

Series 1 - Beginnings

Two tales related to Vincent's origin ...

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Old Beginnings

*Love took up the glass of Time, and turn'd it in his glowing hands;
Every moment, lightly shaken, ran itself in golden sands.*

- Alfred Lord Tennyson

It was evening. Catherine was Above and Father had managed to convince Vincent to play a game of chess with him. Vincent was regarding the board with his usual concentration. It was so intense that Jacob marveled that the chess pieces didn't either ignite or dissolve into sawdust. Vincent would give him no quarter. Jacob could already see that the inevitable was happening and his pupil was ready to trounce his instructor, yet again. He sighed.

In her apartment, tired after a day of cleaning, sorting and packing, Catherine was stretched out on her bed, propped up with pillows, reading Alfred Lord Tennyson. She had found an ancient volume of his complete works in Mr Smyth's book store. *Locksley Hall* had caught her attention having recently been mentioned in the newspaper. Its apparent prescience regarding the modern world was fascinating, despite the fact that the Victorian poet laureate had died before the last century began.

She was now a little over a month pregnant and beginning to come to terms with what that meant – what a child would mean to her love for Vincent, or his for her. Oddly, the poem seemed to even have an opinion about that.

*“Baby lips will laugh me down: my latest rival brings thee rest,
Baby fingers, waxen touches, press me from the mother's breast.
O, the child too clothes the father with a dearness not his due,
Half is thine and half is his: it will be worthy of the two”*

That got her thinking. Whatever a child meant, she would never, never allow Vincent to believe that their relationship would somehow be impaired by this new life she was nurturing. He would always be her soul's and heart's ease. Of course, he would probably have his misgivings. She must make a special effort to see that they did not take root.

She could sense Vincent's concentration through the bond, knew that he was probably playing chess with Father.

Catherine resolutely focused on her reading.

*“Thou shalt hear the ‘Never, never’ whisper'd by the phantom years,
And a song from out the distance in the ringing of thine ears”*

That might almost be referring to their bond.

Father cleared his throat, remembering belatedly that he had something to tell his son.

“Vincent, there's something that I recalled the other day, when you described your life here – before Catherine came into it – as a Fabergé egg. It reminded me of something I have kept all these years.

“I have never told you much about the period when we found you. It was a painful time for us, a difficult time for John and Anna – this you know. Your introduction to our world was a challenge, one we did not completely accept or understand for some time. But when we did, you changed us all by your presence. You know that too. But there is more.

“When Anna found you, and brought you to me, I questioned her closely. She brought you to me first – despite what John told you. John was not himself and she was afraid of what he would do if he saw you. You were outside her experience – anyone’s experience.

“You were wrapped in many layers of old cloth, Vincent, so many that your true size was not evident until we unwrapped you. Whoever had taken such care must have wanted you to have a chance of survival on that very cold January night. You were so tiny that I feared you were premature. But you were well-formed despite your ... um ... obvious differences. Your tiny hands had perfect – and soft – nails and your body was covered with fine golden down. Your lungs were strong and your heartbeat robust. You could also see well – it was obvious that you were aware of your surroundings. Despite these differences, the state of your umbilical cord indicated that you were only hours old. That’s why I am so sure of your birth date.”

Vincent had looked up and was watching Jacob’s face, curious now.

“But I was very sick and cried for days. At least that’s the legend,” he remarked quietly.

“Oh yes, Vincent, you cried – mewled really – and for a long time I could not understand it. You were not really sick, just hungry, but we could not get you to suckle or take formula - and you were getting weaker by the day. One of our women had recently given birth and she tried over and over again to urge you to take a nipple. You were stubborn. Then, somehow, I realized that you needed something else entirely. It wasn’t food you wanted, it was the woman who had given you birth. You were pining to death for love of her.

“There was nothing I could do about that, Vincent. I felt helpless. We had no way of knowing who your mother was – or where she was – or even if she was still alive. But we did have the only thing she gave you – the rags she wrapped you in. I had put them aside to examine later, but had forgotten them in my concern for you. I took them out and looked at them more closely, beginning with the outermost. They were unremarkable, just much-washed, well-worn household fabrics that could have been almost anything in their prime. However, when I examined the one which had been closest to your skin, I realized it was not like the others. It was fabric too, but clean and soft, beautifully made and tightly-woven. It was so close to the colour of the other rags, that I had missed its differences in my hurry.

“On impulse I picked you up, removed the infant’s clothing we had put on you, and wrapped you in that blanket. Immediately, you stopped crying and went to sleep, exhausted. I realized the blanket had something of your mother in it – that she had touched it and held you in it. It must have carried her scent, a sense of her warmth and love.

“When you woke up, you began to suckle. We all felt such relief that our community celebrated. We named you Vincent then, after the hospital – but its meaning, “conqueror”, seemed singularly appropriate too – even more so as the years went by. You conquered our hearts, and over the years have met all the challenges your unusual attributes made necessary.”

Jacob paused and tried to get his thoughts back on track. He was wool-gathering again.

“The point I’m making, Vincent, is that although we know nothing about your mother – or your father – there is no doubt that you were loved. We cannot know why you were abandoned, but I am sure it was not by choice.

“You only needed the blanket for a short while, as if it gave you the will to live. Anyway, you outgrew it quickly. Your rate of growth was almost twice that of any baby I had seen. The blanket was never washed because I did not want to risk that you might want it again. Also, one day, I thought, you would want to see it.”

Vincent by now was looking at Father, his remarkable blue gaze so intent that Father found it almost painful.

“Father,” Vincent began, and found himself momentarily at a loss for words. “Father, why did you not tell me of this before?”

“Vincent, to be honest, I had forgotten. I am an old man. My memory is not what it was – and I admit it tends to be a bit selective. I have not thought about the blanket for decades. You were so precious to me, to this community, and such a great joy. What could it have changed? I didn’t want you upset, so I pushed it from my mind and forgot about it. A bad habit of mine,” he mumbled, looking down at the chessboard.

Vincent stared at Father, trying to hide his annoyance. Why did Father always worry so much about him getting upset? Was he so emotionally unstable that any little thing would set him off? He knew he was not – quite the contrary. He could get angry, certainly, but only with great deliberation. His true anger manifested itself only in the throes of his berserker rage, saving those he loved from the threat of death.

“Where is this blanket, Father?”

Reading the self-indulgent couplets of the Lord of Locksley, Catherine sensed Vincent’s sudden shift in concentration and looked up from the book. His emotions were running close to the surface and she could feel amazement, disbelief, annoyance – and something else. She kept herself calm, not wanting to intrude, but opened her side of their bond completely.

Avoiding Vincent’s accusing eyes, Father got up and hobbled over to a wardrobe in the back of his cluttered library and bent down to open a drawer. He extracted a plastic bag, walked back and put it on the table, beside the chessboard, then sat down again, waiting silently.

Vincent regarded the bag, almost afraid to touch it, afraid of what its contents might tell him – afraid it would tell him nothing. As if moving through thick molasses, he lifted the bag, his hand trembling slightly. It was fairly heavy. A small pale blanket was neatly folded inside, its colour hard to determine. It was, as Father had said, a very densely-woven piece of fabric, almost like felt. Carefully, he untied the ribbon which closed the bag, holding the neck. His sense of smell was very acute, so he closed his eyes and gently eased the bag open, putting his nose inside it as he did so. And was transported into the past.

He could smell a woman who had recently given birth. He knew that smell from assisting Father. But there was more. This woman had been frightened, but not of the child she held. Something else. Her fear lived in the blanket – and more. She had loved the tiny bundle she held. Vincent could smell that too because her scent was all over it. There was a hint of dried lavender. He had no doubt that this was his mother he sensed. Something in him responded and he sighed.

Father watched as Vincent, eyes closed, soaked up the sensations from the blanket, then heard the soft sigh. His son's face was absorbed, tense.

Vincent put his hand into the bag and felt the blanket. It was soft but firm. It seemed to have a peculiar texture, one that seemed to change as he rubbed his hand over it. He looked at it closely. When he finally tightened the neck on the bag and re-tied it, he had a very thoughtful expression on his face.

Father's brows gathered in puzzlement but Vincent said nothing. His face had gone still. Jacob's curiosity finally got the better of him. "Vincent, what did you learn from the blanket?"

"Much that I need to think about, Father. But you are right. I was not abandoned by choice. My mother loved me – but she was afraid. The blanket too is unusual in its own way. I'd like to keep it for awhile, if I may."

"Vincent, keep it forever, if you wish. It is yours by right. I doubt I could learn anything further from it. It is speaking to you."

Tennyson lay forgotten on Catherine's lap. She was looking across her terrace at the city lights and tears were flowing freely. She could feel Vincent's sadness, and she sensed it was something that had been buried deeply. That could only mean one thing and she wondered at it, as she forced herself to be calm.

Father must have revealed something to Vincent. It was nothing that threatened their relationship, she knew without a doubt, but it was affecting the man she loved. Vincent was not trying to dampen his emotions, a sure sign that he was deeply affected. He had momentarily forgotten her, for which she was grateful. He must be quite distracted.

She was just wondering if she should go Below and comfort him, when his customary calm returned, but now with a new sense of purpose. She sensed he was deep in thought, but now very curious – and puzzled – but also strangely at peace.

Vincent stared at the chess game, seeing nothing and thinking deeply. Father cleared his throat, and Vincent looked up at him, brought suddenly back to reality. He came to a decision.

“I don’t think I can continue our game, Father. Shall I concede it to you?”

Father was tempted, but had to be honest. “No, Vincent, we’ll just leave it here for another time. Sleep well.”

Vincent left Father’s chamber and returned to his own. Then the older man sighed and regarded the chessboard, brows knitted in concentration. With a little more time to think, he might yet salvage this game.

Catherine, aware that Vincent was preparing for bed, went back to her book.

Not in vain the distance beacons (did he mean “beckons”, she wondered). *Forward, forward let us range,*
Let the great worlds spin forever down the ringing grooves of change

A suitable ending for tonight, she thought. She closed the book and slipped under the covers. She could sense that Vincent, despite his earlier upset, was tired as well. She sent her love down the bond and felt his return, like an embrace. She sighed happily.

The next morning Catherine returned Below in time for breakfast. She would not willingly miss one of William’s meals. Afterwards, leaving Vincent to continue some work of his own, she went back to her apartment to finish up, filling boxes with articles to be donated to the local charity thrift. Another had items of use to those Below. She filled a suitcase with some special outfits and evening clothes, a couple of pairs of shoes to match, a purse or two. It was liberating, getting rid of so much. She had even given several dresses to Jenny, who would put them to good use.

This was her last connection to her old life. She had not yet decided what to do with the apartment, but with the brownstone almost ready for occupancy, she must soon do so. At least the hard work was finished. A few pieces of furniture would be moved Below or to the brownstone, soon.

By the time she caught her breath, it was nearing dinner time and she realized she had missed lunch. Not a good practice, she berated herself – especially now.

She returned Below, carrying the suitcase and found Vincent waiting at the Threshold. Seeing him was always like the first time. She hugged him close, felt his arms surround her, his love enclose her.

They walked slowly back to their chamber and deposited the suitcase. Then she invited him to renew their love in a more physical way. Gods, she needed him like water or air! He satisfied her so completely that food became secondary to her brain. But her stomach did not make such distinctions and began to rumble loudly.

Vincent laughed at her, pulled her to him and whispered that she needed more substantial sustenance for the sake of both herself and their child. She loved his naked embrace. She was incapable of rational thought while in his arms. He sensed this and let her go, reluctantly.

“Catherine, we must go for dinner. The first signal has already sounded.”

They did a leisurely cleanup in the bath chamber, were still there when the second signal sounded over the pipes. They dried and dressed as quickly as they could, making good use of the hot drying room Kanin had created for them when she moved Below.

They were a little late, but managed to get a big bowl of William’s superb and savoury pork stew, lots of bread - and seats near Father. He smiled at them both and inquired after her health. She assured him she was very well indeed. He winked at her.

After a small mug of beer – Father had assured her it would do no harm - and a generous portion of apple pie, Catherine was feeling more than a little relaxed. Vincent, she noticed, was very quiet now.

