

Series 6 - Inspired by Season Two (part 1)

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by Angie

The Prodigal's Return

*Land of Heart's Desire,
Where beauty has no ebb, decay no flood,
But joy is wisdom, Time an endless song
- William Butler Yeats*

Climbing down the metal fire escape was the hardest thing Rolley had ever done. His brain was telling him to run ... run and hide, but his heart was still up there on the roof with Vincent.

He couldn't believe that Vincent had followed him, sent that woman to drag him from the men's shelter, after so many years. Why had he done that?

The sorrow he had seen on Vincent's face as he told him that terrible story of Miss Kendricks' death, had stabbed him like a knife. But the pain as Vincent tried to convince him to return Below was worse. Far worse, because Rolley knew what being Above cost Vincent. His very existence was full of challenges that Rolley could not imagine. Yet, he had exposed himself to danger - for *him*.

It would have been nice to run into Vincent's arms and ask forgiveness. He knew Vincent had already forgiven him. He had already known the story of Miss Kendricks' death – although not Rolley's part in it. But that didn't matter to Vincent either. He did not dwell on the past. He was only interested in Rolley.

In the end, it was Rolley's shame – that Vincent had found him, and the knowledge of his own worthlessness which won out. He could not return to the rooftop. He would not be able to refuse to go with Vincent back Below if he did. And he couldn't do that. He couldn't face the looks on the faces of all those people who had befriended him, trusted him. Then there was that woman who came to him. Catherine. His shame was worse because she had heard the story too.

Rolley pounded on the shelter door and the grumpy warden let him in. He returned to his cot and faced the wall. But he couldn't sleep. Those months Below when he had learned to put names to the music he played were like a dream now. Had he really learned to read music? Had they really stolen a grand piano for him? Yes – and he had left them all on the night that was to be his first concert. For what? To be with a brother who was a failure at everything he did. He wasn't even a good gang leader. Other gangs shunned him and his two friends. He robbed Mom & Pop shops to survive and never got more than \$40. Those places did not keep cash around anymore. Everyone used plastic at night. His brother couldn't even steal a purse from an elderly lady without killing her. Miss Kendricks. While he, Rolley, had watched and done nothing.

Rolley held his hands in front of his face. Even in the dim light of the shelter, he could see that his nails were cracked and dirty, his hands rough. He had not played a piano, or even listened to a radio, since that awful night. Yet even now, he remembered what it was like to play, to feel the charge, like electricity, that ran through his body and down into his hands as he played what he had heard. He had been, as Miss Kendricks had said, a robot. He hadn't known the names for what he was playing in Eli's basement. He didn't know anything about a piano. He just sat down and let it flow through him, as if he was a radio himself.

Why had Eli taken him Below? That had been the start of all his troubles. If not for that, he wouldn't have known there was another life possible for him. The drugs often kept him from remembering that lost life, but they had worn off now. God, he needed a fix! And he had no money – just the half hundred dollar bill that woman had given him as a bribe to get him out of the shelter and talking to Vincent. He had not asked for the other half – had forgotten. He could not even fool himself that he had been too ashamed to ask. If he had thought of it, he would have.

Now he was penniless and the shakes were starting. He wanted to die. He deserved to die, but was too much of a coward to take his own life in any simple way. He didn't even own a penknife. He would never be able to walk to a bridge to jump off. Then he remembered something. Yes. He could do that.

Rolley remembered one evening Below, after dinner. Kipper had told him about a place where music could be heard. Rolley had not believed him and Kipper had become adamant. So Rolley had followed him to a place they called the Whispering Gallery. They had sat on a rickety, wooden bridge across a rock shaft that seemed to go both up and down forever. Kipper told him it had no bottom, but that the top was far above. The bridge went nowhere. It was bolted to a stone wall. Who had built it, and why, he wondered.

Then, in the quiet, Rolley began to hear sounds, traffic noise, feet over metal grids. Kipper put his finger to his mouth as Rolley opened his mouth to ask a question. He listened then and heard voices, many voices – young and loud, old and quavering, children screeching, babies crying. Then, out of nowhere, the voices dimmed and he heard music. An orchestra was playing somewhere and it echoed down the long shaft. He had not heard such

music since he had come Below. They did not have radios here – would hear nothing through the depth of stone anyway.

He let himself soak up the clear sounds and remember them. The two boys sat quietly until it finished and the sounds of the city returned.

“Where?” Rolley started to ask Kipper. The boy looked at him and smiled.

“No one knows. Sometimes it’s a concert we know is being played Above, in the Met or some concert hall, or even in the Park. Other times, we think it’s old echoes from a long time ago. We’ll never know.

“Vincent comes here a lot, but he doesn’t like us kids being here alone. This bridge isn’t very safe. He almost fell through it once. He was chasing a man. That man jumped for that rope over there and it broke. He fell down the shaft and was gone forever.”

Kipper said that last with great satisfaction. Rolley looked down beyond his dangling feet and brought his legs up onto the bridge reflexively. The shaft went down, getting dimmer and dimmer, the walls almost meeting before there was nothing but blackness. Rolley dug in his pocket and found a penny. He threw it over the side and he and Kipper listened. There was silence, more complete than any he had ever known. All the voices and noises stopped. He never heard the penny hit anything.

“See?” Kipper said.

Rolley had returned to the bridge after that, alone, hoping to hear more music. Sometimes he heard snatches, pieces, but never a concert like that first time.

Now Rolley thought of the Whispering Gallery. That was where he belonged – falling endlessly into nothing. It was all he deserved. He did not really believe there was no bottom to the shaft, but was sure that by the time he reached it, he would be dead, or would hit so fast he wouldn’t even know it. He no longer cared.

Rolley did not know much about the tunnels – had been amazed at their existence, even. While there, he had been interested in only one thing – his music lessons. But he did learn a few things. He knew where the perimeter of the community was. Eli had taken him in and he had been shown other exits. They had been in a part of the tunnel network that was seldom used because they were in the worst part of town – his part of town.

After the weak coffee and stale doughnut the shelter handed out, Rolley made his way to the tunnel entrance then paused to look back at the world he was leaving. It was a bitter day and he knew he would likely freeze to death if he stayed Above. He almost turned back, but was afraid he might be found before he died. Would be just his luck.

He had nothing but the clothes he wore. In one pocket of his hooded jean jacket was his brother’s driver’s license. He’d always left it in his squat when he went out at night, so he couldn’t be identified if he was caught. In the other jacket pocket was the half hundred dollar bill.

Rolley was shaking badly now and had to get out of sight. He bit his lip to stop himself from moaning and reached the derelict section where he and the Paco had come out on that fateful day so long ago. He moved aside a garbage can and crawled into a small door, careful to pull the can back into place. He emerged into a custodian’s room. Then he slid down a shaft into a cellar. The tunnel entrance was dark, but he knew the way now. He walked quietly and pulled his hood over his face. He knew where the sentries were and hoped to avoid them. He walked until he reached the first downward passage and the rough stone walls of the tunnels started. He found a shallow cut and curled up to sleep. He was tired now and he needed darkness. He slept.

