

# NO SHADOW OF PARTING

(No Way Down episode expansion)

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Vincent leaned heavily against the frame of the opened door leading to the tunnels, his weakened body almost hanging over, his head bowed deep down. He gathered his last strength and straightened himself slightly to continue walking, but after just a few limping steps, he heard running and suddenly halting footsteps in the corridor behind him, and then a loud gasp. He froze on the spot listening, a feeling of someone familiar spreading inside of him.

“No questions, Isaac. Thank you for everything. Leave us now!”

Vincent raised his head, turned around, his vision still heavily blurred, and hope resounded in his weak voice.

“Catherine?”

The woman he was praying it to be turned away from her stunned companion and started walking towards Vincent.

“I have to take him home...”

Vincent held his breath and a spark of relief and joy filled his heart, as he suddenly felt Catherine embracing him tighter than any time before.

She said with a broken voice, “I’m here!”

He could feel her fast-beating heart flutter like a scared bird, her effort to calm it down, knowing that he was alive and safe now. He leaned his cheek against the top of her head and breathed in the sweet flowery scent of her hair, embracing her tightly with one arm.

“I knew you were close by...,” he whispered, still almost in disbelief that this was not a dream, that she was really there with him.

Catherine raised her head, which was resting on his chest until then, her eyes glistened with unshed tears and looked up at Vincent.

“I was NEVER giving up!”

The fearless resolve in her voice almost broke him - there was so much feeling in it, so much passion, so much... love...

Vincent felt her putting his arm around her shoulder for support, before she embraced him around his waist. Letting herself be used as a crutch, she started walking with him slowly towards the safety of his tunnels.

After a few steps, they reached Father, who was waiting there. Catherine looked up at him almost certain she would see anger at her in his eyes, but was surprised that the look he gave her was anything but - it was a look of gratitude and admiration. Before she was able to process it, he spoke gently but visibly moved.

“I’m so glad to see you! Both of you.”

He took his son into his arms, held him tightly for a moment and then, acknowledging his inability to support Vincent in his walk home due to his own physical problems, he gladly accepted Catherine’s help supporting Vincent all the way back home.

It was a strain to walk, as Vincent had very little strength left in him; his head was still pounding as a result of the explosion, his vision was still heavily impaired, and the impact of the injuries he had suffered was starting to show, badly. Catherine felt very close to collapsing under his weight several times, but her sheer will to bring him to safety held her on her feet, although her legs felt shaky.

When they finally reached the Hospital Chamber and managed to help Vincent sit on one of the beds, Catherine almost collapsed before sitting down in one of the chairs near the bed. Only then, did Father realize what she had endured to make sure his son could come home again.

“Are you all right, Catherine?” he asked, tentatively.

“Yes... thank you,” she was trying to steady her breathing from exhaustion. “Please, look after Vincent...”

Father turned to Vincent and started to examine him.

About ten minutes later, when Vincent was laying stretched out on the bed, Father asked Mary to bring some hot water and clean clothes for Vincent. When she left, he turned to Catherine, still sitting in the chair, her gaze focused solely on Vincent. It was not difficult for Father to read in her eyes how and what she was feeling.

“Well...,” he started and Catherine looked up to him in agonizing expectation. “Whatever they did to him after the explosion, they did it very... bproperly... He is severely dehydrated, has large bruises on his wrists, probably from being handcuffed, also a few at different places of his body... He has two broken ribs, the most severe thing though, is his heavily impaired vision... He says he can only see light and colored patches but very blurry shapes of people or objects.”

Father watched Catherine’s face growing paler with each diagnosis he presented.

“I strongly believe, though, it’s only due to the concussion he has suffered and that his sight will return to normal in a short time,” he added, secretly not so convinced, but he wanted to give her and himself some hope in all this darkness.

Catherine was quiet, just staring at the beaten man on the bed in front of her, her eyes suddenly full of tears, with one escaping and running down her cheek. She covered her face with her hands as she lowered her head.

Despite being really angry with Catherine earlier that day, Father suddenly felt for her, for he saw that she was truly suffering - he saw the feelings of guilt on her face before she covered it.

In that moment, Mary returned with hot water and clean clothes for Vincent. Father turned to her.

“Mary, could you please clean Vincent and help him get changed? Just be careful, he’s got broken ribs. I need to tape them.”

Mary’s face sank in sorrow looking at the beloved figure of the forever-a-boy, in her eyes. She nodded and stepped towards Vincent, when Catherine, her expression blank again, suddenly rose from her chair and followed her.

“I will do it.”

Father and Mary exchanged a glance before looking at her again.

