

Magic Windows

by Michaela Buzsaki Struchova



The time of the year had arrived again - it was two days before Winterfest. The Tunnels were buzzing with more activity than usual; everyone was in a cheerful mood. Catherine was helping Rebecca with the candles that year. Her candlemaking skills had improved significantly since her first shy attempt two years ago. She truly enjoyed creating those beautiful symbols of light and warmth and sharing them with other good people.

That year, she delivered her first one, too - to Joe. The year before, it was Vincent having the honour, but this year, he chose Elliot so that Catherine could spread the Tunnel love to one of their dearest friends Above.

“Cathy, it’s gorgeous!” Joe admired the craftsmanship that had gone into creating the candle. “Rebecca has done it again; it’s beautiful. And that is saying something, coming from someone who wouldn’t consider himself romantic, you know?” he added with a grin.

Catherine was sitting in his apartment that early evening, enjoying a freshly brewed cup of coffee from a large mug. She laughed at his remark.

“Don’t try to fool yourself, Joe,” she scolded him friendly. “Besides, this one was not made by Rebecca.” A hint of pride coloured her voice.

Joe looked at her. and when he saw the glowing smile and the twinkle in her eyes, he narrowed his eyes with awe.

“*You?*” he asked.

“Yes, all by myself. Well, Rebecca was supervising me, but still, it’s the effort that counts, right?” she replied happily.

The look of her friend’s eyes softened.

“Then I appreciate it even more,” he said quietly and smiled. “Thank you, Cathy.” He swallowed hard, touched by this friendly gesture. Being a Helper and, in a way, a part of the Tunnel community was something very dear to him, but this moved him even more.

“I was very sorry we weren’t able to come last year,” he said after a moment when he recovered. “Diana was really looking forward to it.”

“I know; we missed you both there.” She remembered the unlucky occasion a month before when Diana had been shot during an investigation. It took a long time for her to recover. “But I’m sure it’ll be the sweeter for your both this year,” she added, smiling.

Joe nodded, but then his face grew earnest. It seemed as if he was trying to look for the right words.

“Changing the subject now...” he started. “Cathy... It’s not easy for me to say it, but... I would really appreciate it if you could do me a big favour.”

Catherine’s look was curious. “What is it, Joe?”

He sighed but saw no other way, how to explain it, so he chose to say it directly.

“I know you don’t do these things anymore, but I want to ask you if you could go undercover for us once more...”

She frowned and gasped. “Joe... Been there, done that??”

“I know, I know,” he jumped in. “You gave up this kind of investigative work for Vincent and your family.”

“And for myself,” she added. “I don’t want to endanger any one of them, especially not Vincent. You know that he...”

“Yes, of course...” He sighed again. “Look, I’ll be honest, Cathy.” He looked deep into her eyes. “I admit it will sound like a *déjà vu*, but we have a drug dealer that we’ve been chasing for months now. He’s a real trouble, spreading his net further every day. The problem is that every time we think we’ve got him, he’s a step ahead of us and escapes.”

Joe ran his hand through his curly hair in distress.

"Kids are dying out there, Radcliffe... We were getting really desperate, but it seems that we finally have a chance to get him. The NYPD is organising a bust with our help, but they need a specific type our drugs guy is sweet on." Suddenly he hesitated.

"A chick... looking naive enough to be just interested in getting some good stuff to get high..."

Catherine raised her eyebrows and couldn't suppress a chuckle. "And all this time, I thought you hired me because I looked intelligent."

"Very funny, Radcliffe," Joe grinned before continuing. "So this time, we know who the dealer is; all we need is to catch him in the act. The problem is, there is no policewoman in the department fitting the description of the type we need right now."

The dilemma of the situation bothered her. She knew Vincent was not going to like it if she said 'yes'. However, Catherine's sense of justice won in the end.

"When are you planning the bust?"

"According to his pattern, he will be in his favourite den in four days, the 16th December."

"A nice Winterfest gift," she remarked dryly.

"Look, I know it's not exactly what you planned running up to the holidays, but Cathy, if you say yes and we succeed, many lives can be saved. What can be a greater gift than that?" Joe raised his eyebrows in hope.

Catherine sighed, and her eyes wandered around the chamber filled with memories connected with her little family.

It could concern any family, anybody's children, wives, husbands... she thought.

"You know Vincent's going to *hate* this," she said finally, resigned.

Joe's face lit up, though he was fully aware of the problem. "I know, and I can talk to him if you want..." he offered.

"It's okay," she interrupted him with a smile. "Count me in. I'm sure he'll understand."

They both stood up, and Joe hugged her enthusiastically. "Thank you, Cathy! You don't know how much you're helping..." he said gratefully.

"I think I have an idea," she replied with a chuckle, making him smile.

“I’ll send you all the details tonight,” Joe added. “I would bring them to Winterfest, but I don’t want to spoil it for you both.”

Relieved and happy, Joe squeezed her arm again.

Oh, I think you already did... Catherine couldn’t help the thought but returned his gesture with a smile.

“No...”

“Vincent...”

“Catherine, please, don’t!” Vincent’s voice sounded more desperate than angry. “You’ve put your fieldwork behind you long ago... for your safety!”

She sighed and shook her head. *I knew this wouldn’t be easy.*

“For *our* safety,” she corrected him. “But Vincent, *please*, try to understand. I know deep inside you *do*... They really need me! Joe is desperate; they are running out of time... It will only take an hour, at most, and Joe and the police team will be there to have my back.” Her big eyes were begging him.

He exhaled loudly and bowed his head, gripping hard the top of the chair. He hated admitting it, but she was right. They’d been through the same situation years ago, and he remembered well what effects drugs have on people. He was lucky to have survived his encounter with it, only because of Catherine...

“I know I have no right to prevent you from doing it,” he said resigned, his voice quiet now. “And I know what you want to do is the right thing to do...” He closed his eyes. “I just wish...”

Catherine walked to him and put her hand on his shoulder.

“You *will* be.” She smiled, knowing exactly what he wanted to say. “I’ll be safe because I won’t be alone there. I’ll have my friends around me, and I’ll have *you*.”

Vincent looked at her from behind his bangs with worried eyes. He nodded before speaking.

“*Always...*”

Catherine’s smile widened as she embraced him, laying her cheek against his chest.

“You won’t even notice, and I’ll be back, just in time to get in the mood for the Christmas celebrations with my family,” she remarked happily, looking forward to the occasion.

