

Series 5 - Inspired by Season 1

1. Left Alone (pre-Pilot) - p. 2
2. Friends Do (No Way Down) - p. 5
3. No Words (Nor Iron Bars a Cage) - p. 11
- 4 Hard Truths (Down to a Sunless Sea) - p. 15
5. The Faces of Love (Ozymandias) - p. 20

- by Angie

Left Alone

*There is nothing to escape from and nothing to escape to.
One is always alone.*

- T.S. Eliot

Vincent sat alone in the Great Hall and let the echoes of the past few hours wash over him. The confetti and popcorn streamers were gone, as if they had never been. The last footsteps of the clean-up crew had faded and he was left to close and bar the big doors. He liked to spend a little while by himself in the huge chamber, letting his memories fill the silence.

Kanin and Olivia's Ceremony of Joining had made official the love that had warmed the community in recent months. Kanin was such a quiet man – one who seldom smiled – but Olivia had fallen in love with him just the same.

Vincent looked around the hall in the flickering light of the candelabra. The huge banquet table was now pushed against the wall, the chairs neatly up-ended on top of it. The shifting shadows seemed to speak of dead dreams and lost loves. His own love - the closest he had ever come to love for a woman - had left with Lisa long ago.

Now 35, he was more aware of his apartness than ever. He would never know the love that burned in Kanin and Olivia. He had the love of this community, of course, but that wasn't the same. He ached for what other men had - what he could never have - and couldn't discuss with Father.

Oh, there were women Below who would have gladly shared his bed. Vincent sensed it, but found it too embarrassing to think about for long. Their interest was part curiosity, part affection - not love. He knew the difference. He had not sensed love in Lisa either, but he had loved her, even if it was unrequited.

How could he explain those feelings which had washed over him so long ago? Father had not understood. Were his urges now the same as those of other men? He had no way of knowing and was reluctant to confide in his peers. There were nights when he burned for a lover, the need to surrender himself to a woman. He had read that denial could lead to madness. He hoped not - but how would he know?

Vincent rose suddenly from the chair, picked up the candelabra and walked across the hall to stand beneath the tapestries. They were beautiful, but now seemed to mock him and his life. He had once imagined himself in them. In reality, there was no figure who even remotely resembled himself. How could there be? Worse yet, the people depicted all seemed to have a purpose in life. There were victors, captured in the moment of their triumph, winning over adversaries. Even the soldiers seemed calm, as if they accepted their fate willingly. The lords driving them on rode horses, met, loved and fought in daylight. What did he have?

He worked for the tunnel community - fixing, mining, teaching, guarding – but every day had a sameness to it. He did what was necessary, read books in his leisure hours and wrote in his journal. The measure of those days was heavy on him. He had only the nights to himself, and nothing to look forward to but more of the same. Every day, every hour of work or relaxation, reminded him of his aloneness, his uniqueness – for he had no soul mate, no one he loved waiting for him when he returned to his chamber in the evening – or any other time. Even teaching the children was unsatisfactory these days. They could wander Above in daylight, could leave the community permanently, while he remained behind in darkness and candlelight, waiting. For what?

He sighed deeply and that soft sound seemed to silence the hall echoes.

Suddenly, it was all too much for him. Even the Great Hall seemed stifling. He blew out the candles and left the candelabra on a table, then trudged wearily through the big doors, heaved them closed and put the heavy bar across. Then he fought his way up the windy stairs and trudged back to the habitable parts of the tunnels. He came to a quick decision, even though it was late and dawn only a couple of hours away. He grabbed his cloak and almost ran for the nearest exit into the park.

Emerging from the culvert, he took a deep breath. There was a heavy fog and the noises of the city were muffled, distant. He couldn't see the sky, or even the tops of the trees. It was a world without definition and suited his mood perfectly.

Vincent began to walk, instinctively keeping to the deeper shadows of the trees. The chill fog swirled around him, almost as if he were swimming through it. He had never felt so alone in the world. The fog seemed to bring whispers, hints of words, tantalizing and corrupt scents. He could almost hear his own heartbeat and the soft rasp of his breathing as he moved silently, like a panther, through the trees.

Suddenly, the noise of a vehicle broke the silence. He was near the park road. A white van came to a screeching halt just yards away from where he was hidden in the trees. He retreated further. There was loud metallic *graunch*, and as he watched, a large shape was thrown from a side door by two pairs of arms. Then the door

was closed and the van sped off into the fog. Silence descended like a pall.

Vincent looked at what had been thrown out and realized, with a shock, that it was a body. That made him move quickly and as he got closer he realized it was a woman, wearing a well-made dark coat, open to reveal a slinky dress. A prostitute perhaps. Her purse and shoes had been tossed out with her and lay nearby. As he turned her over, he felt her move slightly and realized she was alive, although unconscious. His breath caught as he looked at her face, a horror of deep cuts that were still bleeding.

There was no time to waste. Father would have to be roused to see to her injuries. He wouldn't like a stranger being introduced, but his doctor's instincts would outweigh any qualms.

Vincent left the purse but picked up the woman's shoes, putting them into the capacious inside pocket in his cloak. Then he gently lifted the woman over his shoulder and began the long return trip, hoping that any broken ribs would not be unduly stressed. His shoulders were well padded and he needed his arms free for the long journey back. She was small and light, as he gently lifted her, but he could feel her warmth. He sensed her strength and strong will to live with relief. She would need those in the days to come.

He realized something else, belatedly. This woman had been beaten, cut and discarded like trash. He too had been discarded once, as a baby, but the similarity ended there. The tunnel community was his family. They were warm, welcoming and supportive, always. They would never inflict upon anyone the horrors experienced by this woman.

Here and now, this woman was truly alone – in ways even he could not imagine. With that revelation, he felt much better.

This woman was a stranger – and he would have to stay hidden from her - but Vincent hoped he could thank her for helping him see the truth. He had a safe place, a priceless gift he seldom thought about. Perhaps he could impart some of that comfort to her before she had to return Above.

And, he decided, he would not give up on love just yet. He couldn't say why that thought came to him, but he decided not to examine it too closely. It too made him feel better.

END

Friends Do

You shall judge of a man by his foes as well as by his friends.

