

# A POINT OF ALMOST NO RETURN

*(Ozymandias episode expansion)*

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Catherine had visited many art galleries around the world, but she had never seen such beautiful display of a community's history on mere concrete walls, as what she had just witnessed on the tunnel walls. There were many paintings of various events, milestones and inhabitants of the world Below, but also famous landmarks from the New York Above were mingled on the walls in vibrant colours and shapes, creating an unparalleled collage of both worlds. This miracles had been painted by Elizabeth, one of the oldest tunnel dwellers, living in the upper levels of the world Below and living and breathing through her art.

Vincent was leading Catherine through 'The Painted Tunnels' and enjoying her awe, seeing the history of his community and the city Above as they passed.

Suddenly, Catherine stopped at the painting of Father holding a baby Vincent in his arms. Catherine's beaming smile brought her face even more alight as she ran her fingers along little Vincent's face. As she looked back at his grown up version behind her, she saw his eyes were smiling. *He was so adorable already as a baby!*

"Your world and mine... She tells our stories on these walls, reminds us that we are all a part of one great city," Vincent said with respect.

When Catherine stepped back to him, she looked around again in awe, mesmerised by beauty she had never seen before.

"It's lovely, Vincent!" she said quietly, deeply moved.

Then she looked back at him and when their eyes met, love was flowing freely through their bond. After a moment, Catherine's smile widened and she reached for his arm to hold it. Vincent put his arm around her waist and they continued in their sightseeing.

They were just crossing a connecting spot between two tunnels, Catherine first and Vincent following her, when suddenly a huge quake almost knocked Catherine against the wall, Vincent managing to grab her around her waist in the last second. As quick as it came, the quake stopped within seconds.

"What was that?" Catherine asked in shock.

"For weeks now, these explosions grow louder, closer... Most excavations stop above our level, but this new tower sinks its roots deeper to the earth, deeper than any building has ever gone before...", Vincent explained with a serious and worried look.

Catherine's eyes widened in realisation. "The Burch Tower??"

"Mouse estimates they'll break through in less than a week... We're helpless to stop this tower, but if it's not stopped... Father thinks it could be the end of our world..."

Catherine held her breath in fear, the shock and horror of the possible reality making her tremble inside -and it was reflected on her face.

"Could you go further down, deeper into the tunnels?"

"It's dangerous as when it rains heavily. The deeper chambers are being flooded regularly. No one would be safe ever again... Also, there are no pipes deeper below, we would have no way to communicate..." His face tried to hide his despair.

"There must be something we can do!" Catherine was grasping for straws, unwilling to give up. Vincent sighed and shook his head.

"There is nothing we can do from here, Catherine..."

She looked at him resolved, breathing heavily.

"Then maybe *I* can do something. I will *not* let this world be destroyed."

The decisiveness and strength in her eyes moved Vincent, yet he sensed the fear growing inside her - the fear for his world, and mostly, the fear for *him* since *he* had nowhere to go...

He smiled at her softly and took her in his arms. She embraced him gratefully, her hold tight around his waist, as if afraid to lose him right now. Her head resting on his broad chest, she was taking in his characteristic scent, so calming and reassuring that she hoped it would help her to calm down, now that she needed to badly.

"Don't worry about us, Catherine, we will survive, we always do..." he whispered into her hair, trying to comfort her, despite not so sure about his own words. The warmth of her small body spread love and peace around his heart again.

"I'm sure the others could live Above, if there was no other way, the Helpers would be more than willing to assist them."

"But what about you?" Fear was clamping her heart. She knew that even if she gladly offered Vincent sanctuary in her own apartment, he wouldn't survive there, as he would be trapped in a small space forever, like an animal in a cage, only able to wonder free at nights...

"I would go deep down below. There are dark tunnels where even this tower couldn't reach," he answered calmly.

She looked into his eyes when realisation hit her, and she trembled in anxiety.

"But then you'd be lost to me..."

He bowed his head before he looked up at her again and his sapphire eyes were glistening.

"Without you I'd be lost to myself..."

"There must be something, Vincent, there *must* be..." she repeated quietly again, with glistening eyes, in denial of the image of the man she loved being taken away from her so cruelly. Her brain started working immediately.

The case Catherine was currently working on was built around the dirty money laundering of a man named Max Avery paying money to various companies and holding groups, but in a suspicious manner. She and Joe were trying to get him prosecuted and they were getting close with the gathered evidence.

