

Series 8 - Inspired by Season 2, part 3

No More Tears - p. 2

Inside my Heart - p. 7

The Emerald Cape - p.15

by Angie

No More Tears

*And blessings on the falling out
That all the more endears
When we fall out with those we love
And kiss again with tears.*

- Alfred Lord Tennyson

Vincent lay on his bed and wondered at his life, which seemed to be in a constant state of flux since he had found Catherine and introduced her to his world. He knew he could never return to a life that was completely wrapped up in the affairs of his tunnel family. Being what he was, he also wondered where their relationship would go - could go.

Lisa had gone above to face the inquiry and had sent word that she would come and say goodbye before she returned to England. The memory of what she had done so many years ago – and her apparent unconcern now – devastated him. How could she not know what that incident had meant to him? There was now only one person who could understand his pain – Catherine.

The worst few moment of his life had been watching Catherine grapple with the thug for the gun, unable to intervene. He had held his breath for what seemed like an eternity. Then the shot had rung out and his heart had stopped. She had staggered back, and still he was not sure if she had been shot. His relief when he had her in his arms and realized she was not harmed, made him incapable of rational thought. He could do nothing but hold her. He hoped to never experience such horror again. No, he didn't want to meet Lisa again. That incident had been her fault. She had lied to them all.

It was still daylight and the wait for darkness seemed interminable. He had decided to tell Catherine everything. He was afraid, but also knew that he had no choice. He couldn't let her think that he was being untruthful, or worse, withholding something that affected their relationship. This thing – the shameful thing that had happened so long ago - was no fantasy. Perhaps if she understood that, she would understand why he was so hesitant about taking their relationship to the logical next step.

He could feel the sun dipping towards the horizon, knew where it was as if he could see it. So many years underground, yet he was sensitive to the missing sun. No clock could tell him the passing of the sun as accurately as he could feel it. He thought about that. It was, he supposed, another of his "gifts", like his more acute sense of smell, better night vision, empathic response – and the bond he had with Catherine. They were the result of what he was – 'different'. Not a freak, no. He would never use that term, not even to himself. He had been truthful with Charles. He did not think of himself that way and Father and his tunnel family certainly did not. To them he was more than a man - one with unusual characteristics. Was he part animal? If so, what part of him was, besides the obvious outward appearance? He thought about that.

No animal, as far as he knew, could cry the way a human did. He had cried often when young, less as an adult, but he needed that release of tension. His emotions were always near the surface and he had schooled himself not to show them. Crying was an acknowledgement of unhappiness, of those emotions which made him human, but which should have had no place in this world, where everyone loved him. Catherine, he was sure, would understand this conflict. He was holding his sorrow in check now, with great difficulty. That horrible period in his life had been far in the past, but Lisa had brought it to the fore, as if it were yesterday. The pain of that long ago time ached in him.

The sun was sliding below the horizon. Vincent rose, flung on his boots and cloak and moved at a fast trot along the tunnels, a way that he could now find with his eyes closed. He could follow his sense of Catherine, knew she was in her apartment. He reached the elevator access to the roof and then flung himself down the fire escape. He slid onto her balcony and waited to catch his breath and get up the courage to knock on her window. Then she stepped outside and moved to the railing, as she so often did. He made no noise, but she seemed to sense something and turned, then spotted him. He sensed her relief. Had she thought she would not see him again?

"I wonder if I will ever not be surprised to see you there?" She spoke lightly, wistfully almost.

Vincent, without further ado, lurched into his story. Catherine moved closer as he spoke. She told him that to her he was beautiful, but he hardly registered that, in his pain and shame. His tears were falling freely now, where only she could see them.

"...these hands wouldn't let go ... and I hurt her."

She was now very close and took his hands in hers as he bowed his head, unable to look at her. She spoke softly, but emphatically.

"These hands are beautiful. These hands are my hands."

Catherine stood holding Vincent's hands, her forehead against his chin, which was wet with his tears. Her heart swelled with love and sympathy for him. It was unforgivable that he should have been carrying this burden around for so many years. She swore then, that no matter what, for as long as she lived – and beyond, if that were possible – she would do all in her power to ensure he never had to cry like this again.

He was so different to the men she had known. He was not ashamed to cry, to admit his faults, to bare his heart to her. She wondered if she deserved to have the love of such a man. She felt so inadequate in the face of his challenges, the life he had to lead because of what he was. Even in her worse moments – when she had returned above, for instance, with her face stitched six ways to Sunday – she could not possibly comprehend Vincent's lifetime of exile. Her face had been fixed, mostly. His could never be – and she didn't want it to be, now. As she had told him, to her he was beautiful. She had learned to look beyond the skin to a heart that beat with such fierce joy, such humility, that she was humbled. But she loved his outward appearance too. In the tunnels, or here on her balcony, he was magnificent.

His vulnerability and caring also made him beautiful in ways she could not have imagined. Even when he was roaring, as when he had rescued her from Colin and his thug, something in her had gloried in the sight. In the full throes of his power – a power he seldom let her see - he was an awesome sight. Colin pointing the gun at him had made her angry and she had remembered Isaac's training. Vincent, she realized, had not known immediately who had been shot, but his arms around her were just what she needed. She was so lucky to know him, to have him close, no further away than her threshold. He was her protector, a role he had chosen for himself. She knew without a doubt that if she wished for him, he would come, if he could.

He didn't seem to realize the effect he had on her. Or perhaps he did and didn't want to admit it.

He was strong. His body – when she could lean against it – was firm and muscled. Yet he seemed to regard that strength as something to be used only for others, his body as something ... abhorrent. He didn't regard himself as beautiful, certainly not sexually attractive. How had the women of the tunnels kept their hands off him, she wondered. She was sure that Lena wasn't the first woman to make advances. Father, she guessed, had discouraged such things, but she was also sure that Vincent himself practiced disinterest. Had Lisa so poisoned his self-esteem that he shunned all women?

She tilted her head upwards a little and, unable to resist while he was so close, planted a soft kiss on his mouth. She felt his surprise in the slight stiffness, the flexing of his hands – but he did not retreat. Nor did he open his eyes, as if he was afraid of what he would see. Well, he could feel her emotions, so he would know she had enjoyed the unique feel of his mouth.