“Catherine, I think Mary is more than capable of —”

“I know she is, but I will do it. He is —” Catherine’s voice trailed off for a moment before she swallowed and continued. “I am the reason this happened, I must and I *want* to do it...”

Her look at Father was direct, decided, and... pleading. He didn’t have the strength, nor the heart, to contradict her.

“All right then. Mary will help you.”

Catherine nodded and turned to Vincent, taking a sponge from the bedside table and dipping it into the bowl of water. She squeezed it and sat down carefully on the edge of the bed facing Vincent and ever so gently started to wipe the sweat and dirt off his face. Father saw a huge tear drop from her eye, directly on the spot where Vincent's heart must have been. He watched her slightly trembling hands, one gliding the sponge tenderly around his son's face, the fingers of the other gently stroking his hair. Her eyes held tears and a look that he knew very well from his own past. He realized it wasn't just the feeling of guilt. *Dear God... she is really in love with him!*

When Catherine finished washing Vincent's face, she asked Mary to help her lift his upper body up to change his shirt. Hearing this, Vincent trembled a bit in resistance, as he imagined Catherine seeing his exposed body and felt... He wasn't sure what he felt - shame? Fear of resentment? Perhaps both, but Catherine sensed his unease and put her hand on his in a calming gesture, speaking softly.

"It's all right, don't be afraid... please, don't be afraid..."

The almost whisper of her voice, the memory of the very same words he'd said to her, when she was first Below lying injured in his own bed, something he could not define persuaded his dead-tired brain to surrender to her care totally. His muscles relaxed and when Mary approached the bed to help Catherine lift him up, he managed to gather some strength and through the pain he helped the two women himself.

Catherine touched the linen of his shirt.

"Do you think you can lift your arms up, Vincent?" she asked carefully.

Without answering, only looking in the direction of her voice, he slowly put his arms up, his eyebrows frowning in pain as he did that, but no sound coming from his throat.

Catherine gently pulled up his shirt and removed it from his body, pulling it over his head.

When his bare torso appeared in the candle light, Catherine held her breath. She knew Vincent's strength was immense, but seeing the perfectly developed muscles on his chest, shoulders, and arms almost took her breath away. The fact that most of his chest, the top of his shoulders, and the lower part of his arms were covered with soft honey-colored fur resembling hair, didn't take anything from the awe she felt in that moment. Only seconds later, when she saw big bruises in the ribcage area and cuts all over his upper body, especially one of the arms, her eyes welled up again.

Vincent felt the mixed emotions in her, and because she took a few moments before she reached for a sponge to clean his cuts, he thought she must have been appalled by the sight of his body. He lowered his head in shame and sighed, reaching quickly for his shirt, which laid in his lap.

Catherine noticed his unease and knew what he was thinking. She quickly grabbed his hand to stop him from covering himself with the old shirt. She knew he couldn't properly see her, but she looked into his eyes anyway, focusing on the bond they shared and how to make him *feel* that there was absolutely no need for feeling ashamed in front of her.

The feeling of her thoughts and something reassuring in Catherine's touch, made him drop his hand again. He took a deep breath before exhaling loudly and then said quietly, "All right..."

Through tears, Catherine started gently cleaning his wounds. She was trying not to touch his skin with her fingers, only the sponge, because she knew how sensitive and embarrassed he was and didn't want to cause him more unrest. But a few times, she couldn't avoid a light touch and each time she did, she felt how Vincent's body got tense and what it cost him to hold control of his emotions. What was absolutely striking to her, though, was the realization that she actually longed to touch him and each time she did, her fingers trembled with an indescribable sensation...

Still, the feeling of deep sorrow over his suffering prevailed over anything more pleasant in her heart, and she couldn't stop the silent tears flowing.

Vincent felt her turmoil and knew why she was feeling like that. When she and Mary finished cleaning his upper body, he found Catherine's hand, held her tight and said calmly and persuasively, "It's *not*, Catherine."

She raised her head to look at him in amazement. *It is NOT your fault*, he was trying to tell her, but how did he know what she was thinking? She knew by now he felt what she was feeling, but to know her thoughts as well... Catherine closed her eyes, sighed and tightened her hand in his, finding comfort in it, and wanting to let him know it. When she opened her eyes again, she saw he was smiling.

After Father had taped Vincent's ribs, disinfected and treated his cuts and prepared the IV stand to keep Vincent hydrated once all his injuries were treated, Catherine walked out of the chamber, leaving Mary to clean and treat the cuts on his legs. For obvious reasons, even Catherine agreed with leaving that task to the woman who had been looking after Vincent since he was a baby.