As people started drifting away to their Chambers, Vincent was obviously keen to leave as well. Catherine waved at a few of her friends as they left, arm in arm. Back in their chamber, she immediately flopped onto the big bed, sighing in contentment. Reaching along the bond, she caught an unusual emotion which seemed strangely familiar. She cast her mind back and immediately associated it with her reading of Tennyson the night before. Then she realized it was not the book itself, but what she had sensed in Vincent.

She looked over at him. He was sitting at his table in profile, staring at something in front of him. Curious, she got up to see what so absorbed him. When she reached him, she was still a little puzzled.

“What is it Vincent?” she asked, although she had a suspicion when she saw the piece of fabric in its plastic bag. She had been looking at similar things herself, lately.

She kneaded his shoulders, which seemed a bit tense. Was it from emotion or was he now feeling the affects of the day’s hard work, she wondered.

Vincent looked up, uncertain how to explain this new dilemma in his life.

“Father gave this to me last night, Catherine. I was wrapped in this blanket when I was found as a baby.”
“Has it revealed anything?”

“It has answered some questions and raised more,” Vincent said slowly. “It is unusual. This blanket is not a rag at all, but very well-made – and an enigma.”

“Well, in my experience, enigmas either reveal their own answers, or their question is forgotten,” Catherine remarked.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and leaned over to kiss him. She was tired, although the evening was still young. They both needed a good night’s sleep, she thought. Her brain was already halfway there. She stroked his hair and found a delectable ear.

“I think I’ll get ready for bed,” she whispered into it. “I’m almost dead on my feet.”

She quickly undressed, put on a long housecoat, then went into the bathroom to clean up. She was shuffling by the time she crawled into bed, tossing the housecoat over a nearby bolster and crawling far enough over to give its owner plenty of room. This action was still not quite automatic, but she loved the fact that she had to do it. She sighed happily and was quickly asleep.

Vincent, who had been watching Catherine prepare for bed, was so tired that he was almost unable to move. His yawns were becoming more frequent. Enough, he decided. The blanket was a curiosity only. He would not let it worry him.

He undressed, then got into bed carefully, not wanting to wake Catherine, but easing himself close enough to her so he could warm her if she felt the cold. They had found that they were actually warmer without nightclothes. The convenience went without saying.

For once, he thought in amazement, her closeness did not arouse him. He felt immense peace. He did feel the need to hold her close, this soon-to-be mother of their child. He draped his arm over her and she snuggled into his chest. Whatever the relic of his past meant, Vincent knew that their love was inviolable. He would probably never know the truth of his birth, but it no longer mattered. He had learned what he needed to know - that his mother, at least, had loved him. Something in his chest unknotted a little, something he had not even been aware existed. He felt such a sense of happiness that he sighed, and heard Catherine do the same.

In that position they slept the night away, dreamless and contented.

END

All in the Family

*I am the family face;
Flesh perishes, I live on
Projecting trait and trace
Through time to anon,
And leaping from place to place
Over oblivion*

- Thomas Hardy

Chapter 1

Irena stood in the centre of her bed-sitting room holding the two precious infants. She had to leave very soon. She knew Virgil was waiting for her, but he had not known she was pregnant. He was safe, but she didn't know anything about his circumstances and she had not walked the streets at night for a very long time. Virgil could not come for her without putting them both in danger. Reaching him would be difficult and perhaps dangerous with one baby, much less two. She now had a difficult decision to make.

She looked around the studio flat which had been her home for 20 years. It wasn't much, but she had kept it clean and herself fed.

The memories flooded her and she allowed herself a little time to reminisce. She and her mother had moved into this place when Irena was 14. It was intended to be the manager's flat, with windows which gave a good view of the street and the hallway. It had a back door to a service corridor and an outside door – and therefore perfect for a 'lady of the night'.

Just before she turned 16, Irena's mother had gone out one evening to the "stroll" and not returned. Irena had woken with a start and knew that her mother was dead. She had tried to find out what had happened, but a missing whore, it seemed, was no one's concern.

Her mother had taught her to read and write – and the ways of lovemaking. She enjoyed her business, she said, and that, she told Irena, was what set her apart from the other whores on the beat. Her customers knew and treated her better as a result.

Irena had lied about her age and taken over her mother's 'inside' trade without regrets. It was fortunate that her first such client had been Matthew Gilchrist, an older man who lived on the first floor of their apartment building. He was gentle and unsophisticated. He had not realized she was a virgin. Years later, when he sent Virgil to her, she had another reason to thank him.

Her 'men' had been as generous as they could. They gave her food, clothing and household necessities, occasionally money, sometimes food. Her landlord took his rent in her bed. He was a rank, overweight man, but he was kind, sometimes giving her money too. He lived in the top floor suite. She hoarded her money with what her mother had hidden in a wooden box which resembled a book – a gift from one of her customers. Among the treasures was a small chiffon bag of dried lavender. It was a scent she always associated with her mother, who had loved the smell and kept tiny bags of it in all the drawers that held their few precious linens.

Irena had spent none of it because she had not needed to. When she needed something, one of her men would find it for her. She had learned from her mother how to make soups and stews out of food to hand and she always had a big pot on the tiny stove in the kitchen nook. She dished it out to some of her hungry men and others helped her keep it supplied.

Among the old, street men she was now almost a legend – and not yet 35 years old. Well, she had welcomed them, the men the real hookers would not even look at. To her, they were the boyfriends she had never had. They used her bathroom to clean up and loved her gently and with real affection, not like younger men who sought such release. She had known those others in the early days when she was younger and prettier, and unscarred. The big welt left on her face, souvenir of her one bad judgment, did not bother her regulars. In the dark, all cats were black, one told her.

Virgil, though, was different. He had come to her one night when she was in her late 20s, wrapped in a long cloak. His voice had captivated her from the first. It was deep and silky and seemed to stroke her soul. He told her Matthew had recommended her. Matthew had become a regular, treating her like spun glass and reciting poetry to her when they relaxed afterwards. Virgil was a special one, an educated one – and only a few years older than herself. He had told her his own story after a while, that Matthew had rescued him as a baby from the man who had made him what he was – a freak.

That was the term Virgil used – freak. It was not how Irena saw him. True, his lion-like face had surprised her at first, but she had never been afraid of him. His body was something else again, when, after several months of companionship and a growing desire on her part, he had allowed her to see it. He was covered in soft hair. On his torso and back – and that special place - it was like fur, and he loved to be touched. She came to see him as beautiful – inside and out – and he made her feel the same way. He stroked her face, but her scar was never

mentioned. She realized he didn't care - that he loved her for all that she was, not what she wasn't.

He was graceful, gentle, quiet, and their lovemaking was unique in her experience. He had been a virgin, but seemed to know what she liked. It took her some time to realize why that was – and why his joy seemed to melt into her bones, make her blood hum.

She had asked him one night if he could read her mind and he had hung his head. She realized he had been afraid to broach the topic. He had spoken almost in a whisper.

“Irena, you are my first and only lover. An empathic bond is growing between us. You can feel my emotions, as I can feel yours – especially when we make love. But I cannot read your mind.”

Irena had told him she loved him, that such things did not matter to her at all. After that, something else had been released in Virgil, for his chest began to vibrate after they had made love. Again, she had not caught on immediately, but when she did, it made her love him all the more. He purred! Soon that purr made his whole body hum and she loved to hug him to her so she could feel it to her bones, like a gentle massage.

Virgil was as educated as Matthew could make him. He had a spirit that seemed to transcend the restricted life he was forced to lead, the world he could see only at night. He read to her, told her of amazing things, wonderful places.

He loved beautiful things and often brought her little gifts he found on his night time foraging expeditions. One evening, he gave her an enameled locket, probably lost because the chain broke. She kept a small lock of his hair inside the tiny glassed compartment and wore it on a thin silver chain from her mother's meagre jewelry collection.

One night, Irena showed him a large, flawless cat's eye marble someone had brought her. He had been fascinated. Irena realized, belatedly, that he had never held one – and why that was. It had not occurred to her that he would never have played with other children. She had given him the glass ball, amazed that such a simple thing could give him joy. He had made a silk pouch to keep it in and wore it around his neck, never taking it off, even to make love.

Irena had known she was pregnant the last night she saw Virgil, but had sensed his fear. He had come to say goodbye. Matthew had grown old and frail and died quietly the hour before. Virgil had to leave. There was a chance that his guardian's death would raise questions, so he had to find a safe hiding place. When he had found it, he would let her know so she could join him. He had a destination in mind, one that Matthew had hinted at, but he would have to be careful. Other outcasts might already be there.

So they had made love one last time to seal his promise and Irena had waited. She knew it was Virgil's child she carried. He was the only one who didn't use condoms. She had never broached the subject and he never asked if she took precautions. She was happy to make love without a layer of latex between them, and if that resulted in a child, fine with her. She had been afraid to broach the topic. Just the same, they had been making love for many years without result. Irena had concluded his uniqueness made him sterile.

She knew Virgil was sensitive about his appearance. Few even knew of his existence. She hadn't, before he came to her. She knew he wandered the streets at night heavily-cloaked. That anyone might regard him as an animal, part lion or half-human, disgusted her. Protecting him became second nature to her.

He had never tried to change her profession, seemed immune to jealousy, understood the expediency. Such compromises had been part of his life since the beginning, she guessed. And he knew her true love was only for himself.

Irena had made another decision after Virgil left, one which now haunted her. She had joined an obscure religious sect which did not believe in hospitals or doctors. They had their own ways and midwives, they told her, and gave her lessons in their beliefs. She bore this nonsense for the sake of her child. She would not be able to go into a hospital, so home delivery was the only option. Knowing so little about childbirth it, she didn't want to take chances with Virgil's child.

Over the ensuing months, while she waited, she told her men that she wanted food, good nourishing food and soft blankets. One worked in a restaurant and had brought her as much as he could. Her increasing size was undoubtedly attributed to this increased diet and Irena did not reveal otherwise. Matthew had once brought her a blanket he had called 'experimental'. It was thick and warm, very well made. She had made a pair of slippers out of it and the rest she cut into two good-sized baby blankets.

She had hoarded the money her men were able to give her and stayed home, reading the books Virgil had given her, over and over. She could sense him, knew he was tired but full of hope, without understanding how she knew that. She sent him her love, hoping that he felt it in return.

They had been kind to her, those religious people, but the birth had shocked them. Her labour had started at least a month early and been easier than she had feared, given her age. To everyone's surprise, including her own, she had given birth to twins, tiny perfect versions of Virgil.

They had bathed the babies and herself and given her some beef tea, but she had seen the look which passed between the midwife and their priest. It had chilled her. They had not been able to prevent themselves from mumbling some kind of incantation against evil. She had felt her blood freeze at that. Then they had left her, but she knew they would be back and that she and her newborns were at risk. She had heard stories about this sect from one of her men. They would not suffer a witch – or her offspring – to live.

The birth had been easy and she was strong. Sleep and rest would have to wait. She packed the secret box of money into her backpack, with all her meagre mementos and a few clothes. She took a last look around the room. At least she would not be going to Virgil empty-handed.

Irena could wait no longer. She carefully wrapped both babies in pieces of the thick blanket Matthew had given her. She hoped it would keep her children warm. Then she wrapped one child in as many old household cloths as she could find. She had a plan.

She had seen the people who picked through the leavings near St Vincent's hospital. They were not tramps, for their voices were clear and educated, as Matthew's had been. That gave her hope. One child would be carried in a sling under her heavy winter coat.

Virgil was now living far away, on the other side of New York, but had sent her a verbal message just before the birth. The man, who said he was a friend, had assured her Virgil was safe and had a home for them.

Irena left quietly, one baby in her arms, the other asleep and hidden. She was tired, but determined. It was a bitterly cold January night and she was afraid the scavengers might not be out. Then what would she do? But as she rounded the corner of the alley near the hospital, she saw them. They were heading her way, meticulously searching all the rubbish. She kept to the shadows.

Irena gave the baby a long kiss and a wish for life and happiness, then she carefully placed him in a cardboard box and moved the box so that it caught the light. Lastly, she wrapped the tiny face to keep off the cold. There was nothing more she could do. She left, her heart breaking, her tears freezing on her cheeks.

Her route to the subway took her back near her old home and a noise made her look up from her sorrow. Three or four men were grouped on the sidewalk in front of the apartment. She didn't need to know who they were. She saw the glint of knives heard their mumbled oaths. Quickly, she turned down a side street and made her way swiftly to the nearest subway, shuffling as quickly as she could down the stairs. She couldn't risk being seen by anyone she knew.

