

TO MOVE TOWARDS LOVE

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(Season 2 - Episode 3 – Ashes Ashes episode expansion)

“What exactly were you looking for in the East River?” Father asked the young Russian sailor, while he cleaned and treating the long cut on his arm.

“Love...it’s not for politics... I show! It’s Anna...” He showed proudly a small photograph of a lovely dark-haired young woman.

“Oh yes, she’s very beautiful,” Father said looking at the photo before passing it on to Vincent, who was standing next to Dimitry on the other side of the bed. He asked with his characteristic quiet raspy voice.

“She ... Is she here in New York?”

“Four years!” Dimitry replied. “We were... How do you say?... To marry!”

“Uh-huh,” acknowledged Father, while bandaging his arm carefully.

Dimitry’s passion came on the surface again.

“I apply also to come! Four years I wait but is *nyet!*” His disappointment was obvious, then he said in a calmer tone. “Then Anna send me a letter... She say she has no more hope I come to America...But I come! Perhaps you understand loving so much someone...”

At hearing the last words, Father looked up to him and then shot a knowing glance at Vincent, who looked back at him confirming that those words have hit home with him only too well.

“Do you know where she is?” Vincent asked then.

“Brooklyn! Is possible you help find?” Dimitry was eager to get on with his search.

Father’s reasonable words brought him back to earth again.

“After you’ve rested for two or three days and I’m sure this is not infected.” He hinted at the wound.

“But is important... In letter she say she marries...She is thinking soon!” Dimitry was getting desperate again.

Vincent looked at him in silence. He understood too well the despair of the man he had saved from drowning just a couple of hours before. He knew what it felt like when all the world around you seems to be going against you, when all you wish is having the love of your life beside you...

Later that night, Vincent stood on Catherine’s balcony. They were looking at Anna’s picture when Vincent filled her in about the events of that night.

“He can never go back now, can he? He’s burnt his bridges home, all for a dream...,” Catherine said with compassion.

“He comes from a land of dreamers,” Vincent said.

“He must love her very much...,” Catherine said and Vincent lowered his eyes thinking silently / *know exactly how he feels...*

“Does he know where she is?”

“Brooklyn,” Vincent answered looking up at her again.

“Brooklyn is a big place...”

“This is what Father is trying to explain to him.”

Catherine sighed and looked at the photo once more before looking at Vincent again with determination in her eyes and a hint of a smile.

“We’ll find her for him, Vincent, I know we will...”

Vincent nodded and smiled back at her wondering if he’ll ever be surprised at her always believing in everything almost impossible and in the end achieving it. It was one of the traits that made her special, what made him love her more every day.

The next morning, Father was changing the dressing on Dimitry’s wound, trying to persuade him into a game of chess with him. Just a few minutes before, he was smiling at the young man’s ability to engage the children, who came to watch him tell a funny and seemingly spooky story. Their laughter and amazement made the old man’s heart warm. When the children had left, he started his doctor’s routine.

Suddenly, 12-year-old Ellie, a beautiful girl, with angelic curly golden hair, entered the Hospital Chamber and asked if she could help Father in treating Dimitry. Jacob had no objection and was oblivious to the adoring look on Ellie’s face when she was looking at the handsome Dimitry, and he smiled back at her. When Father asked her to pass him something, she wasn’t listening, then suddenly ran out of the chamber.

Girls, they don’t really know what they want... Jacob thought and went on with his work.

Vincent entered the Hospital Chamber later that day and found Dimitry in a good mood. He sat down on a chair next to his bed.

“I have a.... friend Above, her name is Catherine. I told her about your Anna and she said she will try to find her for you.”

Dimitry’s eyes were full of gratitude, as he started with his basic English.

“I am very happy ... to meet you, Vincent.... you a good man.”

Vincent smiled and bowed his head.

“All of us here try to help each other and every one who needs help for a good reason.”

Dimitry nodded and smiled. Then he suddenly thought of what Vincent said at the beginning and how he said it.

“Catherine.... is shea friend *only*?”

Vincent looked up at him in surprise but after a moment he sighed, looked in the distance as if in a dream and smiled.

“Catherine is... *more*... than a friend...” Then he looked back at Dimitry and lowered his eyes shyly.

A smile appeared on Dimitry’s face.

“You... *more* than a friend to she?” he asked with genuine interest.

“Yes....” Vincent replied simply with a smile, but the tenderness in his voice revealed the whole depth of his relationship with Catherine.

“Good!” Dimitry said, with a wide smile and patted Vincent on his shoulder before they shared a quiet laugh.

The next day, Vincent was leading Dimitry out of the tunnels to stay with one of the Helpers, until Catherine found Anna for him. He was feeling genuine friendship and sympathy to the young sailor, admiring his determination, his fearlessness (travelling across the world risking his life and leaving everything behind just to find his love), and he clearly saw that he was a good man with a kind heart and strong values.

“Is difficult leaving,” Dimitry said as they were walking. “Is... how your English writer say?”

“Shakespeare?” Vincent guessed.

“Yeah!”

“*Parting is such a sweet sorrow*,” Vincent quoted.

“Yes, it’s that! Sweet and sad. He was a little bit Russian I think.”

Suddenly Dimitry stopped and started coughing strongly, leaning to the wall. Vincent looked concerned. He noticed that Dimitry’s breathing had been getting heavier while they were walking.

“Perhaps we should go back...”

“I must go on!” the Russian replied determined and started to walk on.

