

*This is dedicated to the few friends I had physically close to me that actually shared my fascination with this series. Life has plotted to part us, but they are always in my heart.*

*(This was meant to have a second, steamy part, but this ending was just too perfect, and it's Valentine's day already, so...)*

*Happy Valentine!*

## A Most Daring Assembly

by Rosaura Wells

She had called it a masquerade. She was being generous: parties in her world - and even in his - were events held in proper places with space enough to dance, and they sure entertained more than four guests. But a lucky assembly of circumstances had brought Nancy and Jenny to the city in time for her birthday, and she had already lost - this very year - the possibility of opening for her father that side of her life she could no longer compartmentalize. Of course, to bring Vincent near her friends she needed a pretext for his looks to be overlooked long enough for them to actually get to know him. Alas, masquerade it was. There weren't enough Halloweens in a lifetime for their needs, anyway.

Father didn't know, but Vincent was adamant that he was to be here, his willingness to fulfill this dream of hers - even before she had actually asked - overcoming whatever risk he might face when meeting Joe and the rest. To say that she was overjoyed would be a big understatement. But hey, it was him.

He had even suggested her attire. With soft humour, he had pointed out the natural thing would be for her to be his Belle. Had anyone else called him a beast, even in this indirect way, she would have been enraged. Coming from him, it was a soft self-assured private joke. She obliged, enchanted. Her costume came straight from that first cinematographic version of the classic tale. She had even dared respond that he was way more handsome and charming than the beast depicted there.

She was, all in all, way too worried and occupied to be having a middle-aged crisis.

So how come she was having it?

Certainly the version of it she had had when turning 30 had been pretty tame compared to this. Maybe it had a bit to do with being the last one of her blood on Earth. It was also true that she was running out of time, more now than then, for children, and it was slowly apparent that she would never have one.

When she had met Vincent, she had been in a solid relationship, just waiting for the ring; she would have had least a child - at least inside - by now, had she stayed there. Not that she was sorry, she shivered even thinking of being "happy" with that empty life. But the facts being as they were, she was now in a very, very solid and loving... friendship ... with a man who loved her enough to not endanger her or burden her by binding her to him - even if that killed him. And she was grateful, she

was, really. How many women in this world had a man like that in their lives? Having a relationship that transcended body was rare enough and this was possibly the better representative of such a thing.

But she couldn't but mourn what she couldn't have.

And she was too close to 35 for comfort.

"You look beautiful, standing there," came his voice from the shadows, "the stars, mere jewels to your beauty."

She closed her eyes, grasping the balcony as the deep sound washed over her, raising goosebumps. Really, if they ever had something more physical, she was sure she would die of pure bliss. Just when she was certain of having a strong grasp on her self-control, she turned. Luckily, she still had a hold of the balcony too, for her knees went too weak to support her. It gave time for Vincent to come hold her himself. She could somewhat feel his smile on the other side of the bond.

"That Belle tended to faint too, if I recall correctly," he joked.

"I'm not afraid, as she was."

Blue orbs turned to her, pupils enlarging. "No, that you are not."

His own costume had been tailored in the tunnels. He had recruited Mary's help, though he was perfectly able to sew it himself. Judging by the result, he might as well have walked out of the local cinema's screen minutes prior. Or down the prince's private jet, for that matter. That thing was a classic.

But it was his gaze that never failed to turn her knees into jelly. She could control it most of the time, but lately, sometimes, there was this look in his eyes - wondering, pondering, dark - and the part of her that recognized the longing, dared hope he was actually considering moving forward. Not that she thought he had been playing games when he had promised, after her father's passing, but... She knew her safety was paramount, and courage and care could be incompatible in such cases. And here they were, having shared maybe a kiss in all the time they had been together.

"Am I too late?" he asked, his breath brushing against her cheek as he turned to watch the door, chest vibrating against her.

Sometimes she wondered how much their Bond transmitted.

He parted from her then, producing a perfect red rose. She pressed the fresh petals to her lips, inhaling, eyes never leaving his.

At that precise moment, the bell rang.

"You're just in time, it seems," she answered unnecessarily, her throat still constricted by his closeness.

He let her go slowly, almost regretfully.

"Will you stand beside me?" the lady asked.

Taking her hand in his and leaning on it gallantly, her cavalier answered: "Always"

Then he kissed it, and the soft, warm contact of his unique lips on the back of her hand seemed to lighten up a radiating line of nerves all the way to her heart.

Had the bell not rung again, she might have stood there all night, her eyes fastened to his.

As things were, she had to rush to the door, Vincent strolling easily beside her, so he was right behind her shoulder as she opened. Through the bond she felt the trepidation, but if he was really scared of being discovered, nothing in his external behavior indicated that; he was rather

overcompensating, the charming cavalier of the hostess. She eyed him before opening. He nodded. She seemed to be more worried about his safety than he himself was.

