

Series 12 - Musings

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- by Angie

Puss-in-Boots

Puss became a great lord, and never ran after mice any more, but only for his diversion.

- Charles Perrault (*Puss-in-Boots*)

Vincent was in his chamber Below, reminiscing in his favourite chair – the only one large enough to let him put a foot up on the seat. He was regarding the pair of long roan-coloured boots which leaned against the bottom of his coat rack. His eyes had a distant expression.

Catherine had gone to bed, but aware that Vincent was deep in thought about something, was watching him surreptitiously. He was in profile, as still as a cat watching a bird, completely engrossed in his thoughts. It was one of the things she loved about him, not least because it allowed her to observe him without fear of making him uncomfortable. He was dressed in tight grey pants and a long raw silk pullover shirt tied at the neckline.

What was he thinking? She followed the line of his eyes, and realized he was looking at the long red boots. Vincent had worn them once that she remembered – and that a long time ago - but a precious memory all the same.

The boots, Vincent decided, had to go. He had once thought they were the epitome of glamour. He had worn them with a certain flair, he thought. He had enjoyed fancying himself a swashbuckling pirate or cavalier during the French Revolution. He had worn them to meet Brigit O'Donnell at the Hallowe'en Masque. That was the night he and Catherine had walked the city openly, a memory he treasured above all others.

In truth, he had been disinclined to wear the boots for some time. That was Devin's fault. On one of his visits, he had watched as Vincent put on the boots and his frilly shirt for a special evening of entertainment - and had burst into laughter.

"Well, if it isn't Puss-in-Boots in the flesh!" Devin had laughed until he had had to sit down – in Vincent's chair, no less. Vincent glared at him, unaccountably hurt by the insult.

Charles who had been quietly sitting on the edge of Vincent's bed, had stood up and walked over to him, looked at his face carefully, then his clothes – and smiled.

Charles' face when he smiled was so beautiful that Vincent envied him. Charles' loving heart shone though the terrible deformities, his eyes crinkled in joy and he showed all his uneven teeth without hesitation. Vincent knew his own face was not capable of such expression, that his best "look" was neutral. His expression when he exposed his canines in a roar or growl did not even bear thinking about. He had never actually seen himself that way - and hoped he never would.

Charles had come a long way from his black hood with eyeholes. He and Vincent had become fast friends, and he had learned his lessons so well that he now read stories to the children when he visited. His voice was good, his diction much improved – and they loved him. Vincent could almost be envious of that as well, but knew that such love had been unknown in Charles' life before he met Devin. Vincent, on the other hand, had been surrounded by the love of his "family" below, took it for granted almost.

Charles had spoken quietly and carefully, as was his way. He had looked Vincent in the eyes. His face became serious as he saw the hurt there.

"You are not like Puss-in-Boots, Vincent. You are not a trickster, or unkind. You never ask for anything. Devin is more like him. You look stupendous!"

Charles had become fascinated by large words and used them whenever he could. He and Mouse regularly tried to outdo each other with new and longer adjectives.

"Thank you Charles," Vincent said, hugging the big man and looking over his shoulder at Devin. His

brother had become suddenly stone-faced. Vincent realized that Charles had probably never been so direct in his criticism. It was not his way. He seldom saw the bad in anyone, and his reproaches were that much more effective as a result. A mild reproof from him could start a child crying. In those rare instances, it was hard to tell who was more upset, Charles or the perpetrator. He would only have made such a comment because one of his two favourite people was making fun of the other.

Devin had got up and quietly joined them. He put his arms around them both, looked from one to another.

“Charles is right, of course. You do look marvelous, Vincent. I’m sorry.”

But then Devin had broken into a grin. Vincent waited, knowing what was coming.

Vincent had been the butt of “cat” jokes all his life. He did not resent them. He knew what his face resembled. There was no escaping it. But being called “Puss-in-Boots” had rankled because of something neither Charles nor Catherine knew – but Devin did.

