it never occurred to me that they might have gone anywhere else. So I was very surprised, that night, when I went to tuck Vincent in, to find him poring over something he could only have gotten from the Museum."

Samantha turned, open-mouthed. "Vincent ... you stole something?"

"A free color brochure," came his mild protest. "Not stealing... *taking*."

When the children's laughter had once again subsided, Father went on, "He confessed at once, of course. Our Vincent could always keep a secret," he said fondly, almost proudly, "but he could never lie."

Kipper leaned forward. "Did you punish him, Father?"

"Oh, yes. But that," he said, holding up his hand, "is another story, and we were on our way to speak with William about stores. Suppose you children walk along with us, and I'll see if I can remember. And who knows, once there I'm certain we can find something to keep you all busy until suppertime..."

*See "Promises Fulfilled" - By Lynette Combs

Chapter 2

The terrace overlooking the park was chill with the season, and damp with the rain that had fallen during all the daylight hours. Still Vincent paused, as he always did, to acknowledge the view with a soaring sense of freedom. From here he could see everything - the city, the parkland, the trees reaching their winter-blackened fingers heavenward - and the myriad points of light and flashing headlights, which signaled the existence of all those lives of which he was not a part. But ...

His gaze returned to the building which had been waiting darkly, quietly at his back. Here there lived someone to whom he was connected; and whose love seemed to connect him, with the world as he could see it from this vantage-point. He could no longer really remember what it had been like to waken in the morning without the certain reassurance of the bond they shared.

His step was light as he approached the French doors, and raised his hand. Only as he rapped did his eyes then register the drapes within standing open, and beyond them.

The young woman hopping on one foot across the living room carpet was, as nearly as he could tell, struggling into a pair of green sweatpants. She already wore the matching pullover, but seemed to have made the mistake of trying to fit the pants on over her tennis shoes. Now, brown hair bobbing, she gave another little leap and a jerk at a reluctant cuff. Trim-waisted, her slender hips were clad only in a pair of lacy white bikini-briefs.

All this Vincent saw in the instant his summons sounded. Her head jerked round, her eyes widening and her mouth making a perfect "O" of surprise before her next startled hop took her head-first into the sofa cushions.

He jerked backwards, blinking away his glimpse of pale flashing thighs and taut, sheer fabric. He felt the heat in his face at her inevitable embarrassment and his own; but drawn irresistibly back again, he peeked warily round the doorjamb...

... and saw Catherine now peeking warily over the sofa-back, only her eyes and the top of her head visible. She ducked as he took a hurried step back - and another, and yet another. Thrown into a moment's confusion over his "intrusion," he very nearly went into a full retreat over the terrace-wall. Then, in the very act of levering himself upward, he felt a hesitation.

His own, or hers? He stood very still, opening himself to their connection. No, she was afraid he'd leave; and through the tumult of her feelings, was still hoping that he'd stay.

He did, lingering near the far and least-lit corner of the balcony. In the moments that followed, he resolutely tried not to imagine the ongoing struggle within. It was a great deal, he decided, like trying not to think about pink elephants.

The door flung open. She emerged, now fully-dressed, her jacket open, her hair disheveled with static. Shutting the door behind her, she looked around a little wildly.

"Vincent?"

He moved out of the shadows, a little tentatively. "I'm here."

Still several feet away, she hesitated too. Her face was flushed, and what he felt in her puzzled him - not embarrassment, exactly, although certainly there was that -but something light and contrary and almost mischievous.

"I, uh, I was afraid you'd leave."

"I nearly did. But then I felt..."

"I wanted you to stay," she nodded. "I didn't want you to go away thinking..." There was a

suspicious tremor in her voice; she saw his blue eyes widen, and the corners of her mouth began to quirk. "I mean, to go away, thinking..."

"Yes, Catherine?" he prompted her, too innocently. "Thinking...?"

The mirth came bubbling forth then and, surrendering to it, she came into his arms. She fit there warmly and exactly, her muffled laughter mingling with his own. Resting his cheek atop her silky head, Vincent felt his nose tickled by the still-crackling strands of her hair, and mightily resisted the urge to sneeze.

"I just didn't want you to go ... away," she gasped finally, pulling away only far enough to look up into his face.

"Catherine, I didn't mean to..."

"No," she agreed. "Neither did I. I knew you were coming, and was trying to get out of my work clothes and into something comfortable, before you arrived."

"Yes," he said gravely. "So I saw." His own mouth quirked and then they were chuckling again, giving in to the hilarity of it, leaning into one another till the spasms passed.

Catherine was remembering the dumbfounded surprise in his face at his first glimpse of her - and then, the way he'd peeked around the doorjamb again. She wondered, was he picturing her too - toppling, rump in the air, as she took that header onto the sofa?

"Well," she said at last, wiping her eyes. "Bound to happen, I suppose. Sooner or later."

He looked rueful. "I never expected ... I mean, we ought to have some way, some arrangement, to avoid..."

She gave him a gamin grin. "I think you're just going to have to take your chances there, Love."

He blinked, taken by surprise as he always was by her small unexpected endearments, filing it away to be taken out and cherished again later in the privacy of his chamber. Then he found himself remembering something she'd said earlier.

"You said... you knew I was coming?"

Her smile turned a little shy. "Sometimes now, I know. Sometimes I can feel it."

In the beginning, only dire emergency or his desperate need had triggered her awareness of the bond they shared. But these days it touched her at odd moments, tugging unexpectedly at her heart and mind, bringing a sudden breathtaking sensitivity of Vincent, his presence, even his feelings, far Below. It had been that way tonight; abruptly knowing that he was coming to her, that he was close.

Now, looking up, she saw his face fall into more thoughtful lines, and said, "Is something the matter? Is that why you came?" And then, before he could answer, "... Is it Naomi?"

"No," he smiled, allaying her concern. "Not Naomi." It was an understandable conclusion for her to jump to, though, considering the amount of trouble that youngster had gotten herself (and them) into, this past winter.

Her relief was apparent. "What is it, then?"

So he told her of the children's aborted 'museum expedition', and how such disappointments had lately become characteristic of the Helper involved. "And we still haven't had word of what happened, why he didn't come," he finished, moving to gaze out over the city lights.

"I don't think I understand," Catherine frowned. "Why would he do that? Surely he knew how disappointed the children would be."

"So one would think," Vincent agreed, looking down at her. "If he thought about it at all, then of course he must have known."

"How could he not think about it?" Catherine had only met this particular Helper once, but seemed to remember him as an active and alert individual.

"I'm not sure, but ... this isn't the first time this year that such a thing has happened ... and not only with the children." Turning, he leaned his hip against the low terrace wall. "Milford makes promises - even volunteers for things -and then ..."

"Nothing?" guessed Catherine. She stepped nearer, spreading her small hands thoughtfully on the chill masonry ledge beside him. "So you think it's more than forgetfulness. And you're sure there's no health problem?"

"Milford is a vital, energetic man. It is those qualities, which he's been devoting to his new business, that made him such a valuable Helper. What concerns Father most is that Milford breaks a commitment - or a promise - and makes no effort to contact us with an explanation ..."

"Or an apology?"

His expression almost one of chagrin, he nodded. "And yet, the next time we see him, he is as jovial and reassuring as ever. Just as though nothing at all has happened. It is ... extremely disconcerting."

"Maybe he means it to be," Catherine offered, and saw Vincent give her a look that was at first startled, and then thoughtful. "I don't know, Vincent. For him to say he's coming, and then not even to send word ..." She shook her head. "To me, that sounds like a deliberate slight."

"Deliberate, yes. I'm not certain, however, that it is entirely *conscious*. Milford has never been what one would call introspective."

At her silence he turned, and saw her knitted brow and inward focus. "What are you thinking?"

"Oh ... I was just remembering something you said during Laura's troubles, last year. '*Little by little, she began to shed her duties as a Helper.*' But you know, Vincent, all of that meant something. It was all symptomatic of the problems she was having."

He was watching her with great attentiveness. "And his 'problems'?"

"I'm thinking," she said more hesitantly, "that everything you've described - the broken promises, the inconsistent behavior, the denial - it all sounds like the way an *addict* acts."

