

A Tale of Our Fathers

A Story of “Beauty and the Beast”

By Judith Nolan ©

1976: Vincent and Father...

“You shouldn’t waste your time on an old man like me...” Father turned his head aside to smother a racking cough with a scrap of cloth. “I’m past worrying about. Just leave me be and let me die in peace.”

“You are most certainly not going to die. But you have never made the easiest of patients, Father,” Vincent reminded him gently as he carefully raised the older man’s head to feed him the last spoonfuls of soup from the bowl beside the bed. “You always take care of us when we are sick. Now it’s our turn to look after you. So lie still and regain your strength. The worst is over.”

“I guess so. But I don’t like feeling so weak and helpless.” Father lay back fretfully against the pillows and closed one eye to focus on his son better. “You really do make one heck of a nursemaid, Vincent. I’ll give you that.” He chuckled weakly. “But I guess it takes a lot of courage — more than I have right now — to say no to you, when your mind’s made up to something. I didn’t fancy dying just yet, anyway.” He rolled his head to glance at his other carer. “What do you say, Mary? Did we do a good job with raising our boy here?”

“I think we did just fine.” Mary smiled, looking up from wringing out a cloth over a wooden bowl. “And you should be doing exactly as Vincent tells you. A severe bout of influenza is not to be trifled with. You are still very weak.”

“Fiddlesticks...” Father’s acerbic reply fractured on a cough. He lay back with a sigh, watching his son move silently about the chamber. “He truly does have the soul of a doctor. He’s always finding hurt things in the park. Bring him anything that’s been injured and he’ll try to fix it. I’ve mended all sorts of animals in my time. But I had to finally put my foot down the day I encountered that peregrine falcon flying towards me along the tunnel at three in the morning. If I hadn’t had my wits about me and ducked out of the way, it could have put my eyes out.”

“But I did need to teach it to fly again, Father.” Vincent raised his shoulders in apology as he came back to stand beside the bed. “And I was able to release it into the park the next night.”

“Yes, well...” Father plucked peevisly at the covers as Mary leaned down to bathe his burning forehead with the cool cloth. “Let’s not talk about your nightly forays into the park. You know how dangerous that is. But you chose not to listen to my advice, sage though it is. I can only hope you don’t live to regret it.” He sighed roughly. “Mary well knows there a tale hiding behind every one of these new grey hairs on my head.” He flicked a weary hand at his greying temples. “And if it wasn’t you, then I knew Devin was

the one behind whatever new mischief that was brewing. You two will be the death of me yet...”

“Oh, you can be such an old fool sometimes....” Mary tucked the bed covers closer to Father’s chin. “Let them be. Boys will be boys. But I will say it has been an interesting twenty-one years. Tomorrow is the 12th of January, so you need to rest, Jacob; if you’re planning to be well enough to sit up in the morning and join in the fun for Vincent’s birthday.”

“I never get sick.” Father grimaced. “This will be the first time I’ve missed your birthday celebrations, Vincent. You were so tiny and very ill. No one gave you half a chance of surviving. And yet, look at you now...” He cast a wondering eye over Vincent’s broad shoulders and tall, powerful frame, outlined in the flickering candlelight. “There must be something in the water down here, for sure.”

“Knowing I have family and friends I can count on, that’s what matters.” Vincent leaned down to kiss his father’s fevered forehead and grasp his hand. “It’s late. You should try to sleep now. We can celebrate my birthday when you are well again.”

“I’d rather try beating you at chess.” Father sighed fretfully. “At least I can still do that sometimes. It’d be better than just lying here being fussed over.”

“And work yourself up into another fever...” Vincent shook his head, his tawny mane flowing loosely around his shoulders. “I won’t allow it.”

“You won’t allow it...” Father grimaced, struggling up onto one elbow. “That’s rich, I must say. I am still your father you know. Even if you’re almost twenty-one, you still have to do as I tell you. Or it will be the worse for you. Just wait until I rise from this bed and then I’ll—” He broke off to cough again, before falling back weakly and shutting his eyes. “I’ll think of something...”

“Yes, Father.” Vincent’s answering smile was full of understanding acceptance. “Of course. When you are better. We will talk then.”