Vincent occasionally, even now, hunted vermin in the Tunnels. His eyesight was good in the dim light, his hearing very acute - and he could scent the little beasts. Wearing only enough to preserve his modesty, he enjoyed the chase, the heady rush of triumph when he made a quick, surgical kill. He dropped the carcasses down the Abyss and said nothing to anyone.

Devin had found him carrying several dead rats by their tails one night, when they were still boys. He had said nothing to Father, but not out of kindness. Devin used the knowledge to irritate Vincent with barbed allusions.

That evening he had known that Devin would have to be extra careful. He would lose his warped enjoyment if anyone else knew the secret they shared. Even thinking about his brother’s quip made Vincent warm.

“You look like a great lord with interesting diversions,” Devin had intoned from behind Charles, mischievously. Devin had known that Vincent would recognize the reference from the Charles Perrault book, but that Charles would not catch the subtlety. Catherine might have, but she had been helping William in the kitchen at the time.

Back in the present, Vincent ceased his woolgathering and began to read. He waited until he felt Catherine fall asleep, then he padded over to the boots, picked them up and made his way to the Abyss. With only a slight pang of regret, he tossed them over. It was somewhat ironic that they would join the desiccated remains of his “diversion.”

What rankled most was that Devin had been correct. He HAD looked like Puss-in-Boots, had not even caught the similarity, despite having seen the famous sketch by Gustav Doré. Wearing his favourite frilled shirt, all he would have needed to complete the outfit was a jaunty, wide-brimmed hat – and a very long feather. He could not give up the shirt because Catherine loved it – but the boots were expendable. He would explain their disappearance somehow.

Vincent decided that very soon he would confess to Catherine about his “hunting trips”. Devin would find out that someone else knew their secret the hard way – when Catherine turned on him like a tiger for daring such a joke in her presence. That would be sweet revenge on his brother.

Vincent was smiling as he returned to his chamber.

END

Forgotten Seas

*Nothing is wasted, nothing is in vain:
The seas roll over but the rocks remain.*
- A.P Herbert

It was quiet Below when Vincent awoke. It was still very early and Catherine, beside him, was breathing softly. For a wonder, they were not touching, which meant that he might be able to extract himself without awakening her.

A memory nagged him. Last night, Catherine had been remembering visits to Connecticut and Massachusetts beaches, the soft sand, the salty waves. She had sounded wistful – as well she might, since she would never be able to go there again. Well, she could, but not with him. He, of course, had never seen such places, although he had a good imagination; his dreams had been of warm seas rolling over him. Now it was many hours until dawn and he couldn't sleep. He had an idea and a long-ago memory to follow up. He might as well do it now.

He slid carefully from the bed and stood for a moment, naked in the dim light of the stained-glass window. It was summer, so even now there was some light – and it was warmer than usual too. He had found lately that he didn't need the many layers he had worn traditionally. His body hair, more like fur in places, kept him warm if he relied on it and let his body adapt. Catherine had changed that in him too. Like her, he didn't want to be burdened with clothes that were difficult to remove at appropriate times. Just thinking about those times made him warm.

He sighed softly and found a sweat suit on his trunk that was his favourite lounging outfit these days. It was a slim line, but stretchy and comfortable. It would be perfect for his purposes. He slipped it on and then a lightweight hoodie and a pair of soft boots before looking around. What else? He did not plan to be gone long, but one of William's waybars was hard to resist. He put it into a pocket, then on impulse added a small bright flashlight Catherine used occasionally. He left through the privacy curtain without a sound.

Catherine watched Vincent as he covered his nakedness, trying hard not to get aroused at the sight. He didn't turn to her, so it must have worked – or he was distracted with his plan. She wondered where he was going, but had been well aware that he had not slept as soundly as he did usually. Something they had discussed had made him restless. She did not have to think long to conclude what that was. The ocean! Vincent obviously had an idea – but she hoped it was one that would get him back before breakfast. He never missed a meal if he could help it, so she was reasonably sure he would be back in time.

She opened her side of the bond completely, realizing as she did so that Vincent was not trying to mask his excitement or hide anything. She relaxed and let herself follow her big lover on his journey as a silent partner. It was one of the joys of their bond.