“Are you strong enough?” Vincent asked gently.

Dimitry looked at him and said calmly.

“For Anna very strong... Is you, Vincent, understand me best of all, yes?”

Vincent was contemplating about saying something but he didn’t. He realised Dimitry was right. He himself left all his usual caution behind when it came to his relationship with Catherine. Had it been he instead of Dimitry, he would have done the same to find Catherine, even if it meant going to Hell and back. Besides, he could ask Peter to check on the young man later. Therefore, he just bowed his head and continued walking with him.

Dimitry smiled and patted him on his shoulder.

“Is a little bit of Russian in you too!”

Catherine was browsing through a file with documents about one of the cases she was working on but not really focusing on them, She was trying to figure out how to tell Dimitry that all his perilous journey was done in vain and he came too late, that his Anna married another man just that day, as Catherine finally located Anna’s address.

She was deep in thought when Benny, the sandwich guy, stormed into the DA’s office with his little cart.

“Sandwiches! Home made sandwiches! Right here!”

He made his way through to Catherine’s desk.

“Sandwich, lady?”

“Do you have chicken salad?” Catherine asked.

“Try this one,” Benny said putting a sandwich in front of her. “On the house,” he added and winked.

In that moment, Joe appeared at the desk and tried to grab and look at the sandwich, but Benny softly slapped his hand.

“Eh-eh!! For you, I got anchovies loaf...”

Joe looked a bit perplexed, but then started checking his sandwich and discussing the others with Benny.

Meanwhile, Catherine opened hers and found a tiny folded note inside. After reading it, she looked a little puzzled, then stood up, grabbed for her coat and handbag and made ready to leave the office.

Joe looked at her and asked in surprise. "Where are you going?"

She looked at him then at Benny and finally said. "Lunch..." And she walked away.

Just half an hour later, she parked her car in the garage of an abandoned old warehouse. She got out and waited patiently, not really sure what to expect. It was not the first time that Benny had delivered her a note telling her to meet a Helper, but previously, there was always an explanation *why*. This note didn't mention the reason.

What is going on? she thought, just slightly unnerved. She was trying to persuade herself that if Vincent was in danger, she would feel it, as she felt it when he was trapped in the maze with Father. But she couldn't feel anything like that through their bond, so she settled for waiting for an explanation.

Suddenly, a small black van with tinted windows drove into the warehouse and stopped not far from her. She heard the door open and a man stepping out on the other side of the van. When he approached her and looked at her, she wasn't sure which one of them was surprised more.

"Peter?!" she cried, with a shocked smile.

"Cathy?!" a tall older man in his 60s, in a suit, replied with the same surprised expression. "What on Earth are *you* doing here??"

Catherine frowned a little. "The message said to meet a ...Helper..."

Peter's eyes grew bigger as he pointed at her in amazement. "You?!"

Catherine smiled and nodded.

"No wonder you have been so secretive this past year!" Peter added. He had known Catherine since she was a baby (in fact, he delivered her and had been their family doctor ever since) and the revelation of her being involved with the world Below filled in a lot of gaps from her life since her attack.

Catherine was astonished. "Peter... How long have you been involved?" she asked.

"Right from the beginning. Jacob and I went to medical school together. Someday we'll sit down and I'll tell you all about it, but right now there are more pressing matters to take care of."

He opened the boot of the van to reveal loads of boxes with medical logos on them.

"I brought as much as I could, I'll bring the rest as soon as possible. It's not easy to get this amount without a lot of questions."

Catherine looked at the boxes, trying to figure out why they needed so many medical supplies down Below.

"What's all this??"

Peter started naming different drugs and medical items when it suddenly hit him. "My God, you don't know what's going on down there, do you?"

Catherine was getting worried. "Tell me, what is it??"

"It's very bad, it's an epidemic... Cathy, it's pneumonic plague!"

Catherine opened her mouth in horror and she felt her heart clamping. But in a moment, she said decisively when closing the boot and walking to the van's drivers seat.

"I'll bring them the drugs right away."

“You don’t understand! They’ve sealed themselves off, it’s a strict quarantine!” Peter tried to bring her to reason.

“You vaccinated me for plague when I went to Asia,” Catherine said.

“Two years ago! Without booster shots... No, it’s impossible!”

Catherine started the engine, slammed the door shut behind her with only the window pulled down and then looked at Peter with determination.

“One thing I’ve learned from Vincent - *nothing* is impossible!”

And with that thought, she drove off and left Peter standing there wondering.

Only a little later, Mouse and Jamie passed Father and ran into the corridor before the Hospital Chamber with boxes in their hands.

“Thank God!” Jacob exclaimed relieved. His face froze when he turned and saw Catherine standing next to him with another box. “Catherine, you shouldn’t have come here!”

“How could I stay away?!” she countered.

“Pneumonic plague is the most contagious form of this disease! The risk---”

“---is *mine* to take!” she finished the sentence for him.

Jacob could see in her eyes any arguing would be just a waste of time. He knew her main reason *why* she couldn’t stay away. *He’s going to kill me...* He nodded resigned and led her into the chamber.

Catherine knew the Hospital Chamber from before, but she had never seen more than one person in the many beds ready for patients there. Therefore, when she saw almost all beds occupied now, she shuddered in fear. These were her friends...

“Dimitry is dead...,” Jacob said in quiet deep voice.

Catherine suddenly realised one important person was missing from the scene and a shiver ran across her heart.