“But I do have something for you...” Father opened his eyes. His expression filled with a small amount of smug satisfaction. “Something that I don’t think can wait until tomorrow. At least I am assured it cannot. I’m told it just might explode at any moment. So, I guess we have no choice but to give it to you now.”

“What is it?” Vincent looked around the hospital chamber with deep suspicion, his narrowed eyes searching into every shadow or hidden corner. “What have you been doing? I do hope you have not been over-exerting yourself behind my back, just to prove a point.”

“Not me. I’ve been lying here strictly under doctor’s orders,” Father replied in a mock-solemn tone. “But someone else has been very busy on my account. Or, at least, I really hope they have. I can only pray the gate-keeper hasn’t overstepped the bounds of his limited authority...” he muttered cryptically. He made a quick hand signal to Mary who nodded before going over to the curtain covering the doorway and raising it to one side, beckoning to someone on the outside.

Devin ducked around the curtain and said, “None of us could think of what to get you, Vincent. And with the old boy laid up in here we figured we’d better shift to make it something really special. From all of us. Since it’s your twenty-first tomorrow, little brother.” He crossed the chamber to clap his brother on the shoulder. “So I said, leave it to me. And so, without further ado...” He turned away and went back around the curtain, leaving Vincent to stare after him with intense curiosity.

“Don’t worry, Vincent, it won’t hurt that much.” Father managed to chuckle before breaking into a fresh coughing fit. “Oh, I hate this...” he muttered when he finally caught his breath.

“Now see...I did warn you about getting over-excited,” Mary admonished him, clucking around the bed and rearranging the covers. “You do need to rest. Surely this can wait...”

“Here we are, Vincent...” Devin ducked around the curtain again, leading a young, thin, unkempt boy by the hand. “Come on in. It’s all right.”

“Mouse...?” Vincent looked confused as the boy straightened; staring about him with darting eyes half-hidden behind his tangle of blond bangs. “Are you all right, my friend? Is there anything you need?”

“He’s fine, Vincent,” Devin assured him, drawing Mouse forward. “He just wanted to see you. He knows you’ve been busy making Father better. But he was worried. He wanted to know you were okay too. We’ve been hanging out. Right, Mouse?”

“Right. Devin okay.” The boy ducked his head and gathered a deep breath. His guileless blue eyes darted right and left, looking again for an escape route. “But, Vincent is better. Okay. Good to see.” He drew a deep breath and expelled it in a rush. “Fine.” He nodded vigorously.

“What is it, Mouse?” Vincent advanced slowly, reaching to place a hand on the boy’s tensed shoulder. “Did you need me?”

“Yes!” The boy nodded, brightening. He focussed his wandering attention on Vincent’s watchful eyes and his hand dived into the large pocket of his ragged coat. “Mouse says, happy birthday, Vincent.” He enunciated the words slowly and clearly.

“There you go, I taught him to say that.” Devin grinned. “The kid’s like a sponge. Parrots back anything you say to him. It’s amazing. Learns in a flash, just like that.” He tossed up a hand and snapped his fingers, making Mouse jump.

“He is also young and still very frightened,” Vincent cautioned quietly, tightening his grip on Mouse’s thin shoulder. “We must go carefully or he may run away again. It took me long enough to entice him into our tunnels the first time.”

“Six years. I know.” Mouse bobbed his head. “Vincent find Mouse. All alone. He talks. Mouse keeps quiet. Mouse knows. Vincent brings food. Blankets. Clothes.” He ducked his head, colour mantling his cheeks, as he peered up at Vincent. “Mouse good?”

“I think, back then — when I first became aware of you — I soon discovered I needed you as much as you needed me, my young friend.” Releasing the boy’s shoulder, Vincent sighed, then nodded. “And yes, Mouse. You were very good and very quiet. Sometimes I wondered if you were even there, listening to me talk about anything and everything.”

“Mouse listened. Vincent needed Mouse. Mouse was there. But poetry...” The boy grimaced and shook his head. “Okay. Vincent like. Mouse, maybe not so much. But, now see...” He drew his closed fist from his pocket and held it out, slowly unfurling his fingers. “Now Mouse’s turn. Bring this. For you.” In his grubby palm nestled a small metal egg.

“What is it?” Vincent studied the offering closely, his sapphire eyes filled with wary suspicion.

