

# Eurydice's Swansong

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*Note: Certain dialogue was taken from the episode 'Song of Orpheus' from the TV series Beauty and the Beast, written by Alex Gansa & Howard Gordon.*

"I knew from the start there was something wrong about this case. I just needed evidence to prove my suspicion."

Catherine was sitting comfortably on the deep leather sofa in Joe Maxwell's office. Her boss and friend was sitting on the edge of his desk, his arms folded. He was listening to her explanation of the events from the past few days.

"Alan Taft commissioned someone to look at Henry Dutton's fiscal affairs not long ago and found out that Dutton was nothing but a crook. He pretended to be a big Samaritan, getting money for his imaginary projects from his own foundations, donations, private fundraisers. His latest project was a \$10million dollar shelter for the homeless. He was collecting money on behalf of his foundations, seemingly to support various charity causes. But in reality, sending it to his private account in the Cayman Islands. I found the financial report in Taft's office just before Dutton's people got to me."

"How did you manage to escape them?" Joe narrowed his eyes. "It's not that I don't trust your street-fighting abilities, but still, you were alone against them..."

Catherine couldn't suppress an enigmatic smile before speaking.

"Dutton obviously didn't spare much on training real professionals. To be honest, it was quite easy to paralyse them. And then..."

A flashback of Vincent's hand reaching for her from the top of the elevator appeared in her mind's eye again.

"Then I found the nearest phone booth and called the police."

Joe grinned and shook his head.

"You're one tough cookie, Radcliffe; I have to give you that."

Catherine grinned back at him.

"Thank you, Joe! It's nice to be appreciated."

He chuckled, but then something crossed his mind, and his look changed into a slightly confused one.

"How did you actually get involved in the case anyway? The NYPD investigated the murder of Alan Taft, and they didn't ask the D.A.'s office for help."

Catherine hesitated only for a second.

"I am acquainted with Dutton's latest victim. When I went to see her and met Dutton for the first time, I could smell a rat right then and there. I simply sensed he was using her to get money from her... I'm also glad that an innocent man won't go to prison for something he didn't commit."

A warm smile appeared on her face when imagining Father returning down to the Tunnels soon.

Joe stood up from the desk and walked around to sit down behind it.

"This guy.... He's strange anyway. I bet you five to ten he's not right up there. He didn't want to tell the police his name or address or any personal details. They found silver certificates in his pockets that went out of circulation about thirty years ago; also a pair of tickets stubs from a Dodger/Giants game from 1952! Talk about *Twilight Zone*," Joe added, raising his eyebrows.

Catherine stood up, ready to leave. She put her hand on the door handle, then looked at Joe.

"Maybe he's one of those people who know the past will always catch up with us, one way or the other."

With a smile, she walked out of this office, leaving her boss frowning in a mild suspicion. That vanished soon when he remembered he had his own ticket for a game that night.

With a grin, Joe grabbed the paperwork on his desk to finish his weekly report.

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An hour later, Catherine was sitting in a large and expensive-looking living room in Margaret's house. She was explaining who Henry Dutton really was and why he got arrested the previous night. Margaret, already weakened by her illness, was upset beyond measure.

"I cannot believe I was so blind," Margaret said with tears in her eyes. "I had known Alan for such a long time; I should have trusted him more, and maybe... maybe he would have still been alive today..." She covered her face with her hand.

"You mustn't blame yourself," Catherine spoke gently, taking her other hand to comfort her. "Dutton would have found a way to dispose of Alan either way. He was afraid of being exposed publicly. And besides, a man wrongly accused of Alan's murder has been cleared and will be free again tomorrow."

Margaret looked into Catherine's smiling face. There was such kindness and compassion in her eyes that it made her smile. Apart from Alan, she hadn't seen such deep care in anybody's eyes for decades.

"I was hoping I would die contentedly, knowing I have contributed to a good cause, leaving something behind, but now.... Now it seems to me as if my whole life was only a big waste - of time, of misplaced friendships, but especially of missed opportunities..."

Margaret's voice trailed off; her look strayed somewhere into the distance behind her visitor.

Her eyes vaguely took in the beautiful paintings decorating the spotless white walls around the living room - they were a part of her father's inheritance. He had made sure that Margaret missed no material comforts and indulgences of life, including a convenient and wealthy husband, who died way before his time. Margaret knew, though, that the main thing she had been sorely missing was the one man who could have given her everything else but wealth. He would have loved her until his last days had she only had the courage to stand up to her father all those lost years back...

Perceptive as she always was, Catherine sensed the current of the older woman's thoughts. She leaned a bit closer and squeezed her hand.

"Maybe you haven't missed all your opportunities yet... Maybe there is one more which is waiting for you." She smiled knowingly.

Margaret focused on Catherine again, her eyes narrowing, trying to understand her words.

"The man who was wrongly accused and will be free again tomorrow... He would like to see you," Catherine said softly.

