

# Conqueror

by Angie

*“Veni, vidi, vici. (I came, I saw, I conquered.)”*  
— Julius Caesar

One thing had not changed now that Vincent was the patriarch of the tunnels – he always took on the difficult tasks, no matter what special day or festivity was pending.

Catherine sighed. It was Valentine's Day, and although there was nothing much happening during the day, she had hoped that her husband would find a way to let them have some time alone to themselves to celebrate – like any other couple.

But he had been called away by some kind of intrusion at a far sentry post, and had apologized to her, making it clear he might be somewhat late. He had taken Cullen and a toolbox with him, meaning it was something more serious than a lost drunk.

She knew where he was, at least. As the hours wore on, she decided to go and meet him. She could sense he was satisfied with something, whatever it was they had done, and was likely to be heading home. She knew the tunnels well after so many years, so she knew that he would come the quickest way and that there were a couple of side passages where she could wait for him. She wouldn't surprise him, but she would be able to feel his love for her when they met earlier than he expected - and that was worth the slight discomfort of a chilly upper tunnel in the winter. She had on a warm, dark blue dress, a good warm shawl and sensible shoes. She would be fine.

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Vincent and Cullen had dealt with the incursion, which turned out to be nothing more than a slight collapse of a slope near an entryway under the weight of snow. Footprints had given them some concern, but they led out as well as into the culvert. It seemed likely they belonged to a Park worker checking on the situation. In any case, by the time they got there, there was nothing more than a pile of rocks, some broken branches, and a lot of snow, half blocking their entrance, which had been reported. It was hidden by an ancient metal door that had the appearance of something from a couple of centuries ago – which the tunnel residents had encouraged. It led only to a small storage area sunk into the small hillside, long unused. The back wall shifted to provide an entry into the actual tunnels.

The collapse had been of a nearby bank, not the hill over the entry, so Vincent and Cullen hefted as much of the debris out of the way as they could, mostly to make sure the park workers knew the bank there had not slipped. Then they brushed away any evidence of their footprints, pulled some of the branches over the area, and made sure their deceptive entry was intact. They tapped a message on the pipes that no one was to use the exit until further notice. Park workers would have to repair the damaged bank – and they might not see any urgency in the middle of winter.

Cullen picked up the unused toolbox and one of the lanterns and left, Vincent having decided to check out nearby areas, just to make sure no other hazard had materialized. He found nothing, and satisfied, he began the long walk home, knowing full well that Catherine would be waiting, no matter how late he was. That put a spring in his step.

He was approaching the recent problem area when something on the ground caught his eye. He reached down and found a shard of mirror. He looked around and realized that the mirror on one of the walls facing the adjoining passage had shattered. It was only a small one, but it was enough to give the sentry warning, should there be an intruder through this entry. He made a mental note that it would have to be replaced.

The light was good here. Vincent looked at the shard and was shocked to see himself in full light reflected in it. He still didn't like mirrors, particularly in the tunnels. In their brownstone, there was one in their bedroom. Here, where he knew every brick, he did not want to think about how he looked. But he couldn't take his eyes off his reflection. It was not something he experienced, despite there being small mirrors in strategic places. He could sense anyone nearby, so he didn't need them. They were for others so he could ignore them.

Now, Poe's poem came to mind as he gazed at his unique features. He whispered it to himself.

*"That motley drama — oh, be sure  
It shall not be forgot!  
With its Phantom chased for evermore  
By a crowd that seize it not"*

While it could be argued that everyone in the tunnels wore motley - he was the only Phantom, Vincent thought. Haunting the tunnels, or the brownstone, the two places on the planet he was safe. He sighed. He recalled again why he detested mirrors, even as he accepted them where he had no choice. They hurt. He could hardly forbid Catherine the one in their bedroom. That would be just plain ... inconsiderate. He sighed again.

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Catherine reached a likely cross tunnel and realized, suddenly, that Vincent was not coming towards her, but getting farther away. She could sense that too, she realized for the first time. Their bond was certainly growing more interesting, even after so long. She had never had reason to wonder about its extent before – and wouldn't have tonight, if it hadn't been Valentine's Day.

Well, she was not going to retrace her steps, so she leaned against one of the walls and waited. She suspected Vincent was just being careful. He would not be long.