Vincent ran up the spiral staircase to a tunnel not far below the surface and jogged for some miles along the wider passages. This was an area of the world Below he seldom visited. He waved at the last sentry and entered a section where he was alone but for the local vermin. He cast his mind back to the day he had watched a seaman jump from a ship and swim to shore. The Russian sailor had been ill and died suddenly, just as he seemed to be improving. He had left behind a plague that had taken the life of Ellie, a child he and Catherine had rescued. It was a painful memory, a reminder that they did not know all the dangers of the world Above – and that an act of kindness could have devastating results.

But there was something else about that day. He had been in tunnels that night he seldom traveled. He knew the smell of the sea, because even in New York, the ocean could not be ignored. There had been violent Atlantic storms which had flooded those distant tunnels, and some of the seawater had penetrated even his own world. It made sense, then, that there might be a hidden pool somewhere in the mass of tunnels he hadn't explored, the ones under or near the ocean. The sea had risen and parts of those old tunnels were permanently flooded, or at least tidal. He might be able to find something by following his nose.

Catherine allowed her mind to wander. Vincent was very much absorbed in his running, so she could take the opportunity to mull on her favourite subject ... who else? She could do it now because he was distracted and not likely to pick up her more subtle emotions. She glanced over at the portrait Kristopher had given her and its one oddity got her thinking.

Vincent's hands! Surely they were one of the most wonderful parts of a man she loved beyond all others. In the

portrait, Vincent was portrayed wearing gloves. Those gloves weren't the ones he had worn on that wonderful Hallowe'en night so long ago. Vincent had certainly not been wearing them in the warehouse. More to the point, why had he put gloves on Vincent in the portrait? Had he been afraid of distracting the viewer from the message of enduring love that was being conveyed so eloquently? The gloves didn't even hint at Vincent's long nails. A impartial viewer might wonder why Vincent wore those velvet gloves, but since their colour almost matched her dress, might suppose they were going out for an evening of entertainment.

Catherine knew that Vincent was, at least nominally, left-handed. She glanced at the shelf next to the bed, where a growing row of journals resided, a couple more added every year. He did not write in them as often as he had once, but when he did, he wrote for at least a couple of hours. She supposed she should be grateful that a typewriter held no attraction for him, although the picture he would make typing on an old Remington would be something she would love to see.

He always wrote in his journals here in his chamber. He never did so in their brownstone. He had a beautiful writing hand, one that she treasured in the books he had given her, always with an apt dedication. She had never read his journals, had not even asked to. Even between loving couples, some privacy was important. If he wanted her to see them, he would say so.

She concentrated on thinking of his hands as he traveled away from her.

Vincent reached the tunnel he remembered, the one which had a manhole leading to the port area. He had fallen down this one after that memorable night where he had saved Catherine and Elliott – and cut his hand on a thug's long blade. That scar was with him still. He felt it every time he clutched something with his left hand.

Memories! They were distracting him. He pushed them aside and found the small tunnel he remembered passing so long ago, the one with the strong salty scent wafting from it. He had not followed it then or since. There had been no reason to. Now he was curious.

It was almost a drainage culvert, and several times he had to bend down to avoid banging his head. He pulled up the hood on his shirt to keep his hair clean. He was grateful he had not worn his cloak with its wide shoulders. The passage floor was very damp in places too and he tread carefully.

Then the salty smell became stronger. Soon, he reached a downward section and it became noticeably colder. He must be under the harbour now! It was dim, but not completely dark, for which he was grateful. There was some phosphorescent lichen on the walls. He had not brought a lantern, but he could see well in dim light. He didn't need the flashlight. If there was no light at all, he was as blind as everyone else. No one could see where there was no light source at all. That was a myth he had had to disabuse people of.

He traveled as quickly as he could, keeping one hand on the walls and using his nose as much as his eyes. Finally, he found another tunnel, this one running parallel to the now distant, old shore, and actually heading back in the direction of the habitable tunnels.

