

Despair and Hope

by Angie

*... it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope,
it was the winter of despair ...*

- Charles Dickens

The world Above was experiencing one of its periodic hard winters, putting its most vulnerable at risk, with no recourse left but the streets. The tunnel community was taking in a slow trickle of refugees recommended by helpers. There were more new faces Below than had been seen at any time since its founding.

Everyone was doubling up, but more beds and chambers were desperately needed.

The community had not quite recovered from the loss of two of its own to a desperate group of violent invaders. The extreme danger had forced Vincent to protect his world and his family. It had been unavoidable, predictable even, but had given him nightmares just the same. It had taken him hours to track down the nameless boy who had been with the gang. He found him at last, a bundle of rags and skinny limbs, at the bottom of the spiral stairs, which were icy at this time of year. Vincent had been sad at that, although he suspected the child would not have been easily reformed.

But some good came of this terrible encounter. It was decided to clean and prepare the chamber above Mary's, where the gang had been living, and create a dormitory for the single men and women seeking refuge. The work party had cleaned the chamber meticulously and carved niches in the walls for candles and lanterns. Doing something positive helped all of them come to terms with the recent tragedy. Smiles and jokes started to return.

The roof was less than a foot taller than Vincent, but that made it perfect to hang privacy curtains between the beds. Cullen had become expert at creating captain's bed frames from old wardrobes and knock-down bookcases and the sewing group had scrounged suitable curtain fabric and rods. They also made carefully-tufted mattresses from old sheets and the fabric waste which seemed to breed in their scrap bins. A washroom with a stone tub and toilet were created in the small room where the gang had kept its weapons.

Father had started to hold mass orientation sessions for the new arrivals in the dining room once a week. However, after attending the first session at Father's request, Vincent politely declined to participate again. He felt on display, although that was not unknown when new people joined the community. However, this time the discomfort was of a different nature.

Most of the refugees were women, many of them street people and younger than himself. A couple of the women were pregnant and alone. These young women had regarded him as a kind of alpha male, perhaps because Father was so much older. Their obvious desire to attract his attention – if not more – embarrassed him. His appearance did not seem to worry them at all, something he had not expected. His own family was well-acquainted with him and had seen him in every possible stage of dress or undress. He was accepted as himself, but he was at a loss to understand how these new women could find him attractive. Well they did, and he was not prepared to fend them off, after his first clumsy attempt to do so, diplomatically, had resulted in feminine tears.

His own feelings were not completely impartial. He had never been the focus of so much female attention – and many of the women were undoubtedly attractive. It led to sensations below the belt he found disconcerting.

Better they did not see him until they were assimilated, he told himself. Mary and the other community women would set the new arrivals straight.

Meanwhile, Vincent spent his nights roaming Above, well-wrapped in his cloak. His chamber was sacrosanct – he had not been asked to take in a refugee - but some newcomers seemed to like to wander. He did not return Below until the wee hours, fearing some female incursion. His fears often proved accurate. He could smell their lingering scent when he returned. He had taken to hiding his journal from curious eyes. No one in his family would have conceived of such prying, but the newcomers had not yet learned the essential rules of privacy.

Vincent realized he was getting less sleep than he liked, and was becoming increasingly irritable. He started to travel further Above and retreat into the deep tunnels during the day to escape the noise and disruptions in the habitable levels. There were always chambers to carve and places to map. He kept himself busy and appeared only for meals. Then, still feeling unwanted attention, he had William make him bag lunches and volunteered for border checks and sentry duty far from the hub. Father was hinting that he was becoming unusually anti-social, but the other men were grateful to be relieved of their duties so they could check out the new arrivals. Eligible females were usually scarce Below.

If Father recognized Vincent's dilemma, he did not say so and Vincent did not wish to broach the subject. But the situation could not continue. Vincent could think of no way to resolve his problem. He was becoming desperate. He didn't like having to avoid all the community for the sake of a few newcomers and he missed the peaceful hours in his chamber. He took to wandering the park early in the evening, trying to find some peace.

Then one night, as he was returning home, he heard a loud altercation close to the culvert entrance he had planned to use. He crept closer, concerned. He hoped it was not another invasion.

A woman's voice was raised in fear and anger. There seemed to be several men, their voices loud with threat. Vincent finally realized that a female jogger was being harassed by three men. She was giving a good account of herself, but she was small and no match for them. One pulled out a knife and began to slash at her while another grabbed her from behind and put one large arm over her eyes, blinding her and preventing her making any calculated hits. The third took out his own knife and stood by, as if waiting for his turn.

Vincent moved then. He gave his best roar and flung himself between the two knife wielders, dispatching them with economy, and without further sound by snapping their necks. The last one flung the woman away, and attempted to flee. Vincent tackled him and ended that particular career as well. Then he took a deep breath and went to help the victim.

She was lying on the ground unconscious, her face and arms slashed and her clothes in ribbons. With luck, she hadn't seen him. Vincent gathered her up and carried her Below to the hospital room, then found Father. A quick examination had given rise to both relief and horror. Fortunately, the cuts on her arms and body were superficial, although she had a few nasty bruises. But her face was a different story. The cuts were deep, but had been done with a sharp blade and would heal well. Father had to clean and stitch them with extra care, then he bandaged the woman's face so the stitched would not be disturbed. He injected her with an antibiotic and a sedative so she would sleep for at least eight hours. Then they dressed her in a soft tunnel gown and thick wool housecoat. Vincent couldn't help noticing that she was very fit and nicely-shaped.

There being no chance of privacy in the hospital room during the day, which was used to give health examinations to incoming refugees, Vincent agreed that he should take the woman back to his chamber. He put her in his bed and set up a cot for himself, then put his coat rack in the doorway to discourage any nocturnal visitors before getting himself ready for bed. He promised himself he would

get Kanin to help him hang a rug in his doorway the very next day. He wondered why he hadn't thought of it before. Enough was enough!

In the meantime, he rolled out his sleeping bag on the cot and napped. His empathic talent told him the woman was strong and healthy. He would know when she awakened.