"There is nothing frightening or shameful about you, Vincent," she whispered. "You have a great heart and a beautiful soul. Tell me, what am I feeling now?"

Vincent opened his eyes and looked down at her. She was not hard to read.

"You ... desire me."

"Yes. And what do you feel for me, Vincent? The truth."

He whispered it so quietly, she almost didn't hear it.

"Desire."

"Say it louder please, Vincent."

"I desire you, Catherine."

"We desire each other," she whispered back. "You have held me on this balcony, many times. I am often wearing no more than I am now."

"Yes."

"Have you ever harmed me when you held me? Have you ever felt you couldn't let go?"

"No ... but Catherine ..."

Catherine pushed onward, like the good lawyer she was.

"No, Vincent. Listen. You have desired me and held me and given me comfort and love. And you always let me go. You couldn't harm me – not even when you were driven mad by Paracelus' drug. We are adults, in control.

You and Lisa were young, inexperienced.”

“I still have no experience, Catherine. These hands ...”

Catherine kissed the tops of his hands again, then spoke softly.

“Vincent, I have watched these hands hold babies, sooth children, hold me. They are gentle, loving. I do not fear them, or you. I am not inexperienced, but I have never known true love - until I met you. We will both have a lot to learn. Will you trust yourself and me?”

He looked at her then and saw the compassion in her eyes, felt it along the bond. He basked in that wonderful sense of oneness and understanding. The ache around his heart dissolved. He closed his eyes again and then her head rose a little and he felt her lips touch his again. The sensation was even better than the first time, so delightful he was stunned into immobility. The love and obvious pleasure he felt from her along the bond unmanned him. He could do nothing but try to return the kiss, wonderingly and then happily and with more passion than he had ever allowed himself.

Catherine pulled away as they both struggled for air and lay her cheek against his. He was bent over to allow her to reach him and now found his legs weakening in reaction.

“Catherine.” Vincent spoke softly, unwilling almost, to break the happy silence.

She looked up at him and saw something in his eyes that stunned her. He looked both tired and exultant.

“I must sit down.”

Catherine realized Vincent was quivering just slightly and abruptly berated herself for keeping him standing and stooped while he was in such an emotional state.

“Come inside, Vincent. Please.”

He looked at the patio door and nodded. She let go of one of his hands, but led him by the other into her living room. He almost fell down the two short steps and when he reached the bottom he sat down on them, unable to go further. He sighed with relief.

Catherine immediately brushed past him to close the patio door, then sat next to him. If this was as far as he could go, she would not insist. She took one of his hands in hers again and waited for him to look at her. When he did, the look in his eyes was one of embarrassment.

Deliberately forestalling him from apologizing, she spoke softly. “Every time you’ve come to my balcony, I’ve wanted to hug you until your bones creak. Now I’ll want to kiss you too. Vincent, it isn’t fair!”

“What isn’t?” he asked, his voice breaking. He could hardly believe what he was hearing.

“That you should leave me ... wanting you ... then disappear for days at a time.”

“I ... you ... have work. We have responsibilities,” he ended lamely. What did she expect him to do? Didn’t she realize how hard it was for him to leave her?

“We will always have demands on our time, Vincent. We must make time for us, before there is nothing left for either of us.”

Catherine knew she was echoing the words she had spoken to him long ago, before she had gone to Nancy’s to try and sort out her feelings for him. They couldn’t keep desiring each other and doing nothing. It was too hard on them. Perhaps it would be even harder to part once they made love, but at least they would know what was possible. Perhaps she would then see him more often, a little voice inside her whispered.

Vincent was silent. Truthfully, he did not know what to say. He knew very well what Catherine meant and he remembered those words from her, that time when he feared he had lost her. Her pain then was very real - and all his fault. He had berated himself as he sat by the waterfall, holding the rose she had given him in his palm. He had been too careful, too unwilling to say the words he knew she wanted to hear. If he had lost her then, he would not have wanted to live.

He couldn’t live without her now. If she wanted to go to the next step, then he would do that for her. His desire for her had become almost unbearable on the balcony. He was sure she knew, could see the evidence. He had never talked about his body’s desires to anyone. There was no one else like him – so what could anyone say? How could they even understand?

He looked at Catherine, and ached to feel her lips on his again. He bent his head to her, turned and gathered her close, awkward as it was on the step. Her delight flowed along their bond and he relaxed into the kiss, savouring the taste of her mouth. When they separated, she held him tight, resting her head on his chest. He didn't want to move.

But, that sixth ... seventh? ... sense of his told him that the night was waning and that Catherine needed some sleep before daybreak. He needed to think, make plans. He shifted backwards a little, made her look up at him. He had to say the rest, to be honest.

"Catherine, I am not as other men. My body is ... different. Are you sure?"

"Vincent, I know you are a man. I have known this since the beginning. The outward differences cannot change that. I want to see you – all of you - as you will see me."

Vincent sighed then, and captured her hands in his. The sight almost made him quail but he knew he couldn't do that in front of her, not after what she had said. But he needed a little time.

"Catherine, we will move forward, I promise you, but not tonight. You must sleep. Tomorrow is Friday. Are you free tomorrow night? Would you like to come below, or would you like me to come here?" Vincent spoke in a rush, afraid to stop.

"Which would you prefer, Vincent?"

"I want you with me from dusk to dawn – and longer."

"Below then. Yes. It wouldn't be fair to ask you to crawl down my fire escape after a night of lovemaking."

Vincent felt his desire grow again at that thought.

"I would not want you to leave me. And I could not let you leave me, if you are below."

"Deal!" she breathed.

"And now I should go, so you can get some sleep."

"Yes, but first a good-night kiss."

He stood up, and lifted her onto the top step. They were now almost the same height. He gathered her to him and held her against him his hands under her behind as he kissed her. The feel of her mouth, and the round softness under his hands, was almost his undoing. He pulled away carefully, needing air, and looked at her.

"Will that suffice?"

"For now, Vincent, but you must be prepared for a lot more of them."