He awoke shivering. His clothes were wet with sweat. He needed a fix badly, but he bit the back of his hand and staggered to his feet. He had to do what he had come to do. Nothing else mattered. He would not need drugs where he was going.

He looked along the tunnel. It was dark. Somehow he had slept the day away. No wonder he felt so bad. He began to shuffle inward, stopped when he realized how much noise he was making. He lifted his feet and continued more carefully, feeling like the cartoon characters he sometimes saw on store TVs, sneaking up on something. He leaned on the wall with one hand and bit the other to keep himself aware. He made slow progress, stopping often, both to listen for noises of the tunnel dwellers and to catch his breath.

He circumvented the sentry stations easily and finally reached the area near the Hub. Then he heard voices. He flattened himself against the wall and waited. The sounds receded. He could smell food and his stomach rumbled. He paused, afraid that someone might have heard that, but all was quiet. The tunnels at night were always quiet, he remembered. People went to their chambers and relaxed. He would have to be extra careful.

Rolley slid along the tunnels, passing the hall where the grand piano waited. He looked down at it, feeling a sudden sadness at that. Mouse had spent so much time hauling it below, then putting it together. It was covered with a dust sheet and looked as lonely as he felt.

Getting a grip on himself, Rolley continued. Remembering the way to the Whispering Gallery, he turned into a side passage. He had to put his hand in his mouth again to prevent himself groaning. He was sweating and shaking so badly he could hardly see, and his nose was running. His body ached with his need for a fix. He bit his hand harder, tasted blood. He made himself go on. Now he had no choice. If he sat down, he'd never get up on his own. Someone would find him

He walked, head down, through an archway and suddenly he was on the bridge and almost tripped. He began to walk across it, slowly, looking for a place he could squeeze through the ropes. Yes, there. He got down on his knees and looked over. The shaft was exactly as he remembered, but seemed to have a blue glow around it. He looked up and saw nothing but shadows. Well, he would soon be just another, a silence among the whispers. The sounds were soft and he tried to be silent. He put one leg over the side and then the other, then turned over so he could slide past his hips. Then he closed his eyes and let go.

But he dangled instead of falling. His wrist seemed to be caught. He groaned and opened his eyes. He saw a big hairy hand with sharp nails around his wrist. Only one man had hands like that. He looked up and saw long hair and deep-set eyes. Vincent was kneeling on the bridge above him. It was dead quiet and Rolley could hear his own harsh breathing. A moan escaped him.

"Rolley!" Vincent whispered. He reached his other arm down and got a grip on Rolley's jacket, then pulled him back onto the bridge. Rolley was shaking violently now and Vincent hugged him in his arms for a long time, then wrapped his cloak around them both.

"Rolley. No," Vincent said at last, emphatically. "You can't leave us like this."

Rolley was unable to speak and began to cry. He cried until all the sorrow, guilt and lost years washed from him. Then he began to shiver again. Vincent lifted him up and carried him from the bridge to the hospital chamber, then put him on a metal table. Father came in then and regarded Rolley with real concern in his eyes. Rolley couldn't meet them for long and closed his eyes. His teeth were chattering, then his bladder let go. Warmth ran down his leg and he dropped his head in shame.

Father began to strip off Rolley's clothes with Vincent's help. He was as limp as a rag doll. Vincent bathed him in a big metal tub, dried him and put him in a nightshirt. Father bandaged the hand he had bitten, then injected something into him. Rolley slept.

Over the next few days, Rolley went through drug withdrawal in the hospital chamber, hardly aware of his surroundings. He wanted a fix, to die, but kept his mouth tightly closed for fear of saying one or the other. It was the only dignity left to him. He knew he soiled himself, was cleaned, fed just after Father injected him with something. Father or Vincent were always there when he awoke. One time, he saw the woman who had come to him in the shelter. Catherine.

When he was finally able to get out of bed, he found all his clothes had been neatly washed and patched. He put them on and then noticed that his pockets were empty. He looked around and saw a bowl on the table. He looked in and saw a key – to what, he had no idea - a few coins, his brothers license - and the half hundred dollar bill. Rolley regarded this last. It marked the end of a phase in his life. He didn't need it anymore. He felt better than he had in a long time. He wanted to see that grand piano again. He wanted to touch the keys of the piano he had practiced on, to see if he could still play.

He had an idea then. He looked around for an envelope. In one drawer was a small handkerchief. He wrapped the bill carefully in that and put it in his jacket pocket. He would keep it on him.

Some time later, Rolley slipped the folded handkerchief into the hands of Catherine Chandler, after an evening of music. She was with Vincent of course. She unfolded the envelope and looked inside. Then she pulled out the

half-\$100 and looked at Rolley with a smile. She reached into a small purse she had over her arm and pulled out the other half, then extended them both to him.

Rolley stepped back in shock. His voice grated.

“No. Don’t want it. I wanted to die after you gave me that. Would have, if Vincent hadn’t come along. Now I owe you for my life.”

“You owe us nothing, Rolley,” Vincent remarked in a low voice. “You have given us so much joy – once again – that no amount of money could buy it. You are back among your family, whole again. And your music lives in you.”

“What shall I do with this, then?” Catherine waved the torn bills.

There was only one thing Rolley could think of.

“Miss Kendricks. Don’t want to forget her. I let her down. Want her to know I’ll never leave my music again.”

Catherine looked at Vincent, who spoke slowly.

“Miss Kendricks was a gifted teacher and cared deeply about all her students. Seeing them become musicians was her greatest joy. Perhaps you could compose something special in her memory. That would be the gift that would please her most.”

Rolley’s face brightened.

“Yes. I’ll try. Don’t know if I can. Thank you Vincent.”

Rolley thought furiously. She’d taught him the term, ‘medley’. One of those maybe – to remember all the things she had taught him. He shook Catherine’s hand and Vincent’s, then turned away, already going through music in his head. He saw Father gesture at him and walked over.

Catherine looked at Vincent as Rolley left them, obviously distracted.

“There’s still this to deal with,” she said, waving the two halves of the bill.

“Oh, I don’t think so,” Vincent whispered. “That is a currency too precious to spend. I know just the place for it.”

He took the split bill from her and went down the stairs and over to the piano. Rolley was speaking to Father, so he reached up for the metronome in its wooden case and carefully opened the back. He folded the torn bill into a tight square and wedged it inside, out of the way of the mechanism, then closed it.

There let it rest until the end of time, he thought. He looked up at Catherine and saw her nod of approval. She joined him and they stood next to the piano, arm in arm.

Rolley came back to the piano, sat down and began to pick out a tune.

“To everything there is a time,” Vincent commented. He turned away quickly, grimacing at his own pun. But Rolley wasn’t paying attention. Catherine’s mouth quirked.

“And no time like the present,” she whispered.

Rolley felt better. Yes, what did Father call it? A tribute ...yes ... a tribute to Miss Kendricks. He would never forgive himself for her death, but perhaps she would hear his music, wherever she was, and know that he was playing for her. He always had. She had made him a musician, opened worlds to him.

Now he could remember her as she deserved.