Vincent slipped into a dream. He was in his bed and the woman, seeming very tiny in it, was sleeping beside him. He could feel her heat warming him through his nightshirt. He felt his heart respond to something he sensed in her, an aloneness, almost a despair. Was that why she was jogging in the park after dark? The woman moved and put her hand out, touched his chest, as if she needed that contact, and he sighed.

He awoke and found himself in his bed, with no memory of how he had got there. He must have been sleepwalking! His fatigue had taken its toll. The woman was beside him, but still asleep, facing him. Her hand had flung out and was just touching his nightshirt below the neck. He looked at it in the dim light and dared not move. How ironic that after weeks of trying to avoid female contact, he had put himself in its way!

With a sigh, Vincent decided he would make the best of it, and fell into a deep sleep, the best he'd had in many nights. When he awoke, he quickly slid from the bed before the woman awakened. He sat in his chair and watched as light brightened the stained glass window above the bed and cast its mellow glow on his chamber. He lit the brazier and one of his ceiling lamps.

The woman shifted and suddenly awoke, stiffened and cried out. Vincent went to her immediately.

"Shhhh," he told her, putting a hand on her shoulder. "You're safe now. There's nothing to fear."

She calmed under his hand, but he could sense her fear.

"Where am I? Who are you?"

"My name is Vincent and you are in a safe place. You were attacked. I brought you here and my father tended to your wounds. Your face was cut, but don't worry, you will heal. We had to bandage you to protect the stitches."

Vincent declined to tell her she was beneath the city, in his chamber and in his bed – or that he had been beside her.

"What is your name?" he asked, to distract himself from thoughts he would rather not entertain.

"Catherine," she whispered. "Why aren't I in a hospital?"

"You were bleeding, and this place was closer. My father is a doctor."

"But no one will know where I am. I don't have any family, but I'd like Dr Alcott to be informed of my whereabouts. He's been my doctor since I was born."

Vincent was surprised. "Dr Peter Alcott? Why, of course. We can send a message to him and ask him to come here and see you."

Vincent saw Catherine relax noticeably. She must have been afraid she had been abducted! He knew such things happened Above – helpers sometimes sent them day-old newspapers, but he had never thought to be suspected of anything like that.

"Don't worry, Catherine, I have to leave for a minute to get the message sent, but I'll be right back."

Vincent rushed out of his chamber and into Father's. The old man was just toweling his hair dry. He looked up at Vincent.

"How is our latest patient?"

"She's well, Father, just a little fearful. She'd like to see Peter. Can we send him a message?"

"Oh, certainly Vincent. I'll get Kipper to go immediately. Fancy her knowing Peter. That bodes well. Hopefully he can vouch for her so we won't have to try and keep our secrets. Just let me write a quick note."

Father did so, then tapped on the pipes to summon Kipper. The boy arrived in great haste, still dressing. Father gave him the note and instructions and he ran off.

“That boy never walks anywhere,” Father commented with a chuckle.

“It’s almost breakfast time,” Vincent remarked. “I’d better get some food for our guest and myself. I’ll sit with her today.

“Oh, and Father, tell everyone I want privacy. I’m going to get Kanin to help me put up a door rug.”

Father smiled. “Good idea, Vincent. But don’t trouble yourself. I’ll talk to Kanin. We’ll get something installed for you today.

“By the way, I know why you have been so remote. I’m sorry, Vincent - it took Mary to point this out to me. Some of our female refugees are extremely curious about you – too curious.”

Father looked at Vincent and patted his shoulder. His eyes twinkled a little.

“This new guest can be your responsibility. I know it’s not ideal, but it will keep the others at bay for awhile. I’ll make it plain that you are not to be disturbed.”

“Thank you, Father. Her name is Catherine. I’ll be happy to care for her. You have enough work of your own to do.”

Vincent went to the dining hall to get a tray for himself and his patient, picking out muffins, tea and some of William’s whole wheat rolls filled with smoked ham. When he returned to his chamber, it was to find Catherine sitting on the edge of his bed. He quickly put the tray down on his table and went to her.

“Catherine, you shouldn’t be up yet.”

Catherine looked up at his voice and whispered in a clearly embarrassed voice.

“I’m sorry, Vincent, but I need to use the ... um ... facilities. Can you help me get to it?”

Vincent felt his face heat. “Certainly, Catherine. My apologies for not thinking of that sooner. I’m not much of a nurse. Here, hold onto my arm and I’ll steer you there. Oh, and there will be a little noise soon. Some work is being done here, but it won’t take long.”

Vincent led her to the small bathroom and made sure she knew where everything was before closing the door curtain to give her some privacy. He was waiting for her to call him to help her back when Kanin and Cullen arrived, carrying an enormous rug. They got to work pounding the pins into the rock wall and then hanging the rod and rug.

Vincent was amazed to see the crew so soon. Father must have planned this before he spoke! Well, he had not been inclined to talk to Father lately – or anyone else.

When Catherine called, Vincent led her to a chair and made sure food and drink was within reach and told her where it was. He didn’t want her to feel his hands. If she found his behaviour odd, she said nothing. Vincent was relieved and ate his own breakfast with his usual economy, watching the work on his doorway. They had found a Persian rug in a reddish and gold paisley pattern. It completely covered the entrance. They also pounded a ring into the wall so the rug could be tied back with an old bell pull.

Catherine’s mouth quivered a little as she tilted her head to try and get her bearings. The noises obviously puzzled her, but Vincent forestalled her questions by telling her that Peter would come as soon as he could. She relaxed in her chair a little at and smiled gingerly, then winced as the bandages shifted on her cheeks.

“I can’t even smile,” she whispered.

Vincent felt he had to apologize. “I’m sorry but your smile will soon be restored to you.”

The rest would take longer, but he said nothing.

The curtain crew had just left with a wave and a smirk, when Peter brushed aside the rug and entered.

“Cathy,” he exclaimed, walking over to her and taking her hand. Vincent moved away to give him room. “What happened to you?”

“I was jogging in the park when three thugs decided I was interesting meat. Vincent found me. I must have passed out because I don’t remember how I got here.”

Peter looked at Vincent then, who nodded but said nothing. Peter could not find it in himself to be sorry for the attackers, but Catherine was another story.