"Nancy!" she called.

"Catherine." The guest - dressed as a fairy - burst to her arms and hugged her. "Oh, my... Congratulations! You look so beautiful!"

The woman's gaze went from her to Vincent, and froze. Catherine felt Vincent going very, very still. She didn't know what to do, but she got hold of her smile and just gave her friend another second.

"Wow" Nancy said at least, her smile still wavering. "That's... a genius piece of make-up work. You must be Vincent."

"It's a pleasure to finally meet you," he whispered, taking care of not showing his fangs; Catherine could see his voice working on Nancy's muscles like a massage, all of their smiles turned more sincere by the second. He had to offer his hand to her, taking the risk of her seeing his claws. Catherine watched the contact, Nancy's eyes on it, her pupils dilated, before she raised her gaze again, as if wondering. However, she didn't flinch and Vincent slowly dared lean on the hand in a gallant gesture.

Coats were gathered, gift delivered, gentle music played, wine opened, as they waited for the rest. Vincent took care of serving them, every move graceful as a cat's. Nancy couldn't take her eyes off him. Catherine wasn't sure what it meant.

The bell rang again, and the hostess steeled herself. She had known the first one would be Nancy, but now she wasn't sure and if it was Joe... Well, she had invited him, fully intending for him to meet Vincent, for various reasons, not the least that he could cover for them if she ever failed in doing so. But she knew it would be harder with him than with the girls. She just didn't know how much.

"It's Jenny," he whispered in his ear as Nancy was distracted by the sound.

Catherine sighed. She knew he could smell "female", so no chance of him making a mistake on the subject. This time it was Nancy who opened, though Vincent stood politely.

Jenny, disguised as painter, complete with beret and palette, took a peek at him and just... jumped into his arms.

He closed the embrace a second later, looking at Catherine over her friend's shoulder before paying his full attention to this one.

"I can't believe you're here!" she was saying. "I dreamed you! Just like this!"

"He's mine, though," Catherine joked while touching her friend's shoulder lightly.

"A girl can dream..." Jenny withdrew, smiled to the gentleman and still kissed his cheek before leaving his arms completely.

"Good to meet you too, Jenny," he whispered, still a bit bewildered, a second before turning to fetch her a drink.

"Especially if he's as good in bed as I dreamed," Jenny whispered confidentially in Catherine's ear. To her shock, she added, patting her hand: "Oh, don't worry, Cathy, you'll find out."

Vincent took forever to get back, and even then, by the amusement in his gaze, Catherine knew his sensitive ears had picked the comment. She looked down, blushing, and generally feeling like a teenager.

"So tell me, Vincent..." It was Nancy, always practical. "What do you do for a living?"

They were deep in conversation regarding English literature and children's lessons when the bell rang for the last time. Vincent and Catherine crossed gazes as Jenny went to open without really demanding permission. Through the Bond, their shared anxiety was most reassuring – at least they were in this together.

This time Vincent chose not to stand. He instead sat on the sofa's arm – or rather leaned on it pretending to sit. If he had actually done so he would have turned the furniture or broken it; but the position allowed him to be almost standing without towering over the man, and still look relaxed. Catherine came to his side, ignoring Nancy's bemusement, and he shot her a warning look – she was being too obvious.

When Joe, disguised as priest – something to do with his Italian inheritance, surely - finally stepped around Jenny, he found quite a reception and his smile wavered even before his eyes were laid on the man. His hand went automatically near where his gun would have been, a reflex everyone ignored pointedly.

"Joe!" the hostess called, smiling to her friend as she hugged him amicably. It might have not been the best move, for she felt instantly the prick of jealousy coming from Vincent through the Bond. His wariness of the man evoked primal responses in him. Catherine tensed – she couldn't really control both males - but he had his feelings under control within milliseconds and consciously sent her a wave of approval. When she took her arms from around her friend, she couldn't believe it had been just a second-long hug.

"Congrats, Radcliffe!" the newly arrived uttered cheerfully, as he passed her a bottle of wine, though his gaze was still on the other man.

"It's so good to meet you, Joe," Vincent himself greeted. "Catherine speaks kindly of you."

"It's you she rarely mentions," the other man shot back.

Vincent's smile never wavered. He was careful in extending his hand as soon as the other extended his. The shake was warm and firm, though before letting go Joe looked at it, turning the other's hand slightly to examine the claws. Catherine knew he was no fool, he hadn't spent so much time investigating for nothing, he could connect the dots, and she tensed. She knew Vincent's very existence kept being too fantastic, though.