END

The Cleansing

*“Canst thou not ... with some sweet oblivious antidote
Cleanse the stuffed bosom of that perilous stuff
Which weighs upon the heart?”*

- William Shakespeare

After Ellie's death and the ceremony by the Mirror Pool, the community Below had finally begun to return to normal. Eric was no longer angry, just very quiet.

Mary, Father and Catherine had taken it upon themselves to see that anything worn by any of the sick was either washed in strong detergent and disinfectant, or if it couldn't be washed, bagged for burning. Catherine had supplied large plastic garbage bags to hold the latter items.

Years ago, Kanin had made a small but very effective stone kiln, which doubled as an incinerator for burning Father's medical waste. The volume now required it be stoked and watched for many hours.

Vincent had taken on the job, as penance. Once again, he realized, he had broken the laws of the community and brought a sick stranger to them. He could still hear Father's words ringing in his head from the first time, when he had brought Catherine injured and bleeding Below, after he had found her in the park. That outcome had been happier, but Father had been right – then and now - although Vincent knew he could not have done differently. He had saved Catherine's life and had saved Dimitri from drowning.

In retrospect, Dimitri should have been left at a hospital, where the disease he carried would have been discovered quickly and he would have been treated – he might even have lived. Instead, Vincent had brought plague to their community.

On his head were the consequences, ones he would have to live with for the rest of his life. No one in the community blamed him, but that was only because they blamed no one – it was not their way. They had not even discussed it. Somehow, that made it worse.

He deserved to be given the Silence, but that too was denied him. So he sat, stoking the hungry incinerator with coal he had trundled up from a deep and ancient digging, and ensured all the waste burned to ash. Normally, the kiln used wood and charcoal, but that was impractical under the present circumstances. The job required a hotter and faster burn. The furnace vented out one of the steam pipe conduits and created no smoke if it burned hot. Vincent had to ensure that it did, at all times.

It was now late in the second day of his self-enforced labour. He had managed to nap between stokings, but the lack of a normal sleep was telling on him. He had removed most of his clothing, wearing only a leather welder's coverall, a pair of thick leather gloves and leather construction boots. He needed these to prevent himself from being set on fire. He had tied back his hair and sat sweating out his remorse. He couldn't even read – it was too dark, as well as too hot, for comfort of that kind. It gave him plenty of time for regrets – between deliveries of water and food. Catherine brought these, giving him a kiss with every one. She was the only welcome aspect of his self- flagellation.

Something nagged at him as he sat on the round leather cushion Catherine had brought him with the last delivery. The relief to his rear end, which had been sitting on hot, hard rock, was welcome, and he was able to push aside some of his discomfort a little and think. He muzzily went back over the last couple of weeks in his mind.

Then something rose to his consciousness. That storage room! He had carried Dimitri there before taking him to Father. It was also where Eric had found the wardrobe to hide in, to write his letter to Ellie. Yes, that chamber was a large one. It should be put to better use than collecting dust and spider webs on useless junk. He had an idea.

Finally, the hot work finished, Vincent swept the ash from the incinerator into a metal bucket and hauled it to William's compost room, where it sat with several of its fellows.

The composters generated enough heat to grow mushrooms, one of Vincent's favourite foods. It was always hot in this chamber, but after the incinerator room, it felt cool. He sighed and headed wearily back to his chamber, shed his leather garb, and stumbled down the steps into the bath chamber he shared with Father. Even this steamy chamber seemed cool. He sighed in happiness and let himself relax, lying back on the stone ramp and floating. Gradually his brain began to work again and he developed a plan for the storage room.

He lay there until he heard the dinner signal and gave himself a quick scrub. He found a towel and dried just enough to keep himself from dripping, then went back to his chamber to finish drying where it was cooler and less damp. He was still far too warm. Suddenly, he sensed he was not alone.

Catherine! She was sitting in his big chair waiting for him. The sight of him in a towel was exciting her – and himself. He grunted, greeted her in his most impartial voice and turned away to find some clothes. He was still

damp, though. How could he dry himself in front of her? He stood still, uncertain what to do. Should he ask her to leave? No. He wanted her there.

Catherine seemed to sense his dilemma and got up, grabbing another towel from a pile obviously just delivered. Mary always made sure he had a lot of towels. He needed them. His hirsute body did not dry easily.

He suddenly felt his legs being dried. The feeling was so wonderful that he dropped his damp towel and held just enough fabric in front of himself to cover his private parts. She took the initiative and dried upwards over his rump and up his back. The feel of her hands there, even through the towel, was arousing him further. He closed his eyes, unable to move. Then she stopped.

“Thank you, Catherine,” he mumbled, and quickly moved to the wardrobe to extract some clothing. He slipped on a pair of pants with his back to her, to hide his arousal. It was dim in the corner and he hoped she couldn’t see anything. Then he slid a sweater over his head, put on a long vest that also hid what he wished effectively, then moved to his bed to put on his socks and boots.

She came to him then and he hugged her to him, her softness a balm to his heart. He would have given anything to fall back onto the bed then and take her with him, but the final dinner signal sounded over the pipes and he was extremely hungry.

“May I escort you to dinner,” he asked, as he pulled away from her. She nodded and they left arm in arm.

Vincent hardly tasted the food, so hungry was he. Then he drank a quart of apple juice before he realized it. He felt a lot better, but knew that most of that feeling was sugar-induced. When everyone was chatting over William’s carrot cake, he decided he’d better take the first step in his plan. He wouldn’t be able to sleep until he did. He stood up and raised his arms for attention. There was immediate quiet.

“Friends, I have forged a plan from the heat of the incinerator chamber.”

Laughter around the dining hall made him pause and look wryly around. He resumed a little louder.

“We need to do make a new beginning of sorts. You all know of the storage chamber. It’s a disgrace – full of unwanted stuff and festooned with spider webs. We need to clear it out. I think it could be suitable for a proper school room. We can keep anything of special educational value, but we should get rid of most of it. One of our helpers, Harry, has an antique shop. Perhaps Catherine can tell us what might be of value to the world above and we can haul it to him. Harry deserves some recompense. He has been our main source of books for many years and we owe him more than just our thanks. Anything he may not need should go to a charity.

Father stood up then and smiled around at the sea of faces.

“I think when Vincent refers to ‘stuff’, I hope he doesn’t just mean in the storage chamber. I admit to being one of the worst offenders for collecting items of limited value. I’ll go through my chamber as well. Although most of you may not realize it, many of the items in that storage chamber have been there for decades. Even I have forgotten what’s there. Our current scavenging parties, led by Mouse, just keep adding to it. We must set strict guidelines about what we bring Below, but first, as Vincent said, we must clear out the detritus - everywhere.

“I suggest we start bright and early tomorrow morning and send a message to Harry tonight. Catherine, can you be present?”

Catherine nodded and smiled.

“I’d be delighted, Father. Tomorrow’s Saturday and I have no intention of being in the office when all this is going on. I love browsing through junk! I wouldn’t miss this for the world!

“May I suggest that we turn this into a free rummage party too? There may be items individuals don’t want that may be of use to someone else.”

Father nodded.

