

Surprise Me On Christmas Eve

by Michaela Buzsaki Struchova



Note: This story is a prequel to the story “When The Moon Meets The Sun.” Although it’s not necessary to read them together/in order, it makes a few references in this story clearer.



The sound of footsteps rushing down the tunnel cut through a peaceful atmosphere lingering in the underground air that early afternoon. It was three days before Christmas Day, and the Tunnels had been in a cheerful mood for days, especially their youngest inhabitants. Nothing could dampen their expectations, although Christmas Below was a much more modest occasion concerning the presents.

A sudden thudding sound interrupted the runner’s pace.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Pascal!” said a little girl of about nine years, with shoulder-long dark curls and big blue eyes. It was already the third person she almost ran over on her mission that day.

“No problem, Angelica,” replied the tunnel pipe master with a smile. “Where are you off to in such a hurry?”

“I’m late for the Great Hall. Vincent and Catherine are surely wondering where I am.” She looked nervously in the direction of her destination.

“Oh, I almost forgot! It’s the big day today, right?” Pascal asked. “Yes! I’ve been waiting for so long, and now I’m late... Sorry, I must hurry!”

Angelica flashed a smile at Pascal and ran off again, leaving the pipe master alone. *Every year the same*, he said to himself. *At least it’s not my turn to look after them this year.*

He chuckled and continued on his journey.

Meanwhile, the little girl reached the steep staircase at the end of the Chamber of the Winds. She held her hands in front of her face, trying to protect it from the force of the gusts, her hair creating a halo around her head. Finally, she reached the bottom and stood at the massive door leading to the Great Hall. She banged on the door, making sure to be heard inside.

It only took a moment until the door slowly opened, letting the wind in. Angelica looked up and saw the face of her favourite tunnel dweller.

“I’m so sorry, Vincent!” started Angelica, her day obviously being one of those made of a series of apologies. “I couldn’t find my stupid shoe!” she cried in frustration.

Vincent slightly raised his eyebrows.

“Oh... I’m sorry, my *shoe*,” the girl quickly corrected herself. “Jay must have hidden it from me last night because he was angry with me. We had an argument,” she explained further, raising her voice in an attempt to drown the sound of the wind. “I told him there is no Santa, but he didn’t want to believe me and started a fight, persuading me I was wrong. To which I told him I was not because I’m old enough now to know it wouldn’t be physically possible for one man to fly around the whole world in one night and have presents for every single child. He would have to have thousands of sacks and I’m not even talking about the fact that reindeer can’t fly and that Santa couldn’t go down and up the chimney millions of times in one night without getting stuck in one or at least slipping down and breaking his...”

She suddenly realised Vincent was smiling in amusement. Her friend knew how different Angelica and her younger brother were in their belief in the bearded man in a red suit, and the girl’s vivid attempt to rationalise her thought entertained him.

“I’m sure you can clear your argument with Jay later,” he said calmly, his gravelly soft voice breaking through the wind. He reached out his hand, bidding her to enter. “You have come at the right time. We have only just started.”

Angelica accepted his hand, they walked inside and Vincent pushed the heavy door behind them, securing it with a beam. The sudden silence almost surprised the girl. But then she heard the cheerful sound of children’s laugh and banter further down in the Hall, where her friends were gathered around the hall’s centrepiece. At that sight, her

eyes brightened, and excitement filled her from head to toe. She smiled, breathing a sigh of relief.

She would not miss the annual Christmas tree decorating.



Catherine hung another handmade ornament on one of the tree branches and stepped back to look at the current progress.

“Cullen’s carving skills are wonderful,” she said dreamily, admiring the details of the little wooden angel she had just hung up and other wooden figures decorating the Tunnel Christmas tree.

“From the moment he came to the Tunnels, he was trying out different things,” Vincent replied. “When a few years later Father mentioned that Arthur knocked over the box with the old glass ornaments, Cullen didn’t need more encouragement. And even when, with time, Helpers gave us some new glass ornaments, Father likes the wooden figures the most. I haven’t seen Cullen more proud than on the day his ornaments graced our Christmas tree for the first time.”