- Joseph Conrad

Isaac waited until he was sure Catherine and Vincent were well away, then worked to manhandle the heavy metal door back into place. He guessed that Howie had helped Vincent open it. Moving it across the gritty floor strained every muscle he had, but inch by inch, he narrowed the gap and with one enormous heave, he got it to close and heard the satisfying click when its rusty latch connected. He wondered what the hell the hotel had kept behind it in the old days – caviar, French wines he couldn't pronounce? He took a deep breath, then scuffed up the dirty floor to make sure no tracks led to the door.

He leaned against a wall and allowed himself to think. He had seen the face of Catherine's friend, had understood then why she had been so adamant that they find him. Her attitude towards this man indicated he was more than a friend. He guessed that her arrival at his studio to learn self-defense had been related as well. This man had saved her life, she said. Isaac had glimpsed someone else beyond Vincent – an older man in a lighted tunnel entrance. So there were others down there.

Suddenly a whole lot of other things clicked into place. Catherine had come to him for information on the subway vigilante a few weeks ago. But she had seemed less interested in justice for his victims, or even in the people he saved, than the beast with the claws. He had sensed there was more than she was telling, that she had been afraid of something, or for someone. Now he understood. She had been afraid that Vincent was the vigilante. And he, Isaac, had taken her to the very man who would detect that fear and wonder at it.

Jason. He'd bet that Jason's disappearance was somehow connected to Vincent too. Jason who had used those clawed gloves to wreak his own kind of justice. He would have been fascinated, had he known of Vincent – and somehow he had learned. He had probably had Catherine followed as a precaution. Something had happened. Jason's white hats swore they knew nothing – hadn't seen him for weeks. He guessed this time they were telling the truth. But Catherine knew. From little things he'd heard, she'd been with Jason just before he disappeared. She had visited him in his studio.

Isaac sighed and looked around the dim basement, then at the two bodies on the floor. Howie was lying on top of Chris, holding him in a death hug that said everything, even without the large dark stain on the back of his silk suit. At the last, Howie had saved Vincent. He had no doubt of it. Catherine and he would have been too late to stop Chris from killing him. That meant that Howie has seen something worthwhile in Vincent, even injured as he had been. Vincent would not have been able to escape without help. The Silks had a rep. Isaac had no time for thugs – and no sorrow at all that these ones were dead.

But Howie was different. Isaac knew him as a man who had been taunted for his size and slow mental abilities – but he was not a fool and he had been a decent, gentle man. He had fallen in with the Silks because they treated him as one of them – he had never had friends. The big man had not deserved to die for them.

Something caught the dim light on the floor by Howie's hand and he walked over to pick it up. It was a tiny snow globe - the kind of thing Howie would like. He found value where no one else would look twice – including people. With another sigh, Isaac put the glass globe in his pocket, then moved swiftly up the stairs to the lobby.

The two Silks women were gone, but the other, the prostitute whom they had brought with them, was still there, huddled and weeping at the bottom of a flight of marble stairs. Isaac touched her shoulder and saw her look at him with a face that sagged in despair. He spoke softly. There were a lot of ghosts in this place now. It had the silence of a crypt.

"Come on, now. There's nothing to cry about. The Silk men are all dead. They didn't kill no one but each other."

At this last, the woman looked at him with an expression that was almost joy.

"He ... he ... got away? Is he safe? I showed him how to get here ... he couldn't see. I tried to stall, to give him time ... but I had to tell Chris. He would have killed me."

She blubbered into a sleeve.

"I was afraid they killed him."

Isaac gave her a hand to help her get to her feet.

"Well, you did good. He's safe now with a friend of mine. And you were smart not to cross Chris. Dead is forever. Come on, I'll help you home."

As they left the old hotel, the woman told Isaac her name and how she had found Vincent huddled by her door.

Lucy was obviously ashamed that she had feared him, injured as he had been. Isaac was not sure how he would have reacted under the circumstances, and said so.

When they reached Lucy's place, Isaac declined her invitation for a drink and left her. He had thinking to do. It did not pay to be too curious in his business, but Catherine Chandler was a special case. If there was something going on under the streets, maybe he could help - if he knew what it was.

Over the next three days, Isaac watched Catherine's movements from a distance and learned her daily schedule. If she saw Vincent, it wasn't on the way to or from work. Then, on the fourth afternoon, she went into Central Park after an afternoon spent at the courthouse. She moved swiftly, with deliberation, clearly not out for a late afternoon stroll. Isaac followed her, keeping well out of sight and almost lost her when she unexpectedly ran down a drainage culvert as the sun was setting. He followed noiselessly, and stood in the shadow of the culvert, listening. He heard a metal *graunch*, a click and then soft voices. He ran the rest of the way into the culvert and found what he had hoped. Vincent and Catherine together. Their embrace told him his hunch had been correct. They were more than friends.

Vincent suddenly stiffened and growled throatily, but pulled away only slightly, one arm still protectively around Catherine. He kept his face turned and hidden inside the dark hood of his cloak. Catherine turned quickly. Her mouth fell open.

"Isaac? What ...?"

Isaac spoke quickly, addressing Vincent, who seemed huge and dangerous.

"You must be Vincent. I'm Isaac Stubbs - Cathy's punch bag when she comes to my studio."

Catherine snorted and relaxed, Vincent turned to look at Isaac and revealed his face in the dim light. Isaac didn't see anything he hadn't expected. He waited. Vincent, relaxed slightly too. Isaac then realized he had been expecting some reaction.

"What do you want, Mr Stubbs?" Vincent's voice was unexpectedly deep and soft.

Isaac found himself suddenly at a loss. What did he want? Well, best be honest.

"I'm curious - not a smart thing to be in my profession. I wasn't smart when I took this lady to meet Jason. Maybe I wasn't smart to help her when the Silks got you, but she's a friend. Sometimes I don't listen to my brain.

"I wanted you to know that I found Lucy upstairs after you left. She was feeling so bad that I told her you were safe, Vincent. She's a rare one on the streets. She still cares about people."

At the name Lucy, Vincent straightened. There was surprise in his voice.

"Lucy? She helped me find the hotel. I owe her my life."

Catherine looked up at Vincent.

"Who is Lucy, Vincent? Why didn't you mention her? Should we help her?"

Vincent looked at her and spoke softly.

