

# *Life Is Not A Fairy Tale - However...*

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Note: The theme of this story was inspired by the premise for a possible second-season episode of the Beauty and the Beast series, which had never been developed into a script and filmed. The idea was suggested by Linda Campanelli and M.M. Shelly Moore.

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"I'm sorry, Joe, I don't have the strength to come in today. I feel like my head is about to explode, and I can feel every muscle in my body. And you don't even want to know how many boxes of tissues I have been through since yesterday."

Catherine suddenly sneezed loudly into the phone speaker.

"Bless you! And me, for not being near you right now," her boss remarked dryly on the other end of the line. "Okay, Radcliffe, I get it. You stay in bed with tons of hot drinks, aspirin and tissues for a few days; leave the work to me. After all, it's only Wednesday, and I had no other plans for the rest of the week than taking over your cases." The sarcasm in his voice was apparent.

"I will make it up to you, I promise," Catherine tried to cheer him up. "I'll volunteer for whatever you want for the next month."

"Okay, okay..." Joe chuckled. "Don't get too dramatic. I'll be fine. Get some rest, and I'll see you on Monday if you feel better."

Catherine breathed a sigh of relief; the prospect of her comfy bed and snuggly covers for three days were more than enticing in her shattered state.

"You are an angel of a boss, do you know that?" She said with a stuffy-nosed voice.

"Yeah, but watch out, Radcliffe. I might turn into a devil one day," Joe replied, and she heard the amusement in his voice. "Let me know if you need anything. Bye."

"Thank you, bye," Catherine replied with a tired smile and hung up the receiver.

The vintage clock on the mantelpiece chimed 8 pm. She sighed and realised that she hadn't eaten since breakfast. The way she had been feeling all day forced her brain to put thoughts of food on a sideline. Not hungry anyway, Catherine turned off the lights in her living room, leaving only the city lights from outside to gently illuminate her apartment. She dragged herself to the bedroom and slumped onto the bed on her back, covering her face with her hands.

Great, just great! And I was supposed to attend the children's concert on Saturday...

The way things were looking at that moment, Catherine would have to wave goodbye to enjoying the junior interpretations of the classics Below for the time being, and she was gutted about it. She was really looking forward to that evening.

Her mouth felt dry, and her throat scratchy. Everything in her was crying for a hot cup of tea, but her muscles stubbornly refused to cooperate. Therefore, she just remained motionless, stretched out on her bed.

A sudden soft knock on the French door brought her back to life. Her heart rejoiced, though for a second, her old self was dismayed at the thought of Vincent seeing her in such a state. Nevertheless, Catherine gathered her last strength to get up and walk over to the French door to open it for her beloved visitor.

"Catherine..." That was all he was allowed to say before she made a very reluctant step back from him and shook her head.

"I think I've got flu, Vincent. I feel really bad, and I don't want to pass it on to you, so you should..."

She didn't manage to say more because the next thing she was aware of was his arms around her, creating a solid but gentle frame.

"I think we both know that what I should and what I will do are two very different things in certain situations," he remarked softly, smiling into her hair.

Catherine sighed and couldn't help but chuckle into his chest. The comfort of his nearness was too tempting to resist, and her arms tightened their hold around his waist.

"I think I'm glad about that," she admitted and looked up at him lovingly with glassy eyes. Then she reached for a tissue in her pyjama bottoms pocket.

"I'm sorry I disturbed you in your rest," Vincent apologised with a worried look. "I only wished to see if there is anything I could do to help you. I have felt you have been unwell all day."

Catherine's eyes smiled from behind the tissue, and when she blew her reddish nose, she laughed.

"You could wave a magic wand and make me look like a human again."

The warmth in his eyes as he observed the woman in front of him made it clear what he thought of her appearance.

"You could barely look more human than you do right now," he said tenderly with a knowing smile.

She froze for a moment, yet again enchanted by the truth in his words. "In my previous life, any man would rather stay miles away from me in this condition," she spoke eventually, shaking her head. "The only man never to have done that was my dad."

A fond smile settled on her lips when she remembered her late father.

"After my mum died, every time I was sick, he used to make me a nice cup of hot tea or cocoa, wrap me in my bed sheets, sit down next to me and read me something until I fell asleep. That lasted almost until I was 20." She raised her eyebrows, amused.

Vincent lowered his eyes with a chuckle.

"That's what a loving parent always would do," he remarked. "Father was always the same with me on the rare occasion when I was unwell. In a way, those were some of the most precious times we have spent together."

Catherine regarded him ardently, for a moment imagining little Vincent tucked in bed in his chamber and Jacob sitting in a high-back chair nearby, reading to his beloved son, probably some Dickens or Twain.

Suddenly, there was a flicker of hesitation in his blue eyes.

"You should be in bed," he said carefully. "I could read you something if you liked..."

Her surprise almost made him laugh, but he kept his composure.

I know, Catherine, I never enter your apartment unless it is a matter of urgency.

Her answer shocked him even more, though.

"Actually, you could tell me your own story, from your imagination." The challenging look in her tired eyes gave him no choice.

"As you wish," Vincent replied with a smile. "But before that..." He reached into the pocket of his cloak and produced a little fabric pouch. "Herb tea."

Catherine chuckled and stepped back into the bedroom, holding his hand. Vincent followed her with slight hesitation but then decided that needs must, and he put his usual restraint behind. Just for tonight...

She was about to drag herself to the kitchen when he stopped her.

"Please, allow me," the more than welcomed guest offered his help. "Lay down and rest."

When he saw the astonishment in her weary eyes, he teased her. "Catherine, you know I visit Helpers on occasion. The underground may be my home, but I don't live in a hole."

All at once, she felt ashamed. Of course, Vincent didn't live in a hole and knew his way around a kitchen Above. Limited resources Below didn't equal limited knowledge.

"I'm sorry, Vincent," she apologised and exhaled loudly. "I think this flu is completely fogging my brain."

His amused smile calmed her down, and she allowed him to lead her to the bed and cover her carefully after she had laid down.

"Do not worry about anything, Catherine," he reassured her softly. "Just rest. I won't be long."

Her eyes followed him as he disappeared behind the folding door of the bedroom, and then they shut to do what he told her. And truly, in a blink of an eye, her visitor was back with a steaming cup. He carefully put it in her hands after she had raised herself to sit up, leaning against the headboard.

