

BAtB Fanfiction: V2.0 - Part One: "Missing Time"

*Cold. Dark. Can't move...can't...can't... No. Must stay awake. Must...Catherine?
Must...stay...awa...*

Cold. Dark...too dark. My head...okay...thoughts a little clearer now. Where? Catherine? Are you here? I can't see, shouldn't be this dark. I can't...I can't speak. Something's wrong. I, I can't remember...Oh God I do, I do remember. Helicopter. NoNoNoNo! Catherine? Catherine! Have to get out of here...have to help Catherine...

Vincent struggled against whatever was holding him down, shaking his head repeatedly to try and clear it. Whatever they'd given him was gradually wearing off, but it didn't seem to be making any difference in getting out of these restraints. Or in his ability to open his eyes...wait...they were open. So why was it still so dark? His night-vision should be able to gather and amplify the tiniest bit of light - which meant he was somewhere literally pitch-black, sealed against any light getting in. And, he supposed, anything getting out. Unless they'd blinded him...not a positive thought. He tested his voice again - but his throat was so parched that nothing much more than a whisper came out. And it was cold, cold enough to bother him, and that was saying a lot.

Okay. Vincent took a deep breath and tried to calm himself. He needed to think rationally, see if he could remember anything at all about where he was, who was holding him. He knew how he got here, remembered the net that scooped him up and carried him away - but nothing since. With all he'd been through it took a lot to frighten Vincent Keller, but he'd been absolutely terrified as the helicopter rose higher and flew away, pulling him behind. The anguish he felt as Catherine's hand pulled out of his, the look in her eyes as he was taken...he had no idea if it had happened hours or days ago, but it was all still with him, fresh and raw. Catherine oh God I don't even know if she's alive or...no. No, not going there. She was okay when I last saw her...and Gabe...all those gunshots...Gabe has to be dead, so he can't hurt her anymore. Vincent took a deep breath. He had to hang on to that. He tried pulling at the restraints again...nothing. Right, so staying calm wasn't going to help with that, what he needed to do instead was lose control, get so angry he transformed and had the strength to...

"Mr. Keller."

The voice was coming from nowhere and everywhere. Vincent shook off the beginnings of his transformation and tried to concentrate.

"Mr. Keller, please relax. We're sorry; we didn't expect you to wake yet, not until we had you in more comfortable surroundings. We..."

"Who are you?" Vincent rasped, barely managing to get out any sound at all. "Where am I? What's...what's...happening?" He felt and heard a rush of air by his head and immediately began to feel drowsy again. "No, no please, don't...don't..."

"All in good time Mr. Keller. All in good time." But Vincent was already asleep.

He awoke again to the sound of a thud. Ouch. Not just the sound, the feel of it too, like he'd just been thrown onto the ground. Groggily, Vincent tried to sit up, and promptly hit his head on something. He cursed and decided perhaps he should take this slowly. Realising his eyes were still closed, he tentatively opened them...nope, still pitch black. Or he was still blind. Either way, there was nothing to see. He reached up and groped around, feeling a cold, hard ledge, but on top of that it was soft like a mattress. Patting down the length of it, Vincent realised he must have fallen out of bed...or whatever this was that passed for a bed. Not good, but at least he wasn't restrained any more.

Gingerly, Vincent eased himself up into a sitting position on the narrow bed, realising as he did so that he was naked. Great. Feeling around, he found a blanket and pulled it over himself. The air was warmer than it been earlier, but he still felt a chill, probably borne more out of his circumstances than the actual temperature.

So now what? He seemed to be reasonably intact, other than the maybe-but-hopefully-not blindness problem. Actually the most pressing issue at the moment was thirst. And a need to pee. Damn, thinking about how much he needed water right now was NOT helping the second problem. He shifted uncomfortably.

As if they - whoever 'they' were - had heard his thoughts, the blackness started to dissipate. Some kind of light source had come on, but only a bit, as if they knew his eyes would take a while to adjust. As he focussed, the lights were brought up further, stopping once they'd reached a sort of dim glow. Squinting, Vincent tried to take stock of his surroundings. He appeared to be in a sort of cell, but large, perhaps 15 feet square. Unlike a typical cell, there was a rug on the floor and the bedding around him was high quality and plentiful. The bed itself was formed directly out of the walls of the room, as were the narrow shower stall, sink and toilet in the opposite cor...ahah...water AND relief!

