

One Day

by Michaela Buzsaki Struchova

Note: This story takes place sometime between the episodes 'When the Blue Bird Sings' and 'The Watcher'.

She was dragging herself on the way from the elevator to the basement door. She felt feverish, and the last bits of her strength was deserting her after trying hard to keep on going all day.

Just a short walk and I'll be there... and everything will be all right...

Shivering, she pulled the collar of her long winter coat tighter around her neck. Although it was Spring, she had been feeling so cold all day long - a thin coat was out of the question that day. Suddenly, she wished for being wrapped in his warm, long cloak smelling of candles, leather and *him*.

Finally, after having pushed empty boxes away from it, she stood at the small door leading to the ladder, taking her down to the basement. Leaning against it for a moment, she was building up strength to the short descent. She unlatched the door and carefully started climbing down the ladder, pulling the door shut and holding tightly to the ladder for support.

Her feet had barely touched the ground when strong arms encircled her from behind, pulling her into the safety of his embrace.

"Catherine!" He gasped anxiously, sensing her utter exhaustion.

"Vincent..." She breathed a sigh of relief and leaned against his chest, knowing she finally made it.

Her knees suddenly felt weak. Vincent lifted her in his arms and quickly set off for the tunnels. His heart was thumping wild with fear; he could sense she had been feeling unwell all day. He was restless, waiting for the dark to descend so he could visit her, then sensed she was heading down to the basement.

His legs grew wings, and they reached his chamber in a record time. Vincent gently laid Catherine on his bed, covering her with his quilted blanket after taking her boots off and standing them to the side of the bed.

Catherine, who half-fainted, half-fell asleep on their way there, tiredly opened her eyes to the soothing amber light of Vincent's chamber. She looked a bit confused, but seeing Vincent kneeling next to her, she relaxed again.

"I'm here; you're safe," he whispered, holding her small hand in his. He noticed the perspiration on her forehead and tenderly swiped the loose strand of hair from it.

"I could feel your fatigue and unrest for some time now, Catherine," he said, worry reflected in the soft, gravelly voice that always brought her comfort.

She sighed and looked into his deep blue eyes. "I... I don't know what's wrong with me... I've been feeling weak for two days now; I've had headaches since this morning. I woke up with a chill and could barely get up from my bed," Catherine spoke with a faint voice as if even speaking was straining for her.

Vincent gently touched her forehead with his palm.

"I think you have a fever, Catherine. I will call Father to have a look at you."

He began standing up, his worried eyes never leaving the frail body in his bed. Quicker than he would have expected it, Catherine grabbed his hand.

"Don't leave me! Please..."

He kneeled again, grasping her hand in both of his hands now and spoke almost in a whisper. "I won't, I promise. I will only tap the message for Father on the pipes outside of my chamber; it will only take a minute."

Catherine's tight grip on his hand loosened, and she closed her eyes for a moment. "All right... I'm sorry..."

He smiled and squeezed her hand. "There is no need to say sorry, Catherine," he reassured her. "I'm here, always."

The soft velvet undertone in his voice made her tremble, even now in her poorly state. She attempted a smile and closed her eyes with a sigh.

It took only a minute for Vincent to tap the message outside his chamber before he returned. Glancing at Catherine, he thought she'd fallen asleep. He approached his washstand, reached for the old porcelain bowl and filled it with water from a pitcher on the stand. He moved it to the bedside table, soaked a linen face cloth in it and wrung it. Then he sat down at Catherine's side on the bed and gently put the wet cloth on her forehead, hoping to help bring her fever down.

The cold feel of the cloth woke Catherine, and she shivered slightly. "I'm sorry, Catherine, but we have to try to bring the fever down; you're burning up badly." Vincent caressed the top of her head gently.

She looked into his eyes with understanding and so much love, it almost made him cry. He noticed how glassy those big green pools looked and could feel the heat raging within her body, as if it was his own. It was then he noticed she was shivering badly. He put another blanket over her and wrapped her properly in it.

"Vincent?" Jacob called from the chamber entrance, holding his walking stick in one hand and his medical bag in the other.

"Catherine has been ill since yesterday, Father." Vincent turned his head to the patriarch and stood up. He briefly mentioned Catherine's problems and let his parent examine the patient.

After a few minutes, Jacob made Catherine take a dose of tablets, then stroked her cheek and smiled into her worried eyes.