There were few people on the train and she sat near two massive old black women, cleaning ladies probably. They smelled of disinfectant. Their comforting warmth made her remember her mother. Irena had always retreated to the tiny den when her mother had clients, but she could not help hearing what went on in the next room. It had often made her pleasure herself, but she had been ashamed. One evening, after her guest had gone, her mother had come in to find her in tears. She had taken Irena's smaller hands in her own and looked her in the eye. Her mother's face had softened. She had know what troubled her daughter.

"Irena, never be ashamed of what your body wants. Our bodies, men and women both, were designed for lovemaking – why else do we enjoy it so? We get old quickly enough, Irena. Do not deny yourself life's pleasures. Embrace them."

She had chuckled at the pun, but had hugged Irena. After that, the lessons had begun.

Irena became aware of her surroundings again when the woman next to her got up to leave the train. She looked around, hugged her arms to her, feeling the baby on her chest wriggle a little. At least he was asleep. Miraculously, there was no sign of the punks who often plagued the trains late at night. She began to breathe easier, her heart racing in expectation of seeing Virgil again, at last.

Irena took the subway to its last stop and then began to walk. The long ride had restored some of her energy. It was so quiet, she could hear the soft breathing of the baby – then she sensed Virgil waiting for her. He was not far away now and getting closer. She quickened her step through the quiet streets, her footsteps silent in her sneakers. That was something she had learned from Virgil. He moved like a cat.

Reaching an intersection, she looked across and saw a large caped form. She almost ran to it and was enveloped in a careful hug, as if he was afraid she was an illusion. His love poured into her and she was left breathless. She felt the child move under her coat and Virgil pulled back, startled.

“It’s all right,” she whispered. “Our son is restless.”

It was not the way she would have chosen to introduce Virgil to his child, but his reaction was all she could have wished. Virgil looked at her, his mouth open and his face showing such surprise and joy that she smiled. That look quickly changed to concern and he silently took her hand and led her down the street, then made a sudden right turn into an alley. At the end, a solid metal door was set into a wall. Virgil pushed a brick and it opened inward, just enough to let them in. In the dark inside, he scabbled on the wall and the door closed. She heard a lock snick shut.

They were in complete darkness, then Virgil lit a candle – a long, three-coloured one in a old-fashioned candle holder with a brass guard. It seemed to shed a happy light, she thought, as Virgil took her hand and led her inwards, down many tunnels and passageways – then finally behind a large rock wall and down a set of narrow steps.

Irena gasped. The chamber was high and beautifully-carved from the ruddy native rock. Virgil had paneled the flatter walls with varied pieces of fitted wood, beautifully finished and reflecting the light of many candles. The burners on a small electric stove were burning cherry red. She learned later that Virgil had found a way to pirate enough electricity from the world above for this one essential appliance.

He seemed to have thought of everything. There was a lovely, big four-poster bed, dressers, even a kitchen nook. Another room led off the main chamber, and she could see a couple of chairs and a bookcase. She supposed there was a bathroom behind a curtain, although she had no idea how that convenience could be possible in this place.

She looked up at Virgil, her eyes blurred with tears. She undid her coat then, for it was warm, and Virgil took it from her, hanging it on a coat tree with his cloak. Then he gently helped her untie the baby’s carrier. He looked at the child and his eyes widened. He looked at her, his canines exposed in a grin. She had seldom seen him smile like that. Then he looked guilty. He took her hand and led her across the room to the bed, sat her on it beside him. He put the sleeping child on the bed behind them.

“Irena.” His voice was just as silky as she remembered, but thick with emotion. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t know until after you left,” she said, making the little white lie official. “Then I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t know where you were, so I made arrangements to have help with the birth. He’s so beautiful, Virgil. What shall we call him?”

She wanted to distract him from any discussion about the birth. It no longer mattered.

Virgil got pensive, just for a moment.

“I’d like to call him “Vian” – full of life. Our son is a miracle, Irena. I had not thought it possible for me to father children. Do you like the name?”

In answer, Irena reached over and kissed him. Their arms came around each other and they sat for a long time wrapped in their love. Irena felt wonderful, her energy reinforced by Virgil’s. Now they could start a new life.

Virgil decided the family should adopt his guardian’s last name, Gilchrist, although they could not register the birth.

She would have to harbour the guilt and loss deep inside her. Virgil must not know. Someday, she hoped they would be able to find and meet their other son. She knew, somehow, that he lived, just as she could feel the baby in this room. That little kernel of knowledge comforted her.

She slept gratefully in Virgil’s arms that night, his warmth surrounding her like a blanket.

Chapter 2

Over the following months, Irena and Virgil fell into a comfortable routine taking care of little Vian. Irene breast-fed him and he was voracious. He grew quickly and seemed very aware of his surroundings, gazing at her intently. She realized her empathic bond with her son was growing as he did, although it was not as strong as that with Virgil. His father spent hours watching him, holding him and reading him stories. She was sure the bond with his father was strong.

Irena went Above when they needed food and supplies, but needed to spend very little of her money. Virgil had made arrangements for this as well. The man who had delivered the message, Harry, was an old friend of Matthew's, one from his early years. Harry told them he was a helper for a community of refugees living in tunnels far from their own. He helped them find food and gave them clothing and other necessities, taken from the bundles he normally left for the others. He had a pawn shop and second-hand store, but his real love was books. He and Virgil spent hours in the chamber's den talking about them, comparing their favourites and reading in silent communion. Irena sat with little Vian on her lap, basking in the peace of their little family. She was not an educated woman, but she learned a great deal by listening to the two men. Virgil's love of literature and history had always encouraged her to read the few books he had, but now it became a passion, although she seldom joined in the discussions. She read when she had time and discovered new worlds between the covers of the rough fabric volumes Harry brought them.

The real world concerned her more. One day, Irena asked Harry about the other tunnel community. It would be nice to meet them and be less isolated, she thought. She was sure they were good people if Harry was helping them. Little Vian would need playmates soon.

Harry's face clouded a little as he spoke. They *were* good people, he said, but there was something of a power struggle going on. It was a battle between humanity and power. One man wanted to create a commune of caring individuals, the other wanted to dominate them for his own purposes. The two leaders had even fought over a newborn child, he'd heard. He thought the matter would resolve itself soon, but until it did, he recommended caution. If the power-mad man won, he suspected the community would be unpleasant to live in.

So Irena and Virgil waited, made love with undying passion and read to their son. Virgil's voice calmed him like no other. It made Irena wonder about his origin. He had not told her very much. Someday, it might be important to their son – and his twin - to know more. She put a proposal to him one evening, after Vian was asleep.

"Virgil, I've never asked about your birth and childhood, and it doesn't matter to me, but I think our son should know. Why don't you write it all down - everything you can remember about your life before you met me? I won't read it unless you want me to."

Virgil gathered Irena in his arms and kissed her. His voice was low and soft.

"Irena, you are a woman of sound practicality. You're absolutely right - I should make a record. I'll get Harry to bring me some journals and some good pens. My love, you are welcome to read anything I write – although the story is not a pleasant one."

So it was that Irena watched Virgil write the story of his life. She had not realized until then that he was left-handed. He seemed to use both when doing anything around their home. His hands, heavily-furred and sharp-nailed, were capable of such gentleness, such finesse in everything he did. Then she saw that he had a beautiful writing hand as well. He always used fountain pens and the sound of that moving across the pages in the evening was a comfort to her. At least their sons would know their father, not like her or Virgil himself. She declined to read the journals. They could tell her nothing she wanted to know. His love was enough for her.

She did do one other thing, though, which she felt necessary. Virgil had always avoided mirrors, but now they had a son who resembled him. That son must be made to understand that he was different, special even. When she found a full-length mirror in Harry's shop one day and brought it home, she felt Virgil's discomfort. They had never discussed his appearance – or Vian's.

There was only one answer to that. She gathered up Vian and then pulled Virgil over to the mirror, and made him look in it, at all of them. Seen together like this, the differences were obvious, but so was the love. Virgil held her and Vian to him, his affection clear, just as she could feel it in her heart.

"You see Virgil? We are a family. One day our son will ask questions about what he sees in picture books or reads

in stories. We cannot, and should not, protect him from this. He will want to know why we live here and why his life is different. It won't be easy, but we have to give him pride in what he is, not disappointment for what he is not. You are the best role model, my love."

Virgil gave her a wry grin that let his canines peek out.

"You are absolutely right, once again, Irena. Our son is a miracle. He must be made to understand what that means – the dangers and the wonders both. I will begin immediately."

He was as good as his word. When Vian began to walk, Virgil made him stand before the mirror and look at himself. When he became older and asked incessant questions, Virgil told him why the world above should not see him and what might happen to him if they did. He was firm, but also made it clear that Vian was special in ways no one but himself was – and he told his son why.

Irena watched all this with pride and could not help wondering how her other son was faring. She allowed herself to think about him only rarely. Her empathic connection with Virgil was very strong now and she didn't want him to worry. She didn't know how she could explain. But as their son grew, she made a point of periodically asking Harry about developments in the far tunnels. Moreover, although she said nothing to Virgil, she suspected Vian's twin was living with the other tunnel community. She wished her two children could meet. She knew somehow, through that slight empathic connection, that her other son was happy and well. That gave her hope.

Harry told them that the scholar had won out and the other man had exiled himself far in the deeps below. He was a dangerous man, though, and if he knew about Virgil and his son, would do all in his power to kidnap them.

Virgil laughed at this. No one could take him against his will, he scoffed. Just let them try. But Harry said that some of the man's followers were very large indeed, and not above violence.

Even with this positive change in the distant community, Irena concluded that the time was not right to approach the others, and Virgil agreed. Their safety lay in their silence. Virgil was not inclined to go abroad much any more. He always told Irena he was a happy family man. Irena nevertheless worried about their son, who would never be able to wander above in daylight. How was he to meet other children?

Not long after that, Irena became pregnant again. She was no less amazed than Virgil. She was now almost 40 and had not expected to be blessed again – had been afraid of what might result if she did, although she said nothing to Virgil. His happiness and love for her was something she had not wanted to dampen with her fears.

This child also arrived early, and Virgil delivered it. He had read as many medical manuals as he could in the intervening months and the arrival of the little girl was almost anti-climactic. She resembled Irena, with no trace of her father's genes, other than her hair, which was a rich gold like his. Her eyes were brown like Irena's. Vian's eyes were azure like his father's and he too had inherited the golden hair. They called the new arrival Ilona. Now Vian would have a playmate, and one not too much younger. Irena was happy.

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The years passed and the little family thrived. They had explored their section of the tunnels and found a hidden exit into Central Park near the Bronx Zoo. They had become night owls of necessity. It didn't bother any of them. The children had been made aware of the hazards of daytime and their bond reinforced it. Virgil never flagged at finding them amusements. He found wonders in everything and their children adored him. They were encouraged in turn to explore books and their world and did so avidly. Virgil gave them a classical education and never refused them any knowledge.

Their life was anything but dull. There was still much to learn of life underground. They had found crystal caves, even salt caverns and beautiful galleries of stalactites and stalagmites. The children learned to swim in warm bathing pools heated by natural steam vents. Virgil loved to swim and taught Irena as well. They saw the sun in places where, miraculously, it penetrated the rock and shone on pools, like a large mirror, or reflected off stone walls. These became their favourite places. They were always quiet and took great care not to get close to the other community. But there were other, less welcome, mysteries.

While Vian was still a baby, they had felt the earth vibrate under them for a time. They had dashed from their chamber and stood in the tunnel, fearing that the roof might crash down upon them, uncertain what to do. But the event was quickly over. Curious, they had put Vian into a sling on Virgil's chest, taken a lantern and some food, and sought out the cause.

Virgil was sure it was some kind of slippage, perhaps the collapse of a section of tunnel eroded by water, but they had to know if their area's safety had been compromised. They had traveled for some time, far into the deep sections and eventually reached a massive blockage in a rough-hewn tunnel under the river. Fine dust hung in the air, glittering in the light of the lantern. Virgil had speculated that this might once have been intended to connect to their sector – or perhaps to the salt caverns. It did not look as if anyone was going to risk trying to open that route again. Irena hoped no one had been hurt. In the ensuing months they explored carefully, but never found any other connecting passages. They breathed a sigh of relief, but remained cautious.