"Why me?" Margaret didn't understand.

“Because he has been dreaming about this moment for 35 years...”

The shock and sudden pain in Margaret's face almost frightened Catherine. But then, the older woman whispered.

“And for 35 years, I couldn't forget him...”

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The very same afternoon, they were sitting on one of the small couches in Catherine's apartment, drinking tea. Margaret was very keen on seeing Jacob as soon as possible. Catherine explained that Jacob would be released the following day, once the release papers had been sorted out. She suggested Margaret come with her to the place where Jacob lived, to surprise him.

There was no need to persuade the older woman at all. The two suitcases standing by the door were a clear sign of her intention - she was not planning on returning home; her only wish for the remaining days of her life was to spend them with the man she had loved for more than 35 years...

“He didn't deserve this, any of it...” Margaret's voice was quiet, full of pain. “Alan was a great friend of his, one of the very few who stood by him even in the worst times. He had not many left by then...”

Catherine didn't wish to awaken even more painful memories in the older woman, especially because of her health condition. And she knew very well what power regrets and remorse could have over a person. She took Margaret by the hand again and smiled.

“He found new ones. In fact, many of them.”

Margaret's face lit up slightly with a heartfelt smile.

“I'm very pleased to hear that,” she said, and a lonely tear ran down her cheek. She quickly wiped it away, though.

“Where has he been all those years? I've never heard from him since...” Her voice trailed off.

“He created a new world,” Catherine started carefully. “A world away from the eyes of our world. People of all kinds live there with him - good people whose lives had been affected by tragedies, sad moments, disappointments, feelings of total misunderstanding... People with talents, kind hearts and great spirits who have been betrayed by our world somehow.”

A bittersweet smile appeared on Margaret's face.

“That sounds like a perfect world for Jacob,” she said sadly.

Catherine didn't reply but waited for a moment.

“Is he... married? Does he have his own family?” Margaret was eager to know.

“No, he's not married...”

Margaret sighed, and Catherine had a feeling she heard relief in that single sound. She couldn't help but smile.

“But he has many friends in... the place where he lives. I have not met many yet myself, but those I have are truly lovely people. They love Jacob very much and as he is one of the founders of their world, they all call him Father.”

The older woman liked the notion very much and smiled warmly.

“Where is this world?” she asked.

Catherine hesitated only for a moment. In the brief time of knowing the woman in front of her, she got the feeling, there was no reason to distrust her. After all that Margaret had been through, she deserved a bit of happiness at the end of her life's journey.

It's below the city, somewhere where nobody knows life exists... There is a large network of tunnels where people made their homes. They don't live in luxury, but they have Helpers Above. It's people like you and me, who in one way or another crossed their paths with someone from their world in the past. As an act of gratitude, they help them with food and essentials."

Margaret was in awe. "You are one of them as well..."

"Yes," Catherine replied and smiled. "Not for a very long time yet, less than a year, but I am very happy that I can help anywhere I can."

"How did you cross your path with that world?"

Catherine exhaled and looked away for a moment. The memory of that fateful April night stirred a myriad of various emotions in her; all of them mirrored in her face, albeit only briefly. The disappointment at the party, the horror of the injury, but above all, Vincent.... She smiled enigmatically before speaking again.

"I had an accident last year. I was kidnapped, badly injured and then left for dead in Central Park at night. But as fate would have it, someone found me. Someone... very special... who lives in the world Below, and he brought me there to Jacob, who treated my injuries."

Catherine stopped and let Margaret digest all the information, seeing her bewildered expression. Despite her amazement, Margaret didn't miss the enigmatic smile of the young woman when she mentioned the special someone who saved her.

"Will it be too impertinent to ask who this special someone was?" she asked.

A tinge of blush coloured Catherine's cheeks when she smiled shyly. She looked up at Margaret, and her eyes spoke for her.

"It was Jacob's adoptive son. His name is Vincent..."

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Margaret thought she had seen and heard everything in her life. When she was listening to Catherine talking about Vincent, though, she realised the world held way more miracles than she could ever have imagined.

She was watching the woman in front of her, with an incredulous yet intrigued smile on her face. Margaret's body may have been failing her, but her eyes were still sharp, and her ears could distinguish the tenderness in Catherine's voice when she spoke more about Vincent's qualities. Her look wandered between Margaret and the French window behind, and the sparkles in her eyes were revealing more than she probably would have wished.

*Undoubtedly, this is not just a friendship.*

Margaret hadn't seen Vincent yet, but she was fascinated by the idea of something more between this young woman and her mysterious rescuer. She didn't wish to embarrass Catherine; therefore, she didn't pry further. But her smile revealed to her companion that she surely sensed more.

A sudden look at the watch on the D.A.'s Assistant's wrist brought both women back to reality.

"I think it's time we head down; Vincent will be waiting," Catherine's shy voice changed the direction of their conversation. All at once, she was aware of having lost her control when talking about Vincent. Her feelings for him made her too emotional, causing her to reveal more than she intended.

