

SOMETIMES WE MUST LEAVE OUR SAFE PLACES

by JoAnn Baca

The quiet was ominous to Catherine as she cautiously traversed the Hub Below.

Upon entering the tunnels from her basement threshold, nothing had seemed amiss. But concern began to blossom as she passed first one, then another outpost where no sentry whistled a greeting. This, coupled with the unnatural stillness of the pipes, caused her to near the Hub with trepidation, slinking silently from shadow to shadow, peeking into a series of oddly unoccupied chambers. Now, crouching in a natural alcove of a tunnel wall near Father's chamber, she peered along the length of an uncharacteristically empty passageway.

As she slipped into Father's study she noted the disarray in the giant chamber. Was it in its normal state of controlled chaos? Her eyes took in the clutter of haphazardly stacked books and papers piled in seemingly careless abandon. Nothing to cause concern in that – the Tunnel leader never seemed to straighten his books and papers, but always knew exactly where everything was. Yet as familiar as the disorder was at first glance, upon a second look, things definitely were off kilter. Her gaze snagged on an overturned teacup which had leaked its contents onto the stone floor, pawns and bishops strewn upon the seats of the chairs drawn up to the chess table...Father's cane, tipped over and lying against the massive clawed leg of his work table.

Concern gave way to an unsettled fear, causing her stomach to do flip-flops. Catherine held her breath and slid into the library stacks, working her way toward the little-used back entry to Father's study. She had no idea what to do next, but the situation seemed to call for continued stealth while investigating further.

A hand reached out and tugged at the sleeve of her jacket, nearly causing her to yelp in fright. Her mouth opened and she drew in a panicked breath, then saw that the hand belonged to young Geoffrey, who was holding

an index finger up to his lips. She stifled the cry in her throat and nodded, then knelt to face him.

“What’s happening?” Her voice was a mere breath, barely discernible, but Geoffrey could read her lips.

“Intruders,” he responded, and it was then that Catherine noticed his trembling lower lip. He was being brave, but it seemed a delayed reaction was finally settling in.

Catherine reached out to him and hugged him tightly, ready to offer him what comfort she could. She noticed he only allowed himself a few tears, then stiffened his spine and pulled away from her. “Men with guns are in the Tunnels. They took everyone they could find,” he murmured to her. “I don’t know who they are.”

“Where’s Vincent?” She couldn’t imagine him letting strangers enter the Hub and attack the inhabitants without a fight. Come to think of it, why didn’t anyone *else* put up a fight?!

“Far away. A day’s journey. I heard Kanin whispering to Olivia. He said Vincent was at the Nameless River.” Tears leaked down Geoffrey’s cheeks. “The three of us were hiding in the boys’ dormitory. They got found. I was in a hamper of clothes.” He dashed at his tears, his manner self-accusing. “I should have done something!”

“It’s OK, sweetheart,” Catherine reassured him. “You were right to stay hidden. You couldn’t have helped them by getting caught yourself.” She looked around, then added, “Should we try to find others who are hiding? Maybe we....”

A new sound stilled her – furtive footsteps on the metal stairs at the entry, which gave way to a louder shuffling along the rock floor, nearing them. Catherine’s eyes grew wide. Geoffrey tugged her toward the exit she had been heading for when they had found each other, and they tiptoed toward it. They were just slipping out into the passageway when an unfamiliar male voice shouted, “Hey!”

They began to run, pelting down the narrow side tunnel. Catherine didn’t know where it led, but Geoffrey guided her with sure feet. He ducked

into an even narrower walkway, made a quick series of turns into other tunnels, then scrambled up a short incline, Catherine following as quickly as she could.

They could still hear their pursuer, but he was falling behind. Someone not familiar with the warren of tunnels in the Hub could easily make a wrong turn, and it seemed the man trying to catch up to them had done so. But they didn't slow down, sprinting across a particularly wide passageway that Catherine recognized, down another, then into the cavern where Catherine had spent so much time gazing at the waterfalls with Vincent.

Geoffrey didn't pause, racing to and then clambering up a rocky outcropping; Catherine followed until they were higher than she had ever been. They could hear two voices now, as men entered the cavern below them.

“...thought I saw someone run in here.”

Catherine and Geoffrey pressed themselves against the rocks and tried to control their heavy breathing, hoping the men would not lift their gazes but follow the pathway that led along the edge of the cavern, away from them.

“Better find ‘em quick. Mitch ain't gonna like it if anyone gets away. He said he'd...”

The men's voices receded into the distance. After a moment, Geoffrey reached for a higher handhold and resumed his climb, Catherine at his heels. He had the nimbleness of youth; Catherine barely kept up with him, but her fear gave her the extra adrenaline she needed to exert herself in such an unaccustomed activity.

The sound of a waterfall grew louder as they climbed. Eventually they emerged onto a small flat outcropping abutting the lip of one of the lower falls. Mist clung to their clothing, dampening their hair, but it felt refreshing after the climb.

They couldn't whisper here; the falls made it impossible to hear anything but a near shout. Catherine pressed her lips to Geoffrey's ear and asked, "Why here?"

"We're going in there." He pointed to the falls themselves, then smiled. Taking Catherine by the hand, he inched out onto a narrow ledge that seemed to lead right into the heavy tumult of water. Then he disappeared. As she followed, she realized the ledge was curving inward, and once through the very edge of the waterfall, she found herself inside a shallow cave directly behind the falls.

They collapsed onto the damp earth, rubbing their arms and rolling their shoulders after the effort of climbing. The youngster pulled off his tennis shoes to shake out some stray pebbles.

"We come here to play sometimes. Mouse showed me," Geoffrey shouted.

Catherine nodded. "What about the men?"

"They aren't from Below, they won't know about this place," he replied.

She shook her head. "Maybe not the ones we saw, but..." A shudder ran through her as she explained further. "They mentioned a man named Mitch. He used to live Below when Vincent and Devin were boys."

Geoffrey's face reflected his surprise and dismay at this news. "The same Mitch who shot you?"

She nodded.

"Vincent knows about this place, so he probably does, too. Darn!"

"It was a great idea as a hiding place," she said, consoling him. "You couldn't have known the leader of those men was from the Tunnels."

