

Vignettes - Mirrors

Episodes 21-30

- by Angie

21 - Ozymandias

Vincent and Catherine gazed at Elizabeth's painting of Elliot's dark tower on the wall of the tunnel. The relief they both felt was still tangible, drawing them closer. They had almost lost everything.

Elizabeth had painted it from an image in a newspaper, Vincent knew, but it resembled nothing so much as a nightmare – looming, cold, deadly almost. Why had Elliot elected to depict it that way?

He shook his head and looked down at Catherine. They were still holding hands.

"I don't understand him," he confessed quietly.

Catherine looked at the floor and Vincent felt her confusion and remorse. He squeezed her hand a little. "What?"

Catherine looked up at him. "Vincent there's something I haven't told you. I saw Elliot and offered to marry him, as I said I would – but I put a condition on it. I would only do so if he stopped construction of his tower. He said he couldn't.

"I felt terrible for doing that, but I thought I had no choice. I had to try, even though I was almost certain he would refuse. That building meant more to him than anything else.

"Then later we discovered what he'd been doing and closed him down. I should have seen the obvious earlier. I could have saved you a lot of pain."

Vincent sighed. "Catherine, you did what you had to do – and you saved all of us. How can I fault that? Perhaps if Elliot had agreed, you would not have looked further. He has only himself to blame. Your desperation opened your eyes and led you to the truth."

Vincent paused, trying to verbalize what he felt looking at the image.

"But why did he portray his tower in such a ... menacing ... fashion?"

Catherine looked at the painting again and spoke quietly. "I don't think he understood how it looked to people like you, Vincent - people whose lives would have been changed, ruined perhaps, forever. Elliot wanted to be remembered as the builder of the most impressive tower in New York. It was to be proof of his success."

Vincent nodded. "Then it is a reflection of his pride. Could anything have stopped it without such ... methods? It seemed inevitable, impossible to prevent. Were we saved by obsession?"

"Yes," Catherine declared. "Elliot made choices when he decided to build that. Remember the old couple and their fight with his thugs? In his world everything is black or white. He told me that – and that people are either for or against him. There are no other considerations. He wouldn't change and he couldn't risk his ambition – not even for love."

"Then he didn't really know love", Vincent remarked.

"Elliot would never understand us," Catherine whispered. She moved into Vincent's arms and he enveloped her in his cloak. They were safe again in his world - and with each other.

END

22- A Happy Life

As Vincent stood waiting at the edge of the culvert, he found himself remembering when he had first left Catherine at her threshold so long ago, without even saying goodbye.

He had felt her emotions during the long months before he saw her again, but their separation this time had been more poignant. He berated himself now for not being more supportive. He had rationalized that by telling himself that she had to make a decision for both of them, unencumbered. And she had.

She was running towards him, her eagerness now preventing him from thinking beyond the moment. He let her joy wash through him and felt happiness rise up like a tide from his core.

He could see her now, her small figure running in the moonlight, careless of anything but what she saw – himself, waiting. He braced himself, sensing that she wanted to be close, hugged. He could not deny her or himself now.

Then she launched herself at him. His cloak flew around her, like wings, and his arms followed it, holding her tight under her rump to support her as she stood on her tiptoes.

The feel of her, so close and so happy was indescribable. He stood stunned, unable to say anything, basking in her love for him, reflecting it and adding his own along their bond.

When she gasped out that their love was worth everything, that it was all that mattered, somehow he managed to reply “yes”. Her emotions then engulfed him. He could do nothing but hold her close, his eyes closed in bliss.

Then he imagined he felt her head tilt upwards and his own move down to meet hers, as if in a dream. Their lips touched and held and he was lost - lost to himself and the world. They were one - truly all that mattered.

The world seemed to come to a standstill as they kissed. They were enclosed in stillness, soft darkness. When they parted, he knew they were untouchable. Their love was a fortress. There could be no more doubts.

He felt her sigh deeply and let her down slowly until he felt her feet touch the ground. She did not let go of him and he kept his arms around her, but more loosely. Then she put her arms under his cloak and hugged him, resting her head against his chest. He sighed.

