Two Years Ago… Tonight…

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Note: Some dialogue was taken from the episode 'The Watcher' from the TV series 'Beauty and the Beast' written by Linda Campanelli and M. M. Shelly Moore.

Catherine lit the last candle in the living room and dreamily blew out the flame of the lighter. When she turned her head, she saw him standing at the balcony door.

Her heart skipped a beat, and quickly - not caring about how obvious her excitement - she started towards his direction. She slowed down only when she approached the half-opened balcony door. She couldn't wipe the smile off her face, though. The pure sight of him stirred so many emotions in her every time they met. And the longer they knew each other, the more beautiful he appeared to her.

This night was no different. When she stopped right in from of him, opening the door to the fullest, words failed her utterly. His usual dark cloak over his shoulders framing his festive white ruffled shirt under black waist-coat with broad shoulders, black pants with a silver-buckled belt - all of it was confirming the fact that tonight was a special night for him, too. And the way he was looking at her - drinking the sight of her without uttering a sound, only with an enigmatic smile on his face - left her almost breathless.

"Two years ago… tonight," she said eventually, still smiling and returning his gaze.

Vincent remained silent, but his magnetic blue eyes were expressing all the unspoken words for him. There was love, total devotion, gratitude, joy, wonder… He glanced behind her into her apartment, seeing the sea of candle lights, posing an unspoken question.

Catherine understood instantly and said with a slight hesitation, unknowing what reaction to expect from him.

"I thought maybe we could go inside… by the fire…"

She was half-expecting him to say *Better not, Catherine…* or *We shouldn't…*

What he did instead was bowing his head slightly and lowered his eyes for a few seconds. Then, he moved them slowly up to meet her look again, in an almost seductive way, still without uttering a single word.

Catherine could barely believe it, but then, she heard herself saying in hope, pushing it even further.

"It's warm…."

A tiny hint of a confident smile appeared on his lips. It enlightened his face even more than the candles, and she found herself totally under his spell, enchanted, feeling butterflies all over.

I swear I have never seen a more beautiful man in my life…

And truly, Vincent looked so… irresistible.

Of course, Vincent wasn't blind; his ability to read between the lines from any given context was almost impeccable. Even without the bond, he could tell what mood she was in, by just looking at her, and what dress and look she had chosen tonight.

Catherine usually wore a very romantic style for special occasions or concerts with him, formal office style for work, or her comfortable domestic style. All these were in complete contrast to the dark blue long-sleeved

dress she was wearing that night. It was reaching just below her knees, with a single brooch on the front neck part and a deep open back. Her by now longer hair was loosely falling over her shoulders, with a slightly messy fringe - which was usually neatly styled to the side.

All that was speaking volumes about how she wanted to look tonight. For him. And he had to confess to himself, she succeeded in every way, and he felt utterly helpless to fight what it was doing to him…

He lowered his eyes for a few seconds again before lifting them to her. With that little mysterious smile on his lips, he took a step towards her when…

…when he silence of anticipation was cut off by the ring of Catherine's phone.

Resigned, he took one step back (truly disappointed deep down inside) and waited.

Catherine held her breath when he stepped towards her and when the phone rang, her heart sank. *Not now!*

She tried to mask her disappointment with a brief smile, though, and waited for the caller to leave a message. Vincent waited patiently too. He didn't say a word to her yet, but what she could read in his eyes since he had appeared was more than understandable.

"Are you there? It's Jenny. Cathy, pick up if you're there…" they heard the caller speaking to the answering machine.

Catherine smiled shortly, trying to apologise to Vincent for the short disturbance and ran to the phone.

"Yeah, Jen, I'm here, what's wrong?" Catherine asked her friend over the phone.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah! I'm fine, why?"

"I don't know… I just had one of those weird dreams, and you were in it!" Jenny replied with worry reflected in her voice.

"Well, I'm fine," Catherine said with a big smile.

"You're sure?"

"Positive!"

"Why are you awake?"

"Go back to sleep, Jen." Catherine laughed and hung up.

She started making her way back to Vincent, still laughing about her friend's worry. Jenny's prophetic dreams mostly did not come true, but she was still a firm believer in their power. Catherine took them with a pinch of salt but didn't want to spoil Jenny's fun in interpreting them so, she always played along.

She had almost reached Vincent when the phone rang once more.

