

Don't Give Up

(sequel to 'Meeting the Lion Man')

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The soothing orange and amber tones of candles and a few lamps were casting a comforting glow over Father's large study. However, it was Catherine who filled part of it with her presence that day. Her fingers were skimming through the bookshelves slightly covered with dust, looking for a poetry book to read with Vincent.

Her soft green eyes looked lovingly at different volumes she recognized from many nights in the past, when Vincent had brought them to her balcony. His velvety voice had caressed her ears, often, to a point where everything shimmered and floated around her. She smiled at those memories, and her eyes sparkled.

What sweet memories they had shared over the years! They still read every night together, but her balcony had been replaced by the safety and gentle comfort of his chamber - *their* chamber now. How she had missed him, his voice, his arms and his loving care, in those long, agonising months from not so long ago!

Catherine shuddered, remembering the terrible months during her pregnancy when she was locked in a room alone, without any connection to Vincent, desperate to break out but unable to. Her heart clamped, and her breathing suddenly got ragged when terrible memories flashed back in her mind.

She had to steady herself against the nearest wall to bring her breathing and her heart rate under control. That dark period of her life still plagued her at times - the fear of Gabriel and for her baby, the terrible longing for the man she loved. Sometimes, it even caused her panic attacks.

After living in the Tunnels for almost two months now, since her return from the death bed, they were getting less frequent, and thanks to Vincent's loving care, the pain was getting less sharp. Yet, the attacks hadn't vanished completely...

Catherine's breathing finally went back to normal after what seemed ages to her, but what was barely a minute in reality. She opened her eyes, and her glance fell on a worn-out, green leather-bound volume of a book she hadn't seen in years. She approached the shelf and pulled the book out. Her eyes filled with tears as she lovingly stroked the book cover and her trembling fingers opened the not-too-thick volume.

The illustration on the first page brought a bittersweet smile on her sad face - a boy clad in tree leaves with a beaming smile on his face. The boy who got lost and found himself in a world where he would never grow old...

A tear ran down her cheek when a voice beside her startled her.

"I have always loved *Peter Pan*," Jacob said cheerfully, though his smile faded when he raised his look to Catherine's face.

"My dear Catherine...." The fatherly tone in his soft voice was unmistakable and full of pain felt for her.

Catherine quickly wiped the tear from her cheek and smiled, shaking her head.

"I was just looking for a book to read with Vincent, and somehow I found Peter..."

She was trying to speak lightly, but her voice betrayed pretence and hidden sorrow.

Jacob observed her for a few moments, seeing her hands fidgeting with the silk ribbon attached to the book, serving as a bookmark.

"Tell me..."

Catherine looked at him a little surprised, but then a genuine smile graced her face.

"That's what Vincent always says," she said, lovingly looking at the tunnel patriarch.

Jacob chuckled and scratched his head. "I seriously don't know who started with it first. I simply know that whenever either of us ever had something bothering him, the other would say those two words, and we would talk about it. And usually..." he looked into her eyes again, "it helped us to deal with it a bit better."

Catherine sighed and shook her head slightly. Then, she sat down at the wide wooden bench just a few steps away from them, the book now in her lap.

Jacob joined her and waited for her to speak.

"Father..." she started a bit hesitantly. "You know I've always trusted Vincent, with everything, even with my life... Whatever he had ever said, he had kept his word, and I know it will never change. It's one of the many reasons why I love him so deeply, but... sometimes, I'm afraid that even he can make promises which he has little chance to keep..."

Catherine's voice broke, and her look fell on the book in her hands, opened on the first page now. The joyful never-growing-up boy was staring at her with a beaming smile.

Jacob didn't need more to understand her words.

"You are afraid that Vincent will never be able to find your son," he said quietly.

Catherine swallowed hard, trying to keep back tears threatening to spill any moment. She turned to the closest person to a father she had had since her own had died almost two years before, and there was despair in her big eyes.

"I *want* to believe him, Father! I want it so much... I don't want to fail him by giving up hope and thinking saving our child is a lost cause... But it's so hard to stick to hope sometimes when hope is the only thing we've had so far!"

Jacob covered her hands with one of his, trying to comfort her.

"Hope has brought both of you so far in these past years. You mustn't stop believing in its power!"

Catherine smiled and spoke more calmly. "I know, and I won't..."

Jacob smiled back at her, squeezing her hands, but sensing this was not the only issue for the woman who he had grown to love as his daughter.

"There is something more, isn't it?"

The smile from her face faded, and she lowered her eyes. Jacob almost felt her face was showing traces of shame.

"Ever since I... almost died on that roof that night..." She briefly closed her eyes in pain, still remembering falling into Vincent's arms with life escaping from her body and seeing the agonised look in his eyes.

"I've been feeling a terrible guilt, Father..."

The patriarch's look was puzzled. "Why, Catherine?"

"All this time, I've been thinking... What if there was *more* I could have done? What if I had tried harder to escape from Gabriel, harder to protect our child, to find a way to contact Vincent... Maybe I could have prevented all his suffering; I could have saved our son... Now it almost seems impossible..."