Vincent looked a little taken aback. "Surely not, Catherine."

He was remembering Rollie, and the other addicts of his experience, and the unmistakable physical signs of their drug use. Wouldn't he have recognized such symptoms now?

"Milford hardly seems the type to ..."

"I don't mean addiction to a *substance*," she went on, still thoughtfully. "It doesn't have to be that. But ... you said he's started a new business?"

"Yes, just last year. Since his wife died, he's had little else to occupy his time."

"Then it sounds to me as though he's become a workaholic, Vincent. That can be an addiction as powerful as any drug - and as disruptive, to family and friends. It's like - oh, gambling, for example."

"But," he scowled, his brow furrowing. "Why abuse *us* so?"

"Maybe," Catherine suggested, "he feels he's under so much pressure that ... well, something has to give. And since he can't really renege on his *business* commitments ..."

"I think I see," Vincent said, not very happily.

Of course, obsessive preoccupation with some activity wasn't unknown in the tunnel world either, but with their direct influence it was certainly easier to deal with there.

"So you think that Milford may be trying to tell us something by this behavior ... without really realizing it?"

"Maybe," she nodded, "in order to get you all to make a decision that he's uncomfortable with."

Vincent reached out to take her hands (now chilled from the terrace rim) in his, turning her to face him.

"I came tonight," he said slowly, "because this troubled me, as it has all of us. We're holding a common meeting tonight, to discuss it. I'd ... like you to come."

"Vincent," she said doubtfully, "are you sure?" Catherine still occasionally found herself treading uncertain ground, here; not wanting to be seen as an intruder, or presuming on her role. "You don't think Father will mind?"

"He suggested it," Vincent replied, enjoying her smile of relief. "We both felt you might be able to offer valuable insights."

"All right, then." Her fingers tightening on his, she came up on tiptoe to brush his lips impulsively with hers. "I'll meet you Below ..."

"... At the Threshold," he agreed, his eyes alight.

Chapter 3

Catherine, following Vincent into the large library-chamber, was surprised to find it full of tunnel-folk and avid conversation. The 'common meeting' was already getting underway.

"So it appears most of us have noticed the problem," Father was saying, "and all have been loath to mention it." He was seated at the vast antique desk which, positioned near one end of the room, overlooked most of the assemblage. "Ah, Vincent, Catherine ... we've saved a place for you. Yes, there, that's fine."

Remembering a time when Jacob Wells would surely have objected to her presence at such proceedings, Catherine took a 'front row' seat beside Vincent's and settled in to listen.

"Things like this have been happening all year," Cullen said worriedly. "Ever since he started that new business."

"I understand he's been doing very well with it," Catherine put in.

"Yes," Father replied. "And no one is happier than we, my dear, to see a Helper prospering. But that does not excuse this sort of treatment, of those who have been his friends. He used to be the very soul of dependability."

She nodded. "And you're sure, all of you, that there's nothing wrong, elsewhere in his life? Some personal problem that might ..."

Mary was shaking her head. "He seems perfectly happy; if you ask him, he'll tell you so. Of course his wife died, two years ago, but he seems to have recovered from that."

Vincent turned. "You never met her, Catherine. Betsy was our original Helper; it was through her, after their marriage, that Milford was initiated into our Secret."

"Not that I didn't have certain reservations about that, at the time," Father remembered. "Still, it worked out very well, until now."

"It was such a shame that she died," Rebecca said softly. "Not only for us, but for him, too. She certainly seemed to bring out his softer side."

"Yes," Father sighed. "Still, what concerns us now is Milford's recent behavior. I am particularly disturbed that he would disappoint the children."

"It was, as Geoffrey said, the second time," Vincent murmured.

"You said there have been other, similar instances," Catherine prompted them. "Can you give me an example?" Father looked up, startled; she'd sounded surprisingly lawyer-ish, all of a sudden.

"Well, er ... last month, I suppose. Milford arranged, even *volunteered*, to meet Brooke in the Park and take her to the dentist; and then he neither came, nor sent any kind of word."

"And don't forget Winterfest, Father," came Zach's young voice from halfway up the circular stair. There was a murmur of accord from some of the younger boys, perching there with him.

"What happened at Winterfest?" Catherine asked, remembering the warmth and beauty of their annual celebration. "I don't remember anyone mentioning a problem."

"Well," Mary said, "it was only that he'd offered to pick up one of the outlying Helpers and bring her, too ... and then he simply never appeared. She was very late, and we'd begun to worry."

"Yeah," young Julio was heard to add. "She was bringing the cookies!"

Catherine saw Father reprove him with a glance. "What happened, did he ever say?"

"Nothing," Vincent said, almost neutrally. "We found out later, from another Helper who lives not far away, that he spent a quiet evening at home. That ... wasn't what he told us, however."

"And it takes forever to try to reach him," complained Kanin, from his place beside Olivia. He spoke quietly, so as not to waken the toddler sleeping in her lap. "Sometimes we have to leave two or three messages before he answers."

"Does he give a reason?" Catherine asked him.

"Oh, the notes must've gotten lost - "

" - Or got blown away, or left in the wrong place," Kipper broke in, with all the scorn of an insulted messenger.

"Excuses," William rumbled. "About as original as 'the dog ate my homework!'."

Remembering that the big cook had spent his youth Above, Catherine smiled at the reference; but several of the tunnel-folk, she noticed, looked at him blankly.

He gazed back at them, utterly deadpan. "Think, 'Arthur,'" he suggested - and the tension in the room dissolved into shared and easy laughter. Mouse, who almost never heard his raccoon mentioned without reparations having to be made, looked around him shyly, with a kind of pleased disbelief.

Father, however, was still looking very serious. "Winterfest, the dentist, the museum ... Are we perhaps guilty of asking this Helper to take on too much?"

"Nothing more than he ever has," Olivia frowned.

"And most of that," Rebecca agreed, "he volunteers for."

"All right, then - have we *allowed* this Helper to take on too much?" The patriarch leaned forward. "What I mean to say is, I think we've all seen this sort of thing happen before. Someone takes on too much; and the guilt over unfulfilled obligations becomes such a point of discomfort for him that it causes him to ... well, to *distance* himself from his friends, and from all he means to do. Can that be the case here?"

"I don't think so," Vincent mused. "Usually, that tends to happen to the newer Helpers who, in the first flush of friendship, are apt to promise far too much. I hardly think Milford falls into that category."

"And yet, as far as I can remember," Pascal said slowly, "he hasn't met a single commitment he's made with us all year. At least, not where and when he's agreed to."

"And he fibs about it," Jamie said indignantly. "He said he picked up Father's medicine and all that candlewax, and just couldn't get it down to us right then. But Dr Wong says he came a week late. Does he think we're *stupid*, all of a sudden?"

"Jamie," Father began...

"I didn't think grownups were s'posed to tell fibs," came a small voice from the vicinity of Vincent's feet.

Father sat forward, startled. "Naomi? What are you doing here? It's late - you should be sound asleep."

"We did put her to bed," Catherine began.

"And I tucked her in, as well," Mary frowned.

The child, who'd been sitting cross-legged on the carpet out of sight, now rose up between their chairs like a dandelion. Her nightclothes were patched but clean, her face fresh-scrubbed.

"I came to say goodnight," she said innocently, from the immediate safety of the crook of Vincent's arm.

"Then, goodnight," Father told her rather pointedly.

"But I want to hear what you ..."

"This isn't something you need to worry about, just yet," he said, more gently. "And I think it would be better if ..."

"But I don't get it," she persisted. "This Helper ... he don't love us anymore?"

"He doesn't," Father corrected her automatically - and then hastily caught himself. "That is, I'm sure he does. Now, it's getting late, and it's well past your bedtime."

"Couldn't I stay?"

"Why, no ... but thank you very much for offering."

Pouting, she looked around for Geoffrey, Kipper and Samantha. "How come they get to stay?"

"They're older. When you are older, you may stay as well."

"I'm older than I *was*..."

"*Naomi.*"

"Can Catherine take me?" she wheedled, with the air of giving him just one more chance.

