

When the Moon Meets the Sun

by Michaela Buzsaki Struchova

It was Christmas Eve, just after 10 pm. The freshly fallen snow had spread a crisp white blanket over Central Park and was glittering in the lamp and moonlight.

His breath was transforming into steam in the freezing night air.

It's going to be an interesting climb but it will be worth it.

Vincent pulled the hood of his cloak closer around his neck. Smiling, he made his way to her apartment building across the park in the shadows of the trees.

Catherine put another log into the fireplace in her apartment. It had been over a week since she had been there, so the day before, she spent a couple of hours in the afternoon decorating the little tree in the living room. Once she was ready, she spent some time packing some more things from her bedroom into the boxes ready to be taken away.

She was living Below with Vincent and their son Jacob now. Therefore, they were in the process of bringing bits from her apartment down to the tunnels. Various objects either ended up in Vincent's chamber, or were gifted to the other inhabitants of the tunnels, though most furniture was still in its usual place. The boxes she had packed the previous day were going to be moved to a different place, though...

Catherine looked at the clock on the mantelpiece - it was almost 10.30 pm. She smiled and opened the bottle of wine standing on the coffee table in front of the fireplace, where two wine glasses were waiting to be filled. For a moment, a slight worry crossed her mind - Catherine remembered how freezing-cold it was outside and how slippery the railings alongside her building must have been, imagining Vincent climbing them. But she didn't have much time to worry, because suddenly she heard a soft crunch of footsteps coming from the fresh snow-covered balcony and a shadow move towards the French doors.

A beaming smile appeared on her face when she opened the door and fell into his arms.

"I've missed you!" she breathed into his chest.

Vincent chuckled, and his velvet, gravelly voice sounded bemused.

"We parted not even an hour ago."

"I know, it's been too long!" she teased him with a soft laugh too.

She shivered slightly, and Vincent pulled back from her. Though she was a vision for his eyes, the bare shoulders, low neckline burgundy-red velvet dress with long sleeves she was wearing, was not exactly suitable for subzero temperatures.

"It's too cold, Catherine; let's go inside."

She followed him and watched him closing the door and taking his boots and cloak off. She had to smile, remembering those three years when he didn't want to enter her apartment, apart from her being in danger or in his illness. How easy and natural has it become for him since! Vincent's fear of staining her private world was

gone because of her constant and never faltering love for him and his eventual acceptance of who he was. He knew now he belonged wherever *she* was.

Vincent was still wearing his festive outfit, the usual ruffled white shirt, a lovely burgundy velvet quilted vest and black pants - a true vision himself.

When he turned to her again and saw her smiling while observing him, the corners of his mouth turned up.

“Why are you smiling?”

“I can’t help it.... I’m thinking how far you’ve come, how far *we’ve* come, how blessed I’ve been to have you in my life....” Her face was glowing with happiness and love when she walked over to him.

“And how much my heart leaps every time I look at you...,” she whispered, pulled him closer to her by clutching his vest and kissed him.

He put his arms around her and kissed her back with gentle command. Then, he slowly pulled back, as if awakening from a dream and gazed into her sparkling eyes.

“Every day, every moment when I look at you and Jacob, I feel like I’m in a dream... I still can’t believe this is real, that there are no more dangers or fear, no more heartache, no more aloneness...”

Catherine heard the deep emotion in his soft voice, and stroking his cheek, she marvelled at the depth of his feelings. Even after years, they were getting stronger every day, taking her breath away time and time again. But he deserved every bit of the joy; if anyone in the world did, it was Vincent.

“Then we dream the same dream,” she whispered, smiling, before kissing him gently again.

When they pulled apart, Vincent glanced into the living room area, since his peripheral view had spotted the colourful fairy lights. Catherine saw the almost childlike excitement in his eyes, reflecting the flickering of the flames in the fireplace, almost like two sparkling diamonds.

“I know it’s not as big and beautiful as the one in The Great Hall, but I thought as it’s the last Christmas for us here, it deserved a little bit of magic. After all, this apartment brought me so much happiness,” she said, dreamily gazing into those bright eyes.

“Truer words were never spoken, Catherine... And it is beautiful,” he replied softly and stroked her cheek with his thumb.

She smiled and regained composure.

“I’m glad it will be Lucy, renting this place from the new year. And I’m sure she will be as happy here as I was.” Lucy was the niece of Peter Alcott, Catherine’s family physician and hers and Vincent’s life-long friend, a Helper to the world Below. And it was Peter who had helped to bring Catherine back from the death’s door.

Hand-in-hand, they walked over to the couch. Vincent was admiring the little festively decorated tree casting a magic glow with its twinkling lights.

Catherine noticed his smile.