“Good thought, Catherine. Fine then, it’s settled. We’ll breakfast at 7:00 am and get right to work. Vincent will act as overseer.”

Vincent nodded. “See you all at breakfast.”

The dining chamber emptied to chuckles and laughter as people kidded each other about their ‘stuff’. Vincent was pleased. Already his idea had given his family something to distract them.

He and Catherine returned to his chamber and she turned to him as soon as they were inside and hugged him close.

“Oh, Vincent, what a wonderful idea. This is going to be fun.”

Vincent sighed and held her to him, no longer caring if she felt his arousal. He looked around his chamber.

“Well, Father isn’t the only one whose chamber is cluttered. I should get rid of a lot too.”

Catherine pulled away and looked up at him, obviously a little perturbed.

“Oh, no, Vincent, I disagree. Most of what you have here has meaning for you. Father didn’t mean for anyone to get rid of sentimental items, I’m sure. Well, perhaps that juke box should go. Those are very collectible items these days and worth a lot of money. You can’t play it here.”

Vincent looked at the hulking thing against the wall. It was so much a part of his chamber that he never noticed it. He had to think for some moments to remember why it was there.

“Devin,” he said at last. “It was something he spotted somewhere, in some derelict diner that belonged to a helper, I think. It took several men to haul it here on a trolley, I remember. Father was annoyed, but no one wanted to move it again. So there it has sat, all this time.”

Catherine chuckled. “I wonder how many more overlooked treasures there are?”

“Oh, hundreds, Catherine. Father’s chamber is full of them. If he got rid of some, there might be more room for bookshelves. That’s the only argument I can think of to get him to part with some. He has good intentions, but when it comes to the final decision ... you can guess the rest.”

Catherine laughed again then looked up at him.

“Vincent, seven o’clock is early for me, but I don’t want to miss this. Can I stay Below tonight?”

Vincent looked down and dropped a kiss on her forehead.

“My love, you may.”

He was relieved she wanted no more from him. He was exhausted, and his backside and shoulders ached. He yawned hugely, then apologized.

“I have to sleep, Catherine. It’s early for you, I know, so perhaps you should go and see Father for a book or something. Oh, and take a look around his chamber for any likely items for our rummage day.”

“Good idea, Vincent. I’ll do that. And I’ll use your argument to convince him to part with them.”

“Thank you. He is more likely to listen to you than I. You have a good eye – and he would not want you to see him prevaricating, after what he said at dinner.”

“I think I have a notebook in my purse. I’ll make a list of likely items. Good night, Vincent.”

She left Vincent and went to Father’s chamber. The old man was sitting at the table, staring at a chessboard. Only a few moves had been made.

“Who are you playing with, Father?” Catherine asked as she sat down across from him.

“Hmm ... um. This was the game I was playing with Dimitri. He was a good player, but I’m sure I could have beaten him if there had been time to finish the game.”

Father’s losses at chess were legendary. Catherine decided not to argue the point. She was sure Dimitri would only have lost if he had done so deliberately. Meanwhile, she was on a mission.

“Father, I heard you say at dinner that you’d like to get rid of some of the clutter in here. Looking around, I can see some things that should perhaps be moved to the new school room. Like that orery – and that globe. Very useful teaching tools. If you got rid of some of the swords and things hanging on the walls, you could put in higher bookcases.”

Father looked up and around him, as if seeing it for the first time.

“You’re right of course, Catherine. This chamber is like an obstacle course. Books should be better cared for. Yes, I think those swords should go. I don’t think we should be displaying weapons, even ancient ones.”

“Those might have some value, Father. They’re fairly rare these days. I’ll write that down. What about that bust

of – who is it – Queen Mary?”

Father turned around to stare at it. Where had that come from? It certainly had no literary value, unlike the bronze bust of Shakespeare.

“I think it might be Elizabeth the First in her later years. Yes, she should go too. Would anyone want her?”

“Well, movie companies are always looking for props. Jenny has some contacts in that area. I know there’s a warehouse where they store a lot of movie props. I’ll make inquiries. In the meantime, we can get it out of your way. Harry may know the place I mean.”

“Excellent idea, Catherine. I’m very grateful that you’ll be able to help us. You have much more current knowledge about what is collectible these days.”

“My pleasure, Father. Last time I did anything like this was when my grandmother died. She had a house full of antiques. I managed to purloin a few personal treasures.”

“Well, Catherine, if you spot anything that takes your fancy, please don’t hesitate. Poor Harry might have to open up a second shop to take all this stuff!”

“I’m making a list of items you want to go, Father, but I think we also need one to list the sorts of things we should hold for the schoolroom. What would you suggest?”

Father looked thoughtful for a few moments.

“Yes. Books are always needed, but I suspect we won’t find any in storage, unless John put them there all those years ago. But we need desks, chairs, stools, blackboards, chalk, pencil sharpeners, rulers, maps, art supplies ... and any educational items like this brass orery, as you said.”

“Well, that’s quite a list. Are we likely to find anything of that sort in there, Father?”

Father looked abashed.

“Catherine, I hate to admit it, but I can’t remember what’s in there. Generations of children have played in there by now. A lot of items got put there because there was nowhere else – just in case they might be needed, you know. Then they were promptly forgotten.”

“I see. Where can we put all the items people want to get rid of, Father?”

“Well now, I suspect the dining hall might just be big enough. We should all take our own chamber discards there first thing tomorrow. I’ll tell Pascal to send out the word. Then we can gradually empty the storage room and begin our sorting – with your help and Harry’s. William will have to deliver a stand-up lunch. I’ll tell him. We have to get it all done by dinner time – or go without. That should be sufficient motivation.”

Catherine laughed.

“That sounds logical, Father. It should be interesting. I’ll keep an inventory list of items to go above. Oh, and Vincent agrees the jukebox should go.”

“Good heavens,” Father exclaimed. “I had forgotten about that. One tends to overlook the most obvious things – especially when they’re in dark corners. Do you see anything else in here, Catherine?”

She looked around.

“Well, that religious triptych on the wall is taking up a lot of room. And what good is that mirror sitting on top of that high bookcase, leaning against the wall? It only reflects the ceiling.”

Father looked at them and frowned.

“Quite so. They must go. I don’t even know where they came from.”

“I’ll come by and help you look for other items tomorrow,” Catherine promised with a stifled yawn. Vincent’s fatigue was contagious. “Good-night, Father.”

“Good-night, Catherine. And thank you.”

She left, intending to go to the guest chamber, then changed her mind. Vincent needed some comfort. She had sensed a lack of resistance in him and was not about to let the opportunity lapse. She padded softly and kept her mind carefully blank as she walked into his chamber. He was asleep under the covers, his back to her. It was so quiet, she could hear him breathing, that slightly asthmatic sound she guessed was the result of his unique nose,

as his slight lisp was the result of his canine teeth. As for his other attributes – she had seen his wonderful rear end for the first time today. Even through the towel, it had felt delightful.

Was he wearing a nightshirt, she wondered. Only one way to find out. She quickly took off her clothes, lay them on the chair and slipped under the covers, spooning herself against his hirsute back. He was naked, warm and soft. She felt, rather than heard, his sigh and decided that if he realized she was there, he was too tired to protest – and maybe didn't want to. She carefully draped one arm over his back and fell asleep.