Margaret, understanding her young friend's mild embarrassment, smiled and got up from the couch. But her weakening body betrayed her unexpectedly, and she almost stumbled. Catherine had to catch and support her.

“Are you feeling all right?” she asked, worried.

“I’m fine, I assure you. Too much excitement, that’s all,” Margaret replied quickly.

“There is a tunnel entrance in the basement of this building. Vincent will be waiting for us there. It’s not a long walk from there,” Catherine explained and grabbed the older woman’s suitcases.

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When they reached the basement, Catherine climbed down the ladder first. Margaret carefully passed the suitcases and slowly climbed down the few rungs after her, supported by her friend.

Once they were both down, Catherine focused her sight into the dimness behind the threshold. The unmistakable silhouette of the man who so completely filled her heart was impossible to miss. As always, he was wrapped in his cloak, the hood concealing his face.

The young woman’s face lit up, and her eyes sparkled when she turned back to her companion, took her hand and spoke.

“Margaret, I would like you to meet Vincent...”

Both women turned in his direction as the cloaked man stepped a bit closer. The ray of milky light from above veiled him in a soft glow from head to toe and gave him an almost otherworldly appearance.

Margaret almost forgot to breathe when Vincent slowly pulled back his hood. If his majestic figure wasn’t enough of an image, then his extraordinary facial features made the older woman’s mouth open in awe. Her eyes widened, and after the initial shock, a stunned but genuine smile appeared on her face.

Everything about Vincent was striking, but the thing that Margaret knew she would never forget for the rest of her so unfairly cut-short life, was the eyes that were looking at her from that otherworldly face. They were deep-set, and their sapphire-blue colour didn’t lose its magic even in the dim light of the basement. They were shining bright and reflected such kindness and raw honesty, mixed with a hint of vulnerability, that Margaret had a feeling that she was looking straight into the mystic man’s soul.

“I am glad that you found your way to us. I know it will mean so much to Father...” The quiet deep, gravelly, almost hypnotic voice of the man in front of her echoed in space around them. He looked at Catherine, standing a few steps back, and the serene expression of his eyes changed slightly - they were smiling.

Before Margaret managed to recover, Vincent took the suitcases from Catherine and asked them to follow him.

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“Magical, this world is simply... magical,” Margaret raved while putting down her teacup. “Including you, young man,” she added with a smile, looking at Vincent.

The ‘young man’ lowered his eyes, and his humble smile made Margaret like him even more.

“Father dedicated his entire being to creating this world, keeping it together and passing on its values,” he said.

Catherine’s eyes were fixed on Vincent every time he spoke during their conversation, as if she wanted to remember every word he ever said. To be in his presence, in his own world, was

something she rarely had the chance to experience so far, and she loved every second of it. It felt so... domestic...

A random glance at her watch brought her back to reality.

"I'm afraid I have to go," she said, her voice revealing genuine regret. "I still need to pick up the release papers for Father for tomorrow morning."

"I'll guide you out," Vincent immediately stated.

"It's all right, Vincent," Catherine interrupted him and unawares put her hand on his forearm. "I've already asked Kipper when he brought us tea. You have a lot to talk about with Margaret; I'll be fine. Besides.... I'll see you tomorrow night...?"

Margaret couldn't miss the hopeful tone in the young woman's voice and the eloquent look in both her new friends' eyes.

"Tomorrow night," Vincent replied softly, making Margaret smile widely.

Catherine finally managed to look away from Vincent, and she stood up. Margaret and Vincent followed her.

"Thank you for everything," the older woman whispered when she hugged Catherine.

"I'm happy I could help you and Jacob."

Both women shared a heartfelt smile.

"Will you come and see me again before...?" Margaret asked, her voice fading at the end of the question.

The silence after stung Catherine at her heart, but she smiled and nodded, promising to come the day after tomorrow.

When they parted, Catherine cast a quick but meaningful look at the man by her side. As she slowly walked towards the way out of Father's study, he followed her without a word. After ascending the few steps leading out of the chamber, Catherine turned to Vincent and spoke a bit shyly.

"Good night, Vincent..."

"Good night, Catherine..." His voice was like a tender touch of a feather.

Try as she might, she was unable to part with him without their usual embrace. Unhindered by another person's presence, Catherine hugged Vincent tightly, burying her face in his broad chest, inhaling his masculine scent, smiling. His arms enveloped her gently, as he rubbed his cheek slightly against the top of her head.

As quickly as their bodies almost melted into one, they parted, but very unwillingly, desperate to prolong every second of their time together. Catherine cast a long, meaningful look at Vincent, smiled, slowly released his hands and left the chamber.

His blue eyes followed her and remained on the spot that they saw her last for a few moments after she vanished from sight. An expression of deep longing and a soft, wistful smile settled on Vincent's extraordinary face.