When he tightened his hold on her, Vincent exhaled loudly, closing his eyes. He may have agreed with his wife going undercover, but inside, he was growing restless.

“Okay good, okay fine! Nothing more to fix,” Mouse stated with hands deep in his pockets and a sense of pride in his boyish voice.

“I think Mouse is right, Vincent. Everything is ready for the big event tomorrow,” Cullen said cheerfully, looking around the Great Hall. The whole chamber was dressed festively, prepared for the first of the two eagerly anticipated celebrations of the Tunnel winter.

Vincent put the last of the high-back chairs in its place at the long table and looked around as well. A satisfied expression settled on his face.

“Yes, we are ready to celebrate with our friends once again,” he replied with a smile.

“Mouse likes to celebrate!” their young friend jumped in. “Lots of friends, lots of food... for Arthur, too!” He grinned excitedly, his eyes like twinkling stars.

The lion-man chuckled - Mouse always managed to put a smile on his face.

“Of course, we wouldn’t deprive Arthur of the festive treats of the season,” he remarked, bemused.

“Well, we better get out of here and have some rest before dinner,” Cullen continued and patted Vincent on the shoulder. “It’s going to be a big day tomorrow.”

“You go ahead; I’ll be on my way soon, as well,” his friend remarked.

Cullen nodded, and with a light step and Mouse on his heels, he left the chamber.

Vincent remained alone in the place which held so many memories for him - good and bad, joyous and full of sorrow... A sense of melancholy washed over him for a moment, but then he remembered how fortunate he’d been and shook his head, smiling.

Looking around once more, his look fell on the aged, embroidered tapestries hanging on the wall at the long staircase.

For some reason, Vincent was unable to look away from them. He felt as if something was drawing him near, to admire them closer. He had seen them countless times during his life, but they never stopped enchanting him.

Casually, he made his way up a few steps of the staircase and studied each masterpiece carefully again as if he was doing it for the first time. The vibrant, predominantly red and brown colours of each scene brought real life to them. He smiled, remembering his vivid imagination when he was a boy, thinking the tapestries might lead him to another world. A magical world...

Suddenly, his sensitive ears heard a voice. He turned his head towards the heavy main door of the Great Hall, but it was shut, exactly as Cullen and Mouse left it. He was still alone. His eyes wandered around the majestic space. Apart from the antique furniture, decorations and candles all around, there was no soul to be seen or heard.

There, the voice called again, echoing in his ears and his mind... Vincent jerked his head back to the tapestries, staring at the figures of knights and medieval warriors on them.

It's impossible... he thought, and his eyes narrowed, focusing on each scene in front of him. He couldn't make out specific words, but he could clearly hear someone calling from a distance.

Was it a female voice? He wasn't sure, but there was one thing he *was* sure of - it was coming from the tapestries...

The mind is a tricky thing. Although Vincent was trying to find a rational explanation, his imagination won the battle over his reason. Life experience taught him that there are many layers of reality, so why should he not hear voices coming from an unliving object?

When he heard the voice calling again, his hand decided to answer and apprehensively reached out for the tapestry, drawn by it like by a magnet. The moment Vincent's clawed fingers touched the cloth, his eyes got blinded by a golden light pouring into the Great Hall. Very carefully, he opened his eyes and gasped. The tapestry right in front of him was divided now; each half was pulled aside slightly.

Magic windows...

His childhood memory resurfaced again and almost overwhelmed him. Yet, the curiosity won over his caution. Fascinated, enchanted and unafraid, Vincent stepped into the almost liquid golden glow. The moment he walked through to the other side, the tapestry behind him returned to its original state, and the Great Hall was covered in a veil of semi-darkness again.

"Where is Daddy?" the three-year-old Jacob asked Catherine at the dinner table.

The young mother's eyes darted to her older son, and a nervous smile appeared on her troubled face.

"I'm not sure, sweetheart," she replied, trying to sound calm. Absently, she stroked the golden hair of her other son, Charles, sitting on her other side and playing with the food in his small bowl. Even the children sensed that their father's absence in the time they always spent together was rather unusual.

"Was Vincent... all right when you saw him last?" Jacob senior asked with a lower voice, looking at her worried. He was sitting opposite his daughter-in-law and wandered what kept his son from sharing the evening meal with his family without sending a word.

Catherine sighed and observed him for a moment. Then, she looked at Mary, sitting next to Jacob.

"Mary, would you mind keeping an eye on the boys, please? I would like to speak with Father," she said with a hesitant smile.

"Of course, my dear," Mary replied, sensing some urgent matter.

They could feel the eyes of others in the Dining Chamber following them as they walked out of it. Everyone was wondering where Vincent was.

When they stopped in the tunnel outside the chamber, Catherine turned to Jacob with an anxious look.

"We talked about something last night, something that made him uneasy," she started, making Jacob frown. She explained to him Joe's request and that she had agreed.

The patriarch's eyes narrowed with doubts. "Will you be safe?" he asked. "I mean... That must be what Vincent is concerned with the most."

"I am aware of it, Father, and I told him I will be fine. Joe and his people will be all around me, watching my every move." Catherine sighed. "He agreed in the end, but I know he's very uncomfortable with the situation. But he seemed all right when he left for the Great Hall this afternoon. I've asked Mouse and Cullen, and they said Vincent was fine when he was with them, he was about to leave the Hall right after them. But no one has seen him since..."

She swallowed hard; her eyes were suddenly burning. "I'm scared, Father... I know he's not in physical danger; I would *feel* it but..." She shook her head helplessly. "I just feel that he's in some kind of trouble. And I know I must find him as soon as possible."

"We could send search patrols..." he suggested.

"No," Catherine refused the help. "I don't want to worry anyone. I know he's physically fine, but I need to find my way to him."

Her big green eyes glittered in the light of the torches on the damp walls. They were full of resolve, and Jacob, although worried by her words, couldn't but admire her determination. He squeezed her hand.

"Don't worry about Jacob and Charles. Mary and I will look after them," he reassured her. "But if you need help at any point, use the pipes. And Cathy..." He added earnestly. "Be careful."

"I will," Catherine smiled gratefully. "Thank you. I'll bring Vincent home, I promise." She hugged him, and then, taking a torch from the wall, she set out on her way.