"Father said this tea is especially good for fevers," Vincent remarked while watching her sip the hot drink.

"I hope so," Catherine replied with a tired voice. "I took some aspirin already, but it doesn't seem to be working."

"I know. I can feel it."

Vincent's matter-of-fact statement amazed her. Of course, she shouldn't have been surprised after all this time. He was attuned to her physical and mental state, like a perfect Swiss clock, always knowing how and what she felt. And yet deep inside, it never ceased to stun her and bring her more comfort than anything else in the world.

"Tell me," she said eventually, with a smile after she put down the cup on the nightstand and made herself more comfortable under the covers. "Tell me a story, Vincent."

He returned her smile and sat on the floor next to the bed, leaning his back against it, so that Catherine could see only his profile. For a moment, she thought of telling him to bring a chair to sit on. However, his silhouette with his long arms resting folded on his knees, and the image of half of his unusual face illuminated by the city lights enchanted her. She didn't want to break the spell, so she kept silent and waited.

While still looking into the distance behind the French door, Vincent began telling his story.

"Once upon a time, in a wondrous castle in a land far far away, there lived a beautiful young princess with her father, King Charles, who was a good, kind and wise ruler..."

"What was her name?" Catherine interrupted him.

Vincent couldn't suppress a smile as he glanced at her. "We shall call her Catherine."

A wide smile reached her eyes. "Go on," she prompted him, still smiling.

He needed no more encouragement, and looking ahead again, Vincent continued...

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*Princess Catherine lived what most people considered happily, missing nothing that could provide her enjoyment of all the earthly pleasures. She was surrounded by the most wealthy and the most desired suitors in the kingdom; many had travelled even from foreign kingdoms, wishing to gain her favour.*

*Her father was not happy, though, for she could not decide upon which suitor to choose and give her heart to. Neither of them managed to awaken tender feelings in her, such that would move her heart and make her fall in love.*

*As the days passed, King Charles started losing hope, and the more suitors the princess drove away, the less likely it seemed that she would find someone with whom she could share her life.*

*Catherine was slowly but surely becoming exhausted from life in what she regarded as a golden cage. She loved her father dearly and knew he meant well, but she could not make him see that finding true love is not a contest of the bravest and wealthiest knights who fight for a trophy.*

*Time was passing, and the princess was getting restless. Nothing she used to like doing before brought her joy.*

*One day, in the early morning, when everyone was still asleep (even the guards at the castle gate, who were a little merrier the previous night), Catherine, veiled in a long white cloak, managed to slink away from the castle. Overjoyed at her sudden freedom, she ran as quickly as she could, enjoying the crisp morning breeze, the clear blue sky and the smell and sight of the rich green grass covered with morning dew, shimmering in the warming sun.*

*The princess had never felt such thrill, such contentment, as she did that lovely summer morning. Overjoyed by the sudden freedom, she found herself only a few steps away from the nearby forest. Her big emerald eyes shone even brighter than usual when she remembered the story she had heard the maids in the castle tell many times before.*

*The legend had it that there was a mysterious, strange creature roaming the ancient forest. It had the looks that made it the rarest being in the world, the only one of its kind. It would have lived peacefully in the forest, were it not for the constant fear of being hunted down by people - for its uniqueness and because people thought it might be dangerous to them. Therefore, apparently, it lived in the deep in the forest, constantly hiding from men's eyes.*

*Catherine was fascinated by the story, which many believed was true, but her father and his advisers told her it was only a childish fantasy. So when she suddenly stood at the green realm that could have turned fantasy into reality, she didn't hesitate a moment. Thrill added colour to her cheeks when her feet crossed the imaginary boundary between the meadow and the forest ahead of her.*

*She had never seen anything so beautiful in her life before. How different this was from the cold stones of the castle! Everything around her was painted with vibrant colours, hundreds of shades of green, brown and yellow, with colourful dots of red, blue and white of the flowers scattered in the grass. The birds were singing their morning songs; the golden hues of the morning sunlight cracked through the tree branches, making everything glitter like diamonds. It seemed that everything around Catherine was touched by some magical power, living and breathing as one being.*

*The princess was so captivated by the images she saw and sounds that she heard, that she lost track of time. She kept walking further, pulled by some inexplicable force, drawing her deeper and deeper into the wood. Minutes turned into hours, and it was already late afternoon when she suddenly stopped upon hearing a strange rustling coming from somewhere ahead of her. Her curiosity beat the alarm bells in her mind, and she followed the sound.*

*Only after a few steps, peeking from behind an old oak tree, did she spot something hanging from another oak tree, which was a few feet in front of her. Something had got captured in a thick net, set as a trap there. She couldn't recognise what was inside the net, for it was constantly moving, wrestling with the net-ropes, desperately trying to break free. All at once, the movement stopped, and absolute stillness befell them.*

*Led by a strange pull, Catherine stepped out from her cover and cautiously approached the net. Only then, at a closer look, she could finally make out a figure of something that looked like a human being, though its head was partially obscured by its arms, and she couldn't see its face...*

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*"Strangely, she wasn't afraid, though," Catherine suddenly interrupted him dreamily, totally engrossed in Vincent's story-telling. "And then she saw them... the bluest, most magnificent, brightest and warmest eyes she had ever seen... They were observing her, at first shyly, but then with keen interest, and she suddenly felt tingling all over her body, right down to her toes... Something was tugging warmly at her heart, something she had never felt before..."*

*Vincent, who had turned his head to see her, smiled in the semi-darkness of the room.*

*"The princess decided to free whatever or whoever was trapped in the net. She looked around for anything that could help her," he continued brightly. "She heard the sound of water, a brook running nearby. She ran to it, and when she saw many rocks of different shapes lining the stream, she smiled. Catherine inspected the stone chippings lying near the rocks. Most of them were polished by the stream, smooth and round. However, then she spotted some lying away from*

*the bubbling water, the edges of which were sharp and unsmoothed. She reached for a couple that fitted into her hand and rushed back to the entrapped being."*

*Catherine hastily blew her nose and stepped in again. "After some effort, she managed to cut the main net rope with one of the chippings. There was a loud thump as the net fell to the ground and the being with it. After liberating itself from the tangles, the being stood up with some effort. The princess still couldn't see its face, only its back, but by now, she could surely say it was a man."*

The real Catherine closed her eyes with an enchanted smile on her face. "A tall, majestic figure with broad shoulders and long hair reaching below them, the shade of which reminded her of the gold jewels in her father's crown..."