“What’s the prognosis, Vincent?”

“She’s strong and healthy, Peter. But she has some deep knife cuts that will take a while to heal. We are pretty full here at present, what with all the refugees, so I’m looking after her.”

“And you couldn’t have a better nurse, Cathy,” Peter declared. “I’ve known Vincent since he was a baby. He’s got the patience of a saint.”

Catherine’s mouth pursed.

“But where am I, Peter? I can hear trains above me and some tapping. It’s so quiet here, apart from that, though. No traffic noise – and I can smell wax.”

Peter looked at Vincent, who nodded again.

“Well, Cathy, you are in a very special place. We are far below the city, in a kind of commune, a refuge for people who don’t fit into the world you know. They come here for different reasons, but now we are all one.

“This is a kind of city itself, but joined by tunnels in the rock – and by the hearts of the people who live here. Our values are ones the world above has abandoned. We care for each other, help each other and teach our values to the children.

“I’ve been a helper to this community for a long time – since before you were born. And before you ask, I couldn’t tell you about it. Doing so might have endangered the people here. You’ll see it all soon. You could be one of us, but if you don’t wish to, we ask only that you keep our secret.”

Catherine found herself amazed. It was like something out of a fairy tale. Peter Alcott’s involvement was even more surprising, but she didn’t hesitate.

“You needn’t worry, Peter. I owe my life to Vincent and this place. That alone would be enough – but now I’m really curious. How long do I have to be bandaged up, Vincent? I must look an Egyptian mummy.”

“Just a couple more days,” he told her. “We want to make sure the stitches are not disturbed. You will have scars, but they will heal cleanly.”

Catherine shuddered. She was not particularly conceited, but the thought of having to face the public with a scarred face was not something she wanted to contemplate. She could afford a plastic surgeon – but should she?

Her life to date had been that of a rich girl. Her father’s death had made her even richer. She kept a desk at his old law firm, but in reality, she did little work. Corporate law simply didn’t interest her. She needed something more inspiring.

Perhaps this community could use her talents and she could become a helper like Peter. She would have to learn more. The thought of returning to corporate law was abhorrent and she was sure the firm would be only too happy to buy her out.

Vincent and Peter helped Catherine get back into bed and gave her the painkiller Father had left for her. She soon dozed off. Vincent escorted Peter outside the chamber and walked with him out of earshot.

“Do you think she saw you?” Peter asked carefully.

“No. She was already unconscious, or in shock, when I intervened.”

“Well, I know Cathy, Vincent. She won’t have an attack of the vapours when she sees you. A lawyer learns to keep her face blank. Anyway, I hear some of the new arrivals have been chasing you. Cathy won’t do that, but you may find her hard to forget.”

“I already feel some of her emotions. I sense a sadness, a restlessness. She is not happy – and not because of her injuries.”

“That’s quite true. Cathy has been drifting through life for years. As her doctor – and a friend of the family – I’ve watched her. She needs to be wanted, Vincent. I think she would make an excellent helper – if you can think of something she can do for you.”

“We always need people of talent here, as you know. I’ll talk to Father and see what he suggests.

“I’m glad she’s here. She is the best guard against the misguided affections of the new arrivals.”

“Misguided? I think you underestimate your charms as regards the fair sex.”

Vincent looked uncomfortable as Peter grinned. He spoke sternly.

“Charm is such an archaic word. I know they are not interested in my charms, whatever those may be. They don’t even know me. They just see me as a ticket to stay. Anyway, I’ll never have the love that other men have.”

“Vincent, you may be surprised one day. Love has a way of finding a man no matter where he hides – and you are hiding. Why shouldn’t you experience what other men have? There is no organic reason why not. I’ve known you from a baby – so don’t try to tell me otherwise.”

Vincent hung his head. “Peter, look at me. Look at these hands. You’ve seen my body. What woman could want me – unless they were desperate?”

Peter sighed. He wondered if Vincent wasn’t as adrift as Catherine. Perhaps they would be good for each other. He sincerely hoped so.

“All those things you mention are on the outside, Vincent. They don’t matter to those who love you. It’s what’s inside that counts. You know that. Ask Catherine about her favourite book sometime. It’s called ‘The Velveteen Rabbit’ – a children’s story with a very adult philosophy. Perhaps you should read it. I think you’d find it ... interesting.

“Well, I must get back to my office. Call me if you need anything in the way of medical supplies, eh?”

“Thank you, Peter. We will.”

Vincent returned to his chamber to find that Catherine was sleeping soundly. He decided to go to Father’s chamber.

Father was sitting staring at the chessboard but looked up when he walked in. Samantha was sitting on the other side, smirking slightly. One glance told Vincent that Father’s youngest pupil had beat him again. Vincent could not help a slight grin and Father grimaced.

“What can I do for you, Vincent? Come to gloat over your old man’s defeat – again?”

“No, Father, I wanted to thank you for being so prompt with my door covering.”

Father smiled. “Yes, after I found out why you were away so much, I arranged with Kanin to find a door covering. I had planned to have him put it up as a surprise while you were um ... hiding, but Catherine’s needs forced us to wait.”

Vincent thanked him, then remembered why he had come.

“Have you heard of a children’s story called ‘The Velveteen Rabbit’, Father?”

Father’s eyes got distant for a moment.

“Vincent, that’s a very delightful tale, and almost as old as I am. Whatever makes you ask for it?”

"Peter mentioned it. He said I would enjoy it. Do we have a copy?"

"We used to," Father said slowly. "But I have no idea where it is at present. I try to keep all the children's books over there in the front part of the gallery, but you know, no one ever puts books back where they came from."

"Including you," Vincent remarked.

"Hmpphh - yes, quite true. But you see, I'm busy. I put them over there on the table for sorting out later. But later never seems to come."

"Well, I'll see if I can locate the book in your un-filing system. Who is the author? Then, perhaps when Catherine is feeling better, we'll put her to work as a librarian. What do you think?"

Vincent knew he would not enjoy having his library disrupted, even in the interest of re-organization. He was not surprised when Father grunted discouragingly.