The icy wind at the Great Hall was blowing with a mighty force when Catherine carefully went step by step down the familiar long staircase. She had just remembered that she should have taken the other route, leading to a small door to the Hall on the other side, when she noticed the long, heavy wooden beam that usually secured the massive door was not in place. It would take two men to lift the beam. Or one Vincent...

With relief, she fought her way through the wind and after reaching the door, she pushed it open with all her strength. Quickly, she walked inside and with some effort, she shut the door behind her. Adjusting her messy hair a bit, Catherine looked around the Hall. It was the place where Vincent was seen last, and something in their bond was telling her that it was the only place to find him.

A few candles and torches were still flickering in the darkness and casting long shadows on the walls; otherwise, the Great Hall was empty. After inspecting the vast space with her eyes and seeing no one around, she sighed and turned to leave. At that very moment, a faint call reached her ears.

"Catherine..."

She jerked her head and looked around frantically. Catherine would have recognised that voice anywhere in the world. It was Vincent, but he was definitely not in the chamber. The voice echoed several more times, sounding more and more urgent, drawing her closer to where it was coming from. Suddenly, Catherine stopped at the tapestries. She remembered Vincent's memory from a long time ago.

"I used to imagine that they were magic windows... that if I stared at them long enough and hard enough, they might open up for me, and I could pass through to another world..."

Although rationally thinking it was impossible, she was irresistibly drawn to the colourful fabrics in front of her.

"Catherine!" the voice echoed in the stillness again, and there was no more going back...

Her hand slowly moved towards the tapestry nearest to her. When her fingers made light contact with the cloth, a bright golden light blinded her momentarily. She covered her eyes with her hands for a moment, but when she looked into the light again, her mouth fell open.

There, the *magic windows* opened to her for real. She gasped in disbelief, but the pull on her heart was getting stronger. She refused to back off now. There was no need to hear the gravelly sound of Vincent's voice again. Without further hesitation, Catherine walked through the opening in the tapestries into the unknown...

When Vincent emerged from the golden mass of light, the first thing he noticed was that he was still in the Tunnels. He found himself in one of the countless corridors of the subterranean world, and it didn't look like anything than other tunnels he had been roaming all his life. And yet, there was something almost otherworldly about this one. His highly perceptive senses registered a powerful presence of something. Or someone...

"Mouse?" he whispered into the cold air, seeing steam rising from his mouth. Looking around, Vincent couldn't see anyone, but a creaky chuckle and a cheerful voice with a familiar accent pinned him to his spot only a moment later.

"You are mistaken, child, as many times before."

The sapphire-blue eyes narrowed in recognition. "Narcissa?" His question was completely unnecessary since the Tunnels' legendary oracle was standing right in front of him.

"Welcome, Vincent," she chuckled again, and despite her sight handicap, she walked directly towards him. "I see you finally found it."

His confusion was written all over his face. "Found what?"

"The entrance... to the other world," Narcissa replied enthusiastically.

"I don't understand... What world? How? Why?" Vincent demanded, uncomprehending.

Her hand reached for his arm, patting it in an almost motherly style. "How? That is easy; you willed your mind to open the magic windows," she explained. "Why?" She paused and smiled. "That is a question you will have to answer yourself when the time is right."

Vincent shook his head, knowing Narcissa would only tell him what was necessary. "What is this place?" he asked.

The seer's head moved around, as if she could see the brown shades of the cold walls surrounding them. The flames of the torches on them were flickering in the gentle but icy breeze blowing through the tunnel. A mischievous smile appeared on her face.

"Is it real? Or is it all in your mind, child? Who knows..., " she replied mysteriously and shrugged. "But it's *your* world, a mirror you look at and see the reflection of everything you are, everything you have lived through."

A sudden apprehension gripped Vincent. "How will I get back?" he asked anxiously.

"There's only one way home, Vincent," Narcissa answered, tightening her hold on his arm and leaning closer. "You must face your greatest enemy."

"Paracelsus? Or Gabriel?" Vincent breathed in disbelief, knowing that neither of them had been among the living.

The seer chuckled, released his arm, and started backing off slowly. "Our greatest enemies are often our best friends..."

The last few words already sounded from a distance. In a few moments, her figure faded into the mist, suddenly rising all around.

"Narcissa!" Vincent called after her, but all he could hear was the echo of his own voice. And then, the foggy clouds swallowed him up completely.

When the fog around him suddenly cleared away, his eyes adjusted to a blueish light, veiling large chamber-like space, with thick clouds of steam hovering above an extensive part of the rocky ground. When Vincent eyed the area properly, sudden comprehension hit him like a ton of bricks. A painful memory resurfaced in his mind.

Winslow...

He felt a sting at his heart. Years ago, when Paracelsus had Catherine kidnapped and brought to his underground lair, Vincent set out to rescue her. Winslow and Pascal offered to help, so they accompanied him. And sadly, it was Winslow who found his untimely end among the steam of the very chamber that Vincent found himself in now.

His heavy sigh echoed in the space when he hung his head, trying to chase away the images that had haunted him many times since that tragic moment. Trying, but failing.

"It's all good, Vincent," a deep, resonant voice spoke behind him.

He turned sharply in that direction and gasped.

“Winslow!” he whispered, not believing his own eyes. “But you are...”

“Dead?” his beloved friend answered with a cheeky smile. “Those we love can never die. Isn’t it what *you* always told me?”

Vincent exhaled loudly, words failing him for a moment. “For years... I haven’t been able to forgive myself,” he spoke eventually with a sorrowful look. “If I hadn’t allowed you to come with me, or if I’ve been quicker and stronger when we got attacked, if...”

“*If* never makes a difference, Vincent, you know that very well,” Winslow interrupted him with a sad smile. “What is done, is done. Everything happens for a reason, and mine was a reason I was more than happy to lay my life for.”

“No reason should be good enough to die for it,” Vincent contradicted, his head hanging low in pain again.

Winslow raised his eyebrows, an incredulous smile appearing on his face. “Wow, that sounds really rich coming from *you*.” He chuckled. “Why else did you keep on running to help Catherine when she was in danger? Why did you go to face those Chinese martial arts warriors who could have hacked you to pieces? Why did you set out to face Paracelsus again, after he had almost killed you with that drug? And what about those wild beasts you all called the Outsiders?”

Vincent’s head shot up in awe. “You know about the Outsiders? But that was after you...”

