

Winter Dreams

by Michaela Buzsaki Struchova

The cold early December breeze was playing with Catherine's fine blond hair as she stood on the balcony wrapped in a cosy cardigan, a grey scarf and black gloves admiring the beautiful orange, red and white candle in her hands. It was a gift from the people Below, brought to her by Vincent that night. She told him a story from her childhood, about how she had been afraid of the dark and her mother gave her a birthday candle to put at her bedside to keep the fear away. Vincent listened to her with a smile before speaking, colourful fairy lights on the French door behind him underlining the magic of the moment.

"This is no ordinary candle, it's for Winterfest. It's a special time for us. We have other holidays and traditions we share with your world but Winterfest is our own. It's a time to remember the past, dream of the future... Each year we deliver these candles to our Helpers in the world Above. Without their light, our world would be dark, our lives would be cold without their warmth, candles are our way of saying that they're a part of us."

Catherine smiled, loving the way the people Below expressed their gratitude, and she regarded the candle again when Vincent continued, his focus solely on her face.

"Everyone... the entire community has agreed that this year's Winterfest would be incomplete...unless *you* are there..."

Catherine looked up in awe and saw him smiling. She felt as if she had finally been welcomed as a true part of the community Below, and her heart was bursting with pride, gratitude and love - she was officially a part of the family she came to love so dearly.

Vincent could feel the joy radiating from her and when her lips stretched into a glowing smile, his heart skipped a beat. Her eyes were as bright as the stars above them, and he was bathing in the warmth and love flowing from her heart to his through the bond.

"Thank you, Vincent.... I can imagine no greater honour than to be a part of your world..." Catherine couldn't wipe the smile from her face and with a step she walked into his arms, embracing him, resting her head on his chest.

Then she added quietly. "And no greater happiness than to be a part of *you*..."

Vincent sighed, moved by her words, kissed the top of her head. His arms held her as only those of lovers can. And Catherine didn't want to move an inch, as not to disturb this bliss, a magical moment of eternity, which was warming her like the crystal resting on her chest under the jumper.

They were all carefully descending the staircase of the Chamber of the Winds - the tunnel dwellers and the Helpers. Each of them was holding an orange, red and white candle ready to be used, each of them with an excited smile on their face.

Catherine, wrapped in a warm cream-coloured coat and wearing cream-coloured gloves, was walking behind Vincent, who kept on checking on her every few steps. Her coat was covering a lovely, but not too complicated, low neck, pink-coloured evening dress with long sleeves. A pink fabric rose sat in the middle of

her low neckline. The crystal Vincent had given her for their first anniversary was resting peacefully low on her chest.

When they were all finally down, they stopped in front of a massive wooden double wing door, blocked by a heavy wooden beam. Vincent turned to Catherine and handed her his candle. He could see the excitement in her eyes before he walked to the door and lifted the heavy beam with ease, placing it against the wall next to the door. His eyes found Catherine again for a brief moment and he saw a beaming smile and a childlike expectation on her face. He turned to the door again and pushed the heavy wings open with only a mild effort. A strong gust of wind broke through to the Chamber of Winds, making everyone feel as if they were standing in front of a massive fan.

Vincent walked the few steps to Catherine, and as their eyes met again, he felt her heart beating faster and he knew this time, it was more than just her excitement caused by expectation.

The honey golden mane was flying around his head in the wind, the sparkles in his bright, deep blue eyes. His majestic figure was dressed in his festive ruffled white shirt, brown and khaki vest with broad shoulders and khaki pants, covered by his always-present long dark cloak.

His hand stretched out to her left Catherine breathless. "Can I lead you through the dark?" Vincent asked, after a brief moment gazing at her.

She let her breath out and said with a loving smile, her whole face glowing with happiness. "There is no darkness, Vincent, when you're with me..."

Oblivious to Father's wide smile as a response to her answer, Vincent tilted his head again and his mouth stretched into a warm smile, which took her breath away again. She could feel her heart beat in her throat. She put her hand in his and followed him into the dark.

Catherine was deeply touched by the opening ceremony of the Winterfest. Father, Vincent, Mary, Peter, and some others, took turns in narrating the story of the origins of their world, the way how its first generation realised the need for togetherness, unity, caring for each other and helping each other. Catherine couldn't help but to think how different the world Above would be if living under the principles of the world Below - the world filled only with care, respect, appreciation, gratitude and love.