She leaned against the wall outside of the Hospital chamber, willing to wait there until Mary finished, but Father's look at her made her feel worried.

"I just want to sit beside him after Mary is done... To make sure he's... comfortable...", Catherine said quietly, not sure how to express that she was terrified that something worse might happen to him. All she wanted was to be by his side until he got better again – and she knew he needed her.

Father stepped closer to her and reached out his hand and asked calmly with deep interest in his dark eyes, "Can we talk for a moment?"

Catherine was suddenly reminded of Father's angry words to her earlier that day.

*"Your... relationship ... with my son is a tragic mistake... for both of you!"*

Bracing herself for the possible expulsion from Vincent's life completely for what she had caused to happen to him, she nodded silently and accepted the offered hand, wrapping her arm under Father's, as they started walking towards his chamber. She noticed he was using the support of her arm as much as the support of his walking stick. It made her realize how tired he must be after the long walk through the tunnels that day, in order to hopefully find his son at the only unsealed tunnel entrance in one of the most dangerous parts of New York. Suddenly, she felt truly sorry for him.

When they reached Father's chamber, he gladly slumped into one of the chairs at a large wooden table in the middle of the quite large circular two-storey tall chamber. Catherine quickly glanced around, to see no special furniture, just the essentials. What was in abundance was a sea of books lying in piles in no particular order all around - on the table, chest of drawers, side tables, old bookshelves, on the floor, even on the spiral staircase leading to the upper part of his chamber. She had to smile, thinking, *so that's where Vincent's passionate love for and knowledge of literature comes from...*

Father saw her smiling and said, "Yes, Vincent has spent much time in this chamber since he was a boy. We used to read to each other out loud every evening and talk about what we read. I guess it gave him some comfort, a way to see the world without actually having to be out there physically - a way to take him where he could never go himself..."

The smile on his face slowly faded and changed into melancholy, when he thought yet again of the restrictions his son had had to live under. Then he shook his head quickly and pointed at another chair next to him.

Catherine accepted and, looking with anxiety into his eyes, waited for him to start.

"I... I find it difficult to say..."

Catherine's heart sank hearing Father's words.

"... and I'm ashamed to admit it but... thank you." He blinked nervously then looked at her again.

Catherine opened her mouth slightly, trying to process what he just said, feeling relieved but also confused, as she felt contradiction in what he said.

Father noticed it sounded wrong, so he went on to clarify his words.

"I mean, I'm ashamed to admit that I find it difficult to thank someone who has just shown so much courage, strong will and deep care for my son, just to bring him back home."

Catherine's look softened as she understood him. Father was still finding it difficult to overlook the fact that she has been endangering Vincent's life every time he came to her in danger, or by simply being drawn Above to see her. Her feeling of guilt returned and sharply pricked her close at her heart.

"Forgive me... I ...," she started, but he interrupted her quickly.

"No, Catherine, please hear me out... I know what you mean to Vincent, and I can see now that he means a lot to you."

She lowered her eyes, feeling a blush raising on her cheeks.

"Whatever it is that is binding you two together, it is remarkable and I'm aware that neither I nor anyone else can do anything to stop it, unless one of you want it..."

"I know I spoke harshly to you, and I apologise for my tone earlier today, and although I still think it is a mistake for both of you to continue in deepening your... relationship... and that my heart will be tested in worrying... I want you to know that I respect what you have. I respect the power, the honesty and the depth of it."

Catherine looked into Father's eyes and blinked when her eyes got misty. She felt as if a giant boulder had been lifted from her chest. The thought of her life without Vincent was like a bullet penetrating through her heart... She reached for Father's hand and squeezed it tightly.

"Thank you, Father..." It was all she managed to say, deeply moved.

He smiled and returned the squeeze of her hand, then said, "I'm going to check to see if Mary has finished with Vincent; he needs the IV. And I'm sure he would like you to be by his side."

He stood up, leaning on his walking stick and left the chamber. A smile was still lingering on his face.

When Catherine returned to Vincent's bedside, he was sleeping. At least, he looked like it with his deep regular breathing and closed eyes. But somehow, she could feel his unrest even in sleep. She knew he was having a nightmare, when his head jerked to the side and he snarled, throwing his arms and whole body around the bed. Mary was about to call some men to help restrain him, so he wouldn't injure himself, but in an instant, Catherine threw herself onto his chest and held him as tightly as she could.

It took a few seconds, but Vincent's body suddenly relaxed and his ragged breathing became normal again, as his healthy arm reflexively closed around her.

