

I didn't know this before I went to look, but the old saying "Fortune favors the brave" has many variations and offshoots. It had these even when the Roman poet Virgil put it famously into The Aeneid. The original line might have been an old adage ascribed to the playwright Terrence, which loosely translated, meant, "Good luck favors the well prepared."

Variations like "Fortune favors the bold," "Fortune favors (or sometimes "blesses") the strong," and even "Fortune favors her darlings" are all valid. It is an old saying, with many nuances, some of which do not translate, exactly. I say that, because if you know a different variation than the one I use here, you are probably right. There are many, and even in ancient times, many were known and used.

Watching Catherine take on Collin in 'Arabesque' reminded me of the saying, and mostly inspired this mid-episode vignette.

Fortune's Arabesque

By Cindy Rae

Fortes fortuna iuvat. ~ Fortune favors the brave.

Latin proverb



She was bleeding.

One of the dead men, John, had laid her lip open, and she was bleeding. And clutching Vincent. At least as much as he was clutching her.

"I'm okay ... I'm okay," she reassured Vincent (*She reassured him!* - The irony was not lost on him), as he cradled her. He held her tightly and pressed his terrified cheek to the top of her head, blessing fate that she still lived. He kept her tight to his chest, as if he would absorb her into his huge body. Mend her hurts. Keep her safe.

Moving his hand to cup her cheek, his palm touched wetness, and he knew it wasn't tears.

It might be a good thing that the man Lisa knew as Collin was dead, right now, given the riot of emotions which rocked Vincent's large frame.

Vincent smothered twin waves of regret. One, that the man wasn't still alive so he could kill him, himself. Collin had abducted Catherine, terrorized her, then had died struggling with her, over a gun.

Vincent's second regret was that he'd ever met Lisa Campbell.

The latter regret was actually an old one, in some ways. The first one was very fresh.

Fresh as blood.

"Let me see," he said, pulling her back a little so he could inspect her face.

"I'm okay," she insisted.

"I said 'let me see,' Catherine." For the world, he would not speak to her sharply. But he wasn't about to be denied, either.

There were bruises coming. Impact marks on both sides of her fair face, as John had struck her with the "back and forth" motion favored by bullies and sadists. And dead men.

She was bleeding from the left side of her lip.

And it was dark, in here. Shadow cast. He knew she'd look even worse in the light.

"Catherine..." He could think of no other word to say right now, save her name. She hadn't deserved this in any way. And he didn't deserve her. When she'd asked him to explain what was happening with him, he'd shown her no faith. He'd retreated, too hurt to discuss it. Confessed that he'd once loved Lisa Campbell, then held Catherine at his long arm's length, when she'd asked for more explanation. Closed the door to his home on her; pushed her away, gently, but firmly.

That she was alive, and in his arms right now, was nothing less than a miracle, and he knew it.

"I'm all right. We have to get out of here, Vincent. You have to get out of here."

Bruised and bleeding, and she was still thinking about him. Only him. *God. If you only knew how much I don't deserve you, right now.*

He picked her up and started to go.

"The police." She pushed against his massive shoulder, when she realized he was heading down toward the basement of the abandoned wreck of a building. "Someone needs to stay and make up some kind of story." She pushed against his shoulder again, and tried to get him to put her down.

Yes. Make up something. Something that didn't mention Lisa Campbell, or the tunnel community. Or him. Of course. Tell half-truths and outright lies to the police, to the coroner, to her boss, to the people who counted on her to tell them the truth, because her

"making up something" was the currency which bought his safety, and their relationship.

All he had to do was set her down, bleeding and bruised, and leave her there, alone, and she would do it. She would do all of it.

No. Just no. Not this time.

"Let them reach whatever conclusions they will," Vincent told her shortly, still carrying her. Two bodies of known assassins shouldn't stretch anyone's ability to reason that far. Alain Taggert was hardly without enemies and rivals. And he was noticeably without mercy.

Vincent held Catherine close and made his way through the rubble of the condemned building. They were near tunnel access. And he wasn't about to let her go.

"Vincent, I'm--"

"No. Not right now, Catherine." He cut off any protest. "Not right now," he repeated more softly, as he moved, refusing to set her down, no matter how much sense it made to do so. He wanted her close. He wanted her no farther away than she was right now. And he was very aware that "want" might be a mild way of putting it.

By the time he reached the tunnels, he was no calmer. Zach was on sentry duty.