Vincent stood up too quickly; his head swam and legs buckled, and he clutched frantically at the air before sinking back down to the bed. Okay then, slowly it was. Once again he eased himself up, this time leaning against the wall for support. So far so good. Moving step by step along the cold metallic wall, Vincent managed to reach the other side. A momentary battle occurred as his still-fuzzy brain decided which need to attend to first. Thirst won out, and he reached out to turn on the tap, thinking how cruel it would be if it didn't work. But water gushed out, and with a silent cry of thanks Vincent leaned down and stuck his head underneath to slake his thirst, knocking his head again in the process and not caring. He let the water pour directly down his throat, easing the soreness. As his thoughts started to clear, he wondered briefly if it was safe...but decided that since death by dehydration was not appealing, he'd take his chances with the water.

Of course, taking in the water had another consequence; his bladder was now screaming at him. Turning off the tap, Vincent moved past the shower stall to the toilet, and gratefully relieved himself, one hand still needed against the wall to stay steady. He took the opportunity to look further around the room - and immediately noticed the bottles of water sitting on a small table. It figured.

Out of habit he flushed and shuffled back to the sink, turning the tap on again to throw several handfuls of water over his face, trying to clear the cobwebs. It helped, but only a bit. At least he felt somewhat steadier on his feet. He looked around for a door - but saw nothing at all that looked like an obvious exit. As he did so, the lights came up just a little more. Surely that meant somebody was watching, following his movements.

"Hello?" His first attempt was barely more than a croak. Vincent swallowed and tried again. "Hello? Hey! Is somebody there?" His voice was getting stronger, but there was no response. Not that he'd really expected one. In fact, other than the faint hiss of air circulation coming from above, there was no sound at all. Complete and utter silence. Vincent looked up, trying to determine where the light and air were coming from. As he peered into the gloom above, his night vision began to kick in, and he could see that the ceiling was a good 20 feet high - and seemingly molded out of the same smooth metallic substance as the walls, floor and room fixtures. Even if he did transform, try to jump or climb, there was absolutely nothing to hold on to. For all intents and purposes, he appeared to be well and truly trapped.

Vincent took another look around his immediate surroundings. In addition to the bed in one corner and the bathroom setup in another, the third corner held the table with the water, a stool pushed under it, and - strangely - a comfortable looking armchair. Next to this was a large wardrobe. Opening it, Vincent found some basic clothing, toiletries, towels and a tiny fridge - containing more water, a few wrapped sandwiches and some fruit. Although his stomach rumbled hungrily at the sight, eating was not exactly a priority. Getting out of here was. Grabbing a pair of track pants and a t-shirt, Vincent put them on as he crossed to the last corner of the room. There was no furniture there, so logically, that was the way out. But even up close, he could see nothing; no handle, no lock, not even a hint of an opening. Running his fingers slowly over the surface, Vincent finally encountered a faint seam, not even enough to get a fingernail into; which he was able to follow up and across to where it disappeared into the adjoining wall. Exactly like a door...but one that might have well not been there, for all the good it would do him.

He didn't even bother to pound on it, or try to call out again. As his mind cleared further, Vincent had realised the full extent of his situation: it had to be Muirfield. Who else would have prepared a holding cell like this, capable of containing a beast? Who else would have captured him instead of killing him outright? And Catherine...oh God if it was Muirfield, they would think nothing of hurting her, killing her.

Vincent stumbled backwards until he sat down hard on the end of the bed, despair overtaking his thoughts, despair that quickly turned to rage. He felt the familiar onset of his transformation, the beast beginning to rise, and then...nothing. Vincent started to panic; this wasn't like before, when he took Gabe's 'cure' and his beast was literally gone.

No, this was different. His beast was still there, becoming angrier by the second - but trapped, painfully, just below the surface. He tried to force it, to push the transformation through whatever was suppressing it, but all this did was give him a sudden, blinding headache.

"Mr. Keller."

There it was again, that voice, Vincent jumped up from the bed, the sudden movement causing such a rush of agony that he nearly keeled over. "Hey!" he yelled, gritting his teeth against the pain. "Who are you?"

"Mr. Keller. Please. Be patient. We do not intend to hurt you. And please try not to get agitated; at this stage of your treatment it will be detrimental."

"Treatment? What treatment? What are you doing to me?"

"Mr. Keller, we suggest you eat, and get some rest. But you must calm down; otherwise we will have to assist. Goodnight, Mr. Keller."