"What kind of a creep *is* he?" Geoffrey wondered. "Why would he want to hurt us if he lived here?"

Catherine shook her head. “He’s a sick man. And...I thought he was an imprisoned one. How he got out so soon is beyond me.”

* * *

“We’re still missing some of ‘em,” Mitch growled at his crew. “There’s a fat guy who’s the cook...a tall, rangy guy who does woodworking...a youngish guy who tinkers...a little kid...and...there’s one big guy, scary lookin’ – you gotta be real careful of him. We haven’t found him yet either.”

“I saw a woman, too, but she got away from me,” one man – Bert – confessed. Mitch’s forehead furrowed as he tried to place the additional female. He had Tamara’s descriptions to go on, and he had made sure to appropriate Father’s roster to aid them in collecting all the inhabitants of the Tunnels. Even the old ladies on the far outskirts of the inhabited tunnels had been taken – the crazy blind one with the shells and the batty wall painter who slept with her brushes. They’d been rousted from their beds first, since they lived farthest from the Hub. He’d been sure only five people remained at large. Quickly he scanned the roster again, checkmarks against all but five. No extra woman appeared.

Stalking over to Father, Mitch hauled him roughly by the collar and shook him as he demanded, “Who’s the woman? Don’t lie to me!”

Father shook his head, frightened and puzzled. “The roster is up to date. Complete. There’s no one else.” Mitch let him loose and turned back to his men.

Father cast his mind frantically through a mental list of female Helpers, wondering if one of them had decided to come Below early this morning for some reason, without notice. But he wasn’t going to offer the idea to the madman who had kidnapped his community.

He rued their latest argument over Catherine that had culminated in Vincent’s decision to spend some time apart from his world, down in the depths where the Nameless River ran. Why was he so obstinate in the face of the obvious facts that she loved his son, and his son loved her? With glaring hindsight, he realized that he was the major obstacle to his son’s happiness.

If only he had come to this understanding two days ago, Vincent wouldn't have sought the temporary respite of a faraway refuge. Selfish though the thought was, he understood the truth of it. Perhaps it was his desperate position that forced this self-awareness, but he hoped that eventually he would have come to the realization without the impetus of dire circumstances to strip the truth bare.

Father desperately hoped Vincent would return in time to save them, even as he acknowledged there was no reason Vincent would even know what was happening here.

Meanwhile, the intruders continued their discussion. Bert's pal Jerry complained, "We looked all over. They're hidin' too good."

Mitch cuffed Jerry on the jaw. "Well... *find* 'em! How good can that fat old chef hide? Or a kid? We can have a perfect hidey hole here, but only if we grab up *all* of them, hear me? And use your guns if you need to, especially on the big hairy guy – you'll know why when you see 'im."

The Tunnel dwellers who had been rounded up huddled together in the Great Hall. Most had been rousted from their beds in the early morning or plucked from their sentry posts; some were captured as they'd fled down passageways. The incursion had been meticulously planned and carried out.

Many of the older inhabitants recognized Mitch Denton as Sam's wayward boy, and recalled how much of a troublemaker he had been as a teen. Even those who had never known him had heard of Catherine's brush with death at Denton's hands. There was universal shock and dismay over his attack upon the place he had once called home, and young and old alike trembled to think what his plans were. He must know that as long as they were alive, he could never convert the Tunnel community into a criminal hideout. They felt that something terrible was about to happen, and they were powerless to prevent it. Men with guns surrounded them. And a madman led the gunmen.

Mitch assessed his manpower. He had eleven men with him, each with a pistol and a shotgun. The Tunnel folk were completely unarmed, frightened...they would be easy to keep cowed. He turned to four of his men. "Sonny, Tim, Angelo, Bud...you stay here and guard these numbskulls. The rest of you, come with me."

The other seven men left again to search the passageways and chambers Below, this time led by Mitch himself, who realized that he, alone among them, already knew all the best hiding places.

“Follow me. We’re going to the Chamber of the Falls.”

* * *

As Mitch hiked through the tunnels leading his men, he considered his next steps. He hadn’t been completely honest with the men he’d organized into this crew. They were only a means to an end for him anyway. Even if he were inclined to change his mind, they had already disappointed him. Bennie was OK, but most of the rest...all of them really...were imbeciles. They were fit to do the dirty work – once everyone was rounded up, he’d have the guys march the Tunnel dwellers to the Abyss and shove them in. That would be the easiest thing. It would save ammo, make body disposal a snap, and there’d be no blood to clean up. Then he’d dispose of the crew and move on from there with Bennie. He would get a larger, better crew together once he’d secured the tunnels for himself, building a real criminal empire from his own personal hidden fortress.

A grim smile played on his lips as he thought about Tamara, his old friend and co-conspirator. She was not without her uses. For one thing, she had resources – enough to help him escape from the prison he’d been dumped in after his conviction. And even now, the few henchmen still hanging around her since Paracelsus’ downfall were locking down tunnel entrances throughout the world Below; in a few hours it would be impossible for inquisitive Helpers to access the Tunnels. They could stew all they liked Above; nobody was getting in. After a while, they’d have to give up and leave the Tunnels be. What could they do, go to the cops? Nope. They could assume what they liked, but the Tunnels would be a mere memory for them soon enough.

Yes, Tamara had her uses. Maps, blueprints, descriptions of the folks he didn’t know who now lived in Father’s world, tools.... Yeah, he’d agreed to play things her way, but he wasn’t one for taking orders for the long term. She thought that with his help she’d become the queen, do what Paracelsus had failed to do; but she was just a pawn to him. Those men of hers were old and easily manipulated; he was confident he could win them over to his side.

Then he'd arrange for Tamara to have a little accident – a fatal one. Between the guys familiar with the ways Below and some better guys he'd recruit from Above, he'd assemble a formidable force.

These missing folks were just minor bumps in the road. They'd be corralled soon enough. And when it came to Vincent, well...he was prepared today. He wouldn't be caught poorly armed like he had been before. He had more men and lots of firepower.

Claws and fangs couldn't stop bullets.

* * *

"I suppose we should climb back down and find another way out," Catherine said.