"And you, Catherine." He sighed. "Tomorrow will be the longest day of my life."

"Not so long, Vincent. I'll leave work early and be below by dinner time, if I may presume an invitation. Joe will have to give me the weekend off."

The whole weekend! The thought made him want to sit down again, but he sternly got himself under control.

"Yes. Good-bye," he whispered, quickly gathering the shreds of his dignity and opening the door. He was out the door, almost in one step and gone before she could do more than whisper a good-bye of her own. She knew he could feel her emotions and thought she might be feeling some of his too. There was a ripple of something along the bond. He was happy, and that made her smile.

There would be no more tears now.

END

Inside My Heart

*... heart speaks to heart,
while language speaks only to the ears.*

Francis I, King of France

“Leave me now. Please.”

She had whispered “I love you,” but he had refused to look at her. So she had left, her heart clenched into a knot that only he could untie. All the way to her tunnel threshold she had been able to feel that pain which originated deep inside him. She had looked back then, wondering if she should go back to him, knowing that she shouldn’t. But when she reached the ladder, she stopped. She couldn’t go back above to her soft apartment with all its distractions, either. There were no answers for her there. She felt as if she didn’t belong anywhere.

Catherine turned and slid down the wall to sit on the sand and drew her knees up, hugging them to her. Her eyes were burning but she couldn’t cry, wouldn’t. She had to think. Now, before she went back to her life, away from him.

Her bond with Vincent had been strong since he had rescued her from the Watcher. Something had shifted aside that night, allowing her to feel his love as a part of her, as if his hands held her heart – as indeed they did. Now his pain was wrapped around her own misery.

She could feel his self-disgust as if it was her own. Perhaps it was. She was not without blame. She had gone into the tunnels from the park entrance earlier – granted, after waiting a long while for someone to show up with the children she was supposed to escort. But she had not used the brain Joe valued her for. She should have left and entered the tunnels from this threshold. She knew the shifting ways well and could have reached the tunnel folk without any danger of running into the intruders. She knew they could not have penetrated so close to the Hub. Vincent and the others would not have allowed that.

Even after Vincent had saved her again, at a cost she felt to her bones, she had not been careful enough. When that filthy, undernourished boy had held her gun in his shaking hands, she had been merely cautious. The child’s reaction to Vincent’s words, the exact repetition, had shocked her and his obvious neglect appalled her.

All those sympathetic feelings ended when he shot Vincent. White-hot rage had possessed her then and she had hit the child with all she had, knocking the gun from his hand and violently flinging him aside.

Vincent was all that mattered and she had gone to him quickly, discovered with relief that nothing vital had been hit and she had kissed him hard on the mouth, inside the curtain of his hair. That kiss had been an affirmation of her love and her share of the responsibility for the violence. Vincent had responded by relaxing a little, then hugged her close as she buried her head in his uninjured shoulder. She could feel his mouth on her hair and see the beat of the artery in his neck.

She was so relieved that he wasn’t seriously injured, or worse, that she could think of nothing else for long minutes.

Then she remembered the boy and turned from Vincent to look at him. What would they do with him, she wondered? But one look told her any such concerns were irrelevant. There was only a small, pathetic bundle of dirty clothes with two stick-thin legs protruding from them. Then she realized his head was at an unnatural angle and his eyes open. His neck was broken. She had flung him so hard that he had hit the wall. She had killed him.

Vincent must have known immediately. She looked up at him, her guilt and remorse almost overwhelming her, but one look at his face, bleak with despair, his self-disgust pulsing along their bond, and her own concerns dissolved. She knew, without him saying so, that he blamed himself for her guilt as well.

She had helped him back to Father. Nothing was said between them as she stood close by and waited for Father to bind the bullet wound, put Vincent’s arm in a sling - and leave. Then when she tried to reason with him, to lift that heavy blanket she sensed was smothering him, she quickly realized it was futile. There was nothing to say, nothing that would make it right, just as he had said.

Now, she could feel undercurrents along the bond. The anguish was still there, but also something else – frustration and annoyance. With her? No ... something else. Then she realized that his left hand was bound and he would not be able to write in his journal. He would have no outlet for the emotions churning inside him. That would be hard. Well, she couldn’t write for him, but here in this place, with only the stone walls and sandy floor between them, she might be able to give him the kind of solace he had so often given her, even when he was not with her physically.

She leaned her forehead on her knees, closed her eyes and cleared her mind of everything but his name.

She shouldn't have left him, she realized now. He would come to the same conclusion later, she had no doubt - but it was too late for regrets now. He would have hardened himself against her return, almost expecting it. No, this was the better way.

Catherine opened up her side of the bond completely. Vincent had not shut himself off from her, which was encouraging, but he was so wrapped up in his misery that he was unaware of her, almost as if he had forgotten she existed. She finally felt him relax a little, guessed that he had returned to his chamber and was probably lying on his bed.

Vincent lay in the dark. He wanted no candles, no light. The stained glass window glowed a deep, almost baleful red now that it was night. It matched his mood exactly. He stared into the darkness, then closed his eyes. There was no escape tonight. He was a creature of the night, and that name seemed singularly appropriate. Could a man have done what he had done earlier – killed like that?

Father had taught him never to hate anyone, that hate was a destructive emotion which rebounded on its source tenfold. He had never doubted it. History books were filled with the effects of hatred. So he had learned not to hate, to let it drain from him like sand in an hourglass. But Father could not teach him how to tame his anger. That came from a deeper place, one Father didn't like to admit existed. That anger triggered the violent protective instinct he drew on to protect Catherine and his family below. It frightened him. It wasn't the wild, out-of-control berserker rage everyone assumed took hold of him. No, his dispatch of the outsider gang had been clinical almost – cold and hard – and very deliberate. He wasted no movement, killed like a machine, with maximum efficiency. Something inside him took over at such times and reveled in the pain he caused. He was lost in that dark, blood-lust place until it was over.

Catherine could feel it now to some extent, he knew. That pained him more than his own disgust.

He could sense her now. Tonight he found himself unable to close off the bond between them. She was a bright thread around his heart, a candle at the end of a long dark tunnel. He needed to know she was there, even though he had rejected her earlier. Her love for him was all that kept him sane. He needed it like water or air.

