

# THESE HANDS

(Arabesque episode expansion)

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*Note: Some dialogue was taken from the episode 'Arabesque' from the series 'Beauty and the Beast' written by Virginia Aldridge.*

It was barely 5 am, too early for a social visit, but there was no other way. He landed softly on Catherine's balcony and for a moment contemplated whether or not to knock on her French door.

The reason he'd come might be uncomfortable for her; he knew that. But he also knew there was no one else who could help to find Lisa.

He took a deep breath and tapped on the balcony door. Catherine appeared in a few seconds still in her pyjamas, but wrapped in a warm cardigan. She knew that something must have happened.

"Vincent, what's wrong?" she asked, concerned.

"I'm sorry to wake you, Catherine, but I couldn't wait until evening... I... I need your help..."

He told her about Lisa and how she had sent him a message through a Helper to meet her in the tunnels, but hadn't come last night as promised.

"There is a touring company in town," Catherine said. "Maybe she's with them."

She saw his deep concern. "Your memories must be strong."

Vincent looked out into the city lights. The night's darkness was slowly breaking into dawn.

"It was so many years ago... We've heard of her successes, the Helpers bring us news."

Catherine smiled. "I saw her dance once, it was truly inspired."

"Yes..." he sighed.

A strange feeling suddenly came over Catherine. "What is it, Vincent?"

He turned to face her, his expression and his gravelly voice were urgent.

"Please, tell her that she has place with us... and that I'm here..."

"I will," Catherine replied, still unsure why Vincent was so anxious and enquired further. "Why did she leave?"

She saw a deep pain reflected in his face.

"Because I loved her..."

Catherine's eyes widened a little hearing those almost whispered words - not because Vincent wasn't entitled to love someone before her, but because she couldn't help but feel a sharp stab of fear in her heart.

Vincent eyes weren't leaving hers and she saw deep pain in them, though she was unsure what had caused it. A question was burning in her mind, but she didn't dare to ask it aloud.

Vincent knew what the question was, though, even without hearing it. Just the look in her eyes, the flick of fear crossing those emerald pools he loved so much, told him all.

Catherine tried to compose herself and not read too much into it, but it cost her a huge effort.

"I... I will try to see her after her show tonight. I have a friend who can get me a ticket to the ballet, so hopefully I will be able to reach her backstage after."

She tried to smile, but it wasn't the usual radiant smile, warming Vincent's heart. It was more a reassuring and slightly hesitant one.

"Thank you," Vincent said quietly still looking into her eyes.

Suddenly, it was hard for Catherine to bear his look. She knew he could read through her and she didn't want to make him uncomfortable when he was already visibly distressed.

She flashed a smile in his direction and turned around slowly to walk back into her apartment, but hearing his quiet gentle voice made her freeze.

"Catherine..."

She shivered and tears threatened to spill. *Why am I so afraid? It was his past and I don't even know anything more about it...*

Her hand was holding the door handle but she couldn't turn around, for he would see she was shaking. He must have felt it anyway.

"Yes?" she almost whispered.

And then she felt his arms embracing her lovingly from the back, his warm cheek brushing at her temple, and heard his quiet sigh.

Catherine grasped at his forearms with her hands and leaned back into his chest, closing her eyes. He knew... He had always known what she was feeling and there was no exception this time.

As quick as he had embraced her, he released his hold and let go of her. When she turned around, Vincent was gone and the only trace of him was the light musky scent lingering in the air surrounding her.

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"She's involved with a man who's about to be indicted for arms smuggling. There's a good chance she'll be called to testify against him."

Catherine informed Vincent about what she had found out, after she spoke to Lisa in the theatre. She made her own enquiries after returning to work, in order to see why Lisa had been watched so closely by the man who interrupted their talk.

"For Lisa to come back, I knew there was another reason," Vincent lowered his eyes.

"I'm sorry," Catherine almost apologised, feeling his sadness, but Vincent just shook his head, as if to say there was no reason to apologise.

"Her performances were cancelled, she's probably gotten herself out of the country by now."

Vincent sighed. "Catherine... She's with us..."

"She is?" Catherine couldn't hide her surprise. "Well, at least we know where she is."

"Yes," he sighed again, looking down to the ground as if trying to avoid her eyes.

Catherine noticed it and with a knot in the stomach, asked the one question which had been creeping in the back of her mind ever since Vincent told her about Lisa.

“What does this woman mean to you, Vincent? Can you tell me?”

