

OUT OF THE SPOTLIGHT

By JoAnn Baca

Catherine descended the ladder at her threshold and turned. She smiled at the unexpected face that appeared in the filtered light of the tunnels.

"Jamie! I didn't expect you to come meet me!" Knowing the younger woman as she did, she did not reach out to hug her.

Jamie nodded and allowed a small smile to grace her lips. "It's OK. I figured you could use some company on the walk, and it was me who invited you, after all."

They both ventured along the pathway leading to the Hub.

"It won't be a surprise to him, you know," Catherine said. "I'm sure he can feel my excitement and knows I'm getting nearer."

Jamie shrugged. "It's not like he'd try to stop you though. He just hasn't ever invited you before."

Catherine's eyebrows rose. "Before?"

"Yeah, this is his third time. Everyone keeps asking him to do it again." Jamie snorted. "Why he thought he could get away with only doing it once...."

Despite her best effort, Catherine couldn't help the twinge of disappointment she felt. "Do you think he even wants me here then? Wouldn't he have invited me before if he'd wanted me to see this?"

Jamie waved a hand dismissively. "You know Vincent. Light under a bushel and all that."

Not entirely sure that was his reason, Catherine shrugged. She was here now, and there was no way she was going back Above before she saw him.

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Geoffrey was holding a seat for her, which Jamie pointed to before she melted into the back of the music chamber to find her own seat.

"Wow, you picked the best spot! Thank you, sweetheart!" Catherine hugged him as soon as she sat. Her seat was dead center, first row...where Vincent could hardly miss her, even if he didn't already know she was close by.

Her companion blushed, his freckles dark against his reddened cheeks. "Jamie asked me to."

"Well, it was kind of you to do her the favor." She placed a quick kiss on his forehead, earning him envious stares from many young boys and quite of few men in the crowd.

Silence descended as Samantha appeared on the makeshift stage, announcing the performers for the evening.

Vincent would be last.

As each actor, singer or musician took their place and offered their talents to the crowd, Catherine tried to enjoy it all. But her anticipation was so great she couldn't fully appreciate the performances of the others on the program. She was too anxious to see what Vincent would do. When he finally appeared, a hush fell over the crowd deeper than for any previous performer, as if everyone else had been awaiting this particular performance as much as she.

Vincent strode into a center spotlight that illuminated his face and upper torso. The shadows deep around him seemed to close in, as if even the darkness had gathered to hear him, making the performance seem more intimate. His gaze seemed to fasten upon Catherine, even as she wondered how he could see her with the spotlight shining in his eyes. He began speaking then...the sonnet she loved so much.

When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes...

The crowd expelled a long sigh when he finished, and there was a moment of silence before the people around her rose to their feet, clapping wildly. She rose last, overwhelmed by his performance, stunned by how commanding he

was on that small stage, how perfectly he expressed Shakespeare's words of heartbreak and hope.

She hung back, ensuring she greeted and congratulated all the other performers before finally turning to Vincent as his last admirer left his side.

"I hope you don't mind that Jamie..."

He shook his head. "I expected someone might invite you, if not for tonight, then another time."

"It was serendipity that you were reciting my favorite sonnet then!" She smiled, her skin still tingling from the effect of the words spoken in that gorgeous half-whisper.

Tilting his head, he gazed down at her, and the effect of the lovelight in his eyes caused those tingles to flutter deeper within her body. "Actually, once I knew you were Below, I changed my selection. I know it's your favorite."

Surprise lit her eyes. "Then you only had a short time to perfect your performance? Amazing!"

"Not really..." He looked away, as if embarrassed. "I've been reciting that particular sonnet quite a lot these past months."

Catherine let his words sink in, both the sonnet's and Vincent's own intent. If what he had written in the book of sonnets he had gifted her – *Shakespeare knew everything* – then she could offer him some insight into her own feelings for him in the same way.

She took a deep breath and began her own, albeit impromptu, recitation, imbuing the words with as much emotion as she could, willing him to understand *her* intent.

*Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove:
O no; it is an ever-fixed mark,
That looks on tempests, and is never shaken;*

*It is the star to every wandering bark,
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come;
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
If this be error and upon me proved,
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.**

Around her, unnoticed, others had gathered to hear her speak. She hadn't realized that silence had descended, nor the rapt attention of the audience she had not intended to hear her. When she finished, many hands applauded, startling her. Yet her most important audience stood unmoving until his Tunnel family, realizing they were superfluous to the moment, drifted away. Only then did Vincent, tears now filling his eyes, take her hand and kiss it, the gentle brush of his unique lips sending those previous tingles deep into her core.

"Your skills at interpretation are amazing, Catherine."

"It wasn't skill, only my own thoughts expressed by another, more beautifully than I ever could." Her gaze was heated, willing him to accept her offering, just as she had accepted hers.

The moment stretched between them. The audience had left them alone, the spotlight dimmed, wrapped in shadows, seeing only each other.

What happened next is known only to the two of them - out of the spotlight, no other eyes upon them, their own words replacing the playwright's from that moment on.

**Sonnet 116*