Geoffrey nodded. "I'll lead." But he had only just disappeared under the edge of the falls when he appeared again, panic in his eyes. "They're climbing up here!"

Catherine's stomach sank with the realization that Mitch Denton would undoubtedly delight in taking revenge on her for her part in sending him to prison. But she needed to protect the young boy beside her. She tried to put on a brave face for Geoffrey. "I'll go out. They may think I was the only one hiding here. Wait a bit, then try to escape."

"No! Wait!" Geoffrey scrambled to the back of the cave. "There's a crawlspace back here that Mouse dug out a while ago. We could make it through easy." He pulled some brush away from the opening, threw himself on the ground, and wriggled into it. "C'mon!" Catherine heard his muffled voice say.

She let him get further down the crawlspace as she considered her options. If she put the brush back in place, it was doubtful anyone would imagine there was a carved-out tunnel behind it. She could turn herself over to the searchers...and certain retaliation by an unstable criminal. Or she could follow the rabbit down the rabbit hole...

Catherine inspected the crawlspace more closely. It was roomy enough for a slender boy, but could she fit into it? Well, if Mouse had, she

supposed she could, too. Getting onto her stomach, she measured her shoulders in the opening. Yes, it did seem large enough for her to navigate it, if she didn't carry too much bulk. Catherine slipped off her jacket and began to crawl.

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Vincent was rushing as fast as he could, but his heart sank further with every step. He had sprung awake at the sudden flood of Catherine's panic spilling through the Bond and, flinging off a blanket, he had surged to his feet, stopping only to lace on his boots and grab a canteen before leaving his campsite at a dead run.

He was many hours away from the Hub, even running at full speed. He cursed himself for leaving without letting her know he would be gone. She was not helpless - he knew she could take care of herself - and Catherine was managing her fear now, after the initial gush of emotion. But it was a constant throbbing presence within their Bond, signaling the continued urgency of her situation.

Whatever the crisis might be, he felt certain he would arrive too late to be of any assistance.

He pushed himself harder.

All he could do was try.

* * *

"Father," Mary murmured, "who do you imagine the woman is?"

Barely moving his lips, Father whispered, "I fear...it may be Catherine."

"No!" Mary was well aware of the bad blood between Catherine and Mitch Denton. "What should we do?"

"What *can* we do?" Father shrugged.

Beside him, Kanin confirmed Father's concern. "If we rush them, many of us will be shot, maybe die."

"Nobody's coming to help us," Mary reminded them. "Vincent is too far away. We can't expect William and Cullen to attack a dozen armed men. Even if they contacted the Helpers...should they put themselves in harm's way for us? It's up to us. We *must* think of something."

Olivia and Rebecca, standing beside Mary, both nodded. Rebecca, her tear-streaked face grim, added, "Even if some of us get hurt...Mary's right, we *have* to fight back. The children...."

"It's the children I'm thinking of!" Father retorted, his whisper harsh with emotion. "I'm sure they won't harm the children if we cooperate."

"Are you willing to bet their lives on that?" Olivia muttered darkly, clutching Luke to her chest.

Father stared open-mouthed at the normally timid woman.

"Shut up in there!" barked Bud, brandishing his shotgun to reinforce his demand. His eyes raked his captives, and conversation abated.

* * *

Catherine wasn't sure she would ever emerge from the dark hole she had entered. No light intruded, and the air was clogged with the dust raised by Geoffrey's passage. Despite the scarf she'd tugged over her mouth and nose, she was sneezing and her eyes were watering as she wriggled forward inch by inch. Finally there was a brightness ahead, growing as she struggled another dozen yards. With an exhale of relief she squirmed out of the small crawlway, following Geoffrey into a space she recognized as a dressing chamber adjacent to one of the communal bathing pools. Geoffrey shoved a metal grill back into place over the hole, disguising it once more as an outflow tube for the pool area.

A shadow fell across them as they rose, brushing the dirt from their clothes and hair. Catherine's heart leapt to her throat, then calmed as her eyes focused on the figure before her: William.

“What the heck...?!” the portly cook sputtered.

Mouse appeared at his side, knees dipping in a standing bounce.
“Remembered it! Good!”

William rolled his eyes dramatically and remarked in a stage whisper,
“I shoulda *known* you had somethin’ to do with it!”

The unexpected bit of humor did a lot to restore Catherine’s
equilibrium. If they were joking, things couldn’t be *too* bad...she hoped.

Unfortunately...they could.

First Mouse and then William recounted their stories of evasion. Those who had escaped the first rush of the invasion did so merely by happenstance. In addition to Geoffrey’s quick thinking in slipping under the soiled clothes in a laundry basket, Mouse had been on an early morning “finding” trip Above when his chamber had been searched, and William had been in a pantry chamber that had somehow missed detection in the first sweep. William finished with, “I don’t know if anyone else is still free. Mouse here tracked a couple of intruders to the Great Hall. It’s the only place large enough to hold everyone.”

Just then they all heard a familiar voice shout, “Where the heck *is* everybody?!”

Geoffrey was the first to react, dashing out of the chamber to meet Cullen. After some frantic whispering, Geoffrey ran back inside, Cullen hurrying after him. He looked at the faces of the adults before him and demanded in a low voice, “What Geoffrey said – it’s true?!”

“Fraid so. And you, just now, yelling loud enough to wake the dead...let’s hope you haven’t called the whirlwind down on us all, you dimwit!” William’s face was red with anger.

“Sorry.” Cullen looked abashed, then rallied to growl, “Jeez, I can’t leave the Tunnels *one* night without the whole place going to heck in a handbasket?”

“Where were you? Nobody mentioned you’d be gone all night,” William grouched. “We’re supposed to know who’s in and who’s out by lights out.”

Cullen blushed. “Uhh...guess I forgot to report I’d be Above.”

“Spent the night with Marsha!” Mouse chortled. “Mouse knew!”

“How?” William demanded. “Nobody else did!”

“Cullen’s got a love! Sneaks Uptop lots. Tries not to....”

Cullen slapped his hand over Mouse’s mouth to stop him from revealing even more of his personal business to the others. “OK, my man. They get the picture,” he grumbled.