Catherine looked up at him and sighed again - with regret, he thought.

“Vincent.... I have to go. But I had to see you.”

Vincent hardly knew what to say, still basking in his heightened sense of her. He spoke softly, each word formed carefully.

“I know ... my love. I ... missed you. Waiting ... I felt you. Oh, Catherine!”

He brought her close to him again and she hugged him tight, then reluctantly moved a little apart.

“Farewell, Vincent. I’ll come back ...”

“Tomorrow ...?” he whispered

“Yes,” she replied. She didn’t need to say when. He would know.

She backed away, looking in his eyes longingly, then turned and walked back the way she had come. He watched her, suddenly aware of the park and city. He waited until he could tell she was driving away.

He sighed softly. Had it been a dream? Had they kissed? He was reluctant to move, but forced his feet and legs to move and take him back into the culvert and his world.

No mirror could show the difference in him, he knew, but he had changed beyond all recognition. Her love had transformed him, heart and soul.

END

23 - Remember Love

The images from his nightmare haunted Vincent. Then his stomach rumbled and he realized he had no idea what time it was.

He felt Catherine's amusement and he opened his eyes to catch hers as she lifted her head from his chest. It was silent in the tunnels.

I think it's around 10:30 pm.," Catherine informed him, "and you're obviously hungry. I have something for that. I thought ... perhaps ..."

"Yes, I'd like that," he whispered.

She lifted herself off him, leaving him suddenly chilly. He sat up, swung his feet onto the floor and watched Catherine distractedly as she pulled his big chair close to the bed, arranged a cloth on it, then placed wine, glasses, napkins and tubs of food on it. Then she looked at him, read his expression, and sat down beside him.

"Tell me," she begged.

He sighed deeply and nodded. He looked away from her as he spoke.

"When I left you, I ... I had never felt so frustrated," he confessed quietly. "I wished I had never been born ... then I ... slept ... and got my wish."

Speaking slowly and deliberately, he told her about his nightmares. When he reached her part of them, Catherine took his hand and held it tightly.

His voice broke. "It was terrifying, Catherine," he whispered. "It seemed so real ... and all because I did not exist. Yet ... it made no sense."

Catherine regarded him with compassion as he turned to look at her, his eyes full of pain.

"It does make sense, Vincent. You've changed our lives, because you are our mirror. You reflect the best in us - as we should be. You believe in us, encourage us to be better."

"Catherine, I am so ... different. How can I be anyone's mirror?"

She looked in his eyes and saw genuine puzzlement. He had no vanity. She sighed inwardly.

"You show us that appearances don't matter. What's in our hearts is what defines us. You remind us that love is unlimited, that it doesn't judge."

Vincent shook his head. "I am just one heart, one voice."

"Yes, but the truest one."

Vincent stared at her, astonished. "Father said that to me when we were trapped in the Maze."

Catherine nodded. "He was right, Vincent. You see clearly, unimpaired by prejudice or vanity. You're unselfish, honourable. You're our best example."

Vincent sighed. "How can I be an example? I am ... trapped here, outcast from all else."

"Not trapped, Vincent - protected. Your spirit is strong and brave and has no limits. You are loved for what you are - and what you do. You help and protect everyone."

"But I doubt, Catherine. I have dark places. I fear ..."

"And that makes you human, Vincent. You have taught us what that means. Your dream showed you what happens when love, humanity, is absent. A world without compassion, without hope, built only on despair and fear."

Catherine let go his hand and poured out two glasses of wine, then handed him one.

"Let's toast to love and hope."

Vincent felt the terrible knot in his chest relax and disappear.

"Yes, may we always have both. Thank-you, Catherine."

END

24 – Ashes Ashes

Vincent sat tensely in Father's study, Catherine at his side, as he waited for someone on the Council to say what he expected – but dreaded.

The letter-burning ceremony had given everyone some closure regarding Ellie's death. Then the clean-up and sterilization of the hospital chamber had taken several days and many hands. Now, they were reviewing the plague epidemic itself – and what could be done to prevent a similar crisis.