Catherine knew Vincent's chamber as well as she knew her own apartment. She pictured herself there now, sitting in his big chair, watching him. He had such couched beauty, such strength, even in his pain. Then she imagined herself moving to sit next to him on the bed, taking up one of his strong hands and threading his fingers through her own. Slowly she began to stroke his hand with her free one, felt his fingers curl around hers in response. She brought the hand to her mouth and kissed it, ran her lips over the soft hair on the back, over the knuckles and down his strong fingers to their long nails. Then she moved closer, putting his hand close to her heart. It wasn't close enough. She lifted her sweater and placed his hand under it, against her heart, felt his fingers spread wide. There was nothing between him and her now but a silk camisole. His hand was warm and she held it in place as she softly brushed a kiss on his lips and lay down next to him.

She felt a quiver along the bond, realized Vincent had suddenly become aware of her. He did not close her out though, almost as if he was uncertain about what he was sensing. She felt mild curiosity now, and something else. Hope? Catherine smiled to herself. She was feeling a little better already.

Vincent became aware of Catherine when a sudden calm spread its way into his consciousness along the bond. How could she be calm at a time like this? He investigated and realized she was not – but that she was fantasizing along their bond. He had not realized she could do that and he momentarily forgot his own pain. Her guilt, which he had ignored in order to mull on his own, was still there, still potent, but she had pushed it deep inside. He felt a different kind of disgust at himself now.

How often had he let his self-indulgence affect his awareness of Catherine? Far too often. No more, he decided. Suddenly he felt her resolve. For what, he wondered? He closed his eyes and let himself relax further. Whatever she wanted from him along their bond, was hers. He owed her that much. The sensation was too wonderful to deny, in any case. He needed that.

Catherine stretched her legs out in front of her and leaned against the wall. She needed more solid support for her next move. With a thought, she was back in Vincent's chamber. But now she wished her jacket and sweater away, and then her slacks. Yes, now there was nothing between them but her camisole and panties, and his thermal shirt and pants. She lay on the bed beside him and snuggled under his right arm. She had to proceed slowly and carefully.

Vincent recognized the emotions along the bond and realized with a shock that Catherine was imagining a seduction. He kept his side of the bond quiet while he thought furiously. How could she do this and have him share it? Where was she? Should he go to her? He suddenly knew that she was not in her apartment, as he had presumed, but still in the tunnels. His innate sense of her whereabouts told him she was below her threshold. He had to go to her.

He slid carefully from the bed, keeping his emotions neutral. He slipped his feet into his boots. There was no way he could hurriedly put on a sweater or vest with his arm bound, so he flung his cloak about himself one-handed.

He quietly made his way to her threshold, waving at the sentry station along the way. He couldn't send them a message on the pipes - Catherine knew too many codes now. He reached the tunnel leading to the ladder and stood in the ragged opening, paralyzed. Yes, she was sitting on the ground with her back against the wall and her head flung back, in such concentration that she was unaware of him. Vincent took a deep breath.

"Catherine."

Her head shot forward and she saw him, but seemed unable to move. He saw her flush and realized her embarrassment was keen. He moved towards her slowly, held out his uninjured arm. He didn't know what to say.

Catherine rose in one swift movement and almost ran to him, burying her head in his chest and hugging him to her as if he might disappear. Her pressure and warmth against him forced a sigh from him. He could feel her heartbeat even through his thermal shirt.

"Catherine," he whispered into her hair. Her scent made his head spin and he felt his arousal growing.

"Vincent?"

"Catherine, forgive me." It was the only thing he could say. "I felt your guilt, and then your ... desire. I had to come."

Vincent wished again for two arms to hold her close. He did his best with the one he had, no longer caring if she could feel the bulge in his pants. She felt right against him.

"Catherine, come back to my chamber. Please."

She looked up at him then with such hope and love that he quailed. What had he done to deserve that? He knew what she wanted from him, but his injury would not allow that level of intimacy tonight. They could comfort one another, though. That thought made him warm.

Vincent turned towards the home tunnels, keeping his arm around Catherine, partly for support. He was bone weary. She must have felt it, for she shifted to put an arm around his waist, a pressure that aroused him yet further, even as it gave him strength. He wondered if she sensed that, and looked down at her. She was looking up at him. Her mouth quirked, but she said nothing.

When they reached his chamber, he threw the cloak over a hook and grunted in frustration when it fell to the floor. Catherine groped around in the dimness until she found it and replaced it. In the dim light, he could see she was looking at him with concentration, trying to judge his expression, waiting patiently. He sighed again and found his voice, which sounded half-asleep, even to himself.

"Catherine, I ... I'm very tired, body and soul. Would you stay with me tonight? I'm ... I can't offer you more."

Catherine nodded and immediately took off her jacket and gloves. She went to the bed and flung back the covers,

"Vincent, lie down and I'll help you undress."

He did so and she removed his boots and then pulled off his pants. He canted his hips and held the waistband of his long underwear so they didn't follow the pants. He felt her hands linger on his feet as she took off his socks, then a flash of delight and desire ran along the bond. He was too exhausted to ruminate on this reaction to his

hairy, sharp-nailed feet. He sighed and quickly moved to the middle of his bed, leaving plenty of room for her. He was glad of the dark. His manhood was hard and threatening to use the exit provided in his underwear. He pressed his legs together and yanked the waistband sideways to prevent its escape, his face hot. Was this a good idea, after all? He no longer cared. Catherine's presence was like a balm to his raw nerves.

Catherine, meanwhile, had removed her sweater and sat with her back to him on the bed, removing the rest of her outer wear and tossing it onto his big chair. Vincent could not prevent himself from watching and saw a silken gleam. Then he caught a glimpse of a rounded breast through one armhole as she reached over him to grab the covers. She seemed unconcerned and snuggled up to his right side, burying her head under his arm.

Vincent sighed in delight. She felt wonderful there and he automatically hugged her closer, felt her mould herself to him.

