

Baelfire

By Cindy Rae

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For the Halloween Celebration on Treasure Chambers, 2016.

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Author's note: In the original script of "Masques," there is a deleted scene describing Vincent's return to the tunnels after meeting Brigit. In it, he encounters a group of people in the park, dancing and celebrating around a baelfire.

He's not with Catherine at the time, and he doesn't join them, even though he's invited to do so.

So, of course, I began to wonder, "What if Catherine had been there? Would he go there, next year?"

It is that small, deleted scene which inspired this little bit of "first time" whimsy.

Prologue:

Counting Down to Freedom

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There was a bit of a nip in the autumn air, though the first hard frost was weeks away, yet. There were carved pumpkins in store displays and on apartment window ledges. There were costumes of every conceivable style and price range in the shop windows. There were bags of candy in every store, and the magazines in the trash bins and on the stands were loaded with recipes for caramel apples, spider cupcakes, and popcorn balls.

It was time. Better than "time." It was here.

The sun dipped low, in the greying sky. An eager set of blue eyes watched it. A big body paced in a tight space, his cape fanning out on the turn. It was a way to burn off energy.

In a way, Vincent had been waiting for this night for 364 days.

And in a way, he knew, he'd been waiting for it so much longer than that.

It was October 31st. And not quite dusk, not really.

There were young people (well, they were mostly young, Vincent amended) hauling in wood, up in the park. Vincent knew why. They were setting up for a bonfire. A big one, if the amount of wood was any indication. “Baelfire tonite!” shouted a misspelled sign, tacked to a sturdy tree.

Later, much later, Vincent would wonder if the bottle of wine hadn't had something to do with how the evening had progressed. But even as he wondered it, he knew two glasses of a good Riesling had little to do with anything, really.

He couldn't say the same about the baelfire.

For even prior to the wine, prior to the dancing, prior to, well, all of it, he knew it was the fire he remembered, from last year's trip Above.

Last year, there had been a baelfire, in the park. He recalled it distinctly, as he willed the stubborn sun to set - or at least to drop faster.

The drainage tunnel felt like the constrained, confining space that it was.

Beyond it, lay the wildness, and the uninhibited flavor of freedom.
Freedom...

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Chapter 1

A Jug of Wine and Thou

Catherine's voice rang through her apartment. "There's an open bottle of wine on the sideboard. Give me just a few minutes more?" she called from her bedroom, as Vincent stood in the entryway between the terrace and her living room.

He was impatiently waiting for her. And he knew his impatience was not entirely warranted.

She was not late.

He was early, and he knew it. The lure of throwing off the claustrophobic confines of the drainage tunnel had finally proven too much, and he'd done so, with barely a backward glance.

Freedom.

The stone walls had fallen away, and the open air beckoned. Everything did. The entire city did.

Was there a place he couldn't go, this one night?

He knew there wasn't. And that knowledge was part of what lent boldness to his stride.

Both across the park, and... now.

He stepped almost soundlessly into the space he considered more "hers" than "theirs."

It was a night for pushing edges. He reasoned that it would do no harm to push that one.

The room felt comfortable, and it looked both beautiful and elegant, much like its beloved owner. The wine she'd mentioned was indeed sitting on her sideboard, open, and being allowed to breathe.

"There is no need to rush. It is I who am early," he called back to her, carefully pouring wine into the pair of glasses she'd clearly set out for them.

The wine smelled like summer fruit, and he liked the low sound it made as it splashed into the bottom of the balloon glass, and then filled. The aroma caught his sensitive nose. It had a sweet fragrance, and made his mouth water for the taste.

My Catherine. Always so considerate. Always so... trying to make the evening special for me ... for us.

Light amber liquid glistened, inside the mouth-blown glasses.

But he knew he didn't need wine to make *this* night special. This was Halloween. The one night he could freely roam the entire city with her.

We can go anywhere. Do ... anything, he thought.

The sheer sense of liberty that engendered was like alcohol in his veins, already. He felt the warmth of it coursing through him, before he even took the first sip of wine.

"It's not even truly dark, yet," Catherine said, rushing out of the bedroom to grab a bag off of her dining room table. She was at least a little surprised to see him standing inside her apartment. She assumed he'd move the wine onto the terrace.

But his huge presence made her feel the pressure of moving faster, in spite of his words, so she didn't give it another thought. He'd been in her apartment before, though such occasions were rare.

"I thought I'd have at least another half an hour," she added, digging through the bag for what she wanted.

Vincent took in her lovely form. Dressed beneath her robe, her hair was a little damp from her shower. She was wrapped in a long, white bathrobe, to keep him from seeing her costume until she was ready. Her hair fell in soft layers around her face, freshly washed and blown hastily part dry. Her cheeks were pink, from rushing.

For a reason he couldn't name, he liked that. All of it.

The paper of her shopping bag made a crinkling sound as she fished around, for its contents. She dug down deeper, and scooped out a pair of earrings. Pirate hoops. She smiled when she pulled them clear, and he liked that even more.

"I'm as impatient as some of the children," Vincent admitted. "Some of whom have been in the park since dusk could barely be called that," he tacked on.

"Lucky for all of you, 'sunset' is a process, rather than an actual time on a clock," she sent the smile his way, completely understanding.

Of course he's anxious to be out, she thought. It was a given. She raced back into her bedroom, but left the louvered door standing open between them, in case he wanted to say anything more.

He looked out through the doorway of her balcony, taking in the deepening twilight. The October sun had taken a stubbornly long time to set, though it had done so quickly, once it finally got started

on the task. The last edge of it had just sunk below the horizon. Barely.

He'd chafed inside the closed space of the drainage tunnel until the urge to "go" had become too much to reasonably bear. He'd simply decided to give up waiting, the impulse feeling more like an instinct, at that point.

Go. See. Do. Be free. It was an urge to explore, and just shy of an instinct to claim territory. He wanted to cover ground, and he wanted Catherine at his side, when he did. He didn't question that desire. There was no need to.

This is Halloween. One more costumed reveler walking the streets a bit before true sundown would hardly cause a scene, he had reasoned.

He'd made it to her balcony in near record time, unable to will his stride to slow. He'd felt her readying herself for him, and it fed a deep place, inside. He kept sensing her through their bond. She was as excited as he was. Almost.

"If you'd have waited ten more minutes, you probably could have come to the front door, you know," she stated, emerging from her bedroom sans bathrobe, putting an earring in her ear.

He could have. Yet he'd come over her balcony wall, as he usually did.

"Habit," he said, admiring her fetching beauty.

He decided she was the most strikingly lovely pirate he'd ever seen - And the most attractive, in almost every sense of that word. He knew he was drawn to her, as he always was, but in a different way, tonight. He felt like a magnet, and she was true north. Or like a tide, reaching for the moon.

A moon that was not even rising, yet.

Her costume was too modest to be called risqué', yet there were subtle touches to it that made his mouth water as much as the wine had. A lavender shirt sat off her shoulders, and the lace-up short vest gave new meaning to the words 'form-fitting.' A wide sash wrapped around her waist, and hid the part of her abdomen the shirt and vest didn't cover... almost. The soft gloss on her lips made them look lush, and full, and the earrings made her look like someone ready for an adventure. Jangling bracelets made music every time she moved her arms. She'd crimped her hair, just a little, while she'd been in the bedroom, giving her a slightly "wild" look, all her own.

There was an odd dichotomy at work, Vincent realized. He could be who he really was, while the rest of the world, including Catherine was set on "being who they weren't."

"I'll be one of the few not actually in a costume," Vincent observed, indicating his dark ensemble. Catherine looked down at her outfit, liking how sassy the bright lavender shirt made her feel.

"There are people who will tell you that for a lawyer to dress like a pirate isn't exactly a stretch," she jibed. "That it's kind of redundant, all things considered."

His deep voice was an amused rumble. "Slanderers and ne'er do wells. Shall you make them walk the plank?" he asked, liking the way the ends of the sash at her waist swung, when she moved.

"I might," she smiled slightly, slipping a belt pouch on a sword belt. It held her money, ID and keys. "I suppose it depends on what they've done to annoy me. Where's my... ah!" she said, snatching up a pair of short black leather gloves she'd left on a side table.

Catching her a bit early meant that she was obviously not quite prepared to receive him. Something in him was pleased at seeing her just a touch off-balance, to go with her out-of-character costume.

The gauzy shirt bared both her shoulders and forearms, while the short black vest laced up her front with gold ribbon. The vest served to trim the area just above her waist as it subtly defined her bosom. The hem of the short shirt dropped to a point to cover her navel, but a thin line of skin at her sides peeked out above the sash and waistband of her black skirt, a thing that was more noticeable when she moved, or bent. A handkerchief hem skimmed calves that were beautifully toned, thanks to spending most days in heels. The wide sash accented her tiny waist, then dangled, beadwork woven into its fringe. A decent replica of a cutlass would strap to her hips, and a pair of black leather boots sat waiting for her stockinged feet.