Vincent couldn't resist a chuckle, but his eyes were full of tenderness, appreciating Catherine's passionate imagery. "I thought I was supposed to tell a story," he teased with a smile.

"I'm sorry," she apologised hastily. "Please, go on."

*"The princess wished to see the man's face, but he hesitated. Something was holding him rooted to his spot, unable to turn to reveal himself to her.*

*'Please, don't be afraid,' she spoke gently for the first time, sensing his insecurity. He still hadn't moved, but she could almost feel his heart thumping frantically in his chest. Step by step, she moved closer to him until she could carefully reach for his back, covered under a thick vest on top of a linen shirt. Her small hand touched him gently, encouraging him to turn around.*

*'I won't hurt you,' she reassured him. He raised his head, and a deep sigh made its way out of his throat. He couldn't have been sure she wouldn't turn against him, but how could he have run away without even thanking his rescuer? Very slowly, he turned to her, revealing for the first time his face. If the princess sensed something before, now she was certain - it wasn't a human face; it was..."*

"A face of a lion!" the young woman gasped, excited, clutching her handkerchief.

The intensity of the moment was broken by Vincent's deep, quiet laugh - something she rarely heard, and it delighted her. "I think you would make an excellent narrator, Catherine," he said. "We have story-telling hours for the youngest children. I'm sure Father would be delighted to have you sharing your skills."

Suddenly ashamed of her impatience, she lowered her eyes and smiled shyly. "I'm sorry, Vincent. I guess I got a bit..."

"Carried away?" he finished for her, tilting his head.

"Yes," she confirmed quietly.

Hesitantly, Catherine's eyes found his face again and noticed his heartfelt smile. She relaxed immediately when his hand unexpectedly reached for her cheek and caressed it.

"I like it when you get carried away," he confessed inadvertently.

The bond between them was singing loudly at that moment, sparkling and changing colours rapidly. Before it could explode, with a great effort, Vincent pulled back his hand and took his previous position at the bedside. The sudden silence between them ended a moment later with Catherine's quiet words.

"I'm sorry, Vincent... Please, go on. I promise I won't interrupt you anymore. I really would like to know what happened next."

Her plea didn't go amiss in his ears. He smiled at her and nodded. Catherine relaxed as well and reached for her tea on the nightstand. Then her eyes focused on his face again.

"Where were we?" Vincent mused. "Yes..."

*The man turned to the princess, and she saw his face was not human. It was the face of a lion...*

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*Princess Catherine's eyes widened at the sight. To the man's surprise, she didn't run away as most people seeing him would. Staring at his face with unmasked awe, her eyes were full of wonder and... compassion.*

*"I won't hurt you," she repeated, reassuring him of no bad intentions.*



*"I know," came a quiet reply, stunning her. "Neither will I."*

*His deep, gravelly voice confirmed his words immediately. The look in her eyes softened, and she smiled.*

*"It's you," Catherine breathed. "The creature they talk about in the legend."*

*The lion-faced man sighed, lowering his eyes. "Yes, the one they fear more than their worst nightmares. The one they hunt day and night, thirsty for its blood and their own fame," he added sadly. "Only once I made the mistake of being too careless and was seen. Ever since then I have been a fugitive."*

*The princess suddenly felt ashamed of her people. Why does everything different have to be treated as something dangerous? His statement rendered her speechless.*

*"Can you tell me your name?" she asked when she regained her words.*

*"Vincent," he answered quietly.*

*The sound of his name made her smile. "I'm Catherine," she said.*

*"Catherine..." The man's inquisitive eyes observed her for a moment, finding a sudden peace in his heart, something he hadn't felt for a long time. However, he quickly remembered the danger and was ready to leave.*

*"I must go... Thank you for helping me." He softly expressed his gratitude and turned to go but froze at the sound of the harsh sound of a horn.*

*"King's hunters..." the princess whispered. "Go! Go before they see you!" she exclaimed and pushed him toward the thick bushes behind them.*

*In a blink of an eye, the man-beast vanished as if he never existed. She didn't see, though, how just for a second, he had turned back to look at the woman who saved his life...*

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*It took days until princess Catherine was able to return to the ancient forest. Her unexpected (and by her royal father much disapproved) escape from the castle had its rather inconvenient consequences. A whole week of forced solitude in her chamber prevented her from looking for her new and unusual acquaintance again. King Charles would have done anything for his daughter, but since her mother had died, he was a bit overprotective of her.*

*After a week, the princess finally succeeded. She persuaded her father that there was no danger lurking around in the forest and that she can safely stroll under the lavish green tree crowns - without the suggested company of the guards.*

*And so the next morning, after the sun had barely appeared on the horizon, Catherine ran out of the castle, eager to explore the forest kingdom again. Exploring wasn't her only wish, though; her greatest desire was to see the mysterious stranger again. It didn't take long this time.*

*The sun still hadn't reached its highest point when she decided to rest for a moment, choosing an enchanting spot showered with colourful wildflowers and surrounded by beech, oak and maple trees. Catherine had just succumbed her senses to the rich scent of honeysuckles, when she spotted a tall figure in a dark cloak standing in the shadow of an old beech.*

*"Vincent..." she whispered and hastily looked around to see if they were alone. Only then did she stand up to greet him. "I was hoping I would see you again," Catherine admitted shyly.*

*"So was I," he confessed as well. "My reason was telling me to stay deeper in the forest; it's safer for me there, but..." His voice faded.*

*There are moments in life when no words are necessary. Although she barely knew the man-beast in front of her, she felt strongly connected to him, without knowing why, though. She dared a few steps to meet him, focusing on his deep-set blue eyes.*

*"I would like to get to know this magical place more," Catherine said, genuinely thrilled. What followed was a plea, rather than a polite request. "Would you show me your world?"*

*Vincent's heart revelled hearing those words and seeing the longing in her eyes.*

*"Gladly," he replied, and for the first time, the princess saw his lips stretch into a cautious smile...*

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*And so the princess and the man-beast started meeting in the forest every day. Vincent showed her many beautiful, enchanting places. They watched the golden rays of sun gleam on the surface of the Glittering Pool, sat by the majestic waterfall in the Hidden Valley, and Catherine marvelled at the echo of hundreds of mysterious sounds surrounding them in the Cave of Whispers, Vincent's secret retreat and place of rest.*