He looked up to her and stared at her for a while. Then he retreated back to the barred gate, leaning against it with his side as if needing its support, and spoke.

“There are moments... images I see so clearly... burning so deeply.”

Catherine stepped closer to him, hopefully. “Tell me about those moments.”

“It was a time, when I first felt the tremendous joy that dreams could bring... Intoxication of sending your heart soaring into the realm of hope. And at the same time... I’ve learned that for me dreams can bring more pain that I can ever bear... Enough pain to destroy me, and those around me.”

Catherine wanted to know more, even though at the same time, she felt a growing fear of what consequences it might have for her. For them...

“How? What happened? You can tell me... You can tell me anything...,” she encouraged him.

Without looking at her, he was sought the right words.

“I once thought that... But there are things... things that I dreamt away...”

Catherine felt her heart sinking. “We’ve never withheld the truth from each other... Never...” Her voice was fading in disbelief and anxiety.

Vincent finally looked at her with a heavy heart. “I know...”

Slowly, he opened the grated gate and closed it behind him, then reached for the lever to close the steel door too, while his gaze still rested on Catherine’s eyes.

She watched him disappear behind the door and her heart was thumping wildly in her chest. A sudden rush of cold made her shudder. Her brain was feverishly trying to erase the one thought which made her feel as if she had just lost the most precious thing in her whole life, the only thing that really mattered to her - because Vincent still loved Lisa...

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Vincent was walking back to his chamber, or his feet were walking him, for his mind was on Catherine. He knew he had just hurt her, something he promised himself never to do.

The image of Catherine’s tortured look when he was leaving her was burning in his mind and he couldn’t get rid of it. He felt the cold she was feeling and he was cursing himself for causing her such pain. Yet, how could he have told her what had really happened between he and Lisa, what he had done? His fear of driving Catherine away from him was stronger than his reason. He knew she had the right to know, but he just couldn’t gather the strength to tell her.

And then he thought of Lisa. Catherine asked him what Lisa meant to him.

What did she indeed? A childhood sweetheart, a teenage crush, a ghost from the past? Or a ghost of the future?

No, no one could replace Catherine in his heart. But he still felt strange in Lisa’s presence, something inside him stirred a bit, but he wasn’t sure what. Guilt? For what he’d done or for what he had felt about her? The remains of long lost feelings?

His brain felt like it was on fire and he knew he had to sort it out soon, for his sake and for Lisa's sake.... And for Catherine's sake....

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Catherine entered her apartment and closed the door behind her absent-mindedly. She still wasn't sure what had just happened in the park, but she tried not to panic.

*Be rational, Cathy. He wouldn't leave you behind just like that. You know he's not like that. He must have a good reason for his silence...*

*Yes, but he has never shut me out like this before, because of a woman...*

Taking a few deep breaths, she walked to the bathroom, thinking a warm shower might drive the cold feeling inside her away.

As she stood in front of the mirror, she looked up and saw her face in it. For a moment, she stared at her own image and in her mind she saw Lisa's image. Then she saw tears running down her cheeks. Her shoulders started shaking under quiet sobs and she hung her head down, crying and steadying herself on the edge of the sink. No matter how hard she tried, her brain couldn't win over her heart and keep her head clear.

Her brain was telling her to wait until Vincent was ready to tell her what he kept hidden. But her heart was breaking...

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Deep below the city, Vincent felt the sharp pain in Catherine's heart and he closed his eyes breathing heavily.

He knew what she was feeling, because he had felt it too, when Michael had spent some time Above with her before starting his studies - then he randomly kissed her, overwhelmed by her kindness...

Vincent knew how much it hurt, and despite knowing that Catherine hadn't encouraged Michael, it still burnt like a fire he couldn't put out. To make her feel like that now and leave her in uncertainty was unbearable to him. And yet, he had done so by not trusting her empathy, her generous and kind heart and her love for him, to deal with what he had to tell her...

No, he *must* tell her and he will do that very soon. As soon as he had spoken with Lisa, to sort things out with her first.

He rose up from his chair and went to find Lisa.

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Vincent met Lisa in The Great Hall. She had found him there in the exact moment when he had been lost in his memories of the past.

"You have such strange expression on your face!... What's the matter?" Lisa asked, but he remained silent.

To break the tension between them, she started reminiscing about the lovely past times she had spent there as a child and teenager. The Winterfests, her dancing for others and for Vincent.

When she stopped, he was still quiet, staring at the space before him. She couldn't hold it in any more and carefully touched his shoulder.