Catherine rolled her eyes and laughed again, nodding to Vincent to apologise again and went back to pick up the phone. Vincent turned around and leaned with his hands against the balustrade, observing the city lights.

When she picked up the phone, she heard a man's voice.

"I can see you, Cathy… And I can see him, too…"

A feeling of absolute terror struck her at that sentence - when she understood the threat Vincent was under, it almost gave her a heart attack. He could be exposed to the world any time, and the sheer existence of the

only man she ever truly loved would be in extreme danger, and if not, there was another threat - to protect him, she may never see him again…

<div align="center">*****</div>

"Do you have any idea who it might be?" Vincent asked her when they met down at the threshold after she had hastily insisted on him leaving the balcony.

Catherine stepped over to him, her body language revealing her mental state was almost on the verge of a breakdown.

"There was a call on my answering machine yesterday. I… I didn't think anything of it; I just thought it was a prank call!"

Vincent leaned against the wall and sighed, thinking. Then he looked at her. "What do we do now?"

"I can't go to the police, we can't take that chance!" she exclaimed desperately.

"We don't know what he has! I mean… maybe he took pictures!" Her fear was growing.

She sighed, looking away from him for a moment. "Vincent… the balcony isn't safe anymore…"

Their eyes met, and he could see the helplessness and agony, the racing, desperate thoughts in hers. He could *feel* her sudden rage.

"It was the only part of my world that belonged to *us*!" she cried. "I won't let him destroy it!" she finished and started pacing back and forth, before stopping again and facing Vincent.

He looked at her, and suddenly she looked so heartbroken and vulnerable, and he sensed the indescribable fear and despair in her. Fear for *him* and despair at what implications this situation might mean for *them*….

How brave she is…. he thought to himself, with the promise that he would protect Catherine and everything they had at all costs.

Vincent's eyes were observing her for a moment and seeing how desperately she was trying not to fall apart; he couldn't just stand there any longer. He closed the distance between them and took her gently in his arms. Suddenly, she felt like a lost child in his embrace, so small, so fragile...

<div align="center">*****</div>

The evening was surprisingly chilly for April. The cold breeze was playing gently with strands of his long golden mane, while he was looking over the city into its lights on the rooftop of her apartment building. It was barely nine o'clock, but he couldn't wait any longer to come. Darkness was the main friend he needed to hide his face, and he got that and managed to get there unnoticed. He sensed why she was staying longer at work that day, and he also sensed when she was coming back and needed him. Truly needed him….

Suddenly, the metal door creaked. Vincent turned sharply just to make sure he could hide in the shadows if needed but then relaxed seeing Catherine in the door, her look searching for him. When she had found what she was looking for, very slowly, almost resigned, she walked towards him.

The expression on her face was a cross between blank and devastated. She put her briefcase on the floor and leaned on the half-wall edge of the roof, looking out into the city lights. Vincent followed her with his eyes all the way and didn't blink once.

"Did he contact you?" he asked with his significantly quiet deep gravelly voice then.

Catherine just nodded slowly and then added. "He sent me flowers…"

"It was more than just flowers," Vincent inquired further with care, feeling there was something else from the fear he had felt from her earlier that day.

Catherine turned to face him, and her eyes were full of despair. "He knows about you… about us…"

Vincent bowed his head.

"And until we find out what he wants ---"

"He wants you, Catherine," he interrupted her looking in her eyes again.

The expression on her face changed. "Vincent, you have to stay away."

He frowned, denying the very possibility of her words. "I feel your fear… How do I leave you alone with that?"

"Because I can handle fear!"

The resolve in her voice stunned him - and made him admire her even more.

Then he saw her look change, her eyes welling up and a terrible fear and pain reflected in them, touching him right in the core of his being.

"But if something happened to you…"

Her voice broke; she shook her head and buried her face in his shoulder.

Vincent put his arm around her shoulders, the other one around her waist and felt her body trembling. A faint smile appeared on his lips; he felt deeply touched that despite her being the object of a watcher, someone mentally deranged and possibly endangering her life, her only thought was of *his* safety and protection. He could feel in her how the possibility of losing him was tearing her apart. If only she knew how much, how deeply he loved her…

Vincent gently whispered in her ear, caressing her back. "Come Below tonight."

Catherine pulled back to look at him, her hands resting on his chest as if needing to maintain physical contact with him. "I can't… I can't let him do that to me… I can't!"