"Catherine, there is much about that night I don't remember - and much more that is painful." He turned to Isaac.

"I think you should come inside, Mr Stubbs. It's dangerous to us - and you - to stay here. Come."

Vincent opened the gate, his left arm on Catherine's shoulder as if he needed a prop, and led the way into a well-lit tunnel. He reached over to the wall and pulled a lever. A massive door grated shut and Isaac wondered what he was getting into. Too late to worry about that now, he told himself.

He followed behind the pair of them, noticing that Vincent walked a little tentatively. He was amazed the man could walk at all, so soon after that night.

At a junction, Vincent picked up a stone and tapped on a pipe running the length of the tunnel wall. A tapping sounded in response. Then he turned to Isaac.

"Mr Stubbs, I'm taking you into my world. I believe we can trust you to keep our secret, but I warn you that it will not always be easy. Catherine knows this only too well. You mentioned Jason. He found his way here, running from me, after drawing me to him by holding Catherine hostage."

Isaac couldn't resist. "And now, Jason is ... where?"

"Where no one can know, Mr Stubbs. He fell a long way, probably to his death - after he declined to send me to

mine. We should talk.”

Vincent led onwards and as the passages narrowed, Catherine fell back to walk near Isaac. Even in the dim light of the tunnel, he could see that she looked haggard. Probably had not been sleeping well. She spoke quietly.

“I’m going to have to learn to be more careful. I think I’m the biggest risk to this community there is. Vincent will never admit it, but it’s so. Maybe you can give me some pointers, Isaac. I don’t want anyone else finding this place because of me.”

She got a worried expression as she watched Vincent. Isaac could see he was definitely not moving quickly or with a normal gait. He looked as if he was in pain and Isaac could hear his breath rasping. Broken ribs perhaps?

“Cathy, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have come.”

“Well, you’re here now, Isaac. You may as well see.”

The tunnels seemed to be going steadily downward and getting older. Then they went through an opening onto a rickety bridge over a vast chasm. Vincent paused just a short way out, putting his hand across to prevent the others from moving forward.

“It is not safe. We have to repair it. Mr Stubbs, this is where Jason fell – where I almost did. He could have forced it. Instead he jumped for that rope to escape and it broke. I wasn’t quick enough to stop him. We don’t know where the bottom of this shaft is – if it has one. No one has ever found it.”

Isaac looked down and saw nothing that could be called a bottom, just a gradual lessening of light until it became a dark circle, far below. The silence was heavy, the hole inviting almost. He shivered. That Vincent would have tried to save the man who had hunted him said everything. Ironical that Jason, who was not known for mercy and always careful, had shown the former and taken one risk too many – both within seconds of each other. Isaac shook his head in amazement.

Vincent turned then and herded them off the bridge, then led the way along more tunnels. He made a sudden left turn and Isaac found himself in a cave cluttered with an enough odds and ends – and books – to fill a fancy antique shop. There was furniture too – a bed, a table, a couple of chairs, wardrobes, bookshelves – and a stained class semi-circle reflecting the golden glow from a lot of candles. It looked comfortable and Isaac could see Vincent relax. It was the kind of place Isaac himself could feel at home in. It reminded him of his grandmother’s place. He had never been long enough anywhere to collect anything. These days, he lived out of a suitcase in the back of his studio. He had nothing worth stealing except a load of punch bags and old mats – and an economy-sized roll of duct tape to repair them.

Vincent beckoned him to a chair and sat in a large one himself, sagging into it. Catherine sat on the enormous bed.

Vincent sighed and looked from Isaac to Catherine.

“I am glad you came, Mr Stubbs.”

Isaac interrupted. “Call me Isaac, please.”

“Isaac ... I’m sorry I could not show you more. I got up for the first time today. Catherine has come here every night to watch me as I sleep. She thought I didn’t know.” He gave her a small feral grin.

“She feels guilty, but what happened was not her fault. I followed her. I knew she was afraid that night. You see, Isaac, I can feel when she’s in danger. We are ... connected.

“I wanted to send word to Lucy, to thank her, but I have no idea where she lives. I ... I was almost blind when she found me – and in great pain. I could hardly think. I frightened her, but she helped me anyway. She deserves more than our thanks.”

Catherine, who had been listening to Vincent with obvious amazement, spoke up.

“Vincent, I didn’t know. I haven’t seen Isaac since that night. I’m so sorry Isaac. I should have paid a visit, if only to thank you. I’ve been so worried about Vincent – and I’m not the most popular person here right now. I’ve been expecting to be banned for life. It WAS my fault. I should never have agreed to meet a witness alone, at night, in such a place. It won’t happen again. Joe – my boss – is right. I take too many chances. This time, Vincent paid the price. If he had been killed – I ... I wouldn’t want to live.”

Isaac looked from one to the other, saw the look Vincent’s gave her. Hopeful – and something else. The expression

was not easy to discern on that face, but he'd bet it was love. Catherine could not take her eyes off him – and her face was lit from within. Certainly, she loved him.

Isaac nodded, to himself, as much to them.

"I understand now. I'm your friend. Just tell me what to do, and I'll do it. I know where Lucy lives. I took her home ... after. I can bring her here if you tell me how and where. You can't use that hotel entrance anymore. I closed the door and I don't think dynamite would open it again. Anyhow, I heard the place was sold. The Silks women must have had the bodies removed, because I never heard nothing about them. Nobody talks about them. It's as if they never existed. New York's better without them and their kind anyhow."

Vincent looked at Isaac and then hung his head. His voice was soft, but full of pain.

"When I came to, after the explosion, they had me chained upright to a wall. I could hardly see or hear, but I could sense their hatred of what I am. I was just an animal to be tortured, something too weak to fight back. I broke free when one held a welding torch to me. I ... I killed him, I think.

"I chose not to speak. Howie guessed I could and spoke to me. He helped me open that door. Then he gave his life for me."

Vincent looked over at Catherine. She had buried her face in her hands and her shoulders were shaking in silent misery. Isaac looked at his hands until Vincent spoke again.

"We're grateful to you, Isaac. That door is now welded shut and we sealed off our entrance. Does Howie have any family?"

"No, Vincent. Howie was an orphan, grew up on the streets. I had him in my studio a couple times. He was very strong, but slow. Those Silks, not one of them was over five foot ten. They used him for muscle. He made them feel important. They had a cheap protection racket."