So it turned out. She felt him reach his destination, then his satisfaction that all was well, and turn to head back. He was thinking of her! She loved that feeling and closed her eyes to bask in it.

Then suddenly he stopped, and she sensed his puzzlement, and then something else, something she couldn't define. He wasn't far away from her now, within earshot. She peeked around the corner and spotted him down the tunnel, holding something in his hand. It reflected light ... a piece of broken mirror!

She withdrew back into her hiding place, realizing belatedly that there was a small mirror on the corner of her tunnel that gave a view down to where Vincent stood. There were many such in the tunnels, but she had never really paid them any notice. They were for sentries and patrols, not for her.

Then she heard Vincent recite something. He was not worried about being overheard, so she could make it out quite plainly. Part of a poem, she guessed, and the words explained his emotional state. Wasn't that Poe? Hardly thoughts for Valentine's Day, she mused, frowning.

Vincent disliked mirrors, she knew, but did not speak of them – nor did he use the one in their bedroom. In fact he avoided even looking in it, something she couldn't fail to notice. So why was he looking at himself now? Perhaps he couldn't resist. She stood still, keeping her emotions under control and wondered what she should do .... if anything.



Vincent broke his concentration on the piece of mirror and bent down to lean it against the wall. These were not thoughts for this night, of all nights, when he should be thinking of Catherine and grateful for a life that he had never dreamed would be his. She had made this life possible. He shook his head, as if to toss off the mood, and turned to continue his journey. He had not gone far when he heard his name. Catherine! He turned to gaze into a side tunnel and found her there waiting, a smile on her face that melted his heart. He opened his arms to her and she gratefully walked into them, to be enfolded in the warmth of his cloak. "I thought you might not mind a little company as you walked home tonight," she whispered into his chest.

"When it is your company, of course I would not," he whispered into her hair. She always smelled so good, herbal, clean ... which reminded him that he probably smelled like nothing of the sort after their labours at the gate.

"I'm a bit dusty," he remarked, by way of apology.

"Here, that's a normal thing," she chuckled. "I'm sure I picked up some in my walk here."

"You smell delicious," he disputed her. "You always do."

"Well, then, shall we walk on and get to where there is less dust, and more options for this night?"

“Yes.”

He took her hand and they walked slowly homewards, neither in any hurry now. It was quiet in the tunnels, the pipes silent. Their footsteps seemed very loud. Catherine took her courage in her hands and asked the question she had been aching to.

“What was that poem you were reciting, Vincent?”

Vincent stopped and looked at her, then sighed. It was impossible to keep secrets from Catherine now.

“My apologies, my love. I saw a reflection of myself and a poem by Poe came to mind. *Conqueror Worm*. He was a rather depressing poet sometimes, so say nothing of his horror stories, as you know.”

“Yes, Love, but he was also the one who wrote '*A Dream Within a Dream*'.

*“You are not wrong, who deem  
That my days have been a dream;”* she quoted

They recited the famous final couplet together...

*“Is all that we see or seem  
But a dream within a dream?”*

Vincent chuckled and Catherine joined him.

“If this is a dream, my love, then at least we are both in it and must follow it to its conclusion,” he remarked.

“And we both know how it will conclude tonight,” Catherine said, wagging her eyebrows at him. “*Veni, vidi, vici*.”

Vincent laughed at Julius Caesar's famous words. Truly, no one else could lift him out of a 'mood' like his love. In one fast motion, he reached down and gathered her into his arms. He walked swiftly the rest of the way to the tunnel entrance to their brownstone, where he put her down so they could enter.

“Well, I'd say you certainly held me in a '*tighter clasp*', Vincent. You are my '*hero*', my '*conqueror worm*' – and the rest of mankind matters not at all.”

“And this is a '*gala night*',” Vincent quipped back. “Best we not waste any more time.”

“Up, now, to our '*scenic solitude*',” she replied, stepping through the entry he opened for her.

Vincent regarded her. “Remind me never to recite poems in empty tunnels. You never know who might be listening.”

“Good advice,” Catherine commented as he joined her and closed the door. “This time it was only me.” She did not explain the statement. It was a memory of another man who conquered – Isaac.

“Never only,” he told her, planting a kiss on her brow. They went upstairs. No one needs to know what happened next, although all can guess.

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