



Forged for Winterfest

by Angie

"If ever household affections and loves are graceful things, they are graceful in the poor. The ties that bind the wealthy and the proud to home may be forged on earth, but those which link the poor man to his humble hearth are of truer metal and bear the stamp of Heaven."

- Charles Dickens - The Old Curiosity Shop

What to wear? Catherine mentally ran through the items in her wardrobe, dismissing one after the other. Winterfest was special. All the helpers would be there and many of them loved to dress in something bright or unusual. Even the tunnel residents wore their best, and the Great Hall seemed to resemble a Medieval feast. The date was closing in quickly and she knew her time would be limited once the preparations began in earnest. No time like the present.

She had often worn long dresses and the other accoutrements of a fashionable woman from above, but this year she wanted to do something different. Vincent had already decided to wear velvet, a fabric he loved because of his texture. Annabelle, their tunnel seamstress, indulged him shamelessly.

Texture! Yes! She had to find an outfit that would encourage him to run those wonderful hands over her. He still had difficulty regarding his hands as anything but eviscerating weapons, despite all evidence to the contrary and years of peace in the tunnels. But he didn't doubt her love of them. He loved to be stroked, and she was more than willing to indulge him.

She looked at her own hands, small, almost dainty, with nails that were carefully kept, but quite short. She liked to do her share of work in the tunnel community, and that meant being practical. Long, fashionably-painted nails were not practical. She didn't miss the time she used to spend on them, or even the hours spent while a manicurist did them. The latter was part of her old life, and best left there.

In those early days, she had nearly always worn gloves in the tunnels, not so much because of the chill, but because she never failed to scrape against something. The condition of those gloves were testament to the perils of rock walls. She was more aware now. Perhaps she had acquired some of Vincent's grace.

She had never had long nails, though. In the DAs office they were a disadvantage. How could anyone take a woman with two inch nails seriously? Since opening her own office in the brownstone, and working in cooperation with her former boss, she had kept them deliberately short and unpainted. Nails were not important. Heart and commitment were. The people she helped did not want to talk to a society bimbo.

Dragging her mind back to the business at hand, Catherine realized that nothing in her closet came close to being what she wanted. So she decided to go shopping, a luxury she seldom allowed herself these days. It seemed pointless when such beautiful clothing could be made from the discards of her world. She did her best to locate sources of second-hand clothing, and ensure it got to the tunnel community,

through a helper. She had even bought a complete collection of discarded theatre costumes one year. That had given everyone days of enjoyment, both in the making and in the displaying of fancy outfits from them.

Later that day, after she had cleared off her desk and closed up shop, she put on some sensible shoes, jeans and a sweater, and went shopping, leaving a note for Vincent and Jacob. No telling who would see it first. She did not see much of her men these days. The tunnels were busy.

Christmas displays were out, but not yet dominating, thank goodness, but the shops were already trying to catch early birds. However, none of it appealed to her. She didn't want a cocktail dress, a ball gown, or anything with fussy accoutrements. This year she wanted to be fully mobile, while still showing off her slim figure. And of course, it had to be something unusual enough to surprise Vincent. He loved her in anything - or out of it - as she knew well, but surprising him was difficult.

By the time closing time loomed, she had walked for hours and seen nothing. It would soon be supper time in the tunnels and she would have to return. She strolled into a small mews, almost as an afterthought, since it was on the way home, and suddenly stopped in amazement.

There in the window was exactly what she wanted. She looked at the shop sign - "Vixens". She giggled. Not quite the animal she imagined herself, but close enough. The shop seemed to specialize in exactly what she was looking for, clothing that had fur-like textures in styles intended to flatter. No furbelows (she groaned at her pun) or ribbons or yards of skirt. Just plain, straight lines and fabrics that made her want to purr. And that pantsuit in the window would raise those golden eyebrows to new heights, she thought.

She asked the sales clerk for her petite size, and held her breath while the woman disappeared around a room divider. She couldn't always find clothing small enough to fit.

The clerk returned with a smile, holding up a two piece pantsuit. It was different from the one in the window only in colour. That had been white, this one was a shiny grey - but she loved the look of it - and the lines, which would make her look taller. And she had a lacy white camisole which would look wonderful under it.

All she needed was an accessory to complement Vincent's chosen costume colours. She cast a glance around the store, and her jaw dropped when she spotted the perfect item. Added to the front of her camisole, it would make them a pair. Then she saw a lovely chain belt, and smiled. Perfect! The fates were working overtime for her today, if a little tardily!

Conscious of the time, but with a huge sigh of relief, Catherine purchased the items, not bothering to try them on.

The fabric was stretchy, so if it was a little large around the waist, or a little too long in the leg, Annabelle would help her make it fit. But it looked perfect. She walked swiftly out of the mews and made her way home.

She was barely in the door, waiting for her eyes to adjust to the dim hallway, when she felt herself embraced. She dropped her bags, turned and hugged him back.

"Did you enjoy your shopping trip?" he asked her, his voice low and resonant.

She sighed. No matter how many times she heard it, his voice never failed to make her core heat up. But now was not the time. She signed again.

"I did, Vincent. At least I enjoyed the last half hour or so of it, when I finally found what I wanted."

"Are New York shops so deficient these days?" he queried, smiling down at her as she stood on tiptoes to reach up.

"Perhaps not," she admitted, placing a kiss on his delectable mouth, which met her half way.

"I think it is me that's changed. I want instant gratification, not miles of slogging through designer trash."

"Then you must be hungry. Jacob is eating in the dining hall with his exercise class. I've brought up something special for us, from William."

"Oh, I don't care what it is. Lead me to it," Catherine laughed.

A unconscionably short time later, both of them were leaning back in their chairs with an air of satiety on their faces. The chicken pot pie had been wonderful.

"I don't know how he does it," Catherine mused. "Williams meals don't just fill the stomach, but somehow satisfy the soul as well. I wonder what his secret ingredient is?"

Vincent chuckled. "We've often mused about that. I think it must be love. He truly loves to cook."

"That must be it," Catherine agreed. "Also, I think if he didn't produce such wonderful meals, a lot less work would get done."

"Yes. The thought of the next meal is an incentive to pass the time productively."

There was a silence, and then Catherine spoke up about something that had been on her mind for a while now.

"Winterfest is pending, Vincent, yet I haven't heard anyone speak of celebration plans."

Vincent had been unusually quiet when the subject arose before - as he was now.

For some time he and most of the community had been kept busy assisting with tunnel repairs, diverting water from flooded areas, shoring up walls, carving chambers, removing rubble - to say nothing of attending to injuries, feeding the work teams, washing their clothing - and a host of things she could not participate in regularly because of her own schedule in the Foundation office.

They had insisted she continue her work and give it priority, but it left her out of many 'incidents'.

Vincent had usually been tired and filthy when he returned to their brownstone, and after a shower or bath, fell asleep as soon as he hit the mattress. He even seemed a little vague during their love making. Something wasn't right.

He had left early again this morning, so Catherine had not seen him until she returned from her shopping. He had seemed more relaxed - until her question.

Vincent looked at his hands, and when he lifted his head to look at her, his eyes were haunted.

"What?" she asked, wondering what was wrong now. She half expected some terrible disaster. It had been one hell of a year, but things seemed to be settling down, or so she thought. They didn't tell her everything, even now.

Vincent was silent for long moments. Catherine took his hands into her own.

"Catherine," he whispered, and said no more immediately.

Catherine shifted a little in her chair in consternation. She was now afraid of what she would hear. Vincent must have sensed that and spoke quietly, but without *that* kind of pain.

He looked at her, and his face relaxed a little, but his eyes were now intense.

"This year, we have little to celebrate at Winterfest, and little inclination. We have barely survived."

Catherine relaxed. She gathered her wits together, and tried to sound reasonable.

"Vincent, I know it's been a hard year, but the children and helpers need ..."

He interrupted her. "The children are also unhappy, Catherine, but not because of the lack of Winterfest plans."

Catherine nodded. There had been accidents, losses. One of the youngest children had slipped on the long stairs, after a mudslide had gone unnoticed, and fallen into the Abyss. Two others had almost followed her, but their son Jacob had managed to grab the clothing both and lay flat. At five years old, he was stronger than many children older and bigger. The others had held onto him until Vincent arrived

in a near panic, alerted by their bond, and fortunately not far away.

Jacob and the children still had nightmares about it, and Catherine's heart skipped a beat every time she thought about how close they had been to losing several children, including Jacob. Without the bond, the outcome would have been very different.

In the spring, Kanin had been injured in a cave-in and had needed weeks to recover from a broken right arm and collarbone. His apprentice, Kipper, had broken a leg in the same disaster. Cullen, who had been on the rescue team, had fractured several ribs when he slid into a crevice before anyone could catch him. Vincent himself, usually immune to accidents, had slipped in the mud and fractured a wrist - fortunately on his right hand.

And those were just the work team's injuries. A severe strain of flu, just a month ago, had laid low most of the younger children and forced every able-bodied female into nursing duties, the men still being needed to monitor the state of the tunnels and continue pipe repairs. Jacob had proven immune, so had been spending days and nights below, helping to tend the sick by making sure they were kept hydrated and helping them regain their strength by encouraging them to exercise.

They had managed to stay ahead of City work crews, but of course they never knew how closely. It was a big worry, even at the best of times.

Even William had not escaped disaster. The handle on a huge pot of soup had suddenly come off as he moved it onto a table for serving. He had managed to save half the contents by holding grimly onto the other handle. He had escaped scalding, but the noise and oaths had caused Sara, then in the doorway, to drop an armful of soup bowls and run back into the kitchen, fearing the worse.

That day had meant short soup rations for everyone and a frantic scrambling for enough bowls. Catherine had bought some above and quietly added them to the cupboard.

By then, Father had been at his wit's end, and one night had tripped over a fallen book on the carpet in the library, twisted an ankle, and severely strained his knee and arm. He had been unable to do surgery for some weeks, so Peter had filled in after hours in the brownstone's clinic.

Father himself had spent a good part of every day in a hot pool. Vincent had convinced him to sleep in the guest chamber, where he could be more easily helped, rather than his cramped sleeping nook.

The only good result of that last mishap had been a work party, led by herself, to organize Father's library at last. They had also replaced any worn carpet and made sure there was walking room around the furniture.

By the time he had returned to active duty, his chamber sparkled, every book was in a bookcase, and each shelf neatly labelled by category, thanks to Eric, who loved such detail. Even Father could not find a harsh word to say - other than a mildly petulant comment that he couldn't find the book he had been reading before his accident.

Catherine knew that all these events were now weighing on Vincent's mind. He had not yet explained how they affected Winterfest, though.

"Tell me," she urged, when he remained silent.

Vincent sighed, and his mouth twitched a little at the familiar words.

"Catherine, you know what this year has been like. What is there to celebrate? What are we doing here? Should we be living here in this underground disaster area?"

"Vincent, you know what I would say to that. Why does it bother you now? Surely, you should be grateful that you have met the challenges and survived."

Vincent shook his head.

"No, Catherine, we have not met the challenges. That is what troubles me. You have purchased many bags of cement mix, untold planks of wood, pounds of nails, metal pipes, even soup bowls. If we

need support of this kind, can we really justify our existence here? Our helpers should not have to be straining their resources so we can remain apart, in this ... place.”

Catherine sighed.

“Vincent, I have the money and helping out in this way is no strain on me. I’d rather it was me than some of your helpers, some of whom struggle themselves. The Foundation and our various crafts do bring in some money. The deficit is not large, and I’m glad I can assist, as you know well.

“I know its been rough. My world is having one of its periodic downturns, so many people are feeling the pinch. They don’t throw as much away anymore. They now donate what they don’t want to charity thrift stores - and shop in them. Anything that is not suitable for re-sale, we have arranged to take through the Foundation. We can still make use of much that my world discards. There will be no lack of necessities, while I can help.”

“There is no lack, only because of you, Catherine.”

“Vincent, it isn’t always like this, and you know it. This year has been extremely challenging, that’s all. And you’re forgetting one very important thing. This world is a sanctuary for many people my world would not care about - or would actively shun. That’s what makes your world so important - and why we helpers support its right to survive ... anything.”

Vincent sighed.

“Fine words, Catherine, and I don’t dispute them, but are they enough of a reason? We are not self-sufficient, and never will be.”

“No, but you’re a community, and communities are never completely independent and self-sufficient. They can’t be on this planet - or under it. Yours is unique in many ways, but no different really in purpose. Every community has to deal with reality, just as you do.

“Communities above have to balance the need for road work, sewers, water, electricity and even street lighting, against the things they might like to provide their citizens, such as a museum or a playing field, or a park. They have to deal with disasters caused by weather, earthquakes, pipe breakages, gas leaks. They are dependent on the taxes they raise from their citizens. Those citizens have to earn money and be able to live comfortably in order to contribute to their community.

“Your world, Vincent, is simpler. It doesn’t have to worry about the exchange of money, not directly at least. You volunteer your labour, work together, eat together, care for all the children - and find time for entertainment and celebrations

Yours is a true community - not independent, but always together, built on love. And you have welcomed me into it as well. So I feel that I belong and it is also mine.

“And most importantly, Vincent, this community is essential. Where would you all be, if not here? Even if you lived above, in a building where you could all be together, you would not fit into my world. You would need identification, jobs, clothing and other essentials. Your world exists precisely because it does not have to conform to the norms above. You are able to devote your efforts to supporting people, not things.”