"I'm sorry, Father.... I don't want to be a burden... to you....," she managed to say, almost ashamed.

"Dear Catherine, you are never a burden to us. You are one of us," Jacob said, and she could see that his smile and the warmth in his eyes was genuine. A tear escaped her eye as she smiled back at him.

Then, Jacob stood up and took Vincent aside.

"What is wrong with her, Father?" Vincent asked with a growing fear in his voice.

"That is exactly the problem. I don't know..." Jacob said perplexed.

Vincent was trying to understand Jacob's confusing words. "You don't know?" He was puzzled.

Jacob sighed and shook his head in disbelief. "She has a fever, that much is true, but her breathing sounds clear, her throat looks fine, her heart rate seems normal, she feels no pain.... She's just extremely weak... I am at a loss of what is actually wrong with her. I have taken a sample of her blood though; hopefully, that will tell me a bit more."

He squeezed Vincent's shoulder in support, seeing the deeply unsettled look in his son's worried eyes.

"She will be all right, Vincent," Jacob tried to encourage him. "Just make sure she drinks plenty of fluids and rests properly. It's best if she stays with you, at least until I know what is wrong with her. She needs to be under observation. I will come to check on her in three hours. If anything happens before, let me know right away."

Even if Father had not proposed it to Vincent, he would not have let Catherine out of his sight, not when she was in this state. Therefore, it was very easy for Vincent to assure the tunnel patriarch about keeping watch over the woman he loved more than his own life.

"Of course, I will, Father... Thank you."

Jacob gave him a quick smile and after one last glance at the patient in his son's bed, he walked out of the chamber.

Vincent walked back to the bed, grabbed the washcloth again and carefully sat down on Catherine's side, taking her hand gently in his. With his other hand, he tenderly placed the cloth on her forehead, covered with sweat.

"Vincent...," Catherine mumbled opening her eyes with great effort and squeezed his hand as if grasping for strength from him.

"I'm here, try to sleep. You need to rest." His voice was even softer than usual - as if he was afraid to disturb her fragile state with anything above a whisper.

"Will you stay with me, please?" she whispered equally, her question more a plea than a request.

"Don't ever think I would leave you like this, Catherine," Vincent assured her with a hint of a smile. "I'll be here."

Her face relaxed into a smile, and she closed her eyes, though not releasing his hand.

Vincent's look focused on her face for a moment.

He saw the dark circles under her eyes, the pale complexion of her skin, the signs of a troubled mind showing all over it. He thought about what Father had said, that he didn't know what her problem actually was. What if her physical exhaustion was merely the result of her troubled and overstressed mind? It wouldn't be any wonder, Vincent thought.

The past almost two years had been a roller coaster for both of them. Among all the dramatic events and tragedies they had encountered, their love was the only fragile thing keeping them going, making both of them becoming stronger emotionally and personally. At what cost, though? Vincent knew how to deal with blows; he was used to dealing with them all of his life, though fighting them was becoming harder for him lately. But what about Catherine?

She had a relatively carefree life before her attack. On that April night almost two years ago, everything had changed for her - she said for the better, actually the best it could have, but sometimes Vincent wasn't so sure.

She followed him willingly wherever he chose them to go, right from the start, constantly making him see how much her love for him had guided her life, and that she would never trade it for anything in the world. And yet... she went through so many obstacles to keep their dream alive - at work, with her friends, even down Below. Catherine had to fight very hard to be able to stay in Vincent's life.

And what had he done to make it easier for her? He pushed her away twice, constantly reminded her that certain things could never be between them. Although she refused to accept it, she respected his decision and would rather clamped down on her desires if it meant keeping him in her life.

Was it really necessary? After all that she had done for him, all the sacrifices, all the fights, Vincent was still denying her her greatest wish regarding their relationship. He used to persuade himself it was for her own good, but as time went on and they became closer and closer, he wasn't as sure anymore.

Moreover, one thought kept bothering him no end for some time now - he was able to find her when she was in danger. They had crossed that line so many times, that he started asking himself how long it would be until they ran out of good fortune? What if one day, something prevented him from finding and saving her from harm? All he could do was watch from the sidelines, wait until dark when she needed his strength and support, his love and care.

Yet, he longed to be there for her any time she needed, any time she wanted. Moreover, he desperately longed for hers to be the last face he saw before going to sleep, and the first when he opened his eyes to a new day. And there was only one way to be able to do that. Maybe for the start, he could finally put his old fears aside and give her what she wanted so much - give both of them what they wanted so much and for so long...