"Wait, wait!" No response. "What do you mean, assist?" Still nothing. "Hey you bastards, LET ME OUT OF HERE!"

Even through the newest flash of pain brought on by his outburst, Vincent heard a slight, but definite change in the air circulation. Realisation sank in; just like when he'd awoken before, they were putting something in the air supply to calm him down, perhaps even make him sleep. Was this why he couldn't transform? He stumbled back towards the bed, and collapsed back on it, his anger turning back into despair as whatever he was breathing kicked in.

And as the lights started to dim, a new sound joined the hiss of the air pump: Vincent, choking back uncontrollable sobs of rage and anguish as he fell asleep thinking not of himself, but of Catherine.

Several days - or maybe weeks - later, Vincent sat in the armchair, mindlessly staring at an e-reader he'd been given. It was loaded with everything from classics to current best-sellers, but nothing really piqued his interest. Neither did the crossword puzzles, or the DVD player with a stack of box-sets, or the mp3 player or the handheld game console. He thought only of Catherine, what she must be going through. He refused to consider the possibility that they had killed her, but maybe they'd kidnapped her too. Maybe she was being held here, close by? He wanted to ask - not that anyone ever directly answered his questions - but didn't dare; if they didn't have her, he didn't want to put a target on her back. And so, he just sat, and remembered. Trouble was, it was getting harder and harder to organise his thoughts about her, and Vincent often found himself struggling to remember small details of their relationship. When he did recall something significant, he tried to burn it into his memory, lock it away. Somehow he knew it would be important.

More time passed. Vincent was aware of it not in the conventional way, but by the number of books he'd read, which movies he'd watched. Distant thoughts of a beautiful woman - he thought her name was Catherine - were still frequently in the back of his mind, but he no longer worried about her. She was probably fine, and better off without him around. He'd been worried about someone else too, but for some reason he couldn't seem to remember why or even who that was anymore - although he sometimes had flashes of a smiling face and plaid shirts.

At first, Vincent had tried to keep track of how long he'd been there by marking off the days in the cover of the crossword puzzle book. But then he kept forgetting, and after a while it just didn't seem important anymore. In truth, Vincent wasn't even sure when one day became another, he just knew they did, because - well - he went to bed at night, and got up in the morning. At least he assumed as much. Perhaps he was sleeping through the day and up at night; it was all the same in here. But what actually happened when he was awake? Vincent had no idea. Oh sure, he would shower, eat something, exercise vigorously on the equipment now also in his 'room', read or play a game...but there were huge chunks of time missing. He thought they might have been taking him out - because at some point every day his food and water would be replenished, there were even hot meals now. His towels, bedding and clothing were regularly replaced. While showering one day he realised his hair was shorter than he was sure it had been. But he didn't remember going anywhere, or doing anything, or seeing anyone.

This should have bothered him - but it didn't.

His beast was still suppressed, but that was okay, it didn't hurt anymore - well not quite so much, anyway. The voice had told him not to worry about it for the time being, so he didn't. Actually sometimes he almost felt like he was controlling his beast now, instead of the other way around. He liked that.

The voice told him a lot of things; like the time he woke up with a bandage on his cheek, the voice said it was nothing, it would heal. And it had - although he'd mostly forgotten about it by the time it did. Sometimes there were two voices, and they would be talking about him, not seeming to care at all that he could hear them. And he supposed that was okay, because he usually couldn't remember specifically what they'd said, so it must not have been important.

Whatever he was or wasn't doing during his day, it certainly managed to tire him out. Vincent was usually exhausted by the time the lights would dim, signalling that it was time for him to get into bed, time to sleep. And sleep did come quickly, although in a strange moment of awareness right before he slept, Vincent was always apprehensive; never sure what that night would bring. Too often it was nightmares, resulting in him suddenly waking; shouting about people or things that didn't make sense to him, sometimes even roaring as he felt his beast push to be let out. The voices would invade his consciousness then, shouting instructions, sometimes arguing; "Why is he still doing that?" "I told you he needed more," and Vincent would sense movement around him, as he gradually calmed and fell back into a deep sleep. He never completely forgot the nightmares though. The next day the details would be fuzzy, just out of reach - but he knew it had happened again.

But sometimes, if he was lucky - he would have a good dream. A wonderful dream of Catherine; of them together. Vincent didn't know if they were actual memories or just wishful thinking - but the woman he could barely remember while awake, came alive as he slept...

