

# *The Fight Within*

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*Note: Certain dialogue was taken from the episode "The Alchemist" from the TV series Beauty and the Beast, written by Richard Setlowe, Alex Gansa & Howard Gordon.*

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Catherine was rushing through the Tunnels, driven by the urgency in Jacob's message, that she had found when coming home from work that day.

*He needs you... Father*

Ever since they had parted the day before, she felt unease deep inside. At first, she thought it was because of the disagreement she had with Vincent. She was not happy with the Tunnel folk's lack of will to punish Paracelsus for spreading his drug in the world Above.

Her agitation from that moment disappeared very quickly, though. She understood that Vincent and the others had no choice but to protect what was vital for their survival. They couldn't have given up Paracelsus to the Police because he would have betrayed their world. However, the Tunnel laws were much more complex, something that Catherine was only beginning to understand and learn. No, there was nothing they could have done more. Unless...

*No!* Catherine immediately chased the horrible image away. Vincent would never use his violent side to punish someone. He used it to defend himself and his loved ones, but they couldn't send him on a mission to kill. That would have been... inhuman...

The thought made her shudder, and she quickened her pace. Jacob's chamber was close.

When she finally entered the Tunnel patriarch's private quarters, an unexpected sight greeted her. Jacob was sitting at one of his desks, his left arm secured in a sling. The frown on his face revealed great concern.

"Father!" she exclaimed, approaching him.

"Oh, Catherine..." He stood up heavily, still a bit shaky after Vincent struck at him earlier that day. "Thank you so much for coming."

"What happened?" Her voice was urgent, worry reflected in her eyes.

Jacob sighed and walked back to his desk, trying to explain the situation as best as possible.

"This morning, Vincent went to find Paracelsus and prevent him from going Above again until we find some solution to this problem."

Catherine closed her eyes. *Please, don't tell me he went to---*

"No, he didn't go to kill him," Jacob calmed her down, and seeing Catherine's relief, he continued. "He had been gone for a couple of hours when we received a message through the pipes. Winslow and some others found him in... a very agitated state deep in the Tunnels. They are keeping watch from a safe distance."

It seemed as if every word was causing him pain. "He must have been exposed to the drug Paracelsus deals with because... To be precise, he is in a state of *rage* that I have not seen him in since... well, for a very long time. It's different from when he defends someone. This state is persistent and very deep, affecting him in ways we are unable to do anything about."

She glanced at Jacob's arm, beginning to understand what had probably happened. Her eyes grew very concerned. Seeing her worry, Jacob confirmed her suspicion.

"I went to see him. I thought I could bring him back to his senses, but..." He shook his head in distress. "He didn't recognise me... He thought I was there to harm him. That's when *this* happened." With a brief nod of his head, he pointed at his injured arm. "I'm afraid that if Vincent doesn't calm down, it might put too much pressure on his otherwise strong heart..."

Catherine's eyes widened in sympathy for Jacob, but mostly in fear for the man she loved, who was obviously in deep distress. Vincent was not only a danger to others but also to his own life.

"Where is he now?" she asked.

"He's holed up here, in a forgotten place way below us, an old section of the catacombs," Jacob replied with sad eyes.

"According to our test, the effect of the drugs should only last for three or four hours..." Catherine couldn't believe how strongly the drug was holding power over Vincent.

Jacob looked at her earnestly and walked over to her. His worried grey eyes focused on hers.

"I can't let you go close to him," he stressed. "He's unpredictable. I thought, perhaps if he heard your voice... the empathic connection you share might somehow get through to him." He raised his eyebrows hopefully.

Catherine sighed, her eyes wandering in the space. Her mind was racing.

"Of course... I'll try to talk to him," she calmed him down.

Jacob took her hand in hers. "Thank you..."

She didn't need to look into his eyes to know he truly meant it.

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They were nearing the "hole" where Vincent was hiding. When they finally spotted Winslow, Mary and a few other Tunnel dwellers holding vigil over their friend, it was clear to them the situation was a grave one.

"Any change?" Jacob asked.

"We haven't heard anything for over an hour," Winslow answered with worried eyes.

Jacob acknowledged the information with a nod. He pointed toward the way through in the wall with his crutch.

Catherine understood and walked to it. She crouched at the opening and leaned over it, trying to spot Vincent in the darkness at the end of the tunnel.

"We don't know how far back he is," Jacob explained, leaning over her. "I thought... maybe if you could call out to him or..."

She nodded to him, knowing what he was desperately hoping for. Turning back to search in the dark, she raised her voice.

"Vincent, I'm here now!"