"I need Father in the hospital chamber," Vincent said, as he passed the boy. "Wake up Saul. Tell him I want ice. It's for Catherine," Vincent ordered, not setting her down there, either.

Zach did not bother to point out that it was late, and Saul's sandwich shop was past closed. He knew better, given Vincent's tone and body language. Catherine heard the pipes rattle to life, as Vincent carried her.

"Vincent, I can get what I need from my apartment." She did not like the carefully controlled expression on his face. He stared straight ahead as he moved, barely looking at her. His jaw was set, and she could see the tension, there. His look was intense, and ... unequivocal.

"Vincent..."

"Father will have what you need. And I want you Below." His voice was not harsh, but it was firm. His powerful stride chewed up the ground. His long, dark cape fanned out, behind him.

Reaching the goal of the hospital chamber seemed to calm him, some. Or at least force him to slow down.

"I am so sorry, Catherine," he said, setting her down for the first time, even if it was on Jacob's examining table, rather than on the ground. He snatched up a clean cloth from the folded stack of those and began touching it to her face. She took it from him.

"Vincent, you didn't cause this." She tended her own wound.

Oh, if only that were true. Do you know I'm not worth the saving, Catherine? Do you know what I did? No. Of course you don't. Because I never told you.

He took in a breath and released it, slowly. Had he still been breathing, all this time? He wasn't sure he had been. He

remembered being unable to do that, the second the gun went off. He didn't remember starting again, until just now.

He forced his voice into a more neutral tone. "It's not about what I've caused. It's about what you endured," he replied, staying near as she dabbed at the wound.

He braced his hands on either side of her as Jacob entered, clearly roused from his chambers. A few moments later, Mary came in as well. Zach was right behind her, with cubes of ice wrapped in a plastic bag.

Jacob, knowing better than to alarm Catherine by looking startled at her injuries and having been warned by Zach, schooled his expression into one of a physician's calm detachment.

"Will she be all right?" Vincent asked almost immediately, moving out of the way, so Jacob could work.

"I imagine so," Jacob said steadily, taking her in. He'd know more in a moment. Clearly, she'd been beaten.

Nothing Vincent saw gave him any comfort. Her jaw was swollen. He hadn't seen that, at first, though it made sense. The soft fall of her hair had hidden it. And there was something else about her...

Her wrist. She was favoring the left one. They'd hurt her wrist, when they'd forced her into the car. Or perhaps when they'd restrained her, or when she'd made the insane bid to struggle with Collin for the gun. The gun which had been pointed at him.

There were pressure cuts, on both wrists. She'd been tied to the chair.

So they could beat her. The sentence had the power to push Vincent to an edge he knew he shouldn't be near, right now.

Jacob bundled the ice into a clean washcloth and handed her the cold compress as he cleaned her face and checked her cuts. Her teeth had caused the one on her lip. There was also blood on the hem of her dark jacket. It wasn't hers.

"Your nose isn't broken, and the cut to your mouth will heal." Jacob said it for everyone's benefit, especially Vincent's. One did not need to possess Vincent's particular level of empathy to see that he was... "upset," for lack of a better word.

A steady tension owned his son's huge frame as he prowled the area behind Jacob.

Father poured cool water on another cloth and handed it to her, moving the wrapped ice along her jaw. He checked her ears for blood and her eyes for signs of concussion. There were none.

Catherine held the damp cloth to her mouth as Jacob gently manipulated her neck. Vincent's eyes never wavered from the scene doctor and patient presented. Indeed, the blue eyes barely blinked.

Mary walked by him to assist, watching as Vincent kept his hands clenched into tight fists, and then folded his giant's arms across his chest, simmering. The tunnel matriarch knew that look. She'd known it since he was very young, and he was no longer very young, now. His anger was building. And he was keeping a lot of that inside, trying to keep it from them, or at least, trying to keep it from Catherine.

Vincent cleared away some of the fouled rags, but realized he was only in the way as he bumped into the older woman. Mary was helping Jacob with her usual quiet efficiency, bringing him antiseptic cream, gauze, and fresh towels. Jacob shot Vincent a look as the good Dr. Wells prepared to apply antiseptic to a cut. He knew better than to tell Vincent to leave the room.

"This may sting a little," Father warned his patient. Catherine simply nodded. He did what he had to.

"Powder burns?" Jacob asked, inspecting her jacket, near the blood stain.

