

Another World

by Angie

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'... man should have the fine point of his soul taken off to become fit for this world.'

- John Keats

"You could read me the last chapter of Great Expectations," Catherine said quietly, after the door had closed behind the surgeon and she was alone.

She lay in the hospital bed, her face completely wrapped in bandages for the second time in a month. She had a lot to think about - and there was little else to do.

This time, there was no soft voice reading to her. Thoughts of him made her face heat up under the bandages, and she was glad no one could see.

She thought about how her world had changed. A month ago she had been a different person. Life had been good, if not exciting. Although she worked as a lawyer for her father's firm, she came and went as she pleased.

Now she was back in her world, another world, not his. It was so very quiet and sterile in the hospital room. She could barely hear the traffic, but even the flowers could not completely mask the odour of disinfectant and that unmistakable 'hospital smell'.

How different was his world below ground! There she could smell candle smoke, damp rock and the chamber had been chilly. There had been that almost constant tapping during the day – and sporadically at night - which she had been told was their form of communication.

What an amazing world he must live in! She had seen some of the people, the food she had been given was very good, and Vincent's chamber was well-appointed, if eclectic. All this implied a community with organization.

His hands had been warm, but a little rough, implying that he did hard labour. She had no idea what that might entail, but imagined that work was required to keep clean water running, the damp under control and carve rooms out of rock, to say nothing of the removal of waste and collection of food. She had walked down several tunnels, up a spiral staircase, jumped the huge pipe culvert – with his help – and walked that ledge over a yawning space, like an elevator shaft without an elevator. Good thing she was not afraid of heights. What would he have thought of her then? Fear was something he lived with, but something she had only truly felt very recently. She suspected fear was something his community knew and dealt with on a daily basis. How could he understand the fears of her world, which now seemed so ... trivial?

Vincent. Even his name was special. She had loved his voice as he read to her, a kind of deep purr that soothed and stroked her soul. Unable to see him through the bandages – they had not left even a small opening, just as now – she had imagined what he looked like. That memory was almost funny now.

What had she expected – an underground Robert Redford? That happened only in B movies, she berated herself. She had quickly removed the bandages while he was getting her some tea. She had wanted to look at herself before he returned, but had been unable to find a mirror. She had not expected him behind her. He had said her name – and she had recognized his voice – but that stupid bowl had distorted the reflection of his face, as it had her own, and she had reacted like an airhead schoolgirl. She had screamed and flung the bowl, almost hitting him ... and he had roared and left her.

That roar had shocked her, but she knew she had hurt him deeply too – the very last thing she had wanted to do. She had seen the expression on his face – that remarkable face. He had said nothing until later, when he had brought her clothes and told her it was time to go home. Those moments were

the most precious to her. She had understood so much then, wanted to know so much more, but had kept her curiosity under control.

She understood why he didn't like mirrors. The sight of her stitched face had been a shock, and since her return to her world, she had been avoiding them too. Seeing her face plastered all over the newspapers had been terrible, forcing her to relive that terrible incident, the last part of which she could not remember.

No wonder Vincent avoided being seen in her world. To her world, he would be a freak attraction, a tabloid wonder. He had a full-length cloak, which meant he was used to hiding himself. Obviously, he did roam her world at night. He would be just another shadow in the park then, albeit a large one.

But Vincent's appearance was not frightening – just very unusual. She had looked at him dispassionately after that embarrassing incident and had seen a face that was noble, beautiful even. His hands were different too, but very gentle. And those eyes! They saw right into her heart, yet did not judge her. This was a man who gave her courage, just by his existence, just by thinking about him.

He was an amazing man and obviously a strong one. He had carried her a long way to get her to his father and help, if the route back was any indication. No ordinary man could have done that, even though she was a small woman.