They found out one of the organizations Avery paid was that of Luz Corrales, Catherine's former college friend, who as she found out, wanted to sue Elliot Burch for building his new super tower. She claimed it would damage the community - make rents in the nearby houses unaffordable for ordinary people living there, discriminate against races and older people, and replace all discount stores by expensive boutiques and shops. Elliot asked the DA's office to look at Luz and Max Avery, as he believed they'd tried to sabotage his project.

When Catherine spoke to Luz, her friend denied any illegal practice and was angry at the accusation. Catherine wasn't sure what to think about the situation, but in her heart, she knew Luz was telling her to trust her, rather than believe in Elliot's conviction that she is guilty of sabotage.

She also knew how powerful Elliot was, and that if he wanted something, he would do anything to achieve it. So she knew if he wanted to built that tower so badly, he would do it, no matter what it cost. Her heart was getting heavier with each passing moment. *How on Earth can I stop this? How can I save you, Vincent?*

Disturbed and troubled, she sank into her bed and closed her eyes, unable to fall asleep for a long time.

Vincent was running through the tunnels towards Above. He just found out that Mouse, who was very upset about not being able to do anything to prevent the Burch Tower from being built, had left the tunnels and gone to the excavation site. He wanted to try to stop the excavations by using one of his ways, probably explosives, to block the flow of water which the builders needed.

The way to the excavation site was dangerous, as there were guards at night as well, so Vincent had to hide in the shadows of the sheds and trailers all around the site.

Just as he spotted the silhouette of his young friend about twenty meters ahead of him, bending over something and definitely about to execute his plan, two guards appeared behind Mouse and grabbed him, pulling him inside one of the trailers. There was nothing Vincent could do there, so he turned quickly on his heels and started quickly towards Catherine's apartment building.

She had been asleep only for about an hour, when the tapping on the French window woke her up again. She jumped out of bed, grabbed her dressing gown and ran to the balcony. Catherine knew something must have happened, or Vincent wouldn't have woken her up in the middle of the night. When she opened the door, she saw right away how worried he was when he stopped pacing.

"Burch's men are holding Mouse. He was at the excavation, trying to stop the tower," he said quickly.

"Was he arrested?" Catherine's attorney mind worked fast.

"There were no police."

Catherine sighed in relief.

"That's something, anyway... I'll see what I can do."

She saw Vincent's despair, as his eyes locked into hers, and she touched his hand gently in reassurance.

"Don't worry, Vincent..." she whispered, and in a moment, she disappeared back into the apartment in haste.

Catherine reached Elliot's office in record time. She knew he would be there; he mostly worked well into the night, claiming he could do much more when undisturbed, unlike during the day.

When she entered his office, he was just on the phone and when he saw her, he hung up.

"Would you mind telling me what the hell is going on?" Elliot started with a little bemused look.

"Your security people are exceeding their authority, that's what's going on!"

"They apprehended a trespasser..."

"Fine! Then call the police and have him charged with trespassing - but you'd better cross your fingers that he doesn't sue you for false imprisonment," Catherine insisted angrily.

Elliot turned the phone slowly to her.

"Here, you call the police," he smiled and crossed his arms.

Catherine closed her eyes and shook her head.

"Let him go, Elliot... He won't bother you again, I promise," she said more calm now.

Elliot smiled.

“He asked for you. He doesn’t know the name of the President of the United States, but he does know your name. Now I find that just a little curious.”

“Please, just let him go, no harm was done. What good would it do if you’d have him arrested?” Catherine pleaded.

Elliot rose from his chair and faced her.

“I might get a few answers! A few months ago, you came to me and needed my help. You couldn’t explain, ‘Trust me’ you said. Well, trust is a two way street. If you want me to let this person go then trust me enough to answer some of my questions...”

She was looking at him with disbelief, remembering how he helped her to get explosives for Mouse, when Vincent and Father were trapped in the maze.

“You can’t barter for trust, Elliot.”

He bowed his head and sighed, sitting down again before Catherine continued.

“And I can’t tell you what you want to know... I made a promise.”

“Why should I let him go?”

Catherine couldn’t come up with anything plausible, so she said the only thing that she could.

“Because I’m asking you to...”

When Catherine returned down Below with Mouse, Father was overjoyed and expressed his deep gratitude to Catherine.

When he asked Mouse if he had learned his lesson, the boy just answered, “Yes, shouldn’t get caught.”

Vincent bowed his head trying to hide his smile. Catherine smiled too, but when Father took Mouse away to teach him a real lesson (in a gentle manner of course), her face turned serious again. Vincent saw it and reached for her hand as she walked down the stony stairs. She accepted the hand and they gazed at each other for a moment.

