

A TOUCH OF MAGIC

by Wayne R. Kelley

Vincent strode smoothly along the familiar passageway leading to the Waterfall Chamber. Every turn, every crevice and shadow along its winding length, had become as familiar to him as his favorite books. He could easily walk from his chamber door, to the brink of the underground stream, with his eyes closed, guided only by his knowledge and his other heightened senses.

But today, he refrained from such tests of skill. The day's work had been tedious, keeping him away from the main hub of the community, until just an hour before. Leftovers from the dinner meal and a warm bath had restored him physically, but did little to replenish his spirit. To truly feel whole again, only one thing would suffice.

The last bend came into view, accompanied by the splashing tumult of the falls. He slowed his gait, moving up to the open archway noiselessly. The panorama of the expansive chamber spread before him, but his eyes and heart focused solely on the lone figure seated on the ground overlooking the rolling stream.

Catherine was contemplating the play of crashing water on the distant rocks, and radiating a deep, peaceful calm. She sat with her legs outstretched, crossed at the ankles, resting her back against a conveniently-placed rock. The handmade slip dress she wore today was the same soft green color as her eyes. Her moccasin-style boots were cast aside, leaving her bare feet exposed to the cool air.

She swung her gaze toward him, as he crossed the small strand of embankment leading to the overlook. He lowered himself to the ground next to her, drinking in her fragrance on the damp breeze.

"Hello, love," Catherine greeted him warmly, draping an arm across his wide shoulders. She pulled him closely up to her, flooding the empathic bond between them with unrestrained passion.

"I've missed you," she whispered huskily.

"Not as much as I've missed you," Vincent responded in a hushed growl. He lowered his lips to hers; the tender beginnings of what he hoped would become a lengthy kiss.

But it was not to be. The pounding of running feet along the bank, and a child's voice shouting "DADDY'S BACK!!!", was all the warning they received.

Vincent broke the lip lock and braced for impact. As his head snapped around, he raised both arms and caught the airborne body of seven year old Jacob, spread-eagled in mid-leap. The air gushed from his midsection with an "Oof!", and the boy went limp as a dishrag in his father's outstretched hands.

"Daddy," he exclaimed, as he lifted his head to look at Vincent's face, "you gotta come see what I found!"

Vincent set the boy on his feet, glancing over at Catherine ruefully. "You gotta," she echoed, her eyes full of mischief.

The decision was apparently final, as Jacob was already pulling on him to get him standing. Catherine's arm slipped away, as he rose to follow the boy to his great discovery.

Glancing back, he saw a smile illuminating Catherine's face. Even after seven years of marriage, her smile was stunning, and almost ever-present. The 'happy life' she'd longed for was a reality, though sacrifices had been required.

Catherine had been sacrificing things since their paths had crossed ten years earlier. The secrets she'd kept, and the help she'd given during her life Above, had imperiled her more than once. She'd always claimed that their relationship was worth the risk.

But for Vincent, the strain began to tell over time. Desiring a lasting life with Catherine, and feeling her longings through the bond every day, became torturous for him, because he felt unable and unworthy to pursue such a dream. After three years the struggle within him had reached a breaking point, and he'd fallen deathly ill.

But Catherine had rushed to his side, reaching him through the bond and pulling him back from the brink of oblivion. Over days of recovery she'd stayed Below day and night, and as they'd talked, they'd come to terms with their deepest feelings and needs. The ultimate truth of their love had cleared away all doubts, and they'd made the decision to be together.

So, Catherine had moved Below, giving up her career and most of her contacts with the city. She and Vincent had been formally married in the Great Hall, and shortly after, conceived a child.

The pregnancy and delivery had been fairly routine, but Jacob had been born with his father's distinctive appearance, though with Catherine's green eyes. And with his birth, the bond had expanded, encompassing all three.

From there, life continued onward. The Tunnels continued to help those outcast from Above, and Catherine found her place as wife, mother, and community leader, alongside Vincent. Father had even begun relinquishing leadership of their world to Vincent, opting for the simpler role of grandfather.

Vincent followed Jacob over to the outcropping of rock near the chamber entrance. The boy picked up a stick, turned, and brandished it at him, sword-like.

"I found a magic wand!" Jacob crowed. He held the treasure out to Vincent for inspection. It appeared to be a spindle from an old chair or table, a foot or so long, slightly tapered, with ornate tooling at the thicker end. The furniture storerooms contained dozens of similar specimens as a result of age or damage.

"You didn't find it attached to anything, did you, Jacob?" Vincent inquired, only half-serious. No one needed to be breaking furniture to make toys, after all.