He sighed and returned to Margaret, who meanwhile reached for one of the many books in the chamber. She was pretending to keep her distance from their private moment. But when Vincent approached her, he noticed her smile, which revealed she could read much more between the lines.

"Catherine is a very special woman," she said, her eyes inquisitively observing his reaction.

"I have never met anyone like her before," Vincent said quietly, his eyes looking into the distance. "She gives a new meaning to... everything," he added softly.

Margaret touched Vincent's arm, squeezing it lightly.

"I think she thinks the same about you," she said with an encouraging smile.

Vincent's face showed surprise, but then his eyes softened, and he smiled incredulously, shaking his head.

"Sometimes... I dare to believe... But other times, I'm frightened..."

"Of losing her?" Margaret asked.

"Of losing myself," he whispered, his eyes haunted.

Margaret knitted her brows, studying the exquisite features of his face carefully. She had no idea what this magnificent being in front of her was truly capable of, what force was hiding behind the scholar and gentleman. Yet, she trusted the kindness in his eyes and the honesty in his words.

"Vincent," her voice forced him to look into her bright eyes. "Fear only makes you weaker. If you don't fight it, you might lose everything and regret it for the rest of your life. Trust someone who knows what it's like..."

A flicker of recognition, gratitude and hope, reflected in his deep blue eyes when he smiled again, and his facial muscles relaxed again. He put his hand on Margaret's arm, returning the gesture of support and encouragement.

"You didn't lose everything," Vincent said knowingly, smiling.

Margaret looked hopefully into his eyes.

"I guess I'll find out tomorrow..."

She flashed a quick smile at Vincent, patted his arm and returned to her book.

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Jacob Wells was more than familiar with prison bars. Although it had been thirty-five years, he couldn't erase from his memory the cold feel, the sterile scent and the clinical look of a prison cell. That morning, looking around the one he found himself in made him think, *some things never change...*

Suddenly he heard the cell gate open with a loud, screeching noise.

"You can leave," the prison guard said with an indifferent voice.

Jacob thought he was hallucinating. But then he noticed the delicate figure of someone he knew, standing behind the guard - Catherine Chandler.

"You are free," she said with a warm smile. "Everything got cleared up. You can go home."

Jacob's eyes welled up. Although he heard from Vincent that Catherine was very good at her work, in all honesty, he did not believe she could help him in any way.

*It seems you were wrong about her once again....*

Trying to retain his dignity, he swallowed the tears and stood up heavily, reaching for his walking stick at the bed.

When he came out of the cell and approached Catherine, their eyes met again.

Overwhelmed and quiet, unsure of what and how to say it, Jacob flashed a small smile at her and nodded in appreciation.

Catherine nodded back, and together, they followed the guard.

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The founder of the underground world spent the whole cab journey from prison in a contemplative mood. There were so many things he wanted to ask Catherine. But Jacob knew all questions had to wait until they were alone, without witnesses to overhear them. He only told Catherine which subway station he would like to go to - there was an entrance to the Tunnel world that he'd used before.

When they got out of the cab, Catherine paid the driver and pointed with her hand to Jacob to indicate which way to go. They started walking and seeing nobody was listening, just rushing past them, Catherine finally spoke for the first time since they left the prison.

"We managed to find evidence convicting the real murderer; he's already behind bars, awaiting his trial. Vincent will tell you all the details."

Jacob frowned, remembering his dear friend Alan Taft, who lost his life so senselessly.

Catherine, seeing his distress, brought out her trump card.

"There is someone waiting for you Below," she said softly. "She can't wait to see you again..."

Jacob's grey eyes widened in shock, making her smile. Suddenly he remembered something else.

"Vincent...??"

Catherine nodded calmly. The expression on her face was telling him everything he needed to know.

Jacob exhaled loudly and shook his head, studying the woman next to him briefly.

"You barely know me, and yet, you have risked so much for me."

She looked at him with a warm smile, her eyes reflecting the hope that he would understand and believe.

"I know all that I need to know. You are Vincent's father and a good man. And you saved my life. I could finally repay your kindness towards me," Catherine said softly.

For the first time, Jacob smiled genuinely. It seemed that relief, the thought of going home and seeing Margaret were slowly reaching his tired soul.

They started walking again, already seeing the sign SUBWAY not far away from them.

"Are you coming with me?" Jacob asked, glancing at his companion.

"No," she replied. "I will come tomorrow, though, if I may... Margaret wants to see me before..." Her voice trailed off, but she quickly regained control over her emotions. "I thought it's best to give you two time for each other first."

Jacob smiled in appreciation. "We will be happy to see you," he said, and she knew it wasn't a lie.

Within a moment, they reached the staircase leading down to the subway. Yet again, it seemed hard to find words.

The man known in his current life as Father turned to the woman who probably saved his life and stole the heart of his son.

"Well... goodbye," Catherine said with a smile, her eyes not leaving his face.

Jacob understood that to remain silent would have been not only rude, but also impossible.