Vincent was now very intrigued. He knew he had never been in this section before. The light was slightly better and he moved quickly. At least he was going towards breakfast, not away from it. He rounded a corner into light. What he saw stopped him dead.

He stood at the entrance to a vast chamber whose walls seemed to be pulsing with glittering ripples. He looked around and spotted the source of the reflections, a pool on the far side. He wondered how this cave had come to be, and realized at once that it had an attraction important to ancient peoples. Salt! It was everywhere, blocks, crystals and mounds of it. It was also a lot warmer than the tunnel he had just left.

Vincent padded across the chamber and marveled at a place so colourful, even in the dim light. The light source seemed to be coming from different places. He looked up at one bright spot and realized it was like a tiny porthole. He must be seeing the water through a quartz crystal window. This might even be an extension of the crystal cave where he had found Catherine's crystal. The salt had come from a different eon to the quartz and finding them together was a miracle. He shook his head in disbelief. Obviously there were still wonders to discover in their underground world!

Every facet of the salt crystals seemed to magnify the light. It was magical. This source of salt would interest Father. There might be some trace minerals of use to the tunnel community as well. He picked up a few

crystalline samples of different colours and put them in his pocket to take back, Trace elements were something the community below needed to keep healthy. Father had written treatises on the effect of a life underground on the human body.

Vincent stood looking down at the pool. It was surrounded by white sand, salt undoubtedly, but seemed deep and clean. He bent over to dip his finger in it and found it cool but not cold. He tasted it and sensed nothing but salt. This pool was probably as saline as the Dead Sea!

Without further ado, Vincent stripped off his clothes and settled into the water. Yes indeed, he could float almost on the top, without thought or movement. Glorious! He let himself relax. Then realized belatedly that he had an audience of sorts. Catherine! He sent a shiver of love and happiness down the bond.

Catherine felt Vincent's amazement and pleasure at whatever he had discovered and was a bit envious. She immediately gave up her own reminiscences. He was enjoying himself and she wanted to enjoy whatever it was with him. She felt him realize she was hitch-hiking and basked in the love he sent her, while sending him a blast of her own. He felt very relaxed, floating almost. He was! He had found a place to swim! Now she really was jealous! She wanted to hear all about it when he returned.

As if on cue, she felt his emotions change. He probably realized he must return. Good. But where was he? She got up from bed and put on a housecoat, then sat in his big chair. She could sense that he wasn't far away, although that puzzled her. He had gone off in quite a different direction. Her sense of their whereabouts wasn't as good as his, but she knew he had gone one way and was now a lot closer, although somehow far below her.

Vincent left the pool and gathered up his clothes. He was too wet to put them on, but it wasn't cold in the chamber. He looked around, trying to find an exit other than the one he had entered. He hated retracing his steps and it would take a long time. His stomach was reminding him it was almost time for breakfast. He could sense that he was not far from the home tunnels if he could find another way back. Catherine seemed almost close, compared to earlier. He found a possible exit on the shore side of the chamber. It was logical there might be several ways in if this had been a popular source of salt for the ancients. He hoped the route was safe and had not collapsed in the interim.

He moved quickly to the opening and saw that it seemed to lead inward and upwards, both directions he wanted now. He took the route cautiously at first, wanting to let his eyes adapt to the relative darkness again. The tunnel walls were good solid bedrock, albeit with hints of quartz crystals in them. He was now convinced he would eventually emerge somewhere he knew, although he couldn't imagine how he could have missed a tunnel like this anywhere near the hub. He'd bet even Mouse didn't know of this one - he would have told everyone. The entrance must be very well hidden indeed.

Gradually, he became aware of the sound of rushing water. He quickened his pace, daring to hope. He knew only one place with that sound. After a couple of tight squeezes and a hairpin bend, he had to bend down. He emerged from behind a large rock and into daylight. He looked up. Sure enough, he was just to one side and far below the big waterfall. He could look across and up at the ledge he and Catherine often sat upon. Big rocks on both sides of the tunnel hid it completely. He felt dwarfed by them. They were the size of houses! He had never been here, but the route across the chasm to the habitable tunnels was one he knew. He and other boys had often jumped from rock to rock to get below the waterfall and fish in the pool there. Somehow, they had missed this opening. Well, the rocks were large, smooth verticals and seemed welded to the cliff and each other.