Catherine was just waking up. He watched her from the window sill as he had so many times before, smiling as she turned and saw him there. He'd known it was important to be there for her today, the anniversary of her mother's death; hadn't wanted her to face this day alone. For so many years he'd done the same thing - worried about her as he watched her, respectfully, on this day. But this was the first time she'd known he was there; the first time he was able to go into the room and comfort her properly. Teasing her about her sleeping habits and putting down the coffee he'd brought - now half empty - Vincent lowered himself onto the bed and took the kiss he'd been waiting impatiently for since daybreak. As Catherine returned the kiss, certain parts of his anatomy reminded him that wasn't the only thing he was impatient for...but no. Vincent was determined to be the good and dutiful boyfriend today. Catherine had a busy and emotional day ahead, and this was certainly not the time to give in to his urges, no matter how hungry her lips seemed to be against his own. He pulled back with a sigh, telling himself that they could spend time together later, celebrating the other anniversary that fell on this day.

However it seemed as though his girlfriend had other ideas. Ready with a litany of reasons why they should spend the day in bed together - including reminding him that it was also their anniversary of sorts; Catherine wrapped her arms around him and leaned in for another kiss. Secretly thrilled she'd remembered the positive significance of that day, Vincent felt his resolve crumbling. With a groan and a half-hearted "no no no", he met her lips, rolling her over and...

"Ow!" Catherine's head had connected squarely with the wooden headboard. They both dissolved into giggles.

"Are you...are you okay?" Vincent could barely get the words out. She nodded and they both started laughing again. "Right. That's it," he announced. "That's a sign that we need to get out of this bed and start the day. You've got that security thing with...with the mayor and Gabe," he tried not to let his disdain for the man be too apparent in his tone; "and if we want to go to the cemetery to visit your mom together before work, then we should leave soon."

"Uh uh, you come back here." Catherine was having none of it. "Give me a sec." She grabbed her phone from the nightstand and quickly sent a text. "There, I've told Joe and Tess that I have a personal matter to take care of, and will meet them at the park instead of the station. Now you..." she dropped the phone to the floor and pulled Vincent back down. "You are wearing entirely too many clothes. I know you love this old coat Vincent, but really, not in bed, please." She eased the coat over his shoulders. "Or this shirt, it's sort of in the way." One hand crept under the hem and began to dance gently over his tight abs. Vincent shuddered. "And these jeans, I've never noticed just how restrictive they are; they'll have to come off immediately." He groaned as Catherine squeezed his rapidly growing manhood. Yes, his jeans were feeling awfully restrictive right now.

Vincent sat up briefly to shed the coat and shirt while toeing off his boots. Catherine was already busy with his belt buckle, and as he gently lowered himself back down over her, she undid his button and zipper, allowing his now straining shaft to push out against his boxer briefs. One gentle hand wrapped around his neck as her mouth sought his again, her tongue pushing hungrily against his. Her other hand furiously rubbed and tugged the enormous bulge in his briefs, and Vincent felt himself begin to throb and tighten. He pulled back slightly, breaking the contact. "Whoa, hey I know we don't have much time...but Catherine if you don't slow down it'll be over before we get started."

"Mmmm Vincent, I just want you so much this morning," her hand was searching for him again, "I don't want to slow down or think, I just want to touch you, feel you, taste you, have you..."

A growl escaped him as he looked down into her eyes, dark with passion. Damn, what man could resist that? He should just let her continue, and then he could enjoy the explosion that at this point, he was barely holding back. After all, it wasn't like he wouldn't be ready again almost immediately...and it wasn't like she didn't know exactly what she was doing to him...Ah fuck. He growled again. No. This was Catherine's day. She may have wiped out some of his best intentions by seducing him into bed already, but he could still be the 'good boyfriend' and take care of her first.

"Uh uh." Vincent rolled off to her side, suppressing a sigh. "My turn. Didn't you say it was a 'celestial' day? I'm gonna make you see stars." She moaned at the implication, the heat and scent of her arousal now unmistakable. He rose up on his knees. "But first, now who's wearing too many clothes?" As Catherine grinned and pulled off her tee shirt, Vincent flung back the sheet, ready to make short work of the flannel pyjama bottoms he knew she would have on. Suddenly Catherine leaned forward, pulling back his hand.

"Vincent please...be careful." He stopped in confusion and looked down - then did a double take. "What on earth are you wearing?"

