

TO KEEP LOVERS APART

(China Moon episode expansion)

by Michaela Buzsaki Struchova

(Author's Note: some dialogue was were used from the Beauty and the Beast series episode 'China Moon')

"They found our hidden doors and secret passage ways... Both groups penetrated to the tunnels."

Jacob took heavy steps down the stairs in the round base of his study, with Catherine and Vincent sitting quietly at the table. Henry, Lin and her grandfather gathered not far away from them.

"Are you sure?" Catherine asked, worriedly.

"Jamie saw them pass... For so long, we have been safe here, and now they bring their violence to our home."

Jacob sat down heavily into his usual chair, then covered his face with his hand in despair.

Complete silence filled the room for a moment. Then, Vincent stood up and approached his father, laying his hand on his shoulder in support.

"They've left us no choice," he said quietly.

Father looked up at him, and in a second he understood the decision his son had just taken.

"None," he said, with a heavy heart.

Vincent turned around, grabbing his cloak.

"If I'm not back within the hour, you must flee," he said, matter of factly, putting his cloak around his shoulders in one swing.

Catherine realised in horror what he was about to do, and an indescribable fear struck her heart as she rose from her chair. The man she loved was going into an almost certain death, trying to stop the intruders wanting to harm the people he loved most, to protect the only home he'd ever had. Yes, he'd gone into a fight many times before, but this was different. This time, he would be standing against immaculately-trained Chinese warriors, whose ancient martial arts technique was literally as deadly as their swords and other weapons. Very few had even a slight chance against them. And although possessing extraordinary strength, he was alone.

As Vincent was about to pass her by, Catherine grabbed the edge of his cloak, pressing her hand on his chest. He stopped sharply and looked at her.

"Come back to me, Vincent," she said, with determined but terrified look in her eyes. She was sure he could feel her heart racing.

Vincent didn't reply, just held her gaze for a moment, then turned around and decidedly walked up the stairs. He vanished from everybody's sight in the dim light behind the wall.

Catherine stood in her spot for a minute, then sank into her chair again, burying her face in her hands, trying to compose herself, to calm down - for Vincent's sake.

Dear God, please, let him come back safely.....

Suddenly, she felt someone's gentle hand on her shoulder. It was Jacob, who saw her despair. At first, he wanted to say something to cheer her up, but then realised that all words were pointless and that they both feared the same thing - that Vincent would never return.

Catherine looked at him and he saw that her eyes were welling up, although she tried to fight it. She tried to smile at him, but she couldn't hide the emotional turmoil within her, and it took her an immense effort not to break down in front of him.

Jacob sensed her upheaval. After all this time, he finally understood why his son loved this woman so much. He knew by now that she was truly in love with Vincent and saw him as who, and not what, he was. It was her deep care for people, genuine feelings for him, her empathy, kindness, and high level of understanding, her will to sacrifice everything to protect Vincent and his world.

Above all was her strength. When everything around was crumbling down, she always tried to remain calm and keep herself together.

Just like now - a lesser woman would probably break down and cry, but not Catherine. Even with misty eyes, she still wasn't losing hope and didn't want to cause additional worry to others by losing her nerve and crying. Her caring stood above her own fears and sorrows. Jacob had to admit to himself that Catherine was truly one of the most remarkable people he had ever known. After all his doubts at the beginning, he was truly grateful that she and Vincent's paths had crossed that terrible yet memorable night. For in many ways, they were so alike and so right for each other.

He couldn't help but fondly stroke Catherine's head.

She smiled at him through silent tears and he saw in her eyes how grateful she was. It was almost as if she finally got his true blessing, Suddenly, he felt as if the memory of a warm summer morning sun had spread around his heart and he smiled back at her.

Minutes were passing, and Catherine was getting more and more restless. She started pacing back and forth across the library, her mind feverishly trying to keep it together, to help Vincent focus and not endanger him by distracting him with her fear. She wasn't sure she was succeeding but she was trying hard anyway.

Jacob had already given orders to the tunnel dwellers to prepare themselves for the possible evacuation and that they needed to be ready in an hour should it become necessary. He was back in the study now, watching Catherine pacing around almost like a lion trapped in a cage.

Dear God, she and Vincent really were so alike, he thought and couldn't help but to smile to himself, though the smile vanished quickly when he thought of the danger his son was facing this very moment. He shuddered at the thought of what might be going on in the tunnels further away from them.

Catherine stopped pacing and glanced at her watch. 42 minutes had gone by... *Please, please come back to me....*

Suddenly, she felt it, a faint warm pull at her heart - she felt him close....

Quickly, she turned around and was staring at the entrance to the library, holding her breath.

And then his tall majestic figure appeared in the entrance.

He looked tired but unharmed.

Catherine let her breath out louder than she intended and as he reached the bottom of the stairs, instantly forgetting about the presence of others, she ran into his arms. They were holding each other tight, and this time, she couldn't hold back tears. But she knew it was safe now.

"Vincent!" she whispered into his chest.

He held her very close, his cheek resting at her head, breathing in the familiar flowery smell of her hair. He was home again...