"What on Earth are you thinking of?" Lisa asked.

Vincent finally reacted, but didn't look at her. "Of what happened in this hall... between both of us!"

He suddenly turned around to face her. He took a step to be closer to her, but then thought the better of it and stepped back.

"For so long I... couldn't forgive myself for hurting you... for driving you away..."

"I'm going to make a new life for myself."

"Lisa...", Vincent walked to her and started to speak, but she stopped him with her hand.

"You hold a too great reverence for the past, Vincent... It was nothing... Don't you see? It was child's play..."

He turned around and she walked to the other side of the hall.

"So are we playing now?" Vincent asked after a moment, and walked over to her again.

"I know that you're in danger, that you're hiding... You surround yourself with illusions, but illusions fade. Lisa..."

He wanted to touch her hand to turn her attention to him, but she pulled her hand away looking a little frightened.

*Catherine would never do that, no matter what...*

Vincent backed off, sadness overshadowing his eyes. "You must trust me, please, as you once did..."

She looked at him, but Vincent could still see the uncertainty in her eyes.

Suddenly, he felt it and his head snapped to side, his eyes wide open, for a moment waiting, listening...

*Catherine!!!*

The last thing Lisa saw was his figure flying up the staircase and disappearing through the entrance door.

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Catherine was the last to leave the office that day. She was still trying to bring all the information and available evidence together in the case against Lisa's ex-boyfriend, Allain Taggart. She knew Lisa would have to testify, in order to make him go to jail, otherwise the evidence would be inconclusive.

The next thing was to convince her about it somehow, but to do that she would have to go Below to speak to her. The thought made her slightly dizzy, as she would have to face Vincent too, and she was afraid of what she might find. But the DA in her prevailed and Catherine decided to go Below at once.

The streets were quite empty for that time of evening. She had only walked a short distance from her building when two men grabbed her from behind and pushed her into a car. In one of them,

Catherine recognized Colin, Lisa's ever present watchdog, whom she'd successfully escaped to the tunnels Below.

They drove her to an old unused storage building and dragged her inside, one of the men pushing her against an unfinished wall of wooden planks. The next thing she felt was two painful slaps hitting her face hard.

“Now tell me... Where is Lisa?!”

Catherine breathed heavily. “I don't know...”

“Wrong answer!”

Colin took over and tried to scare her by making the other man punch the wall next to her. Broken bits of wooden planks were flying around for a few seconds.

But Catherine, although scared, decided not to give in. If she told them where Lisa was, she would endanger Vincent and all the others Below as well. She'd rather die than to do that.

Just as the man took a breath to repeat his threat, his one hand clenching her one arm and the other squeezing her chin, a deafening animal roar and sound of shattering glass penetrated the air. Vincent jumped down through the skylight and landed right in-between the two men.

Colin grabbed Catherine around her neck and stood behind her. As she tried to fight his hold, Vincent gave the other man with a huge hit of his clawed hand and sent him through the wooden wall next to them. The brutal force of the impact of the body with the wall made the wood shatter into splinters.

Then he turned to Colin with a dangerous snarl, showing his fangs, and started walking slowly towards him to help Catherine.

When Colin suddenly drew his gun, pointing it at Vincent, Catherine gathered her strength and fighting skills and kicked Colin in his stomach with her elbow, managed to turn around and face him very close.

Vincent stopped snarling in surprise, then suddenly heard a loud bang as the gun went off. His heart stopped beating for a couple of seconds, but then he saw Colin's face freezing and his body sliding down. Catherine stepped back and uttered a few shocked sobs, suddenly realising what she had just done.

Vincent immediately pulled her close to him from behind, desperately like a magnet, reassuring himself that the gun really hadn't harmed her. His arms engulfed her fully, holding her tight, maybe too tight, but he was unwilling to let go. His cheek pressed against hers and he was breathing heavily, breathing her in, the sense of her... alive...

She stopped sobbing, leaning her head back against his chest, finding relief and comfort in those beloved arms, trying to take deep breaths.

“I'm okay... I'm okay...,” she was reassuring him, knowing what he was thinking.

“Catherine...” Vincent only managed to breathe out in whisper into her hair.

He briefly kissed the top of her head and cradled her even closer to him, his heart still racing, terrified of what had almost happened a few seconds ago.

*Please, never let me go...* Catherine thought to herself and closed her eyes in relief and exhaustion.

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Apart from Catherine explaining who the men were and what they wanted from her, they didn't talk throughout the journey back to the Home Tunnels. Catherine felt too tired and achy, and Vincent was still in shock at almost having lost her. He held her small hand tighter than usual and she noticed that.