"I think you'd better ask her first. Ah, the author, let me think. Margaret – no, Margery Williams. Yes, that's it. Try looking over there under the staircase. There are a lot of older books there. I think it has a pinkish cover."

Vincent went to look over the bookcase indicated. It was so low and so full that he had to sit on a stool to see the books on the lower shelf. A few minutes later he found it, to his surprise. It had a purple rather than pink cover and seemed to have a number of illustrations.

'The Velveteen Rabbit – or How Toys Become Real,' he whispered to himself.

'There was once a velveteen rabbit'

Vincent thanked Father and took the book back to his chamber to read. He quickly found himself enthralled. It was a simple but delightful story. He read the entire book, then returned to the beginning. A few paragraphs in, he read a passage again.

"What is REAL?" asked the Rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender, before Nana came to tidy the room. "Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?"

Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real."

"Does it hurt?" asked the Rabbit.

"Sometimes," said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. "When you are Real you don't mind being hurt."

"Does it happen all at once, like being wound up," he asked, "or bit by bit?"

"It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "You become real. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."

Vincent stopped. The story might well have been describing his life. He was loved, certainly, but had been, in a very real sense, 'carefully kept'. That was not the fault of his family, but a fact of his uniqueness. Nevertheless, he had closed himself off from any love from the opposite sex. He had become prickly on the subject and sharp-edged. Was he afraid of being 'broken' or disappointed?

How could he consider himself whole – or real – without that particular kind of love? He realized Peter was probably right. If he ever did find a woman who could love him, his appearance wouldn't matter.

He was still deep in thought when Catherine awakened.

"Vincent?"

Vincent realized he had not been paying attention to his patient. Some nurse he was!

"Yes, Catherine, I'm here."

"I'm hungry, Vincent. Is it mealtime yet? I have no idea what time it is."

It was nearly lunch time and Vincent said so.

"I'll go and get us a tray. Don't move until I get back. I don't want you to fall over anything."

He ran out through the door covering and down to the dining hall. William, who was preparing a number of trays for other convalescents, looked up when he came in.

"Well, Vincent, what can I do for you? I presume you want a tray for yourself and your patient. Here, take this one. I'll add an extra large bowl of pea soup and some more bread, a pot of butter and some brownies."

"Thank you, William. I'll need some tea as well. Can we squeeze a pot on here?"

"Well, we can get it on there if you can carry it – and I know you can," William chuckled, adding a few extra teabags and a large thermos of hot water.

Vincent managed to get the tray back to his chamber, but the door covering nearly defeated him. How was he going to get through it without brushing something off? Mary happened by, saw his quandary and held the rug for him. He gave her a grateful smile and got the tray safely onto his table.

Catherine was sitting on the edge of the bed again. She looked up towards him as he approached her and cleared her throat.

"I need help to the facility again," she confessed. Vincent gave her his arm, careful to keep his hands and nails away from where she could feel them. He arranged the food on the table while he waited for her to finish. The soup smelled wonderful. William's meals always did.

Once she sat down and was given a soup spoon, Catherine made short work of the pea soup. Vincent buttered the bread for her as she needed it and made sure she knew where the tea was. He was still trying to minimize actual contact with her. When they removed her bandages, he would have to be sure to be elsewhere.

After lunch, he helped Catherine back into his bed. He decided to broach the topic of the little book.

"Catherine, Peter mentioned that you liked a particular children's story, 'The Velveteen Rabbit.'"

Catherine stiffened and then relaxed. "I wonder how that topic came up? Yes, it's a favourite. My mother read it to me when I was little, and I read a part of it at my father's funeral last year."

"The part about being real?" Vincent asked.

"Yes, how did you know? Well, I guess it's obvious, isn't it? You see, I don't feel very real anymore. My life is a drag and I can't seem to change because I don't know what I want. I have more money than I'll ever need, but my life is empty."

"Is there no special man in your life, Catherine?"

"You've met the only special man I know. Peter Alcott. He's been a friend as well as my doctor, all my life."

Vincent looked at the woman dwarfed by his bed. She was beautiful, seemed intelligent and had a fit, well-proportioned body. Those things would be attractive to any man – and he certainly found them so. He didn't understand.

Catherine interpreted his silence correctly and sighed.

“I know you look at me and wonder how I can be unhappy and alone. You are probably thinking I’m spoiled and just difficult to please. Perhaps I am. But, when I look in a man’s eyes, I don’t want to see my own reflection looking back. I don’t want to see my wealth or my expensive clothes. I want to see love. I want someone to see who I am, who I can be, possibilities - even if I don’t know what those are. I want to be more than just a trophy on some man’s arm.”

“Catherine, you will never be that. You are stronger than that.”

She dropped her head and clasped her hands together.

“Vincent, I’ve never been challenged in my life, until now. I don’t think I have the strength to change.”

“You do,” he told her emphatically. “You just need to be motivated.”

Vincent realized that this woman was more lost than the refugees who had come to them. They were all quite clear about what they wanted – even when that was himself. This woman was still searching. She would have a lot of challenges to overcome in the coming weeks. Her face was going to have scars. Even if she had them surgically repaired, there would be other less visible scars – inside.

“Catherine, your bandages will come off soon and then we can give you a tour of our home. It has many wonders – and people. If you’d like to become one of our helpers, there are many ways you could help us. Do you like books?”

Catherine straightened her back. “Books are my vice. I love them. Any books, but particularly the classics – poetry, history, novels. I’d rather read than do almost anything else these days. Another reason why I’m not getting out much, as Peter has observed.”

Vincent smiled. “Catherine, I too love books. There are a lot in this chamber, which you’ll see for yourself, and Father has a library chamber packed with them – but no organization at all. I ... I’m ... well, books are my retreat too. I don’t go Above much. I ...um ... can’t.”

There, he’d said it. Catherine was obviously puzzled.

“Why can’t you go Above, Vincent? Are you disabled?”

“That’s one way of putting it, Catherine. I’m ... unusual.”

“But you’ve been helping me. You’re strong and you’re intelligent. What could be so bad that you are forced to hide?”

“Catherine, you may see for yourself soon. But please, don’t ask me any more. I think you should rest now.”

“Very well, but I need help to the washroom again. Too much tea.”