“I may not be roaming the Tunnels anymore, but I have my ways, be sure about that.” Winslow grinned, but then a frown clouded his face. “If it wasn’t for you, nobody in the Tunnels would have survived. It may not have been the best or the fairest way to deal with the problem, but it’s true - *you* saved them all, Vincent.”

“I didn’t save *you*...” Vincent whispered, feeling his eyes burning.

His friend spoke with a soft, consoling voice, much softer than usual from the robust and always outspoken man. “You *did*, and you don’t even know it.”

When he saw the puzzled expression on Vincent’s face, he smiled. “You know I’ve always been a bit on the tough side. A bit too stubborn, rough around the edges, sometimes too harsh on people who didn’t deserve it... But you were always by my side when things got tough for me, always gave me courage, supporting me when I felt like the world had turned against me. And when you and Catherine fell in love with each other...”

He paused, shaking his head in wonder, smiling. “It made me realise that no matter who we are, what we look or talk like... if we are open to love, it will come to us... Maybe not always a romantic one, but still love. You made me believe in it,

Vincent. It was the reason I was willing to risk my life for it. And what can be nobler than to die for love?"

Winslow put his hand on his friend's shoulder. It felt cold, but for Vincent, it felt like a blessing. Unable to resist, he pulled the former Tunnels' blacksmith into a heartfelt bearhug. Whether this was a dream or not, he wasn't going to let the opportunity slip through his fingers. Unprocessed grief, shame and persistent feelings of guilt were making their way out of his system all at the same time.

"I've missed you," he whispered sadly but feeling grateful for having the opportunity to speak to his friend one more time.

"I know," Winslow replied when they pulled back from each other. "That's why I had to come."

When Vincent looked into his honest, dark eyes, a feeling of melancholy washed over him. "But you cannot stay," he acknowledged quietly.

"Not in a way that you can see me, but you are a clever one, so you know where you'll *always* find me," Winslow remarked knowingly, his eyes resting on his dear friend's face.

Vincent's furry hand covered his chest on the spot over his heart. "Always..."

The two very different and yet so similar men shared one more smile, and Winslow slowly turned around, walking away into the misty cloud. Suddenly, he stopped and turned around to look back at Vincent as he remembered something.

"Oh, and Vincent..." Suddenly he looked insecure, almost shy before the white cloud enveloped him. "Would you tell Jamie I'm sorry I was so harsh on her the last time we spoke together? And that she needs to stop feeling guilty about the same thing. I know she only wanted to help."

For the first time since their unexpected encounter, Vincent smiled wholeheartedly. "I will; don't worry," he replied.

"Great! You know, that girl worries too much sometimes." Winslow rolled his eyes. "I seriously have no idea how Mouse can keep up with her. That boy's a saint or somethin'..." He continued shaking his head while walking deeper into the rising steam.

Vincent's eyes followed him until he disappeared completely in the thick white mass. He couldn't help but laugh softly. *Good old Winslow... Oh, don't you worry; you will always be loved...*

With that comforting thought and an affectionate smile on his lips, Vincent leaned his head back and closed his eyes. A deep sigh of relief escaped his throat, and for a moment, he allowed himself to turn back time and awaken long-gone memories

buried deep in the back of his mind. The treasured memories of his shared time with one of the best friends he'd ever had.

The golden light Catherine had walked through cleared away, and she noticed she was standing in a familiar place. The thunderous sound of the rushing water stream made her recognise it instantly - the Chamber of the Falls. It was she and Vincent's favourite place in the Tunnels. They spent many moments of contemplation, reading or talking there, undisturbed by the hustle and bustle of their everyday life. A perfect place for finding peace of mind, recharging energy and regaining balance within.

Something was different about the place this time, though. The light falling on the waterfalls through the opening to the world Above was usually either white or golden and orange, depending on the time of the day and the weather outside. But this time, Catherine was staring into a whole spectrum of rainbow colours, giving the liquid mass shades rarely seen underground. It looked as if Mouse had broken his tube of colours and sprinkled it all over the falls. Moreover, a touch of glitter gave the whole phenomenon an air of fantasy...

"I have never seen anything like this before..." Catherine whispered in awe, her bright emerald eyes mesmerised.

"And you probably won't see it again," a female voice behind her almost made her jump.

Spinning around on her heel, Catherine felt instant relief. "Narcissa!" A sudden confusion hit her. "What are you doing here? You never come to this place..."

"Oh, I travel to more places in these Tunnels than anyone could ever imagine!" The older woman snickered. "Here, there... I am like the wind, blowing through the long and winding corridors. You can't see me, but you can *feel* me wherever I'm needed..."

The younger woman frowned with concern. "Are you here because of Vincent?"

"You are clever, child," the oracle laughed. "But then again, Vincent is clever, too, and still, he doesn't have a clue what to do to get back." She shook her head at the irony.

"What do you mean, to get back? Back to where?" Catherine was puzzled.

Narcissa directed her unseeing gaze into the rainbow-shaded, shimmering waterfalls. "Back to your world, back to himself."

She turned to her friend again, anguish casting a shadow on her face. "He has built great walls around him, a cage with steel bars, his own prison inside his mind," she said, pointing at her temple, stressing every word. "If he doesn't break it, he can never be free again."

Catherine felt anxiety creeping into her bones. Was this real or was she in some kind of dream? It felt like part of the familiar place she had called home for a few years now. And yet, there was an odd, eerie feel about it. And now she learned that Vincent was in serious trouble, and neither of them knew how to deal with it.

“How can he break it?” she asked anxiously.

“He has to face his greatest enemy,” the seer answered earnestly.

Paracelsus? Gabriel? But they are...

“Who?” Catherine inquired curiously.

Narcissa chuckled and shook her head. “*What.*” Her reply left the young woman even more baffled, though she knew by now that the oracle’s words always made sense eventually.

“Can I find my way to him?” Their bond had worked like a charm since her return, but she wasn’t sure whether it would work in “this” world as well.

“That will depend on both of you,” Narcissa replied knowingly. “But your heart is in the right place; his too. And hearts will always find each other.”

Her smile gave Catherine hope, and she squeezed the older woman’s hand. “Then I must be on my way,” she noted with a smile. “But which way?” The question was meant more to herself than to her companion.

“There is only one way,” Narcissa replied anyway, smiling. “The heart will tell you.”

When Catherine turned her head to reply to the seer, she couldn’t see a soul. Standing alone again, she frowned and her eyes wandered back to the waterfalls. The shimmering colours of the rainbow were still veiling the mighty stream when she closed her eyes and focused all her senses to listen to her heart - and the one beating in the distance away from her...