“Vincent??” She looked at Father in panic.

“He’s all right. He appears to be immune, thank God.”

She closed her eyes briefly and let out a sigh of relief. Then she looked around the chamber again and took off her coat.

“All right, tell me what I can do...”

Vincent was tending to one of the patients, along with other tunnel dwellers helping out in the Hospital Chamber. He wasn’t aware of what was going on at the chamber entrance, for he was sitting with a young man in the opposite corner of the chamber shielded by a folding screen, changing his cold compresses. He stood up and walked to a bowl of cold water to wring the cloth he was using, when he saw Catherine doing the same thing just a few metres away from him.

“Catherine!” he whispered loudly.

She found his eyes right away and although she knew he would be angry, she couldn’t help herself and walked quickly to him embracing his body tightly, as if never wanting to let him go, breathing in deeply his scent, her cheek on his chest.

Vincent felt his anger vanishing, but fear taking its place when he held her tight and whispered into her hair with a desperate breaking voice.

“You mustn’t be here, it’s dangerous! Why? Why have you come?”

Catherine pulled back from him to look into his blue eyes filled with deep anguish. "You *know* why..."

Her eyes were welling up and reflecting all the fear and worry and above all, they were overflowing with love - for him...

That was it, those three words and just one look undid Vincent and he couldn't say anything more to keep her away. He understood now that she had shut off her feelings from him, just like she had when Paracelsus kidnapped her, to prevent him from worrying about her and not sensing her presence for as long as possible. He pulled her close to him again, rubbing his cheek in her hair and sighing. Despite the desperate situation surrounding them, and despite being terrified she would get sick, he was glad that she was there with him.

"Besides, I was vaccinated against plague two years ago, there is very small risk for me too---" she didn't finish the sentence knowing what it would do to him.

He pulled back and looked at her with a dead serious expression in his eyes.

"All right, but you must promise me one thing... The moment you start feeling just a hint of being unwell, you *must* tell me or Father, you will *not* try to hide it. Catherine, promise me!"

Her heart was deeply moved by his care, she smiled gently and her voice was barely audible when she said, "I promise."

Vincent sighed again and shook his head lightly as he separated from her. He started walking back to the patient he was tending to, when Catherine gently called his name. He stopped in his tracks and looked at her before she said softly.

"If I had to leave this earth tonight, there is no other place I'd rather be than in your arms..."

She smiled at him shyly and walked away.

Vincent couldn't move, he could barely breathe, nor think clearly in wonder.

And I in thine, Catherine...

"Would you like some more water, Ellie?" Catherine asked leaning over the frail body on the bed. She remembered so vividly how, not even a year ago, she and Vincent rescued Ellie and her 8-year-old brother Eric from a foster care home selling children to a street gang, forcing them to rob people on the street. Eric had become very agitated when Father took Ellie to the Hospital Chamber as he wanted to go with her. She stopped him and he was angry at her for leaving him, when she had promised she would never leave him again. In the heat of the moment, Eric said he hated her, which left Ellie very distressed and sad before Father took her away.

Catherine carefully put the glass of water to Ellie's mouth and the girl took a few sips. She was getting weaker by the hour and Catherine was getting worried about her more and more.

"Eric?" Ellie asked faintly.

"He's waiting outside. So far, he hasn't shown any symptoms. Maybe he'll be all right." Catherine replied with an encouraging smile holding the girl's hand.

Her hand was stroking Ellie's hair gently and she started singing a lullaby to her.

Vincent was sitting at a girl's bed, tenderly pulling a cover over her when he stood up and looked around to see who else needed his care. Suddenly, his eyes landed on Catherine singing to Ellie. If he had wanted to describe how this image made him feel, words would have failed him. The closest would have been *beauty, miracle, love, wonder, gratitude*, but also sadness and impossible dream... *She was born to be a mother.... But it can never be, not with me....*

A sharp feeling of sorrow stung his heart and yet, at the same time, the feeling of immense warmth was spreading in it, a warmth melting his doubts and fears, all his pain, and opening a tiny window which let a tiny ray of light. That light was whispering to him from a far distance, yet still... *Despite of everything, she chose you and wants to stay with you forever. What if ...?*

Catherine was wringing more cloths in a bowl of cold water when Vincent slowly walked to her and leaned against the table next to her, looking at her from the side. Their eyes met, and for a moment they gazed at each other without words. Then Vincent broke the silence.

"I watched you a moment ago with Ellie..."

Catherine looked down at the bowl again, her soft blond hair covering the side of her face visible to Vincent.

"My mother used to sing that song to me... I haven't heard it since." She looked at Vincent with a smile. "I think she must have made it up."

"You're remarkable," he breathed.

Catherine lowered her eyes shyly and looked at the bowl again saying with a bemused voice trying to disguise how his observation touched her.

"I hope you're not talking about my singing."

"No, about... how much you give to... all of us," Vincent said seriously.

Catherine looked deep into his eyes stating the simple truth.

"To be able to give ... is what all of you have given to me..."

She looked away again, hoping the hair covering her face would help to hide how deeply moved she was and how weak her knees suddenly felt when Vincent's blue eyes were piercing hers the way they were just then. Luckily, Vincent straightened himself up again and walked away slowly, deep in thought. She allowed herself a little smile.