An agitated growl echoed like a threat in the distance.

Catherine's eyes widened, and she looked back at Jacob, her eyes deeply troubled.

"God, he *needs* me! I have to go to him..." she said, trying to keep her voice down.

“I can’t let you do it,” he objected. “I thought he needed me too, but all I did was frighten him.”

“Well, I have to take that chance!”

“He’ll strike at you! He’s not the Vincent we know. He could kill you...”

“What did you think I’d do when you brought me here? Leave him alone?” Catherine was adamant. “I have no choice...”

She stood up and resolved like never before, she took the first cautious yet firm steps towards the man she loved more than her own life. She had done it many times before, but this time was different. Vincent was crouching on the floor with his back to the cold wall. It appeared as if he was trying to protect himself from those who would wish to harm him.

His growls were getting louder, more desperate, as he pushed himself up abruptly, yet still backing against the wall.

Catherine’s eyes were fixed upon him, her look unwavering, the resolved expression on her face was astounding.

*You can do this, Vincent... You’re much stronger than you think. The rage has no power over you! I’m here...*

His face was pure animal agony; he was growling, sweat covering his whole face, his fangs flashing at her in the dim light. It was obvious that he was desperately fighting the urge to attack her then and there. She could almost hear him call in her mind, *Stay away, Catherine, don’t come any closer!*

But she didn’t stop...

*We can make it, Vincent... I’m here now, I’ve got you and I won’t let you fall! Don’t hold on to anger; hold on to love...*

At the moment when his growls turned into roars that were desperate and menacing at the same time, she stepped into a ray of white light illuminating her from above. Her eyes, her whole heart and soul focused on him - fearless, unwavering in her intent.

*Come back to me! I’m here...*

Vincent's agony almost claimed him, making him thrash his head from side to side, yet cling to the wall with the last remains of his self-control. Catherine approached him, and with all her power, she threw herself on his chest, embracing him as tight as she could.

*Wherever you are now, whatever you want to do, I’m not afraid! Stay with me, Vincent...*

Suddenly, as if by magic, the roars stopped. Vincent’s tense muscles relaxed, and his arms embraced Catherine’s slender body, almost joining them into one being.

“Catherine!” His breathing was ragged. He rubbed his cheek against the top of her head, eagerly as if his life depended on it. “Catherine...”

A wide smile followed her deep sigh of relief. She still refused to let him go, her face buried in his chest.

"I'm here..." she whispered, only then realising that her heart had been racing in tandem with his.

Vincent succumbed to sudden weakness, and he collapsed to the ground. Catherine went down on her knees with him, still holding him firmly.

"It's all right," she said. "I've got you..."

He wanted to apologise, to thank her, to tell her everything he had not dared to before. However, his voice deserted him, as his legs did for a moment, and all he could do was to cling to her and let his tight embrace speak for him.

Minutes passed and Vincent's body and mind slowly recovered from the extreme physical and mental overdrive. Catherine was determined to stay still and hold him for hours if need to be, but sensing the shift in his hold from desperate to loving, she finally dared to look up at him.

His blue irises were clear again, but she didn't get the chance to observe them better, for Vincent lowered his eyes immediately and sighed. For some reason, he didn't dare to look at her.

"Catherine?" A worried voice from the other side of the tunnel reached their ears.

"We're all right, Father!" Catherine called back. "We're coming now."

Her index finger went under Vincent's chin and lifted it gently, so she could look him in the eyes.

"Are you ready to go back?" she asked softly with an encouraging smile.

His only reply was a slow nod after he avoided her gentle gaze again.

Catherine decided not to push on him so soon after his ordeal - it was visible that he was exhausted. She helped him to stand up. With her arm around his waist to support him and his arm around her shoulders, they set out to face the others.

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*How can I look them in the eyes after what I've done? Will they despise me or hate me?*

Vincent's usually light steps were heavy, like his heart, when they approached the group surrounding the leader of the Tunnels. He kept his head down, unable to look at anyone. The overwhelming sense of shame didn't allow him to do so.

"He's all right." He heard Catherine reassuring them about his well-being. But the words sounded distant to Vincent; his head felt like a fishbowl.

"Thank God!" Jacob whispered with relief and flashed a smile at them.

Immediately, without any hesitation, Winslow walked over to Vincent's other side and helped Catherine to support him on their way back to the Home Tunnels.

Catherine couldn't help but marvel at how unafraid these people were. They knew that in his animal nature, Vincent was a deadly force. And yet, they were there for him every moment of his torment. Anyone else from Above would flee at the first opportunity - not these people. The most extraordinary member of their community meant too much to each of them. They knew the real him, just as *she* did, and that's why they stayed. Vincent was family...