Then Vincent leaned forward a bit and said in concern. “Your heart is full of turmoil.”

Catherine shook her head and said, “It’s Elliot...”

They started walking, and Catherine tried to explain her problem.

“It was so easy when I thought I was falling in love... And even easier when I was certain he was evil! But now...”

“Now you see him as he truly is, good and bad, strong and weak, capable of great deeds and great wrongs. A human being...” Vincent finished her thought knowingly.

Catherine stopped and sighed.

“Yes, with human feelings... I feel like I’m trading on his feelings!”

Vincent bowed his head when he felt and saw the guilt written all over her face.

“You only did what needed to be done, Catherine,” he said, but knew it wasn’t enough to convince her. How many times he had heard the same words when he’d done something he didn’t like to protect those he loved?

“I know, I just...,” she was at loss for words.

Vincent took her in his arms whispering. “I know...” That was all he could say and he hoped Elliot wouldn’t turn his favour against Catherine.

*- I’ve waited my whole life to built this tower...*

- ***We're helpless to stop this tower...***
- *I do love you...*
- ***Father thinks this could be the end of our world...***
- *I'd do anything in the world to make you happy...*
- ***It could be the end of our world...***
- *Catherine, I'm asking you to marry me...*

She felt like her head was about to explode, trying to find a solution to an impossible problem. *How* else could she stop that tower? Luz and her campaign was the only thing that could work, but that could take months and they didn't have that much time. *Vincent, I don't know what else to do...*

Catherine was getting really desperate, when her thoughts were suddenly interrupted by a slam on her desk, where a newspaper landed. She looked up in surprise and saw Luz with angry fire in her eyes, spitting angry words at her. A full page article about DA's office investigating Luz's group was the centre of attention. Catherine tried to explain to her friend that she hadn't known about the article. Luz was convinced she'd set up a bogus investigation, then leaked it to the press, making all the investors in her campaign withdraw from supporting her financially to take Burch to court.

*Elliot...* Catherine thought immediately when Luz left in fury. *Of course, it was him, what else could I have expected?* She sighed and as the truth set in, she grew even more desperate. There was only one solution now. But to do it, Catherine would need all the strength she could gather, and by doing it, she would crush her soul and heart to dust and that of someone else as well...

When she stepped down the ladder in the basement and saw him standing at the threshold, her heart almost stopped. *God, give me strength, please...* she pleaded and braced herself for the next few minutes.

The moment she crossed the threshold and his eyes met hers, Vincent knew something was wrong.

"Tell me," he said quietly, using his characteristic phrase.

Catherine explained what happened with Luz and how their last chance for stopping the tower had vanished.

Vincent sighed, but gave her a small smile.

"Don't worry, Catherine, you did all you could," he said, trying to comfort her.

She was gathering her strength for telling him the inevitable.

"No, I haven't... yet..." she said, her voice barely audible.

Vincent looked at her puzzled.

"When I returned from you after bringing Mouse back, I found Elliot waiting for me at my apartment... He asked me to marry him."

He was staring at her, his heart sinking with she was saying.

"Catherine....," he whispered, an expression of denial and fear was shading his deep blue eyes.

*God, I can't do this! I can't... I must!*

Catherine swallowed and tried to look resolved, keeping her face emotionless, although she couldn't make her bottom lip stop quivering a little as she spoke.

"He said he will do anything for me, so I will marry him if he promises to stop the tower."

Vincent's heart stopped for a few seconds, the horror of the feared truth sinking in. He turned to the wall in despair, holding on to it for support. Then he gasped and turned to face her again, leaning heavily against the wall with his back, his legs shaking.

"Catherine... No!!"

"I *have to!* It's the only way." She felt as if she was pushing a dagger into his heart.

"With Luz discredited, nothing stands in the way of the tower."

Her eyes started welling up but she still tried to hold on. She couldn't break down or she would never be able to save him.

"Elliot leaked the story, I'm sure of it. Luz stood in his way so he removed her and used me to do it."

Vincent couldn't believe his ears. "How can you even consider a union with such a man?"

"He's a human being, strong and weak, good and bad, as you've said yourself..."

Vincent's own words were hurting his ears now almost to a bleeding point.

"And he loves me... as much as a man like Elliot can love." Her lip was quivering even more.

"But you do not love this man..."

"No!!" she cried. "But there is more at stake than just me here... The Painted Tunnels, Elizabeth... Father and Mouse... All the children who found safety Below."