Vincent sighed and looked down at the book on the table, which Catherine had not paid any particular notice of, until now. She saw was Charles Dickens *The Old Curiosity Shop*. Why was he reading that? It would be enough to make anyone depressed, she thought wryly.

“What you say is true, Catherine. But in a year such as this, we feel as fragile as the world in this book. We can’t return to what we were. I think we have lost something, and I don’t know what it is, or how to replace it. No one does. That’s why we have not planned anything yet. What is there to celebrate? We are all bone weary, sad and disillusioned.”

Catherine was silent for long moments. How had she missed this? Everyone always seemed okay when she visited, if a little quieter than usual. That was to be expected, given what had been happening.

Jacob had said nothing, either, but he spent a lot of time below, either in classes or doing tasks like others of his age group.

She gave herself a mental kick for not being more discerning. Perhaps they had not wanted to worry her - or had not realized the extent of their own depression as they tried to live a normal life.

There was only one thing to do - she had to convince Vincent that there was a solution. He would convince the others. She looked at the book and had an inkling of an idea. She took Vincent's hands in her own and shook them until he looked at her.

"No, you can't go back, Vincent, but you do need to reinforce your sense of community. This year, why not encourage a focus on the past, on what made you each happy - remembrances, stories, poetry, song - whatever anyone wishes to share. By doing that, you'll celebrate the fact that you are all here now, and thereby your tunnel community as it is now. It will put this horrible year into perspective and give you some closure. With good food, mulled cider, beer, wine, and perhaps a small gift exchange, we can make this another Winterfest to be remembered.

"We need to have some humour and laughter too. We can light a huge fire in the Great Hall fireplace and create a cosy atmosphere."

Catherine remembered a quote from *The Old Curiosity Shop* and frowned, trying to remember it. She paraphrased a little.

"None are so anxious as those who watch and wait: at these times, mournful fancies came flocking on their minds, in crowds."

Vincent's face broke into a smile. He picked up the book and gazed at it.

"Yes. Perhaps we have been too sunk in ourselves to think clearly. I agree we can't eliminate Winterfest. I'll talk to Father. He has been as tired as the rest of us and probably didn't want to broach the subject at this time. Perhaps Devin and Charles will be home this year," he added as an afterthought. His brother always brought cheer with him, and Charles' happiness spread to everyone around him.

Catherine smiled at him.

"And maybe you should find a happier book to read, Vincent."

Vincent chuckled and put the book back on the table.

"Yes. But, it has much that speaks to me, Catherine. A man who wanders the streets of a city, observing, feeling for the poor people he sees, wanting to understand their lives, wanting to help - yet knowing that he cannot, ultimately, do anything except offer sympathy."

Vincent quoted - wryly now;

"Have I yet to learn that the hardest and best-borne trials are those which are never chronicled in any earthly record, and are suffered every day!"

Catherine looked at her husband and her heart ached.

"And sympathy is not enough - it can't be. I understand, Vincent. Your world accepts that there will be sadness and knows that everyone understands. You don't need to state it. Instead, you burn letters at the Mirror Pool.

"This Winterfest, perhaps there needs to be something like that too. Perhaps we need to recognize the sorrow and challenges and burn them in the big fireplace."

Vincent looked at her in amazement. "That is a very good idea, Catherine. I think we could all do that - even you. I know you have been busy too. You are helping new arrivals, and you have had to often help us here as well."

"But my work is clean and not dangerous," Catherine commented. "My worst fear is being buried under paper."

Vincent chuckled. "Then perhaps you can find something to burn too - a kind of release from that stress."
"Yes, perhaps. Newspapers, for instance. Especially the front pages. They're depressing. I'd like to consign them to the flames."

Vincent was silent for a moment and then looked at her with a smile.

"Catherine, I think we can make our burning ceremony quite special.

"Well then, now that the celebration is on, I guess I should get back to work."

As it happened, events took another turn the very next day. Later, she would wonder how the Fates managed to generate such delightful coincidences.

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Catherine looked at the small card in her hand and a flood of memories washed over her as she stood looking down at the mail slot in the door of the brownstone. The card had been enclosed in a brief letter asking her to visit.

Jonathan Smythe. She had been in his bookstore only a couple of times since the sale of Kristopher Gentian's paintings, and then for gifts. Her life with Vincent had taken precedence – along with the Foundation set up to help the tunnel community.

The books in Vincent's chamber, as well as Father's, had given her plenty of reading material – once she had helped to organize them at last. She realized with a shock that it had been almost two years since she had entered the door of the bookstore. Where had the time gone?

Now the mysterious Mr Smythe wanted to see her, at her convenience. She left a message for Vincent on the kitchen table, just in case she wasn't back by lunchtime, put on a coat and left the brownstone. She caught a bus to the Village.

The bookstore with its big "777" on the door gave her a sense of *deja vu*. She walked in, heard the bell tinkle and looked around. It hadn't changed at all. The smell of old books seemed calming and welcoming. Why hadn't she come here more often?

Mr Smythe when he came to see who had entered, looked much the same as well, perhaps just a little more ruffled and a little older. He nodded at her and gave her a slight smile.

"Miss Chandler, how good of you to come by so quickly. Please come to my little sanctuary in the back and join me for a cup of tea."

Catherine followed him to a small, cosy room in the back, a windowless parlour that looked not unlike a chamber below, she thought, since it lacked a window. It was lit by an array of small lamps, had a single cot covered with a patchwork quilt. a very solid looking oak desk and chair, and a small kitchen nook where Mr Smyth was busying himself with a kettle and teapot. She sat down on an ornate, upholstered chair next to a small round table and waited.

The kettle whistled and Mr Smyth made the tea and added it to a tray with two cups and a small plate of cookies. He set it on a table and sat down in the other chair.

"What can I do for you, Mr Smythe?" she asked at last.

He looked at her and his face took on the intent expression she remembered.

"Miss Chandler, I don't have many friends, but you're special because of what you did for Kristopher. I know you love books and obviously you have very literate friends with fine taste. You bought *Idylls of the King*, after all, among others. I asked your friend Jenny – the one who organized the show of Kristopher's paintings – where to find you, and she gave me your address. I have a request."

He took a deep breath and continued after a short pause.

"I have some money now, thanks to the proceeds from the paintings, for which I thank you. I would like to go on a trip to Europe for a couple of months, visit the old world. "

"And browse their bookstores," Catherine hazarded.

"Quite. But this store will have to close. There is no one else to look after it. I wondered if you knew anyone who could keep an eye on it for me. I don't want to sell it and it would be disrespectful to just disperse the books to ... well, just anyone. I've been coming to this shop every day, except Sundays, for the last 40 years. We've grown musty together.

"But I want to retire when I return. I bought a small house in Queens from an old uncle, just recently – well, he almost gave it to me, or I couldn't have afforded it. He had a lot of books, most of which have passed through this shop. He didn't mind giving them to me because he knew I'd treat them like valued friends. Those left in the house I want to read myself, and then pass on to this shop."

Catherine considered the problem. She thought of a possible solution immediately, but would Father agree?

"Mr Smythe, I can certainly make sure this bookstore is watched, but I might also be able to find someone willing to run it for you."

"Oh, I don't want employees. Too much bother. If you can find someone you feel is ... suitable ... I'll sign it over to you. I have a small pension and some modest savings, and even with Kristopher's cemetery upkeep, I'll be quite comfortable."

"Cemetery upkeep," Catherine repeated. She still had difficulty believing Kristopher was really dead, and that she'd had a zabaglione with his ghost – not to mention the lovely portrait he had given them. After the art show, she had gone back to the files Joe had dredged up and seen the picture of the frozen body. It was Kristopher all right.

Mr Smythe nodded.

"Yes, Kristopher's grave is in the Brooklyn cemetery. He was cremated, of course, but I'll give you directions, if you like. It's just a small stone plaque in the grass, in the corner reserved for artists and similar folk with little means. You might wish to keep an eye on it. I'll be gone for at least two or three months, I think."

Catherine felt a twinge of guilt. She hadn't even visited Christopher's grave! She hadn't even thought of it. She took a breath and managed a small smile.

"Certainly, Mr Smythe, I'll help however I can. When will you be leaving?"

"As soon as I can confirm the arrangements. I had a duplicate key made and here is a map of the cemetery with Kristopher's grave marked. The bookstore, then, is yours in the interim. If you'll give me your phone number, I'll make sure the authorities know to contact you, in case of an emergency."

"Well, you've thought of everything, Mr Smythe." Catherine dug in her purse for a business card and handed it to him. He looked at her and smiled.

"You're no longer with the District Attorney's office," he commented.

"I left some time ago. I'm doing similar work, but on my own terms, from an office in my home."

"Ah. Well, I must get busy with my own arrangements. This is such a relief, you know. I only hoped you could help. Thank you, Miss Chandler."

Catherine smiled. "You're very welcome, Mr Smythe. I'll get back to you as soon as I can about the candidate to run this shop and arrange a meeting. It will be well cared for, I promise."

"I'm sure that it will. I'll look forward to hearing from you then."

Catherine rose, shook hands with him and then left with a parting smile. A bookstore! That would please Father.

She returned to the brownstone and finding no one there, immediately went below. She found Vincent in his chamber. He seemed to be doing some tidying up. He turned when she entered and immediately met her with a hug.

“You’re happy. Did Mr Smythe have some particularly delectable book to offer?”

“Oh, better than that, Vincent. He offered me his entire bookstore – and I accepted.”

Vincent stood back, his hands on her arms almost too tight. He realized this and quickly loosened his grip. Amazement was plain on his face.

“His bookstore? But why?”

“He’s taking a European vacation and wants to retire when he returns. He’s asked me to keep an eye on the shop in the meantime, but he’ll sign it over to anyone I recommend.”

Vincent was speechless for a moment.

“Catherine, that bookstore is in a part of town where we have few helpers. We must see if there’s a convenient tunnel access. I’ll tell Mouse.”

“Yes, but more importantly, we have to find someone willing to keep the store operational. Can you think of anyone, Vincent?”

Vincent looked abstracted for a few long moments.

“There are several possibilities, Catherine. I think we should discuss it with Father. He may have some suggestions.”

“Yes, of course. Maybe he’ll even donate some of his books. With a bookstore, he can go any time to get more - or make a request. I’m sure we can find some willing couriers.”

Vincent looked around at the books piled on every flat surface of his own chamber.

“Father isn’t the only one with too many books. If they were more easily found, the children might like to visit too.”

“A wonderful idea, Vincent.”

She paused and then said thoughtfully.

“I wonder if we could include the bookstore as part of our tunnel orientation process for new people? A few willing hands would be helpful to sort the inevitable piles of books. And we want to encourage readers. However, there’ll be property taxes on the shop. It should pay its own way.”

“Indeed,” Vincent agreed. “We must not borrow money from the Foundation. I think we need someone with a good head for business.”

“Are there any here, Vincent?”

“I believe so, but you know we don’t demand to know much about our residents. However, I’m sure if we make an announcement, someone will come forward. Let’s go and see Father.”

They found the old patriarch in his customary position, playing chess, this time with Eric. Catherine realized his opponents were getting younger - and judging by the frown on his face, he was faring no better with them. The thought made her smile.

They waited while he manoeuvred himself into a stalemate, and sat back with a sigh. Eric didn’t look too happy, either. He obviously preferred an outright victory.

Father noticed them, almost with relief, and thanked Eric, who nodded and rose, then left with a polite goodbye to the two guests. They quickly told Father of their new acquisition and he sat back with a look of astonishment on his face.

“A bookstore in the Village? How on earth ...? Never mind. I’m sure it’s a long, convoluted story, and I will be even less enlightened when I’m told.

“Hmmm. I do believe we have some people with the requisite skills, but I think we should not have just one, but several people involved, as well as some of our youth. We could all stand to take a turn above once in a while. I’m sure a bookstore will not stress us unduly.”

“I hope not, Father,” Catherine said quietly. “But you know it won’t be easy. It has to make enough to pay the taxes and we need someone to do bookkeeping and keep the shop organized, to say nothing of being there to sell books. We should also think about security. We can have a tunnel access, but we must be sure we use the front door as often as practical.”

“Quite, Catherine, and a signal pipe must be near the store. We must be careful about appearances. There should be no activity at night that cannot be accounted for.”

Vincent looked a bit crestfallen at that, Catherine noticed. Books were his passion and she would not have him excluded from this new venture.

“I think we can work something out, Father. Vincent must be able to visit too. Perhaps we can arrange for a ‘book club’ meeting to account for the activity after dark. Part of the shop could be made into a small reading area, I think.”

“Yes, some sort of window covering will be needed - if there isn’t one already. We don’t want people seeing right through to the back. I’ll ask Kanin to take a look.

Catherine smiled. “Wonderful idea, Father. I have to get back to Mr Smythe and arrange for him to meet our principal candidates. Can you think of anyone?”

Father rubbed his chin, obviously going over the roster of tunnel dwellers in his head.

“There are some that come to mind.”

“Anyone you suggest will have my approval, Father.”

“I’ll make an announcement at lunch and call for volunteers. I can hardly believe it. A bookstore! My word!”

They left Father smiling and obviously deep in thought. He was looking around his chamber speculatively. A good sign, she thought.