Sometime during the night, she awoke to find herself facing into the chamber and Vincent spooned against her. The dreams she had after that were erotic in the extreme, and she hoped they didn't bother him.

By morning, they were both lying on their backs and when Catherine awakened, she turned her head to look at Vincent. He was watching her and looked rested and content.

"If just having me in your bed gives you that expression, whatever will you look like after a night of love," Catherine whispered.

"Catherine ..." He was clearly embarrassed now, but he reached over to pull her to his side and planted a kiss on her lips.

"Hmmmfff," she said, stroking the broad chest and its dense curly hair with one hand. "Vincent, you would test the patience of a saint. And I'm no saint."

She ran her hand further down, felt his stomach muscles tense.

"Catherine," he murmured, placing his hand over hers. "Please. I have not the strength or willpower to deny you, but now is not the time. We have work to do and we have nearly overslept. It is almost breakfast time."

"All right, Vincent, but I've never felt less like working. I'll settle for a real kiss – for now."

He gave that to her, with interest. They were both gasping when they parted lips.

Catherine could feel his arousal against her. She was tempted to go to work on him anyway, but knew he would not want to be late for his project. She sighed. Then she remembered she didn't have to go into the office. It was Saturday – and the sooner they got their project finished, the sooner they could continue where they'd left off.

She looked him in the eyes and saw that their minds were thinking alike.

"Right then, let's get moving, Vincent. I promised to help Father move his donations to the dining hall after breakfast."

They rose and separately took a quick sponge bath in the small bathroom. Vincent put on his thermal underwear and a much-patched dark blue coverall, after giving Catherine one he found in a drawer. It was almost her size and would fit well over her clothing. She looked at him with a question in her eyes.

"From when I was a boy," he told her.

He also found a kerchief for her hair and she tied it back. She looked at Vincent's long amber locks.

"You could use one of these too."

"Yes, I could. I have a bandana around here somewhere." He rummaged in a drawer and caught up a bright red strip.

"Would you mind, Catherine? I find it difficult to tie these things."

Catherine deftly tied the bandana under the hair at the nape of his neck, allowing her fingers a little play time, then stood back.

"You look like a pirate," she commented, grinning.

"Appropriate, since we're seeking buried, or at least forgotten, treasure," he remarked.

They both pulled on socks and boots and Vincent gave her a small patched sheepskin vest for warmth – although Catherine was sure she wouldn't need it once they got working. He flung a loose leather jerkin over the coverall and they left for the dining hall.

Breakfast was a noisy affair and over quickly. Cullen organized a work party to move the chairs out of the way and group the tables. Father thumped his cane for attention.

"Right. Now I want everyone to take a hard look at their chamber and bring anything they don't want here. If

nothing else, we may be able to give our chambers a new look. Harry has said he will be here around lunch time. If anyone needs help moving anything, speak up now. Oh, Vincent is parting with his juke box, so we need some strong backs and the trolley to get that in here.”

Two hours later, after everyone had contributed items from their chambers, the dining room would have done credit to an upmarket antique store, Catherine thought. They advanced to the storage room and removed everything except furniture that might be useful for a school room. They found several assorted tables and mismatched chairs. Then behind an cluster of ancient bed irons, they discovered a blackboard and a huge crate of crayons, pencils and chalk. Several yardsticks were sharing an umbrella stand with a variety of walking sticks. Catherine moved the latter to the hospital chamber. Such things had their uses. One stick was a very pale wood pierced with many holes that seemed to be natural. Catherine was staring at it when Olivia came by and laughed at her expression.

“I bet you don’t know what that is from,” she giggled.

“You’d win that bet,” Catherine replied.

“It’s a tobacco plant stalk. They’re very strong. I had a friend down south and they used to sell these to tourists. Beautiful, isn’t it?”

“It is – and so light too. I would never have guessed.”

When they had removed all the items to the dining room, a team of teenagers began to dust and clean the chamber. Catherine went to find Vincent, wondering what he was doing. He had a crate on his bed and was piling things into it.

“Vincent!”

He turned to look at her. She noticed that most of the items that had been on the shelf under the stained glass window were gone. She couldn’t for the life of her remember what they had been. A curio cabinet now held only a very ornate chess set.

“What are you going to do with all this space?” she asked.

He laughed. “Surely, you do not have to ask that, Catherine.” He pointed at his table where piles of books completely hid the top.

“Well, I’m glad to see the Muse, or whatever she is, hasn’t been declared excess.”

Vincent looked a bit embarrassed.

“I couldn’t part with her. She was my dream girl for many long years. Now she is a reminder that dreams can come true – and that reality can be even better than those dreams.”

He rose and gathered her into his arms. They stood thus for some minutes, unable to break apart. Catherine sighed, finally, and looked up at him.

“I’m keeping you from your work. You should get your box into the dining chamber. Harry is probably already there.”

“Yes,” Vincent whispered into her hair. “But I have never felt less like working.”

“We’ve accomplished great things already, Vincent. Have you looked at the storage chamber?”

“No. I helped move the juke box and then Father had several items to move. Kanin nearly lost a toe when one of the swords broke free of its scabbard. Then a large pile of books fell to the floor. The dust raised will take weeks to settle.”

“Perhaps we should send a work party to tackle that library,” Catherine suggested. “We did find some bookcases in the storage chamber. The school room won’t need all of them. There’s also the matter of that wardrobe. It was too heavy to move easily – and we didn’t think it should be given to Harry. It might be useful. Any ideas what to do with it?”

“There needs to be a place where children can retreat if they wish,” Vincent remarked thoughtfully. “Eric found it useful that way. There’s a very small chamber we never found a good use for. I think the wardrobe will fit in there. We can let the children put whatever else they’d like in there.”

“A very good idea, Vincent. Every child likes a secret place to play. I suggest we just move the wardrobe in and

say nothing. They'll find it. We don't want to make it seem like adults are involved."

Vincent looked at Catherine in amazement.

"Catherine, you are absolutely right. Let's get this box to the sorting area and while everyone is engaged with Harry, we can quietly move the wardrobe."

They left the box in the dining hall, where so many people were milling around that it seemed as if a fair was underway. They made their way to the new schoolroom. The wardrobe sat against the far wall, huge and dark. Vincent found a push cart leaning against the wall and examined the wardrobe. He put his shoulder against the side and managed to heave it up a little. He grunted.

"Catherine, if you can slide the trolley fork under this, I think I can get it positioned."

He heaved the wardrobe up again and Catherine obediently slid the forks under it as far as she could. Vincent let it down and then pulled the handles of the trolley towards him. The wardrobe shifted and tilted and a hurricane of dusty things – they looked like old feather boas – cascaded onto Vincent's head. He sneezed violently and suddenly the cart wheels rolled backwards. Vincent was unable to stop the momentum and was trapped against the wall, between the handlebars. He made a sound of disgust. Catherine tried very hard not to laugh. Vincent was covered in dust. Obviously, the cleaning party had not thought to do the top of the wardrobe, probably because it would have needed a ladder. It was almost seven feet tall.