Dream... This is all nothing but a wondrous, surreal dream...

Vincent was still contemplating Winslow’s unexpected appearance when the thought occurred to him that his recent experience might not have been real. Finally, he opened his eyes again and noticed the surroundings had changed. He was standing in a smaller space now, another chamber familiar to him, one used for specific purposes - the Hospital Chamber.

The beds were empty; it seemed that everyone was as fit as a fiddle in the Tunnels. Vincent took a few curious steps, wondering why he had been transported to this

place. His mind feverishly raided its memory. Successfully, for the time of one of the darkest periods in the existence of the Tunnel community was not so easy to forget. Dimitry and the pneumonic plague...

This is beginning to feel like a guilt trip, Vincent thought and sighed. When he brought the young Russian sailor to the Tunnels after rescuing him from drowning, he'd had no idea what the man would bring with him. The plague spread like wildfire, and it was only thanks to Peter Alcott's help providing the medicine needed, and Father's relentless dedication to looking after everyone night and day, that the lives of the Tunnel people were spared in their world. All lives but one...

Vincent's eyes were suddenly burning. He squeezed them shut and saw an image of a young girl with an angelic face and long wavy hair of the colour of the morning sun, smiling at him. Her happiness was so palpable, so pure... so short-lived.

He felt something warm tickling his cheek. His hand reached up to his face, and his fingers wiped away a tear. *Strange how the pain perseveres, often longer than people*, he thought, and opened his eyes to the dim light of the chamber where his father had spent an important part of his subterranean life. Vincent was not a jumpy person, but the sight that presented itself to him at that moment made him shudder.

"Hello, Vincent, I've been waiting for you for so long..."

The girl he had just seen in his mind's eye was standing right in front of him, as real as she could be under the circumstances.

"Ellie..." he breathed, his voice breaking.

If Winslow's appearance shocked him, seeing the foster child that he'd grown to love dearly in such a short time, made him utterly speechless. And as if she knew it, she did the most natural thing a child would do after not having seen someone dear for a long time - she fell into his arms.

"I've missed you so much!" Ellie whispered while Vincent held her as the most fragile porcelain statue - gently and carefully yet heartfelt.

"And I've missed you," he whispered, softly stroking her hair in a fatherly way. "We all have, especially Eric..."

"I know; I can feel it all the time."

Vincent pulled back slightly to look into her big blue eyes, shaking his head with wonder. "I'm beginning to think that those who are not among us anymore are watching us, always," he remarked with a small smile.

"Always," Ellie replied with a beaming smile, brightening her eyes, and then giggled. "I remember it's your favourite word, Vincent."

He chuckled. "Yes, it is. It carries a deep meaning, a true value, reassurance, hope..."

The girl released his hands and sat down with him at one of the beds nearby. There was a moment of companionable silence, in which Vincent was taking in the angelic image of his eternally young friend, with joy, but also pain.

"It had always brought *me* hope," Ellie said with a sweet smile. "When Catherine brought us to the Tunnels, I was so happy... I finally felt like I had a home..."

"It will always be your home, wherever you are," Vincent reassured her eagerly. His guilt of robbing her of the hope was like a boulder sitting on his chest.

"I know that." She lifted her eyes to him again with gratitude. Suddenly her smile faded, and her eyes glistened. "Thank you for the letter back then, Vincent..."

Her friend swallowed hard, remembering his own words written on a piece of paper, burning in the small fire, its ashes being carried away up Above.

"No father could have ever had a more wonderful daughter..."

"I loved all the letters from everyone, but yours and Eric's meant the most to me," Ellie continued.

Vincent was fighting back tears. How many times had he tried to chase away the horrible feeling of guilt eating him up for years? If it wasn't for him, this little angel would still be alive. She had all her life ahead of her when he took it away from her...

"I meant every word," he stated, bringing a beaming smile to her face. "And I'll never forget."

"But there is something more you must do," she said suddenly with a fierce resolve.

"Anything," Vincent offered immediately.

"You must forgive yourself."

Her words astonished him.

"I know you feel responsible for my... For me leaving, but it was not your fault, Vincent." Ellie took his hand and focused on his eyes. "You tried to help someone, endangering yourself when doing so. No way you could have expected what would happen when you had brought Dimitry down to us."

Vincent suddenly felt an urgent need for walking. He got up and started pacing, unable to hide his emotions.

“For years, I’ve been telling myself the same,” he said finally after a few moments, staring ahead, avoiding her eyes. “But I can’t forget!”

His sudden swift turn around made Ellie’s eyes well up - not in fear, but in compassion. In her cruelly cut-short life, she understood way more than a child of her age normally would.

Vincent noticed the tears in the girl’s eyes, and the frown on his face vanished immediately. He took a few hasty strides towards her and went down on his knee.

“Forgive me, please,” he whispered painfully and covered her small hands with his.

“It’s okay,” Ellie replied with a bittersweet smile. “I know it’s hard, especially for you. But it’s the only way to move forward. See, when I was in the foster home with Eric, I often felt that I couldn’t protect him.” She sighed. “Being the older sister, I should have, but there were times when he got into fights with other boys, got beaten by the carers. Even when they separated us and sold me to that street thieves leader... I thought maybe if we had spoken to Catherine when she wanted to speak to Eric... I should have escaped somehow, find Eric... I was so scared that they would do something bad to him...”

A deep frown appeared on her porcelain-white face.

“You did the best you could, having his back since you were both still so young, watching over him.” Vincent comforted her.

“So did you,” she replied, smiling again. “And you still do. Eric has the best teacher he could ever have. Just as I had...”

Profound gratitude and adoring love brightened her eyes while her small hand reached for his golden, shiny hair.

“I’ve always wanted to do this,” Ellie said with a bemused smile. “I’ve often wondered what it felt like.” She ran her fingers through the tresses of Vincent’s mane, exploring their texture and feel.

The spontaneous and sweet gesture made him chuckle. “Has your expectation been fulfilled?” he asked, raising his eyebrow.

“No.” She giggled. “It’s... softer than I always imagined. Like... one of those old cushions you had on your bed.”

Vincent’s smile widened. *No one has ever compared my hair to velvet. Catherine says it feels like the most precious silk...*

“Thank you.” He nodded, smiling. “Though you should see it after I have washed it. It feels more like a bristle.”