They took what shelter they could in the rock alcoves of the chamber, each one holding whatever they could find that might serve as a weapon. Cullen pulled out a screwdriver he had found in one of the pockets of his overcoat, Catherine and Geoffrey hefted rocks in each hand, and William deftly twirled a frying pan. They waited, tense and fearful, but after five minutes passed with no one coming for them, they relaxed.

“OK, what’s the plan?” Cullen eyed the chamber, dissatisfied with the cover it offered. “Can’t stay in here, we’re sitting ducks.”

William rose stiffly from a crouching position, one hand rubbing his lower back. “We were just getting to that. Catherine and Geoffrey showed up just a minute before you. I think we need to beat feet. Nothing we can do for the others right now. We need Helpers.”

Cullen snorted. “What, you plan to call a bunch of shopkeepers and street performers to come down and deal with men with *guns*? Get real. We gotta at least hold ‘em off until Vincent gets back.” His gaze fell on Mouse. “Never thought I’d say this, but...got any ideas?”

Mouse nodded enthusiastically. “Good ones! First...go!” He shuffled to the entryway, peeked down the corridor in both directions, then headed quickly away from the Hub.

Catherine looked at William and Cullen, then exited the chamber, Geoffrey trailing in her wake. William shrugged at Cullen, and both men followed.

* * *

With low murmurs and the slow shifting of one individual, then another, the Tunnel denizens discussed their dilemma. Dustin, Olivia and Rebecca, Martin, and Ruben proffered their suggestions to the members of the Council who were in the Great Hall. None of the Council, especially Father, was entirely happy with the idea which seemed to stand the best chance of working; the odds were still long, and the danger greatest to those who would initiate it. Resolve would be tested – both that of the participants, and that of the others who had to watch the plan unfold...and do nothing.

Reluctantly, Father added his nod to those of the other Council members.

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Mouse led them by surreptitious means to a store of flashlights, coils of rope and staves. “Sentry supplies...good to use,” he mumbled, passing them out to the small contingent.

“Makes a decent weapon,” Cullen said, slapping the heavy flashlight against his palm.

Mouse outlined his plan with precision. “Turn off lights. Use flashlights. We see. They don’t.”

William nodded, considering. “R-i-i-ght. We track down the ones lookin’ for us, hogtie ‘em, then we work on gettin’ everyone out of the Great Hall.” He brightened. “Could work!”

“*Better* work,” grumbled Cullen.

* * *

Mitch emerged wet and angry from the shelter behind the falls. “Dammit! Somebody *was* there! I don’t remember any tunnel leading out of

it though. *Damn! C'mon.*" He began scrambling back down the rock face, followed by his increasingly reluctant men.

Lagging furthest behind, Bert muttered to Jerry, "Didn't Mr. Big there say this would be a piece o'cake? I don't remember nuthin' about climbing rocks and runnin' through miles a tunnels."

Jerry nodded, gasping with the effort of his descent. "And look how many of 'em there are. All them kids and women. I mean, yeah, we need women to do the cookin' and such, but...I don't wanna deal with so many snot-noses! Jeez, it'd be like living with my old lady and her brats all over again! And what's he planning to do with all the men?"

"I sure hope he knows what he's doin'," grouched Bert.

* * *

Olivia passed a sleeping Luke to Kanin, kissing the top of her young son's head tenderly. Then she and Rebecca began to put their part of the agreed-upon plan into effect, enlisting Jamie and Mary in spreading it. The four women circulated slowly among the Tunnel residents in the Great Hall, speaking to the other adult women seemingly at random. The plan was passed from ear to ear, each woman nodding her acquiescence, then casually shifting position to ready herself. Meanwhile, Father and Kanin quietly passed word of the plan to the men and older children in the crowd.

* * *

"Split up and search, teams of two," Mitch barked. They had left the Chamber of the Falls and were standing at a crossroads in the Hub where several passageways intersected. Bert and Jerry immediately left by the nearest corridor. Two other men – Carlos and Eddie – split off and melted into a different tunnel, leaving three men standing with Mitch. "You're with me, Bennie. Cain, Mose, take that other corridor. Check everything."

The men nodded and hurried to do his bidding. Bennie turned to Mitch. "Where to, boss?"

Mitch considered his options. The others were tracing down all the tunnels in the immediate vicinity. "Let's go get something to eat." Bennie smiled and nodded. Mitch led the way toward the kitchens.

* * *

Vincent paused for a few minutes' rest, taking a long pull from his canteen. He was mystified by the sensations flowing through the Bond. Catherine had a firm resolve, and her fear, while not gone, was under control. It gave him hope that whatever had happened, he would have the hours he needed to get home to deal with the situation.

Pushing off from the wall, he stood and resumed his headlong run.

* * *

Mouse and Geoffrey returned to the sentry post where the others had taken cover, hoping no one would return to an outer sentry station once the sentry had been captured. They had done a bit of scouting, and now reported that a number of the intruders had broken into teams of two and were not in close proximity to each other. Their small band might never have a better chance to act.

Swiftly they moved toward the closest duo of intruders. Carlos and Eddie were heavy-footed, easy to find. Mouse slid through the tunnels ahead of them, and soon they were approaching extinguished torches.

Eddie and Carlos looked at each other, puzzled. Wafting smoke testified mutely that the torches had been lit until very recently.

Eddie shrugged. "Musta burned out of fuel."

Carlos nodded. "Proolly. Anyway, they got electric lamps in the rooms, and that's where we gotta search."

The two moved deeper into the dimness of the tunnel, entering chambers and turning on lights as they searched. When Mouse disabled the electricity in their vicinity, they were plunged into darkness.

Moving with the ease of those who knew every turn and outcropping of the Hub's passageways, the men from Below were not hampered at all by the lack of light. They quickly surrounded the outsiders.

In their confusion, Eddie and Carlos bumped into each other, and each dropped his shotgun. Before they could pull their pistols, Geoffrey shined his flashlight directly into their eyes, blinding them. Catherine and Mouse knocked them off their feet from behind, smacking them behind the knees with staves; Cullen and William followed swiftly, tackling them and holding them down. It took little time for the men to be relieved of their weapons.