"Now I have no leverage to move," Vincent announced. "Catherine, you'll have to go and find Kanin or Cullen and another push cart. I'm trapped."

Catherine looked at him and reached up to plant a kiss on his lips, which he had wiped with the back of a sleeve.

"Right. Back in a flash."

She ran out of the chamber and back to the dining hall. She found Kanin and Olivia examining some ancient metal toys.

"Kanin, I need your help. Vincent's trapped himself in an awkward spot. We need a hand cart too."

"Okay. I think there's one by the door. Let's go."

They found the handcart and Catherine led him back to Vincent. They quickly explained where the wardrobe was to be moved and Kanin grimaced. He and Catherine managed to tip the wardrobe backwards from the front, just enough to get the hand cart under it, and Kanin slowly wheeled it out, braking the axle with one foot. Once Vincent was free, the two men pushed the second cart under the front and began laboriously wheeling the huge piece of furniture out of the new school room. The trip to the small chamber was uneventful, but getting the wardrobe through the narrow door needed a lot of manoeuvring. Finally, it was in place and set against a wall, out of sight of the door. Both men were sweating and Catherine, who had been giving directions, closed the doors on the unwieldy thing for the umpteenth time. The door catch was broken.

Kanin heaved a sigh of relief. "Whew. I hope no one wants this moved again."

"We won't mention it, just to make sure," Vincent declared. "In all the confusion, no one will notice. Let the children find it and look upon it as their secret place."

"As long as enough of we adults know about it. We don't want missing children."

"Good point," Vincent commented. "We can spread the word quietly. Now, I guess we'd better see what's happening in the dining hall. It must be almost lunch time."

No sooner had they left the room, then the lunch signal rang down the tunnel.

The three looked at each other.

"Last one to lunch is a rotten egg." Catherine shouted, quickly pushing past the two men and running down the tunnels. She could hear the two men blundering behind her. This section of tunnel wasn't wide enough for them to run side by side and she had the distinct advantage. She scooted into the dining chamber, nearly colliding with Mouse. He heard the noise behind her and quickly pulled her to one side as Kanin and Vincent catapulted through the door, skidding to a halt. Several people looked their way and Father, who had been talking to Harry, rolled his eyes. Catherine sedately made her way to the two men. The tables of oddments had been somewhat reduced, she noticed.

"What do you think, Harry?" Catherine asked, somewhat breathlessly.

"I'll take it all," he announced. "I can sort it in my shop and send what I can't use to charities or whatever. Give my helper something to do. I have a small truck."

Father heaved a sigh of relief.

"Thank you, Harry. That would be wonderful. We can haul the stuff to the entrance below your shop and help carry it up. When would be convenient?"

"I have Mack watching the store now. If we can move the stuff there today, he'll help. He's a big strong guy. He knows about you, although he's never been below. He's a whiz at cleaning up items for sale."

Father looked around the chamber, where almost everyone was now standing around the buffet table.

"Attention, everyone. Harry would like us to move this stuff to his entry today. As soon as we've eaten, I want every able-bodied man, woman and child to carry something. Vincent, can you act as general supervisor? Perhaps Catherine and Jamie can organize the children."

"Yes, Father," Vincent replied, around a sandwich. Catherine nodded her acceptance and realized she was very hungry. She left Father and went to get something to eat. William had prepared an impressive array of sandwiches and brownies. She took two of each on a plate and sat down on the floor, where several others had done the same. There was no room for chairs, but a cache of old rugs had been piled at the wall to make the floor less hard. Vincent sat down gracefully beside her. He carried two glasses of iced tea.

"Thought you might want a drink after all that running," he remarked with a grin.

"Thank you." Catherine took a large gulp and leaned back against the chamber wall. "Ah, that's wonderful."

It was going to be a long afternoon. She looked around the dining hall at the loaded tables and hoped Harry's shop wasn't too distant. Vincent helped her to her feet and they joined the crowd waiting for instructions. Every cart and trolley they had was waiting, along with some canvas bags to carry the smaller items.

Vincent regarded the disarray and sighed. Well, first things first. He raised his arms for attention and got immediate silence.

"First, we need to fill these bags with some of the medium-sized items. Do not make them too heavy. Then load them on the trolleys. Geoffrey, you and Kipper get together a team to pull the carts. Do not overload them. There are some baskets here for smaller items that the children can carry. Mary and Rebecca will be in charge of those teams. We have four handcarts, so Kanin and Cullen, you get a team together to move the juke box and anything else that's very heavy. The rest will bring what is left."

There was a furious bustle for a while and then Harry led the parade of goods the long route to the tunnel entrance below his shop. Vincent remained behind with Mouse and Jamie. They had assigned themselves the duty of cleaning up and returning the dining hall to its former state. The three of them soon had the work done. William brought them out some lemonade and cookies. As the work teams returned, they joined the impromptu party.

Catherine followed the last detail to Harry's and waited until the delivery team left. Then she pulled him aside and discussed an idea she had. Harry looked at her with new respect and readily agreed.

"I owe Father and Vincent a great deal, Ms Chandler. I still have this shop because of them. They sent help when I was seriously ill a few years ago. I would have lost the shop. They watch over me like family and ran the shop. I give them what I can – books mostly – but it will never be enough. Count me in."

She thanked him and left. She met Father, who had worriedly supervised the progress of the teams from the junction, half-way. They walked behind the team returning with the empty trolleys and carts. Catherine took his arm as he was obviously tired. She helped him sit down beside Vincent in the restored dining room then poured herself and Father a drink and grabbed a cookie as William brought over a plate. She sighed with relief. It was done.

After a long sip and a sigh, Father regarded his son.

"Well, Vincent, are you satisfied now?"

Vincent looked at Father and swallowed hard.

"Satisfied?"

"You know very well what I mean, Vincent."

Vincent hung his head. Had he been that obvious?

“Father, I ...”

“Vincent, listen to me. You are not to blame for what happened. Dimitri died of pneumonic plague, undoubtedly, but his disease was already well-advanced when you brought him to us.

“I am to blame. I knew he had a fever, but didn’t do even the most basic tests on him until it was too late. If I had, he would have been quarantined immediately and we would not have had an epidemic. I was negligent. We must be more aware - I must be more aware.

“Peter and I are going to ensure we all get vaccinated against some of the more common diseases as well. Pneumonia, meningitis, polio – that kind of thing. We have depended on our isolation to protect us. No longer. Peter will supply the serums. This will not happen again.”

Vincent took one of Father’s hands in his own.

“Father, all you say is sensible, but you cannot blame yourself. We are all to blame for our frequent commerce with the world above.”

“Exactly my point, Vincent. We must be more responsible. Our contact with the world above must be limited to necessary ones, and by very few people at any one time.”

Catherine listened to this exchange with concern. The plague had been a terrible blow to Father’s self-esteem, but the danger of a repeat was not great. Vincent, she knew, would feel the restriction most. His life was already severely limited – and he did not seem susceptible to disease. She had to speak. She cleared her throat.