"Catherine, you've been more than a good friend to me," he said earnestly. "I know what you've risked, and believe me... I am grateful. Goodbye..."

He took her gloved hand and squeezed it tightly. Then he turned back to the staircase and started descending step by step.

"Father..."



Her voice stopped him and forced him to turn back to her. His knitted brows and tight jaw were more than a sign of his worry of what he might hear.

The expression of Catherine's big eyes impressed him, though.

"I just want you to know, I would never hurt him," she said, clearly willing him to understand her truth. "I *love* him."

The resolve in her voice and face when saying those words touched Jacob deeply.

"I know," he flashed a smile before turning earnest again. "But I also know it can only bring him unhappiness."

"Why do you say that?" The desperation in Catherine's voice was almost painful.

"Because part of him... is a *man*."

Jacob's eyes stayed with her for a beat, seeing the recognition of the sad partial truth in her face.

*Although I truly wish it could be different for both of you...* he thought to himself.

Finally, he turned around, and this time, he walked on, heading to the subway station.

Catherine watched him disappear with an almost resigned expression. But then she shook her head lightly.

*We will find a way; we must...*

She took a deep breath and exhaled loudly. Remembering the big pile of case files on her desk at work reminded her of the fact that the world keeps spinning even on days like these. She turned on her heel and set out to get a cab to work.

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Margaret was looking at some obscure spot in the sea of books ahead of her. Sitting on one raised end of Jacob's split-level chamber, she was spending her time in contemplation rather than focusing on something particular she could see.

*He will be here any moment... What will he say? What will he think of me?*

Margaret's hands were trembling slightly. Even the warm long coat she was wearing couldn't drive away the cold creeping into her bones. True, since she decided not to take any more drugs to numb the physical pain caused by her illness, she had been feeling much weaker. It had only been two days, but the effect was alarmingly quick.

That morning, however, the main cause of her unrest was the feeling of seeing the man she had loved for 35 years again...

Not far away from her on the lower level of the chamber, Vincent was sitting in one of the chairs and reading. His mind was at peace, for he knew his father was returning home and was in the best hands - in Catherine's.

When his sensitive hearing caught a sound slightly different from the pipes-tapping, he lifted his head and spotted Jacob walking slowly into the chamber. Immediately, he stood up and walked over to welcome his parent, his long arms engulfing him in a tight embrace.

"Father! I'm so glad you're safe!" Vincent exclaimed, his voice full of relief and happiness.

Jacob smiled widely, returning the bearhug, grateful for seeing his beloved son again.

"It's good to be home," he said when he pulled back. Then, there was only one question on his mind. "Where is she?"

"Over here, Jacob..."

When the older man turned his head, following the strong female voice, his eyes widened. What he saw was a vision, even after such a long time. The woman he had been trying to erase from his mind for decades (in vain) was as lovely as he remembered her. Like in a daze, his hand slowly took off the hat from his head.

Margaret's eyes were burning bright, and her whole face lit up. Without hesitation, all physical problems suddenly forgotten, she ran down the few steps to face her former husband, reaching for his hands immediately.

"Jacob! Oh, Jacob...", she said, her eyes burning into his.

"You're too beautiful," Jacob replied with an incredulous smile and shook his head. "I can't believe you're here!"

There was nothing more important to her at that moment.

"No words," Margaret ordered with a smile. "Just... Hold me!"

They fell into each other's arms, unwilling to part ever again, shedding tears that never truly dried out.

As Vincent was watching them from a distance, his heart rejoiced in this reunion. And yet, he felt a tiny prick at heart when thinking about another woman, high above them.

*Will life separate us as well?*

Returning to the present, he smiled and quietly left the chamber, leaving the lovers to reconnect alone.

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The Waterfalls were glistening in the soft white light penetrating from Above. While they were sitting on the rocky bench facing the massive water stream, Jacob was admiring Margaret's profile. Her face hadn't changed much in all those years. The light in her eyes seemed even brighter with the reflection of the light from the Waterfalls. Only the fatigue caused by her illness painted a few wrinkly traces around her eyes. She was still the most beautiful woman he had ever seen...

"So much wasted time," Margaret spoke softly, using the same words twice within the same week. The expression on her face was melancholic. "So much lost happiness..."

"You were not happy with your husband?" Jacob asked, wondering.

"Content, yes, but happy..." She sighed. "My father picked my new husband for me, two years after..."

"After he annulled our marriage?" Jacob helped her.

"Yes...", Margaret replied sadly. "Jonathan was wealthy, had prestige, a good name in higher circles. He wasn't a bad man, and he respected me as much as he could. It didn't take much time for him to realise, though, that I could never feel anything more to him than friendship. He respected it, and for that, I will always be grateful to him in my heart. I told him I loved once and that I could never love anyone else again..."

Her eyes got misty; she blinked several times, trying not to get emotional. Jacob took her hand in his.

"You never had children?" he asked.