Ellie laughed wholeheartedly; the ringing sound of it echoed in the chamber and made him chuckle. This lighthearted conversation about such a mundane thing was helping to relieve his tension. Vincent's feeling of guilt and his agitation were mercifully weakening with each passing minute.

"Well, I should go," the girl said then, reluctantly letting go of his hair and standing up. "Don't worry, I'm all right," she added quickly, noticing his worried eyes. "It's a nice place where I'm staying, so peaceful..."

Vincent wanted to ask where that place was, suddenly eager to confirm what many people take for granted. In the end, he remained silent, but his eyes spoke for him.

"Yes," Ellie answered the unasked question. "You will like it there too, but not for a long time still."

His eyes glistened at the sudden thought of his young friend's leaving.

"Could you tell Eric I love him, please?" the girl pleaded. "And Catherine... and Father and the others."

Would they even believe me? Vincent thought for a moment. "I promise," he replied, though, unable to not fulfil her any wish.

"Thank you, and remember the favour you must do me."

A heavy sigh left his chest, but then he smiled. "I'll try, I promise." Those words were enough to light up her face again and embrace him with all her strength.

"I have never been happier anywhere else than with all of you," Ellie whispered as a tear ran down her pale cheek.

Vincent couldn't help but envelop her with his arms as if she was his own child, kissing the crown of her flaxen hair.

"Our world was a more beautiful place while you were with us," he whispered back.

When she pulled back, he wiped away the lonely tear from her face and smiled. "I love you," she said with a beaming smile.

"And I love you, always," Vincent promised, stressing the last word as was his habit, born out of conviction.

The girl released his hands. With one last look into his eyes and a smile that could brighten up the Great Hall, Ellie turned away from him and walked into the white light that had just appeared in the exit from the chamber.

When she disappeared out of his sight, Vincent sighed, but an affectionate smile settled on his face.

“Never say goodbye because goodbye means going away and going away means forgetting, (1)” His words carried his farewell to her.

And then, there was darkness...

Vincent was trying to make out anything in the blackness that had surrounded him. He strained his eyes briefly when suddenly something bright penetrated the dark space ahead of him. Curious, though apprehensive, he started walking, following the source of the warm light.

At the moment, when his eyes finally detected the tunnel he was walking through, he reached an opening in the rocky wall in front of him. Vincent tilted his head. *This looks familiar*, he thought. Since there was no other option, he walked through the opening and descended into the space on the other side of the wall. He looked around, and the sight almost took his breath away. He was standing in the Crystal Cavern...

Memories flooded his mind immediately. The first anniversary of his meeting with Catherine... His quest for a gift for her, the crystal he brought her back from this place and that she had cherished as her most precious possession. And the time when he found it lying abandoned in the sand in the cavern, after his almost fatal breakdown, when he thought he had lost her forever...

“No...” he frowned, suddenly feeling tightness in his chest. “I’m past this, I have been for some time,” he was trying to convince himself.

“Are you really, child?” a familiar voice asked.

Vincent turned his head and saw the oracle standing by his side again. “Why am I here, Narcissa?” he asked anxiously.

The old woman focused her unseeing eyes in the direction of his voice. “This is the end of your journey, Vincent. Here, you must decide whether you will move on or stay...”

When he didn’t reply, she could feel his confusion, and it made her chuckle. “You are your father’s son, even though you’re not,” she said with a motherly smile. “Look...”

She grabbed his arm and walked with him towards the centre of the cavern. “What do you see?”

Vincent recognised the familiar vast space filled with glittering crystals of all kinds, shapes and colours everywhere the eye could see, just as he had seen it the very first time he had been there. One thing was different, though. Creating a magical reflection of all the sparkling beauty around, six large freestanding frameless mirrors stood at the walls of the cavern, surrounding them.

“I see mirrors,” he spoke, briefly enchanted by the sight. “But they were not here before...”

“Of course not,” confirmed Narcissa, leaning closer to him. “They only appeared because you need to look inside them.”

Vincent glanced at the seer, at first astonished but understanding quickly. “To look inside *myself*,” he stated quietly.

“We all must do, sometimes. We may not like what we see, but there is no way to escape it. Go, Vincent, and look carefully. Look into your soul, look into your heart...”

Uncertain (or afraid?) of what he might see, he obeyed his unique friend anyway and stepped closer to the first mirror. He was prepared to see anything - especially himself in the state of rage, bringing destruction upon those who wished to harm the people he loved. Anything but a flashback to Catherine being shot by Mitch Denton and falling helplessly to the ground...

He gasped and shut his eyes, remembering the first real feeling of horror when he thought he was losing her. Having warned her to be careful before, knowing what Mitch was capable of, Vincent still came too late to her rescue. There was nothing he could have done against a bullet. He was not too late to carry her to the nearest hospital and possibly save her life with that, but too late to prevent the whole almost fatal accident.

Vincent dared to look back into the mirror, seeing himself holding Catherine in his arms and roaring his despair to the skies. He quickly looked away and walked over to the second mirror.

In it, despite the darkness, he recognised Catherine’s apartment. There, she was crouching next to one of her couches, clutching her stomach, her face an image of pain.

The men warning Catherine to step back from the investigation of the murder Laura had witnessed Above...

He winced at the sight of her suffering. Yet again, he hadn’t managed to come and help her in time to prevent her from being beaten up. Moving fast, he walked over to the third mirror. The blood almost froze in his veins at the sight of a dark lake and a car half-drowned in it.

The Watcher... The first time I truly felt her go... That was my fault... I should have been faster, stronger in the garage... I could have saved her then...

With each painful memory, Vincent's agitation was rising. His heartbeat quickened, his mind fiercely searching for an explanation of why he had to see all of it again.

The following two memories were especially heartwrenching. In the first one, Vincent saw himself in a dark alley, trying to finally reach Catherine after her kidnapping, seeing some men holding her inside a car, but unable to stop it from driving away. The second memory was the most haunting one.

The rooftop...

The boulder that he had thought was gone for some time was back, lying heavily on his chest and making it almost impossible to breathe. His heart was breaking anew. When he saw the agonised expression in Catherine's pale face, speaking of her love for him through a poem, Vincent covered his face and desperately pleaded with Narcissa.

"Please, don't show me anymore..." His voice was breaking, unspeakable torment washing over him again.

The oracle's unseeing look was intent. "I am not showing you anything, child. It is *you* who recalls the images."