"Pyjamas."

"I know that, but ummm...you have dozens of perfectly good pairs. Not like these." He laughed. They were threadbare, almost worn through in places. The motif was so faded it was barely recognisable as the Pink Panther. Vincent was about to make a joke when Catherine spoke, her voice quiet.

"They are perfect."

Realisation hit him like a ton of bricks. "Oh God, Catherine I'm sorry. These are from your mom, aren't they?"

He could see tears pricking at her eyes as she nodded. "The last ones I have. About to fall apart I think, I only dare wear them once a year. I...I thought you were about to rip them off me."

"I was...I'm sorry. Come here." Vincent gathered her into his arms and gently kissed her forehead. They sat that way for several minutes, until he sighed with resignation. "Look, I guess the moment's kind of passed. Perhaps we should just get ready and..."

"What are you talking about?" Catherine turned her head and gave him an indignant stare. "Oh no Vincent, you have work to do. I still want those stars you promised me. And from the feel of things the 'moment' certainly hasn't passed you by." She was right. His erection had flagged slightly, but it was returning to full strength as she spoke, stubbornly pushing into her hip through the cotton of his briefs. Vincent looked into her eyes and they burned back into his; the passion had indeed returned...and then some.

Almost reverently, he slid the pyjamas down her legs and off, carefully folding them and leaning over to place them on the dresser. Then he pulled off his jeans, briefs and socks, throwing them in the general direction of the floor. Catherine couldn't pull her gaze from his impressive shaft, bobbing as it was released, becoming even larger right before her eyes. She murmured something and reached towards it...but Vincent stopped her, pushing her arm away gently as he eased down and used his other hand to cup and caress her mound, her trembles working through his entire body.

Her thighs parted automatically as he blew gently on her most sensitive spot, settling comfortably between her bent legs. Catherine moaned loudly, and his own lust increased exponentially. As his long tongue reached out to stroke her folds, Vincent thought for the umpteenth time how much he enjoyed this, how incredible it was to give this kind of gratification to the woman he loved. Although he was just as hard and aroused as ever, his own needs were completely secondary at this point; his entire being was focussed on Catherine's pleasure. His fingers joined his tongue, and she shuddered, pushing against him, demanding more. Vincent obliged, his fingers probing deeper, his tongue flicking at a rate that had to have a little help from his animal DNA. She was close now, her hands fisting in his hair as she whimpered and shook. Vincent stopped for a moment to watch her, fuelling his own pleasure; and then dove back in, sucking hard exactly where she wanted him. It was more than enough to send Catherine over the edge; she pulsed wetly against him for long minutes, practically wailing as he licked and sucked and stroked, decreasing his attentions only as her fire diminished.

Eventually Vincent stopped and pulled himself back up over her body. Catherine wasted no time in bringing her mouth to his for a deep, hard kiss. As they broke apart, he looked at her questioningly. "So, stars?"

"Oh Vincent, you just gave me entire galaxies." He grinned, feeling quite pleased with himself. Catherine shifted and her hand moved between them, seeking out his throbbing manhood. She licked her lips, and Vincent knew exactly what was coming next. Literally. Oh God he wanted her touch, wanted her mouth on him. But not now. He needed to be inside her, and there wasn't time for both. As much as it nearly killed him, he sat up, staying just out of reach. He grabbed her hand, brought her fingers to his lips and kissed them, glancing at the clock and murmuring "later".

A look of understanding passed between them, and silently they repositioned themselves, fitting together like a puzzle as Vincent groaned and slipped inside her heat.

He plunged fully inside her in a single stroke, not holding back at all. Catherine's hungry inner walls gripped him with every thrust, making him want to go even deeper, to become a part of her. She wrapped her feet around him, pulling him closer, and he began to growl uncontrollably. Vincent looked down at Catherine, and knew his eyes were flashing gold, his veins pulsing, his muscles rippling. She looked back, reflecting the fire in his eyes, and they both knew it was time. He lengthened and thickened further inside her, and stilled, just for a moment - then let go. Roaring, keening - they came together, each one's pleasure building off the other, perfectly in sync. Perfectly in love.

Something had awakened him. Damn. As Vincent gradually came back to reality, he fought to keep thoughts of Catherine foremost in his mind. He felt closer to her than he had in weeks...and in a moment of clarity unlike anything he felt when he was fully awake, Vincent knew that everything was not alright...that all he had left of himself, or of Catherine, was what they had in his dreams. And he was damned if he was going to let anyone take that away from him too.