When they reached Jacob's large chamber, Vincent had already regained some of his strength and didn't need too much support anymore.

"Sit down here." Jacob pointed at a padded high-back chair.

His son obeyed and slumped into the antique piece of furniture. With a loud sigh, he leaned his head back and closed his eyes. His mind was clear again; the terrifying fog caused by the drug had lifted, but he felt utterly exhausted, both physically and mentally.

"I'm sorry, I know you need rest, but I must check you out first," Jacob said softly. Mary was standing by his side, ready to help.

The sapphire-blue eyes opened and met the grey ones. Then they glanced at the arm sling of the older man. Vincent winced, and his heart sank.

"It's nothing serious," Jacob stated, seeing his son's distress at the sight of his injury - an injury that *he* had inflicted upon his parent. Jacob gently touched Vincent's hand, making the younger man look at it.

The image of his father's hand covering his furry one was almost surreal. The claws that not so long ago aggressively struck at his parent were now gently caressed by the hand of the man he could have killed easily.

*How can you not be afraid of me? How can you not loathe me, Father??*

When Vincent looked at him incredulously, Jacob understood the unspoken question.

"It wasn't *you*; it was the drug that forced you to react like that," he claimed with an earnest look, trying to soften his son's feeling of guilt.

"It was me, Father... That's what frightens me the most..."

It was the first time the lion-faced man had spoken since they had returned. The haunted look in his eyes pierced Jacob right through his heart.

"I'm so sorry, Father..." he whispered, his eyes glistening.

Jacob stroked his son's head with long, consoling moves.

"There is nothing to apologise for, I promise you." He insisted on his truth with a warm smile.

Not convinced, but relieved he hadn't caused greater damage, Vincent sighed and dared a tiny, insecure smile at his father.

Catherine was watching them from a place nearby. Her eyes were burning - she didn't need their bond to know what was torturing the man she loved. At the same time, she knew there was nothing that could reverse what had happened. The only way forward for Vincent was to accept it and find forgiveness within himself.

*He needs me; I can't go back yet...*

She turned to Mary, who was standing by her side at that moment, waiting for more instructions from Jacob.

“How could I send a message to someone Above, please?”

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Catherine left with Mary to send a message to Joe, informing him about her possible absence in the next couple of days. 'Family emergency' would have to do, as usual.

Jacob and Vincent remained alone in the chamber. The older man eyed his son once more. The younger man's head hung low; he seemed deep in thought; his paler than usual facial features spoke about his fatigue and troubled mind. His tall figure was hunched, his hands fidgeting on his lap. He reminded Jacob of a schoolboy who had committed something improper and was ashamed of it after they caught him out.

The patriarch was searching for words to lift his son's spirit, but his mind was blank all at once.

“I... I will ask William for some tea and something to eat. You need to regain your energy, to get your full strength back...,” he said finally.

When Vincent didn't reply, Jacob sighed and turned to leave. A strained and incredulous voice halted him suddenly.

“Why did she come for me?”

Jacob turned around to face his son.

“I thought *you* would be the very last person to ask that question,” he teased.

Vincent lifted his eyes to him - they were still haunted, yet at the same time, hopeful, as well. He knew he should have been angry at his parent for allowing Catherine to approach him in such a dangerous state. However, he was fully aware that no one could ever tell the woman he loved what to do if she set her mind on something, especially something concerning *him*. Vincent knew that Jacob must have tried to stop her, but knowing Catherine, staying away from him was not an option for her at all.

“Despite my state, when I saw her, Father... I was terrified...,” Vincent whispered painfully, and Jacob knew he didn't mean terrified *of* Catherine.

“I know,” he nodded with empathy. “But I also knew even back there that she was the only one who could have brought you back to us... That girl,” he said with a chuckle, shaking his head, “is fearless and stubborn as a mule... Remarkable.”



A small smile appeared on Vincent's lips.

"So if you really need to hear it, the answer to your question is," Jacob continued, "because she loves you."

He left his words to hang in the air, and with a kind smile, he slowly walked out of the chamber.

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Vincent remained sitting alone in the chamber. His eyes were staring aimlessly at the cold ground beneath his feet; his fingers were restlessly playing with the leather straps on his vest.

*I know she loves me, I've known that for a long time, but it still doesn't lessen the miracle... and the danger.*

The disturbing images that had overwhelmed his mind for hours flashed in his memory. He winced, trying to chase away the ghost of the terror that had threatened to destroy him and everyone near him. They came so close - if it hadn't been for *her*...