Her pained eyes rested on Vincent's; then, she blinked and stated the naked truth.

"We're alone in this…"

Then all her strength let her down, she felt worn out, and all she longed for was to feel his arms around her, the warmth of his body, the comfort of his beating heart.

She knew they couldn't stay for long, but she desperately needed him, at least for a moment….

Vincent felt her need and took her in a tight embrace so she could hide in the safety of his arms. *We will make this through, Catherine, we always do…I won't let anyone hurt you….*

As if she heard him, she pulled him closer to her body and he heared a deep sigh.

<p align="center">*****</p>

Intruder scaring her….. Gun missing…. Police checking…. Clock ticking… Words coming back…..

"*You don't play with creeps like this…*"

"*He wants you, Catherine…*"

"You're with him, aren't you?! Of course, you are; why do I even ask…"

"You died, Cathy…"

Catherine remembered her conversation with Jenny earlier that day; Jenny told her about the fatal outcome of the events in the dream she had about her friend. That was the last straw for Catherine. When half-mad, she finally decided to go down to Vincent, her head was about to explode.

She should have known, at least guessed. But in her state, she just fell into it like a hungry mouse seeing cheese in a trap. Of course, he was behind the garage door. She had been so careful all the way down the emergency staircase, avoiding the lift, and when Catherine thought she was finally safe, she felt the hand on her mouth.

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Vincent was running, no… flying across the Stoney Point Park, illuminated only by the moonlight. His heart was racing almost to the point of exploding. His fear was affecting every fibre and muscle of his powerful body.

Finally, he felt he was as close as he could be to her, on top of a small hill overlooking a large pond. Suddenly, he stopped running and felt an icy shiver spread across his heart. He fell to his knees into the cold grass. His eyes were fixed on the half-sunk car at the pond shore in front of him. The thread of their bond felt terribly weak, almost faded away.

No… Not without me! Catherine…. let me feel you… please!!!

All at once, he couldn't get any air into his lungs. He managed to take a couple of short breaths, closed his eyes, feeling as if his heart was ripped out of his chest, and let out an excruciating roar… Then he bowed his head in total despair.

"Too late… You're too late!"

He looked up and saw a man laughing at him with an expression of total satisfaction. It took Vincent just seconds to stand up and kill the man with one strike of his clawed hand and an angry roar.

Then he looked at the car, breathing heavily.

No… it's not over yet… I won't let it!!

He gathered the last bits of strength in his body and ran downhill towards the pond. With one huge jump, he landed on the car boot.

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Catherine suddenly felt very comfortable. There was a white, almost mist-like light spreading from ahead of her. Feeling drawn to it like a moth to a flame, she started walking towards it when she saw two figures standing not far away. A man and a woman, their faces in the shade because of the light shining from behind of them.

"Mother!" she cried with joy and a bewildered smile on her face as she continued walking. The female figure stretched her arms towards Catherine.

Catherine was closing the distance; she could almost touch the woman's hand when someone grabbed her arm from behind and turned her towards them. All she felt then was being gently lifted in Vincent´s arms and carried back, away from the light….

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Vincent laid her on the grass after removing her soaked denim jacket and putting the wet strands of her hair away from her face. He put his ear to her chest to confirm what he felt deep inside already. No heartbeat…

His brain was working in a frantic yet conscientious mode. He quickly but gently pulled her head slightly up, very carefully blocked her nostrils with his fingers and opened her mouth, within a moment checking for anything blocking the throat. Without hesitation, he put his mouth to her soft lips and gave her a breath. He repeated it several times and then started giving her chest compressions.

"Breathe!" He begged rather than commanded.

Suddenly, Catherine started coughing, and water ran out of her mouth, clearing her lungs.

Vincent rolled her on the side, letting her cough up as much water as she could. When she stopped and started shaking from shock and cold, he took her in his arms and wrapped her in his warm cloak. He was holding her tight, maybe too tight. When he closed his eyes, breathing heavily, he could think only of one thing - *she's alive!*

Vincent rested his chin on the top of her head; his arms were holding her like the most precious treasure in the world. He held his breath for a moment and then sighed with immense relief and joy. "Oh, Catherine…"

He could feel her slender body shake heavily and hear her short breaths affected by it.