She had no idea what Vincent's life was like, except that he was obviously well-educated, a wonderful reader and intelligent to talk to - although he did not say a great deal. In his world, appearances truly didn't matter. He was part of a unique community, one that obviously cared about others. Vincent had saved her and his father had stitched up her face and treated her other injuries. That was not an act anyone in her world would have done without expecting something in return.

In fact, if Vincent had not found her, what would have happened to her? She had been unconscious and bleeding. She knew she had been tossed from the van and had a vague memory of lying on the grass in pain. No one would have found her at that time of night. Quite likely she would have died. She owed Vincent her life.

He was worth some hard thinking. How old was he? He seemed to be at least as old as she, perhaps a little older. He did not behave like a young man. He had told her he had been found as a baby, abandoned, so he had lived in the world below all his life, and survived – and grown strong.

She had been abandoned to die also, discarded like a piece of trash. That was an experience she could not have predicted for herself, not even as a nightmare. But now that it had, it made her think about her life.

What was her life worth to anyone, except perhaps to her father? She was just an ornament to Tom, whose ambition had attracted him to her. He expected her to help him in his climb to the top.

Well, that was over. She would not, could not, go back to that life again. She had been given a new life, an opportunity to do something worthwhile. Vincent had made her think beyond the narrow confines of her society, made her realize the truth. She wanted to make him proud of her, make his act of kindness, and her time in his world, worth something more than a memory. She had to be strong too, prove that she could be, to herself as well as to Vincent.

What was he doing now, she wondered? Did he think about her? Could she visit him in his home below ground? She desperately wanted to see him again.

Vincent had said goodbye to her at an entrance below her building. Had that always been there, or had it been created for her convenience? She suspected the latter, since he had asked her where she lived. Would that entrance be sealed up again now?

She had waited until the voices had disappeared before going up the ladder and then to the parking garage. When she came up into the lobby, she had implied she had been dropped off. There were no closed circuit televisions in her building, thank goodness. She wanted no investigation of the storage room and tunnels.

The guard had taken one look at her and called the police, then pressed her to sit down and even offered her a coffee. She had not told the police more than was absolutely necessary, pretended not to know where she had been for the previous 10 days. They had taken photographs, but had not pressed her for more. That, she decided, was because her father had arrived and insisted on taking her home.

If she had not had the resources to get her face fixed, what would she have done? Quite possibly, she would have stayed with Vincent. She would not have wanted to be a part of her world, where appearances did matter, all too much. Would they have let her stay, if she had asked? Well, that would not happen now. Their world was not hers. She had to make her way in her own first, and then perhaps earn the right to see Vincent's. She very much wanted to do that.

So what was she to do? She did not want to go back to her father's law office. Tom might want to continue their relationship, but she had no desire to do that. That was part of her past. A part of her would never forgive him for his lack of compassion that night – which had resulted in her leaving alone. She had been mistaken for someone else, an escort or hooker – and she knew that Tom always hired one or two for such events. It had never bothered her overmuch, until now. Ironic that she might have been mistaken for someone at his party, but now she knew she couldn't return to a life so inconsequential and false.

She had to do something worthwhile, something challenging. She had skills as a lawyer. Perhaps they would be useful in the public arena, perhaps the DA's office, if they were hiring. She might be recognized and probably wouldn't be taken seriously. She would have to work hard to prove herself.

Vincent had helped her and now she wanted to help others. She wanted him to know how he had changed her life. Did she dare try and find him? She wanted to believe she would see him again – after she had found a new job and started on a new path. She would find a way.

She must be patient and that was something she must learn to cultivate. Vincent had a great deal of it, and he was an inspiration. But, first she had to heal.

Satisfied she had sorted out her life, as best she could, Catherine dozed off.

END

Another World - Vincent

This warm kind world is all I know

- William Cory

Vincent sat down on the edge of his bed, after leaving Catherine at her threshold, and looked around his chamber. He had not slept in it for 10 days, but in a nearby unfinished chamber, so as to be close if she needed him. She had lain here. His bed and chamber now seemed empty without her.