I can't... This is all wrong... I was too late, too late every one of those times, and she had to pay for it...

A gentle hand landed on his arm. "It's time for you to find her and return home," Narcissa stated.

Vincent revealed his face to her and knitted his eyebrows in confusion.

"But you said... I was supposed to meet my greatest enemy to be able to return home."

The seer's snicker echoed in the cavern. "Think, child. Have you not met it already?"

His brain was feverishly searching for an answer. Meeting Winslow and Ellie was both, a joyful and a bittersweet occasion. He couldn't protect them, save them from being taken too soon. And reliving the almost tragic moments with Catherine reminded him even more painfully of his own imperfection and fallibility, the inexplicable fear that had gripped him in the past few days again.

What was he so afraid of, now that his life was filled with peaceful and happy family life, combined with often hard but rewarding work for his community? True, there had still been occasions when it wasn't a rosy garden, but Vincent was

finally living what he had always dreamed of - the life of a loving and loved husband and father. What was the reason for his agitation then?

He thought back about his conversation with Catherine a few days ago. When she told him about Joe's plea, the peace settled in his heart was suddenly gone; it scared him how quick it vanished. What if Catherine got into real trouble and Joe and his colleagues wouldn't be able to help her? What if *he* wasn't able to help her because he'd be too late again?

A sudden realisation hit Vincent like a truck.

"Our greatest enemies are often our best friends..."

Narcissa's words from earlier rang in his ears with clear comprehension now.

"My fear of failure," he whispered, and his crystal clear blue eyes gazed at her in awe.

"You have always been clever." The seer smirked with satisfaction. "I knew you would see in the end."

"For years, that fear had followed me, haunted me," he stated sadly.

"Your best friend..." Narcissa smiled and patted his arm. "Now, you see. Now you can let go of it."

"How? Can I ever be sure that I won't fail again?" Vincent asked with doubts.

His friend shook her head and smiled knowingly. "Nobody knows; nobody's perfect," she replied. "To fail is human. Everything is written for us - whether we win or lose."

She pointed at the last mirror. "There is one more place you have to look at."

Vincent took a deep breath and exhaled loudly, preparing himself for another blow. What his eyes saw, though, made them twinkle in delight. In the last mirror, the glowing, happy face of the woman he loved with his whole being, made his heart soar and finally, he smiled.

Catherine diligently at work in her office; Catherine, sharing joyful moments with her friends from Above and Below; Catherine playing with their children, smiling, radiating pure bliss...

That heavenly face restored...

Vincent gasped when all at once, the image of his wife in the mirror turned her head directly toward him, piercing his wondrous eyes. A beaming smile graced her features, and when she spoke, the whole universe of her feelings for him and everything he meant to her was encompassed in a single word.

“Vincent...”

Almost hypnotised, his hand slowly reached for the face in the mirror. “Catherine...” He was unable to say more; his eyes turned misty, succumbing to the feeling of gratitude and being blessed.

Narcissa chuckled. “Is *this* failure?”

Vincent couldn’t suppress a dazzling smile when he spoke softly. “No... this is triumph.”

His hand reached for the pouch hanging around his neck, holding it tight, and his deep, blue eyes shone brightly like diamonds in the colourful light of the cavern.

After she had left the Chamber of the Falls, Catherine was wandering in the Tunnels for a good while - not exactly knowing where to, but she followed the pull she could feel from a distance.

Where are you, Vincent? Guide me...

The pull was getting stronger with each step; she knew he was close. She still wasn’t sure whether it was a dream, a vision, or reality, but none of it mattered. All that mattered was the man she loved and her desperate need of finding him.

Narcissa’s words were still unclear to her, although she suspected it had something to do with the disagreement she had with Vincent about Joe’s request. Since then, he had been affectionate, caring and attentive as always, but there was a restlessness in his eyes that he was trying to hide. Catherine was sure there could have been only one source for those feelings. And she knew, the restlessness wouldn’t pass until she was back safely from her undercover operation.

The air in the Tunnels was getting colder, the chill creeping into her bones. At that moment, she envied Vincent his long, warm cloak, always lovingly covering its master. In her mind, she could not only visualise it, but her nostrils could smell its distinctive scent, the masculine and so unique scent of *him*...

Catherine shook her head and took a deep breath. *Now it’s not the time to get distracted*, she chided herself. She tried to focus on the path ahead of her, occasionally using the walls as support when the tunnels got too narrow.

Catherine...

She jerked her head at the sound. It was neither a calling nor a cry; it was a loving whisper in the wind, carried over to her like a feather blown gently in a light breeze.

“Vincent?” Her body shivered, not from the cold, though.

Her widened eyes frantically searched the space around her. Finally, they focused on the ray of golden light that had suddenly appeared at the end of the tunnel she was walking through a moment ago. A cloaked silhouette walking out of the light towards her was a sight for sore eyes.

“Vincent...” She gasped, her eyes glistening.

There were no restraints on either side; they fell into each other’s arms eagerly, almost desperately.

“Forgive me...” he breathed into her hair, holding on to her like a lifeline.

“For what?” Catherine was uncomprehending.

“For doubting you, no... For doubting *myself*,” he replied with a sigh as she pulled back from his embrace slightly, though still holding him. “In my fear of failing you, I forgot who you are, who *we* are...”

Catherine’s beaming smile reached her shining eyes.

”Vincent...” Her hand tenderly stroked his cheek. “You could never fail me, you never have... Life can betray us sometimes, make us suffer, make us ...”

“Be late...” he added sadly.

“Yes.” She sighed. Finally, the fog had lifted, and she knew what the problem was. “But that’s life. Nobody knows what will happen. Nobody’s perfect.”

Vincent smiled at the memory of Narcissa, who spoke the same words only a few moments ago.

“Things happen, things that we wish we could have prevented...” Catherine continued, smiling. “But that doesn’t mean we should lay low and let others deal with what *we* can. And I know I will always have the best chance of succeeding with you, whatever I have to face. I trust you with my life.”

He pulled her close again, exhaling loudly. The last traces of his fear were dissipating; the boulder on his chest was lifting, freeing him from the chains he forged for himself.

“Good,” he reacted after a moment. “Because you will have to trust me with this. This is where we go out...”

He took her hand in his and pointed at the golden light behind him. Catherine understood immediately and nodded, sharing an encouraging smile with him.

