

No Prisoners

by Angie

Questions are a burden to others; answers are a prison for oneself.

- Patrick McGoohan

Vincent sat on a table to one side of Father's chamber, away from everyone, and listened to the discussion about the outsider gang, who had killed Randolph and now threatened their very existence. He kept his facial expression neutral, but his thoughts ran down a too-familiar path as he listened.

Father, of course, took charge. "Everyone, will you please be quiet. Quiet, please. We must be together in this."

William of course, blunt as always, got to the heart of the matter immediately. "We tried diplomacy and look where that got us." He banged his fist on the table and got the attention of everyone, while Vincent smiled inwardly. "Now is the time for action."

"Just what is it you are suggesting, William?"

At this point Vincent let the voices wash over him, catching the gist, but avoiding the emotions behind them. Father argued diplomacy and care, against the people who wanted to do something, anything, to drive the gang away. Vincent knew they would eventually get to the point he waited for, and it was William, of course, who did, after everyone left.

He spoke harshly to Father. "You're making a serious mistake. You're letting ideals get in the way of what's obvious. More blood will be spilled."

William left them then and Father immediately turned to Vincent, who had been silent through the entire discussion.

He sighed. "Part of what William says is true, Father".

"A violent confrontation with these people must be avoided, Vincent."

"And when it can no longer be avoided?"

"Only then, when there is no other option."

"But, when the time comes, Father, you won't hesitate."

"Of course, I won't hesitate."

"You will let me go out to do what must be done. Whatever... must be done."

"I pray that won't be necessary."

"So do I."

"That is not who you are to us."

"That IS who I am and perhaps even my fate. The very part of me which I struggle to overcome gives me the power to protect the people who protect me. Who give me life."

"Vincent, that is not your fate."

"My survival depends on this world. There is no other choice for me. For me, there is no other place, Father."

Vincent left then, unable to face Father any longer, knowing that the patriarch really didn't understand the full gravity of what he would have to do when the time came. And the time would come. He knew that. He had been able to feel the violence in the gang after that first encounter, when he had stayed out of sight. He knew there would be no other choice.

It didn't take long. The next meeting, called urgently, was more heated, since they had lost two more of their people to the outsiders, Simon and Matthew.

William said. "... we must strike back... hard. We have the means and we have each other. And we have something else. We have you, Vincent."

Father, of course, protested, but Vincent was no longer in any doubt which way the decision would go. He resigned himself mentally for the necessity. There really wasn't a choice.

When everyone had left, Father turned to him. "I'm sorry, Vincent. I am... truly sorry."

So Father was sorry. As he walked down the tunnels where he had lived his entire life, Vincent pondered that. Sorry didn't mean anything in this context. Did Father truly understand? So much was never said, even among the council, when their lives were endangered and their secret weapon, himself, was sent to deal with it.

Did they truly know what they were asking? He didn't just disable intruders, or drive them away. He did not take prisoners, or hostages. Neither was practical or possible in a fragile world like theirs. So, anyone who saw him had to be destroyed, killed, because the risk of leaving a witness was too great. It was not just himself who was in danger from these intruders, but their whole world - men, women and children.

He could live nowhere else, as he had told Father, and had no choice if he was to protect those who protected him. Father knew this, but he did not seem to grasp the implications - or chose not to voice them. Father's initial desire for diplomacy was almost idiotic in this context. How could they keep anyone they spared from talking about what they had seen? Even if the expectation was that no one who escaped would be believed in any tall tale about lion men and underground worlds, the risk was not zero. Someone might get curious enough to explore for themselves. It was easier to leave no witnesses. The people so 'eliminated' were generally not going to be missed. They had not been invited, and were usually violent.

He was sent to deal with incursions because he was a killing machine, a very effective one. The bodies were thrown down the Abyss. There was no other option. No one would find them there. It also gave them all a measure of deniability, because there was no reminder, no corpse or gravestone to mark what had happened, later. He on the other hand, could never forget. Each death became part of him, made him more the beast he resembled, made it harder for him to reconcile the man he wanted to be, especially for Catherine.