Margaret shook her head and smiled.

"Not that I didn't wish to, but... To me, children should be born out of love and since I lost mine... Perhaps my subconsciousness played a part in my lack of success. But we can't always have what we wish for, I guess."

Jacob tenderly stroked her cheek. Margaret took his hand in hers and kissed the back of it, exhaling contentedly.

“It seems that you became a parent without even wanting or expecting it, though,” she said with a smile.

The tunnel patriarch chuckled and directed his look into the liquid mass in the distance again.

“Vincent has been the greatest blessing of my life.” The truth of his words was undeniable in his grey eyes. “I may be his father but *he* taught me everything - patience, forgiveness, humility, faith... He brought back the true meaning of the word ‘love’ in my heart...”

Margaret was warmed by the light in Jacob’s eyes, lit by the pride and genuine emotions evoked by the memory of his adoptive son.

“It seems that especially love becomes him very well,” she remarked, almost mischievously.

Jacob looked into her eyes again, caught by surprise.

“I’ve got cancer, Jacob, not a brain defect.” The raised eyebrows and an affectionate smile made him chuckle and shake his head.

“I won’t even ask how you found out,” he noted, bemused.

“Rightly so because I would have to tell you that I have eyes, my dear.”

Another chuckle, another shake of the gray-haired head. Then knitted brows.

“Sometimes I wonder...,” Jacob started, almost drifting away into his own thoughts.

“No, you *worry*, there’s a difference,” Margaret countered gently.

The love of her life locked his eyes with hers again.

“If I had a son with such big and gentle heart, deep wisdom and intelligent mind, I would trust him a bit more.”

Jacob frowned, not entirely convinced by her words.

“You don’t know everything about him, Margaret...”

“That is true; I can only guess. But what I do know is that he loves Catherine and that Catherine loves him. That alone is worth having a little faith in that miracle, isn’t it, Jacob?”

She did it again. Thirty-five years later and she still had the power to make him believe in the impossible.

“I guess so.” He nodded with a smile, then kissed her on the cheek.

The next thing Jacob saw was Margaret taking out something from her coat pocket and placing it in his hand.

“I won’t need it in the place where I’m going...”

Her former husband looked at his hand and saw the wedding ring he gave her all those years back on their wedding day. His eyes looked at her in awe.

“Yes, I kept it all those years,” she answered the unasked question with a smile. “Keep it until the time comes when you will need to pass it on.”

Jacob’s eyes narrowed in puzzlement, making her chuckle.

“For such a well-educated and intelligent man, you can be very slow sometimes,” she added and raised her eyebrows teasingly. “You know he’s going to need it one day. I am sure of it. True love should never suffer because of conventions.”

Jacob opened his mouth to protest at such a prospect. But the uncompromising expression on her face silenced him immediately, and he understood the meaning of her latter words too well. Despite all his conviction, suddenly, he found himself intrigued by the possibility. Finally, he chuckled and carefully put the ring in his vest pocket.

He put his arm around Margaret's shoulders and pulled her closer to him. Her body felt more fragile than four days earlier, when she'd come down to the Tunnels, but Jacob didn't care. Nothing could dampen his spirit at that moment because his wife was back by his side.

For the next long minutes, their eyes were focusing on the rush of water ahead of them and the strong emotions filling their hearts and minds.

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Vincent quietly entered the guest chamber and slowly walked over to Jacob, sitting on a chair next to the large bed. Margaret's frail body was resting seemingly peacefully in it, her face much paler than on the day she had come to the Tunnels. Life was slowly slipping away from the woman whose life-long dream had come true too late.

With a sigh, Vincent gently put his hand on his parent's shoulder.

"I am losing her," Jacob whispered, his eyes welling up. "After all this time, I get her back only to lose her again..."

"Margaret has had her fair share of suffering throughout her life," Vincent replied equally quietly. "But in the end, she found her happiness again. *You* gave it to her, Father. And that feeling will stay with you forever."

Jacob looked up at his son, mulling over his words and acknowledging their truth. He smiled while a stray tear rolled down his cheek. Then, he covered Vincent's hand with his own.

"I am glad you got to know her, Vincent... And that she got to know you," he spoke with a moved voice.

"So am I," his son replied from his heart.

A weak voice interrupted their conversation and forced them to look back towards the bed. Margaret was awake, her consciousness present for that moment, resisting the fatal fatigue, slowly but surely drawing her to the white light.

"Margaret!" Jacob breathed and eagerly took her hand in his. "How are you feeling?"

"Like in Heaven," she replied with a beaming smile. "I just wish... I could have come here sooner..." Her smile faded and deep regret filled her pained eyes.

"You're here now; that's all that matters," Jacob replied with a brave smile and kissed her hand.

"Vincent?" Margaret addressed the younger man.

"I'm here," he replied softly.

She outstretched her other hand towards him, making him walk over to the other side of the bed to accept it. Margaret squeezed his warm hand with genuine gratitude and smiled. Then she looked back at Jacob.