With each lit candle, she could feel the powerful symbol of the darkness being lifted from people's minds and the light of a new, better day illuminating them.

Vincent, sitting at the head of the long table next to her and Father, could feel deep emotions stirring in her, and as he looked at her and their eyes met, she was sending waves of love and gratitude through their bond.

When the official opening was over, it gave way to the entertainment part, and as the sound of live fiddles filled the air in joyful tunes, the merriment had no end. People were mingling and sharing cheerful memories and the news of their lives in the year just gone by. The smiles, good food and drinks on the tables, to take whenever one pleased, board games (especially useful for the children), a good mood everywhere - and Catherine got to enjoy it all with the man she loved most in the world right beside her. She felt like she was walking on clouds and couldn't stop smiling.

Vincent felt her happiness and looked at her when they stopped walking around for a bit and leaned against the wood railing of the staircase leading up to the large old tapestries hanging on the wall.

"You are happy, Catherine," he said with a smile, stating a pure fact rather than posing a question.

She looked at him and smiled even wider. "How could I not be? This is the most wonderful and most meaningful social event I have ever been to! And I have been officially made a part of this amazing family."

Catherine looked around the hall at the happy faces of people who were so dear to her now. "I wish my dad could be here, but apart from him everything I love is here." She turned back to look deeply in his eyes. "And every one..."

Vincent's heart skipped a beat. He was drowning in the green pools of her eyes and it took him a few seconds to gather himself. He lowered his eyes with a shy smile.

Catherine always loved when he did that. She never understood how someone so majestic and strong could at the same time be so shy, yet she found it very sweet and charming. It was so... Vincent.

She looked up towards the tapestries and walked up the stairs to look at them closer. Vincent followed her. They stopped in front of the beautiful medieval images woven delicately into the tapestries.

"They're wonderful! Where do they come from? Who's the artist?" Catherine was mesmerised.

"It's a mystery we've never solved. Perhaps, they're enchanted," Vincent said with a dreamy smile, admiring the masterful craftsmanship yet again as each year. "I used to imagine that they were magic windows... That if I looked at them hard enough and long enough, they might open up for me and I could pass through them to another world... When I reached out it was only cloth..."

Catherine's smile faded from her face and she looked back at Vincent. Just when she thought she couldn't love him more, he said something which touched her deep within and her feelings for him got even stronger. She thought of all the years of his life before, his unparalleled imagination which he used times and times again to bypass the restrictions imposed on him from the day he was born. He could have turned bitter, cursing his fate and yet, he made the best of every day, every moment, creating his own magic world and despite his brain telling him 'it can never be for me', his heart was leading him to 'it could be for me if I believe hard enough in it'. Well, apart from that one thing, the only thing Catherine still had to work on hard to make him believe in its possibility... Just like the warriors on the tapestries, Vincent was a warrior, fighting against the prejudice of most of the world Above which did not see him for who he was. But most of all, he was fighting his own inner battles against himself.

Vincent's eyes met Catherine's again and he held his breath, for the wave of love pouring from them and from her heart to him was immense. And then he saw something else as well. Suddenly, he felt like a moth drawn to a flame and in that moment he knew, they were both lost in each other...

It took them a moment to remember they were in public and whatever they both longed to do, it was not the right time, not the right place.

"Would you... would you like a drink, Catherine?" Vincent managed to say quietly, with a deeper voice than usual, his mouth suddenly feeling very dry.

Catherine blinked and sobered up from the trance. She smiled at him and took his hand before they walked down the stairs.

On the way to the table, they passed Pascal, who was eager to return to his pipes and Catherine had to smile at how different Vincent's and her world were, when people Above work mostly just for pay checks, but down Below everybody did their work with such passion.

At the table, Vincent poured Catherine a glass of punch and then one for himself as well.

"I've never seen you drink alcohol, Vincent," she smiled, bemused.

Vincent chuckled. "I very rarely do, only on special occasions, it's not really my thing, but I do like William's punch."

His eyes were twinkling and Catherine loved the fact that she learned something new about him, again.

"I shall remember that," she murmured to herself, mischievously, while taking a sip of her drink hiding behind the glass.

Vincent was observing the entertainment in front of them without looking at her. "I heard that, Catherine," he said, like a teacher scolding a pupil for some mischief, but his little smile was revealing how bemusing he found Catherine's almost silent remark.