Father, of course, blamed himself for not recognizing Dimitri's illness sooner, but Vincent knew that the real fault lay with himself - for introducing a sick stranger. Yet as he sat rigid in his chair, no condemnation was uttered – or even hinted at - by anyone. He had taken no part in the discussion so far.

Catherine looked sideways at Vincent, well aware of why he was so quiet, and what he expected. She had been invited to attend the meeting because she had helped in the care and clean-up – and because Vincent wanted her there.

"We must ensure that our vaccines are up to date," Father was saying. "Peter has offered to provide what we need. I'll make a list of who needs what. He'll also examine anyone we bring from above. The wonder is that we've never had this happen before."

Vincent decided he had to speak. His voice was uncharacteristically rough.

"You would not have had to worry this time had I not brought Dimitri here," he declared.

Everyone looked over at him, but for long moments there was silence. Finally, William lost patience and spoke in his typically blunt fashion.

"You wouldn't be here, Vincent, neither would Catherine, or Mouse, or Father - or lots of us – if folks hadn't helped. The rule is wrong. How could we look at ourselves in a mirror - or even each other - if we turned our backs on need?"

"William is right. We must be a good example to our children." Mary added. "We can only offer hope, a safe place to heal. We can't judge. To refuse to help would violate everything we stand for."

Father sighed. "I see we've all thought this over. I agree our primary rule needs to be clarified - but we also need better procedures so we can avoid health risks."

Pascal spoke up. "I think everyone knows we need to do something. But what?"

"We need an isolation room - perhaps the old storage chamber," Father mused. "We must also educate ourselves - the children, our helpers, and you too, Vincent."

"Yes, Father," Vincent agreed quietly. "I could teach the children some basic diagnosis."

"I can think of no one better qualified," Father smiled. "All agreed?"

Everyone nodded and Vincent relaxed visibly. Catherine realized his overwhelming sense of guilt had made him expect the worse. She knew the tunnel community's solutions, by default, were based on compassion and understanding - not blame. They were not afraid to look at themselves critically - and change if necessary. That was their strength.

She sighed and smiled at Vincent when he turned to look at her. He gave her a wry look. He would be more careful - but so would they all, now. It had been a hard lesson.

END

25 - Chamber Music

Vincent stood with his head bowed, dejected beyond anything he had ever experienced, unable to speak. Catherine took his hands in hers and stood close to him. She said nothing, but her mind was busy.

Rolley obviously had such overpowering guilt and remorse that he could not see beyond it. It said a great deal about the man that he could still feel such strong emotions, she thought, and that was hopeful. He had not wanted to talk to Vincent, but the prospect of seeing Father, or anyone else, would have been far more daunting.

He had told his story to Vincent, finally, leaving out nothing, clearly blaming himself. The tunnel community had not known everything about the death of their gifted teacher - but that was in the past. Vincent had been more worried about Rolley and his future. But he had not been able to reason with Rolley.

"We must go," Vincent said at last, breaking into her reverie. He led the way down the ladder and lifted her off at the bottom. They made their way back to the tunnel entry and began the long walk back to the home tunnels.

Nothing was said while they walked, but Catherine, one hand in Vincent's and the other in her pocket, had an idea. She might help him feel less like he had failed.

He steered them to his chamber and she gave an inward sigh of relief. She had been half afraid that he would lead her to her threshold. Perhaps he needed her company. Certainly, she had no desire to return just yet. It was late, but the day would take care of itself. Joe was used to her occasionally arriving late in the office, and knew she often worked late. He didn't demand a reason for either.

Vincent sat down on his bed, so she sat beside him. He gave a huge sigh and looked at her, the first time he had done so since the rooftop. He still had hold of her hand, and his grip was firm and warm.

"Why?" he asked, abruptly. "Why couldn't I make him see that he's still loved and wanted here?"

Catherine turned to face him.

"Vincent, Rolley is an honourable man. He takes full responsibility for the death – and it's destroying him. He has fallen so low he can't see anything but himself.