Catherine felt freezing cold, her limbs were stiff, and though she desperately wanted to put her arms around his waist, she didn't have the strength. The physical shock of almost drowning would take some time to wear off. Yet, she wanted to tell him… *needed* to tell him, in case her body would give in…. Among the short breaths and shaking, she managed to gather strength to whisper into his chest, covered with a soft quilted vest.

"I love you…"

She felt his lips on the top of her head, where he placed a long kiss and then, his cheek resting there, holding her even closer. She wasn't sure whether it was the approximate nearness of his body to hers, or the kiss, but suddenly she started feeling much warmer.

<p style="text-align:center">*****</p>

Almost ten minutes had passed when they suddenly heard the police cars sirens in the distance. Shivering only lightly by now, Catherine raised her head to him and spoke with reason winning over her heart's desire.

"You must go, quickly!"

She could see his indecisiveness, not willing to leave her in this state. "We'll meet on the balcony…"

Vincent's look rested on her eyes for a moment, then he kissed her lightly on the forehead and stood up. He looked at her once more, then he ran for cover towards the trees nearby and disappeared out of her sight in seconds.

Still wrapped in his cloak, Catherine pulled it closer around her neck, putting its hood over her head and waited for the police to arrive. She breathed in the familiar beloved scent trapped in the cloak, closing her eyes. It worked - she could almost feel his arms around her….

<p style="text-align:center">*****</p>

"Jen!… I'm not going to be…alone…" Catherine said shyly, lowering her eyes when her friend Jenny started planning how they would spend the rest of the night. She was unwilling to leave her friend alone after the nightmare she had just lived through.

Jenny's smile froze a bit in realisation before a huge smile appeared on her face again. "Oh, you're not going to be… alone…"

Catherine just shook her head again, not wishing to elaborate more.

Jenny laughed. "Well… what am I doing here?"

They embraced, and Catherine was glad her friend didn't ask any more questions.

Jenny grabbed her coat and handbag and they walked to the door. "I sure am glad you're okay," she said when she hugged Catherine tightly one more time.

"Thank you," Catherine replied with a genuine smile and gratitude.

"Goodbye," Jenny said when she left the apartment.

"Bye…," Catherine replied and quickly closed the door, securing the only working lock that Joe didn't manage to break when he kicked in the door about a couple of hours before.

She turned off the lights and started impatiently towards the balcony door in her bedroom. She could feel her blood rush to her head in anticipation when she suddenly stopped a few steps from the balcony, looking in its half-opened door.

He was there, standing among the slightly pulled back drapes which were lightly moving in the soft breeze and the sight of him took her breath away…

Most of his face was in the shadow of the darkness, but he looked like an angel, illuminated gently by the city lights from the back - a knight waiting for his lady, eagerly yet calmly, the perfect image of a fairy tale hero. And yet, Vincent was real, and he was hers…

Catherine's breathing fastened, and a hungry expression brightened her eyes. She ran the few steps straight into his arms.

Loudly gasping for air, she held on to him for dear life, moving her arms gradually from his arms to his shoulders, then locking them around his neck tighter than ever before.

"I felt you go!" Vincent whispered with a broken voice into her ear.

He was holding her not too tight in fear he might hurt her, though passion was filling every muscle of his body. His hands were gently moving about her back. But his voice betrayed him as he repeated even more painfully after burying his head into her shoulder for a moment.

"I felt you go…"

She let out a sigh (was it one of pleasure?) and commanded, "Hold me tighter…"

Vincent obeyed, moving his arms more up her back.

"Tighter!" Catherine couldn't get enough of his embrace. She wanted to melt into his body, to be one with him; his nearness was intoxicating, and she was longing for his touch terribly since they had parted at the lake.

Vincent couldn't restrain himself anymore. He held her as tightly as he could, afraid that if he let go, she would vanish into thin air, and he would lose her for good this time. No, he wouldn't let go, not ever…

"Catherine…" he whispered with passion; his breath on her neck made her tremble.

As she had just come out of the shower, she was wearing only a light nightgown covered by a bathrobe, her hair was still wet, and Vincent was suddenly too aware of the shapes and feel of her body underneath. His body reacted in the only way a man in love with the woman in his arms reacts - and to her delight, Catherine could feel it very clearly.

She smiled and started stroking his hair. Her other hand was moving up and down, slowly caressing the top of his back. She turned her head, nuzzling her face in his neck, breathing him in. Caught in the feeling, she gently kissed his neck. Vincent groaned silently, and she felt his muscles tense.