*She risked her life for me, again...*

When they were finally in his chamber, he sat her down on the bed and looked at her face, checking again the minor split on her lip, the result of Colin's hard hit, and another cut near the wrist of her left hand from when it hit the wood planks behind her when Colin pushed her against them before. She hissed slightly when Vincent gently touched the hand.

"Sorry," she apologized, looking down.

"It is I who should apologise," Vincent said quietly, looking at her.

Her green eyes met his blue ones and he could see so many questions in them, still painfully waiting to be answered, but knew now was not the right time. He had to get Father to examine Catherine and treat her injuries. Then, they would talk...

"But first... I'll go and get Father, to have a look at you," he hesitated slightly when rising to his feet, still holding her uninjured hand.

Catherine lowered her eyes and sighed listlessly. "Okay..."

He walked slowly to leave the chamber, but turned around to look at her once more to check she would be all right. She was looking at him with such sorrow reflecting in those deep green windows to her soul, that it almost broke his heart. He knew what she was thinking, what she must have been thinking all along since he had left her at the steel door that night.

*It is NOT what you think, Catherine! If you only knew...*

Desperately hoping that she could feel through their bond what he was trying to say, he left the chamber to get Father.

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Catherine was leaning back on a heavy brocade cushion on one end of Vincent's bed, her head resting back, staring at the ceiling, which had shadows dancing on it in the warm candle light. She was trying to calm down, shut her thoughts out of her brain. She absent-mindedly touched her sore lip, then closed her eyes.

It was then that Lisa suddenly ran into the chamber and saw her.

"Oh... Excuse me, I didn't mean to... I was just looking for Vincent," she gasped and was about to leave, when Catherine stopped her.

"Lisa... Please, come in!"

The ballerina hesitantly accepted the invite and then noticed Catherine's injured lip. Her eyes narrowed in shock.

"What happened?!"

Catherine sat up on the bed and looked at her calmly. She noticed that even here, Lisa shone as if on a stage. Despite an old woollen scarf freely covering her shoulders, a white long evening dress with open shoulders was revealing her slim, graceful figure. Carefully styled dark brown hair was framing her pretty, almost porcelain white face, with its relatively small but inquisitive brown eyes.

*She couldn't be more different from me...*

"Your friend Colin ... he was determined to find you, thought I might know where you were."

She then revealed to Lisa that U.S. Attorney and Federal Grand Jury were looking for her, to question her about Alain Taggart - and that Taggart would surely like to stop her somehow from incriminating him. Lisa tried to deny she knew about anything mentioned, when Catherine rose from the bed and walked over closer to her with a sad look.

"Now you're lying to me... You lied to Vincent." Her voice was sad.

"No! Never, never to him," Lisa countered.

"You have caused him some deep pain which I... cannot reach..." Catherine went on quietly, sadness filling her voice.

Lisa looked closer into her eyes, suddenly realising that the woman in front of her might be a bit more than just a friend to Vincent. Her rather small figure was dressed in office clothes, her longer blond hair falling freely over her shoulders, and her round face was beautiful with barely any make-up, with full lips and a delicate nose. But it was those big green eyes which struck her and revealed more about Catherine than she probably would want to reveal herself.

"Well, *if* that's so... then I'll leave, immediately," Lisa said, resolved, and pulled off the woollen scarf, turning to walk out of the chamber.

"Where would you go?"

"I have friends all over the world!" Lisa's face was glowing with fake pride.

She didn't manage to fool Catherine though who spoke with a tired soft voice. "How long do you intend to keep hiding?"

Lisa's eyes went ablaze. "I... intend ...to *survive!*"

But Catherine wasn't having it. "What are you going to do, Lisa? What will you do when it's all over? When the world no longer loves you? Will you just cling to whoever will have you? Is that all you're worth?" Her last words were almost whispered.

Lisa turned around slowly with an intense look, and she saw the care and compassion in Catherine's eyes.

"You don't mean to be unkind, do you?" she inquired quietly.

"No," Catherine replied softly, her sad eyes fully focused on the ballerina. "Just realistic."

Lisa walked defeated to the bed and sat down, looking first at Catherine and then into the distance, as if being transported to a place far away from there.

"Realistic... Okay... It *is* over."

In that moment, Vincent and Father entered the chamber, but Lisa continued hardly noticed them.