Her voice faltered; silent tears were running down her cheeks now.

Jacob's arm went around her shoulders, pulling her closer.

"Oh, my dear child...", he whispered, and his voice almost betrayed him. How much would she and Vincent still need to suffer until they found their happiness at last?

"Listen to me," Jacob said, resolve filled his voice now, while he was stroking her hair.

"You cannot blame yourself for anything that happened! None of us knows what happens next; there is no point in thinking 'what if'... We only try to do the best we can under the given circumstances. You have been through a horrible ordeal, both of you, but you have fought through it with a lion's strength. You and

Vincent... Both of you have proved to each of us that anything is possible with true love and perseverance! And your child is the living proof of it." He smiled and pulled back to look into her eyes.

"Catherine," his voice was soft again, and his eyes were insisting. "Never give up on hope... Vincent never did, and it led him to you..."

Catherine smiled again through tears, her eyes full of gratitude towards the man she loved like her parent.

"I won't, Father...", she swore with a smile when he patted her cheek.

The mental weight on Catherine's shoulders suddenly felt a bit lighter, and a thin ray of hope was making its way into her heart.

"Catherine...!"

The unmistakable gentle velvety baritone made her head turn towards the chamber's entrance.

"Vincent," she whispered and stood up, almost running into his arms.

Of course, he came, he just had to. He had felt her distress and emotional turmoil even from the depth of the pipe chamber, where he was helping Pascal repair a few pipes.

"I'm here, Catherine," Vincent whispered into her hair and planted a soft kiss into her crown while her arms tightened her hold around his waist.

He looked over her shoulder in Jacob's direction, and his confused look made Jacob smile and nod. *She's all right, Vincent, don't worry...*

He nodded back to his parent in understanding.

"Come," Vincent said softly to Catherine, leading her out.

The young woman turned to Jacob once more and smiled gratefully.

"Thank you, Father..."

The older man smiled back at her, and his heart was full of hope for all of them.

"Are you feeling better?" Vincent asked after they had finished their cup of herbal tea that he had brewed in their chamber.

"Yes, thank you," Catherine replied with a warm smile and a loving look.

They were sitting at the table, and the tea was a very welcome distraction for Catherine, after she had explained to Vincent why she got so upset in Father's study.

"I just feel foolish and a little ashamed for disrupting you in your work, with me being silly...", she said, looking embarrassed into her now empty cup.

Vincent gently took hold of her hand.

"Catherine, there is nothing silly about being worried about our child.... I'm glad Father was with you, but please... Know that you can trust me with anything that troubles you," he said seriously.

His intense yet warm look willing her not to hide any feelings from him. Then he sighed and looked away.

"I just wish I could finally bring you better news for once..."

The pain in his voice made Catherine feel even more guilty. Of course, he was suffering too. His desperate search Above night after night, the regular updates from Diana and Joe with the same fruitless results... The longing for a child, which wasn't meant to be and yet, which now, somehow became the child, which was supposed to become the centre of their love and being...

Knowing Vincent's interaction with children in the tunnels, she had always known he would make a wonderful father. And despite his earlier strong beliefs that such a role was never meant for him, she had

never let go of hoping that, one day, she might make him see things differently. Now that they *were* different, the loss of their son hurt even more.

They say a child is a blessing for their parents. For Vincent and Catherine, their child could have been more than a blessing - it could have been their deliverance...

Catherine stood up slowly and stepped to Vincent, pulling his head to her stomach. Her hands were tenderly stroking his hair when she pressed a kiss into his crown.

"You will soon, I know it," she said softly and smiled. "I know *you*..."

Vincent's arms held her tightly around her waist when a few tears escaped from his closed eyes.

"I can feel his pain, Catherine...", he whispered sadly. "I can feel he is getting weaker.... I feel so helpless.... I can hear him in my dreams, and yet I can't reach him!"

Vincent sobbed quietly, and Catherine continued stroking his head, tears wetting her cheeks as well.

The sudden urgent repetitive sound on the pipes made his head jerk at once as he listened again.

"What is it, Vincent?" Catherine asked, still not perfect in recognising the pipe signals.

"It's Diana and Joe.....," he said and stood up quickly, grabbing his cloak and walking towards the chamber entrance.

"Vincent!"

He turned around, hearing her voice, and his eyes softened, though his heartbeat was frantic.

"They've found him..."

Vincent and Catherine rushed to Jacob's study and entered it within a few minutes from hearing the pipe call.

Diana, Joe and Jacob were standing around the large circular wooden desk; their faces were serious but somehow excited, as well.

Please, let it be good news... Catherine was pleading in her mind while clutching Vincent's hand desperately as if needing physical support to deal with whatever was about to come.

Vincent squeezed her hand and looked at her with a small encouraging smile before turning back towards the people who called them.

"We've found him," Joe spoke first. "It's almost unbelievable, but one of my contacts stumbled across the doctor you described, Cathy, in a pharmacy and managed to trace him to the mansion where Gabriel is hiding."