"No, Dad," Jacob explained earnestly. "I found it behind some stuff in Grandfather's library. He said I could have it."

"All right, then," Vincent assured him, adding, "Just be careful with it, especially around the smaller kids."

"I will," the boy chimed, flashing a grin that showed his canines. He turned, pointing the 'wand' at a small rock on the ground, and sang out, "*Wingardium Leviosa!*"

Vincent chuckled and slipped his arm around Catherine as she glided up beside him.

"What's he doing?" he asked her as they watched Jacob wriggling the spindle, as though trying to move the rock without touching it. "And is Father trying to teach him Latin?"

"No," Catherine chortled. "He's playing Harry Potter."

"Who?"

The chortling turned to giggling. "Oh yeah, I forgot you live under a rock, dear," she teased him, "so you don't know about Harry."

"No, I don't," Vincent rumbled darkly, "but I'm certain you'll enlighten me about this person."

"Actually," Catherine replied lightly, "he's a character, from a book - *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. It's fantasy, like C. S. Lewis or Tolkein; it's all the rage in children's literature Above these days."

Vincent was intrigued, but immediately distrusting of anything from outside their safe haven, an attitude he seemed to be inheriting from Father, along with the mantle of leadership.

"With its own verbiage, I'm guessing," Vincent surmised as Jacob continued muttering strange words at the uncooperative rock.

"Of course," Catherine laughed. She nearly burst into full-blown guffaws at her husband's droll expression, but restrained herself with an effort. "Oh, come on, he's having fun, and using his imagination, and I think it's cute. And he's read eight chapters since yesterday."

Vincent blinked. "Well, I suppose I can't argue with reading and imagination," he conceded. "Perhaps I should look it over myself, before the other children start fighting him over it."

Catherine knew Vincent's own interests in literature, and could smell an ulterior motive.

"You could probably borrow the book while he's asleep," she suggested as innocently as possible.

Vincent nodded thoughtfully, then noticed the satisfied smirk on Catherine's face. Realizing she'd played him like a concert grand, he jabbed her lightly in the ribs and filled their bond with sparks of promised revenge for her manipulations.

"Come along, Jacob, it's time to go," he called.

Jacob gave up trying to levitate the stone and fell into step with his parents as they started their return to the hub.

Catherine awakened later that night, tangled in the pile of blankets that covered the bed in their private chamber. Pushing her way out from under the mound, she swung her feet to the floor, toeing into her slippers. She pulled on a robe as she shuffled past Jacob's room toward the front of their family suite.

Vincent's original room had been converted into a more common room, when they'd set up the bedrooms adjacent. As she reached the entry, she spied her husband in his pajamas, laid back in his recliner chair with *Sorcerer's Stone* in hand, oblivious to all else, including the time.

Catherine chuckled in spite of herself. Through their bond, she could sense him, lost in the wonder of the engrossing story. Her emotions broke through his reverie, and he glanced across the room at her.

"Oh, hello, dear," he greeted her. "Is something wrong?"

"Yes," she answered as she approached. "There's this large empty spot in our bed...." She sat on the arm of the recliner. "Is that all you have left?" she inquired incredulously, nodding at the book.

Vincent shrugged. "It's an excellent read," he explained. "It's taken almost no time to get this far."

"Dear heart," Catherine informed him dryly, "it's five o'clock in the morning."

Vincent's deep blue eyes widened in shock. "Oh, honey...I'm sorry...." He closed the book and levered the recliner upright so he could come to bed.

Catherine hopped up and put a hand on Vincent's shoulder. "It's okay, love, you don't have to stop reading. Finish the book, and I'll get up with Jacob and let you sleep in. You've earned it." She broke into a smile.

"Thank you, dear, I promise it won't be long." Vincent relaxed and opened the book again. When Catherine didn't move, he glanced up through wisps of unruly hair to see her still grinning at him. His unspoken curiosity passed to her across their connection.

"Now I know how you must've looked as a kid," she remarked, then turned and retreated quickly to the bedroom.

Vincent chuckled now, and turned his attention back to the final chapter of the story. Twenty minutes later, Vincent closed the back cover and laid the book on the lamp stand beside his chair. Many stories and books had become cherished favorites of his over the years, but rarely had one touched him quite so deeply as this magical tale.

Harry's character was easy for Vincent to identify with; his loneliness, the amazement at discovering his unique gifts, the joy of acceptance in a separate world, were all too familiar. And he was stunned by Dumbledore's declaration, that a person's choices were more important than their birth in determining the kind of person they would be. But, most keenly, he was captured by the idea of a world where goblins and centaurs could live side by side with humans, where he and Jacob wouldn't need to be shuttered away for their own safety.