Once their guns were gone, the men gave up all resistance, succumbing meekly to being bound and gagged. Perhaps they thought their compatriots would release them soon enough...and that possibility was still all too possible.

Catherine, William and Cullen dragged the duo into a nearby bedchamber, one of the few with a locking door, and Geoffrey gathered bedclothes with which to cover them, to muffle any noise they might make to attract attention.

Mouse had taken the opportunity to conduct a brief scouting expedition. "Next two...close," he murmured upon his return.

Cullen keyed the lock and deposited the key in a drawer in another chamber. Everyone looked to Mouse, nodding to indicate they were ready. He led the way to the next pair of intruders.

Jerry and Bert didn't know what hit them. They, too, wandered past a series of burned out torches. They, too, shrugged off the oddness of it. One moment they were poking their heads into a succession of empty chambers, the next the lights went out. Soon they were nursing bumps and bruises while sprawled on the dirt floor of the tunnel, arms and feet tied tightly together. They didn't struggle, warily averting their eyes from the bright flashlights a young boy was directing into their faces as they were gagged and dragged into one of the rooms they had just inspected...not well enough, apparently.

Another key locked another chamber door, and the motley band of Tunnel defenders moved ahead to where Mouse had scouted another pair of intruders.

Cain and Mose were next. By now the Tunnel team had their method down pat. It was over in seconds for the intruders, and soon they, too, were hogtied, gagged and stuffed under mounds of bedclothes on the far side of Kanin and Olivia's bedchamber, with the door locked firmly in place.

* * *

The movement began almost imperceptibly. The edges of the crowd of Tunnel dwellers swelled here and there, then expanded outward very slowly. Bud was the first to notice it, and he sat up straight from his lounging perch on one of the trestle tables which had been pushed against the walls of the chamber. At first he thought his eyes were playing tricks on him. But then....

“Hey! Sonny! You seeing what I'm seeing?”

Sonny had been daydreaming as he stood with his back to the hall's massive oak doors. Now he, too, straightened, blinking his eyes and focusing sharply in the direction of the throng. From his vantage point, it seemed as if the crowd had grown slightly, but he sensed no movement. That the women had ceased creeping forward upon hearing Sammy's call was not something he could discern, since he hadn't been paying careful attention for a while.

“What? I don't see nothin'!” he shouted back.

Angelo had been retying his shoelaces, just for something to do. Despite having charge of a hundred or so people, this was boring work, just standing guard. He looked up at the crowd, but noticed nothing except that maybe they had spread out a little.

“Me neither!” he offered.

Tim piped up from his station along the wall opposite Sonny. “They seem to be settling, spreading out a little. So what? We had 'em packed in pretty tight.”

“OK.” Bud stood down. Maybe his nerves were just on edge. For a while he stared hard at the closest knot of women, but they avoided his eyes, and soon he flicked his gaze elsewhere. *Yeah, they’re probably just trying to get comfortable*, he thought to himself.

A half an hour went by with little happening except the occasional cry from an infant, quickly shushed by its mother. Then some unheard signal seemed to run through the crowd. Again it began to expand inexorably, flowing toward the guards.

After a moment, Bud and Tim spotted it. Frowning, Tim called out, “Heads up! They’re moving closer!”

All the guards detected the now unmistakable signs of the crowd closing in on them. But it wasn’t everyone. The women and older girls were edging the crowd, merging into groups, and heading directly for each of the armed men.

Flummoxed, Bud tried to regain order. “Stop it, right now! We’ll shoot, don’t think we won’t!”

Angelo gaped at Bud, wondering if he was bluffing. These were just *women*, for gosh sakes! Did Bud intend to order him to shoot down unarmed girls?!

Tim was having the same reaction. He half-turned toward Bud’s position. “You’re kidding, right?” he shouted.

Reacting immediately to his lack of full attention, ten women closest to Tim converged quickly upon him. Suddenly Tim found himself overwhelmed by a sea of female bodies, and he couldn’t lift his arms to brandish his weapon at them.

Bud, Sonny and Angelo reacted with alarm as they saw Tim being inundated by the women. Knots of other women imitated their companions as their targets’ attention was momentarily diverted, pressing closer to their selected captors. Bud saw what they were doing and lifted his shotgun in their direction. “Stay back!” he screamed. “I mean it!”

Refusing to be deterred, the women nearest to Sonny and Angelo closed their respective gaps quickly, surging against them, making it impossible for the men to level their weapons at the crowd. Small, strong hands plucked the sidearms from their belts; slender but powerful arms wrested their shotguns away. Scarves, belts and shawls were employed, and soon all the intruders except Bud were bound and rendered harmless.

Bud surveyed the scene. He had a couple of rounds in the shotgun and the bullets in his gun. He could scare the holy crap out of these people. They didn't seem like they had the stomach to endure a bunch of dead women and girls. It was still possible to take control back from them.

He raised his shotgun and aimed at the white-haired older woman who was closest to him.

No one in the Great Hall moved a muscle. All eyes were on Bud as he stood, legs planted firmly, shotgun trained on Mary.

Bud's mind was working frantically. He considered his situation. Even if he made each bullet count, now that he was the lone captor left with weapons, if the crowd were crazy enough to keep coming, he'd be torn apart. Besides, who had the guns the other guards had been carrying? Were they trained on him now? Would he be shot at if he opened fire?

He had always thought this was a harebrained scheme, but Mitch had been so persuasive, and it had sounded too good to be true – a safe place off the grid already set up to live in, with broads and all the comforts of home. Well, he wasn't going to die for Mitch's idea of Fantasyland.

Bud raised his hands and, as Mary rushed forward, allowed her to wrench his shotgun from him. Men came forward now, trussing him up like the women had done with his buddies.

Bud was humiliated. How had this happened? Those women were *crazy*, coming at them like they did. What was wrong with the *men* in this place?! Although, he had to admit, he wouldn't have had much trouble firing into a group of men. But teenage girls? Old ladies? *C'mon!*

* * *

Vincent bent forward, hands on knees, trying to catch his breath. He was still hours from his goal, from Catherine. His strength was waning, but he had to keep going. What would he find when he reached the Home Tunnels? Would he have enough strength left to deal with whatever needed to be done?