"Played out... Do you know what played out means to me?... It's when the music stops..." Her eyes still far away, a deep grief reflected in her face.

Vincent realised in that moment that the stage and limelight were all Lisa lived for and that nothing and no one could make her happy if she couldn't stand and perform.

After a moment of silence, Lisa returned them all back to reality when she said decisively. "All right... I will testify."

Catherine approached her kneeling to her and took her hand. "You're doing the right thing, Lisa..." she said quietly, with a little smile.



The ballerina looked into those green eyes and suddenly understood why Vincent would let Catherine, a woman, lay in his bed, the most private part of his chamber. Those eyes were revealing a very special person behind them.

She returned her smile and squeezed Catherine's hand in understanding.

Vincent, observing the exchange between the two very different loves of his life, was suddenly absolutely sure where his heart stood, if he ever had the chance to choose between them.

In fact, he had known it all along, but since Lisa had re-appeared, his emotions had been in a turmoil and sometimes it had been hard for him to recognize the truth behind the veil of sorrows of the past and doubts of the present and future. But not any more. If anything, the events of tonight made the truth break through the walls surrounding his heart, as well as clearing his mind as never before. The veil had been lifted and there was only one direction he could be taking, no matter what the obstacles facing them.

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It was the day of Lisa's testimony at the Grand Court. She was sitting in the empty corridor, waiting to be called in as a witness to the courtroom, with Catherine sitting by her side. They were quiet for a while, each immersed in their own thoughts.

Then Lisa took off her large sunglasses and looked at Catherine with interest. "You really love him, don't you?"

Catherine stunned at her observation, shot a surprised look at her before sighing and replying almost inaudibly, "With all that I am..."

Lisa nodded with the briefest of smiles before continuing.

"Before you were... attacked... we were talking about... the past... And then suddenly, out of the blue, that look in his eyes as his head snapped away to stare in the distance for a moment... I have never seen a look like that from him before, not even when he ..." She halted the sentence abruptly, before continuing. "It was the look of absolute... terrifying fear... And then he was gone in a second, as I found out later, to rescue you."

Catherine looked down at her hands. "I always feel terrible for him when he... when I unintentionally *force* him to do it... But there is something... a *bond* between us, that makes him feel what I feel, makes him know when I'm in danger... and no matter how I try to protect him from these situations, I can't shut out what I... feel in those moments..."

"You are not afraid of him?" Lisa inquired with keen interest.

"No. I trust him with my life," Catherine looked up at her, stating the fact as if it were the most natural thing in the world. "I know he would never hurt an innocent person. And I know he would never hurt *me*..." Her voice trailed off.

Then she looked at Lisa and risked a daring question. "Are *you*?"

Lisa sighed and looked away. "I don't know... But I know I never wanted to hurt him."

Catherine desperately wanted to ask what actually happened between them, but she bit her tongue and went quiet for a moment. Lisa broke the silence again.

"After you went back Above that day, he told me that you saved his life... that he would have probably been shot, if you hadn't risked your own life to turn the gun away from him."

Catherine closed her eyes in pain, remembering the horror that had struck her that moment when she'd imagined him dead, forcing her to fight Colin to stop it from happening. She still had a vivid image of Vincent being shot in his arm, by the scared child, in the incident with the Outsiders a month before. And she still remembered the sense of her heart freezing, in that moment, and her vision blurred by frantic despair, before she knew for sure he was not fatally injured.

She trembled and shook her head in denying the terrible but possible scenario of his demise. With eyes still closed and with a frown, she whispered, "If he died... I know I would have gone with him."

She opened her eyes staring at the door in front of her. "Without him, there's *nothing*..."

Lisa's look at her turned from the one of curiosity into that of deep admiration. "He feels the same about you," she said directly.

Catherine looked at her with uncertainty before saying hesitantly. "I thought so, until ...," she couldn't finish the sentence.

*Until you appeared*, she wanted to say, but didn't and looked away.

Lisa smiled and kept observing her. "You mustn't give in to assumptions, Catherine. There is a reason why Vincent feels an obligation to me, but it's not what you think. It is not my place to tell you, I'm sure he will do it at some point. But trust me, I know him and I know that he *does* love you with all his being."

Catherine still wasn't convinced when she looked up to Lisa. "How? How can you know?"

"Because he told me."

Catherine's heart skipped a beat and her eyes turned misty as Lisa went on.

"I saw how he looks at you, how *you* look at him, the connection between you, even when you didn't speak, when he... held your hand.... Vincent may have been in love once before, but he's a grown man now. He knows his heart and he's not a teenager any more ..."