Isaac suddenly remembered something and unzipped a pocket in his jacket. He held out the miniature snow globe to Vincent.

"This belonged to Howie. I found it next to his hand. Have it to remember him by."

Vincent took the tiny object and looked at it, curled his large hand around it. Isaac hardly noticed the long hair and sharp nails because tears were now running down Vincent's cheeks. Vincent's voice was a pained rasp as he looked at the globe.

"I heard him talk to the one called Chris. He offered this to him in exchange for letting me go. Howie blocked a bullet with his body - twice. I heard that too. Thank you ... Isaac. I'll keep this in memory of him.

"Could you do me another favour, Isaac? Could you talk to Lucy and see if there is anything we can do to help her? She would trust you. Tell her I sent you. I can't visit her and Catherine shouldn't. I remember her saying that her mother wanted her to be a nurse. She has a good heart. It would not be a fast process, to join us. We have to be very careful. But if she is willing, we can begin her initiation. There is an entrance near your studio, under the overpass. You may use it any time you wish – with care."

"A lesson I'd be advised to learn as well," Catherine commented quietly as she looked at Vincent and wiped her face.

"This time, it was only me," Isaac grinned – reminding Catherine of their first meeting.

She laughed, a bit hesitantly, and nodded. Vincent looked puzzled.

"It's what Isaac told me when I wandered into his studio to ask about self-defense lessons, yelling and blundering about. I need a refresher course, I think."

Isaac laughed, his voice booming in the chamber.

"Lady, you don't need no refresher course. You proved that a few nights ago. You just need to be aware and motivated – and avoid distractions."

Catherine rose and went to Vincent. She stroked his hair and rested her hand on his shoulder.

"Well, I guess you know who distracts me these days. I'd better show you out, Isaac. I know the way to the entry near your studio. I had Vincent show it to me weeks ago, just in case I needed to reach you ... unofficially. Vincent has to rest."

She looked at him as she said this and he nodded acceptance, then looked at Isaac. He sounded tired.

"Thank you for coming, Isaac. I'm sure we will meet again. We might be able to use your skills to train some of our sentries, if you have time. We have no money to pay you, but we have the best cook in New York, and you're welcome to join us for dinner any time.

Catherine smiled and Isaac looked at them both. He grinned.

"Now that's an offer I'm not likely to refuse. I'm the worst cook in New York. My only specialty is portable Italian cuisine."

"Italian?" Vincent asked.

Catherine laughed. "He means out of a can, Vincent. The brand name sounds Italian."

She took Isaac's arm and led him away, waving at Vincent, a promise in her eyes which Isaac didn't miss. He wondered if a woman would ever look at him that way and sighed to himself.

The route back did not take as long as trip in. He guessed there were many ways in this network of tunnels. He noted that they passed at least two sentry stations, that he could detect, and he felt his neck hairs twitch at several other points. These were careful people – and they had reason to be. He had not seen anyone but Vincent – and his cave – but that told him a lot. There was organization here. These people were civilized. He wanted to see more.

Catherine led him down a tunnel whose roof began to slope towards the floor. He had lost his sense of direction long ago, but he guessed they were now below the overpass. She reached her hand into a large crack where the roof met the wall and pulled. The wall swung inward with barely a noise, just enough to let them squeeze through. Isaac told himself he'd better lay off the burgers if he was to use this entrance. They emerged between two pillars and Catherine signaled him to wait a moment. He heard the wall scrape softly shut and without words, she showed him a hand-sized crack in a deep shadow at the top of the wall, matching that on the other side, then mimicked a push. He nodded and she led him out into the night air, around a right angle in the concrete he had not known existed. From the outside, it seemed joined to the road bed above. Clever.

When they reached his studio, Isaac stopped and turned to Catherine.

"I bet you don't want to join me for my 'special', so I won't ask. I'll talk to Lucy tomorrow and send a message to Vincent. Is there an easy way to do that?"

She smiled.

"Well, you could drop it down the grate in the alley next door. That's probably easiest. I'll introduce you to some messengers one day. We'll do lunch. 'Bye Isaac – and thanks again."

"Friends do for each other, Cathy. Remember? Take care of the big guy."

"Oh, I will, Isaac - that you can depend on."

Isaac watched her move back to the underpass and made sure she wasn't observed. This part of the street was usually empty – and tonight was no exception. With a sigh, he unlocked his door and headed into his kitchen nook. The noise of the highway was a constant hum in the background. It had been so quiet in the tunnels, he'd just now realized how noisy his studio was. He guessed he would never feel quite at home in it again.

Catherine and Vincent had introduced something into his life he had never thought much about – magic and love. Neither had a place in his business, until now. He was grateful for the reminder that there was more than beans and duct tape in the world. Friends did that too.

He was smiling as he opened up another can of 'special'. He really must vary his diet. Maybe this tunnel cook Vincent mentioned could give him some pointers. He'd be willing to trade those for self-defense lessons!

END

No Words

“Words, words, mere words, no matter from the heart.”
- William Shakespeare

Vincent sat back in his chair, and thought about what he had just written in his journal. He knew himself to be a man of few words, and those he did speak were always carefully considered. Since rescuing Catherine, he had been writing entries in his journal in the form of letters to her. They helped him to understand their relationship, put into words what he did not seem able to say to her face. This time, however, even the words he had written seemed inadequate.

His bond with Catherine seemed stronger than ever - after he had given up hope of ever seeing her again and had lost faith in their friendship and in that bond. She was now home, preparing for bed. She was happy and it occurred to him that if he had not shut himself off from their bond after she told him she was going to Providence, he might have known she was looking for him when he became a captive and been consoled. How many kinds of fool could he be?

It had been a terrible day and night. Catherine ... yes, Catherine ... had rescued *him*, released him from the cage and found his cloak and other clothing, as well as all the notes from lab tests, in a nearby locker. Professor Hughes was nothing if not thorough. He had obviously not trusted the younger man at all.

Then Catherine had helped him escape the University campus under cover of darkness, accompanied him to the nearest tunnel entrance, and insisted on staying with him all the way home. Word had passed quickly on the pipes and by the time they had reached his chamber, it was full of his family, despite the late hour. Father had wept with relief at seeing him unharmed and been profuse with his thanks to Catherine. It had all been somewhat embarrassing for Vincent, since he knew he was entirely to blame for his capture.