Catherine chuckled. “I think my contribution will look quite poor next to his and others’ masterpieces,” she said when she took out a hand-made ornament from the bag at her feet. It was a hand-sewn heart made of various red patterned fabric pieces.

Vincent tilted his head and smiled. “You made it with love and therefore, it is perfect,” he said. “And what greater gift could you give than your heart?”

“Hot chocolate with marshmallows,” Kipper remarked as he hung a paper star on the branch nearby. The other children giggled.

Catherine chuckled too, especially when she saw Vincent trying to hide his amusement.

“You know you could have told me before, Kipper,” she seemingly scolded the teenager. “I know of a wonderful coffee shop and cake place. They sell the most amazing hot chocolate...” She closed her eyes, pretending to imagine the smell and the taste of the favourite winter drink. “They put a pinch of cinnamon and chilli in it...” she continued, teasing the boy.

“Chilli?” Kipper raised his eyebrow despite salivating at the prospect of the taste of that strangely flavoured drink.

“It enhances the chocolate flavour,” Vincent explained.

Catherine looked at him, surprised. “I see someone has had a training with William on the matter of all things sweet,” she said, amused.

”*Chocolate Lover’s Paradise*,” Vincent offered with a mischievous smile, reaching for another ornament in the box. “Father’s study, the second aisle on the upper lever, the third shelf from the top.”

Everybody laughed, including Catherine, who revelled in the fact that she discovered a guilty pleasure in her beloved. Suddenly she felt even happier that the duty of the adult supervision of the children at the Christmas tree decoration fell on her, Vincent and Jamie that year - the obvious sentimental reason for Catherine being it was her first holiday celebrated as a Tunnel dweller.

"It's all right, Vincent," Jamie patted her friend on his arm. "Even heroes can't be perfect."

That earned her another chuckle from the decorators.

"I'm so glad I'm old enough to help with the decorating this year," Angelica remarked, admiring the sparkly glass snowflake Vincent was just hanging up on a branch. It was last year's gift from Sebastien. "This is way more fun than pretending to believe in Santa Claus and telling the babies in the nursery that they must be good to make it on the Nice-List," she added, rolling her eyes.

"You don't believe in Santa?" Catherine asked.

"Please!" Another roll of the eyes of the nine-year-old. "I could give you a full list of rational explanations why such a person can't exist."

Vincent unsuccessfully tried to hide his smile and decided to let Catherine have a little fun without explaining the nature of the girl's festive beliefs - or the lack of them.

"All right, I'm all ears," Catherine said with genuine interest.

"No!!!" A chorus of six children cried at once, making the woman freeze in her position.

"I'm sorry, Catherine," Zach said, more gently, "but let's say Angelica's lists are... quite long." He raised his eyebrows, hoping to get the thought across. The aforementioned spoil-sport didn't seem to be bothered by the lack of interest from her children's counterparts.

"I remember the Christmas when I stopped believing in him."

All eyes turned briefly to Samantha, who had a pensive expression on her face. "It was five years ago. I had just turned eight. Father was reading us *The Night Before Christmas* and it suddenly hit me... How could Santa climb down a chimney here? We don't have any in the tunnels. I couldn't believe none of the children ever thought about it."

"See? That's my argument number one," Angelica jumped in victoriously.

"Anyway," Samantha continued. "I sneaked out of the bedroom that night and saw Father sitting at a desk in his study attempting to wrap a couple of books in brown paper. One of them was one that Vincent got as a Christmas present that year. I realised Santa was just a story the adults tell little children to bribe them into their best behaviour."

"Some children can't be bribed with anything," Jamie remarked, glancing at Zach. "What?" he asked, shrugging. "It's not my fault that no one could appreciate my *lively* ways in my early days."

“Lively ways, right, that’s what you call it…” Jamie raised her eyebrows, shaking her head.

Vincent followed the youngsters’ exchange with amusement, not suppressing a chuckle anymore. He remembered everything, including Zach’s *lively* ways back then – outweighed by his intelligence and kindness. The almost fifteen-year-old boy was as dear to his heart as all the children in the Tunnels, the younger and the older ones.

“We all have always appreciated your lively ways, Zach,” he said. “Perhaps some more than others, but we have, especially because you listen and accept advice.”

Zach’s face lit up with pride - Vincent’s words were greatly valued by everyone.