There was a tiny hint of regret in her voice, and at the same time, the realisation that she could never give him what Catherine did. She wasn't able to.

"Just give him time to come to you and explain everything," Lisa concluded, with a small but genuine smile.

Catherine swallowed and then nodded smiling, too.

*Time... The only thing we constantly have so little of.....*

## PREVIOUS EVENING

Vincent returned to his chamber after leading Catherine to the threshold. His heart was aching, his head knew what he had to do and yet... Yet again, he hadn't found the strength to do it.

*Why? Why can't you tell her, you fool?! You know she would listen, she would understand - she always does!*

He shook his head, unable to understand his cowardice and fear. The vulnerable and pained image of her standing at the threshold with pleading eyes was haunting him.

He had almost lost her, again... She was willing to lay her life for him, and still he wasn't able to be totally honest with her. Fear had clamped his heart and bound his tongue. He knew Catherine's heart

like his own, and knew there was only one way to tell her - he must trust her judgement, as he always had.

“Vincent?” a voice from behind him brought him out of his thoughts.

Lisa was standing at the entrance to his chamber, unsure whether she could enter.

Seeing her, Vincent looked away and walked over to the other side of the chamber. “Come in, Lisa.”

The ballerina stepped in, rather hesitantly. “I just wanted to say goodbye before I leave in the morning,” she said, her brown eyes were glued to his face.

Vincent looked at her, his eyes revealing almost nothing to her. She remembered the ardour and adoration she used to find in them in their teenage years. Now, there was only a vast silent acceptance of the fact, a mere acknowledgement of the reality.

And there was something else, she couldn't define exactly, but it was almost chilling her to the bones.

“I hope it goes well in the court for you. I wish you all the best. Goodbye, Lisa.”

Vincent spoke without emotions, but his words were genuine and somehow she felt it. She knew there was more though.

“What is it, Vincent?” she asked inquisitively.

He exhaled loudly, as if releasing the withheld emotions, unable to keep them away from her.

“You are asking *me*?” his voice was quiet but strained, betraying disbelief.

“Yes, I feel as if I have done something wrong and I don't know what it is,” Lisa said adamantly, with a stronger voice than she herself expected.

Vincent's head snapped away from her, as if looking at her was causing him indescribable pain. He started pacing, but it took only a few strides before he stopped abruptly and turned to face Lisa again.

“Catherine almost died tonight!! Because of *you* and your selfishness!!” he almost roared.

Lisa finally understood that look in his eyes. It was anger combined with fear - fear of the possibility of losing something very precious to his heart.

“Vincent, I assure you that was the last thing I wanted... I had no idea Alain would notice her...”

“You had no idea about many things!” he was trying to keep his voice down, but it was very strained.

“Even back then... Everything is a play for you - the world has to turn around *you* and no one else is important! It's about time you woke up, Lisa! People's feelings, people's lives are at stake...”

Vincent was breathing heavily, his eyes never leaving Lisa's, though he could feel his anger subsiding, slowly being replaced by fatigue and regret, when he saw her hurt expression.

“I'm sorry, Lisa,” he sighed and shook his head. “I overreacted and it wasn't your fault. Please, forgive me.”

She was staring at him, his head hung low, his vulnerability visible more than ever. “It's Catherine, isn't it?” she asked quietly, with intense curiosity.

Vincent looked up at her and she saw his eyes were glistening.

“Nothing and no one else matters more to me... She's everything...,” he breathed with despair.

Of course... Deep down inside, she had known right from the moment she saw them together for the first time that evening. The way they regarded each other, the silent understanding, the way he took her hand when leading her away from the tunnels....

During those days spent Below, every now and then in conversation with others, someone referred to Vincent and Catherine. Not Vincent *or* Catherine, Vincent *and* Catherine. Innocently, without any special stress, Lisa was getting a feeling they were somewhat of a legend in the tunnels, although at that time, she wasn't sure what kind.

"You love her..." she whispered being sure now.

Vincent closed his eyes His sigh was more than enough of an answer.

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The chessboard on the table in Jacob's chamber hadn't been touched for the last ten minutes. Jacob was waiting for Vincent's turn, but he clearly saw that his adoptive son's mind was miles away from the board. Precisely, miles *above* the board. When he saw it was pointless, for Vincent just kept staring at the figures in front of him, but was not really thinking about his next move, Jacob spoke.

"Vincent, I think it's time you spoke to her. It's been two days since you saw her."