She was folding a long square of patterned purple silk into a loose triangle, and tying it around her head. Though it covered most of her hair, it had a face-framing effect, and drew attention to her eyes.

If any woman was more beautiful, he had no idea who she was.

"All you need is a parrot and a hook," he declared, his smile unexpectedly wide, as he held out her glass of wine to her.

She was pleased at his clear delight with her.

"I don't need a parrot," she replied, taking the glass from his proffered hand. "Not when I have the largest ... ship's cat in existence."

She knew she hadn't offended him, with the description. Their "costume" had been pre-planned, though he did not look overly different from his usual self.

They touched glasses and drank, the ring of the glassware still in Vincent's ears as he swallowed the crisp wine. It was a thing she likely wouldn't have said to him, any other day of the year.

Freedom. The evening was brimming with it. He was glad for it, and for her. For them.

She set down her glass and crossed the room to fish a vial of perfume out of the handbag she'd carried to work that day. Her stocking feet were soundless on her thick carpet, but her jewelry continued to jangle, enticingly. Her bracelet collection shifted, as she opened the small bottle.

His steady gaze took in her every move. He was enchanted. "Well. This particular ship's cat has a very beautiful captain," he complimented.

She dabbed perfume on her wrists, and on her collar bone, smiling her pleasure.

Vincent was aware that by coming too early, he was getting to watch her perform what he viewed as a wholly feminine ritual.

Her longest finger dabbed fragrance just behind her left ear, sending the hoop earring to dancing.

"Many thanks, kind sir," she dabbed the right, then capped the perfume, smiled demurely, and dropped a tiny curtsy. The skirt fanned as she did so, the lace panels that covered it spreading out, to his interested eyes.

She's lovely. So very lovely. So... utterly captivating. And so very ... mine.

The last thought came all but unbidden, and as unexpectedly possessive as it was, it didn't surprise him. It was a thing he'd been feeling for some time now, though it was a thing he couldn't say aloud, just yet.

Vincent watched as Catherine shook out the hem of the skirt, turned in a circle just for fun, then curtsyed, again, just for fun.

The formal move would have looked entirely correct, in the owl woman gown she'd worn last year. This year, he wasn't so certain.

Did pirates curtsy? Clearly, this one did.

"But I'm not the captain. I'm just one of the crew," she deflected any pretensions at rank as she put on the crystal necklace he'd given her for their first anniversary. The shimmering stone nestled very enticingly against her breasts, the pale violet hint of color embedded within it seeming deeper, next to the colors she wore.

She perched on the edge of the sofa and tugged on her boots. He was sorry to see her calves disappear. But the soft, suede leather matched her sword belt, perfectly. It even complimented his own footwear.

"Have you thought of where you'd like to go this evening?" Catherine asked, taking in his dark-clad form.

Other than his cape, he was dressed almost entirely in black, save for the gleaming white of a poet's shirt, the throat-hugging lace at the collar looking entirely right for the evening. A studded, black leather belt with a large buckle cinched his waist, and caused the hem of the shirt to fall in soft gathers of cotton, below.



Catherine marveled at how out-of-place tunnel clothing looked against the glitz of the nineteen eighties, yet fit so perfectly with the era of tall ships and ladies-in-waiting. Long black gloves with leather fringe covered his beautiful hands. She recognized them from last year, when he'd met Brigit O'Donnell.

Her hands, by contrast, would be covered by shorter gloves, their presence a necessity against the autumn nip in the air.

"I'd like to walk around the fountain in front of the Metropolitan Opera House, again," he said, knowing it was true. He'd spent years listening to the music they played within the gorgeous hall, yet unable to get close enough to the building to see it, to touch it. – *At least from the front*, he amended mentally.

"The Met it is," she grinned. "Anywhere else?"

"That is my choice, for a destination. You should pick the next one," he demurred.

"Oh, no. Vincent, this night is for you," she protested, rising from the sofa. "All of those places we visited last year... all those places, anywhere. I can go anytime," she reasoned, settling the uneven hem of her skirt around her boots as she crossed the room to be near him. He shook his leonine head. "This night is not just for me. It is for *us*," he insisted, extending her wine glass to her, again. He refilled them both.

"To freedom," he toasted, wanting to hear the glasses ring, one more time. It sounded like a starting bell, to his eager heart.

"To freedom," Catherine agreed, clinking the edges of the glassware together, again.

"Anxious to get started?" she asked, knowing he was. They both drank to the toast. He had an urge to drain the glass, but refrained. Barely.

He carefully returned his wine glass to the table. "Beyond it," he answered, scooping up a dark, short cape for her that reminded him of his own.

She smiled, as she set down her wine, and he settled her outerwear across her shoulders.

"We should go, then," she said.

He utterly agreed. She was the perfect pirate. And she was perfectly his.

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Chapter 2

Fountain Walk



The area in front of the Metropolitan Opera House was awash in patrons and street side revelers who wore everything from refined evening clothes to outrageous costumes. So much so, that he and Catherine barely stood out from the crowd. Even his cape was a “common” thing, this night, as Count Dracula styled vampires rubbed shoulders with masked Darth Vaders, or other costumed characters.

Women in white played Princess Leia, and they mixed in with dark brides of Frankenstein, or simply regular brides, or angels. Women in black strolled in pointed hats, carrying brooms, and they were all scattered among people masked as politicians, bandits, (most joked it was the same thing) or famous gangsters. It was Halloween. There was even a wide selection of "Cats" and "Phantoms," thanks to the Broadway musicals.

"Enjoying it?" Catherine asked, knowing he was. The huge circular fountain was awash with light. Stray revelers were tossing coins in, making wishes.

"Immensely," he confided. "Last year when we were by here, I remember the feeling. The... beauty of it. The anticipation. The ... atmosphere of people waiting to go inside," he recalled, looking up toward the huge, arched windows. "People ... waiting for something wonderful to happen."

Was that why I wanted to come back here? he asked himself. *Am I waiting for something wonderful to happen?*

He didn't know, for certain. He only knew he felt it again, standing among the crowd.

Catherine smiled. "I was thinking that you might want tickets for the performance, but it's so long we'd miss the rest of the evening," she confided, realizing that even on this night, compromises had to happen.

He loved her for her consideration. "I believe this is better. Perhaps some year," Vincent replied, nodding to a fellow tom "cat" who gave him an approving grin. The man's date was dressed as a mouse. Her grey unitard revealed her sleek figure, and her long tail swayed as provocatively as her hips.

"Down, boy," Catherine grinned. "Do you think she's pretty?" she asked, following his eyes.

Vincent swore he was only admiring the array of costumes.

He chuckled at her. "I think I was born at night. But thankfully, not last night," he replied, lifting her up by the waist and setting her

booted feet on the edge of the circular fountain. It was wide enough to sit on. And they probably shouldn't be doing this.

"Clever," she congratulated him. Then: "Hey! What are we doing?" she asked, as he hoisted her.

He held her hand and began to walk her around the fountain, keeping her steady so she wouldn't fall. People who had been sitting there moved politely, indulging the pair.

"I'm taking you for a walk, just as we planned," he stated innocently. She held his gloved hand and kept pace with his shortened stride.

"I don't think we're supposed to be doing this!" she stage whispered, looking around for a security guard or policeman, to shoo her down.

"Devin and I used to do worse. I'm responsible for half the grey in Father's beard, and most of what's in his hair," Vincent confided, clearly content to flout the rules for the sake of seeing her step whimsically around the edge of the huge fountain. Water sprayed on her right side, while Vincent held her left hand.

"We'll get in trouble!" But she laughed as she said it.

"I won't let you fall," he replied, either purposely misunderstanding her or ignoring the protest, entirely.

"I won't fall." The retort was delivered in an almost boastful tone, and Vincent could sense the little girl who used to climb trees, within it.

"We have no problem, then," he said smoothly, enjoying the thrill of adrenaline that was coursing through her system, and by extension, along their bond.

The smooth lip on the fountain was a wide, even path. She could stand with both feet together on it, if she wanted to. The low heel of

her boots made a rhythmic, clicking sound, as she paced along the edge, his hand in hers.

Some of the spectators cheerfully grinned at their antics.

"You're completely unafraid of trouble, aren't you?" she marveled with a delighted laugh. It was Halloween. His playful side, a side she saw too seldom, was very much on display.

"Trouble?" He raised an arched eyebrow. "I understand I'm with the most beautiful member of the District Attorney's office, if there is any 'trouble' to be had," he said, noting that one of the Met's security guards had caught sight of them, and was coming their way.