Virgil schooled the children and Irena taught them to sew and cook. Her soups and stews were still the main staple of their diet. A pot was always on the stove. Virgil called it her cornucopia, since it was never empty. She also learned to make bread, scones and cookies in the little oven. They ate well, if not luxuriously. Irena's mother had always stressed the importance of a good diet. Irena would not compromise on food.

Soon the two children were pre-teens and beginning to get restless. Irena talked to Harry again about the others. It seemed that the dangerous man was still living far Below, but the other community was thriving. There had been many births and they protected their area with considerable vigilance.

Irena quietly decided that she wanted to meet these people, if only to know whether they might become friends. She did not want her children so isolated from others. She stayed home one morning when Virgil and the children went on one of their exploration expeditions. She often did this now, enjoying a little peace and quiet on her own. Virgil was gradually mapping the tunnels and the little party always seemed to come back with some souvenir of their forays. Their chamber displayed geodes, hunks of glittering pyrite and even some old ship brasses and coins.

Irena put on a pair of dark pants and a sweater, then a hooded jacket. She walked quietly towards that section of the tunnels where the others lived, her mind working furiously as she activated the doors Virgil had installed to protect them.

How could she introduce herself without risking her family? Would they drive her away or attack her? She thought not, from what Harry said, but she needed some means of getting their attention without seeming threatening. She had not arrived at any solution when she rounded a corner – and stopped dead, putting her hand over her mouth.

Two boys were crouched in the tunnel, their backs to her. They were playing with a kitten. One of the boys was tall, older and dark-haired. But the other had long golden hair like Virgil's. She didn't need to know who he was. Her heart, and the thin empathic bond she had felt with this lost son over the years, told her.

She moved silently into a shadow and watched. The younger one moved and she caught a glimpse of his face. Even knowing, it made her gasp. He was so beautiful, so like Vian! She felt her legs give way and fainted.

She was only out for a minute but when she opened her eyes, two faces were peering down at her in concern. One of them was her son's. She closed her eyes and tried to get a grip on herself. She found her throat had tightened and she began to weep.

The older boy helped her to her feet and her son took her other arm. They waited until she had herself under control, then led her inwards, quite a long way, stopping once so the older boy could tap on a pipe in what sounded like code. Then they entered a section of well-lit tunnels and came into a chamber lined with books. The boys left quickly, she supposed to return for the kitten.

Her first thought was how Virgil would have loved to see this library. Then she saw a severe-looking older man dressed in many layers of woolen sweaters walking towards her, limping and leaning on a cane.

"Good afternoon," he said quietly. "My name is Jacob. Most of the community calls me Father. Can I help you? The boys said you fainted. I'm a doctor. Please don't worry. You're safe here."

"The boys?" Irena said weakly, feeling her legs wobble. Jacob immediately took her arm and led her to a chair. She sank down gratefully. She dearly wanted to know what her son was called.

"Yes, Vincent and Devin. They're always in some kind of mischief. I hope they didn't upset you."

"No," Irena said, her voice quivering, her mind in a whirl. "I'm sorry. I was lost - and seeing him – it was a shock."

"You mean Vincent, of course. Yes, he has that effect at first. But he's a gentle soul and a very good student – when I can keep him and Devin apart. Where are you from Irena? How did you find us?"

Irena realized Jacob had misinterpreted her shock, and was thankful. She could not reveal her secret yet, but she decided to give Jacob as much of the truth as she could.

“We’ve been living in a cavern for some years – Virgil, myself and our two children. Harry has been helping us. He’s told us about this community, has done so for many years. But don’t worry,” she added seeing Jacob frown, “although we live in the tunnels ourselves, it’s a very long way from here. We are no danger to you. I wanted to meet you, have wanted to for a long time. I could hardly believe what he told us. Now I see he didn’t tell us the half of it.”

Irena watched Jacob’s face and saw the indecision.

“I’m really sorry for imposing on you like this. I’ll leave you now. It was a pleasure to meet you Jacob.”

Jacob stood up as Irena left the chair.

“May I know your name?” he asked.

“Oh, dear, what am I thinking?” Irena blushed. “My name’s Irena Gilchrist.”

“Is there anything we can do to help you and your family, Irena? We do welcome refugees here, and we help many still living in the world above. You don’t seem to need our help, though. Harry is a good man.”

“Father!” a soft voice interrupted and Vincent came running into the chamber. He was cradling the kitten. He stopped dead when he saw Irena and got a peculiar expression on his face. It was one that reminded her so much of Vian and Virgil that Irena felt her heart jump. She clamped her hand on the back of the chair to steady herself. She could feel Vincent’s excitement and puzzlement.

“I’m sorry, Father,” he said, his eyes moving between the two adults. He frowned and words tumbled from him. “Devin and I want to know if we can keep the kitten.”

Father looked at Vincent with an expression that made the boy quail.

“Vincent, you know that we don’t allow pets here. There are very good reasons for that. Do you remember what they are?”

Vincent hung his head. “Yes, Father.”

“Well then, the kitten cannot stay. I’ll make sure it goes to a good home with one of our helpers Above, though. All right?”

Irena spoke up.

“I’ll take the kitten, if you’ll let me,” she offered. “Harry would love it.”

Jacob looked relieved.

“Thank you, Irena. Vincent, please give the kitten to this nice lady. And go and get cleaned up for lunch.”

Vincent handed the kitten to Irena, giving it a perfunctory stroke with a long-nailed, long-haired hand. The cat was purring loudly in her arms. The boy hardly noticed. He was regarding her with a quizzical expression. Irena smiled at him.

“I’ll take good care of him, Vincent, and you can visit him if you wish, once he’s settled.”

Vincent looked around at Jacob and caught the look of caution and warning which Irena didn’t miss either.

“Thank you Irena,” Vincent threw over his shoulder as he ran out the door.

“That boy,” Jacob sighed. “He didn’t even say good-bye.”

“Thank you for the kitten, Jacob,” Irena said softly.

Vincent was a delight. How she wished she had seen him grow up!

“I’ll see the kitten is cared for. I meant what I said about Vincent visiting, but it is a long way. I’ll understand if you’d rather he didn’t.”

Father spoke quietly. “Vincent is very special, Irena, as you saw. I worry about him. Devin, I’m afraid, has got him into trouble in the past. Once he was nearly caught Above. I’ll have another talk with that boy.”

“I understand,” Irena said again, softly. Jacob looked at her, unsure why he trusted this woman he had met only minutes before. Vincent had been fascinated and not at all shy with her, as he usually was with strangers. He had come to rely on Vincent’s first impressions. They were never wrong.

"I believe you do," he said. "I hope we'll meet again. I'll have Mary guide you back to our border. Be well, Irena."
"Thank you, Jacob. You too. I think we will meet again."

Mary, summoned to Jacob's chamber, took Irena in hand and led her to the perimeter. At that point, Irena assured her she could find her own way. Mary gave her a hug that included the kitten and smiled at her.

"Do come and see us again soon," she invited. Irena made a vague promise and walked away, conscious that each step took her further from her son and that it might be a very long time before she saw him again.

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Irena said nothing immediately about her visit to the other tunnel dwellers, but Virgil caught her roiling emotions. She had taken the kitten directly to Harry and he had been thrilled with it. Irena had almost wanted to keep it, just because it had been loved by Vincent. But Jacob was right – a cat did not belong below ground.

"What is it, Love?" Virgil asked her two days later, after the children were sound asleep in the side chamber he had carved out for them. Irena knew she could no longer keep the secret. She was glad Virgil truly loved her. What she had to say would be difficult.

"Virgil, there's something I've never told you, about Vian's birth. You see, I had to have the birth at home because I was sure the child was yours and I didn't want to risk a hospital and questions – or worse. I joined a religious group who offered to help me when the time came. But Virgil, they were shocked by the birth, as though I had given birth to devils - that I was some kind of witch.

"Devils?" Virgil asked. He looked at Irena, wondering if the plural had been a slip of the tongue, then knew it had not. He gripped her hand in his own and began to stroke it. He could tell she was upset and tense. Whatever it was, he would help her through it. She was his life.

"Yes Virgil. You see, I had twins. I knew they would return and try to kill me and the babies, and you were waiting, so I packed up to leave. But I was so afraid, Virgil. I hadn't been on the streets in a long time and I knew they were dangerous. I could hide one child under my coat, but not two, even though they were small. I ... I wrapped the other baby as well as I could and left him behind St Vincent's hospital in a box. There were people rooting around, and I knew they would find him. I guessed they were from the other tunnel community after I met Harry. They didn't sound or dress like tramps.

"Oh, Virgil, I wanted us to meet those others long ago, but it was too dangerous. I have been able to feel our other son, a little. I knew he was well.

"Then two days ago, I couldn't wait any longer. I had to see what the other community was like for myself. So I went to their section. I found two boys playing in one of their outer tunnels and ... and ... one was our son, Virgil. I fainted and they helped me to Jacob, the man who's their leader. Our son's name is Vincent – and he's a well-mannered, affectionate boy – everything I could have hoped. I left as soon as I could, my heart was pounding so. Now I don't know what to do."

Virgil drew Irena to him. How she must have suffered in the months they were apart! He blamed himself for this dilemma. He had not told Irena about this chamber or his situation. Well, he hadn't known she was pregnant, either, but that was no excuse. He whispered into her hair.

"Irena, you did what you thought you had to. Our other son is alive and well, that's all that matters. But I don't think we can disrupt our family and the others – at least not yet. Harry says that other man now calls himself Paracelsus and still lives far Below, leading a violent gang and engaging in criminal activity in the world above. They are a constant source of worry.

"Now I understand more about his reports over the years. The child they fought over was ours, Irena. I'm sure of it. We must not put our family at risk while Paracelsus lives. We'll have to be vigilant, although I don't think we are in danger here. We are a long way from that part of the tunnel network and my security walls discourage the curious. But we must not allow visitors from the other community, or go ourselves to visit them. It might be noticed. One day, we will both see our son again. I'm sure of it."

Irena buried her face in Virgil's chest and hugged him. It was almost enough to know their other son thrived – but oh, it was so difficult to remain apart! Why was life so complicated?

Not long after that, Harry came to visit and reported that the boy Devin had disappeared and was presumed dead

when they couldn't find him. He and Father had argued. Irena was sure that Vincent was devastated by this event and wished he could meet his brother. He must feel very alone, Irena thought. But it was still too dangerous.

Irena sighed and tried to send her love along the thin bond with her other son. She hoped he got some consolation from it.

Harry gave them ongoing reports on the kitten, which had filled a hole in his life. He was almost as alone as they and the little cat had made him very happy. They did not tell him of the hole in their own lives. That was something they could never speak of to anyone else.

Chapter 3

The years passed and Virgil continued to write in his journals, although now they dealt with day to day life. Vian and Ilona's studies expanded into areas that interested them. Vian became a scholar of languages and history while Ilona studied medicine. She could have gone to medical school but chose instead to get some experience with a local doctor, Peter Alcott, to see what aspect of the profession she liked best. He was a helper of long-standing with the other community, and Harry introduced her as his niece. She became an apprentice nurse under his guidance.

Harry continued to ensure Irena and Virgil lacked for nothing, but they asked for little. Irena had learned to knit and crochet, and in exchange for the remnant balls of wool and old pullovers which she unravelled, she gave some of her work to Harry for Vincent's community. It gave her comfort to know that something from her hands was near Vincent, perhaps even worn by him.

When she learned Vincent went Above often, risking detection, she made a dark, long hooded cloak with wide roll-up sleeves from pieces of scrap leather and wool. She poured all the love she had into each stitch, willed it to protect its wearer. She made another for her son Vian, who was also curious about the world he could never see in daylight.

Irena learned from Harry that the cloak had become Vincent's second skin. He wore it even on trips around the tunnels – in fact any time he left his own chamber. She made a more feminine one for Ilona from dark leather scraps and an old black velvet dress Harry gave her one day. In these enclosing garments, her two children did go above together, but never far away or for very long. Vian liked to visit a man who was watchman at a library and who let him borrow books. He had an interesting story, she learned. The man had lived in the distant tunnel community, but had been injured during a collapse and could not bear to be below ground anymore. Irena wondered about that collapse. Could that have been the one they felt and sought out?