Vincent turned off his reading lamp, rose from his chair, and padded quietly toward his bedroom. As he passed the entry to Jacob's room, he drew the curtain back an inch, watching his son's sleeping form on the bed within. If only I could give you that, he wished silently. Letting the fabric fall, he resumed the short trip to his own bed.

Over the next few days, Jacob continued to read the book, and play 'wizard' with the other children during his free time. Vincent was able to explain the basics of the story for Catherine's benefit. She soon became intrigued enough for herself, to begin reading it in the evenings in bed.

Harry, of course, just tugged at her heart, like so many of the abused kids during her tenure with the District Attorney's office. But from the moment she stepped into Harry's train car, Hermione was Catherine's favorite character. She had a confidence that Catherine hadn't possessed at that age, because her mother's death had left her clinging to her dad for support. She could remember spending many afternoons in the company of a nanny or housekeeper. But even as exasperated as Hermione often was with Harry and Ron, it was obvious that they were fast friends. And her bravery in helping recover the Sorcerer's Stone was something that Catherine had only discovered in herself after her

attack, with Vincent's help.

She couldn't help smiling when she caught Laina's daughter, Cathy, playing Hermione to Jacob's Harry. She was beginning to find boys her age exasperating anyway, so she was a natural for the part. In fact, 'Pottermania' seemed to be spreading to all the younger children, thanks to Jacob's enthusiasm.

This, naturally, did not escape Father's notice. After being accosted by a half dozen children in bathrobes, riding brooms through the corridors, he sought out his son and daughter-in-law for an explanation.

"Explain?" Vincent responded in amusement. "It'll be simpler to let you read the book." Catherine handed him one of several copies that had materialized Below in recent weeks.

Over a few days, as Father read through the story, he harked back to many wonderful memories of his own childhood. He recalled listening with rapt attention to his mother reading *The Chronicles of Narnia* to him at bedtime. Dumbledore proved Father's favorite, being the benevolent leader that he was. The wizarding world, separate but better in so many ways, required as much protection as the Tunnels, it seemed. Father felt he'd tried to be as kindly and wise as Albus under the weight of such responsibility. Looking back, he knew that he'd not always succeeded, but neither had he failed in those matters of greatest import.

Vincent noticed that Father seemed to enjoy his 'retirement' more after reading the story. He even had some lengthy discussions about magic with the children, a subject he'd routinely dismissed in years past. And copies of the book began to circulate amongst the other adults, now that Father's stamp of approval was upon it.

Within weeks, evidence of the story's growing impact could be seen and heard all over the community. Familiar terms from the book became part of daily language. Mouse became fascinated by the idea of corridors and stairs that moved and disappeared, for 'security purposes' of course. Children began forming their own Hogwarts houses, and wearing their colors, and competing in games. Jamie even organized a form of Quiddich for them to play.

One incident proved a bit tough to handle, however. Jacob came to Vincent one afternoon, his face still damp from crying. Vincent could feel his distress, and asked what was wrong.

"Daddy, is magic real?" Jacob rejoined by way of an answer.

Vincent was taken aback by the question, and Jacob's sincerity in asking, so he asked another one while gathering his wits. "What kind of magic?"

"Wizard magic."

"Like the kind in Harry Potter?"

"Yeah," Jacob pressed him. "We can do all kinds of magic, can't we, Dad? We can see things in the dark, and hear things and smell things no one else can."

Vincent could see this was not going to be a simple answer.

"Well, Jacob, it is true that you and I have some special abilities that other people don't have. But I'm afraid there's nothing magical about them."

"But...Mommy can hear what we think, and we can hear her, and she's not like us," Jacob protested.

"Jacob, we can sense each other's feelings, not thoughts," Vincent corrected him. "But it's not because of some spell; our connection is because of the love we share for each other."

Jacob hesitated, seeming ready to burst from anger, but afraid to show it. "Ivan says it's because we're freaks," he blurted suddenly. "I wish I could blast him with a spell."

Vincent hugged his son close, his own eyes misting with emotion. "We are not freaks, no matter what Ivan says. We are different, in ways that even I can't explain or understand completely. But it doesn't make us any less worthwhile than anyone else. Unfortunately, it doesn't make us wizards, either."

Jacob sniffed and dried his face with his sleeve before looking up again.

"Okay."

Vincent kissed his son on the forehead, then let him go to leave.

Jacob shuffled away about four steps, then whirled around excitedly. "But what about the time Ivan chased me to the Falls, and I jumped all the way over the stream to get away from him?"