Later that day, immediately before lunch, Father made a brief announcement to the tunnel community about the bookstore, but without mentioning Catherine. There were a few surprised looks as he explained what was needed. He asked that anyone interested in helping give their names to Mary. He also asked that Kanin and Mouse visit him after the meal. The meal was a little livelier with speculative talk.

After that, he stood up and pronounced that Winterfest preparations must begin. Vincent was delegated to organize teams to ready the Great Hall. Anyone with modest suggestions about food should talk to William, he declared.

After this, Catherine and Vincent followed Father back to his chamber and sat unobtrusively in the gallery reading nook. Kanin and Mouse arrived just as they were settled. Father explained what he wanted and both left quickly, together, since they had to determine both what the shop looked like and whether a tunnel entrance was feasible. They promised to report back by suppertime.

Mary came in about 20 minutes later bringing a list of volunteers. For the benefit of the two hidden in the gallery, Father read the list aloud, but the tone of his voice told the hidden couple that he was a bit disappointed.

There was a silence and then Mary spoke, a bit apologetically.

“You know that a lot of our residents don’t want to go above, Father. These few do so now for other reasons. I’m willing to organize this for a little while. I think once we have a schedule and word gets around, other volunteers may come forward.”

Catherine and Vincent looked at each other. With Mary in charge, Mr Smythe would have no cause for worry. Would she be willing to meet him?

Father had obviously wondered the same, for he revealed that the current owner would want to meet her. Mary said nothing for a few moments, then gave a quiet “Of course. I’ll be happy to meet him. Who will introduce me?”

Father told her that Catherine was acting as the go-between in this case, since she knew the current owner.

“We’ll probably set up a time for you to meet the owner tomorrow, Mary. Would that be convenient? I’m sure Catherine will want to talk to you beforehand.”

“Of course. I can arrange with Rebecca and Sarah to take care of the children when I must be in the bookstore. I won’t be needed in the shop at night, so bedtime duties won’t suffer.”

“Thank you, Mary,” Father said gratefully. “I’ll tell Catherine.”

Mary left and Vincent and Catherine joined the patriarch at his table.

“I should have known it wouldn’t be easy,” Father commented wryly.

“I’ll go and talk to Mary,” Catherine announced, thinking that perhaps the two men would prefer to discuss possible candidates without her present.

“Thank you, Catherine. Good idea,” murmured Father, to her retreating back.

Catherine found Mary in the nursery, as she expected and was welcomed with a hug.

“You came quickly,” Mary commented with a smile.

Catherine smiled back, sure that the tunnel grapevine had been working in its usual efficient manner, without pipe messages.

“Mr Smythe, the current owner of the bookstore, would like to meet you,” she confirmed. “I think you’ll like him. I think perhaps he should make me the official owner, and then I can keep the records in the Foundation’s office. Would you be willing to meet him tomorrow morning?”

“Yes, I can arrange things. Perhaps around 10:30 am would be best. Then I can get back for lunch and begin making plans in the afternoon.”

As Catherine returned to the brownstone, she thought about her schedule. She wanted very much to get this new project underway in time for Winterfest. It would certainly raise the spirits Vincent said were at an all-time low. Perhaps they could have a special ceremony to inaugurate their new acquisition.

She called up Mr Smythe and conveyed their suggested time for a meeting. He agreed without hesitation. After she hung up, Catherine breathed a sigh of relief. Well, that was a good sign. Events would unfold quickly now.

Vincent arrived a few minutes later and hugged her from behind.

“Well, what news?” she asked. “Mr Smythe has agreed to our meeting time. Do we have candidates?”

“I believe so, Catherine. Mary thinks that Eric would be the perfect candidate to keep track of the books themselves. He seems to delight in keeping lists and organizing - often to our disadvantage.”

Vincent chuckled and Catherine smiled. Both remembered how Eric had made several of the less tidy tunnel residents uncomfortable as he helped Father do inventories. This would give him an endless job and a significant challenge from the start. And he seemed to love books and was an avid reader. He had been responsible for the organization of Father’s library. He had read up on the various catalogue systems and had organized many of the non-fiction volumes. The fiction, a collection that was in constant use and impossible to track, he had decided to leave for another time.

“And as for the bookkeeping, Brooke is interested and Father has books on the subject, which are now accessible. He has offered to give her some lessons.”

“And what about the tunnel access?”

“Mouse and Kanin say it is possible. There’s an old maintenance tunnel below the Village, which we

seldom use because it's partly blocked with rubble, pushed there during modernizations above. It is a good barrier against the curious, so we have left it. City crews ignore it too. We can clean out enough of the tunnel to create an access and then build a wall from the rubble beyond it. Mouse is going to try and determine how thick the walls are in neighbouring shops. We don't want to attract attention going to and fro."

"And the windows?"

"Kanin said the display window allows nothing to be seen of the inside of the shop at all, and it has an outside night shutter. The front door window is very small and has metal security shutter on the outside also."

Catherine looked rueful. She hadn't noticed those details.

"I imagine we can use Mr Smythe's back room however we wish," she commented.

"We will need a place to sort books, and for Brooke to work," Vincent remarked. "Is it large enough, do you think?"

"Yes, I believe so." She sighed. "I'm remarkably unobservant. I should just be our official shopper," Catherine commented.

"I suspect we will all have much to learn," Vincent told her.

"And it looks as if we'd better get up to speed sooner, rather than later."

"From the death of each day's hope another hope sprung up to live to-morrow,"

Vincent quoted.

I think we had better call it a day and grab some supper, then relax. I'll probably be dreaming of shelves of books following me around the tunnels."

"I think I can promise you better dreams than that," Vincent remarked with a feral grin.

"I never could resist a waking dream," she told him, returning his grin with interest. "Where is our son, by the way? I haven't seen him today!"

"He's helping Mary with some of the toddlers. He reads them stories and they all nap obediently. Our son has a talent, Catherine."

"Like father, like son," Catherine quipped.

The next day, Vincent arose first, as he usually did. He looked back at Catherine, still trying to eke a few more minutes of sleep from the day. Finally, she sighed and turned onto her back to gaze at him.

"You're not helping, you know," she said. "How can I sleep when I know you're staring at me?"

"The flowers that sleep by night, opened their gentle eyes and turned them to the day. The light, creation's mind, was everywhere, and all things owned its power," he replied.

"Don't tell me that was from *The Old Curiosity Shop* too," Catherine commented with a smile.

Vincent smiled back. "Then I will not tell you."

"You are my day," she said huskily.

"And I think today, there will be some light on our bookstore," Vincent quipped in return.

"I certainly hope so."

They washed and dressed and went below for breakfast, gathering up Jacob on the way. He liked sleeping in the dormitory with the other children, and although Catherine missed seeing him as much, he was obviously flourishing under the tunnel system. He was a good student and always willing to help.

He babbled on about some projects the children were planning for Winterfest and then wriggled out of Vincent's arms in the dining hall after giving his father a sloppy kiss. Vincent grinned after him and pulled Catherine to him.

“Our son is growing up,” he remarked. Catherine nodded, still not quite resigned to that.

Father asked to meet the two of them in his chamber afterwards. They had no idea what was involved in keeping a bookstore, he explained. They needed to have some idea before Mary talked to Mr Smythe; to be clear on what was needed from them.

Breakfast seemed happier than it had for weeks. Catherine attributed it to the new venture, something entirely foreign to floods and similar disasters. Afterwards, they went to Father’s chamber to find he and Mary, as well as Eric and Cullen, with their heads together like conspirators.

“Didn’t you eat breakfast?” Catherine asked in amazement. She had been talking to Vincent and Kanin and hadn’t noticed anyone missing.

“We had it here,” Father explained.

“Now, we have created a list of what should be involved in a retail venture. I would imagine Mr Smythe already has most of this organized, but he may have a way of doing it that we need to understand.”

Catherine and Vincent regarded the list on the clipboard Father handed them. Catherine’s eyebrows rose as she read it. She had never considered most of these things. They hadn’t even occurred to her. Retail was not her area of expertise.

“Ignorance is bliss,” she muttered. Vincent looked at her, a question in his eyes.

“If I had realized how much was involved, I might never have agreed,” she remarked quietly.

Father heard her and snorted.

“And why should you know about running a shop, Catherine? Most of us are just as ignorant, even those of us who lived above. We are fortunate to have some less idealistic and more practical people here. I am not among them, I might add. But Mary is, and so is Cullen. We have them to thank for this list.”

Catherine smiled at him and Vincent chuckled. “It seems very ... lengthy,” he commented.

“It may seem that way, but I’ll warrant we’ve forgotten something,” Father remarked ruefully. “We can hope that the current owner will volunteer his expertise in this regard.”

“I’m sure he will,” Catherine confirmed. They handed the clipboard back to Father, who lay it on the table and stared at it with an intensity that made it clear he believed something important was missing. He muttered under his breath:

History

How long has the shop been open?

What are its hours of operation?

Books

How are they acquired and from whom?

How are they paid for?

Do you take books on consignment? If so, what are the terms?

Financial

What does the shop make in a month?

How much are the business taxes?

Does the shop advertise? If so, where?

Does the shop offer senior discounts?

Is there a list of preferred customers?

Security

Is the shop secure?

Is there an alarm system?

Have there been any break-ins?

Do the police do foot patrols in the area?

Structure

Are there any structural problems?

What does electricity and heating cost?

Are there any rodent or insect infestations?"

Catherine chuckled at the last item.

"Do ghosts count as an 'infestation'?" she asked.

Father looked up at her and frowned. "And why did you ask that?"

"It's just that the artist who painted our portrait occasionally lurks about the place - or rather his ghost does. I've seen him myself."

"Well, that should make for interesting book club nights," Father chuckled. "I don't think any of us are particularly superstitious, but in any case, he doesn't seem to be the harmful kind of phantom if he hands out paintings."

"No, he's quite harmless, unless you expect him to stay within the lines."

Vincent laughed at that and Father frowned even harder.

"And what is that supposed to mean?"

"Just that he seems to write his own rules," Catherine told him.

"Does he borrow books?"

"Not that I'm aware of, but Mr Smythe would know. Apparently quite a few of Kristopher's books are part of the bookstore's stock."

"Ah, well then. A ghost who likes books is a distinct advantage. Does he increase sales?"

"He certainly gave me a good suggestion," Catherine admitted, looking at Vincent. "Mr Smythe told me he likes to appear to attractive young ladies."

"Who are no doubt the most intractable customers when it comes to making up their minds," Father commented. "So his help may be invaluable."

Cullen snorted. "As long as he doesn't require flickering lights or creaking floorboards, he'll be welcome.

"Which reminds me. We had better find out if anyone comes in to clean and dust."

"Good point, Cullen," Father exclaimed and added that question to the bottom of the list. "I'm sure we can do it ourselves, but we need to know about any outstanding arrangements.

"Contracts! Yes, we had better find out if there are any of those too," Cullen said.

"Now those are something I know about," Catherine remarked.

"And we may very well need your expertise," Father agreed.

"So are you ready to leave, Mary?" Catherine asked.

“Yes, just let me get a coat. Is it raining - or heaven forbid, snowing?”

“Not as far as I know. But it may be blustery.”

“Then I’d better wear a head scarf too,” Mary said, as she left hurriedly to get her coat.

Father folded up the list and gave it to Catherine, who put it in her purse. Then he looked at Vincent.

“I think we’d better do some more intensive Winterfest scheduling today, Vincent. We need a team to help Rebecca with the candles. We’re late this year. Those candles have to be delivered this week, so that our helpers have time to arrange their lives so they can attend.”

“Yes, and I’ll start a team on cleaning the Great Hall,” Vincent replied.

And William must be asked if he needs anything, Catherine reminded herself silently. She’d have to do that when she returned, since Mary arrived, looking a little breathless.

The two women made their good-byes and headed to the brownstone’s tunnel exit. Leaving through the house basement access to the street was sensible for many residents now, although they didn’t do so any more often than necessary and made a point of going in and out at odd times as well.

The trip to the bookstore was uneventful and the weather was calm. Mary seemed a little nervous.

“I haven’t been here in many, many years,” she confessed. “It hasn’t changed outwardly, but the stores all have different goods now.”

“Yes, it has become ‘gentrified,’” Catherine remarked. “Except for our friend Mr Smythe. I think he’s indigenous.”

“Funny, I don’t remember the shop, but then I seldom had time to read, or the money for books,” Mary confessed.

They walked in the door and the bell’s jangle brought Mr Smythe out from his sanctuary.

“Miss Chandler. Welcome,”

“And this is Mary, Mr Smythe.”

He gave a small bow to Mary and ushered them into his room. He had a kettle already boiling and a plate of cookies was placed prominently on a table, around which he had placed three mismatched chairs.

“I’m afraid I seldom have even one guest, so I hope you don’t mind the rather ad hoc arrangement,” he apologized.

“Goodness no,” Mary smiled at him. “These are lovely old chairs, something you seldom see any more. Solid oak - and they look like they came from a school.”

“They did,” he admitted. “The school board sold off a lot of their old desks and such many years ago, so I bought a few. There’s a desk over there in the corner, a beautiful thing that must have seen decades of teachers. Everything you see here will remain when I leave.”