Finally, he had had to plead fatigue in order for his family to leave himself and Catherine alone. Truly, there were no words then that would express the relief he felt at knowing she had not left New York, that she had searched for him and found him – and that she would not now be leaving him. He didn't know how this had come about or what had led her to him - but she had shown great courage.

His gratitude was boundless. He would have died in that cage – he had wanted to. He would not have allowed himself live to be made into a spectacle or lab experiment.

Words were his tools, his refuge, what made him human – and they could be a burden, a heavy one. They were what he withheld from enemies, so they would not ask questions, demand answers he would not, could not give. He was safe now, so how could not express what he felt? Sometimes, especially when he thought of Catherine, words weighed him down, seemed unable to rise to the heights she deserved.

Words, he decided, were not enough to repay her for what she had given him – his life. She would probably say that there was no payment needed, that he had once saved her life. True as that was, his differences made his danger a very different prospect to hers. Father had often warned him about being captured. He had thought he understood the risk – but he had been very wrong.

Being captured by the Silks had been a life-threatening peril, one he might not have survived, but capture by the two scientists was another risk entirely. They offered nothing, thought nothing of him, except as they would an animal. In that, they were much like the Silks. Hughes, even as he died and asked forgiveness, had not really understood what capture had denied Vincent. Hughes had thought only of himself and what his scientific colleagues would think – until it was too late.

Freedom, Vincent realized, was not just an airy conceit that could be embraced or not as convenient – it was a humanizing concept. Animals did not think about freedom. They were restricted by their natures, could do little to change their environments. Humans had no such restraints. True, he had less freedom than some men, but he was still immeasurably more free than any wild or domesticated beast. There were words for all the advantages men had over beasts. Yet they were just words, if freedom was not included.

Watching Catherine as she read to him, he had realized he loved her. It was a word he had never expected to be part of his vocabulary, at least in relation to a woman. There were no words to describe the depth of his feeling for her now. He knew her heart and knew she loved him too, but somehow, it did not seem right to burden her with the knowledge of his love. What other opportunities might she have? He knew now that if she left New York, it would be like losing half his heart - but how could he tell her that?

Perhaps she knew. Longfellow's poem, as she read it, seemed to take on a meaning he had never noticed before. Yet, she had smiled when she read it. It was not a poem one normally thought of as happy – but she had smiled. Looking at her, he had felt his face respond with an almost smile too – and immediately he had felt better. He had been so recently in such despair, that a true smile was impossible. Yet, she had deserved a smile – more – although what more he could give her, he did not know.

Yes, he had to let her know how grateful he was, somehow. Tomorrow night, he would visit her on her balcony – that place he had feared never to see again – and hope that the right words came to him.

With a sigh, Vincent lay down on his bed and pulled the blankets over himself. He truly was bone-tired. He would never regard his home below as a prison again.

The next night, Vincent stood on Catherine's balcony, waiting for her return. She was still on her way, he knew, but could not deny himself the balcony any longer. He peered through the glass doors and saw that her living room was full of large boxes, some of them taped shut. Of course - she had been packing to move! The sight made his heart clench all over again. He staggered to the end of the balcony and gazed dumbly at the city lights until the pain receded somewhat. But for his stupidity, she would now be embarked on a new career. How could she forgive him that lost opportunity? What did he expect now?

He almost left then, but was stopped by the patio door opening and the sound of his name. He spun around and saw her, and knew he could not leave now. That would be the coward's way out. She deserved better than to see him flee.

She began to walk towards him and he felt the magnetic pull and walked towards her, gathering his courage as he did so. He stopped while still a step away from her, but she did not. She was almost touching him when she stopped and looked up into his eyes. She spoke his name again, softly.

Words failed him completely. His throat seemed closed with rocks. He could do nothing but look at her.

She reached down and took his hands in hers and brought them up to her waist. She seemed to understand his silence, and continued to gaze up at him while her thumbs stroked his hands. Nothing had ever felt so wonderful and he wondered if his heart would burst with the joy of it.

Then she moved to lean against him, placing his hands on her waist and wrapping her arms around him under his cloak. He felt her love envelop him, speak silently to his own. He said her name then, whispered into the top of her head, so quietly, she might not have heard. It was the only word he could speak.

It didn't matter. He could feel what she felt – what she was telling him. She was relieved that she wasn't leaving New York. More than that, she was happy that he had come to her, wanted him close.

She tightened her arms about him and said his name again. He looked down at her and realized she was crying and felt his own eyes follow suit. They had so nearly lost each other, that thinking about it made him quail. He wrapped his arms around her, nuzzling the top of her head and whispering her name as his own tears fell. He found no other words to say, and she it seemed could find none but his name.

They stood so for some time, and then gradually, Catherine pulled away slightly and looking up at him with a pleading expression. She steered him to a rug that lay on the balcony, near the front wall. She sat down on it, tugging at his arm. He could not refuse her anything and meekly followed, sitting down with his back against the wall. She sat up then, folded her legs to one side and took his hand in hers again. She regarded him with a slight smile. He glanced in the patio door and was reminded of all she had given up for him. He dropped his head and tried to hide in his hair. A finger under his chin made him look at her, but his expression must have told her something, for she spoke at last.

"Vincent, don't feel badly. It was very noble of you to tell me what you did, when I told you about Providence. I know there was a more you didn't say. I wasn't sure of my own mind then, but as I packed up boxes, I kept finding things that reminded me of you. I realized that I was leaving behind more than just memories. Then, when Father told me you were missing, I hoped you were not dead or injured somewhere above. I didn't know what to do. Then Edie's newspaper headline jumped out at me and I knew, somehow, that something had happened to you.

"When I saw you in that cage, I was afraid I was too late, that you had left me. I couldn't have borne that, Vincent. The thought that those men had brought you so close to death made me angry. I would have done anything to save you – anything!

"Vincent, you must understand that nothing and no one is more important in my life than you. I've told you this before, but now I know what that truly means. It means I can't – won't – ever leave you, not ever. We're connected and any parting would be too painful to endure. I hope you don't want me to leave.