Catherine frowned and shivered. Vincent squeezed her hand tightly.

"How do you know Gabriel is in the mansion?" Vincent asked, trying to stay calm, though it took a great effort from him.

Joe looked nervously at Diana, who took over the talking.

"Because I saw him."

Catherine gasped quietly, and Vincent felt his blood boil in his veins.

Finally! Finally, you will pay....

"How did you see him?" Catherine asked, still frowning.

"I staked out the mansion. I knew there was no way the doctor could own such a big mansion on a doctor's salary. On the third day, Gabriel left the mansion after dark in a limousine. Your description was perfect, Catherine, his face looks like pure evil..."

Diana stared into the distance briefly, then continued. "He came back two hours later. That's when I called Joe, and we decided to come here today."

Catherine looked at Joe, and he could see her accusing look and lifted his hands as if in protection for a moment.

"I know, Radcliffe, I shouldn't have left Diana to stake it out herself, but she insisted. She didn't want to risk revealing my involvement in the matter - just in case, it didn't work out. It was wrong, and I do feel ashamed for it."

"It was the safest thing to do!" Diana contradicted him with a stern look.

"Both of your intentions were noble, and we are grateful, that nothing dangerous had happened to Diana, but we have to focus on the next step, please..."

They turned to Vincent, who spoke calmly, but firmly. His eyes were bright and focused, willing his friends to put everything irrelevant aside.

"Yes," Jacob agreed. He was observing the exchange quietly. "We have to decide on what to do next and how to do it as safely as possible for everyone involved."

"I will go," Vincent said without a sign of hesitation.

Catherine shivered when her eyes looked at Vincent. *Please, don't....*

"You can't go in daylight, Vincent," Joe said, matter of factly.

"I'll go at night; darkness is my closest ally."

"Even at night, you would need help; this is not a one-man job."

Joe was trying desperately to keep Vincent away from whatever they needed to do. Although he had known him only for just over a month, he saw enough in the years of his practice to know what desperate parents were able to do for their children. And if *Vincent* went too far....

"He won't go alone," Catherine said, her voice full of resolve.

Vincent shot a look at her.

"Catherine, no! You mustn't go with me - the danger is too great!" His words were firm, though his voice betrayed a sign of almost begging. Fear sent a cold shiver down his spine.

"It is our son, Vincent! And I want to be by your side when we free him!" Catherine pleaded.

"Please, Catherine, understand that..." His voice broke as his eyes glistened when he looked deeply into hers.

I do, my love, I know you're terrified of losing me again, but you won't, I promise!

"I can't let you go alone, Vincent; that would be a suicide mission...", she said desperately.

"He won't go alone."

They all turned to Diana.

"I will go with him," she added, her sharp eyes focused on Vincent.

"As will I," Joe said with a hint of pride in his voice. These were his friends, and he was willing to do anything for them.

"It will be dangerous...", Catherine countered.

"And therefore, a few men from the Tunnels will come along with them."

Jacob's words surprised even Vincent.

"Father...", he started gently, trying to prevent any harm come to the underground world people.

"No, Vincent, your son is one of us, whether present or not, and we must protect him. I will call the Council and all people right away to see who would want to volunteer, though I am quite sure there will be quite a few."

The vintage clock on the mantelpiece in Vincent's chamber was silently ticking away; the time was nearing 10 pm. Vincent was just putting his dark cloak around his shoulders when Catherine's hand gently stopped him.

"Vincent...Please, be careful," she whispered.

Vincent looked into her green eyes and saw them welling up. He knew too well what she was afraid of.

"Don't worry, Catherine, I will." He pulled her close to him, sighing into her hair and holding her for a while.

"I wish...," she started.

"I know," Vincent interrupted her. "But you will be... In here."

He pulled away to look at her and put his hand over his heart.

She smiled and couldn't look away from his face, as if it was to be the last time she would ever see him. She had known fear before, in so many shapes, so many times and yet...

Catherine had never known a greater fear in her whole life, than the fear of losing the man standing in front of her. He was the best part of her, the other half of her heart and soul, the reason for her being. Along with their child, Vincent was the most important thing in her life.

She knew if something happened to Vincent, she would not survive it. Just like he had been slowly fading away when he thought she was dead, Catherine would fade away and eventually die, too, if something happened to him.

Please, come home to me.... Both of you...

Vincent smiled and cupped her cheek tenderly. 'I will, we will,' he said quietly and kissed her gently.

Then, he pulled back and finished fastening his cloak. The time was showing 10 pm sharp. "It is time."

He walked towards the doorway.

Catherine followed him holding his hand. Just before leaving the chamber, he turned back to face her.

"I love you," he said with such tenderness in his voice it made Catherine tremble.

She stroked his cheek and could find only one response with her shaky voice. "And I love you..."

Vincent smiled at her one more time, and with a swish of his cloak, he vanished out of her sight behind the tunnel bend.