"Shhh…, " she whispered. "It's all right…"

Catherine continued stroking his hair, but then she pulled slightly away from him and moved her hands slowly to cup his face, touching her forehead on his. Her fingers were tracing the outline of his face tenderly; then, her thumbs caressed his cheeks.

Even in the semi-darkness, she could see the blue of his eyes darken, feel the electricity in the air, the heat perspiring from his body. Both hers and his breathing were shallow, their mouths half-opened and their eyes drinking in the sight of each other's mouths. Something was pulling them together like magnets.

"Catherine…," he breathed again, with an unusually deep voice, and she felt his arms pulling her even closer to him, even though it was barely possible anymore.

One of her hands slid down to his chest, and she felt his heart racing. She smiled before almost whispering. "*To burn with desire and keep quiet about it is the greatest punishment we can bring on ourselves…*" (1)

Vincent, with his eyes still longingly resting on her mouth, said equally quietly with his deep gravelly voice, breathing heavily.

"God and you forgive me, but I can't bear the punishment anymore…"

"Then don't…" she whispered, and their mouths finally met.

It was unlike anything Vincent had ever imagined, and unlike anything, Catherine had ever imagined. What had started tenderly and cautiously turned into a heated, passion-driven exploration and fulfilling their long time, tamed desire. A myriad of adjectives came to their minds much later - sweet yet passionate, gentle yet hungry, exquisite, sparkling, magical, controlled at the beginning, and so beautifully uncontrolled by the end…

Vincent's embrace was tight, almost possessive as he got lost in her, all his senses occupied fully - taking in every curve of her mouth and body, the scent of her hair, every sound she made, every feeling of joy, excitement and deep pleasure reaching him through their bond.

Catherine felt she could burst from happiness. Extremely hungry for his touch, his kiss, the feel of his arms moving around her body, she felt like floating.

They were slowly but surely getting swept away by their passion, when Vincent suddenly pulled back from Catherine's mouth, though not from her arms, almost breathless. Catherine was trying to catch her breath, too, and he could see a question burning in her darkened eyes.

"I… I'm sorry, Catherine…." he said quietly, still unable to let go of her or look away from those green pools.

She frowned slightly in disappointment.

"Are you sorry for the kiss?"

Vincent shook his head quickly. "No! Not for the kiss!" He saw her frown disappear in relief. "I'm sorry for breaking it…" he said with such sadness in his eyes, that Catherine felt her heart clamp for a second.

"Vincent…" She smiled and gently caressed his cheek with her thumb before he continued.

"I just need a bit more time for… learning not to lose myself *in myself* in the moments of ---"
"--- passion?" She could see he was trying hard to fight his life-long fears. At least he was finally willing to fight them and not run away.

Vincent sighed heavily and bowed his head for a moment. "Yes…"

Catherine cupped his face with her hands, pulled it down a little and gently kissed his forehead, then traced the face with her fingers, finally resting them on his unusual but beautiful mouth, sending shivers down his spine.

"It's all right, Vincent, as long as you are *willing* to learn…"

With that, she gave him one of her glowing smiles and settled in the warmth and comfort of his strong arms, her head resting under his chin. Vincent sighed again, and this time with heartfelt pleasure and placed a lingering kiss on the top of her head, just like he did it a couple of hours before at the lake. And although Catherine still hadn't cooled off from the passionate moment of a moment ago, she did feel even warmer again.

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They had remained in the blissful embrace calming down for a few minutes before Vincent got hold of himself, returning to reality, reminded of the fact that she had come out of the shower only minutes ago, and her hair was still wet.

"You should get… dry before you catch a cold."

Catherine pulled back to look into his eyes with a smile, her hands resting on his chest. "I know…" It was all she could bring herself to say.

He saw his own image mirrored in her wide-opened green eyes, but he also saw so much more. Their bond was like a silent speaker. All the flow of her emotions was running straight to his mind and heart. And he was listening gratefully and hoping she could hear the same words coming from him.

Catherine's smile widened, and he knew she did.

Very slowly, she let go of him and turned to walk inside the apartment.