"Better to beg forgiveness than ask permission?" she quizzed, noting the same thing. The guard waved Catherine down. She waved back, acknowledging him. She stopped walking, and put her hands on Vincent's shoulders, indicating she wanted to be lifted down.

"Fun time at the Met over," she stated with a conspirator's smile. "Either that, or I'm about to be arrested. Would you come visit me in jail?" she teased, loving the feel of his hands as they settled firmly around her middle. The cropped style shirt rode up, and his index fingers brushed against the bare indentation at her waist, before they slid around to the back. Even his gloved hands could feel the difference between where her skin was covered, and where it was bare.

He looked up at her, unaware that the fountain light was making his eyes an impossible, glittering shade of azure.

"I would come to see you every day," he promised, as if it were some kind of possibility. They both knew it wasn't. But tonight was a night for feeling like anything was possible.

"Your turn to choose," he insisted, lifting her with easy grace and setting her down, gently as air.

"Chinatown," she decided on impulse. "We can walk down the streets and stop off at Henry and Lin's."

Vincent loved the idea. Even when it wasn't Halloween, the streets of Chinatown were an elaborate, foreign fantasy, to him. "Do they decorate for Halloween in Chinatown?" Vincent asked.

Catherine's smile was radiant. "I don't know. Let's go see."

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Chapter 3

Walking Neither Empty-Handed, Nor Among Enemies

If anything, Chinatown was even more elaborate and heavily costumed than the area in front of the Met had been. The Asian penchant for not just "masks" but giant masks seemed everywhere.

Silk clad figures wore everything from Chinese opera masks to Fu dog heads to Western superhero regalia. It was a loud, raucous street party, with a Chinese Dragon dancing down Canal Street. One with sneakers on, underneath.

Owing to the long line, Vincent and Catherine gave up on the notion of getting a seat at the Tea Room. Indeed, they barely managed to catch Lin's astonished eye from the street, as Catherine waved.

With a clipboard in her hand to seat the customers queued up at the door, Henry Pei's new bride burst into laughter at the joy of seeing Vincent roaming her neighborhood, above the ground. He looked like just another New York citizen, out enjoying the nightlife. She motioned for them to come in and cut the line, but Vincent shook his head, refusing to be rude.

"You look marvelous!" Lin shouted above the din, throwing a pair of fortune cookies their way. Vincent grabbed the wrapped packages out of the air and tucked them in his pocket.

"Thank you!" Catherine shouted back. "Tell Henry we said 'Hello!'"

"I will!" Lin gave Catherine what she hoped was a nautical-looking salute.

Vincent and Catherine wandered down the wide open avenues, many of which had been closed off to automobile traffic.



Jack O' Lanterns (many with Asian features) graced numerous doorways, and firecrackers popped in the street. Friends waved 'hello' to each other over the heads of others, and shouted out names. Lanterns swung on poles and spicy food smells filled the street. Different Chinese dialects mingled with English, punctuated by intermittent fireworks. Everyone seemed to be either going someplace or returning from it.

"This is madness!" Vincent shouted over the din, his smile so full that a wayward Superman stopped to stare at Vincent's impressive fangs, and gave him a thumbs up sign.

"It is!" Catherine agreed, laughing. Streamers were flying through the air, some settling on her shoulder. A prancing unicorn danced by, led by a winsome fairy.

"I hope you're not thirsty!" Catherine shouted over the melee. Vincent wrapped a steadying arm around her and pulled her in toward him as a two hundred pound man dressed as a literal Madame Butterfly sailed by, his broad "wings" taking up a good deal of space on the street.

"I am neither hungry nor thirsty. I am just... enjoying this. Enjoying you." He leaned in toward her ear to say it, not wanting to continue to shout.

Catherine's answering smile told him all he needed to know.

"Where next? It's your turn," she said.

"Why don't we just... drift back toward mid-town, and perhaps we'll be fortunate enough to find a carriage, as we did last year?" he suggested, loving the feeling of keeping her close to his side. They were being jostled, and bumped, occasionally.

Though the press of the strange crowd was a thing he should have found uncomfortable, he realized the opposite was true.

A large, boisterous crowd emitted a kind of energy that seemed utterly singular to itself. He and Catherine were among revelers, young and old, of every possible color and description. And the revelers were... reveling. Loudly, and with an infectious kind of fervor.

"This completely changes my opinion that Halloween is a holiday where children get candy," Vincent said, threading his way through the happy mob with his "pirate" in tow. He had her firmly by the hand. Another sensation he found he adored.

"Merchants say Halloween has been taken over by the grown-ups," Catherine said. "Most costume sales are for adults."

A gliding snowman with a sign that read "Only 8 more weeks 'til Christmas!" rolled merrily by. Vincent realized that underneath the elaborate costume, he - or she - was wearing roller skates.

"What was your favorite costume, as a child?" Vincent asked, pleased when the sidewalk widened out enough so that they could walk side-by-side. "Do you remember?" he prompted.

"Oh, I don't know," she answered, wagging her fingers at a fellow female pirate who was heading in the opposite direction. "My fairy princess costume, I suppose. After all, every little girl is supposed to want to be one. What was yours? Do you recall?"

She prayed that the question wasn't an insensitive one, that he had indeed done as she'd seen the other tunnel children do, make a hat or some kind of costume, and play games in the common area, enjoy treats sent down by the helpers, and listen to Jacob's old ghost stories.

"It's difficult to choose one childhood memory from another," he stalled. "Devin and I were Tom and Huck, one year, He carried a section of whitewashed fence, and I had our treats all tied up in a bandana, on a stick."

Catherine laughed at the delightful image. "Well, I guess that settles which one of you was Tom and who was Huck."

Catherine kept beaming at him. She'd been doing that all evening. So had he, in return.

The shine on her lips made them look positively kissable, he thought.

"Should we open our fortune cookies?" she asked. His eyes had been so fixed on her mouth, he almost didn't hear her, for a moment.

"If it pleases you to," he said, producing them from his pocket. There was one for each of them.

Catherine took hers and cracked it open, removing the little slip of paper, inside. Vincent did the same.

"You first," she prompted, watching him scan the words.

It was advice he scarcely needed this evening. "It says 'Take a chance. There is freedom at the edge of a boundary.' You?" he asked.

She chuckled, realizing how appropriate her fortune was, for the evening.

"Mine says 'A disguise will not hide a true heart. Honor knows no costume,'" She quoted.

Vincent found he could not agree, more.

He slowed down their stride, and directed her toward an alcove.

"What are we doing?" Catherine asked, feeling them step out of the rushing stream of the crowd.

"Taking the advice of our fortunes," Vincent answered, sheltering her with his big body as he nudged her backward, into the doorway.

"At the moment..." He drew her farther into the alcove, putting a little more space between them, and the traffic of the sidewalk. "I feel that I must admit that my *very favorite* costume is that of a particularly elegant lady pirate. And that it cannot disguise her true heart."

He realized he was about to do something he'd wanted to do all evening. Something completely uncharacteristic, and ... free.

Catherine's back was pressed against the door, and Vincent momentarily blocked out her view of the street, thanks to his huge form. He was an enclosing presence, and in his own way, both an entirely benign, and an utterly formidable one.

The dichotomy of that sent tingles of awareness racing up and down Catherine's spine. Tingles she tried to suppress, lest Vincent become aware of them, and it make the situation awkward.

"You think so?" she asked, trying to keep her voice light, as she suppressed her awareness of his physicality.

He felt her do it. His voice became almost unbearably gentle. "It's all right to feel it, Catherine. Surely, on this night we can, if we can't at any other time."

She barely had a chance to take in the words before he planted his broad hands so that they framed her in the doorway. He lowered his head for an impulse of a kiss.

The brush of his lips was quicksilver and magic, and for Catherine, Chinatown, the noise, the firecrackers and the world itself all fell away, and her universe became contained in his two lips, gently moving over hers.

Tingling awareness changed to fire, and she forgot to clamp down on the sensation, just as she forgot to breathe.

What does he mean? her mind tried to ask. But the thought couldn't stay, having nothing to grab onto, as the universe felt like it was trying to shift, on an invisible axis.

I'm falling after all, she thought. She knew that was impossible. Also, that it was true.

Feel it. Let yourself feel it. I won't let you fall, he swore silently, unaware of how closely his thoughts aligned with her own.

For Catherine, the light-headed sensation continued. She could say nothing, for needing to grab onto the front of his shirt, for support.

He'd rocked her where she stood, and she swore he was aware of it, and felt his smile, as he ended their kiss.

"Do you think we'll be able to get a carriage?" he whispered in her ear. His breath was warm, near her neck. And there was just a tinge of humor to go with the sheer sensuality of his voice.

What? Oh. A carriage. One where a horse pulled you along. Catherine realized that might be a good idea, considering she currently doubted her ability to stand, steadily.