"I'll come in a little while," Catherine grinned. As usual, she was not quite able to hide her amusement at the effect Naomi always seemed to have on the old man. "I promise. Now, do as Father tells you, all right?"

"Goodnight," Vincent whispered into Naomi's ear; and kissing her so that his chin-bristles tickled her neck, he pushed the giggling child on toward Catherine. "Finish up, now, and go straight to bed."

The little girl wended her way toward the door, collecting kisses all along the way.

"No dawdling," Father said briskly. "Someone will come and check on you in a moment." He waited until she'd gone out into the corridor before returning to the subject at hand; his expression, as he looked over the gathering, unconsciously retaining its sternness. "This meeting is not for the purpose of indictment, really. It may be that, with Milford's new financial success, and his business obligations, he has simply been too busy."

"We could understand that," Rebecca frowned. "All he'd have to do is say so." Most of their Helpers had gone through periods, at one time or another, when they were less "helpful" than at other times; intervals of crisis or change, when the tunnel community was more than willing to show a turnabout spirit of friendship.

"I understand what you're saying," Catherine told her. "If that were true - if he *was* too busy - why would he keep volunteering, do you suppose?"

"Milford has always seen himself as very capable and sure," Father mused.

"Always in control," Pascal suggested.

"Exactly. This year, especially - why, look at all of his new responsibilities. He seems to revel in it all. And he may actually be unable to conceive of himself as *less* in control, less able to contribute."

"Milford has often said," Vincent recalled, "that much of life is simply ... 'getting your priorities in order'."

"Apparently," Cullen said with surprising bitterness, "we are no longer a priority for him."

"We don't know that," Father said quickly.

"What else could it be?" William demanded, from the far end of the long library-table.

"I can't help thinking," Pascal put in, "that he must be trying to communicate something to us, by this behavior."

"You may be right," Vincent told him. "Catherine had a similar idea," and he described, in general terms, their recent conversation Above. "Milford may indeed be trying to ... tell us something."

"What?" Mouse was scowling. "Mad? Hurt? Why not just *say*?"

"Yes," Father answered him, sympathetically. "That would be simpler, Mouse, I agree. I can't imagine any grievance he might have ... or what might keep him from making it known to us."

"You mean ... he could be punishing us for something?" Rebecca looked sincerely taken aback. "For what exactly, I'd like to know?"

"... Or putting us in our place," William grumbled. "With himself, as our benevolent benefactor ..."

"So we can just be glad of what he does give us?" Cullen was still scowling.

"That may be unnecessarily harsh," Vincent's soft voice recalled them to themselves.

"He still sends lovely gifts," gentle Mary said; although whether this was offered in the man's defense or otherwise, wasn't entirely clear. Catherine suspected the woman was trying very hard to be fair, since Naomi's presence had probably reminded her of the other little ones in her care whom the man had disappointed.

"... But it's almost as if he's doing it to boast how well he's doing, how much he can *afford*," Pascal countered.

"And if that's the case," Vincent said, "then he's giving of his things, and not of his heart."

"Little by little, he's going away from us." Brooke shook her head. "Do you think maybe ... he's feeling he's outgrown us?"

"*Outgrown?*" Catherine sat forward, surprised by her own sudden sense of outrage. "How could he think he's 'outgrown' all of you?"

The keeping of their Secret was a sacred trust; their friendship and philosophies had changed every aspect of her life. How could anyone simply walk away? She felt Vincent's hand warmly covering hers, where it gripped the chair-arm,

Father could see they were all stung by the idea that they could simply be discarded, like so many children's toys. "Not *outgrown*, perhaps. It doesn't seem to me he's growing in any direction ..."

"... Except perhaps," Vincent put in, "away from us."

"Yes," Father agreed. "He's been entirely preoccupied with monetary concerns, every time we've spoken this year. It's plain his heart has not been where we are."

"The 'care package' he brought, last week, was very extravagant," Sarah said uneasily, as though she, too, had been uncertain what it meant. "Beautiful things, and just about all of it new ... like he'd bought it in lots. But, opening the boxes, he seemed as surprised by some of it as we were."

"Perhaps he sent someone out with a list," Father said. "An employee. No harm in that, I suppose."

"Kipper won't wear his sweater," came a piping interruption.

Heads swiveled. Vincent looked up to see Eric near the stair-top, his feet dangling through the bannister rails. "What do you mean, Eric?" he asked, of this seeming non-sequitur.

"The sweater he gave Kipper," the boy explained. "Kipper won't wear it. It was new and everything."

Vincent remembered seeing the garment; a sort of "ski-sweater," striped in at least six brilliant colors. It had seemed just the sort of thing their brash Kipper would favor.

"Is that true, Kipper?"

The boy was plainly embarrassed at being singled out - or perhaps it was something more. "He said ... he said he knew they weren't very tunnel-ish colors but ..."

"Go on, Kipper," Vincent encouraged him, "It was a very bright sweater, I know. What did Milford say to you?"

"He said, '*But what the heck, beggars can't be choosers, right?*'"

An audible gasp sounded throughout the large chamber. Catherine, sitting next to Vincent, felt as though she'd been slapped. What, she wondered, could the tunnel-folk themselves be feeling? She looked around her, and could see it in their faces.

Kipper lifted his curly head, and his dark eyes were bright with something like tears. "I really liked it till he said that, Vincent. Honest. But he made me feel..."

Poor, Catherine thought.

But Vincent said, "Ashamed."

"We're not beggars!" That was quick-tempered Eric.

"No, we certainly are not," Father agreed, visibly suppressing his own anger.

That anyone who knew them, could say such a thing to the child! Whatever could have possessed the man? And yet the remark itself was only symptomatic of an attitude that evidently had the entire community feeling like poor relations. Father could hear their discontent rising all around him in indignant undertones.

"All right," he said finally. "All right, now..." Gradually, they quieted; and then he said, "We can't allow it to go on, of course. Particularly with regard to the children."

Catherine turned, surprise widening her eyes. "Can't allow...? But, what can you do about it?"

In her own world people also drifted away, faltered in their friendships, grew distant and were not heard from again. Those things just... *happened*, didn't they? It was sad, but what could anyone do?

"We take our relationships very seriously, here," Vincent said, as she turned to face him. "Our friendships are important to us."

"Far too important," Father added, "to pretend we haven't noticed something's gone seriously wrong. Our friends deserve more directness from us than that."

It was a viewpoint that opened her eyes, and she heard a murmur of agreement stir the chamber.

"There are needs here which are not being met," Father went on, "not only ours, but apparently Milford's as well ..."

As he continued, Catherine saw Vincent tilt his head suddenly as though listening, his eyes straying toward the chamber door. She lifted her eyebrows inquiringly, and he gave her a small wry smile. *I'll go*, he mouthed silently. Father glanced up, his eyes narrowing as his son rose to move quietly up the short metal stair; then he returned his attention to the discussion at hand.

Out in the corridor, Vincent stood with his hands on his hips, looking sternly down at the little robed figure awaiting him. "Aren't you supposed to be in bed?"

"I was *going* to bed," Naomi said brightly, reaching up to tug one of his hands from its righteous pose. "Little by little."

"'Little by little'?"

She could hear the smile in his voice, and skipped a little with relief. "You know - like Brooke said."

They set off down the tunnel.

"It isn't polite to eavesdrop," Vincent told her, almost as an afterthought.

"Father doesn't like it," she agreed, blonde head bobbing. "Vincent? What's a dentist?"

"It's a sort of doctor," he said (realizing that she should see one for a checkup soon as well), "who fixes people's teeth. Brooke had a toothache."

"What kind of toothache?" she asked, one finger exploring her own mouth, in case such a malady were also lurking therein.

"Oh, a wisdom tooth, I think."

"What's 'wisdom'?"

Vincent's pace slowed a little. "Wisdom is... a kind of knowing. It's like knowledge, but better."

"Oh... I get it!" She stopped and pulled him round to face her. "I heard you and Father talking about that one day. The 'tooth beyond knowledge'!"

"What? Naomi..."

But she was pulling him down the corridor again, her mind already dancing past the words to something else.

