

A Fine and Private Place

By Lindariel

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Karen Fishkin Crow, Laura Goist, and Carole Whitehead
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Mouse hurried down the tunnel passageway toward the main community Hub. Part of his latest deal with Father allowing Mouse to forage unsupervised Above for discarded parts and tools for his many projects - *- Taking, NOT Stealing* – was:

- (1) Mouse would always let Father know what area of the City he'd be visiting (*Father worries too much*);
- (2) Mouse would stay away from construction sites (*No fair! Best place to find good stuff!*); and
- (3) Mouse would agree to help run errands and carry messages to and from their Helpers in that area.

OK, good! OK, fine! No problem. Nice to visit with Helpers. They give good lunches and snacks to Mouse. And clues for finding stuff, too!

Today, Mouse had relished the pleasure of spending some time with Harvey Robinson who played his saxophone outside the diner two blocks away from the District Attorney's office. Harvey was a skilled jazz sax player whose auditory hallucinations had sidelined what would have been a very promising career.

Through various Helpers, Father had tried many times to encourage Harvey to come live Below. But Harvey found the tunnels confusing and claustrophobic, and he missed what he called "The Music of the City," the myriad urban sounds that inspired his improvisational jazz style. So, Roland Sims, the Helper who owned the diner, had volunteered to provide Harvey his meals, a safe, comfortable place under the diner's front awning in good weather for Harvey to play his beloved saxophone and earn some money during the day, or a spot inside the diner when the weather turned wet or cold, a clean bathroom and living space above the diner at night, and help with his laundry. Roland's customers loved the music, and Harvey enjoyed taking their requests. The two men genuinely liked each other and made a good team together.

The mid-May weather was warm but pleasant, and Mouse greatly enjoyed listening to Harvey weave his skittering, brilliant tunes that so perfectly matched Mouse's own unique energy. Also, Harvey often had messages from Catherine, as well as information on good foraging spots.

Note for Vincent today! He'll be so happy! Mouse enthused, as he trundled down the spiral staircase and raced off toward the intersection that would lead straight to Vincent's chamber.

He arrived to find Vincent absorbed in taking measurements of the access tunnel to his chamber and making notes on a series of drawings.

"Hi, Vincent!" called Mouse, bouncing breathlessly on his toes. "Visited Harvey today. Brought note from Catherine!"

“Thank you, Mouse,” Vincent replied, eagerly reaching for the note. “How is Harvey doing?”

“Roland says Harvey is great,” Mouse reported. “Music brings in new customers. Harvey plays any tune they want.”

“That’s good to hear,” Vincent answered, as he scanned Catherine’s message. “Roland understands Harvey’s illness very well. His younger brother has schizophrenia, so he knows what to look for and how to get Harvey the help he needs if his symptoms get worse.”

“Good news from Catherine?” Mouse asked, so curious, pointing to the note.

“Well, yes and no,” said Vincent. “Catherine and Joe Maxwell have finished prosecuting their case, and they got a conviction, which is very good news. Unfortunately, Catherine won’t be able to visit us this coming weekend. Her father’s older sister is gravely ill and may be dying. Her cousin Evelyn has suggested that Catherine should come visit as soon as she can. She’ll be taking time off work and driving up to Connecticut this evening.”

“Oh,” said Mouse quietly. “Catherine will be so sad, like when her father died.”

“Let’s send good thoughts to Catherine and her aunt,” Vincent advised. “Who knows? She may get better. But if it is her time to let go of life, we can wish for her an easy and peaceful passing and comfort for Catherine and her family.”

“Yes, yes,” said Mouse, twitchy and uncomfortable with the subject of death. New topic! “Working on a project?”

“That I am,” Vincent replied firmly, pocketing Catherine’s note. “It is time for my chamber to have a door. And I want a real, solid wood door, not a tarp or blanket or curtain.”

“Oh!” said Mouse, eagerly looking at Vincent’s drawings and then poking about the access tunnel. “Not an easy project,” he noted. “Natural stone walls, uneven shape, BIG opening! Lots of challenges. Vincent needs help. Mouse will help! Jamie too!”

Vincent laughed. “I appreciate your enthusiasm, and I will be most grateful if you and Jamie would like to help. But I want to keep this project a secret for right now. This door is going to be a surprise gift for Catherine, and I don’t want to listen to any more of Father’s lectures than necessary. Just one inevitable big discussion once the door has been installed, and that’s it. I plan to ask for forgiveness rather than permission. Well, not even forgiveness. Other people have doors or coverings for their chambers. And so should I, if I wish.”

“That’s right!” Mouse agreed. “Father always coming down, poking around our chamber, asking questions. Jamie says, not his beeswax!”

“Hmmm,” Vincent replied. “I think it’s probably past time Father and I had a long conversation on the subject of privacy, and this door will be the perfect opportunity. Would you please take a message from me to Catherine and give it to Benny for delivery? Then we can share my plans with Jamie.”

“OK good! OK fine!” grinned Mouse. “Mouse can keep a secret! Always glad to help Vincent and Catherine!”

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Benny arrived at Catherine's office door just as she was finishing up the last of her sentencing paperwork for the Dryden case and preparing to leave the office early so she could pack and get on the road to Connecticut before rush hour traffic became too impossible.

"Benny!" she called out in surprise. "Let me guess. You've got a message for me!"

"I sure do, pretty lady," Benny replied with a wink, handing her Vincent's message. Then his smile waned. "I'm sorry to hear about your aunt, Miss C. I hope she gets better real soon!"

"Thanks, Benny. So do I!" Catherine responded, as she fished through her desk drawer for a Baby Ruth and a few singles to tip the perky bike messenger. "Here you go!"

"Always a pleasure, Miss C," Benny said with a nod. "Is there a return message?"

Catherine quickly scanned the note.

Catherine, my heart goes out to you, your aunt, and your family. I hope she recovers from this illness quickly. But if your cousin's assessment is correct, and this is your aunt's time to be released from a long life well-lived, then I hope for a peaceful and serene passing, knowing that she is surrounded by her loving family. Take great care on your journey! Return soon to the comfort of your Tunnel family. I will count the hours until you are once again safe in my arms. Yours forever, Vincent

She smiled and held the note to her heart, sending her love to Vincent through their Bond.

"No, Benny," she replied. "Vincent is just wishing me safe travels and sending his concerns about my aunt. I've already told him my plans and given him my love earlier today."

"And you just sent him your love again right now, didn't ya?" Benny asked with a smile.

"You bet," she grinned. "You be safe on that bike, young man!"