His despair drove him upright once more, and once more he began running toward home.

* * *

Bennie shifted uneasily as he played lookout for Mitch. He didn't like this, not one bit. None of the others had made it back to the rendezvous point. Mitch was madder than ever now, raging and stomping around, tearing through room after room, destroying things just for kicks... Weren't they supposed to live here soon? Why would Mitch tear up the place they planned to make their home?

Mitch had told him to sit tight at the entrance to the room that looked like a library while he prowled around in there. He could hear Mitch tossing books and screaming for someone... Vincent, was it? Weird. The guy was really unbalanced. Bennie wondered if he had been smart to throw in with Mitch. He was having second thoughts...heck, *third* thoughts...about this whole grand scheme.

A sudden movement he saw out of the corner of his eye caused Bennie to twirl, shotgun raised. A woman dressed like someone from the streets of New York, not like one of these Renaissance Fair rejects, was standing not ten feet from him. He hadn't heard her approach.

She lifted an index finger to her lips and smiled at him, beckoning him with the other hand to come closer. *What the HECK...?!*

His shotgun wavered as he considered her. She didn't look like much of a threat. In fact, she seemed pretty friendly. He lowered the shotgun and whispered, "Who are you?"

Suddenly, from his unprotected flank he felt a hand slide over his mouth. He stiffened, but more hands were on him now, cadging his gun from his waistband, yanking his shotgun from his hands before he thought to

pull the trigger to warn Mitch something was wrong. He was on the dusty ground, face against rock, in another heartbeat. The hand on his mouth was replaced by a towel, and a gag was expertly fitted around his head while his arms and ankles were tied tightly.

The woman leaned toward the men who were holding him. “This leaves one?” she asked in a barely discernible murmur.

William nodded. “The mastermind.”

They could hear muffled curses coming from deep inside Father’s library. The Tunnel defenders eyed one another, each acknowledging to the others that this would be their toughest enemy to overcome.

Although they had hidden the other men’s weapons each time they had taken down an intruder, not wanting the temptation of using one and alerting the others of the potential danger lurking in the darkness, now William appropriated Bennie’s handgun while Cullen grabbed the shotgun. Cullen whispered to Geoffrey, “You’ve done great, kid. But leave this guy to the adults.”

Catherine added, “He’s the most dangerous of them all, Geoffrey. I know you want to help, but...Cullen’s right. Go hide. One way or another, this will be over soon.”

After eliciting a reluctant nod from the boy, the others melted into the library, their plan of action roughly sketched out but dependent upon too many factors for certainty. Mouse located Mitch’s position first and pointed; the others nodded to indicate they had gotten the message. They approached Mitch from various directions, grimly determined to deal with him in whatever manner they could.

Mitch was bellowing now. “What are you waiting for, Vincent? Afraid of a man with a gun?” He shoved a bookcase over, making footing near him precarious. He heard a shuffling off to his left. Turning, he discharged his shotgun in the general direction of the sound. A surprised curse greeted his ears. “Ha! Did I wing ya?” Mitch shouted.

“Don’t shoot,” a female voice pleaded. Mitch squinted to see who it belonged to. As a familiar woman rounded a nearby library stack, arms

raised in surrender, he grinned in sudden feral glee. “Well, well. Miss Chandler. Thought you’d be smarter than showing up here right now. Where’s your boyfriend?” His eyes scanned the room quickly, but he saw no one else.

“He’s not here,” she admitted. “It’s just me. What have you done with everyone?” Her voice trembled as she spoke.

This was the part of the plan that held the most risk. They had discussed it, but no one was sure exactly how Mitch would react upon seeing her. Catherine had felt certain he would want to gloat a bit instead of shooting her straight away, and the plan depended on her sudden appearance distracting Mitch until the others could close in on him. So...she played the fearful victim, hoping to appeal to his sense of triumph and nudge him into mocking her, verbally abusing her...anything, as long as he kept talking while Cullen, Mouse and William converged on his position.

“They’re all safe...for now,” he retorted, enjoying her fear and discomfort. “What do you know about my missing men?”

Catherine screwed her face into a picture of confusion. “Missing men? I don’t know anything about them.”

“Nice try.” Mitch smirked at her, shaking his head. “But one of my guys mentioned he saw a woman earlier, someone not on the Old Man’s roster. Had to have been you, right?”

Shrugging, Catherine admitted, “OK...yes. I’ve been Below for a while, trying to find the others...but I haven’t seen your men since then.”

“Whatever, lady. Why don’t you come closer so you and me can talk without raising our voices...just in case you’re trying to signal anyone.” He gestured with his shotgun.

Catherine hesitated, her eyes locked on Mitch’s. Something moved just on the edge of his range of vision. He whirled and discharged his shotgun again. Books flew and papers fluttered to the ground, but no one was there.

Mitch threw his shotgun to the ground, both barrels now empty. As he reached for his gun, he was tackled hard from behind and he fell heavily, the breath knocked from his lungs. Catherine dove for the pistol which had skittered from his hand in the altercation, but Mitch lunged, his fingers managing to snag it first, and he pulled the trigger as he raised it, his aim wild. The blast of sound momentarily paralyzed his attackers, and Mitch, struggling to pull air into his lungs, wrenched free of them and scrambled across a mound of books toward the stacks.

Cullen and William had tossed aside their weapons when they and Mouse had tackled Mitch. Now they were caught in the open without them as Mitch leveled his weapon in their direction. They froze, hearts in their throats. Catherine, too, was too close to edge away. The tableau of motionless forms amused Mitch, who laughed nastily as he informed them, "Like shootin' fish in a barrel."

As Mitch was deciding which of his attackers to kill first, he heard a commotion above him. A young boy was perched over the top shelf of the library stack behind him, and before Mitch could react, the boy shoved an armload of books down on top of him. Mitch ducked, lifting his arms to cover his head, the gun in one upraised hand.

Cullen and Mouse, no longer targets, hurled themselves on Mitch, Mouse struggling to get the gun out of his hand while Cullen rained blows on the big man. Mitch fought with desperation, his finger closing over the trigger as Mouse continued to wrestle with him. Cullen yanked on Mitch's arm while Mouse bore down on it.