"However, you reminded him of another life, the one he lost, and he'll begin to think again. And one more thing – he has the other half of this."

She reached in her pocket and showed him the half hundred dollar bill.

Vincent looked at it, then her. "I don't understand."

"Vincent, Rolley is at the bottom. This represents hope – or I hope it will. He has no money and he's a drug addict. You offered him a second chance. He knows he can turn his life around if he returns here. Or he will want the other half of this so he can buy more drugs. I promised it to him if he talked to you. I hope I didn't drive him to more despair – but I do believe this will bring him close, sooner or later. He can't pretend any longer that he's alone and unwanted. When he comes, he can be helped."

Vincent nodded and relaxed a little, half-believing now that the prodigal would return.

And so it was.

END

26 - God Bless the Child

Lena sat in a chair in her small chamber, rocking little Catherine's cradle with her foot, thinking, her forehead wrinkled with the effort.

She had never had time to really consider her life before – in her business, it was best not to. She had time now, nothing but time.

Inevitably she found herself thinking about Vincent. Would she ever get over him? Did she want to?

Their first meeting had told her that he didn't enjoy hiding from newcomers. His surprise at her reaction to the first sight of him had made her heart melt for him. She had heard his story before that, of course.

Why had she assumed Vincent would not already be in love - and be loved in return? Why had she assumed his kindness meant more? Recalling the expression on Vincent's face that last time, she knew now that he had been afraid for her - not of her or himself. He had feared she would not understand. And of course, she hadn't, then.

But that didn't change the way she felt about him now. Perhaps she would always love him. He knew how she felt, so did Catherine, but they still cared about her. They were so kind to her – everyone was.

That was what she found hard to understand, she mused. She had never met people who gave so much without expecting something in return - and they had even welcomed her back after she had run away.

Vincent was one of them, yet his differences had made him what he was - a man of a few careful words. It was as if he could read minds. When she looked at him, she had seen herself in his eyes, like a mirror, but one that showed her as she wanted to be, not what she was - a pregnant whore. Yet, somehow, he made her feel she was worth more than the price of a trick. He saw through her to her core.

Yet he hated mirrors, she had learned, and she understood that too. She had hated hers too, because it never showed her true self, the one she kept inside, hidden from her johns. That had been another person, one that dreamed of mountains and trees.

He was alone, as she had been. Her profession had set her apart, just as his looks kept him hidden. Yet, instead of being bitter, as she had often been, Vincent helped others to find their way. Could she learn from his example?

She would have to change, leave her old personality behind, like her old wardrobe – and her mirror. Maybe Vincent would help, Catherine too. She knew they would understand, and encourage her. She needed that now. It was frightening to think how close she had come to giving up this life, and abandoning her daughter, just because she was ashamed.

She knew now that there was no shame in love. Vincent had shown her that too.

Lena smiled. Thinking had helped, after all. She felt better and knew what she had to do.

END

27. Dead of Winter

It was very late. Father sighed deeply and put his glasses on top of his book. He couldn't concentrate on his book wouldn't sleep if he went to bed. Winterfest had been unnerving, but what haunted him now was the man he had once known as John Pater.

After he had addressed John, he had seen the man he had once known, without the hate that had marked him minutes earlier. Instead, John's face had shown confusion, perhaps even a little regret, in those few long moments, but he had said nothing. He had shoved Samantha at them and in the confusion escaped out the big doors, while the wind extinguished all the candles.

In a sense, Father mused, staring at the book before him, he and John had been two sides of the same coin – almost mirror images. They had been good friends and still understood each other.

Father had not seen John, now Paracelsus, in all the years since he had been outlawed, but rumours of him had surfaced now and again. The man had killed people with his drugs and then abducted Catherine in order to draw Vincent. This time, death and destruction had been directed at the tunnel community.

John had killed poor Lou, almost killed Narcissa, and stabbed William. Yet he had ultimately failed, again thwarted by Vincent. Paracelsus would not forgive that. Would he try to murder his antagonist? No, that would be too simple, too clean.