"That costume is amazing," the priest finally nodded.

If his gaze was still wary, no one seemed to notice.

"Thank you," Vincent answered easily.

"You come disguised as what?"

"As man," the other dared confess.

The girls chuckled, Catherine's laugh a bit forced, but only to Vincent's ears. Introductions taken care of, it wasn't long until Jenny proposed, "Now that we're all here, can we take out the cake?"

"Gifts first" Nancy argued.

"Don't be boring!" That was Joe. "We have to play around a bit first. Care for a game?"

"Of?"

"What's that thing young people like? 'Truth or dare'?"

Nancy groaned, while Vincent and Catherine tensed, not daring cross gazes. Truth, they could not give. Joe was obviously – and quite bluntly - trying to get Vincent to show his game. Someone with very good reasons to keep secrets wouldn't give them up in a game, but he might give clues, react to questions.

"Come on, you cannot be serious," the mother protested for them.

"Why not?" Jenny asked then, eyes shining. "That's the best way of getting to know each other real quick... all barriers get down... apart from getting really pissed..."

"It's... impolite!"

"Prude!" Jenny stuck out her tongue childishly, to Joe's amusement.

Nancy blushed.

"We're old enough to avoid questions about your husband."

"Come on, Jenny, you're acting like my daughter!"

"Don't be old! Catherine deserves a bit more fun before turning... how old are you today?"

She had hit straight on her middle-age crisis, so by the time they gave the birthday woman the final word, she had acquiesced even before eyeing Vincent. He looked reserved, but nodded slowly. Tonight he'd give almost anything to please her.

"But cake first," Catherine amended in way of apology.

Vincent left his glass instantly and went to fetch it. Given his massive frame and the very limited amount of experience he had in being into her house – always preferring open spaces, clean air, the view - it was amazing how he maneuvered around everything. Jenny turned off the lights and when he came, carrying a true tower of chocolate, its small candles were the only illumination apart from that of the moon. Then, everyone started singing "happy birthday". Catherine hadn't felt this happy in such a long time...

It was almost like Winterfest, she reflected. Darkness. Friends all around, their familiar voices filling everything. The smell of good food and wine. And Vincent, bringing light...

"I'm so happy you're all here," Catherine said, wiping a tear as she beamed at all of them, the Bond vibrating with how much she actually meant it for someone in particular.

Jenny 'awww'ed and came to hug her, Nancy joined, and Joe eyed Vincent before joining as well. Catherine extended an arm to her cavalier from among them, and he finally stepped to them, his hug warm around her.

"Pictures!" Nancy claimed, as she left the hug to extract a camera from her massive purse.

Vincent's smile paled, and it took all his strength not to snarl. Catherine's gaze had gone to him instantaneously. They could claim he believed in souls being stolen by pictures, or something, but it'd be suspicious. A heartbeat, and he nodded. All of them were in disguise. If it came to that, pictures could be destroyed. Catherine's heart inflamed with affection. He was going very far – taking too many risks - to assure this evening was perfectly normal for her.

"Everyone gather there," Nancy was ordering.

"Let me take the shot."

"Don't be silly, man. Belle can't be missing her Beast on her birthday."

So he stood beside Catherine, looking far more comfortable than he actually felt.

Nancy stopped fixing the tripod to look at them, her gaze going from one to the other. They were doing that not-touching thing again – standing half a meter from each other, and yet looking for all intents and purposes as if they were alone in the room. The strength of it kept Jenny and Joe – each to one side - slightly apart from the both of them. It was magical.

Then she joined the picture, right before the timer went off. Two pictures later, they were ready to move on.

"Time for your wish, girl"

"Dunno," Catherine sobbed. "I feel as if I had everything right now."

"But it's mandatory!" Jenny offered. "When turning 34 you are meant to grumble and say that you were supposed to have by now... dunno... an Olympic medal... a doctorate... four children... a prix Nobel or at the very least an Oscar."

"But I'm not an actress!"

Everyone laughed at that.

However, she closed her eyes and asked for her wish. Not because the candles were to fulfill it, but because inside her the Bond thrummed, and on the other side someone was listening. She felt the flash of Nancy's camera. As soon as she opened her eyes and blew the candles, her eyes connected with him. His gaze was enigmatic like that of a sphinx.

"Wow, you do have a sweet tooth" Jenny pointed out.

Vincent, who had been trying not to lick his spoon, just because it wasn't polite, but was quite obviously pondering it, looked up to her and smiled. His fangs did show this time, but none of them minded.

"I wanted to come as Saint Valentine, but there was no costume left," Joe was saying.

It was still a while until they finished their dishes.

"Showtime!"

"You can't be serious, Joe," Nancy scolded.