Even so, he was a bit shocked when he felt her foot slide over his calf and stroke his leg. He realized then that she was enjoying the contact. He couldn't deny her anything and certainly did not want to argue the point. For the first time since the outsider gang had invaded, he felt good. He closed his eyes.

Catherine felt Vincent relax. She could tell he was enjoying their closeness and she loved the warmth and strength she could feel against her. His hand had moved to rest against the naked skin between her camisole and panties. It was warm and gentle. In response, she moved her own hand under his shirt to rest on top of his navel. His sigh confirmed his permission.

She would have to be careful now. She waited until she felt him slide into sleep and cleared her mind again. She wasn't sure if she could do this, but she knew he needed release, a reminder of his humanity. That was what she hoped to give him tonight. It would be only temporary, she guessed, but it was necessary.

Catherine leaned her forehead against his ribs and closed her eyes. She spread out the hand on his stomach, loving the uniquely erotic feel of the long soft hair there.

She had not seen much of Vincent's body – he was too careful when he knew she was around, but she had caught glimpses, especially when Father ministered to him. She knew he had a lot of body hair, but also guessed that it was soft, like that on his face. Oh, he felt delightful and the scent of him next to her made her heart race!

The warmth of Catherine next to him was balm to his heart and soul. Vincent's hand, almost of its own volition, found the naked skin on her waist and rested there. Her heat ran up his arm and then straight to his groin. He sighed internally, feeling Catherine's joy at the contact. Her calm was seductive and contagious. When she placed her hand on his belly, he gave up trying to think. He let himself slide into sleep ... and dreamed.

Catherine could feel Vincent's muscles relax under her hand and sensed he was asleep. He was very tired and she didn't want to wake him. Theoretically, this should work. Slowly, carefully, she imagined her hand moving southwards to where Vincent's legs joined. She could not know what she would find there, but she had seen the impressive bulge in his underwear as she grabbed the sheets and knew that his arousal embarrassed him. She gave her imagination free rein.

Her fantasy hand moved slowly, bypassing his erect column to slide down to his testicles. She was sure they would be delightful to touch and pictured her hand cupping a pair of large globes in a soft covering, perhaps softly furred like his face. She felt him growl softly, paused her fantasy in amazement. Her own heat began to build in reaction, but still he didn't awaken. She resolutely continued. Her hand now squeezed a little and she felt a sudden frisson along the bond. Had he joined her in her fantasy? She paused and realized she could feel his arousal along their bond. She suspected he'd had erotic dreams before and the thought made her labia ache with desire. She clamped down on that. This fantasy was for Vincent's benefit, not hers.

Gratified at her success, she moved her imaginary hand slowly higher, until she could touch the base of his penis. Ah, it was hot, engorged, just as she wanted it. She could feel Vincent's awareness and felt as if she was under his skin, feeling both her own hot imaginings and his. She thought her hand higher yet and circled his column with it. Then she slid it upward slowly, relaxing and tensing her hand as she did so. She could feel his desire building towards climax and moved further, until she could feel his crown, smooth and hot against her

palm. She tightened her grip just a little, felt the internal gasp and tensing under her real hand that was Vincent's reaction. Then she imagined a drop of wet warmth under her hand and squeezed.

There was a real shudder as Vincent's manhood exploded, shooting wonderfully warm fluid over her real hand on his stomach. He gave a large sigh that made her heart ache.

She just had to know what he was like. She quickly moved her hand under his waistband and captured his organ in it, heard that soft growl again. He was wet with semen, but that sensation only added to her delight, which she tried to suppress. Gods, he was large! Then she heard Vincent moan and felt him tense under her hand, but still he didn't awaken. Thank goodness he had been so exhausted! She tentatively moved down carefully to cup his testicles, found them as soft as she had imagined. Curiosity satisfied for the time being, she sighed, gently removed her hand from his underwear and returned it to his stomach.

Vincent knew he was having another wet dream, but the sensation was so much more intense than usual, he felt delight rather than disgust. Then he realized the reason - he wasn't alone! Catherine! Somehow she was there, her love surrounding him, her hands working magic on his organ. He had never felt anything like it. Was it real? Was he awake or asleep? He didn't care. He let the dream have its way, felt himself suddenly climax and ejaculate. He sighed with relief and let his body melt into the bed. Then he felt her hand cup him again, lightly and lovingly, then move back to rest on his belly. He sank into a deeper, dreamless sleep.

Catherine felt Vincent's relief and knew she didn't need to worry about waking him. Now their hearts beat as one, as if they occupied the same space almost. She wondered what he would think of that. In the days to come, when she would have to work Above, she hoped this heightened connection would help him come to terms with his demons. At least now she knew he was no more than a thought away from her, wherever she was.

...

The next morning, Catherine awakened on her back to daylight brightening the stained glass window. The events of the past night flooded over her, overlaying the violence of the day before, and her role in that. She had to force herself to keep her emotions under control. Vincent had turned onto his side, facing her, but was still sound asleep, his breath soft on her shoulder.

With the clear sight of morning, she realized she had to leave before he awoke. The events of last night would be an embarrassment to him – and she was not sure he would be grateful for her part in them. Nevertheless, the experiment had been a success as far as she was concerned.

She quickly slid from the bed. She was about to get dressed when she decided she wanted to leave him something, a token. A note? But that might be read by someone else. Well, there were two obvious choices. She opted for the less erotic one and took off her camisole. Now where should she put it? Why not next to him? She carefully laid it next to his face on the bed, then threw on her clothes and left as quietly as she could.

She had a full day of work ahead of her and no idea what the time was. Well, Joe would have to take her as she came – whenever that was. She needed a shower and a coffee.

As she entered her apartment, she looked at a clock and realized it was not even five o'clock. She could only have slept for a few hours. She let herself sense Vincent along their bond and felt his peace. That was ample reward for a few less hours of sleep. She hoped it would continue, but feared it would not. Daylight would bring his anguish back into focus, but perhaps it would not be as sharp now. She resolutely decided to say nothing about the events of the previous night, unless he asked.

She undressed and went into the shower. She had to get her mind into work mode or Joe would ask awkward questions.