"This... This is what my life should have been like...", she whispered, and her eyes glistened.

Jacob couldn't stop the silent tears anymore, blinking them away desperately, not to miss a single detail of Margaret's face.

"Please, forgive me...", she breathed, her eyes pleading.

"There is nothing to forgive, Margaret...", Jacob's replied gently; the anxiety and pain from what he knew was coming were killing him inside.

With her last strength, Margaret looked back at Vincent.

"Look after him, please... Look after each other, always..."

Vincent swallowed his own tears and nodded. "I will."

"And Vincent..." she added. "Whatever it takes... don't ever give up on your love..."

Her eyes were suddenly fierce, filled one more time with conviction.

The stunned expression in the young man's eyes made her smile.

"I promise," Vincent said when he regained composure.

Turning her head once more towards the love of her life, she could feel it coming.

"I want you to know... that the last seven days... have been the happiest of my life.."

She gently freed her hand from Jacob's and with trembling fingers tried to wipe away his tears.

"Thank you, Jacob... Remember... I have always loved you..."

"And I have always loved *you*..." Jacob replied, unable to say anything more. Words failed him utterly.

With one last smile and look into his grey eyes, Margaret's eyelids dropped, her breathing stilled, and she moved to the place where all troubles disappear and eternal peace replaces pain and all sorrows.

"Goodbye, for now, my love..." Jacob whispered when he kissed her forehead.

He gently stroked her hair and studied every detail of her face. His heart was breaking to pieces; the serene expression on her face made him weep silently. The last image of Margaret was to remain with him for the rest of his life: she was smiling...

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The funeral of Margaret Chase was a surprisingly small and subdued affair. Along with the priest, a few trustees of various charities, and two of her oldest friends, Father and Catherine were the only attendees. After the short but dignified ceremony, when everybody had left, they remained alone at Margaret's grave.

It was a bright, sunny day; the air was crisp and fresh. Catherine looked up at the sky where birds were chasing each other and singing their songs. In all the sadness, she had to smile. It was as if Margaret herself was telling them, *Don't weep for me; celebrate my life and sing, for I will be with you forever.*

She looked back at Jacob standing next to her. His eyes were lifeless, the loss written all over his face that suddenly looked much older.

"*Unable are the loved to die. For love is immortality,*" (1) he quoted silently, staring at the fresh grave covered with flowers.

Catherine's eyes were full of compassion. Her gloved hand slipped into his and squeezed it lightly, as a sign of her support. Jacob gladly accepted it and looked at her with a bittersweet smile.

"She truly liked you," he said and shook his head with a chuckle. "We did not see each other for thirty-five years, but by God, Margaret did not change a single bit. She had an uncanny ability to see things as they truly are and never doubt them." His smile faded. "Her only major weakness was her lack of resistance towards her father."

Catherine sighed, looking for words of encouragement.

"Sometimes, even the best people struggle when the pressure of the world around them is too great. They forget about their own strength and slip into what seems more convenient."

Her eyes wandered to the grave, but Jacob could see that she was somewhere else in her mind.

"Their weakness often robs them of the greatest opportunity of their lives."

“Unless someone helps them to find their strength again,” Jacob remarked with a knowing smile. Catherine awakened from the reverie and looked into his eyes. She couldn’t resist a smile herself. “Yes...” That one word was more than eloquent when she lowered her eyes shyly.

Jacob was observing her kind face for a moment. She had become so much more to him in the past two weeks - a true friend. Suddenly, he regretted that the times they had crossed paths were always surrounded by some dramatic events. He wished to get to know her better, on a more quiet, peaceful occasion. Maybe Margaret was right. Maybe things didn’t have to be as complicated as he had always thought...

“Thank you for arranging things with Margaret’s estate,” Jacob said after getting out of his broody moment.

Catherine shook her head with a smile as if it was the most insignificant thing she had ever done.

“There was very little for me to do. Alan kept a very close eye on everything surrounding Margaret, like the best friend he was to her. All paperwork was very tidy and clean. The people in his firm were very helpful,” she explained.

Jacob nodded and knitted his brows - his typical sign of being serious.

“I am happy that her money will be divided between the people who are so desperate for help,” he said, remembering the charities Margaret was talking about to him with great passion.

Catherine smiled enigmatically. There was one important thing she’d omitted when telling Jacob and Vincent about the details of Margaret’s last will.

“Well, it seems she cared not only for them.”

She produced a small envelope out of her handbag and handed it to her companion.

Jacob recognised the envelope as one from his own writing set. He curiously opened it and found a short handwritten letter. When he saw to whom it was addressed, his eyes started reading eagerly.