“I can’t wait for you to read *A Christmas Carol* on Christmas Eve again, Vincent,” said Geoffrey quietly, and his hazel eyes got brighter. “It’s one of my favourite parts of the holidays.” He smiled, a cherished moment appearing in his memory. The maned man was touched by the boy’s words, smiling at him in return.

”The day I met you was when you were reading it to other children in Father’s study,” Geoffrey concluded fondly.

“You were one of our Christmas children, as we call them, arriving from the orphanage two days before Christmas.”

”Yes. I was lucky that one of the people working there was a Helper,” the boy replied. “It was the best day of my life, knowing that somebody wanted me.”

Catherine listened to their recalling of memories with mixed feelings. She was touched by the way they met and obviously struck a deep bond of friendship and trust, but also sad when recalling Geoffrey’s words of how no one ever wanted to adopt him when he was in the orphanage. Her heart went out to the boy who would have loved and worshipped anyone with a kind and intelligent approach and yet, all he ever got Above was rejection.

“How about you, Catherine?” Jamie inquired. “How was Christmas for you when you were a child?”

Catherine thought for a moment, then smiled.

“My Mum and Dad used to tell me stories at the Christmas tree when I was little. My mum was making up stories about wondrous places, good people and magical creatures doing kind things for others.” Warmth filled her heart. “We used to snuggle up under the tree and my parents were taking turns in entertaining me. I always fell asleep after some time and my Dad had to carry me to my bed.” She chuckled, but then her smile faded a little, momentary sadness from her parents’ passing stung her.

“Tell us a story, Catherine!” little Kate demanded, excited.

The other children suddenly turned to the woman, and their faces revealed they were interested as well.

Catherine looked at Vincent, a little hesitant, but when he encouraged her with a nod and a smile, she sat down at the nearest chair and let the others find their places to sit

around her. Vincent leaned against a table on the side, folded his arms on his chest and waited with interest.

“Once upon a time, there was a young woman,” Catherine started. “She had everything she could have ever dreamt of, but her life was incomplete, for she was missing one thing – true love. But that all changed one night when she... lost her way and met a stranger who helped her to find it again...”

Vincent was listening to the story of his own experience, albeit fictionalised and a bit adjusted – the fatal night when his and Catherine’s paths crossed for the very first time. His mind wandered back to that time when everything was so new and unexplored. How far have they come since then? How many sacrifices did they have to make? It was all worth it, though. How different their lives could have been! How emptier...

“... and because she was missing her friend badly,” Catherine came to the end of her story, “she didn’t wish for any Christmas gifts that year. All she wished for was to see her friend again, to have him back in her life, for she knew that her life would never be complete without him anymore...”

The silence that filled the Great Hall lasted a few seconds when Kipper asked.

“Did she ever see her friend again?”

Catherine’s eyes travelled to Vincent, seeing the contented expression and a warm smile on his face. “Not that night, but as most fairy tales have a happy ending, she did soon after. They became one heart and one soul forever.”

While other children smiled and got up to continue decorating the tree, Geoffrey remained in his seat.

“Thank you for sharing that story with us, Catherine. It was beautiful,” he said knowingly.

His perceptivity left no doubt in his mind who the story was about. He was genuinely grateful for the privilege of hearing the story of Vincent and Catherine’s beginning since he knew how private they were about their relationship. Especially after the perils and heartache they went through the previous year, it was natural that every moment they shared was precious and they wanted to keep it safe in their own private world.

“Love is for sharing, so why not do it, especially at Christmas?” she remarked with a smile and winked at him.

Geoffrey nodded with a smile and joined the other children at the tree.

Jamie couldn’t help a quiet remark to her friend.

“He is right, Catherine. It was beautiful. But I can’t believe they didn’t understand you were talking about yourself.”

With that, she left to help the children.

Catherine chuckled and walked over to Vincent. Together they were watching the young decorators at work. Vincent’s enigmatic smile piqued her interest.

“I see you enjoyed my story,” she teased, looking forward to his response.

“You are an excellent storyteller, Catherine,” he replied, amused, still observing the children. “Real life writes the best stories.” He turned to face her. “Speaking of which, I have an errand to run. Do you think you and Jamie can manage without me for a while?”