Then his eyes pierced hers, when her face reappeared from behind the glass. There was more than just recognition in them, their sapphire blue was burning brighter and she could feel her cheeks blushing. She looked away shyly from those blue fires for a moment. It amazed her how he could turn from shy to absolutely confident and mesmerising within a few minutes.

Oh, Vincent, you know what that look does to me....

He didn't need the bond to know her feelings; she was like an open book in that moment and he loved what he was reading in her. Knowing her soft spot for *that* look, he decided not to torture her any more and laughed quietly, picking up one of William's cookies from the table, trying to make it easier for Catherine to relax again.

The rare sound of his laugh warmed her heart, happy to see him so content. "It's nice to hear you laugh," she said with a smile, grabbing one of the cookies for herself, too.

He smiled and looked out at the dancing couples in front of them.

"I used to laugh a lot as a child, especially with Devin..." He shook his head and chuckled. "The things we did together, Catherine... Sometimes I wonder how Father didn't get a heart attack from it all."

Catherine smiled dreamily imagining Vincent as a boy doing mischiefs with his older brother. "And then?"

Vincent's face turned more serious. "Then Devin left, things happened... I grew up... and life got in the way somehow, I suppose..."

Catherine felt a hint of melancholy in his voice. *Yes, life - Devin leaving... Father's constant reminding him how different he is... Hard work in the tunnels... Sacrificing himself for everyone else, protecting the loved ones at the cost of his own sanity... Full realisation of why he will never be able to walk in the sun... Impossible dreams haunting him...*

"Well," she said softly, after a moment of silence between them, "I'm glad I could draw a laugh out of you tonight..."

Vincent turned to look at her and she could see a lovely smile reaching right up to his bright eyes.

"Catherine, you draw so much more of me, you surely know that..."

There, she was lost again... She desperately wanted to hug him, but she knew the presence of everyone around them would make him uncomfortable. So she just smiled warmly at him and tried to project through their bond, the immense depth of her feelings to him.

Judging by his gaze, she succeeded.

The medieval feel of the fiddle music was like a fairy tale to Catherine's ears. Despite limited resources and the indulgences of the world Above, the people of the tunnels certainly knew how to entertain themselves. And as she watched the dancing pairs floating in front of them, she couldn't help but look at Vincent with a deep gaze and an almost challenging smile on her face.

Vincent returned her gaze and smile and time stood still around them for a moment. It was suddenly interrupted by Jacob, who approached them and turned to Catherine.

"Do you like the music, Catherine?" he asked with a smile.

"Very much! I've always loved the waltz," she said with a blissful expression.

Vincent caught the gentle hint with a smile.

"Well, you know, in its time, the waltz was considered to be quite scandalous... wicked even." Jacob raised his eyebrows in pretended shock.

Catherine mirrored his look, glancing to the dance floor again. "Hmm... imagine that!"

She turned back to Vincent, meaning to ask something which she was dying to know all evening. "Vincent, can I ask you something very... personal?"

Jacob thought this might be something not meant for his ears and turned away, trying politely to distance himself from them a bit. Vincent didn't seem phased by her question and answered with a proud smile.

"You know you can ask me *anything*, Catherine."

A beaming smile appeared on her face and her eyes sparkled when she asked, "Do you dance?"

Jacob's face relaxed and he smiled wholeheartedly.

Vincent's heart made a leap and his eyes were transfixed by Catherine's gaze. He was too overwhelmed by her question to answer right away. They hadn't stopped smiling, their gaze deepened and for a moment, and they were connected by some invisible magical thread, making them forget about any one and anything around them.

"Vincent, you have to come! There's a sound on the pipes!"

Pascal's breathless plea brought them back to reality, when he appeared out of nowhere standing next to them. When he realised he had just interrupted something, he tried to apologise a little embarrassed.

"Oh... I'm sorry... I didn't mean to interrupt..."

Vincent sobered up from daydreaming and inquired calmly. "What kind of sound?"

"I don't know, it's so weak. Normally, it would be lost in the traffic, but with the system so quiet..."

"How do you know it's a message? It could be anything, a loose fitting, a steam rattle..." Father tried to calm Pascal down.

"Or Narcissa. We must be sure," Vincent said in thought. He looked back at Catherine and softly touched her arm. "I'll return as soon as I can."