Well, that was good news, Catherine thought to herself. The chairs were all straight-backed, but because of the seat indentations and curved backs, unexpectedly comfortable. Now that she thought of it, her elementary school had had smaller versions of these same chairs. They never seemed uncomfortable that she could remember.

Getting her mind back on topic, she realized that Mary and Mr Smythe were chatting quite happily without her.

“Let’s have some tea and a cookies first,” Mr Smythe suggested and got up to pour the tea. He placed a tray with three cups, sugar and lemon slices on the table and asked them their preference.

“Plain for me,” Catherine stated, as did Mary. “But those cookies smell delicious. Ginger?”

“Yes,” he answered. It’s an old family recipe. I thought you might like something traditional. Please help yourself.”

Catherine picked up a cookie and took a bite. Delicious! She took another and soon finished it.

“Wonderful,” she enthused. “I can’t say I’ve ever had anything quite like them. They seem to perk up my mouth. What are they called?”

“Ginger Sparklers,” Mr Smythe replied. “It’s a very easy recipe and therefore perfect for bachelors like myself.”

“They’re delicious,” Mary agreed. “Do you think we could have the recipe? We’re planning a party and I think these would be a lovely addition.”

“Of course. I’d be delighted to contribute the recipe,” Mr Smythe smiled at them both.

“Now, I supposed we should talk about the arrangements, as we sip our tea. I’d imagine you have many questions.”

“Indeed we do,” Catherine admitted. “We aren’t very knowledgeable about retail, but we’re very eager to learn from you.”

“That’s what I expected,” he told them. “A bookstore is not a complicated business, really. Books come in, books go out.”

“And how do they come in?” Catherine asked, pulling the list out of her purse.

“A very good first question,” Mr Smythe commented. “I do occasionally buy from estate sales, and as I mentioned, my uncle gave me quite a few, as did Kristopher. However, the majority come from a credit arrangement. People bring in books and I give them a credit of one-third of their market value. They can use that credit towards buying other books, which I sell at market value. I keep track of all the credit clients on file cards.”

“Do you have many of those?” Catherine asked, curious. Surely some money had to be generated in order to pay the bills.

“Oh, quite a few, but I do also sell quite a number of books in a month. More than enough to pay the bills,” he remarked, as if he read her mind. “This is an excellent location and I also hunt out special volumes for people, on request. I have a lot of contacts in the book industry, and I’ll make sure they all know of the new arrangement so that you can use them as well. I’ll give you the list.”

Gradually, over the next hour, the two women got answers to all the questions Father had been able to think up. It was a lot to absorb, but they were confident that the bookshop would be a working proposition.

“What would you like us to do first,” Mary asked at last.

“I think I would like you to take the spare key and all the paperwork associated with the shop with you, to peruse at your leisure. You may have more questions and I won’t be leaving for another two weeks. I was able to make a plane reservation to southern France, where I can begin my tour in relative warmth. I confess I find New York winters increasingly uncomfortable.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Catherine told him and they rose to say goodbye.

“I must thank you again, Ms Chandler,” he told her as he shook both their hands.

“I don’t think I would have dared to give this shop to anyone else, or even contemplate a trip to Europe. You have made it possible. I’m very grateful.”

“We’re happy to help,” Catherine smiled. “And if you wish to visit at any time, or perhaps add some of your European bargains, you know you’ll always be welcome.”

“Thank you. I most likely will drop in on my return. I’ll have the ownership papers drawn up with a lawyer right away.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that, Mr Smythe. I can draw them up on a standard form and save you the expense, if that’s all right with you.”

“Indeed it is!” he enthused. “Thank you so much! Feel free to bring the papers here any day. I’d like to have a few days to prepare for my trip, so the sooner you are in control, the better.

“Oh, and here’s the recipe. It’s one I keep handy because I like to share it. There are so few people who bake anymore, so I usually make some for the holiday season and hand them out in the shop. They’re not messy, so I know there won’t be any consequences to my stock,” he chuckled.

He handed them a zipped folder and a key on a small ring. “Here is all the paperwork and the spare key, in case you wish to come here after hours before the papers are signed. You’re very welcome to. I don’t want you to have any doubts.”

“Thank you, Mr Smythe!” Mary smiled. “I’m sure we will enjoy this new venture. We must let you get back to work for now, but we’ll see you again very soon.”

She moved close to him and gave him a brief hug, which he returned

“My pleasure, indeed,” he assured them, leading them to the door and holding it open for them with a bow.

They waved at him as he closed it and walked back to the bus stop.

“That went extremely well,” Catherine commented.

“Yes, he seems a very nice, old-fashioned gentleman,” Mary remarked.

This is going to work, Catherine told herself.

They returned to the brownstone and went below immediately. Catherine wondered if she should have written up the context of their conversation, but decided that perhaps Father would prefer a verbal report. Between herself and Mary, they should be able to satisfy all his questions. Thank goodness her legal experience meant she had almost total recall. Still, someone should take notes.

However, that would have to wait until after lunch. She and Mary went straight to the dining hall and joined the community, who seemed a great deal more animated now. Jacob was gobbling down his food and ran out of the hall before either of his parents could speak to him.

Catherine sighed and picked up a tray, loaded it with a bowl of minestrone soup and bread, and joined Vincent. He looked at the door where their son had exited and his expression was wry.

“What?” she asked, savouring the delicious soup.

“I remember I was the same during Winterfest preparations, which are well underway now, by the way. The news about the bookstore seems to have raised everyone’s spirits.”

“Good. I hope we can count on some volunteers, although I don’t think we’ll need many. I must draw up the transfer papers this afternoon, and try and get them to Mr Smythe tomorrow. He’s eager to leave.”

Catherine finished the rest of her meal quickly, then asked Vincent about his plans for the afternoon.

“I will be in the Great Hall. We have cleaning underway there. Jacob and the children will be helping. You?”

“The legal stuff, of course, but I need to talk to William too. We were given a lovely recipe by Mr Smythe.” Vincent’s eyebrows rose.

“A man of many talents,” he observed.

“Yes. And a good shopkeeper too, I think.”

She rose to talk to William, glad to have an excuse to do so that didn’t reveal her unspoken agreement with him. She made sure he never lacked the basic ingredients for Winterfest foods.

She found him in his small office, just off the kitchen, looking at his ledgers. He kept an moderately precise accounting of his supplies, mostly for others, particularly Father and his inventory lists. William always knew what he had on hand.

“And how are you set for Winterfest, William,” Catherine asked.

He looked up at her and smiled.

“Not too badly,” he confessed. “Appetites were down for many months, so I made a little less of everything. Therefore we have a glut of some things.”

Catherine handed him the recipe from Mr Smythe.

“Do you have what you need to make a lot of these?”

William regarded the recipe and nodded.

“This is probably the most basic cookie recipe I’ve seen, other than sugar cookies. I presume you can vouch for them?”

“Yes, they’re lovely. The ginger will please the children, I think.”

“Oh, everyone needs some spice in their lives, Catherine,” William chuckled.

Catherine laughed. It was good to do so, she realized. Even she had been a bit sombre of late.

“What supplies do you need for Winterfest?” she asked at last.

He got a thoughtful look and then gazed at the ledger.

“I’ve been trying to think of what to make,” he confessed. “I thought we should try and do something special this year, to mark the end of a bad time. These cookies are certainly special, but something else is needed too.”

“I’ll make my usual meat pasties and such, of course. Maybe I can vary them a bit more.”

“How about samosas?” Catherine asked.

“Ah, now that’s an idea. They use more vegetables, which would be good, since we have a lot of potatoes, carrots and onions on hand. And they’re spicier too.”

“Perogies?” Catherine suggested.

William’s brow creased in thought. “Yes, I could make those, but I’d need help. I’d need a team of perogie pinchers, and then they have to be boiled, of course. And I would need some curd-type cheese for those.”

“Consider it done. I’ll buy some this afternoon and bring it down,” Catherine told him. “Anything else?”

“I think I have enough other supplies,” he told her. “Thank you, Catherine.”

She left him with a smile and went to Father’s chamber. The patriarch was sitting at his table, as if waiting for her. Mary sat next to him.

“Welcome, Catherine,” he said rising. “I need to know what you both discovered about the shop, so now is a good time. Do you have the list?”

Catherine handed it to him and he sat down, waiting expectantly.

Mary began, recalling her impressions of the shop and its owner first. Then the two of them reported on what they had learned about the arrangements and such from Mr Smythe. The credit arrangement made Father nod.

“A fine idea. We might even benefit from that with some of our own books.”

The rest of the details were soon disposed of. Catherine told him she had a key, and that Mr Smythe wanted to officially transfer the shop as soon as possible.

“I’m going to draw up the papers this afternoon and will deliver and sign them as soon as possible, hopefully tomorrow.”

“Wonderful, Catherine,” Father enthused.

She rose and left them, Father still writing furiously, and returned to the brownstone. There she drew

on her knowledge of contracts and fished out a template she could adapt easily. It was a work of only a few minutes. They would need a witness. She thought perhaps Peter would be a good choice, the only person above with enough reputation to act as one. And his association with the tunnel community and all its doings was an asset. She picked up the telephone and dialed his office number.

After a short wait, she got his assistant and asked to speak to him. There was a pause and then Peter's voice came on the line.

"Hello? How can I help you."

"Peter! It's good to hear your voice again."

"Catherine, my dear. It has been too long. What's up?"

"I'm to be the owner of a bookstore in the Village. I'm drawing up the papers now and need a witness to come with me tomorrow sometime, so that we can do this legally. You're the only one I can think of that would impress Mr Smythe."

Peter chuckled. "It would be a pleasure to do more than bone-setting and pain relief. I hear a story in this, but I'm afraid I can't talk to you right now. I have a patient waiting. But I can clear my schedule for about half an hour tomorrow, say around 10 am. Would that be long enough?"

"Certainly, Peter." She gave him the address and then they said goodbye. She called Mr Smythe and gave him the news. He sounded very pleased.

"I'll expect you both tomorrow at 10 am, then."

That done, Catherine looked at her own schedule, realized she had no clients for the afternoon, and headed out to do the shopping. On impulse, she went into a charity thrift store she had noticed and browsed the toys section. There was a huge bag of small toys and plastic eggs. She knew they had come from a line of European chocolate eggs she had briefly been addicted to. It had always amazed her how they could fit so many pieces into the plastic egg in the middle of each chocolate one. These would thrill the children in some homemade crackers, she thought. Magazine pages would make excellent, colourful crackers. She bought the bag and returned to the brownstone, feeling very happy.

Vincent was having a shower when she returned, so she waited for him to finish and dress, wanting him to vet her idea. His face lit up when she showed him the bag of small toys.

"Catherine, you must have read my mind. I wanted to make crackers from the newspapers, perhaps put a cookie inside, but magazines and toys would be much better. William will thank me. There's enough here that everyone, even we adults, can have one."

She chuckled. "You're right, Vincent. I loved these things when they first came out." She told him their story and he nodded.

"They seem very clever," he admitted, prying open one of the plastic eggs to peer inside. A tiny jigsaw puzzle in a plastic wrapper fell into his hands, along with an instruction sheet with a picture.

"Could we take these toys apart, do you think?"

"Some were quite complicated, I remember," Catherine told him. Perhaps they should be left intact. Taking them apart might break them. I remember they fit extremely well. The ones in the eggs are probably puzzles or other one piece items. So there's something for everyone."

"Indeed. I'll help you prepare these, Catherine. It will be our surprise. Do we have enough magazines?"

"I think so. I have a pile in my office that I keep meaning to throw out. They're catalogues and such mostly, with some news magazines."

"Then all we need is some string or ribbon. I'm sure we can find some of that."

"How about we start tomorrow afternoon on these," Catherine suggested.

"I'll sort them out, and put them in piles here on our table," Vincent offered.

He was obviously very intrigued by the toys.

"It'll be supper time soon, so I'll see about getting some thing to tie them," he said.

"Wait, I may have something," Catherine told him. She went to rummage in a closet where she kept gift paper and such. She emerged with a very large bag of stretch ribbon, in all colours of the rainbow.

"Will this do?"

"Yes. And we can throw it in the fire afterwards, along with the magazine wrappers."

Catherine frowned. "I guess it will burn," she commented. She knew the stuff did not untie easily and most was thrown out in her world. Burning was at least more efficient.

"I'll test some," Vincent told her, sensing her uncertainty.

"Yes, that would be best. We don't want any nasty surprises."

"Then I'll take a small piece and do that after supper." He extracted a piece of yellow ribbon and slashed it with a nail.

"Wish I could do that," Catherine remarked. She gathered up his hands and kissed them. She felt his amazement through the bond and grinned at him.

"These hands are so talented that I wish I had them with me all day."

"They are yours whenever you need them," Vincent told her huskily. "Although I have to accompany them."

"A complete package, if ever there was one," Catherine remarked, kissing him full on the lips.

Vincent sighed. "I think we had better get to the dining hall before we go any further."

"But later?"

"Later I will show you the full package," Vincent whispered.

"Deal!" Catherine said, and they went arm in arm below to the dining hall.

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After dinner, seeing how excited everyone was, Samantha immediately decided she had to do something special for Winterfest. She knew her own limitations, but felt sure there was something she could surprise people with. Accordingly, she grabbed a lantern and headed towards one of the storage caves on the perimeter. She bet it had all sorts of treasures. She thought she might be able to polish something up that would look nice in the Great Hall.