"Vincent? That Helper, the one who broke his promise. Is that how people stop loving you? Just ... little by little?"

Concern banished his amusement. Reaching down, he swung the child up into his arms. "That isn't going to happen to you."

Her little arms caught round his neck, tangling in his hair. "But Brooke said..."

"Everyone who loves you," he promised, "will still love you when you wake up in the morning. If we can ever get you off to sleep, that is."

She leaned back in his arms. "What about you?"

"Me?" He widened his blue eyes.

"Will they all still love you, too? In the morning?"

But by now they'd reached her small chamber, and he was saved an answer. He disentangled himself (over the usual protests), put her down and turned the soft quilt back. "Cover up."

"But will they?" she demanded. "Forever? I always will."

"How could I ask for more?" he sighed, and tucked her determinedly into bed. Bright strands of his hair tumbled forward as he leaned over her. "Be quiet, now, and rest."

"But will you tell me about love, someday?"

"You already know all about it," he said, and kissed her tumbled curls. "People only forget, sometimes, as they grow older."

"I never will," she told him valiantly.

"Grow older?" he teased.

"No - I'll never forget. I will *always* remember."

He looked down at the child, so small and yet so resolute, seemingly so invulnerable there in the safety of her cot. She had lived in a world without love, so perhaps she would remember. *Forever*, she had said... and, *Always*. He remembered Catherine saying once, "*Such a father's word, 'Always'*" ... And he smiled to himself. If that was his role here, then it was one he'd fallen prey to unsuspectingly, and without a shot fired in his own defense.

Naomi was watching him, her head tilted against the patchwork pillow. "But I don't want to get any older, neither."

"Everyone does," he pointed out.

"Not me. *Father says*," she began mutinously, "Father says, I don't even have to be *six* if I don't want to."

Vincent shook his head over the memory. That wasn't *quite* what had happened ... After her last great 'adventure' Above, a Helper had stolen her records from Child Social Services; records that revealed not one, but two conflicting birth-dates. There was no birth certificate, no way of ascertaining which one was correct; so Naomi had taken her "finding day," as he had, to celebrate ... And it had been generally decided that she was still so small for her age, and had been so developmentally deprived, that it could do no harm to allow her to put off turning six for another year.

"But you will be," he said, "eventually."

"What's 'eventually'?"

"Little by little," he smiled, and stepped to the door. "We'll talk about it tomorrow."

She heard finality in his voice. "Can I have another drink of water?"

Vincent feigned incredulity, just as though they didn't go through this sort of thing every night.

"You'll float away."

"Another story?"

"Tomorrow," he answered. "Sleep now."

"I'm sorry she was already asleep by the time I got there," Catherine said, a little wistfully. "Maybe we should have wakened her."

Vincent said, "Please, Catherine" - and his expression, when she looked up, was one of such paternal martyrdom that she laughed softly aloud. He went on, "I'll tell her that you came to say goodnight."

They walked on, hand in hand, through the empty corridors. The only sounds they heard were their own footsteps and the muted, intermittent tapping of the pipes. "Was she listening outside the door?"

"Yes... just as I used to do." His smile faded. "She asked me about the way Milford seems to be 'going away' from us. I think she was worried that if a Helper could begin to stop loving us, or *her*..."

"Then anybody might?" Catherine looked up at him sidelong. "I don't think that's something only children are afraid of. Do you?"

"... No." He clasped her hand more warmly. "I suppose not. I did tell her, though, that everyone who loved her tonight, would still love her when she wakened in the morning. She seemed to be content with that."

"I wish everyone," Catherine sighed, "could be so easily reassured!"

He turned his head, startled, to look down at her. "Everyone, Catherine? Or have you someone specific in mind?"

With an almost furtive glance up and down the empty corridor, she stopped and pulled him round to face her. "I will still love you tomorrow, Vincent."

His eyes widened. "Catherine, I ..."

She reached up and took his lionesque face in her hands. "Tomorrow and tomorrow, and tomorrow, Vincent," she whispered, coming up on tiptoe; and with every promised "tomorrow", she dropped a kiss on the tip of his soft-bristled nose. She felt his hands close around her waist - and wonder of wonders, he was *not* pushing her away. It still surprised her, sometimes - his tentative willingness, now, to be close ... to touch, and to be touched. She knew that he could feel that in her, along with her delight. Catherine smoothed the hair that fell over his shoulders like raw strands of tawny silk; and then, gathering that softness in both hands, she moved backward into the shadows, drawing him after her.

He followed like one enchanted - and he was; by the laughter trembling on her full lips, and by the mischief sparkling in her smoky green eyes. The uncertainties of their first two years together had left them so often - too often - serious. He had so seldom seen this whimsical, quixotic side of Catherine that, when it surfaced nowadays, he felt himself well and truly magicked.

On tiptoe again, she brought her mouth within a fraction of an inch of his.

"Vincent," she said softly.

Her warm, sweet breath moved lightly, teasingly over his lips and cheek. She moved nearer still - as if to whisper in his ear - and though she was not touching him, his skin tingled to the warmth of hers. *How does she do that?* He wondered, suddenly short of breath, his heart leaping.

"Vincent," she repeated -

- And he bowed his head that last fraction of an inch, and kissed her.

Catherine was exquisitely conscious of the uniqueness of this mouth she loved - the sweet division of his upper lip, the softness of the lower, the hidden hint of his sharp teeth. His long hair tickled along her throat, and his hands, at her waist, pulled her closer. How could he ever have believed she might reject these kisses, pressed upon her with such gentleness? In the fragile privacy of their thoughts, each of them wondered it; she with triumph, and he with gratitude.

The tunnel wall was cold and rough against her shoulder-blades; gladly she leaned into him instead, and felt his arms encircle her strongly - no longer, she realized, as though she might be made of glass.

Their lips parted finally. She dropped a damp kiss into the hollow of his throat, and nuzzled into the warm curve of his neck. Vincent pressed his cheek to the familiar satin-softness of her hair. He was filled with a never-ending wonder at the love she expressed so freely ... a love he seemed to have waited for, unknowingly, all of his life.

Through the bond he felt her happiness peak sharply into humor, a feeling that made him smile before he lifted his head.

"What are you thinking?" he asked.

She looked up at him, smiling too. "I was thinking of the look on your face, tonight. You know, on the balcony, after..."

She saw his blue eyes widen; a very similar expression, she decided with a throaty chuckle.

On the very heels of the sound came another (one she ought to have expected, she thought, her smile turning wry); the tapping of a walking-stick, and an ostentatious clearing-of-throat.

Now Vincent was chuckling too, almost inaudibly. "Yes, Father," he called out softly. "What is it?"

The elder man stumped into view, plainly disgruntled. "Well, you may rest assured that if there had been another way through I would have taken it. I *did* hang back, quite as long as I thought, er, polite, but you *would* dawdle ..."

Dawdling, Catherine thought drily. *Well, I suppose you could call it that ...* Vincent stepped forward and she turned, holding fast to his arm, feeling suddenly shy at their having nearly been caught necking in the passageway like teenagers. Jacob Wells gave her a flicker of a glance, sharp and almost kindly ... and she breathed a sigh of relief over his still-new, if watchful, acceptance of their growing relationship. There was a time, not long gone, when the slightest hint of intimacy between her and Vincent would have resulted in howls of patriarchal rage. This tentative change of heart was yet so new to Catherine, that she sometimes still expected him to one day "regain his senses" and demand they do the same.

Now he said, "So, is Naomi asleep, finally?"

"Finally," Vincent nodded.

"Perhaps I ought to go in and check, just in case ..."

"Father," Vincent put out his hand, "if you should wake her again ..."

"Er ... yes. Well. I see what you mean. Perhaps I'll just leave well enough alone, then."

"Thank you," Vincent said gravely, his deep eyes twinkling. "Come. Walk with us." He took Father's arm and, the elder on one side and Catherine on the other, started down the corridor again.

"Now then," Father went on, "has Catherine filled you in yet on the remainder of our meeting?"

"I was just, uh, about to do that," she said quickly; heard Vincent chuckle softly, and couldn't resist smiling up at him. Neither of them caught the wry quirk of a smile Father turned his head to hide.