He walked away with Pascal and Catherine watched him disappear out of the Great Hall making his way through dancing couples.

Jacob, not thinking much of it, was trying to entertain Catherine and begin explaining her the origins of the waltz. She was trying to listen, but her mind was somewhere else. She could still feel the light touch of

Vincent's hand on her arm and the magnetic gaze of his blue eyes on hers, remembering how warm it made her inside. *Hopefully, before the night is over, we will make it to the dance floor...*

* * *

About half an hour later, Catherine was in the middle of a pleasant chat with Rebecca, the young woman who grew up with Vincent and was like a sister to him. Catherine knew how fond and protective Vincent was of her and she shared his fondness, ever since she had got to know Rebecca better. It was she who made all the candles for Winterfest, in fact, she was making most of the candles the tunnel dwellers used every day.

"It's amazing what you can create with wax, Rebecca." Catherine praised her companion with a smile. "And I loved the lavender-scented candle you gave me when I saw you last time, thank you again!"

Rebecca laughed heartily. "You're welcome, Cathy! Vincent told me your hair always smells like a mix of lavender and meadow flowers so I thought you might like it."

Catherine felt her cheeks blushing and she smiled shyly.

"Oh, don't be embarrassed, Cathy... You know how Vincent rarely speaks about what stirs him inside, so when he does, it has to be something *really* special and it's really sweet when he lets his guard drop." Rebecca winked at her with a cheeky smile.

Catherine laughed. Inside, she felt so warm that she could melt. The thought of Vincent revelling in the smell of her hair so much that he mentioned it to someone else, spoke volumes of his affection and made her tingle all over. Not that she didn't know he loved her, and she loved the characteristic scent of him as well, but she still found it ... enchanting.

Rebecca saw the delight in Catherine's face and her dreamy look and her own face turned a bit more serious. "I am really happy that he found you, Cathy...."

Catherine looked at her with misty eyes. "So am I... I don't know how I could live my life without... him...." She spoke quietly, the thought of not being a part of him stinging her at heart for a second.

Rebecca smiled and took Catherine's hand in hers.

"God knows Vincent had suffered enough in his life and he's been carrying his burden with incredible grace and dignity... You two are the kindest, most loving, caring, generous and warm-hearted people I've ever known... I realise it's not easy for either of you, living in different worlds, but I want you to know that I believe - and I'm not the only one - that what you share is so unique, so beautiful and so strong, that you can make anything possible."

Catherine was at a loss for words, so she just hugged her friend tightly and whispered. "Thank you..."

After that, she watched Rebecca join a young man in a dance while she was left to her own thoughts.

Suddenly, the music was replaced by the sound of hush and astonishment around, when Vincent emerged from the crowd carrying unconscious Narcissa in his arms. Pascal was trailing nervously behind him. Mouse and Sebastian cleared the space on the long table in front of him, pushing candles, chalices, plates and Father's chess box to the table's edge, before Vincent gently laid Narcissa on it.

Catherine made her way nearer to the table.

Father immediately asked Mouse to get his medicine bag and started checking Narcissa's pulse. "Where did you find her?"

"Down in the shattered rooms, below the stone circle. She must have crawled there," Vincent replied.

"Her pulse is very weak. Oh my God, look at those burns..." Father was extremely worried. "We must get her up to the Hospital Chamber right away, she's very dehydrated."

In that moment, even Vincent jumped away slightly, as Narcissa suddenly awoke and straightened herself up dramatically. While sitting with her arms stretched out, her blind eyes kept staring into the space ahead of her.

"The Evil One... is here!!" Narcissa proclaimed in fear.

Vincent helped her lay down again and as the faces of all others around him, his face was suddenly full of worry.

Later in the Hospital Chamber, Father and Peter treated Narcissa's injuries and burns, with Mary helping them. Vincent and Catherine were standing at the end of the bed watching them.

"Vincent?" Narcissa suddenly cried sitting up again.

He walked quickly to her side and bended over. "I'm here, Narcissa," he said with a calming, deep voice.

"Beware the poisoned rose..." She exhaled and fell back to the pillow.

Vincent looked at Catherine with a bad premonition reflecting in his eyes. They were both trying to understand the meaning of the magic woman's words.