“Gizzo...” The boy tried to frown and smile at the same time, his eyebrows rising and falling expressively. “Good gizzo. Mouse made. Took time.” He held it out and up to Vincent, lifting it above his own head, almost to the level of his tall friend’s frowning eyes. “See...?”

“Yes, I do see, Mouse.” Vincent stared down at it. It had been intricately made from what looked like gold. “It’s very beautiful...Um, what does it do?” He looked past the offering to the boy’s mobile face, which was still working furiously with alternating expressions, as if Mouse was trying to decide which one best suited the present occasion.

Vincent was well aware the last time the boy had attempted to make anything mechanical, it had nearly severed Winslow’s thumb when it exploded prematurely. Mouse had been working to make improvements to an old pop-up toaster, trying to turn it into a multi-function machine. There had been a few similar problems recently with the things Mouse tried to invent or improve on. It was the mechanical workings that continued to fascinate the boy, not the end result. Good or bad, it was all the same to Mouse. Vincent was swiftly learning it would always be so with his unpredictable young charge. It was the price they all needed to pay in exchange for the ongoing use of his erratic genius.

“Not right. Maybe next time...” The inveterate tinkerer had shaken his head in disgust. “Less boom...” He had gathered up the shattered remnants of the toaster from William’s battered kitchen table and shuffled away out of the Long Gallery, muttering to himself.

“Good gizzo...” Mouse took Vincent’s hand now and placed the egg carefully in his upraised palm. “Not like toaster. No bang. Works.”

“Ya gotta give the kid credit for figuring things out,” Devin interposed with a chuckle. “I don’t know how he does it. He just sees something and he has it all worked out. He’s been tinkering non-stop on this for some time. I doubt he’s even slept these last five days. He said it’ll work this time, there’s no problem. Just a whizz.” He thrust his hands into the pockets of his jeans. “I can’t wait to see what happens next.” “Devin...” Father breathed warningly. “I hope you have only done as I asked and kept an eye on him during Vincent’s absence. You know you’re not the best influence for the child. You go off on too many tangents. You must not encourage him.”

“Aw, come on, that whole exploding toaster episode wasn’t my fault,” Devin complained with a shrug. “Mouse just needed some guidance. A little brotherly advice. Vincent was stuck in here, nurse-maiding you, so he came to find me when he had this idea for the brother’s birthday. I think that shows he’s making some progress. You said you wanted to make it a surprise. But Mouse has been busting to give it to him.”

“That’s as may be,” Father replied. “But you must always come to me first in future. Mouse is not like the rest of the people Below. He is still very fragile.”

“Good Mouse. Good gizzo...” Mouse peered doubtfully at Father’s frowning expression, worrying he had done something wrong to make Father look so mad. “Works...”

“It’s all right, Mouse,” Vincent reassured him. “Father is just worried about you. Show me what the gizzo does.”

“Okay. Yes...” Mouse reached out with a fingertip. “Press here...” He tapped the top of the egg.

“All right...” As Vincent advanced his free hand towards the object, Mary gasped in worried anticipation, and then quickly put up a hand to cover her mouth. Vincent looked from Father’s wary expression to Devin’s encouraging nod.

“Go on...” Unable to contain himself, Mouse bobbed up and down on the spot, his expression filled with gleeful anticipation. “Do it.”

“Very well...” Trying not to flinch in any obvious way, Vincent turned his head slightly to the side and half-closed one eye as he slowly depressed the point of the egg. At first nothing happened and then there was a muffled click. It made his accelerating heartbeat lurch momentarily. But nothing exploded in his face.

Watching closely from the bed, Father couldn’t prevent his instinctive, “Careful, Vincent...”

“Okay...” Mouse started laughing and clapping his hands. “Good. Works. Best one.”

Vincent watched in wary fascination as the top half of the egg began to open outwards like the petals of a small flower and the whirring noise intensified. Then, slowly rising out of the top, he saw a tiny and intricate figure standing on a small, round platform. It took Vincent a few seconds of frowning concentration to decide the figure was a representation of himself, complete with cloak and a miniscule book held open in one hand. Tucked against his side was an even smaller figure with a mop of blond hair obscuring its features.