She peered into the cave and lifted her lantern. It was ... what was that word from Shakespeare she'd always wanted to use? Stygian? Yes, and the contents seemed to have been stuffed in with no regard for size or shape. She could hardly get in the entry way and as she squeezed past partly-crushed boxes, strange large objects and dusty cloth. She realized that this was where a good portion of the portable, former parade float items had been stored - the ones Mouse had discovered in a dusty old storage room under some ancient buildings a couple of years previously.

She carefully inched her way through, trying to see if anything would fit her purposes. She peeked behind a grotesque Santa Claus. There! It was a small, green-painted wooden bench seat with a heart shape cut into the back. Getting closer to look at it, she realized it had Christmas images all over it. It looked as if it could be re-painted, but she'd have to make sure there was paint. Mouse would know.

She muscled her way to a pipe and tapped out a request for Mouse to meet her, then waited until he replied. Surprisingly, he arrived quickly. Samantha led him to the bench and pointed to it.

"Do you think this could be repainted, Mouse?"

"What colour?"

“Um ... I think” Samantha was momentarily at a loss. Then she thought of the perfect scheme and told Mouse.

He looked at the bench and considered it. “Might need two coats, even three. Light over dark. Tricky.”

“Will it have time to dry before Winterfest?” she asked.

“Sure. Use latex. Wash brushes in water. Very simple. Dries fast.”

“Do you have the colours?”

“Maybe. Have to look. How soon?”

“As soon as possible.”

“Ok good, ok fine.” He regarded the seat and hefted it from one end.

“Not heavy but seat hard,” he commented. “Needs cushion or no one will use it.”

Samantha thought about that. Well, if she had to, she had to. Annabelle might have something she could use. She said as much to Mouse.

“Annabelle has lots of stuffing. Mouse gave her big bag not long ago. Took from old chair that tilts.”

A recliner, she figured he meant. “Whatever for?” Samantha asked.

“Neat lever gizmo on chair,” Mouse replied, which told her nothing. She decided it was probably best not to know and sighed.

“Can you help me move it?”

“Where?”

Again, Samantha had to think. She wanted it to be a surprise, so where could she do it? Here was best, but there was almost no room - and not much light either. She looked around. Maybe if they moved the bench and then shifted some of the boxes near the entrance she could paint it there. No one was likely to come this way in the next few days. This storage cave was clearly a catch all. She made the suggestion to Mouse.

“Sure. Can bring old newspapers for the floor too. Always have some for Elizabeth.”

“Okay Mouse, then we’d better see if we can get this out.”

In the end, it took the two of them over an hour to shift the bench into a space large enough to hold it while they moved boxes back where the bench had been. They were both panting by then - and covered with dust.

Samantha sneezed and looked at the bench again. Now it would need a good wash too. She thanked Mouse and asked him to get her the paint and the rest as soon as he could. Then she left the storage room and went to see Annabelle.

“How big do you need the cushion?” their dwarf seamstress asked. Samantha had no idea, of course, and said so. Annabelle handed Samantha a tape measure and back she went to the storage room, took the measurements, and muttered them to herself all the way back to the sewing chamber so she wouldn’t forget. Annabelle wrote the numbers down on a scrap of paper, then led her to a pile of upholstery fabric.

“This would work best,” she commented, pointing at the pile. “Choose what you think will match the colour of the bench.”

Samantha looked over the stuff and picked up a piece of dark green with gold stripes. There didn’t seem to be anything in a yellow she liked. Well at least this wouldn’t clash - she hoped. And it looked elegant.

“What about for the back?” she asked, realizing it would be no more comfortable. “It needs to be white.” She wanted something that agreed with her colour scheme.

Annabelle regarded her indulgently. She frowned a bit, then smiled. She led Samantha to a box with a

lot of large and bulbous leather pieces.

“These were taken off some chairs Mouse disassembled,” Annabelle told her. “The arms are not much use for clothing, so here they sit. I think you can find some white in there. It can be just draped over the back with a little stitching around the edges.” She walked away, leaving Samantha staring at the box.

Why did her ideas always become so complicated? She remembered the work she had done to create a pen holder for Vincent. Drilling those holes in that piece of rock had been hard work. She had learned new respect for the men who carved out whole chambers.

She rummaged through the box, and indeed found a long arm section with a seam along its length, in thick white leather. Another seam joined it to the front section that draped over the arm. It seemed to be the right width, and she confirmed that with the tape measure she remembered she had in her pocket. She hoped it was long enough as well. It didn't need to go right to the bottom, she realized, just offer some padding in the middle and top and drape over the back. She had no idea how to fix it to the bench though. She took the piece over to Annabelle, who smiled at her.

“You'll need to pick out the stitches on that front piece. Here's a seam ripper. No time like the present.”

Samantha said nothing to that, just sat down on a chair and went to work. The stitching was old and came apart with a tug after she got it started, then ripped around the edge easily. That was quick, she thought. She pulled out the loose threads then looked at the edges now showing needle holes. Obviously the edges would have to be turned under. She wondered how to sew anything so thick. She went to Annabelle and asked.

The dwarf smiled at her. “Now there's a trick to that, which I'll show you. See, the leather is rough on the wrong side, so we can avoid having to sew it by hand.”

She went to a cupboard and extracted a jar of some milky fluid and a popsicle stick from a some standing in another jar. She opened the lid, put it on the table next to Samantha, and then gave her the wooden popsicle stick.

“You smear this stuff - thinly mind - on the inside of the leather at the edge, then fold it over. It'll stick for life. This is carpet latex, what the big guys above use to make sure the weaving on their rugs doesn't come loose.”

The latex had an an odour she couldn't quite place, but it wasn't unpleasant. She got to work, spreading the latex sparingly, then folding the edges over a little at a time. The job was done in surprisingly short order and she was pleased with the result.

Then she remembered the back of the bench and figured she could glue the leather through that heart - if this was long enough. She thought it was. Then it wouldn't move and she wouldn't have to nail anything.

She carried the leather piece to Annabelle, who had just finished sewing up the cushion cover.

“Could I have some of that latex to glue this to the bench? It has a cut-out on the back.”

Annabelle looked at her with new respect.

“Great idea!” she exclaimed. “Now you're thinking. Sure, I'll give you a small amount in a jar. You won't need much. Now you have to stuff this cushion cover.”

She showed Samantha the bag of stuffing Mouse had mentioned.

“You have to stuff it in this opening, and when you think you have enough, fold over the edges and close it with a few stitches. There's thread and needles on the table in that basket.”

Samantha dug her hands in the bag, grabbed a handful and stuffed the cushion. It took a surprising amount to fill it. Then she realized it looked like a sausage instead of a cushion, and removed a lot of it. When she had what she thought was enough for comfort, she carefully sewed the opening shut, following Annabelle's directions.

Not so bad, she told herself, examining her two pieces. Now to see if they'd fit properly. Annabelle brought her a tiny jam jar, poured a little latex into it then twisted on the top.

"This will stay liquid until you need it. And take the stick as well."

Samantha thanked her, grabbed her items and dashed out of the sewing chamber. Annabelle sighed and rolled her eyes.

"That one! She'll meet herself going the other way one of these days."

When Samantha returned to the storage room, it was to discover that Mouse had already been there and left a pile of newspapers, a large paintbrush, three small cans of paint, a large rag, and a long wood paddle to stir the paint. He also left her a flat knife to open the cans. All the paint had been used before, but hopefully there was enough for her purposes.

She placed the cushion on the bench and smiled. The leather piece was just about perfect too. She wasn't worried about any small flaws.

It was late, so Samantha decided to leave the painting until the next day, before breakfast. She didn't know how much time she would have, so she had to take it where she could, before and after normal hours. However, she moistened the rag at a nearby wall tap, and washed down the bench. It would be dry by tomorrow, she was sure. She went to bed with a smile on her face.

The next morning, Samantha washed and dressed quickly and took a lantern to the storage room. The place seemed to soak up light, but she thought she would see well enough.

She opened the first can of paint, stirred it, then began to paint the bench from the bottom. She worked steadily until she reached her goal, then put the lid back on the paint. She couldn't continue with the next colour, but maybe the last one was possible. But first she had to clean off her paint brush. She did that at the wall tap, making sure to cover the wet spot with sand, so it would dry. Then she carefully opened another can and stirred it with the opposite end of the stick after wiping the wet end on some newspapers. She painted the top part of the bench and then stood back to regard her handiwork. Yes, this was going to be nice. It would need another coat of paint though. Mouse was right.

She sighed and took her paintbrush and rinsed it out again. She would not be able to paint the last colour for several hours.

The signal for breakfast came and she headed to the dining hall, hoping that whatever job she was given would not take all day. Classes had been suspended so everyone could help with the initial preparations for Winterfest.

Breakfast seemed even more animated. There was laughter when Mouse sat down with a full bowl of porridge with a small mountain of brown sugar on top, and almost overflowing with milk. He grinned around at his friends, then dug in with gusto.

Samantha took a more modest bowl and took a look at the work roster on the chalk board. She was scheduled to help Rebecca with the candles until lunch time. Well, could be worse. She liked doing those. She was not listed for anything in the afternoon, so she should be able to finish painting the bench the remaining colour. Then before breakfast tomorrow, she'd be able to repaint the other two parts. The last one could be repainted before bedtime, with luck.

She sighed. It would be ready in time. Mouse would probably help her carry it down to the Great Hall. He never gave away secrets. They would have to cover it with something and hide it in a corner. She wanted it to be a surprise, especially for Vincent and Catherine, although anyone could sit on it.

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Catherine returned to the brownstone after breakfast, did some necessary paperwork, then gathered up the legal documents. She made it to the book store just ahead of Peter. They entered and found Mr Smythe at his sorting table, cleared of books, but holding a large ledger and long metal file card box. He smiled at them and Catherine introduced Peter. He welcomed them into his back room and to his desk, which was also very tidy. Catherine showed him the documents and he read them over carefully. "You've done exactly as I would wish," he commented.

They all signed the documents and Catherine used her legal stamp to date them.

She sighed happily.

"I'm so glad you contacted me, Mr Smythe." she remarked. "This is almost a Christmas present, and I know we'll enjoy the work."

Peter looked at them both and smiled too.

"Well, I can see I am not needed, so I'll leave you two to it. Nice to meet you Mr Smythe. May I say that you could not find a better person to manage your store."

"It's not mine now," he chuckled. "I plan to travel a bit."

"Bon voyage, then," Peter laughed and left them with a wave and fond farewell.

"I take it the ledger and file cards out there are your records," Catherine said at last.

"Yes, and you'll find any other records you want records in this desk's drawers. All that remains is for me to give you the keys."

He pulled out a ring from his jacket pocket and handed it to her. It had five keys. Catherine looked a little puzzled.

"This is the front door, like the one I gave you the other day, and this is the back," he explained, indicating two of the keys. These other two are for the shutters on the door and display window. This last is for an old wooden filing cabinet in the cellar where I keep past records, over 40 years of them."

"May I see the back door?" Catherine asked. She had not realized there was one, but of course there had to be. That was law.

"Naturally. This way." He led her to what she had assumed was a bathroom door, and opened it. It led into a small hallway with three doors, one indeed a bathroom, as he showed her, another led to the cellar, and the last, at the end of the hall, opened onto the alleyway. That door was solid wood, metal covered and creaked alarmingly.

Mr Smythe apologized. "I almost never use this door," he confessed. "My trade usually enters by the front door. I'm sure a little oil will fix it."

"Of course," Catherine smiled. She looked out and saw a typical alley, lined with dumpsters and dim even in broad daylight. It would give them another option for opening or closing the shop, and she liked that. She expected there would be a lot of traffic from helpers and the tunnel community for some time.

They returned to the shop and Mr Smythe closed the door and bolted it.

"It locks automatically on closing from the inside," he remarked. "The bolt just makes me feel safer when I'm in here."

"Have you had problems?" she asked. He had not mentioned anything when she and Mary had queried him.

"No, not really. Certainly not since Kristopher became its guardian, in his way. He can create an air of ... how shall I say it ... morbidity. It seems to act as a deterrent to anyone thinking of breaking in the back way. The front entrance is equally solid, and too exposed for most crooks.

"Kristopher ..." Catherine whispered.

As she did so, she suddenly felt very cold, as if she stood in an icy draft. She frowned a little, then moved sideways. The room warmed a little. She looked at where she had stood, then looked at Mr Smythe. He smiled knowingly at her.

“Yes, that’s one of his tricks. Quite effective, I think.”

“So he’s here somewhere?” Catherine asked.

“I don’t think he leaves here often,” Mr Smythe confessed. “He was happy here and he seems to ‘haunt’ the shop, as you know. Perhaps he’ll find other interests now you are taking over. My life has been quite ... unremarkable. Yours, I suspect, will have a great deal more fascination for him.”

“I’d bet on it,” Catherine remarked, remembering how he had accosted her in the culvert while she was giving Vincent the copy of *‘Idylls of a King’*. Well, if that happened, they could deal with it. They owed him a great debt for the portrait, although she was not sure what they could do for a ghost. No doubt he would let them know. He wasn’t a shy ghost, just one who liked to play with their assumptions. He definitely worked outside the lines, as Vincent had said.

Catherine stopped that train of thought with a grimace. Here she was trying to form a plan for a ghost! Ridiculous! She gathered up the papers from the desk and turned to Mr Smythe.