The music was playing again, people continued socializing, but the mood was a little bit more subdued after the incident of the past few minutes. There was an hint of unease in the air. Vincent and Catherine were walking among the people looking around.

"You think he's here, don't you?" Catherine asked with a worried look.

"My mind says it cannot be, but a small voice inside me whispers yes," Vincent replied quietly, still looking around.

"I feel it too..." Catherine agreed.

"It makes no sense... How could he have hoped to bring off such a masquerade? There are no strangers in Winterfest."

Catherine thought for a moment and then looked at him intrigued by an idea. "Could he impersonate one of the Helpers?"

"Helpers are part of us, friends." Vincent shook his head slightly in disbelief.

"Sometimes we drift away from our friends, we lose track of them for a little while... When we see them again, if they seem changed we don't think twice about it," Catherine elaborated more, something telling her she was on the right track.

"Most of those who were Helpers 30 years ago are gone now. Paracelsus could not know the others."

"Surely there must be a few? Those who were Helpers from the very beginning, who knew Paracelsus when he was a part of your world."

"Only three," Vincent said, gradually glancing at all of those who he named. "Peter, Lou and Sebastian."

Catherine observed them for a moment and then turned to Vincent. "There must be a way to test them, to see if they are really who they seem to be.... Let me try Peter."

Vincent nodded and when she walked away, he turned his steps to Sebastian who was sitting at one of the tables playing card tricks on some of the children and Mouse.

Meanwhile, Catherine approached Peter who was in the middle of a cheerful discussion with Father.

"Peter, did you ever tell Father how we met?" she asked with an inquisitive smile.

"Of course not! After all it's your reputation I have to protect." Peter pretended to be dead serious before turning to Father. "Would you believe, she was stark naked?"

"In a hospital delivery room!" Catherine exclaimed and laughed, letting Peter embrace her shoulders while Father laughed with them.

On the other side of the Great Hall, Vincent silently approached Sebastian, watching him trying a card trick on Mouse. Having known Sebastian for years, he knew the cheerful magician was prone to cheating in cards so, when he asked Mouse to find the King of Hearts by choosing one of the three cards on the table, Mouse picked one which was revealed as a Ace of Spade.

Vincent stepped to them and revealed the other two cards as the same Aces of Spade. He looked calmly at Sebastian, who appeared embarrassed and said just, "No...", with an attempted apologetic smile. Vincent knew this Sebastian was real.

At the same time the 11-year-old Samantha reached for Father's chess box on the same table. Vincent watched her leave with it, when his eyes focused on some indefinite spot in the distance, as he remembered something. He followed Samantha, who sat down at another table, across from 9-year-old Geoffrey, and wanted to open the box. In that same moment, Vincent's hand covered the box carefully.

"Father said we could...", Samantha said in disappointment.

Vincent oblivious to her plea, took the box in his hands and stepped back observing it and then he looked at Catherine, who had joined him, still smiling after leaving Peter and Father. Her smile faded when she looked at the top of the box.

"A rose!" she whispered as Narcissa's words came back to her.

And indeed, in the middle of the top of the box, there was a silver delicate rose ornament.

"Stay here, Catherine, I'll take it to Mouse. If there's anything wrong with it, he will hopefully know what to do," Vincent said quietly and left her.

It took about 20 minutes until they both appeared, but to Catherine's surprise, they were holding one chess box each.

Vincent pointed at the box in his hands to Catherine and said quietly again.

"This one is safe. It's the set belonging to Father."

"And the other one?" Catherine asked.

Mouse opened the second box slightly ajar and Catherine's eyes widened in shock.

"Don't worry, there is no danger any more," Vincent said quietly, reassuring her.

She was thinking for a moment and then took Vincent's set from him before speaking. "I think the moment of truth has arrived for Lou."

He understood and nodded.

They both walked over to Lou, who was chatting to William at a cask of ale. Catherine used her brightest smile as she approached them. "Lou, I thought you might want to have a game of chess," she said in pretended excitement.

She noticed Lou's hesitation for a couple of seconds, then he replied, with an uncertain smile. "Try Father, he's a chess player... Me, I wouldn't know a horse from a castle... Now, if you want a game of five cards..." He tried to persuade her in a lighter tone.

"I'm afraid Father is out of my league." Catherine laughed, with Vincent standing right behind her. "I'll teach you the moves..." She tried to lure Lou with a big smile.