Vincent bowed his head. She was right, she was just following his own principles - giving up one's own happiness for the good of those we love.

"And you... you most of all."

He lifted his head up to look at her again and he saw her eyes were full of tears, although she was trying to keep a calm face.

"Vincent, you have risked your life for me hundred times. How can I stand by and watch your world being destroyed if I have the power to save it?"

"I cannot allow you to sacrifice yourself in such a way," he breathed, still hoping to stop her.

Catherine lifted her head higher and swallowed. Her voice was on the point of breaking, she knew she had to leave now otherwise she would falter.

"I'm sorry, Vincent... but it's not your decision... I'm going to marry him... I have to..."

With that, she turned and quickly walked away from him crossing the threshold and leaving him leaning against the wall in disbelief.

When she was out of sight, she slowed down and just before reaching the ladder, she slowly turned around and her face was wet with tears. She was dying to go back to him, to say she couldn't do it, that she didn't want to leave him and that she could never love anyone else as she loved him. But she knew she had to follow the plan otherwise the love of her life and his world would vanish in dust and eternal darkness.

Vincent couldn't breathe and his eyes were burning. His legs gave in and he slid down to his knees along the wall, his head falling down in despair. Gasping for air, he felt his heart shattering into thousand pieces, his body collapsed. His mind was clouded with the vision of Catherine leaving his life and living with a man she didn't love, all for him and his world... He threw his head back in excruciating pain and let out an agonising crying roar.

In the same moment, Catherine gasped, and couldn't stop crying. She felt as if a huge knife had torn through her heart. She had never felt such pain before and just shook her head trying to send him all her love through their bond.

*Don't, my love!... Please, try to understand.... I have no choice.... I love you more than my life and my own dreams...*

But she knew it was pointless. He was dying inside. She knew it because she was too. When she finally managed to climb the ladder and shut the basement door behind her, she knew the rest of her life would be a slow, painful death...

Sitting in the office the next morning, Catherine was trying to process the event from the afternoon before.

Elliot refused her offer.

He was overjoyed when she said she would marry him (though he noticed there was no joyful expression on her face), but when she told him she would marry him if he halted the building of the tower, he couldn't let go of his life long dream. Once again for him, people were put aside, even though it meant giving up on the only woman he ever loved. His ambition was greater than his feelings.

Catherine wasn't sure whether she was happy about it or not. Of course, she was relieved and her heart leapt because she wouldn't have to leave Vincent, but when his world was revealed, she would lose him anyway.... It was hopeless...

Suddenly, her colleague brought her a printout of all of Max Avery's donations to different companies, revealing he'd kept sending pay cheques even after his assets were frozen by court order. Catherine was confused. Where was he getting the money from? She was told they came from a holding company in Cayman Islands.

"Max Avery wouldn't know Cayman Islands from Statton Island..."

And then it hit her... They've been conned by Elliot Burch! He wanted to get rid of Luz so he staged a sabotage charade, accusing Avery of his own act to turn it against her! The money for Luz came from Elliot's anonymous account without her even knowing it!

She could have strangled him right on spot. It seemed that Elliot Burch would never change...

Catherine flew into Joe's office in seconds and when she explained him in rage how they have been tricked, Joe was furious.

"I *knew* we shouldn't have trusted Burch!"

When he picked up the phone to call his boss, John Moreno, Catherine was still angry, but with the rage, a ray of light penetrated to her heart - Vincent and his world were safe.

Vincent was leaning against one of the walls in The Painted Tunnels, his head leaning back, staring at the ceiling. He felt like all the strength and will to live deserted him.

*I've lost her...*

He couldn't think of anything else, only of his future life, or ... mere survival without her. Yes, the world Below would probably be saved, but there would be no salvation for Vincent. He would crawl back into the darkness, never to see the light again...

Absent-minded, he caressed the pouch with Catherine's rose hanging around his neck. The only thing that would remain with him to remind him of the only woman he ever truly loved. The only woman who ever truly loved *him*...

He felt like he spent all his tears hours ago, so he was crying inside. He wished to die...

Vincent was so engrossed in his sorrow, that he almost missed the sudden shift of Catherine's feelings through their bond. Since they talked last, he'd felt only deep sorrow and pain from her,

the same as he felt in himself. But there was something else now. Frustration, anger, almost rage... Suddenly he snapped and his eyes flew wide open.

*She's coming here... And she's.... happy!*

He was confused. If she was happy to be marrying Elliot, she wouldn't be coming down to see him. What if...?