"What did happen, Father?" Vincent asked him. "Were you all able to come to a decision?"

"Yes, I think we were. There is some resentment there, of course ... even anger. There is a feeling of our having been ... oh, discarded. Cast off, perhaps. And yet I think our community was able to think this through, and act, without any sense of, well, of bitterness ... although Jamie *was* rather determined," he said dryly, "that Milford be made to realize that we *have* been aware of his recent shortcomings, and aren't '*stupid*' after all."

Both of the younger people were amused at this reminder of that young woman's impetuous temper, and the protectiveness she felt for what was, in effect, the only real family she had ever known.

Vincent said, "What was it you all decided upon?"

Choosing his words carefully, Father described their proposed course of action.

"This isn't overly harsh, I think," he said, with a glance at his son, whose opinion he greatly-valued. "And it isn't meant as a punishment, whatever he may come to think."

Vincent nodded, thoughtfully. "And how will you...?"

"We've invited Milford to a meeting, this Friday night," the patriarch replied. "A Council meeting, although I'm fairly certain most of our citizens plan to attend." He hesitated. "I hope that's all right, Vincent. You weren't there; I know you and Catherine usually do get together on Friday evenings, but this is likely to be the best time for Milford, and so I was hoping..."

Vincent, glancing toward Catherine, saw how pleased she was to learn that Father thought this a consideration worth mentioning.

"Yes, of course, Father. You know we'll be there ... But Milford - you're sure he'll come?"

"Mouse has volunteered to deliver the message personally ... and you know Mouse. He is persistent, if nothing else. Milford will not be able to say the note was 'lost,' this time at least." He turned to look past his son, to his companion. "Catherine, we enjoyed your comments at tonight's gathering. You made several excellent points; brought us a fresh perspective. I'm glad you could come. We all were."

Catherine's shy smile only hinted at the pleasure these words gave her. "It was all very... very *educational* for me. In my world, we mostly handle such things by not handling them. We don't seem to hold our friends - or ourselves, sometimes - to account the way you all do."

"Our relationships are taken very seriously by us all," Father mused. "We couldn't exist here otherwise. Indeed, what else have we?" Leaning comfortably on Vincent's arm, he gestured with his cane, as at a truth visible on the path before them. "Just as Naomi has learned to trust Vincent to be there for her, and as he once trusted me - "

"Still do," Vincent murmured.

"Thank you," Father said warmly. "But, just as we nurture and cultivate those more intimate trusts, so we must also be able to depend upon our friends."

Catherine knew that, individually and as a whole, this community did take very seriously the commitments that it chose to make; to its members, to the children under its protection, to its Helpers in the world Above. Knowing this, she found it privately astonishing, then, that what had characterized her relationship with Vincent for their first two years was the very *precariousness* of it; the sense that, despite their bond, she might at any moment turn to find this world - and its heart - closed to her, "*for her own good*." This had been the measure of his self-doubt; that he'd been ever-ready to deny her love, and all that he was, solely for her protection.

Looking up at him now, as he bent his leonine head attentively toward Father, Catherine felt such a surge of love and protectiveness that she wondered that the force of it didn't stop him in his tracks.

"It nearly did," he admitted later, at the Threshold beneath her building.

"Why didn't you let it?" she teased him, loving the lingering shyness with which he still confessed such things.

"Catherine - what would Father have said?"

"*Your father*," she said, with humorous and deliberate emphasis, "is starting to make me nervous. Do you realize, he hasn't scowled at me or warned us to '*be careful*' in, oh, weeks and weeks. Do you think he's all right?"

"He does seem to be ... mellowing." In the half-light, sharp teeth glinted in his smile.

So do you, Catherine thought but did not say, as she leaned against the cool brickwork, close enough to feel his warmth. "I was glad he wanted me there tonight, at the meeting. It made me feel as though I were really a part of all this."

"You *are* a part of all this."

With a rueful smile, she shook her head. "For a long time, I was a part of you ... and you were a part of all this. It's only this year that I've started to feel as though this world might be ... home, too."

"I've felt you growing more comfortable here." Thus lightly, delicately, they sometimes treaded round the edges of the dream they shared.

"Sometimes, at the end of an evening, it just seems so inconvenient - so *unnecessary*, somehow - to have to go back Above again." She shook her head. "I have to be very 'stern' with myself, and remind myself why I have to go. The office. Moreno, and Joe. Bills that need paying, dishes that need washing ... Things, responsibilities - people, even - almost from another life and time."

More and more, these days, going back provided a peculiar culture-shock.

Vincent nodded. "You know that everyone here accepts you as one of them. That could never change, now ..."

"Whatever we decide to do," she smiled. "Yes, I know." She looked up into his face, and the very tilt of her head seemed to challenge him. "Do you think we might be able to make this decision one day before we get very, very old?" She saw his blue eyes widen with surprise, eyebrows rising up into his bangs even as he struggled to keep a straight face.

"Catherine," he murmured, "I don't believe we have to."

Now it was her turn to look surprised, and he saw consternation there as well. "Have to what?" she began. "Make a decision, or - "

"Grow old," he told her. "According to Naomi."

"Naomi?" She couldn't help but smile at his sudden unexpected whimsy. "What does Naomi have to do with this, pray tell?"

"*Father* says," he repeated with exacting emphasis, "that she doesn't even have to turn *six* if she doesn't want to."

"After you brought her back," Catherine remembered. "The two birthdays?"

"Yes. And so she's made up her mind, I think, to be five here forever..."

"Where it's safe," Catherine said softly. She understood. "There are a lot of risks in growing, and growing up."

Vincent leaned a little toward her. "She was so certain, Catherine. As though it really *was* just a matter of will, or belief. And I was thinking ..." He was smiling playfully now too. "If Naomi doesn't have to grow older, then perhaps it's possible that we won't, either."

"There's magic in your world, Vincent," she said, thinking, *And it's mostly you*. Something in her green eyes, meeting his, seemed to turn her smile a little sad. "But we can't always stay where - and when - it's safe, Vincent. Sometimes - "

"*We must leave our safe places*," he agreed, quoting an old friend. "I know, my Catherine." He drew her into an embrace, nuzzling into the silken fall of her hair, feeling her arms encircle him beneath his cloak. Her full lips pressed warmly into the hollow of his throat. He caught his breath and felt her mute laughter on his skin and through the bond ... and he was taken by surprise, as always, by the twinned sensation of her delight and his own pleasure.

"Catherine," he whispered, closing his eyes. How had he ever lived, he wondered, before knowing - really *knowing* - that he could hold her slight, strong body in his arms this way?

He drew his breath to speak, to tell her of these thoughts and feelings - then turned his head sharply toward the tunnel from whence they had come.

"Who's there?" he called out softly, and Catherine wondered if the growl she heard in his voice was really more than her imagination.

"Who is it?" she asked him, her heart leaping as she, too, heard a slight shuffling sound from somewhere beyond their sight. Yet even as she felt her alarm she knew how silly it was, for none but friends would come from that direction ... Who could it be? Surely, she thought (biting her lip against a sudden hysterical urge to giggle), surely Father wouldn't have followed them all this way, simply for another chance to interrupt!

"All right," Vincent said sternly, his low voice carrying out into the unseen corridor. "Who is it?"

A long silence was followed by a faint and ghostly reply. "Mouse."

"Mouse?" Vincent hesitated, plainly puzzled.

Catherine poked him in the ribs, her eyes dancing. She whispered, "You thought it was Naomi, following us again, didn't you?"

He squeezed her into submission, an easy victory, murmuring, "And who did you think it was?" - for he well knew. He lifted his voice again. "Mouse? What are you doing out there?"

"Waiting for you," came the still-disembodied complaint, as though that answer should have been perfectly obvious. "It's okay. Couldn't hear - much. Hurry up, finish up."

Catherine smothered her soft laughter in the broad expanse of Vincent's chest. After a moment, she heard him chuckling too.

She called, "Come out, Mouse. It's okay."

"Sure?"