“I guess you can leave for your trip whenever you wish, “ she told him with a smile.

“Yes, and I think I’ll do so right now and begin my preparations. There’s nothing more I need, nor do I take anything with me, except memories. You’re in charge. This is a Saturday, and I usually don’t open on Mondays, so you could just close the shop early and have some time to plan.”

“Good idea,” Catherine replied. There was a lot of work to do yet, but they’d have to have a seamless transfer of the shop. They didn’t want to lose a day’s trade if they could help it, but half a day, yes, that would be fine.

She followed Mr Smythe to the front door. He took one look around the bookstore, as if wanting to keep that serene view as a final memory, then smiled at her and wished her a good morning.

“And please do come back to visit,” Catherine told him as they shook hands.

“I certainly will, but not for some while,” he replied. “I have a world to explore.”

Catherine closed the door behind him and turned the hanging sign in the small window from “Open” to ‘Shut’. An open and shut case, she chuckled to herself. Would they were all so simply dealt with!

She moved the ledger and file card box to the desk and then sat down in the desk’s chair and looked around. Mr Smythe had not taken even the teapot! She decided there was nothing more to do at present. She’d have to find out when the tunnel entry would be done. They should open the shop via the front door, and at least some helpers should come in that way. She wondered where the nearest tunnel entry was. The back door bolt could only be set from the inside, a minor inconvenience. She’d better look downstairs before she left.

She went down into the cellar and turned on the light. A single light bulb shone dimly from the ceiling. The room was no smaller than the store above, with a large number of cardboard fruit trays of books, spine side up. Each tray was neatly labelled on the front with black marker, and all were neatly stacked on old wooden trestle tables. She guessed the books were either duplicates, or there wasn’t room for them at present. Something for Eric to look into, she decided.

The wooden filing cabinet, a tall four drawer one, was an effective room divider between the books and a small sink unit.

The room was clean and dry, and still had plenty of room. They could even arrange for their “book club” meetings in it, with a few more chairs and an end table or two. There was an electrical outlet, so they could boil water, perhaps even have a microwave for making popcorn. That would be a nice surprise for Vincent and the tunnel guests.

She couldn't tell which wall was going to form the tunnel access, but one wall had been roughly wood panelled. She hoped it would be the one they wanted to use. She'd have to make sure they covered everything with drop sheets, including a curtain in the cellar entry, before they started pounding out the walls. She'd talk to Kanin about that.

Satisfied that she knew what was necessary, Catherine returned to the back room and prepared to leave. She put on her coat, grabbed her briefcase and turned. She shrieked when she saw a large shape silhouetted in the doorway, then clapped her hand over her mouth when she recognized it as Kristopher. She sent a wave of apology to Vincent. She didn't want him busting through a wall!

"What?" she asked her ghostly visitor, still flustered. He looked embarrassed.

"Sorry I startled you. Just wanted to thank you for taking over this place." Kristopher looked around and then looked at her with a smile.

"There'll have to be a few changes, but nothing dramatic," she told him, wondering how much he knew. He nodded. "Yes, Vincent must be allowed to come and go off hours. I'd like that."

"Why?"

"Oh, I think we could have some interesting conversations on literature and art. I don't get much chance to talk you know. People who come in here just want to browse."

"And you can help them do that," she commented.

"I just offer suggestions. And only to subjects I consider ... amenable."

"Yes, I remember," Catherine remarked, recalling Mr Smythe's observation on that subject. She giggled.

"No hard feelings, I hope?" he asked quietly.

"No. The portrait you did leaves us in deeply your debt. If we can do anything, just ask."

"I think I'll patrol the tunnels on occasion," he told her, "once you have the doorway made. I can deter certain unsavoury types. And I want to get to know your tunnel painter."

"Elizabeth."

"Is that her name? Appropriate. I'll be careful, I promise. I dislike being shrieked at."

Catherine sighed. "I doubt I could deter you from anything."

"Not physically," he agreed. "But I'm a sensitive artist, you know."

Catherine couldn't help it. She laughed.

"Kristopher, your sensitivities are well-controlled. It's your ... demeanour ... I worry about."

"You needn't, you know. I'll be very discreet."

"Well, I must go now. Lunch is imminent."

"Say hello to Vincent for me," he said, walking through the door into the bookstore.

She followed him and knew immediately he was gone. The place now felt empty.

In the tunnel community, happy noises rang throughout, a sound Vincent found raised his spirits like nothing else could do. He berated himself for being so depressed only days ago. How a little good news could change everything!

He almost wanted to hum a tune. His mouth did not allow for whistles or humming, and although he could do the latter, he had received very odd looks when he did so. He had not even attempted it until Catherine came into his life. It had never occurred to him. He had never been happy enough.

Catherine had quietly told him that he sounded as if he was in pain when he hummed, his voice being naturally hoarse with deep undertones. His speaking voice, he knew was quite the contrary, for those same reasons, so he contented himself with that. He could roar, he supposed, but that too would be misconstrued. He didn't know if he could produce a roar that sounded happy. Well, perhaps he did when he made love to Catherine, but that was private. He didn't want to broadcast that sound through the tunnels!

He would have to content himself with thoughts of the celebration to come. A smile was allowed - even on his countenance.

"Fan the sinking flame of hilarity with the wing of friendship; and pass the rosy wine," he quoted as he entered his chamber.

Catherine rose and hugged him hard.

"Sounds like you've recovered your good humour," she remarked.

"Yes," he admitted giving her a deep kiss. "How did your meeting with Mr Smythe go?"

"Everything is ready for us to take over now. I have the paperwork and the keys. I need to talk to Kanin and Mouse about the tunnel entry. They'll have to make sure they cover the cellar contents so the place doesn't fill with dust and create a lot of work. There's lots of books there. And Kristopher asked me to say hello to you. He is looking forward to chatting with you."

"Kristopher! Catherine, he has been on my mind. I wondered if he had remained around after you sold his paintings."

"Oh, he's around all right. You'll know by the cold spot he drops over you."

Vincent laughed and hugged her tighter.

"At least he doesn't rattle chains or engage enormous spiders."

"I believe he has expanded his ... um ... realm to the tunnels. He particularly wants to meet Elizabeth."

"Should we warn her?" Vincent asked.

"I suspect she's already seen him. He can materialize when he wants to. I'm sure he has no intention of frightening her."

"I must thank him when I see him then," Vincent commented. "We worry about her alone out there, so far from us and closer to the surface. If he can be her guardian, all of us will be very grateful."

"I don't know what he can do, other than produce a cold spot," Catherine reminded him. "However, Mr Smythe seems to think that's quite effective."

Vincent chuckled.

"I suspect he is right. Our main concern is curiosity seekers. They can be easily discouraged."

The signal for lunch sounded over the pipes, and they linked arms and walked to the dining hall.

Catherine went to Father and told him the news. He nodded and pointed at the blackboard.

"We must get a team ready to work in the shop immediately," he commented. "I'll add that to the work roster and talk to Mary."

"We won't have to rush too much. The shop doesn't usually open again until Tuesday."

"That's a relief," Father sighed. "And I suppose it will close between Christmas and New Year?"

"I think that would be a good idea. We'll need all the time we can get to familiarize ourselves with the shop. That said, Mr Smythe has left it in good order. I don't anticipate any major problems."

"Good, good."

Catherine smiled and turned away, looking around for Kanin. She found him and Mouse sitting together, conveniently. She approached them and both turned to her with a smile.

"Gentlemen! I just wanted to know how long you think it will take to create a tunnel access under the bookshop?"

Kanin answered. "It will probably take a few days, if we begin now. We have to move a lot of old rubble and construct a wall beyond the entry point. That we can do immediately, but Mouse and I need help if we're to speed it up."

"Perhaps Vincent and I can assist," Catherine suggested. With the weekend upon them, there was no time like the present.

"That would be wonderful. Too many helpers and we'd be falling over each other," Kanin remarked. "We can start this afternoon, if you're both free."

"I'll talk to Vincent. I don't think he has anything planned. Oh, and before you start on the wall entry, I want the cellar contents covered with drop sheets. There's a lot of books and such in there."

"Let Mouse do that." Mouse responded. "Have lots of tarps."

Catherine gave Kanin the spare key and thanked him, then returned to Vincent, who was almost inhaling soup and a sandwich. He had brought her the same and she sat down and tucked in, her stomach rumbling.

"And what have my favourite men been up to?" she asked him, bringing her mind back to the tunnel community.

"Cleaning the Great Hall," he told her. "Every year it seems worse."

"Perhaps we need to use it more so that it gets cleaned more often," Catherine suggested.

"I doubt Father could stand the strain of scheduling more than one or two events a year there," Vincent replied.

"So I assume you're finished there and are available this afternoon for some ... um ... rubble shifting?"

Vincent turned to look at her, almost choking on his tea. "Rubble shifting?"

"I'll be there helping too," she told him. "We need to get the entry into the book store done before the shop opens again on Tuesday."

"No peace for the wicked," he grumbled.

"Mouse and Kanin will be helping. I don't know how much material has to be shifted, but I'm hoping an afternoon will be enough. Perhaps we can get some short order help."

"I don't know if any of the children are available. Father has them making decorations, cleaning the tables and chairs in the Great Hall, washing the floor, and bundling up the candles for delivery. I'm afraid we'll be on our own."

"And I know that section of tunnel. We'll need a wheelbarrow and heavy gloves. It will be hard work."

Catherine sighed. "Well, it's my fault for taking on the book store, so you can all blame me for every bruise and aching muscle."

"The fault is not yours, Catherine. We just have few spare hands and we can't draw from our sentries any further. Mouse's alarm system has helped, but it isn't always reliable."

"Ready folks?" Kanin asked, at Catherine's back.

"I think so," she replied. "Just let me put on some tougher clothing. We can meet you there."

"Ok, good," Mouse declared. "Will get wheelbarrow."

"And I'll find us some good rock picks," Kanin promised.

The two men left. Vincent and Catherine went back to his chamber and found some old clothing to change into. Vincent gave her a pair of gloves, which weren't too overlarge.

"An old pair of Devin's," he told her, when she looked askance. "I still find things of his in odd places."

“How odd?” she asked, curious.

“These gloves were in a niche in the upper tunnel.” He pointed up the metal ladder. “I think he kept them there for his nocturnal explorations.”

“Has anyone heard from Devin and Charles?” she asked.

“Not for some months. He will probably phone us when he knows his plans.”

“I suppose so. I hope he’ll leave a message.”

They left for the work site, Vincent leading. Catherine could never correlate the underground world with that above, even though the main man-made tunnels seemed to follow either subway lines or roads. Vincent, however, always knew exactly where he was.

The walk was longer than she expected, even so, and she stopped in dismay when she saw the backs of Mouse and Kanin leaning over a wheelbarrow. The rubble was almost to the ceiling of the tunnel. She followed Vincent and immediately set to work filling the wheelbarrow. When it was full, Vincent trundled it several yards back the way they had come and dumped it along the walls.

“Where is the shop wall from here?” Catherine asked.

“About 20 yards further,” Kanin told her, then noticing her dismay, “but it isn’t all like this. We piled up some of this to discourage curiosity. A few feet in, it’s much more open.”

“Good news,” she grunted, lifting another large rock into the wheelbarrow.

They worked for a couple of hours, finally clearing a passage to the wall where they wanted to place the entry. Then they began forming the wall beyond that point, again piling the rocks in a seemingly random way, so as to look like a collapse. When they were done, they all regarded the new wall with pride. It wasn’t pretty, but no one would be able to shift any of the rocks to even look into their section of tunnel. The barrier was about seven feet deep, more than enough to discourage any investigation, and also mask anything but loud noises.

“It think this is enough for today,” Vincent remarked, wiping his face and leaving a dirty streak behind.

“Yes, tomorrow can do entrance,” Mouse agreed. “First thing after breakfast, maybe?”

Kanin nodded. “I need to go in and get measurements, Catherine.”

“I can let you in the back door early tomorrow. Might be best not to be seen right now. Once the entry is done, we can bolt the door again and then take our time. It doesn’t have to be all done this weekend, but I want people to be able to get in and out from the tunnels while we’re getting it all organized. I’ll use the front door, and so should anyone running the shop. We’ll need to get to know our neighbours and the local police foot patrol.”

“Agreed,” Vincent commented. “Supper beckons now, and we all need a bath.

There were grunts of agreement and they all wearily made their way back to the home tunnels. Vincent and Catherine left the other two and went into his chamber, immediately stripping down and heading into the small bathing chamber he shared with Father, behind the stained glass window.

They settled in for a soak and sighed deeply. It was only when the first notice of supper was tapped over the pipes that they roused themselves to use soap and clean up. Wearily, they dried and got dressed, then shuffled to the dining hall.

Kanin and Mouse looked equally tired and gave them small smiles. Father looked at them all and saw their fatigue. He said nothing, merely shook head in sympathy. Nothing was ever simple in their world.

Catherine and Vincent left as soon as they had eaten and returned to the brownstone. They said nothing as they put on nightclothes and clambered into bed. For once, Catherine was glad that Jacob was below. His energy would have defeated her. Vincent put his arms around her and she spooned herself against him. Neither had the energy for love-making and were soon sound asleep.