Vincent's look still rested on her when she suddenly turned around and pleaded. "Don't leave! Please…"

He could feel her longing and smiled, unable to fight it and replied quietly. "I won't…"

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When Catherine finally dried her hair and changed into silk pyjama s(she didn't want to tease Vincent anymore that night), she looked at the watch on her bedside chest of drawers. Twenty minutes had passed since she left Vincent. She quickly put a night robe over the pyjamas and hastened towards the balcony. She stopped at the French door, and a sudden realisation hit her at the pit of her stomach.

He was sitting on the ground, with his back and head leaning against the brick half-wall, his eyes closed, his chest rising and falling slightly in peaceful breathing - he was sleeping.

My God, how could I have been so selfish?! Catherine thought, feeling guilty.

Although Vincent's face looked relaxed, only now, she noticed that his skin looked paler than usual and exhausted in the moonlight. With all the enormous strength he possessed, yet again, she had forgotten he was only human.

Of course, he was exhausted! He had spent two nights watching over her, waiting down at the threshold of her building, then running and riding a train across the whole city to save her, and then had to make the same journey back. And yet, he was still here because s*he* asked him to!

Catherine quickly walked back inside before returning with a warm blanket. Guilt bit her heart as she squatted down to his side and gently covered him. Something salty reached her lips. It was a tear that ran down her cheek without her noticing it. She was moved by his loyalty, his devotion, his care, his love for her… Vincent was never one for putting his own interests or well-being above those of others, but when it came down to her, everything else went aside when her well-being was at stake.

Very gently, she caressed the hair lining a side of his face, and her thumb brushed his stubbly cheek, just lightly as a touch of a feather so she didn't wake him. Then she leant towards him and put the softest of kisses on his temple.

Vincent moved and opened his eyes right after she pulled back to face him again.

"I'm sorry…" she apologised. "I didn't want to wake you."

He looked at her curiously, looking around in confusion for a moment. "How long have I been asleep?"

Catherine smiled at him with care. "Only a few minutes."

He slowly straightened himself up a bit against the wall and looked at her with his usual, calm expression again. "It must have been the aftermath, the shock of the impact with the car," he said as a matter of fact.

Catherine looked confused, and then, her eyes widened.

Vincent understood her fear, scolding himself for letting the reality slip from his tongue and tried to calm her down immediately.

"In the garage… I tried to stop him when he was driving away with you…. I failed," he concluded quietly, and she could hear the guilt in his voice.

Catherine felt a frosty shiver running across her heart. *He got ran over by a car!!* Her eyes were frantically scanning his chest and the rest of his body before landing on his eyes again.

"I'm fine, do not worry, Catherine, a bit sore but fine." Vincent felt that she wasn't convinced. "It's not the first time I was hit by something really hard. You should know by now I can endure a lot physically…" he concluded, reassuring her with a smile.

When he saw a tear running down her cheek, her sorrow overshadowed his joy of being with her.

"It's my fault…," she spoke quietly. "It's all my fault…. Father was right; I only put you in danger…"

Vincent couldn't bear the pain inside of her and reached his hand to cup her cheek, shaking his head in disagreement. "You know it's not true and I'm not doing anything that I wouldn't *want* to do…"

Catherine closed her eyes for a moment and held his hand on her face, slightly leaning into it. She noticed Vincent wanted to say something more, but she stopped him with her own words.

"Sometimes I wonder if it wasn't better for you if you had never found me… Never knew me…. You would be safe, you would---"

"---not live, just survive." Vincent finished the sentence for her with a serious but loving look.

Catherine sighed, and a bittersweet smile appeared on her lips.

"So would I," she whispered, took his hand and kissed it gently.

"Are you in any pain, Vincent?" she asked worriedly.

"No," he answered gently in truth.

Probably in physical shock still, it may come later though, he thought.

Catherine embraced him ever so carefully, not to cause him physical pain, if he was by any chance injured, and rested her head on his shoulder.

Vincent put his arms around her and let out a sigh.

"You should get some rest, Vincent," she spoke into his hair. "And promise me, you will let Father check you out when you get back down Below."

"Catherine…" he tried to contradict, tell her not to worry.

"Promise me!" she insisted and pulled back, looking into his sapphire eyes seriously. Vincent smiled.

"I promise."

She managed to smile and slowly tried to stand up to allow him to leave, but Vincent gently pulled her back, holding her hand.

"Not just yet…." His eyes pleaded.

Catherine obeyed him only too gladly and gently landed in his arms again.