As he lifted the egg closer to study the second figure, a grubby fingertip rose to point to it. “Mouse,” the boy intoned solemnly. The fingertip shifted to the larger figure. “Vincent. Friends. Good?”

“Mouse, it is incredible. Thank you,” Vincent breathed. “Such amazing craftsmanship.” As he spoke, the egg whirred and clicked and then the two figures were once more enshrouded within the wings of their golden shell. Vincent resisted the temptation to press it open again. You never knew with Mouse’s inventions...

“Happy birthday, Vincent.” Mouse nodded. “Mouse did good?”

“Mouse did very good indeed. I will treasure it always...”

“Okay.” Mouse hopped gleefully from foot to foot. His stomach rumbled. He stopped and frowned. “Mouse hungry...” He patted his belly. “Eat now?”

Everyone in the room fell into relieved laughter. Vincent put his arm around Mouse’s shoulders and hugged him. “Come on then. Let’s see if we can find you something to eat. I think Father will survive without us for the immediate future. I’m sure Devin can entertain him for a while.”

“No toast...” Mouse jerked a worried look up at him. “Gotta fix it yet...” He heaved a sigh. “Not sure how...”

“It’s all right, Mouse,” Vincent replied as he walked with his young charge from the hospital chamber. “Perhaps tomorrow we can ask Winslow if he can help you to fix it.”

“Okay, good. Okay fine...” Mouse nodded. “Happy birthday tomorrow, Vincent.”

“Thank you, Mouse,” Vincent acknowledged solemnly as the curtain fell into place behind them and they walked companionably together down the tunnel towards the Long Gallery...

1979: Catherine and Charles...

“Oh, my darling girl. It is so good to have you home again.” Charles Chandler smothered his only child in a bear hug. “I have missed you so much.”

“Hi, Dad. It’s great to be back.” Catherine swam back up out of a cloud of Old Spice aftershave and the secure warmth of her father’s soft wool cardigan and reached to kiss his cheek. “I’ve missed you too.”

“And to think I was so worried about you, out there, all alone, in the big wide world.” Charles smoothed back the fall of soft ash-blond bangs from his daughter’s forehead. “But I can see attending Radcliffe has done wonders for you. You look so different, so grown-up.”

Catherine smiled mistily. “You had to learn to trust me to make my own decisions. And I had to learn how to fall down and then get back up by myself. Without you being around to hug me and try to make me smile.”

“And now you’ll be twenty-one tomorrow...” Charles sighed. “It hardly seems possible. You look so like your mother in this light, that sometimes...” His voice trailed off, as he sighed and shook his head. Then he brightened and continued, “I’ve arranged everything. There’s not a thing for you to worry about beyond just looking your beautiful self. I’ve booked the Tavern in the park again, like we did for your sixteen birthday. Everyone who’s anyone will be there. I’ve made sure of it. No expense has been spared.”

“Oh, Dad...I thought...I mean...” Catherine hesitated, not wanting to extinguish the eager gleam of anticipation in his eyes. “Yes, the Tavern is fine, but I wondered if we couldn’t have something smaller — more intimate — here at home. Just some friends and family.”

“But I thought...” Charles frowned. “I assumed you’d want to have a big party. It’s not every day you turn twenty-one. It is a special time.”

“I know, Dad.” Catherine hugged his arm with both hands. “But you and me, we hardly get to talk any more. It’s almost like we’re strangers now, ever since I moved out. We don’t seem to have a lot of time together. I’d like us to do something before I go on to Columbia in the fall. I thought, maybe we could get away together, spend some time alone. Perhaps we could even drive up to the lake house in Connecticut.”

“Oh, my darling girl, I wish I could. But I have back-to-back meetings for the next ten days and then we have a settlement conference I can’t miss. After that there’s the Norton Trust mess we all have to get stuck into if we’re ever going to sort it out...” Charles shook his head. “Oh, how I wish I could keep you with me, always...I know that’s not possible, but...” He grimaced, a worried frown drawing his brows together sharply. “You are still thinking of joining me at the firm when you graduate from law school? Is that what this is all about? We sure could use a first-class brain like yours.”

“Of course.” Catherine nodded quickly. “Where else would I go?” She couldn’t hurt him with the truth that the thought of practicing corporate law for the rest of her working life, didn’t excite her at all. But she knew it would break his heart if she refused.