Father knew, as did everyone, but they didn't voice those concerns either. They let him choose whether or not to act - as if there were any choice by that time. His internal conflicts and guilt were the price he paid for taking lives, saving lives who meant everything to him, and the place he called home.

He was helping moving items for barricades when he suddenly felt Catherine's fear. What was she doing in the tunnels? He could tell she wasn't far away. He ran out immediately, to

Catherine, to do whatever was necessary.

What followed was worse than any of his previous attacks on intruders. There were many of them, some of them women, and also a child. They fought like demons, but none was a match for him. He had been shot by that child at the end, but that didn't matter. He was numbed by what he had done, what he'd had to do, because he'd had to win. The bodies littered the tunnels, and Catherine's attempt to give him solace as he leaned against the wall, barely feeling the bullet wound, was ineffective.

There was no way to avoid the remorse, the guilt, even though he had only done what he had to do, what was expected of him. He had tried to dispatch the people quickly and cleanly. Others had had to dispose of the bodies this time, and they had done so quickly. He'd needed Father to remove the bullet and bind his shoulder, so he at least had not felt compelled to help. The pain was deserved. He needed it to focus his attention on the present, so as not to think too much about the past.

Catherine approached him as he sat on the chair in Father's chamber, his arm in a sling, silently turning over the battle in his mind, as if somehow he could have done anything differently, being what he was. He had not enjoyed the killing, but he did feel unwanted satisfaction in having done it so efficiently - and that unnerved him more than the fact of it. He didn't know quite what he *should* feel about it, and Catherine wouldn't understand either. He could feel her sympathy, her love, but what troubled him could not be put into words.

"Let me share your pain."

He glanced up at her. "How can you even look at me?"

"Because I know you... I know who you are."

He looked at his hands. "You don't know me."

"Vincent... There are dark places in all of us."

He sighed inwardly and refused to look at her. She would never understand. No one could. He had to say something, though. She deserved that much. It was all he could say.

"But part of me feeds in that darkness and I am lost in it. Leave me now. Please."

He heard her move away and didn't watch, although he sighed when she was gone. He felt her getting further away, trying not to worry about him. He wanted to run and tell her not to worry, that there was nothing she could do, or he could do, to change what had happened. He did not because he knew it would not accomplish anything, or relieve his current pain.

Catherine herself, he admitted reluctantly, had been the reason for no few of his killings. She risked herself in ways he could not condone, but knew that she did so because she believed in what she was doing, that she was helping to rid her world of some of its criminals. Did she consider that he would have to rescue her, if it could be done safely? That he lived in fear that some day he would not be able to, because he could not be caught above in daylight? Did she consider what it cost him to rescue her? He thought not. She could no more understand than Father did. No one could see inside his soul but he himself. He tried not to show the depth of his despair and disgust to anyone, to be what they expected, and to restrain that part of him that wanted to roar in triumph.

He should go to her, try to explain, try to get her to understand that his disgust was not because of who he killed, or even why, but that he HAD to kill. It was her blind spot that she did not grasp this, just as Father did not. They loved to think of him as a sane being, an educated man who taught children and read poetry. They did not seem to care that when he

was fighting, he was neither, merely very efficient and always deadly.

He didn't move. Instead, he sat there for a long time, unable to get beyond the turmoil in his head, how to continue with his life, while wondering if it was worth it. Without him, the tunnel community would have to arrange their own protection. Without him, they might have been destroyed by some of the intruders - Mitch, or Paracelsus, or this latest gang. He had let both those men live, since they already knew him. It was no consolation.

He knew that Catherine was alone, more alone perhaps even than he, that night, and that she was often more alone, holding him and his world secret as she did. He could not, he realized, make her more so, or give her more grief, more fear. That was all that kept him from throwing himself down the Abyss after his victims, to put an end to the horror inside him.

That night, she truly walked alone and deep within me I felt the cold and terrible truth of all that kept us apart.

Fate has left me adrift, with no wind to carry me to the safe shores of her love.

The END