His peripheral vision caught a slow, quiet movement, following the sudden feel of her presence. Catherine approached Vincent, who was still sitting in the antique chair. She leaned towards him, supporting her weight by one hand over the armrest and the other on top of the headrest. Her eager eyes focused on his tortured face.

"What is it, Vincent?" Catherine asked softly, and Vincent looked away from her in pain, not daring to meet her eyes. "What are you thinking?"

He sighed, gathering the courage to open up to her.

"How ashamed I am... that you saw me as I was..." he whispered and finally dared to look into her eyes. "How grateful I am that... you were there..." His eyes bore into hers with great intensity, all the awe and love reflected in them.

A small smile appeared on her lips as she put her hand on his shoulder without breaking the eye contact - the gesture more eloquent than anything she might have said.

"You saved my life, Catherine." His voice sounded stronger all at once, and when he lay his hand over hers, she suddenly felt a great urge to be even closer to his face...

A shuffling sound of footsteps made Catherine straighten up and look up to the chamber entrance. Jacob approached them slowly, reluctant to intrude in their private moment, but the emergency of the situation forced him to put his empathy aside.

"I contacted Mary and Winslow," he said. "They're ready to convene."

His words broke through Vincent's fatigue and made him alert immediately.

"Sorry, Father," he said quietly, looking at his parent, resigned. "The time for that has passed."

"Vincent, I do understand how you feel..."



“You *can't* understand how I feel,” he cut his parent off, and his voice sounded very low and tired.

After an eloquent beat, Jacob tried to continue.

“We all agreed, harsh measures are required, but it is not *your* responsibility to decide what they may be.”

Vincent lifted his eyes full of resolve to him.

“It is mine... I have seen the demons Paracelsus has unleashed, felt them inside of me ... how can I explain... become... disconnected... as if the dark side of your imagination eclipses all compassion...all dignity...” His voice was shaky, his mind reliving the terrifying experience.

Catherine frowned in an attempt to imagine the state Vincent described. Her hand was covering his, trying to soothe him. When he went silent, she challenged Jacob with a look, an unasked question hanging in the air.

*Was there really no other way to stop Paracelsus than letting Vincent go through this?*

Her mind was telling her *no*, that it was Vincent's decision, but her heart was frustrated, probably because of her own guilt... Hadn't *she* tried to push Vincent to action to bring Paracelsus to justice? She even raised her voice on him...

Before Catherine could ponder more on her thoughts, Vincent released her hand and stood up.

“I must go,” he said, resolved.

“You're still weak...” Catherine's hand gently tried to stop him from leaving.

“And there are fifty people already dead.”

His look refused any arguments. He was right - Paracelsus had already claimed way too many innocent people. Something needed to be done...

Vincent held her gaze for a moment longer before glancing at his father and walking out of the chamber. His mind was still full of vivid memories of the living hell his brain was going through not long before.

Flames burning him almost to ashes, stealing his breath... The crimson shade of the blood veiling his eyesight... Screams piercing his ears and his heart, tearing it to raw flesh... Unbound fury, ravaging his soul... Hallucinations, turning his state of mind into sheer madness, ripping his very humanity to shreds... And Catherine, walking towards him out of the mouth of flames like the Angel of Death herself, luring him in to join her...

No, there was no other way but to confront the enemy.

Catherine looked at Jacob, more in contemplation than wishing to say anything. His silent and knowing gaze told her he was in the same state of mind. They both knew this was inevitable. And they both hoped it wouldn't end in tragedy...

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After Vincent had left in search of his confrontation with Paracelsus, Catherine hesitated. She couldn't return Above without knowing the outcome of that confrontation. Her deep feelings for Vincent chained her to the world Below.

*I may not go with you, Vincent, but I am with you every step of the way, and I won't let you slip through the cracks again...*

She glanced at Jacob again, hesitation but also a clear wish, written all over her face.

"Do you need someone to guide you up, Catherine?" the patriarch asked her, though his own face revealed a doubt. He knew the woman in front of him was not going anywhere, any time soon.

"I..." Catherine started, and her bright eyes spoke for her. "I was hoping..." She didn't need to continue. The plea and resolve were clear as rain to Jacob. He flashed a knowing smile in her direction and nodded.

"Of course," he acknowledged quietly. "I will ask Mary to bring us some tea."

The gratitude and relief in Catherine's face made him smile even wider. Yes, this woman was here to stay. She was to stay in Vincent's life, and it was all right. Jacob nodded in encouragement, and supported heavily by his walking stick, he left the chamber.