“Father, all you say makes sense, but it ignores the most important value of your contact with my world. You are not isolated – you can’t be, nor should you be. Despite the commitment of everyone in this community to a safe and loving place, there will be challenges. Don’t over-react to the threat of disease. In 30 years, this is the only instance of epidemic you have had – and it was introduced by a foreigner. Inoculations are a good idea, but more important is awareness and knowledge - not isolation.

“I suggest that you and Peter train some of this community in medical knowledge and disease recognition and control. You cannot be expected to be everywhere at once, Father. Peter has contacts with clinics in many of the areas where you have helpers. He can place volunteers there when you think they are ready. They’d be welcome.

“And don’t worry about the cost. I will help you set up a fund in Ellie’s name. Harry has agreed to give you 20 percent of his selling price on the goods you have given him. A consignment fee, if you like. You’ll be able to draw on this fund to buy whatever supplies you need.”

She didn’t tell Father that she would supplement the fund with some of the inheritance from her grandmother. It was the least she could do. This community had given her so much, and now she could give back to it in a material way.

Father looked at Catherine and marvelled at this strong, dedicated woman who loved his son. Oh, there was no doubt on that score – had not been for some time. She had skills his world needed, but more than that, she was family – and family did not avoid the truth. She was correct.

“Catherine, thank you for a wonderful idea – and I accept your offer. I’m sure the Council will agree. I’ll call a meeting this afternoon. Medical classes should start immediately. Perhaps I can be scheduled for some use of the school room, Vincent?”

Vincent smiled. “Father, of course we can schedule time for you. We should decide who might be candidates for the first class. I suggest only three or four at a time – and young people in their late teens or early twenties.”

“Yes, excellent idea, Vincent. Our youth need something to keep them engaged.”

“Now, I think I’ll have a nap before our meeting. Tell Pascal to announce a Council meeting, please Vincent.”

“Yes, Father. Would five o’clock be all right?”

“Yes, that will allow me about two hours of rest. Goodbye, Catherine – and thank you again.”

“Sleep well, Father.”

When the old man had shuffled out of the hall, Catherine put her hand on Vincent’s.

“And what are your plans now?” she asked.

Vincent yawned massively, showing all his teeth.

“Catherine, last night notwithstanding, I’m still in sleep deficit. I need more than a nap, but that will have to suffice, for now. Come. You look tired also.”

They rose and found Pascal leaning against a pipe, listening. Vincent delivered Father’s message and then escorted Catherine back to his chamber. He stopped just inside the entrance and tried to get his thoughts straight. He needed a bath. Catherine probably did too.

“Catherine ... I must have a bath. Perhaps you’d like to return above and clean up too. Then come back here in time for dinner, if you wish – about 7 pm.”

Catherine was disappointed, but couldn’t fault the logic. She needed a change of clothes, certainly. She shrugged off the coverall and left it in the laundry basket. Then wordlessly, she hugged Vincent and left him. She didn’t trust herself to speak. She was sure her desire was evident along the bond, anyway.

She returned to her apartment for a shower and changed quickly. What to do now? She wanted to give Vincent time to bathe and nap, but she had no intention of waiting until seven o’clock to see him again. She sat on a couch and concentrated on the bond. Yes, she could feel Vincent was quiet. He must be already in bed. Well, that was her cue. She quickly gathered up her jacket and keys and went to the threshold, careful to keep her thoughts neutral. She walked quietly along the tunnels and silently into Vincent’s chamber. He was dressed, but napping on the bed among the bolsters, his back to her. She quickly doffed her jacket and lay down next to him on her back. Not as lovely as the previous time, but his warmth next to her was a balm. She had not realized how tired she was. She fell asleep quickly.

She awoke to a softness on her lips and opened her eyes to see Vincent pulling away. She remembered doing something similar to him that time he had been dreaming – after he had declined her invitation to Connecticut. She had never been sure if he had known she had kissed him, had been afraid to ask. Now, he seemed to want to take the initiative. She was glad he had not berated her for being there. His kiss was proof he was not upset.

She pulled him to her and they hugged on the bed, Catherine feeling as if she could never bear to be apart from him, by so much as an inch, again.

“Catherine ...” he whispered into her hair as some tapping sounded over the pipes.

“I know. There’s a meeting.”

“Yes. Are all our moments destined to be interrupted, do you think?”

“Only if we let them, Vincent. We must find moments where we cannot be.”

“Yes, that we must. It won’t be easy. It will take time.”

“I know. But the wait will be worth it.”

“So many things have taken time already. To learn, to love, to let go.”

“You’re thinking of Ellie.”

“Yes. We did not realize how often she had nursed Dimitri. She was a victim of our negligence.”

“Not negligence, Vincent. Never that. Ellie loved Dimitri. Her last words were that he had said she was beautiful. A first love is always the most potent. It opens a woman like a flower. That’s when she realizes she is beautiful. It’s the most precious gift a man can give a woman. Later on, she would perhaps have had that dream taken away. Dimitri would probably have left, if he had lived, even without his Anna. Ellie died with that love and first awakening fresh in her heart.”

“And what about the love a woman gives a man, Catherine? You have given me that. Sometimes I wonder how I survived without it.”

“You were waiting for love, Vincent. I will give you all I have - and I will never leave you.”

“Yes. I know. Sometimes it frightens me, the power of our love.”

“It shouldn’t, Vincent. Nothing bad can come of true love. Ellie knew that too. Even at the end, she did not regret her love, only that she was unable to live it.”

“And I must have the courage to live it too.”

“Yes,” Catherine whispered. “But you do, Vincent. It’s there inside you, waiting.”

“I believe you.”

He pulled her closer yet, and their joint sighs filled the chamber. When they finally moved apart, Catherine knew he had accepted the inevitability of their love. Ellie’s legacy, she thought, would live on in so many ways. She smiled.

END

What is Real?

“When you are real, you don’t mind being hurt ...”

- Margery Williams (The Velveteen Rabbit)

Lena looked down at her daughter in her little bed and stopped reading *The Velveteen Rabbit*. Little Cathy never tired of the story, but today she had been celebrating her second birthday and she had fallen asleep with the first few words.

Lena looked down at the familiar words and three jumped out at her – ‘*What is real?*’

It was a question she’d often asked herself since she had returned to the tunnels and her baby daughter, after Catherine had searched her out in her old apartment. She had wanted to return to her old life, the life with no love and no hope. Love was painful - too painful for the likes of her, she had decided.

The men who bought her favours did not want love, just sex. She had given them the latter, and a pretence of the former. It was a game all prostitutes played and their customers enjoyed. It made the strictly business transaction something more, although the masquerade fooled no one.

Lena had never known love until she met Vincent. She had never known her parents, had made her way on the streets, become tough and heartless, protecting herself when necessary. She had built a wall around her heart and prided herself on not taking crap from anyone.

How she wished she hadn’t met Vincent! Why hadn’t Catherine - or someone - told her about him when she first came to the tunnels? They had told her of him, but not about him, making her curious. Then she had heard the story Father told the children, about how Vincent came to be in the tunnels. Who could hear that and not want to meet him? Well, she had - and no one could change that now.