Vian and Ilona had been told of their brother, but understood the necessity of their separation. Like his father, Vian was not overly curious about the world above, nor inclined to roam far. He preferred to live that life in books. The two of them spent hours discussing what they read.

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Irena gradually became aware that Virgil was no longer feeling as energetic as he had been. True, they were both getting older, but something else seemed to be at work. He was often in pain and that pain was getting worse. Soon, it became obvious his joints were becoming arthritic. His hair began to grow in grey.

Then came the day that Irena was forced turn inwards and push any thoughts of the other community from her mind. When Vian was in his early 30s and his father not yet 60, Virgil became bedridden for long periods. Even Ilona, now a new doctor in her own right, thanks to Peter's sponsorship, could not determine what was wrong. He had little appetite and slept a great deal.

Over the next several months he lost a lot of weight and his hair turned to white. Irena knew he was in pain and his breathing was sometimes very laboured. She could feel his exhaustion and held him through the long nights, sending her love and strength to him along their bond. One night she feared he would breathe his last.

That galvanized her. She asked Ilona to bring Dr Alcott. Perhaps he had some insight or there was some medication that could help. Since he was a helper to the other community, he would be trustworthy. They could

no longer maintain their isolation.

Peter, when he visited the family in their chamber hideout, could not contain his astonishment. He heard their history, in brief, with amazement. Why had Ilona not told him? Irena explained, gently, that they had thought it best in light of the dangers presented by Paracelsus.

Peter then told them that particular danger was over. Almost a year ago, Vincent, driven to distraction by the man's lies and more than once a victim of his malicious intent, had killed him as they fought in Father's chamber. Paracelsus had been disguised as Father while Jacob was tied up in an apartment Above, left to die. He had been found by Catherine, a woman Vincent had saved.

But Vincent himself had not come out unscarred and had nearly died of madness until Catherine had saved him in turn. He had recovered and was now living with his Catherine in a converted brownstone she had bought for them. They had a young child.

Irena was pleased to hear the news. Virgil's illness had prevented her from even thinking about Vincent. She had not even tried to feel him through their bond. Now she wished she had – and that she had kept better informed of the other community.

Peter treated Virgil as best he could with vitamins and medication for arthritis, then took a blood sample. Virgil began to put on weight and gained strength, although he was a shadow of his former self and still tired easily. Peter quietly had a lab examine the blood, and swore them to secrecy. With Ilona's help he told them what had been discovered - that Virgil's illness was not one which could be cured. He was suffering from premature ageing.

Peter felt strongly that it was time for the family to be re-united and in this he was supported by Irena. It would be a shock to the tunnel community, but Peter offered to act as liaison. A few days later, he told Irena that Vincent and Catherine had extended an invitation. The family discussed it and decided that Irena should go alone for this first meeting.

Leaving Virgil that day, and seeing the hope in his eyes, Irena gave him a deep kiss. Her throat was tight and she was near to tears as Peter escorted her to the brownstone's tunnel entrance. She got herself under control as they went upstairs to where Vincent and Catherine waited in a room cozy with books and a roaring fireplace. Peter made the introductions.

Irena looked at her son and had to hold onto herself to keep from running to him. He had grown into a man like his father and brother. Peter had not told revealed much, other than that there was a special family who wanted to meet them.

Vincent seemed to sense the turmoil in Irena and rose to hug her. She melted into his chest and began to cry. She pulled herself away reluctantly, unable to trust her voice.

Catherine then took her hand and led her to a couch where she could hold her hand and calm her. Vincent didn't seem to know what to do next. He stood in the centre of the room looking puzzled, sensing something about this woman he could not put into words.

Irena looked from one face to the other, finally resting on Vincent.

"I'm sorry, Vincent, Catherine. I ... I don't know where to begin. Perhaps I should just say it. Vincent, you are my son, a twin to my son Vian and brother to my daughter Ilona. My husband Virgil Gilchrist is your father. I came here because Virgil is ill and dying a slow death of old age. He isn't yet 60. I wanted our family to be re-united before it's too late."

Vincent was stunned and stared at Irena. Catherine could sense confusion vying with elation. She got up and put her arm around him.

"How," he managed to whisper over Catherine's head. "How did you avoid us all these years?"

"We did meet once, Vincent, when you were a boy."

Vincent started and looked at Irena closely. She had a long scar on her cheek and suddenly that old incident came back to him.

"The kitten," he said. "I gave you the kitten that Devin and I had found. You're Irena."

"Yes Vincent."

“But where have you and your family been living, Irena? And why?”

Peter broke in at this point.

“Vincent, one of our helpers, Harry, kept them informed and helped them considerably – still does. They’ve been living in a chamber far from here since just after you and your brother were born. When they learned of Paracelsus, they decided it was best they remain isolated, for their own protection. I told them a few days ago that the danger is now over.”

“But why was I abandoned,” Vincent asked quietly, unable to prevent himself from asking the question which most haunted him.

Irene dropped her head and spoke softly.

“I was desperate, Vincent. I had just given birth and I had to travel across New York to join Virgil. My life was in danger from a religious group I had joined. I knew I could carry one child under my coat, but not two. I wrapped you well and left you where the tunnel scavengers would find you. They were close by. I’ve felt you through the years. I have an empathic connection with all my children – but strongest with Virgil. I knew you were well and happy – but oh, I did want to see you. That’s why you met me so long ago.”

“I remember feeling unusual when I looked at you,” Vincent said quietly. “Many years later, Father showed me the blanket he had kept – the thick one you wrapped me in first. I knew then that you had loved me. It gave me great solace to know that, but I also sensed fear. Now I understand.”

Vincent made a decision. He was uncharacteristically impatient – but there was no reason to wait.

“May I see my father now, today, Irena? I feel it’s already been too long and I ... well, I won’t be able to think of anything else until I’ve seen him.”

Irena smiled at this big son of hers.

“Of course you may Vincent. Vian is with him now and Ilona can probably be spared from Peter’s clinic for a little while.”

“I’ll bring her,” Peter offered, then to Vincent’s amazed and almost accusing look, continued in a hurt voice.

“Vincent, I’ve only known about them a very short time. Ilona never mentioned her family. Harry said she was his niece. I was as shocked as you.”

Catherine looked at Vincent and decided he should go alone for this first meeting. She had baby Jacob to feed soon, and she was sure there would be other opportunities to meet this new family. She could wait.

“Vincent, you must go now. I’ll see them all another time.”

Vincent gave Catherine a kiss before giving Irena his arm. Peter left to bring Ilona.

To Vincent, the walk to the far side of the tunnel network was tortuously long. Irena, although healthy and fit, did not have his stride. He made himself take note of the tunnels as they entered less familiar territory. It was amazing that he had not known about this family. He thought he had seen every tunnel.

But then they rounded a corner to face a blank brick wall and Vincent at last understood. Irena touched a brick and the wall rotated quietly on a centre pivot. She looked up at him.

“Virgil did this. It’s one of the many safeguards he created. He was a very strong man once. I wish you could have seen him then – but you are very like him, Vincent. He will be thrilled to see you. And his mind is unimpaired. He’s a remarkable man – the only man I have ever loved.”

Irena and Vincent entered a section of tunnels that had been well-cared for and were lit by small beams of natural light. Vincent guessed the effect was done with mirrors, but the work involved humbled him. Kanin’s jaw would drop if he saw this!

They rounded a large stone outcrop and Irena led the way down a set of narrow steps. The chamber Vincent entered took his breath away. It was exquisite, there was no better word. It had been smoothly excavated and lovingly paneled with woods of every kind. The light, again, was indirect and reflected. Candles sat on nearby ledges, awaiting darkness in the world Above.

But all this, Vincent took in at a glance. What riveted his attention was a large bed, and the man who lay in it, propped up on pillows, his eyes closed. His white hair flowed over the pillow and around his unique face. A man

sitting next to the bed on a chair stood up as they came in and smiled at them both. Vincent had to stop and take a deep breath. It was like looking at himself!

He got his muscles moving and approached his brother and father for the first time. His heart was racing. Without preamble, Vian moved to gather Vincent into a tight hug. Irena took a chair on the other side of the bed and watched quietly, her mouth turned up in a gentle smile. Vian spoke first.

“Brother, I’m so glad you could come.” He spoke a little louder. “Father, look. We have a special visitor.”

The man on the bed opened his eyes and they widened as he saw the two brothers side by side.

Vincent immediately approached him and took a hand, noting with amazement that it was even larger than his own, although the knuckles were swollen with arthritis.

Virgil looked at him and smiled.

“You must be my son Vincent.”

His voice was a soft rasp and his words were carefully pronounced. Vincent’s own, when he finally got his tongue to work, was almost as quiet.

“Yes. You are someone I had never thought to meet. I can hardly believe it, even now. I had always thought myself unique, alone in my difference. And then to find that I have a twin brother and a sister as well – to say nothing of a mother and father ... I’m ... I don’t know what to say.”

Virgil dropped his eyes, his face sad. “I’m afraid we are at fault for not allowing you that knowledge before now. We had become set in our isolation. Irena wanted to meet you, but we decided the risks were too great, given what Harry told us. Perhaps we were over-cautious.”

Vincent’s face became stiff as he remembered.

“I understand – better than you may think. My life has been one of limitations and risks, balanced against love and duty. Father – Jacob – did his best to keep me safe and hidden. But if I had paid attention, I would not have found Catherine and my life would have been very different. May I call you Virgil?” His father nodded.

“You were right to be afraid, Virgil. Paracelsus almost killed me twice and caused untold suffering to others. He killed without remorse when it suited his purposes. He was a brilliant man, but completely unscrupulous. If Father...um...Jacob, had not won out in those early days, our community would now be a place of hate and fear. That’s how he wished to rule us.

“He was obsessed with domination of our community – and myself. He wanted me to be his violent right hand. He cared for nothing but accumulating gold. He kidnapped Catherine once to draw me to him, threatened to harm her if I did not cooperate. One of his thugs nearly killed me. If he had known of you, he would have done all in his power to steal Vian and turn him into a weapon.”

Virgil sighed. “So I understood, when at last we knew of your existence. Harry never met you apparently, or we might have found a way to meet you sooner, my son, and thereby saved Irena and yourself much grief. I am sorry to meet you like this, an old man waiting for death.”

Vincent sensed that Virgil was suffering pain that wore him down and made life miserable. Old age, Irene had said, which was a puzzle he did not want to unravel just then. Its implication to himself and his siblings was worrying.

Vincent stroked the hand he held, fascinated by it, having never seen another like his own. It was warm and the palm strangely smooth. Was this what Catherine felt when she held his hand? He didn’t know if he could help, but he sent strength and love down the thin bond he felt with his father.

There was a sound of footsteps behind him and Peter came into the chamber with Ilona. Vincent found himself again at a loss. His sister was tall and golden-haired, but bore none of the facial characteristics of himself and Vian. In that sense, she was like Vincent’s son, Jacob. But differences likely existed in her blood, as they did with Jacob. They should all have blood tests for comparison’s sake, he thought.

Ilona approached the bed and Vincent rose to greet her. She smiled at him and Vian, gave them both a quick hug, then went to Virgil.

“How are you, Father? Would you like some tea? Peter has given me a special preparation made by William, the cook in Vincent’s community. It will help ease your arthritis.”

Virgil smiled and nodded. He already looked a little better, Vincent thought as he sat down again, taking up the large hand. He re-doubled his efforts to strengthen the older man. Virgil looked at him with respect.

"I thank you for what you are trying to do, Vincent, but it won't cure me. I know my days are numbered. But you are helping to ease the pain, just by your presence.

"And now I have to ask? What do you think we should do? I find myself wanting to move forward, to leave my family in good hands."

Vincent stood up, still holding Virgil's hand, and looked around at everyone.

"You're welcome to move into our tunnel community, all of you. We have some empty chambers, though none as beautiful as this. I can bring a work party to help you move your belongings, whenever you wish."

Vincent paused, overcome by emotion.

"I would like you to be part of us. We are like family and have the best cook Above or Below. Peter can confirm that. But you might find it a bit chaotic and noisy, so we can give you chambers on the outer circle if you wish. We all eat together, but William will be happy to provide you with trays if you'd prefer. There will be some adjustments. We have a lot of children and a busy work roster, but Catherine and I will be happy to help you settle in. With a baby of our own now, and her work for the Foundation, I am not called upon to do the back-breaking work any more. We will be at your disposal.

