

A sharing of hearts

by Angie

*“Nothing is here for tears, nothing to wail
Or knock the breast, no weakness, no contempt,
Dispraise, or blame, nothing but well and fair,
And what may quiet us in a death so noble.*

- John Milton

Vincent knelt down by the Mirror Pool and rested back onto his heels. He looked across the still waters to the opposite side, barely visible in the dim light. He suspected only his eyes would be able to see it. No one but he came here without a torch or lantern. The only light was what could be seen through the long chimney up to the sky above. And it was night there now, and overcast. Not even the reflection of a star disturbed the pool.

The water here never rippled, never rose or sank below its current level. It was bitterly cold, slightly brackish, two disadvantages that had always discouraged anyone from swimming in it. Then it had become the place where they cast the ashes of letters to their departed ... and sometimes the cremated ashes of their friends too, if that was their wish.

As someone whose natural territory was the dark, Vincent found it comforting that he might one day be part of that darkness, forever. For the source of the Mirror Pool was unknown, and its outlet a secret – like himself.

The water came in via an underground rivulet and left through a vent on the other side, a hole he could just see as a darker dark. He had discovered both as a youth, swimming here, late at night, alone. He had never told Father, of course. Another of his many violations of the prohibitions. It had given him great personal satisfaction to do these things, even if no one ever knew about them. That was something he had learned from Devin.

He came here to contemplate and reflect, and often to mourn. He did not expect revelations or solutions, but the dark and still cavern seemed to absorb all his thoughts and emotions - and bring surcease in the process. He didn't know why this was so, but he was grateful for it. For some things, there truly were no adequate words. Death, pain, sorrow. He had discovered this unique quality of the cavern long ago too. There were other places in the world below he loved, but none, not even the Chamber of the Falls, gave him this kind of peace. Perhaps it was the sense of enclosure, the utter silence broken only rarely by the barely audible plink of an errant drip off an invisible rock.

Since Ellie's death, the burning of letters and casting of ashes on the water had become part of the community mourning ceremony. He would never have thought to suggest such a thing,

despite his use of the place. It had taken Father and Eric to see the obvious, that something needed to be done to remember those who passed beyond the veil.

Vincent had always sought out solitude in his darkest or saddest moments. He realized this made him unique, that most people preferred company at such a time. In his case, however, it was either let his thoughts flow into the non-judgemental air of this place, or let his beast side roar his agony to the walls of his chamber. He preferred the quieter option, and he knew his tunnel family would too. That thought almost made his lips quirk in a wry grin. He brought his mind back to the present. This was not a time for levity.

Another helper had passed away above, one he had known, and who had known him, from his earliest days in the tunnels. And through the intervening years, that man, Dr Peter Alcott, seemed always equal to any challenge, was always serene and thoughtful – and a very good doctor, even for a patient as strange as himself.

There were so many memories, too many to write down and burn, too poignant to even put into words. Just the thought of all those years made Vincent's eyes burn with unshed tears. Like all children, he had responded to emotions, but his were deeper, empathic.

He remembered Peter's gentle hands and soft voice as he prodded for broken bones, or other ills of his unusual charge. Father, of course, also examined him, but Peter's was the expertise from above, the necessary confirmation or consultation about modern processes Father could not claim to know, having left that world completely. Perhaps Father wished to see how closely they agreed. After all, he'd had medical charge of a large, albeit secret, community. He read a lot of medical books, but Peter was the sounding board. They'd had long discussions on many aspects of medical care.

Peter's quiet voice was the one he remembered in his darkest hours, when he had been too sick or confused to speak. Father was always there too, but it was Peter who always told him the truth, even when it was distasteful. Peter had never lied to him, or tried to pretend he was other than he was, or make excuses for him. For that Vincent had been grateful many times. It had allowed him to face and know himself – and most importantly, accept himself. Father had been too close to his adopted son to be so impartially frank.

But all things change. By the time Catherine had entered Vincent's life, he had been quite resigned to the fate of being alone, in the sense of apart. No amount of love could change that reality, or so he had assumed. But Catherine had done so effortlessly, while also putting him at risk of his emotions once again. Peter had encouraged him to face challenges, not to deny them, deal with them, accept the sadness ... and the joy. And he had ... eventually.

Even Peter could not rationalize away a lifetime of denial, but Vincent had come to realize that there was another life possible for him, and to dream of it. Even Father had resisted that idea in the early days of his friendship with Catherine. Peter, knowing Catherine so well, had never expressed any such reservation. But Peter had not been immediately forthcoming about his knowledge of the woman he loved – to either himself or Catherine. That knowledge might have made a great difference in the early days, when Vincent felt he was fighting Father as much as his own urges. But Peter had always been loathe to interfere, at least when Father's edicts were at issue.

Vincent looked down at his hands and sighed. The hair on his hands was almost white now. He knew with a certainty that his muscles and bones would protest when he rose from this position. He was no longer young. Father had died the previous year, and now Peter had joined him. Few were left of the adults he had known as a child. Soon enough, it would be his turn to be scattered on these waters in this silent place.

He could not claim to have had an uneventful life. He had known the joys and sorrows, fears

and hopes - and regretted none of them. Wasn't that how one measured one's life? The details faded with time, but the emotions that accompanied them were never forgotten. Naturally, his great sorrow would never leave him until he breathed his last. That was a fact he accepted. It allowed him to continue. He did not want to forget her – or anyone who had died.

Peter had known some of that same sorrow, to outlive a child that he had delivered, almost a daughter, the child of his best friend. Peter had not attended Catherine's funeral. Vincent who could not, knew he would not have, even had he been able to. He understood why Peter might have chosen not to be present, although he had never spoken of it.

For Vincent, the sorrow had another dimension, the love of a man for a woman, and the child she had bequeathed to him. His son, Jacob, was sad as well, for Peter had been a person he deeply respected, a mentor, the man who had inspired his career.

That perhaps was the most suitable legacy, Vincent mused. What more could a man want than that someone would carry his torch into the future? Who would carry his, Vincent wondered. No one could, in fact. There was no one else like him. All he could hope for was that some of the younger members of the community would remember the lessons he taught them when needed. As he had remembered Peter's and passed them on. And Father's too. And William's. And even blunt Winslow's.

He breathed deeply, sucking in the cold air, as if it could dull the pain of the weight of all those lost friends. He missed them all.

So many of his community had passed away, but their voices were not gone as long as someone remembered them. What unique voice could he, Vincent, ascribe to Peter, he asked himself. There was only one answer, and he whispered to the still pool in front of him.

“When there is no answer, you go back to your heart, where the definitions don't mean very much. You once told Catherine that, Peter, when she tried to find an explanation for my illness. She lived that truth. So did you.”

Vincent rose then, with the predicted protests from his body; but they were welcome now. They proved he was still alive, and that was a blessing, no matter how coloured with sorrow.

“If we live, we ache,” he whispered wryly to the silent cavern. He felt the knot in his heart loosen a little. “And we love and we lose,” he added.

The inevitability of it all soothed him. He closed his eyes and pictured Peter's face, that craggy face that seemed always on the verge of smiling. He would miss that more than anything.

“Thank-you for sharing our lives, and giving of your heart, old friend. Rest in peace.”



The END