"I don't know," she said weakly, willing her eyes to focus.

"Can you walk, Catherine?"

Again, she swore she could hear the humor in his voice. He knew full well she couldn't take so much as two steps, without stumbling. He had to know what she was feeling, right now. The bond told him, if her unfocussed expression didn't.

"I don't know," she repeated, dully, aware that it was the truth, but also aware that her answer should have been something more ... empowered. Like "Of course I can, Vincent." But it wasn't.

"Well, then."

He nuzzled her neck before she felt her feet leave the pavement. He stepped into the flow of pedestrian traffic, his pirate queen in his arms.

Catherine leaned her head against his broad chest. She could hear the thump of his mighty heart. "You're carrying me," she said, locking her arms around his neck.

"So it would seem," he replied, edging them along through the crowd, his long stride eating up a good amount of ground.

"On Canal Street. In front of a thousand people. You're carrying me." The reality of it caught up with her at the same time the magic of it did.

His blue eyes grew smoky, as he looked down at her. "Yes. Yes I am. Do you know what that feels like?" he asked.

She shook her head, keeping it against his huge breast. His heartbeat thrummed comfortingly, against her ear.

"Freedom," he answered, his voice a low rumble of surety.

She tightened her grip and kept ahold of him.

"Do you know where I want our carriage to go?" he asked. She shook her head, overcome, for a moment, by unwanted tears.

"Fifth Avenue," he whispered. "There are coins in my pocket. And I am going to buy you ice cream."

The unexpected sob was so sudden, it was out before Catherine could call it back. It escaped her throat, and she held him all the tighter, unable to hold in the sound, and grateful that she didn't have to explain it.

She tilted her head upwards. "I love you." She whispered it into a tufted ear. "I love you, so much."

He kept his head low, sheltering hers, his blonde hair a curtain of privacy, safety, and comfort. The crowd was thinning, and his stride was growing even longer, and more powerful. Catherine got the impression he could walk the length of New York with her like this, if she asked him to. *The state, not just the city.*

"I know," he whispered back, brushing a tear away with the gentlest touch of his lower lip. "I know you do, Catherine."



Chapter 4

"...And No One Looked Twice."

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There was a soft-serve ice cream vendor on a street corner near Sak's, and even though the only flavor he had was vanilla, Catherine swore it was better than anything Haagen-Dazs had ever sold her.



She couldn't entice Vincent to take a lick off her cone. But when she removed her short gloves and simply dipped her finger into the cold, gooey treat and held it out to him, the notion that he was even going to resist was utterly ridiculous.

He approached her outstretched finger with an almost mischievous smile, and slowly took it into his mouth before the ice cream could drip. He took off his gloves and held her hand steady, forbidding her to have it back until he was through.

She trembled as he thoroughly cleaned her index finger, and nearly forgot the other hand held the remainder of the cone. His tongue rasped a sensual line all the way up her nail, and when he asked, "Is there more?" in a tone that would have made an iceberg melt, Catherine needed a moment to remember he was talking about ice cream.

Maybe. Probably. I'm not sure, she fumbled, then, *back to maybe,* she concluded, catching the heated look in his eyes.

It was like watching his inhibitions fall away, and while Catherine realized she had no idea how many of those he truly had, if he had any at all, it was eye-opening to understand that the cautious, often quiet person he was, adopted many of those reserved mannerisms

thanks to the confined life he was forced to live, rather than because it was his nature to minimize his considerable presence near others.

He'd said all night long he felt freedom, and from the carriage ride to the ice cream vendor, it was clear he felt more of it.

They strolled down the wide street, while Catherine could still trust her legs to do so. The lavish displays in the shop windows intrigued him, even though he had no money save what he'd spent for her dessert.

"Does it make you sad to look at them?" Catherine asked, as they passed a display of outrageously priced leatherware.

"No," he answered honestly, stopping to admire a wallet he'd never own, and had no use for. "To me, this is fascinating. He took in the entire display. "It looks like art. Temporary art."

Catherine looked up at the window with new eyes, understanding what he meant. Display windows were staging areas for merchandise, and as such, they were both artistically arrayed, and they "moved." The same items would not be on display a week or two from now. This was not the Mona Lisa, eternal and unchanging. It was a store window, and a patterned scarf served as a backdrop for a series of brightly colored handbags, belts, and wallets.

"I never thought of it like that," Catherine said, realizing how much effort the designer had put into things like composition, color and balance.

"They look pretty," she agreed, taking in the scene with fresh eyes.

"You are far more so," he said it almost idly as he caught a drip down the side of the cone she still held. He caught it with his bare finger,

and brought it to his mouth for another taste. Their treat was almost gone.

Catherine stopped looking at the window, and took him in, instead.

"You've been saying things like that all evening." She tugged her silk scarf off her head, wanting to look more like "Vincent's Catherine," rather than like the fantasy person she'd been playing at, all evening.

This was still them. And tomorrow would be... not Halloween. It would be November first, and their lives would have to go back to normal.

"Was any of it untrue?" he asked, taking the remains of the cone and the sticky paper from her hand and throwing it in the nearest trashcan.

"No." She realized how vain that sounded, considering how frequent his compliments had been.

She tried again. "I don't know, it's just..." She feared she was about to spoil the evening. She felt as if she just needed to bite her tongue and simply... play along. Yet...

"Tell me." It was his constant, steadying request, and it always drew her.

His voice stayed low, and coaxing. "I can sense how you're feeling, but I can't read your thoughts," he added.

"Tomorrow, it won't be Halloween," she said, as if that explained something.

He waited patiently for her to continue.

"This is like... like we're on vacation. Like we're in Las Vegas and all our restraints are off." She was referring to the kiss, more than

anything else, but all the rest of it had a certain... unrestrained quality to it as well.

"That is a bad thing?" Vincent asked, sincerely curious.

"No, not in and of itself, but..." She looked down the street. A woman dressed like a flower child was walking with a friend dressed like a hooker. Both of them were spilling out of their low-cut tops.

"Most people regret some of their less... inhibited moments, on vacation. They ... rue some of the things they do, when they've been drinking, or... something."

Vincent regarded her thoughtfully. "I do not think a glass of wine had a few hours ago is clouding my judgment. But if it is, I intend to drink one at the beginning of every Halloween night I spend with you," he said, much to her surprise.

"Enjoy this with me, Catherine. And don't be afraid," he urged.

"Vincent, I just..." she was fumbling for words, and he could feel her doing that, as well as see it. It was not the usual posture, for an attorney.

"You just do not want me to be disappointed when tomorrow comes, and this day is another year away. You just do not want me to say something, or do something I will ... regret, come morning's light, when we're watching the sunrise over the bridge," he stated her concerns for her.

Okay, maybe he can read my mind, she thought.

She felt a need to explain. "I love you. I want this night to bring you happiness, and be special. And not for the world would I want to ruin

that, but... it just feels like something about this night has been... a little bit of a runaway train, between us."

He reached for her hand, and took her bare fingers, threading them with his. He pulled her close. Both free of gloves, thanks to the ice cream, he could feel the remains of the sticky dessert, in her grasp.

"We've faced other things, many things," he said, his voice a low tone of reassurance. "I think we can handle a runaway train," he concluded, bringing her fingers to his mouth. He kissed them first, then brushed the bend in her knuckles with the barest tip of his tongue, tasting vanilla.

"Can we?" she asked, her eyes asking for some sort of permission to join him in this, as much as the reassurance he was trying to give her.

"If we choose to, I believe that we can," he said, both of them knowing he was talking about not just "many things," but anything she wanted him to be talking about.

She just had no clear idea what that was.

"You're taking a chance. Tempting fate," she said, trying to tell him that certain choices might change things forever, between them.

"Considering my fortune, I think I have fate's blessing. I only need yours, then."

"For the world, I wouldn't deny you that. You know that, Vincent. We're pushing an envelope, here. We have been, all night."

"If I am, this is the night for it," he shrugged away her concerns. "We will do nothing you are uncomfortable with. From there... surely a place the size of New York can contain our ambitions?" The corners of his mouth had a subtle, upward tilt.

Could it? Considering the shivers of awareness that had been dancing along her spine all evening, she wasn't sure.

"You're a marvel, you know," she answered.

His sincere smile was her immediate reward. "Are you ready to walk, again, or shall I carry you, some more?" he asked.

Her own smile was full of love, as she willed herself to set aside her concerns, for the moment. "I think I can walk. Where should we go?"

"They were building a bonfire in the park. There was music. I think I would like to go see that. But I picked the last thing we did. It's your turn," he said.

"The park? But you spend every night in the park," she said, thinking that this night above all others, surely he'd want to get away from there?

"Not when there is a bonfire, and a chance a gypsy will tell my fortune, and an almost given certainty that a beautiful pirate will dance with me," he said. "Not among strangers who greet me as a friend."