"Don't worry about my career – my life above. It's gruelling work, never-ending, but without you, it would be empty. You saved my life, Vincent, and made me look beyond myself. I can't go back to what I was, nor do I want to - but I am what I am because of you. Don't feel guilty – please."

Vincent didn't know what to say. How could he explain what she meant to him, how their bond let him share her life in daylight, a life he could never experience any other way? He could no more give that up than he could live without her.

He had been a fool. He had implied he would experience Providence with her, that she was going there for both of them. But he had not even allowed himself to feel her preparing to leave, nor had he visited her to say goodbye, the very least he could have done ... if he had believed what he had told her.

A noise escaped him that made her look at him, but still he could think of nothing to say. She was too good to him. Instead, he pulled her against him. She looked up into his eyes and stroked his face gently with one hand. She seemed to understand his muteness.

"You have nothing to regret, Vincent. Say my name and say 'yes', she whispered.

“Catherine. Yes,” he said softly, obediently.

She sighed then and laid her head against his chest.

There was no more need for words then – for which Vincent was very grateful, but he swore to himself he would find some. She deserved all the words there were, all the gratitude and love he could give her. Surely there must be words for that.

END

Hard Truths

It takes two to speak the truth - one to speak and another to hear.

- Henry David Thoreau

Vincent stared down at his hands again. He couldn't sleep, hadn't been able to sleep since that terrible night when he had rescued Catherine from Stephen Bass. That was three nights ago now.

His hands. They had betrayed him, fueled by his anger, his fear – and something else.

Catherine had told him he need not feel ashamed, and he had honestly told her he was not – in the way she meant. He knew he had done what was necessary. It was the how of it that disturbed him.

He had almost been too late. He had felt Catherine's rising panic as he ran, breathless now with fatigue from the long journey, through the nightmare woods he had seen in his visions. He could feel her life being strangled from her.

Then he had seen her on the ground, her white shirt bright in the darkness, the man bending over her, his hands around her neck, babbling some madness Vincent had not tried to understand.

And what had he done, with all his advantages, his strength and the element of surprise? Instead of grabbing her attacker by the neck and dispatching him with a quick twist, he had roared his anger to the world. Why?

When the Chinese gang had invaded the tunnels with their hand weapons, his roars had been a warning – one they had chosen to ignore, but enough of a concession to a dangerous enemy. He had ... killed ... them, one by one, efficiently – and quietly. He had been protecting his family and the man they sought – Henry. There had been no shame, no sleepless nights, after that.

But in those nightbound woods, he had displayed his bestial aspect, his roar sufficient to make Stephen Bass stagger away from Catherine – and see him. Vincent had used his roar to good effect often, to distract, to instill fear – and he did not hesitate to use it so, when necessary. But he had not had any of those excuses with Bass because the man had been obviously unarmed.

Now, if Bass survived, he would bear the scars of Vincent's hands forever, an anomaly that no one would be able to explain and put himself and everyone in the tunnels at risk.

How could he have been so stupid? Had he been overcome by jealousy, as both Father and Catherine had accused? No, he knew what jealousy was. He knew himself. Jealousy was destructive, perhaps the most dangerous emotion of all, because its target was a person. He had never allowed himself that luxury. Long ago, he had taught himself to drain jealousy away, turn it into water flowing over stones. He had not been jealous of Stephen Bass, but afraid of something he could not put into words. It had been Catherine's fear he'd felt from the start. Catherine understood that now.

Envy, on the other hand, yes, he could feel envy. He envied everyone who could walk in the sunlight, buy an ice cream, visit a museum. But that envy was tempered with sadness. He knew he would never experience those things. He was what he was.

However, it was that sadness, the need to expand his world beyond the tunnels, which had sent him Above at night. It was that glorious sense of freedom, the need to roam, see the sky, which had led him to be abroad the night he had found Catherine and carried her bleeding and broken to his world. That night had changed his life.

But even envy didn't explain his actions with Stephen Bass. Something else had fired his blood. Had he perhaps wanted Bass to see him, to know the kind of man he was up against? Bass would not see him as a man, almost certainly. Vincent had no illusions about how he appeared to strangers. What would the man think of their encounter? Would he think he had had a nightmare, gone temporarily insane? That would probably be the verdict of his doctors – although the scars would not be so easily dismissed.

Would Bass realize Vincent was Catherine's secret friend? Was that what Vincent had wanted – to make his claim on Catherine clear? Bass had known Catherine was in love with another. She had told him that, although not with whom. She had told Vincent what Bass meant to her – a memory of a simpler time. She had once loved Bass, she admitted, before she had discovered something of his true nature and left him.

Catherine. Anything which threatened her, threatened himself. He knew he needed her, that she loved him, worried about him. Had he slashed Bass out of love for Catherine? He sincerely hoped not. That kind of twisted love was what Bass had apparently felt for her. He did not want to think that he was becoming obsessed to that degree, to the exclusion of reason. Their love was – and had to be – true, warming – not over-protective and stifling. He worked hard to prevent himself from wanting her close to him day and night, safe.

She had to live her life Above and he had his own responsibilities Below. Their worlds were apart, but mostly they were separated by barriers he could not surmount, although others could, if they wished. He was the only one in the tunnel community who really understood those barriers, being what he was.

Vincent flexed his hands. His fingernails were sharp, hard and slightly-pointed. He could cut thick rope with one quick slash. Flesh was no resistance at all. But he could also calm a child, sew on a button, carve wood, and stroke Catherine's hair with these same hands. They had many uses, some of which he had not yet discovered, and others he desperately wanted to try. Catherine did not fear his hands, not anymore, not since that first time. And that had not been fear, so much as surprise.

So what conclusions could he draw? He had to go to Catherine's aid when her life was in danger. At such times, he was a machine, albeit a deadly efficient one. He would never forgive himself if she came to harm because he had not been there to help her, no matter what it cost him later.

What could he do? What was the answer? How was he to control himself? Tears ran down his face and he rested his head on the table, inside the cradle of his arm, and let himself drift into sleep.

Thus it was that Catherine found him a short time later. She had asked Jamie, who was on sentry duty, not to announce her arrival. Jamie had nodded and waved her on.

Vincent had not been to see her since the night he had rescued her and she could feel his unrest, like an itch along their bond. Since he and Father had almost died in the rockfall, she had begun to feel Vincent, just a little. She didn't have to guess what he was thinking now, and her guilt was extreme.