Vincent went to her and lifted her arm, making sure he did not touch her skin. She grabbed his forearm for support. He guessed she was testing a theory. She relaxed as she felt nothing out of the ordinary. Even through his layers, she could tell his arm was of normal shape. He led her to the bathroom again and helped her back to the bed afterwards. She lay back and turned her head to him as he arranged the blankets over her.

“Thank you, Vincent. I look forward to seeing you.”

Vincent didn’t know what to say to that last. He merely said she was welcome and returned to his chair. She fell asleep quickly. He could tell she was healing well. It was fortunate that she had no broken bones and just a few bruises – except for her face, of course.

He found himself very tired. Too many nights without sleep, even with the previous night’s good, if unusual sleep, had taken their toll. He rolled himself onto the cot and fell asleep immediately.

When he awoke, he was stiff and one foot had gone to sleep. The cot was barely long enough for him. He pried himself out of it and shuffled to his chair. He felt grubby now. He hadn’t had his usual

bath because of his patient. He looked over at her. She was still fast asleep. He could have a bath now if he was quick and quiet about it.

Vincent removed all his clothes well away from Catherine, gathered up his robe and two large towels and moved silently down the small curved flight of stairs to the bathing chamber he shared with Father.

He quickly stepped into the steamy pool, grabbed a bar of herbal soap and scrubbed himself with it. He rinsed then sat on the side of the pool toweling his hair dry. He pulled a bristle brush through it, getting out the snarls carefully. Then he stood up and tried to get as much of his hirsute body dry as he could. He was almost finished when he felt Catherine awaken. He quickly put on his robe and dashed back into his chamber.

“Catherine. Are you all right? Do you want anything?”

Vincent was a bit flustered and hoped she wouldn't notice.

“No, Vincent, but I think I've had enough sleep for awhile. Perhaps you could tell me more about yourself and this place. I like to listen to your voice.”

He looked hurriedly around. Even though her eyes were bandaged, he didn't want to be undressed in front of her.

“Um, certainly. Just a moment. I need to tidy up a little around here.”

He made some shuffling noises, then frantically rooted in his wardrobe for fresh clothing. He eventually settled on a pair of combination underwear, a long blue shirt and dark blue pants. He was too warm from his bath to wear anything more and still a bit damp. He flung another towel over his shoulders so his wet hair wouldn't soak his shirt.

He sat down on the chair and saw that Catherine had managed to sit up.

“What would you like to know, Catherine?”

“Well, Peter didn't mention you, Vincent. How did you come to be here – wherever 'here' is?”

Vincent chose his words carefully.

“I was found abandoned as a baby, behind St Vincent's Hospital. That's how I got my name. I was brought here and cared for and I grew up here. This community is my family. Father treats me like a son. He taught me how to read and let me loose in his library.”

“How many people live here?”

Vincent was about to answer when Father peeked around the door rug.

“May I come in?”

“Of course, Father,” Vincent replied.

“Well, and how is our special patient today?”

Catherine smiled and then grimaced. The movement had probably made her face hurt.

“I feel fine, Father.”

“Well, let's just make sure. I want to take your temperature and blood pressure for a start. Then I think I should take a look at those stitches and replace the bandage, which I'm sure is annoying you.”

Vincent got up quickly.

“I'll go and get Mary, Father.”

He ran out the door before Father could protest and quickly found her in the hospital chamber, pushing around a trolley filled with glasses and a pitcher.

“Then you take over my work here, Vincent. I was handing out fruit juice to our patients. They need to keep hydrated.”

She left quickly, and Vincent handed out drinks. There were a few women in the ward and they seemed to find him fascinating. Two tried to grab his hand, but he was too quick for them. He finished his serving and then went around and collected the empty glasses. There were no tables in the ward, in order to make as much room as possible for beds.

That done, Vincent carried the tray of glasses and the pitcher to the kitchen. William was busy seasoning an enormous pot of stew. The smell of baking bread made Vincent's mouth water. It was almost supper time. He'd have to take a tray to Catherine again, but he had to make sure she was bandaged again first.

He made a fast retreat and lurked in the tunnel near his chamber until Mary came out. She nodded at him and he entered. Catherine was lying down, but her bandages were now fresh. Father was rummaging around in his bag. He looked up when Vincent entered.

"Ah, Vincent. Catherine should have another antibiotic tablet and a painkiller after supper, to help her sleep. I'm afraid the bandaging was a bit painful, but her face is healing well. Soon it will start to itch. She'll have to have her face bathed a couple of times a day with witch hazel to reduce the swelling and alleviate the itching when we take the bandages off for good. You can do that."

Vincent stiffened in shock. "Father! I ... I can't."

"Nonsense. Of course you can. You have a gentle touch and a lot of patience. I'm afraid the rest of us are too busy. Catherine is your patient, remember."

"When would you like me to start this treatment?"

"We'll take the bandages off first thing tomorrow. The sooner the stitches are exposed to the air, the faster they will heal. By night time, Catherine should be feeling a lot better – although she'll have to sleep on her back for a while yet. I want the bandages on tonight, just in case. Some areas are a little inflamed and I know it's hard to resist touching them, even inadvertently."

Catherine had said nothing during this exchange but now spoke quickly.

"Is it supper time yet? I'm sorry to be so fixated on food, but I love your meals and my stomach seems very empty."

"Ah yes, that's the antibiotics," Father commented. "They tend to clear out the stomach rather quickly. You can eat as often as you like, just tell Vincent. William usually has something around."

"I'll go and get us a tray," Vincent said and left at a half run.

Tomorrow! How would he survive the look he was sure to get from Catherine when she saw his face – to say nothing of his hands! He felt his face flush at the thought and was still warm when he entered the kitchen. William turned and grinned.

"Vincent, you didn't have to run here. I'll make sure there's food enough left for yourself and your patient! Or has she been whispering sweet nothings in your shell-like ear?"

Vincent put on his best exasperated voice.

"William, what exactly are sweet nothings? They sound like your famous hollow meringues! As it happens my patient has an appetite and she's very fond of your cooking. But she needs substance – not hot air."