"I'm sure," she answered, meeting Vincent's rueful smile with a watery one of her own. She made as if to step back, but he held her there easily, his fingers laced behind the small of her back, his expression enigmatic.

"Okay good, okay *fine*." After a moment the young man popped into view, his face smudged, his bowl-cut yellow hair still wind-blown. "Knew you'd be here," he told Vincent smugly, as though these moments of togetherness were a secret that he somehow shared with them.

Vincent made a sound in his throat which, Catherine thought, sounded a lot like Father's "*humph*" of disapproval. But Mouse was beaming up at his mentor, full of accomplishment and satisfaction.

"You've been Above," Vincent guessed, and looked him covertly up and down. None of the boy's many pockets seemed to show any unsightly - or moving - bulges.

"Milford's shop," Mouse nodded, his large blue eyes shining. "Delivering the message."

"Did you get him?"

"Got him."

"Good."

"Didn't think he was going to answer," Mouse frowned. "Had to stand there a long time. Finally came, though."

It would have done the man little good to try and outwait him, was Catherine's wry thought; she'd often wished (good help, after all, being hard to find) that the D.A.'s office could hire Mouse to deliver its subpoenas.

"And you gave him a note?" she prompted. "Does he know what the meeting's going to be about?"

"Didn't see what Father wrote," he shrugged. "Think maybe just 'Council meeting' and when. You know. Maybe he wouldn't come, if he knew."

"Perhaps he won't come anyway," Vincent sighed, with a cynicism unlike him.

"You think so?" Catherine raised her head to look up at him, surprised and concerned; and saw that all the humor had gone out of his face. She understood that the thought of the loss of this friend - or of any friend - weighed upon him heavily.

"Catherine, there has been nothing in his behavior, this past year, to indicate that he would answer such a ... such a summons. He has not been honest about his feelings, but ... he has a life Above. He may no longer feel any obligation to abide by our laws, or attend such a gathering."

"That would be a message in itself, wouldn't it," she said sadly. "Of how he values you all, and your world."

"And yet ... because of who we are, and because of our Secret, we cannot simply pretend that this friendship, and what is Happening to it, does not matter."

"You're not worried that he'll give away the Secret," she said, the denial in her voice a reassurance; thinking, *He wouldn't. No one who's known you, could ever do that.*

"*Said* he'd come," Mouse broke in stubbornly, not a little alarmed at the turn this conversation had taken, and wrenching it back toward surer ground. "Said he'd come, so he'll come."

Catherine couldn't help but smile. Mouse couldn't conceive of anyone telling him a lie to his face, believing all the world to be as guileless as he was.

"I'm sure you're right, Mouse. We'll see."

"It's late," Vincent said softly. "And you have to work in the morning."

"It isn't Friday yet," she agreed; and hugged him hard, burrowing into the solid warmth of his embrace and memorizing it, as always... until the next time. She lifted her head to step away and felt his lips brush the side of her brow - only a little self-consciously, she thought, as Mouse stood there watching them intently.

"Come along, Mouse," Vincent said, stepping away finally. Catherine stood near the foot of the ladder, watching them go. Just as they stepped through the ragged brickwork entryway, and when they were almost out of earshot, she heard Vincent murmur, "It isn't nice to eavesdrop, Mouse. You know that."

"Hardly heard anything," Mouse retorted. And then, after a moment, as though he couldn't resist: "Saw plenty, though!"

Catherine grinned to hear him scamper away, and Vincent's heavier footsteps rushing after him.

Chapter 4

Night had fallen on the city outside the shop window. Inside it, there was dark as well; and a man stood looking out, watching as the headlights of passing cars slashed through the blackness, shielding the alley and the store-fronts opposite.

Not even the homeless were taking refuge there tonight; nothing and no one looked back at him from those familiar shadows. Even the traffic had begun to dwindle, at least as much as it ever did in this part of Manhattan, even after the commuters' rush to get out of the city for the weekend.

After a little while he turned away, satisfied. He'd sent his employees home and closed up hours ago; and then spent a productive evening inventorying the stock that stood gleaming all around him now. The day's receipts were done as well, as he felt again the warm sense of fulfillment that had brought him. He'd known, as he worked, that the other shopkeepers on this street were closing up and going home on time; but he'd felt no compulsion to join in that exodus, thinking, *The king is in his counting-house, counting out his money*. It was a rhyme that came to him at odd moments, one he secretly enjoyed without any sense of irony.

He left the window now and strode purposefully toward the storeroom for his overcoat, thinking ahead to a late supper in the nearby apartment which he now shared with no one. In another life he would have left earlier, eager to be home on time for the dinner *she* would have had waiting ... but the thought only flickered over the surface of his mind, and was gone again. He didn't mind being alone now, and had come to think of himself as a man without attachments, living a life without complications.

He turned the corner into the storeroom and moved toward the coatrack without turning on the lights.

"Milford."

He nearly fell over the wastebasket then - and swearing, caught himself on a corner of the desk. He reached for the lamp there and turned it on.

"Jesus!" he said to the cloaked figure now visible in the corner. "You almost gave me a heart-attack, do you know that?" He sank into the swivel-chair with enough force to set the springs to squealing in protest. "Why can't you ever just knock, like other people?"

The 'intruder' stepped toward him. "I didn't mean to startle you."

"Come on, now. 'Fess up." The man looked up at him with a grin. "You know you do it just for the effect. Wouldn't it be more honest just to jump out and yell 'Boo!' at people?"

Vincent couldn't help but smile. Although he and Milford had never developed the closeness he shared with some other Helpers, he'd always enjoyed the man's frank, irreverent sense of humor. It was, he reflected, one of the things he was going to miss most. His smile faded at the thought.

"You're late," he said without preamble.

There was nothing accusatory or reproachful in his tone; it was a statement of fact, nothing more. Still the shopkeeper's face fell - almost, boyishly, Vincent thought -and his eyes shifted away, toward the wall-clock.

"Late?"

Vincent reproved him with a look that would have done even Father credit. "The Council meeting." He saw that it was on the tip of the man's tongue to deny he'd even known about it, and shook his head slightly. "Mouse told us you said you'd be there."

"Oh... yes, of course. I guess I, er... I just lost track of the time."

Vincent nodded, with apparent sympathy. Only he knew that the Helper had been asked to come an hour early, in anticipation of this sort of 'forgetfulness.'"But you can come now."

"Well... Look, Vincent. I've got an awful lot to do, and..."

"You were just leaving," said his guest, softly, nodding toward the overcoat still hanging on the rack.

Under that patient scrutiny, the man's face reddened; he ran one hand back through fading brown hair. "Look," he said again. "Look ..."

"Did you have any intention of coming?" Vincent asked him.

"Well... well, sure I did," Milford sputtered, plainly unnerved by this kind of straight-forwardness.

"Then come," Vincent said simply. "Father and the others... they're expecting you. It's important."

After a moment of stubborn indecision, during which he rebelliously gripped the padded arms of his chair, as though afraid he would be dragged free of it, Milford got up and put on his coat. He was not a tall man, and the bulky outer garment turned stockiness almost to stoutness.

"Still cold?" he asked shortly, reaching for his scarf.

"Still cold," Vincent nodded, and watched him wrap the soft woolen length around his neck.

It was only after the two had slipped Below, through the nearest Park entrance, that the Helper asked, rather gruffly, "What's this all about, anyway?"

Vincent glanced at him sidelong, thinking the man must already have a suspicion, or he wouldn't have avoided the question until now. Milford's eyes were fixed obstinately on the path ahead.

Vincent answered, "It's about friendship, and trust."

"That's kind of nebulous, isn't it?" the other said irritably. With some awkwardness he jumped a drainage-pipe gap that Vincent had leaped lightly ahead of him. "Do you think you could be a little more specific?"

"*The Council* will be more specific," Vincent said mildly, almost soothingly, striding onward, giving him not a moment in which to hesitate.

The sounds of the pipes came to them clearly now, as they descended the honeycombed levels. Hidden sentries, having sighted the pair, were sending word of their arrival on ahead. Milford cocked his head.

"I always liked that sound," he said grudgingly. "Never really got around to understanding it much, though."

