THE TRUTH BEYOND KNOWLEDGE

(To Reign in Hell episode expansion)

Michaela Buzsaki Struchova

They were floating on the underground river in a raft. Catherine, wrapped in his cloak, sitting on one end, curiously observed the giant rocky walls alongside the river, the tall stone arches across it, the many shades of red and orange colours reflecting in the air.

Vincent was standing opposite her, skilfully using a long paddle to push them forward every now and then, more for keeping the direction than forcing movement, since the current took its own course, taking them slowly towards the river bank on the other side. He couldn't stop looking at Catherine, in a very adorable, almost boyish way, trying to let the feeling sink in that she was finally safe, and he hadn't lost her.

After a while, he grabbed into the side pocket of his padded vest and pulled out the crystal on the gold chain, which he gave Catherine for the first anniversary of their meeting. He held it out to her and said.

"I found this on my way to you."

Catherine sighed with gratitude and he saw an immense relief and joy written all over her face.

"Oh! I thought it was gone forever…" She held it tightly in the palm of her hand and gave Vincent a loving gaze and smile.

Then, Vincent's expression turned from an adoring one to a worried one, as he put the paddle inside the raft and leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knee. He focused on her from below his eyebrows.

"Catherine," he said and she looked up at him shifting her attention from the crystal. "On this journey, for the first time, I felt as if you were somehow lost to me… I knew you were in danger, yet I could sense no fear…"

Catherine could see he was really worried about the sudden seeming loss of their bond.

"I *was* afraid, Vincent, but I couldn't allow myself to *feel* the fear," she said calmly.

Suddenly, it dawned on him. "You didn't want to draw me…"

"I couldn't."

Her look was almost painful, expressing all the fear for him and the unspoken feelings she was suppressing while being in captivity.

"You would sacrifice so much…"

Catherine's eyes were radiating pure love and a little smile appeared on her lips. "I would sacrifice everything for you..."

Vincent lowered his eyes humbled and at the same time deep in thought.

Then Catherine continued. "What Paracelsus said, about your past…"

Vincent didn't let her finish the thought and looked into her compassionate eyes again.

"Before I left, Father told me something which I am just now beginning to understand."

Catherine tilted her head slightly with interest.

"He said there is a truth beyond knowledge, beyond everything we could ever hope to know…"

Her lips stretched into a wide all-knowing smile. "Yes…"

"And that truth… is love…," Vincent concluded with a soft smile and his blue eyes piercing Catherine's in a way that made her tingle all over.

She felt blush rising to her cheeks, lowered her eyes shyly. She briefly glanced into his eyes again before looking away with a shy but wide and heartfelt smile.

When she thought back at that moment, later, she remembered how utterly adorable and attractive Vincent looked, and it was mighty difficult for Catherine to compose herself again.

When she thought of the men who briefly or for a longer time appeared in her life apart from Vincent, and although she felt drawn to a couple of them for various reasons, the images of all of them faded in an instant, in comparison to the one of Vincent. This majestic, beautiful, enigmatic, chivalric wise man, the epitome of kindness, generosity, care, extreme modesty, loyalty, empathy and above all *love*.…

Moreover, her, THEIR feelings were reaching far beyond innocent affection/ They were reflecting and transcending the strongest and closest bond two people in love can ever have.

But compose herself, she did, as they had two days of journey back ahead of them. She knew it wouldn't be an easy one, and yet she was immensely looking forward to it, because it would mean two full days and nights they could spend together - alone…

Vincent got out of the raft with one silent soft jump and fastened it at a heavy rock on the river bank. He reached for the lantern in the raft, putting it next to him on the stony platform, then for his bag, hanging it over his broad shoulder. Then he offered his hand to Catherine, to help her out of the raft, too. She gladly accepted and stepped over the raft edge, though losing balance slightly and landing directly in Vincent's arms. For a few moments, they remained standing still in this sudden and very close embrace, their faces almost touching, as Vincent had lowered himself a bit when catching Catherine.

They could feel each other's breath on their faces and the gaze between them was one first of surprise, then of love and then it deepened and .…

Vincent could feel his heart racing, blood rushing to his head, heat rising all over his body, his breathing getting heavier.