"Hey, I've got wings!" the saucy messenger replied, tapping the Mercury logo on his uniform. "They'll never catch me!"

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Down in Mouse and Jamie's chamber, Vincent spread out his design drawings across their workbench and shared his ideas and measurements with the Tunnel community's resident inventor and their promising young engineer.

"Wow! This will be a beautiful gift for Catherine, but it's a really big project," Jamie stated, as she flew through a few careful calculations. "First of all, you're going to need a set of double doors to cover a space this wide, and they'll be much prettier and more practical than one large single door. You could even set it up so one side can be locked into the upper frame and the floor, while the other side gets used most of the time for coming and going, unless you have to move something big in or out of your chamber."

Mouse tapped on one of the more technical sketches. "Need Kanin to build out the wall."

“That’s right, Mouse,” Jamie replied. “The simplest solution for installing doors like this will be to build out the natural stone walls with masonry, probably bricks rather than stone, so we can create the proper shape for setting and anchoring the door frame. For that, we’re definitely going to need Kanin’s help. I’d also want him to check over my calculations to make sure we have the proper materials and mortar to support the weight of these doors. Hopefully, we can use quick-set mortar that won’t take days to dry and set.”

“I was already planning to consult Kanin about helping me install the doors once they’re ready,” Vincent replied.

“I also think you should consider exploring our salvage chambers to see if we already have some double doors about the right size,” Jamie continued. “Your designs are really beautiful, Vincent. But it would be so much easier and faster to use a set of salvaged doors rather than building them from scratch. Plus, salvaged doors will have much nicer woods and finishes, and maybe even windows or other pretty details. Dominic Martinelli helped us salvage lots of double doors over the years from buildings the City contracted him to demolish. We didn’t use all of them when we closed in our storage chambers and William’s pantries. Cullen could give you great advice on restoring, refinishing, and adapting the doors for your use. That’s where I’d start.”

“Sounds like a plan,” said Vincent. “It’s almost time for dinner. Perhaps we could go take a look at the salvage chambers later this evening after we’ve eaten? I could also talk briefly with Kanin and Cullen and get their advice as well.”

Mouse’s stomach took advantage of Vincent’s suggestion by growling loudly.

“OK fine!” Mouse laughed. “My stomach votes for dinner!” And then he scampered out of the chamber ahead of Vincent and Jamie, putting his words into action.

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Later that evening, Cullen joined Vincent, Jamie, and Mouse in their search through the community’s large salvage chambers. They’d already set aside two possible sets of doors with the correct dimensions, but Cullen encouraged them to continue the search.

“I know there’s a set of doors down here somewhere that would be just perfect,” he insisted. “They remind me of that clock Catherine gave you last month, Vincent. Beautiful oak doors with carved roses and ivy all around the outer frame and the bottom door panels and lovely arched leaded glass windows with an acid-etched rose motif in the center of each pane.”

“Oh, yeah!” Jamie agreed. “I remember those! We found them at the site of that old wedding chapel on 21st Street that the City had condemned. Dominic got us that job with his demolition crew. The Chapel of the Rose, I think they called it. But weren’t they covered in a sort of garish red paint?”

“Yep, and that’s gonna be a pain to strip off,” Cullen replied. “But it’ll be worth it to save those beautiful carvings. I think we even have all the original hardware and hinges.”

The group continued searching, and just as Vincent was about to suggest they call it quits for the night, a muffled shout went up from the very back of the second salvage chamber.

“Found them!” called Mouse, hacking and coughing from the dust.

Vincent moved swiftly to Mouse's side, offering the inventor a bottle of water and a pat on the back. Then he looked at Mouse's discovery and sighed. *Oh! They are perfect!* And then a heavier sigh with just a bit of a groan. *And they're going to be a BEAR to restore!*

Cullen joined them and declared, "Yep, those are the doors I was thinking about."

He pulled out a measuring tape to check the dimensions.

"They're certainly tall enough and wide enough, Vincent, but it's your decision," Cullen stated. "They're gonna require a lot of very painstaking, smelly, time-consuming work. Leaving aside all of the stinky paint stripping, which will be a nasty chore, there's years of grease and grime and dust to remove first, and I can already see that the carvings are gonna need a lot of restoration. They're pretty beat up in places."

"At least those beautiful windows are intact," Jamie noted. "And look, here's a bag with all the hinges and screws. The latches and hasps are still attached, and we can just remove the lockset and fill it with a blank, so we don't even have to hunt for the right hardware. *And* we have the original doorframe. That will really help."

"Like your clock," croaked Mouse, sipping water and running his hands over the intricate carvings. "So pretty. Like Catherine!"

Vincent cupped his hand around the leather pouch holding the ivory rose Catherine had given him for their first anniversary and thought of the delicate carved roses and ivy climbing over the face of the mantel clock she'd found for their third anniversary. *Catherine ...*

"Yes," Vincent responded. "It will be a lot of work, but these are definitely the doors for my chamber."

While Cullen trudged back to his woodshop to set up a work space for Vincent's project, Vincent, Mouse, and Jamie began the unwieldy task of transporting the large, heavy doors from the salvage room to Cullen's chambers. It took them three trips, one for each door and a third to bring the heavy frame and all the hardware. After they finally had the doors settled into place, the four friends celebrated their success with a stealthy midnight raid on William's kitchen for snacks and something to drink.

"You're gonna need a lot of spare time to work on those doors, Vincent," said Cullen, munching on a sandwich. "I know you want to do as much of the work as possible yourself, since they're a gift for Catherine. I'm happy to advise you about the cleaning and finishing, and I'll certainly claim the pleasure of restoring the carvings, but I can also help out by taking on some of your sentry shifts."

"Us too!" Mouse volunteered, and Jamie added, "We could take your turns at kitchen duty, and I can do your nursery shifts, too. That just leaves your classes, but I think Father would notice if you stopped teaching your classes."

"You're right," Vincent agreed. "I'm grateful to all three of you for your help today. I would appreciate being relieved of some of my various duty shifts, but certainly not all of them. You have your own projects and work as well, and I don't want to impose upon your rest and relaxation time."

"Hey Vincent, in case you haven't noticed, we *want* to help you with this project," Cullen insisted.

"Right, right!" Mouse chimed in, gulping the last of his milk. "We love Catherine, too! Want to help with your secret surprise."

“You might as well face it, Vincent,” Jamie smirked. “You’re stuck with us!”