Vincent's head shot up. From the pure habit of decades, he couldn't believe his ears - that his father was actually sending him Above instead of lecturing him against it. Then he sighed and closed his eyes.

He remembered the night he'd saved Catherine, then later led her to the threshold, how she waited for *the* talk, yet he hadn't had the courage to do it there and then. He'd asked her if he could do it next time. The disappointed look of sorrow in her eyes, as she agreed graciously as ever, was still too vivid and painful in his mind.

"I want to, but I don't know *how*..."

"Just tell her the truth?" Jacob raised his eyebrows and smiled, although parental worry was written over his face.

Vincent shook his head and chuckled. "I wish it was that easy."

Jacob stood up to grab a book from the mantelpiece behind him.

"It won't get any easier if you keep on pretending you want to let me win a game, after almost a year of defeats."

Vincent chuckled again and marvelled at his father's ability to bring humour to even in the most serious matters. He took the figure of his Queen and observed it deep in thought.

"*The truth is rarely pure and never simple,*" Jacob quoted his favourite Oscar Wild, while looking at Vincent lovingly.

"But only the truth can set you free."

A bitter sweet smile appeared on Vincent's face, he placed the Queen carefully next to his King and rose from his chair. He closed the distance between them and embraced the older man.

"Thank you, Father..." he whispered, kissed his forehead and left.

"Godspeed, my son..." Father said quietly into the empty space.

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When Vincent quietly landed on her balcony, he stayed in the safety of its partially shadowed corner. Normally, he would tap on the French door to let her know he was there, but he was still lacking courage.

*What will she think? How will she feel? What if she pushes me away from her life?* Vincent was wrestling with his own fears.

Catherine was ready to go to bed, but she couldn't sleep. Her thoughts were constantly on Vincent (and he was aware of it), on how evasive he'd been with regards to Lisa and what happened between them.

She was replaying the conversation with Lisa in her mind.

- *He really does love you.*

- *How do you know?*

- *Because he told me.*

Her heart was crying out for him but she knew she couldn't push him. But why? Why could he tell someone else that he loved her but never her directly?

She went to the balcony; something was drawing her out there. Someone, to be precise, as she hoped she could get at least a feel of Vincent, imagining him standing there as always waiting for her.

She walked out and with a sigh looked over the city in the dark, looking to the left and then back straight ahead again, her face expressing the melancholy that fell over her aching heart.

It was then she heard the quiet velvet tone of that beloved voice, coming from the right.

"Catherine..."

She turned her head faster than lightning and after a few seconds, her lips stretched into a subdued smile.

"I wonder if I'll ever not be surprised to see you there."

Vincent didn't react to the remark, just kept looking directly into her eyes seriously. Then he bowed his head and his voice was quiet.

"We've never withheld truth from each other."

Catherine's smile faded. "No..."

He chanced a glance at her again. "Catherine, there are things I must tell you. About who I am... and *what* I am."

She walked slowly over to him, her intense look never leaving his eyes.

"Vincent, to me... you're beautiful..." she tried to persuade him.

"What I have to tell you is not beautiful... It's terrifying, and shameful... But it is the truth." He looked at her again, waiting for her response.

"Then I want to hear it."

He saw in her eyes that she really wanted to listen, so he found the courage, took a deep breath and started talking. He told her about how when they were young, Lisa used to dance in the Great Hall for him. His eyes were blinking into distance.

"There was nothing in the world as beautiful as Lisa..."

Catherine sensed his feelings of the past.

"You desired her..."

Vincent looked at her to see how that made her feel.

“There is no shame in that,” Catherine said, confirming again the true nature of her compassionate heart.

He shook his head and went on. “For me, there is.”

“Why?”

Vincent closed his eyes and bowed his head slightly when his voice started cracking.

“Because I hurt her... In my desire, I forgot who I was, who I am...” The tears were suddenly inevitable.

“She moved closer, I wanted to hold her... She was dancing and I felt a pull, it was pulling me to her and I reached out to her... Suddenly, in her eyes, I saw a fear of me... I... I saw myself... But I couldn't let go of her...”

He looked down at his clawed furry hands in shame and despair with tears running freely down his face now.

“These hands would not let go of her... And I hurt her...”

He looked at Catherine and his breathing was getting heavier, as he sobbed quietly. Then he looked at his hands again clenching them into fists and opening them again.

“And I knew then that these hands were not meant to give love...,” he sobbed again, quietly breaking down, like a very fragile glass window pane, not able to hold off the raging of the storm lashing it.