"Very well, Vincent. There's a tray over there you can take. I'll just move some extra food onto it from another. There! By the way, I made cream buns for dessert, but perhaps you don't want any. Too much like a sweet nothing, aren't they?"

Vincent growled. "William, those are not nothings. And you know very well I could never refuse them."

"You just make sure you give your patient her fair share, Vincent. I'll ask her how many she got tomorrow. No cheating."

Vincent laughed and looked pointedly at William's ample belly.

“And how many have you sampled today?”

“None of your business, Vincent,” William harumphed and walked away to load another tray.

Vincent returned to his chamber, meeting Father on the way. They both stopped and said nothing for a moment. Vincent guessed the older man had something to say, and waited.

“Vincent, I know you would rather Catherine didn’t see you – at least right away – but you must realize that she will want to eventually. Peter tells me she is a sensible woman, so I don’t think you need to worry overmuch. But you have to be there. You are the one she has been talking to, who has cared for her. She needs you there. She hasn’t seen herself in a mirror yet. It will be traumatic. I think perhaps your appearance might actually give her strength. What you have overcome is far greater than what she will face. She can have plastic surgery to remove most of her scars. You have no choice but to be what you are.”

Vincent sighed. He knew Father was right, but he wanted to hold onto his secret a bit longer. How long, he didn’t know. Was he afraid of being too real to Catherine? Perhaps.

“Father, I understand your reasoning and I can’t fault it. But it’s me and my face which are at issue here, not Catherine’s. No matter how many times I see that initial shock on someone’s face, I never get used to it. It defines me – keeps me alone, even among my family here Below.”

Father nodded. No one who had seen the hurt on Vincent’s face at such times could forget it. They all lived with that reality, but it was not personal for them. They couldn’t really know how it felt.

“Vincent, that you are willing to risk such a reaction with every new arrival shows such courage that we are all humbled. We can’t know what it’s like. After that first look, though, everyone comes to love and respect you very quickly. That’s more than many people in the world Above can boast for their entire lives. Hang onto that, Vincent. It makes you more special than you realize. It’s all that really matters.

“By the way, you’d better get that food to your patient before it cools. I’ll call before breakfast tomorrow for the great unveiling. Don’t worry, Vincent. And sleep well. You should take Catherine for a tour tomorrow. She’s recovered enough to walk around a bit and some exercise will do her good. Good night.”

Father brushed by Vincent before he could think of a good reply. Vincent sighed and continued to his chamber with the tray. Father had thoughtfully pinned up the carpet so that he could get in without endangering the food. Why hadn’t he thought of that? Vincent shook his head. He was not himself. He was still tired and not thinking clearly.

Catherine was sitting on the edge of the bed again and Vincent helped her to a chair and brought a robe for her. It was getting chilly in the chamber. He added fuel to the brazier and found a pair of sheepskin slippers that someone had left by the door. Mary probably. He gave them to Catherine, who put them on with a sigh.

“Thank you, Vincent. They’re lovely and warm. Your chamber is charming, by the way, from what I could see of it before Father wrapped my face up again. A typically male retreat. I love it.”

“Typically male, Catherine? What on earth does that mean?”

Catherine pursed her lips and spoke softly.

“Well, slightly untidy and with lots of things which reflect your interests – statues, a chess set, a fountain pen – and a great many books. I’ll bet you’ve read them all too. In my world, a den might have all these things, but they are mostly for show, designer pieces – like a scale model ship on the desk or a coffee table book about King Tut. Conceits.”

Vincent found himself intrigued. Why would anyone need such conceits? What advantage was there? Everything in his chamber had a meaning for him. The chess set had pewter figures of knights and ladies, bishops and kings, and had been the inspiration for many fantasies as he grew up. Other oddments, like the bronze statue of a Muse and an ebony elephant, were things he had found on his

wanderings, or had been in boxes left for them by helpers. The world Below had begun to resemble a museum by the time he was in his teens. Although they always gave a priority to the necessities, beautiful objects gave everyone pleasure. They made their world seem less forbidding, less remote from the world Above. But how could he explain this to Catherine, a woman who had access to as many fine things as she wished?

“I see,” he said at last, although he was not sure he did. “Yes, I’ve read all the books here, except that pile on the table, which I’m working on. I have a lot of books which belong in Father’s library, but that is such a mess, I’m reluctant to add to it by returning them.”

“I’d like to see this library tomorrow, Vincent. Can you take me there when my bandages are off?”

“Of course. Father says you should get some exercise. I’ll be happy to show you around.” If you can stand the sight of me, he said to himself.

“Now you should eat your dinner. Father has left another painkiller and an antibiotic tablet for you. How do you feel now?”

“I’ll feel much better after some of your good food, Vincent. But my face is tingling a bit. I’ll be glad to get the bandages off.”

“Yes, Father will be here before breakfast. I think we should both have an early night tonight.”

They finished their meal in silence, Vincent helping Catherine to find her utensils and cup of tea – and take the painkiller. Then she asked him to take her to the bathroom again. While she was there, he dug into the bottom of his trunk and found a small hand mirror. He hated having them in his chamber, but this one had been part of a brush set. He still used the bristle brush, the only kind which seemed to be able to get the tangles out of his hair. The comb was too painful to use, or he had insufficient patience when the teeth bent to weird angles. He took it out too, though, on impulse. Catherine might want to use it.

He helped her back to bed when she called and arranged the blankets on her. He found a bolster and lifted her legs to slip it under her knees. He felt his heat rise as he did so and spoke carefully.

“This will make you a little more comfortable on your back. It helps your back straighten.”

“Thank you, Vincent. That does feel much better. I haven’t done anything, but I feel tired.”

“Father assures me you’ll feel better tomorrow, Catherine, and without painkillers.”

Vincent left her and sat on his cot. He was still wearing almost nothing – just what he had put on in the morning. He had not had time to layer on more clothing, but he didn’t feel cold. It was nice not having so much weight about himself. He filed that information away for later and took off his boots, leaving on his socks. He rolled into the sleeping bag and was quickly asleep once he realized Catherine had already succumbed.