Catherine felt flushed, her breathing got shorter and heavier too, her heart pounded. She couldn't help herself and lowered her eyes to linger on Vincent's unusual half-opened mouth. As if drawn by a magnet, his eyes rested on her full lips too and for a few seconds, both of them shared the same burning desire...

Suddenly, Vincent swallowed hardly and looked down to the ground, trying to compose himself, straightening his posture and slowly let go of Catherine. She blinked and looked down, trying to cover her attempt to bring her breathing back to normal, but she knew Vincent could feel her increased heartbeat. Just a few seconds ago, she saw the desire in his eyes too. *Why didn't you…??* she thought.

Then, she said with a slight pang at her heart but a shy smile on her face. "So, where do we go from here?"

Vincent gave her a very curious look and she realised the double meaning of her question.

"I mean... to get back to the others..." She blinked with a nervous smile again.

His lips widened lightly into that irresistible calm smile she loved so much. He said, taking her hand in his, the other holding the lantern already, "Follow me."

She looked into his darkened blue eyes and replied in a whisper, "Anywhere..."

It seemed like the tunnels were never-ending. They walked for miles through dimly lit corridors, surrounded by fog rising from the ground everywhere around them. A few times, they had to walk up tiring, long stony staircases and cross a wooden bridge across a deep dark abyss, which made Catherine shudder a bit although she had no fear of heights.

Vincent never let go of her hand, offering her the feeling of security, and also because he himself wanted to be sure all the time that she is safe. When, after walking for most of the day with only short breaks for resting, they reached a small platform surrounded by dark brown rocky walls with only one tunnel leading out of it, Vincent dropped the lantern and his bag.

"It's late, we'll stay here overnight and continue in the morning."

Catherine was astonished how he could know what time it was, when he never had a watch on him and the light (or darkness) in the tunnels seemed always the same to her. She gave him an admiring look.

Vincent smiled and added. "The changing shades of light in the corridors, Catherine, the slightly dropping temperature, although we're going upwards, my inner sense of time and also..."

"...you're tired," Catherine finished for him, with understanding, and her lips broke into a wide smile.

He looked down, chuckled and looked back at her again. "Yes, that too."

Catherine felt a sudden urge to stroke his face. Even in the dim light, she could suddenly see that it was paler than usual and his eyes were not as sparkly as always, with slightly darker rings under them.

He had endured so much time and time again just to save her from harm. She always thought of him as of the noble knight, always strong, always present, always ready to protect the ones he loved. She realised that at times, she forgot he was only a human, too - with his insecurities, fears and between all the physical work he was helping with in the tunnels, and rescuing her, he had the right to be tired, too.

She gave in to her feelings, sharing a tender look and smile with him, slowly raised her hand and cupped his stubbly cheek gently stroking it with her thumb. Vincent sighed slightly but didn't pull back. He closed his eyes briefly and when he opened them, Catherine's hand moved very slowly away from his face again.

"You really need some rest, Vincent. You look exhausted...," Catherine said very quietly. Her deep concern for him touched him his heart.

"So do you, Catherine," he replied with a smile, and pulled out a blanket and a small comforter from his bag and stretched it out on the ground next to the wall and laying the comforter on one end of it.

Then his look turned serious and almost apologetic.

"I'm afraid this and a couple of biscuits is all I can offer you, as we have no wood to start a fire, until we reach the emergency supply station further up, tomorrow."

Catherine dropped down to her knees on the blanket and stretched out her hand to him.

"All I need is here with me," she said with a smile looking in his eyes letting him know biscuits were forgotten in her mind already.

After a moment of hesitation, Vincent relaxed and took her hand and went down too. He stretched out along the wall pulling Catherine carefully in an embrace, her back gently pressing against his chest and head resting on the comforter but still staying close to his. He wrapped his cloak around her sharing his body heat with her. Catherine sighed with contentment and entwined her hands with his in the embrace. She closed her eyes and smiled.

"Good night, Catherine," he whispered tenderly into her hair.

"Good night, Vincent...," she replied half asleep already.

The last thing Catherine felt before drifting off was a long touch of his warm lips on her temple.