"And Virgil, we have a hot steam room, which might give you some relief – perhaps more than William's famous tea. Father has an arthritic hip and finds it helpful. And we have a wonderful library."

Virgil nodded his relief. He looked at Irena and at his other children. They smiled their willingness.

"Well then," he said. "It seems everyone is only too happy to leave this home of ours. I confess I wish to see this library of yours. Books are my main passion these days."

"Then I will make the arrangements," Vincent promised. "I think I should leave now and let you all have some peace. When would you like me to bring a moving crew?"

Irena looked at Virgil and replied. "Vincent, I think it should be soon. As you see, we do not have a great deal, but we will want to take everything possible. We do not want to be a burden to your community. If you can give us two days to pack and get organized, we can move on the morning of the third. Would that be convenient?"

"I am sure it will be," Vincent declared. "And I will personally bring a wheelchair for Virgil. It is a long walk and there is no need for him to tire himself out. I know it will be difficult for you to leave this place, but be assured it will not be abandoned completely. If you are willing, we will find a use for it, despite its distance from us. It seems very well hidden. But that can be decided at a future date.

"I'll return in three days, about mid-morning, with a crew of helpers and some carts."

With that, Vincent said his goodbyes and left. Peter followed him. Once in the tunnels again, Peter called Vincent to halt. He was striding along as if in a race against time. Vincent paused and apologized. Peter looked at him and smiled.

"It's understandable, Vincent, but before we return to Cathy, I wanted you to know what I've discovered about Virgil. I took a blood sample some days ago, when I gave him some medication for his arthritis. I'm sure his deterioration worries you, but it need not. His blood is quite unlike yours, incompatible in fact. I suspect that the abominable process which created him used cloned cells. If that is so, his premature aging is explained. Experiments with animals have had the same results. He might be able to tell us whether this is so, if his guardian told him. Irena told me he has written it all down."

Vincent looked a little shocked and then curious, but had a more important concern.

"How long does he have to live, Peter? Can you make a guess?"

"He did rally for a while, after I brought some medication, but he's becoming weaker again, and in more pain by the day. Even medication will soon cease to work. This kind of disease tends to advance more quickly towards the end. I can't risk giving him stronger painkillers because of his unusual physiognomy. He's worn out, Vincent. I would guess he has only a month or so to live."

Vincent hung his head and leaned against the tunnel wall. Was there a Fate called Irony? He couldn't remember. There should be, he thought wryly. When he stood straight again, it was with new determination.

"I understand, Peter. Thank you for telling me this. I must make sure his last days are as happy as I can make them."

"Vincent, seeing you has made him very happy. I think his family is more important to him than anything else."

They continued on to the brownstone and found Catherine waiting in the kitchen with little Jacob on her lap. It was almost lunch time.

She grinned at them both.

"Your timing is excellent, gentlemen. I've reserved seats in the dining room Below for us all. I hope you can join us Peter. I believe William has cooked up something extraordinary, even for him. He seems to think we all need some serious shoring up after the excitement of today – and in preparation for the days to come. News has preceded you – in its usual mysterious fashion. Of course, everyone is waiting to hear the latest, so you will have to satisfy their curiosity. But this way, it need only be said once."

"Excellent plan, Cathy," Peter exclaimed. "But what's this special meal?"

"I'm sworn to silence," Catherine declared. "You'll just have to come and see for yourself."

"Well, I'll do more than just look at it, you can be sure," Peter quipped.

Vincent laughed, and capturing Catherine, took Jacob from her and led them down into the tunnels and to the dining hall. Some time before they reached it, a delicious smell wafted to them.

"I really should talk to William about secrecy," Vincent remarked. "These aromas tell everyone within miles of the kitchen that there is more than meets the eye down here. One day we're going to be discovered because of these odours are wafting Above and into some curious nostril."

Peter laughed. "Well, if you put Mouse onto it, I'm sure he'll devise an innovative solution."

"Oh, yes," Catherine agreed. "But would we survive it, I wonder?"

They were still chuckling as they entered the dining hall. Although the final lunch signal had not yet sounded, it seemed as if everyone was already seated. An air of anticipation seemed to pervade the hall. Three seats and a highchair for the baby, were waiting for them next to Father and they quickly took possession of them.

Father stood up and there was immediate silence.

"Friends, Vincent and Peter have a tale to tell, I am assured. However, food must come first or William will feed me nothing but dry toast and gristle for the next month.

"Let's eat!"

William brought out a huge platter piled high with something. The smell was one Catherine remembered from a favourite British pub – steak and kidney pie! William, of course, had put his own stamp on this basic fare and the result was exquisite. Huge tureens of mashed potato and mushy peas also made the rounds. The whole was washed down with, what else, William's special ale!

The three guests ate quietly, savouring every bite. The work that must have gone into these pies, Catherine thought, amazed. All that pastry! She fed Jacob some of this fine fare, but soon realized he was not impressed. She managed to get him to eat enough vegetables to keep him quiet though. Vincent, eyeing the portion left, raised an eyebrow and quietly shifted it to his own plate. It was gone seconds later. He looked at Catherine with a feral grin. She rolled her eyes. Peter, who had caught this exchange, laughed.

Keeping to the British food theme, William had prepared an enormous bread pudding, the taste of which garnered many expressions of delight before each bowl was scraped clean. Little Jacob almost inhaled his, meaning Vincent had to be content with his own portion. He tried not to look disappointed, but Catherine wasn't fooled.

"Perhaps I should learn to make one of these," Catherine mused. "I'm sure William will be happy to teach me."

Vincent looked at her. "Do that Catherine. I think our new family might want to enjoy this as well. We must have a reunion party soon."

While everyone was drinking their tea and coffee, Vincent stood up to immediate and absolute silence. He related what he knew of his new-found family to a sea of amazed faces. Then everyone started talking at once. Father stood up and called for order.

"Friends, I know this is incredible news, but we must be patient and show some restraint. This family has been isolated for over 35 years. They will be moving here in a few days, but we must not overwhelm them at first.

Vincent's father is ill, dying in fact, so we must give the family time to be alone and offer our support only when it is requested.

"I suggest that anyone who wants to visit the new arrivals, does so individually, after making a formal request through Vincent. No rushing into their chamber with your usual abandon! Their privacy will be very important to them. We must respect that."

Father looked at Mouse when he said this. Mouse hung his head.

"Mouse never wants to upset anyone," he mumbled, "especially Vincent's family."

"Good," Father exclaimed. "Then it's settled. Vincent will call for volunteers in three days time to help his family move, but there's some work to be done to prepare the empty chambers. Vincent will decide which ones are suitable and I'll add that to the work roster."

Chapter 4

It did not take Irena and her children long to pack up their few belongings, so they used the rest of the time to say goodbye to their home and prepare themselves for a new life. Virgil, to Irena's surprise, seemed eager to leave. He watched the packing and moving with keen attention. She would miss their cozy home. It had been a labour of love and the only home she had ever been able to call her own. She took comfort in what Vincent had said, that the chamber might useful to the community in the future.

That night, Virgil held Irena close and whispered to her.

"Don't be sad, Irena. We always knew we might not be isolated forever. How wonderful that we have a son to help us in this new life. That would not have happened but for you. Your decision that night long ago has made this miracle possible."

He held her, sending her his love along their bond, until he felt her fall asleep. Then he followed her.

During the next two days, Vincent joined the work team to clean two adjoining chambers for the Gilchrist family. He picked ones that were in the same general area as the brownstone. The location would permit easy communication between the two families.

Later, if they wished to move closer to the hub, a large chamber was ready for them. It had once housed the violent Outsider group, but despite its extensive remodeling, no one in the tunnels wished to live in it, so it was still vacant. Vincent's family would not know its history and it was certainly spacious and convenient to the tunnel amenities.

On the third day, Vincent led a work party, which included Kanin and Cullen, to the distant chamber with two wheeled carts. A wheelchair, borrowed from Peter, was perched on one of them. They would probably have to make several trips. As soon as Kanin saw the hidden tunnels and their light source, he became very interested – and then he saw the chamber itself. With the bright sun streaming through the openings, it was magical. He gasped. Vincent was sure he would be talking to Virgil about this wonder after the family was settled.

Vincent introduced everyone. Ilona and Vian were still packing bags, but stopped to listen when Vincent asked the important question.

"We have prepared two adjoining chambers not far from my brownstone, but on the outskirts of the community. We also have ready a large chamber – about twice the size of this one, with adjoining rooms – near the hub. You may live in either area – but if you wish to take the more remote chambers, the other will be held for you as well, as in time you may wish to be closer to the hub."

Irena looked at Virgil, who was sitting in a chair wrapped in an afghan, and a message seemed to pass between them. Then she answered Vincent.

"I think we would like to be near you for awhile, Vincent. Virgil and I have led quiet lives. Thank you for your kindness."

"Well then, we had better get you moved," Vincent decided. "We will start with all the easily portable things and then come back for the furniture. Virgil, you and Irena are invited to visit Father while all this is going on. I've brought a wheelchair. I will take you there."

Virgil smiled. "Thank you son. That would be wonderful. I very much want to meet Jacob. I suspect we will have much in common."

Vincent helped his father up the steps and into the wheelchair, shocked at how frail he appeared out of bed. He waved goodbye to the others, now busily packing up the trolleys, and accompanied by Irena, he pushed his father down the long tunnels to meet Father.

Getting closer to the hub brought a lot more noise from the overhead trains, and the usual frantic messages on the pipes. Vincent sent one of his own to ask that Father be informed of their imminent arrival. As they passed near the brownstone's entrance, Catherine emerged with Jacob and joined the procession, after a brief introduction. They stopped again so that Virgil and Irena could see their new chambers, then moved on to Father's library.

Once again, Vincent assisted his father on steps. He had never realized how inconvenient these were to the disabled and swore that something would be done to allow Virgil – and others - easier access to such places. Even Father might appreciate a ramp into his chamber.

Father rose and helped Virgil to a seat next to the brazier and Irena and Catherine sat beside him.

"Would anyone like tea and cookies?" he asked. There was no dissent, so he tapped on the pipes and a few minutes later a heavily laden tray appeared, carried by Olivia.

Virgil looked curious, his head tilted. "All that tapping. It sounds like a kind of Morse Code."

Father smiled. "It is Virgil, but adapted for our special needs. We've come up with a kind of shorthand to ensure quick responses, especially in emergencies. Pascal, who is the master of our Pipe hamber and communications, would be more than happy to fill your ears for hours about our system. Just say the word – but later."

Vincent, at this point, decided he had better get back to work. He waved at everyone and returned to the work party. They had arrived at the chambers with the first load as he approached. Ilona and Vian helped to unload it and Ilona stayed behind to start the unpacking, while everyone else trundled back for another trip.

It took them five trips, the last two mostly furniture. The carts were not big enough to carry more than a few boxes and the family had accumulated more than they realized. The stove was left behind for future users of the chamber. When they reached their new home with the last of it, it was to find that a table had been loaded with a huge pitcher of fruit juice and a plate of William's giant oatmeal cookies. There were great sighs of relief and everyone sat down on whatever they could find to take a rest. Ilona smiled at them all.

"I can't believe how wonderful this all is. I look at Vincent and I think Vian. I must get used to having double vision all of a sudden. I hope you two are not going to start wearing identical clothes."

Vincent laughed and put his arm around his brother. They were both sitting on a trolley.

"I think we are too old for that kind of thing, but it won't be our fault if people are not very discerning."

"Well, that's as may be," Vian replied. "But I think there is an easy way to tell us apart. Only Vincent wears that pouch around his neck. I'm sure there's a story attached to it, and I daresay everyone but us knows it already. I'll have to think of something suitable to wear myself. Perhaps a paisley ascot."

Vincent laughed. "Well, it can be chilly in these tunnels, brother, so a scarf might be a good idea. But there are also lots of things for it to catch on, or get caught by. Just keep it away from Mouse's raccoon."

"Mouse?" Vian asked.

"Ah yes, sorry. You'll probably meet everyone tomorrow. I wouldn't want to spoil the surprise," Vincent smiled, then got serious.

"I think we'd better get your chambers organized so that our parents can settle in and relax. I'm sure Father has kept them entertained."