The quite unusual request from Vincent surprised her a little, for he had never abandoned his duty if the reason wasn't some emergency. The worry in her face and heart made him take her hand and squeeze it.

“Do not worry; it's nothing serious, but I can't postpone it for later,” he explained. That (and the peace and happiness she felt through the bond) calmed her down, and she smiled again.

“Sure, we'll be fine. Just do what you need to do,” she said and on impulse, pressed a light kiss on his lips.

Only the giggle from nearby made her aware that it was the first time they had shown such intimacy in front of other Tunnel dwellers. Vincent chuckled, and seeing Catherine's mild embarrassment, he squeezed her hand again.

“I'll pick up Jacob in the nursery on the way back,” he added and then left, leaving her slightly flushed.

Their living together was still very new, and although they loved finally sharing a life together and with their son, the favourable reaction from everyone in the Tunnels was still something almost miraculous to her. After the terrible year they had, it almost sounded too good to be true. *I better get used to it and enjoy it to the fullest*, she told herself and sighed with contentment.

In the middle of her reverie, Catherine noticed Samantha suddenly standing next to her. She looked a bit uncertain as if wanting to ask a question but not sure whether or not she could.

“What is it, Samantha?” Catherine asked softly.

“I was just wondering...,” the girl started and leaned closer to her friend before whispering. “What's it like to kiss Vincent?”



Mouse's chamber was as usually full of gizmos and bits from all over the Below and Above. Everywhere Vincent looked, there was something to admire – finished and unfinished machines or other technical projects the young man had been tirelessly working on, colourful glass pieces and balls, souvenirs from Above... and Arthur, of course, the ever-present and mischievous furry friend of the Tunnel tinker.

“Mouse?” Vincent called, searching the chamber for his friend. “Here!” came the response from the back of the chamber.

Mouse climbed from under the large working table standing there, holding a golden wire in his hand.

“Arthur’s playing tricks on Mouse again,” he complained and turned to the animal that meanwhile made itself comfortable on the only empty spot on the table. “Bad Arthur! Wire is no toy!”

Vincent suppressed a smile, pondering how much the pet racoon resembled the nature of its owner.

“Have you finished the present I asked you for?” he asked then.

Mouse immediately changed tune and his eyes lit up with excitement. He raised his hand, indicating Vincent to wait, and he started rummaging the table for the requested object. When he finally found it, he victoriously showed it to his friend.

“Finished today morning!” the tinker exclaimed proudly. “Not much time for it but turned out fine.”

Vincent reached for a small leather pouch and noticed that his hand trembled for a second – from the anticipation.

“I apologise for not giving you more time but I didn’t have what you needed earlier than the day before yesterday, as you know,” he said.

Mouse was eagerly waiting for his friend’s verdict. Vincent slipped his index finger into the pouch and carefully pulled out something small and shiny. As he turned it, it sparkled briefly in the candlelight, just as Vincent’s eyes. The flutter in his heart gave away how much this meant to him.

“Mouse...” he breathed, loving the look and the feel of the ring in his hand. “You have done a wonderful job. Thank you.”

The younger man could burst with joy. “For Catherine!” he said, thrilled. Vincent’s face shone with gratitude. “Remember, it’s a secret.”

The tinker straightened himself and ran his hand over his mouth in a quick move, indicating his lips were sealed.

“Mouse can keep a secret!”

Although his mind had some doubts about the truthfulness of that statement, Vincent smiled and patted his friend on his shoulder.

“For Catherine...” he said and hid the ring in the pouch again, which he put in his cloak pocket.

Christmas Eve should be a very special one this year...

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Deck the halls with bows of holly...

Catherine couldn’t resist humming a beloved Christmas carol as she was hanging a crystal ballerina on the small tree in her apartment. After a period of drama and pain,

her heart was full of joy and love, enjoying her new life with the man she loved and the child their love created.

It was the last time she would be decorating in her old place, for she was already in the process of emptying the apartment and renting it out to Peter Alcott's niece. Living with Vincent and their son Jacob in the Tunnels and the plan she had on her mind would mean the apartment would be empty most of the time. Catherine wanted to give it to Lucy, but the young woman refused, insisting on paying rent to her friend until she could afford to buy it from her.