When she woke up, she found herself laying on the blanket along the wall wrapped toe to neck in Vincent's cloak, with the lantern casting its steady light not far from her. A cold shiver went through her when she realised Vincent wasn't there with her. For a brief moment, she was worried but then calmed down, thinking that if anything happened, he wouldn't have tucked her in so carefully. Her thoughts were confirmed when she saw Vincent entering their overnight resting place again holding a leather covered flask.

"Good morning, Catherine," he said tenderly.

"Good morning," she replied, with a loving smile that trembled a little.

"I went out to get some water while you were still sleeping. There is a spring we found nearby on our way to you, actually Winslow found it and ..."

His voice broke in the middle of the sentence and the expression in his face changed as he lowered his eyes to the ground.

Catherine felt a wave of sadness going over her heart and she knew what he was feeling at that moment. They had passed Winslow's grave the day before. It had been a very emotional moment for both of them, although Vincent only told her what had happened, leaving his own feelings aside.

"Vincent...," she whispered, stood up and approached him slowly. Then she reached out to touch is chin with her fingers and lift it up to look into his eyes. She saw tears in them.

"It is my fault, Catherine..."

Vincent couldn't hide his feeling of guilt as a tear ran down his cheek. She gently wiped it away with her thumb and caressed his cheek.

"No it is not, Vincent," she contradicted, quietly but firmly. "Winslow came with you of his own will because you were his friend. He cared for you very much and wanted to help you and me any way he could. You would have done the same for him if he needed help. I know that and you know that too. He believed in something which is high above anything else. It's called LOVE."

Vincent shut his eyes for a moment, took a deep breath and then let out a sigh. When he opened the eyes again, Catherine noticed he was calmer and there was a certain acceptance of the truth of what she said.

"The ever present truth beyond knowledge," he said quietly with a hint of a sad smile.

Catherine smiled back at him.

"In any shape and form," she added, and in his sapphire eyes and through their bond, she could read his gratitude and love.

She slid her arms around his waist, and closing her eyes she leaned her forehead on his chest.

Vincent sighed again, put his arms gently around her, bowed his head and planted a lingering kiss on the top of her head.

Catherine felt a deep sense of pleasure and joy and smiled widely, then she put a kiss on his chest before looking at him again and slowly letting go of their embrace but still holding his hands in hers.

So many words were hanging in the air unspoken between them, and yet, they both knew what they were. They never really needed words for communicating - they spoke through their feelings, their eyes, their connection, which bound them by their hearts, souls and thoughts.

Vincent raised his hand slowly to her face and after a few seconds of hesitation, he gently stroked her cheek with his thumb, never breaking their eye contact. Catherine leaned her face into his palm as he did that, briefly closing her eyes.

"We should get going... you must be cold. The movement will warm you again," Vincent said then, having noticed her light trembling every now and then.

"Yes, we should...," she replied, returning back to reality, thinking to herself *All I need to be warm is to feel your arms around me…*

Vincent sensed her thought from the way she was looking at him, and with a smile, he pulled her close again, wrapping his arms around her with love. Her head rested below his chin.

"But first, have some water and biscuits, please," Vincent said after a little while, when gently pulling back. He took a small package wrapped in linen cloth out of his bag and handed it to her along with the flask.

She gratefully accepted them. There were only five round oat biscuits and after she ate one, she realised Vincent was just sitting on the blanket near her leaning against the wall watching her peacefully.

"What about you, Vincent?" she asked.

"I'm not hungry," he said, with a quick smile, but a sudden quiet growl of his stomach betrayed him.

Catherine suddenly understood that he was leaving the last food he had for her. She felt deeply touched by his loving gesture, but in a moment, she took one more biscuit and was handing the remaining three to Vincent.

"Catherine, really...," he tried to protest, but she didn't want to hear a word of it and the look in her eyes was a resolved one.

"Vincent, eat."

He shook his head and took the biscuits from her but breaking one in two halves and handed it back to her.

"At least a fair share," he said, with an almost teasing smile from below his eyebrows.

She chuckled and took the half from him. As she did, their fingers touched and for a moment, their hands remained still, before they pulled back and ate the rest of their modest breakfast in silence.