Vincent woke to the aroma of tea and the scent of Catherine. He shook his head a little at the latter and looked around. She was not in his chamber. Then he saw the wisp of silk next to his pillow and gathered it to him

reverently. Now why had she left this? He carefully brought it to his face and sank his nose into it, breathed in her scent with delight for long moments. A tapping on the pipe reminded him he could expect visitors at any time and he reluctantly put the camisole under his pillow, away from curious eyes.

Where was Catherine? He reached out to her and felt the slight frisson that told him she knew he was awake. Her emotions were under tight control. Something was bothering her, but she was obviously at work.

With a sigh, he threw back the covers and slid his legs onto the floor. His underwear seemed welded to his body hair and he tweaked it impatiently with his free hand. Then he realized what must have happened during the night and remembered a dream – the kind he usually felt great shame about in the morning. Today, it seemed to have the opposite effect and that was another puzzle. Catherine had come to his chamber and he had brought her, although he couldn't remember why. Hadn't she helped him undress? Hadn't she lain next to him in his bed? That was the last thing he recalled, and that was disturbing. He couldn't make sense of the timeline. Had he had that erotic dream while Catherine was with him, or after she left? What would she think of him if she had seen the result?

His head felt as if it were filled with sand and his shoulder ached. Father had given him a painkiller the night before. They always made him feel disconnected. The shoulder! Memories washed over him – the violence of the day before, Catherine in danger, his coldly efficient killing of the outsider gang. And the bullet fired by the feral boy.

He rose and threw a heavy wool robe over his shoulders before he sat down with a thump. Then he realized he couldn't pour because his left arm was in a sling. He got up again and impatiently turned the chair so his right hand could. He grunted as his shoulder protested the rough treatment.

That's why Catherine had come to his chamber! He had felt her concern for him and her own guilt over the boy. He had found her sitting under her threshold. There was something more, but his mind had gone blank again.

He drank a cup of fragrant jasmine tea and sighed. Too much was making no sense. He needed time to think. He definitely wanted to avoid Father for a few hours. He stripped off his long underwear and went into his bathroom to clean himself. The water was icy in the pitcher and the cold washcloth on his privates made him gasp, but did serve to wake him up a little more. He managed to put on a clean pair of much-patched long johns and his pants one-handed, but he couldn't change his shirt. He buttoned up a heavy flannel shirt and managed to ease it over his head and get his good arm in, although his shoulder ached afterwards. He was fortunate the bullet had been of small calibre and easily removed.

The gun! Another mystery. It had to have been Catherine's. Why had she brought it Below? She never came armed. She knew their prohibitions. He sighed and shook his head, trying to get his brain to function.

Something had changed between himself and Catherine. That bright thread he always associated with her seemed much stronger now. He could feel her inside him, close to his heart. He wasn't sure what to think about that. Had something happened the previous night that he'd forgotten? He felt a flush run up his face. Surely not! She couldn't have seen him in the throes of his dream – or could she?

He reached out to her again, but now sensed nothing but her usual daytime emotions along the bond, although he was certain she felt his concern, which puzzled him still more. Their connection was definitely stronger. When had this happened? He would have to think about this too.

Vincent yanked on a pair of socks and his boots, then flung his cloak over his clothes, grunted when the shoulder protested. He almost ran to the waterfall cavern.

Once there, the water seemed to flush away his doubts and he decided he felt remarkably good, considering his state of mind the night before. He *had* sent Catherine away, he remembered that much. Yet she was the key to his present peace. He always felt better when she was near and he shouldn't question that either. He still had a lot of thinking to do, but it could wait. Once his arm healed, he would go to the nameless river for a day or two. The quiet there would allow him to think clearly.

He suddenly felt a shudder from Catherine along the bond, and guessed she had a few regrets herself. He seemed to be very aware of her today. He shared some of his new calm with her, felt her love for him return along the bond. He sighed and leaned back against the rock.

Catherine felt Vincent's confusion and smiled to herself. He seemed only a little upset, at least at present. She could live with that.

Her own dismay at her actions yesterday would have to be examined carefully, in an impartial lawyer-like manner, or Vincent's hard won peace would be upset. Well, she'd had lots of practice with that. Just the same, she couldn't help thinking about the dead boy. What kind of life had he had with that gang? He'd deserved better – certainly more than being smashed against a wall by someone who'd had the advantage of being well-fed and fit. She guessed that her anger had been similar to Vincent's. It seemed to come from a deep place inside herself, something primal and heartless. She shivered.

Catherine suddenly felt Vincent's comforting presence like a benediction around her heart. He could not have known what she was thinking, but he'd felt her unease. She sent her love to him and knew he felt it. Their hearts now spoke to each other, without words. If nothing else resulted from her night of fantasy, that melding was worth everything to her.

She knew that she would need some time to understand this new level of intimacy too. She didn't want to push Vincent further. The next time she saw him, she'd better be prepared to give him some space. Perhaps a gift – a book they could read together. Yes, he would appreciate that. Some things didn't need words, but words could still give solace.

There was a wonderful old bookstore near the courthouse. She'd have to explore that one day soon.

In the meantime, there was this dratted brief to complete. She pulled her concentration back to the immediate and made herself focus on it.

By the waterfall, Vincent felt Catherine's resolve and sighed. Suddenly his stomach growled and he realized it had been a long time since his last meal. He'd slept through breakfast and lunch was almost over now. If he didn't hurry, William would eat all the food that was left over.

One thing at a time, he swore to himself, and rose to return to the Hub. Father would want to look at his shoulder too. With enough distractions, he could postpone his ruminations for a while longer. He could still feel the warmth around his heart that was Catherine's love. It would give him strength in the days to come. After that, anything was possible.

END

The Emerald Cape

*The weight of this sad time we must obey,
Speak what we feel; not what we ought to say*
- William Shakespeare

After Catherine had rescued him as he wrestled in the throes of Paracelsus' drug, Vincent had decided that he wanted to give her a special gift. Jewelry seemed to have been more than satisfied with the crystal necklace and he loved to see it on her – or know that she was wearing it under her clothes, next to her heart. He kept her gift to him, the rose in its leather bag, always outside his clothes, unless he was worried that it might get caught or lost when he was doing hard labour in the tunnels.