"She wrestled a man with a gun." Vincent's terse assessment told them all just what he thought of that. He willed himself to take a step back, so Jacob could work unimpeded.



Catherine made light of Vincent's comment. She knew she had to. She didn't need their bond to see how angry he was. "They say 'Fortune favors the brave,'" she offered.

His voice was a hair off of "sharp." And well over the line of "concerned."

"Don't quote Virgil to me, Catherine. Not right now," Vincent replied. She was holding the ice to her face with one hand, while Father inspected her wrist.

"It may be Terrence, actually," Father said unhelpfully, trying to either diffuse his son's anger or re-direct his ire.

"Does that hurt?" Jacob asked Catherine, moving her wrist, slowly. She shook her head, at first, then winced. Father set it down, gently. Mary brought over a bandage roll without needing to be asked.

"Where is Lisa?" Vincent's voice sounded deadly. Jacob looked over toward his son, but it was Mary who answered. Cautiously.

"She was in the Great Hall with Samantha, for a while." Mary looked at Father, who nodded, almost imperceptibly. Whatever confrontation the two of them were about to have, it was unavoidable. And possibly overdue. "Or she might be in her old room."

"Do you want me to ask her to come here? Send word on the pipes?" Zach asked. Vincent had quite forgotten that the young boy was still standing there.

"No." He crossed to where Catherine sat, as she tried to look like she was in less discomfort than she actually was. He dropped his voice

low, willing himself to sound calm. "When you are done here. My chambers? ... Please?"

Catherine knew he was forcing his voice to gentle, for her sake. She nodded. Carefully. Her neck and jaw both hurt. And for the world, she wouldn't admit it, while he was standing there.

Vincent satisfied himself that she was being well cared for, scooped up a stained cloth from the table, and then swept from the room, the dark cape trailing as if it couldn't hope to keep up with whatever his intentions were. There were hurricanes, in his blue eyes.

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She'd taken a beating. And she didn't even know why, not really. Because I haven't been able to tell her. Not all of it. Hardly any of it. The thought dogged him as he stalked through the circular hallways.

When he found Lisa in her room, there was no preamble.

"Do you think this is still child's play, Lisa?" She'd have heard the summons for Jacob, on the pipes.

His voice was hot, bitter, and biting, and he had a furious stare to match it. Vincent tossed the bloody cloth on Lisa's old bed, next to where she sat. Catherine's blood. Just looking at it made him want to strangle the dancer. His dancer, once.

Lisa moved instinctively away from the soiled rag, and whatever accusation it bore. She also had the poor grace to try to sound aristocratic, as she spoke.

"Certainly you don't blame *me*, for whatever happened."

Standing with fluid grace, she had the gall to give him her back. A back he'd laid open, long ago.

She'd healed. He hadn't. And the old wound inside him had never felt more raw.

"Alain Taggert's men beat Catherine." He ground out the words. "They wanted to know where you were."

Her lithe ballerina's body froze. Her head turned, and she held a dancer's taut pose. "Surely, she didn't ... tell them?"

Ah, there she was. This... stranger who had returned to him, this self-absorbed woman he'd once loved, as a girl. Dedicated to looking out for her own hide, and damn who got hurt, in the process.

She turned completely, and it was then he saw it. Fear. It flickered across her brown eyes, though she struggled to keep her voice neutral, to maintain her facade of control.

Vincent felt that he could give lessons, when it came to facades of control. He was giving one right now, in that he wasn't shaking her.

"Did she tell them? You mean so a man who outweighed her by over a hundred pounds would stop backhanding her? Of course not," he snapped, furiously. "Because *then* she'd have to reveal *you*. And *that* means she would have to reveal *me*."

Enough of control. He was furious. Past it. He picked up a figurine from her dresser. A porcelain ballerina. He heaved it against the wall so hard the shards had shards, by the time gravity pulled them to the carpeted floor.

Lisa was unfazed. Or trying to act like she was. Bad tempered men hurling objects was something she'd had experience with, from time to time, after all. And in spite of their history, she knew Vincent wouldn't hurt her.

"I'm sorry she was hurt. Truly." Lisa knew when to sound sympathetic. "Now" was clearly that time. "I'm sure Father and Mary are taking very good care of her," Lisa added, aware that Vincent wouldn't be here if the damage to the young woman was severe.

Of course. Father and Mary always cleaned up Lisa's disasters. And I always paid for them. And now Catherine was.

