

Appearances to the Contrary

by Angie

(That) mighty frame, how build, unbuild, contrive

To save appearances ...

- John Milton

Vincent was serene these days, but could not forget the price by which that serenity had originally been achieved - the loss of his bond with Catherine. He had survived the worst period of his life, one where he had fully expected to die, and truth be told, wanted to.

Catherine had saved him, the how of it inexplicably erased from his memory, but she had remained at his side as he recovered, so he had not wanted to ask. He was too grateful for her presence, even in light of his failure to remember her name, to want to upset her further with questions.

Once recovered, though, his tunnel family had wanted him to participate in something they were planning, no doubt as an aid to his full recovery, a musical comedy. They had chosen *HMS Pinafore* and the children were rifling through their seamstress' boxes of oddments looking for costume material. Vincent had not paid much attention. He had not planned to play a role in the musical, beyond perhaps helping to coordinate the various scenes, or shift scenery that would take several other men to move. He preferred to be in the background now.

Therefore he was surprised when he answered Mary's summons one day and found her in her chamber with a big smile on her face.

"Hello, Vincent. You know about our plans to produce *HMS Pinafore*, but I suspect you've not been told details. We want you to play a particular role and I have helped to create the perfect costume for you."

She held up a short, patch leather vest with two lines of gold buttons joined by braided cord.

Vincent blinked at the piece, amazed at the obvious love and work which had gone into it. He was momentarily speechless. He loved all his clothing, but this was something very different. Although still made from scrap leather and suede, it was the short style he preferred and with the same large armholes that allowed him freedom of movement.

"It's beautiful, Mary. I presume I am needed to play Sir Joseph Porter, Lord of the Admiralty."

"Yes, Vincent, if you would be so kind."

"And sing."

"Well, yes. But you needn't worry, Vincent. Your voice is quite able to do the sing-song needed. We don't expect you to be operatic."

"Which you know would be impossible," Vincent remarked. While his speaking voice seemed to sooth everyone, his singing voice was less so. He wasn't tone deaf, but that was about the extent of his ability.

He accepted the vest from Mary and on his return to his chamber, he tried it on. Naturally, it fit perfectly. He began to wish for a mirror, something he had never wanted before. He went to one of the storage chambers and found an old, but very dusty one on a swivel mount. He cleaned it up in his chamber and placed it next to his coat rack.

He did look very good in the vest. No denying it. He wanted Catherine to see it, but knew she would not be visiting for a few days, being busy with some unexplained crisis at the office. That worried him, but there was nothing he could do about it. He could no longer feel her in the old way, the way he ached to have again, although he knew she was alive. He had to presume she was also safe.

He hung the vest on a hanger on the coat tree and draped his cloak over the mirror. He wasn't yet ready to see himself on a regular basis. He would find something permanent to cover the mirror, except for the rare times he might need it – or Catherine did

Days later, the vest was forgotten, as was all thought of the musical comedy. No discussion was needed. Catherine had been abducted and Vincent was frantically trying to find her. He followed a pipe message to where she was being held, but had been unable to rescue her, watched her being driven away, away from him.

What followed were long months of nightmare searches and despair as he searched for his love. The man who held her prisoner seemed to be all too efficient at thwarting him. Even with the help of everyone in the tunnels, they had not been able to locate her. It wasn't until he felt a whisper of their lost bond, that he tracked her down, but only to lose her again, forever as he thought.

The night on the rooftop, holding Catherine in his arms, was the worst in his life and he had felt his heart sink to a new low, one even his tunnel family could not hope to sooth.

Blake's poem came to him and he found himself repeating it, quietly, in the long hours of the nights that followed.

*“A weeping Babe upon the wild
And Wheeping Woman pale reclined
And in the outward air again
I filled with woes the passing Wind “*

He had worn the vest once or twice since, in private, superstitiously clinging to it as a connection to Catherine, the last special thing he had worn before she disappeared. He wanted the comfort of the love it represented. Catherine hadn't seen the vest, but he had intended her to see it, and he was certain she would have appreciated it. That was reason enough to cherish it.

He wore it when his tunnel family went above to attend Catherine's funeral. His life had changed. The vest seemed to embody that, and he gained some comfort from it, as he pondered what he would do now, to do with what Catherine had told him with her dying breath.



He had become a crusader now, a force to be reckoned with, as he embarked on a campaign to locate his son, Catherine's son, and the man who held him. Elliot and Diana helped, but the nights were not long enough for Vincent to do all he wanted in the search.