Whenever she was thinking her feelings for him couldn't be any stronger, he proved her wrong with a few words, a gesture, or a look. How amazing that she, who was always so self-assured in her previous relationships, felt so shy and overwhelmed by the deep love she shared with this almost otherworldly man? Because he was the only man who really made her feel like a woman who was equal to him. Not an ornament, a buddy, or the decorative other half of someone socially important. He made her feel like a true soul mate, companion and equal partner in good and bad, in happiness and sorrow. Moreover, he didn't put any of his dreams or ambitions above her. *She* was his priority. Even after more than a year, their bond was deepening, their love for each other growing stronger and more beautiful, despite all odds thrown in their way. They had endured and she knew that no matter what the sacrifices asked of her, she would sacrifice everything gladly for him, for Vincent gave her life a true meaning.

The greatest thing you'll ever learn is just to love and be loved in return.

Catherine was helping Father to change the IV for Mouse, who had been recently brought to the chamber by Jamie and some others, after suffering plague symptoms too. Jamie noticed it when they were picking up new boxes of medicine from the warehouse and bringing them Below. She begged him to get looked at.

Suddenly, a faint cry reached their ears.

"Catherine! Help me!"

It was Ellie and Catherine ran to her immediately, holding her hand. The girl's face was porcelain white, her golden hair damp from sweat, which also covered her cheeks and forehead. Her eyes were glassy and distant, as she smiled looking in the space far away, slowly recalling something that Dimitry had told her.

“He said... that I was... beautiful...”

Her smile faded, her breathing stopped, her lifeless eyes stayed fixed on the space behind Catherine.

At that moment, Father approached them quickly.

Catherine felt a frozen chill run through her heart, when she said with a harsh voice. “Ellie?... No.... No!!”

She pulled Ellie to her tightly, as horror clamped her heart. Started sobbing, gasping for air, cradling the inert body, as if trying to revive it.

Jacob sat down on the bed, reaching for Ellie’s hand when Catherine released her and her pleading eyes turned to him. He tried the girl’s pulse and when feeling nothing, his face turned into agony.

“Dear God!... I’ve lost her...”

Catherine looked back at Ellie, gasping for air, and couldn’t suppress the tears and pain any more. She rose up from the floor at the bed where she had been kneeling and still looking at Ellie’s dead body and shaking her head in disbelief, started stepping back. She was stopped when she felt a body against hers. Somewhere in the back of her mind, despite the agonising pain that grasped her heart, she recognized Vincent, who himself was trying hard to come to terms with what he had just witnessed. His arms gently embraced Catherine’s shoulders, as she turned to him covering her face and fell against his chest crying. Cradling her, he felt one of his own tears running down his cheek.

Vincent literally ordered Father to rest, taking over the responsibility of telling Eric that his sister had passed away. He knew it was going to be a difficult task, but someone had to do it and he knew that Father was feeling guilty for not being able to help Ellie.

Vincent walked out of the Hospital Chamber and found Eric kneeling there at the wall. He lowered himself down to him, leaning against the same wall and started explaining to the boy that he had some bad news, how Ellie fought had fought hard to come back to Eric.

“Sometimes bad things can happen in life, and all our courage, all our love cannot change them... And all we can do is... cry... for those we have lost... and remember them always in our hearts... and go on.”

Eric didn’t seem to understand. “Ellie will get better. She promised!”

Vincent felt tears filling his eyes, as he pulled the boy up to face him, taking his hands in his.

“Ellie loved you very much, Eric... We can’t always keep our promises, no matter how hard we try, no matter how much we love...”

“Ellie will, she’s different!”

Vincent bowed his head in despair before looking up at him again.

“Eric... Ellie is gone...”

The realisation hit Eric like a lightning. For a moment, he was just staring at Vincent, then, his little fists started hitting Vincent’s chest in anger and frustration.

“You liar! Liar!” and he ran away, leaving Vincent in more heartfelt pain than before.

Father was laying in one of the beds in the Hospital chamber resting, but he couldn’t sleep. He kept staring at the wall trying to find the answer to a simple question. *How?*

Vincent walked in and sat down next to him.

"I failed her, Vincent," Jacob said absent-minded. "*How* could I let a beautiful child like that die? She put her life in my hands."

"Others have put their lives in your hands as well... Geoffrey's sitting up. Mouse is stronger... They need you, Father. Eric needs you."

Vincent held his father's hand tightly.

Jacob sighed, running his other hand in his hair.

"Eric... Ellie was the last family he had."

"No," Vincent contradicted him. "He has *us*, he has *you*. Only he doesn't know it yet.."

They found Eric in one of the currently unused chambers full of antique furniture and statues covered with cobwebs. He was hiding behind a folding screen. Jacob asked him what he was doing and Eric replied from behind the screen that he was writing a letter to Ellie, telling her he was sorry for saying he hated her, that he didn't mean it.

"Will she be mad at me?" Eric asked anxiously.

"No, I think she'll understand."

"But how am I going to send it to her?"

"I think I know a way..." Jacob cleared his throat. "I'd like to write a letter to Ellie, too... Maybe you could lend me a piece of writing paper," he added in a lighter tone.

Eric tore a sheet of paper from his notepad and his small hand passed it on to Jacob.

Vincent was watching them from a distance and he couldn't stop the silent tears flowing.