“Well, I know you’ve always expressed an interest in criminal law. I thought maybe...well, I figured you might decide to do that instead. You’ve always been involved in campaigning for the poor and I’m aware you’ve never showed as much enthusiasm for corporate law. But it is a secure future and I—”

“It’s what we’ve always talked about, Dad.” Catherine interrupted quickly, sliding her hand down to clasp his fingers. “How could I go anywhere else? You need me to look after you.” His answering look of gratitude was all the confirmation she required.

He needed her far more than she would ever need him. He badly wanted her reassurance all was well between them and would always be so...

“Okay, look...” Charles compressed his lips. “This party, at the Tavern...if you’re really sure you’d rather do something here, something smaller, then I — ”

“It’s cool, Dad, really.” Catherine shook her head. “Whatever you’ve arranged is fine with me. We still have plenty of time to get together and talk. Who knows, I might meet someone at the party tomorrow night. Maybe there’s even a future lover lurking outside in the bushes...” she said teasingly, knowing her father had always been wary of her choice of male friends, and hadn’t approved of any of them. But then no one would ever be good enough for Charles Chandler’s precious daughter...

“Well, just make sure you run him by me first...” Charles kissed her forehead. “I’m not so old that I don’t remember what it was to be young and in love. And how the moonlight and soft music can make you more than a little careless...”

“I will, Dad, I will. I promise.” Catherine leaned into his shoulder and hugged him close. “I promise you, if I ever meet anyone I could love as much as you loved my mother, you will be the first to know...”

1975: Stosh and Stanley...

“Aw, come on, Pop. You know I want more than this! You love working on the docks. It’s your life, but it just ain’t mine. There’s nothing there for me.”

“Stop calling me that stupid name!” Stanley Kasmarek raised a clenched fist as he flared at his only child. “I’m not some soda drink, I’m your father. You will respect that if nothing else. Obviously my wishes don’t matter much to you, then. You’ll go or stay to please yourself. Well, it’s all the same to me.”

“We’ve been over this and over this.” Stosh threw up his hands. “I see the ships that are leaving the docks every day. They’re going to Zanzibar or Cape Town, even as far away as New Zealand. They’re leaving, going somewhere away from here. Can’t you understand I want to do that too?”

“So I’m no longer good enough for you, is that it? I might have known. Your fool head was always filled with dreams. So how you gonna live? How and with what?” Stanley spat back. “Those dreams of yours are free, kid. It’s living that takes the hard work and money. How do ya plan to get by?”

“With these...” Stosh held up his two hands before him. “And with this...” He tapped his forehead. “I’m gonna do it, Pop. With or without you, I know I can do it. I’m twenty-one tomorrow. There’s nothing left here for me...”

“Aw, Christ...” Stanley took a turn around the dingy and rumpled apartment. A widower and his bachelor son didn’t spend too much time worrying about the feminine niceties. He kicked out at an empty beer can and it rattled away beneath an old, rump-sprung chair. “You’ll be broke and on the streets inside a month. Well, don’t come crawling back here. If you leave then I’ll wash my hands of you! Shame your mother ain’t here...” He glanced back at his son. “She always knew you were unhappy. She worried about you, ya know. Probably too much. That worry killed her in the end. You just wouldn’t see that either. But you’d have stayed to please her. You’d still be my son.”

“Don’t go there, old man...” Stosh clenched his fists at his side, his grey eyes narrowing. “Mom’s death you can’t lay at my door. We both know it was cancer. This life just wore her out in the end.”

“Yeah...? Why not? Give me one good reason. She hated to see you miserable. I’d hear ya both talking in the night. You, whining on about what couldn’t be mended or changed, and her trying to comfort you. She couldn’t live with that pain, knowing she couldn’t help you or make it better. Cancer was just the doctor’s excuse for a broken heart.”

“There’s no way you’re gonna see reason, is there?” Stosh lowered his hands to hang uselessly at his sides. “If that’s how you feel, I can’t change that.” His shoulders slumped. “I’m gone in the morning and there’s an end to it. I’ll write to you and let you know how I’m doing when I get settled. Found myself a job.”