Vincent must be warned. Father started to rise to go to his son, when he heard the familiar voice and looked up in surprise to see Vincent standing across from him.

"Father."

He sat down again. "Vincent, I was just going to come and see if you were still awake. You're in grave danger. Paracelsus will not forget."

Vincent nodded. "I know, Father. I will be careful."

Here was the man, a leader, who was a clear reflection of their values, Father thought, gazing across the table. John had wanted to take the baby Vincent with him into exile. What would he have become under that tutelage? It didn't bear thinking about.

"Father?"

"Vincent, few people now know why John Pater was outlawed. It concerns you too."

"He loved me, he said, and had to leave me behind."

Father looked intently at his son. "Yes. He could not have cared for you, although he wouldn't admit it. He had gone quite mad."

"Then there is no more to say, Father. You did what was best for me."

Father suddenly felt too weary to elaborate. That story would have to wait. He put both hands on the table and rose stiffly to his feet.

"And now we should both get some sleep. We have work to do tomorrow. Good night Vincent."

Vincent leaned over and planted a kiss on Father's forehead. "Good-night, Father."

END

28. A Fair and Perfect Knight

Vincent pulled Catherine closer to him and they gazed out over the city side by side. Finally, he could stay silent no longer.

“Catherine, it’s difficult for me to apologize when my emotions are strong – and I did not want you to see me that way.”

Catherine sighed softly. “How long have we known each other, Vincent?”

Vincent replied swiftly. “Two years, three months, 26 days.”

Catherine turned to look at him, astonished at his quick reply and saw his face flush a little. He had been keeping track! He looked down at her and one corner of his mouth lifted wryly.

He spoke softly. “I keep a journal, Catherine. My life began the night I found you. Every night since then, I have thanked the Fates that brought us together.”

“Me too,” she said quietly. This opportunity was too good to miss, but she had to get it right. She spoke softly.

“Since that night, Vincent, you and I have shared many incidents, including some where your emotions were strong. Yet, even under the influence of drugs, when you were mad with anger, I did not feel endangered. What could possibly happen if you kissed me, as we both wish?”

Vincent turned to look over the city, and considered her question. Catherine was correct, of course. A kiss could not make him lose control the way Paracelsus’ drugs had, especially out here on her balcony. What was he really afraid of? Why did he deny himself what other men desired – and had sampled on two occasions he knew of? Was he always to be just a ... a “voyeur” via their bond? He had caught her looking at his mouth often, and felt her emotions at that time – wistful, curious, eager. It was not what he expected, given what he was.

He looked down at her again. Catherine saw him differently to how he saw himself, but outward appearances no longer mattered. Their hearts were now mirrors for each other. They had grown together and their love was in no doubt. He would feel her next to his heart, always.

He knew what he had to do. He bent over her and dropped his head down so that he could kiss her forehead, and then paused. When she tilted her head up to meet him, he kissed her on the lips.

Time seemed to stand still. His arms automatically drew her closer, for both their comfort, until they could get no closer. He hardly noticed, so absorbed was he in the sensation of her lips and her joy along the bond.

When he began to think again, he realized that he had not felt anything of the sort when Michael kissed her. He had felt her emotions when Elliot kissed her too, so long ago, but even that had not been like this. He had not truly understood the difference until now. A kiss was not just a kiss. It needed love.

When they eventually drew apart, Catherine looked into his eyes and saw herself reflected in them. She could think of nothing to say. She lay her head against his chest and felt him take a deep breath.

Their hearts spoke the only language they needed, she mused. She could feel his heartbeat through his vest, and knew he was happy, knew that he could feel her joy too. She also sensed that he had learned something valuable, and that there would be more kisses in her future.

She sighed happily.

END

29: Sticks and Stones

Laura had found the courage to live above with the man she loved. Her love had all those elements which he and Catherine knew were essential to their own love, one as rare as Laura's.

Laura had seen herself as a whole person in Jerry's eyes. That, to her, was worth any sacrifice. Despite the love from her tunnel family, she had been alone. Vincent understood that feeling - he had faced it every day of his life. Now, with his hand in Catherine's, walking along the tunnels, he knew that love had changed him - and that he could never claim to be truly alone again.