But try as he might to stay there with her; the more he woke up, the further away she was...until he was just lying there; feeling the familiarity of being sexually satisfied, but also feeling completely disoriented. He knew he'd had another great dream - the evidence was all over his chest - but he had no idea what or who it was about. He shivered. Feeling suddenly exposed and a little embarrassed, Vincent reached for the kicked off sheet and drew it back up over himself, becoming aware as he did so of the voices discussing him again.

"Jesus, he's been at it again. I don't know how he manages it, but Keller seems to have a better love life asleep, than I do while I'm awake."

"Well, with looks and equipment like that, he probably had his pick of them."

"Jealous?" The first voice laughed.

"Hell no, not with what he'll be going through soon. Poor sod might as well enjoy it while he can, even if it is in a dream."

"You mean...? Oh no. Boss says no chemical castration for this one. Didn't you realise? Keller's not just another one of our test subjects; he's the real thing, an original. He's the one all the other testing has been for. From what I understand, they're pretty much ready to move onto the next step. Controlling his subconscious - like these dreams - was the only thing taking longer than expected, but I heard today that they've figured that out now too. Tomorrow they're moving him, so say goodbye to your nightly entertainment."

Vincent smiled and turned over on his side, punching his pillow to get more comfortable as he drifted back to sleep. That was nice. Whatever was causing his confusion, the voices were going to take care of it. He really had nothing to complain about.

Late afternoon. Outside, in the woods. Vincent motioned to Jeremy to move noisily around the other side of the copse, while he stayed silently in place. Sure enough, their 'prey' took the bait, appearing from the underbrush to make his move on Jeremy. Vincent stepped out, and moving faster than any human eye could properly process, he was behind them, disabling their target with silent efficiency.

Later, Vincent sat on the deck, enjoying the country air and having a beer with his two friends; his mission partner Jeremy, and their 'handler' Tucker. Tucker was actually the man's last name, but everyone just called him that. Or Agent. Tucker had been in charge of their training for the month he and Jeremy had been up here in Ontario, their upcoming Government mission so secret they couldn't even train in the USA. At least that's what he said, and Vincent trusted him implicitly. The three of them talked about the baseball game playing on the TV they'd dragged outside, and complained about the mosquitoes, deciding that Canadian mosquitoes were definitely worse than their American cousins. After a while Vincent became silent, eventually getting up from his chair and moving to the railing.

"Vincent, what is it?" asked Jeremy.

"That guy - our training target today. I can't help wondering if he's okay. I tried to do as we planned, not bring him down too hard - but the adrenaline was going and my beast nearly got the better of me this time...I just..."

"Vincent, everything's fine." Tucker moved to stand beside him, handing him another beer. "You did perfectly, again. Just as we wanted. You haven't lost control of your beast for weeks - and not once since we got up here." His eyes narrowed as he lowered his voice so Jeremy couldn't hear. "And Condor - remember - no emotions, no worrying. You signed up for this mission with that understanding. You and your abilities are vital to the safety of our nation." He stepped back and smiled.

"Of course sir. I can do that sir," replied Vincent, not even realising Tucker hadn't answered his question. He completely forgot the conversation and sat back down with Jeremy, both of them yelling at the TV about the latest umpire call.

After breakfast the next morning, Tucker made an announcement. "I've got some news. I've talked to the Boss, and they're ready for us back in New York. Time to put all this training to use in the city, just as planned. So today we'll run through a couple of scenarios outside like usual, then we'll get all packed up. You need to be ready for us to move out tonight once it's dark." Vincent and Jeremy nodded their assent, heading towards the door as Tucker spoke again. "Jeremy, go out back and get the gear for today. Vincent, would you stay here a moment please?"

Vincent stopped and turned back into the dining room. "Yes?"

"Vincent, today we're going to do things a little bit differently. Today, your target is Jeremy."

"Oh, okay one on one. We've done that before, it's good training for both of us."

"No Vincent. Not training. Today you track Jeremy, and then you kill him."

Vincent wasn't sure he'd heard Tucker correctly. "No - he's my partner. He's my friend. We've been training as a team all this time. I need him. For the mission."

"No, you don't. Think about it - in all our training scenarios, you've been the one to apprehend the target. You work alone. He's not a beast. You are. He's not necessary to the mission. You are. Both of you knew when you agreed to the mission that difficult sacrifices might have to be made. You've killed for your country in training before, when there was a threat. This is no different."