“If you walk out that door, boy, then don’t bother to come back through it again! I don’t wanna hear from you! You’ll be as dead to me as your mother is. There ain’t no way back.” Stanley expelled his breath harshly. “It’ll be finished between us. You make me ashamed to be your father. What am I gonna tell the guys?”

“You’ll think of something. You’ve always told them how useless I am, anyway.” Stosh sighed. “Mom used to say that life is for living. You gotta grab it with both hands and hang on for dear life. Ride it to a stand-still or it’ll buck you off and leave you face-down in the dirt.”

Stosh’s generous mouth curved upwards in sad memory. He stifled the knot of tears that rose in his throat, threatening to choke him. His father had always despised emotional outbursts of any kind, unless it was expressed with his fists after he’d consumed too much booze. “Well, I’m hanging on for that ride and I’m not letting go, even if it breaks my back. Not for anything or anyone. Not even you, Pop. Not anymore.”

“Fine!” His father flung himself away, stalking over to an old writing desk against the far wall. He threw back the delicate lace square that hung down over the front of the top drawer. “Some things are beyond mending. But don’t ever say I didn’t warn you.” He glanced back at his son as he yanked on the handle, nearly spilling the contents onto the floor in his anger. “Twenty-one tomorrow...God, I remember when I was that age. My parents had only been twelve years off the boat from Poland. My dad worked every hour of daylight, and then some, to make a life for us all here in New York. He didn’t have dreams or ideas above himself. He knew what he owed to his family.”

“I know the history, Dad. I’ve heard it often enough.”

“Yeah, well family don’t seem to mean anything to you now, does it, boy?” Stanley frowned at his son’s set expression. He snatched up an envelope from the drawer before slamming it shut again. “Your mother wanted you to have this when you turned twenty-one...” He held the envelope out, making Stosh come to him. “She made me promise her, on her death-bed, that I’d hand it over. It’s all I’ve got to give you. Guess now’s as good a time as any...”

“From Mom...” The boy advanced slowly, his frowning eyes devouring the proffered gift. “What is it?”

“Anna scrimped and saved to put a little aside, every week, for years. She told me she had some idea you might need this one day.” Stanley’s mouth thinned. “I told her she was crazy. That you’d be fine in a couple of years. Get yourself a nice girl and settle down; have some kids. Nothing like having kids to focus a man’s attention on what really matters. I told her our boy wasn’t that stupid as to want what he couldn’t have. But then, what did I know? You always were more her son, than mine, it seems. So go on, take it and get out of my sight!”

Stosh accepted the envelope only after his father thrust it into his hands. He turned it over slowly, assessing it from all angles. If he closed his eyes he could imagine a faint trace of his mother’s violet perfume that she always wore. His heart ached with the wistful memory and his eyes burned. Inhaling a deep breath, he released it in a rush as he inserted one finger under the seal and carefully tore the envelope open. Inside was a wad of money. He counted it slowly, in dawning wonder.

He looked up. “There’s over a \$1,000 here. It doesn’t seem possible.”

“Your mother was set on you having a better life. That’s why she fought me all the way to give you that fancy education. Guess I can see I’ve got my money’s worth,” Stanley sneered, hooking a thumb towards the bead-curtained hallway leading to the bedrooms. “I’m gonna get a few hours sleep. I’m on the night-shift, so I won’t be here in the morning, when you wake up. Make yourself good and scarce before I get back. I’ll not speak to you again, miss ya, or grieve for you. You killed your mother. I don’t see why I should let you be the death of me too. Leave ya keys on the night-stand. I think I’ll get myself a paying lodger.”

“And there isn’t anything I can say to make you change your mind, is there?” Stosh drew himself up to his full height, dragging distracted fingers through his long, dark hair. “You think you know it all. You think you know me. Well, you don’t, and now you never will.”

“I know enough to say you’ll come crawlin’ back inside a couple of months. When all that money’s either gone down ya neck, or wasted on some loose woman.” Stanley grimaced as he turned away towards the doorway. “It’s the curse of the Kasmareks. We can’t hang onto anything good for too long. Remember that, boy. We let the best things in life just slip right away...” He sighed roughly, waving a careless hand in dismissal. “Go on, get away from me and leave me be.”