Catherine exhaled loudly, burying her face in her hands for a moment. She looked around the chamber, taking in the piles and shelves of books filling almost the entire space around, looking for some kind of distraction. She had been to Jacob's chamber only a few times before, mostly in haste on a matter of urgency. At those times, Catherine hadn't had much time to have a proper look at the personal space of the man everyone called Father. And there she was, standing in the same chamber again, facing another grave situation.

Suddenly the sound of heavy footsteps from behind caught her attention. It was Winslow, the Tunnel blacksmith, carrying a tray with a teapot and two cups.

"Catherine," his deep voice announced his arrival. "I was just visiting with Mary when Father came. I offered to bring the tea as I was going this way anyway. Father will be here soon."

Catherine smiled warmly and took the tray from his with hard labour roughened hands.

"Thank you, Winslow," she said gratefully and walked over to the table, putting the tray down.

She started pouring tea into one of the cups when she noticed Winslow was still standing on the same spot and watching her. Raising her head and with an obvious question on her face, she waited.

"I just wanted to tell you..." Winslow started slowly. "What you did today was... very brave."

Catherine bowed her head with a shy smile.

“I think most people would use the word foolish.”

*What an understatement, Cathy; most people would have called the white coats for you.*

“No,” Winslow interrupted her seriously. “There is only one thing that can force people to do something like this, and even then, most people value their own life more than someone else’s in times of greatest danger.”

Winslow paused for a moment, and his dark eyes suddenly turned almost shy, looking away from Catherine, who was watching him.

”I know I didn’t behave the best to you when we first met, and I’m truly sorry about it,” the blacksmith continued, his look pinned to the ground.

“It was a tense situation back then; everyone was worried. And you didn’t know me yet; it’s all right.” Catherine smiled, trying to lessen his feeling of guilt.

“That’s no excuse. I’m not the softest of guys, as you may have noticed, and believe me, I am sorry about it.” He looked at her again.

“I’ve known Vincent all of his life.” Winslow smiled at the memory of his beloved friend. “I am a bit older than him, but we spent so much time together when we were growing up...”

His love for Vincent was evident.

“He was always someone you could rely on, even as a child. He would never betray you, always had your back, always told you the truth even if it hurt sometimes... I have never had a better and more loyal friend in my life...”

Catherine squeezed his arm gently.

“And he surely knows how much you love him,” she spoke quietly.

Winslow lifted his eyes to her; his look was unusually soft.

“I truly hope so... And I hope that one day, I will be able to repay him for all the good he has done for me over the years.”

“I think you’ve done that already,” Catherine replied quietly, her smile warming him.

He bowed his head in mild embarrassment, then glanced at her again with a small smile. All at once very self-conscious, Winslow turned on his heel and disappeared behind the tunnel bend.

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Catherine was pacing around the spacious study of Jacob’s private quarters. With each passing minute, her mind was getting more restless and worried. It had been almost three hours since Vincent had left to find Paracelsus. She didn’t know how far he had

to go, but she hoped it wouldn't take hours. Her nerves were stretched and wouldn't last so long.

But what was he going to do with the biggest enemy of the Tunnel community? Catherine wasn't sure, but she knew Vincent would never do anything irrational out of pure revenge. She knew it... hoped for it...

The sudden slow movement at the chamber entrance made her turn sharply in that direction and set her heart racing. Vincent's majestic figure, covered by his almost ever-present dark cloak slowly descended the steps.

Catherine released the breath she didn't realise she was holding. Her relief was palpable, but she tried to control herself and fight the urge to run into his arms. But when he suddenly stood beside her and looked into her eyes, he saw everything. Even if he hadn't felt her emotional turmoil while he was gone, he would have seen it all in those green pools now.

"Are you all right?" she asked softly when she eyed him head to toe.

"Yes," Vincent answered quietly, and his eyes found the tense face of his father, standing by the desk completely obscured by countless books. "Paracelsus is dead."

Jacob frowned, bowed his head and sighed. He wasn't sure what he was feeling at the moment - relief that their world was safe again, or sadness over the futile loss of one of his former friends? Whatever it was, he was sure Vincent did whatever he needed to do.

"How?" he asked listlessly.

"I tried to persuade him to leave the Tunnels and never come back, but he refused," his son started explaining the events from earlier. "He said..." Vincent sighed and shook his head. "He tried to put poison in my mind with his words... Suddenly, he attacked me. We fought, and a fire broke out."

Catherine understood now where the faint odour of smoke was coming from since he appeared.

Jacob reached for his walking stick and slowly made his way toward his son.

