

OOPS!

Eric watched the others as they disappeared into the drainage tunnel closely followed by Brook, who looked glaringly back over her shoulder at him. He had absolutely refused to go back with them until he had successfully raised his kite into the air as the others had done, and in exasperation Brook had left him.

As soon as they had gone, he gripped the string close to the kite in one hand and the small piece of wood Cullen had given him to use as a spindle in the other and ran as fast as he could in the open area by the tunnel entrance. A wind had sprung up in advance of a promised thunderstorm, and the kite finally took off. Eric stood triumphant, playing the line out as the kite soared above the trees, dipping and turning with the wind.

Unnoticed by the boy, black clouds were boiling towards him from behind, pregnant with rain. A bolt of lightning momentarily lit the sky, and he finally noticed how dark it had gotten. His brief inattention, however, allowed the kite to plunge into the top of a tree. He kicked the ground in frustration. It had taken him a long time to make that kite, and he was determined to get it back. With his face as black as the clouds above him he stomped over to the tree and looked up. There, very much out of reach, dangled his kite. The lowest limb of the tree stretched out just above his head, but even jumping up as high as he could, he couldn't reach it. In the meantime a light drizzle had begun to fall, fogging his glasses, making him even more miserable; and he hung his head joining his tears to the rain.

"Eric, what are you doing out all alone in this weather?" Catherine called from behind him. She had been on her way to the culvert when she saw him standing forlornly under a tree, her tree she noticed, with a smile.

"My kite's stuck up in the tree," he pointed upward, "and I can't reach it."

She looked up measuring the distance, this tree she had climbed many times as a child and just recently when her father had passed away. She was pretty sure she would be able to get the kite down for her little friend.

"Don't worry, Eric; I'll have it down for you in no time."

Confidently she jumped up and grabbed the limb above her head, swinging her legs up to wrap around it. She shimmed herself upright and reached for the next branch and then the next until she got to the one just above where the kite was stuck. Carefully she reached out, extending herself so that her finger tips were just able to close around the string. Pulling it free she was about to head down when a strong gust of wind wrenched the kite out of her hand unbalancing her. She felt herself slipping and made a lunge for the limb she was standing on. It was no good. The bark was too wet to offer a good hold, and she felt herself plummeting downward. The last thing she remembered was the ground rushing toward her and her father's voice calling out, *'Don't fall!'*

Eric stood frozen in horror as he watched Catherine tumble out of the tree. When he could make his feet move, he ran to her, but had no idea what to do. Blood was pouring from a cut on her forehead, mixing with the huge drops of rain that were now pounding the ground. Lightening streaked the sky, and loud claps of thunder pealed through the air as he stood over her.

Suddenly strong hands picked him up and set him to the side. Vincent crouched low over Catherine, assessing her condition. The area above her left eye where the cut was had swollen into a good sized lump. Carefully he gathered her up and carried her to the drainage ditch, which now had quite a bit of water gushing down it. Eric ran on ahead and tripped the lever to open the door. He held the gate open as Vincent passed through with his precious burden and then closed both doors.

“Eric, tell Father what’s happened, ask him to meet me in my chamber,” Vincent instructed the boy. He could already hear a message from the sentry going over the pipes that he had just passed, announcing that he was returning with an unconscious Catherine.

When Eric burst into Father’s chamber he was breathless, “Father...Father...” he gasped gulping much needed air.

“It’s all right Eric.” He went to the boy, putting both hands on his shoulders as the child’s chest heaved from exertion. “I heard the pipes. Tell me what happened.”

As Eric spoke, Father got his medical bag from the cupboard. “It’ll be all right, Eric, now you go get into some dry clothes before you catch a cold.”

When he entered Vincent’s chamber he saw a pile of wet towels on the floor along with a pile of sodden clothing. He assumed Vincent had taken off Catherine’s wet clothes and dried her off. He arched an eyebrow at that but said nothing. Vincent was just covering her with more blankets as he stepped to the bed.

“Eric told me what happened,” Father said as he positioned himself by Catherine’s head to begin his examination. Gently he probed her forehead, “There is the possibility of a concussion, that’s quite a bump she has there.” He swabbed the cut and applied some ointment. “She’ll have to be watched closely.” He looked at his son and had no doubts that Vincent would sit up all night keeping an anxious vigil. Turning away from his patient, he reached up and squeezed Vincent’s shoulder as he passed by him on his way out. “Call me when she wakens.”

Vincent nodded and pulled a chair close to the bed to begin his watch.

Hours later Catherine began to stir; she raised a hand to her head gingerly touching it, sucking in her breath when she felt the bump. Slowly she opened her eyes and saw Vincent sitting close beside her.

“I fell out of the tree, didn’t I?” She asked.

“Hm hm, you did.” Vincent leaned his elbows on the bed, gently moving a lock of her hair off her face.

“That was pretty dumb, wasn’t it?” She looked into his blue eyes so close to her.

“You were trying to help,” he replied, tilting his head to one side and gracing her with one of his rare smiles. “How are you feeling?”

“I’ve felt better,” she smiled wanly back at him.

“Can I get you anything?” he asked, “Some tea perhaps?”

“No,” she shook her head, immediately regretting the motion, letting out a low moan.

Alarmed, Vincent stood. “I’ll get Father.”

“No, no, I’m fine,” she reassured him, reaching up quickly to take his hand, not wanting him to leave. “I just have to remember to keep my head still.”

Slowly he returned to his seat, wrapping her small hand in both of his. It was so small, so delicate. He stared at it mesmerized and slowly lowered his head to kiss her fingers. Realizing what he had done he blushed and glanced at her to gauge her reaction. She was smiling at him.

Catherine was thrilled he had kissed her hand! She looked at the hands that held hers, big and powerful, strong enough to kill with a single swipe, strong enough to carve a chamber out of solid rock, now gently holding her hand. She reached out her other hand to stroke the back of his feeling the soft fur that covered it. Her eyes meet his again and she felt herself drowning in their blue depths. Slowly, ever so slowly, he leaned forward and touched his lips to hers. Her heart leapt with joy, and she could almost feel his confused emotions through the bond. He wanted this almost as much as she did, she knew that now; and before he could pull away she took his head between her hands and returned the kiss. He pulled back startled at his own boldness and her ardent reaction.

She smiled at him impishly, “I always wondered what it would take to get you to kiss me.” Her smile widened to a grin, “I would have fallen out of a tree long ago if I had known.”

He chuckled and kissed her again.

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