The next morning, both groaned a little as abused muscles made themselves known. They dressed in more old clothes and went down for breakfast. The atmosphere was cheerful.

The roster seemed full of odd jobs, none of which involved the four people involved in the shop work. Father announced the primary job, that of delivering candles, and got yelps of eager children around him in a very short time. Jacob, though, was too young to go out alone, so he was teamed with one of the older children who would deliver to an apartment block with several helpers.

Vincent, Kanin and Mouse headed into the tunnels, and Catherine went above, entered by the front door, and then went to open up the back door of the shop. She realized that someone would have to leave by the front every day in order to put down the shutters. Well, no problem.

She opened up the back door to find Mouse waiting, peering around a huge armload of tarps that seemed enough to cover the Statue of Liberty.

“Need measurements,” he told her and she showed him the way into the cellar. He immediately pulled out a hammer from one of his many pockets and tapped on a wall. The sound was returned immediately from the other side.

“Good,” he commented. “Now must cover everything.” He began to unfold the tarps and Catherine grabbed a few as well. In short order, everything was well blanketed, even the sink. She looked up at the stairway and cellar door.

“What about that?” she asked Mouse, pointing.

In reply, he grabbed a very large tarp, and pulled out a nail from another pocket. He hammered the tarp edge to the wooden floor joist, then did the same further along, until the whole stairwell was hidden. The tarp pooled on the floor, so there would be no dust getting under it, she noticed.

She decided to leave them to it. She said goodbye and pushed through the curtain as a loud hammer blow sounded and a curtain of dust dropped down from the ceiling. Mouse nodded and stood back, waiting.

She went back upstairs and bolted the back door, then stopped in her tracks. What had she forgotten? She wracked her brain and suddenly it came to her. The ceremony! She needed something to mark the start of their new venture. What better thing than some books! She looked around the bookstore, uncertain. She could choose some from the store itself, but what if Father already had them? She wasn't that familiar with the tunnel library books. Then she had an inspiration and headed towards the telephone in the back room. A massive thump that shook the floor discouraged her from that idea. She'd have to make the call at home.

Quickly she closed up the shop and returned home, praying silently that this would work. She sat down in her office chair and dialed a number. It was picked up amidst a lot of noise and she wondered if she had dialed the shop by mistake.

“Jenny?”

“Cathy????!! Sorry about the racket. We had a leak in the ceiling and the workmen are moving furniture around so they can get to it. I have to move a lot of books I've been storing. Lord knows where. Our storage room is already chock-a-block.”

Catherine could hardly believe her ears.

“Jenny, I think I may have a solution for you, if you can box up those surplus books. I own a bookstore in the Village now. Remember “777”?”

“How could I forget it? That's the guy who found all those paintings. My clients are still raving about them.”

“Well, the owner has decided to retire and asked me if I wanted the bookstore. He seemed to think I was the best choice, because of what I did for Kristopher.”

“And now you want stock? I can promise you some publisher’s editions.”

“Well, yes, we would like some unique stock, but I also need some books for gifts. Some friends of mine will be running the shop, and I wanted to mark the occasion with a little informal ceremony.”

“And I bet I know who these friends are. Vincent could sell a lot of books just with his voice ... but that might be hard to arrange.”

Catherine laughed.

“Yes, it would, but we have a resident who is also pretty good at selling books, not to mention discouraging crooks. Did you meet Kristopher?”

Jenny was silent for long moments.

“You mean he’s still alive? I didn’t hear that. His artwork is valuable because there won’t be more of it.”

“No Jenny, he’s still dead. It’s just that he haunts the store. I saw him there the first time I went in, and I spoke to him yesterday.”

“Good lord, Cathy! What other extraordinary things are going to happen to you? No, never mind. I don’t want to think about that. I prefer to be pleasantly surprised - after the fact.” She laughed.

“As you wish, Jenny. So can we arrange to pick up your surplus books? We have a cellar to store them in, so you don’t have to give them to us permanently. But I do want to extract a few for the ceremony.”

“You can have them, Cathy, and donate any proceeds to the store. I owe you for that art show - and now for storage. You should be billing *me!*”

Catherine chuckled. “I think this will square things. I’ll make a display of the books to draw in some customers. It’ll be good publicity for you too.”

“Deal!” Jenny declared. “I’ll have the books ready tomorrow. Can’t work in this, so I might as well pack boxes. Those I have.”

“Great. I’ll call and let you know when the pickup van can get there.”

Satisfied that she had solved another problem, Catherine went below and made her way to the worksite. The hole had been made in the wall and Mouse and Kanin were carefully shaping it.

Vincent was carefully inserting small rocks from the excavation in between the larger ones in the false wall. She tried to make herself heard over the racket, but finally admitted defeat and pulled him back down the corridor a ways.

“How are they going to hide the entrance,” she asked him.

Vincent smiled.

“Mouse has devised an ingenious lever assembly that will lift away quietly. We’ll create a false plate on each side that looks like the wall. He said the levers came from a of chair that tilts back.”

“A recliner? Good heavens!”

“Is that what they’re called? The devices are very strong and more than sufficiently large for our purposes.

“You seemed pleased with yourself, Catherine,” Vincent noted, curiosity bright on his face.

“I am, but I can’t tell you any more about that at present, other than to ask how we can get a van over to Jenny’s office to pick up some boxes. She needs to store them because her ceiling is leaking, and I’ve offered this cellar.”

“We should be finished in another few hours, certainly by dinner time. The door fitting will be done tomorrow, but there will be no more noise and dust after today.”

“Perfect. She’ll be pleased. Who can pick up the boxes?”

“Cullen can contact a helper who has a truck. I’ll come back with you and talk to him. I’m not needed here now. Kanin and Mouse can handle the rest.”

They walked back to the hub and tapped out a message for Cullen to meet them in Vincent's chamber. He arrived quickly.

Vincent explained what was needed and Catherine gave him Jenny's office address. He nodded and left to talk to the helper to arrange a time the next day.

Catherine sighed. "Has lunch happened yet? I feel as if I missed part of today."

"No, but it won't be long now. I need to clean up. Why don't you have a nap on the bed. You look tired."

Vincent found her asleep when he exited his bath. The lunch signal sounded, but Catherine didn't stir, so he decided to bring them lunch. He went to the dining hall and returned with a tray loaded with a pot of tea, two cups, a plate of cheese sandwiches and some brownies.

He sat down and began to eat, not wishing to disturb Catherine. But she must have smelled something, because she stirred, then sat up blearily and looked at him.

"Lunch, my love?" he asked, smiling at her.

"Yeah, I think so," she replied. She got up slowly, sat down in the other chair and dug in.

"I don't know what's the matter with me," she confessed.

"I do," Vincent replied. "You have taken on an enormous responsibility and done it in record time. And you shifted half a ton of rocks yesterday. Not your usual work. Naturally you're tired. You've hardly had time to relax for three days now."

"When you put it like that, I guess it makes some sense. I must be getting old," she said at last.

"Never, my love. We grow old together. You will do what has to be done. Don't be so hard on yourself."

She looked up at him and smiled.

Cullen walked in then and they turned to him.

"All arranged for 11 am tomorrow morning. Is that ok, Catherine?"

"I'm sure it will be. I'll go to the shop and meet you at the back door. We can take the boxes easily down into the cellar. I understand the messy work will be done on the entry."

"I just saw Kanin and Mouse. I think they may be done now."

Vincent's eyebrows rose. "I'd better find out."

Catherine followed him with the tray and they went to the dining hall. She looked around for their son, but again didn't see him. She sighed.

Vincent went to talk to Kanin and came back smiling.

"They're going to put the doorway up this afternoon. Kanin said there was no need to finish the opening any further, as it will be covered by the door. Mouse has gone to put that together. When it's installed, they'll paint it to resemble the walls."

"Good, so maybe we can remove the tarps early tomorrow?"

"I should think so, Catherine. I'll be there to help move the boxes inside. Do you know how many there are?"

"No, but knowing Jenny, I bet there's at least a dozen."

Vincent nodded. "Well, with everything in hand here, perhaps we should work on our Winterfest preparations."

"I'd like that," Catherine smiled. "And I have to go home anyhow to call Jenny,"

They returned to the brownstone and Catherine made a quick call to Jenny to tell her about the book pickup. She sounded a bit frazzled, so they didn't talk long.

Catherine went upstairs to find Vincent putting another cracker into a large basket, already half full. He was working quickly and efficiently, and the crackers looked cheery in their magazine wrappers.

“Wow, you’re a fast worker,” she commented.

“I had help,” Vincent confessed. “Jacob made an appearance and did some when I told him about them. But apparently Kipper came up and reminded him he had other work.”

“Well at least you saw him,” Catherine remarked. “When this is all settled, he’s going to find me dogging his little rear end. I feel like my son is a stranger lately.”

“He’s happy, but I agree we need to assert some parental rights,” Vincent agreed.

Catherine sat down next to him and also went to work. In an hour or so, they had completed their work and leaned back. The basket was almost overflowing.

“What else do we need?” she asked, sure that she had forgotten something.

“We had discussed burning our tribulations,” Vincent reminded her. “These wrappers will burn nicely and we can ball them up into ‘stones’ to throw into the fire.”

“That sounds sensible,” Catherine admitted. One less thing to worry about in the Great Hall. Which made her think of William. Lord, she needed to buy him that cheese! She had completely forgotten the other day, despite going out for just that. She had come back with toys instead of food! Tomorrow she’d buy it, just as soon as they had finished at the shop.

The rest of the day was uneventful. Kanin reported that the door was in place and had its first coat of paint on the tunnel side. They would touch it up tomorrow. The inside, he said, was not going to be a problem. They had carefully cut the wood panelling and attached it to the door. The join was all but invisible, especially since the light in the cellar was relatively dim, being lit by single light bulb.

Catherine nodded, grateful that another problem had solved itself. It was all going so smoothly, almost as if it was ordained. After the year of disasters, it was nice to have fixable problems and pleasant expectations.

The next day, now Monday, Catherine entered the shop from the front door, locked it behind her and immediately took the bolt off the back. Kanin was not due for another hour, but she wanted to make sure everything was ready. There was no bell on the door. She went downstairs to the cellar and found Vincent and Mouse carefully bundling up the tarps, trying not to shake off any dust. They shoved them through the tunnel entry as they took them down, and Kanin grabbed them from the other side and put them in the wheelbarrow.

Catherine looked at the door and her jaw dropped. It currently rested flat against the ceiling, its mechanism on the lower side. She walked over to look at. The one on the tunnel side was identical. She supposed the dual door was a good idea, for security reasons. Very ingenious, and she said as much to Vincent.

“Yes, Mouse has outdone himself. This is such a wonderful construction that we are thinking of using it in other places - if he can find some more recliner chairs.”

“I suspect that won’t be a problem,” she remarked.

“No. Mouse seems to have a nose for finding what he needs.”

There was a pounding from above them and Catherine went up to open the back door. Cullen stood waiting, the van’s back door open and ready to unload. He immediately began to unload and left the books in the hallway. Vincent arrived and took them, two at a time, down to the cellar. Kanin and Mouse also arrived to assist, and before she knew it, the van was empty. She had not counted the boxes, but there seemed to be an awful lot of them.

Kanin wiped his brow. “Wait here a moment, Catherine. I have a special delivery for you.”

He went to the truck and opened the passenger door, extracting a large zipped bag, that was obviously fairly heavy.

“Jenny asked me to give this to you personally.”

Well it didn't take a genius to know what was in the bag, Catherine decided, but what books was the question. She thanked Cullen, who smiled and drove off. She closed and bolted the door behind him and humped the bag into the back room. She put it out of sight in the knee well of the desk. It barely fit. Returning to the cellar, she looked around and found Vincent and Kanin moving some folding wooden chairs through the doorway.

“Good thinking,” she said, as they all sat down gratefully. “I think we're done here, at least as far as the renovations go,” she told them. “Now I have to see if we have someone to run the shop tomorrow.”

“I'm sure Mary will have that under control,” Vincent told her.

“I agree. Any sign of our ghost?”

The light bulb flickered, as if in reply, and the four of them laughed.

“I guess he answered,” Catherine noted, looking around. Kristopher did not materialize.

“Enough. Let's go back and get some lunch,” she suggested. “But I have to close the shutters on the front door. I'll meet you back there.”

The men left by the new doorway, but not before Kanin showed Catherine how it worked. A simple, but very sturdy latch fixed it to the concrete floor between the doors. They would have to leave the way they entered, she realized. There were too many one-way locks in this shop.

“Perfect,” she exclaimed, leaving aside her own complain. The tunnel side still needed to be properly camouflaged, and she supposed there would be a hidden lock there too. No doubt it could be done.

“We're going to mix some of the sand and stones with paint and cover this side,” Kanin told her.

“Done before,” Mouse agreed. “Works good.”

“Is there a pipe handy?” she asked, suddenly remembering that detail mentioned by Father.

Mouse pointed at a pipe sticking out of the wall of the tunnel, where it met the ceiling and to another inside the cellar at a similar point inside. “Goes to sentry 3 junction.”

That meant little to Catherine, but as long as it worked and there could be communication, she was satisfied. She said goodbye to Mouse and he shut the door and she heard him latch it to the floor. She left the shop by the front door, locked down the shutters, and went back to the brownstone, then down to the tunnels. She was certainly getting her exercise, she thought ruefully!

