THE ALCHEMIST: A MISSING SCENE

by A.N.D.

FAERY TALES 3

Catherine hurried after Father as he led her through twisting tunnels. As they walked, he filled her in on the situation. Vincent's determination to follow Paracelsus and stop him from taking his hallucinogen above; Vincent's subsequent reappearance in the tunnels, obviously under the influence of the drug; how Father had tried to talk to him, only to be attacked, how Winslow and others had stopped Vincent from killing Father by driving him away with torches... Father had taken only enough time to bandaged his scratched chest and put his arm in a sling before contacting her.

They reached the edge of the cavern where Vincent was holed up, and Father asked the watchers if there had been any change.

"We haven't heard anything for over an hour," Winslow replied, with concern.

Father sighed and turned to Catherine.

"I thought you might call to him," he told her, "that perhaps the bond you share..."

Catherine moved to the mouth of the passageway.

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Vincent huddled in the corner, dizzy, confused and angry. It was damp and cold, but he was safe from the blinding fire that had earlier chased him from his prey, from the blurry form that had come at him in the tunnels above. It had lunged at him, and he had struck back, but before he could finish it off, had suddenly spurted fire in his face and he was forced to run. All was quiet now, but he sensed it waiting, heard the fire burning at the far end of the passage. If he stayed very, very quiet, it might not find him...

Centuries flowed slowly past him. He heard shuffling and whispering at the mouth of the passage, but the monster did not come down. He was quiet. He could wait until its fires burned out, and then he could come out and kill it, and be safe.

Suddenly the monster spoke to him, calling him by name in a high wail. "Vincent, I'm here now!" He snarled back at it, warning it not to come into his cavern.

It paused in consternation and muttered.

Vincent felt its fear and determination, and growled again. His fangs and claws were sharp and strong. He could defend himself. Something was moving down the passage toward him. He crawled to his feet and roared his fury at it. It moved into the light and he recognized it as the angel in white he had seen behind the gates of Hell, beckoning him into the fires of damnation. He lunged through the doorway at it, snarling in its face, but the flames of Hell rose again in front of him, driving him back. He flattened himself against the wall, trying to escape, shaking his head to protect his face from the heat. The fire came closer, wrapping around him as the angel touched him. His senses overloaded as he burned. Feelings of fear and worry and anguish stormed through him, swirling and coalescing into...

"Catherine."

She hugged him tighter, and he felt her relief, as well as her concern. Vincent threw his arms around her, rejoicing in the return of his sanity, and the strength of her love. "Oh, Catherine," he murmured into her hair. She was indeed an angel, he thought, come to lead him from his drugged hell.

He wanted to stand, and hold her forever, but she stirred in his arms and pulled back to look closely into his face. One slim hand reached up to caress his head, bruised from the various walls he had encountered while trying to literally knock some sense back into the world.

"Vincent, are you all right now?"

"Yes," he whispered back, "now that you are here." All the tension and delusion were draining away, but clarity of mind brought clarity of memory. He gripped her arms and pushed her away. "Catherine, you should not have come down here. I have not been... myself. I might have hurt you. I might have..." Horror froze him as he thought of what he might have done to her, what he almost did to her.

Catherine squirmed from his grip and wrapped her arms around him again, reaching up one hand to stroke his hair comfortingly. "You might have, but you didn't. You once said you could never hurt me, and I still believe that's true. I couldn't leave you when you needed me so badly. Please don't torture yourself with what never happened."

"You are so brave." Vincent clutched her closely, cradling his head on her soft hair. She held and stroked him until his trembling slowed.

The sound of footsteps in the passageway startled them both, and they broke apart. Winslow, still holding his torch, stood in the single patch of light a few yards from them.

"Cathy? Are you all right?"

He eyed Vincent warily, and Vincent, in sudden shame, found he could not meet Winslow's eyes.

"The snarling stopped, but we couldn't tell if you were okay or not."

Vincent turned away, hiding his face behind long hair and wishing he could wrap himself in his cloak away from all eyes. How many people had seen him as he was? What had he done?"

"Everything's fine, Winslow," Catherine said firmly. "Everything is going to be all right. Is Father still up there?"

"Yes. He'll want to check Vincent for himself."

"Then we'll go to him." Catherine turned back to Vincent and took his hand. "Are you ready to come back?"

"Yes," he said dully, and followed her without protest.

Winslow was continuing to stare at him, and Vincent noticed he had shifted his torch to the hand closest to them. With a sudden shock, he realized, Winslow was afraid of him.

The worst shock of all was waiting at the mouth of the passageway. Vincent barely got a glimpse of him before Father reached to hug him close.

"Vincent, thank God! I've been so worried..." Although Vincent put both arms around him, Father only hugged him back with one. When Father shifted to assess the damage to his son, Vincent saw why.

"Father! What happened...?" His voice trailed off as he felt the accusing stares of the people around him. Vincent suddenly, sickly, recognized the "monster" he had attacked hours before.

The white bandage and sling across Father's chest filled his whole universe, and the horror of what he might have done to Catherine was swallowed in the deeper revulsion of what he had done to his own father. Shock and lingering weakness overcame here, and he collapsed to his knees, tears running down his muzzle.

Biting back a howl of misery, he whispered, "Oh, Father. Father, please forgive

me. I knew not what I did."

A gentle hand gripped his shoulder, then cupped his chin and forced him to look up. There was no fear or blame in Father's eyes, only love.

"There is nothing to forgive, Vincent. This is all the fault of Paracelsus, and we do not blame you for being his victim." Father smoothed Vincent's hair back, exposing bruises, burns and scratches, and Vincent sensed sudden anger behind his foster parent's concern. "You have been hurt the worst of all, Vincent. Come back to our chambers and let me tend to you."

Obediently, Vincent climbed back to his feet, but his head was still bowed. Father was right, Paracelsus was to blame for his drugging, but still he would have to live with the fear his own actions had caused. He had always been different, and the others in his world had always respected his temper, but not until today had his tunnel mates seen him as some uncontrolled beast. He could not bear to look up and see the fear in his friend's eyes.

Father turned to lead the way back home, and Catherine took Vincent's hand and started to follow, but Winslow suddenly called after him. Vincent turned to him and waited.

"Vincent, I want to apologize, too. I'm sorry I was afraid of you. You were brave enough to go after Paracelsus when the rest of us weren't. I hope I didn't hurt you."

There was a general murmur of agreement among the watchers.

At that moment, feeling the undiminished love and trust around him, Vincent would have forgiven them if they had set him on fire. He reached out to clasp the black man's shoulder.

"As Father has said, there is nothing to forgive. You did what you had to do."

Catherine smiled at them both, and squeezed Vincent's other hand. "It's all over now, Vincent. Everybody's all right, you'll see."

Vincent squeezed back, unable to disturb her joy with his darker thoughts. It was not all over. It would not be over until Paracelsus was made to pay for what he had done to both worlds, above and below. They would meet again, and next time, Vincent would truly show the alchemist the beast he had unleashed.

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