“I found it hidden in the furthest corner of the nursery. It’s as if it was waiting there for me. I didn’t have the heart to leave it there.” Her lips stretched into almost a motherly smile when regarding the tree.

“Your kind heart spoke for you again, Catherine,” Vincent said quietly and looked at her lovingly, making her return his gaze in the same manner.

“I hope Mary won’t have much trouble with Jacob. I left her all his favourite toys and the book he likes you to read to him. I can’t help but be a bit jealous of you, since he likes it more when *you* read to him than when I do, but then again...” She turned to him and added dreamily, “*I* love it when you read to me, too...” Vincent chuckled.

“But he undoubtedly prefers *you* singing to him,” he teased her.

A gentle smile appeared on his face when they sat down, and he looked into the fire. Catherine saw a hint of sadness in his eyes.

“What is it, Vincent?”

He sighed and looked at her. “I just remembered the first time I heard you sing...”

Catherine’s eyes turned misty at the memory - it was when she was singing a lullaby to Ellie, the angelic girl, who Vincent and she managed to save, along with her brother, from the hands of a pack of street robbers, forcing children to steal for them. Ellie died during the pneumonic plague outbreak in the tunnels. Catherine knew how much Ellie loved Vincent; the girl saw a father figure in him, something she never had and Vincent was deeply affected by her passing.

She swallowed hard and wiped a tear from her face. Vincent pulled her into his arms, stroking her hair. “I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I didn’t mean to make you upset.”

Catherine shook her head, resting on his shoulder.

“It’s all right; I often think of Ellie myself. Every time I look at Eric, she’s there...” She smiled and pulled back to face him.

”I know; I feel it too,” Vincent acknowledged and smiled. “Her love is always here to stay with us in our hearts.”

Catherine smiled and decided it was time to change the mood. She took the bottle and poured wine into both of their glasses. Then, she passed a glass to Vincent and kept one for herself, raising it with a toast.

“To love and family,” she spoke softly, and her voice resonated with all the gratitude, deep love and happiness.

“To love and family and the mother of my children.” Vincent was gazing into her eyes while he took a sip along with her.

Catherine raised her brows, bemused.

“Anything I don’t know about?”

Vincent lowered his eyes and chuckled.

“No,” he said in an innocent, almost boyish way. “But something we could *do* about...”

His smile widened, and his sapphire eyes were sparkling.

Catherine laughed wholeheartedly. It was still quite unusual for Vincent to slip out of his character of a noble and gallant gentleman and throw in cheeky remarks like this. Since they had become lovers, he was much more comfortable talking about the physical aspect of their relationship, revealing his slightly playful side from time to time - much to Catherine’s delight.

She leaned close to his face, whispering in a very eloquent way.

“Later...”

She pulled away from him and laughed again.

“I wanted to prepare some nibbles to go along with it, but after I saw William’s menu for the Christmas Eve dinner, I thought we’d be glad to *escape* food, not run to it.” She laughed.

Vincent chuckled.

“Yes, most people Above have a feast on Christmas Day, but William likes to spoil us all on both days. He says at least twice a year we can feast like royalty - Winterfest and Christmas. We have been so lucky and grateful to all our Helpers, friends who make sure that no child or adult has to go hungry to bed.”

He smiled with a fond memory of the tunnels’ beloved cook and all those who had helped to make life Below possible. Then, he looked up at Catherine again with a bemused smile.

”And I’ve heard that especially one has been extremely generous this year again, particularly with the dessert.”

Catherine blushed and put a loose strand of her hair behind her ear. It was an automatic move she made to mask the mild embarrassment of being caught again.

Vincent loved her little gesture. Just like he loved the way she always tried to keep it a secret when she wanted to give more to his family Below. Catherine never wanted to show off her wealth, she truly cared about them and wanted to make their life better and more comfortable as much as she could.

He lifted her chin with his index finger to make her look up into his eyes. She did so with a shy smile.

“I know I live Below now, but... I still have my inheritance. Yes, I put a part of it aside for Jacob’s future, but after all that you all have given me in these past years, that’s the least I can do...”

The smile and look he gave her made her heart skip a few beats; she felt like a teenage girl exposed to her crush, wanting nothing else but to melt into his arms.

“Your generosity knows no boundaries, Catherine. We are all truly grateful for everything you give to us, and I’m not speaking only of material things,” Vincent said with his characteristically deep voice, which even after years, made Catherine shiver with delight.

She would never understand how anyone could think Vincent a beast. He was like a beautiful majestic, noble knight, who accidentally left some fantastic medieval story to cast his spell of love, understanding, kindness and charm on everyone willing to watch and listen. His face was magnetic and otherworldly, and his voice and his eyes were something to haunt one in beautiful and magical dreams forever. His darker side was part of the appeal as well, though, making him real and more human. And the best of all - he was all hers, body, heart and soul...