Vincent could finally head back to his private chamber. After three days of helping with the sick ones, most of them were recovering and he was relieved again for a few hours by Mary, who sent him to get some rest. He barely slept in the last forty-eight hours and with Ellie's passing, his heart felt heavy. He desperately wished to close his eyes and sleep but even more, he wished to make sure that Catherine was all right and resting. She had been very distraught at Ellie's passing and he could feel ripples of sorrow passing through her constantly from that moment on. Vincent and Father sent her to get some rest in Vincent's chamber. He had wanted to take her there, but she said she would be fine. He knew she wouldn't be, but he was needed with the patients.

Now, almost five hours later, he was finally able to go and see her. His legs were literally dragging along, his eyelids feeling very heavy, yet his mind still clear and focused. He knew he couldn't surrender to fatigue yet. In her unselfish way, she was trying hard to suppress her feelings but wasn't successful all the time, and he knew she needed him...

When Vincent finally entered his chamber, he found Catherine sitting on his bed with her arms around her knees, her head slightly down, her face pale with slightly dark rings under her eyes. The tray with sandwiches and teapot with a teacup which William brought to her remained untouched on the table. His heart almost broke at the sight, but he knew how she was feeling. He was feeling the same.

She looked up and smiled a little. Even through her veil of sorrow, Vincent could feel through the bond that she was genuinely happy to see him. He closed the distance between them, sat down next to her and took her in his arms.

"I'm here...", he whispered.

"I missed you...", she whispered into his chest, her arms embracing his waist tightly.

"I missed you too..."

He pulled back slightly to look into the green pools of her eyes. "How are you feeling?"

She chuckled quietly raising her eyebrows and he realised how pointless the question was.

Of course, I know how you're feeling, I always do.

He smiled and rephrased his question. "What are you thinking?"

Catherine smiled at him and sighed. "I'm thinking why such a precious young life had to be taken away from this world, before it could even fully discover its wonders?"

She didn't expect any answer and shook her head a little, looking away.

"I'm thinking how happy she was here, so bright, so kind, so full of life and love. She finally found a home..."

Catherine looked back at him and her lips stretched into a bitter sweet smile.

"Vincent, she loved you very much, looked up to you... She told me she had never met a kinder, braver and wiser person than you... She never knew her father but she wished he were... like *you*..." Her eyes were full of tears again.

Vincent closed his eyes, leaning his head back a bit and his own breath got trapped in his throat. He tried to steady himself but the fatigue, the stress, the will to stay strong for the sake of others and the emotions of the past three days were too much to handle for him. He covered his face and started sobbing quietly.

Catherine pulled his head gently on her shoulder and put her arms around his neck, with one hand stroking his back to comfort him. She has never seen this beautiful human being break down emotionally like this before and she was deeply moved, although her heart was breaking for him, too, seeing him in so much pain. But she felt the same pain and all she could do was offer him shelter, her embrace, her understanding, her love. They comforted each other and just for a moment, time stood still for them.

When Vincent calmed down, he pulled back from Catherine's embrace slightly, his arms remaining around her waist though. With his head down, he didn't feel brave enough to look her in the eyes yet.

"I...I'm sorry..." he whispered, ashamed of having lost control over himself.

"Oh, Vincent..." Catherine said softly, wiping away the tears from his face and then stroking his cheek gently with her thumb.

"There is no need to be. We're all just... human," she said with a smile.

He looked into her eyes and smiled. Then he pulled her head closer to him and kissed the top of it. She always did that, always pulled him out of the darkest abyss of his mind and brought him back to the light.

Vincent stood up and slowly walked to the table. He took a sheet of paper from a carved wooden box on it, sat down and started writing.

Catherine inquisitively but gently asked. "What are you doing?"

She saw he wasn't writing into his journal, as normally he would be.

"I'm writing a letter... to Ellie..." he replied quietly, screwed the cover of his ink pen back on and turned to Catherine. "It's actually Father's idea."

Vincent told her about the conversation between Father and Eric, and the idea Father came up with right after.

Catherine smiled with tears filling up her eyes again, but took a deep breath, stood up and walked over to the table before sitting down on the chair next to Vincent.

"Could you lend me some paper and pen, please?" she asked.

Vincent looked into her eyes, smiled and opened the box to take out another sheet of paper.

Many of the tunnel dwellers stood gathered on the bank of the Mirror Pool that evening, including Mary, Mouse and some of the children. All of them were holding a piece of paper in their hands. Catherine was there too, with Vincent standing right behind her, his hand resting on her shoulder, offering her a mental shield, the feeling of comfort and strength.

There was a small fire lit in the centre in front of them, the only source of light apart from the reflection of thousands of stars in the sky above them, mirrored in the pool.

Jacob stepped to Eric who was standing at the fire holding his letter to Ellie. "It is time, Eric," he said quietly.

The boy knelt to the fire and threw his letter in it. He looked up and then back into the flames.

"I wanted you to read my letter first, Ellie... So you know I'm sorry... That I miss you... And that I really do love you!"

Jacob patted him on his shoulder in comfort and when Eric stepped away. He knelt heavily himself, using the support of his walking stick, and kissed his letter before adding it to the burning light.

"Forgive me, Ellie.... Love you..."

Catherine stepped closer next, kissed her letter and when adding it to the others, her words mouthed *I love you*. Vincent felt how bravely she was trying not to break down, taking a deep breath as she stood up to join him again.

And so, all the people present added their letters to Ellie to the crackling fire, saying their final good-byes to the girl, who had brought smiles to their faces and touched their hearts with her warmth and kindness for the short time she had spent with them.