Love for Laura and Jerry would never be simple. Perhaps it was the ideal, Vincent mused, just not attainable for everyone - or even possible without those elements of complexity which defined and challenged it.

Catherine had assured him that Laura and Jerry would be happy. She spoke from experience.

Laura had chosen love over everything else, the unknown above rather than life in the tunnel community. He would never face that choice, being what he was, but he could accept more of the choices love offered. Did he have the courage?

Catherine was patient, and just days ago he had kissed her for the first time. He had not yet told her he loved her - and that omission now pained him. Surely he could do that much!

Vincent slowed and stopped and Catherine paused and looked up at him, curiously. He saw the love that always shone from her face when she looked at him. It always amazed him that he could evoke that kind of response in her, a beautiful woman. He spoke softly, holding both her hands in his.

"Catherine ... I ... I should have said this long ago. I want you to know that I love you."

Catherine's face broke into a smile. "I know you do, Vincent. I wouldn't be here if you didn't, and if I didn't feel the same way."

"I ... I do not know what to say."

"I have never doubted your love, Vincent, because my heart knows you. Your body language and your hugs, tell me everything - and I know you can feel my love for you."

"Yes. It warms and fills a place in me I thought would be forever barren. I know how Laura feels."

"So do I."

Vincent pulled her gently towards him and put a hand under her chin so he could kiss her. He held her, savouring her lips until he had to move apart to breathe. She literally took his breath away, he thought, with an inward chuckle.

"You are remarkable, Catherine."

"No, but I am what I am because of you. You've made my life more meaningful and brighter - and more complicated."

"As you have for me. I believe Laura has shown us a mirror of ourselves."

"Yes. Perhaps it has to be seen in others before it can be recognized," Catherine whispered.

"Perhaps it is another of love's mysteries," Vincent suggested gently.

"Do you think there are more?"

"Yes."

"Then we must be prepared for more wonders, Vincent."

"Yes."

END

30. Labyrinths

You can find family wherever people love each other.

Catherine thought about what Vincent had said as they made their way to his chamber. She was so quiet and so obviously thinking that Vincent said nothing. When they got to their destination she took a seat on his bed and he sat beside her.

“What?” he asked, finally, when she remained deep in thought.

Catherine sighed and looked at him with a half smile.

“Your community is amazing, Vincent. I learned so much about them as Brian was hearing their stories.

“Perhaps we should do this more often,” Vincent mused.

“I think so, Vincent. Every person here has an experience that should be shared. They really brought home to me how important your world is – and how fragile, as you told Brian. It depends on everyone keeping it secret. How on earth has this secret been kept for so many years?”

Vincent looked away and was silent for long moments. When he turned back to her he spoke very quietly.

“When people come to us, they leave their old lives behind. They also have to face themselves, not as in a mirror, but as others see them. And they have an obligation to become part of our community, in every sense.

“Catherine, our new arrivals and helpers know the importance of our secret when they join us. They become friends as well as family. We are bound by love. There is no stronger bond.”

“I know. I feel it surround me when I come here. Like a soft blanket.”

“Yes, but a soft blanket within walls of stone. Without that blanket, our world and its love could not exist. But we never forget the rock walls which keep us apart, hidden and safe. They are the real secret. You know this - you are one of us now.”

“Perhaps I don’t think of it often enough. Brian followed me here and I didn’t notice. I should have been more aware.”

“Catherine, you are careful. Brian reached the inner tunnels because our sentry system failed. He was lucky to find us. He could have been injured. There are many dangers. It is not your responsibility to watch for intruders. It is ours.”

Catherine sighed. “That boy was really searching for a way to reach his father, but didn’t realize it. You saved them both.”

“No, Catherine, they saved themselves and each other. All we did was help Brian look beyond his pain and see his father clearly. They were more alike than they knew.”

“There are so many people in my world who need that insight, Vincent. Brian was fortunate.”

“Yes. Perhaps he will pass that lesson on to others. We hope so.”

END