Lou hesitated again and then said with a disinterested smile. "Nah, I'll pass..."

Catherine's expression changed instantly from cheerful to suspicious, and she turned around, as if to walk away.

Suddenly, she turned on her heel and called out. "Lou!"

When Lou turned, she threw the chess box at him. He hissed and quickly stepped aside to avoid it in visible fear. The look he gave Catherine and Vincent left no doubts that he was aware they had seen through him.

In that moment, Mouse appeared with another chess box, identical to the first one. "Yours?" he said and opened the lid dramatically.

Lou quickly moved his hands to instinctively cover his face, only to realise that nothing happened when Mouse opened the box.

"Disarmed it," Mouse said with pride, holding the now useless explosives mechanism.

"We found Father's set in the tunnel ... where you hid it," Vincent spoke calmly but knowingly.

Quicker than anyone could realise, William stepped in front of the fake Lou, grabbing his arms in anger.

Suddenly the fake man managed to push a button under his hand sleeve, and a long blade appeared out of his sleeve. Vincent protectively put his arm in front of Catherine, as he saw the evil man slashing at William, injuring his belly.

When William fell to the ground, Vincent took a giant leap at the fleeing man and stopped him, grabbing him hard and slashing at his face, peeling off some of his face mask.

When Vincent stepped back a bit, the man quickly grabbed Samantha, who was standing nearby, holding her under her neck and pointing the blade at her.

"One step closer and the child dies!" he cried, when Vincent wanted to attack him.

Suddenly, his voice changed into a deep diabolical one. "The hour of unmasking is at hand, it would seem," he said and pulled off whole of his face mask to reveal his true face.

"John!" Jacob gasped.

"Paracelsus! John is dead, killed by *you*, Jacob!" Hatred was visible in his eyes.

Catherine was getting restless. "Let the girl go!" she cried.

Paracelsus turned his attention to her and asked in a mocking tone. "So that your dear Vincent can rend me limb from limb? I think not! No, regrettably, it might seem I need a hostage..."

Samantha was terrified under his touch, but she was trying not to cry.

To everyone's surprise, Jacob stepped closer and said. "Then take *me*.... I'm the one you want, John, not the girl.... We both know that...," he finished quietly.

There was a moment of intense silence, with everyone waiting with bated breath. Then, Paracelsus loosened the grip on the girl, and Samantha ran into Catherine's arms. Before Vincent could move, Paracelsus pointed the blade at Jacob's throat.

Jacob asked, "What happened to you, John? You were a good man once... my friend!"

"Spare me the homilies, Jacob!" Paracelsus spat with hate. "These poor deluded fools may not know what happened... but you and I, we remember... Don't we?!"

He pushed the blade on Jacob's throat almost too much, and Vincent's heart froze.

"We remember ... differently, John...," Jacob said calmly.

In that moment, a flash of light blinded them from the distance ahead of them - it was Sebastian who finally put one of his magic tricks to good use. The light blinded Paracelsus for a second, and Vincent used it to pull his father away from danger. Paracelsus saw he had no chance and opened the heavy door, before disappearing into the gust of wind which entered the Hall and blew out most of the candles. Everyone shielded themselves in protection. Vincent ran after him and vanished in the dark, with Mouse and Jamie following him shortly after, the wind and the dark swallowing them as well.

A while later, Catherine had a feeling of *deja vue*, while standing in the Hospital Chamber, watching Father and Peter treating William's luckily not serious injury, while Mary was assisting them. Sebastian joined them too. In a moment, Vincent returned with Jamie and Mouse at his heels, saying there was no sign of Paracelsus, he had vanished without a trace.

"In his eyes, there was such anger there, and hatred... and yet, for an instant, mind you, I think I saw a hint of sadness as well...," Jacob contemplated, then he chuckled. "I probably imagined it. And anyway, Catherine was our real hero! How could you possibly know it was Lou?" He wondered.

Catherine sighed. "I ruled out Peter when he told that embarrassing story of his... There's no way Paracelsus could have known that Peter delivered me."

Peter chuckled.

"And Sebastian has been trying all day to get Father play chess," Vincent continued.

"The last place Paracelsus wanted to be when that box was opened was across the chess board. That left Lou," Catherine finished.

"Well, however you did it, we are *deeply* grateful, dear Catherine," Jacob said with a smile and a genuine respect in his eyes.