Vincent recalled crossing thirty feet of water to retrieve his son from a narrow ledge on the far side of the chamber, and marveling at how he could have gotten there without getting drenched.

"You said I musta flew," Jacob challenged him hopefully.

"That was just a figure of speech, Jacob," Vincent explained patiently. "You know you're stronger and faster than other kids your age, and when you're frightened, your body can do things that it normally can't. That's all."

They left the room together, and Ivan received a lengthy lecture from Vincent later about name-calling.

On Jacob's eighth birthday, William and Catherine cooked up a Hogwart's feast, complete with pumpkin juice, treacle tarts, and chocolate frogs. But life continued, as it often does, and the mundane considerations of it returned to the forefront of their activities. There were still mentions and evidence of wizarddom Below, but muted and in the background of things.

That was, until *Chamber of Secrets* was published. Catherine arranged through Helpers to purchase a dozen copies as soon as it hit the bookstores, and to have it read in classes for the children, to avoid fights amongst them for the volumes.

In no time, the Tunnels were once more overrun by young wizards and witches, searching for the Slytherin's secret chamber. One afternoon, William entered his kitchen to find Jacob, Cathy, and a few other kids brewing up a noxious 'Polyjuice Potion'.

When Devin made it to town for a visit, he queried his brother on the second day, "Who is this Guilderoy character?"

Catherine nearly choked herself when he asked. Vincent enlightened him, beginning with, "Oh, he's just a fraud, that's all...."

Once Devin had a chance to read about the character for himself, he threatened murderous revenge on all the children sniggering at him behind his back.

"Little monsters," he was heard muttering.

"If the shoe fits, brother dear," Catherine teased mercilessly.

"This is your fault," he rounded on her in mock anger. "Giving books like that to children just turns them into...."

"Into what?" Vincent interrupted him with a growl.

Devin choked back an epithet, amusing Catherine all the more. "Devin, you get more like Father every time you visit," she informed him with wicked glee.

But Devin got over being known as 'Guilderoy', and life Below returned to normal again. But Harry and his world were more a part of the Tunnel world. Catherine was able to keep tabs on the developments with the next book, and the feature film being made.

Jacob turned nine, and then ten, and still the world of Hogwarts remained an interest, though other things grew equally popular with him. The first book was filmed, and Helpers described it for the kids after seeing it in the theaters, and brought them magazines and news clipping about it. When the movie was released on video, Catherine arranged to buy it and show it to the community in the Great Hall.

At Winterfest 2001 they celebrated successfully completing the first year of a new millennium. With Jacob's eleventh birthday coming up in March, Catherine and Vincent put out the plans for an enormous party. *Prisoner of Azkaban* was nearly written, and another film was underway, so everyone was in the spirit of things.

The party was held in the Great Hall, and this time everyone came as characters from the books. Jacob got to be Harry of course, thanks to an official robe, wand, and round glasses. Father came as Dumbledore, and Vincent and Catherine as Hagrid and Madam Pomfrey. Devin even showed up as Lockheart, complete with a blond wig and an ornate lavender outfit.

After three hours of feasting and games, everyone retired to their chambers and homes. Vincent and Catherine left the hall last, returning to their suite near midnight.

"Well," Catherine sighed, "we certainly gave him a great party."

"Yes," Vincent agreed. "I only wish we could give him more." He shook his head in disappointment. "A place like Hogwarts Above, in a world of magic where no one could harm him...."

"I know, dear," Catherine replied, patting his arm comfortingly. "I do too. But he's safe here, and we have our own sort of magic, you know." She stopped in the corridor just outside their front room, turning to face him. "Dumbledore said it's the oldest and strongest magic of all."

Vincent smiled and lowered his face to hers. "Love," he whispered, then kissed her deeply.

After a moment, though, they were startled by a rustling noise as something rushed from the chamber entrance over their heads. Turning quickly, senses alert for danger, Vincent saw a pale flying creature disappear around a corner, and the sound of beating wings.

"What was that? A bat?" Catherine exclaimed in alarm.

"No." Vincent replied slowly, his mind trying to comprehend what he'd seen. "It was definitely not a bat." Turning back, he led Catherine into the sitting room to see what might have happened.

Scanning the room, he spotted something lying on his writing desk. As he approached, he could see an envelope made of parchment paper, sealed with wax, upon which was stamped an ornately rendered

letter - the letter "H".

Vincent lifted the envelope, barely daring to breathe. Turning it over slowly, he noted the lack of a return address or stamp. The address on the front was written in glittering green ink. He read it to Catherine in a faintly trembling voice.

*"To Jacob Chandler-Wells
The Tunnel Community
Beneath Central Park
New York, New York, USA."*