There was only one more difficult passage before them that day - climbing the rope up to the platform leading through the parts of the upper tunnels more familiar to them.

More difficult for Catherine, that is, as the last time she had climbed a rope was in high school, as she informed Vincent when they reached it.

"I can carry you, Catherine, you just hold on to me from behind," Vincent said, as he had been planning to do that anyway.

But Catherine shook her head.

"No, I can do it, Vincent. It's a bit damp, so it might be slippery meaning more dangerous if you carry more weight than yourself," she said, after examining the end of the rope with her fingers.

What she didn't say was how extremely tired he looked, although he had been trying to conceal it from her. And although she herself felt shattered, she would never endanger Vincent if she could prevent it.

Vincent touched the rope and realised she was right. It felt damper than when he climbed down it a couple of days before. *Maybe the colder temperature*, he was thinking for himself.

Then he looked at Catherine and said. "All right, you go first and I'll follow you."

She smiled at him, took a deep breath in and out and put her hands on the rope. Focusing on it, she asked Vincent, "Any last minute tips?"

The corners of his mouth turned slightly up as he spoke. "Yes. Keep wrapping the rope around one of your feet when pulling yourself up – and... try not to fall."

She turned her head, gave him an incredulous look, and tried to contain her laughter. His voice when he'd said the last part sounded almost cheeky and she liked that.

Vincent felt her bemusement and was content with himself - he wanted her to relax, as she would need to use all her strength to pull herself up into the height of about four metres. Being too nervous wouldn't be beneficial for her in that respect.

Catherine couldn't look away from his eyes for a moment, seeing how their blue warmth was smiling at her. The sparks have returned to them, too. *Oh God, I didn't know it was possible to love him even more…* she thought before sobering up and focusing back on the rope again.

The first couple of pulls were difficult, Vincent helped her to keep her feet tucked firmly in the rope, but then she got the grip of the technique and slowly but surely was making her way up to the platform. When she disappeared into the mist floating above them, Vincent started climbing himself. In his mind, he had to marvel at Catherine's physical strength.

Those delicate small hands are stronger than one would think.

When they were both at the top, breathing heavily, trying to recover their strength, Vincent gave her an admiring look. Catherine felt a little blush in her cheek and lowered her eyes shyly away from Vincent's.

"I wasn't sure I still had it in me," she said with a little smile, trying to sound composed. She started rubbing her hands unconsciously and suddenly winced in pain.

"Catherine..." Vincent immediately approached her, took her hands carefully in his and looked at her palms seeing slight grazes on the skin of her left hand. He looked worried, then pulled a square linen handkerchief out of his vest pocket. He folded it a few times to form a long shaped bandage of it and wrapped it gently around Catherine's hand. His lowered head was very close to hers and she could feel the warmth radiating from his face on her own one. She trembled slightly at the careful and tender touch of his warm hands.

"I haven't used it," he said reassuringly, seeing her mouth half-opened and thinking she might have doubts about the cleanliness of the handkerchief.

Catherine's look at him was suddenly deep and intense.

"I assure you, Vincent, that's the *last* thing I'm thinking of right now...," she replied, as if in a trance.

His eyes focused properly on hers again, realised the nearness of her face, and when her look dropped down to his mouth, he suddenly knew what she meant. as his heart rate increased along with hers.

I feel you, Catherine… Trust me, I'm dying to do it but….

He tried to steady his shorter breaths, fighting his own desire. Finally, he decided on a compromise and lowered his head to place a soft kiss in the bandaged palm of her hand. As he did, he could feel her tremble again. Then he continued gazing at her and stepped back a little releasing her hand.

Catherine let a sigh out after she held her breath at Vincent's kiss and understood he was trying to control himself.

Forgive me, I just… I got lost in your touch… It's the most beautiful sensation I've ever known…

She tried to project her feelings to his heart through their bond. When his face relaxed and he gave her one of his lovely shy smiles, lowering his eyes for a few seconds, she knew he'd understood.

Finally, he said with the usual calm velvet gravelly voice that could melt butter, reaching for her injury free right hand.

"Come, it's time to go home."