The gun went off, its report plunging them all into shocked stillness.

Cullen rolled off Mitch, his ears ringing painfully. Mitch and Mouse remained motionless beside him.

Stark terror filled the faces of the others in the chamber, and they all scrambled to the immobile men. Gently, Catherine lifted Mouse from atop Mitch. His head lolled to the side, and she turned stricken eyes to Cullen. William straddled Mitch's slumped body and peeled Mitch's fingers from the gun, gingerly lifting the weapon away.

Blood covered both men's chests.

Catherine put two fingers to Mouse's neck, then relief relaxed her features. "His pulse is strong!"

William copied her, testing Mitch for a pulse. After half a minute, he pulled his fingers back slowly and shook his head. "He's gone."

Cullen snapped, "Better than he deserved."

Nobody disagreed.

Geoffrey knelt beside Catherine, who scooped him up into a warm hug while trying to shield his eyes from the aftermath of the violence.

"Bravely done, lad," William admitted gruffly, ruffling Geoffrey's hair.

Cullen gingerly patted Mouse's cheeks until the younger man blinked his eyes. Mouse gazed at the face of the dead man lying next to him, then down at his own blood-covered chest, and promptly fainted again.

William rolled his eyes and, hiding behind a hollow bluster, declared, "Typical!" Abandoning Cullen's gentle approach, he slapped Mouse smartly on the cheek and was rewarded by a startled reaction as Mouse came back to consciousness.

Mouse took in the concerned faces surrounding him. Alarm spread over his features and he sputtered, "Not my fault!"

Suddenly all of them were smiling, giddy with relief, hugging each other and leaning against each other as they finally let down their guards. But the moment didn't last long, the sober reminder of what had transpired quickly snapping them back to the problems that still faced them.

Cullen stepped carefully around the piles of fallen books and entered Father's bedchamber beneath the stairs. Mouse followed Cullen in search of a fresh shirt. As Cullen returned with a sheet which he used to cover Mitch's body, he, William and Catherine conferred. "We're looking at four more men with guns holding hostages in the Great Hall," William reminded them. "And no way in other than those heavy doors."

Mouse, buttoning one of Father's shirts as he returned to them, piped up, "Another way in. Mouse knows."

"Of *course* he does," Cullen remarked, his tone wry. "OK, what's the plan?"

* * *

Vincent felt his legs cramping. Too much running without adequate rest or water was taking its toll on him. He knew his body would fail him and he would be no use to Catherine if he didn't rest and drink.

His canteen was empty.

Emitting a frustrated growl, he forced himself to a slower pace while taking a detour to an outpost where he knew there were supplies. The supplies had been replenished recently to accommodate men working on a new water recovery system. He promised himself when he got there he would sit down for fifteen minutes; he would eat and drink something. He would.

He drank and ate quickly. He refilled his canteen. Within five minutes he resumed running.

* * *

"What next?" Kanin asked as the erstwhile hostages finished trussing their former guards more securely.

All eyes fixed on Father except Rebecca's and Olivia's. The women smiled ironically at each other. They were thinking the same thing: *Funny how, after the women did the dirty work, everyone automatically turns to the male authority figure!*

"We have weapons now," Kanin reminded everyone. "Not many, but maybe enough."

Father immediately responded, “No! No weapons. We cannot risk it. Perhaps *these* men could not bring themselves to shoot women and girls, but we cannot trust in that reluctance in the others.”

“Then...what, Father?” Brooke asked.

An old woman wearing a cloak adorned with beads, shells and twigs stepped out of the crowd to stand beside Father. “Even now, it is over, children,” Narcissa promised. “We are safe.”

Around them, voices exclaimed, “We’re safe?” “What happened?” “Thank goodness!”

Father shook his head, displeased by the apparent eagerness of some in the community to latch on to her hopeful message. “Nonsense, Narcissa. It’s cruel to give such false hope.”

A new voice cut through the crowd’s murmurs. “True!” Mouse emerged from under the edge of one of the large tapestries hanging in the upper gallery. He stood at the top of the stairs and crowed, “We won!”

Several of the men in the crowd rushed to the double doors at Mouse’s energetic pointing and yanked on them, the heavy doors slowly giving way. Outside, a small troop of familiar faces emerged from the windy stairway and cautiously entered the cavernous space, looking around in frank amazement as the assembly broke into cheers.

Cullen called for silence, and in a grim voice exclaimed, “Mitch is dead. He and Mouse struggled with his gun...and Mouse won.”

All faces turned in amazement to gaze at the fiercely blushing man-child who hopped from foot to foot in embarrassment.

Catherine’s voice lifted as she added, “Geoffrey toppled books onto Mitch, distracting him from shooting at us.”

Quickly, William’s baritone cut through the crowd noise. “Catherine used herself as bait to draw his attention, and Cullen jumped on Mitch.”

“What of the other intruders?” Father asked, his concern overcoming his temporary loss of speech at the remarkable turn of events.

“All trussed up like Thanksgiving turkeys!” William’s smug report generated smiles and clapping.

“What do we do with them now?”

The crowd fell silent contemplating Jamie’s question.

“Have an idea!” Mouse chirped.

* * *

From an unseen perch, Tamara retreated, melting back into the lower tunnels where she had her lair. As she walked the familiar pathways, she considered her situation. Long months of spying, of preparation...the expenditure of her precious store of funds...had yielded only failure. Mitch Denton was a vicious man and a fool, but he had been her best hope of achieving mastery of the tunnels – her own goal since that idiot Paracelsus had failed to accomplish the task. She would cry if she had any tears, but she had banished them from her life long years ago.

Calling to her small cadre of her followers clustered in a secret cavern awaiting her next command, she reported, “We have lost. We go home. We will begin work on another plan.”

As she trudged deeper into the earth, despair suddenly creased her face. *What other plan?*

* * *

After Mouse confided his scheme to Father, the older man stared at him in disbelief. “It will never work.”

Narcissa bent her head and murmured to Father. He listened, shaking his head at times, until finally he shrugged and announced, “What can it hurt?”