She had been careless, yet again, had failed to see the danger. She could blame no one but herself for what had happened with Stephen. She had let him get too close, lulled by his seeming calm, his alleged illness. Now she wondered whether he had been terminally ill at all. He knew her so well, knew he could play on her emotions and gain her sympathy. He had not cared that sympathy wasn't love. In his arrogance, he thought he could woo her again. Why did all the men she knew think like that? Tom, Elliott, Stephen. Quite a roster of disastrous relationships. All had made unreasonable demands on her. Vincent was the sole exception. He asked nothing, gave everything. He was the one she would gladly spend a lifetime with – and he was hesitant. She couldn't blame him.

Vincent was obviously asleep so she sat down on a nearby chair and looked at him. She couldn't see his face behind the soft waves of his hair, but he had not sensed her arrival. He must be very tired indeed. Perhaps he hadn't slept. She had not slept well either. Joe had sent her home early after she spilled a coffee all over her latest file.

Her hands still shook when she thought of Stephen and she locked them together on her lap. She hadn't wanted to see him, but had felt obligated to try, for Vincent's sake. She had wanted to assure him he was having delusions, but he would have scars, big ones. Lord knows what the doctors would make of those!

He had been raving when he came to and was whisked away for surgery and psychiatric examination. She had received a lift back with the police, but poor Vincent had had to return home the hard way. She didn't want to think about how he had arrived, much less how he'd had to return, tired and bloody. He'd had to leave quickly to get back before dawn.

She had been assured that Stephen would never leave the institution. The evidence they had found in the house was decisive and damning. The requisite three doctors had declared him insane. His possessions and assets would be managed by a court-appointed guardian. He would have no recourse – but he deserved no better and she felt no sympathy for him at all. He was a predator, a stalker. She had seen plenty of those in the DA's files. How could she have been so blind?

Vincent was a different story. She wanted to give him solace, hold him in her arms, apologize properly. Her apology, on her balcony afterwards, had been far short of what he'd deserved.

Catherine stared at her hands. She was desperately afraid that, this time, she had gone too far. She had shouted her frustrations at Vincent, before meeting Stephen that last time, made accusations that must have hurt him deeply. How could he forgive her? What would she do if he couldn't?

She felt tears run down her cheeks. She felt as if her world was collapsing, getting sucked into a loveless void.

“Catherine.”

Vincent’s soft voice made her start and she looked up, saw that he had turned to her. His face looked haggard, as if he too had been crying. Perhaps he had. That she should be the cause of it horrified her. She got up quickly and before she reached him, he had risen from his chair. He gathered her into a hug and she felt his mouth on her hair. She put her arms around him and wept bitter tears into his sweater. Her legs began to wobble uncontrollably and he led her to the bed and made her sit down beside him. She couldn’t look at him, and was unable to stop the tears that were soaking his shoulder as he held her.

“Oh, Catherine. Don’t. Don’t blame yourself.”

“Vincent,” she whimpered, “it was my fault. I was blind, stupid. Story of my life with men – until I met you.”

“No, Catherine. I came to you and I attacked him. On me rests the blame. I wasn’t thinking clearly. My anger and fear got the better of me. I became what he saw – an animal. I could have done ... otherwise.”

Catherine looked up at his face then. His mouth was drooping in self-disgust. She knew what he was thinking.

“Vincent, no. Listen to me. I wish you *had* killed Stephen. He deserved it, if only for forcing you to rescue me. I would have killed him if I’d had the means. But you are not a killer, not of an unarmed man, however mad. You don’t kill for the sake of it, Vincent. I’ve watched, remember. You are *not* an animal, you’re a thinking man – a wonderful man. The man I love.”

He looked down at her then and his face cleared a little. He spoke quietly, though, his voice still deep with pain.

“Catherine, you can’t know what it feels like to kill with bare hands, to know that these nails can destroy. I don’t enjoy it, but I do it when I must. Something takes me over at such times, something heartless and very efficient. But I know what I’m doing. I can’t pretend I don’t.

“But there was something else at work in me when I saw him choking you on the ground. I knew I could pull him off you and kill him quickly, before he even saw me, but I didn’t. That’s what bothers me.”

Catherine moved to stand in front of him and put her hands on his shoulders. He had sagged on the bed and his head drooped. He was looking at his hands.

“Vincent, your arrival saved my life. If I’d had just rudimentary caution, it wouldn’t have been necessary.”

“You don’t understand, Catherine. That isn’t what bothers me either. I had to save you. There is no blame on you for that. How could you have known what festered in his heart after so long?

“No, I wanted him to see me, Catherine, to know who had rescued you and what I was in your life. I saw that knowledge in his eyes, mixed with the fear, the disgust. If I had killed him then, it would have been because of what I saw on his face. It angered me, made me irrational, even though I knew I could expect no other response. You stopped me – and rightly so. It would have been murder - not even self-defense. He was no match for me. I was guilty of the sin of vanity.”

“No, Vincent, not that, never that. Stephen’s the real villain of the piece, I see that now. Neither of us could conceive of such a man – not even I, who had once known him well. How could *you* have been prepared? As to the other, your wish to let him know you existed, that was understandable too. You spend so much of your life hidden, Vincent. You did what you did out of love for me. Why shouldn’t you want to let others know you love and are loved? It’s a perfectly natural wish. It’s one I have as well.”

Vincent sighed. Talking it over had helped. He felt as if he could sleep well now. He broke into a massive yawn before he could stifle it. Catherine saw the full extent of his canines and couldn’t prevent herself from a huge yawn of her own.

“Oh dear,” she groaned. “I thought I was going to swallow you with that one. I’m so tired – and I’m sure you are too.”

Vincent looked at her, felt her fatigue along the bond, feeding his own. He could barely hold up his head. He was too tired to think any more.

“Catherine, stay here. You can lie on the bed and have a nap. I’ll sit in the chair.”

She took hold of his hands then and looked in his eyes.

“Nonsense, Vincent. There’s room for both of us in your bed. I want you beside me. We need to comfort each

other.”

He didn’t argue. What harm could there be? And he did want her close. He removed his boots and rolled onto the bed, moving over to give her room. She slipped off her boots and slid next to him, spooned as close as she dared. She captured one of his hands and drew the arm over her until she could hold it to her heart.