*With each day, the princess and her new friend were becoming fonder of each other. The unconditional respect with which Vincent treated his natural environment, and all the living beings in it, touched Catherine's heart deeply. They almost forgot for some precious hours that Vincent, although living freely, was not truly free. The threat of the hunters on his heels was hovering over their heads like a thick, dark cloud promising a heavy downpour.*

*"Can I ask you something... personal?" asked the princess one day, when they were passing by the crystal-clear, bubbly brook.*

*"You know you can ask me anything, Catherine," came Vincent's heartfelt reply.*

*She lowered her eyes and smiled. "Have you always been like... this?" The slight hesitation at her last word didn't go unnoticed.*

*With a smile, the man with the lion face sat down on the grass, inviting her with his hand to follow him.*

*"Yes, I was born like this," he said when she made herself comfortable and regarded him with interest. "No one knows why and who my parents were. I was found in the forest by a kind, honest man, a widower, who raised me as his son. He was unafraid to adopt a creature like me, without even imagining what I might grow up into. Fearing that people would never accept me as one of their own but harm me, he intended to hide and protect me from anyone's eyes. It is because of him that I am still alive. He was my greatest teacher, and I owe him everything. The man that I am today is greatly his doing."*

*The tenderness with which Vincent spoke revealed his genuine fondness for his foster father.*

*"Where is he now?" Catherine inquired keenly.*

*"He lives near a village on the other side of the forest, about two days' journey from here." He paused, and his eyes turned distant.*

*"When I was 17, I realised he could not keep hiding me from the prying eyes of his people any longer. Although living in a remote spot away from the village, it was too dangerous for him to live with a creature like me. People can be... difficult with what they don't know... So I left, and the forest became my second home. I lived in peace until that unlucky day when one of king's hunters spotted me while chasing a deer."*

*Vincent's voice faded as he lowered his eyes, trying to conceal his sadness.*

*His melancholy moved Catherine. "Have you ever seen your father since you left?" she asked.*

*"A few times," Vincent replied and smiled. "He comes to the forest sometimes, mostly to read in the shade of the trees. He says he finds ultimate peace in such moments. I rarely approach him; it's... safer for him that way..."*

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*"That's not fair," Catherine interrupted Vincent's narration, frowning. "He shouldn't be living so alone."*

*Vincent smiled at her compassion. "No one thought of building tunnels for living in medieval times, Catherine, only for escaping from one place to another," he tried to set the facts straight. "I'm sure otherwise, he would have been beating his father in an early version of Chess every day in the underground. Did you know that the game was considered one of the most desirable skills of a knight from the 12th century onwards?"*

*"No, I didn't, but still... It's not fair."*

*"That is why our princess came onto the scene," he added teasingly, raising his thick eyebrows. This silenced his beloved, since she opened her mouth to speak, but closed it immediately after.*

*"Shall we continue?" Vincent asked, amused.*

*"Yes, please," Catherine said after taking another sip at her tea. "I think now is a good time to bring some complication into the plot," she added with a twinkle in her eyes.*

His deep chuckle made her smile. She was enjoying this story-telling hour immensely, and without even noticing it, her headache had subsided meanwhile.

"Well spotted," Vincent stated and relaxed back against the bedside again. His eyes wandered past the French door again. The bedroom bathed in the city light, which had a calming effect on him.

*"One day, the princess returned home to the castle from her daily walk with her forest friend and found her father, King Charles, waiting for her in her chamber."*

"I bet he came to tell her he felt the weight of his years and thought it was time she finally got married and ruled over the kingdom with her noble husband."

"Isn't that what usually happens in fairy tales?" Vincent teased.

"I'm doing it again," Catherine sighed with frustration, briefly hiding her face in her hands, "interrupting you when you are the storyteller here. Please, continue..."

The lion-man chuckled and then continued.

"Well then..."

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*"Why should I marry someone I have seen only once?" the princess cried.*

*"You couldn't wish for a better husband than Prince Elliot. He is well educated, charming, and the heir to the throne of one of the wealthiest and most powerful kingdoms in the world, which borders on ours. In union with him, together, you can rule both, his and our kingdom when the day comes. He will make sure that you and our people will be protected and safe," the king presented his case, bringing out arguments that he thought invincible.*

Catherine started pacing restlessly around the chamber. "But I don't love him!"

*The king stopped his daughter by holding her arms, trying to calm her down. "I only want what is best for you," he said quietly but with underlying urgency. "Elliot is a good man, and maybe it won't take long until you find that you can learn to love him."*

*The look in the princess' eyes expressed shock. "Learn?? Is that what you did with mother?" she asked in disbelief. "Of course, not!" denied her father adamantly. "Your mother, the queen, was the love of my life... But I was not so fussy when looking for a spouse as you have been, my dear."*

*"I would rather say you had better luck at finding your soul mate so soon," Catherine countered quietly, lowering her eyes.*

*The bitterness and pain were written all over her face, and the king wished he could make it easier for her. Little did he know that his child had fallen in love with a man-beast, a fugitive hunted by his own people. Yes, the princess was sure she was in love, only that the man of her dreams was not prince Elliot.*

*"Please, father, don't make me marry him," she pleaded, lifting her eyes to her parent again.*

*"I have no other choice... Please, understand," he begged her.*

Catherine shook her head, unable to stop the tears from falling. "I'm sorry, father... I can't!"

*She ran out of the chamber without leaving the king a chance to react. There was only one place she wished to go...*

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*She ran for a long time, without a desire to rest. The lush greens of the forest provided her with the much needed asylum, at least for a while. Wiping away her tears in an attempt to regain control of her emotions, her eyes searched for the only person she wished to see at that moment.*

*"Vincent, where are you?" she whispered desperately when she finally stopped.*

*"I'm here," the soft reply came from the shadow of a tree. As it happened, he felt her nearing and appeared at the right time at the right place to meet her.*



*Her reaction surprised him; Catherine ran into his arms, embracing him with relief but a stabbing feeling in her heart as well. For the first time in his life, Vincent knew what it felt like to be held by a woman. Nothing in his vivid imagination ever came even close to the burning feeling that washed over him, almost sweeping him off his feet, and for a moment, he forgot to breathe...*

*"Catherine, what happened?" he inquired with care, watching her lovely, but depressed, face when she pulled back.*