It will be strange to leave this place behind... It holds so many beautiful memories...

Catherine took a deep breath to shake off the melancholy and imagined Vincent seeing the tree when he entered the apartment the next day, on Christmas Eve. They planned to spend one more night there after the festive dinner in the Tunnels. She turned on the fairy lights on the tree. In the semidarkness of the living room, the tree twinkled as if lots of colourful fairies sat on its branches. As she sat back on her heels and looked at the little sparkling star on top of the tree, Catherine opened her mouth in awe, an enchanted expression settling on her face.

After all she had been through, she was much more sensitive to little things that many people take for granted. Life itself was a rare gift to her, and she appreciated and lived through everything with much more intensity than before.

Her mind wandered back to earlier that day...

Vincent shut the heavy door of the Great Hall behind him and followed his father as they walked to the Christmas tree.

"Oh my, you have done a truly wonderful job, all of you!" Jacob exclaimed, his eyes burning brightly.

"Catherine really knows how to decorate, Father," Jamie remarked, acknowledging her friend's skills. "She even told us a Christmas story."

"I just can't help it. Christmas is my favourite time of year, and because last year I couldn't..." The new Tunnel dweller went quiet, unwilling to return to the traumatic experiences from the previous twelve months.

Vincent took her hand, trying to chase the nightmare away. "It will be the more beautiful this year," he said, looking at her with conviction and promise, and was rewarded with a grateful smile.

"Yes, I'm sure it will," Father agreed with a smile, despite feeling a lump in his throat. Everything was different twelve months ago – they thought Catherine was lost forever.

"I hope Jake didn't cause you trouble, Father," she changed the topic.

"Not at all," Jacob replied truthfully. "You know Mary... She's been fussing about him as much as about every little child, bless her soul. I barely had the chance to hold him for a minute. She must have worn him out because she fell asleep just before I left them to get here."

The collective chuckle lightened the atmosphere. Then Vincent spoke to the youngsters. "Thank you all for coming and lending a hand to create this masterpiece. You can return now and look forward to tomorrow."

He turned to the adults. "I will let them out."

"I'll go as well," Jamie jumped in. "I promised I'll help Mouse to finish his latest 'gizmo'", she rolled her eyes at the last word, making Catherine chuckle. They both knew that Jamie secretly enjoyed spending time with Mouse, regardless of how much he tested her patience and imagination.

The children said their thank you's and bye's and followed Vincent and Jamie to the door. When he was out of hearing, Jacob turned to Catherine and lowered his voice.

"Is it ready then?" he inquired with keen interest.

"It is," Catherine answered, sharing his enthusiasm. "I will tell him tomorrow, after the festive dinner, in my apartment." She paused, and a trace of uncertainty overshadowed her thrill for a moment. "What if he doesn't like it, Father?"

Jacob turned around to check his son hadn't returned yet, then took her hand and squeezed

it.
"He will love it, Catherine," he said, smiling. "Of that I am sure."

"Thank you... for supporting me...us." Her voice was equally quiet, but in her case, due to how moved she was by his affection and encouragement. "How could I not?" He stroked her cheek, expressing his great fondness of her. "Long ago, at the very beginning, I was a fool... I am not anymore. At least, I hope so." He chuckled.

Catherine couldn't reply because Vincent had just returned to join them at that moment. However, she couldn't deny Jacob a warm smile and a little nod of her head before taking Vincent's hand and leaning her head on his shoulder...

The smile wasn't leaving her face. Looking at the final look of her small Christmas tree, she was satisfied. She was sure Vincent would appreciate it. She wasn't as sure about the other thing she had in mind, but her anticipation was greater than fear of rejection. Therefore, after one last look at her work, she unplugged the fairy lights and stood up to tidy up. With the tree finished, everything was ready for the alone time with Vincent the next day.

Catherine put her jacket on, grabbed her tote bag and keys, ready to leave. At the last moment, her eyes glanced at the balcony French door. A wave of nostalgia almost overwhelmed her.

We'll make new memories... and add them to the beautiful ones we already have...

Finally, a smile returning to her face, she turned towards the front door, turned off the lights and left the apartment.