There was a sigh that seemed to fill the chamber and then the sounds of soft, even breathing.

When Jamie looked in a little later, she left quickly with a smile. She reported to Father that Vincent was sleeping – and so was Catherine. He looked only mildly surprised at the latter. Anyone who could give Vincent reason to sleep, at last, had his thanks. Catherine knew how to give him solace. He didn’t know what had happened three nights ago, but it had obviously affected both of them badly. They needed each other. He told Jamie to pass the word that they were not to be disturbed.

Now where had he put that Thoreau?

END

Faces of Love

*Everything that lives,
Lives not alone, nor for itself*
- William Blake

Catherine had never seen Vincent's face look so vulnerable – and so beautiful.

When he had shown her Elizabeth's beautiful painted tunnels and she had felt the tunnel shake from an explosion, she had not connected the dots immediately. It had never occurred to her that anything could affect the physical reality of life Below. It seemed so solid, so unchanging - so safe.

When Vincent told her that Elliot Burch's huge tower might mean the end of their world, the expression on his face had almost made her miss the import of his words. He had never looked so helpless in front of her. Even those times when he had asked for her assistance, to do what she could, he had not been asking for himself, but for others. He knew she would do her best – and that it might not be enough.

Of all those Below, he would be most affected by the loss of their world, although he would be the last to admit it. She had seen that knowledge in his eyes, after the dust had settled. He had looked at her, pleading with her to understand what he was not saying.

How could she fail to realize the danger to him? But there was nothing he could ask this time. He knew she was as helpless as he.

Had he even realized who was behind the blasting and monstrous construction then? If he had, he had said nothing. He knew what she felt about Elliot. His own emotions about the man were not impartial either. He would never have dreamed of asking her to intercede.

Vincent alone could live nowhere else, as he had told her once. It was not something that needed repeating. She was only too aware of what her world would do to him, if he should be discovered. Perhaps he could live Above, somewhere out of sight, but his life would be so confined, so restricted, that he would die a slow death.

Catherine realized, with a sudden clarity, that even if Vincent lived with her, their love would not be enough to sustain him for long. He needed his family - Father, the children, his books, his chamber. He would become a caged lion, in a very literal sense.

She had reminded Vincent of some of that logic, later, when she told him she had decided to accept Elliot's offer of marriage. She was going to sacrifice her happiness for their world and him. Even as she told Vincent that, and seen his reaction, heard his cry of agony, she had known that Elliot might not be willing to halt his dream tower for her.

Elliot wanted to possess her. That was all he wanted, no matter what he said. Love was not something she believed he understood at all, it wasn't real to him. Monuments to his vanity were the only things he understood. He wanted her and he could have her – but only on one condition.

She could not tell Vincent that she was, in fact, bartering with Elliot. It made her feel horrible to even think of forcing the man to choose in such a way. What would Vincent think of her? But what else could she do? The DA's office was helpless.

If Elliot refused her demand, what would she do? She had thought about that too. She would give up her job and disappear from sight. She would move Below to be with Vincent, wherever they had to live. Her money might help make that transition easier for everyone – if any amount of money could do that. She didn't say anything about that either.

She had not told Vincent this final fallback position. How could she? He would not be able to conceive of her doing such a thing for him - and would have done everything he could to dissuade her. She didn't want him to know until it was done, too late to change.

She loved Vincent. That much she knew. Even marriage to Elliot would not change that – but it meant Vincent would live only in her dreams. She would never have seen him again. He would not have allowed their relationship to continue under such circumstances – and she would have felt honour-bound to try and make Elliot happy. Happiness for her would have been impossible, but she would have to pretend. She didn't want to imagine the horror of that life.

If that came to pass, she wasn't sure she could resist forever the temptation to try and see Vincent again. She didn't think she would have the strength. Just as surely, she knew he would refuse to see her. His pain would be intense and he would blame himself for making her aware of the danger in the first place.

But if he had not, and the community below had suffered, she would never have forgiven herself for her blindness.

Something had happened between them when the tower was halted – fortuitously by an injunction when Elliot's machinations had been exposed. She felt less guilty where he was concerned now – and her relief was indescribable. She felt as if she'd been given a new lease on life, was walking on air. Nothing could be the same now.

Vincent had taken her to the painted tunnels again, as if to remind them both what had been saved – more than just pipes, chambers, books and a safe haven. A work of art, Elizabeth's reason for living, had also been rescued from the jaws of destruction.

Elliot, who had made a point of donating a large amount of money to an art gallery, might have understood the satisfaction in such a deed, but he would have had one eye on his own aggrandisement. Vincent wanted nothing for himself, and Elizabeth painted out of love. Elliot would not have understood that either. Anything without monetary or publicity value meant nothing to him – even herself. She would have been paraded around as his trophy. The thought made her feel ill now.

When Vincent hugged her to him between those curved, colourful walls, she had felt all the tension and disgust with herself drain away. She felt closer to him than ever before, and not just physically. It was as if their souls had found a common language. She could feel his heat, his relief, as she put her arms around him and leaned against his chest. She would have given him everything, anything, then, if he had asked, not out of desperation now, but for a love whose bounds were limitless.

His face, when she looked up at him, was just as beautiful as it had been at the beginning of the crisis, but something had changed. He knew now that she would do anything for him, even forsake her own happiness. He could no longer pretend not to know that, or keep himself apart from her. He let her feel his joy at her return to him, and he knew she felt the same. He could have pushed his advantage – Elliot would have – but he was not that kind of man. Almost, she wished he was.

And that, thought Catherine at last, was the reason she loved him so. He was so unselfish, so caring. He had saved her life at the risk of his own, given her a reason to live, a goal in life. There was nothing more he could give her, except himself. And he had now done that, she sensed.

She could have asked him for more too, now that she sensed his relief, tried to move their relationship into that realm she dreamed about. But that would have been a violation of this new trust. She would have to be patient.

Whatever happened in the future, she would remember his face, expressing everything he could not put into words. That beautiful, unique face was speaking to her alone. She felt humbled by it.

She hugged him tighter, felt him respond. They stood thus for a long time, defined only by their love – their own *'eternity in an hour'*.

END