"Well." She picked his hand up, still entwined with hers, and kissed the backs of his knuckles, lovingly. "Considering your last choice was to make one of my dreams come true, I think you're still owed one."

He brushed a kiss across the back of her fingers, in simple thanks.

"Shall we go?" he asked.

Disentangling their fingers, she re-tied her scarf to her head. "The park it is."



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Chapter 5

Baelfire



The area had been roped off, far from trees, shrubs, or anything else that might catch fire. If Vincent had no idea where the wood came from, specifically, he had no trouble recognizing the smell of good dry oak, going up in flames. It had been split, and the logs stood in a leaning circle, flames licking them from bottom to top. The crackling

sound was familiar, for Vincent, but unique to some, in the crowd of onlookers.

A lone violinist played for those who wished to dance, tunes that were sometimes lively, and sometimes mournful. The dancers were as eclectic a collection of celebrants as Vincent had seen all evening. Witches danced with gypsies who danced with pirates who danced with ballerinas and belly dancers. A mop-haired clown danced with a pregnant Glinda the Good Witch. A half masked phantom danced with his Christine. A trio of sailors passed a flask between them, and danced mostly alone.

Vincent had no idea if their uniforms were real, or just costumes.

He only knew that the fire seemed to have the ability to draw him toward it, just as much as the music did.

In the inky darkness, the bonfire served as a beacon, to the eyes. Stepping toward it was as inevitable as pulling back a bit, once the heat became too intense. The crowd established its own perimeter, the crackling flames at the center.

A particular ring of that perimeter was for dancing. Beyond that, another was for watching. The space in between the two was a no man's land where people either moved into, or out of the other two circles. The dancers stayed in motion, while the outer ring stayed largely still. The contrast between the two felt... intoxicating, to Vincent.

There was no one "right way" to dance, here, no certain place anyone had to stand, or be. It felt like freedom of a different kind, with the huge fire at its center.

"I wish to dance," Vincent said, sensing the freedom being had by those who were moving to the tune.

His words surprised Catherine. Which was to say that they surprised her, again. The crowd had a sometimes raucous edge, and the party had been going on for a while. Inhibitions were beginning to fall away, here. A man with an unbuttoned shirt was close-dancing with a tight-suited mermaid, his hands obviously cupping her backside. She didn't seem to mind. And they weren't the only couple with their hands on what would normally be considered private places.

"You do?" Catherine asked.

This was no Winterfest waltz, no polite turn around a dance floor. There were almost as many styles going on here as there were people to dance them. And his words were a declaration, as much as invitation. She felt the restless energy in his big body. He wanted to move, even though they'd been walking much of the night, sometimes even carrying her.

"I... I don't know how to dance to this," Catherine hung back a little. A veiled Scheherazade moved by, making broad motions with her bare arms. A pair of ballroom dancers smartly tangoed past.

"We can make it up as we go," Vincent stated, clearly not willing to take "no" for an answer. He tugged on her hand. Catherine followed him into the circle.

He gave me a fantasy, this evening, with the ice cream. Surely I owe him one.

A couple dressed in "Saturday Night Fever" clothes discoed past. She wore platform heel high enough to require elevator access.

"Dance with me, beautiful Catherine," Vincent prompted. "Let whatever... constraints you are feeling just... fall away," he urged, keeping his gloves off, as did she.

He brushed the barest kiss across her exposed fingertips, and tasted vanilla, again.

If the rest of the evening had been about an unchained Vincent feeling the fetters of his confinement lifted, this was the moment that same instinct communicated itself to Catherine.

Catherine shot the disco queen a dismissive look. "All right," she agreed, settling herself before him, ready to dance. He saw the twinkle in her eye, and approved.

He began with her in almost a waltzer's position, arms raised, one of her hands held loosely in his own. But the need to turn in a broad, continuous circle almost immediately required adjustment to that. No box step, no matter how well intentioned, was going to cover enough ground to be able to stay out of the way of the more expressive dancers in the circle.

A ballerina mixed pirouettes with her grand jetes. An athletic male companion echoed her. An elderly pair of women locked arms in an odd kind of "promenade," reminiscent of a square dance. Others simply free-styled their way around. There seemed to be no one "right" or "wrong" way to be here. It was a free-for-all, of movement.

This is freedom, again, Catherine thought, taking them all in.

Vincent held her loosely as he spun her out, before him. Several times he simply picked her up, and turned her in a half circle, setting her down on the other side. She could follow his lead. He'd always been an excellent partner, for her.

Five times around the wide circle and they stopped, joining the ring of spectators. Catherine was panting at the pace of it, and dying of thirst. A wide cart that sold mulled apple cider was a blessing, and she bought them both a cup.

The flavor was rich, and spiced with cinnamon. Vincent kept an arm around his love, and his cape extended over her shoulder to make sure she stayed warm enough. The half-naked belly dancer shimmied past, clearly using the flames of the fire for warmth. He paid her little mind, even though she danced up to him, before she danced away.

"Give me a moment to catch my breath and we'll go again," Catherine said, removing her head scarf again. She wiped perspiration from her forehead, and tied the scrap of cloth to her belt, letting it dangle. Her cheeks were pink, from her cheerful exertions. He moved his cape off her shoulders.

"You're not cold?" he asked, making sure.

"Between the fire and dancing with you, I'd say 'hot' is more like it," she smiled at him, fanning her face with her hand. Her crimped hair floated enticingly, around her pretty face.

The violinist was a gypsy, both in his attire and his features. Both were dark, and a red bandana tied around his head was a shimmer of silk.

As if by some unseen signal, he changed his tune, and sawed loudly across the violin, calling attention to himself. He gave a dramatic run up the fingerboard, the sound going from high to low.

Sensing the change, most of the dancers stepped back, as several couples dressed in gypsy garb stepped forward. It was not a formal declaration that the next dance would be theirs, but it was so.

"A dance troupe," Catherine said.

"Or simply a group of companions, determined to enjoy the evening," Vincent answered.

The women were exotically beautiful, and sultry. Most had lush curves and all wore a tiered, multi-colored skirt that was hitched up on one side. Whether they were members of a professional dance company or just a bunch of friends who had decided to be here, Catherine didn't know. But it was obvious that they knew each other, and that their dance was either well known to them, or had been previously choreographed.

The men stood still as the women walked around them in a circle, a bare fingertip trailing across a black clad chest and back. The men's bandanas were different colors, red, blue, black, or purple, but the rest of their outfit was utterly black. They all wore an earring, from a diamond stud to a thick silver hoop. Most had facial hair, trim beards or moustaches, but at least two were clean shaven.

When the women had finished circling their men, it was the men's turn. The women stood, hands on hips, as their partners imitated them, trailing a finger along their collar bones, and around their bare shoulders. The women wore their thick, raven hair mostly down, and flowing. Each man stopped behind his partner and grasped her shoulders, burying his nose in the hair near her neck.

And then they began to move.

It was a simple dance, really. Three steps to the right, turn the woman, then pick her up, spin around, and set her down, two steps or so forward from where you were. Three claps of the hands, and start again.

The audience began to applaud, as the pattern repeated over and over. Bright smiles flashed. The gypsies were having fun.

Several of the braver couples joined in, imitating their moves. The dancers smiled even more broadly, and encouraged this, some even willing to exchange partners between the couples, so that the more seasoned dancers could teach their newfound brethren. An older man with an accordion began to play with the violinist, while a younger one with a drum began to beat out a primal tempo.

It felt wonderful, and wild. And even though the dance had prescribed steps, it still felt free.

"Please. I want to do this," Vincent said. Catherine realized how rarely he had the opportunity to join in with anything so impromptu. The energy of the crowd was a call to pleasure.

"Oh, yes, please," Catherine answered, throwing their cups away.

Do you dance, Vincent? It was the thing she'd asked him at Winterfest, over ten months ago.

Clearly, he did.

But for all the similarity he had to the other revelers, it became obvious to Catherine that something about this was uniquely Vincent.

While the gypsies approached their women with a certain machismo and flamboyance, Vincent circled her with a level of intimacy that began to make the rest of the dancers fade into the background. He stayed close. And the feel of his fingertips on her collar bone lit a fire more real than the one Catherine found at her back.

When her turn to circle him came, it was the look of wonder in her eyes that caught him, more surely than any snare. The difference in

their height was a telling thing, as was his sheer breadth. She had to take longer steps to come around him in time. Her eyes refused to leave the amazingly broad line of his shoulders. It was as if only by having to circle him, and in time to the music, did she realize once and for all how powerfully he was built.

"May I teach you?" A young male gypsy stood to one side, offering to partner Catherine while his very beautiful counterpart extended a hand to Vincent.