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The next day, after Vincent finished teaching his middle-school history and young children’s literature classes, he changed into his most worn-out work clothes and joined Cullen in the woodshop around mid-morning to begin the arduous task of stripping paint from the doors and their large frame. Shortly after removing some of the red paint from one of the doors, they discovered to their chagrin that there was another coat of green paint underneath, and possibly a coat of black paint beneath that.

“Oh man!” complained Cullen. “This job just got three times longer, and we’re definitely gonna need more paint stripper from Austin’s Hardware. I’ll go up Top after lunch and see what he has to give us.”

“Thanks, Cullen,” Vincent replied. “Please let Austin know that I’ll be happy to come up after hours and help him in his storeroom in exchange for the paint stripper.”

“I’m sure that won’t be a problem,” Cullen answered. “Well, let’s keep going and find out just how bad this is gonna be!”

After another hour of work, the two men were relieved to find that the black paint had only been used as an accent for the trim around the windows and the central slat down the middle of each door.

Just as they were cleaning up to go to the dining hall for lunch, Mouse barreled into the room, shouting, “Message from Catherine! Sent through Henry Pei!” and handing Vincent the folded note.

Cullen and Mouse waited anxiously as Vincent read through the note, his shoulders slumping just a bit.

“Oh, dear,” he murmured. “I was afraid of this. Catherine’s aunt has passed away. I’ve felt Catherine’s anxiety and sadness since she first got the news of her aunt’s illness. But there was a sudden stab of pain this morning, followed by grief. That must have been when it happened.”

“Oh, no!” “Golly, that’s awful,” murmured Mouse and Cullen.

“Catherine says she won’t be back to the City for at least another two weeks,” Vincent added. “She’s helping her cousin with contacting family and making the funeral arrangements. There are also issues with her aunt’s will and estate, so her cousin has asked for Catherine’s legal assistance as well.”

“That’s too bad,” said Cullen. “I know we’ll all really miss Catherine, and I’m so sorry she has to go through another loss so soon after her Dad’s death. That’s got to be really hard. She says at least two weeks, right?”

“Yes,” Vincent answered. “It could be longer, depending upon whether they need to wait more than a few days for the family to gather and how involved the estate problems might be. Catherine’s aunt was a wealthy woman, and she says the investments alone are quite convoluted. She’s asked me to come to the Pei’s basement at nine o’clock this evening so she can speak with me by telephone and tell me more.”

“Well, I say we take our lemons and make lemonade,” Cullen declared. “Let’s use this time to get these doors finished and installed so you can surprise Catherine with them when she comes home. She’ll really need private time with you then, and these doors will help ensure you get it.”

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Word about Catherine's loss spread quickly around the dining hall. Tunnel members dropped by Vincent's table throughout the lunch hour to offer their condolences for him to share with Catherine.

"It's at times like these when I'm made most aware of how alone Catherine must feel sometimes," Father sighed. "Her work so often places such heavy burdens upon her spirit that we can do little to assuage. And now to lose her father's sister, when we are all so far away. I'm glad you will at least be able to speak with her by phone this evening and send her our messages of sympathy and love."

"Catherine knows we are with her in spirit," Vincent replied. "She has often spoken with me about the strength and courage she draws just from the knowledge that we believe in her and support her, even if all we can do is wish her well and send her our love. It means the world to her."

"Nevertheless, it is a helpless feeling to know someone you love is grieving, and there's really nothing that can be done to ease that special pain," Father added. "I can't begin to imagine how it must weigh on you, Vincent."

"It is no burden to share Catherine's sorrow, Father," Vincent answered, as he prepared to leave the dining hall. "It is a privilege."

At the hall entrance, Kanin drew Vincent aside briefly.

"Cullen has spoken with me," Kanin confided. "I'm going to help out with your sentry duty as well. I've already pulled together the tools, salvaged bricks, lag bolts, and quick-set mortar we'll need to install the doors. I'll spend some time getting the rock walls and floor brushed down, cleaned, and prepared, and I'll go measure the doorframe and mark out the placement for it on the tunnel floor at the spot you've selected mid-way down your chamber's access tunnel. Mouse and Jamie are good with masonry if they have the right guidance. You just let us know when the doors are ready, and we'll get them up in two days, I promise."

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Later that evening, a very pregnant Lin Pei settled Vincent into a comfortable chair by the telephone she and Henry had installed in the basement of their restaurant just for the use of the Tunnel community. She gracefully brewed some tea for them to share while he waited for Catherine's call.

"This is lovely, Lin, thank you," Vincent declared, as she ceremonially served the tea and sat in a padded wicker chair to keep him company.

"It's my pleasure," she replied. "Henry and I are so sorry for Catherine's loss. Please feel free to come here anytime you'd like to speak with her, not just for occasions like this, but during the day when she's at work or her apartment as well. We really do want the Tunnel community to make use of this phone as often as you'd like."

Just then, the phone rang, and Lin answered, "Pei's Szechuan Palace. How may I help you? Oh, Catherine! We've been expecting your call ... You're very welcome. We're always happy to help ... Yes, he's right here."

Lin handed the receiver to Vincent and then quietly and carefully made her way upstairs to give him privacy for his call.

“Catherine, My Love,” Vincent murmured into the receiver.

“Oh, Vincent!” Catherine responded, tears apparent in her voice. “I ... I’m sorry to drag you away from your evening, especially since I don’t really have any further news to share yet. But I just ... I just needed to hear your voice ...”

“I’m *glad* you asked me to come,” Vincent declared gently. “I want to be here for you however I can. If you want, I’ll come here every evening at nine o’clock until you can come back home to talk about the little mundane moments of the day, or read to you, or just listen to you breathe. Whatever you need.”

“Oh, I’d like that,” she answered, tearfully. “I r-really would! I’ll understand if an emergency keeps you away, and there may be some days when I have to deal with family matters and can’t get to the phone. But I would l-love to talk with you every night if we can. Just l-listening to your voice ... s-soothes me.”

“Then it’s a date,” Vincent responded tenderly. “I brought a book of poetry with me this evening. Wordsworth. Would that be acceptable?”

“Oh, yes!” she replied. “Anything! Anything at all.”

