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Left Alone

- by Angie

*There is nothing to escape from and nothing to escape to.
One is always alone.
- T.S. Eliot*

Vincent sat alone in the Great Hall and let the echoes of the past few hours wash over him. The confetti and popcorn streamers were gone, as if they had never been. The last footsteps of the clean-up crew had faded and he was left to close and bar the big doors. He liked to spend a little while by himself in the huge chamber, letting his memories fill the silence.

Kanin and Olivia's Ceremony of Joining had made official the love that had warmed the community in recent months. Kanin was such a quiet man – one who seldom smiled – but Olivia had fallen in love with him just the same.

Vincent looked around the hall in the flickering light of the candelabra. The huge banquet table was now pushed against the wall, the chairs neatly up-ended on top of it. The shifting shadows seemed to speak of dead dreams and lost loves. His own love - the closest he had ever come to love for a woman - had left with Lisa long ago.

Now 35, he was more aware of his apartness than ever. He would never know the love that burned in Kanin and Olivia. He had the love of this community, of course, but that wasn't the same. He ached for what other men had - what he could never have - and couldn't discuss with Father.

Oh, there were women Below who would have gladly shared his bed. Vincent sensed it, but found it too embarrassing to think about for long. Their interest was part curiosity, part affection - not love. He knew the difference. He had not sensed love in Lisa either, but he had loved her, even if it was unrequited.

How could he explain those feelings which had washed over him so long ago? Father had not understood. Were his urges now the same as those of other men? He had no way of knowing and was reluctant to confide in his peers. There were nights when he burned for a lover, the need to surrender himself to a woman. He had read that denial could lead to madness. He hoped not, but how would he know?

Vincent rose suddenly from the chair, picked up the candelabra and walked across the hall to stand beneath the tapestries. They were beautiful, but now seemed to mock him and his life. He had once imagined himself in them. In reality, there was no figure who even remotely resembled himself. How could there be? Worse yet, the people depicted all seemed to have a purpose in life. There were victors, captured in the moment of their triumph, winning over adversaries. Even the soldiers seemed calm, as if they accepted their fate willingly. The lords driving them on rode horses, met, loved and fought in daylight. What did he have?

He worked for the tunnel community - fixing, mining, teaching, guarding – but every day had a sameness to it. He did what was necessary, read books in his leisure hours and wrote in his journal. The measure of those days was heavy on him. He had only the nights to himself, and nothing to look forward to but more of the same. Every day, every hour of work or relaxation, reminded him of his aloneness, his uniqueness – for he had no soul mate, no one he loved waiting for him when he returned to his chamber in the evening – or any other time. Even teaching the children was unsatisfactory these days. They could wander Above in daylight, could leave the community permanently, while he remained behind in darkness and candlelight, waiting. For what? He sighed deeply and that soft sound seemed to silence the hall echoes.

Suddenly, it was all too much for him. Even the Great Hall seemed stifling. He blew out the candles and left the candelabra on a table, then trudged wearily through the big doors, heaved them closed and put the heavy bar across. Then he fought his way up the windy stairs and trudged back to the habitable parts of the tunnels. He came to a quick decision, even though it was late and dawn only a couple of hours away. He grabbed his cloak and almost ran for the nearest exit into the park.

Emerging from the culvert, he took a deep breath. There was a heavy fog and the noises of the city were muffled, distant. He couldn't see the sky, or even the tops of the trees. It was a world without definition and suited his mood perfectly.

Vincent began to walk, instinctively keeping to the deeper shadows of the trees. The chill fog swirled around him, almost as if he were swimming through it. He had never felt so alone in the world. The fog seemed to bring whispers, hints of words, tantalizing and corrupt scents. He could almost hear his own heartbeat and the soft rasp of his breathing as he moved silently, like a panther, through the trees.

Suddenly, the noise of a vehicle broke the silence. He was near the park road. A white van came to a screeching halt just yards away from where he was hidden in the trees. He retreated further. There was loud metallic *graunch*, and as he watched, a large shape was thrown from a side door by two pairs of arms. Then the door was closed and the van sped off into the fog. Silence descended like a pall.

Vincent looked at what had been thrown out and realized, with a shock, that it was a body. That made him move quickly and as he got closer he realized it was a woman, wearing a well-made dark coat, open to reveal a slinky dress. A prostitute perhaps. Her purse and shoes had been tossed out with her and lay nearby. As he turned her over, he felt her move slightly and realized she was alive, although unconscious. His breath caught as he looked at her face, a horror of deep cuts that were still bleeding. There was no time to waste. Father would have to be roused to see to her injuries. He wouldn't like a stranger being introduced, but his doctor's instincts would outweigh any qualms.

Vincent left the purse but picked up the woman's shoes, putting them into the capacious inside pocket in his cloak. Then he gently lifted the woman over his shoulder and began the long return trip. She was small and light, but he could feel her warmth. He sensed her strength and will to live with relief. She would need those in the days to come.

He realized something else, belatedly. This woman had been beaten, cut and discarded like trash. He too had been discarded once, as a baby, but the similarity ended there. The tunnel community was his family. They were warm, welcoming and supportive, always. They would never inflict upon him the horrors experienced by this woman. Here and now, this woman was truly alone – in ways even he could not imagine. With that revelation, he felt much better.

This woman was a stranger – and he would have to stay hidden from her - but Vincent hoped he could thank her for helping him see the truth. He had a safe place, a priceless gift he seldom thought about. Perhaps he could impart some of that comfort to her before she had to return Above.

And, he decided, he would not give up on love just yet.

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