He looked around, seeing all the familiar things he had collected over the years with new eyes. He had been changed, first by Catherine's presence in his life, now by her absence.

Loneliness was so much a part of who he was, what he was, that he seldom considered it. In his world, everyone depended on everyone else to survive. He had helped to care for many of his tunnel family, yet nursing a woman from the world above had made him realize the depth of his aloneness - and awakened something he could not put a name to.

He had spent as much time as he could with her, both to ease her fears and take her mind off the pain. Their painkillers were not as strong as she would have received in a hospital above, because their medical supplies were limited. So he had read poetry and stories to her and they had discussed them. His voice seemed to sooth her, and she was happy when he was with her.

He already missed having someone different to talk to, someone who had seen things he would never see, could only know from books - and tell him about them. Father and the others were more careful, perhaps fearing to make him long for the impossible. Catherine had not known about that stricture, of course. To have that barrier dropped, if only for a short time, had made him aware that he was as much a prisoner as she.

Had he thought to hide himself from her? Father had bandaged her face completely, to ensure she didn't move unnecessarily, or touch any of the deep cuts he had so carefully stitched. But those bandages would have had to come off before she could return above. Some secrets could not be hidden from her.

Catherine was observant, and had lots of time to think as she lay in his bed. She had asked him about the trains and the tapping on the pipes. She had sensed his reluctance to say much about his world. He had told her more than Father would have sanctioned, but once she knew she was safe, she hadn't pressed him to say more.

Having a woman in his chamber 24 hours a day had been strangely satisfying, although he knew it was necessary so that their guest learned only what was unavoidable. What had she thought of his chamber when she had seen it for the first time? She had searched it after she had unwrapped her bandages, while he was getting her tea. He knew she had been trying to find a mirror - or anything she could see herself in. She had not realized he did not have such things - or why that should be.

He knew what he resembled, all too well. She had been shocked by his appearance and that had hurt - more than it should have after so many introductions. He had felt her shame and regret almost immediately, even as he left her alone. When he returned with her clothes, he sensed that her damaged face had given her some perspective on his. She had asked how he had come to be. It was a reasonable question - and he answered it as he often had. When she pushed back his hood, he knew that she truly saw him as he was and did not judge him. He would never forget that sensation.

She had seen some of his world as he led her home, although he had taken her by ways that avoided the common areas. She had been amazed by what she saw. Then he had left her at her basement threshold, without even saying goodbye, except with this heart, so instinctive was his

reaction to the sound of stranger's voices.

Perhaps she would like to visit again. He would have to convince Father, but knew he could do that. He had felt Catherine's genuine gratitude and sensed she would enjoy meeting the members of his tunnel family. She could even become a Helper, if she wished.

She would need friends. She would have to endure much, with a scarred face. He could hardly comprehend the kind of person who could inflict such wounds on another. He knew she was strong, as he had told her.

With a sigh, he got up and changed into his work clothes. He must stop daydreaming. He had not helped with the usual repairs and chamber cutting while nursing Catherine, and his strength was needed in several areas.

For the next two days he worked hard, deep below, helping to repair distant pipes and mine a place where unique water conditions created a natural cold storage chamber. He and the other men ate and slept where they were working, their meals brought down in relays from the kitchen. He had no time, and was too tired, to brood.

On the third day they finished, and after a quick wash-up and substantial supper, Vincent gratefully stripped off his clothes and soaked three days worth of grime from himself in the bathing chamber he shared with Father. He lay in the warm water, fed by some of New York's old hot springs, and sighed happily, feeling his muscles unknot at last.

He felt along the bond for Catherine, and was pleased to discover that there was nothing amiss. She seemed calm and resolved – and relieved. That meant her world was treating her well. He didn't understand that, but was happy for her.