The last person to kneel to send his goodbye to eternity was Vincent. As he looked into the flames, his eyes got misty and he sighed, bowing his head down for a moment. Then he looked up again and carefully placed his letter on top of the burning logs. The words he had written appeared before his eyes again.

Dearest Ellie,

No father could have ever had a more wonderful daughter.

I love you always,

Vincent

Then he stood up and stepped back to Catherine, who was observing him with a grief stricken expression. When their eyes met, they both knew how painful this loss was for them.

As they all watched the flames dance across the logs, suddenly a light breeze picked up a few pieces of ashes from the fire and started to pull them higher and higher, up through a narrow chimney-style passage, swirling until they finally vanished in the dark starry sky above them.

Rest in peace, golden child...

Vincent closed his eyes and for the first time since days, just for a brief moment, his heart felt lighter.

Catherine and Vincent walked into Father's chamber, waiting for him to return before she would go back above. The worst was over - most of the sick tunnel inhabitants were almost fully recovered, or much better again, so she could finally be persuaded to return to her world. Moreover, it was Sunday evening and she would have to be at work the following day, otherwise

she would have to send a message to Joe through some of the Helpers, and she didn't wish to complicate things for the people she loved so dearly.

The silence and solace in the chamber was almost unreal after all the worrying hustle, continuous movement of people and stress of the past almost three days she had spent Below. She stopped in the middle of the chamber and closed her eyes, taking in the peace, although still badly numbed by the loss they all suffered with Ellie's passing.

Vincent felt the emotions stirring in her and took her in his arms, leaning his cheek against her head. Catherine gladly sunk into his embrace, the only place where she ever truly felt safe and warm. They stood like this silently, they didn't know how long, deep in thought and passing on strength and love to each other.

They didn't even notice when Peter suddenly entered the chamber. He stopped in his tracks and observed the couple with surprise. He saw, as they pulled back from each other slightly and Vincent cupped Catherine's cheek and caressed it gently with his thumb, before letting his hand drop and taking hold of her hand. She smiled and the look in her eyes told Peter everything he needed to know.

Suddenly, he felt like an intruder and didn't want to pry on their intimacy any longer and coughed slightly to announce his presence.

Catherine and Vincent both looked in his direction and smiled in surprise.

"Peter! You're here?" Catherine exclaimed when he approached.

"I just couldn't stay away, I had to come and take a look if I could help somehow..." Peter said choking on his words.

"Somehow?" Vincent said in disbelief. "Your medicine saved our lives..."

Peter looked at him and saw clearly why he had loved this extraordinary man since he'd been a little boy. The care, gratitude and love in his eyes was something which has always warmed the older man's heart.

Peter swallowed and tried to lighten the mood.

"Well, it wasn't exactly *my* medicine but I'll try to relay this to the hospital management if they ever find out what I *borrowed* from them," he said and winked.

They all chuckled and visibly relaxed.

When Vincent gave him an update of their situation, Peter sighed with relief, although felt sad too.

"I'm truly glad to hear the worst is over....Though I'm really sorry about Ellie... If you need *anything* else, please, just let me know." He looked into Vincent's blue eyes.

Vincent put his hand on Peter's shoulder in gratitude and said a simple but heartfelt "Thank you."

At that moment, Father entered the chamber, his walk heavy, his face pale. He looked as tired and worn out as he was feeling.

At first, he was shocked to see his old friend there, but then words of gratitude and relief followed freely along with a bear hug initiated by Peter, after he had assured Jacob he'd had the vaccine himself earlier that day.

Vincent didn't want to break the moving scene, but he knew Catherine was exhausted and needed rest.

"Father... I'll just walk Catherine home. I won't be long," he said with quiet concern about his parent.

"Of course," Jacob replied. "Dear Catherine, yet again, there are no words to thank you and please, if you notice *any* hint of feeling unwell ---"

"I will see Peter, I promise," she finished his thought with a little smile, glancing at Vincent, reminded of their first conversation when she'd come Below earlier.

They walked further to the few steps leading out of the chamber, when Catherine stepped closer to Jacob. Her face was serious again, sadness setting on it.

"It was a beautiful thing you did for Eric."

Vincent put his hand on Father's shoulder from behind him.

"It was for *all* of us," he said.

Jacob was moved too much to reply, so he just bowed his head slightly.

Then Catherine did something he would never have expected - she gave him a peck on his cheek, before joining Vincent and walking out of the chamber.

Father stood in awe, touched by her spontaneous kind gesture and smiled shyly.

Peter approached him with a grin. "She is really something, isn't she?"

"Yes," Jacob had to admit. "A true wonder..." he added, thinking of how Catherine's presence since she had entered their lives, and especially Vincent's, had made a huge positive impact on them all. Yet again, he felt ashamed of how insensitive he had been towards her at the beginning. Then a sudden thought hit him.

"You actually know Catherine?"

Peter laughed. "Ever since she was a baby! She has always been a lovely girl, but until Friday, I had no idea she knew about your world, though it does explain her change and secretive behaviour in the last year considerably."

Father smiled and nodded knowingly. Then, Peter couldn't help it and asked with interest.

"Since when have they...?" He couldn't finish his thought - he was still struck by the sheer existence of what he saw just a few minutes ago.

Jacob looked at him and smiled. "Since the moment they met."

Peter smiled back at him and something in his heart was telling him that it made perfect sense.