Diana *had* helped him learn more about Gabriel and finally it had all ended after he surrendered himself to Gabriel and held the baby that Catherine had given birth to, their son - *his* son. He had escaped with the baby, with help from Diana, and been re-united with Father, and amazingly Catherine too. She had been held in an undercover operation by Gabriel, who was apparently a law enforcement agent, her death a sham. * The reasons were beyond his comprehension, but he was content to know no more than Catherine did. She was restored to him, and that was all that mattered.

Then, with peace and contentment restored to the tunnels, the community decided to revive their previous plans for the musical. Now that Catherine and baby Jacob were among them, the production had taken on a triumphant, even celebratory air. Vincent, however, still felt an inexplicable ennui. He tried not to

reveal it to his tunnel family, or Catherine. It had all happened too quickly and he still felt somewhat out of synch with the tunnel world, and with himself.

Catherine had declined to participate as an actor in the operetta, needing time to become used to the new reality too, but had promised to help off stage. She was very busy feeding and caring for baby Jacob, something she cherished beyond everything, except Vincent. She had no time to practice for a role, she said, and Vincent made no objection, happy for her to do whatever she wished. He could deny her nothing, still amazed that she was alive and living in his chamber with him.

Diana had agreed to play the role of Josephine, Captain Corcoran's daughter.

Vincent modelled the military style vest for Catherine one day, as the performance date grew closer. Catherine gazed at him with love and smiled. She knew the history of the vest from Mary, but had not asked him about it, having decided to let him choose the moment to show her. He looked so very handsome in it. She sighed.

"Vincent, you look magnificent. I had never thought of you in something like that, but it suits you."

Vincent quoted in a sing-song voice:

"But still, in matters vegetable, animal, and mineral

I am the very model of a modern Major-General"

"You are indeed," Catherine told him.

"But," Vincent continued:

"Things are seldom what they seem

Skim milk masquerades as cream."

Catherine laughed. "You my love, are exactly what you seem. And even that vest cannot change you beyond recognition. For which I am very grateful."

She stood on tiptoe to plant a kiss on his mouth and he hugged her to him. He sighed. So much had happened, so much had changed. He felt as if he was still living in a dream. One he definitely did not want to wake up from. Their anniversary was now approaching and the joy among his family mirrored their own.

Although he had never lived anywhere but the tunnels, he was aware as never before what an artificial world it was. He had seen something of the world above, of course, during his life, but usually at night. He knew it was no paradise up there, but never had he seen so much of the darker, unpleasant side as he searched for their son. He could not seem to quite cast off the shadow it had left on his heart.

It was the vest, he decided, and its association. Although wonderful and made with love, it would have to be retired when the operetta was over. It truly did

belong in another life, one he hoped he would never have to re-live. It seemed to fit the crusade he had embarked on, then, but it was too military-looking for his everyday taste now. He wanted to put it away with those bad memories. Not forgotten, but as proof that he had triumphed, survived – and that Catherine had too. And their son was as miracle that should have no dark associations, now.

Catherine gazed at his face, sensing something of his emotions. She had not missed the fact that Vincent, although more content than she had ever known him, had some lingering sadness. Their bond was restored and she found it amazing that she could feel him now, although she was less adept at understanding what she sensed. In this case, knowing the history of the vest, she thought she understood.

She spoke softly in the words of Buttercup (she had been helping Mary learn the lines):

*“Sir, you are sad! The silent eloquence
Of yonder tear that trembles on your eyelash
Proclaims a sorrow far more deep than common;
Confide in me – fear not – I am a mother!”*

Vincent looked down at Catherine and mentally shook himself. What was wrong with him? Here in his arms was everything he had ever wanted, his love, for always. And he had both Jacob, his son, and his son's mother, his love. For always.

He smiled at the words of Buttercup ... and felt as if his face had cracked, so long had it been since he had used those facial muscles. His heart filled with love and the shadow over it dispersed, like candle smoke in a draught.

Catherine felt the change. “Better?” she asked.

“Yes,” Vincent admitted. “Yes, Catherine. This vest brings back memories I would rather not think about. But I will wear it in my role, and then perhaps I can put it away ... with the brighter memories of *HMS Pinafore*.”

“I think that's what you need to do,” she told him quietly. “I understand.”

“I know you do. That's why I love you so.”

“That goes both ways,” she told him, as they closed the space between them for a kiss.

Truly, this anniversary was one they should celebrate without any shadows between them, Vincent reproved himself. The balm of her love chased them away, and he let go of his sadness. He was extraordinarily fortunate, he knew. And they had their whole lives ahead of them.

He sighed as he contemplated his new life. And kissed her again.



THE END

*Too Deep For Tears