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"Okay, good, okay, fine!" Mouse exclaimed with excitement. "Mouse always happy to help!" he added.

"You always do such a wonderful job, but it's really beautiful," Catherine praised the young man.

"Only added the little gizmo..." he blushed. Ever since their first encounter, his friend had a very special place in his heart, and her good opinion was very important to him.

"But a very special one. Thank you again."

Mouse flashed a smile and glanced at the bed.

"Vincent will be very happy tonight," he said, grinning.

It wasn't the first time Catherine realised his childlike innocence has its limits too. "I hope so," she laughed, then raised her eyebrows. "But not just because of the dress," she scolded him.

A chuckle preceded Mouse's turning on the heel, intending to leave the chamber. He was getting hungry, and the thought of William's delicacies made him salivate. He reminded himself to make sure Arthur gets something nice, too.

"Oh, and Mouse?" he heard Catherine call after him.

He turned around like lightning and waited.

"As we said before... It's a secret. No one knows about it," she reminded him. *Well, apart from Father.*

"Sure... Mouse can keep a secret!" he promised and ran away.

Left alone in the chamber, Catherine laughed, then exhaled contentedly and reached for the dress spread out on the large bed covered with a quilt. The rich burgundy-red velvet felt soft and inviting in her hands. The dress was long, with long sleeves and a wide and low neckline - in a way simple and majestic at the same time. The red colour was striking, though. She had never seen anyone Below wear such a colour, apart from Vincent. She loved the burgundy-red jumper he wore occasionally, and which she had never seen him wear before her disappearance.

Oh well, Maybe the dress was a bit posh for the Tunnel world, but after all they had been through in the last year, she thought they deserved a little reward. Of course, she couldn't help but provide Vincent with a matching vest (skilfully sewn by Mary).

A sudden thrill filled her veins as she checked herself in the dress in the not-too-large antique mirror standing against the wall by the massive wardrobe. She hadn't felt so happy for a very long time. First, Vincent's breakdown, then her kidnapping and balancing on death's door... All of these had left deep scars on her soul. Step by step, day by day, they were healing (or at least lessening the pain in her heart) - with the help of Vincent, their son, Father and all her friends Below, as well as Above. Catherine knew her recovery wasn't a short-distance run, though; it was a marathon...

She swiftly chased the ghost of the past away, put her winter coat on and opened the bottom drawer of her chest of drawers nearby. At first, looking over her shoulder to make sure Vincent hadn't returned yet, she took out a small box, wrapped around with a red ribbon, and put it in her coat pocket. Then, smiling, she walked over to the crib next to the bed, picking little Jacob up and pulling him close. Her son was already dressed for the occasion, a cute little gentleman - naturally, matching the colour scheme of his parents. *After all, it's Christmas...*

He appeared as silently as ever - standing at the chamber entrance, glued to the spot, admiring the image before him.

"You're back..." Catherine acknowledged Vincent's presence with a beaming smile. She didn't need any verbal response. The way his eyes complimented her look made her blush.

"I think I might have overdone it with the dress," she laughed nervously, though pleased with his approval. "I mean, we are in the Tunnels... Isn't it too... extravagant?" she asked.

Once more, Vincent overlooked the figure of the beloved woman in front of him and smiled even more.

"*Elegant* is the word I would use," he said, genuine admiration colouring his gravelly baritone. He walked over to hug her, kissing the top of her head and inhaling her natural scent. Then he gently stroked Jacob's rosy cheek.

"You've always had a way with words," Catherine remarked, chuckling. "But thank you."

"I only speak words that tell the truth," Vincent replied, amused, and nestled his son in his one arm.

"There's one thing missing," she said and pulled apart from his embrace. She took her crystal pendant from the nightstand and hung it around her neck. "Now I'm ready."

Vincent kissed her tenderly, then took her by the hand.

"It is time," he said and led them out of the chamber toward the Great Hall.

As she walked beside the man he loved the most in the world, Catherine's mind travelled ahead to the time after the festive dinner with their extended Tunnel family, when she and Vincent would have some time alone in her apartment. Her free hand

inadvertently slid into her coat pocket to make sure the small box was still there. Confirming it was, she smiled enigmatically.

It should be a very special Christmas Eve...