Vincent and Catherine were walking slowly hand in hand towards the threshold. They weren't speaking much, just enjoying the comfort of each other's presence after what had been an emotional roller-coaster for both of them. When they stopped at the threshold, they faced each other, still holding hands.

"Will you be all right?" Vincent asked quietly with care.

She smiled into his bright eyes and nodded.

"Yes... I just need to sleep and accept the reality to process everything," she said, before sinking into his arms with a sigh.

"Will you?" she spoke into his chest, slowly caressing his back with one hand.

"I will... It will take time, but I will," he replied, quietly stroking the back of her head and putting the lightest of kisses on her temple before pulling back.

They looked at each other once more, with still so many words unspoken as always, but they both felt they didn't need to speak - they just knew.

"Get some sleep... Good night," Catherine whispered, slowly letting go of his hands and walking away into the light, before climbing the ladder leading above.

Vincent was watching her disappear and only one thought crossed his mind.

I love you, Catherine...

The alarm clock woke her up at 6.45 and it felt like a hammer to her head. She was tempted to call work and leave a message to Joe that she wouldn't be coming in, but the responsible Catherine Chandler in her won the battle and she slowly dragged herself out of bed. She felt fine, apart from the prevailing lack of sleep and feeling a bit dopey because of it. She noticed no signs of health issues and saw no reason not to go to work. Also, while she was Below, Father had given her a booster shot against the plague, so the risk was minimal. Besides, she would have to explain to Joe why she left work at lunch time on Friday and never returned. He'd left her five messages on her answering machine, but she hadn't had the strength to call him when she returned from Below.

She'd barely entered the DA's office when Joe called at her from across the room.

"Cathy!!"

And here it comes...

"Joe, I'm really sorry...", she said, when they met in front of her desk.

She noticed his deeply worrying look turn to relief and then slipping into his boss role again.

"Where the hell have you been?! And why haven't you called me back??" Joe was really trying hard to hide how afraid he had been for her.

She saw it and felt bad for not being able to be open with him but she smiled.

"I'm really sorry Joe. I had a family emergency and totally forgot about work. I only returned home last night." There, at least she wasn't lying.

Joe observed her for a moment. He knew by now that whenever she disappeared, she mentioned 'family emergency' and it could really mean anything. But her commitment to work and the value of it. also made him know that she would never make an excuse to get out of the office, if there was no important reason behind it. Therefore, he just shook his head before looking at her again, speaking calmer now.

"Is everything okay now? With your... family?" he asked.

She gave him an understanding smile and nodded. "Yes... Thank you."

Joe smiled back at her and turned to leave. "Okay, back to work then, and Radcliffe?"

"Yes, Joe?"

"You look like hell," he said with a grin.

Catherine laughed. She knew she would have been in much more trouble if he hadn't had a soft spot for her. Still, she was grateful to Joe. She felt he sensed more than he ever said, but he never questioned her more than was needed. Always loyal, always trusting, always caring. She was really lucky to have a friend like him.

The hours were going quicker than she thought, as she was working her way through the pile of cases on her desk, when suddenly she noticed someone standing near. She looked up and exclaimed in a surprise.

"Peter!" An expression of worry appeared on her face. "Is everything... okay?"

Peter smiled knowingly.

"Yes, everything is fine, Cathy! Sorry to barge in on you like this but I thought... Maybe I could take you out for lunch? We have a lot to catch up on."

He could see Catherine's face relax in relief and smile. She looked at her watch, it was almost one pm.

"Oh my, where has the time flown?? I am actually starving, I gladly accept your offer."

She grabbed her coat and purse and followed him out.

'*The Jimmy's*' was a small diner on the corner, not far from where Catherine worked. It's interior was nothing extravagant, but cosy - burgundy and cream wallpapered walls, cream tables, burgundy booths, a 60s jukebox in the corner turned up not much, in order not to disturb the customers talking to each other, framed old photographs of baseball players hanging on the walls. And the smell of home made burgers was filling the air. Despite being lunchtime, there were only two more customers on the other side of the diner.

"I have to admit," Peter started, as they sat down in a corner booth away from others. "This would be the last place I would expect seeing *you* lunching."

They both laughed when going through the menus.

"Have I really changed so much?" she asked in amazement.

Peter looked up at her and smiled. "In the best possible way, Cathy... You were always a good girl, kind and nice to everyone. But let's face it, you were more of a..."

"Fashion law queen?" she said and chuckled.

"Sort of," her older companion laughed.

She shook her head and said in a contemplative fashion, "I guess, people change... Events, things change you... Life changes you."

"And certain people change us, too," Peter added knowingly.

Catherine looked into his eyes again and then smiled dreamily. "Yes..."

Then she regained composure and asked. "I guess, you want to know ... how can it be that Vincent and I..."

Peter interrupted her quickly with a smile. "I know *how*, Cathy, trust me. He was always a wonderful boy and he grew up into the finest man I've ever known. The fact that he is... unique... doesn't change anything about it."

Catherine was moved and relieved that she didn't have to defend her feelings in front of him. Only someone with a pure, kind and open heart could understand and Peter was all of that.

"I'm so happy that you two crossed paths, you really deserve each other... You can't imagine how often, ever since you grew up, I wished that you could get to know him. I knew he could do so much good for you."

He took her hand and continued. "I've seen you struggle in the past few years, Cathy. The men in your past life, all trying to own you, to overpower you, to have you as a presentable other half, or turn you into their own image.... And I've seen you suffer through it, unable to break through that barrier that was keeping you from being yourself, from living a life that you desired and deserved. I even tried to tell your father a few times, but he seemed blinded by his belief on what he thought was best for you."