Although he did not know much about her, he knew she was rich by the standards of his world. Her clothes were very good quality. Mary, who had repaired the ripped coat as best she could, had commented on that. Her apartment building was old, but obviously for rich tenants, since it overlooked Central Park. It had a doorman too, he noticed, when he went above to determine its location for the threshold entrance they were creating.

That entrance would remain, although they would have to change the ways that led to their world. Mouse would see to that. He knew Catherine would never tell anyone about them now, just as she had promised.

She had warmed a place in his heart. Closing his eyes, he allowed himself to re-live those last moments, before the sound of voices made him leave her. She had laid her head on his chest and hugged him at her threshold, so tenderly that his bones wanted to melt from joy. He had never felt such ... oneness ... with anyone.

The memory made his face heat up and his groin pulse. He resolutely dampened the latter response. How could he hope to be attractive to any woman? Certainly, some of the tunnel women would have shared his bed. He knew that - and they all knew what he looked like under his clothes. There were few secrets and no privacy in the common bathing chambers where he taught the children to swim. But they would regard him as a friend, perhaps were curious - but they also knew that Father certainly would not approve. He was protective of Vincent. Catherine, though, had not seen any reason to treat him as other than a man – and one who had saved her life. He felt himself smile as he remembered her voice, soft and affectionate.

Was he in love? He had not felt anything like this emotion for a very long time – but this was much stronger and deeper.

What was he to do now? How could he go back to the way things were before he had met Catherine? Did he want to? Truthfully, he did not want to forget her, or pretend everything had returned to normal. He wanted to see her again, although he knew that would not be easy.

He had not finished reading Great Expectations to her. The last chapter remained. Perhaps he

could have the book delivered to her – or even take it to her himself. The apartments in her building had balconies. He could leave it there for her - but not yet. He sensed the time was not right. She needed time to re-adjust to her world, without reminders and distractions from him.

With that thought, he scrubbed vigorously and washed his hair. Then he dried himself, put on his long housecoat and sat in his big chair while his hair dried. He tried to read, but his thoughts were still on Catherine. He felt her fall asleep and found he was ready to do the same, wet hair or no. He wrapped a well-worn towel around his hair and slid into bed. He was asleep in moments.

When he awakened, later than was usual for him, he was stiff and sore from the unaccustomed labour. He grunted as he dressed, searching his sense for Catherine, to take his mind of his aches. He could tell she was sleepy - then his sense of her almost disappeared! He stood stock still, one boot in his hand, suddenly fearful. Then he realized she was just very deeply unconscious, and he relaxed. Perhaps she hadn't been able to sleep and had taken a sleeping pill. These last days must have been difficult for her.

He wished her well, he finished dressing and headed to the dining chamber for breakfast. Today, he decided, he would resume his classes for the children. He needed a break, and he suspected Father would be grateful to have some time for his other duties.

During the next week, Vincent felt Catherine's boredom, and one evening decided to visit her. Then, he belatedly realized she was not in her apartment, but elsewhere in the city. He expected she was visiting and would return later that night, but she didn't. The next day, he felt her leave New York. She went some distance, perhaps out of the state. He could sense she was well, although apprehensive. He knew she wanted to return – was impatient to do so. He sighed with relief. He must be patient and try to transmit his strength, hope and affection along their bond.

He felt her fall asleep and he decided he needed to write in his journal. He picked up his fountain pen and uncapped it, opened his journal to a clean page, and thought for a minute. He would write a letter to Catherine, one she probably would never read. It was difficult to find the words, the right words, for how he felt. In this secret letter he could admit what he could never tell Father – that he had enjoyed caring for her, that he cherished the memory of those days, that they were the sweetest days of his life.

He realized something else as he wrote to her – Catherine had opened up a world of possibilities for him. She would be a part of him now, forever. On reflection, he was glad he had not said goodbye to her. To do so would be to admit that something had ended. Better to believe it was only a farewell - and that he would see her again.

He yawned hugely and decided to finish the letter another day. He rolled into his bed and fell asleep immediately.

END