"Oh, but I am. And Belle here approved."

"Jenny was manipulating her. That doesn't count."

"In love and war..."

Jenny was already sitting on the floor, on a cushion she had dragged from the sofa, the empty plate beside her, and looking as if it was her birthday.

"Why are you so excited about this, Jenny?" Catherine asked curiously.

In way of response, the woman pointed her chin at both males.

"Intrigued." Then, turning her gaze at the woman beside her, Jenny chuckled. "Come on... this can't be so grave..."

But it was, and Catherine couldn't fathom how this insightful woman couldn't see it.

Or maybe she was right. It wasn't as if whatever was said here could be used in court.

Sitting, and before Vincent himself had done so, Joe shot out, "Truth or dare, man."

Blue eyes stared at him, serious.

"Dare."

Joe's smile was of true male bonding.

"Climb to the roof."

"Joe!" Nancy protested as Jenny gasped. Catherine couldn't be surprised. "You cannot put him at that kind of risk!"

"I have the feeling he can do it."

"Have you forgotten it's Catherine's birthday, that you want to kill her... cavalier?"

She was using her motherly tone, and he shrank.

"OK, so what would you suggest"

It was Jenny who answered:

"Kiss her?"

Everyone turned to her. Catherine was blushing intensely.

"On the mouth," Jenny clarified, a twinkle in her eyes.

The Belle covered her face with her hands, having already repented of letting herself be guided by the nose. She did not want Vincent to feel forced into anything. Though she was more than ready to kiss him. But still. Even if it ever happened, it shouldn't be as a spectacle for her friends.

She was almost startled as Vincent stood and came to her, his shadow alerting her of his presence, effortlessly kneeling beside her as the cloak billowed behind him. (His mastery using such a garment had to give them away.) Their eyes met, his gaze humorous, yet a bit troubled, as if asking. She couldn't believe he'd ask. Gently, he put a finger under her chin and brushed her lips against hers.

It was over way too soon, almost before she had noticed. Every receptor on her lips was aflame and crying for the brevity of it. She licked them self-consciously, her eyes never leaving his. She couldn't believe it had happened. There was this deep, deep silence, before Nancy sighed, enchanted, and Jenny shouted and applauded, as Joe himself looked terribly disturbed.

It had been perfect.

Just then, it occurred to her that spectacles weren't that bad. Kissing before friends happened in wedding all the time, after all.

She cleared her throat.

"It's your turn."

He seemed slightly distracted, his gaze magnetic on hers, as if he too was finding hard to wake from their shared reverie, but then he eased himself beside her and forced his gaze off her and to Jenny.

"Truth or dare"

Catherine couldn't believe those words in his lips.

Very interesting lips, by the way.

Soft, the lower one.

She shook her head.

She was starting to understand why he had been always adamant in setting certain boundaries.

Jenny told them the worst regret she had as a child – Vincent's questions weren't nearly as spicy as she wanted - then Joe told them the age of his first kiss and turned to Vincent again.

The Bond thrummed warily, but they decided to allow it for once, even though they could claim Nancy hadn't played – nor had Catherine, for that matter - it was somewhat risky.

"Truth," Vincent claimed this time.

"Have you ever killed?"

"Just in self-defence," the man answered, not skipping a beat; he had been prepared for that question.

The other man eyed him, but his suspicions had seemed to ease somewhat with the answer. After all, saying 'No' would have been easier and less risky, and Joe's gut had to tell him that Catherine wouldn't have befriended a true blood-in-his-claws killer – not this intimately, at least.

Jenny had stood to change the music. Something livelier came from the player and this time Nancy had to shout from the balcony that she loved New York. No one wanted to put the birthday girl in any kind of trouble, so Jenny kind of chose her own question for Nancy and started telling them a torrid, yet somewhat funny story, of what had happened in a certain summer camp when she was 15.

And she chose Vincent, again.

He was being way too popular for Catherine's taste.

"How many women have you been with?"

Catherine gasped and Nancy scolded the girl-woman, while Joe lay back, braced on one arm, sipping from his glass, uninterested.

"Actually, none."

Joe had a coughing fit, as Jenny gasped and Nancy turned to him, her mouth open.

"You intend to tell me you're a virgin? At... how old are you?"

"It's none of your business," Catherine intervened.

She was blushing, but she couldn't help but be intrigued, not that she hadn't been pretty sure before. Vincent didn't seem to care, at least not in the negative.

"Come on, Cathy, he's way too sexy to be saying the truth. He moves with too much ease."

But no one had anything to add, so Vincent turned to Joe and asked if he really liked Catherine. Everyone turned to them, open-mouthed. Catherine's cavalier had gone easy until then, but that didn't seem to count with the other man, not that he hadn't provoked him enough. Joe eyed the concerned woman before answering.