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The following morning, Catherine had to go down to the police station to report everything she could about the previous night. Of course, she still insisted she didn't know how she got out of the car boot. In her own words, when she woke up, she was lying on the grass wrapped in a cloak and couldn't remember anything.

The inspector didn't look fully convinced, but he had let her go, saying the case would be closed as the kidnapper was deceased, and from what she told them about him stalking her, there didn't seem to be anyone else behind the whole matter.

Catherine thanked him, apologised for the lack of information he wanted to hear and calmly walked out of the building. Inside, her heart was pounding hard all the time, but she managed to appear calm and coherent, which surely helped. Her lawyer experience had paid off big time for Vincent's sake. And for hers…

Joe told her to get lost; he didn't want to see her at work for the next five days, as he said he wanted her to have enough time to recover from the nightmare. She appreciated it more than he could have ever guessed and gladly accepted his order. Yet only after she gave him a warm smile and a hug, her usual way of expressing the words *Thank you for your care* to her boss and friend.

She hired a cab and couldn't wait to get home. When she shut the door of her apartment near Central Park, she quickly changed into jeans and a white jumper, grabbed her sports jacket and rushed back out, down to the basement.

When she crossed the threshold and started her tunnel journey to Vincent, her emotions were running wild. She slept only for about two hours after Vincent had left, feeling worried about his health, thinking about her involvement in all the dangers he had to face. *What if he's seriously hurt? Maybe internal bleeding?*

No, she thought, she would feel if he was really in danger, just as she felt it when he and Father got trapped in the Maze. Still, she knew she needed to speak to Father before seeing Vincent because he would not conceal the truth from her, even if it was serious. That's why she closed off her side of the Bond with Vincent, as she had when Paracelsus had kidnapped her. And she also needed to see Father for another reason…

When Catherine finally reached Jacob's double-level chamber, she saw him sitting at his desk, reading a book. He looked serious but calm and focused, with his glasses slightly down on his nose.

"Father?"
He looked up, took his reading glasses off and spoke in genuine surprise. "Catherine! I didn't expect to see you… today…"

She wasn't sure how he meant it, but the tone of his voice didn't sound angry, and that was a relief. She had to admit to herself that no matter how much their relationship had improved over the last two years, and how much she admired, respected and loved this man, she was still a bit unsure about his opinion of her. Catherine understood it, though; he was overly protective of Vincent.

"I'm sorry for disturbing you, but I need to talk to you…" she said hesitantly.

Jacob stood up from his chair and stretched his hand out to her, indicating her to come in. Catherine walked towards him and took a deep breath.

He could clearly see her inner turmoil, and his age and life experience told him the reason for it.

"He will be all right," he said with a quick smile, and in his eyes, there was a twinkle of understanding.

Catherine closed her eyes for a brief moment and sighed loudly. "I'm… glad to hear it," she replied with relief.

"He told me he didn't think it necessary, but if he didn't let me check him out, you would never speak to him again, so he had no choice." Father's eyes smiled, and she could see bemusement in them.

Was it possible that he wasn't angry with her? No fury about her almost causing his son's death just to prevent hers? This man really puzzled her.

"And are *you* all right, Catherine?" Father suddenly asked in a genuinely caring tone.

She looked up to him again and said faintly.

"I'm fine…. But…. " Words got stuck in her throat; her eyes got blurry. And then, her a bit shaky voice changed and sounded full of resolve.

"Father, I know why you were against me seeing him, making him come up Above, time and time again, into the constant danger threatening his life…. You were right, I know that, but my heart just didn't want to listen; the thought of parting from him forever was tearing me apart…. I love him more than my life, and my life is *nothing* without him. But after last night, if you tell me never to see him again, I will obey you. I will do *anything* to protect him, even if I had to stay alone for the rest of my life…."

Her eyes were full of pain but courage as well. There, she said it, now to await the ordeal – life or slow but certain death…

Jacob looked at her closely, in awe. Her face mirrored all the emotional turmoil of the past twenty-four hours – her usually perfect rosy skin was pale, her eyes tired, there were slight rings under them, the sign of crying and lack of sleep.

Her words moved him deeply. Guilt was biting him, realising that this remarkable woman in front of him still had doubts about his feelings regarding her relationship with his son. In truth, he'd become very fond of her; by now, he loved her dearly, just like he loved Vincent. Despite still worrying slightly whenever Vincent went up Above, he was truly happy seeing his son's eyes twinkle with the light of joy that Catherine brought into his life of darkness.

