

# Love Among the Ruins

by Angie

*'And the slopes and rills in undistinguished grey  
Melt away— '  
- Robert Browning*

Catherine handed Vincent his anniversary gift and waited a little impatiently as he carefully took off the ribbon, slitted the tape with a sharp nail and carefully unwrapped it. He opened the box and his eyebrows went up.

He lifted out the scarf and held it in both hands, not sure what to say. In the light from the waterfall, bright today, its colours were .... spectacular. It seemed to be made of little regular holes, like windows.

"It's beautiful, Catherine," he said at last, rubbing it against his fingers. "And very soft."

"The label on the yarn said it's merino wool and bamboo - they call it *Spring Fling*," she told him. "The pattern is called *windowpane*. I thought it might not be too warm for the tunnels."

"It's Spring in the antipodes," Vincent commented, musing.

"And you're all likely closer to it than anyone else on this hemisphere, Catherine returned, a little acidly."

"I had never thought of that," Vincent admitted, smiling at her and drawing her into a big hug.



Catherine had noticed that almost no one wore scarves below, possibly because their other clothing was thick enough to be adequate. There were no fierce winds in the home tunnels, although Father sometimes wore one in his chamber, which seemed to have draughts.

She also guessed scarves were not entirely practical - or safe - when they were doing heavy work, but she had wanted to give Vincent a visible token of her love, something handmade. Would he wear it, though?

He did, every day, and received many compliments on it. Colours of this kind were rare in the tunnels, candlelight making everything more brown or green. He began to enjoy the effect it had and wore it whenever practical, and certainly when Catherine was with him.

He also decided to wear it on a brief trip to check out a report of water leakage in the deeper

tunnels near the spiral staircase, since it was only a look-see, not a work party.

He approached the area and noticed that the floor was getting damp, and then muddy, then with actual puddles in the uneven stone as he proceeded. He was certainly getting closer to the source.

He found it not long later, a small waterfall down the left hand wall, likely coming from some pipe leakage far above. It ran over the floor and back the way he had come, but also affected the area for some distance ahead. He carefully made his way around it, holding his lantern out to see as far as he could in the gloom. He looked up, raising the lantern high and saw a tall, very wet sloping wall above him, that looked like it might have partially collapsed from the water. He guessed a pipe had broken somewhere. Finding it was not going to be easy, but Pascal probably knew where it would most likely be.

That moment of distraction lost him his footing on some mud and he slid down a slope he had not realized was there, and sent him down an eroded bank., No one had mentioned that, he thought wryly, as he instinctively flung his lantern up onto the tunnel floor so he could use both hands to try and stop himself falling further. He slid over a deep cut where he could not see the bottom, but managed to find something to hold onto while his feet swung to find a narrow ledge under an overhang. He pulled himself against the cliff gratefully.

Catching his breath at last, he waited, there being nothing else he could do. Catherine would feel his distress and he made sure to let her know he was fine, just trapped.

She did indeed get the message, and immediately rounded up Mouse and Cullen, with two long lengths of rope, to accompany her to where Vincent had fallen. They reached the spot, carefully, and tried to see him, but everything was black and wet below the level of the floor. They saw Vincent's lantern some distance ahead, but it had fallen on its side and gone out.

"Where are you?" Catherine called.

"Here," came his voice, strongly, from some distance down and sideways.

"Can't see him," Mouse mumbled. "Can't put rope down until know where."

Cullen had them both hold the rope while he tried to rappel down the side a little, but his lantern showed nothing but a black hump he couldn't see around, and they pulled him back up.

Meanwhile, Vincent had heard what Mouse had said and realized he had to do something to make himself more visible. There was only one way to do that, he decided with a sigh. He pulled off the scarf, attached his small penknife to the end, then reached around the overhang and tossed it as far as he could, holding the other end of the scarf. He hoped it had gone far enough. He didn't want to let go of the scarf.

Mouse, who had been leaning as far over as he could, held by his belt by Cullen, his lantern on a rope below him spotted the bright scarf immediately.

"There," he shouted and pointed, and scrambled back up. With three lanterns illuminating the area, they sent one down on a rope to get a better idea of the challenge. The scarf shone brightly against the dull, wet muddy lump of the overhang.

Cullen made a loop in the rope and tossed it down to the overhang to where he could see the scarf. It shone like a beacon in the gloom.

"Got it," Vincent bellowed, and the three rescuers leaned on their end as he climbed the rope, hand-over-hand. He had grabbed the scarf and put it around his neck again, still attached to the penknife, and it rattled all the way up on the stone until he finally reached the floor of the

tunnel and scrambled over the edge and crawled to a place with no mud, although unavoidably wet.

Catherine and the two men sat down gratefully when he was safe. Vincent was heavy!

He was a bit winded himself and sat down beside them, carefully untying the penknife and putting it back in his pocket. The scarf, when he held it to the lantern light, was definitely the worse for wear. Not damaged, but quite dirty with mud.

Catherine, seeing his distress, spoke softly. "Don't worry, Vincent, it's washable. I'll do it when we get back and it'll be just like new."

Vincent shook his head. "No, Catherine, I must do it. It saved my life."

His experience did have a salutary effect on the men of the tunnels, no few of whom had had to be rescued in similar situations. They all now carried a bright length of scarf or fabric in a pocket, or around their neck tucked into their inner clothing.

Catherine's pattern became quite popular, and a lot of bright yarns in Mary's box were used. Silk infinity scarves, made from old shirts blouses and kerchiefs, were also sewn up by the tunnel folk. They rolled up into a very small package for those who simply wanted something handy in a pocket.



Even Father, who was rarely in danger, now wore a silk scrap scarf made by Mary, all the time.

"*Love among the ruins*", Catherine quipped, chuckling.

Vincent regarded her, puzzled. "Browning?" and quoted his favourite line from that poem.

*"O heart! oh blood that freezes, blood that burns!*

*Earth's returns*

*For whole centuries of folly, noise and sin!*

*Shut them in,*

*With their triumphs and their glories and the rest!*

*Love is best.?"*

"I was thinking of the 70s movie," Catherine replied. "I never really understood the allusion of the title. But it seems fitting here. The movie was, after all, a love story, as is the poem."

"Indeed," Vincent agreed. "And love shines in unexpected ways, sometimes - even saving our lives."

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