The burst of energy he felt gave him wings and he started running in her direction. He didn't get far when he saw her shape in the orange glow of the tunnel lights. Her face was radiating such joy and love, he almost forgot to breathe. He stopped and not knowing what to expect yet hoping against hope, Vincent just gazed at her.

Catherine stopped too, just a few steps away from him. Her green eyes misted over and she almost whispered, "Your world is safe...."

Vincent just kept gazing at her, suddenly sure there was something more to come.

"And I'm not marrying Elliot," Catherine breathed. A smile of joy appeared on her face, while tears started streaming down her face, freely now.

He closed the distance between them and almost crushed her in his arms.

"Oh, Catherine!"

He felt his own tears warming his cheeks as he was thanking Heaven for being so kind to him, as he breathed in the flowery scent of her hair he loved so much, bathing in the love she was sending to his heart.

Catherine felt elated, ecstatic, overjoyed and relieved that she'd managed to help save Vincent's world, and didn't have to give him up in doing so. How she'd missed his arms, his warmth, his love! Not even twenty-four hours ago, she thought she would never see him again and almost died in pain and now, she had him back and couldn't get enough of his nearness.

"I almost died in agony, Catherine," Vincent said with a broken voice. "It's horrible, but I couldn't think about anything, not even about what would happen to the people in the tunnels/ All I could think of was you leaving me, to sacrifice your life so that my world could live. I could see myself being thrown to eternal darkness, where no light ever reaches.... I was so selfish in my thinking..."

He felt terrible about being oblivious to the lives of the people he loved.

Catherine pulled back and smiled at him, wiping tears from his cheeks gently before wiping her own ones.

"No, not selfish.... just in love."

When she put into words what he could never bring himself to say aloud to her, he felt grateful for her recognition and incredibly happy that she shared the same feelings of love with him.

He took her hands into his and suddenly wanted to know what brought this unexpected turn of events.

"How did you do it, Catherine?" he asked shaking his head.

She chuckled and shook her head.

"To cut long story short, by a happy random research, we found out Elliot was the one who orchestrated the sabotage of his own project, by secretly funding Luz in Max Avery's name. All the charade was just to get Luz out of the way. We were able to bring him to court right away by providing the evidence from his Cayman Islands account. The court stopped the building of the tower immediately and will initiate an official hearing against him.'

Vincent shook his head in disbelief.



“Who will ever understand this man? He could have all he wanted, and yet he chose the path of deceit and striving for more and more without appreciating what he already has...” his intelligent blue eyes met hers again. “Or *could* have had.”

Catherine understood and the amount of love he saw in her eyes shook him to the core.

“His loss is our gain,” she said with a smile and squeezed his hands.

“Yes,” Vincent sighed with relief. Then his look turned serious.

“I thought I would never see your face again... When you walked away from me there was such resolve in your heart...”

Catherine looked away, remembering that awful moment.

“It was the hardest thing I’ve done in my life.”

“And the noblest,” he said with admiration.

She looked back at him.

“Every step was like a *knife* inside me.” Deep pain flashed through her eyes. “All my love for you was calling me back...”

“But a greater love drove you onward... Your strength saved us all.”

Catherine looked away again and Vincent knew something was bothering her.

“Yet I feel your melancholy,” he remarked.

She sighed.

“I was just thinking of Elliot... Vincent, you helped me find the best part of who I am, but Elliot... he’s lost more than just his tower, he’s lost himself...”

Vincent lowered his eyes and thought for a second.

“Then all we can hope for is that someone, or something, will help him find himself again someday.”

Catherine smiled at the generosity of his heart. *Elliot almost crushed his world, and still he is merciful with him... There is not a single bad bone in the body of this amazing man...*

She brought his hands up to her face, closed her eyes and rubbed her cheek in the furry backs of his hands. It sent an almost electric sensation through Vincent’s body and he sighed quietly.

When she looked up at him, he was drinking from her eyes and couldn’t understand how he deserved such deep love from such miraculous and beautiful woman. But he knew he would cherish her love until the end of his days.

Catherine felt deeply moved by his look, and with his face so close to hers, she felt a strong urge to kiss him, but thought the better of it. She pulled their hands down again and laid her head on his chest in bliss, closing her eyes and embracing his arms.

Vincent put his own arms around her, stroking her back gently and leaning his cheek against the top of her head. He knew that there was nothing in the world that felt better than this - Catherine, his angel of light, the wonder and embodiment of pure, unconditional and deep love, right here in his arms...

END