"And I'm sure it's *you* who should have a bloody lip and a swollen jaw," he retorted.

She had no idea how full of anger and self-disgust he was. Even he wasn't sure what depths he was plumbing, for that.

Lisa kept her eyes lowered, as she carefully took his measure. He was obviously agitated. As much as she'd ever seen him. Maybe even as much as the last night they'd spent together, as adolescents.

"I know you're angry," she soothed. "But you don't mean that." She ventured a look upward. "Vincent, I had no idea that something like this would-"

"Happen? You had no idea that something like this would happen? Of *course* you did! It's *why* you *came* here! Don't you *dare* tell me you had no idea! Don't you *dare*!" He cut her off, suppressing an urge to roar, actually roar at her. "You, above all others know what Alain Taggert is like! What he is capable of!"

"I am not responsible for Alain!" Lisa protested.

"No! You are responsible for being with him!" He would not let her get away with the "It's not my fault" position she was apt to adopt. Not this time.

Ahhhh, Lisa's quick mind leaped as gracefully as her feet had ever done. And landed on a conclusion that was totally incorrect. *So that's why he's upset. Because I was with Alain.* Lisa knew how to soothe jealous males. She'd been playing that game all her life.

"Vincent ..." her voice was cajoling. "Don't be jealous of Alain... I'm leaving him ..."

It took him a moment. It actually did, to process what she was implying.

Dear God. She could not think that that was what this was about. She could not possibly think he was jealous of her arms dealer lover, or that he still wanted her? Vincent grappled with disbelief, at the depth of her Narcissism.

I loved you, once. Were you always this way? His mind had no answer for the question.

Vincent drew in a deep breath, praying for calm. Or at least something that approached it. "Lisa, the clothes you are standing in," he indicated a gorgeous white evening gown, "are bought with blood money. And if you need proof of that ... there is some of the blood." He indicated Catherine's, on the cloth.

"I work. I make my own money." Lisa raised her head a notch.

"Do you?" His tone was unforgiving. "So it's you who bought the jet that flew you here? You, who pay the rent on villas in France, and for diamond earrings?"

He knew his voice sounded hard, in his own ears. It gave her no quarter, no illusion to hide in. And right now, he wasn't sure which of them he was angrier with, her, or with himself. Catherine hadn't taken a beating just for Lisa's sake. She'd taken one for his. Because if she gave up Lisa, she gave up the World Below, and that meant she gave up him. He knew it. They all did.

Lisa had the good grace to not continue to argue. She pulled on a tunnel shawl to cover her evening gown, and wrapped it protectively around her.

Her voice was steady, and self-absorbed, a thing he was becoming increasingly less shocked by. "You... you are sheltered, here." Her tone conveyed its own bitter edge. "Safe. Secure." She jerked her head in an upward motion. "You have no *idea* what it's like up there, Vincent." She folded her arms in a lecturing pose. "How hard you have to work, just to keep up. Knowing no matter *what* you do, you're getting older, and there are always newer, prettier people, waiting to take your place."

Vincent had no sympathy for her. For perhaps the very first time in his life, he had none. He did not wonder what he'd ever seen in her. But he did wonder where the lovely young girl she used to be had gone.

He stepped dangerously close to her, and then took half a step more, well aware that he was within her personal space. So was she. If she

backed up, she'd hit the wall, and they both knew it. She held her ground, trying to appear unfazed by his temper.

Fine. He'd call her bluff.

He towered over her, letting her "feel" his height. And his anger. And a little of his self-disgust. When he spoke, he dropped his voice deceptively low. "If you wish to imply to me that I, of all ... people," he chose the word carefully, "... do not know what it is like to live in a world where everyone else is more attractive, you are *severely* deluded, Lisa." His tone was biting soft. So soft, she knew he would not speak to her, again.

He didn't.

He turned around and stalked out of the room, just to calm himself. To compose himself enough to be able to face Catherine once more. Without looking like he wanted to kill someone. Again.

His body count was already at "two," this evening, if you counted both the would-be assassins, and he did, in spite of Catherine's struggle with the gun.

It was one of the few times self-recriminations over all he hadn't told Catherine outpaced his remorse over killing someone, even someone who richly had it coming. He wasn't sorry Collin and his brutal friend, John, were dead. He was only mildly sorry he couldn't send the latter through a dry rotted wall, again, so he could fall to his death again. Sorry he hadn't been standing closer to Collin, so he could either knock the gun away himself, or take the bullet.