So Vincent opened the book to Wordsworth’s ode, ‘Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood,’ and softly read the poem’s final verses:

*What though the radiance
Which was once so bright
Be now for ever taken from my sight,
Though nothing can bring back the hour
Of splendour in the grass,
Of glory in the flower,
We will grieve not, rather find
Strength in what remains behind;
In the primal sympathy
Which having been must ever be;
In the soothing thoughts that spring
Out of human suffering;
In the faith that looks through death,
In years that bring the philosophic mind.*

*And O ye Fountains, Meadows, Hills, and Groves,
Forebode not any severing of our loves!
Yet in my heart of hearts I feel your might;
I only have relinquish’d one delight
To live beneath your more habitual sway.
I love the brooks which down their channels fret,
Even more than when I tripp’d lightly as they;
The innocent brightness of a new-born Day
Is lovely yet;
The clouds that gather round the setting sun
Do take a sober colouring from an eye
That hath kept watch o’er man’s mortality;
Another race hath been, and other palms are won.
Thanks to the human heart by which we live,*

*Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, and fears,
To me the meanest flower that blows can give
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.*

Over the next few days, Vincent spent his mornings fulfilling his teaching duties, his afternoons in Cullen's workshop continuing the grimy task of cleaning and stripping the doors and doorframe in preparation for Cullen to undertake the restoration of the wood carvings, and his evenings in the Pei's basement sharing news with Catherine or reading to her from the stack of books he'd selected for that purpose. At last, the doors were fully cleaned and stripped, and Vincent could leave Cullen to the restoration work, while Vincent returned to his regular duties and conferred with Kanin, Mouse, and Jamie over the best way to install the doors.

On the evening after Gwendoline Elizabeth Chandler-Henshaw had been laid to rest, Vincent spent most of his phone call with Catherine just listening to her talk. She described the music and readings she and her cousin had selected for the funeral, shared reminiscences about her aunt, uncle, and cousins, sporadically wept over her loss, and speculated about the upcoming legal wrangle concerning the will and estate. And Vincent gave her the gifts of his complete attention, the occasional thoughtful observation, and the warmth of his love despite the miles that separated them.

After three days of careful restoration work, Cullen approached Vincent at breakfast with the news that the doors and frame were at last ready to be sanded, stained, polished, and sealed. Once Vincent had finished teaching his classes for the day, he hurried to the woodshop and was stunned with the results of Cullen's craftsmanship. The carvings looked spectacular, retaining all the grace and flourish of the original master who created them.

"Cullen, they're just magnificent!" Vincent enthused. "You've absolutely outdone yourself!"

"Thanks," the master carver replied shyly. "Whoever created these doors was a true artist. It's always such a pleasure to restore something this special."

That afternoon and the following two were spent carefully sanding the doors and frame so they'd evenly take up the deep, rich stain Vincent had chosen to reveal the beauty of the wood grain and the extraordinary details of the carvings. Then, he spent another two afternoons staining and polishing the doors to a rich, burnished glow, and sealing them with teak oil.

And as the hours of painstaking work passed, sometimes the satin surface of the wood morphed under Vincent's calloused hands into the silken warmth of Catherine's skin. Visions of intimacies they could share in the privacy these doors would create occasionally brought his work to a temporary halt, and he needed a quick and vigorous shake of his head to clear away such thoughts and continue concentrating on the work at hand.

Finally, Vincent carefully cleaned and oiled the antique brass hardware and polished the beautiful etched glass windows. At last, the doors were ready for installation!

The following morning was a Saturday, so Vincent, Kanin, Jamie, and Mouse could get started on the masonry work for the doors right away after breakfast, since Vincent had no classes to teach. By their lunch break, most of the brick-laying was complete. All that remained was the more complicated upper

sections of masonry to fill in around the arched top of the door frame once it was in place. That work would be strictly reserved for Kanin, with their assistance.

“We’ll need to let the quick-set mortar dry overnight, so that’s all we can do for today,” Kanin stated once they’d settled around a table in the dining hall. “Tomorrow morning, we’ll install the door frame with lag bolts and fill in the rest of the masonry.”

He turned to Vincent and said ruefully, “Unfortunately, putting in the lag bolts is going to get pretty noisy, and I suspect at that point your secret will be out with Father.”

“Well, the moment was bound to come,” Vincent sighed. “I’m about as prepared as I can be for that inevitable conversation. But who knows? Father may surprise me. He certainly has on other occasions.”

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On Sunday morning, Vincent carefully checked the masonry work as he was leaving for breakfast. All was well. The mortar had fully set and dried, just as Kanin said it would. Now came the final push to finish the project that day.

After breakfast, Vincent and his co-conspirators headed directly to Cullen’s woodshop to retrieve the doorframe and the two doors. They all spent several moments admiring the result of Cullen and Vincent’s hard work and congratulating them on their achievement. Then, they carefully carried the doors, frame, and hardware up to Vincent’s chamber access tunnel.

They all held their collective breaths as Kanin and Vincent carefully fit the ornate doorframe into the brick encasement they’d created the previous day. It slipped in perfectly and would only require some caulking to fill in and seal the edges where wood met brick. All they needed to do was anchor the wood frame into the masonry with the long lag bolts and close up the remaining area above the archway at the top of the doorframe.

“We’re going to use the original holes for the screws that attached the doorframe to the chapel as the guide holes for our lag bolts,” Kanin reminded them. “I’ve already bored them out to the correct size. Now I need to chisel set points in order to grind the pilot holes for each bolt into the masonry. So, get ready for Father to arrive, because this is going to be loud.”

Sure enough, after about five minutes of the sharp sound of Kanin’s mallet striking the chisel head, the all-too-familiar tap-thunk, tap-thunk of Father’s walking stick could be heard coming down the passageway at an indignant clip.

“Vincent!” Father called as he rounded the corner into the access tunnel to Vincent’s chamber, stopping short when he saw the work crew in place. “What on earth is going on here?”

“We’re installing the doors for my chamber that Cullen and I have been restoring for the past two weeks,” said Vincent calmly, and he motioned for Kanin to continue his work.

After two more mallet-to-chisel strikes, Father burst out, “You’re WHAT?!?!?!?”

Kanin paused again, and Vincent replied, calmly, “We’re installing my chamber doors.” Once again, he motioned for Kanin to continue.

After barely one mallet-to-chisel strike, Father declared, “Vincent, you have not cleared such an involved project with the Council. I must insist you cease at once and allow us to confer about this unapproved use of the community’s resources.”

“Why?” asked Vincent, calmly, calmly.

“Oh, don’t be ridiculous, you know exactly why,” Father replied. “This is how things are done here.”

“Not at all,” Vincent responded, still calmly.

“What in heaven’s name do you mean?” Father retorted.

“Because many people have doors or tarps or curtains covering their chamber entrances,” replied Vincent, oh-so-calmly. “And none of them bothered to apply to the Council for approval. Why should I?”

Father just gaped at Vincent for a moment, and then drew himself up into his most commanding posture. “You know full well this is an entirely different situation,” Father stated sternly.