He woke to a dark chamber and sounds from the bed. He sensed Catherine was upset, having a nightmare perhaps. She was thrashing about and moaning. He quickly extracted himself from his twisted bedclothes and went to her. He could see that she was at risk of harming her face further, so he sat on the edge and gathered her to him, murmuring soothing sounds. She calmed immediately, lay her head against his chest and sighed. She didn’t wake up, but the position was an awkward one. He shifted onto the bed and held her, pulling the blankets over them both with his free hand. Her forehead was against his shoulder, but her face was turned away. There seemed no danger to her stitches, so he let her stay there. The warmth of her body against him was arousing, but he was too tired to care. In moments he felt himself drift off to sleep again.

When he awoke again. It was to find Catherine definitely awake and snuggling into him. Embarrassed, he pulled away slightly.

“Catherine, I’m sorry. You were having a nightmare and seemed to find my presence soothing.”

She lifted her head and ran her hands over his chest. Good thing he hadn’t put on his nightshirt, he thought. His clothes covered him reasonably well, except for his hands, which were out of her reach.

“Don’t apologize, Vincent. I’m sorry I woke you up, but not that you are here. You are the most cuddly thing I have ever had in my bed.”

Vincent decided it best not to reply to that and looked around the chamber. His innate sense of time told him it was morning, although quite early.

“Um ... there’s some time before breakfast. Father won’t be here for a little while yet. Would you like to wash?”

She sighed. “Yes. I feel quite grubby now. But how can I bathe with these bandages on?”

“We have a small bathing chamber here, Catherine. I can take you there and help you. Um ... if you won’t find it too embarrassing.”

Catherine smiled carefully and pulled away to address him.

“Vincent, nude bathing is not unknown to me. I’m not ashamed of my body. But if it will embarrass you, you don’t have to watch. Just show me the way and give me a sponge and soap. I can do the rest. Well, except my hair. That will have to wait until another day. I don’t imagine Father would want me to get soap on the bandages.”

Vincent left the bed, lit a few candles and one of the overhead lamps. He found her a thick terrycloth robe, but turned his back while she dropped the nightgown to her feet and wrapped herself in it. Then, he led her to the bathing chamber and showed her where to stand to wash and put a privacy towel on a hook at Father’s entrance. He probably would not be up yet, but best be sure. He returned to the pool edge and pointedly looked at the ceiling rather than at his patient.

“The pool isn’t deep, Catherine, but keep a hand on the side, just the same. When you’d like me to guide you back, just shout. Your robe and towel are next to your hand, when you want them.”

He left her happily splashing in the pool and decided he needed a wash at the very least. He stripped off his clothes and gave himself a tepid sponge bath in the bathroom, then put on a pair of much-patched but stretchy pants and a long sweater over his combination underwear.

Vincent was just putting on his socks and boots when Catherine called. She was wrapped in her robe and smelling of herbal soap. She smiled shyly at him as he led her up the stairs and back into his chamber. He led her to the bed and found her another clean nightgown with lots of ties so she didn’t have to pull it over her head. While she dressed he found a wool robe against the chill and then helped her to a chair. His own chair he placed on the other side of the table, away from the light, so that he could watch her but be in profile.

Father bustled in as Vincent was wondering if he should go for a breakfast tray. It was still a bit early, though. The breakfast signal had not yet sounded on the pipes. William hated early birds.

“Well, I see we are all well-rested and ready for a new day!” Father declared. He handed a stainless steel bowl to Vincent and ordered him to fill it with warm water. Vincent poured some cold water from the pitcher in his bathroom then warmed it to blood temperature on the brazier. By that time Father had taken Catherine’s temperature and blood pressure.

Vincent put the bowl on the table at Father’s elbow and with a look which spoke volumes, moved around the other side to sit in his chair. He found himself unable to speak, almost hoping to be overlooked. He picked up a book and pretended to read, but didn’t even register the title.

Catherine would find him easily enough, even in the shadows, but she would have to look and she would see his profile first – and his hair.

Father dampened the bandages with a sponge and gradually stripped them off. The last to come off was the one across her eyes. She opened them and blinked a few times. The stitches stood out stark against her white face and Vincent found himself a little shocked at the sight. Father spoke to her softly, telling her how she would have to be careful of the stitches for a few more days, and that they needed to be bathed so that they were kept clean.

Catherine saw the mirror on the table and lifted it, but Father caught her hand.

“Catherine, just remember that what you see does not reflect you as a person. You’ve been lucky. You are alive.”

Catherine nodded. She looked in the mirror and froze for long moments. She lifted a hand, as if to touch her face, then dropped it and put the mirror back on the table face down. Her mouth quivered.

Vincent could feel her distress and wanted to run to her, but caution got the upper hand. He waited, as did Father.

When Catherine raised her head, it was to look around. Vincent was sure she saw him, but her eyes brushed over him, as if he was just another decoration. Was he hidden that well? But then she returned to him, obviously concluding there was no one else in the room. There was no horror on her face. He could sense only puzzlement and sadness. Her own shock had made her less partial to judge him, just as Father had predicted.

“Vincent?”

He looked at her face on then, and nodded. He couldn’t speak. There were no words for what he felt at that moment.

Catherine was quiet while she examined him closely, looked at the book he still held and the hands that held it. Then she looked him in the eyes and her mouth quirked.

“Vincent, you are the most real person I have ever seen.”

Father, who had been watching, burst out laughing and looked at Vincent, mild triumph in his eyes.

“Well, we’re all real here and hungry, I’m sure. I think breakfast must be ready by now. Didn’t I just hear the signal? Would you care to join us in the dining hall, Catherine, or would you like a tray in here again?”

Catherine quailed, obviously not happy about showing her face to a lot of people. Vincent felt her resolve, though and sensed she had decided she had to get used to being stared at. He admired her for that.

“Yes, I’d like to eat with you all - if Vincent will join me.”

Father laughed again. “I doubt you could prevent him, Catherine. He never misses a meal. He likes playing nursemaid – at least to some people. Consider yourself fortunate that you are one of them, my dear.”