"But Tucker..." Vincent was confused, and starting to look distressed. "Jeremy's not a threat...I can't..."

"You can, and you will. Vincent, this is the test you've been waiting for, so you can move on to the real work. Jeremy has served his country well. Now it's time for you to do the same." Tucker's tone changed. "Condor - listen carefully: This morning you will track Jeremy, and kill him."

So Vincent did.

Later that night the helicopter arrived to take them back to New York. Vincent had a moment of apprehension when he first heard the sound of the rotors, then he had a strange flash of hands touching as he climbed aboard with Tucker. It didn't make sense - but it was soon forgotten.

Why am I here? Again! I don't know this place...and yet...something, something...

Vincent shook his head, snapping himself out of the thoughts he'd become lost in. He looked around. He was standing in an industrial part of the city, in front of an old warehouse building that had certainly seen better days. In fact, it looked like it had been nearly destroyed in a fire - or maybe an explosion; one entire wall was missing. Trouble was, Vincent had no idea why he would come here, and not just once either. This was the third time in as many weeks he'd suddenly found himself standing right here, his mind a fog of thoughts that he couldn't quite put his finger on.

This wasn't the only place either, there were others. He just couldn't remember them. Tucker had kept him very busy since their return to New York, but when he did have a bit of down time like this morning, Vincent liked to go for walks. He enjoyed being out among the crowds, using sidewalks instead of the rooftops he usually travelled by when working - almost as if it was something he'd been missing for a long time. But sometimes - like today - he'd find himself heading in a particular direction, arriving at a building or place only to realise he had no reason to be there. Worse, after he left he'd completely forget about it, until the next time he found himself standing in front of one of them.

His phone rang. Vincent answered, listened, replied in the affirmative and headed off towards home; the warehouse already fading from memory. It was time to go to work.

Home. Or the 'safe house', as Tucker called it. A swanky, split level houseboat moored at the rather upscale 79th Street Boat Basin. Tucker had stayed close by for the first week or so; but since then had only checked in by phone, although frequently. The place had been fully outfitted with top of the line appliances, exercise equipment and electronic toys, and the closet filled with an assortment of stylish clothing, both casual and formal. Everything fit perfectly, as if he'd had his own personal designer doing fittings. He'd been told the houseboat was essentially 'his' as long as he wanted it; the marina rental costs automatically prepaid, along with the utilities. There were valid credit cards along with other documentation and ID in various names, and an ATM card linked to an account for 'housekeeping' expenses and ready cash, as Tucker explained. Basically, Vincent didn't want for anything.

He entered the houseboat and pulled out the special satellite phone, untraceable and used only for work. "Condor," Vincent announced himself to the person answering at the other end. This time it wasn't Tucker, it was Tucker's boss - identified with a digitally scrambled voice. Vincent was given instructions, and then disconnected, returning the phone to its hiding place. He paused for a moment, adrenaline pumping. This was it. Finally, after weeks of smaller jobs - mostly information gathering, killing only if there was a direct threat - today he would begin the work he'd trained for. The work he'd willingly given up his past for. The work that would save his country. He was ready.

A few hours later, Vincent was trying to figure out where it all went wrong. The operation had started out smoothly enough, everything running to plan. He'd allowed himself to get captured, then waited, 'restrained' until the target arrived. Li Zhao. The man who'd essentially created him, but not for good. Vincent was supposed to wait until Zhao's guard was down, and then eliminate him and his henchmen. Efficiently. Quickly. It should've been simple.

But then that woman showed up, calling his name and distracting him. Zhao got away. Now there were two men as well, looking very out of place but still efficiently shooting darts at him. Darts? Oh God. Tranquilizers. He ran at them, but not in time. Another dart and the effect was too immediate, too strong; down he went. The woman knelt by him, touched him, cradled his cheek, and his beast receded immediately...he didn't even have to think about it. Must have been the drugs. She said something about a scar being gone...what scar? She was telling him everything would be okay, but how could it be? He'd failed in his mission. She said she never stopped looking for him - but he didn't know her. And yet...she looked into his eyes as if she knew him, as if he should know her. Instead of being terrified, she hadn't flinched at his beast. Nothing made sense, and his head was swimming...and...and...

"Who are you?" Vincent's world went black.

To be continued...

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