Vincent looked at Catherine, moved by Father's words, and suddenly feeling very proud at her.

"And the rest is silence," Sebastian quoted Shakespeare.

Mary said she needed to check on Narcissa, and Peter asked for a guide to lead him Above. Suddenly, Catherine felt very sad, almost disappointed. Vincent could feel it in her and his own heart was saddened. He couldn't resign to the negativity of the end of the evening.

"Is this the way we want Winterfest to end?" he asked, and all eyes turned to him at once.

"Each of us slinking away to nurse our wounds, each alone? Have we forgotten what this day means?"

Everyone was thinking for a moment. Finally, Mouse broke the silence.

"Okay good, okay fine!" He stretched his hand out to Vincent.

Vincent took his hand firmly and smiled. Suddenly, all of them were smiling and they knew the evening shall end in much better way.

Catherine gazed at Vincent with a smile and her heart mirrored his deep feeling of pride from a few moments ago. *He's so remarkable...*

Mouse and Peter helped William on his feet and walked out towards the Great Hall again, with Jacob, Mary, Jamie and Sebastian following them.

Vincent and Catherine stayed alone. Vincent reached for Catherine's hand with a smile and a warm look. She accepted it gratefully and shook her head lightly, the corners of her mouth still turned upwards.

"What is it, Catherine?" Vincent inquired.

"You always find the right words to lift one's spirit... To light one's inner fire again... That's a great gift, Vincent..."

He lowered his eyes almost shyly and smiled again.

"One of the many things I love about you..." Catherine finished her thought.

Vincent looked up, and his deep blue eyes met her sparkly green ones. If he had been bolder, he would have asked what were the other things she loved about him, but he didn't dare. Drinking from those green pools gladly seemed enough and his heart felt like soaring in the bright summer sky.

Catherine's heart was soaring too and she wished they could have stayed alone forever, but she knew they had to return to the others. After Catherine taking a deep breath and smiling widely, they left the chamber hand in hand.

All the tunnel inhabitants and Helpers created a large circle in the middle of the Great Hall and they all held hands. Only Catherine was standing in the middle of the circle, looking around with a smile, waiting for what would happen. Jacob spoke to her in an almost ceremonial tone.

"Catherine? You're a part of us... Come and complete the circle." He reached his hand out and smiled.

The young woman felt a slight shiver going down her spine.

A part of us, he said, I officially have a family again...

She was truly moved and trembled slightly as she accepted his hand with a smile. When standing next to him, she took Vincent's hand on her other side and looked up to the man she loved - almost forgetting to breathe under his loving gaze.

You are truly a part of us, Catherine, a part of me forever....

"The darkness almost engulfed us this year, but our unity gave us strength," Jacob spoke to everyone. "Our shared light showed us the truth. As we part for another year, Let us remember, darkness is only the absence of light, and all winters end!"

As everyone held their joined hands high up, Catherine thought that never before she had felt she belonged so well, so elevated and inspired, than at that very moment. Below was her home now, too. She found friends here, a new family and most of all, she found the love of her life....

The fiddles stopped playing, the plates and chalices were empty, the tunnel folks and Helpers parted and returned to their home chambers and Above. A few candles were still burning, though, as Catherine and Vincent stood in the Great Hall, leaning against a wooden railing, watching the shadows dance on the walls. They felt very content and at peace, enjoying the stillness after an unexpectedly eventful evening.

Vincent couldn't get enough of the sight of Catherine. The woman of his dreams was truly a vision in her pink dress, her hair styled in waves, long pearl earrings and Vincent's crystal laying on her chest. Her rosy cheeks and glittering eyes reflected how happy she was feeling.

"How did you like your first Winterfest then, Catherine? Aside from the dramatic interlude of course...," Vincent asked.

Catherine looked at him in childlike wonder. "It was... magical... I have never seen people so enjoying themselves, so at ease interacting with each other. Even if I didn't know everyone, they were all so welcoming and kind. Whoever I talked to, they made me feel like they *wanted* to talk to me and not just *had to*..."

Vincent smiled contented before she continued.

"And the whole meaning of it is so inspiring... I wish people Above could see and feel this, the world could be so much better if everybody thought your way." Her voice trailed off in thought.