"Vincent?" Catherine whispered with a frown, her eyes still closed, her breathing suddenly heavier.

Vincent understood that she was dreaming. He tightened the hold on her hand, and with his other hand, he gently stroked her forehead.

"It's all right, Catherine, I'm here," he spoke softly, willing his words to break through any discomfort she was feeling in her dream.

He obviously succeeded, since Catherine's breathing slowed down and her forehead relaxed. She sighed as if in relief, but there was an undertone of something else, which Vincent couldn't identify.

The emotions he was feeling through the bond coming from her were a bit confusing - a hint of worry mixing with excitement, sadness with elation. He wished he could see what she was dreaming about to decipher what was bothering her. Suddenly, he felt warmer, the heat penetrating through his skin from the hand he was holding, right through his whole body. Catherine shivered slightly, turned her face towards him in her sleep, and sighed again before whispering.

"Vincent..." This time, the tone of her voice and the expression he saw in her face left no doubt what she was dreaming about.

Vincent shuddered at the thought, and his initial impulse was to release her hand and step away from the bed. And yet, he couldn't move... It was as if he was beguiled by a power he found too hard to fight against. He felt her elevated heartbeat; it matched his own and suddenly, his instincts won over his reason as he slowly lowered himself next to her on the bed and pulled her protectively though also longingly into his arms. He sighed at the feel of her body pressed to his. While leaning his cheek against the top of her head, he whispered into her hair.

"I'm here, Catherine, always..."

Still dreaming, Catherine's free arm wrapped around his waist, pulling him closer, and she sighed again. This time, a smile spread on her lips, and a tear ran down her cheek. Vincent could feel her heartbeat calming down, the contentment coming through from her into his heart. Suddenly, his own fatigue caught up with him and soon, he drifted off to sleep as well.

When Jacob entered his son's chamber three hours later, he stopped in his tracks at the sight in front of him. A deep frown of concern appeared on his forehead, when he saw Vincent sleeping in bed with Catherine in his arms. *What were they thinking?!*

But as soon as his thought appeared, it became secondary when he noticed Catherine's relaxed face. He approached the bed quietly to have a better look at the woman who stole his son's heart. The perspiration on her face seemed to have been gone; her cheeks were no more flushed with fever, her whole face seemed much healthier than when he saw her last.

Jacob's eyes drifted to Vincent's face where a small smile had settled. *He has never looked so... peaceful...*

Was it possible that all those years while he was worried about a situation like this happening to Vincent, the truth was much different, much simpler? Maybe the truth beyond knowledge was more powerful than he thought. *Oh well, you suggested Catherine staying here anyway...*

Jacob smiled, and his look lingered on the beloved couple for a moment longer. Then he reached for another blanket at the foot of the bed and gently covered Vincent, lying on top of the quilt covering Catherine.

With one last glimpse and a never-fading smile, he walked silently out of the chamber.

When Vincent woke up, the first thing he saw when opening his eyes was the warm green glow of Catherine's eyes looking up to him. Her head was still resting at his chest, but he could tell she had been studying his face for some time. The loving smile on her lips told him all he needed to know about her well being.

"Catherine..." he whispered, revelling in the feel of waking up to her in his arms.

"Vincent," she replied softly, the smile never leaving her now much more relaxed face.

"How are you feeling?" Vincent asked with care, checking her forehead gently with the palm of his hand.

"Much better," Catherine answered truthfully, and even if she didn't, he could see and feel the reality himself. Her eyes were bright but not glassy anymore; the rosy colour was back in her cheeks, the fever was gone.

"Good... You had me worried, Catherine."

The hint of pain in Vincent's voice moved her, as it always did when he openly expressed his care about her. She softly stroked his cheek before speaking.

"I'm sorry, Vincent... I don't know what happened, I thought of seeing you yesterday, but then I decided against it as I knew you were busy helping Kanin to carve the new chamber for Evelyn and James. I knew me being unwell would only worry and distract you..." The tone of her voice carried a hint of guilt.

"Catherine, you know I care about you more than about anything else in my life," Vincent spoke resolutely, his look very serious. "It doesn't matter what I'm doing, when you need me, I'm here for you, *always*. You know that."