Catherine's heart was breaking to shards too, for she could feel his agony and couldn't bear the man she loved so deeply hurting, in such an intense way that only time and love could mend. She knew what was holding him back desperately from becoming more physical with her...

With her face mirroring his pain, she gently took his hands in hers and kissed the soft fur-covered backs of both of them, then softly rubbed her cheeks against them before looking up to his crying eyes again.

“These hands... are beautiful! These are *my* hands!” she said with great emphasis, hoping to convey to him all her love and acceptance of who and what he was.

Vincent looking at her, half wanting to believe her, but still half convinced of his guilt and the unworthiness of her love. He shook his head slightly and closed his eyes, as the stream of his tears kept flowing down his leonine cheeks. He bowed his head as she continued kissing his hands holding them tightly until their foreheads met. He allowed himself to silently cry out all the pain that had been sitting on his chest for years.

After a while, Catherine pulled him into a tight embrace and he placed his head on her shoulder, suddenly feeling very tired. It felt like he hadn't cried for years, for the amount of tears he'd shed tonight was immense.

Now, Vincent was getting calmer. He could feel the steady rhythm of Catherine's heart, the warmth of her hold, remembered her encouraging words.

“Thank you...,” he whispered, with genuine gratitude.

“I wish you would have told me sooner,” she said softly into his golden hair. “You wouldn't have to carry the burden for so long...”

Vincent sighed. “I will have to carry the burden for the rest of my life, Catherine... But at least it's a bit lighter now.”

"I'm here for you, Vincent, you know that... Anything you want to talk about ... you must know by now that nothing can make me afraid," she said quietly, but with conviction.

Vincent pulled back a bit to look into her eyes. The compassion and love in them made him bless the day he found her all over again.

"I've never felt such fear as when that gun went off...", his voice broke. "For a moment, I thought ..."

"I know," she finished quietly for him.

"Catherine.... You mustn't do anything like that ever again! If anything happened to you...." Words failed him.

"Vincent, I can't promise you I won't ever do it again, because I would do anything at any time to protect your life. If anything happened to you..." She couldn't finish *her* thought now, felt freezing cold at the prospect of facing this world without him.

Vincent gathered her into his arms again, his hold on her tight and comforting.

"Then I'll pray such occasion may never arise again," he whispered into her hair, closing his eyes.

They remained silent for another while and then Vincent spoke again.

"Catherine?"

"Mmmm?"

"I'm sorry..." His voice was quiet and fragile.

"For what?" she asked.

"For causing your misunderstanding about me and Lisa... You *know* there is only one woman I ..." He let the rest of the sentence hang in the air.

*I wish you would finally find the courage to tell me...* she thought before replying gently.

"I know..."

She held him tighter, her head resting on his chest.

A colder breeze picked up and he felt Catherine's body shiver slightly. After all, she was only wearing a light nightdress and a silk night robe over it. He pulled back slowly from her.

"You should go inside, it's getting cold...", he said quietly in concern, reminding her of his true self again.

Catherine smiled briefly and looked him straight into the eyes. They were still sad, but the agony and despair were gone from them, leaving space for their sky blue colour to become a brighter shade again.

"I am not leaving you until I know you will be all right," she said, and Vincent heard the resolve in her voice.

He looked at her and for the first time in days, he smiled. "I will be all right, Catherine, I promise," he said softly.

She wasn't sure whether to believe him or not, but decided to go with the first option, or at least partially.

"I might be away for a few days, so don't worry about me if you don't hear from me," Vincent added.

"How long?" she asked, with a slight sting at her heart, understanding why he needed the space to clear his head.

"I'm not sure..." He bowed his head again sighing.

Catherine observed him for a moment, then reached her hands to cup his face and put a lingering kiss on his forehead.

Vincent closed his eyes as she did that and held his breath. The touch of her lips stirred powerful feelings in his body, but he didn't pull back. All he could feel was the heat warming up his tired soul and the love slowly mending his broken heart. He knew she could pick those shards one by one and put them back together again, if he allowed her. And did he *want* to allow her!

He let the breath out, as she pulled back and smiled at him in a way that made his insides tremble. She squeezed his hands again and slowly releasing them, she walked over to the French door.

Vincent, still in a daze, turned to start climbing down from her balcony, when he heard her call his name.

"Yes, Catherine?"

Her emerald eyes spoke before she even said the words out loud, but he shivered when hearing them.

"I love you..."

He smiled and watched her turn and close the door behind her.

END