"Are you... sure John is dead?" He lifted his grey eyes to him with half-interest, half-hope.

Vincent lowered his eyes for a moment. "Paracelsus suddenly stopped fighting, realising he was about to lose his gold... He vanished out of my sight behind a wall, running into the fire."

The furry hand landed gently on the older man's shoulder. "I'm sorry, Father."

Jacob glanced at his son again and flashed a smile.

"I suppose it had to happen one day," he said in contemplation. "John's ambitions were always... larger than life. It was bound to cost him everything."

"Would you like me to look for him?" Vincent asked with care.

“No.” Jacob shook his head and covered his son’s hand on his shoulder with his own. “I doubt you would find... anything. Go and have a proper rest; you need it.”

A kind but sad smile settled on his face when he turned to Catherine and nodded. She returned his gesture the same way and watched him leaving the chamber. Her heart was aching for the man she learned to love dearly, although, to her dismay, she could find very little compassion for Paracelsus and his fate deep inside.

“It will take some time until he accepts the reality,” Vincent remarked knowingly. “Paracelsus was his friend once.”

“How can a man who was once a part of this world turn against it so strongly?” Catherine wondered.

“Too many men with great ambitions have often succumbed to false fancies and feelings of injustice,” he replied with a sigh.

Catherine focused back on the man by her side.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” she asked, frowning, suddenly noticing the perspiration on his forehead.

“Yes, I... I am just tired,” Vincent replied, not wanting to worry her.

Her small hand gently touched his forehead. She didn’t need a thermometer to know it was too hot.

“You’re burning up,” she whispered, fear reaching her eyes. “I’ll get Father!”

Before he could react, she ran out of the chamber, hoping to catch up with Jacob.

Vincent closed his eyes and sighed. Perhaps Catherine was right before he left, when she said he was still weak. All at once, he felt the fatigue creeping into his muscles and bones. A familiar heat started spreading inside of him with gaining intensity like a wildfire.

He grabbed his chest and tried to calm his quickening heartbeat. Something was definitely wrong...

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“It seems the effect of the drug on him is stronger than we thought,” Jacob remarked quietly while putting his stethoscope into the medical bag. “Vincent rarely gets ill, but I know that I can’t give him any medicaments. His body tends to react aggressively to those. The only thing we can do is to try to take his fever down by applying cold compresses. He usually recovers by himself once the fever breaks.”

Catherine’s worried frown told him what she thought about his treatment suggestion.

“I know, it sounds harsh and careless,” he added and put his hand on her shoulder. “But unfortunately, there is nothing else we can do apart from that. Just pray, it doesn’t get worse.”

When she looked up into his grey eyes, she acknowledged the truth in his word. This man had looked after Vincent since his birth and knew more about his physical disposition than anybody else. She had to trust him.

“All right.” She sighed, looking at the man sitting hunched on the bed nearby. “I’ll take care of him.”

Jacob smiled at her, reading every possible emotion in those few words and the way she regarded his son. “Mary will relieve you in two hours, you will need rest, too,” he stated. He had guessed this outcome beforehand.

“I don’t need to rest, Father.” Catherine shook her head. “All I need is for Vincent to get well again.”

Only then, she looked at him again, and Jacob could see the fire of determination in her bright eyes. He nodded, and despite being worried about his son, he had to smile again.

”I’ll have some herbal tea sent to you. That always seems to keep Vincent calmer, and he needs to drink a lot, as well.”

He took his medical bag. “Let me know if he gets worse,” Jacob added, and after one last glance at the patient, he left the chamber.

Seeing his father leave, Vincent finally allowed himself to succumb to his fatigue. He stretched his body along his large bed, unable to pretend in front of Catherine anymore. The exhaustion and fever burning his body were suddenly too much to handle.

Catherine immediately reached for the heavy blanket at the end of the bed and covered him carefully. When she filled the bowl on his washstand with water, soaked the washcloth in it and started gently washing his face, the first contact of the cold cloth with his hot skin made Vincent shiver.

“I’m sorry,” Catherine apologised softly. “It’ll be all right...”

Her delicate fingers ran through a few strands of his golden mane, dampened by the sweat. The caress of her hand seemed to work its magic - Vincent closed his eyes, and only a moment later, he fell asleep.

Catherine relentlessly continued working the cold compresses until she finally felt that his skin felt cooler. She put the bowl away, gently traced his cheek with her fingers and curled up into Vincent’s high-back chair. She would have loved to lay down next to him to hold him, but knowing his apprehension, she resisted, unwilling to make him uncomfortable when he awakened.