"Betsy did," his guide replied. "She went out of her way to learn the basic codes. I remember that in her early years as a Helper, she enjoyed learning about every aspect of our world."

"Yeah, well, that was the kind of thing she would've liked, I guess," Milford said noncommittally, and shrugged his hands deeper into his pockets, although it was warmer down here than it had been out-of-doors.

"We all have our ... priorities," Vincent nodded. "We can usually find the time and energy to devote to that which we truly love."

Milford made no reply to this. Then, after a moment: "The way seems longer than I remember."

"The ways change," Vincent reminded him.

"Where is everybody?" For they were now in the home tunnels, and they were empty. "I haven't seen any kids, or..."

"The meeting," Vincent reminded him.

A flicker of alarm crossed the man's face. "I thought you said it was a Council meeting."

"It concerns all of us. No one who wishes to attend, will be turned away."

The doorway to the library-chamber was within sight now; and both of them could hear the murmur of many voices therein. Milford stopped in his tracks. He was scowling.

"Now, wait just a minute, Vincent," he began.

"Come along, Milford," Vincent said, as gently as he would have spoken to one of the children; and taking the man's elbow, he guided him forward.

Catharine, looking up, was the first to notice their arrival. She rose from her seat as they descended the short metal stair, and went to take Vincent's hand.

"They're ready to begin," she whispered, as silence began to fall over the large chamber. "Milford, I'm glad you could come."

He gave her a brusque, dismissive nod, his eyes flickering here and there over the gathering. He saw that not only were the Council members in attendance, but so were most of their family members. There were empty chairs scattered throughout the crowd, and yet many of the tunnel-folk were standing - *and every single one of them was watching him*. Even old Jacob, facing him there in the center of it all, had come to his feet; although, leaning heavily upon his stick, he did not come forward to offer his hand in greeting.

"Milford," the patriarch said, rather formally, "we are all very glad that you could come tonight. There is a matter of some importance which we felt it necessary to - "

"What's this all about?" the Helper demanded, a little more plaintively than he would have liked. "Why are you all..." *Why are you all looking at me*, he wanted to ask, but swallowed the question back again. "Why did you ask me here? You've had plenty of meetings without me in the past. What does this have to do with me?"

"Yes," Father nodded, as though it was a reasonable question which deserved the gravest consideration. "That is the question which your own behavior, over the past year, has led us to ask ourselves: What does any of this - " and he looked over the people there, to the very walls of the place and the unseen tunnels beyond " - have to do with you?"

"I ... I don't understand." For the first time then he noticed the large cardboard box, stamped with his own company logo, on the floor nearby. "Was there something wrong with that last package I sent down? Is that it?"

"Why, no," Father replied. "In and of themselves, your gifts were very nice. This has more to do with certain changes we, all of us, have noticed in you. And since it has affected your relationship with us, we merely wished to ... to discover if there is anything we've done to offend you, or perhaps something you would like us to do - "

"I don't know what you mean," the man said, stubbornly. "I don't know about any 'changes.' Does this have something to do with the museum thing, over the weekend? Look, I would've come, but - "

"You disappointed the children," Mary reminded him.

"And you didn't even send word," Jamie put in.

"*Please*," Father said sharply, looking round him until they all had quieted. When he turned back to Milford, his tone was once again conciliatory. "It wasn't our intent, in calling you to this meeting, to accuse you of any wrongdoing. We are concerned with more than your failure to keep your promise to the children, or the fact that they were left standing in the cold for hours, waiting for you."

He paused until he was certain that the point had been made, then braced both hands on the head of the walking-stick before him.

"Milford, through the years you have been our good and valued friend. Yet now we see you drifting away from us; and although you affect not to have noticed, we wish you to know that we have."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"What I am talking about," Father went on with a gentle relentlessness, "are promises made willingly, and broken carelessly, and without apparent reason."

There was a murmur of agreement throughout the chamber. Milford was frowning fiercely, but his evasive eyes lingered, like Father's hands, in the vicinity of the cane-top. "I don't remember anything like that."

"Winterfest," William said succinctly.

Cullen added, "Father's medicine."

" - And all that candlewax," Rebecca nodded.

"Whole week late," Mouse pointed out.

"Did you think we wouldn't talk to Dr Wong?" Jamie demanded. "That we wouldn't know you lied?"

"All right, Jamie," Father said hastily. "There have been other examples, as well. The point is, Milford, that these were all responsibilities which you had taken on willingly - even volunteered for - and yet, without explanation, you - "

"I think you're exaggerating," the man said, his stocky frame braced with denial.

Catherine, at Vincent's side, found herself studying him as she would a witness on the stand; watching his eyes, listening for a tone of voice that would belie the words he spoke.

He said, "I've just been busy, that's all. This new business - "

"You're doing well," Vincent agreed, "and no one is happier for you than we, your friends. If you're too busy to help, if you don't have time to take on quite so much, that's all right. You needn't feel ashamed."

"Look." Milford was shaking his head, not listening. "I know I've been a little, well, preoccupied, lately, but after all, haven't I still been sending you everything you could ask for? *More* than you've asked for? I mean, I may not be the most thoughtful guy in the world - Betsy told me that, more than once - but how many friends do you have that can give you what I do? Come on, Jacob, let's face it; beggars can't be choosers, right?"

Resentment stirred the room. "Yes," Father said, his gaze steady. "So you told Kipper, I believe."

The Helper had the grace to blush.

Vincent spoke with deceptive mildness. "You did not used to condescend to us, Milford." His tone, his very stillness, caused Catherine to ease closer to him, reaching down to lace her fingers through his.

"Look," Milford was blustering, "I've had a lot on my mind lately. I've been *busy!* But I've sent you lots of - "

"We are not your charity, Milford," Father interrupted him patiently. "We are your friends. And we would rather have you here, with an open heart and empty hands, than to possess all the pretty gifts you send us, so conditionally."

"Conditionally?" The man seemed honestly disconcerted by the word. "What do you mean, conditionally?"

The old man nodded toward the door behind the Helper; and at this signal, children began to file around him into the chamber. Each one was carrying a carefully-folded garment or a shiny new toy; and each child placed his or her contribution neatly inside the large cardboard box in which it had all arrived. Most of the youngsters avoided looking up at the visitor; some, like Kipper, looked up at him reproachfully. Last in line was the littlest among them; Naomi stood gazing up, small empty hands upon her hips, for nothing in this package had been small enough for her. But - "I wanted the *box*," she pouted.

"Naomi," Vincent called her softly; and she ran to hide herself between him and Catherine.

"What's all this?" Milford demanded, staring at the box. "Why did they do that?"

Father had been watching this small drama gravely, not speaking until every child had found a place among the folk already gathered.

"This is the children's own idea, Milford. They've discussed it, and decided that they are not comfortable, keeping presents they have to feel ashamed of taking. They've never been made to feel ashamed, before."

"We're not beggars," Eric said loudly.

"No," Milford said; and it was plain that the children had shaken him in a way their elders had not. "No, I never meant that. I'm sorry if I made you kids feel that way. Please, keep these things - "

"Don't want 'em," Kipper said, his black eyes hard. "Why don't you find some poor people to give 'em to?"

Pascal, hearing the anger in his voice, stepped near enough to put his arm around the boy.

Milford was both angered and bewildered by this rejection. He rubbed one hand distractedly over his face.

"Okay, so I've been a little careless. I've admitted that. But I honestly don't understand what the great big problem is -"

"Don't you?" Catherine asked softly. "Honestly?"

"Milford, if you have some grievance," Father said, "some resentment that may be causing you to - "

"Just say," Mouse urged him. "Don't go 'way mad - "

"I just seem to be doing most of the giving here, lately." The words hung hurtfully in the quiet chamber; too late to take them back.

"And we do all the taking?" Jamie challenged him.

Again, he reddened. "Well, it's plain that - "

"What has been plain from the beginning," Father cut in, with a steadiness that silenced everyone, "is that in this relationship we share with our Helpers, there are certain material considerations they can provide, which we could never hope to match. Instead, we offer other things." He leaned forward intently, hands clasped over the head of his cane. "The uniqueness of our society; the warmth of our friendship. The willingness to give our all for our friends, Above and Below." His faded blue eyes flickered over each of the tunnel-folk in turn, as if seeking - and finding - those qualities in everyone present.