"No," Vincent said shortly, his eyes turning to steel. The youth was a handsome buck. And Vincent had no intention of letting Catherine go to him.

"She is with me, this evening," he hastened to explain. The woman gave a moue of regret.

"Perhaps some other time," Catherine ameliorated any hurt feelings as they had to move forward, or cause a collision. The gypsy couple bowed out with grace, and the dance continued.

The longer they danced, the more Catherine felt a kind of spell being woven, between her and Vincent. Though the steps were easy enough to follow, they were making the dance their own, Vincent adoring the motion of picking her up, and turning with her.

Feel how strong I am, he thought it, with more than a little vanity. Feel how strong, for you, Catherine. This will always be there for you. Always be yours to command, for as long as it is mine. You're a feather in the night. Feel me.

While Catherine could tell some of the other men were tiring, thanks to the rigors the dance required of them, she knew that Vincent wasn't even winded.

The next time he was supposed to set her down so that they could continue, he simply kept her in the air. When every other woman was set to the ground, clapped, and struck a haughty pose for their enamored admirers, Catherine remained aloft, her hands on his shoulders, looking down into his blue eyes.

His voice was gravel on velvet. "Are you shimmering, now, my Catherine?" He knew she was, as firelight licked her front and his back. His hair was shot full of copper highlights. "Are you floating?" he asked.

He turned in a circle, slowly, and she let her hands go from his shoulders, extending them outward in the posture of wings.

I'm not asleep. I'm in that place where everything shimmers, and floats.

She remembered his reference. They had been reading, on her balcony. She'd been trying not to fall asleep, leaning against his arm. His huge arm.

Yes. Yes, Vincent, I am floating. I'm flying.

"I'm flying." She said it aloud, and the look of approval he gave her was so mixed with deep passion, she couldn't disentangle the one from the other.

He turned them both so that her back caught the heat, and it was his face the fire touched. The look in his blue eyes could have melted glaciers.

How can blue eyes look so warm? She had a moment to think it before he spun her again, a little faster this time, so that the short cape on her back fanned out. She felt the strength in his arms. He was holding her steady. His biceps didn't even tremble.

You make me feel so delicate, she thought, knowing she was gathering envious stares from the other women. She didn't care. At the moment, the night held just the two of them.

He spun her again, her back once more to the crackling flames.

"We're close to the fire," she said, unafraid, as she brought her arms back down so that her hands once more rested on the top of his shoulders. The heat felt a shade more intense.

"You have no idea how true that is," he responded, finally letting her slide down his great length. He was a wall of muscle as her booted feet sought the steady surety of the ground. He brushed her mouth, barely, with his, as she descended. Her leather heels finally found safe purchase on the autumn soil.

Yet, having her feet back on the firmament made her feel not only unsteady, but almost bereft, as his hands left her waist.

A smattering of applause reached them as the three-piece-combo changed their tune to something more spritely, and he drew her back into the comparative anonymity of the crowd.

The half-naked belly dancer sashayed up to them, the coins on the belt that draped her waist making a jangling sound.

"You're sexy," she said bluntly, to Vincent. She was buxom, and spilling out of a sequined bra.

Vincent didn't want to be near her, and resented the intrusion on his space.

What astonished him more, however, was Catherine's reaction to her. Not so much in what she said, but how she felt. The bond crackled with something.

"Take a walk," Catherine directed the forward young woman, her green eyes giving no quarter, and her body giving less as she interposed it between Vincent and his admirer.

With a negligible shrug of her shoulders, the young woman moved off, making sure her backside swayed provocatively, and that Vincent had a front row seat to the view.

Catherine's eyes narrowed, slightly. *Whore.* He could almost feel her thinking it.

"Down, boys," Catherine said under her breath, noting that Vincent's admirer had a slew of those, all her own.

"You said something like that before, back at the Met. You can't think I ever even look at another woman?" He said it as a question, and he saw something flicker, behind her eyes.

This wasn't about them. This was an old hurt. Something someone else had done to her, the way Lisa had once done something to him.

Someone once betrayed her trust, he realized. For a pretty face or the spilling cup of a bra, someone hurt her, once. Fool.

His voice was instantly gentle, and reassuring. "I'm so sorry, Catherine." He reached over and pulled her close. "For whatever it was. I'm sorry it happened. It never should have."

She was almost undone by his kindness, by his ability to understand, without needing all the humiliating particulars. He had no way to know that she'd spent an entire adolescence secretly praying to be able to fill out a large cup size, in her bra.

"That was a ridiculous reflex. And it doesn't belong between us," she stated, positive she was correct.

That was true, but it was also human to feel threatened, to feel jealousy. She'd said as much to him herself, the day Michael's disaster of a kiss had threatened him. For that matter, he'd had much the same reaction, when the young gypsy had asked her to dance.

"I suppose we all have out ... misbegotten memories, from the past. And will have, until we make our own future. He was a fool, whoever he was, and whatever he said or did. Just as every man here is a fool, who isn't on their knees, in front of you. If they only knew you as I do, they'd understand."

He said it with such guileless sincerity, she could only stare at him.

"Oh, Vincent," was all she could reply, loving him all the more.

They were getting jostled and bumped, even though the fire was beginning to die down. And Catherine was beginning to chafe some, at the crowd, though she didn't know particularly why. Vincent not only sensed it from her, he shared her feeling.

The hour was growing later. Midnight had come and gone, and the mood in the air had begun to shift. It wasn't "this" or "that" particular person she was picking up on. The adults as a group were contributing to an increasingly charged sexual atmosphere. Several of the couples had begun slow dancing, regardless of the tempo of the music. Many were kissing. Some, wantonly.

Vincent went from feeling like he wanted to immerse himself in the people near him, to suddenly feeling like everyone else was too much, and only Catherine was wanted near. He suddenly wanted privacy, and the word "needed" was not far from "wanted," in his awareness.

His palm settled possessively on her waist, and her shirt had ridden up just a hair, when he'd lowered her down his long body. His palm

brushed a bare line of skin, and he kept his hand there, drawing heat from the contact.

"I want to go away from here," he said, guiding her away from the group. "Want you alone with me. Do you understand?"

She did, and she needed to tell him she did. He was making her knees weak. And certain other parts of her were feeling quite strong. Parts she hadn't had to contend with for about two years.

She glanced over toward the skyline. The city lights glistened.

"It's just... we have a few hours before sunrise. I hate to think of dragging you inside before you have to go."

He pulled up his hood, and his face was a shadow in the dark, this far away from the fire. "If by 'dragging me inside,' you mean taking me back to your apartment so that I can make love to you the rest of the night... I can promise you I will not feel disappointed to see the sun come up lying entwined with you, rather than on a bench near the Brooklyn Bridge," he said, a soft touch of humor in his voice, amid the serious and passionate image he'd drawn.

"Ohhhh, Vincent," she drew out the first word, and reached up to cup his great cheek. "I don't know what to think," she said honestly.

"Perhaps it is not a thing that bears thinking on. Perhaps it isn't to be reasoned with. Or reasoned over," he stated.

"Just... jump in? Pretend there are no consequences?" she asked.

"Something like that," he replied intimately.

"A serious step lightly taken?" She raised an eyebrow at her query.

"That is a poem by Robert Frost," he said, recognizing it.

"Do you think he ever regretted it?" she asked.

"I don't think he ever lived like he did," Vincent answered.



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Chapter 6

This Darkling Hour

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She'd thrown open every glass-paned door in her apartment to the Samhain night, and it allowed the wind to circle through her home. Her balcony seemed to stream into every room, so that there was no division between the outside atmosphere and the inside of her living space. She kept the interior lights off.

They were two shadows, moving in the New York darkness, a darkness that would never be total, thanks to the millions of people who lived there.

Millions like him.

October's last moon rode the sky, a hazy, waxing gibbous a hair off of full. The park sprawled before them, the glare of the baelfire still

bright, still... there, below them. The city tumbled on for what looked like forever, after that.

One of the largest metropolises on earth, and it all felt like "his," to Vincent. Like his, tonight.

He stood calmly on her balcony for a long moment, his tall form adopting an utterly proprietary stance. It surprised him to find himself so self-assured. She, by contrast, was a flutter of breathless energy, in his mind.

He sensed that Catherine was nervous, but not afraid. There was a fine distinction, there, and it was one he would not have been able to make, when they were new.

The runaway train she'd likened them to was indeed hurtling forward, and Vincent cared little for where it stopped, or if it ever did. The light from the baelfire was the brightest thing he could see, in this darkling hour.

Words were wanted, here. His woman needed to be courted, needed to be wooed. Further, *he* needed it.

Like the show of physical strength in the park and in Chinatown, he needed to assure both of them that he was a capable lover in every way.