Not that him getting shot would even the score, on the evening. But it would be a damn site better than walking away from the scene untouched, while Catherine sported a body full of injuries.

He knew his lack of repentance regarding killing was uncharacteristic. And he knew what was fueling that.

No, he wasn't sorry they were dead. He had a laundry list of things he *was* sorry for, but that wasn't on them. At least not tonight. He replayed the scene of Catherine's struggle for the gun, in his mind.

He'd known a second of absolute terror, as the deadly weapon Collin held, the one Catherine had wrestled him for, went off. The only thing that had saved Vincent's sanity in that moment, was their bond. His brain screamed to hold onto her within it when the gun fired, knowing his arms were too far away to reach her in time.

She and Collin had been locked in a terrible, a deadly embrace. When the lethal automatic had fired between them, she'd been both determined and scared. He could feel it. All of it.

Scared but not dying. Not hit. He could tell the difference.

A second later, he knew who was. Collin. He'd slumped to the filthy floor, killed by his own bullet.

Damn her. She'd actually fought with a murderer, for a gun. For his sake.

She'd even stood *between* them, when she did it, just in case, so he, Vincent, wouldn't get hit. With a bad arm she'd wrestled with Collin. Collin, who killed people for a living.

Vincent had been occupied with John. Collin, in the meantime, had managed to raise the gun and aim it. At him.

So she'd struck down his outstretched arm and struggled for control of the deadly weapon. Until it had discharged, and she'd no longer needed to fight for it.

Fool. Brave, brave fool.

Sweet, sweet, impossibly brave and foolish Catherine.

"They say fortune favors the brave."

He leaned against the wall a moment, breathing hard; knowing he in no way deserved either her, or her love. Or her act of bravery.

She'd risked her life for him. Again. And she didn't even understand very much about "why" this time. What Lisa's homecoming had wrought, inside him. What she reminded him of, about himself. What she'd meant to him, back when he was too young to know better, and what all of it had caused.

Catherine had asked. And in his shame, Vincent couldn't answer her. Not really.

When Vincent collected himself enough to trust his legs, he went back to the hospital chamber, simply because that was the last place he'd left her.

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He found not Catherine, but Jacob.

"She is in my chambers?" Vincent asked, suddenly exhausted from the evening's efforts. All of them. Jacob nodded.

"Mary took her there. I take it you saw Lisa?" Father asked. Vincent nodded.

"She always did have a certain ability to ... turn your world upside down." Jacob's words reached him, before he could turn and go.

"Lisa is very ... talented, that way." Vincent replied, staying near the doorway.

"Yes. Even so, I was speaking of Catherine." Jacob let the comment settle, as he set a pair of surgical scissors back in the tray. "Catherine told me what happened this evening," Jacob commented. He kept his eyes on what he was doing.

"Did you tell her anything?" Vincent hated himself that he had to ask.

Father glanced up at his son. "About you and Lisa? No." He closed the lid on a box of rolled gauze. "She asked only peripherally. I told her she would have to talk to you. Mary, very kindly, simply kept quiet." Jacob stowed the box on its appropriate shelf, then continued to put the other hospital supplies away. There was a bowl full of water, with a rag floating in it. The water was pink.

Father's knowing eyes took Vincent in, and they were sympathetic.

"Did you want me to speak to her about it, Vincent?" His voice was extremely kind. It was how Vincent knew he was in trouble.

Blessedly, Jacob dumped out the offending bowl.

"What could you say?" Vincent asked. "That I mauled a young girl? That I nearly struck you, for trying to save her from me?" Vincent's self-contempt knew no bounds on this topic.

Father peered at his son over his spectacles. "You know, it has never ceased to amaze me that you treat everyone else more gently than you treat yourself." Vincent's gift for being hard on himself was legendary, at times. Vincent said nothing, at the charge.

"And it's a trait you share, with Catherine." Jacob picked a white pill out of a small paper cup. "I gave this to her. For the pain. She insisted she didn't need it." He set it back inside the cup.

Vincent looked at the milk-colored tablet. If only there was a pill he could swallow, to take all their pain away.

His low reply was firm. "She will be waiting for me in my chambers. Bring it. We will both make her see the wisdom of taking it," Vincent told the only man he'd ever called "Father."

Jacob nodded and picked up his bag, returning the pill to its bottle.