But something more was needed. He wracked his brain for inspiration.

While still trying to think of a gift, he had become ill again and Catherine had rescued him a second time from his madness. The need for a gift had become imperative. She deserved something very special. But what? He couldn't give her anything she needed, could he? She had money enough to buy anything she wanted. Ergo, it had to be something she needed, but wouldn't think of. And it had to be something she could wear in his presence - and be seen to wear

He thought back over her visits to him and the ones they enjoyed most. The concerts, of course, rated very high indeed. Was there something he could give her for those? She always wore evening clothes, whilst he still insisted on wearing his all-enveloping cape. It was a part of him. He usually slid it off and sat on it during the concerts.

A cape! Of course! Catherine didn't have a cape! That would be ideal. Perhaps something long and elegant.

Having got that far, Vincent sought out the community's quartermaster and mistress of their sewing room. Annabelle, as usual, was almost hidden behind a table of clothing, fabric and oddments she was sorting. Vincent could see the dwarf's rich auburn hair in its enthusiastic beehive bobbing just above it. He approached her and stood watching her slide along the ramp that Cullen had made for her, so that she could reach the table more easily. Since she had regular sewing and sorting sessions every Wednesday, tables could not be reduced to her size or they would inconvenience her helpers.

Annabelle looked up finally and smiled at Vincent.

"I knew you were there, you know Vincent. My ears are almost as sharp as yours – but in my case, literally." She put a hand behind an ear, which was indeed slightly pointed.

"What can I do for you, you lovely man?"

Vincent was always taken aback by her obvious compliments. Catherine was the only other woman who had ever given him any. He did not fool himself. His looks were not the stuff of female dreams. Yet, Catherine found him attractive, and so did Annabelle – and neither hesitated to tell him so. It was a mystery he chose not to pursue.

Vincent cleared his throat and began to explain that he wanted to present Catherine with a cape.

"Ah, your Catherine. A fine lady, by all that I hear – and one who loves you as you deserve, Vincent.

"Well, let's see. I hear she has green eyes, so a cape in emerald green would be appropriate, yes? Full-length of course, and made of a heavy velvet, if possible. With maybe two modest inside pockets – you know, for a handkerchief, or book.

"Now, I've never met Catherine, so you'll have to give me her measurements."

Vincent quailed. How was he to get those? He would be too embarrassed to ask, and that would expose his plan.

"Don't look like that, Vincent. You've held her, just show me with your hands where her shoulders come on you, their width, and that should be it. I know how very observant you are. She'll probably be wearing high heels, so I'll take that into account."

Vincent did as Annabelle asked and she got out a tape measure. She made some notes on a pad she kept nearby.

"Well, there we are, Vincent. Now I just have to find the fabric. Hmmm. That might be a challenge, but there are ways. How soon do you want this cape?"

"Whenever you can manage it, Annabelle. I don't want you distracted from your other work for this community. There is no hurry."

"Very well, Vincent, leave it with me. I'll let you know when its ready," she smiled up at him. Even on her ramp, he

towered above her. He really was most extraordinary. A beautiful soul – and a magnificent man.

Vincent saw the look in Annabelle's eyes and felt himself blush. He decided to retreat.

"Annabelle, thank you. I hope I haven't asked for something impossible."

"Vincent, nothing is impossible. You, of all people, should know that."

"Um, yes. Well, goodbye Annabelle." Vincent left as quickly as he could. He heard Annabelle's good-hearted chuckle behind him and flushed again.

Over the next weeks, Annabelle rooted in all the boxes she had been given by helpers, without finding anything. She quietly put the word out to them that she needed some yards of emerald velvet. She suggested they keep their eyes open for old curtains, upholstery fabric, old theatre costumes perhaps – and waited.

Then one day, a helper named Barry told her of a theatre being demolished, one that had been derelict for some time – and a very old one. It had drapes for the taking, he said. Annabelle asked to be shown to the theatre and Barry, who was a security guard for the developer, drove her there one afternoon.

Along the way, Barry told her about the old theatre. He was old enough to have seen it in its prime and was obviously sad that it would soon be no more. He also mentioned that the area was a prostitute stroll and the old theatre had been the scene of a rather nasty fight resulting in the deaths of two men of good family, a few months previously. The authorities assumed the men were the victims of a turf war.

Annabelle walked gingerly through the broken glass from the popcorn machines and showcases in the foyer. Barry turned on the main lights and she walked into the theatre proper. She stood aghast as she looked around at its now faded opulence – the gilded, ornately-carved ceiling, the finely-carved "gods" where the wealthy had their private boxes. It was cathedral-like in its magnificence. A bygone time indeed, she thought, as she started down the aisle between the rows of old leather seats towards the stage, where the velvet curtains waited.

She got about half-way down the aisle and saw what were obviously blood stains on the floor. She stopped and had to sit down on the nearest seat, suddenly uncertain of her purpose.

This was THAT theatre! This was where Vincent had dropped through the ceiling and rescued Catherine from the two young madmen who had been killing prostitutes. He had been shot in the process. She had heard all about it from Rebecca, who had helped Father patch up Vincent and calm Catherine when they returned later. The bodies of the young men had been found by this very helper. He had told her so, with some pride. He didn't know the story behind his gruesome discovery, though. The bodies, he said, looked as if they had been slashed with broken glass. Barry had not connected Catherine with the slayings – or Vincent either, thank goodness.

Annabelle got herself together and, carefully skirting the bloodstains, approached the stage. She found the stairs and clumped up to the curtains, one of which had finally given up its hold on the rods far above and dropped onto the floor, forming a substantial mound of dusty velvet. It was certainly the right colour and there were such acres of it, Annabelle was sure there was something salvageable. She put her arms under it and tried to heft it. It was very heavy – more than she and Barry could manage. How to get it out?

Annabelle quailed a little at the obvious solution, but finally decided that Vincent had to be asked to help. No one else could do it. She hoped he would not hate her afterwards for reminding him of that horrible night.