“Actually, I don’t see why it is different at all,” Vincent replied, positively serenely. “But since it appears this requires a conversation between the two of us, perhaps we should go to the library where we can talk more comfortably – and privately.”

He turned to the rest of his work crew and said, “If you’ll excuse me for a moment, I’ll be right back.”

“You go ahead, Vincent,” Kanin replied. “We’ll keep working.”

“You most certainly will NOT!” Father commanded.

“Yes. We *will*,” Kanin responded, firmly. “Once you’ve talked with Vincent, you’ll realize he has just as much right to protect his privacy as every single other member of this community.”

“Yes, yes!” Mouse piped up. “And Mouse and Jamie too!”

“Well, I *never* ...” Father blustered, completely flummoxed by this unexpected show of rebellion.

“Come, Father,” said Vincent, gently taking the older man’s arm. “Let’s go talk about this in the library, calmly and rationally, like two grown *adults*.”

Vincent drew a spluttering Father gently down the corridor, as Kanin’s rhythmic mallet strikes started up again.

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Vincent and Father had barely finished descending the steps into the library when the older man started in on the harangue that had been rapidly gathering steam while they walked.

He plopped himself down into his favorite chair and said, “All right, Vincent. I want to know right now just who put the idea into your head that you needed to close yourself off from your family behind a brick wall and a locked door!”

“Father!” Vincent replied, calmly. “Could we please dispense with the hyperbole? I’m hardly walling myself off. It’s just the necessary masonry to fit the doorframe. And in case it missed your notice, there are no locks on the doors! And they have lovely leaded glass windows.”

“Well, still, I don’t see why, after all these years, you suddenly seem to think a door is even necessary,” Father complained. “If you need more privacy, surely a blanket or a tarp would be sufficient.”

“In case you haven’t noticed, Father, people come into my chamber almost every hour of the day and night with questions, problems, or just to visit,” Vincent answered. “I love my family, and I certainly want to be available to them within reason, but the situation has simply gotten out of hand. I’ve tried placing a lantern in the access tunnel, but folks are so accustomed to my constant availability that they just barge right by without noticing. I feel strongly that a solid wood door is what will be required in order to institute what Catherine has referred to as ‘office hours for Grand Central Station.’”

“So, it’s just as I thought,” Father pounced. “*Catherine* has put this ridiculous notion into your head.”

“Not at all,” Vincent replied, still calmly, but with just a hint of edge creeping into his tone. “Catherine only commented about office hours *after* I brought up the idea of installing a door last month.”

“Nevertheless, you’re doing this for *her*,” Father insinuated. “Oh, Vincent, haven’t we already talked about how dangerous it is for you to indulge in these private trysts with Catherine? Now, I adore Catherine! I truly do. She’s a wonderful young woman and a blessing to us all. I know how much you love her, and it is plain she genuinely loves you in return. I’ve seen some of the stolen kisses you’ve exchanged, opening yourselves up to temptation. But the two of you simply *must* find ways to sublimate your desire for one another! Otherwise, I fear you are courting disaster!”

“How can you possibly know this?” Vincent charged, rising to the challenge. “Did you learn nothing from the time Catherine walked right into my arms when I’d been driven mad by Paracelsus’ horrendous drug? I was completely out of my mind, and yet she was absolutely safe with me. When I was so blind with drug-addled rage that I couldn’t even *see* her, our Bond told me who she was and brought me back from the brink.”

“Yes, I know how incredibly grateful we all are to Catherine for being so brave to go comfort you during that dreadful time,” Father ranted. “But what you’re contemplating is just sheer madness! Utter folly! Why would you risk the life of the woman you love for the possibility of a physical relationship? You could kill her in the throes of passion because we have no idea what you really are!”

“JACOB WELLS, HOW **DARE** YOU!” shouted a familiar voice from the library entrance.

Vincent and Father turned to see an incandescently angry Mary bearing down upon them.

“Mary, I ...” began Father.

“Not a word!” she snapped. “You sit down right now and listen to me, BOTH of you!”

Father and son looked at each other in shock and obediently dropped into their respective chairs.

“Dr. Wells, man of science,” Mary began tersely, almost mockingly. “How dare you even begin to question Vincent’s humanity? Have you told the story of his infancy here in the Tunnels so often, leaving out certain things for safety reasons, that you’ve completely forgotten *my* contribution to his survival?”

Father gaped at her and then suddenly snapped his mouth shut, stunned.

“I thought so. Well then, it’s high time some important truths were finally told,” Mary continued, taking a seat at Vincent’s side and reaching for his hand.

“I found my way into the Tunnels about two months before you were discovered, Vincent,” Mary explained. “I was six months pregnant when my husband decided he didn’t want to be a father. He wasn’t at all pleased when I defied him and refused to agree to put our baby up for adoption after it was born. The next day, I came back from the corner grocery to discover that he’d packed his things, cleaned out our bank account, and left me high and dry. Within a month, I was out on the street, destitute, and the weather was getting colder. Homes for unwed mothers were all at capacity, and I didn’t think I could bear the sermonizing or their insistence that I give up my baby for adoption. So, I tried the shelters, but they were dreadful places. Not at all safe.”

Mary sighed, shaking her head. “I don’t know what I would have done if Sarah hadn’t befriended me and brought me into the Tunnels. It was still relatively rough living back then, but it was dry and safe, the people were kind and helpful, and there was even a doctor who could tend to me when it was time for my baby to be born.”

Mary paused, as if gathering her strength. “Two days before you were found, I went into labor. I had a really rough time of it. I pushed and pushed, but my baby just wouldn’t come out. By the time Jacob realized the umbilical cord had twisted into a knot, it was too late. My little girl, my Angela, arrived stillborn.”

Mary wept quietly for a moment, wiping her tears with an embroidered handkerchief, Vincent clutching her hand in support.

“I don’t remember much of anything about the next few days,” Mary continued at last. “I was practically comatose with grief. I honestly don’t believe I cared if I lived or died. I could hear a baby crying somewhere in the distance, but I thought I was just imagining things. Then my milk came in, which made everything worse, and I just laid there in my bed, unwilling to eat or drink or even wash.”

“One evening, Peter came into my chamber with a wailing little bundle in his arms, begging for my help,” she added. “Anna Pater had found an abandoned baby – you, my dear boy – and Peter and Jacob had been unable to get the poor thing to tolerate any of the different baby formulas Peter had brought. Well, just the sound of you crying caused my milk to let down again, and even in my almost stupor, every motherly instinct in me came rushing to the fore. I took you in my arms, held you to my breast, and you latched right on and drank hungrily.”