"Sure I do. What man in his right mind wouldn't?"

Vincent raised his glass and drank to that. He couldn't agree more.

Joe couldn't get right back to Vincent, so he asked Catherine if he had a chance with her. No one noticed that he hadn't even offered her to 'dare'. There was this slight movement of hers, not as evident as grasping Vincent's hand or sitting on his lap, a mere leaning on him, probably unconscious, yet when she answered in the negative – a mere, apologetic shaking of her head - everyone understood. Since it was a game, Joe just shrugged and drank before smiling brightly.

"Had to try," he said.

Catherine asked Nancy about her worst memory as a mother, and everyone turned green as she told her of babies' backsides turning into literal cannons of golden matter, reaching the end of their cradles. Everyone was still recovering as she asked Jenny why she had greeted Joe so enthusiastically. This one tried to get away with an enigmatic smile, which earned her a pondering gaze from him, delivered over his glass. Then she pointed out she hadn't gotten the 'dare' option,



which was then offered. She was to kiss Joe, of course.

"Ey! He has just confessed to liking my friend here!"

"Your friend here is pretty much engaged," Nancy shrugged, a merciless light on her eyes.

For a fraction of a second, the word echoed in the Bond. Engaged. Catherine liked that, and he seemed to adore it.

"And you two were the ones pushing for this game," the mother completed.

Everything escalated from there. Soon Nancy was protesting that Jenny already knew the intimate details she was asking in public, and although Vincent didn't seem mortified – yet - Catherine would have felt much more at ease if they just stuck to safe questions. Of course, the amount of alcohol in everyone's blood wasn't helping.

"Vincent, you have to <hiccup> perform CPR on someone <hiccup>. "Complete with mouth-to-mouth"

It had been Nancy, this time, earning enthusiastic applause from the third girl. The hostess wondered, alarmed, if the taste for spicy demands was contagious.

"Well?" Nancy demanded.

The beast shrugged and stood, offering his hand to his Belle, as a magician would with an assistant. She followed him to the sofa, lay down on it, thrilled, and closed her eyes. Everyone was standing around them, but the sofa provided a certain intimacy, and in fact medical procedures were far from romantic. She felt him pinch her nose, cover her mouth with his and breath into her lungs. There was no contact from lips to lips whatsoever. She felt slightly cheated.

"That's not fair!" Jenny exclaimed.

Catherine opened an eye.

"You do know his dad's a doctor, right?"

Nancy looked like a frustrated child - or the hiccuping pup from the cartoons - as Vincent himself chuckled lightly, distracting her attention, but he still didn't seem drunk.

He himself reassured her, "It's strange to hear someone call him 'dad'"

Well, apparently she was the drunk one. She had even revealed Father's profession, and though it wasn't that much, really...

"No, no... don't worry," he pleaded in a whisper, having sensed her change of mood, as Nancy looked at Joe and Jenny, now sitting side-to-side. As if to distract her, he added, "What shall we ask of them?"

They were starting to take personally the obvious target the rest had put on them. So at that point they became a team, consulting with each other before targeting each opponent's fears and joys. They were so cute together, that the others couldn't really be mad. Besides, half of that consult was in gazes, and they couldn't fathom how it happened, not without knowing of the Bond. Anyway, they responded in kind.

"Catherine, be Juliet," Nancy, again. At least she was back to proper English literature.

"It's not fair," the birthday girl answered.

"Why not?"

"For one, because I'm more than twice her age."

"So?"

"And every dare is including Vincent, and he's already been asked twice as much as you as it is."

"I didn't say it had to be with him."

Before Catherine even registered the twinkle in her eyes, Vincent leaned forward, a speculative gaze on the group. There was no way he was letting her enact this role with the other man, who hadn't even stirred; it was so obvious he wasn't allowed.

Catherine looked at him, thrilled by this development, even as she herself called: "Jenny, you're Romeo."

This one pretended to complain, that she couldn't for the life of her remember the strange lines from their high school lessons. All ladies went to her aid, rushing to Catherine's bedroom to unearth her copy of the book – and not being too careful about the state they left it in.

"Vincent," Joe called.

This one lifted his gaze warily, not letting the other man see.

"If you ever hurt her, there'll be no cave deep enough to hide from me."

Unaware of how close to home he had hit, Catherine's boss looked at his rival severely, until this one smiled.

"I knew I could count on you."

Before any of them could answer, all girls were rushing back, Jenny holding a battered, but well-cared for edition. And the play could start, interrupted only by the reading of the script, and the 'it's right there!', and the kicking and screaming in laugh when things went too hot, and... well, interrupted often.

"*If I profane with my worthiest hand*..."