Vincent flushed and walked to her. She followed him with her eyes and took the arm he held out to her. He was still speechless, but the three of them left the chamber and walked down the chilly tunnels to the dining hall. They followed Father to a table and sat together. Vincent caught a few curious glances but realized the whole community was well aware of Catherine’s injuries and the courage it had taken for her to join them. They were pointedly almost ignoring them. The hall was noisy with conversations.

Catherine relaxed when Vincent passed her a tray of muffins and poured her a cup of tea. She ate two muffins hungrily, then took several slices of cheese and a roll.

Meanwhile, Vincent wolfed down bread and cheese and two cups of tea before she finished the muffins.

Catherine turned to him when she had finished.

“Vincent, you promised me a tour. I’d like very much to see more of this place.”

Vincent nodded, his mouth now full of apple.

Father stood up then and waited for quiet.

“Friends, I want you to meet Catherine Chandler, a friend of Dr Peter Alcott, who came to us for healing. Vincent will be showing her around and I hope she will want to become a helper. Please feel free to answer any questions she may ask. We have no secrets from our friends.”

There was a round of applause at this and shouts of ‘welcome Catherine’. Father then read out the morning roster of jobs and ignored the groans that followed the more obviously onerous ones – garbage detail and ice collecting.

Catherine found herself amazed at the amount of work and wondered if every day’s roster was so busy. The children, at least, all had classes.

Soon everyone had left the hall but the three of them. Vincent rose and offered his arm to Catherine. Father smiled up at them.

“Don’t take her too far, Vincent. She hasn’t had time to fully recover her strength yet.”

Vincent looked at Father and frowned.

“Father, you know very well that I can tell when a patient is tired. I believe you have a junior literature class to worry about. We’ll see you at lunch.”

Vincent led Catherine out and decided to walk her to the Pipe Chamber first. It was not far away, and then he could show her the Whispering Bridge. The Chamber of the Falls would have to wait until she was stronger. But he would show her Father’s library.

Vincent ushered Catherine into the Pipe Chamber and its incessant din of tapping noises. Her eyes followed Pascal as he rushed between one bunch of pipes and another with his metal rod. She shook her head in amazement and looked up at Vincent.

“I can see that your communication system is very well organized, but I can’t for the life of me understand how one man can handle it.”

Vincent smiled down at her. “Pascal has a talent for never missing a message, but he does have assistants. They’re in sub-chambers where there are pipes leading to our farthest reaches. The sentries report in regularly, so we always know if there’s a problem. Pascal re-routes any important messages to the person who should know.”

At the Whispering Gallery, Catherine was clearly enthralled. Today there were lots of voices and a tinny sounding musical piece – perhaps from a radio.

“How?” was all she could manage. Vincent explained that it was a mystery, but that he liked to hear the sounds of the world Above – especially the occasional concert.

“There’s no predicting what anyone will hear. We don’t even know where the sounds are coming from. This cave network is riddled with water-eroded holes and channels for the pipes.”

After that, Vincent took Catherine to Father’s library. Fortunately, Father was teaching classes in the schoolroom, a fact Vincent knew. He had not wanted the older man present when Catherine commented on the mess. It would just get his back up.

But Catherine’s jaw dropped and her eyes traveled over the mountains and racks of books, as if she did not know what to look at next.

“Vincent, this is amazing! I could spend weeks in here! It’s incredible. Better than any library or bookstore I’ve ever seen!”

Vincent looked at her and decided it was time to broach his idea.

“Yes, it is amazing, but almost completely chaotic. It needs organizing – for all our sakes, but Father’s most of all, since he is charged with devising lessons for our children.

“You’ll have to stay here a few more days, to complete your recovery. If you wish, when you feel strong enough, you and I could work together to organize this mess.”

Catherine looked up at Vincent and there was something in her eyes that warmed him to his toes. When she spoke, her voice was husky.

“I’d love to, especially if you’re going to help. I owe you all my life. It’s the least I can do.”

“You don’t owe us anything, Catherine. We are here for those who need us, always. Come, I think you need to rest now.”

Vincent sensed that Catherine was tired. He made her sit in his chair and gave her face a bathing with diluted witch hazel as Father had prescribed. She bore it stoically, although Vincent could tell it smarted. He was as careful as he could be, but the stiff stitch ends inevitably got caught in the cloth, no matter how careful he was. Vincent sighed with relief when it was over and tried to get his muscles to relax.

“I think I’d like to lie down for a while, Vincent. Do you mind?”

“Catherine, you may do whatever you wish. I’ll leave if you like, to let you sleep.”

Her reaction surprised him.

“No, I want you here. I ... I feel so alone. I think you understand me better than I do myself. Please don’t leave.”

“All right, I’ll stay Catherine.”

Vincent remembered with shock that he hadn’t written in his journal since Catherine’s arrival, or much even before that, because he had been so tired. This would be a good opportunity to catch up. He extracted the journal from under the miscellaneous pile on a bookcase where he had hidden it. His journal was intensely private. Not even Father read it. He knew that Catherine would respect that privacy, but he didn’t want her to know about it – yet.

He began to write. His life, he wrote, had changed, almost without his realizing it. A woman had come into his life – into his chamber and his bed even – and even though she’d been unable to see him, she had forced him to look at himself in a new light. He had never been so close to any woman outside his family. The experience had been a little frightening, but also quite exciting. He knew that Catherine would always be his friend now, and that was something he found amazing in itself. As a helper, he would be able to see her often, and that thrilled him. Beyond that, he dared not hope. He couldn’t consider himself the answer to any woman’s dreams, no matter what Peter said. But a close friendship was something he looked forward to. He was no less alone than Catherine.

A spring of hope ... in the tale of two cities, one Above and one Below. They were moving through a winter of despair already – the reverse of what Dickens had recounted. Maybe the rest of that famous first paragraph would be reversed as well and there would be a season of light to end this particular season of darkness.

We had everything before us, we had nothing before us. Yes, definitely, that quotation was reversed. He and Catherine faced a similarly bleak future before two days ago. Now they had everything before them, together and separately – challenges and possibilities both.

Vincent looked over at the woman on the bed. She looked tiny in it, but she now loomed large in his heart. And they would be working to organize Father’s library together.

He smiled. For the first time in many weeks, he looked forward to tomorrow.

END