He knew he stood between too many things to count. His experience and his inexperience. His past, and his future. His Father, and his father's prejudices. The instinctive need for safety and the intense need for freedom. His love and his passion. His woman and his world. It was the last which held his attention.

"Sometimes... before... I would go into the homes of helpers like Old Sam, or wander the park, or the streets, and... I knew I couldn't give

that up. No matter how much Father worried, no matter the risks it bore... I couldn't... lock myself away, as he had done. I couldn't. It felt like I couldn't breathe, when I thought I might have to," he confessed, as she joined him on the balcony.

He inhaled deeply of the crisp, night air. Beside him, Catherine nodded her understanding.

"Sometimes, I felt like I held the world Above in my left hand, and the world Below, in my right." He extended both hands out, palm up, then made a grasping motion, and closed his fingers.

"But there was ... nothing in the middle. An empty place. Until there was you." He put his left fist to his heart. "You are my center, Catherine. You are *the* center. You're my heart. Neither place means anything to me, without you. Not anymore."

Catherine held his other hand. "It looks like we are both people of two worlds, then," she said, lifting his hand to brush the back of it against her cheek.

"It seems as if we are," he said, loving her for understanding. It was true, and they were perfect for each other, for it.

"You've fought this idea." She knew it was true. So did he.

He looked to one side, letting his gaze linger, over the park. "I can still only be truly free one night a year, with you. It is no small thing to be aware of, Catherine."

She shook her head. "Maybe freedom *is* the ability to walk down the middle of a street, whenever you wish. Maybe it *is* walking around the fountain and buying ice cream and ... dancing in a public place." She kissed the back of his hand.

"But maybe there are other kinds of freedom, too," she whispered.

Perhaps there are.

He didn't know. He, of all people, truly didn't. In his experience, freedom was a thing you absolutely fought for, guarded, and planned over. It was a carousel ride or a careful route to her balcony. It was not a thing that simply came... whispering in the night.

"If we can have two entire worlds between us... can we not... have each other, as well?" he asked.

He pulled her close, and tasted the apple flavor again, on her lips. It was not gone.

Nothing is gone, he thought, knowing that the entire night still lay before them, that though he could be anywhere in the city right now, anywhere, with her, that *this* was the one place he wanted, truly *wanted*, to be.

Part of being "free" meant the freedom to choose to be indoors, with her, even though he could be out of it. The notion was a heady one, for him, and he realized how right she was. Freedom wasn't just about the places he could go. It was about the things they could be, to each other.

His inability to have much of the former had clouded his judgment on their ability to have the latter. But she was right. There was more than one kind of "freedom," more than one kind of opportunity, for them.

The sensation of his fingertips brushing against her belly fascinated him. It was a touch he'd been craving all evening, thanks to the pointed hem of her shirt, and he brushed the soft material aside, just for the joy of feeling her abdomen contract, at his questing touch.

The kiss she gave him changed from loving to wanton, the moment he flattened his palm.

None of it felt like simple exploration. It felt like homecoming.

And though the opposite of "freedom" might be "home," to some, for Vincent, he knew it wasn't true.

They were the same word, to him, and they both sounded a deepening bell, in his heart.

The baelfire still burned orange, in the park, and he could sense its glow, sense its heat, as much as feel those, as they rid themselves of their clothing.

Gloriously nude, and night-clad, he picked her back up, again, as he'd done when they danced around the baelfire. Moonlight painted her face. It highlighted the hills and valleys of her facial features, as it limned his back.

"You still shimmer, my Catherine," he said, turning her so that the light touched her back, and his front.

"You still float."

"Do I?" she whispered, running her hands through his hair to brush it back from his shoulders. The light was painting the planes of his face with silver.

She traced his jawline with her thumbs and stroked his powerful neck, trailing her fingertips down to his massive shoulders.

"I'm too far away," she whispered. "I want to touch all of you."

He lowered her with the studied power of a titan, letting her feel her way down against his hair-covered torso. Her curls mingled with his, a moment, and he forgot to breathe.

"You're perfect," he swore, as the soft swell of her breasts crushed against his chest.

--

Nothing was as he could have predicted, and yet, everything was exactly as it should have been.

Was that him, sighing, moaning in the dark, thrashing, both above her and beneath her? It was. She kept her hands clasped with his, forbidding him to hide them, to ball them so that his terrifying fingertips did not show, or were kept away from her most sensitive skin. He could have wept for the moment she guided his hand down to her tenderest flesh. More for that moment, even, than the one where they were joined.

Was that her, crying out, startled, even, when he brought her over from "pleasure" to "rapture?" Was that her, (not him,) who left a scoring mark on his bicep, when the rapture simply became too great to bear?

He had to stop a moment, when the moonlight showed the glistening path of tears, down her cheeks.

"They're happy tears," was all she could say, tightening her legs around him lest he withdraw.

Was that her? Glorious, beautiful her? It was.

The completion he couldn't hope to contain felt endless, like a thing that simply refused to stop continuing, as her undulations received him, gorgeously.

When he realized that the floor was hard against her back, he simply rolled, still inside her. When she sat up, he loved the look of her face

and form, highlighted in silver by the falling moon. She looked primal, and pagan. Her hair was tousled, and wild, and she looked like a deity gathering her power. Something primitive. Something an ancient world would worship, or build a temple to.

The irony was not lost on him. Was it not his place to be pagan, while hers was to be refined?

It seemed a night for unexpected answers, to questions he never knew he was supposed to ask.

His desire to make her more comfortable turned into a lesson on feminine prowess, and a woman's ability to recover quickly, from sublime pleasure. He was as fascinated as he was ensnared.

He had to sit up at one point, simply so he could tell her.

She locked her hands behind his neck and pushed against him, guiding him back to hard readiness.

"You love like a queen," he whispered.

She shook her head, drawing closer to another ending, beyond speech.

Instinctively, he pressed his huge hand to the small of her back, helping her to it. She shook, and wept into his massive shoulder, as he simply let go and followed her.

The night was soft moans, and few words, and he didn't need to explain why he took the cushions off her couch and beckoned her onto their balcony, as the nighttime waned, and the moon sank lower still.

He held her in the place where she'd tugged his hands down, so long ago, that first night he'd found the courage to return to her. Near the

place where "No shadow of another parting from her" became a mantra, inside his head.

His climax had felt thunderous, and inexplicably virginal, even though this wasn't their first time. Like a circle had been drawn complete. Like a tiny seed of "wanting" had borne a glorious tree of "having" to verdant fruition.

"I love you," he whispered to the dying moon, as he whispered it to her.

Her answer was in her kiss, and the moisture on her cheeks... and thighs.



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Chapter 8

All the Saints and Sinners

When dawn crept into the living room, they were sprawled back on her floor, the carpet beneath their lazing forms, his cape shared as a half-effective blanket.

She half-drowsed on her stomach, facing him while he lay on his back, both of them refusing to sleep in more than brief snatches, punctuated by deep kisses.

For two people who'd managed to 'go to bed together,' he realized, thinking in the euphemism, *we've managed to utterly avoid a bed.*

It was just as well. Vincent doubted any confined space could have contained them.

She stretched languorously, sighing as she peeked at him.

"You're smiling," she said.

"How can I not be?" he replied lifting up his arm and offering his shoulder as a pillow. "The woman I love is completely beautiful. And... half wrapped in my cape."

She realized that "half" was a polite fraction, and that she actually had the lion's share of their makeshift 'blanket.' Much of her back, her backside and thighs were all covered against the morning chill while he barely had enough to cover his privates. She tugged the dark, heavy fabric over, sharing it.

"Cold?" she asked, aware they were now in the most chill part of the morning. The sun was barely up.

"Not possible," he said, holding her close and readjusting his cape around them. He ached everywhere... pleasantly.

"There's a bed in my bedroom. It has a bed in it. And blankets and pillows," she yawned, snuggling down right where she was. His shoulder was better than any pillow. She watched the morning sun paint the hair on his chest the color of antique gold.

"As inviting as that sounds, it lacks one absolutely essential thing." He brushed a loving kiss across the top of her forehead, the gesture so familiar a thing between them, she had to smile.

"Breakfast?" she asked, sprawling herself a bit across that same chest so she could see his beloved face as he rested his head on a bent arm.

"You," he replied, kissing her nose.

She loved him. And loved that if they were about to have "morning after" regrets, that they weren't there, yet.

"The day I regret last night I will be dead in my grave," he stated bluntly, reading her without needing her to say a word.

She planted a kiss on his massive shoulder, for an answer.

The sun came farther into the room. She hated that their amazing night was over. But over it was, and he would need time to get back Below.

"The sun is up. Father will be starting to-"

"I am sitting near the Brooklyn Bridge watching the light paint your hair gold. We have time, my love."

My love. He'd called her that some time between their second time and their third. Sometime between the balcony and holding her perched on the back of her sofa. He'd been primal and demanding. Then slow, and almost whisperingly soft. So had she.