Vincent stood for a while, letting the breeze generated by the waterfall dry him. Then he got dressed and found the rock path. His legs were longer now and jumping from rock to rock was relatively easy. Soon he was just below the viewing ledge. He climbed up and stood there for a minute, gazing back over at where he guessed the new tunnel entrance was. There wasn't a hint of it and it would certainly be a challenge to reach in any normal way. Not everyone would want to jump boulders to do so. Maybe they could construct a kind of stone causeway part way across. The salt would make that undertaking worthwhile. He'd have to talk to Father - later.

He moved swiftly down the tunnels to his chamber. Catherine was sitting on his chair, obviously waiting impatiently for his story. He grinned at her, and then realized he was feeling very uncomfortable. His body was beginning to itch so ferociously that he was distracted from the amorous emotions tickling him along their bond.

With a grunt, he removed his boots and sweatsuit, carefully putting the salt crystals on the table before looking at himself – quite aware that Catherine was enjoying the sight. Had he developed a rash from all that salt? No, but he seemed to be coated in white powder. Salt! Of course! He looked over at Catherine, who was chuckling.

“I see you found a saltwater swimming hole. Ah Vincent, in all my talk of the ocean, I forgot to mention one thing. After a swim, everyone needs to have a fresh water shower. The salt is nice to swim in, but unpleasant to wear.”

“Then it’s a good thing that the route to it starts and ends in the Chamber of the Falls,” he told her, trying not to scratch himself.

“Does it? But you went the opposite way. That must have been quite a journey. I want to hear all about it.”

“It was an interesting trip, but all steps lead home, it seems, Catherine. But the next few are going to take me to our bath chamber. I have to get this stuff off me. Care to join me?”

She did.

END

More than Light

*Thro' the world we safely go
Joy and woe are woven fine
A clothing for the soul divine*

- William Blake

Vincent sat in his chamber Below, feeling more relaxed than he had in days. No matter how much he loved the brownstone, something in him could never forget that he did not belong above. He was most comfortable here in this chamber, where he had lived most of his life.

Catherine and little Jacob had left him alone while they attended to their own affairs, and Vincent took the opportunity to read a book of William Blake's poems. It was the folio volume Michael had given Catherine when he stayed with her just before he began university. Blake had been one of Michael's passions and had guessed, rightly, that Catherine loved his work also.

To Vincent, Blake had a blunt style quite different from the romantics of his day. Sometimes his verse was almost child-like in its innocence, other times it gave a powerful hit below the belt, challenged accepted beliefs, scorned them even. Some lines seemed to speak to him directly.

*"Abstinence sows sand all over
The ruddy limbs and flaming hair
But Desire gratified
Plants fruits of life and beauty there"*

Why had he insisted on abstinence in the face of Catherine's love – right to the last – almost losing himself in the process?

*"Everything that lives
Lives not alone or for itself"*

That had been a hard lesson – realizing that he was not alone, could not pretend to be alone, had no right to distance himself from the woman who loved him - any more than he could remove himself from his family below.

*"And does the sun and moon blot out
Rooting over with thorns and stems
The buried soul and all its gems"*

Vincent looked up, suddenly aware that his chamber was sunny. Somehow the light from Above - in its mysterious way – was illuminating his chamber brighter than he had ever seen it. The stained glass window was gleaming with such brilliance that it made his overhead Tiffany lamps seem dim. He got up and blew out the tiny oil lamps in them, quickly followed by the candles, then sat suffused in that warm golden glow. It was bright enough to read by, but he now felt no inclination to do so. He lay the book on the table and tilted his head into the light. Something was nagging at him and he opened his mind to let it speak to him.

He was still sitting thus when Catherine entered the chamber – and stopped enthralled. Vincent was bathed in a mellow light, his hair turned to spun gold, his face upturned and his eyes closed, as if he were deep in a trance. She knew he was not, but he was calm, expectant, waiting – but not for her, although she could not say how she knew that.