An hour later, the majority of the goods had been put in place, although unpacking and organizing would take a great deal longer. Vincent left his siblings in their new chamber and returned to Father.

Virgil looked tired and Irena worried, so Vincent extracted them with little difficulty. Father looked a little weary himself, but gave Vincent a look which said he wanted to talk with him. Catherine took one look at Father and quietly said her goodbyes at the same time, walking with Virgil and Irena to their chamber. She politely refused to visit with them, sensing their fatigue. She left with a wave to Vian and Ilona and returned to the brownstone. Vincent left the wheelchair with Irena, promising to take Virgil anywhere he wanted to go, at any time.

Vincent returned to Father's chamber, wondering what the old man had to say now. He felt tired himself and was aching for a soak in a hot bath. He sat down across the table and waited.

Father cleared his throat. "I just wanted you to know, Vincent, that I have seldom been so amazed in my life. I could never have imagined that your story would come to light in such an incredible fashion. I think I understand a great deal more now and realize I have made a number of mistakes in your upbringing. How I wish circumstances had allowed Virgil and Irena to join us with your brother! Another crime to lay at John's door. It seems we are never to be rid of him, even after his death."

Vincent shook his head.

"Father, there's nothing that could have been done to prevent what happened. You did what you thought best for me. I lived and thrived – and I received an excellent education in the process.

"None of that matters now. Although I now have another, blood-related family, there will still be challenges. Virgil is dying – may have no more than a month to live. Peter does not believe the problem is one that I or my brother will inherit. I worry about Irena, though. Virgil has been her life and this is very hard on her. Like myself and Catherine, they have a strong bond."

Father nodded.

"You know that everyone in this community will welcome them, Vincent. Are you planning to bring them to breakfast tomorrow?"

"I think I'll drop in on them before breakfast and see what they wish, Father. They may want to get unpacked and rest. William can prepare them trays, and that might be best until dinner. They have not met many people at once, ever, and it won't be easy. I don't want Virgil to become overwhelmed. He's quite fragile, Father. I can feel his pain. Perhaps you could introduce him to our steam room soon, if he feels able. I will take it upon myself to take him around in the wheelchair, but some of our tunnels were not designed for it. I'm sure Catherine would love to give the others the grand tour."

"That would be best, Vincent. You are the best person to decide. Let me know if I can do anything."

"I will, Father. Now I must return home. Catherine has not seen much of me today and I need a bath."

"Good night then Vincent."

"Good night Father."

Vincent trudged wearily down the tunnels. He was not used to such prolonged labour anymore. He paused only when he came abreast of his family's chambers. He saw that they had their privacy curtain closed, so he did not disturb them. Undoubtedly they were as tired as he.

Once back in the brownstone, Vincent discovered that Catherine had a hot bath ready for him. She had anticipated his need and stood by with the soap and bristle brush to give him the full treatment. Vincent gave her a look which was an invitation, so she joined him in the enormous tub. By the time they had finished they were both very clean, and more than a little relaxed.

Catherine emptied the tub and gathered Vincent into a huge towel. He was now almost asleep on his feet and she rubbed him down with great efficiency before doing herself. Then she led him to bed, where he was asleep almost as soon as he lay down.

Catherine studied Vincent as he slept. He did not look any different, but she could sense a sea change in him. Finding he had a family had eased an ache he had not been willing to admit he had. She hoped he would not suffer the pain she had when her father died. Having a mother and siblings would help.

It was odd. She would have wished for exactly this to happen if she had thought it remotely possible. Now that it had, she found herself a little jealous. Vincent would be busy with his new-found family and she would have to share his affection. He might not always be close by and would likely be distracted. That would take some getting used to. However, her love was undiminished, as was his. They would weather this change as they had the others. She could not be selfish. She was a fortunate woman.

Her own life seemed placid in comparison to what Vincent and his family had experienced. Well, it had been routine – and had changed only when Vincent had rescued her, and then only because she had taken a job that put her in danger. She was very glad that she had changed her life again when she became pregnant with Jacob. She now worked for the community. Foundation work gave her the sense of accomplishment that in the DA's

office came only with long hours and a cooperative witness.

Irena was remarkable and she hoped there would be time for them all to get to know each other.

She snuggled up to Vincent, felt him sigh in his sleep. That was a sound that made her heart ease. She fell asleep with a smile on her face.

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Catherine woke up to find Vincent surrounding her, waiting patiently for her to realize the fact. He was vibrating with a low purr. She didn't want to move, she decided, and snuggled into his side. The purr ratcheted up a notch and suddenly Catherine could no longer pretend to be sleepy. She moved to look into his eyes and saw that they were dark with passion. And she had been afraid he would be distracted!

"What?" she asked him quietly, although she knew perfectly well 'what'.

"Catherine, I never thanked you adequately for your bathing services yesterday. I was almost asleep on my feet and didn't give you the attention you deserved. But I'm fully recovered now."

Catherine ran her eyes down Vincent's body and had to admit that he looked ready for anything. She gave him a look that matched his own and slid on top of him. They spent the next while making up for lost time and starting their day in the fashion they enjoyed best.

Afterwards, Catherine stroked Vincent's chest and the arm that now hugged her close to his side, where the vibration of his post-coital purr was like the wind over velvet. She spoke softly.

"I'll bet Vian's going to find himself the centre of some attention. Most of the women had given up on you, even before I showed up. You might have to give him some brotherly advice."

Vincent chuckled. "Catherine, I think it's more likely that you will be in great demand by women wishing to know what they can expect."

She hadn't thought of that. Catherine rubbed her hand over Vincent's chest and sighed.

"Vincent, you're right - and I don't think I'm ready for that kind of 'girl talk'. I guess we'll both just have to let nature take its course. Somehow, I am sure it will - and all will be resolved in the end."

"If I am anything to go by, it will - and Vian has not been less alone than myself. I expect Virgil has had man-to-man talks with him."

Catherine did not miss the use of his father's first name. With another "Father" in the tunnels, it was perhaps best - and Vincent had not known his real father until now. She shook herself a little to get her brain in gear.

"I'd better attend to little Jacob. I can feel he's hungry."

She trotted out of the room, felt Vincent's gaze follow her out. She picked up Jacob from his cot and brought him back to the bedroom. Vincent had hiked himself up and she sat in the 'V' of his legs, positioning the baby so he could suckle. It was one of their favourite morning routines. She loved feeding her child, felt no desire to wean him, even though he was eating soft food now. Jacob was healthy and growing strong. Soon enough, he would be too big for it. Once he started walking, that would be the time, she decided. Meanwhile, she let herself bask in the joy and knew Vincent was feeling it too. His purr had become the slightest rasp, as of sand particles pushed by a breeze. But she knew it was there, and so did baby Jacob.

He suckled greedily and then abruptly stopped, immediately falling asleep. Catherine cuddled him, but felt the familiar heavy discomfort in the un-used breast. She shifted sideways and gave Vincent a look. With a grin, he lifted a leg for her to lean against and shifted himself around until he could bend his head to her breast. His soft lips caressed the nipple and he sucked slowly, and then with greater abandon. Catherine let her head fall back against his arm and sighed. The love and contentment she felt along her bond with Vincent made her almost want to sleep herself. He stopped and moved to plant a deep kiss on her lips, the taste of her own milk still sweet on them.

Then he gathered her to him and they sat cradling their son between them.

Catherine would have been happy to remain there all day, but they had responsibilities.

Vincent caught the resolve and sighed deeply.

“Yes, we must see to my family – and breakfast for ourselves. We’d better get ourselves ready. I would like you with me, Catherine. I want you to meet my brother and sister. If you feel able, perhaps you could show them around. I suspect Irena will want to stay with myself and Virgil.”

Catherine smiled. “I’d be happy to show them around Vincent. Ilona is delightful and I do want to know Vian better. He seems so like you, but different in ways I can’t put my finger on.”

“You keep all your fingers to yourself,” Vincent quipped. He found himself amazed that he could joke about it. Was he just a little jealous? He shook himself mentally. Then Catherine leaned over to kiss him and he knew that their bond would never let either of them “wander”.

By the time they made it to the tunnels, it was almost breakfast time. They went straight to the new arrivals and found the privacy curtain tied up. Vincent and Catherine entered to find everyone seated around a table, examining a stack of books. Virgil looked a bit uncomfortable.

“Good morning,” Vincent announced, to find four sets of eyes look up in surprise.

Irena rose quickly.

“Vincent. Welcome. We were just looking at Virgil’s journals. No one has read them and we wondered what to do with them.”

“Well, at the least, you need a bookcase,” Vincent commented. “I will ask Cullen to bring you one. He usually has a few around.”

Virgil looked up at his new-found son, then.

“These are the sum of my life, Vincent. I used to keep them in a trunk, but that seems inappropriate now. I think the early ones, at least, should be read by everyone. There shouldn’t be any secrets between us.”

Vincent’s curiosity was intense, but he didn’t know what to say to this revelation. His stomach suddenly reminded him of more immediate concerns. He temporized.

“No decisions should be made on an empty stomach. Would you all like some breakfast before we begin the day’s activities? I can get some trays brought to us.”

There was a round of smiles and nods at this, so Vincent used a nearby pipe to tap for two breakfast trays, fully-loaded.

“Is there anything you would all like to do today?” Vincent asked, as they waited for the trays.

There were looks back and forth at this, and Vian spoke first.

“Ilona and I would like to see the sights, if that’s not too much trouble.”

“And I’d like to try out the hot bath,” Virgil stated with a smile.

“Well, I don’t think I’d be welcome in the bath,” Irena commented, looking at Virgil. “So I’ll join the tour, please.”

“Well, I’ll be the official tour guide,” Catherine told them. “I’ll leave little Jacob with Mary in the nursery and we can leave as soon as we’re finished breakfast.”

“And I’m sure Father would be happy to have a bath with you, Virgil.” Vincent remarked. “I’ll join you as well. We have so many years to make up, I don’t want to leave you. And someone has to prevent Father from reciting Virgil’s Aeneid in Latin, which he seems to know by heart - someone less polite than you, Virgil.”

There were laughs at this. Then Rebecca and Olivia arrived with two laden trays, piled high in a way that only William could manage. There were gasps and laughs of thanks as they put them down on the table. Vincent and Vian moved the journals back into their trunk and everyone tucked into the food. William had even thought of little Jacob and had included a bowl of porridge sprinkled with brown sugar. He wolfed it down as fast as Catherine could feed him. He was not a fussy eater, for which she was grateful.

So began what Vincent thought of as the days of re-discovery. He felt as if a chamber had opened in his soul, one that had existed since his birth, but been locked when he had been separated from his natural family. He found he knew so much about Virgil, Vian, Ilona – and especially Irena, that there could be no other explanation. They were days of almost frantic joy, tempered as they were with the sad knowledge of what was to come.

Virgil and Father got into a routine. They talked and ate in the library, sometimes joined by Harry, who had decided he did not want to miss his literary diversion, and occasionally Vincent. Then on alternate days, the two men soaked together in the hot pool, both seeming to get as much enjoyment from talking as from the heated water. Kanin joined them there once to learn about Virgil's rock-carving methods. It was a discussion Vincent was glad he missed, when he heard about it.

More often, Vincent sat with Irena in the Library and waited for the two patriarchs to signal they were ready to re-join society. One day he took Irena to visit William, after she expressed delight at the soups and stews the cook produced for their meals. They discovered they had much in common, when Irena told the story of her "cornucopia" pot. William pointed to an enormous stew pot on a back burner as his equivalent. The secret, they both agreed, as Vincent listened in amazement, was to have soups that were complimentary, so there were no conflicting flavours on subsequent days as the pot was "recharged." William also showed Irena his pantry, where the cold temperature allowed him to keep large crocks of stock from the roasts he made. Nothing was wasted. His scraps went into a composter. Irena hugged William afterwards and Vincent saw genuine affection on the big man's face. Irena, he had learned, could make anyone feel good. She never judged anyone.

Sometimes, Catherine joined them in the library and gradually Irena learned their story and told her own. Vincent was again saddened that his family had been so isolated, but Irena had nothing but happy memories of her years with Virgil and the children. They had been blessed, she insisted.

Vian and Ilona joined the work roster for the tunnel community. Peter had been sorry to lose his partner, but was assured it would not be permanent. For these critical weeks, she had not wanted to be far from her father or her family. Peter visited often, checking on Virgil and discussing ways to relieve his pain with Father. It soon became obvious that Irena was the best medicine for him.