*"I am about to be married to a prince, someone I barely know. My father says it's for my protection and the well-being of the kingdom because he feels the time has come for a new ruler..."*

*A dark shadow fell over the lion-man's face as he stepped back from the princess, averting his face. "Is the prince a good man?" he asked.*

*"He is polite, generous, well-spoken..."*

*Vincent sighed and dared to look at her again. "Your father wants only the best for you," he said with a lump in his throat. "You should do as he asks of you."*

*A cold shiver ran through Catherine, and the long-held-back words finally made their way out. "But it is not the prince that I love..."*

*His eyes met hers, and Vincent knew in an instant who occupied her heart completely. Her affection for him had been evident for some time, but they never crossed the boundary of friendship - until now.*

*"It cannot be..." he whispered, although his heart was crying out to express his own feelings for her.*

*"We could run off together!" Catherine suggested eagerly, holding his hands. "Far away from here, deep into the forest where no one would ever find us..."*

*The anguish in her voice was making it harder for him to resist. "It would be no life for you, constantly watching your back... You would never be free anymore..."*

*"The only way I can be truly free is with you," the princess countered with a pleading look. "Only with you, I can be myself."*

*Vincent's resilience was crumbling quickly – he needed to leave before he gave in, and they both would be doomed to a life of fugitives.*

*"Then take the memory of me, of us..." he paused, swallowing hard when seeing the hope in her glistening eyes. "Take strength and courage from it and do what must be done."*

*He released her hands and reluctantly started to retreat. "I will never forget your kindness. Thank you for giving me a dream that I will keep deep within me for as long as I live." His voice broke as he watched her shake her head in denial, trying to stop him.*

*"Go, Catherine... Be happy..."*

*Before she could say anything more, Vincent vanished into the shrubbery behind him, and the only thing left of him was the image of his silhouette imprinted in Catherine's memory. She was devastated, and yet she didn't run after him. If this was his decision, she would respect it – even if it was a wrong one...*

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*He didn't know how much time had passed since he left her standing alone. Walking deeper and deeper into the forest, Vincent wished for the first time in his life that he would get lost in it and never find his way back. The green realm had been his sanctuary for many years, but right now, it felt like a prison from which he could never escape. His heart was aching, drowning in the sorrow of the memories of the time he had spent with Catherine. It was all a dream, an illusion that could never have lasted forever...*

*Deep in thought and unaware of the path he was walking on, he found himself on a clearing overgrown with tall grass and wildflowers. Vincent stopped abruptly and found cover behind the nearest tree, suddenly aware of the danger in an open space. Then he saw it - an old timber-beamed cottage with a crooked roof, sticking out from the thick shrubs surrounding it.*

*At first, he wanted to retreat to the forest, for contact with people was the last thing he was looking for. He was about to turn on his heel when the cottage front door opened with a creaking sound, and a man came out into the open. He*

was tall, dressed from head to toe in black, including a long black cloak with a cape covering his head. Vincent hid behind the tree again and watched what the man would do. A part of him was telling him to run away, but a voice deep within persuaded him to stay.

*"The time for retribution has come," said the man and his very deep, resounding voice made Vincent shiver involuntarily. "The king did not agree with my proposal yet again. It is time to show him the power of one man."*

*Putting down the cape, he looked upon the cloudless sky and closed his eyes. A chilling grin appeared on his face.*

*"The spirits are with us, Erlik," he said to the raven that had just landed on his outstretched arm, casually stroking the bird's shiny feathers. "Tomorrow, we will welcome a new dawn of mankind."*

*Vincent shivered at the mention of the raven's name. A long-forgotten memory flashed in his mind...*

*His father once told him a legend of a dark, evil sorcerer living somewhere in the ancient forest. He was outcast from his people for his evil deeds and since then lived alone, only with his raven, Erlik.*

*Vincent had always believed the story was only a legend, told by village folks to scare their children to prevent them from going too deep into the forest and getting lost. Never in his wildest dreams had he ever imagined that he would stand only a few feet away from the living man from the legend. What was this agreement proposed to the king the magician was talking about, though? The lion-faced man needed to know more, so he strained his sensitive ears again.*

*"I offered him a peaceful retirement, letting me take over the rule over the kingdom, and he dared to reject it! I was born to be a king! I am the strong one, not he!" The sorcerer threw his arms around in anger, making the raven, sitting on his arm, fly away. "For years, I have been pushed into the shadows, away from people... an outcast sneered at by society, but it is over now! Tomorrow will be the beginning of a new era..."*

*All at once, Vincent understood why the king suddenly so urgently insisted on Catherine getting married. The dark magician was the reason why the ruler was so desperate to get special protection for his child - and his country.*

*Stretching his arm out, the sorcerer invited the bird to sit on it again. "You know what these hands are capable of, Erlik, don't you? A bit of magic dust, and before a new day begins, I will have my own army. By daybreak, I will lead it to battle. I will make King Charles reconsider his resistance, and before the night falls tomorrow, no ruler in the world will contest my power."*

*Satisfied with his plan, the sorcerer walked back into his cottage, taking the raven with him.*

*Vincent didn't dwell on what he had heard for too long – the danger was clear and imminent, and there was no time to waste. He had to warn the king, and then...*

*First things first, though, he needed to get to the castle somehow. There was no way he could have approached it during daylight, he could have been exposed too easily. Darkness was his ally, though, so he had to wait until the sunset – then his time would be right.*

*Silently, he cast one last glance at the clearing before retreating into the forest. However, Vincent knew that before long, he would be back for the decisive act.*

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*The same night, veiled in his long, dark cloak, hiding in the shadows and avoiding the light of the torches, he dared to approach the castle gate. Soon, there would be a change of guards, and he knew that was his chance.*

*It was not the first time that Vincent appeared under the castle. Several times after nightfall in the past, his curiosity (and his loneliness) drew him to this place, observing it from his safe hideout. He knew it bustled with people during the day, yet it oozed with calmness and tranquillity at night. He liked watching the shadows play on the castle walls, feeling the comfort of the light of the torches, yet still feeling human presence with an occasional later passer-by or the watchmen guarding the royal residence.*

*The tower clock had struck ten when Vincent noticed the four guards leaving their posts and vanishing behind the gate. He sensed his only chance, and after searching the surrounding with his eyes, he stole upon the heavy iron gate and hastily dropped something on the dusty ground right in front of it. Then he immediately ran for cover again.*

*It took only a minute before the new guards appeared to take up their posts.*

*"Hey, what's this?" One of the watchmen picked up something from the ground at his feet. It was a letter, wrapped around with a leather strap.*

*"To Princess Catherine – Urgent," he read aloud, frowning.*

*"Right." His companion laughed. "Another fool trying to send a love letter to the princess."*

*The other guard had a strange feeling, though. His eyes searched the nearest surroundings. He couldn't truly explain it but he was gripped by an unpleasant foreboding. "I think I better deliver this," he said and turned on his heel.*

*Watching them from his cover, Vincent breathed a sigh of relief. It was up to Catherine now to speak to the king as soon as possible. He realised there was no time to idle and set out on his journey back to the forest. There was somewhere else he needed to be...*

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Vincent interrupted his narration and looked at Catherine. The expression on her face was one of deep interest but also of confusion.