Catherine felt her eyes getting misty, then she said quietly. "That night, when they attacked me...." she swallowed, "it was Vincent who found me in the park..."

Peter's eyes smiled as she continued.

"He brought me to Father... Jacob... and they saved my life... I was bleeding heavily, there was no time to bring me to hospital, Jacob had to treat me right away. And so I stayed there, recovering for those ten days that I was missing."

She shook her head and smiled. "It's strange, everybody thought I was missing and meanwhile...." She looked at Peter again. "I was found."

He understood perfectly what she meant and squeezed her hand tighter.

“Ever since I first heard Vincent’s voice, I... I've felt safer and warmer than any time before.... The way he was speaking to me, looking after me, reading to me, feeding me, *listening* to me.... He opened a new world to me, the world of compassion, unselfish care for others, devotion to what is right, appreciating the simple things in life we so often take for granted... He gave me the strength to believe in myself, that I could be whatever I want to be and use my strength in the best way to help others... I've never felt like that before. My heart... shifted before I could even understand the full impact of it... He saved my life in every possible way.”

Catherine sighed and was trying to think how to explain the next part, while Peter was silently observing her with a lingering smile never leaving his face.

“I can imagine. God knows this world needs more people like him,” he then said quietly.

“Yes, very much...”

She looked passed him outside the window and he could see so much love in her eyes that it made his ageing heart warm.

“So that’s the reason why you left your father’s company?” Peter asked.

“Yes.... I realised I could do so much more, in a way I wanted to give back to those who need it most.”

The waitress came and they ordered their meal. When she left, Catherine told Peter about the extraordinary bond between Vincent and her. The power of it stunned him, but in the best way. Then, while they were eating, Catherine told him about how she was spending time with Vincent, they shared a few stories about him and Catherine felt like a giant burden had been lifted from her heart. She finally had someone Above who she could talk to about the man she loved, and it made her feel truly happy.

Just before they were about to leave, Catherine suddenly looked sad.

“What is it, Cathy?” Peter asked concerned.

“I wish... I wish I could tell Daddy about Vincent...”

Peter sighed and nodded. “I know.... But I’m afraid he’s not in the state of being able to understand... *yet*.”

Catherine looked at him, her look questioning. “Do you think he ever will be?”

“I hope so... For both of your sakes,” he replied, smiling at her and marvelling at what a miracle a true pure and deep love can be to cross and push all the boundaries life poses on it.

When Catherine came home from work three days later, she felt much better. The talk with Peter had truly lifted her spirit and it felt wonderful to talk about Vincent with someone Above. She wasn’t alone on her side of the river any more - and it felt wonderful.

She had just made a fresh pot of herbal tea when her senses sharpened and right afterwards, she heard the tap on the French door. Her heart leapt and she almost ran to open the door. When she did, she fell into his arms right away.

“Catherine...,” Vincent whispered.

The sound of his voice speaking her name made her tremble, as it always did. She pulled him closer and breathed in the beloved scent of him.

“I felt you were getting better during the day. I’m glad,” he said gently into her hair.

She pulled back to look into his warm deep eyes. “Peter took me out for lunch and we talked about you.” She couldn’t stop smiling.

A wave of love washed over Vincent from her heart and he smiled shyly, lowering his eyes for a brief moment.

"I hope you didn't linger on the bad things," he said, with a hint of teasing his voice.

Catherine chuckled and took his hand and rubbing her cheek on the soft furry side of it, closed her eyes for a few seconds.

"There are no bad things," she said quietly and released his hand before walking over to the balcony half-wall, leaning her back against it.

Vincent followed her, his heart touched deeply by her words and the loving little gesture. He leaned with his back against the wall too and kept watching her.

"I hope you managed to get some proper sleep," she said with a worried look.

Vincent face looked better, in fact. The pale colour had disappeared, his cheeks back to the soft bronze shade and his eyes looked brighter, sparkle having returned to them. He looked almost his usual beautiful, healthy self again.

"Yes, I did, I feel much better now," he reassured her.

"I'm glad... How are the others doing?"

"There are only three more patients, but Father reckons they could be released from Hospital Chamber by tomorrow." A quiet laugh escaped his throat. "And Mouse is already planning his new project - an expansion of Hospital Chamber."

Catherine laughed and warmed at the memory of the genius restless young man with the eternal boy in his heart. The expression on her face turned more serious then.

"What are you thinking, Catherine?" Vincent asked.

"Poor man... To have come so far only to have his dream turn to ashes.... Even if Dimitry had lived, he would have found his Anna too late."

"Perhaps he knew that, even when he first received her letter," said Vincent, looking ahead in thought.

"And he came anyway...," Catherine said wonderingly, her eyes never leaving his face.

"He loved her," Vincent said, looking back at her. "He had no choice."

"Even though he already knew?"

Vincent sighed and looked deep into her green eyes. "One either moves towards love or away from it, Catherine, there is no other direction..."

They gazed at each other and both felt their hearts beating in unison, in the faster pace that is so characteristic and inevitable for those whose hearts are intertwined.

Their bodies moved towards one another like magnets and when they finally broke their gaze, their faces touched lightly, brushing cheeks, as they ended up in a gentle but firm embrace, both feeling eternally grateful for the chance they had been given - the chance to move towards love.

END