Every evening, when Vincent wheeled his father back to the family chambers, Irena would take Virgil in hand and read to him, until she felt his fatigue. Then she led him to their bedchamber and joined him in their bed. She sensed his happiness and snuggled into his arms, her heart full of love for him. She was happy too, but it was of a different nature. All her family were together again at last – but she knew it was only for a short while. Often they made quiet and careful love. Irena tried to pour her strength into Virgil, knew that he felt it and appreciated it.

Then one night they lay together, both tired after a day of visitors, a dinner with Vincent and Catherine and an evening of music in Father's library. The concert had amazed them both. Music had never had a role in their lives because neither Virgil nor Irena had known even the rudiments, or had a musical instrument. Exposed to such extraordinary talent among the tunnel children, they were a little sad to realize what they had missed.

"Oh Love," whispered Virgil, sensing Irena's regret. "We have had such a wonderful life together. There is nothing more I could have wished for, even had I known."

Irena looked at him and rubbed her hand over his chest, stroking the soft fur there.

"I know, Virgil. I have been blessed beyond any dreams. With you beside me, what more could I want?"

Irena felt his love pouring down their bond and suddenly came to a decision. With that, the tension around her heart melted away and she felt light-headed and happy. Then she felt Virgil's realization and understood, belatedly, that he had been afraid for her, had held on because he could not leave her alone. She felt him relax and he pulled her to him. They made passionate and furious love, something neither had thought possible again. Afterwards, Virgil's purr seemed to make the bed vibrate and Irena felt his uninhibited peace and happiness.

Not much later, they lay side by side, holding hands. Virgil let go the strings of his life, all but one, and drifted towards the veil that awaited. That one string was Irena and she held his hand tightly and wrapped her soul around his so they could pass on together, through the veil and into a place where there was no pain and their love was all that mattered, all that remained.

Ilona and Vian felt their parents part from them, before the sun rose in the world Above. The joy of their release, their happiness in leaving together made the two children get out of bed and hug each other in consolation. A little later when they saw Irena and Virgil in their bed, holding hands, absolute peace on their faces, there were

tears. They had the comfort of their bond, which was now stronger, a lasting gift from their parents.

Shortly afterwards, Vincent arrived breathless. He looked down at Irena and Virgil and immediately understood. They would not be parted, even in death. It was what he hoped for himself and Catherine in his deepest heart. Seeing their contentment, he realized it was not a selfish wish, but quite the opposite. Leaving one or the other alone would have been akin to torture, impossible. He looked at his brother and sister with tears in his eyes and they joined in a hug. They stood there a long time, unable to break it or speak, their tears mingling silently.

Then Catherine arrived carrying little Jacob. She added herself to the hug and somehow, her love for them all made it possible for them to separate. Vincent gathered her to him, then looked at Ilona and Vian. His voice was quiet.

“They were special people and we will never forget them. We have a special ceremony here, for those who leave us. We write letters and burn them by the Mirror Pool, so that their messages may float into the heavens. If you wish, we will bury Virgil and Irena in our catacombs.”

Ilona spoke. “That would be wonderful, Vincent. I don’t think there is anywhere they would rather rest than here. These last weeks have been so wonderful for them. We owe you so much for the joy they felt and the love you gave them.”

Vincent hung his head. “You owe me nothing. They were an inspiration to me and a pleasure to us all. We will miss them. Now I must go to the pipe chamber and inform Pascal. This is one message I want to deliver in person.”

Vincent left and Catherine looked at Ilona and Vian. They looked a little stunned and she realized that they probably felt a little empty since the empathic bond with their parents was gone. She herself felt Vincent always. If that should leave her, she knew she would rather be dead. She understood Irena’s reasoning perfectly. It was also her own. She suspected Vincent felt the same way.

“Come,” she said softly. “Vincent will arrange with Mary to prepare them for burial. There is time for breakfast. We all need that now, I think. We need people around us, friends and family. Come.”

Later that day, the community stood in the catacombs and watched as Irena and Virgil, wrapped in a single shroud, were slid on a plank into a large wall nook prepared for them. They wore, as they had always worn, their gifts to each other. That had made Vincent’s throat close in grief. The locket had held some of Virgil’s golden hair – so like his own.

“Together they lived in joy, together let them rest in peace,” intoned Father in conclusion.

There were several minutes of silence and a few snuffles, before candles were lit to mark their grave and they all walked slowly up to the Mirror Pool. There, a brazier received the letters and flung the messages up the stone chimney to the sky. The ashes were carefully laid on the pool, where they drifted into a hidden recess and disappeared.

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Within a week of the funeral, Ilona and Vian moved into the chamber closer to the hub and Ilona returned to Peter’s medical clinic. Vian continued to join work parties, but it soon became obvious that he was restless. One day, he and Vincent sat in the den of the brownstone drinking a mug of William’s excellent ale. It was a day in early spring and the sunlight was streaming in the window. Vian thought he had never seen anything so wonderful, but was as aware as Vincent that he would never be able to wander in it. He had joined his brother in the brownstone’s garden, though, and looked forward to seeing it in the summer. He sighed.

Vincent looked at his brother. They were not quite identical, despite all Irena’s – and Catherine’s - fears. Their different lives had marked them in ways that could not be erased or concealed.

Vian had led a carefully constricted life, but it had been rich with family. Vincent could envy him that. Vian was a scholar first, and although he did his share of the hard labour in the community, he did not enjoy it. In a sense, he was the most isolated of the family. He had inherited all of Virgil’s passion for books and learning and nothing else really mattered to him. To date, he had been celibate as well, despite considerable interest among some of

the community's women.

Vincent suddenly had an idea. The old family chamber was still unused. Perhaps Vian would like to organize retreats for the teens in the community, themselves always restless and eager to escape work parties. He knew Vian would like to learn music. That could be arranged also.

Vincent made the suggestion and saw Vian's eyes light up. He smiled and Vincent could sense his joy and gratitude. Why hadn't he thought of that before? Vincent asked himself. Well, perhaps the time wasn't right until now.

Vian's voiced his happiness.

"Vincent, that's a wonderful idea. I can take the kids on excursions, teach them orienteering – many things. In exchange, some of the musicians can teach me and others. I'll take them for two or three days at a time and bring them back. That will make the tunnels here a lot quieter. In between, I'll ask Ilona to suggest ideas for the retreats and we'll plan them. She has a practical head on her shoulders, which she inherited from our mother. My father and I were more interested in books than bread."

The reminder about books made Vincent think of Virgil's journals. He hadn't yet read them. That would be a project he must undertake soon.

"I just had a thought, Vian. Where are Virgil's journals? I would like to read them."

"I think they're still in that little trunk, Vincent. He didn't write in them much after we came here. Of course, you should read them – we all should. You take them first and then Ilona and I will read them. I understand you write journals as well."

Vincent smiled at the irony. "Yes, and I suspect some of mine will be as painful to my child as Virgil's will be to us. I had dark periods in my life – even after I met Catherine. Now, the entries are almost banal," he laughed.

"Oh, I'm sure they are never that, Vincent," Vian remarked. "Would you allow me to read them?"

Vincent started. Some of his journals were intensely personal. However, Vian was his brother. Who else would understand them as well?

"Yes, of course you may read them, although you will find some entries disturbing."

Vian looked at this brother, conscious that he may have overstepped a boundary. Vincent was so used to keeping his thoughts to himself. He'd had no one to confide in, unlike himself.

"Vincent, I don't have to read your journals if you are not comfortable with the idea. It's just my curiosity showing. But I can promise that I will never let anyone else see them, most especially Ilona. She, I suspect, would not want to intrude anyway."

Vincent gave a sigh of relief. "Thank you Vian. I would appreciate your discretion. Even Catherine has not read my journals. One day, Jacob will read them I expect, but probably not until I am dead."

"So be it," intoned Vian, raising his mug in salute. "But you know, I think it would be nice if we could read my father's journals aloud to each other, here in the den. I suspect that they too will be somewhat emotional at times."

That is an inspired idea. Yes, let's do that. It will give us good reason to keep some of William's excellent beer on hand – strictly to lubricate our vocal chords, of course."

"Of course," Vian agreed with a laugh.

Over the following months, the brothers followed through on their plan and Vincent and Vian both learned more about their father. There were indeed emotional entries and some that drove the brothers to tears and hugs. They discussed what they read and Vincent began to feel a part of his family, at last. They all had so much in common.

Catherine and Ilona became friends and often took little Jacob with them on shopping and sightseeing trips. For Catherine the experience was a novel one. No one else from the tunnels was remotely interested in the world Above. They had left it by choice and had no desire to return to it. Ilona, though, had no such reticence. She helped Catherine see New York with new eyes and the stories she told of her impressions thrilled both Vian and Vincent.

Vincent's family, Catherine realized, had enriched their lives in ways she could not have imagined when they had first been introduced. Her one remaining concern was that Ilona and Vian find partners and experience the

joy she and Vincent shared. But, she reflected, look how long it had taken Vincent to accept her as a permanent presence in his life.

Virgil and Irena had been perfect parents. While no life was without limits, love had none – and it always found a way. There was still time for their other two children to find that truth.

As it happened, Vian found love in an unexpected place. He occasionally taught the children's history class, aided by Brooke. She had mentioned, once, that the Tunnels had history too and taken him to see Elizabeth and her painted walls.

Brooke had been upset when Michael left to attend university, and soon realized that her schoolgirl crush would not bring him back. Word reached her that he had a girlfriend Above. She refused to talk about him and concentrated on teaching. Vian, unaware of her sorrow, had treated her with real friendship and she began to see him as something more than a fellow teacher. She realized he knew almost nothing about anyone in the community - a bonus. Too many others looked at her with pity.

Elizabeth, meanwhile, showed no signs of flagging in her painting project. Damage done by the blasting for Burch Tower had been repaired as best it could with cement.

The historian in Vian was fascinated with the paintings. Elizabeth, for her part, treated Vian much as she did Vincent. She was flattered at the attention and told him the stories behind the paintings. Vian then began to make notes and then take photographs of the various paintings, with the intention of writing a book of Tunnel history, with related references to events in the world Above, some of which were also portrayed on the walls. He began to feel as if he had missed something critical, and found the knowledge he gained addictive.

Brooke, now intrigued herself, helped him to light the wall areas with a large battery-powered flashlight, so that he could take good quality photographs. The two worked long hours in the painted tunnels, well aware that Elizabeth, for all her energy, would not live forever. Catherine supplied him with some portable darkroom equipment and he and Brooke developed the film and discussed the design and content of the book. By the time the rough draft was ready, the two were inseparable. Brooke moved into the big chamber he shared with Ilona and Ilona moved back into the family's former quarters near the brownstone. Soon Vian and Brook expanded their photography into the deeper tunnels and areas discovered by both Irena and Virgil, as well as Vincent, Mouse and others. They often camped out in the Gilchrist family's cavern to do this work. Their record became an important part of the communities archives. When they had their first child, a little boy who was a carbon copy of Vian, they rejoiced.

Ilona, meanwhile, had become a fine doctor, and when Peter he retired, just after Catherine gave birth to the twins, he offered her his practice. However, Ilona declined and decided that she preferred outreach medical services. She ran the tunnel community's clinic, which had been moved to the brownstone adjoining that of Catherine and Vincent. There she helped to train students and used a legacy from Peter and the Foundation to send them to medical school. She continued to live in her chamber Below, using the entrance in the brownstone.

Despite Catherine's best efforts, Ilona did not find a soul mate. Like Jacob her son, Ilona never felt completely comfortable with topsiders, Peter being the sole exception. She and Jacob became good friends, though, despite their age difference. To Jacob, Ilona was the only one in the Tunnels who could understand his conundrum. Both agreed that being 'different' like Vian, Vincent or the twins, would have been easier. Their restrictions would have obvious and uncomplicated. As it was, neither wished to start a relationship that meant introducing an outsider to the tunnel community – and neither wanted to live Above. They, more than any other of the special children, the children and grandchildren of Virgil and Irena, felt caught between two worlds. They did not feel deprived, though. The love of the tunnel community and their family was always there – and they both had work they cared deeply about.

Nothing else was so important. That too was a legacy to those two special people.

END