"What is it, Catherine?" he asked, tilting his head.

"I was just thinking of something the sorcerer said," she mused. "He said, 'I was born to be the king...'"

"Yes?"

"Why would he say such a thing if---"

"Yes, Catherine, if." Vincent smiled when he interrupted her. "But we are not as far, yet," he teased.

Catherine nodded apologetically. "Of course, but I'm more than ready to hear more," she teased back.

Vincent leaned back with a contented smile and continued.

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*The moon was pale but still overhead when Vincent made his way back to the clearing. The early morning pushed the darkness of the night away, turning the sky into a purple and pink canvas. However, this time, the lion-man didn't remain hidden in the safety of the trees. He put up the hood on his cloak to partially conceal his face, and determined, he walked toward the cottage. In his mind, the confrontation with the dark magician was inevitable.*

*When he stopped at the front door, his hand reached out to knock, but suddenly, he heard a roaring sound in the back of the cottage. Noiselessly, he walked around the cottage and stopped around the corner, staying partially hidden from sight. What he saw almost took his breath away - amid the other side of the clearing, flapping his wings wide, roaring and standing on his strong hind legs was a giant, grey-scaled dragon...*

*Never in his life had Vincent seen a more majestic beast. Hypnotised by its sheer magnificence, the forest guardian forgot about his usual cautiousness and took a few steps forward, staring at the dragon in awe.*

*"He is the king of the forest," a deep, dark voice brought Vincent back to reality. He jerked his head towards it. "The leader of my army," the sorcerer boasted with a grin.*

*His tall, dark figure and the sly expression on his face made the lion-man shudder.*

*"You knew I would come," he stated with sudden certainty.*

*"Of course," replied the magician with satisfaction. "I've been waiting for you for years, ever since I'd seen you for the first time."*

*Vincent frowned with disbelief.*

*"Did you really think you were the only... human living in this forest all this time?" The sorcerer raised his thick, black eyebrows. "Right back then, I knew you could be of use to me one day. And that time has come today," he added.*

*His uninvited guest shook his head. "You are mistaken. I can be of no use to you."*

*A reverberating laughter cut through the crisp air. "I am never mistaken! Stars never lie. I saw you in their light many winters ago and waited for your arrival ever since then."*

*The dark magician turned his focus on the dragon, only a few feet away from them. His eyes widened with excitement as he watched the giant and restless animal pace in circles as if waiting for its master's orders.*

*"Is this your army?" Vincent asked doubtfully and hinted at the dragon. "I think you need a little more to defeat King Charles and his soldiers."*

*The sorcerer pierced the man beside him with a curious look. "So you know about my plan? Well then, at least we don't have to waste more time on explanations," he added sourly. "And as for your question... No. Let me show you..."*

*The magician reached into his cloak pocket and threw a handful of something glittery in the air. A sudden breeze picked the grains of the golden powder and carried them further towards the open space in front of them, surrounding the dragon. Two more dragons, lesser in statue than the first one, appeared out of the sparkling dust, flapping their wings for the first time.*

*"I can make hundreds of them in minutes," the sorcerer boasted triumphantly. "They could destroy not only the army but also everyone else in the castle. Everyone..." He looked at Vincent from the side. "And that's where you come in."*

*With horror, Vincent pondered on the terrifying prospect of the possible outcome of such an attack. Then he asked with confusion. "Why me?"*

*"Because in the castle lives someone you care about," the magician grinned. "At least, that was my impression on the lucky occasion when I saw you two together the other day," he added matter-of-factly. "So young, so passionate...", he mused before his face turned to a stone. "So foolish..."*

*Vincent tried to control himself, though the blood in his veins was boiling, and he was fighting his animal instinct to attack the evil beside him. Then his reason won over his emotions - he remembered the letter where he warned the princess, which she must have read by now. If the stars were aligned, there could still be hope.*

*"How do you think I could be of use to you?" he asked, seemingly calm.*

*"You could convince the king to surrender his power to me without a fight. I'm sure your lovely lady Catherine would gladly help you. Besides, your unusual... abilities might be of advantage."*

*Vincent glanced at his furry hands, each finger ending with a sharp claw. Was this evil magician expecting him to kill human beings for the greed of one man?*

*"Do you really think I would betray the people of my kingdom so easily?" he asked incredulously.*

*"Your kingdom??" The sorcerer questioned his words incredulously. "You have been hunted by those people! Why would you defend them if they want to kill you?"*

*"Their desire to kill is driven by their ignorance. They fear what they don't know," Vincent answered sadly. "I'd rather die than help turn them into slaves for the rest of their lives," he added adamantly, with a strained voice. "I may be capable of killing easily, but I would never serve the dark side. I have come here to prevent you from turning your plan into reality."*

*The sorcerer couldn't hold back a laugh. "And how do you imagine doing it?"*

*"We can solve this without violence. You will refrain from spreading your magic outside your home and leave the king and his people alone. We can all live in peace."*

*"That's childish and stupid," the magician sneered. "We don't live in a fantasy world, where all creatures big and small live happily in peace. Life is about the survival of the fittest and reaching for your dreams by any means. It always has been."*

*"Life is not only about surviving. It's also about living. You could still choose the right path and create new dreams," Vincent argued.*

*"The only right path is the one of power!" the sorcerer stressed stubbornly.*

*"Then... there is no other way for me but fight."*

*The eyes of the dark man narrowed, flashing with hate. "As you please..."*

*With a swift move, he pointed at Vincent but stared at the dragon. "He is yours! Do what must be done!" he shouted angrily at the giant creature.*