After a moment, Catherine slowly pulled back from him, covering him gently with the blanket he'd thrown aside in his fit. Her fingers tenderly pushed a few tousled strands of his hair away from his face and then, trying to calm down herself, she sat on the chair next to the bed with a deep sigh. It was only a few seconds, but she got the sense of the enormous strength Vincent possessed, even in his sleep - her arm muscles were aching.

*My God, what must he have been through in that single night? What had the Silks done to him?*

Catherine remembered all the bruises, cuts, and minor burns all over his body, and she felt like crying again. She wished she could take back the whole night, she wished she had called for backup on her stake-out, she wished she didn't have the bond with Vincent, so he wouldn't rush to her when he sensed her fear...

*No! Not the bond, it's the most real and beautiful thing I've ever known...* she regretted her thought right away. But the point was, this was her fault, no matter what Vincent told her in his kindness. She still felt guilty.

Suddenly, Catherine felt very tired. Running around the whole Lower East Side with Isaac searching for Vincent, and then literally carrying him to the tunnels, wore her out physically as well as mentally. And she couldn't get rid of the horrible feeling she'd had right after the explosion; the feeling of losing the most precious thing she'd ever had... She sensed Vincent couldn't be dead, but in those first seconds, her brain was struck by the typical human reaction. The relief when she his body wasn't found was like a new lease on life, and although worried sick until they found him, it gave her the hope and strength to carry on. Indeed, she was never giving up, she couldn't, for if she did, she would have given up on her life herself. She knew that now.

Exhausted, weary and with a tear escaping her eye, she bent over Vincent's sleeping form once more and on impulse pressed a light kiss on his forehead. Then she retreated to the bed a few metres away, surrendering to her own fatigue.

*I'll watch over you, Vincent, sleep well...*

Her eyelids were suddenly heavy, her body went into off-mode, and soon she drifted off to sleep.

When she woke up a few hours later, Vincent was awake. She could tell he still couldn't see properly, he was staring up at the ceiling, even though he knew she was there. Catherine got up from her bed and walked over to him, sitting on the chair next to his bed.

"Vincent?" she said softly.

"Catherine..." a pure whisper of his velvet gravel voice, which made her shiver.

*God, the way he says my name...*

She took his hand into hers and caressed the furry back of it with her thumb.

"Are you in much pain?" she asked.

Vincent took a deep breath and then sighed, slightly wincing.

"The broken ribs are making themselves known..., but I have a stronger will than them," he said quietly, with a hint of humour.

Catherine chuckled. "You certainly do, Vincent... You have a stronger will than most people..."

He turned his head in her direction, following her voice and squeezed the hand holding his gently. "Thank you..."

"For what?" Catherine asked.

"For finding me... bringing me home," he answered obviously moved.

Catherine swallowed hard.

"I... you found your own way home, Vincent. You were already at the tunnel door when I caught up with you with Isaac... You did it all by yourself, considering your condition, it was... just incredible..."

She was in awe yet again. This was a man who didn't know the meaning of the words "giving up", no matter how hopeless, how sad, how devastating or impossible. He would never give up and so, neither did she, that night. In the end, she helped him walk home to safety.

Vincent smiled.

"But you were always near, Catherine. It was the thought of you that kept me going."

She gasped quietly, squeezing his hand again. A tear escaped her eye again.

"And *you* carried me home; Father could never have managed alone..."

Catherine knew what he meant and for the first time, she felt she had somehow contributed to his rescue. All this time, guilt had been eating her. Finally she found at least one thing that made her feel better. *He* always managed to make her feel better and she would be eternally grateful to him.

“All through that night, I felt so helpless, Vincent...” It was getting difficult for her to find the right words. “I was so close to you, yet you were always a step ahead of us. When I knew the Silks were chasing you... I was so afraid...”

She was close to tears and Vincent squeezed her hand again to comfort her, but his face reflected the pain he felt remembering the way the Silks had treated him. All the injuries suddenly ached more. And he could still hear Howie’s last words in his head.

*So much hatred, so much violence, against so much innocence...*

Howie was the most innocent person he had ever encountered, apart from children, and he was genuinely sad for such a tragic passing of a compassionate soul. He died so that Vincent could live; there is no greater gift than that of life and love.

When Vincent spoke again, it was with a voice full of love.

“You found me in the end... We’ll always find each other, Catherine, whatever happens...”

Catherine smiled, loving his certainty, something she still had to learn to believe in.