Vincent felt her tremble, and knowing the reason for it, he leaned to her face and gently pressed his lips on hers. Her arms went up around his neck immediately, and he smiled in the kiss. He would never cease to be amazed how he could make her feel like this, how she could want him so much, but it filled him with pride, love and a happiness he had never thought he would experience. She had the same effect on him, and it was getting even stronger with time.

When they stopped, needing air, Catherine leaned content against his chest and sighed, shivering slightly from excitement.

“I think if I could get any happier, Vincent, I would burst,” she chuckled and tightened her hold around his waist.

”I don’t think I could get any happier; I am already in Heaven,” he whispered with a smile.

She looked up to him, and her eyes twinkled.

“Mmmm... I think you should look under the tree; it might change your mind,” she grinned.

Vincent glanced under the tree and then back at Catherine.

”I thought Santa was supposed to stop by later tonight?” He raised his eyebrows, and his eyes were smiling.

Catherine chuckled.

“For a short time when I was little, after my mum had passed away, I had a nanny whose family came from Germany. She told me that they get their presents on Christmas Eve, after the festive dinner, because Father Christmas visits them that evening. I thought it lovely, because it adds more magic to that special night - fairy lights twinkling in the night, beauty and peace all around...” Her face was glowing as she spoke of the fond memory.

“I’ve heard of this tradition from one of our Helpers; he came to New York from Berlin,” Vincent said with a smile. “Many, especially East-European, countries celebrate Christmas this way. It sounds magical, indeed.”

Catherine took his hands in hers, and suddenly she looked shy again.

“I wanted to give you your present tonight because.... It is a magical night, and because it is something that is for both of us, and Jacob... and it could be so much more, but you have to open it first...” Her voice was a bit shaky, though Vincent heard a hint of hope in it too.

He was very intrigued by now, so he stood up slowly and walked over to the little tree, kneeling to its base and looking for what Santa had left him.

Suddenly, Vincent felt like a little boy again, full of expectations and excitement.

The children Below never received many presents for Christmas, most of them hand-made either by their families or friends, but they always cherished and loved each of them. Vincent himself had received quite a few presents in his boyhood. Among the presents he cherished most, was the model of the Empire State Building that Devin gave him once. Once he grew up, his gifts used to come mostly from Father and Mary, usually some classical book he liked.

He remembered the present Catherine gave him for Christmas the year of her first Winterfest. It was a new black fountain pen with a miniature golden rose ornament on its screw-on cap. *'For your journal writing....'* she had said, and he remembered how moved he was by it. He hadn't used any other pen since then.

Vincent was getting the vibes of anticipation and hope coming from her through the bond. He spotted a small white box with a shiny red ribbon on top. He took it and walked back to Catherine with a smile, a warm glow radiating from him.

When he was about to open it, Catherine quickly put her hand over his hands.

"Before you do it, I want you to know I've been thinking about this for a long time. I knew I wanted to do it if the day came, that you'd let me be a part of your world for good, and my greatest wish would come true...." Her green eyes were glistening, and she almost choked on the last words, but she managed a smile.

Catherine's words deeply touched Vincent. He realised that she had seen herself as his constant companion for a long time. Much longer than he had been willing to accept that there was simply no way they could *not* be sharing a life together, long before Jacob came into their world.

When she released his hands, he took off the lid of the box in his palm.

He was not sure of the meaning of what he saw, although he had an idea, and the stunned look on his face gave Catherine a head start.

Inside the box, there was a set of three keys attached to a golden keyring with a small golden sun pendant on it. Vincent's mouth went suddenly dry. Catherine saw his puzzled expression and started.

"What has been one of your greatest wishes all your life long, Vincent? Seeing the sunlight, feeling its warmth on your skin, seeing the true colours of the trees, the grass, the flowers. Laying under a tree in the grass without having to watch if anybody sees you and you have to run away..."

Catherine took a deep breath, and holding the keys, she took his hands in her palms.

"A house, Vincent... A detached brownstone on the other side of the park... It's at the end of a quiet side street with a very healthy distance from other houses, two storeys, a private, wide, high-walled garden with apple, pear, oak and birch trees.... a roof covered-terrace... One of these keys is for the door in the basement that has direct access to the tunnels, Mouse already checked it, and there are pipes, leading out straight to the Home Tunnels... And Vincent, on the second floor, leading from the master bedroom, there is a roof-covered balcony where you can look over Central Park in the distance..."

Her voice was shaky again as she whispered the last words, her eyes going misty with the thought of the reminder of such an important place in their lives.

"We would still have a home in the tunnels, but we could also be staying in the house if we wanted more privacy. Anyone could visit us through the basement access. You could come and go as you please without any danger; you could read in the library, sit out on the terrace in safety and play with our son in the daylight...."