*The dragon stood erect, letting out a bone-chilling roar and breathing fire all around before standing on all four legs again. Then his eyes settled on the lion-man, piercing him with a cold gaze, ready to strike any moment.*

*Vincent noticed that the sorcerer stepped back, watching the scene unveil from a safe distance. He briefly eyed the other two dragons - they reminded him of the guards, waiting for an order from their captain, patiently standing behind.*

*There was no time to dwell on them, though, as their leader attacked his intended victim immediately. Luckily, Vincent was fast and skilful on his feet, outrunning the frightening creature with little effort, often predicting the beast's next move. He even lashed out at the dragon with his clawed hands several times, but more out of reflex than to hurt it. However, he knew that he had no chance to hold it off his back forever, especially without a weapon. He needed to do something else to stop the dangerous fight.*

*Vincent knew he was facing a mortal threat, and yet he couldn't help but feel a strange connection to the dragon raging against him - this was a battle between two beasts. Or maybe more? As his physical strength was being tested to the maximum, suddenly he saw the dragon's head change shapes in flashes - he saw the face of a handsome young man with a crown of a prince, then the roguish face of the sorcerer, and then... his own, animal face...*

*Confused, he shook his head to chase the images away. This must have surely been another trick of the dark man himself...*

*"Come on, don't fight your true nature!" the sorcerer challenged him from a safe distance. "Don't be a coward and act as the beast that you were born!"*

*As if by a swish of a magic wand, Vincent suddenly froze on his spot, standing tall, exactly at the moment as the dragon directed his enraged eyes at him again. The look in the lion-man's eyes changed - with great focus but also calmness, he looked into his giant opponent's eyes. His direct, but inoffensive, gaze surprised the fire-breathing creature and stopped it in its attempt to attack again. Only then did Vincent notice that the dragon's eyes were changing colours, from black to caramel-brown, emerald-green and steel-blue.*

*"What are you fighting for?" Vincent suddenly called at his opponent. "He is only using you and will destroy you as soon as he reaches his goal when you and your brothers help him to defeat the king!"*

*To his astonishment, Vincent was convinced that the dragon was thinking about his words for a moment. There was something in those peculiar eyes telling him this creature wasn't just an "ordinary" dragon...*

*"Kill him! What are you waiting for? I brought you to life to kill!" the sorcerer shouted at his magical creation from the top of his lungs, unease and sudden fear evident in his eyes. But the dragon kept staring at Vincent.*

*"It doesn't have to be this way," Vincent spoke calmly, his eyes focused on the majestic being in front of him. "You could live free and at peace with everyone."*

*Slowly and very carefully, still watching his opponent's eyes, he reached with his hand towards the dragon's snout. Surprisingly, after a short, tense moment, the beast allowed him the contact, and its aggression and rage vanished like candle smoke.*

*The unexpected turn of events changed the sorcerer into a furious monster. Seeing the disobedience of his own creation and his plans falling like a house of cards, he ran towards Vincent and directed his hand at him, wanting to crush him with his dark magic. But before he managed to do or say anything, the dragon opened his mouth and released devastating flames at the raging man. One mighty breath of fire was all it took to overpower the evil magician and make him disappear with a scream in flames and smoke forever.*

*Vincent stared at the dying flames where, only a moment ago, the mighty sorcerer stood in all his glory. There was no trace of him now. Sudden fatigue gripped Vincent, and he bowed his head, only to be surprised by the sound of a deep, vibrating voice.*

*"Now you can live free and at peace with everyone, too," the dragon said.*

*Vincent tilted his head, surprised that the majestic creature in front of him could speak. But he had no time to ponder on his discovery, for a sudden light breeze picked up, and all three dragons slowly disappeared in it, turning into the gold dust they were created from.*

*"Vincent!" a joyous call reached his ears, and he turned around swiftly. For the second time in two days, Princess Catherine ran into his arms. As he held her, with pleasure but also relief, over her shoulder he noticed the king and his soldiers standing in a wide half-circle not far away from them, watching - with curiosity, but also respect...*

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The sound of Catherine blowing her nose made Vincent stop and turn to look at her.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she apologised, her eyes glistening. "It was so... moving..."

Her emotional statement made him smile.



"I'm pleased you liked it," he replied. "Usually, I tell stories only to the children, so I may have slipped into a bit more... romantic side of things."

He lowered his eyes and Catherine could have sworn he was blushing. "You know I love the romantic side of things, especially when it comes from you," she said fondly. Suddenly her smile faded. "Wait, you haven't finished the story yet..."

Vincent relaxed again, though Catherine noticed the melancholy on his face.

"There's not much more to tell," he stated hesitantly. "Vincent's selfless and brave act earned him respect from the people in the kingdom, who didn't fear the beast anymore and saw no reason to hunt it anymore. Someone who was willing to sacrifice his own life for the king couldn't have been vicious, could he?"

The king was very grateful to him, although he was surprised to see his daughter feel so bound to a man with such distinctive looks. The princess confessed to Vincent that she would love to stay with him, for she was deeply in love.

However, Vincent was convinced, that they were too different, and there was no way for them to share a life together. He decided to stay in the forest, the place that became his second home, and be its loyal guardian, and the princess and the king promised him to help protect the forest and all living creatures in it forever..."

Catherine felt as hit by an express train. "This cannot be," she whispered, deflated. "There is still something missing, and also..." her voice faded in the stillness of the bedroom. "It can't end like this; there must be a way! They deserve... more..."

When Vincent dared to look into her eyes, the sheer despair in them almost broke his heart. He sighed loudly and leaned his head back against the bed. A small smile settled on his lips.

"All right, Catherine," he said eventually and rested his arms on his knees again. "It's time to finish the story. That way it should be..."