"*Unworthiest*!" Nancy corrected, her wand tracing spirals in the air.

"No, it's not!" Jenny protested angrily, showing her hand, as if to prove she had washed it.

"*Good pilgrim*!" Catherine recited, rolling her eyes as Jenny left the 'stage' – a designed place in the carpet - to crawl towards her drink, "*you do wrong your hand too much*..."

"See? She agrees!" Jenny called and crawled back in a hurry to kiss her, to Joe's utter delight.

"That comes five dialogues later!"

Vincent was torn between amusement and pain, seeing poor Shakespeare's work mutilated this way.

"I'm the priest!" Joe announced at the proper time.

The other man tracked his progress to the scene, eyes narrowed, but Catherine was already returning to him as the other man took the stage, her hand finding his, this time, as if his inner wish had somewhat communicated to her. Which it probably had.

"It's '*countervail*!'" she had to correct almost immediately, Vincent sighing his 'thank you' to her ear.

"Wanna take my place?" Jenny asked irritated, reaching for her palette, as if finally ready to throw it at their heads as a discus.

"Just say the lines! '*But come what sorrow can, it cannot countervail the exchange of joy that one short minute gives me in his sight*'"

"*her*' sight" Nancy corrected.

Catherine blushed, eyeing Vincent, who seemed at once amused and moved.

The lightness in his eyes seemed to dim in darkness full of meaning as he completed the speech, "*Do thou but close our hands with holy words, then love-devouring death do what he dare; it is enough I may but call her mine.*"

The entire room went silent for several seconds, until Jenny breathed out a 'wow' to what Nancy nodded, speechless. They had obviously never seen him perform or recite. However, given that he had said it all looking at her, one couldn't say Catherine was less affected. She felt as if the entire room was devoid of oxygen and his eyes had turned into twin moons – and she, obviously, into water. Even knowing he didn't mean it to the extent of risking her ending up as Juliet, her heart was beating three times faster than it should.

"Catherine....," Nancy called.

"Mmhmm?" this one pretended to listen.

"Remember when I didn't say it had to be with him?"

"Mmhmm?"

"I changed my mind."

Joe was shaking his head, which had nothing to do with his lines but fit perfectly, "*These violent delights have violent ends and in their triumph die, like fire and powder, which, as they kiss, consume. The sweetest honey is loathsome in his own deliciousness and in the taste confounds the appetite. Therefore love moderately. Long love doth so. Too swift arrives as tardy as too slow.*"

Catherine was thinking on the lines of "too slow", as she took her cue and went – or rather crawled informally - to the 'stage', reciting her measured lines as she did. She didn't really expect Vincent's voice for Romeo's; she closed her eyes and shivered when he started from his place. She feared that in the thrill of listening to him, she'd lose her cue, then her lines rather overrode the ending of his – in time as in emotion, "*Conceit, more rich in matter than in words, Brags of his substance, not of ornament. They are but beggars that can count their worth. But my true love is grown to such excess I cannot sum up sum of half my wealth.*"

She had turned to look at him, and the current of meaning in her words vibrated strong and clear, and as deep as the color in his eyes.

" 'Come, come with me', " Joe said a moment later, " 'and we will make short work. For, by your leaves, you shall not stay alone Till holy church incorporate two in one'."

Nancy chuckled.

"I agree," Jenny approved, raising her glass.

The lovers hadn't even taken the eyes from each other.

"He's to play Juliet now," Joe joked, referring to the virgin character's speech. His light mock – a vengeance - was to meet no target; Vincent hadn't been raised to consider it a fault.

"Let's cut to the morning after," Jenny demanded instead.

"Only if it's the last one," Catherine intervened, even before forcefully taking her eyes off him; her heart wouldn't hold his reciting of the whole play.

"Only because you're the birthday girl," Nancy approved.

"You up to this?"

In response, Vincent stood and came to the stage, his powerful presence exiling Joe without intending to.

There was this tight moment with him looking into her eyes, and she forgot this was a play.

" *Wilt thou be gone? It is not yet near day*."

The whispered, intimate words spoke of them, of their parting, each day, never knowing if they were to meet again, or when, both of their worlds working to keep them apart.

But they were still playing, and in the play they were lovers just waking from a night spent in the arms of Love itself. And they were teens. Vincent's hands held her hands, or brushed her exposed arm, or cupped her cheek, and she was always breathless - was it a smirk? - struggling to remember lines she had never had trouble with, while also unable to keep her arms to herself, even though there was far less skin for her to touch. Then he nuzzled her wrist, and as he met her eyes again, suddenly she remembered what was coming.

" *Farewell, farewell! Give me one kiss, and I'll go down*."