The whole situation reminded her of the time months ago, when he was recovering from the injuries caused by the Silks. Back then, Catherine adamantly insisted on looking after him the same way she was doing now. And just as back then, she was worried sick, for Vincent was not like any other person she could nurse. He was the man she loved; he was everything...

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A few hours later, Catherine got woken up by the sound of restless moves and ragged breathing. She almost jumped out of the chair, leaning over Vincent and feeling his forehead - he was burning up again. Immediately, she thought of calling Jacob, but the desperate sound of Vincent's strained voice stopped her.

Still in his sleep, he reached hastily for her, grabbing her arm. At that moment, he woke up. His eyes looked haunted, terrified; his breathing was laboured. Catherine tried to soothe him by stroking his face and holding his hand. It worked - he sighed and shut his eyes, mental pain written all over his features.

"Fire... There's fire everywhere... The flames consume everything, everyone... Even you..." He opened his glassy eyes to her. His vulnerability, fear and agony were plain to see.

*Keep going, Vincent... Talk to me...*

She tightened her hold on his hand, sharing her strength with him.

"Tell me," she whispered. "Tell me everything..."

He winced, unable to erase the disturbing images from his mind, though reluctant to talk about them. And yet, her voice had almost hypnotic power over him at that moment.

"The fire was... devastating..." His breathing was ragged. "There were voices... desperate, terrible voices, crying, screaming! I felt like crawling out of my skin... And then..." He paused.

"And then?" Catherine prompted him gently, leaning closer to him. She noticed he was trembling. *Maybe this wasn't such a good idea...*

"Then I saw *you*... Walking towards me, reaching for me... seducing me..."

He gasped at the memory, squeezing his eyes shut. Shame almost burned him inside when he realised that he bared his soul to her completely, with such an intimate revelation.

*It shames me, Catherine, but despite the horrors within and around me, I enjoyed your seduction...*

"I was trying to fight it, to drive you... the image of you away back to safety, but to no avail..." His voice was breaking. "And then there you were... for real. Nothing could have driven you away..."

Catherine compelled him to look at her.

"Nothing *ever* will," she said, resolved, and a convincing smile lit up her face. Her gaze left no doubts about the truth of her words.

Vincent's eyes welled up against his will. Without thinking, he pulled her into his arms, holding her tight for the second time that day.

"Catherine..." he breathed.

The physical proximity of her body brought tranquillity to his agitated mind and heart immediately, though at the same time, awakening electrifying feelings in his veins.



Those feelings he had always tried to hide and bury in the deepest part of his soul. Rubbing his cheek in her silky hair, something he did more frequently as of late, was soothing his hurt psyche like a healing balm on a wound.

They remained silent for a while, processing Vincent's nearly tragic experience, each in their own way. After some time, Catherine lifted her head to look at him. She reached out to touch his forehead - it was warm, but there were no signs of the heat that was burning him up earlier that day.

Reluctantly, she disengaged herself gently from his arms.

"You should drink something," she remarked and walked over to the table where she noticed a teapot with cups. Someone must have brought them while they were both asleep.

Vincent watched her intently, already missing her physical nearness. He sat up slowly, trying to make his limbs work, though still feeling drained.

"Thank you," he whispered, when Catherine passed him his cup. A puff of steam was rising from it into the cool chamber air. The tea was still surprisingly hot.

She let him sip on it while her eyes lingered on his pale face. Catherine sensed there was more, much more that he was keeping to himself. Her compassion and love for him prevented her from asking the question, though.

"Yes, there is more," Vincent suddenly confirmed her unspoken suspicion.

Catherine lowered her eyes in mild embarrassment, realising she had been caught out. The bond they shared was getting stronger by day, and his extraordinary empathic nature was breaking all logical boundaries. Suddenly, she remembered something Vincent mentioned earlier.

"Paracelsus told you something... something that bothers you..." It was not a guess; it was a statement, spoken with undeniable certainty.

He sighed and absently placed the cup on the bedside table. The memory of the sly smile on the face of the man in black resurfaced in his mind.

*"Are you content to accept Father's story? Found as a babe outside Saint Vincent's hospital. Did you really believe that all these years? I know the truth. Aren't you at all curious to know why you are... the way you are?"*

"Paracelsus said many things," Vincent contemplated. His eyes were staring ahead of him but not focusing on anything. "His words were like a poison, like the terrible drug that almost destroyed me... He questioned my origin," he added, finally looking into Catherine's eyes again, "suggested that Father might have lied to me about how I came to the Tunnels."