“Well, this Kasmarek is going to be different...” Stosh addressed the swinging strings of beads that clattered together behind his father’s shuffling form. “Even if I’m down to my last cent, I will never come back here, Pop. I can promise you that...”

2010: Jacob and Vincent...

"I cannot believe it has been more than twenty years..." Father looked up from the chess board to frown at his son seated across the table from him. "It seems like only yesterday when you found Catherine up in the park and I began to truly despair of your ever finding happiness, or making any kind of life together. And now, here we are..." He shook his grey head in wonder. "We have come a very long way, you and I. And it has been an incredible journey. But now, looking back, I know I would not have missed it for anything."

"It has indeed. And today, we will pass yet another milestone." Vincent leaned forward to peer at the chess pieces; searching for the trap he was certain his parent had set. Father might have slowed considerably in the body but, even at eighty-eight years of age, his mind was still as sharp as a razor. Vincent's eyes narrowed and he nodded. "I see you have learned how Anand finally defeated Kramnik to retain the World Championship of 2008. Now I wonder who decided to share that information with you..."

"As if you didn't know." Father smiled gleefully. "At least my grandson takes pity on an old man. He knows how to look after me. He keeps me informed of all the important goings-on Above. Though that cellphone he gave me the last time he came home still frightens the dickens out of me every time it rings. I can't believe that even Pascal is thinking of getting one now, though he once swore he would never sacrifice his sticks for the perils of modern technology. But Mouse insisted it is the way of the future and we'd better get used to it. I guess the digital age has well and truly reached us down here, whether we like it or not."

"Well, Jacob wishes only to please you," Vincent replied, reaching to make his move. "You know he loves you deeply. The world up there is so different now."

"Jacob is a good boy." Father's eyes narrowed with intent. "Ah, I see what you're doing...Now, if I remember rightly..." He moved his queen slowly forward. "I believe that is check..." He sat back with a satisfied smile to watch his son's reaction.

"Are you two at it, still?" a feminine voice asked from the entrance to Father's chamber. "It is almost midday, you know. The guests will be arriving before long and neither of you are making any attempt to be ready."

"Your husband has yet to admit defeat." Father shrugged, smiling up at Catherine as she came down the short flight of steps to the lower level of the room. "And I am winning for a change. At my age, I can't afford to ignore a winning streak."

"You two will never learn..." Catherine moved to perch on the side of Vincent's chair, placing an arm around his shoulders before leaning down to kiss his temple. "Twenty-one years ago today..." she whispered softly, for Vincent's ears alone. "I remember it well..." She shook her head as she sat up. "I remember my father threw me a huge party for my twenty-first, up at the Tavern on the Green. He so desperately wanted it to be a night to remember. He hated it when I finally left home to go to law school." Vincent tilted his head to one side and frowned. "Mouse gave me that golden egg. The one you found in our chamber the other day, Catherine; with the figure of me inside it. If I remember correctly, he'd worked for weeks to perfect it. When he finally presented it to me, I wasn't at all sure it wouldn't blow up in my face."

“Yes, that’s right...” Father nodded slowly, his eyes narrowing with the memory. “As I remember it, I had the flu and was confined to bed. Mouse said he just couldn’t wait to give the gift to you. He was still very young and barely socialised in those days. I sent Devin to look after him, praying they wouldn’t get into some fresh mischief together. Sometimes I am amazed how we survived those early years intact. I lost count of how many things that boy blew up.”

“But he did learn and we did survive.” Vincent smiled, shaking his head as he reached up to draw Catherine down to sit across his lap. “So much has changed. So many wonderful things have come to pass and to be.”

“And yet some things have remained the same...” Catherine turned to thread her fingers up through the still-tawny fall of her husband’s mane, smiling into the sapphire depths of his eyes where the dancing flame of their abiding love burned brighter than ever. “But Jacob will be here soon and you do need to change. We have a party to attend and we mustn’t be late. The guest of honour would never forgive us.”

Vincent didn’t immediately reply as he studied the picture she made in the flickering candlelight. She was the love of his life and she looked as beautiful now as she did that long-ago night on her balcony when he had finally surrendered to the inevitable and allowed himself to be drawn towards the beauty and acceptance of her love. A life together had seemed utterly impossible then...and yet now...