"With each Helper out there, our way can be passed on to others. All it takes is inspiration and the will to change the perspective of seeing things," Vincent said in contemplation. "Although, as you have seen tonight, darkness and evil lurks even in the brightest places..."

Catherine looked into his eyes and saw sadness. She wondered whether he meant just Paracelsus or himself as well, but didn't comment on it. "Do you think he'll return again?"

Vincent sighed and looked at the enchanting tapestries on the wall opposite to them. "I'm afraid it's inevitable in one way or another, sooner or later. Paracelsus will never be satisfied until he gets what he believes is his."

Catherine's voice got deeper. "Then we have to make sure that we pass on as much light in the darkness as possible."

Vincent looked at her and felt inspired all over. "Yes..." he said and smiled at her, his eyes bright again.

Catherine looked into the space again, her eyes wondering around, like she was listening to something.

"Can you hear it, Vincent?" she asked.

"What, the quiet? The wind outside crying to get in?"

"Listen!" She turned to look at him again. "You can hear it if you try, the music!..." She spoke in wonder.

Vincent listened for a moment and smiled looking back at her.

"Yes... I hear it..."

Catherine was beaming and the connection between the deep sapphire blue eyes and the emerald green ones was magical, binding their hearts in joy and love yet again.

Vincent broke the silence without breaking the eye contact. "Catherine... That question you asked me earlier..."

"I remember..." Catherine held her breath gazing at him, butterflies tingling in her stomach.

Vincent didn't speak any more but with an enigmatic smile, he softly touched her elbow and lead her to the centre of the Hall. He took her gently in a dance hold and gracefully started gliding around, leading her with assurance she had hoped for but never would have expected.

Although he didn't hold Catherine tightly, the touch of his hand on her back and his hold of her hand made her feel warm inside, even without the effect of physical movement. Her smile widened and she surrendered to their floating across the improvised dance floor.

Vincent could feel every emotion running through her - excitement, happiness, a pleasant dizziness... They were mirroring his own. They didn't need real music, they heard it in their hearts - the music of their love...

When they finally stopped, they remained in the hold, looking into each other's eyes, trying to catch their breath. Catherine wasn't sure whether it was from the dancing, or the fact that her heart was beating so fast.

"I hope I was worthy of your skills, milady," Vincent said finally, with a chivalrous smile, when he woke up from his own day (or better night) dreaming and held her hands in his.

Catherine chuckled and then spoke with a voice overflowing with love. "You have more brilliant skills than you even realise, sir..."

She moved slowly closer to him and kissed him lightly on his cheek.

Vincent trembled lightly under the soft touch of her lips but didn't pull back.

When she looked at him again, he tilted his head slightly and then gave her one of his lovely smiles which always made her weak in her knees. Then he straightened up again.

"It's late.... I can lead you to the threshold unless..." He stopped mid-sentence.

Catherine raised her eyebrows waiting.

"Unless you would like to stay in a guest chamber tonight..." Vincent breathed, amazed at his own words.

Catherine's smiled widely and then said. "Would you believe that someone had offered that option to me tonight already?"

Vincent was visibly confused. "Who?"

"Father," Catherine answered and after a moment of absolute shocked silence from Vincent's, she laughed.

Feeling relaxed after her laugh, Vincent chuckled and shook his head. "I would *never* believe Father would suggest anything like this on a non-urgent occasion..."

"I know, I was astonished, too! He said it's Friday and I'm not working tomorrow anyway, so I don't need to rush back and could spend the day here if I wanted to," Catherine claimed, bemused.

Vincent grew a bit shy. "And? What did you tell him?" His eyes were piercing hers.

"I told him... I would love to..." she said quietly, and what she saw in Vincent's look made her heart tremble once again. She could see that he was happy. In fact, better than happy, as Mouse would say.

“I will lead you to your chamber then so you can get some good sleep after all the excitement tonight,” Vincent said.

“Perhaps, we could have some of that nice herb tea first and read a bit...?” Catherine suggested with raised eyebrows and a silent wish written all over her face.

“Perhaps,” Vincent replied, smiling tenderly as his heart leapt.

“And perhaps some of William’s chocolate chip cookies as well,” he added, with an uncharacteristically mischievous smile.

It was followed by the sound of Catherine’s sweet laughter.

After snuffing out the remaining burning candles, they took their leave hand-in-hand, leaving the Great Hall alone to its magic and mystery again.

The End