"Father." Vincent stopped him a moment, a restraining hand on the old man's arm. Jacob looked up at him.

"About... that night.... I never told you I was sorry. I screamed, and cried, raged and cursed you, and railed, and apologized about what I'd done to her, but ... never about the things that I said to you. That I hated you. That I wished you were dead. That I wished I was."

Jacob heaved a parent's sigh. There were layers of shame from the events of that night. Many of them. Though Jacob had tried to tell

Vincent he'd done nothing wrong, they both knew Vincent didn't believe that.

He squeezed the hand that restrained him, lovingly.

"Vincent, you never needed to," Jacob reassured, meaning it.

Vincent wasn't sure if that was true. But he accepted the words as they made their way toward Vincent's chambers.

Catherine was already there. And amazingly, so was Lisa, sitting on his bed, defeat in every line of her white-clad form. What Vincent could not accomplish with a harangue, Catherine had apparently accomplished with something else. Lisa would testify. She would turn over her life to the Attorney General, and give up Alain Taggert.



Vincent eyed Lisa, who sat on his bed while Catherine stood by. The internationally famous ballerina looked smaller. Beaten. Played out.

Her music had stopped.

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A long day passed. Vincent felt that the night was both too slow in coming, and prayed that it never would. He wanted to see his love. He wanted to tell her ... everything. Things that might make her hate him, or at least see him differently. Things she deserved to know. Things that had owned a piece of his soul.

When sunset deepened to night, he made his way to her balcony as if it were a gallows walk, knowing it was a journey that had to be taken, part of him wondering if it was the last time he'd ever make the trip.

Would she realize what he was, now? Would she hate him for what he was about to say? He didn't know. He only knew he had to say it. Had to make her aware that what she'd embraced was ... inhuman.

Too inhuman, perhaps.

What I have to tell you is not beautiful. But it is the truth...

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Several hours later, as he made his way back home, he still felt as if he didn't deserve her.

The night had started out as a clear one, and still was. There was a soft, spring breeze, and a gibbous moon walking low through scattered clouds. The breeze had caressed her gauzy curtains, causing them to flutter.

And she had caressed his beastly hands, and accepted him, helping to restore his shredded sense of self.

Catherine. She'd been sweet, and she'd been soft. Wrapped in silk and in tenderness, seeming to extend both of those things to him. And she'd been far more forgiving, far more understanding of him than he'd ever been of himself.

Perhaps Jacob was right, in his assessment. Vincent didn't know. He only knew that Catherine was a lifeline, in a sea that had ever raged with his long ago disaster.

She'd held onto his hands for a long time, on her balcony, and kissed them, again and again. He'd wept out his misery, and bowed his head, as she'd raised hers, an ocean of understanding in her tender, green eyes.

They'd stood for a long while, barely speaking, fingers clasped, foreheads touching, poised over his monster's hands. Hands she'd not let go of, until the shimmering moon began to sink, and he knew he had to leave.

Lisa Campbell had danced back into his life. And nearly as tragically, she'd danced back out, again. Every time he saw her, it seemed, he knew what it was to regret.

He marveled that Lisa never seemed to have any of those. He wondered how that was possible.

He didn't wonder about what the future held for Lisa. But he did wonder why he didn't wonder, if that made sense. Was it because he had Catherine, now? Was it because on some level, Lisa had been right about some things?

He knew it wasn't child's play, the thing that had passed between the two of them. He knew it wasn't "play" at all, at least not on his part. But he also knew he'd given it far too much power to wound, and to scar. And he'd done so for far, far too long.

You hold too much reverence for the past. Lisa's comment followed him across the rooftops.

If only that night had meant as little to me as it had meant to her, he mused, feeling himself finally let go of the worst of his remorse.

He stopped, and sat on the top of a building not too far from Catherine's, not ready to go down, yet; not ready to give up the night for the warm shelter of the tunnels.

The wind picked up, and pieces of a newspaper fluttered across the park, far below him. He knew that the evening edition had had Lisa's picture in it. She'd been wearing sunglasses, and a guarded expression. A well-dressed man, probably her attorney, had been guiding her arm. Vincent hadn't read the article. He hadn't even wanted to see the picture. She was his past.

And Catherine was his future.

For he knew that whatever path his life took, the woman who defined it would not be a vainglorious little dancer. It would be a heart-open little attorney, brave as any lioness.