"Catherine..." he whispered.

It was all he was able to say. He was tired from the fight (he had defeated five armed warriors, two more had died by the hands of their own men) and the mixed feelings of frustration from what he had to do yet again, and relief that his loved ones are safe, were too overwhelming.

He glanced up and saw Father looking at him with relief... and love, as strong as a father's love can be. He gave him a nod to confirm that he had succeeded and that their home was safe for all of them once more. And then he just surrendered to Catherine's warm embrace, his heartbeat steadied itself with hers, and he finally felt at peace again.

"I felt so helpless like never before..." Catherine said, when they sat down in his chamber afterwards.

"I could feel it, I could feel your fear before I left," Vincent replied. "And then all I could think of was protecting you, protecting everyone I love, no matter what the cost."

She pressed his hand strongly - they had been holding hands since they left Father's study, as if afraid to let go of each other again. Then she brought his hand close to her cheek and rubbed it against the soft fur on the back of his hand.

Nothing more needed to be said. Their looks spoke silently for a moment, then Vincent put his arms around her and pulled her close, pressing a gentle kiss on the top of her head. Catherine embraced his waist, leaning her head on his chest, closed her eyes and smiled.

Catherine couldn't stop thinking at Lin and Henry's wedding, which they had attended in Father's large study earlier that day. Lin chose Catherine to be her maid of honour, and for that occasion, Catherine had been dressed in a beautiful, traditional Chinese-style purple dress, with her hair pulled tight and decorated by a small branch of white flowers.

When Lin and Catherine were getting ready before the wedding, they had talked together happily. First, Catherine helped Lin into her wedding dress and with her hair, then Lin assisted Catherine with her dress and hair. As she was pinning the flowers on the side of Catherine's head, she suddenly got more serious and looked at her in the mirror observing her intensely.

"What you share with Vincent is extraordinary..."

Catherine froze for a second, then tried to understand how Lin meant it. The younger woman continued.

"I heard from my grandfather that there is a woman who is very dear to Vincent, but when you came to me for the first time, I didn't even think it could be you. And although I love Vincent dearly as a brother, and he is one of the finest men I have ever known, I ... well, I never believed any woman could ever love him in *that* way... But the day when he went to..." she paused as if not wanting to spoil the happy day with a memory of that terrifying moment. "When the danger came to the tunnels, I realised for the first time that the woman is you."

Catherine smiled a little and turned around to face Lin.

"I know that for most people it might seem a bit... surreal but--"

"No, that's not what I meant!" Lin interrupted her and went on. "I think it is absolutely wonderful that you two found each other, and that you found love that is so deep and so pure... and so visible to everyone else," Lin concluded with raised eyebrows and a chuckle.

Catherine smiled. "I think I lost control of myself for a bit that day..." she said shyly.

"It is like a vibrating light that is breaking through the darkest cloud," Lin added with a warm smile.

Suddenly, Catherine's face grew sad as she lowered her eyes. Lin knelt to her side and asked what was wrong. Catherine looked at her and sighed.

"Vincent is the most incredible, beautiful and most human human being I have ever known, and every moment we share together is so precious and special. and I love him with all that I am..."

"But?" Lin sensed there was something more.

"But we've had to face so many obstacles... I wish for so much more... for him... for *us*..."

The young Chinese woman nodded with a smile.

"Patience is power; with time and patience the mulberry leaf becomes a silk gown."

Catherine looked into the wise brown eyes and smiled.

"Then I shall make sure I am patient for as long as it takes, for I am very fond of silk gowns..."

Standing next to the bride at the marriage ceremony in Father's study, Catherine couldn't help but to think of that old Chinese proverb again, and her head turned up to the staircase, where her gaze met that of the man she loved.

Vincent's majestic figure was standing above them. He was dressed in his festive white ruffled shirt and masterfully hand-crafted black leather waist-coat and dark brown pants, and although he was happy for the young couple, he couldn't take his eyes off the woman in purple standing next to Lin.

"Your love is the sum of your being, it must be cherished until the end of your days. Let your courage to love serve as inspiration to all who climb the highest mountains and cross the great waters in love's name..."

The Chinese priest's words were resonating strongly in Catherine's ears, and as she saw Vincent watching her during these words, she knew he was thinking and feeling the same.

Later that night, they stood on Catherine's balcony, both quiet for some time, both in a melancholic mood.

"You looked... so beautiful," Vincent started after a while, his eyes never leaving hers. "For a moment... I allowed myself to dream," he said sadly and bowed his head for a moment.

Catherine took a step towards him and said in the same tone. "So did I..."

"They have a lifetime together...", Vincent continued. "Our time is always so measured, minutes, seconds..." His voice trailed off as he looked into her eyes.

"Then we must learn to measure our lifetime in another way..." Her voice broke at the end and her big eyes welled up.

Vincent let out a sigh, closing his eyes for a few seconds before opening them again.

"Yes."

He stepped towards her and embraced her gently, while Catherine laid her head on his chest, put her arms around his waist and let him comfort her with his warmth. Yes, this was one of the moments measuring their lifetime - and she was grateful for it.

END