He leaned close to kiss her gently, before he whispered, “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. It was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness. It was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity. It was the season of light, it was the season of darkness. It was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us...” He cupped her cheek in the palm of his hand. “I love you, Mrs. Wells.” The rich, unbreakable bond between them flowed and rippled with the strength of their love, and the sense of their mutual need, one for the other...

“I know...” Catherine breathed. “And I love you too. But how about you save some of those deliciously distracting thoughts until after the party...?”

“You know, my father threw me out the night before my twenty-first birthday.” Elliot lowered himself onto the settle beside Vincent and handed him a mug of ale. He turned from watching the dancers in the middle of the Great Hall to survey his good friend. His mouth tightened. “Of course I made it easy for him. I told him I didn’t want the same things as he did and I was leaving anyway. He threw a wad of money at me — money my mother had saved for me — and told me never to darken his doorstep again. He was ashamed of me.”

He shrugged, looking down into the mug of William’s fine brew he held in his hand. “He also said I was dead to him. But the money was enough to give me the start I needed. And I never got to thank him for that.” He gave a regretful laugh. “Somehow I doubt he would have listened anyway. We were always poles apart and he detested me for — as he saw it — killing his only son.”

“Do not be too hard on yourself, Elliot.” Vincent clasped his shoulder. “Perhaps your father understood you more than you knew. Perhaps he knew that you needed to go your own way and leave Stosh behind. He just couldn’t admit it.”

“Perhaps...” Elliot sighed, turning back to watch the dancing. “It was all so long ago. And now, here we

are, fathers in our turn. Do you think we have done a better job?"

"There certainly have been challenges..." Vincent followed his friend's gaze to where Jacob was dancing with Rebecca, Elliot's sixteen-year-old daughter. They were laughing together as they circled the floor, obviously at ease with one another. "And yet..." Vincent smiled. "There is no manual to tell us what to do. Maybe we were just as blind."

"Perhaps that's for the best." Elliot shook his head. "And Jacob is doing well at Columbia?"

"Very well," Vincent acknowledged. "He has his mother's talent for the law. Her father was thrilled when Jacob decided to enrol and follow the family tradition. Charles said they could always do with a fresh, young brain in their practice. But Jacob is not so sure corporate law is for him. He rather fancies taking up Joe's offer of a summer job at the D.A's office. Catherine is in two minds whether to allow him. She worries about the inherent dangers."

"Good luck there. I don't envy you," Elliot sympathised. "Rebecca is convinced she's going to be an architect. Nothing I can say will change her mind. I understand now something of what my own father must have felt. But we cannot control our children's futures. We can only bless them with love and guidance and send them forth into the world, praying they will not fall."

"Are you finally turning into a philosopher after all these years, Elliot Burch?" Vincent teased lightly. "Or is Shannon finally educating you in the finer arts?"

"Possibly..." Elliot grinned. "Or maybe it's too much of William's fine ale. It does muddle your thinking and make you see things you know are not real. But I do know that once upon a time I was a different man. Back then, if I could not see it, measure it, weigh or understand something, then I preferred to ignore it. Perhaps I was more like my father than I knew. I had no room in my life for sentiment. I was far too busy becoming the great Elliot Burch." He flicked a dismissing hand. "And then, one night, Cathy brought you into my life, and you both showed me what really mattered in this world."

He reached to clink his mug against Vincent's. "To good friends and all fathers..."

"To understanding them..." His good friend accepted the toast and they were both silent for some time. Then Vincent said reflectively, "Perhaps that is all we are in the end — simply a reflection of our fathers. The men who have gone before us and shown us the way, tried to make a difference for us. Good or bad, we are what they have made us."

"Maybe..." Elliot nodded, looking across the hall to where Father was trying to interest Mouse in a game of chess. Mouse appeared torn between Jamie's insistent hand on his arm — trying to tug her unwilling husband back to the dancing — and Father's earnest entreaty for just one game.

"Maybe some things will never change..." Elliot shook his head. "Thank you, Vincent. For everything."

"No, some things do not change..." Vincent was watching Catherine threading her way towards them through the dancers and the glorious colours and endless rhythms of their deep, mutual love reached out to enfold him; making him aware of her on every level of his being. "And for that we must be eternally grateful..."

THE END