*Dear Jacob,*

*please, don’t take this as an act of charity, but after what I have seen since I came Below, after all I found out about your wondrous world, I cannot act differently...*

*I made a small change in my last will, witnessed by Catherine and one of your Helpers. A part of my inheritance will be put into a separate account, set out in Catherine’s name. She kindly agreed to act as my intermediary. All the money in the account will be available for the needs of your world, Jacob, as and when you need it... I knew you would never have agreed with it if I mentioned it to you, but I hope you will not think badly about me for arranging this behind your back.*

*I have caused you so much pain in your life and will do even more so soon (for all of it, I am profoundly sorry), but now I can make some amends, at least in this small way. I know how difficult it can get for all of you at times, so please, put away your pride and accept this as my last and truly heartfelt gift to you. God knows you have given me the greatest gift of all - your love...*

*Be well, and never forget - I love you forever...*

*Yours,*

*Margaret*

By the time Jacob finished reading the letter, he was blinded by tears. A huge lump in his throat prevented him from speaking, but Catherine didn’t need to hear any words.

“Whenever you need it,” she said, smiling. “In a week, in a year... Just ask, and I’ll arrange it.”

When Jacob finally managed to look up at her again, there was not much he was capable of saying, although there were so many thoughts running through his head. Therefore, he just nodded, and the gratitude and emotion in his eyes warmed Catherine’s heart.

For the first time in their still brief acquaintance, Jacob Wells stopped thinking about any ‘what ifs’ and possible complications with his son and did the most natural and human thing - he hugged her.

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The sheer peach-coloured curtains on the French door were gently dancing in the fresh breeze of the night; the distant humming sound of the city traffic was strangely soothing. Catherine was standing on her balcony, looking out into the city as she had so many times before.

She was thinking about the past two weeks, about the woman she’d met only briefly, but who had left quite a mark on her soul. She was thinking about Jacob and his grief, coping with losing the greatest love of his life. It was not so difficult to comprehend how he must be feeling, for immediately, Catherine thought of what it would feel like to lose Vincent...

A cold shiver went down her spine at that image, and she quickly waved it away in her mind. She wrapped herself tighter in the jacket she was wearing. The mental image had a strong physical effect on her.

“Catherine...”

The sweetest sound of the night echoed on her balcony, and she quickly turned her head to follow it.

He was standing in the corner, as always in such a situation, waiting, not wishing to interrupt her contemplation. But her shivering made him break his habit.

“Vincent!”

Her feet were quicker than lightning when she landed in his embrace.

*No, I couldn’t bear losing you, never...*

As if knowing what Catherine was thinking, Vincent tightened the hold of his arms around her.

“Are you well?” he asked softly, leaning his cheek against her head, inhaling her scent as he realised how much he had missed her.

It didn’t escape his notice that their embraces were getting tighter and less cautious with the passing of time.

Catherine slowly pulled back, reluctant to let go of him, but his well-being was always her priority.

“Yes,” she replied. “How about you, Vincent?” Her eyes expressed all her concern and care.

He sighed.

“I am all right, but... It’s a strange feeling without Margaret being with us,” he replied. “She was Below for such a brief time and yet...”

“Yet, you miss her already,” Catherine remarked, sharing his feeling.

“Yes.” Vincent smiled. “There was something very wise about her, very kind and knowing.”

The lamps on the balcony wall gently illuminated the features of his unusual face, softening it and brightening his eyes.

Catherine smiled when seeing how fond he was of Margaret. She sighed and shook her head lightly.

“Somehow, I still can’t believe she is gone. I knew her for such a short time and still... It seems unfair that she had to wait for so long to finally be happy, only to leave so soon after.”

“Margaret said... the last seven days were the happiest of her life,” Vincent recalled her last moments in his memory.

“And how is Father?” Catherine asked, genuinely concerned about the patriarch.

“Healing... Alone... Grateful...” Vincent carefully chose every word.

“They truly loved each other,” she remarked.

A wondrous smile appeared on his face.

“Yes,” he breathed, his eyes twinkling in the dark, as he marvelled at the everlasting miracle of love.

“It’s so sad,” Catherine contemplated, “to have had a beginning and an end, and all the time in the middle empty.”

“They had seven days, Catherine... Seven days...”

The light in his eyes and the wisdom of his words struck her almost unprepared.

*As always, you’re right, Vincent. Time is so relative in love. I would give anything just for spending one day with you...*

Her exceptionally expressive face was talking for her, and Vincent was more than capable of reading in it. The strong pull of their bond only strengthened their mutual thought and emotion. So many words between them unspoken, and yet, so much understanding even without them...

Catherine was unable to resist the pull any longer. Inevitably, she landed in the warmth of his arms again. Resting her cheek on his chest, she sighed and closed her eyes. Vincent quietly breathed in the sweet scent of her hair, revelling in the close contact between them.

Time and circumstances may have robbed his father and the woman he loved of a happy life. But Vincent was prepared to listen to Margaret’s advice, whatever it might take. He was unwilling to let his happiness slip away so easily.

Even if it lasted only for a single night...

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(1) Emily Dickinson: *Unable Are The Loved To Die*