Mary looked up directly into Vincent’s eyes and said lovingly, “You saved my life, Vincent. You, in your innocence and need, gave me purpose and helped me find my way again. I nursed you for almost six months, until you finally developed a tolerance for formula and we could begin weaning you onto a cup and later to solid foods. But we had to keep my nursing a close secret. The morning after I first fed you, the community discovered that John Pater – Paracelsus – had murdered Anna, poisoned her because she had feared his growing obsession with you and had taken you to Jacob for care instead. The community banished John, but Peter and Jacob were terribly worried that John might harm or kill me if he learned that I was the only source of nourishment for you at the time. So, we three created the falsehood that you had finally accepted one of the formulas Peter brought, and when I needed to nurse you, I’d just say I was giving you your bottle.”

Then Mary turned back to Father. “So, Dr. Jacob Wells, medical scientist, what was it that this unusual baby needed in order to survive? What was the only thing his poor starving little body could accept? HUMAN milk. MY milk! So don’t you DARE question whether Vincent is human EVER again! Do you hear me?”

Father blushed and stammered, “Y-Yes, Mary. I’m so very sorry – to BOTH of you. I’ve never really considered that aspect of Vincent’s origins. But you’re right. He could only consume human milk. And that should tell us something, shouldn’t it?”

After a moment, Mary replied. “Apology accepted, Jacob. You’ve had a lot on your shoulders over the years. Perhaps it’s time to let this one worry go. Vincent and Catherine are both adults. What happens between them is their decision to make. Not yours. Not mine. Theirs.”

“Yes, yes, of course, you’re right,” Father answered, bowing his head. “Vincent, can you ever forgive me?”

“Forgive you?” Vincent asked gently. “For loving me? For raising me and teaching me? For worrying constantly about my welfare? For caring about Catherine’s safety? I don’t believe these are things that require forgiveness, Father, but rather profound gratitude. For holding onto old fears long past their expiration date? That I can quite easily forgive, because they were my fears, too. And now, because of Catherine’s love and courage and the magic of our Bond, I’m finally beginning to believe there could be a way past them.”

.....

By the time Vincent returned to the work crew, all of the lag bolts had been installed, and Kanin was about half finished with the remaining mortar work. It took the rest of the morning, but when William put out the first lunch call, the masonry work and part of the caulking had been completed.

“OK, well done!” said Kanin, as they put away their tools and cleared up the work site. “Vincent, you’ll need to leave the doors closed for the rest of the day while the top mortar sets. Later this evening, it should be firmed up enough for us to put in the top lag bolts and the rest of the caulking, and then the project will be finished. To be completely safe, I’d suggest keeping the doors closed until tomorrow morning, so the mortar and caulk can finish curing up. Do you have another place to stay tonight?”

“Oh, yes,” said Vincent. “I plan to sleep in one of the old hiding places Devin and I discovered long ago. I’ll be fine.”

“When will Catherine be back?” Jamie asked, as they set off for the dining hall.

“I’ll be sure to ask this evening,” Vincent replied. “Based on last night’s conversation, unless they had a breakthrough today about the will, it might be another few days, perhaps as long as a week.”

“Poor Catherine!” Mouse said. “Always having to straighten out other people’s problems.”

“Well, this is her family we’re talking about,” Jamie replied. “Sometimes things can get difficult when money and family are involved.”

“Silly!” Mouse retorted. “So stupid to fight over money!”

“Have you already forgotten what happened when you found that treasure, Mouse?” asked Vincent. “Not even our Tunnel family was immune to squabbles, even violence, over money. Besides, Catherine’s family isn’t fighting over money. They want to abide by the directives in her aunt’s will, but some of them contradict one another. Catherine says she’s planning to suggest that they all agree to put the confusing portion of the estate into a charitable trust to support of one of her aunt’s favorite causes. That way, everyone will be satisfied, and all of the convoluted tax problems can be avoided as well.”

“That’s actually a very clever idea,” said Kanin. “Catherine’s such a smart attorney.”

“She is indeed, especially since estate law isn’t even her specialty,” agreed Vincent. “I’m just very anxious for her to return home!”

.....

Later that night, as Vincent settled down on the Army cot he kept in his secret hideaway above the entrance to the Chamber of the Falls, he happily recalled his latest phone conversation with Catherine. Her relatives had eagerly accepted her proposal to create a charitable trust with the problematic portion of her aunt’s estate and use it to provide enduring support for an organization the elderly lady had enthusiastically championed during the last few years of her life – a group that fostered the creation of community vegetable gardens and fruit groves in impoverished neighborhoods.

Two more days! She’ll be home in just two more days, and she’s convinced Joe to give her an additional week off work once she’s back!

As Vincent drifted off to sleep, he kept hearing Mary’s voice over and over in his mind.

“Vincent and Catherine are both adults. What happens between them is their decision to make. Not yours. Not mine. Theirs.”

.....

Catherine leaned forward eagerly in the driver’s seat of her car as she cleared the rise in the highway, revealing the City of New York in the distance. Home, at last, almost!

It had been such a terribly sad and fraught two and a half weeks. She was endlessly grateful that she’d arrived in time to visit with her aunt and bid her a loving goodbye before the elderly lady had slipped into a final coma and passed away. Her father’s sister had not been an easy woman to know because she’d had such firmly set and uncompromising expectations for every member of her family. But Catherine had always admired her aunt’s exceptionally generous commitment to philanthropy, and now her legacy would most definitely live on, even after the formidable woman’s passing, through significant bequests to hospitals, universities, and art museums, as well as the charitable trust her family had created for the community garden program. It was devastating to lose her last direct connection to her father, to witness the end of a generation of Chandlers, but Catherine at least had the comfort and satisfaction of knowing she had done right by her aunt and had helped her family settle the complex estate in a manner that pleased all concerned.

Catherine breezed relatively easily into the City in the light Tuesday late morning traffic. Soon, she pulled into the parking garage at her apartment and lugged her suitcase and dress bag into the elevator, stopping off in the lobby to pick up a carry-bag full of mail that had accumulated, then back into the elevator, down the hall, and into her apartment. FINALLY!

I’m back, My Own, I’m safe, she thought, willing her love to Vincent through their Bond.

She dropped the mail onto her desk, thinking, *Later, much later*. All she really wanted was some lunch, a bath, a long nap, and then to pack a duffle bag and go straight Below for a week. *Do not stop. Do not pass Go. Do not collect \$200!*

But of course, she couldn't leave the mail to rot for another week, so she knuckled down to sort through the entire bag, throwing out the circulars and junk mail, setting aside two letters from friends and all of the condolence cards to read later, and quickly dealing with the bills. She'd mail them on her way out that night. She also dutifully checked through the messages on her answering machine, none of them really important since she was off work, many of them condolence calls. Again, later. She left a message at the office informing Joe that she'd arrived home safely but would be unreachable for the remainder of her requested bereavement leave. Done!