And he was leaning forward, his mouth coercing hers open in a kiss as ardent as it was brief, her arms rising instantly to try and keep him there. He slipped from her and left the scene and she was left there, chest heaving, half-lidded eyes, not knowing if she was Juliet playing Catherine or the other way around, until a second later everyone clapped and whistled.

"How often have you played Romeo, exactly?" Catherine dared ask, jealousy not that veiled in her tone when he approached, her whisper reaching only his ears in the general brouhaha.

Yes, it had been a smirk and it was back, even as he gasped, no less affected than her.

"Only this once."

"You nailed it."

"Is it time for the gifts?" Nancy asked.

"It's not Christmas, girl," Jenny joked. "There's not one for you."

"I still like gift time," the woman shrugged, alcohol fusing her grave self and that of the child she has once been.

Catherine suddenly remembered there hasn't been a gift from Vincent, unless they counted the rose. She didn't want him to feel uncomfortable.

"Why don't we open your one, and then keep playing?" the hostess offered, not believing her own words.

"Why, someone has developed a taste for games!" Joe toasted.

"Or for kisses," was Jenny's input.

Catherine really, really had to ask Vincent for tips in avoiding blushing in moments like this.

Nancy's gift included an album with pictures of their young selves. They all sat on the couch, pressed together, with no regards for personal space, so they all could look at the pictures. Except for Joe, who stood behind. Catherine wondered how came that no one had noticed Vincent's intense body heat. She herself felt she was sinking into it, which given the late hour and the rather cold evening, was most welcome. Jenny made sure of embarrassing her plenty, but past boyfriends were generally avoided.

But then they insisted on opening the rest.

Joe's gift came in the shape of an accordion.

Jenny's was a negligee.

"Jenny!" Catherine protested, while trying to keep it from the men's view. Well, she'd be sure to show

it to Vincent... at some point... if he ever allowed it... In fact, as she thought of it, her gaze went to his, and by the intense look of his eyes and the oh-so-slight increase in breath rate, she suspected he has already seen at least part of the silky garment. But it wasn't intended for Joe's eyes.

No one pointed out the lack of a fourth gift. And by then, they had already started to toss truths or dares to each other jokingly. Joe had tried to play the instrument - emphasis on 'tried' - and Jenny had given them her best imitation of an old professor of theirs, while Nancy cradled her drink, laughing slightly too often.

"Down on your knees, Vincent," she ordered when it was her turn. "That play lacked a proposal."

His smile paled before growing. That vein of mischief Catherine adored to see in him was now apparent, as he made her stand before dropping on one knee - not that it changed much. He was so tall their eyes were almost even. There was a silence, so long that even the traffic seemed to quiet somehow, and her initial amusement wavered as he held her hand. The bond let her feel a strange mixture of playing and dead-serious. His eyes in hers... They took her breath away.

"Catherine..." His whisper seemed to contain in itself everything he was to say. She shivered. "I doubt, even with our Bond, you'll ever fathom the impression your beauty made on me, that first moment I saw you..."

"I was badly scarred," she pointed out.

"It ran deep. With my eyes open or closed, you were made of sunshine, of the matter summer is made of. But it was later, as you fought for your life, and then, for giving it purpose, that I really witnessed how much courage you had. How much life in you. How much spirit. I stood there, mesmerized, wanting so much to own you - this primal side of me - as you owned me. I knew then, as I know now, that you'd change my life, that it'd be beautiful, made beautiful by your touch."

She was crying, and faintly aware that Nancy was too. Someone had turned off the lights and was, even now, lightening the birthday candles still on the table. Over thirty diminutive lights and the silvery one of the moon, enough to see his eyes - and know he meant it.

"I cannot ask you to be mine," he whispered. "All I can ask - now, in this fateful day, among the friends you love so much - is to be yours forever."

He had - she didn't know from where - produced a ring. She couldn't see it and she couldn't care less what it looked like. Shaking hands came around his neck, inadvertently fingering the pouch she herself had put there. It's a game, she reminded herself, but even as she tried to keep a grasp on reality, she knew with all of her heart that he'd be the best actor in the world, if he didn't mean every word he had uttered.

"Say 'yes,'" Nancy pleaded.

"That's part of the game?" Joe asked confusedly.

"Say 'yes', damn it," Jenny demanded, "or I will".

Catherine just put her forehead to his, his eyes so close. She couldn't believe this was happening, and even less that this was a game.

You mean it, don't you, Vincent? She thought silently, her throat closed, but their Bond conducting at least half the words.

He opened his mouth, lips shaking, words spent, and nodded against her. A half sob of pure bliss left her mouth, yet she didn't dare kiss him, for if this wasn't a game, then this all had to be a dream and she wouldn't survive waking up, as would surely happen with her senses in overdrive, as he left them, always.