Catherine spotted the volume of Blake on the table next to him and wondered at that too. She knew that he did not read the poet much – but then perhaps today was Blake's day. She found that poets, like music, had their shining moments. When one could match them to one's life, the result was magic, a gem that shone undimmed down the years, never to be forgotten.

"What is it, my love?" she asked softly, approaching him quietly and sitting on his lap. She stroked his face, then moved to lightly caress a soft ear under his hair – something she knew would get his attention, if it didn't physically arouse him.

Vincent looked down at the woman he loved, still struggling to identify that elusive something. He couldn't put it into words so he temporized.

"Where's our son?"

"Jacob's in the dorm playing pinochle with some of the boys. It's his latest obsession."

Pinochle. Of course. The memory washed over him and he wondered at the coincidence, even as he felt the familiar sorrow spread from his heart. Catherine immediately felt it and gave him a soft kiss. He hugged her to him, his eyes now burning with unshed tears. He dropped his forehead onto Catherine's shoulder.

Catherine shifted to put her hand under his chin and lift it up.

"Vincent. Tell me."

He looked at her and sighed, then turned to look at the stained glass sunburst, still day-bright. So many memories. This one was bittersweet.

"Catherine, I've had a flashback. Something was nagging at me. Then you mentioned pinochle and it came together, with that." He pointed at the source of the golden light. "It seems unusually beautiful today. It ... Winslow made it – and today is the eighth anniversary of his death."

"Winslow?" Catherine breathed. "He made that? It's magical, Vincent. Winslow seemed so ... down to earth. Practical."

"Yes, Catherine, he was all of that too. I remember him as a boy, though. He came to us as an orphan. He had been abandoned and was eking out an existence on the streets, stealing. He hid in a drain under one of the alleyway grates. The tunnel accesses in such places are very narrow and we had never thought to brick them up. He was very quiet, very canny and we didn't know he was there for weeks. He didn't try to move far, just enough to hide from anyone looking down from the street.

"Then he got sick and ... well, the smell drew us to him. He was about my age – eight or nine. Father treated him and we boys played with him in the hospital chamber while he recovered. We taught him pinochle. After that, he, myself, Devin and Pascal played regularly for years. Sometimes others would join, but the four of us were well matched and no one else ever lasted long.

"Then one day, we visited the shop of a helper - one of many we older boys were sent to. Father wanted to ensure we were exposed to any skill that might interest us. This man had a glass-cutting business – just windows, cabinet doors, that kind of thing. But in the back he was an artist. He collected old stained glass from buildings slated for demolition and re-made it into lamps and small items. He was very good. We were all amazed - but Winslow was captivated. At the age of 12, he became an apprentice to this helper and spent his days above.

"He was a dreamer, our Winslow, although he kept that well-hidden. He wanted to make something special. He and I were good friends, and of course Devin bunked with me, so he decided to make us something for this chamber. He told us that much, but we had no idea what it would be. It was his secret. Then one day, about a year later, he had us help him carry Below something heavy, all wrapped in burlap.

"This chamber had been chosen by Paracelsus, you know, to be his own. The light was magical and that wall opening unique here Below – to say nothing of the bathing chamber behind it. Father put Devin and me in here because he could not bear to use it himself. The memories of what John Pater had done to the community were still too raw. We knew nothing of that until much later. Father never told either of us that Devin was his natural son, as you know. No one questioned his decisions then.

"For me, because I couldn't go above in daylight, this chamber was magical. But when we unwrapped that burlap and saw what Winslow had made, we were rendered speechless. He had made me a sun!

"Over the next few days, as we waited for it to be properly installed, Winslow told us its story. He was very proud of it. He had found a lot of yellow glass in the back of the shop and that had given him the idea. He found the green roundels on each side, the 'lady' in the middle, the snake-like green waves, and top centre 'shell' in parts of a Regency window from a now-demolished hotel. The deep red circle between the yellow sections had been above the entrance of an old post office."