Her chores at last completed, Catherine ordered in some lunch, unpacked her suitcase, and once the food was delivered, she sank happily into a hot bubble bath with a glass of wine and a modest plate of spaghetti Bolognese on the tub tray. Carbs for grief, her cousin had insisted, and darn it if the carbs weren't comforting in a very basic way!

She leaned back into the tub and sent another wave of love to Vincent, knowing he would sense that she was settled and resting at last. They'd already made plans to meet in the sub-basement later that night. As the hot water gradually leached away the tensions of her long drive, Catherine could have sworn she felt a wave of love coming back to her, and the faint impression of a message.

Rest, My Love! Be well!

.....

Later that night, Vincent was so anxious to see Catherine that he arrived in her sub-basement a full half-hour early, pacing an impatient path into the dust on the cement floor, trying to subdue his more passionate nature.

Calm yourself! She's rested a bit, but still very tired from an upsetting fifteen days.

But, I can't wait to see her! It's been FOREVER!

Huh, and I accused Father of hyperbole ...

Then he heard the unmistakable sound of the elevator in motion.

It could be Her!

Or it might not. The elevator has already been summoned several times since I got here. There are many people living in this building.

But it COULD be HER!

Sure enough, it was. The elevator stopped at the basement level with a ding-ding-clank-scrape of the doors, and he could hear the soft pitter-pat of her tennis shoes as she descended the short flight of steps into the storage area, the scrape of the boxes being pushed aside, and then the access doors quietly swinging open.

So glad I oiled those squeaky hinges last month.

And there she was, *My Angel*, the soft light of the overhead incandescent bulb illuminating the outline of her beloved figure.

“Vincent!” she called softly, handing her large duffle bag down to him.

He quickly set the bag aside and returned to the base of the ladder, pulling her swiftly into his arms for a resounding kiss. That went on. And on. And on. And on. Until he realized she was softly weeping, her tears wetting his cheeks.

“Oh, Catherine,” he crooned, holding her closely and rocking gently, offering her a handkerchief, and just letting her cry.

After a while, her tears eased, and she whispered, “We forgot to sh-shut the door. Again.”

“So we did,” he replied, kissing her lightly on the nose and making sure she was steady on her feet before releasing her to take care of that simple errand.

He picked up her duffle bag and curled an arm about her waist.

“You’re still so tired,” he said. “Let’s get you to your chamber so you can truly rest.”

She leaned into Vincent’s side and fell into step with him. But inwardly, she thought, *MY chamber? Oh please, I want to stay with you, not in a guest chamber again.* Then she sighed quietly. *No, don’t push him. Only he knows what he’s ready to accept. Just be glad that he’ll be close by. That’s enough.*

They walked at an easy pace, talking quietly about inconsequential things. Eventually they came to the intersection that split off toward the guest chambers, but Vincent just kept walking on down the tunnel toward the main Hub.

Perhaps we’re getting some late dinner first, Catherine thought. I am hungry. Again.

They soon came to the access tunnel for Vincent’s chambers, and he turned, gesturing for her to precede him. She smiled at his gallantry, and stepped into the tunnel, only to stop short in shock.

Before her were the most beautiful double doors she’d ever seen in her life. They gleamed a deep warm chestnut brown in the torchlight, and the pleasant scents of wood polish and teak oil filled the space. The ornate antique brass hardware gleamed in the light. There was even an old-fashioned doorknocker! The arched, beveled-glass, rose-etched windows allowed the soft light from within the chamber to pour out into the tunnel, but they were small enough and placed high enough on the doors to allow complete privacy. And the *carvings!* Delicate roses and swirling ivy twined up and down the door frame and over the lower panels of the two doors.

Like our clock! she thought. *I just know Cullen did this!*

She turned to Vincent, absolutely speechless for a moment. And then she launched herself at him, throwing her arms around his neck and kissing him with an almost unbridled passion. Vincent stumbled just a bit and chuffed in surprise. She’d caught him off guard, and he still had the handles of her duffle bag in his right hand, but he wasn’t about to object. He hiked the handles up to his elbow, swooped Catherine up into his arms, never breaking their kiss for a moment, and carried her to the door.

One press to the right-side door latch, and the unlocked side of the doors silently swung open on perfectly balanced hinges. He dropped the duffle bag into a nearby chair, still kissing Catherine, who clung to him like a vine, and gently pushed the door closed with a satisfying click.

They were alone.

And still kissing.

Then her stomach growled. Loudly.

They laughed, the intensity of the moment easing just a bit. Vincent set Catherine gently back on her feet and turned her to look into his chamber.

“Welcome home, My Love,” he murmured into her ear in the darker tones of his second nature, and a few happy tears leaked from her eyes and down her cheeks.

Vincent had cleared all the books and papers from his table, and it was set for a cozy dinner for two, a small arrangement of red and white roses anchoring the display.

“William will be sending a late supper for us shortly,” Vincent continued, his voice lighter. “Why don’t you make yourself comfortable, and I’ll set your bag over by the wardrobe.”

He escorted a slightly tottering Catherine over to her chair, and she drank in the rest of the chamber from her comfortable wingback, noting little touches here and there that had been undertaken to help her feel welcome. Her Tunnel robe draped across the foot of the bed, her moccasin slippers waiting just underneath. Extra drinking glasses and tea cups on the sideboard. The novel she had been reading the last time she was Below waiting on the nightstand. Special scented candles from Rebecca. And then, there were the incredible new doors.

“Vincent, how on earth were you able to accomplish all of this in such a short time?” she marveled. “Those doors alone must have taken forever to make and install.”

“I had some help,” he admitted, nuzzling her fragrant hair before taking his own seat at the table. “The last few weeks have been quiet for us here in the Tunnels, fortunately. No emergencies. No other big projects on the work calendar. Most of us have been enjoying the opportunity to rest and work on personal hobbies and tasks. I spent my spare time on these doors.”

“They are astonishing,” she said, just as a sharp tap chimed on the brass doorknocker.

“That will be our dinner,” Vincent noted, rising from his chair to open the door.

William swept in on a cloud of delicious aromas, carrying a large dinner tray with two covered plates, a small iced carrot cake for dessert, and a pot of fragrant tea.