Why hadn’t someone told her that he and Catherine were a couple? If she had seen them together in those early days, she would never have approached Vincent the way she had. Their love for each other was obvious to a blind person – and she was not blind.

The memory of her advances to Vincent made her cringe, still. He had been kind but firm in his rejection, but she couldn’t just turn off her love. It was real – and it hurt.

She still loved Vincent, hopelessly, completely. Catherine understood, but Lena didn’t speak of it. She stayed distant from them both, spoke to them only when they spoke to her, which was seldom. That had not been difficult what with the turmoil rocking the tunnels over the past year - Paracelus disrupting Winterfest and stabbing William, Catherine almost getting drowned by a stalker, the invasion by the outsider gang, and then Vincent’s illness and recovery. She had heard about it all, but felt it best not to approach them. What could she have said that would help? Nothing.

What is real? she asked herself again. In the dark, small hours of the night, she often thought of Vincent, imagined what it would be like to be Catherine, sleep with him, have him love her. And if she pleased herself as she thought of him, who was to know? Did that make her love for him any less real? No, the rejection was real too. She would have to live with that for the rest of her life.

She knew the difference between fantasy and reality. Her whole life had been a careful walk between the two. Her dreams of mountains had given her some peace after her clients left. The reality of the streets did not leave much room for dreamers, but often she had cried herself to sleep, wanting something more, but not knowing what that was.

Then she had become pregnant. Her clients used rubbers, but one must have leaked. Her world had suddenly become painfully real. She was pregnant and she did not want to give up the baby. She could not take clients after her condition became obvious. She had been desperate when she called Catherine, driven almost to suicide. If she couldn’t give her baby a better life, she had decided, it was better they both die.

Catherine had saved her, broken the rules to meet her, had given her hope, then introduced her to the tunnel community. Now, here she was, in a place which fed them both, helped her, even gave her love. Except that it wasn’t the kind of love she wanted above all else.

Did other women fantasize about Vincent? Was she the only one with a mind low enough to want him, despite his relationship with Catherine? Or was she the only honest one of his female admirers?

She had seen the looks on some of those faces when he walked into the dining chamber. He walked like the big cat he resembled, swift and graceful. When he spoke or looked at her, she felt as if her bones were melting. Was she the only one who experienced that? She thought not. She knew lust when she saw it – and she had seen it,

veiled though it was, on some faces. She was sure Vincent was aware of it, probably Catherine too. But no one acted on it. That was not their way. That was how she was different. None of them, she'd be willing to bet, had ever approached Vincent as she had done – even before Catherine entered his life.

Well, except that Lisa. She had caused a ruckus for a time, sucking up to Vincent, parading around the tunnels like some a queen visiting her peasants. She had not known about Catherine either, at first. Lena sympathized with her for that, if for nothing else. They had both been told less than the truth. Why? Why were Vincent's feelings always the last to be considered when new people came to the tunnels? How did he feel about being hidden away until the "right" moment?

Vincent was always respected, of course, always listened to. But his situation was different, and no one could pretend otherwise. His life was below ground and it could never be anywhere else. When he made a decision, especially when it came to protecting his tunnel family, no one could stand in his way. He did what he had to do to protect them and himself.

What made him so desirable? Lena asked herself. Was it just because of what he was and his exile underground, or was there more, at least from the female side? He dressed well, often much better than the other men. He looked wonderful in everything, had more clothes than any of the other men. He was certainly well built. Their diminutive quartermaster, Annabelle, put special efforts into his wardrobe. The dwarf, Lena was sure, loved him in her own way too. She sighed when he left the sewing chamber after any visit, although everyone chuckled. She at least was honest about it. She made wonderful clothes for Vincent, as special in their own way as the ones she made for herself. That cloak, for instance, seemed to be a part of him, giving him even more grace and beauty. No, Annabelle did not pretend she wasn't attracted to Vincent. Lena took some heart from that. It made her feel less alone.

How could anyone not love a man with such serenity and love? He gave it unreservedly to every unhappy child. He had held little Cathy once when she was teething and she had stopped crying immediately. Babies seem to find him fascinating, children loved him.

She had even seen adults also use him as a shoulder to cry on. Here, no one was ashamed to show emotion. Vincent was always there for them, a man who seemed to have boundless love and compassion.

Lena moved to her bed and sat on the edge of it. Reality was painful. She was consumed by a sadness, a longing, hopeless and endless. What was she to do? She lay down and cried into her pillow, her body racked by sobs. It was too much, she couldn't pretend anymore. What could she do?

"Lena?"

That voice! Lena sat up quickly, in spite of herself and cringed. Vincent loomed in her doorway! Why had he come? She didn't want him to see her this way. She had to be strong, distant.

He walked over to her and she saw something in his eyes that made her weep all the harder. Sympathy! No, she didn't want his sympathy!

Vincent sat on the bed and gathered her in his arms.

"Lena, I heard you as I walked past. You know we all love you here. You shouldn't keep your sorrow to yourself."

Lena melted into his chest, in spite of her resolution, enjoying his closeness, the scent of candle smoke in his padded vest – and another smell, something unique to him. She sobbed silently now, unable to stop. Life was so unfair!

Then she felt the bed sink a little further and another pair of arms reached around her. She turned her head. Catherine!

"Lena," Catherine whispered. "We haven't been fair to you at all. Forgive us. We get so wrapped up in each other that we forget that you are part of us too."

"Part of you?" Lena rasped, shocked into speech.

"Of course. I brought you here, Vincent helped you deliver your child, held it in those first minutes, felt your joy. We have watched you for two years, but never thought you were so unhappy. Lena, you shouldn't have suffered alone. We love you."

Lena was speechless. How could she admit to her hopeless love for Vincent? What could they do about it

anyway? She burrowed further into Vincent's chest, still sobbing occasionally, now embarrassed as well. She felt his arms tighten around her and Catherine's hand rubbed her back.

"Don't Lena. We know why you're sad. It's all right. You don't have to say anything."

Lena felt something on her hair, realized it had to be Vincent's mouth and felt his breath on her head. She lifted her head to look up at him, caught his amazing blue eyes. What she saw there calmed her and she felt the hurt around her heart dissolve. She was happy, she realized at last, here in the arms of the two people she loved most in this world, besides her daughter. She smiled wryly at him and then turned to look at Catherine, who smiled back.

"There, you see? We're here for you, Lena, always. You don't have to say anything, do anything. You deserve to be happy."

Lena could find nothing to say. She still loved Vincent, but now she realized that she did not have to avoid him. When she needed a hug, he would give it to her willingly. Catherine too. That realization suddenly made everything fall into its rightful place.

"Thank you," she managed to whisper, then remembered the book she had been reading, that she knew almost word for word. It was beside her on the bed, and they must have seen it.

She had been like the little stuffed rabbit, believing she was real, but not really a part of the tunnel community.

"This is real – for always?" she asked, feeling somewhat like the little rabbit when he was made real by the fairy.

"Yes," Vincent and Catherine said together.

"We love you, Lena," Catherine whispered to her. "And you won't be alone - or unreal, ever again."

END