She shrugged her desire to get him Below, and set safety aside, for a moment. If this was what he wanted, she was the last person to deny him. Sooner or later, and likely within the next few minutes, the need to prepare to part would overtake him, and he would go.

Perhaps she'd plan to meet him later, after she showered.

No "perhaps" about it. She knew she would.

"But you're right that we probably don't have much time," he said, looking at her clock. "It is already after seven."

She sighed, and he felt it. "I'll shower while you dress. I can meet--"

"That means there are only a little more than sixteen hours in this day. We need to be married, by midnight."

Say what?

He really has jumped off the ledge of all restraint.

She had no idea how to take his pronouncement. So she opted for taking him lightly.

"Or, we could just have tea in your chambers, and spend the day together," she kissed him lightly, aware she was refusing him, but not really taking him seriously - and implying he should do the same.

"As long as we spend it telling our friends they need to meet us in the Great Hall... is there a dress you'd like to wear?" he asked. He was clearly not one to be dissuaded.

"Vincent... you're serious." She disentangled them carefully and stood up, wrapping his cape around her, suddenly feeling entirely too nude, and entirely too tasked with having to explain to him about impulsive decisions made in passionate moments.

"Of course I am," he said, sliding into his rumpled trousers. He finger combed his mane back from his temples. "A ring. I will need to ask--"

"Vincent, stop." She hated to say it, but she had to. "Last night was... incredible... life changing, even, but... marriage? This isn't nineteen forty one, and you don't need to ... to make that offer and..." She stopped at the look on his face.

"You would share everything you are with me, yet not consent to be my wife?"

He was hurt by a rejection she didn't even consider a rejection. She wasn't trying to spurn him. She was trying to talk him back down off a ledge. She tried again.

"Vincent, I love you. I've... I've considered us ... married, in a way, in our hearts, since ... since I don't even know. Since I came back from Westport, I suppose."

"Good," he said, shouldering into his thermal shirt. "Down Below, we have a ceremony that accompanies that."

"Vincent--"

He cut her off. "Catherine, we don't have to be content with half-measures. You said it yourself. We're free to do ... not all we wish, but all we *can*." We *can* do this." He said, as if it were that simple.

"A week ago, you'd never have said that to me."

A week ago... I didn't understand how beautifully your body fit with mine, and how much that would make me long to be your bridegroom.

"A week ago, I was a different person. As were you."

She dropped his cape and shrugged into the purple shirt, and snatched her skirt up off the floor. It was covering one of his socks, which he reached for.

"We've been so afraid of losing what we've managed to carve out for ourselves, we're terrified to ask for any of the things we truly can have. I want to be your husband. God willing, I want to be father to your children. I want to grow old with you, and when the day comes,

guide my world with you as my side." He hastily pulled the ruffled shirt over his head, the sock still in his hand. "This is not a thing you wish?" he asked.

Catherine blinked. It was her dearest wish. And at the moment, "where do I live" seemed like a base triviality.

What am I supposed to say? "What about my job?" That seems almost inconsequential, to this.

And she had a feeling she knew what he'd tell her. *Keep it or don't. As you wish. It's a thing you can choose.*

"I would still live here?" she asked.

"Of course. If you wish to. I would just... plan on me staying over, more often, obviously." He nuzzled her bare shoulder, the innuendo obvious.

"So it's ... just that simple," she said, trying to both point out that it wasn't and pray that it could be. "We move your toothbrush next to mine in the bathroom, and that's it. Not a care in the--"

"Any cares we have, we will meet with your intelligence, and my strength. Or my intelligence and your strength, whichever serves us better," he said, as he tugged on his left sock. "And the support of an entire community, behind us."

He kept his eyes trained on her, aware that he shouldn't have to be talking her into this.

"You're... you're moving very fast, for me," she confessed. "And... this isn't necessary, Vincent."

"That our anniversary be November first? I'm afraid I must beg to differ, my love. Have you seen my other sock?" He was looking around her apartment for it, lifting her purple headscarf. No luck.

"I think I kicked it out onto the balcon--why must it be now? Why today?" she asked.

He took in what was clearly her deep confusion, as if realizing it for the first time.

Stepping close, he took her soft hands in his, drawing her close, enfolding her. His voice was a soft rumble, beneath her ear.

"We are every possibility, Catherine. Not limited. Not... beggars at our own banquet. I mean to feast. With you, before this night is over, if you're willing."

"But... why rush? What's the hurry? Surely we have all the time in..."

"When did we make love, Catherine? What time was it?" he asked.

She looked at the clock, searching a memory.

"I don't know... it was after midnight. One o'clock? Two?"

He gave her a subtle squeeze.

"On November first. All Saint's Day. One day, your son will ask me about how he should best conduct his life. When he does that, I would very much like to be able to look him in the eye and tell him that I waited to make love to his mother until our wedding day."

Her eyes widened with realization. And the extent of his ability to plan ahead. And... dissemble, a little.

"You ... cheat!"

His tone was arch. "I hear no word in that sentence which is not a lie. Provided we get you to Jacob before midnight."

"But we---" she repeated his phrase inside her mind. Technically, he was correct.

"I'm very glad I never have to go up against you in court," she said, staring at him as he finished dressing.

"Of course, we could have only daughters. Would you like to explain it to them?" He was tugging on his other boot.

"That's blackmail. You're blackmailing me."

"We can wait, if you like. But if we do, this conversation will fall to you." He stood and buckled his studded belt.

"You're talking about a conversation with children we don't have yet, fifteen or twenty years from now." Her eyes were wide.

"Olivia assures me the time flies." He seemed wholly unconcerned.

"Vincent... I ... yes. All right, yes. But ... one day?"

Her mantle clock chimed eight.

"Less than that. Is there a dress you'd like to bring down? Or would you like all of us to gather here, in your apartment?"

"I... the Great Hall. No, my apartment. On the balcony. But there might not be enough room. No... the Hall. I ... Vincent!"

He picked her up and spun her.

"Say 'yes,' again. I want to hear it." He all but growled it in her ear.

"You're a bully and I'm telling our children you blackmailed their mother. Some day," she stated.

His smile was positively predatory.

"I will confess to it. Say 'yes.' Just once more. Once more, and then not again until I hear you say it in our vows."

She leaned her mouth close to his ear, ready to give as good as she got.

"I... think I'll make you wait," she whispered.

He wanted to growl, again, and nip her ear, playfully.

"Witch."

"No. Pirate."

He lifted her body against his refusing to let her feet touch the floor. Her body warmed, to his.

"Say 'yes,' or I'll make you stay here, with me, loving you. And it will be another hour or two before you have time to prepare your own wedding," he threatened, brushing her neck with a feathery kiss.

Her arms twined around his neck.

"Oh, no. Vincent is going to make love to me again," she teased.

"Whatever shall I do?" she feigned distress, her eyes going as sultry as his were.

They were a fine pair. And now he wondered how he was going to be able to keep his hands off her, for the next several hours.

"Say 'yes.' Say 'yes,' or we'll both end up half-naked, saying our vows, with all of three people in attendance," Vincent begged, increasing the pressure on her neck, for a kiss. He was a few seconds away from removing his clothing again, and they both knew it.

"Yes," she gave him the word, and a shudder wracked his frame. Reaction. Emotion. He set her down but his arms stayed wrapped around her waist, tightly.

"I love you," he said, having no idea how he was going to let her go long enough to plan the rest of their day.

"I love you, too," she said, taking his mouth in a searing kiss.



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Epilogue:

A Soft Flame

The bride wore Winterfest white, the first dress she'd ever danced with him in. It served as her 'something old.' She borrowed his copy of Great Expectations to carry in place of the Bible, and they both placed their hands on it as they said their vows. The simple bands that adorned their hands were new. A lace handkerchief Mary had embroidered with forget-me-nots was her 'something blue,' though Catherine swore she had the look in her groom's eyes, for that.

The Great Hall teemed with a mighty assemblage, hastily convened and cheerfully gathered. Peter Alcott gave the bride away. An urgently summoned Devin was still panting a little from his cab ride from La Guardia and his run across the park, as he stood as best man.

A huge pillar candle set with seed pearls and tied with ribbon, was their wedding candle, courtesy of Rebecca. A sheet cake bearing only the words "Remember Love" was their wedding cake, there being no time for William to come up with anything more elaborate.

Vincent and Catherine knew it was all perfect, just as it was. And they made it with almost forty minutes to spare.

A short while later, the wedding pillar still flickered, casting a velvety, warm glow over two lovers, as they entwined beneath its glimmering light.

A soft flame.

A blessing fire.

A tiny piece of baelfire.



No matter where you are when your fire burns brightest, I wish you
Love, ~ Cindy