Still looking at her intensely, Jacob slowly reached his hand up to her cheek and stroke it fondly, wiping away a single tear that managed to escape her eye. "You mustn't stop seeing Vincent. First, because it would slowly kill him and second because I won't allow it."

Catherine held her breath in surprise.

"I know, I was overprotective of him for most of his life, and I know that certain aspects of your relationship will … not be easy for him and for you to deal with. But he is a grown-up man who knows life. and God knows that he can handle its difficulties better than anyone I've ever known. And sometimes I tend to forget about it, I forget that I can and must trust him... For me, he will always be---"

"--- your son," Catherine finished for him with a heartfelt smile.

"Yes," Father smiled back at her. "You two *belong* together. I've known that for a long time now and I am truly sorry, dear Catherine, if I didn't make you feel that enough already, but I really do… You've changed his life beyond measure, in the best possible way and I am wholeheartedly grateful to you for that," he concluded, holding her hand now.

Catherine was so moved, she couldn't say a word. Therefore, she just hugged Father tightly, her eyes blurry again.

"Thank you, Father…" she whispered, with her arms still around him.

When she pulled back, she was smiling and saw tears in his eyes, too.

"It is I who thank *you*…" he said with a smile.

<p align="center">*****</p>

Catherine….
Vincent stirred under his quilted blanket and tried to sit up, waking from a dream only to fall back, feeling blunt pain in the bottom part of his ribcage. *I almost forgot… Father said it will hurt for a while.*

The previous night, the pain had been muted by his fear for Catherine. Then, by the passion and afterwards, the exhaustion from the chase. But as soon as he had returned to the tunnels early morning, it appeared. just as he expected.

He sighed and closed his eyes. But then suddenly, he felt it - he felt *her* nearing him. When he opened his eyes, she was standing at the entrance to his chamber.

"Catherine…" he almost whispered, his voice revealing deep emotions.

She walked towards him and sat on the edge of his bed close to him, taking his hand in her hands, the warmest of feelings spreading around her heart.

"Vincent…" she whispered, too, with a beautiful smile.

He tried to sit up for the second time within minutes, and failing again; the painful look in his face made her realise there was some problem.

"Are you all right?" she inquired with a fearful look.

Vincent's face relaxed when he found more comfort lying back again.

"Remember the first time you laid here? Let's say I do know better how your body felt those first few days…"

The truth started dawning on her. Of course, a direct front collision with a running car….

"Only one broken rib for me, though, I guess sometimes it's not that bad being… *me.*" He smiled and looked at her gently, reassuring her he was fine.

Vincent saw how Catherine's eyes started welling up. And he felt a strong sense of guilt running through her.

He gently cupped her cheek and said seriously, "It is *not* your fault, Catherine." His look was decisive, admitting no other truth than his words.

Catherine smiled at him, though it was a bittersweet smile. She took his hand, which was still on her face, and put a long kiss into his palm while closing her eyes.

But if something happened to you---

The words of their conversation on the rooftop the evening before ran through her mind again. If anything did indeed happen to him, she knew *her* heart would have died with his….

Vincent's look at her was direct but calm. "But it didn't," he said quietly.

Catherine looked at him, amazed. Even after all this time, the fact that he knew exactly what she was feeling and now even thinking still managed to catch her by complete surprise sometimes.

He smiled and pulled her gently into his embrace.

Catherine laid beside him, very carefully placing her hand on the top of his chest to avoid the broken rib and not press, her head leaning into his shoulder. She felt his hand caressing her hair and felt indescribably grateful at that moment. Grateful for being alive and grateful for being blessed with the love of the noblest, most honest, beautifully spirited, gentle, kind and loving human being she had ever known. And she was grateful for all the family that came with him.

You'll find family, wherever people love each other, Vincent said once.

The memory of that moment between them made her smile, and she finally relaxed and completely surrendered to the familiar warmth and peace of his embrace.

Vincent felt it and kissed her on the top of her head. "Rest now," he said softly into her hair, smiling.

"As long as you do, we still have an anniversary to celebrate…" she replied.

Her last words faded away and a few seconds later, she felt the world around her shimmer and float and soon after, she was in the land of dreams.

<div align="center">END</div>

1/ Federico García Lorca: *Blood Wedding and Yerma*