She shivered slightly hearing his words and seeing the look in his eyes. "I know, but still..." Her fingers were absently playing with the straps on his vest, her eyes following them. Catherine felt bad for always counting on him being there for her when the need for him overwhelmed her.

Vincent lifted her chin with his fingers to make her look into his eyes. "*Always*," he said, stressing the meaning of the word.

Catherine smiled and exhaled loudly. She couldn't help but bury her face in his chest, trying to get as close to his body as he would allow her.

How can I keep my distance from him now that I tasted what it feels like waking up in his arms?

Her desperate longing for him reached Vincent's heart, and he sensed what was troubling her - he was facing the same problem. The sensation of her body safely wrapped in his arms, her tantalizing smell, the warmth of her skin... He knew it would be almost impossible to keep his hands off her now. And yet, they must go with care...

"Catherine?" he asked gently.

"Yes?" she replied with a question.

"After Father had examined you, he said he had no idea what was wrong with you. Apparently, all your body functions were normal. Apart from the fever, you seemed all right..."

Catherine looked up at him slowly, and the look in her eyes told him there was something else he was about to find out.

"What happened two days ago, Catherine?"

She closed her eyes briefly and exhaled loudly, then sat up to face him better despite lowering her eyes, or maybe to gather more courage. The words were not so easy to speak.

"I... I had a dream," she said quietly.

When she hesitated to continue, Vincent encouraged her. "A dream about what?"

He knew the answer before she could confirm it when she looked into his eyes again. "About you... About *us*..."

The silence after combined with the deep longing in her bright, dreamy eyes was almost unbearable. Vincent closed his eyes and sighed.

"I'm sorry, Vincent," Catherine apologised, knowing how touchy the topic of intimacy between them was for him. "I just couldn't help it... The dream was so... beautiful, so real... And yet.... just like many times before---"

Catherine stopped herself abruptly, realising what she had just admitted to him. But Vincent's look was warm and loving, although troubled as well.

She gathered her courage to finish the sentence. "Just like many times before, it ended too soon... *Way* too soon..."

Her slightly raised eyebrows suggested the meaning behind those words to him, and he understood completely. How many times had such dreams sweetly tortured him in the past two years?

"When I woke up," Catherine continued. "I just felt such a horrible longing... Such despair and aloneness, I almost couldn't bear it..."

Her vision got blurry as she awaited his reaction.

"And the despair, the aloneness and the... longing..." He swallowed hard. "... made your body react with a physical collapse."

Catherine sighed and thanked God he didn't run away from her after hearing her confession.

"I guess so... I couldn't stop thinking about it, about you." She lowered her eyes shyly. "I just missed you so terribly, and though I knew you were busy, I couldn't bear the thought of not being near you..."

When she looked up to him again, her face was a reflection of everything she felt for him - all the care, the devotion, the fear of hurting him, the love that burned so much within her, that she struggled to contain it.

Vincent's insides were like jelly; the power of her need was almost overwhelming, and he was terribly tempted to give in to it. However, he managed to keep his calm and asked quietly.

"Since then, you dreamt about ... us... again?" His assured gaze was an answer to the question itself.

"Yes..." she whispered.

"When you fell asleep here today?"

Catherine sighed, and a tear ran down her cheek. "Yes..."

And then Vincent did the last thing she expected - he smiled and wiped the tear away from her face with his thumb.

"I know," he said quietly.

To say Catherine was shocked was an understatement. Her half-opened mouth and widened eyes were more than proof of that.

Vincent didn't stop smiling; he sat up to be closer to her and took her hands gently in his hands.

"And judging by your physical improvement, I think I know how *that* dream ended..." He spoke quietly with a tone in his voice that could melt butter, looking deep into her emerald eyes.

For the first time since she woke up, Catherine smiled and she shook her head incredulously. "Oh, Vincent..." She laughed softly. "You have *no idea*..."

The warmth of her gaze made him realise, the dream ended better than good, better than best, as Mouse would say. And in a strange way, he felt proud that he could awake such dreams in her. His smile widened, and for a moment, they were simply gazing at each other lovingly.

Then, Vincent's expression got more serious.

"Catherine, as you told me some time ago - one day....One day we will cross that boundary.... We will do it with courage, and we will do it with care."

"One day *soon*?" she dared to ask, raising her eyebrows slightly in hope.

He chuckled and took her in his arms, whispering in her soft hair. "One day soon..."

END