Catherine frowned in distress. She couldn't believe that Jacob would deny Vincent the truth about something so significant. The founding father of the Tunnel community had only his adoptive son's best on his mind. Could it all have been only a disguise of some deeper, even disturbing truth?

"Do *you* believe that Father lied to you?" she inquired, unsure of what to think.

Vincent exhaled loudly, releasing the last tension from his aching muscles.

“I will always wonder... but I don’t think I’ll ever find out. The only truth I know is that Father saved my life, raised me like his own son, gave me all the love, kindness and wisdom that a father can give. Whatever he did was done from love.” He glanced at Catherine. “No other truth could ever change or deny that.”

Her lips stretched into a smile, silently agreeing with him. She took his hand in hers, holding it tight.

“You should try to sleep more,” she prodded him gently. “The recovery might take a couple of days.”

Vincent’s ardent, though tired smile, was the only reply she got. His eyelids already felt heavy again, and he barely registered when Catherine pulled the blanket neatly over him. The thoughts of the underground lair of Paracelsus, his extremely power-driven mind and obsession with gold, as well as his poisonous words... It was all hovering above Vincent like the Sword of Damocles. However, the fatigue was stronger, and within minutes, he fell asleep.

Catherine’s sigh confirmed her relief, though another emotion as well - concern. Paracelsus might have been dead, but he managed to significantly upset the peace of mind of the man whose mental and physical balance was very fragile at the moment. Would there be any consequences for Vincent? She could only hope that if the answer was ‘yes’ they wouldn’t bring something more disturbing upon him...

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Two days later, Joe Maxwell’s favourite D.A.’s Assistant sat in the courtroom most of the afternoon. She would have preferred it if the hearing she was involved in would have taken place on another day. However, work was work, the date had been set a few months prior, and Catherine had no say in the matter. This case was too important for their office.

By the end of the hearing, she was exhausted. The lack of proper sleep in the past three days caught up with her. She had left the Tunnels only the evening before, having promised Joe she would be present at the court hearing the next day. Vincent was almost back to his full strength and there was no need for her to stay anymore.

When Catherine finally made her way to the drainage tunnel in Central Park that evening, she was longing for Vincent’s calm voice and his peaceful presence. The whole past week had been simply wrong, too dramatic, too tragic...

She walked through the bend straight into the image of Vincent waiting for her at the gate, as usual. His eyes noticed the visible traces of weariness and grief on her face as she walked towards him.

“Catherine...” Compassion filled his voice when she stepped into his warm embrace, exhaling loudly.

”I’m so glad you’re here,” she breathed, absorbing strength from his body.  
”I’m always here, whenever you need me.”

A smile brightened her face. “I guess I’ll never stop being amazed about it.”

She slowly pulled back from him, looking into his eyes with care. “How are you feeling?” she asked.

“Better, thank you.” He smiled.

The melancholy in her expression returned.

“I’m sorry you couldn’t attend the funeral today,” Vincent stated softly, knowing what was bothering her.

“I still need to stop by at the NYPD. I promised I would come after I’m done with the court today. It was so hard to focus on the case...” Catherine remarked, frowning. She absently walked a few steps away from him, leaning against a wall. “All the time, I couldn’t help but think that I should have been somewhere else.”

“You were there in your heart,” Vincent tried to console her. “Jimmy was a man fully dedicated to his work; he would have surely understood why you couldn’t truly be there.”

“Jimmy... wouldn’t compromise,” she spoke softly, remembering the detective who for such a short time became her friend as well.

“Beyond the sadness, his life had a great meaning,” Vincent added and walked over to her.

“Catherine, I know why you expose yourself to danger.”

“Because there are some risks worth taking.”

Vincent’s gaze was direct and eloquent. “And there are some things worth risking everything for.”

She nodded slightly in agreement, her sad eyes connected with his by some unseen powerful force, as always. After a few beats, Catherine unwillingly walked past him towards the exit. Yet, she stopped and turned around to look at him once more. Their eyes met again, and a small smile appeared on her face. With the image of Vincent watching her from the semidarkness engraved in her mind, Catherine turned around, and a moment later, she disappeared behind the tunnel bend.

Vincent remained rooted to his spot for a long moment, contemplating their last words. The mere existence of their relationship was a great risk, and yet they had both been willing to take it, day after day. Catherine wouldn’t compromise either. Fearlessly, she walked into the arms of a beast and saved him from his doom, ignoring all rational reasons why not to do so.

It saved his life. It saved *them*...

*“Some of the greatest battles will be fought within the silent chambers of  
our own soul.”*

*- Ezra Taft Benson -*