Once, you led me to a way out to my world Above and then we went our separate ways for a long time. We have entered this world each on our own, but we will walk out of it together. Nothing will separate us again...

She locked her eyes with his for an eloquent beat and noticed that there was peace again within them. The restlessness was gone, and the sapphire blue of the irises was as warm as it always had been.

“I’m ready,” Catherine said eagerly. “Wherever you go, I am with you, forever.”

“Oh, I know that,” Vincent tilted his head, smiling, his heart full of that deep emotion belonging only to her.

When they stepped into the shimmering light, the world behind them ceased to exist, and the one ahead of them opened its windows to another day.

The bright glow of hundreds of candles around the Great Hall added a special magic to Christmas Day in the Tunnels. The feast was delicious as always; William and his kitchen team had transformed the generous contributions of the Helpers into a mouthwatering feast, as every year.

“I often think whether it’s appropriate to have two feasts so short after Winterfest. It must surely be a sin to eat so much food,” Jacob mused, looking at the leftovers on the long dining tables in front of him.

“The Winterfest is a way of expressing our gratitude to our friends Above, who share so much with us throughout the year, no matter how much they have themselves,” Vincent remarked. “Christmas is a time to express our gratitude to each other, to spend time with our loved ones, remember those who have left us, and remind ourselves how fortunate and blessed we are to have each other. Surely, Father, celebrating it with a nice meal will not harm anyone.”

Jacob looked at the wise face of his adoptive son and smiled. “As always, you are right,” he agreed. “It was another eventful year for everyone, and as it often happens in life, it was not always a happy one. This is the least we can do for those who were less fortunate than most of us.”

Vincent’s reply was a silent smile and a pat on his father’s shoulder.

“I’m truly glad that Catherine’s undercover operation was successful,” Jacob changed the topic. “I was a little worried.”

“Me too, Father.” Vincent couldn’t conceal his relief. “Everything went very smooth. Joe and his team didn’t have much work with the man.”

And luckily, neither did I, though I was nearby, he thought to himself.

“Daddy!” A child’s voice made them turn their heads.

“Jacob...” The young father scooped his older son into his arms. “Have you lost uncle Devin?”

“No.” The golden-haired boy giggled. “Playing hide-and-seek.”

“And I suppose you are winning.” Vincent chuckled.

“I’m afraid our son is much better at hiding than you used to be as a child,” Catherine whispered into his ear from behind, smiling.

Vincent turned around and saw his wife holding their younger son, Charles, in her arms. The toddler was asleep, resting on her chest.

Perfection, he thought, savouring the image of his beloved family around him.

“Too much food and excitement for Charlie; I think this is his punishment,” Catherine remarked, bemused, hinting at the child in her arms.

Jacob raised his eyebrows and grinned at his son. They both chuckled, remembering their conversation from earlier.

Jacob junior tried to draw his father’s attention. “Look at the tapestries, Daddy?”

“Of course,” Vincent replied warmly and put the boy down, holding his small hand. He nodded to the patriarch with a smile. Together with the rest of his little family, they made their way past their tunnel friends, up the stairs to the almost legendary tapestries, hanging on the stone walls.

“Magic windows,” little Jacob whispered in awe, as enchanted by the old masterpieces of craftsmanship as he had been at Winterfest, when he saw them for the first time.

Catherine’s eyes found her husband’s, mutual understanding and love passing between them.

“When I was your age, I used to think the same,” Vincent replied to the boy with wonder. “And one day…”

Little Jacob finally took his eyes off the tapestries. “What, Daddy?”

The deep blue eyes of his parent focused on him.

“One day, I understood that we all carry magic windows within our own hearts.” He cast a knowing glance at Catherine. “They appear at the time when we need it the most. All we need to do is learn how to open them.”

“And how to close them again, so we don’t get lost on the other side,” Catherine added with a smile.

Vincent couldn’t get enough of the image of the woman who crossed to a different world only to find him and bring him back. Was it their shared dream or reality? They still didn’t know. After they had walked into the golden light together,

everything went black, and the first thing they could remember was waking up together in their chamber.

When he talked about their experience with his father, they couldn't come to a clear conclusion either. And Narcissa was as mysterious in her answers to Vincent's questions as ever. But he did keep his promise to Winslow and Ellie, however incredible it appeared to Jamie and the others.

A dream or not, their journey was real, purposeful, and they made it back safely, together.

"What are you thinking, Vincent?" Catherine noticed the brooding expression on his face. Although she had a suspicion, she was still interested in hearing his voice. An enigmatic smile settled on his face, as he rested his eyes on Jacob standing at his feet with his big blue eyes glued to the tapestries again. What made Vincent smile was the loved-out stuffed toy lion the boy was clutching in his hand.

"I remembered the first Christmas since I'd met you," he replied and looked into her eyes, visibly moved. "I was so desperate to see you again, or at least to feel your physical presence... Against my best judgement, I climbed up to your balcony and found that beautiful little Christmas tree you put up there. And this..." He pointed at the lion in Jacob's hands. "And the note. It was something I've cherished ever since then, knowing that you saw me as a friend, even after such a long time..."

Catherine gasped, remembering everything, including the note she wrote at the last minute.

"For the best gifts are rarely found under the Christmas tree..."

"You never told me you came," she whispered incredulously, inwardly regretting her ignorance of his presence there that night. "I missed you so badly that night... I felt as if a part of my heart was missing..."

Now it was Vincent's turn to gasp and shake his head in awe. "I could feel your loneliness, your longing," he said in disbelief. "But I didn't know..."

"That it was *you* I longed for?" Catherine finished with a bittersweet smile.

"Yes..." He sighed. His hand travelled up to her face, caressing her cheek tenderly.

She closed her eyes for a moment, savouring the sensuality of his touch as always.

"We may have had our bond back then already, Vincent, but..." Her eyes twinkled in the candlelight. "We didn't know how to open our magic windows yet, how to face our doubts... We may have known how to look into others, but we needed to learn how to look into ourselves, both of us."

And we did, Catherine, together, he thought as the sound of children's laughter and friendly chatter filled the Hall behind them with warmth and love.



*“Each heart has it’s haunted chamber,
Where the silent moonlight falls!
On the floor are mysterious footsteps,
There are whispers along the walls!*

*And mine at times is haunted,
By phantoms of the Past,
As motionless as shadows
By the silent moonlight cast.*

- Henry Wadsworth Longfellow -



(1) J.M. Barrie: *Peter Pan*