She was a little late, but found Vincent waiting for her and enough food to left over to satisfy her. William was always aware of who was working and kept food aside. No one was allowed to go hungry on his watch.

Afterwards, she and Vincent went to Father's chamber to see what else needed to be done, since their work on the shop was finished. He was talking to Mary and they both greeted Catherine and Vincent.

“The shop is ready to open tomorrow, if our inside team is,” Catherine told them.

Mary nodded. “Brooke and I will be there at 10 am and see what custom is like during the day. I think we can find enough helpers if we need them. No one has to be there all day. We can switch off. It will be good training for some of our teens to learn some customer service.”

“That's a relief. Are there any other jobs that need doing for Winterfest? I feel as if I've been slacking,” Catherine admitted. “Even Jacob has been busy - so busy I've hardly seen him.”

“Everything is well in hand, Catherine. William will begin the food preparation tomorrow and is organizing teams to help him.”

“I suspect Jacob will want to be in on that,” Catherine mused aloud. Then she remembered the cheese, yet again. She needed to go back to the shop and get that back of books anyhow. She could do that quietly, and get the cheese at a nearby shop.

She managed to do both the next day, without alerting Vincent, who had been dragooned into helping hang decorations in the Great Hall, which she learned, seemed to involve lifting up the smaller children so they could hang their paper chains from the bases of the chandeliers.

Catherine found Mary engaged in checking the ledger, and Brooke arranging a reading corner, so she merely greeted them and then hauled the heavy book bag and shopping bag with the cheese to the brownstone through the tunnels. She left the cheese in their fridge and then hauled the bag into her office, by which time she was panting. She sat down to catch her breath.

Automatically, she looked at the telephone and realized it was blinking. She pressed the message button. Devin's voice boomed out at her.

"Hi Chandler. Charles and I will be there tomorrow, December 8. I'm driving in. Be at your door just in time for lunch, we hope."

Well, that was good news, if a little lacking in detail! Now for the bag.

With not a little flutter of anticipation, which she tried not to transmit along her bond with Vincent, she unzipped the bag and began pulling out the books. Her mouth dropped open as she saw the titles on one after another. Jenny had done her shopping for her and presented her with the materials for the ceremony as well!

Catherine silently thanked her friend and tried to think of a way to thank her. She would be attending Winterfest of course, as would Joe. Perhaps William would help her fill a tin with Christmas goodies for Jenny. Food was one thing her friend could never refuse.

In the meantime, the books had to be wrapped and Catherine set herself to doing that. Some were big and needed more than the usual amount of wrapping paper, but she managed to find enough and tied them with ribbon. Then she put them back in the bag and left it zipped in her office.

One more job out of the way! She left the office and was almost bowled over by Jacob, who apologized.

"I just came back to change clothes. I tripped over a mop and got soaked."

Catherine hugged him to her and looked at him closely. His chin was scraped.

"Where are you going now?" she asked.

"William needs some help," he told her.

"Well then, could you take this bag to him? He's expecting it. And he might let you to help him make perogies if you ask nicely."

Jacob whooped and grabbed the bag, kissing her and then almost running down the stairs.

"Be careful," she yelled after him. Lord she wished she had his energy!

Nothing to do now but wait, she decided. She tried to expel the tension caused by so many loose ends, then went below to wait in Vincent's chamber for his return. Abruptly, she decided she needed a soak, and undressed and went into the bathing chamber. She was half asleep when she felt a unique set of lips pressing on hers.

Vincent gazed at her when she opened her eyes and she regarded him, her desire blooming. He carefully lifted her off the ramp and carried her into the pool. He let her down over his engorged manhood and she sighed with delight as they became one. She became boneless, but his strong arms didn't falter, even as she could feel his heat rising and engulfing her. They climaxed together and he carried her back to the ramp, gathering her into his arms as he lay down. There was no need for words. They snuggled and relaxed completely. Catherine realized she would never have been able to reach this state of glorious happiness without her lover's help, and she kissed his mouth. He pulled back to look at her and smiled.

"Feeling better?"

“As if you had to ask.”

Vincent chuckled.

“Winterfest is the day after tomorrow. Then we will see all our friends and put the grand finale to this year.”

“Yes. Oh Vincent, Devin left a message. He and Charles plan to be at our door before noon tomorrow.”

Vincent hugged her. “Wonderful,” he murmured.

After a short rest, they soaped themselves and spent some time drying with the towels, ardour almost overtaking them again. Both sighed as the lunch signal sounded on the pipes.

“I think I’m hungry,” Catherine admitted. “And for more than you.”

“Yes. We must see to bodily needs first,” Vincent agreed. “But I think we can relax for the rest of the day, and even tomorrow. Perhaps our son will grace us with his presence. We’ve done our share. Everything is ready except the food, and that is well in hand.”

Vincent looked at her ...

“The magic reel, which, rolling on before has led the chronicler thus far, now slackens its pace, and stops. It lies before the goal; the pursuit is at an end.”

“I second that,” Catherine laughed. “I plan to go to bed early. We must make sure that our guest room is ready too, in case Charles and Devin would prefer to stay with us.”

“Devin is nothing if not inconsistent,” Vincent admitted. “Nevertheless, the tunnels may be a bit too crowded for his liking.”

....

Devin arrived as promised and did indeed prefer that he and Charles stay with them. They went below as soon as each had claimed a bed, though, and the remainder of the day was spent in garrulous reminiscences in Father’s and Vincent’s chambers. Jacob, who could never resist his uncle’s stories, was never far away. At one point, he sat on Charles’ lap, and the big man hugged him close.

Catherine said little, amazed as always at the adventures the two of them managed. While not quite on the scale of his life before Charles, perhaps, Devin had a talent for finding a way to include his friend in his plans.

The following day, Winterfest day began with a flurry last minute pre-Winterfest activity, which succumbed to pressure by noon. Catherine, Vincent and Jacob dressed in their finery and went below to be on hand to greet guests.

Catherine felt Vincent’s eyes on her and was gratified that she had chosen her costume well.

Vincent looked elegant in deep red velvet and leather, and Jacob wore a pair of unpatched pants and a vest made from padded silk that Annabelle had made for him. He had saved it for Winterfest.

Guests were starting to arrive and were encouraged to sit in the dining hall, where tables had been moved aside to allow for cosy discussions in the chairs. William passed around hot chocolate and tea, and provided seemingly endless plates of sugar cookies. By late afternoon, though, everyone was ready for a change in scenery.

Father announced that they could now enter the Great Hall, and the assembled guests made their way down the windy stairs and waited for Vincent to open the big doors. This was just a formality of course. The work crews had all entered via the stairwell from the kitchen, and the food made its way there by dumbwaiter, another of Mouse’s ingenious uses of materials to hand.

With the door open, everyone entered and immediately sat down a table, lit only by a single lantern.

Then they solemnly performed their traditional ceremony to a respectful silence. Father added a line about the difficulties of the past year before lighting his candle and passing it around. As the Great Hall chandeliers lit up, the noise level also increased and Father finished his speech to a round of applause and a few shrill whistles. Catherine was sure one of the latter was Joe. He looked smug.

Father smiled, realizing that the relief was necessary to everyone, helpers and tunnel folk alike.

After that, music began and the usual mingling and dancing got underway, everyone punctuating this with short periods of food and drink sitting wherever there were handy chairs.

After about an hour, Catherine approached Vincent and reminded him about the ceremony. He nodded and stood on a makeshift stage near the tapestries. The musicians stilled their instruments.

“QUIET”, he shouted. Jacob stood next to him, banging two warming pan lids together. The racket had its desired effect.

In the silence that followed, Catherine stood on a makeshift stage nearby and raised her hand.

“As you all know, we have acquired a bookstore. I wanted to mark the occasion with something a little special, and thanks to Jenny, we have both the first new stock and our first benefit.”

She reached into the bag she had hidden behind the stage and pulled out a large book.

“This is for Father, whose books never fail to thrill a new generation of readers.”

She handed him the package and he looked around.

“Open it,” several voices advised him, none too quietly.

Shrugging, he did so, and lifted up the book for all to see. It was a coffee table book with photos of the world’s great libraries.

“Magnificent,” was his hushed comment. He hobbled over to a nearby table and sat down with the book in front of him.

“Vincent,” Catherine called next, handing him a package only slightly smaller. He opened the parcel to find an illustrated volume of Samuel Pepys diaries. His eyebrows rose as he noticed that this edition was “unabridged”. Catherine smiled at him, knowing exactly where his thoughts were going. Pepys treated his diary better than he did his wife.

Other books were handed out, each singularly appropriate to their recipient. The last bundle, a rather uneven looking one, Catherine handed to Mary. It was a collection of beautiful children’s books. Jacob’s eyes lit up when he saw them and there was no doubt who would be reading them to the others.

There was a round of applause as the last books made their way to a table. Then Vincent raised his hand for silence again.

“We have one more surprise,” he announced. “ In this basket, we have some special crackers, all with a small surprise inside. We want to use this celebration to laugh, of course, but we also want to excise some of our angst from this year. I suggest that we think of a particularly odious memory and cast it into the fire, in the shape of the paper from these, where it will never trouble us again.

He handed out crackers and there was soon laughter and whoops from the children. They merrily tossed the balled paper into the fire, yelling as they did so. Several children yelled “flu” and watched happily as the paper was consumed. Not everyone had a complaint, but the paper went into the fireplace anyhow.

That over, the party began again, and several couples began to dance. Catherine and Vincent joined them. They had not been dancing long when they noticed a commotion by the stage. Everyone around them stopped as well and everyone turned there.

Samantha and Mouse were manhandling a small bench onto the stage. It was painted in Winterfest colours and there were some ooohs and aaaahs as the crowd realized the work that had gone into it.

The musicians stopped and Samantha stood up taller as silence descended.

“I repainted this bench for Winterfest,” she explained. “It’s for anyone to sit in, but I’d like Vincent to be

the first.

There was a round of clapping and Vincent made his way to the stage, somewhat embarrassed by being singled out. He looked down at the bench and was at a loss for words.

“Are you sure, Samantha?” he asked, trying not to sound overwhelmed, rather than dubious.

She nodded, so he gingerly sat down on the bench. It was solid and comfortable enough, he decided, but just a little out of scale for him. He had to cross his legs to sit properly. Samantha, however, didn't seem to notice, so he rose quickly before she did and thanked her with a hug.

Catherine however, was trying not to giggle and he waved her up. She sat obediently on the bench, which was much closer to her size.

“Lovely,” she declared and rose to hug Samantha in turn.

There was laughter and clapping at that and several other people stood in line to try it.

Jenny sat in it and pretended to fall asleep, until Joe nudged her and they went onto the dance floor.

After that, Winterfest became a free for all, much as it usually did. Food was eaten, the potables were handed out liberally and enjoyed in the same spirit, and the crowd gradually thinned out as the evening grew later and later.

Catherine and Vincent left last, Vincent ensuring that the fire was out, the candles likewise and the bar across the door. The cleaning would wait until tomorrow, or even the next day. Jacob was waiting for them in Vincent's chamber and they all returned to the brownstone.

“I think we've chased the blues away,” Catherine remarked quietly, as Jacob went down the hall to his room. Devin and Charles must have already made it to theirs, since the door was closed.

“Indeed,” Vincent agreed.

“From the death of each day's hope another hope sprung up to live to-morrow.”

Hmmm ... I like this one better ...

“Anything that makes a noise is satisfactory to a crowd.”

Vincent chuckled.

“Yes, noise does seem to be important at Winterfest.”

“AND YOU TWO COULD DO WITH A LESSON IN QUIETUDE!” came Devin's bellow from the guest room.

Vincent and Catherine mumbles a “sorry” and went into their bedroom. They got ready for bed quietly and under the covers quietly. Vincent hugged Catherine to him and said, quietly of course;

“And once again, my love, *The Old Curiosity Shop* says it best ...

“The night crept on apace, the moon went down, the stars grew pale and dim, and morning, cold as they, slowly approached. Then, from behind a distant hill, the noble sun rose up, driving the mists in phantom shapes before it, and clearing the earth of their ghostly forms till darkness came again.”

END

Author's Note:

The Old Curiosity Shop is still there in Portsmouth Street, London, on the corner. Charles Dickens lived at Bloomsbury and knew the area surrounding the shop very well. He was known to have visited the shop on a number of occasions.

With its precarious overhanging upper storey, uneven floorboards, sloping roof and wooden beams, this 16th century building warrants its title as probably the oldest shop in central London. It also fits perfectly the image of Charles Dickens' creaking, half-timbered 'Old Curiosity Shop'.

While some doubt has been cast over the assumption that the shop was the inspiration behind Dickens' novel of the same name, the building certainly does a very good job of convincing sceptics otherwise.

At one time it functioned as a dairy on an estate given by King Charles II to one of his many mistresses. Made using the wood from old ships the building miraculously survived the flames of the Great Fire of 1666 and the bombs of Second World War.

Still functioning as a shop (an upmarket men's and women's shoe boutique at the time of writing), the building's future and architectural heritage is now protected by a preservation order. Dwarfed by more recent architectural constructions, the shop is often literally overlooked by tourists and locals alike, but is worth seeking out if you're in the area – especially if you need a new pair of unique shoes.

<http://www.the-old-curiosity-shop.com/collection/>