"Your wife understood this, Milford. I thought you did, as well. Perhaps you did, once."

"We've been there when you needed us," Vincent reminded him.

"When Betsy died," Pascal said softly.

"And when you risked everything, and moved to the new shop," Kanin put in. "You couldn't afford to hire movers - "

"But we all came," Mouse finished for him. "Pushed and carried - moved everything."

"I remember, all right?" The Helper snapped. Clearly more frustrated and embarrassed than remorseful, he never even noticed the way Mouse's eyes darkened with hurt. "What do you want from me?"

"Your friendship," Vincent answered. "Nothing more than that ... and nothing less."

Naomi was tugging urgently at his trouser-pocket, upset by the unhappiness she'd felt growing around her. When he glanced down she whispered, "Is something terrible going to happen?" and he hushed her gently.

"I'm not sure," Father sighed, "just where the problem here began. What we do know, however, is that we tell people how important they are to us by our treatment of them. I'm sorry to say that your treatment of us this past year, Milford, has not been that of someone who values our friendship. In fact, it has seemed an almost deliberate attempt to give us the opposite message."

"But what do you want me to *do*?" he demanded, for he was a man geared more to action and accomplishment than to this kind of philosophizing.

"All we want," Father replied, "is for you to give what we have said here today, some very serious thought. You perhaps need to reconsider the promises you mean to make, and those you mean to keep. And we are going to give you time in which to do that."

Milford looked at him blankly. "What do you mean?"

"I mean we have decided," he went on very deliberately, "that for the space of one year, you are not to initiate contact of any kind with our community; nor will we, regretfully, attempt to reach you."

Milford stared, his jaw sagging. "You're kidding."

"No," Vincent said sadly. What Milford did not know was that his own response here tonight had been the deciding factor in imposing this 'sentence,' which some here Below had believed to be too harsh.

He felt Catherine pressing close, and slipped his arm around her. The bond told him that despite her outward calm, her feelings were in turmoil. He knew that she must be trying to imagine what it would be like to struggle through such a year, alone.

Milford seemed to swell with indignation. "I don't believe this!" he said hoarsely. "You're doing this to *me*? After all I've - "

" - Done for us?" Pascal finished for him. He didn't say it angrily, but in that thoughtful way most typical of him. "It's true, you've done a lot ... but I didn't know you had been keeping score."

"Milford." Vincent waited as the man turned, his jaw clenching against more angry words, to face him. "Being a part of our world, knowing the Secret, is a privilege. We strive very hard, each one of us, to create something of value here ... something our Helpers cannot find in their lives Above. A world, a society, they will want to be a part of. Do you understand?"

"And those things you've 'done' for us," Father went on. "That is the cost you have placed upon your friendship; it is no price that we have demanded."

"Yes," Mary nodded. "Why, we have Helpers who give us far less, in a material way, and some who can afford nothing at all, except perhaps their time - "

"For music lessons," Geoffrey put in, thinking of Eli. "Or running messages to Catherine," added Zach, whose job it was to find the Sandwich Man.

"Yes," Father nodded. "Exactly so."

"So I'm what? Banished? Exiled?"

"Think of it as ... a sabbatical of sorts," Father suggested. "A time for rest and reflection, elsewhere. And in that space of time, we hope that you will reconsider your 'priorities.' Perhaps, after all, you will not miss us; but I would like to think that the ideal of friendship will regain its importance in your life, and that you will return to us eventually."

"But you can't." As though finally realizing that this was not a debate -- that there was no reprieve - the businessman suddenly looked more like a schoolboy on the verge of tears. "This isn't *fair*."

"I'm very sorry. We all are. Mouse," he said as an aside, "I'd like you to help him with this box, if you would." Now at last Father came forward, leaning on his stick. With his free hand he reached out, and clasped the younger man's hand. "We will miss you, Milford," he said sincerely.

"Vincent will guide you out ... but I hope that you will find your own way back to us."

Chapter 5

"It troubled you," Vincent murmured.

"Yes. Of course it did."

Despite the lateness of the hour and the certainty of darkness pressing down over the city Above, here in the Chamber of the Falls it was always, somehow, an early spring morning. Catherine sat with her arms wrapped around her bent knees, gazing off across the lake toward the far wall of this vast cavern. There an underground river tumbled out of the darkness, falling like liquid crystal from a great height. Below, clouds of soft vapor rose to hide the place where icy cascades mingled with the warmer waters of the springs. The sound of it came to them like the whisper of far-distant thunder.

Now she turned, and laid her cheek upon her knees to study Vincent. The banished Helper had been escorted back up into his world, and Vincent had come back to join her here. He looked, Catherine thought, if not exactly tired, then at least thoughtful and subdued.

She said, "I know it bothered you, too."

He laced his fingers over one bent knee, hooking the other over the precipice-edge as though unmindful of the drop.

"It reminded me of Mouse," he said, "and the Silence."

"I was thinking of it too," she admitted, remembering the circumstances, almost two years ago, under which Mouse had found himself facing a similar sentence. The month-long Silence imposed had been a terrible shock to the boy, who was a favorite here Below; and then, like now, some had felt the sentence to be too severe. Vincent had told her that he himself had hesitated, when it came time to put it to the vote.

She said, "Do you think Mouse...?"

"He didn't mention it, on the way back down... He was only saddened, as we all were, by Milford's attitude. Mouse is such an innocent spirit; he cannot understand how it is that people ever change for the worst. But ... did he think of his own Council judgement?" Vincent gave her a wry smile. "Mouse lives in the present. For him, what's done is done. I do not think he saw himself in Milford."

"I did," she sighed. "Not Mouse, but me. I mean, it's the kind of thing we all have to be careful of. We all fall short sometimes ..."

"You never do," he said at once. He put out one arm, and drew her closer to his side.

She was happy to oblige. While he was holding her, she never thought about being so near the edge.

"And Milford," she said. "Do you think that, at the end of the year, he'll come back after all?"

"I hope so," he replied. "We are poorer, with the loss of any friend."

"And yet tonight, that didn't stop you ...?"

"No." He shook his head, resolve still firm in his tone. "In any relationship, there are things which can impoverish us more than mere absence ever could."

"Well," she said softly, "perhaps his heart will 'grow fonder' ... and you will see him again." She felt his arm tighten around her, and went on: "After you left, I helped Mary and Sarah put the children to bed. They were worried. They wanted to be sure that what happened to Milford wasn't their fault."

"Their fault?"

"You know, because they 'told on him.' The museum trip did seem to be ..."

"The straw that broke the camel's back." He nodded. "You reassured them?"

"I think they already knew it." She leaned her head on his shoulder. "They just needed to hear it."

"This has happened to us before," he said softly, almost as though to himself. "People do leave us sometimes. They grow up, and into lives elsewhere; they grow old and move away to be with their children. They even seem to 'grow away' from us occasionally. Oddly enough, it most often happens in connection with ... oh, success, I suppose you would say; even affluence."

"You mean, like a Helper winning the lottery?" she half-joked.

"In a way. It sometimes happens when they find themselves able to enter into a more materialistic world ... a world to which we can contribute little."

Catherine thought of how often he'd compared himself, and the magic of his world, with the apparent luxury of hers; and how even he saw himself as falling short, unable to compete with what he saw there. She rubbed her cheek against the soft, worn leather patch at his shoulder. "You value yourselves too little."

He stirred and she could feel his warm breath, and then his lips, at the part in her hair. He murmured, "Do we?" She was smiling - a smile he couldn't see - with the pleasure of his touch, but her voice was stern.

"You do."

"Tell me, my Catherine."

She lifted her head to look directly into his eyes, so close now that within those blue depths she could see love as clearly as she'd ever seen anything in her life.

"You're all I know of magic," she whispered to him. "And that world up there ... that world, with all its riches, and illusions, and its bustle and its self-important busy-ness, everything that Milford got so caught up in ... Don't you understand, Vincent? That's just the kind of world that needs you most."

The End