I smell strawberry ginger, my favorite! Catherine thought.

“Welcome home, Catherine,” William said softly, giving her a smacking kiss on the cheek and removing the covers from the plates with a flourish.

He'd prepared *all* of her favorites – roasted rosemary chicken with his mother's secret marinade recipe, jacketed double-baked potatoes with all the fixings, and a fresh salad with mixed greens, goat cheese, cranberries, walnuts, and a raspberry vinaigrette dressing. Clearly, William had called in some favors from their Helpers, and it all smelled just divine!

"You've lost weight again, young lady," William gently scolded her with another kiss to the top of her head. "Don't they know how to feed you up there in Connecticut? Now, I expect to see a clean plate when I return for these dishes!"

"Yes, Sir, Chef William, Sir!" she laughed, giving him a little salute. "I haven't had much appetite or time these past weeks, and now it seems I'm *starving!*"

"We'll fix that problem soon enough. And I'll have you know I was a Corporal, Miss Chandler," William retorted with a sniff. "I worked for my money!"

They all laughed at that, and William took his leave with an elaborate bow, closing the door quietly behind him.

She looked back at the lovely table, the beautiful roses, the savory food served on charmingly mismatched china dinnerware, the tempting dessert, the aromatic tea, and her handsome, beaming dinner companion. And once again promptly burst into tears.

"Oh, Catherine, My Love," Vincent crooned, as he knelt at her side, gently stroking her arm.

"I – I'm sorry," she blubbered. "I just can't seem to stop d-doing this! It's all so lovely, and I'm *ruining* it!"

"No, no, not at all," he soothed. "You've been through an exhausting and heartbreaking time. Of course you're emotional over the smallest things."

"This is *hardly* sm-small, Vincent!" she cried. "Look at everything you've done for me – for us! And I can't st-stop *crying!*"

"*Not all tears are an evil,*" he whispered to her, laying his head on her shoulder.

"And now you're quoting G-*Gandalf* to me!" she wailed. "You know how much I l-love that book!"

That last interjection finally got them both laughing, Catherine mopping her face with Vincent's now bedraggled handkerchief.

"It's all right, Catherine," Vincent said, once the laughter eased up. "Everything you're feeling is perfectly fine. I want you to cry if tears are needed, laugh if it makes you feel better, talk about anything under the sun, and sleep as much as you desire. This is your time to rest and heal, My Love. And I am here for you."

"Yes," she sighed, sinking back into her cushioned chair. "I can do that."

"And you should eat as well," Vincent added, returning to his seat. "Otherwise, we'll both be in trouble with Corporal William."

“Well, we certainly don’t want that,” she replied, picking up her fork and eagerly digging into her rosemary chicken. “Oh, this is *so* good!”

Vincent chuffed, “You sound like Kipper.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” Catherine giggled. “That young man can *eat!*”

They fell into easy, light conversation as they enjoyed their meal. Updating Catherine on the latest Tunnel gossip and the children’s progress with their studies. Describing her aunt’s impressive mansion in Connecticut with its marvelous art, beautiful gardens, and walking trails by the lake. Chuckling over Mouse’s latest Rube Goldberg-style plan to improve water pressure for the Tunnel showers. Discussing the community garden organization that will benefit from her aunt’s estate.

Soon the last bite of carrot cake and the last sip of strawberry ginger tea had been consumed, so Vincent placed the tray of empty dishes outside the door for William or one of his kitchen helpers to retrieve. He closed the door and turned to see Catherine standing in the middle of the worn, faded carpet, tracing a pattern with her toe and fairly vibrating with restraint. He crossed and took her gently into his arms.

“Catherine,” he murmured. “If you wish, I would very much like for you to stay with me here in my chamber while you’re with us Below. I want to keep you close and hold you while you sleep. I want ... **I want to be as much as I can for you. I ... I ...**”

He wants!

She kissed him softly, slowly, and thoroughly.

“And I want to be with you,” Catherine replied. “Whatever that means for now.”

He smiled at her. “We will at least be guaranteed privacy. Father and I had quite the discussion when he discovered the doors being installed. We’d gotten a bit shouty when Mary, of all people, came bustling in and settled the matter in the most unexpected of ways. I’ll let her tell you about that, because it was an intensely personal revelation for her. Let’s just say that Father now has a brand-new perspective on the possibilities for our relationship. How we choose to move forward will be entirely up to us. No more lectures. No interruptions.”

“Be careful, Vincent,” she chuckled. “In my current emotional state, I may just try to eat you alive for breakfast, so to speak, and that wouldn’t be fair to either of us right now. I could be the one needing your help with runaway passions. I’m clearly not quite thinking straight after these last weeks.”

“That’s to be expected,” he sighed. “You’ve come face-to-face with our mortality as human beings. With the fragility of life and how truly short our span of time on this earth really is in the grand scheme of things. Passionate feelings aren’t uncommon or unreasonable. And we have much to ... **explore.**”

“You’re tempting me,” she murmured, assessing him.

“**Maybe, just a little, My Catherine,**” he whispered back in the dark, secret voice of his Otherness, then sighed again. “I’m entirely at sea here, My Love. You’re vulnerable. I’m uncertain. You’re grieving. I want to be of comfort to you in more ways than just as your profoundest friend. We have the great unknown before us. I have all these ... **thoughts ... images ... desires.**”

He shook his head. “I hardly know what is permissible or appropriate. And I still worry for your safety. I can’t help it. The caution is just so ... indelibly *stamped* within me.”

“Shhhhhh,” she crooned to him, taking his face in her hands. “Let’s get comfortable and snuggle up in your big bed and just ... be ... for now. I’m *so* tired. I’m bound to fall asleep in seconds. And maybe, nestled in your arms, I’ll be able to stay asleep without starting awake every half hour.”

He leaned his mighty head down to nuzzle her hair, sighing, “Yes, I can do that.”

It didn’t take long for Catherine to unpack her bag into the wardrobe and cupboard drawers Vincent had reserved for her, or for the two of them to change and get ready for bed. Soon, Vincent blew out all of the candles, leaving only the lamp Mouse had wired to illuminate the stained glass window above the bed. He gathered a drowsy Catherine into his arms, and she slipped gently into a deep sleep.

At last, they had a fine and private place.

THE END

*The grave’s a fine and private place,
But none, I think, do there embrace.*
from ‘To His Coy Mistress’
by Andrew Marvell

Vincent’s chamber is far from a grave,
and there certainly will be a lot of embracing going on,
if I have anything to say about it!
But I greatly enjoyed making ironic use
of this well-known quote.
Lindariel