She held her breath at the last image.

"At nights, we could watch the city lights on the balcony, just like we used to here..."

Catherine was still waiting for a reaction from him, but could not see his face now because his head was down, staring at the keys, she thought.

“Vincent, you showed me the incredible beauty of the night; you gave me the moon and the stars. I want to give you the sun...”

She was very emotional now, and her heart was pounding fast. Would he like the idea, or would he think it foolish? If he didn't like it...

Vincent interrupted her thoughts by finally lifting his head. What she saw in his face almost broke her heart - he was crying... Silent tears were streaming down his cheeks, and he shook his head in disbelief. Catherine froze for a moment, misreading his feelings and thinking she went too far.

Vincent felt the panic rising in her, and he smiled through the tears, holding her hands tightly in his.

“You are truly the most remarkable, thoughtful, empathic, generous, kind-hearted and beautiful woman I have ever met...” he breathed.

Catherine breathed a sigh of relief and smiled, though she was still a bit hesitant.

“Do you like it?”

Vincent's smile widened as he tilted his head. “Like? I don't know whether or not I am worth it, but I *cannot wait* to see it! There are no words good enough to thank you...”

The blue in his sapphire eyes got darker and Catherine got lost in it. Her arms flew around his neck when she pulled him as close as she could.

“I was so worried you would think I stepped too far...” She cried quietly into his neck, holding him tight.

”Catherine, no one has ever given me more than you. our love, strength, faith, your perseverance, your belief in me... The courage to accept myself as I am, Jacob and now the sun... Thank you,” he whispered. placing a kiss into her hair. “And if you think you stepped too far, I want to step even further.”

She pulled back from him, trying to understand what he meant with the last words, an obvious question in her eyes, while gently wiping away his tears.

Vincent smiled warmly and retrieved something from the pocket of his vest.

“I *was* planning to give it to you tonight, so you see, it is not just me who is getting some early present from Santa,” he chuckled.

She smiled and was unable to hide her excitement.

“I have thought about this for a while, too. Ever since the blessed day when you returned to me after the darkest time of my life, and once we finally had our son with us, there was no going back for me anymore. Since the moment I first saw you, I knew I would be bound to you by my heart forever, and by returning my love, you have made me the happiest man in the world. Yes, Catherine, a *man*....You have made me feel accepted, loved, desired; you have made me a father... We have been through so much pain and suffering, and yet you stood by me in Heaven or Hell - through the joy, through my darkest hours when I lost myself and was on the verge of insanity. You never wavered or have left my side willingly...

"I have almost lost you, but I was given a second chance, and I intend to keep the promise I gave to your father. I want to love you, watch over you and protect you until my last breath if you let me.”

He put something small and cool in the palm of her hand.

”My dearest Catherine, will you marry me?”

Catherine gasped and looked at the thin golden ring in her hand. It had a small white crystal set in the centre. The light from the fireplace was reflecting in it and making it sparkle. It was the same type of crystal, as the one hanging around her neck at that very moment - Vincent's gift to her on the first anniversary of their meeting. Mouse outdid himself again.

She took the ring in her trembling fingers, and her vision got blurry when observing it. Looking into his eyes again, she remembered all the years of longing, heartache, beauty, love, cherished moments, fears, dangers,

seemingly impossible dreams, and near-death experiences... They all mingled into a more than deserved happy ending and she almost couldn't believe their time had finally arrived.

Vincent was probably more nervous waiting for an answer than Catherine was before, but she did not torture him for long.

"That is all I ever wanted...", she breathed, and her beaming smile and tears of joy made him feel like fireworks were exploding inside of him.

Vincent put the ring gently on her finger and kissed her with unmasked passion. He took her in his strong arms and sighed into her hair, almost unbelieving of his luck.

Mine... Truly mine forever...

"Catherine..." It was all he could say. The words got stuck in his throat from the overwhelming emotions spreading like a hot spring in his veins.

Vincent already had everything he ever wanted and needed - the love of his life was living with him in his world, and they had a child together, filling each of their days with happiness and wonder. He had his own little family, and through Catherine's gift, he would have a second home and a safe way to enjoy daylight for the first time in his life. And yet, by achieving this last step, he felt, he had gone full circle - the circle of life

They weren't able to say anything for a few minutes, just relishing in their warm embrace. A state of incredible happiness and peace engulfed them; their love flowing freely and fully through their bond.

"Mrs. Wells....," Catherine whispered into his ear with a smile and then pulled back to lock her gaze with his.

"I love the sound of it." She laughed quietly, her cheeks still wet from tears.

"And I love *you*..." Vincent whispered back and tasted her lips to confirm it.