Later, she would learn that he had found the ring months ago, mere days after her father's passing and their subsequent promise of going forward. It had, also, been announced. Narcissa had told him there were to be three signs. That was the first one, he knew, even as he fought to believe he had a right to claim her. Their lives were far too tangled for him to keep expecting her to leave. Still, he was prudent; he had waited. Her birthday had been a second sign. He had this gift, and with it, a second gift that was himself; she could accept one or both. And then he had been dared... and he had dared... it was her turn now.

"Why don't we go all the way?" Jenny had asked meanwhile. "We even have a priest here..."

"Not a real one," Joe had pointed out, eyebrows wriggling suggestively.

"Never mind," Nancy had plotted. "I bet you have due permits to pronounce them man and wife in the eyes of this state."

His silent acknowledgement was enough for them to push him unceremoniously - and a bit drunkenly - next to the couple, now standing, but lost in each other's eyes and blissfully unaware of everything else. All protests from the minister - "We're not in Vegas!" - were thoroughly ignored and Catherine didn't even know he was there until formal words started coming from his mouth. She did a double take then, the Bond thrumming with slight alarm - hers; she was scared of this scaring him. But even when a scholar's understanding came after hers, his resolve never wavered. Rigidity was not taught Below. If Joe, unknowingly, could truly join their hands in the eyes of the state, that would subtract no meaning to a formal celebration Below; and he was not wasting this chance. He'd rather savor it fully. And she could make of this 'game' what she wished, his hold on her hands was still firm and hopeful.

"Your parents' rings?" Nancy whispered and giggled.

The blonde looked at her, at Joe, and Jenny, and finally at her groom, and pressed her lips together. He saw the decision form in her eyes, drunken elation filling their Bond.

"Top drawer. To the left."

And so it was performed, before a Joe whose very reticence belied the pretense of this all being just that: pretense. Her mother's ring fit perfectly on her finger, and her father's miraculously seemed made for Vincent's too. Before all that remained of her family, they were pronounced man and wife - the 'man' part no less significant than that of 'wife', in several ways. And she received a third kiss that was a perfect son to the two previous, bridal eyes closing and opening to a new stage of her life, one mere hours previous she had thought she was never to live - for she could not imagine living it with any other. When all girls hugged, while Joe shook the beastly hand again, Nancy was crying, and Catherine suspected it wasn't drunkenness that made her act as if this was a "true" wedding. Her friends had grasped quite fast the depth of their commitment.

"I'm borrowing that wedding dress," was Jenny's comment; and then to her ear: "I want every detail".

"The newlyweds have to dance," was Nancy's new suggestion.

The calculating gaze in Jenny's eye was the only warning, but Catherine must have known she knew which was the sexiest CD in her collection. Nancy giggled, Joe pretended not to care, and Jenny pushed them both to the stage. They were all decidedly too drunk.

All but Vincent, who kept the dance frustratingly respectful - a firm hand on her waist keeping those irritating centimetres between them - even after Joe and Jenny joined and started dancing drunk and horny - at least as far as they would go in a respectful friend's house. Nancy protested she should have brought her husband after all.

But nothing would truly damp her happiness, today.

By the time the pink fingers of dawn stretched through the sky, Vincent offered his bride a hand, Jenny dragged Joe from the floor, someone woke up Nancy - persistence was required, as she kept pushing the person's hand and snoring little balloons - and they all gathered at the balcony to watch the sun wake up.

This has to be a dream Catherine kept thinking, as Vincent held her against his chest, fingers intertwined, golden rings shining together, not far from where Joe yawned and Nancy 'aw'ed and Jenny just closed her eyes to the breeze.

This was perfect, complete with the quiet happiness of having all of her closest friends here, and the thrilling anticipation of what was to come once they were no longer here.

For the moment being, the future held no shadow. She was pretty certain that, knowing Vincent's true look was this one, wouldn't change their opinion of him; not after expending a whole night admiring his talent. They would eventually meet the rest of the dwellers, or they would not; they had already approved of her joining, had in fact been instrumental to it, and she was sure they knew - no matter the amount of wine they had consumed - that she wouldn't have used her parents' rings if this wasn't serious.

As for Vincent, they'd live as if they were engaged for as long as they wanted, before the formal celebration Below, but she wasn't taking off the ring Vincent had put in her finger - none of them. Ever. It was hilarious to remember that 12 hours previously she had been in a crisis partly motivated by thinking this was not to happen.

Vincent's arms tightened behind her, all of his body fastened to hers (another novelty), his smell - candles and leather and something only his - becoming the very key to this memory.

No matter what the future held, they were facing it. Together.