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Catherine stayed by Vincent’s bed in the Hospital Chamber for three days, before she finally sighed in relief, sensing that the worst was over and his strength was returning. In those three days, she was exchanging his cold compresses when he got fever, putting fresh dressings on his wounds when needed, feeding him, holding his hand, watching over him when he slept, reading to him, talking to him about anything, just to distract him and make him feel more comfortable. Father asked one of the Helpers to relay a message to Joe, about her having a bad cold and staying at home, with a friend looking after her - and turning her phone off. He even let her sleep in a bed not far from Vincent, so that she could have him in sight in case he got worse. Father quickly realised that trying to send Catherine home to rest was useless, as she refused to leave Vincent’s side.

“Did *he* leave when I was hurt and needed help?” she asked him, at his first attempt and he knew there was no arguing with this woman.

Although he tried to fight it, somewhere deep inside, he started developing a fondness for her, although it would eventually take him some time to admit it. But whenever he stopped by to check on Vincent and saw Catherine’s little gestures towards his son (a gentle stroke of his forehead, the soft holding of his hand, the quiet words as she was talked to him, or the most caring and loving way of feeding him), he couldn’t help but smile. All these years, he was trying to protect Vincent from the world Above, telling himself *and* Vincent that he was different and that the world wouldn’t understand that and would try to harm him. And yet, since Catherine appeared in his life, she had shown him more affection, care and understanding than Father could have ever imagined for his beloved son, ignoring completely the fact that he looked different.

*Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, I guess...*, he thought, but then swiftly returned back to reality, trying not to have his mind clouded by the greatest wish he had for Vincent.

On the morning of the fourth day, Catherine walked into Vincent’s chamber, where he had been moved the night before, with a tray with a teapot, two cups with saucers and a two bowls with oatmeal and two bananas.

The fruit was Catherine’s doing, as she knew by now how rare it was for the tunnel dwellers to have the chance to get fresh fruit. The day before, she secretly gave Zach, one of the older boys,

some money to go Above to get some bananas, apples, oranges, grapes and lemons (for tea). Zach took nine-year-old Geoffrey with him and they brought back two full crates of fruit (much to Father's dismay when he found out the source of this surprise, but eventually appreciating the value of the gift meant for everyone. She was glad she had a wallet with enough money on her in the pocket of her jacket, as she hadn't left the Tunnels since they'd brought Vincent back there.

Mary gave her some of the dresses always ready for guests, and basic toiletries, so she didn't miss anything essential. Apart from them and the cook William, she didn't really meet any of the other tunnel dwellers, as she spent most of the time by Vincent's bedside.

She was just pouring tea into one of the cups, when Vincent suddenly said with a hint of surprise in his voice.

"Catherine?"

Turning around to him, she saw him looking in her direction, no... directly *at* her.

She quickly put the teapot back on the tray and crossed the distance between them, to sit on the edge of his bed and hold his hand. It didn't escape her attention that he continued to look straight into her green eyes.

"Vincent? Can you... see me??" she almost whispered.

He squeezed her hand a little.

"You are so beautiful..." Vincent said quietly, his blue eyes mirroring the familiar warmth and depth and the corners of his mouth turned upwards slightly.

Catherine let a sigh out and a tear ran down her cheek when she smiled at him, overwhelmed with emotions. She didn't know how, but suddenly she found herself leaning against his chest, her hand still holding his.

Vincent embraced her shoulders with his free arm, his cheek leaning to her head, and sighed. He felt she was crying. Catherine shifted her weight slightly, making him wince. She raised herself up immediately, remembering his broken ribs.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, I forgot! Forgive me!" she cried, pulling back, wanting to stand, away from the bed. Vincent stopped her by holding her hand.

"It's all right. Please... stay..." his deep gravel voice whispered.

That voice... Catherine knew right from the first time she heard his voice that she would dream about it for the rest of her life, no matter where it might lead her. She couldn't resist him, not only because he asked her to, but also because she truly *wanted* to be near him, to feel his presence, the touch of his hand, the caress of his eyes on her face, the comfort of his words, his heartbeat she could feel within her own one...

Remembering only a few weeks ago, finding herself thinking that she was falling in love with Elliot Burch only to be betrayed by him, she couldn't understand how she could have thought anyone but Vincent could find and occupy that secret place deep in her heart. She knew she had hurt him badly, and yet, he forgave her. She felt nothing but devotion and deep affection from him. *No one* could ever compare to him...

When she sat back down, still holding his hand, Catherine smiled and said firmly, "I will never leave you..."

Vincent's blue in his eyes suddenly got darker and his usually shy look when being close to her turned deeper and... hopeful. When he smiled at her, she knew "*he saw no shadow of another parting from her*" either.

END