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*"I still can't believe my father didn't question anything when I told him about your letter," Catherine mused, when they sat side by side on their favourite spot by the brook. "He trusted me, and seeing the danger, he acted immediately."*

*"Your father knows you and loves you, Catherine," Vincent replied knowingly. "He knew you wouldn't lie to him in such a serious matter. His kingdom came first; anything else had to be put aside for later."*

*"I think you're right," she acknowledged with a small smile. "By the way, do you know who the sorcerer was, for real?"*

*Vincent shook his head, his curiosity aroused.*

*"He was my father's brother... He was convinced that he was the chosen one, that his brother was too weak, too kind to lead a kingdom. His insatiable desire for becoming the ruler, although he was the second in line, had led him astray on the path of evil. That is why, many years ago, my father sent him into exile away from our kingdom. He had no other choice to keep peace for our people, although it broke his heart. It seems his brother's thirst for power had never diminished, though. No one knew he had returned."*

*"Staying away from people in his cottage deep inside the forest, keeping it low so that he could be forgotten and unrecognizable... until the time would come to strike again," Vincent mused. "He knew people never dared to go too deep into the forest because they feared the 'beast'..."*

*Catherine nodded, and her eyes wandered across the glittering water surface into the distance. "When I saw you with the dragon... I've never been so frightened," she admitted quietly, shaking her head, then looked at him again in awe. "How did you know that it would listen to you and understand what you say?"*

*Vincent chuckled. "I didn't. All I did was hope," he replied. "I believe that every creature has something decent in them, something that can be spoken to without using violence, no matter how good or bad they appear."*

*Her smile was contagious. "Some people would call you naive," she teased.*

*"I know," he agreed, shrugging. "But what is life if not hoping for the best even in the face of the worst and ugliest that we can ever imagine? To give up is easy; it's the hope and believing into something better that moves us forward."*

*He paused. "Besides, no living being, whether good or bad, wishes to be someone's slave. So of course, the dragon listened."*

*The princess watched her 'beast' with admiration and that deep and powerful emotion that makes life worth living. In her still so young life, she had never met anyone with such strong, yet simple conviction and belief in goodness and in people. Even when he was hunted, he didn't seek revenge but rather blamed the people's deeds on their ignorance. Was it even possible to survive in the world with this attitude? She didn't know. All she knew was that she wanted to believe. Vincent made her believe...*

*"The curse of the beast is broken," the lion-man stated with pretended enthusiasm. Although his life was about to become peaceful again, his heart dreamed of things he was sure could never be.*

*"You will never be hunted anymore," Catherine said, smiling. "From now on, my people will never do you harm. They will get a chance to know the real you. They will respect you, protect and love you. From now on, you are free..."*

*"Free," he pondered. "Everyone has their own definition of freedom. Free doesn't always mean happy..."*

*"What do you mean?" Catherine knitted her brows.*

*Vincent sighed and stared at the bubbling water in front of him.*

*"For all my life, I had had to accept what I am, my appearance, my animal instincts... We can't change what we were born as. We can only influence who we become and what we do with the life we were given." It was becoming more difficult for him to speak, especially when the princess gently took his clawed hand in hers. "And that is why we have to part ways..."*

*Her heart sank. "I don't care about your appearance, Vincent. I fell in love with you because of who and not what you are!"*

*"A fish and a bird can fall in love, but they cannot find a home to live together," he breathed sadly. "You deserve better, Catherine."*

*"I know I do," she agreed eagerly. "That's why I need and want to stay with you."*

*There was little he could have said to oppose. His mind understood that sometimes we need to follow our heart even if there is every reason not to. Seeing the determination in her eyes, the genuine desire to share her life with him, Vincent was humbled - and overpowered.*

*"Life is never perfect, Vincent; none of us is perfect. But as you said, we can influence what we do with the life that we were given." Her hand reached for his face. "What you and I were given was a true gift. We can't waste it..."*

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*And so it happened that Princess Catherine and Vincent, the man-beast guardian of the ancient forest, remained living in the forest. Together with King Charles and all the people in his kingdom, they protected the forest and lived in peace and harmony with all its living creatures forever since. They lived happily ever after, and maybe they still do...*

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When Vincent finished his story, his eyes wandered to Catherine's face. She had tears in her eyes but was smiling at him. His heart rejoiced at the sight.

"Good enough for a happy ending?" he teased, with a twinkle in his eyes.

She took his hand and pressed a gentle kiss on its back. "It can always be better," she replied quietly, but her dazzling smile didn't fade. "But it will do... for now."

Vincent noticed the paleness had disappeared from Catherine's face, and her nose didn't resemble a clown's nose anymore either. He also felt her inner restlessness was gone, as well.

"I think you're on the mend, Catherine," he said; an amused smile played on his lips.

"I've got the best cure for my illness, don't I?" she teased with raised eyebrows.

His deep chuckle echoed in the semi-darkness of the bedroom. He lifted himself from the floor and reached for the now empty cup on Catherine's bedside. With one look at her and a sweet smile, he turned on his heel.

"You're leaving?" Catherine asked, upset.

"Yes," he answered, looking back at her, and he paused for a moment before adding, "to refill your cup, my princess."

Her disappointment turned into joy and a beaming smile. She snuggled more into her covers and watched him disappear into the kitchen again.

"I'm glad you... I mean Vincent... didn't kill the dragon," she remarked when he returned with a steaming cup in his hands. "I've never imagined you as a dragon slayer."

Vincent smiled and passed the tea to her.

"And how have you imagined me, Catherine?" he asked, tilting his head when his natural curiosity got the better of him.

It took only seconds for her to come up with an answer.

"More as a... dragon whisperer," she replied softly and lowered her eyes to take a sip from the hot drink in her hands.

The gentle look in his eyes was the only reply to her compliment. He sat on the bed next to her, watching her with his usual, quiet intensity.

"Vincent, I know that life is not a fairy tale," Catherine stated with a streak of melancholy on her face. "However... that doesn't mean that we can't add a bit of magic to it sometimes to make it happier, can we?"

The hope in her bright eyes touched his heart, and he couldn't help but nod in agreement. "Yes, we surely can," he answered quietly, smiling.

She reached for his hand, craving closer physical contact with him, at least for a moment.

Vincent was dazed by his feelings for the woman on the bed. Suddenly, he remembered something and reached for the inside pocket of his cloak.

"I almost forgot," he said, producing an old volume. "Classics and poetry are wonderful and soul-enriching, but I thought this might be a nice reading for a change. A little different kind of entertainment."

Catherine looked at the title on the worn-out cover of the book in Vincent's hands.

"Grimms' Fairy Tales," she read and chuckled. "You never fail to surprise me, Vincent."

"Magic, Catherine, remember? Sometimes we all need a little bit of magic to make our life happier..."

END

*"And for us, this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them, it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures... had only been the cover and the title page: now at least they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story, which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before."*

- C.S. Lewis: The Chronicles of Narnia: The Last Battle -