Annabelle trotted back to Barry, where he was guarding the entrance, and told him of her plan. He nodded his agreement, so she went out the back door of the theatre, propped it open with a nearby brick, and found a pipe where she could tap out a message. Then she waited. There was a manhole to the Tunnels nearby and she watched it. In due course, it shifted to one side and Vincent emerged. He signaled when he saw Annabelle and quietly followed her inside. They did not want to attract attention. Annabelle spoke quietly over her shoulder as she led Vincent to the stage.

"Vincent, there is a huge old velvet curtain here I need your help to move below. It would be perfect for that cape you want for Catherine."

Vincent had been following Annabelle to the stage and stopped dead. He looked around, up at the ceiling and then down the aisle. He did not miss the bloodstains. He leaned against the stage wall and closed his eyes. He clearly remembered how he'd felt after rescuing Catherine that night. He had felt like the beast he was, not much

better than the two young men he had killed. Blood and death. The place still reeked of it.

He felt a hand grasp his and opened his eyes to look down at Annabelle.

"Vincent," she whispered. "Our helper doesn't know the story of this place. He's guarding the front entrance. Come, some good will come of this place after all. Help me get this velvet below. The theatre is being demolished soon, so all traces of that horrible night will be gone and Catherine will have her cloak. Please."

Vincent got a grip on himself. He squeezed Annabelle's hand and gave her a look of gratitude.

"Thank you, Annabelle. You're right. It's over. Let me see this curtain."

As it happened, even Vincent was challenged by the weight, but he managed to heave it off the stage and out the door to the manhole. He poured it down fold by fold, then clambered down after it. He waited while Annabelle gave her thanks to Barry and followed him. She helped him fold it into a long, neater bundle, then carried the trailing edge over her shoulder as he humped the unwieldy mass down the tunnels to the Hub, and then into her sewing chamber. Vincent gratefully dropped it at last, trying not to raise any more dust than necessary. Even so, they both coughed.

Seen on the floor, even in this large chamber, the mass of velvet was almost overwhelming. Vincent regarded it with amazement.

"How on earth are you going to turn that into anything?" he asked.

"Well, it'll be a challenge, I grant you," Annabelle agreed. "But look at it Vincent. It's such a lovely colour, and very thick. Very old, good quality stuff. I'll just cut out enough for the job. There is still some good fabric there under the dust, but it'll need to be cleaned. Don't worry, I can handle it."

"You're a treasure, Annabelle. If you need my help with this, just let me know." Vincent left her with something akin to relief, after thanking her for her diligence on his behalf. He was covered in old dust himself and the memories of that night were haunting him. He needed a long bath. And he wanted to get his mind around the origins of what would become Catherine's cape. He decided that he would say nothing unless she asked.

Over the next weeks, Annabelle went to work on the cape. She cut generous portions of velvet from the curtain and beat out the dust. Then she brushed and cleaned it gently. It looked wonderful, almost gleaming in her workroom, which had real daylight coming through a shaft. There was indeed enough for a cape – several capes. She cut off the remainder of the salvageable portions of the curtain and hung it in her drying room for beating later. The less dubious portions she cut into yard squares and piled in one corner of her work chamber. The tattered remainder, she quietly hauled away piece by piece to the community's dump, a chamber deep in the bowels of the tunnels. It would bio-degrade eventually.

She found a length of smoky, black satin. It had obviously been in a fire. She aired it and used it to line the cape. Mouse, who was always finding her buttons and things, gave her a box of oddments one day which included a big glass ball button, in a matching shade. Perfect.

The cape was ready by the time she heard that Vincent and Catherine had at last consummated their love in her apartment. Annabelle also heard that Catherine was moving below and put the finishing touch on the cape, a woven loop for the glass button. Now it was ready.

She wrapped the cape in brown paper and sought out Vincent. She found him shuffling furniture around in his chamber, making a great racket.

"Vincent," she shouted over the noise as she entered.

He turned to look at her and quickly approached her to relieve her of the package. His grace and speed as he moved took her breath away. She sighed and craned her neck to look up at him.

"This is the cape for Catherine. I think you'll both like it."

She regarded him with interest. He did look a lot more relaxed, more at peace with himself. Well, she could guess the reason for that. She gave him a wicked smile.

"And congratulations, Vincent."

Vincent flushed. He didn't have to ask what she meant. Plenty of others in the community had made similar

remarks to him lately. He didn't mind. The comments meant that Catherine had been accepted, and that was worth a little embarrassment on his part.

"Thank you Annabelle. This means a great deal to me. How can I ever thank you?"

Annabelle looked up at him, grinning mischievously. "Well, if you can lift me onto that chair of yours, you can give me a kiss."

She had not really expected him to comply and whooped in surprise as he picked her up, placed her on his big chair and gave her a soft kiss on the lips, holding it for a moment longer than was absolutely necessary.

"Was that adequate?" he asked, as he moved away, a glint of humour in his eyes.

Annabelle was rendered speechless for a moment. She smiled at Vincent and found her voice.

"Very much so, Vincent. Catherine is a lucky woman. Now if you'll return me to the floor, I'll be on my way."

He did so, and she tramped back to her chamber, almost on air. She decided that she would have to try and earn another of those kisses. She sighed.

Vincent opened the package and shook out the cape. It was truly beautiful and definitely worth more than a kiss. He would have to think of a suitable way to thank Annabelle.

He was a little surprised to find that the cape did not engender any adverse reaction. After all, he rationalized, it bore no resemblance to the theatre curtains, other than its colour. And it had been made with love. Annabelle had done a wonderful job. He would always be aware of its origin, but that was as it should be. He did not want to forget that night. It was part of who he was.

But, Catherine must not have her pleasure in this gift spoiled. She need not know. He hung the cape in his wardrobe and covered it with a dressing gown he seldom wore. Now all he needed was the right time to bestow it on Catherine. That happened to be at Yuletide.

Vincent told the story much sooner than he expected after bestowing his gift. He could never refuse Catherine anything. She listened as he spoke of his pain, his sorrow, his love and desire. Her memories were as sharp as his, but something beautiful had resulted and their love had survived all hardships. How could this cape and its story be other than a blessing? It was a testament to all that they were. Their kiss confirmed it.

END