Catherine sat amazed as Vincent talked. She had been in this chamber hundreds of times, yet had never thought to ask about the window. It seemed to belong. She could not imagine Vincent's chamber without it.

"That's a wonderful story, Vincent. I hardly got to know Winslow before he was ... killed ... helping you rescue me. I wish I had. He was always so gruff, though."

Vincent's mouth twitched.

"Yes. He never believed that anyone could love him for himself. He was always trying to outdo himself, make

himself the best, the most useful, the strongest. Stained glass became his passion. He made us all the lamps we use here Below.

“He made us so many lamps that we still have many in storage. The man with the shop died just a short while after Winslow finished this window and left the contents to him. Winslow brought all the glass and tools Below and set up a workshop. Then, when he had made everything possible from every bit of glass from the shop, he stopped. He announced he had paid back his teacher and declared he was finished with that kind of work. By that time he was 15. He moved into a small, bare chamber with room only for a bed and trunk and joined our work roster. His glass workroom eventually became Mouse’s chamber. That hole you fell down when you first met Mouse had been the ventilation shaft. Mouse turned it into a trap.

“Winslow was a big man, as you know, so he did a lot of heavy labour. He and Kanin did a lot of chamber-carving together. They expanded our living space and improved our lives, immeasurably.”

Catherine turned her face into Vincent’s chest and hugged him. Sometimes she couldn’t help feeling guilty. She had been heedless, several times. It was a wonder she and Vincent had survived to have a child, much less enjoy a life together.

Vincent caught her emotions and held her close. He was well aware that her guilt came to the surface on occasion.

“Catherine,” he said softly, in that voice she loved best of all. “You need not feel guilty about Winslow. You were abducted. It wasn’t your fault, but mine, if it was anyone’s. Paracelsus hated me after I set his lab on fire.

“Winslow insisted on coming to find you. We could not have stopped him. On the way, he told me that he envied me your love – that he had never known the love of a woman, but that he knew our love was real. He felt it was something worth fighting for. What could I say to that? I wanted to send both him and Pascal back, but they wouldn’t hear of it.

“Winslow was a good man, a talented man, but he had little belief in himself. He was like myself in that he felt he would never know a woman’s love. Like me, he turned to the pickaxe to drown out frustration. Or pinochle. He was the best of us four. He would have been a phenomenal chess player, but the game didn’t interest him at all. Too high-brow, he said.

“He was wrong about love. Several women here Below would have gladly shared his life and his bed – but he died before he realized it – or more likely, would admit it to himself. Jamie loved him most of all, I think, and she saw him die. She was inconsolable for weeks. She became the hard, practical woman – and Mouse’s minder – we know now. I don’t think she will ever love another. She, like Winslow – and me - is someone who can only have one passion at a time – and that one is forever.

“Winslow had deep passions. He loved us all, I think, with such intensity that he was afraid to show it most of the time.”

Catherine looked at the window and her eyes burned now.

“I remember when I came Below, that day when I felt you were in danger and I was told that you and Father were trapped in a cave-in. Winslow had taken charge. He was mesmerizing to watch, frantic almost. He would have pounded away at those yards of rock until he died trying. He wouldn’t have left you there, even when no hope remained.

“Thank goodness we found another way. His strength was invaluable then too. That drilling contraption of Mouse’s would have been useless without his physical strength. He had a heart as big as himself – and yes, he was a special man beneath that rough exterior. No wonder Jamie loved him. She, like me, saw what was hidden beneath the surface of the man she loved.”

Vincent said nothing to that. He looked at the stained glass semi-circle and sighed. The light was fading, as if Winslow was now satisfied that he had been recognized and remembered. Vincent looked up at the lamps and saw each one as a unique memento of a special man.

Catherine looked up too.

“They’re a wonderful legacy, Vincent. No one could wish for a better.”

Vincent nodded. "They'll light us forever, enriching us as he did, while he lived. He was a 'tyger' who burned very bright indeed – and created his own symmetry."

*Tyger Tyger burning bright
In the forests of the night
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?*

END