Kipper was dispatched to find Sebastian. He usually knew at which subway entrance the old Helper could be found, as he had been apprenticing with the magician during his free time.

While Kipper was on his errand, the community organized to gather the captured intruders in one place. A small contingent was asked to move Mitch's body to the infirmary. Once Father pronounced him dead, a few of the older residents, out of respect for the memory of Sam Denton, held a brief funeral service before Mitch's body, wrapped tightly in sheets, was consigned to the Abyss.

Sebastian hastened Below with Kipper. As Sebastian met quietly with Narcissa, Kipper reported to Father that several tunnel exits he had tried to use had been blocked; he'd had to utilize his newly acquired lock-picking skills to get out. At that, Father raised his eyes heavenward but kept his feelings to himself regarding what Sebastian was teaching the youngster; after all, it *had* proved useful.

He made a mental note to send work parties to all entries to ensure they were made accessible. For the moment he put off pondering who might have helped Mitch and his gang; blocking tunnel access points required detailed knowledge of the pathways Below, something Mitch's crew did not possess.

Narcissa and Sebastian briefed a hastily convened Council, which approved their plan in the absence of palatable alternatives. Sebastian then spoke to the community.

"Narcissa and I will hypnotize these men. Since they appear to be highly suggestible – why else would they have bought into Denton's crazy scheme - it should work. We will suppress their memories of their time Below and of how they entered the tunnels, then blindfold them, lead them Above and release them."

Worried faces confronted him. Father stepped forward to add, "It's highly unusual, I know. But Narcissa and Sebastian have assured the Council it can work. And what else are we to do with them? We cannot imprison them here, nor do we wish their presence to infect our community. To be sure, we will block the entrances through which they entered and double sentries along those routes for a time." He ran one

hand through his hair, revealing his frustration with the situation. “This is unorthodox, but I’m convinced it’s our best option.”

* * *

Nearly there, nearly there, nearly there.... The mantra played incessantly in Vincent’s mind, each footfall punctuated by a word.

* * *

Sebastian returned with Cullen, Kanin and a cadre of other men. The hypnosis seemed to have worked, and the men had been taken to different areas of the city and let loose. They had been watched for a time and the watchers had agreed that the men, confused, had quickly left the areas close to the entrances and seemed unaware of what had occurred in their recent past.

Relief settled upon the Tunnel denizens as they returned to cleaning up the mess left behind by the intruders. William had called in all his kitchen helpers to ready a hasty meal for the hungry community. Sooner than they thought possible, the weary Tunnel family sat to eat.

Over the sound of slurped soup, Kanin stood on a trestle table and announced that, if the assembled men agreed, the next day would be declared Tunnel Women’s Day, with the men doing all the work. “It’s the least we can do for them,” he concluded, “to express our gratitude for their bravery and fortitude. They saved us all.”

A chorus of cheers from the women was balanced by well-meaning groans from the men, who quickly began to laugh at themselves and cheer as well. William and Cullen traded injured looks. “What about us – me, Cullen and Mouse?” William inquired. “We risked life and limb and skinned knees jumpin’ on those guys, and I still gotta cook?”

Panic formed in the eyes of the crowd. Who among them could manage to prepare three meals for everyone? Realization blossomed in many hearts. They had relied on William’s talents for too long...just as they had relied on Vincent’s abilities to protect them. But today they had proven to themselves that they had the resources to handle protection without their guardian’s help.

Kanin spoke for them all when he answered William. “You’re right, you three deserve the day off too.” He addressed the community again. “Meeting after dinner here by me; we’ll figure out what to cook, maybe learn some new skills. OK, men?”

Nobody dared to grumble as William stood, fists on his hips, grinning widely. “I got some easy recipes, don’t you worry. If you can peel a potato, you can cook!”

* * *

The meal was nearly ended when Vincent finally appeared at the entrance to the dining chamber, dusty and exhausted. Seeing everyone peacefully assembled, all threat apparently ended, he gave in to overwhelming fatigue from overtaxed muscles and overworked lungs, his legs starting to give way beneath him. Catherine rose from a bench and rushed to his side.

“We’re fine. I’m fine,” she murmured, wrapping her arms around him and accepting his weight as he collapsed against her. Cullen moved swiftly to Vincent’s side and assisted Catherine in guiding Vincent to a chair. Grateful, he collapsed into it. Someone handed him a mug of water; someone else called out for food.

As Vincent drank and ate, others in the chamber crowded around him, eager to inform him of the excitement he had missed and proud to explain their parts in overcoming the latest threat to their home. Catherine stepped aside to let the others have their moments – Mouse, Geoffrey, Rebecca, Jamie and the rest.

She smiled with pride. They had done it. They had risen to the occasion and defended themselves. Possibly this would herald a new era in Tunnel protection. Now that the community knew it had resources other than Vincent for fighting off threats to their existence, he might not be the only one they turned to when the time came to protect their home.

* * *

Alone at last in his chamber, Vincent and Catherine lay on his bed wrapped in each other's arms. Exhaustion was claiming them both now that their adrenaline-fueled day was over. Vincent had made no objection when Catherine had steered him to his bed and gently helped him off with his outer clothing, nor when she had stripped to her underwear, laid beside him and pulled a thick quilt atop them both. Terror had worn the fabric of his resistance thin; gratitude for the second chance he had been given overwhelmed him.

"I thought my heart would die, Catherine," he murmured, pressing a kiss to her temple. He sank his fingers into her hair, pulling her closer, even as he drew her body nearer with one hand low on her back.

So much unexpressed anguish was in his voice, tears pricked at her eyes. *What he must have suffered, being so far away*, she thought.

Hugging him tighter, she sought to ease his remembered dread. "We're here together now. All is well. I love you." She smiled against his neck as she heard his rumbling reply. "Together...now and always. I love you, Catherine."

He hadn't mentioned his trip, or why he felt he had needed to take it. Curious, she asked, "Did you find what you were searching for at the Nameless River?"

"No." He pulled away slightly so he could gaze at her. Their Bond thrummed with the purity of the emotion singing through it. "It was here all along."

His crystalline eyes glittered as he took her face in his hands and urged her mouth to his. When their lips met, their hearts knew – they had found their safe place.