Catherine obeyed him more than gladly, with a smile thinking *Home is where the heart is and I'm walking right next to mine now.*

After passing the emergency supply station, Narcissa´s chambers and familiar places on the second half of their journey back to the upper tunnels, there was the second peaceful night, which they spent in each other's arms again. They finally walked into Father's chamber on the late morning of the third day since Vincent saved Catherine from the retribution act of Paracelsus, as the dark man called it himself.

When Jacob saw their familiar figures in the entrance to his two storeyed chamber, he rose from his chair as quick as his achy leg allowed, grabbed his walking stick and started towards them.

"Vincent! Catherine! Thank God!" He was beaming with relief and joy embracing Catherine first and kissing her on her cheek and then Vincent, taking his head in his hands and putting a kiss on his son's forehead.

"You have no idea how glad I am to see you both...," he said and they could see his eyes were glistening.

"It's good to be back home, Father," Vincent said with genuine gratitude.

Jacob's face faded into a nervous expression suddenly.

"Paracelsus...?"

Vincent said seriously but calmly. "When he didn't achieve what he wanted, he disappeared before I could do anything."

Jacob sighed worriedly. "I guess we can only hope his manic desire for ruling over our world will fade away."

You don't really believe that… The same thought crossed both Catherine's and Vincent's minds. But they didn't want to cause him more stress and kept their thought to themselves.

"I... I'm so sorry about Winslow, Father…" Vincent said quietly, his voice full of shame, bowing his head deep down, trying to hide the tears threatening to spill.

Jacob gently took his son's face in his hands again, forcing him to look into his eyes and truly hear what he was about to tell him.

"It is *not* your fault, Vincent," he said firmly. "Winslow cherished your friendship, he loved you, and he loved Catherine. He would have done anything for you, just like all of us. It was his choice to help you and you did all you could to protect him."

"I will be trying to tell this to myself for the rest of my life, Father...," Vincent replied quietly, his eyes glistening.

Luckily, the doctor in Jacob prevailed, and he started inquiring about their physical state. It seemed as if things were getting back to normal again.

After they both had a bath and change of clothes (Mary provided Catherine with one of the spare dresses of her own and brought some of Vincent's to him before his bath), they reached Vincent's chamber. They found that a few candles were lit, illuminating the familiar place with warm light, reflecting in the yellow and green colours of the stained glass window and spreading warmth and comfort straight into their hearts.

"Mary," Vincent said with a smile in his voice. "Every time I go away, she always makes sure that I can return from darkness into the light."

Catherine noticed the warmth in his voice. She knew by now that Mary was the closest to a mother figure that Vincent had ever had. He held her in high regard and felt genuine love and respect for her.

She smiled and suddenly felt very tired, although it was not even noon and she yawned.

Vincent turned to look at her as she said apologetically.

"I'm sorry, I guess it's the long walking, my feet are actually killing me too," Catherine laughed.

He smiled and his deep blue eyes were overflowing with love and care. He pulled her towards his bed, took off her trainers, making her lay down and covering her carefully with his quilted blanket, tucking her in gently.

Catherine didn't protest at all, her body was too tired and also, she was truly enjoying Vincent's silent but gentle care for her.

Her eyes met his and no words were needed as she reached for his hand pulling it to her cheek, leaning it to the furry back of the hand with a wide smile and closing eyes for a moment.

Vincent's heart bathed in this loving gesture and it was filled with so much more that he could ever be able to express in words.

"Rest now," she heard his quiet voice say. Her eyelids started feeling heavy.

"Don't go, please...," she murmured, already dozing off.

"I won't...," Vincent whispered. Seeing she had drifted into the land of dreams, he leaned slowly over her face and put a soft kiss on her forehead. Then he gazed for a while at the beautiful features of her rosy pink face, the delicate shape of her full lips, the strands of dark blond hair falling freely around her face spread on the pillow.

With a quiet sigh and a smile, he sat down in his velvet padded high-chair facing the bed, curled up as much as he could into a comfortable position, shut his eyes and fell asleep almost immediately.

When William stopped at the entrance to the chamber carrying a tray full of food and a large teapot with cups and saucers, he saw two people sleeping peacefully - one in the bed and one in the chair. He had to smile when he noticed that both of them were smiling in their sleep.

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