His Catherine. She was smaller, and frailer, than Lisa. Isaac Stubbs' training aside, she was not as capable of caring for herself as Lisa was; because she was not as self-centered, and not as uncaring, not as

ruthless. Catherine lacked the ability to self-deceive that Lisa had, and that others often perfected. Others, including him, sometimes.

After all, had he not been deceiving himself for some time, now, regarding him and Catherine? Had he not been telling himself they might yet be able to make it, if they went with love, and with caution? And damn little honesty, between them, about things like Lisa Campbell, and what she'd meant to him, once? What disaster that had caused? Not just years ago, but days ago, when Catherine had asked him to tell her what was wrong?

It had taken a long time for him to come to Catherine with all his guilt. More, after her beating, since how could she know if he was worth saving, or even worth loving, if she didn't know all of it? That his hands were bestial, that they were not meant to give love? Love, which he craved?

How was it that Catherine had taken that huge, weighty burden from his shoulders, and helped him set it down? Simply by kissing his hands, and telling him they were hers? How could she do that? *What strength was there in her, that made such a thing possible?*

Love and caution were wonderful things.

But he no longer knew if those two things alone, would serve him, serve them.

But he knew that blind, dogged, determination just might. Her strength just might. Being honest enough with both of them to reveal all he was to her just might. Courage, courage to the point of foolhardy bravery just might, *just might* see them through.

Fortune favors the brave.

She had not given up on him. She hadn't even agreed with him, when he'd told her his hands were not meant to give love. His Catherine. She had stood with him on the night drenched stones until the moon tracked down, holding his hands, hands he'd told her had slashed a young girl ... and she'd not given up.

She had not flinched, and she had not faltered. There hadn't even been a whisper of it, inside their bond. She'd just stood with him, communally, not letting go of his hands. Holding him with her smaller ones, planting kiss after kiss across his fingers, rubbing her soft, fragile, healing cheek against their furred expanse.

She'd willed him to feel what she was feeling, through their bond, and because she was Catherine, he had no choice but to do just that.

"These are my hands." She'd said it again, and again, as the night moved, on, caressing her soft skin across his soft fur, brushing her soft mouth across his fingers, even unto the tips of his claws.

Was there anyone braver than she? In that moment, Vincent didn't see how there could be.

She'd held him firmly, and kept him close, and in her great strength, she'd refused to let him go. Refused to let him confess and simply retreat into himself. She'd kept his hands clasped in hers, not letting him leave until he understood she thought him ... beautiful. *Beautiful.*

It was a word he could hardly say, to himself.

And ... more than beautiful. Better than beautiful. She thought him ... *hers.*

"These are my hands."

And in her strength, he'd found hope. In her bravery, he'd found some of his own, again.

Dared he hope to one day hold a woman, the woman he loved, intimately? It felt so strange to feel the ember of that hope coming alive again, and after such a long, long time of being banked.

He stood, looking out at the waning night, knowing he needed to make for home.

If she had the courage to face all they both were, then so would he. If she could heal his wounds, tend his hurts with a kiss to the back of his hands and a heartfelt declaration, *"These hands are beautiful. These are my hands,"* - then he would accept that. He would have to, or he'd doom them both. And Catherine wouldn't permit anything else, it seemed.

It was time to face what fear had cost him, in some ways.

Time to be as brave as his love.

He looked back toward her building, knowing her rooms were already dark. She was sleeping. Resting. Gathering her strength for tomorrow, to face whatever dragons she might have to slay, for his sake, or someone else's. *So brave.* So brave, was his Catherine.

"Fortes fortuna iuvat," Vincent quoted, praying it was true.

Fortune favors the brave. He would need it to, at least a little, if he hoped to move them forward from this place.

He knew he would try. He knew he had to. And more, felt like it was possible that he could, for the first time. And after all, he had his Catherine, with him. And there was no one braver than she.

He climbed down from the building and lengthened his stride toward home, the return journey feeling light years faster than the one going out had been.

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Beneath the dappled light of a sinking moon, a dancer in a safe house searched for her courage, as a man with a lion's features felt certain he'd found his, again.

It was resting eighteen floors off the ground, in the bed of a woman who'd held his furred hands, kissed their backs and called them "beautiful."

"Fortes fortuna iuvat," Vincent repeated, as he reached the circular opening of his home.

Fortune favors the brave.

--fin—

No matter where you are in your own fairy tale, I wish you love ~

Cindy